

THICKER THAN WATER

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Author's note: Especially as this is a *Blake's 7*/Buffy crossover, I should make it clear that any odd attitudes about the British in this story are coming from Southern California teenagers who believe they are the only people in the universe living in the "real world." Giles may sometimes support their prejudices, but Giles is a Watcher whose idea of teenage rebellion was summoning up killer demons to possess his friends. A little oddity is to be expected.

His name was Demetrius, though he hadn't used it in a long time. He doubted anyone remembered it but him. Still, as he looked around the grandeur of his new home, he remembered his days as young man in Greece, walking the streets of the great city, hearing the vendors shouting their wares, passing friends, stopping to speak with the learned men and leaders of the land. He had been glad to hear his name in those days.

This house was styled after one of the great temples of Greece. It had, he knew, been built by a film producer from Hollywood, a man of questionable artistic vision and no financial talent. He had gone bankrupt shortly after his home was built. But somehow, by some chance, the talentless oaf had produced this masterpiece. In a land whose people couldn't tell a decent Greek vase from a plastic imitation, the vision that had guided the ancients had been recaptured here. For the first time in centuries, it made him imagine what it would be like to hear others speak his name again. If all went well, he might make this his permanent home.

He threw aside the blood drained remains of his latest meal and looked at the high school yearbook, studying three faces circled in red. This was what he had come for: Xander Harris, Buffy Summers, and — most especially — Willow Rosenberg.



Heading to the school library, her arms full of spell-books and packs of herbs, Willow Rosenberg stumbled. She was only saved from falling by her friend, Xander, who was walking behind her. Willow was a slight, redhead and Xander was tall and dark haired. Catching her, despite the awkward load she was carrying, should have been no problem. But Xander was also one of those boys nature had shot through their final growth spurt at high speed only to throw them out the other end disoriented and permanently convinced of their own clumsiness. He managed to catch Willow smoothly enough, but then his brain caught up with what he was doing. He immediately tripped and almost dropped her. They were only saved from hitting the ground by some

help from the third member of their trio, Buffy Summers.

"You OK, Wil?" Xander asked, once they'd sorted themselves out and were all, more or less, standing on their own feet again.

"Fine," she assured him, moving quickly to keep a box of holly berries from falling, "I just felt dizzy for a second."

"All right, Willow," Buffy admonished, "haven't I warned you about saving the world on an empty stomach?" Like Willow, Buffy was a petite girl, but the resemblance ended there. Unlike Willow, she radiated enough confidence and strength to intimidate half a high school without even trying. And when she tried There was a reason Sunnydale had become a lot safer since Buffy moved in.

"I'm OK, really," Willow insisted. "I just felt kind of spacey for a second."

"Would that be a Star Trek: Voyager kind of spacey or more of a Phantom Menace?" Xander asked.

"In Sunnydale?" Buffy said. "It's a menacing phantom. Always."

"Didn't we have one of those last week?" Xander quipped.

"Come on guys," said Willow, her arms beginning to ache from the load, "saving the world? Spells? We've got work to do."

"She's right, Xander," Buffy said. "We've got to deal with the here and now. The bright, new future can take care of itself."

"Yeah," said Xander. "You know, after Sunnydale, evil empires and space aliens would be a piece of cake."



They certainly had nice night clubs on this station, Vila thought as he went in. Nothing like Space City — they had laws against that kind of thing here on Cansai and actually enforced them. Still, if you just wanted a good drink, some good music, and a chance to meet some good-looking women, well, this was the place. Much better than the ones he knew on Earth where half the women were there to



pick your pocket and the other half would call the Federation guards if you said something wrong, or left them with the tab, or put a hand where they didn't want it, or borrowed their valuables without asking.... He'd never had much luck with women.

To his surprise, he spotted Avon in a corner. He was sitting at a small table, watching the dance floor with the same emotion he might have used for computer code. Well, not really, Vila decided. He'd seen Avon get pretty worked up over computer code. He was alone, the small drink in front of him completely untouched. Something would have to be done about that, Vila decided. You couldn't leave a poor drink unattended like that.

He walked on over. "Hello, Avon, having fun?"

"Vila," Avon said. He might have been identifying a form of mold from his tone. He didn't bother looking at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, I suppose," Vila said. "I saw that ad, realized it had been a long time since I got out, and here I am."

There was a long pause. "What ad?"

"Oh, you know, all those little ads of things to do and places to go the hotel puts on your terminal screen. I was looking through them and—"

"You broke into my room?" Avon asked, his voice deceptively mild.

Vila, who recognized that tone and knew exactly how dangerous it was, shifted uncomfortably, "Uhm, well, I needed a few credits. And, er, you hadn't handed out the higher grade credit chits, not even the ones in our names. That's all I took." He assured him, flashing the gold card just long enough for Avon to see it had Vila's false name on it before letting it vanish back into his sleeve. No reason to flaunt it around. This place might be safer than Earth, but that was no cause to try and attract thieves.

He expected Avon to berate him, to point out those cards were for the pick-up tomorrow, that the whole point in teleporting down to this neutral station, using false I.D.s, and sending off the *Liberator* was to avoid attention. Attention Avon probably thought Vila was perfectly capable of drawing, once he'd had a few drinks. But then, Avon thought every-

one who didn't spend their lives hugging shadows, the way he did, might as well be jumping up and down in front of Federation security yelling, "Here I am! Shoot me! Shoot me!"

Instead, Avon only said, "Stay out of my room, Vila." There was a long pause while Vila tried to decide what kind of threat or retribution Avon meant by that and whether it would be safe to sit down by him (and possibly grab the drink), when Avon said, "Did you get Cally hers?"

Vila tried to imagine what Avon suspected and what he might be admitting to if he answered. Nothing came to mind so he finally, timidly, went with the truth, "No."

"Get it for her. But make sure no one sees you going in."

Vila was scandalized, "Avon, no one ever *catches* me stealing."

"Is that how you wound up on so many prison ships?"

"Is it my fault people make assumptions when they catch you with wristwatches they think you shouldn't have? You know how the Federation is. If you're a Delta with a gold watch, you have to have stolen it. Prejudice, that's all it is."

"And the fact the watch was engraved, "To Vice-President Lumar, From His Grateful Friends."

"That too," Vila admitted. He scanned the dance floor. My, my, there were a lot of nice-looking women on Cansai. Local fashion right now was for pastels, pink and green hair with matching clothes being the most common. One woman caught his attention. She'd gone for the natural look, short, dark hair — probably its natural color and a deceptively simple, bright red dress. It didn't look like anything impressive at first, till she moved in it. Then Vila found all sorts of interesting things happening to his heartbeat, besides reminding him of some of the tighter outfits his old crew-mate, Jenna, used to pick out. He felt a nostalgic twinge, thinking back to the days when Jenna used to drag him through the ship's stores while she sorted through various outfits, letting him carry her selections and generally shooting down any of his suggestions. He missed Jenna. Those weren't the best of times, but they were better than a lot of the missions Blake and Avon sent him on. Although, he thought, admiring the brunette, perhaps he was being a little hard on Avon. This mission wasn't bad, not bad at all.

Avon noticed what he was looking at. Disbelief and a faint touch of disgust slipped through his usual, cool mask. "Vila," he said, with considerably more feeling than he'd shown over breaking and entering, "don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't look at her. Don't talk to her. Don't have anything to do with her."

"Why? What's wrong with — Oh, my, I think she's coming our way."

She was indeed coming their way, a small, knowing smile playing about her lips. Amused, seductive, attracted — Vila's mind raced to assign all sorts of

hopeful meanings to it. She strolled over, past a few other tables, till she stood right by them. Vila felt his heart stop as she looked at him, large, dark, doe eyes meeting his for just a moment before her attention settled on Avon. “Hello,” she breathed, her voice husky, “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I haven’t been here before,” Avon said coldly, so coldly Vila — who was once again wondering whether Avon hadn’t had his blood replaced with liquid nitrogen — felt his hopes soar. He was ready to leap to this woman’s side as soon as she gave up on Avon. He gripped his gold card firmly in anticipation —

“New in town?” the woman tried again.

“Yes. On business.”

The enigmatic smile settled into playful kittenishness. “Oh,” she cooed, “then perhaps you’d like to discuss your *business* with me?” Business obviously meant something locally it didn’t mean in the rest of the galaxy, Vila decided, not that it mattered. Avon would give her the brush off. He would move in, and then —

“Yes,” Avon said. He picked up the drink, and he and the woman walked off, leaving a crushed Vila behind them.



“Was all that necessary?” Avon demanded once they were alone in one of the upstairs rooms of the nightclub.

She shrugged. “There were witnesses. If anyone asks, you and I just met for the first time down there. Besides, I told you not to bring any friends.”

“He’s not my friend and I didn’t bring him. And don’t complain. You’re lucky I came at all. This had better be as important as your message said.”

“Don’t try to intimidate me. You’re the lucky one, lucky I decided to ignore all those ridiculous things you said years ago —”

“Oh? Were they ridiculous?”

“— and that I occasionally decide to look out for your welfare. You’ve behaved stupidly — even by your standards — and, if it were only you, I wouldn’t touch this mess. However, there’s more to this universe than your selfish, self-centered, idiocy. I have decided, once again, to save your hide.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“I’ll call it whatever I like. And you will do exactly as you’re told, for once in your life, if you want to get out of this alive. Understood?”



Vila had finally gotten a drink. It had been a random choice, some local brew recommended by the bartender, but it had turned out to be a good one. Soon, with its warm glow inside him, his normal optimism began to come back. So, she’d gone off with Avon, so what? He’d seen the effect Avon’s looks sometimes had on women. It usually went away about as soon as they had a taste of his personality, but some people were just born shallow, appearance was all that mattered. What did he want

with a girl like that? Especially when there were so many lovely girls all around him. Some of them, he was sure, wouldn’t mind paying a little attention to him....

The com on his teleport bracelet beeped, knocking him out of his reverie. He clicked it on. “Yes?”

“Maguire, where are you? And where’s Chevron?” Cally demanded.

It took Vila a moment to recognize the aliases they were supposed to be using and another moment to realize he might have given Cally a reason to be angry. As far as she knew, they’d been captured by bounty hunters or shot in a street brawl. “We’re in a nightclub, *The Lucky Stake*.” That ought to calm her down. Cally rarely cared to go to nightclubs. “Sorry, didn’t think you’d be interested.”

There was a long silence. “A nightclub? Why?”

“Well, I saw the ad on the terminal. A — I mean Chevron came on his own. Funny, I didn’t think he liked nightclubs. He wasn’t enjoying himself at all.”

Another long silence. “Chevron went to a nightclub?” Cally said very carefully, as if she wasn’t sure she’d heard him right.

“Yes, I suppose he saw the same ad I did. You couldn’t miss it. Very bright and—”

“I didn’t notice the ads, Maguire. Where—”

“Well, I didn’t either, not the first time. But I saw it on Av — Chevron’s terminal, and I—”

“It was on Chevron’s terminal but not yours?” Cally asked sharply.

“Well, not that I noticed. Funny, it was very bright. Catchy jingle, too. I suppose that’s why Avon decided to give it a try.”

“Maguire, stay where you are. I’m coming over.”



Cally found *The Lucky Stake* easily enough. Fortunately, she also found Vila before he was too drunk to answer her questions. His story didn’t make her feel any better. Avon didn’t go to nightclubs, not ones like they had on Cansai where gambling wasn’t allowed (had he really believed no one would ever find out how he and Vila took Orac and used the little computer to break that casino on Freedom City? Big winners were always all over the local news). But he had gone in response to an ad, an ad neither Vila nor Cally had seen on their own terminals even though the hotel gave the same ad programs to all their customers.

And, once getting there, Avon had done nothing at all till a certain woman approached him. Despite (according to Vila) treating her like dirt, she’d gone off with him. They hung around the bar long enough to divert attention (not that Vila, who seemed to have spent a good deal of time watching them and feeling sorry for himself, put it that way) before going upstairs, where the private rooms were.

What if this was just another of Avon’s old girlfriends? She’d only met one — Vila had quipped there could only be one, and that was still far more than he had ever expected Avon to attract — Anna Grant of late and not precisely lamented memory.

Anna, the woman Avon had spent years believing had died under torture rather than give him up to Federation security. Anna, who had turned out to be Federation security, who had died trying to kill Avon.

If this was another woman like her, they could all be in a lot of trouble.

She felt for the gun in her pocket. It was one of Dayna's special creations. It looked like a normal stun pistol, one of the few personal weapons allowed on Cansai. Unlike the legal variety, it could be reset to a deadlier level. Cally, hesitated, then left it at stun. For now. She could always change her mind later.

She only considered dragging Vila upstairs with her for half a second. Drunk as he was, he'd be worse than nothing as back up. From the very little she knew of such places, a woman going upstairs alone might be ignored under the assumption she was meeting a friend. A woman dragging a drunk who, she knew from experience, might break into choruses about the Supreme Commander's Desperate Search For a Date at the drop of a hat, would not.

Up she went. If this turned into a shoot out, Vila could find his own way home.

Theirs was the room at the end. The lighting was dim and, thankfully, no one was about. Now she was here, she wasn't certain what to do. Break down the door? Come in, lasers blazing? Knock? She leaned close and tried to listen.

The Lucky Stake valued the privacy of its customers, but the doors weren't quite soundproof. If you stood close enough and if the voices on the other side were loud enough, you could hear at least part of the conversation.

The voices were loud enough. The voices were more than loud enough. If *The Lucky Stake* hadn't valued the privacy of its customers, the whole space station would be hearing them.

"What do you mean, you just found out? You expect me to believe that?" The voice was muffled by the door, but recognizably Avon's.

"Believe the self-evident, obvious truth? Since when have I thought you were intelligent enough to do that?" Came a more feminine, equally enraged voice.

"Not when you nearly got me killed, that's certain."

"As if you didn't know—"

"If you want a sacrificial lamb, go and—"

Sacrificial lamb? What in the worlds was that?

"Sacrificial lamb?" the woman yelled, "Oh, that's funny. The body count is on your hands this time."

"Me? I didn't make this mess—"

"You could have fooled me—"

"Or are you just trying to get rid of the last survivor? Clean up your own trash—"

"Try and grasp this, *Avon*," Avon, Cally noticed, not Chevron. But the woman it a strange, mocking twist, "*You don't have a choice*. And I don't either. Or do you really think I'd be talking to you if I did?"

That must have been the winning argument, since it was followed by a long silence and, when

they resumed yelling, they kept their voices rational enough Cally couldn't follow them. Whatever they had left to say to each other, they kept it brief. While Cally was still deciding what to do, the door flew open and Avon strode out.

He looked like a barely contained thunderstorm, but he managed not to walk right over her. He stopped, frowned, then apparently dismissed her. Nothing new there. He probably didn't realize she'd heard anything. "Donna," he said, using her alias and forcing his voice into civility. It seemed like a bad fit. "What are you doing here?"

"I called Maguire. We thought you might be in trouble."

That amused him in a dark, vicious way. He threw the woman behind him a look, "Nothing I can't deal with," he assured one or the other of them.

The woman smiled and stepped out of the room. She was very pretty, Cally noted, not a hair out of place. The flush in her cheeks might have been due to anything other than a screaming match ended just seconds ago. She fixed her large, dark eyes on Cally with a demure, shy smile, "Who's this?" she asked Avon. Oh, Cally had to give her points. She would never have connected this shy, fawn-like child with the screaming harridan of moments before.

Avon shot the woman an annoyed look. She countered with an insistent, innocently questioning gaze. "An associate," Avon told her coldly.

The woman looked at Cally, still smiling. "I'm Regan," she said, "Regan Goneril." Cally would have doubted the truth of that even without Avon's snort of disgust. The woman ignored him, "It's always nice to meet one of Chevron's friends." She smiled engagingly. "What's your name?"

Avon gave Cally a warning look, "Donna Bel," she said, sticking to the alias Avon had created for her, "I was looking for my friend." She tried to imitate Regan's innocent stare. "I hope everything's all right?"

"Fine," Avon said, taking her by the arm, "I was just leaving."

"What was all that about?" Cally whispered as he marched her down the stairs.

"A problem," Avon said. "You shouldn't have come here."

"Why not?"

He hesitated, glancing quickly behind them. "It would have been better if she hadn't met you. That's all."

"Better how?"

He shrugged. "It probably doesn't matter. You didn't tell her your name. That's good. Just stay away from her."

"Why—"

Avon cut her off. "There's Vila. We'd better collect him and get out of here before he's mugged. Come on."

Avon flagged down one of the auto-cabs as soon as they got out, instead of heading for the public transport, as Cally'd expected. He was in a bigger hurry than she'd realized. "Use the public sys-

tem whenever possible," he'd told them before they left *Liberator*. "We'll blend into the crowds and be harder to trace." It had been on a list of similar, paranoid rules he'd given them about keeping a low profile on this mission, one of several he'd already broken this evening.

Cally pushed the now nearly comatose Vila back in his seat while Avon programmed their destination. "Are you going to tell me what that was about?" she asked.

"No." Avon looked out the window. Soon, they were passing along the station's edge. Large view windows showed the star-fields beyond. Avon watched them, his face closed and unreadable. Once or twice, he seemed about to say something. Cally waited, trying to think of an argument that would pierce that thick hide of his, but came up empty. *Do I want to know?* There was something in his eyes that troubled her, something that kept her from pressing the issue and demanding the answers he owed them. What else was new?

They traveled in silence till they reached the hotel. Avon got out first, helping Cally unload Vila. He signaled a couple of bellhops over to help them. Cally wasn't sure if it was good training or the deadly light in Avon's eyes, but the bellhops rushed to assist. Avon paused by the door of the cab. Abruptly, he told her, "I have to leave. For a few days. Don't try to get in touch with me."

"What?" It was so sudden, she could barely find the shock she knew she should be feeling, "We have a job to do—"

"One you two are perfectly capable of yourselves. Just keep him sober."

"While you do what?"

"It's none of your business," he said calmly, his voice so gentle it took the sting completely out of his words, a phenomena as unnerving as anything else that had happened this evening. He said it as if she should be grateful this wasn't her concern. "If *Liberator* gets back before I do... just go. I'll catch up with you, if I can."

"Av—" she caught herself on the forbidden name and, before she could try again, he was in the cab and gone.



OK, Willow thought to herself, time to save the world.

Mom and Dad were both downstairs working through the usual stack of papers they brought home from their jobs. Most of the time, they got pretty oblivious when they were doing that, but Willow decided against trying to sneak past them. If there was one thing hanging out with Buffy had taught her — besides vampires being real and Sunnydale being built on a door leading straight into pure evil that wanted to burst out and eat up or torture everything in the world — it was that Murphy's law really worked and Willow could count on her parents tuning out if a demon was trying to eat her alive but not if she was trying to save them from one.

Or whatever Giles had planned for tonight.

She went with plan B. There was a small rope ladder in her room, something her father had installed in case the house was ever burning down and Willow needed to get out without using the door. The good thing was it worked just as well when she only needed to sneak out. She made sure the ladder was firmly attached and pushed the rest of it over the windowsill. Then she picked up her back pack and climbed out.

These things were never as easy as they looked, Willow thought as she got tangled halfway down. Although Buffy never really said, Willow figured she just jumped out fifth story windows headfirst with no ladders at all. Willow, on the other hand, was doing her best to get her footing back without falling into the rosebushes. The very thorny rosebushes. The rosebushes that would probably cut her up into red-haired hamburger if she landed in them. Not to mention making so much noise even her parents were bound to notice what was up.

She took a deep breath and tried to think reasonably, as her hands began to lose their grip and one foot slipped, leaving her suspended over a darkness she knew ended in carnage, discovery, and being grounded the rest of her life. Suddenly, just as her vision started to go dark and sparkly, she felt strong hands reach out and grab her. With a panicked, dizzy feeling of terror, she realized she was about to faint at what had to be the worst time possible.

But she didn't faint, not quite. A moment later, as her vision cleared, she found herself standing on the ground, unfamiliar hands resting on her shoulders. An equally unfamiliar voice whispered, "You should be more careful."

Fumbling for a stake and holy water, Willow spun around and faced the stranger. He had already taken a step back, hands held up appeasingly, but she caught the faint touch of amusement in his eyes and in his almost suppressed smile. Whatever this guy was (demon? vampire? run-of-the-mill psychopath?), he knew he could make chopped liver out of her without raising a sweat. Great. OK, it was her job to change his mind. She mustered the most assertive voice she could find, "Back off!" she commanded. Sort of commanded. Well, only if shaking like jell-o was commanding.

The man smiled. Scared as she was, Willow felt her knees get weak at that smile. C'mon, Wil, she told herself, so he's good-looking. Well, fantastic looking. OK, so he's maybe the best looking thing to set foot in Sunnydale in your entire lifetime, and the dark hair, deep brown eyes, with that fantastic, fair-skinned complexion — just like a vampire in the movies, she reminded herself. But the real ones *never* looked so good....

"If you're that worried about what's behind you," the man said, still smiling, "perhaps you shouldn't be out at this time of night."

Whoa, reality check. This guy is the enemy. Act confident, Wil. "I can take care of myself." Willow

assured him, brandishing her stake more or less effectively.

The man shrugged casually, but backed off another half-step. "I believe you," he said, "but you don't." He turned and walked away into the darkness. "Be careful," he said just before the shadows ate him up.



Angel felt edgy that evening as he made his way to the school. He was more cautious than usual. No one saw him as he entered or heard him as he walked, silent as a shadow, through the halls and past deserted classrooms. He was almost at the library doors when he hesitated, turned, and went through a back way where the others wouldn't see him. Just being careful, he told himself, knowing it was a lie. The truth was he had a hunter's instincts, and they were telling him something was wrong tonight. Wronger than usual. Hold to the darkness, they told him, be silent, do not be seen. Those instincts made him pause again, hidden in the shadows of the library's looming bookcases, and listen to what was being said.

Half the gang was gone. Oz's band had an out of town gig somewhere, and Faith had gone off to fight some demon in India. Angel thought Giles had said something about an incarnation of Kali-ma, the destroyer. Cordelia, he guessed, just hadn't been invited or had turned them down for a date. But, the others were there. Willow was perched on the edge of the reference desk, looking animated and perhaps afraid as she finished telling Buffy, Xander, and Giles her story. "... and then he just walked off and vanished," she concluded. "It was so freaky. Do you think it means anything?"

This last part was addressed to Giles, the mentor and voice of reason in this group. His voice reflected the same concern Angel felt. "Vanished? Did he use an invocation or ritual gestures? Or did he just disappear? Was it a gradual fading or instantaneous? Were there any odd effects, lights, sounds, the smell of brimstone, or anything else?"

"Uh, no," Willow said hesitantly, "It was more a walk-away-from-the-house-till-I-couldn't-see-him-anymore kind of vanishing."

Giles obviously didn't follow. "Excuse me?"

"She means it was perfectly natural," Buffy told him. "No spells, no magic, no demons from the abyss."

"It was?" Giles was clearly puzzled, "Then why are we discussing it?"

Because something threatened Willow, Giles, Angel thought, the demon in him growling. Vampire or man, there was one thing both parts of him agreed on, nobody messed with his friends (*Nobody but me*, the demon hissed). Was this what he'd sensed?

Buffy, on the other hand, only rolled her eyes at Giles' denseness. "Giles, Sunnydale may be convention central for all Things That Go Bump In The Night, but there are still perfectly human nut-cases out there and meeting one is fairly freaksome."

No, what was bothering Angel wasn't human. There was something else to this.

"He wasn't a nut-case," Willow protested. "At least, I don't think he was. I mean, yeah, I thought he was a vampire or something when I suddenly found him holding me. But that was just cause I fell off the ladder. And he told me to be careful. It was just—"

"Wait a sec, Wil," Xander said, getting more sense out of this confused sentence than Angel did, "Have you been fainting again?"

Fainting spells? Not good, not good at all.

"Fainting spells?" Giles echoed. He sounded calm, with only his usual, academic interest. Deceptive. Like Angel, he could feel a shift in the wind. He knew when danger was coming.

"It's nothing," Wil assured him. "My mom already took me to the doctor. I'm just a little anemic."

"Anemic?" Giles asked, with that same calmness.

"Before you ask, nothing's been drinking my blood at night or anything. I already checked."

"How else can you get anemic in this town?" Xander wanted to know.

Willow was turning red. "If you maybe skip a few meals and try to make up for it just by eating Twinkies, your iron count goes down, and you get anemic. I'm already on vitamins," she added anxiously, "and I go to see the doctor again next week. And I ran a few spells myself, protective charms and stuff, just to make sure. But my readings are clear. Nothing's been sucking the blood out of me, OK?"

"We believe you, Wil," Buffy assured her.

No, Angel thought, I don't.

"And, as for these strangers in the night, you and I have got to talk mace. Don't worry," she consoled her. "It comes in all kinds of accessory friendly containers these days."

"If you two wouldn't mind discussing your personal arsenals later," Giles said, "perhaps you could take a look at this book?" He pushed an ancient, leather bound tome in front of them.

"Uhm, Giles," Xander said, glancing at the text, "whatever that's written in, we can't read it."

"Then look at the pictures," Giles said in his best heaven-give-me-patience-with-American-teens voice. He turned a page.

Xander winced and looked away. "On second thought, Giles, why don't you just read me the story?" he said, moving quickly away.

Giles ignored him. "Willow," he asked, "is this the man you met?"

Angel saw Willow look at the text and blanch. Even Buffy, coming up beside her, looked disturbed. "That's very... graphic," she said.

"Yeah," said Willow, "you don't usually see such, uh, realistic colors in medieval illuminated manuscripts."

"The monk who made it was a reputed genius," Giles told them. "Is this him?"

"You mean the one who still has a head, right? No, I've never seen him before. Who is he?"

Giles relaxed. "He's the problem I wanted to discuss with you tonight, a vampire called the Athe-



nian.”

The Athenian. Angel stood very still. This was the trouble he'd been feeling and it was worse than he'd imagined. He finally stepped out into the light. “If the Athenian's in town, I say we leave,” he said bluntly.

“Doesn't the school spray for these kind of pests?” Xander asked the others. “Been lurking there long?”

Angel ignored him. “You've faced a lot of powerful creatures, but you've never faced anything like him.” he told them.

Giles wasn't slow on the uptake. “You've met him before?”

“Unfortunately.” He glanced over at the book. Oh, that one. He could understand why Willow went pale looking at it. “What do you know about the monk who made this?”

“He was a prisoner while the Athenian did this. Apparently, he wanted a chronicler. But the monk managed to hide it before the Athenian finished his little reign of terror and killed him.”

“He didn't just kill him,” Angel said. “He made him a vampire. The monk hid the book with holy relics, so neither of them could get it. The Athenian's usually more careful than that. This is probably the only book in human hands about him. The only one from an eyewitness.”

Willow stole a quick look at the book, then quickly looked away, turning slightly green. “So that's what he really looks like?”

Angel looked at the drawing. It showed a tall, lean man, very muscular. His skin was incredibly pale. His hair fell in long, black locks, half-hiding his eyes. It was the eyes, he suspected, that upset the others in the room, rather than the gruesome scene. They glittered, obsidian black, contemplating the carnage around him with cool detachment, and seeming to look beyond at the reader. “Yeah, that's what he looks like.”

“So, he's a mean vampire,” Buffy said. “So what? We've dealt with those before. What makes this guy so special?”

“I told you he made the monk a vampire. It was because he liked his work. That's what he does. All vampires have their own criteria for progeny, for the new vampires they make.”

“Oh, you guys are selective?” Xander said, with mock surprise. “Gee, I never knew. And after all those new graves we've staked out, just in case. So, tell us, Angel, what do you look for in a new friend? Measurements?”

“Someone I can put up with,” Angel said. “Sure, sometimes I'd just do it. Those are throwaways. Whether they survive or not is their own problem.” Yes, he'd done that kind. There was a time, when he'd lost his soul, he'd sent one fledgling vampire, a freshly killed friend of Buffy's, to the Slayer with one message: Angel sends his love. He hadn't expected the girl to survive and he'd been right. From the look on Buffy's face, she was probably remembering the same one. “But we don't do that often,” he added.

“That kind can come back to haunt you. In more ways than one.” He did not elaborate. No one asked him too. Good. “For most of us, there's a reason, but it's usually personal. We liked someone's looks, we thought a joke they made was funny, we think they'd be fun to hang out with, things like that. Or, maybe, because they're useful. The Athenian goes beyond that. He goes out of his way to hunt for talented, intelligent people, gifted people.

“If someone with a weird talent dropped in a vampire's lap, sure, we'd use them. But most of us don't go hunting for them. Not usually,” he corrected, again not elaborating. “But the Athenian does. That means you're all in danger. Even you Xander.”

“Me?”

“You've been possessed by the spirit of the hyena, you were nearly changed into a sea monster, and you've fought the undead for three years and survived. Yeah, he'd be interested. But, if that's what he's in Sunnydale for, if he can't find you, he'll move on.”

“If? What else would he be here for?” Buffy asked.

Angel hesitated. If he told her this, there was no way she'd leave, not unless he could prove it wasn't what the Athenian wanted. But she was the Slayer. She needed to know. “He's also a wizard, a magus.” He pointed his thumb at the graphic illustration. “That's what that was all about, raising power. I know a little about magic, but it's his obsession. He's spent most of his existence adding to his power. If he isn't here to hunt for talent, he's looking for power. It's as simple as that.”

“Just to be clear on this,” Buffy said, “you said he's spent his whole existence hunting power. Exactly how old is he?”

“No one's sure,” Angel said. “Between two and three millennia.”

“And he's been collecting magic power all this time?” Buffy said, obviously contemplating a very big, very nasty vamp.

“Yes, but he's had setbacks.” She needed to know this, he told himself. It didn't matter that he stood a better chance of getting her to leave with the other story, she needed to know the whole truth. “The last one I know of was over a century ago. Not long after Dru and I... not long after I met her. The Athenian wanted her to join up with him. I didn't like the idea.”

“You attacked him directly?” Giles asked.

Angel shook his head. “I'd have been crazy to try.” Even Dru would have been against it. “I tried pointing out we were in my city, but he didn't go for it. So I let the people know what he was and what he was up to.” He was giving them the truth, but there was no reason to let them know how he'd done that. He'd been a soulless monster then, literally. It hadn't bothered him in the least to plant the evidence people needed to know there was a sadistic bloodsucker in the area. “A mob came — it was too big a place for him to do what he'd done in that monk's village. They burnt his home and magic artifacts he'd spent

centuries collecting.” Except a few toys Dru had fancied. Leave that out too. “He also lost a lot of his followers that night. I fought him after they were done. He wasn’t any match for me.”

“So why are you running scared?” Xander asked.

“Because I was lucky. I didn’t realize how lucky back then. He wasn’t expecting a vampire to whip up a mob of enraged humans to come after him, and he still took out plenty of them. If he’d been ready, they’d have been wiped out. This time, he’s ready. And you’re the people he’ll be hunting for.”

“Not you?”

He shrugged it off. “It was a vampire turf war. He won’t bother.” Well, he might not, especially if Angel had still been a normal vampire instead of a creature with a soul.

“We can’t leave,” Buffy said. “If he’s as bad as you say, we can’t leave Sunnydale defenseless. Besides, Sunnydale’s built on the Hellmouth. There’s plenty to keep him interested if he doesn’t have new vampires to look after.” She thought about it and added, “but, Willow, we’re going to walk you home tonight, OK?”



Willow felt like a little kid as her friends stood around and watched her climb up the ladder. At least, this time, her vision stayed clear and nothing started spinning. Inside her room, everything looked OK. Her fish were still there, alive and swimming. Several protective charms were giving the all clear. It looked good. She gave the others the thumbs up sign before closing all her windows and hanging extra protective charms on them. Maybe she should make a few more.

She’d been at work several minutes, chopping herbs and drawing magic diagrams, before she heard the voices downstairs. People were talking. She recognized two, her mom and dad, but the third...

Willow grabbed her bathrobe, the fluffy one with the big pockets where she could hide almost anything, like extra vials of holy water and a few big crosses and stakes with some charm bags tossed in just in case, before going downstairs. At the last moment, she grabbed her baseball bat, just in case. She’d been meaning to take a self-defense class one of these days, something to convince her dad it was perfectly natural if she came down with a crossbow or maybe a semiautomatic loaded with silver bullets. Too late now.

She stopped on the stairs, trying to be inconspicuous, baseball bat held ready, as she sized up the situation downstairs. There were her parents, sitting at the couch, three empty cups and saucers spread over the coffee table while they spoke to a man seated in the old, overstuffed chair beside them. It was the man from the ladder incident.

Just then, Willow’s father looked up and saw her. Hastily, she tried to hide the bat behind her. “Willow,” he said. “Did we wake you up? Come down and meet your cousin, Kevin.”

Cousin? Willow thought, as she hastily shoved the bat through the second floor railing by the stairs. The man her knees had gone weak for was her *cousin?* And she had a cousin who didn’t think anything of her climbing out of the house in the middle of the night? He had to be from Mom’s side of the family.

But he wasn’t. He was Kevin Abrams, a distant (distant, Willow thought, that’s good) relation on her dad’s mother’s side. He’d been out of the country several years, which accounted for his accent (Willow, who was used to Giles, hadn’t noticed it when he first spoke to her. Now, she realized two and a half years of Giles wasn’t enough to immunize her from how incredibly cool British accents were), doing computer work for various firms (computer work, Willow swooned).

He gave her his blinding, earth-shaking smile again. “Your parents wanted to wake you up when I arrived, but I told them not to bother. We didn’t mean to disturb you.”

That brought Willow back to reality with a thump. He’d seen her leave and, instead of telling her parents, had covered up for her. This wasn’t rational adult behavior. Reminding herself he could still be a psychopath, even if he was a relative, Willow tried to get a grip on herself. She made a few inane comments but refused to be drawn deep into the conversation, not that she probably could have gotten into this conversation. It was mostly her dad and Kevin reminiscing about the last time they’d seen each other over twenty years ago. Kevin, she gathered, hadn’t kept in close touch with the family (“Never much for writing letters, I’m afraid,” he apologized). But, finding himself in Sunnydale, he had to look up Cousin Ira and his family.

OK, Willow thought, it was a surprise visit. He’d be going soon. She could deal with this. Because, cousin or not, she still knew her heart was beating fast just having him around. But, when he finally said something about having to go, he let slip that he still needed to check into the hotel.

“But you have to stay with us!” Mom said, family duty on overdrive. Or maybe the accent got to her, too.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly,” Kevin assured her. “I wouldn’t want to be a bother.”

“It’s no bother,” Mom said. “Ira, tell him. We have a guest room all ready.”

Dad lent his support.

“Well,” Kevin said hesitantly, obviously not wanting to impose, “if you insist...”

“Of course, we do,” Mom said. And that was that. They chatted a few more minutes till Mom looked at the clock. “But we’re keeping you up. You must be exhausted after your flight.”

“I’m fine, really. But, if you wouldn’t mind...”

“Not at all. Willow, why don’t you show him to his room?”

Willow’s stomach lurched, but she nodded. She even smiled, a much more painfully artificial smile than Kevin’s. “Sure, Mom. No problem.”



They went up the stairs. Willow had forgotten all about the bat, but Kevin gave it only a mildly curious glance. He picked it up before she could do anything about it and handed it to her. "Yours, I presume?"

She nodded, and finally burst out with the question she'd been dying to ask since she saw him in the living room. "Why didn't you tell my parents?"

"Tell them what?"

"Tell them you caught me sneaking out of the house!"

"Oh," he said mildly, "didn't they know?"

"You think I use a ladder when I'm not trying to sneak out?"

"One hears so many stories about American teens," he reflected. "Besides, for all I knew, you were practicing a fire escape. And we'd only just met. It didn't seem my place to comment."

"But it was all right for you to grab me from be-

hind?"

"I thought you could use the help. You only had a few feet to go, but those rosebushes didn't look pleasant. And you seemed quite pale, unless it was the light. Do heights frighten you?"

"No, I mean, not usually. I mean, it's only the second floor."

"Hmm, then I apologize. You looked like you were having a problem."

"Well, I wasn't."

"Very well," he flashed his smile, "next time, I'll let you climb down by yourself and make sure to tell your parents afterwards. Does that satisfy you?"

"Uh—"

He eased the voltage in his smile down to a friendly, understanding level that didn't tie Willow's neurons in knots. "Don't worry, Willow. I'm not planning to make trouble for you. Just..." his expres-

sion altered again, real concern showing in his dark eyes, “try to be careful,” he told her again.

Unnerved, Willow beat a hasty retreat to her room.



The next morning, painkillers in hand, Cally went and told Vila all about it. It took awhile to get him into a state where he fully understood what she was talking about, but at least she had the advantage of civilized medicine. Having dealt with Vila a time or two when there was nothing on hand to sober him up, she appreciated the difference.

“He left?” Vila said, “Just like that? That’s not like him.”

“No,” Cally agreed.

“It must have been the woman.”

“Of course, but why? What hold could she have on him? He’s already on the Federation’s most wanted list. How could she top that?”

Vila cleared his throat. “Well, you know, Cally, she was very nice to look at. If a woman like that asked me to go with her, well, now....”

“Vila?”

“Yes, Cally?”

“Be quiet.”

She tried to concentrate on the job they had to do. It wasn’t actually too complicated. The trick had been to avoid any connection between it and *Liberator’s* crew. Cally had thought Avon was being paranoid — she still thought it — but she’d been willing to play along. Paranoid or not, the matter was important.

They’d been contacted (through roundabout routes Avon and Orac had verified as trustworthy) by the president of Lindor, Sarkoff, an old friend with his own grudge against the Federation. His people had gotten hold of some new, Federation technology. The stuff itself was priceless, from the rebellion’s point of view, but Cally was more than a bit frustrated by the cloak and dagger games they were supposed to go through to get it. They couldn’t go to Lindor to get it because Sarkoff was trying to downplay his connection with Blake’s people to avoid a premature strike from the Federation (premature, from Lindor’s point of view, meaning ever). For the same reason, they couldn’t have any ship traceable to Lindor bring it to them. Just burying it in the sand on an uninhabited world led the risk of their package being picked up by the wrong people or damaged by the elements before they could get it.

The solution? Their package was now in the hands of an art dealer and fence, a man with a certain reputation for trustworthiness in smuggling and illegal sales, contradictory as that seemed to Cally. If the Federation did trace it to him, he was a businessman in neutral territory who, their records would tell them, made a point of not knowing who had delivered certain goods. Just the fact he had been the middleman would suggest his source was simply another group of thieves, not another government. After it had been through his hands, even

tracing it to Lindor wouldn’t tie it to Sarkoff, just local crime. And there was no way they would trace it to Lindor. Or so Avon and Vila had insisted. Cally, who apparently had a bit more faith in Federation torturers than they did, and in their ruthlessness in cornering their quarry, no matter whose territory they lived in, wondered but played along. After all, this was Sarkoff’s idea, not theirs. Nothing she could do would change it.

Still, it would have been better to do this with Avon. Like Vila, he understood the criminal element, understood it far better than she did, but, unlike Vila, she trusted him to recognize if this fence was double crossing them and — more importantly — know what to do about it without getting the rest of them killed. Vila didn’t inspire that kind of confidence.

Well, there was nothing for it now. Win or lose, they had to at least make the effort.

At nine o’clock precisely, Madame Donna Bel and her associate, Ian Maguire of the venerable firm of Thompson and French, arrived at *Zerafin’s Gallery*. They were ushered quickly from the waiting room to Mr. Zerafin’s office. Cally took an immediate dislike to him.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, well-dressed and handsome with dark brown hair. His manners were flawless but he still managed an easy, friendly air without being overly familiar. He should have been charming. Instead, she found herself uneasy being in the same room as him and wanting to leave as quickly as possible.

Perhaps it was his eyes. Aurons were sensitive about eyes. ‘Windows to the soul,’ humans called them, and perhaps it was true. She knew that, as a telepath, she seemed to get a better feel for people when she could see their eyes. Zerafin kept his hidden behind small, dark lenses. But she had seen sunglasses before. They didn’t mean he wasn’t trustworthy. For a fence. Perhaps it was just Avon’s sudden departure. All she knew was that she wanted to get far away from him. Now.

“Ah, yes,” Zerafin was saying, “your employer, Mr. French, contacted us about the Rennoran piece. Lovely bronze work, five centuries old, part of the baroque revival on Chelzai. You’ll wish to examine it, of course?”

“Of course,” Cally murmured, giving him the recognition phrase, “Mr. French is very interested in bronze.”

“A man of taste,” Zerafin replied, right on cue, bringing out the statuette. “Bronze is sadly neglected these days.”

“I don’t know much about it myself,” Cally replied, kicking Vila in the shins to remind him he was supposed to *study* the piece, not pay for it. Yet. “Mr. Maguire is the art expert. I rely on his expertise.” There, that was the whole recognition speech. But Zerafin wouldn’t leave it there.

“Oh, experts,” he said, smiling as if it was a private joke. “We’re only amateurs who’ve wasted more time on our subject than normal mortals.”

That was a patronizing joke, Cally decided. It was what a conceited specialist might expect the untrained rabble to think, "You're just saying that because I said I haven't studied art," she told him. "You don't expect me to believe your life's work is a waste of time, do you?"

He laughed. "My life's work has been repairing the time I've wasted."

"I don't understand," she admitted, suspecting she was laying herself open to some cutting remark by saying it. Her time with Avon and the rest of *Liberator*'s crew had taught her to know when that was coming.

But Zerafin only said, "Then I envy you." adding a mocking smile that made her doubt he did. "And I hope you never do understand."

Cally was saved from thinking of a reply by Vila. "Looks good," he declared. "We'll take it."

Zerafin smiled, and there was a brief discussion on the price. That part had also been arranged ahead of time. Cally and Vila signed a few forms with carefully practiced signatures, adding equally false thumb-prints, and the statuette was theirs. It was a forgery, of course, a smuggled device carefully shielded in its interior, ready for Avon to analyze. If Avon had a chance to analyze it. Concentrate on the present, she told herself. Mr. Zerafin didn't know the truth about this transaction. He was supposed to think it was just another shady deal. It was their job to make sure he didn't learn otherwise, to just finish this sale and get out of here without doing anything peculiar or (hopefully) even memorable. They were almost done, and Cally would be glad to get away.

"Oh, by the way," Vila said, pulling a jewelry box out of his pocket. "Any idea what this is worth?"



Giles walked into the library the next day, expecting to meet Buffy and her friends for another council of war. Instead, he found a complete stranger typing away at Willow's computer while Willow looked on in awe. Buffy and Xander sat nearby looking entirely happy at this invasion of their territory. Then he remembered Willow's description from last night, and realized who the stranger was.

He was sitting in the sunlight coming down from the windows, so he wasn't a vampire, Giles assured himself. Although he still might be any of a hundred other varieties of demon. It wasn't likely he had enchanted all three of the others, but it was the only explanation Giles could think of. He tried to ease his way over to the supply closet where the weapons and counter-spells were kept. Sneaking around, however, was almost a lost cause when a Slayer was present.

Buffy looked up. "Hi, Giles, this is Willow's cousin, Kevin."

The man at the computer got up and extended his hand, "Abrams, actually," he said. "Kevin Abrams." A cousin? An eccentric one, from the story Willow had told, but Giles had a few eccentric relatives himself, most of them fellow Watchers. The

man also had a British accent. Eccentric and British. It wasn't necessarily a bad combination. Could it be he was finally going to meet a civilized man in this town?

"Giles, Rupert Giles," he replied, shaking hands. Hmm, warm blooded but not inhumanly so. He also had a pulse. Nothing conclusive, but good signs. "I hadn't heard Willow mention you were coming to visit."

"It was a bit sudden," Abrams admitted. "I was hired to do a job over in San Francisco for a British firm with a branch there. Then, an old friend asked me to come check some programs on your school's computers. I only met Willow last night." Abrams looked at her, sharing a private joke. "It seems she was on the way to the library."

The pieces began to fit together. "Willow did say something about that," Giles allowed.

"I'm afraid I gave her quite a fright," Abrams acknowledged. "But I didn't have a chance to properly introduce myself at the time."

"Look, Giles," Willow broke in, "Kevin's a computer programmer. He was just showing us some of his work. It's incredible." Hero worship was written all over her face.

Abrams made a depreciating gesture. "It's nothing, really. Now, that program you were showing me, on the other hand, was quite original."

Willow's face glowed. "Do you think so?"

While Abrams went on to tell Willow he did, indeed, think so and why, Giles pulled Buffy aside. "I take it this is the same man Willow met last night? She didn't have two strange encounters and forget to mention one?"

"Nope, just him."

"And is he really.... I mean, did you, er..."

"Willow checked out his credentials last night, soon as she was alone with the Internet. Everything cleared. And I double checked everything else. No spells, no magic auras—"

"You checked for auras?" Buffy might be the Slayer and the Chosen One, but her skill with the most elementary spells was sadly lacking.

"I used the weird mirror you have in back."

Oh, good, the mirror. Giles doubted even Xander could misread its answers, although it tended to have odd side effects. "Did you have any ... problems?"

"Nah, but get a better translation for the directions, will you? Wil says 'by and by' hasn't meant 'right this instant' for about five hundred years."

Giles closed his eyes, remembering that part of the text and contemplating what happened whenever it was done wrong. "Buffy, you didn't."

"Hey, we got the fire out. Oh, and Kev, here, hasn't been feeding her spiked cookies, either," she said, referring to Ted, the killer android, one of the few non-supernatural foes they'd fought. He'd kept his victims friendly by drugging their food. "I think he's exactly what he looks like, just another uptight guy from England. Xander said we should make him tea, but he couldn't figure out the directions on the tea

set, so we didn't — that's another thing you need to translate, sometime."

"As an attempt at humor, Buffy, that was not successful," Giles said dryly, then he paused, considering what he'd seen Xander and Buffy do the few times they'd used a kitchen. "You didn't really fix him any of my tea, did you?"

"We were going to, but we couldn't find it, just some can with crumbled leaves in it. Where are the tea bags?"

Unfortunately, this was not an attempt at humor. Perhaps, Giles reflected, they really did need an American translation on tea preparation. "Later, Buffy. Right now, we need a council of war and I don't think Willow's cousin would appreciate what we have to say."

"No problem, I'll get rid of him," Buffy said, so chirpily Giles wondered if Abrams would ever set foot in Sunnydale again when she was done with him. All she did, however, was go over to Willow and say, "Hey, Wil, this is really neat, but don't you and I have to study for our test tomorrow?"

"Test?" Abrams asked.

"American history," Buffy said, obviously picking the subject she thought Abrams was least likely to know anything about. *Good move*, Giles thought. Abrams did seem the helpful sort.

"Ah," Abrams checked his watch. "I'm sorry, Willow, I hadn't meant to take so much of your time. I'm not being paid by the hour, but I still have a job to do. I'll let you and your friends get to work." As he spoke, he hit a few buttons on the computer, closing down the program. He popped out the disk and slid it into its case. "It's been a pleasure meeting you," he said to the others. "Willow, I'll see you later tonight."

"Sure," Willow said, still glowing. She sighed audibly as Kevin left and the door closed behind him.

"Uh, Willow," Xander said, "I thought the guy was your cousin?"

"Distant cousin," Buffy said.

"And still old enough to be her grandfather. How 'bout it, Wil?"

"It's not like that!" Willow protested, "At least, I don't think.... I mean, he's just, you know. And when he's around.... I mean.... well, isn't he great?"

"Very cool," Buffy assured her. "I didn't understand one word in five, but it all sounded way cool to me."

"Oh, he's just incredible about computers!" Willow was getting rapturous. "He did stuff I've never heard of! Stuff I never dreamt about! And did you see how he was so casual about it, like it was no big deal? And the way he just—"

"Willow," Giles said, "much as I try to encourage your love of higher learning, we really need to discuss the current crisis."

"Meaning Mr. Slice and Dice," Xander said. "Do you have any solid plans, Giles, or is this just a panic control discussion?"

"Xander, while one expects a certain amount of pessimism in this line of work, it's not welcome at the moment."

"Right," Buffy said. "We've dealt with guys tougher than this. Remember the Master? This Athenian guy would have been shaking in his boots if he met him, and we took that loser out."

"Only after he killed you," Xander said.

"Picky-picky. The point is, we got him and we'll get this guy. We just identify his weaknesses and go for them."

"And those weaknesses are what? He's really snotty for a vampire? So, maybe we should stake out museums and art shows?"

"Only if they're of magical objects," Giles observed.

"Magical art shows," Willow said thoughtfully. "Wait a sec, I think I've got an idea."



It was some hours later and getting dark out before they were ready to move. Giles loaded them up with weapons — there was no point in taking chances — and they headed for the parking lot. "Are you sure all this stuff will fit in your car?" Buffy asked.

"It has a plenty of trunk space," Giles assured her. "How do you think I brought these to the school?"

The packing, despite some near disasters from Xander ("Don't pack the spell of Pyrrhus by the stakes. It sets them on fire."), was over quickly. They were ready to move, when Giles noticed Willow looking odd. She stared vacantly, the blood draining from her face. She swayed, then her eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed. Naturally, this would happen just as Kevin Abrams, finishing his work on the school computers, was also walking out into the parking lot.

Abrams moved quickly. Giles, taken by surprise, had barely managed to get a hold of Willow before Abrams caught her from the other side. Abrams immediately took charge, helping Willow down into a sitting position, her head between her legs. In just a moment, she began to stir. "Wha-? What happened?"

"You fainted," Abrams said calmly, gently stopping her from lifting her head. "Don't. Just breathe deeply."

Willow followed his advice. Giles looked at the man, frowning. He was clearly concerned, but there was something different about him, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. "You know first aid?" Giles asked.

"I know about fainting," Abrams said curtly. He seemed to remember himself and added, more civilly, "It runs in the family." He said to Willow, "Are you feeling better?"

Willow nodded into her kneecaps. Abrams helped her slowly sit up. "Is this your first one?" he asked.

"No, they started a few days ago," Willow said, sounding tired and worn out. The concern in Abrams face deepened for just an instant, before vanishing under a mask of calmness.

"You OK now?" Buffy asked.

"No," Abrams said sharply, "she's not. We need to get her back to the library." He looked at Giles, "Is there a place she can lie down there?"

"Yes, but—"

"Good." He scooped Willow up in his arms. "Don't try to walk yet." He told her. Ordered her, actually, Giles thought. Giles went after him, putting up a hand to stop Buffy, who looked like she was trying to decide if she should stop Abrams forcibly.

"Mr. Abrams, Willow said she's already seen a doctor. If this runs in the family, I'm sure—"

"No," Abrams said. "You're not."

When they got back to the library, Abrams set Willow down, elevating her feet. "I feel fine," Willow protested.

"Stay there," Abrams snapped.

"Sure you're not overreacting?" Xander asked.

"Possibly. Get her a drink of water, will you?"

"Honest," Willow said, "I feel better."

"Lie. Down."

Meekly, Willow obeyed. Giles studied him a moment and the dangerous glint in his eyes. "Well?" he asked. "Are you overreacting?"

Abrams shrugged. He looked at Willow again and abruptly took Giles over to a corner of the room, out of earshot. Buffy and Xander tagged along. "Possibly," Abrams repeated. "But if it's not her first attack..." Attack, Giles thought, not the usual word for a fainting spell, a word for something far more serious. "...overreacting is a much safer choice.

"I told you, it's hereditary, though Ira ... Willow's *father* never had it." He gave the words a sarcastic twist. Giles frowned. "He wouldn't take it seriously. I... may take it too seriously. My brother, years back, had it. He had it much worse."

"Which, in plain language, means...?"

"He developed complications," Abrams said briefly, not elaborating. He shrugged again, regaining some of his urbanity. "It's not what usually happens. I probably am overreacting. But... while I was working on your computer system, I couldn't help but notice, your school has the most remarkable fatality rate. Sunnydale doesn't seem to have a healthy atmosphere. Even for people who aren't... anemic." He looked back at Willow, pain, very briefly, flickering in his eyes before he hid it away. "She should rest."

"Uh, Giles..." Buffy pulled him away from Abrams. Very quietly, she said, "We need Willow. To check things at the museum, we need a witch and a computer programmer. I'm sorry about his brother, but he said it himself. He's overreacting."

"Buffy, if what he says is right, Willow should stay here. If nothing else, we can't afford to have her fainting during the break in. I should be able to handle the incantation."

"And the computer records? Giles, that "Word-perfect for Dummies" Willow got you didn't prepare you for a life of computer crime."

"She's not the only computer programmer here."

Buffy followed his gaze. "Kev? Giles, are you nuts? We've known this guy, what, six hours? What

makes you think you can talk him into helping us commit felonies?"

"He's aware of the high death rate, he's concerned about Willow, and he's a fellow Englishman. Let me talk to him."

Buffy rolled her eyes in disbelief. She was still doing it when they piled into Giles' car and headed to the museum. Abrams got the front seat. Buffy and Xander had to make do with the back. "What about Angel?" Buffy said, trying to make a last ditch effort at changing the plan.

"Angel?" Abrams asked.

"A friend of Buffy's," Giles told him. "He'll be meeting us at the museum."

"A very weird friend," Buffy said. "Strange. Different. You won't like him."

Abrams smiled, almost predatory. "I'm looking forward to meeting all your friends."



Angel was waiting for them in a parking lot, standing in the shadows. There were none of his kind around, not that he'd expected any. The parking lot was in back of a store, relatively secluded, but also relatively well lit with a few too many people just a few feet away on the other side of the glass doors. Or they looked like people. This being Sunnydale, you never could tell.

Giles' car finally drove up. Practical as ever, Giles chose a parking space at the edge of the lot in the shadows where witnesses were less likely to notice it. Angel had been surprised when Giles chose this place to meet, but now he could see the sense of it. The museum parking lot would be deserted this time of night, making it that much more memorable if anyone saw a car or people there. Also, if there were any guards — or anything else they should watch out for — a few teens cutting through the back of the museum were a lot less suspicious than a librarian and his study group pulling up and parking there. Back in his hunting days, Angel had never needed to think about things like this. He'd wanted to lure over guards and he'd had his own way of dealing with witnesses.

When they got out, he saw the stranger with them and no Willow. What was the deal? He felt a tightening in his chest. The Athenian hadn't gotten Willow, had he? The idea of Buffy's innocent, little friend as a vampire was one that hardly bore thinking about. Was the man one of the Athenian's agents? Enemy or ally? Silently, Angel came closer.

"—and then I'll get the files," the man was saying. He had an English accent and was conservatively dressed in dark colors. A little too dark and stylish to be a Watcher, Angel decided, despite the accent. Not that all Watchers were trustworthy. He didn't have any obvious weapons, none he was threatening the others with, but—

The man turned suddenly, flying into a sharp kick. He was strong for a mortal. But vampires were much tougher than humans, and Angel was tougher than most vamps. But the sensitive spots, as he was

quickly reminded, hurt just as bad if they were hit hard enough. He doubled over. A hard fist hit him in the face. He couldn't help thinking this human really knew how to fight his kind.

Angel saw Buffy draw a stake, saw her eyes widen as she recognized him. Then the stake was snatched out of her hand. The next thing he knew, the stranger was pressing it hard against his chest with one hand and holding him by the throat with the other. Very softly, the man said, "Are you looking for something?"

Angel looked up at him, trying to look innocent and harmless while Buffy yelled, "Don't! It's Angel!" Recognition registered in the man's face in the same moment. He instantly pulled back the stake and let Angel go. "Sorry," he said, sounding so calm Angel wouldn't have believed he was a bit sorry if he hadn't been looking at him. The look on his face was too troubled for Angel to think he was lying.

Angel straightened up, trying to look nonchalant. "No problem," he said, keeping his eyes on the man. "Buffy, who's your friend?"

"This is Kevin Abrams," Buffy said, sounding understandably stressed. "Willow's cousin. Willow's sick. Kevin thought he could help us." Angel wasn't sure if the uncertainty in Buffy's voice was some secret hint about what was really up or if she was beginning to wonder how helpful Kevin Abrams would really be. Both, probably.

"Sorry," Abrams said again, still sounding calm. "You were following us and trying not to be seen. I understand that's how a lot of people die around here." He turned and started walking out of the parking lot. The others slowly brought up the rear.

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea," Buffy said.

"Nearly staking a vampire isn't a bad thing," Xander said. He'd never liked Angel, but he sounded uncertain.

"I was coming up behind you," Angel said slowly, still thinking of the look on the man's face. "It's what you would have done if I'd been a normal vampire."

"We didn't bring up vampires," Buffy said. "He just knows a lot of people die in Sunnydale. Violently."

"It still makes what he did a good idea," Angel said, watching Abrams. The man seemed cautious, but confident too. Another hunter, Angel thought, another predator. This could get interesting.



Most of the spells Willow knew took a lot of work. Some spells were like that. You needed five different kinds of chalk, all from the white cliffs of Dover, or a mint leaf plucked (not cut) from the left side of a plant growing in Australia during the full moon, or something else from a lunatic's scavenger hunt. On the other hand, some spells she just didn't do so well. She chanted out loud because she couldn't make them work if she did it in her head. She used herbs and charms representing the four elements under her control (all right *two* elements) because,

when she tried it the other way, it rained in her room or something. But she was really good with pencils.

Giles said it was because she was already comfortable with them. He'd explained — at length — how being able to use an object in a regular, mundane way could help you do it in a not so mundane way. She supposed that meant, if she'd only known more spells to do with computers, she could have done wonders with them. But using computers for magic had never crossed Giles' mind and, since the last time Willow had done anything remotely arcane with one, she'd unleashed a psychotic demon into the Internet, she wasn't about to try it alone.

Pencils, however, she'd mastered. Except when she was a little excited and they moved too fast. After setting up every charm she knew to protect herself from the powers of darkness, she killed time zapping her No. 2 around the room.

Unfortunately, there were some things she hadn't set up charms against.

The library door came flying open as an infuriated Cordelia, high school social queen and all around spoiled brat (not to mention Xander's old girlfriend) stormed in. "What's going on?" she demanded. "I come home and I have this message on the answering machine. 'We don't think it's anything serious, but you may want to be out of town for a few days. A deranged vampire may want to kill you.' And that's it. What is wrong with you people?"

The pencil froze when Cordelia made her entrance, but Willow managed to keep it afloat. "Oh, hi, Cordelia. Oh, uh, yeah, Giles said to tell you if I saw you. There's a killer vampire loose who might want to kill you. But he probably doesn't. Giles said not to worry about it. After you leave town."

"Hel-lo! Has the man ever heard of *talking* to people? Seeing them face to face? Giving them a warning they can get before it's three days old?"

"We, uh, tried, but no one could get in touch with you and—"

"I was in Los Angeles shopping. What, I'm like the only person who knew about the big fashion shows? They're launching everything for the new season. Where else would I be?"

"Actually," Willow said, "you probably were. The only one who knew, I mean. And aren't those things kind of hard for normal, uhm, most people to get into? It's, maybe, not like Buffy could have just walked in?"

"Oh, like she couldn't break through the roof like she always does? So, who is this vampire? What kind of trouble have you people gotten me into this time?"

As quickly as she could, Willow explained about the Athenian and his snobby ways of hunting people. She decided not to point out the illuminated manuscript and its realistically gory illustrations.

"Exceptional, gifted people?" Cordelia moaned. "You knew this guy was coming for me, and all you did was leave a message on my answering machine?"

"We don't know if he's coming for you," Willow



protested.

"As if there's anyone else in this town he'd be after? I'm doomed. I've got to pack up and get out of here."

While this was just what Willow wanted, Cordelia was so distressed, she thought she ought to give her a little reassurance. "You should be OK. Giles and Angel think it's after Buffy and her friends who have, you know, spent the most time slaying. And being possessed. And stuff. And, let's face it, you didn't even get bespelled on Halloween, and that happened to everybody."

"And you never got kidnapped by a science class dropout trying to make you into Mrs. Frankenstein," Cordelia snapped, but she thought about what Willow said. "This Albinian guy, he doesn't have a thing for devastatingly gorgeous brunettes or knockouts with great people skills, does he?"

"Don't worry, you're safe. And, anyhow, I've got protective spells up all over the library."

"Is that why you're here by yourself? I was wondering," Cordelia said absently, looking over some of the books Giles had left on the table. Probably looking for one called "How to Survive Vampire Stalkings for Dummies," Willow thought, then immediately felt guilty for the nasty thought as Cordelia went white as a sheet. "Willow, why are you here by yourself? What happened to the others? Did this Elbow creep... *get* them already?"

"What? Oh, no! They're just breaking into the museum. They thought they'd check it out in case the Athenian had been there."

"So, what are you doing here? Didn't they need your help?" Cordelia collapsed into a chair, obviously distraught, "At least Buffy's *doing* something. Don't you *care*? I'm being stalked by the Norman Bates of the vampire set, and you're sitting here protecting the books. Where are your priorities? Doesn't my life mean anything to you?"

"We really don't think he's after you, Cordelia. I

was, uh, you see, I kind of passed out a little, and they thought they might do better without me. You know, in case I fainted and set off the alarms or something."

"But you're the computer whiz. And witch. Don't they need you?"

"Giles was handling the magic. And Kevin — he's my cousin from out of town." Although Cordelia hadn't met Kevin and couldn't begin to know how awesome he was, notable smugness still crept into Willow's voice as she said "*my* cousin." Eat your heart out Cordelia. "He's handling the computers."

"Oh," Cordelia said, mollified. She asked curiously, "So, computers are like some genetic disease in your family?" Before Willow could find an answer for that, Cordelia started to freak again. "But how do you know it's safe here? What's to keep him from having been here before you set up the magic alarms? Maybe the whole place is rigged. Maybe he was just waiting for me and—"

"Cordelia," Willow assured her as patiently as she could, "he hasn't been here."

"You don't know that. He could have been all over the place. He could have—"

Willow sighed. "Look, I'll prove it to you." Then she had to think of a way to do that. Fortunately, it came to her pretty quickly. "There's a spell I've been learning. You do this one and it'll make anything to do with a person glow. If they've, like, touched something in the past 24 hours. OK?" Of course, that one only worked if you knew their true names, which had to be worked into the chant. Oh, well, Cordelia didn't need to know that.

Quickly, Willow got out her chalk and drew designs on the table (unlike some spells, which required mathematically sound shapes like circles and pentagrams, this one required a blue blob with at least 11 lobes — but no more than 37 — none the same size or shape [it was supposed to represent the chaos of a normal life, Giles told her]). She added

her herbs, lit some candles (it was a good thing Giles always had spares), and made the chant, substituting “Athenian” in Greek for the name (belatedly, she wondered why she was doing the rest of it properly if spell was just a fake-out to make Cordelia feel better). Nothing glowed.

“There, you see?”

“Maybe it doesn’t work.”

Stung — and guilty — Willow said, “Of course it works!”

“How do I know? Maybe that was all just a big fake-out to make me feel better.”

Willow squirmed. “Uh, Cordelia—”

“I know. Prove you did it right. Do it again, only for someone else. Only show me what’s supposed to glow before you do it.”

“Who? I mean, who comes into the library besides us? And we’d make the whole room glow.” Which was really uncomfortable, as Willow knew from experience.

“Then do that cousin you mentioned, Carter, make it glow for him.”

So, Willow cleaned off the table (each blob was only good once) and did it again, pointing out the chair where Kevin had sat, the computer, and some books she’d seen him look through. She invoked the spell. Nothing happened.

“Hah!” Cordelia said. “You *were* just trying to fake me out!”

“No!” Willow said. “It should have worked. It should—” Then she saw the one object glowing in the room. It was a book of Giles, lying with a few others. It wasn’t even a very important book, a little collection of funny news events from Britain. Willow vaguely recalled it had been a gift to him from Miss Calendar before she’d died, a little joke about it being all right for British people to have a sense of humor or something. It didn’t look like he’d ever read it, but he kept it here all the time.

Willow picked it up. It practically burst open, light pouring off the pages and nearly blinding her. Then she saw the news clipping it had opened on. Her stomach felt like it dropped to her knees as she realized her spell had worked after all.



Things got strange as soon as they started to break into the building. The plan was simple enough. They were going in from the roof. Abrams was going to break into the computer files (the museum, unfortunately, was under-budgeted and nothing was available online. There was no way to get near those files except through the old computer and disks in the museum curator’s office), and download or print (depending which was faster and quieter with the antiquated system) records of anyone the museum had done business with, especially anyone interested in objects Giles identified as potentially magical.

If the Athenian had tried to buy anything from them — and, since meeting Angel in Europe, he’d had more reason than ever not to attract attention

through theft when he didn’t need to — they could follow the money back to him. On the other hand, if he hadn’t tried to acquire anything but Giles could identify something he would be interested in, they could draw him out when he made a try for it, sooner or later. And Angel still knew a few tricks to convince the Athenian sooner was better.

Angel was an old hand at breaking and entering. So, apparently, was Abrams. Angel and Giles both knew how to check for alarms, disarm them, and open a skylight by now. Abrams stood casually towards the back and watched as the two of them did it, playing with a small calculator as they worked. No, Angel realized, it wasn’t a calculator. What, then? A computer game? Abrams hit a series of buttons, then smiled in satisfaction.

“What on earth?” Giles said suddenly.

“What is it?” Angel asked.

“I don’t know,” Giles said. “There seems to have been a power outage. The lights have gone out.”

Abrams slid his game into his pocket. “Then let’s go.”

“Uh, Kev,” Buffy said, “how are you going to turn on the computer if there’s no power?”

“I’ll handle it,” Abrams said. He checked the climbing gear Giles had brought. From the look on face, Angel supposed he found it adequate — but just barely. “I don’t suppose you have any other equipment? Infrared goggles? Sensor detectors? Anything like that?”

“Er, no,” Giles admitted, then, remembering, said with a burst of enthusiasm, “Oh, wait, what about this?” He pulled out a flashlight.

Abrams, Angel noted, had a real gift for radiating complete disgust without any change of expression. But he took the flashlight. Then, without another word, he went down.

“Is it just me,” Buffy asked, “or do you get the feeling he’s done this before?”

“There may be a reason he’s stayed out of the country so long,” Giles admitted as he got ready to follow him. He glanced at the Americans around him and added, “Besides the obvious.”

After Giles, Buffy went down. Angel waited till she reached the bottom. Then he walked to the edge of the roof, keeping a lookout. Xander stood by the skylight, waiting for the others to come back. Angel paced around the edge of the building, scanning the town. This wasn’t right. He should be down there with Buffy. Better yet, he should be the one down there instead of her. Buffy should be here in the open where there was a better chance to fight free if there was trouble. It wasn’t like Giles needed her. Art and ancient languages weren’t exactly her strong points.

She hadn’t said anything, but Angel knew Giles didn’t want him down there, not that he blamed him. He looked over at Xander. Like Giles, he didn’t care much for Angel these days. He also looked nervous and edgy, hopefully about the current mess and not about being left here with him. Angel decided to at least try getting some information from him. “What

do you know about this Abrams guy?"

"He's Willow's cousin," Xander said, sounding distracted. "Just got into town yesterday. A real computer wiz, like her. Guess it runs in the family."

"Maybe," Angel said. There was something about this guy, something familiar. But he didn't think it was Willow he reminded him of.

"What's the matter, don't you trust him?"

Angel looked sharply at Xander, but he wasn't being sarcastic, like he usually was these days when he used Angel and trust in the same sentence. He was concerned. So Angel gave him an honest answer. "I don't know. He's too good at breaking into places. And he's pretty eager to come and do it for people he's only known a day. But there's something else about him...." He trailed off, still not sure what it was.

"Giles talked to him. Englishman to Englishman, he said. That's why he came."

"Must have been some talk." This didn't make sense. Angel felt like he was looking at this puzzle from the wrong direction. He paced to the other edge of the building. Giles didn't trust blindly, not usually, but Angel had seen him be pretty near-sighted where Watchers — or anyone with their accent — were concerned. Homesickness, Angel thought, recognizing the symptoms. He still felt a sharp pain for his own home, lying on the far side of two centuries. The Ireland he'd known had been destroyed by war, famine, and time. The home he'd loved he'd destroyed himself. And everyone in it. What would he do for a ghost out of that past? What *wouldn't* he do? Even if he knew it couldn't be trusted?

He leaned over the safety wall, watching the lights below and trying to put these pieces into a picture, when cold hands reached up and tried to grab him. Angel twisted his arms and threw off the grip, throwing off the gripper too. He caught a glimpse of a vampiric, demon face before the attacker screamed and fell. Angel jumped back from the wall, silently cursing as more vampires poured over the edge. "Xander," he yelled. "Watch out!"

Xander lifted a cross with one hand and pulled out a bottle of holy water with the other, throwing it at the vampires. His aim was lousy. Angel had to jump out of the way as the bottle broke, spraying the area. Great, now he couldn't get near Xander to protect him. He counted. There were eight coming right at them. Angel pulled out his own stake, feeling a surge of energy go through him. The closest thing a human could have to it would be an adrenaline surge, which was like comparing the pencil Willow could levitate to the forests of trees Mt. St. Helens had hurled down its side. This was living fire in his veins. The demon inside him really didn't care what it destroyed, so long as it destroyed something, and his soul didn't feel a twinge of guilt at staking these guys.

Two charged him as soon as they climbed over. Angel caught one on his stake while catching the other with his fist on her neck. She fell back as her

companion burst into dust. But there were three more behind her. One pulled a crossbow. Great, a vampire who could think. Angel ducked behind the building's huge air-conditioner as the vamp fired and missed. But now he was further away from Xander. Three of the vamps were circling him, and he only had the one cross. With no way to retreat, it was only a matter of time before one got through his guard.

The moment's distraction cost Angel. One of his vamps, taking advantage of it, came over the air-conditioner and jumped him, stake ready. Angel barely had time to twist and catch him. He was coming too fast for Angel to stop, so he rolled with the impact and used it to throw the other away from him — right off the roof. Another charged him. Angel had time to catch her arm and shove it to the side before the stake in her hand could reach him, but he caught the full impact as the rest of her rammed him in the stomach. Angel, slammed back against the air conditioner, struck back with his stake. She burst into dust. "Guys, we've got company!" he yelled, finally remembering to warn the others. He hoped they heard him. Honestly, what did the Watchers council have against cell phones and walkie-talkies? His remaining two vamps tried to tackle him together. He fell to the ground and rolled out of their way, springing back to his feet, safely out of the way, as they landed. It would be easy to take out at least one of them now.

But he'd finally gotten back near Xander just as one of the other three vamps lunged up from underneath Xander's arm and managed to knock the cross away. It grabbed the boy by the throat. Angel tackled him, breaking Xander free, and the two went rolling along the side of the building. Xander, Angel saw, wasn't stupid enough to try retrieving his cross before the other pair reached him. Instead, he reached into his sack with both hands and pulled out a stake and more holy water. Then Angel lost sight of him as his adversary tried to shove his claws in his face. Angel let him, sinking his fangs into the claw. Then he pushed him back and kneed him, hard, buying enough time to bring down his stake. Angel whirled, ready to fight—

And saw one of the remaining vamps holding Xander, one hand holding him by the throat, the other twisted around the boy's head, ready to snap his neck in two. "Hold!" she cried. Archaic English. Bad sign. Old vampires were always so much better at surviving. At least the other three vamps seemed to think this order was aimed at them, too. They froze where they were. "Stay way you are," the vampire said. "Or the human dies."

"I thought your master wanted him alive," Angel said. She had to be working for the Athenian. The odds against anyone else sending vampires to the museum tonight were just a little too big.

She smiled. "Not as badly as you seem to."

"How about a deal," Angel said. "You let him go, I let you go."

"You'll let us go? There's one of you and four of

us. Don't make demands."

Angel grinned. "There were nine of you. And these three are wounded." Xander hadn't staked any, but Angel smelled holy water burns and saw blood on two of them. "You kill him, you've got nothing left to bargain with." She was standing by the edge of the roof. If Buffy had heard his shout and tried coming up that way, she'd be in full view of the vampire. But Buffy was the Slayer. She was fast and, with luck, maybe, just maybe....

The vampire smiled as if she knew better. "I can let you drink his blood when I've snapped his neck," she said. "There still might be enough life in him to make a vampire. Isn't that what you wanted to do with your friend?"

She didn't know who he was. Or what. Angel realized now would be a very bad time to explain about his curse. "I need him alive. He's no use to me dead." Xander winced and tried to say something. The vampire choked him off.

"You don't think—"

She didn't finish. A silvery cord snaked out behind her, circling around the arm holding Xander's head. She looked at it and began to scream. Smoke rose from beneath it. Her arm was yanked back. Xander broke free and dived for his cross, only a few feet away. Angel tackled the vampire nearest him. He caught a glimpse of the vampire, her face contorted in rage, going over the edge. Then he saw Abrams come charging at the other two vamps. He'd grabbed a workman's shovel, left up here for who knew what reason. At least it had a wooden handle, but Abrams didn't know what he was up against.

He'd have to find out on his own. Angel had his hands full. The stake had been knocked out of his hand. This vamp was a good fighter. Angel wouldn't be throwing him over the edge any time soon and he couldn't break away from him. They rolled across the roof, trying to shove their fists into each other's faces. Then they stopped rolling, with the other vampire on top. He tried to wring Angel's neck.

Idiot, Angel thought, bringing up his knee as hard and as fast as he could and following it up with a blow right to the jaw. It wasn't enough to come close to killing one of their kind, but it was more than enough to knock him out. The vampire slumped like a sack of grain. Angel tossed him aside and scrambled to his feet, ready to save Abrams if it wasn't too late already.

Consequently, Angel was just in time to see the end of the fight. One vampire lay unconscious on the ground, the dented shovel lying beside him. The other came charging at Abrams. Abrams stepped aside at the last minute, catching the vampire's head in his silver cord. One end of the cord, Angel could see, ended in a black box. Abrams flipped a switch. The vampire gave a single, inarticulate scream. Smoke rose from the neck. Futilely, the vampire tried to claw the cord away, but it wouldn't break. Writhing in pain, the vampire twisted, disconnecting the cord from the box. Abrams let the cord go and jumped back, reaching for the shovel.

But the vampire had had enough, running straight for the edge of the roof and vanishing over the side. Grabbing a stake, Angel followed after but, by the time he reached the edge, the vamp had already climbed to the bottom and was running away. He couldn't see any others down there. If any had managed to reach the bottom in one piece instead of ashes, they hadn't hung around.

"Thanks," he said to Abrams. "What was that?" he added, nodding at the box.

"This?" Abrams said. "Power pack for the computer, after the blackout. I ran a current through the wire with it." He was wearing gloves, Angel realized, rubber ones.

"Glad you came prepared." *Like a Boy Scout from the Dark Side*, he thought sourly. "But how'd you get up the wall? Fly?"

"Fire escape. Isn't that how they came?"

He was saved from answering by Buffy, who chose just that moment to climb through the skylight. "Hi, guys, what's happening?"



Xander burst through the library doors, triumphantly cheering, "Kev's the man! Kev's the man!" The others, quieter but no less enthusiastic, trailed behind him. Kevin, bringing up the rear, looked inquisitively at Giles as Xander continued his victory chant.

"Yes," Giles assured him, "that's a compliment."

"Willow, you should have seen it," Xander enthused. "We came, we saw, we conquered."

"You mean you didn't hide in the bushes?" Cordelia asked.

Xander, noticing her for the first time, scowled, "It's called being a lookout, Cordy. You know, that thing people who don't want to be caught do. Is that what you've been doing? The others figured a vamp got you when we couldn't find you, but I knew our luck couldn't be that good."

"Funny, my luck seems to go so much better when I avoid you people. And all your psychopath friends. Speaking of which—" She looked uneasily at Kevin and, strange a phenomenon as it was, seemed to be at a loss for words.

Buffy jumped right into the silence. "Willow, Kevin was incredible! You should invite all your cousins to town if they're like this. Hey, maybe we should get your *parents* involved if they're like this!"

"He's not my cousin," Willow said.

"OK, distant cousin. Kissing cousin. Whatever, we could really—"

"*He's not my cousin*," Willow said again. She stood with her back to the reference desk, her white-knuckled hands clenched tight around its edge. She stood rigid and pale, her voice tight with half-contained emotions.

There was no shock. The joviality, faint to begin with, vanished from Abrams' face, replaced by something very neutral and withdrawn. Unlike a vampire, there was no physical transformation, but

