

# **The Wolf Gate**

## **By Matthew Baugh**

**Los Angeles – 2003**

Within the dark halls of Wolfram and Hart a darker figure moved. Dressed and masked in black the silent form glided through the corridors, slipping past guards and alarms with ease. The figure paused at the door to the file room and gazed at the keypad. Behind the mask dark brows knitted in consternation.

There was a noise down the corridor. The dark figure was immediately alert. It moved to the shelter of a water cooler and sank down behind it. Surrounded in the folds of its long cape it became another shapeless shadow in the darkened hallway.

A janitor came around the corner pushing a mop bucket. He paused at the door and punched in a code. The door swung open and he wheeled the bucket through. As he turned to shut the door he found a small black form there and a long bright blade at his throat.

"Muy Gracias Senor!" the form whispered, "I really wanted to get in there."

A few moments later, the janitor was tied securely to the partition that screened off the receptionist's desk.

"Not a word Senor," the soft voice hissed, "At the first sound..." the long blade flashed out faster than the man could see and cut into the fabric of the partition. The janitor nodded his head furiously. He was rewarded with a flash of white teeth as the figure grinned and tipped its hat.

"Now," the dark figure turned and scanned the enormous room, "Where do find what I need?"

"You could ask the receptionist." Came a voice from the door.

The caped figure spun to see a tall man. He had entered even more silently than the burglar had and stood in a nonchalant pose.

"Wow," he said, "And people think I wear a lot of black."

"Angel!" the voice was more than a whisper and was clearly feminine.

"No, wait." Angel went on, "The receptionist is only here when we're open. If she's not here you must be a burglar." He paused a moment, "Which would probably explain the mask and black outfit."

The black-clad woman grinned, "I guess I underestimated your security systems."

"You got past the conventional alarms pretty well." He conceded, "But we have enchanted wards too and you tripped a bunch of those."

"A lesson for next time." Her hand flashed under the cape. Angel was faster and caught her wrist before she could produce a weapon. Then he was surprised.

She hit him across the face with her left elbow. The strike was so quick that he didn't have a chance to block it. He didn't manage to block the backfist blow that followed either. She hit harder than a small woman should have been able to, or a large man for that matter. In fact, he realized as he was thrown back by the force of the blows, she hit even harder than he could.

Then she had her blade out, a long rapier, and she held it like she knew how to use it. Angel feinted to the left then shifted his weight to the right and leaped for her. He was rewarded with a stab of pain in his shoulder. He retreated.

"What the hell?" he glanced at his wound then back at his opponent. "A silver sword?"

"An alloy of silver and iron," she returned, "A blade forged to fight evil."

"Who are you?" he demanded, "Who runs around Los Angeles waving a sword."

"Angel, are you all right?" the voice came from Charles Gunn as he rushed into the room, Wesley Wyndham-Price followed close behind. Both men carried drawn swords.

"Watch out!" Angel snapped, "She's really good!"

"Yeah, well," Gunn replied, "We're pretty good too! Flank her Wes."

"Wesley circled to the woman's left while Gunn moved straight in. She didn't move until he lunged at her. Then she parried, disengaged his blade and riposted with a single movement. The tip of her sword traced a bloody line down his forearm and he dropped his weapon with a cry.

"I've got you!" Wesley cried, and lunged at her while her sword was still busy. She sidestepped him like a matador and swirled her cape tangling his sword in it. Then she smashed the pommel of her sword across his face, shattering his glasses and sending him reeling.

She wasn't fast enough to handle a third attack. Angel closed with her, catching her sword wrist and slamming his other fist into her ribs. She was stunned and dropped the sword. Angel followed up with a kick that threw her against a row of filing cabinets.

"Not so tough without your sword." he commented as he rushed to close with her.

But she wasn't there. At the last moment she leaped in the air, flipping gracefully over his head.

Then she had the sword again. She used it to hold off Wesley and Gunn as she backed out the open door.

"This round to you Senores." She said, "But you haven't seen the last of me." Then she was out the door and speeding down the corridor.

"Damn!" Gunn growled, "He had his cell phone out in a second and hit the speed dial. "Security, this is Gunn. We've got an intruder. She's leaving the files section."

"They'll catch never her." Wesley said.

"Yeah?" Gunn responded, "We'll see."

"Maybe they shouldn't," Angel said, cradling his wounded shoulder, "She'll cut them to pieces." He paused in thought; "I wonder who she could be?"

"I think we have a clue." Wesley said. He pointed to the partition where the terrified janitor was still tied. The fabric next to him was slashed in the shape of the letter 'Z.'

### **La Riena de Los Angeles – 1795**

"How is she Dr. Pavayne?" the young man asked.

Don Carlos Pulido looked at his guest's face. Don Diego Vega's handsome features were composed in the same world-weary expression they always wore, but he thought there had been a touch of genuine concern in his voice. He hoped he had heard correctly for Don Diego worried him sometimes. The Vegas were one of the noblest bloodlines in all California and a union between his daughter and young Diego would be the envy of the caballero families. But Diego was so passionless sometimes that he did not seem a proper young man at all.

"Senorita Pulido is very weak Don Diego," the British physician said. He had been in California for many years but there was still a trace of England in his accent.

"We can see that Doctor!" Don Carlos snapped, "What we must know now is how to heal her!"

"Please Don Carlos," Diego said, "Such shouting is most vexing. I am sure it disturbs Lolita as well."

"That's quite all right Don Diego." Pavayne said, "Actually I am fairly confident I can treat this case with ease. The night air has affected Senorita Pulido. If she stays inside with the shutters closed for several days she should recover. There is also this medicine which I have found most effective in these cases."

He produced a paper packet from his bag and tore it open to reveal a fine gray powder.

"She must have a spoon of this dissolved in a glass of wine before she goes to bed each night. It will help her to rest and to recover her strength."

"Gracias Doctor," Don Carlos murmured, "She is all her mother and I have."

Pavayne smiled graciously but his look turned to alarm as he noticed Don Diego. The young caballero had taken a sizable pinch of the powder between his fingers and was peering at it closely.

"Disagreeable looking stuff." He said, "And such a smell. Doctor, are you sure..." Diego broke off as his face began to contort. He tried to stifle the sneeze with a perfumed handkerchief but it was too late. The powder scattered into the air.

"Please Senor Vega!" Pavayne cried, "The medicine!"

"On come Senor Doctor." Diego said with a tone of exasperation, "I am certain there is more than enough of your foul powder for my fiancée." He smiled wanly at the young woman in her bed. "Poor Lolita to have to endure so much. It wearies me just to think of it."

"Please don't concern yourself Diego." Lolita said, her usually vibrant voice now weak. "With the Doctor's care I will be well very soon."

"Thank you Senor Doctor," Don Carlos shook the Englishman's hand as he rose to leave.

"I am happy to be of service Senor Pulido." Pavayne replied, "Please send for me if there is any need."

"And you Don Diego," Don Carlos said when the Doctor had left. "I appreciate you staying with us in my hacienda while Lolita is ill. If you wish to keep vigil by her bedside for a time it will be fine. Her duena, Rosario will be with her all night."

"Many thanks Don Carlos," the young man replied, "But my darling Lolita's illness weighs so heavily on me. I really must retire if I am to be any good to you tomorrow."

As Diego left the room Don Carlos turned to look at his daughter but she would not meet his gaze. His heart went out to her. Lolita was a passionate girl and should have a suitor with some fire in his veins. He prayed that marriage would make a man out of the foppish Don Diego.

When Diego shut the door of the guestroom his languor fell away from him like a discarded mask. His face creased with concern and he strode across the room with purpose.

"Everything is ready Bernardo?"

The huge man nodded. Bernardo was Diego's servant, a giant in body who was believed by all to have a child's mind. Only Diego knew that the mute servant possessed intellect and a powerful

will. He had relied many times on Bernardo's wit and loyalty and had not been disappointed.

"Good!" he said. "It is important that Don Carlos not know that I have gone. I will be back as soon as I can. You must stay and keep alert. I believe that Lolita's life is in grave danger."

Bernardo nodded fiercely. If the situation arose he would protect the little Senorita with his life.

Diego slipped out the window and moved away from the house. In a steep arroyo a quarter mile away he found Tornado where Bernardo had tethered him. The huge black stallion whickered as Diego approached.

The dark clothes, mask and cape of El Zorro were in the saddlebags, along with a sword and a brace of pistols. Within moments the young caballero was transformed into the legendary avenger of the night.

"Come Tornado," he whispered, "We have business this night with Jose of the Cocopahs."

Half an hour later the great horse slowed as he neared the Indian camp. Several warriors moved to challenge the lone rider but lowered their weapons when they saw who it was. One man who stood nearly a head taller than his fellows strode forward as Zorro dismounted.

"Jose, my brother," Zorro said, "It is good to see you. I have need of the wisdom of the Cocopahs tonight."

"My brother is always welcome." Jose replied, "What we can do we will."

"I must see Gray Owl," Zorro answered.

Gray Owl was the medicine woman of the tribe. Her hair was gray and her body stooped, but it was still easy to see the strength and grace that had been hers as a young woman. Like Jose, she was a loyal ally of El Zorro.

"It is good to see my son the Fox." Gray Owl said.

"It is good to see my mother the Owl," the black clad man responded. "There is something I must ask you."

Zorro knew that this was impertinent. For the Cocopahs there were many formalities to be observed in conversation. One of the most important was to wait and listen while an elder spoke. To break in on his words, or even on the long pauses between thoughts was considered disrespectful. He hoped that Gray Owl would understand his urgency and forgive him.

"I will answer your question," Gray Owl said, "If I have the wisdom you need."

"Thank you Gray Owl," Zorro replied, "I have come because of a man in the Pueblo. He has been here since the early spring when he came from San Francisco de Asis. Like you he has medicine which he uses to heal the sick."

"I know of this man."

"I do not trust this man," Zorro continued, "I fear that he is evil and that his medicine is poison."

"A brujo?" Gray Owl's eyes narrowed, "What you say is very serious my son. If this man is using medicine to cause sickness and death he can bring great harm on the land. Are you certain of what you say?"

"I have brought some of the medicine he uses." Zorro fished a perfumed handkerchief from his shirt. Folded in it was a large pinch of a pale gray powder.

Gray Owl examined the powder carefully. He rolled it in his fingers, sniffed it, and even touched the tip of his tongue to taste a tiny sample. Finally she spoke.

"I know of this medicine. It is a mixture of roots that only an evil man would have reason to make."

"What does it do?" Zorro asked.

"If a person eats this powder it would confuse his spirit." Gray Owl answered, "It would wander, no longer knowing where it was. While the spirit was confused the body would be empty and an evil spirit could enter in and guide it."

Zorro nodded his face grim.

"I am grateful Gray Owl," he said, "Now that I am certain of my enemy I can move against him."

"There is another thing I have to tell you."

Zorro nodded and listened respectfully.

"Three nights ago I had a vision," Gray Owl continued, "I saw a great wolf unlike any I have seen. He was very big and his fur was as dark as the coat of the horse you ride. This wolf was caught in a cage, but the bars of the cage were weak. He tore at them until it seemed he would be free. When the wolf had thrust its head through the bars a fox came and attacked him. The fox and the trapped wolf fought for a long time and I could not tell who won."

"What does this mean?" Zorro asked.

"I cannot say," Gray Owl replied, "But I think that you are the fox."

"If that is so, then who is the wolf?" Diego paused a moment to think. "Is it the man I told you about?"

"I do not think so." The medicine chief responded, "As terrible as a brujo is, I think the wolf is something even stronger. You must be very careful my son."

Zorro thanked Gray Owl and Jose then rode back to the arroyo where he changed clothes again. As Don Diego he returned to his room, climbing to the window with great agility.

"Bernardo," he whispered, "Has anything happened?"

The mute servant made signs with his hands that everything had been quiet and that the whole house was asleep.

"Muy bien!" Diego said, "But I think it will be better if I take my host up on his earlier offer. He picked up an oil lamp and a book of poetry. "Don Carlos will certainly understand if I am too overwrought to sleep and choose to stay up in Lolita's room reading.

A few moments later a sleepy looking Don Diego rapped softly on Lolita's door.

"Who is it?" came old Rosario's voice.

"It is Don Diego," he said with a yawn, "I have changed my mind and wish to watch over my beloved."

"Just a moment Don Diego." The woman replied. There was the sound of clumsy movements in the dark room, then the door opened.

Diego stepped in but as his lamp illuminated the room his heart nearly stopped. The shutters were thrown wide open and the bed was empty. Lolita Pulido had vanished into the night!

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

"That's bloody horrible!" despite his words Spike wore a look of glee. "Some little girlie in a mask puts you lot on your collective fannies and I'm not around to see it?"

"I wish you had been here." Gunn retorted, with a sour look at the blonde vampire, "I'd like to have seen what she would have done to you."

The senior staff of Wolfram and Hart was gathered in Angel's office to discuss the break in. Wesley and Gunn sat on the sofa, nursing their wounds. Winifred Burkle hovered near by looking concerned.

"What are we dealing with Wes?" Angel asked. They had gathered in his office following the foiled burglary to assess the situation. "Who is she, and why does she think she's Zorro?"

"According to these files," Wesley replied, "She may very be El Zorro."

"Technically I think she would be `La Zorra.'" Fred added with a shy smile.

"Very true," Wesley acknowledged. "And she may be the first woman to wear the mantle of the fox. Though there are several incidents when there *might* have been a female Zorro."

"Wes, are you saying that there really is a Zorro?" Gunn asked.

"Yes Virginia, I think he is." Spike purred.

"Not only is there a Zorro," Wesley continued, "But he, or she, or they have a long history with Wolfram and Hart. It looks like it goes all the way back to the late eighteenth century when the firm first came to Los Angeles. The conflict shows up at least one other time, in the early 1930's."

"What kind of conflict?" Fred asked.

"I can't say," Wesley replied, "The files are very vague about that. I'll have to do a good deal more research to determine anything."

"What does it tell us about her?" Angel asked, "Is there any clue why she's so strong and fast?"

"I don't know," Wesley admitted. "I suppose there could be some sort of supernatural power that passes from one generation to the next."

"Or she could be a slayer."

They all turned to the voice in the door. Angel looked stunned; Spike chuckled.

"Nice place you've got here." Faith said, "Can I come in?"

### **Los Angeles (Tarzana) – 1932**

"Have you ever been to a backyard barbecue John?" the famous author asked his even more famous guest.

"The African tribes I know have outdoor feasts that are similar." Lord Greystoke replied, "Though this is different in many ways. I appreciate your doing this for me Ed."

"I hope you'll enjoy it." Ed replied, "And don't worry, your steak will never even touch the grill."

The Ape-Man smiled, there were not many men who understood his preference for raw meat. His old friend has made this venture to California much more pleasant than it would have been otherwise.

"I understand you've been seeing Hollywood for the last week." Ed continued, "How did you like it?"

"It is a very strange place." The Ape-Man said, "I have been to many strange lands hidden in my native Africa but I find that Hollywood seems far stranger."

Ed chuckled. "I've had a few dealings with them myself, mostly making movies about you." He shook his head sadly; "I've actually been told I don't know anything about what a jungle movie should be like."

"I actually auditioned for the lead in a 'jungle-man' film." The Ape-Man replied, "It was just a whim. I wasn't terribly surprised when they told me I was the wrong type."

"Of course they thought that." Ed chuckled, "You can't blow up your chest to superhuman size like that Elmo Lincoln fellow."

"And I can't yodel." Greystoke said with a smile.

"At least the new ones are a little better," Ed's voice had a sour note in it, "Your wife really hated the actress who played her in that silent picture they did about you."

"She hated the film." Greystoke replied, "I don't think she ever met the actress."

"I just remember that she asked me to kill her off when I was writing about your experiences in the Great War." Ed replied. "She was hoping that might keep anyone from portraying her in another movie."

One of the children gathered for the barbecue came out of the house and handed Ed a large sealed envelope. He thanked the boy and looked it over."

"It's for you John."

The Ape-Man shrugged. "I've gotten several like that already. You can put it where I put the others."

"It's from a law firm." Ed said, "Wolfram and Hart. They're supposed to be tough customers. Maybe you should see what it is."

Greystoke shrugged again. Mail from lawyers didn't interest him. And, after a lifetime facing the likes of the beasts of Africa he didn't find people who fought with pieces of paper very intimidating.

"May I open it then?" Ed asked. When the Ape-Man nodded an affirmative he tore open the envelope and examined the contents.

"You've been busier than you had told me." Ed said with a chuckle. "Damaged sets, delays in filming and a dead lion?"

"Perhaps they'd be happier if I had let him eat a couple of actors." Greystoke said dryly.

"They probably would have loved having that on tape." Ed agreed, "In any case, the Production Company is suing you for a ridiculous amount of money."

"If they want something from me, they should come and try to take it."

"If they do I hope they film it. That's some footage I'd like to see." Ed paused a moment and his expression became more serious. "Listen John, I know you hate this stuff but I've had to deal with it a lot. Let's go down and talk to them, with our own lawyer. It could be that we can sort this out with no trouble to speak of."

"You know the ways of civilization better than I do." The Ape-Man said, "I will trust your judgment."

"Good. I know just the lawyer for us." Ed said, "He has helped me in a couple of matters. He's not as brave as I would like but he's very intelligent and that's what counts in a legal matter. I'll give him a call, his name is Jim Vega."

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

Faith looked herself over in the full-length mirror. She had to admit she liked the way she looked in the Armani suit. It was about as far from her style as anything she'd ever worn, but it was... nice. She smoothed away some imaginary wrinkles and stepped out of the door.

"You look great." Angel commented as she came back into the office.

"Thanks," Faith responded, "Just don't get used to it. It's not really my thing. Besides, I'm not getting along well enough to afford a suit like this more than once every... well, never."

"You're welcome to keep the suit, if you like it." Wesley offered.

"Gee, thanks." Her voice was ironic, "But it's hard to know when I'd have the opportunity to wear it again. It's not like I was CEO of an evil law firm."

Angel winced. "Faith, I told you already I'm not going to go evil again. It's a chance to do more good than I've ever done before. You have no idea of the resources we have here, the power."

"That's always how it starts, isn't it?" She asked, "The power?"

"I know that. We understand how careful we have to be." His voice was tense with restrained anger, "I am being careful. I know how to handle it."

"It wasn't too long ago I remember I was saying a things like that." Her voice was quiet and hard, "We al know how well that worked out for me. Of course I'm a bad example, what about Willow? She was five by five with all her power, and then she flayed a boy alive and tried to kill everyone on the planet. OOPS, I guess it was a little harder to handle all that power than she thought."

"It's not like that at all."

"Of course it's not." She said, "Willow's young, and you've got hundreds of years of experience. You won't make the same mistakes she did. I mean, you'd never make a mistake that would let an innocent suffer, or hurt someone you care for." She paused, "No, wait. You've already done that."

"Faith," the tension in his voice was becoming real anger, "That's not fair."

"No it's not!" She made herself look him in the eye. "It's not fair but it's real. You've never meant to hurt the people you love, but you have. You never wanted to kill all those people when you were Angellus. You never meant any of it, but it still happened."

"It won't happen this time Faith, I'm not Angellus anymore. I know what I'm doing."

"No," she countered, "You don't! You're trying to use a powerful evil force to do good. It doesn't work. It's like trying to make a... a wolf into a tame dog. You can't do it!"

"I tamed a wolf once." He said, "It's no big deal for a vampire."

"Okay, bad example. Not a wolf, something really nasty and uncontrollable like..."

"Like a giant sloar?" Wesley offered. Then he fell silent as Angel shot him a fierce look.

"Okay, a giant sloar!" Faith continued. "You think you've got him domesticated when one day he turns and... well, he does whatever a giant sloar does."

"That would be swallowing you whole," Wesley supplied, "And roasting you slowly in his bowels."

Faith made an incredulous face.

"I know it's risky Faith," Angel's voice was soft. "And I appreciate that you're trying to keep me on the straight and narrow. I just can't turn my back on this. Too many people would suffer and that would be my responsibility too. You can't turn away from power just because it's dangerous."

"So you've got to do what you've got to do?" she looked angry and sad, "Me too. I just what I have to do doesn't bump up against what you have to do anytime soon... I would really hate that."

"For now at least we're on the same team." He said, "We both want to find out if this girl is a slayer."

"True." Faith sighed, "If she is I want to help her learn what that means, and how to cope. I just wish I knew that last one a little better myself."

The intercom buzzed. "Angel? Miss Alejandra Vega and her attorney are here to see you."

Angel winced as Harmony pronounced the name `Ali-jahn-dra.' Harm hadn't wanted to come in to work that day, fearing that a slayer on the premises was bad for her. She had an idea that Faith had sent Faith just to kill her 'nemesis.' Angel had convinced her that she would be safe. Now he wondered why he'd missed the excuse to be away from her for a workday.

"Please send them in."

"Alejandra Vega was nineteen and every inch the spoiled rich party girl. She had carefully textured streaks of blonde in her dark hair and was dressed in up-to-the-minute clubbing clothes. The lawyer with her was fortyish and nondescript. She seemed oblivious to the fact that he was with her.

"Miss Vega." Angel reached to shake her hand but she held it as if expecting to have it kissed. He obliged and she looked him over appraisingly as he did.

"Alejandra Rosalinda Maria y Guadalupe Vega if you want to be formal." She smiled and lowered her lashes at him, "But you can call me Alex. All my friends do."

"These are my associates, Mr. Wyndham-Price and Ms. Street." He gestured to Wesley and Faith.

Faith hadn't wanted to use her own name for this masquerade so she'd chosen 'Street' which seemed appropriate enough given she'd grown up on the street. The fashionable Ms. Vega smiled at the mention of the name.

Alex had let Wesley kiss her hand also and scanned him as frankly as she had Angel. Faith she offered a dismissive smile and a handshake.

"I had a great-uncle who was a lawyer." She said, "His secretary's name was 'Street' too."

"Actually, Angel countered, "Ms. Street is an associate, not a secretary."

"This is a fabulous office!" Alex purred, ignoring his comment. She turned her green eyes on Angel; "It's so powerful and mysterious, just like... Aaaah!" She squealed as she tried to pull her hand away. Faith relinquished the powerful grip on the other woman's hand leaving Alex pouting and holding her sore fingers.

"OOPS, guess I've been working out too much recently." Faith said with an insincere smile, "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Alex Vega glared at her but said nothing. She accepted the seat Wesley offered her.

"Miss Vega," Angel said, "Mr..."

"Mason." The man supplied. "I'm Randy Mason."

Angel nodded and continued. "We called you here because we've uncovered something connected to your family. We think that Wolfram and Hart might have possession of an item that belongs to you and we'd like to return it."

Mason looked surprised. "You'd like to return something?"

"What is it?" Alex's eyes were as bright as a child's. "A treasure?"

"We don't know exactly." Wesley said, "Our files don't provide any details."

"We were hoping you could tell us." Angel continued, "If we knew what it was we could find it and return it to you."

"You don't know?" Alex pouted a moment, then brightened. "Maybe you and I could look for it together?"

"Miss Vega," Mason interrupted. "It's obvious these people are playing some sort of game." He turned to Angel, "How can you claim to have something of the Vegas and not know what it is? I demand that you turn over whatever documentation you have at once for us to examine."

"That's fair," Angel nodded to Faith, "Ms. Street?"

"I have it all right here." Faith picked up a fat file folder and crossed to Mason. As she reached to give it to him her foot caught on a chair leg and she fell into Alex, her hand driving the folder into the woman's face. The two ended in a tangled heap on the floor and the men quickly helped them to their feet. Faith was apologizing and Alex was sputtering furiously.

"She tried to kill me!" she shouted, and followed the accusation with a blistering torrent of Spanish that Faith was glad she didn't understand."

"I'm terribly sorry," Angel stammered, "Ms. Street usually isn't this clumsy."

"I'll sue you!" Alex wailed, then turned to Mason, "How much can we sue them for?"

"That's not necessary," Angel offered, "We'll be glad to make things right."

She sniffed but her eyes had a calculating expression, "It's a deal," she said, "You take me to dinner and we'll call it even... and fire that little tramp."

"Consider it done." Angel said, "Shall I meet you at eight?"

"Make it nine. I like to get in a little partying before dinner."

Wesley handed the folder to Mason and he followed Alex out. When they were gone Spike, Fred and Gunn entered the room.

"Well, that was bloody useless." Spike muttered.

"I don't think so." Wesley countered, "we know that Wolfram and Hart has suspected a link between the Vegas and Zorro for a long time, but this girl doesn't seem to have slayer strength."

"Or slayer reflexes." Faith added.

"Yeah, maybe." Spike returned, "but she could've been faking all that."

"It'd be really hard." Faith said, "The reflexes are there, it's almost impossible not to use them."

"She would need an extraordinary amount of discipline to manage it." Wesley's voice was thoughtful, "I'd imagine half a dozen years training under a Watcher at least."

"Normally yes," Fred said, "But if she comes from a family who've been keeping secrets for generations, who knows."

"I can see her doing the Zorro thing." Angel commented, "It's kind of sexy actually."

Faith frowned at him, "Don't tell me you're going for that you're going for her 'bad girl' act. That's supposed to be my schtick."

"You have to admit, it kind of works for her." Angel grinned wolfishly, "She's got that exotic Latina mystique already, and a beautiful face, and great legs..."

"I'm waiting for the 'but.'" Faith retorted.

"That was pretty nice too."

"In any case," Wesley interjected, "Spike's right, we don't know anything for certain, which means it's time for plan `B'."

"What's plan `B'?" Faith asked.

"That'd be me." Spike said, "The big boss here had one of his evil lawyer chappies put a homing device on little Miss Vixen's limo. Now I can find her while she's out clubbing and steal her away from whatever bloke she's with."

"You're going to try to seduce the truth out of her?" Faith's voice sounded approving.

"Not exactly," Spike said, "I'm just going to get her over to a nice karaoke bar I know. We've got Green Gussie stationed there."

"He means Lorne," Fred supplied. "He's an empath demon who reads people when they sing."

Spike looked exasperated at the interruption but continued. "Right, and as soon as she sings a few bars he'll have the straight skinny on her."

"That's not bad." Faith said. "A karaoke demon, really? I guess I always knew that stuff was demonic."

### **La Riena de Los Angeles – 1795**

Don Diego Vega left the hysterical Rosario to wake the house and found Bernardo.

"I must ride!" Diego whispered, "Lolita's life depends on it. You must make Don Carlos understand that I went out to find her. No doubt he will assume that I have become lost out alone at night."

The huge servant nodded, then signaled that he wanted to help the Senorita.

"It is not your fault my friend." Diego placed his hand on Bernardo's shoulder, "She was taken from us by some dark enchantment that I do not understand. There was nothing you could do."

Bernardo looked downcast. He knew how dearly his master loved the beautiful young woman, and she had come to mean a great deal to him as well.

"You can still help," Diego said, "I believe the culprit is the physician, Senor Pavayne. He may have lead Lolita back to his home in Riena de Los Angeles. I will head straight there. You and Don Carlos' men must look for tracks and follow them carefully. If the Fox is following the wrong trail her only hope will be for you to find the right one."

Bernardo set his jaw and nodded. He was a skilled tracker; even at night he would find the trail and follow it to the end.

"Via con Dios," Diego said and slid out the window again.

Lolita's mind seemed oddly disconnected as she rode through the night. It was as if she had watched herself from a distance as she rose out of the bed and crept down to the stables. She had saddled her favorite riding mare and started out for Riena de Los Angeles without knowing why. She only knew she had the vague sense of being called.

After a long ride she had come to the home of the English physician. She had always wondered why Senor Pavayne had chosen to build his home away from the main community. It occurred to her now that it was situated where it would be out of sight of the Presidio. Anything could happen in this house and the soldiers would never know it.

Lolita's fear grew as she watched herself dismount and tether the horse. She saw her feet tread across sharp stones as she moved to the front door but could feel no more pain than if they were someone else's feet. As she reached the door it opened and Pavayne stood there with a horrible grin and a surgeon's knife in his hand. She wanted to run or at least to scream. Instead she could only watch as Pavayne took her by the hand and led her docile body inside.

"I know what you're thinking my dear," Pavayne chuckled, "You want to fight me, or run from me. Even more you want to scream and cry before you drown in the fear that is rising in your heart. I wish that I could give you that release, I really do. There's nothing in life as sweet as the cry of a pretty girl as she knows she's going to die. Alas, I cannot afford the luxury. That big Sergeant Gonzales may be a fool, but he's not deaf. If I'm not careful he and his men will realize that the Reaper has been living here, right under his nose all along."

He moved closer swinging the blade. She wished she could faint but her treacherous body would not even do that.

"Where shall we start me pretty one?" he crooned.

Then the window burst in as a familiar black-clad form crashed through the glass.

"Zorro!" The Reaper hissed, "I don't know what you want here bandit, but this is none of your concern."

"No?" Zorro smiled grimly as he strode forward. "What you do is the business of any caballero, you murderer of women! El Zorro is here to deal out justice to you."

"Stay back!" The Reaper leaped behind Lolita, grasping her long hair with one hand and placing the small knife at her throat.

As quick as he was, Zorro was far quicker. The bullwhip he held uncoiled as he struck and the tip cut across Pavayne's hand forcing him to drop the dagger. He took a step back and the whip slashed across his face. He backed way from the merciless attack, trying to keep Lolita's unmoving form between him and his dark nemesis. It was useless. He turned away to protect his face and he felt the whip cut through the fabric of his shirt three times in succession. Without looking he knew that his back was marked with the letter `Z.'

"Zorro, I am free!" Lolita ran to her rescuer, her power of movement restored as the Reaper's concentration was shattered by pain.

"Praise the Blessed Virgin!" Zorro whispered and touched her face with a black gloved hand.

"You are fortunate she is unharmed Senor Reaper. Because of that you will have a cleaner death than a pig like you deserves." Zorro cast aside the whip and drew his sword.

"Coward." Pavayne managed to gasp.

"How dare you call me that?" Zorro demanded, "What does a killer of women know of courage?"

"I know that a true caballero does not kill an unarmed man." The doctor said, "I am an English gentleman and I demand the chance to face you with a sword in my hand."

"You are a diseased animal, who deserves only death." Zorro countered, "But if you prefer to die armed, so be it."

Pavayne staggered to his feet. He moved painfully to the wall where a pair of crossed rapiers was displayed. He grasped the hilt of one to pull it loose.

"I appreciate this... fool!" When Pavayne tugged on the handle it became clear, this was not a real sword but a lever. The sword remained attached to the wall, while the wall slid open revealing a hidden passage. Pavayne leaped in and the wall closed after him.

Zorro reached the panel almost instantly, but not in time to keep it from closing. He tugged at the sword hilt but nothing happened. He beat on the wall and tried to force it open with his sword blade, but his efforts had no effect.

Pavayne laughed as he staggered down the long passage. He had dreaded the possibility of meeting El Zorro since he first came to Los Angeles, but he had survived the encounter. He would have to leave this place of course, just as he had left London years ago. No matter, there were many other lands where he could find his prey.

The passage let out into a small ravine where he kept a good horse and a stash of money. He would ride south to San Diego de Alcalá and board a ship from there.

As he emerged from the passage Pavayne realized that something was wrong. A shadowy form stood in his hidden chamber, leaning against the wall.

"Who?" The reaper's question was cut off as powerful arms seized him from behind and held him fast.

"I wouldn't struggle Senor Doctor. El Lobo is very strong, I wouldn't want him to kill you by accident." The shadowy figure stepped forward and lit a small lamp. In its light Pavayne could see the face of his captor.

"Magistrado Ruiz?" He gasped, "What is the meaning of this?"

"Relax Senor." Ruiz answered, "My employer has need of you this evening and I could not take the chance of you saying `no.'"

"Your employer?" Pavayne was confused, "I am a friend of his Excellency the Governor! He will not look kindly on this action of yours."

"Actually," Ruiz smiled, "I have more than one employer. My true master is one his Excellency has no knowledge of. Tell me, have you ever heard of the Wolf, the Ram and the Hart?"

### **Los Angeles – 1932**

It was late evening as the limousine pulled up to the front of the building that housed the law offices of Wolfram and Hart. Greystoke shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His sharp senses seemed to catch echoes of strange sounds and hints of disturbing odors, but it was nothing he could pin down.

"What is it Lord Greystoke?" James Vega asked, and stifled a yawn, "Is the car too confining? Or perhaps it's that suit you wear?"

"Don't talk like a fool Jim." Ed snapped, "John's worn suits and ridden in cars since you were in knee-pants. It's only the movies that try to make him out to be a buffoon in civilization. No, it's just the prospect of sitting down with a pack of lawyers that bothers him. It bothers me a bit too." He paused, "No offense meant of course."

Vega smiled absently and waved the comment away.

"Actually," Greystoke murmured, "it's the wind."

"Yes," Ed replied, "the Santa Ana is blowing tonight. I might have known it would have an effect on you."

"They call them the `Devil Winds.'" Vega commented, "There are many stories about them. Some say that they make animals mad and fill the hearts of men with strange passions. A night

like this is a time for dark doings, for romance, for adventure." He shrugged, "All I know is they make the air uncomfortably hot and I cannot sleep well."

The long car pulled to the curb. And Greystoke looked up. It was an impressive structure but the Jungle Lord had grown used to such man made edifices. It was a feeling from the building that impressed him rather than the building itself.

"This is a bad place." He said.

"Oh, don't worry John," Ed replied, "We'll be done here soon enough. Jim's going to give us a riding tour of his ranch later today. That'll be more to your liking. It's a beautiful place, lots of uncultivated woodlands."

The three men entered the lobby of the building leaving the hot wind behind. The Ape-Man still felt uneasy, even out of the Santa Anas. It seemed to him there were hints of smells he could not place and echoes of sounds he couldn't identify. It was nothing tangible, just a vague sense of wrongness that preyed on his keen senses.

A large man started across the room towards them. He was over six feet tall with an ample padding of muscle and hard fat. He walked with the bow-legged gait of a man who has spent much of his life in the saddle. The Ape-Man noticed Jim Vega stiffen as he approached.

"Howdy counselor." The big man drawled. He nodded at Greystoke; "This must be the fella's got our client all upset."

"Hello Dace." Jim answered curtly, "Gentlemen, this is Mr. Brad Dace, though I've also heard him called `El Lobo.'"

"Now that ain't fair Mr. Vega." The big man said mildly, "I know there was an outlaw called El Lobo and that he was responsible for your uncle's death, but it wasn't me. I was proved innocent in a court of law."

"Quite right," Jim replied, his tone was mild but the Ape-Man thought he detected steel in it. "I must apologize. It was a lawyer from this very firm who defended you wasn't it? You seem to have recovered from the trampling you took too."

The big man's face darkened. "That blasted horse! They should have caught it and had it put down!"

"He was just protecting his rider as I heard it." Jim countered mildly, "though that was never proven either. Tell me Dace, are you working here now? Don't tell me you've joined the profession."

"You'd never catch a man like me pushing papers for a living." Dace chuckled, "But they do keep me around to handle rough situations. I guess they're worried your client here might get rowdy again."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about from Lord Greystoke." Jim countered.

Dace's eyebrows rose with amusement, "*Lord Greystoke?*" he gestured to the elevator and bowed with mock courtesy. "After you your lordship. My employers are waiting to see you."

The employers were a group of four men in identical suits, seated at a conference table. They rose when Greystoke and the others entered.

"Ah Mr. Vega." The lawyer who spoke was a medium sized man with a commanding voice and a beautiful head of white hair. "And this must be Lord Greystoke."

"Gentlemen," Jim said, "This is the illustrious Mr. Renshaw." Renshaw smiled, his expression reminded the Ape-Man of crocodiles he had known in the wild. "Allow me to present my associates, Mr. Remington, Mr. Benbow and Mr. Pritchard-Mitford."

Each man smiled the same predatory smile as his name was mentioned. Each except for Benbow that was, his smile made the Ape-Man think more of a hyena.

The business of the lawyers was as tedious as Ed had said it would be. Greystoke had learned the patience of waiting motionless a whole day waiting for prey, but this was different. It was especially difficult in the building's oppressive air.

Suddenly the Ape-Man stiffened. His nostrils twitched as they caught a faint but very familiar tang in the air. He rose to his feet and was moving for the door before the startled lawyers could react.

"Hey pal, where do you think you're going?" Dace stepped into the Jungle Lord's path and put a massive hand on his chest.

The next moment Greystoke had seized the bigger man and hoisted him over his head as if he weighed no more than a housecat. Dace tried to struggle but the Ape-Man shook him violently, then threw him into a heap at the foot of the table.

"John!" Ed cried out, "What on earth?"

The Ape-Man didn't answer; he turned and strode purposely through the door. Ed and Jim Vega exchanged worried looks and hurried after him, the lawyers trailed behind. They caught up to Greystoke at the far end of the corridor.

The Ape-Man gripped the ornate handle of a conference room door and tried to turn it.

"Now see here!" Renshaw blustered, "You can't just..."

"I smell blood." The Ape-Man interrupted. He focused his jungle-bred sinews against the door lock. After a moment there was a metallic 'snap' and the door swung outward.

The room was identical in size and design to the one they had just left, the difference was the décor. This room was draped in black with occult symbols emblazoned everywhere. The conference table was set up as an altar with black candles and other unholy paraphernalia. Several surprised looking lawyers in dark robes looked up from the slaughtered carcass of a black goat. Their leader snarled and tried to conceal a bloody dagger.

Jim Vega smiled languidly at Renshaw.

"Gentlemen," he drawled, "Perhaps you'd care to hear our counter-offer."

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

"So, what exactly do you think is the connection between the Vegas, Zorro and Wolfram and Hart?"

Faith was sitting on the corner of Angel's desk eating Chinese take-out. She had swapped her suit for jeans and a low-cut blouse. A slender broadsword lay across the desk by her side.

"It's hard to say." Fred replied, "The Vegas were one of the first Spanish families in Alta California. Zorro goes back to the end of the eighteenth century, and Wolfram and Hart has been here about that long too." She made a vague gesture with her chopsticks, "I suppose it makes sense that they would've crossed paths. And it makes sense for Zorro to have clashed with Wolfram and Hart. He was a hero after all and..."

"...And heroes are always going to fight with Wolfram and Hart." Angel finished for her.

"Well," Fred looked embarrassed, "Until just recently that is."

"That's it?" Faith asked, "Nothing more?"

Angel shrugged, "We know that the firm kept a close eye on the Vegas, we just don't know why. There are a lot of reports in here claiming that different people in the Vega family have been there when Zorro, or some Zorro impersonator shows up. It happened in Utah and New Mexico after the Civil War, in Baja, in Idaho, in Tijada and God knows how many other places. I dunno, it looks like somebody was really reaching to try to connect a lot of unrelated dots to me."

"It does get really elaborate," Fred chimed in, "Different investigators for the firm have come up with different theories. According to one report the Vegas are related to Long John Silver and Jean Lafitte."

"Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum." Faith quipped, "But what does that have to do with our situation?"

Fred blushed, "I'm not certain, but it's really interesting stuff. I got kind of caught up in these notes on the famous bandit Joaquin Murietta. Did you know that there were actually..."

"We can't find a connection." Angel interrupted, "Maybe because there's no connection to find. Zorro, or a couple of different Zorros, fought Wolfram and Hart at different times in the past. The firm investigated and thought the Vegas were connected to Zorro, but they couldn't find anything more conclusive than some wild theories."

"This one might help." Fred chipped in; "According to one of the researchers, Zorro wasn't actually a man at all."

"Was he a woman?" Faith asked.

"No," Fred's voice was hesitant, "It looks like Zorro was actually an immortal were-fox who tore his victims apart and used his claws to slash the 'Z' sign into their bodies."

Faith smiled grimly. "I wouldn't put it past our girl to have claws."

"That was no were-coyote I saw." Angel said with a scowl, "I don't know who Wolfram and Hart hired for this research, but they were overpaid. What sort of person sits around researching wild theories about masked vigilantes?"

"I don't know," Fred replied, "It's really kind of fascinating. Did you know..."

"I think the point is, this information doesn't help us." Faith said. "Vegas or no, we need to find what it was that got Zorro all upset with Wolfram and Hart. There has to be a connection."

The intercom beeped and Harmony's voice came from the speaker.

"Boss, the security guy's here. Should I send him in?"

"Yeah," Angel replied, "Thanks Harmony."

A moment later the door opened to admit a tall, heavily built man with dark hair and elaborately sculpted sideburns.

"Yes sir?"

"We're expecting a visitor." Angel said, "We think the same woman who broke into the files section last night may try to get back in tonight."

"We'll stop her sir." The big man said.

"No." Angel replied, "If she comes, monitor her and let me know right away. Under no circumstances are you to try to take her yourselves unless I give the word!"

The big man looked surprised, but he didn't protest.

"I'll see to it sir." He said.

"That'll be all Mr..." Angel's voice trailed off as he fumbled for the man's name.

"Cantreras sir," the security man supplied. "Luis Cantreras. But everybody on the security detail just calls me `El Lobo.'"

### **La Riena de Los Angeles – 1795**

"Pull Tornado! Pull!" the masked man cried and slapped the great horse's flank.

Tornado reared and surged forward drawing the rope attached to his saddle taut. Inside the hacienda there was a sound of creaking wood where the rope's other end was bound to the hidden door. The wood held for a moment, then there was a `snap' as the latch shattered and the panel opened outward.

"Stay here Senorita." Zorro commanded, "You have my pistol, and Tornado will protect you."

Lolita Pulido's hands trembled, but she held her chin proudly.

"I am a daughter of caballeros!" She said, "If you would face danger, I would face it with you."

"Ah my brave one." Zorro grinned, "I would be proud to have you by my side, but it cannot be. A caballero's place is ever to protect his lady. If I were to permit you to go into danger I would lose my honor."

"Your lady?" Lolita's face lit up then turned pale. "Ah Senor Zorro, I wish it could be. But I am pledged to wed Don Diego Vega. If I were to love another it would be the honor of the Pulido family that would be lost!"

"Have faith little Senorita," Zorro said, "These problems which seem so insurmountable to us mortals are often solved more easily than we can imagine. I swear to you, no smear shall ever come on the names of Pulido or of Vega because of El Zorro."

"I do not understand," Lolita said, "But I will trust you Senor Zorro."

The Fox grinned and bowed to her.

"And now," he said, "I must rid the world of this insect who calls himself the Reaper."

The secret panel hung from one hinge. The masked man pushed it aside and followed the tunnel beyond, sword and pistol drawn. He moved surely in the dark, emerging in the hidden stable moments later.

"Santa Maria!" he breathed, "This devil's escape is very much like my own. I wonder how many more haciendas hold such secrets."

He lit a lantern and scanned the floor for signs. The reaper had come this way and two men had met him. One of the men was small, the other large and heavy. The large man had struggled with the Reaper and had overcome him. Then the men had left on two horses.

Zorro followed the tracks to the cavern's secret exit in a small box canyon. There he lost the trail for the canyon floor was naked rock, but he thought he knew where this canyon ended. He turned and hurried back up the passage to where Lolita and Tornado waited.

"Zorro!" the young woman cried when she saw him, "Did you find the Doctor?"

"No Senorita." He replied, "Stranger things are afoot tonight than I realized. I need you to take your horse and ride to the Presidio. Tell Sergeant Gonzales what has happened. If I fail to capture the Reaper it will be up to him and his men!"

She nodded, "And you Senor Zorro?"

"I will try to follow the trail." He said, "I think that there is more devilry than even the Reaper at the other end."

Zorro leaped nimbly into Tornado's saddle and wheeled about. He waved to Lolita and sped away into the night.

"May all the saints protect you." She whispered.

Finding the box canyon had been easier than Zorro had hoped. The tracks were not easy to follow by moonlight, but he persevered. After a time he had a general idea where they were heading, to the northeast, away from the pueblo. Away from the missions as well, and from the haciendas too. In fact there was nothing that lay in this direction except...

Zorro remembered, and his heart grew cold.

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

Angel's cell phone rang just as the mu goo gai pan ran out.

"Yeah, this is Angel."

Faith was staring at Fred with a look of amazement. "I can't believe you ate all that."

Fred blushed and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm making up for lost time I guess. I was trapped in a dimension where humans were cattle and I had to forage for food."

"That would be a drag." Faith agreed.

"That was Wes and Spike," Angel said, snapping the phone shut. "They lost her."

"How did that happen?"

"They followed her limo to a ritzy club about twelve blocks from here and saw her go in. When they followed her inside they thought they had her but when Spike moved in, it wasn't her."

"What do you mean?" Fred asked.

"Same outfit," Angel replied, "Same hair, same size. Different girl."

"Are you thinking mistake?" Faith said, "It could happen pretty easily. I'm sure there are lots of dark haired girls with the lame outfit in any good sized club on a Friday night."

"Yeah." Angel responded, "But I'm thinking, maybe a set-up."

"Which would put her..." Faith began.

"Right back in this building." Angel finished.

"Wow!" Fred gasped, "Do you guys always finish each other's sentences like that?"

### **Los Angeles, California – 1932**

Greystoke stared across at the darkened hulk of the Wolfram and Hart building. He couldn't say just why he had come back that night. His legal business there was done. The lawyers had dropped the suit immediately for fear their strange ritual would be exposed. They had even offered the Jungle Lord a tidy sum of money to ensure that he would not take action against them.

The Ape-Man had been disgusted by their offer, but Ed and Jim Vega had been more practical. Ed has commented that there are times to use legal maneuvering as ruthlessly as the other guy. It was all that kept you from being taken advantage of.

The Ape-Man had accepted his friend's decision, but he had not been satisfied. There was something evil about the law firm, much more so than even the occult ritual he has interrupted. He didn't know what he might find, but he felt compelled to come just the same.

Across the street there was a movement. Greystoke watched as a shadowy form crossed to the building and began to scale the outer wall. The figure was all in black and moved with agility that he had seldom seen among civilized men. It paused occasionally, seeking a way in. Finally it found an unlatched window on the fourth floor and slipped in.

The Ape-Man gave the intruder a few seconds, then left his car and trotted to the side of the building. The wall was textured brick with deep chinks where the mortar separated them. A skilled climber with the right equipment could make his up fairly well. The black figure no doubt had some sort of climbing hooks or suction cups to do as well as he had.

The Ape-Man smiled as he looked up at the open window. He had no such tools, but he had been raised in the jungles of Africa. The side of a building would be little difficulty for him. Moving quickly, he stripped off his suit coat and shirt. His shoes and socks went next, and it was only with some reluctance that he retained his trousers. He swarmed up the side of the building with the agility of a monkey.

His fingers and toes found the smallest chinks and held fast to them. Within moments he was in the window.

The darkened room was a lawyer's office and the black clad figure was still inside. He turned as Greystoke entered. The Ape-Man caught a quick look at the black mask covering the man's face and the revolver ready in his hand. He sprang across the room before the gun could be brought into play. The two collided and crashed to the floor.

The stranger was unusually strong and quick, but no ordinary man could withstand the jungle-honed strength of the Ape-Man. Within a few moments the struggle was over and the man in black was pinned.

"Surrender!" Greystoke grunted in the language of the Great Apes who had raised him. Then he switched to English, "Give up friend. If you're who I think you are there's no need for us to fight."

"Greystoke?" The man in black disguised his voice but the Ape-Man recognized it.

"We know each other." The jungle lord said, helping the man in black to his feet. "Why are you here?"

"Perhaps the same reason as you." The man replaced a broad-brimmed hat on his head. "There is something wicked happening in this place. It should be found out and stopped."

"And the costume?"

"The animals of your jungle rely on camouflage do they not?" the masked man grinned, "Well, this place requires a kind of disguise as well. In this mask I am El Zorro, the Fox. As the Fox I can go places and do things that a man without camouflage could not. I know it must seem foolish, but it is effective, trust me."

Greystoke shrugged. "It seems less fooling than fighting with papers and speeches."

Zorro grinned again; "Despite myself I must agree! Come, let us find our malefactors."

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

The dark figure moved silently through the vast file room. She cursed softly as she scanned the file drawers. "This stupid filing system is harder to beat than the security was!"

"You know," said a voice, "I never really saw that as an advantage before. You learn something new every day."

Angel stepped into sight, Faith slightly behind him. Each carried a sword.

"Same as before," he commented, "But this time I'm better prepared."

"So am I." The black clad woman snapped. In one smooth motion she drew a revolver and fired it at him. Angel clasped his shoulder and collapsed in agony.

"ANGEL!" Faith cried. She moved as quickly as the other woman had, hurling her sword with terrible speed and accuracy. It struck sparks as it hit the revolver, dashing it out of her opponent's hand.

She dropped to Angel's side. "What is it? I didn't think a gun could hurt you like that?"

"...Silver bullet." Angel gasped, "...Didn't hit anything vital. I just need a few minutes."

"Silver bullet huh?" Faith picked up Angel's sword as she spoke, "I thought that was a different masked man's gimmick."

"When one fights a vampire, it's best to be prepared," The woman in black returned as she raised her sword.

"Yeah? Well I hope you brought a faithful Indian companion too, you're going to need him!"

Faith moved forward with a series of cuts, which her opponent deftly parried. They fought back and forth for several moments. The woman in black was the more skillful fencer, but Faith had more experience and better fighting instincts. The woman tried a clever feint for the ribs that masked a cut to the shoulder. Faith barely caught the ruse in time to parry it, then backed off a step.

"We haven't been formally introduced," Faith said, "Should I call you `La Zorra,' or is `Bitch' good enough?"

"Sure," the woman's teeth flashed in a grin, "Or 'Vixen' if you like. Isn't it funny how some people can make an insult out of anything female?"

"Hey," said Faith, "I thought I was paying you a compliment."

La Zorra leaped in the air, turning a somersault over the Slayer's head and landing on the other side of her. Faith wasn't caught off guard by the move. Her foot thrust out behind her, catching the younger woman in the abdomen.

"Oof!" La Zorra went down in a heap and lost the grip on her sword. Faith was over her almost instantly her own sword at the ready.

"Ready to give up now?"

"Not quite." Zorra's hand flashed to her belt and came back with a bullwhip. Faith sprang back just in time to keep her legs from tangling in the lash.

"So, who are you now?" she asked, "Indiana Fox?"

Zorra grinned and slashed with the whip. Faith ducked and the tip took paint off the file cabinet behind her. She leaped over a second lash and cartwheeled past a deadly diagonal stroke.

"Not hitting much with that thing, are we?" she quipped.

"I'm just answering your question." Zorra shot back, "You wanted to know who I am."

Faith followed her glance to the file cabinets. The whip had cut a 'Z' there.

"I'm guessing that means you're still working on the other twenty five letters." Faith said, "Anyway, it's time you learned who I am."

As she moved forward the lights snapped on. Zorra blinked for a moment, then gasped. "You! I saw you in my visions!"

"That's a Slayer thing." Faith replied, "And you should know that you can trust me too."

"What are you doing helping that chupador de sangre?" Zorra gestured towards Angel with her whip.

"It's kind of complicated." Angel muttered.

"We don't have time for all that now."

The three turned to the door. Fred had entered and stood there with a book in one hand.

"What do you mean?" Angel asked.

"I've figured out the connection." Fred said, "If I'm right we've got to hurry!"

### **La Riena de Los Angeles – 1795**

The old mission building had been abandoned for years. It was a half-finished shell, which had never been completed. The Cocopahs had always said that it was a place of evil spirits, they had warned the Franciscan priests not to build there, but their fears had been dismissed as childish superstition.

It was not long before the robed friars began to have their own misgivings. The day the ground was consecrated the Santa Ana winds rose up with such ferocity that no work could be done for three days. At night the howling of wolves could be heard on the plains. These were not the cries of coyotes or of the small desert wolves common to the area, but the sound of the huge beasts found far to the north, in the land held by the Russians. The wolves were never seen and no tracks were found, but several of the mission cattle were discovered torn to pieces.

The friars had prayed vigilantly against Satan and all evil spirits, but it had not stopped the strange occurrences. Finally, when the body of a young boy was found partially eaten they agreed to move the building of the mission to a safer spot. Fray Filipe had hated to concede the struggle, but the Cocopahs would have revolted if he had not.

All of those old tales ran through Zorro's mind as he approached the ruin. The Santa Ana was blowing hot on his back and Tornado whinnied nervously. He patted the great horse and spoke soothingly to him. As he drew nearer, Zorro could see the flickering of a fire inside the shell. Someone was here though why, and why Dr. Pavayne's trail should end here was beyond him.

Zorro dismounted and crept to the outer wall. Through the unfinished window he saw two men, Magistrado Ruiz and the hulking brute called El Lobo. They were dressed in strange robes and Ruiz was chanting something in a language he could not understand. Zorro shifted his position to see more through the narrow opening. What he saw made him catch his breath.

"Santa Maria!" he whispered.

The floor of the ruin was decorated with a seven-pointed star. Directly over the star's center the body of Dr. Pavayne hung by its feet. The man's throat had been cut and his blood formed a wide pool beneath him.

"Even such a man did not deserve this devilish fate." Zorro whispered as he drew sword and pistol. He climbed to the top of the wall then leaped to a place across the circle from the chanting man."

"Magistrado Ruiz!" he cried, and raised his pistol "Your devilry is over!"

Ruiz eyes opened wide with fear. "Zorro!" he gasped, "No, it can't be not now!"

With a frantic motion he threw a small vial into the center of the blood pool. "Lobo!" he cried, "Lobo protect me! Come forth!"

### **Los Angeles – 1932**

"This way." Greystoke whispered and nodded down the corridor.

"What is it?" Zorro asked.

"Blood." The Ape-Man replied, "Something that had no place in a civilized office building."

Zorro smiled grimly, "Perhaps not. Then again, you are not so familiar with lawyers I think."

The two men moved through the building like shadows the Ape-Man in the lead. His jungle-honed senses caught the faint tang of blood on the air and led him downward, to the basement floor of the building. As they came to the basement door he felt the small hairs on his neck and back raise up.

"Listen." He whispered.

"Chanting." Zorro replied after a moment, "But not in any language I understand."

The masked man readied his whip and pistol. Greystoke drew his father's hunting knife from his belt. They looked at each other and Zorro nodded, together they burst through the door.

The floor of the room was decorated with a seven-pointed star. Directly over the star's center the body of an unknown man hung by it's feet. The man's throat had been cut and his blood formed a wide pool beneath him.

There were two robed men standing at the circle's edge. The larger of the men was Brad Dace, the smaller was Benbow, the lawyer who looked like a hyena.

Benbow's eyes opened wide with fear.

"No!" he gasped, "You can't stop me now!"

With a frantic motion he threw a small vial into the center of the blood pool. "Lobo!" he cried, "Lobo protect me! Come forth!"

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

"El Lobo?" Faith's voice sounded confused, "Your security guy, he's the link?"

"I think so," Fred said. "When I couldn't figure out what the link with the Vegas was I looked for something else in common. Every time there's been a conflict between Wolfram and Hart and the Vegas there's been a man called El Lobo involved."

"What is he?" Angel asked, "Some sort of immortal." His voice was hoarse. His shoulder was still throbbing and he leaned heavily against Faith as they moved through the corridors.

"I don't know." Fred replied, "I just know that there's always one involved. When I realized that I tried to contact our El Lobo. Security said he had gone to the basement, but I tried to find him using the cameras, but the whole basement area is blacked out."

"It's true." Zorra added, "There is a story handed down by my predecessors. They say that when a man called El Lobo comes to work for Wolfram and Hart it means real trouble."

The elevator arrived and the group moved inside it. Fred hit the button marked "B."

"What kind of trouble?" Faith asked.

"The story says something about 'opening the wolf gate.'" Zorra answered, "But I don't know what that means. The journal of one of the Vega family is supposed to tell more about it. Unfortunately, the Vegas don't have the journal anymore, it was stolen years ago by men working for Wolfram and Hart."

"That's what you were after?" Angel asked.

Zorra nodded, "Safeguarding this 'wolf gate' has always been the responsibility of Zorro."

The bell rang as the elevator reached the basement floor. The doors opened on a scene of horror.

The floor of the room was decorated with a seven-pointed star. Over the center of the star center the body of an unknown man hung by its feet. The man's throat had been cut and his blood formed a wide pool beneath him.

Two robed men stood at the circle's edge. The smaller man was one of the dozens of lawyers who worked for Wolfram and Hart. If Angel had ever seen him before, he didn't recognize him now. He did recognize the bigger man, it was Luis Cantreras, the security man who liked to be called El Lobo.

The lawyer's eyes opened wide with fear.

"No!" he gasped, "You can't stop me now!"

With a frantic motion he threw a small vial into the center of the blood pool. "Lobo!" he cried, "Lobo protect me! Come forth!"

### **Beyond the Wolf Gate**

Lobo waited.

Waiting wasn't hard in this timeless place. Things were as they always were and as they always would be. For the wolf rage was eternal and hunger was eternal. The very idea that it could be any other way was meaningless.

El Lobo knew that this was not the case in other realms though. There were realms where time passed. In them hunger could be sated, rage could be vented, relief could be found. The Wolf, Ram and Hart had showed that to him. They claimed kinship with El Lobo and brought him forth when he was needed. So long as he served them, they would give him the cherished opportunity to feed and rage and to live with a past and a future. It was exhilarating!

The chanting had roused him from his hunger and his wrath. Voices were calling on him. They used the name of the Wolf, Ram and Hart and they spilled the libation of blood on the ground.

There were three voices. That was a difficult concept for him in his world where all was one. He knew that three was powerful though. In that other realm three was the number of past, present and future. It was also the number of Wolf, Ram and Hart. When three voices called to him using the words of power he would go to them.

These three were separated from one another he realized. In that realm time could form a barrier between past, present and future. The beings that lived there could not cross such a barrier, but it was nothing to El Lobo.

Then the wolf gate opened. It was a strange situation for him, something in his realm that not as it always had been, but he knew the rewards this strangeness offered. To the three voices he moved. Through the wolf gate he moved. Into the three vessels that had been prepared for him he moved.

### **La Riena de Los Angeles – 1795**

"Santa Maria!" Zorro whispered.

Something had happened to the room, he could no longer see the stars. It was as if suddenly a box had formed around the ruin and around him. He could no longer feel the heat of the Santa Ana wind, and the light of the moon and stars was dimmed. Shadowy figures appeared where there had been none before; the room seemed crowded with people where there had been only

three.

He shook his head to clear it. A caballero was not afraid of witchery!

Then he looked at El Lobo and felt his veins freeze. The man was growing, turning into some sort of giant beast before his eyes. His clothing split as his body twisted and grew, claws and fur sprouted, the face distended into a lupine muzzle. Within seconds the man called El Lobo was gone. What was left was part man, part wolf and as huge as one of the brown bears in the cold north of Alto California.

Silently, El Zorro crossed himself, then moved forward to face the wolf.

### **Los Angeles – 1932**

Beneath his face Jim Vega's face had turned shock white. The change in the room had been disorienting. He could see dark figures throughout the space where there had been none before. Above he could make out a shimmering, as if the building above him had become translucent and the stars were shining through.

The worst of it was Dace. His old enemy had changed somehow. He had become some sort of wolf-man, like in the movies. But this werewolf was much bigger than any that Hollywood had imagined. El Lobo seemed to have tripled his bulk to become an eight-foot monstrosity.

Reflexively Jim raised his pistol and emptied it into the advancing creature. There was no effect.

"Mother of God." He breathed, "What do we do now?"

He was answered by a growl at his side, nearly as bestial as that of the giant wolf-man.

With a bestial challenge the near-naked form of the Ape-Man launched itself at the monster, his long knife gleaming in the unearthly light.

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

"That's freaky!" Faith exclaimed as the room changed around her.

"I think it's some kind of trans-temporal distortion." Fred said, "The summoning's happening in three different times, um at the same time."

"Is it just me," Faith responded, "Or does that really not make sense?"

"Fred will figure it out." Angel said, "In the meantime we've got a king-sized werewolf we probably ought to be focusing on."

"Right." Faith raised her sword, "You flank left, I'll go right. Zorra, you look for an opening and try to skewer him."

Faith and Angel moved forward but La Zorra hung back. She had been distracted by a faint sound like gunfire. As she peered off to the side she saw a silhouette that looked familiar. As she concentrated it took on a more distinct form.

"Great-grandpa?" she whispered.

### **The Wolf Gate – Now**

There were man-creatures here. El Lobo knew them of old. They were weak things that made good prey. There were a number of them, but they were not all together. He could see them in three different... what was the word? Three different times!

He remembered that this had been the case before when the Wolf, Ram, and Hart had brought him to this strange world. Cerberus they had called him then and they had set him as a guardian for their interests. One of his faces was always in the past, another in the present and the third in the future. It made him unstoppable. These prey-creatures were limited by their relationship to time. They could not strike all of his heads at once.

With a snarl he moved forward to rend and tear the small man-things.

### **The Wolf Gate – 1795**

Nimble, El Zorro ducked past the monstrous claws and thrust his sword against the beast's chest. It was a clean hit, but the sword bent and snapped without ever piercing the monster's shaggy hide. With a silent curse Zorro dropped the useless hilt and rolled between the beast's legs, narrowly avoiding the snapping jaws.

Recovering his feet he fired his pistol, point blank. The flash seemed to dazzle the wolf but the ball rebounded with no effect at all.

"How can I beat this thing if I can't even hurt it?" he wondered.

He snapped his whip, not at the wolf but at a projection in the phantom ceiling above it. The whip caught, just as the beast leaped for him again. Using it as a line he swung to his left, out of the monster's reach.

## **The Wolf Gate – 1932**

With practiced grace the Ape-Man ducked past the wolf's grasping arms and drove his knife into its exposed chest. The tempered steel did not break, but neither did it pierce flesh. It slid harmlessly across the monster's skin and fur, not even leaving a scratch.

Greystoke was startled. It was only for a fraction of a second but that was still enough for the wolf to send him reeling with a backhanded blow. He was hurled a dozen feet to lie stunned at the base of the wall.

The wolf was on him in an instant, jaws wide for a fatal bite. The Ape-Man tried to move but his muscles wouldn't respond quickly enough. He was going to die. That knowledge didn't bring fear to his heart but he did feel a pang of regret that he would not see his wife again.

There was a sharp 'crack' as the tip of Zorro's black whip lashed across the slavering muzzle. It looped around the creature's jaws and pulled them shut. The creature growled and clawed at the improvised muzzle.

Sharp claws tore through the rawhide with terrible ease and the wolf turned back to face his other enemy. Zorro dropped the ruined whip and faced the monster, weaponless.

## **The Wolf Gate – 2003**

Angel was still slowed by his wound. The wolf's first slash caught him squarely, shredding his shirt and carving deep wounds across his chest.

"Not really my night." He gasped as he landed on his back.

The beast moved towards him, hoping for an easy kill but Faith was too fast for it. A kick to the back of the leg brought the creature to one knee. Another kick rocked its head back, then Faith used both hands to bring her sword down on its head with all her force.

The sword shattered into a dozen pieces and the wolf seemed to grin. It rose to its feet unhurt and moved slowly towards her. Faith landed several more kicks and punches. The wolf didn't even bother to block them. It reached forward and caught her neck in its hands. Powerful claws dug into her flesh as the grip cut off her air.

Faith struggled, but the wolf was much stronger than she was. The hands lifted her now, raising her into the air and towards the waiting jaws. Abruptly the pressure lessened and she saw a look of surprise and pain cross the beast's face. It dropped her and staggered backwards. Strong, slender arms caught Faith and lowered her gently.

"Zorra?" The word hurt her bruised throat.

The black clad woman nodded, "Are you all right? I was afraid I acted too late."

"...Been better." Faith rasped, "What happened?"

She raised up a bit and saw the body of the giant wolf-thing lying on the floor. La Zorra's gleaming sword was run through its chest.

"It's over now." Zorra said, "The sword of my ancestors was enough to slay it."

"It's not over!" Fred had come up beside them, her face and voice were anxious. "This is a trans-temporal demon. He exists in different times, um simultaneously." She winced as the apparent illogic of the statement. "Unless we can kill him in those other times, he'll just come back."

"Great!" Angel muttered as he limped up to them, "How do we do that?"

Fred looked forlorn as she shook her head. "I don't know. I could research it, but that would take time."

"I might know!" La Zorra rose to her feet. She crossed to the creature's body and withdrew the blade. She turned to where she had seen the silhouette before and threw the sword. "Great-Grandpa, catch!"

### **The Wolf Gate – 1932**

El Zorro dropped into a wrestler's crouch as the wolf-man approached. "I don't have a chance." He murmured, "But I can die fighting, as my ancestor would have wanted!"

The creature rose above him, its arms spread wide to slash, its jaws open. Then the beast staggered as it was hit from behind."

Jim Vega's eyes widened and he grinned in amazement. Greystoke had tackled the creature from behind and had pinned its arms in a full nelson. The Ape-Man locked his legs around the giant creature's mid-section as he applied the pressure that had broken the necks of so many of his foes in the African jungle.

"What a man!" Zorro cried, and he cast about for something to use as a weapon. "Hold him a minute longer."

Greystoke strained, but this beast was strong. He was stronger than the mightiest of the great apes. Despite his Herculean efforts, the Ape-Man knew the wolf-thing would soon break his grip and it would be over.

"Vega!" he cried, "I can't hold him! You have to run!"

Zorro laughed. In this hopeless situation he felt more than ever like his famous ancestor. "And leave you? No Senor Greystoke, this day our fates are the same, whatever happens."

The Ape-Man said nothing but Jim fancied he caught a gleam of approval in those steely eyes.

Then he thought he heard something. It was as if a voice, strange yet familiar was calling his name. He turned and thrust up his hand by instinct to catch the gleaming rapier that was suddenly there.

He gazed at the weapon for a moment, recognizing it. "This is Don Diego's sword! It should be in a case in my home, miles from here."

The sound of a growl brought him back. The beast had gained a little leverage and was pushing its arms together. The Jungle Lord was beginning to lose his hold.

"No creature!" he cried, "Now I answer you with the steel of the Vegas!"

He thrust and his blade pierced through the wolf's throat. The point emerged from the back of the wolf's neck, barely missing the Ape-Man's scalp. Then it was over, the beast collapsed to the floor.

Greystoke looked down at the body for a moment, lips drawn back in a bestial snarl. Then he placed one foot on the giant carcass, raised his head and bellowed out the victory cry of the bull ape.

Zorro stepped back awed at the change that had come over his friend. "Is it over?" he asked after a moment.

The Ape-Man narrowed his eyes and peered around. "There were still shadowy forms struggling in the strange light. Neither man could see them well but both sensed that it was not yet over.

Jim swallowed, "You served me well tonight." He said to the blade, "Now I think there is another who needs you." He turned and tossed the sword into the half-seen conflict.

### **The Wolf Gate – 1795**

The fox had led the wolf a merry chase, but El Zorro was running out of places to flee. He dived through an unfinished window, then rolled aside as the beast crashed through the wall.

"Madre de Dios!" he gasped, "El Lobo is still stupid but he is strong enough to make up the difference."

Something made him turn his head just in time. He caught the rapier as it flashed past and looked at it in wonder.

"A beautiful weapon." He breathed, "I have never seen its like! But where did it come from?"

His chance to speculate was cut short as the wolf caught up with him again. It lashed at him with its claws and he raised the rapier in a futile attempt to parry. He was stunned when the wolf withdrew with a cry of pain and a wounded paw.

Twenty feet away Magistrado Ruiz was taken aback as well. Surely no mortal weapon could harm the terrible guardian of the Wolf, Ram, and Hart! He took heart when he saw Senor Zorro's next attack strike the creature's chest. The cut wounded the giant wolf but not seriously.

Zorro struck again and again the cut drove the beast back without slaying it.

"He can inflict only superficial wounds!" Ruiz barked with glee. "My beast will finish him soon!"

Then Zorro struck again and the Magistrado saw that the cuts were not random at all. They formed a "Z" across the wolf's chest.

"No!" Ruiz screamed, but it was too late. Zorro's sword thrust home and the giant beast fell lifeless.

Zorro kissed the blade and tears formed in his eyes.

"The Blessed Virgin must have sent you in my hour of need." He whispered. "It would be wrong to hold onto a blade that belongs in heaven."

He looked up to where the phantom ceiling was already fading. "Adios!" he said, "Until Zorro needs you again!" And with that he hurled the blade upwards where it lodged in the ceiling and faded from sight.

### **Los Angeles – 2003**

The gate was closed, and the room had returned to normal. In place of the giant beast, the unmoving form of Luis Cantreras lay on the floor. Near him the lawyer who had performed the ritual huddled in fear.

"I think it's over now." Fred ventured.

"Good!" Angel grumbled, "When someone gets the time, I'd appreciate hearing exactly what it was that happened."

"Simple." Faith replied with a shrug, "We beat the bad guys. I'd think you'd be used to that by now."

"That sounds pretty good." Angel said, "It just seems more complicated this time."

"Technically complicated," she responded, "But I can deal with being confused by the magical stuff. It's when the good-guy, bad-guy stuff gets tangled that I get confused."

"Faith..."

"I know." Her voice was softer than usual; "We need to talk. And we will, I promise. I'm just not up for it right now. Besides, there's someone else I need to have a talk with first." She smiled at the masked woman. "What do you say *Senorita Zorra*?"

"What would we have to talk about?"

"For one thing, that." Faith nodded up to where a beautifully made rapier was lodged in the ceiling. "And once we get that loose I've got a whole lot of *Slayer* stuff you need to know about."

### **Los Angeles – 1932**

It was a sunny day as Ed walked with his friend Lord Greystoke to the platform to where the train for New York waited.

"I know you're eager to get back John, but I'll sure miss you." Ed said, "What am I going to after I've written up the latest batch of adventures you've given me?"

The Ape-Man smiled. He hadn't told his friend about his latest adventure. His friend was a rational man. He didn't have any trouble believing in places that made sense like lost civilizations hidden in the African jungle, but he would never accept the strange tale of wolves and shadows the Ape-Man had experienced.

"I got a call from Jim Vega this morning." Ed continued, "He's sorry he missed seeing you off. He says maybe he'll make it to Africa one of these days and look you up. You know, he's not a bad fellow, for a lawyer that is."

"Tell him he's always welcome." Greystoke said, "And Ed, I've decided there are much worse things than lawyers in the world."

### **La Riena de Los Angeles –1798**

It had been three years since *Zorro's* adventure at the ruined mission. *Magistrado Ruiz* was gone

and Don Diego wondered how his mysterious masters of the Wolf, Ram and Hart would deal with him. He had sent the Magistrado back with failure to report and a scarred cheek in the shape of a "Z."

He sprinkled sand across the latest entry in his journal. This record must be passed down to his descendants. If anyone ever tried to open the terrible wolf gate again, there should be someone to take up the mantle of Zorro to stop them.

Diego sighed. Thinking of heirs to the mantle of Zorro inevitably brought his thoughts back to Lolita Pulido. The little Senorita's heart was as brave as any he had met, but her body was delicate. The whole incident had wrought a toll on her health and she had returned to Spain, where the finest physicians could see her. She wrote to him often, but her absence still left a vacancy in his soul.

Perhaps he should visit her, he thought. It would do him good to see her again. Also, Toledo boasted the finest sword-smiths in the world. Perhaps there he could commission a special sword, like the one he had held so briefly. A sword to fight injustice in his lifetime and beyond.

"Bernardo!" he called. "Pack a trunk for a long journey, and make certain to pack my black clothes. We go to Spain!"