

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.