

MUTATED KLANTHIS

NONONO!

I'M SICK OF CORFLU
COVERS!!



I'LL GET
YOU FOR
THIS!

WHO
CARES?

BS79

A Faan Fiction Novelette

NUMBER

7

MUTATED KLANTH

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W H A T H A T H G O N E T H B E F O R E T H

For the benefit of new readers we remind you that back in July 1978, Kenneth P. Gale was stricken with a mysterious affliction that left him comatose, clinging to life by a mere thread. But Ken's fannish energy force had been accidentally transferred to his little clay statue of Corflu, his dauntless all-purpose mascot and alter ego. The fannish energy animated the statuette, and along with his newly-acquired sentience, Corflu had an unlimited pipeline into the fannish energy flow, which gave him great power, including enormous strength, mind over matter and the power of teleportation -- with which he promptly deposited the entire (then-) current roster of INTERLAC into Ken's apartment, Fan Central Station. Corflu explained to the baffled and bemused mass of fen that a mysterious aggressor had stripped Ken of his fannish energy and that the rest of the membership was in immediate danger of being hit next. He proposed that the INTERLAC members break into teams, devise various projects that would generate substantial quantities of fannish energy which Corflu could rechannel into Ken's very fiber of being and thusly return him to the land of the so-called living. In the meantime, he urged, they would do well to track down this faceless enemy that seemingly wished to whup them out of existence.

For a time, this prescribed course of action was followed to the letter, but it gradually became apparent that not all was well in Corflu's deranged plaster psyche. He seemed emotionally detached, strangely laconic and given to long periods of sulking silently on Ken's coffeetable. After a handful of "fannish labors" were completed, the festering suspicion in many LACKers' minds rapidly developed into an outright distrust. The doubt was fueled every step of the way by Corflu's irrational behavior, and when a model of Zerferman, Jay Zilber's mascot, and most of Ken's furniture were briefly animated, too, suspicion and confusion incremented geometrically.

It was then that things went from basically weird to definitely bizarre. Corflu had previously teleported INTERLAC members in teams to Ken's Fan Central Station expressly for the purpose of

performing "fannish labors", but now he was teleporting them across the country without rhyme nor reason. Harry Broertjes found a flock of members in his Fort Lauderdale apartment; Mike Flynn was transported from Washington to the site of a sculpture in Greenwich Village known to some as the Cosmic Cube, inside which Flynn discovered that Corflu, now mysteriously weakened and powerless, had been imprisoned. And from then on, the members of INTERLAC had begun to either disappear or become inaccessible by phone....indeed, the entire country's phone service was severely disrupted, but even after service was resumed, fannish phones remained out of order. And to top it off, Ken awoke from his coma and stumbled off in a delerious stupor.

As fen and pro alike tried to make sense of what was going on, the situation grew worse. Wherever Corflu appeared, INTERLAC members disappeared. And those who disappeared found themselves floating in a strange, purple fourth-dimensional void. Corflu appeared in various fannish centers of America, and only the Colorado members realized in time that there was a correlation between his appearances and their comrades' disappearances. At that point they decided to split up and avoid their usual fannish connections...especially telephones, which seemed to be inextricably linked with the disappearances. Rick Foster made a last desperate effort to contact remaining members through the U.S. mail, and had succeeded in passing on word of his discovery to a few lucky ones who remained.

But it was Ken Gale, in constant telepathic contact with Corflu, who knew what was really going on. By infiltrating the phone company office where he had once been an employee, he breached the telephone service disruptions and possible taps, and spread word of his knowledge to Harry Broertjes (who in turn passed it on to Mike Flynn), Mike Valerio, and Jim Chadwick, the few remaining members. But in the process, Ken was captured by N.Y. Bell Security Force...

...and that's what hath goneth beforeth, over the last year. Which brings to July 1979, and what ith happeningth noweth...

MUTATED KLANTH/Chapter Sixteen

STARRING...*Mike Flynn*...*Mike Valerio*...*Scott Sherman*...
Jim Chadwick...*Steve Cohen*...*and a host of others*

The splitting headache was eight years overdue. Mike Flynn cursed under his breath as he turned the Floydmobile into Herschell Street and pulled into a parking space. The trip from Key Hall in Washington to the old familiar neighborhood in the Bronx was a bitch of a five-hour drive, especially when compounded by the throbbing in his temples. Probably a basic tension headache -- this was, after all, pretty nearly the last time he'd have to make this drive -- certainly in Door-Bashed-In Floyd, the car he'd acquired 4 years earlier -- what with graduation now recent history. It was a weird feeling. Not quite through with Washington D.C. since he'd be working there this summer, but it was still weird. A lot of things has been pretty weird over the past few months, though.

But no weirder than finding Jim Chadwick sitting out on the front steps of 1354 Herschell Street, waiting for him.

"Miggle...?"

"Chadwick...? Whatcha doing here? Gimme a hand with this bag, willya?"

Chadwick scrambled over to the parked Floydmobile as Flynn started to unpack. "You know there's only about ten of us left?"

"Christ."

"Some of the Massachusetts people, most of the Coloradoans. Probably Ray Chan, but nobody knows for sure. If he did respond to Foster's letter, it's still tied up in overseas mail."

"Swell. Whoah, grab this -- the bottom's falling out!"

Chadwick caught it and lugged the box full of mundane and fannish miscellanea onto the steps. Flynn followed with an even larger one, bulging at the seams from countless clippings, posters, crudsheets, notes, photos, books, and apazines.

"Soon as we finish unloading the car, I'm gonna have to call Foster at 'Mr. Steak'. Should be safe as long as I call from...uh...maybe the Salton building where my mom works. It's just three blocks away."

"I think you'd better call Scott Sherman, too. I've got the number of the main desk at his dorm. Word is, he wants to put a full-page ad in The Buyer's Guide to alert mainstream fandom to what's happened to us."

"Has anyone...", Flynn struggled with the keys, balancing the box precariously on his knee until the door swung open.... "Has anyone even thought to call some of the waitlisters?"

Jim stared blankly. "Dunno if Foster even tried to contact them by mail. I assume the West Coast waitlisters know the story by word of mouth. But the New York grapevine is...well...just you and me, Miggle. There's just nobody left to spread the word."

"Yeah...figures." Flynn had a vision of fifty INTERLAC members, their eyes glazed over like Ken's had been while he was still an accounted-for comatose body. Maybe they were being stored in a meat freezer or being dissolved in lime pits. Or hidden under the Hackensack Meadowlands right next to Jimmy Hoffa. Or in the Cosmic Cube sculpture like Harry said...?

A chill went down his spine. "Look, I'll go make those calls right now. You wanna sit tight here? I'll just be fifteen or twenty minutes or so."

Jim shrugged.

"Okay. Prolly not much in the fridge but help yourself. Maybe bring in a couple more bags from the car if you feel like being useful." Flynn trotted out the door again, and down the steps, muttering under his breath... "A Buyer's Guide ad? Christ in Hackensack..."

"Mike," Rick Foster choked, "You probably shouldn't have called me, not even here. It's not safe --"

"Had to take the chance," Flynn interrupted. "We've got to come up with some sort of rational explanation for all this, while there's still enough of us left to fight back."

"Nothing's been logical or rational about this for months. And yet...there must be something...some missing piece of the puzzle that would bring it all into perspective."

"Look, Foster, I don't know where to start. I mean, I was under the impression that, for no apparent reason, Corflu teleported himself -- or got himself teleported into -- the Cosmic Cube sculpture in the Village last December. I was playing Twenty Questions with him tapping back and forth, and we got absolutely nowhere. I still don't know why he was in there, or why he teleported me -- or got me teleported -- out there when he did. Now you say that he's been running around the country since then, tapping our phones and is in fact therefore personally responsible for everyone in INTERLAC disappearing off the face of the earth and disconnecting their phone service to boot. I can't...deal with this...!"

"You know, Miggle, you'd almost think there were two Corflus. Have you been to the Cube since January?"

"Aw, c'mon Rick! You're not trying to tell me that one Corflu is still in the Cube and another is running around zapping people, are you?" Flynn paused. "If it didn't almost sound possible, I'd have to --" Flynn paused again as it began to sink in. "Oh, my..."

"What? You got a handle on something, Mig?"

"Look. You got Corflu-1. The original, the one who was animated when Ken lost his fannish energy. Starts us out on this project to generate fannish energy. No big deal..."

"Suddenly his M.O. changes. He starts acting really bizarre. He forgets about the thing with Ken, becomes completely irrational and illogical. Corflu-2."

"What?"

"A bogus Corflu. Substituted somewhere along the line by that goddam evil force that the original Corflu kept alluding to."

"So could Corflu-1 have been imprisoned in the Cosmic Cube by Corflu-2?"

"It's more than possible. It's the only thing that makes sense in this whole mess. Corflu-1 must have been stuck in the Cube all these months...and we never had any reason to suspect...Look, I'm gonna take Floyd down to the Village and see what's tapping. I think we're onto something. And I'd better cut this short just in case



this phone call is being tapped by our mythical evil force somehow. I left Chadwick alone back at my house, and he'll prolly want to come along, too. We're gonna beat this thing yet, Rick."

clik bzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

"Foster? Hey Rick, you there?"

clik clik clik bzzzzzzzzzzzz

O shit. Flynn clenched his teeth, hung up and dialed the number at Mr. Steak again. He hoped that he'd been cut off accidentally by Salton's switchboard operator, though he knew too well what had really happened.

The phone rang on the other end of the line, but it was a different ring this time. This was followed by another series of sound effects as his call was rerouted through microprocessors in Bell Telephone computers all over the country. Finally....dead silence. Not even a recording. Flynn hung up...

...and panicked. He'd just given away Chadwick's location over the phone.

Mike Flynn ran. Paranoia was always a good way to stimulate the adrenalin. But genuine fear worked even better. Please don't let it be too late...

It was too late. The front door was still propped open when he stopped, near exhaustion, in front of the gate. Jim Chadwick had evidently been carrying in some of the boxes and set one down in front of the door to hold it open. Hallway was empty, kitchen door wide open. Phone off the hook, signs of a struggle. Most of the magazines, flatware, and knick-knacks on the kitchen table were scattered about the room on the floor -- the table itself had been pushed over. Jim Chadwick was nowhere to be found.

"Oh hell," he said, returning the table to its upright position. "Mom'll kill me."

Kee-rist, he didn't even remember New York anymore.

Mike Flynn stood in the center of Astor Place. It was nearly midnight, just a day since he'd collected his BBA from George Washington University. He was looking forward to a week or so of relative inactivity before taking up his search for Real Employment.

Instead he was babysitting a cubic monstrosity in Greenwich Village. "The Cosmic Cube," as his former fellow New Yorkers called it. Absolutely stupid, he thought. Stupid. Dumb.

Then he reminded himself that it wasn't as stupid as it had once seemed. After all, since Ken Gale's disappearance, nothing had been quite right in INTERLAC. At first he'd thought, well, maybe it was just a clever practical joke on Ken's part, even after seeing the supposedly comatose body of Ken Gale in the Fan Central bathroom. But Flynn had himself been whisked by Corflu's powers of teleportation from Eastern Flight 484 on December '4, 1978, and it was then that he was convinced that things were on the up-and-up.

That was the first time that he'd been to the Cube. Angry, in frustration, he began to thwack it resoundingly, only to discover it thwacked back.

Which sort of brought him full circle. That was the first weekend that INTERLACKers began to disappear wholesale. Almost before he could turn around, he'd gotten letters noting the disappearance of...hell, almost everyone was gone. Chadwick had told him that. Chadwick was gone.

He'd risked another phone call to Valerio earlier in the day. What a royal pain that was, too -- getting Mike's schedule from the Registrar's Office of the Podunk University he attended, then tracking him down to the student center. (But even if his home phone were operational, he didn't dare use it now.) Valerio sounded grumpy, but promised he'd come. Valerio always sounded grumpy -- he'd be no fun if he didn't.

But that phone call could mean disaster. Assuming that the second Corflu had the ability to follow the conversations of the INTERLACKers -- although Flynn hadn't yet exactly figured out quite how -- then he knew that Mike Valerio and whoever was left in Boston were on their way down. Which meant that...well, if the call had been placed at four, giving Mike two hours to get his shit together and pick up whoever he could find and given that the trip from Boston to New York was a little under five hours -- well, that meant Mike was over an hour late.

At one, Flynn figured, he'd have to give up.

"Mike, did you really need that pizza?"

Valerio glared at Scott Sherman, briefly noting Sherman was in the world famous Death Seat of the Blue Bitch, and then depressed the accelerator a little more. Eighty would be fine for a stretch.

"Scott," Mike began... "Scott, okay, we barely got our asses out of the fire this time, but we're making it now. We can have this thing into the City in ten minutes."

Steve Cohen drew his head from his hands and asked, "But isn't New York at least a half hour from Greenwich?"

"Not," smiled Valerio, "if I keep doing 80."

"Well," Cohen sniffed, "if you hadn't wanted that pizza, Corflu'd never have traced us. Well, we got away."

At that very instant the wailing of a siren dopplered into their perceptions.

"Aw shit," Valerio said as he pulled over to the side of the road. "That doesn't have a green light, does it? It's not Corflu, I mean."

Cohen looked through the rear window. "Nope."

"Shit."

"Hello, is this the Triple-A Welding Company? Oh yeh? You too!" Flynn slammed the telephone down.

"Damn uppity people. How'm I supposed to know that the guy's office is in his house. Shhheessh. Lessee...Acme...Anderson...Apex Welding Company...open 24 hours."

Flynn's fingers darted around the pay phone dial. One ring.

"Hello?"

"Um, hi. Um, my name is Mike Flynn and...um, you are um, open, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you do emergency work?"

"What kinda emergency is this?"

"Um...I have a couple of friends of mine and um, they're uh, trapped, and I think they'll need to be cut out."

"Twenty bucks an hour."

Flynn patted his wallet. There was fifty dollars in graduation money in it, provided he didn't get mugged on the way back -- and also providing parking Floyd wouldn't cost more than thirty dollars.

"No problem."

"Whatcher address?"

Flynn gave the location of the building across from the Cosmic Cube and hung up. Where the fuck was Valerio?

"Is Manhattan on the Deegan or the Cross Bronx?"

"Are you serious, Valerio?"

"Quick, here's an exit for Bartow Avenue."

"Don't get off. I don't recognize that."

"Where do I get off?"

"That's a good question," Cohen chided.

"Shaddup."

"There should be a sign for one of the bridges soon."

"Wait -- there's one. Throg's Neck Bridge."

"That goes to Manhattan."

"Does it?"

"We'll never know. You just missed the exit."

"Mike," Cohen asked, "is this the first time you've driven to New York?"

Valerio nodded.

"Why didn't you tell us that," Sherman grimaced.

"Fershlugginer signs," grumped Valerio.

The waitlisters!

Flynn ran back across the street to the phone booth, and dialed information for Nancy Northcott's telephone number. She was number

one on the list, and had dropped him a note during the semester which he'd been too busy to answer.

A sleepy voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, is Nancy there?"

"Speaking," she yawned.

"Hi, Nancy, this is Mike Flynn. What are you doing right now?"

"Mike Flynn? Wait. What kind of question is that at one in the morning? I'm still a law student, you know. School's not out for another two weeks. I'm sleeping."

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"Well..."

"I wouldn't've if it weren't important. But we need all the help we can -- it may be all the help I can get. I think I'm the last INTERLACKer. I can't find Foster, and Chadwick's disappeared and Gale's gone and I don't know what's happened to Harry..."

"Wait. Are you serious?"

"'Course I'm serious. You think I make a habit of calling people I've never talked to at one in the morning just for the hell of it?"

"Well, you do know Strick..."

"Strick's not that weird..." he began. But then he realized the implications that had and dropped the line of questioning. He needed this woman's help.

"Can you come to New York?"

"New York?"

"Sure, you've heard of it. Big Apple, kinda seedy..."

"Can't come there. I've got school."

Flynn was about to ask her what kind of a INTERLACKer she thought she was going to be, then thought better of it. "Well, why don't you call the waitlisters? You start, and you can each keep going. Get a list of everyone."

"At one in the morning?"

"This is an emergency. Just call 'em."

"What do I tell them?"

"Tell them the truth." Flynn looked up and saw a truck marked Apex Welding Company approaching the Cube. "I gotta go, Nancy. I'll see you tomorrow." Flynn hung up. In Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Nancy Northcott looked dazedly at her phone with some confusion for several moments before she sighed and went into the other room for a copy of the Legion Bulletin.

Flynn hailed the truck driver. "Yo'!" he cried in the standard New York greeting. "Over here." A gruff man of about forty with a ruddy complexion and three day's growth of whiskers caught his eye and pulled the truck to a halt just in front of the Cube. "Huh?" was his retort.

"I said 'over here.' I'm the one who called. Let me show you what I want you to do."

The driver took his hands from the wheel and made a 'Why Me' gesture toward the heavens, but walked toward Flynn in spite of himself.

"See this Cube?"

"Cube?"

"Yeah. Right here. Don't touch it."

The driver looked at the sculpture nervously. "Why not?"

"My friends are trapped in it."

The driver closed his eyes. It didn't work. When he opened them again, Flynn was still there.

"You don't believe me," Flynn said, disappointed.

"You could say that."

"Here, let me prove it to you." Flynn ambled over to the Cube and began to pound upon it. Three short, three long, three short. He hoped like hell that he was right...in his rush to start, he'd forgotten to check his information. What if what Harry had told him was no longer true?

KNOCK.

"Corflu, is that you? Answer with one if yes, two if no."

KNOCK.

"Corflu, do you know where Harry is?"

KNOCK.

"Do you know where Ken is?"

Pause.

KNOCK.

"Do you know where any other INTERLACKers are besides me?"

KNOCK.

"Are they in there with you?"

KNOCK.

Flynn turned. "See?" Inwardly he sighed, and his stomach knotted tighter at the same time.

The man from the welding company began to pace. "This is City property."

"It belongs to someone, anyway, that's a fact "

"I can't go cutting through City property."

"Sure you can."

"Nope."

"How'm I supposed to get them out?" A sympathetic knock came from the Cube.

"Well, I don't know. How'd you get them in?"

"Teleportation."

"Huh?" It figured.

"Can I rent the equipment?"

"Do you know how to use it?"

"I can learn."

"It'll cost another twenty an hour."

Flynn swallowed hard. Hell, they were INTERLACKers. They were worth it.

"Deal."

"Um...", the guy said, "I'll go get a cup of coffee."

"Right."

The man walked across the street in search of an all night coffee shop. Shouldn't be too hard to find in the Village, Flynn surmised, and began to cut through the Cube.

He couldn't believe he was actually doing it.

Five minutes later, he hadn't made much progress. To complicate matters, it had begun to rain. Not very hard, but the kind of light summer drizzle that's cold when there's a breeze. Either that, or he was shivering in fear. He wondered what he was more frightened of -- getting caught by the Police and being dumped into jail, or finding out what may or may not be in the Cube.

What if it was another ruse of the second Corflu?

Flynn put the blowtorch down just as a beaten blue automobile skidded to a halt in front of him.

"Mike Flynn!" cried the driver in exultation.

"Valerio?"

"None other."

"Excellent!" He walked over to the car "This is the famous Blue Bitch?"

"Whaddya think?"

"Eh." Flynn oscillated his hand in a plane with the ground.

"Well, fuck you."

"Scott," Flynn continued, ignoring Valerio's crude remark, "how've you been? It's been ages since any of us have heard from you."

"I know."

"Who's thin? Wait a minute -- Steve Cohen?"

Cohen nodded. "I didn't think you'd recognize me."

"I didn't. It was a lucky guess. I remember the glasses."

"Oh."

"So Flynn, what's up?"

"Park the car."

"Mike," Scott interrupted, "is that a blowtorch?"

"Something like that."

"What are you doing with it?"

"Come here."

Valerio, Sherman, and Cohen got out of the car, following Flynn toward the Cube. The latter pointed at the small scar on the Cube. "See?"

"Miggle, I think you've been drinking too much milk from Harrisburg."

"Nonsense. The rest of INTERLAC is trapped in there."

"Right."

"Hit it."

"Hit what?"

"The Cube."

"You're not serious."

"Hit it."

Valerio shrugged. "Okay." He slapped the wet metal.

KNOCK.

Valerio nearly jumped out of his shoes. "It answered!"

"Sure."

"There really are INTERLACKers in there?"

"Yep."

"That's crazy."

"Yup."

"Who's in there?"

"Oh, I don't know for sure. Harry, I think. Ken may be."

"Ken?"

"Let me check. Corflu, is Ken with you?"

KNOCK KNOCK.

"But you say you know where he is."

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

"What is that, a maybe?"

KNOCK.

"Oh."

The rain began to fall harder now; sheets of water pounded the sea of pavement that surrounded the safety plaza in which the Cube was set. Miserable weather for welding -- or for anything else. Except, Flynn mused, for writing. There was something about roddy.

weather that created a downright inspirational environment for the creative process. Especially for depressing introspective stuff. Someday I'll have to write a book about this. Especially if I get put in jail.

He pulled the safety goggles down over his eyes and set at it with the blowtorch again.

"Is this called Astor Place or Astor Plaza?" asked Scott nervously.

"Place, I'm pretty sure," Flynn replied.

"I thought everyone was calling it Astor Plaza," Cohen chimed in.

"Does it matter?"

"Well, Jay said 'Plaza'."

"Well, it's Place."

"You sure?"

Valerio was about to add his two cents, when he caught sight of a figure in the shadows. "Hey, Miggle, who did you rent this equipment from?"

"Apex Welding. Some old grubby guy. Came in that truck," he pointed his elbow toward the truck without interrupting his work.

"That's him, right? With the paper bag, coming this way?"

Flynn turned around for a moment just to check...and dropped the torch. "Hell, no. Play it cool, you guys."

He emerged from the shadows, and walked right past the cube without paying the slightest attention to the group. Every foul odor known to man wafted along with him, despite the pouring rain. They watched wide-eyed and open-jawed, hands clamped on their nostrils, as he walked to the other side of the cube and settled comfortably on the base of its foundation.

"Now what do we do?" Sherman nudged Valerio's ribs.

As if in answer, the bum snapped, "Well? You'll get wet out there. Have a seat with me and Martha." He began to sing off key, "Lawdy, I was...*hic*...bawn a r-wramblin' m-han... You don't mind a li'l song, do you? Me an' muh dog, Martha...we're *hic* on tour this summer..."

"What dog?" whispered Cohen.

"Ignore him. They come with the territory. Besides, if he comes too close to this, he'll catch fire." Flynn picked up the torch again and concentrated on the spot that was still glowing a little. He was getting the hang of it now. Progress was slow but increasingly evident.

"Wait a minute there, fella." The bum climbed up again and stumbled around to Flynn's side of the cube. "You know about the creature in there, don't you?"

Flynn turned around and got a good look at his face. It was a sickening sight, his premature signs of aging, the withered, filthy body -- and yet the man couldn't have been more than 30...maybe 35 tops. Hell, he knew the Allman Brothers. The rain was probably



the closest thing to a real shower he'd had in a year. But he was no ordinary drunken fool...he knew about the Cube.

"You're gonna let him out, are you?"

Yeah, Flynn nodded. "You've heard the tapping, too?"

"There's a...a creature in there, yes. It's a demon from Hell... or no, it's...it's a beautiful woman. Sometimes I can't *hic* I can't tell. But it's in there, you believe me, don't you? Nobody believes me when I..." With that, he fell to his knees -- Flynn had to pull the torch away to avoid hitting him with the flying sparks -- and pounced on the side panel of the cube. It returned the pounding ominously. "Demon! DEEMON! You can hear him, can't you?"

Mike Valerio roused himself from his self-imposed dumbstruck state and pulled the bum away from the Cube. "Easy, mister. You'll hurt yourself. Scott, give me a hand here...there you go."

Flynn shook his head. Rotty weather is depressing as hell, he thought, and started the torch again. If he had had any doubts that what he was doing bordered on lunacy, they were replaced with confirmation.

He'd made pretty fair progress now. Burned all the way through on a couple of spots. Wouldn't take too much longer to make a hole

large enough for a man to pass through...or a 12-inch statue. Ghod, were there really almost fifty people in there? The cube itself was probably big enough to hold them, but set on one corner the way it was, they'd have to be climbing all over the place on top of each others' shoulders. Might be fun, he snickered...for awhile, anyway. But if they've really been in there for as many months as they've been missing... What did they do for food... or air, for that matter? How did they go the bathroom?

Valerio and Sherman returned from wherever they'd led the wino off to. "Mig, this is utterly demented craziness," said Valerio. "I'd sooner believe that there is a demon in there than the whole of INTERLAC."

"Yeah. It is more likely. Wanna take over for awhile?"

"That's okay. Really. You're doing a great job on your lonesome."

"Thanks. Whup, I think that's about it now...just a few more... seconds..." At that, a section of the metal wall broke loose. For a moment it seemed to ooze outward, and then broke loose with a loud snap of metal under stress. But it didn't fall down; it flew outward, whizzing past Flynn's head with a quarter-inch to spare, finally coming to rest in the middle of 4th Avenue. A blast of air pummeled its way out of the remaining hole like a miniature wind tunnel.

Valerio held his arm in front of his eyes, quinting through his fingers, and peered into the hole. His hair, blasted mercilessly by depressurizing air, stood straight out in the opposite direction.

"Holy --- it's glowing purple in there and..."

"...oh my god, it's full of fen....."

Ken Gale gave up for the moment. The wrist straps were secure, but he'd have his chance yet. Right now, the best thing to do was to play dumb, and assess the situation as fully as possible.

He was strapped into a very uncomfortable wooden chair in a small empty room. The overhead light hurt his eyes. There was a mirror on one wall; Ken was positive it was a 2-way job. They could see him even though he couldn't see them. Why else would the mirror be there? And a loudspeaker in the corner...they'd used it to communicate during the first interrogation. There must also be a pick-up mike, but it seemed to be well hidden. Not much in the way of available material that might help him escape...but as long as his wrists were bound to the chair, escape was impossible anyway.

"Mr. Gale."

Ken said nothing.

"Mr. Gale, we are impatient. Who have you talked to since you awoke from your coma?"

Not one word. Why did that voice sound familiar...?

"Names, Mr. Gale. Names and addresses. And phone numbers. Who

have you seen?
Who did you talk
to?"

Silence.

"Mr. Gale, you made some non-authorized calls from a terminal in one of our branch offices. We didn't catch on until it was too late to trace them. But we have reason to believe you called a Mr. ... Bro-ert-jes.

Ken had no intention of answering a single question.

"You called this Mr. Bro-ert-jes. But you were making calls from that terminal for several hours. Most of the numbers you tried were no longer in service because we had already deactivated them. But Mr. Bro-ert-jes was one of the few we hadn't yet dealt with. We have now, but you made some other calls. Who else did you call?"

Ken's feet were not tied, but that fact was of little use. The chair itself was too heavy to move... or maybe it was bolted down. Maybe if he kicked it long enough it would break.

"You awoke from your coma quite some time ago.



You must have seen some of your friends outside of INTERLAC during that time. Who did you see? What did you tell them? Mr. Gale, we are not malevolent! We do not kill when we don't have to. None of your friends have been harmed. They are merely in storage, so to speak. Now let's be reasonable. Tell us what we need to know. Because if you don't it will become necessary to kill. Is that what you want?"

Ken started to kick the chair violently.

"Oh no, Mr. Gale. We have to intention of killing you at the moment. I was referring to your INTERLAC friends. One by one. Think about that. We'll talk a little later, I trust. Make yourself comfortable."

Ken winced. The dialogue sounded as if it came straight out of a fifties B-movie, or worse, a Conway story. Yet, he'd dealt with these people before -- worked for them before -- and was therefore surprised.

At the dialogue, anyway. Situationally...unexpected. He knew that the phone company had a hefty chunk of power, but he'd never realized the extent that it would go to retain that power. He knew perfectly well that basically he was a two-bit piker. It was just as well that nobody had constructed a black box for everyone in INTERLAC -- everyone on the roster and the waitlist would probably be dead by now.

But to escape. That was the problem.

The room was stark. He smiled in the direction of the mirror. He ceased his kicking; it was to no avail and tiring only him.

Information. That was the key. He knew perfectly well that they had nearly everyone else stashed away somewhere. But apparently he'd been the first; at least, that was what he'd discovered when he'd come out of his coma weeks earlier. Donna Camp had related what Jay told her of the whole affair, and his mental link with the real Corflu filled in the rest. Talk about Conwayisms! The phone company was obviously up on his personal life, but that wasn't unexpected. Fifty INTERLACKers! Could he even hope to rescue them?

He'd never do it from here.

But apparently he knew who wasn't trapped. Let's see -- he'd called Rick Foster, Ray Chan, Broertjes -- well, apparently they'd gotten to Harry -- or at least they said they did. Who else? Miggle, but that was at WRGW...and after Emma had called him after the incident in Seattle...

The phone company evidently didn't keep close tabs on what he'd been doing. Or had they?

He had a plan.

If they needed information from him, they couldn't afford to have him hurt. If he could inly injure himself somehow...no, that was sick. Could he take something? Apoplexy? Appendicitis?

"Owwwwwwwwwwwwww....," he moaned.

"ohhhhhhhhh...."

He closed his eyes and tossed fitfully, trying to grab at his side. "Don't let them know you're in pain," he said loud enough for them to overhear. "It's better to die than to admit weakness..." Gale wished he could watch himself in the mirror. Oh, for a Legion monitor...

Fifteen minutes later, he heard a pneumatic hiss. Door opening?

"Mr. Gale?"

"Ooohhhh..."

"Mr. Gale?"

"Aaawrrr..."

He felt hands probing his midriff. He drew a breath sharply, as if in pain.

"Well Dr. Mortimer?"

"Seems okay, but it's hard to tell how sore or tender the area is with him sitting up."

"Could he be faking it?"

"Yes, Then again, maybe he couldn't."

"That's not the information I was looking for."

"Sorry. I'm going to have to look at him lying down. Just put him on the floor."

Ken felt hands tugging at his bonds. In seconds, he was free. He only had an instant to act -- if they got him to the ground he wouldn't be able to get up.

He ran.

Fortuitously, they had left open the door and he had run right at it. He began taking long strides and rushed into a hallway. He didn't recognize it. He heard voices behind him. Obviously the people he'd just run away from. Too bad he hadn't the chance to look at them. He came to a second corridor, followed it. Also nothing familiar. A third. Antiseptic. Nothing familiar. Another. It was growing apparent that he'd been transferred to another building. But where?

Oh, no. It all came back now. He'd been here once before. He'd been offered the opportunity for a promotion once. Took the ten-cent tour of this complex and sat in on a training session. It was at that point he determined to quit the phone company entirely. There was something unsettling about the high security, the armed guards, the hidden t.v. cameras, the secretive attitudes of his supervisors...it was here that he began to comprehend the inherent corruption and evil of his employers, and realized that he could not morally allow himself to work for them. There were dark secrets here and Ken did not want to know what they were.

Now he knew.

For a while, it was like standing in front of an industrial fan. Air rushed across the faces of the four INTERLACKers at the Cosmic Cube, feeling warm and at the same time, sinister. The air had a sense of being of another place. Flynn tried to yell to the others across the din it made, but couldn't for a while.

Finally, it died down.

"Space warp?" Scott asked, not believing it for a minute.

"Right," muttered Flynn sarcastically. "Just like the Ytter-bium Trail."

"No, I'm serious."

"Serious?"

"Serious?"

"Serious?"

Sherman looked at his companions. "Sure. Unless you'd care to buy the other-dimension theory."

Cohen scratched his head. "Another dimension?"

Valerio agreed gruffly. "Scott, this isn't the comics."

"I dunno, Mike."

"Scott, it sounds awfully bizarre," reiterated Cohen.

Flynn interrupted the conversation. "Now, Mike and Steve, wait a minute. He may not be too wrong. You gotta remember, all of us were teleported at least once by something or someone, and if it can teleport, well...why not another dimension or a space warp?"

"Quick! Who's got Gerry Conway's phone number?"

"Down, Scott," said Mike. "Seriously, we should check this out. Which brings to mind the first thing we should do." Flynn approached the Cube from behind, so as to be away from the hole he'd cut into it, and rapped it soundly.

KNOCK.

KNOCK.

Flynn beamed. "They're there!"

Sherman approached the Cube and looked into the hole. It was purplish-black, and looked as empty as a dealer's soul. He stuck his head through...

...and disappeared.

"Scott! Scott, where'd you go!"

Scott pulled his head out. It was still attached. "Nowhere."

"Dig it!" exulted Cohen. "It's gotta be a warp. Or something. You disappeared."

Scott thrust his hand into the hole. He could no longer see it, but he felt it, as well as the breeze its movement created.

"I'm going in," said Flynn.

"What?"

"I said, I'm going into there. There are INTERLACKers in there, and they've got to come out."

"You're not serious."

"I am."

Flynn ran to the Apex van, where he found a length of rope, which he tied around his ample waist. What kind of knot?, he thought briefly, then recalled that he only knew how to make a square knot, tied four into the rope, and ran back.

"I'm ready."

"Mike, you're not really going in there, are you?" Valerio asked, but already it was too late. Flynn aimed his bulk at the hole -- -- but wouldn't fit.

"Scott, I guess you'll have to go."

"What?"

"Come on." Flynn said, as he stepped out of the rope. "You've got to move quickly, before people get here. We're already in a shit-load of trouble."

"What?"

"Come on," Flynn insisted. With Cohen and Valerio's help, they tied the rope around Scott, and then dropped him (with some resistance) through the hole.

"Holy shit!" Valerio yelled. "We haven't anchored that rope!" Cohen, Valerio and Flynn all grabbed onto the rope and quickly secured it. They were just in time, too, because as soon as it was tied it went taut. Scott Sherman was going as far as he was going. Wherever it was.

From what he could figure, he'd gone in a complete circle. There seemed to be no way out, except back where his pursuers surely were. Ken Gale looked ahead of him; nothing but a long corridor with one door at the end.

Dammit, he thought he'd had a better sense of direction than that.

Gale opened the door and stepped into a room more plush than he'd ever seen in his entire life.

"Mr. Gale, I've been waiting for you."

That familiar voice. "...Joe?"

"Evidently."

The lights brightened; Joe was turning a dimmer switch which was one of several controls built into an upholstered black armchair.

"Joe?"

"You seem surprised."

Ken didn't know how to tell this man, no matter how untrue it seemed at the moment, that he had always referred to his as 'The Dummy At Work'. His name was Joseph Brucato, and Ken had regaled many of his fannish guests with stories of the aforementioned gentleman's stupidities. But now, here he was, sitting in this room, obviously controlling activities far beyond Gale's imagination. And wearing a three-piece black suit which blended almost hypnotically into the room's decor...pure black. Directly in front of Ken was the one wall that was not painted black, for set in it was a pane of glass through which he could see the interrogation room he'd recently escaped from. Joe was obviously the man behind these operations.

"I am."

"Well, don't be. And now, what can I do for you?"

"For starters, you can give me some information."

"Interesting request. I believe that's what we were requesting of you before you became so...uncooperative."

"What is this whole operation for?"

"Reasonable question. Very well, Ken." Joe opened a drawer in the black and chrome desk before him and placed a folder labeled "Gale" squarely in front of him. "Come," he motioned. "You may recognize these bills."

Ken slowly walked toward the desk and snatched away the folder. His eyes grew wide, first in astonishment and then in anger; the folder contained a complete dossier on his past, his present, his activities, and his long-overdue unpaid phone bill. "Really, Ken," he continued, "You should have paid that bill. The phone company does not deal lightly with such transgressions..."

"You haven't the right to-- " Ken started to protest.

Joe Brucato slammed his massive fist on the desk and stood up his face seething in fury. "We have the God-given right to do anything we please! Mister Gale, we have extended you every possible courtesy in the past, but you have gone beyond merely the failure to return our favors. You have abused and misused us, and if we so choose, we can take any measure we desire in order to see justice done. We have as much authority to prosecute and punish criminals as any other multi-national corporation. The Telephone Company is a legitimate world power, Mister Gale, and you...have...ripped... us...off!"

Ken studied the bill carefully. "Okay, then. Maybe you can tell me what this \$64.00 charge is for."

Joe stood up and walked across the room to stare into the empty space of the interrogation room through the two-way mirror. "Ken, you were part of an experiment. A human guinea pig. You were chosen in part for your transgressions against us, and also because as a former employee you conceivably know too much. We...arranged for your comatose state by sending hypnotic signals through your telephone line. It was intended as an experimental penalty for those who cross us. The \$64 bill was merely an assessment to help finance

the experiment.

What we did not count on was that our electronic signals set off a chain reaction which -- for reasons still unknown to us -- animated your statuette and somehow caused it to acquire your subconscious memories and thought processes."

Ken had read countless thousands of comics and science fiction novels, and prided himself on keeping an open mind, ready to accept any possibility no matter how outlandish or bizarre it might seem. But this went beyond bizarre -- it was simply too unreal. Ken heard every word but, but none of it would sink in. It took a conscious effort to comprehend the implications.

"Nor were we prepared for the intervention of your many firmeds. They were bound and determined to revive you from your coma, and with the aid of your powerful mascot they may well have succeeded in doing so. Which is why we were forced to substitute a Life Model Duplicate Corflu that was strictly under our control.

"This...this so-called Fannish Energy Force that your mascot tapped as a source of power...it is an amazing thing. Our technicians are presently studying it in the hopes of amplifying and harnessing it in more controlled circumstances. But I'm afraid its power simply does not compare to the resources we have available now. It was a simple matter to teleport the original Corflu to one of chrono-spatial distortion storage receptacles; our so-called "Cosmic Cube" was used in this case. We should have stored your body there too, I suspect. But there's no use dwelling in hindsight. No doubt you wish very much that you had done some things differently too.

"But no matter. We sent our Corflu on a mission to dispense with any other security leaks, any of your friends who might know of or stumble onto our schemes. In fact, very shortly, we expect final word that the last of your...your INTERLAC companions has been rounded up and...dealt with."

Joe spun around; in his hand was a standard-issue laser pistol. "Now, we must deal with you too. I don't know what triggered the termination of your coma, and we cannot take the chance that an inefficient means of plugging this security leak will be effective." He raised the pistol casually. "As I told you earlier, Ken, the Phone Company does not kill when it does not have to..."

"...but unfortunately, I'm afraid we must now make a rare exception."

The rope couldn't have been more than fifty feet long, but from the inside of the cube Scott sounded like he was hundreds of yards away. It was only because the air current from inside were still depressurizing out at a modest clip that he, Flynn, and Valerio could hear Sherman at all.

"...It's....weird and anti-gravity...all over...I can make out about half a dozen LACKers from here...there's Nanco...Brown...a couple of people I don't recognize...uh...and that could be Liz Smith...um...holy mackerel, here's Corflu! He looks unconscious, though..."

Flynn stuck his head through the hole and yelled "IS THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN DO TO HELP THEM...? Jeez, for a short 50-foot rope it sure stretches pretty far in that reality, he thought. Scott appeared to have been drawn into the cube about as deep as the length of a city block. Incredible, since from the outside the cube appeared to be less than 25 feet across at its widest point.

He felt confused for just a moment, but soon became somewhat familiar with his alien surroundings and how he related to them. While his senses perceived the space as being fuller, he realized this was just an illusion.

In the distance, it appeared, were people, but he knew they had to be very close. He called into the purple void.

There'd been a small p-o-p, and then they began to feel as if they had been drawn into the middle of a Kansas tornado. Initially, they floated into the forcefield retainers that kept them separated, though thankfully not fast enough to be hurt. Then, they actually began to float through the barriers.

It was Jim Chadwick, the most recent addition to the group of INTERLACKers in storage, who first noticed a pair of legs four times normal size coming straight at them. However, the legs rapidly shrunk back to scale and then Jim recognized the form of Scott Sherman.

"Hey, Scott!", he shouted, just as he heard Scott call, "Hey, Jim!"

"Is that Scott Sherman?," Broertjes called out from a lower level.

"Scott, get us out of here," Bob Soron shouted from some distance above and beyond. "We don't want to be here for double extension...!"

"People are talking in there," Cohen said. Flynn heard the voices too, and stuck his head into the hole in the Cosmic Cube. While dark, he could still make out the forms of several INTERLACKers. Scott himself appeared to be a good mile away now. He pulled him-

self out and said to the others, "It;s got to be four-dimensional."

"How so?"

"Look at it this way. Obviously we can't perceive in the fourth dimension, but we can perceive its distortions. Knowing that, distance perception is being screwed up to the people in there. However, that doesn't really change the fact that in that small area are about forty-seven people."

Steve Cohen looked confused, and wonder why he'd ever set out to join this crazy bunch.

"So?" asked Valerio. "I mean, what's it mean?"

"Well, the way I figure it, it means we may have some trouble getting them out."

"Oh, swell," sulked Valerio.

It didn't prove to be difficult at all. Just crazy.

Scott untied himself, and allowed his body to float in the direction of the others. In the lack of gravity, it took some minutes of struggling to keep his balance and maintain a steady course, but with directions and encouragement from those who'd grown accustomed to it, he was able to traverse the distance.

"Great, Scott," volunteered Sherm Boyson, "but now that you're here, how do we get out?"

They swam.

Apparently, once contact had been reestablished with the outside world, all of the barriers collapsed. And so, the whole group of trapped INTERLACKers was able to swim toward Scott's dangling rope, and were lifted out one by one.

Ken had only one bluff. "If you fire that, I won't be able to pay your bill."

Brucato hesitated for only a moment, but that moment was enough to buy the time Ken needed. Closing his eyes, he rushed straight at Brucato -- and then past him, crashing through the two-way mirror and right back into the room where he'd been held prisoner minutes earlier.

Not that it was a guarantee of freedom; heck, no. But it would buy him some time, because the goons that had been following him would have to start all over again. Unless they were really spastic and had decided to turn around and backtrack. Ken frowned; he hadn't thought of that. Then again, if Joe Brucato had turned out to be who and what he was, then perhaps the rest of the phone company wasn't quite as incompetent as he'd always thought.

That didn't sound plausible to him, either, but he couldn't take the time to think about it. He had to get moving.

This time, he took the first door he found once outside of the detention room. At least he'd wind up in a different part of the complex. Where the hell were the elevators?

Zilber slapped his forehead. "I can't deal with this, Flynn," he moaned, as he looked into the hole sliced into the Cosmic Cube, that he'd just emerged from. "This is a work of art, you know. See right here, can't you read the sign?"

"John V. Lindsay, Mayor."

"No, you cretin! 'Alamo. A Gift To The City Of New York. Bernard Rosenthal, 1967.'"

"The Cube is really called 'Alamo'?"

"What about the Alamo?" Kevin Gould asked.

"Nothing," Flynn muttered. "I think Zoob's been in the phantom zone a little too long, Kev, that's all." Zilber glared at Flynn, but already the center of the conversation was moving away from them, and into the control of the INTERLACKers' spiritual Leader, Harry Broertjes.

"Look, guys," he began, "this is going to sound worse than a fan fiction plot, but it's honest-to-God-true-for-real."

"What is?" Boyson demanded.

"Well, before I got thwacked into there, Ken was able to get in touch with me."

"Ken?" "Why didn't you tell us?" "Shit!" "Ken?" A chorus of indignant babble spread. Broertjes held his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. "Easy. I wasn't sure how safe we'd be if I spilled the tough beans while we were in there." Jay grimaced at the mention of his zine title.

"Anyway, the sequence of events that many of you don't know about is the following. Somewhere along the line, a robot Corflu was substituted for Ken's former statue. The Corflu doppelganger zapped the original into the Cube and then all the rest of us, once he tracked us down using the phone lines and facilities. And in the meantime, Ken had been revived. No one's real sure why; the best guesses Ken and I and Corflu could come up with were either that, with Corflu trapped here, he no longer served as a drain on Ken's fannish energy, or that Ken's constitution as a Trufan allowed him to recover incredibly quickly."

Broertjes looked around. All fifty assembled INTERLACKers were mulling over what he'd just said, but none of them was shouting 'Conway' or anything comparably obscene.

From the direction of Judy Rosenbaum's foot came a weak moan. Startled, her eyes popped open as wide as the day she learned the name of the new Legion writer; there on the ground before her was the flaccid form of the once seemingly all-powerful Corflu. Its telepathic moan was heard only by herself, and she stooped over to

pick up the limp creature. It moaned again, softly. "Oh, you poor poor thing," she whispered and as she held it to her cheek as though to comfort him, the telepathic emanations grew louder. Suddenly, she felt faint...dizzy...she stumbled forward into Roger Winston's unexpecting arms. Roger had barely enough time to look both astonished and delighted when he, too, felt his knees buckling. The unlikely couple collapsed in a heap.

But neither was unconscious, and Corflu had now regained enough sentience to help them to their feet. The statuette stretched its atrophied clay muscles, and gave out a mental yell that was heard by all. The group's collective hubbub dropped twenty decibels.

"I...must extend my...thanks to Roger and...Judy here," Corflu telepathed, slowly and deliberately. "I had to borrow some of their fannish energy for a jump-start, but they'll be okay. As will I, though as long as both Ken and I are conscious, neither of us will be at full strength..."

"But where is Ken?" Turniansky demanded. "We've been getting the runaround for a year now."

"Ken...is...." Corflu began, "Ken is in serious danger. He's been moved from the branch office of New York Bell. In fact, he's now..." Corflu tuned into Ken's psyche and triangulated, "...in Central Park!"

Fannishness is wonderful. Between Flynn's Floydmobile and Valerio's Blue Bitch, all fifty-one people (and one mutated klanth) were transported from the Greenwich Village Beach through Manhattan to a location that Corflu insisted was a phone company building.

Flynn, however, was not amused. "Corflu, look at this logically. First of all, you're ruining Floyd's shock. Second of all, there is no phone company building in the middle of Central Park."

"Sure there is. And we've got to hurry, because Ken's in serious trouble!"

"Fine," Miggle sighed.

The caravan of cars drove bumpily northward on Lexington Avenue, then Corflu took them to a left on Sixtieth, and from there to Central Park South. "Stop here!" Corflu instructed, and Flynn ground the car to a skittery halt. His tires just weren't meant to hold 8,000 pounds of people and vehicle. He didn't even look at them when he got out. He checked his wallet; he still had fifty dollars! The dumb schmuck forgot to collect the money for the welding equipment!

"Okay, bird, where to now?" Boyson demanded.

"This way."

The INTERLACKers followed the foot-tall statue past the IND entrance to a small gazebo-like structure just west of the park entrance. "Down here," Corflu sniffed.

"That's an office building?" Paul Levitz exclaimed.

"Come on, Corflu," O'Connor added, feeling silly still talking to a statue, "the phone company can't be in there."

"Wanna bet?"

Once in the structure, Corflu tabbed a panel, and doors hissed open. A long tunnel was ahead of them. As well as INTERLAC's future.

Ken felt trapped. It was logical, considering the circumstances; his first escape attempt had brought him in a circle right back to his captor; this time, he'd found a dead end. Of all the stupid luck.

//Come on, Ken, you can hang on//

Corflu?

//Yes. We're coming. Do I take the south or the west stairway once I'm past the main entrance?//

West.

//Nineteenth sub-level?//

I think so. Yes.

//Hang on//

That's going to be tough.

//Don't be a gans//

Shut up. You're just a figment of my imagination.

//I'm your alter ego. I've also got the fannish energy of the entire apa---//

Right. You sound like a Gerry Conway story.

// //

Corflu?

// //

Corflu?

// //

Corflu!

Gale was now a little annoyed. He'd had some contact with Corflu since he'd been awake, but it had stopped earlier that day; he presumed that something had happened. Now, Corflu was back again, and with all of the INTERLACKers -- except that again the link was cut off. Either Corflu had to shut up -- or everyone in INTERLAC was in trouble.

And now he could hear footsteps in the corridor.

It was a brief fight. O'Connor, Flynn, and Berkenwald teamed up to all but mutilate one Telephone Company guard, and Winston, Slaten, Liggett, and Copley easily felled the other. "Quick," said Corflu, "they'll be after us almost immediately. Take the west stairway!" Fifty-one INTERLACKers ran as hard as they fucking

could. Richard Bensam and Kevin Gould led the pack, waiting only for Flynn, O'Connor, or Valerio to bust down an occasional door.

At length, they reached a brightly lit corridor. Corflu himself had a subconscious mental map of the rest of the route, although he still hadn't quite latched onto Ken's actual location.

It didn't take long to find it.

As they ran down a third corridor, at the very end stood Ken Gale. At first, the skin below his beard registered fear, then surprise, then delight, and finally, even for Ken Gale, anger. "Gaense!" he cried. "I thought you were the phone company fools!"

"Huh?" asked Dave Kaufmann. "Do I look like I work for the phone company?"

"Do I?" Ken retorted.

"QED," replied Dave.

"The phone company has minions?" Len Wein asked, winking at Marv Wolfman.

"Sure," affirmed Corflu.

"Oh, come on. You're just a bird," cracked Wolfman.

"How'd this person get into INTERLAC, anyway?" asked Flynn somewhat indignantly.

"He's a pro," said Ray Chan. "Be nice to him."

Flynn slapped his forehead for the umpteenth time. "I can't deal with this."

Suddenly a more sinister voice echoed in his ears from behind. "Try to deal with this, then!"

Everyone whirled around. Blocking their exit from the hallways was a group of five Phone Company goons wearing strangely militaristic uniforms -- led by Joe and the second Corflu!

"Joe!" Ken shouted.

"Who?" demanded Brenda Mings in her typical kitten-like voice.

"Dummy at work," he explained.

Almost thirty INTERLACKers 'ahhhd' in recognition.

"Ah, but Mr. Gale now knows that I'm not that much of a dummy. My disguise was evidently a successful one. As I started to tell you in my...ah, study...N.Y. Telephone has wanted to deal with you for some time. Almost since the very day you began working I was keeping an eye on you, and you were soon my only charge.

"In fact, if I don't take care of you soon, my entire career will have been a waste. You're the biggest thorn in our side, Mr. Gale. You are not a big fraud, you aren't the type of person who would actually destroy our equipment -- but you advocate its abuse to enough people with your influence that respect for the sovereignty of the Telephone Company is being eroded. We cannot afford that.

"If that respect erodes, we will be unable to run the seventy-nine nations we currently do. We have options outstanding. We have

to deal with the current crisis in South African diamonds. Our most valuable piece of spying equipment is scheduled to fall right on this very city in a couple of weeks.

"True, we can't blame all of this on you. But you're a pain in the ass, Mr. Gale, and we need a scapegoat!"

And with that, Joseph Brucato aimed his laser pistol directly between Ken Gale's eyes. Frantic glances were exchanged, but there was nothing to be done at that moment...

The door at the far side of the corridor burst open, and hordes of INTERLAC waitlisters led by Nancy Northcott poured up. Caught by surprise, Joe turned for the slightest instant, and Corflu-1 saw his chance. With every last remaining ounce of fannish energy he could muster, the original mascot leapt at Joe's throat. Caught by surprise, he squeezed the trigger and a pure-white beam of energy ricocheted off the ceiling, hit the light fixtures, and sizzled itself out.

Corflu-1's attack was cut short by the robot Corflu-2, who mentally (mechanically?) hurled Joe's assailant against the wall. Joe went sprawling and the laser pistol fell to the floor. In seconds, the corridor was a mass of flailing arms, legs, and torsos in a mad



scuffle to claim its ownership...members, waitlisters, and security guards alike.

Crunch.

A misplaced foot crushed the weapon into spare parts. Joe stood up in blind rage and lunged for Ken's legs, toppling his 6'4" frame into the morass of waitlisters. "You won't escape me this time, you valueless scum! I'm prepared to die in the service of my corporation!" Ken struggled in vain...Brucato's physique hardly suggested an athletic sort, but Ken could not break his grip. Brucato grasped the robot Corflu and screamed, "For Ma Bell! We who are about to perish salute you!"

With his free arm, he yanked the head off the robot. A brilliant magnesium flare bathed the entire corridor in a blinding white light; the sound of a thunderous explosion and the sound of limbs and entrails being torn apart made an indelible impression on every ear within the immediate vicinity...

When the smoke and haze cleared, only those of strong stomach could bear to look.

Brucato himself had taken the brunt of the blast, but Ken had purposely tried to shield the the rest of the members with his own body as best he could; his torn, mangled remains had been thrown several yards and lay in a heap. There was no trace at all of the robot Corflu; the original stood in shock, in helpless shock and frustration before the remains of his creator.

The tiny statue collected Ken's remains in his arms and stood there, his beak clamped with grim determination.

The chamber was silent.

A dense cloud bank covered the city as the crowd of eighty emerged wordlessly into the grassy expanse of Central Park. As they laid Ken's torn corpse onto the grass, the sky rumbled, and the first drops of what looked to be another typical New York City summer thunderstorm plunked earthward.

"Can you believe what happened?" asked Richard Bensam in a daze. Nobody, it seemed, could even muster the energy to answer in any manner.

"You know," said Liz, "for someone who rarely ate, he seemed to have more energy than anyone I knew."

"Always trying to do a million and seven things," Len added ruefully.

"He threw a great convention," said Burkert, sniffing a little bit.

"Half of us must have stayed over at his house," added Val.

"Easily."

"Maybe," said Bob Soron, "we can make him an Honorary Member posthumously."

"No," said Flynn. "Ken'd never go for that. Ken never believed in...in..." He couldn't finish.

"He Time-Warped better than most," added Chuck. Brenda Mings nodded, and wiped her tears on her ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW t-shirt.

"So that's Ken Gale?" Glenn Kerfoot added. "Didn't he always print green zines?" It was almost telepathic.

Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed. The INTERLACKers were exposed to the elements in a very unfavorable way, but nobody noticed. Miggle stumbled out to where he'd parked Floyd and returned with a mylar blanket to cover Ken's body with. He was proud of the parking ticket that was on his windshield, decomposing in the rain. When he returned, Corflu was kneeling at Ken's head, wearing the closest thing to a pathetic expression that Miggle could ever have imagined might cross the face of a near-imaginary creature.

"It's not fair," Corflu wailed telepathically. "It's not fair. I tried so hard. You all tried so hard. And...snuffed out, in the prime of life. Like...like SHADE, THE CHANGING MAN. Like SUGAR & SPIKE." Then he was silent, and the rain seemed to come down even harder, making the entire city grayer than it usually was. Almost empathically, the entire INTERLAC contingent backed away to leave the mascot alone with its creator.

"I've drawn Corflu for a year, easily," Tom Mitchell said, "but now I know what his appeal is."

"Well, that could be because Ken's personality is part of him now more than it ever was," suggested Zilber.

"Gawd, death is so final," said Ron Coyne, awed by the first of many of his growing-up experiences.

"Yeah."

Strick looked inspired. "Look, maybe I'm dwelling somewhat in pseudoscience still, but...after all, this whole thing is pseudo-scientific, right?"

"What are you hinting at?" asked Morrissey, now vaguely interested.

"I think I know what she means," said Zilber. "It'll never work."

"Pessimist," snooted Val.

"What'll never work?" asked Broertjes.

"Transferring fannish energy into Ken. Just like we were supposed to all along."

"Are you crazy, Strick?" Zilber asked. "He's dead, not weakened or comatose!"

"Hey, can it hurt?"

"Well, I dunno," said Len. "Assuming there are not rituals..."

"Which there assuredly are," Liz indicated.

"...assuming there are none, there's still the matter of how legal it is to have a corpse in the middle of Central Park."

"I take it," said Paula, almost seizing the opportunity for some banter, but failing miserably, "that they're not too fond of dead people in New York."

"Not really," said Chadwick.

"He's probably right," Val said.

"We could preserve the body," Paula said, "for a while. I learned about a bit of embalming from an Egyptologist..."

"And I can get some formaldehyde and whatever else we might need," added Beth.

"It sounds perfectly ooky," grimaced Zilber.

"You'll live," said Flynn.

"Is this going to be in the photo section?" asked Taylor.

"That's sick."

"Sorry."

"Well, then won't we have to do something fannish, Strick?" continued Valerio in the original line of inquiry.

"I suppose."

"What could be fannish?"

"What did Ken do for INTERLAC?"

"Mailing comments," suggested Buc.

"He printed greene zines," Kerfoot remembered.

"He wrote Xax's Axis," beamed Taylor.

"I could do cutesy pit shit with him," added Broertjes.

"Have respect for the dead," Flynn warned, garnering strange looks from everyone present. "Sorry."

"I've got it!" spoke up Bob Rusk. "Here's what we do. Remember ADVENTURE #312?"

George Guay took on his 'You Can't Be Serious' expression. "Yeah. So?"

"Well, maybe somehow we can directly transfer our fannish energy into Ken and restore him to life in the same way the Legion revived Lightning Lad!"

"But that won't work," said Bensam.

"Right," said Barber. "Not to mention that the death of another Legionnaire was required."

"Well," Foster picked up, "if Bob and Strick are right..."

"...then," Slaten finished, "only the fannish energy should be transferred when one of us is hit by the lightning." Slaten then took on a look of horror. "I didn't really say that, did I?"

Eighty nods met his gaze.

"I was afraid of that."

"Waita minute, though," said DuGarm. "It might work."

"Right," said Kuypers, "and there's really living wigs."

"It was a cute story," said Rich.

"Cutesy pie," said Turniansky. "But, looking at it only with a pseudoscientific rationalization...what do you think, Len, Marv, Paul?"

Everyone fixed their attention on the three professional comics writers in the group. If anyone would know whether or not being hit by lightning would kill a fan, it would be these three.

Len shrugged his shoulders; Marv turned and asked Paul Levitz what was so great about Ken Gale, and Paul said, "I don't know. I don't talk about plotlines with INTERLACKers."

"Well," said Ernst, "why don't we take a vote?"

And there, in Central Park, a solemn vote was taken to revive Ken Gale. Bensam, Broertjes, Rosenberg, DuGarm, and Morrissey co-signed the motion, and it passed 34 in favor, 7 opposed, 8 abstentions.

"Okay," said Karla Jarrett, "if we're going to do this, we need metal rods to attract electricity, right?"

"So?"

"Where do we get them?"

"Well," started Len, "there's a souvenir shop near here that sells stuff like Big Apple cigarette lighters and miniature Empire State Buildings..."

"That'd work!" shouted Liggett.

"Sure, he ran through those stupid Empire State coupons," said Soron. "Lots of implicit fannish energy there!"

"Okay, gang, let's split."

The rain came in huge, unrelenting torrents now, yet Ken's body glistened as though in anticipation of the ritual. One by one, the crowd returned with their tiny Empire State Building replicas and gathered about, awaiting instructions.

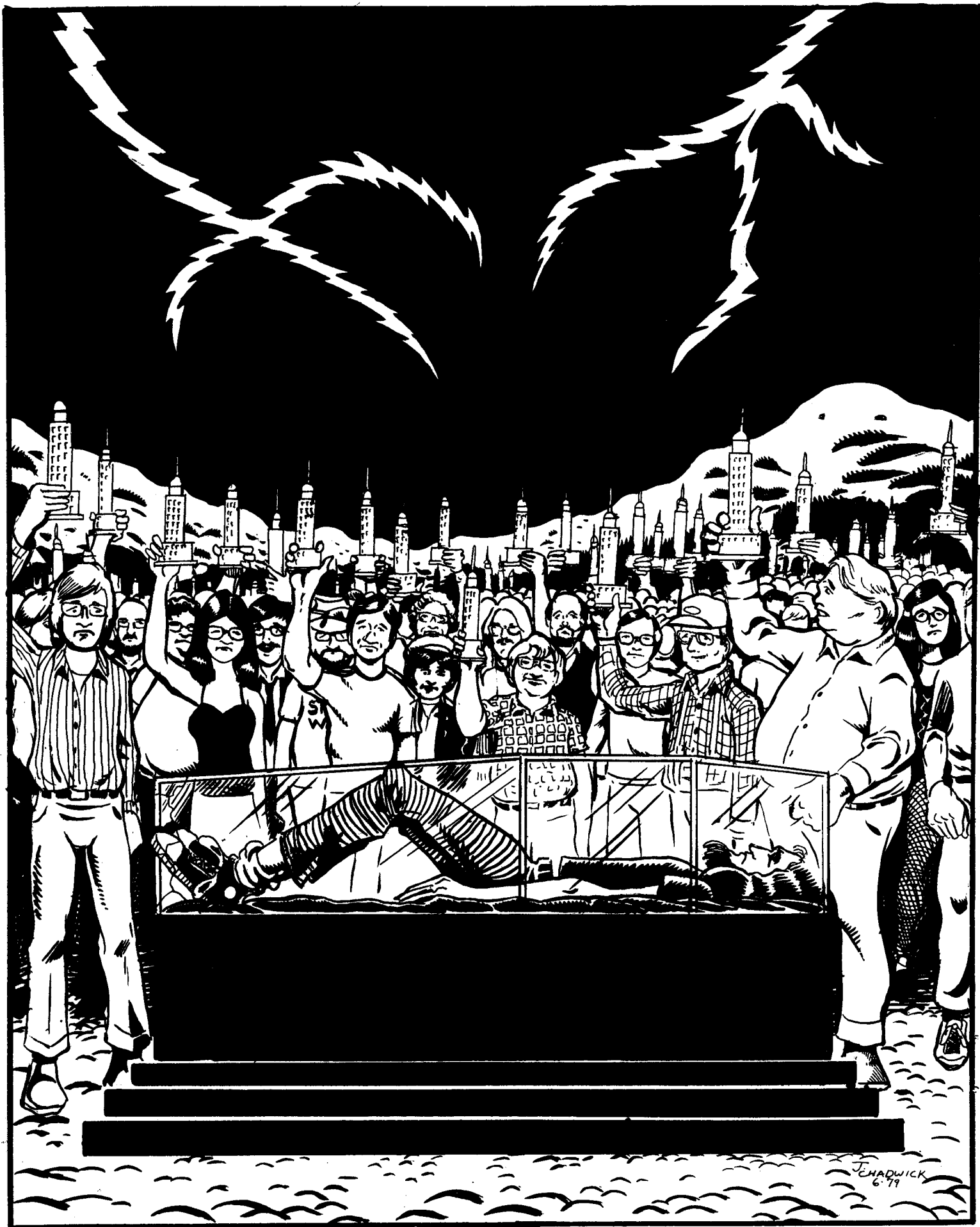
"Okay, everybody," Len Rosenberg called out. "If there is anyone who would prefer not to participate for religious or moral reasons, please step back." Nobody budged.

"Very well. All of you -- place your left hand on any part of Ken's body, and raise your right hand holding your lightning rod as high in the air as you can reach." Most of the hands went up immediately; a few hesitated, then succumbed to peer pressure. Only Marv Wolfman's hand remained at his side.

"What was so great about Ken, anyway?" he whispered to Len Wein, who promptly nudged him sharply until his colleague obligingly raised his Empire State Building model as well.

Then...they waited in silence. And waited.

Ed Via muttered, "If I get killed, I want double page-credit for this in the Boxcars..." Karla Jarrett was about to remind him that he wouldn't be eligible for legitimate page credit until he



was invited into membership, but she was cut off by a brilliant flash, a deafening roar --

And then it was over.

Sherman Boyson's charred carcass remained standing up for the briefest moment, then tottered and hit the ground with a sickly thud. And simultaneously, Ken's eyelids fluttered open. He was baffled for only a moment; it was easy to intuit what had happened from the sight of everyone's identical glazed expressions, their Empire State Building figurines still raised in shock.

"NO!" he screamed, the anguish oozing from his face like the water droplets that drenched him. "NOOOOO. I don't want to live at the cost of someone else's life! How could you have..."

"Hey guys!" A familiar voice pierced through the staccato pounding of the rain. "Sorry I missed everything, but I got my directions confused and couldn't find my way back from the novelty shop." Sherman Boyson sauntered over toward the group, and caught sight of what was supposed to be his own carcass. "Who...*ulp*... bought it?" Before anyone could express the slightest bit of amazed confusion, the Boyson-carcass began changing...blurring... mutating back to its original form:

A stiff, unmoving, and slightly burnt Corflu statue.

Fan Central had never seen a party so large. "There's just a few things I still don't understand," Ken said as he turned up the stereo just a bit. "You say that my furniture, the speakers, the Karin The Nurse model and the Zerferman sculpture were animated, too...? What was that all about?"

"Well, as near as we can figure," Jay explained, "the robot Corflu's powers were largely illusitory, based on mass hypnosis. He couldn't really match the original's, so he had to fake it. And to tell you the truth, I think he tended to break down just as often as any given pay phone. Some of those inexplicable animations and random teleportations were just a result of poor workmanship on the part of his builders."

"Hey, Harry," started Denny Roy, "you are going to do an exclusive expose on the Phone Company for the Miami Herald, aren't you?"

Broertjes was indignant. "Hell, no! You've got to realize that nobody, absolutely nobody could possibly believe a story like this."

"But..."

"And besides, even if it meant a job offer from the Times, I still wouldn't take the chance. The phone company has minions everywhere. I don't want to run into Joe Brucato's Florida counterpart. Let's just keep this our little secret, okay?"

Roy nodded, and wondered if it would be more than a week before Harry gave in and wrote the story anyway. He knew darn well he was sitting on Pulitzer material...and besides, AFPC.

Ken stared sadly at the model of his mascot which occupied a place of honor on his bookshelf again. "Sacrificed himself just to save me. You know, I never even got to really meet him in the flesh...or in the clay, that is. What was he like?"

"A lot like you," Chuck grinned, "but definitely less hairy. Definitely less hairy."

"Nancy, I gotta hand it to you," Flynn shook Nancy Northcott's hand warmly. "Your timing back there couldn't have been more excellent. But how'd you breach their security? How'd you find us?"

Nancy thought for a moment. "You remember ADVENTURE #374?"

"Of course. 'Mission Diabolical!'"

"You remember how the Legion of Substitute Heroes found the LSH at the last moment, just in time to save them from the trap set by Scorpius?"

"Yup."

"And do you remember how they explained their timely arrival?"

"Sure. Polar Boy said, 'Just a little detective work.'"

"You got it, Flynn."

Eighty voices echoed his own in a chorus of "SHOOTER!!!"

The party droned on into the night.

-FIN-

THE MAKING OF

MUTATED

KLANTH

An Afterword by Jay Zilber

A full year ago when Mike and I first began to outline plans for this seven-issue epic, neither of us had the slightest idea what we were really getting into. The project mutated so thoroughly out of control that, several times along the way, we were tempted to end it all by running a one-page, one-sentence installment that would read: "And then Ken Gale woke up."

KLANTH, of course, had its roots in a two-shot faan fiction story we had done for APA-5 some time back entitled MUTATED PANTHER. The plan for KLANTH was to go it five better, to begin the story in last year's annish and conclude it seven issues later in this year's. But the scope of KLANTH far exceeded PANTHER in ways we hadn't expected.

Every time we sat down in a story conference, the plot changed. Especially if we'd misplaced our notes from the previous conference. In the original outline, Corflu actually was going to organize twelve fannish labors, but after a couple episodes had been written it became obvious that this premise was not only boring and repetitious...but we couldn't think of enough fannish labors in the first place. (Some of them would have included: Teach Mike Grell anatomy ... Steal Mike Nasser's Adams swipe file ... Force Jim Shooter into Chuck Nanco's apartment ... we were really hitting the bottom of the barrel when we came up with ... Kiss Gretchen Finke.)

So we plotted, and replotted, trying to keep the story's new and improved directions consistent with everything that had been established earlier. (Although there are a few minor details that require a bit of imagination to reconcile, I think we were remarkably successful.) At one point we nearly decided to end the current plotline prematurely and send Corflu hitchhiking across the country, running into various regional cliques of INTERLACKers here and there. Various prospective candidates were considered for the identity of the "villain," including Mike Raub, Jenette Kahn, Warner Communications and/or Cadence, Charles Korbas, or even ourselves. It was not until we were halfway through writing KLANTH that we settled on the Phone Company. And not until even more recently did we firmly agree to go with the two-corflu concept.

And of course, the starring line-up for each team had to be changed every two months. We had started out with every member on last year's roster in carefully balanced groups assigned to specific chapters in a particular order -- and all of that had to be scrapped and revised each time a member resigned or a new member joined.

Gradually, the writing style changed as dramatically as the plotline. The original plan called for two chapters per issue; Jay would write the odd-numbered chapters and Miggle the

even ones. Then, after a time, we switched positions in that order, and then we started adding more chapters to each issue and editing each other's work. Its culmination here is the ultimate collaborative effort; written mostly during two of my visits to Washington, we turned the conclusion into one massive chapter and traded off at the typewriter every few pages, much as had been done for the original MUTATED PANTHER. But this chapter was done far enough in advance (unlike PANTHER, which was composed on stencil) that we had the opportunity to perform extensive co-rewriting and co-editing. Result: there's no grossly obvious change in style or structure from page to page. We know who wrote each part, and the more observant will probably recognize our individual stylistic tricks here and there. But on the whole, it's been melded into a single coherent entity, and we're darn proud of the way it turned out.

Was it worth it?

Well, yes and no. No, if your inclination is to skip over faan fiction, and certainly no if you see no use for spending so much time, energy, and money on a 40,000-word story that only a few dozen people can possibly appreciate or understand.

But if we entertained any of you, then it was worth it to us. And even if we didn't, KLANTH gave us an outlet to get a lot of bad writing out of our systems, to find approaches that worked and discard the ones that didn't. It was a chance to play off of each others' ideas, to learn from each others' techniques. And it gave us a good lesson in meeting deadlines, forcing us to write even when neither body nor spirit were willing.

And finally, it gave us a huge body of source material for any legitimate collaborations we might do in the future. This summer will see the beginning of what may be as successful a partnership as Niven and Pournelle (or Rowan and Martin)...but we are planning to spend a couple weeks in August developing some new future projects for non-fannish professional submission...

...not to mention SON OF KLANTH.

Finally, we'd like to acknowledge our thanks to cover artists Chuck Nanco, Rick Taylor, Tom Mitchell, Liz Smith, and Bill Sherman; to Jim Chadwick for providing the marvelous spot illos for this issue; to Harry Broertjes for printing several chapters with unreasonably short notice; to Brenda Mings for her cover, and for typing most of this and last month's KLANTH. And finally, to every body whose support and encouragement kept us going, and who provided the inspiration for everything.

Cheers!

NUMBER 1 JUNE, 1978
 SELF-INDULGENCE OR A NEW ART FORM? READ...
MUTATED KLANTH
 TROUTMAN ZINE GROUP
 A
 BIG BROTHER PRODUCTION

MUTATED KLANTH
 ZINE
 Dog
 Cowboy
 Rip-off
 PRODUCTION
 ONLY 04
 WE STILL GIVE 'EM AWAY!
 AUG. NO. 2



MUTATED KLANTH WHICH ONE WILL
 OKAY...I THOSE "F OUT OF OR ILL S HEAD C
 HOW ABOUT "VIBRATING" JONES?
 HANDFUL OF SAND?

IN THIS ISSUE!:

- * DOES LEN ROSENBERG REALIZE HIS ASTROLOGGER COP HAT IS MISSING?
- * WHAT IS THE TRUE FATE OF THE VLACKSWAGEN?
- * DID SHERMAN BOYSON DO THIS?
- * WHY IS CORFLU HOLDING A iGulpt HANDFUL OF SAND?
- * WILL KEY GOULD FIND A JOB?
- * IS COLORADO FOR REAL OR MERELY A GOOD STATE TO PUT A CAPTION?

BEGINNING: THE EPIC SAGA YOU THOUGHT YOU C EASILY DO WITHOUT...
CORFLU VS. GEI



MUTATED KLANTH

UTATED LANTH



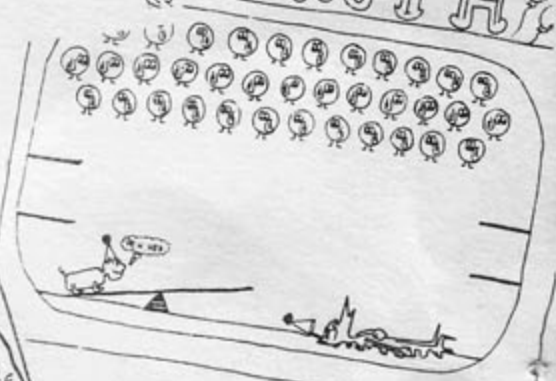
MUTATED KLANTH

ZINE
 BIG BROTHER RIP OFF PRESENTATION

IF THIS IS A HOT BATH IT'S HOWCUM IT'S GOT ALL THESE VEGETABLES IN IT??

HALP!

CORFLU IN SEATTLE!!



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