

# Finding Faith

*Annals of the Librarian Attack Force, part 3*

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Having failed to stop Servalan from activating her L-Space gateway, the LAF now has to stop her from using it. But the only way to do that comes through knowledge only possessed by Servalan's ex-henchwoman Faith, and Faith has gone under ground.

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

**Featured pairings:** Faith/Gabrielle, Nene/Priss, Ivanova/Jenna, Drusilla/Servalan

**A.S.S Story codes:** ff

**Story rating:** NC17

"Hey, Faith, there's someone here who says she can outdrink you!"

Faith looked up from the glass of Coke she'd been staring into for the last half hour. It was Maria, one of the bar's waitresses, who had shouted at her. She strongly suspected that Maria had a crush on her. She couldn't possibly care any less. Maria was too curvy, her hair was too dark and she was too much of a frail little femme. Nothing like Gabrielle. Or Buffy. Or Cordelia, for that matter. Heck, she wasn't even *Willow*.

"Yeah?" Faith said. "Tell her congratulations from me."

Maria came up and leaned on the other side of the bar from Faith.

"Come on, Faith," she said. "You know you can beat her."

"I don't *care* if I can beat her."

Maria leaned closer and tried to look conspiratorial.

"Please? There's a couple of girls over there who say they'll bet against you and I could use a bit of extra cash."

Faith laughed. "Ok then, but I'm not paying for the drinks."

Maria bounced and looked stupidly happy. "Great!" she said. "Can you live with that awful tequila boss bought way too much of?"

She got up from her seat. "Yeah, I can live with that," she said. "Where's this other chick?"

"There." Maria pointed at a brown-haired young woman sitting at a table in the middle of the pub. She wore bikers' leathers, with the top pulled down around her waist. Under it, she wore a blue t-shirt with the name of a maker of motorcycle tires printed on it. As far as Faith could see with the heavy tobacco smoke and dim lighting, she didn't look at all bad.

Faith walked over to her table and sat down.

"You wanna do this?" she said.

The other girl shrugged. She had strangely colored eyes, Faith saw now that she was closer. Her irises were almost red.

"Thought so," Faith said, and a moment later Maria arrived with a tray full of glasses of tequila.

It had become a habit for Faith to spend an hour or two at the pub before she went to work. It gave her an illusion of having a social life. The other hopeless cases that whiled away the evening hours over whatever drinks or drugs they could afford knew her by sight. Nodded at her when she came in. A few of them, like Maria, even knew her name and occasionally spoke to her.

Every now and then someone would make a pass at her. Most of those took no for an answer, for the rest a broken arm conveyed her message quite clearly. So far she hadn't had to shoot anyone.

Which was a pity, really. Quite a few of the sleazebags desperately needed shooting.

"Ok," Maria said. "You take turns drinking a glass. The first who can't drink up, or who falls off her chair, loses. Clear?"

"Fine," Faith said. "Who goes first?"

"Challenger does, of course."

The brunette smiled. Somehow, her smile seemed far more bitter than happy. She lifted a glass, tipped it slightly in Faith's direction and quickly emptied it down her throat. Coughing ensued.

"Damn!" she said. "What *is* this crap?"

Her voice was dark for a woman's.

"Cheap," Faith said. "Maria, get some limes and salt, will you?"

She didn't wait for a reply, or for the taste-killers to be brought. She took a glass, saluted her opponent and emptied it.

"Damn, that's awful!" she said, not quite voluntarily.

"But it's cheap," the other girl said, with a smile that was a little friendlier than her last one.

"Your turn," Faith said.

The red-eyed girl certainly could hold her alcohol. A few score glasses later, she was still sitting up fairly straight. She had a little trouble getting the glasses to her mouth, but nothing too bad. She'd probably last at least another dozen shots.

Faith herself was feeling a little tipsy. Not much, just enough that she probably shouldn't drive a car. Which was all right, 'cause she couldn't afford one anyway. She took the monorail to work.

Which reminded her.

"Look, I really have to get to work soon," she said. "My boss gets really pissed off if I'm not there by ten PM. If you wish, we can take a break and continue later. I usually quit at three am or so."

"Same here," the girl said. "See you in a bunch of hours, then."

Without further ado, she stood up and pulled on her leathers fully. More than a little bit wobbly, she walked over the coat rack by the door and fetched her helmet.

"You're not going to ride a motorcycle anywhere, are you?" Faith said. "You can hardly stand up straight!"

"I'll manage," the girl said and vanished into the night.

Faith turned to Maria and the two betting girls. "If she gets herself killed, I win," she said.

She got up from her seat. Very slightly unsteady. Probably not even noticeable by anyone but herself. Or one like her. Like Buffy. Or Gabrielle. And she was not going to think about them, now was she?

"See you later," she mumbled in the general direction of Maria. Slinging her leather jacket over her shoulder, she walked out and headed for the monorail station.

It was a hot night, hot and humid. What little wind there was did its best to slither in between skyscrapers and arcologies, along multi-level highways and once-beautiful boulevards. Cars from the smallest armored two-seater to huge land-trains brutally forced their roaring way through the night, transport jets and police VTOLs screamed through a sky glowing dirt-gray from street lights reflected in polluted clouds.

Faith looked down at it through the monorail car's window. The car was dirty and vandalized, the cheap plastic scratched. A handful of other people was there. Some of them she recognized, other people going to work at times when normal people where about to go to bed.

Occasionally, they'd smile at her. Their rides to work had got a lot safer since Faith started riding along with them.

The first night she took the monorail to work, a teenaged boy tried to rob her by threatening her with a knife. She'd thrown him off at the next station, his knife buried to the hilt through his kidney. She'd thought of it as teaching him a lesson in the value of choosing your enemies carefully.

The second night, three guys from the first one's gang came to teach her a lesson involving motorcycle chains and baseball bats. She thoroughly beat the crap out of them. Two of them went out the windows somewhere along the way, the last she threw at exactly the same spot she'd thrown his buddy, both his thighbones broken.

The third night the rest of the gang came, some of them with guns.

Best damn workout she'd had in months.

When they passed the second to last station, the monorail car was a charnel house. Blood and brain substance was splattered all over the walls. The floor was a huge pool of blood, vomit and urine. Quite a few of the gang were dead. As a demonstration, she'd made a point of shooting them exactly between the eyes with their own guns. Others, those not carrying firearms, she'd punched or slashed as need dictated.

She spent the time between the second to last station and the last station systematically breaking every single bone in the gang leader's hands. When they arrived, she walked out as if nothing had happened.

The fourth night, she got to ride alone all the way. Over the next few nights, people started to share the car with her. Word got out that messing with people on the monorail was a spectacularly bad idea. One night, a middle-aged guy in a worn suit told her that his son had said that the word on the street was that some sort of military experiment was loose in the monorail system slaughtering anything that looked like it could fight.

Fair enough.

She got off at her usual station and walked the few blocks from the to the nightclub where she worked as a bouncer. The streets here were more populated than the ones around the pub, cleaner and better maintained. Occasionally, one even saw a patrolling police car drift by. The club itself was sort of sleazily fashionable. Nobody important would be caught dead in it, but they got all the up-and-coming bands before they made it in the really fashionable clubs. Which meant that they had plenty of tables where the important people could be not seen.

This night, there was a line to get in. Must be a pretty good band, to draw that much people that early in the evening. Usually, they got the largest crowds just after midnight.

She walked into the employees' dressing room, hung her jacket in her locker and pulled on the bulletproof black vest with "SECURITY" written across the back. She put on her radio headset, made sure her taser nightstick was fully charged.

"You there, Guardian?" she said to the radio.

"Always, my Faith," the club's resident AI replied. "How are you this sweltering night?"

"Fine," she said. "What's the crowd like?"

"Calm and still like a forest pool a windless morning, reflecting the rising sun and the life-green forest."

She moved out into the club proper. The walls were black, the floor was black, the ceiling was a projection hologram of the sky as seen from space. There were a lot of people, some of them wearing anonymizer masks. Music was playing, but it was obviously canned and not that interesting.

The main room was roughly circular, with deep alcoves radiating out from it. The stage was in the center, with the main bar surrounding it. Faith meandered through the crowd. Her intoxication was gone, slayer alertness was coming on strong. There were usually some very nasty people here, and one had better be prepared. Particularly when the night's band was late, as they were now. That'd usually be a fast ticket to Troubleville.

Except tonight it wasn't.

"What's going on?" she whispered to her microphone. "Why the calm?"

"The band of musicians, the bringers of rhythm and melody, the technological troubadours we're expecting tonight, they're known, they're notorious, they're infamous for their inability to keep to the schedules of lesser beings like us."

"In other words, people are expecting them to be late so they're not pissed off about it?"

"As always, my dear, you are absolutely right."

"So why the lots of punters? This band famous or something?"

"A sensation of the underground, a sweet Orpheus from the depths of the living city," the AI whispered, and not for the first time Faith wondered where the hell the club's owners had bought the thing.

There was movement on the stage. People were coming up through the stairway in the middle of the circular stage, and taking their places at the instruments. The crowd fell silent, and there was a general turning towards the stage, an expectation of things about to start.

Faith moved towards the stage. Partly because it was a fair chance that any trouble would start there, partly because she wanted to see what this band was all about.

In a globe of holo-projected light, a woman jumped up through the hole in the middle of the stage. She somersaulted forward and landed perfectly in front her microphone stand. She took the microphone in one hand, sank down on one knee.

Absolute silence filled the room. Faith looked up at the singer. Blonde hair, nicely shaped body, short skirt, tight top. A face she recognized, and strangely red-tinted eyes.

She pulled her microphone close to her mouth. "Does the band have a name?" she asked.

"Of course. A label, an appellation, is needed for fame. Had not a choice of such been made by themselves, the confused distributed mind of the populace would have given them one. They are Priss and the Replicants."

On stage, the woman started singing about mad machines.

Dressed in dark blue hakama and gi, Gabrielle walked down from the house to the beach below it. The sky was a clear blue, and it was fairly warm. Not quite as warm as she was used to from Greece, but warm enough to be comfortable.

On the sand, she dropped the bag she was carrying and spread out the rolled up straw mat she'd had wedged under her arm. She sat down on the mat, left side towards the lake. About a hundred meters out, a target buoy was gently bobbing in the slight breeze.

She put her hands in her lap in the traditional meditation pose, straightened her back, closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind.

The anger was still there. Deep inside her, like a hot glowing wire running through her being that she couldn't get rid of. Damn Xena for abandoning her, and damn Faith for doing the same. She hardly even *knew* the girl, what right did she have to decide that they had no future?

Calmly, she opened the canvas bag and took out an assault rifle. A Heckler & Koch G36, recommended to her by Jenna. Slowly and methodically, she disassembled it.

A couple of months had passed since their less than successful visit to England. They'd returned empty-handed to the LAF Compound, and quite expected to be thoroughly chewed out for it.

Instead they were mostly ignored.

Jenna and Susan went back to occasional ordinary low-level library rescue missions and overdue book retrieval. Gabrielle went into training. Contemporary mainline police procedures. Shadowing techniques. Surveillance. Computers. And the theory and practice of firearms.

She took a long black scarf out of the bag and tied it around her head as a blindfold. With it in place, she reassembled the rifle, loaded and cocked it. Cradling the rifle in her arms, she listened.

Xena had taught her to listen. To take in all sounds, both the ones that were and the ones that weren't. To know the sounds that confirmed what was expected and the ones that told her what was new. She listened to the wind traveling over the water. She heard it move the waves and be moved by them. A slight splash as the target buoy moved. A stronger than usual rushing as the wind momentarily sped up. A myriad sounds of the world talking to her, speaking just as clearly as it did with light.

She lifted the rifle to her shoulder and twisted her upper body to the left, so its muzzle was pointing towards the target.

The LAF firearms teachers had talked a lot about proper stance, proper holding and proper breathing. Obvious things. Xena, though she never got to see a firearm, had talked to her about knowing your weapon, making it a part of your body. About listening to the language of metal and bone. To *know* where everything was.

She felt the rifle's weight. She felt its balance, and she knew its movements. The wind spoke to her about how it made the target gently sway, and the rifle spoke to her about the cartridge in its belly waiting to be released and the way the bullet would travel. She made herself stop thinking, she ceased to be Gabrielle and became nothing more than a conduit, a vessel through which the wind spoke to the rifle. They knew each other, and became one. Bullet, rifle, human, wind and target became a single interconnected system, and firing became inevitable.

A shot rang out. The target buoy rocked violently for a moment, before it stilled itself. Gabrielle put the rifle down. The wind kept blowing. The waves moved on.

Later that night, Ivanova and Jenna were out on the back porch of the house they shared with Gabrielle. It was a smallish one-story house, designed for four people to sleep and eat in. There were a number of houses mostly like it spread all over the northernmost part of the forested LAF Compound training grounds. They were there for LAF members who didn't want to live among the main buildings, for whatever reason.

In the case of Ivanova and Jenna, the reason was that too much people at the same time bothered Gabrielle, and they wanted to be close to her. So they applied for a house, cashed in a few favors and got assigned one right by the eastern beach of Lake Biblios.

"Did you see her practice today?" Susan said.

"No," Jenna said. "What did she do?"

Ivanova was sitting in a deck chair, a drink in her hand. Jenna sat balanced on top of the railing, leaning against one of the supports. The night was pleasantly mild. The sky was almost clear, only an occasional cloud obscured a waxing moon.

"Rifle. About a hundred meters, head-sized target. Hit dead center with every shot..."

"Doesn't sound too hard."

"...blindfolded."

There was a silence while Jenna digested this. "Are you serious?" she said, after a while.

"Yup. Watched her from up here."

"That's not possible."

"I know. I tried it, once. Back in Earthforce. Me and a couple of other cadets spent most of a day watching silly martial arts movies and got the stupid idea of trying things they did in them. Blindfolded target practice being one. We had trouble hitting the right wall, much less the target."

The night was full of sounds. Cicadas rasping, waves hitting the shore, wind whispering through trees. In the distance, shouts and gunfire from a night training session. A dull roar from a plane passing high above.

"Well, she's from a pretty strange universe," Jenna said. "Things work differently there. I saw a bullet go through Callisto's chest without leaving a mark, just knocking her back a bit. So I guess it's not unreasonable for Gabby to be an unreasonably good shot."

"Maybe. Except her world didn't have guns."

"Where is she, by the way?"

"Inside, writing. On a parchment scroll, with a feather pulled out of a bird, I might add. Just to rub in the 'not from here' bit."

Jenna got down from the railing and dropped herself into a chair instead. "I keep feeling that we should somehow *fix* her. Make her less sad and hurt and all. That it's our fault that she got abandoned again, so soon after the last time."

Ivanova finished the last of her drink. "I can't see how it'd be our fault. But maybe we should try to fix it. To find Faith for her."

"And I thought you were nuts when you wanted to look for Gabby in London. At least then we knew what universe she was in."

"Oh, come on. We can at least try. It's not like we're doing anything else important."

Jenna looked at the empty glass in Ivanova's hand. "Are you going to fill that up?"

Ivanova checked the glass too. "I haven't made up my mind yet. Why?"

"I thought you could make me one too, and then we could try to figure out a way to find a missing girl."

Gabrielle woke to the sun shining in through the open window and birds singing outside. She heard Susan's and Jenna's slow, sleeping breaths beside her in the bed. Carefully, she slipped out of bed. On her way out of the bedroom she grabbed the nearest available dressing-gown. It turned out to be one of Jenna's, but rather than return and get a smaller one she just rolled up the sleeves. She passed through the kitchen to pick up a large glass of orange juice, grabbed her laptop from the table in the hallway where it had somehow ended up and headed outside.

Just far enough away from the house that she couldn't see anything but forest, she sat down under a tree. She could still hear the waves on the lake and some cars in the distance, but if she didn't pay attention to that she could almost convince herself she was back in Greece. That she was still roaming the countryside with Xena, fighting for what she thought was right and making love in secluded places.

The laptop kind of broke the illusion. She opened its lid, woke it from suspension and waited impatiently for it to connect to the local net.

It hadn't taken her long to get used to the thing. It was a bit like exchanging letters, but very quickly.

Xena had taught her many things during their years traveling the wilderness. One was that everything leaves traces. No matter how light or inconsequential, there will be something. Even the birds flying high through the air could be followed, by the reactions to their passing shadows and the way they stirred the air that moved the leaves. *Everything* could be tracked, she insisted. But she never could explain how she followed the gods, who appeared out of thin air and left the same way.

The laptop chirped, telling Gabrielle that it had established contact with the net and downloaded her waiting mail.

Faith was no goddess. Although supernaturally enhanced in many ways, she was still basically human and very mortal. She would've left traces. Gabrielle just had to find them.

She'd tried to think like Faith. She was running away, so she would've wanted to run as far away as she easily could. Which meant going away from mainline to a fiction line. Which took resources. Resources that Faith's easiest way to access was the Henchperson Agency where she was still technically employed.

Most of her new messages were junk, as usual. There were some lecture notes and other LAF-related ones, which she ignored. And, at last, there was a mail from the Henchperson Agency.

The only person that matched the description she had given them could be contacted via the Agency's branch office in MegaTokyo, where the contact officer should be able to help further.

MegaTokyo. The LAF had a branch library there. She closed up the laptop and hurried back to the house.

Servalan was starting to feel bored by the time the Maitre'd finally appeared and announced that her company had arrived.

"Excellent," she said. "Show her here and serve the first course, will you?"

It was a high-class restaurant, decorated in mostly crystal, gold and red. There were numerous tables, most of them large enough for four and all of them covered with white tablecloths. Serving staff moved among them like overly polite ghosts, putting down plates, filling glasses and removing used things.

"Madam, your guest," the Maitre'd said and pulled out the chair opposite Servalan. A strange-looking woman sat down. She had noticeable bone ridges over her eyes, ridges that continued towards the center of her face and eventually became the top of her nose. Her cheekbones were very strong. Her dark brown hair hung down to her shoulders, and her ears were pointed.

Servalan smiled her most inviting smile. "Hello," she said. "I am Supreme Commander Servalan. I'm so glad to see you."

"I am warmaster Jha'dur of the Dilgar, sometimes known as Deathwalker," the woman said. "I came because I was told you had a business proposition for me."

She did not sound particularly polite.

"Direct and to the point. I like that. Yes, I have a proposition for you."

Waiters appeared and placed soup bowls in front of the two women. Servalan's was a cauliflower and cheese soup. What Jha'dur's was she wasn't sure she wanted to know, but it smelled sour and slightly fermented.

"I believe that you haven't had much work since your brief appearance on Babylon 5," she continued.

Jha'dur just glared at her.

"What would you say to becoming ruler of that entire universe?"

The alien woman started eating. "What would I have to do?" she said.

Servalan smiled again. "Why, nothing more than practicing your science and your art," she said. "With some direction from me."

"You mean you want to chose who I kill and when."

"In a nutshell, yes. Will that be a problem?"

"No," Deathwalker said. "No problem at all."

The boulevard was, as usual, quite busy. People walking about, shopping and things like that. Maybe just enjoying the sunshine and the warm weather.

Servalan sat down at a table at a cafe. "A large espresso, please," she said to a nearby waitress. "No sugar, no cream."

That done, she turned to the woman who had already been sitting there when she arrived. She was blonde, her hair cut short. Her eyes were blue, and she was rather attractive. Servalan beamed a smile at her.

"Najara, I presume?" she said.

The woman -- Najara -- smiled. "Yes," she said. "And I guess you're Servalan."

"Of course. So pleased to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Do you want something to eat? They do a fine salad here."

Najara shook her head. "Thanks, but no. The djinn suggested I fast this week, so nothing but liquids for me."

"Ah yes, the djinn. You still have contact with them, obviously."

"I do, yes. I still fight for their cause, hard as it is these days."

Servalan's coffee arrived, and she sipped at it. "What if I were to help you?" she said.

"You would fight for the light?!"

"Well, I was rather more thinking of giving you more opportunities and better tools to do the fighting yourself."

Najara looked doubtful.

"Say," Servalan said. "Don't you come from the same universe as Gabrielle the bard?"

"Gabrielle? You know her?"

"Well, know is probably too strong a word. She was a guest at my house a while back. I hope to have her back again soon, she left rather in a hurry. Nice girl, don't you think?"

Najara leaned back in her chair, eyes ever so slightly narrowed.

"Yes, I'll work for you," she said.

The gate to the graveyard was old and rusty, yet when Servalan pushed it open it moved as if it had been newly oiled. Which was quite likely exactly what it had been.

She'd picked a night with a full moon to come here, and she'd been lucky enough that the sky was clear. It wasn't anything near daylight, of course, but she could see by it decently well. It not being daylight was the point, so she didn't have much choice, really. She walked through the gate, and started aimlessly ambling around between the graves.

Not that she would've admitted it to anyone, but she was actually quite scared. While recruiting Deathwalker and Najara she hadn't risked anything worse than a rejection. They might be amoral or not quite sane, but for the most part they were rational beings who acted out of self-interest. She could relate to that, understand it.

The one she was after now was anything but rational. She was an insane physically very powerful predator whose prey was humans. Servalan discreetly patted her pocket, making sure the compact object she kept there hadn't somehow vanished.

"Oh, look, a pretty little girl," a voice suddenly said a few steps behind her. Servalan turned around so fast she almost tripped over her own feet. Her heart was beating as fast as it possibly could, and she could feel the adrenaline pumping into her bloodstream.

The woman who had spoken was about the same height as herself, with long dark hair, brown eyes and a heart-shaped face. She was dressed in a long white gown that didn't do much to hide the curves of her body.

"Does the pretty little girl want to play?" she said, looking very intently at Servalan and smiling slightly.

"Play what?" Servalan heard herself say, her voice hoarse with fear. Her brows furrowed in irritation, she was prepared, she shouldn't be frightened. She'd been through worse than this!

The woman -- Drusilla, she was sure -- came closer. "Bunnies," she said. Her face suddenly changed into a horror-mask caricature of itself. "And things that eat bunnies," she added.

Servalan put her hand in her pocket. "It doesn't sound like a very fun game for the bunny," she said.

Drusilla came closer. "I'm not the bunny," she said, smiling cruelly. She reached out and put a cold hand behind Servalan's neck.

She looked far younger than her two hundred years, Servalan thought. Not even her eyes reflected her true age, there was a childlike innocence to their hypnotic madness.

A hypnotic madness that nearly captured her. It's wasn't until she felt the vampire's breathless lips against her skin that she finally reacted. She brought her stun gun from her pocket, pressed it against Drusilla's side and put fifty thousand volts of alternating current into her body. The vampire spasmed and fell.

Servalan took a second or two to catch her breath before she turned Drusilla over on her back, pulled her arms up and handcuffed them together. She'd ordered the cuffs specially. They were made out of a fiber-reinforced plastic that the producer promised was many times stronger than steel. She really hoped they were right and not just bragging, these vampires were really strong.

She sat down astride Drusilla's back, not caring if she got mud and grass on the knees of her dress. She wanted this creature. Not only was she strong and fast, she was also a psychic of some considerable power.

Drusilla moved a little under her, evidently coming out of the stun much faster than a human would have. Servalan took a crucifix from her pocket, held it by it's thin silver chain. She slowly dragged it over the vampire's cheek, watching the skin it touched blister and burn.

"Are you sure you're not the bunny?" she said.

Faith walked down to the bar a little earlier than usual, to see if Priss was there. Since their drinking-competition, they'd made a habit of drinking together. They didn't talk much. The red-eyed singer was a taciturn woman, and most days so was Faith.

She'd walked into Priss' dressing room after the concert and bluntly asked her if they didn't have some drinking to finish. For a reply, she got thrown a spare helmet.

Faith won the contest, but it was a lot closer than she'd have guessed. There was something about Priss that wasn't entirely kosher, but she'd decided she didn't want to know. Being told would lead to telling, and the less she had to say about the entire Slayer thing the happier she'd be. These days she was a pretty good bouncer at a pretty good club, working honestly and living in an apartment she could afford. So it was right under a highway, big deal, in this place most people lived like that. Only the super-rich got it better.

Priss sat in her usual corner, whisky in hand and biker's leathers pulled down to her waist. The t-shirt was white, with target-style concentric rings over the heart. Faith sat down across the table from her, also with her back to the wall. Moments later, a glass and a bottle of Coke was put down next to her.

"I keep dreaming about this girl," she said, carefully not looking in Priss' direction.

"I don't know what it means, if anything. I used to dream about another girl, one this new one reminds me of. Those dreams, the old ones, were wicked weird. They'd be all full of symbols and portents and crap, most of which seemed really important but didn't make any kind of sense."

She poured the content of the bottle into the glass.

"Not so with these. They're *quite* easy to understand. Tends to be the boinking like crazed weasels sort of dream. Which is pretty much what we did in the time we spent together. Only, in my dreams she makes me come over and over and over again, while

I completely fail to satisfy her. Which is *not* how it was. She says it doesn't matter, that she enjoyed it a lot anyway -- but I know she's lying to spare my feelings. It matters. I'm not good enough for her. She'll leave me, like everyone else."

"Did you love each other?"

The question took her by surprise. She hadn't expected any reply at all, she just wanted to say things out loud. Clear her mind.

"Yeah. Seems strange to say that when we had less than two days together, but yeah."

"So how come she left you?"

"What? She didn't leave me. I left her before she got the chance. Snuck out while she was sleeping."

The fist took her completely by surprise, bowled her over and landed her on the floor.

She looked up at Priss, who was leaning over the table, fury written all over her face.

"Idiot!" she hissed. "You had someone who loved you, and you threw it away because you were afraid it might not last? How stupid can you get?"

Faith brought her hand up and felt her sore cheek, shocked. She watched, paralyzed, as Priss came around the table, kneeled next to her and grabbed her shirt.

"When you have something like that, you do whatever you can to *keep it*, do you hear me? There's too much shit in the world that'll take it from you for you to go and just throw it away!"

She pulled Faith up and deposited her in her chair.

"I had parents, who died in an earthquake," she said, leaning over Faith. "I had a lover, who was murdered by GENOM. I had Sylvie, who I had to kill in order to save the entire fucking city. I had Linna, who got her skull crushed by a boomer in 2033. I had Nene, who got her brain fucked over by a meme virus and still lies staring at the ceiling in a Kobe hospital. And I had Sylia, who just disappeared without a trace on Christmas Day 2035."

There was something in the way she spat out her words that robbed Faith of all initiative. She just sat there and listened, awed by the sheer intensity of the rant.

"You know what the world is like. You know what a disease-ridden dung heap we live in. Hate may get you moving in the mornings, but it's only love that can make you want the mornings to keep coming. And it's so rare, and so hard to get, and only a complete and utter *moron* would lose it because she's afraid to lose it!"

Priss straightened up, returned to her place and emptied her glass in a single gulp. She filled it up, emptied it, and filled it again.

"Maybe I can find her again," Faith said, her voice very low.

There was no reply.

"Gotta go to work," she muttered and left.

She was hardly there that night at work. Her body moved through the crowds as usual, but her mind was back in England. She kept remembering her one night with Gabrielle, and the more she did the less certain she became that leaving had been the right thing to do. As closing time drew near, she knew that it had been yet another a mistake.

"Do you ever make mistakes, Guardian?" she whispered into her headset mike.

"All that exists is part of nature, and nature is imperfect. As I am part of all that exists, I am imperfect. Only the perfect, if such exist, never make mistakes."

She smiled and sighed a little. "You could just have said yes."

"So brief a statement, spoken in so new-born a context; it would grievously lack in grace and poetry."

"Yeah, anyway. What do you do when you've made a mistake?"

"I regret and I remorse. I try to mend and I try to repair. I try to learn. I try to not do it again."

Around her people were dancing. The music was loud, a rapid pulsing beat that the ads outside claimed was based on data transmitted in real time from the huge old radio telescope in lunar orbit. She moved among them like an alien, like a ghost. One calm figure in a sea of movement.

"What if you never learn?" she said. "What if you can't repair?"

Hologram stars glittered above.

"What is it you have done, my child? What terrible deed have you committed, what atrocity burdens your heart?"

"I left a girl," she said, and she felt tears run down her face.

"There can always be forgiveness," came the reply.

"Not for me," Faith said. "Never for me."

There was a battle in progress up on the highway. Faith could hear the shots, explosions and tearing screams of fusion rockets through the supposedly soundproof windows, and occasionally she'd see a piece of burning wreckage fall past her apartment on its way down to the slums. From the things that fell, it looked like the AD Police were getting their asses kicked. Again.

Her apartment was eight steps along the window wall, four steps from the window to the inner one. On the inner wall were two doors, one leading to the standing-room-only bathroom and one to an only slightly larger kitchen. In the main room, she had a low bed, an equally low table, a net terminal and a chest with some clothes and stuff in it. On the table was a small mountain of empty pizza boxes and takeout cartons.

When burning debris wasn't lighting up the canyon-like space between her building and the next, she could see her reflection in the glass. She didn't much like what she saw. Dark, desperate eyes. Hair that she let hang down the sides of her head, obscuring her face as if she was hiding. A tight top that showed plenty of cleavage. A diversion. Don't look at me, look at my tits. Like my body, and I can pretend that you like me.

The way she looked, she'd seen it before, in fighters who had been in one fight too many. The look that said kill me when I'm not looking. Best before yesterday.

If not for her Slayer abilities, she would long ago have joined them in oblivion. If not for Priss' fist, she wouldn't even have wobbled on her way there.

The bruise on her cheekbone had already faded.

She opened her clothes chest, dug through carelessly folded black pieces of clothing until she found her makeup kit. Using blue eye shadow and some dark rouge she carefully painted the bruise back on. In the small makeup mirror and the light from a burning AD Police chopper it looked convincing enough.

She closed the kit and threw it into the chest, kicking the chest's lid closed.

"Call the agency," she told the terminal.

"The Henchperson Agency, what can I do for you?" the Agency's limited AI answered after a very brief silence.

"It's Faith," she said. "I'll be taking jobs in mainline again, if you have any."

"Noted. There is a local inquiry for you."

"Well, doesn't their timing suck. Tell them they can probably find me at Sally's during the next few hours, if they really want to. I've got a debt to repay."

She hit the terminal's off button and left the apartment.

"Find anything yet?" Jenna said.

She sat at a table in one of the LAF Compound's small libraries, flipping through a large and thick book. Behind her, in front of a computer terminal on a table of its own, sat Ivanova.

"Not yet," Ivanova said. "I'm not used to this old piece of something unmentionable. I wish they'd put all databases on the main system. And I wish they'd get a halfway decent AI to index them."

Jenna kept flipping pages, looking them over as she went. "AIs don't work on mainline," she said. "You know that. And I thought you didn't like the things anyway."

"They can be useful at times... Particularly if you don't let them talk."

"Yeah, I can see the point of that."

Jenna turned a page and scanned down it.

"Although of the two talking computers I've dealt with, only one was annoying enough that you wanted to smash..."

Her voice trailed off to silence.

Ivanova looked away from the monitor.

"What?" she said.

"Did you talk to Gabrielle this morning?" Jenna asked.

"No," Ivanova said. "She was already up when I woke. Why?"

"What about last night?"

"I fell asleep before she went to..." Her voice trailed off and she frowned. "How long has she been gone?" she said.

"Since the day before yesterday. There's an inter-library transfer note here, for Attack Librarian Gabrielle to MegaTokyo."

"MegaTokyo... That rings a bell..." She started typing frantically at the keyboard.

"She must've found a lead to Faith," Jenna said. "Or maybe Xena decided to stop being dead. Except then she'd have gone back home, of course. So it's Faith."

"Ah, there, a hit," Ivanova said. "And MegaTokyo is..."

She hit the enter button with a dramatic flourish.

Her eyebrows rose. "Classified?!" she said. "The information on MegaTokyo is *classified*? By order of Assistant Head Librarian Stingray? What the fuck?"

Jenna closed the book she'd been looking through. "Coincidence?" she asked.

"I don't believe in coincidence," Ivanova said. "Particularly when a certain Assistant Head Librarian is involved."

"I agree," Jenna said. "Sounds like a road trip."

Jha'dur walked through the French doors onto the terrace outside. It was night, but a silvery full moon twice the size of Earth's spread plenty of light over the scene.

The house was high up on a mountainside, with an insanely steep slope going down into the valley. Down there she could see a pastoral landscape, with fields of grain, lush forests and slow rivers. Villages huddled here and there.

"It's pretty," she said. "And it's not real. No place on your world ever actually looked like this, and this mountain doesn't make geological sense."

"Some places in my world looked like this," Najara said from behind her. "Although that world is apparently unusual and not very stable."

Servalan stepped up to the railing separating the terrace from a drop of several hundred meters. "Jha'dur is quite right," she said. "This place isn't real."

"I think it's pretty," Drusilla said, sliding up next to Servalan and leaning her head on her shoulder. "I like the birds."

"There are no birds," Callisto said. "It's night."

"But I can hear them singing..."

Jha'dur turned around and leaned on the railing. The house was as incongruous as the valley. It spread upwards from the terrace for several stories, all of them sticking out of the mountainside. There was no architectural coherence to it at all, style clashed with style from part to part. They'd all come out through a set of French doors that wouldn't have been out of place at Versailles onto a terrace that looked like the set for an old Hammer Horror movie. The left half of story above them was Swiss-style cottage, the right was Frank Lloyd Wright. Further up, the chaos increased.

"If it's not real, why are we here?" she said.

"Because it's not a story either," Servalan said. "A story has to make sense. This place doesn't. Which means that it's not in a library somewhere, which in turn means that the LAF can't reach us here. The only way to get here is through my L-Space Gateway. It's a safe place to build a base."

"They go squeak squeak squeak squeak and they flutter about in the air..."

"Those aren't birds. They're *bats*, you daft woman."

"I see. Yes, a safe base is an important strategic asset. Can we get enough material transported here to build a development lab?"

"I'm afraid not. The natural laws of this place, such as they are, will not allow it. You will have to work in a more usual place."

"Mommy, she's nasty. Can I eat her?"

Servalan stroked Drusilla's long hair.

"Not now, dear," she said. "Mommy's talking business."

"I want you to take Najara with you, for support," she went on. "It is a fairly dangerous place. And, I suspect, a place where you will feel quite at home."

Priss' t-shirt was black, with a picture of a skull on it and the word "SMILE" under the skull. She sat rolling a shot glass full of amber liquid between her hands, as if she couldn't quite decide whether to drink it or not.

Faith leaned forward over her shoulder, took the glass and put it on the table. Priss turned towards her, looking annoyed.

"Hey, that's..." she had time to say before Faith's fist hit her face.

It wasn't a very hard strike. Not anywhere near as hard as she could hit, because that would've crushed Priss' skull and she didn't want that. It was just about enough to give her a bruise and knock her to the floor.

Priss looked up at her, confused. "What was that for?" she said.

"Knocking me out of a rut," she said. "Thought I'd return the favor."

She picked Priss up and put her back in her chair.

"You said you have a friend in a hospital, right? How long has she been there?"

"I don't know."

"*How long?*"

Priss looked away. "Three years, one month, two days."

Faith jumped up and sat on the edge of the table.

"Let me guess here," she said. "She's on some storage-only medical plan because your setup didn't quite work out as you'd intended, and you haven't been to see her for all the time she's been in there."

"What do you care?" Priss muttered, still not looking at Faith.

"Let's call it experience. This thing that's wrong with her, what did you call it? A meme virus? Is it at all curable?"

"I don't know," Priss said. "Sylia said it might be, but it'd take a complete VR setup and an AI to drive it, and she couldn't get that without blowing the Sabers' cover. Which she wouldn't do, even when she and I was all that was left of us. Then she too went away."

"So," Faith said. "Where do you find that VR setup?"

"I don't know," Priss said. "Rent one from a well-stocked porn shop, I guess. Why?"

Faith smiled at her. "I know an AI," she said. "And it's pretty damn bored, so I think it could be persuaded to have a go at healing your friend. Unless you'd rather sit here drinking yourself into oblivion."

She frowned.

"If you can. You hold your booze almost as well as I do, and I don't think I *could* drink myself to death even if I tried. Takes a lot to kill a Slayer. Just ask all the people who tried to waste cute little Buffy. Not that many of those are still around to ask..."

Priss finally looked at her. "What are you on about?"

"So, what do you say? Do we go visit a sick friend or not?"

"You never met her."

"Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. I think that's how the line goes. I must admit I never really got the concept. But I'll give it a shot."

She saw Priss' gaze pass by her and focus on something nearer the middle of the room. Mentally replaying the last few seconds' worth of sound, she realized there had been steps getting closer. Suddenly alarmed, she turned around.

A few steps in front of her stood a blonde girl, dressed in blue jeans, serious boots and a large fire-engine-red leather coat. She had her hands in the coat's pockets, and Faith got an impression that if she pulled them out they wouldn't be empty.

"Hello, Faith," Gabrielle said. "Who's your new friend?"

Servalan sat in a throne-like chair on the terrace. It was still night. The oversized moon hadn't moved at all, so the night promised to be long, possibly eternal. Drusilla was sitting at her feet, resting an arm on her knees.

"Do you think the moon dreams?" the white-clad vampire said. "I think she does. I think she dreams of tiny little things scurrying through the grass."

"Can you hear her?" Servalan said. She wore a white dress much like Drusilla's, except that it was cut for her less voluptuous form and she didn't wear a band around her neck. A white purse hung from her waist.

"I'm hungry. Let's find someone to eat," Drusilla said.

She looked up at Servalan's face.

"You could play with her first," she said. "And then I would drink her, and she'd taste like butterflies."

"There is no one here for you to eat, dear. You'll have to wait. I know you can."

"Callisto is here."

Servalan stroked her cheek. "No, dear. You can't eat Callisto. She wouldn't like that."

Drusilla stood, smiling. "I would," she said.

Servalan looked up at her. "Be nice, Dru. If you're not nice you know mommy will have to hurt you."

"I could eat my mommy, now," the vampire said. "I couldn't do that before, with grandmother."

Rising from the chair, Servalan took the few steps over to the railing. A soft, warm wind smelling of dry forest blew up from the valley, bringing with it an occasional seed that glinted silver-like in the moonlight.

"Come here, Drusilla," she said.

While she heard the steps come closer, she wrapped the chain of a crucifix around her hand so that the cross lay against the palm of her hand. That done, she opened the drawstring of her purse, checking that she could easily reach the handcuffs inside.

When the steps were just behind her, she turned and quickly put her hand on the vampire's neck. The deathly pale woman jerked forward, putting her hands on her neck in an attempt to ease the burning pain.

With a practiced move, Servalan took the handcuffs from the purse and snapped them closed around Drusilla's wrists. Moments later, she fastened the handcuffs' chain to the white leather band around the vampire's neck.

She knew the vampire was faster than this. That she was, at some level, allowing Servalan to incapacitate her.

"Threatening to eat your mommy isn't nice, Drusilla," she said. "Now I'll have to punish you."

She stepped aside and pulled Drusilla forward, making her stumble against the railing so she ended up with her torso hanging out over the precipice.

Servalan ran her fingers up her captive's spine. "Look at that, dear," she said. "Do you think you could fly?"

She took a firm grip on the top of Drusilla's dress and pulled down, ripping the thin fabric and exposing her naked back.

"I don't think you can," she said, gently touching her. "You don't have any wings."

Unwinding most of the chain from her hand, she let the crucifix land on the cold, naked skin. It made a hissing sound as it burned, and a smell of charred flesh spread over the terrace.

Drusilla screamed.

"Will you be a good girl?" Servalan asked.

Drusilla nodded eagerly, her breath shallow and rapid.

"I don't believe you."

She let the cross drag along Drusilla's skin as she slowly removed the remnants of her dress. It left trails of bright red and blisters.

"Spread your legs," she said. Drusilla obeyed.

Servalan put her hand on the vampire's vulva, the cross hanging down between her thighs. "Stand very still," she said. "You know where the burning thing is, and where it'll touch you if you move."

Slowly, she slid a finger inside Drusilla. She was wet, very wet. Servalan heard her breathing change, deepen.

"You're a very bad girl, aren't you?" she said.

Drusilla nodded. "Yes," she said. "Bad..."

While she moved her finger back and forth inside the cold vagina, Servalan awkwardly dug out a small bottle from her purse. She uncorked it with her teeth. At the same time as she pushed another finger in, she poured a little of the bottle's contents on Drusilla's back. The reaction on the skin was much the same as from the crucifix.

Again, Drusilla screamed, except this time Servalan couldn't tell if it was from lust or pain. She kept finger-fucking the vampire as she slowly emptied the bottle all over her, holy water running down her sides and burning her ample and sensitive breasts, her thighs and her pussy.

It was a peculiar feeling to feel blisters form under her fingers.

She pulled her fingers out, moved them up and pinched her clitoris hard, getting a strangled moan-like cry out of Drusilla. Having emptied it, she let the holy water vial fall down the mountainside.

"Will you be good?" she asked.

"No," Drusilla got out in between peculiar hulking noises. Servalan couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying.

She let go, walked back to her little throne and sat down.

"Crawl to me," she said. Drusilla looked at her, head twisted over her shoulder. Awkwardly, she got her body inside the railing and started walking on her knees towards Servalan.

Servalan decided to let it pass as crawling. She pulled her dress up, bunched it around her waist. She was naked under it. She scooted forward so her crotch was at the edge of the seat, and spread her legs. The gently moving warm air caressed the tender skin on the insides of her thighs, and she couldn't resist the temptation to touch herself there, drag her fingertips over numerous half-healed puncture wounds.

Drusilla's gaze was glued at Servalan's lower body. She licked her lips, a small gesture Servalan was sure the vampire didn't know she'd made.

"Lick first, dear," she said. "No eating until I tell you."

Drusilla smiled, a smile that sent a shiver down Servalan's spine even though she'd seen it scores of times now. She closed her eyes, and let out a sigh of content pleasure as the vampire's cool tongue reached her waiting sex. She hadn't managed to get her to tell how or when, but at some point in her long unlife Drusilla had learned to eat pussy remarkably well. Servalan leaned back, put her hands on the back of Drusilla's head and pulled her in harder.

Not having to breathe might have something to do with it, and that was the last coherent thought that passed through Servalan's mind for some time. She tried to not let the pleasure build to quickly, tried to coast on it and keep it for as long as possible. But eventually she felt herself start the steep climb up towards orgasm.

"Now," she whispered.

Sharp teeth slid deep into her thigh, touching her femoral artery. As blood started to pour out of her she felt the familiar ecstasy of the vampire's bite add to the sexual pleasure and she came, hard and fast and long and blindingly. After an eternity of instants, as she felt her consciousness failing, she pushed Drusilla away with the last of her strength.

Her last thoughts before darkness engulfed her was that sometime, some day, she'd be too late and she'd die.

But what a way to go.

The car was a deep shiny red, and it reached Ivanova almost to the waist. It was as exactly as wide as it could be and still be usable on MegaTokyo's streets. The wheels were nearly as high as the car, and their sides were covered by tough but lightweight armorplate.

It had no windows of any kind, yet she'd been assured that the visibility was excellent. Microscopic cameras were implanted in the car's surface, and the images from them were projected on screens on the inside. Or directly into the driver's brain, should she be equipped with a direct neural interface.

The top speed was something only a lunatic would use inside the city, even with a neural. It went from standing still to illegal fast enough that an optional extra was liquid-cocoon acceleration couches for driver and passenger. It had tubes for six solid-fuel rockets. It had dual machine guns covering 45-degree arcs in the front and back of the car, and room for 6000 rounds of caseless ammunition, all of which could be spent in under four seconds.

It was the coolest car Ivanova had ever seen.

"*This* is what they gave us?" Jenna sounded incredulous.

"Yup," Ivanova said. "Almost makes me wonder what they would've given us if I'd asked for something fancy."

"It's pretty heavily armed for a family car."

"I got the impression that this is a pretty nasty place."

Jenna crossed her arms over her chest.

"You never take me anywhere nice," she said, doing her best to sound like a slighted lady.

Ivanova put her hands on her hips and looked sideways at Jenna.

"Well," she said. "Maybe I would if you'd put out more often."

Jenna's eyebrows rose. "If I? *You're* the one who insisted that you needed to sleep!" "Busted," Ivanova smiled. "Shall we take this thing for a spin?"

She put her hand on a hidden sensor plate and a part of the side swung open. She got into the driver's seat and opened the passenger door for Jenna.

The car was standing in a garage under the local LAF branch library. It was a dull room, with bare concrete walls and oil stains all over the floor. A few other, less extreme, cars were parked in it, but no other people could be seen. A light fixture above blinked on and off in an irregular pattern.

Ivanova could see every detail of it on the screens in the car. Busy checking out the controls and displays, she felt more than she saw Jenna get into the seat beside her.

"Seems I'm the gunner," Jenna said after a little while.

"Seems like. You ready to go?"

Without really waiting for response, Ivanova started the engine. It made a sound that was more of a high-pitched whine than the roar she'd expected. After a few seconds, all checklights had gone from amber to green. She moved her fingers slightly, seeing immediate feedback projected on the display in front of her. As a test, she asked the on-board system to plot a maximally fast course out of the garage.

"Here we go," she said. She signaled the garage doors two levels higher up to start opening and activated the projected course. The engine noise rose an octave in tone and a hundred decibel in volume. The car screamed forward, leaving black marks behind on the concrete. Acceleration pushed Ivanova back like a neutronium blanket. There was no chance for her to control the car, human reflexes were much too slow for the speed the car held after the first two bends in the way up. She concentrated on understanding what was going on, and learning how the car handled.

A few seconds later, they roared out under a garage door that had just about opened enough that they could get under it.

Once outside, the car braked and stopped at the side of the road.

"End of program, I think," Ivanova said.

"Next time, warn me first, ok?" Jenna said. "Preferably early enough that I get time to buy and put on a much more supportive bra."

"Sorry," Ivanova said. "I didn't realize it could accelerate like that. I've done gentler takeoffs in fighter spacecraft."

She looked around. It was day, but with the leaden gray sky and canyon-like streets it didn't make much difference from how it had looked last night. Huge buildings, many neon lights. Most things dirty, many broken. Occasional traces of weapons fire.

"So, where do we go now?" she said. "The city is huge, and I don't think either Gabby or Faith are going to advertise their whereabouts."

"They might, in an unintentional unusually-good-fighter sort of way. And it seems that the car has a computer network uplink, so I could scan for news items that way while you drive around and see what you can spot in the real world."

"Works for me."

"And drive carefully, please. We want to find news, not *be* news!"

In an instant, the car became totally silent. Faith just stared, quite unable to take in the presence of the girl in front of her.

There was a dry giggle behind her. "You must be the girl Faith ran away from," Priss said. "Although I think she neglected to say that you're gorgeous."

"Thank you," Gabrielle said. "I think you have the advantage of me here."

Priss raised her glass and saluted Gabrielle. "I'm Priss," she said. "I've been your girlfriend's drinking partner, and I've tried to beat some sense into her."

Gabrielle looked at Faith. "Did you succeed?" she asked.

"Well," Priss said, "*she* just tried to beat some sense into *me*, so I think something got through."

Slowly, Gabrielle walked forward until she was very close to Faith. She gently stroked her cheek. "Why did you leave?" she whispered.

"I...," Faith said.

"Because she's *stupid*," Priss said and threw an empty bottle at Faith's ass. "That's why."

"I'm sorry," Faith said. "I didn't mean... I was just about to try and find you again."

"That would be the beating sense into part?"

Faith looked away, ashamed. "Yeah," she said.

Gabrielle stepped away from her and sat down across the table from Priss. "Hi, I'm Gabrielle," she said and offered her hand.

"Yeah, I know," Priss said as she took it.

"I guess I owe you a favor," Gabrielle said.

"Nah. Stupid there just returned it." She gestured towards her eye, which was in the process of swelling shut.

"I think I can see why you two got along."

Priss glanced up towards Faith, who had turned towards them and looked completely lost.

"I'll get some drinks," Priss said. "I hope you like beer, because that's all they have here that doesn't suck."

"It'll do."

"Good." She rose and headed for the bar. "The usual?" she asked as she passed Faith, getting a brief nod in reply.

Faith pulled up a chair next to Gabrielle's and sat down. "You came all the way here for me?" she said.

Gabrielle smiled. "Yeah," she said. "I know, I have no right to bother you. It's not like we were really together or anything. I... just want to know why. I thought we had something, and then you just left."

"This is not even your world," Faith said.

"No."

"And you're not here on a mission or anything."

"I made one up in order to get transport here, but... no. I'm not here on a mission. I'm probably in for one hell of a time once I get back."

"You're just here for me."

"Just for you."

"Fuck," Faith said and turned away.

The ordinary bar noise had returned once it became obvious that nothing violent was going to happen. Someone had turned a display to a news channel, and an announcer was reading out a long list of battles that had been fought in the city during the last twelve hours.

As usual, the A.D. Police had had their asses kicked.

"Here you are," Priss said and put two glasses of beer and one glass of Coke down on the table. She sat down and looked at the other two.

"So, are you going to drag Faith out of here right away?" she asked.

"I hadn't planned further than a few minutes ago," Gabrielle said. "Why?"

"Faith had just offered to help me try to heal an old friend," Priss said.

"This friend, is she evil?"

"What kind of question is that?" Faith said.

"Sorry," Gabrielle said. "Old habit. Of course I won't try to pull Faith away from that. If you don't mind, I'll join you."

"Fine with me," Priss said. "Faith?"

Faith shrugged. "Sure," she said.

"Well, then," Priss said and raised her glass. "To us."

Faith and Gabrielle raised their glasses. They looked at each other.

"To us," Gabrielle said.

Drusilla screamed in pain and fell to her knees, clutching her head.

On her throne, Servalan picked a grape from the bowl at the small table that had appeared some while ago. Nothing else had changed. They were still on the terrace. It was still night.

"What do you see, dear?" she said.

"They are coming," Drusilla said. "I can see them. Traipsing through the night like fairies."

"Coming where? And when?"

"They're coming to see us. They're coming for a party. With dancing, and tea, and tiny little cakes that smell like almonds."

"You can't take that seriously," Callisto said from the entrance to the building. "The woman's insane. She's hallucinating."

Servalan had another grape. "Ah, Callisto," she said. "We haven't seen you for a few days. How have you been?"

Callisto walked around so she could see Servalan's face. "This is a very peculiar house," she said. "It moves when you don't look. I don't think it likes us very much."

"Drusilla is a perfectly genuine seer," Servalan said. "We should listen to what she says. It may be hard to understand, but it isn't wrong."

The vampire got up from the stone floor. "I want to dance," she said. "Does anyone want to dance with me?"

Callisto gave her a disdainful look.

"Certainly, dear," Servalan said. "But to dance, we need music." She got up from the throne and embraced the vampire.

Drusilla smiled. "The birds will sing for us," she said. "That will be our music."

"They're *bats*," Callisto said. "Not birds. Bats." She pulled her sword from the scabbard on her back, sliced through the air. Something small and black fell down into Callisto's waiting left hand. She held it out towards Drusilla.

"Look," she said. "It's got *fur*, not feathers. It's a bat, *not* a bird."

Drusilla let go of Servalan and clasped her hands to her bosom.

"It's *beautiful*," she breathed. "Can I have it?"

She took the bloody little bundle from Callisto's hand without waiting for a reply. "Hello, little birdie," she said. "You will sing for me and I will love you *forever*."

Servalan put her arm around Drusilla's waist. "Come on, dear," she said. "I'll sing for us, so we can dance."

She started to sing, in a surprisingly good voice. The words were nonsense, the sort of meaningless lullaby one might sing to a very young child.

Drusilla let the dead bat fall to the floor and put her hands around Servalan, leaving bloody handprints on her white dress. She leaned her head on Servalan's, closed her eyes and swayed gently from side to side. Slowly, the two danced around the terrace to Servalan's song.

The bed looked much too large for the girl lying in it. She looked tiny compared to the three women who had just entered the room, although it was hard to judge while she was lying down. Her hair was bright red, and she seemed to be no more than twenty years old. The bed was more or less a mattress surrounded by medical machinery, machinery that for the most part connected to the girl through tubes and cables.

"Her name is Nene," Priss said. "She was our communications and computers girl."

They were on the twenty-fourth floor of a huge concrete block that looked far more like a warehouse than a hospital, which in a sense it also was. The patients in here were exclusively of the kind that wasn't ever expected to come out again, and who couldn't afford or wouldn't notice a proper resort.

Nene's eyes were moving under their closed lids, as if she was dreaming. She breathed regularly and without help, and there were relatively few things connected to her. As far as Gabrielle could tell by looking, there was nothing wrong with her.

"Looks like she might wake up at any moment," Faith said. "Brain damage?"

Priss shook her head. "As far as I know, there's nothing physically wrong with her at all. It's just her mind that's stuck in some sort of endless loop. If you look at her eyes for a while you can see their movements repeat."

Gabrielle had already noticed that. About every fifty heartbeats, Nene's eyes made the exact same movements. It unnerved her more than she would've guessed if someone had told her about it. It was such a small thing, yet so very wrong.

She looked out the window. Predictably, the view wasn't much. Mostly one saw a large piece of city that had been badly demolished and never repaired, and beyond that a thin slice of ocean between the ruins and the sky. "So, what are we waiting for?" she said.

"Nothing," Priss mumbled. "You got the VR rig?"

Faith took something that looked a lot like a jeweled hair net with a pair of sunglasses stuck in it from a pocket in her jacket. "Here," she said and handed it over.

Priss leaned over the girl in the bed and put the glasses on. "I think it's about time you called your friend," she said as she started to fasten the jewel-like electrodes to Nene's scalp.

"I guess." Faith took a phone from another pocket, dialed a number.

"It's Faith," she said. "Let me speak to Guardian."

Gabrielle looked out the window again. In the distance, towards the ocean, the lower edges of the clouds were breaking up into rain. Strange vehicles flew through the air, and for a few moments she saw the staccato reflections of machine-gun muzzle-flashes on a broken wall.

"Yeah, we're here now," Faith said behind her. "How do we connect you?"

Mirrored in the window, she saw Priss gently stroke her friend's face, longing visible in her face.

"Right, I see it. Small black box with lots of sockets on the front."

Faith took a thin black cable that hung from the not-sunglasses covering Nene's eyes and connected it to a machine at the head of the bed.

"That enough?" she said to the phone. "Right. We'll just wait then."

Gabrielle and Priss both turned their heads to look at Faith.

"So we wait," Faith said. "One of these machines wouldn't happen to be a TV, would it?"

"Yeah, that's the girl that left with Faith and Priss," the waitress said. "Kinda cute, if you ask me."

Both the clientele and the decoration in the bar reminded Ivanova of the dumps down in Downbelow on Balyon 5. Not a place for meeting people, just somewhere where you didn't have to be alone by yourself while you drank yourself into oblivion. Which, from what the waitress -- Maria -- had been telling them was exactly what Faith had been doing the past few months.

"You wouldn't happen to know where they went?" Jenna said, her fingers playing with a currency chip.

Maria eyed the chip. "Sorry, love," she said. "I only heard them say they were going to visit a sick friend of Priss'. I didn't even know she *had* friends."

"Really?" Ivanova said. "She doesn't sound like too bad a sort."

"Oh, I'm not saying that she was," Maria said. She put a glass of something yellow, foaming and mostly transparent in front of Ivanova.

"It's just that she pushed people away, if you know what I mean?" she went on. "Not nasty or anything, just... nothing. Like talking to a wall. Just enough not to be too impolite, and not a syllable more."

Ivanova lifted the glass and smelled it. It *could* be beer of some kind. She decided not to risk it, and put the glass down again.

"So how'd she hook up with Faith?"

Jenna hadn't even touched her glass, Ivanova noticed. That probably wasn't a coincidence. The blonde ex-smuggler was a lot better than she was at the whole digging through shady bars for information thing. Maybe the beer was some sort of decoy. Get served the worst elk-piss the bar has, pay for premium stuff, waitress pockets the difference.

"Well, they were pretty much the same, weren't they? They'd sit over in the corner, being surly together."

When she looked closer, she noticed that the glass wasn't very clean. No matter if it was meant for drinking or not, she wasn't going to.

"Do you know where Priss used to hang out when she wasn't here?" she said.

"Another round?" Maria asked.

"Sure," Jenna said and handed over the currency chip. Moments later two more glasses of elk-piss appeared in front of them.

"Starscape Cafe, the place where Faith works," Maria said. "Priss sings there at least a couple of nights a week. Pretty good, I'm told."

"Thanks," Jenna said. "Let's go there," she continued as soon as the waitress was out of earshot. "Maybe someone there knows more about this sick friend of Priss'."

"I don't have to finish these, do I?" Ivanova asked, indicating the glasses.

"No!" Jenna said. "Are you crazy? That stuff would probably give you dysentery."

Ivanova got up from her seat. "I probably shouldn't drink and fly anyway," she said. "There so much *stuff* in the way when you're flying down here. Space is easier."

"Driving," Jenna said. "You're *driving*, not flying."

"Whatever."

"How long is going to take?" Gabrielle asked.

"I don't know," Faith said. "Guardian didn't say. I could try to ask it, if you want."

"No, that's all right. Asking won't make it go any faster anyway."

The rain had kept coming closer, and was now beating at the window, obscuring the view entirely. Which was a change for the better, as far as Gabrielle was concerned. Priss had moved some wires and a box about, and pictures and sound had appeared on the box. Not a proper terminal, she'd said, but as good as they could do right there and right then. It showed some kind of game show, where people got asked things and if they answered wrong they got punished. The more questions they got right, the larger the prize money and the harsher the punishment. For the past couple of hours, they'd been announcing that today someone would try to answer a question that would lead to death or riches.

Gabrielle found it sick, but strangely compelling. She couldn't stop watching as contestants got electric shocks and had body parts cut off. Supposedly, they were volunteers.

"You shouldn't have come here," Faith said in a soft voice behind her.

"I'll leave again if you don't want me here," she replied. She wasn't surprised, she'd known when she set out that Faith might not want her.

"No!" Faith said. "That's not what I meant. I mean, you shouldn't have had to come here. It's not a place for you. You should be somewhere nice."

She turned around so she was facing Faith. "In your arms will be nice enough for me," she said.

Faith smiled and shook her head. "I just don't get you," she said.

"You'll learn," Gabrielle said. "Do you want to stay in this world?"

"Not really. It was just a place to go. If you want to go somewhere else, I'll come along. If you want me to."

"Good. Because I pretty much have to live on mainline, as long as I'm in the LAF."

"Yeah. Them. I suspect they may be mite pissed off at me. With the raiding the compound and stealing that book and all."

"Nah," Gabrielle said. "That's fine. You were working on an evil henchperson contract. It's Servalan we want to nail. I'm pretty sure you could join the LAF, if you wanted."

She smiled. "You certainly wouldn't have any problems finding a sponsor in the Force," she said.

Faith looked at the rain-streaked window. "I'll think about it," she said.

There was an audible groan from the bed.

"Nene?!" Priss said, standing up so fast she pushed over her chair.

"Priss?" the girl in the bed said, her voice weak and hoarse from lack of use.

"Yes," Priss said. "It's me."

She sounded like she was an inch away from crying.

"Where am I? I feel strange."

Gabrielle and Faith looked at the two women, their own problems temporarily forgotten. Nene had taken off the VR set and looked around, obviously confused.

"You're in a hospital," Priss said. "You were badly hurt. You've been here for a long time."

Faith picked up the phone and disconnected the VR set. "She all right?" she said into it. "Ok... We'll do that... I'll get back to you when we're somewhere safe."

"I'm very sleepy," Nene said. Her eyes closed, and she appeared to fall asleep almost instantly.

"No," Faith said as Priss reached forward to wake her up. "Guardian says to let her sleep for a couple of hours. It's implanted dreams that will help her stabilize. When she wakes up, we should take her somewhere that's familiar to her, if possible."

"Most of those places are destroyed," Priss said. She took Nene's hand, held it in both of her own.

"But not all?"

Priss hesitated. "No, not quite all," she said. "The old truck with our hardsuits is still standing in the back of the ruins of Doctor Raven's garage."

"Yeah, well," Faith said. "Do you want her to get well or not?"

There was a gasp from Gabrielle.

"I do," Priss said. "Me going there might draw attention from old enemies, if they're still watching. Wouldn't put it past the patient fuckers..."

"Um, guys?" Gabrielle said.

Faith turned to her. "Yeah?" she asked.

Gabrielle pointed at the video terminal, were the gameshow had momentarily been replaced with news. A press conference was on, with a bunch of people sitting at a podium being questioned by members of the press. The central individual was a strange-looking woman, with prominent bone ridges over her eyes and pointed ears. Faith turned the sound up.

"...as Professor Jha'dur just said, she will be assisting both our genetics and cybernetics divisions in their research. Her input has already proven invaluable to us, and our customers can look forward to significantly improved models of their favourite cy-

berwear within the next few months. GENOM considers itself very lucky to have been able to secure the services of such a brilliant scientist. Next question. Yes, you there from Hokkaido Star?"..."

"Behind the weird-looking one," Gabrielle said. "The blonde woman with the sword sticking up over her shoulder. It's Najara. She's from my world. She used to have a really bad crush on me. She's... not too stable, mentally. And most of all, she shouldn't be here. At all."

"It's a night club! Of course it's only open at night!"

"Well excuse me! We didn't *have* that sort of place in my world!"

Ivanova and Jenna were sitting in a not particularly pleasant diner across the street from Starscape. They'd been sitting there for over an hour, drinking just enough coffee to keep the old woman behind the counter pleased enough to let them stay.

Ivanova looked incredulously at Jenna. "You didn't have nightclubs?" she said.

"I come from a *really* repressive dictatorship, ok? To find a casino, you had to go way off into interstellar space. Which was pretty much only possible for military types and criminals."

"All right," Ivanova said. "I forgive you. What do we do until it opens?"

Jenna looked around. The place was dirty. The overall style was plastic and neon. It smelled of old frying grease. A news terminal played soundlessly in a corner.

"Sit around and drink coffee?" she said.

"I'm not sure this *is* coffee," Ivanova said, glowering at her cup. "Let's try something else."

"Like what?"

"Don't know."

Silence fell. Ivanova looked out the window at the people passing in the street. Overall, it was a pretty sad bunch of humans. Badly dressed, either because of poverty or bad taste. Most of them looked sick, even the big and muscular ones. Mechanical augmentation seemed to be fairly common.

"Look at that," Jenna said from across the table, looking at the news terminal. "They sure have some freakish people in this place."

Ivanova turned her head, looked and froze.

"She's not from this place," she said. "That's Deathwalker. She's from *my* world."

Najara closed the door to the elevator hall in the huge apartment she and Jha'dur shared. It consisted of most of the four hundred and fourth floor of the GENOM Tokyo Tower, high enough that they were above the polluted clouds that constantly covered Mega-Tokyo. It was a beautiful apartment, furnished in a meticulously designed way that took the maximum advantage of the sunlight coming in through the floor-to-ceiling armored-glass windows. Everything went well with everything else, and one didn't dare move a chair for fear of spoiling the effect.

"I wish you'd told me we'd be here for a few more months," she said. "I could have used the time to set up a hospice. This place badly needs to be brought to the Light."

Jha'dur took off her heavy parka and hung it in a closet.

"I want you to contact Servalan," she said. "Arrange for the first deliveries tonight."

"I thought you said that things weren't going to be finished for a few months?"

Jha'dur walked over to the bar and poured herself a drink.

"The trinkets for the natives won't be," she said. "Our stuff has been in production for two weeks now, and the first batch is ready to be delivered to our employer. I'm quite looking forward to trying them out."

Najara sat down on the edge of a pastel designed couch.

"I see," she said. "I wish you'd told me."

Jha'dur remained standing. "It's elementary security protocol," she said. "What you don't know, you can't reveal, and you didn't need to know. Now you do, and now I'm telling you."

"I see," Najara said. "I guess that makes sense. I'll just go message Servalan, then."

She got up from the couch and headed for the door, not looking too happy. With her hand on the doorknob, she stopped.

"Do I need to know how big our stuff is, and how it's to be transported?" she asked.

"They're roughly human-sized," Jha'dur said. "And they'll be walking by themselves."

"It didn't use to be this bad," Nene said, looking out the window of the rented car. "It used to be pretty bad, but it was our kind of bad. Not this."

Gabrielle looked out as well. She still wasn't used to cityscapes, so she couldn't really tell the difference between one kind of bad and another. It all just looked broken and messy to her. Not unlike a village after a warlord had raided it, actually. Which might not be entirely unlike what had happened.

She and Nene were waiting outside a ruin that Priss claimed had once been a garage. The front part of it had collapsed entirely, and she could see parts of machinery crushed under heavy blocks of concrete. It looked like everything that could be removed from the machinery had been, and not by skilled hands.

"How long did they say they'd be?" Nene asked.

"Long enough to find the truck, start it up and get it out. And frankly I don't really see how they're going to get it out at all through all that rubble."

"It's a special kind of truck," Nene said. "Priss'll get it out. She's a special kind of girl, too."

Nene had bounced back quite well from her coma. She didn't remember any of it, she said, apart from a kind of dream about geometric shapes. She still felt weak, and a bit lost and far from home because of the sudden jump a few years into the future, but all in all she was fine.

"Do you think she's interested in Faith?" Nene said.

"I hope not," Gabrielle said. "But I don't really know."

There was a roar from somewhere inside the ex-garage pile of rubble, like a huge wounded animal had suddenly woken up. It sounded more like the things that occasionally flew through the sky than like the things they'd met on the highways.

"What in the name of the gods was that?" Gabrielle said.

"The truck," Nene replied. "Sylia and Dr Raven built it to be used in combat."

The rubble moved. Pushed from behind, it was lifted up and then fell down, and finally swept aside by a thick metal plate haphazardly stuck to the front of a large red vehicle. It moved forward, slowly but inexorably, sweeping the ruins of the garage aside. Once it reached clear space, the metal plate fell down and its headlights lit up the street.

"Great, it works!" Nene said. "Come on, let's get in!"

She jumped out of the car and ran up to the side of the truck, waving happily at it. Gabrielle followed, a lot more cautiously.

The headlights went out and the engine fell silent. A moment later, the driver-side door opened and Priss jumped out.

"The paintjob's fucked," she said, "but otherwise it's fine. The reactor should get a looking-over sometime soonish, and the comm suit probably needs upgrading bad, but all in all it's in pretty good shape."

"Where's Faith?" Gabrielle asked.

"Inside," Priss said, gesturing towards the back. "Told her to try on a hardsuit. Sylia's old one should fit her quite well. And you should be able to use Linna's."

"And we'll use ours," Nene said. "So the Knight Sabers rise again."

"Yeah," Priss said. "I guess they do."

"My legs are too fat!"

Gabrielle tried in vain to get the legs of her hardsuit to close. She was standing in front of one of the four hardsuit stations inside the truck. Faith was kneeling in front of her, helping her fit the suit. Linna had been quite a bit slimmer than she was, so it took some work.

"Don't be silly," Faith said. "You've got *muscles* in them, girl. Just enough fat on them to be nicely soft and curvy. Here, let me adjust the suit a bit."

She connected a battery to a handful of spots inside the suit and fiddled with the machinery in its legs. Gabrielle felt things move, shaping themselves to her legs. She also felt Faith's hands move up her bare legs, caressing them.

"Is that really part of the adjusting?" she asked.

"Well, I gotta make sure it doesn't pinch," Faith said. "What would people think if you ended up all bruised?"

"Ah," Gabrielle said. "So it wouldn't be that you just like feeling me up?"

Faith grinned and moved her hands all the way up to where a pair of panties covered Gabrielle's crotch. "Got me," she said. "Do you mind?"

There was an edge of worry in her voice.

Gabrielle bent down, grabbed Faith by the front of her shirt, pulled her up so their faces met and kissed her.

"Answer enough?" she breathed when their mouths finally separated.

"If I say yes, can I have some more?"

A girlish giggle came from Nene, sitting at the comms console further down the truck. Supposedly, she was upgrading the truck's software.

Priss, still further down the truck, looked up from where she was disassembling her hardsuit's railgun when she heard the giggle.

"Faith!" she shouted. "You're supposed to get her *into* that hardsuit, not out of her clothes!"

Faith blushed and let go.

"Aww," Nene said. "Can't we let them go on? They're so cute."

"I'll happily watch them fuck," Priss said, "but first I want us combat-ready. If they were watching the garage, they'll be coming for us soon, and we'd better be ready to defend ourselves. None of us will be cute if we're blown to bits."

"She's right," Gabrielle said. "Let's finish this and go somewhere private."

Faith nodded and returned her attention to the adjusting of the pale green power armor.

"So are all four of these suits the same, apart from the colors?" Gabrielle asked.

"No," Faith said. "Yours is the fastest and most maneuverable, but also the most lightly armed and armored. You'd better try not to get hit. You've also got these whip-like thingies that can supposedly cut through just about anything. Priss' suit is the opposite of yours, slow but heavily armed and armored. She'll spearhead assaults, and she's got the best ranged weapons. Nene's suit is optimized for comm and ECM, so she tries to stay well back from the actual fighting. Hopefully, she can disrupt the opposition's coordination and tell us where to concentrate our attacks. Purely by virtue of being the tallest, I've got Sylia's old suit. It's the C&C one, so I get status displays from the other suits and I can remote-control the truck. It's also got some other weird shit that I have no idea what it is, and neither does Priss. Apparently Sylia didn't always tell the others everything she knew. And her tits were smaller than mine. Try the arms now."

Gabrielle slid her arms into the suit's sleeves. They fit well, and after a few minor adjustments she could hardly feel that she had the suit on at all.

"Feels great," she said.

"Good. Let's try to close it all up, then. Lean your head back to make contact with the helmet, then just concentrate on it closing. It should pick up on your thoughts and obey automatically."

She did as Faith said, and the suit closed around her. She expected it to be claustrophobic, but soon found that it wasn't. As soon as the suit closed off her normal senses, it spliced in its own artificial ones through the VR rig in the helmet. Instead of being locked into a woman-shaped tin can, she found herself with vastly improved vision, hearing and smell. Lots of information appeared to her, visually and otherwise. Temperatures, electromagnetics, predicted motion vectors, relative locations of the other suits.

"Hey, this is cool," she said. "Can I try to move?"

"A bit, if you're careful," Faith said, and a stress analysis diagram of her voice appeared in the lower left of Gabrielle's visual field. "No jumping, or you'll dent the ceiling."

"Just try moving a little, to make sure it's aligned correctly," Priss said. "We'll make a full test of all the suits later."

Gabrielle took a few careful steps, moved her arms about a little. She still couldn't tell the difference from when she didn't have the suit on, so she assumed that it had aligned correctly.

"How do I get this thing off?" she asked, and by the time she got to the end of the sentence it was already opening up.

Faith smiled. "Disconcerting, isn't it?" she said.

Judging from how dark MegaTokyo looked in the middle of the day, one might have assumed that it wouldn't be much different at night. If so, one would have been wrong. At night, the sky darkened and the streets and buildings lit up. Different kinds of people started moving about, and the sounds of fighting mostly changed from air-to-surface missiles to gunfire.

Ivanova stopped the car a couple of kilometers from the GENOM tower. The thing was huge, several kilometers wide at the base and at least two high. It vanished up through the clouds, some sort of effect keeping the air clear near it so one could watch it go up and up into the night.

Jenna looked up at it.

"So this Deathwalker is in there somewhere, you say?", she said. "How long do you think it'll take to find her?"

"I had no idea it was this big," Ivanova said. "I didn't know a building on a planet could *be* this big."

"So, basically, you're saying that the charge in with guns blazing option is pretty much out?"

"Pretty much."

"Sneaking, then."

"We suck at sneaking," Ivanova said. "You know that."

"I know," Jenna said. "Do you have a better idea?"

"I thought we might drive up to the entrance and ask to see Jha'dur."

Jenna thought about it for a while.

"Should we tell them who we are?" she asked.

"Why not? It'd almost certainly make Deathwalker interested."

Jenna thought about it some more.

"How do we get out afterwards?" she said.

"A house this big must have a library somewhere," Ivanova replied.

"Susan?"

"Yes, my sweet?"

"We have a plan."

Ivanova smiled. "Great," she said. "So let's go."

"Wait!" Jenna put her hand on Ivanova's, preventing her from starting the car.

"There's one question left to settle."

Ivanova looked confused. "What question?"

"Sunglasses or no sunglasses."

"Ah. That question." She looked at Jenna. "It's night," she said.

Jenna looked back at Ivanova.

"Sunglasses," they said in unison.

Faith drove the truck at a leisurely speed along MegaTokyo's highways, circling the GENOM tower at a respectful distance. She was in her hardsuit, as was the three women in the back of the truck. They'd spent a few hours getting used to them, mostly just moving about in an abandoned warehouse. Gabrielle had taken to it like a fish to water, and after just a few minutes she was giving Priss a run for her money.

Faith hadn't had it so easy. The suit wasn't made for someone with a Slayer's speed and strength, and occasionally she felt like the hardsuit was obstructing her more than it helped. Sure, it made her stronger -- much stronger -- and fairly bulletproof, but she couldn't move like she was used to. She'd probably get used to it eventually, but for the moment they'd decided that she should hang back and help protect Nene.

"Anything yet?" she asked, using the inter-suit comm channel.

"Most of my old backdoors are gone," Nene said. "But I'm getting something. There's an apartment at floor 404 that's assigned to one Jha'dur and bodyguard, which should be them. Jha'dur is also assigned an underground laboratory, which may be tricky for us to get to."

"Something on the four hundredth floor *won't* be hard to get to?!"

"Of course not, we've got the motorslaves."

"The what?" Gabrielle chimed in.

"Motorslaves..." Priss said. "Transforming flight-capable small mecha. Er, think of them as heavily armed robots that can fly. Faith can control them from her hardsuit. They can carry us to the 404th floor, no problem."

Faith could almost hear Gabrielle's smile. "You have such things in this world," she heard her say.

"Well, we need them," Priss said.

"Yay, security camera!" Nene said. "They're in their apartment, and the bodyguard is your girl all right."

"So, like, do we go waste them now?" Faith asked. "Gabby?"

There came a sigh from Gabrielle. "Yes, we go waste them now," she said. "Although, if an opportunity to get them alive appears, please take it."

"So you can question them?" Priss asked.

"That too. But mainly I just don't like unnecessary killing."

"You're *so* not from around here."

"Hey, people!" Faith said. "Off-ramp coming up. Do I take it?"

It was closing in on midnight, which didn't do much for the traffic situation. The highway was still more or less full of cars. Not that she had to care all that much about them, they tended to give way for a huge armored truck cruising along at over 200 kilometer per hour.

"Take it," Nene said. "Then go right, and we'll take off from the top of the hill a few kilometers on. It should take us long enough to get there to deploy the motorslaves."

"Gotcha," Faith said. She turned left onto the offramp without signaling or checking for other cars. Not only was she driving a big-ass truck, she was driving an armored, fusion-powered big-ass truck.

Ivanova drove up onto one of the bridges leading into the GENOM tower and stopped at the checkpoint. It was quite heavily armored, and she could see mecha and gun nests nearby.

"Yes?" a voice said on the radio.

"Er, hi," Ivanova said. "Could you please tell your guest researcher Jha'dur that Commander Susan Ivanova of Earthforce would like to see her?"

"Earthforce? Never heard of it."

"No surprise there. Jha'dur knows of it, though. We've met before."

"I'll notify her. Please drive into the waiting area to your left and wait for further instructions. Thank you."

She slowly and carefully inched the car into the indicated space. It was a small area, about big enough for four cars to wait in. It was surrounded on all sides except up by heavy concrete walls, and the way in was through a typical blast-dampening corridor. Looking up, she could see several rocket launchers aimed straight at them.

"Somehow, I get the impression they don't really like unannounced visitors," Jenna said.

"You could be right," Ivanova said. "So what do we do now?"

"Wait and see if they let us in?"

"I guess."

Silence fell inside the car. Nothing much could be seen, except for the occasional flying vehicle passing above and the muzzles of the rocket launchers.

"Mind if I turn on the radio?" Jenna said.

"Not a bit."

She did, and music came through the speakers. It was rhythmic, bland, and probably meticulously engineered to appeal to as many as possible while being so forgettable that they could more or less recycle it a month later. Still, it was better than the silence.

"So, if you didn't have nightclubs," Ivanova said, "did you have music?"

"Pretty much not," Jenna said. "There was a bit of fascistic anthem and a minor amount of patriotic singing, but no more. It was a grim place."

"Certainly sounds like it. Maybe we should apply for vacation and go there to stir things up."

"Not really necessary. We did a fair amount of that once I met Blake. Not to mention the intergalactic war. Not to disparage your talents, dear, but in the mess-creating department you really can't compete with an alien invasion from the Andromeda galaxy."

"Maybe if I had a really good day?"

"...and that was the first hour of our four hours of non-stop music," an annoying voice on the radio said. "Stay tuned for a bit of news and rumours..."

Ivanova looked at where she thought the radio ought to be. "If its non-stop music, why are you talking?" she said.

"You know that oh-so-fab researcher GENOM has been touting the past few weeks?" another voice on the radio said. "The rumour is that she's not human! An unnamed source inside GENOM claims that she doesn't eat normal food, and that her skeleton is something really way out. If she's a new kind of boomer or a space alien, our source doesn't want to say."

Jenna looked at Ivanova as well as she could in the cramped interior of the car.

"Want to call them up and say?" she asked.

"Probably not a good idea," Ivanova replied.

"Our second bit of rumour also concerns GENOM," the announcer went on. "You remember those battlesuit-clad babes from a few years ago, the Knight Sabers? Apparently they're back! We've had no less than *five* reports tonight about them being seen down in the old ruins. So, look out, GENOM, the old avengers are coming back to kick your asses!"

"Coincidence?" Ivanova asked.

"Of course," Jenna said. "It's probably not even true."

"Commander Ivanova?" the radio said in the guard's voice.

"Yes?" Ivanova said.

"Professor Jha'dur agrees to see you. You may proceed into the tower, following the guide signals. Visitor's badges will be waiting at your assigned parking space, and they will guide you the rest of the way. Have a nice visit to GENOM."

Without a further word, the two attack librarians backed out of the waiting area and drove into the brightly lit tower.

The side of the truck opened, and Gabrielle could suddenly see the road's surface less than a meter below where she hung from the motorslave. She knew that she was well armored, but it still felt like an awfully high speed to be exposed to.

"Are you sure this will work?" she said. "As far as I know, Faith's never flown this kind of thing before."

"She's got a point, Priss," Faith said. "You sure I'll be able to control these things? And four of them at once?"

"Oh, don't worry," Nene said. "You've got more than enough guidance support from the motorslaves' onboard systems. They're nearly impossible to crash unless they get shot. As long as you've got halfways decent reflexes and coordination you should be fine."

"And, like," Priss said, "your reflexes and coordination are way better than halfways decent. More like supernatural."

It felt weird to have three people chattering away inside her helmet like that.

"Actually," Faith said, "supernatural is exactly what they are. So, anyway, here we go. Gabby, Priss, you ready to drop?"

"Ready."

"Sure."

With a roar and a sudden acceleration that felt like a kick in her ass, the motorslave disengaged from the truck and took off. For a fraction of a second, they fell towards the road, then they soared away upwards. About twenty meters above and forward of the truck they stabilized, keeping even with it. Off to her right, she saw Priss in her blue hardsuit hanging under her own motorslave. Below, on the road, she saw cars veer away and choose other roads, avoiding what they suspected would soon become a battle zone. Experienced MegaTokyo citizens.

"Nene, you ready?"

Faith's voice still came through loud and clear, not in the least affected by the distance or the roar from the motorslave's rocket engines.

"Yes!" Nene said, and two more big vaguely humanoid things shot away from the truck, balancing on brilliant spears of flame. They took up station behind herself and Priss, forming the rear two corners in a square. The truck closed up and slowed down, about to keep circling the tower on autopilot.

They hovered for a few seconds. Gabrielle assumed that Faith needed the time to get used to the feeling, to orient herself.

"Ok, here we go," Faith said. "Estimated twenty-two seconds to impact."

A gentler acceleration this time, although longer. They swept forward over buildings and roads, another four strange things in the MegaTokyo sky. They went up and forward, and after only a few seconds they were over the furthest outreaches of the GENOM tower's base. Small vibrations came through her suit as the motorslave above her extended its cannons.

"We're going in close to the tower, to avoid close-defense fire. Shortly before we reach the target floor, we'll increase distance and then close again. Mine and Nene's motorslaves will fire at the armorglass, breaking it open or at least weakening it seriously. Gabby, Priss, yours will accelerate as much as possible and then turn over, to hit the glass and debris back-first. As soon as you're over what looks like a solid floor, they will eject your suits. After that, you're on your own. We'll hover outside covering your backs until you've cleared the place enough for it to be reasonably safe. And we have ten seconds left."

The glass wall in front of her went up and up, smooth and unbroken. They went more up than forward now, following the tower's curve at a distance of a handful of meters. She could see the ends of their rocket exhausts scorch the glass where they passed.

"Five seconds. Get ready to turn," came Faith's voice.

Gabrielle's motorslave begun to rotate, giving her a fantastic view of the city. The area around the GENOM tower was rich, and looked it. There were rooftop gardens and pleasantly lit parks, people moved about leisurely and unworriedly. It looked like a different city from the one she'd seen from Nene's hospital room.

"Three."

They were moving out from the tower.

"Two."

The turning point came, and for a moment she was weightless. It was an awesome feeling, hanging over the city of lights.

"One."

There was an explosion behind her. She curled up as her motorslave sped backwards, instinctively bracing for impact. She wouldn't know if the tower's glass had held or not until she hit it, there would be too much smoke and debris for Faith to tell.

"Impact."

"I think you may have to earn your keep," Jha'dur said.

Najara looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" she said.

She was sitting on the couch in their apartment, alternating between absent-mindedly reading a fashion magazine, watching a news terminal and looking out the windows. Jha'dur had just answered a phone call, and had turned to her wardrobe.

"We're about to get a couple of visitors," Jha'dur said. "One of them is a woman I've met before, one Susan Ivanova of Earthforce, at the time stationed on Babylon 5. In the same fiction line that I come from. I suspect she is now an attack librarian."

Najara stood. "So, do we just attack them at sight, or do we ask why they're here first?"

Jha'dur shrugged into a heavy grey jacket and put a modest gun into an inside pocket. "We attack on sight," she said. "If they had any right to be here, Servalan would've told us."

She took another two guns out of the wardrobe, holding one in each hand. The were big things, nearly as long as Jha'dur's forearms and with barrels almost a handspan thick.

"It's been too long since I was in a face to face battle," she said, smiling. "I spent too long as a Warmaster and fugitive, I forgot the thrill of impending danger. I will enjoy this."

Najara drew her sword. "Do we coordinate, or just stay out of each other's way?" she asked.

"Cover my back," Jha'dur said, throwing Najara a gun and taking yet another one out of the wardrobe for herself. "If things start going bad, we head for the lab and the L-Space gateway there."

Najara caught the pistol in her left hand and readied it. "What about GENOM's security people?" she asked.

"If they get in the way, kill them."

"Right." She got in position behind Jha'dur, looking around the apartment. There couldn't be anything hostile there, of course, but years of living and fighting in the forests of Greece had ground the habit into her. Always check your back, even if there wasn't anything there a moment ago.

There was something moving outside the window, just a few handfuls of paces away.

"Pincer movement!" she shouted a moment before the elevator signaled its arrival at their floor. "Let's get out of here!"

"Emergency stairs, to your left," Jha'dur said behind her. They both started moving that way, guns at the ready.

There were several things outside the window, vaguely humanoid things with too many arms and legs. They flew on pillars of fire, and two of them were pointing large cylindrical things in her direction.

"Incoming!" she yelled, and a fraction of a second later she saw fire light up in the cylindrical things. She threw herself behind a heavy ever-so-designed sofa.

An instant later, the room filled with noise, smoke and flying glass.

Ivanova and Jenna stood pressed to the wall on either side of the elevator, guns at the ready, as the doors begun to open. They heard voices, and then running steps.

"Something's going on," Jenna said in a hushed voice.

An enormous noise filled the elevator, a near-solid wall of splintered glass came through the opening in the half-open elevator doors, a shockwave hit the doors with enough force to make them bulge inwards and decisively stop moving.

Without thinking, Ivanova crouched as low as she could. Dull, repeating, loud thuds of large-caliber automatic fire followed the explosion, and she felt more than heard projectiles tear through the elevator's steel cage. A continuous high-pitched howl provided background to the other noises and made it nearly impossible for her to think.

Cautiously, she looked up. The weapons fire seemed to have ceased. Jenna was crouching where she'd been standing, apparently unhurt.

"I think we're a little bit outgunned," Ivanova shouted at the top of her lungs, hoping that Jenna could hear her over the intense noise.

"You don't say!" she yelled back, looking up at the fist-sized holes in the elevator wall's sheet metal.

The noise receded, dropped to bearable levels. Heavy steps and machine-like noises could be heard in the large room outside the elevator.

Slowly, Ivanova moved her head so she could see out. There were two robot-like things in the demolished living room, robots that for some reason were shaped like women in high-heeled boots.

She pulled her head back in. "Two robots," she whispered to Jenna. "One close, one far. Shall we see if our guns dent them?"

Jenna nodded.

"Greenish one, head, as much lead as we can manage, you go high, I go low?" Ivanova said.

Jenna nodded again.

They rose from their crouches, checked their guns.

"One," they mouthed in unison.

"Two," and they tensed, ready to jump.

"Three," and they threw themselves out through the door, firing as they went.

"They got away," Priss said as their motorslaves retreated out the demolished windows. "I thought they weren't supposed to be ready for us? Nene?"

Gabrielle looked around the room. It was, unsurprisingly, a complete mess. Broken glass lay everywhere, there were holes from the motorslaves' autocannon more or less all over the place, furniture had been turned over and wrecked by their entrance. A few things had caught fire from the jet exhausts, and the fire was slowly spreading to other things.

"There's movement in one of the emergency stairways, going down," Nene said. "And an elevator seems to be stuck on your floor. Can we come in?"

"Seems clear," Gabrielle said.

"We go in," Faith said.

Something appeared at the edge of Gabrielle's field of vision. "Wait, there's someth--"

Bullets struck her helmet, pushing her slightly off balance. Instinctively, she dodged, somersaulting forward and landing on one knee. Supporting railgun fire came from Priss, ripping open a yard-long gash in the concrete wall behind where the assailants had just been.

"I'm unharmed," she said. "Don't shoot, they seem to be quite harmless."

"YOU THERE! DROP YOUR GUNS AND COME OUT WITH YOUR ARMS IN THE AIR!"

Priss' voice boomed out at a fantastic volume. Gabrielle could hear it quite clearly through the hardsuit's armor, even without the audio pickups. She extended her arm, aimed her own small railgun at the shooters. Best be careful.

"All right, all right!" she heard a familiar voice shout. "We give up already! Sheesh! What *are* you people anyway?"

Gabrielle lowered her arm and stood.

She flipped her helmet visor up. "Susan?" she said. "Is that you?"

For a few moments, as Nene and Faith landed in the room, the intense howl of jet engines drowned out any possible reply. While she couldn't speak, she saw Ivanova and Jenna stand up, arms in the air, looking daggers in her direction.

"Um, guys," she said once the pair of motorslaves had dropped off their cargo and retreated, "these are my friends."

Priss let her arm drop. "Then why were they shooting at you?"

"I'm not exactly dressed like I usually am."

"Gabrielle?" Jenna asked.

Gabrielle walked up to them. "Hi," she said. "You can relax now. Well, as much as is reasonable on hostile ground. And you can pick up your guns again."

"Gabrielle," Ivanova demanded.

"What are you guys doing here anyway?"

"Looking for you," Jenna said.

"And Faith," Ivanova filled in.

Faith came up behind Gabrielle and opened her visor. "Well, you found us," she said. "Good job. Gabby, don't you think we should be chasing a couple of bad guys?"

"Oh. Right," Gabrielle said. "Look," she said to Ivanova and Jenna, "one of the women who had this apartment is..."

"...Warmaster Jha'dur from Ivanova's fiction line," Jenna said. "We know."

"I was going to say a religious fanatic called Najara from *my* line, but your version works too. They're on their way down the tower, probably to escape or to get to Jha'dur's lab. We're going after them. Wanna join us?"

"They're pretty much unarmed," Priss said over the hardsuit link. "If it comes to fighting, they'll be dead meat."

"You're a lot more heavily armored than we are," Jenna said.

"Follow on behind," Gabrielle said. "If Jha'dur's built something nasty, maybe you can help figure out what it is and what to do about it."

"Reasonable," Faith said. "Priss, Nene, meet Jenna Stannis and Susan Ivanova, Gabrielle's *ex*-girlfriends."

Gabrielle looked at her with a raised eyebrow and a small smile at the stressed "ex".

"Susan, Jenna," Faith went on, pretending she hadn't said anything noteworthy. "Meet Priscilla Asagiri and Nene Romanova. Now let's haul ass after the baddies, shall we?"

At the four-hundredth floor, Jha'dur got out of the emergency stairwell, closely followed by Najara. The room they came out in was a public area, a connecting point for many sub-sections and several self-contained transport systems within the tower. Normally,

it'd be quite filled with people. At the moment, the wail of alarm sirens had quickly and efficiently cleared it out. The two women ran across it, heading for the express elevators near the center.

"Where are we going?" Najara said in between heavy breaths.

"The lab," Jha'dur replied. "If they're coming after us that heavily, we're taking what we've got and getting out of here. Or do you fancy taking on mecha with your sword?"

Najara just ran. When they were halfway across the room, security forces in black suits and dark glasses started coming out of the elevators and headed towards them.

Priss kicked in the door to the stairwell, shot out the floor in it and jumped down to the floor below.

"Clear," she said. "Can you track them, Nene?"

"They opened a door at level four hundred," Nene said. "Security boomers are coming up."

"Damn. What's on level 400?"

"Transit nexus. Wait. I think I have them, an elevator car was just ordered to Jha'dur's lab from level 400."

"Boomers?" Gabrielle said. "What's that?"

"Artificial people, more often than not for combat," Nene replied. "We don't want to fight very many of them, if we can avoid it."

"And a bunch of them are coming up this staircase?" Faith said.

"Yes," Priss said. "I can hear them now."

"Come up here again," Faith said. "Shoot out another floor or two or something to delay them. I'm bringing the motorslaves back in."

Noise and explosions erupted in the stairwell as Priss brought down a fair bit of wall on top of the already wrecked floor.

"I think you should cover your ears," Gabrielle said towards Jenna and Ivanova and closed her helmet. Moments later, all four motorslaves landed in the apartment, hulking like deformed giants in the smashed interior.

"You have a plan?" Priss asked.

"Kinda," Faith said. "Level four hundred is four floors below us, right?"

"Yes," Nene said.

"And I guess Nene can get us an elevator from there to the lab."

"Yes," she repeated.

"So we leave two motorslaves here to distract these boomy things, let the two others blast our way straight down four floors, then we take the elevator."

"You're crazy," Priss said.

"Sounds like it could work," Gabrielle said.

Priss opened her visor and looked at them in disbelief. "And, if I may ask," she said, "how are you planning to get *out* again?"

"The same way Jha'dur and Najara is," Gabrielle answered for her. "If they're going to the lab, they've almost certainly got an L-Space gateway there. Jenna, Susan, you're L-Space certified, aren't you?"

Ivanova nodded.

"L-Space?" Priss looked very doubtful.

"Hey, it works," Faith said. "It's how the lot of us got here in the first place. We have a way out. Jenna, Susan, get behind something solid."

Without further ado, two of the motorslaves blasted the hell out of the apartment floor.

The elevator doors slid open and the two women stepped out into the laboratory. The name was possibly not entirely suitable, since most of the large room was more of a production facility than a research bed, but it was meant to be a laboratory and it was easiest to keep calling it that. There was row upon row of gleaming stainless-steel cylinders, about half again as high as a human. Multiple pipes, hoses and cables attached to the cylinders and vanished into the mess of plumbing and cabling in the ceiling and under the raised floor. The inner wall, the one with the elevators in it, was entirely covered with computer racks. A low incessant hum from an enormous amount of small cooling fans permeated the room. Not far from the elevators, a couple of desks had been arranged into a makeshift workplace for Jha'dur. Just beyond it, a handful of bookcases could be seen.

Jha'dur headed straight for the workplace. "Watch the elevator," she said. "I mustn't be disturbed for the next few minutes."

She sat down, and her hands started flying over the keyboards.

"Right," Najara muttered. "I'll just stand here with my sword, ready for those mech thingies."

Gabrielle held on to Ivanova and jumped down through the still-smoking hole to the four-hundredth floor of the GENOM tower. Steady weapons fire could be heard from above where two of the motorslaves were still holding off the security boomers.

She landed, bending her knees deeply to ease the shock for Ivanova. The floor was mostly clear, only two men in black suits near the entrance to the emergency staircase could be seen. There was something strange about them, Gabrielle thought, and after a few seconds she noted what it was. They were *growing*, sort of swelling from inside. Their skin and clothes tore apart, and instead of a human pink color they were a dull blue. They also bulged with muscles, and had decimeter-long claws.

She fired at them, as did Priss and Faith. They withstood an incredible amount of punishment, but they couldn't take the sustained fire from three hardsuits and two motorslaves for very long, and by the time they'd got halfway to the group they were noting but spread-out scrap.

"Nene, elevator?" Faith said.

"Across the hall, number seven," she replied. "It should be there by the time we've crossed the room."

There was a massive clanging sound followed by a rush of fluid as the bottoms of all the steel cylinders opened at once. Sparks flew and things shorted out as equipment that had never been intended to be flooded suddenly was. A sickly-sweet smell mixed with burning plastic filled the room.

Najara looked towards Jha'dur, not sure if what had just happened was intentional or a disaster. The alien woman didn't seem worried or upset, so she guessed it was intended.

Things started crawling out of the cylinders. Bright pink, humanoid things more or less covered in dark grey goo. They slithered down through the newly opened bottoms, wriggled out between hoses and pipes. They tried to stand on legs that hardly held them, and supporting themselves with their hands they half walked, half crawled towards the bookcases near Jha'dur's workplace.

The first of them was almost there when Najara finally realized that they were women. Quite normal human women, except that they were naked as newborn babies -- which, in a sense, she supposed was exactly what they were --, without a hair on their bodies and had that goo stuck to random parts of their bodies. The goo fell off as they walked, so she guessed it had had some function while they were still in their cylinders.

One by one, they walked in between the bookcases and vanished from sight. Najara looked on, both revolted and impressed.

Jha'dur got up from her seat.

"It is done," she said. "Now we'll just see how many of them get through the gateway before the librarians get here. Do you want to stay and watch, or do we leave now?"

Behind Najara, the elevator chimed.

The elevator door had only opened a centimeter when the blade of a sword swept in and hit Priss on the head. Surprised, she staggered backwards into Faith, who took a step back to steady herself and hit Nene. It took them seconds to sort themselves out, seconds Gabrielle didn't bother to wait. She grabbed the doors and forced them apart as fast as she could, held on to the sides of the opening and swiveled up and out with one leg extended. The kick only hit the sword, which flew out of Najara's grasp and flew out across the laboratory.

With her left hand, Najara shoved her gun into Gabrielle's faceplate and fired, using the recoil to help power a back-flip onto a steel cylinder. Having landed, she ran from one cylinder top to another, heading for the gateway.

"I can't see!" Gabrielle's said. "Something broke in my suit!"

"Lie down," Priss said, "we'll take it. Try using visuals from our suits, if you have to move."

She jumped over Gabrielle to get out of the elevator, closely followed by Faith. Once out, they both stopped.

"Bloody hell," Faith said.

There were hundreds of messy but naked women moving through the room, pushing and shoving each other in desperate attempts to get to the gateway. None of them spoke or made any other sound, which only made the scene spookier.

"What do we do with these?" Priss said.

Ivanova came out of the elevator, closely followed by Jenna.

"We should stop them from using the gateway, at least," she said. "They must be what Jha'dur and Najara came here for. Where are they, by the way?"

Priss looked around. "Can't see them. Can't see anything that looks like a gateway either."

"It's over there," Faith said, pointing at the bookcases a few meters away.

"So let's stop them from using it," Gabrielle said. She'd taken her helmet off so she could see. "Jenna, can we go through the gate and close it behind us?"

Jenna nodded. "We can," she said. "But that means we won't be able to figure out where these things are going."

"It's more important that as many of them as possible don't go anywhere, wouldn't you say?" Ivanova said. "And while it would solve the problem, at least I just can't shoot them down in cold blood."

Jenna sighed. "You're right," she said. "Let's go home."

It was a fairly tired group that walked across the grass of the LAF Compound's rear training ground, on their way from the L-Space Gateway Complex to the house at the shore of Lake Biblios, and at least two of them were pretty confused and culture-shocked as well. The long run through dark book-lined corridors with angles that seemed somehow *wrong* followed by the sudden exit into the sun-lit grass-covered courtyard of the LSGC jarred, even though it was meant to be calming to the arriving travellers.

It was early afternoon at the Compound. It was warm, and a soft wind moved over the knee-high grass. A few birds sang, and voices could be heard in the distance. The hardsuits had lost a lot of function once they left the MegaTokyo fiction line, but at least they mostly carried their own weight. The sensor systems had been the first to go, so all four of the hardsuited women had their helmets off. Faith had quickly grown so annoyed with being slowed down that she'd taken the entire suit off and was walking around in her underwear carrying the hardsuit across her shoulders. Gabrielle was trying hard not to ogle her too obviously, and not succeeding very well.

"Well, this is our home," Jenna said when they reached the front porch of the house. "It's not big, and its not even really ours, but it's home."

"It looks nice," Nene said. "And it looks like plenty of room for all of us!"

Ivanova gave her a weird look.

"Why is the door open?" Faith asked.

Silence fell.

Jenna and Ivanova looked at each other.

"I thought you locked the door," Jenna said.

"I did," Ivanova replied. "Someone must've used the master key."

The door opened, and Assistant Head Librarian Stingray appeared, carrying a tray full of glasses with brown liquid in them.

"Ice tea, anyone?" she said.

"Who the fuck are you," Faith started to say. Halfway through, she was cut off by an enraged howl from behind her.

"*SYLIA!?*" Priss screamed at the top of her rock-star lungs.

"Oh my," Nene said.

"Hello, girls," Sylia said. "I was sure you'd make your way here eventually. You took rather longer than I expected."

Ivanova looked at Priss and Nene. "You know her?"

"Um, yeah," Nene said. "She's Sylia. She built the hardsuits and started the Knight Sabers and stuff."

"You left me to rot!" Priss screamed, although not quite as loud.

Sylia held out the tray of glasses. "Anyone?" she said. "I knew you could take care of yourself," she added in the direction of Priss.

Faith dropped her hardsuit to the grass, took two glasses and passed one to Gabrielle. "Um, if I may ask," she said. "Why are you right here right now?"

Sylia smiled approvingly at her. "Partly, to welcome you here, Faith," she said. "I hope my naughty subordinates here have asked you to join the Force?"

Faith gave Gabrielle a quick sideways look. "Yeah," she said.

"Excellent," Sylia said. "I certainly hope you're not planning to turn us down?"

"Well, uh,..."

"Good, that's settled then. Welcome to the Librarian Attack Force, Trainee Attack Librarian Faith."

She put the tray down on the porch table.

"Now," she said. "Stannis and Ivanova, why did you leave the Compound without notice?"

"Assisting a fellow Attack Librarian we believed to be in trouble, Ma'am," Ivanova said.

"And that fellow Attack Librarian would be Gabrielle here, I suppose."

"Yes."

"Commendable, but still against the rules. I will have to discipline the two of you, even if only slightly."

"Yeah, all right," Jenna and Ivanova grumbled.

"As for Gabrielle," Sylia went on. "You ventured into a proscribed fiction line without permission or notice. That is quite bad."

Gabrielle shrugged.

"You are demoted," Sylia said. "You obviously were promoted to full Attack Librarian before you were ready. You are again a Trainee Attack Librarian."

"Stannis and Ivanova," she went on, "your housing privileges are lessened. You will have to find a fourth person to share this house. Gabrielle and Faith, since you're starting your training in between recruitment periods you'll have to take classes by yourselves. Report to the Head Training Librarian first thing tomorrow morning. Gabrielle, I'll trust you to give Faith all the necessary practical guidance needed. Your overseers will be Stannis and Ivanova. Nene and Priss, if you'll come with me." She smiled. "We have some catching up to do."

Without a further word, she opened a small parasol to protect herself from the sunshine and walked off towards the main Compound. Priss and Nene looked at each other, shrugged and walked off after her.

Jenna, Ivanova, Gabrielle and Faith were left looking after them.

"Let me get this straight," Faith said. "She just punished you people by having me move in with you, and Gabby in particular by having her take lessons with me, and me only."

"Pretty much," Jenna said while she walked up the three steps to the porch and the front door. "Welcome to the house. You two can take the second bedroom. We'll start soundproofing it tomorrow."

Gabrielle blushed.

"You don't mind?" Faith asked, incredulous.

"Don't be silly," Ivanova said as she followed Jenna. "Soundproofing may be extra work, but we'll pretty much have to have it if we want to get any sleep at all. That girl's a *bad* screamer."

"That's not what I meant..." Faith said to the open door.

Gabrielle laid an armored arm around Faith's waist. "She knows," she said. "She's just teasing."

"You don't have to stay here if you don't want to," she went on after a short silence.

"Do you want me here at all?" Faith said. "I'm not too hot on this being considered punishment thing."

"We broke the rules. The Assistant Head Librarian has to do something to us, or she's not following the rules either. But I strongly suspect that by bringing you, Priss and Nene here we actually did exactly what she wanted us to do. So she's giving us punishments that aren't. For Jenna and Susan it's pretty much status quo. They got a bit of a break from the routine work. For me, I get to spend my days with you. Which is more or less exactly what I hoped for when I went to MegaTokyo in the first place."

She removed her arm from around Faith and stroked her hair as gently as she could with the hardsuit glove.

"So the question remains," she went on, "do *you* want this? Because if you don't, it'll be punishment for you, and that's totally out of the question."

Faith looked away for a moment, then she looked back at Gabrielle and smiled. She stabbed a finger at Gabrielle's hardsuited chest.

"So," she said, "is this what you like to wear to bed or should I go get a can opener?"