

the
Adventuress

No. 11/\$1.75



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THE ADVENTURESS #11, Winter 1984/85. Published quarterly, or whenever time, money, and material permit, by SJ Graphics. Single copies: \$2.00 via first class mail in the U.S. or surface mail to all foreign countries. All original material is covered by first publication laws. Printing: cover and interior by Village Printers, Los Gatos, Ca.



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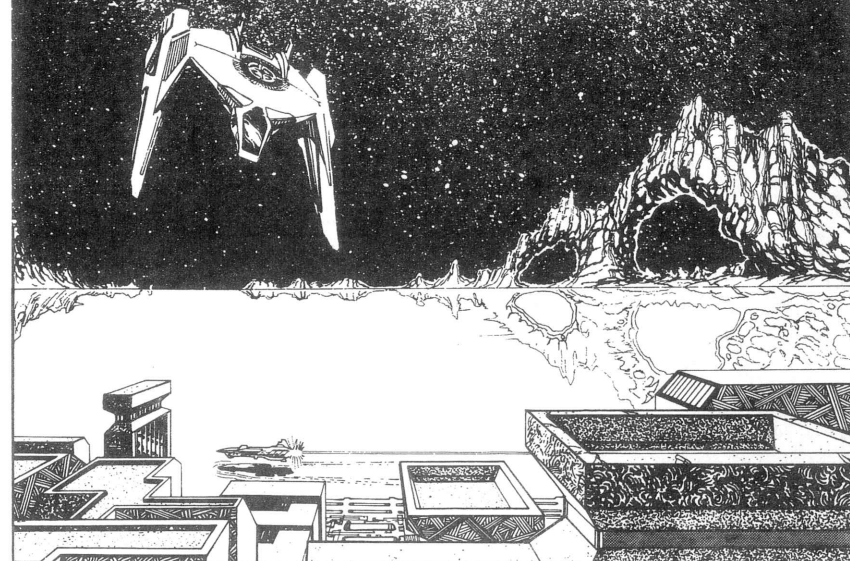
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Excalibur Log: Time at present, 7th day of the 2nd month of the year 2420. Captain A. Shadowwing recording . . . "Tarka, a world in the Acherion system, one of the few safe havens left to me within the Ephasian Unity's sphere of influence. It's major affront to the galaxy's morals is the Valeské spaceport, one of my least favorites of the great scum centers of the galaxy. Which is to say, I don't have many friends here."

EXCALIBUR

Written and drawn by Greg Espinoza



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Typography by Steven R. Johnson

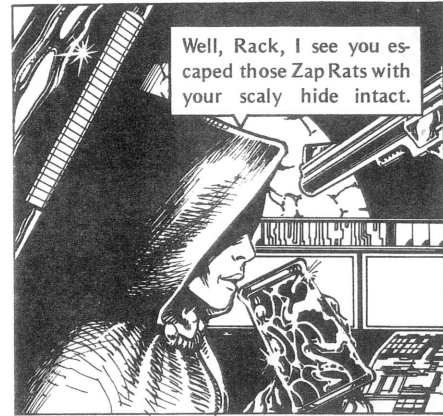


"The Smilin' Skull was the last dive I expected him to find me in. Thought I left him light years behind on Skara. Persistence was always one of his strong points, followed closely by ineptitude."

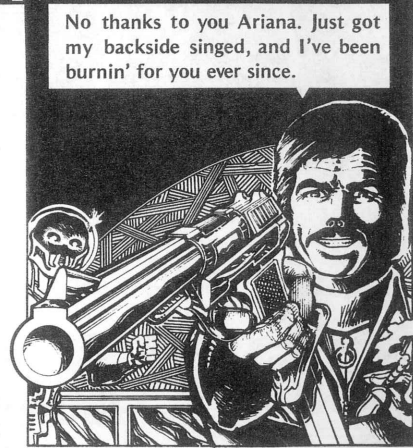
Hostile humanoid within blaster range. High probability of a critical hit.

I'll handle it, Lijah.

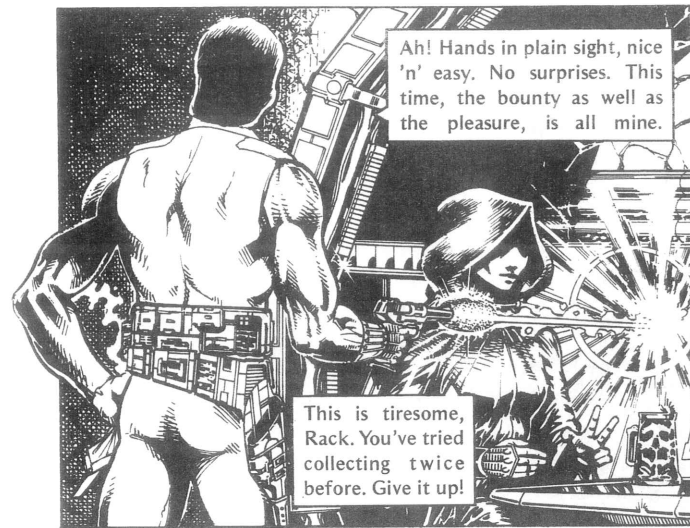
Maybe!



Well, Rack, I see you escaped those Zap Rats with your scaly hide intact.

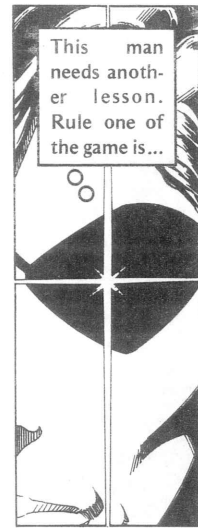


No thanks to you Ariana. Just got my backside singed, and I've been burnin' for you ever since.



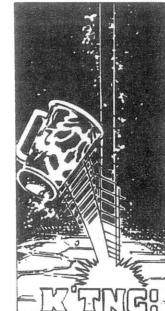
Ah! Hands in plain sight, nice 'n' easy. No surprises. This time, the bounty as well as the pleasure, is all mine.

This is tiresome, Rack. You've tried collecting twice before. Give it up!



This man needs another lesson. Rule one of the game is...

... Never take your eyes off your opponent.



Damn... she... did it... to me again... son of... sonuva...



"How uncharacteristic, you did not kill him."



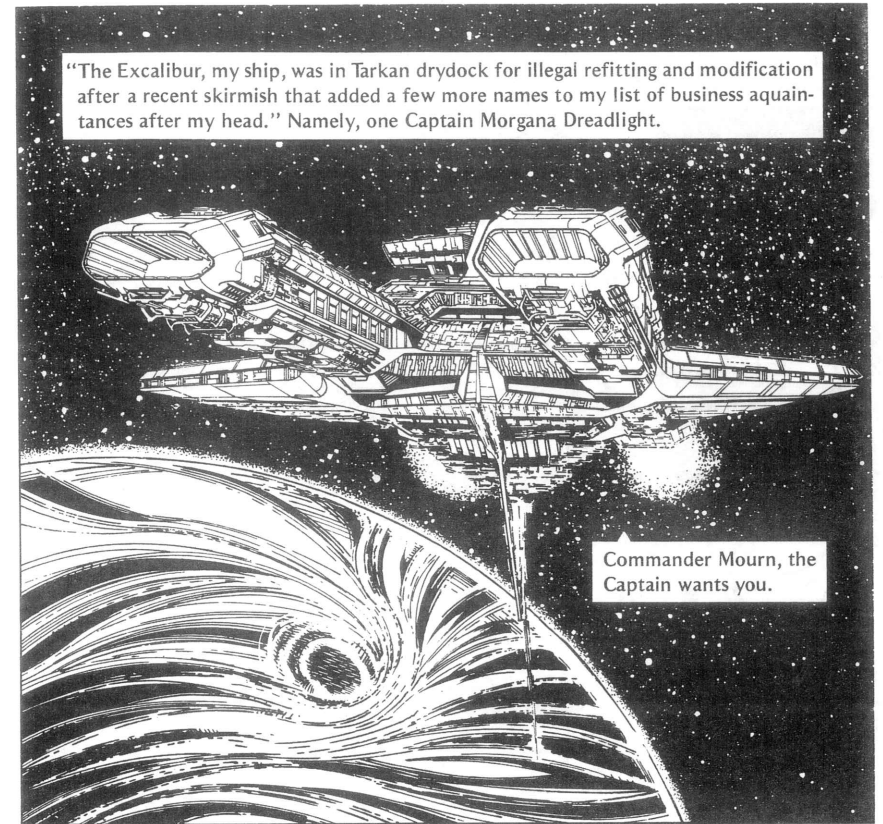
Unnecessary. To fry someone who's so much fun, would be a waste. This time he almost finished what he was going to say.

He will follow us!

I expect it! Especially since I'll be taking his manhood with me. Let's get back to the "Vengeance Flight."

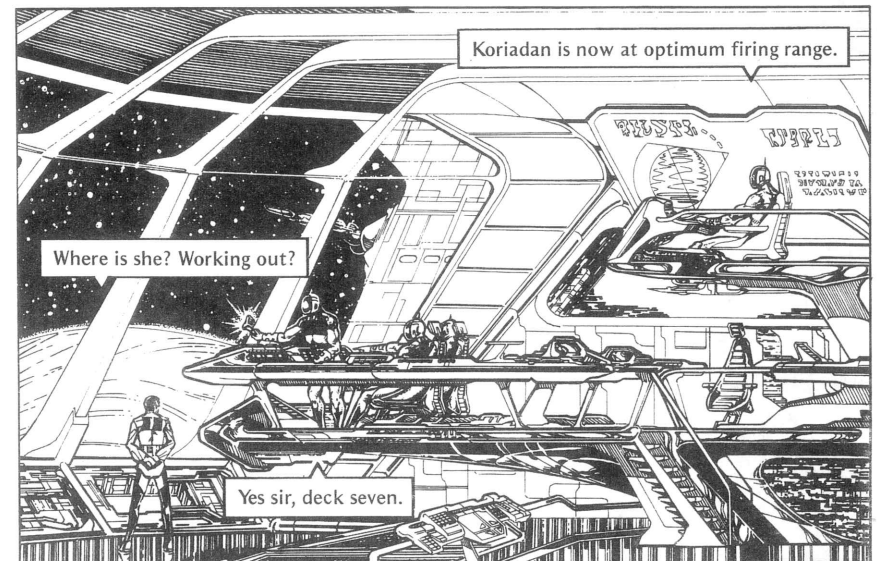
Proximity scan reveals no further impedance. Proceed.

Now, on to business. I hope they haven't screwed up the refitting.



"The Excalibur, my ship, was in Tarkan drydock for illegal refitting and modification after a recent skirmish that added a few more names to my list of business acquaintances after my head." Namely, one Captain Morgana Dreadlight.

Commander Mourn, the Captain wants you.



Koriadan is now at optimum firing range.

Where is she? Working out?

Yes sir, deck seven.

Fine, I'll be on deck seven. We'll commence with the destruction of the planet when I return.

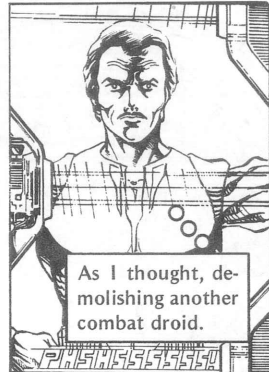
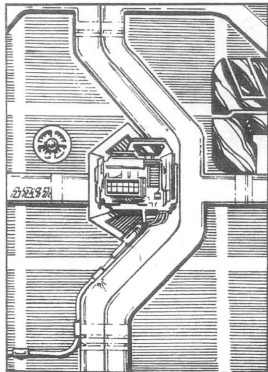
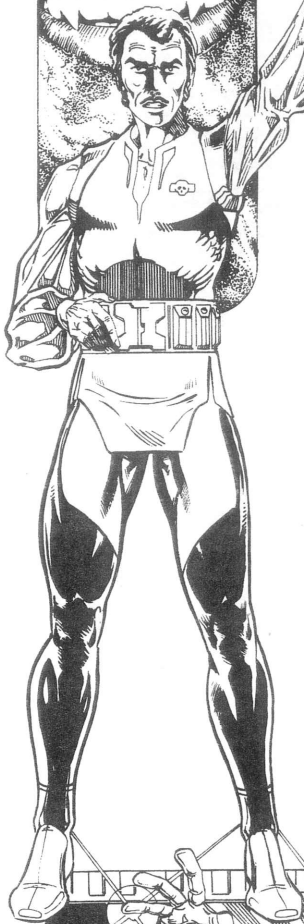
In another part of the ship . . .

Having your flesh burned away, kept alive in unending agony.

Do you know pain?

You will yet learn.

The pain of the dissolution chair is nothing.



As I thought, demolishing another combat droid.

My apologies, our retaliatory strike against Lassuún is ready. Perhaps more time would alter their stance.

You took your time getting here, Mourn.

KAG!

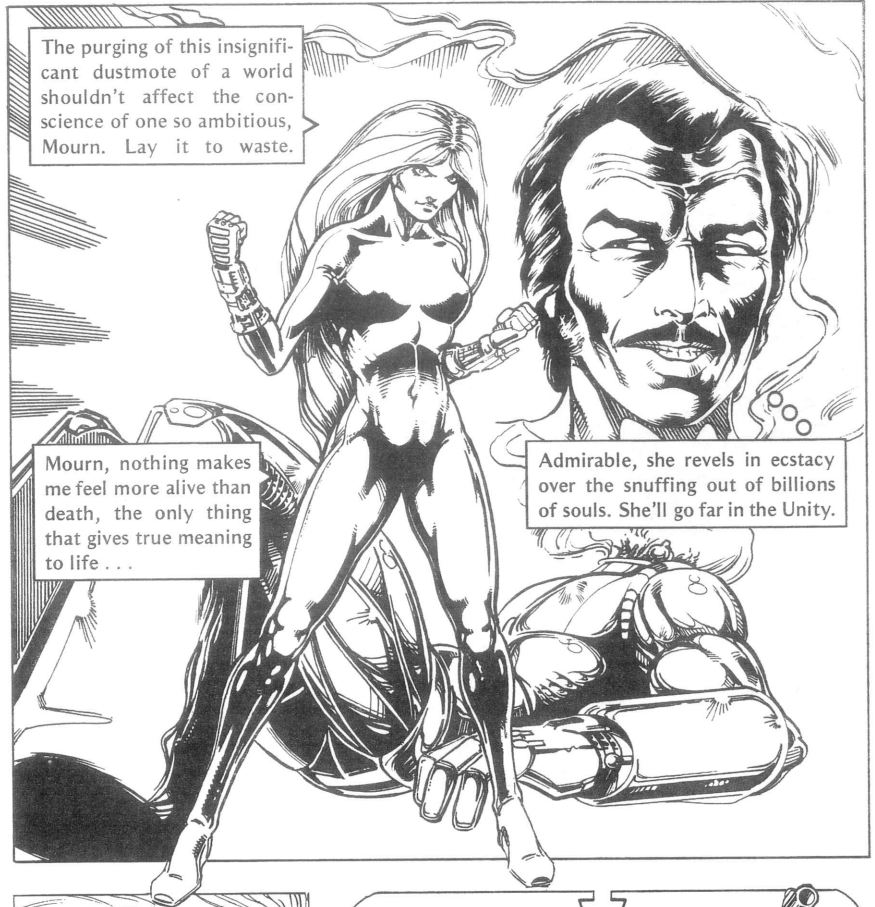
Oh no, not againnn . . .!



The purging of this insignificant dustmote of a world shouldn't affect the conscience of one so ambitious, Mourn. Lay it to waste.

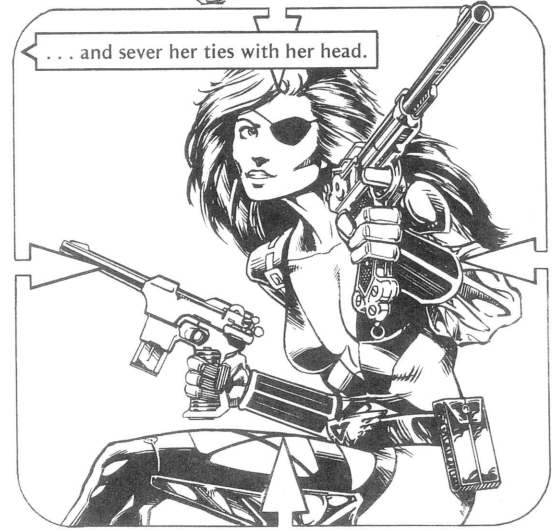
Mourn, nothing makes me feel more alive than death, the only thing that gives true meaning to life . . .

Admirable, she revels in ecstasy over the snuffing out of billions of souls. She'll go far in the Unity.



. . . soon I'll introduce Shadowwing to it's cold embrace . . .

. . . and sever her ties with her head.



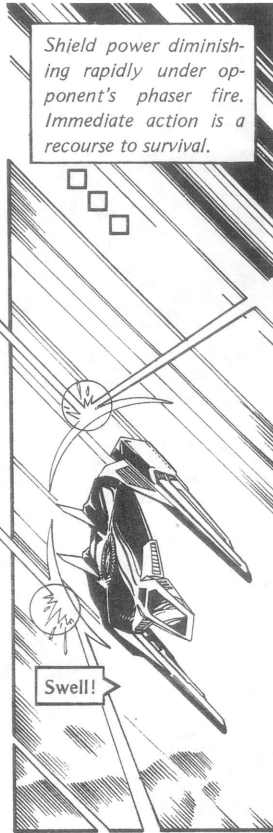
panel inked by Leta Dowling



Damn you Rack, to the first burning hell I can send you.



I should have figured he'd have a back-up. But with his ego, he had to take me on himself.

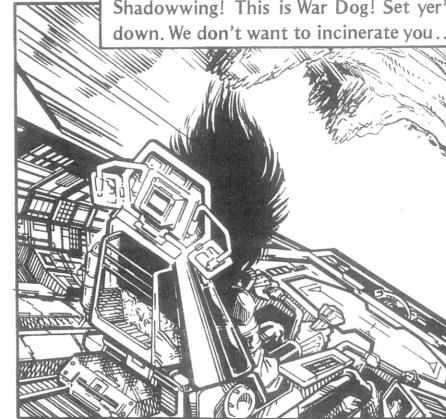


Shield power diminishing rapidly under opponent's phaser fire. Immediate action is a recourse to survival.

Swell!



Where's an asteroid field when you need one?!



Shadowwing! This is War Dog! Set yer' ship down. We don't want to incinerate you...yet!



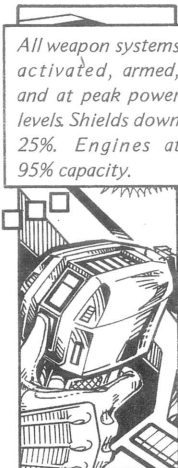
Ashes aren't negotiable.



What's your answer?



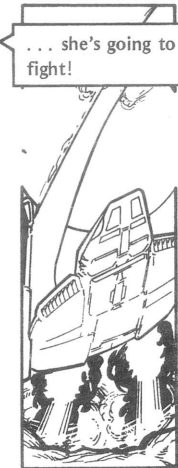
Lijah, tie ship's weapons in with me.



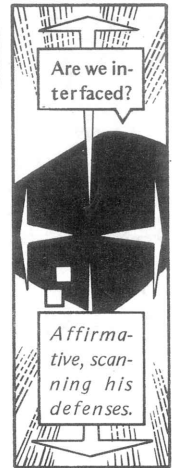
All weapon systems activated, armed, and at peak power levels. Shields down 25%. Engines at 95% capacity.



Be ready boys ...

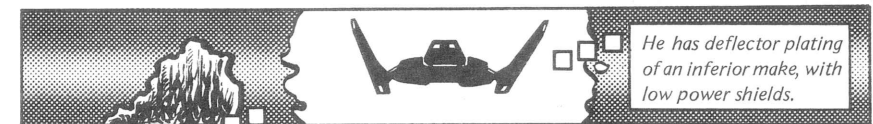


... she's going to fight!



Are we interfaced?

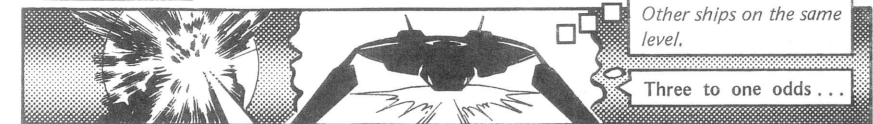
Affirmative, scanning his defenses.



He has deflector plating of an inferior make, with low power shields.



Third generation Malakoth phasers of maximum effect if we lose our shields.



Other ships on the same level.

Three to one odds ...



... that's just about right!

AAACK!

We can't lead the Bounty Hunters back to the ship.

We'll thrust into them.

Try to escape ... just try!

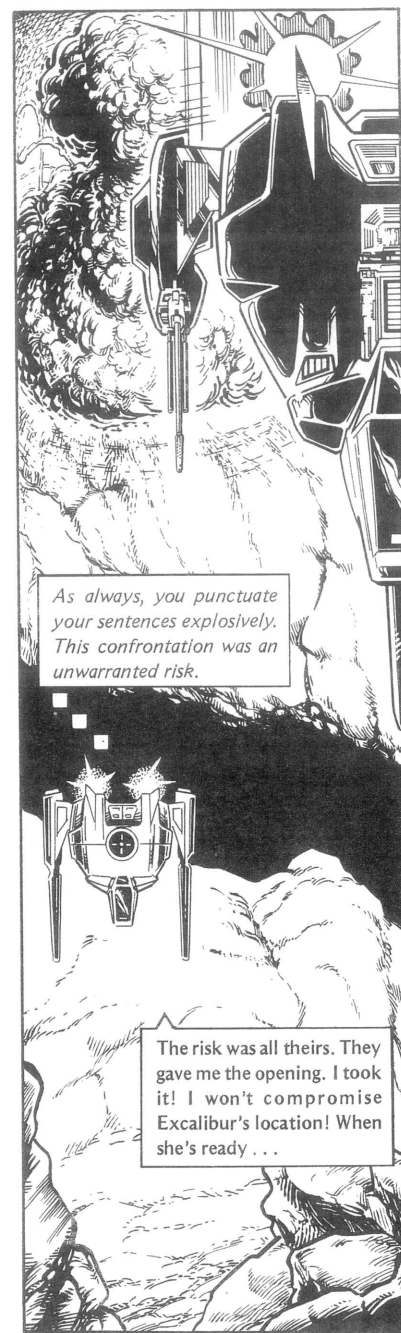
She's blown the engine dampers ...

I've lost many friends to your kind.

NO!

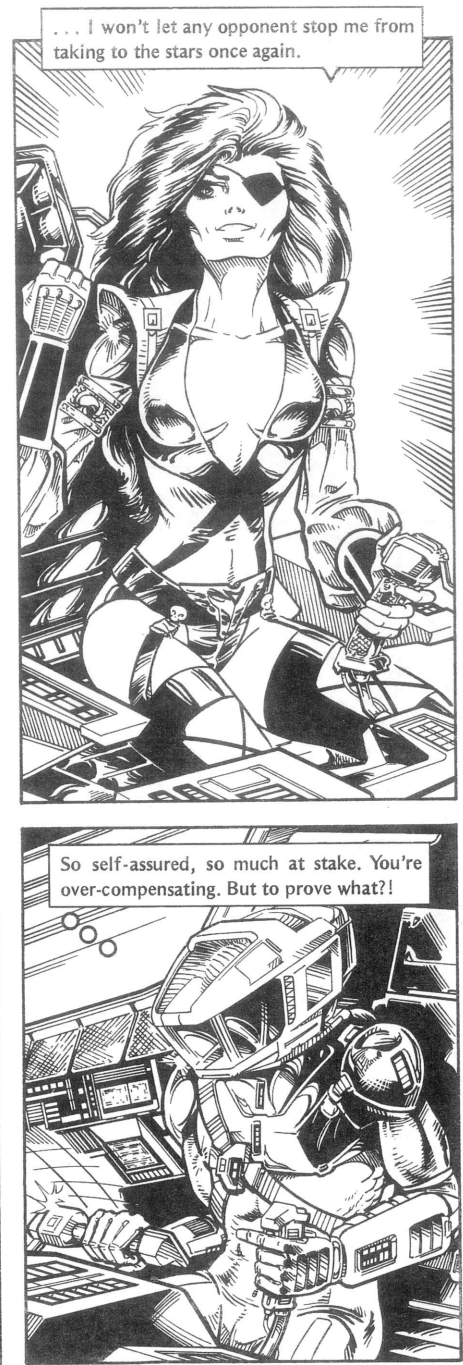
Give my regards to the worms ...

... if there's anything left to bury!



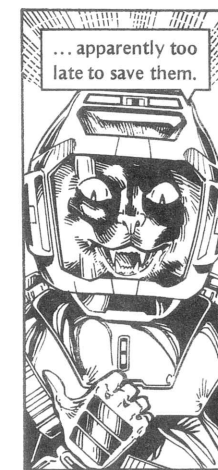
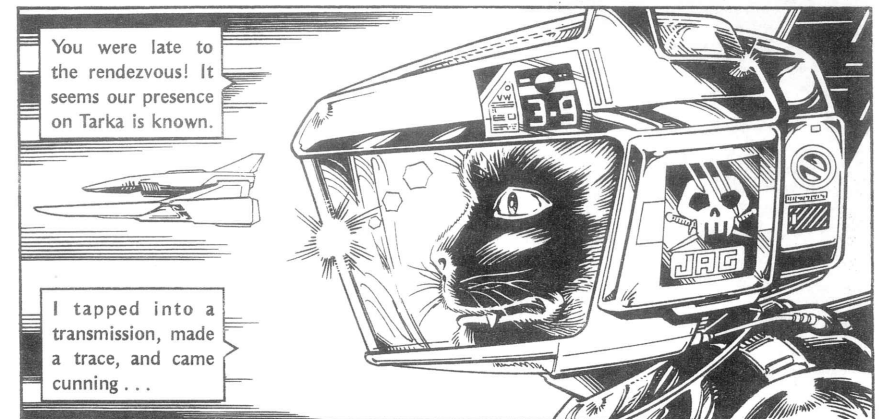
As always, you punctuate your sentences explosively. This confrontation was an unwarranted risk.

The risk was all theirs. They gave me the opening. I took it! I won't compromise Excalibur's location! When she's ready ...

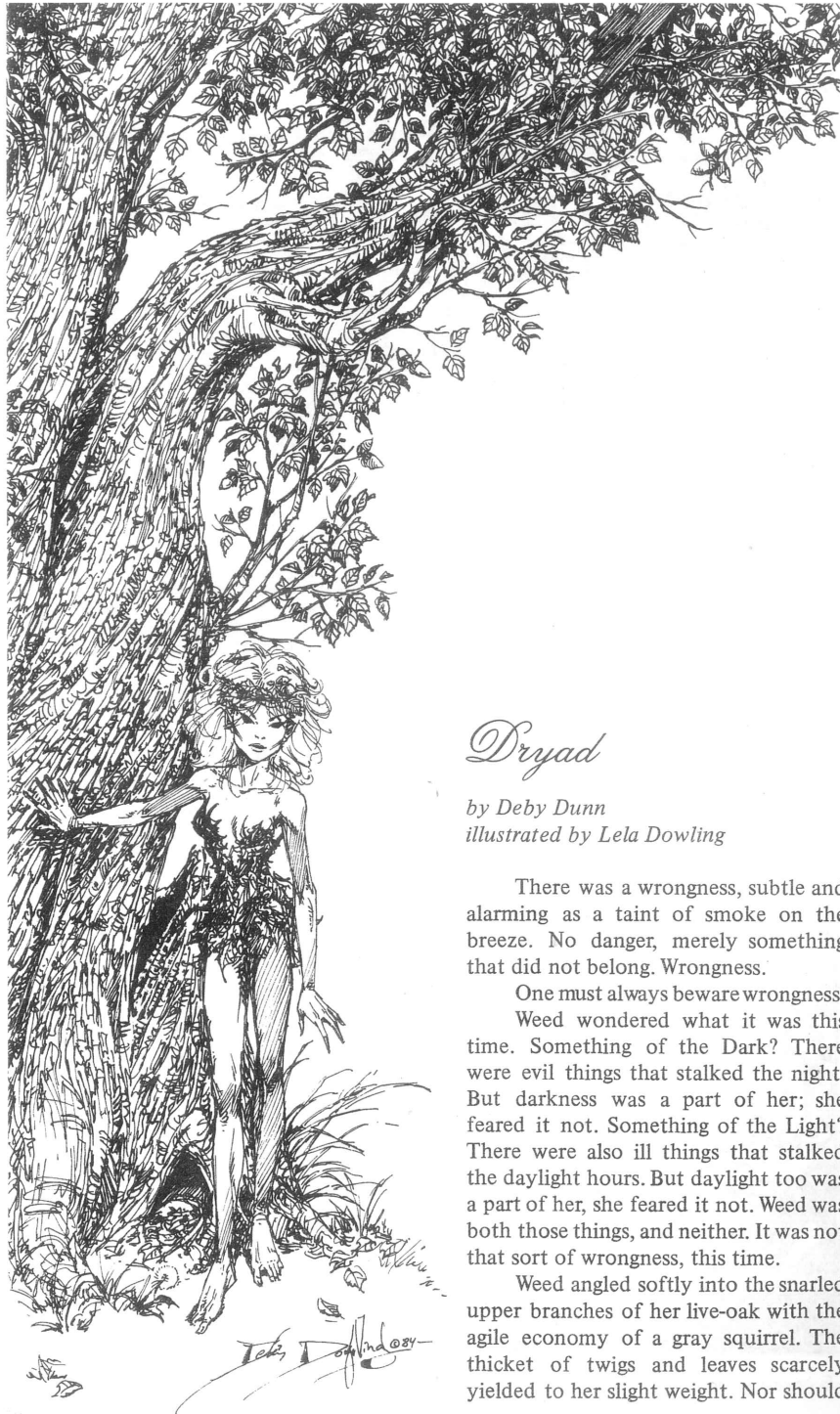


... I won't let any opponent stop me from taking to the stars once again.

So self-assured, so much at stake. You're over-compensating. But to prove what?!



To be continued



Dryad

by Deby Dunn

illustrated by Lela Dowling

There was a wrongness, subtle and alarming as a taint of smoke on the breeze. No danger, merely something that did not belong. Wrongness.

One must always beware wrongness.

Weed wondered what it was this time. Something of the Dark? There were evil things that stalked the night. But darkness was a part of her; she feared it not. Something of the Light? There were also ill things that stalked the daylight hours. But daylight too was a part of her, she feared it not. Weed was both those things, and neither. It was not that sort of wrongness, this time.

Weed angled softly into the snarled upper branches of her live-oak with the agile economy of a gray squirrel. The thicket of twigs and leaves scarcely yielded to her slight weight. Nor should

they; Weed was part of the tree, not an addition to it.

She sought the wrongness.

Once, she felt in the vaguest of ways, there had been other times — better days, when the air had not stung at her eyes, burned at her sensitive nostrils, chafed at her very skin. Long ago, before the mortal city commenced its sprawl of subtle poisons. It was less than memory, that recall. Weed had no memory. She merely knew it had once been so. She never wondered why.

She felt the air. It smarted with haze on even a cool day. She felt the dry earth that bore up the roots of her oak. She felt the darkling roots. The wrongness was not there. She searched the algaed streamlet that watered her gully. She felt sun warming oak and sycamore leaves, and the wrongness was not there.

It must be something from outside.

That was not good. One never knew what might wander in from outside. Weed trusted nothing that encroached from beyond her gully: her home, her world, her domain. If it was not of her world, she did not trust it. That was the first rule.

The wrongness persisted, nibbling like a caterpillar on a leaf. Weed slipped down to the bare and gnarled lower branch which formed her private watching-post. From there she could see all: the near and far sides of her gulch, and both sides of the ridge that her oak commanded. Being as she was, Weed saw without being seen. Crouching upon the broad, twisted limb, she was as a part of the tree. One skinny arm circled the oak's trunk in a comradely gesture she knew the tree appreciated. Also, it helped her fade into the bark.

Weed narrowed her eyes — black eyes, dully shiny, lacking pupils — and stared suspiciously over her world. The fiery sun westered leisurely, forcing her to squint as she peered restlessly into every crack and cranny of the terrain she knew so well, from the narrow cleft with its sheer flanks where the spring trickled miserly forth to the strip of blacktop which arbitrarily cut across the foot of the gully and ended her domain. The wrongness persisted. It stung her like red ants. Weed frowned, a very daunting expression.

At that moment, her eyes caught a glint against the harsh orange light of the dying day. A searing reflection: sunlight upon metal.

Weed scuttled to the ground in a single rapid movement. The instant her calloused feet touched bare, hard earth she fell into a crouch, one narrow hand reaching absently back for contact with her oak. Weed opened her nose and filtered the air cautiously. Other than wrongness, no danger.

As swiftly as a breeze, and as softly, Weed darted down the ridgetop, through the dry brush she knew so intimately, leaf by leaf and stone for stone. No matter what the haste, nothing is as quiet as a dryad in her world.

She reached the streamlet and paused a fraction of a second before leaping the scummy ribbon of water with jackrabbit speed. Up the opposite slope she raced without breaking stride. At the canyon wall she turned and pattered down toward the blacktop. Thus she came at the object she had glimpsed from its sunward side and stopped, fading herself into the hillside.

Human mortals — two! Weed felt a burst of . . . something. She so rarely had contact with human mortals. A few hikers would stamp into her world from the cleared patch by the blacktop and spread their lunches beside the streamlet. Those were good for teasing. But this day wrongness came from one of them.

It was not the first time human mortals had brought wrongness, Weed dimly knew. Once — once, in that long-ago time, that lost distant country, where all had been peace and plenty, laughter and games, there had been . . . family . . . Then there had come human mortals with their wrongness, many of them, and the world had been changed . . . and Weed was left alone . . .

Her hands curled and tightened into fists without her knowing it as she blurred



herself into the brush, watching the human mortals make a great noise as they tramped up toward the streamlet from their vehicle. The brush that was an easy path for Weed gave them unaccountable difficulty. The bigger one, male, cursed and mangled the brush in order to pass through it. Weed heard its shrill, silent cries, felt twinges of sympathy with its stabbing pains. While she watched and felt . . . something . . . within . . . like the feeble struggles of a backstranded insect . . . something that twisted and tugged inside her . . . and she knew not what it was.

The human mortals had passed beyond her vision, though Weed knew exactly where they were. She stood rigidly staring at where they last had been, and the frown that crimped her face was not of anger. She strove to understand . . . both the wrongness and this disturbance within herself.

At last Weed followed, her movement as a breath of air over straggling weeds and sunkilled grasses. She crooned noiseless comfort to the injured brush in passing.

As ever, the human mortals had come upon her own private spot — the place where she rested when the sun grew hot. There, beneath an overhang created by the still-living trunk of a fallen sycamore, they lay down together by the streamlet and passed a brown paper bag between them.

Weed scampered up the side of a nearby slender young sycamore and watched, unseen, poised about midway up its trunk like an unlikely squirrel. She watched the human mortals pass their brown sack. Eventually the big one tipped his head all the way back, then carelessly discarded the bag over the top of the sheltering sycamore trunk. It struck the ground a solid blow, which Weed resented, and its contents shattered with a high note.

Weed scowled. She had an urge to whisk over to the careless missile, quick as a wink, scoop it up, and drop it on the messy human mortals from over the edge of the reclining sycamore. Her sycamore. Her bruised soil.

That annoying wrongness had blurred with the deepening dusk, but it had not lost potency. Weed itched to act against it. Yet she was uncertain what it was, and she would prefer the human mortals not see her.

As she observed them uncertainly, the human mortals lay back and began to kiss violently. Weed sensed a pulsation of wrongness. She was confused. Kissing was not wrongness . . .

Sex was a great magic, her mother had taught her this. Weed had always felt it so,

before the dark time when she was cut off from all her own kind. Now there was no one for her to make the great magic with. Her gully was dry and barren, grown up with weeds and thorny bushes. That, she knew, was the nature of the land, a product of its climate, and not entirely her failing. Yet it was true that she and her world reflected each the other.

Weed watched the humans couple as dark gathered more swiftly. Gloom was no confusion to her sharp eyes. She felt wistful and vaguely envious, but that without malice, as the emanations of their magic-making throbbed sweetly upon her nerves. The fallen sycamore would absorb their magic and prosper. Weed approved of the idea.

Suddenly there came a concussion of wrongness that made Weed reel — she clung to the slender sycamore for balance. Wrongness was a clot in her brain as the male fastened both hands to the throat of his partner and began to squeeze. Weed writhed with the female as she struggled in terror for her life, frantic as her lungs were forbidden air. She felt with the male as struggles bounced harmlessly away, ineffectual. Her breathing deepened with his as crimson ecstasy arose to consume him — pleasure that should have come from the magic they made — !

None heard the cry of horror that trickled from Weed's throat as it closed with the female's in death. The roaring of wrongness deafened. Satisfied, the male fell back, gasping with pleasure, beneath the cringing sycamore. At last the coyote howling of wrongness yapped into silence.

Weed lurched back to herself precipitously, holding her sycamore trunk to keep from teetering into the abyss of wrongness. She and the sycamore, and the oak tree up the slope, shuddered together at the horror of it. Weed pressed one hand to her mouth and tasted bitterness as she bit down on the knuckles. She did not cry out again. But her mind was a wind-storm whipping up a haze of shattered confusion, sickened terror, horrible satisfaction.

No, no, no!! was the shriek of her mind. It was wrong, wrong! Blasphemy, defilement, to pervert the great magic in such a way!

At that, the twilight steadied around her. A terrible rage, such as she had not felt in aeons, sucked all her whirling fragments into a whole creature. This was her nature: that all things in her world were a part of her, whatever they might be. Their state influenced her. Such was the nature of wrongness: it was that which did not belong as a part of her. And this was her resolve: that she would no longer endure the blaspheming human mortal as a part of herself.

With the swiftness of thought, Weed plummeted earthward. Her descent was as silent and graceful as the strike of the barn owl that nested across the ridge. Vengeful dedication made her sleek. She was directly in front of the sated human mortal. The twilight had always been her favorite time, and he could not help but see her clearly.

Weed's flesh was pale, as softly shiny as a newly peeled branch. A ragged garment of brown bark and dead leaves closely followed the subtle lines of her small, girlish body. Straight as a tree she stood, poised as a rattlesnake ready to strike. A tiara of acorns and oak leaves twined about her wild head, perched atop a manelike mass of hair the color and consistency of thistle-down; beneath that crown a triangular face and sharply pointed ears. Her features were strange, fey and inhuman, set with lightless black eyes slanting upward at their corners. Thin lips parted in a chilling smile, to reveal wicked, uneven teeth.

The human mortal goggled, gulping as she fixed him with pitiless pits of eyes. Realizing that she must have witnessed his deed, the male human groped to his feet. Before him sprawled the female, his victim, lifeless limbs still twisted by her futile struggle for life. In nakedness neither of them made an impression on Weed.

She reached into nothing and brought out a long knife, its blade the color of shadow and keen as the moon's edge. Implacably she put out her left hand, displaying the eerie weapon. With a flick of her wrist the shadowy dagger leaped across the space

between them to bury itself in his chest. Death was instant. Shadow took substance; gargling, the male died. Weed opened her hand and the blade leaped back to her. She touched its dusky hilt to her lips, then dismissed it back to nothingness.

Wrongness was banished. Weed was safe. Her world cleansed. Yet she stood immobile, staring at the dead. Two corpses slumped, where before there had been but one. She could not feel that this was right.

Why, Weed asked herself, had she done this? She did not herself believe in killing. Being as she was, a creature of spirit, she neither ate, nor drank, nor, indeed, ever rested. She took no life to sustain her own. Yet death was ever present in her world, in the ghostly owls, in the silent mantids, in the coyotes that sang to the moon. As such, it too was a part of her. Yet it had never touched her. She did not think it could.

Weed had no age. She had always existed, it seemed to her. Yet even she had once been young. It came to her now that one time, when she was far younger, the human mortals of the wrongness had entered her small world, driving her forth with some magic that — it was a terrible, hard thing, to recall this — magic that had altered her world, so it was not they, but she, who did not belong — !

She had not wanted to not belong. She had lingered, frantic, at the edge of her grove world, for as long as she could. When one of the human mortals strayed in her direction, she had leaned down from her treetop perch — ay, foolish youngster! — and said to him, *I am not evil! Wherefore would you drive me forth?*

And the human mortal had replied, with a shine of pity in his mud-colored eyes: *For that you have no soul.*

Weed had not understood what he meant. But behind him had come more human mortals, bearing torches that flamed with pale golden greed. Weed had fled, lest she be consumed with her world. For some time after, as she wandered in search of a new world, she had sought to understand what it meant to have no soul, and why the lack of one should condemn her. Moreover she wondered why, if she truly were soulless, there were yet things that could . . . stir her up inside.

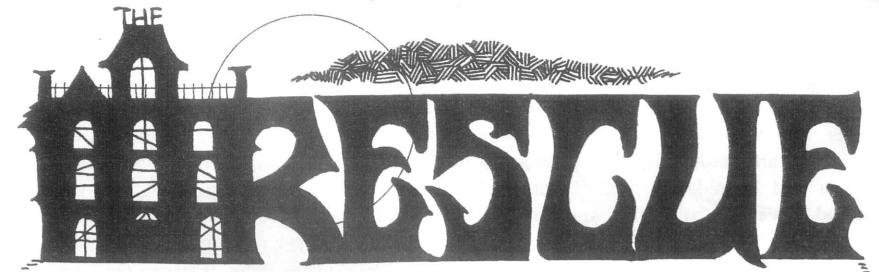
Why, she wondered again, did human mortals drive her forth? “For that she had no soul”? But what was this thing, a “soul,” and why should she care to have one? Did possession of a soul mean that one must become like the human mortals, who had more of wrongness in them than anything else in the universe, and who could not feel the world around them dying wherever they trod?

. . . and yet, though their minds were dead to the world, Weed had always sensed that human mortals felt other things, which she in her turn was only dimly aware of. What things did they feel? And what was it like? Were their things . . . better than hers? Or merely another sick pleasure, like the defilers?

Weed was confused beyond hope. The upset within her was a wrongness of itself. She did not understand, she did not understand — ! And it would not be so long before she again forgot to wonder . . .

Like a duck emerging from deep water, Weed shook herself all over, striving to relax her taut body and unclench her spirit. With the speed of a deer she leapt the fallen sycamore, leaving behind the bodies of the human mortals, so white in the deepening dusk. Within moments she had reached her own oak, and scampered up to the lookout branch to await other human mortals coming in search of their dead. City lights spread over the valleys below, like a glittering net caught full of twinkling, tarnished stars.

The live-oak crooned comfortingly in a soundless voice as deep as the earth to her inner unrest. A stinging wind whispered and sighed through the treetops all about her, set them waving at the lightless heavens. Soon her entire impoverished world reverberated to the voiceless choir of oaks and sycamores. As the night wore on, Weed added her ethereal treble to their unworldly basso. The song became a keening dirge for mortal things with souls, and a sobbing lament for soulless immortals. □



story by William R. Barrow

art by Sheryl A. Knowles

Patti shivered. She clutched her little kitten to her chest and petted it reassuringly. She could hear its heart beating just as frantically as hers. And its frightened mewings made it even more clear that it, too, was scared.

“Don’t be afraid, Midnight,” she whispered as she scratched the kitten’s ears. “There is no one here but us. We’re going to be okay. You just wait and see.” But the creaking of a floorboard in the next room and a faint cackle — as if some strange being from another world was laughing at them — made her want to turn and flee . . . made her wonder if she might not be wrong.

She struggled to contain her fears. “No, Midnight,” she said firmly. “We vowed when we came here looking for your mother that we wouldn’t be afraid. So we won’t be!” Despite her show of courage, Patti could feel butterflies in her stomach. Maybe she shouldn’t have stolen alone into the decaying, run-down house on a stormy night. But she had to get Midnight’s mother back. Her cat had been seen near this weird old house, and Patti was determined to bring it home.

She stood alone with her black kitten in the rotting old house. Strange sounds were coming from the parlor not far from where she was. She fought valiantly to keep up her courage, trying to ignore the grating creak of old wood against other old wood in the next room. She tried to pretend that she couldn’t hear the eerie cackling which sounded like an old woman laughing in her grave.

If only it wasn’t such a black, stormy night, she groaned to herself. If only the moon were shining through the windows so she could see better, if only the wind that was howling outside would stop so that she could know for sure where those strange sounds were coming from.

“Well, Midnight,” she voiced gravely, “if we’re going to find your mother, we’ve got to get busy. We’ve got to search every room. There’s no other way.”

She gripped her kitten tighter. Cautiously, she started groping her way through the dusty old furnishings towards the dark outline of a strange door. She soon found herself at the entrance to the parlor.

The creaking sounds were now louder, and so were the cacklings. Patti felt her spine tingling with excitement, felt her hair rising. But she forced herself to go on, forced herself to continue her effort to find the mother cat that she had raised from a kitten.

“It’s now or never,” she whispered. With Midnight held tightly to her chest for solace and comfort, she gripped the doorknob leading into the parlor. With all her might she twisted and pushed, and then stepped into the room.

A flash of lightning immediately illuminated the room, and a clap of thunder followed. There, in the center of the parlor, she saw it — an old woman wearing a black robe and a black cap, rocking in a squeaky old chair!

The ghostlike creature saw her at the same time that she saw it. Its chalk-like face burst out in an evil laugh; its long, bony arm reached out towards her and the kitten.

Patti was petrified. She felt her heart stop, felt a lump form in her throat. The kitten’s fur stood on end and it hissed loudly, just as when it was threatened by a stray dog.

Slowly, Patti began backing towards the door, but a sudden gust of wind whirled through the house, slamming it behind her. The pitch dark room closed in around her. She could hardly see a thing, but she could hear the old woman rocking, cackling, breathing. She didn't want to see or hear more — she and her kitten were in danger!

She whirled about and ran for the parlor door. She gripped the doorknob, twisted it hard, and pulled it with all her might. But the door wouldn't open. Somehow the door had locked. She pulled, and pulled, to no avail. She was trapped, and trapped good unless she could find another means of escape.

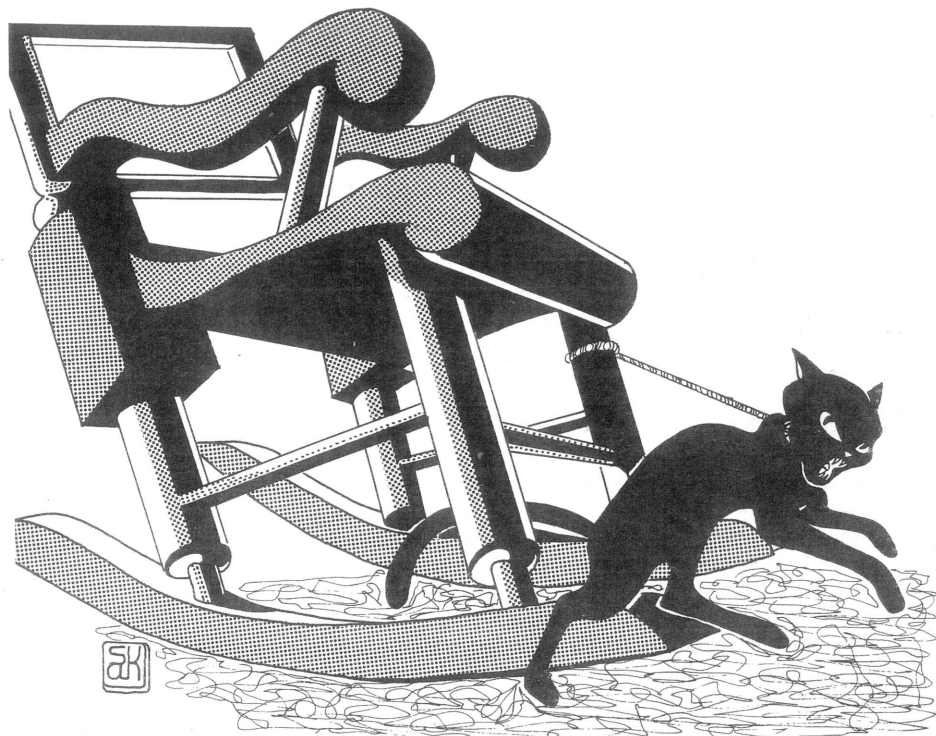
The room suddenly became quiet. The creaking of the rocking chair had stopped; so had the cackling. But then Patti heard something worse. The creature she had seen was now shuffling across the creaky floor, towards her and the kitten.

Patti's mind filled with panic-stricken thoughts. What should she do now? She had to get out of the room, and get out fast. But how?

The answer came as another streak of lightning flooded the room with light. The bony figure in its tattered, rotting coffin dress was now only a few feet away from her. The skeleton-like hands were stretching towards Midnight. The creature's eyes gleamed hideously, like hot coals in a fire. Its toothless smile stretched across the sinister face like shadowy writing on a pallid tombstone. It was grabbing for Patti with one hand and Midnight with the other.

"No you don't," Patti screamed, picking up an old broom she had seen lying against the wall. She hurled the broom with all her might at the ghoulish creature. She gasped in horror as the broom appeared to pass through the strange being. The creature threw back its head and cackled madly; its progress was unhindered.

In that moment, Patti saw Midnight's mother. Cringing in fear, the mother cat was



held fast to the old woman's rocking chair by a long leash. When it recognized Patti, it ran hopefully towards her, wailing loudly.

Taking advantage of the old crone's merriment, Patti darted to the mother cat. She slipped the leash from its collar, and snatched the cat up by the nape of the neck. With both pets in her arms, she raced to the opposite side of the room, to the window that had shown the lightning flashes.

Without hesitation, she pushed both cats through the opening of a broken window pane and dropped them to the ground. Then, without daring to look at the menace she faced, she fled along the wall towards the parlor door.

With its fetid garments whipping like loose sails flapping in a heavy wind, the creature raced after Patti. Screeching over the escaped cat, it clawed desperately at Patti's fleeing figure, like a hawk seeking vengeance on a thief who had robbed its nest.

This time the parlor door opened. Patti was through the door and down the hallway in an instant, escaping onto the crooked front porch. In another moment she was down the ramshackle stairs, and racing behind her two pets towards her house.

She didn't even pause to look back at the ranting and raving figure in black that was shaking its fists angrily from the front porch of the dilapidated old house.

Exhausted, Patti trembled as she entered her home. Her great-aunt Gretchen was bent over the fireplace, stirring a massive pot of steaming liquid. The black-clad old woman cackled gaily as she picked up the mother cat, stroking the pet until its hair stood on end and sparks began to fly.

"That'll teach your old Aunt Gerti not to steal your cat," she grinned, scratching the wart on her pointed chin. "Yer learnin' fast, honey. Someday yer gonna to be the most daring and famous witch of us all." □

How Alaina Became a Frontier Scout

written by Charles Denton
illustrated by Christine Mansfield

This tale is true. Its details have been reported by people whose credibility is beyond doubt. There are also records you can check in the great library at Mirzea which you can check if you still disbelieve.

We have all heard of Scouts' Commander Alaina, the first (but certainly not the last) woman to become a Frontier Scout. So brilliant were her strategies and so heroic her deeds that she was knighted on the field of battle by the Emperor himself. Her statue is given equal honors with her male counterparts in the Hall of History.

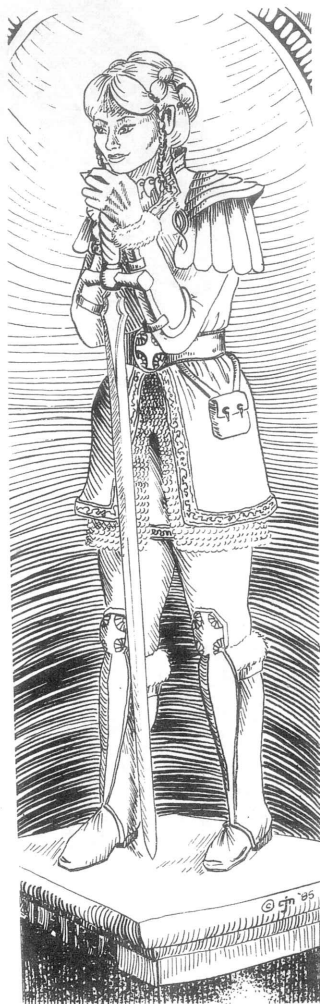
The statue shows her as an average-sized, very pretty woman of about forty years of age, wearing the same mischievous grin she usually wore into battle. Her hair is coiled in braids atop her shapely head, and her hands and chin rest upon the great sword she won during the Wars of the Witch Queen.

However, it is not our purpose to repeat well-known history or to discuss great art. Instead, we shall go back to the beginning of Alaina's career and tell how she became a Frontier Scout in the first place.

The story begins in Teros, a minor feudal village on the frontiers of the Crystal Empire. A few months before, Teros had been politicked away from the sphere of influence of the North Reach by emissaries of the Emperor. The Frontier Scouts had been ordered in to serve as police force and tax collectors until regular Empire administrators could be appointed.

Though Teros had its provincial feuds, petty squables and minor crimes, the Scouts found it boring. They were used to far more arduous duties in Imperial Service, and Teros held nothing more than a few semi-skilled pickpockets and a chance murder or two.

Alaina first came to the Scouts at their headquarters in Teros (set up at the local inn, as usual). She was breathless, her cheeks were flushed, and she glanced nervously about herself as though expecting pursuit. She entered, and spotted a bored-looking man in the uniform of the Scouts who was apparently standing guard duty at the common room entrance.



"Please sir," she said, nearly whispering. "Where may I find the recruiting officer?"

The man pointed into the common room. "In there, miss. Back table in the darkest corner, most likely." She hurried past, and he paid no further attention, knowing many who had been recruited by sisters, lovers or whatever. Besides, it was none of his business.

Alaina peered around the common room, carefully assessing each man she saw before noticing Captain Doniss fondling a waitress in a dimly lit corner. She hesitated, then strode purposefully to his table. "Excuse me," she said, with just a hint of nervousness in her voice. "Are you the recruiting officer for the Frontier Scouts?"

Doniss glanced back at her, then whispered something in the waitress's ear. The waitress giggled, sighed, and walked away. "I am indeed the recruiting officer, ma'am. Captain Doniss at your service." He was also the commanding officer of the Scouts' garrison in Teros, but since she hadn't asked about that, he saw no reason to tell her.

"May we speak privately?" She rung her hands.

Doniss studied her before answering. She seemed very anxious about something, and that speeded his decision. Ladies in distress always held a peculiar appeal for him. "Certainly. Please sit down. Would you like something to drink?"

She shook her head. "Is it true that you accept criminals as recruits in the Frontier Scouts?"

Aha, thought Doniss. *She hopes to secure a position for some lover.* He leaned forward. "Yes, it's true. But if they stay criminals after joining the Scouts, they are usually killed. We tolerate no crimes against one another."

Alaina nodded. "I - I have heard that you protect such criminals against prosecution, even from nobles. Is that also true?" Her expression was very intent.

Doniss nodded. "It is. The Emperor feels all men should have a chance to serve him. Once in *his* service, a Scout answers to no one but his brethren and the Emperor."

Alaina swallowed before asking. "And is it true you must take *any* who apply for membership?"

Doniss shrugged. "Such is the Emperor's law." His mouth quirked in a smile. "The law doesn't even specify that a recruit must be male." His tone made the remark seem to be a jest.

But it was Doniss who was completely thrown off-guard by what Alaina said next. "If that is truly the case, then I wish to join the Frontier Scouts."

"What?" shouted Doniss in surprise. Some of the men turned, laying their hands on their swords when they heard him. They quickly turned away, grinning. It had been a long time since a woman had surprised their commander.

When he was sufficiently recovered from his surprise, Doniss said, "Ma'am, that is unheard of. Women do not join the Frontier Scouts."

Alaina began weeping quietly. "I *must*. They will kill me otherwise."

Doniss felt uncomfortable. "Has someone done you a wrong? I may be able to help . . ." His voice trailed off as she shook her head.

"The only way you can help is by making me a Frontier Scout." She glared at him. "But you will not, even though your laws say you must take *any* who apply."

Doniss's eyes narrowed. If she wished to take the matter before the Emperor, she *could* make trouble for him. Something asked, unbidden in his mind, *Why not? At least let her try.* He grinned with secret merriment. "If I did let you join, ah -"

"Alaina," she supplied intently.

Doniss nodded as though he'd only momentarily forgotten her name. "If I did let you join, Alaina, you'd be treated exactly like any other recruit. There would be no special privileges because of your sex."

Alaina nodded gravely. "I expect none. I only wish to be a Frontier Scout."

Doniss leaned back in his chair again, laying a finger alongside his temple. "The training is very hard. Many do not survive it."

She shrugged and said in a low, determined voice, "I will survive."

Doniss surprised himself with the thought, *I bet you will*. "Very well, ma'am. Be back here at sunset for the swearing in."

She rose. "I will be here, sir." She left, walking as though a great weight had been lifted from her.

Doniss's second in command sat down beside him. "You heard?" asked Doniss. "Aye," answered Torm. "You realize that she'll be raped to death in the first week?"

Doniss shook his head. "I don't think so. Usually, when there is only one female among a large group of men, the men tend toward protectiveness." He shrugged. "At least, that has been *my* experience."

Torm grunted. "What do we do when she wants to leave? The oath is binding for ten years and the penalty for desertion is hanging."

Doniss snorted. "Do you really think the Emperor will press the matter?"

Torm shrugged. "Maybe not." He sipped moodily from the mug of ale he'd brought with him, then chuckled. "On the other hand, what are we going to do if she completes training?"

"Why, we will have the honor of training the first female Frontier Scout in Imperial history," answered Doniss, who burst into laughter as well.

* * *

In later years what Alaina would remember most about the oath-ceremony was not the rogues around her, though they were colorful enough. They were ten hardened, desperate men, willing to follow the hard path of a Scout rather than dance at the end of the Emperor's rope. These men faded into the background of Alaina's memory as she met thousands like them during her career in the Scouts.

It was after the oaths had been given and received, that their sergeant gave a lecture. She remembered it above all else. She regarded it as the core of military wisdom and always tried to apply it whenever she could.

After a string of verbal insults, which Alaina realized were more or less customary, the sergeant held up a jerkin of hard-boiled leather, a steel helmet and a wicked-looking shortsword. "Very soon, you scum will be issued similar items. These are the only arms and armor you will ever get from the Scouts. If you want better, you'll take it from dead enemies. Understand?"

Each recruit nodded.

"Very well. Next thing then. This unit, my fine little birds, is now your family. You look out for one another as brothers look out for one another." He looked at Alaina and added, "And sisters too. You don't fight among yourselves, you don't steal from one another, and you don't even insult one another without leave. It is far too easy to take revenge while on the march or in battle. Don't create a need for revenge among one another. We have better enemies to kill than other Scouts." He nodded, agreeing with himself, eyeing each recruit. "That's all. Be on the village square practice field at dawn."

Alaina raised her hand. "Sergeant? Aren't we supposed to be sent elsewhere for training?"

The sergeant grunted. "Too expensive, recruit. The Emperor does not waste more money than necessary on you." He turned and left, letting another soldier lead them to sheds they were to use as barracks.

When they'd been left alone to bed down, one of the other recruits smiled at her — a broken-toothed grin that left no doubt about his intentions. "What are you, some new kind of camp follower?"

The others laughed. Alaina knew she would get no help from them. "I am a Scout, the same as you."

The man laughed, causing shudders to course down Alaina's spine. "If you were the same as me, dearie, you'd be a *man*." Alaina backed away, feeling for a wall to put her back against. The man followed, grinning. "Let me teach you a few things about what happens *after* a battle."

She knew he was about to lunge at her, and decided to take matters into her own hands. She smiled. "Very well, darling. Come and get me." The men roared with laughter, and her assailant all but ran in his haste to take her.

He put his arms around her, and she reached down, trying hard to make her caress seem real. He chuckled and as he bent forward to kiss her, she grabbed his genitals and squeezed mightily, making the man cry out with pain. "I'm a very strong woman, dear," she said, still smiling. "Are you sure you can handle me?" She increased the pressure on the man's groin, making him scream. "The next time one of you tries to touch me," she declared to the others, "I'll castrate you." She brought her other hand to the man's chest and shoved, forcing his head hard against a wooden post. He groaned and fell.

The others were sullen. "Cully meant nothing by it, lady," said one.

"Aye," said another, who only had one eye. "Twas all in fun."

"It was *not* in fun," said a man who'd been standing in the back. "Cully sought to rape one of his own, a fellow Scout! If he will do that *now*, think what he might do on the battlefield! I would not trust *my* life to such a man." The thin man spat on the floor. "Fun!" he said, making it sound like an obscenity.

Some of the men glared at him, others shook their heads and turned away. A rat-faced little man spoke up. "Thomas is right! Cully was never even-handed, even with his friends. I wouldn't trust him either. Matter of fact, I don't even trust him now!"

Alaina moved toward Thomas as others found reasons to mistrust Cully. "Thank you," she said when she was near him. "I am Alaina."

Thomas grimaced. "Don't bother to thank me. I didn't do it for you."

"Then why?" asked Alaina, bewildered.

Thomas shrugged. "Because the sergeant was right. If we can't trust each other, we might as well be dead." He glanced around the room, noticing that none of the men chose to aid Cully. "You'll be all right now. They'll not touch you now without your leave. Even then they'll be wary."

"They will not touch me," whispered Alaina.

"Why did you join the Scouts?" asked the rat-faced man.

Alaina sighed, sadness passing like a cloud over her face. "It was — just after my marriage. My husband and I were walking toward our new home, and the Earl rode by. He said — something about his rights as my lord, and took me from my husband's arms. He — my husband — fought, and the Earl's men cut him down."

"Did you run away?" asked Thomas carefully.

"No, I couldn't. There were too many." Alaina was trembling. "I let the Earl think I wanted him, and when we were alone, I cut his throat. His sons have sworn to see me tortured to death."

"Ah," said Rat-Face. "It didn't happen inside the Empire, did it?" Alaina shook her head. "They've abolished that practice here. But the Scouts would have had to give you over to the Earl's brats to keep the peace." Rat-Face laughed. "No wonder you became a Scout! They can hardly give one of their own to North Reach lordlings." Even Thomas was grinning.

"No," said Alaina. "They cannot." She smiled and yawned. "Dawn comes early, friends. I'm going to sleep."

* * *

Alaina could never remember much about the first weeks of training. It was a hazy time of muscles that ached beyond endurance, of insults and instruction from the sergeant, of sword cuts practiced on fresh corpses, and the constant smell of her own sweat. At times only the thought of what awaited her should she leave the Scouts kept her going.

Gradually, she found that she was becoming proficient with the shortsword, and more than once she received compliments from the sergeant for her footwork in the practice arena. She spared herself many of the scars a Scout recruit normally carried

because of her adeptness at avoiding her opponents' sword strokes.

She also found that she was adept at treating minor wounds, and she swiftly became popular among her comrades for her gentle touch. She never did quite develop a taste for the bitter, potent ale that Scouts preferred, though she could hold her own in any barracks drinking bout.

Captain Doniss watched her progress with an approving eye. Alaina was a good recruit and would make a fine Scout. He anticipated little trouble in convincing his superiors to allow her to remain.

After all, he reflected as he watched her work out with Thomas and Rat-Face, the law was the law. He was secretly glad that Alaina had forced him to comply with the letter of the law. The Scouts needed something new, and Alaina could open the way for a lot more women now rotting in Imperial prison.

He smiled as she scored a "kill" on Thomas. The girl was definitely Scout material.

His reverie was interrupted by Torm, who entered Doniss's chambers accompanied by two men dressed in somber, but expensive-looking clothes. Torm's face was carefully neutral as he said, "These men would have words with you, Captain."

Doniss' eyebrows rose a fraction. Torm never called him Captain unless something important was happening. "Be seated, friends," he said in his most effusive tones. "Tell me your problem."

One of the men sniffed and said, "We are not friends of yours, nor of any common soldier. We are emissaries of his highness, Earl Mikal of the North Reach. You will do well to remember that, southerner."

Doniss bit back an answering insult and said, "What does the Earl wish from the Crystal Empire?"

"We seek the return of a murderer you have been sheltering." Both men looked at Doniss as though they expected him to kiss their hands in apology.

Instead, Doniss looked blank. "Murderer? There are only lawful citizens of the Crystal Empire here."

The man who'd spoken first snorted. "The murderer is a woman, Captain. Her name is Alaina. Does that refresh your memory?"

With a sinking feeling, Doniss answered, "I seem to remember a recruit to my own organization by that name, but I do not think —"

The emissary interrupted. "We saw her on the practice field. She is the one."

Doniss's tone was chilly. "That woman is not a murderer. She is a Frontier Scout in the employ of the Crystal Empire. What she has or has not done before she joined is no longer a consideration."

"Do you mean that you will not turn her over to us?" asked the emissary.

Doniss shrugged. "If that's how you take it."

The man's face darkened and he tugged at the thin sword he carried at his side. Doniss stood and in an eyeblink had his own sword pointing at the man's torso. "Don't try it, flunky. I'll gut you on the spot if I see so much as an inch of your blade."

The man's companion pulled him away from the table. "I have studied your laws, Captain," he said in a high pitched voice, "particularly those dealing with Frontier Scouts. I understand that a formal challenge may be issued against one who has not completed training."

Doniss nodded, not wanting to, "That's true." And he silently cursed the Emperor's treaties which even allowed this scum from the North Reach to make such a challenge.

The man smiled. "In that case, would you be kind enough to tell me whether or not this person has finished training?"

Doniss swallowed hard, his mind going over the consequences of a lie. "She has not," he said at last, the words bitter on his tongue.

The man's smile grew broader and his friend was smiling too. "Then may we go to the practice field and get this unpleasant matter taken care of?"

Doniss nodded, gesturing for his visitors to leave first. He followed, Torm falling in beside him. "What rotten luck," muttered Torm. "I was hoping she'd make it."

"So was I," said Doniss. "Ever been in the North Reach?"

Torm shook his head.

Doniss smiled without humor. "Those dandies are better with their swords than they look."

"And Alaina's been practicing all day." Torm said gloomily. "She'll tire quickly." He glanced at Doniss, his expression sly. "We couldn't intervene for her, could we?"

"No," answered Doniss. "There is the law, for one thing. And for another, it would be unfair to *her*. She must stand or fall on her own."

Torm nodded reluctantly. Doniss was right, as usual. When they came to the practice arena, Torm cried, "Recruit Alaina! Stand forward!"

Alaina, sweating from her previous exertion, stepped out of the half circle of men standing around the well. "I am here, sir." She looked from Torm to Doniss, then recognized the two emissaries. She gasped.

"These — uh, men, have issued a challenge to you in accordance with the law," said Doniss in a loud voice. "They claim vengeance-right and say you are a murderer. What answer do you give?"

While her fellow recruits muttered against the North Reach, Alaina responded squarely. "I killed an animal in self-defense. It was not truly murder." She straightened and threw back her shoulders. But my husband was most certainly murdered by these crows. If they would challenge me, then I accept." She glared at them, and said in a low voice to Doniss, "At least you haven't handed me over to them outright."



Doniss glared back at her. "The challenge is lawful, child. You are not a Scout until you have completed training. In any case, challenge has been given and accepted. When do you wish to fight?"

Alaina appeared to ponder the question. Then she screamed, "Here and now!" and she leapt into attack position.

There was a ringing sound as two swords were drawn from their scabbards, combined with a cry of outrage from recruit Thomas and a smattering of applause from Alaina's other comrades. A two-on-one challenge was rare sport indeed. The recruit accepting a challenge choose the place and conditions of the fight, but few would back their own bravado by fighting two men at once.

Alaina's spontaneous and ferocious attack caught the northerners off-guard, and she managed to slice a tendon in one man's sword arm. The high-voiced man danced toward her before she could strike a killing blow at his companion. Sparks flashed as she parried his attack. He sneered at her, "Join your pig-keeper husband in death, slut." He pressed in, his sword weaving in a blinding arc.

As he leapt away, Alaina felt herself grabbed from behind, lifted, and then thrown to the ground. The reflexes she'd so painfully developed in the past weeks saved her life. She rolled and kicked upward, and was rewarded with a muffled grunt of pain. As she sprang to her feet, she saw the man she'd crippled clutching his groin with his good hand. She cut his throat almost as an afterthought.

His friend snarled and attacked. Almost before she realized her danger, Alaina found herself pressed to the edge of the circle. As the man brought his sword in for a killing slash, Alaina ducked and brought her own sword up, snapping the northerners blade near the base.

She brought her sword around in a glittering arc toward the man's vitals, but her blow was blocked when his hand closed around her wrist. In his other hand, the man held a dagger almost as long as her shortsword. They pushed and pulled at one another in a deadly parody of dancing.

The edge that Alaina had gained by instantly accepting the challenge was gone. It had bought her the death of one foe, but now she felt herself tiring rapidly. In desperation she lashed out with her foot, causing both of them to tumble to the ground. There was a cry of consternation from the recruits as the combatants rolled about, then a high-pitched squeal of agony, and silence.

Doniss moved forward carefully, expecting the worst. He jumped away as the northerner's body rolled away from Alaina, then smiled as he saw the hilt of her sword protruding from the man's chest. Alaina drew herself to a kneeling position, looked at the blood covering her body, and retched, all to the sound of raucous cheers and congratulations from her comrades. Rat-Face and Thomas helped her to her feet.

"Trooper," said Doniss quietly, "do you wish their weapons?"

Alaina looked back at him, uncomprehending. "W-what?"

"You defeated them," explained Doniss. "That gives you the right to take what you wish from their bodies. Gold, weapons, whatever. It's all yours."

She realized that he was speaking to her. "Oh . . . I'd like to clean up first."

Doniss nodded. "Take your time, trooper. When you've picked what you want from the carrion, get it off my practice field." He turned and ordered the men away.

Alaina splashed cool well water on herself, wincing as it made contact with the cuts and bruises she'd collected during her fight. Then it hit her. *Captain Doniss had accorded her the rights of a full Scout!* She smiled, remembering how he had addressed her as "trooper." Not "recruit," and not "child." Trooper. She was a full-fledged Scout!

Her happiness faltered as she looked at the bodies and thought of the price she'd paid for that title. Then she placed those thoughts at the back of her mind. She was a Frontier Scout now, for better or for worse.

That was all that mattered. □

