

Rogue Slayer, Fighting Bard

Annals of the Librarian Attack Force, part 2

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Servalan's plan proceeds, carried out by her loyal henchwomen Faith and Callisto. A small group of Attack Librarians try to stop her. Complications ensue when a certain Librarian meets a certain henchwoman again.

Featured fandoms: Babylon 5, Xena: Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Blake's 7

Featured pairings: Faith/Servalan, Ivanova/Jenna, Faith/Gabrielle, Callisto/Gabrielle

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: NC17

It was raining. It had been raining the day before, too. And the day before that. Heavy, insistent raindrops that beat and beat and beat on the roof of the truck, slowly driving Faith nuts. She'd tried having the radio on, but all the stations she could find were even worse than the rain. So she put up with it. At least it wasn't Callisto sharpening her sword.

She'd spent the last three days mostly stuck behind the wheel of the truck for three simple reasons. One, Callisto couldn't drive. Not that Faith had a license to drive trucks, but hey. You learned things while living on the fringes of society. Two, their hired help wasn't allowed to know where to go. As soon as they'd filled the truck up, they got their pay and split. And three, since they were robbing stores they needed the getaway truck ready to go. Which meant someone behind the wheel and the engine idling.

Well, it saved her from lifting stuff and getting rained on. Everything's got an upside.

The hydraulic lift at the back of the truck worked for a time. A short silence, and the passenger-side door opened. A smiling Callisto in a black raincoat and wide-brimmed black hat climbed in. There was blood on her hands.

"We're done," she said.

"You didn't get blood on the books, did you?" Faith asked. "You know how pissed off the boss got the last time you did that."

"Don't worry," Callisto said. "I waited until all the books had been carried out before I killed the staff."

She looked thoughtful for a moment. "At first I didn't think I'd like doing it that way," she said. "But waiting until it's almost over lets them hope I'm going to spare them, and that makes it so much more fun. I spent so much time just blasting people, when I was a goddess, that I forgot the simple pleasure of seeing mortal fear in a victim's eyes. I must remember to thank Servalan for showing me that again."

Callisto certainly could have taught Mayor Wilkins a thing or two about being crazy.

Faith pulled out from the curb. Once again, she forgot which side she was supposed to drive on for the first mile or so. Never mind, she had the bigger car. She had a big-ass truck and they had stupid little British cars. Like the one Giles used to drive. Tinfoil crap.

"I feel so much more *alive*," Callisto said. "Like I just woke up from a long, dreary nightmare. And now I want to play."

"Yeah, well, would you please not play too much until we've got this here mission over with? 'cause I got this feeling that your playing would draw police like honey draws flies, and we get enough attention from them already. What with the robberies and murders and all."

For a minute or so, there was silence, but for the noise of the engine and the road.

"You want to fuck me, don't you?" Callisto said.

Faith nearly swerved off the road. "What?!"

"Don't be afraid, little girl. I'm just asking if you'd like to enjoy my naked body and bury your face between my thighs."

"I wouldn't exactly kick you out of my bed. Why?"

"Just curious."

They drove on. Dark, wet road kept rolling in under the front of the truck. The headlights cast fast-moving shadows among the trees and hedges lining the road.

"Do *you* want to fuck *me*?" Faith asked when she couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"No," Callisto said.

Faith stifled a groan and turned the radio on.

Gabrielle knocked on the door to the dorm room. It was, unlike most other doors nearby, spotlessly clean and newly painted.

The door was opened by a tall, blonde woman. "Yes?" she said.

"Hi, Seven," Gabrielle said, blushing. "Er, do you remember me?"

"Certainly," Seven of Nine said. "We had sex on the dance floor two days ago, when I entered the Force. It was most enjoyable."

Gabrielle's blush deepened. "Can I come in? I'd rather not talk about this here in the hallway."

"Certainly". Seven stepped aside and let Gabrielle in, closing the door behind her.

The room was, if possible, even more spotless than the door. The bed was immaculately made, the books were sorted onto the shelves, the few papers on the desk lay in precisely aligned low piles. Gabrielle stopped in the middle of the floor, worried that her host would dislike it if she touched anything.

"Can I get you something?" Seven asked.

"What?"

"As your host, it is my duty to offer you refreshment. I have several beverages available, none of which are good for the human metabolism."

"I'm fine, thank you."

Seven nodded.

"Um," Gabrielle said. "That time on the dance floor..."

"Yes?"

"The girl who was with us? Who was she?"

"Ah, Faith." Seven licked her lips.

"That's her name? Who is she?"

"Her name is Faith. I met her in a bar."

There was a short silence.

"That's it?" Gabrielle said after a while. "That's all you know?"

Seven looked slightly uncomfortable. "She claimed to be more than human. I did observe that her stamina and strength were significantly superior to an ordinary human's. I also have the phone number to the apartment where she was staying at the time."

"Can I have that number, please?"

Servalan stood in an anonymous conference room. It was on the large side, with a long table surrounded by chairs in the middle. The table was made out of dark wood, as was the chairs. Along one wall were windows, on the opposite one were a few cabinets and a door. The shorter walls held a large map of the world and a whiteboard, respectively. The whiteboard had a large diagram in several colors drawn on it, and lots of little yellow sticky notes placed around the diagram.

Servalan looked at the diagram, whiteboard marker in hand and deep in thought. There was something missing. Something crucial. She turned again to the book that lay open at the table. It was old, very old. She suspected that it wasn't even manufactured in this reality, but there was no way to be sure. In any case, it was in much better condition -- and much better made -- than its age should allow. The instructions in it were cryptic, as suited a tome of vast mystical power. It annoyed her, no matter how suitable it was. She preferred her instructions clear and to the point. These were written in Federation Standard Language Two, which was designed for sociology and psychostrategy and was an utter bastard to translate into the terms of engineering and mathematics she needed to build her L-

Space gateway.

She sighed and started to read a passage over again. She was halfway through and felt that she was on the verge of a new understanding when the door opened.

"Hey, boss?" Faith said.

Servalan sighed again. "Yes?" she said.

"We've got the next batch of books here. Do you want them placed anywhere in particular?"

"No," she said. "Stack them a safe distance from the others."

Faith walked into the room. "That's what I figured, so I had the goons start doing it... Is that the book we stole from the librarians?"

"Yes," Servalan said. She tried to glare Faith out of the room, but it didn't seem to work.

Faith leaned over her shoulder. "Hey, it's in English," she said. "And here I thought there was a law that these old tomes had to be in some hopeless dead old language, like Latin or Norwegian or something."

"Norwegian isn't dead," Servalan corrected.

"Whatever. Anyway, d'you have new instructions right now, or will that wait until tomorrow?"

"It'll wait," she said. "Please leave, I'm trying to think."

"All right. See you in the morning, then."

Faith headed for the door. Servalan looked at the page again, at the precise columns of writing. That Faith had seen as English. So why did she see it as Fed-2? She was equally used to Fed-1, Fed-3 and Standard. So there must be a point. Maybe she was trying an entirely wrong path. Maybe mathematics and engineering just wasn't it.

She looked up at the diagram, looked at it with new eyes.

There. The solution. So obvious.

She laughed out loud.

Faith stopped with her hand on the doorknob. "Are you all right, boss?"

"Fine, Faith, fine..." An impulse struck her and she yielded to it.

"I would like to discuss some plans with you," she said. "Over dinner. Tonight. In my quarters."

"She wasn't there any more, was she?"

Ivanova looked at Gabrielle over her rice bowl, bowl in one hand and a pair of chopsticks in the other.

"Of course not," Gabrielle answered. "She and her companion were long gone. But I did manage to get a log of numbers called to and from on the phone in their room, and some other traces."

Jenna poured herself some more tea. "So where did they lead?"

"At first, to a luxury mansion in Zaire built by a slave trader in the 19th century. That was evacuated too, but the contracts pointed to a law firm in Hong Kong. The law firm turned out to be a front for a Beijing Tong, which had expedited the deal to repay a favour they owed an organized crime family in Saint Petersburg. The Russian maffia had been paid to do this by a couple of businessmen from Hokkaido, businessmen who proved to belong to the semi-legal branch of the yakuza. They were acting as consultants for the Tokyo branch of a New York real estate agency that specializes in the wealthy and discreet. They, finally, had dealt with the woman called Servalan. Their contact address for her is a drop box in London."

Both Jenna and Susan had stopped eating. "How on Earth did you find all that out?" Susan asked.

Gabrielle shrugged. "Google. It's amazing what people leave laying around on

their web sites."

"So, I guess we go to London?" Jenna said.

"It's where the trail leads. Do we know anything more about Faith?"

Ivanova picked up a sheaf of papers. "A little. She's from a fiction line called Buffyverse, where she was a supernatural heroine who started working for evil. Apparently, she's more of a morally ambiguous character than a true villain, which may be good for us."

"Do we have anyone from Buffyverse?" Jenna asked.

"One, actually. Attack Librarian Kendra comes from there, but she left before Faith was introduced. She's got the same kind of powers as Faith and gave us some general information on that, but couldn't say anything specifically. We have been trying to contact a girl called Buffybot who may know more, but without any luck so far."

"What about trying to reach the Buffyverse directly, talking to people there?" Gabrielle said.

"Thought about that," Ivanova said. "But it seems they blew up their only known portal to L-Space at the end of their third season, so at the moment we can't get there. A pathfinder team led by Kendra is trying to find another portal as we speak."

"I've been looking at current events," Jenna said. "Trying to see if there's happened anything that could be connected to Servalan and her gang. Which there seems to be. There has been a string of book store robberies in England. A lot of books have been stolen, but no money or other things. The robberies have been unusually violent and bloody, with numerous executions of helpless bystanders. This rather fits what Gabrielle has told us about Callisto. I've plotted the robberies geographically and over time, and there is a clear pattern. If I'm right, they're planning a major strike against Charing Cross Road in London within the next few days."

The three looked at each other, food forgotten.

"So who orders the tickets?" Ivanova asked after a little while.

Faith woke up. The spot beside her in the bed was empty. She rolled over a bit, discovered that it was also cold. A quick look at the clock on the bedside table revealed that it was just after eight in the morning.

She pulled the duvet over her head. Didn't the woman ever sleep? They hadn't fallen asleep until well after three in the morning, and she must've been up again by seven. She closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

Failed.

It was still raining. Occasionally, the wind would throw the rain against the window so she could hear it. She was starting to suspect that the British weather was deliberately trying to annoy her. The weather and their cold, drafty buildings. And they drove on the wrong side of the road, and everywhere felt *cramped*.

So far, she didn't like England. She was beginning to understand why Giles and Wesley had been the way they were, though. And, to be fair, some of the food was excellent. She was fast becoming addicted to really stupidly hot curries.

Keeping the duvet wrapped around her, she got out of the bed and shuffled towards the small office where Servalan usually worked. She nudged the door open with an elbow.

"Good morning, dear," Servalan said without turning around or even looking up from her work. "You slept well, I presume."

"Why do you always get up so damn early?" Faith asked.

"Habit," Servalan answered. As always, she was dressed in immaculate white. Today, she wore a long skirt, jacket and high heels. There was some frilly things

sticking out here and there, but Faith had no idea what they were called. She never got around to learning those normal girl-things as a kid, and when she stopped being a kid she was more into beating things up than dressing them up.

"How's it going?" she said.

"Well," Servalan said. "You'll have to make another procurement run."

"Another one? We already have fifteen trucks full of books!"

"We need more of a certain *kind* of books."

"There appears to be a mistake," the clerk at the reception desk said.

Ivanova raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" she said.

"You seem to have been booked in a room with a double bed," he said, frantically tapping at his keyboard.

"Well, the girl I spoke to when I booked claimed you don't have any rooms with triple beds, so I had to settle for that," Ivanova said.

"There is a room with twin beds available," the clerk said, apparently not having listened to a word Ivanova said.

Jenna put down her suitcase. "Certainly not," she said. "Having sex in a single bed is cramped enough for two, it'd be nearly impossible for the three of us."

The clerk looked strangely at her. "What?" he said.

"Try it yourself some time, if you don't believe me."

His eyes jumped quickly from Jenna to Ivanova to Gabrielle and back. He was just about to say something when Jenna interrupted.

"Oh, it's fine." She thrust her ample cleavage forward. "I'm not really a woman," she lied.

"Me neither," Ivanova went on. "We used to be, though."

"But we only had the money for one operation, so we kind of split it between us."

"You should see what *she's* like under the clothes," Ivanova said with a nod towards Gabrielle.

Gabrielle groaned and turned away, not wanting to see or hear any more.

"Hear that?" Jenna said. "Constant pain, poor girl. Well, not girl any more, really, but there aren't any words, you know? We're suing the Salvation Army."

The clerk had an expression like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming train. "The Salvation Army?" he said.

"Yeah, they own the hospital. It's really a very kind thing, helping poor drug-addicted doctors like that, and the rates are just *so* low, but I do think they should be more selective in which doctors they let perform surgery, you know? The shaking hands and the delirium, it's not a good thing when you're handling sharp objects elbow deep in someone's privates."

Gabrielle stifled a second groan. "Take care of my things, will you," she said to Susan. "I'm going for a walk."

"Take care," Ivanova replied. "Dinner when you get back?"

"Sure. See you in a while." They kissed briefly, and Gabrielle walked out of the hotel.

Outside, it wasn't quite dark yet. The western horizon glowed red and gold above Hyde Park, the last few rays of the sun slipping in under the heavy clouds. She picked a direction more or less at random and started walking along the rain-wet streets. There were a lot of people about. Many of them Londoners on their ways home from work, she guessed. Many others looked like tourists, less hurried and stopping at each and every store-front. Quite a few of them spoke languages she'd never heard before. Instinctively, she tried to listen to them, tried to catch the meaning behind the unfamiliar words. Tried to read their faces and postures and movements. But there were too many of them, too many voices, too many

thoughts and minds and wishes and pains. It all became a blur to her, an overload of information.

Not even Rome had been like this.

She was pretty good at reading people -- storytellers have to be -- but here it was just too much. She saw, but she couldn't deal with it all. Too many lives talking at once, and it all became noise. She tried to stop, tried not to look at them, not to read their thoughts in their eyes, but failed. Old habit, hard to break.

Hoping to get away from the worst of the crowd, she turned a corner into a side street. She hurried, almost ran, forward until the din abated. Not silence, really, but at least not more than she could handle.

The streets here were narrower, and there was more litter and debris of various kinds lying around. It smelled variously of urine, vomit and borderline rancid cooking fat. The people she met seemed to think mostly about alcohol and sex. Cheap alcohol and sleazy sex, to be precise.

She walked on.

Until she saw Faith behind the wheel of a passing truck.

"Soho Bookshop", the large neon sign said. The windows were well-lit, and full of brightly colored clutter. Books, magazines, videos, toys, just about everything a porn shop catering to the general public would be expected to have. There were some people inside, and quite a few moving about on the street, but nowhere near as many as there would be come the weekend. Faith turned the truck into an alley across the street from the shop, put it in reverse and accelerated as fast as she could.

The back end of the truck rammed into the store. Glass, paper and plastic flew about and the store's sign went out. Faith pushed the button that started lowering the rear lift, opened the door and jumped out. She'd made sure to hit beside the entrance, so she only had to toss aside a small amount of debris to get in.

The inside of the shop was silent. Most of the front was entirely wrecked, and the customers and staff just looked at her. She grabbed the nearest person, a young man in black leather and with lots of piercings. Effortlessly, she forced his head down onto the counter and twisted his arm up behind his back until she could hear the tendons in his shoulder snap and it was very obviously dislocated. He screamed loudly, which was a nice bonus. Sometimes, they just went silently into shock.

"Be nice little people and do as I say, and nobody *else* gets hurt," she said.

"She's late," Ivanova said.

Jenna sat on the double bed, flipping through a fashion magazine. "Don't worry," she said. "She's a bloody strong girl, she can take care of herself."

Ivanova stood by the window, looking out over Marble Arch and Hyde Park.

"But she said she'd be back for dinner," she said. "It's long past any reasonable dinnertime."

"So what do you want to do? Go look for her?"

"Yes."

Jenna looked up. "Get real," she said. "This city has over twelve million people living in it. Needle in a needle stack."

"She can't have walked that far."

Jenna threw the magazine aside and got up from the bed. She stood behind Ivanova and gently put her arms around her waist.

"You're really worried, aren't you?" she said.

Ivanova nodded.

"And you really think that looking for her will do some good?"

Another nod.

She placed her cheek against the side of Ivanova's head. "It's your intuition speaking, isn't it?"

"I never can tell," Ivanova muttered. "Seems you can, though. So is it?"

For a handful of heartbeats, Jenna just held her.

"You're certainly tense enough," she said. "I think it is. Let's go."

Gabrielle woke up and wished she hadn't.

Her head felt like someone was repeatedly hitting it with a hammer, from the inside. She was lying on her back, a back which felt like a solid mass of bruises, with her hands stretched out above her.

She tried to move, and discovered two things. One, that just about every body part she had hurt. Two, that she couldn't move her hands.

Both discoveries were rather disturbing. The last thing she remembered before waking up was fighting Faith. Obviously, she'd lost. They'd been in a bookshop, a bookshop specializing in erotica, pornography and sex toys. Faith had been in the process of robbing it, and Gabrielle had tried to stop her. She thought the people in the shop had been able to get away, but judging from her own current circumstances the books had probably been stolen.

Well, she'd tried.

"How are you feeling?" a voice said.

Gabrielle slowly opened her eyes. For a moment, the pounding in her head got so bad that her vision faded. She groaned.

"Not so hot, huh? Here, I've got some painkillers for you."

She was in a room with bare concrete walls and some pipes running across the ceiling. A basement, she guessed. It was quite dark, the only light seemed to be that which came in through the door.

When she'd spotted Faith in the truck, she'd immediately tried to follow it. It wasn't easy, but the fairly thick traffic and narrow streets at least made it possible. Even so, for a while she'd lost it. Until she heard the crash when it ran down the storefront.

A hand gently lifted her head.

"Here," the voice said, and another hand held a couple of pills in front of her mouth. Faith's voice. Briefly, she considered refusing the pills, but it seemed quite pointless. If her captor wanted to kill her, she'd already be dead. If she wanted to drug her, it'd be easy enough to do that anyway. She took the pills into her mouth.

"Good girl," Faith said. "Here." She held a glass to Gabrielle's lips, who drank eagerly.

Faith let Gabrielle's head down just as gently as she'd lifted it.

She'd barged into the shop, sais drawn, and tried to talk to Faith. It hadn't worked. They'd fought, demolished even more of the store than the truck had.

"Try to sleep a bit, ok?" Faith said. "I'll be back in a few hours."

Mercifully, Gabrielle slid back into darkness.

The phone rang. Jenna kept staring out the window. Outside, it was about as dark as central London ever gets. Which pretty much meant that the light came from street level rather than from the sky.

Ivanova picked up the phone before it had a chance to ring a second time.

"Yes?" Jenna heard her say.

They'd walked around for a while after Susan started getting nervous. Not really going anyplace, just around. Looking at people and places, hoping to meet Gabrielle somewhere. Just a few hours earlier, Jenna wouldn't have believed how many strawberry blonde athletic girls in blue jeans and dark red turtle-neck sweat-

ers there were in London. The place seemed to be crawling with them.

"Yes," Susan said. "I didn't see what brand it was, but the rest matches."

It was Jenna who eventually spotted her, mostly because she was taller. They'd seen a couple of police cars, complete with flashing lights and wailing sirens, parked outside a shop on a side street to the one they were on. There was also a truck there, "parked" with its rear end inside the shop. On the theory that something that kept Gabrielle from getting back to the hotel was quite likely to be interesting to the police, they approached.

When they saw that the shop was a bookshop they started walking faster. When a policeman came flying out of it they started running.

"Penrith? Where the hell is that?"

After the flying policeman came Faith, carrying an unconscious Gabrielle. She and her captive got into the truck, which sped away quite a bit faster than was reasonable.

"Right. We're on our way."

Susan hung up. Jenna looked expectantly at her.

"The truck got photographed by one of those cameras for catching speeders, outside a place called Penrith way up north of here. Base contacted a local librarian, who had a look around and reports that the truck was seen heading for an old manor a handful of miles outside the town. A manor which had been unused for quite some time, until it was rented by an undisclosed person a few months ago. I'd say we have a lead."

Jenna smiled grimly. "I'm inclined to agree," she said. "Let's get a car and some guns and get moving."

Her hands were fastened to a thick pipe that ran from floor to ceiling, and they were fastened there with a serious pair of handcuffs. She'd tried breaking them, but it didn't take much trying to realize that her hands would break long before the handcuffs or the pipe did.

So she stopped trying, and tried to rest. It wasn't easy, but she'd been held prisoner often enough. She knew how to enter a sort of trance where she could wait for days but still be ready to act as soon as an opportunity opened. She'd learnt it from Xena. She had no idea who had taught it to her. Lao Ma, probably. It felt like a typical inscrutable oriental sort of thing.

"I brought you some food," Faith said and Gabrielle nearly jumped off the mattress. She hadn't heard a sound as the girl approached.

"I hope it's something one can eat through a straw," she said. "Because I seem to have a bit of trouble using my hands."

Faith put down the food next to the mattress and sat down.

"If you sit up, I'll feed you," she said.

With some effort, Gabrielle did as she suggested, ending up with the pipe as a back rest, her legs straight out in front of her and her hands behind her neck.

"What happened, anyway?" she asked. "The last thing I remember is fighting you and not doing too badly."

"No shit, sister. You're amazing. I gotta ask, are you some kind of supernatural warrior? 'Cause for a while there it felt like I was fighting Buffy again."

Gabrielle smiled and shook her head. "Entirely natural," she said. "But I had a teacher who I suspect was half goddess."

Faith thought about it. "Wicked," she said. "Anyway, it pretty much ended when I kicked you through the wall."

"Through the...? No wonder my back hurts!"

"It must've been a pretty crap wall, but yeah. Sorry about that. Didn't mean to, really."

"No biggie," Gabrielle said. "It was a fight. They have a nasty habit not to go as you planned. I didn't plan to end up here."

"No. I guess you didn't."

Gabrielle hesitated a little. "If I may ask," she said, "what are you going to do with me now?"

Faith looked down, suddenly finding something to adjust on her boot.

"Your boss doesn't know I'm here, does she?" Gabrielle said.

"No," Faith admitted. "She doesn't."

"So I'm your personal little secret..." She smiled impishly. "Are you going to ravish me?" she asked, suggestively parting her legs a little.

Faith's face turned beet red. "No!" she said.

"Really?" Gabrielle said. "You certainly seemed to like touching me that night at the club, and now I'm entirely at your mercy. You could use my poor defenseless little body any way you like. And I thought you were going to feed me, by the way."

"Oh. Sorry."

Faith picked up one bowl and spooned some of its contents on top of the other bowl.

"What is that?" Gabrielle asked.

"Curry," Faith said. "I hope you like it hot."

The impish smile reappeared on Gabrielle's face, and a moment later the blush on Faith's.

"I didn't mean it that way!"

"I like it hot," Gabrielle said. "Whichever way you meant it."

Faith put some of the food on a spoon and put it in Gabrielle's mouth. As she pulled it out again, Gabrielle let her tongue slide suggestively along the spoon's underside.

A frustrated groan escaped Faith.

Servalan looked at the numbers written on the top left corner of the bookcase. Forty-four, two hundred and twelve, sixty-three. She opened the heavy binder she was carrying and looked up the page with those numbers on it.

Top shelf, the collected works of James Joyce. Including the secret ones. She looked at the shelf. About half full.

Check.

Bottom shelf. Eighty-eight Harlequin romances, all different. She looked down at a solid row of almost but not quite identical backs.

Check.

She closed the binder and walked on down the aisle. Turned left at an intersection, right at the next one, then right again. Stopped at random about a third of the way down. Seven hundred and six, three, forty-seven. She opened the binder again.

Top shelf, the collected *Discworld* novels, volumes one to sixty.

Check.

Bottom shelf, the collected *Discworld* novels, volumes five hundred and forty-one to six hundred.

Check.

She walked on, stopping here and there to see that all books had been placed according to her plan. She looked at shelves full of Robert Ludlum novels, shelves with Berlin phone books in reverse chronological order from 1945 to 1914, shelves full of misprinted Bibles, an entire bookcase with only one lonely volume in it -- the last remaining copy of Aristotle's *Comedy* --, shelves full of galley proofs of science fiction works that never actually got printed, a shelf full of cop-

ies of three different novels that all accidentally got printed with the exact same cover, shelves with books where the third word of every title was "Stone".

Enormous variation, but everything exactly according to plan. She must remember to send an appreciative letter to Faceless Minions, Ltd. They'd certainly done an excellent job. Which reminded her. She headed back towards the entrance.

"Callisto!" she yelled when she was within earshot of it.

"Right here," came the reply from just outside the door.

Servalan walked out of the gloomy aisle between the bookcases into a room only marginally cheerier. It was large, of course. The walls were covered with dark wooden paneling and the floor with dark, heavy carpets. There were large windows that might have let in quite a bit of light if they hadn't been covered by heavy curtains.

Callisto sat in a stuffed chair, reading something. She'd dressed in an approximation of traditional English hunting costume, with tight white pants, bright red coat and black riding boots. Her hair was done up in a pony tail.

"Where's Faith?" Servalan asked.

"Off somewhere," Callisto said.

"When will she be back? I need that last batch of books."

"They're in the loading bay."

"Oh. Good. Have the faceless minions shelve them according to the plan, will you."

Not much left now. Just a few more shelves of books in sub-library number four. The first three sub-libraries were all complete, all of them enough by themselves to let a skilled librarian slip into -- or out of -- L-Space. That worried her a little, but stopping it would be far too much work and unacceptably risky, so she'd decided to just hope that no librarian would happen to find it.

Anyway, as soon as she blew the thin walls between the sub-libraries and joined them to one huge meticulously sorted library all her worries would be over.

She turned to Callisto again. "Oh, and if you see Faith tell her to keep in touch, unless she wants to be left behind when I activate the gateway."

Faith scooped up the last of the curry on a piece of naan bread and put it in Gabrielle's mouth.

"So, when I got out of prison I didn't really know what to do. The slaying gig was pretty well sewn up by Buffy and her Scooby Gang, so I more or less ended up in the evil henchman business by default. I mean, I'd done it before, and if I may say so myself I was pretty damn good at it."

She picked up a paper napkin and gently wiped Gabrielle's mouth.

"And now I'm sort of stuck with it. Not much of a career, maybe, but it's *my* career."

"You could join us," Gabrielle said.

Faith snorted. "Yeah, right. Like you'd take on someone like me. I'm a killer. You're, like, heroes."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "And you think we don't kill? Tell me, how many have you killed?"

"Nine," Faith said.

"I lost count a bit after a hundred," Gabrielle said.

Faith looked at her for quite a while.

"You've killed a hundred people?" she finally asked.

"Oh no," Gabrielle said. "I've killed far more than that. That was just when I lost count. My ex-girlfriend Xena killed thousands, even if you don't count the ones slain by her armies."

For a little while they just looked at each other.

"I've got to go," Faith eventually said. "I'll be back later."

She got up and left, without even looking back.

Gabrielle looked at the empty door, wondering if she'd offended the girl. She hadn't meant to brag, just to put Faith's actions in perspective. She was sure that the young Slayer wasn't nearly as bad as she made herself out to be, that she was basically just trying to get attention.

Gabrielle leaned her head back against the pipe, sighed and closed her eyes. Well, she'd try her best to give Faith all the attention she needed. And with some luck she'd manage to talk her over to the good side. Images of Faith naked in bed with her rose unbidden. She pushed them away. Wishful thinking wouldn't lead to anything useful.

When something blocked the light coming through the door she suddenly realized that she'd been hearing steps approaching.

"Why, *Gabrielle!*" a voice she knew all too well gleefully exclaimed.

She opened her eyes.

"Hello, Callisto," she said.

"I wondered what Faith was hiding down here, but I couldn't *dream* that it'd be something *this* entertaining."

The tall blonde came closer, smiling.

"Are you comfortable?" she asked. "Those clothes look a lot more confining than the ones you used to wear. I can help you take them off, if you like."

"No thanks, I'm fine," Gabrielle said. Answering wouldn't make a difference one way or another, but some form of resistance made her feel a little bit better.

Callisto sat down heavily, straddling Gabrielle's legs. She leaned forward, close enough that their breaths mingled.

"Polite, polite, polite," she said. "Always so polite. But you don't have to pretend for auntie Callisto. I know what you really want."

She grabbed hold of Gabrielle's sweater with both hands and ripped it apart. Leaving the rags hanging from Gabrielle's captive arms, Callisto moved her hands to Gabrielle's bare breasts.

"Now, doesn't that feel better?" she asked.

"No," Gabrielle said. She turned her head, not wanting to see Callisto's leering face.

Callisto pinched her nipples. "Tell me," she said, "how is Xena these days? I haven't seen her since the end of season four."

"She's dead," Gabrielle mumbled.

Callisto stopped. "What?" she said.

"Xena is dead," Gabrielle repeated.

"Liar!" Callisto slapped her, hard enough that her head bounced against the wall. "You wouldn't let her do that. You'd bring her back, like a good little lap dog."

"She wouldn't let me. She wanted to stay dead."

Callisto slowly stroked Gabrielle's hair.

"Now did she," she said. "It was an ever so noble sacrifice, I'm sure. Saving someone else. And leaving her little friend all alone for me to play with."

She solidly grabbed Gabrielle's hair.

"Give me a kiss, dear," she said.

Something hit Callisto on the head, hard. Gabrielle saw her eyes roll up before she collapsed sideways, revealing Faith standing behind her holding a shovel with a dent in the blade.

"Are you all right?" Faith asked, clearly worried. "I'm sorry, I had no idea she

was snooping around down here."

"I'm fine," Gabrielle said. "But if you don't mind, I'd really rather not be here when she wakes up again. Especially not tied up."

"Shit, yeah." Faith quickly looked through her pockets, got a key out and opened the handcuffs holding Gabrielle.

"Thanks," Gabrielle said while she rubbed some feeling back into her hands. "You're not going to be very popular here now, are you?"

Faith dropped the dented shovel. "No, I guess not. Time to run again."

Gabrielle took her hand. "Let's run together. At least until we get to the nearest library. I owe you dinner, a safe place to sleep and a ticket out of here. At least."

"I captured you! Why would you owe me anything?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Getting captured comes with the territory. *She's* extra. Don't argue now, we'll need all the time we can get."

She set off for the door, expecting Faith to follow.

"Er, Gabrielle?" Faith said.

Gabrielle stopped. "Yes?"

"Not that I mind the view or anything, but are you really going to run around with your tits hanging out like that?"

"Do I have a choice? You don't look like you have a spare shirt in your pocket."

"She doesn't need hers, does she?" Faith said, lightly kicking Callisto's ass.

Ivanova sat on the hood of the Jeep with her knees pulled up so she could rest her binoculars on them. She'd been watching the old mansion for hours without seeing much of interest. Birds flew by. A few rabbits ran past. Occasionally, she'd see a shadow pass by a window.

Dull.

They'd driven all night, taking turns behind the wheel. As a former fighter pilot and a former smuggler, they both drove like maniacs. By sunrise, they'd reached Penrith and found the local librarian, who directed them further. Since then, they'd been parked next to the road leading up to the mansion, not far from the main gate and with quite a good view. If one sat on the car, at least. So they'd sat there, watching, for most of the day now. They'd taken turns sleeping a bit.

On the positive side, the truck they'd seen Faith drive was parked next to an old garage some distance from the house, making it reasonably sure that it was at least the right house to watch.

"Got anything?" she said.

Inside the Jeep, Jenna was listening to a radio scanner.

"Some kids playing with walkie-talkies," she said. "They're planning to sneak into old man Forrester's garden when the sun sets and nick some apples."

Ivanova smiled. "I think that's outside our jurisdiction."

"Or you'd kick their tiny little asses?"

"Well, can't go easy on crime, now can we?"

"Of course not. Unless we're the ones doing it."

"That's different."

There was something moving at the side of the mansion, something bright red. It quickly vanished into some bushes.

"Yeah, that's *us*," Jenna said.

Ivanova sat up straighter and tried to spot the red something again.

"I saw something," she said. "Guns ready?"

Jenna put the scanner down and stepped out of the car.

"As ready as reasonable," she said. "What did you see?"

"Looked like something came out of the house, and headed this way."

Jenna briefly ducked into the car and returned with an assault rifle and

something that looked like a mutant AK47. She passed the latter on to Ivanova.

"Just in case," she said.

There was something, moving from one bush to another. Clearly a person. No, two. One in bright red and blue, and one in white and black. The one in red stopped, looked around. For a moment, she could see the face.

Gabrielle. It was Gabrielle, dressed in a too large white blouse and a red coat instead of the sweater they'd last seen her in. Heading for the gates, as far as she could tell.

She jumped off the hood. "It's Gabby," she answered Jenna's questioning look. "Let's get a couple of extra guns and go meet her."

Faith carefully moved a branch aside and pointed.

"Gate's over there," she said. "Locked, but I've got the code."

They were hiding inside a large bush. They'd crawled out through an old coal chute, and dashed from cover to cover from there, doing their best to stay out of sight from the mansion.

Gabrielle leaned close and looked over Faith's shoulder. Faith didn't move the slightest bit out of the way.

"Not much cover for the rest of the way," Gabrielle said. "I take it the gate is the only reasonable way out?"

"Unless you want about a million alarms to go off, yeah. The fence is wired like crazy."

Gabrielle looked at the ground they had left to cover. About six or seven seconds to run, she guessed.

"How long will it take you to open the gate?"

Before Faith had time to answer, they heard a couple of dull thuds off to the side, followed by running steps.

"What the...?" Faith said.

A black-clad figure crashed into the bush, rolled and came up on one knee, aiming a weapon with a disturbingly large muzzle at them.

"Hi, Susan," Gabrielle said. "You didn't just come over the fence, did you?"

There was a flurry of breaking branches and tossed-about leaves, and another black-clad figure repeated the maneuver Ivanova had just performed, except that she ended up pointing a smaller-caliber weapon at them.

Faith let go of the branch she'd been holding on to. "Do they always greet you this way?" she asked.

Ivanova lowered her shotgun. "Yes, we did," she said to Gabrielle. "Is that a problem?"

"I thought she was the enemy," Jenna said, aiming at Faith.

"She got better," Gabrielle said. "And yes, it's a problem. Faith here says that the fence is lousy with alarms. So I guess Servalan knows we're here now."

Jenna also lowered her weapon. "How many people have she got in there?" she asked.

"Just herself and Callisto," Faith said. "There are some faceless minions too, but they'll keep out of the way as much as they can and only count for visual cover anyway. Mind you, Callisto is a *really* nasty piece of work. I wouldn't have liked to meet her while she was a goddess."

"Just two?" Ivanova said. "Let's waste them!"

"We haven't got any guns," Faith said, nodding towards Gabrielle.

Jenna smiled. "MP5 or Kalashnikov?" she said.

"Callisto!"

Servalan hurried down the stairs to the basement. One of the minions had seen

the blonde immortal go down there, and she hadn't been seen anywhere since. Faith was nowhere to be found either.

An entirely different universe, and she *still* couldn't find competent underlings.

"Callisto!" she shouted again. The basement was dark and smelled musty. It was probably full of rats and other unsavory things.

She heard something move in a room a bit further down the corridor. Suddenly she wasn't so sure coming down here had been a good idea.

"I'm here," she heard Callisto say, and a moment later she saw her come out of the room where she'd heard the movement. She was naked from the waist up. Which was a pleasant enough sight, but hardly appropriate under the circumstances.

"What on Earth were you doing in there?"

"Faith had a cute little prisoner. She knocked me out, and now they've both gone away."

"Prisoner? What prisoner?"

"Xena's old girlfriend Gabrielle. The lying little bitch said that Xena is dead, but that can't be true. Xena is much too tough for that."

Servalan looked at Callisto for a little while. There was an insane gleam in her eyes that she didn't like at all.

"Never mind that," she said. "The perimeter sensors triggered a few minutes ago. Two humans and enough weaponry for five or six of them. Have a look at it, will you."

She turned around and walked away without waiting for a reply. She had a plan to finish. With some luck, Callisto would delay the intruders long enough for her to do so.

Gabrielle had left the red jacket in the bush where they met Jenna and Ivanova. The white blouse she'd taken from Callisto was thin to the point of translucency and it ripped very easily, but those were drawbacks that were easier to live with than being a bright red target. She'd put it on when they were planning a cross-country hike, where protection would've been more important than camouflage. Now, she just hoped that there wouldn't be too many holes in it by the time they reached the kitchen entrance Faith was leading them towards.

For once, she'd chosen to carry a firearm, the relatively small MP5 sub-machinegun Jenna had brought. She didn't stand much chance against Callisto with her sais anyway, so she might as well try for distance. Noisy and imprecise as the gun was, it was still a vast improvement over a bow.

The sound of a truck starting came from the front side of the mansion, behind them.

"Must be the faceless minions leaving," Faith said. "Which probably means that Servalan is about to activate her gateway. Let's hurry."

She set off at a crouching run, keeping bushes between herself and the mansion. Gabrielle, Ivanova and finally Jenna followed, weapons ready.

It was finished. Every last book had been put in its place, every last bookcase stood where it should be, every last reading pulpit and overstuffed chair was properly placed.

Servalan stood looking into the main entrance to her library. It wasn't a gateway yet, it was still four separate libraries. But she could already feel the pull of L-Space, almost feel the not-quite-there aisles in between those built by her minions.

All that remained was to connect them. To trigger the explosive bolts and blow out the segments of wall blocking off the sub-libraries from each other. To flip up the transparent plastic little lid covering the small red button on the radio trigger

she held in her hand and push it. One little push, and boom. L-Space gateway forms. The holy grail of L-Space travel, the library that existed partially outside space and time and could take you *everywhere*.

She flipped the transparent plastic lid open with an immaculately manicured thumbnail. Outside, she heard gunfire. No matter.

She put her thumb on the button.

Pushed.

Deep inside the library, a number of small explosions occurred so close to simultaneously that she couldn't tell them apart.

One by one, the wall segments fell.

Faith briefly lifted her head above the stone lion she was hiding behind and squeezed off a few rounds in the general direction of the mansion's kitchen entrance. She'd barely got it back down again when a burst of bullets ricocheted off the poor lion.

Gabrielle lay next to her, reloading her gun.

"This isn't working too well, is it," Faith said.

Jenna and Ivanova lay a couple of steps away from them, in cover behind a stone animal that Faith couldn't identify. Jenna kept taking single shots at Callisto with her slick-looking rifle, while Ivanova was digging ammo out of her pockets and reloading her weird-ass shotgun. Coordination was clearly lacking.

"Gabrielle," Jenna said, hopefully low enough not to be heard into the house. "As soon as Susan's reloaded, we'll give covering fire while you two advance. Ok?"

Gabrielle slammed the magazine into her gun. "Ok," she said.

"What the fuck is *that*?" Faith said.

Electric blue lines were crawling over the mansion's facade. They spread out over open and even areas, and bunched together over corners and decorations. The lines quickly grew in intensity, and moved slightly outwards until they moved about half a step or so from the walls.

The gunfire stopped, as the three librarians and the recently unemployed henchwoman stared at the phenomenon.

"No way I'm going into that," Faith.

"Me neither," Gabrielle said. "You said the L-Space gateway was nearly finished?"

It took her some seconds to notice among the other strangeness, but as she looked at it Faith suddenly realized that she could see the sun *through* the house.

"You think that's what it is?" she said. "If so, I don't think it's working right, because it looks like the entire thing is going away."

Which it did. The building was fading, fast. The electric blue lines snaking all over it stayed clearly visible until the house faded first into gray mist and then into nothing at all. With a strange crackling noise, the lines vanished all at once. All that remained of the mansion was a large hole in the ground where the cellar had been.

Ivanova stood up. "Bloody hell," she said.

The desk was very, very large. It was also placed so that the person sitting behind it had her back to the windows looking westward.

Sylia Stingray, whose desk it was, liked to receive her visitors in the late afternoon.

West of the Librarian Attack Force Compound were training grounds, which from a distance looked very much like primeval forest. There was nothing tall enough to block the view from Sylia's office. Nor to prevent the sun from shining

straight at her visitors' faces.

Sylia didn't like visitors, and did her best to discourage them.

It was working quite well, she hadn't had anyone visit her more than once for years. So much easier, so much more *civilized* to conduct business via electronic links. The less time she had to spend with humans, the more time she could spend working on four or five things at once. Her fingers flew over her highly customized keyboard at an unbelievable speed.

Gently, the terminal chimed.

"Who?" she said.

"The head of the LAF Research Division," the terminal said.

Her hands stopped moving and she looked up from the screen.

"What?" she said.

"The head of the LAF Research Division," the terminal repeated.

"Let her through." She started typing again.

"Sylia?" a feminine voice said.

"Yes," she answered.

"The nexus has formed," the voice said. "We've had it on the scanners for almost two hours now."

"I don't have to tell you to keep looking, do I?"

"Of course not! But there is one thing you may want to know."

"What?"

"It's flawed."

Sylia stopped typing. "Flawed?"

"There is a category imbalance. Very small, it's still a fully formed nexus, but enough that we might exploit it."

"I see. Thank you for the information."

"You're welcome!" A bright but not quite sane laughter echoed through the office, until it was cut off by another gentle chime.

Sylia swiveled her chair around. The view wasn't only there to discourage visitors, she liked watching the sun set. It helped her think. Besides, she found it symbolic.

"Terminal," she said after a little while.

"Yes," the terminal said.

"Let me know as soon as Attack Librarian Gabrielle, Attack Librarian Ivanova or Attack Librarian Stannis reports in."

"Noted."

Carefully, Faith extracted her arm from under Gabrielle and slid out of bed. She collected her clothes from where they'd ended up when she and Gabrielle tumbled into bed the night before, and silently dressed. She got pen and paper from a drawer in the room's desk and started to write.

After Servalan's mansion had disappeared, they'd packed themselves and their things into the Jeep and left. There wasn't much else to do, really. They put the weapons in the back covered with an old carpet, Ivanova got behind the wheel, Jenna beside her and she and Gabrielle ended up in the back seat by default.

After a couple of miles, Gabrielle asked if she could lean on Faith, because she wanted to try to sleep. Getting knocked out and chained to a wall isn't particularly good rest.

A few miles later, they were kissing. Another few miles, and Jenna turned up the radio really loud so she wouldn't have to listen to the make-out session going on behind her.

A couple of times on the way, Gabrielle drowned out the radio.

Faith put down the pen and stared at the empty paper. She sighed. She didn't

know what to write. She didn't even *know* this girl. Her feelings were based on unfounded hope, illusions that'd wither and die in the harsh light of morning.

Jenna and Ivanova had talked the hotel receptionist into giving Faith a room, in spite of the lack of a booking or even money. She didn't catch how they did that, she was too busy kissing Gabrielle. She heard something about "But he... she... whatever hasn't seen his... her... whatever's brother in *ages!*", which didn't make much sense to her. She didn't care, she got a room. With a bed, with a Gabrielle in it. Which was way better than average for ex-Slayer jailbird trash like her.

She picked up the pen again.

"I really loved being with you," she wrote. "I hope you find someone better than me."

Without signing it, she grabbed her leather jacket and left.