

He didn't need to turn around to know she had a gun pointed straight at his heart. Or that she would use it.



Regan drove them to the hospital and parked. Cally stuck her gun's muzzle in Regan's ribs. "Now, just get us inside."

Regan rolled her eyes again. "Just keep your weapons out of sight, will you? They're very jumpy about that sort of thing here for some reason. Something about the overall violence rates. It won't do any of us any good if you get yourselves shot."

"Now, why should I believe you?" Cally said, not moving the gun, "Our being shot would certainly solve your problems."

Regan looked, if anything, more disgusted. "By being caught in the crossfire? Besides," she added lightly, "I seem to remember promising Avon I'd keep you alive. He's not entirely rational, you know. He might actually expect me to do it. No matter how difficult you make it."

With that, she led them out of the car to the hospital entrance. Cally did slip her gun out of sight in her jacket pocket but kept her hand on it. Regan looked unimpressed, but kept whatever acidic comments she was thinking to herself, settling on walking up to the front desk and speaking with the woman on duty there instead.

Suddenly, she looked bewildered and panicked, "Please," Regan said to the woman, a half-suppressed sob caught in her throat, "I'm here to see Willow Rosenberg. They said there'd been an accident. What's wrong with her? Where is she?" Regan, Cally began to realize, just couldn't refuse a chance to ham things up. Even her accent had changed, making her sound like a local. That might help her against them later if there was any crossfire to avoid. Sympathetic native versus evil foreigners.

The woman at the desk consulted some papers, her face mirroring some of Regan's concern. "Are you family?"

"Her aunt," Regan said. "Where is she? Is she all right?"

"She's listed as stable," the woman assured her. "She was already sick when the car accident happened, but she's doing well. The doctor can give you the details."

"Please," Regan said. "Where is she? Can I see her?"

"She's in room 413. That's on the fourth floor. The elevator's down the hall."

Regan nodded. Cally saw tears pooling in her eyes. "Thank you," she sniffed.

She turned around, and the tears vanished. "Amateur," she muttered, marching them down a deserted hallway, her accent back to normal, "Did you see that? *Three* times I asked her. With the body traffic they see here, you'd think they'd know how to answer a simple question by now."

"Traffic?" Vila asked, uncertainly.

"Corpses. Critical injuries. Mad, life-sucking demons terrorizing the children's ward. Honestly, what's their problem?"

"Er, overload?" Vila offered. Regan snorted. He tried to change the subject. "So, what was that thing she said to find? The elevator?"

"It's what they call an inter-level transport tube. It only goes up or down. No sideways motion." She let out a long breath, letting her anger go. "Primitive," she shrugged, "but it works. And that's all we need, isn't it? You heard her. Willow's on the fourth floor, room thirteen. Once we're there, you can — I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

*Names*, Cally thought, remembering Avon's warning.

"Vila," Vila said, before she could stop him. Regan nodded, making a small, twisting motion at the same time. Vila let out a startled cry. He lost his balance and tripped, falling to the side, going down right between Cally and Regan.

Regan was on him before Cally had a chance. She caught the falling man and grabbed his gun before he knew what was happening. Then Regan had her arm tightly around Vila's neck, with his body as a shield and her gun pointed at Cally. "Like I said, primitive, but it works." She glanced at Cally's pocket and the hidden weapon inside. "Feel like shooting? I don't know how good you are, but maybe you're feeling lucky?"

"Let him go," Cally said. By some very strange chance, they were still the only ones in the hallway, but it couldn't last. It least, it shouldn't. *This woman just attacked Vila without laying a hand on him. What else can she do?* It had to be telekinesis, and Regan seemed to need mental props like hand gestures and statements from her victim. A weak telekinetic. Not that Cally could hold a candle to any kind of telekinetic at all. And what if Regan could telepathically keep anyone from coming down here till she was done? "Let him go," she repeated, trying to go for the same kind of deadly confidence Avon managed so well.

Regan laughed. "Or what? Look, it's been fun, but I have so many things to do. And so do you." Her smile broadened. "Zerafin and Avon have already been here. You've only got a few minutes before nothing you do matters." She threw Vila at Cally. Something really was wrong with his leg. He couldn't stand and almost collapsed on her.

"Oh, *please*," Regan said. "It's just a sprained ankle." She turned on her heel and walked away, back towards the entrance. People started walking into the hall. Reluctantly, Cally hid her gun, "Remember, Donna," she said cheerfully. "Just a few minutes. Have a nice day."

"Cally," Vila whispered, "I think you'd better do what she said and get up there. I'll be all right." He sounded uncertain, and Cally didn't blame him. These people were aliens and their whole town was insane. Besides, Regan was setting her, or Avon, or *someone* up. That much was obvious. And it was just as obvious she had no choice.

Praying Vila would be all right and that she could operate this 'elevator,' she ran to the end of the hall.



To save time, Buffy and Angel took the stairs. It wasn't like they couldn't run up them faster than the elevator could have taken them, even if they didn't have to wait for it. *I should do a workout video*, she thought. *Step Aerobics with the Slayer*. She burst onto the fourth floor, Angel right behind her, and saw Willow's room at the end of the hall. She could make out Abrams standing over Willow, disconnecting all the equipment keeping her alive. She pulled out 'Mr. Pointy,' the stake, and took aim. Then Angel's hand closed over hers, stopping her.

A woman, dressed really tacky, had stepped in the way, her own weapon drawn. *Oh*, Buffy realized belatedly, *Cally the "Alien."* But Cally hadn't seen them. In fact, her gun was pointed at Abrams. "What's the deal?" Buffy whispered. "I thought they were on the same side."

"Wait and see," Angel suggested.

Although he had his back to her, Abrams must have sensed something was up. From a purely professional point of view, Buffy had to appreciate his reaction. He didn't stiffen or freeze in that, awkward, jerky way some people had. He just went very, very still, like a large panther that realizes the prey is looking its way. Slowly, he turned, hands raised not so much in a gesture of surrender as a signal he wasn't about to fight. Yet. "Saving her life," he told Cally.

There was a long silence.

"I don't trust him either, but we need his help," Abrams said.

More silence.

*This is weird*, Buffy thought. "What kind of conversation is this?" she whispered.

"She can send her thoughts," Angel said wonderingly, putting it together. "That's how she attacked before." *Aliens*, Buffy remembered. *Oh, boy.*

"Then you look at her!" Abrams snapped in response to whatever Cally — who, just maybe, really was from Outer Space — had said. "She's dying! If you think the doctors here can help her, you're wrong. Now, help me or shoot me, but stop wasting time. She doesn't have any!"

"Wow," Buffy said. "The guy can lose his cool." Then what he'd said caught up with the rest of her brain. "He sounds like he means it." *Could* he? If meant it — if he wasn't responsible for what was happening to Willow—

"Maybe we should go talk to him," Angel suggested.

"Hold on," Buffy tried putting it together. Abrams knew what was wrong with Willow. He'd just said he knew he could save her — and that the poor, little Earthling doctors couldn't. Come to think of it, he'd said pretty much the same thing when Willow first realized he wasn't her cousin.

And here's the million dollar question: What do a bunch of aliens want with a half-dead Willow?

While Buffy silently debated, Cally came to her own decisions. Slowly, she lowered her gun. Then she put it away. A long, tense second passed, during which Abrams didn't pull out his own gun and shoot her. So, did that make him trustworthy? Not having any idea what the answer was, Buffy took a step towards them. Then the vampires attacked.



Avon cursed. Just when Cally had begun to listen to him, vampires attacked. Right now, the Slayer and Angelus, out in the hall, were their target, but that wouldn't last. He knew from bitter experience how Willow would attract them. He saw Cally turn and draw. "Don't shoot!" he snapped.

"It's stun. I can—"

"There are too many of them. If Buffy or Angel are stunned, there's nothing between the vampires and us." Hospitals in this era often had a chapel and possibly holy water and large crosses, but that would be on the entry level and out of reach. There was the window, but they were four stories up and — oh, wait, fire escapes. It was a primitive world. They had to take those precautions. But a way in was also a way—

Avon turned in time to see the first vampire coming in and stunned him. Unfortunately, a vampire with more serious laser holes just got angry. A human would be out for hours. With a vampire, he'd be lucky if it bought thirty minutes. He shot the one coming in behind the first. For a moment, he hoped the bodies would block the window, but the vampires behind the first pair simply grabbed their unconscious friends and tossed them aside — the whole, four story drop aside. Loyalty. Well, he might have done the same thing himself — but never to run *towards* laser fire.

He shot two more. "Can you hold them off?" he asked Cally. She looked sick. He didn't blame her. From what he'd been told, Aurons felt vampires in their minds. She was safe so long as she could attack them telepathically. Soon as she gave up on offense, however, their minds would bewitch her. Shakily, Cally aimed her gun and, to Avon's relief, began shooting at the incoming vampires instead of him, giving him enough cover to grab Willow. The shooting wasn't necessary, however. After the first one fell, the others scattered, driven back by Cally's mind.

"Let's get out of here," he told her. White faced, Cally nodded and they retreated through the door. Avon tried to think of a way to ram it shut behind them, slowing pursuit, but nothing came to mind. Their guns wouldn't melt these locks, just blast them to pieces. Anything else would require a telekinetic to ram it from the other side, something Cally wasn't even if she'd had the mental energy to spare.

Cally glanced behind her. "Avon, you have us retreating into a firefight."

"And our allies. If they don't kill us."

Angelus, he noted with relief, had gone to his demon face. Good. Now if he would just keep it up

— and if they lived through this — Cally might not ask any awkward questions before he was ready for them.

Except the vampires smelled Willow. They didn't care about Buffy anymore. Maybe they didn't care about whatever mission whatever vampire lord currently in control of the city must have sent them on — and there must have been one or they wouldn't be attacking a hospital en masse. Hyped up with battle and ready for a feeding frenzy, all they were interested in was getting past Buffy and grabbing the source of that raw blood smell.

He crouched down, letting go of Willow's legs with one arm so he could pull his gun. Cally was looking too pale, possibly ready to pass out herself. He managed to shoot a few, but they would overwhelm him by sheer numbers. Dumping Willow and running seemed like the only way out, but that wasn't an option. If only he had one of Dayna's explosives—

"Hi, Avon," a bubbly, irritatingly cheerful voice said. He turned and saw Regan leaning against the wall — and chewing gum, no less — a large canister of oxygen in her hands. "Guess what I found?" With that, she tossed the can down the hall.

Angelus saw it coming, grabbed Buffy and dived down the hallway, out of the impact zone. The oxygen tank soared over them and exploded in a glorious fireball. Shrapnel and flames burst in all directions. There was no way Angelus could escape the blast, and if just one piece of flying metal cut Buffy in the wrong place—

He looked at Regan, relieved to see her chanting under her breath, that annoying, smug smile plastered all over her face. The fire didn't even singe Angelus and, when Buffy landed almost at Avon's feet, there wasn't a cut on her. "Hello, Miss Summers," he said. "Glad you could stop by." He checked the door to Willow's room. Still closed. But Cally was shaking now. "But we must be going. Care to join us?"

Angelus helped her up. "Come on, Buffy, let's get out of here." They got up and ran, just as the sprinkler system kicked in. Avon looked back at Regan's little inferno. No, the flames stubbornly continued to burn. It would still be a while before anyone could use that route.

"Hey," Regan said, "don't I get a thank you?"

"No," Avon said. "If we're all alive in the morning, I'll think about it."



Cally was barely aware of the corridor as they raced down it, too caught up in the minds around her. Vampire minds. Flames blazing at the edge of her thoughts. Instead of struggling to sense them, like her own kind, she had to fight to keep them back. She pushed at them, making her thoughts fire to drive them back, only to have new ones blaze up in their place. The effort numbed her, shutting out everything else including her own exhaustion. She didn't realize how close she'd come to the end of her own strength till she stumbled, falling to the floor.

Avon, still a few steps ahead of her, must have heard something. He slowed and looked back. As soon as he saw her, he came to a complete stop. She could see him try to shift the unconscious girl in his arms, to free at least one hand but it was too difficult an endeavor even for his intellect. Before he could work his way around the physics of it, Regan caught her and kept her from hitting the ground. Cally heard her murmur strange words in another language, then something that sounded like her name.

A strange warmth hit her. It started at the base of her spine and coiled upwards till it exploded in her brain, a burning wall ringing her thoughts, keeping the vampires and their endless brush fires away.

"Keep moving!" Regan shouted to the others, "I've got her!" Avon actually hesitated. Cally noticed and knew she should feel touched but was too tired to follow up on the impulse. "They're after the girl, not us!" Regan snapped. "You've got to get her out of here. I'll watch over your friend." When Avon still hesitated, she snarled, "I swore it already. They'll kill the girl. Move!"

References to Willow seemed to be Avon's weak spot. He moved. Regan pulled Cally up. "Come on, we've got to get you away from here before anything else goes wrong," she said, dragging Cally down a different hallway.

Cally, who wasn't sure she could walk two feet by herself, didn't fight, but she asked, "What about the others?"

"They can take care of themselves. But our undead friends are following the little girl, and you don't have the strength of a half-drowned kitten." She pulled Cally into a hospital room, one with a window.

"They can get in there," Cally noted, trying to care as she collapsed onto the end of the bed.

Regan didn't even glance at the window. "They won't. Trust me."

Cally remembered an Auron saying, *He who trusts can never be betrayed, only mistaken*. Trusting Regan, she was sure, would be a very serious mistake. "Because they're after Willow?"

"I am amazed. Avon actually has a friend who listens. And here I thought the two were mutually incompatible."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I don't answer questions. Not often. Still, you need to know some of it. If you're not going to get us killed," she sneered the last, apparently feeling Cally had done enough in that direction. Cally, used to the way Avon put others off with insults, ignored it and waited. Regan finally went on, "The girl has a condition. It's what's caused her coma. It also makes her very attractive to vampires right now. They have a strong sense of smell. That should pass soon, if Avon has any sense at all. But you're still safer away from him. We all are."

"Really? After you've gone through so much work to be here? And to bring me here, too. It wasn't an accident we saw you in the plaza, was it? Why? What's

going on? And don't tell me to ask Avon. I've been put off long enough."

"My, my, you are a feisty one, aren't you? Avon's taste in women always was deplorable."

Cally gritted her teeth. "Tell me."

"And resolute. How pathetically predictable. What next? A speech about my moral obligations? I warn you, that one never works. Besides, why should I share anything I know about Avon with you?"

"Stop the games. I don't know what you and Avon are to each other, but you were never —" Despite what she'd said to Regan earlier, the words stuck in her mouth. "— never lovers." It would have been an insult to say it if he was an Auron, indecent even to suggest such an illicit relationship. Only it wasn't an illicit relationship in the Federation, and Avon wasn't an Auron. She knew that, so long as they abided by certain rules and laws, his people did whatever they liked without further obligation, legal or personal. Avon, she was despairingly sure, had always played by the rules. "I'm not a rival," Cally went on. "These aren't some little, romantic games, whatever you pretend. You're playing with our lives, and I want to know why. Now."

"Pathetically, predictably resolute too. The answers are simple. The red-haired girl is dying. I suppose you noticed? You might say it's our fault. Avon would probably say it's mine, although I was only cleaning up his mess. As usual. He can save her life, by the way. If worse comes to worse, I suppose I could, too." She gave a martyred sigh, "But it would be a great deal of trouble. At the moment, however, so long as he does the grunt work, my associate, Mr. Zerafin, and I feel our own interests would be furthered by her survival, enough so that we've been willing to offer a certain degree of help, although I don't know if it will go much farther. My humanitarian impulses are hardly infinite."

"I didn't think they were. Is that why Avon hates you?"

The comment surprised Regan, and she burst out laughing. "Oh, no," she said, stifling giggles, "he doesn't hate me. He just holds a grudge. *Not* the same thing. I suppose I shouldn't blame him, but he's *such* a little boy sometimes..."

"What happened?"

"Hmm? Oh, his brother ran into some trouble and Avon seems to think I should have gotten him out of it. I suppose I would have," she added carelessly, "but I had a lot going on, just then. Too many irons in the fire. Besides, it's not as if they hadn't gotten into the mess on their own." She shook her head, "You make your blunders and you pay the price."

Cally remembered one of the faces in Zerafin's pile of drawings. "Tobias?" she asked.

"Oh, you've heard of him? I *am* surprised. It's not a subject Avon brings up, much. I wonder if he's actually serious about you?"

"You mean instead of being serious about you?"

Regan smiled, a sad, wistful smile, "I thought you didn't believe that. Is that really what you think?"

Cally hesitated, "No," she admitted, "I don't know what is you between you but — no."

"Ah, like I said, intelligent. Keep thinking, and you just might survive being around him. If it doesn't kill you. Avon's not my type, not that way. And never was. Satisfied?"

"Zerafin?"

"You're a nosy one, Donna. But, no, I'm not *his* type. Any other questions?"

Cally considered. There should be hundreds. But only one came to mind. "What does *Requiescat in Pace* mean?"

Regan frowned. "Your Latin is execrable, did you know? It means 'may he rest in peace.' Or she. Or it. Latin can be a little unclear on those points..."

"Rest in peace?"

Regan sighed. "A prayer for the dead, may their souls know peace, may they not walk the night, unlike some people you've met recently..."

"A prayer for the dead," she repeated. With an odd, detached certainty, she added, "You let his brother die, didn't you?"

"Avon didn't explain everything, did he? Typical. But I take it back about him being serious. For the record, I didn't *let* anything. I simply didn't get around to them in time."

"Because your humanitarian impulses are not infinite," Cally said evenly.

"Understanding at last. A girl can only do so much, Donna. A girl is only *obligated* to do so much. And it was their own fault. Although I shouldn't blame Avon too much. He nearly bled to death trying to keep that kid going. Still, he was only half-grown himself. It wasn't like there was that much he could do." She sighed.

Cally stared at her. And she'd thought the vampires were bad. "You're a monster."

Regan considered that, "No," she said slowly, "I wouldn't say so. I'd just say I've learned to live with these little choices life sends."

"Then why did you bring me here? Did you want an audience to hear you gloat?"

"My dear, you think too poorly of yourself. You're far more than an audience." Regan went over to the window and looked out. "This is *such* a peculiar town. The things I could tell you about it.... But your part is very simple. You're unique, in Sunnydale. And if you had any idea what sort of things have come through here, you'd appreciate what a distinction that is. There are demons who can hear thoughts, but they can't sense a vampires. You can. But you've been going about it all wrong, attacking them. You haven't the strength for it. Still, there's one thing you *could* give me. But, if you can't, you're still unique." She walked away from the window. "If there's one thing working with Mr. Zerafin has taught me, it's that unique things are valuable." She moved before Cally realized what she was doing, grabbing her by the arm and twisting it painfully behind her back. "You just have to find the right market." Then she called at the door, "It's open, Athenian. Come in."

Too late, Cally realized the protective wall Regan had put around her mind worked both ways. She hadn't felt this creature coming and, now, she couldn't fight him. Regan smiled cheerfully as the demon-faced man entered. "Good day, sir," Regan said brightly, sounding like a salesgirl, "I believe I have just what you want right here." In Cally's ear, she hissed, "Do exactly what you're told and you get to live."



Avon followed as Angelus led the way into another room, Buffy and her stakes bringing up the rear. It was, as far as Avon could tell, just another hospital room but at least this one didn't have windows. Unfortunately, it didn't have oxygen tanks either.

Now the adrenalin was wearing off, he realized Regan had outmaneuvered him. If nothing else, they could have had Angel pick up Cally and carry her. It wasn't as if the old vampire would notice the weight. No, Regan hadn't wanted to hang around and, for her own reasons, had wanted to drag Cally off with her. Knowing the old witch, it could range from concern over Willow to wanting to see how many vampires an Auron could deal with under battle conditions. But she'd more or less promised to keep Cally alive. She'd at least try to keep that promise. Probably. And she knew as much about surviving vampires as anyone else on this world. But it bothered him how easily she could still manipulate him after all these years.

Forget it. He had other problems to deal with. He put Willow down on the nearer of the two hospital beds in the room. Behind him, Angelus and Buffy had begun to barricade the door, discussing their own battle strategies.

"—get so many vampires?" Buffy was saying.

"He's linked to them," Angelus was explaining. "Something with the sire-bond —"

There were so many vampires because of Willow, whatever Angelus thought. No, he realized, Angelus had to know better. Willow's blood was like a beacon to every vampire in Sunnydale right now, including him. But there was apparently only so much true love and repentance could make even Angelus admit. Telling Buffy it was all he could do not to drink her best friend's blood must be a bit more than even his compulsion to confess demanded.

Not Avon's problem. What mattered now was taking care of Willow. And Angelus and Buffy were distracted.

The sleeve of his leather jacket, despite its bulk, pulled up easily enough. He took the knife out of his pocket. Wide-bladed and bright, it was etched with stylized Celtic designs and runes. Overly dramatic, he thought, but necessary. He made the cut, quickly and cleanly, just deep enough to give him the blood he needed. He waited while the red drops beaded up on his arm, then pressed it against Willow's mouth.

He heard a startled gasp behind him and looked up to see Buffy staring at him, coming to whatever

conclusions a Slayer came to when she saw a scene like this. But she didn't attack. She might have meant to, but Angelus, also looking on, had caught her by the shoulder, stopping her.

No, he realized, not Angelus. Angelus would have helped Buffy take him apart if he didn't attack first. This was someone else. From the way Buffy's eyes widened as she turned to face the vampire beside her, Avon suspected she had realized that too.



Buffy looked at Angel, wondering what had gotten into him, when she heard Willow take a deep breath. Then she coughed. As Buffy turned to look at her, she sat up and looked around. "What...?" she started to say, then saw Abrams standing beside her. Buffy noticed how he was looking away from Willow, calmly straightening his sleeves. Right. "Oh, no," Willow said, "not you again." Abrams glanced at her. His face was calm, almost as if he'd forgotten she was there, certainly not as if she mattered. So why did Buffy think she'd caught a glimpse of pain in his eyes?

Willow seemed to have caught it too. Then she caught the hospital gown. Her eyes widened in surprise, the rest of her turning red with embarrassment.

"Wil?" Buffy said, coming towards her, not sure if she should be relieved or check for a pulse. Or other signs of demonic possession. "Are you OK?" Buffy sat down by her and patted her hand. Yeah, there was a pulse.

"Yeah, fine," Willow said, her voice weak and a little cracked. "Where are we?"

"Sunnydale Hospital," Buffy said. "Are you *sure* you're all right?"

"Fine," she said, managing to sit up without too much help. "Not even dizzy. What happened?"

Abrams answered, "You had another attack. After your friends... rescued you," he said dryly, shooting Buffy a look. She had to give him points. There weren't many people who could make rescuing someone from a kidnapper sound like a felony offense. Especially when they were the kidnapper. "Thanks to them, you got to the hospital in time to be in a coma while vampires attacked and tried to kill you."

"Coma?" Willow repeated. "People don't go into comas from anemia. Do they?"

Abrams looked at her coldly. "Then you don't have anemia, do you?"

Uneasily, Buffy looked from Angel to Willow to Abrams. "So, what was wrong with Willow? And how did you "fix" it?" Besides with a knife and his own blood, that is.

"I haven't fixed it," Abrams said sharply. "But I've stopped it. Temporarily." He looked at Willow and paused, looking for words. He actually seemed awkward for a minute, Buffy thought. "You haven't been anemic," he told her. "It's... a blood disease, an hereditary one. It develops in the teens. Usually. About your age. To recover, you need a... transfu-

sion. From an adult. One who's already survived it." Now, he really was getting awkward. All right it was gross, and Abrams was leaving out a lot — in Buffy's experience, medical treatments involving rune etched knives weren't the kind *Reader's Digest* ran articles on. But they still weren't the sort people got embarrassed over. *So what's he planning on telling Willow this "cure" entails? If he's trying to set Willow up for something, if he even thinks about it, I'll kick him from here to the Mayo Clinic.*

Willow's mind, as usual, was working in a completely different direction. "Hereditary? But I'm not — I mean, nobody's ever —"

Abrams, for all his attempt to look calm and collected, was floundering. If the situation had been different, Buffy would have laughed. "Have your parents ever told you — I mean, do you know — you're adopted?"

*Adopted?* Buffy didn't like where this was going. But Willow blinked, as if Abrams words didn't connect to the conversation, "Huh? Oh, sure. My mom's into all your modern child rearing theories," she explained, rolling her eyes. "I had to listen to all these long speeches about how it wasn't good to keep me in the dark and I'd just assume there it was something bad if they kept secrets — I was about seven before I finally managed to listen to the whole thing and figure out what she was talking about. But, how did you... oh." Willow finished in a small voice. She did a much better job at looking awkward than Abrams, Buffy thought.

Buffy decided to intervene. "Uhm, excuse me," she said, raising her hand and wiggling her fingers. "Comment from the Peanut Gallery. Are you trying to tell us you and Willow are... related?"

Abrams was looking harassed. "What do you think I just said?"

"I think you just said you can come up with a good story under pressure. I also think you're out of your mind if you think we're going to believe you."

Abrams' rescue came from an unexpected quarter, surprising them both. "No, Buffy, it's what I thought," Angel said, leaning casually against the wall — what Buffy recognized as the deliberately casual, no fight intended stance. "Once I realized what he was." He gave one of his small, tight lipped grins — apparently, demon recognition entitled you to an inside joke. "*Mo chlann*," Angel said, "The *Seanfear*'s children, right?"

Warily, Abrams nodded, probably no more sure than Buffy what Angel was going to tell them — or how much.

But at least Angel didn't have a credibility gap. "I don't suppose you'd mind translating that?" she asked.

"It's simple. I told you about the *Seanfear*, how he —"

"Wait," Abrams interrupted, "You *told* her —"

Angel cut him off. "She needed to know," he said evenly. He looked at Willow. "They both do." He went back to the story, not explaining that cryptic comment.

*Great*, Buffy thought. *Why couldn't I have found a communicative vampire to date?*

"The *Seanfear* was in love with... a vampire. A long time ago. It didn't work out, and a clan of Watchers was mostly wiped out because of it. He... regretted it." There was a deep pain in Angel's eyes as he told the story. Well, Buffy thought, he could probably relate. "He got involved in the fight. A little late, but... well, the killing ended. But the Watchers were still dead. He tried to make amends. He... started a new line."

"Started?" Buffy said. "Excuse me, you mean he, uh..." *Cold-bloodedly started seducing girls left and right so he could set up the children for Giles' job? Started an orphanage with a mad scientist's basement for biological experiments? Remembered to make a wish on his birthday cake?* "What do you mean?" She noticed Willow looked about as sick — desperate to hear the answer as she was.

Fortunately, people asking dumb questions seemed to put Abrams back in comfortable territory. With a good mixture of contempt and condescending exasperation, he said, "It was simple. Most Watchers lines are human with a small, arcane heritage. Like your friend Giles. The Hafocs line. You know what that is, don't you?"

"A bunch of stiff, British guys who like to get together, listen to classical music, drink tea, and discuss the best way to put a stake in something?"

"Besides that. Hafoc is an old word for hawk, a bird you have on this world. A merlin is a type of hawk. It's also —"

"*Merlin?*" Willow said, "You're saying Giles is related to *Merlin?*"

"I take it you've heard of him?"

"Uh, yeah, but... Giles?" she added to herself, "I've got to watch *Sword in the Stone* again."

"Fine," Buffy said. "Giles. Merlin. I'll remember this the next time I need pull heavy armaments out of a rock. Now, how about you?"

"I don't know what stories you've heard about Merlin," Abrams said, although Buffy bet he didn't expect her to retain anything useful, the way he said it. Or accurate. "But he was part... demon." Abrams said the word as if it offended him. Yeah, he was the kind who must view anything irrational as a major insult. How did he handle having a whole family founded in irrationality? Not very well, Buffy guessed. As if he'd heard what she was thinking, Abrams said, "My family descends from —" he looked at Angel sourly, "— the *Seanfear* and his deceased... lady love." A lot of sarcasm on 'lady love.' He seemed to rank romance right up there with question and answer sessions or root canal. Buffy thought it was probably a good thing the *Seanfear* wasn't around to hear his grandkid's opinions. But there was a problem in the logic.

"Vampires can't have descendants," Buffy objected. "I mean, not, uh... you know. They're dead. They can't..."

"They can," Abrams assured her, "with enough magic and gene-splicing."

"Wait," Willow said, "you're saying I'm... that I'm not.... What am I?"

Abrams looked at her, an expression in his dark eyes actually bordering on compassion. *He's got to be telling the truth*, Buffy realized. *She's the only person he doesn't treat like they were a road-kill wannabe.* "You're human," he told her gently. "This is the only time in your life you even need to think about it, unless you have children of your own, someday. It's not all bad," he added, sounding almost *shy*, for crying out loud! "A lot of your gift for magic probably comes from — from us. Some of your talents.... And while the blood fever — while this lasts, you can't be made a vampire. It's not all bad."

"No, they just zero in on her from all over the state," Buffy said. "Just tell me one thing: what made you Willow's blood donor?"

"What do you think?" he said wearily.

"Uh-uh, I'm not playing that game. Say it flat out."

His eyes met hers, dark and hostile, but he finally said, "Because I'm her father."

"My... what?" Willow said, her voice ending in a squeak.

Abrams turned back to her to say whatever he was going to, but Buffy didn't give him a chance. "Her father. And you knew she'd die without your help. OK, why don't you explain why this is the first time you've come to visit?"

"Because I didn't know she existed till a few days ago!" Abrams snapped. He closed his eyes, regaining equanimity. "Willow, I'm sorry. Your mother meant a great deal to me. But there were...." He tried to search for a word big enough to cover what there had been, and failed, "... problems," he finished.

*How lame can you get?* Buffy wondered. "Problems," she repeated levelly. "Big enough you walked out on her and Wil. I've heard this one before. Exactly how 'big' were they? Or do you mean *she*?"

"*They*," Abrams said, "were trying to kill me. I thought Anna — Willow's mother — I was told she died. I didn't know she'd survived till years after. And I didn't know we had a child." He looked at Willow. "Or what had happened to you. Believe me, if I'd known, I wouldn't have... I would have come for you."



Regan hissed a warning in Cally's ear, then shoved her at the vampire who caught her in a firm, cold grip. She had one consolation this time, that she couldn't feel his mind the way she had before. It was not much consolation. For lack of alternatives, she spat in his face. He laughed, wiping the spittle aside with one hand and pulling her neck to his teeth with the other. She felt his cold tongue brush against her skin a moment before the teeth pressed into her throat.

"You don't want to do that," Regan drawled. "At least, not if you want to keep her. If you just want the meal, go ahead."

The vampire pulled her back a little, looking at Regan curiously. "What do you mean?" he asked, still holding Cally tightly.

"I mean she's not exactly human. Drink her and drain her and never regain her," she said, as if it were a nursery rhyme. "No matter how much blood you pour down her throat."

"Explain."

Regan shrugged. "I don't know if you've ever run into telepaths or mind reading demons or anything like that before, but most of those things can't read a vampire. Thoughts are there, but no reflection, just like the rest of you."

"Why else would I be bargaining for her?"

"Innate sadism? But back to Aurons. An Auron — I'm hoping you haven't forgotten too much Greek to understand what that means?"

Cally guessed that last was a jab from the way Regan said it, whatever Greek was and whatever she thought it had to do with her people. But the vampire only smiled as if it were a joke. "It's poor Greek, but are they really children of the dawn?"

"By George, I think you've got it."

"So, she doesn't see reflections. She makes her own light."

"There's just no slipping anything past you is there?"

Cally tried to say something. The vampire's hand tightened around her throat before she could get out more than a squeak. Before the room had gotten too dark, he let her breathe again, never bothering to look at her. "So, what does this have to do with her next life?"

"Dawn. Daylight. I don't understand it. Aurons insist their gifts are natural, and I tend to believe them. But something in them really is sun driven. If you kill her, she probably won't raise up again. Even if she does, she won't have the mind-powers she has now. She may not even have enough intellect to light a lightbulb. Understand me?"

The demon caressed Cally's throat. "If that's true, she's worth much less than you promised me."

"That would be so much more convincing if you weren't drooling on her."

"She smells sweet," the vampire admitted. "And she's pretty enough." He smiled hungrily, "For some things, a living woman can be so much more amusing than one of my own. But you offered me more than a few nights' diversions and a meal."

Regan rolled her eyes. "So, I'll deliver. *You* can't change her, not by yourself. You need additives, the magical equivalent of artificial preservatives and flavors."

"And you only mean to charge me a small, extra fee, I suppose?" He sounded urbane enough, but Cally doubted yes was the right answer.

"Oh, no," Regan said. "Trust me, just doing it will be favor enough. Pure vampire blood won't do it. You'll need to mix yours with a hybrid's, someone part vampire, part human. His name's Avon."



The doors of the morgue crashed open as Angel stormed through, bringing the small alien/lunatic/clever liar (or whatever he was), Vila, with him. He threw him down in the center of the room. "People," Angel said. "We've got problems."

Vila, who had been trying to pick up the nurse treating his ankle just a few minutes ago and was now dealing with a demon faced Mr. Seraphim (or whatever his name was) was inclined to agree.



Abrams (or Avon, Buffy wasn't sure what she was supposed to be calling him now) pulled out a plastic looking ray gun, turned on the ray beam, and slowly sliced a hole in the floor.

"What if someone's standing under it?" Buffy asked.

"There's no one —" Angel and Avon began at the same time, stopped, and looked at each other. Darkly. "There's no one underneath," Avon said. "The room's empty. Besides, the beam only goes a few inches."

"Ohh-kay," Buffy said slowly, "and how did we know who was in the room? Tricorder readings?"

Whether or not Avon knew what tricorder readings were, he ignored Buffy's question, only saying, obliquely, "There's more than one way to empty a room." Then he finished the cut.

"Gee, I hate to tell you this," Buffy said, looking at the cut slab of plaster, "but it's not falling out."

Avon looked at her impatiently, "Of course not," he said. "We're trying not to attract notice. Dropping a piece of ceiling onto the floor below isn't going to help."

Buffy held her temper. Barely. *Willow's father*, she reminded herself. *Heredity is a bigger mystery than biology class ever told us.* She looked at Willow, who was wearing Avon's jacket over her hospital gown and still dazed by everything that had been dumped on her, birth-parents — a birth-father, at least, and not one Buffy would have wanted.

"What's wrong?" Willow asked.

Embarrassed to be caught staring, Buffy looked away. "Just, uh, trying to see the resemblance."

"Oh." Willow studied her feet. "Do you?"

"Oh. Uhm. You're kind of fair skinned. Like him. And your hair's straight. I don't know, maybe your build is kind of the same."

"Oh." Willow thought about it. "You think it's that strong?"

"No!" she caught herself, "I mean, not really. You're nice, patient, considerate — I mean, you've noticed there are other people in Sunnydale besides just you. That puts you in a whole different universe than this guy."

Willow looked uncomfortable. "He's not that bad."

"I'm just letting off steam," Buffy said quickly. "This is a lot to handle. An awful lot. And, yeah, he knows he's not the only guy on the planet," Buffy admitted. *Or he wouldn't want the rest of us to get off and get out of his way so badly.*

She tried again to see the resemblance. Willow was polite, easy to get along with, compassionate — well, there was the fair skin and straight hair. The eyes — nah, not the eyes. Abrams' — Avon's! — were dark brown, more like Xander's and Cordelia's than Willow's (Xander and Cordelia related, now there was a *really* sick thought). She checked Willow's eyes, just to confirm her opinion, but Wil's hazel eyes, that usually changed shade with any shift of light, were holding steady at tawny brown. Brown.

*Still not like his*, Buffy thought. Just look. Total innocence, that's what you saw in Willow's eyes. Naive. Trusting. Unlike Avon. If you could drill two holes in someone's face and hit toxic waste, that would be his eyes. Angel as an evil demon had had more soul than this guy. So did zombies. So did killer witches, and doomsday demons, and... just about anything else she could think of. There was no way they could be related.

Except they were. Except there was something in Avon's eyes she had seen in Willow's a few times. Like the time she took apart that cyber-demon who'd pretended to love her. Or the time she'd been under Amy the amateur's spell to love Xander and been willing to take an ax to him rather than see any of the other girls under the same spell get him. Or the time she'd grabbed the gun, knowing the attacking monster was her boyfriend, Oz, and shot. *So what am I thinking? That this guy goes around shooting old girlfriends and best friends?* She looked at his eyes and thought about it. *Yeah, I could see it happening.*

"What are you thinking?" Willow asked.

Buffy swallowed an honest answer and hedged. "There are some things alike about you, besides the hair." She thought fast. Disturbingly, she didn't have to think long. "He's intelligent, curious. You both stay really calm in a crisis."

"You mean besides fainting?"

"When you're working on a solution, you're calm. You've kept cool when I was losing it — when *Giles* was losing it."

"Giles lost his cool? When did that happen?"

"The band candy thing."

"Oh. Right. OK, I guess I can be calm." She didn't sound too sure of it, but she was trying.

"Just don't be as obnoxious about it," Buffy added.

Willow let out a breath and even managed a grin. "Right."

Because Avon was obnoxious. Stuck on himself worse than Cordelia ever was. Obnoxious, self-centered, conceited — *And vulnerable*, Buffy realized, not sure why the word fit but knowing it did. But not vulnerable like Willow.

Like Angel, when he'd been freed from centuries in hell. Desperate, beast-like, driven to the edge. To the edge, over the edge, and about five miles under. Twenty years ago, had Avon been some goofy, insecure kid like Willow? And had he spent the time since in his own private hell? What had he said about thinking Willow's mother was dead long before Willow was born? And she *had* died, just not



when he thought.

Buffy noticed he hadn't said anything about how.

For now, unaware of Buffy, Willow, and their brooding, Avon was simply looking around, all homicidal impulses and personal despair — if there were any — out of view. He spotted the metal crank on the hospital bed and brusquely told Angel, "Try using that."

Angel seemed amused, in his very sedate sort of way, at Avon ordering him around. But he broke off the crank. He examined the end which, to Buffy's practiced eye seemed sharp enough for... well, for most of the things she used sharp stuff for. Only it wasn't wood. But Angel seemed satisfied. He stabbed it into the sliced piece of floor, at an angle to make it easier to get a grip on without pulling it out. Then it was just a matter of hoisting the slice out and getting it out of the way, then pulling the crank out. Both the floor chunk and the hole would be out of sight of the door. "Good job," she admitted. Avon was good at this. *Yeah, probably lots of experience sneaking out of places.*

Avon ignored her, frowning at the mess they'd made. "It doesn't matter to me," he said, "but people will know something strange happened here in the morning."

"You really are new to Sunnydale, aren't you?" Buffy said. "Trust me, they won't worry about it."

"Most people who live here are good at denial," Willow added. "It's a coping skill."

"Speaking of coping," Buffy added, "let me go first. I'll check things out. Just in case you *didn't* clear everyone out." She moved before Avon had a chance at a comeback and was feeling pretty good about getting the last word. But, as soon as she jumped through, she saw Mr. High-and-Mighty had been right. She double checked, but finally had to call up, "All clear."

"Good," Angel said. "Here comes Willow." He helped lower her down. Then came Avon, with Angel bringing up the rear.

*Right, Buffy thought, don't let Willow in till we know it's safe. Don't leave her alone with Abrams/Avon, and don't leave him as the guy guarding our rear.* Buffy knew that look on Wil's face, and it wasn't called coping. She pulled Willow aside while Avon started on a new hole. "I wasn't trying to be... I mean, I know this is big and... What I mean is, it doesn't matter what he looks like, a new father's a lot to deal with. Are you OK with... are you OK?" Buffy asked her.

"Sure," Willow said, sounding strained. "I mean, my mom's always gone on about how, if I want to meet my birth-parents someday, she'd help me, support me, be totally for it, whatever. I don't think she means it — she has this twitch thing when she doesn't mean it — but that's how she talks. And I never expected my birth-father to be part demon or anything, so it's not like Mom's pep talks really covered this scenario, anyway. But I'm dealing with it."

The strain was definitely showing. Willow was usually better at whispering in front of the enemy.

Or parents. But Avon couldn't help overhearing the last part. And he wasn't the kind of guy to ignore private conversations. "I'm not part demon," he snapped. "Anymore than your friend Giles is." He fixed his dark glare on Angel. "I simply have the misfortune of coming from a very unpleasant family."

"Unpleasant," Angel said, dryly. "Is that what you call it?"

"Also neurotic, meddling, and hero-obsessed," Avon snarled. "Probably why I stay as far apart from them as I can."

"Hero-obsessed," Angel repeated. "That's a new one."

"If you can think of a better term, I'd be glad to hear it."

"You're not really making me feel good about this," Willow said. "I mean, new family and everything. I'd always kind of hoped they weren't, you know, nuts or, dem — uh, anything...."

Willow's nervousness evidently raised Avon's core temperature from zero kelvin to something in the human range in under five seconds. Honestly, it was a wonder he didn't have a rosy glow. In a much gentler tone of voice, he told Willow, "It's not part of... it's not hereditary. Life over a Hellmouth is one thing. Away from it and a few other hotspots, the universe is a rational place. I prefer rationality. My..." There was a slight pause, covering (Buffy guessed) a large number of deleted profanities, "... family doesn't. That's all."

"Excuse me," Buffy said. "Let me get this straight. You're some kind of Watcher. You have to do the pseudo-vampire bit to pull through puberty, and you're telling me you just want the simple, logical life?" Avon wasn't a monster. He was cousin Marilyn from *The Munsters*. Crossed with Mr. Spock. *I need a break*, Buffy thought, *I really, really need a break.*

"Demonstrably," Avon said. He added to Willow, who (unlike Buffy) seemed to rate complete sentences. "There have been a lot of heros in my family. It ended badly for them."

*What's the average life-expectancy of a Slayer?* Buffy asked him the same question she asked herself about her own calling. "But what about the people around them? Did it end badly for them?"

"More often than you would believe," Avon said wearily. He let Angel pull out this piece of floor, and down they went, in the same order as before, onto the second floor.

"What about your friends?" Buffy asked, after they'd come through, "Mr. and Mrs. Space Cadet? You're not telling me they're Watchers, too." *But, if they are, Giles will never hear the end of it.*

"They're associates," Avon said, "and they seem to have gotten into this on their own. Why?" he asked casually. "What did they tell you?"

"You mean besides their story that this couldn't be Earth and that we're a lost colony? Not a thing. Why?"

"Ah," said Avon. "That would be Vila. I wouldn't worry about anything he says. His grip on reality has always been... negotiable."

"You have ray guns. You're cutting the floor with one now. And you did things with computers that made Willow stand up and take notice. But you made mistakes like a... what did you call it, Wil? A newbie?"

"Newbie," Willow said.

"Right. You said that was because these were different than the ones you're used to. So, either your from the Twilight Zone, or—"

Willow suddenly interrupted her. "You're my *father*," she said, as if it had just hit her. "When I first saw you, I thought you were *cute*." She looked sick. "This is one of those oedipal things, isn't it? My mom's right. Everybody *does* have these deep rooted—"

"Wil, try and stick with the program, will you? There are some holes in this guy's story."

"What you felt was normal," Avon said patiently. "On some level you can sense the person who can see you through this, who can save your life. If you have any self-preservation at all, you know you need them. At least for a short time. If you don't know why, it confuses you. At best."

"I hear you still hate the guts of the one who pulled you through," Angel said.

"That," Avon said acidly, "is for other reasons." Angel didn't pursue the matter, not even when Buffy looked at him inquiringly. Great.

Then they were on the first floor. "OK," said Buffy. "Make a break for the door? Find a well populated corner to hang out in till daylight?"

"We go down one more floor," Angel said. "We're right over the morgue." He glanced at Avon. "And some people need to get acquainted."

Meaning what? Giles and Avon? Buffy looked at Willow, about to ask what she'd prefer, just to get one up on the guys and their mutual secrets game. But Willow didn't look up to it. She was still in some kind of shock. And pale. Paler than she'd been just a little while ago. "Wil? You OK?"

Too late, Buffy realized Willow had, in her slow, methodical way, been working up to freaking out. "You mean for someone whose had their whole world turned inside out?" she said, voice steadily rising with hysteria, "Yeah, I'm just fine. I mean, now I know where I get the witch stuff. That's good, isn't it? And the computers. And, oh, yeah, the hair. Did my mom — my birth-mother — was she a redhead? Or —"

"Wil, sit down," Angel said. "You're a little overwhelmed. You need—"

"I need!" Willow said manically, "I need a father — and a blood transfusion — and crosses all over my room — and a psychiatrist — and — and —" But she didn't finish. Her eyes rolled up in her head as the color completely drained from her face and she fell like a sack of wheat. Angel and Avon managed to reach her at the same time, on different sides, catching her. Noticing each other, they exchanged dark, sardonic looks. Buffy was beginning to see the point to Giles' kind of Watcher. They didn't get into one-upmanship with the vampires.

"Is she—?" Buffy asked.

"She just fainted," Angel said. "She'll come around."

"She shouldn't be fainting again," Avon said, finally beginning to stress. Great. "Not yet." He took Willow from Angel, lowering her carefully to the floor and smoothing back her hair, concern almost cracking through his stony features.

"The Hellmouth—" Angel said.

"The Hellmouth couldn't account for this. We should have had hours. We should have had days — weeks — before she got this far. There's something wrong."

"Then we'll fix it," Angel said simply. "But, first, we have to get out of here." He took Avon's gun and began cutting the last hole.

Buffy went up beside him, keeping an eye on Willow, who was opening her eyes and listening to whatever Avon had to say to her. Buffy couldn't make out the words, but his tone was low and soothing. *Unreal. This is all very unreal.* "What did he mean, it shouldn't be going this fast?"

"This thing has a progression, a pattern," Angel said as he cut. "It usually gives plenty of warning signs. The Hellmouth may speed it up but, he's right, it shouldn't speed it up this much."

"Fine, it shouldn't be happening. I agree. So why is it?"

"The Athenian," Angel whispered, so softly Buffy could barely hear. But he still checked on Avon and Willow, making sure they weren't listening. "It might be something he's doing to the Hellmouth—"

"Don't tell me *he's* trying to open it—"

That actually surprised a laugh out of Angel. "Hardly. He likes the world just the way it is. And he doesn't like to share. No, he may be drawing on it for some spells, but he won't open it and let a universe of demons in. But he may be casting spells around Willow, trying to get a focus on her. Don't worry," he added. "She'll be all right."

"You're sure?" *Convince me. She's my best friend. Lie to me. Do anything you have to. Just convince me.*

"No. But there's a reason no one but us ran into vampires. You didn't see any hospital staff, did you? No doctors or nurses, no patients, no armed security. Even in Sunnydale, it takes work to keep that many people from noticing this big an attack."

Power. Lots of it. "Great."

He managed a tight grin. "You took the words right out of my mouth." He shoved the crank into the plaster one last time and hoisted it out. Willow, Buffy was glad to see, was on her feet again. "You first." Angel told Buffy. She jumped down into the morgue, landing lightly and looking around. "Everybody OK?" she asked, looking them over. Yeah, everyone was here and all right, Giles, Xander, Cordelia, and.... Her heart stopped. This wasn't possible.

"Buffy!" Angel said, rushing across the room to her. "Are you all right? That guy you were with, he's not—"

Then Angel — the other Angel — came down through the roof. He wasn't surprised to see his twin.

"He means I'm not him," he said calmly. "I'm Zerafin."



Angel found himself staring at the other man — Zerafin, if Vila knew what he was talking about. He'd probably exaggerated the resemblance — half-hysterical and scared out of his wits, he might have believed Angel was Giles, if he'd said he was — he hadn't seen his own face in centuries, so he couldn't be sure. But he knew the faces of his family. He saw them every night in his dreams, his nightmares, and this man could have been one of them. But Angel knew only too well how they died, each and every one of them. There was no way this man could be his kin, no matter how strong the resemblance, no way at all.

"*Dhia dhuit*," the man said easily. *God to you*. A greeting used in Ireland as long as even Angel could remember.

"*Dhia is Muire dh* —" he began automatically, *God and Mary to You*. then stopped abruptly, hardly noticing as Abrams and Willow came through the ceiling hole, hardly noticing Willow was conscious, if very confused as Abrams pulled her out of the line of fire. *Later*. So the man spoke Irish, *Gaeilge*. Lots of people did these days. Giles did. Angel could see him following the conversation with interest. But those people spoke the language as it had survived in the west and south in the present day, not as Angel's own people had spoken it in their corner of Ireland two centuries ago, not as this man was speaking it now. No, it was all in his head. The man spoke two words and, because he looked like family, Angel thought he sounded like them, too. "*Cad is ainm duit?*" he demanded.

The man smiled. "*Is mise Aingeal*."

Angel shook his head, refusing to believe him. "*Nil...*" But the sound of the words was right. The way Angel had lived back then, he realized, he could have had a son, he could have had a legion of sons. And if one of them, somehow, had survived the poverty and hunger that plagued all of Ireland's poor in those days — but especially fatherless children born in the back streets and brothels — maybe he could have grown up to look like his father.

But he'd be dead. And Angel would have heard if there was another vampire, just a few years younger than him, with this face. *Giles* would have read it somewhere in his books and warned Buffy. It couldn't be. But he spoke like one of his own people.

A sick joke of Darla's, maybe? She'd found a man who looked like him, who maybe was kin to him. Then she killed him, changed him, and kept it secret all these centuries because — because — Motive escaped him. But it was possible.

Except for his speech. Even before the language was dying, the one used in a house like his father's and the one spoken by street walkers and beggars was never the same. Darla had never mastered his dialect. She couldn't have taught it to anyone. An-

gel would hear the difference in this man's speech. Wouldn't he?

"Uh, guys?" Buffy said. "Want to let us in on it?" She was trying to sound light hearted and failing. She had also moved out of arms reach of both of them. Probably ready to grab her stake in half a second, once she knew who she was aiming at. Maybe. She'd found it hard enough to kill him the last time. Angel looked at Giles, hoping he would tell her, hoping he would add the rational explanation Angel knew had to be behind this if he could just see it.

"He wanted to know who I am," Zerafin said easily. "I told him."

"Angel's long lost twin brother?" Xander hazarded.

"No," the man said. "Angel."

"That's funny," Xander said, refusing to be fazed by this news. "Cause you just said you were Zerafin."

"I am," the man admitted, leaning back against the wall. Probably trying to look nonthreatening and friendly. Try again. "And I have other names," he went on. "One you may have heard. *Seanfear*. Or *Seanathair*."

*Seanathair*. Giles started at that one. Willow did too, then frowned, obviously trying to remember if that meant what she thought it did. *Don't tell me she's been studying Irish, too. And from an Englishman?* She could have asked him. It would have been good to teach someone his own language, to hear it again. Any time but now.

"Meaning...?" Buffy said, looking back and forth between them. Giles kept quiet, and Willow (thankfully) seemed sure she'd got it wrong. The other man, Zerafin, only smiled at Angel, waiting for him to answer.

"*Seanfear* is old man," Angel said at last. "*Seanathair* is.... It doesn't matter. Who are you?"

"I told you."

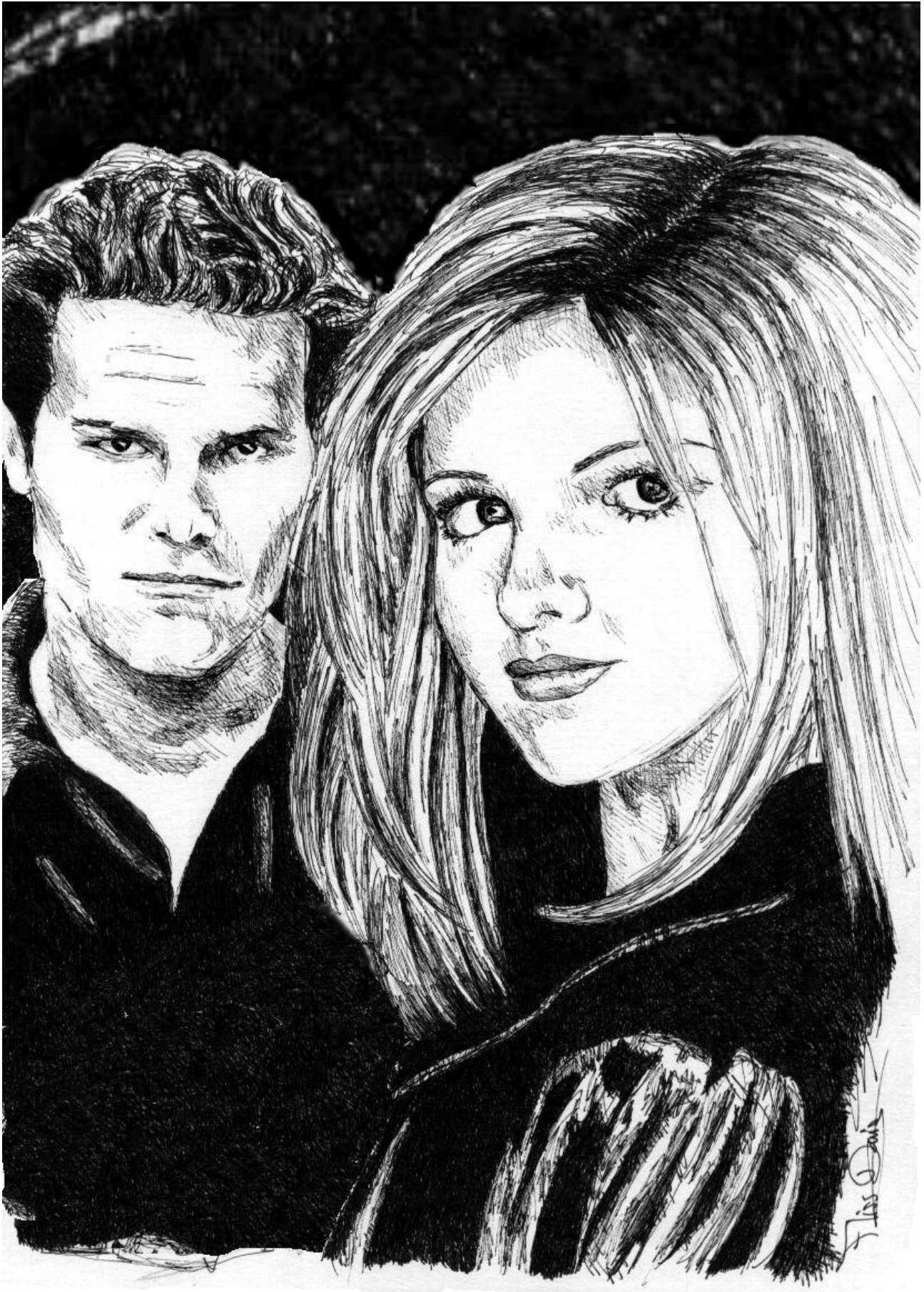
"I want a better answer."

Buffy looked at Zerafin uncertainly, "You told me the *Seanfear* was a demon. You said...." Whatever he'd said, Buffy was no more comfortable with it than Angel was with *Seanathair*. She didn't finish.

Zerafin looked at her compassionately. "I told you the truth," he said gently. "I'm a demon, Buffy, a vampire. You know that. The rest is true, too."

Compassion. Buffy's strength. And her weakness. Angel had used it against her often enough. But she rallied and shot back sarcastically, "What, about you falling for another vampire? Big surprise there. But you wouldn't have done that with a soul. And you wouldn't have cared what she did without one."

Vampire? Love? Angel was dying to know what she was talking about but he didn't say anything, waiting for the other man, whatever and whoever he was, to answer. There was a long silence, adding him to the list of people with truths they didn't want to talk about. Unlike Buffy and Angel, this man — Zerafin or *Seanfear* or whoever he was — finally told them his. "You were the vampire, Buffy," he said very



quietly. He let that settle as he looked from face to face. “You know Avon’s not from your time. Neither am I. Originally, things went differently in Sunnydale. There wasn’t any Willow. She hadn’t been born. So, you didn’t go to rescue her when the Master’s servants took her. That meant Xander wasn’t rescued either. So, he couldn’t save you when you were taken by the Master. You died.” His voice fell to a whisper. “But I wouldn’t let you stay dead.” Looking at Buffy, his eyes were full of grief and pain, the pain of damnation Angel knew only too well. But it was worse, he realized, deeper and more lost than anything he had ever felt. Angel still had his hope of forgiveness. This man, meeting Buffy’s gaze, had none.

“No,” Angel said, not sure what he was denying, “I wouldn’t have been there, not without Xander. I couldn’t face the Master. He made me go.” Not an easy admission to make, not in front of Buffy, but easier to bear than what this man was saying. At his worst, Angel would have let Buffy die, nothing more. Please, Heaven, nothing more...

“You would have gone,” the man said quietly. “Sooner or later. You were fighting with your fears and your feelings for her long before he came. In five minutes. Or ten. Or twenty. You would have gone. She’s the Slayer, with all her kind’s gifts to hold on to life. Or not give into death. Lying in the Master’s pool, in the pit of his power, she had time. She could wait.”

Giles, to Angel’s relief, finally injected a dose of reason, “The powers of the Hellmouth and the powers of the Slayer are opposed by nature. You’re saying it helped keep her alive?”

“Do you think there’s anything it wouldn’t do to damn the Slayer?” He looked back at Buffy. “I couldn’t breathe for you, the way Xander could. I couldn’t make your heart beat again. If I had a life of my own to give you, I would. But I don’t. There was only one thing I could do. And I did it.” He closed his eyes, reliving old pains. “In that place, with the power rising, you revived before the Hellmouth finished opening. You killed the Master. But not before he saw what you’d become. He died laughing.

“And I wouldn’t believe it. I thought I could keep you from being... being like the others. I believed you when you said you wouldn’t feed on humans because you loved me. Or I tried to. Until you fed on Giles. Until you changed him.” He faced the Watcher. “One of your line’s gifts is being overlooked. Demons forget about you unless you make them look at you. There’s a tale of vampires sent to hunt down a girl who was going to warn a Watcher and have him send for the Slayer. And they killed her. But they never touched the Watcher standing just in arm’s reach, the Watcher she had already warned. But Buffy could never forget you. Another vampire, if they thought of you at all, would have just killed you. She didn’t.” And that was the truth, Angel realized with a shock. If he hadn’t worked with Giles, he never would have thought of him when he’d lost his soul and fought Buffy. As it was, he’d left Jen-

nie Calendar’s body in Giles’ house because he had to leave it somewhere. And because he was used to causing pain. But he’d never hunted Giles, no matter how much pain he was trying to cause Buffy, until the very end. Even then, it was only because Giles was the one person he knew who had the knowledge he needed, not because he was Buffy’s friend. As if he’d never seen him.

Zerafin went on, looking at Giles, now. “The other Watchers weren’t safe from you. Their gift doesn’t work against one of their own. If they’d known you were dead, they might have protected themselves. But they didn’t. They didn’t even know *Buffy* was dead. You’d told them she’d been revived — you believed it yourself — and none of you ever questioned how. Till it was too late. Same as me.”

Giles wasn’t buying it. “I know what vampires are like,” he said calmly. “Lusts drive them. Buffy would have taken your soul soon enough, so why did you stop her?” Interesting question. Only, Angel noticed, Zerafin hadn’t said he’d stopped her.

He didn’t say it now. But he answered the question. “Because breaking my curse requires peace. A moment’s pure peace. I lied to myself about what she was, but I knew. She had Buffy’s memories, her courage, her sense of humor, everything about her I loved. Except her soul. I’d made her a demon, a demon who would destroy everything the Slayers and Watchers had fought for through centuries. Do you think there’s any peace in that? Even for a moment? For a single heartbeat?”

“Well, there sure isn’t a high I.Q.” Xander said. Sarcastic, irreverent Xander, unimpressed by logic and hating Angel on principle. Angel had never been so grateful to him. “You really expect us to believe you dated a vampire and never knew what she did in her spare time?”

“She was the way she’d always been, in so many ways,” he whispered. “I thought, if she... cared for me, she’d listen when I told her not to prey on your kind. Because she knew I couldn’t bear it. I tried to believe that.”

“So...” Buffy said awkwardly, “uhm, what happened? To her — me — whoever she was.”

“She stopped pretending. She didn’t even try. She would come to me still warm from feeding, the smell of blood on her lips. I saw Giles.... I tried to stop her, but it was too late. She’d gotten rid of the Master and taken his place, consolidated her kingdom while I’d stood around doing *nothing*. And she wouldn’t kill me.” He looked at Angel and said, in a whisper only Angel heard, “*A Liam*, she wouldn’t kill me.”

*A Liam*. Liam, Angel’s real name that not even Darla ever used. Meeting Zerafin’s eyes, Angel believed him at last. And he also understood what Zerafin was telling him, knew he was the only one there who understood what he was saying.

If Angel had ever fallen into the Master’s hands after joining up with the Slayer, death was the least of his worries. That was the Master’s reward for loyal servants who had only failed in a task. Imprison-

ment, torture, and the knowledge he had failed — failed to protect Buffy, Sunnydale, the world; failed to redeem himself and left everyone else to pay the price — the Master knew what that would do to him. And the Master knew how to do plenty of other things as well. So did his servants. Avoid fire and wood, and there was almost nothing you couldn't do to a vampire. Again, and again, and again.

Suddenly, he knew there would be one difference if it had been Buffy instead of the Master. With the Master, he would have failed — but he would have fought him. Zerafin couldn't fight Buffy. It had been his own weakness that had made her what she was, his own weakness that had created all that evil, his own weakness — *Angel's* weakness — that had left him a drunk fool in Ireland, following after Darla and asking her to let him into the dark world he sensed glittering around her instead of running for his life — his life and the lives of everyone he knew. So, when this shattered remnant of her wanted him to hurt and suffer, he would have accepted it because he'd deserved it. He'd earned every moment of it.

And, he realized with cold clarity, no matter what she did to him, if there had ever been a moment when she looked at him, needing him, needing whatever peace and comfort lost souls could give each other, he would have given that as well. Because she didn't deserve what she had become. Because it was Angel's crime, not hers. Because every sin, every horror she committed was ultimately his, never hers. Vampires just were, they didn't have a choice. He had. Angel didn't explain this to the others. Neither did Zerafin.

"*Seanathair*," Willow said, "Isn't that — doesn't it mean —?"

"Not now, Willow," Abrams said.

"But isn't it Irish for —"

"Grandfather," a clear, ringing voice interrupted as the morgue doors were thrown open. A tall, dark eyed woman, too similar to Abrams to be anything but a kinswoman, strode in, smiling. Several vampires were with her. One held the woman Cally (if she was a woman, Angel wasn't sure), her arm twisted behind her back, forcing her along. One of the other vampires, standing right behind the smiling woman, was the Athenian.



Willow instinctively backed away. Avon stood in front of her. That was a surprise, but a nice one. After all, he hadn't really known her that long, and the Athenian was nasty. But he hadn't seen those pictures in Giles' book, so maybe he didn't know. Maybe she should warn him. Peering over Avon's shoulder, she saw Buffy pulling a stake and Angel carefully backing away from Zerafin. Oh, good idea. If the Athenian didn't know there were two Angels, there wasn't any real reason to tell him, was there?

Zerafin didn't attack. He just stood in the center of the room and looked at the dark haired, smug woman standing beside the Athenian, the woman who called him Grandfather. *Grandfather. How*

*many nutty relatives do I have?* "Regan," Zerafin said, voice was completely flat but still managed to drip with accusation. Wow, they could use him in the drama club.

"Hello, Grandpa," she said brightly. "How's it going?"

"What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious? Making sure I'm on the winning side."

Zerafin looked at the Athenian. "What did you offer her?" he said coldly.

"Immortality," the Athenian said. "Something she didn't think she'd ever get from you." *Immortality*. The word took a minute to register. When a vampire used it, that meant only one thing.

"You know it's a lie, Regan," Zerafin said. "He's offering to kill you and let a demon take up residence in your corpse."

"What can I say, old man? Did you ever stop to think souls are over-rated? Look at you. You had it all, good looks, power, Grandma, three square drinks a day, and what happened? You were miserable. You threw it all away just to keep your conscience quiet and raise a bunch of sniveling brats — you don't mind if I call you a sniveling brat, do you, Avon?"

Willow couldn't see Avon, but his icy, level voice radiated murderous intent, "Have I ever cared what you said?" he asked with forced, shaking mildness.

"You always were such an obnoxious brat. If you weren't my favorite sister's kid.... You should be grateful. It's a blanket deal, immortality for you, your little girl and — what *is* the Auron, anyway? A pet? Or just one of those strays you tolerate while it's useful?" An aunt. A great-aunt, even if she looked early twenties. And cattier than Cordelia. Willow hadn't even thought about what Cally was to Avon, besides maybe a friend. But, whatever it was, she had a strong impression he would have liked to rip his aunt's tongue out for what she'd just said.

Avon glanced sharply at Cally, then the Athenian. "It won't do you any good. An Auron —"

"Your aunt warned me of the dangers," the Athenian said smoothly. "And the way around them. Your blood." Willow looked at her great-aunt, who wasn't showing any obvious signs of guilt over setting up her nephew — and Willow, if there wasn't enough blood to go around. *That's gross. Did I just think that?* Besides, it wasn't like it mattered. The Athenian wanted her alive. Maybe it was a really good thing her birth family hadn't raised her.

Avon seemed to be thinking the same thing. The deadly coldness in his voice got a lot colder. "Regan's blood would work just as well," he told the Athenian.

"But I need her to do the spells, and I doubt you would. Assuming you know them. I understand you were never very interested in what she had to teach."

Avon shot another glare at Regan. "I never did share her inflated opinion of her hobbies, no." With a glacial smile, he added, "You realize we'd all prefer to die?"

"Uh, Avon, I *wouldn't* prefer —" Vila interrupted.

“Yes, you would, Vila.” He looked at the enemy. “Well?”

The Athenian was amused. “You’d prefer death. Do you know how many say that? It always ends the same. What you want doesn’t matter. I only need your corpse.”

“And my blood. And my daughter. And my associates. That’s a lot of people, and you expect to do it without our fighting? And without even one of us dying before you can drain us? You’ll excuse me, if I’m not impressed by your chances.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t care. Take him.” Only two of his people moved forward, all the Athenian thought he needed. Oh, dear, Willow thought, getting ready to move. Avon pulled out a cross and a recently used stake, his expression grim. The two vampires hesitated, considering their attack. Willow wished she had a charm bag and tried to spot a pencil.

Then Regan gestured. The cross and stake went flying out of Avon’s hands. He snarled a curse but otherwise didn’t waste time on his back-stabbing aunt, charging the nearest vamp. Having been on the receiving end of vampire attacks, Willow was able to appreciate his technique. When vampires attacked vampires, they were vicious, but they were careful. *Don’t leave yourself open, leave yourself room to fight*, seemed to be the motto. And when humans tried to fight them, assuming they tried to fight at all and didn’t run screaming, which was the smart move, they fought the same way, never realizing till way too late how much damage it took to beat off a vamp.

Running wasn’t one of Avon’s options. The only chance he had was to do the worst he could as quickly as he could, and he was doing it. Wherever he hit the first vamp — Willow couldn’t see — it was enough to make him double over. Stakeless, Avon threw him into the second. *Not bad*, she thought, catching a glimpse of Angel grabbing the vamp nearest him and snapping his spine. Ouch. But the vamp wasn’t dead — really dead? more dead? — but she didn’t think he’d be walking for a long time.

Buffy, brandishing stakes, charged at the Athenian. Regan whispered and gestured, sending her flying into the wall. Angel picked up the wounded vamp and threw him at Regan. She ducked, letting him hit the Athenian. Angel made a leap towards Cally. Willow wondered why she wasn’t fighting vampires herself. She didn’t look drugged but she looked tired. Exhausted, maybe? Or maybe in shock. Willow had been like that the first time she’d met vampires.

Except Cally was doing something. Willow realized she could see some kind of light around her. Only light wasn’t the right word. Neither was see. It was one of those witch things that came and went, like when her fingers tingled around a spell or she knew there was going to be a pop quiz. It was kind of weak and frail, but there were little tendrils going from her to the Athenian. Was she under a spell? Or was she casting one? And what was an Auron,

anyway, and why would you need Avon’s blood to do something to them? Whatever she was doing — if it was her doing it and not the Athenian — he either hadn’t noticed or didn’t care. Willow hoped he hadn’t noticed and tried to think of some spell to help — if there was anything to help — but nothing came. Giles’ lessons had never covered this situation.

Trouble was everyone needed help. Angel ducked as one vampire tried to stake him, grabbing his attacker by the arm and taking her stake while throwing her over his back and onto the floor. Hard. Two more came at him. Armed now, he lunged at one while avoiding the other’s feint. Buffy was trying to deal with four at once. Avon lunged for his fallen stake only for it to go skittering away. Willow tried to clear her mind and focus on her levitation spell to bring it back, but the vamps were already tackling him. Willow whispered another spell as fast as she could. To her surprise, it worked. A little. Little sparks of flame, about as vicious as a birthday candle, lit on the vamps’ hands. Nothing serious, but they dropped Avon, beating the flames out. Avon rolled away. Still, these vamps were good. The Athenian, in his stuck up, find the ‘gifted’ way, might be as good as he thought he was at I.D.ing talent. One of the vamps even managed to grab Angel from behind — and he’d never been easy to sneak up on — while two others grabbed him by the arms and another pair jumped in to help, pinning him.

She looked around. Buffy was also out of the fight, the same with Giles and Xander. Cordelia and Vila were cowering in separate corners. Avon still managed to stand between Willow and trouble, except he wasn’t standing. She saw blood trickle down from his mouth and wondered how she had been so useless in this fight just as a new wave of dizziness hit her. *No*, she thought, *I am not passing out again. Not now.*

The Athenian smiled, showing his fangs. “Not bad for one night’s work,” he commented. “You’re legends in your own time, the Slayer and her friends who defeated the Master, defeated the Judge, defeated Fate and all the Powers of Darkness. And now I’ve defeated you.” He grinned at Zerafin. “I imagine, once word of this gets out, it will be a long time before I have to worry about a young upstart getting in my way again.” He really sneered when he said ‘young upstart.’ Willow fought to steady herself while remembering Angel’s story about how he’d met the Athenian and realized the vampire was talking about him.

So did Zerafin. “I told you before,” he said easily, “it was my city.”

“And Sunnydale is now mine. It’s funny how these things work out, isn’t it?”

“Depends on your sense of humor.”

“I will make you a deal for your life.” The Athenian added, “If you’re interested?”

“Would it stop you if I said no?”

“I doubt it. I’m curious. This witch is says she’s of your bloodline, since you died. And so’s that man. But they’re alive. True descendants, not vampires

you sired. How'd you manage that?"

"The wonders of gene splicing. And sorcery."

"I would like the details."

"Don't you ever watch *X-Files*? They had a few episodes on it. Besides, why do you care? You're not into humans. Except for lunch."

"Call it curiosity."

Zerafin shook his head, "You just can't stand competition, can you? Having someone else pull off something you can't."

"I don't need the small man or the brunette," the Athenian commented. "I think you know how slowly I can make them die. You used to be good at that, yourself. Or you can take them with you. Your choi —" He stopped, frowning. "There's something wrong. What —" Then he turned on Regan. "You said you would block the telepath," he snarled. "But I can feel her brushing against my mind. Stop her."

Telepath? Was that what they'd meant by Auron? And was that the light Willow saw? "She can't get through one of my spells," Regan protested.

"Reinforce it. She's not doing damage, but —" Then he saw Angel. He stopped and smiled thoughtfully. "So," he said, "you do still make vampires. And from your own flesh and blood, by the look of him. We may have more in common than I thought. What is he, your son?"

"Oh, no," Buffy muttered, "Not the explanations again,"

"Not exactly," Zerafin hedged.

"Then why are you —" He frowned. "I told you to stop her," he said to Regan.

"Now, that would be foolish of her," Zerafin said. Now he was smiling, like a wolf after a lamb. "When we went through so much trouble to get you both here."

The Athenian saw the smile but discounted it. Probably thought it was bravado. "What are you talking about?"

"Reg, explain to him."

Regan smiled. "I think the word he's looking for, in local dialect, is *psyche*." She made a gesture. Vamps went flying. "You've got to love Sunnydale, don't you? So much ambient energy for witches to draw on. Like I said, I play for the winning side. And the side I'm on wins. It kind of makes selling out a waste of time, don't you think? If you'd thought, instead of being such an egotistical jerk who thinks he's the center of the universe, you'd have noticed that."

The Athenian growled, grabbing for Regan's throat. "If you think —" But his hand ran against a small ball of fire that had suddenly sprung up between Regan's fingers. She did the spell a lot better than Willow. He pulled his hand back, beating out the flames.

"Oh, but she does think," Zerafin said, "and you didn't."

"It doesn't matter," the Athenian snarled, summoning fire of his own. Whoa, he *really* knew how to do that spell. "I have everything I need to destroy you, so long as the Hellmouth—"

"Yeah, yeah," Zerafin said, "So long as you're in Sunnydale and can draw on the powers of the Hellmouth, we don't stand a chance, yadda, yadda, yadda. Guess what?" He made a gesture, and Willow recognized a completion spell — a intricate, often power heavy spell that might take days or even weeks to put together, only needing a single word or action to activate it once it was set. There was a strange series of sounds, like doors slamming. The hole in the ceiling vanished along with her dizziness. The morgue melted away, becoming a large, dimly lit living room, totally impressing her. This was big league stuff. The Athenian, on the other hand, looked worried as the fire in his hands died away.

"We're not in Sunnydale anymore," Zerafin told him, "and you've used up all the strength you've got. Oh, and one other thing. Cally, had enough time?"

"Demetrius," Cally said, her voice shaky but strong. "His name is Demetrius."

"And that," Regan said cheerfully, "is all we needed to know." She made a gesture and a bright, glass sphere appeared in her hand. "Recognize this?" Before the Athenian — Demetrius? — had a chance to answer, she began to chant and the orb began to glow.

Willow didn't know if the Athenian recognized that orb. It was the same kind she'd used to restore Angel's soul after he'd lost it. According to Jenny Calendar's notes, it had been what her ancestors used to give it to him in the first place. Maybe he didn't know what Great-aunt Regan was doing (*how* could she have a great-aunt that young?), but he knew it was a threat. Ignoring the fiery light surrounding the orb, he knocked it out of her hand. Angel jumped for it, but Willow was already acting, finally able to do something useful with her levitation spell. The orb wobbled in the air for a handful of seconds before dropping back into Zerafin's outstretched hand. He tossed it to Regan, who resumed chanting without missing a beat. The Athenian's thugs lunged for her but Regan conjured small balls of fire with her free hand and threw them. Only very small ones, Willow wouldn't have expected anything larger with the power drain from the orb, but she was blown away Regan could do both conjurings at the same time. When the small flames, stopped midair, stretching up and down and out till they turned into crosses, she was on the verge of hero worship. Maybe her great-aunt wasn't so bad after all.

The Athenian tried attacking Zerafin by himself and was promptly caught by the throat. "OK, Demetrius, this is what's going on. You just happen to have the same name as someone I would really like to see dead. I can't get his name. Even if I got an Auron near him, he'd kill her. So, guess who's the lucky replacement?" Then he threw him to the ground as Regan finished her chant, shouting one word, "Demetrius!" as she finished the incantation. There was a flash of bright light. The Athenian screamed and—

Zerafin knelt down beside the crumpled demon.



“Demetrius?” he said, offering his hand. The Athenian stared at it uncertainly.

“Who are you? What—?”

“Give yourself a moment. It’ll come back. It’ll hurt, but it’ll come back.”

“I don’t know what you — what have I —”

“Come on, *Demetrius*,” Xander said, making the name sound like an insult, “Any massacres coming back to you? Screaming civilians? Burning towns? How about blood or gore?”

“Harris,” Angel said, looking at the defeated vampire with a kind of horrified fascination, “leave him alone.”

The Athenian’s expression slowly changed. Probably a good sign that the past few millennia were coming back to him, Willow guessed. He went from numb to shocked. “What... ?” he whispered. Then his eyes widened in horror. “What have I... ? No. *No!*”

Zerafin, who, after all, had been through this before, knelt down beside him, trying to help him up. “Demetrius, it’s all right.” he said, “Or it will be. Listen to me. You can —”

The Athenian struck Zerafin’s hand aside, lunging for a stake, a look of terrible resolve on his face. Zerafin was on his feet in a second and stepped back, ready to fight. But fighting wasn’t on the Athenian’s mind. He plunged the stake into his own heart, then vanished in a small explosion of dust.

Angel looked pale and grave, and maybe a bit sick. Zerafin and Regan just looked grave. In a closed, not looking anything sort of way. That must be where Avon got it. *Raised by a vampire and a wicked witch. No wonder he’s kind of intense.*

“Ancient Greeks,” Zerafin murmured, then seemed to notice the other vampires still being held back by Regan’s crosses. They looked back uneasily. “Guys, you really shouldn’t be in my house,” he told them.

“You don’t know our names,” one of them said, pretty boldly under the circumstances.

“True enough. Anybody feel like sharing?” The vampires shifted nervously. Nobody said anything. Zerafin sighed. “No? Too bad, because I don’t have any more time to waste. You’re not welcome here.” He turned to Regan, “Just exorcise them, will you?”

Regan nodded and began another chant as the orb began to glow. Zerafin ignored the show. “Willow, you still need to get through the blood fever. If you and Avon can come this way —” Willow busy watching Regan and the vampires, barely heard him. As Regan’s incantation wore down, she saw the vampires’ demon faces superimposed over their human features. It was a real exorcism. They were being pulled out of their host bodies. Then the faces — and the rest of them — were pulled away. For a moment, she saw them dangling outside. Then there was a flash of light as something was cut. The demons vanished. The bodies fell into dust. “— Yeah, I know it’s interesting the first time you see it, Willow, but pay attention. This is important —” Then he was explaining the ritual that would save her life again.

“Is there anyway I could do that?” Willow asked,

studying Regan and the small piles of dust on the floor.

“Only in this house. Or one like it.”

“Oh.” She thought about it. “Can I make a house like this?”

“Only if you live in it a thousand years.”

“Oh. Is that how you brought us here from the morgue? Because you’ve lived here a thousand years?”

He shook his head. “It’s just my house. Reg and I set up the spell earlier to make the morgue a gateway to it. You understand symmetry spells?”

“Kind of. But don’t the places have to be alike to do that? You make a connection between two places that are alike. But that was a morgue.” She looked around the place, half expecting to see bodies lying around.

“A morgue is a place to keep dead people. I’m a dead man. This is where I keep myself. But Regan did most of the work. She can show you —”

“Skip the technical lesson,” Avon snarled. “You set me up.”

“We surprised you,” Regan said. “It’s not the same thing.”

“You —” Luckily, Willow would never hear what insult Avon was getting ready to hurl. She had a feeling it would have been bad enough to change her opinion of him, which was pretty uncertain already, if Zerafin hadn’t cut him off. This family just wasn’t in to letting people finish sentences.

“She did what I told her,” he said. “I was the one who sent Willow here to grow up. And it worked. It wouldn’t have if you’d known about it any sooner.” He looked at Willow. “But I kept an eye on her. When the Athenian moved against her and started drawing power from the Hellmouth, he triggered her blood fever. You had to come, so I brought you. And we had our chance against him.”

“Er,” Vila said, creeping away from his corner toward the main body of the group, “what chance would that be?”

“Finding the Athenian’s true name,” Regan said. “We’d never have done it in our world. He’s too cautious. He knows what we could do with an Auron.” She looked disdainfully at Avon and said, “What some of us can do, at any rate. And don’t glare at me, *Avon*. You want him good and truly dead as much as the rest of us.”

“*Our* world?” Vila said. “What do you mean? Isn’t he dead?”

“No, he’s not,” Avon snapped. “They didn’t risk our lives to win a war, just to get a small edge the next time they run into him.” He turned back to his aunt. “There’s a fair number of people I want dead. It doesn’t mean I have to kill everyone I know to do it.”

“Really? Since when?” Regan smiled. “Besides, you’re still alive. *Everyone* ’s still alive. Stop whining.”

“Uh, excuse me,” Willow said, wanting to head off bloodshed but also having her own complaints, “but since I’m the one who almost got killed — and

who just met my... uh... well, you guys, and you kind of dumped me off here and maybe sort of messed up my life, I think I've got a reason to complain." Regan gave her a disbelieving look. "Maybe," Willow added hastily.

"Stop trying to intimidate her. She's right," Avon said.

"Willow," Zerafin said, "You're right. I used you. I think it was for your own good. The world we come from wouldn't have been an easy one for you to grow up in." He looked at Avon, "If you'd grown up. Not everyone does. Especially your family." Avon said nothing. Zerafin looked back at her. "I needed to send you somewhere, and I chose this place because —" He looked at Buffy, then looked away. "Times past aren't easy to change, but this one could be. I know I risked your life doing it — and I risked your life again to get at the Athenian — but I had to change them."

"You've always been willing to risk our lives to do that," Avon said, but he sounded tired, most of the venom drained out of him.

"I know," Zerafin said, just as wearily, as if he were admitting something important to Avon. Willow had no idea what. "I know this world's been hard," he went on, "but it's been good to you, in its way. You've grown into your gifts, and you've survived. It may not have been the right choice, it may not have been the best one, but it's the one I'd make again. I'm sorry if it was the wrong one for you."

Willow shrugged, uncertain. "It's all right," she said. It probably was. Her parents were kind of flaky — well, most people who lived in Sunnydale were, it was how they dealt with it — but they were OK. And she had Oz, and Buffy, and Xander, and everybody else. Besides, she thought, looking at Avon with his grim face and Regan with her cold-blooded, bitter smile, it wasn't like she was seeing a great alternative. Funny, she'd thought Angel would have been better with kids. But the Angel she knew hadn't turned Buffy into a vampire or had to deal with everything that had happened after that. OK, he'd tried to send everyone to hell, but that wasn't the same thing and he hadn't had his soul then, anyway. Still, you really would think he'd handle the family life thing better.

"Don't let him off the hook, Wil," Regan drawled. "He owes you. Big time. You may want to collect someday."

"Thanks, Regan," Zerafin said dryly.

"Anytime, Gramps. Oh, by the way, Willow, I think these are yours," she said, tossing her a bundle of clothes produced from nowhere in particular. They were hers, all right, the same ones she'd been wearing when she passed out in Cordelia's car, with everything, including her charm bags. They'd probably been stuffed in a hospital locker or something before Regan got them. Maybe she'd teach Willow how. "Now," Regan went on brightly, "don't we have to save your life or something?"

The ritual was simple enough — just a blood transfusion with special effects — but everyone in-

sisted on watching it. Her friends wanted to make sure Zerafin wasn't pulling another fast one. Cally and Vila seemed curious. Willow, who was beginning to feel like a circus side show, thought about telling them to mind their own business and ask Avon if they had any questions. But one look at Avon, who seemed a lot less happy about how public this was getting than she did, told her why he wasn't the question-answer man.

Cordelia, on the other hand, looked disgusted and said, "Are you kidding? Blood is not my idea of entertainment. I'll stay out here. Hey, Zerafin, do you have cable?"

And five minutes and some incense later, it was all over. Zerafin gave her a few instructions while bandaging her arm, "Get lots of iron and take it easy. You'll probably be tired for the next few days," sounding almost like a regular doctor, except a regular doctor wouldn't have added, "Vampires may still be attracted to you for the next seven to ten days, so don't go out at night. Angel can tell you when it's safe. I'll give Giles the recipe for a potion you can take if you have any lingering symptoms."

Cally bandaged Avon's arm, very silently, during all this. Vila cleared his throat once, as if he were going to ask something, but Avon's glare cut him off. Willow decided not to comment either.

Then Zerafin was bundling them to the garage. There was a car parked there — a minivan, actually. Regan took the driver's seat and started asking directions to everyone's homes. Willow would have guessed she actually knew, from what she'd seen and heard, but figured everyone felt better pretending she didn't. It was very anticlimactic. Finding your birth-father, almost being killed by vampires, and learning your talent for magic came from being part demon wasn't supposed to end with a lift home in a minivan.

Avon stopped her before she got in, "Willow —" he hesitated, obviously at a loss for words, "Take care," he said, with enough force to keep it from sounding lame. "If you need help, you can call on me. Remember that."

"It's not like I'm going to forget any of this," Willow said.

Avon's eyes glinted with an appreciative irony, but he only said, "I'm surprised you don't want to."

"That would be easier," Willow admitted. "A lot easier. This is just too weird. And — hey, wait a second! Aren't you in danger of going poof or something? I mean, didn't you just change the whole past that made you and—" Willow tried to encapsulate theories from a dozen *Trek* episodes, stumbling over them.

"But this isn't our past," Avon said. "Our past happened. When this time was changed, it became your present."

"Huh? But, that — oh, you mean like alternate histories and stuff? We're kind of a separate timeline now?"

Avon winced. "That's a crude analogy — a very crude one — but it will do."

"Oh, don't blame her," Vila interrupted, stepping close enough to overhear. "She can't help it. She was raised here."

"Yes, she was," Avon said. "What's your excuse?" Vila mumbled something and backed off.

"You're not much of a people person, are you?" Willow said uncertainly.

Avon sighed. "I never claimed to be. Remember what I said. *Remember.*"

Impulsively, Willow hugged him. He stiffened, at first, taken by surprise. Then, with an effort, hugged her back. "Here," she said, stuffing a small, hand-stitched bag, smelling faintly of mint, into his hands. "It's a charm bag, for protection." Abruptly, she turned and jumped into the minivan, wiping away tears. The engine started and they rode away.

"What were you talking about?" Xander asked.

Willow shrugged. "Nothing. Saying goodbye. He told me to remember him."

"Like you could forget."

"You'd be surprised," Regan said. "It can be easy to forget sometimes. And you need to. *Obliviate.*"

*Key word spell*, Willow thought, another of those complicated spells the user could set up days in advance, just like in the morgue.

*Morgue? What morgue? What was I thinking of? What -?*

"Everyone awake?" the driver said, "You guys looked pretty trashed, there. Not that I blame you. Those were pretty scary people chasing you, the ones with fangs. I almost didn't stop." Memory, uncertainly, came back. Oh, right, Buffy must have been fighting vampires. It had something to do with what made Willow sick. There'd been spell and an explosion of light. It must have shaken her up. That was why she couldn't remember clearly. But Giles had found out everything he needed to help her. The trouble should be over, if she got some rest over the next few days. Giles said there was an herbal potion he could make if there were any lingering effects. But there had been more vampires than they'd expected. They were lucky Giles had flagged this woman down.

"Thanks," Willow said. "For everything." *Everything? Why did I say that?*

The woman gave an ironic smile. "Don't mention it. You could say I owed you one."

Willow was going to ask her what she meant, when Xander said, "Wil, what's wrong? You're crying."

Willow put her hand to her face, felt the tears. "I don't know," she said, looking at the drops on her hand. "I don't know." But they continued to pour down as they rode home and for long after.



## EPILOGUE

Avon watched as they drove away. It was for the best. The less she had to do with him and the rest of this, the better. He only wished he'd been able to leave

Grandfather Angelus and the others behind this easily, but they had a way of always coming back into his life. He wished.... but wishes didn't matter. They never had.

"You'll miss her," Cally said, startling him. He hadn't noticed her coming up behind him. Careless of him. Or Grandfather's home. It had a way of playing with his mind.

"Does it matter?" he said. "Peculiar as Sunnydale is, it's easier than life in the Federation. Or on the ship."

"She's a daughter to be proud of," Cally said with the odd intonation she fell into whenever she was thinking in Auronar or translating one of her people's sayings. It was probably what they said to all new parents. "She's like you," she added in a more normal voice.

Avon snorted. "I hope not."

"And this is really Earth?" she asked after a moment, changing the subject. "Ancient Earth?"

"Yes."

"Was what happened here, what Zerafin said happened without Willow, was that what made the Federation?"

The question surprised Avon. Sometimes he forgot how quick Cally's mind was. Or her little obsession with bringing what was left of the Federation down. "Part of it. There were other things."

"And that's why you can't stand heros? Your family?"

Avon wanted to snap it was none of her business, but he was too tired. Besides, it didn't matter at this point. "Probably. Why? can you stand them, after what Regan did?"

Cally shrugged. "She warned me. She told me how to look in his mind with her help. She said if she had his name, she could stop him."

Which wasn't an answer. "Oh, she warned you. About five seconds after throwing you to the wolves, if I know her."

"You've thrown us into some dangerous situations yourself," Cally pointed out.

"I've told you to stay out of them. It's not my fault you don't listen."

Cally sighed, uninclined to argue. "If you say so. Didn't she warn — *tell* you what she was doing?"

"She told me I had a daughter, Anna's daughter. She told me where she was and that she had the blood sickness. Nothing else. Except to remind me it would kill her if I didn't come." As if he needed the reminder. He remembered that evening, saying goodbye to Cally. He hadn't expected to come back alive, not really. There were always dangers, of course, but he hadn't had any reason to be so fatalistic. But he had been remembering the last time he'd seen the blood fever. "If I'd known the Athenian was here...."

"And he exists in our world? Another version of him?" Cally asked, catching him off guard. He'd been thinking out loud. He must be more tired than he realized. It was the blood spell. It was draining in its own right without the memories it brought back.

“Oh, yes. He exists. He killed my brother.”

That startled her. “What?”

“We’d both been captured by him. We were just boys and we were careless. But it was the same as Willow. The Athenian was working on something big. Being around it effected Tobias. He had his blood fever.” He shrugged. “I’d already been through mine, but I was too young to bring him through it. I bought him time, but it wasn’t enough.” The fever had bought them their lives. The Athenian couldn’t kill Tobias till he was through it, and he didn’t mean to lose him if he could help it. So, Avon had also lived while the Athenian tried to find an adult from the family. There was only one problem. “Regan knew what had happened, but she prides herself on watching the bigger picture. She and the others —” The others. He silently cursed that slip. He hadn’t meant to bring them into this. The three relatives Cally knew about were more than enough. But she either hadn’t caught it or decided not to ask. He went on. “— were trying to stop something else. She decided there wasn’t time for us.

“It’s almost funny,” he added, feeling anything but amused. “The Athenian was behind... behind what she was trying to stop. But she thought it was someone else working on... working elsewhere. By the time she knew she was wrong, it was too late.”

If Cally had said anything, one of her trite, Auron sayings or something more original, he would have brushed it off, but she only put a hand on his shoulder, very briefly. Hardly a personal touch at all. She squeezed once, then let go.

He could tell her the rest of it, tell her what the Athenian had been doing, an experiment with mutoids — if she thought about it, she’d have to realize mutoids were just a kind of vampire — and imagined her reaction. She’d recognize the history. She might even agree Regan had been right to try and stop it instead of coming after her nephews. And Cally would also recognize the time period. She could do math. He’d been barely sixteen, which would now make him... older. Older than she thought. And it wasn’t as if telling her mattered, not now.

He was still making up his mind when Grandfather drew him aside, “It’s time to go back,” he said. “Are you ready?”

“There’s nothing keeping me here.”

Grandfather didn’t rise to the bait, but then he never did. Unlike Regan. Instead, he looked at Cally, just out of hearing — and politely keeping her distance, like a good little Auron — and said quietly, “We couldn’t have done this without her. She seems like a good person to have on your side.” He waited, but Avon said nothing. “Avon,” Grandfather said quietly, “I can’t tell you how to live your life, but try and learn from my mistakes. Regret may be part of life, but you should keep it a small part. My life would be different if I’d told some people how I felt before it was too late.”

“Different and better aren’t the same thing,” Avon said.

Grandfather smiled bitterly. “I couldn’t have done much worse.”

Avon looked at Cally a long time. “She’s an Auron,” he said at last. “Even with his name, you won’t get rid of the real Athenian anytime soon. He’ll be ready for you. And you know what he does to Aurons.” Then he stepped away, ending the conversation. He herded Cally and Vila towards one of the doors and pulled it open before Grandfather could try to resume it. While Vila gaped and made some inane comment about the obvious, that it opened (for now) into Cansai station, Avon looked at his (give or take a few greats) grandfather, waiting.

“*Obliviare*,” Angelus whispered.

Avon pushed them out, letting the door close behind him, barely paying attention as Cally and Vila adjusted to the gap in their memories. He managed a couple comments when they asked. In a few minutes, they would think he had rejoined them after saying goodbye the evening before. Vila, if he remembered Regan at all, would probably make a very pathetic attempt at ‘man of the world’ jokes which Avon would have to squelch. Cally, being intelligent, tactful, and a prim and proper Auron, would keep her suspicions to herself and let the matter drop.

“Wait,” Cally said. “The statue. I almost forgot it.” For the first time, Avon noticed the large handbag Cally was carrying. She’d had it when they came onto the station, but he didn’t remember seeing it on Earth. Grandfather or Regan must have held onto it, after sending her into the past. You could trust them to keep track of small details, even if they almost did get people killed. Cally reached in and pulled out the security box, opening it up. “You might as well see what we came all this way to get,” she told him.

Avon barely heard her. It was a bronze work covered with enamel. He recognized the period and the style, what Angelus might have called “An excellent example of its kind.” And obviously a fake, given the subject matter. It was a figure of a young, red haired girl dressed in clothes a millennium out of date. She looked up at Avon with a curious, innocent expression. Willow. Without meaning to, he found himself smiling back.

“That’s strange,” Cally said. “She looks like you. I hadn’t noticed before.” Then she frowned, trying to call back lost memories, before shaking her head and giving up.

“Maybe she’s family,” Vila offered. “Your twenty-times great grandmother.”

“Unlikely,” Avon told him.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Vila said. “Solid metal. That’s how I always pictured your mother. Iron, steel, stone, something like that.”

“You wouldn’t have cared for my mother’s family,” Avon said calmly, his hand tightening around the charm bag hidden in his jacket pocket, “And my father’s family was even worse.”

