

the change was just as complete and more unnerving because of it. He took a half step towards her, stepping away from the group, and said calmly, "Why do you say that?"

Willow nodded towards an open book lying on the table in front of her. "Look at that. There's a picture of Kevin Abrams — the real Abrams — in London. You're not him."

Abrams glanced at the book. The man in it had dark hair and fair skin, but that was as far as the resemblance went. "I'd be very surprised if there were only one Kevin Abrams in the world."

"After I saw it, I checked all your records. You'd broken into everything, changed every picture and ID I could find. And you made mistakes like some little *newbie*. Once I knew there was a problem, they jumped out at me." It was hard to say which made her angrier, finding out he'd lied to her or finding out he'd lied so incompetently.

Abrams shrugged. "I was working under terrible time constraints."

"No time? You talked to my dad about all the old times, and you expect me to believe this was a rush job?"

"I let your father do the talking," Abrams reminded her. "I only followed along with what he said. You'd be surprised how often people believe what they want you to tell them."

As the most recently, completely conned victim in the room, that hit too close to home. "So, why did you bother?" Willow practically screamed, "What did you want from us? *Who are you?*"

"I told you already."

"You *lied*. From the moment I met you, you *lied* to me! Why?" Willow demanded, "What did you want?"

Kevin looked at her very coolly. "To meet you."

"You sure you want to stick with that story?" Angel asked. "Forty year old guys who want to meet teenage girls are usually bad news, in my experience."

Kevin shot him a look, "You would know, wouldn't you?" The words dropped into a complete silence. There was no way he should have known enough about Buffy and Angel to make that comment, no way at all.

Angel was the first to speak, "Meaning...?" he said curiously, as if he really didn't understand what Kevin was talking about.

"Meaning a two hundred year old man chasing after an underage girl," Kevin said evenly, just the slightest glint of dislike in his eye.

Angel still kept his cool. "Why don't you sit down and explain things. Now."

"I'd love to," Kevin said. "But, somehow, I don't think you want to hear my answers." Angel was standing between him and the door. He tried to dodge past him. Angel lunged at him, but Kevin jumped back, pulling out a large cross in one hand and a small, black device in the other.

"I'm sorry," Kevin said, not sounding sorry at all. "I didn't want it to work out this way."

Buffy, pulling out a stake, came at him. Kevin seemed to squeeze the black device. Buffy fell to the floor. Angel stared at her, then his vampire face slipped out. "She's still alive," Kevin assured Angel, as calmly as if he weren't facing a demon radiating murder. "I don't want to kill her. Or you, Angelus. But I can. Get out of my way." He edged his way out, keeping an eye on them. At the door he paused and looked at Willow. "You're going to need my help," he said. "Ask for it a little more politely, next time." Then he was out of the library and gone.



Buffy came around, eventually, and Willow got to repeat everything she'd just told the others, how she'd found the article, how she'd followed up with a computer search and found out most, if not all, of Kevin Abrams's current records were faked. "It was really weird, too," Willow told her. "I mean, just to get into some of these records and change them takes some kind of computer genius. But the mistakes were real newbies. It's like he knows tons about computers, but he's never worked with these systems before."

"So, you're saying Kevin's a foreign spy?" Buffy asked, not quite believing it.

"Oh, they're not satisfied with national secrets. Now they want Sunnydale," Xander quipped. "All in favor of giving it to them, say 'aye.'"

Willow missed the joke. "No," she said slowly, "it couldn't be that. Banks use a lot of the same programs all over the world, and he had mistakes there. It's like... well, I don't know what it's like, but it's got to be pretty bad."

"Uh, let's think about this," Xander said. "Our guy, Kevin, comes to a small town, pretending to be somebody's long lost cousin, but he's really not related to anyone there at all. He knows plenty about computers, but not about ketchup. There aren't any records on him over a week old. And he has a ray gun in his pocket. Am I the only one thinking space invaders? How about it, Ange, you've been around awhile. Ever met any little green men who *weren't* from the Hellmouth?"

"Xander, he can't be from outer space," Willow protested. "He knew who Angel was. He knew *what* he was."

"She's right, Xander," Buffy said. "Have you ever heard of Martians carrying crosses?"

"Actually, I have. But that was in a real cheesy movie. But if he's not an alien, what is he?"

"You might look at the evidence we have," Giles said. "He called Angel, Angelus. That's a name only Watchers, vampires, and a few, assorted demons would know. He knew about his relationship with Buffy, which cuts it down a little further—"

"Oh, gee, Giles, only a *few* vampires, demons, and Watchers. Boy, it's a good thing we're in Sunnydale, or that might actually be a short list."

Giles pushed back his glasses and looked down at Xander, shutting him up. "As I was saying, he seems to know a great deal that only a few *humans*

would know. More importantly, he knew about Willow. In fact, he knew enough to convince her parents he was a member of the family. It's true he was pretending to be a relative they hadn't seen for years, but that still took considerable knowledge and effort, despite what he said about cons. He's extremely talented with computers, despite some odd gaps in his knowledge, and he also has at least one weapon unlike anything we've seen before."

"Outside of Star Trek," Xander amended.

"Outside of what?" Giles asked. "Oh, is that another one of your pop culture references?"

"Never mind, Giles," Buffy interceded. "Knowledge, computers, ray guns. So what is this guy?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Giles admitted.

Buffy grimaced. "I'm going patrolling," she announced. "For some reason, I've got a really big urge to find a problem I can stick a stake into."

"Buffy, it's still dangerous," Giles said. "If you meet the Athenian—"

"I'll bring him home in an ashtray," Buffy said. "If I meet Kev," she looked at Willow, who wouldn't meet her eyes, "I'll bring him back alive. Probably."



"You shouldn't have done it," Cally hissed at Vila over lunch, making sure no one in the café could hear them.

"Why not?" Vila asked, a touch loudly. People turned and stared. She kicked him under the table, and his voice reluctantly fell to a whisper, "When's the next time I'm likely to meet anyone who can price a piece like that?"

"We are trying to remain invisible, remember? One more sale among dozens. We weren't supposed to do anything to stick in his memory."

"It was just a necklace. How was I supposed to know it was anything important?" he wheedled.

She wasn't buying it. "Why did you steal it if it wasn't? You know what's valuable and what's unusual. You also knew you hadn't been able to find out anything about it —"

"— If Avon would just let me use Orac more often —"

"— And you thought Zerafin would just brush it off as another sale?"

Vila squirmed uncomfortably. "Well, I didn't know it was a pre-Federation religious icon. There are hardly any of them left. Mostly because the Federation shoots anyone they find with them. But a *natural* sapphire. That was a surprise. I've never seen one that large that wasn't synthetic. I wonder what the uncut stone looked like? I hope it was about the same shape as the final piece — what did he call it? A cross? It's a shame to think of someone chopping up a really large, genuine sapphire. Do you know what those things are worth? But you can never tell with religious fanatics. Some of them will do anything."

Cally, whose homeworld had been full of what Vila called "religious fanatics" and had been a much better place to live than the Federation, gritted her

teeth and stuck to the main issue, "I'm surprised he bought it. This isn't Federation territory, but it's still dangerous. Did you see him? I think he was afraid to touch it."

"If I'd known how old it was, I'd have been scared to touch it, too. Pity the chain's not original. That would have really upped the price. But I can't complain. He paid a pretty penny for it."

"And he'll remember he paid a pretty penny."

"He's a fence, Cally. It's what he does. Besides, Avon's not here, so no one should be complaining."

Cally let the matter drop, although she thought about mentioning it to Avon later. No, she decided, if they got out of this in one piece, there was no reason worrying Avon with might have been. Or putting Vila through whatever Avon would undoubtedly put him through once he knew. Besides, it wasn't as if Avon would have any right to complain, not after the way he'd run off and left them. The thought failed to cheer her.

After they'd finished their meal and were heading back to the hotel to await Avon or *Liberator*, whichever came first, Vila asked what was wrong. "You're not still upset over that necklace, are you?"

"Doesn't it bother you the way A—" Now Vila had her doing it. "The way Chevron ran out on us?"

"So, he ran into an old friend. It happens." Vila's eyes began to glow at the memory. "And what an old friend! Did you see her? Why can't I run into old friends like that?"

"I did see her," Cally said. "She looked like a cold blooded killer."

"Like I said, an old friend. What other kind does Avon have?"

"Ones who aren't planning to kill him, I hope. Did you see the look on his face? That wasn't a happy reunion."

"What does it matter, Cally? It's his business. He wouldn't let us stick our noses in if we wanted to. And I don't want to."

"And it doesn't bother you that he may be—" Cally froze. "Look over there," she said quietly.

Vila looked. They were near the end of the corridor where it opened onto a plaza with an abstract statue dominating the center. A little to the left, in the statue's shadow, stood Mr. Zerafin talking with Regan Goneril. "So she knows a fence," Vila said. "Some people do."

Cally watched as Zerafin pulled out a small package and handed it to Regan. Whatever it was, she smiled. Not a nice smile, Cally thought.

"See?" Vila said. "Just another, everyday, irregular business deal. Nothing to get excited about."

"Why do it here? Why not his office?"

"Maybe she doesn't want anyone to know she knows him."

"No one except us, everyone in this plaza, and whatever kind of security monitors this station has?" This was fitting into a picture at last. A very ugly one.

The final piece fell into place as Regan started to walk away. "Come on," Cally said. "We've got to follow her."

“Why? It doesn’t matter.”

“You’re the thief, Vila. Didn’t you see? She didn’t pay him.”

Vila could be slow, but he wasn’t stupid. If she hadn’t paid for the package now, she’d paid for it earlier. Or done a job for it earlier. Like talking one of the Federation’s most wanted into going to a certain place at a certain time alone, without backup. He didn’t have any more illusions about a man like Zerafin that she did, probably fewer. If the price was right, a fence was always a willing middleman.



A few minutes later, they found themselves in an upscale residential wing. They watched, unobserved, as Regan slid her key into the scan-lock of one of the apartments and went inside. Vila got down to business. “Knock on the door or break in?”

“Which is quieter?”

“Break in. I can fuddle the security equipment so no one will notice us going in, but, if we knock, we lose the element of surprise. And give her half a chance to call security on us.”

Cally hesitated. “Do you think she would call security? She looks like she has plenty to hide herself.”

“So do we.”

“But we’re not wanted on this station.”

“Neither’s she, as far as we know.” He added, almost hopefully, “I keep thinking. Avon did trust her, trust her enough to do whatever it was she asked him to. Maybe he knows what he’s doing.”

Cally bit her lip, thinking, then shook her head. “Avon also trusted Anna Grant. Remember how that worked out? If he’s walked into a trap, I want to know all I can about it before I follow him in.”

Good point. And Vila knew Cally. She’d go after Avon all right, dragging him along with her. “Right. I’ll get the door.”

It took a few minutes. Getting past all the locking and security systems in a state of the art neighborhood wasn’t as easy as it looked, but it wasn’t anything serious. Just time consuming. Cally should realize that, Vila thought, stealing a glance at her. She was playing lookout and seemed to be remembering every one of the *very few* times Vila had failed. At least, that’s what Vila thought she looked like. All right, he’d made a few mistakes. Who hadn’t? After all, hadn’t he met nearly all of the others on board a prison ship? Even Avon. So there.

The lock opened and armed squads failed to descend on them, so it looked like he was still a success.

The first thing to hit Vila when they went in, guns drawn, was the smell. Well, the first thing after he’d figured the price for that painting over the couch. And those antique teacups would fetch a good money. But the smell was strange, a mixture of herbs and mint with an underlying smell of fire.

Fire?

On a space station? A limited oxygen supply space station?

This, Vila realized, was bad. He must have shorted something out when he broke in. Hadn’t these people ever heard of circuit breakers? He ran for where it was coming from, a back room, with Cally, who had come to the same realization, right behind him. Only, when they burst through the doorway, they didn’t find a fire burning out of control.

Regan was there, kneeling inside a shimmering circle with her back to them, a bronze brazier sending up fountains of multicolored smoke. Candles, burning very unreal shades of flame, were spread around her. Hearing them, Regan turned, an expression of extreme annoyance written so deeply across her face, Vila thought at once of Avon. “What are you doing here?” she demanded. “Get back!” as light began to cascade around her.

The warning was too late. The frothing glory poured over them. Vila had a brief impression of being turned inside out, then nowhere. Then something large and hard came up and hit him.



“Strange place,” Cally commented as they went down the street. Although it was night, there were crowds of people walking up and down the poorly lit sidewalks. Why were they all out and about so late? Busy nightlife? Or did their sun just set early? On Earth, they would have been in an underground city with round the clock illumination. On Auron, they favored a softer illumination, but the dark shadows she saw everywhere would still have been scattered and gone.

The real question, of course, was what they were doing here. When they found themselves in an alley only a few minutes ago, the first thing either of them had thought of was teleportation. But *Liberator* had the only known teleport system in existence.

“Well, maybe someone else developed it,” Vila suggested.

“Vila, we’re not on Cansai anymore,” Cally said. “There isn’t a planet in range of the station. We couldn’t have teleported.”

“Maybe Avon made an improved system and sold it to someone. He would, you know.”

The problem with Vila, Cally reflected, was the way he could throw out the most appalling thoughts without thinking. Avon wouldn’t just sell a tactical advantage to someone outside the ship, knowing it could come back to haunt him ... unless he was planning to leave the ship and probably join up with whoever he’d sold it to.

No. Avon had his problems — a limitless supply, in fact, as near as she could determine — but he wouldn’t betray them. He wouldn’t sell them out, especially to a woman she was quite sure he hated.

What had happened to Regan Goneril was another question Cally didn’t have answers to. She hadn’t been in the alley with them. She might have just slipped the beam and been killed in teleport after the way Cally and Vila had burst in on her. But that, Cally suspected, would have been a piece of

good luck, and their luck was never that good.

Perhaps she was on this planet, having arrived wherever she'd meant to arrive. Perhaps she was still on Cansai. Perhaps Vila and Cally had slipped the beam, somehow arriving alive on a planet no one knew about and where no one would ever come to look for them. Cally didn't know and had no way to find out. About all she and Vila could do right now was try to find out everything they could about this planet and go from there.

And all she knew, so far, was that the lighting wasn't as good as it could be. As for the lights themselves, she'd never seen anything like these metal posts with their harsh, overhanging, blue-white lights. It mixed with anything from the softer yellow coming from store windows to the lurid neons lighting up signs. It's a wonder everyone doesn't have a headache, she thought. What kind of people could stand living here?

"I rather like it," Vila said. "Sort of old fashioned. Very medieval, don't you think?"

Cally swallowed her first response and said, "You mean you've seen this kind of place before?"

"Only in historical dramas," Vila admitted. "What was the name of that big one a few years back? 'Jane Austen Does Reno,' now, that was a classic. This has got that same, old Earth look."

"This is Earth?" Cally fought back the panic that triggered. This was an above ground city. There was no way this could be Earth. Besides, Earth was the fashion capital of the known galaxy, which this place certainly wasn't. She and Vila didn't stand out too badly, she thought, but they might have collected more stares in daylight.

"Hmm, doesn't look like Earth, does it?" Vila admitted. "You think it's a lost colony? What's that one they always tell stories about? The one founded by... what were they called? The Society for Creative Anarchists? Maybe they — Hello! What's this?"

Vila had stopped in front of metal box with some kind of... was that fabric inside? "What is it?" Cally asked.

"It's a news box! They used to use these to get the news out before holovids. I remember in the Jane Austen holo, when Lydia Wickam ran off with Mr. Rochester, Jane bought a newspaper to cover... er, never mind. But if it's one of those, it has local news and information."

Cally tugged on the box. "It's locked."

"No problem." Vila fiddled with it a moment, then pulled out a mound of printed sheets. "Come on," he said cheerfully. "Let's go read this."



A few moments later, they were in another alley, reading the news. The stuff wasn't cloth but some kind of synth-paper, although Vila thought it was made of plant fiber. Cally wasn't sure she believed his claim that whole forests were destroyed to make one sheet, but she did wonder what they did with the day's leftovers. They must make an awful mess. But she had more important things to worry about.

A little reading told her this planet was named California. Or was that the continent? It must have been named after that Old Earth empire. They used a different calendar than the Federation, one she couldn't make heads or tails of, although Vila thought it looked like one from ancient history. The weather report was the only thing that gave a hint to the local time of year. It was supposed to be warm for the next few days. Could it be summer here? Or were they just in a warm region of the planet? Probably the later. This town seemed to be named Sundale, after all.

What was more interesting were the articles on political corruption. They had a free press here, like Auron and Lindor. This wasn't Federation controlled territory.

No, she corrected herself, this wasn't Federation controlled territory *yet*. That didn't mean they weren't in the area and trying to take over. Still, she and Vila were probably safe if they were careful. And if no one here harvested organs from undocumented, homeless people, like some planets she could mention.

More disturbing were the sections on deaths, funerals, and the mysteriously missing. "They have a high death rate," she told Vila, wondering if the woman they'd followed had anything to do with it.

"Bound to," Vila said cheerfully. "You know how things were in the olden days, no medicine, people dying of plague all the time, little infections killing them off. You can't imagine what it was like."

Cally, who had survived germ warfare and genocide on two worlds, certainly could. She also didn't look forward to being on a world where disease related deaths were ignored as 'normal.' But she didn't think this was such a world. Not unless someone had come up with a germ that could be mistaken for a 'vicious dog attack,' or an 'accidental maiming,' whatever that meant. No the deaths here were too violent for Vila's explanation. She was about to point this out when she felt something, something cold at the border of her thoughts. She looked at the source and saw three men — or things that looked like men. The whisper of them, at the edge of her mind, said otherwise. A warning siren began to scream deep inside her while one of the three stepped forward, smiling. His eyes glittered, obsidian black.

"I know what plague is like," he said.

"Er, really?" Vila said, backing away. "Well, isn't that nice? Uhm, we've got to be going—"

"I was there," the not-man went on, "when the Black Death destroyed Europe, when the dead were piled so high robbers — and other killers — hid behind them, waiting for our prey to pass by."

"Whatever works for you. If you'll excuse us, Cally and I have really—"

"I died," he went on, ignoring Vila's blather. "In Athens' war with Sparta, when Pericles took all our people into the city, meaning to wait out the enemy. But the water fouled, and we died in our own filth. Except the lucky ones. Like me. We died other ways. I never stayed dead. We fed on the unlucky survivors

after.”

As Vila tried to back away, Cally stood transfixed. It was true, what he was saying. She saw it unfold around her, felt the truth in every word he said, just as she could feel what he was, a living darkness with streaks of blood red fire, a living river of lava flowing through stone black and blistered as scabs.

Then the lava erupted, a geyser of destruction so strong she barely noticed as his face transformed, becoming twisted and inhuman. His onyx eyes turned yellow, as bright and slitted as a goat's, while beast's fangs sprouted beneath his lips. Frozen in place, she stood there as he lunged and seized her, his hands terribly cold. And strong. Coming back to her senses at last, she couldn't break his grip. Grabbing the back of her neck with his icy hand, he forced her throat to his teeth.

Then Vila hit him from behind with a large, metal container. It must have been for holding garbage, judging by the reeking mess spilling out of it. The creature growled and turned on the little man while his friends looked on amused. Vila, getting a full view of that face, whimpered and backed off. Cally twisted free.

The creature growled again, torn between two targets. Vila made it easy for him by cowering behind the fallen container. The monster lunged for him. Cally pulled her pistol and fired. The monster howled. His friends, startled, came at her, their faces changing as his had. But the monster ignored her, concentrating on Vila. She fired again and could see the hole it made in the creature's clothes. Then she spun and aimed at the two her were almost on her. They ignored her shots.

“Cally...!” Vila screamed.

Leave him alone! Cally shouted silently into their minds. *Go away and leave him alone!*

This time, she got a response. The creatures stopped, putting their hands to their heads as if they were in pain. Realizing she had somehow gotten the advantage, Cally continued her silent screams. The monsters backed off.

But one of them, the one who had spoken to them before attacking, studied her face even as he backed away. Cally sensed she had made a terrible mistake. She had just risen in his mind from prey to curiosity. Whatever else this monster might do, Cally doubted he would rest till he had learned all he could about anything that made him curious, he would carve her to bits looking for the secrets inside....

Then a young girl suddenly jumped in front of Cally. “Hi,” she said brightly. “Mind if I cut in?” She hit the creature in front of her with a weapon — a dagger? — and he collapsed into dust. The other one grabbed her from behind. The girl flipped him over her back, throwing him into a wall. The creature grabbed another metal container and threw it at her. She ducked, giving him a chance to charge her. There was a short sword in his hand and he was aiming it right at her stomach. The girl continued her downward momentum, catching herself on her

hands as her feet flew out, knocking his legs out from under him. She rolled clear as he fell, managed a jumping twist and came down with her own weapon — a wooden pike, of all things — right where he'd been a moment before. But the creature had already gotten out of the way and moved back. Then he charged her again. Cally shot him in the eyes. He stopped, blinded, not so much screaming as roaring. The blond girl buried her pike in his chest, and he exploded into a pile of dust. The first monster, the one that had looked at her so curiously, had gotten away.

The girl, knocking dust off her pike, turned and looked at Vila and Cally. “Hi,” she said again (Cally silently braced for an attack), “Didn't anyone ever tell you it's dangerous to wander around alleys?”

“We wanted to read the newspaper,” Vila said as he got to his feet, obviously ready to duck back behind the metal container at the first sign of danger. He seemed as unsure about this girl as Cally was.

“Ever heard of the library? Speaking of which, you wouldn't happen to be friends of Giles, would you? Or Kevin Abrams?”

“Who?” Vila asked.

“Friendly, neighborhood Watcher-man? Or local con man psychopath? No? I'm just wondering because you sound British. And one of you used something pretty strange on the vamp.” Her gaze switched to Cally.

Unlike Vila, Cally didn't let herself get flustered. “A vamp?” she asked coolly.

“Vampire,” the girl clarified. “Like the two guys who were about to drain you and your friend.”

Drain. Did she mean it would have drunk her blood? Yes, that made a twisted kind of sense. “Are they native to this world?” Cally asked.

The girl gave her a long, not quite comprehending look. “Excuse me?”

“Are they from this world?”

“Uh, would that be world as in 'planet'?”

She'd made a mistake, Cally realized. Whatever this world was, travelers weren't normal. If it was as primitive as Vila thought, perhaps the settlers had even given up space travel. She tried to think of some way to cover, to laugh as if it were a joke, when Vila piped in with, “What else would it mean?”



Some time later, Cally and Vila were sitting in a school library, listening as the girl tried to explain life — or unlife — in this town to them while simultaneously explaining to the librarian and a few friends the rather unremarkable cover story Cally had given her.

“Aliens?” a teenage boy named Xander asked, “You people are *aliens*?”

Cally, who'd dealt with her share of human xenophobia, didn't like the way he kept saying that.

“I'm — I mean *we're* human,” Vila assured him, glancing nervously at Cally. The creatures the girl had killed had been murderous, but it had also been

nonhuman. Which had been her reason for doing away with it? “We’re just not from around here.”

The boy didn’t grasp the difference. “Aliens?” he asked again. “From outer space? I was *joking* about Kev.”

“Aliens with British accents,” a red-haired girl, Willow, added. For some reason Cally didn’t understand, everything from the way she and Vila spoke to the weapons they carried made their rescuer and her friends almost murderously suspicious.

“Hey, Giles,” Xander asked, “is there something you’re not telling us about Mother England? Like you guys really are from outer space?”

“But you have to know about other worlds,” Cally protested. “Aren’t you an Earth colony?” They certainly weren’t Aurons, not the way they acted.

“OK, news-break,” Buffy said. “This is Earth.”

“No, it’s not,” Vila said patiently. “Earth has huge, underground cities, and Space Command, and things like that. It’s civilized.” Not the term Cally would have chosen, but she didn’t interrupt. “And it doesn’t have vampires. You’re just a lost colony or something. But don’t you have any spaceships?”

“Oh, please,” said the dark haired girl, Cordelia, the only one with a remotely normal sounding name. “Why are we believing their story? I mean aliens? Outer space? Do you really expect me to believe higher life forms dress like that?”

“Cordelia,” Buffy said patiently, “they have ray guns.”

“So did Kevin. And you had that big gun you blew the Judge away with. It didn’t make you 7 of 9.”

“Thank goodness,” Xander murmured.

“You blew up your judge?” Vila asked, obviously impressed.

“Oh, no, he was just a demon,” Willow assured him. “Buffy got off probation the regular way.”

“They didn’t need to know that, Wil,” Buffy said.

“Forget Buffy’s criminal history,” Cordelia said. “Am I the only one who finds it remotely suspicious that, soon as Willow finds out her cousin Kevin was up to no good, we have two more Giles clones drop into our laps? And their story doesn’t make sense, not even for Sunnydale.”

Cally looked at Giles curiously. “You’ve been cloned?” Auron was the only world she knew of where cloning was common, and he did seem to be the only sane person here. Were they trying to preserve good genetics?

All the young people in the room suddenly looked faintly ill. “Multiple Giles,” Xander said. “Was it only me or did everyone just have a Twilight Zone experience?”

“Guys, stay focused here,” Buffy said. “Can you see what’s going on?”

“England’s ruled by space aliens?” Cordelia said. “Like who didn’t know that? Have you seen those hats their empress wears?”

“Queen, Cordelia,” Giles said wearily. “And, as for aliens, that’s what everyone back home told me about southern California.”

“Guys,” Buffy said. “I believe them. Think about it. I mean, even in Sunnydale, would anyone be this confused unless they weren’t from Earth? And, if they were with Kevin, wouldn’t they have a better story?”

“This isn’t Earth,” Vila said.

Vila, Cally hissed silently, *be quiet!*

Buffy’s argument seemed to carry some weight. “All right,” Giles conceded, “if you’re not from... our planet, would you mind telling us where you are from? And how you got here?”

Cally repeated the story they’d given Buffy, adding a few more details — honest ones. She and Vila had been on Cansai station for business reasons when their associate (Cally hesitated here. If they really were as ignorant of other worlds as they seemed, would it hurt to use real names? They hadn’t reacted when Vila slipped and used theirs, but it wasn’t as if the Federation’s most wanted list would show up here. She remembered Avon at *The Lucky Stake*. He said it was a good thing Regan didn’t know her real name. And this might well be Regan Goneril’s home-world. She looked at the girl, Buffy, who had admitted to some kind of criminal past, a very violent one, from what the other girl, Willow, had let slip. And Buffy claimed to be human, but Cally had seen her defeat those two creatures. If they’d been as inhumanly strong as the one that grabbed her, then this girl was even stronger. What was she really? Cally left Avon’s name out of it, only telling them how their associate had been approached by a strange woman.

“Was she good-looking?” Xander asked. Cally gritted her teeth. Was that the only reason any man could think of for Avon to walk into a death trap?

“In a black widow sort of way,” Vila admitted. “His type, I guess.”

“They didn’t act like old friends,” Cally told them. “More like enemies. I only heard part of what they said, but he was furious with her.”

“Could have been an act,” Buffy said.

“No,” Cally told her, with flat certainty, “it wasn’t.”

She went on, editing their relationship with Mr. Zerafin — there was no reason to bring fences and criminal contacts into this — and leaving out some of the reasons why they had followed the mysterious woman. Vila interrupted her towards the end.

“So, we go in, thinking there’s a fire,” he said, “and there she is with candles and funny smelling sticks burning, in the middle of this big circle. Then there’s a big light and, bam! We’re here. It was the strangest teleport I’ve ever seen.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Teleport?” Willow asked. “You mean like Star Trek?”

“I take it back, Buff,” Xander said. “These have got to be the two biggest space cadets in the galaxy.”

“Excuse me?” Cally asked. While she didn’t understand the words, Xander’s tone left her with no doubts there was an insult hidden in there.

“Never mind him,” Giles told her. “From what you described, I don’t think your transportation here

was, er, mechanical.

"You may have noticed things in Sunnydale are a little different than what you're used to. While we may not have the technology you're accustomed to, there are other... crafts practiced here that make up for it. A good many of these involve rituals of assorted kinds. Burning incense, chanting, those would be fairly typical components of one."

Cally digested this. "You mean magic?" she asked incredulously. These people were more primitive than she'd thought. "You can't be serious."

"Willow," Xander said, "get your pencil."

"Excuse me," Buffy said. "Remember those things that attacked you in the ally? The vampires? Undead creatures of the night? They don't cover those on "Bill Nye, the Science Guy.""

Cally answered calmly, "You said yourself, they're extra-dimensional creatures that can gain entry to this universe by animating a dead body. That's not magic. There's no reason to be superstitious about it."

"You're kidding, right?" Buffy said. "You're telling me you'd think it was perfectly normal if one of those showed up in your neighborhood?"

"Well, not normal," Vila admitted. "But things happen. Remember the creature that used Orac to try and take over the Liberator so it could make a body, Cally? The one that chased you off the ship? And then there was the dead woman who tried to drain the life out of you. It's all perfectly normal — er, realistic stuff," he assured Buffy and her friends. Cally suddenly had a wave of sympathy for every time Avon and Tarrant had threatened to throw Vila off the ship.

"Let me get this straight," Buffy said. "You get attacked by dead people a lot?"

"Well, Cally does," Vila said. "It's funny, now that you mention it. That vampire, in the alley, he came right at you, and you just stood there."

Vila, stop talking! Cally sent desperately.

"Don't they teach survival skills at the space academy?" Xander asked. "If someone with big fangs comes at you, you get away."

"I... was too surprised," Cally hedged. "I'd never seen anything like that thing. Then it grabbed me. Unlike you, I'm not used to this kind of thing."

"That's not the way your friend tells it."

"I've been attacked. Twice. And I was unconscious most of the time."

"If that's what you do when the undead attack, you'd better start making funeral plans right now," Cordelia said without sympathy.



If Xander were to find him making a habit of listening at keyholes, Angel thought from his hiding spot behind the bookshelves, he'd probably just take it as another sign the demon was in charge again, but he listened anyway.

Angel had been brought up to believe in things like second sight, not that he'd ever thought he had any, not while he was human. He wondered now if

he'd been right. The first time he'd met Darla, his vampiric sire, he'd known there was something different about her, something that seemed to open up into a world he'd never imagined. And he'd been right, even if he hadn't had sight enough to run screaming at the sight of her. As a vampire, he'd found a gift for spells and magic, not as strong as, say, Drusilla's, but strong enough to open gates to Hell and destroy a demon's glove. It would be good to believe not all of it came from the demon inside him. Yeah, nice to think he wasn't a blood drinking monster who would murder his friends given half a chance, too. Self-deception. That's how he'd let himself believe a thing like him could love Buffy without ever hurting her. Even seeing Darla nearly murder Buffy's mother, then try to shoot down Buffy hadn't taught him better. Oh, no, he'd had to learn the hard way.

But whether it was a mortal's gift or a demon's, he'd caught one glimpse of the woman Buffy and her friends were talking to and ducked back into the shadows before she could see him. He didn't have Drusilla's gift. He could recognize a vampire, if he saw one. Usually. And the few Slayers he'd met had had a... what? Not a light, not some kind of aura. They'd had an... intensity. As if they were more there than other people.

And Drusilla? It had been a light around her. Even as a vampire, never walking in the day, she had a look to him as if she were in sunlight. That's why he'd wanted her, maybe loved her, and why he'd hated and tortured her.

The light around this woman was weaker, but it was the same light.

There was nothing around her friend. Angel knew the type. Hunting him would have been like hunting a rabbit. Cornered, he would stammer out anything and everything in panic. But the woman kept him from giving everything away. Angel saw the light around her grow brighter, saw it glow on the little man, bringing his too-open speeches to a halt.

He'd come in too late to hear everything. He gathered Buffy had rescued them. Sorcerers? Angel wondered. Would sorcerers need rescuing? Watchers might. Like most of Giles' clan, they sounded British — not that all Watchers were, but the British Isles were such a comfortable place for eccentrics with private, benign agendas. There were a lot of them there, and vampires actually avoided a few parts.

But they weren't Watchers. They were strangers who didn't quite trust either Giles or Buffy.

Angel waited till the conversation had worn its way down to a tired, unsettled conclusion. Cordelia, no surprise, was the first to decide she'd had enough. She offered Willow a ride home, and Xander managed to assume that meant she would give him a ride home too. Buffy and Giles, with an uncertain glance at their guests, decided to follow the others out, an obvious excuse for a private conference. Angel doubted the strangers were fooled, but they were either polite or reasonable enough not to protest.



Besides, they had to have a few things they wanted to discuss privately about their hosts.

He hesitated. He should probably tell Buffy what he knew, or thought he knew, about the woman. Maybe she could make sense of it. Or Giles. On the other hand, this was his best chance to hear what these two had to say.

While he hesitated, the woman's light grew and swelled while the little man mumbled to her. Then the woman turned, her eyes growing large. There was no way she could have seen him, but she looked straight at his hiding place, and her light poured on to him.

There were words mixed up in it, questions and

demands. But it was the feel of it that surprised him. He'd had the ghost of a murdered woman inside him once, a woman who only wanted to give peace to the spirit of her killer. His soul had been gone then, and he'd hated the feel of it. Brightness, love. It had been like poison to him. This was the same.

There was more to this woman than simple self-sacrifice. He felt grief in her — incredible grief — and a need for justice, to set wrongs right. He also guessed she didn't realize how much of her essence came through to him. But it also hurt. It cut at the darkness in him. Knowing he was making a mistake, he answered her call and stepped out of the shadows. He meant to say something reassuring, some-

thing reasonable, but he found himself growling at her light and felt his tongue press against fangs. He had put on his demon face at the touch of her soul. He tried to pull it back, to find human words, but the little man was already panicking. He grabbed a stake from the table, it must be one of Buffy's, and threw it at him. Angel knocked it aside, but the woman was drawing a weapon of her own, a small gun. Great, Angel thought, knowing how bullets hurt. He ducked back behind the books as she fired, hitting the wall behind him. There was no sound of bullets whizzing by, but the old wood burst into flames in a small, bullet sized spot. Whoever she was, it looked like she came prepared for vampires. He had to get out of here, fast.

Then the doors burst open as Buffy and Giles came rushing back in. Instinctively, the woman turned towards them. She might shoot, Angel realized, grabbing a heavy book — Giles favorite kind — to throw at her. The woman saw it and started to duck, taking aim at Angel again. There was a dark shadow rushing across from the other side of the room. A man in black, Kevin Abrams, was rushing her. The woman's eyes lit with recognition. She started to lower the gun, but that wasn't enough for him. He hit her arm, knocking the weapon out of her hand and taking it from her. He brought it up just as Buffy reached the woman, pressing the muzzle against her forehead. "Don't," he said calmly. "This one's not set on stun."

"Leave her alone," Angel growled.

Abrams spared him a sardonic glance. "I just saved you from being shot. If you didn't notice."

"Hurt her, and I'll make you wish you'd never been born."

Abrams actually smiled. "I never doubted it, Angelus. Cally, Vila, it's time to be going."

The small man, Vila, glanced uncertainly from Buffy to Angel. "Uhm, do you know these people, Avon?"

"Unfortunately," Abrams said. "Believe me, I'd like to keep it as short an acquaintance as possible." Although the little man still seemed uncertain, he also seemed used to following Abrams orders. He began to back out, letting Abrams cover him. The woman, Cally, looked at the gun pointed at Buffy's head and pursed her lips, but she, too, began to retreat.

Abrams backed away. Angel thought about rushing him, but Buffy could get shot. *Would* get shot. There was no shelter nearby and she didn't have room to maneuver. If Abrams pulled the trigger, if he *dared*....

The woman and the small man ducked out the back door. Abrams waited while they got out. "Is this your last visit?" Buffy asked. "Or are you breaking in tomorrow night?"

"I have what I came for," Abrams assured her. "Believe me, I want less to do with you than you want to do with me." Then he dodged out. With a gun no longer pointed at her head, Buffy rushed for the door. Angel heard the small hissing sound and

saw Buffy pull her hand away from the doorknob, giving a quick cry of pain.

"The thing's melted," she yelled, but it didn't slow her down. Not wasting time on the door — it was a security door and too tough even for her to kick down quickly — she ran for one of the windows and jumped out. Angel, imagining what a clear target she must make, silhouetted against the lights of the building, ran after her.

"Buffy, he's got a gun! Be careful!"

"He's got Willow!" Buffy yelled back, already running into the parking lot, making right for Cordelia's red car as it started to speed away. Angel could make out two forms lying on the pavement, Xander and Cordelia. The car swerved around them, making straight for the exit from the parking lot with Buffy standing directly in their way.

There wasn't any way out except over her, and Angel didn't trust this Abrams to turn humanitarian and stop. Not giving himself time to think how crazy his plan was, Angel ran and leaped, throwing himself right at the speeding vehicle. It actually worked. He landed on the car's roof and managed to get some kind of grip with one hand and smash his fist through the driver's window with the other. He grabbed the steering wheel and turned them out of Buffy's way, but the sudden movement threw him off the car. He scrambled, trying to grab hold of something — anything — with his other hand, catching at the window. The glass bit painfully into his wrists. *Not like I can bleed to death*, he told himself, trying to ignore the pain and tighten his grip. But, man, he was going to be hungry after this. He saw Abrams look at him, completely exasperated. The car came to a screeching halt, then went into reverse, knocking him loose.

But now Buffy had caught up with them. She ran for the car's back door. Realizing he'd been a complete idiot, Angel saw the rear door's window was down. Buffy didn't even have to try to rip it off its hinges. She had it open before Abrams could build up any speed. Abrams either didn't see what she was doing or was cutting his losses. As he turned and sped back to the gate, Buffy pulled Willow out. The turn's momentum knocked them free of the car. The two of them crashed and skidded against the cement, and Angel smelled blood, Buffy's blood. He pulled himself up and ran to her. "Buffy, are you-?"

"Fine," Buffy assured him, trying to get up with Willow lying on top of her. "I'm fine." It wasn't true. She was bleeding heavily. But at least she could still move. Slayers heal quickly, Angel reminded himself, if you don't kill them outright, you haven't killed them, hoping the vampiric warning was true. Then he realized Buffy was staring at Willow. Why? She'd landed on top of Buffy. Angel couldn't smell her blood at all.

But she wasn't moving, all the same. Willow lay as still and pale as death, a condition Angel knew only too well.



The ride was, from Cally's point of view, mercifully brief. The vehicle didn't move like anything she remembered riding in before and, to make matters worse, had all sorts of extra, disorienting touches. The controls were designed by a madman, requiring hands *and* feet. Avon had managed them so far, but she didn't see how he could keep it up. Add broken glass and the smell of blood, and she was only too glad to get out when Avon pulled over in the dark shadows of a large park.

"You want us to *walk*?" Vila said, obviously panicked as his eyes darted from one shadow to the next, obviously trying to guess which were cast by branches moving in the slight breeze and which were just... moving.

"The car's too conspicuous," Avon said. "Odds are, they've reported it stolen by now. The local law enforcement may not be up to Federation standards but they're not incompetent, not about things like stolen vehicles."

"And kidnapping?" Cally said, drawing her gun as they headed off into the dark.

"Put that away," Avon said. "A drawn weapon will only draw attention." She hesitated. "I mean it," he said evenly. "We need to avoid official notice in this place. Keep your hand on it, if it makes you feel better, but keep it out of sight."

Reluctantly, Cally put it away. "You still haven't answered my question."

"I wasn't kidnapping anyone."

"An unconscious girl just happened to be in that..." What had he called it? Some foreign word. "That caaw —"

"Car," Avon corrected, rolling the r.

"That primitive heap of metal. And you just happened to be upset when your demon friend pulled her out —"

Vila cleared his throat. "I think we were all a little upset by that, Cally. The thing jumped on the whatever-you-call it, pulling people out, it's enough to upset anyone."

Cally didn't look away from Avon, "You stopped us from shooting him, but you didn't want him to have the girl. Explain."

Avon shrugged. "There's nothing to explain. Angelus — Angel, as he's called — is a vampire. They're a local life form —"

"We've heard of them," Cally said curtly.

"Met one," Vila added. "Other than this Angel bloke. Fellow nearly killed Cally, but —"

"You *what*?" Avon's cool voice had dropped a few hundred degrees Kelvin. "What were you doing?"

"Just reading a news thing," Vila said. "We ducked in an alley, and —"

"An alley," Avon repeated. "Do you two have a suicide pact or just a dedication to stupidity?"

"Stop trying to change the subject, Avon," Cally cut in. "We met an alien, some kind the locals call vampires — extra-dimensional beings taking over human bodies, if there's anything to local superstitions. They feed on the locals, except for one blond

girl, who seems to be genetically modified and believes she has some kind of holy calling to hunt aliens and kill them." It wasn't like Cally to rip on others' beliefs the way so many humans did, but the self-contradicting insanity of the past hour deserved it. "Apparently, part of her faith requires using blocks of wood instead of guns, but that's her problem. Only it's not the whole story — I hope — since you went out of your way to save one of these creatures when he attacked us. And this same creature froze when you threatened his kind's mortal enemy. And then he nearly killed himself trying to rescue a young girl you were trying to make off with. And they all seemed to know you. This is getting a bit bizarre, even for you, and I want an explanation. You *owe* us an explanation."

"I don't *owe* you anything. I told you to wait for *Liberator* and stay out of this. You didn't. Don't blame me if it gets you killed. As for Angelus, he's not like other vampires." He paused, giving Cally the look she knew meant he was trying to cut a very complex concept down to the bite size pieces lesser intellects like Cally's and Vila's could handle. Her grip on the gun tightened in sheer frustration. "He's in love with her."

Cally blinked. "He what?"

"He's in love with the Slayer. Something... happened to him. The human part of him isn't gone, the way it is in most vampires. It's enough for him to..." Another hesitation before Avon could force himself to spit out the foul word, "... *care* about her. And her friends. Including the one we had with us."

"I have business to take care of here, business I would have finished if you two hadn't arrived and started shooting at everything that moves. I met the Slayer and her friends earlier, but I managed to do it without causing half the excitement you have. Now, thanks to your interference, I'm back where I started. Worse. Because Buffy Summers, and Angelus, and every ally she can get hold of are now standing directly in my way. Satisfied?"

Before Cally could answer, a fanged monster leapt out of the bushes, lunging right at Avon. He managed to whirl around and jump back in one move, keeping it from grabbing him, and pulling a long, wooden stake out of his pocket at the same time. He buried it in the monster's chest. There was an explosion of dust, and the creature vanished. "Let's get moving," Avon snarled, "before every demon in Sunnydale finds us." The way he said it made it clear it would be Cally and Vila's fault if they did.

Vila, gaped at the pile of dust, then ran after Avon. Cally wasn't so easily cowed. "You carry stakes, too. Does that make you a Slayer?"

"Hardly. It makes me a survivor. Stakes kill vampires. Bullets and lasers don't. Usually."

"And you just happen to know all about it?"

"I don't go to a world unless I know how to survive there. Unlike some."

"But —" She didn't have a chance to say more. They'd reached the end of the park. A black car drove up in front of them, the tinted window rolling

down. Regan Goneril looked out. Like Avon, she was dressed as a native, a leather jacket pulled over a low cut blouse of sapphire blue. Vila's cross glittered below her neck. Flashing Avon a malicious grin, she said, "Hey, kiddo, need a ride? The streets aren't safe this time of night." She glanced at Vila and Cally, "You know how much lowlife there is around."



Struggling to make Willow's heart beat, Angel almost wished Xander's dislike of him ran deep enough to push him out of the way and take over this job. Still groggy from whatever Abrams had hit him with, the idea probably hadn't occurred to the boy. Ironically, if it did, Harris actually trusted him enough to let him do this. And Angel, in the few seconds between each futile push on her heart, could not bring himself to ask.

He remembered the night Buffy had been killed, led to the Master by a demon child. The old leech had drunk his fill of her, gaining the strength to break free of his prison. Angel, desperate to save Buffy and urged on by Xander — innocent, ignorant Xander who had no idea how many fates truly were worse than death — had rushed in with the human boy to save her. Too late.

But Xander could do the one thing Angel couldn't. He could breathe life back into her. If Angel had known how, if he had forced his lungs through their mockery of life, it wouldn't have helped. It would have done worse. The breath of life, humans called it. Vampires weren't alive. He told Xander he had no breath, but it was more than that. He could force his lungs through the motions, pushing air in and out, enough to speak or feign life. But it wasn't human breath. He had something different, call it the breath of death. If he had tried to do what Xander did, he would have blown out whatever small embers of life still burned inside Buffy.

But, reluctantly, he had learned the need for what little he could do. He had learned enough CPR to begin pushing down on Willow's heart as soon as he knew it had stopped. Xander, if he were in Angel's place, would act with all his strength. So would Giles or even Cordelia, ready to give their all to save her or die trying. If Angel did that, if he let the panic he was feeling overwhelm him for one moment and pushed as hard as he could, Willow was dead. Her heart would be crushed under his hand. It was another irony of a vampire's unlife, one he had faced that night in the Master's cave. For him, doing all he was able could be so much worse than nothing.

And with each, unresponsive push, his mouth watered. She was still warm, a small voice at the back of his mind said. There was still time, time to drink her dry while her blood still ran thick and rich with life. He ignored it, or tried to ignore it along with the hunger clawing at his guts.

He couldn't say that to Xander, maybe not even to Buffy. So he pushed and prayed, wondering what gods listened to creatures like him.

Then Willow coughed. Angel felt the sharp tingle

beneath his fingers as her heart began to stir again. He jumped away from her, stung. An ambulance, whose blaring sirens he hadn't noticed, pulled in beside them.

Angel let Buffy and Giles give whatever stories they had to the paramedics, who began checking over the unconscious girl. He caught enough to know they didn't like what they were seeing. Willow was in a bad way.

Worse than you know, Angel thought, backing away, suddenly frightened by the girl he'd been trying to save moments before. What he'd felt in the moment she began to breathe hadn't gone away. Instead, it became stronger, calling to him.

Buffy came alongside him. "Come on, we're going with them to the hospital."

Angel shook his head. "No. I can't. I —" He hesitated. There were things he hadn't told Buffy, things he never meant to tell her. This was one of them. "I'm going to find Abrams," he half-lied. But it wasn't a lie. Abrams had known. He'd known about Angel, who he was, what he was. He had to know about Willow too. "I'm going to get the guy who did this to her." Another lie, a bigger one. Abrams hadn't done this to her. Whatever was happening to Willow, it was from inside her. He'd felt it in her blood, in her pulse. He turned and left before Buffy could stop him. Then he started to run, getting as far away from Willow as he could, the smell of her blood still thick and strong in the air around him.

He remembered the night his sire, Darla, had thrown a bleeding woman into his arms, a woman he'd been trying to save. Had been. Till he held her, till he smelled her, till he could taste her blood in the air. It didn't matter this was a living, breathing person. It didn't matter Angel had come to save her. It didn't matter she was Buffy's mother. He'd felt himself giving in.

Like he was now.

The small hunger he'd felt trying to revive her had risen up, roaring in his veins till it was all he could think of. He didn't know what was wrong with Willow or what had changed in her, but he knew he couldn't be near her, not if he wanted her to live. Abrams, who had targeted Willow from the beginning, who had gotten closer to fear over her illness than he had over a roof-full of attacking vampires, and who had known Angel as Angelus but didn't want to kill him, he'd said Willow would need his help if she wanted to live. Angel, trying to ignore the heavy, raw, beautiful smell of Willow's blood, was beginning to believe him.

And if he'd lied, well, Angel still knew how to wring answers out of anyone once he put his mind to it. If Abrams had set this up, Angel might even let himself enjoy everything he was going to do to him. He licked his lips, feeling his fangs as his blood hunger finally faded.

Sometimes the only way to block out one blood-lust was with another.



It took them ten minutes to reach what Regan called “a temporary base of operations,” and what Cally considered a sprawling, mausoleum of a house on the outskirts of town. No neighbors. Regan drove the car into a windowless garage. In case anyone happened to have seen it, Cally guessed, and might connect it to Avon’s — and probably Regan’s — crime spree.

There was a door leading directly from the garage into the house. Regan opened it then paused in the doorway, “Not that any of you need it,” she said, “but you’re all invited to enter.” Avon scowled.

“We’re not dead yet,” he snapped.

“Yet,” Regan agreed amiably.

How long had they known each other? Cally wondered. It took time to be this good at annoying each other with such short, oblique sentences. But Regan Goneril seemed to have a talent for rubbing people the wrong way. Then there was her house. The place was appallingly short on windows. Earth people, Cally reminded herself, but the open air buildings she’d seen in other parts of Sunnydale had made her hope for something more Auronish.

She didn’t care for the feel of it either. Humans cared less about the feel of a home than telepaths, of course, but she was constantly surprised with what they’d put up with. The feel of this place was old and mouldering, a place where the feel of the living wasn’t nearly as strong as the feel of the dead. She searched for a word to describe it, but it was Vila who found it.

“Haunted,” he commented, half joking.

Cally didn’t laugh. Yes, haunted.

Avon frowned. “Hardly,”

“There are no ghosts living here,” Regan assured him. “The occasional visitor and passer through, perhaps, but no permanent residents.”

“Except us,” a cheerful, familiar voice added. With an oddly detached feeling, Cally saw Mr. Zerafin walking down the stairs. Like Regan, he had a wide, predatory smile, more predatory than any of Avon’s.



Cally’s eyes flitted from person to person, Zerafin with his wolf’s grin, mildly smug Regan, and Avon, his face as closed and inscrutable as obsidian. “What’s going on?” she asked, her face far more level and controlled than it had any right to be.

Zerafin plopped himself into an overstuffed chair, resting his crossed legs on the coffee table in front of him. “Nothing that’s actually any of your business, Ms. Bel,” he said. Avon’s head snapped towards him when he used Cally’s alias. “We’re just collecting on some old debts,” Zerafin went on. “Or paying them off.”

“Or trying to,” Regan muttered.

Avon went very, very still, a nearly imperceptible act if you didn’t know him. “You’ve met?” His voice was calm, mild, and only a touch deadly.

Zerafin waved it off. “On Cansai. I was the fence you were supposed to meet.”

“A fence,” Avon repeated, still mild.

“It pays the bills.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

The dark lenses hiding Zerafin’s eyes couldn’t hide his mocking confidence as he met Avon’s gaze. “Do you think I’d lie to you?” *Why would I bother?* his tone asked.

Avon looked from Cally and Vila to Zerafin uncertainly. “I work with them,” he said evenly. “Sometimes, I even need them. Alive.”

Zerafin smiled. “Something I’ve been known to appreciate. From time to time. Don’t worry.”

Avon’s mildness vanished into straightforward threat. “*A Sheanfhear—*” he growled.

Zerafin’s mockery also vanished. “I said don’t worry,” he said evenly.

And Avon backed off. Cally looked at Zerafin, unnerved, but there was no hint of how he had accomplished the supernatural feat of cowing Avon. Almost. “I’ll hold you to that,” Avon said.

Zerafin was as amused as a full grown bear threatened by a stubborn mouse. “Do that. Just don’t get worked up over it. Sentiment,” he said the word as disparagingly as Avon ever had, “there are people who couldn’t stop caring about someone who ripped their heart out of their chest and held it in their hands.” He smiled beatifically, “I’ve seen it. Be careful you don’t do the same thing.”

“Don’t worry,” Avon said, looking at Regan. “I learned.”

Regan stiffened, her eyes turning deadly. Zerafin casually got up from his chair, an action that just happened to put him between the two. “We’d better get moving. I’ve been listening in on the emergency channels while you and your friends were having fun. Our... objective’s gone to stage two.”

It was Avon’s turn to stiffen. “Second phase?” he demanded. “How—” He glanced at Vila and Cally and curbed whatever he was going to say. “It’s too early.”

“What’s too early?” Cally said.

Zerafin ignored her. “Blame the neighborhood,” he told Avon. “There’s still plenty of time. If we move.” He headed out.

Cally came after him. “What—” she started to demand when Avon caught her arm and stopped her. He gave her a warning glance, started to say something, then stopped and went after Zerafin.

“Regan,” Zerafin called over his shoulder, “you’d better keep an eye on things here.” He finally spared half a look for Cally and Vila just before walking out the door. “You two, make yourself at home.” He added to Regan, “Take care of the guests, will you?”

“Oh, I promise.”

Avon, following in Zerafin’s wake, paused, a flash of expression on his face. Anger? Dislike? Whatever it was vanished before Cally could identify it. He looked at Regan and repeated meaningfully, “Take care of them.”

Regan rolled her eyes. “I thought you’d noticed. I’m a grown woman. I can take care of things.”

"I know you're grown. I've seen what you do to children."

"Avon," Zerafin snapped. "Enough. We don't have time."

Avon hesitated, then followed him out.



Regan stretched back like a cat. "Well," she said, "they may be gone for a while. Can I interest you in anything?" She gave Vila a minxish look. "This world has some marvelous liquors."

"Really?" Vila said, brightening at once.

Vila, please, Cally sent. "What about answers?"

"Answers imply questions. I hadn't noticed you asking any."

"What are you doing? And what's Avon's part in it?"

Regan turned wistful. "Avon's part is his business. I'm sorry," she said virtuously, "it wouldn't be right for me to go into it." She smiled, as charming and false as Cally had ever seen, "My part is simple. At the moment, I'm offering you a drink."

"No, thank you."

"Your loss. Food?"

"No."

"Well, if you insist —" Vila began.

"No."

Regan sighed theatrically, "A Puritan. I should have known. Avon never hangs out with anyone interesting anymore."

"Since he stopped hanging out with you, you mean?" Cally said more viciously than she'd meant. *Be calm*, she reminded herself. *Don't let this woman — or whatever she is — get to you.*

Regan ignored the tone. "Precisely," she admitted.

Not that being calm meant she couldn't tell the truth, Cally decided. "I think it was good judgment on his part."

"Funny, so many people say that. Which just goes to show, you shouldn't judge situations you know nothing about." Regan said cheerfully, "Are you sure there's nothing I can get you? Drinks? Food? Or would you prefer a new wardrobe?"

"No."

"Then let me show you your rooms — unless you really *enjoy* staying down here with me? I wouldn't want to deprive you."

"Er—" Vila said.

"Yes, show us the rooms," Cally said.

Regan sighed again and switched to a different attack, "I did like your alias, by the way, Donna Bel. It was Avon's idea, wasn't it? He has such a terrible sense of humor."

"What do you mean?" Cally said, giving her a chance to go on.

"Didn't he tell you? No, of course not. He never tells anyone anything. He's still such a little boy some ways. I would guess you're the one called Cally — you don't have to say you are. Avon did warn you about names, didn't he? I'm feeling all sentimental lately," she reflected. "Something about this town,

I suppose — and will give you an added warning, just so I can stay on dear, little Avon's good side — he does have one, you know. Don't tell your name to anyone here. Names are more dangerous than you realize. Take yours — or whoever's — for example. Cally means beauty or warmth in one language. In another, it means darkness, a goddess of death and destruction. Belle can mean beauty. But Bel was also a god of human sacrifices and unspeakable rites. Or unspeakable in front of an Auron. If you happened to be one. I don't know if someone else, say Vila, if he happened to be here, would mind. It also means lord, and Donna means lady — has Avon ever found you just the tiniest bit, oh, shall we say, over-assertive? And belladonna is a deadly plant which looks *just like* a harmless relative, my cloned friend. It also means beautiful lady. It reeks of bad humor. And considerable thought. Don't you think?" Her eyes were happy and cruel.

Cally was unnerved. What had Avon been thinking? No, she told herself, this Regan was on a fishing expedition, throwing out half-formed hints and insinuations, but waiting for Cally to make admissions and give her solid information to work with. "Everything Avon does has considerable thought, whether he cares about it or not," she said stiffly.

Regan laughed, clapping her hands, "Oh, well said. You might have what it takes to survive around him after all. I hadn't expected that."

"And you don't? What *is* your connection with him, anyway? You might have killed his best friend from the way he treats you." Of course, that was how Avon treated everyone, but he'd been in overdrive around her.

To Cally's surprise, that remark hit home. Regan turned on her, no longer playful and nasty but simply angry. She started to snarl something.

Vila, ever mindful of the potential for violence around him, stepped in. "The connection's simple," he said. "She's part of the same, cold blooded species as Avon, trying to pass for human." He said it jokingly, not meaning to be taken seriously, probably paying no more attention to what he said than Cally had to what she'd said to Regan a moment before. Like Regan, she was just as stung by his harmless missile.

Vila always tossed out the most horrible ideas without noticing. Avon was human, of course. Earth Alphas — Earth *citizens* — all were. It was a xenophobic world. There was no way an alien could get around that, no matter what. *Unless he was an expert computer programmer*, she thought, *and created a human identity for himself.*

It wouldn't matter to her if he wasn't, any more than her own alienness seemed to bother him. But Regan... there was something wrong about her. There was something even more wrong about Zerafin. Avon had his problems, but, no, she couldn't think of him being like Zerafin. Besides, only a human would even *want* to live on Earth. She let it go and tried to concentrate on what Regan had let slip.

Your rooms, Cally thought, following Regan. *How*



did she have rooms ready for two very unexpected guests? Answer: she'd expected them. But Avon hadn't. *So.* Always nice to know where the communication chain breaks down. Especially when it's deliberate. What else was she up to that Avon didn't know?

Regan led them upstairs to a large landing, then down to a pair of rooms towards the end (the harder for her and Vila to sneak out past everyone else, Cally supposed). She let Vila into his, then showed Cally into hers. Cally pretended to be thankful and stepped inside, immediately disturbed by what she saw there. It was a woman's room, with a few knickknacks scattered about. It was done in soft blues, most of them edged with embroidery in deep reds and blacks. An Auron style. She picked up a vase, stylistically painted with mythological scenes, Avena and the Hydaros, Herak and the King. Auron myths. Painfully, obviously Auron. "There are even some clothes," Regan went on. "Local styles mostly. Don't worry," she sized Cally up, "they should fit."

"How—" Cally began, then swallowed on a dry throat, her hand closing tightly around the vase, "You just happened to have these ready? In case we just happened to come?"

Regan smiled, "Mr. Zerafin said these rooms were for you. He's prepared for the most unexpected things."

Cally looked back at the room, remembering Zerafin's gallery. She could see something of the same artistic eye behind it. Or thought she could. She suspected, if she touched the bedspread, she'd recognize the feel of real sylwa fiber, one of the finest —

and most expensive — cloths from her homeland. This was no spur of the moment creation. Even if Zerafin had a warehouse full of Auron artifacts — unlikely but not impossible — time and talent had gone into this, and an understanding of what Cally's people considered beautiful. An understanding of what *Cally* considered beautiful.

Was Zerafin another exile? Was that why he hid his eyes? So she wouldn't see them and touch the mind behind them, recognizing a fellow Auron? And if so, what crimes had he committed? She was suddenly sure, Auron or not, he had good reason to keep his thoughts hidden away. Especially from her.

"Oh, look at this!" Vila called happily from his room, dragging Cally's thoughts back to the present. "This is the best stocked bar I've ever seen!"

Cally locked eyes with Regan who, back to being smug, looked back. "Do you have a perfect cage for Avon, too?" Cally asked.

Regan practically cooed. "Oh, Donna, I've been trying to pen in that boy for years. It never works. You should know by now." She turned and sauntered — oh, yes, *sauntered* — away. "But, if you need him later, he's in the room next to mine," she called over her shoulder.

"Was that your idea?" Cally shot back.

Regan laughed. "It's always nice to be near *dear* friends, isn't it?"

"And Zerafin's on the other side?" Cally said, more snidely than she'd meant. *Easy*, she told herself. *You can't afford to start a war.* Although it looked like Regan could, and with a good will.

More laughter. "Perish the thought. The man's

married to his work these days.” She made an absent gesture to a set of elegant, pseudo-wood doors at the opposite side of the landing. “He can’t afford distractions right now.” She wrinkled her nose slightly. “You’re welcome to take a bath, you know. Don’t worry. I don’t know how things were on your ship, but there’s plenty of hot water here. Don’t stint yourself. Please.

“There’s also plenty of food, if you’re hungry.” Her smile turned nasty. “Even gingerbread. You wouldn’t mind that, would you, little mouse?” Cally frowned as Regan walked away, laughing. She didn’t catch the reference, but she’d have bet Orac, the *Liberator*, and all their weapons it wasn’t a compliment.

She managed to bite her tongue as Regan walked away. Not that she was likely to appreciate the insults Cally was holding back, even if she translated. Auron invectives assumed you *understood* morals even if you didn’t have any. Instead, she waited till Regan was back in her room, then went and grabbed Vila before he finished his first drink.

“This is torture,” he complained. “When can I have a chance to relax?”

“After we’ve checked Zerafin’s room,” Cally said.

He stared at her. “Zerafin?” he said at last. “You mean the tall, muscular, possibly homicidal man even Avon’s afraid of? That Zerafin? You know what happened the last time you had me break into a room?”

“I asked your professional opinion,” Cally said calmly, ignoring Vila’s fears. They were too close to her own. “You said it was the best way to go.”

He squirmed uncomfortably. “Everyone has bad days, you know.”

“Then this is your chance to show me how good you really are.”

So, he came. He admired the craftsmanship of Zerafin’s locks for twelve seconds and opened them in three, letting them in to a surprisingly spare room. After the comfort of her own room — and the sheer decadence of Vila’s — she was surprised by how Spartan the art dealer’s own quarters were. His ornate doors opened on a merely functional den. There was a large, utilitarian desk, shelves of data files — the standard crystals and more exotic kinds — a couple of chairs, and a lamp. The only decoration was a small, painted statue in a glass case. It took Cally a few moments of mental digging to conjure up an identification. The woman wore something called a... calamari? No, a kimono, an Old Earth national costume — oh, wait, they called it ethnic. Japanese.

Then she remembered how she’d learned that. Avon had made some biting but obscure comment about Aurons. She’d had to use both computers, Zen and Orac, to define the terms. Then she’d had to have them explain the explanations. Avon had never respected her acceptance of exile. She’d told him it was only right and honorable for her to accept her people’s decision. “Oh, it’s honorable,” Avon had shot back. “Like a samurai committing *seppuku*.”

An obscure phrase from an obscure era. *It doesn’t*

mean anything. Two men from Earth knew some of the same bits of Earth’s history. What was strange about that?

The same alien race. Pretending to be human. Vila’s comment echoed in her mind. Cally had thought Regan was the link between them, a sinister woman with a shady past who brought Zerafin into Avon’s orbit. Or vice versa. What if, instead, Zerafin and Avon were old... what? Partners? Associates? *Friends?* Then how much did Avon really know about what was going on? What if Zerafin wasn’t coercing him? What if Avon knew every devilish step of Zerafin’s game and was playing it just the same?

Devilish. The word echoed in her mind. That was what frightened her. There was something about Zerafin that made her want to run out of this place and not come back. If her feelings were right and if Avon knew everything about him but didn’t care, then what?

She shivered, and went into the next room, the bedroom. There were a couple chests of drawers and a wardrobe, both simple and unornamented. Oddly, there was another desk. Once again, everything was functional, nothing decorative, with two exceptions. There was a large, black trunk carved out of something Cally at first thought must be wood till she touched it. It was bone. It had ornate locks of swirling, filigreed silver and gold twisting into fantastic, stylized beasts who stared up at her with black, lidless eyes. She looked down at their dark, unfathomable gaze. No, it wasn’t a trick of the light. They stared.

The headboard of the bed was also carved. Dark brown, she could not begin to guess what it was made from. It didn’t seem heavy enough for stone and it didn’t have feel of anything that had ever lived.

There, Zerafin’s indulgence — if it was indulgence — ended. There were dark blankets and white sheets on the bed. Utilitarian. The bed itself was in slight disarray. Zerafin obviously didn’t bother overmuch with tidiness in the morning. This small, human failing failed to reassure her. There was no sense of the man who lived here. The unmade bed seemed simply to say how meaningless it was to its owner. She remembered the snide comment she had made to Regan and felt sick. Being here with him would be like sharing a room with a corpse. She hoped, fervently, the two were nothing more than business partners or, at worst, friends.

She turned away, not bothering with the chest and its waiting eyes. Most of the drawers on the desk were unlocked anyway. She found books and notes in languages she didn’t know. Some looked handwritten. Zerafin’s diaries? Not unless he’d been alive a very long time, from the look of them. And had a passion for leather and vellum. They seemed like the sort of ancient texts she’d seen in museums on Auron. Perhaps, part of his business? But they’d been casually placed like old workbooks and manuals. *Humans*, she reassured herself. *No sense of history.*

In one drawer, she found an artist's portfolio, a collection of sketches, the first sign so far suggesting Zerafin had a soul and wasn't just an undead automata. She opened it and looked through. There were quite a few. All done by the same artist. All, she was strangely sure, done by Zerafin. Some had names written on them, some in languages she could read.

"Drusilla." That was a waif-like girl with large, innocent eyes.

"Spike," a cocksure youth. Impudent, she thought, and never worried about consequences.

She found one of Regan with long, wavy hair. "Enter the witches" was scrawled along the bottom.

Then she found a young man in his teens, golden haired, dark eyed. "Tobias," it said. "Requiescat in Pace." He looked like Avon.

She pushed them away as if they stung, scattering the sheets beneath so they stared up at her. "Buffy," said several, not that she needed the help recognizing the girl. Several others, showing a girl at different stages from childhood to almost adult, said "Willow."

Cally's hands were shaking. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to be calm, and gathered the sketches together to put away. One last sketch, arrogant and determined to go its own way, fell out of the pile. It showed another young man, a boy. Something had been scrawled beneath it but it was nothing she could read. He might be fourteen or fifteen. It was Avon.

Slowly, she looked through the sketches again. Yes, they were by the same artist. But it couldn't be Zerafin. He couldn't be thirty. Avon was nearly forty human years, even if he didn't look it. Zerafin couldn't have made that sketch.

No, she corrected herself, he couldn't have made that sketch from a *live* subject. He might have used holos. Or imagination. She looked at the sketch of Regan. She looked the same age as she did now, but the dress she wore was archaic, out of style by over a century. The hair fit the era. A flight of fancy, nothing more.

Some people liked to draw. Some people liked to do other things. She'd sensed viciousness in him. And... something horrible. Something she still couldn't name and didn't want to admit, so she settled on more banal, comprehensible evils. He kept sketches suggesting long standing acquaintances with people who didn't know him. People, judging by the life sketches of Willow, he might be obsessed with.

And Avon had tried to kidnap Willow for him. Avon had accused Cally more than once of thinking people were better than they were, but she *knew* him. She *knew* what he was capable of. He claimed situational ethics were a virtue and, given the right circumstances, she didn't doubt he could kill a man in cold blood.

But sell a girl to possible psychopath? Steal her for him?

No. Never. Not unless.... There were threats

Avon, arrogant as he was, might cave into. More likely, he would accept a bad deal, convinced he could turn it around later. Especially if he didn't know how bad the deal really was.

And how bad is it? she asked herself.

Cally got her answer when Vila came in behind her. "Er, Ca—"

"Don't say it. Don't say my name," Cally said, suddenly taking Avon's warnings very seriously, here in this cold room with its aura of death. The filigreed locks looked on, amused.

"Oh, uhm, Donna then. You need to see this."

He was as whey-faced as Cally felt. And completely serious for once. She followed him back into the outer room.

He'd found two hidden storage compartments. He went to the one in the floor first, pulling the lid aside so she could see its contents, an assortment of beautiful knives, blades, and instruments of torture, each engraved with the same intricate patterns Cally had seen on Zerafin's bone chest. Then Vila opened the one in the wall. It was a refrigeration unit. Almost anticlimactic. She almost could have laughed, it was so obvious. This was what she'd sensed. Not that she could blame him for being overprotective of his snacks. Tidy, too. The containers of blood were lined up as neatly as the samples in any lab. One was half drained. So. Zerafin had very good reasons to wear his dark glasses around her. "We've seen enough," she told Vila. For once, he didn't argue.

"What are you doing here?" Regan asked, standing in the doorway.

"Looking around," Cally said. She nodded towards the blood. "Anything you'd care to explain?"

"Oh, please, you've never seen animal blood? But I'm forgetting, you just shoot people, don't you?"

"What does Zerafin want with the girl Avon tried to kidnap?"

"That's his business, Donna dear. Why don't you ask him?"

"He's trying to catch her again, isn't he? That's what they went to do."

"There's just no slipping anything past that razor sharp mind of yours, is there? Honestly, what did you think they were doing?"

Cally ignored the insults and drew her gun. "Good, then you can take us to them."



Angel had tried a few different places for information with no luck before finally winding up at the slaughterhouse. Whoever Abrams and his friends were, they knew how to keep a low profile. Before getting down to business, Angel got some packets of blood, trying to get control of the hunger inside of him. Much as he'd tried to ignore it — much as it sickened him — it still clawed at his guts, the terrible hunger — the *need* — Willow's scent had sparked in him. And, although his injuries from the car fight were already closing, he'd lost too much blood. He needed to replace it — before he did something he'd regret.

He took more than he wanted, trying to drown out his thirst. He drank till he was almost sick, and it seemed to work. At least he didn't want to hunt. For now. Carefully, he wiped away any trace of his meal from his mouth and went looking for Benny, the night manager.

He was friendly enough. Despite his usual reserve, Angel tried to stay on the good side of the people who controlled his food supply. But Benny would probably have been friendly with a brick. He was that kind of guy. Angel sometimes wondered how Benny had survived so long in Sunnydale.

"Hey, Ange, what brings you here?" Benny asked, "Didn't you just make a pick up?"

"Just looking for information," Angel assured him. "I'm looking for a man. He might have made done some business here." Bones, blood, odd remains. Angel didn't make any suggestions. This was a long shot, assuming Abrams was either a wizard or demon, despite his human smell. Maybe he'd needed to buy food or spell supplies. He showed Benny the sketch he'd made. "Seen him?"

"Sorry, Ange, can't say as I have. Is he trouble?"

"Maybe. He was involved in an attack on a friend tonight."

Benny shook his head. "What's the world comin' to? I'm tellin' ya, it's getting so folks ain't safe in their own homes. You find him, you take care of him, you hear?"

Angel was never sure what Benny knew about him — or *thought* he knew about him — but normal people didn't buy blood. Not in the quantities Angel needed. "I was planning on it."

"Good — Hey, this friend of yours, it wasn't that tall gal you were in here with the other day, was it?"

Tall gal? The only woman he'd ever been here with was Buffy, and that hadn't been his idea. "I'm not sure who you mean," he admitted.

"Sure you do. Tall gal, dark hair, cut real short, figure that wouldn't quit. Her. The one you were here with day before yesterday."

Day before yesterday. Angel had made his last purchase a weak ago. "I forgot she came in with me," he said blandly.

"Bad move, Ange. Take it from a man who's been married twenty-seven years. Don't forget where you take a woman, even if it is this place."

"You're sure I'm the one she came in with? She didn't wait outside?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why? What's the problem?"

"And I was with her? Day before yesterday?"

"You're starting to scare me, Ange. Yeah, you were with her. You asked how my family was and everything."

If Abrams had been a shape changer, he'd have looked like Willow's cousin. But Angel wasn't willing to bet on his doppelganger just coming from Benny seeing things or an unconnected bit of trouble. He had to get to the hospital and warn Buffy. Now.

And Benny deserved a warning, too. "You're Catholic, aren't you Benny?"

"All my life."

"If you have a crucifix or a cross, keep it with you — I mean right with you, not in a drawer. You may need it." Then he went out.

"What's got into him?" Benny asked the air after Angel left, "That's what he told me last time."



Demetrius gathered up his people. It was time to act. He'd gotten a feel for the Slayer's strength at the museum, when she'd dealt with his throwaways. No significant losses there, but he'd seen what she was capable of. Now, he was going to take her. He'd been suspicious when his source reported Angel's abrupt departure, but it was no ruse. Whether cutting his losses or following some false trail, Angelus was out of the fight, as was the witchling, Willow. If nothing else, Demetrius had to act quickly for her sake. From the reports he'd picked up, her condition was worsening. A half trained girl who'd cast a spell it had taken all the elders of a gypsy tribe to work before was a talent he didn't intend to lose.

As to the young woman he'd met earlier, the one with a mind of fire, he'd arranged to take care of her too, adding her talent to his court. It was only a matter of time, now.

Only a matter of time.



Buffy wanted the lowlife who had done this to Willow. She wanted him worse than killing the Master, taking out the Judge, or just about anything else she could remember wanting in a long, long time.

Once they got to the hospital, things moved quickly. Giles concocted some story that seemed to satisfy everyone, something about Willow passing out at the wheel of Cordelia's now stolen car. That brought a startled exclamation from Cordy, who went on for about five minutes on how Willow Rosenberg would never sit at the wheel of her car, as if, ever, yadda, yadda, yadda. Then she finally caught the looks Buffy and everyone else were giving her. Something clicked in that shallow head of hers, and she added, weakly, "I mean, ever again." After that, Giles didn't have much trouble convincing the doctors to take a look at Cordelia and Xander ("the unfortunate passengers"), and Buffy had been relieved to be told they were all right — or as all right as people checked over by doctors looking for concussions and broken bones instead of ray gun burns were supposed to be.

But Willow wasn't all right. The doctors said stuff about anemia and blood irregularities and a bunch of other things maybe even Giles didn't follow. As if they knew anything. As if their explanations would have mattered if they had. In real life, all their long winded summaries meant one thing: Willow lying pale as a corpse in a hospital bed, unconscious and maybe dying. It meant Kevin Abrams and his friends were laughing somewhere, thinking they'd gotten away with it. Well, they were wrong. They were going to pay. Big time.

"You'd better go now," the nurse told them. "She needs her rest."

"Rest," Buffy muttered, once they were in the hall. "Yeah, right."

"Buffy?" Giles was concerned.

Did he think she'd gone over the edge? She'd show him over the edge, him and every demon in town.... "What did Abrams do to her?" Buffy demanded, "And how do we undo it? Tell me you need me to rip out his heart and feed it to him, cause that's what I'm doing."

"Want some help?" Xander asked.

"Buffy, *no*," Giles said. "We don't even know Abrams is responsible."

"Let's see." Buffy ticked the points off on her fingers. "Abrams shows up, Willow gets sick. Abrams tries to kidnap Willow, Willow gets sicker. And Abrams' friends tried to shoot up your library and my boyfriend. What are we waiting for, an ad in the Times?"

"Willow said her attacks began *before* she met Abrams. He may be unconnected to them. Or connected in a way we haven't thought of, or—"

"Or working for that vampire, the 'Thin One' guy you keep talking about," Cordelia broke in. "If you find him, he's only going to kill you and make you into a vampire. And then what happens? You jump all your unsuspecting friends and drain us dry before we know you're dead. Stop thinking just about yourself, for once Buffy and think about *us*. Especially me. I want to go on living for as long as possible."

"If this guy can do this to Willow when he's not even near her, what do you think he can do to the rest of us?" Buffy shot back. "Or do you want to drop dead from — what'd they call it? 'anemia and blood loss' without putting up a fight?"

"No offense, Giles," Xander said, "but I really have to vote with Buffy on this one. I say we find Kevvie and get some answers."

Giles closed his eyes, fighting off visions of his protege and her friends racing headlong to their deaths or perhaps simply wincing at Xander's usual mangling of the Queen's English. 'Kevvie,' indeed. "You might at least wait till morning," he said quietly. "If Abrams is working for the Athenian, his allies will have less of an advantage then."

"Yeah, but does Willow have time?" Buffy asked.

"You might—" Giles began, when a new voice broke in.

"Buffy!" She looked up and saw Angel hurrying towards them down the hall — not running, cause that wasn't his style except when actually chasing demons (or trying to outrun them), but doing that rapid stride thing of his that made his black coat billow about as much as leather could. There was a look on his face, grief and relief mixed together. She caught a brief glimpse and was trying to sort it out when he reached her and took her in his arms, pulling her close.

"Gee, Ange," Xander said. "It's like you haven't seen her for, what, thirty minutes?"

Buffy could have hit Xander, except it was hard to be angry when Angel held her like this, hard to be afraid, or desperate, or much of anything except happy to be where she was. "I was worried about you," Angel murmured into her hair. "I thought — I didn't know—"

Giles cleared his throat, "Er, uhm, Angel," he said. "Have you learned anything? Something you'd like to share with the rest of us?"

Angel didn't actually push Buffy away. His arms stayed wrapped around her, but there was breathing room as he turned his attention to Giles. "I heard some strange stories down at the meat factory and followed them up." He hesitated, seeming uneasy. "I'm not sure, but I think Abrams is working for a... a sort of demon. Not an evil one, not exactly, but most people who've met him think he's a royal pain: the *Seanfear*."

"I haven't heard of him," Giles said.

"You wouldn't have. He's... pretty low-key. They say he comes from Ireland originally." *Like Angel*, Buffy thought, wondering if that was how he knew about a demon even Giles had never heard of. Not that vampires didn't get around. "The story is, years back, a branch of Watchers died out in a land he made his home in."

"Uh, 'scuse me," Buffy said. "*Branch* of Watchers?"

"Being a Watcher is an... inheritance." Giles said uneasily. The Watchers had their own secrets, some of them not shared even with the Slayer. Personally, Buffy just thought they liked keeping things to themselves, like little boys with secret clubs. "But there are different families," he went on.

"Right," Angel said. "Most these days are from the Hafocs line, from England. But there are others." A corner of his mouth quirked up in a bitter, ironic smile. "And there *were* others, others who died out. Giles could probably tell you stories. What he doesn't know is the *Seanfear* ... had a part in that. It was complicated. Stupid. The way I heard it, he had a... thing. For a vampire." Angel gave the words a sardonic twist. Buffy thought briefly of two of the vampires Angel had once had a 'thing' for, Darla, his sire, his lover for maybe a century, and the woman he'd killed to save Buffy. And there was Drusilla. As a mortal, Drusilla had been tortured and driven mad by the evil Angelus before he'd made her into one of his own kind. Now, there was nothing she could do to him — no torture, no crime — that would make Angel go to war with her. He might fight her to save others, but Buffy suspected Dru could tear out his heart and Angel wouldn't lift a hand to stop her, not if it was just *his* life on the line. Was that the kind of 'thing' he was talking about?

"I... think she might have cared about him," Angel added, as if it mattered. "I don't know. She used him, hurt him, and — thanks to him — was able to get her fangs into most of the Watchers around there."

"I think I'd have heard about this," Giles said stiffly. Watcher lore. Yeah, Angel was really stepping



on Giles toes, here.

"From who? There wasn't much of anyone except vampires and demons who knew about it. Who lived. And there weren't any Hafocs around taking notes." He slipped into brooding mode, the thought of lots of dead people and human longevity (or the lack thereof) having that effect on Angel, but he pulled out of it pretty quickly. Or pulled out of it enough to keep talking. "It went a lot further than the *Seanfear* had meant." Further than he'd *meant* it to. Yeah. Right. Don't put this guy down on the side of the angels.

But *her* Angel needed a little prompting to keep going. "So, he and vampire-chick broke up?" Buffy suggested.

Angel hesitated. "Yeah," he said finally. "You could say that." More brooding mode. "He hasn't been a big fan of vampires since then. But it doesn't mean you can trust him. Or want him around."

"But what does it have to do with Willow? Or Abrams? Does this have anything to do with the Athenian?"

Angel looked at her sharply, "They aren't friends. But the Athenian... didn't really have a part in that mess—" Mess. The *Seanfear*'s "thing." Right. "—but he came along after. Some people would tell you the *Seanfear* would like to kill the Athenian. Other people would tell you he's sat back and let vampires slaughter people. *Helped* them slaughter people. But Abrams is human."

"You sure?" Buffy asked, "Cause I've started wondering."

Angel smiled again, a real smile. It wasn't very big but it lit up his eyes, chasing at least some of their sadness away. "I know what a human smells like, Buffy. He's human, or human enough to smell like one."

"Maybe it's his aftershave."

"He's human," Angel assured her. "And humans and the *Seanfear* don't get along. Not always. Whatever Abrams part in this is, you can bet he didn't want it. That may help us. You can ask him when you see him."

"Yeah, well, I have to find him first."

Angel cleared his throat. "Not a problem. I already found him." He seemed almost embarrassed to have tracked down the enemy before Buffy had a chance to start hunting.

"You've got him? Where?"

"Seems he was coming to pay a sickbed visit," Angel went on, "but I got in the way. If you want him, just come downstairs."

"Downstairs?" Xander asked skeptically, "Right, the first floor's only the busiest one in the hospital. Must be lots of places you could stash a guy there where no one would notice."

Angel smiled, "Not the first floor. The basement. The morgue."

But, when they reached the morgue, no one was there.

Avon winced, watching Buffy and her — what was the word in this era? Swain? Beau? No, he had it, sweetheart — watching Buffy and her "sweetheart" embrace and carry on until they could finally get on to less important matters, like going downstairs to check on the enemy. At long last, the way was clear.

There was no one around and, if there had been, all they would have seen was one more concerned man coming to check on a sick friend. There was no security worth speaking of, not even a camera in the hallway, not that it really mattered. One way or another, by the time someone noticed what he was up to and tried to do anything about it, he'd be long gone. He hoped.

He looked at Willow, lying there pale and still. He could trace the lines of her mother's face in hers. Her hair was straight, like his, but red — a solid red, not her mother's red-gold. The innocence he'd seen when he first met her was bone deep. Even vulnerable and asleep, it didn't desert her.

He wondered, if she were around him — and Zerafin, and Regan, and all the rest — how long it would last.

Unwillingly, he thought of Anna. He had believed in what was between them, once, had thought only death could end it. He learned better when she died. Holding her in his arms, he'd watched as the life drain out of her. Her bright eyes, that flashed like jewels when she laughed or when she was angry, growing dim, dull. Her skin, fair but flushed with life, turned pale and waxy. It wasn't like death. It was some terrible transformation, relentlessly destroying everything about her he had ever loved or hated, everything in her that loved or deceived. Then, even her soul was gone, leaving an empty ruin in its place. No, not like death at all. Death, for good or bad, was an ending, and Anna had never let him go.

Never mind. This time, no one was dying or doing anything like it. He just had to get Willow and get out. He checked her condition, frowning. She shouldn't be this far gone, not yet. He should have had *time* — time to win her trust, time to explain this to her, time for her to be ready.

Not an option.

He disconnected the tubes and wires. Some, he remembered needed have the machines they were attached to turned off first or they would set off alarms when they lost track of Willow's pulse. Another tube had to carefully disconnected just to stay clean and avoid infection. There, done. Nothing to do now but take her and get out of here—

Removing the last wire — something that seemed to be monitoring her breathing — he didn't sense the danger behind him till too late. Then, he knew. He didn't have to turn around to recognize her. She'd gotten much better at pulling off an ambush since they'd first met. Although he'd been distracted just now. He also wasn't surprised by what happened next.

Avon, Cally's thoughts echoed silently in his mind, Keep your hands where I can see them and step away from the girl.

