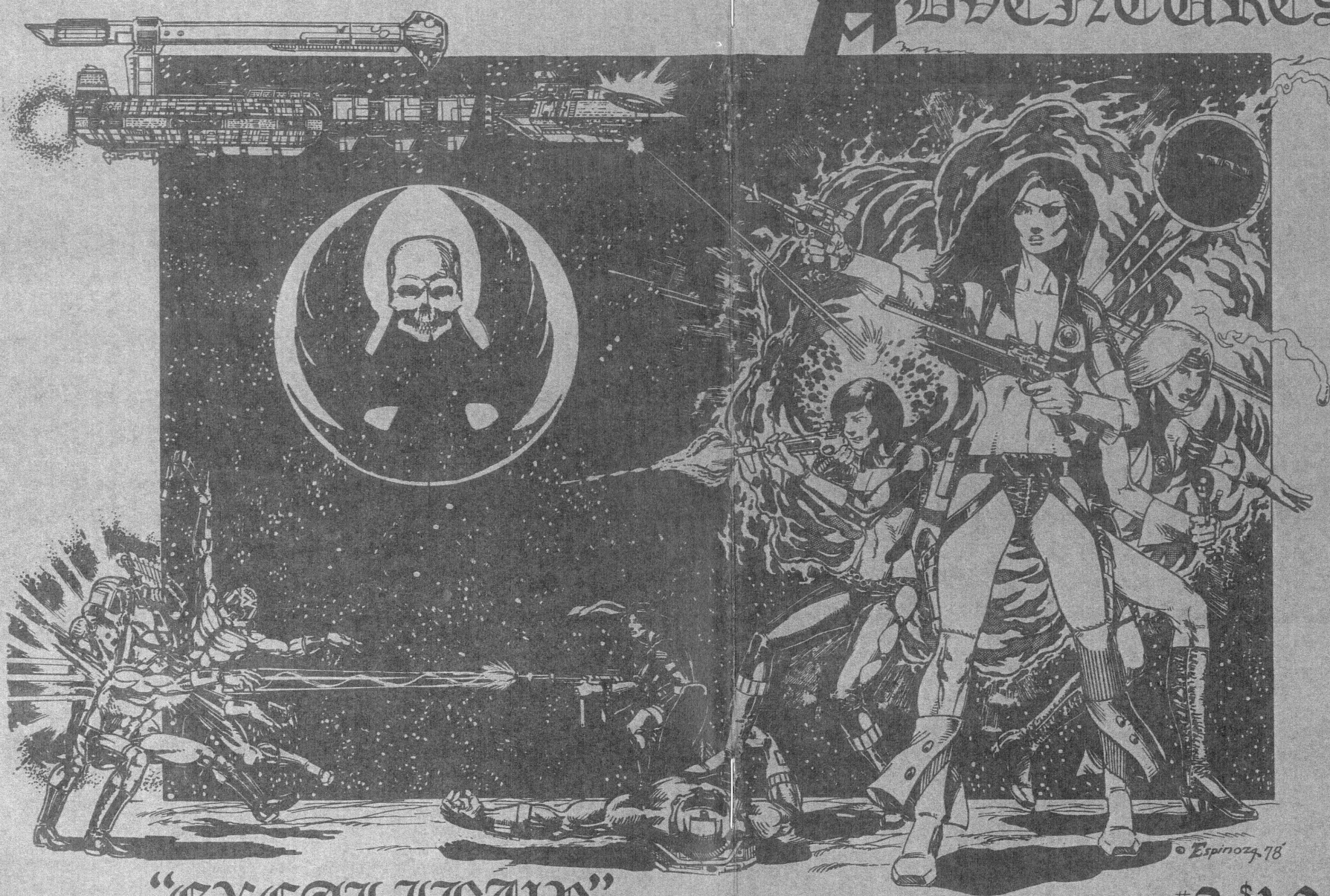


THE ADVENTRESS



"EXCALIBUR"

no.#8 \$1.00



THE EXCILBUR'S PULSE LASER CANNONS PUTS THE FLEEING SHIP'S MAIN WEAPONRY OUT OF COMMISSION!

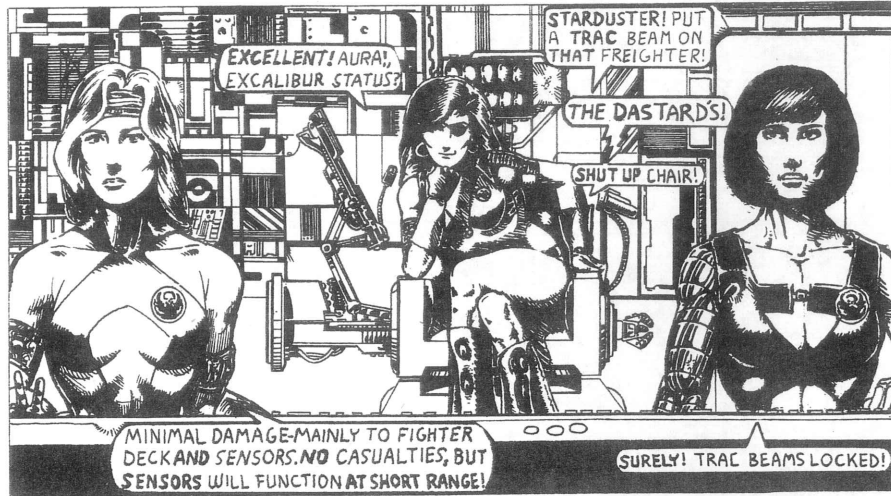


A SIMILAR BLAST DISABLES THE SHIP'S MAIN ENGINES!



ARIANA!

SENSORS INDICATE THE FREIGHTER IS NOW CRIPPLED!



EXCELLENT! AURA, EXCILBUR STATUS?

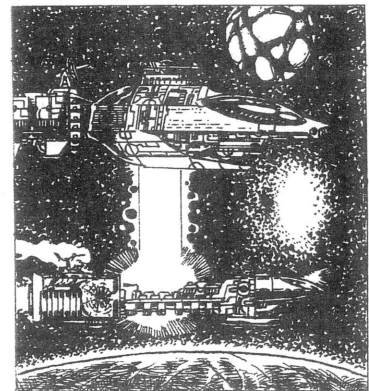
STARDUSTER! PUT A TRAC BEAM ON THAT FREIGHTER!

THE DASTARD'S!

SHUT UP CHAIR!

MINIMAL DAMAGE-MAINLY TO FIGHTER DECK AND SENSORS. NO CASUALTIES, BUT SENSORS WILL FUNCTION AT SHORT RANGE!

SURELY! TRAC BEAMS LOCKED!



LET'S STEP INTO THE DRAGONS DOMAIN!

SHALL WE PAY THEM A CALL?



SEVERAL MINUTES LATER...

SOMEONE'S BEAMING THROUGH!

AN ASTUTE OBSERVATION YOU ABOMINABLE MORON!



ZAKT!

SECURE THIS DECK AND TAKE OUT AS MANY AS POSSIBLE! SET PHASE-BLASTERS ON KILL!

"INCIDENT"

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY GREG ESPINOZA
SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS BY EE 78

"IT WASN'T GOING TO BE EASY, AND I ACCEPTED THE JOB WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT I WAS WALKING INTO A TRAP. HOPEFULLY I COULD SURVIVE THE ENCOUNTER, COMPLETE THE COMMISSION, AND MARK THIS DOWN AS JUST ANOTHER..."

WELL IF YOU DON'T FIND THE ACTION TO YOUR LIKING, WHY DON'T YOU WALK BACK TO THE EXCILBUR! AND GIVE MY BEST REGARDS TO ANY FEDERATION 'STAR-REEVERS' YOU HAPPEN TO RUN INTO!

IN PAST BATTLES, IF THEY COULD FIGHT LIKE THEY TALKED...

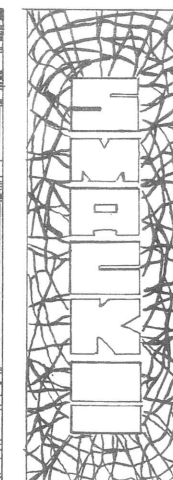
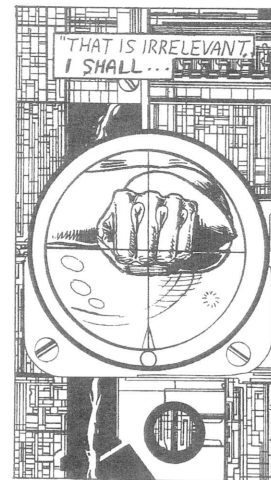
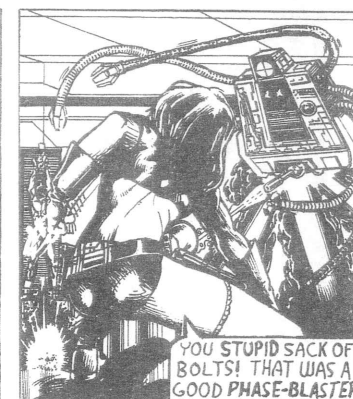
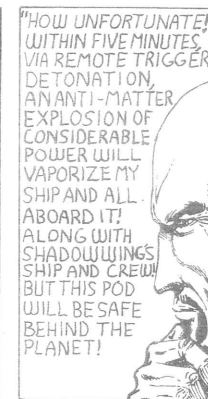
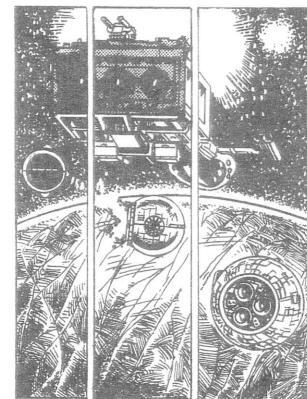
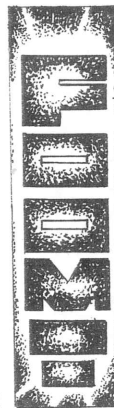
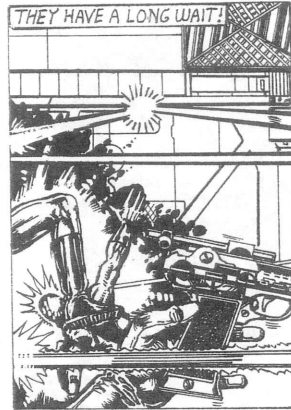
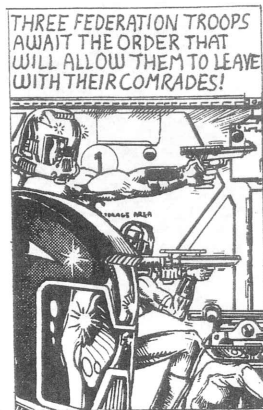
ARIANA, MY DEAR! YOU HAVE AN UNCANNY KNACK FOR FINDING US THE MOST DIFFICULT COMMISSIONS!

GOTCHA!

I LOVE THAT MERCENARY WIT!

... WE'D HAVE WON SOONER!

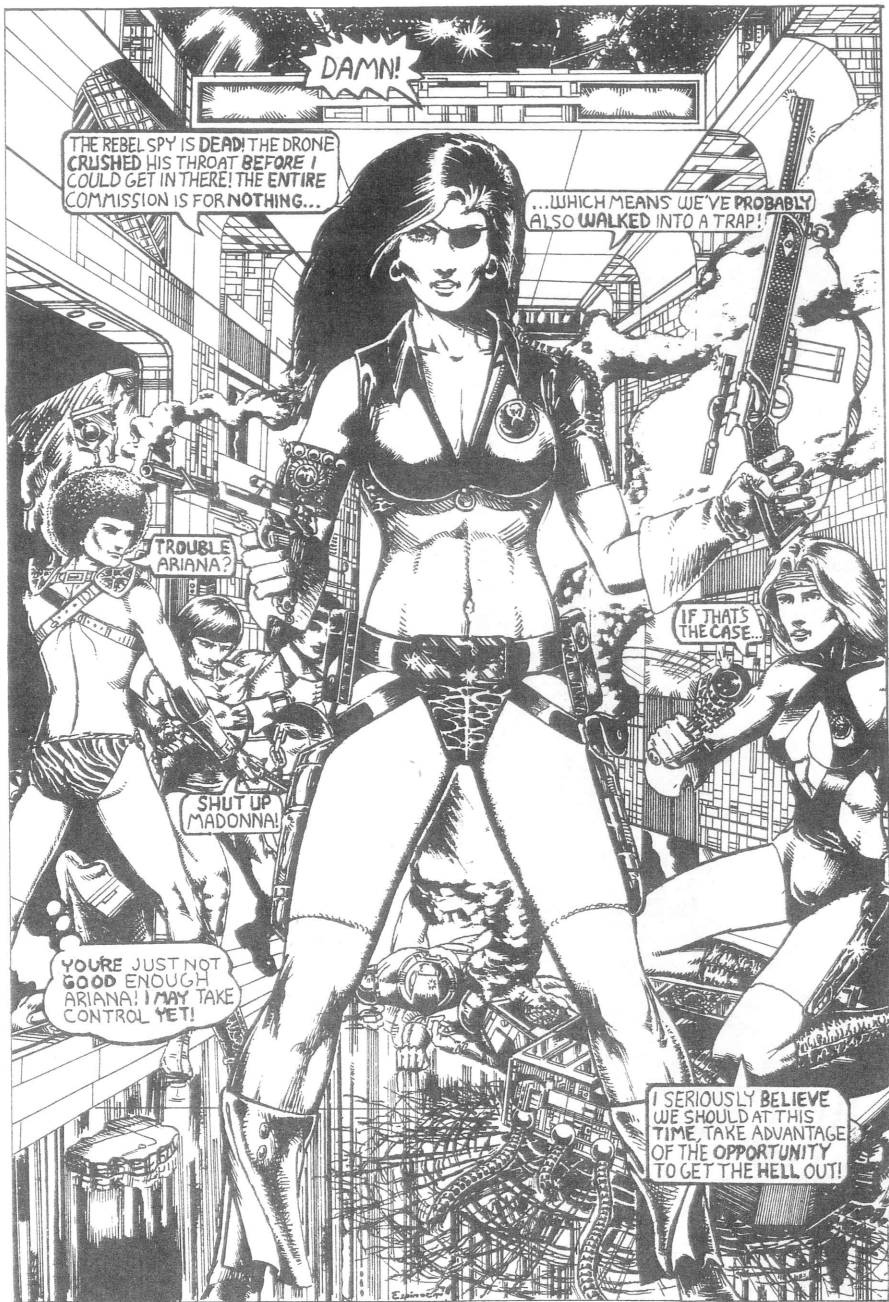
MARVELOUS!



EXCALIBUR LOG (SUPPLEMENTAL) "I AM ENGAGED IN COMBAT WITH A CLASS NINE DEFENSE DRONE! THIS COMMISSION HAS BEEN CHECK FULL OF LITTLE SURPRISES, AND I'VE HAD IT UP TO MY BELT BUCKLE!"

"I GAVE THE DRONE A SNAP-PUNCH TO ITS MAIN SCANNER, WHICH JOLTED US BOTH BUT ALLOWED ME TO GRAB ONE OF ITS WILDLY FLAILING TENTACLES! I THEN SWUNG THE DRONE AROUND ON ITS ANTI-GRAV AXIS, BEATING ITS METAL BODY TO BITS AGAINST THE WALLS! I THEN THREW IT BACK OUT THE DOOR REBOUNDED IT AGAINST A BULKHEAD!"

"I WALKED OVER TO THE PRISONER AND CHECKED HIM OVER..."



DAMN!

THE REBEL SPY IS DEAD! THE DRONE CRUSHED HIS THROAT BEFORE I COULD GET IN THERE! THE ENTIRE COMMISSION IS FOR NOTHING...

...WHICH MEANS WE'VE PROBABLY ALSO WALKED INTO A TRAP!

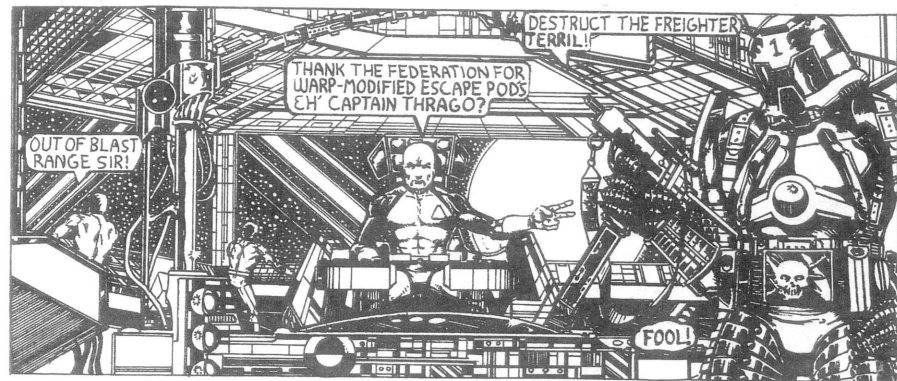
TROUBLE ARIANA?

IF THAT'S THE CASE.

SHUT UP MADONNA!

YOU'RE JUST NOT GOOD ENOUGH ARIANA! I MAY TAKE CONTROL YET!

I SERIOUSLY BELIEVE WE SHOULD AT THIS TIME, TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET THE HELL OUT!



DESTRUCT THE FREIGHTER TERRIL!

THANK THE FEDERATION FOR WARP-MODIFIED ESCAPE PODS EH' CAPTAIN THRAGO?

OUT OF BLAST RANGE SIR!

FOOL!

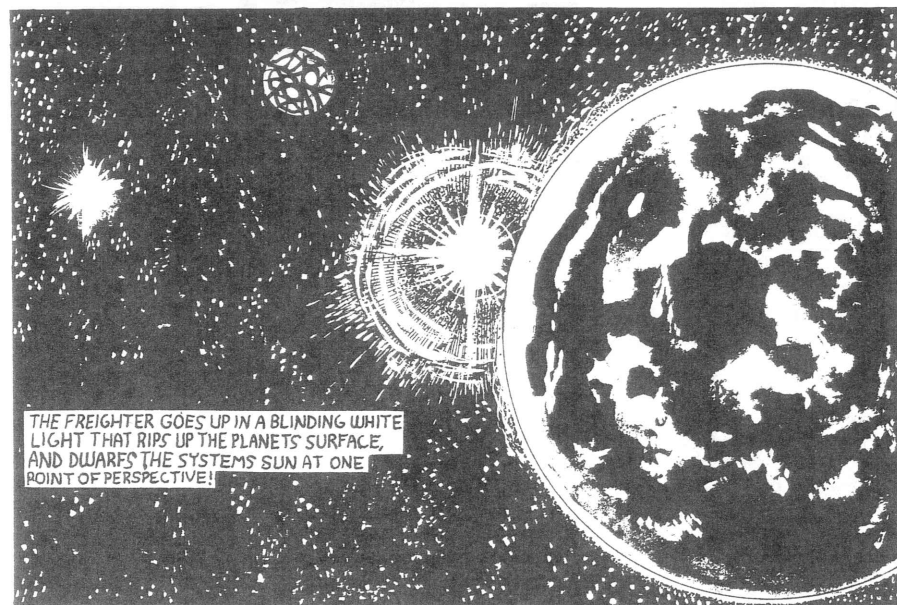


GOOD-BYE SHADOWWING!

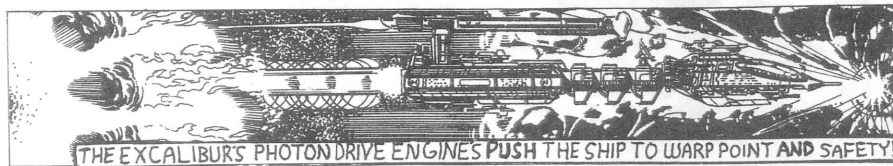
LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!

WAIT!

ANTI-MATTER BUILD-UP!?



THE FREIGHTER GOES UP IN A BLINDING WHITE LIGHT THAT RIPS UP THE PLANET'S SURFACE, AND DWARFS THE SYSTEMS SUN AT ONE POINT OF PERSPECTIVE!



EXCALIBUR LOG (SUPPLEMENTAL); THIS HAD TO BE THE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN! THEY DETONATED AN ANTI-MATTER CHARGE RIGHT NEXT TO MY SHIP! THOSE EPHASIANS ARE GOING TO BE IN FOR A BIG SURPRISE THOUGH! WE SURVIVED!

THE EXCALIBUR HAS A CREW OF 275 PEOPLE! OF THE 50 WHO BOARDED THE FREIGHTER ONLY 35 CAME BACK! THE COMMISSION WAS A TOTAL WASTE OF TIME AND LIVES! A FACT OF WAR!



SENSORS INDICATE SOMETHING MADE A LIGHT WARP JUMP JUST BEFORE THE EXPLOSION! YOU FAILED TERRIL...



FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO DONT KNOW, THIS IS MY FIRST COMIC STORY! BEING SUCH, I WOULD LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS TO MY FRIENDS; ALLAN, SANDY, PHIL, BRYAN, STEVE AND ESPECIALLY, BEN! AND WATCH FOR ARIANA IN A NEW SCIENCE FICTION ROLE PLAYING GAME; STAR-ROVERS; SOON TO BE RELEASED BY ARCHIVE MINIATURES OF BURLINGAME! I WOULD GREATLY APPRECIATE ANY COMMENTS ON THIS SERIES! © 78 ©

IXIONA:

by Nick Chinn

Centauress in the 20th Century

Synopsis – In the last chapter, Ixiona, Diana and Eunice traveled to Athens for a meal at the local McDonald's Restaurant. Disguised by a magic spell, they nevertheless were sighted by Andros, the son of a Lapithae descendent, able to see through any centaur's spell. As a member of a family sworn to eradicate the centaur race, Andros' father dedicates himself to Ixiona's death. Ixiona and company are back in their luxuriously-furnished cave in Thessaly, and Ixiona is writing in her journal/diary.

Chapter Five: "Dear Journal"

Dear Journal –

Yesterday Diana, Eunice and I went to Athens to grab a bite to eat at McDonald's . . . I'd never eaten there before so I thought it would be a great adventure. But the fun turned out to be a potential disaster – I think that a son of a Lapithae saw us, the cursed bastard. I only hope that he doesn't tell his parents, who are sure to be more angered by my presence on Earth than a younger Lapithae would. If his father finds out about me, he will surely hunt me down and violently kill me . . . then I'll never get a chance to prove that my father doesn't belong in hell.

I've got so many things to worry about – my boyfriend, Raquedon, is becoming a mystery to me. The other day we walked to a meadow in the woods and talked about trivial things. That meadow was the same place we have had so many heart-to-heart talks long into the night. How I wished things could be that way again. Sometimes my suspicious mind tells me that he doesn't care for me as much as he used to, but he always insists that he does. When I throw my arms around him he often seems alienated by my advances.

But sometimes he does not, which puzzles me a lot.

He can be so very gentle and affectionate, and I love him so much when he is that way. But other times his mind seems to wander and I can't reach him. Then he'll say some things that turn me off . . . like some things about other girls he knows, and I get jealous to the point where I won't have anything to do with him. But then he'll be affectionate again, and I'm happy again. But when I get jealous I get so depressed, thinking that everything between us isn't worth it and it's all over.

I don't know if I can stand this emotional roller coaster for very much longer.

If I concentrate on regaining Raquedon's feelings, then I'll have less time to devote to my father's vindication. Oh, but if I spend too much time on my father, Raquedon doesn't come around to see me. And I need Raquedon's emotional support and companionship to keep me strong. Hey! I have been strong before without a boyfriend, so why can't I do it now?

Want to know why? Because now that I have a boyfriend, I can't seem to unhook myself from him, and I want more of him. Unfortunately for me, he doesn't seem too willing to go along with the game. I guess it's up to me to force the issue. I'll have to use my feminine wiles, whatever those are.

You know, I find it hard to split my time and efforts in two and to do justice to all facets of my life. Why does life have to be so complicated? If Hades had not made a mistake in judging my father, I wouldn't have to be doing all this. Sometimes I think that if I did find a more devoted boyfriend, instead of fickle Raquedon, I would have more energy to direct toward more important goals.

Oh, but I do love Raquedon, and right now I don't want anybody else.

Sometimes I feel that Fate controls everthing and that I really am a pawn in a grand scheme of the cosmos – I am a tiny piece of a cog in a wheel, so insignificant that my function in the uni-

verse would never be missed if I were to suddenly leave. In that sense, nothing I do will matter, because whether or not I vindicate Chiron won't matter when time marches on and leaves us all behind in the dust of the ages.

Dammit, but clearing my father's name is so important to me. But why? Is it my mission in life?

Why couldn't any of my hundreds of brothers or sisters be given this unenviable task? On an emotional level, I do believe that I must restore my father's honor. But when I step back, collect my thoughts and analyze the situation, it all seems so hopeless to me. An insurmountable task. I have tried before to break into Hades' domain, but failed. I was lucky to even return home, and I never got close to my father. But I have already chronicled those events in this journal, and guess I shouldn't dwell on past defeats so much.

Sometimes I wonder if this journal ever does me any good, or will a psychiatrist do me better? Who cares about me writing all about my personal history? I have often wondered what my friends think of me when they ask me what I'm writing about. I tell them I'm writing down my thoughts in my journal. They don't understand — "Oh, I used to keep a diary, too, but it got too silly," they laugh. But my journal isn't silly, and you know that. As a matter of fact, I write things so personal that I wouldn't want anyone to read it. So what's the sense in writing down anything at all if nobody is going to read it? Well, the journal makes things seem so bearable for the most part. I guess it's a good thing to get it all out of the system.

Until now, I felt that I had a lot of time to work things out with Raquedon while still pursuing my goal. But if I'm going to be hunted down, I'm going to need to exercise much more caution, and I won't have as much time. But too much haste will probably spoil everything though, and all that I've worked for will crumble.

Does Raquedon love me? I wish he'd say, but he doesn't.

Diana is helping me research who knew my father best, and will testify to his benevolence. We plan to lure the ghosts of these people into the open, separate them from any other spirits around, and solicit testimony from them. Then we can try and present the evidence to Hades, and I hope that information will be enough to free my father from hell. Few living beings have entered Hades' realm and returned, though. I don't want to get stuck in hell without dying first — hey, but I expect to go to heaven, I'm such a good person (I think, but that's not my judgment to make) — but at least my efforts will be for a righteous cause. I hope my father appreciates it, if he's not already gone insane from being unjustly trapped in hell. When I think of his suffering I know what I must do and that I must go through with it, whether Raquedon supports me or not. Sometimes Raquedon is all-supportive of my goal. Other times he remains quiet and offers no encouragement at all. Sometimes it seems that he's trying to get me to motivate myself. I guess I'm supposed to get a bigger sense of achievement that way if I think I did it my way. I have a hard time remembering exactly whose idea it was in the first place to save my father's soul. I asked Raquedon repeatedly, but he says he doesn't remember, either. But I know he's much smarter than that.

I haven't told you much about Eunice. She's a really flaky character and loves to eat a lot of food.

It's a wonder that she's so skinny. Maybe she has a lot of nervous energy just like me. I've never seen anything like her — she has a unicorn's horn, a human head and body, and goat's legs and tail.

We found her in the woods. We don't even know exactly where she came from. She says that she has ancestors dating back to the so-called mythological era. I think Eunice looks funny, but I guess humans think I look funny, too. Frankly I think humans look funny. They are strangely funny . . . especially when they try and kill my relatives . . . and me. I have yet to figure it all out.

I don't know what to do with Eunice. Maybe we can make a warrior out of her — she seems to be feisty enough. We're going to need brave people with us when we finally visit Hades. I'm not looking forward to that confrontation, but it must be done.

So our next step is to figure a plan for attracting the ghosts we need to talk to. I have read that this means digging a hole in the ground, slaughtering a lamb, and pouring its blood into the hole. The ghosts will crowd around the hole and drink the blood. According to history, we can fend off unwanted ghosts with a sword until we find the right ghosts. I never met a real ghost before, but

(continued on page 35)



Aphrodite

Jeff Thompson & Tom Luth

•Chapter V•



Chapter 5

The gorgeous clone, Aphrodite, gasped as another bullet whizzed by her head. She sprinted fluidly around and over the prostrate forms of the townspeople, who had flattened themselves on the sidewalk when Mitch Owens had spotted Aphrodite near the town square and had begun chasing her and shooting at her. The lovely cloned form of the hideous Skull Goddess did not dare to slow her frenzied pace, lest Mitch, the crazed brother of Mark Owens — the man she had loved and who had died because of her — should overtake her.

The crack of another bullet's discharge from Mitch's gun — plus the sound of an approaching police car's siren — made Aphrodite grimace. *If I'm not outrunning Mitch, the clone thought to herself, I'm outrunning the police! It's been like this for a month now, ever since Mark died! Mitch has caught up with me in three different little towns so far!*

Suddenly Aphrodite found herself running over a bridge. She glanced at the traffic whizzing along the Interstate highway beneath the overpass and an idea struck her. Halting her flight and looking behind her, Aphrodite was glad to see that Mitch Owens was not in sight yet. She turned her attention to the vehicles on the Interstate — and to one particular truck rapidly approaching the overpass. Out of the corner of her eye, she now was aware of Mitch Owen's advance. Concentrating on the truck and her timing, Aphrodite hurled herself from the bridge onto the top of the tall truck, scant seconds before it passed under the bridge!

Seemingly safe again, Aphrodite pulled herself up on one elbow and surveyed the injuries incurred in her spectacular leap — several cuts and scrapes and a cut lip. *Oh, well, she mused silently, I'd rather be slightly banged up than at the mercy of Mitch! Anybody who would run through city streets shooting a gun — no matter what the reason — has got to be out of his mind!* Aphrodite (or Dot, as she had been called) stretched out on the top of the truck and tried to relax. Hundreds of billowy clouds swiftly paraded over her head in an endless race as the strong wind violently waved her jet-black hair.

The thoughts of the newborn clone with the consciousness of Skull Goddess returned to the uncanny dream which she had had three times in the last week or so. *I'm finally free of 'blinking out' to Ethera — so now I'm dreaming about it! Only — it's a very different Ethera. It's a happy Ethera — and I caused it! All three times in my dream, I caused it! I . . . along with . . . him . . .*

The incessant motion of the truck soothed Aphrodite and eventually lulled her to sleep. The monstrous vehicle continued to careen down the flat highway — bearing its fitfully-sleeping stowaway on its rusted, dented top.

* * *

Aphrodite drifted through all-too-familiar ebony. Her gaze fell upon a long, thick lance clutched tightly in her hand. Suddenly the clone felt substance beneath her feet — she had returned to squalid, malevolent Ethera! She seemed to detect the hissing of myriad demons and wicked lost souls crouched in the dark shadows all around her.

At that instant in the dream, Aphrodite screamed as she spied the dread hate-monster shuffling toward her — the hate-monster that was the pure evil of Hesbolo and that had devoured the purely good frame of herself — as well as destroying the Etheran body of Skull Goddess! Aphrodite tightened her grip on the mystical lance and steeled herself for the imminent battle always included in her recurring dream.

Before the unspeakable creature could reach her, the dreaming Aphrodite flung the alabaster spear at it; the weapon buried itself deep in the creature's writhing mass. Suddenly the hate-thing was engulfed in a blinding light — to be replaced by the glowing form of a young man! Dot uncovered her eyes and studied the blonde man. She could not discern many specifics about the being, for he was bathed in a shimmering light. Dot sensed the man's handsomeness and compassion.

The celestial man advanced toward the unafraid Dot and thanked her for ridding the world of the hate-monster. "Now that the creature's evil has been cast out, I am freed and I can thrive!" he declared in a resonant, gentle voice. The being studied Dot and she sensed an expression of awe on his glowing visage. His warm, strong hands took her hands and he proclaimed,

"You are a newborn babe — pure in heart and deed and untainted by the hideous world which you must call home, Earth." Dot looked shocked as the young light-man announced, "You, clone, are pristine and removed from the blemished paths of the other Earthlings. Now, come with me as I cleanse Ethera!"

A stupefied Aphrodite allowed the benevolent being of light to grip her and elevate her with him as he gracefully soared high above the grimy surface of Ethera! Aphrodite stared in astonishment as the celestial man surveyed the countless, gnarled malefactors limping along the lanes of the ethereal realm — because, as the light-man gazed at each rogue, he was consumed in a brilliant light and transformed from a grotesquerie to a regal being of light similar to the youthful flying man!

Presently, the glowing man returned Dot to the ground and the latter stared incredulously at her surroundings. The dark, murky gloom of wicked Ethera had been replaced by a shining, pastel plane of tranquility! The celestial man released Dot and bade her farewell.

"No, wait!" the dreaming Aphrodite cried. "I don't want to go back to Earth now that Ethera is so beautiful! I don't belong in that world! I want to stay here with you in this paradise — and love you!"

"That cannot be," the light being stated stoically. "I wait here for another. Besides, it is *your task*, unspoiled clone, to cleanse your other world!"

* * *

Aphrodite gasped and bolted to a sitting position atop the truck. "My God, I've had the same dream for the fourth time!" she cried aloud. "What does it mean? What makes me keep dreaming it?"

Dot looked around her and realized that the truck was parked with several other tall rigs at a truck stop in another town. Suddenly enveloped by a cold chill, Dot rubbed her arms and rose unsteadily to her feet.

"Ready to come down now?" a voice on the ground taunted her. Dot looked down — standing on the left side of the truck with his gun poised was Mitch Owens! A gunshot barely missed Dot as she sprang onto the truck parked to the right of the first truck. The agile clone ran the length of the small parking area by leaping from one rig to another. Finally she jumped to the grass beside the parking lot and rolled over several times. Then she got to her feet and dashed off, having eluded Mitch Owens once again.

* * *

Clad in a dress thrown over her blouse and shorts, and a pair of sunglasses — both of which she reluctantly had stolen from an unlocked automobile in town — Aphrodite strode nervously along the streets of downtown Phillipsburg, planning her next move. *Oh, what kind of life is this?* she mentally asked herself. *It's bad enough that I'm a clone and I don't really fit in with original beings — but, on top of that, Mitch Owens and the FBI are hunting me down for manslaughter! Sometimes I wish I —*

A curious sight interrupted Aphrodite's reverie. In front of her, Dot noticed a pretty, teen-aged girl wearing a large poncho and trudging dazedly along the sidewalk. The girl's walk suggested an almost trancelike state. Dot quickened her pace and was horrified to see the girl step off of the curb without looking — and an auto was rapidly approaching the intersection.

Dot brushed past a pedestrian and leapt toward the teen-ager. She seized the girl and quickly pulled her back onto the curb, causing both of them to lose their balance and stumble. The teen-aged girl looked frightenedly at Dot, but her expression grew warmer as she rose to her feet.

Fingering the new rip in her poncho, the girl addressed Aphrodite with, "Good heavens! You saved my life, didn't you? I don't know what to say! Uh . . . thank you! Oh, and my name is Veronica."

Aphrodite clasped Veronica's extended hand and said, "Hi there. I'm Dot. Listen, Veronica, you've got to be a lot more careful. Didn't you see that car?"

"No, not really," Veronica replied. "I was thinking about something else; I'm always

doing that. I've got two different scars from not looking where I was going!"

Aware of the small crowd which now encircled the duo, Dot began to depart. Veronica gripped her arm and asked, "Please, Dot, would you walk to my house with me?" An uneasy Aphrodite agreed and they began walking. Dot adjusted her dark glasses and bit her lip.

As they strolled along the peaceful residential boulevards near the downtown area, Dot suddenly blurted out, "Veronica, *what* were you thinking about? I mean — why *didn't* you see the car coming?"

A placid smile appeared on Veronica's lovely countenance. "I was thinking about what I usually think about, Dot — the man I love. I think about him and the time when I shall be with him forever."

Dot stifled a chuckle at Veronica's exaggerated adolescent crush and inquired, "Where does this boy live?"

Veronica's large expressive eyes sparkled as she replied, "Oh . . . nearby."

"Then the two of you have gone on a lot of dates?"

"Certainly not!" Veronica declared. "How could we? But someday I'll be with him forever."

Dot asked, "Well, where is he now?"

"Nearby . . . sometimes," Veronica replied thoughtfully. Aphrodite cast a worried, confused look at her peculiar companion and walked in silence. A few moments later, Dot began to have another chill. She glanced at the houses across the street and gasped — Mitch Owens was on the other side of the street one block down! Dot's cold chill intensified.

Veronica, noticing Dot's shivering and agitation, asked the clone what was wrong. She replied, "Oh, ever since I had to jump into some ice-cold water a month ago, I've had a chill every now and then." Frightened, Aphrodite pushed the sunglasses farther up the bridge of her sleek nose.

Veronica removed her poncho and extended it Dot, saying, "Here Dot. I'm kind of hot with it on, but it might warm *you* up."

Dot gladly accepted the garment and quickly slipped it over her head. By now, Mitch Owens had crossed the street and was advancing toward the two females. Perspiring, the cloned Skull Goddess thought, *Oh, please, Mitch, don't recognize me!*

Mark Owens' younger brother blocked Veronica and Dot's paths on the sidewalk and he stared quizzically at the disguised latter. Veronica, sensing the electric atmosphere, pulled Dot's arm and exclaimed, "Come on, Mom, or we'll be late!" The teen-ager gripped Dot and led her past Mitch Owens. Near panic, Aphrodite did not look back.

The pair walked in silence for a block. Finally Veronica softly said, "He isn't following us, Dot. Relax. We'll get to where I live after four more houses!"

Aphrodite wiped her brow and muttered, "Thank you, Veronica, for . . . back there. But *why* did — ?"

"I like you Dot. I really do. I *like* you! That man was evil, but you aren't! I just know it!"

* * *

Several minutes later, Aphrodite stood at the top of the stairs in the entrance foyer of Veronica's attractive residence. She glanced toward the room where Veronica was changing her clothes and then gazed down the stairs at the front door — which opened to reveal a middle-aged man and woman. Veronica's parents?

The man swiftly closed the front door and applied the chain lock as Aphrodite watched, unnoticed, from her perch atop the staircase. "There — that's better!" the man sighed.

"Travis, we don't need the chain on during the day," the woman commented as she deposited her handbag on a table. Suddenly her eyes widened with realization and anger. "Oh, now I see! Dammit, Travis, you've been gambling again and you owe those men a lot more



money! When are you going to quit endangering Veronica and me? Oh, Lord, Travis, how can you throw away our money and act so unconcerned when we have so much of a problem with Veronica?"

"Veronica," Travis repeated the teen-ager's name wryly. "Some days I wish to God we'd never adopted her, Wanda. We don't know the first thing about who she really is or where she came from."

"Excuse me, but I happen to love our daughter!" Wanda retorted. "She's been wonderful all these years — she's always behaved perfectly — she's kind and thoughtful, she's never rude or angry, and she's never done anything dishonest, unlawful, or immoral. Veronica is a fine daughter — except for her one big problem. But you take any other teen-ager these days and they all have much worse things wrong with them!"

Aphrodite listened intently at the top of the stairs as Travis replied, "Maybe so, but her 'one big problem' just isn't normal at all! Honey, there's something wrong with her!"

Wanda told him, "It's just that she has never really lived in the real world. She has a fantasy world where she thinks everything is idyllic and some Prince Charming is waiting to take her away. Don't all girls have romantic daydreams?"

"Wake up, Wanda! Veronica daydreams twenty-four hours a day — and the situation has gotten a helluva lot worse in the past week or so! Nowadays, the kid swears that her mystery man 'has been born' and he's 'finally real' — and that she dreams about him every night — and he talks to her during the day!"

An astonished Aphrodite gasped loudly. Travis whirled around and saw the clone, shouting, "Hey, you! You get out of the house right now! Get out or I'll kill you! I've got a gun!"

Veronica burst from her bedroom and exclaimed, "No, Pop! Dot isn't a burglar — I asked her in. She's my friend."

"But Veronica never *makes* any fr—" Wanda began to whisper but halted as Veronica ushered Dot down the stairs. The girl's mother added, "Uh, sweetie, where did you meet this woman? Is she a teacher?"

The beautiful clone answered, "No, my name is . . . Dot Newman. I helped your daughter out of a jam."

"Don't be modest, Dot," Veronica chided

her. "Mom, Pop, Dot Newman saved my life!"

Veronica explained to her foster parents how Dot had pulled her out of the street and Travis snorted. "one of these fine days you're gonna be thinking about your fairy kingdom and walk right off of a bridge or something! Nobody's gonna be there to save you then!"

* * *

"You're more than welcome, Dot," Wanda cheerfully replied to Aphrodite's expression of her gratitude for being invited to stay for dinner. "is everything all right?"

"It's — um, it's wonderful! The best dinner I've ever eaten!" Dot stammered between mouthfuls. Veronica smiled at her from across the dinner table; Travis looked sullen.

She snowed Veronica and Wanda, Travis thought to himself as he eyed Dot, *but I know better. That snooper is one of Mr. McCaslin's gang that he sent over here to hurt us all if I don't pay him. Damn!*

After a gulp of milk, Veronica asked Dot, "Do you want me to tell you more about my beloved?" Wanda looked suddenly uncomfortable and Travis muttered an obscenity. Before Dot could reply, the adolescent had launched into a monologue about how a wonderful man lived very near, yet very far away from her. With an almost maniacal gleam in her large eyes, Veronica gushed, "I always knew he would come and now he has! Just nine days ago! He comes to me at night and during the day and says that the only woman who can share her life with him is one who is completely pure in heart and deed! Dot, he told me I had forsaken the corrupt way of the world for all of my sixteen years and that someday I would join him!" Dot's eyes bulged in amazement.

"I've HAD IT!" Travis roared and overturned the dinner table. "Veronica, I don't want you EVER to talk about that crap again! EVER! I have enough problems without every stranger in Phillipsburg knowing I have a crazy kid! So SHUT UP, by God!"

Wanda screamed as if in pain and raised her hand to strike Travis. Veronica seized her mother's hand and lowered it, whispering, "No, Mom. That's not right. Don't worry about me." After gently kissing her mother, Veronica accosted the seething Travis and planted a tender kiss on his rough cheek. Then she slowly mounted the stairs to her bedroom, obviously crushed. Aphrodite, wide-eyed with confusion and disbelief, bolted out of the house.

* * *

That night, in a shabby boarding house in downtown Phillipsburg, a perspiring, restless Aphrodite tossed and turned in a precarious slumber — and she began to dream. In her phantasm, Dot returned to the new Ethera and watched as the youthful man of light beckoned to Veronica! The strange pair outstretched their arms, embraced — and seemed to melt into a brilliant light!

Aphrodite awoke from her dream bathed in sweat. Running a hand through her raven mane, Dot's thoughts raced. *Did my spirit actually return to Ethera and free that light-person? Was it a real occurrence and not just a weird dream? If he IS real, then is he the same man that Veronica fantasizes about — the man she claims now has been born?*

Springing off of the seedy mattress, Dot cried aloud, "I've got to see her again! I've got to learn the truth from that girl!"

Dot ran the half-dozen blocks to Veronica's house at a breakneck pace akin to her flights from Mitchell Owens. Upon arriving at the house, Dot gasped to see the front door standing wide open. The cloned Skull Goddess entered the house and bolted up the stairs to Veronica's bedroom. Dot threw the lightswitch — Veronica's bed was empty! "Oh, my God," Dot sighed. "Where could that poor, confused girl be?"

Dot felt something cold and metallic on her back and spun around to find Travis blocking the doorway, a pistol in his hand! He seemed steeped in the scent of whiskey. "I knew it!" he shouted. "I knew you were one of McCaslin's people — sent here to hurt me and my family! Now what the hell did you do with Veronica?"

Laughing ironically, Dot spat, "I seem to care more than you really do!" and kicked the firearm out of Travis' unsteady hand. The heroine pushed him aside and raced down the stairs

and out of the house.

Dot sprinted madly along the midnight streets, straining to spot Veronica. After covering several blocks, Dot was on the edge of the downtown area and spied the teen-ager on the other side of the avenue, running and sobbing loudly. "Veronica!" Dot yelled. "Veronica, I want to help you!"

"No! No!" the girl sputtered and ducked into an unlocked church sanctuary. Dot prepared to cross the street when she detected swift movement out of the corner of her eye — Travis was running erratically toward her, his gun glinting in the moonlight!

Dot darted across the boulevard and into the old cathedral. She followed the sound of footsteps and realized that Veronica had begun climbing the winding stairway leading to the church's high bell tower. With a worried, pained expression on her exquisite face, Aphrodite began the spiraling ascent.

Soon the heroine silently emerged on the open-air platform over which the giant bells were suspended. Carefully sidestepping the large hole through which the bells' ropes hung down to the round floor, Dot stealthily approached the sobbing Veronica, whose back was to her. The girl was standing at the unfettered edge of the platform, staring at the Phillipsburg skyline.

"No one on this Earth believes me or understands me — or wants to!" the girl was crying to the wind. "I do not belong here! I belong only with you, my darling lover! Only you are like me!"

"No, Veronica — I'm like you too!" Aphrodite declared. A surprised Veronica faced the clone and eyed her incredulously. Dot continued, "He told me I was 'pure' too!"

"You? No! No, Dot, I can't believe that you've seen him! That you are — No! No one has seen him except m—"

"Except you — and me!" Dot interrupted her. "I want to help you, Veronica. I think I can — because the being of light thinks we are like each other." Aphrodite outstretched her hand.

"I've got you cornered now for sure!" the gravel voice of Travis gloated as he appeared on the platform and trained his gun on Aphrodite. "You and Brian McCaslin won't get away with this! I'll see to that, lady! I'll put every last one of you in jail for kidnapping!" Travis' growling laugh almost obscured the entreating cries of Wanda, who was in the churchyard begging her brutish husband not to hurt anyone on the tower.

Before Dot could reason with Travis, Veronica shook her fists and wailed, "Oh, God, this cruel, violent, insensitive world! I can't live in it anymore! I must be with the man who loves me!" Dot used the distraction to knock the pistol out of Travis' sweaty hand and off of the bell-tower. The weapon clattered along the ancient church's turrets and landed on the grass near Wanda.

Suddenly Veronica's eyes bulged and she grinned. "Oh, yes! I see you!" she shrieked almost gleefully as she stared into space. "I see you there, my darling! The time has come for me to join you! The time has come for me to dwell with you for all eternity!" With a hysterical laugh, Veronica lunged at the air and plummeted off of the bell-tower. Wanda's agonizing shriek intensified as an incredibly bright light illuminated the tower and then went out, leaving only the original, eerie moonlight.

In the churchyard, Wanda screamed and cried, "There's no body! Where is my baby's body? She fell off right here, but why isn't there a body? Good God, where did my poor Veronica go? Oh, WHERE?"

Dot stood limply atop the bell-tower, stunned at the revelation. Her trance was broken by Travis' curses. "You'll pay for making her jump! You killed her all right, but now I'm gonna kill you!"

"No, Travis!" Dot shrieked. "Veronica didn't die! Somehow, I guess she went to —"



Dot gasped as she spotted the knife which Travis had produced from his pocket. Travis jumped at her — and Aphrodite leapt toward the bell ropes, gripped one, and slid to the bottom. She groaned softly as the ropes burned her palms.

Upon arriving at the ground, Aphrodite ran through sanctuary, found a back exit, and disappeared into the humid night.

The near-empty train car wheezed and clattered down the track — carrying in its pungent confines a disheveled Aphrodite. The beautiful clone was ripping up her dress to use as makeshift bandages for the stinging abrasions on her hands. She silently mused, *Was Veronica's lover only a figment of a disturbed girl's imagination? If THAT'S so, then where is Veronica NOW?*

Aphrodite discarded the possibility with a shake of her head. *Somehow, it wasn't a dream. Then what did the light-man mean by telling me to 'cleanse' Earth? All I know is that I don't belong here either — a newborn clone in a world of jaded, malignant humans.*

After a pause, Aphrodite tilted her head and whispered, "I wish I were as lucky as Veronica is . . . now."

Aphrodite and this story copyright 1978 by Jeff Thompson. Original artwork copyright 1978 by Tom Luth.

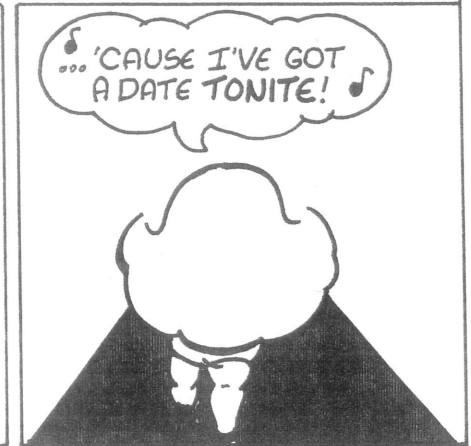


Fannah

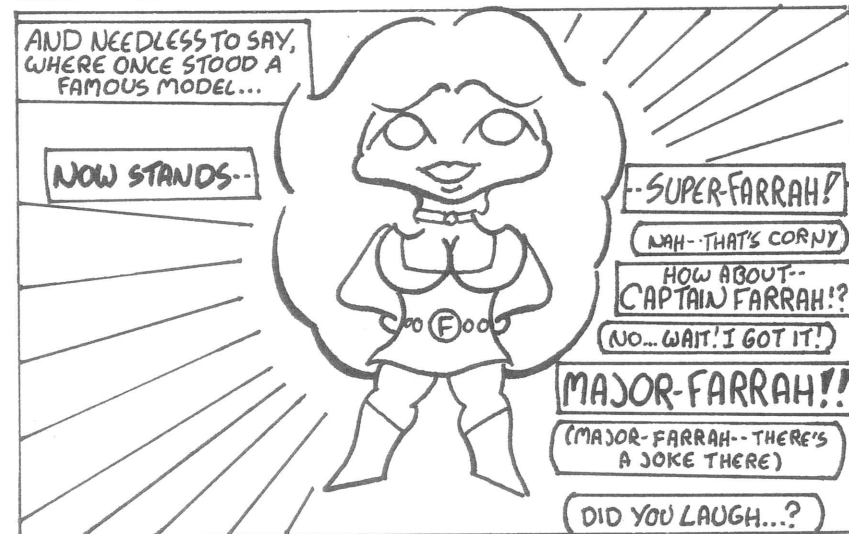
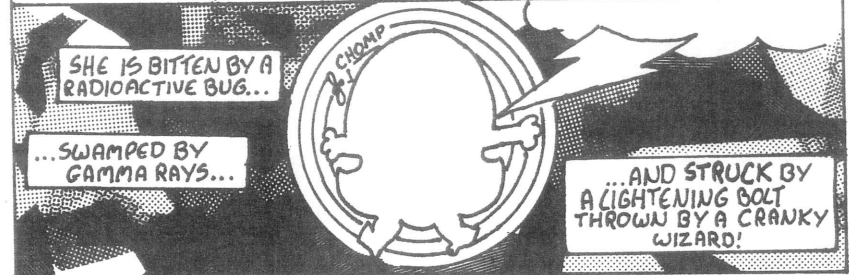
THE FASHION MODEL

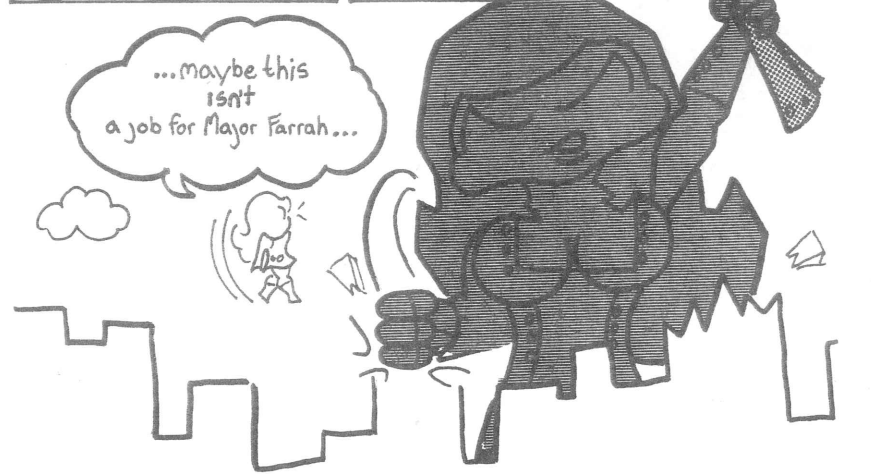


FLASH
FLASH
FLASH

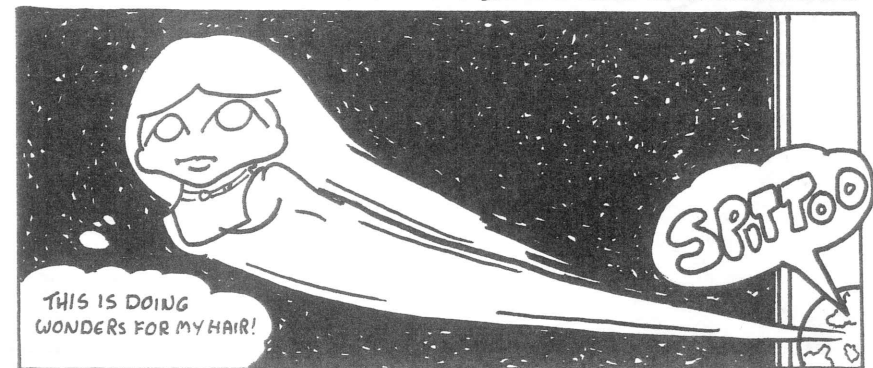
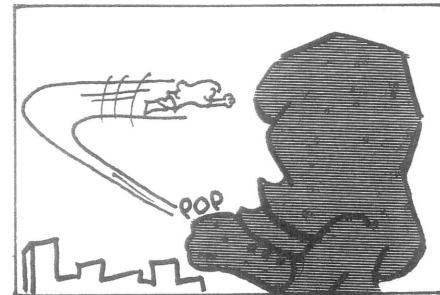


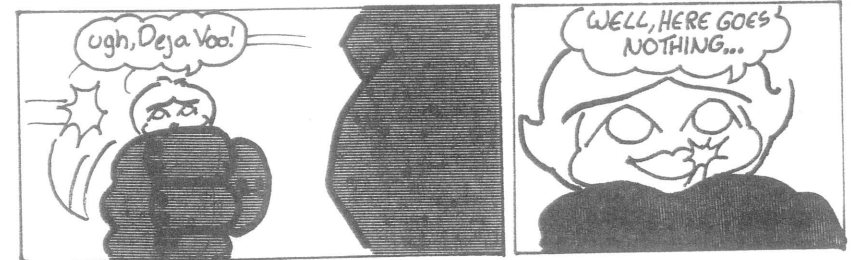
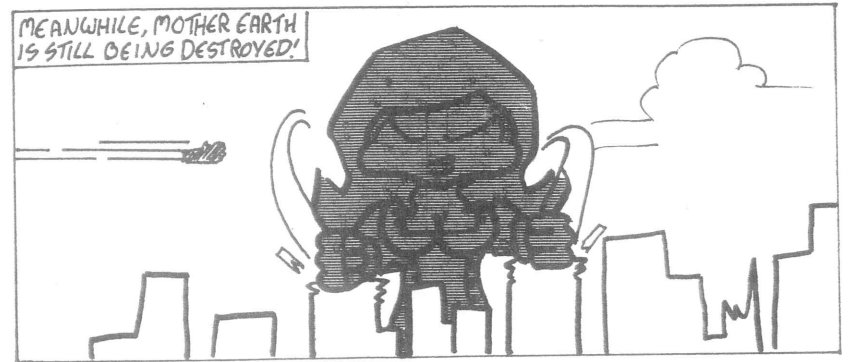
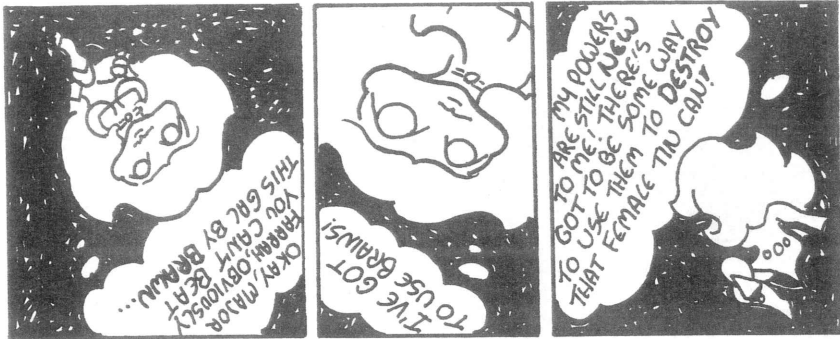
ORIGINS ARE FUNNY THINGS. NO MATTER HOW HARD A WRITER TRIES, ORIGINS ARE ALWAYS STUPID! SO TO MAKE IT EASIER ON ME, LET'S JUST SAY THAT AS FARRAH THE FASHION MODEL WAS WALKING HOME...





WITH THE EDITOR'S PERMISSION, MAJOR FARRAH WILL DO A "MARVEL" AND SPEND A WHOLE PAGE TRYING TO CLOBBER THIS MEAN, UGLY ROBOT!







Al Tanner's

SHAMROCK and Pixie

"REIGN OF
THE SPHINX!"

Story:
Scott Gibson

Art:
Larry Heller



There was a balmy breeze blowing, lessening the intensity of a ninety-degree California day as Heather Donovan stepped from the airplane and descended the stairs to the asphalt. Behind her, fairly bubbling with excitement, came Heather's twelve year-old sister Bonnie. The young girl paused at the top of the stairs, surveying the hustle and bustle of the busy airport. The wind blew her long golden hair about, and she impatiently pushed strands of it out of her face.

Bonnie closed her eyes and frowned, as if trying to distinguish a singularly important fact from the sounds and smells around her.

"Come on, slowpoke!" Heather called to her. "We've got places to go!"

After retrieving their luggage, the sisters hailed a taxi to take them to their hotel.

"There's so many things I just *have* to do!" exclaimed Bonnie. "I've always wanted to visit California."

"Hold it, youngster," smiled Heather. "We've come here on business, not just for sight-seeing."

Instantly Bonnie became somber. "I wonder what's wrong with Dr. Azmoff. Why haven't we heard from him in so long?"

Her older sister gazed out of the cab's window, looking, yet not seeing the California scenery moving rapidly by. "That's something we're going to find out right away. He hasn't answered any of my letters, and according to the telephone company, he has had his line disconnected!"

"He's always been kind of a weirdo," snorted Bonnie. "Who knows what he's up to now?"

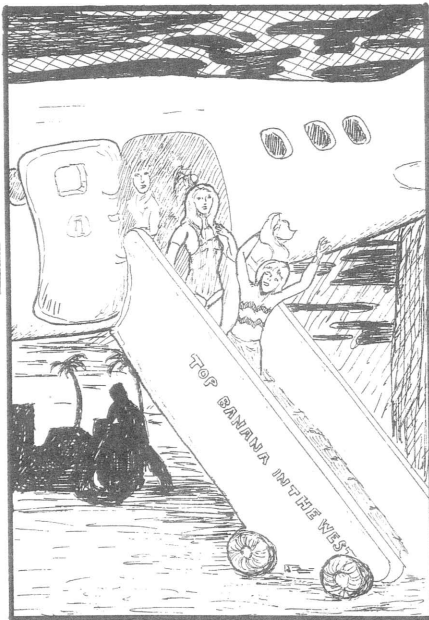
"Bonnie! Dr. Azmoff has been a friend of the family since long before either you or I were born. I don't want you talking about him like that," Heather reprimanded.

"Well, he is a little strange," murmured Bonnie defensively, after a moment's silence.

Heather had to conceal a smile. "Dr. Azmoff is what you call *eccentric*. And he can well afford to be."

The taxi drew up before a large hotel, nestled back from the street in groves of palm trees.

"Please wait for us," Heather directed the driver. "We'll need you to drive us somewhere else in just a moment." The girls alighted and moved into the hotel lobby. After registering,



Heather had their luggage sent up to their room; all except for a small overnight case which she carried back to the cab.

"You're taking our Shamrock and Pixie costumes with us? Do you think we might need them?" Bonnie asked excitedly.

Heather raised her finger to her lips in a shushing motion. "I don't know," she said under her breath. "But we should be prepared, just in case."



The drive to Azmoff's home and lab, an isolated seaside estate, was a lengthy one. Bonnie fell silent, fascinated with the scenery. Heather's concern for their scientist-friend occupied her thoughts.

"After all," she reflected, "if it weren't for Dr. Azmoff, there probably would never have been a Shamrock and Pixie."

"Dad was working on a case, investigating details of a crime he was reporting on when he first met Dr. Azmoff, who was able to supply some crucial information concerning the whole affair. The doctor has been a trusted friend of The Donovan family ever since. He was a

great comfort to us when Mother and Dad were killed, and he encouraged Bonnie and me in our decision to become crimefighters.

"Except for our butler Victor, the doctor is the only person that we've trusted with the knowledge that Bonnie and I are Pixie and Shamrock."

"This is the address, miss," said the driver, interrupting Heather's thoughts. The car pulled over to the roadside, in front of a huge iron-rod gate on which was posted a large NO TRESS-PASSING sign.

"I'm afraid I can't get you any closer than this," the cabbie apologized.

"No, this will be fine," Heather murmured, looking with puzzlement at the uninviting sign. She handed the man a substantial amount of money, and the girls stepped out into the graveled driveway.

As the taxi sped off, Bonnie surveyed the gate. "What do we do now?"

Her sister glanced up and down the highway to make sure no cars were in sight. Then she stepped forward and attempted to open the gate. It was locked.

"We climb over," she shrugged.

It took only a few seconds for the athletically-inclined pair to scale the iron barrier and drop to the other side. Bonnie began trotting down the long, winding driveway, but Heather called her back.

"What's wrong?"

Her sister beckoned her into the dense undergrowth by the side of the driveway. "I think it would be better if we appeared as Shamrock and Pixie, rather than as ourselves."

Bonnie caught the perky green outfit that her sister tossed at her. "But why?" she asked. "Dr. Azmoff knows our secret identities anyway!"

"Dr. Azmoff does," Heather said grimly, pulling on her boots. "But no one else knows."



"And since we haven't heard a word from the doctor in so long, we have no idea what may be going on or who might be in the house with him. Ready?" she concluded, slipping on her mask.

Bonnie nodded briskly, and stepped from the bushes into the sunlight.

The walk to the large imposing house with connecting laboratory wing was short one. In no time, Shamrock and Pixie were ascending a set of marble stairs to an ornate veranda. Their knocking was answered at some length by a slim, middle-aged woman who regarded them curiously.

"There is a 'no trespassing' sign on the front gate. You aren't to be on the grounds," she informed them coldly.

"We're friends of Dr. Azmoff," Pixie chirped brightly. "He'll want to see us. We're Shamrock and Pixie!"

The solemn woman in the equally solemn black outfit looked unimpressed. She shook her head. "Dr. Azmoff sees no one. I don't know who you are, but you aren't to be on the grounds," she repeated stubbornly.

Shamrock took over. "Won't you please at least tell the doctor that we're here? That may make a difference."

"I'm afraid not. You must go."

"No. Not until we see the doctor," said Shamrock with a firmness that startled even Pixie.

The older woman looked exasperated. After a moment's deliberation, she sighed and disappeared down the hall, leaving the green-garbed duo in the doorway.

"I didn't know that Dr. Azmoff had a maid," whispered Pixie after the servant's footsteps had faded away. "He never used to."

After a lengthy wait, the heroines heard footsteps approaching and loud voices.

"... no interruptions... your job... to take care of such disturbances..."

"sorry... persistent... refused to leave..."

A thin, grey-haired man of about sixty stepped into sight, accompanied by the woman who had opened the door.

"Dr. Azmoff! It's good to see you!" Shamrock cried out.

The older man, attired in a white laboratorial coat much too large for him, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and studied the pair in the doorway for a moment.

"We've been worried about you... you haven't answered any of our letters!" Shamrock continued. Still the man said nothing, but continued to stare at the two.

"What's the matter? Don't you recognize us?" Pixie inquired sharply.

"Of course I recognize you," the doctor snorted. "But what are you doing here?" There was no trace of friendliness in the voice.

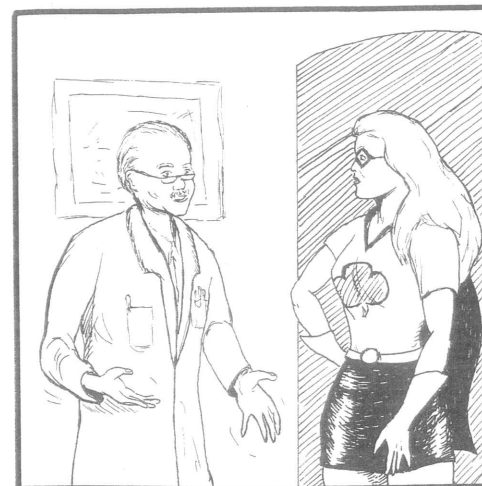
Shamrock was taken aback by his words. Not so Pixie.

"Why, we were very worried! We didn't know what had happened to you! So we came out to California to make sure you were all right! Besides, you haven't sent any gas pellets to Shamrock —"

Her sister laid a hand on the young costumed crimefighter's shoulder, a warning not to say anything else.

"We just wanted to make certain that nothing had happened to you, Doctor," Shamrock said coolly, resentful anger welling within her. "We didn't know you had a housekeeper," she nodded towards the woman in the starched black uniform who now stood silently behind the doctor. "We thought you might be alone and sick or something."

"Well, I'm not sick. I'm fine. And busy, very busy. So please go away now." Azmoff dismissed them with a wave of his hand.



tombs." Then, as if fearing he had revealed too much, the doctor turned and left the room abruptly.

"Come on, Pixie. We'd better go now."

The youngster nodded slightly to her sister, indicating that she had finished "probing." The duo moved out onto the porch. They were starting down the steps when the housekeeper called after them softly.

"Wait. Please wait."

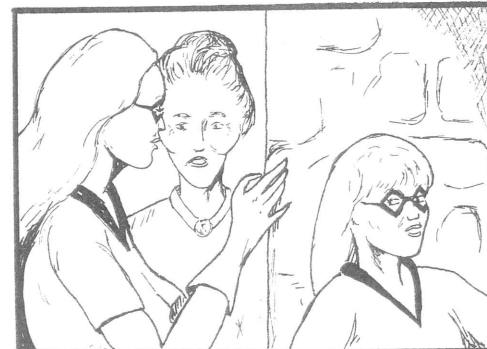
Surprised, the heroines stopped and faced the slender woman, who, with drawn and worried face, glanced around furtively, then moved out onto the veranda, pulling the front door closed behind her. "I'm - I'm worried about the doctor," she confided in a trembling voice.

"The way he acted towards you just a minute ago... that's the way he's been for months now. Ever since he received this assignment commissioned by the government. He spends all of his time in his laboratory. I - I have to remind him constantly to eat, or he wouldn't even do that. He's put up 'no trespassing' signs all around the property. He had the phone disconnected. He doesn't even open his mail!"

She stopped, breathless, and looked expectantly at Shamrock.

"I don't understand. I've known Dr. Azmoff for years - he's never behaved like this," was all that the Emerald clad law enforcer could offer.

The housekeeper drew closer. "I think that the doctor's life is in danger! It's bad enough that he doesn't look after his health, but... lately, strange men and strange cars pass by here every



day, at all hours, stopping sometimes . . . I - I hear people prowling around the grounds late at night. I've told Doctor, but he says I'm foolish and imagining things. He'll be so angry if he knows I told you this, but I - I had to tell someone. Can you please help?"

Startled by this sudden dispersal of information, Shamrock took the older woman's hand and patted it reassuringly.

"Of course, Miss - what is your name?"

"Emily."

"All right, Emily. When those men and cars come around -"

"Oh, I must go! Doctor will wonder what's been keeping me!" the housekeeper cried. She pulled herself away hastily and reopened the front door.

"You will help Doctor, won't you?" she quavered.

"Of course, but we need to know -"

The *click* of the door shutting cut off Shamrock's question. The girls looked at each other; Pixie shrugged puzzledly, Shamrock sighed, and they walked down the drive to the highway in silence. Near the gate Shamrock retrieved their suitcase and they changed back into streetclothes.

After scaling the gate, the Donovan sisters walked half a mile up the road to a bus stop Bonnie had noticed earlier from the taxi window.

It was a hot and dusty ninety minutes later that the girls walked into their hotel lobby.

"Me for a shower." Bonnie grimaced. She pressed the elevator button. Heather wandered over to a news vending machine and purchased a paper.

"I ought to find out what's going on in the world," she said.

The elevator discharged them several floors up. In their room, Heather tossed the paper onto a table in the corner. It wasn't until both she and Bonnie had showered and she had changed into lighter, cooler clothes that she finally picked up the newspaper once more.

"Hey, look at this," she called out, after studying the front page for a moment. "I guess our city isn't the only one to get some crazy costumed hoods running around. The California police are looking for some character named Sphinx, a guy they believe is responsible for several recent raids on chemical warehouses, hospital supply firms, and even a jewelry store or two."

Bonnie rubbing her hair vigorously with a towel, stepped out of the bathroom.

"Wow! Sphinx, huh? What does he look like?"

"That's just if. Although police have been able to identify some of his henchmen from mug shots, no one has ever gotten a good enough look at the 'top banana' to know just what he looks like. He wears a long purple robe with a black hood to cover his face. Rumors are that he is one of the 'biggies' in all syndicate operations on the West Coast."

"Boy," said Bonnie breathlessly. "Would I like to go after him!"

Heather smiled. "Isn't one case at a time enough? We're not done looking into this business with Dr. Az -" She stopped suddenly, the smile fading from her lips, replaced by a look of startled realization.

"Wait a minute!" Heather sank into a chair and studied the newspaper story carefully.

"What is it? Tell me, what have you discovered?" demanded Bonnie.

But her sister, absorbed in the paper, did not answer. Bonnie sighed, and petulantly threw her towel on the floor. Heather took no notice; the twelve year old sighed again, this time resignedly, and sat down on the edge of one of the beds.

After what seemed like an eternity to her sister, Heather stood up, still clutching the paper, and smiled triumphantly.

"May just be a long shot . . . seeing connections that aren't there . . . but that's a chance



we'll have to take . . ." she said thoughtfully.

"What?" cried Bonnie, exasperated. "What are you talking about?"

Heather faced the twelve year-old, her eyes sparkling.

"You say you weren't able to pick up any clear impressions from the doctor when you probed his emotions earlier?"

"I told you on the bus already," Bonnie snapped. "It was just a jumbled mess. I don't know if maybe I was picking up Emily's feelings too, and they were getting all mixed up with the doctor's, but nothing made much sense. There was anger and just a bit of fear, but that fits right in with the stories both of them told us. Doctor Azmoff was angry that we showed up at his house and Emily is afraid that someone wants to hurt him. And we knew that already!"

"No, I don't think we know the half of it," Heather said somberly. "Do you remember what Azmoff told us he was working on?"

"Uh, some dumb thing about a project for the Egyptian government," Bonnie scowled, trying to recall the words.

"That's right!" Heather almost shouted. "He was doing research for the Egyptian government, something about chemicals used in embalming mummies . . . in the tombs! Bonnie, an Egyptian tomb is -"

"- a Sphinx!" Bonnie cried. "Now, I see! Dr. Azmoff was trying to tell us something during that conversation. He's being held prisoner by Sphinx!"

"That's right! He slipped us a clue right under their noses. I'll bet we were being watched very carefully every moment we were in that house!"

Bonnie made a beeline for the closet, from which she extracted Pixie's emerald skirt and blouse. "We've got to get back there and rescue Dr. Azmoff right away!" she cried, kicking off her slippers.

"I'm going to make arrangements to rent a car," said Heather as she tucked the newspaper under her arm. She grabbed her handbag and moved to the door. "I think we're going to need one.

"I'll meet you at the rear entrance to the hotel in fifteen minutes," she directed. "Be sure to bring my Shamrock outfit. We'll change on the way."

The sun was resting on the horizon as Bonnie Donovan threw the small overnight bag into the back seat of a small, tan convertible and joined Heather in the front seat. With a squeal of tires, the car shot out of the hotel parking lot and joined a steady stream of cars moving in the direction of the rapidly setting sun.

By the time the car drew near Azmoff's oceanside retreat, the girls had the road almost to themselves. Approximately a mile short of their destination, Heather pulled the convertible over to a deserted roadside rest area on a small bluff overlooking the ocean. She killed the engine.

"I don't dare take the car any closer than this," she murmured, more to herself than to Bonnie. "We don't want to alert anyone at Dr. Azmoff's that we're coming. And I certainly don't want this car traced to Shamrock and Pixie, since it's rented in Heather Donovan's name."

The sisters alighted and made use of the roadside restroom to change garments. The remaining daylight had faded to a murky twilight when Shamrock and Pixie scaled the gate to Azmoff's estate once more. They moved stealthily up the drive, neither daring to speak to the other. Hasty glimpses in all of the ground floor windows revealed nothing. All seemed peaceful within.

Shamrock determined to enter through what clearly was a door to the doctor's lab. After only a few seconds of prying, she was able to spring the door's sturdy lock, and then the duo slipped quietly inside.



They found themselves in a narrow hallway, with several closed doors on either side. The hall itself led to a descending stairwell. The heroines stood in concentrating silence, listening for any sounds. Faint voices drifted up the stairs.

Both listened intently, but were unable to make out any distinct words. Pixie began moving forward, her agile and trained form moving as soundlessly as a cat. Shamrock followed.

The girls moved slowly to the head of the stairs and then down. The voices were much clearer now.

At the bottom of the stairs was an open doorway, through which bright light spilled. Pixie approached this cautiously. Peering through the opening into a well-lit room, the lass was alarmed to see Dr. Azmoff surrounded by three bulky men. One of them was speaking in loud and threatening tones to the doctor, who was backed up against a long table which was cluttered with racks of test tubes and other scientific paraphernalia.

But what startled Pixie even more was the sight of a fourth man who was standing off to the side. He had a tight grip on Emily, Dr. Azmoff's frail, mousey housekeeper. The older woman's expression was one of terror and pain, no doubt because the burly henchman was twisting her right arm behind her back.

"Why, that big ape . . ." Pixie growled under her breath.

"Hush," said Shamrock, who had come up behind the youngster, and was now surveying the scene. "Don't let your temper give us away."

"But look what that goon is doing to poor Emily," Pixie protested. "We've got to stop him. I'd like to knock his teeth —"

"You'll get your chance, but not until we get both her and Dr. Azmoff out of there," Shamrock whispered. "And we'll need this element of surprise



for that."

The lovely young woman's eyes scrutinized the scene carefully, taking note of everything, and formulating several possible plans of action. As she examined the room, Pixie stood by, rubbing her gloved fists eagerly.

"All right," said Shamrock finally. "Listen good and quick: We'll both run in together. Don't try to be fancy or take swings at those guys. Just try to distract them. I'll grab Emily first; when they try to stop me, you get Dr. Azmoff and *make tracks* for this door. Don't stop, and don't look back. Just *get him out of here*. Emily and I will try to get away through that door at the other end of the lab. By splitting up, we'll confuse them for a second and then weaken their manpower when they split up, too. Now, have you got it?"

Pixie nodded briefly, and got ready to spring.

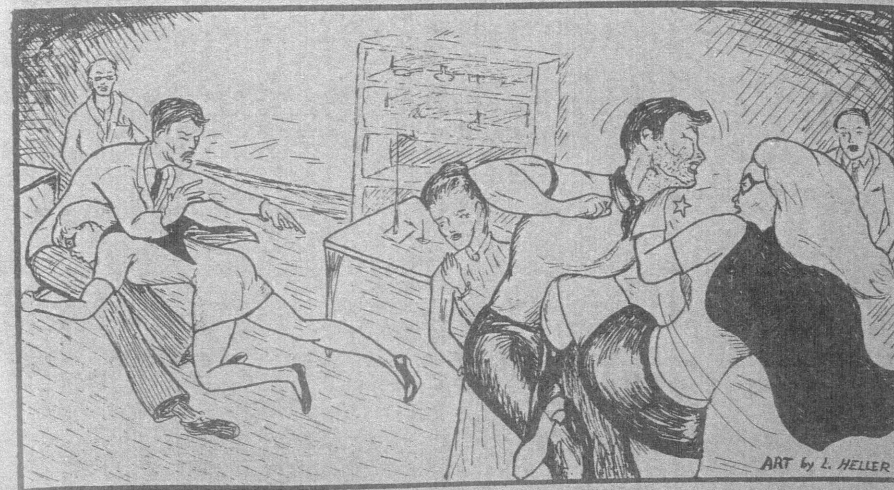
"Go!" Shamrock hissed.

"Wha — ?" cried the muscle-bound terrorist who was twisting the housekeeper's arm as he saw Shamrock diving at him. But he didn't have the time or breath to finish his question as her knee struck him sharply in the side. He slid to the floor, aided by Shamrock's fist which connected with his temple. In the very same motion, the heroine snatched Emily from his grasp and began dashing towards a closed door on the other side of the laboratory.

The other men had hardly turned to view the commotion when Pixie had reached Dr. Azmoff. Pausing only long enough to shove one of the hoods who was blocking her way, the youngster grabbed the doctor's hand and was headed back to the door from which she had sprung.

The man she had shoved fell against the others, and all three fell in a heap on the floor. But almost instantly, they were on their feet again, and after the escaping quartet.

"No, no," the doctor was gasping as Pixie pulled him along, but she ignored him. Together they raced up the stairs, down the hallway and out into the grounds of the estate. Pixie could hear their pursuers not far behind them, so she dashed across the lawns and into the woods, the



doctor still in tow.

Spying a thicket of heavily tangled bushes, the youthful heroine took a deep breath and plunged into the undergrowth. Dr. Azmoff was trying to say something, but their hasty flight had left him out of breath. Pixie herself was left somewhat winded, but she quickly shushed the old man and then turned her ear to the dark forest around them. Far away there were sounds of men thrashing in the bushes and cursing, but soon things grew quiet.

With a sigh of relief, Pixie turned to the doctor. "Are you all right?" she queried anxiously. Without waiting for an answer, she added: "We were so worried when we hadn't heard from you in so long. So we came to find out —"

But Dr. Azmoff had grabbed hold of her arm. Even in the almost total blackness of the night and the woods, Pixie could see the expression of alarm on his weathered face and she was instantly frightened.

"The whole scene —" the doctor was breathing heavily. "What you just saw in my laboratory . . . that . . . that was just a set-up. Those criminals knew you were watching, and — and it was just a trap!"

"What are you saying, Dr. Azmoff?" Pixie whispered wildly. "What kind of trap?"

"I suspected for a long time now . . . wasn't sure, but confronted her anyhow. Foolish mistake — should have gone to the police!" Azmoff stopped speaking and looked at his companion hopelessly.

"I don't understand! Tell me what's going on!" demanded Pixie. Quite unconsciously, she gripped the doctor's arm in a vise-like hold.

Azmoff's voice trembled as he spoke. "My housekeeper — Emily — she's behind this whole charade. She calls herself . . . The Sphinx!"

To be continued

Ixiona (continued from page 12)

this doesn't seem as frightening as going to Hades' place. I hear it's not so hospitable there at all. Well, I have been writing here for a long time. I guess I have a lot to put down on paper. But right now I have to do some more research, so I guess I'll leave you now. I want to go see Raquedon, but there are more important things to do . . . but I'll probably go see him anyway, because it makes me happier, most of the time.

To be continued