

Quartet

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Quartet

by [roseveare](#)

Summary

Los Angeles is about to be wiped off the face of the Earth, its resident guardian Angel nowhere to be found; Fred, Gunn, Lilah and Wesley are going to Hell in a handbasket.

Notes

Takes place approximately 3 weeks after the events of *Tomorrow*. Originally posted in October 2002 between seasons 3 and 4.

The attempted rape/non-con warning is for one short flashback scene in Chapter 5.

PART 1**1.**

The Hyperion was too big for two people. She and Charles rattled 'round like marbles in all its space. Mornings were the worst, waking up with this emptiness to themselves the whole rest of the day.

Fred crept out of bed down the corridor to the shower, crept back towelling her hair, crawled under the covers again and snuggled into the chest of Gunn, who was still trying to steal an extra few minutes' sleep.

The damp coldness of her skin woke him to groggy curses. She giggled and rubbed her wet hair against his belly, but the mirth echoed strangely in the hotel's aura of absence and she swallowed it.

And it wasn't fair. Because this - this should be fun. She and Charles, it was new and it was special, and if Angel hadn't disappeared and Cordy hadn't disappeared and Lorne hadn't left and Wesley hadn't gone all crazy and betrayed them-

Well, if those things hadn't happened, having the Hyperion to themselves for a time would've been nothing if not of the Good.

Her ear, rested against Gunn's stomach, was excellently placed to notice his breathing once more begin to slow and the first rasp of a snore rattle up his chest into his throat.

A poke in the ribs turned it into a grunt.

"We should get up. It's almost nine. If you want to keep the office open..."

"Yeah."

No debate or hesitation, no question, he woke in the space of a concept and suddenly she was the one still huddled beneath the covers, watching him pull on a fresh shirt with yesterday's jeans.

Sacred duty. They were big words, but they fit. The public face of Angel Investigations, the investigative agency, might not be the essence of what the operation really was - but in the absence of Angel, Cordy and Wes, it was something tangible to hold on to. It had become important the business stay alive. That they keep it running smoothly.

And because she'd promised herself she would break the habit, she bit her lip against wondering aloud if today would be the day one of them walked back through into the hotel's reception. It didn't prevent her from wondering it quietly. She could picture the scene in her

mind. How they'd look around and take in all the signs that she and Gunn had kept things running, and they'd be so pleased and proud.

Well, not Wesley. 'Cause Wesley was at the very least enjoying serious under-the-sheets time with the opposition these days. But Angel. Cordelia. Even Lorne. She needed so badly some affirmation that it was all right, that they'd been not abandoned but entrusted.

She shook the thoughts away. They were familiar interlopers, occupying her morning brain every day for almost three weeks, but they were not helpful. Not the least helpful in the helping of the helpless that was the order of the day.

She slipped out of bed, picked a dress from the closet and pulled it over her head, leaning against Charles' back as he bent to tug his sneakers on and lace them. He rubbed against her playfully as she straightened.

This time she didn't allow the space to stifle her giggle. She reached back and entangled his fingers with hers.

"Come on," he said, drawing her along; out into the corridor, down the stairs. "You get the doors open for business, I'll bring you breakfast at reception."

Wesley grunted to wakefulness to find Lilah Morgan sitting on the edge of his bed painting her toenails an arrogant shade of pink. Relaxing back into the sheets, he silently watched her blurred form.

"Am I so interesting?" she purred coolly after ten minutes, not looking up. She crooked her other knee, perched her heel on the edge of the mattress, and blew briefly across her toes before beginning the next coat. "Well, I guess... Watcher. Watching. You Watch me paint my toes so beautifully, Wesley, I'm amazed the Council fired you."

He didn't dignify that with a reply - Lilah, he'd discovered, had a very obvious sense of humour - but felt for the new glasses discarded on the nightstand, and lifted them by a dangling spar to set them on his face. Movement made the covers catch the rough scar tissue on his throat, and he pushed himself up on one elbow.

"You don't usually stay for the morning afters."

He'd been getting used to waking up alone, and was on the way to convincing himself she'd broken the routine simply to irritate him.

"Habit is such an ugly thing. The scourge of innovation."

He winced. "Philosophy."

"You think minions of evil can't have depths?"

And he'd tried so hard to purge that question mark from his voice.

She replaced the lid on the nail polish and bent to set the bottle on the floor, pulled her legs up onto the bed crossing them carefully at the ankles and wiggled her toes at him.

The nail polish was the only thing she was wearing.

Wesley wondered what she saw in him that encouraged this game. The marks of too much alcohol and too little sleep, the scars on his throat and in his eyes. Were they the kind of darkness that drew a woman like Lilah?

He considered her question, feeling a sly smile mount a takeover upon the muscles of his face. "Demons, maybe. Vampires, assuredly. Soul-draining fiends of pure evil from the dawn of time, remotely possibly. Lawyers... hmm. Difficult. I'd have to consult my books and get back to you on that one."

"Books." She pouted and mimed a tossing-away gesture. "I always preferred practical research to boring old words."

"It is the time-honoured method to prove or disprove an hypothesis," he agreed, accepting the day's apparent roleplay of domesticity.

Lilah flexed her toes, extended a fingertip to lightly touch a nail, grimaced as she withdrew it and contorted her body to blow across her toes with quick breaths. After several seconds, strain forced her to relax her limbs and she settled for irritably wafting a hand over the drying polish.

Wesley flicked his glasses back onto the nightstand, doubting he'd be putting them on again anytime that day. He'd discovered the world, at the moment, was easier to handle out of focus. "For such an extensive research project, it's probably best if we start right away."

She shrieked as he tackled her, and continued to scream of her nails' plight until he found her something else to scream about.

First call of the morning took them to a restaurant where some crazy vamp was terrorising staff and customers. The vamp was dressed like a wino and staggering like one too; the clientele flinching from its ugly face and uglier breath wore suits that probably cost more than Angel Investigations made in a year. Gunn joked he was tempted to leave the vamp to it, maybe take some comedy pictures, but Fred's insistent prodding won out.

Vamp didn't put up much of a fight. He got more of a workout tackling the doorman who chased after him whining about a suit and tie. Some people seriously needed to sort out their priorities.

Gunn tucked the stake back inside his jacket as they left, and looked over his shoulder at the restaurant manager carefully watching them go. He fingered the roll of cash the man had thrust into his hand stammering a hurried 'thank you, goodbye'. "I'd give more than cash to see what Cordy could've made of that guy."

He felt a *twang* in his chest as he said the words.

"Never mind. Maybe Angel and Wes did the respectable-front thing better," Fred said as they trailed down the street to the truck, "But I'm glad it's you that's still here."

"I'm glad it's me that's here too. So long as it's you that's here with me." Gunn slipped his arm through hers and hung onto his restraint against anything more. They were working now. Mission time.

As the giddy haze of his initial hook-up with Fred began to fade - fighting the good fight as just a guy and a girl without souled-vampire-power would cause that to happen pretty damn quick - it had began to creep over him that at least some of the shit that'd gone down in those months might not have gone down if he'd had more of his eye on the job than on Fred. Maybe he would've noticed what Wesley was planning. Maybe he would've seen the signs of whatever it was caused Angel and Cordy to leave or took them away.

So now work got to be work, and no play, not even a little. Especially now they had only two minds and bodies to help the helpless, Angel Investigations couldn't afford wandering attention.

Didn't mean he didn't miss the haze.

Fred chattered, and he listened to a diatribe on science, and tests regarding what made a vampire a vampire, and trying to pin down the rules such as they were (Fred was frustrated by the inconsistency of the supernatural: everything, she said, had set rules and laws. You had only to find them out) and he kind of wished, as he had increasingly lately, that he'd had more schooling than he had. Because this was a girl he wanted to understand better, which wasn't happening when she could talk for hours with him grasping no more than half the vocabulary alone.

Didn't mean he couldn't still listen to her for hours.

A shrill noise startled him from his daze and he dug the cellphone from his pocket. "Angel Investigations, we help the helpless. Yeah?"

He listened to the voice across the line. Anger welled up automatically at the mention of the name and he quashed it. "Wesley Wyndham-Pryce doesn't work with us any more, man." He pulled a sympathetic face to Fred's wide-eyed look. "Angel's... Angel's on vacation. I... give me a moment." Covering the speaker, he asked Fred, "You know a Ralph Bowen? Claims to be one of Wes' contacts, says he's some kind of mystic?" She shook her head and he returned to the call. "Yeah... No, the agency's still open for business. What was it you wanted?"

Gunn listened to the answer with steadily mounting incredulity, then anger as the caller wound up.

"What? No, you've got to be kidding me. You're the one claims to know about this shit. You can't- No, hey, wait-"

He lowered the cell and glared at it.

"Charles? Charles, you're being scary. Charles, please, answer me."

-snapped back to reality with the realisation she'd been talking for some minutes while he stood staring at the cellphone in his hand like a crazy man.

"What's wrong? Charles? You look kinda-"

Gunn shook his head, trying to bring some order to his thoughts. "Mister Ralph Bowen," he said, wincing as his voice grated in his dry mouth, "just dropped the next best thing to the fucking apocalypse in our laps. *He's* leaving town. 'Cause, he says, this city's not a healthy place to stick around in - seeing as how according to his mystical mumbo-jumbo it's gonna be wiped off the face of the planet sometime today."

Mind-readers in the lobby was always a good indication it was going to be a Fucked Up Day At The Office. Lilah scowled as she pushed past them, feeling their stares absorb her memories of the morning and night.

A smirk on the lips of one irritated her.

"I'm recruiting," she snapped. She stepped into the elevator and the doors slid shut to cut his smirk from view.

God, she hated the paranoia in this place at times. Who were they after now? Had something serious happened, or just another round of examples?

She clutched her briefcase with whitening knuckles, didn't speak to the familiar faces in the elevator car who likewise weren't speaking to her, and tried not to sweat because on top of everything else she didn't need her foundation to drip. Her heart was beating too fast.

Screwing Wesley Wyndham-Pryce was hardly in itself a punishable offence, even if she hadn't shared all her plans with her superiors. But. Was she so sure there hadn't been anything, no matter how small, said to Wesley in the past few weeks that could be construed as passing information to the opposition?

No. No, she was sure. She was careful.

She slowed her breathing and calmed her pulse, relaxing through force of will. Relaxed, she ached. Wesley hadn't been gentle. He seldom was. Who'd have thought?

Opposition, though...? She smiled to herself. Hardly anymore. She was almost certain. Though the senior partners might be less so.

Her smile choked and died. She'd been certain about Bethany.

The elevator drew to a smooth halt at her floor and she strode out, exchanged a few nods of greeting with co-workers from her division and glared at interns engaged in hushed discussion. The haste with which they peeled off and returned to their work gave her a warm glow of authority. She carried on down the corridor to her office.

Opened the door to find Linwood sitting in there surrounded by a team. Shit, then the mind-readers weren't random sweeps. The place really was at Defcon One.

He looked up, and his flinty gaze followed her to her desk, where she rested her briefcase down and didn't sit. She raised an eyebrow and hazarded a smile. "Good morning."

Linwood always had been a humourless bastard, but lately he seemed to be going for some kind of record in maudlinity. "It most certainly isn't. We have a problem. Last night, there was a break-in."

Her breath caught. She registered that the harsh note in his voice was fear, and her brain pulled up a dozen different artefacts and files the sudden absence of which could prompt his 'we-are-all-about-to-die' intensity.

Then he said the name and she could've sworn her heart stopped beating.

Linwood nodded, not even mustering a smile of satisfaction at catching her off-guard. "It's gone, Lilah. And, whoever took it - they intend to *use* it. The psychics have been having nervous breakdowns since about 4am this morning. I hope you're ready for that Hell-on-Earth experience, because it's all going to happen considerably earlier than planned."

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"So somebody broke in and stole this device - the... Naminore, you say? - from Wolfram and Hart? I'm aghast at such a disgraceful flouting of the law. And that they should target such an undeserving victim, obviously."

Lying flat on his back on the couch, Wesley raised his book to cover his face and returned to Dante and Beatrice.

"That's very funny. Except, the purpose for which they're going to use the artefact involves the tedious side effect of the destruction of this city and everything that happens to be in it. Think you'll still find it funny when you, me, and everything else within a fifty mile radius ceases to exist?"

"I hadn't any plans," he responded, and turned the page.

"Goddamn it, Wesley, this is serious. Listen to me. We're talking massive chaos and destruction, a loss of life measured in seven figures. You. Me. Your little ex-friends. My oh-so-charming co-workers. Everything *gone*."

"I'm sorry, Lilah, I think you mistake us for people who care. Even if you're telling the truth, I have no interest in helping either Wolfram and Hart or Angel Investigations. Now, if you don't mind, I'm busy." He turned the page.

"I wish you'd stop reading that book." She leaned over and dashed it out of his grasp. "You aren't Judas and it's not like Dante understood his damn theology that well anyway and you cannot want to die." She paused, breathing hard. He watched with interest as the real Lilah Morgan broke through the surface of her normally perfectly-maintained facade, and realised that her panic... wasn't faked.

"I do know that," he said, picking up the book and dusting it off. Resting it carefully down on the coffee-table and feeling his brow crease as he tried to absorb that the city might actually be in danger; to figure out whether it was surprise that was responsible for his lack of emotive response. "What precisely do you expect me to do? I'm sorry your firm has been screwed over in a manner that spells destruction for the whole of LA. Shouldn't you be booking your ticket out of here?"

"I'm not running."

"You astonish me. Could it be those depths we spoke of earlier surfacing to prove me wrong?"

"Do I look like Lindsey McDonald? I start things, I finish them. I don't get all whiny and back out. I worked hard to get this far. If I run, I'll have nothing. I'm not going to build everything from scratch all over again. It took too long and too much the first time."

"Ah, the self-serving impulse continues to rule after all. But I still don't see what you can possibly expect me to do."

"I expect you to help me stop it before it's too late."

Wesley managed to change his coughing fit into a grunt. "And Wolfram and Hart *approve*?"

"Hell, yes. Do you know how badly an apocalyptic event on this scale right now would screw with our schedule?"

"Ah." He quenched a smile. "But let's pretend for a moment that you're part of a powerful mystical firm entrenched in dark magics with a vast array of its own resources, internal and external. Why would you approach a... an independent like me?"

"Because most of the 'resources' who know their business at all are clearing out of LA as we speak," Lilah snapped. "I've a team on stand-by to help us if we need them. There are a dozen more teams tearing this city apart after whoever stole the thing, but if they've already invoked the artefact by the time they're found... we won't have much time before we're all going to hell in a handbasket pretty fucking literally. You've probably got more practical experience in stopping this shit than anyone else we have to call on right now. If any of the mystical types dumb enough to stick around have any chance at all-"

"You think I do," he finished. "Come on, now, Lilah? With *my* track record of late?"

She regarded him in silence. He rolled his eyes, breaking the contact.

"I don't understand. If you have this artefact, you must have a purpose for it. You've probably been intending to use it yourselves. So - why the panic?"

"Time and place, Wesley. It's been foretold in half a dozen different prophetic writings we have in our possession that the activation of the Naminore is a crucial portent of the next apocalypse, due in - well, not yet. It doesn't say for which side it will be a weapon. We want to be sure it's ours, at the time we choose. It's about control. Can't stop something from happening - see that it happens at your convenience. Basic rule of business, isn't it?"

"Besides, we have over a century's lead on this thing. We had a reservation, damn it. Let some thief swipe it now?" She made a noise of disgust. "We need to recover the artefact and fast, before its power's wasted by some hack cultist or amateur collector who doesn't know the potential of what they're dealing with. The fact it would destroy Los Angeles is a small concern by comparison. Though I personally find it a fairly distracting one."

She paced a few times, some of the tension draining away. Maybe she sensed she had him. Maybe there was a limit to how much tension her tough, sensuous body could hold. Her mask had returned to its norm and he found himself mourning the refreshing honesty of the face underneath.

"You'll be paid, of course," she said, mistaking his silence for the last vestiges of doubt.

Wesley laughed. "Outside contracting for Wolfram and Hart to save over three million lives... It has a certain poetic perversity. My little ex-friends would have a fit. Still, I don't really see what I can do."

"Your performance hasn't let me down yet." Lilah smirked.

He rolled his head to one side, looked up at her crookedly.

"Well, then. Perhaps I could give it a try, at that."

Fred didn't need the force with which the door crashed inwards from Charles' shove to know that Charles was pretty darned angry. He had been since not long after he got off the phone and told her someone had stolen an object from Wolfram and Hart that was going to destroy Los Angeles. And that was fine and understandable as something to get angry about, but she'd suspected the anger had another source even before he finally vocalised it.

"This should've been Angel's deal. He's apocalypse-guy. Seen a handful of 'em, by all accounts, including some he tried to bring about himself. Damn it, if he hadn't run out and left us-

"Don't," Fred said, and her voice cracked. "Don't say it. Please. We don't know what happened. For all we know he could be dead... dust... or imprisoned somewhere and he can't get back to us. We don't know that he left us on purpose. I won't - we shouldn't condemn him for it until we know."

Gunn turned, his fury crumbling. "I'm sorry, baby." He folded her in his arms. She indulged in the embrace for a second before wriggling out.

"I know we haven't talked about it much. Maybe we should have. But I think... we've other things to be doing now. It isn't a good time."

"It'll never be a good time."

"I... I know. But you get what I mean, right, what with the impending doom all impending. We should research this thing. What did your contact say, again?"

"It's called the Naminore. Somebody stole it from Wolfram and Hart. It's meant to be a portent in calling down the apocalypse. Something about it opening up a gateway to a hell dimension."

She frowned. "That doesn't seem a lot to go on."

"It's all he said, minus the asides of whimpering, the 'we're-all-gonna-die', and a generous slice of 'end-of-the-world-is-nigh'. Damn, for all I know he could've read it in some tea leaves. For all I know the guy's full of shit. Except... the fear was real, nobody could've faked that. He sure as hell believed what he was saying."

Charles perched on the desk that had been Cordelia's next to a whole pile of books that'd been Angel's and Wesley's. He picked up a book, opened the pages.

An instant later, slammed it down again. "God *damn*." He swung off the desk and paced angrily, back and forth over the same few feet of floor, until he jerked to a halt wearing an expression like thunder.

"What is it?"

"Fucking Latin is what it is. Or Aramaic... Etruscan... some other long dead or demonic language you and I have no chance of understanding."

Fred sighed, nodded. "I'll start looking at the English and Latin ones I can read." Necessity overrode her lack of enthusiasm for Wesley's former role. "You-"

"I'll try the internet. Then I'll try some more of Angel's and... Angel's old freaky magic contacts. See if I can't hire some research help in."

"For apocalypse type stuff, I guess we can stretch the expenses."

She tried to smile. He didn't laugh.

It wasn't the first time their lack of research-muscle had been an issue, only the first time in a case that could be serious. Many of the things they'd dealt with in their weeks running the business alone had been run-of-the-mill, the sorts of cases Angel and Wesley might've handed to the two of them as a matter of course. Others had not. She'd performed magical charms (mostly simple ones, and the one that had gone wrong hadn't done too much damage to the foyer); one exorcism of unfriendly spirits; had countless times sat up all night digesting heaps of books that threatened to turn her brains to kaplooey all over again. Charles had taken on demons that would've fazed Angel, and it was a wonder they'd only ended up having to go to the hospital that once.

Gunn set to work at Cordelia's computer and Fred stretched out the books on the floor and squatted cross-legged amongst the piles. Wesley would've known precisely where to look first, probably could've quoted several passages off the top of his head without the need for books at all. Fred had nightmares of that being her someday. She was just beginning to absorb facts like how the Books of Atnarjan were little use for accurate facts about the magical or demon world but excellent references when trying to track the mundane history of an object (it had only taken two instances of puzzling over descriptions of imaginatively wrought demonic species to work it out). And there were still so many of the books she lacked the linguistic skills to even read.

She wished more of these magical scribes had understood the value of indices.

Gunn's fingers tap-tap-tapped on the computer.

She looked up from the book she was working through, watched him bent intently in front of the screen.

"Maybe you're right," she confessed with a sigh. "Maybe he did leave us. And maybe we should talk about it. Admit that it's a possibility. He and Cordelia - maybe they went away on purpose, and they aren't coming back. You know how they were together, just before."

He turned his head; his eyes had taken on a hollow cast. "I know."

"And maybe we can't blame them," she said in a rush. "They've been fighting for so long, and they went through so much before I even got here - some before you did, too - and maybe they deserve some rest. Some happiness-"

"Cept for the part where Angel turns evil when he gets some."

"Oh." Fred's hands flew to her mouth. "I... you really think-? He couldn't, surely, knowing what might happen..."

"He better hadn't." Charles' lips were set in a grim line. "But for what it's worth, I don't think that happened. You're right, though, we should be prepared. We should have talked about this before now, because we need to be ready. It *could* be what happened, whatever we want to believe. We never imagined that Wes-" He choked on the name. He hardly ever said it. But he picked up again determinedly, "that Wes would betray us. So we gotta be ready, up here-" he tapped his hairless skull "-just in case.

"Cause we both know what we'd have to do, then."

"A hell dimension." Wesley was sitting on the edge of the couch now, fingers interlaced and rested under his chin, and his eyes were beginning to light with that fever of interest of those who actually got enthusiastic about such things for the sake of academia alone. "Overlapping LA? How extraordinary. I can't believe I've never come across this before. With something so akin to Sunnydale's Hellmouth, you'd think I'd have heard. I was provided extensive information on the Hellmouth, after all, in my training to be a Watcher..."

Lilah rolled her eyes. She paced, restless, feet aching inside her five-hundred-dollar shoes. The pulse of fear at the back of her mind had subsided, and she kept it under control. Reminded herself that, his penchant for fumbling aside, Wesley Wyndham-Pryce had been the brains of Angel's organisation.

Although right now she'd like to know what the hell had happened to Angel. The one time she could actually use the undead bastard of a Champion of Good, and he vanished without trace, leaving her to dig in the kooky-sidekick reject bin.

"It's not like the Hellmouth," she said irritably. "It's not even really there. It's just... potentially there, until the Naminore comes into play. Then we're all entering a whole new shiny definition of 'screwed'."

"Yes. I did grasp that point." Wesley flexed his arched fingers. "Naminore... It didn't register to me at first - your pronunciation really isn't terribly accurate, Lilah - but I think I may have come across the name before. It's of Eastern origins, isn't it? It came up for auction in Persia

towards the end of the last century, after having long been thought lost, and swiftly vanished into obscurity again when acquired by an unknown - not so unknown anymore, I suppose - buyer. I never heard of any specific mystical purpose ascribed to it, though, it was more generally thought of as an ancient curio. A few rumours surrounding it which might reasonably be referred to as... well, as insane, to be quite honest. But I don't think even those mentioned anything about it being the key to a hell dimension, more along the lines of 'power beyond the dreams of mortal men'."

"Yeah? That would be because steps were taken not to advertise the fact. You know, your lot always underestimate the influence of my firm." She grinned at him. "Even you and your big old library of a photographic memory."

"Not eidetic, just exceptionally thoroughly trained." He stood and stalked to a bookcase; started pulling ancient bound volumes off it. The movement put his face in shadow.

Lilah pursed her lips. Ah, yes. She remembered now that Wyndham-Pryce senior had by all accounts particularly rigorous methods of teaching his offspring. In his defence, they seemed to have worked. She bit off a quip about how files and records could use him. So far repetitions of her job offer had resulted in a truly Arctic cold shoulder and an invitation to leave, and she couldn't handle a ten-degrees-below, pissy Wesley on top of the rest of the morning's shit. She contemplated the line of his back as he reached up to pull down books. It was rigid, tense. When wasn't it?

Oh. Right, yeah.

She wondered if Wesley suspected how much she knew about him, how far Wolfram and Hart's information on Angel's group of hangers-on stretched, how many of his weaknesses were catalogued in her current favourite bedtime reading; a big ring-bound file of prime Wyndham-Pryce screw-ups.

Lilah wasn't entirely sure this new incarnation would even care. How much of the information was defunct now?

"I have to make a phone call," she said. "You find some passages about the Naminore."

He turned and frowned at her, one brow lifting slightly.

"Research won't do you any good unless I call." She smiled. "Wait and see."

She lifted her cell phone to her ear, prodding the keypad. Linwood's tinny voice answered after two rings. "We're going ahead," she said. "Told you I could convince him. I'll need it lifted."

Linwood's response was pretty much as expected from their earlier debate. She pouted at him through the digital connection.

"We talked about this. If I could get him to agree, you'd contact them about removing the glamour. With respect, sir, it's not like it's serving any purpose at the moment. Whoever took

the Naminore clearly knows exactly what they're doing already, and if we don't have all the information we can hardly go ahead-"

She rolled her eyes at the reluctance still dragging his grudging response.

"And the other thing, too," she said, before he rung off. "As soon as possible."

Wesley was staring at her from behind a pile of books. "Dare I ask?"

"Give it ten minutes, and there's a birthday surprise coming your way. Oh, and the scrolls we have that are connected with the artefact should be delivered by courier anytime now."

"Scrolls?"

"Well, photocopies of them. The originals were, sadly, also stolen."

"Photocopies?" Wesley looked - the only word for it was 'scandalised'.

"Yeah." She replaced the cell phone inside her jacket. "Is there a problem?"

He shook his head. It was more wondering than affirmative. "You are aware, aren't you, that you redefine the term 'heathen'?"

Lilah was lifting the edges of her mouth to grace him with her most sumptuous smile when the tap on the door sounded. She went to answer it, ignoring Wesley's grunt of protest.

"Thanks," she said, taking the folder from the black-robed figure outside. She dug in her purse and passed across several notes. "Keep the change."

A noise of acknowledgement came from beneath the hood, where a blue-white chin was all that could be seen of a face. The figure dissolved away and she closed the door on its fading features.

Turned around to find Wesley directly behind her, arms folded, looking halfway between cross and bemused.

"Come on, darling." She salvaged dignity from her involuntary jump of surprise by standing on her toes to touch her lips to his, pressing the folder into his grasp. "Catastrophes to avert, lives to save. Does all this bring back memories yet?"

Two hours of thoroughly racked nerves later, Gunn had moved on from the scant online sources to the telephone and Angel's contact book, with its names and numbers scratched out in straight rows in the vampire's neat hand.

"...Persia, 1898...yadda, yadda... never seen again..." Fred read out between calls. "Guess that's how long Wolfram and Hart have had this thing. I could quote its history backwards by now. It'd be kinda nice to find something new. I mean, there's nothing here - no mystical purposes, no doom and will-lay-waste-to-large-chunks-of-Southern-California warnings. And

yet, up until the early 1900's there're references to people obsessively searching for it, and it seemed to be some sort of coveted artefact."

"Why covet if the thing didn't have some sort of power?" Gunn summarised.

Out of five mojo guys so far, two hadn't answered, one hadn't even recognised the name, and the other two had informed him with gentle humour that the object had no known power and someone was clearly playing him false with their tip-off's.

He was beginning to think they were right.

"What if it lost its power," Fred said, "and somehow, now, it's been returned?" She groaned and put her hands to her head in severe research-pain. Gunn winced in sympathy. Fred didn't like being research-gal. "But if that happened, surely there should be a reference somewhere to it happening!"

She stretched out flat on her back among the mess of books with a 'huff'. Only the seriousness of their task held back Gunn's smile.

"Well, we know it ain't because the info's in the books we can't read. Two of these guys I rung are listed as expert in a dozen crazy old languages, and they don't know any more than you've found." He tossed the phone aside. "I'm with the book guys. I reckon someone's yanking our chain."

"I - I don't know." Fred raised herself onto her elbows. "I got a feeling - you know. Something's not right here. I think maybe we should try call-"

"Don't say it. Do *not* say it." He heard the threat in his voice and tried to rein in the anger.

"But, Charles, this is serious. The whole city could be in danger. Millions of lives at stake, and we want to get stuck on personal grievances? I just think-" She broke off with a small gasp.

Gunn felt it too. A split second where the air was charged and seemed to hum with... something. Didn't feel electrical. Felt more like when Wes had banished that Thesulac thing, here in the lobby, back nearly two years now.

He wished he hadn't thought of that. "What the hell?"

Fred was climbing shakily to her feet. "That was mojo. Someone's working mojo. We might be too late-" She stopped, still as a statue, halfway up off her knees, staring down.

At the opened pages of one of the books.

"Oh, my." She swallowed a few times, pushed her glasses further up on her nose, picked up the book and bent her head to it. Gunn was already on his feet, moving to join her.

"What is it?"

"This... wasn't here before. There're whole passages in here that've just appeared. Just now. I swear they weren't here before. I *looked*. I couldn't have missed them-"

Her voice disappeared and she was reading, chin almost touching the pages, eyes huge behind her spectacles, and for all that this was Fred and he'd have said there wasn't anything could make her look other than pretty, he didn't like the expression on her face at all, nor the horror in it that grew every moment.

"This is bad," she said, finally raising her head, light glinting off her lenses. "Very bad."

"How bad? I mean, what-?"

"Well, it's kinda wrapped up in a lot of big old mystical words, but basically we're talking bad in the sense of 'LA's reality being written over by that of a pocket-dimension foretold as the manifestation of despair upon the Earth' bad," Fred said matter-of-factly.

She snapped the book shut, rounding off the speech with terrified smile of accomplishment.

3.

"So let me get this straight," Gunn said, running through the passages she'd read out. "LA's fate is to become a hell dimension that's some kind of temple to despair?"

"Well, I think the translation is 'ashes', or 'dust'... my Latin's not exactly fluent. But the references to despair, desolation... they're pretty clear throughout the passage. This is a Hell, a literal one, and if this ritual gets completed it's going to materialize in our dimension. Right here on the ground where this city stands."

"I'm so sure that should surprise me more than it does." Determination tightened his jaw. "We have to find whoever took this thing and stop them. Any of your books say *how* we stop them?"

"They're not my books," Fred near snapped at him. "They're Angel's. And Wesley's."

Even so, she was already flicking through pages marked with little yellow stick-it labels that would've had Wes in apoplexy at the thought of damaging the ancient paper, and Gunn swallowed comment on her sharpness. It wasn't anything new that she was resenting feeling helpless over the research role she feared she couldn't fulfil.

The minutes ticked past as he watched her, his thoughts tightening his chest. His legs felt heavy as he crossed to the phone, lifted the receiver. He listened to the ringing a long time before putting it down.

Fred was hunched over the books another half hour before she glanced up again. Gunn was alarmed to see damp streaks on her face.

"Fred?" He was half risen from his chair when her next words stopped him in his tracks.

"I don't think I can do this," she said. "I can't - I won't be able to perform the rites to neutralise or reverse the effects of this thing. This is heavy mojo, real magic stuff. Maybe Wesley could, but... I can't do this. It'd be like a kid playing with matches. You know, matches and fire and burning and explosions. *Anything* could happen-"

"And 'anything' could be worse than a demon hell dimension swallowing LA?"

She gulped back the rest of her tirade to consider a moment. "Probably not that." She sighed. "I'm all right, I'm just... never mind. I know we have to try."

Next instant she'd jumped to her feet and was pressed against him, fingers gripping his arms with a strength desperation must've stretched her slim body to its limits to exert. His gaze touched hers and he knew what she was going to say.

The panic flowed out of her like blood. "We should go, Charles. We should warn people and go, it's the most we can do. The best thing we can do. Get the city evacuated, if we can make them listen. If people thought there was going to be a major earthquake - a deadly epidemic - something, *anything* we could make them believe. We do that and we go, get out of here. Together."

"Fred." His voice didn't sound right. "You know the folks at the top in this city aren't about to do a full scale evacuation on the doom-crying of some two-bit PI agency-"

She rolled right on, deaf to him. "The destruction - well, not actual destruction in the destructive sense, I mean nothing's gonna be destroyed, not like with a big explosion or anything, it's just gonna be gone, but never mind that - it's only localised. We can get away, to... we can go to my parents!" A brilliant, terrible smile took over her face, then died again the next instant. "We can't do this alone," she whispered. "We'll fail, and we'll die. This isn't fighting monsters. It's dark, dark magic. I don't even know enough to know how dark, but nothing that requires the spell components of this ritual can be happy, fluffy magic. We need Angel, and Cordelia, and Wesley, and they're not here. We're just the backup team, Charles."

She must have seen his answer in his face. Her eyes were brimming.

"No," he said. "*No*. Exactly what we can't do is leave. You're right - Angel and Cordy, they aren't here. And, damn it, I went and called Wesley, and he's not picking up. But we're here, and maybe the only ones in a position to even try stop this happening. So we have to try."

Her head hung, hiding her face, and he couldn't read her silence. He was unnerved - this wasn't his Fred. It wasn't like her.

"Fred, it's what we do. And we're not the backup team now, we're the main team. The main team can't slink off before the match."

She buried her face against his chest and after a moment his T-shirt was dampening but he could feel her nodding into his breastbone. "I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have suggested doing that - the running and hiding. It's just we have so much to live for now, and we've had so little time. It hasn't been enough, and I don't want us to die."

Gunn pulled her closer and almost wished he could change his answer. His fight had had casualties before had he'd be a damn fool to think it wouldn't have them again. He didn't want to get her killed, not the girl he planned to live a long life with. But the words were out now, no backing off, and he knew they were the right words. Everybody else had gone, lost the mission and disappeared. They weren't going to.

He wanted, though - wanted to send her away on the bus to her folks. Needed her too much to do it. Whatever small skills she'd learned in research and spells were a lot greater than he would ever have at his fingertips.

Anyway, he was willing to bet she wouldn't be any more likely to leave without him than he'd be to abandon her.

"We're not going to die," he said. "We're gonna kick evil's ass. Just like we've always done."

He kissed the top of her head. "Maybe we'll get there in time not to even have to do the mojo. Slay the bad guy, business as usual."

Fred nodded again. Breaking the embrace, she returned to pouring over the books on the floor.

"It wouldn't be us, anyway, if we ran," she said, her hair falling forward covering her face from view. "We'd be some other folks, who looked like us and maybe talked and acted like us, a bit, but we wouldn't be us. And we'd have such a hard time trying to find ourselves again, maybe we never would."

"It's a remarkable feat. I would have said impossible. To blanket-glamour near every source in existence that mentions the true nature of an object-

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Sprawled out luxuriously in the back of the limousine, Lilah waved a hand in limp dismissal. There was only so much enthusing over this esoteric shit a girl could take. "It was done over a century ago. They could do mass blood-sacrifices back then without the rest of the world noticing and taking exception. I guess, in a sense, modern times are a real pain in the ass for you mystical types, right?"

He looked up from the photocopied scrolls to glare at her.

"Of course," she added, flicking the edge of the papers in his hands with a perfect nail, "The downside of that is the fact none of our people could actually remember all the details. Releasing the glamour entire could mean trouble, later."

"From the writings I came across about the artefact, anyone with any mystical inclination who sees those passages is probably joining your more nervous colleagues clearing out of LA as we speak," Wesley said. "But this does rather beg the question, how does whoever stole it know what to do with it?"

She nodded. "Could be that whoever they are, they're old enough to have been looking a very long time."

"That wouldn't seem to bode well." His tone was bored; perverse bastard. His gaze returned to the scrolls and the limousine slunk around a corner, making him snatch for them as they slid from his knees. Irritably, he said, "Could you possibly have found us some transportation that was, say, a little *more* ungainly and conspicuous?"

"It's a *Limo* in *LA*, Wesley."

"I suspect this isn't an area that sees many limousines, nevertheless."

"It's hardly my fault you seem to have a map to all the crummiest places in this city tattooed onto the inside of your big old brain."

He shrugged. "The ritual concerned with the activation of the Naminore requires a 'hot spot' - a location with natural stored potential for dimensional transference. I know of three in the

LA area. I apologise if they fail to have the decency to be in places you condescend to frequent." He squinted out of the window and tapped on the glass to the driver's compartment, to no avail. Looking pained, he began to search for a way to lower the barricade.

Lilah rolled her eyes and pressed the intercom. "Round about here will do." She glanced at Wesley.

He nodded grudgingly.

"Don't worry, I won't let on to any of our colleagues how out of place you feel with the high life."

"Because it would damage my fragile ego so much?" he said with sarcasm. "My family, if you recall, were not what you might call destitute. They just weren't so-" he gestured around him disdainfully "-so damned dramatic about it."

"No," she agreed. "Old money, right? Not like us upstart colonials. Polite dinners and courtesy and afternoon tea. Rules and belts and cupboards and a whole different world of repression. Forgive me if I wouldn't wanna trade."

Contrary to expectations, he just looked sour and didn't ask how she knew.

Well, that was one question answered, anyway - the psych reports on his reactions were nothing but obsolete waste paper. If they survived, she'd have to commission new ones. Couldn't let things fall behind.

The limousine had drawn to a halt but neither of them made a move to get out. When she was bored enough to break the silence, Lilah said, "Your father was an asshole. You know that, right? And, knowing who I work for, you must know I *know* assholes."

"I'll thank you to refrain from insulting my family, please," Wesley said tightly. He reached for the door.

"You need some serious therapy." Her disgust froze his grasp on the handle.

"This is not news." Wesley's fingers jerked down and a warm breeze sidled in through the door to stroke her knees. "I suppose you have your own analysts as well."

He got out and Lilah joined him. "Actually, no, we outside-contract those." She smoothed her skirt down. "But only the very best. We're very discerning."

He snorted, rolled up the papers and stuck them inside his jacket.

The street was dry and dusty, and she followed him along the sidewalk to a door in the side of a shaky-looking building. He pushed it open. Inside was dark and a faint tang of charcoal and some form of accelerant caught in her nose. She let Wesley go first down the staircase and returned to the limousine for a flashlight.

Cursing the debris underfoot as it stuck in her heels, she caught up with him at the bottom of the steps. He was standing, hands in pockets, in the midst of a large room with structures that might have been a bar and a stage before the damage reduced them to largely matchsticks. Place looked like it'd been nuked.

"Welcome to Caritas," Wesley said, his voice light and his face grim.

"The demon karaoke bar?" She'd heard of it. She couldn't imagine it was drawing many customers of late.

He didn't respond. He walked across to the stage and ran his finger through the dust on it, straightened up and shot a wry smile back at her. "Nobody's been here. On to the next-"

When they drew to a halt outside Los Angeles Public Library, Lilah pouted and said, "Don't we have enough books?"

Wesley was accustomed by now to the way she felt obliged to sniff and offer disparaging comment for every situation. He slid out of the limo and walked up to the main doors without so much as a glance in her direction.

They were blocked off by barricades and tape, with a sign reading 'closed - building maintenance in progress'. He peered through the glass panels, but couldn't see anything within, untoward or otherwise. Listened out for the sounds of hammering and machinery.

Foreboding filled him and the fear that had been distantly hovering finally thudded home. His lungs struggled to find oxygen and his heart sped up. *Feeling* surprised him. A lot of the time lately, he'd felt as though a thick veil stretched between himself and the rest of the world.

He pressed his lips into a thin line and stalked back to Lilah. "Call your team."

Crisis transformed her to all business. She pulled out her cell and dialled without debate. "Reyner," she purred when a tinny voice responded. "I need you here, like yesterday. We've found it. The Public Library. Yeah? Five minutes? I'll give you three."

She put the phone away and flicked her hair back; smiled at Wesley. There was something very false about her smile.

He recognised it in the next instant. She was afraid. Something of a revelation - Lilah Morgan who worked for Evil Incorporated, pitted herself against Angelus and placed herself in the path of countless demons and Billy Blim, also lacked for the brand of easy gung-ho physical courage that seemed to have surrounded him so prevalently since he came to California.

Wesley laughed, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Come here," he said, surrendering to the urge to find out what she tasted like while in the throes of a bout of humanity.

"Wesley, this would be a really bad time to be arrested for public indecency," she said, muffled as he grabbed her and buried their collective fear in lust.

He had her pinned against the hood of the limo, her tongue gouging the back of his throat, when his experiment was interrupted by someone tapping his spine with an object that was hard and smooth and felt alarmingly familiar.

Lilah made a choked noise, her eyes focused behind him, her hands fluttering against his shoulders.

They untangled, and he turned to face the half-dozen armed men who'd emerged from a badly-parked black van stretched diagonally across the sidewalk. In addition to the automatic rifles they carried, they were strapped with knives and stakes, their belts strung with ammunition. Oddly, while passers-by were staring, it was mostly at the two people who'd been sharing a kiss on the verge of being a public act of sex on the hood of a limousine.

The tall, shaven-haired man removed the end of his rifle from where it had nestled in Wesley's scar, mouth twitching in faint apology. He accorded Lilah a respectful "Ma'am" but lurking at the back of his eyes was a sarcastic, slightly apprehensive 'so good to see you're taking this life and death situation seriously'.

"Reyner." Lilah straightened her clothes and hair, visibly setting her composure back into place, and shot a glare at Wesley as though she suspected he'd deliberately planned to humiliate her before her subordinates. He filed it in his brain for future reference as another way to make her squirm.

She ran her glare around the troops and wordlessly pointed to the library, her posture full of command.

"Maybe not a good idea to burst in through the front door," Reyner said dryly. "There's only so much slack that the public's apathy and the inconspicuousness spells can take up, after all. Sewer access? Service doors?" He turned to his men. "Check it out."

While the troops marched off smartly to obey, Reyner waited with Wesley and Lilah in uneasy silence. Wesley took the case Wolfram and Hart, through Lilah, had provided from the back of the limousine and made the most of the excuse it provided, resting it on the car roof and checking through its contents thoroughly again. Five minutes later, one of Reyner's team returned to report sewer access.

The last thing Wesley had expected to be doing with his afternoon was following a group of heavily armed Wolfram and Hart thugs through the sewers to break into Los Angeles Public Library in order to save a city. But given the other options were drinking himself into a useless stupor in order to avoid thinking about the project of finding gainful employment for an ex-watcher, ex-demon-hunter, ex-fighter-for-the-forces-of-good that did not include demonic law firms, he failed to consider the turn of events to be anything very terrible.

In the darkness of the tunnels, he accidentally brushed against Lilah; felt her shudder through the layers of his clothing and her own. Closed his mouth on a snide remark about fear of the dark.

"Can't believe they just left. Walked out, left all that shit behind. Didn't even set the alarms." Charles' hands weren't on the wheel of his truck and his eyes weren't on the road. She nodded and said nothing, pointed at the oncoming minivan and hoped he'd remedy the situation. "Aw, man."

The truck swerved.

"Is it just me, or are there a lot of folks heading out of town for this time of day? Tell me there's not this many people in LA connected with the freaky and mystical who could've gotten the heads-up on this to do the mass exodus."

"I - I couldn't say. Maybe it's just normal traffic, and our brains are playing tricks 'cause we know."

The magic store where they'd gone to pick up the gear for the spell had been hurriedly closed. After a brief debate about the distance of the next nearest and the importance of not wasting any more time, Gunn forced the door. They'd left an anonymous IOU. Fred hoped the store didn't get looted, what with them having broken the lock and all. But maybe they had insurance.

Did insurers pay out for business premises being sucked into a hell dimension?

Charles was keyed up in a really bad way. His driving was scary.

"Where are we gonna get a human heart?" she asked again worriedly. He'd kept evading the question, and it wasn't making her any happier. "It doesn't say it has to be fresh. I mean, we could stop by the morgue, or - or even the graveyard."

"No time." He glanced at her and she didn't like what was behind his eyes, but she pointed back to the road and they at least returned to facing forward. "Sides," he said reluctantly, "Odds are good that whoever's performing this crazy demon-dimension ritual has one of their own to spare. We can hope. We can hope all the more that we don't have to cast this spell."

Fred gulped and stared at the road ahead. Forced her attention back down to the books.

"Where we headed?" Gunn asked.

"The library."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Well, logically, this kind of thing would work best at a spot where the borders between our reality and others were already thin. I can't translate all the information, but it makes sense that the Naminore should be activated on one of these hot-spots. And of those we know of in LA, the library is the one other folks are most likely to know about, and the one most possible to use discreetly for a major ritual of this kind. Also," she admitted, "I kind of really don't wanna go there so I know, you see, I know it's that one. Because last time I was there I

got sucked into a hell dimension for five whole years and I guess I really wouldn't want that to happen again."

"If it helps," Gunn said, "I ain't too keen, either. So it's gut instinct, then?"

"I guess you could call it that." She reflected upon his naiveté in the face of nature's basic laws.

The truck glided around a long bend and the weapons made their familiar din rolling around under the tarp at back. The plastic shopping bag at her feet spilled out some of its contents and she toed them back inside, biting her lip in disgust.

Maybe she should've told Charles all of what the spell would do. But... no. It was better that he didn't know. She could at least save him any part of the decision whether to go ahead or not, knowing...

She studied him, his eyes narrowed in concentration as he negotiated them through sharper corners and darker streets. Even the sun had gone behind rare thick cloud and the bad light made it harder to trace his features. She resented the traitorous sun, wanting to mark his face into her brain, in case... just in case.

She loved him; of that she was sure. Big, scary, obliterating love. Movie style epic love.

And yet, she couldn't help but wonder how much of their crazy devotion could be chalked up to desperation. The friend they'd lost at least in part by setting out upon this love... having paid a price like that, there had to be a real good reason, didn't there? It had to be fate. Powerful, brilliant, until-death love, because anything less would be unbearable.

She hated that tiny core of doubt, but how could she tell how *real* they were, when all this guilt got in the way?

If they died side-by-side fighting the good fight, would that make it all alright?

They turned onto the street leading to the library. Fred could've sworn her heart trembled inside her chest at the sight of the big building. She looked at her knees.

Charles whistled a high, sarcastic note as he drew them to a halt. "Well, look what we've got here. Why am I not surprised to see who's throwing this party?"

Fred followed his gaze - to the black limousine and van parked over the other side of the road.

4.

The ritual was taking place between ecology and horticulture, easy enough to find following the sounds of chanting. Lilah waited behind the safety of a bookshelf while Reyner's team ghosted out around the aisles to surround the anonymous robed figures.

The chanting, raw and discordant, grated on her nerves. The voice speaking didn't sound like it came from a human throat. She concentrated on her fingers, twisting them tightly in the fabric of Wesley's ugly jacket, and watched for the moment everyone fell into position.

Wesley was eying the action taking place around him, looking something of a restless fifth wheel, forced to stay back and watch others lead. He'd crossed his arms; she suspected to keep himself from fidgeting.

Lilah smiled and stroked her fingers down his sleeve. No problem, of course, with a take-charge attitude. If anything it was a pleasant surprise.

Nervous and irritable, darkly concentrating upon the tableau of the ritual in progress, he shook her hand off.

The circle of eleven figures hidden within dark robes was formed around a twelfth, and it was he who chanted. His robe was open, the hood hanging down his back. A tall man, with severe-cut greying dark hair, prominent cheekbones and nasty eyes. Lilah wrinkled her nose in disgust. Mortimer Chaney. That *hack*.

In front of him was a small altar, and upon it an oily black globe the size of a bowling ball that seemed to suck energy and light from the air around it. Scratches visible on its surface, too irregular to be decoration, too deliberate to be the random damage of years, might have marked out the shapes of runes though they looked like no symbols she recognised. The room seemed to grow darker the longer the artefact fixed her gaze. She realised the edges of her vision were blurring into malevolent black shapes that crept and shifted, and she tore her eyes from the Naminore an instant before it was ripped anyway from her view.

Her thoughts cleared. Time resumed its normal pace.

Wesley's hands trapped her face, painfully rough, and he frowned at her through their frame.

She pressed a finger to his lips, warning him against sound. He gestured frantically, and she understood it wasn't her phasing out that formed his principal concern. Chaney was approaching the end of the rite. Reyner and his team were waiting to make their move.

She nodded. It was time for an intervention.

Lilah stepped out from hiding, strode through the unmarked boundary of the circle, tapped her foot and cleared her throat loudly.

The chanting dried up with an unmanly squeak.

"Mort Chaney. Why doesn't it surprise me to find your dirty little fingers in this dark magic pot?"

There was a motion behind her. She heard Wesley grunt and a heavy impact. An acolyte slumped forward onto the ground almost at her feet.

"Next?" Wesley queried roughly. He joined her, casting a glance between herself and Chaney. "You know this... individual?"

"He's a chaos mage. I should've guessed. Who else would be dumb enough to summon a hell dimension down on top of themselves?"

"Good point."

Chaney drew himself up indignantly, evidently recovered from his initial shock. "I don't appreciate this denigration," he said pissily. "I think a certain Wolfram and Hart bitch and her new pet Watcher are overlooking the fact they're outnumbered six to one." He drew a long, serrated knife and took a step towards them.

A click sounded. Lilah smiled as Chaney froze.

"Ah. Actually, no," she purred, as seven men armed to the teeth with the best small arms money could buy melted out from the shadows. "But... before you get shot to ribbons, Mort dear, would you care to tell us how in the hell *you* got the heads-up about the Naminore? There's no way you were alive before the glamour spells were put in place. It's beyond the realm of mortal comprehension how you've survived sixty years on this Earth."

"Fifty-four," Chaney snapped. "And I happened to attend the death bed of an ancient member of my order, who - oh, screw you, Morgan." He folded his arms in a sulk. "You can stay curious. It isn't as if you don't intend to kill me anyway."

She shrugged. "I never made any promises. As for the rest, I can live with my curiosity."

Backing off - not that she had any qualms about the aim of the men, but she knew from experience that blood had a considerable splatter-distance - she raised a hand to signal Reyner. Simultaneously, Chaney leaped to take the last chance he'd ever get.

A broad gesture and an improvised piece of magery snatched the rifles from the hands of the team, but couldn't recall the bullets already fired. Chaney, swathed from thigh to opposing shoulder, dropped to the floor convulsing, his blood splashing up.

The Naminore seemed to swell hungrily at the baptism.

Lilah staggered amid a hail of bullets. Her heel gave, skewing her balance, and a weight slammed her down just as she'd thought she'd caught herself. The weight pinned her and breathed hot and heavy against her ear. Its hand covered hers, pressing her palm flat against the tiled floor.

"Don't move," hissed Wesley.

Her hero.

"Get off me, you asshole."

The last of the gunfire dispersed, Wesley rolled away and she sat up, gasping, in time to see him borne to the ground by a tackle from an acolyte obviously a linebacker in his spare time. She hurriedly retreated from the action to reclaim her hiding place behind the shelf, almost tripping over Wesley's abandoned case.

Three of the chaos acolytes and one of Reyner's men had been cut down with Chaney. The chaos mage's final spell had reduced the automatic weapons to piles of scrap cluttering the floor, and in the absence of firearms Reyner's men and the acolytes were skirmishing with manly enthusiasm. Lilah accorded them enough of a disdainful glance to establish the Wolfram and Hart team firmly in control of the affray, then left the boys to it.

She watched Wesley knock out the man who'd jumped him and stagger upright again, mildly scuffed. When he took a purposeful step towards an acolyte taking on one of Reyner's men, she briefly ventured from safety to pull him back.

"What are you doing?" he snapped, leaning dizzily against the shelf for all his protesting bravado. He produced a handkerchief from somewhere and dabbed at a cut on his hairline.

"At our level," she sniffed, "You have to learn to let others do the legwork. We don't fight. We have minions to do that. Damn it, Wesley, there are rules. You don't put your neck on the line doing the menial work."

Disgust twisted his expression. "You really are-"

"Yes, I really am. But look at the Naminore and tell me that there's someone else here who can stop it if you go get yourself killed."

"With Chaney dead and the activation ritual incomplete, there shouldn't be any danger-" He squinted at the excitedly pulsing black globe and frowned. "Although I daresay having an open conduit to a hell dimension in the middle of LA can't really be a *good* thing. I suppose other unpredictable effects are possible. But we can't get to it for bodies now anyway, and if I don't help, that man is going to die-"

A final twist on the henchman's neck caused him to explode in a cloud of green dust even as Wesley broke her grip. Another of Reyner's people jumped the offending acolyte and demonstrated his displeasure by jamming a knife into the man's back.

"See? Minions." Lilah smiled gleefully.

Wesley stopped in his tracks. "I..."

"Thought they were human? We started looking for alternative options after that first fiasco in your old hotel. These guys, the evidence destroys itself. No bodies. It's a sweet deal."

His open-mouthed stare gave her a warm, fuzzy glow inside.

Reyner and the final remaining minion were finishing off the last of Chaney's people. Lilah bent down to retrieve Wesley's case and pressed it into his hand.

"Come on, let's do what we came here to do."

Whoever had recently gone in through the sewer entrance at the back of the library hadn't pulled the cover back down right. Fred's wild guesses aside, at least that meant they'd probably got the right place.

"Real smooth," Gunn said as he yanked up the grille.

Fred slid lithely through before he could move to check out the waiting dark first, and called back up, "It's all alright. All nice and quiet down here."

Right; girl had lived in a cave for five years. Sometimes he forgot that. Forgot how the dark was home and the normal ingredients of human fears posed no threat, not rats nor spiders (he almost grinned at the memory of her being called up to rescue Cordelia or Wesley from the occasional eight-legged brute of the Hyperion's mutant population) nor the mere absence of light.

Gunn really didn't want to think about her acclimatisation to the stuff of nightmares over the course of five years. He slid down into the dark to land at her side, boots squelching on shallow dampness, and pulled the cover back over after them, setting it slightly out of place as he'd found it.

Neither did he want to think about the need to hope whoever was doing this ritual was human so he could cut out their internal organs for the last component of the reversal spell. He'd never killed a human being, leastways not so far as he knew and he hoped to God he knew correct, but the memory of that incident as a stupid kid stuck in his mind, Bobby's blood on his hands after the fight and the relief when he found out the other boy was gonna pull through.

Nuh. Not thinking about it.

They headed along down the sewer, Fred too quiet at his side and he knew she didn't want to do this either. Could hardly blame her for not wanting to go back to this place or anywhere like the other, and he had to be strong for her, and be ready to do what was needed. If they failed... if there was any possibility they really could end up in some other demon dimension... Damn. The girl had gone mad in a cave over the course of five years in a world where humans were cattle. And Pylea - Pylea hadn't been a *hell* dimension, not as such, not for real.

"Do you feel it?" Fred asked. "The air - it feels kind of heavy. Static. Like a thunderstorm."

Gunn did feel it. "You think we're too late?"

"I... I think if we were too late we wouldn't be here to wonder." Her voice was shaking. "But I think it's started. I think we're gonna have to do... I think we should hurry."

They quickened their pace, though not so much they'd alert anyone left on guard with the noise of their haste. He tightened his grip on the axe as they made their way up into the basement, patted the uncomfortable lump of the crossbow zipped inside his jacket.

There was nobody waiting there, but he jumped as much as Fred did when the unmistakable sound of gunfire ripped the air.

"Shit." Gunn looked sourly between his axe and her crossbow. "I'm guessing we're gonna have a serious armament problem."

"Who're they shooting at?" Fred wondered. Out of the sewers, she shivered nervously at his side. "Do you think it could be ritual shooting?"

He blinked.

"We should get moving." No choice. No chance now to get away.

"Right." Fred's left hand was bunched in the corner of his jacket, leaving him both hands free, her other hand holding the trembling crossbow ready. In the stark light of the library she was paler than even her norm.

Whatever the shooting had been about, it had stopped now, and they wove between aisles of shelves trying to track where it had come from. The air still felt charged and expectant; the faint noises of disturbance and murmurs of voices emanating from somewhere close by seemed to echo in it.

Gunn tried again not to think about the man he'd have to kill.

Then he turned a corner and his heart near thudded its last at the sight greeting him, 'cause things had just gone and gotten about a thousand times worse.

A circle of corpses and neon dust spread out around an altar with something on it that looked like the Evil Glowing Basketball From Hell, and standing over it muttering in some language that wasn't English-

Wesley added the mandrake root to the smouldering pile of spell components beside the Naminore on the altar, careful not to touch the night-black globe or let it draw his gaze too close. He didn't want Lilah having to snap him out of its trance a third time; twice had been tedious enough.

"Sheep's blood," he said. She handed him the vial and he poured it over the ashes, quenching the last of the fire. The smoke thickened and blackened, rising in truly unreasonable quantities. He choked and pulled out his handkerchief to press across his nose and mouth, and at his side, her complexion already a peculiar shade, Lilah crushed a sleeve against her lips.

After the initial gush the smoke dwindled to a slim chimney. The air around them cleared gradually and, with some relief, he allowed himself to breathe again.

All that needed be done now was read out the words, completing the spell to reset the balance of the dimensions, purifying the Naminore. He fervently hoped that his reinterpretation of the spell without the clause to consign its caster's soul to an eternity of despair would still work as intended.

Lilah was smiling and looking on approvingly as he took up the scroll - the original, taken from Mortimer Chaney's corpse, splattered with blood, a bullet hole piercing one corner - and began to read.

As the words passed his lips he could feel the power gathering in his own blood and bone, and the increasing effort it took to drag the words out at all. Despite his awareness of the spell's necessity and his pessimistic preconceptions of the issue as an already lost cause, he still had to fight down fears for the safety of his own soul.

Three lines from the end, the thought crept through his focus that Lilah had gone very still. His voice wavered on the guttural syllables of the next line, but he pressed onward. There really wasn't much left to-

Cold, sharp steel settled against his scar and silenced his determination.

"I really wouldn't," said a voice he recognised all too well, with an edge of danger in it that he could never recall having directed towards himself before.

He looked up from the scroll into the eyes of Charles Gunn. What he saw there dissolved his fear and reconstructed a familiar numbness in its place.

"Gunn." His voice in his surprise came out far more gentle than he could have intended, the result being that he spoke his former friend's name with a soft intonation not vastly different from how he'd said it a hundred times before, and surely there was something wrong there?

Gunn's face twisted in disgust and he didn't move his axe. A little way beyond him, hurt shock in her face, Fred was holding a crossbow to cover Lilah, Reyner and the other remaining non-human minion.

"I don't believe this. Man, I know you betrayed us, but - you're working for them now?"

Wesley felt a warm trickle down his neck from his scar. He took a breath and raised his head higher, baring his throat in obstinate challenge. He'd taken a bullet for this man once. Could Gunn kill him, after all they'd been through together?

He pondered his own approach to the question; the analytical interest where presumably there should be emotion. He said, "Outside contracted," and shrugged in faint apology, but couldn't hide his amusement at Gunn's horror. "You know how it is. You have to take the work where you can find it. I'm sure that maxim featured in your life on the streets on more than one occasion."

Gunn looked as though he'd very much like to take a swing. Evidently Fred thought so too, as her voice cut between them, "Charles, *don't*."

She took a step closer, careful to keep the crossbow on Lilah. Her eyes were wide and fearful. "We can't do this, Gunn," she said, something terrible and torn underlying her voice. "We *can't*."

"Can't do what?" Lilah asked. "Kill us? Of course not. You're the goody little two-shoes. Not even the ones who're vaguely dangerous."

Lilah did not know Fred and Gunn terribly well, Wesley reflected. Even Fred now glared at her as though she'd like nothing better than to use the crossbow in her hands. He'd seen them both more than ready to kill before.

"Lady, I will stake you through the heart if you don't shut the hell up, human or not," Gunn said.

Wesley leaned forward as much as the axe would allow to share a mocking confidence. "It won't help. You know she hasn't got one."

The hate in Gunn's eyes should've stung, and didn't.

His next words, however, threw Wesley's thoughts into confusion.

"Fred. Get the knife."

Fred really wasn't liking this. The evil lawyer woman was looking vastly entertained and Charles was looking like killing someone and Wes was looking vaguely puzzled and apprehensive in a manner that was all too much like the kind friend he had been rather than the traitor he'd become - and she knew what Gunn was thinking, she could see his intent in his eyes and face and every line of his posture and she had to stop this, stop it now, because they just *couldn't*-

"Gunn, don't," she said again. She had to break through to him. "Get away from him. Let me talk to him. Wesley! Wesley, you can't be working for these people. I know you meant to save Connor by taking him, even if you betrayed Angel, and I know that doesn't excuse anything, but-"

"I know," he interrupted, eyes cold now, voice rough and pitiless and not anything like she'd ever heard him sound before. Even when he'd been mad and trying to kill her with an axe, his voice had stayed scarily soft. "The road to Hell is paved with them. Let's not do this. Save it, Winifred."

"No, no, we have to do this. We can't save it because we have to save you, because otherwise he's going to kill you so, you see, it's not like there's gonna be another chance."

"Fred." Charles' tone was annoyed. His hands shifted on his axe. "I need that knife. This thing, it's a bit unwieldy for delicate organ-extraction."

Lilah's eyes were wide, impressed. "Wow. You really would kill him, wouldn't you? This guy who was your friend two years, fought beside you, even took a bullet for you... I think our people may have seriously underestimated you, Charles. We never did extend you a job offer, did we?"

"I said shut the hell up, you poisonous bitch." Gunn's eyes left Wesley a second to glare at Lilah.

Wesley grabbed the shaft of the axe with both hands, that tatty old bloodstained scroll scrunching between his palms and the wood. "What the hell's going on? Kill me? You're here to kill me?"

Even as a traitor, the question was taut with disbelief, as though he couldn't imagine any reason they'd do that. Fred had a cold feeling beginning to gather in her insides - not just the fear that had been there before, the fear at what they'd have to do, but the feeling that something wasn't right. They could be making a terrible mistake.

"Charles, I think maybe-" She jumped and gave a shriek, her fingers fumbling, coming close to shooting Lilah by accident as the remaining Wolfram and Hart minions took advantage of Gunn's preoccupation struggling with Wesley to make their move. Gunn took a hand off the axe to reach inside his jacket; withdrew the crossbow there and shot without hesitation, casting the weapon instantly aside as Wes came close to wresting the axe away. Fred gasped as a black-clad man who'd looked entirely human dissipated into greenish dust, and spun around to loose her own crossbow at the second.

"Crap," muttered Lilah.

She didn't waste time trying to reload, but snatched the knife from their bag of spell components instead, brandishing it at arms-length. She'd killed things with a knife in Pylea. They hadn't been human, she didn't know what it would feel like to kill a human, but she knew how to kill, the feel of the blood and the heartbeat dying beneath her fingers. Lilah must have seen; she kept her distance.

Fred risked a glance at Charles. Wesley had forced the blade back from his throat while he was distracted, but Fred knew from almost a year's worth of practise sessions that Gunn was the stronger, the result of the fight inevitable.

"Your man's got better instincts than you do," Lilah called over to Wesley, seeming oblivious to his danger.

"I am so not his man... in any sense," Charles said, getting flustered at the double-entendre, to skanky-lawyer-lady's obvious delight.

"Lilah. It's not the time for head-games," Wesley snapped. "Gunn, Fred, please - I don't think you realise what we're doing here, how crucial this is. Let me explain-"

"Wes-" The moment stretched, Gunn squinting at Wesley as though trying to find something in the bleakness of that barely-recognisable face. Then the moment snapped, and Charles regained the axe by unexpectedly jerking the shaft forward to crack across Wesley's jaw. He

backed off, spinning the weapon, and glared at Lilah. "Enough of this shit, lawyer lady. You two, both of you step back from your Souvenir From Hell snow globe. *Now.*"

"Wait, you don't understand." Wesley followed, his movements unsteady and his hand clasped to the side of this face like he had to hold his jaw together. "Fred," he turned to her instead. "You'll listen to me-?"

"Don't touch me!" In her haste to retreat, she tripped over the bag with the spell components, sending its contents scattering. Wesley looked down and froze.

When he looked up again it was in unquantified shock. "Those are - you were going to-" He was down on his knees, rummaging through the bag before she could do anything to prevent him. When he surged up she saw the book clutched in bone-white fingers. "*Garvensal's Compendium?*" he choked. "The spell in here - do you have *any* idea what it would have done to you?"

It broke her heart that he had such passion left in his fear for her. More so that Charles was watching, and now he would *know*.

She nodded dumbly, unable to lie.

"What's he talking about?" Gunn demanded.

Lilah's peal of laughter split the air. "You mean you two, you came here to save the day? Oh, that is so priceless..."

Gunn rounded on her. "I am gonna kill you the next time you open your mouth." He turned back to Fred. "What's he talking about, 'what that spell would've done to you?'"

"I-I-" she stammered.

"The price for working that particular form of the rite, as indeed with all of the original forms, is the caster's soul," Wesley said tersely. "I suspect she wanted to spare you the choice, Gunn." He paused, then his whole body flinched as though he'd been punched. "You thought that *I-*"

"You can keep your mouth shut, too," Charles began, before the words sunk in and he turned back to Fred with pain in his eyes. She looked away, unable to face it. "You were gonna-"

He'd come so close to her he'd forgotten about Wesley, who dived for the altar, tearing open the crumpled scroll in his hands. Words ripped from his mouth. The language wasn't English or Latin, but she recognised what he said verbatim.

They were the words she'd been practicing in her head most of the way over in the van.

Lilah moved to help Wesley, latching onto Gunn and trying to hold him back.

The last lines of the reversal spell. Inside Fred's brain, the world re-ordered itself with a neat *click*.

"Charles, wait! No!" she yelled, and leaped to help Lilah. "You mustn't stop him!"

Their strength wasn't enough to hold Gunn back, as he reached over the altar to grab Wesley's throat, strangling the last of the words into silence, yanking forward as Wesley's eyes widened in fear and he gurgled a warning.

The Naminore, caught between them, flashed a blaze of liquid darkness at the contact, and Fred screamed as the world disappeared around her for the second time in her life.

PART 2**5.**

A breeze tossed particles against her skin. She blinked, squinted and shielded her eyes against the barrage. Vision didn't help much. She saw only the same alien landscape stretching out around in all directions.

A floor of grey ash, softening and giving beneath her heels.

A featureless grey-white sky soaring up into a giddy eternity.

A forest of pillars irregular intervals apart; uneven dark stalks like dead and petrified trees rising to scale the same endless heights as the sky.

No sign of end or interruption upon any horizon.

She didn't need Wesley and his books and painstaking research to tell her this place was a shrine to desolation.

Lilah walked through the dust, through the pillars, head down to avoid the vertigo of looking up, searching for - anything. Anyone. Mainly Wesley. The footprints she left in her wake sagged back into the dust of the ground, vanishing within seconds, and this place seemed as soundless as though she'd been deafened. Her feet made no noise, the wind no more than that. She could feel her heart pounding, but couldn't hear it. Her mouth was dry and her throat ached with fear.

The wind swirled the dust in unnatural little eddies and currents, spiralling, drawing pictures in the air. Its touch slid down her neck and shoulder like the caress of some slimy, living thing, and she shuddered, backed into a pillar and flinched from the texture of leathery dead flesh.

Something cold whispered through her brain.

//Lilah...//

She was in a goddamned hell dimension. Damn Wesley's little ex-friends. And damn him, too, for letting this happen.

Except they already were, all of them, damned. A giggle escaped her and she put a hand to her lips to keep in the hysteria. Realised only then that she'd heard sound.

She opened her mouth and shouted.

"Wesley!"

The cry hit the air, blazed through it like the passing of a supersonic jet direct overhead, fractured and spun around her. Its echo seemed to linger an eternity. By the time it ended she was on her knees in the dust, hands pressed over her ears, sobbing in soundless dry heaves.

Fuck.

She staggered up again, refilled her lungs determined not to be defeated.

"*Wesley!*"

Back on her knees, her skirt covered in dust, her head spinning.

"Goddamn it." She got one foot under her. A hand caught her by her hair and slammed her face-down in the dust.

Glass broke and she heard it shatter, felt sharp points nick her exposed skin. More caught in her clothes as she fell and were rammed through the fabric into flesh, trapped between her body and the floor as she hit.

The ground felt soft, like carpeting.

"He's not coming. You can't do anything without a man to answer your beck and call, can you?"

She choked on the dust she'd been spitting. She knew the voice. But he couldn't be here, any more than the carpet or broken glass-

He pulled her over, his hands to the throat she was still trying to force air through.

She gaped up and saw him standing over her/gaped up and saw nothing but the landscape of dust and columns and sky.

It wasn't like she should be surprised to find him a resident of her own personal Hell.

"Gavin, you f-"

A fist landed on the right side of her jaw, backswung to catch her left cheek. "Now, Lilah, you know I won't tolerate that." He yanked her around like a toy on a string and planted an elbow in her eye.

And yeah, she'd been here, done this (where the hell had her goddamn office come from?), knew the ending. Struggling didn't prove any more successful than it had the first time around as he dragged her to the desk, curled a hand through her hair and slammed her forehead into the edge of the wood, and the daze that followed reduced her to sickly-remembered passivity as he draped her across the desktop and ran a hand up her skirt.

"This isn't real," she said, her voice blurred, and she hadn't said that last time. "You get that? You're not even real, you little shit, you're just a re-run."

"You know how long I've been waiting to screw you, Lilah?" he breathed in her ear, oblivious, one hand curled under her back, the other busy elsewhere. Her gasp got stuck in her throat and choked her. "Everyone else gets to screw you. The firm gets to screw you. Why should I be left out? Come on, Lilah, it's not exactly an exclusive venue."

Her hands flailed to push him off, and he slapped them away like butterflies. They fluttered over the surface of the desk-

No!

"*Shit, no, you bastards!*" the words wrenched from her throat, screamed up into the grey sky and the empty world and all the nothing that was in front of her. Her hands touched nothing, her back ground into the desk and there was *fucking. nothing. there.* "You fucks... you bastards... what the hell is this...? this wasn't what happened... didn't happen... fuck, this didn't happen... where's the file on the desk... the *file*... where's the fucking file... I know there was a file... *I picked it up and I put a dent in the bastard's skull that had him hospitalised a week and I broke three of his ribs and whythefuck is this happening-!*"

Someone grabbed her by the shoulders, pulled her away from Gavin, slapped her across the face and threw her back into the dust.

"You little *whore.*"

"Wha-?" Her whole body was raw and she couldn't form words properly with her battered mouth.

Where the hell was Gavin? Because she wanted him back. Fine, her personal eternal torment was Gavin Park's scrawny little prick, so bring it on. Like, *now.*

She stared up at the owner of the accusing voice and shook all over. Noticed numbly how the oily-fingered breeze blew dust on the ground away to reveal tiles, their pattern distinct and half-forgotten, and sculpted the walls of an old hallway. "You're. Not. Here," she articulated with all the clarity she could muster.

Mother was crying. She'd always been good at that, in both her incarnations.

This version was younger as Lilah had almost forgotten her ever being, younger but still old, blue-checked house dress scraping the tiles, collecting up dust. "You'd prefer I wasn't. That I couldn't see how filthy you are. Offer yourself to any man who could pull you up another step on your glorious career. Was it worth it, Lilah? Now you've gotten so far, was it worth it? I knew you were dirty. I knew it ever since I came back and found you with him..."

A hallucination. It had to be. A hallucination, to know who she was and what she'd done. And surely she could tell a hallucination to *fuck off-*

"I suppose you won't believe me now any more than you did then that it wasn't actually by choice," she croaked. "I guess who cares anyway, when all the others were? Water under the bridge as they say and, in fact, he did me a favour. Taught me something about life, as the cliché goes."

"Don't you talk like this to me. You're still my daughter."

"Yeah? When did that happen? Last time I had a conversation with you when you remembered my name it featured considerable protest to the contrary. But, hell, you know I wasn't going to be poor. So what else was I going to do after dad died when you got with the fucking Bible Bunch full-time and didn't give a damn that the money was drying up while you were out crusading?"

"While you were out with your dirty men." Her bony hands wrung in the fabric of her dress. "Damning yourself."

"Yeah? You never did understand that it's all just skin. I was just trading in skin. Skin and bone and flesh and blood but, hey, I signed away my soul too, so I guess you were right about me after all, all those years. Does that make you happy?"

"I'll see you repent your sins if it's the last thing I do." Mother bent down and Lilah was forced to stand on bruised and aching thighs that shivered under her weight, the shaking memory of a fifteen-year-old's legs. "I'll take you to the priest, and you'll repent."

"The hell I will!" Lilah screamed and struggled against muscles powered by single-minded faith. "Get the hell off of me, you crazy old woman, get the hell off and leave me alone. You're not my fucking mother. In case you forgot, *you forgot me*, you *bitch*, you spent your life trying to make me someone else and when you couldn't you tried to forget I existed and then you finally fucking did! That money you hated so much is what kept you alive for the past six years and you don't know who the hell I am so leave me alone I'm not going with you and don't you fucking pretend you forgot me for any other reason than because you WANTED TO-"

He had to find Fred.

Was beginning to doubt the possibility of ever finding anything, here. Place was creeping him out. Ashes and weird-ass pillars leading from nothing to nothing and the kind of silence that made him want to yell like a crazy man to fill it.

As hell dimensions went, though - he could imagine worse options. No sign, at least, of fire and brimstone. Not much of anything.

Unreality pervaded the place, yeah; the pillars felt weird and the dust was kinda creepy in itself, too much like funerary ash for comfort, and the air he breathed lacked the city fumes of LA but was somehow dead and stale all the same.

And Fred... she might be here somewhere, alone, maybe in trouble, maybe afraid. Because of him.

Not just because of him. God *damn* Wesley for a stinking traitor.

He remembered the confused instant before the world fragmented into darkness and he found himself in this dead place. Fred had been hanging on his arm and yelling something, and the lawyer bitch on his other arm, but they'd disappeared and there'd been no sign of Wesley either. The demon eight-ball had touched them both - his chest burned where it had. If he was here, so was Wesley. Maybe the women.

He couldn't deal with the idea of Fred being here. Not after Pylea. The thought sped his steps through the desolate monotony of a world.

Through the swirling dust and something like the heat-haze of a nonexistent sun that permeated the air close to the ground, he caught a glimpse of a figure up ahead, before they were lost again in the forest of pillars.

"Hey!" he yelled, not liking the way his voice bounced back at him with volume way past the threshold of pain. He staggered and covered his ears, pressed his lips together and started running.

He was drawn on by sightings of the figure - slim, dressed in dark clothes, could have been Fred, too distant to tell for sure - who seemed to hold an impossible lead considering their meandering pace looked barely a saunter.

"Charles Gunn. Been a while since I saw you 'round these parts."

He froze. Behind him, leaning against a pillar-

"George? Man, you're dead. Love to chat and catch up on times, but I got better things to do than talk to some hallucination."

Breathing heavy, he turned his back. Whoever he'd been following still flitted in and out of view up ahead. He needed to catch them-

"Narrow of you, brother." George tagged at his side; he had Gunn's axe in his hand and it dripped blood that looked red and human. George had a pair of small puncture wounds in the side of his throat and wore his collar turned down as though to show them off. "I need to get seeing to the rights of dead black Americans, 'cause they're being seriously overlooked. Would've thought you could get behind that."

Gunn's skin crawled as the spectre followed him through the dust. Not threatening, but creepy as hell. Shadowed by his own personal ghost.

Wasn't real. Couldn't be real. Damn hallucination-rife hell dimension.

He wondered whose blood was on the axe.

"It's all right, dog," George said. "You know I forgive you, right? I wouldn't blame you for what happened. We could've waited. You had places to go, people to see. Your new group. They do good work, I heard. Or they used to. Not so much lately, with the in-fighting. You got my sympathy though, man. Never a good thing when families start to break apart."

"Never is," Gunn said.

The slim figure he followed glanced back but he couldn't make out any more detail than a white face, dark hair.

"You're cold, man..."

He quickened his pace. After a moment, he realised he was leaving George behind. The *thud* in his chest ousted transient relief at getting rid of the spectre, but when he paused and turned, it was too late. There wasn't anything there to go back for.

He twisted his eyes again to front to see the figure tantalisingly near. A last burst of running and he rounded a pillar to plant his hand on a slim shoulder.

"Hey, thank God I found-"

Wesley spun, shaking his hand off. "Don't touch me, please," he said with that kind of polite aloofness that had always pissed Gunn off the most.

"*Shit.*"

Wesley gifted him a disapproving frown. "You left me behind, found the new thing, moved on." His English voice made ridiculous an attempt to mimic Gunn's speech patterns. "You don't get to kiss and make up now."

Gunn did what he pretty much always wanted to do to Wes in his smug-ass superior mode and had wanted to do a whole lot more the last couple of hours and swung a fist that slammed the superiority off his face. "You bastard. You got us into this shit."

"Responsibility really is an alien concept to you, isn't it?" There was blood on Wesley's lip and his tongue crept out to clean it away, unperturbed. Gunn stared at him a long moment.

"You ain't Wesley."

Wesley was pissed as hell right back at him at the moment. Wesley would have hit back.

"I know. It's fascinating, really. The temporary reality of these memory projections... this is really how you pigeonhole me inside your head?"

"Man, I'd forgotten how much you used to talk."

"Ah, yes. Thank you. I believe I may have been meandering from the subject a little." His eyes filled with hurt accusation and - irritatingly - pity and he crossed his arms over his chest. "I know you can't help it, but I really am terribly angry. I thought we were friends, but... you ceased to care so quickly. Like a snap of the fingers, and with a soul in your heart. But how could you not? You've seen too much. You've done things, and lost people. Too many things, too many people. Most before I ever even knew you."

"Damn, Wesley. What was that again? Think I drifted off there." This was illusion only. He wasn't about to let a phantom manipulate his emotions. He'd find the real Wesley, who had to be around here somewhere, and beat *his* face in.

He started to walk away. He'd left George behind, he could outrun Wes too.

Wesley's voice trailed him. "You think you can live in this world, pretend the killer in you and the hole in your heart doesn't matter. You can have the normal life, the normal girl. Pay taxes, grow old, be the good citizen. But you and I know better, don't we? I've seen how much you enjoy the fight."

Gunn stopped walking and rounded on him. "Shut the hell up, you fake."

"I'm not the only illusion here. You know of course she's hardly normal, don't you? There're all the physics degrees and the five years in a demon dimension, for a start."

"And that's what this is about, right? Well, she picked me, not you. For all your fancy talk and your big brain and the fact you both have so much more in common and she'd probably be - she picked me, all right?"

"Hardly the point I was making, as a matter of fact. But never mind, we're moving on now, anyway. Oh, and isn't that a wonderful irony? You've learned to move on so well, Charles, to accept loss and move forward, you forget that sometimes it's just the same as giving up."

"Damn it-" Stop. Swallow. Not real.

"How long do you think it will take for you to move on from her? If she dies, if you get her killed? Or will that be the last stroke? Do you perhaps see her as your *connection to humanity*?" Not-Wesley barked a long, bitter, laugh that echoed around the pillars and sky to surround them on all sides.

"I said shut the hell up!" Gunn's temper snapped, pressured by the amused tick of a sardonic smile and a world full of maddening hollow laughter, and he was shouting into Wesley's face. Wesley looked undaunted - fact, Wesley looked like he had every intention of keeping talking until someone beat him into unconsciousness.

Damn. He breathed, tried to get a grip. Illusions...

"I always thought we were alike, Gunn. You lost your Reason, but you kept on fighting. Because the fight was more important. But was it really the fight, or was it the kill?"

Gunn knocked him down and he kept talking. Hit him again. Again, and still with the words. He wasn't even sure they were coming out of Wesley's mouth any more or forming as heard in his own brain. His ears were full of bees and he couldn't see his adversary's lips move. Wesley wasn't making any effort to defend himself, but Gunn didn't give a fuck. Hits that should've knocked him cold weren't even making enough of an impression to break the flow of the goddamn words.

George's axe - his axe - was on the ground at his feet, the blade glinting as dust shifted over its surface. He snatched it up, brought it down.

Wesley still talked with his head half-severed from his neck.

He kept swinging the axe until the shape on the ground was unrecognisable and he was splashed over with red like he'd bathed himself in the stuff. It was only then the horror jumped him and sucker-punched him to his knees in the blood and dust. Hands to his face - they were wet. Streaked his cheeks and jaw like war paint as he pulled them down.

Gunn stared at his hands; the red gloves they wore.

"That wasn't real," he said aloud. He heard his voice shake. He repeated the denial, a yell the empty world tossed back at him distorted.

"Hell, no, big bro," the voice of Reason at his back said. "But I sure hope you're not gonna try deny it might as well have been."

She had been here years.

No. Not years. No? Maybe years?

She didn't know how long it had been. A long time.

She had been here a long time.

Here was desert, or at least something quite like desert. It wasn't warm, and its floor was ash instead of ground rock particles, and there was no sun, no seasons, no day and night, columns like some big old Roman temple except the temple was the world because there was no roof, no floor only ground and sky. There were no animals to hunt, no vegetation to feed on, unlike Pylea, but she didn't seem to need nourishment in this place. She wasn't even sure the air was - well, air.

Likewise there were no green people or grey people or hairy people or spiny people to hunt her, but there was so little else she missed even those. Man - or woman, she supposed with a giggle - couldn't live on a vacuum.

Vacuum, desolation, despondency... despair. A world of emptiness, a temple to despair. She remembered that phrase, coming back to her in a flash like she'd read it somewhere, or maybe heard it spoken.

She smiled at the memory of books and talk.

Perhaps she was dead. Perhaps dreaming. Pylea had been a dream, hadn't it? Or had that been the other place?

She remembered-

There had been a dark-skinned man, a good man, who held her and loved her and said sweet things, and they lived together and ate together and fought evil together. Before that-

Other faces. Another man... not really a man at all; a hero, a monster, a knight on a white charger. A princess, brave and funny and kind, and kinda scary too some of the time. One of

the green people, only not like the other green people who didn't tend to wear bright colours and burst into song.

A third man. Clever and soft-voiced and nice. Until he wasn't.

She caught them in glimpses among the jumble in her head that lacked logic or order. A frustration - logic and order turned the universe around, didn'tyknow, and she'd an inkling her brain used to have a significant reliance on them too. In their absence, things fell apart. Chaos and madness were no good, no good at all.

A bright flash of darkness - and see, logic had packed its bags outta this place, or how could darkness be bright? - had put an end to the dream world where things made sense and had brought her back to this one.

She slunk through the endless landscape, cowering down behind columns, ducking between them. Nobody was in sight and she was sure she would've looked pretty odd to them if anyone had been, but you never knew. She'd learned that, yes. Sometimes the things you saw weren't real. Sometimes you were seeing so many things that weren't real you didn't see the things that were real at all.

For all she knew, the denizens of this place could be invisible. Strings of calculations and theory poured through her head at the idea - how would invisibility work? The calculations came as natural as the animal caution that imbued her movements.

Dust and dust and dust... how long had she been journeying?

She was lost. She knew she was. She was lost and she needed to find her way back again. Back, back... back to the grim kind man from the world she'd dreamed?

That sounded right. She caught a tantalising glimpse of a name and pounced, tracked, hunted it down.

Gunn. Gunn, his name was Gunn. Such a strange name. Not a name but a thing. A - she ransacked the disarray of her brain for the right image. A weapon. Like a crossbow, but not at all really.

It fit the man in her thoughts very well.

So, Gunn. Maybe he was lost, too. If so, she had to find him. He'd never been lost before and he wouldn't understand what to do, wouldn't be able to look after himself so well as she knew how. She would be able to show him.

She searched through the columns, peering around, keeping her caution. It was like a forest. Or a parking garage. Darkness and cement pillars. She giggled and hushed herself as she heard the sound fall peculiar on the air. Yes, just like a parking garage, only it wasn't dark here.

Well, only on the inside.

Inside...

No sun in the sky for illumination. The light wasn't real.

She dropped into a crouch, chasing her thoughts. The dust tickled at her knees.

Not real not real not real not real...

She was doing it all wrong. The dream was to blame. It had got into her brain, dulling her instincts, making her stupid.

She closed her eyes, tried to close her ears, block treacherous outside stimuli that could be faked. *Really felt* instead of just seeing, listening, feeling, and felt them all around her, not so far away at all. And so scared, so much fear and anger and hate, and she had to-

Fell through a rabbit-hole in reality and reached out and touched-

"Gunn?"

He was laying into the ground with bloodied fists, struggling as though against an opponent. She scrambled to his aid, aimed sharp kicks where the head of the invisible attacker ought be.

"Get off him! Don't you hurt him!"

Her kicks failed to connect. As he continued fighting, she cautiously went down on hands and knees and felt for his opponent, and her hands passed through air.

Gunn drew to a halt and looked up at her breathing raggedly. "Dead," he said, voice raw, face stretched in horror.

"Dead?" A revelation, as the lost look in his eyes told her she wasn't the one seeing things - or not seeing things - here.

She ran her hands again through the area he stared at so blankly, sifted sand through her fingers. Picked two handfuls and let it run out of her palms in rivers. The living wind caught some of it on its way to the ground and abraded it against her skin.

"There's nothing here," she said. "Look. Just dust. It wasn't real. Come with me, please, we have to find our way."

She let the last of the dust trickle away and stood. Held her hands out to him, for all the use her strength would be in heaving his tall frame upright if it didn't want to cooperate.

"He wasn't real?"

"No. I don't think anything here is. You haven't hurt anybody."

"Nuh-uh. Doesn't matter. He's still dead. The others, too. It doesn't matter whether they were real or not, 'cause they were real to me when I killed them."

He was on his feet now, but backing away from her. "You need to stay away from me, girl. You need to. There ain't nothing I do but kill. Sticking with me is the best way to get yourself

made a corpse."

"You know that's not true." She leaned forward to grip his shoulders, held on tight when he flinched back. Another name broke free of the morass in her brain. "Charles. Charles... you have to believe me. You're a good man. You wouldn't hurt me."

She remembered saying those words to somebody else, who'd gone on to prove her wrong, and bit her lip to stop the thought running out of her mouth.

He was staring at her, blinking as though really seeing her for the first time. "Fred?"

"Yes!" She jumped in excitement. She'd known she had a name, for all that she'd lost it again in this place. She hugged him for giving it back to her. "Yes, it's Fred, Charles, it's Fred!"

He was laughing with a strained wonder, and the sanity was beginning to return to his eyes. Fred loosed her grip to lean back and take in a better view of his face.

"It's this place. It tricks you and it gets into your head but it's not real. You have to remember that it's not real and then we'll be all right. Whatever it tricked you into thinking, you have to not think about that, okay? Okay?"

"Fred, you-" She saw the edges of his smile fall. "Oh, man, no. You - what did this place do to you?"

"What?" She heard her voice shrink and then her throat swallowed it up completely and she looked down at herself, clad in rags, lifted a hand to her face and remembered she'd had glasses there but they weren't there anymore, which explained why the world was blurry...

She felt his hands on the side of her face and he lifted her head up. She tried to smile at him. It came out wrong. Her thoughts broke loose and followed. "No, no, no, no... I - I'm crazy, aren't I? I'm crazy again and you don't love me any more now I'm crazy. And I mean, that's okay, 'cause who would, and I can't blame you for that..."

She felt him stiffen through the contact of his warm palms. "Damn it, Fred. 'Course I do. I love you crazy, I love all of you, no matter what. It doesn't matter."

"Really? I mean, would you still love me if I had no arms or legs?" She squinted at him, curious at this declaration.

"Baby, I'd love you if you were a brain in a jar."

She giggled as her crazy brain in her head dug up the memory of that movie. "You really mean that?"

"Sure I do. No matter what. And things'll get better, just like they did before. I already know how strong you are. You gonna be all right?"

She nodded brightly. "Are we escaping?"

"Yeah," he said. "We're getting out of here. We're gonna go find that bastard Wesley and make him get us the hell back to LA."

Connor was following him, slashed throat gaping to expose muscle and cartilage, sometimes an infant crawling impossibly on limbs not developed enough, sometimes that wild teenage boy, sometimes other ages in between, a multitude of small children feral from the hell dimension where he'd consigned them.

Sometimes he blinked and it wasn't Connor, it was Faith, another child of the dark, her eyes like holes and a shard of glass in her hand, gripped tight enough to drip her own blood onto the dust floor. The blood faded away upon landing.

And sometimes it wasn't Connor or Faith. Should he even wonder why all the worst horrors of his life seemed to revolve around these spectres of damaged childhood?

Wesley knew how this place worked, knew that Connor and Faith and that other small boy weren't real, understood the forces that manifested them. It didn't mean they didn't bother him, but - he, of all of them, had to maintain some measure of control in this place. He had the knowledge, knew the rules, knew the theory that might take them home. He suspected the darkness in him ran too deep to permit this dimension full reign over it. He couldn't afford to let go.

It had taken too long as it was to fight free. If the others had also been transported, they could already be lost by now.

"Lilah?"

She was curled in on herself, head buried, arms around her knees. Huddled, rocking back and forth, back and forth. Her hair was in disarray, all trace of style gone. Her neat skirt had become a garment with all the elegance of a grey sack and was scrunched up by her posture, revealing a slice of buttock with a distractingly ugly red weal branded across it. He only recognised her by the process of elimination that confirmed she was certainly neither Gunn nor Fred.

She seemed not to hear him repeat her name.

Wesley knelt and firmly untangled her arms, caught her head between his hands and lifted it. "Li-"

She was just as unrecognisable when he could see her face. It was swollen, bruises darkening her flesh, one eye shut.

She reached out shaking fingers and dug them into his arms, pushing him away. The noise that crawled up out of her throat could only be called a whimper. Her terror of his touch was unmistakable.

He had ice water in his veins, but that touch felt like it was burning him, hot and fierce as a homemade flame-thrower cobbled together from lighter and aerosol spray, and he tried to drop his hold, but she in turn was trying so hard to push him away he couldn't extract himself from her grip.

The terror, the bruises, and he was almost sure he'd been caught up again, all this far too near to the stuff of his own nightmares. Almost sure. It would have been more convincing had it been anyone but Lilah.

"Lilah," he snapped. He couldn't slap her to bring her out of it. That would hardly *help*, even if there had been any patch on her where he could do that without causing her undue pain. "Lilah! It's Wesley. Whatever it is you've experienced in this place, it wasn't real. It isn't real, none of it. You and me and quite possibly Winifred and Gunn are the only real things here. You have to snap out of it. Can you hear me? It's Wesley. *Wesley*. You remember, your favourite pet project?"

The expression on her ruined face didn't change visibly, but the pressure of her fingers on his arm stopped trying to push him away and became a desperate, possessive clutch.

For a long moment she just clutched, and breathed, and he counted the rasps of her breath.

Then she said, "Wesley?"

Then she said, "Oh, my God."

And abruptly his arms were full of desperately clinging lawyer, the pressure of her grip creating bands of pain across his chest and back where he'd had his own old scars reopened, too many to count.

She was real, in the midst of this nightmare place, so he held her tightly in return and ignored the pain. She sobbed into his bloody and tattered shirt, and he remembered how once he had held Fred like this, in the midst of danger.

But Lilah was not Fred and after a moment her torn-out emotion silenced, he felt the familiar poise creep back into her form, and she raised her head, loosened her vice-grip a little.

Her eyes flashed with anger and her face was hard under the battered mask. "We have to get out of this fucking place," she said. She looked him up and down. "What the hell happened to you?"

"You did, in a way." He was unable to hold back the sarcasm as that particular connection struck him. "You sent her after Angel, after all, two years ago. I suppose it was more than a little irritating for you when you realised someone else caught the brunt of her aggression."

"The rogue slayer?" A smile touched the edge of Lilah's mouth, until a wince wiped it off again. She shrugged one shoulder daintily. "Nothing personal, Wesley. Bygones, right?"

He glared, too raw to accept her dismissal of it. She should realise how little he too liked being forced play the victim, even if he had been typecast in the role. "So. What happened

here?" He traced a finger lightly - but not too lightly - down her swollen cheek, and watched her flinch.

"The day I tell you that, they'll be serving up ice-cream treats in Hell," she said viciously, shoving him away.

"We shouldn't lose each other," he cautioned dryly to her back. "Alone, we could easily get caught up in the visions again. Once our spirits and bodies are broken down, there'll be nothing but the battered threads of our souls left to drift in this place for eternity."

"Right." She reluctantly moved back in close, her shoulder to his. "So how do we get out of here? We *can* get out of here, right?"

"Yeah, Wes," a voice behind him said with grim joviality. "How *do* we get outta here? You want to share, bro?"

6.

Remembering herself in bursts since she'd found Charles, Fred had recalled enough to be taken aback by the way Wesley spun at the sound of Gunn's voice and took an automatic step that placed him in front of Lilah; to gape at the protective vibe that was muted but undeniably there. She wasn't sure why she felt the twinge of betrayal, when Wesley had been lost to them for months now, and this didn't change anything.

Lilah's bark of laughter jarred the not-quite-air and Fred could imagine her throwing a wink over Wesley's shoulder... except her face was in no condition to do so. Fred gasped as details registered, taking the form of bruises and cuts, reddening swellings with knuckle marks she could pick out if she stared close enough...

"What happened to the two of you?" Gunn asked the question that hadn't yet made its way to her own lips, his grim facade shaken, his sure strides faltered, his hand clenched around the handle of his axe like any minute his strength could snap it in two.

Wesley might look like someone had beaten him within an inch of his life, but he was also as stern and wound-up as Fred had ever seen him. His eyes fixed on Gunn and the raspy thread Justine's knife had made of his voice coiled through the air. "So you're willing to let necessity overrule your thirst to spill my blood?"

"Yeah, well, call us crazy but me and my girl don't reckon much to this place. Nightlife sucks, fast food's rubbish too. Can't find a Taco Bell for blocks, and you know how it is, dietary essentials and all that. So we'd kinda like to get back to LA. Figured you being the guy with the brain and the books and all, you might just know how."

Wesley's smile was forced past the contusions on his jaw and stretched and bled the cut along the line of his cheekbone. "Hallucinations of times past starting to wear on your troubled psyche?"

"Says the man who looks like all kinds of shit."

"I think we both know the worst horrors aren't physical."

He said the words with conviction but the hollowness in his eyes spoke loud enough to her that he knew as she did it wasn't strictly true. All horrors started with the physical. What *they* could do to *you*. They could lock you up in darkness, hit you, hunt you, back you into living life inside a cave, make you afraid, make you push back the borders of what you were willing to do to survive, make you a monster. Her own madness pressed in from outside, cost of keeping the body alive in Pylea.

She noticed Gunn still flinched. Watched him stiffen, the muscles of his face bunch up in anger. Saw the gathering retaliation.

"Don't," she blurted.

Three pairs of eyes turned her way. She shifted nervously and edged closer to Charles.

"We don't want to do this." She tried again; the mediator, the voice of reason, the role that had become hers if she could remember how to do it. She'd never have imagined, back when she wondered what her place could be in an Angel Investigations so complete without her, that it would be for her to stand as the shield in the rifts between them. She dredged reserves provided by fear to strengthen her voice. "We really don't. The fighting, the arguing, the trade-off of insults, but especially not the fighting. We need to get out of here. All of us-

"We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for your meddling." Lilah pushed Wesley aside, anger radiating from her. She pulled herself straight and tall to face them, a posture brittle with pain. Her voice was darkened by the hate her battered face lacked the mobility to express. "If you hadn't interfered, I... we wouldn't have had..." She choked. "This was an act of intervention to preserve the city of Los Angeles, which since it would've been wiped out of existence if we'd got there ten minutes later ought to be pretty fucking grateful. Including you and your little band of do-gooders."

"It won't help," Wesley interrupted wearily. The commanding quality of his tone and stance was aching familiar even if the hand rested on Lilah Morgan's shoulder was not. "Fred's right. There's nothing to be gained by arguing. We're not each other's principal enemy here. Rather, we may be each other's best chance of escaping intact. You've experienced the power of this dimension. Alone, we're vulnerable to it. It will drag up the worst experiences in our past, the most terrible things we can imagine ourselves perpetrating or having inflicted upon us, in short those things that bring us nearest to despair. The less alone we are, the less vulnerable we are. And the more chance we have to formulate a plan to get out of here."

"That's sweet." Lilah hooked her nails into Wesley's arm as though punishing his gesture of comfort. "Real nice. But you and me, we don't need them. We can spot for each other. Admit it, Wes, it'll be a hell of a kick to leave them here after the way they treated you. Abandoned you when you were hurt, left you all alone - except for me."

"You b... That isn't true. He was our friend-

"Fred, don't." Charles' hand curled around her waist to hold her back. "You heard the man. 'Sides, she's not worth it. You might catch something touching her."

"He was our friend," Fred repeated, hugging the arm around her waist with both her own. She couldn't remember ever hating anyone quite so much as Lilah, then, as the lawyer tipped her head and half-smirked. "He betrayed Angel. Betrayed us. But we might've... it didn't have to be like this. If he'd let us we might've been able to talk Angel round eventually, given him another chance. He... you..." Her eyes drifted to Wesley's. "You never let us."

"Instead he closes himself off, makes it clear he's all over with us, starts shacking up with the skanky ho lawyer enemy." Gunn wasn't talking to Lilah either. "How are we supposed to act, huh?"

Wesley's expression was bleak and his hatred apparently for everyone present. After a moment he settled it on Lilah. "Nobody gets left behind."

Fred's breath caught.

And Wesley's mouth twisted, grimly calculating. "It's far too likely that the energy drain from its victims increases the reality of this dimension in some manner and strengthens its power. I hardly need tell you we don't want to do that."

He didn't feel anything, crushing Fred's hopes. Without emotion, he observed the way her gaze and the corners of her mouth fell. Maybe he felt the smallest trace of intermingled sadness and satisfaction to see her learn he too could withhold the power of forgiveness.

Stretched in a tug-of-war between Lilah's showy possessiveness and Gunn and Fred's guilty enmity, Wesley strove to steer his thoughts along the path of reason. There were three people looking to him for answers. Four souls, including his own, to wrest from an almost very literal hell, and even if one was Lilah Morgan and the others people he could hardly bear the sight of anymore, he'd long been a soldier in the fight against evil. Had the reflexes of one still.

And even if a cold voice in his head persisted its whispering that not one of them mattered, he had to get out of this place.

He could see how the others had been marked by it. In the lingering madness in Fred's eyes, that had taken so long to leave the first time. In the way Gunn held his axe close to his side, uncertainty where there had earlier been deadly threat. In Lilah's fury, which spoke of how little she liked being the victim this place had made of her - and yes, he could relate, but it wasn't the worst of his fears.

Fred was staring at him again. "We did try," she insisted, her voice rising. She cast a guilty glance back to Gunn. "*I* tried. I wouldn't... I wouldn't want you lost. Wesley, you were our *friend*."

A new wave of blankness broke over him, and he felt his lips creep into a grin, crushed over grit teeth. "Yes, but wasn't I convenient *gone*?" He shifted his smile between the two of them, noticing the way they moved together, Fred's hand on Gunn's arm. He wiped expression from his face. "We can work together for survival. We need to. But we're not friends."

Gunn scowled. "You're telling us. That's rich, man."

He could have sworn Fred's eyes glittered with moisture as she blinked them closed.

"This is all very touching." Lilah's hand crept up to his neck and he barely managed to minimise the flinch as she ran her fingernails along his scar. "Not to mention genuinely... pathetic. But we did have a subject - say, our current thorny trapped-in-a-hell-dimension problem - if anyone feels like returning to it anytime soon."

In Fred and Gunn's presence, he resisted the impulse to slap her hand away, but failed to keep the irritation from his clipped, "Precisely." He paused, thinking hard, skin crawling under Lilah's caress and conscious of Fred's appalled fascination upon his neck. He pulled out the photocopied scrolls - the originals, he presumed, still lay where they'd dropped in the library - and unfolded them, trying to concentrate on the fuzzily reproduced text and not the delicate trembling of the paper.

Thought came sluggishly - pain was never much of an aid to reasoning - but it came. After long moments, he crushed the papers in his fists and thrust the crumpled mass back inside his jacket.

He stared apprehensively out across the barren vista of the landscape.

"What the hell now?" Gunn asked.

"I'm not sure we're alone."

Fred made a small noise like a whimper and Gunn pulled her close enough that his body echoed the shiver of hers through the embrace. His grip on the axe shifted to something more resembling action-ready. "We've been trawling all over this place, and we've seen nothing. No demons, no minions, just freaky creepy hallucination vision shit. Wesley, there's nothing here."

"No," he agreed. "Not as such. The wording of the scrolls, however, would seem to suggest this place is host to some form of demonic entity."

"You want to quit with the head games, man, and tell us what you're getting at?"

"Oh, please." Lilah's voice dripped sarcasm like poisoned honey and her fingers continued to trail up and down Wesley's neck. He continued to tolerate it for the disgusted disbelief in Gunn's eyes. "The demon's incorporeal."

"The Temple of Ashes will be called down upon the Appointed Place, and despair itself will walk the Earth and feed upon the souls of humankind," Wesley quoted. "Despair itself."

Fred was staring very intently into a none-too-well-defined distance, her lips moving a little, and watching her he had the feeling whatever was left of her scientist's brain had made the connections before he had himself. "I can feel it," she said in a thread of a voice further muffled by the perplexed twist of her mouth and the teeth sunk hard in her lip. "It's watching, and... and I thought, before, it seemed as though there was an intelligence directing the visions."

"Huh?" Lilah said.

"Madness... alters the perceptions. I suppose it's possible she really can sense something," Wesley murmured.

Fred broke Gunn's embrace and sank down on her knees. Her fingers drew symbols and numbers in the dust, among swirls and lines and stick figures that couldn't be a part of any

sane equation. Under her breath, a tirade of mutterings too quiet to hear. Abruptly her fingers paused and she said, distinctly, "The demon... this dimension... the whole 'manifestation of despair' thing. The - the things we experienced. We're in the mind of a demon."

Wesley grimaced. "Thank you, Fred, for phrasing that in perhaps the most terrifying manner possible."

"She's right, though, isn't she?" Lilah stood back, folding her arms across her chest. "It doesn't live in this dimension. It is this dimension."

He rubbed his neck, which itched where her nails had travelled.

"After a fashion, yes, although I'd probably not dramatise it in precisely those words. But the scrolls - the copies - suggest the entity and the place to be intrinsically linked. I fear this also means that the demon itself is probably the key."

"Key?" Gunn asked. Having to rely on the enemy for explanation was drawing his face into mean lines normally reserved for the vampires he fought.

"The key, the key..." Fred mused. Then, as her hands dashed through the pictures she'd drawn, eradicating them before they could fade, she concluded, "Of course! The key to get home. This place... you said it yourself, we've been walking around for years... hours... well, however long we've been walking around, we've seen enough of this dimension to know there's no variation. I think... I think we'd never find anything more here than we've already seen, however long we looked. It's... it's just backdrop. It's not real. It's not important. Concepts like time and space and distance, they don't apply. This isn't our reality. Our brains only process it in terms anything like familiar because it's the only way they *can* process it at all."

"The mind of a demon," Lilah echoed.

"Yes! Other than ourselves, the demon is the only thing here that's really real. If there is a way back, the answer can only lie with the demon *itself*."

"Alright, so I understood maybe a coupla words in there somewhere," Gunn said. "Now can someone explain how this helps us get home?"

"Maybe it doesn't," Lilah said. "Maybe you get to die horribly knowing you sent all of us including your little girlfriend to Hell, and this dimension gets to eat your soul. And then at least there'll be one part of this that makes for a happy ending." She glanced nastily at Fred. "Two parts."

"Stop it, Lilah," Wesley said. "It's not hopeless. I think there could be a way."

"Then spill. *Now*."

"We've each already resisted this place's principal power; we all now have some measure of immunity. It may be that our transferral to this dimension has granted us more strength here than we would have if the ritual had succeeded and this reality was transplanted into ours. I

don't for a moment imagine we could've had the escapes we've had if things were running as intended. We're an anomaly, don't you see? We were never meant to come to this place. We *aren't* powerless here."

He dragged his foot violently through the dust; a mockery of Fred's daubs.

"We've felt it affect us - what if it goes both ways? It's very likely that we are affecting this place in return. Our presence could be throwing off some crucial balance, and if that's the case our presence is a problem this dimension's controlling intelligence must address. We've already proven it can't do that with the hallucinations, certainly not in the short-term, and who knows how long it could last? As far as I've been able to determine, so long as we're here we have no need for sleep or sustenance. We could exist for a long, long time before we succumbed."

"The status quo can't hold," Fred said. She chewed at her finger, then sank it into the dust again. Four stick figures appeared in its trail.

"Our presence here long-term could cause untold damage," Wesley added. He narrowed his eyes at the horizon, the shifting dust.

"We're like a butterfly." Fred raked jagged lines through the stick figures. "Chaos."

"Ah, quite."

"Mort would be delighted," Lilah snarked.

Dust shifted meaninglessly between Wesley and the horizon. He let out the breath he hadn't registered holding and glanced down to the ground as it wiped away Fred's equations.

He looked up again when he heard Gunn's choked exclamation.

"Wesley?" An ironic grin bent Lilah's swollen lips out of shape. "Whatever this entity is that occupies this dimension - I think you gave it ideas."

He bit down hard on his own smile as he turned around.

Lilah watched the dust collect, blackening as it thickened in the air, its eddies and swirls resolving into a shape made larger and more distinct as further material gathered into it. For a moment before it coalesced, she thought she saw something spherical, shimmering and black at the centre of the maelstrom. Then the entity of air and dust reached a state resembling solidity, though little gales continued to rage across the surface of its form.

She tore her eyes from it long enough to rub the life back into her cricking neck and gauge the reactions of her happy band of enemies.

Charles Gunn's face was grim and his knuckles white, a warrior anticipating hell of a fight on his hands (God, these action-hero types, she really could just drop them all off the nearest

cliff). The Texan girl was doing an applaudable impression of a goldfish. Wesley was looking sour and focused and there, at least, things were pretty much as normal.

"Damn," Gunn said, drawing the word out into two long syllables, as the demon loomed and stretched. "It's no wonder you don't manifest that ugly face until you really have to."

An abrasive hiss of wind-blown particles answered the remark.

"Gunn," Wesley said warningly.

The Texan, Fred, had produced a knife from somewhere and Gunn was hefting his axe with intent, although both of them looked somewhat dubious about the weapons' effectiveness against a dust demon.

Lilah stepped forward, waving them aside with a sneer. "Let me handle this."

"What you gonna do, negotiate with it?" Gunn asked.

"Negotiation is always possible." She halted several cautious feet from the demon and tried to look businesslike and respectful in place of pissed, hurting and scared out of her mind. "Lilah Morgan, Wolfram and Hart. You'll have heard of us." She hesitated, then uttered the firm's other name, sneaking an assessing glance around the outsiders present. They were staring at her, Wesley sharply. Well, she hadn't really expected *him* not to know.

The huge, featureless head shifted angle. In the tornadoes of its eyes there was no alteration in colour or spark of reflected light to signal the focus of its glare, but she knew it was looking at her, and had to suppress a shiver, trying not to wonder how deep below the skin it saw.

//Can it be the day has finally come?// Its voice was the hiss of wind-blown dust, the crack of trees being felled, and bypassed her ears to go direct to her brain, burning its path through in a psychic invasion that felt as much a violation as Gavin's Billy-influenced touch. *//The day I walk among men and devour their souls?//*

"Ah - sorry, no. False alarm," Lilah supplied. "But, hey, not long now. Keep that chin up."

A spike through her brain affirmed the truth behind the flippancy. The demon's anger reverberated in her thoughts and shook ground and pillars and sky.

She swallowed; regarded the sky with edgy suspicion. "A mistake was made. The Gate was taken, by interlopers intending to use it contrary to prophecy. Our task was to reclaim it and return it to its correct place until the proper time. Its opening was accidental."

//I had not thought your people tolerant of accidents.//

She grimaced. "I'm sure they'll demonstrate their displeasure adequately when I return. Which brings me rather to my point - we must return to our dimension to preserve the integrity of the Gate until the time for its opening. I appeal to you to facilitate our passage."

A hissing of sifting sand, grains abrading grains. Pinpricks of fear all over her skin.

"The lady's right." A dark, quick voice from beside her. She felt the warmth of his body across the inches of air separating them. "It would seem in your favour to help us return. The Naminore - the Gate - should to be taken back to those who would use it correctly. Or it could be lost again, and it could be many more years before you'd be summoned to the world."

//Events will unfold as prophecy dictates. Your return will not alter that. It is a long time since I was able to inflict torment on mortal souls. You will succumb, once separated, once injured. In this form, you will not evade my power.//

Lilah wasn't sure who'd moved, maybe they both had, but she was abruptly aware she and Wesley were pressed close against each other.

"Hey, if it's souls you want, you can have them," she said. She pointed to Gunn and Fred. "I don't include them in my petition. In fact, consider them a gift from Wolfram and Hart, a little advance taster."

The swift commotion behind her made her smile.

"Lilah," Wesley snapped.

She narrowed her eyes and stepped away from him. "And, you know what? Strictly speaking, I'm not petitioning for him, either. He's not part of the firm yet, his soul's for the taking. If you know anything about my people, you know mine was signed away years ago."

"It's true," Wesley muttered with nasty sarcasm. "Wolfram and Hart keep it locked in a box in the basement."

Standing stiffly between Wesley's anger and the demon's amusement, she challenged, "Well?" and was infuriated when the query shivered on her lips.

//The quality of your despair is too delicious, even in a used soul, to let slip from my grasp. I will keep it and drink it.//

"Hey! No. We're on the same side-" Lilah broke off, shaking as she felt the demon focus on her. She closed her eyes, but still knew who was standing before her even as she knew they weren't; recognised the sound of *her* breathing, the scent of the cheap perfume *she'd* worn, back when *she* was younger and disapproved and *remembered*.

Hands clamped on her shoulders and shook her, not gently. A hard voice next to her ear said, "Leave her alone," though she could tell Wesley really didn't want to be defending her.

She forced her eyes open again. The demon's influence had departed. It's attention was on Wesley. Lilah elbowed him hard as he swayed and, despite all evidence to the impossibility of such, the demon managed to look put out.

//Clever morsel, I barely scratch your surface. So much darkness, nobody and nothing in your life you didn't betray.//

"Fuck you-"

She had an instant in which to disbelieve she'd actually heard that, before a scatter of angry particles burst from the demon's body to surge out in a blast of wind and vertigo that had her turning in the air then slamming down in an impact cushioned by another body that groaned under her.

She dizzily heard Charles Gunn's voice, from about half a mile away. "Y'know, dog, I guess you and me are gonna get along a whole lot better than I thought. 'Cause, *damn*, I've been wanting to do that all day."

Blinking dust from her eyes, she caught a hazy upside-down view of Gunn standing like some vampire-hunter action figure before the now-reconstituted demon.

"Lilah." Wesley shifted beneath her weight.

She gripped her arms 'round him, keeping him down. "Let Gung-ho over there handle things a minute. It's his turn."

He curled his fingers around her wrists. This place had left no strength behind his grip, though there was plenty in his glare.

She tried to smile. "Oh, about all that? Sorry, but... well, you know what I am."

"I know," he rasped. He shoved her clear. Her face hit ground, she jerked back up spluttering dust and fury. Turned on him angrily.

On hands and knees in the dust, face smeared with the black of bruises and grime, he'd torn the scrolls from his jacket again, and leafed through them now with oblivious trembling hands that rent the paper in his haste. "I've seen it," he said, raising his head to meet her stare. "The key... I know what it is... now we just need to get to it."

"Wes?" she said uncertainly, hollowness inside her as she wondered if this dimension had driven him as mad as it had Fred Burkle.

"We need to get to it." The desperate force in his voice did nothing to ease her fears. "In the ritual... at the core of the ritual, is a spell to make despair - *this* demon - physically manifest. Of course, it's intended to be performed in our reality and to quite different purpose. But here, with a few adjustments... it may just give us a chance to fight our way out of this."

"So you've got your own hell dimension," Gunn said. "Can't say you've decorated to my taste but, hey, must be cool."

He twirled the axe. This thing wasn't going to take him down easily as it had Wes and lawyer-bitch. He grimaced at the sight of them huddled together where they'd been thrown, either too damaged to get back up and fight or just happy to leave it to him.

He knew Fred was a few steps behind him to the right, her knife in her hand, habitually giving him space to wield his axe. They'd had to fight together way too much since everyone else vanished. Not that there was anyone in the world he trusted as much with his back, not

anymore, but the last thing he wanted was for her to get killed for having his back. And fighting this thing - well, there was a good chance they were both going to get killed.

It wasn't new, the knowledge that after getting out of this alive, getting killed was the next best option. He had no illusions what would happen to them if they were trapped. No illusions either that he'd have to make sure Fred died cleanly.

Gunn flinched back from the memory of killing Alonna to save her but, yeah, he'd done it before, he would do it again, no matter how the act exacerbated wounds already scratched open and raw by this place.

//You taint my realm with the stink of love.// The demon's voice in his head exuded disgust, and Gunn couldn't rein in his bark of laughter.

Love. Affirmation out of the mouth of a damn demon. Love.

With a lump in his throat, an electric spark in his chest, and a rushing, giddy cascade through his head, he almost missed the quick motion of Wesley's hand trying to catch his attention. With recognition of the gesture came another jolt, one less pleasant than the last.

Distraction, it meant, in a code he hadn't seen in a while because Fred wasn't yet enough into the physical side of fighting to share it, and Angel had never needed an equal partner to rely upon in tag-teaming a demon to defeat.

He looked hard at Wesley; at the papers spread out around him, at Lilah by his side and craning over his shoulder.

"That really sucks for you, huh?" He tucked Fred under one arm in an exaggerated embrace, feeling her nervous amusement through their contact as he taunted the demon. "So if Fred and me start smooching, is your ugly ass gonna vanish in a puff of smoke?"

A feral hiss of dust and a pause like thinking. He shouted out a curse and almost dropped the axe as he felt the contents of his head rifled, memories picked over and discarded. *//But I see a price, a darkness, another treachery. A fine circle of traitors you all make.//*

Gunn bit his lip so hard his teeth almost connected through it.

"Sometimes things can't be helped. Sometimes you can't not..." he began defensively. Realised he was explaining himself to a damn demon and, worse, to Wesley listening on, and anger dashed guilt aside.

Beyond the demon, he became aware of Wesley repeating the previous signal, more urgently than before.

Well, if a distraction was what he wanted-

Gunn hurled the axe at the demon's head, ducked and rolled, taking Fred down with him, narrowly avoiding another attack the likes of the one that'd downed Lilah and Wesley. He was aware as he moved that a voice had risen above the noise of shifting dust and his own blood loud in his ears. More chanting, a lot like the ritual's chants although he couldn't say he

knew the stuff well enough to pin it for sure. Gunn seized up his axe - it'd passed right through the demon, dust reforming ranks again after it - as he came to a halt and rolled back onto his feet to face the creature.

"Hey, ugly - pay attention, damn it, or I swear I'll be back here with a dustbuster to Hoover your ass."

Trouble with trying to fight psychic scary-ass hell demons, it was helluva job to trick the fuckers.

"Protect Wesley!" he shouted across to Fred, with dismay at hearing those words leave his lips. He ran to join her blocking off the demon's path to Wes, who clutched papers to himself amid his own personal tornado, and they took on the brunt of the dust storm to shield their former comrade. He snaked his arm through Fred's to keep her on her feet, and raised the useless axe.

Wesley shouted a final syllable as they were scattered to the winds.

Something changed as he was lying dazed, trying to scrape together a thought. The noise of the shifting dust, ever-present since they'd arrived in this place, had vanished leaving uncanny silence in its wake. Gunn raised his head and fought dizziness to watch whatever Wesley had done take effect on the demon.

The dust that formed its body mass was solidifying, the eddies of its skin sluggish and slowing ever more. It threw back its head and howled, and its agony tore through Gunn's mind. He saw the others wince and fall back in the midst of picking themselves up.

"It's physical now." Wesley's spell seemed to have wrung dry the last of his reserves, but he managed to raise his eyes to Gunn's. "You can fight it."

He didn't need telling twice. He forced his reluctant body into action, surging to his feet, coming up from the side to hack at the demon's neck. It was like trying to hack into stone, though at least it marked, rocky splinters spraying out, the 'flesh' more crumbly beneath the tough skin.

The demon, still a long way from helpless, dragged a claw down his arm when it swung in retaliation, and then Fred was darting in on its other side, embedding her knife into the joint of an elbow in a carefully placed two-handed stab. She'd put so much strength behind the blade it sank to the hilt and she lost her grip on it and fell when the demon drew its arm back.

But the limb sagged and Gunn was learning it a lot, lately, that winning wasn't always about how strong or how quick.

Not that those things didn't also help.

"Fred!" A clumsy lunge with the axe only just kept the claws at bay. Weapon raised defensively, eyes upon the demon, Gunn leaned down and snatched Fred up.

"You all right?" He couldn't afford to look at her.

"I'm good." A concerned touch trailed down his cut shoulder. "But you're bleeding."

"It's nothing." That wasn't entirely true. The cut smarted enough to distract, and bled enough that it'd be slowing him down before long. The fact it wasn't a serious wound didn't mean it wouldn't kill him. "I'm good too, baby."

Gunn plunged back in. The demon deflected the axe harmlessly, and delivered back at him a swipe that might've knocked his head clean off his shoulders had it connected. The back-swing caught him in the ribs hard enough to knock his breath away. Weaponless, Fred darted in and snatched its arm, clinging onto the handle of the knife still embedded there. Her expression sick but determined, she twisted. The demon plucked her off and tossed her aside. Gunn's heart ceased to function, but then he heard a shrill, angry yelp and risked a glance that confirmed she'd landed safely - on Lilah.

But he'd been bought enough time to recover, and the demon was thrashing, distracted and in pain. Gunn chose his target and hurled the axe hard as he could. The blade sank in, half-severing its leg, and he ran forward, retrieving the axe and striking to finish the job even as the demon toppled.

"No! You mustn't destroy the heart-"

Wesley. Staggering, half-falling on hands and knees, lurching up again, sagging down. Blood over half his face from the cut on his cheek and what looked like the granddaddy of all nosebleeds.

His lunge knocked Gunn sprawling and dragged short the axe blow, though the blade still cut deep enough to spill blood black like oil from a gaping hole in the demon's chest. It twitched, not dead, not dying, and what in the *hell* did Wes think he was-

Wesley plunged his red-stained hand into the wound. Words exploded from his lips as his fingers reached deep... deep enough to connect with the demon's heart. His other hand, flailing, snapped up Lilah's wrist. He yelled, "Fred! Gunn!"

Something like desperation in his roughened voice.

A familiar darkness was beginning to spiral out from the demon's chest.

"*Shit.*" Gunn grabbed for Fred's extended hand, saw her in turn reach out to Lilah.

Who laughed and pulled away.

The world was fast being enveloped in a spiral of darkness. He thought he still had Fred's hand fast in his, but amid the confusion it was hard to tell. Nerve messages weren't clear, vision was screwy, and he could hear Wesley-

Shouting. And Fred, sounding almost as angry as he.

7.

The tiles of the floor rose up to greet her. Hard.

A skinny warm body thudded on top of her an instant later and Lilah rolled side, shoving, swearing and wrenching her wrist loose from the smaller woman's death-grip. The little red marks from her nails were almost invisible among the rest of the bruises, but made up for their physical inconsequentiality in irritation.

But she was in the library, she was back in her own world, she was out of that place, and suddenly a lot of the rest of her problems were looking considerably smaller than she'd ever imagined they could.

She got one foot under her, heel see-sawing with her legs' unsteadiness; the other foot then and she was standing, after a fashion. Her hand shot out to the nearest shelf to prevent her falling.

Wesley was several feet away. He'd got as far as hands and knees but now crouched, pale and shaking, his breathing audible. The look he was aiming at her wouldn't seem to indicate him eager to accept her help. She turned-

Froze.

Behind her, an arching, glowing rent grinned out of the air. Several yards across and four feet off the level of the library floor, cutting just above Chaney's makeshift altar, its curled up ends mocking. Underneath it, Charles Gunn and Winifred Burkle were helping each other up and backing away, heads ducked to avoid the tear in reality.

"What the hell?" Gunn said, emerging into safety, pulling Fred the rest of the way after him and into a protective embrace. "We did that?"

He looked accusingly to Lilah and Wesley when he said it, but it was his little girlfriend who answered. "I think we did. It can't be good. I'm pretty sure that's not supposed to happen."

"No." Wesley stood leaning on a small work table, which creaked and threatened to buckle. "But hopefully it isn't immediately dangerous. It will still need to be closed as soon as possible, however."

Lilah nodded. "Plus, a cleanup team to get rid of the bodies, slime, and illegal weaponry. Yeah, I'll call my people." She patted down her suit, looking for the phone that wasn't there. Bent to search the bodies of Chaney's men, fighting dizziness, until she retrieved an only slightly blood-dashed cellphone that responded when she poked the keys.

"Hold it a damn minute," Gunn said, narrow-eyed.

"What? You're going to threaten me again? With *what*? You left your big shiny axe in the hell dimension."

"How 'bout my fist?"

"Been there. Done that." She pushed in the number and waited, bored, while it rang. Wondered idly how many people were staffing the offices and how many had cleared out of the city while she risked her neck.

Wesley said sharply, "She's doing exactly what needs to be done. We don't have the resources left to close the rift ourselves, but somebody must. We can hardly leave it there for the public to gawp over."

"He's right." Fred restrained her man of action with her small hand on his arm, and her fragile fingers halted him as though she possessed the strength of a Slayer. "I... We can't leave it as it is to let other people get sucked into that place."

Somebody finally picked up her call and she informed them of the situation and told them to dig up Linwood if he was still in the country, then tossed the phone aside. Wondered, irritably, whether it was worth searching for her own or admit the likelihood the demon would be occupying itself playing with the thing for the next few years it waited to make its big debut.

Looking among the disarray on the floor, she spotted instead the ornate carved box that had acted as a container for the Naminore. She picked it up and examined it for damage. It seemed unharmed, and she glanced at Wesley, who grimaced understanding and pulled off his jacket. He gingerly moved to wrap the garment around the orb.

Gunn's head snapped up. His gaze could've reduced them both to ashes. "Whoa, now. Tell me you're not just gonna return that thing to Wolfram and Hart?"

Wesley raised his eyes, shadowed to dark holes in his face. Lilah flinched back, for an instant genuinely fearing the air between the two men would combust.

But this... this was a supremely promising development.

"I beg to differ." Wesley's hands tightened on the Naminore as he picked it up, and her blood *sang* with the sweetness of success. "That's rather what I was paid to do."

That's rather what I was paid to do. Gunn heard it, but he didn't quite believe it, in spite of everything. He knew a guy was capable of doing bad things out of anger - hell, he knew it too well. Knew that Wesley had been angry and maybe he'd had the right of that, just a little, because it was true enough he'd betrayed them but they'd still handled it badly. That, he understood, like he understood that the feelings he had for his former friend were more complex than the simple hatred and betrayal he'd been trying to box them into.

What he didn't understand was Wesley standing there telling them he was ready to betray the mission to Wolfram and Hart for money.

"You can't mean that." Fred said, before he could.

Lilah smiled.

Let the bitch smile - she hadn't seen what he had. He backed away, keeping the movement low-key, unthreatening; bent down to the crossbow Fred must've lost in the earlier fight; slipped the discarded bolt into place and sprang up, pointing the loaded weapon-

At Wesley.

No... Hellish visions surged through his brain, memories of what he'd done in that place, what he was capable of. He switched his aim to Lilah, hoping the move appeared smoother than it felt, hoping they hadn't seen him flinch. His voice came out hard. "You care about whether this bitch gets some pretty damn fatal acupuncture, you'll hand over the bauble."

He felt Fred's eyes on him. There was no accusation there, only resignation. They couldn't allow a powerful magical artefact to fall into the hands of Wolfram and Hart, and he could hardly forget his recent discovery of how far Fred too was willing to go for the mission.

Wesley stared back at him, his expression flat. Gunn knew that feeling, felt its reflection in himself. It sucked his energy, a draining sensation he tried to resist.

They'd fought too often side by side. The mental leap necessary to comprehend fighting each other took a lot out of them both.

Wesley said, "She is a human being, Charles. Living. Breathing. Somewhere, she has a soul. Does that cease to matter because she works for the opposition?"

Gunn noticed how pale Lilah had become. Hadn't realised he was that damn convincing. A voice in his head sneered, *way to go, Charles. Terrorising unarmed, beat-up women*. But he remembered Angel's empty horror, relating how she'd ordered her people to kill Connor. Cordy, mutilated by killer visions. Angel tricked to feed on the blood of his own son. And he realised he was more than ready to carry through on his threat.

"Compassion, bro? She's not worth it. Wesley, you know what she's done. Some of it to you. Hell, you know whose fault Billy was-"

"Gunn. Don't." Wesley had gone very still.

And it struck Gunn how differently things might've gone without that incident, thinking of the stuff Cordelia had said, slightly tipsy one of those grim evenings after she got back to find everything had come crashing down in her absence. Wesley, and Fred, before he got infected by Billy's blood... Wes had almost asked her, long before Gunn had started to feel these things.

He might never have had her at all... Maybe he'd only ever known what he'd found with Fred because of that incident. He had known only at his friend's expense, and there was anger

there too, that it had had to be that way, too easily dragged up by the damn demon. "I don't understand why you care. Even if we're not working together anymore. Lilah Morgan? How can you sink that low?"

"She was all there was. I was alone, and the only one to come to me in anything resembling geniality was the enemy. It wasn't much of a choice - nothing, or her."

The Naminore clutched in his hands, he stepped in front of Lilah, and there could be no mistake, this time, that the move was deliberate. The crossbow in Gunn's grasp lowered, bypassing his brain's permission. He couldn't make his arm raise it again.

Fred left his side to take a cautious few steps closer to Wesley, faint damp streaks on her face glistening when they caught the light.

"I know I messed up when I came to the hospital," she said, her voice a whisper. Gunn blinked. Hospital? "Those things I said, they were the truth, but there were other truths too. Things I didn't say and should have, that you probably needed to hear more than accusations. Like how worried we were, and how long we searched. I needed to see you, but then when I did... I was just so angry.

"But that's not what matters now. You can't give that thing to Wolfram and Hart. There's a prophecy. They'll use it to destroy LA."

"I know." Wesley's face was distant. He cast a furrowed frown at the dimensional breach.

"Actually," Lilah butted in, "The prophecy only says it will be used. It doesn't give any details. We figured it might as well be by us as not. Comes in useful to know you can hold an entire city hostage if things get rough."

Fred ignored her. "Wesley. Please. She isn't all you've got. You still have your soul, and that's important."

"Hmm?" He pulled out of his distraction. His smile was a long way from nice. "I thought you'd already given up on that."

"Please, Wesley," Fred implored. "We can't fight you. Please give us the Naminore. Maybe we can use it for good. I swear we'll try."

Wesley hefted the dark globe. The jacket shifted against its smooth surface and his grip failed. He recovered it with a flicker of alarm, and shot a glance at Lilah. She started to cross to him, holding the box ready to receive the Naminore.

"I already know what I have to do," he said, and the pitch in his voice and the grin on his face weren't overly indicative of sanity.

He moved. Away from Lilah. Towards the rift. The bundle in his hands braced in a familiar fashion.

Apparently Lilah watched basketball too, because her cry of "*No!*" rang out even as the connection clicked in his own mind, voiced as a doubtful, "Wes...?"

"Don't," Lilah said. "Wesley, they'll crucify me. You know that."

Gunn, discovering he didn't have too much of a problem, shut up and watched the show.

"I'm sorry." Wes sounded almost like he meant it, though more likely too tired and beat up to muster the appropriate sarcasm. He advanced a further step to the rift.

"You know what power that device has," Lilah snapped. "You've heard the old rumours... well, they're not rumours, Wesley. Don't do this. That power, it could be yours. We could make it part of your permanent contract. Or - or entrust it to your care as an independent agent. Think of it, damn it. You could be a real power. Show them all. The Watchers Council, Angel, your father... Don't throw that away."

Gunn didn't think Lilah would miss the spark of temptation amid the manipulated-and-fully-aware-of-it anger in Wesley's eyes. He thought of this scary new pissed-off Wesley as some kind of super-mage and shuddered.

He wasn't expecting the mingled fear and excitement in the set of Fred's face and the lines of her slim body as she crossed to Wes, pausing a fraction beyond arm's reach. Wesley responded by backing off a step. He flinched as the rip in reality flared up with the Naminore's proximity and for a long moment all that could be seen of Fred was her silhouette against its backdrop. Gunn heard her voice over the furious, almost electrical static of the rift. "She's right. You could use it. You could use it for good! Think of the people you'd be able to help."

Wesley laughed, a cracked sound that didn't contain much mirth. "I never had any overwhelming ambition to be a warlock. No, Fred. You really cannot think that this device, in my hands, could ever be used for good?"

"Yes." Her faith flowed out with the single word, a bridge extended between them.

Wesley crumbled it with a look.

Fred's shoulders slumped, but she wasn't defeated. "Then, let us take it. We never had enough muscle behind us, even with Angel. It was always a case of trying against all hope, expecting to die. You - you worked without him last year, I know you know what it's like. These past weeks with just us... Gunn and me, we don't have the kind of power to keep up the fight alone for long. I... I set out today to die, because I thought it was the only way I could fix this thing right. Worse than die, even." She held out her hands, fingertips falling short of contact with his sleeves. "Wesley. I - I know things aren't right between us, but you know us. What we do. You know we - I - I'll use it well."

Wesley tipped his head to one side, and looked, finally, at Gunn. Gunn bit his lip, nothing to say. He didn't know what Wesley saw in his face that made his decision, but the next instant, the bundle had left his hands.

The rift swallowed it in a blaze of light.

Fred stumbled back, arms dangling helplessly at her sides, her mouth hanging open as she gazed after the Naminore's path.

Lilah screamed and dived for the tear even as it began to dwindle.

"You stupid *bitch!*"

Gunn blinked, having trouble processing the fact that snarl had come from Wesley.

Wesley grabbed her trailing hand the last moment before she was consumed entirely, planted his feet and fought against whatever mystical forces tried to drag her the rest of the way. Lilah seemed to be fighting his efforts, too.

It was hard to imagine what she thought her employers would do to her that would make it worth going back to that place. Gunn stood, watching, unable to turn away or move to help.

The sharp recollection that Wolfram and Hart were on their way snapped him out of it. He and Fred were likely to be disposed of in short order if they were still there when the evil law firm's forces arrived.

He caught Fred's arm and pulled her away with him.

Exiting, he spared a glance back to see the dark man and the angry woman, dragged clear of the last remnant of the rift, collapsing together in a heap on the floor.

"Owww."

"Sorry." She smoothed a hand down his arm in apology, planted a light kiss as near the wound as she dared. "Better now?"

"Much. But take it easy there, huh?"

The laugh that was normally so easy in Charles' voice was strained. Fred sighed, lightly so he wouldn't hear, and returned to dressing the cut the demon had drawn along his upper arm.

They were semi-clad in fluffy towels stained here and there with blood, damp from showering, which they'd done together, supporting each other in their exhaustion. They'd exclaimed on each other's bruises, hers more visible, ugly on her paler skin, but his more severe. They'd towelled each other dry, and now they sprawled on the bed amid a sea of bandages and medical supplies, Charles full-length on his belly and she, cross-legged, finishing tying off the white bandage on his arm that was already beginning to soak through with tiny pinpricks of red.

"Maybe you need to go to the hospital for stitches," she said, frowning at the dots.

"Naw. I'm good. I've had worse."

"I know."

"All finished now?" He rolled over onto his back at her affirmation, and she let herself relax, curling up against his side.

When they'd emerged from the library it had been night, almost morning. Now the dawn was beginning to seep through the window of the room she and Charles used when he was staying with her at the Hyperion. They had not been away very long (she remembered being struck by panicked thoughts that perhaps they would come back to find days, weeks, years had passed, while they were in that place) although the hours they'd been away had been very long indeed.

Wisps of madness clung to her thoughts still, but they were fading, and in any case she did not fear them. She had beaten them back before, and Gunn loved her, mad or sane.

"You've got to promise you won't hide those things from me in future," he said, harder than he usually spoke to her out of work hours, surprising her with the suddenness of his change in mood. His head rolled round, his eyes pinning hers. "What happened today, that's not got to happen again. I couldn't deal with that, knowing you were keeping things from me, that some of this magic you're doing might be dangerous and you'd never tell me the danger. I can't spend my life wondering if you're setting yourself up to die. We need to share this stuff. 'Cause we know what happens when folks go all Lone Ranger."

"I'm sorry." She reached for his hand. He folded her fingers in his. "Secrets are bad. I know I should've told you, but at the same time... I didn't want to make you choose. The mission, or me. I didn't want you to stop me."

"'Cause you got the mission too, girl." He drew her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

"You said once-"

"-that I'd choose you over the mission. I know."

She studied his face. "You're not sure any more if that's true."

"I..." He surrendered her hand and reached around her to pull the whole of her close instead. She snuggled, waited. "Fred, you know you're the most important thing in the world to me. What I said then, I meant it, but-"

"-we're changing. I know. These past weeks, the two of us, without anyone else to shoulder the burden..."

"It gets harder," he said, speaking slow, pausing often, "to separate. You. Me. The mission. It all feels the same. It-"

"It's us," she breathed. "Angel's gone. Cordy's gone. Wesley's... lost. And this... this is what we're supposed to be doing."

"Yeah." His hand travelled up her back and tangled in her damp hair. "This feels right."

"But we almost died today."

Like everything, there was a reverse side.

"But we didn't."

"I meant what I said to Wesley, Charles. I'm not sure how long we can last. After all, we're only human. Angel and Cordy were champions of good. What happens if they never come back?"

"Then we hold the fort. As long as it stands. No surrender."

She smiled. Wriggling, she discarded her towel and untangled his, flicking them off the bed onto the floor. He reached down and pulled the light covers up to their waists.

"We could've used the Naminore," Fred said.

"Doesn't matter. Wolfram and Hart didn't get it. LA didn't get blown to ashes. That's what's important."

"It wasn't us who stopped those things."

"You think Wesley would've acted as he did if we hadn't been there?"

His cynicism stung her eyes, mostly because she feared him right. Wesley had turned into someone she didn't recognise.

Tiredness was beginning to creep through her limbs, sleep almost ready to claim her. She sagged against his chest, her head upon his ribcage, listening through it to the heartbeat and the breathing already slowing. He flinched as her weight touched a bruise spread over his lower ribs, and she shifted to accommodate, whispered an apology.

She thought he was asleep - she was on the verge of it - when he spoke, grimness showing through the exhaustion in his voice. "Sometimes the world makes hell of a lot of no sense. Today... today Wesley and Lilah saved millions of lives. For who knows what selfish reasons, but they did a good thing. And we... I almost did a bad thing, Fred. For good reasons, yeah. But I almost killed him. I was that close."

"Intention - intention is important," Fred said. Wanting to push back the hollowness in his voice. To replace it again with hope. Not sure she knew how.

She felt him nod. "We made a mistake."

She breathed in, falling down into a restful abyss. Breathed out in words.

"We're not the first."

It was midday when he opened the door to find her outside it, although he knew it only from the blurry clock on the wall of his darkened room. What windows there were in his small apartment had their blinds drawn tightly down.

"Lilah," he said blankly. Surprised, and trying not to feel relief.

"What, no hug, no emotional reunion?" she drawled. She smiled like a predator. He realised her bruises and contusions were gone as though they'd never existed, and squinted. No make-up job could have hidden... She caught his gaze. "I told you my job had benefits. Well, sometimes. You, on the other hand, look like shit. You could at least have changed. Not to mention showered."

She wrinkled her nose.

Wesley, who'd at 4am that morning made an uneasy escape from the squad of Wolfram and Hart agents infesting the library, had returned to his apartment, staggered to the bed and collapsed into sleep on top of the covers, where he'd remained until disturbed by her knocking. He scowled.

He tried to think of a way to say, *I didn't think I'd see you again* that wouldn't come out sounding even remotely needy or recalcitrant. He settled for twisting his voice into a roughened growl to ask, "Why are you here?"

Her cheerful polish vanished. Her hand slammed down to pin his where it rested on the doorframe holding up much of his weight. Her other hand tangled in the collar of his bloodied shirt and she stepped inside his space, pushing her face into his so their noses all but touched. Unlike most women, she was barely shorter than he, especially in heels, and just because it wasn't her habit to be physically domineering didn't mean she couldn't be. She was stronger than he was right now.

Her hand ground his into the wood.

"That was my way back in, you bastard. My chance to make up for this year's fiascos and you screwed me over." He felt her spittle dash his face.

He curled his free hand around her waist and bent to touch his forehead sardonically to hers.

"I'm glad you're not dead," he breathed, meeting the glare of her eyes.

She melted against him with a raucous laugh. Her fingers pushed through the gaps between his and though she continued her attempts to break his hand, the action became oddly affectionate. No. That was the wrong word. Sexual. Her nails dug in his palm. As if he needed any more skin broken or blood drawn.

"You bastard," she said again. She ran her tongue over his bottom lip. Lingered over the split, tasting his blood.

And Wesley reflected that Lilah worked for Wolfram and Hart who, while they did not forgive traitors, certainly expected and understood them. Even valued, since they appeared to have once promoted Lindsey McDonald for possessing the qualities of a turncoat.

In any case, their relationship was hardly based on trust, or like, or anything that would be damaged by betrayal.

"So, why aren't you dead?" he asked, pulling his head back to free his tongue.

"Huh. Given that I just saved the butts of most of the senior staff, they seem to be in a forgiving mood about the part where I didn't actually recover the Naminore. Who'd have thought?"

"Certainly not me."

She gave him a hard look, abruptly fragmented by a smile. She stopped crushing his hand and slipped out from the circle of his arm. He wavered a moment without the support of her body. "What the hell. Seriously? Better gone than in the hands of the opposition, or used at the wrong time. And as someone who happens to live in this city, I'm inclined to think it one weapon plain better *gone*."

"Indeed. Though it's a great pity I had to throw it away. A magical artefact of that sort of power and historical significance..." Wesley tried to shake the feeling back into his fingers.

"Didn't for a moment imagine that you enjoyed that little act of occult vandalism, Mr Research-Obsessed. We can blame your little friends for that, anyway. I know what you'd have done if they hadn't been there to screw with your head."

He raised his eyebrows; said nothing.

"Incidentally, you do know, don't you, that even without the soul clause that was some rather dark magic you performed yesterday?"

He tipped his head to one side; just looked at her.

"And the Naminore itself - that you effectively destroyed - wasn't actually a tool of evil. More like a balancing power."

"It's balanced."

Lilah laughed. "Indubitably. Although, did you wonder if it might not even be more suited to the purposes of good? Not that, when you think about it, there's anything here in LA that it would benefit the Powers to have obliterated."

"Yes, and it would only cost several million innocent lives."

She waved a hand. "You of all people know that lives are hardly the real issue when you're fighting an eternal war." She shrugged, dismissing it with an arrogant tip of one shoulder and a toss of glossy hair. "Well. I only wondered if you realised. About the part where you destroyed something which that have aided your... former... side. Though there is still that prophecy to consider, even if it does appear you've screwed over any obvious means of its coming to pass."

Wesley felt the smile stretch his face, tugging at the cuts and bruises, and he turned away so she wouldn't see. Walked back inside the room, leaving the way clear for her to enter. Heard the door close.

"I should have known you'd get a kick out of that one," Lilah said, a grin in her voice, a spring in the clicks of her stilettoed steps. "You want to take a look at those for us, by the way? We can offer a very generous fee."

"Lilah. Let me think... No."

Her laugh, like cheerful shards of glass. Her fingers, brushing the back of his neck. Her not-entirely-genuine sucked-in sympathetic breath as she found a bruise there. Her voice, silk against his ear.

"Come on, now. Let me help you lick those wounds."

END

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