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Latest Promo

## From TV Guide:

### 6.3 - A Temp is Just a Temp:

Angel and his gang investigate a series of ritual killings. Meanwhile, a string of increasingly unsuitable job applicants have Angel wondering if some positions just can't be filled.

[09.28.04 22:00]

## Schedule

- **Episode 6x03** will air October 06, 2004 at 9:00 pm EDT!

## New!

- Episode 6x02: Tremor premieres! [09.22.04]
- Episode 6x01: Flutter premieres! [09.08.04]
- Spoilers for the first couple of episodes are here! [08.26.04]
- Writers for the first eight episodes of season six announced! [07.29.04]

(Other formats will be available soon)

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The rating for this season will not go higher than an R.

This season is slash-friendly.

## 6.2 Tremor

### Wolfling and Mad Poetess

#### Previously on No Limits...

"The Senior Partners didn't just let us go," Angel slammed his right hand down on the bedside table, knocking over the radio, which had been playing softly in the background. It began to hiss and crackle with static. "We were outnumbered, outmatched, out-powered, outdone. Gunn was minutes from death - hell, we all were. Spike, me, even Illyria. They had us, Nina. They had us."

"Maybe that was all they wanted to do," Nina said. "Maybe they only wanted to shake you up a bit before they left town."

"So they do all that and then just vanish?" Angel demanded. "Drop everything in the middle of battle without even a word?"

"Not enough air in the world to disguise the truth of the matter," Spike said as he followed behind Gunn. "This is a joke."

"It's the best we could do," Gunn said.

"It's a joke," Spike repeated. "This isn't a real office. Real offices have real office space. They have filing cabinets and bookshelves. What they don't have is soda machines and broken-down marquees out front that read 'Angel Investigations, We Hlp Th Hepss.'"

"There's no real problem," Gunn said.

"There's a problem because the man that's got his name above the titles is not in the game," Spike said.

Gunn snorted. "You don't think the problem is that Angel's a little too in the game?"

"He is nowhere near the game," Spike said. "And you know it."

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"Three months," Angel said. He pressed his hands onto the desk blotter. The burn scars on the left were even more livid in the sickly fluorescent light. "It's been three months since the battle. The Senior Partners are getting their revenge, and they're not waiting around anymore. We need to mobilize and we need to mobilize now."

Spike and Gunn continued to sit there.

Angel stared at them. "What did I just say?"

"We heard you," Spike said.

"We just don't believe you," Gunn said.

"I'm not making it up!" Angel said. He rolled up his shirt sleeve, exposing the dark red and purple on his arm. "See?"

"I see dragon burn," Gunn said.

"It's worse than it was," Angel said. "Last night I got hit by these freaky floating things that looked like those demons that stabbed Elijah Wood."

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"Who are the people bothering you?" Gunn asked the Geraces.

Joey shook his head. "Not people. Demons. This one, he comes in. Threatens me and my wife. Says we owe him money."

"Do you?" Angel asked.

"Never seen him before in my life," Joey said.

"What does he look like?" Spike asked.

"Tall." Rebecca held a hand over her head to illustrate. "And yellow."

"With horns," Joey said. He tapped a finger behind each ear, then on the middle of his forehead. "Three of them, all around his head."

Rebecca clung to her husband's arm. "He said he would hurt us if we didn't honor our contract."

Gunn raised his eyebrows. "Contract?"

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"Angel," Pete said. He flipped the case open, hauling out the book again. "Angel,

formerly Angelus, current owner of Angel Investigations?"

Angel nodded, avoiding Mari's questioning gaze. "Don't tell me I've got a contract, too."

"No," Pete said. "No contract at all."

"Good, because I've been trying to get out of all of those," Angel said.

"You're still in my book, though," Pete said.

Angel frowned. "For what?"

Pete shoved Mari out of the way as he lifted a rifle out of the case. "Something my employer found to be a lot more valuable."

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"Don't make fun," Cossi said. "I sneezed more power before breakfast than any of you three put together. Than this asshole did before he decided he was going to fill the void."

"Wait." Angel held up a hand to stop him. "Which asshole?"

Cossi looked back at him. "Ymo Ga. Head of the Ga family. Three-horned bastard who used to control the crime syndicate out in Chicago. Now he's coming out here."

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Angel raised his sword and pressed it into Cossi's chest. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Apparently volumes," Cossi said. "But with regards to this I know that you used to be in charge of Wolfram & Hart. And when you destroyed the company you left a huge gap for every demon-monster-crime syndicate freak to try to fill in. That law firm kept control of this town. Maybe they were more evil than most of us, but at least we all knew who was in charge. Now they're gone, and it's chaos. If this town goes to shit while every underground cabal battles it out for control of this place, then that's your fault. You made it happen."

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"All those euphemisms?" Gunn asked. He swiveled his computer around, revealing a headline that said 'CHICAGO SHALL RISE AGAIN'. "Looks like this was the one they used to describe a hostile takeover."

Spike frowned. "Isn't rising again a happy thing?"

Angel shook his head. "It's not. That's from the Great Fire."

"1666?" Spike asked.

"1871," Gunn corrected. "Chicago. The presses burned along with everything else. Took two days before the Tribune could report anything."

Spike gave an appreciative whistle. "Cossi wasn't joking around. They're going to torch the place, ideally with us in it."

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Angel summoned the last of his strength to lift his sword and stab -

- and fell forward, but this time not to the ground. This time he fell right into a demon's grasp.

He struggled, or tried to, but the demon was stronger and had lifted him into the air. Without anything to brace against, Angel had no leverage. All he could do was try to get free. Somehow to break the hold, get out, regroup, fight back.

He'd gotten as far as forming that plan when the demon's sword disappeared and in its place was a rotting, skeletal hand.

The hand lifted up, caressed his cheek, and then clamped onto his face.

It was then, as Angel's body filled with a pain so exquisite that a dragon burn seemed almost pleasurable in comparison, that he understood how Pete and the other demons had come to die.

Their bodies had exploded from the agony.

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Gunn grabbed hold of the shape that had just tried to sneak into a doorway. He pushed it back against the wall and held his axe up.

"Okay, talk and talk quick, or else you're going to be feeling my sudden weight-loss plan," Gunn said. "I call it my no-head diet."

"Sounds kinky," the thing said. It moved out of the darkness and smiled up at him with dazzling eyes and bright red lips. "Though I'm not so sure if that's a promise or a threat."

Gunn blinked, staring. "*Gwen?*"

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"Glad to see your memory is still working as well as your reflexes," Gwen said. Her smoky gaze flickered down to her arm, which Gunn still had pinned against the wall. "Although this wasn't exactly the welcome I was hoping for."

It took him another second to let go of her, which was purely a delayed reaction from her unexpectedly familiar face and had nothing to do with the tight black outfit on the even tighter body pressed close to his own. "What kind of welcome do you usually get when you sneak up on people in dark alleys?" he asked.

"Depends on why I'm sneaking up on them," Gwen replied, shooting him her killer smile. "Though usually they don't even know I'm there. You're good."

"Yeah, well, it helps when the sneakee is already on the lookout for trouble. You just weren't the trouble I was expecting to find." He couldn't help grinning. "Ain't saying that's a *bad* thing, though. What're you doing out here?"

Gwen shrugged a shoulder. "Out for a walk?"

"Think we got past that part," Gunn said. "Now we're on 'why?' And then we have the 'why now?', or you could get creative and do 'why here?'"

"Can't a girl just be in the neighborhood and stop by to visit a friend?" Gwen asked.

"The middle of an alley that's three blocks from where I wasn't even working the last time you saw me is your idea of in the neighborhood?" Gunn crossed his arms and gave her his best take-no-bullshit look.

"I take long walks," she replied.

"Through *this* part of town?" Gunn asked.

"Excuse me, but I am capable of taking care of myself," Gwen said, standing up a bit straighter. "You know, I can't believe you would honestly suggest that I couldn't handle an area like this."

"Mostly I was suggesting that there's nothing for you to *steal* in a neighborhood like this," he replied. "Unless overpriced cartons of milk and two-for-one lotto tickets are the hot new thing on the black market."

"Actually, it's sixteenth century French jewelry," Gwen said, "but the milk thing comes close."

He frowned. "Who around here has - no, wait, I'm not even going to get into it."

"You assume that just because I mention it there's something to get into?" Gwen asked. She grinned and added, "Because if that's the case remind me to tell you about my new pants."

"I assume because I've *met* you that there's something about this I won't like," Gunn replied. "But right now that's a guppy on the scale of my big-ass shark problems."

Gwen's response was cut off by the sound of an unholy howl. "What the hell is that?"

"My guess?" Gunn said, hefting his axe into a ready position. "Sharks."

They ran down the street, following the noise through sharp turns and garbage-strewn alleyways until Gunn recognized the path his feet were taking him on.

"*Shit*," he said, putting on a burst of speed.

"What?" Gwen asked, keeping pace with him.

Gunn didn't need to answer, however. One more corner deposited them right into the fray of a flying, swirling mess of trouble.

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**Episode 6.2:** Tremor

**Written by:** Wolfling and Mad Poetess

**Story Developed by:** Wolfling, Mad Poetess, The Brat Queen

**Edited by:** apillarofsalt, Lady Alatarriel

**Produced by:** The Brat Queen and Flaming Muse

---

Demon-things, dark and cloud-like, had Spike and Illyria outnumbered and Angel hanging in mid-air. Angel's face was contorted with pain. Strained, gargling sounds escaped his mouth, and if a vampire could look more dead than usual then Angel had that covered in spades.

Spike, for his part, was knee-deep in a swordfight that he seemed to be barely breaking even on. But he must have seen the two new additions arrive because he called out,

"Hey, Charlie. Glad you could make it. Little help would be - " Spike paused during the clanging block of a blade that went straight for his throat. "Helpful."

Gunn leapt into the thick of it even before Spike had finished speaking. He started trading blows with two of the demons, feeling the strength that their constantly flowing shapes gave no clue of. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Illyria trying to do battle with her own foes. Blood was dripping down her face, and she did *not* look happy.

Figuring Spike and Illyria could handle their own, Gunn ran for the demon that had Angel, using his axe to parry a sword stroke from one of the creatures, then diving straight past it towards its buddy, the vampire-floater.

What he *should* have heard as the thing turned towards him was the satisfying chunk of axe into bone or whatever made up the arm that was holding Angel in the air. Instead, all he heard was 'whoosh' as his axe hit air and the demon disappeared entirely.

No time to process, though. The demon was gone, but Angel was still there. The vampire was curled on the ground, empty hands either spasming or already trying to reach for a sword, Gunn wasn't sure which.

The split second he'd given over to thinking about Angel's needs was cut abruptly short when he heard Gwen yell, "Behind you!" Gunn spun around to find one of the demons - if it was the one his axe just went whoosh through he couldn't tell - swinging a sword towards his head.

He just managed to bring his weapon up to fend it off, but the thing was awfully close and awfully fast and whooshed into nothing before Gunn could spin around and try to slice it up with a follow-through.

Glancing over at Gwen, he found her looking just as frustrated as he felt.

"I can't hit these things!" she said.

"Way ahead of you on that," Gunn agreed. He tried to see how the others were faring.

Across the street, he could see Spike and Illyria as they thud-clang-danced in a circle, neither one of them seeming to do much damage to the demons that dissipated before any blade or fist could hit them.

Next to him, Angel had managed to climb to his feet.

"I am all over some advice if you've got it," Gunn said, tossing Angel a spare knife that he'd had stashed in his pants pocket.

Angel managed to catch it without dropping. "Defense. Don't let them touch you. Aim for the weapons."

"Got anything else in mind?" Gunn asked.

Angel parried a demon that swooped towards him. "Working on it."

Two more demons attacked. Gunn swung left; Angel took right. The blade of Gunn's axe crashed into metal with a satisfying second, then again slipped through thin air. Angel dropped before the arc of the axe could slice him in two, using his own momentum to somersault underneath the demons and come back up again with his sword in hand.

"Gonna be feeling *that* in the morning," Angel muttered.

"Anybody got a clue about what these *are*?" Spike called.

"We find out, you'll be the first to know," Gunn replied. He caught a glimpse of a demon

heading right for Gwen. "Look out!"

Gwen twisted out of the way, the movement as graceful as a gymnast's as she turned, leapt over the slicing blade of one of the demons, and came up face-to-face with Illyria.

Illyria cocked her head, studying Gwen. "You are different."

"Yeah, could say the same about you." Gwen gestured to Illyria's face. "Not that the new look's not working, but - "

"You are different *enough*," Illyria decided. With a movement almost too fast for mortal eyes to see, Illyria shot her hands out, shoving Gwen directly into the path of one of the demons.

"Illyria, no!" Gunn tried to break through to help. "Gwen, get out of there!"

"Trying!" Finding herself rising into the air, Gwen struggled in the grip of her captor. She freed one hand, blocking the bony fingers that were coming towards her. "Oh no you don't. Not on the first date."

"Drop her!" Angel shouted. He threw his sword, aiming for the demon's head, just as Gwen fired up an electric charge through her hand and into the demon's body.

The demon turned into vapor with a shriek, dropping Gwen. Angel's sword flew directly through it, not stopping until Spike snatched a hand out and caught it from the other side.

"Regroup," Angel ordered, herding them all into the safety of a tight alleyway. The demons swarmed over the entrance, literally clouding the way as they shifted back and forth from corporeal to not.

"Right annoying, the way they keep doing that," Spike observed, not taking his eyes off of them. The demons didn't seem interested in advancing one-by-one when they could just trap them in the alley and wait for them to try to get out.

"We can't *hit* 'em if we can't *touch* 'em," Gunn agreed.

Illyria gave them all a look of disgust. "Neither can *they* hurt *you*."

"Great in theory," Angel said. "In practice, they keep coming back."

"Get 'em to piss off long enough, we make for cover and figure out how to fight another day," Spike pointed out.

"Yeah, unfortunately I left my assault rifle in my other pants," Gunn said. "We don't have enough weapons to make them stay smog until we get home."

"One of us could be a decoy," Angel suggested.

Spike snorted and leaned his shoulder against the brick wall beside him. "Leave it to you to find a way to make this all about heroing."

Angel gave him a look. "Actually, I was going to suggest *you*."

"So *help* me if you two start up right now," Gunn said, "or I will stake you myself."

Angel frowned, studying the clot of demons. "There's one less."

"Not less." Illyria pointed to a vaporous mass that floated above the others. "Weaker."

"Fine line of difference," Gunn said.

"Isn't that the one Charlie's girlfriend got?" Spike asked.

"How can you tell?" Angel asked him. "They all look the same."

Spike shrugged. "Seems as good a guess as any; she's the only one who actually hurt one of 'em."

Angel turned to Gwen. "How many can you hit at once?"

"Hi to you, too," Gwen replied.

"Kind of in the middle of something here," Angel reminded her.

"So was I," Gwen retorted.

"Like *what*?" Gunn demanded.

"I have needs," Gwen replied, flicking a bit of gravel off of her pants. "Hobbies."

"We *need* to get out of here alive," Angel said.

"What makes you think I can do anything about that?" Gwen asked.

"Because shocking lasts longer than cutting." Angel's frown deepened as he saw Gwen's demon re-form into solid shape. "Or long enough."

"I don't recall asking you guys to risk your life for me the last time we all were together," Gwen said.

Gunn simply folded his arms and looked at her.

"Oh, all *right*," Gwen stalked to the front of the alleyway. "But you so owe me big time."

"Got your back," Angel promised.

The demons moved faster as they all approached. Within seconds the attack was renewed. Angel and the others tried to distract with blades and fists, while Gwen snuck into the middle of it all, grabbing at whatever demons she could and shocking whatever she touched. Each time she did the demons vanished with a shriek of outrage, re-forming again moments later to renew their attack.

"We need *longer* than that," Angel told her.

"Working on it," Gwen replied through gritted teeth.

The demons began to notice her. They abandoned the others to swarm around her, surrounding her with swirls of smoke and cloth until Gwen was barely visible inside of them.

She could be heard, though, and the demons showed her the same lack of mercy that they had shown Angel, grabbing her and lifting her up and doing *something* to her that made her scream and scream loudly.

What it also did was piss her off.

"Let - me - go!" Gwen shouted, screwing her face up as the air cracked, sizzled, and then exploded with energy as blue streaks of electricity arced from one demon to the next. The piercing, high-pitched wailing came from the demons, then, as one by one they were

forced into smoke and rendered powerless to do anything save fly around and shriek what could only be some of the nastier curses in their language.

"Well, they don't seem to like *that*, do they," Spike said, making his way towards Gunn and Angel - unhindered by attacking monsters now - through the scattered corpses that littered the street.

Illyria stood in the center of the road, watching. She could have been planning, or contemplating, or maybe trying to decide if they should file taxes as a business or a not-for-profit this year. Gunn didn't even want to try to fathom what went on in her head.

"You broken or just bent?" Spike asked when he finally noticed Angel, who was leaning against a lamppost and looking paler than usual. The annoyed scowl on Angel's face was probably answer enough and had the added benefit of not starting another round of the Spike and Angel Show, now appearing nightly at the Trocadero for your tomato-throwing pleasure.

"Long as you can't suck him up with a Hoover," Gunn answered as Spike put out an arm and Angel took it with a disturbing lack of his usual reluctance, which said more about the pain Angel was in than any amount of extra paleness or strain around his eyes, "I think he's still lower on the help the helpless list than our girl Gwen. Speaking of which, where the hell'd she go?"

A weak groan provided the answer. Gwen was lying on her side on the pavement, her eyes closed and her breathing shallow.

"Back to the Walden," Angel told them. "*Now.*"

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Angel managed to avoid dropping into a chair until everybody else had made it inside, which he thought was a pretty impressive accomplishment, considering that the only thing holding him up during those last few seconds after they walked back to the theater was the door that *he* was holding so Gunn could carry Gwen through it.

When he finally did sink down into one of the threadbare chairs that were part of the original lobby decor, he regretted it almost instantly. The quick motion made his burn pull at him and his generally abused muscles protest loudly. The impact with the under-padded seat seemed to travel straight up his spine and into his throbbing skull.

"I could use some blood," he said, glancing vaguely in Spike's direction. Expecting or even hoping that Spike would be cooperative about getting it was probably a good sign of just how fried his own brain must be.

"Hmm. Bet the temp could zap you up some." Spike pulled one of the first-second-and-third aid kits from behind the counter and slapped it onto the flat surface, then made as if he was looking around for someone. "Kev? Oh, Kevin, where are you? Come quickly; you're needed!"

"Spike..."

"Oh, that's right. You fired him."

"It's one in the morning; he wouldn't be here, anyway. Could we not and say you didn't, and then you get me some blood?" Angel gritted his teeth and forced himself to add, "Please?"

Spike handed off the first-aid kit to Gunn, who had just settled Gwen into a chair a lot more gently than Angel had managed for himself. Then Spike tapped his own head. "Angel should get his eggs scrambled more often; makes him almost polite."

"Excuse me? *You're* saying *I'm* - " Angel started, then stopped. He didn't have the energy

for it.

"Could we all not and say the both of you didn't?" Gunn asked brusquely. "Just get the man some blood, Spike." He glanced down at Gwen, who was conscious but looked somewhat out of it.

"While you're at it, could you get a girl some Gatorade?" Gwen's voice was a bit shaky but proved that she was more aware than Angel had been giving her credit for. "Possibly a bottle or two of aspirin?"

"Sure. Saving my ass earns you at least a juice box." Spike hopped up on the counter and swung his legs over, dropping down behind it to rummage in the old concession stand's mini-fridge. "Also, you're prettier than he is." A single finger poked up from behind the counter, pointing unerringly in Angel's direction.

Angel sighed. "Would *kicking* your ass earn me some blood?"

Spike stood back up behind the counter, an energy drink in one hand and a packet of blood in the other. "Only for the entertainment value in watching you try." He tossed the bottle to Gunn before turning away toward the microwave. "Painkillers in the box in front of you, Sparky."

"Thanks."

Gwen, Angel thought, looked slightly better than he felt, but that was only because she was still breathing. He watched her wince as she leaned forward and dug through the medical kit until she pulled out the aspirin bottle. Shaking out a couple of pills, she took the drink from Gunn and swallowed them, washing them down with almost the entire contents of the bottle.

"So," she said, sitting back again, "does someone want to tell me what those were that I was zapping? Friends of yours?"

Gunn shook his head. "Never saw them before in my life. Although..." He looked over at Angel. "Were those the things you were ranting about attacking you on vacation?"

"I wasn't ranting. I don't rant." Angel massaged the back of his head, not that it seemed to help with the pain. "I explain. And yes, those were the things that I was *explaining* to you about attacking me on vacation. *Now* do you believe - "

"No," Gunn and Spike said in eerie - and annoying - unison.

"Is it too much to ask for a little respect around here?"

Gunn tossed him the bottle of pills. "Does it surprise you that the answer is yes?"

The microwave beeped, and Spike pulled out a mug that Angel could easily and happily smell from across the room. He carried it over and held it in front of Angel's face. "One lump? Two? Cream? Sugar?"

"Dehydrated essence of ex-vampire?" Angel reached up for the blood and downed half of it in a gulp, using the second half to wash down a much larger handful of pills than Gwen had taken.

"Guess that sad retort means your head's knitting back together," Spike said, walking back toward the counter. "Pity, I could've grown to like the mannerly version."

"The funniest thing," Angel said, "and by that I mean the only funny thing, about that statement is the idea that you'd recognize manners if they came up and asked politely for permission to bite you on the ass."

Gunn gave them both an annoyed stare and turned back to Gwen. "Yes, they *are* always like this, and, no, none of us knows what the hell those things were besides ugly and fast."

"They are the Hunters of Silences," came Illyria's voice from across the room. She was standing at the small sink that was part of the old concession stand's setup, where she'd been silently tending to her own wounds since they'd returned.

Angel looked at her. "You know them."

Illyria inclined her head in agreement. "They are a species that thirst for pain and delight in causing it."

Spike glanced at Angel and popped the cap off of a bottle of beer. "Sounds like somebody I know."

"In my day we kept them as pets," Illyria added.

"And remember who she wanted to fill *that* role," Angel said, looking pointedly at Spike.

Gwen nudged Gunn with her foot. "Isn't your ex taking the pretentious punk thing a little too far?"

"Spike's not my - " Gunn started, then saw who Gwen was looking at. "Oh. Yeah. Long story. Short version? That's not Fred."

From his position by the counter, Spike made a grand gesture of introduction. "Former all-powerful god demon Illyria, meet Sparky. Sparky, meet Illyria."

Gwen sat up with obvious care. "Gwen's fine."

"We were talking about demons who want us all dead?" Angel prompted. Then, looking at Illyria, added, "You know, *now*."

Illyria looked back at him. "I have not desired your death for days now."

"And we're going to stick to the trend where you keep doing that, and I swear to God I won't move the videogames without telling you," Angel replied. "In the meanwhile, let's talk about Fido."

Tilting her head, Illyria frowned. "Fi - "

"Means the Hunters, love," Spike translated. "Nasty demon pets from your time?"

"Torturers," Illyria said. "Mindless creatures who exist only for the torment and the kill."

"You all can stop looking at me any time now," Angel said. He sat forward, wincing as his body protested the movement. "How do we stop them?"

"If I had the full capacity of my powers I could banish them to hell dimensions the likes of which halflings such as you can only dream of," Illyria said.

"Just out of curiosity," Angel asked, "are you *ever* going to stop hanging that over my head?"

Spike held up a hand to get their attention. "If our floaty boys are the pets, sounds to me like we need to stick a jackknife in whoever's holding the leash."

Gunn nodded. "We gotta track down Ga."

"We gotta track down the Senior Partners," Angel said.

"Oh no, you are *not* starting that again," Gunn told him.

"You heard what she said," Angel shot back. "These guys are pets to more powerful beings. Serious powerful. Senior *Partner* powerful."

"Yeah," Spike drawled. "Or *rival* to the Partners powerful."

Angel refused to be swayed. "This didn't happen by accident. They've attacked me twice now, on purpose. This isn't somebody who pulled up next to me at a traffic light and decided they didn't like my face. This was a *plan*."

"*Maybe* somebody set them on us; doesn't mean it's the big evil bogeys from the seventh level of hell that did it." Spike made a pained face. "I'm so sick of that Devouring From The Ass Up routine. Just occasionally, shit happens without being a harbinger of the End Times. Plenty of everyday people can't stand you too, you know."

"Like the guy who shot you in the chest?" Gunn pointed out. "Sounds to me like you've been attacked *three* times today, Angel, and it ain't the Senior Partners doing it."

"Guys?" Gwen spoke up. "No offense to this very L.A.-style need to care and share and hash it out, but when somebody's trying to kill me I focus more on stopping them than I do on playing twenty questions on what's their motivation."

"She's right," Gunn said. "We've got Ga, and we've got flappy things. They might be one and the same, but we have got to find out."

"If nothing else," Angel said, "I think we bought ourselves a little time on the Great Fire of Los Angeles."

"Not too likely the horny demons are going to turn up the heat when they're already oozing precious bodily fluids all over the pavement." Spike immediately held a finger up to silence Angel. "I know how that sounded. I'm tired. Let it go." He took another swig of beer.

"The Haunters *killed* Ga's boys," Angel said. "Doesn't sound like they're on the same side to me."

Illyria didn't seem thrown by that fact. "The Haunters are like rabid animals. They toy with their prey and any creature careless enough to cross their path. They know loyalty only to those who can destroy them."

Spike turned to Gwen. "Sounds like you're their mama duck now."

Gwen immediately held up her hands to disclaim responsibility. "Hey, the people downstairs from me are still pissed about that time I tried bringing home a *dog*. Swirly demons are *not* my thing."

"She did not destroy them," Illyria said.

"They *did* come back," Gunn acknowledged. "Not for a while, but - "

"So let's do that," Angel said. "Let's knock them out and keep them out."

Gwen leveled a glare at him. "With what? In case you didn't notice, I was already turned up to eleven. I've got nothing left on the dials once we tap out the saving-my-own-ass resources."

Spike tipped his own head in a gesture that was disturbing both because it made him look like a bleached-out bookend to Illyria and because it meant he was *thinking*, which was never good. "Don't suppose we could just plug her into the wall outlet?"

Gwen gave him a look. "Do I *look* like a coffee maker? You want to try plugging me into something, it sure as hell better come with a vibrate function."

Spike waved off her objection. "Wall outlet, portable generator, spare car battery. Whatever. Juice you up is what I'm saying."

"Again I'm back on vibrate function," Gwen replied. "And it doesn't work that way. Fantasize all you want about shoving me into wall outlets or even the Hoover Dam, but what I zap is what you get."

"But you can be influenced by *some* stuff, right?" Gunn asked, brushing a hand over Gwen's arm. "Otherwise you'd be needing to jump-start my heart right now."

"That's different," Gwen said. "That's controlling the levels. It's not drawing in a new power source."

"Perhaps it could." Surprisingly, that comment came from Illyria, who was looking at Gwen assessingly.

"It doesn't," Gwen insisted. "Trust me. I've been doing this all my life. Outside influences have no effect on my power. Can't juice me up; can't drain me off. I'm a self-contained freak."

Illyria studied her, her head tilted and her eyes focused. "That could be changed."

"You thinking a spell or something?" Angel asked.

"It may be possible to increase the power output by accelerating the... internal generator with an initial external charge." Illyria's diction, halting at first, grew more precise as she continued. "It would require only a bioelectric interface, a focusing mechanism, and an alternator to maintain the cycle and to prevent overload."

Spike was the first one to open his mouth in the silence that followed. "That's not Old One Speak."

Illyria looked at them all sharply, strange eyes more opaque than ever as her gaze moved over the room. "The memories still exist within me. Do you wish me to pretend that they do not?"

Angel studied her. "Not that this doesn't feel a little bit like grave robbing but - do you have the memories to *make* something like that?"

"Make? No," Illyria said. "But there is no need. Fred's laboratory had what is called a So'ama Accelerator."

"Speaking of grave robbing," Spike murmured.

"Think you can dig them out of the rubble?" Angel asked.

"It has not troubled me before," Illyria replied. "Wesley's things, hers - there is no difference."

"What if it's not in one piece?" Gunn asked.

"Cross that bridge when we come to it," Angel said.

Gwen stood up in protest, grimacing slightly with the movement. "I don't remember agreeing to let anyone accelerate my generator."

"Gwen - " Gunn began, rising to his feet beside her, but she immediately cut him off.

"No. I didn't come here to take part in some kind of build-a-better-monster-zapper experiment. I've had more than my share of scientific types poking at me when I was a kid, and I don't need any more."

"These nasties are killing people," Gunn said. "You gonna let the responsibility for that lie on your shoulders?"

"From what you guys have said so far," Gwen replied, "these nasties have been killing *demons*. I have to say I feel pretty okay about that."

Angel stood up as well. He moved about as slowly as Gwen had but still managed to stare her down. "They came after me. They came after my girlfriend. They're going after whoever the hell they want, and they're not discriminating."

Gwen held up her hands and took a step toward the door. "You guys do the hero gig, not me."

"Sometimes us heroes need help," Gunn pointed out.

"Plus who's to say the demon dogs aren't going to track you down and give you a personal thanks for the first go-round of making them the untouchables?" Spike added. He cocked his head in her direction. "In which case, sounds like you'd need *our* help."

Gwen didn't look any happier, but after a moment of glaring at Spike she did return to her chair. "This is what I get for stopping to talk to you," she complained to Gunn as she sat with a sigh. "A bunch of ancient great white hunters who think I'm the tiger they need to mount on their trophy wall. This kind of thing only happens when I'm around you people."

"What will we need?" Angel asked Illyria.

"A dose of sanity?" Gwen suggested.

"A Nyamia crucible," Illyria replied. "It is the only thing which will focus her power in the way we require."

"And we'd get that over on Venice Beach, right?" Gunn asked.

"Shoot me for saying this but are we talking about something that's yaa big - " Gwen held out her hands to illustrate something the size of a breadbox. " - kind of marbled, and looks like it's made of jade?"

"Yes," Illyria said, turning her attention back to her.

Gwen sighed and said, "I think I know where I can find one."

"You just happen to know a place that sells the latest from D&D Industries?" Gunn asked.

"I happen to know where I can find various kinds of shiny and expensive things," Gwen replied with an arch smile. "You might call that a hobby of mine."

"Whatever," Angel said, considering sitting down again and deciding against it given how little he had enjoyed it the last time. "Just get it."

"For those of us who've been bored by the science since this started," Spike said, "I'd like to point out we've still got ourselves some demons with a Guy Fawkes complex."

"Spike's - " Angel swallowed heavily and managed to force the words out. " - not... totally incorrect. The Hunters didn't get everybody. We should try to track the rest down."

"Maybe beat them up a bit?" Spike suggested, his eyes brightening as he strolled closer.

"I'm not ruling it out." Angel glanced outside. "Still dark. You up for this?"

"Better hope I am, old man." Spike thumped a hand on Angel's chest. "You can barely stand."

"If anything attacks me, I'm using you as a shield," Angel said.

"Do the same for you," Spike replied magnanimously.

Angel ignored him. "Illyria, get the accelerator. If it's broken, try to fix it. Gunn, you and Gwen get your hands on the crucible."

"Do our best," Gunn said.

"Call if you need anything," Angel told him, then, remembering, added, "Um - *Spike's* phone."

Gunn frowned. "What happened to - "

"*Long* story," Angel said as he limped out of the room.

---

"Let me get this straight. You're now a lawyer, thanks to having the education stuffed in your head in one afternoon? And all this through an offer from a talking panther?" Gwen shook her head as she climbed out of Gunn's truck. "I could have told you that was going to turn out badly."

Gunn slammed his door and pocketed his keys before responding. "Panther didn't talk. Exactly. It just had... really expressive eyes."

"I think the operative point here is you were taking advice from a big kitty."

"Big kitty with connections to big power." He closed his eyes, and when he opened them the statement didn't sound any less stupid and neither did he. "But I'm not arguing. Wasn't my finest hour."

"It does sound like a rough year all around," Gwen commiserated as they headed down the sidewalk. "I'm sorry about Fred."

Gunn tasted the same metallic guilt he always did when the topic came up. He deftly avoided responding by gesturing in front of them. The street dead-ended in a fenced-off school playground that looked like it had seen better days. "Since straight is not an option, we going left or right?"

"Left." Gwen led the way around the corner, occasionally glancing toward Gunn. "So, you still a lawyer?"

"I still know how to be. Haven't exactly been filing a lot of motions from the offices of Angel Investigations, Sunday matinee half-price."

"I don't know. Could be a good gimmick for your business," Gwen teased. "You could offer free popcorn with every settlement reached."

"You think we can afford to give away popcorn?"

"Guess that would depend on how good a lawyer you are." Gwen turned and led them

down an alley.

"Nah - depends on how rich the client is," Gunn said, instinctively watching the shadows for anything that shouldn't be there. "And when your agency motto is We Help the Helpless..."

"And you're okay with that? The being poor but noble thing?" Gwen asked, not even attempting to hide the curiosity in her eyes.

He thought about any number of answers that would have taken longer to explain than the time he wanted to spend talking about the memories they were wrapped around and discarded them all. In the end, he settled for, "Yeah. I'm good with that."

She looked him over. "Guess that makes you a bona fide hero, then, huh?"

"Not a hero." It came out gruffer than he'd intended; he softened his voice. "Just on the right side of the fight. Again. Finally."

Gwen fell into a thoughtful silence as they continued down the alley.

---

"You know, you can split off and go wherever it is you're going any time now." Spike didn't look back as he headed down the street in front of Angel.

"I'm burned, Spike, not concussed," Angel said. "Try as often as you want, I won't forget that we're going to the same place. Much as I'd like to."

"Not like it's a joy for me to hang around you, either," Spike shot back. "Bad enough doing it on your best days; it's even less fun when there's nasties at your back."

"So you admit I was right about that?" Angel asked.

Spike glanced back over his shoulder. "What, then? Now? There's always something after you; never said there wasn't. Part and parcel of the hero gig, right?"

"Maybe," Angel said. "Or maybe it's just us."

"Speak for yourself; I spent most of this century with nobody trying to kill me unless I pissed 'em off directly."

"So that would mean you had nobody trying to kill you for what? About five minutes?"

Spike wasn't quite fast enough to face front again before Angel caught the corner of a grin. "At least a week in nineteen seventy-three. Granted, we were leeching off a Grateful Dead tour. You know how hard it is to piss off a Deadhead?"

"I'm sure you gave it the old college try," Angel said.

"Running one over with his own van finally worked."

They were nearing the intersection where the Haunters had attacked them the night before; the streetlights were still burnt out, but the bodies were strewn everywhere. Spike stopped on the sidewalk, looking around cautiously, checking the sky above the road as well, Angel noted, as though the demons might swarm back out at any second.

"Too much to hope that somebody might clean up?" Spike said.

Angel nudged one of the corpses with his foot. "Not like we've got a department to take care of that anymore."

"Your own fault for firing the interns," Spike said.

"We're looking for *clues*," Angel reminded him.

"Dropped wallet might be nice." Crossing the street, Spike wandered around, staring down at the bloodstained asphalt. His voice took on a wistful tone. "Cash. Credit cards. iPod..."

Angel spotted something gleaming dully in amongst the blood. He squatted down, picking it up gingerly. "How about a hotel key?"

"Dunno," Spike said, glancing over. "Place any good?"

Angel gave him a look. "Come on. Let's go for a drive."

---

"You know," Gunn said, "you never did tell me what you've been doing all this time."

Gwen looked upwards, studying a building with a determined eye. "Oh, you know. Donating to charity. Reading to the blind. The usual."

"Right," Gunn said. "And if that *actually* resembled the truth it'd sound like..."

"Did a whirlwind tour to find out what it's like to touch stuff," Gwen said. "As a word to the wise, they *do* not like it when you manhandle Norwegian paintings."

Gunn looked over at her with not quite as much disbelief as he would have liked. "You didn't."

Gwen smiled coyly and turned her attention back to the task at hand. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

He decided not to take that particular bait. "So did you see anything interesting while you were off finding new ways to break penal codes?"

"Spoken like a true lawyer." Apparently convinced that the coast was clear, Gwen guided him towards the back of the building. "And I saw lots of interesting things. The world's really a fascinating place. You should think about seeing more of it."

"Fun as that sounds, somehow I don't think I could convince Angel to take the evil-fighting gig on tour."

"Not everything has to be about Angel." She stopped and reached up to pull a fire escape down. "Maybe you should think about branching out on your own."

Gunn shook his head. "Not everything *is* about Angel; it's about doing what we can do. And let's just say I had a good long year to figure out how quick it goes to hell when we don't do it as a team."

Gwen shrugged. "As long as you're happy. You want to go up first?"

He snorted but put his foot on the ladder. Then he turned to look back at her. "This is about staring at my ass while I'm climbing, isn't it?"

"Well, duh," Gwen said with a roll of her eyes and another smoldering grin.

"Just checking." He started climbing, hand over hand. "Any particular window I'm supposed to be looking for here?"

"We're going all the way to the top. The guy who has the things we're after has a skylight."

"Gotcha." Once they were on the roof, he paused. "You *are* gonna to tell me he runs a puppy mill in his spare time or something, right?"

"Actually he runs a cathouse." Gwen flexed her fingertips and pressed them into a silver box that sat beside the skylight. A spark flew out, and then the skylight slid open. "I can tell you he kicked a puppy once if it'll help."

Gunn peered down, judging the distance from the roof to the floor. They were directly over a study, which was filled with books, couches, and desks, but no people. "Was it a really cute puppy?"

"What - you don't avenge ugly puppies?"

"No, but... Damn. How is it you can manage to make me feel guilty about liking some completely fictional animals more than other completely fictional animals?"

Gwen merely smirked. "Innate talent."

As the coast was clear, Gunn attached a climbing rope to the top of the fire escape and dangled it through the skylight down to the floor below. He shimmied down, then held his arms out to help Gwen come down after him. "And you still steal stuff when you could use your mutant made-up guilt power and make a fortune as a televangelist?"

"Everyone has some standards." Dropping to his side, Gwen took a moment to orient herself, then went over to the bookcase. She ran her fingertips over the spines of the books, clearly looking for something.

Gunn kept his ear out for trouble. "So why does your puppy-kicker who owns a cathouse have a whatever you call it crucible, anyway?"

"He's a mythology geek," Gwen replied. "The rest are just hobbies."

"He owns a brothel as a *hobby*? What - stamp-collecting just not captivating enough?"

"What do you think?" Gwen moved her search to the next shelf down. "If you had a choice between stamp collecting and having your own personal whorehouse, you telling me you'd choose the stamps?"

"Hell, yeah, I'd tell you I'd choose the stamps," Gunn said.

Gwen finally found what she wanted and sent another spark through a book that was apparently not as real as the others. A previously invisible panel swung open in the wall next to the bookcase, revealing money, a pair of bejeweled necklaces, and a dark, marbled box that looked like it was made out of jade. "Would you be lying through your teeth?" Gwen asked.

"In the words of my people," Gunn said, "I take the fifth."

"In the words of mine," Gwen said, reaching for the jewelry, "I'll take everything to go."

"Hang on." Gunn put out a hand to stop her. "I thought we were here for one thing."

"You were." Avoiding his outstretched arm, Gwen dropped the necklaces into the bag she was carrying. "I'm not."

Gunn's eyes narrowed. "So when you said you were walking through the neighborhood - "

"Hey," Gwen said, "you were on business, I was on business. What's the big deal?"

"My business is *not* your business," Gunn said.

Gwen grabbed him and dragged him over to the corner furthest from the door. "Clearly not or you'd know to keep your voice *down*."

"We are *not* stealing anything more than we have to." His tone brooked no argument, but he did make himself speak more quietly.

"Excuse me, but I'm risking my life to help you guys," Gwen reminded him. "I think I'm entitled to a little commission."

"It is *not* going to work like this," Gunn said.

"Oh, it only works where we steal the things *you* want to have?" Gwen asked.

"The things I want *help* people," Gunn said. "And it's not like I'm happy about us doing this in the first place."

"Yeah, I'm sure you'll be sending this guy a check to repay him real soon," she retorted with a roll of her eyes.

"You think this is a joke?" Gunn asked. "I've had friends who have *died* because of what happened when we started mixing the lines of good and evil. *I* almost died because of it. I might not know why I got out of it and they didn't, but I know for damn sure I won't repeat the same mistakes twice. Now put the jewelry *back*."

Gwen's eyes blazed. "You know, if you can't tell the difference between me and what you used to work for then I'm starting to wonder why I bothered coming to see you again."

He glared at her as the lights began to flicker. "Oh, so just because you're pissed at me you're going to annoy me with cheap-ass parlor tricks? Real mature."

Gwen looked around, the anger in her expression transforming to caution. "That's not me."

"If it's not you then who..." Gunn trailed off as a bit of movement drew his eyes upward.

There were Haunters waiting by the skylight.

"*Shit*," Gunn said. He grabbed the Nyamia crucible with one hand and Gwen with the other. "Quick, you got another way out of here?"

Gwen pointed towards an open doorway. "That way. Bedroom. Other fire escape."

"Go." Gunn shoved her in front of him.

They ran through a surprisingly unoccupied bedroom. When the window didn't open on the first try, Gunn rammed his elbow through the glass, letting his coat absorb the damage and the impact. Once outside, he and Gwen half-ran, half-slid down the stairs and banisters of the fire escape until they made it down into the street.

"Truck's that way," Gunn reminded her.

The streetlights around them crackled and flickered once before going black, plunging them into darkness. The demons floated down, circling the two of them like a pack of lions around two choice gazelles.

Gwen took up a defensive posture, her hands in front of her as she tried to keep both of the Haunters in sight. "What are you waiting for?" she taunted them. "Can't be afraid of

little old me, can you?"

One of them remained where it was, floating above her. The other took a run straight at her, sword-arm ready to swing down at her face. When Gwen's hand shot up, however, the demon zapped out of existence before it could come in contact with her, reappearing above a burnt-out dance club sign.

The other tried a similar move, but it ended up ducking at the last second, too; Gunn couldn't tell if it was chickening out pre-emptively or dodging what it considered a threatening movement of her hands.

Of course he'd left any weapons that *he* could use back in the truck, not thinking a quick walk to what he thought would be Gwen's apartment was going to require an axe or a longsword. Gunn looked around for something that he could defend himself with before jumping into the fray, but nothing seemed obvious. There was no convenient construction on this corner that might leave loose boards lying around. A manhole cover might make a decent shield, but what the hell would he pry it up with? If he had a crowbar he'd be using that to whack at the things, anyway.

One of the Haunters dove at Gwen again but at the last second peeled off in another direction, heading straight for Gunn.

"Hey!" Gwen called out, sounding mortally offended at being ignored. "You were dancing with me!" At her last word, Gwen held out her hand, bolts flying from her fingers to first one, then both of the Haunters. It was only the second time Gunn had seen Gwen pull off such a feat, and it was just as impressive as it had been then.

The angry, high-pitched screams had the people around ducking and covering their ears, those few who hadn't already scattered across the street or into the nearest open building. Gunn followed suit on the ear-covering, though he stood where he was, watching the enraged demons as Gwen's homemade lightning poured into them.

Gwen kept up the attack until the Haunters began to turn translucent around the edges, then broke it off. "If I were you," she told them, "I'd run along before you make me real cranky."

One of them quieted for a second and made a test run, but not at Gunn, or anything Gwen would be likely to blast it for. The demon flashed straight through the darkened neon 'Vibes' sign. The screeching picked up again when it ended up on the other side, obviously completely insubstantial.

There was no visible signal between them, but one moment the two demons were still hovering near Gwen, and the next they were gone. The street was silent except for the confused chatter of those people curious enough to start venturing back out into the open again.

Gunn crossed the rest of the way back to the sidewalk and picked up Gwen's bag from the ground beside her. "So much for hiding in the crowd. You ok?"

Gwen nodded, though she looked unsettled. "I'm starting to really want to get rid of these guys."

Gunn hauled out his cell phone. "Then I'm thinking we'd better get together with the others, if we want to do something about that."

---

"Not a bad place," Spike commented as Angel pulled the car in across the street from what looked to be one of LA's five-star hotels.

"Evil does like to live in style," Angel said.

Spike glanced over at him with a small smirk on his lips. "You of all people would know."

"I'm thinking a place this fancy, this is probably where Ga is staying," Angel said, ignoring both the comment and the smirk.

"I'm thinking as unobservant as you are," Spike replied, pointing, "you could have sussed that out by using your eyeballs."

Angel looked in the direction Spike was indicating, towards the more private driveway on the side of the hotel. Hardly anyone was around to notice a tall yellow, three-horned demon stepping out of a stretch Hummer and looking as though he owned the place.

Angel unlocked his door. "I'm going to kill him."

"With what? Your menacing stare?" Spike asked. "You're one-third the vamp you usually are. How exactly are you planning on stopping him?"

"I have ways," Angel said, though he didn't move beyond gripping the steering wheel more tightly.

"What *you* have is a - " Spike stopped as a metallic ring filled the car. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone. "Hang on. I've got an incoming."

Angel decided he didn't want to wait. "Whatever, I'm going to - "

Spike grabbed his arm before he could go anywhere. "Leave it. Demons attacked again. Charlie's sending out the bat signal."

Angel watched as Ymo Ga was surrounded by bodyguards and safely escorted into the hotel. "Crap."

"That's the heroing biz," Spike said with an almost philosophical shrug.

---

Angel and Spike returned to find the lobby of the Walden empty of their friends.

"Anybody here?" Angel called out.

Spike walked over and opened the stairway door that led up to the projection booth. "Hey, La Blue Girl, you up there?" he shouted into the echoing space. When there was no immediate answer, he added, "Come out, come out, wherever you are. I know you're there, you know; I can hear you."

Angel heard a clunk, as of something metal being set down with as little patience as Spike ever inspired in anyone, then Illyria appeared in the doorway, landing easily although she had obviously jumped down from the top of the stairs to Angel's office.

Spike blinked for a second but recovered quickly enough. "What were you hiding up there for? Didn't you hear us call?"

"I was not hiding; I was ignoring you," Illyria replied. "Is there a reason I should not?"

"Of course there's a reason..." Spike frowned and glanced at Angel. "Which I'm sure is going to come to me any second now..."

"Find the accelerator?" Angel asked.

"It was damaged - " Illyria held up device that looked rather like a dented and somewhat rusted flame thrower before laying it on the counter. " - but I believe it will work."

"You know that for certain?" Angel asked.

Fixing her eyes more sharply on him, Illyria managed to look more irritated than usual. "I cannot test it without all of the parts."

"Speaking of." Spike nodded in the direction of the lobby doors, through which Gunn and Gwen were entering. "Everybody still in one piece?"

"I'm getting sick of feeling like I'm getting sunburned from the inside out, but we're not hurt," Gwen replied.

"Did you get the crucible?" Angel asked.

Gunn handed a heavy box over to him before heading toward the concession stand. "If that's it, then yeah."

Angel turned to Illyria. "This thing hard to put together?"

"There is a space made for it," Illyria said. "Even a being of your intelligence could manage it."

"Might be over-estimating our Angel there," Spike said.

Angel flipped over the main part of the accelerator and saw the large compartment where the crucible would fit. He slid it into place and stepped back as the device began to hum. "Now what?"

"I guess now I learn how to shoot that thing." Gwen looked at it a bit warily.

"Plus we gotta figure out how to find these demons so we *can* shoot them," Gunn said before taking a long swallow from a bottle of water.

"Guys?" Angel said, noticing the lights flicker and feeling the itch begin on the back of his neck. "Something tells me that last part isn't going to be a problem."

They all ducked as the demons came crashing through the front windows.

The crash of glass was a familiar and unpleasant sound for Angel as he dove for the weapons cabinet, Spike and Gunn close behind him. The front of the theater was filled with swirling darkness. The main marquee no longer shone in through what was left of the windows, and the larger lobby lights were out, but the smaller lights from the counter area and half-open auditorium doors were quite enough to illuminate the shrouded demons in their silent, creepy ballet.

Angel made it to the cabinet, grabbing a sword just in time to block a blow from one of the demons. He tossed another towards Spike, then an axe, trusting that vampire reflexes would catch both.

"Watch that, will you? Could've cut off my head!" Spike handed off the axe to Gunn and aimed a punch at the demon that came flying at his face; it flickered out before his fist could make contact.

"I don't get that lucky," Angel muttered under his breath, spinning and swinging his sword at another Haunter, following it with another stroke and another, not giving the thing a chance to reform.

Not that it mattered; there were plenty more where that one came from. The air was thick with Haunters flickering and out of existence. If the former attacks were opening skirmishes, this was a all-out assault.

"Gwen, get the accelerator!" Angel shouted across the fray. "Illyria, watch her back!"

Gwen snatched the device off of the counter, quickly sliding her arms into the straps. "It'd help if I knew how it worked!"

"Aim it towards the demons," Illyria replied.

"Thanks," Gwen drawled. She pushed a few buttons, unleashing a bolt of lightning that shot across the lobby and blew the soda machine into pieces, nearly hitting Spike in the process.

"The *other* demons," Spike snapped as he swung his sword at a nearby Haunter.

"I can't control it!" Gwen retorted, glaring down at the wand in her hands.

Illyria gave an untroubled and jerky shrug. "The machine has been damaged." One of the demons came toward them, and she stepped forward to meet it.

Gwen started to take it off. "Oh no. I didn't want to do this in the first place. I am *not* keeping this thing on and doing who knows what with it or myself."

"You're the only one who can do it," Gunn called as he swung his axe through a temporarily insubstantial demon.

"What if this thing blows up on me?" Gwen demanded. "What if it hurts the LISA? You think I came back all this way to give people a reason to treat me like a freak again?"

"People will die if we don't stop these guys," Angel said, meeting her eyes across the counter as he pulled back from the fight for a moment. "Believe me, there's worse things in life than being treated like a freak."

Gwen hesitated, but her gaze was drawn to the battle and the damage the demons were doing to the lobby.

"Okay," she finally said. "But right now I can't shoot them without shooting you."

Angel thought about it, glanced behind him as Spike yelled out a warning to Gunn, and then pointed upward. "Projection booth."

Gwen pointed in front of her. "Counter. What's it to you?"

Angel gave her a look. "Go there. You can aim from up there and hit the demons. We'll try to herd them into the theater."

Gwen looked at him dubiously. "Think you can manage it?"

"One way to find out," Angel replied before leaping back into the thick of the battle.

Gunn seemed to be holding his own, axe-head flashing in a similar rhythm to Angel's sword: hit out at the things to make them disappear and keep hitting so they wouldn't go solid again.

Near the counter, and thus nearest to the auditorium, Spike was playing the same game but fast enough that he got the chance to move as well, slowly drawing the three or four that were concentrating on him in the direction of those half-open doors. Angel caught Gunn's eye; Gunn nodded in response and both of them began backing in that direction, slowly enough to draw more and more of the Haunters with them.

Spike kicked the door fully open behind him and began retreating down the faded carpet path between the rows of seats, almost as though he was being driven, instead of

leading, which was exactly the impression they wanted to give.

---

The lights flickered in the projection room as Gwen made her way inside. She crawled over abandoned equipment and filmstrips to the front window, positioning herself to fire down on the theater below.

She found herself feeling a bit... closed in; strapped as she was into this metal monstrosity, all she could do was look out the window in front of her and wait for the battle to come to her.

Below, in the theater, things moved to her point of view in an almost comical slow motion. First Spike appeared in one of the central aisles, barely fighting off several flying demons. Then, eventually, Gunn made his way down the opposite aisle, Haunters following him as well. The two men darted in and out of the rows of seats as they dodged the fluttering dark shapes in the air.

Gwen grew even more antsy; she now had targets in range, but she couldn't do anything about it. Not until Angel got his undead butt in gear and lured the rest in.

---

The lobby seemed to have grown in size, Angel thought as he made his way across it, fighting for every step. He'd almost made it to the theater doors now, but it felt like it had taken forever.

There were four demons - no, five, one kept flitting in and out without actually getting close to him - under the impression that they were pushing him through the doors. He paused there for a second to maintain that impression, as if it were the last bulwark before being shoved into enemy territory, then backed into the theater. Behind him, Spike shouted a warning as one of his opponents broke away to dart at Angel.

"What - the minute he shows on the scene, I'm not good enough for you people?" Spike called.

Angel turned to face the new attack, the quick move pulling painfully on his healing burns in a way that if he hadn't been in the middle of a life or death fight would have stopped him cold in his tracks.

"I think we're all too popular for our own good," Gunn replied to Spike, even as he moved to lure the Haunters closer to the optimum target range. Illyria fought beside them, looking annoyed that at best she could only hold her own against what had once been comparatively lesser demons.

None of them looked up at the projection booth; none of them would even if they had been able to take their eyes off their enemies. Even though they didn't look, however, they were all acutely aware of what was going on up there and knew that if this plan was going to work it would have to happen soon.

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Gwen felt the energy key up around her as the demons came into range. Judging by the kick of the first blast, she didn't think this was a trick she wanted to try too often.

"Just means I'll have to make every shot count," she muttered. She lined up a large group of the demons in her sights and fired.

The power exploded from her, this blast even stronger than the first. Bolts of lightning lashed out, streaking towards whatever target they could claim.

But that would hurt the others - or it might.

Using what strength of her own she could lend, Gwen reached out and strained to manipulate the energy flow. It was like trying to tame a T. Rex with a leash made of dental floss, but she concentrated hard enough to make blackness swim in front of her eyes in the hope that there might be a chance of minimizing the damage to Angel and the others.

The shrieking echoed up from below like they were screening a particularly bad horror film. In a way, they were, since the creatures' shadows loomed large against the screen, dipping and swaying, in the light from her blast.

Below the level of the demons' screams, there was an almost melodic sound, like the film even had incidental music. It took her a second of staring out into the darkness before Gwen realized it was the shaking of the chandelier in the center of the auditorium, the force of the power flowing past it knocking the crystals against each other like wind-chimes.

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Angel glanced up at the ominously swaying, tinkling chandelier above him as the power broke off, but it didn't look like it was about to come down on his head just yet.

The sound level fell to something almost tolerable as most of the shrieking demons stopped diving through solid objects and extended weapons and disappeared in frustration, leaving only eight or nine of them to advance on the defenders.

Except they weren't advancing at all; they were floating before the three men and Illyria, not attacking, not within sword-range.

The demons weren't even looking at them. Their shrouded heads were turned *up*, towards the projection booth.

"They're going after Gwen!" Angel shouted to the others, then dove into the center of the cluster of Haunters.

Yelling loudly, he spun and kicked and slashed and generally made a target of himself, forcing the Haunters to concentrate only on his attack.

The only problem with getting all of the Haunters focused on him, Angel thought as he backed towards the front of the room, drawing the demons with him, was that all of the Haunters were focused on *him*. There was only so much even vampire reflexes could do to block attacks, and it was no surprise that hits began to sneak through his defenses.

Simple flesh wounds from their weapons were the first, but then came glancing touches of fiery fingers bringing with them brief bursts of pain, a promise of what he would feel if they ever managed to get a proper grip on him again.

He was so focused on the balance between keeping their attention and holding them off that when Angel felt the edge of the front of the stage at his back he almost jumped in reflexive surprise. He'd drawn them all the way into the theater; there was nowhere left for him to move.

Except up. He reached up with his sword-free hand to give himself leverage for a jump up onto the stage and fell back against the wood, this time in real pain, as his burn-damaged muscles screamed at him. It seemed to Angel, as his pain blurred his vision for a second, that the Haunters were coalescing into one dark mass, reaching directly for him.

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Gwen definitely wanted to throw up now that the second blast was done. Her head hurt, her hands ached, and the small of her back was starting to feel uncomfortably hot in a way that did not make her feel happy about what all this was doing to her system.

Then she saw the demons go after Angel. She really didn't want to use the device another time, but...

"*Damn* it," she said and fired again.

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From his position on stage, Angel could see Gwen's latest shot. The flow was off somehow. Sulky, stuttering, even. It was stronger than what she could have generated naturally, but not as strong as the last two blasts. The demonic shrieks began again, but they weren't as loud or as frantic.

Then there was a high-pitched whine almost like the sound of an engine pushed way past its max. It was the sound of too many revs too fast too soon. The machine jerked, and then another blast burst out, this time pure blue and exploding through the air like a star giving up its final breath.

Angel and the others were knocked off their feet as the theater shuddered with the force of an earthquake. The chandelier shimmied and shook, then fell to the floor in a crashing avalanche of brass and crystal.

Throughout all of it, the Haunters were screaming. Their bodies trembled and blurred as the electricity flowed through the air, each of them shrieking almost deafeningly loudly as they were forced to turn intangible.

There was a final, blinding flare, framing the Haunters like a photo negative for the span of a heartbeat before they disappeared entirely. The empty auditorium, Gunn and Spike dark, blurry spots as they started to run toward him, was imprinted on Angel's vision. Then, just as suddenly, everything went black.

It took a few moments before they found each other in the darkened theater, and they made their way back toward the lobby.

"Think we blew the neighborhood out with that one," Spike observed, glancing out the destroyed front of the building to the street beyond.

"If the neighbors ask," Angel said, "we know *nothing* about this."

"Long as it's just a blackout, I'd say we did okay," Gunn said.

"I count four of us," Spike said. "Where's Charlie's girl?"

Suddenly realizing there was too *much* silence, Angel raced upstairs. Gunn followed behind him, grabbing a flashlight from its place behind the lobby countertop.

"Shit," Gunn said once they reached the projection booth. He tried to reach out to offer a hand but stopped himself before he could touch.

Gwen was sprawled motionless on the floor. She was passed out, pale, and the LISA was smoking and sending faint sparks crackling over the skin of her lower back.

"Shit," Gunn repeated more quietly, apparently not content with saying it only once.

Angel could offer no rebuttal to that.

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"She going to be all right?" Spike asked from his position on the countertop.

Angel slumped down in his chair in the lobby, relishing the lack of need to move or do anything right that second. Their lighting was the flicker of firelight from the many candles they'd set up, and it made the Walden seem like a room out of Angel's past; candlelight always seemed to throw him back in time a little. Having Spike there only made that feeling stronger. "Seems like."

"Apparently it was just a short or something," Gunn said, taking off his coat and righting a chair to sit in it. "Gwen was fine as soon as she got home."

"Wager she's not going to try Blue's toy again anytime soon," Spike said.

"I believe her exact words on the subject involved all of us doing something that's anatomically impossible," Gunn tilted his head thoughtfully. "Except maybe for Illyria, but I really don't want to know."

Spike hopped off of the counter and went to stand by one of the broken lobby windows, looking out at the street. "Pity we burned out the porn shop sign; always thought it made a nice comfy nightlight for working late."

"I don't know what's scarier," Gunn said. "The fact that he knows that's a porn shop with the number of letters that were *already* burnt out in that sign or the fact that he's kind of right. Didn't realize how used I'd got to the neighborhood already."

"No, the scary part is you seriously believing I knew it was a porn shop from *reading the sign*," Spike replied.

"The power is only gone temporarily," Illyria observed. "It will be back."

"Funny, that," Angel murmured.

Spike turned away from the window to look at him. "Something on your mind?"

Angel stood up slowly, brushing down his clothes. "Nothing. I'm going home."

"That's it?" Gunn asked. "No speeches about the Senior Partners? No nagging us about danger being around every corner?"

"No doing anything about my case?" Spike added.

"It's late," Angel said. "Whatever else is going on, we can deal with it after we get some sleep."

Gunn narrowed his eyes at him. "That sounds... suspiciously sensible. Though a little bit lazy."

"It's way past midnight. The neighborhood's dark but not on fire," Angel pointed out. "I'd say it's going to be safe for at least a little bit. Let's all go home. Catch our breath. Or something. We'll do the rest of it later."

"What about Ga?" Spike asked.

Angel shrugged, fishing the keys to his Viper out of his coat pocket. "He's gotta eat breakfast at some point, too."

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The sun was just starting to lick at the horizon when Ymo Ga appeared by his stretch Hummer again.

"So it turns out," Angel said, standing in the shadow of the tall car's door, "that I don't

need to have a big fancy law firm to do my research when I can just charm the front desk into telling me what time you go out to meet your partners for an egg white omelet with a strawberry smoothie on the side."

"Angelus," Ga said. His hand flicked out to gesture at the bodyguards who were smoking cigarettes by the private entrance to the hotel.

Angel's right hand shot out to hold Ga's hand still. "Ah, no. That would be a *stupid* thing to do if you want me to kill you quickly. *Slow*, on the other hand, could be a lot of fun."

Ga relaxed his hand. He nodded towards the car. "Shall we have this meeting privately?"

"I'm not much for something this ostentatious," Angel said. "Too big, too boxy. Also I already hate that I've spent this much time with a low-life like you. Any more and people might talk."

"Any more than they already do about the presumptuous vampire who does not know his place?" Ga asked.

"Funny thing, that," Angel said. "I *do* know my place. It's here, in this city, and it's protecting everyone who lives here, because I'm the Champion and that's what I do. So I want you to go home and tell all your pissant friends and business partners that I don't give a damn about what happened to Wolfram & Hart. *I* own this town. I will *always* own this town. And if any of you have a problem with that, I'll make sure that you get down on your hands and knees and pray for the days when the worst things I could do to you involved attacking you with tort cases and paper cuts."

"You think all I want to do to you is attack your city?" Ga demanded. He leaned in, his red eyes flashing. "You *stole* from me. You *took* from me. Having your city is the least of my concerns."

"Yeah," Angel said, "not really caring about - "

Ga grabbed him, tearing open the front of his shirt to reveal the circular brand on Angel's chest. "That spot was *mine*. The Circle was ready to accept *me* before you came in. I was *primed* for the ultimate goal of my power. But the Senior Partners chose *you*. Now the Circle is closed. You are the only member that remains. And until you perform the ceremony to give me the position and glory that is rightfully mine I will hunt you *and* your people down like the rabid dogs they are and not stop until each and every one of you weeps tears of blood and spittle and - "

"Okay, already bored with *that*." Angel morphed into game face and grabbed Ga's elbow, jerking him forward and using the momentum to crack the demon's head into the side of the car. He then shoved the unconscious Ga into the back seat and slammed the door closed behind him.

The bodyguards ran up. The one in front said, "Hey, you can't - "

"Can. Did," Angel said, taking a few casual steps away from the car. "And now *you* can tell all of your boss's friends what will happen to them if they set one foot into my city."

"What?" the bodyguard asked.

Angel pulled the lit cigarette out of the demon's hand and flicked it over his shoulder. There was a second of hesitation before the stretch Hummer exploded in a ball of flames, courtesy of the gas and gunpowder that Angel had seeded it with while the car had been left alone.

"You know," Angel said to no one in particular as the demons ran to save their boss, "in the past three months I have learned the most *interesting* stuff about what you can do with burning things."

No one seemed to be listening to him, so Angel smiled to himself, got into his Viper just as the sun's rays appeared in earnest, and drove home.

"It's a strange sort of family," Wesley observed. "Vampire, ex-Watcher, gang member, aspiring actress - and of course now we've added a somewhat introverted physicist to the mix."

"Strange is the only kind of family I know." Angel made a gesture of contentment. "As far as I'm concerned, this works."

"I'm glad we can fulfill your abnormal sense of normality," Wesley said.

"As a wise person once told me - " Angel checked his watch " - two minutes ago, it's all about me. And making me happy."

"*Somewhat* happy," Wesley qualified.

"I'd settle for *any* happy," Angel said. He stopped in front of a store window, looking down at what was inside. "Speaking of which, you think Cordy would like any of this?"

Wesley stepped forward. Inside the display were intricately patterned silk scarves and leather pocketbooks with thick gold buckles. "It's certainly her taste. By which I mean each one of these items costs at least three figures, if not more. I've honestly never been able to tell if she looks at anything other than the price tag."

"She always looks great." Angel's hands were pressed against the glass, as though he could pick up one of the scarves if he only concentrated. "Maybe the orange one?"

Wesley frowned. "Didn't you already get her a gift when you went to Tibet?"

"That was a souvenir," Angel said.

Reminded, Wesley's hand was drawn towards the front of his chest. It rested over the spot where he'd placed the 16th century Murshan dagger that Angel had gotten for him. "You don't think she liked her necklace?"

"No." Angel made a face of frustration. "I mean yes. I mean - I'm just thinking of her birthday."

"Cordelia's birthday isn't for months," Wesley said.

Angel seemed uncomfortable at that. "Yeah, sure, but - it's never too early to shop, right?"

"If you wait you might be able to buy it on sale," Wesley offered.

"I just want to get it *right*," Angel said.

"I can certainly understand - " Wesley started, then stopped, realizing. "Oh."

Angel looked up at him. "Oh?"

"Nothing." Wesley hid his smile by turning and gesturing back towards the car. "Actually, we should - "

But the movement had jostled the dagger, sending it plummeting down to the sidewalk in a loud, embarrassing clatter.

Angel turned to him, attracted by the noise. "Wesley?"

Wesley's mouth opened and closed as his sudden attack of clumsiness rendered him temporarily without words.

Angel's frown deepened. "Wes?"

Wesley tried to recover. "Angel - " He bent down to retrieve the blade. "Sorry, I - "

Angel bent down as well. His hand reached the handle at the same time Wesley's did. They sat there, staring at each other, locked in a confusing tug-of-war.

"Wesley?" Angel asked again.

"I'm sorry," Wesley said. "I should go."

Angel seemed taken aback by that. "What?"

"I meant we should go," Wesley clarified. "On about our business. I'm afraid we actually do have things to attend to beyond lectures and window shopping."

Angel handed the dagger over. "No rest for heroes, huh?"

"Sadly no." Wesley slipped the dagger back into place, relieved when he didn't drop it again.

"At least it keeps things interesting," Angel pointed out.

"I've found I've yet to be bored," Wesley replied.

Angel flashed a smile at him, and they went back to work.

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## Feedback!

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