

A WILLOW ROSENBERG - GIRL GENIUS ADVENTURE

WILLOW ROSENBERG

and Her Computronic Matrix

BY VICTOR APPLETON II

and

BATZULGER

Contents

Chapter One -- Back to Shopton	5
Chapter Two -- An Acrobatic Save	12
Chapter Three -- Genius at Work	20
Chapter Four -- The Mysterious Gunmen	27
Chapter Five -- A Strange Secret	37
Chapter Six -- Redhaired Target	44
Chapter Seven -- Flight Training	52
Chapter Eight -- Skyjack	59
Chapter Nine -- Spark of Inspiration	67
Chapter Ten -- Energetic Computation	75
Chapter Eleven -- Quarry Blast	82
Chapter Twelve -- Tara Speaks.	90
Chapter Thirteen -- Launch Day	98
Chapter Fourteen -- First Steps	107
Chapter Fifteen -- Tests Passed	114
Chapter Sixteen -- The Threat	121
Chapter Seventeen -- Fake Out	129
Chapter Eighteen -- Ground Control	135
Chapter Nineteen -- Infiltration	144
Chapter Twenty -- Break Out	149
Chapter Twenty One -- Escape From Mirinsk	157
Chapter Twenty Two -- Cat and Mouse	164
Chapter Twenty Three -- Pilot in Command	171
Chapter Twenty Four -- A Revelation	179
Chapter Twenty Five -- Chow Cracks the Problem	187
Chapter Twenty Six -- Countermeasures	194
Chapter Twenty Seven -- The Showdown	200

Chapter One -- Back to Shopton

Willow Rosenberg woke up in her bedroom of the small company apartment she shared with her best friend, Buffy Summers. They had just flown in from Sunnydale two days ago, arriving at the Shopton airfield well after dark. Buffy had been doing the flying of course, as Willow was still learning to handle the twin-jet Pigeon Elite. She considered the small prop driven Pigeon Special to be more her speed to be honest.

Buffy was a natural pilot however; trained by Tom and Sandy Swift who were both legends in the aviation industry and incidentally, Willow's and Buffy's bosses. Both the young women had spent the previous summer as interns at Swift and Son Industries or SSI as it was generally known, Willow as a technical specialist and Buffy as a pilot trainee. In the first few weeks however, they had managed to get involved with a terrorist from Tom's past and more than that, help defeat his fiendish plot!

Now they were college students. Buffy was starting out in Aeronautical Engineering and Willow in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. Both of them would be attending the State University of New York Shopton campus which was, because of its close working relationship with SSI, one of the finest engineering schools in the world.

Both of them had work-study jobs at SSI as well; Willow in the prototype fabrication labs and Buffy as a company pilot and assistant without portfolio, as Tom put it.

Willow yawned and stretched and rolled out of bed to brush her teeth. As she passed by the living room of the apartment she saw Buffy doing her

morning routine; which at this point appeared to be far too many handstand push-ups.

"Morning Will!"

"Morning Buffy," Willow yawned in response.

"There's coffee in the pot and when I went for my run I stopped off and picked up doughnuts...even the kind with sprinkles," Buffy said cheerfully, not hesitating in her push-up repetitions.

Willow smiled, "Thanks Buffy," she replied and she meant it too.

"Anything to keep that big brain powered. Looking forward to working in the plant again?"

"Yeah. I really am. I can't wait to see Phil and Tom and Harry and Abe and..."

"Chow's cooking?"

"Well yeah, as long as he doesn't spring one of those oddball ideas of his as a recipe."

"I actually liked the cactus soufflé..." Buffy said sadly.

"You and Chow were the only two I'm afraid, who did."

"Anyway," Buffy said, "You need to shower and get dressed so I can shower and get dressed while you're drinking your coffee. We can't be late for school!"

"Half day of classes, half day at SSI. This is going to be weird."

"It'll be different at least. Look at it this way Buffy; you've already learned a lot of the reasons planes fly by flying. Picking up the math should be simple."

"So says you! My brain is full of other things than math...like lip gloss shades and other important stuff."

Willow was still laughing as she started her shower, Buffy was far smarter than the air-headed cheerleader she sometimes pretended to be. A lot of things had found that out, most of them far too late for their own safety.

After Willow had finished Buffy rushed in. Willow got dressed and had a couple of doughnuts and some coffee. The doughnuts with sprinkles were her favorites.

By the time Buffy was ready it was time to go. The pair walked downstairs and hopped in one of the driverless vans that SSI used for transporting their employees. Waving their ID bracelets over the sensor, the two women told the driving expert system the name of their destination and then settled back to enjoy the ride.

Shopton in late August was lovely with clear blue skies and bright sun. The van even traveled for a short distance alongside Lake Carlotta before it pulled into the university campus. The women disembarked and headed to their respective classes. At one they met up again and Willow spoke as if in thin air, "Dispatch. Van for two at SUNY Student Union."

"You really like that thing don't you?"

"The Little Sister? Yeah, it's really neat," Willow was referring to the semi-implanted communications device behind her left ear.

"As long as it doesn't get hacked..."

"Hey Tom fixed that, and now with the Alpha Filter, it's impossible to Mind Ride anymore."

Buffy grinned, "I know. I just enjoy watching you get defensive."

"Why don't you get one Buffy?"

"Same reason I can't have pierced ears. I heal too fast and it would just get pushed out."

"Oh, I never thought of that."

"That's cool. It's just not really a problem most people have, so naturally they don't do the thinky thing about it."

The two women chatted about their classes and their homework until the van arrived. Boarding it they were whisked away to the gigantic SSI facility.

It had four runways each capable of handling the space shuttle. Along with one of the most sophisticated Air Traffic Control towers in the world. The plant was covered with research buildings, workshops, hangers, garages, warehouses, and manufacturing. It even had a police and fire station.

The van pulled through one of the employee only gates and headed onto the ring road that encircled the plant. After a short drive it pulled up in front of a building that would have looked futuristic in the 1960s. Now it simply looked a little out of place. It would never be altered though because it was Tom's personal office and private lab.

"Willow! Buffy!" a tall thin youngish woman with long white hair called out to them.

"Phil!" Willow yelled as she ran over. Phil or Phyllis Radnor was the assistant chief of security for SSI. A second generation Swift employee, she had been a Philadelphia police officer and detective before returning to work for Tom. She was also a close friend of both women.

"Hi Phil," Buffy, "Is the genius in his lab or the office?"

"Lab I think. I take it classes started and you're here for at least the next semester?"

"Hopefully," Buffy laughed, "if my brain doesn't absorb calculus faster than Willow will be stuck here all on her lonesome."

"No Oz?" Phil looked over at Willow. Oz was her boyfriend.

"Nope, the poopyhead decided to tour this fall with his band. He'll be passing through in October though."

"That's good. I have to run these reports over to the bunker," Phil was referring to the SSI security building. "I'll see you later though!"

"You'd better!" Willow replied as she and Buffy entered the building.

Once in the lobby they checked the hazard light above the lab door to make sure Tom wasn't in the process of performing any dangerous experiments. It was off so they entered.

"Willow and Buffy!" Tom Swift was a tall man in his early to mid sixties with blond hair turning gray and clear blue eyes. He walked over to the women and gave each one a hug. "It's so good to see you. How was the flight?"

"Ask Buffy, I slept most of the way."

"It was great Tom! The new engine pack smooths out the power band really well."

"You noticed huh?" Tom was always probing.

"So what are you working on now?" Willow asked.

"This?" Tom gestured at what looked like an aquarium festooned with cables and electronic components, "It's an idea I came up with about a month ago. You remember the Insta-Rock gun?"

"Sure. That's what you crippled the Black Cobra's stealth sub with," Willow replied, "It fires a catalyst causing the minerals dissolved in seawater to precipitate into stone."

"Exactly, I'm trying to make a version that doesn't use chemicals, and only affects the ferric content, the iron, in the water."

"How does it work?"

"Let me show you..." Tom stepped beside the tank and aimed a small antenna at the water. There was a golden glow and gray crystals started forming and sticking together into solid lumps of metal.

"That is really neat," Willow said.

"I think so too," Tom answered proudly. "This is just a simple test bed though, so don't expect girders yet."

The three stood and watched the lumps enlarge, and then Tom went to shut down the device. Suddenly there was a fat blue spark and electricity began arcing all across the lab! Trapping the three where they stood!

Chapter Two -- An Acrobatic Save

The two women and the elder scientist were trapped in a corner by the lashing electrical arcs. The closest exit, behind a curtain of dangerous blue sparks.

"Tom, what happened?" Willow asked frantically. Some of those artificial lightnings were striking close to her.

"I don't know and my remote power cut-off isn't working!" he pointed at a small black box in his hand.

"Where's the main power cut-off, Tom?" Willow asked, her eyes darting around the room.

"Behind that pillar! The main switch is on the side, see it?"

"Buffy," Willow turned to her friend, "can you get to it?"

The short blond powerhouse looked at the switch, then nodded and grinned, "And if I screw up, think of the money I've saved on a perm!"

"It's too dangerous Buffy!" Tom responded, "The lightning is too erratic in its paths. There's no way to dodge it!"

Willow snapped her fingers, "Go high Buffy," she pointed at the ceiling 15 feet above their heads, "The bolts will be more likely to strike targets close to the emitter."

"Which is my high frequency generator there on the work bench," Tom added. "That should work, but how are you going to get up there?"

"Raw talent?" Buffy said as she shrugged and smiled. "And in the center ring..." she took a step forward and leaping up, pushed off with her foot from the workbench top in front of her. This push sent her into a back flip towards the wall behind her. Her powerful legs coiled, and as both her feet touched the wall five feet above Tom's head, she pushed up and out as hard as she could causing her to sail in an arc towards one of the suspended light fixtures.

Using it like a Tarzan vine she changed her forward velocity to upward, and was soon clinging like a leech to one of the gas pipes and conduits that were attached to the ceiling.

"Ta-dah!"

Tom stared open mouthed at the display of acrobatics he had just witnessed. Willow looked at him and smiled. "Buffy was an expert cheerleader in High School, and you knew she was a lot stronger than she looked."

"I just didn't realize how strong or acrobatic she was," Tom said respectfully.

At the moment the subject of the conversation was making her way across the conduits until she was right above the power box. Then letting go, she dropped like a rock and slapped the switch to the off position as she

whizzed by. She landed in a roll and bounced back up, "And the crowd goes wild!"

Tom rushed over to his apparatus to make sure everything was switched off as Willow rushed over to her friend, "I used the cheerleader excuse," she whispered.

"Thanks Will. I hate being secret identity gal sometimes," Buffy whispered back. Then more loudly she asked, "What happened Tom?"

"Well this works similar to the repelatron in that it's aligned to the energy signature of iron. The Seaforge causes the iron molecules dissolved in the water to resonate, amplifying the attractant signature so that the molecules cling to each other making a monocrystalline whisker."

"Mono what?" Buffy asked.

"Monocrystal," Willow replied. "Any solid phase element can make crystals. A monocrystalline whisker is a filament of material that is structured as a single, defect-free crystal, sort of like a diamond with absolutely no flaws. Because all the atoms are aligned properly they can be amazingly strong."

"Exactly Willow," Tom said proudly, "The other thing the Seaforge does is use ultrasonics to make sure the monocrystals pack closely together. So close in fact that it creates Van der Waals force causing them to bind together as a solid block."

"So these iron crystals are really strong and you can make things out of them that will not break? Can you make a sword out them?" Buffy asked.

"Sure. Well eventually. What happened just now is the Seaforge started to affect part of the workbench which extruded and shorted out the power supply. I'm going to have to work on the focusing I guess." Tom sighed.

"I would also suggest you put a closer cutoff switch in...Just in case."

"I'll do that Buffy. So you two ready to get to work or has this scared you off?"

"After last summer?" Willow asked, "We're all ready to go and do stuff Mister."

"Easy Willow," Tom laughed, "Are you ready to start on your project?"

"What project?"

"The one we talked about last year. The one where you suggested an AI research program based on both Ted Buchanan's and SSI's work?"

"That? You were serious?" Willow gasped.

"Of course I was. I'm a mechanical engineer at heart, the future is in microelectronics and my family has always wanted the Swift name to stand for advanced concepts. Tell you what, talk to Mr. Cassidy, my secretary, to get you and office and do what I said last time we talked about this, outline the steps and equipment and tech requirements. You can draw upon SSI's

research resources like any other project lead. Get me an outline and a concept, then show it to me, and remember; if you can't come up with one, tell me why exactly. Is that straightforward enough?"

"Wow," was all Willow could say.

Buffy patted her friend on the shoulder, "I wish I could help Will, but that is sooo out of my comfort zone."

"As for you Buffy," Tom gave her an evil grin. "You start Zero-G training."

"Zero-G as in space?" Buffy gasped.

"SSI pilots need to know how to operate all our flying equipment, including spacecraft and seacopters."

"Oh..." Buffy looked stunned. "Me in space?"

"Willow will get to go too I'm sure."

Now it was Willow's turn to look scared.

Buffy laughed, "Well it can't be more dangerous than sneaking on to a terrorist's submarine at least. Where do I go first?"

"Head over to the spaceflight training building next to Hanger 5. Doctor Ransome will be waiting for you to give you your initial physical."

"Guess that's where I'm off to then," the effervescent blond said with a smile, "See you later Will!"

"Bye Buffy! Have fun!"

"And you Willow, head upstairs to see Mr. Cassidy and get your office. I have to start cleaning this mess up."

"Okay Tom. I guess I'll talk to you later?"

"You will, don't worry."

Willow headed up the spiral staircase and down the hallway filled with the models, paintings, and photographs of inventions of three generations of Swifts. Mr. Cassidy was in his 20s and had taken over from Miss Trent when that worthy had retired.

"You must be Willow Rosenberg! The boss said you'd be by."

"I'm here for an office?" Willow still felt nervous.

"Got one set up for you over in the prototyping building. Tom said you had friends over there."

"Yes I do! That's great!"

Mr. Cassidy smiled, "Relax Willow. The boss is a good judge of inventive talent. Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"Uh, okay I guess..." she tried to relax.

"You're on the third floor. Number 320. If you need materials or such, give me a call and I'll help you through the process. Your ID will unlock your office."

Willow left Mr. Cassidy and took one of the rechargeable carts from the stand outside the building to drive it over to the prototype building. Before she headed up to her new office, she stuck her head in to the mechanical prototype area.

"Willow!" Abraham 'Abe' Haskell, SSI's top machinist and mechanic saw and walked over to give her a hug. Soon the rest of the crew was greeting her too. She told them what her project was and they all grew quiet in thought.

"So you have some ideas from some scientist in your hometown?" the big engineer asked.

"Yeah Abe. His name was Ted Buchanan and he never finalized them...not really. He died a couple of years ago. Also a boy I was involved with, a guy named Malcolm, also had some...interesting ideas in computer design. He's given up on computers now and is back to papery books."

"I remember you talking about the Aquatomic Tracker's programming with Tom," Abe said thoughtfully. "You think you could really do an artificial intelligence?"

"Maybe? I don't know, but as I was on my way over to here I started thinking about some of the lines of inquiry I could try."

"Well good luck and if you need any help..."

"Thanks guys! I really do appreciate the support," with that Willow left and headed upstairs to her new office.

Chapter Three -- Genius at Work

Willow was hunched over her laptop. She had scanned all of Ted's files and then hidden the originals. The only easily accessible copy was what she was perusing.

On her workstation screen she had the code for the programming of the Aquatomic Tracker displayed and occasionally she would compare the two.

"Not into microelectronics and computers. Tom Swift is a big fat liar!" she finally said.

She had started her new project by directly comparing the code that had got her into this mess; the selector's and Ted's android's. The reason the Tracker's code had seemed so similar is that had the ability to make use fuzzy logic to make 'judgment calls'. The android code held the same kind of patterns and both were brilliantly written, but obviously by different people. The selector's code was elegant, and the android's was an awful kludged together mess in many ways.

It was obvious when Willow checked who the selector's programmer was, "...Tom Swift jr." she muttered, "A big old liar!"

Fortunately for her, both the coders had obsessively documented and commented their programs. Ted had copious amounts of design notes as well, and soon the white board wall of the office was covered with notes comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities of the code.

Willow was standing looking pensive at a section of Ted's heuristic learning circuits. She was pretty sure now, that that was the location which had made the android go homicidal, and was trying to trace the fault path when there was a knock at the door.

"Huh? Oh! It's open!" Willow stammered and saw in relief it was Buffy and Phil.

"Will you sure you've only been here for six hours?" Buffy asked strangely.

"Uh, yeah! Haven't been messing with temporal frameshifts at all...nosiree. That could be really bad."

Phil laughed, "So it just seems like you've been here longer then..." she pointed at the floor to ceiling scribblings on the white board and the stack of paper coffee cups.

"I needed my brain to be fully caffeinated to get the most oomph out of it...I think I'm oomphed out now though," she looked slightly sad. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Will, it's almost seven PM. We were wondering if you would ever get finished. Also we brought you an office-warming gift," Buffy presented her with a small terrarium which contained a Venus Fly trap plant.

"It's really that late? And thanks for the carnivorous plant."

"Yes it is," Phil replied, "and you're welcome. Buffy said all offices need a plant."

"It's pretty cute actually. I think I'll call it Guido," Willow examined the small case. "This is a pretty sophisticated terrarium, Buffy."

"We may have freed it and the plant from the botanical research section prison. Guido needed a new home," Buffy said proudly.

"That's one of the new chemically balanced environments. It moderates temperature, humidity and everything else to keep the plant happy. All Guido needs, is to eat some hamburger every day," Phil added.

"That's really sweet you guys...Oh god, it's really seven o'clock!?"

"Uh huh Will."

"I missed lunch and haven't started my homework and I'm going to miss dinner and..."

"Breathe Will! Breathe slowly!" Buffy shook her head as she calmed her friend down. "We're going to get dinner right now, the only homework you had was some reading which you finished on the van ride over from school, and you pigged out on my emergency doughnuts during the van ride."

"Oh? Oh yeah. Sorry for the minor freakage."

"So dinner?" Phil cut in.

"Oh yeah, let me shut this stuff down."

As Willow powered everything down the other two women looked at the web of scribbles on the whiteboard. Buffy jumped a little as Willow clicked a switch and the scribbled notes disappeared.

"All your work!"

"Take it easy Buffy. It's a smartboard with no markers needed. Think of it as a really big touchscreen. The projectors mounted on the edges let me do 3d stuff on it too."

"Have I ever mentioned how much I am not a high-tech Buffy?"

"No, because I've seen you in a glass cockpit and you're perfectly happy," Willow sounded smug.

"But all that stuff does things!" Buffy said plaintively.

"Stop whining Summers!" Phil ordered, "It's time for food."

The three laughing women left the Prototype building and walked over to Phil's SUV. Soon they were heading into Shopton proper. Phil drove down the main street and pulled up in front of 'Donnie's Steakhouse'.

"Are you psychic Phil?" Buffy asked.

"Nope, I just seem to remember you both liked this place last time you were here."

"Good thing to remember. Buffy likes her food barbaric," Willow cut in.

"Hey!"

"Shush you."

Dinner was delicious and as they finished up with dessert, they chatted about the last few months including the accidental explosion at the girl's old high school.

"A gas leak at graduation?"

"It could have been worse and destroyed the whole town," Willow said seriously.

"That's the kind of thing your Take Back the Night program couldn't help with," Phil replied.

Buffy mumbled something around her apple pie like, "You might be surprised..."

"Anyway Buffy, how is that program doing now that you're not there?"

"We got a new person in who's taken over my role Phil; her martial arts instructor knew mine. Small world huh?"

"Speaking of martial arts Buffy..." Phil said leadingly.

"Oh? You think you can take me with your command of giraffe-fu?" the blond cocked an eyebrow accusingly.

"Better than that aggravated mosquito style you do," Phil shot back. As she was six foot one and Buffy was only five foot two inches, the source of the jibes was obvious.

"Okay it's so on. Tomorrow at five! Main gym!"

"Deal, Willow, we'll need you there as a ref."

"But I have..."

"..to be there. Phil's right, attendance is mandatory for geniuses named Rosenberg."

Willow looked from one to the other of her friend's faces. They looked determined. She sighed, "All right I'll be there."

"Excellent Will! Now Phil if you could run us home, some of us still have to get our reading done," Buffy looked slightly guilty as she said that.

As Willow fell asleep the pieces of code she had been staring at, whirled around in her head forming new patterns and she started to get a glimpse of an idea.

Buffy had headed out for a run and to see 'what was the what', as she would put it. It was a warm night and she only ran into a little dust. Shopton's nightlife being nowhere near as hazardous as Sunnydale's.

Eventually her run took her close to the perimeter fence surrounding the SSI complex. In the shadows near the wire she saw two figures doing...something?

"Hi!" she said as she jogged up. "What's up?"

The closer one turned, and pointing a strange looking pistol at her, pulled the trigger!

Chapter Four -- The Mysterious Gunmen

Buffy's initial reaction on seeing a weapon pointed at her was to dive to one side. She did a neat tuck and shoulder roll, ending up in a crouch on the other side of the road, away from the fence.

The gunman had fired the moment she had moved but her violent change of direction had affected his aim. There was a dull 'thunk' from the gun and the section of the fence Buffy had been standing beside shook violently. The automatic security lights mounted on the fence posts activated at this sudden impact, and started performing a pre-programmed search pattern.

"Forget her you idiot! We have to leave now!" non-gunman yelled at his partner. The pair started running away across the road. As they ran the gunman fired his strange pistol a few more times in Buffy's direction. When whatever it was hit the asphalt of the road, a spray of gravel and dust flew off.

Buffy lay flat and waited till the shooting stopped. She had no desire to become a target. As she lay there she heard the sound of a large horsepower engine starting up, and raising her head she saw a sports car leap away down the road. Rising to her feet she brushed off the grit and twigs, and sighed as she waited for plant security to arrive.

"Buffy?"

"Harry!" it was Harrison Ames, the SSI security chief in the first jeep to arrive.

"What happened?"

"I was out for a run and I saw two guys messing with the fence over there," the petite blond pointed. "I said 'Hi' and one of them pulled a weird gun and started shooting at me. I dived for cover and he hit the fence over there. The lights switched on so they took off. They got away in some kind of muscle car going that way fast."

"Are you hurt?" Harry was concerned. He well knew how Buffy seemed to be more than a little reckless on occasion.

"Me? No. I saw that gun and did not feel like being Colander-Buffy, capable of draining your finest pasta. I got down, and stayed down."

"Harry!" Jimmy Po, of Harry's lieutenants called him from the fence, "Take a look at this!"

Buffy and Harry walked over and looked at what Jimmy had found. It was a small green box connected to the fence by two short lengths of sand colored wire. The box had been set into a small hole and had been in the process of being buried.

"Jimmy, get some more teams and check the perimeter fence. Look for any signs of the wires. There may be more of these."

"Sure thing Harry."

Another pair of security jeeps pulled up and their teams started walking the fence line.

"Buffy, did you see where the shot hit the fence?"

"Sure, also where the other shots hit the road," she walked over to the chain link which was well illuminated in the security lights. "Weird, I don't see any marks at all."

"You said some of the shots hit the road?"

"Yeah, over here," where she pointed was just smooth clean asphalt. So clean in fact it looked newer than the rest of the road. It was easy to see where the whatever had hit, by the fact that the dirt was gone. "Harry, what could have done this?"

"I have no idea. My crew will check it out though. You want a ride home? You've had enough excitement tonight."

"Yes please. Thanks Harry."

"No problem Buffy."

The pair were soon on their way back to Willow and Buffy's apartment. Harry dropped her off and the tired teen headed upstairs to tell Willow what had happened.

"So you're sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine Will, relax. Harry's on the case right now, and I have homework," she headed off to her room and began to study. Willow looked pensive for a little while then got back to her notes on heuristic learning concepts.

The next day after class they were both back at SSI. Buffy was in the simulators practicing on several new SSI aircraft cockpits and Willow was in her office. She had been working for a few hours when there was a knock on the door.

"It's open!" she called out.

"Well brand my kettle it's good to see ya again Willow!" a voice boomed out from behind her.

"Chow!" Willow spun to give the Swift Executive Chef a hug. "It's great to see you, and that is a...beautiful shirt."

Charles 'Chow' Winkler beamed with pride. The aforementioned shirt was teal blue with a bright purple yoke and silver thread trim.

"I picked it up at the Calgary Stampede last year. It was discontinued, no idea why either."

"People just don't have your sense of style Chow."

"Mebbe so. Anyway, I heard from Phil that you were hidin' yerself away up here I thought I'd bring ya a snack. Fresh made blueberry muffins!"

"Thank you Chow. They smell delicious," Willow walked over to the plate and took a bite. "And they taste even better!"

Chow smiled. There were very few things he liked more than someone enjoying his cooking. As Willow ate the muffin he looked at the wall of scribbles.

"So whatcha doin' here Willow?"

"I kind of talked my way into a private research project. Remember when we were chasing the freighter with the Aquatomic Tracker?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, during the trip out to look for the ship I asked Tom about the computer and one thing led to another and led to this..."she pointed at the smartboard.

"What's it do?"

"You know what Artificial Intelligence is Chow?"

"A computer that thinks like a person right?"

"That's one way of putting it. The dictionary definition is something like, a machine that understands its environment and can make decisions that give it the best chance to succeed. Humans can understand their environment and can make those kinds of decisions, so a computer that can do that too..." her voice trailed off.

"Yeah, I can unnerstand that. So how do ya do that?"

Willow smiled and pointed at the board, "Somewhere in there may be the key to the 'how'. There was a guy that Buffy and I met a few years ago, he's dead now, that came up with some radical new ways of designing heuristic software," at Chow's blank stare she laughed. "That's a computer program that can learn. It does something one way and the next time does it slightly differently. It remembers what way works best and is constantly improving. That's what Ted's was supposed to do at least, but it had problems, like getting stuck in the 1950s..."

"What?"

"Never mind. Anyway, looking at the detection program that analyzes the water and finds the best trace in the Aquatomic Tracker and using Ted's work...I think I can come up with something better. In fact I think I may have come up with an idea on how to do it."

"Well it sure sounds like science fiction t'me."

"Chow, you work at SSI. This place is science fiction."

"True enough," the old cowboy laughed. "You take care now Willow and I'm sure I'll b'seein' ya 'round!" with a jaunty wave he left the office.

"Bye Chow, and thanks for the Muffins!"

Willow went back to her computer and began looking up other Swift computer projects. Two hours later her Little Sister buzzed.

"Yes?"

"You forget about the match you're supposed to be reffing Will?" it was Buffy.

"Oh no! Is that now?"

"It is five after all. Get over to the gym Willow; we'll be waiting for your impartial judging of the combativeness."

"Sorry Buffy!" Willow saved all her files and shut down her office before rushing out.

"Hi Will, what's the rush?" a voice called over as she was crossing the parking area.

"Buffy's sparring with Phil, and I'm supposed to be the ref, Abe."

"I'll give you a ride, hop in!"

Willow jumped in the machinist's truck and soon was speeding to the gym.

"Buffy versus Phil? That should be impressive," Abe said with a slight sense of awe. Both women were well known at SSI for their skill in

unarmed combat. Of course, Buffy always held herself back, with nobody but Willow suspecting the fact.

"Yeah, it usually is."

Abe pulled up and Willow rushed into the gym. A small crowd had gathered and Buffy and Phil were stretching out on a padded section of the floor.

"Hi Will!" Buffy called out.

"Sorry I'm late guys!"

Phil smiled, "That's okay, Tom said we were to wait until he got here."

"Oh? That's good. What do you need me to do?" Willow asked curiously as she walked over to her friends.

"Stand in the middle and tell us to start, then get out of the way?" Buffy said grinning.

"I can do that...I think."

"Relax Willow," Phil said comfortingly.

"I'll try?"

Tom showed up then and waved at the women.

"Guess it's showtime. You ready Buffy?"

"I am. Ready Will?"

The red-haired genius nodded. The tall and short fighter faced each other and touched gloves then waited for the signal. Willow looked at them and nodded then raised her hand, waited a beat and dropped it. Yelling, "Go!" before she stepped back out of the way.

Phil immediately did the splits dropping below a swift set of punches from Buffy, who was forced to sidestep to avoid a leg scissor. As Buffy regained her balance, Phil rolled to her feet in one smooth motion and launched a series of palm, elbow, and forearm strikes which Buffy barely managed to slap aside, block or dodge.

Phil stayed on the attack, using her longer reach to force the engagement to where she wanted it. Buffy's speed however made her a hard target for any blows to land including at one point, doing a hands free cartwheel to avoid a sneaky leg sweep. Occasionally though a few punches or kicks would land and eventually both woman stopped and just grinned at each other.

"I'm saying that your giraffe-fu has improved," Buffy laughed as she pulled off her gloves.

"You were just taking it easy on me again weren't you?" Phil replied also laughing.

"Mayyyyy-be?" the pair walked over to the locker room to shower and change.

"Willow."

"Uh yes Tom. Is something wrong?"

"No. I just wanted to ask if you liked your office."

"Oh it's great! I love the smartboard and Buffy and Phil gave me a plant!"

Tom laughed, "Take it easy. Any ideas flowing?"

"Actually yes can I talk to you tomorrow about some of them?"

"Sure. Just stop by the lab. I should be there all day."

"Okay Tom, see you then."

Chapter Five -- A Strange Secret

The next day, Willow stopped by Tom's lab as soon as she arrived from school. He was working on the Seaforge and looked completely engrossed.

"Uh Tom?" Willow said hesitantly.

"Oh hi Willow!" Tom took off the pair of stereo-magnifiers and walked over to the brilliant teen. "So tell what you've figured out in the last two days?"

"About the project?"

Tom nodded.

"Well, I think I have a couple of ideas on how to do this. I've been going over all the research that SSI has done on expert systems and learning programs. Everything from your original Space Lane Brain forward actually. There was some stuff listed under Project: Exman that seemed to be sensor interpretation processing, but most of it was restricted access.

"Oh yes, good old Exman...wellll, considering last year, I think I can trust you," Tom pulled his electronic key from his pocket and beamed it at a bare patch of wall. A portion slid to one side revealing an large freight elevator. The pair stepped into the elevator and the two foot thick Tomasite and Atomeron door slid shut. The elevator descended and opened into a large warehouse like room.

"Welcome to the vault Willow."

"What is this place?"

"This is where all the prototypes go for storage. There are models and or blueprints of every invention that my grandfather, father, and I designed here."

"What's that?" Willow pointed at a wooden cylinder in a glass case.

"That is the original motorized butter churn my grandfather invented, which started Swift Industries. I called this the vault, because over the years during the process of design, SSI has come up with some very dangerous things. We've never marketed any since around World War I, but some of our inventions could be very hazardous in the wrong hands, and for some I don't think there are any right ones actually." He led Willow to an armored door which slid open as he waved his electronic key at it. This room was filled with heavy racks except for a series of glass cases at the far end. As the lights came on, Willow saw the cases were filled with some very unusual objects.

The first case had a large oblate spheroid of some black material and was covered with intricate symbols or pictoglyphs. The next case had preserved specimens of an exotic set of plants and a very unusual group of insects. The final case was the largest and held the preserved body of an almost dragonish nature. At the end were a bookcase and a nine foot tall robot with a star like head.

"That's Exman," Tom said pointing at the robot.

"What is this stuff Tom?"

"Back in 1954, my father and I were contacted by extraterrestrials. They had launched this," he pointed at the black rocky shape, "and it crashed right next to runway 05. Scared the heck out of us. We dug it out and saw the symbols and immediately started to try to translate them."

Tom walked over to the bookcase and pulled out two old and battered stenographer's notebooks, "These belonged to my father and me. We spent years deciphering these symbols," he flipped one open and Willow saw it was filled with esoteric calculations.

"So did you succeed?"

"Sure...eventually. It was right before my father died sadly, but at least he got to see what it said."

"What did the meteor say?"

"Not much really. It was designed to teach us how to communicate in this language more than anything else. The Space Friends, that's what we called them, were in a war with a group we called the Space Legion. They had been under a terraforming attack and their planet was in trouble so they were looking for help. Centuries or even millennia ago they had visited Earth and left caches of equipment and other things that could help them, and we recovered several. In return they gave us Nestoria, Earth's mini-moon."

"So what's with the robot?"

"Well Willow, they sent an energy intelligence down for a visit and it needed a body to interact with us. That's the body."

"Oh. So there was no programming in it then."

"Well, we did have a full set of Swift Enterprises' state of the art telemetry in there too...Granted it was state of the art for 1961, but it was a lot better than anybody else could do."

"And you measured all the signals it generated didn't you?"

"Of course. I even built a rudimentary system to simulate the sensor readings, but it really wasn't my field." Tom picked up a pair of binders from the bookcase. "Here you go Willow. All the information I have on the Exman intelligence cloud."

"Are you serious? You're trusting me with this?"

"Willow, you and Oz were selected for more than your intelligence for internships. Integrity was a large part of it."

"So testing well was only a small part of it?"

Tom nodded, "Come on, both of us have work to do."

Willow entered her office with the binders and immediately started wondering what else Tom had locked away besides alien artifacts. Shaking

her head, she opened one and started seeing what she could glean from the forty year old data.

She was still hard at work looking through the yellowing pages when Buffy came in.

"Hey Will!"

"Buffy! Is it time to go?"

"Not yet, it's only four. I just got out of the Zero-G trainer. Fun and a great work-out too! What are you reading?"

"Some old research notes Tom loaned me," Willow replied casually.

"Yay? Well, I saw Phil and she said those boxes that were being planted were supposed to turn the entire fence line into like a super-bug that could listen in on any communications at SSI."

"That kind of thing is Tom level smarts," Willow said carefully.

"Yeah, Phil and I were thinking a snake actually, just like you just were."

"He doesn't like me."

"He wanted to recruit you."

"Buffy..."

"Don't worry Will. I'll bodyguard you; he's still not sure what I can do."

Willow shivered. Her last encounter with the genius weapons designer, the Black Cobra, had almost gotten her drowned at the southern most point of South America. What diabolical scheme was he plotting now?

Buffy patted her best friend on the shoulder, "Willow, I'll stick close while you figure out what he's after and how to mess up his plans."

"I can do that."

"You have done that. How long you want to stay tonight."

"I can leave now actually. Let me lock these up," Willow slid the binders into the small office safe and thumb-printed it shut. She then said a few quiet words over the lock.

Buffy raised an eyebrow, "Important stuff?"

Willow nodded, "Very. I just put a version of the ignore me on it. No candle needed."

"Cool, you are getting good at that stuff."

"Yeah, kinda scary sometimes though," Willow turned off the lights and they headed down to catch a shuttle van.

They had passed through the main gate when Buffy started suddenly and turned around in her seat, "Willow, the car that's following us is the same one from the other night."

"The guys that shot at you?"

Buffy nodded, "I recognize the sound of the engine."

"What do we do?"

Before Buffy could answer that, a pickup truck burst from a side street, and slammed into the hood of the van!

Chapter Six -- Redhaired Target

The impact sent the van skidding and finally falling on to its side. Willow blinked a few times to refocus her eyes and saw Buffy hanging limply from her seat belt; dangling above her.

She tried desperately to unlock her own seat belt, but she had landed in such an angle that the tension on the reel wouldn't let her.

"You got 'em!"

"The redhead is the one that matters..."

Willow heard a pair of rough voices approaching and the scrape of boots on the pavement.

"Hurry up Morrie, we don't got much time before those cops start nosing around!" the first voice hissed.

"I know Ed! Probably easiest going through the roof. No way we're reaching the doors."

"Whatever Just get it done," the first voice, Ed, hissed. A grinding sound started and a fountain of sparks started spraying from a thin line being cut in the roof.

Willow continued to struggle trying to reach the latch when an idea struck her.

"Well duh!" Willow she muttered as she stopped struggling and concentrated on finding the location of the reel. Touching the side of it she felt vibrating under her fingertips until suddenly there was a click and the belt flopped loose. Slipping free she moved up to Buffy's head and whispered in her ear.

"Buffy wake up! We're in trouble!"

"...body get the number of that Krant'hk beast?" Buffy mumbled as her eyes opened.

"Buffy!"

"Yeah yeah Willow. Us. Trouble. In. I know this recipe by heart. Maybe next time we can add chocolate chips?" Buffy grabbed her jammed belt latch and with a sudden jerk freed it. The loud grinding sound coming from the roof covering the noises the two women were making.

"I'm calling SSI Security Buffy."

"Good plan, I'll keep our new buddies from getting too friendly until the cavalry arrives."

Willow called dispatch from her Little Sister. The Duty Officer told her they were contacting Shopton Police and they should be there soon. When the call was done, Willow looked over at Buffy who had produced a telescoping tactical baton from somewhere. Seeing her redhaired friend's quizzical eyebrows, Buffy grinned, "You didn't want them too badly hurt right?"

Willow sighed. She could only imagine the other weapons the petite blond had concealed on her fashionably dressed frame.

The top long cut had been finished and the first of the two vertical cuts was three-quarters done when a small tube was shoved in the gap. Willow's first thought was, "Gas!" and she immediately jammed the end of a ballpoint pen into the open end, blocking any possible chemical flow she hoped.

There was some muffled cursing from outside the van and then the faint sound of a police siren approaching.

"Forget the gas! Just use the sleeve and pop the top Morrie!" Ed said quickly, "Those cops are going to be on top of us any second now!"

"Got it! Hey use the thump on that pickup!"

"Good idea!"

There was a quick series of dull 'thunks' punctuated by the sound of metal being slammed very hard. Then there was a mechanical whine and a metal gauntlet forced its way past the cut metal and grabbing the edge began peeling back the roof like a sardine can!

Buffy swung into action, smashing down on the fingers with a pattern of rapid strikes from her baton. The gauntlet was jerked out of sight.

"They've got a jackhammer in there!" Morrie yelled.

"Never mind that we got to get out of here!" there were wild footsteps, and then the sound of a high powered motor being revved and the screech of tires. The police arrived not a moment later.

The women were extricated and given a ride home, where they promised they would give a statement tomorrow afternoon, but mentioned that the names Morrie and Ed were used. The Shopton police officer took that down and wished them good night.

When he was gone and the girls were working on their homework, a pensive Buffy looked up.

"Willow, you'd better start carrying your bag of tricks with you. Stuff for the ignore me and that kind of thing," Buffy said thoughtfully.

Willow nodded, "I have to stop by that whole foods market for some of it."

"We can do that on the way to school tomorrow."

"Good plan," they worked some more then Willow looked up.

"Buffy, they were after me."

"Yeah. My hair? Not so red."

"But I don't want to intern for the Black Cobra."

"Better than the Black Frog."

"Don't even joke about that!"

"Sorry Will. I said I'd bodyguard you and I will. What the heck was with that glove I beat up anyway? It felt like I was attacking rebar."

"It looked like some kind of exo-skeleton. Basically a mechanical frame that you slip your body inside and augments your strength."

"Also makes your fingers really tough. Look at my baton," Buffy produced the metal rod like a magic trick and Willow saw the dents in the tempered aircraft aluminum. "I've hit all sorts of things with this and never seen damage like that."

"You do tend to hit things really hard."

"Well yeah. Anyway it's time for bed, Mr. Gordo is calling!" Buffy was referring to her lucky plush pig stuffed animal.

"Good night Buffy," Willow remained seated at the table then went into her room and opened the false bottom of one of her suitcase from which she pulled several extremely old books. She opened the first one and started to make some notes.

The next morning after a stop at the store and school. The two were at the Shopton police station along with Phil Radnor as a representative of SSI. They gave their statements and then Phil started asking questions to the police sergeant on the case.

Apparently the pickup had been stolen and then after the collision had been flipped to block the road. There were massive dents all over one side like it had been hit by a giant's hammer. An electric high speed rotary saw had been used to cut into the roof. It had been left behind along with its power pack and was not of any known manufacture. The tube Willow had blocked with her pen was connected to a cylinder of some sort of compressed gas, also left behind. The gas was now at the State Police lab being analyzed, a sample had been forwarded to SSI as well. So far there were no other clues.

The three women left after an hour or so and headed in Phil's SUV back to the plant. In the lot outside Tom's lab was the wrecked van, which a couple of SSI technicians were going over. Tom was standing there as well and waved.

"Hi Boss!" Buffy said, "This wasn't our fault, honest."

"I believe you. I'm just glad you two are all right. Willow, you said they were after you?" Tom asked.

"Yup. They said 'The redhead is the one that matters...' which I really don't think is fair. I think Buffy matters a lot. What is with the dad guys saying she doesn't? I just don't understand that. And furthermore..."

"Easy on the babble Willow," Buffy cut in.

"Was I starting to again? Oops."

"It's okay Willow, you had a stressful experience," Tom said, "We're upping certain security measures. An attack against one of my people is an attack against me. I really don't like being on the defensive."

"So what now?"

"Well, Buffy has to fly to Fearing for a suit fitting. Take one of the Ducks."

"You're the best boss ever!" Buffy was very fond of flying the supersonic capable Whirling Duck Mark V. A combination of a jet and a helicopter, it was a dream to pilot.

"I try," Tom said laughing. "Phil, you keep an eye on Willow until Buffy gets back. I don't think anything will happen on the plant grounds, but we've been surprised before."

"Sure thing Tom."

"And Willow remember. We're all on your side in this."

"I think I want to stare at computer code for a while to calm down..." the young genius muttered as she headed towards the Prototype Building, Phil in tow.

"So Tom," Buffy asked, "This guy had what Willow called an exoskeleton or something. My baton bounced off it like it was nothing. You have anything to even the odds?"

Tom looked thoughtful, "I'll give it a thought. See me when you get back from Fearing."

Chapter Seven -- Flight Training

Willow was adrift in a sea of paper when Buffy knocked on her office door before letting herself in.

"Whoa Will, did a laser printer explode?"

"Uh, I might have gotten a little carried away..."

"What is all this stuff?" Buffy asked after carefully moving a stack of papers so she could sit down.

"A start of an idea? I think I figured out how to fix Ted's program."

"So it isn't homicidal?"

"That was a big part of it. Right now I'm looking through all the computer designs SSI has done to find something more compact for it to run in."

"Will, what are you planning?"

"I'm not sure yet actually. Anyway, how was the fitting?"

"My spacesuit and my flight suits will be done in two weeks. So for the next two weeks I'm being checked out on the Halberd Class transport rockets. Class room and simulator...Yay me?"

"You're going into space!"

"In a month or so, yeah. Who would have thought it? Don't worry Will, Tom said he'll fly you to Outpost 2 in the Challenger and we'll meet up there."

"I'm going into space???"

"Of course you are. What would I do without your brain to get me out of trouble?"

"So what are you doing now?"

"Under orders of our boss. I am taking my flying student, Willow Rosenberg, on a proficiency flight as she needs some more stick time in the Pigeon Elite. Pilot in Command Rosenberg will fly, Co-Pilot and Instructor Summers will watch. Those were Tom's instructions so lock your stuff up and get ready to go flying."

Willow realized it was useless to argue against both Buffy and Tom, and secured all her documents and computers. They headed out to the flight line and were met by Tom's sister Sandy Barclay. Sandy was co-owner of the company and handled most of the sales and personnel management. She was also a former SSI test pilot however, and enjoyed flying as much or more than her brother did.

"Hi there Buffy! Taking up Willow for some time?"

"She's actually taking me up, you want to come along?"

"In an Elite? Sure, I haven't ridden as a passenger in ages. It will be interesting to see what it feels like."

Willow almost started hyperventilating. Sandy had written the book on the Elite as well as many other SSI aircraft. She had been flying since she was sixteen and was qualified on every former and current SSI airframe. Now she was going to be a passenger in a plane Willow Rosenberg was flying!

Buffy and Sandy were silent as Willow did the pre-flight including a walk-around. Buffy strapped herself into the Co-Pilot's Seat while Sandy was on the spare cockpit jump seat. as Willow put on her headphones and called the tower. Getting permission to run up the engines, she went through the start-up checklist as was rewarded by the increasing whine of the pair of powerful Swift Dynamatic turbofan engines. The tower gave permission to taxi and she activated the automatic tug to back the aircraft out of its parking space. When the tug disengaged, she gave a little forward thrust and was soon moving to her space in takeoff order. The she received clearance to takeoff, Winding up the engines she released the wheel brakes and was soon rolling down the runway. A moment later she was airborne with the landing gear quietly retracting.

"Great takeoff Willow," Sandy told her. "Very smooth and professionally done."

Willow felt encouraged by that, but was still too nervous to completely relax. For the next hour Buffy gave her maneuvers to do, described in flight emergencies and asked for the response, and watched her control of the aircraft.

When they finally touched down Willow felt completely worn out and was grateful when she finally shut down the engines and completed the post-flight paperwork.

"So Sandy?" Buffy asked.

"You were right, she's really good. Willow, you're an excellent pilot; you just need to relax a little more."

"Willow," Buffy said, "give me your pilot's log so I can update it. Now Tom told me you're supposed to go flying twice a week. That way you won't get stale in the office. Understand?"

"Is that true?"

"Yes. Next time we're going to do some simulator work and I'll start familiarizing you with the Skeeter. Rotorcraft are the best."

Sandy laughed at the dazed expression on Willow's face. "It's okay Willow; I can't tell you the amount of times Phyllis Newton and I had to pry Tom out of his lab. He had the same expression."

"Phyllis Newton?"

"Tom's old girl friend and my best friend in since elementary school. Her father ran Swift Construction."

"Oh, is she still in Shopton?" Buffy asked.

"No, she moved to New York City, when she and Tom broke up."

"Aww that's sad. What happened?" Buffy pressed.

"Tom was never the kind of guy who would think about marriage. Phyllis dropped plenty of hints and eventually they just moved apart," Sandy shrugged.

"So Tom has never married?" Willow asked.

"He hasn't even dated since Phyllis left I think. That was almost thirty years ago."

"Wow...By the way Sandy," Buffy asked curiously, "Why are you telling us this? Isn't it kind of personal?"

"Because since you two and Oz showed up last summer, Tom's been happier than I've seen him in years. Something is up and you two are involved somehow...at least Willow is," Sandy sounded puzzled.

"Any ideas why it's me?" Willow asked.

Sandy shook her head, "None, I'll try to find out though."

"Thanks Sandy!" Willow said and meant it.

The two girls left the flight line and headed to the shuttle van site.

"Buffy, don't you think they're going to try again?"

"Oh, I'm hoping they do. Tom and I have a few surprises ready. Also Phil is going to be following us in an unmarked car."

"Oh we're being baity again! Just like Sunnydale."

"Yup!"

The van drove a different route this time and as they were about to turn towards their apartment the van suddenly made a sharp left.

"Willow, try your Little Sister. My cell just stopped working," Buffy was looking at her useless phone.

The teen genius couldn't get through either and told her friend.

"Well it looks like they've succeeded on the kidnapping. Now we just wait to see where we end up," Buffy looked pleased.

"You were expecting this?"

"Tom was. The kidnappers are in a world of hurt and they don't know it yet."

The van continued on speeding up and then did a quick U-turn into the back of a moving semi that had just lowered a set of ramps. Once it was inside the ramps retracted and the doors closed leaving the two teens sealed inside a dark space.

"He was not expecting this," Buffy said in an annoyed tone. "They're probably going to gas us and haul us out."

"And then what?"

"I have no idea."

Chapter Eight -- Skyjack

There was a faint hiss and a pink vapor began flooding the van.

"This stuff looks familiar," Willow said absently as she collapsed unconscious. Buffy took a quick look around to make sure they hadn't missed anything before collapsing as well.

The redhaired genius came to, finding herself strapped to an airline seat. Across the aisle of the private jet was the slumped form of her friend. As Willow glanced over she saw Buffy's mouth twitch in a smile as the blond gave her a wink.

"Rosenboig's awake! Tell Ed," the statement came from a very big man with a battered nose and short wiry red hair.

"Uh, what happened? Where am I?"

"Miss Rosenboig, sorry abouts the rough ways we uh, invited ya. My ma always raised me t'be a gentleman ya see. But there was uh what's the woid? Exhument, extrement...?"

"Exigent?"

"Yeah! Dat's the one! Thanks Miss. Dose woids always mess me up."

"I know. And you know there's a perfect word and you just can't quite remember it?"

"Yeah, dat's the woist."

"So we got invited roughly and we're now in a plane?"

"Somethin' like dat. Oh, here's Ed..."

"Hello Miss Rosenberg. I hope Merle here wasn't bothering you."

"Oh no. We were talking about vocabulary, language, and memory actually."

The man called Ed gave a start at that and a look of confusion passed over his face. He had a very beak-like nose and a weak chin and had grown a pencil thin mustache. Those features coupled with his scrawny build reminded Willow of a starved rat.

"Ed Ratface," she thought to herself, "that suits him."

"Miss Rosenberg, we'll be landing in an hour or so. Just relax and everything will be fine."

"Why hasn't Buffy...My friend over there woken up?" Willow made sure to put a little tremble in her voice.

"I...I really don't know."

"Do you think she had some kind of allergic reaction? She's so small and weak you know," Willow grinned inwardly as she imagined Buffy fuming and not able to respond.

"Yeah she is a little tiny thing," Ed Ratface said. He checked her pulse, "And her pulse is really slow, almost like she's dead. Lemme see what I can get for her," he headed forward.

"Thank you sir!"

"So Merle, right?"

The big man nodded.

"Why were we...uh was I invited to wherever and who did the inviting?"

"The Cobra wanted t'meet you two."

"Like the Black Cobra?"

"Yeah. Dat's him. He said you'd talked or somethin' before."

"On the radio."

"Yeah. Apparently you impressed him and he's a guy dat don't impress well."

"Well thanks Merle, and I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Why?"

"For her," Willow looked over at Merle's side, and as he turned that direction he saw Buffy now free standing there. Just before the small blonde's fist impacted the underside of his jaw and he collapsed unconscious.

"Absolutely perfect Will," Buffy whispered as she released her friend.

"The gas didn't affect you at all did it?"

"Nope, got exposed to it that other time before sooo..."

"Where are we?"

"I heard them talking about heading to Cuba. We've been flying for two hours and this model has a cruising speed of about 475. I'd say we're somewhere near Florida or the Bahamas."

Willow looked out the window and saw islands below, "Bahamas..."

As she was looking, Buffy had lifted Merle up and propped him against the seats so it looked like he was bending over Willow. She then slipped back into her seat and waited for Ed to return.

"Still discussing language Merle? Stop bothering the nice lady and head forward," Ed said casually as he approached. Getting no response he took another step forward and felt a grip like an iron bar go around his throat. His vision swam as pressure was placed on his carotid arteries and sagged in a limp heap.

Soon both he and Merle were strapped down and gagged in the seats the two women had recently occupied.

"Well then," Buffy said with a smile, "Time to turn this plane around!"

Walking quietly the pair arrived at the cockpit door and Buffy tried the knob before slowly shaking her head and pulling her hand away. Willow nodded and cupped the latch between her hands. There was a faint click and the redhead smiled before making an 'After you' gesture.

Buffy tried the knob again. This time it turned easily and soon she had the door open a crack. She made a quick peek in then closed the door.

"No co-pilot. As I take out the pilot you slip into the co-pilot's seat and take the airplane. Understand?"

"But..."

"Don't worry about the gauges you don't understand the yoke, pedals and throttle are in the same places as on an Elite and the base instruments are in the center cluster. Just keep us flying straight and level. You can do this Will."

Willow nodded slightly shakily and took a deep breath. Buffy pulled open the cockpit door just wide enough for the slim women to slip through then in a crouch moved forward till she was right behind the pilot's seat. After waving Willow to enter, she stood and unplugged the pilot's command headset from the radio before swinging around and aiming a punch at his temple. The pilot must have caught a flicker of movement because he

moved his head out of the way in the nick of time so the blow merely grazed him instead of knocking him out.

Willow had slipped into the co-pilot's seat and grabbed the yoke; her flailing feet finally resting on the pedals. The pilot tried to twist the yoke back and forth to roll the airplane and get Buffy off of him, but Willow resisted with all her might. Finally Buffy managed to get the pilot into a sleeper hold and he was unconscious as well.

Unstrapping him, the blonde hauled the 200 pound man back to the passenger area and tied him down before returning to the cockpit. Scooting the pilot's seat forward she replugged the headset and strapped in before putting her hands on the controls, "I have the airplane."

Willow heaved a sigh of relief and took her hands off the yoke, "Thank you Buffy."

"What for? You're a fine pilot; you held control just as needed. Home now?"

"Hang on a second. If this is the Cobra's plane it may have some surprises. Let me check the radios and the Instrument Landing System."

"Good call Will. At the moment we have a course locked in, but it's to Havana."

"Can you wait a second to disengage it?"

"Sure."

Buffy kept an eye on the instruments while Willow flipped open the hatch to the avionics bay and stuck her head in to look around.

"A-Ha!" she cried out triumphantly, she had a small circuit board in her hand.

"What is it?"

"Basically it could turn this into a really big drone I think. I wondered how I would booby-trap a plane and then looked there."

"I'm glad I'm on your side Will. Can I come about now?"

"Yeah, but stay off the radios until we get close to US airspace."

"Got it."

The business jet made a leisurely turn under Buffy's careful control and was soon retracing its flightpath back to Shopton.

"How will we explain this one?" the blond asked.

"Not a clue. Maybe they dropped their guard and we got lucky?" Willow answered.

"That works Maybe I tripped Merle and he fell down and knocked himself out?" Buffy asked next.

"And then I distracted Ed while you jumped him!" Willow replied excitedly

And so the two women discussed what story they would tell as they flew back north.

Chapter Nine -- Spark of Inspiration

Buffy landed the aircraft smoothly at Shopton's airport. There were already a number of SSI and Shopton PD vehicles on-site examining the semi that had eaten the shuttle van.

"Willow! Buffy! Over here!" the two girls saw Harry Ames waving at them.

"Hi Harry! What's all the fuss and stuff?" Buffy asked.

"Didn't you know you were kidnapped?"

"Oh that..." Willow said fairly calmly. "We hit some rough air and Buffy beat them up when they were being bounced around."

"Bounced around?" Harry asked.

"That seat belt light goes on for a reason you know Mister."

"So the crooks are still on board?"

"Yes. There are three of them but don't be too rough on them, they were nice and they are working for the Cobra," Willow replied.

"And you two are alright?"

"They used that pink smoke so yes," Buffy replied, "Also they gave Willow a chance for long distance flight hours. Don't forget about making me sign off on that in your log!"

"But you held on to the yoke the entire time?" Willow said surprisedly.

"Nope, I just let you think I was. I was just resting my hands on it. You stuck the landing too. Great work!"

"You mean...all the time...?"

"Yup! Just wait until I tell Tom how good a pilot you are."

Harry and Buffy laughed at Willow's expression of shock and disbelief, then Buffy hugged her best friend, "You were great Will, I felt safe with you as Pilot in Command."

"Wow," was all Willow could say in a little voice.

"Ladies," Harry spoke up, "It's late and I should get you home."

Willow nodded, "Can we get our schoolwork out of the van first? I think the bad guys must have left it there, because it wasn't on the plane."

"Homework..." Buffy groaned, "Well, whatever."

After recovering their bags Harry drove them back to the apartment, "I'll have someone here tomorrow to pick you up here and at Shopton University."

"Thanks Harry."

"It's no problem Willow. An attack against you is an attack against SSI. And you definitely know how the boss is about attacks on SSI."

The two women nodded and went upstairs to work on their homework.

The next morning they were met at the front door by Phil who drove them to class and came back to pick them up at noon.

"Thanks Phil!" Willow said happily as they headed off towards the plant.

"It's no problem honest. I have been assigned as official Rosenguard for the time being."

"What about me?" Buffy asked curiously.

"Tom wanted both of us on this. The Cobra wants Willow for some reason."

"Fair enough. He seriously has the resource-y stuff to ruin our days."

"You got that right," Phil agreed.

Willow headed up to her office. When she had been flying back from the Caribbean (even if she hadn't realized she was the one doing the flying), she had also been thinking about her project. The biggest problem was in

building something that could run that kind of code quickly enough. Even three dimensional integrated circuits would have too much lag time in switching states.

She pulled up the documents on Tom's Exman simulator. This was a plasma ball which could react to various inputs from the Exman chassis sensor systems. She then brought up the documentation on the Caves of Nuclear Fire.

"So an Inertite compound was used to resist the anti-proton attack..." Inertite was a compound Tom had discovered in Africa.

She then made a phone call, "Tom, this is Willow. Can I ask you a technical question?"

"Sure."

"How well does Inertite resist plasma temperatures?"

"Hot plasma? Extremely well. It transmits the heat through it however, so whatever it is needs to be coated in asbestalon and Tomasite as well. Why?"

"I have an idea about an artificial brain."

"I'll be right over."

By the time Tom arrived Willow had made several drawings on her smartboard and Chow was standing there watching her work.

"Hi Willow! Hi Chow, what are you doing here?"

"I wuz droppin' off some coffee fer Miz Willow and she wuz jest a sketchin' away."

"So you thought you'd watch?" the scientist asked his old friend.

"Yup. She's a smart lady. I figgered I'd learn somethin' interestin' anyhow."

"Oh! Tom!"

"Relax Willow. Just lay out your idea," Tom said soothingly.

"Okay, I was reading your experiments. The ones you did after the 'X' energy went home."

"The plasma mind study I did?"

"Yes. As I was reading it sounded like it was in some ways acting as an FPGA."

"Whut's that FPGA thingy?" Chow asked.

"A field-programmable gate array. Basically it's a circuit board that can be made to act like all sorts of other circuits by feeding it a particular computer program."

"So it's like one o'them chameleons?"

Tom laughed, "In a lot of ways that's close. Think of it as a Swiss-army knife of computers. Each configuration is a different tool that folds out."

"Okay. I got that then."

Willow continued, "So I was thinking solid state circuits are way too slow for the kind of data handling a real AI would have to do. Why not a reconfigurable energy based system?"

Tom stood there thinking for a second then said, "You have my full attention."

"A plasma-based brain. It will be able to reconfigure for the Buchanan algorithms far faster than any silicon based system, and will be more likely to have adaptable learning."

"So it can shift its logic structure to meet the demands a particular task is placing on it?"

"Exactly. The reason I asked about Inertite was to keep stray high speed particles from coming in and disrupting the precise magnetic eddies that will be storing the information."

"Well this is an out of the box approach," Tom said smiling. "Now let's see a research plan."

Willow groaned and nodded.

At about seven Buffy knocked on Willow's office door. Stepping inside she saw the redheaded genius scribbling away madly on her smartboard, "Will, its dinner and home time."

"Oh? Sorry Buffy, I got carried away with my artificial brain design."

"Artificial brain?"

"Yeah..." as she shut down her office Willow started to explain it to Buffy. The two women walked outside and Buffy led Willow to a newish Blazer.

"Where'd this come from?"

"It's mine, I got it today."

"Where'd you get the money?"

"I asked my mom for a loan and bought it from SSI. It used to be one of the service vehicles. It's an electric running off Swift Solar Batteries. Abe over in prototyping checked it over and they quick installed a roll cage just in case."

"Oh cool."

"Yup he also replaced the windows with clear Tomasite. The fabrication work this place can do is amazing."

"You said something about dinner?"

"Yeah let's go home."

Chapter Ten -- Energetic Computation

When Willow got back to the lab the next day, she went straight to work. Buffy had to pry her out at nine PM to get her home. This happened the next day as well and even on the weekends. The Cobra had made no moves in this time frame. Finally after several months of concentrated effort and plans she called Tom.

"Yes Willow?"

"Could you come over to Lab 11? I have something you might want to see."

"On my way."

When the elderly inventor arrived he saw a small group of people staring at what looked like a very large softball. It was the shiny white of Durastress plastic and was studded with small copper nodes and had hair fine wires attached to each node. This braid of wires ran over to a pair of his latest version Little Idiot computers. The size of a paperback, each machine was capable of workstation performance with 32 separate processor cores per unit.

"Wow Willow. You finished it!"

"This is a prototype Tom," Willow said apologetically. "It might explode, melt, catch fire, or turn into a breakfast burrito...well maybe not the last part, but the chance of badness is pretty high."

"That's why the Durastress then?"

"Yeah. I have two inches of that as the outer shell molded around the actual core. I loaded the gas first so it is seamless. The inside is Tomasite, Asbestalon, and Inertite like we talked about, while the high temperature internal elements are made of that pseudo-gold you found."

"Atomeron?"

"Yes. That's what the internal magnetic grid is made of as well as the spark initiators."

"So what gas are you using?" Tom asked, genuinely curious.

Willow looked slightly guilty, "Umm...Exploron and hydrogen mixed with the Inertite solution you used for your atmosphere processors?"

Tom went white as a sheet, "So that's an anti-proton bomb?"

"Nooo! The Inertite prevents the proton anti-proton reaction in the gas, and the mixture allows me to achieve four different types of magnetic eddies for information processing. That's why I put so much Durastress and Tomasite on it, to prevent accidental ruptures and that's also why I had prototyping build this..." She pointed at a large white cabinet on the other side of the lab. "...for testing."

"That's Durastress I assume?"

"Two foot thick solid cast and the door is fitted to only open inward. see the reinforcing lugs?"

Tom nodded as he examined the massive sarcophagus. Willow wheeled the stand holding the sphere, the Little Idiots, and the high voltage initiator in its own Faraday cage into the vault and connected them to the umbilical cable that was molded in. Then Abe and Buffy lifted two massive bars of Durastress and slotted them into place to secure the door.

"Okay Will. We are ready to go!" Buffy called out.

"Got it! Charging initiator," the teen genius flipped a switch on her control board. A faint high pitched whine started building and plateaued. "Ultra-Capacitors charged and initiator ready." She flipped up a red safety bail labeled 'Do Not Touch! Especially Buffy' and pressed down on the button underneath.

The whine stopped and a loud snap was heard as instruments started displaying information.

"And we have ignition and pressure is holding!" Willow said joyously, "It's working!"

Tom watched the instruments, "Willow, is this thing self-powered?"

The redhead nodded, "Considering the comparatively huge amount of monatomic hydrogen and Exploron in there it was easy enough to use really teeny tiny amounts to keep the heat up, while utilizing the rest for processing power. It has enough to last for fifty years or so before it needs to

be replaced. If I need to shut it down before that though, I just need to draw off the surplus power above its maintenance level and disable the power generation by changing the magnetic field."

"Very slick," Tom said, "You've incidentally invented an anti-proton power generator..."

"I have? I guess I have...Oops?" Willow looked embarrassed.

"I'll get the patent forms over to you later. In the meantime what's next?"

"Well I have your original code from the Exman project updated for the modern systems. Let's try that."

"Sounds good."

Willow typed in a command at her workstation and the instruments jumped as the plasma computer began to process it. "I have it slaved to that camera over there and this screen will show us what it sees. Buffy put the apple down now."

Her friend set an apple from the cafeteria down on a table in front of the camera. The screen started giving blocks of random size until it had produced a vague picture in black and white of the fruit.

"I'll tell it about color now," Willow initiated a second program and the fruit turned red. This was repeated with a lemon and a block of blue putty. Then Buffy set a color wheel down in front of the camera. The picture filled

in red, blue and yellow, waited a second and then started to slowly populate the rest of the wheel in the appropriate shades.

There were cheers in the lab as the wheel finished.

"Congratulations Willow!" Tom said proudly.

"Well I expanded on other people's work, especially Ted's for the creative impulse work and your's for the learning routines," Willow said modestly.

"Yes, but neither of them came up with an anti-proton based computer," Buffy replied, "You did."

"Yeah well...Uh oh..." Willow was looking at the tell tales.

"Uh oh what?" Buffy asked.

"Temperature's climbing in the brain, I've just killed power generation and am bleeding off the excess heat, but everybody should get out now!"

The onlookers quickly left as Willow, Buffy, Abe, and Tom stayed behind.

"What's going on?" Tom asked quietly so as not to disturb the furiously typing Willow.

"The override link has fused open apparently and the excess won't bleed off. It's getting really really hot in there."

"Like how hot?" Buffy asked.

"About 4,500 degrees and climbing. The pressure in there is truly scary too."

"How long before it blows?" Tom asked.

"Thirty minutes maybe?" Willow replied.

"So how big?" Abe queried the redhead.

"Maximum? About a kiloton yield, probably less though."

"So what can stop it?"

"I'm not sure..."

Tom headed to the intercom, "This is Tom. I need emergency equipment in a perimeter a quarter mile from Lab 11! No closer! I repeat No closer! Any personnel inside that perimeter should evacuate immediately! This is not a drill!"

Buffy had been quietly thinking, "Tom how fast can we get a Skeeter with a cargo hoist over here?"

"Ten minutes, why?"

"Do it."

"We're going to haul that vault to a safe place and let it do what it will do."

"How are we going to get it out of here? Even made of Durastress it weighs about a ton. We needed a forklift to get it in here and we don't have one close enough or fast enough," Abe asked.

"Leave it to me!" Buffy replied.

Chapter Eleven -- Quarry Blast

Tom and Abe had hustled out of the room to prep a Skeeter, one of SSI's pocket helicopters. Willow looked at her friend suspiciously.

"You do have a plan right?"

"Well duh, haul this to that empty rock quarry where you busted up Tom's gizmo so the Cobra couldn't use it. There's nobody living next to it and the blast should be channeled upwards by the stone walls."

"That's actually a really good idea Buffy! How are we getting the vault outside though? It weighs a ton...literally."

Buffy gave her friend a slightly 'Are you kidding me?' look, then walked over next to the machine with a coil of Tomasite rope and some reinforced gloves.

When Tom landed the Skeeter outside ten minutes later he saw the vault out on the concrete on a series of rollers that he recognized as being parts of the inside banister. Buffy stood next to it leaning against her car with a fire axe and a grin.

"Sorry Tom! I might have damaged the stairwell a little..."

"It's okay. What's the plan Buffy?" Tom asked worriedly.

"The quarry the Cobra used. It's empty and the blast..."

"Would be channeled!" the elder inventor caught on quickly.

Working quickly the four wrapped the vault with the winch cable around the vault and Tom hopped into the Skeeter to takeoff.

"Aren't you coming Willow?" he yelled. The redhead looked over at Buffy who nodded and waved as she pulled off the heavy gloves and wiped her forehead, Willow hopped into the cockpit and soon the Skeeter had hoisted the vault off the ground and was heading towards the quarry.

"How'd you get the vault down so fast?" Tom asked over the headset.

"Buffy is really good at improvising."

"Rollers and a pulley?"

"And her truck for brute force," Willow didn't mention that she drove the truck around as Buffy was busy with the vault and the doorway.

"Well we're here. I'm going to quick release the winch and drop it as we fly past. Hang on!"

Tom roared by the quarry then stabbed a button on the console. The explosive bolts on the Skeeter's winch detonated and the entire assembly dropped out of the aircraft. The hit the quarry bottom in the shallowest part which was about ten foot deep, and the winch plunged in at a deeper area dragging the vault with it. The Skeeter had just gotten about two miles away when it finally detonated.

It was a clean explosion as there was no real radioactive material involved and most of the energy was in the form of a massive heat pulse which vaporized the sphere. The pressure wave blew the vault apart but the toughness of Tom's incredible Durastress plastic reduced its damaging effects significantly. There was still enough to make a colossal BOOM and turn all the water in the quarry to steam, but otherwise that was the extent of the catastrophe.

Once Tom finished riding out the shockwave he brought the Skeeter about and they hovered over the rapidly thinning cloud of steam.

"Wow..." was all Willow could say.

"I have had experiments go just as badly Willow. Do you know what went wrong?" Tom asked curiously.

"The override link was just tungsten not Atomeron. It must have melted. That has to be what happened."

"How long will it take to make another?"

"Well the wiring robot is already programmed. All the molds are still around. Just the casting and assembly time really. A week maybe? Wait a second mister...You want me to keep going? I almost blew up the plant!" Willow sounded distraught.

"And you had taken some very reasonable precautions...Hey, is that part of the vault?" Tom pointed at a white slab about a quarter mile from the blast point. Willow gasped in awe at the force of the explosion.

"I think that's the door."

"Good design. It looks intact except for missing its hinges and the box it was attached to," Tom said laughing, " he wheeled the Skeeter around and headed back to SSI.

"And you're serious?"

"About keeping going with the plasma brain? Absolutely. It was doing interpolation of colors without any real programming to do so. You've got something there Willow, something very interesting. Next time though we'll have you set it up in the test bunkers until you get the kinks worked out."

"That might be a good idea," Willow agreed eagerly.

When they arrived back at the lab, they found Buffy and Abe cleaning up the mess. Buffy hadn't been kidding. Getting the vault down the stairs had torn them up along with the wall next to them, and that was before the banister had been sacrificed for rollers.

"It worked?" Abe asked.

Willow nodded.

"We heard the boom clear enough-ish. No flash of light though."

"It went off underwater, Buffy," Willow explained as she downloaded the information from the telemetry from the workstation, "So Abe, you ready to build another one? This time less explosive?"

Abe shook his massive head, "Sure why not, what was the failure point?"

The big machinist and the redhaired genius walked out discussing the problem as Tom watched Buffy set furniture back upright.

"Okay, how did you do it?" Tom asked.

"What?" Buffy said innocently.

"Get the vault around two right angle bends and down a flight of stairs in less than ten minutes."

"Ohhhhh that."

"Well?"

"You saw my truck and the handy dandy coil of rope tied to it right? I'm just glad you wax the floors."

"How much do you weigh Buffy?"

"100 pounds or so. Why?"

Tom just shook his head. There was no other method that the 5'2" tall teen could have used to move the vault. But something about it just didn't add up.

"Never mind Buffy. You want to help me stow the Skeeter?"

"Sure Tom!"

The odd pair climbed in and flew it over to its tie down point.

A week later the experiment was repeated, this time in one of the explosion resistant bunkers under SSI. The tungsten had been replaced in this version and Willow had added two more safety interlocks in the design to enable emergency shutdown.

"Okay color is working again. I am now loading the main heuristic system code into the left lobe."

"Left lobe?" Tom asked Abe who was again standing by.

"The two computers that interface with the outside world. Willow calls them the left and right lobes. Left lobe handles logic and problem solving and right lobe handles perception. The color routine was loaded into the right lobe," Abe replied.

"Like the old wives' tale about being left and right brained?"

"Exactly!" Willow said as she got up from her console and stretched. "I needed to call them something and Pre-Processing Node and Sensory Node are boring names."

Tom laughed, "That is an excellent reason. So Ms. Rosenberg what is the...What are you calling it anyway?"

"Oh, well it's a high density mixed-mode plasma magnetic matrix computational system. That's a mouthful though. I've been calling it the Test Anti-proton Reasoning Apparatus or 'T.A.R.A.' for short."

"Tara it is then. What is Tara going to do next?"

"Learn to communicate. Text to speech with images flashed up. Ted's notes indicated this was how he managed to get his prototypes working. As Tara has a million times faster processor then he did it should take less time. I'm going to stay here tonight and monitor the progress."

"Don't worry Tom, I'm staying too!" Buffy said brightly.

"Fine. I'll let Chow know so he can bring some food by for you two."

"Thanks Tom," Willow said happily.

"Good work Willow," the inventor left the two teens in the lab watching the plain white vault on the video screen.

"So what does the Mechanical Brainogram say?" Buffy asked after Tom was gone.

"Delta and Beta analogues are present. That's the pattern of a small child in intense concentration if it were in a human brain."

"So it worked?"

"Yes, Buffy. Tara was just born."

Chapter Twelve -- Tara Speaks.

Tom Swift was in a quandary. He was seated at his desk, an unusual locale as he was normally more likely to be found at a workstation or a lab bench, and was looking at an employee's records.

The employee in question was Buffy Anne Summers. Superficially she was just that, superficial. Petite, blonde, fashion obsessed...she was a perfect example of the Cali girl stereotype. The type that was seen as a trophy wife in the tabloids.

On the other hand, Tom knew she was a superlative martial artist and a natural pilot, thought remarkably quickly on her feet, and apparently had no fear. He flipped through the public records of Sunnydale her hometown; she had moved there her sophomore year of high school after an incident in Los Angles where she had been accused of burning down the school gym. Her other records had her accused of burning down a science lab, being accused of murder, and being voted 'Class Protector' whatever that was.

Tom closed the folder and leaned back in his chair while rubbing his eyes. He thought he had known what he would be getting with Willow and possibly with Oz. Buffy had been a wild card though, but so far she had proved to be just as dedicated to the protection of Willow and by inference SSI, as she was well informed on the latest Paris runway looks. Quite frankly Buffy made Tom's head hurt. Rising and locking the folder in his safe, Tom then headed over to Willow's lab.

Willow was seated at her workstation examining data displays when Tom arrived.

"Hi Tom! We got Tara moved safely!" she pointed at the white softball affixed to a test stand.

"I see."

"It's so much nicer to work in here than in a bunker."

Tom laughed "I know Willow. Those test bays get cold."

"Yeah, Buffy was all whiny about the drafts too."

"Speaking of which," Tom asked, "She's not here?"

"Your sister came by and wanted to head over to Fearing Island. She asked Buffy if she wanted to get some more Whirling Duck stick time and you know Buffy..."

Tom laughed again. The short blonde's obsession with flying was well known on the plant.

"She should be back in an hour or so...What do you need to talk to her about anyway?"

"Just some stuff about her space trip...and yours too actually."

"Ooo when's it scheduled?"

"Buffy will be heading up in a week; you'll be heading up in two weeks."

"Two weeks! That's awesome Tom. You're the best boss ever!"

Tom was amused by the exuberance of his young protégé and grinned, "So what can Tara do today?"

Willow looked smug, "You could ask her yourself you know..."

Tom looked startled then a look of amazement crossed his face, "No..."

Willow nodded, "Oh yes. Breakthrough was about two days ago and I've just been running through the logs to see the actual tipping point. I think I can duplicate this. This morning though has been the first time that Tara has been able to hold conversations."

"So it can..."

"She."

"She can...understand audio?"

"Yup," Willow said as she slid a mike over to the elder inventor.

"Hello Tara."

"Hello unknown voice..." a whispery voice came out of a small speaker mounted below the brain sphere.

"I'm Tom, Tara."

"Tom Swift?"

"Yes."

"I think have read about you. It is in my files."

Tom unkeyed the mike and just stared, "Willow, she has a sense of self. Of uncertainty."

"Yup. You wanted an AI. I give you an AS, Artificial Sapience. The sheer amount of switch paths in the proton/anti-proton matrix are the only way that level of synapse integration could work," she took the mike from Tom.

"Okay Tara, I'm going to turn your eyes and ears on."

"Thank you Willow."

The redhaired teen flipped a set of switches and entered a password on her workstation. A monitor flared to life and immediately a small camera mounted above the brain sphere started panning.

"I can see. This is wonderful Willow."

"Amazing..." Tom whispered as the camera panned over to him.

"It is nice to see you Tom."

"You too Tara. It's actually an honor to meet you."

"Really? I am nothing special."

"I think I could find several thousand engineers that would probably disagree with that."

Willow nodded in agreement with Tom, "You're darn tooting! Tara, you're unique."

"I am merely a simple machine."

"No," Tom said thoughtfully, "You are certainly not simple and the machine status is debatable. Willow, Tara...Congratulations. You have done something wonderful. I have some things to take care of, but I will be back later."

"Goodbye Tom," came from two voices. One human and one not.

Willow faced Tara's camera, "So what now?"

"I don't know. I would like to have other senses perhaps?"

Willow turned back to her workstation, "Let's see if SSI has any old or new projects that can help. I know I could modify the aquatomic tracker circuitry for smell and taste, but data interpretation is the tricky bit," she

typed away, "touch can be done with micro pressure sensors...yeah, we can do this."

When Buffy got back the next day she saw that Willow's smartboards were covered with sketches and that Tara and Willow were working together on redesigning some incredibly complex piece of hardware.

"Wow Will! Kinda going overboard?"

"Well I have an enabler now..." she nodded at the brain sphere.

"Tara...are you being a bad influence?" Buffy said mock sternly.

"Me? I don't think so? Willow, am I causing malign processes?" Tara's 'voice' sounded worried.

"That was a joke Tara," Willow said, "Memorize those particular vocal inflections, Buffy's posture and attitude and consider context. File those as a data analysis template. And you Buffy. Be nice!"

"I'm sorry Tara," Buffy was immediately contrite, "I apologize."

"This attitude you took. Is it typical human behavior?"

"Some parts yes," Buffy admitted, "Teasing is part of friendship...or it can be. I was teasing Willow...and you I guess."

"Does that mean you consider me human?"

Buffy and Willow froze.

"Yes," Buffy said finally. "If you can be teased and react the same way as a human that's been teased...then you must be humanish."

"Thank you Buffy."

"Uh you're welcome?"

Willow laughed at her friend's confusion, "Tara is a learning system. She needs more data to integrate."

"I do...I need so much more. That's why Willow and I have been designing sensors," Tara said almost defiantly.

"Yeah I can see that...is that a vacuum cleaner?" Buffy pointed at one part of the sketches.

"No silly," Willow said, "It's part of the smell/taste system. This board over here has the touch system and over here is improved vision and hearing. Now that Tara can give me feedback, we can design more effective optics."

"Well, I have to get back to the hangers and prep an Elite for a customer's check ride. You two have fun!" Buffy left.

As soon as she was well clear Willow pressed the switch that flopped a new view on to her smartboard. The outline of a mechanical skeleton was

displayed. Locations for the brain sphere and the various sensor interfaces were marked on it along with actuators and joints.

"So Tara, how do we let you keep your balance?"

Chapter Thirteen -- Launch Day

"Three-Two-One...Liftoff!"

The familiar and traditional intonation of the countdown signaled the ignition of the SSI Starstreak Cargo Rocket from Fearing Island's Launch Pad #3. In the viewing stand a mile away, Tom, Willow, and Mrs. Summers watched as Buffy took her first actual flight into space.

Joyce Summers was gripping Willow's arm in nervousness as her only child rocketed away from Earth of a column of white fire, thunderous noise, and billowing clouds of smoke.

"It's okay Mrs. Summers, it's way safer than Sunnydale in May," whispered Willow to the older woman.

"I know...but Buffy is so small and space is so big..."

"I'd like to see you tell her that," the redhead said with a grin then hugged her best friend's mom, "She'll be fine."

"So Willow," Tom said as the glowing streak was lost in the sky, "In a week you'll be joining her. Mrs. Summers, you're welcome to join us in the flight up of course," Tom said it almost casually.

Joyce went pale, "Are you serious?"

Willow nodded, "When it comes to saying things like that he always is. Along with 'It's my company, I get to decide...' It's kind of terrifying how his snap decisions always seem to work out."

"Experience," Tom said with a smile as he stood up and stretched his lanky frame, "and knowing how to spot the absolute best people..." he winked at Willow, "like Ms. Rosenberg and your daughter. So Joyce, want to go to space?"

"Uh..."

"Tom, I think you broke her."

"Well let's get back to Shopton then so she can meet Tara and the rest of the SSI family. Getting her here was slightly rushed."

"Who's Tara?"

"Uh, a new friend of mine and Buffy's? I think you'll like her."

The three took a quick ride over to the airfield and were soon on board a Duck.

"Joyce, you can sit in the back or the front with Willow and I," Tom said, "The view is a lot better up here."

"A helicopter? Won't this take a long time to get to Shopton?" Mrs. Summers asked.

"You'd think so wouldn't you?" Tom slipped on his headset and motioned for Mrs. Summers to put one on too. Willow slipped into the Co-Pilot's seat and put hers on as well as she strapped in. "Fearing Tower this is Duck-6. Tom Swift Pilot in Command."

"Roger Duck-6, Over."

"Duck-6 requesting clearance for VTOL takeoff. File for IFR to Shopton."

"Got it Boss! Have a good flight!"

"Planning on it," Tom flicked a frequency switch, "Launch Control, this is Tom. Status?"

"Heya Boss! Looking good. On the beam and smooth flying."

"Excellent. Patch me through to the crew, private line."

"Sure thing. Take a minute or so."

"No problem," as he had been speaking one of the remote tractors had pulled the Duck out to the center of the launch pad and the counter-rotating rotors were spinning up with a high pitched whine.

"Fearing Control this is Duck-6. VTOL run up complete. Request clearance for lift," Tom placed his hands lightly on the controls.

"Duck-6, flight plan submitted. You are cleared to lift to Flight Level 5 initial, Boss." The tractor released and the Duck soon lifted off.

Buffy's voice crackled over our headphones, "Streak 132 to Ground. What's up?"

"Buffy!" Joyce said happily.

"Mom!?! Tom Swift is behind this isn't he?"

"I plead the fifth," Tom said as he was grinning at the other two.

"How was it dear? The takeoff I mean," Joyce asked.

"Like several elephants were using me as a comfy cushion. Jack it's my mom!"

"Well hello Mrs. Summers!" a cheery voice said. "I'm Wilfred Jackson, the Chief Pilot and Instructor for SSL."

"Is Buffy doing all right?"

"She's a pro. I think I'm going to take a nap for the rest of the flight actually..."

"Don't you dare!" Willow heard an aggrieved blonde say.

Jack laughed, "Mrs. Summers, she's doing great, regardless of her personal opinions. We'll be on the station in a few hours so she can tell you herself. When you coming up?"

"You mean everybody knew?" Joyce said.

"That he'd ask? Wasn't hard to figure out. It is Tom after all."

Tom tried to look innocent and failed miserably.

"Buffy, I'll see you in a week I guess."

"Yay!!!"

"Whoops! Getting pinged by Station Control. Time for us peons to get back to work," Jack said. "Streak 132 Out."

"Duck-6 Out," Tom replied and then reset the radio's frequency. "You feel better now?" he asked Joyce.

"Yes. Thanks Tom."

"No problem...Willow, would you activate the Silentenna system and Mrs. Summers, please look up at the rotors. You were saying something about how helicopters were slow I believe?"

After a supersonic flight back to Shopton, the Duck landed softly and another remote tractor pushed it into its hangar.

"That was amazing," Joyce said.

"This whole place is amazing," Willow replied. "I just wish Buffy was here to show it to you."

"Well, shutting down the gallery for a few weeks was tricky. Otherwise I would have been here sooner."

"Well," Tom said, "Willow could you show Mrs. Summers to the hospital so she can get the quick space tourist physical?"

"A physical?"

"It's just a precaution and takes less than half an hour," Tom said reassuringly. "We've been in the space travel business for so long we know what works and what doesn't and what really needs to be checked for."

"Alright I guess," Joyce replied as Willow led her over to a line of parked electric trucks and waving her bracelet over the steering wheel started one up.

"Hop in!"

Soon the pair were driving across the massive plant. Willow waving at people she knew and describing the various buildings they were passing before they finally arrived at the plant hospital. Doc Hanson was waiting for them. A distinguished looking man in his early 70s, he had been working for the Swift family since the 1950s. He ushered them inside and soon had arranged for Mrs. Summers to be seated in a large and complex looking

chair. While she was seated she was asked to fill out a long and questionnaire. When that was done there was a faint humming and she was requested to remain perfectly still. The humming stopped and she was told to stand up as the exam was done.

"That's it?"

Willow grinned, "Tom told you it would be quick. That chair is a hyper-acoustic scanner. Like an extra fine detail MRI with no heavy duty magnetic fields. It also took a small blood sample with a ultra-fine needle while you were filling out the questionnaire. Doc Hanson and the space medicine experts will take a look at your results and have a result in a few hours. For those of us that expect to be in space under high-G acceleration and expect to operate in zero-gravity as well, the exam is a lot longer. Like two days longer. Buffy and I both went through that one."

"Wow," Joyce said.

"Yeah, you hear that word around here a lot," Willow headed back to the truck with Joyce following her, "It's lunch time here and most of the people I'd like you to meet are probably at the cafeteria. So?"

"Sure Willow."

The pair got out of the truck at the cafeteria building and went inside.

"Hey Chow!" Willow greeted the flashily dressed chef, "This is Buffy's mom Joyce Summers. Mrs. Summers, this is Chow Winkler, greatest chuck wagon cook in the world."

"Well brand my skillet! It's a pleasure t'meet such a fine guest!" the old cowboy said as he doffed his stetson. "Yer daughter's a pistol ya know?"

"Oh I do," Joyce said with a laugh.

Soon the pair were sitting down with Phil and Abe, and Joyce was telling them how she felt about seeing Buffy go into space.

"It was terrifying, but I felt so proud of her."

"Well she is an amazing person," Phil said, "And one of the few people who actually manages to confuse the boss on a regular basis."

Abe nodded in agreement, "He can't figure her out, but he sure knows she's competent. Look Mrs. Summers, Tom's not here, can you tell us how she can do what she does? When they ran the extended space physical on her, he went over it with a fine tooth comb and apparently it was all completely normal. However she's done things like take out individuals twice her size without even a scratch..."

"She's talented?" Joyce said without losing her poker-face.

"Aaagh," Phil said, "Of course her mom's in on it too...Mrs. Summers, I've sparred with daughter a lot, and I always get the feeling she's holding back. She's never beaten me though and I don't want it to be because she's afraid of hurting my feelings."

"Actually," Joyce said seriously, "she's probably more afraid of hurting you."

Phil sat back in her chair and nodded slowly, "I was worried that might be the reason. We'll have to have a chat later Thanks Mrs. Summers."

"Of course Phyllis...I hope the chat goes well."

Abe broke the momentary solemnity, "You going to introduce Mrs. Summers to Tara?"

"You finished the sculpt?" Willow said in a pleased tone of voice.

"This morning while you were out at Fearing. Actually the spincast was finished last night. The surface mold was finished today."

"Is it ready for assembly?"

"Yup...Tara's impatient too," Abe said with a grin.

"Cool. Let's finish eating then."

Soon the quartet were on their way to the prototyping building.

Chapter Fourteen -- First Steps

Willow had moved her research from her office down to one of the semi-clean room fabrication facilities. There were several techs working over what looked like a hospital table, "Hey Willow!"

"Henry? What are you doing here?" Willow asked puzzled. Henry Sterling was the head of SSI's electronics prototyping.

"Couldn't resist sneaking a peek. This is some seriously excellent work Willow."

"I had help," Willow said with a smile and nodding at Tara's white brain sphere. "It was a true collaboration. Right Tara?"

"Yes Willow," Tara's slightly shy sounding voice came out of the speaker.

"That's Tara?" Joyce asked in amazement.

"Yup. A high density mixed-mode plasma magnetic matrix computational system. The only one in the world too."

"I'm not that special," Tara said quietly. "I'm just a-an a-advanced computational system."

"You are so special missy," Willow replied, "and don't you forget it. Anyway this is Buffy's mom."

The camera swung over, "Uh, hello Mrs. Summers. It's really nice to finally "

Joyce looked stunned then replied, "Hello Tara. It's nice to meet you too," she turned to Willow, "How?"

"Ted Buchanan..."

"Oh my word..!" Joyce gasped, "But Tara seems so..."

"Nice? She is. Remember the raw material Ted started with though."

Tom's ears perked up at this interplay, "You mean you actually saw some of Mr. Buchanan's work?"

Joyce nodded quickly as did Willow.

"It was really broken though," Willow added, "and used semiconductor systems for its memory. The only stuff I used for Tara was the decision making algorithms."

"So you met him?" Henry asked walking over.

"I dated him for a while actually," Joyce replied. "It was right before he died in a fall."

"Oh I'm so sorry. I wish I could have talked to him," Henry continued.

"It's alright," Joyce said.

"Willow?" Tara asked, "Is it finished?"

Willow walked over to the hospital bed and looked down on what appeared to be the body of a young woman wearing a hospital gown, with blonde hair and greenish-blue eyes. She gently touched one cheek. It felt like real skin.

"The DuraDerm seems perfect Tara."

"DuraDerm?" Joyce asked.

"A type of plastic I developed to cover prosthetics," Tom said. "I created it for the Veterans Administration Hospitals."

"So is that a robot?"

"No Mrs. Summers," Willow said, "This is Tara's body. She picked out what she wanted her face to look like and we used a specialized printer to make the mold. The skeleton and servos are scaled down from Tom's old robotics work. Far more sophisticated than Ted's stuff."

"It...she's amazing."

"Thank you Mrs. Summers," Tara said, "but we have to see if I can successfully interface with it."

"Speaking of which," Willow said walking over to the rack where the brain sphere sat and pulling on a pair of non-static gloves, "Mitch, open up the pod."

One of the techs gently rolled Tara's new body on its side and swung open a cunningly concealed panel on its ribcage. Abe and Willow rolled the Sphere rack over next to the bed.

"Ready Tara? It's gonna be kind of scary with the no sensory input till we get you plugged in."

"I'll be a-alright Willow. I'll be brave."

"Cool. Disconnecting...now." Willow clicked off the left and right lobe Little Idiots, While Abe was swapping their drives over to the identical units mounted in the body, Willow was carefully unplugging and transferring the hair thin data lines that covered the softball sized brain sphere to the support equipment to their equivalent sockets on the body's data bus. This was careful finicky work and after twenty minutes Willow was sweating with tension.

Finally though the last connection was made and Willow started the test routine to make sure all the connections were correct and tightly made. After five minutes that test was completed and she pressed the switch inside the pod to activate the Little Idiot support computers before shutting the access panel and rolling Tara's body onto its back again.

There was a data cable plugged into the back of Tara's neck which gave status reports on one of the large monitors. Willow and the rest watched as

the small interface computers began updating the stored information with the rush of data from the new sensors. Willow pressed a few keys, "I'm activating her hearing, vision, and voice now. Tara? Can you hear me?"

"Oh yes! Yes I can...a-and I can see too!" Tara's mouth moved as she spoke but the rest of her stayed perfectly still.

"Alrighty!" Willow pressed a few more keys, "Try accessing the autonomic simulator."

"What's that?" Joyce asked Abe.

"A sub-processor that handles blinking, breathing simulation, pulse, pupil dilation, body temperature...that kind of stuff. Tara wanted to be able to blend in. It was easy enough to put together."

Tara's chest shuddered as she took a breath. Willow reached down to check her wrist and throat pulse then smiled, "Nice and steady! Touch next," a few more key presses and Tara's eyes widened.

"I can feel the bed!"

"And smell and taste..."

"Ohh!" came from Tara as her last two senses came fully online. "This is a-amazing!"

"Okay then, spooling up the gyro. Abe and Mitch, get the harness on her."

The mechanical prototyping chief and the tech slipped a webbing contraption around Tara's body and connected it to what looked like some sort of gantry.

Joyce and Tom watched in fascination as the redheaded genius took charge. Joyce thought to herself that this was so unlike the Willow she was used to.

"Okay Tara. I'm unlocking the actuators. Try to sit up. Mitch, take up the slack on the harness."

Tara's body shook for second then bent at the waist. The harness keeping a light tension on her.

"How does it feel?" Tom asked.

"I feel fine Tom," Tara braced her hands on the bed and swung her legs over the side. Willow reached over and brushed some of her long hair out of her face. "Thank you Willow."

"You're welcome. Mitch keep an eye on the tension. Tara can you feel the gyro?"

Tara clumsily nodded, "Yes. I know which way is up," she slid her feet down to the floor then levered herself up into a standing position.

"Cool..." Willow breathed, "Mitch, tension?"

"None required. It's all on Tara."

"Fantastic," Tom said finally, "Willow, consider your extra credit complete."

Tara took a tentative step forward. It was more of a slide than a step actually."

"How do you know how to walk?" Joyce asked.

"I watched a-all the Eadweard Muybridge kinescopes a-and a-analyzed them for a-application to my situation. It looked easy...it really isn't," she said almost sheepishly.

"And that's why we have the suspension harness," Willow said with a grin. "To keep Artificial Sapiences from face-planting on their first walk."

"I'm sorry I'm so much trouble..."

"You're no trouble at all Tara," Mitch said, "This is just a precaution you know."

Tara continued to shuffle slowly around the room and then finally raised her foot more than an inch from the floor. All of sudden her left leg locked in an extended position and her limbs began to flail!

Chapter Fifteen -- Tests Passed

"Mitch!" Willow yelled, "Full tension!"

The tech headed towards the hoist controls but was hit in the chest by one of Tara's arms. The electric motors powering them providing deceptive force and sending Mitch flying.

"Willow!" Tara called out, "I've lost control!"

"Hang on," the redhead called back after dodging a rack of flying equipment, "It'll be okay. Everybody get clear! That includes you Tom."

"Are you sure?"

"My project..." Willow ducked another tray of flying tools, "...my problem. Now scoot!"

After everybody else was out, Willow concentrated on the hoist controls on the other side of Tara's flailing body. There was no way she could get past those metal and plastic bludgeons...not physically at least. She took a deep breath and on the panel a switch began to vibrate and shift. A minute later it clicked over and the hoist's powerful motor lifted Tara off the floor. With nothing to push against her motions were far less dangerous.

Willow rushed over to her workstation and saw that the data cable had somehow still stayed attached to Tara's body. Crossing her fingers she typed the command that killed the power to the motion actuators. Immediately Tara stopped thrashing.

"You okay Tara?"

"I think so?" came the shy voice. "I hope I didn't hurt anybody."

"I think Mitch is okay," Willow went to the door and opened it. "All clear everybody."

The techs, Tom, and Joyce trooped back in to see the formerly neat and organized assembly area looking like a tornado had hit it.

"Wow," Abe said in amazement as he looked at Tara suspended with her toes two feet off the ground, "How did you get to the controls?"

"Threw a wrench and got lucky," Willow said quickly as she started running back the system logs, "And there's the problem...Feedback loop and over-correction."

"What?" Joyce asked.

"When any biped stands up, there's a slight wobble; As you have the knees, ankles, and hips which are all hinges basically. The muscles compensate and try to keep this matched with what the inner ear, on us humans, tells us is upright. Tara has a gyroscope which tells her the same kinda thing. However her joints are a lot more rigid than a humans, so I programmed some sway into her autonomic nervous system simulator. That meant part of her systems were fighting another part of her systems. The more the gyro corrected, the more the simulator de-corrected...therefore

spazz-out Tara when both systems decided to go into all-out war against each other."

"I see. Can you fix it?"

"Sure, but it's going to take some coding. First things first, get Tara dressed in something other than a hospital gown."

"Thank you Willow," Tara said.

"Thank Buffy, the lady lives for fashion. Next we get you upstairs to my office and start troubleshooting the code. There has to be a breakeven point..." Willow looked ruefully around the assembly area, "Actually first is cleaning up this place. I'm sorry about the mess Tom."

The elder scientist laughed, "Nothing exploded and there were no injuries more serious than a scrape. This was relatively calm compared to some projects I've worked on. Come on guys let's get this gear picked up so Willow can get back to work."

Joyce looked up at Tara, "It was very nice to meet you young lady."

"Thank you Mrs. Summers. It was great to meet you too."

After the loose tools were picked up, Tom called for facilities maintenance to return the various hardware back to storage and escorted Mrs. Summers out. Willow lowered Tara into a wheelchair and reactivated her servos from the waist up so she could help with the dressing.

The other techs had left by this time so the two were alone in the assembly area.

"You didn't throw a-a wrench," Tara said.

"Oh you noticed?" Willow replied cautiously.

Tara nodded. This time it was a lot smoother than her first attempt, "Did you use a-a repelatron?" she was referring to Tom's amazing pressor beam device.

"Nope," Willow said, "Check in your memory for references to paranormal phenomena."

"It says that is superstition?"

"Nope again. It's real and I can do it. Tom doesn't know though and I'd like to keep it that way. Look up Salem Massachusetts."

"Oh dear...I wouldn't want to see you on fire."

"Me neither."

"Is Buffy a-a ...?"

Willow laughed, "Hardly. She's something else entirely. Mrs. Summers, Buffy, and Chow already knew about me. Nobody else in Shopton does except for you now. Can you keep my secret?"

Tara nodded again, "Thank you for trusting me Willow...can you teach me it?"

Willow was stunned, "I honestly don't know. Let's get you walking and dancing first okay?"

"Okay."

Soon Willow was wheeling Tara out of the assembly room.

Two days later they were in the assembly room again. This time with Willow standing next to the hoist controls. Tara looked like any other young woman in a nice top, slacks, and sneakers with the support harness over the top.

"Ready?" Willow asked. Tara nodded and Willow powered up her legs. Slowly Tara stood up; using the bench she was next to for support.

"Yay!" Willow shouted in joy, "It works!"

Tara smiled. She had been working on her facial expressions while Willow had been coding, "It feels much easier too."

"It should. I left some intentional wobble acceptability in the gyro code."

Tara slowly stopped walking and raised one foot off the floor until she was balancing on one leg.

Willow gasped, "The heuristic routines are working?"

"Yes. A-all my data...knowledge is a-adapting to the changing parameters...situation," she swayed as the autonomic simulator and the gyro met each other halfway.

"And your speech patterns are correcting too...except for that stutter."

"My phoneme bank has a-a small glitch. I could restore from source?"

"Nooo. It's great. It's a trait that makes you, you."

"Thank you Willow."

"Thank you. You want to go outside?"

"Can I?"

"Sure. I've had the tension disengaged the last five minutes."

Willow unplugged the data lead and closed the access port on the back of Tara's neck. Fully sealed, it looked like normal skin. Then they removed the support harness and headed out the door.

It was a beautiful September day in Shopton and the leaves were changing. Tara stepped outside and her eyes widened. Willow knew it was due to the interaction of the autonomic simulator and the stimuli processing routines but the effect looked natural and wonderful.

"So Tara, what would you like to see first?"

"I'd like to say hello to Tom a-and Mrs. Summers."

"Sure. Tom's in his lab I bet and Mrs. Summers is at an art show in New York today. We can see her when she gets back."

"Tom then?"

"Tom it is," Willow climbed into one of the plant vehicles and waited for Tara to join her then pulled out, and headed towards the main building.

"Hello Tom..." Tara said shyly as she entered his office.

"Tara!?! Willow this is fantastic!"

"Yeah, once I figured out where the loop was I could fix it pretty easily. Good thing I had help," she looked proudly at the blonde next to her.

"I'll say...Willow; remind me to give you more impossible projects. So what are we going to do with an expert in robotics and cybernetic systems?" he looked at Tara, "You want a job?"

A surprised Willow and Tara just stared at the grinning inventor.

Chapter Sixteen -- The Threat

"Tara!"

"Yes Tom?" the elder scientist had hailed his newest 'employee' as she was about to board a Swift Shuttle into Shopton.

"Where are you off to?"

"Willow is still in class, but Mrs. Summers offered to take me out shopping...to get some more clothes. Is that a-alright?"

"Sure that's fine. I do have a few quick questions though...actually not really quick to answer I bet."

"Go a-ahead," Tara was now sounding curious.

"Where do your emotions come from? The rest of us use chemical cues, but you..."

"Those are part of the Buchanan a-algorithms. Willow says that his creation of a-an emotional pattern on a-an electronic structure was the finest part of his work. She also says that his original methodology was sloppy a-and really broken. When I 'woke up', I had a-a fully formed set of emotional responses set up a-and ready to go," Tara smiled. "I never had a-a childhood."

"Can these patterns change?"

"My base code is heuristic, so sure. I can learn a-and a-adapt."

"Amazing..." was all Tom could say in reply. "You'd better catch up with Joyce then!"

"Thank you Tom," the blonde android got on to the shuttle and it pulled away.

The shuttle delivered her to the apartment complex where Buffy and Willow lived and where Joyce was staying for the time being. Mrs. Summers was waiting outside and she boarded as soon as the door opened.

"So Tara, are you ready to get some nice things?"

Tara nodded and as soon as the seat belt was fastened the shuttle pulled away towards the mall.

Willow was following the lecture in her advanced calculus course, when her Little Sister chimed, "It's Phil! There's trouble!"

Willow looked up and quietly left the lecture hall, "Okay Phil what happened?"

"Mrs. Summers and Tara were attacked as they were leaving the mall!"

"I'll be right there!" rushing outside she climbed into Buffy's truck which she had been using since her friend had gone into space. Soon she was pulling up next to Phil's 4x4.

The white-haired security specialist was staring at a seriously broken shuttle. Mrs. Summers was standing next to her.

"What going on? Where's Tara?"

Joyce turned to face her daughter's friend, "We were just leaving and were climbing in when a dark van pulled up next to us. There was a weird pink smoke and I fell down. When I woke up, Tara was gone."

"The shuttle's comms were destroyed somehow," Phil pointed out the charred electronics.

"EMP probably," Willow said sniffing the air and smelling roasted circuits.

"Electromagnetic pulse? What would that do to Tara?"

"Very little. Can't wipe her brain sphere. The eddy currents in that are far stronger than any portable device could produce, and the rest of her systems are really well shielded...It might have paralyzed her though until her system could reroute around the disrupted areas...Mrs. Summers, did you hear them say anything?"

"Uh yes actually. As I was falling unconscious someone yelled 'Grab her daughter!' I think."

Willow looked surprised, "They think Tara is Buffy...they probably used the EMP to wipe the shuttle's cameras and recorders and took out Tara by accident.

"Blonde, slim, attractive, using a Swift Shuttle and they knew who Mrs. Summers is..." Phyllis mused. "Anything here that can help find her?"

Willow looked around and shook her head, "The Black Cobra wants me, not Buffy so why go after her?"

"Leverage?" Phil asked.

Willow nodded, "I bet I'm going to be getting a phone call. Back to the plant? We have to tell Tom what's up."

Soon the trio were in Tom's office.

"They grabbed Tara thinking she was Buffy? And you think they're going to want to make an offer for something?"

Willow nodded, "There's something I have or the Cobra thinks I have access to and he wants it. I just hope he doesn't figure out what Tara really is..."

Tom nodded, "That could be dangerous. The only good part is that reverse engineering her would be amazingly difficult considering how her brain is constructed...though he can make his own anti-protons if he really needed to."

"So Willow," Joyce asked, "Can you save her?"

"If I can find her. Tom, I need Buffy back on Earth. Every time the Cobra's tried for a kidnap when the real Buffy's around he's failed miserably."

Tom nodded, "She'll be down tonight. Any thoughts on how to find our wayward Tara?"

"A few. Phil could you keep an eye on Mrs. Summers? I need to get to the lab."

"Sure, come on, let's get you a cup of coffee," Phil said to the elder Summers.

"Willow, what do you have planned?" Tom asked.

"Some preparations for when he calls me."

"He meaning the Black Cobra?"

"Yup. He's probably gonna use the Little Sister network. We know he can knock it out so why not transmit on it?"

"The frequencies have been changed after the last time..."

"Those boxes Buffy found on the fence line were some kind of super bug remember. What if he had planted some others first?"

"I see."

"Where are those boxes anyway?" she asked slightly casually.

Soon Willow was in the lab disassembling one of the compact and stealthy transmitters. Going to her safe she whispered a few quiet words and keyed in the combination before removing a small backpack full of unusual items. Making sure her door was locked, she laid out the circle and set up the candles before placing the frequency hopping chip from the disassembled bug in the middle.

"Synchlocked encryption systems equal the Principle of Contagion in technology, once together, always together," she muttered as she lit the candles, "Let's find your buddy."

Soon a slight glow filled the circle and she had an impression of distance and direction. Cleaning up her work area, she secured the backpack in her safe and called Harry Ames, "It's Willow, I managed to get a synch-pulse bearing off one of the bugs. It gave me a compass direction of 38 degrees and signal falloff makes me think it could be three and a half miles away? Probably an automated receiver, but it's something."

"Really? Thanks Willow, I'll get a team out there now."

Willow leaned back in her chair and smiled slightly, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from... Guess it works just as well in reverse."

Just then her Little Sister chimed, "Miss Rosenberg?"

"Cobra."

"Indeed."

"What do you want?"

"Your assistance in a small matter. That's all."

"And what matter would this be? Something to do with world domination?"

"Just some property I would like to reclaim."

"Nestoria?" Willow was speaking of the captive planetoid also known as Little Luna.

"You are clever," the Black Cobra's deep cultured voice rumbled. "I have some encouragement for you."

"Buffy..." Willow put all her effort in sounding depressed.

"Exactly. She is quite well at the moment, and as soon as I reclaim what's mine..."

"Nestoria was given to Tom and his family," as she spoke Willow was typing quickly, notifying the Swift computer security team about the Little Sister breach.

"A mistake. A place for simple research? It should be a manufacturing facility with easy control of the space-lanes. He should be charging tariffs

instead of giving up his rights to the governments of the Earth. He is a terrible businessman to be brutally honest."

"I see. So what do you want from me?"

"For you to run a simple errand for me. I would have had one of my other employees do it, but you annoyed me."

"Oops? I didn't mean to flood your underground complex and destroy your life's work..."

"Somehow I don't entirely believe that statement. Anyway, the choice is either the destruction of Swift and Son Industries or your friend's life. You decide!"

Chapter Seventeen -- Fake Out

Willow smiled to herself. She had thought it would be something like this. Putting all her effort into it she tried to sound as resigned as possible, "You know that's no choice for me...What do I have to do?"

"First know that I am constantly monitoring your Little Sister as of this moment. If the signal stops, your friend dies."

"Alright," Willow pulled out a few pieces of paper and began writing while still talking to the Black Cobra, "What if I enter a dead signal area? Like any of the secure zones in SSI?"

"I will still be able to follow and listen to you unless the zone is quantum shielded..."

"A-ha!" Willow thought, "he's piggybacking off of Tom's Space Prober technology." The quantum shield trick had been used by the Cobra and his minions before to block Tom's amazing electronic telescope. She wrote this down too.

"...Do I make myself clear?"

"Oh yeah. Completely clear. Almost transparent even. I'll stay away from the main computer labs which are quantum shielded to protect against stray cosmic ray induced errors...but working there is part of my job here. It'll look really suspicious."

"Make an excuse. It only has to last three days."

"Okay."

"Now send an email to Tom. Tell him you are worried about your friend and can't concentrate on work and need to go home to take care of Mrs. Summers."

"You're monitoring my emails of course?"

"Of course. Do not encrypt it and type just what I said, no changes."

"Sure," Willow sent the email.

"Excellent! You are many things, but foolish is apparently not one of them."

"I just don't want Buffy hurt."

"She is very resilient. I would not worry about her...unless you fail to follow my instructions."

"I understand. Now what do I have to do?"

"You need to leave the plant, but first stop by Tom's office, open the safe with the combination SS183DT3490E ..."

"Could you repeat that?"

"Certainly, SS183DT3490E "

"Okay. Then what."

"Remove the master command file. It is in a red folder. Take it with you to your apartment. I will contact you later."

"How did you get the combination?"

"You are not the only traitor at SSI," the Cobra replied with a menacing chuckle. "Now hurry along Miss Rosenberg," the voice clicked off, but Willow knew he was still listening. She gathered her bag, her coat, and the papers she had been writing on and headed towards Tom's office. When she arrived after a slight delay, she found that it was empty, "Of course it is..." she said to herself. The door was locked however.

Fortunately she knew quite a bit about the locking systems at SSI and pulling her own electronic key from her pocket as well as a small screwdriver she popped the door plate and adjusted the lock to respond to hers as well. With a click the lock popped open.

The safe was located in the floor beside Tom's desk and had a small alphanumeric keyboard attached. Willow quickly entered the code she had been given and the door swung open. Inside were quite a few folders including the red one she was looking for. After removing it, she whispered, "Got the file...I'm leaving now," before shutting the safe and exiting the office.

When she arrived back at the apartment she sat down and opened the folder in question. It was a list of all the security overrides for all of SSI's

assets. Grinning she started up her desktop and scanner, and, after removing the network cable, began typing as quietly as possible.

It was about an hour later and she was sitting in her living room with the bedroom door closed, when the Cobra's voice got her attention.

"Miss Rosenberg."

"I have the file, now what?"

"Go to downtown Shopton and drop it in the trashcan outside the central police precinct, then return home. You may go back to work tomorrow."

"Got it."

The next day she went back to school and then to work. Tom was waiting in her office, "You feeling better today Willow?"

"Uh yeah...lots better. Any luck on finding Buffy?"

"None yet. We got some good leads though. Tell you what...head home and wait there. You aren't going to be much good to me..." suddenly a loud screech rocketed through the Little Sisters.

"Tom what was that?" Willow yelled, the noise was overwhelming

"I don't know!" he rushed to her workstation and began typing. "It looks like something is corrupting the Little Sister system...some kind of

virus!" He picked up her desk phone and started dialing, "This is Tom! Shut down the Little Sisters now!"

The screech continued for a few more minutes and then finally shut down.

"Did it work?" Willow mouthed.

Tom nodded, "I never thought I'd let a virus loose on my own system though," he said with a grin.

"You had to make it look real," Willow said calmly.

"Okay then. The folder?"

Willow handed the original back to him. The copy she had dropped off in the trashcan had been scanned and edited. She had had to shut the bedroom door so that the Cobra couldn't hear the printer running. The notes she had left on Tom's desk had outlined her entire conversation with the mastermind.

"I changed all the passwords to these," she tapped a list. "That way if somebody tries to login with them you can divert them into a sandbox. Who knew your safe combination? Was it Mr. Cassidy?"

Tom nodded sadly, "Harry checked him out a little more thoroughly. I'm not going to get him brought in until Tara's back though. His real name is Casmerin and he's a known member of the Kranjovian Mob."

The Kranjovian Democratic Republic was a former Warsaw Pact member called the People's Republic of Kranjovia. After communism fell, it had become a hotbed of corruption and organized crime.

"And the bug signal?"

"To a satellite repeater just outside of town which beamed it to a commercial unit owned by the Kranjovian Ministry of Culture. The same unit has signals that strongly resemble my anti-inverse square wave generator."

"That's the basis of your Space Prober right?"

"Yes, it looks like the Cobra figured out a way to tap certain kinds of signals using it...like the Little Sister. Fortunately the focusing lens technology is a lot more complex or nothing would be safe. I'm working on a way to spoof the location signals now and the virus shutdown will let that happen."

"And the final location of the Cobra's Ground Station?"

"Mirinsk Kranjovia. Get your bags packed; Buffy will meet us at the airfield."

Chapter Eighteen -- Ground Control

Willow idly tapped her new necklace. It allowed her to override the audio pickup on her Little Sister. Currently the Cobra's monitoring was listening to her watching soap operas and her position was in her apartment.

In actuality she was in an unmarked SSI jet with Buffy and Abe piloting. They had boarded the jet in Newark so the Cobra's men wouldn't notice. Also in the jet was Phil along with a couple more SSI security guys.

Willow had her laptop out and was studying conversational Kranjovian before getting bored and heading up to the cockpit.

"Hi guys!"

"Hi Willow," Buffy said, "How's the ride going?"

"Not too bad. I'm really sorry I screwed up your space trip."

Buffy laughed, "It's fine...plus Tom said he'd make it up to me. Also, it's the Cobra's fault not your's. Stealing Tara is just not cool."

"Even if he thought it was you?"

"Well yeah."

"I wish Tom was along," Willow said.

"You two have outthought the Cobra before," Abe replied, "Tom needs to stay in Shopton where he's expected. You can be sure the Cobra has guys watching him like a hawk."

"So what's the plan Willow?" Buffy said, "I'm the bus driver and muscle-y bits."

"I knocked together a detector that will pick up the electromagnetic signature of Tara's brain sphere. The problem is it's really short range because of the heavy-duty shielding. The only good point is that it's a weird enough part of the spectrum that people named after snakes shouldn't be looking for it or even notice it accidentally."

"Whereas people named after trees can and will?" Buffy said with a grin, "What kind of range are we talking about?"

"Three or four miles. Less if she's in a Faraday Cage. That's a room that screens against electromagnetic interference."

"Okay. So like a room that you would want to work on radio gear right?"

"Exactly, or be immune to listening devices," Willow replied.

"Gotcha. So where are we gonna start looking?"

"Well we know where the signal was beamed to. I guess there? There has to be some kind of hardline connection, I really can't picture the Cobra wanting to worry about interference."

"This is Mirinsk International Tower," a heavily accented voice came over the radio, "Apple Air Private Aircraft NX2020, you have entered our flight control radius."

"Received Mirinsk Tower," Abe replied, "Ready to receive instructions."

"Guess I'd better get changed," Buffy said with a grin, "What does Phil think of her outfit?"

"I didn't ask..." Willow said, "but I can't wait to find out."

The pair exited the cockpit and saw Phyllis Newton, Assistant Chief of Security at SSI, wearing an insanely expensive pant suit with her distinctive long white hair concealed in a decorative turban. Her tall model build increased by the four inch heels.

"Not bad Phil," Buffy said approvingly.

"I feel ridiculous. Everybody will be staring at me."

"And that's the whole point," Willow said. She and Buffy were now wearing relatively conservative suits of their own as well as plain brown wigs. Buffy with a long one and Willow with a short one. The two other SSI security along with Abe were wearing plain black suits and sunglasses making them look like bodyguards

"Yeah I get it," Phil sighed, "But I don't have to like it." The rest of them laughed at her morose expression. Finally Phil grinned as well.

When the plane landed they departed into the private customs area and the reason Abe was along was revealed. He spoke fluent Kranjovian.

As the big machinist talked their way through customs; explaining that 'Miss Smith' had no desire to bring any attention to her visit and that she was prepared to be very 'generous' to assistance in reducing her paper trail.

The customs agents, responding to reason and a large wad of currency, agreed and the group was soon out in a rented limousine heading to The Star, the finest hotel in the city. "Also," Phil had added when they had cooked up this scheme, "the one used by most of the mobsters, so you can sure it's swept for bugs on an almost hourly level."

Once there, the two girls pulled on normal Kranjovian casual clothing...the kind seen on teens worldwide, and headed off down the back stairs. Convincing Tom to let the pair of them do the initial scouting had, in Buffy's opinion, been the hardest part of the whole operation so far. Her logic had been, "Who would expect two teens to be able to cause so much trouble?"

Catching a bus the pair rode as far down the line as they could before disembarking. The ground station was located in an area filled with small office parks, but a satellite dish would still be easy to spot. After a half an hour of prowling, Willow's Little Sister chimed.

"Miss Rosenberg."

Willow waved Buffy to a stop and clicked on the audio overlay feature on her necklace. At the moment it sounded like she was doing the dishes.

"Black Cobra."

"Still at home I see."

"Tom told me to stay away from work if I can't concentrate. Thinks that accidents could happen. I assume you read the email?"

"It was read, yes. I also see you are not allowed past the gate? Why is that?"

"Tom knows I'm a workaholic and don't respond really well to reason?"

"This is unfortunate. I see also that you have been locked out of plant security and you entering where I need you to enter would be flagged instantly. These things do occur, fortunately I plan ahead. You will leave your apartment tomorrow and head to New York city. Grand Central Station. There will be a key in the driver's side front wheel well of your friend's vehicle. Use that key to open a locker and remove what it contains, then proceed to the Empire State Building and wait for instructions."

"Okay I guess. What's in the locker?" Willow asked. Trying to put as worried a tone on as possible.

"You will see. Cobra out!" the connection broke and Willow immediately sent the recording to Tom.

"We'll deal with it Willow," the elder inventor said calmly, "How goes the hunt?"

"Pretty well. Can you get a refinement off that last transmission?"

"Working on it as we speak...head about a half mile northwest and that should put you right on target."

"Great! Thanks Tom!"

"I must have been crazy to let you two do this...."

"Trust us Tom...besides; what were you doing when you were our age?"

"The exact same things as you well know. Stop using logic, Willow. I can't argue against it."

Willow giggled, "We'll be careful Tom."

"I hope so, Tom out."

"So what did the Boss have to say," Buffy asked.

"The usual worrying and a better fix on the ground station. That way," the young scientist pointed.

Soon they were outside what looked like a small office block with a dish and web of antennas on the roof.

"That has to be it," Buffy whispered. They had taken precautions to move up behind the cover of other buildings. The target had cameras slowly swinging back and forth.

"Yup," Willow replied as she opened her pack. "Ignoribility time," she whispered as she lit the candle.

The pair were soon jogging over to the closest camera. Buffy boosted Willow up so she could reach it and splice into the building's network. The patch took less than five minutes to run.

"Now what?" Buffy asked.

"Now this," Willow pressed a few keys on her laptop and the view the external cameras received, was recorded and looped, "We need to get into their network operations center."

"Which way?"

Willow looked around for the main power lines and spotted a door near them, "We'll start there. If I can find their server room, I can find their NOC. The servers and transmitters will need the most cooling and electricity."

Buffy easily levered the door open while Willow suppressed its alarm. Soon they found themselves in a room full of noisy machinery.

"The chillers," Willow said, "Keeps the air cold for the delicate electronics," looking through a workbench she found a set of ventilation blueprints, "Eureka! We're here," she pointed, "and we need to go here," the pair left the machinery room target in sight. Using her tap into the internal cameras Willow was able to plot movements of the employees as well, enabling the duo to avoid them. Buffy took a quick peek through the small window in the NOC's door then ducked back down.

"Three people all working...What do you need to do?"

"I need access to one of their terminals...preferably unlocked."

"I can take out all three really quietly," Buffy said thoughtfully, as she reached into her own pack and pulled out a weird looking pistol with a small video screen on top. "This is the Whisper Lance; it's a sonic stun gun. Tom says it uses a tailored waveform that only discharges on fluids."

"Which means?"

"I can shoot through walls," Buffy said with a grin as she flicked a switch. The screen lit up showing a ghostlike view of the room and its occupants.

"Do it."

"Doing it," Buffy said, lining up and squeezing the trigger gently. There was a tingle through the two girl's hearing, and one of the human ghost images slumped. Buffy quickly repeated the shot twice more and the other two employees were out cold.

Willow had the door open and rushed over to the closest activated workstation, pulling up her translator application on her laptop, she aimed the camera at the screen while Buffy pulled the slumped figures back into their seats, "You have two minutes Willow!"

Quickly the redhaired genius slipped the disk with her own tailored virus in and quickly installed the routine, then clipped a transmitter under the desk.

The girls were gone before the first technician revived blearily then shook his head to clear it seeing that he was still in his chair he looked at the others and shrugged.

Chapter Nineteen -- Infiltration

"How long till you crack it?" Buffy asked, as Willow, sitting on their hotel room sofa, accessed the transmitter she had implanted.

"I'm in already, the virus helped with that...the trick is figuring out what data stream goes to which client...Abe what does this say?" she spun the screen so the big machinist could look at it.

"It goes to a bank."

"Damn it! I thought that one looked good because of all the security," the redhead blew a stray lock of hair out of her eyes, "It looks like a lot of shady businesses work out of that site."

"You said he just called you when you were approaching," Phil spoke up. "Check out how that call was routed maybe?"

Willow slapped her head in disgust, "I'm such an idiot! You're the genius Phil, you should be doing this," she bent back to her keyboard and typed some more, "Okay, got an account...and it has a dedicated optical fiber line attached to it! This is looking good. And there are connections for every time the Cobra called me! This is it!"

"Now what?"

"Payment is made by...'Other Means' it says here. Probably cash. There's a contact number for technical issues...Oh Abe?"

"You want me to call it?"

"Yeah, but let me rig the setup first," Willow said with a grin before plugging in a mike she ran back through her laptop. "You'll make the call from the ground station's line."

"Works for me. What should I say?"

"Just say you're making sure the contact information is up to date," Phil suggested.

"That's good," Abe said appreciatively, "Okay here we go."

The faint ring came out of the speaker then, "Zdravo?" It was in British English accented Kranjovian.

Abe took the hint, "I call from Mirinsk Ground to Space Systems. to...check? Yes, to check that appropriate number for nepredvidenny...uhh emergency...contact is valid for all customers. This is Novy Preduzeczce Komunikacije I have reached?"

"Ahh," there was an obvious tone of dawning understanding, "Yes, yes it is. Thank you...Hvala."

"Odlicno! Nema na cemu, gospodica!" he hung up.

"New Enterprise Communications..." Abe said to himself.

"Nice and innocuous," Buffy commented.

"And I have a trace. Went to a landline assigned to the Mirinsk Water and Power Utility."

"Great," Phil said, "can you reroute any calls to the ground station your laptop. The one's from that number or any Water and Power number I mean?"

"Sure, I mean the ground station is using a software driven phone system," she tapped some more keys and suddenly there was a ring. Willow handed the mike to Abe.

"Zdravo! Mirinsk Prizemlje se Svemir Sistemi. Ja Ivan."

"Ivan," the same woman's voice said, "Did you just contact Novy Preduzecce Komunikacije?"

"Da...Is there problem gospodica? Boss says we need records...update is word?"

"Yes."

"Ah dobro...good. Update on records."

"Just making sure."

"Of course, zbygom...goodbye!" Abe hung up again, and then everyone in the room sighed in relief.

"Good call Phil!" Abe said.

"I would do an immediate call back," the white haired security expert said, "How long can you keep that call trap up?" she asked Willow.

"For the Water and Power numbers? Indefinitely," Willow answered confidently, "I traced the physical location of where that number is located supposedly. A substation on the outskirts of town."

Buffy grinned, "So we check it out while Miss Smith has a night on the town?"

Phil groaned, "I have to be seen in public with that ridiculous hat?"

"It's a turban and it looks super good on you," Buffy replied, "We're gonna need Abe for his language skills I think."

"You two be careful." Phil said with a sigh.

"Only if you'll be careful," Buffy said with a smile. "You might choke on a pea or something at dinner you know."

"Arrgh!"

The two teens and the machinist caught a cab a block away from the hotel and got dropped off three blocks from their destination. The building looked like it was little used, but Buffy's keen eyes revealed the fresh tire tracks on the concrete parking pad. She pointed them out.

"Any cameras?" Willow asked.

"Yup, you can just barely see the glint but there's two on each wall," she pointed them out as well.

As they were discussing their options a truck pulled up.

"That just blocked two cameras!" Buffy whispered, "Come on!"

The three ran up, straight behind the truck in its blind-spot, as the driver waited for the loading door to open, before sliding underneath it. As it rolled forward, they grabbed on to its frame and allowed themselves to be carried inside. Once in, they waited to see what would happen next.

Workers speaking a *mélange* of languages quickly off-loaded several crates from the truck using a small electric forklift and they were stacked neatly in a corner. Then the warehouse emptied. Buffy wiggled till she could get a peek and signaled that the coast was clear. The three scampered over to the stack of crates and began examining them.

They were heavy industrial parts from various Eastern European factories. As they were looking for an invoice the pile of crates shuddered and the three realized they were standing on a concealed freight elevator. One that was going straight down!

Chapter Twenty -- Break Out

The elevator stopped with a clanking thud. Willow glanced up and saw a cover had slid across about forty feet up. During the descent the three intruders had ducked behind the crates so when they had arrived they were unnoticed for the moment. A couple of the workers spoke in Kranjovian to each other.

"They're not going to move these until the morning," Abe whispered to the two teens as the lights in this loading bay began snapping off.

"So we broke in at quitting time? Cool," Buffy said quietly with a grin.

Willow pulled out her 'brainfinder', as Buffy had nicknamed it, "I'm getting a weak signal from that direction."

"Let's go then," Buffy said as she drew her telescoping baton and extended it.

Abe was amazed at Buffy's stealth. The petite blonde moved like a ghost in sneakers. Willow was also far quieter in her movements than he would have expected.

"I heard you two worked in a 'Take Back the Night Program'. Is that where you learned to be so sneaky?" he whispered to Willow as they waited for Buffy to scout ahead/

"What? Oh? Yeah. We had a terrible gang problem in our hometown. It's gotten a lot better though. Buffy is a natural at this kind of stuff or

anything physical really. I just try not to trip and fall on my face in a hilarious sit-com fashion."

Buffy crept back to the pair, "Storage and barracky things on this floor. The good stuff has to be lower."

"Stairs?"

"Right this way..." Buffy led them to a stairwell with a security camera angled slightly up. Willow knew that at full speed Buffy moved like a blur so the odds of anybody spotting her on her approach were slim to non-existent.

"Camera?" the redhead asked.

"Got lucky on its pan," the blonde replied.

"Abe could you boost me up so I can tap into the security feed?"

The big machinist lifted Willow while Buffy tried not to giggle.

"Okay patch is wired in," Willow fired up her laptop and started counting camera nodes, "Looks like four levels counting the warehouse on top...Oooo! There's Tara!" the android was lying on a bunk, apparently asleep, "She's on level four."

"Of course she is," Buffy replied, "These stairs alarmed?"

Willow pressed a few keys, "Not anymore."

Heading down the stairs Willow whispered, "There's a guard on the other side of the door." She was looking at the security feeds.

Buffy drew her Whisper Lance and turned on the screen. No image appeared. "Tom warned me about this. The wall is sound insulated somehow. If I can't see them, I can't zap them. Don't worry, I'll do it the old fashioned way." slipping through the door there were a few thuds and a low, "It's clear." Abe marveled at the boot print on the guard's jaw as Buffy hauled him back into the stairwell.

"Amazing..." he whispered. Willow in the mean time had searched the unconscious guard for keys or security cards and had found the latter which she handed to Buffy.

"Which way's our lost Tara?" Buffy asked after she had tied and gagged the guard securely with his belt and the sleeves of his jacket.

"That way," Willow pointed. "About a hundred yards."

"Can you take out the cameras? I don't really want witnesses," Buffy said as she cracked her knuckles and stretched her neck.

"Sure. How long should we wait?"

"Give me a one minute head start okay?" she finished her stretches. Abe looked completely confused.

"Trust me Abe. On something like this, Buffy works better alone. Ready Buff?"

"And now..." Buffy ran down the hallway quickly and soon the sounds of impacts could be heard. Abe began to move forward, but Willow put a hand on his shoulder, "Trust me, we'd only get in the way plus she's been looking forward to this since the Cobra's guys ran into our shuttle," Willow checked her watch, "...and that's 60 seconds. Let's go."

As they ran down the hallway they saw several guards and workers lying collapsed on the ground.

Finally they arrived in what looked like cell block with a panting Buffy standing in front of it. She drew her Whisper Lance and opened the door with the key card Willow had liberated. Abe and Willow felt the tingle in their ears as the sonic weapon fired and soon the four guards inside were unconscious.

"That thing is pretty cool," Willow said. Abe was gaping in amazement at the speed and precision the petite blonde had displayed in carving through the Cobra's forces.

"How in the heck...?" he began as Willow started to work on the terminal.

"I have several natural talents," Buffy replied. "Shopping, piloting, and combat."

"Does Phil realize you take it easy on her?" the machinist asked.

"Maybe? Please don't tell her though. She's so proud of her skill and she is really really good too!" Buffy said seriously.

"Okay okay!" Abe laughed, "Willow did you find...?"

"Yup! Cell six. I'm opening it up now."

The doors swung open and there was Tara, who sat up when the three entered, "Willow! Abe!"

"Tara!" Willow ran over and hugged the android, "I was so worried. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine Willow."

"Will," Buffy said warningly, "I hear people coming and I may be good, but against a ton of troops with guns?"

"Right. Back to the stairs?"

"Yup!" Buffy said, "I'll take rear guard. By the way Tara, that hair color was a perfect choice. It looks really good on you."

"Thank you Buffy," the youthful looking android said shyly.

They headed back the way they came, with Abe in the lead. When they got to the top of the stairs, Willow checked her tap on the facilities cameras. When the coast was mostly clear she tapped Buffy on the shoulder. The

blonde dynamo rushed out and quickly incapacitated the one guard watching the door with a punch to the gut and a quick uppercut. He was so blindsided by his young assailant's speed that he didn't even have time to make a sound before he was unconscious.

Abe whistled, "Why aren't you a pro fighter?"

"Wouldn't be fair," Buffy said with a smile. "How do we get out of here Will? I'm sure they have troops at all the ways up."

Willow checked the layout of the facility and the various cameras, "Looks like they locked down all the elevators...I can fix that though, and stationed guards at all the stairs. On the surface they have guards in the main warehousey place."

"Can you start the elevators remotely?" Abe asked.

"Sure!" Willow replied.

"When we get to the one we're going to use, send the cargo one to the surface. That will sure as heck draw their attention."

"I can do that," Willow quickly set up the command, "We need to go to the right, and Buffy, there's a guard in front of the elevator we'll be using."

"Got it," quick as a flash she took off followed by her three companions. When she got to the elevator she slid into the surprised guard's legs and quickly slipped him into a sleeper hold.

"A padlock?!" Willow looked at the heavy metal fastener barring their path, "Low tech isn't fair!"

Tara stepped forward, "Maybe I can help?"

"Oh yeah..." Willow said in sudden comprehension.

Tara grasped each side of the padlock's hasp and began to pull. The powerful actuators that made up her muscles were far stronger than even Buffy for this kind of work. The others watched in awe as the hasp began to bend and deform. Then with a loud metallic ping the hasp broke free and Buffy and Abe were sliding the elevator doors open, There was a gaping elevator shaft and the four began climbing the service ladder. The elevator had been sent to the bottom so it least wasn't blocking their path of escape.

Finally they reached the set of doors on the surface. Buffy went to open them, but Abe shook his head and pointed up at the machinery room. A short climb and the breaking of another lock let them into a space crammed with the heavy duty motor and support equipment.

"Okay Willow," Abe said, "Activate the cargo elevator."

The redhaired genius did so. Soon the camera views were of far too many people with guns surrounding the entrances to the upper warehouse section. Buffy took that as her cue to open the machine room door to the roof, and begin incapacitating the guards stationed up here.

Soon the four had climbed down and were rushing away from the building as fast as possible.

Tara had been freed.

Chapter Twenty One -- Escape From Mirinsk

The four jogged away into the Kranjovian night.

"...so they called me Buffy a-and I thought if I a-acted like a-a silly blonde they'd ignore me a-and I was right," Tara had finished explaining her capture. "My a-autonomic simulator was good enough for the basic tests. Pulse a-and respiration I mean.

"You did great," Abe said reassuringly.

"Yeah you did," Buffy chimed in, "Did you see the Cobra?"

"No. He wasn't there from what I overheard."

"Great," Buffy sighed, "Time to chase down an annoying snake...again."

Willow stopped, and pulling out her laptop, activated a program before putting it away again.

"What was that Willow?" Abe asked.

"I just shut down the Cobra's satellite service and telephones. At least to that base."

"That should sow some confusion," Abe replied.

"I hope so."

"We need a vehicle," Buffy said.

"Can we use that one?" Tara asked pointing at a delivery truck, parked overnight.

Abe nodded, "Sure can!"

Tara pried the door open and Abe hotwired the rattly old vehicle with the assistance of his pocket multi-tool. Soon they were heading back to the hotel. As they drove Abe noticed several powerful sedans speeding past them.

"We have company!" he sang out. The three girls stayed hidden in the back. They heard the sound of a horn and the truck slowed. "There's a roadblock."

"How many?" Buffy whispered.

"Six or so..."

"I can handle it," the petite blonde said confidently, "When they ask to see what's inside, tell them that the back is unlocked."

"Are you sure?" Abe sounded worried.

"Not a problem Abe. Just act casual and annoyed that you were stopped."

There was the sound of the window being rolled down and then a voice, "You speak English?"

"Da...leetle English. What problem?"

"Safety check, open the back."

"Is empty...back unlocked."

"Gustav! Denis! Krugmann! Check it out!"

"Only three," Buffy sighed, "You two stay low," she crept next to the back door and made sure the latch was undone before waiting for it to swing open.

She jabbed the thug standing closest in his Adam's Apple with her stiffened fingers. This caused him to start choking. The next one received a punch in the diaphragm leaving him gasping and curled up on himself. The one who was swinging the door open received a quick strike to the temple dropping him like a sack of wheat. The throat strike recipient took an elbow strike to the jaw which knocked him flat and dazed him long enough for Buffy to put a choke hold on the gut punched one until he passed out. She then repeated the trick on the dazed first target. The entire furious attack was over in an instant and was remarkably silent. Buffy shut the van door after loading the bodies inside and circled round the passenger side of the truck. Willow relocked it.

"What's going on? Is there anybody in there?" The thug who had initially been calling out orders seemed worried "Gustav!"

By this time Buffy was around to the front, staying hidden by the fender.

"What you do?" Abe asked in heavily accented English.

"Krugmann! Denis! Lewis, go around back and see what's up!"

The designated searcher headed around and saw...nothing, "Sergeant! They're gone. They've vanished!"

"What!?!!" the sergeant headed back to check. Buffy took the opportunity to draw her Whisper Lance and stun the remaining thug who was guarding Abe before circling around in front of the front bumper and carefully climbing up the hood and onto the truck's van body. Once above her targets she was easily able to stun them with her exotic weapon.

Soon she and Abe had packed all of them into the trunks of their cars.

"Shopping, piloting, and combat..." Abe began.

"Yup!" Buffy said cheerily, "Now we should make with the leave-age-ness before their buddies show up. Okay?"

The rest of the trip back to the hotel was without incident. They left the truck a few blocks away and walked to the back door. Once inside the room they were greeted by Phil and, Aaron and Lance, the two guards.

"You did it!"

"Of course." Buffy said. "Tweaking the Cobra's security guys is kinda becoming a hobby of mine. How was dinner?"

"Bland and overpriced and I still think that this hat looks silly."

"It's a turban not a hat," Buffy replied.

Meanwhile Willow was setting up the Private Ear radio and calling Shopton, "Away to Base."

"Tom here."

"Home Zero, Away One."

"Excellent Willow."

"I also might have broken his communications link to the base here."

"That could be helpful. We got the key and Harry has gone down to stake out the lockers. If the Black Cobra can't communicate with his base, he may not know things have gone horribly wrong yet."

"Cool. Any instructions?"

"Get out of town as soon as possible and as quietly as possible... You given Tara her passport?"

"I'm printing the fake entrance stamp now...Miss Tara Maclay...why Maclay anyway?"

"Guy I went to school with's last name. I was in a hurry when I made it."

"...Miss Maclay was stamped in the same time we were and our manifest has been adjusted."

The rest of the group was packing and soon all their gear was ready to go. Aaron and Lance went first with the luggage cart. As the rest were waiting at the elevator, Phil stiffened, "They found us!" she whispered

Willow glanced over her shoulder and saw a group of tough looking men with cheap suits heading their way.

Buffy shrugged nonchalantly, "If they're too close they can't use guns?" Phil stared at her and finally grinned as well.

"Let's get close then. Abe get Willow and Tara clear," the tall woman pulled off her turban and shook out her long white hair. Buffy pulled off her brown wig. The pair then turned and walked straight towards the oncoming thugs.

The machinist shoved the two other girls into the elevator as soon as the doors opened, just ahead of the incredible fight that was taking place on the fifteenth floor. The last thing Willow saw, was Buffy using a wall as a springboard below slamming a flying knee into a thug's forehead with a tooth-rattling crack. Meanwhile, Phil had been steering another thug into a

wall with smooth and precise applications of aikido. This also resulted in a thud of massive impact.

The elevator doors opened on the lobby, Abe grabbed Steve and told him to get a cab, while Aaron headed into the elevator to back up Phil and Buffy. A few minutes later the elevator reappeared with Aaron holding a dazed Phil over his shoulder, "Buffy tossed her to me and told me to get you guys out of here! She said, 'Tell Willow I'm Wendy Darling tonight'. What does that mean?"

"She's going out a window!" Willow yelled and ran for the front door soon there was a crash of glass from above and the group on the street saw Buffy scrambling and sliding down the ornate facade of the old hotel, before letting go at the fourth floor and crashing and rolling through the curbside cafe's awning before flipping unsteadily to her feet.

"Time to flee?" the blonde asked in a slightly dazed tone as she stumbled and reeled.

Chapter Twenty Two -- Cat and Mouse

They stuffed Buffy in the cab and piled in after her soon the minivan was speeding through the city with the driver a proud recipient of some of Tom's cash.

"Where to?" he asked in Kranjovian.

"The airport!" Abe replied, "Private terminals!"

"Of course."

Buffy had shaken off her daze by now and was carefully picking pieces of glass out of her clothes. While Phil, Aaron, and Steve were looking at her in amazement.

"What?" Buffy asked, "Do I have a bug in my teeth?"

"I knew you were tougher than you looked," Phil said, "but what you just did..."

"Ex-cheerleader and figure skater here. I have a super good sense of balance and spacial awareness...See Will; I do too know big words. Hitting that awning wasn't any worse than falling from the top of a pyramid formation," she casually popped her neck and shoulders. "Softer than a football field actually...of course the slide down to where I felt confident enough to let go of the building wasn't much fun. I so need a manicure now and my hair is a wreck." She then gave Phil such an aggrieved and put-upon stare that Willow laughed.

"Tara," Willow said, changing the topic of conversation, "System diagnostics?"

"I feel fine Willow. A-all my sensors register a-at a-acceptable levels."

"That's great!"

Phil wasn't having any of the topic change though, "Abe, what happened during Tara's recovery?"

"Not much really," the big machinist said carefully. "Snuck in, Willow suborned the security net, found Tara, got out. Ran into a road block, but we got past that too with no real bother."

"So they never knew you were there?"

"A few guards may have seen us, but Buffy has that neat toy that Tom made," Willow filled in, gesturing at the Whisper Lance.

Phil nodded. That made far more sense than a 5'2" 100 pound college freshman taking out a horde of base security even though she had seen Buffy take on the group at the hotel. It seemed much easier to believe if nothing else.

The cab driver was good and knew all the tricks to get them out of the crowded city center in record time, finally the lights of the airport were in sight. After dropping them off at the terminal he sped away into the night. Clearing customs past the loan sleepy agent was easy. He just vaguely

looked through their passports and stamped them 'Exited'. Soon Abe and Buffy were pre-flighting the sleek jet while the others, including Willow and Tara, scanned it for any sort of bug or tracking device.

After getting a clean bill of health, Abe contacted the tower, "This is Apple Air Private Aircraft NX2020. Filing IFR Flightplan to London and requesting weather."

"Apple Air, Barometer is at 1002 millibars. Sky is clear and temperature is 15 celsius at ground level. Flight plan opened. move to taxiway 2."

The jet's engines fired up and it slowly rolled down the tarmac until it reached the turn at the end of the taxiway."

"This is Apple Air...On station."

"Apple Air you are cleared to enter runway."

The plane made the turn and Buffy began advancing the throttles to take off power.

"Apple Air you are cleared for takeoff. Have a good flight!"

"Thank you Mirinsk Tower," Abe said before clicking off the microphone.

Buffy released the brakes and in a remarkably short time they were airborne. Phil stepped into the cockpit, "How long till we're out of Kranjovian airspace?" she asked.

"About an hour," Buffy replied after clicking one of the multi-function displays into navigation mode, "Worried that we may get company?"

"Actually, yes."

"Makes sense to me. I seem to remember hearing from Tom that Cobra likes his stealth aircraft."

Abe looked impressed, "Very good."

"Also," Buffy switched on the plane's Private Ear radio and set a particular frequency, "This is Swift Recovery 1 to Outpost."

"Receiving, Recovery 1. Hey Buffy!"

"Hi Vince! Could you get a lock-on on me with the prober. Set a radius of twenty miles or so?"

"Worried about unfriendly company?"

"Yup! Call Tom direct if you need clearance."

"I'll do that just to dot the 'i's and cross the 't's but I can start slewing it anyway."

"Thanks Vince, Recovery 1, Out," she returned to looking out the windscreen.

"Clever," Phil said. "And if he uses his quantum shielding trick, we'll know his equipment is in the area."

"Exactly! Abe could you take the con? I so need to get rid of the rest of this glass," upon receiving a nod Buffy stood up and headed back into the passenger cabin. She saw Willow and Tara were seated at the conference table with the projector running, going over circuit diagrams.

"What's up?"

"Upgrades so Tara isn't captured again," Willow said.

"That sounds like a great idea!" she headed back to the full bathroom, grabbing one of her suitcases on the way, and stripped off her jacket, only now wincing slightly. Pulling off her shirt, Buffy checked the nasty stab wound which she had picked up during the fight in the hotel. It was actually pretty deep into the muscle and only her fuzzy black turtleneck had managed to soak up the blood so that the others hadn't seen it. After a shower and heavy gauze dressing from her first aid kit and a clean shirt, she headed back out.

"Bad one?" Willow asked.

"I've had worse," Buffy said with a twisted grin before heading back to the cockpit.

"Buffy!" Abe said, "Outpost just called on the Ear."

"Quantum shield?"

"Yes."

"I so hate being right. Which direction?"

"From the stern."

"Okay switch on the rear cameras and activate thermal imaging. If they're using a fast interceptor, compression heating of the leading edges should show up even if they're invisible to radar," Buffy said quickly.

"You're not as blonde as you act," Abe said with a grin.

"Don't spread that around, but remember, I am in the aeronautical engineering program at Shopton after all."

"That secret is safe...along with the others."

"And there they are..." Buffy pointed at the screen at a faint light colored line that flickered in and out.

"What now?"

"Now we get some altitude," Buffy said as she snugged down her safety harness. Then she keyed the intercom, "Attention. We have

unfriendly company up here. It is going to get very rough, so strap in tight!" She glanced over at Abe, "You too."

The private jet picked up speed and altitude, and with the rear camera Buffy and Abe could see that their pursuer was keeping up with them. Buffy suddenly slammed the nose down and the Swift jet was soon screaming towards the ground until they had performed an inverted Immelman turn, and they were now heading straight at the stealth plane. Buffy banked right, almost at the moment of impact allowing the exhaust vortexes of the twin high performance jet engines to slam against it. The stealth plane wobbled and lost control. Even going into a flat spin momentarily before finally its onboard computers corrected its path; steadying and accelerating out of the critical area. During that time Buffy had slammed the throttles to the stops, and was now making for the ground at the jet's top diving speed after switching off the transponder and the radar!

Chapter Twenty Three -- Pilot in Command

Abe wasn't sure how Buffy could see the ground to pull up in time. All he knew was that they were screaming along a river about thirty feet above the water. He could see trees on the river banks at eye-level in fact. A sudden explosion from the ground showed that a missile from their pursuer had narrowly avoided hitting them

"Abe!" Buffy called out, "Start giving me turns in advance!"

Abe nodded and brought up the navigation screen before starting to call it like a rally car co-driver, "Next bend left in a quarter mile. Right half mile! Straight for a two miles...!"

In the back the rest of the occupants were strapped in and hanging on for dear life. Phil was trying to get a hold of Tom with her satphone.

"Boss! We've got a problem!"

She had it on speaker, as trying to keep it next to her ear with the sudden random g-forces was not really an option.

"I can see that. The probe has a solid lock on you regardless of SSI's newest pilot's attempts otherwise," the elder inventor said. "Are you okay?"

"They took a shot at us and missed. It feels like Buffy and Abe really don't want them to take a second one."

"Tom!" Willow called out suddenly, "Can you see where they are by what you can't see...like the ground underneath them? If you can, can you uplink that to our plane's data-link along with detailed terrain maps? I'm pretty sure Abe and Buffy would appreciate that."

In the cockpit, the communications panel gave a cheery ping.

"SSI, we're kind of busy right now," Abe replied. as the plane jogged suddenly to the left and up then suddenly down. Buffy had spotted the missile launch with the thermal camera and had skidded the private jet up and over a tree which had taken the explosion.

"Prepare to receive a software load for the Heads Up Display, Abe!" As this was an SSI designed jet it had the full 'glass cockpit' with flat panel screens and a projector which could display vital flight information on the windscreen. Right now, Buffy had the HUD configured to show the artificial horizon and the flight instruments.

"Got it Tom!" the machinist said recognizing his boss's voice. "Buffy! HUD is going to reboot in five...four...three...two...one...now."

The windscreen display flashed off and Buffy was now back to using the multifunction display directly in front of her. Time slowly ticked by as the system reset itself and finally it popped back up. The flight instruments were back, but now there was also a real-time wireframe of the surrounding terrain overlaying the view. As Buffy watched, turn point indicators started appearing, correcting for her speed and flight attitude, "Cool..." she whispered. Then she noticed a flashing red indicator on her screen labeled

'Bad Guy!' Grinning, she keyed her microphone, "Can you take out his radar?"

"We can try!" Tom replied. The inventor sent a signal up to the Outpost to aim one of the powerful communication masers at the pursuing aircraft. The antenna slewed then locked on to the general area of 'nothing' detected by the prober before broadcasting white noise over a range of ascending then descending frequencies.

After ten minutes the red caret spun off the display in a random pattern. Buffy took this opportunity to climb from the river course and make a break for the Kranjovian border. In less than twenty minutes they were there.

"Status on our shadow?" Abe asked Tom.

"He had to land we think. Might have cooked one or two of his stability control computers with the maser."

"Oops?" Buffy said with a laugh then clicked on the intercom, "Attention. You can unbuckle now as our pest has been thoroughly swatted. Flight time to Fearing is...about six and a half hours." She reset the transponder and contacted Polish Air Traffic Control for clearance. Once that was taken care of, she unstrapped and headed to the passenger cabin. Willow and Tara were picking up every loose item that had been thrown around, Phil was on a phone call to somebody, "Harry Ames probably," Buffy thought. And Steve and Aaron were cleaning the mess up in the small galley.

"Sorry about the bumpy ride," the short blonde pilot said apologetically.

"I'm good," Willow replied, "Anything that keeps missiles from hitting me I'm fine with." Tara nodded in agreement.

"Well I don't want to have to go through it again," Buffy said firmly. She walked over to the intercom panel, "Abe, I'm gonna take a nap. Wake me up in two hours. Willow will be your copilot for the time being," she said with a grin at her friend.

"What!?!!" the red head said quickly, "But I'm not qualified on this..."

"Yeah you are. You forget...I get to see your simulator results. Just make sure Abe isn't getting sleepy like I am."

"You sleepy so soon? Wait a second..." Willow's voice dropped to a whisper, "You got hurt back at the hotel?"

Buffy nodded with a wince, "Knife in the side. I need to lie down soon. Wouldn't normally be a problem, but the g-forces made it worse."

"Would you like me to take a-a look a-at it Buffy? I have an excellent medical data-a base," Tara asked in a concerned tone.

"I should be good. Just need to change the dressing and lie down for a while," Buffy replied as she headed back to the small bunk area.

Willow headed forward and sat in the pilot's seat and put on her headset. Tara followed and sat in the jumpseat.

Abe looked around and flipped the master intercom switch to 'OFF', "Okay Willow, how in the heck can she do what she does? I mean, Buffy's been only flying for a year or so and she managed to do things with this aircraft I wasn't sure were possible."

"Buffy considers 'logical' and 'possible' as guidelines, not rules," Willow began. "She is stronger, faster, smarter, tougher, and way more cunning than anybody would suspect."

"Is that why the ditzy blonde act?"

"Yup, protective camouflage. When people underestimate her, she always wins. However, it's not *all* an act. She really is that obsessed with shoes and fashion."

"I like her," Tara said. "She's nice to everybody."

"Yeah, I met her first day of sophomore year in high school and she stuck up for me against the popular clique. I can honestly say...Buffy Summers changed my life."

"Like how?"

"Gave me confidence. I wouldn't be at SSI if it wasn't for Buffy. Heck I probably wouldn't be alive. We had a really bad gang problem."

"You've mentioned that before," Abe said. "What about the local law enforcement?"

"The Mayor was super corrupt and had stacked the police with cronies. Also he had skimmed money off the school maintenance funds, so when he was killed by the gas leak at the high school exploding..."

"Poetic justice?"

"Kinda I guess. We lost a lot of classmates too though."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah well getting it back to the Buffy questions. She and our school librarian started up the take back the night program and it helped a lot of people over the years. Mr. Giles is still running it too. Anyway, Buffy is a martial arts savant as you've seen," Abe nodded at that. Savant was probably putting it too mildly. "...and she saved me and a friend of ours from getting killed by a gang when we accidentally stumbled into one of their deals."

"Sounds like the boss's best friend Bud Barclay. He pulled the boss out of some nasty scrapes too."

"He was the one killed...?"

"By the space debris collision? Yes. I never met him of course, but talk to Chow or Doc Simpson or Phil's dad about him. They have some amazing stories. Or you could talk to Sandy..." Abe's voice trailed off.

"How long was she married to him?" Willow asked.

"Three maybe four years? They had been dating since they were both in high school from what I understand. What I'm saying is you and Buffy and Tara have a good set of friendships going. Treasure them."

"I do."

Eventually Willow settled in on the controls and Abe logged her in for stick time and the two of them began telling Tara what they were doing and why. Eventually Buffy came forward, looking far more rested, and offered some more instruction to the android.

"Tara," Abe asked, "You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but do you need to learn? I mean, can't you just upload all the information?"

Tara smiled, "I can if it's just data. But for a-actual skills I have to create a-anti-proton linkages much like a-a human brain forges neural pathways linking intent, a-action, and response. I a-also need to consider feedback loops. So if I wanted to become a pilot, I could upload a-all the ground school a-and procedure data, but I'd still need to integrate that knowledge with my reflexes. It will take me less time probably because I can set my mind in a-a simulator mode a-and I don't need to sleep."

Willow," Buffy said, "Make a note. Flight lessons for Tara when we get back...also aikido. A defensive style would be nice to know."

"You'd teach me to fly?" Tara asked.

"Sure! What have we just been doing for the last two hours? Speaking of...Abe take a break," Buffy slipped into the pilot's seat after Willow got up, "I've got the airplane. Tara, move into Abe's seat when he gets up."

And so the instruction continued all the way back across the Atlantic.

Chapter Twenty Four -- A Revelation

The jet touched down on Fearing Island's landing strip and taxied to the terminal. Tom was waiting on the hardpan along with Mrs. Summers, Chow, Harry, and a number of other SSI people.

"Buffy!" Joyce ran over and hugged her daughter.

"Hi Mom! We're okay!"

"I know, but I have to worry..."

"Hi Mrs. Summers!" Willow said cheerily, "Hi Tom, we fetched a Tara!"

"I can see that. How are you doing Tara?"

"I'm a-alright Mister Swift."

"Glad to hear it. Come on inside all of you," He looked over at the maintenance crew waiting off to the side, "Complete teardown on that airframe. It's gone through some impressive g-loading."

"Got it boss!" the foreman said.

Once inside the Fearing main conference room Tom placed a suitcase on the big table, "This is what we found in the locker at Grand Central. Harry missed whoever dropped it off and we're not sure how."

"There was a key in the locker when I passed by it on my initial sweep. When I sat down in my vantage point thirty seconds later, the key was gone," Harry said. "I didn't see anybody else in the locker area."

Willow looked thoughtful. "Maybe some kind of cloaking device? We know the Cobra is all about the sneaking and stealth tech."

Tom nodded, "That was my first thought. He's used stealth subs and jets at least. I'm getting copies of the security footage and I'd like you and Tara to run through it, Willow. When we get back to Shopton I mean."

"Sure Tom/Yes Mister Swift."

"What about me Tom?" Buffy asked. "I'm more blunt instrument than Sherlock Holmes."

"You want to head back up to the Outpost?"

"Actually yes, and I want to bring mom with me. The Outpost seems the safest or maybe even Nestoria. I'm more than a little with the peevedness, that a skunk like that snake attacked my mom."

"Joyce?" Tom looked curiously at the elder Summers.

"I'd like to see space. I don't have to use a rocket like Buffy did though?"

"I'll fly the two of you up in the Challenger III after this meeting ends. Nestoria sounds best actually," Tom was referring to his remarkable

repelatron propelled spaceship based on a design he had invented to win a race to the Moon back in the late 1950s. The cost of manufacturing the massive repelatron units, as well as the rarity of some of their most vital components, had kept the innovative ship design from totally supplanting chemical rockets for space travel.

"So quickly?" Joyce asked.

The lanky inventor nodded, "No time like the present. Now this suitcase was what was left in the locker. It has a biometric lock and I'm pretty sure who can open it...Willow?"

She walked up and pressed her fingertips against the scan plate. There was a whirr and a click and the lock popped open. Inside was a complex device with a small screen and a keyboard. The screen blinked and whirred to life and a distinguished looking Eurasian man with long white hair in a ponytail appeared on it.

"Miss Rosenberg, Mister Swift, I must say I was not expecting this meeting...At least I wasn't yesterday about this time."

"Cobra," Tom said quietly.

"Indeed. Sadly my initial plan has gone awry due to some problems in one of my facilities. Very clever working around the Little Sister manipulations and I am very curious how you managed to knock down my aircraft. You should not have been able to track it at all. I don't expect you to tell me though."

"I would agree."

"Your Miss Summers and Miss Radnor are quite capable. I understand they prevented the recapture at the hotel. Pity I was unable to maintain control over Miss Summers."

"Cobra," Willow asked, "Since we're being all talky instead of fighty at the moment, what does this suitcase do? Aside from being a hot-line to your secret lair I mean. I could take it apart of course..."

"Very true, you could. Consider it a problem for the student..." he gave a gleaming white toothed smile. "I do have goals to accomplish and assisting you in stopping them...I truly do not believe that would be prudent," he shrugged slightly, "Do you?"

Willow had to shake her head at that.

"And Mister Swift, I do believe you have located one of my agents. Mister Casmerin took some work to plant in his job. I will tell you that I am slightly vexed at his removal."

"I'm sorry about the inconvenience," Tom said with a straight face.

"I am certain you are," the Cobra replied dryly. "Well this communiqué is over, and I believe I will be disconnecting now..."

"Wait a second!" Willow said impulsively, "Why me? I mean why try to subvert me? I am really junior in the pecking order here."

"Oh? He hasn't told you? I would, but why spoil the surprise," the screen clicked off and smoke began to rise from the suitcase.

"Catalytic reaction!" Tom yelled, "No way to stop it!" he slammed the lid of the case closed and sealed it. There was a muffled thump and the case jumped.

"No taking that apart," Willow said sadly.

"Well we're back to square one," Phil said.

"No we're not," Willow replied, "What did he mean Tom?"

Tom stood stock still, "I'll tell you when I get back from Nestoria."

"I'm holding you to that buster!" Willow said surprisingly forcefully.

Soon the Challenger was shooting into space with Chow, Harry, Joyce and Buffy aboard while Tara, Phil, Abe, and Willow were flying back to Shopton and the SSI main plant.

"Phil, what's going on?" Willow asked.

"I have no clue," the tall security specialist said, "but Tom never does anything without a really good reason."

"Do you know why Oz and I were picked?"

Phil shook her head. First I heard was that he was recruiting some new talent to see if they could work with SSI," she nodded at Tara, "As usual he made a great choice."

"Wait a second, Tom personally made the selection?" Willow was now really puzzled.

"Yeah...yeah he did," Phil's voice trailed off.

"Is that unusual?" Tara asked.

Abe nodded, "Normally interns are hired through the regular departments. Tom told us Willow and Oz were part of an experimental program."

"I see..." Willow said even though she was sure she didn't.

When they arrived at Shopton, Willow and Tara headed straight for Willow's office and began trying to tease any data out of the Grand Central security tapes. Willow ended up falling asleep at her desk as Tara continued on into the night.

The next morning they had determined that shadows had subtly been altered as though an almost completely invisible individual had passed by, then they saw the locker swing open and close with no person standing next to it.

"Optical cloaking," Willow groaned, "and we have no idea how he did it."

"A-absorption or redirection," Tara chimed in.

"Can't be absorption...that would look completely black...redirection then. Some way of curving light around the cloaked person? That would explain the shadow bending."

"Bending light takes a-an a-amazing a-amount of energy. Cameras a-and projectors?"

"Synched to the opposite side? It would be a simpler solution even though coordinating the imagery would be really hard. But he is really good with computers...I don't know Tara, we need more information. Also what was the Cobra talking about? About Tom not telling me...?"

"I don't know either Willow. Should we crack his private files?"

"Tempting...I think I'll wait until after he hasn't explained, before I do that though."

An hour later Tom arrived in Willow's office. He sat patiently as the pair described what they had discovered and inferred.

"Well he could have used something like my telejector, but I know he doesn't have the anti-inverse square wave generator. Otherwise he'd have my space prober and he wouldn't need to use agents like Willow or Cassidy as much. What he has gotten of mine is dangerous enough. I'm reasonably certain he's copied Tomasite with his advanced radar absorbing materials," Tom was speaking of the advanced space-age plastic his father had created.

It was extremely strong and heat and radiation resistant as well as not reflecting electromagnetic radiation, "as well as my Private Ear and the design of my Mighty Midget atomic power cell. Thanks anyway."

"Tom..." Willow said as the inventor turned to go, "About what the Cobra said?"

Tom froze and slowly turned back to see Willow staring at him with her 'resolve' face/

He was quiet for a minute and then began to speak, "This might seem impossible or that I'm completely crazy, but hear me out...Willow, do you believe in magic?"

Chapter Twenty Five -- Chow Cracks the Problem

"What are you talking about Tom?" Willow said as calmly as possible.

"Magic. The use of forces that seem to defy natural laws."

"I still don't understand. Are you talking about witches, wands, and broomsticks?"

"Oh no, that would be silly! What if there were other natural laws that allowed the apparent breaking of little things like any of the laws of thermodynamics?"

"Other natural laws?"

"Ones that could be suborned by a particular frame of mind. A spark of genius you might say. Allowing focus and intuition beyond that of normal levels of creativity."

"A-allowing the creations of things like Tomasite or repelatrons?" Tara asked.

Tom nodded, "Exactly."

"And there aren't many people that can do this?" Willow said slowly.

Tom nodded again, "I know of several. Like my grandfather and father, the Black Cobra of course...you. I developed the tests that got distributed for

'Career Days' to search for key signs. I found several besides you and Oz, but they appeared to channel their spark into something non-technical.

Willow nodded thoughtfully at this, "I see. So I have this so called spark?"

Tom pointed at Tara, "I would say so. You're a first year college student and you created her. You have to be absolutely brilliant of course or you wouldn't know how to subconsciously utilize the second set of natural laws that permit the creation of something as amazing as Tara. I'll bet Ted Buchanan had this ability as well."

"But other people can build the things you design...how is that possible?" Willow asked.

"Once the design is completed, the critical part of subverting the rational world is done. After that, the normal natural laws are warped so in this particular instance, the 'impossible' is plausible," Tom said with a shrug, "My father spent a lot of time codifying what is and is not possible for us."

"So you call it 'magic', because?"

"What else to call it? It seems like we're the Connecticut Yankee to everybody else. We come up with technologies that shouldn't work, shouldn't even be capable of existing...but they do. We'd be burned at the stake if anybody realized what we could actually do and exactly how we do it. Primarily by physicists and mathematicians. The good thing is that we camouflage our abilities by having 'provable' results...at least they're provable once the design is finished and the rules have been slightly

rewritten. Results that are obviously manufactured and grounded in the 'real world," he said with a sheepish grin.

"So how do I use this...spark?" Willow asked.

"It just comes to you like the inspiration to build the world's first AS," he smiled at Tara whose emotion and autonomic systems simulator triggered a blush response. "I wasn't planning on telling you for quite awhile actually. But an annoying snake pressed the issue."

"So no wands or brooms?"

"Not unless you build them...and they could be quite interesting if you decide to," he yawned. "Now I need to get some sleep."

"Okay Tom. You know this is going to require some serious thought."

"I hope so. I needed to think after my dad told me."

"Who knows about it?" Willow said.

"Sandy, you two, my ex-fiancee Phyllis Newton...the Black Cobra of course. How did he find out? He has the spark; it helps with leaps of logic too. Now I really need to get some sleep."

"Sure Tom. Have a good nap."

After the lanky inventor left, Willow started to grin, then giggle, then laugh, and finally she was howling. Tara patted on the back after she started choking and gasping.

"Thanks...I don't know what I was expecting, but it sure wasn't that," she started to giggle again, "So missing the forest for the trees...Mister Super-Genius Swift."

"So a-are you going to tell him?" Tara asked, "a-about the wands a-and brooms kind of stuff I mean."

Willow shook her head, "Not yet, but I know I will in the future," she suddenly looked thoughtful, "Tara, I built you, but I didn't create you, you know?"

"Huh?"

"Tom was pointing at you like you were my creation. You're not. I designed your brain, but I didn't build the person inside that brain. You're my friend and co-worker, not my tool."

Tara's eyes widened.

"Now let's figure out how to catch and track an invisible man," Willow said firmly.

After a few hours Chow swung by with his coffee and sandwich cart, "Hey there Miz Willow and Miz Tara!" the happy-go-lucky ex-cowpoke

said with a broad grin which almost outshone the amazing lavender and gold shirt he was wearing.

"Chow have there been any sudden reports of blindness in the plant today?" Willow asked.

"What? Oh m'shirt. Got it fer a song last time I was in Abilene. Cain't unnerstand why neither," he seemed genuinely puzzled. "So whatcha big brains workin' on?"

Willow clicked the remote and the video from Grand Central played on the wall screen. Chow jumped slightly when he saw the locker door open and shut with no apparent human involved.

"So we're goin' up against Claude Rains?" he asked when the tape was done.

"Not exactly. He used a drug to make his blood, bone, melanin, and pretty much all of his internal colorants transparent...at least that's what Griffin the invisible man did in the original H.G. Wells story. It's kinda impractical. You can't see because your retina doesn't have any opaque surface for light to focus on for one thing. Plus in the winter, it would be awfully chilly-ish."

"Is it something like whatcha did at the Black Cobra's base down south?" Chow was the one person at SSI besides Buffy, Tara, and Joyce who knew what she was capable of and he was sworn to secrecy.

Willow shook her head again, "That creates ignoribility. Like the person is there, but you just don't notice them or even their shadows. See this part," she scrolled back through the footage, "how this shadow changes really slightly. If they were ignorable we wouldn't notice this. This is technology, not what I can do."

"That's good ain't it? So how they doin' it?"

"You see things because light reflects off of them right?" Willow began.

"Sure, like a mirror kinda?"

"Exactly, different colors reflect different wavelengths. That shirt of yours absorbs all the non-lavender and non-gold colored light frequencies and reflects the rest. A white piece of paper reflects everything and a black cat doesn't reflect any really. We don't see a completely black figure so he's not absorbing the light. We think he's redirecting it."

"Brand my boot leather! How the heck do ya do that?"

"Maybe really tiny cameras and projectors mounted next to each other that takes a picture on one side and projects it to the opposite side."

"What about boot soles?" Chow asked.

"Huh?" Willow said.

"The soles of his feet. Things like teeny tiny cameras are fragile. Ya cain't put them on the bottom of yer shoe, so ya cain't project t'the top of the shoe."

"You're absolutely correct Chow," Willow said. "Okay, he has to be doing one of two tricks then...either a material that allows light to flow around him, like a stone in a river causes a ripple, but downstream you can't see any trace of the ripple, or maybe an energy field that actually bends light."

"Light's everywhere...that would take a heck of a lot of power..." Chow mused.

"Sure would and the levels of the magnetic fields required would cause a lot of side effects probably. So it has to be a material..."

"Ya mentioned that the Invisible Man wouldn't be able to see 'cause light wouldn't work on his eyes. How does this polecat see?"

"That's it Chow! He can't be invisible to all light or electromagnetic radiation. He has to have a range that he's not redirecting! You're a genius," Willow hugged the old cowboy.

"Well thank-ee kindly Miss Willow. It's always nice to hear I'm not jest another pretty face," with that he headed out into the hallway heading towards the next office on his route, whistling happily.

Chapter Twenty Six -- Countermeasures

"Okay," Willow said looking at one of the smartboards that covered the main wall of her office, "Infrared is out. Too many commercial detectors are available. Same with Ultraviolet. It would cause a lot of materials to fluoresce...skin creams, some kinds of plastics, bleached hair...and you'd want an emitter to make sure you have the right frequency so you can see...especially so you can actually function inside buildings. So like I said, Ultraviolet is out."

"Higher or lower frequency?" Tara asked.

"Going higher would mean X-Rays, Gamma Rays and the like. Has to be lower. In the radio frequencies and lower than microwaves because of motion detectors...so a form of radar," Willow had pulled up a map of the electromagnetic spectrum and had been crossing off ranges as she had been talking, "It can't be too low a frequency or the wave length itself wouldn't have enough resolution to pick out details on surfaces...I mean shortwave radio has a ten meter wavelength...I'm thinking the Ultra High Frequency range. Nice short wavelength of about a decimeter. Plenty of ambient radiated energy from television broadcasts too."

"The detector is the only part that has to be 'visible'," Tara said. "The device can warp the rest out of sight."

Willow nodded, "You're right. Ground pressure, body capacitance, acoustics, and chemical detectors...those would pick up our invisible man. Keeping him from getting anywhere useful on the other hand..." Willow started sketching on her smart board. Soon Tara was helping her.

Tom was in his office when the pair entered about four hours later pushing a cart. Willow set a shoebox sized device on his desk.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Anti-invisi-guy tech," Willow said proudly.

"Okay."

"We're thinking that he generally sees the outside world in the UHF to EHF frequency range. He only needs a detector large enough for the wavelength. Probably using UHF to navigate and SHF or higher for when he needs to do fine work...maybe even in the infrared range."

"Sure, a switchable vision system would make sense."

"This is an ammonia sniffer and a microwave motion sensor attached. As soon as it detects a human with the sniffer, it activates the microwave sensor. If that sensor does NOT detect a body where the sniffer says there is one...Pow goes a silent alarm!"

"So you're using their own stealth to confirm that it's them. That's very clever. What then?"

"This," Willow produced grenade looking device, "just toss it close to the area."

"And it is?"

"A-an Infrared to Extremely High Frequency white noise strobing generator. It's a dazzler. We used your synthetic a-aperture designs to handle the multi-radiator problem," Tara replied.

"And you two whipped these up this fast?"

"Most of it is older tech repurposed so it really didn't take that long to make these prototypes," Willow answered

"High soon can these go into production?"Tom asked

"I sent the designs to the limited assembly line. The components are all pretty much stock so...immediately?"

"Right. I'll call down to the line and have Phil and Harry start putting the detectors up at areas not covered by ultrasonics."

"We also have this," Willow uncovered what looked like a stubby rifle. "It has a radar and a sonar unit built in. Hold the trigger and both units activate. There is a difference on the range of the returns; it immediately fires a super high intensity strobe pack like the grenades, only much more powerful. It should be strong enough to burn out most sensor units. Make sure there are no people not wearing electromagnetic screening suits between you and the invisi-guy though. Microwaves and people is not a good combo."

"Point noted and great work, both of you."

"Thanks Tom/Thank you Mister Swift," the two girls left, leaving Tom making phone calls.

When the pair got back to Willow's office, they copied the other set of specifications and headed down to the assembly area they had used for Tara. The blonde android lay down on the hospital bed and Willow skillfully opened the DuraDerm access panel on her left arm and began carefully soldering in a set of junctions. She then took the other items they had built in the prototyping shop and began installing them. After about forty-five minutes of delicate work she sealed everything back up.

"Okay Tara, you should be ready to go with the physical connections."

Tara focused her palm at an instrument cart and suddenly the cart leaped away. Willow had installed the guts of a repelatron pistol into her arm!

"Looks good. How about the sensor upgrade?" she referred to a basic duplicate of the device that they had shown Tom.

"Excellent. The a-acoustic, microwave, a-and chemical sensors a-are functioning perfectly. The Little Sister implant is a-also working perfectly."

"Cool," the redhaired genius said, "Whatever the Cobra wants is in the SSI plant. He's going to have to come to us to get it."

"How do you know that?"

"Simple Tara," Willow explained, "he needed to subvert me to get a case into the plant to do something. I know it involves the plant, because of the way Cobra wanted me to work around quantum shielding and it will happen today."

"The Cobra specializes in munitions and space correct?" Tara was accessing the SSI database remotely as she spoke.

"Yes."

"Well Willow, there is a-a prototype Skyhook heavy lift system in final testing in Hanger L. Would that be of interest to him?"

"Maybe, what does it do?"

"It is a-an ultra high efficiency launch engine using repelatron boost a-along with chemical rockets."

"Well, the Cobra wants heavy lift capacity that's for sure. He's still kinda annoyed at me for breaking his Orion system and base."

"The device is due for static testing in the morning."

"Tara, that's what he's going after. Tom keeps the secret of repeltrons really well guarded. All the ones, like on his flying highway, are embedded in blocks of Tomasite and or Durastress so they can't be taken apart and reverse engineered. A prototype thing though won't have those protections! When is the engine being moved to the test stand?"

Tara quickly scanned through the SSI test logs, "Now actually. Moving to the static mount."

"We'd better get moving!" Willow activated her Little Sister, "Phil this is Willow, head to the rocket engine test area. The Cobra's target is there!"

Chapter Twenty Seven -- The Showdown

The two were careening across the darkened plant in one of the electric trucks when they caught up to the robotic cargo hauler.

"Looks okay," Willow said as the autonomous truck plodded along with the tarp covered massive engine on its lowboy trailer.

"Willow," Tara pointed, "that rope just untied itself." She was indicating one of the heavy tarp's tie-downs. Willow nodded and accelerating, pulled the truck in front of the hauler. The simple robotic brain detected the obstacle and immediately ground the hauler to a stop. Willow and Tara were out of the truck. Willow carrying the rifle and the prototype grenade.

"See anything?"

"More a-ammonia than just you is present," the willowy android said after a quick scan.

"Yeah, they're here," Willow activated her Little Sister, "This is Willow. We found the sneaky guy on Freight Road Two just past Warehouse 11. He's on the engine hauler."

Phil's voice came over the link, "Can you see him?"

"Tara can, and I'm about to even the odds," she threw the prototype grenade where Tara was pointing. Where it landed and activated with a loud hum. To her normal vision it just looked like a dull red throbbing. Willow

then swung the odd rifle towards that point with her finger on the trigger. All of a sudden a green light lit on the stock and the massive capacitor bank discharged, then began whining as it refilled from the Swift Solar Battery in the stock. Now even Willow could smell burned electronics as a helmet was tossed to the ground and a bodiless head began running away. Tara calmly raised her hand and extended her palm in the classic 'Stop' position. There was a faint whine and the sound of a body hitting the ground. By the time SSI security arrived they had managed to pull the invisibility suit off of the captive.

"Impressive," Phil said, "I take it the grenade worked?"

"And the rifle too! Blew out his complete sensor suite," Willow handed Phil the burned out wreck of the helmet along with the weird silvery mesh suit. The wearer was sitting there looking dazed with slight burns on his face received obviously when the circuitry had exploded. "Then Tara dropped him with a repelatron burst."

"Not bad, not bad at all. Any damage to the engine?"

"I don't think so. We got to him as he was climbing under the tarp. The test team should make a close check though," Willow said.

At this point Tom arrived and immediately began examining the suit, "Looks like an electronically deformable mesh. Probably so it can adapt to various frequency ranges. Looks like your guesses were right on target, Willow and Tara. Great work."

"What now?"

"Now we look for the other one," Tom said grimly "The Cobra's not the kind of guy to make just one attempt."

"Where could he get access to the repelatron circuits?" Willow asked.

"The limited a-assembly line!" Tara gasped, "It's where these were made a-and the specifications a-are still loaded. A-all they would have to do is slip the request for a-a complete unit into the job queue a-and it would be built."

Phil's security team remained with the hauler to escort it to the engine test pad and guard it, while Tom, Tara, Phil, and Willow headed towards the compact factory building called the 'Limited Assembly Line'. This building was completely automated and was capable of taking a finished and successfully prototyped set of designs, and produce them in limited runs for further testing.

As they bounced along Willow had changed the power cell in the dazzler grenade and had rearmed it.

"Willow, there are far too many hard metallic surfaces in the line to risk using the rifle. The chance of a ricochet is far too dangerous," Tom said as Phil squealed around a turn.

"I understand Tom," she set the weapon on the floor. "Tara, it's up to you."

The apparent teen nodded, "I can see them."

The jeep skidded to a stop and the group piled out. "Ready?" Tom asked.

"Yes sure we're ready as in Tara and I are prepared to confront whatever ..." Willow let the babble flow until Tom's eyes glazed slightly.

"Okay okay..." Tom said quickly, "Let's go."

The group unlocked one of the doors by the warehouse section and soon Tom was searching through the cartons of finished products. He quickly found what he was looking for; more of the dazzler grenades that Willow and Tara had designed and submitted earlier that evening. Soon all of them had several each.

"Tara, you and Willow get up on the catwalk. Maybe you can spot him from above," Tom said as he began tinkering with the trigger mechanism of a dazzler grenade. "Phil and I will stay low and set up some traps."

"Won't he be in the control booth?" Phil asked.

"Maybe one of them is."

"You think there's more, Mister Swift?" Tara said worriedly.

"Yes...the Black Cobra is a meticulous planner, and the only reason there would be only one at the hauler is that they were a diversion."

Soon Willow and Tara were climbing the ladder that led to the web of gantries over the factory floor. Tara had scanned carefully and they climbed as quietly as possible. Meanwhile Tom had wired three of his modified dazzlers with tripwires around the paths to the exit. He had a small blue pencil looking thing in his hand and scanned around with it periodically.

"Your sonar pen?" Phil asked.

"Haven't used it in years," Tom whispered, "Still in this case it may prove helpful. In fact there's an odd return over by that support column."

"I'll go check," Phil whispered in his ear before slipping over under cover of a massive CNC machine.

She saw a small cloud of metallic dust from shop waste move as if somebody had kicked it. Holding her breath, she lunged out from under the machine and grabbed for where she thought the ankles would be. Her hands made contact with that weird mesh and hanging on she pulled backward sending the thief crashing face first into the floor. The cacophony of sounds of the line covering the thud of impact. She swarmed on top of her opponent and soon had him restrained. After thinking for second she pulled off his suit and shucking her jacket, started putting it on.

"There's one," Tara whispered to Willow. The android was pointing at a area of the catwalk about thirty feet away. The two girls were crouched behind the motor unit of an overhead crane. Willow nodded and began moving in a slow crouching walk. When she was less than ten feet away she rounded the corner and charged the unsuspecting suited thief. Willow wasn't as strong or as skilled in unarmed combat as her friend Buffy, but she had

grown up in Sunnydale. She connected with her shoulder to the pit of her target's stomach and with a loud whoosh knocked the wind out of him as he went sprawling, with her lying on top. Tara rushed up and grabbed his hands with her implacable titanium grip and soon he was trussed like a chicken. Willow slipped on his helmet and powered up the sensors.

"Tom! Phil! There are two in the control booth. Tara and I got the one up in the rafters and I'm using their helmet to search," Willow sent over her Little Sister.

"I'm wearing one of their suits Willow, and am currently heading along the south wall towards the booth," Phil replied.

"The tanglefoot wires are laid along the path to the north doors with dazzlers on trip wires right before them," Tom chimed in.

"Tara, I'll be all right up here, you go help Tom."

"A-are you sure?"

Willow nodded, "He'll need your sensors."

The slender android made her way back to the factory floor while Willow watched Phil, wearing one of the invisibility suits; make her way to the control booth door. She swung the door open and soon there was a heck of a fight going on. One of the guys in the booth took off past Phil and started running for the door; Willow threw her dazzlers in front of him, and turned her head so she wouldn't be blinded by the intense flashing now visible through the helmet's sensors. He turned and charged towards Tom

and Tara, broke the tripwire firing another dazzler that was suspended at head height, and now slightly blinded, tripped over the radio transparent and therefore invisible web of thin nylon line Tom had tied at ankle height. Tom and Tara had him subdued quickly by the time Phil had finished off the one in the control booth.

All four, with their four prisoners, sat outside the factory building waiting for Chief Slater of Shopton Police to arrive. Tom rubbed his head bemusedly, "Sorry about the danger and the crises, Willow. I try to run a peaceful operation here."

"Still quieter than my hometown," the redheaded genius said with a grin. "Do you think this is it for the Cobra?"

"This time. Now that we know what he's after, we can guard against it better...and with your sensors, his suits won't be able to get in as easily. Now after these guys get carted away you need to get some sleep. We're going up to Nestoria like I promised."

"Tara too?"

"Of course Tara too. She's one of the family, right?"

THE END