

MINERVA

By Romana Lotsawa



ILLUSTRATED BY VERONICA VINYL

A "NEW WOMAN" NOVEL

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QUEST IN MOROCCO

Bill hated flying. Despite many rattles and groans from the plane's superstructure, though, it was soon airborne, and the landing gear folded up into the plane with a loud scraping.

"This is an excellent airplane," explained Harun confidently with barely a trace of an accent, as he tried to reassure Bill; "I have flown on it many times before. We will land first at Ouarzazate, before continuing on to Zagora."

"I'm not worried about the plane," began Professor Webb annoyed, "but I am most skeptical about your initial report. Are you *sure* about this find?"

"It is most assuredly a pyramid, despite its design eccentricities. I estimate that it is equal in size to, but far older than, those in Egypt. Our military was removing a mine field near the Algerian border, when they suddenly came across a large structure buried in the sand," said Harun with no small amount of excitement.

"What do you mean by 'design eccentricities'?" asked Professor Webb, making it clear by the tone of his voice that he was unconvinced.

"It is unusual," began Harun, pausing for a moment to catch his breath, "because the outer stones are not horizontal, but are obliquely set into place, thus creating ramps instead of terraces. This emblem is everywhere," Harun added as he held out a nearly flat medallion. It was shaped like a silver isosceles triangle that represented the image of a pyramid. A partially-raised golden oval was placed concentric to the triangle. Etched into the oval was an image of the letter M shaped by four black lightning bolts. Above the M, but still on the oval, was a small green circle. The green circle was delimited by four sets of parallel triplet lines: two horizontal and two vertical.

"Impressive," commented Professor Webb, as he tilted his glasses for a better focus, "but it is simply *not* authentic. It is too perfect! A machine made it; it cannot *possibly* be an ancient artifact. I sense some kind of a hoax. I can only hope that it will not blemish my reputation. And what is this green symbol above the letter?" he wondered as he paused to fetch a fold-up magnifier. "You especially should know the image of the Southwestern Native American Sun god, Harun! It does not

The stop over at Ouarzazate was brief. As the plane was refueled, everyone except for the Moroccan army officers, Professor Webb, Bill, and Harun got off the plane. Two Moroccan interior ministers boarded the plane. They came over and shook hands with Bill and Professor Webb. Bill was astounded how well Americans were received in Morocco.

The temperature at Zagora was hot and rising. Bill and Professor Webb took refuge in the airport cantina, where they found food and refreshment, while Harun conferred with local officials.

“I have secured a Land Rover,” announced Harun as he dashed to their table. “Hurry; it is time to leave!”

The Land Rover followed a winding road up and over a ridge and then headed toward indistinct images lost in the heat-shimmer on the horizon.

After assigning them a tent, Harun led Bill and Professor Webb toward the object of their expedition. The area was already hot, and getting hotter. “This border is in dispute, but the pyramid is clearly on Morocco soil,” he commented as he led them past the tents of the Moroccan Army bivouac. Half a kilometer away, on a similar ridge on the opposite side of the border, five ghostly Algerian tanks, engulfed by shimmers of heat, were parked.

“They won't bother us, so long as we do not remove any artifacts without coordination of the two governments. But here it is,” he declared as he spread his hands in the direction of the dig.

“It's definitely not Roman, and not Egyptian, for sure,” said Bill as he scanned the area with a pair of compact binoculars. He took a single picture with his Polaroid camera. Though only about ten vertical meters of the structure had been uncovered, it was clearly as Harun had described it. The angled ramps imparted a spiral illusion to the surface of the pyramid.

“It *still* looks like a recent fabrication,” protested Professor Webb. “While not modern per se, it could date from sometime after the death of Mohammed.”

“Words can't really do it justice,” said Harun. “Hurry! Up close, your skepticism will vanish!”

Bill was determined to be first, as he worked his backpack into place and ran down the well-worn trail toward the pyramid. Finally, Bill ran his hands over the outer surface of the pyramid, as he carefully worked his way up one of the pyramid's narrow ramps.

“This stone work is in excellent shape, and so precise!” yelled Bill as Harun and the Professor stopped below him.

“Come with us,” urged Harun; “there's a shaft over here that leads to the entrance.”

After a few minutes of haggling, Harun finally got them all clearances to enter. The entrance led to an elevator that took the three of them fifty meters down to a long, curving man-made tunnel. The tunnel was dry and dusty, and the lighting was meager, but the temperature was pleasantly cool.

“The pyramid is large, and so is the cost of excavation,” explained Harun in a reverberating voice, as he led them deeper beneath the ground. “Constructing this tunnel turned out to be much cheaper, using these prefabricated forms.” He knocked his right knuckles against one of the forms, a combination of metal and plastic.

The tunnel ended at the bottom of one of the buried faces of the pyramid. There was a large metal spool, made up of the remainder of a very long string of lights.

“No one has figured out how to open this door, assuming this *is* the door,” said Harun. He ran his hand along a slab of rock surrounded by vertical and horizontal framing composed of a different material. It had some kind of modest scroll work engraved on the surfaces. “If necessary, we will blast our way through it.”

“Not necessary,” said Professor Webb as he walked to the right-hand side of the door and pointed to several small protruding bricks. “By pushing and pulling on these in sequence, the latch will be released. Bill, can you figure it out?” he asked slyly, making sure Bill knew it was a challenge.

Bill did not have all the field experience of Professor Webb, but he gave the problem his best try. “These etchings above the bricks give the key. Pull this one out, push this one in, pull these two out together, and then push the first one all the way in!”

Professor Webb took a gulp; then proceeded to admonish Bill, “Not quite; you picked the wrong first brick. It’s the one below it. Otherwise, your sequence is correct.” He pulled and pushed the bricks through their sequential motions. “Remember your dust mask,” he warned as he placed his over his mouth and nose. “We do not want to succumb to any dust-laden curses, now do we?”

The door vibrated abruptly, then it vibrated again. Surprisingly, instead of rising upwards, it slid to the left. Once the opening was large enough, Professor Webb dashed blindly in, closely followed by Harun, who unrolled the spool of lights into the Pyramid. A scrawny tabby cat walked alongside Bill, who nervously followed and turned on each of the lights as soon as they were free of the spool. Two dark-colored cats ran past him, in pursuit of dancing shadows on the chamber wall.

“My, it’s unusually clean and dry for a... God!” cried Professor Webb. “This is the moment I’ve spent my whole life waiting for!” Flawless hieroglyphics covered all the wall and ceiling space.

“Some of these I’ve never seen in any of my studies,” remarked Bill as he strove to find a starting point. As soon as he found it, he translated, “Behold, all who enter, that this is the sacred sanctuary of Minerva, Goddess of Light, Protectress of the Earth and the Sky!”

“That *is* what it says, but it makes *no* sense at all,” Professor Webb confirmed. “Minerva is the Roman variation of the Greek Goddess of Wisdom, Athena. This structure is *not* Roman. I am not saying that it’s ancient, but if it predates Roman civilization, that would lead to a paradox of definitions!”

“We’re going to need more lights,” said Bill as he switched on the last light in the string. “These halls are too large for our puny flashlights.”

“There is another spool in storage. Study what you can, while I go fetch it,” urged Harun. He turned and left the pyramid.

“I don’t really need him. I can check the middle corridor myself by flashlight!” announced the Professor, as he quickly strode toward the opening, browsing the hieroglyphics along the way.

Bill moved in the same direction as the Professor, but at a slower pace. He carefully scanned a series of hieroglyphics that were much larger than their neighbors, as if

they were meant to attract attention. Along with the written message, a mixed group of people, men and women, was represented. However, at the representation of the entrance to the middle tunnel, only the women were shown entering it, while the men were shunning away.

“Professor,” warned Bill, “I think you should see this. It says that only the Daughters of the Chosen Path may enter. The Lord of Death waits for all others!”

“Nonsense,” replied Professor Webb, as he waved Bill away in disapproval. “I’m certainly not going to be deterred by superstitious...” There was a flash of amber light. The tabby cat hissed and arched its back. After Professor Webb’s last phrase echoed, there was only silence. Worse, the entrance to the corridor was in motion, continually growing smaller.

“Professor! Professor!” yelled Bill as he ducked his head and ran into the corridor, “where are you? What has happened?” Despite his caution, a sudden arc of sweeping light melted the floor under his feet, and Bill plunged downward into a dark abyss.

“Professor Webb, can you hear me? I’m sorry I lost my dust mask,” he called. There was no reply; in fact, there were no normal sounds whatsoever. Bill spied his computer case. It was the only thing that he could even recognize as a physical object. As soon as he reached it, he nervously opened the case and turned the computer on. It booted up to its normal desktop without a problem. His elation was only momentary, as he wondered aloud, “I wonder what good it will do me here, wherever this... *place* is! Here, Kitty. Where did you go?”

Bill looked around for his pith helmet without success. He repacked his computer and slung the case over his right shoulder. Since nothing around him made any sense, he picked a direction at random and walked that way. He did not get far, as he encountered an invisible barrier. It was soft and flexible and absolutely transparent; it was also impenetrable. As he probed with his hands, he seemed to find similar barriers all around him. Like a blind man, he groped along, seeking an open path.

Bill spied the tabby cat. When he tried to approach the animal, it would run away, but not entirely out of sight. Twist and turn as it might, the cat did not seem to encounter any barriers. Bill took the hint and followed.

After what felt like hours of traveling, Bill stopped again to eat and drink. Without a working watch, he found the passage of time difficult to judge in his strange environment. He was careful to conserve his food and water, since there was no indication that his efforts had actually taken him anywhere at all. As he finished a sip of water, he realized there was a difference, as he sensed sounds and changes in lighting just ahead. Disturbingly, the tabby cat had vanished from sight.

He found himself standing at the edge of a green, grass-covered knoll surrounded by a nebulous ring. All the colors were extra vivid and contrasty, like a postcards. Bill looked back; whatever portal he had passed through had vanished, assuming it had actually ever existed.

When he looked at his feet, he realized that he was standing on a path made from a complex pattern of inlaid stones. The path very much resembled the bed of a creek, as it meandered up the knoll without any straight lines. The path’s destination was obvi-

ous: a fat stone tower with a familiar look to it. Faint, shimmering veils of noisily-crackling, rainbow colors surrounded the tower.

Bill followed the progress of three cats as they walked up the path. As he raised his eyes skyward, he nearly fell over in shock and awe. What he saw was a nearly mirror-like image of the grassy knoll and the tower; however, the reflection of the tower in the sky was dark gray, the grass was brown, and everything was surrounded by a swirling tornado of kaleidoscopic colors that radiated somewhere above the tower.

Bill nervously looked around; he sensed he was being watched. It was eerie and spooky. A burst of warm air passed by him, but he reacted to it with chilling fear. He ran toward the tower, realizing there was no alternate action possible.

As he approached the structure, he could see that it was much larger than it had first appeared. For a moment, he wondered where he had seen that shape before; then he realized that it looked very much like a huge space shuttle. However, instead of booster rockets, it was surrounded by seven cylindrical, vertical bumps that were equally spaced around the circumference. At the top, the bumps blended perfectly in the nose cone-like peak.

The path led to a large, square, open door in one of the cylindrical bumps. There was nothing special about the door, except that it was surrounded by hundreds of inlaid medallions, just like the one that Harun had shown to Professor Webb.

“Professor Webb, are you here?” called Bill as he raced in the building. There was a glowing replica of the medallion inlaid in the floor, which marked the entrance to a small room opposite the entry door. Bill briefly peered into it, feeling that it must be significant. It was filled with at least five intersecting mirrors, all of which reached from the floor to the ceiling. Though the room had no apparent source of illumination, it was, nevertheless, well-lighted.

Someone moved in the nearby shadows. “Oh, Professor, I can't tell you how glad I am to see...” Bill's voice fell silent, as a tall, thin man with an Asian face and long, radiant white hair turned to face him. The man wore a long-sleeved, iridescent olive top that fit snugly over similarly-colored olive pants at his beltless waistline. His tall, bright green boots completed the outfit which looked very much like a military uniform.

“Who are you?” asked the man in perfect English. Bill wanted to shrink away from his piercing brown eyes. “What are those strange things covering your eyes?”

“They're called eyeglasses. They improve my vision. I... I'm Bill Creighton. I was helping Professor Webb explore a pyramid in Morocco. Suddenly, I found myself here, wherever this place is,” replied Bill weakly. “Have you seen the Professor? He seems to have vanished.”

“If he came here, he has found oblivion. No man may enter Sallaka!” said the man sternly.

“But I am a man, and so are you,” Bill pointed out.

"I am neither man nor woman. I am Ayleborne, Keeper of this sanctuary!" replied the man with the penetrating tone of authority. His face had a contorted smile, as if he were concealing something.

"Where is this... place?" wondered Bill as he nervously gazed upon many strange objects in the room.

"This is not a 'place', as it neither exists nor *not* exists. It is a reflection in the Mind, of Akanishta, the Realm above," explained Ayleborne.

Not understanding the paradoxical statement, he could only think to ask, throwing up his hands in frustration, "How did I get here?"

"How, indeed, can someone such as you enter? For eons, I have been waiting for the arrival of the next young woman, who will find her destiny here in Sallaka!" replied Ayleborne. "Let me see," ordered Ayleborne in a strangely enthusiastic mood. Methodically, he began to undress Bill, who found it impossible to resist. As he stood naked before the imposing stranger, who seemed to delight at the shape of Bill's body and genitals, Bill felt embarrassed, lost and helpless. A cat rubbed against Bill's naked right leg, and Ayleborne lurched back with a horrified expression on his face.

"What terrible creature have you brought? What kind of a demon are you?" he asked.

"I am a man, and *this* is a simple house cat! I may not be tall, dark, or handsome, but I *am* a man," Bill asserted again.

"It is impossible for any man to enter! Either you are really a woman, or you are an illusion. I must consult the Oracle," said Ayleborne. He touched a large fancy blue S, preceded and followed by a blue dot. The wall dissolved away without a sound, revealing a hidden room. Inside, Ayleborne activated a strange crystalline control panel, meanwhile keeping a nervous watch for cats. A thin, oval display floated over the control panel. Nothing appeared to hold the panel in place, not even thin wires or struts.

Bill hurriedly dressed, but did not turn his gaze from Ayleborne, as he watched how the man operated the controls. Bill could see patterns in the way symbols appeared on the display in response to the way the man moved his fingers across the crystals.

Finally, as Ayleborne seemed totally occupied, Bill tried to sneak toward the door. He did not get far. Moving silently, Ayleborne abruptly grabbed Bill by the back of his shirt.

"I did not hear the Oracle say anything," said Bill, as he quit resisting.

"The Oracle is a facility of rapport with the One Mind; it communicates by thought, not voice," replied Ayleborne.

"It's amazing that you speak perfect English here," said Bill, not knowing what else to say, as Ayleborne continued to lead him backwards.

"I do not speak your language; to the contrary, *you* have been conversing with me in Sallakan. It is the only language that can be spoken here," explained Ayleborne. "I think you will free me from this prison," he added very softly.

“What did you say? What did the Oracle say about me?” asked Bill with a raised voice.

“It is confused. It said that you are both man and woman at the same time. How can this be?” pondered Ayleborne.

“Well,” began Bill, “I am told that when I was little, I wanted to be a girl, though I can't actually remember. My parents sent me to a therapist, who used hypnosis and electric shock to save me. I am told that I was completely cured. However, when I was in high school, I always felt different, and the other boys seemed to sense it. They often harassed me for no particularly good reason! I was always labeled as an intellectual nerd!

“Can I go home now?” asked Bill, changing the subject.

“I cannot show you the way back, because I do not understand how you or those loathsome animals got here!” explained Ayleborne seriously. “There is only one known way out for mortals such as yourself.”

“What might that be?” asked Bill nervously. “I’m sure I’m not going to like your answer!”

“Transformation, empowered by the Light of Akanishta, is the only way!” proclaimed Ayleborne. His arms were raised, his palms held outward.

“By transformation, you mean one would have to become... what?” puzzled Bill.

“The transformation is into the powerful Minerva, of course. There *is* no other. All the women who came left as Minerva. It was their destiny,” said Ayleborne factually.

“If they're so powerful, how come I've never heard of these women?” questioned Bill. “After all, I *am* an archaeologist.”

“I know that answer not. I fear they fell victim to some dangerous, unforeseen peril. I can only speculate,” replied Ayleborne with a shrug of his shoulders.

“That still does not explain how I will get home,” Bill objected; “I certainly can't become Minerva, a woman!”

As Ayleborne turned away for a moment to consult the Oracle, Bill dashed out the door and down the stone path. He looked furtively back over his shoulder, but he was alone as he arrived at the nebulous ring. As Bill felt both hungry and thirsty, he quickly removed his backpack, expectantly thrusting his right hand past the flap into the pack. All his provisions were missing. Remembering Ayleborne's words, Bill shuddered as he sensed the transformation had probably begun.

Bill desperately sought a plan of action. As a test, he jabbed at the ring with his right hand. It entered and passed back out of the ring without any resistance.

“*Maybe I can escape this way,*” thought Bill as he blindly jumped into the ring. A moment later, he was back in the tower, standing next to Ayleborne.

“The field is reflexive; all paths lead here,” explained Ayleborne. “You *cannot* escape by foot!”

“What did the Oracle *really* say?” asked Bill impatiently. “You're playing a game with me!”

“It says that you must attempt the transformation, despite your general unsuitability,” replied Ayleborne.

“Hey, I *can't* become Minerva! I'm a *man!*” Bill protested.

“The Oracle is knowledgeable, but it is not infallible. You are a dilemma, and the transformation is one solution. I would not recommend it, however, because I do not believe you have the emotional stability and fortitude,” said Ayleborne, shaking his head slightly.

“You shall become either Minerva, or a permanent resident of Sallaka. Which shall it be?” questioned Ayleborne. “Soon, your former life force will ebb away, as your entire structure conforms to the laws of Sallaka!”

“I simply *can't* become Minerva! No, I won't do it!” Bill asserted. *Why is he lying? Why do I sense that Minerva is really my only option?* Bill thought pensively.

Bill was absorbed in his thoughts as Ayleborne again consulted the Oracle. *I've lost track of time... assuming there is such a thing here to track. I don't even feel tired, or in need of sleep. This is a good place to go nuts in,* he thought.

“How do you feel?” asked Ayleborne, a surreptitious look in his eyes.

“Now that you mention it, I am starting to feel a little queasy,” Bill lied, sensing that was what Ayleborne wanted to hear.

“Come here,” Ayleborne motioned firmly, “and place your hands on these glowing receptors. They emit an energy field that will soothe your pain.”

Bill reluctantly obeyed him. Bill placed his hands on the receptors. There was a pleasant feeling, but Bill refused to indulge in the sensation, sensing that he had better not drop his guard.

Ayleborne pressed a crystal; a hidden door opened, but Bill pretended not to notice. Feeling that Bill was properly absorbed, Ayleborne crept away, while Bill pretended not to notice. He was acting most suspiciously, and Bill was determined to find out where the mysterious stranger was going. Bill broke his connection with the receptors, then slipped off his backpack and shoes. The doorway had vanished, but it reappeared when Bill duplicated Ayleborne's motions. Curious, and strangely confident, he proceeded to follow his host.

Though he appeared to pick his way randomly through a maze of corridors, Bill was sure that Ayleborne knew exactly where he was going. Using his archaeological training, Bill sensed that the path led toward the center of the tower. Bill peeked around a corner, but quickly pulled his head back. Ayleborne had reached a dead end. He turned and stared, as if he was suspicious about being followed. Bill took another quick look, in time to see Ayleborne pass through the solid wall at the end of the corridor.

Nothing is as it seems here, thought Bill as he hesitated at the wall; then he confidently stepped forward and walked through it without feeling any resistance whatsoever. Bill held his hands near his eyes, trying to block an overwhelmingly bright light. At the same time, he tried to keep track of Ayleborne, who appeared as a faint shadow against the glare.

Once the pupils of his eyes had contracted, Bill realized that he was inside a wide, circular domed chamber. In the center was a pure white, silent, super-intense, un-flickering column-shaped beam of energy: the Light of Akanishta. Giant replicas of the medallion of Minerva marked the origin of the beam in the ceiling and the termination of the beam in the floor.

“No, no, go away!” cried Ayleborne as he rushed toward Bill. However, he stopped abruptly, as a tabby cat pranced defensively between him and Bill. The cat gave Ayleborne a low, defiant growl.

Realizing that he could not win in a fight against the man, and that the cat might leave, Bill instinctively took what he thought was his only option and dashed into the Light of Akanishta. The cat followed him.

“Please take my place, as the Keeper of Sallaka!” pleaded Ayleborne. “Save me, please save...”. Ayleborne's voice diminished into silence.

Bill braced himself in expectation of pain, but he felt only pleasant sensations as he walked toward the center of the beam. As he stood on the golden oval, upon which the letter M was etched in black lightning bolts, he felt a pair of hands reach out and pluck him from the beam. Instinctively, he searched for something to hold onto. Suddenly, he found himself standing upon some unseen ground, overlooking an improbable stellar scene. It contained countless stars, galaxies, and planets, all compressed into one small area.

“I am Tara. Come, follow me,” urged a radiant golden-yellow, beautiful woman. She wore a flowing red dress, adorned with rainbow-colored jewels. Her long golden hair sparkled with energy.

“This is an interesting place,” said a high-pitched voice. Bill looked down at the cat. Not only could it apparently speak, but it had taken on a strange, glowing appearance.

“Who are... how does he...” began Bill. He stopped abruptly, surprised by the heightened pitch of his voice.

“Cats act as my eyes and ears in your world. They come and go as freely as they please,” added Tara.

Bill cautiously examined himself with his hands. Though he could not see himself clearly, he appeared to have the body of a young woman, with silver-toned skin, wearing a flowing gold-colored dress. Like Tara, he was also barefooted, though his feet did not register any temperature, or the texture of the surface he was standing on.

As Bill followed Tara, he perceived that he was moving with bursts of motion. There were gaps in his path that he could not account for. She led him to what appeared to be an altar suspended in the heavens. It had no apparent connection to any of its surroundings.

“Did I change sex?” asked Bill.

“The male aspect cannot enter this realm. In a way,” she replied, “you are now Minerva. Perhaps you have been Minerva before. Remember, however, all identity is merely a creation of the mind.”

“And you are... ?” questioned Bill expectantly.

“I am Tara, the Daughter of Transcendent Wisdom. I have brought you to this Locus of Akanishta for your initiation before you return to Sallaka, and then to your world.”

“This Minerva, what is so special about her?” asked Bill. He was still trying to accustom himself to speaking in a soprano voice.

“Minerva is a culmination of the greatest potential of your species. Minerva embodies courage and great strength, balanced with kindness, compassion, and unconditional acceptance of all beings.”

“What will happen to my identity as Bill Creighton?” questioned Bill.

“Nothing, for Bill Creighton and Minerva will be an essential unity, though they can never be simultaneously embodied. When Bill Creighton utters the word ‘Sallaka’, he will be transformed into Minerva. The complementary reverse word ‘Akallas’ will transform Minerva back to Bill Creighton.”

“Sallaka is the word!” cried the cat as it bounded past Bill.

“Just like magic!” cried Bill with an unintended girlish squeal.

“Yes, it *will* be like magic,” Tara agreed, “but not without limitations. Minerva can only be embodied for a fixed period of time. As a mortal, you will wear a ring that will indicate when the transformation is possible and will also warn of diminishing powers. Depending upon Minerva's use of her powers, and karmic conditions, Bill will have to wait a period of time, which can range from a few seconds to a few days, before he can undergo the change again.”

“It doesn't sound convenient,” said Bill.

“The mix of male and female attributes is the underlying problem, which you can circumvent entirely,” explained Tara. “If you merely think the command words, you may switch back and forth at will, except for limitations on Minerva's subsequent use of her regenerated powers.”

“If Minerva thinks the command, who will *she* become?” asked Bill curiously.

“She will become your mortal female alter ego, whom you have yet to give a name. It will be necessary to find a balance, lest all aspects of your identity suffer. But it is time!” commanded Tara as she took a step and then pivoted on her right foot. Apparently triggered by the sweep of her outstretched arms, a colored, glowing pentagon appeared under her feet. A pedestal projected upwards from the center of the pentagon. At the top of the pedestal was a scintillating jewel the size and shape of a football. She motioned to Bill to place his delicate, feminine hands on the jewel.

“I *want* to go through with it!” replied Bill to Tara's unspoken question. Details about Minerva and her powers rapidly passed through Bill's mind. In fact, there were so many instructional phrases, many of which overlapped, that he wondered how he was going to assimilate all the information.

For the final stage of the initiation, Tara placed her hands on Bill's hands. The radiance of her aura overwhelmed her physical image. “*Remember,*” came Tara's mental warning, “*Minerva embodies the highest principles of courage, discipline, and compassion. Serious violations of these principles will result in the loss of her powers. The Law*

of Karma will prevail. Seek out allies, because you will need them. But beware, Minerva must never be seduced by the power of lies, because the penalty is oblivion."

"How can Minerva be sure?" questioned Bill.

"Her advanced intuition is sufficient," came the reply.

As the beam of light dissipated, Bill found himself facing the frowning face of Ayleborne. Bill felt as if he had been gone for years, but it was obvious that only a few minutes had actually passed.

"It's my turn now; you've failed!" cried Ayleborne gleefully. "You are destined to take my place."

Bill ignored the man; he knew where he had to go next. Feeling slightly euphoric, he was lost in his thoughts as he turned and walked out of the domed central chamber, directly through the outer wall to the corridor on the other side.

"Well, I might as well try this," sighed Bill; then he carefully and softly recited, "the word is Sallaka." Nothing happened, so again he spoke, this time with emphasis. "The word is **Sallaka!**"

The transformation took place within the span of a bright flash of light. It stung like a high-voltage electric shock, but no pain lingered. Nothing was left of Bill except memory; even his eyeglasses were gone. The image that Bill had grown up with was replaced in an instant with that of a fabulously gorgeous Middle Eastern woman, whose light bronze complexion was soft and flawless. Her eyes were bright emerald green, and her long dark hair glistened with golden overtones. Her muscles were smooth and well-formed; though she actually looked stronger than Bill, her physique was far more feminine than any woman bodybuilder. Even her shadow on the floor looked great.

Her outfit was stunning. She wore a tailored dress that looked as if it had been made of pure silver. As she touched the fabric, it crackled and glowed, repulsing her finger at the same time. The whole garment was covered with a type of reactive, local force field.

The dress had a matching cape that was bright silver-gold on the inside and dull silver on the back side. The bodice had a slightly lowered, but flattering neckline, which cleverly merged with the triangular medallion of Minerva on her chest, and it had three-quarter sleeves terminating in extra-wide, golden cuffs. There was another medallion of Minerva on the front of a wide black belt that accentuated her feminine waistline. "*The power source, obviously,*" thought Bill-Minerva. The skirt, which gracefully hung from her perfectly proportioned hips, did not quite reach her knees. Her legs, equally well-proportioned, sported form-fitting golden boots that came halfway up her calf.

She turned a circle, carefully observing the image in the mirrors and her shadow on the floor. There were wide, golden bracelets on each of her wrists, and each bracelet also bore the medallion of Minerva. "*The transducers for strength and motion,*" she knew instinctively somehow. The final touch was a heavy-looking headband, nearly black in color, that held another medallion of Minerva directly above her forehead. "*The receiver and transceiver.*" Attached to that medallion, hovering above her head

like three halos, were three thin, silver rings. “*Power transfer devices,*” came the realization.

“Eat your heart out, Superman! I'm *much* prettier than you. Besides, you're only a comic book character anyway! Your secret identity, Clark Kent, is a loser! Now, if you had changed into *Lois Lane...*”

“You cheated me!” yelled Ayleborne, as Minerva faced him at the entrance to the mirror room.

“I'm really sorry,” said Minerva as she pushed him aside, “but I *have* to leave. Perhaps your time will come some other day; at least you'll have some company,” she suggested, but the tone of her voice carried doubt.

“Minerva's debut will have to be delayed, because Bill has to reappear, so that there will be no undue attention, or confusion” she sighed softly, as she responded to her newly-enhanced power of intuition. Minerva's speed of thought and reasoning was much faster and far more thorough than that of any mortal human being. Within less than a second, Minerva tried several variations before she mastered the correct enunciation, “**Akallas!**” The flash of the following, mildly painful, counter-transformation was masked by the overlaid mix of many spotlights probing from the ground below.

Bill verified that he was normal again (whatever “normal” now meant), including all his original clothing, minus the shoes and other possessions he had left behind. At first, he felt what he characterized as withdrawal symptoms, which he attributed to the loss of his new femininity. Finally, after a pause to recuperate, he yelled as loudly as possible, “Help! Can someone help me? I seem to be lost!”

“Meow!” came the abrupt statement from behind. Bill turned to face the three cats. They had left Ayleborne to his fate. He reached down to pet them, but each fled in a different direction.

“We gave up our search for you and Professor Webb, until one of the guards sighted you. He was so surprised to see you up there, that he began to hallucinate a far-fetched tale of a silver woman. He had to be relieved of duty,” Harun mentioned, as he leaned from across the table toward Bill, trying to make himself heard in the crowded Zagora Airport cantina. “It is amazing you survived in there for five days! But you never did see Professor Webb again? I searched the pyramid extensively without finding a trace of either of you.”

“No,” began Bill, as he carefully recanted a strategically altered version of his adventure, “Professor Webb fell into a deep chasm, along with tons of rocky debris. I was knocked to the side and slid into some kind of ventilation shaft. I lost my computer and backpack, even my shoes, but I did manage to find my way out. Fortunately, I had a spare pair of sneakers in my luggage, or I would have trouble getting around” Bill added, as he glanced to check his watch. It was running again and seemed to display the correct local Moroccan time. He carefully hid the finger that bore the ring of Minerva, because he did not want to explain its soft green glow, which indicated that it was possible to become Minerva again. “By the way, did you see those three cats? They were my constant companions, but they seem to have disappeared.”

“My friend, this is Morocco. The house cats seem to own the country,” replied Harun, laughing.

“But these three were especially odd,” commented Bill.

“Do you want to stay and explore some more? Your University is sending a replacement in three days,” Harun explained.

“No, I'm too upset about Professor Webb,” replied Bill, as he strained to show some compassion for a man who had hated him. “I really must go home, if only to check up on my mother. She runs an income tax business from our home. She's good at math, but she is also somewhat absent-minded.”

“I guessed that you would feel this way, so I took the liberty of getting you a flight back to Marrakech in the morning. You have a room for the night at a nearby inn. It's not much, but accommodations are scarce here,” said Harun apologetically.

“I'm sure it will be fine. Thanks for all you've done for me,” replied Bill gratefully.

Neither of them noticed a small pair of eyes staring at them from high in the overhead rafters of the cantina.

“Billy, is there anything I can get you while I'm in town,” asked Harriet Creighton, Bill's mother, as she glanced into his room, seeing that he was still in bed. She was wearing her favorite brown skirt-suit, which meant that she was going to meet a client. As she adjusted her wire-frame glasses, her eyes looked weary. Once again, she was working long hours without getting enough rest.

“No thanks, Mom, and please, don't call me Billy!” he moaned. “You *know* how much I hate that!”

“Be sure to get your rest, Billy. I'll be back in about four hours. Remember to fix some soup and eat a balanced lunch,” she added, as she left Bill's room. “Oh, and be sure to fix the VCR programming. The power went out for a few hours last week, so I missed some of All My Children and Oprah!”

“I'll do it, Mom,” he replied with a lack of interest.

Bill listened for the engine in her car. When he could no longer hear it, still wearing his pajamas, he went to the front door and cautiously opened it. He sighed in relief as he spied her car turn a distant corner and move out of sight.

“*It's time for Minerva to appear!*” he thought as he braced himself mentally. “*I have a lot of things to sort out during this week of leave that the University gave me!*”

“The word is **Sallaka**,” he said with deliberation, bracing for the pain, as he entered his mother's bedroom and stepped toward her full-length mirror. “*Fantastic, simply stunning!*” she thought as she studied her own image. “*I have the urge to take off these clothes and gawk at myself. I don't have the time; besides, I think one of the rules for Minerva is that she **not** disrobe!*”

“*Minerva, meet Susan James. The word is Akallas!*” she thought. Nothing happened. “*Emphasis is important, obviously. The word is **Akallas!***”

The image in the mirror changed to that of an attractive young woman with auburn hair and sad-looking brown eyes. There had been no pain this time; apparently,

female-to-female transformation was much smoother. Susan was the name Bill would have been given, had he been born a girl. James was his mother's maiden name. Though Bill's pajamas had engulfed her like some wrinkled bag, it was clear that Susan had a figure much like that of Minerva, though she was not as tall.

As a young boy, Bill might have strongly identified with his feminine side; however, no previous experiences prepared him for this moment. As Susan stood naked in front of a full-length mirror, she gently performed a tactile exploration of certain anatomical details, using just her finger tips. Compared to Minerva or Bill, Susan was delicately muscled. Her arms looked thin. She turned from the mirror for a moment; then she discovered that she had to bend over to peer downward over her well-formed breasts. Her shapely legs were not very massive, either. The narrow waist, the wide hips, and the precipitous curvature at the crotch all seemed most interesting, if not provocative.

Sadly, she realized it was time to get dressed, so she carefully rummaged through Bill's mother's wardrobe. She picked out a bra and panties set first, which fit reasonably well. Next, she put on a pair of knee—high nylons, before adding a short—sleeved red blouse and a pair of black stirrup pants. The shoes were more difficult, because Susan's feet were a bit larger than her mother's feet. It was a tight fit getting into a pair of low—heeled brown sandals. As soon as she found one of Harriet's old black purses in the hall closet, she threw in Bill's wallet and keys; then she slung the purse over her shoulder. She was ready to go. Susan paused to think out loud, “Who am I, really? Is it Bill, Susan, or Minerva? Will I develop a split personality? If I want a life of my own, how can I make Bill give up his? In a moment, Minerva will return. Her sharp mind does not seem to be disturbed by such mundane problems. It's enjoyable to be Susan, too, but how will I ever introduce her to my mother? As Bill, I will be much too squeamish to ever break the news! Of course, mother does like those soap opera-type colossal secrets... boy, do I have a terrific surprise for her!”

Minerva locked the back door; then she tucked the key into a pouch in her belt. She readied herself behind a small plum tree, so that Mrs. Reigstad, a nosy neighbor with a commanding view of the back yard, would not see her. It was a short, quick dash to the backyard shed, where she stashed some of Bill's clothes.

“Time for the test adventure to begin. Think flight!” She pointed her arms upward, as she visualized flight. She did not even hear the sonic boom, as she streaked upwards to a high altitude in an instant. At an elevation of one hundred twenty-five miles, she began to have problems. She was forced to drop lower into the atmosphere.

“I've reached some kind of limit,” she thought as she cautiously descended. *“The bracelets won't carry me any higher. It must have something to do with the density of the air or the temperature. I'm not feeling any harmful effects, though, like difficulty breathing or explosive decompression. One thing is sure, I am going to have to tune my control a lot more! This thought-controlled motion is a new concept for me!”*

After a half hour in the air, she began to feel quite confident. As Minerva, she felt an overwhelming sense of serenity, but it overlaid a gnawing uneasiness. In this persona, she would be denied the essential continuity of existence that everyone else took for granted. *“How do I integrate my time as Minerva with the rest of my life? What good is it to be an all-powerful, really attractive woman? Is something missing?”*

"I've always wanted to visit Florida. Think speed," she thought as she curved toward the Eastern coastline and headed south at a low elevation. She had no idea how fast she was traveling, but she knew that she was not moving slowly. Some telemetry-type information seemed to appear directly in her mind, but she did not know how to interpret it.

"How fast can I really go? Will whatever I think induce the bracelets to perform?" she asked herself as she concentrated on speed. First, brief red flashes of heat flickered around her. As her speed increased, she became encased in a bullet-shaped field of superheated air. *"This must really be fast, but I don't feel much at all! I'm protected by some kind of a thermal barrier, a skin-hugging force field. This speed could be dangerous to others, though, so I'd better slow down,"* she thought as she slowed. In an instant, the envelope of heat that had engulfed her dissipated. As she turned her head to look back, she could see a rooster-tail of water spray that stretched skyward all the way to the far horizon.

Some kind of warning signal sounded in her mind. As she turned upright, she realized that she was on a collision course with a jumbo jet. She turned in time, but the turbulence in her wake did not miss the plane. The plane shook violently for a few seconds and lost altitude; then it leveled off and appeared to resume stable flight. Minerva circled the plane once to make sure it was not damaged; then she sped out of sight in an instant, as many astonished passengers looked on.

Several miles from Miami, Minerva spotted a small fishing boat. Some intuitive sense told her that it was in trouble. The boat was not moving, and the waves were growing more aggressive, as a storm approached from the South.

"This is the big moment; let's see how I interact with people," she wondered. Gracefully, she slowed her speed and approached the deck feet first, arms pointing upwards. She landed harder than expected; in fact, her left boot cracked the wood in the deck, but it did not break through.

"My God, who are you?" asked a bearded man ran up the staircase to the deck.

"Wow! What an outfit!" yelled a young boy who followed him.

"I think you're in trouble. I'm here to help," Minerva announced.

"We do have a problem," admitted the bearded man. "Our propeller shaft broke and fractured part of the hull. We're taking on water. We have manual bilge pumps, but they are wearing the four of us out. I radioed for help from the Coast Guard, but they may not arrive before we sink."

"Where is your lifeboat?" asked Minerva.

"I'm afraid it has a leak, and I forgot to get it fixed," he replied regretfully. "We will get fined for the violation for sure!"

"What kind of an outfit is that you're wearing?" asked the boy excitedly.

"I'll get you part of the way home!" declared Minerva, as she grabbed a long coil of rope and broke off a fifteen-foot section with her bare hands. She tied one end to a bow hook and attached the other end to a clip on her belt. She tried to leap into the air as smoothly as possible. *"Gentle as she goes... oops!"* she thought as she miscalculated

and went too high. For a moment, the entire boat was airborne, before she dipped low enough to keep it in the water.

“There’s a Coast Guard cutter ahead!” Minerva announced as she slowed to release her tether. She circled the boat once and added, “They should see you. I have to leave. Be sure to get that lifeboat fixed. Have a nice day!” Her last words were muffled by the sonic boom that followed her rapid departure.

Minerva flew away from the Miami area, out over the Caribbean Sea. There was a cruise ship several miles ahead. “*No problem, I’ll exercise better control this time,*” she thought as she slowed to reduce the vortex of turbulent air that trailed behind her. She altered her flight path, so that she could pass by the ship unseen. However, to her surprise, she passed the ship only a few hundred feet in front of its bow, while hundreds of passengers watched and cheered wildly.

“*I’ll eventually get it right,*” she thought, as she mentally admonished her poor control. “*I can’t worry about it now. I have an important task to perform for Bill and Susan!*”

Minerva continued for many miles, until she came upon an area containing numerous shoals. They were very colorful, but she was not here for sightseeing. As she swooped down to pick up a large, waterlogged canvas bag floating amongst some ship’s debris, she thought, “*I’m deep in the Devil’s Triangle. Good place for a swim, though it’s not a proper place for a lady to be hanging out!*”

She sped around the area once in a wide arc, while her extended vision scanned deep below the water’s surface. Bill could swim, but he disliked the initial plunge into any kind of water. “*Water should not be a challenge to me!*” she thought. Moments later, she plunged into the water, dragging the canvas bag alongside her. She paused to test for ill effects, but she felt fine, despite not having any SCUBA gear or other breathing apparatus. She slowed her descent to look around. She was in a graveyard, but it was not an ordinary graveyard; instead, it contained scores of wrecked ships.

Moving at a speed that frightened away all the fish, including sharks, she searched through wooden hulls. There, through rapid motions of her left hand, she churned up the sea bottom. Through some miracle of her special vision, the debris in the water did not obscure her vision in the least, so she could see and scoop up hundreds of gold and silver coins, including many priceless doubloons.

Minerva returned to the surface with a forceful motion that caused a fountain of water to burst hundreds of feet into the air.

She hovered over the water, turning slowly in place. She had collected enough untraceable gold and silver coins to make Bill or Susan very wealthy. This was necessary, since Bill and Susan were not really separate from Minerva, because of the latter’s adventures, their earning power would be reduced.

As she was about to depart, her senses began to tingle. She looked up in the sky, but her extended vision could not find the source of an annoying radiant energy. It seemed to emanate from some location deep out in space, to which she could not physically travel. “*I’ll have to pursue this mystery later; I have a very busy schedule,*” she thought as she sped away in a northerly direction. She needed to stash most of the coins at Bill’s house, before continuing with her agenda.

"I'll give you \$220,000 for the lot," offered Stan Hansen, a well-known, wealthy Los Angeles coin collector and dealer. "Of course, that's before I deduct for taxes. Uncle Sam must get his due too, you know," added the white-haired man, as he sat and grinned at Susan across his dining room table.

He reached over the table and gently held Susan's left wrist. "Please, this is strictly a business deal!" she snapped, pushing his hand away. Her reaction was swift and firm, in marked contrast to Bill's usual behavior. Minerva had warned her of his flirtatious behavior. "Save it for your bimbo girlfriends!"

Taken aback, Stan kept nervously tapping the capped end of a pen against the wooden tabletop. He still wanted to move closer toward Susan, but she gave him an icy reply with her eyes. She instinctively knew that she was more physically vulnerable than Bill. Stan Hansen was also her first interactive encounter with another person.

"*He's trying to con me!*" she thought as she gave him a skeptical glance. "*It's a good thing that Minerva slipped into a local university library and actually looked up the true value. Even though she can't turn completely invisible, that fuzzy stealth mode of hers does make her hard to see!*" "Mr. Hansen, I expect to get what the coins are worth. Why, one of those doubloons is not even documented, and they are all in above-average condition. Come on; you *know* the wholesale value is in excess of \$520,000! I can always try Hawthorne Coins across town, instead!"

"No, that won't be necessary, Ms. James. I want these coins, and I am prepared to pay what you're asking!" he added with a conciliatory voice.

"Er, but I really can't pay any taxes," began Susan hesitantly. "*I don't really even legally exist!*" "Let me level with you. I am having trouble with the IRS, so I can't allow them to know about these coins, but I really need the money!"

"I'm very sorry, Ms. James, but I can't bring myself to do anything illegal. I have a reputation, you know!" he said sternly.

"Well... how about if I let you have them for \$420,000 cash. Send the rest to the Internal Revenue Service. If you will work with me, I'll consider selling you more of my family heirlooms!" she added with a wink of an eye.

"It's a deal," he announced with no hesitation, as he quickly walked to her side and shook her hand. "I'll get you the money. But I'd feel better writing you a check; it could be dangerous for a pretty young woman like you to be carrying that much money!"

"I assure you that I am in absolutely no danger," she replied dryly.

"Will thousand-dollar-bills be okay?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes, for all except the last ten thousand worth. I'd like that in one-hundred-dollar bills, if you please!" she said firmly.

She first went to a discount woman's emporium. She immediately discovered that experience in shopping for women's clothes was not necessary, since she was able to guide the women clerks through the use of hinting, which masked her lack of knowledge about women's clothes. Bill would never have asked for help.

Susan purchased a black slip, several pairs of off-black pantyhose, a pair of shiny black pumps with two-inch tapered, pointed heels, and a blue-toned polyester floral

print dress. The dress had a jewel neckline, a thin black belt, and a moderately flared skirt. Each padded shoulder was accentuated with three gold-toned buttons. The long, wide sleeves ended in narrow, elasticized cuffs.

Susan struggled with the back keyhole button for almost five minutes; then she finally got to step back and take in her new image, as she slowly turned in front of the dressing room mirror, with her arms held outward. *“Wow! I look like the proverbial girl next door. What a difference these clothes make! This should give me confidence for the rest of the day!”* she thought, feeling somewhat frivolous. Susan was so unlike Bill. She was extroverted, confident, temperamental, and socially savvy, while Bill was introverted, timid, nervous, and a social misfit. Susan adored her developing identity. She possessed a sense of happiness that had always eluded Bill. It was not surprising, she sensed, what Bill had often felt, that somehow he was destined to become a woman. Susan would probably eclipse Bill entirely.

The sales clerk was a pretty, young blond with waist-length hair. She handed Susan a shopping bag; then she rang up the purchase while Susan stuffed her discarded clothing into the bag. Susan staggered for moment, as she learned to swing her hips while balancing on the pointed heels. Once she mastered the correct gait, she dashed to an alley to transform into Minerva. Amazingly, everything that Susan had been carrying vanished along with Susan. It was much like having a magic closet.

Next she encountered a lingerie shop, where she filled another shopping bag with ladies' undergarments, before moving on to a fancy dress store. She bought six more dresses and two fancy skirt suits: a red one and a brown one. Her load was beginning to weigh her down, but she struggled onward to a shoe store, where she purchased five fancy pumps, covering a range of colors and heel sizes.

A wave of hunger suddenly swept over Susan. It was not entirely unexpected, since she had never eaten since coming into existence. Minerva did not seem to crave any food, but Susan had to eat. She was conveniently close to the food court of the mall, so she ordered a large chicken salad and a bowl of chocolate yogurt, along with a glass of water. While she ate, she wondered if meals were interchangeable between her and Bill.

It was nearly evening when Susan completed her shopping; then Minerva went to a secluded rooftop she had spotted earlier. Susan repackaged and bagged all her purchases as efficiently as possible. It was a major effort to lift everything at once. It was so unwieldy that she could not even walk. However, once she thought the magic word, the problem became academic, as Minerva replaced Susan. All of Susan's baggage had again magically vanished.

“Someday, I really must figure out where everything goes; it's like having a purse with infinite capacity!” thought Minerva as she sped eastward toward home.

Minerva changed course toward Northwestern New Mexico. There was a strange flicker of light in an otherwise desolate and uninhabited area. The light was a fire glowing within an uncharted ceremonial kiva. Seven Indian women, fully dressed in native costume, sat evenly spaced around the fire, within the depression of the kiva. As Minerva paused high above them, one looked skyward in her direction. Though she could not see Minerva, it was as if she had sensed her presence.

“The leader is another of the special people,” realized Minerva, as she sped across the state line into Colorado. *“But what does **that** mean?”*

The double transformation in the backyard shed was done as quickly and quietly as possible. Minerva became Susan, who removed all of her newly-purchased clothing. She felt sad about having to remove such a flattering outfit. Minerva reappeared briefly, en route to becoming Bill. Bill dressed himself; then he carefully packed all of Susan's clothing. Just touching it evoked a feeling of sensual pleasure for him. However, he was also seized by embarrassment whenever he thought about Susan's bold encounters with other people.

As Bill crept around from the backyard toward his front door, he noticed that the light in his ring had gone out. It would be several hours before he could become Minerva or Susan again. However, at the moment, all he could think about was getting to bed and getting a good night's sleep. It would take a couple more days to shake off the effects of jet lag.

“What took you so long, Billy?” asked his mother as he walked into the house. She had already prepared for bed, since she was wearing a pink nightgown under her red corduroy robe.

“I went walking around town, then I saw a couple of movies,” he replied.

“Did you see the news. It's been one thing all day long on every channel!” she exclaimed, as she turned on the television.

“...who has been nicknamed the Silver Goddess!” continued a woman newscaster. “Several Atlantic radar stations tracked her moving at more than Mach six! In Florida, the crew of a fishing boat claimed that she towed their boat without the aid of any machine! Hundreds of passengers on a cruise ship all gave the same vivid description. During just a few hours, she seemed to span the entire continent. You're seeing several amateur photographs, which are all quite blurry. She's too fast for the shutter speeds that were used...”

“Excuse me, Vicky,” interrupted a man as the video switched to him. “This is Donald Samuels, again, bringing you that interview with Dr. Ralph Hudson of M.I.T, that we lost a few minutes ago...”

“Am I on?” asked a balding, middle-aged man, who had a neatly-trimmed beard. “I have analyzed the data thoroughly. So far, I have not seen any proof of a silver flying woman. What we seem to have are a lot of unusual atmospheric disturbances, but no flying people have been detected. Human beings simply cannot fly unaided, and certainly not at supersonic speeds. This has all the trappings of some type of mass hallucination.”

“This is Vicky Marshall again, with the latest breaking news on our mysterious silver lady. I have an exclusive report! It seems our flying lady has a name: Minerva, like the Roman goddess! A little more than an hour ago, she was briefly seen near Burlington Colorado, where she dramatically rescued a little girl, Samantha Carlson, who had been lost in the hills most of the day...”

“Why did you turn off the television, Billy?” asked Harriet with a hurt expression.

“Please, Mom, I am very tired, and stop calling me *Billy!*” protested Bill with a forcefulness his mother had never seen him exhibit before. “I have a lot of things to discuss with you, but I need to get to bed. This super woman can wait until morning. Good-night!”

“By the way, Billy, some strange cat has been perched in the big tree in back, staring into the house all day long.”

“Hmmm,” wondered Bill, thinking of Tara.

A single, long oval walnut table, surrounded by high-backed, non-padded matching chairs, occupied most of the floor space. Except for a heavy, amber-colored glass ash-tray in front of each chair, the table was bare. An extra large chair, similar in design to all the others, was situated at one end of the table. There was an unusual emblem on the back of the large chair, as well as on the wall behind the chair. The emblem resembled a hooded head, surrounded by a thick brown circle, all contained within a large depiction of the Greek letter Alpha.

Several figures, apparently all men, entered the room in single file and walked around the table. Although they differed somewhat in height and weight, except for one, they were all dressed alike: in hooded brown cloaks. The only differences in the cloaks were large Greek letters drawn in calligraphic black over each person's chest. Some of the Greek letters were followed by smaller, black numbers. In the center of the procession, there was one contrasting light tan cloak, which garment bore the Greek letter Alpha. It was otherwise similar in design to all the other cloaks.

At the moment the figure in the light tan cloak reached the oversize chair, the procession halted. Everyone pulled his chair out from under the table; then the tan-colored figure sat, while the others remained motionlessly standing. Two arms were raised high into the air and then thrust downward; it was the command for all to be seated.

There was silence, until the tan-colored figure pounded a black gavel and spoke with deep, commanding tones, “This monthly meeting of the *Circle of the Brown Cloak* is now in order! I feel uneasy, as if we're being watched,” he said suspiciously. He removed a device from a pocket and carefully scanned the room. He did not detect the cat perched on an outside sill.

“Nothing, there is nothing wrong,” he uneasily admitted. “We will start with four items. Brother Gamma 3, you go first.”

“Thank you, Brother Alpha,” began the man confidently. “I have good news to report. Consolidated Mercantile has successfully taken over Amalgamated Metals. Our immediate profit is \$56 million in sold-off stock options, plus we will save another \$11 million because of layoffs in the coming year. In the next five years, we will also pocket another \$1.2 billion by judiciously raiding the pension funds!”

“Excellent, excellent!” cried Brother Alpha as he led a round of applause. “Now, Brother Beta 2 will give his report!”

“Our war with the Mafia Dons is over; they have conceded defeat!” announced Brother Beta 2. “From now on, they will pay fifty-five percent of everything they make

from drugs, extortion and prostitution. That comes to more than \$950 million per year!”

“Good news,” cried Brother Alpha as he led another round of applause. “Now, Brother Lambda 1 will give his report!”

“Brother Alpha,” began Brother Lambda 1, “I am pleased to report that we successfully induced the board of Reliance Products to block the appointment of Karen Michaels as their new CEO. Ms. Michaels has also subsequently resigned. There may be a lawsuit, but it’s sure to drag on for years!”

“Excellent, excellent!” cried Brother Alpha as he led another round of applause. “Now, Brother Iota 9, it is your turn.”

“I have good and bad news,” announced Brother Iota 9. “At Center Research, the sexual harassment suit instigated by three secretaries was thrown out by the court, when no one dared come forth to substantiate their allegations. It seems that all the witnesses *somehow* found themselves mired in financial problems.”

“But now, my Brothers of the *Circle*, we have a matter of great concern before us. In a moment, you will see,” began Brother Alpha as he motioned to Brother Beta 1, who went to a small control panel next to the lighting controls. A large, flat television screen lowered from the ceiling and stopped just above Brother Alpha's head. Pictures appeared on the screen, but there was no sound.

“These are numerous sightings of this silver-clothed woman,” explained Brother Alpha. “I do not have to tell you that she represents our worst nightmare. If this super woman is allowed to flaunt herself, *all* women are bound to rise up and demand total equality, instead of just talking about it. Whoever she is, she cannot be tolerated. Today, everyone has a priority assignment: learn all you can about this woman, espe-



cially about her supposed miraculous powers. She *must* have weaknesses; what woman doesn't? If all goes well, she will soon be history!"

"Billy, you're still in bed!" complained Harriet soon after she had arrived home. She had spent most of the day with three of her major clients in town.

"Just another hour, or so," whined Bill. "Mom, you just can't *believe* how tired I am!"

"I'll have dinner ready in an hour," she asserted. "If you're not up by then, you'll miss out, Billy. It's your favorite tonight: cabbage and Polish sausage."

"Tell me again," requested Harriet in a confused tone, as she sat across the kitchen table from Bill.

"Mom," Bill explained, "we are going to sell this house, so that you can have a new home-office much closer to town. I'll get both of us each a new Pentium computer, to replace that old XT. Plus, I'll get you a FAX machine and a modern business telephone."

"What's come over you, Billy?" questioned Harriet. "When I mentioned such a thing last year, you said it was a bad idea. Remember, you wanted me to retire soon!"

"Er, I really can't explain just yet," replied Bill. "Mom, let's just say there are going to be a *lot* of changes around here, especially for me. You'll understand when I show you, when I get established in my new life," he added as he glanced at the ring, which was still devoid of any glow.

"But what about your job? You're going back to the University, aren't you?" she asked.

"I'm taking an indefinite leave-of-absence," Bill explained. "Let's just say that I've come into a small fortune, enough to set us up very nicely. I'm thinking of becoming a freelance journalist, with emphasis on scientific topics," he added, as he still cringed in excited embarrassment over Susan's attitude.

"Really?" she said as she stood up. She tilted her head downward with a skeptical glance. "Billy, you're acting very strange. Maybe you should call our doctor. You are much better-suited to being an archaeologist than a journalist!"

"Trust me, Mom," Bill urged, as he confidently nodded his head. "You will see me do a *lot* of unexpected things in the days ahead.

Window curtains lifted into the air and discarded packing material skidded across the floor, as Minerva busily raced around the extra bedroom being converted into the business center of the new house. It made more sense for her to setup and connect the computers, equipment and furnishings, since she was so much faster and more efficient than Bill.

She unpacked and located the two computer desks first; then she assembled a new computer system on top each of the desks. All the connectors and power cables were done next, but it was not yet time to power up the systems. She placed Bill's new portable computer next to one; then she set up Harriet's old IBM XT computer next to the other. After interconnecting cables were in place, she turned on all four computers. There were two separate tasks to be accomplished: Bill's data for his lost computer

needed to be restored from a backup tape, and everything needed to be copied from Harriet's old computer to her new one. With Minerva's speed of thought, the whole process seemed to move at a snail's pace. Fortunately, there were many other pending tasks in the business center to keep her occupied.

A third desk was set up as Susan's professional video editing and processing center. Besides the two high-definition 8mm camcorders, it included a monitor, a special effects-title generator, and a dual-cassette 8mm copy deck.

As Minerva was setting up the new copy machine, a hand touched the door handle; she immediately spoke "Akallas," the word for the reverse transformation. Bill reappeared instantly, crying out in pain, but he was moving too fast to keep his balance. He slipped and fell to the floor.

"You know, Billy, cats are watching our back door ag... what on earth? What is going *on* in here?" asked Harriet before she had finished opening the door. "I heard all this noise. Billy, what in heaven's name are you doing on the floor?" she asked as she gave him a quizzical look.

Bill paused while he tried to think up an explanation; then it came to him, "I slipped on the floor while moving this copy machine table. I nearly twisted my leg."

"On the carpet?" she asked skeptically. "Billy, I really think you should make an appointment with our doctor. You've been acting very strangely. Maybe you got one of those strange diseases in Morocco. You were lucky to get back, and poor Professor Webb..."

Bill stood up. With a vigorous motion of both hands, he implored, "Trust me, Mom. I'm *not* sick, but I am also not the same person I was before the trip. You'll eventually come to understand, but you'll have to wait until I'm ready, until we're *both* ready, for a complete explanation!"

Bill had never seen his mother become so speechless. It confirmed his suspicion that she would have to be carefully prepared for the revelations yet to come.

"Anyway," she finally began, "I came to tell you that there were more sightings of that Minerva woman reported. Yesterday, she prevented two jet airliners from colliding over Chicago and rescued a cat from a tree in Nebraska; then she publicly announced the location of a lost gold mine in Arizona and donated her claim to charity! In Alabama, she rescued this black woman named Elizabeth Putnam from prostitution and drugs... told her that she was a special person and ought to do something better with her life. You should have heard the woman shouting, 'Hallelujah! The Lord Be praised; I am saved!' I tell you, life seems so much better each day, since she first appeared. Don't you think so, Billy?"

"I suppose so, Mom," he replied with a disinterested tone. He was trying not to invite any speculation, especially since his mother had just garbled some of the facts that he knew well. Soon, Harriet would probably hear about the pyramid of Minerva and possibly connect her appearance to his return from Morocco.

Susan lacked any official identity, so Minerva set out to give her one. She visited the records departments of a local hospital, an out-of-state school district, the county seat, a distant university, the department of licenses, a multi-state bank, and the So-

cial Security Administration. Using speed, advanced senses, strength, and her fuzzy-stealth power, she managed to forge all the important documents. Locks were not a barrier, since it took only the touch of a finger to open any door.

Bill's memories were useful, and the availability of advanced copy equipment at the locations was also especially helpful. Within a few hours, Bill had acquired a younger sister named Susan, who, due to financial reasons, had gone to live with Harriet's late sister, Elena James, in another state, shortly after Bill's father died. Susan had changed her last name to James, before going on to school and then college. Susan had recently graduated with honors with a degree in journalism. Minerva was careful to pick doctors, teachers, professors, registrars, witnesses, and others who either were dead or had left the area of record.

The task was complete by early morning. While Susan's records were not flawless, they would hold up to most examinations.

Before changing back to Bill, Minerva paused to reflect. *"Of course, I don't really have a life, since I am just an extension of Bill or Susan. So far, it's been a fantastic, enlightening adventure, but I worry that the bubble may eventually burst!"*

Bill attached a lightweight, portable electromagnetic spectrometer to his belt; then he spoke the magic word, and Minerva was on her way. Today, she wanted to investigate the mysterious radiant energy. She had sensed it many times in her travels, and she knew where to find it each day, but she still had no idea what it was, or why it was irradiating the Earth. Her extended senses were sharp, but she did not yet understand how to interpret what she felt. She wondered if she had forgotten too much of the information that Tara had given her at the Celestial Altar.

She sped across the countryside at a high altitude toward the longitude of best reception. Soon, she found the latitude of maximum intensity. Dark, starlit scenes were embellished with predawn shadows, as she landed in the Sierra Madre Mountains, near Durango, Mexico. Not having a comparable human sense, she found it difficult to characterize what she felt. However, her keen senses did warn her that it was sinister.

Minerva had not been affected by the air temperature, but Bill shivered in the cool morning air. While aiming the spectrometer skyward, he welcomed the warming rays of the rising sun. He turned in a complete circle, while he tilted the device from side to side. The spectrometer did not show any unusual readings, nor did any of the readings vary by direction. It was time to seek special assistance.

Racing the light of dawn, Minerva sped in a northerly direction toward Tucson, Arizona. As soon as she reached the still-lighted streets of the city's distant southern suburbs, she turned and headed westward. She passed low over vast fields of saguaro cacti, which were especially striking because of all the picturesque hues added by her extended vision. She could clearly see her destination: the domed buildings of the Kitt Peak National Observatory.

As she hovered above the complex, she thought about how thrilled Bill would be to explore everything, but this was not a sightseeing visit. She was careful not to enter the field of view of any telescopes. It was not really a problem, since the doors on all the telescope domes were already slowly sliding shut, while the telescopes inside were

parked for the day. With the change of the shift, the stellar astronomers would soon be replaced by solar astronomers.

Five people exited from the main door of the largest dome. There were two women and three men, discussing non-astronomical topics.

Minerva needed one of them to help her. She expected that she should pick one of the women, so she was surprised when her intuition chose the thin, dark-haired man instead, noting that he was also one of the “special people”. Though she found the judgment difficult to quantify, let alone justify, she also found him interesting.

Using fuzzy-stealth, Minerva moved in closer until she could read his ID badge: Roger Cavendish. Susan would have to arrange a meeting with him. However, Minerva would first have to set up preparations.

Within seconds, Minerva had sneaked into the observatory and found the office with the nameplate reading “Roger Cavendish, Assistant Astronomer”. The office was crammed with kraft envelopes, photos, charts, and long paper rolls. There were no clear areas, not even around the late-model IBM PC clone on the old wooden desk, nor on any of the walls. Roger was very messy, but Minerva was not there to organize his office; however, she was forced to do a small amount of high-speed arranging to find her way around. She made a clear space next to the computer, and she found a calendar schedule behind a stellar photo on the wall behind the computer. She could see that Roger had a varied schedule, sometimes alternating between shifts each week.

The PC was still on; the screen blank except for the familiar DOS prompt. She quickly typed in a file and set it to display at system boot up. In it, she suggested that he investigate an anomaly at a given Right Ascension and Declination. She signed the message “From a friend, M.” To insure that he would read it, she shut off his computer.

It was time to head for home. Harriet would soon be getting up. She would wonder what had happened to Bill.

High over Western Texas, Minerva’s intuition warned of danger on the ground several miles to the Southeast. She could not ignore it, despite already being late arriving home. As she dove through the lowest layer of clouds at a rate that would have made any normal person dizzy, she again assumed the fuzzy-stealth mode.

She saw the problem: there was a late model, green-colored car out of control on a steep side road, about four miles from a main freeway. Smoke spewed from the area of the left front wheel. The road had a coarse, irregular graveled surface. It also had a steep bank on the right side and a twenty-foot drop on the opposite side. The driver repeatedly rammed the bank in an attempt to slow down. The maneuvering made a lot of noise, but it did not reduce the speed of the vehicle.

Minerva had already calculated what to do, as she made a running landing alongside the car. The moment she grasped the driver's door handle, she became fully visible. The driver again steered into the bank, but this time Minerva applied a helping lateral thrust of her right hand. It was too much. The car came to a quick stop as its nose plowed deeply into the bank, creating a cloud of ejected sand and gravel, also creating a potential for severe injury to the driver. Minerva was about to yank off the door

to pull out the driver, but she decided to wait. She watched the air bag slowly (from her point of view) inflate from the hub of the steering wheel. Once the air bag had deflated, she tore the door from the vehicle with little more than a flex of her right wrist.

The driver was an attractive woman in her late thirties, dressed in a blue-green skirt suit with matching high-heeled pumps. She was a redhead, but it was obvious that her hair had an added extra-dark salon tint. She also had a bruise on her left cheek.

Minerva broke the shoulder belt in two places; then gently lifted the unconscious woman out and to a temporary rest on the car's trunk lid. It was not a safe perch, so Minerva searched for a better place. She bounded to the top of the bank, where she saw only a large boulder and scraggly vegetation. It did not look promising, especially since the temperature was already turning hot. Sensing that it was time to use one of the rings, she removed the top one from her headband and tossed it onto the boulder. In response to her mental command, the rock turned to the consistency of plastic and changed its shape. Two lizards fled the area to seek shelter elsewhere. As the boulder rose upward like a bubble, it turned into a dome-like structure, supported by four thick, curving pillars which rested on a slab floor. As a final touch, she pulled the rear seat cushion from the car and placed it on the slab floor under the dome.

Once she had laid the woman on the cushion, she returned to the car to inspect the damage. "*Bill never even dreamed of doing this*", she thought as she pulled the car free of the bank and effortlessly lifted the front end. The left front wheel area smelled of acid, especially around the master brake cylinder, which was severely damaged. The area was no longer smoking, nor was there any obvious source for the acid damage, but Minerva was certain that it was sabotage. A warning sounded in Minerva's mind: there were also traces of a poison gas, probably cyanide.

Minerva quickly returned to the woman's side. Her breath was shallow, and her skin was growing cold to the touch. She was dying. She needed immediate, intensive care. "I'm so sorry," sighed Minerva, "you can't survive one of my rapid trips, and I can't get help here fast enough. Even *my* powers have limitations," she added sadly as she touched the woman's forehead.

Expecting that death was but moments away, Minerva knelt over the woman and sadly waited. The nearly constant wind ominously subsided, and the area around the woman's shelter became silent. The only sounds were those of the cars on the main artery and a large dust devil a few hundred feet away in the canyon below the dirt road. Minerva feared that this might be the moment of truth, a letdown from weeks of being on a flying ego-trip. Unexpectedly, the woman began to stir. First she moaned; then she opened her eyes. "It might be wise to lie still, in case you're injured. Do you think you can talk?" Minerva asked patiently. "*Tara didn't tell me about the power of empathy!*"

"I'm Cynthia Wilson... at least, I think so. I don't know what happened. There was this detour in the road. Now I've smashed my car. It's a bad day, but I seem to have a lot of bad days. Who *are* you?" she asked hesitantly, with a faint trace of a Texas accent, once she realized that Minerva was not an ordinary-looking woman.

"I must investigate this, but I'll be right back," explained Minerva as she put some distance between herself and Cynthia; then she slowly lifted into the air, taking care not to create another sonic boom.

Minerva followed the side road back to the main highway. She arrived in time to see a strangely dressed figure packing away a detour sign in the trunk of a large black sedan. It was a man wearing a brown cloak, which bore the boldly-imprinted symbol Kappa 2. The garment was no barrier to Minerva's extended vision. She noted his face; then memorized the vehicle's license number, while she swooped downwards on an interception course.

Minerva instinctively pulled back her arms and slowed her descent, once she realized that the black vehicle was not an ordinary car. Its privacy glass was no barrier. Her extended vision warned her that it was crammed with sophisticated-looking equipment, and possibly explosives. "*Time for a second ring,*" she thought as she removed it from her headband. A replacement was already growing in place of the first ring. She was in no physical danger; after her experience with Cynthia Wilson's vehicle, she had decided to use a more careful method for handling *this* car.

With a careful flick of her wrist, the ring was sent hurling toward the vehicle, guided by Minerva's mind. It landed gently on the roof and stuck firmly to the metal; then it emitted a glowing field that brought the car to a halt at a predetermined position on the shoulder of the road. The cloaked man leaped out and looked around. When he saw Minerva coming, he pulled out an automatic rifle tipped with a large silencer. He fired, and kept firing until the clip was empty; then he reloaded and fired again. Few bullets came Minerva's way, and she casually brushed aside those that did. She caught and kept two of them for future analysis.

Realizing how futile his action was, the cloaked man returned to his car and closed the door. As Minerva landed, she became aware of an unusual humming sound, accompanied by overtones of ultra-high-frequency sound that only she could hear. Flashes of energy lit up the dark windows from the inside. Some kind of machine was straining against the stasis field of the ring; an overload was building up. Minerva tried to thrust her hands through the driver's door glass, but she encountered nothing solid. The disintegrating car had been replaced by a cold but intensely bright aura that was already dissipating.

"*Another mystery,*" she thought as she turned and sped back to Cynthia Wilson. "*I have to get this woman to a hospital; then I have to head for home. Bill is long overdue!*"

"Where do you live?" asked Minerva once she returned to Cynthia.

"I live in Garland, which is essentially Dallas," she replied.

"That's too far," said Minerva as she calculated the parameters. "You have two options: I can carry you to a nearby Ranger station, or I can send someone to fetch you. I must warn you, though; I travel fast, and I don't have much experience carrying anyone!"

"I've heard about you! You're the mysterious flying woman. What's your name... M something?" she asked hesitantly.

“Minerva, I am called Minerva! These guys who dress in these silly cloaks will probably think up another name for me.”

“Yes, you *are* Minerva. But you're real, not at all like a comic book hero!” Cynthia added. It was clear that she was extremely perceptive, and very intelligent.

“I exist in the *real* world, just like everyone else,” explained Minerva emphatically. “Without a sense of humor, I think I'd be ludicrous. Are you ready to go? Do I need to explain the seat belts and accommodations?”

“I'm ready and I trust you; it'll be the high point of my entire life!” cried Cynthia, as her face broke out in a broad smile. “Where did you come from? Do you have a secret identity?”

“Watch the news; all things will be revealed in good time. But, it's time to go!” Minerva gently embraced Cynthia. As the two of them sped skyward, the thermal barrier formed around them. Even at a speed of Mach 2, Cynthia found that she could easily breathe and could even carry on a conversation.

As Minerva set a course toward Pecos, Cynthia began to recount her story. She had been returning from a visit to a subsidiary of her company in El Paso, when she took the detour that got her into so much trouble. She had recently won a big harassment case, but the judgment had not really improved her life. Marcus Dellaford, her harasser, had supposedly been fired; instead, much to her dismay, she had recently learned that he had been secretly promoted to a branch office in Atlanta. The chairman of the board, Wendell Morgan, claimed that it was the best course of action and that the man faced permanent dismissal if he ever bothered her again. The reason Marcus really quit harassing Cynthia was that he had found another woman, who closely resembled Cynthia. She was now the unfortunate recipient of the man's unwanted attention.

Minerva did not say much; she mostly listened, while she learned how women communicate with each other. She also sensed that many unexplained, still-unfolding events were not coincidental, but were somehow connected

Bill was two and a half hours late when he rematerialized within the backyard garden at his new house. It had been specially laid out to be hidden from the prying eyes of the neighbors. He carefully opened the backyard gate without making any noise; then crept around to the front of the house. His mother's car was in the driveway. He wondered if that was good or bad news. He also wondered why he bothered to keep a car for himself, since he hardly drove it anymore.

Cautiously, he opened the front door and peered in. The living room was too quiet; his mother should have been there watching the last few minutes of her favorite soap opera. Bill walked in, leaving the front door open to reduce noise. He wanted to find his mother and learn what she was doing.

She was not in the work room. He checked her bedroom; she was not there either, nor was she in the kitchen. He knew that she was not in the backyard. Perhaps she was visiting the widow across the street, who was also an avid soap opera fan.

Bill relaxed, as he was about to step into his bedroom; then he found his mother. It was clear she had been rummaging through his clothes. She was angrily displaying the blue-toned floral print dress.

“Oh, Billy, we tried so hard to cure you!” she snapped.

“I don't know what you mean,” he replied, feigning ignorance. “What am I doing with that dress? It belongs to a friend of mine.”

“I'm not dumb, Billy. You've never had a steady girlfriend; you certainly don't have one *now*! You've been acting *very* strange ever since you got back from Morocco. This stupid urge to wear women's clothing has come again, hasn't it? It's so embarrassing! What will the neighbors think? Your father and I prayed so much that you would not turn out to be gay!”

“That psychiatrist led you astray, Mother,” Bill complained with a hurt expression. “A lot more correct information has become available in the last few years. I'm transgendered, not *gay*!”

“My God, that's even worse!” she responded, having seen many transgendered people on talk shows.

“Anyway, it's still not what you think, Mom,” he replied. “*How can I explain to her that I am also **two** women? Now is **not** the time to tell her about Minerva!*” Bill took the dress and laid it neatly over the back of a chair; then he nudged his mother to sit beside him on the edge of his bed. “Mother, I am going to give you a demonstration of a new reality, so you had better go sit on the living room sofa and brace yourself!”

“What? So you can show me how ridiculous you look in this dress?” she asked.

“Trust me; I will *not* look ridiculous! I assure you, Mother, that this will make sense,” said Bill, as he gently pushed her from his bedroom and closed the door.

“Mother, I would like you to meet Susan,” she announced with a slightly exaggerated, but confident gait. With her handbag swinging from her shoulder, she executed a graceful pirouette on the pointed heel of her left pump; then, in one an exaggerated but smooth motion, she ended up facing Harriet. An equally graceful curtsy completed the maneuver. “Hello, Mother... meet Susan!”

“Who... *who* are you?” she asked with a nervous loss of breath.

“A few minutes ago I was Bill, but the prodigal daughter returns, and she looks quite smashing! She is not a bit shy and timid like Bill! See, I have all the documents!” she began as she emptied her handbag on the sofa. “Birth certificate, high school diploma, college degree, and driver's license!”

“Is this some kind of a joke? Did Bill put you up to this?” she asked. She finally picked up the birth certificate; then she just stared at it in silence. The document clearly stated that she had given birth to a daughter named Susan. Harriet was not normally quiet for such a long period of time.

“Mother, it's time for you to get used to my feminine identity. I can't explain everything to you at this time, but I *do* like being Susan better than being Bill. As Susan, I will make a much better freelance journalist; in fact, I'm getting ready to head for M.I.T for my first interview, with Dr. Ralph Hudson.”

"I don't understand how you do this, but isn't it very uncomfortable to maintain such a disguise?" asked Harriet.

"Call me, Susan, Mother; it's my name. This is not a disguise. Through a process that you will eventually come to understand, I've become a genetically- and anatomically-correct woman," she added, as she began to removing her clothing. Soon, she had stripped to nothing more than black bra and matching panties.

"You... you look just like a woman!" exclaimed Harriet in astonishment.

"Yes, Mother, no falsies, no padding, absolutely nothing is added or faked. I'm still Bill, but *not* Bill, as is quite obvious," emphasized Susan with raised arms. At that moment, a passing car backfired, distracting Harriet for an instant. It was not much time, but it was long enough for Susan to become Minerva, who immediately shouted, "Akallas!"

"What did you say?" asked Harriet, catching a hint of the flash of light from the transformation, as she turned her head back to Susan. Instead of the attractive woman she had just met, she instead gazed upon her son, incongruently dressed in a flat, over-stretched bra and women's panties. She was so shocked that she readjusted the fit of her glasses several times.

"I've returned to Bill to demonstrate the truth of my transformation. You won't be seeing much of *me* anymore, Mother," he added. "I will be leaving for Africa, and Susan will be moving into the spare bedroom. For the sake of appearances, we can't have me sharing the same bedroom with my own sister."

"How... did... you... *do*... that?" she stammered.

"In time, you will understand more, but just a little information at a time, okay?" he said.

"Take your time, Billy, and I want you to know that I still love you, no matter *who* you are," she sighed. Her facial expression, however, indicated that she was anything but satisfied.

Susan bent over the sink to put on her earrings; then she turned to face the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. This was going to be her first full day as a woman, so she had resolved not to waste it. Everything looked strikingly correct: the red skirt-suit with the white camisole shell, the black hose, the red pumps, the fingernails, and finally, the matching jewelry. Her hair also looked nice, but that was not good enough. Her first stop would be a beauty parlor; in fact, it was the same one that her mother used at a nearby department store. Susan had never been to a beauty parlor before, so an education was forthcoming.

Everything Susan needed fit into two moderate suitcases. She thought about taking a coat, but decided that the temperature was not cold enough. However, she did not forget to slip a small umbrella into her handbag.

"I'm on my way, Mom," she said, as she gave Harriet a peck on the right cheek, which obviously made her mother a little nervous. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Her assigned hairdresser was running about five minutes late. While she sat and waited for her turn, she eagerly skimmed through the Tucson paper hunting for any

articles about the Kitt Peak observatory. There were none; it was disappointing. She decided that she would have to take a subscription to the paper or else risk missing the awaited article. There was, however, a brief mention of Cynthia Wilson in the El Paso paper. It was not flattering, and it did not deal with any of her tribulations; instead, Cynthia's story was lumped in with many other unbelievably Minerva sightings!

Susan was assigned to Marcel, an older, graying male hairdresser. The receptionist said that he was one of the best in the business, but Susan was very hesitant once she realized that he was gay. He led her to a machine, where he showed her a variety of styles through the use of video. Susan picked a style similar to that worn by Barbra Streisand, accentuated with a light blond tint. Marcel trimmed and styled her into a flawless match of the video image; then he expertly touched up the makeup around her eyes and handed her a mirror for a close-up look. Her new image was startling, if not stunning. As she left, she thanked him and gave him a generous tip; however, she hoped that she would get someone else next time.

Susan drove to a rooftop parking garage at a nearby office complex. The garage offered secured parking for several days at a time. She picked a corner opposite the elevators, behind a large panel truck. As she removed her luggage, she thought, *"I see no reason to take a commercial flight, but what if Mother should get worried? If she calls the airlines to trace me, it might cause problems. Next time, I'll have to prepare all the details better."*

Susan paused at the railing. She carefully looked around, even checking to see if someone might have a view from a nearby high-rise office, but everything looked clear. She looked as pretty as a picture, as she picked up her luggage and stood facing the railing. She was gone in a flash.

"Is my car ready?" asked Susan, wondering what kind of a story to concoct. "The name is James, Susan James."

"Every car is ready," replied the young uniformed woman behind the counter. "You're my first pickup customer this morning. Logan has been fogged in for the second day, and all flights have been diverted."

"I stopped to see my aunt Elena in Pittsburgh," explained Susan, "so when I heard about the fog, I decided to take a late-night bus. I really can't miss my interview at M.I.T."

"I found your reservation," informed the woman. "It's being printed up now. So, you're a reporter?"

"A freelance journalist," Susan corrected her with a tinge of sharpness in her voice. "It's my first assignment, so I have to be on time," added Susan with a softened tone, as she handed over her driver's license and a credit card.

"Just sign where I've marked the red X, and you'll be ready to go. Here are your keys. It's the light blue Camry right outside the door," said the woman pleasantly. "There's a map in your packet showing you how to get to your hotel in Cambridge."

"Thank you," said Susan, as she picked up her bags and headed for the door.

"Good luck!" wished the woman behind the counter.

Susan found parking space in a lot on the other side of the trees from the tall Cecil and Ida Green building, which was home to the Department of Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences. Her short trek to the building entrance, lugging her video equipment case, did not go unnoticed. Susan liked the feel of her pantyhose, as well as the feel of the knee-length straight skirt that defined the length of her stride. This was the moment of truth, as she excitedly let her feminine hips sway naturally and tried hard not to look like a man *trying* to walk like a woman. However, she could not walk like a man anyway, and no one was a bit suspicious; many a male eye turned in her direction, students and faculty alike. Even several women stopped to admire her outfit and her obvious poise. At the building entrance, a young man practically tripped over himself, as he opened the door and gave her directions.

Since Susan was a few minutes early, she took her time to reach Dr. Hudson's office. After a trip to the ladies' room, she paused to view the many information displays on the walls. She looked at the staircase and then the elevator. Someday, she would learn how to ascend stairs in heels. Not today, though, and certainly not while carrying a load, so she prudently decided to take the elevator. Once inside, she pressed the button for the desired floor. The elevator was extremely slow, but she eventually reached the floor that contained the staff offices.

Stepping off the elevator, she found the plaque with room number directions. Confidently, with her heels tapping rhythmically, she started down the hallway. Here was the one she wanted, bearing the name "Dr. Ralph Hudson" in fancy block lettering. The door was ajar; it opened as Susan gently knocked.

Susan recognized the balding, middle-aged man behind the desk as Dr. Hudson. He had shaved his beard sometime after the interview on Minerva's first full day. He was talking to a younger man, who was much taller and leaner than he. "Hello," he began with obvious masculine interest in her looks, "you must be Susan James. I'm surprised to see you, considering that Logan is all fogged in."

"I was visiting a nearby relative, so I planned ahead once I heard that news. I am always very prompt," she assured him.

"Ms. James, this is my associate Dr. Rudolf Benda."

"I am most pleased to meet you," he said as he turned and gently shook Susan's hand. "He's a lucky guy today; I've really got to run."

"We'll get together again this afternoon, Rudy," Dr. Hudson informed him.

"Yeah, and in the meantime I'll work on that study profile. Bye; it really is nice to have met you, Ms. James," he said with a broad smile.

Soon, each camera was set up on a compact tripod. Susan attached small color LCD's into the output of each camera; then she plugged everything into a master battery still sitting in her case. After a check to make sure that there was a tape in each camera, she pointed one at her and the other one at Dr. Hudson. The final step was to aim the cameras; then she sat down and concentrated on the images on the CRT's.

"I'm ready for the interview," Susan announced, as she said down facing Dr. Hudson. She demurely crossed her legs, taking care to prevent her skirt from riding up. "I am precise and factual, I understand most of the terminology, and I assure you that

there will be no trick editing!" she declared, emphasizing her attitude was strictly business.

Impressed by Susan's combination of beauty and brains, Dr. Hudson stumbled for a moment; then he began, "I don't really know why you would want to interview a boring collegiate type such as myself, but it's obvious that you are a professional. I'm ready," he announced with a relaxed tone.

"I'm turning on the camcorders... we are now live. Hello, this is Susan James, your chronicler of current scientific events. Today, we have the honor of talking to Dr. Ralph Hudson, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The subject, of course, is the silver flying lady, Minerva. Is she fact or illusion? We'll discuss the details..."

"Susie, Susie, come quick!" yelled Harriet suddenly. She grabbed her daughter's left arm and tried to pull her into the living room.

"Mother, please!" cried Susan with lowered eyebrows and a dismayed stare. At the same time, she realized that her mother was accepting Bill's transformed persona much faster than expected.

"You're on the news, dear!" continued Harriet excitedly.

"So I am," she replied, as she recognized the broadcast of her interview with Dr. Hudson. "I look awful, and I'm stumbling over every word," she observed. "It's embarrassing, but amazing that they found time to broadcast so much."

"...and you still maintain that every radar image is strictly an atmospheric disturbance," queried Susan on the television."

"Absolutely!" asserted Dr. Hudson. "We've had an unusual combination of sunspots and solar flares in the last few weeks. As a result, the jet streams around the world have shifted. This has created traveling resonances through temperature inversions that look like high-speed flying objects."

"But what about all the eyewitness accounts of a flying woman, wearing a fancy silver dress?" asked Susan.

"Oh, that's a publicity stunt," scowled Dr. Hudson. "This woman is obviously capitalizing on giving people what they want to see."

"But she has been sighted in widely separated locals, only a few minutes apart," countered Susan.

"I'm surprised no one has noticed the flaw in this hoax," replied Dr. Hudson. "There is simply more than one of these deceitful women. Check the eyewitness accounts... they are never quite the same, because they are describing entirely different people."

"Do you have a closing statement, Dr. Hudson?" asked Susan.

"I... I think that I just gave it. I hope I can help put this subject to rest."

"Thank you for your time," said Susan, as she strained to be sincere.

"The pleasure was all mine," replied Dr. Hudson. "You're certainly one of the more interesting journalists I've spoken to recently. Perhaps your viewers would like to learn about my research on a world weather model."

“That might be interesting,” said Susan, though she did not intend to follow through on his suggestion. “This is Susan James, concluding this interview. But first, I would like to issue this challenge: Minerva, wherever, whoever you are, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Interesting story,” said the woman newscaster after Susan's segment had ended.

“Interesting young woman, too,” added her male co-anchor. “Coming up, weather and sports, but first this word from our sponsor...”

“So much for that,” sighed Susan as she turned the television off. “I've got a lot of work to do with my delivery. But still, they actually broadcast it. Will wonders never cease!”

“Are you actually going to meet Minerva?” asked Harriet excitedly. “Oh, Susie, that will be so exciting!”

There was still some daylight as Minerva paused high over the ceremonial kiva. There were now six women seated inside the depression. As before, the special one looked upwards in her direction. It was tantalizing, but Minerva had no time to stop to visit.

It was dusk, as Minerva sped across the sky toward home. It had not been a particularly eventful day, and she had not intervened in a single crisis. She had eavesdropped in private conversations without learning anything interesting. She had speed-read many technical journals without finding a true scientific breakthrough. She had even skimmed through back issues of all the Arizona newspapers she could find, but there was no news of any unusual discovery from the Kitt Peak observatory.

She was about to pass more than a hundred miles to the south of Chicago, when her intuition warned her that something was wrong. She turned northward at high speed to investigate. She had come to know and trust such feelings; so far they had proven to be unerring.

Minerva landed on the roof of a major Midwestern bank. The lock at the entry door was no barrier to her magic touch. She bounded down a gray, concrete and iron staircase until she came to the sixteenth floor. Her extended vision and hearing told her that this floor contained the bank's computer and data processing centers. Something was very wrong: all the seated employees were unnaturally motionless, while strange figures darted around them.

Minerva passed a guard station on the way to the data processing area. The guards stared blankly at their monitors; they looked much like zombies. Though they were alive, they appeared to have been drugged. As Minerva scanned the monitors, she could see many men wearing hooded cloaks. They were dressed the same as the man who had tried to kill Cynthia Wilson. The video recorder had been turned off. Minerva turned it back on. It would be a silent witness to the coming confrontation.

Minerva saw a tall, attractive brunette sitting motionless at her desk. Her hands still rested on her computer keyboard, endlessly entering the letter B into her workstation. As she paused to verify that the woman was in good health, she could overhear a muffled conversation. The men were thieves. They were stealing money and assets, but they were doing it electronically, rather than the old-fashioned, brute-force method.

“Excuse me, but that's a terrible outfit,” said Minerva as she approached one of the cloaked men from behind, tapping him on his left shoulder. She did not give him time to react, as she pushed him against a wall, knocking the wind out of his lungs; then she removed a compact machine gun from his hands and ripped through his cloak to grab his wallet. The man fell unconscious to the floor, as Minerva angrily crimped the breach of his weapon. Whoever these men were, they were starting to annoy her.

Using fuzzy-stealth and speed, Minerva quickly disabled five more of the cloaked men, crimping their weapons and collecting their wallets. She marveled that she could pinch so hard that even the strongest metals felt like putty. Besides the cloaks and the names based on Greek letters, Minerva sensed another attribute common to six men whom she had touched. They were all possessed of an unnatural fear of women, accompanied by blind hatred.

There were only two more left, but they spotted Minerva. “Stop!” yelled one of them as he kneeled beside an unconscious woman and put a knife to her throat. The other fired a few rounds at Minerva, but she caught or deflected every bullet. “If you do not leave at once, this woman dies, and my partner will spray the others with his gun!” The man with the knife was Omega 6; the man with the gun was Epsilon 4. “*These designations must mean something. I **will** learn who these people are!*” Minerva thought, giving herself a mental note.

“Don't hurt them; I'm leaving,” said Minerva as she strained to create an appeasing, slightly timid tone. She let the door swing wide as she left the room. In a single motion, she removed a ring from her headband; then she burst through the narrowing opening and crossed the room at high speed. The tossed ring stuck to the chest of Epsilon 4 and immobilized him, while Minerva interceded and, with a sweeping motion of her hand, blocked the knife and struck Omega 6 in his shoulder. The subsequent rush of air knocked everyone from their chairs, sending paper flying and chairs skidding across the floor.

As Minerva reseated the unconscious bank employees who had been thrown to the floor, Omega 6 regained enough strength to limp to a far wall. He exposed some kind of electronic device on his wrist; then he faded away before Minerva could stop him. He was gone. Not even Minerva's sharp senses could find him anywhere within the building. The other cloaked men, though not conscious, also began to fade. Minerva fought to hold the man been immobilized by the ring. Some kind of powerful matter transference field had built up around him, and it was trying to draw him away. As the tug of war continued, Minerva realized that she would lose as soon as she relaxed her mental grip generated through the ring. “*This is no ordinary gang of crooks! At first, it was sort of funny, but I'm going to get serious, before the joke is on me!*”

A piercing thought shattered the control unit on the man's arm, but the field continued pulling at him. At the same time, Minerva sensed the man's innermost fears. On a whim, she wondered, “*If you hate women **so** much, how would you like to resemble the tall brunette?*” An instant later, much to her amazement, he had been turned into the woman's twin sister, and the field abruptly dissipated, taking the cloak with it. The speed and thoroughness of the transformation surprised Minerva. “*These rings are implements of extreme power. I must be careful how I use them!*”

People were beginning to stir. "Sorry, but it's time for me to go. As for you, *Miss*, I hope you enjoy your new life. Try it; you'll like it," said Minerva without any sympathy or regret.

Minerva picked up one of the wallets she had confiscated and opened it. It began to incinerate with a cold flame, but not before she memorized its contents with her high-speed reading skills. Since no one else could scan the remaining wallets at her speed, Minerva decided to open each one and let them incinerate as she processed the contents. "*They think of everything. The evidence may be gone, but I know a lot about six of them!*" she thought with a sense of satisfaction.

As soon as she arrived home, Minerva wrote down all the information she had memorized from the wallets of the cloaked men. Upon the approach of Harriet, Minerva quickly transformed to Susan, who removed Bill's clothes and hung them in his closet; then she put on a robe and walked to her own room. Bill would be out of the house for an extended period. He had flown to the central Sahara to hunt for a fabled lost treasure. The jetliner trip had taken many hours, but it had been necessary for the sake of appearance. Of course, it had taken Minerva less than three hours to return home.

Harriet had cried as she saw her son leave on his trip, but she did not question how Susan was going to get back. Susan wondered why there were so many gaps in her mother's logic. Old age, perhaps?

Once Susan was dressed, she went straight to the work room to finalize her taped interview with Minerva. She inserted the original tapes in the edit deck and played each one in interleaved sequence. She marked all unintended flaws for deletion, since the master tapes were supposed to create the illusion that she and Minerva were two different people. She had even chosen a remote hotel north of Denver to create the impression that Susan James and Minerva had picked a location to their mutual liking.

Tomorrow, Susan would drop off the edited tape at Channel Nine. She had already been assured that an interview with the mysterious Minerva would be broadcast, that it was newsworthy enough to be given extremely high priority.

At 7:00 P.M., Susan and Harriet sat down in front of the television, expectantly awaiting the coming news special. Susan was somewhat nervous. She wondered how she could feel so confident during the interview process, and yet look so unpolished on video tape.

"Hello, this is Vicky Hollingsworth. Welcome to a special edition of the Channel Nine evening news. Donald Samuels and I have a real treat for you tonight!"

"That's right, Vicky," began Donald, "because tonight our guest, Ms. Susan James, has the scoop of the century: an interview with the fabled Minerva. At last, the mysterious and powerful flying woman has been captured on video in a live interview, and you will learn all about her in her own words."

"We'll join Susan James in a moment, but first a word from our sponsor," interjected Vicky. "There will be no commercial breaks during the interview."

Harriet muted the television sound with the remote control, while the two of them waited for the interview to begin. Three minutes later, the show came back on.

“Hello, this is Susan James, roving chronicler of scientific events,” began Susan on the television.

“You've got much better poise this time, Susie,” remarked Harriet as she stared intently. “And your makeup is better.”

Susan looked her way for a moment with an annoyed scowl.

“In my last interview, I challenged Minerva to meet me,” continued Susan on the screen, nervously brushing a dangling bang of hair aside. “Well, here we are, at the Tall Pines Hotel in Fort Collins, Colorado. She is a very busy lady, but she has promised to give up fifteen minutes of her valuable time. I wish to take this moment to thank you for coming.”

“Thank you, Susan, for inviting me; I feel people have questions, so it is time to introduce myself and give some answers,” began Minerva.

“I will let... excuse me, is it okay to call you Minerva?”

“That is my name,” replied Minerva in a confident, steady voice, as the scene switched to a frontal view of her from the waist up. “Though, I might add, I have nothing to do with any Roman gods.”

“You have an interesting complexion,” observed Susan, “sort of a Middle Eastern look.”

“That is somewhat true; my physical appearance is that of a North African woman. However, I am not from Africa, or even from your world,” explained Minerva.

“Interesting,” commented Susan, “so is there a simple explanation, for who you are, why you are here, and the meaning of the triangular emblem?”

“I am assigned here as the guardian and protector of your world. I am still learning what that means; though I have vast mental powers, I really do not understand much about the scheme of things and how I fit in. One thing is for sure, I am required to uphold the highest of ideals, not necessarily *Truth, Justice, and the American Way*,” she added dryly, with an intentional humor. “I also think I need to devote special attention to the status of women on this world; the lives of women can often be described as abysmal, at best!”

“*Who* assigned you here?” asked Susan, in a puzzled tone.

“Tara, the Daughter of Transcendent Wisdom... she is sort of my ‘supervisor’, if you will. She is nearly impossible to describe. She resides in Akanishta, a dimension far beyond our simple reality. The triangular emblem is a pyramid, which embodies the power of the higher realm, represented here by the image of the Sun,” explained Minerva.

“This is the stuff of heroic mythology, like the legend of King Arthur. Tell us about the extent of your powers, and especially about your outfit and ornaments,” continued Susan. By this point in the interview, her voice had acquired a better sense of confidence.

“I can't divulge everything, but my speed and reflexes are *fast!* I have extended senses, including vision, hearing, touch, and smell, among others,” said Minerva, tak-

ing care not to reveal any secrets. “I am extremely strong, and I don't seem to be vulnerable to any physical dangers. My special dress is also indestructible, being woven of a special energy-fabric from beyond your realm,” added Minerva. “It's functional as well as pretty!”

“Many people, including Dr. Ralph Hudson of M.I.T., have voiced doubts about your authenticity,” noted Susan. “I saw you arrive, but how do you convince others?”

“Anything I do for you visually, Susan, could be attributed to video tricks and sleight of hand, so I will try a more convincing tact. I take care to avoid looking like a comic book hero.” Minerva paused for a moment, while her eyes took on an altered appearance. “It is 10:20 A.M., Mountain Daylight Time. A few minutes ago, a slide blocked Highway 34 in Rocky Mountain National Park. Road crews are on their way at this moment. A jumbo jet has just taken off from the new Denver Airport... it seems to be turning toward a southwesterly direction. It looks like the currently orbiting space shuttle will pass over Albuquerque in a few minutes. They're passing near an older rocket booster stage of some kind.”

“I'm sure everyone will work hard to verify these facts,” interrupted Susan. “I know we are nearing the end of the interview, but our viewers would probably like a glimpse into your personal life. What's your day like? Do you sleep? What do you do when you are not ‘on duty’, so to speak, especially for recreation?” asked Susan, as she stumbled to appear to ad-lib questions not on her script.

“I am technically on call every moment of the day, whenever I sense a need for my services. Unlike comic book characters, I am a *real* person, and I have *real* feelings, but I do not have much of a personal life. Even if I could stand their inflated egos, there are no super men to date. I have been given an extraordinary means for dealing with this situation, but I do not want to discuss it at this time. I might add that I am required to use my powers with wisdom and precision, ever wary of unexpected consequences.”

“Perhaps we could have a follow-up interview at a later date,” suggested Susan.

“I would like that,” replied Minerva.

“I see that my allotted time is over,” lamented Susan, striving to be convincing. “Do you have any parting remarks.”

“I take my duty seriously, so I feel compelled to give this warning: I have detected the presence of a secret, sophisticated and dangerous criminal organization. I find their actions to be troubling, to say the least. I am slowly learning about them. When I am ready, I will expose them for the kind of people they are! End of interview. Good-bye!” finished Minerva, who moved so fast that the video showed only her quickly-dissolving latent image.

“As you can see, my subject has vanished into thin air,” remarked Susan. “Until next time, this is Susan James signing off,” she said, as she gave a self-conscious parting smile. She had obviously tilted her head downwards to glance into her LCD monitor.

“This is Vicky Hollingsworth again. After a commercial break, Donald Samuels will moderate a panel of commentators to discuss what you just...”

Vicky's voice was cut off abruptly as Harriet hit the mute button on the remote control. "My God, Susie, you actually did it!" she sputtered excitedly.

"Excuse me, Mom, but I have to answer the phone. That should be Vicky Hollingsworth," said Susan as she hurried to the wall phone in the dining room. "Yes, Vicky, this is Susan. Yes, it could have been better, but it looked much better that I expected it would. What? You're kidding! Don't they care about ratings! That's stupid! Oh, I will definitely do that. Thank you, good-bye!" she added as she almost slammed the phone onto its cradle.

"What's the matter, Susie?" asked Harriet as she muted the television again. "The commentators were ecstatic over your interview!"

"*They* might like it, but the board of directors at Channel Nine do *not* like it. It seems that most of them belong to some fundamentalist religious group that does not approve of Minerva's attitude or heritage. They will no longer air any of my interviews, nor will they market this interview for me! Vicky was apologetic and suggested that I try Marilyn Haynes at Channel Four instead. In the morning, I'll do just that. Good-night, Mother; I'm not in the mood for any more television tonight," snapped Susan angrily as she headed for the hallway bathroom.

Brother Alpha pounded his black gavel with a vengeance; then he spoke, "This unscheduled meeting of the *Circle* is called to order. Not so long ago, we thought Cynthia Wilson was our greatest threat, and we were mildly worried about Minerva, this 'super woman'. Now she has twice interfered with our plans!"

Everyone pounded the table in frustrated protest. Upon a subtle hand cue from Brother Alpha, they stopped and waited silently. Since everyone wore hooded brown cloaks, the clues of normal body language were absent. This served to increase the level of tension, frustration, and discomfort in the dismal meeting room.

"Brother Omega 6, we are awaiting your report!" demanded Brother Alpha in a displeased tone. "You were the last to encounter this woman; what do you have to say for yourself?"

"It was not my fault!" yelled Brother Omega 6. "She is too powerful and too fast! When she moves, she can't be tracked. I was lucky to escape her grasp."

"And what of Brother Epsilon 4?" continued Brother Alpha. "He has not been accounted for. His cloak returned to us empty. Even when we secured a copy of the police report, we could not find any mention of his fate. *What happened to Brother Epsilon 4?*"

"I... I don't know. She threw some device that stuck to his chest. It was very powerful, but I was not able to study it. I escaped barely in time!" cried Brother Omega 6 in self-defense.

"We have apparently encountered such a device before," interjected Brother Lambda 1. "During our unsuccessful attempt to eliminate Cynthia Wilson, we lost Brother Kappa 2, when something hit his car. It caused the transporter field to short out, sending our comrade into limbo!"

“Then there is the matter of you six who lost your wallets!” complained Brother Alpha. “There is the high probability of a security breach!”

“They disintegrated when she opened them!” asserted Brother Epsilon 12, who was one of the accused. “All safeguards functioned perfectly, as designed!”

“You all saw the interview on television,” countered Brother Alpha, “so you all know that her mental powers must be *very* fast. I'm not taking any chances! The six of you are going to be reassigned overseas.”

“It's not our... ,” began Brother Epsilon 12, but Brother Alpha interrupted him.

“The decision of the board stands. Be seated and shut up. It is time to move on to the next item of business,” said Brother Alpha, as he changed the subject.

“Agents have been sent out to set up a network to track this Minerva,” responded Brother Lambda 1. “We think we can employ equipment similar to that used to communicate via meteor trails. It may take many months, but we think it can be done, no matter *how* elusive she might be. In the meantime, it is necessary to deal with this reporter, Susan James. We must learn out what she knows! If she should pose a threat to use, she *will* be eliminated!”

“Excellent. It is an excellent idea.” said Brother Alpha with a raised fist. “I have sent a message to the Emissary for assistance. It will take many months to arrive at his world; however, I'm sure he will know how to deal with this woman when he arrives!”

Applause sounded throughout the chamber

“Susy,” interrupted Harriet, as Susan typed an article on her computer, “there are two people to see you. A gentleman and a lady. They say they are from the FBI.”

“Mom, I do *not* have the time!” objected Susan. “Can you think of a way to get rid of them? Make up a good excuse, if you have to!” “*I am due to leave in a few minutes, so Minerva can reappear to make her rounds for the day!*”

“I tried very hard, dear... very hard, but they won't take ‘no’ for an answer,” Harriet apologized. “Oh, that's a nice new dress you have on,” she added, referring to Susan's new wine-colored, man-cut shirtdress. Susan wore an unbuttoned white sweater over the dress, because the work room was cooler than the rest of the house. “You're so fastidious with your looks, Dear, that it's hard to believe your brother is so unkempt!”

“Thank you, Mother. Being a woman has turned out most enjoyable, with no bad side-effects, at least, not so far.” “*So far, I've even been spared the ordeal of a period, but I do feel somewhat strange today.*” “However, I guess I must get this over with,” complained Susan as she ignored her mother's comments. She removed her sweater and placed it neatly on the back of her chair. She followed her mother to the living room.

Susan's eyes fell upon the woman first, who was taller than she, with darker and shorter hair. The woman was wearing a Navy blue skirt suit. Her shirt was light blue, with a mock-tie collar. Navy blue hose, a heavy-duty black purse, and shiny, black two-inch pumps completed her outfit. The outfit was feminine, but it was also all business.

The man was four to six inches taller. His suit was also Navy blue, and his black oxfords were as shiny as those of his companion. His shirt was white, and he wore a plain, dark blue tie. He could not have fit Susan's mental image of an FBI agent any better.

"Hello," he began with an intense, droll, deadpan speech, "I am Special Agent Matt Jameson, and this is Special Agent Tammi McKenzie. We have been dispatched from field headquarters to intero... um, *interview* you!"

"What is this?" questioned Susan as she dropped her eyebrows. "Are you Joe Friday's brother or something? I don't have time for your skits."

"Ignore him; he's like this naturally," explained Tammi with a warmer, more natural tone. "And I realize that Tammi is not a very intimidating name; it was what my mother gave me. I really *am* an FBI agent, and this is a friendly visit. May we sit down?"

"ID first!" demanded Susan. "I want to see proof, if you're going to waste my time!"

Tammi pulled her wallet out of her purse and opened it; then she poked Matt to remind him. Susan took her time to carefully examine their ID cards. Everything looked in order.

"We were intrigued by your interview with this Minerva," began Tammi enthusiastically. "We wondered if she told you more off camera, and if you would be willing to relate it to our boss."

"Like what?" responded Susan quizzically. "That woman is in constant motion. I was lucky to corner her for fifteen minutes. The camcorders were going all the time, and I did not edit out anything that was pertinent!"

"I'll level with you," said Matt in a steady voice, continuing to sound droll, no matter how hard he tried not to, "We have been on the trail of a powerful, elusive criminal organization for years. We have never been able to crack their operations and only know about them through extrapolation."

"Are you like the agents on the television show?" asked Susan. "I mean, do you investigate UFO's and other strange phenomena?"

"We don't lead such exciting lives," explained Matt. "Our job is mostly surveillance, in pursuit of organized crime. When they moved from their bases of operation in the big cities, disguised as legitimate businesses, we followed them."

"Our field headquarters is not far from here," said Tammi. "If you have the time, we'll drive you there for a conference with our boss, if you're willing. Please, we really *do* need your help!"

After ten minutes of travel down a local arterial road, Matt slowed his car. The road ahead was blocked... a detour sign marked an alternate round. Matt drove right to the sign and looked around; then he put the car into reverse.

Susan choked in realization; then she blurted out, "Go through! I do not believe the sign! It is some kind of a trap. Someone wants us to go the *wrong* way!"

"It's all dug up on the other side. We might get stuck in a ditch," protested Matt.

“Don't worry, Susan,” urged Tammi. “We really are quite safe. This sedan is armored, and all the glass is bullet-proof!”

“I bet there is no construction going on,” Susan repeated. She was going to say more, but she realized that she was being a bit *too* knowledgeable. She was left in a quandary about what to say and do next.

The detour route was a dusty, graveled road. Signs with arrows pointed along the path they were on, directly past all side roads. Susan did not need Minerva's perceptive powers to know that they were *not* headed back to the main artery. She glanced out her window. She was sure she saw a cloaked figure peering from the shadows within a cluster of trees. “*If they are after me, I can't let them take me. If I became Minerva, she would know what to do. I do not believe these two people can be trusted with her secret. How long can I wait, before Minerva has to appear?*” Susan asked herself.

“What the... !” cried Matt as all the doors on the car suddenly unlocked. The trunk lid popped upward at the same time. A cloaked figure ran behind and dropped a cylinder into the trunk. Moments later, a thick gaseous smoke spewed from the trunk of the car.

“Some kind of a gas bomb!” yelled Tammi as she pulled her semi-automatic pistol from her purse. “I'm switching on our emergency beacon!”

Wind blew the cloud of gas in front of the car, partially blocking the view. Matt opened a panel in the vehicle's center console. As he flipped a large red switch, he rapidly explained, “They've got the power controls access code. This should override, unless they also have the master access code.”

At that moment, the power side windows began to roll down, letting in the fumes from outside. Susan felt her eyes burn. Matt floored the accelerator. Air-blown dust replaced the fumes, which trailed behind them. “I can't see!” he yelled.

“I can feel it creeping in through the seat from the trunk,” said Susan as she grabbed her purse. “It's time to get out!” she yelled as she tried to open the door on her side. The latch would not budge; worse, the locking stem was one that could not be grasped once the door was locked.

“My lock is stuck, too!” coughed Tammi. “Matt, turn around; let the wind blow it away from us!” she blurted as she slumped over into unconsciousness.

“Right,” he responded, slamming the brake too hard. The car spun around on the gravel; he was barely able to keep the vehicle from sliding backwards into a ditch. “Oh, I'm really feeling... groggy,” he moaned, while trying to steer.

In response to the wrenching maneuver, Susan had twisted her neck. She felt pain where her shoulder harness dug into her neck. She was dizzy and had a numbing headache, but willpower kept her going. She watched Matt draw his gun, but he fumbled and dropped it. While Matt confusedly groped around on the floor for his weapon, sensing that she was on the verge of unconsciousness, Susan thought the magic word.

As Matt passed out, he tilted forward until his head came to rest on Tammi's lap. The car, now running out of control, turned back and died in the ditch they had just avoided. Minerva reached over the seat and grasped the wheel. Using her own motive

power, she propelled the car back in the direction from which they had just come. Executing an extraordinarily sharp turn, she sent the vehicle speeding up a side road in the direction of the main artery.

Minerva spied a meadow off to the right. It was clear of trees and contained several small, shallow pools of water. It was just what she wanted. As she slowed, she steered into the meadow; then, in one smooth operation, she switched to fuzzy-stealth mode and exited the vehicle, closing the door behind her quickly with little noise. The car bounced through two pools and came to a stop as the front wheels sank into spongy ground.

Before the car had come to its final stop, several cloaked men were already running toward it. Omega 6 was in the lead. He never saw Minerva, who struck him square in the middle of his chest emblem. In the same motion, she smashed his wrist control unit, accidentally breaking his forearm. Omega 6 fell to the ground, doubling over in pain.

“I am getting very tired of you people!” she yelled near the next man's ears. As he turned, she hit him hard and smashed his wrist control unit. This time, she was careful not to break his arm; however, he did end up with two, very painful broken ribs. “*Maybe I ought to control these punches,*” she wondered, as she disabled three more of the cloaked men at once. “*After all, I'm supposed to make all the right choices. Of course, these guys don't deserve much sympathy!*”

Minerva relaxed for a moment and completely materialized. The remaining cloaked brothers saw her and fled toward their hidden cars. This time, Minerva ignored them and sped to the two black limousines. She tore off the hood and trunk lids, flinging them high into the air. A few well-placed punches left the engines resembling demonstration cutaway models, rather than functional motors. A moment later, all the sophisticated electronic equipment in the two trunks looked like confetti.

Minerva turned to deal with those cloaked brothers who were still on their feet, but they had all transported from the area. There was also an attempt to retrieve the limousines, but it failed. The wrecked electronics arced and sputtered in a futile attempt to set up a transporter field.

Minerva looked around. Her extended senses showed only Matt, Tammi, and the five injured men on the ground. A helicopter was approaching... it had FBI markings. It was time for Susan to return, but first Minerva checked the five fallen cloaked men. Apparently, they had all taken poison and were nearly dead. Warily tracking the helicopter, Minerva gently stroked Omega 6's neck. It was not an act of compassion, but an attempt to keep him alive for questioning.

Minerva returned to Matt's car in fuzzy-stealth mode, as the FBI helicopter hovered over the two smoking limousines. She paused, before turning back into Susan, to note that Tammi was also one of the “special people”. “*What makes all these people so ‘special?’*” wondered Susan, as she looked out her side window. She breathed a sigh of relief, as the helicopter landed next to them. It was one breath too many; she finally passed out from cumulative exposure to the gas. She had returned to the same state as before the transformation into Minerva.

Susan heard an unintelligible voice. She opened her eyes, but the light hurt. She felt strange. She was in a hospital bed, wearing a hospital gown, but there was something different. There was an unusual weight on her chest and a feeling of openness between her legs, compounded by the strange sensation of a foreign object. Tactile investigation confirmed her suspicions: she was a woman! *"Of course, I'm a woman !,"* she sighed, remembering her life of complicated identities. *"Bill is off exploring the Sahara. I am his sister, Susan! But is that a tampon I feel? My gosh, I must be having my first period!"*

"Doctor, she opened her eyes," said a blurry woman.

Susan's eyes finally focused. Tammi was bending over her head, talking to her. She was wearing a pastel red robe over her hospital gown "I guess I breathed too much of that gas," she said, choking for a moment on her own saliva.

"We all did," added Tammi. "Matt and I have only been up for two hours. We have four dead attackers and two of their wrecked cars, but we also have a live suspect in custody. He's in intensive care, under heavy guard. It looked like a war was fought while we were all knocked out!"

"Really?" questioned Susan, feigning ignorance.

"We speculate that your super friend Minerva showed up. She is one damned powerful woman. Isn't it odd that in a man's world, the most powerful person turns out to be a woman? When I was young, I always wondered if becoming an agent was the right idea. Now I *know* it was!"

"Minerva appeared, and I missed the whole story," Susan complained in pretense. "I saw one person running around in a brown cloak, but I don't even know who it was!"

"Channel Four has already called, but first, we still want you to talk to our boss, as soon as you're able."

"Can I tell them anything that I want to?" asked Susan doubtfully.

"Of course, we have no secrets," responded Tammi.

"And you will tell me everything that you know," added Susan sarcastically.

Tammi hedged, but her expression said no. "Wait until you see our boss. Are you willing?"

"I guess so, but did anyone call my mother?" asked Susan.

"She's on her way," explained Tammi.

"In that case, I would look forward to meeting your boss," replied Susan enthusiastically. *"Those people are getting rough, so Minerva will get even rougher."* she declared to herself

It was dusk when Susan drove into her driveway. It had been a busy day. She had finished taping another of her *Science Moments*, a weekly feature on the Thursday evening Channel Four news. It was fortunate that Minerva could collect facts so quickly, because such extensive information gathering would have worn Susan out. Minerva had also had a very busy day, flying reconnaissance to map out the operations of the cloaked men, using information unknowingly provided to her by the FBI as

a point of reference. During one night last week, she had sneaked into FBI headquarters and had accessed their informational database to extract all known information about that secret criminal organization.

The FBI files told Minerva a lot, considering that the *Circle of the Brown Cloak*, as they were called, had never been mentioned in any newspaper or any television news program. Many of the known members of the *Circle* had long criminal records, while others were seemingly law-abiding citizens. While the identities of those in charge were unknown, it was known that they were amassing a vast fortune by any available means. At the same time, they were conducting a paranoid campaign against women and minorities.

As she read the last file, Minerva realized that it was the *Circle* that was becoming such a nuisance for her. They had cleverly placed hundreds of sophisticated transmitter-receiver units in an attempt to track her by detecting her ionized trail. But they had not foreseen that the signals would react with her thermal barrier that formed whenever she flew at high speed.

Susan was part-way through her next Science Segment write-up, using Minerva's speedily-typed notes as an outline. This week's subject would be a newly discovered mass-burial ground of dinosaurs in Alberta. She would need to do two or three mini-interviews. Plus, she would need to secure the rights to other copyrighted audio and visual materials.

"Susy, come quick!" yelled Harriet. "There's a special news bulletin on the television. An astronomer in Arizona discovered a space station!"

Susan ran to the living room. Not even snagging a heel on the carpet seam in the doorway was enough to slow her down. She had decided that Minerva's attempt to spark interest in an anomalous signal in the sky had been futile.

"...switch you to our network affiliate in Tucson, Arizona," said Marilyn Haynes. "We will be back to All My Children in a couple of minutes."

"We have with us in our studio," began a male newscaster, "Dr. Roger Cavendish, assistant astronomer at the Kitt peak observatory. Roger, please tell us what you found."

"Well, Phil, we have found what appears to be a large metal space station in orbit in the asteroid belt."

"Is it one of ours, or the Russians?" asked Phil.

"Not to our knowledge," continued Roger. "Whoever it belongs to, though, it is *big!* It is also bombarding the Earth with a strange, focused particle beam, composed of two kinds of previously unknown mesons."

"This all seems a little far-fetched," suggested Phil.

"I know. We processed all available data for several weeks before making our findings public. We scan the energy beam each day. We can't see it at night any longer from Kitt Peak, but the Hubbell telescope is now sending us excellent photographs. Everything is preliminary, but we are preparing a formal.. "

“There you have it,” interrupted Marilyn. “Please stay tuned to the evening news for a complete, in-depth report. We now join our regular programming in progress.”

“While you find out what happens to Erica Kane,” announced Susan, “I’m going to phone Marilyn. I’m sure I’ll be leaving for Arizona in two or three hours!”

Susan parked her car at her rented parking place. It was in a parking garage at the edge of town, fairly close to where she and her mother lived. The top floor was used mostly for commercial vehicles, which meant that nearly all the traffic on that level was in the early morning or late afternoon. As an added benefit, there were no nearby tall buildings from which anyone could observe the stall where Susan parked her car.

She pulled her turquoise short-sleeved jacket from the passenger seat and put it on over her white shell. The jacket matched the moderately short turquoise straight skirt and low-heeled turquoise pumps. She also wore coordinated abalone earrings and a necklace with an inlaid abalone pendant. She took a quick check in the wide-angle passenger-side mirror. Her hair had now grown down past her shoulder blades. She decided that it was blowing in the wind too much, so she collected the hair behind her and pinned it into place with a wide abalone barrette.

Susan pulled her two suitcases from the trunk; then she locked her car. She opened the non-video case to verify that she had brought more coins to sell to Stan Hansen. At the present time, the money from her broadcasts was coming in too slowly to keep her finances in the black, so she needed an income boost. The IRS demanded quarterly taxes on money she had not yet received.

Susan snapped the spectrometer to her belt and lifted the suitcases. Minerva reappeared at the magic thought *Sallaka*. Minerva picked up the pager. After a quick glance from side to side, she was on her way.

As Minerva detected another mini-tracking station, she swooped down to investigate. She cautiously approached the unit, which looked like all the others: a dull black cylinder, with a telemetry dish on top and a detection antenna on one side. First, Susan had to reappear, so she could analyze the telemetry signal. Minerva had deduced which communications satellite the miniature dish was aimed at, so it was up to Susan to determine which transponder and channel were being used. Minerva had modified the spectrometer to derive that information. Within two minutes, Susan had jotted the figures on her notepad. She promptly picked up her luggage and switched back to Minerva.

Past experience with tracking stations had taught Minerva what to do next. She moved in close in fuzzy-stealth mode. With a super-fast motion of her right hand, before the proximity detectors could respond, she pressed the S-shaped button that raised the control panel. She then zipped through the complex symbol-matching sequence to reprogram the station. Lastly, she carefully bent the detection antenna, taking care to aim the electronic compass in yet a different direction.

Once she was airborne, Minerva soared to a high altitude, so she could travel faster to make up for lost time. Tucson was her next stop, where Susan would pick up her rental car and get her hotel room, before the short drive to the Kitt Peak Observatory.

Susan set her video suitcase down and looked around the Kitt Peak visitor center while the tall, blond receptionist, Pamela Meiers, processed Susan's paperwork. Pamela wore a figure-revealing brown floral print dress that had a moderately low neckline. Susan remembered how the sight of such attractive women used to make Bill excited and envious at the same time. Susan, however, felt she could hold her own against any other woman's looks.

"Here's your temporary pass, Ms. James," announced Pamela with a smile. "It will admit you anywhere in the complex, with proper escort, of course. Roger will be down to meet you within five minutes."

"Thank you," replied Susan sincerely.

"This is my office," said Roger as he unlocked the door. "You'll have to pardon the clutter, Ms. James; I'm not noted for being very tidy."

"Please feel free to call me Susan, Dr. Cavendish. This really doesn't look *that* bad," replied Susan, trying not to show any surprise. "*He obviously cleaned it up since Minerva was here last. It must be because I'm a woman. Now, if Bill were visiting...*" she thought as a picture on Roger's desk caught her attention.

"I prefer that you call me Roger. Those are my two kids," explained Roger. "Melody is eight, and Trevor is six. My wife and I just concluded a bitter divorce. I was lucky to win any visiting rights at all."

"Really," commented Susan, "you don't seem to be a difficult person. *He actually seems to be quite nice: a polite, sincere, considerate, and cultured man. Minerva picked him, and her intuition cannot be wrong. But why do even I find him so compelling?*" Susan mulled to herself.

"The whole thing is too complicated to believe," he sighed. "But you seem to be doing well; I've seen some of your work. Not too many women are involved in scientific journalism, especially not attr..." he added, deciding not to mention her physical appearance.

Susan took it as a compliment that he found her attractive and yet restrained himself. "I've been involved... in various aspects of science all my life," Susan explained, contorting her face slightly as she attempted to keep Bill submerged. "*Practice control, Susan; watch your body language.*" "Please continue, while I unpack my equipment and set up for our interview. I would also appreciate doing a brief video tour of your facility."

"Of course," he agreed enthusiastically; "we never get enough worthwhile publicity, and Congress is always trying to reduce our budget."

Six minutes later, Susan had adjusted the two camcorders and rechecked all the settings. Once everything was ready, she took a deep breath and began, "Hello, this is Susan James, your chronicler of current scientific events. Today, I am interviewing Dr. Roger Cavendish, assistant astronomer at the Kitt Peak National Observatory. The subject, of course, is his discovery of a mysterious space station in the asteroid belt. Tell us about it, Roger."

“It began several months ago. A mysterious person called M apparently broke into my office and left a message for me on my PC. It was the declination and right ascension of a celestial object. I wrote down the coordinates and erased the file. I was a little angry but I did nothing about it. The note got lost in the debris in my office for six weeks before I found it again.

“I reported it to the staff. We decided to aim our big telescope at the coordinates, but there was nothing there.”

“How did you find the object, then?” asked Susan curiously.

“We have the latest electronic aiming and image enhancement technology. We don't have to waste film or our eyesight to see something, and the telescope can be programmed for a random search within a specified circle. To say the least, we were astonished when we found a large metal object drifting amongst the asteroids.”

“How do you *know* it's metallic?” asked Susan.

“We managed to secure the use of NASA's Hubble telescope for a half-hour. The jumbled spectrographic readings, and the high surface albedo are consistent with an object made of metal alloy; besides, we could actually see it, a perfectly ellipsoidal structure,” he grinned, “covered by arrays presumed to be telemetry antennas.”

“What of the unusual mesons,” queried Susan, “are they transmitted from these antennas?”

“Possibly, though we do not know how. They decay too fast to reach the Earth, so they are somehow generated by a beam when it hits the atmosphere.”

“Does anyone have any idea what effects they might cause?” asked Susan, her curiosity genuinely piqued.

“Scientists at the University of Arizona are studying the decay patterns, which are very unusual.”

“In what way?” asked Susan.

“There is a theory that they arrive carrying modulated patterns that look very much like brain waves!”

“Our tour concluded with the telescope just you see behind me, which is the instrument that first found the space station,” explained Susan. “We have talked extensively with Dr. Roger Cavendish, who is extremely knowledgeable about this unusual phenomenon, and we have been given a tour of the facilities which receive and analyze the information. Pending further information from other scientists, you now know as much as anyone else. Did Minerva leave the message? It's just speculation, since no one knows. This is Susan James, signing off from the quest for information at the Kitt Peak observatory!”

“We're now off-the-record,” announced Susan as she shut down her camcorders and prepared them for packing.

“Are you... going to be in Tucson long?” asked Roger nervously.

“I was thinking that maybe... we could have...”

"I'm very sorry," explained Susan, who was actually flattered, "but it's been a tiring day, and I have to leave for Los Angeles in the morning. My royalties arrive slowly and I'm a little short of money, so I have to sell off some assets. These junkets tend to drain my cash flow." "What next? Am I going to start responding to men as a woman? Yet, I am a 'real' woman, now, and he **does** look sort of cute. Actually, he's very plain... just explain that to my libido!"

"I can imagine, the way you have to travel back and forth across the country," admitted Roger.

"Thanks for a really great interview, Roger. When this hits the air, it should put me back into the black."



"You're more than welcome," he added as he moved closer. Susan tensed as she feared he was going to kiss her, but he merely shook her hand. "Here's my card, it has my home phone number, should you ever want to reach me. It's an unlisted number."

"Thank you," replied Susan with a puzzled tone that contained a note of irritation.

Having finished his final inspection of the coins, Stan Hansen finally said, "It's a deal. Just wait here while I get the money."

"Here we are," he began with a smile, taking care to keep his hands to himself, "is the full amount: \$225,000 in crisp, new \$1,000 bills."

Susan took the time to count; then she started to say, "Thank you," but an image on the television caught her attention. It looked like a street riot of some kind. "What's going on?" she asked.

"That's a bunch of hoodlums, marching from somewhere in the hills west of Richmond. They didn't get a permit, but they are doing it anyway. They're all

skinheads or Nazis, very bad for business! I heard the police moved in a couple of hours ago, but now the whole thing is out of control. If you ask me, Ms. James, Ms. James!” exclaimed Stan once he realized he was speaking to an empty chair. Minerva was already on her way to pick up Susan's luggage, stashed away on the roof of a tall building, before heading Northward.

It was late evening when Minerva passed over Richmond. It was not difficult to find the rioters and looters; sporadic columns of smoke marked the position of their activity. As Minerva searched for a location to set up Susan's video, she spied two suspicious figures hiding amongst the trees of a rooftop garden. Once she saw the brown cloaks, uniforms of the *Circle*, she swooped down to intercept them. “*Oh, how I hate these guys!*” she fumed in silence.

Before the men could turn to see who had landed behind them, Minerva simultaneously knocked them cold with a rap of her hands on the backs of their heads. She smashed their wrist control units and ripped off their cloaks; then she tied them together, back-to-back, with their own belts.

“Epsilon 14, Kappa 2, are you there? This is central control... please report,” cried an irritating male voice, silenced once Minerva disconnected the battery attached to the suitcase-sized communicator.

Susan reappeared long enough to set down her suitcases. An instant later, Minerva had the camcorders set up to record both directions along the street below, which was filled with noisy, rampaging youths. At first, they seemed to be wildly roaming, but Minerva noticed they were responding to clever hand signals from prompters in their midst. As Minerva pondered the obvious diversionary tactics, she spied three more members of the *Circle* on a balcony a half-mile away. As soon as she disabled them, she noticed that the rioters were busily erecting stations armed with antitank rifles. With dusk approaching, it was a dangerous trap that the police might not spot in time.

“*If only I could turn back the clock and destroy their nighttime advantage,*” she mused. “*If I can't do that, this may be the next best thing,*” she thought as she removed a ring from her headband and tossed it into the sky. The ring began to glow. The higher it went, the brighter it grew, until it began to radiate as much light as the Sun. Finally, it hovered in a stationary position high over San Francisco, bathing most of California and Nevada, as well as part of Western Arizona, in a bright, cold light that would last half the night.

Minerva was about to disable the antitank guns, when she heard distant screams. She immediately sped off to investigate. Residents of a multi-building apartment complex were being terrorized by rioters. Inside, she saw a skinhead drag a woman, brutally pulling her along by her hair, from her apartment into the hall and beat her. He wore a ragged T-shirt, covered with small swastikas, which boldly declared: **Death to Queers**. Minerva knocked him to the floor. Once she was satisfied that the woman was not badly hurt, she flew like the wind throughout the hallways, knocking down the rioters like so many bowling pins.

Minerva slowed to a fast walk, so she could check the condition of the apartment residents. None of the rioters were conscious, and many were badly bruised, but Minerva was not presently concerned about them.

“Thank you, thank you!” cheered a young man. Others joined in their jubilation. “These people have been threatening us for years.”

Minerva had grown to expect and like such adulation. “Why? Why do they hate you?” she asked curiously.

“Gays and lesbians like us have always been targets. Since this is a gay and lesbian area, they know where to find us, unfortunately.”

“You're all homosexuals,” frowned Minerva.

“Of course,” he replied, “is there something wrong?”

“I have to help the police!” declared Minerva. “Have a nice day!” she added somewhat insincerely, just before she sped ungracefully out a fire-escape door.

Minerva disabled one more post manned by cloaked members of the *Circle*. With the arrival of National Guard troops, and without the convenience of darkness to mask their activities, most of the rioters were in the process of fleeing or surrendering. Minerva flew to a high altitude and scanned the scene below. She sensed no critical problems, so she decided that it was time to leave.

“Mother has not paged me yet, but it is only a matter of time. I must collect my luggage and head for home; I've got all this videotape to process before its no longer news!” she thought as she steered Eastward at high speed.

A few minutes later, Minerva discovered that she was having difficulty maintaining a steady course. For the first time since she had received her powers, her ring flashed red and emitted a shrill warning noise. She sensed that her powers were waning, but she did not know why; she had never before reached the limitation of her embodiment.

Minerva drifted toward the Southeast, despite wanting to go straight east. This had never happened before. All attempts to correct her course proved to be fruitless; her mind wanted to go in one direction, her body wanted to go in another. *“Is my lighted ring in the sky causing this effect? Is it somehow affecting my powers?”* she wondered.

Without warning, she flew into a black void. All sensations of gravity, position, and time vanished with the light. Equally abruptly, the darkness was replaced with a panoramic view that she had seen once before. It was the celestial realm of Akanishta. An instant later, she was face-to-face with Tara. However, this time Tara's flowing red dress had been replaced with an unadorned, somber yellow robe. Tara's mood was unmistakably one of dismay.

“What happened... why am I here?” asked Minerva nervously. “Why has my uniform turned dull black?”

“It is because you have failed to take your commitment seriously,” explained Tara sadly. Behind her, thousands of cats stared at Susan with disapproving expressions and mewling. “As Minerva, all your actions should be spontaneous, correct, and based on intuition, not pride and prejudice! You have also failed to seek out allies. You cannot hope to defeat the agents of the *Circle* alone!”

“I'm sorry,” replied Minerva tearfully. “I was worried that this superwoman thing might overwhelm my common sense; I guess I *have* gotten carried away with the glamour! But I can change my ways, really I can!”

"I believe you," continued Tara, "but it is not within my power to shield you from your flawed attitude!"

"So, I am going to be punished!" stated Minerva.

"There is no punishment," explained Tara. "There is neither any *Giver* of punishment, nor any *Receiver* of punishment. There is only the Law of Karma: one cannot avoid the consequences of one's actions."

"What will *my* consequences be?" questioned Minerva.

"You are likely to lose your powers... very soon!" warned Tara.

"For how long? Forever?" asked Minerva fearfully.

"No one can know. Your powers will be gone until the ring reactivates, however long that takes," said Tara hopefully. "Prepare to leave; I can no longer hold you."

A time discontinuity occurred. One moment Minerva was descending out of control, the next, she was half Susan, half Minerva, standing before a strangely-colored, impressionistic landscape. She was surrounded by a montage of bright, flickering images. It was the midst of a ghostly battle that was not actually there. Though she knew it was not real, she was nevertheless engrossed, sensing that it involved her in some way that she could not imagine.

The images randomly dissipated until they were all gone; then there was another discontinuity, which left Susan standing on unstable ground, luggage in hand, in desolate surroundings eerily bathed in the light of the glowing ring, which was still suspended in the sky above San Francisco. Susan looked excitedly around, wondering what it meant and where she had landed. There were rolling hills not far away, and there were also sporadic clumps of meager vegetation. Susan set her luggage down; she was having trouble keeping her balance and her ankles both hurt. One look at the ground beneath her feet explained why: it was composed of a mixture of coarse gravel and sharp, jagged volcanic ash fragments. One fragment had already cut into the outside of her right ankle without damaging her pantyhose.

"This is *really* great! Damn it!" she cursed out loud. "I'm stranded in the middle of Death Valley, wearing a flimsy skirt-suit, high heels, and pantyhose. This ground will probably cut my ankles and legs, as well as my shoes, to shreds. I have no food or water, and it's already long past sunset. It *will* get cold tonight! Luckily, at this time of the year, I may not have to worry about hypothermia!"

Susan stood and angrily stared, while a cool breeze blew against her thighs. There were no sounds of civilization, not even a distant murmur of tires on a roadway. She stared across the wasteland toward the rolling hills. The scene was vaguely familiar, but she could not place it in her memory.

She clapped her hands and smiled; she had a cellular telephone tucked away in her purse! Hurriedly, she pulled it out and turned it on. "Hello, operator, hello... can you hear me? Nothing but static! But what can I expect, tucked away in a deep basin, probably at or below sea level, miles from the nearest network cell?"

Susan paused to take several deep breaths. "Calm down, girl. You have a change of clothing in the suitcase, and you have been here before; well, *Bill* has been here before.

Five years ago, he walked across this valley on a desert training exercise for the University! There are several mine shafts at the base of those hills. They might offer shelter! There is a trail to the crest of the hills, which should be high enough to operate my telephone! Moses had his desert purgatory; this might be *mine!*”

The light of the ring was quickly fading. Soon, she would have only moonlight to guide her, but the moon would set sometime after midnight. Susan exchanged her skirt and slip for a pair of blue, long-legged shorts. White sneakers were a welcome replacement for the flimsy pumps. She found three low-calorie chocolate bars, which might give her the energy to carry her luggage across the valley. She even had an umbrella and a tube of sunscreen, items that she would desperately need in the morning.

Susan's arms ached, but she would not give up her luggage, not after waiting years to acquire a woman's wardrobe. Bill's spectrometer was the first thing to be tossed away. Soon, the trail behind Susan was littered with other throwaways: extra camcorder batteries, toiletries, cosmetics, and a hair dryer. Finally, she decided that she would not part with anything else, especially since she estimated the mine shafts to be less than an hour away. She felt every rock through the soles of the sneakers, but the intermittent pain was not enough to slow her down.

Glowing eyes approached her. Susan could not even see a body attached to the eyes, not even when she felt something rub against her left leg. It was a very dark house cat. Excitedly, she reached to touch the friendly feline, but the cat moved away. She followed, struggling with her luggage, but the cat always stayed out of reach. It seemed to be leading her in the direction of the mine shafts.

Susan tripped and fell, skidding into a drainage rut on her knees. Expecting the worst, she felt around her knees and elbows for injuries. Miraculously, she had fallen into a patch of sand, completely missing all the nearby rocks and cacti. Torn pantyhose was the most severe damage! However, the dark cat was nowhere to be seen.

Susan thought about Minerva's lost glories.” *“I have to work on ‘our’ homophobia, definitely. I can't blame society for my prejudices! I must be more systematic in dealing with the Circle; I should have gained far more ground by this time. Of course, I can only do so much alone, but I'm not supposed to work alone. How **do** I enlist all these ‘special people’ that I meet?”* She wondered what kind of a story she could concoct, assuming she were to be rescued; then she fell asleep. She was exhausted.

Saturday morning, Susan was awakened by a raucous, echoing round of heehaws and heavy tromping that heralded the arrival of dawn. She leapt to her feet; then she breathed in relief. It was a jenny and her colt. They were following an erosion channel at the base of the nearest hill, heading for a distant canyon. Once they were gone, only the cries of unseen birds and the motion of air from an occasional breeze interrupted the annoying silence.

It was time to take shelter, before she risked dehydration. The base of the hill was full of horizontal mine shafts, as Bill had observed years ago. Susan picked a larger one, which was almost four feet in diameter. She crouched down and entered the shaft, pulling her luggage along behind her. The shaft narrowed; then it ended about thirty-five feet into the hillside. Susan shoved her luggage against the roughhewn terminal wall; then she sat down with her back against a smoother section of the shaft.

“This is my base of operations, such as it is,” she sighed. “Talk about a fall from grace! I can't afford to rest long. I have to climb this hill before it gets too hot, and I need to go to the bathroom. As soon as I change my underwear, I'll grab my purse and umbrella and be off.”

Susan turned on her cellular phone. It emitted a faint but audible dial tone. She wondered whom she should call. As she tilted her purse, a card fell out. It was the card Roger Cavendish had given to her. It contained his unlisted home telephone number.

“Of course,” she thought dramatically, “I stopped to look at the wildlife and got lost. It's flimsy, but I can fill in all the blanks later. It will take Roger all day to get here, so I have to call now!”

Roger's phone rang twice; then his answering machine gave a message, “This is Roger Cavendish. I will be gone for the entire weekend. At the tone, please leave a message.” Susan became disheartened, but Roger's message took an unusual twist, “If it is an emergency, I can be reached at the Desert Inn Motel, at Needles, California. The telephone number is...”

Susan dumped out her purse, searching for pen and paper. Having found a pen, but no paper, she hurriedly wrote Roger's alternate number on a \$1,000 bill. It was a stroke of unusually good fortune that Roger was so much closer to her than his home near Tucson.

As Susan dialed, she could not have been more excited than if she had seen a rattlesnake. “Hello, Desert Inn? Could you please connect me to the room of Roger Cavendish. He's requested not to be disturbed for another hour? But this is an emergency! Thank you.”

Susan braced herself, seeking composure. “Roger? Sorry to disturb you. This is Susan James. I have a bit of a problem... an embarrassing problem. Well, to put it bluntly, I am stuck in Death Valley. I need a ride. It's a long story that you might find hard to believe... another of my science misadventures. Location? Probably about fifteen or twenty miles southwest of Badwater. You were coming up here anyway today? What a coincidence! Do I mind you bringing your kids? It's okay with me. How will you find me? Well, I will try to move Eastward, and here is my phone number...”

Back in the mine, Susan went over her options. “It's getting hot, but I *have* to move on. If I leave my luggage here, I can travel light, but it will be a long way back to retrieve it. Maybe I can carry it part of the way. I need water, and there are a pair of small Teflon cisterns about two miles along the route to the highway. They should have water in them. I'll do it!” she declared.

As Susan left the entrance of the mine, she was startled by a short, bearded man wearing a white linen shirt, matching pants, and a white cowboy hat. Fearing what might happen to an attractive woman in the middle of the desert, and not knowing what else to do, Susan dropped her luggage; then she hit him repeatedly with her folded umbrella.

“Stop, lady! Stop it!” he yelled. “Ow! Really, I am harmless!”

“Okay... just keep your distance!” warned Susan.

“See, here's my card!” he implored.

“Drop it and move back!” shouted Susan skeptically. She picked up the card and read its inscription:

“Harley Winslow: Geologist, Physicist, Soldier-of-Fortune, and Adventurer. I Make House Calls.”

“That's me!” he proclaimed. “But who are *you*?”

“Susan James, Roving Chronicler of Current Scientific Events,” she countered. “Of course, you have probably seen my television program.”

“Can't say as I have. I don't own a television; they're a waste of my valuable time. I saw your tracks out in the basin, so I came to investigate. You sure look out of place. You're not properly outfitted for the desert. Where's your water?”

As Susan relaxed, she realized Harley had a mule. Her mouth watered when she saw his three canteens. Sensing her thirst, Harley removed one of the canteens and tossed it to Susan. Taking care not to drop her guard, she backed up; then she took one of the longest drinks of her entire life.

“Thanks,” she said as she handed the canteen back to Harley. “If I had known I was going to be stranded here, I would have packed some water.”

“I can prepare some rations if... ” began Harley.

“Thanks, but no,” replied Susan with a downward motion of her hands. “I can eat later. I need to get to the highway. A friend is coming to meet me in a couple of hours!”

“You sure are strange,” commented Harley; “none of what you say makes any sense. How did you get here? And how does anyone know where to find you? Then there are all those cats... do they belong to you? I've never seen house cats *here* before!” Harley pointed at a nearby rock promontory, where three dark felines watched from shadowy cracks.

“I attract cats wherever I go; it's a long story you would not believe. Let's see... well, I stopped by here, because my brother, an archaeologist, told me all about it. I just did not prepare very well. A friend is coming, because I just talked to him on my cellular telephone,” explained Susan seriously.

“Oh,” commented Harley quizzically, as he lifted his hat to scratch his head. “Abigail and I can take you to where you want to go. Abigail is my mule.”

“I figured that out,” said Susan with a smile. “If it's okay with you, I would like to leave at once. I'm not used to this heat!”

“You say you were doing historical research in that valley,” questioned Susan, adjusting her umbrella, as she followed Harley and Abigail down the gravelly trail toward the highway. Though it was growing as hot as a furnace, Susan was managing well under her umbrella, especially since Abigail was carrying her luggage.

“People say I'm a crackpot, but the evidence is there. A thousand years ago, a battle was fought in Death Valley.”

“Really,” responded Susan curiously. “Was it Indians?”

“No way,” he began, as he pulled a sharp piece of reddish rock from his pocket, “See the intense burn patterns within these rocks, which look like ordinary lava. If you cut them and look under a microscope, you can see strange etchings, like they were subjected to intense plasma bombardment. It must have lit up the sky for hundreds of miles,” said Harley as he swept out a wide arc with his right hand.

“Oh,” replied Susan weakly, as she remembered her vision seen upon landing. “*Suddenly, fate is ticking away like crazy, but Minerva can't do a thing right now! Is Harley one of the 'special people'?*” “There's the highway, and here is the large mine shaft,” Susan announced. “I think I should wait here for Roger.”

“Whatever you say, Ma'am,” said Harley agreeably. “After all, who am *I* to call someone crazy?”

“Harley, thanks for everything. I wish you luck in your research; in fact, I would like to interview you,” suggested Susan as she handed Harley her card. “Would you please write your address and phone number on the back of *your* card?”

“No one has ever taken me seriously,” replied Harley in a surprised tone.

“Thanks again,” said Susan appreciatively, as she gave him a light peck on his left cheek. At the same time, she handed him five crisp \$100 bills.

“Thank you, Ma'am. I may be proud, but I can really use the money. It sure was a pleasure meeting you! It's lonely out here. So, until we meet again... ”

“Which should be before the fireworks begins again,” Susan added knowingly.

Harley smiled, as he looked into her sad brown eyes. He found it slightly terrifying, sensing that the attractive young woman standing in front of him, was not quite what she seemed. He tugged hard on Abigail's reigns to turn her around; then he and the mule started back up the hillside trail.

Once he was out of sight, Susan placed an overdue call to her mother. Harriet was angry; she said she had paged Susan several times. Of course, Susan's pager had vanished with Minerva.

“Mother, I do not know exactly when I will get home,” spoke Susan forcefully, “but it *will* be soon. Call me if you have any problems... a non-trivial, *real* problem, that is!”

“I can't believe it!” said Roger emotionally, as he drove past the exit to Death Valley National Monument. “You were actually there! How on Earth did you manage to get about this place without a car?” Susan noticed that Roger must really have striven for a close shave, because his face had several tiny razor nicks.

“Daddy, are you going to marry Susan?” asked Melody innocently.

“Melody, please!” responded Roger embarrassedly.

“It's okay. I don't mind. Children talk where adults fear to tread,” commented Susan. Her confidence in her adopted feminine identity was beginning to startle her.

After ten minutes of travel, they encountered a roadblock. Susan tensed, pulling her hands to her chin, “Oh, no!”

“They're working on the road everywhere today,” explained Roger. “They sure can be exasperating, can't they?” he complained.

“Yes,” sighed Susan, as a lady road worker wearing bright red and yellow clothing directed them to drive down a gravel shoulder for a thousand feet before returning to the main road. This time at least, it was actual road work, not some plot of the *Circle*.

After dropping off the kids late in the day, Roger and Susan headed toward Tucson. “I called the airlines yesterday, hoping to see you off, but no one had you listed,” admitted Roger.

“That's because I use an alias when I fly,” replied Susan with an inventive excuse. “I'm a television personality, and there are some people who take a dim view of my journalism.”

“Okay,” paused Roger skeptically, “but can you explain Death Valley?”

“I heard about this scientist named Harley Winslow and his theories about Death Valley, so I went to meet him,” said Susan creatively.

“Without a car?” asked Roger with a quizzical look.

“It's embarrassing; I don't want to talk about it,” objected Susan. “How long before we reach town?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Another two hours,” he replied.

“Maybe we should stop, so I could make hotel reservation,” suggested Susan. “I also have to make an airline reservation for a flight home!”

“I have a guest room at home,” began Roger nervously. “I can put you up for the night, if you don't mind a little clutter. It'll save you time and money, and I will be a perfect gentleman. I'll even fix you one of my late-night gourmet dinners!”

“I don't want to impose,” said Susan tiredly. “All I really need is a full, quiet night's rest.”

“You can't get that at a hotel,” warned Roger. “At noon, I'm going to a special luncheon. You're welcome to come if you like,” he added a bit apprehensively. “I assure you, it's like nothing you've ever seen before!”

“Okay, but please, let's keep it simple. Roger, I like you a lot, you're really a special person. Please, do not even think about any relationship; I am not a good bet for any romantic involvement.”

“I... see,” he replied softly. However, it was plain to Susan that he had become even more intrigued by her.

Susan had set up her video gear on Roger's dining room table, so she could go over her videotapes. She especially wanted to review those of the riot in San Francisco. She knew that the broadcast of her interview with Roger had no deadline, but she did not know if the riot videos had any news value left.

“That's different,” said Roger as he peered at the image in the small LCD monitor.

“It's a riot staged by skinheads and neo-Nazis. I accidentally happened to be in the middle of things,” she claimed.

“Wow! Talk about the middle! That does not look safe for anyone! Anyway,” he explained, “it's time for me to change for the luncheon. I'm a little slow,” he added hesitantly, “so it will take me about an hour and a half to get ready!”

“Okay,” commented Susan, not paying much attention. “Oh,” she asked as he was about to walk away, “is my turquoise suit okay? I don't really have anything fancy to wear!”

“It's just fine. I assure you, Susan, that you will be the hit of the luncheon,” said Roger, once again with a hint of hesitation in his voice.

Susan heard Roger walk in, but she did not turn her head, because she was busy packing up her video equipment. She did notice, however, that he made a strange sound when he walked. “I'm almost done here, Roger; then I'll be ready to go.”

“How is this?” he asked with an unusual sounding voice.

Susan turned her chair around. Roger was no where to be seen. Instead, Susan gazed at a tall blond woman, whose hair curled from back to front around her ears and rested lightly on her neck and shoulders. She had a reasonable figure and shapely legs, and her taupe nylons and two-inch golden pumps looked very fashionable. She wore an eye-catching, form-fitting dress, brilliantly colored with red flowers overlaying an etched pattern of reds, yellows, and blues. The dress had a button-down-the-front design and a jewel neckline. The hemline of the narrow skirt reached a couple of inches below her knees.

“Susan, meet Eleanor,” she asserted in a strained alto voice. “I'm Roger's sister!”

“Nice, but your nose and chin are a bit obvious,” commented Susan. “Nearly everything looks good, but if you're trying to shock me, it won't work. Is there some reason for this demonstration?”

“This is how I'm going to the luncheon... all the men and their wives and girlfriends will be dressed this way,” he explained as a matter of fact.

“Oh,” replied Susan lightly, as she began to laugh softly, “now I understand! You're a crossdresser, a transgendered person!” “*Even Minerva has been naive. No wonder she picked him!*”

“I don't understand your...” scowled Roger. Such a look did not match his feminine image.

“I'm not making fun of you. I understand, I understand,” explained Susan excitedly. “You can't imagine how *well* I understand. Let's just say I am very knowledgeable about transgenderism. I also know you really need the support of a genetic girl!”

“I did not realize you were so well-informed, especially in the vernacular. You *really* don't find this offensive?” he asked curiously.

“Not at all! It's a lot of work and it's important to you, so it's okay with me. Really!” continued Susan, who was thoroughly enjoying the situation.

“God, I sure hope you're not putting me on,” he cried; “because I *really* need the support.”

“Roger, you'll find that I don't go out of my way to accommodate anyone,” she added earnestly.

“Good, but please remember to refer to me at Eleanor. Let me transfer some things to my purse; then we'll go,” said Eleanor as she walked into her hallway with a slight stumble.

“You drive in public like this?” questioned Susan.

“Of course,” she replied, “I've been doing it for years. I always carry some of Roger's clothes just in case.”

“You're brave... *quite* brave,” complimented Susan. “*This is exciting, but do I dare tell her about Minerva and Bill?*”

“Oh, I'm supposed to warn you that this is all confidential,” explained Eleanor. “After all, you are...”

“A journalist, Rog, I mean Eleanor? But I'm a video-journalist, and my video equipment stays here. Everything I do is ethical, straight forward, and *by permission*,” emphasized Susan.

Eleanor motioned that it was time to go. As Susan followed her out to the car, she took special note of how Eleanor's skirt moved, especially in reaction to her slightly wobbly gait. Eleanor was still Roger; yet, she looked good, despite not being very attractive. Susan wondered what caused people's preoccupation about men wearing skirts.

The luncheon was the third annual business meeting of the *Alpha-Omicron Chapter of SWATA*, the Southwest Arizona Transgender Alliance, a regional crossdresser's club. There were about forty-five members present, along with some of their wives and girlfriends. Susan noticed, however, that the wives and girlfriends present numbered only eleven. As she walked around and introduced herself, she was repeatedly told that women's fascination with crossdressers, paradoxically, did not generally extend to their husbands or boyfriends.

“What do you think of our group?” asked Molly, who was President of *Alpha-Omicron*. Molly wore a bright red jumper over a white, short-sleeved blouse. Her high pumps were a shade of fluorescent red. She was tall and broad-shouldered, but her waistline was very slim for a man.

“I never thought so many men were this brave, or that women's clothes would even *fit* so many men, though the heels are a bit too high and the hair too long,” she replied. “Interestingly, when they compliment me, I can return the favor.”

“I've noticed that you're not disturbed by any of this,” observed Molly. “Usually, when genetic girls first come to one of our meetings, they have a high anxiety level.”

“Not me,” Susan assured her. “I think this is educational, and even a bit fun!”

A brief business session followed dinner. After everyone got up and began to circulate, Molly took Eleanor aside. “Your friend, Susan, is really something.”

“Everyone seems to notice; she's already quite popular with the other members, and even with the wives and girlfriends,” commented Eleanor.

"I'm curious about how you met her," wondered Molly.

"She interviewed me about my astronomical discovery; she's a science video-journalist. She even does science briefs on one of her hometown television stations. I assure you, though, she has promised not to expose any of our secrets," assured Eleanor.

"Do you sense anything unusual about her?" questioned Molly.

"There are things she does not adequately explain, but she is beautiful and brilliant at the same time," said Eleanor, as she watched Susan from across the room.

"In other words," explained Molly, "she is your ideal dream girl."

"You might say that," agreed Eleanor.

"I get the impression you may be in love with her," Molly observed.

"It's a little early for that, Molly, but it is not impossible," agreed Eleanor again. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Eleanor, she's too good to be true; it's sort of scary. When I listen to her, I hear her talk more like a man than a woman. My instincts tell me that she's one of us, appearances to the contrary. If she *is* a transsexual, I would surely like to know the names of her surgeons!"

"But she implied she was a 'genetic girl!'" asserted Eleanor.

"Give me a break, Eleanor; that's one of *our* terms. Real women simply do not refer to themselves as 'genetic girls'," countered Molly.

"You're an unusual woman," commented Eleanor as the two of them drove back to her house.

"True, but you are also an unusual man," Susan pointed out, "considering how you're now dressed."

"But that doesn't bother you?" Eleanor suggested.

"Not at all," asserted Susan.

Eleanor pulled to the side of the road, took the car out of gear, and set the parking brake. "Susan, there's something I really have to ask you. When I am dressed as a woman, I become more socially inquisitive. Are you a transsexual?"

"No," began Susan, as Eleanor's expression turned to one of relief, "and yes. If you want to understand my paradox, you have to listen and believe. Are you ready for my secret?" asked Susan seriously.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure I can handle it," said Eleanor with an expression of eagerness.

"I *am* a genetic girl... I have periods like any other woman, and I think I can even get pregnant. I have a brother named Bill Creighton, who is a genetic male. He and I are the *same* person!" Susan nervously grasped her purse; two \$1,000 bills fell out.

Eleanor did not speak; she only shook her head in disbelief, as she raised her fingers to her cheeks.

“Sometimes I can't find a writing pad, so I use one of these,” added Susan dryly.

Eleanor still had an incredulous expression on her face.

“See, I told you there might be a problem! Eleanor... Roger... my life has been hell almost two days now, so I could really use a little of that ‘support’ you and your *Alpha-Omicrons* talk about!” complained Susan tearfully. “We'd better get going, if I am going to get some rest before leaving in the morning.”

“Just give me five minutes,” urged Eleanor, “because I'm apparently missing something!”

“I was born William Creighton, a shy, intellectual young man,” explained Susan carefully. “In Morocco last year, Bill was granted the power of transformation. I had a choice of being either Bill or Susan; since Bill was transgendered, I chose to be Susan. I screwed up Friday and lost my powers. Now the *Circle* is free to wreak whatever havoc they choose!”

“You *really* lost me!” complained Eleanor, bewilderedly following Susan's story.

“Who do you think left the message on your computer?”

“They say it was Minerva,” replied Eleanor.

“I left the message I *am* Minerva!”

“How can you be Minerva? That's a little far-fetched,” commented Eleanor as she carefully looked Susan over.

“Who do you think cleaned up your messy desk and found your hidden calendar that day? I am Minerva, but I've lost my powers. Now I have to fly on a jetliner, just like everyone else! I think it's all connected: the space station, the *Circle*, and the high level of turmoil in our world!”

“What is this *Circle*, anyway?” asked Eleanor.

“It's a group of psychotic men who like to dress up in brown, hooded cloaks and undermine our society in the name of some macho plan of dominance. One could refer to them as ‘crossdressers’, but it's not funny; they are dangerous, well-armed, and well-financed!”

“Weird! And people say that we of *Alpha-Omicron* are strange! Okay,” continued Eleanor, nervously looking out the window of the car, “and I suppose you lost your powers over Death Valley.”

“Right!”

“This is too heavy to discuss here, so we had better wait until we get to my place!” Eleanor stumbled over her words.

Roger was more composed, but Susan was pensive, as they waited for the boarding announcement of her flight. The two of them hardly spoke, although their body language said volumes. Roger took her right hand to reassure her. Susan smiled and said, “I had no idea what an ordeal this would be. Bill... well, Bill could *not* have handled it!”

“How will you manage?” asked Roger.

“I will broadcast our interview; then I will dutifully lead the life I have laid out for myself. Somehow, someday, I will use this great body I have been given, to do the right thing. Maybe, just maybe, Minerva will return,” she sighed hopefully.

“I can't get over how confident and self-assured you are, despite your problems,” commented Roger. “Even the people around us now are aware of your presence.”

Susan glanced quickly from side to side. It was true: people everywhere seemed to be furtively sneaking glances in her direction. “A little of Minerva rubbed off, I suppose,” explained Susan with a smile.

“Well, that's your boarding call,” announced Roger nervously.

Susan did not wait for Roger. She took the initiative to embrace Roger and kiss him passionately. “The best part about being a woman is that I can react any way I choose. See you... hopefully soon.”

Molly had warned him to resist Susan, but Molly was not in love with her.

“Brothers, *He* has arrived!” announced Brother Alpha. As he rose to his feet, his voice echoed in the long, somber meeting room. “First, everyone must remove any all gold or gold-plated jewelry and embellishments and place it in their pockets... *now!*” After a brief rush to comply with the unusual order, a tall, broad-shouldered figure, wearing a black hooded cloak, entered; then Brother Alpha lowered his head and uttered in reverence, “I give you our Master, the Emissary!”

“Master!” echoed everyone in unison.

“Emissary G'Zon, it is so good to see you again. We are beset by problems, all caused by a deadly woman named Minerva! This is what she looks like,” explained Brother Alpha, as he displayed a photo created from Susan's famous video interview.

“Ah, I have met her kind before, long ago. These women *are* dangerous, but I know how to deal with them and how to exploit their innermost weaknesses. You *have* been tracking her, of course!”

“We try,” lamented Brother Alpha, “but she keeps sabotaging the equipment. We have not detected her at all for the last few weeks, so I fear she has learned to elude our detectors entirely.”

“I shall investigate later, but now I must prepare myself for your world. Bring me a change of clothing! Stand back!” he ordered.

G'Zon raised his clenched fists upward, while forming a strained expression on his face. As the brothers of the *Circle* watched in awe, his flesh turned to the consistency of putty and began to change shape. Within moments, it was obvious that his appearance had assumed a more human aspect. He beckoned to the brothers holding his new clothing; they rushed to his side.

“There,” he began, as he adjusted his accent, “how do I look?”

He turned through a full circle, as he showed off his Navy blue suit, with its light blue vest, red tie, and black oxfords. “This feels very strange. You humans wear such inconvenient clothing.”

"It's fabulous!" Brother Alpha assured him. "You look like a Hollywood leading man or a politician, and your accent is perfect!"

"Excellent!" commented G'Zon. "I want a tour of all your facilities; then you will take me to your command center, where I might resurrect my army of mechadrones, and introduce new technology for your assault on your world and on this woman!"

If anyone had been watching, they would surely have taken notice of Susan, wearing her red skirt suit, happily skipping toward the elevator, without losing her balance because of her high heels. She was on her way home from the Channel Four Studio. She had just wrapped up her latest *Science Moment*, featuring the newly-discovered dinosaur burial ground in Alberta. Marilyn Haynes was so pleased with her work tonight, as well as with her interview with Roger Cavendish and her video-clips from the San Francisco area riots, that she had just offered Susan a permanent job with the station, as a roving journalist and reporter.

Susan was elated. At the moment she pressed the elevator button, she was sure she would accept the job. She felt her developing career would help compensate for the loss of Minerva's help. Letters continually arrived at the station, addressed to Susan, sharing her publicly-voiced concern over the absence of Minerva.

Next week, she had another interview with Roger scheduled, concerning new findings about the mysterious space station. She knew that Roger was really more interested in her than in the interview, but she was more flattered than disturbed. Her mother was excited about Roger too, because Susan talked to him on the phone every other day. Though Harriet had never met him, she constantly lectured Susan how a modern woman could have it all: husband, children, and career. Susan wondered if her mother even remembered Bill anymore.



Susan checked around before walking to her car in the parking garage. As she opened her car door, she heard a noise. When she saw a small calico cat, she thought she had found the source, but the cat was not creating any noise. She knew that it was not a good idea to investigate, but there was too much of Minerva in her personality for her to ignore the situation.

She removed a canister of pepper gas from her purse and walked slowly in the direction of the elevator at the other end of the underground lot. A pretty young woman in a blue dress was screaming and crying. A tall, heavy-set man was attacking her. Susan watched in dismay as he slammed her against the concrete wall next to the elevator; then he punched her in the stomach really hard.

“Try to leave me, will you... thought you could hide... I'll show you!” the man yelled.

“No! Ow!” cried the woman as he hit her again.

Susan grabbed her cellular phone from her purse and dialed 911. “There's an assault underway in the Channel Four parking garage,” she explained quickly. “Yes, near the intersection of James Street and Fifth Avenue! Now he's coming after me!” yelled Susan as she ran toward the elevator near her car.

Susan was not fast enough; he was at her side within seconds. As he grabbed the phone from her hand and smashed it to the pavement, she sprayed him liberally with pepper gas, causing him to double over in pain. Susan ran. As she looked back, he was already chasing her again. She pressed the button and the elevator door opened; then it closed in time, just as his hands touched the shiny metal doors.

As the elevator moved upwards, Susan pressed the fire alarm. To her dismay, the elevator changed direction, heading downward again, and nothing she did to stop the motion had any effect. Susan moved to the back of the elevator and readied her pepper gas cylinder. She took a long gulp of air as her assailant pried the elevator doors wide as soon as the opening mechanism had created a crack.

“Bitch! You're all alike!” he yelled, hitting her with so much force that Susan's feet lifted from her high heels before she slammed into the back wall of the elevator. She tried to fire the pepper gas cylinder, but it only fizzed when she pressed the lever. It was empty.

“*I'm going to find out all about assault!*” thought Susan as she desperately tried to catch her breath and escape. When she attempted to jab him in the crotch with her knee, he merely deflected her blow and knocked her to the floor.

The man pulled on her right arm as he pinned Susan's head to the floor with one of his heavy, dirty brown boots. “Know what? You're going to die!” he threatened, as he continued to ignore the fire alarm and approaching police sirens. “But I'm going to damage that pretty face of yours first,” he warned as he pulled a five-inch knife from his belt.

As he was about to drop Susan's arm, he noticed the ring of Minerva. He tried to pull it off, but it wouldn't budge. “No problem,” he said almost casually as he positioned his knife under her finger. Susan tried to yank her hand away, but he had a vice-like grip on her.

Not knowing what else to do, Susan let out an earsplitting scream. At the moment he tilted her hand to get a good cutting angle, Susan saw the glow in the ring. As the knife touched the finger, Minerva had replaced Susan. "What the hell is the problem?" he wondered, when the knife refused to cut.

A look of dismay came over him, as Minerva got to her feet while maintaining an iron grip on his hand. The anger in her eyes could have pierced steel, but she chose to be gentle. The man cried out like a baby as she smashed both the knife and his hand.

"You like to hit women," scolded Minerva; "so why don't you hit *me*?"

The man did not have to be asked twice. Despite the injuries to his right hand, he angrily punched Minerva in her right shoulder with his left hand. Punching Minerva was like hitting an electrified brick wall. He broke a couple of bones in his hand, and a flash of energy shoved him backwards so hard his head hit and cracked a car's side window.

As the man slid to the pavement, Minerva moved to the injured woman's side. Police and fire units were closing in, so she had to act quickly. She stroked several bruises, especially those around the woman's head, to help relieve the pain.

"It feels good to be Minerva again; now I can go to Death Valley and retrieve Susan's things. Susan's luck has improved, but she's going to hurt for a while. It's time for her to reappear, but she will suffer the consequences of her injuries!"

As medics pushed the cat aside and lifted Susan from the elevator onto a stretcher, they wondered why she was smiling. They could not understand that Minerva was back, that she had done the right thing.

"Now you get a lot of rest, and don't you dare drive anywhere, Dear," fussed Harriet, as she prepared to go talk to a new client. "Remember, your friend Roger will be flying out to see you on Wednesday, Susie."

Susan, of course, had been waiting for an opportunity for Minerva to reappear, if only because Minerva was not in pain. Though Susan was supposed to *report* the news and not *be* the news, she had just gained nationwide attention on a Channel Four special about battered women, sporting all her painful bruises. Channel Four administration was so appreciative that they gave Susan extended medical leave with full pay, though she had not yet signed a contract.

When Minerva reached the Desert Inn Motel, Roger's car was already gone. She presumed that he had just left to pick up his kids at his ex-wife's house. Not knowing the address, Minerva sped upwards, while circling the motel in an ever-widening spiral. Less than two minutes passed, when her sharp vision spotted Roger's car. She quickly dropped downward, slowed, and leveled off, following the vehicle from an altitude of about 2000 feet.

Roger parked in the street next to his ex-wife's house. As he walked up the driveway to the front door, he wondered why several dogs were barking. He looked around, but he could see nothing wrong. His daughter, Melody, excitedly let him in even before he could knock.

Minerva approached the house in fuzzy-stealth mode. She saw Roger, Melody, Trevor, and Roger's ex-wife, all seated in the living room. Roger was wearing his usual hiking outfit: a short-sleeved green shirt and blue jeans. Melody and Trevor were dressed somewhat alike: striped shirt and faded brown shorts. Roger's ex-wife was a pretty, tall blond, dressed in sandals and a light-colored shirt dress with vertical stripes. Her facial expression was anything but friendly; however, Minerva was surprised what her intuition revealed about the woman. It was time for Susan to begin Minerva's plan. Susan took a gulp of air and rang the doorbell. At that moment, she was certain her developing relationship with Roger would soon come to an end.

"Susan, wow! Daddy, it's Susan!" announced Melody. Susan was wearing a red T-top, blue shorts, and white sneakers.

Overcome by mixed emotions, Melanie was both hostile to Susan's presence and sympathetic to her bruises. "My God, what happened to you, woman?" she asked.

"I came between a man and his estranged wife," explained Susan.

"Did they get him?" Melanie asked angrily.

"He's in the hospital. He won't be beating any more women for some time. But I'm not here to talk about myself; rather, I have a proposition for both of you," said Susan as her eyes looked upward.

"If it's about Roger, I don't care," replied Melanie bitterly. "He's all yours!"

"No!" cried Susan sternly. "This is about matters of life and death... our future... your children's future! Your children should not be here, but I don't know where to send them. Stand back," she ordered, as she thought the magic words and turned back into Minerva.

"Far out!" yelled Melody and Trevor in unison. Both of the children ran to touch her and feel the fabric of her uniform. Minerva put an arm around each of them and turned them to face their parents.

"Yes, Roger," she began, "my powers are back. It's time to build a special team. Roger, I've known for a long time that you are one of the 'special people'. Melanie, until moments ago, I had no idea that you were, too!"

"In what way are we 'special'?" asked Roger skeptically.

"Yes, please explain," urged Melanie. For the first time since Susan had arrived, she had dropped her guard.

"I have the power to grant transformation. Roger, I would like you to be Lexa, and Melanie, I would like you to be Diana," said Minerva earnestly.

"You can turn him into a woman?" Melanie grimaced. "Oh, he will like *that!* What will I become? A man?"

"No, just a *very* powerful woman," replied Minerva with a scolding glance toward Melanie. As she stroked the children's heads to keep them calm, she continued, "Before you decide, I will tell the story as I understand it. It's sort of a recruiting story, for you two and all the others, that begins in Morocco..."

"I'll do it," announced Roger; "I don't know how I can refuse to offer my help in your struggle."

"The trouble with you, Roger, is that you could *never* refuse this stupid fetish of yours!" snapped Melanie. "But if it's help you need, I'm willing, Minerva," agreed Melanie. Her decision clearly placed her at odds with her basic nature. "Just please do *not* turn me into a man!"

Minerva placed Melody and Trevor on adjacent cushions on Melanie's large tan sofa. "They're sort of sedated right now," explained Minerva. "I've also impressed the importance of secrecy on their minds. They're both bright enough to handle it."

Minerva pulled a ring from her headband. She concentrated her thoughts as she held it in her hands. The ring grew nearly as large as a hula hoop, and its center began to glow brightly. It was as if it held a brilliantly-white miniature star.

"You're first, Roger," Minerva commanded. "When I drop my left hand, hold your arms to your sides, crouch down, and then jump as high into the air as possible!"

Roger gave a puzzled look, but he followed Minerva's directions. Once Roger had reached the highest point of his jump, Minerva tossed the ring, which moved at such high speed that it encircled Roger from head to toe and returned to Minerva's hand before his feet hit the floor. For an instant, Roger seemed engulfed by a column of white light like the light of Akanishta.

Melanie's turn came. The ring encircled her body and sped back to Minerva's hand. Minerva then tossed the ring into the air, where it was transformed into two small, glowing objects that fell toward the floor. Moving faster than either Melanie or Roger could follow, Minerva crossed the room and caught the objects, one in each hand.

"Roger, this is your finger ring," said Minerva as she handed it to him, "and Melanie, this yours. I presume you both understand their function."

"Was that real?" asked Roger with a stunned expression. "Did I imagine that I stood at the edge of creation, talking to a goddess named Tara for more than an hour? And what was the meaning of all those white cats?"

"Hey! I talked to her for more than an hour, and I did not see *you* there!" objected Melanie. "By the way, the cats were calico, not white!"

"It's time for your training flights," announced Minerva as she stepped between them. "You both can't go at once, because someone will have to stay to watch the kids."

"I can wait," Roger volunteered. "After all, Tara said I should master the art of patience, as well as working on my social graces."

"Very well," continued Minerva, "Melanie and Roger, speak your names after the syllable 'akna'."

A delay followed as they both mentally struggled to get their magic words correctly. Roger was first, as his counterpart, Lexa, replaced him in a flash, closely followed by the first appearance of Diana. Melody and Trevor rushed back and forth between them. They were intrigued by the look and feel of the persons their parents had become.

Diana and Lexa both somewhat resembled Minerva, with their Middle-eastern complexion and emerald-green eyes. Their outfits had the same cut as Minerva's, but the similarity ended there. Subtle variations of a pastel yellow-gold colored their clothing, and their boots were bright red. Their armbands and headbands looked the same as Minerva's; however, their headbands contained no transformation rings. The emblem on their chest was different, consisting of two triangles: a bright gold one overlaying an offset black one. The gold triangle contained a black lightning bolt, which pointed downward; while the black triangle contained a similar golden lightning bolt. The only differences between their two outfits were names **LEXA** and **DIANA**, in bold Sallakan characters, under the overlapping triangles.

“Fantastic!” exclaimed Lexa, as she verified that she was indeed a woman. “Being a woman feels good, even better than I had imagined! The transition has a bit of a sting, though.”

It was an overcast, muggy noontime in Atlanta, as Minerva silently entered an apartment complex at the edge of town. She quickly found what she was hunting for: Apartment 31. She knocked at the door, taking care not to chip or dent the wood. The door opened part way, held in check by its safety chain. An attractive young black woman peered through the crack.

“Hello, Eliza Pitman,” began Minerva. “Do you remember me? May I come in?”

Eliza threw off the chain and flung open the door. She gave Minerva a firm hug as she cried, “Oh, Ms. Minerva, am I glad to see you! See, I lost thirty pounds, and I have not sniffed cocaine or turned a trick in months. I've cleaned up my language, and I even have a steady boyfriend... not one of those deadbeats that I used to run around with. I'm working my way up in a law firm. In another year, I'll be a full-fledged legal secretary!”

Minerva apprehensively gazed at Eliza. “*She's become centered. Now I've come to disrupt her life again!*”

“Why such a look, Ms. Minerva?” asked Eliza nervously.

“I've long known that you are one of the ‘special people’, Eliza,” she explained, “but I never told you what that meant. I've come to ask you to join my team in a monumental battle against the growing forces of evil. It will be dangerous, it will be demanding, and it will not make life easier!”

“Ms. Minerva, for you I'm willing to tackle *anything*. You only have to ask. A little explanation would help, too; I can't imagine how I could be of any help to you,” commented Eliza.

Minerva watched the results wrought by the second ring from her headband.

“Tara was so dark, and yet so radiant! So were all her cats!” cried Eliza as she skipped to her bedroom to view her herself as Sheba in the full-length mirror. “She is a *most* striking black woman, isn't she?”

“We all see her differently,” clarified Minerva; “Tara's nature is beyond mere form or appearance!”

Sheba turned in circles, ecstatically examining her new image. Her outfit was much the same as Lexa and Diana, except for the name in Sallakan characters. However, her skin had more of a dark chocolate complexion, rather than the olive look of Minerva and the others. Sheba retained the striking emerald-green eyes, which muddled any apparent ethnicity.

“You say I can fly fast, I’m bulletproof, and really strong?” questioned Sheba.

“Yes, within reason,” replied Minerva. “You and your sisters have great powers, a diminished subset, about thirty percent, of my own. Come with me now to test your new capabilities. I do not have much time; I must meet with another convert tonight as well.”

“When will you explain?” wondered Sheba.

“I think you understand the basics, so it is time to test your wings,” urged Minerva as she first pointed to the apartment lanai, then upward.

It was time for a brief return home, but Minerva was forced to move faster, once she spied Harriet's car entering the Creighton driveway from afar. The front door opened, as Susan ran into her bedroom. There was no time to undress, so she leaped into bed and pulled the covers up to her neck, concealing what she was wearing.

“How are you feeling?” asked Harriet moments later. “I was able to come home on a break. My client wants a second brainstorming session at 3:00 P.M.”

“Bruised and frustrated,” replied Susan annoyedly. “*It's time for mother to find about Minerva!*” Susan threw back the covers. “Mother, I can't lie in bed. I have things to do!”

“Susie, Dr. Benner would never approve!” scolded Harriet.

“Mother, you've been so naive,” countered Susan. “While you rant on about minor things, *I* have to deal with a coming world crisis! Watch!”

In a flash, Susan became Minerva again. At first, Harriet stared without comprehension; then a look of awe came over her face, as her mouth dropped. “You... *you're* Minerva,” she observed weakly. “Suddenly, I don't feel so good. Oh dear!”

“Mother!” cried Minerva, catching Harriet before she collapsed to the floor. Minerva quickly laid her on the bed. The look of pain told her that it was no simple fainting spell; Harriet was suffering a heart attack. Susan had discussed the risks her mother faced with Dr. Benner. At the time, he had told her it was just a matter of time.

“She's much better than I would have expected,” remarked a surprised Dr. Benner to Susan, as he read the ultrascan report, “considering the right ventricle was so fragile. Remarkably, she's getting better while we talk. I wish I could take the credit, but I would more attribute it to her stubborn will, along with a lot of luck.”

“When can she come home?” asked Susan. “*I did not expect this complication; I wonder how I will manage everything.*”

“I want to keep her under observation for three more days. I am going to make her rest, even if it takes sedation. You should be at home resting too, young woman,” he scolded lightly, motioning to her many bruises.

"I only notice the pain when I lie still, but I will go home and rest a little," Susan said softly, allowing herself a white lie, while thinking, "*Minerva will be unfettered for three whole days!*"

Minerva could see Tammi McKenzie working in her back yard, digging some kind of a trench. Nearly silently, Minerva landed to Tammi's right. For a moment, Tammi did not notice her.

"Oops, I did not see you come down," said Tammi, as she stuck her shovel into the ground. "I'm building an underground tunnel, so my cats can get from the house to their outside play cage. Come into the house; I've been expecting you."

"You knew I was coming?" wondered Minerva.

"Someday, I was sure you would come. But why not; my life is anything but normal. Please sit down. Would you like something to drink. I'm not really as calm as I look, you know!"

"Thank you, no," began Minerva. "Perhaps *you* should sit! I am assembling a team, and I would like you to join us. I can grant you the power of transformation, to become a powerful woman similar to myself. I want you to be one of my chief assistants. There will only be two such people."

"Okay, but only if I can fly. I *have* to be able to fly. Just joking... what am I saying!" stumbled Tammi.

"You *will* be able to fly... and much more. I will even give you a new name," offered Minerva. "It will be dangerous; there are sinister forces in the shadows these days."

"I know all about them," said Tammi seriously. "Any name will be okay, so long as it's not so sissy as 'Tammi'."

"How about Nyoka?" suggested Minerva.

"A nice fantasy-like name. I'll take it!" replied Tammi firmly; then her voice softened, "There is something you should know about me."

"What would that be?" wondered Minerva.

"I've never had a normal life. My parents wanted me to go into women's fashions, not law-enforcement, but I've always been strong-willed. While I was going to college, I met and married Steven McKenzie, a graduate engineering student. We had a stormy relationship from the start, which ended when we learned that I could not have children."

"That's sad," consoled Minerva.

"True, at least the childbearing part, but not the failed marriage," replied Tammi. "Of course, when the doctor told me *why* I could not have children, I was dumbfounded. Minerva, I only look like a woman! Physically, everything looks correct, but they told me that I had the chromosomes of a man! I was born with a condition where the X-chromosome turns off the Y-chromosome."

As Tammi broke into tears, Minerva comforted her. "It is time for the transformation to take place; I have many others to process in the next few days. Tammi, you will

meet others, including yours truly, who understand the trials of being a transgendered person.”

In a flash, Minerva turned back into Susan. “Did you notice how masculine I was?” asked Susan.

“Not really,” answered Tammi, “but I *did* wonder how you could be fortunate enough to interview Minerva.”

“I *could* change into Bill Creighton, my birth identity, but he would wreck all of Susan's clothing. Are you ready?”

“I'm ready,” replied Tammi with two thumbs up. “But you are so trusting. Technically, I should tell my superiors about you.”

“But you won't,” said Susan assuredly.

“No, because I have also been assigned to stop the *Circle of the Brown Cloak*. I want to have the power to defeat them!”

A lone woman sat in the kiva. She was dressed in native American garb. The central fire was growing dim. Nearly silently, Minerva descended and seated herself on the opposite side of the kiva from the woman. Minutes passed, before the woman looked up.

“Oh, you have finally come,” she said with a smile. “I have waited patiently these many weeks. My friends abandoned me, taking me for a fool.”

“You do not look someone to be labeled a fool; you seem to know why I am here,” sensed Minerva.

“I have sat here on and off for many months, fashioning these arrows, tipped with pure gold. It can penetrate the armor of the Faceless Ones. My ancestors fought them many years ago; I will be ready when they come. As before, the men will be helpless,” she said, as her mind wandered back to a lost age.

“You are a medicine woman and a berdache,” observed Minerva.

“I am a two-spirit woman, and a true hermaphrodite,” she admitted. “I have many names. My given name is Dawn Horse, but most call me Dawn.”

“And I will give you yet another name,” added Minerva. “Tell me, Dawn, which tribe do you belong to?”

“I was born to the Navahos, but I live as an itinerant medicine woman, calling no tribe my own. I have waited all my life for this moment. I am anxious to meet Tara,” said Dawn sincerely.

“In a moment, Dawn, your dreams will come true. Of all the people I have met in my travels, you are certainly one of the most perceptive. I sense you even have a name picked out,” guessed Minerva.

“Please call me Sunshi. It will suit me better than any other. I will be honored to serve at your side, battling the forces of darkness,” she said earnestly.

Arleen Barnes, who was Harriet's hired nurse, adjusted the hospital bed which she had wheeled into the living room with Susan's help. Not being used to constraint, Har-

riet was a reluctant patient. Her only consolation was that it was almost time for the next episode of All My Children.

“Susy dear, did you call Larson and Associates?” asked Harriet, referring to the firm handling her accounts during her recuperation.

“Everything is fine,” Susan assured her; “they are very competent.” *“She has not mentioned Minerva, but she gives me these knowing glances.”*

“Hurry, Arleen; it's time for my program!” urged Harriet.

“I'll be leaving for work in fifteen minutes,” warned Susan.

“Oh no!” cried Harriet, as Susan was about to leave. “They've interrupted All My Children!”

Susan arrived in the living room, as her colleague, Marilyn Haynes, appeared on the television. “Good afternoon. We interrupt this program for a special bulletin. Last year, we thought nothing could top the appearance of Minerva. However, in the last few days, there have been sightings of as many as a hundred new superwomen, all dressed in striking yellow, gold, and red costumes.”

“Last night, a black superwoman named Sheba broke up a Ku Klux Klan rally near Macon, Georgia. While giving the men a verbal scolding, she calmly unmasked them to reveal their true identities; then she dared them to face their prejudices. Across the entire Middle East, one or more superwomen spent the day disarming Syria, Iraq, and Iran. In Tibet, the Chinese army awoke to find most of its armored vehicles and artillery in ruins. In Yugoslavia, the Serbian army awoke to a similar revelation.

“As if this were not fantastic enough, late this afternoon, the major capitals of the world received a special dispatch from Minerva, warning of pending worldwide warfare. We now return you to our regular programming in progress. Stay tuned for further details during the Six O'clock News.”

“I've got to go, Mother; I'm late,” announced Susan. “Finally, real-life is going to upstage these soap opera plots,” she observed.

“Be careful, Susie,” urged Harriet, taking care not to discuss anything in front of Arleen.

“Oh, and I'm taking tomorrow off,” informed Susan. “I'm going to visit some friends out-of-state.” *“Actually, my assembled team is going to raid the New Mexico headquarters of the Circle.”*

As soon as the door was open, a black alley cat ran through and vanished into the darkness.

G'Zon waited until every brother of the *Cloak* had entered the dark warehouse; then he forcefully closed the door and threw the large switches that turned on the lights. The central floor was filled with many strange objects and devices. Silently, as if on cue, the men arranged themselves into a large elliptical pattern around the central floor, until each had an unobstructed view.

The men were especially fascinated with the hundred-or-so red, white, and black figurines that resembled the slender, large-headed aliens associated with publicized UFO encounters.

“Are they alive?” someone asked.

“No”, began G'Zon, “not in the ordinary sense. These are sample mechadrones, special robots. This is their inactive shape, in the likeness of one of my enemies, the T'Lar'Nerr. They are colored by function. Watch what happens when I activate them!” warned G'Zon as he aimed a hand-held remote control toward the center of the warehouse.

“Gentlemen,” announced G'Zon, “I give you my mechadrones, my invincible army.”

“Mechadrones,” began G'Zon obligingly, “are one of my people's greatest creations. In two days, they will overrun your world. With them, we have subjugated beings across the galaxy. The reds are the controllers. They drive armored attack hover-chairs. The blacks are the soldiers who spearhead the battle. Each of them has a focused, high-powered plasma beam weapon within its head. The whites are scouts. They map the battle for the reds. They also emit broad-frequency jamming signals and will, using a powerful explosive, self-destruct if necessary...”

The warehouse doors burst from their hinges with a percussive suddenness. One door became airborne, flying across the interior, until it impaled the wall on the opposite side. Within the blink of an eye, Minerva and her legion of superwomen entered and filled the warehouse.

Sunshi took aim and shot a gold-tipped arrow into a red mechadrone. The robot immediately shorted out; then toppled over like a piece of melting wax. Minerva took the hint, attacking the many robots with rapid sideswipes of her golden bracelets.



“Minerva is occupied with these robots!” cried Mollena. “G'Zon must not escape!”

The first two superwomen who reached the alien struck him with several times. Despite the force of their blows and the generated blinding flashes, G'Zon was mostly unaffected. Worse, his blows against the women were not deflected by their tensile barriers.

“That’s no way to treat a lady!” cried Nyoka, striking G'Zon with repeated martial arts kicks.

Others joined the attack; however, G'Zon proved to be unexpectedly resilient. When Maitra of India attacked, G'Zon waved a hand in front of her face. As if mesmerized, she stopped and stared blankly at him. As he touched her forehead, her image began to fade; then she was gone.

“No!” cried Nyoka. Within seconds, she had also vanished.

“We can take him!” urged Lexa to Diana. “His powers won't work on me!”

Lexa and Diana attacked in unison. Unfortunately, they were simultaneously overpowered. Together, they vanished just like the others.

Minerva prepared to confront G'Zon, as Sunshi loaded another gold-tipped arrow. While the arrow was en route to its target, Minerva moved faster. Within an instant, she was standing in front of G'Zon.

“Prepare to meet your fate!” asserted G'Zon. “Your kind cannot withstand my power.”

“*His hand cannot harm me!*” she said to herself, as she summoned inner strength to overcome its hypnotic effect. “I will not submit!” she cried, striking her golden bracelets together so hard that they emitted blinding sparks. At that moment the arrow hit G'Zon in his left side and she struck him. G'Zon was visibly suffering deep pain far beyond the obvious effect of Sunshi's arrow and Minerva's blows.

“What have you done with my people?” demanded Minerva as she backed him into a wall of concrete blocks.

“They are in my sanctuary!” replied G'Zon, as he strived for composure. “They will die there! In a moment, you shall join them!”

“Where are they?” demanded Minerva again, as she forcefully shoved G'Zon against the wall. Recognizing it as some kind of microchip key, Minerva pulled the blue pendant from his chest and stored it in her belt. G'Zon's eyes turned black. Radiant, sparkling patches of energy appeared on several parts of his body. As G'Zon reverted to his original form, his skin undulated rapidly, and the patches grew until they merged. They began to incinerate him like some fanciful cosmic plague. Within seconds all that was left of G'Zon was his outline that had been etched into the wall.

Minerva stared at the image in stunned silence. This battle was over, but not without losses. At that moment she was not sure what had happened. It was like a nightmare. “*Tammi, Melanie, Manohar, and my Roger... where are you and what am I going to do without you? I won't give up on you! Melanie and Roger, I will take care of your kids! Tammi, your cats will be safe! Maitra, I will comfort your family!*”

The air was alive with tension and excited conversations. The chamber of the big theater room was packed to the limit. MP's strained to keep lower-ranking military out of the room. Never in history had the Pentagon been witness to such an event, as Minerva and members of her legion prepared their presentation behind drawn curtains.

Air Force Major-General Barbara Fontain calmly stood at the podium, hands resting behind her skirt, as she scanned the faces of her military comrades, most of whom were men. She was wearing her best dress uniform, which looked like it had been tailored just for her figure. As usual, her fine brunette hair, shoes, jewelry, pantyhose, and makeup, while looking proper, all tugged at the limits of regulation. She was especially happy that the President had placed her in charge, passing over every man present. General Braddock, the chairman, was clearly not happy about the turn of events.

"If everyone would find a place," she ordered loudly, "we can begin. We've got a full agenda, so if we want to get home tonight, we must start now! I would like to start off by introducing my counterpart from Russia, Commander Ilyana Svetsokya."

Commander Svetsokya stood up for a moment. She was dressed in drab Russian Army fatigues. She was not pleased with the way the men in the theater seemed to react to her presence.

"What's going on?" demanded a Naval Admiral. "Why have all the men been deactivated?"

"Such questions will soon be answered," replied General Fontain sharply. "Let's say that they've finally invented the war you men can't fight."

"Preposterous!" remarked a distant male officer.

"Watch, you might learn something, but please wait until the end for questions and answers" commanded General Fontain, as the curtains were pulled back. Minerva, Sunshi, Mollena, Sheba, and eight other superwomen stood in the midst of hardware, including equipment and mechadrones taken from the *Circle's* warehouse.

Minerva stepped to the front of the stage. Having everyone's undivided attention, she immediately began, "I am Minerva. For the last few months, I have *been* the news, but all that is about to change. These women you see with me are part of my Legion, which has been created to battle an organization known as *The Circle of the Brown Cloak*. For years they have lead a secret reign of terror all over the world, but in less than two days they will 'go public' in a big way. Many parts of the world will be caught up in a war, the likes of which this planet has not seen in a thousand years. At this moment, preparations are underway to counter an attacking army, which my associates shall describe shortly," finished Minerva, as she motioned to Mollena.

"I'm Mollena, the technical expert of the Legion, and I'm going to explain all I've learned about these weapons, created by a warlike alien empire." She looked around at the men shaking their heads in disbelief. Undaunted, she went on to explain everything the Legion had learned about the mechadrones and the alien hardware.

"Despite the overwhelming nature of all this hardware, it does have flaws," added Mollena hopefully. "If bombarded with a trio of microwave frequencies, their shielding becomes weak enough for ballistic penetration. We of the Legion will carry tiny transmitters, as are attached to my bracelets. They emit the suppression waves, as well as a

destructive sonic burst. However, since there are so few of us in the Legion, your forces will do most of the work. As I speak, factories all over the world are modifying tanks with plasma shields, gold-plated bullets, and our new plasma-beam tube.”

“This is a sample plasma-beam tube,” announced Sunshi, holding the six-inch long device up for all to see. “When plugged into a focusing cradle, it can emit a powerful beam of electrons. Since the plasma filament is self-regenerating, it can be used a hundred times or more before it finally burns out.”

“This is very interesting, but we men can use this just as well as you wo... ” objected General Braddock.

“No man in this room, unless they are transgendered, can last more than minutes against this enemy!” warned Minerva. “They know how to tap into men's minds and cloud their senses. They have been manipulating men's minds for centuries from their orbiting space station. If you can't *concentrate* on this enemy, you can't *fight* them. The aliens have long known that women are nearly immune, so they have waged a reign of hatred against women for centuries.”

“Surely our minds can be shielded from such mind control!” asserted another man.

“Of course,” answered Minerva; “however, there is a catch. The mind-wave nullifying field is easy to generate, but it causes dramatic physical changes. Unless you want to spend the rest of your lives wearing dresses and high heels, we don't think many of you men will volunteer.”

“My men will face *any* danger!” asserted General Braddock without thinking through what he was saying. “And what about the space station if it exerts the claimed influence?”

“We have not forgotten the space station,” explained Minerva. “While the battle is underway here, a select few and I will travel to the space station.”

“How?” asked General Braddock. “We don't have any space craft capable of making such a trip!”

“But we will, soon,” announced Mollena. “But before we start questions and answers, I'd like to introduce our special guest, the world's foremost expert on the aliens, Dr. Harley Winslow.”

Dressed in his new gray pants with matching sports jacket, wearing a white turtle neck shirt instead of the shirt and tie he hated, Harley cautiously stepped up beside Minerva. “What happened to Susan; she was supposed to be here?” he wondered.

“She had an unexpected appointment and can't make it,” explained Minerva. “We are here to help you. The overhead projectors you requested are ready.”

Tension in the audience had already led to restlessness and soft crosstalk; then louder murmurs swept along, as everyone wondered about Harley. He was eccentric and unknown in regular military circles.

Harley placed transparencies of the two world hemispheres on the overhead projectors. “I have waited half my life for this moment. In a few hours, no one will ever call me crazy again! The ancient alien landing sites are well-known to me. I have visited them all, without any reimbursement of my expenses, might I point out. As you can

see, there's a little red dot in Death Valley, one near Roswell, and red dots in the Gobi Desert, near the Caspian Sea, in the Sahara Desert, in Western Australia, and Argentina. It is at these locations that I think they buried their robot hordes when their invasion failed last time.”

General Fontain was about to ask for questions, but order broke down, as everyone in the theater rushed to the stage. It was unusual to see so many, normally dignified military brass, rudely pushing and shoving each other to get a first glimpse of the hardware on display.

Bulldozers were busy pushing dirt up on the sides of the hastily constructed Quonset huts.

“We're on line,” announced General Fontain so she could be heard above the noise, watching one television screen after another spring to life. Sunshi stood at her side, silently watching. “Our command center is operational. We have ‘eyes’ throughout most of Death Valley. Observers, to your posts,” she commanded to her hand-picked squad of women NCO's.

“The First Armored Division is rolling into position,” announced one observer.

“The visitor center has been abandoned. It's parking lot is empty and covered with tumbleweeds. Someone forgot to close a screen door,” announced another.

“I only see one car, and it's on its way out,” added a third observer.

“My sector is also quiet,” began another observer. “Wait, there is some movement. There are animals, hundreds, maybe even *thousands* of animals. It could be all the animals in the park. They're migrating southward.”

“It is as before,” explained Sunshi, “as in the tales told to me by the shamen. The animals sense something is wrong, so they flee from the area. It will not be long before the enemy shows itself. I shall go and prepare the Legion for the attack.”

“Thank you,” said General Fontain, briefly gripping Sunshi's hands. “We will do our part!”

“It's hardly what I expected,” commented Mollena, once the ring tossed by Minerva had completed its task. What had been a yardful of aircraft wreckage had been transformed within moments into a dark, strange-looking object. It was about forty feet long and twelve feet wide, but it had no normal surface features, such as nacelles, fins, or meaningful shapes or contours. Instead, it was covered with irregular, somewhat prismatic projections and depressions that were reminiscent of the inside surface of a dichroic chamber. There was in fact, only one recognizable object on the entire spacecraft: an extra large plasma tube, securely bolted to its focusing cradle, at the topmost point of the hull.

Minerva glanced quickly back toward the cats watching from atop a storage shed; then, as she aimed a remote control device, the spacecraft lifted slightly from the ground. Extra bright slices of light thrust from both sides and pierced the late evening sky. The hull seemingly dissolved to create two doors, one on either side. A deep hum grew in force and made the perimeter fence vibrate, while warm, forceful wind sud-

denly blew across the landscape, driving wispy clouds by at high speed. In the clouds high above, lightning flashed, but no bolts struck the ground.

Using their great strength, Minerva and Mollena quickly loaded their cargo: several crates containing munitions, food, clothing, electronic gear, and pressure suits from NASA.

“Our pilots are here,” observed Minerva.

“The spacecraft is primed and ready to go,” added Mollena.

Two women, wearing gray flight uniforms, walked directly to Minerva. They were obviously entranced with the two superwomen. Finally, the tall blond spoke, “I’m Major Wilma Lawrence, and this is my associate, Captain Maria Channing.” She pointed to her companion, a shorter brunette. “General Fontain sent us, but she did not really say what we would be flying. I’ve never seen...”

“You will find the controls straightforward,” assured Mollena.

“The seats have automatic restraints, which should be friendly to female anatomy. But, it’s time, so we will all have to revert to our true form,” warned Minerva. “Once we gain altitude, we will change back.”

Mollena returned to being Molly, and Sheba again became Eliza. They stared at Minerva expectantly. They were both quite surprised to see Susan take Minerva’s place. Susan was wearing a figure-hugging black jumpsuit, which had a matching black belt, black boots, and thin black handbag.

“I never even suspected,” admitted Molly, who was wearing a black Transexual Menace sweatshirt. Her face was liberally covered with black makeup. The golden polish on her fingernails seemed out of place. “You look spectacular; you even had your hair cut and permed.”

“Never go into battle unprepared,” quipped Susan in response. “But seriously, we *all* look more like refugees from some James Bond movie!”

“Well, we’re certainly not the A-team; I didn’t bring my long earrings,” added Mollena dryly.

“I watch your program all the time,” said Eliza proudly, placing her hand on Susan’s shoulder. “And, even as Susan, you still look strong and beautiful!”

“Thank you,” Susan replied sincerely.

“Did you bring your equipment?” asked Molly, turning to face Susan.

“It’s all in my handbag: sonic pistol, electronic tool kit, and all the rest. No woman should be without this stuff! This is my alter-ego’s electromagnetic spectrometer attached to my belt. Come on, it’s time to board. We have to be underway before the battle begins,” commanded Susan with authority.

As Susan prepared to shut the door with the remote control, two of the cats, a brown tabby and reddish-white shorthair, bolted through the opening. They refused to leave the spacecraft.

Thinking of Tara, Susan commented, “There’s no time to evict them; let’s go!”

“It all seems straight forward,” commented Major Lawrence, straining to see the cats, who were resting behind the rear seats; “sort of a combination of military and commercial cockpits, though the trajectory screens and relative velocity indicators are quite different. The forward monitor does seem to be a bit small.”

“What should we name them?” asked Eliza. Her face tensed for a moment as the flexible restraint arms grasped her body; then she relaxed and smiled, realizing they were quite comfortable.

“The displays?” wondered Molly.

“No, no, the cats,” clarified Eliza.

“Buck and Flash,” suggested Molly, as she checked the plasma gun control system. “I bet they will not allow us to turn them over to check their gender.”

“Does *anyone* really understand all this?” asked Major Lawrence.

“Molly does somewhat. She’s a retired commercial pilot; before that she was in the Air Force,” explained Susan.

“In those days I looked much different, and went by the name Marvin,” said Molly in a distasteful tone. “I was scheduled for my final surgery tomorrow, but it will have to wait,” she sighed.

“Molly,” reminded Susan, “surgery is no longer necessary for transgendered males. Just use the mind-wave nullifier. There's one onboard.”

“Yes!” she replied with a broad smile. She wasted no time setting up the nullifier to irradiate herself.

“I know your pain,” responded Captain Channing, “because I am a lesbian. The military is not friendly to either you or me. After this mission, I plan to go public.”

Molly gave Major Lawrence a questioning glance. “She's a friend to both our causes,” added Captain Channing.

“I have to be,” explained Major Lawrence. “My husband and I have four children: a straight daughter, a gay son, a lesbian daughter, and a transgendered son. When the Lord picks you, She really goes all out!

“But enough talk. I think I’m ready. How are you doing, Maria?”

“The outer doors are shut... if you can call those doors. Turning on running lights. There's no engine RPM or trim to adjust,” replied Captain Channing.

“Dimming lights... oh, *that's* different,” remarked Major Lawrence, as the monitor screen expanded and engulfed most of the wall space. “Pull back on the throttle, aim upwards, and... my Lord, we're already into the stratosphere.”

“The target trajectory is on the first subscreen,” announced Molly. “Rendezvous is in less than three hours.”

The cats hissed in unison; then an explosion rocked the spaceship. An evaluation immediately appeared on the second subscreen.

“No damage,” observed Captain Channing. “Did we hit something?”

“No!” warned Susan; “we’re under attack by some kind of killer satellites. They’re about a foot in diameter, and are covered with thick antennae. Hundreds may be converging upon us!”

“We seem to be a wee bit faster,” observed Major Lawrence. “Maybe we can outrun them!”

“They will catch up with us at the space station!” warned Susan. “The station is surrounded by a force field that will require time to pass, because we’ll have to decipher the entry code.”

“I’ll try out this plasma gun,” announced Molly as she activated the weapon’s console. “I’ll set automatic targeting. Here they come. Firing!”

Silent flashes lighted space for miles in every direction, as satellite bombs were struck and exploded. The plasma gun seemed to be very accurate, as well as efficient.

“It’s working quite well, and the energy drain is minimal,” said Captain Channing, glancing at the third subscreen.

General Fontain watched from her command center, as tongues of plasma snaked back and forth through the air over the valley floor. High-altitude flares constantly exploded and drifted downward like some mad light show.

In the distance, a hover-chair exploded, engulfing a platoon of black mechadrones in blinding light. As soon as one monitor went dark, another lit up because of the flares or battlefield action.

“General!” announced a female aide as she burst in out of breath. “It’s General Braddock. He’s leading a personal platoon of ten of the latest MA-294 tanks on a direct attack!”

“The idiot! He was told the rules! Sergeant Taylor, get him on the radio. He *has* to turn back!” commanded General Fontain.

“He claims that they are using the mind-wave nullifiers. Those tanks do carry enough missiles...”

“This is Braddock,” came the reply over the radio. His voice had an unusual quality. “We are going to blast these alien contraptions to Kingdom Come!”

“Listen, General Braddock,” began General Fontain once she had been handed the microphone, “I am ordering you to cancel this operation! *I* am in charge!”

“We’ve got a lot of static, Dear. I can’t hear you. Braddock signing off! See you after the war.”

“He’s not listening,” confirmed Sergeant Taylor.

“I just can’t hit any more!” lamented Molly. “They must have some kind of reactive intelligence that allows them to predict my shots!”

“The station is in sight, but there are too many close satellites!” warned Susan. “Major, head for that asteroid and pull in close on the shadow side!”

“Will do! I think even Han Solo would be proud of *this* maneuver,” replied Major Lawrence, as she guided the ship very close to the large, slowly spinning, irregular chunk of rock. Within moments the distant Sun was lost from view.

“Here they come!” cried Molly, squeezing off more than fifty rapid shots. Many satellites exploded compliments of the plasma blasts, while others collided with the asteroid, seemingly unable to distinguish it from the ship.

“It's just like a shooting gallery,” remarked Eliza excitedly. “We got them! We got them!”

“Look! The remainder are regrouping,” observed Molly.

“Now we have to blast that small asteroid over there,” pointed Susan. “The ionized fragments will confuse the satellite bombs!”

“It'll put a big load on the plasma gun, but I think it can be done,” agreed Molly.

Major Lawrence did not wait for orders; she drove straight for the target asteroid, with several satellites in pursuit. “Moving to place target between us and the satellites. The window is... *now!*”

As Molly fired away at the asteroid, continually increasing the power of the plasma weapon, radiant fragments of rock flew everywhere. One satellite bomb struck the ship, but the others pursued glowing fragments of rock instead.

“Guess this is a residual man-thing,” commented Molly without breaking her concentration.

Unexpectedly, the plasma gun went dead.

“The filament failed to regenerate; we have to run for it!” yelled Molly.

“I'm accelerating, but I will have to put the brakes on, or we'll stray too far from our trajectory curve. How hard can we hit the force field?” asked Major Lawrence.

“I don't know,” replied Susan, “but there it is. This is the moment we *really* test our deodorants!” She pointed as the ellipsoidal object that was now rapidly growing in size. They could already clearly see the many antennae that covered its heavily-dimpled surface.

“There's another ship. It's docked at the space station,” observed Captain Channing. “I'd say it's about sixty feet long. It's shaped, well, it's shaped like the head of a really big Phillips screwdriver.”

“I have to start deceleration,” began Major Lawrence, carefully watching the blip, representing the ship, near the graphic curve. “We are almost there, almost back in line with the traj...”

The ship groaned as its deceleration sequence completed abruptly. The inertial damper and various restraints prevented damage to people and cargo. Even the two cats were unhurt.

“Only a slight pinch in the breasts,” commented Susan, gasping to catch her breath.

“Motive power shut down,” announced Major Lawrence, as she reached the controls, “but we are stuck to the force field on the wrong side!”

Susan looked toward Molly. Without any comment, they both moved to the console that controlled the fourth subscreen. Upon activation, a complex series of red curves appeared on the screen. A flat white line represented the field surrounding the ship's hull.

“All we have to do is adjust the parameters to modulate the white line to overlay the red curves,” said Molly confidently.

“You sound like you've done this before,” wondered Susan.

“No, but I've never had an incentive like a slew of killer satellites coming after me either,” Molly replied, pointing to the rear portion of the wraparound screen.

“Major, give us a little forward power, and brace for impacts!” commanded Susan.

“I've got a match on the first harmonic... now the second,” began Molly hopefully, “and the third harmonic should...”

An explosion jolted the ship. Two seconds later, another satellite hit with equal ferocity.

“That's it!” cried Molly.

“We're not moving,” lamented Susan.

“It's those damn explosions,” complained Molly; “they've caused the force field to generate ultrahigh harmonics. In a few seconds, they should subside.”

A moment later, Major Lawrence announced, “We're through. We did it!”

“But look at our power curve,” noted Captain Channing; “unless we refuel, we won't be able to get home!”

At first, only the American flags were visible above the swollen clouds of dust; then, one-by-one in an offset line, General Braddock's tanks emerged from the battlefield. Winding around and between craters and debris, the vehicles finally came to a halt outside General Fontain's headquarters. The General and two of her aides were waiting.

General Braddock stepped out of the lead tank. Stumbling for a moment, he approached General Fontain. “I feel strange, almost euphoric,” he said in a high alto voice. “I sound strange too, and I think I'm going to need a new uniform.”

“Sir,” complained one of his lieutenants, “I've done a quick examination. I don't think I'm a man anymore.” Sergeant Barnes says I look like a girl he used to date, and *he* looks like someone who'd be gorgeous in a dress. You did not fully exp...”

“My, you've never looked better,” said General Fontain, toying with her competitor. But what will your *wife* say!”

“This was *her* idea. It took a lot of sacrifice, but we whipped them,” Braddock bragged.

“Not quite; about twenty escaped. They won't get far,” assured General Fontain with a smile. As the rest of General Braddock's tank commandos assembled near him, it

was plain that each one had been completely transformed by the mind-wave nullifiers. *"This could get interesting, after they are all reclassified as women. Very interesting, indeed!"* she thought with a wicked smile.

"That ship is attached to a raised portion of the hull... some kind of docking port on the equatorial rim," noted Major Lawrence, as she steered past the alien ship, parallel to one of the deep grooves along its length axis.

"Why is it such a strange color?" wondered Eliza.

"Those are burn marks," replied Molly. "Perhaps they're battle scars, or else it gets hot while traveling through interstellar space."

"Another docking port coming up," announced Captain Channing, "but I don't see any kind of a door."

"The metal melts away after docking," explained Susan, "like the doors on our ship. Minerva did not know the code, however, so she designed another way."

"The fourth subscreen has already brought up the docking display," began Molly; "all you have to do bring us into contact at the designated place."

"But how do we get in?" asked Eliza.

"We burn our way in!" answered Susan.

Once the cutting ray had completed its job, the hull dissolved like liquid to create a door. Only a transparent force field now separated them from the inside of the space station. There was a final, impatient wait for the telemetry analysis of the interior.

"That's it!" said Captain Channing excitedly. "The air is breathable, though the oxygen content is only eleven percent; we'll need to use our oxygen supplements. Humidity is very low, so we'll need to take water to prevent dehydration. Fortunately, there are no unusual electronic or radiation fields. We lucked out; no space suits today. Even artificial gravity: about one point two Earth gravities!"

"Opening force field," announced Major Lawrence. A brief rush of pressurized air blew into the station, led by the cats Buck and Flash.

"It's safe to go in now," assured Molly, "just be sure to use your supplemental breather. The force field may be open, but it's still securely holding our ship to the side of the station. Follow me!"

"Whew, this air sure smells strange!" commented Eliza, as she tried to make sense of the room they had just entered.

"It's stale, which means that there hasn't been anyone here in a long time," explained Susan. "No lines, no seams, no decorations. They sure liked austerity."

The cats moved to blank wall and looked back expectantly. They softly mewed.

"Hey, cats; there's no door there!" cried Eliza.

"At least, if we knew where to go, we could blast our way through," complained Molly. "It's all bare, except for a couple of these decals shaped like fancy S's punctuated by dots."

Susan moved quickly to the nearest decal. Thinking of Ayleborne back in the Pyramid of Minerva, she pressed the figure squarely. Several feet of wall dissolved to reveal a colorful, floating oblong visual display, below which was located a crystalline control panel.

Susan paused to study the controls. She noticed the perplexed looks on the faces of her comrades. "To open the door," she began, looking toward another section of wall, "you run your hand sideways like this." The wall in front of the cats dissolved to create a doorway. The doorway lead to a pantry-like room, which in turn lead to a station corridor.

"How?" wondered Molly, placing her hand on Susan's shoulder.

"It pays to have a nerdy archaeologist alter-ego," replied Susan, walking toward the door.

With sonic pistol drawn, Eliza followed the cats through the door. Seconds later, she returned carrying a weapon that was made of several small transparent rods surrounding a much larger, central white rod.

"There's a whole wall of these," she commented. "But how does it work?"

"First of all," explained Molly, wondering for a moment if she heard a cat hissing. "I think you point it the other way! Seems to be some phased, multi-tube laser gun. Let's see; the controls can't be *too* difficult. Here it is. Turn it on, and the outer tubes glow red. Pull this slide, and the color gradually changes to blue, a higher power setting. Aim at that robot, and press this trigger."

Several parallel beams, each one creating a high-pitched *pop*, shot from the weapon, striking a dark blue mechadrone that had just appeared in the doorway. The beams tore and fractured the robot. Once its internal mechanisms shorted out, it melted down to an amorphous blob.

"I never noticed the awful smell they make," remarked Susan, as she jumped over the smoking remains of the robot; then she returned with several more laser rifles. She promptly handed them out, before stepping into their ship. Moments later, she emerged wearing a backpack filled with explosive charges.

"Maria and I will stay to protect the ship," offered Major Lawrence.

Stepping from the ship with a filled back pack, Molly shook her head in response.

"A bad idea," agreed Susan. "We have spray paint to mark our path, but we want to take the other ship, if at all possible."

Molly paused to place an explosive charge on the control panel, then activate it. It would be detonated by a special radio frequency.

Eliza was the first one to reach the corridor. Instantly, she dropped to her stomach and fired. "Scratch two more robots!" she shouted. "Eliza the commando strikes again!"

"Careful," warned Susan, helping Eliza to her feet; "none of us have any special powers here. Here are some more power packs for your weapon." "Now that we've all assembled here, it's time to move on," urged Molly. "I've got a bad feeling that every

one of those things on the station is headed our way.” Then she turned to Susan, “Which way, Commander?”

Susan paused to use the spectrometer; then she pointed in the direction the two destroyed robots had just come from. The cats were waiting for them. “We want to go where power readings are most intense. Just follow those cats!”

“This way!” urged Susan as they entered an obliquely angled side corridor. “It's so strange, without any seams, like it was cut or cast this way, but why the curvature?”

“It's a spiral,” observed Molly, placing another explosive charge at the junction. “There must be arrays of these connecting the inner chambers to the outer hub...” She did not finish her next sentence, as she raised her rifle and helped the others blast an approaching group of mechadrones.

“Due to the curvature, they can't see any better than we,” remarked Susan, waving the others to follow her deeper into the station, before bold Eliza and the cats moved out of sight.

“There's light ahead, really *bright* light!” yelled Eliza.

When the others caught up to Eliza, they saw her standing in a wide circular inner corridor, touching a glowing, translucent wall. She looked back at them curiously, with a questioning look in her face.

“I think it's some kind of biosphere,” judged Molly upon inspection. “That inside coating appears to be moisture. I wonder how we...”

Once again, Molly was interrupted by the appearance of more mechadrones. This time, it was a group of reds riding in sedan chairs. Once they had destroyed the leaders, the five women fled down the inner corridor in the opposite direction. As usual, the two cats were still several paces ahead of them.

Ahead, two flashes of light reflected off the dull corridor wall. There was an uneasy silence.

“Something happened to the cats,” announced Susan. “Buck and Flash are gone!”

“I see a doorway ahead!” yelled Eliza. “See the light? Oh my,” she uttered weakly, stopping in her tracks. She had discovered two desiccated corpses, each clad in clothing reminiscent of ancient Egypt.

“Who were they?” wondered Molly.

“Ladies,” began Susan, “these are two of our predecessors. A thousand years ago, they helped defeat the aliens on Earth; then they were transported to this station. Stripped of their powers, they were murdered by those robots. I hear voices!” she cried, racing toward the doorway.

“More robots on the way!” warned Eliza, as the five of them paused at a circular, glowing portal.

“I think it's a weak energy barrier,” said Molly, as she thrust an arm into the field. “It tingles, but it's bearable. Come on,” she urged, as she left the corridor. The others followed.

Eliza was the last through the portal. She turned and expectantly pointed her weapon. "They're not coming through!"

"Maybe they can't pass the barrier. What a strange garden," remarked Captain Channing, turning through a full circle. "It's a botanist's paradise, though it could use some pruning. And we don't need supplemental air!" she added, removing her nose piece. "I've been madly dashing about too much, because I could swear I just saw a cat that did not come with us!"

Susan dropped her weapon and ran madly through the foliage toward the center of the biosphere. She leaped into Roger's arms. "How are the others?" she asked without relaxing her grip his neck.

"We are all alive, Roger, Manohar, and Tammi," said Melanie, placing a hand of Susan's shoulder. "I never dreamed I would be so glad to see you, you know. Do you have water? It's not easy to lick the dew off the foliage."

"Here, drink all you want, and have a candy bar. My, your beard has really grown," she commented, as Roger set her back on her feet.

"I never got around to having it removed," he admitted after taking a long drink himself. "You felt unusually heavy."

"It's the higher gravity, and the explosives in my backpack, to destroy the station's central control unit with."

"It's there," pointed Tammi toward a tall, pulsating column, as Molly gave her water, "but it is shielded by an electronic barrier. It also acts like an electronic fog, which makes the whole thing nearly invisible a few feet away." Susan noticed that she held a kitten in her other arm.

"Well, I'll just blast my way through," threatened Eliza.

"No!" warned Susan, as Eliza's shots were deflected. " Hunt for the nearest S-symbol! My, there *are* endless cats!"

"There's more than a hundred of them, all vegetarians, apparently," explained Tammi, "and they keep giving us these *glances*."

"I found an access port!" shouted Molly from the other side of the column.

A carefully aimed pulse from one of the alien lasers fractured the glass-like cover of the switch. As Susan pressed the S-shaped symbol, a portion of the floor beneath them moved upwards so rapidly, pushing its cover of foliage aside, that Susan and Molly scrambled to jump clear of an emerging sculpture-like metallic structure.

As soon as the motion stopped, the metallic cover dissolved away like some kind of molecular fog, revealing the familiar crystal control panel, complete with floating viewscreen.

"We would never have gotten this far without you," sighed Roger. "Even so, who can figure this out?"

"Susan has the touch!" assured Molly.

"I hope," replied Susan, activating the display with a sweeping motion of her right hand. Taking a nervous gulp of air, she paused to look around. All eyes were upon her, including those of more than a hundred cats.

A three-dimensional image of the space station appeared. It was surrounded by scores of alien symbols. Not knowing where to start, Susan swept her hands over the controls several times. A discontinuous, enlarged schematic of the central section of the station appeared. It was their vicinity, but the cross-sectional view was wrong. As Susan tilted her hand, Molly cried, "That's it! But what do we do now?"

"We learn the symbol language," sighed Susan. "If only Minerva were here! I'll start with the flashing image of the control column." She was aware that, to her side, Molly was placing the last explosive charge and setting up the detonation timer.

A menu of more symbols appeared. Susan picked one; then she searched for an operation. "What happens if I do this? Oops!" she cried, slapping her hands together, as the alien ship detached and drifted from the space station.

"That one near the middle looks like a transmitter of some kind." suggested Roger.

When Susan picked the symbol, flashing lines formed between the station and a distant planet. "You're right," acknowledged Susan; "we've located the meson generator. Now, if I can apply closure... "

Bright strobe lights began to flash, accompanied by an alarm sound consisting of two notes: a very low sound like a fog horn and a raspy high-pitched sound.

"I see robots congregating beyond the biosphere!" warned Eliza.

"If only we could transform!" lamented Roger. "I just tried again, but no luck. I thought that with the meson field gone... "

"I wonder;" said Susan. Pausing, she thought, "*what happens if I give a resolute 'Sallaka'?*" The flash of light from the transformation reflected off the pulsating column.

"Oh, heaven be praised!" cried Eliza, giving Minerva a big hug. Everyone was upbeat; despairing faces changed to smiling faces. Even the cats were visibly happier, as they expectantly formed a tighter circle with Minerva at the center.

"Apparently, the meson beam was suppressing my powers of transformation," explained Minerva. "Now, it is time for me to crack this symbol language. I think I've figured out the force field." With a motion of her hand, it expanded outward, causing hundreds of flashes as killer satellites were destroyed. With another motion, the force field collapsed entirely. It was shut down. Minerva did not pause; she rapidly tested hundreds of symbol combinations.

"Watch," she said, as a luminous cylinder of energy materialized next to the control panel. "Now I move this symbol to the alien ship. That's it; it's flashing. I've set up a transporter link. We're leaving! Molly, set the detonator!"

There were many puzzled expressions, until Buck and Flash began took the lead of a long procession of cats. Following some unknown instinct, in turn, each feline entered the field and silently vanished, while the people watched in awe. Soon, only cats carrying kittens were left; then they too were gone.

"I've never seen such obedient cats!" remarked Tammi. "But is it safe? Okay, I'll be the guinea pig!" said Tammi, stepping into the field, while still cradling the kitten. "I'm going to see how well th..." Her voice seemed to vanish with her; then, much like a distant echo, there came, "It's a safe path to the bridge!".

"Hurry!" urged Minerva. "I have to keep refreshing the transporter connection!" One by one, she waved each of those remaining through the shimmering portal, until only she and Molly were left.

"It blows in twenty minutes!" warned Molly moments before she was transported away. Pointing at the center of the control column, she added, "There are several modules containing memory chips. The one in the center, full of red chips, must be the master, but the one near the top with the green chips could be the most interesting. It lit up while you were going over the schematic, so I think it is their help and information storage!"

After Molly vanished, Minerva paused at the transporter field, while her mind sorted all the possibilities at high speed. Quickly, she pulled a ring from her headband and tossed it into the field. As the ring pulsed in synchronization, acting as a safety stabilizer, Minerva pushed forward into the protective field around the control column. Radiant flashes of light covered her body. Though it was painless for her, it was much like entering electrified gelatin. It took her a split second to find the release. Moments later, she emerged from the force field with the memory array.

The timer was closing on the nineteen minute mark when she entered the transporter field to the alien ship. Her image vanished as the first mechadrone entered the biosphere.

Minerva avoided stepping on any cats as she arrived on the cramped bridge of the alien ship. A bright flash of light followed the collapse of the transporter field, leaving the room nearly dark, illuminated only by the light from the large forward viewscreen.

"Good, you're here; I can't get any response from these controls," lamented Molly with a hint of exasperation, as she struggled to maneuver around the three extra-large-size seats. "If we don't move soon, we could get a nasty jolt when the station explodes!"

"Every time we touch something, this blue dot on the control panel flashes!" observed Major Lawrence from the far left seat. "I think it's getting stuffy in here, too!"

Seeing a slot next to the blue dot, Minerva reached to her belt to remove the blue microchip key she had taken from the ship's owner. Once she figured out the correct orientation, she pushed the key into its slot. Light as bright as day flooded the bridge, and welcome fresh air blew forth from nearby vents. An AFT viewscreen appeared above the forward viewscreen, and a nearly transparent, green-blue holographic image appeared in the space in front of the viewscreen. It was a three-dimensional representation of the spaceship and the space around it.

"Maria, I think I've got this thing figured out!" announced Major Lawrence. Once Maria was seated beside her, Major Lawrence chose one of two tall levers on the steering assembly in front of her. When she pulled back on it, the ship began to move. They

were slowly pulling away from the space station, which was now only visible in the AFT viewscreen.

“What does the other lever do?” wondered Captain Channing.

Holding the first the first lever with her right hand, Major Lawrence gently pulled on the other with her left hand. The space station quickly vanished from sight.

“The more I pull this lever, the higher these feather-like stalks rise from the grooves,” observed Major Lawrence, “and the faster we go. It must be some kind of warp generator, which probably reaches maximum effect when the stalks are fully extended.”

“Detonation in twenty seconds!” Molly reminded. “It's time to turn toward home!” She continued her countdown.

Major Lawrence looked toward Minerva, who replied, “Do it while I check the control system for any kind of transponder or remote control.”

“One... zero!” said Molly finally.

Major Lawrence silently counted the time it took for the light from the explosion to reach them. Nearly six seconds later, the bright flash of light appeared and then quickly faded. Increased magnification showed nothing at the station's coordinates. Passage through the debris field was eerie, due to the way it reflected the light of the distant sun. Since there was nothing significant left, Major Channing continued on without stopping. The crew was relieved that they were actually on their way home.

Molly was especially happy, realizing she was no longer a man. Now her body matched her mind.

There was no word for the elevated emotions Susan felt as she strode down the aisle with Roger. Minerva was on vacation; this was Susan's day, but it was hard to forget the event-filled past two months. She wore a unique, light pink dress of a design that hinted of ancient times. Roger wore a white tuxedo, which he despised, as a one-time concession to her. She knew that he would rather have worn a dress to the wedding, and she had promised that one day he would.

This wedding was very non-traditional. There were no youthful attendants. Though gender-blurring had been on the rise ever since the space station had been destroyed, Susan had planned hard to make sure it would *not* be a theme at her wedding to Roger. Halfway to the altar, they were met by their mothers, who would escort them the rest of the way. Eliza was there as support for Susan, while Molly was Roger's “best man”. Most people present, especially Mrs. Cavendish, had no idea why Roger had made such a choice. Harriet was so caught up in everything that she had even forgotten that Susan was the unexpected daughter in her life. Most of the guests had not even noticed that they were in a gay church, despite the fact that the Reverend Paul Adams was a well-known activist.

Susan's concentration was poor. She nodded and said “yes” on cue. As they exchanged rings and embraced, she noticed several cats resting on the back choir seats. They were watching intently. Moments later, the happy couple was surrounded by friends and celebrants.

"I get to kiss the groom," announced Marilyn Haynes. As she hugged Susan, she handed her an envelope and added, "If I had my reporter hat on, I would say your guest list is most unusual. Maybe you'll explain it to me someday... off the record, of course."

A quick peek inside the envelope revealed a \$25,000 bonus check and an offer of a staff position at Channel Four News. "*Nice, but I expect I will soon get an offer from a station in Tucson!*"

Melody cut a piece of cake for Susan, while Trevor did the same for Roger. As Susan and Roger exchanged bits of cake, Melanie took the first pictures. Tammi took a picture with her camera; then called out, "Molly, Dawn, Eliza, and Melanie... let's get a group picture. That's a smashing dress, Dawn. It almost upstages Susan's outfit. Marilyn, would you take our picture?"

"Certainly," replied Marilyn. "I understand the bride and groom will soon be leaving for Bermuda."

"We've got a room at a fancy big cottage," explained Susan. "Its name's a secret!"

As soon as they set their luggage down, Susan began searching the room. She looked under the bed and under the dresser; then she went through the closet.

"Is there something wrong, Darling?" puzzled Roger.

"This is our honeymoon. I don't want any snoopy cats. For a change, Tara can mind her own business!"

"Relax," he urged as he tenderly embraced and kissed her. "Let's retire. There are no cats here, and we're both tired."

"Okay," she replied with a gleam in her eye.

"You look pensive," remarked Roger, when she returned from the bathroom.

"I have a special gift for you, Roger dear," she began, "but I'm hesitant about giving it to you."

"Something that would come between us?" he asked.

"Not if it is used wisely," she admitted, "but I have no guarantee of that."

"What are we talking about?" wondered Roger, sitting up at the edge of the bed.

"Well, since *I* know how important it is to be the woman *I* was always meant to be, I designed this for you," she explained, while going to her suitcase. She reached in and pulled out a flaming red wig.

"It's nice, but I already have several wigs," he admitted.

"Not like *this* one," she said emphatically; "this one will take our relationship to unexplored heights. If you put this wig on, you will *become* the woman of your dreams! You can become my girlfriend or even my wife, if I should change back to Bill! I might be reluctant, though, considering that being a sexually active woman is better than I ever imagined it would be!"

"Wow! Susan darling, I really don't know what to say. It's a fantastic gift. Hey, maybe *I'll* get to wear a white wedding dress, and *you'll* have to suffer the tux!"

Susan scowled for a moment, but once back under the covers, in Roger's embrace, she added, "I don't know exactly how we will work this out. As a wife, I expect you to be the man I married, but as a transgendered person, I expect you to be your alternate gender part of the time."

At that point, they lost interest in the line of conversation. They never even noticed the dark feline outline, on the outside sill beyond the window blinds, bathed in the light of the moon.