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## IXIONA:

by Nick Chinn

### *Centauress in the 20th Century*

*Her story – Ixiona, daughter of the centaur Chiron, employs the aid of Diana Morris, a publicist and descendent of a goddess, to excise Chiron's spirit from the underworld. Diana is whisked to a cave in Thessaly on the back of Pegasus, and Ixiona explains the dilemma to Diana.*

#### Chapter Four: "We Do It All For You"

"I'm hungry," groaned Diana. "May I ask what you have around here to eat?"

"What do you prefer?" asked Ixiona. "Roast leg of lamb? Roast suckling pig?"

"I don't suppose there's a McDonald's in Greece near here?" said Diana. "I could go for a Big Mac and a milkshake. And maybe an order of fries."

"Fries what?" asked Ixiona, puzzled.

"French fries . . . they're sliced potatoes boiled in oil."

"Isn't McDonald's the place where they have those Marble Arches?" asked Ixiona. "I've heard a lot about the place on the radio. There's one in downtown Athens next to the Baskin-Robbins. We can go get a dinner and then some ice cream for dessert. I'm all for it! What about you, Alberon?"

Alberon, keeper of Pegasus, grumbled at the thought. "Ugh! Those Big Macs give me indigestion and bad breath. Why don't we take Pegasus and fly to Maxim's?"

Ixiona stomped a hoof on the floor. "I've never been to McDonald's and I'd like to go," she huffed. "You can stay if you want, Alberon."

"You don't realize exactly what you're missing, Ixiona," Alberon said cynically. "You two go ahead and eat there." He feigned a loud burp.

"I have just one question," said Diana, looking at Ixiona's rather large body. "How do you get to McDonald's without causing a commotion?"

"Ah, yes," sighed Ixiona. "I *do* appear sort of . . . unusual. I have a big dock for being a centauress, too."

"I wouldn't know," said Diana, not understanding.

"My boyfriend likes it, though," said Ixiona.

"What does he like?" asked Diana. "And who is he? You haven't mentioned a boyfriend before."

"My boyfriend Raquedon. He likes my dock." Ixiona stepped toward her sleeping chamber and turned around, pointing slyly at Diana. "I'll be right back," she said, slipping into the room past gold silk curtains.

Diana looked inquisitively at Alberon, who shrugged his shoulders, hinting that he didn't know what Ixiona was up to.

A whooshing sound emanated from Ixiona's room, and a million twinkling particles of dust billowed out from the room. Ixiona stepped out of her room. "Well, how do I look?" She strutted up and down like a high fashion model.

To Diana, Ixiona still looked like a centauress. "I don't notice any difference."

"You've got to be kidding," said Alberon. "Ixiona has assumed a totally human form. I can see it."

"But I don't see it," said Diana. "Rather, I still see a centauress."

"Oh – the spell never works on immortals or descendents of immortals. Because you are a descendent of Artemis, Diana, you still see me as I really am. Any normal persons who look

my way see me as a beautiful woman. Alberon has no immortal blood, so he see the apparition."

"How did you concoct the spell?" asked Diana. "And is there any way I can see what you look like?"

"I look like me without the girth — and I have clothes on; a strapless gown. The spell is made with this enchanted gold earring I wear, given to me by Chiron. My father knew that sometimes I'd have to mingle with humans and not be conspicuous. I don't think he ever foresaw my using it to go to a fast-food restaurant."

"It's no restaurant," scorned Alberon. "It's a grease pit. All the food tastes the same. Some American comedian says that everything there comes out of the same machine — even your change."

"But that's exciting, Alberon," smiled Ixiona. She motioned Diana toward the cave entrance, and Pegasus followed. "Let's leave this sourpuss here," said Ixiona as they walked out of the cave.

Ixiona's hoofs clopped and echoed in the well-lighted passageway. "What about your feet, Ixiona?" said Diana. "They're kind of loud. Does the spell also cloak the sound of your hooves?"

"You got it right," said Ixiona. "You're catching on quickly. I know you'll be a lot of help when we visit some spirits to find out what they know about dad."

As they walked, Diana thought to herself. Why me? Why now? Why didn't this lady try to save her father years ago?

"I sense trepidation in your heart, Diana." Ixiona stared into Diana's eyes deeply. "Your eyes ask questions. I hope I haven't made a mistake in bringing you here."

"You're right," sighed Diana. "I am full of questions — but maybe it's overshadowed by a sense of adventure . . . no, a sense of heritage and predetermination. Do you believe in that sort of thing?"

"Oh, yes. All the time," said Ixiona. "But I don't know why things often seem predetermined. It makes you want to believe in the gods . . . that they still exist somewhere waiting for all of us to catch up. Oh, I don't know."

"What can you tell me about my heritage? I'd like to explore my roots."

"So you saw that program, too, huh? I thought it was a bunch of hype. Anyway, all I can tell you right now is that I'm hungry and so are you, so let's go eat first, okay? Afterwards we can talk about your ancestry."

"Alright. How far to Athens? I don't know my Greek geography."

"Oh, just a couple hundred miles," said Ixiona.

"And do we take Pegasus?" asked Diana, recalling her unusually quick journey from California to Thessaly on winged horseback.

"You do, but I don't fit on his back," said Ixiona. "I ride in a funny trailer attached to his harness."

"But I can't drive . . . er, ride Pegasus," Diana protested, "and Alberon isn't going."

"Somebody else can drive us there — wait here a minute." Ixiona trotted back to the well-hidden cave entrance. After awhile she returned, accompanied by a strange companion. Her friend was a weird combination of creatures, with a human head and torso, goat's legs and hooves, a lion's tail, and the horn of a unicorn on her forehead.

"Boy, if you think I look strange," Ixiona told Diana, "then you must really think that Eunice here is funny-looking." Ixiona turned to Eunice. "No offense toward you, right, Eunice?"

"Not unless you want me to make jokes about *you*, Ick," Eunice cracked.

"Ick?" questioned Diana, laughing.

"That's what Eunice calls me," shrugged Ixiona.

"I call her that because I don't like the name 'Eunice' too much. It's old-fashioned," sneered Eunice. She turned to Diana and said, "Don't worry about us. We like to joke about each other. I'm what you might call a unicorness — at least part of me — and when Ick found



There are no air sickness bags on board, so please lean 'way over if you get queasy and don't mess the upholstery. Part of our voyage will be over water, but due to new regulations we don't need to pack lifeboats. Please keep your head, arms and legs inside, and no flash photography, please. Thank you for coming along, and enjoy your flight."

\* \* \*

"Well, here we are at McDonald's," beamed Ixiona. "Unfortunately I can't go in, Diana, because I'm too big. You can go in and order for us and bring the food out here. Eunice and I will wait here by the door. She has to make sure nobody comes too close or they might run into my invisible body. Even if people can't see me, they can bump into me."

"I suppose you cast a spell on Eunice so people will see her as human too," said Diana.

"Yep. Have to — we don't want to cause a scene," said Ixiona. "Once my uncle Vyron got real drunk or something and he went running through a city, shouting like a crazy man. It was real stupid of him. I think the Lapithae saw him because we never heard from my uncle again. Oh — but enough of that. Let's order some food so my stomach will keep quiet."

"What do you want, Ixiona?" Diana asked. "What does someone who is half human and half horse eat for meals?"

"Sometimes fun stuff, like steak and eggs with coffee," answered Ixiona, "or sometimes some hay, but not often."

"Ooh, yuck!" frowned Eunice. "That hay sounds unappetizing."

"Oh, yeah, Eunice?" Ixiona retorted. "What about the time I caught you munching on a tin can?" Eunice just shrugged and laughed to herself.

"Do you have a human stomach or a horse stomach, Ick?" Eunice asked.

"Well, I've got both — a human stomach in my human torso, and a vestigial horse stomach in the other part of me," Ixiona explained, touching her human belly. "Although I really wonder sometimes, because I get super hungry after Chinese dinners, even though I stuffed myself. What is it with Chinese food, anyway?"

Diana thought about it a bit. "I think it's a plot," she said. "Those inscrutable Chinese must put some kind of chemical in all the food to make your stomach and salivary glands crave food even when you're full. So after you leave one restaurant, you get hungry, and right there is another little restaurant to grab your business." Diana turned toward the Marble Arches. "Let's get back to the matter at hand — I'm going to have a Big Mac, large fries, and a chocolate shake."

“MMmmMM. I just love chocolate,” drooled Eunice. “Just get me five chocolate shakes, a chocolate hamburger and chocolate-coated french fries.”

“They don’t have that sort of stuff, dummy,” said Ixiona.

“Okay. Then I just want ten chocolate shakes. Yummy.”

“I’m not too hungry now, Diana,” said Ixiona, “so I’ll settle for three Quarter Pounders with cheese, two orders of french fries . . . whatever they are . . . and three apple pies. Oh, and four strawberry milkshakes.”

Diana laughed aloud at the hearty appetites of her friends. “I just wonder, Ixiona,” she said, “how come you know about all McDonald’s food except for french fries?”

“Oh, I get confused about things that are french,” Ixiona said. “Alberon, who’s been to McDonald’s several times, always talked about french fries but never brought one to me because he ate them too fast. Then there’s my boyfriend who talks to me about french kissing.”

“He just talks???” wondered Diana.

“He talks a lot,” said Ixiona. “Because we rarely see each other. Raquedon supports me in my quest to vindicate my father . . . as a matter of fact, I think he suggested it – or did he suggest that I enlist your help? I don’t know . . . I don’t remember. Go get the food, Diana.”

The lines inside were short, and Diana walked up to a brown-haired teenager. He was practically in a trance, staring out the door, and didn’t notice Diana. Diana looked out the windows but didn’t see anything there except Ixiona and Eunice. She waved a hand in front of his face, and he flinched. “Yoo-hoo!” Diana said. “Do you want to take my order, or do I have to take all my business elsewhere?”

“Oh, I’m sorry ma’am,” he said. “I thought I saw something weird out there, but it must be the evening sun playing tricks on my eyes. Must also be the long hours here at the low wages.” Diana gave him the large order, which filled up two large shopping-bag-sized McDonald’s white sacks.

“Must be a lot of hungry people with you,” the boy said.

“What? Oh, yes,” Diana mumbled. She grabbed the bags firmly and hurried out the door.

“Oh, boy. Food!” exclaimed Ixiona, smiling as Diana approached. “Let’s go and sit at this bench over here.”

Diana walked numbly to the bench, thinking deeply, and sorted out the meal to Ixiona and Eunice. “Ixiona, is it possible for someone here to see you – as you really are, a centaur-ess? The kid inside who took our order was awfully distracted and he was looking at you guys.”

Ixiona had an immediate horrified look on her face. “What did he say? What did he see?”

“I didn’t ask him, but he said it was something weird. But wait, Ixiona – he said it might have been the sun on the window and his fatigue playing tricks on him.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to say anything and have people think he was crazy,” said Eunice. “Besides. I don’t care about the way I look . . . I like it! I don’t care if I’m seen in public.”

“But I DO!” cried Ixiona. “If I’m seen by the Lapithae, they’ll hunt me down like a witch. They’ll send dogs after me to bite my legs. Then when I can’t gallop anymore, they’ll beat me to death with staffs and burn me! They did it to my aunt Minerva!” Ixiona sank her head into her hands and sobbed.

Diana put an arm around Ixiona’s shoulder and tried to comfort her. “C’mon, Ixiona. We don’t know for sure if he really saw anything.”

“I can sense it now,” Ixiona sniffed. “Relatives of the Lapithae live all over Greece. By the Gods! He touched this food! I don’t want it.”

“He was only a kid,” Diana pleaded to no avail. Ixiona took the food and hurled it against a McDonald’s simulated brick wall.

“A curse on this place,” Ixiona yelled.

“Let’s get the hell outta here before we attract too much attention,” said Eunice, eyeing

up and down the street for onlookers. The three walked swiftly down the street and ducked into a small alley.

Diana peered around the corner. “Nobody’s following, and nobody’s looking.”





"Well, that's good," said Ixiona. "I feel a little better now. Heck, I didn't want that food anyway. One bite of one of their burgers was enough to convince me that Alberon is right. The food is the pits."

"That reminds me," Eunice said, licking her lips. "There's a place called the Burger Pit near here. Let's go – I never got to finish any of my chocolate shakes."

"Let's just go right home," Ixiona shuddered. "I've got a different kind of shakes."

\* \* \*

A brown-haired teen opened the door to his home and went inside. He drew a deep breath, thinking about his day's work. His father, smoking an ivory pipe, glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Andros Lapidopoulos!" his father griped. "You should have been home over an hour ago! Taking a job was supposed to make you more responsible, not less!"

"I'm sorry, father," said the boy. "But I was thinking about something I saw today at work."

"Must have been a girl, huh?" his father snickered.

"It was two girls, father. But they were not human. One was a female centaur, and one was half-goat and human with a horn of a unicorn. I think I saw it – but nobody else did. Am I crazy, father?"

His father sat back in his rocking chair and rocked pensively for a minute. "Son, let me tell you something. You are not crazy. You did see them. Tell me, did the centaress have spots on her hind quarters?"

"Yes."

"What about white hair by the ankles?"

"No, definitely not. Father, have you seen this creature before?"

"Yes, I have. Have a seat, son. I have to tell you something about our family heritage. Let's start with this pipe I'm smoking – it's made out of the horn of a creature just like the unicorn lady you saw today. And that centaress – I thought I saw her many years ago, but that one had white hair on her hooves. Let me show you this arrow in the chest of family heirlooms. It's eons old, used by generations of our family to strike down the centaur race."

The man's son slowly shook his head.

"And do you know why?" his father bellowed. "Because the centaurs are our family's sworn enemies."

"Feuds that are this old seem futile and silly to me, father."

"Back in so-called mythical times, when the centaurs used to get drunk and behave like animals, they once killed many of my ancestors – no! Your ancestors, too – back then, that's when this feud was not so 'silly'!"

"So you say you've seen this female centaur before?" asked the boy. "Does she have a name?"

His father thought for a second, and said "Yes, I have seen her, and I tried to hunt her, but the one I saw had white hooves, as I said. You saw another?"

"I guess so."

"We must hunt them down, son, and revenge the deaths of our ancestors. We've both seen different centaresses – that's two too many for me."

\* \* \*

The next morning, Ixiona searched around the cave for quite a time. "Eunice – have you seen my hair dye? I haven't seen it for days and my ankles are brown again."

"You bleach your hair?" laughed Diana.

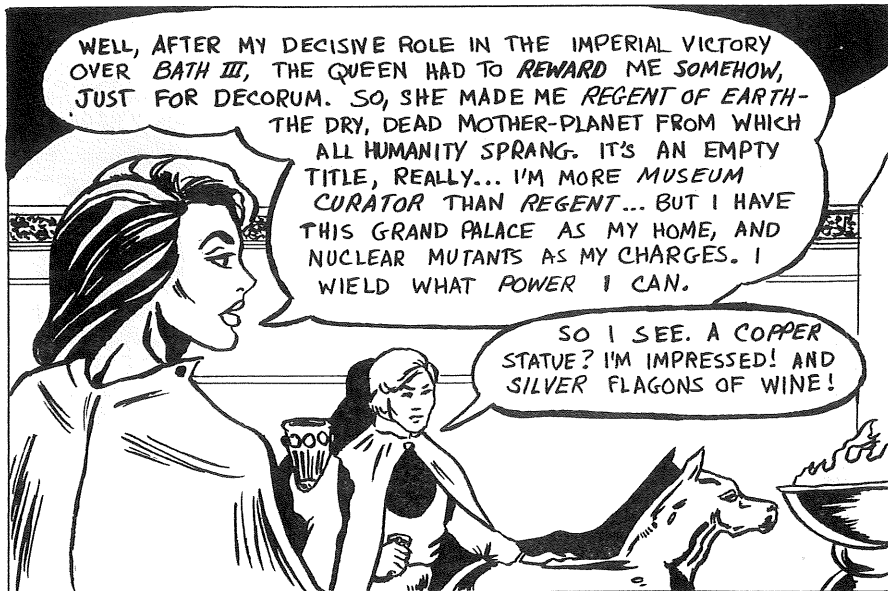
"Sure," said Ixiona. "I hear that blondes have more fun, so I tried it. But I just color my ankles."

*To be continued*



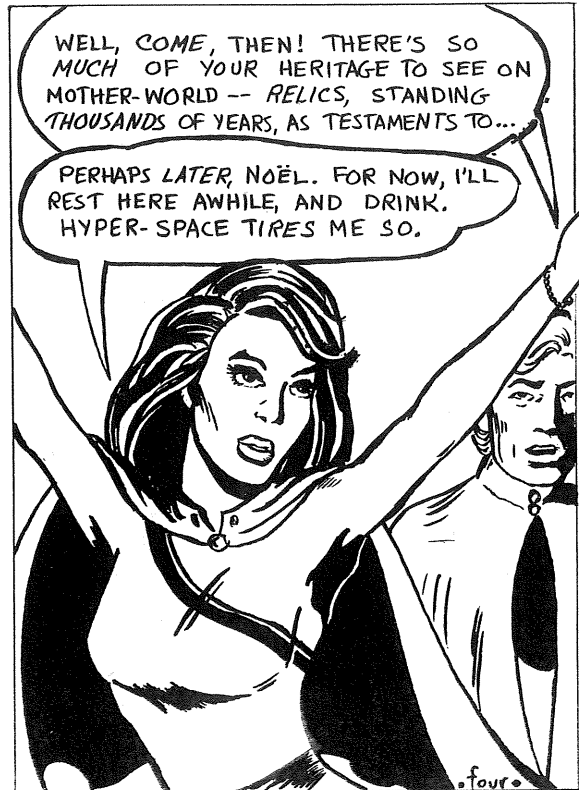






WELL, AFTER MY DECISIVE ROLE IN THE IMPERIAL VICTORY OVER BATH III, THE QUEEN HAD TO REWARD ME SOMEHOW, JUST FOR DECORUM. SO, SHE MADE ME REGENT OF EARTH-- THE DRY, DEAD MOTHER-PLANET FROM WHICH ALL HUMANITY SPRANG. IT'S AN EMPTY TITLE, REALLY... I'M MORE MUSEUM CURATOR THAN REGENT... BUT I HAVE THIS GRAND PALACE AS MY HOME, AND NUCLEAR MUTANTS AS MY CHARGES. I WIELD WHAT POWER I CAN.

SO I SEE. A COPPER STATUE? I'M IMPRESSED! AND SILVER FLAGONS OF WINE!



WELL, COME, THEN! THERE'S SO MUCH OF YOUR HERITAGE TO SEE ON MOTHER-WORLD -- RELICS, STANDING THOUSANDS OF YEARS, AS TESTAMENTS TO...

PERHAPS LATER, NOËL. FOR NOW, I'LL REST HERE AWHILE, AND DRINK. HYPER-SPACE TIRES ME SO.



VERY WELL. I'LL BE OFF, THEN, TO PRACTISE THE ART OF STATECRAFT.



GONE... AT LAST! BUT HER EYES -- DOES SHE SOMEHOW -- NO. IMPOSSIBLE!



MOMENTARILY...

BISHOP ON IMPERIAL BAND 986 um, TO HER MAJESTY'S COMMAND POST, PRIMARY DETAIL. MESSAGE: TARGET SUSPECTS NOTHING. BY TONIGHT...

REGENT KNIGHT WILL BE DEAD!



QUICKLY! MONITOR ALL TRANSMISSIONS ON ALL IMPERIAL FREQUENCIES! VERIFY REPORTS OF REBEL ACTIVITY ON AESTER VII! VERIFY CURRENT IMPERIAL STATUS OF CHRISTOPHER BISHOP! AND KEEP ME INFORMED!



MILADY! IS IT AS WE FEARED?

YES! THE EMPIRE WANTS THE EARTH AGAIN...



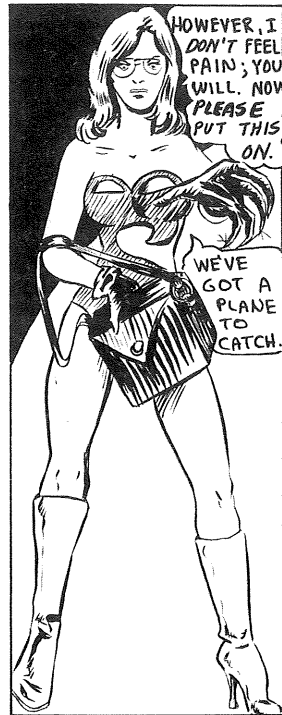
AND IT'S WILLING TO KILL US TO GET IT!

NEXT: THE TRAITOR!





sorry to hear about your personal problems, but we cannot hire you at the present time, due to your over-qu wouldn't be able at this regretf reasona better, thank y aeronau





WELL, HEROES, LET'S GO... WHERE?



THE NEXT DIMENSION, IF YOU WILL, TURN LEFT.



TURN LEFT? THAT'S IT?

AND HERE WE ARE.



NATURALLY.

COME ALONG, SISTER, DON'T DAWDLE. WE'VE GOT TO KILL A DRAGON!

I BELIEVE YOU HEARD IT FROM THAT DIRECTION, MS.

CERTAINLY.

WE'LL CHECK TO BE SURE, SONNY.



INCIDENTALLY, MY NAME IS NOT SISTER, I'M -

NAMES? THE IDEA IS THAT WE'RE NOT GONNA SURVIVE THIS, CAPER!

BUT AT LEAST WE'LL ALL DIE FOR A REASON



GRIVE

THAT'S A PRETTY BIG REASON.



HOW CAN YOU STOP THAT?

LIVE BAIT.



AND WHILE SHE KEEPS HIM "BAITED" -



WE GET WHAT WE CAME FOR?

THE TAIL!



PULL!



GUESS I FINALLY MADE... IT. SEE THE ANGEL?



MUS' BE DEAD, SO PEACEFUL

SISTER?



SISTER?

HEY... MS! THEN, YOU'RE DEAD, TOO!



HECK, NO! WE'RE ALL ALIVE! BABE RESCUED US, AN SONNY PATCHED YOU UP. THOSE DRAGON RECOILS ARE -

BABE?



BABE WAS IN THE DRAGON'S TAIL. YOU HELPED HER ESCAPE THAT PRISON!

THAN KEW.



I GIVE UP!

NOW WHAT, MS?

THIS WASN'T EXACTLY WHAT I HAD PLANNED.

MS. SAYS YOU FLY, TOO!

# THE END?

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Annaliese Gevaert in:

## The Immortal

by Rich Morrissey and Stan Holder

"So Howard Hughes is dead," remarked Gerard Bennett as he meticulously adjusted his tie. "You know, somehow I always thought he'd last forever."

"I can't see why," said Frank Rooney, the youngest member of the group. "Sure, I was surprised too when I first saw it on the teletype yesterday — but I knew it'd happen before too long. I mean, when you get to be his age . . ."

"But it was hard to think of him as an old man," Gerry put in. "Whenever I thought of Howard Hughes, I considered him relatively young. I suppose I may have subconsciously believed those rumors of some top-secret Swiss clinic where they can keep you young forever — that is, if you have enough money."

The others at the table were used to Gerry's idle chatter, as they had been sharing lunch at the Aurora Borealis restaurant for some months. Although the five of them worked at different jobs — and Gerry Bennett, Leopold Katz, and Quentin Queiroz were self-employed — they had in common a free hour between noon and one in the afternoon, and sufficient funds to dine at the Aurora every business day. They had gradually drifted together, and now all of them looked forward to their lunch hour as one of the highlights of the day.

Now Dr. Katz said, "Sheer wish-fulfillment! We all know we can never escape death, so we reassure ourselves with such nonsense." As a psychiatrist, he was always slightly irritated when laymen like Gerry bantered about terms like "subconsciously."

"I wouldn't call it nonsense," Quentin Queiroz remarked. "Arthur Clarke says we'll probably achieve immortality for all of us by the next century. And Robert Heinlein wrote a couple of novels about a specially-selected family group that had been breeding for longevity since the nineteenth century."

"That's right — who to be sure there aren't immortals among us, even now?" boomed Gerry. "If they were hiding out in the African jungles, like in *She*, we'd never hear about them except vaguely . . ."

"What's *She*?" asked Quentin.

"I think it's a play about the Cuban leader, Guevara," said Annaliese Gevaert, who was a drama professor, "but I didn't think it had anything to do with . . ."

"I'm not talking about him!" snorted Gerry Bennett. "Even you'd like it, Quentin, if you ever read anything besides the comic books and such you sell in that shop of yours. H. Rider Haggard wrote it — it's about a white woman who becomes immortal by bathing in a mystic flame, and becomes a goddess of an African tribe. Then she . . ."

Annaliese, Frank and Dr. Katz had little to say for the next few minutes, as Gerry and Quentin competed to tell about the immortal characters of whom they had read. But eventually they both ran down, and Annaliese Gevaert spoke.

"I know this is going to be hard for you to believe," she said, "but a few months ago I encountered someone who was something like the people you mention — or at least claimed to be. It was at the convention of the American Humanities Association last September."

"You mean there was an immortal guy there?" asked Gerry sarcastically.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," replied Annaliese. "But not the Wandering Jew, or someone who'd bathed in a magic flame, or any of the things you and Quentin have mentioned. It had to do with Constance Baker's necklace."

"At that, everyone listened even more carefully, for they all knew that Annaliese actually had been involved in that affair. She began her story.

\*\*\*

As I think I've mentioned (said Annaliese), Rodney Baker is the head of the Humanities Department at Eastwood University. Last fall, both he and I had papers to present at the AHA convention in Chicago. We were accompanied by Rod's wife Connie and Ellen Harris, an honor student who had expressed great interest in attending.

The Department was paying for everything, so we decided to take the Luxotrain. I'm sure you remember the publicity about the Luxotrain when it first went into operation ten years ago. It was supposed to be the latest thing in rail travel then, and even now it's much better than most of the trains that are running. It's set up like a European train, with individual, closed compartments each seating six people, three facing forward and three backward. The aisle is on one side of the car rather than in the middle, and each compartment has a door that opens onto it.

We looked for an empty compartment when we first got on the train, but all of them were at least partially filled. The one we finally chose already contained two people: A hard-faced man in his thirties, and a girl of about fourteen who was sprawled across all three of the seats facing him. At first they pretended not to notice us, and Rod was ready to seek other seats — but Ellen tapped the girl on the shoulder, and without a word she got up and took the seat next to the man.

Ellen tried to start a conversation with the girl, but found her very uncommunicative. All she learned was that the man's name was Gideon Weeks, and that with his daughter, Miranda, he was going to Chicago to demonstrate dyes for a New Logan firm. After a few more such inquiries had yielded monosyllable replies or none at all, Ellen gave up and left Gideon to his Howard Hunt thriller and Miranda to her *Hearthrob* magazine. She chatted with us for a while, and then all of us tired of conversation ourselves and turned our attention to books or to the scenery. None of us noticed when Miranda left the compartment.

So it was a complete surprise to us when the compartment's sliding door was thrown open and a fat conductor entered, dragging Miranda by one arm. "Is this your daughter?" he bellowed at Gideon Weeks.

Weeks drew himself up to his full height and glared at both the girl and the conductor. "Yeah," he said. "What's goin' on?"

"I heard a scream from Mr. Kablish's sleeping chamber," boomed the conductor, "and this kid ran right into me as I started in. Mr. Kalish told me he'd waked up and seen her going through his things —



and I knew I'd seen her in here when I collected the tickets."

A young man still wearing pajamas and a bathrobe appeared at the door. He had a round face, dark curly hair with sideburns, and wire-rimmed glasses. "I hope you won't be too hard on her," he said to Weeks, who had snatched Miranda from the conductor's grasp. "She was only — why Rod! Are you going to the convention too?"

Rod had looked up with great interest when he had heard the newcomer's voice. "Gene! I didn't know you were going!" He turned to us in delight, and said, "Annaliese, Ellen . . . this is Gene Kalish, one of my most brilliant past students. Gene, you know my wife — and these two young ladies are Annaliese Gevaert, who teaches in my department, and my best student of this year, Ellen Harris. But, tell me, why did you take a sleeping compartment?"

I glanced at the conductor again; he didn't seem particularly pleased that Miranda's heinous crime had been forgotten by all but her father. He muttered, "Don't let it happen again," and left. Gideon Weeks looked at all of us in embarrassment and, maintaining a firm grip on his daughter, drew his suitcase from the overhead rack and set off down the aisle.

" . . . well, after the cast party," Gene was saying, "I knew I couldn't get any sleep before I got on the train — and I wanted to be fresh for the first evening. Besides, I'd heard that the Luxotrain's sleeping compartments were incredibly better than ordinary Pullman bunks, and I was curious. And indeed, they are! Would you like to come and see mine. . . ." he stopped and looked down at himself in sudden realization, and concluded, " . . . as soon as I can put some clothes on?"

Gene Kalish's compartment was the most memorable thing we saw on the rest of the journey — at least, we didn't see any more of the Weekses. But Rod listened enthusiastically to Gene — who spent most of his time with us from then on — when he told us about the acting workshops he'd set up at the college where he taught. Gene added that he hoped to organize a workshop at the convention, and Rod instantly promised that all of us would attend.

\* \* \*



22

Two days later, the four of us from Eastwood University were eating dinner at the hotel when Gene came over to our table. "It's all set," he told us. "The workshop is at 8:30 tonight, up in my room."

"We'll be there," Rod assured him. "How many others have you got?"

"About twelve so far," was the reply. "including you. But I'd like to have as many as possible — I'd appreciate anyone else you can get. What time is it, do you know?"

"It's twenty after five," Rod told him. "Don't you have your watch today?"

"I just can't seem to find it, somehow — and it was a good watch, too!" complained Gene. "But you know how disorganized I am, Rod — I'm sure it'll turn up. See you later."

I had to go to the ladies' room a few minutes later, and as I was

returning to our table I was astounded to see the Weekses at a table on the other side of the dining room. Instead of the striped T-shirt and short overalls she'd worn on the train, Miranda was wearing an expensive-looking evening gown that looked very incongruous on a girl of her age, and Gideon Weeks had on an expensive suit rather than the cheap one he'd worn before. Both of them were drinking champagne, and they looked to me more like a husband and wife than a father and daughter. Suddenly Gidon looked up and saw me looking at them, and I felt compelled to speak.

"Good evening, Mr. Weeks. How did the demonstration go?"

"Oh, so-so," he mumbled. "Don't know for sure yet."

I had reservations about my next offer, but remembered that Gene had specifically said that he could use anyone else we could get. "Uh . . . we're all going up to an acting workshop in Gene Kalish's room, 2140, at 8:30 tonight. Would you and Miranda like to come?"

Miranda shook her head vigorously, and Gideon said, "I don't think so, thank you. See you around." I was almost relieved as I bade them good-bye and returned to our table.

\* \* \*

I daresay Gene Kalish's acting workshops are very successful among the students at his college; he just had an inappropriate selection that evening. He started off with something called a



Sunrise Exercise, which involved a good deal of bending over and straightening up ("one vertebrae at a time" as Gene put it). We saw at once, and Gene admitted, that dresses were inappropriate under the circumstances, so most of the female members of the group returned to their rooms to change. Ellen, however, was wearing cut-off jeans, and I had opaque tights on under my miniskirt, so we saw the exercise through. We were starting on the next exercise, which involved facing someone we didn't know and mirroring his or her actions exactly, when Connie Baker ran back into Gene's room, panting.

"Rod!" she screamed. "My diamond necklace has been stolen!"

That broke up the workshop, of course. All of us raced toward the stairway after Connie, and down the two flights (there was no time to waste in waiting for an elevator) to

the room Rod shared with his wife. We gathered around as Rod called the desk to report the loss, when suddenly it struck me. I made for the elevator at once, but Ellen, the only one who had noticed my departure, caught up with me as I was waiting for it to arrive on the 19th floor.

"What is it, Miss Gevaert?" she asked me.

The bell rang, and we hastened to the opening elevator door. "Gideon Weeks!" I told her as I pushed the button for the lobby. "He's the only person I can think of who knew all of us would be away at 8:30. Then there's Gene's watch — Gideon wouldn't be the first crook to have his child do some of his dirty work, like searching for things to steal, for him. But he can't have gone far in this length of time — he could still be up in his room, for all we know. Unless we see them when we get down to the lobby, the first thing we'll do is to find out what room they're in."

23



But we did see them as soon as the door opened – right by the hotel’s main door. Before I could stop her, Ellen cried, “Hey, those two stole –” and then clapped her hand over her mouth, realizing what she’d done. But it was too late – Weeks pulled Miranda after him and plunged into the revolving door. By the time we got across the lobby and outside, we could see the Weekses pulling away in a taxi.

Fortunately there were always several cabs in front of the hotel. There was no time to lose – we got into another, and with a \$20 bill persuaded its driver that we were indeed serious about following the other cab. There was so much traffic that neither cab could move very fast – but I realized from my training as a private detective that this was to our advantage. Being several cars away, the Weekses might not even notice they were being followed.

And they didn’t seem to when their taxi turned into a side street, and they both got out and disappeared into a basement apartment with a flight of stairs leading directly from the street to its door. I paid our own driver, and Ellen and I got out and surveyed the situation.

“Shall we go in?” asked Ellen eagerly.

I told her no, and silently cursed myself for sending our own cab away before I’d thought matters through. “You’d better go and call the police,” I told her, “and I’ll wait here to make sure they don’t leave. Unless there’s another –”

But I never finished. The street, though not as busy as the main one, was by no means deserted, and I’d thought nothing of the people who occasionally strolled by – but suddenly Ellen and I found ourselves tumbling down to the foot of the stairs. We looked up to see a lanky man at the top of the short flight, with a gun pointed directly at us.

“Not another sound out of either of you!” he growled softly. “Get inside!”

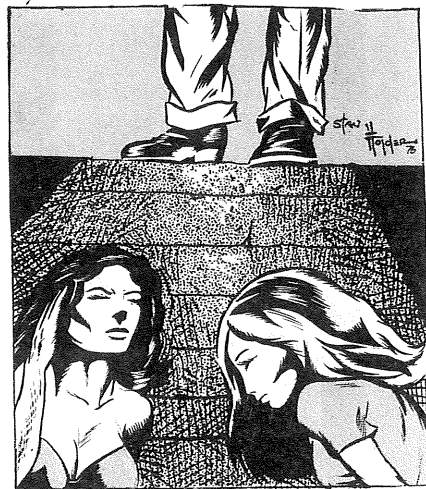
If anyone else on the street had noticed what had happened, there was no indication of it – so there was nothing to do but obey him. The door was unlocked, and we stepped directly into a large room that, although not lavish, was furnished unusually well for that section of Chicago. The floor was covered by a thick brown carpet, and two men, Gordon Weeks and a heavyset fortyish individual with an air of authority, lounged on a davenport along one wall. Miranda stood in front of them, partially unzipping her gown and letting it fall to her waist. Ellen gasped in shock as our guard slammed the door behind us.

Miranda reached into her padded brassiere and withdrew the stolen necklace, which she handed to Gideon’s companion. “A brilliant job, Miranda!” he said. The girl stretched her arms back, and allowed herself to fall into a neighboring chair in triumph.

“Tie those two up in the other room, Jo Jo!” she said to the man with the gun. At this point Ellen panicked, and aimed a backhanded swipe at him. Jo Jo caught her hand without showing any sign of surprise, and with his other hand caught Ellen across the face with a slap that knocked her unconscious.

He had convinced me that he was a seasoned professional, and that at least now I would be no match for him in physical combat, so I didn’t resist as, after tossing Ellen over one shoulder, he led me to an adjoining room whose only furnishing was an old radiator. To this he lashed me with tight leather thongs, and then proceeded to tie the unconscious Ellen alongside me. I tested my own bonds when he turned his attention to her, but found them, at least for the moment, inescapable.

Miranda wandered into the room as Jo Jo was wrapping the final thong around Ellen’s right ankle and the leg of the radiator. She was wearing a different T-shirt, but the same



overalls she had worn on the train. “And how do you do, my dear young ladies?” she said sarcastically, dropping an exaggerated curtsey. At this, Gideon and the third man came in and joined her.

“Do you have the necklace, Gideon? Sal?” she asked each of them in turn. The heavyset man, Sal, drew it out of his vest pocket and unhesitatingly handed it to her. She put it on and, with her head held high, paraded back and forth.

“I must say, Sal,” I observed, “you certainly trust that little girl!” Sal burst out laughing, and Gideon joined him.

“Why shouldn’t I?” asked Sal. “She’s the one who first gave me a break – let me into her street gang over thirty years ago.”

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Sal, Gideon and Jo Jo left then, and I stared at Miranda. She looked back with an expression whose like I had never seen on a child’s face, and for an instant she appeared not a little girl but a shockingly deformed old woman. But then the feeling passed, and as she sat down on the floor before us and wrapped her arms around her knees, I thought that surely Sal had been making a mad sort of joke. And yet – all the men seemed so deferential toward her . . .

“I don’t expect you to believe it,” Miranda told me. “Otherwise I never would have let Sal tell you. But it’s quite true – I did give him his start in the underworld. And Gideon, and many others – over many, many years . . .

“I don’t like to remember what my early life was like – suffice it to say that it was in another country, in another time. I was fourteen years old when I caught the sickness – I didn’t know what kind of disease it was, and I still don’t. Doctor’s didn’t bother with people in my social class.

“But I got well – and from then on I never grew any older. It was years before I realized it – that, to the world, I’d be fourteen years old forever. What could a girl of fourteen do – what can she do even now unless she is exceptional – except prepare for a future that in my case will never come?”

“I survived the only way I could, selling what I could including myself, before I finally realized I did have one asset – experience. I have been organizing and building up my contacts ever since – and it isn’t a bad life now, even considering . . .”

She paused and looked at Ellen and me with an envious expression, and in that instant I almost pitied her. However immortal the girl I knew as Miranda Weeks might be, she would never experience adulthood, sexual pleasure, the ordinary love of a man – so many things the

rest of us took for granted.

Miranda leaped up and waved the necklace in my face. "But I'm a lot richer than you'll ever be, Annaliese!" she cried, as much to herself as to me. She replaced it around her neck, and strutted out.

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When Ellen finally awoke, I had the beginning of a plan in my mind. "Ellen," I told her, "I think I can stretch far enough to turn the control knob. There - got it!"

"But - you . . ."

"Ssssh! Don't say anything. It'll be painful, but I think we can stand it longer than the ropes can."

She never had a chance to say anything, for Miranda came running in at once. She hastened to the knob and turned it to the left, but as it had already been turned as far in that direction as it would go, her hand slipped. And in that instant I wrenched my feet from their bonds, flung them up in the air, and captured Miranda in a tight scissor-like grip.

You didn't . . ." gasped Miranda in sudden realization.

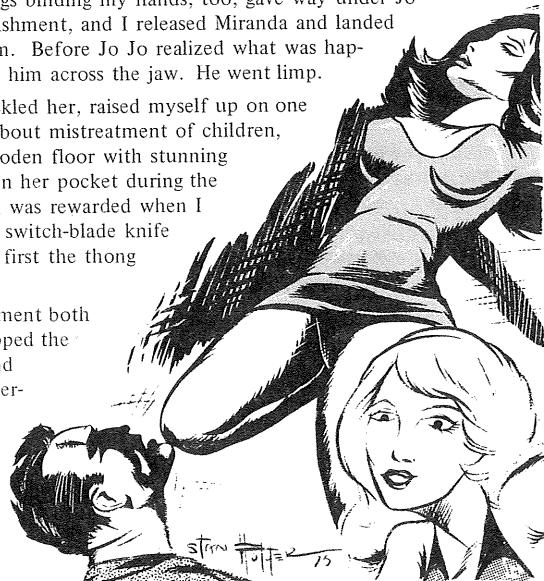
"Of course not," I told her. "Even if this radiator were working and we could have withstood the heat long enough for our bonds to burn, both of which I doubt, my hands aren't anywhere near the knob. You should have remembered that. But Jo Jo didn't devote quite as much attention to my feet as he did to my hands -"

"I was interrupted by the subject of my discussion himself, who came charging in and tried without success to force my legs apart. He then took the course of action for which I had hoped - he grasped Miranda tightly and tried to pull her free. I shifted my weight, maintained my hold - and then the thongs binding my hands, too, gave way under Jo Jo's pull. He fell backward in astonishment, and I released Miranda and landed in a crouch, half-astride both of them. Before Jo Jo realized what was happening I clenched my fist and struck him across the jaw. He went limp.

Miranda wriggled free, but I tackled her, raised myself up on one elbow and, overcoming my qualms about mistreatment of children, shoved her head against the hard wooden floor with stunning force. I thought I'd felt something in her pocket during the instant I'd been on top of her, and I was rewarded when I plunged my hand in. I removed the switch-blade knife and hastened to Ellen's side, cutting first the thong that held her right hand.

I was none too soon: at that moment both Gideon and Sal arrived. I quickly slipped the knife handle-first into Ellen's hand and flung myself at the adversary I considered most dangerous: Sal.

He was even stronger than he looked, and came close to crushing me in a tight squeeze as we rolled over and over each other on the floor. But Sal's respect for Miranda got the better of him when we came



dangerously close to rolling over her - for a moment he pulled away from me, and that moment was enough. I pulled my fist free and let him have it square on the jaw.

His grip on me seemed to tense - and then, in an elating moment, relaxed. I extricated myself and found Gideon and Ellen at a standoff - she had been unable to free herself further, but had managed to keep Gideon at bay thus far by frantically waving the knife in his direction. A blow to a strategic pressure pint at the back of his neck put him completely out of commission. Ellen finished cutting herself free, and we lost no time in recovering the necklace and getting out of the apartment and onto the street.

We called the police from the first phone booth we saw, and directed four armed policemen back as soon as we could. The three men were still unconscious, but Miranda had disappeared - we described her, but she was never found.

Among the few stolen objects still in the apartment was Gene Kalish's watch: it and the necklace were returned to their owners. None of the three criminals mentioned Miranda except in passing at their trial, and in testifying I found it advisable not to bring the matter up - after all, it wouldn't have done much for my credibility as a witness.

But sometimes I wonder exactly how much "organizing" Miranda actually has done - if her contacts included people as far removed as Gideon and Sal, surely there were many others . . . Yes, I think of Miranda - the way she looked at me as we talked and struggled, and the grievances she must have with me - and sometimes I worry.

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"A delightful story," said Quentin Queiroz after Annaliese had finished, "but not very original. There've been a lot of immortal villains like Vandal Savage in the comics, and I think Ray Bradbury used the idea of a kid stuck at the age twelve in one of his short stories. You told it well, though."

"Why, Quentin!" cried Gerard Bennett in mock indignation. "Surely you don't mean to imply that you don't believe Annaliese's story, do you? Ah, would that I had the stamina, not to mention the inclination, to investigate matters the way she does!"

In excellent humor, the five diners paid their bills and set off in different directions. Annaliese lingered briefly outside the Aurora's door, and Frank hesitated briefly and walked over to her.

"Not that I didn't like your story, Annaliese," he began. "but I do wish you'd tell us what really happened that day. I'm sure it's just as interesting a story."

Annaliese pursed her mouth for several seconds, and then exhaled. Looking the reporter square in the eyes, she said, "Frank, you saw the reports about those criminals' records. Tell me, do you really think any of them - or any of their known associates - had the brains to get some of the loot that was found in their hideout?"

Frank Rooney looked away, and glanced at his watch. He stammered for a second or two, and finally said, "Well, it's almost one now. See you tomorrow."

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