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A **HEAVY METAL** Graphic Novel

THE VENUS INTERFACE

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RETAILER DISPLAY UNTIL AUGUST 15, 1996

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Heavy Metal presents

THE VENUS INTERFACE

by Lou Stathis

Jim Fletcher



Rick Geary



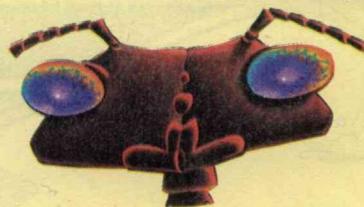
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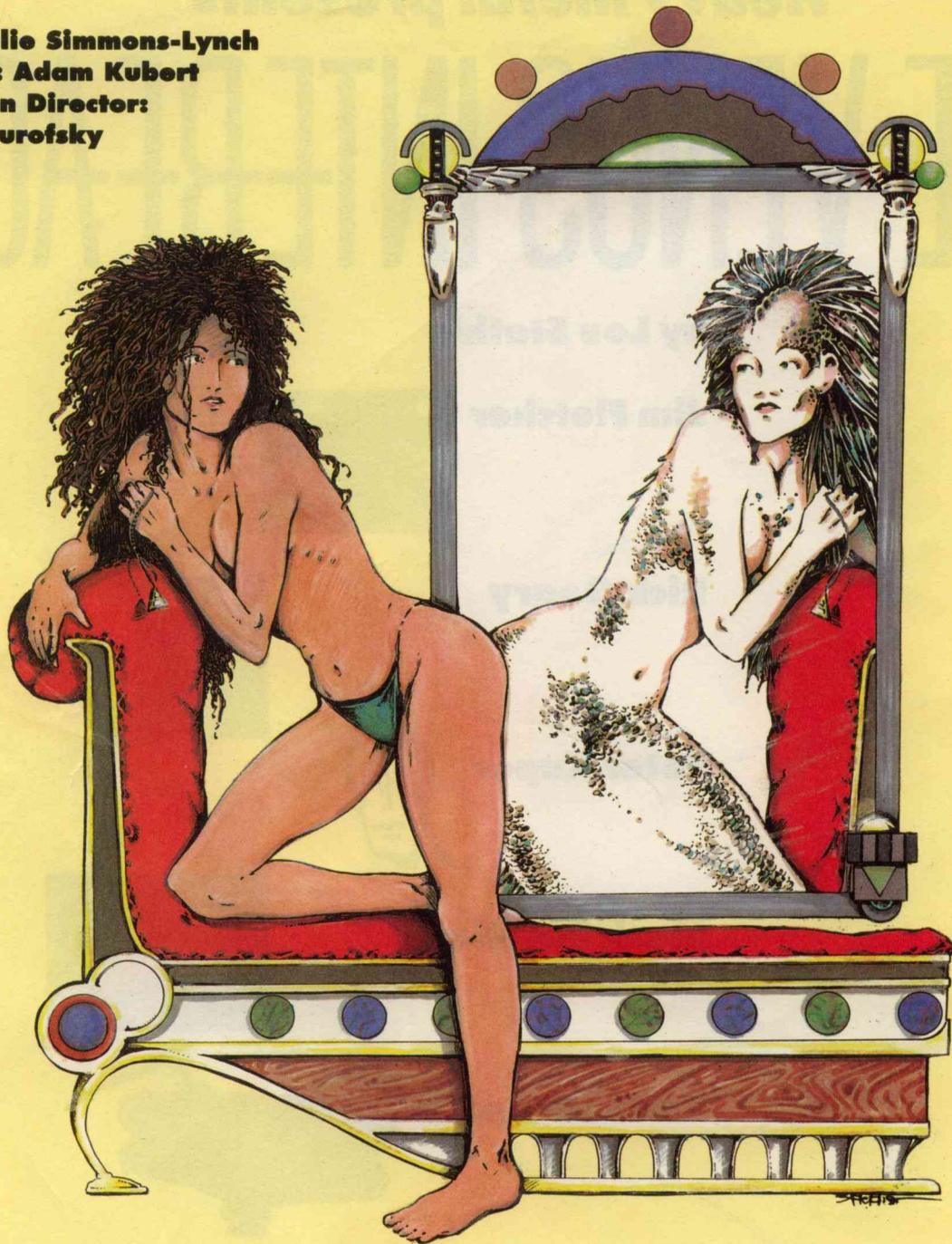


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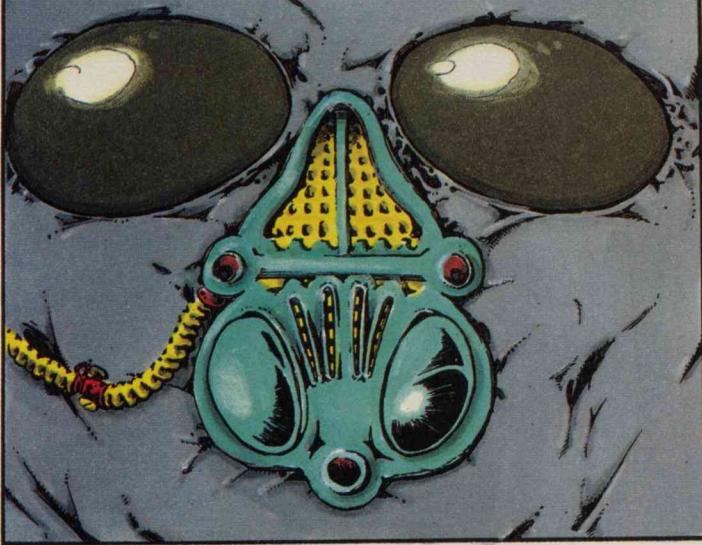
AUTHOR'S NOTE: Inspirational catalysts for this graphic novel include William Burroughs (from whom I copped the word Interzone), Joy Division (who also copped the word, using it to title a song that helped set my mood during the writing), James Tiptree, Jr.'s short story "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side," and Philip K. Dick's novel *Eye in the Sky* (not to mention everything else he wrote, the collective cerebral marinade of which performs constant inspirational service). This work is therefore dedicated to all of them. — Lou Stathis, NYC

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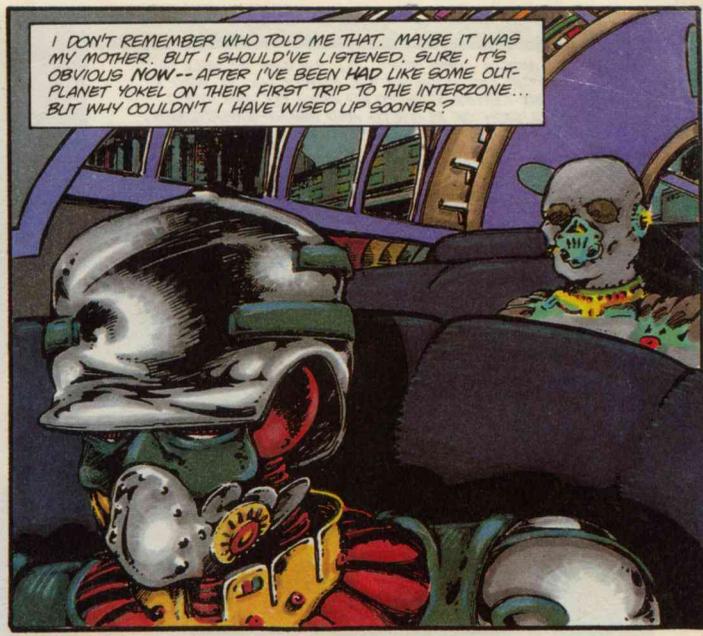
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"CYNICS ARE THE BIGGEST SUCKERS...."

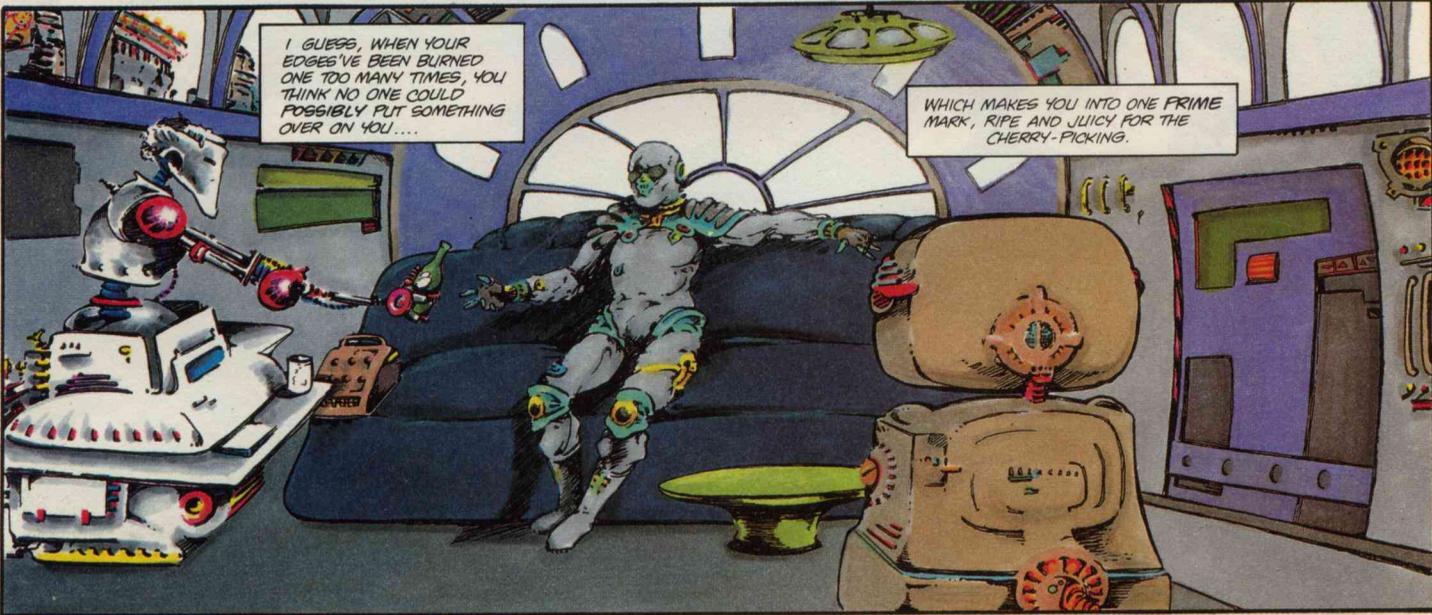


I DON'T REMEMBER WHO TOLD ME THAT. MAYBE IT WAS MY MOTHER. BUT I SHOULD'VE LISTENED. SURE, IT'S OBVIOUS NOW-- AFTER I'VE BEEN HAD LIKE SOME OUT-PLANET YOKEL ON THEIR FIRST TRIP TO THE INTERZONE... BUT WHY COULDN'T I HAVE WISED UP SOONER?



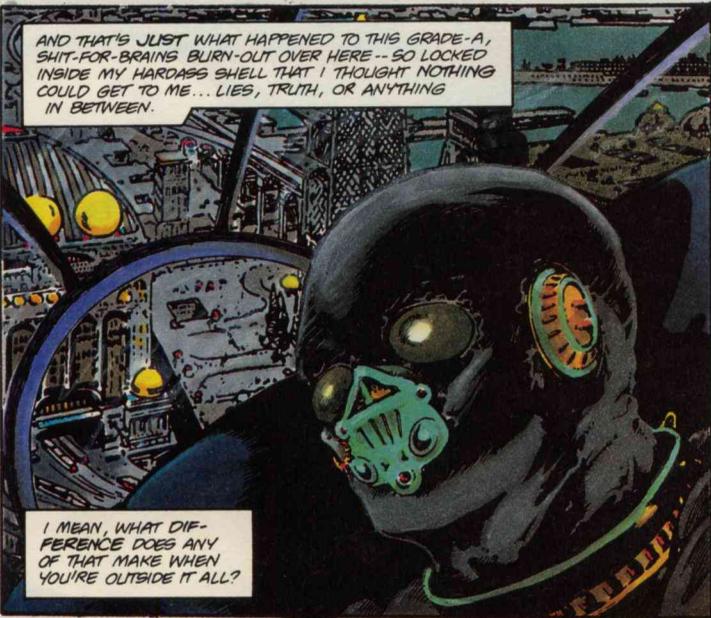
I GUESS, WHEN YOUR EDGES'VE BEEN BURNED ONE TOO MANY TIMES, YOU THINK NO ONE COULD POSSIBLY PUT SOMETHING OVER ON YOU....

WHICH MAKES YOU INTO ONE PRIME MARK, RIPE AND JUICY FOR THE CHERRY-PICKING.

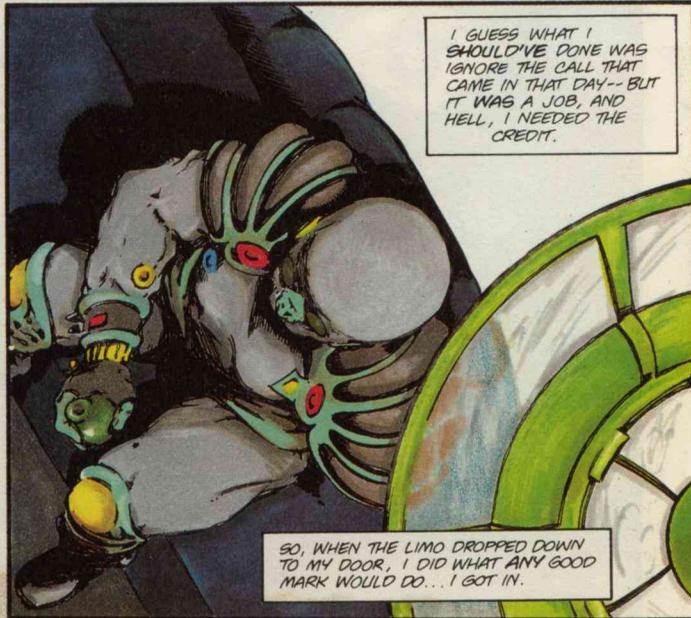


AND THAT'S JUST WHAT HAPPENED TO THIS GRADE-A, SHIT-FOR-BRAINS BURN-OUT OVER HERE-- SO LOCKED INSIDE MY HARDESS SHELL THAT I THOUGHT NOTHING COULD GET TO ME... LIES, TRUTH, OR ANYTHING IN BETWEEN.

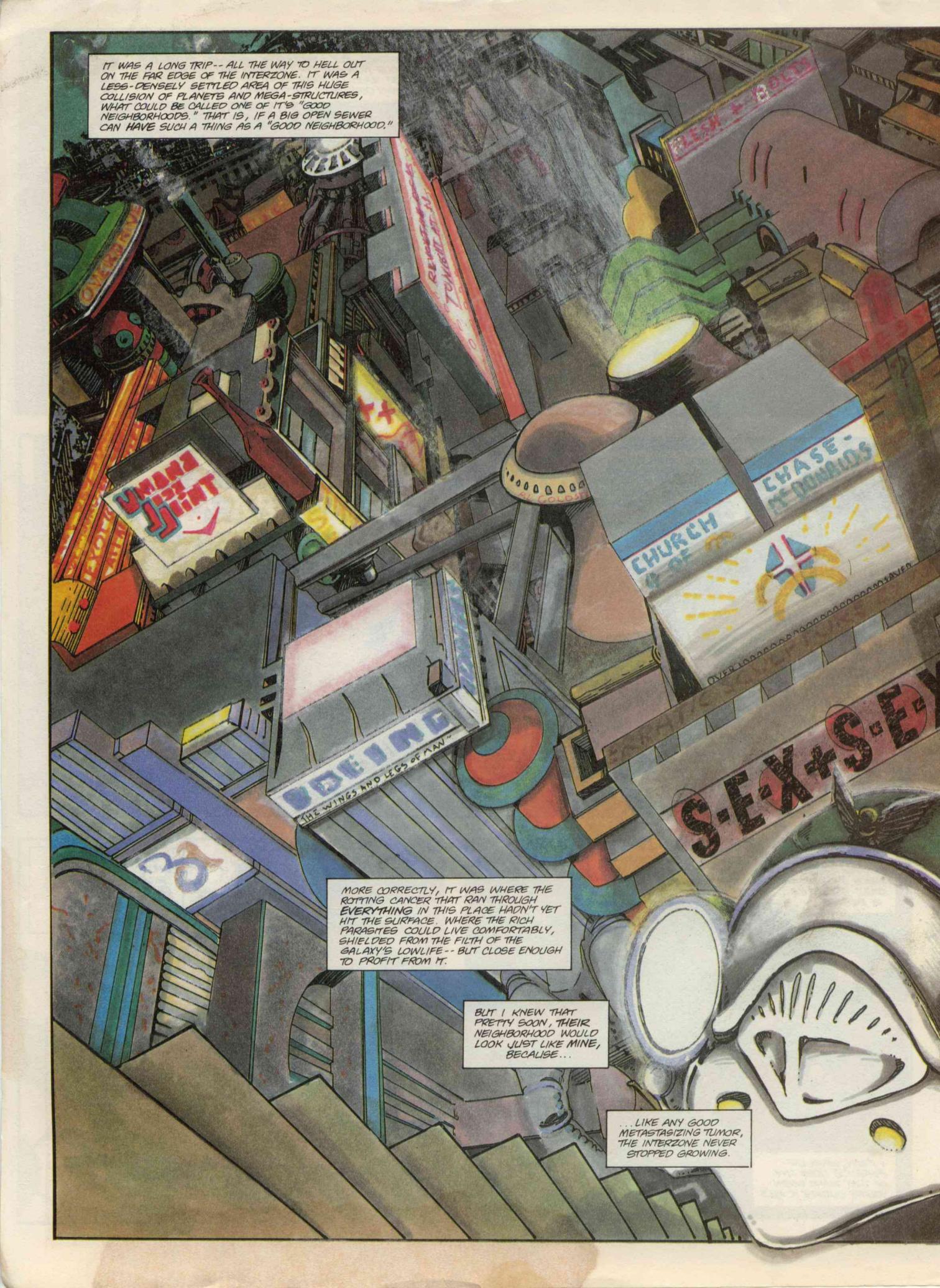
I GUESS WHAT I SHOULD'VE DONE WAS IGNORE THE CALL THAT CAME IN THAT DAY-- BUT IT WAS A JOB, AND HELL, I NEEDED THE CREDIT.



SO, WHEN THE LIMO DROPPED DOWN TO MY DOOR, I DID WHAT ANY GOOD MARK WOULD DO... I GOT IN.



I MEAN, WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES ANY OF THAT MAKE WHEN YOU'RE OUTSIDE IT ALL?



IT WAS A LONG TRIP-- ALL THE WAY TO HELL OUT ON THE FAR EDGE OF THE INTERZONE. IT WAS A LESS-DENSELY SETTLED AREA OF THIS HUGE COLLISION OF PLANETS AND MEGA-STRUCTURES, WHAT COULD BE CALLED ONE OF IT'S "GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS." THAT IS, IF A BIG OPEN SEWER CAN HAVE SUCH A THING AS A "GOOD NEIGHBORHOOD."

MORE CORRECTLY, IT WAS WHERE THE ROTTING CANCER THAT RAN THROUGH EVERYTHING IN THIS PLACE HADN'T YET HIT THE SURFACE. WHERE THE RICH PARASITES COULD LIVE COMFORTABLY, SHIELDED FROM THE FILTH OF THE GALAXY'S LOWLIFE-- BUT CLOSE ENOUGH TO PROFIT FROM IT.

BUT I KNEW THAT PRETTY SOON, THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD WOULD LOOK JUST LIKE MINE, BECAUSE...

... LIKE ANY GOOD METASTASIZING TUMOR, THE INTERZONE NEVER STOPPED GROWING.



POST BROS. level 4
MASSAGE & FUNERAL DIR

MADDER'S
SNUFF &
STUFF

BIG
F.

LIVE
Alien
Show*

WAR DANCE C

WANTED
FOR MANS

THE INTERZONE'S BEEN SPREADING LIKE AN OMNIVOROUS MALIGNANCY FOR HUNDREDS OF GALACTIC-STANDARD-UNIT YEARS, EVER SINCE IT WAS FIRST SET UP AS A FREE-TRADE ZONE TO EASE TENSIONS BETWEEN THE MILKY WAY'S THOUSANDS OF INHABITING SPECIES.

NOTHING CURES RAMPAGING WAR-FEVER QUICKER THAN A WHIFF OF UNLIMITED PROFIT...

FREE TRADE WAS SOON FOLLOWED BY FREE EVERYTHING. THE RULE OF LAW FELL APART, BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE COULD DECIDE WHOSE LAW SHOULD RULE, AND WHO SHOULD ENFORCE IT.

THINGS GOT REAL HAIRY FOR A FEW DOZEN GSUS -- BODY COUNT IN THE MILLIONS, NO SPECIES SPARED, ETC. -- FINALLY SETTTLING DOWN WITH THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE INTERZONE/HOMEWORLD EXCLUSION COMPACT, WHICH WAS THE MAXIMUM AMOUNT OF LAW ANYONE CARED TO DEAL WITH, AND THE MINIMUM REQUIRED TO KEEP ORDER.

IT ALSO ESTABLISHED RIGID HOMEWORLD SEGREGATION, WHICH MEANT THOSE AREAS WERE STRICTLY RESERVED FOR INDIGENOUS SPECIES. NO EXCEPTIONS.

ESTABLISHING THE INTERZONE AS THIS POLLUTED GALACTIC CROSSROADS, WHERE THE PERPENDICULAR CHANNELS OF GREED AND PLEASURE DUMPED ALL LIVING THINGS TOGETHER. A NICE PLACE TO VISIT...

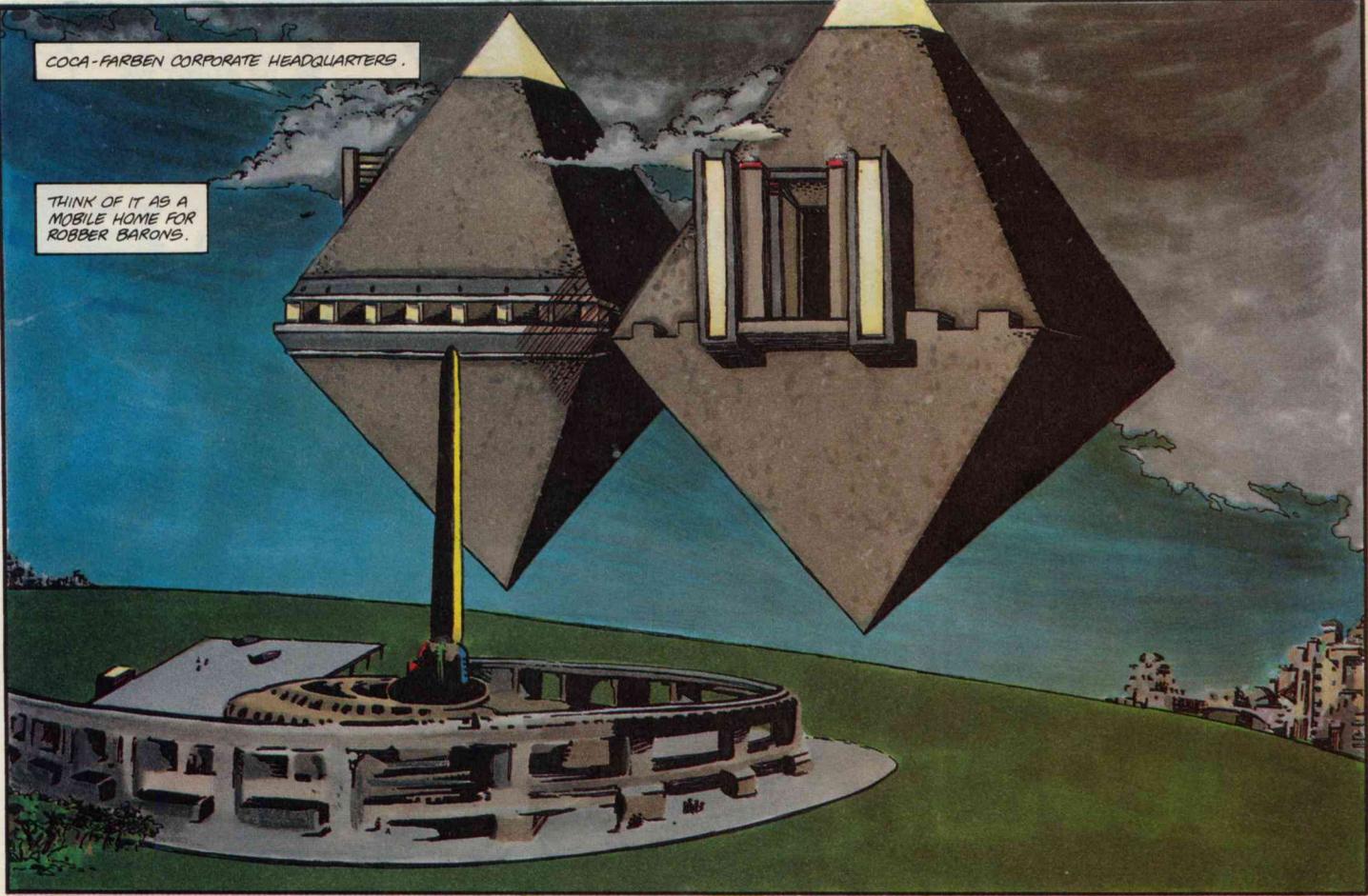
... BUT NOWHERE ANYONE SANE WOULD WANT TO LIVE.

... AND THE STINK OF UNHOLY MONEY HANGS HEAVY OVER THIS PLACE -- LIKE A CLOUD OF DEAD MOLECULES WAITING FOR A BLACK HOLE PLUNGE. TIME STOPS, AND EVERYTHING TEETERS ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS.

SEX MACHINE

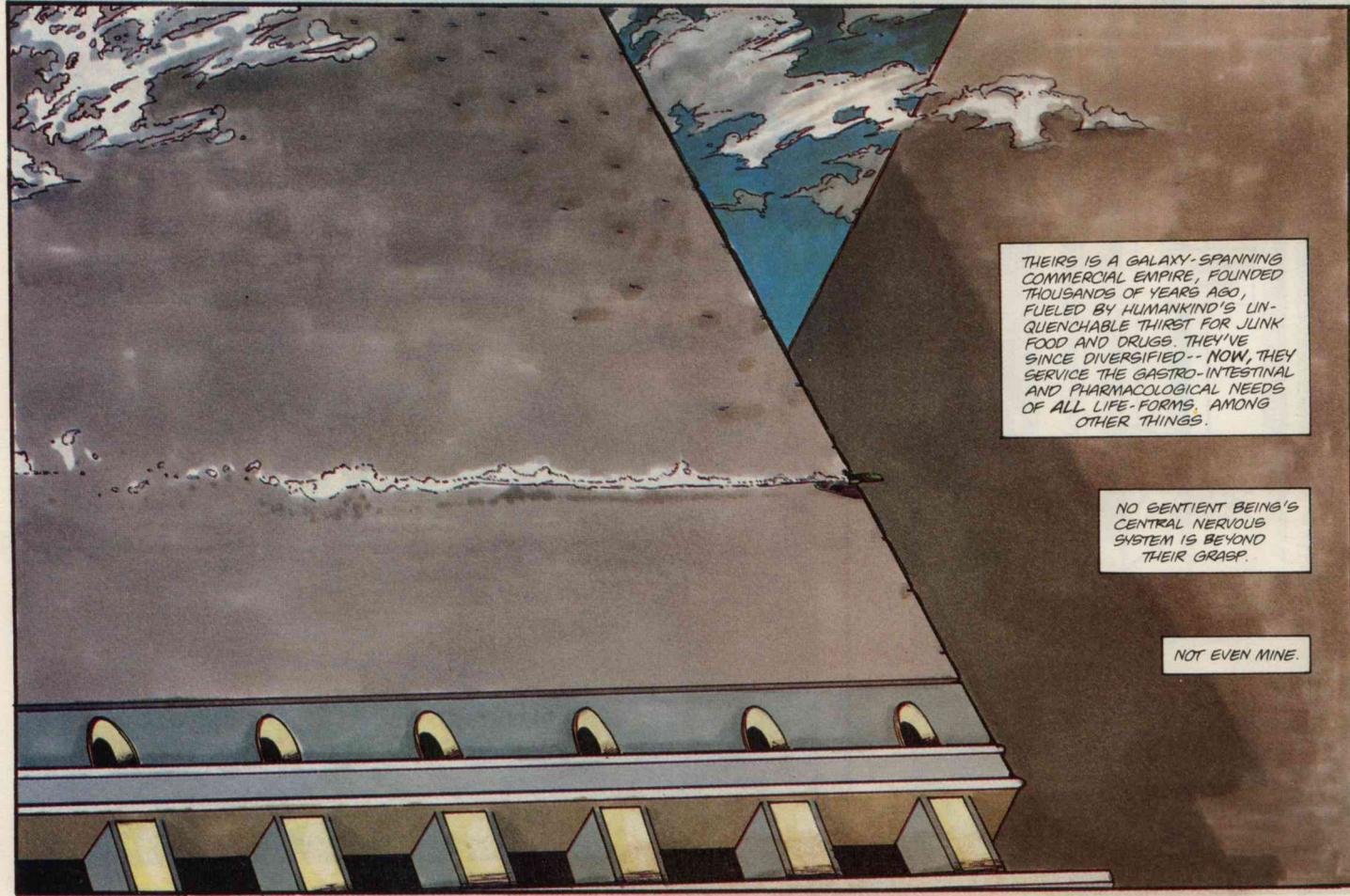
WHAT IT SAID WAS PRETTY BASIC: ANYTHING GOES IF THERE'S MUTUAL CONSENT AND FULL KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONSEQUENCES.

OTHER THAN THAT, YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN, PAL.



COCA-FARBEN CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS.

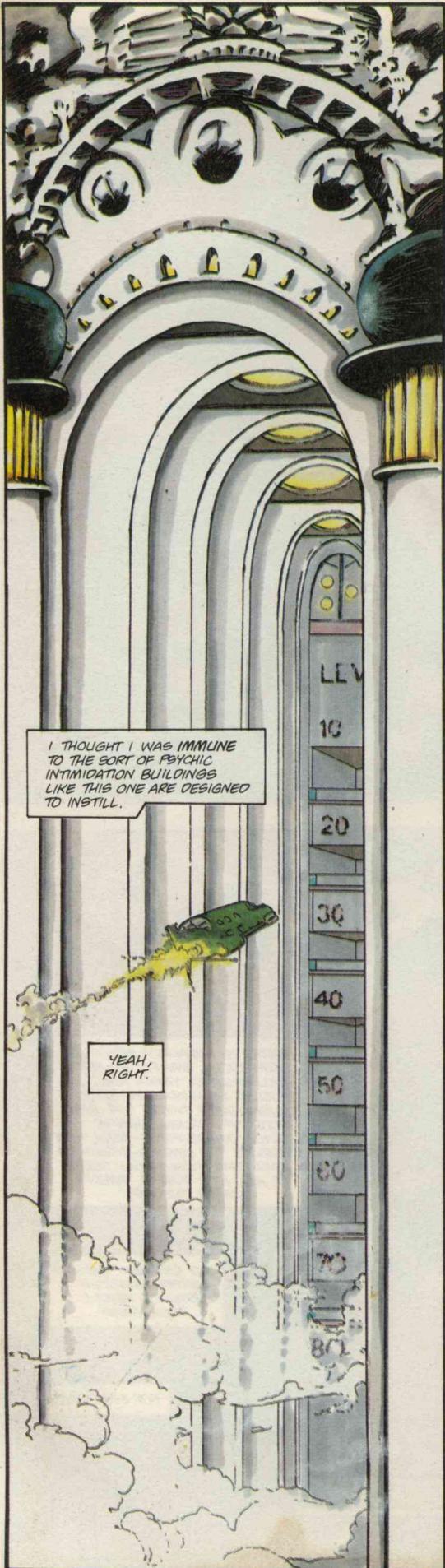
THINK OF IT AS A
MOBILE HOME FOR
ROBBER BARONS.



THEIRS IS A GALAXY-SPANNING
COMMERCIAL EMPIRE, FOUNDED
THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO,
FUELED BY HUMANKIND'S UN-
QUENCHABLE THIRST FOR JUNK
FOOD AND DRUGS. THEY'VE
SINCE DIVERSIFIED-- NOW, THEY
SERVICE THE GASTRO-INTESTINAL
AND PHARMACOLOGICAL NEEDS
OF ALL LIFE-FORMS, AMONG
OTHER THINGS.

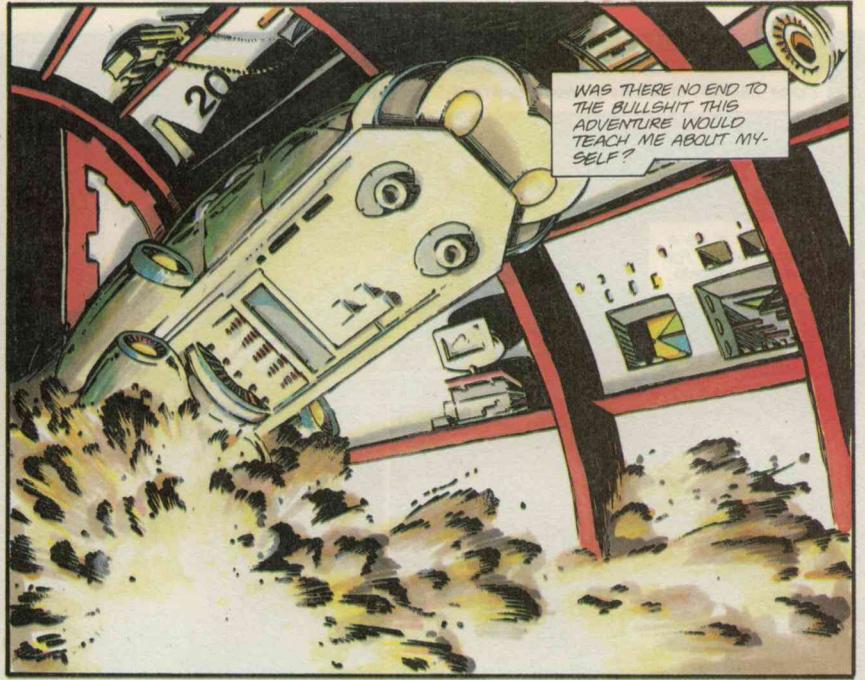
NO SENTIENT BEING'S
CENTRAL NERVOUS
SYSTEM IS BEYOND
THEIR GRASP.

NOT EVEN MINE.

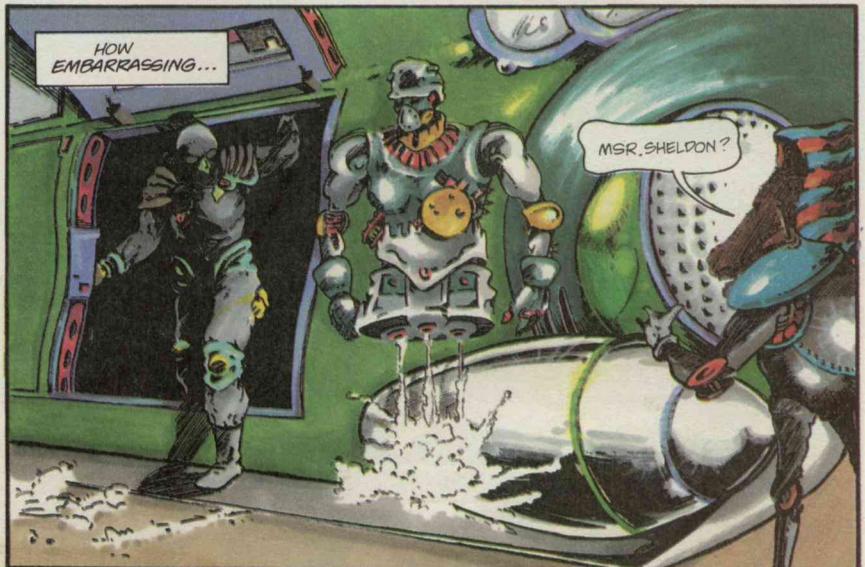
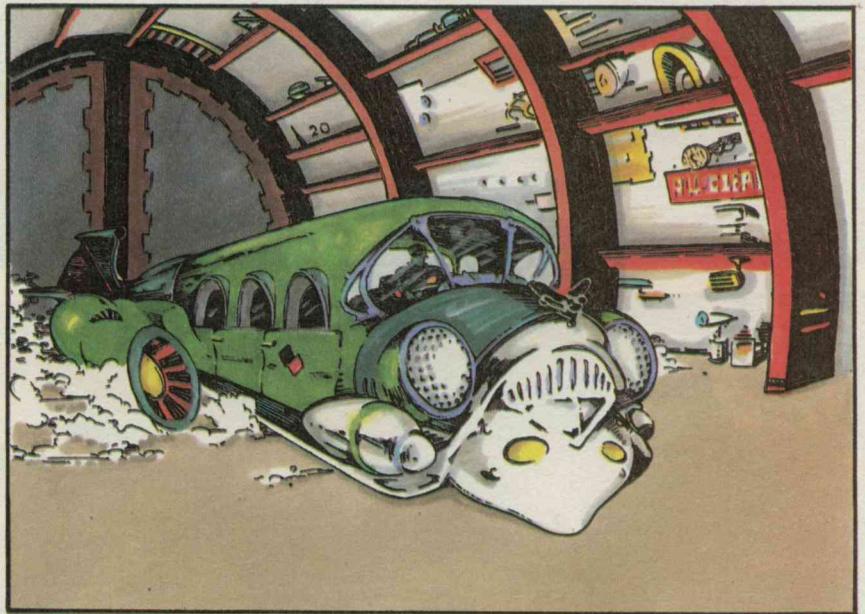


I THOUGHT I WAS IMMUNE TO THE SORT OF PSYCHIC INTIMIDATION BUILDINGS LIKE THIS ONE ARE DESIGNED TO INSTILL.

YEAH, RIGHT.



WAS THERE NO END TO THE BULLSHIT THIS ADVENTURE WOULD TEACH ME ABOUT MYSELF?



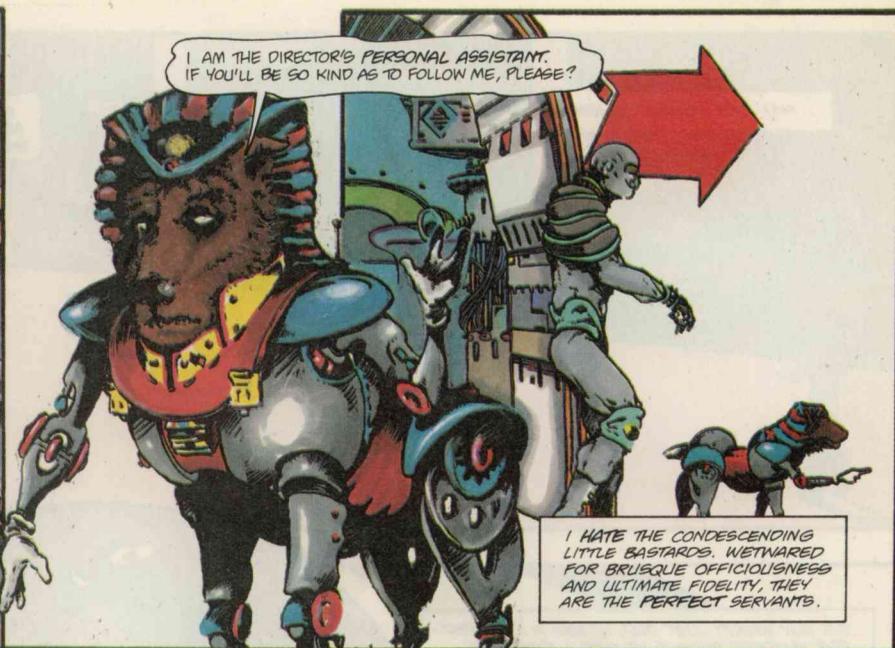
HOW EMBARRASSING...

MSR. SHELDON?



DOWN HERE, MR. SHELTON.

A GODDAMN LITTLE DOGBOT WAS THERE TO MEET ME.



I AM THE DIRECTOR'S PERSONAL ASSISTANT. IF YOU'LL BE SO KIND AS TO FOLLOW ME, PLEASE?

I HATE THE CONDESCENDING LITTLE BASTARDS. WETWEARED FOR BRUSQUE OFFICIOSNESS AND ULTIMATE FIDELITY, THEY ARE THE PERFECT SERVANTS.



THE DIRECTOR IS MOST EAGER TO MEET YOU.

YEAH, THEY ALL ARE, THE PEOPLE WHO WANT TO HIRE ME. THEY WANT TO SEE IF I LOOK LIKE A FREAK--WHETHER THEY CAN TELL I'M A POLYMORPH THE MINUTE I WALK INTO THE ROOM.



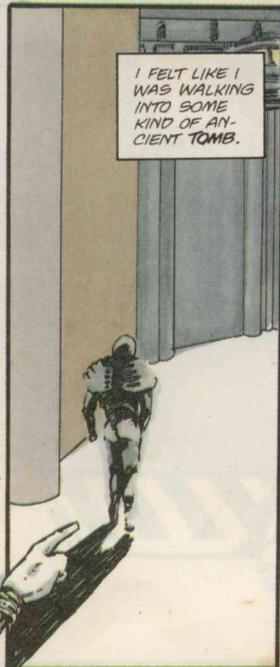
DON'T WORRY YOUR LITTLE SILICON BRAIN-CHIP ABOUT IT, SHORT STUFF...

I SHOULD INFORM YOU THAT THE DIRECTOR IS IN A VERY FRAGILE STATE OF HEALTH, AND SHOULDN'T BE SUBJECT TO VERY MUCH STRESS. YOU HAVE NO SURPRISES PLANNED FOR THIS MEETING, I HOPE?

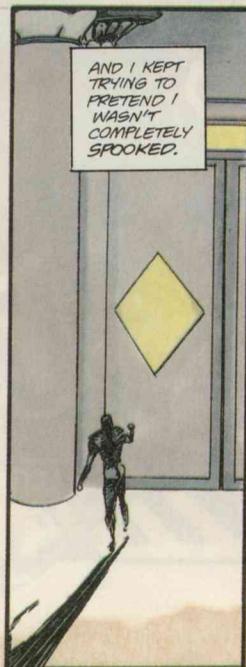


I WON'T PULL ANYTHING--AS LONG AS HE DOESN'T.

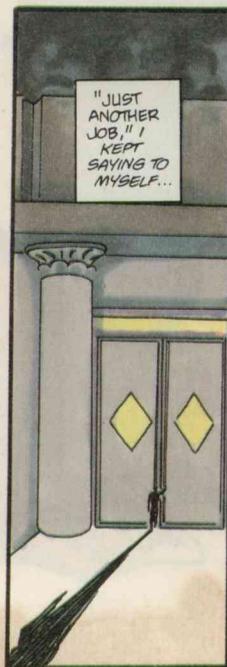
VERY WELL. THE DIRECTOR IS WAITING FOR YOU IN HIS OFFICE, THROUGH THOSE DOORS THERE.



I FELT LIKE I WAS WALKING INTO SOME KIND OF ANCIENT TOMB.



AND I KEPT TRYING TO PRETEND I WASN'T COMPLETELY SPOOKED.



"JUST ANOTHER JOB," I KEPT SAYING TO MYSELF...



... AND JUST ANOTHER CLIENT.

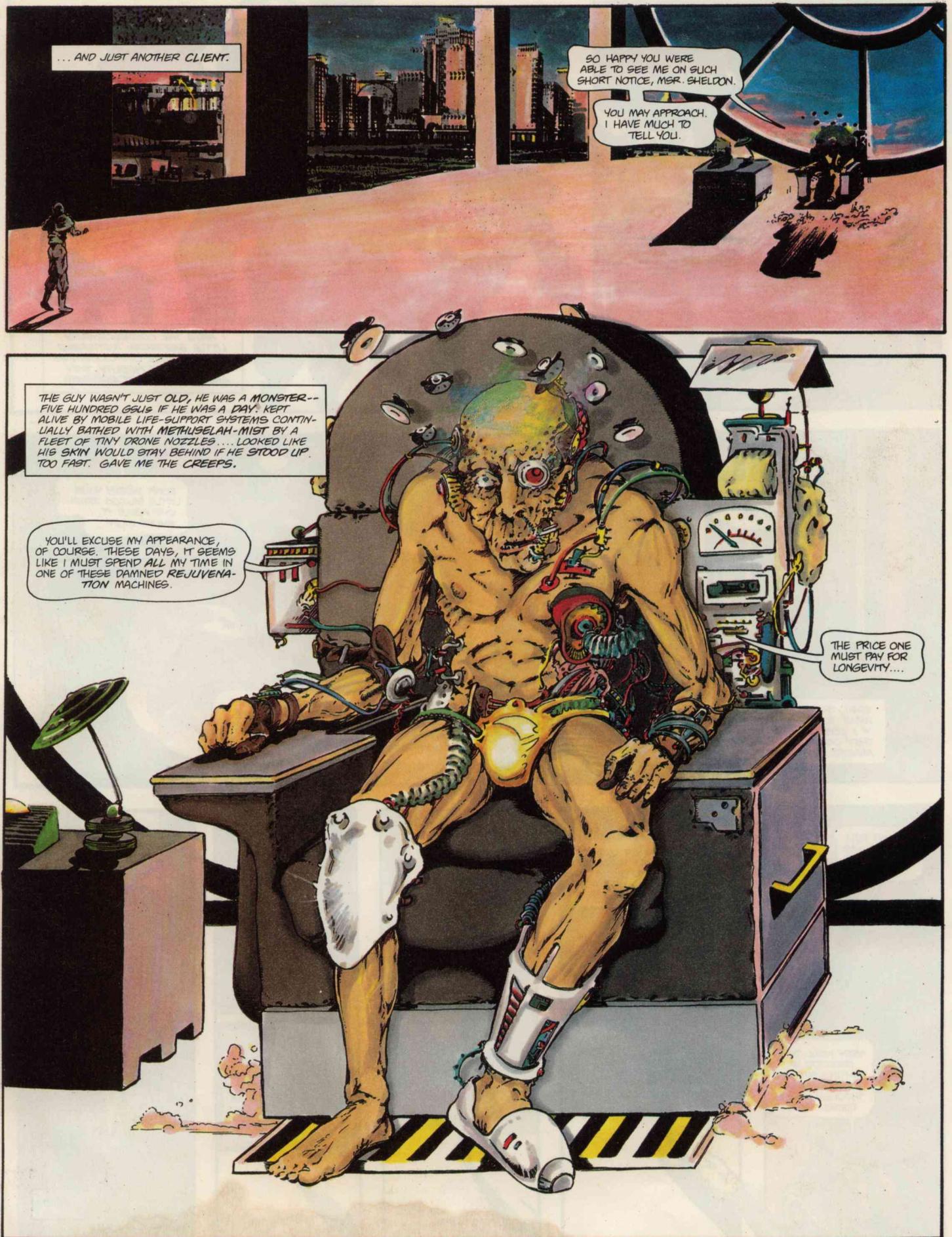
SO HAPPY YOU WERE ABLE TO SEE ME ON SUCH SHORT NOTICE, MR. SHELDON.

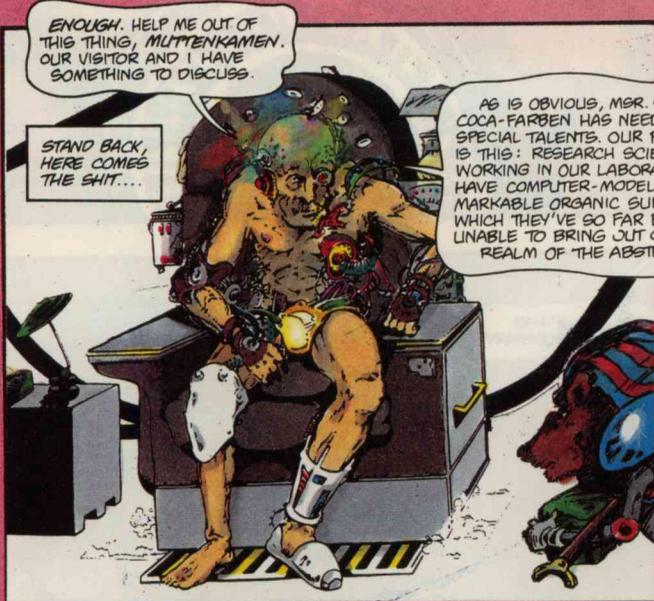
YOU MAY APPROACH. I HAVE MUCH TO TELL YOU.

THE GUY WASN'T JUST OLD, HE WAS A MONSTER-- FIVE HUNDRED GSUS IF HE WAS A DAY. KEPT ALIVE BY MOBILE LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEMS CONTINUALLY BATHED WITH METHUSELAH-MIST BY A FLEET OF TINY DRONE NOZZLES.... LOOKED LIKE HIS SKIN WOULD STAY BEHIND IF HE STOOD UP TOO FAST. GAVE ME THE CREEPS.

YOU'LL EXCUSE MY APPEARANCE, OF COURSE. THESE DAYS, IT SEEMS LIKE I MUST SPEND ALL MY TIME IN ONE OF THESE DAMNED REJUVENATION MACHINES.

THE PRICE ONE MUST PAY FOR LONGEVITY....





ENOUGH. HELP ME OUT OF THIS THING, MUTTENKAMEN. OUR VISITOR AND I HAVE SOMETHING TO DISCUSS.

STAND BACK, HERE COMES THE SHIT....

AS IS OBVIOUS, MRS. SHELDON, COCA-FARBEN HAS NEED OF YOUR SPECIAL TALENTS. OUR PROBLEM IS THIS: RESEARCH SCIENTISTS WORKING IN OUR LABORATORIES HAVE COMPUTER-MODELED A REMARKABLE ORGANIC SUBSTANCE, WHICH THEY'VE SO FAR BEEN UNABLE TO BRING OUT OF THE REALM OF THE ABSTRACT.



THEY THEORIZE THAT ONCE THIS CONCOCTION OF THEIRS IS INTRODUCED INTO A LIVING ORGANIC SYSTEM, IT WOULD ALTER CELLULAR FUNCTIONING SUCH THAT ALL AGE-RELATED DECRETITUDE WOULD STOP.



YES, AS YOU MIGHT SURMISE, I HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF PERSONAL INTEREST IN SUCH A LIFE-PROLONGING PRODUCT.



TO SAY NOTHING OF ITS OBVIOUS MARKET VALUE TO COCA-FARBEN.

BUT THOSE INTERESTS ARE TRIVIAL COMPARED WITH THE POTENTIAL FOR UNIVERSAL GOOD SUCH A PRODUCT HOLDS WITHIN ITS SUB-GENETIC STRUCTURE.



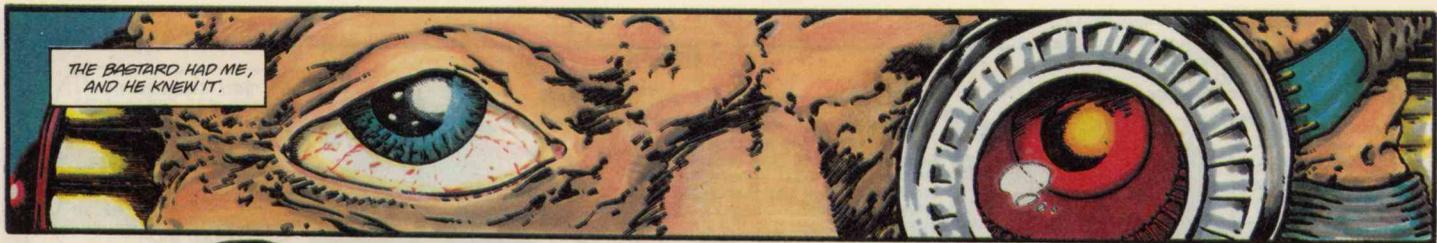
IMAGINE THE SORT OF CIVILIZATION, THE ACHIEVEMENTS, THAT COULD BE BUILT BY BEINGS OF ETERNAL LIFE! THE POSSIBILITIES ARE LIMITLESS!

SOMEHOW, THE OLD WHEEZEBAG'S RAGING CASE OF ALTRUISM WASN'T CONTAGIOUS. I WAITED FOR HIS NEXT MOVE. I KNEW WHAT WAS COMING. AND HE KNEW I KNEW. IT WAS BORINGLY INEVITABLE....

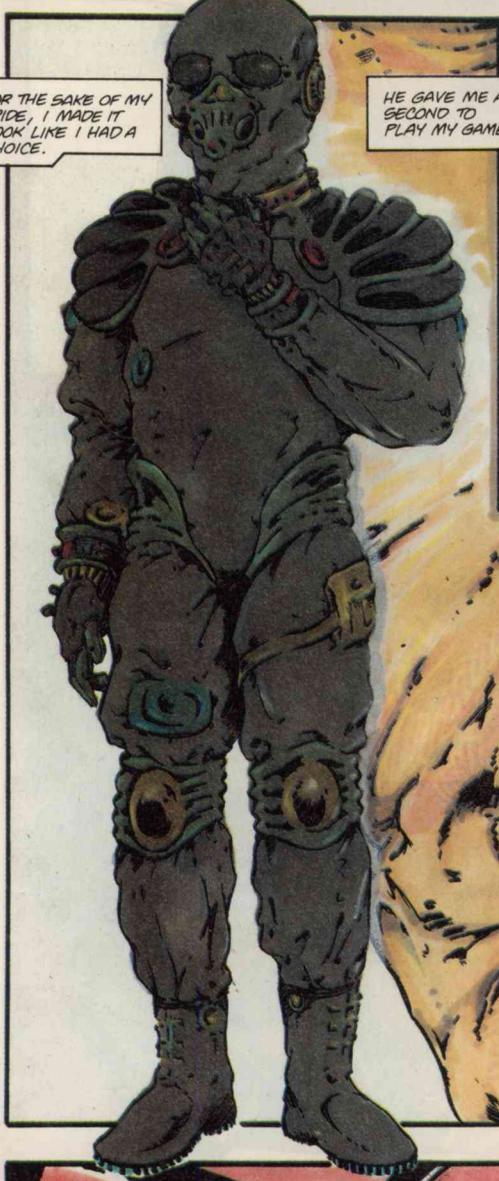


I UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN AGING PROCESS IS ACCELERATED BY YOUR, UH, CONDITION. IS THAT TRUE?

BINGO.



THE BASTARD HAD ME,
AND HE KNEW IT.



FOR THE SAKE OF MY
FRIDE, I MADE IT
LOOK LIKE I HAD A
CHOICE.

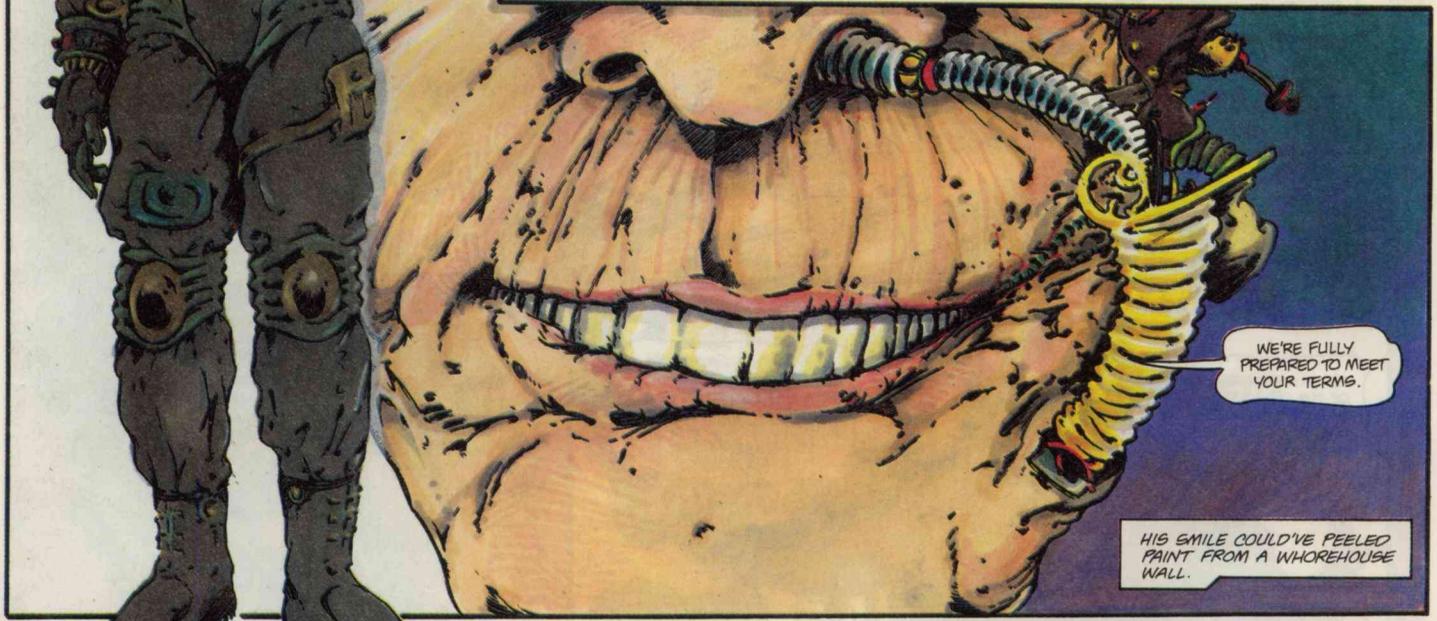
HE GAVE ME A
SECOND TO
PLAY MY GAME.



THIS CHIP HAS
ALL THE NECESSARY
DATA.



THIS IS
GONNA
COST
YOU....



WE'RE FULLY
PREPARED TO MEET
YOUR TERMS.

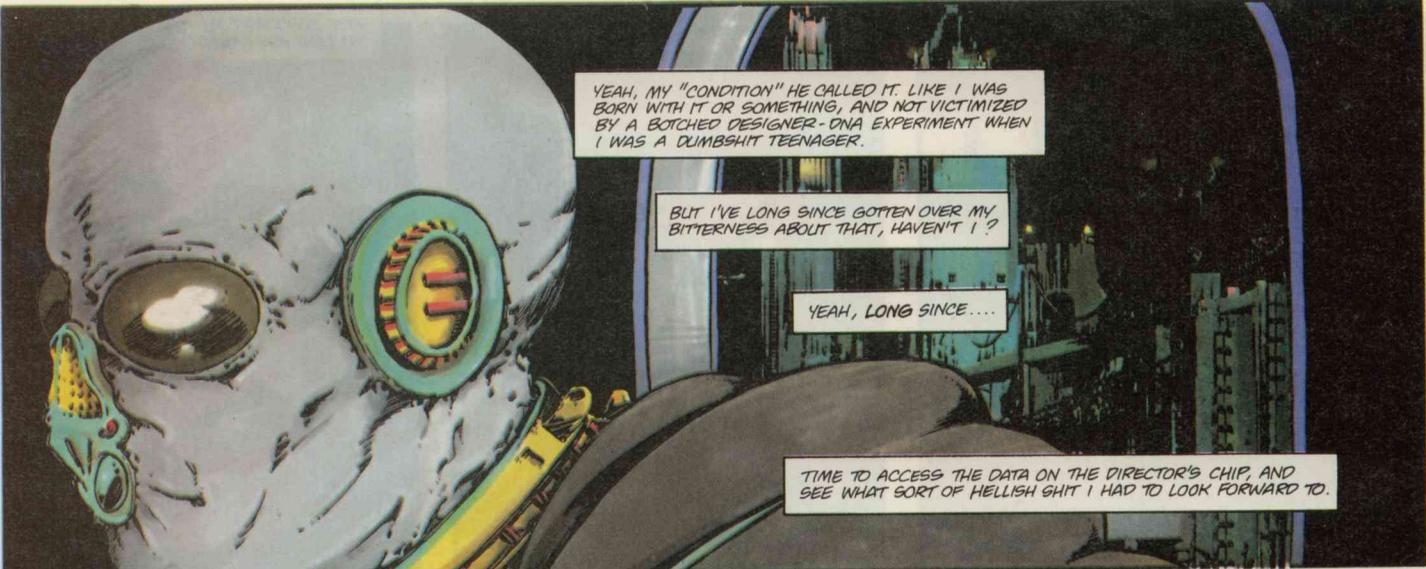
HIS SMILE COULD'VE PEELED
PAINT FROM A WHOREHOUSE
WALL.



PLUS, I SUSPECT YOU'LL
REQUIRE USE OF OUR PRODUCT
WHEN YOU'VE COMPLETED ITS
ASSEMBLY-- IF IT DOESN'T
KILL YOU FIRST....

YEAH, WHICH MEANS THE SOONER
YOU TRANSFER A GIGA-CRED ADVANCE
INTO MY ACCOUNT, THE SOONER WE CAN
BOTH RECAPTURE OUR LOST YOUTH.

DON'T
WAIT UP....

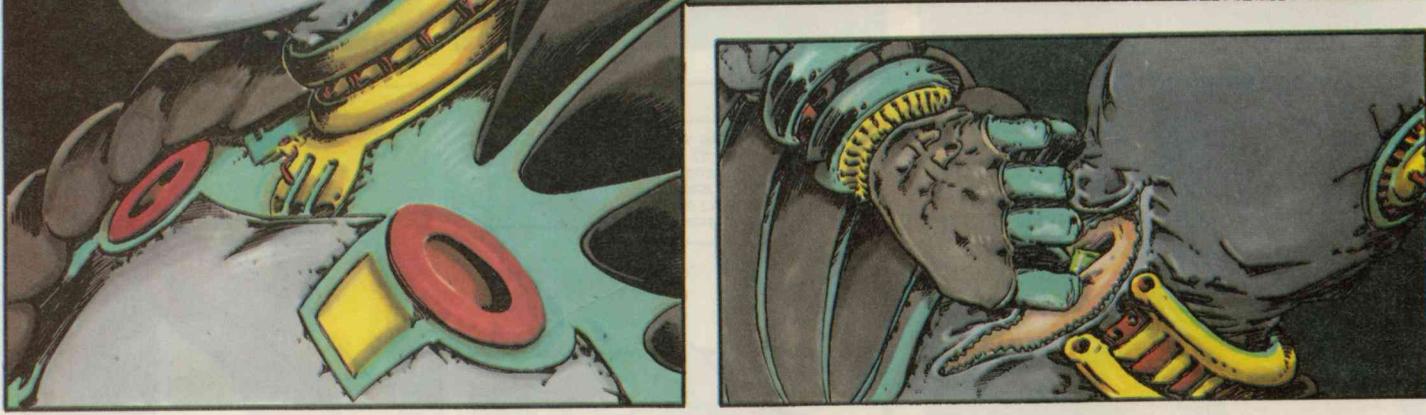


YEAH, MY "CONDITION" HE CALLED IT. LIKE I WAS BORN WITH IT OR SOMETHING, AND NOT VICTIMIZED BY A BOTCHED DESIGNER-DNA EXPERIMENT WHEN I WAS A DUMBSHIT TEENAGER.

BUT I'VE LONG SINCE GOTTEN OVER MY BITTERNESS ABOUT THAT, HAVEN'T I ?

YEAH, LONG SINCE....

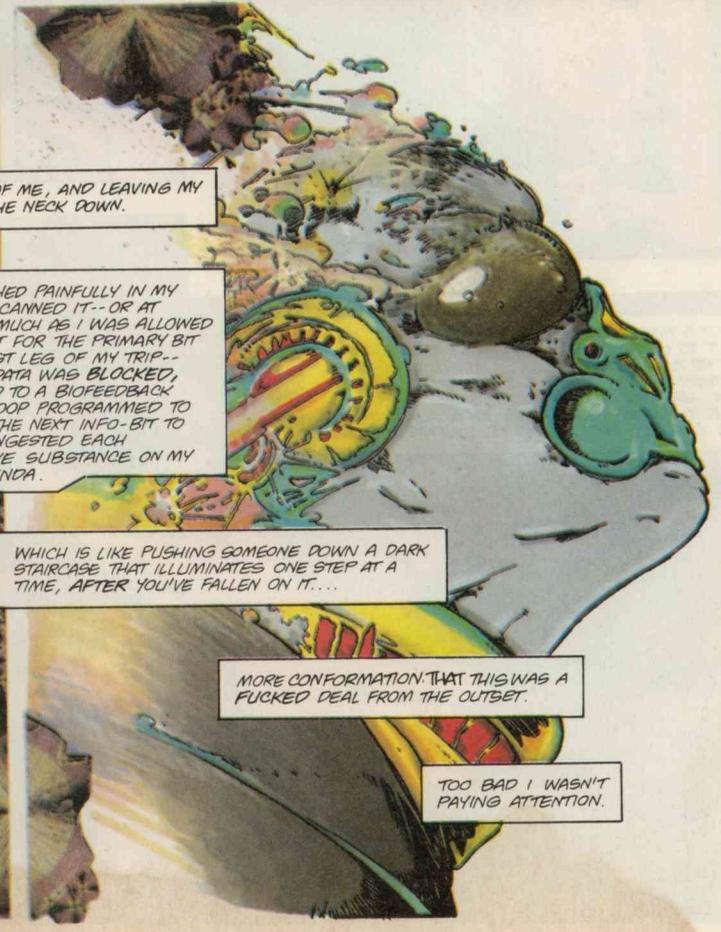
TIME TO ACCESS THE DATA ON THE DIRECTOR'S CHIP, AND SEE WHAT SORT OF HELLISH SHIT I HAD TO LOOK FORWARD TO.



AS ALWAYS, DIRECT DATA READ-OUT HIT ME LIKE A BUCKET OF ICED SYRUP.--

--KICKING THE BREATH OUT OF ME, AND LEAVING MY BODY FROZEN SLACK FROM THE NECK DOWN.

INFO FLASHED PAINFULLY IN MY HEAD. I SCANNED IT--OR AT LEAST AS MUCH AS I WAS ALLOWED TO. EXCEPT FOR THE PRIMARY BIT --THE FIRST LEG OF MY TRIP-- ALL THE DATA WAS BLOCKED, AND GATED TO A BIOFEEDBACK DOMINO-LOOP PROGRAMMED TO RELEASE THE NEXT INFO-BIT TO ME AS I INGESTED EACH SUCCESSIVE SUBSTANCE ON MY TASK AGENDA.

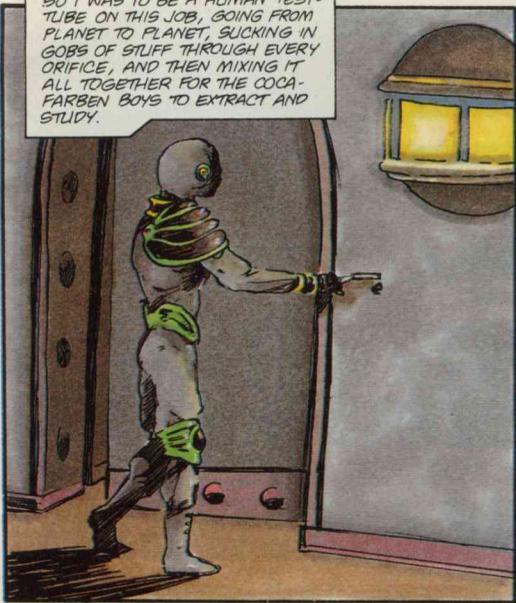


WHICH IS LIKE PUSHING SOMEONE DOWN A DARK STAIRCASE THAT ILLUMINATES ONE STEP AT A TIME, AFTER YOU'VE FALLEN ON IT...

MORE CONFIRMATION THAT THIS WAS A FUCKED DEAL FROM THE OUTSET.

TOO BAD I WASN'T PAYING ATTENTION.

SO I WAS TO BE A HUMAN TEST-TUBE ON THIS JOB, GOING FROM PLANET TO PLANET, SUCKING IN GOBS OF STUFF THROUGH EVERY ORIFICE, AND THEN MIXING IT ALL TOGETHER FOR THE COCA-FARBEN BOYS TO EXTRACT AND STUDY.



I GUESS I'VE DONE WORSE FOR LESS.



BUT DON'T ASK ME TO TELL YOU WHEN.



IT WAS THE PAYOFF THAT WAS BLINDING ME TO ALL MY INTERNAL ALARM SIGNALS-- THE PROSPECT OF INFINITELY EXTENDING THE RAPIDLY SHRINKING PROBABILITY POOL THAT WAS MY FUTURE.



I WAS TRAPPED, YOU SEE. I HAD TO USE THIS FUCKED "TALENT" OF MINE TO LIVE-- BUT EACH TIME I USED IT, IT KILLED ME JUST A LITTLE BIT MORE.



AND IT'S TIMES LIKE THIS ONE-- WHEN I'M ABOUT TO UNDERGO ANOTHER TRANSFORMATION-- THAT'RE ALWAYS THE WORST. I START WONDERING WHETHER ANY OF THIS IS WORTH KILLING MYSELF OVER. USUALLY IT ISN'T. SOMETIMES I TALK MYSELF OUT OF GOING THROUGH IT AGAIN. THIS TIME CLEARLY WAS WORTH IT. I WANTED TO LIVE.



REACHING INWARD, I FIRED THE NEURAL CIRCUIT, AND STARTED THE TRANSFORMATION. THE PAIN, AS ALWAYS, WAS WAITING...



... AND, AS ALWAYS, IT WAS WORSE THAN I REMEMBERED IT. WORSE THAN I THOUGHT IT COULD EVER BE.



MY BODY BURNED WITH THE INTENSITY OF A SUN GONE NOVA.



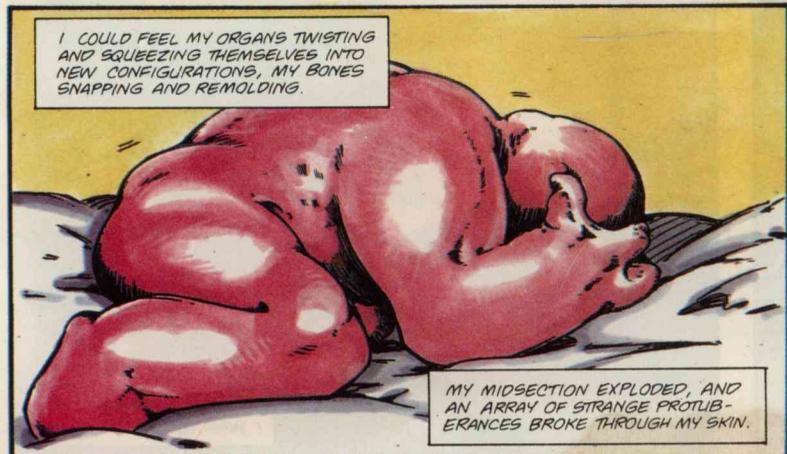
SUBATOMIC FIRE GEYSERED UP MY SPINE.

MY BLOOD SIZZLED, AND MY SKIN STARTED TO STRETCH.

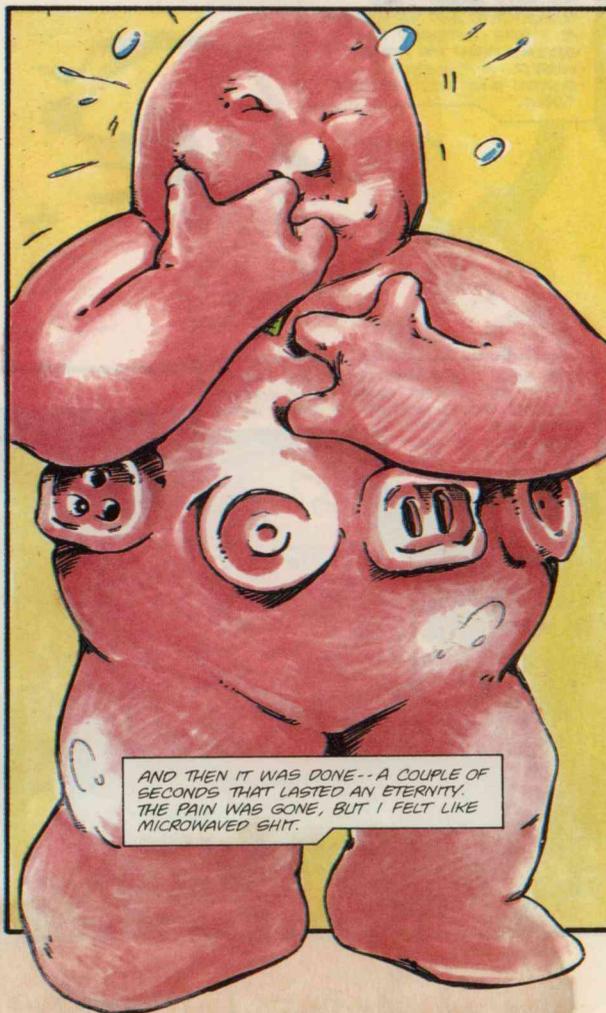
FOLLOWING THE TEMPLATE-PROGRAM DOWNLOADED FROM THE COCA-FARBEN CHIP, MY BODY BEGAN ITS MOLECULAR TRANSFORMATION.



I COULD FEEL MY ORGANS TWISTING AND SQUEEZING THEMSELVES INTO NEW CONFIGURATIONS, MY BONES SNAPPING AND REMOLDING.

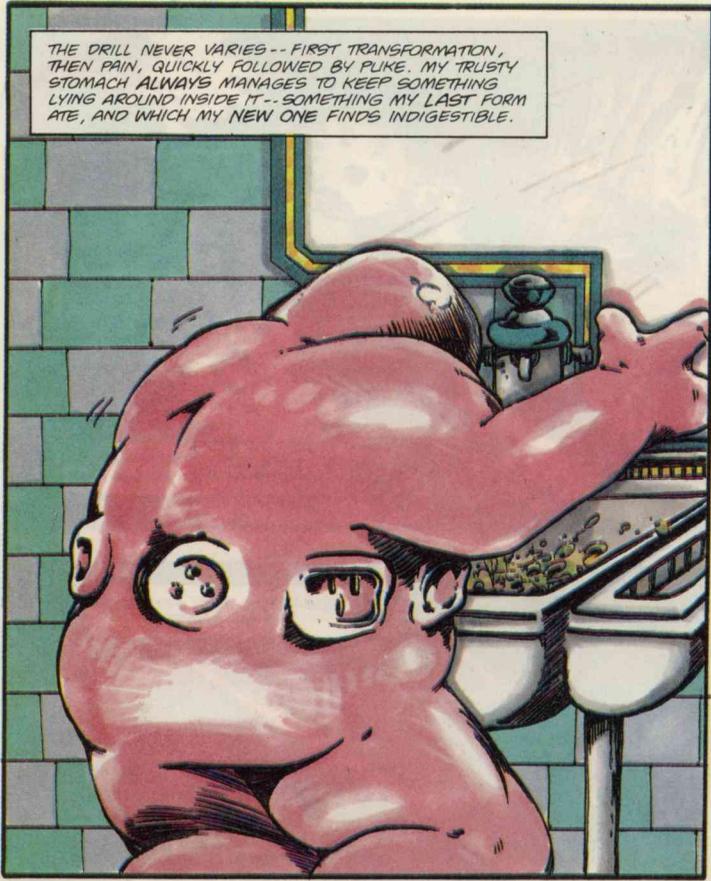


MY MIDSECTION EXPLODED, AND AN ARRAY OF STRANGE PROTUBERANCES BROKE THROUGH MY SKIN.

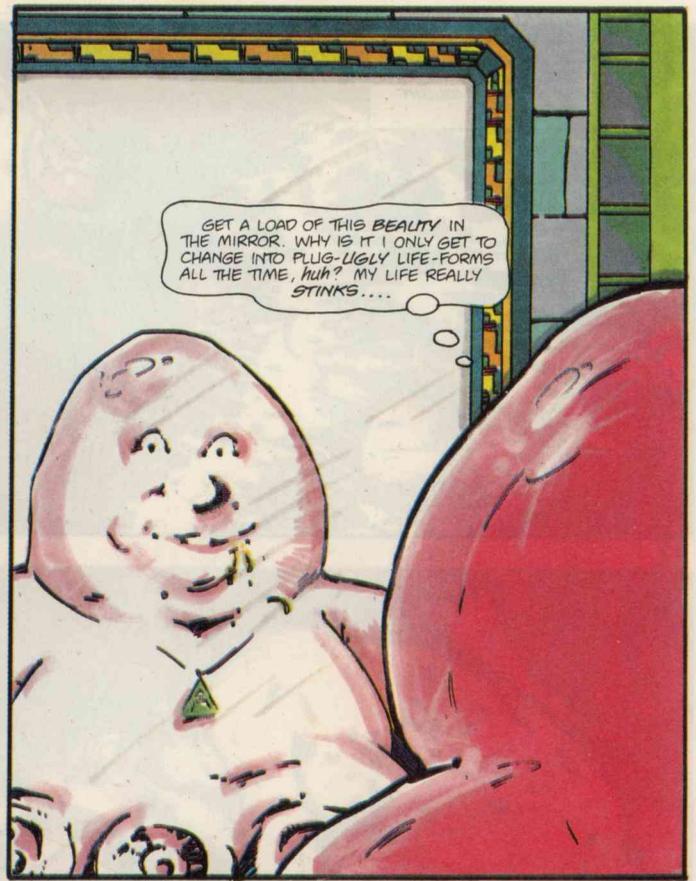


AND THEN IT WAS DONE--A COUPLE OF SECONDS THAT LASTED AN ETERNITY. THE PAIN WAS GONE, BUT I FELT LIKE MICROWAVED SHIT.

THE DRILL NEVER VARIES -- FIRST TRANSFORMATION, THEN PAIN, QUICKLY FOLLOWED BY PUKE. MY TRUSTY STOMACH ALWAYS MANAGES TO KEEP SOMETHING LYING AROUND INSIDE IT -- SOMETHING MY LAST FORM ATE, AND WHICH MY NEW ONE FINDS INDIGESTIBLE.



GET A LOAD OF THIS BEAUTY IN THE MIRROR. WHY IS IT I ONLY GET TO CHANGE INTO PLUG-UGLY LIFE-FORMS ALL THE TIME, huh? MY LIFE REALLY STINKS....



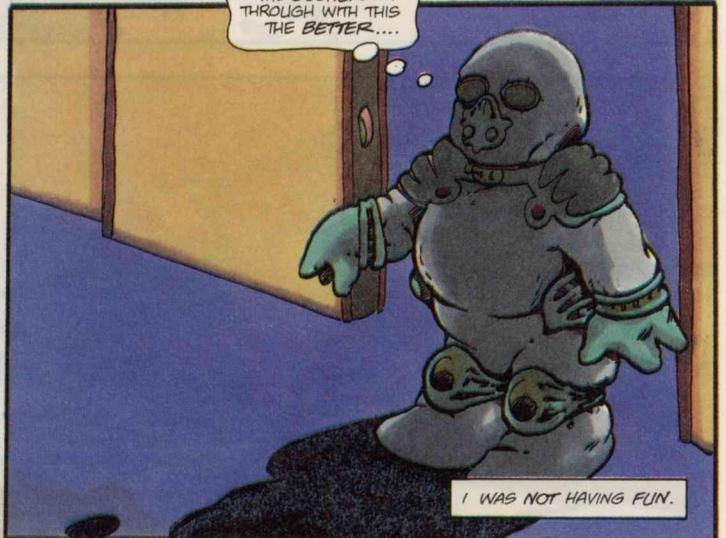
THE CHIP DOWNLOADED MORE INFORMATION INTO MY CONSCIOUS-ACCESSIBLE FOREBRAIN, BRIEFING ME ON THE SILLY BEAST I HAD TURNED INTO AND THE MATERIAL I WAS SUPPOSED TO SECURE FROM ITS HOME-WORLD -- A PLANETARY SYSTEM THAT SOUNDED LIKE "LALA."



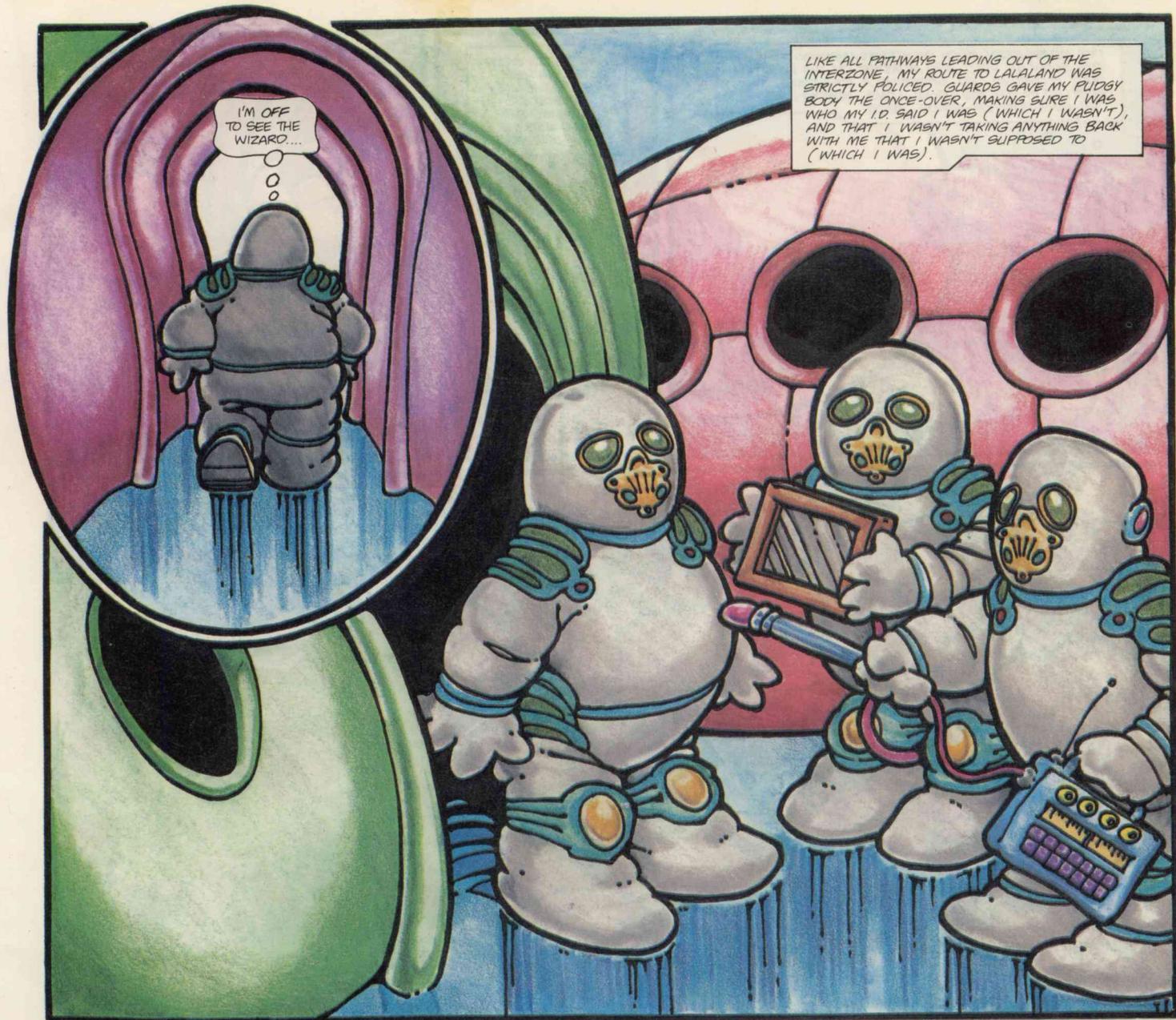
THE MORE I LEARNED ABOUT THIS LALA PLACE, AND WORSE, WHAT THESE GOOFY-LOOKING THINGS AROUND MY WAIST WERE USED FOR -- I DON'T EVEN WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT NOW -- THE CRANKIER I GOT.



THE SOONER I'M THROUGH WITH THIS THE BETTER....



I WAS NOT HAVING FUN.



I'M OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD....

LIKE ALL PATHWAYS LEADING OUT OF THE INTERZONE, MY ROUTE TO LALALAND WAS STRICTLY POLICED. GUARDS GAVE MY PUDSY BODY THE ONCE-OVER, MAKING SURE I WAS WHO MY I.D. SAID I WAS (WHICH I WASN'T), AND THAT I WASN'T TAKING ANYTHING BACK WITH ME THAT I WASN'T SUPPOSED TO (WHICH I WAS).



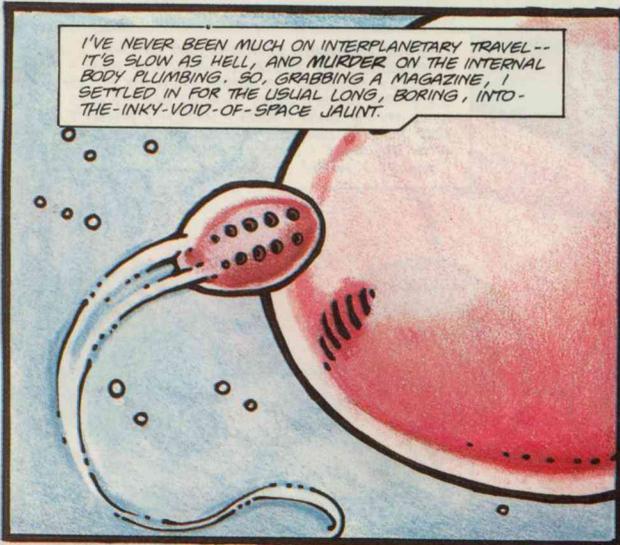
BUT I PASSED THEIR MACHINE-MUSTER WITHOUT A HITCH, AND THEY WAVED ME ON TO A SHIP WAITING TO ROCKET OFF TO LALALAND.



WHAT A HAPPY-LOOKING BLINCH THOSE LALALIANS WERE....



AND DAMNED IF THAT FEELING WASN'T CATCHY. HORMONES I'LL BET.



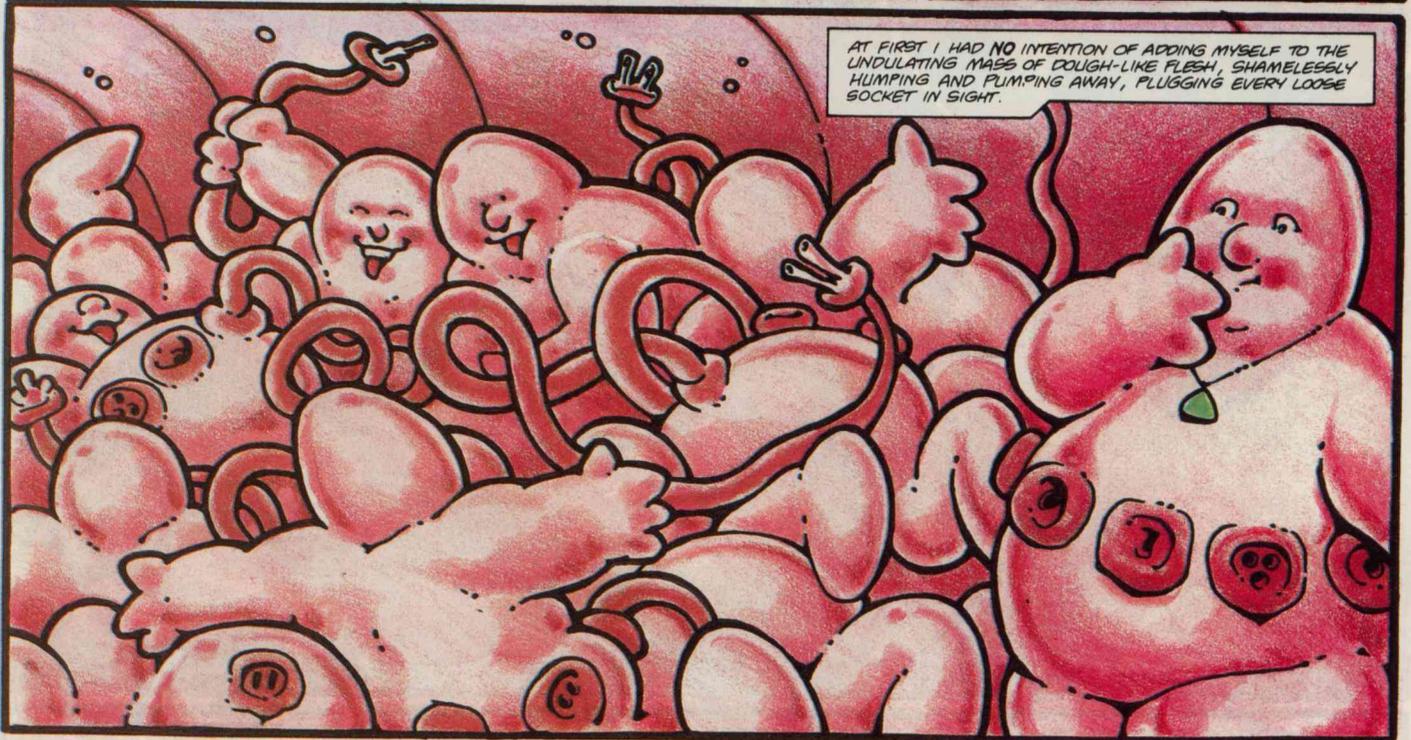
I'VE NEVER BEEN MUCH ON INTERPLANETARY TRAVEL-- IT'S SLOW AS HELL, AND MURDER ON THE INTERNAL BODY PLUMBING. SO, GRABBING A MAGAZINE, I SETTLED IN FOR THE USUAL LONG, BORING, INTO-THE-INKY-VOID-OF-SPACE JAUNT.



AND DISCOVERED THE RATHER UNIQUE LALALIAN METHOD OF LIVENING UP DULL ZERO-G SPACE JOURNEYS...



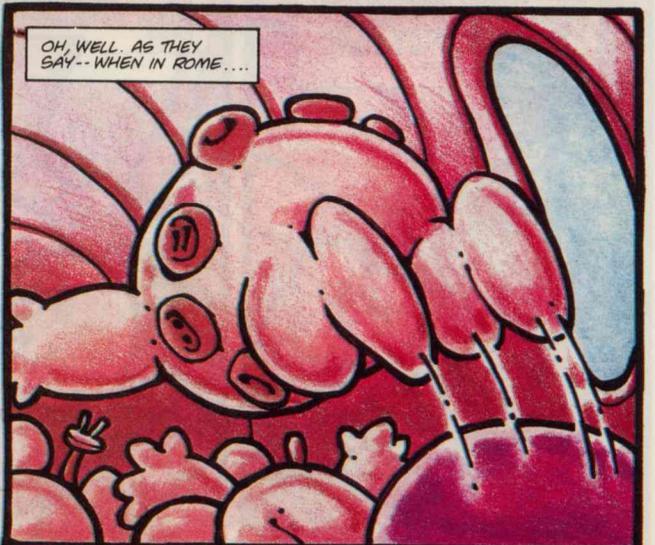
A FUN-LOVING BUNCH INDEED.



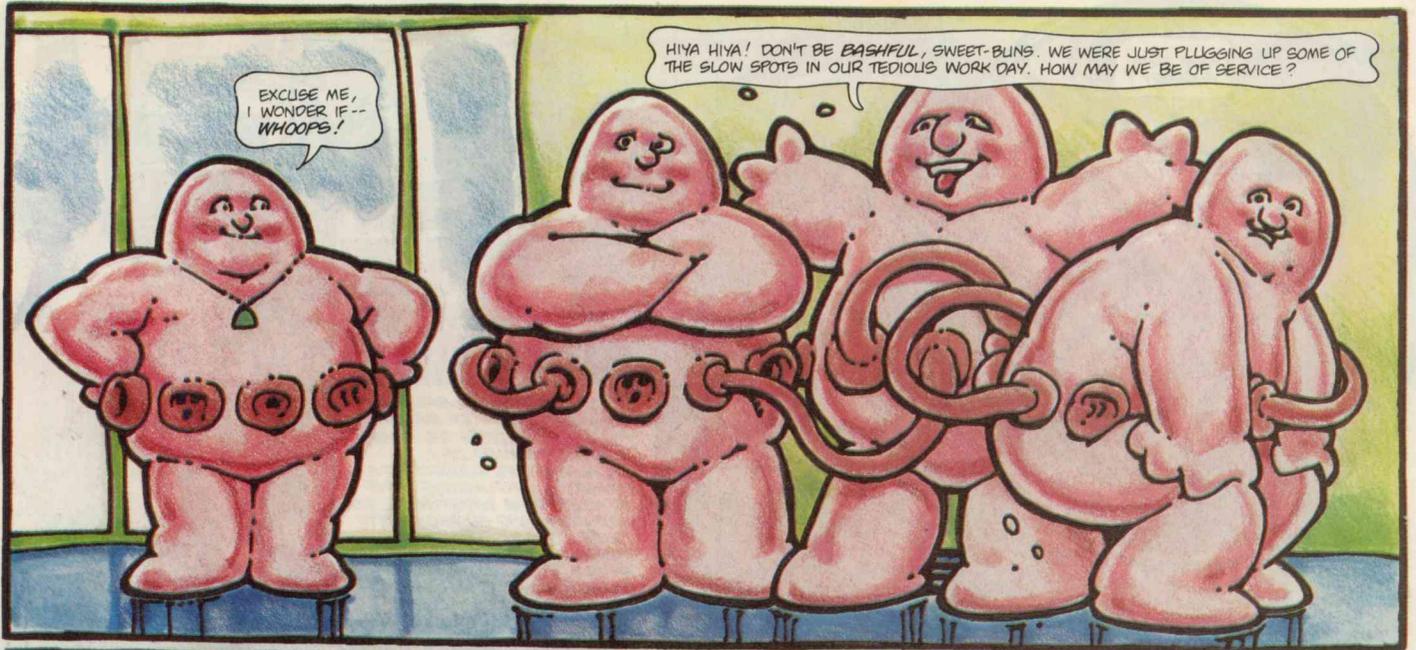
AT FIRST I HAD NO INTENTION OF ADDING MYSELF TO THE UNDULATING MASS OF DOUGH-LIKE FLESH, SHAMELESSLY HUMPING AND PUMPING AWAY, PLUGGING EVERY LOOSE SOCKET IN SIGHT.



UNTIL MY OWN SET OF CUTE LITTLE THINGIES GOT A WHIFF OF THE ACTION, AND WHINED OTHERWISE AT ME.

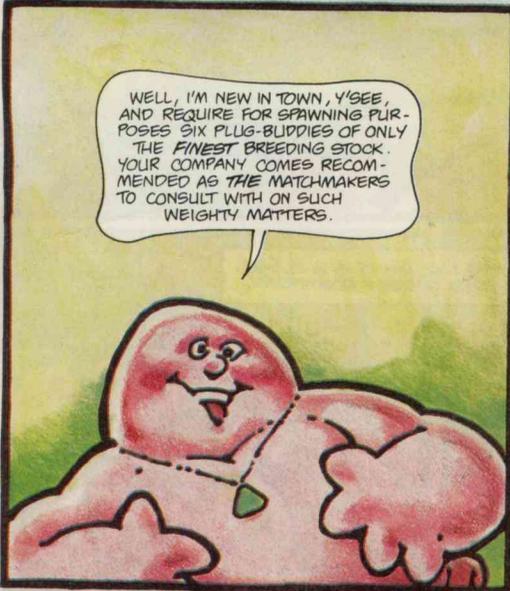


OH, WELL. AS THEY SAY-- WHEN IN ROME...



EXCUSE ME, I WONDER IF-- WHOOPS!

HIYA HIYA! DON'T BE BASHFUL, SWEET-BUNS. WE WERE JUST PLUGGING UP SOME OF THE SLOW SPOTS IN OUR TEDIOUS WORK DAY. HOW MAY WE BE OF SERVICE?



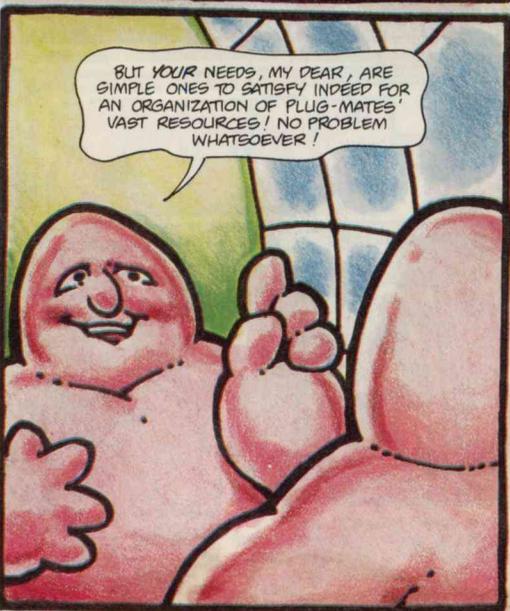
WELL, I'M NEW IN TOWN, Y'SEE, AND REQUIRE FOR SPAWNING PUR-POSES SIX PLUG-BUDDIES OF ONLY THE FINEST BREEDING STOCK. YOUR COMPANY COMES RECOMMENDED AS THE MATCHMAKERS TO CONSULT WITH ON SUCH WEIGHTY MATTERS.



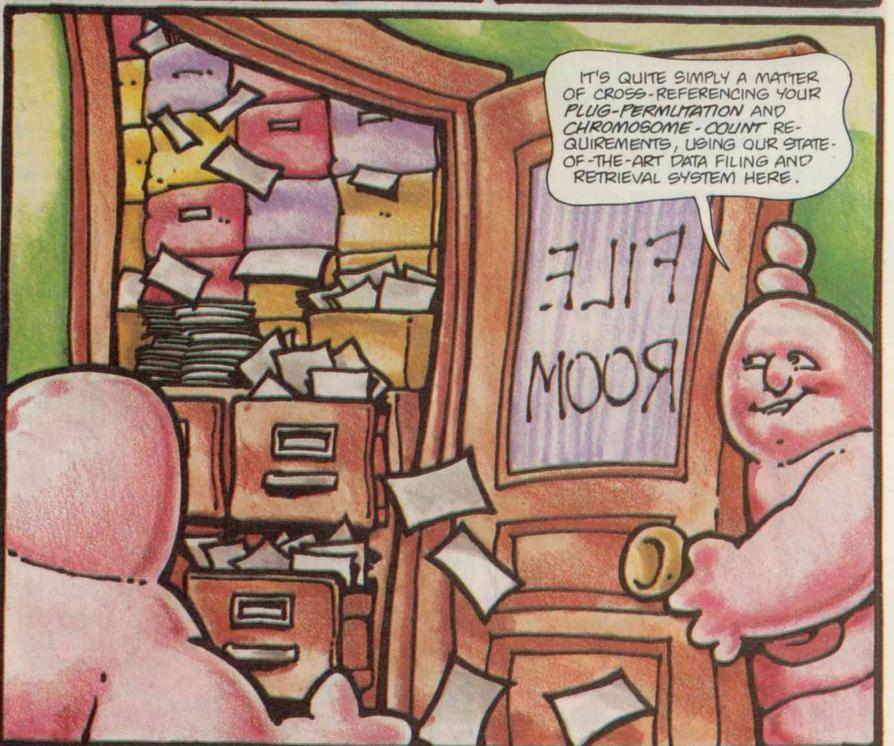
WORRY NO MORE, MY DELICATE LITTLE PUFF PASTRY! IF YOU'LL JUST WADDLE INTO MY OFFICE...



YOU HAVE INDEED JIGGLED DOWN TO THE RIGHT PLACE, TWINKIE-THIGHS! PLUG-MATES OFFERS LALALAND'S MOST COURTEOUS, EFFICIENT, AND WIDE-RANGING MATCH SERVICE-- PRETZEL PLAYS OUR SPECIALTY!



BUT YOUR NEEDS, MY DEAR, ARE SIMPLE ONES TO SATISFY INDEED FOR AN ORGANIZATION OF PLUG-MATES' VAST RESOURCES! NO PROBLEM WHATSOEVER!



IT'S QUITE SIMPLY A MATTER OF CROSS-REFERENCING YOUR PLUG-PERMUTATION AND CHROMOSOME-COUNT REQUIREMENTS, USING OUR STATE-OF-THE-ART DATA FILING AND RETRIEVAL SYSTEM HERE.



SHOULDN'T TAKE BUT A MOMENT, SWEET-CAKES....

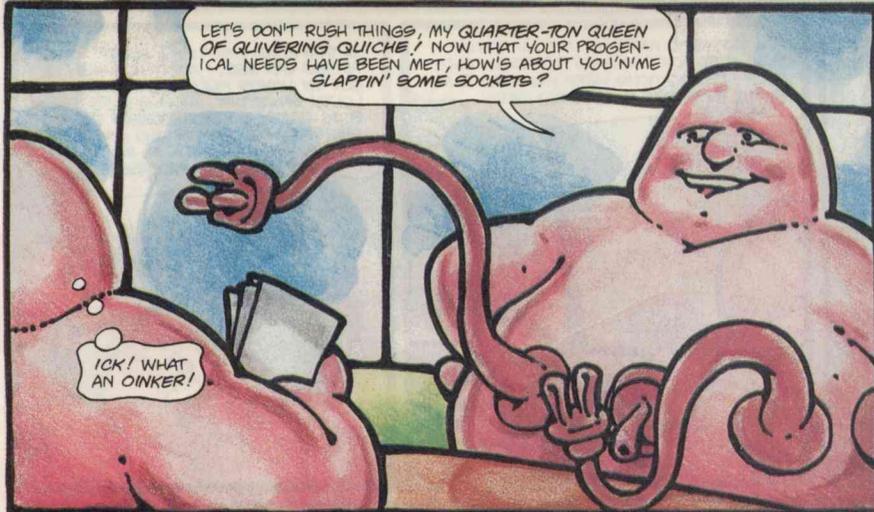


VOILA! A SEXTET OF SEX-PETS FOR MY MARSHMALLOW MOMMA!



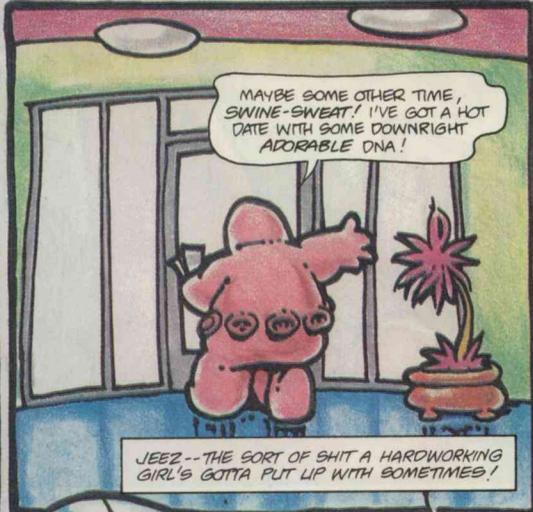
THE DOUGHBOY GEEK WAS GETTING A TAD TOO FAMILIAR FOR MY TASTES. I HAD A GOOD IDEA OF WHAT WAS COMING....

THIS OUGHTA COVER IT, hmmm?



LET'S DON'T RUSH THINGS, MY QUARTER-TON QUEEN OF QUIVERING QUIICHE! NOW THAT YOUR PROGENICAL NEEDS HAVE BEEN MET, HOW'S ABOUT YOU'N'ME SLAPPIN' SOME SOCKETS?

ICK! WHAT AN OINKER!



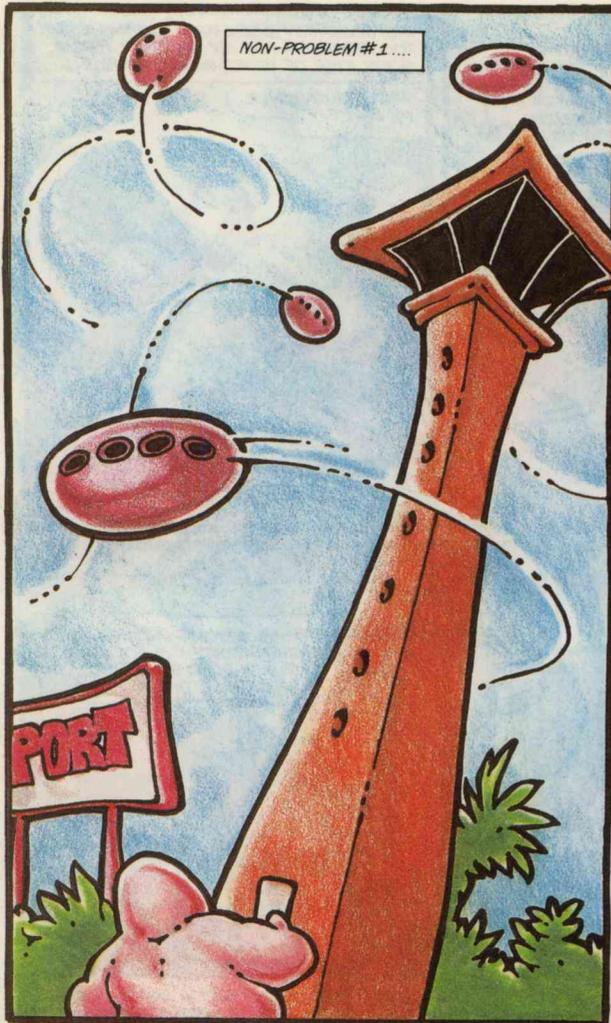
MAYBE SOME OTHER TIME, SWINE-SWEAT! I'VE GOT A HOT DATE WITH SOME DOWNRIGHT ADORABLE DNA!

JEEZ -- THE SORT OF SHIT A HARDWORKING GIRL'S GOTTA PUT UP WITH SOMETIMES!



THIS BEGAN MY LALALAND ORGY-ODYSSEY. IT WAS NOW UP TO ME TO TRACK DOWN EACH OF THE HOSE-HOUNDS ON MY LIST, AND GATHER THEM TOGETHER FOR THE UNPLEASANT EVENT....

AS THE PORKER SAID, "NO PROBLEM WHATSOEVER!"

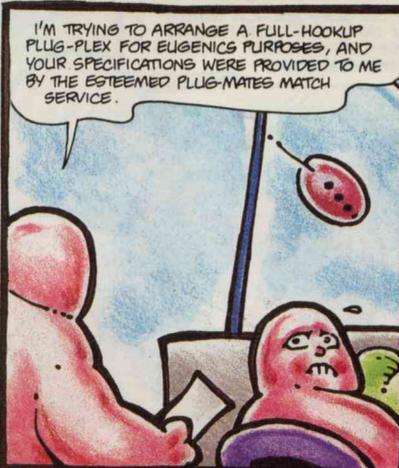


NON-PROBLEM #1...

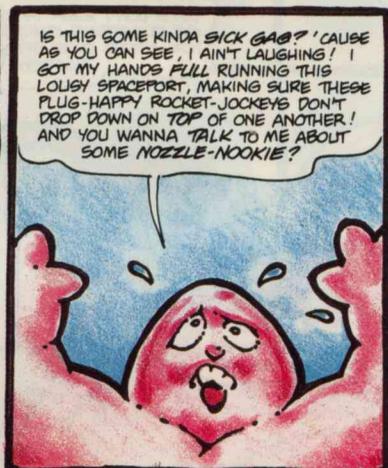


UH, EXCUSE ME, DO YOU HAVE A MOMENT? I NEED TO SPEAK TO YOU ON AN URGENT PERSONAL MATTER.

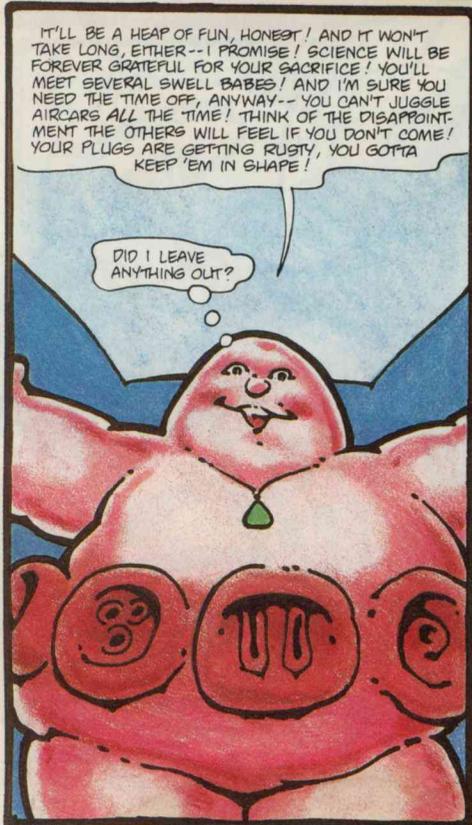
HAVEN'T THESE CLOWNS EVER HEARD OF A FLIGHT PLAN?



I'M TRYING TO ARRANGE A FULL-HOOKUP PLUG-PLEX FOR EUGENICS PURPOSES, AND YOUR SPECIFICATIONS WERE PROVIDED TO ME BY THE ESTEEMED PLUG-MATES MATCH SERVICE.

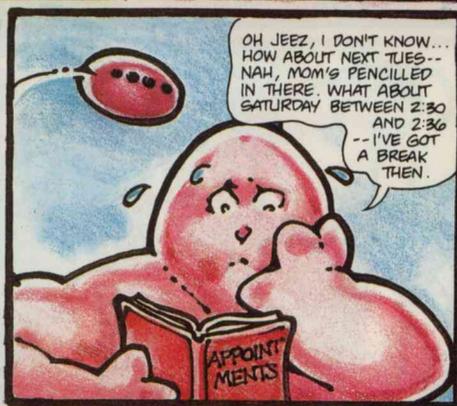


IS THIS SOME KINDA SICK GAG? 'CAUSE AS YOU CAN SEE, I AIN'T LAUGHING! I GOT MY HANDS FULL RUNNING THIS LOUSY SPACEPORT, MAKING SURE THESE PLUG-HAPPY ROCKET-JOCKEYS DON'T DROP DOWN ON TOP OF ONE ANOTHER! AND YOU WANNA TALK TO ME ABOUT SOME NOZZLE-NOOKIE?



IT'LL BE A HEAP OF FUN, HONEST! AND IT WON'T TAKE LONG, EITHER-- I PROMISE! SCIENCE WILL BE FOREVER GRATEFUL FOR YOUR SACRIFICE! YOU'LL MEET SEVERAL SWELL BABES! AND I'M SURE YOU NEED THE TIME OFF, ANYWAY-- YOU CAN'T JUGGLE AIRCARS ALL THE TIME! THINK OF THE DISAPPOINTMENT THE OTHERS WILL FEEL IF YOU DON'T COME! YOUR PLUGS ARE GETTING RUSTY, YOU GOTTA KEEP 'EM IN SHAPE!

DID I LEAVE ANYTHING OUT?

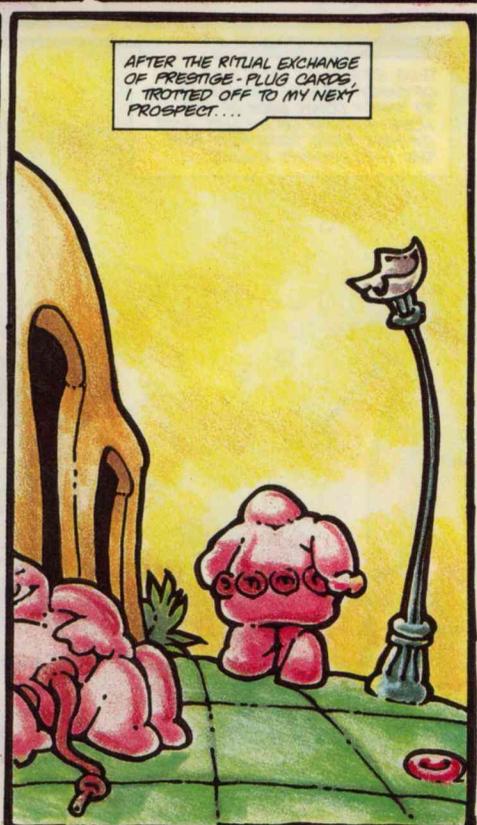


OH JEEZ, I DON'T KNOW... HOW ABOUT NEXT TUES-- NAH, MOM'S PENCILLED IN THERE. WHAT ABOUT SATURDAY BETWEEN 2:30 AND 2:36 -- I'VE GOT A BREAK THEN.



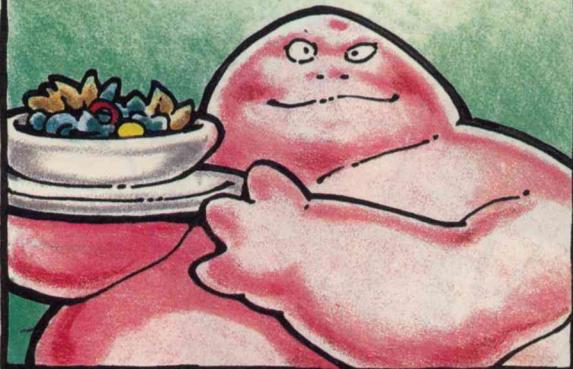
YEAH! SOUNDS GREAT! IT'S A DATE!

When! CAN I GET BACK TO WORK NOW?



AFTER THE RITUAL EXCHANGE OF PRESTIGE-PLUG CARDS, I TROTTED OFF TO MY NEXT PROSPECT...

NEXT ON THE LIST WAS A WAITER WHO, BY THE LOOK OF IT, COULDN'T BE TRUSTED TO DELIVER ALL THE FOOD HE WAS CARRYING TO THE TABLE IT WAS INTENDED FOR. HIS OWN MOUTH, I SUSPECT, SHORTSTOPPED A GREAT DEAL OF IT.



AN APPEAL TO HIS APPETITES SHOULD DO THE TRICK.



YO! YOU BIG HUNK OF HANDSOME GARÇON, YOU!

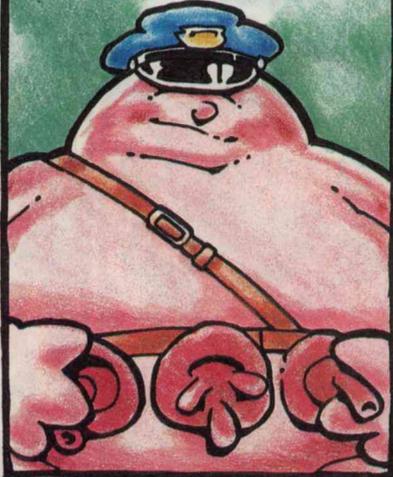
NEXT WAS ONE OF THE TOWN'S FEW WORKING GARBAGE GUYS....



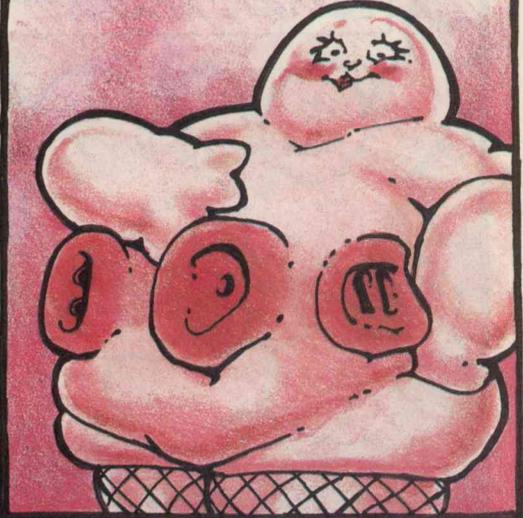
THEN A POLITICIAN, WHO DISINGENUOUSLY PRETENDED IGNORANCE OF SUCH AFFAIRS...



AND A TOUGH MACHO COP, WHO WAS GRACIOUSLY AT MY SERVICE.



NUMBER SIX WAS A BIT OF A SURPRISE--



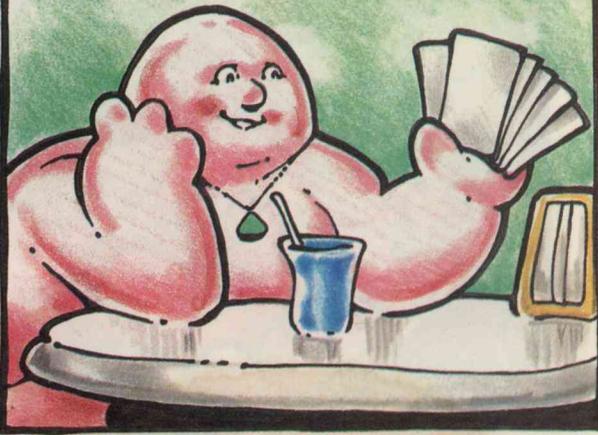
-- A STREETWALKING, MICRO-CRED SOCKET-STRUMPET, WHO REFUSED TO ENTERTAIN ANY OFFER WITHOUT AN EXCHANGE OF LEGAL TENDER.

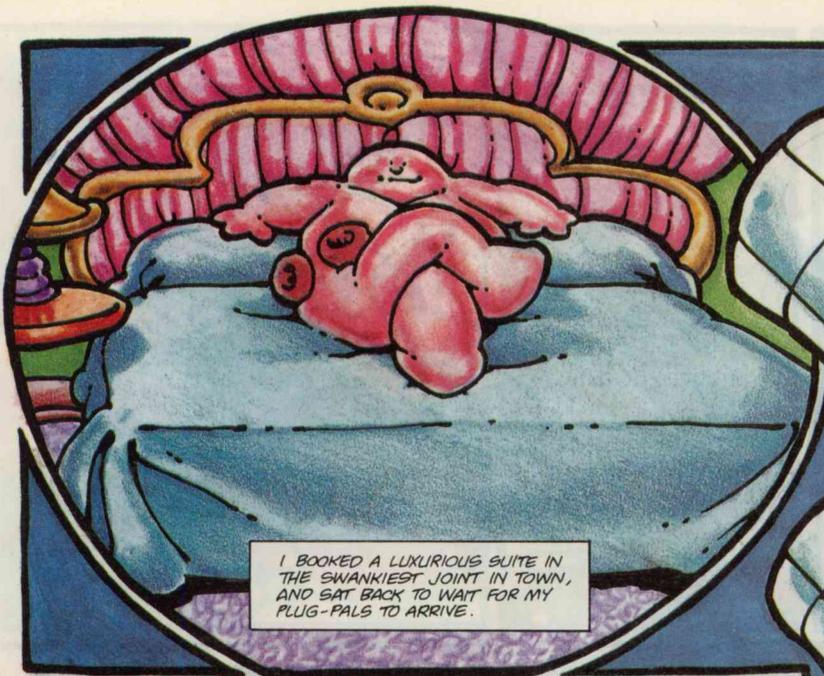


AFTER SOME CLEVER NEGOTIATING PLOYS ON MY PART, WE REACHED AN AMICABLE AGREEMENT.

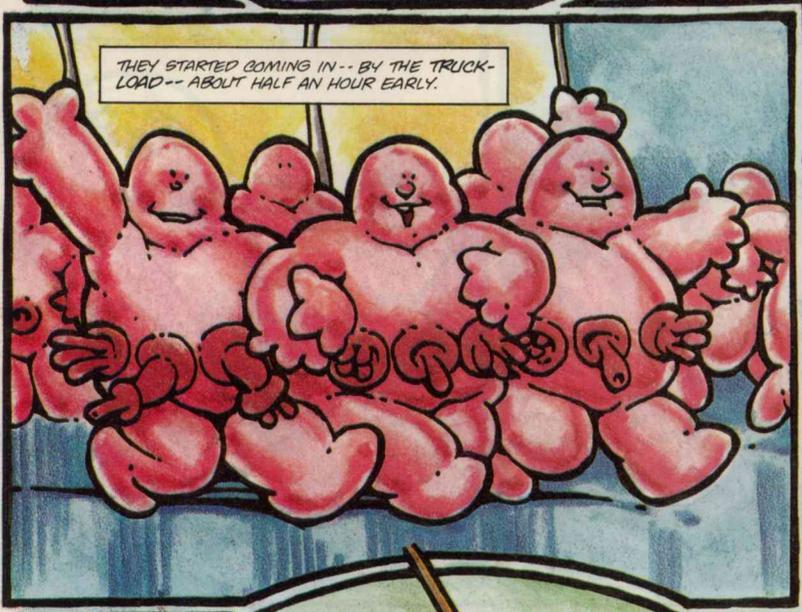


ALL ARRANGED. NOW CAME THE EASY PART-- SECURING THE NECESSARY SAMPLES OF LALALIAN JOINT JUICE....

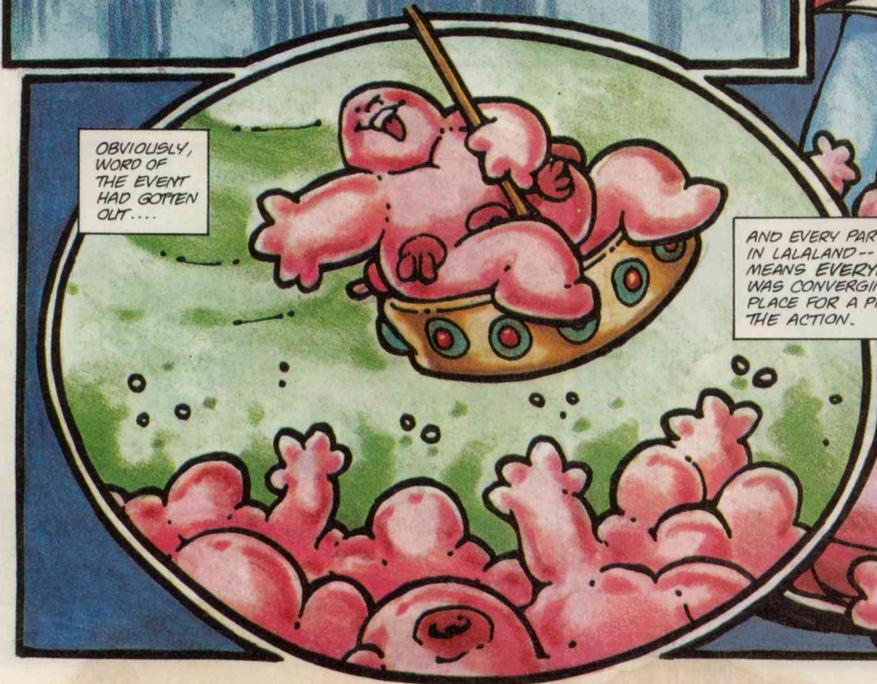




I BOOKED A LUXURIOUS SUITE IN THE SWANKIEST JOINT IN TOWN, AND SAT BACK TO WAIT FOR MY PLUG-PALS TO ARRIVE.



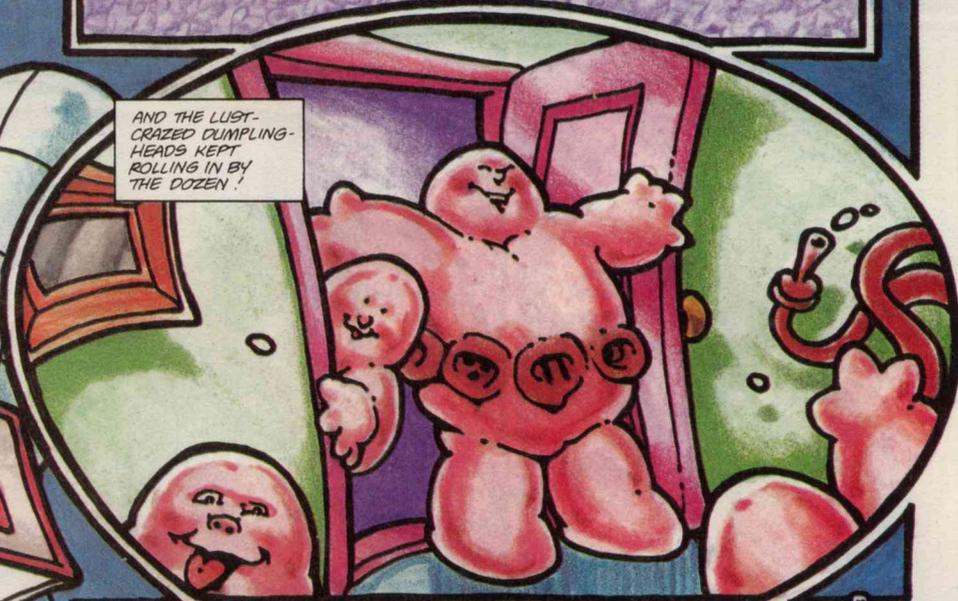
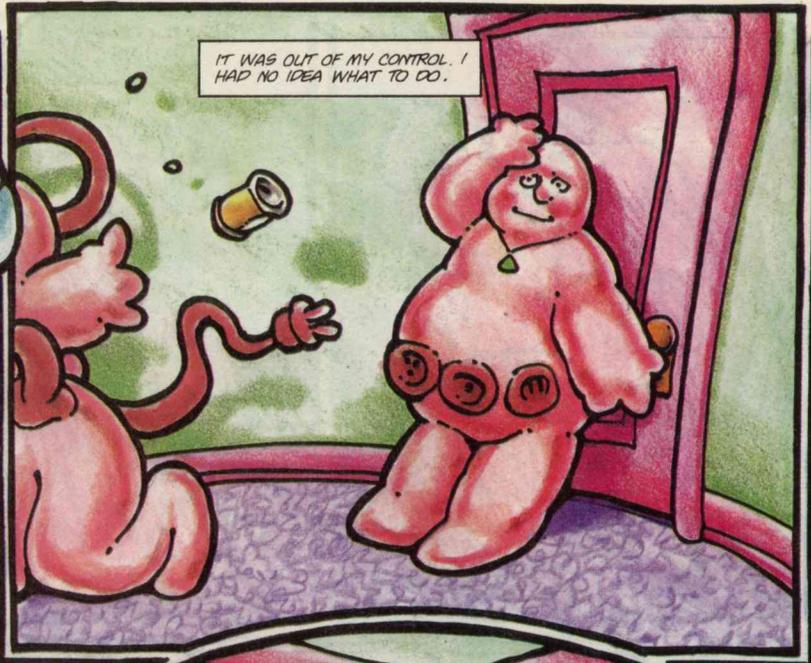
THEY STARTED COMING IN-- BY THE TRUCK-LOAD-- ABOUT HALF AN HOUR EARLY.



OBVIOUSLY, WORD OF THE EVENT HAD GOTTEN OUT....

AND EVERY PARTY-HOUND IN LALALAND-- WHICH MEANS EVERYBODY-- WAS CONVERGING ON THE PLACE FOR A PIECE OF THE ACTION.

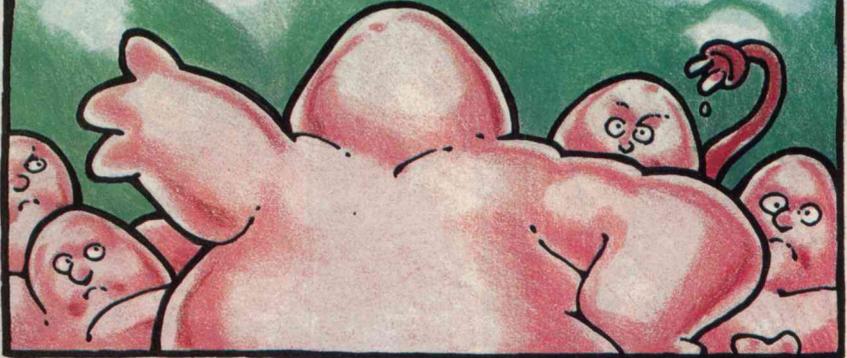
PLUG



I READ 'EM
THE RIOT ACT.

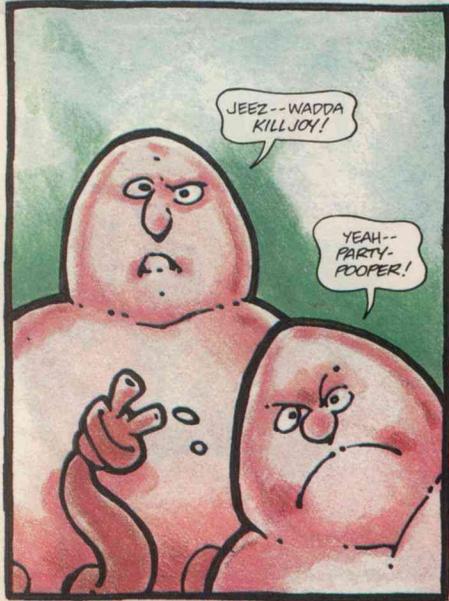


NOW LOOK HERE, YOU GUYS -- I INVITED YOU ALL HERE FOR A SPECIFIC, SCIENTIFIC PURPOSE, NOT JUST TO PARTY YOUR PORCINE LITTLE BRAINS OUT! SO STOP HAVING FUN, AND LET ME GET MY JOB DONE! AFTER I'M THROUGH YOU CAN DO WHATEVER THE HELL YOU PLEASE! GOT THAT?



JEEZ -- WADDA
KILLJOY!

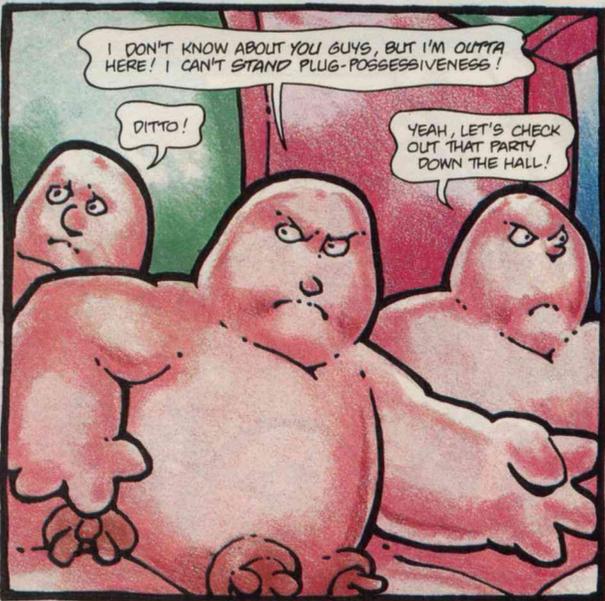
YEAH --
PARTY-
POOPER!



I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU GUYS, BUT I'M OUTTA
HERE! I CAN'T STAND PLUG-POSSESSIVENESS!

DITTO!

YEAH, LET'S CHECK
OUT THAT PARTY
DOWN THE HALL!

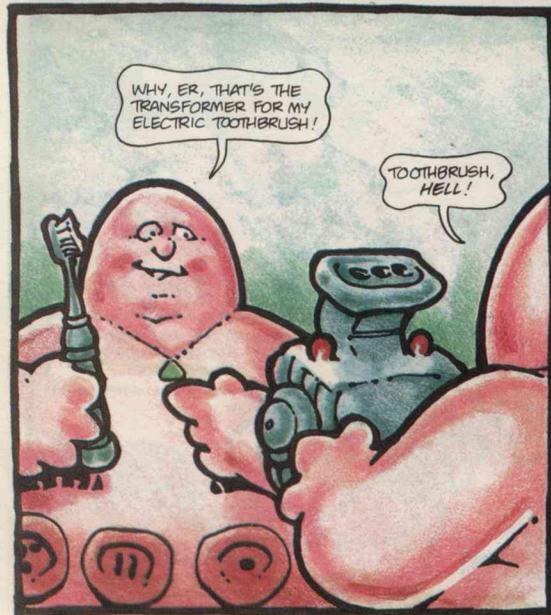


HOLD IT FELLAHS!
CHECK THIS OUT --
LOOKS PROMISING!

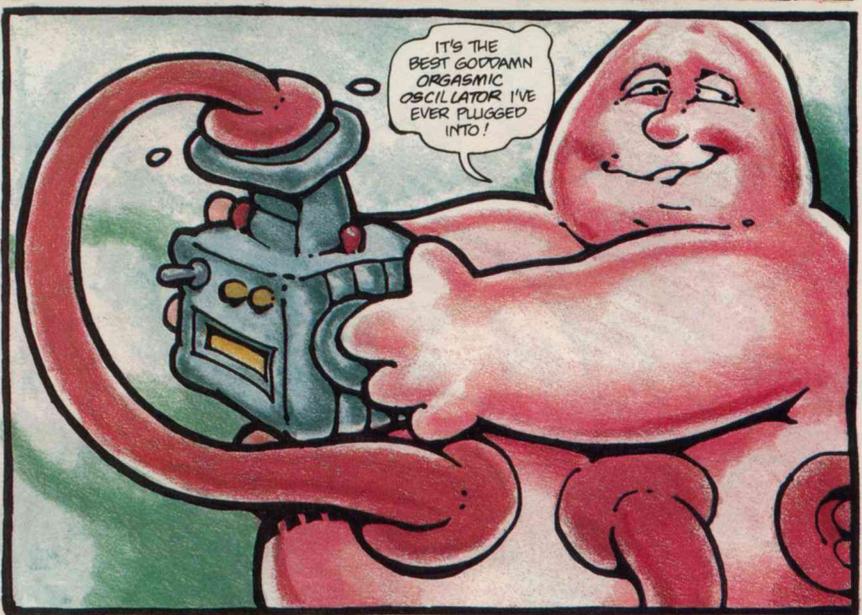


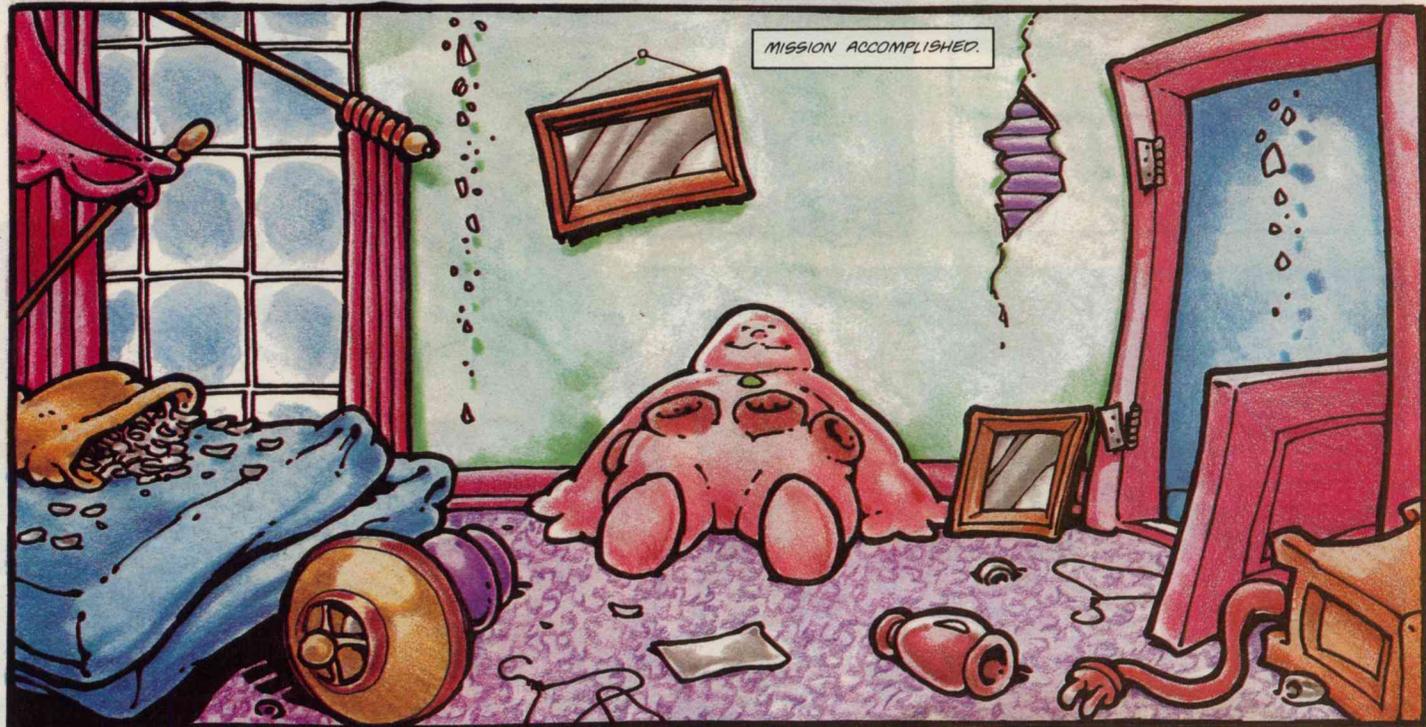
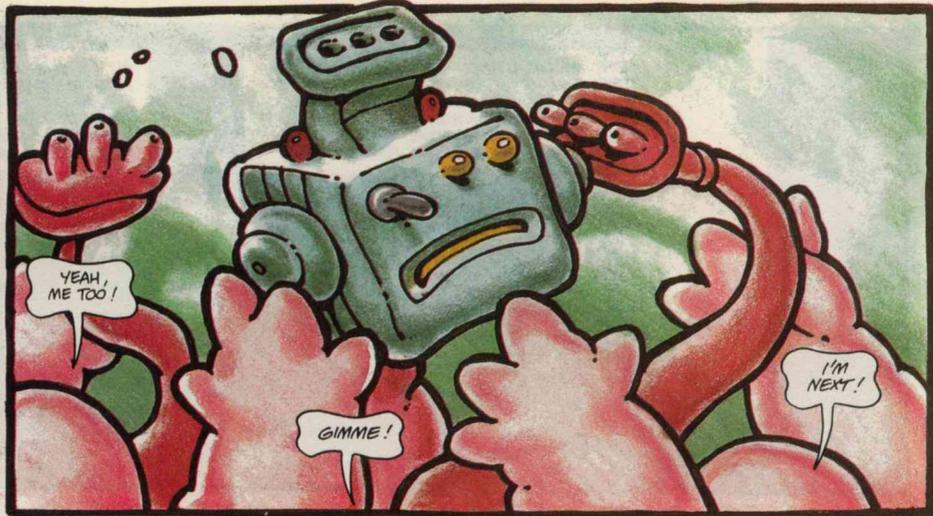
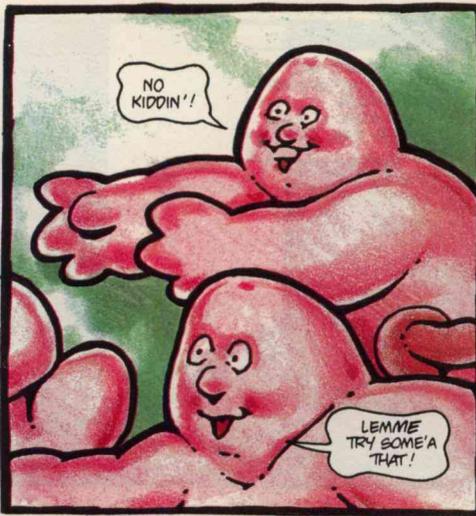
WHY, ER, THAT'S THE
TRANSFORMER FOR MY
ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH!

TOOTHBRUSH,
HELL!



IT'S THE
BEST GODDAMN
ORGASMIC
OSCILLATOR I'VE
EVER PLUGGED
INTO!



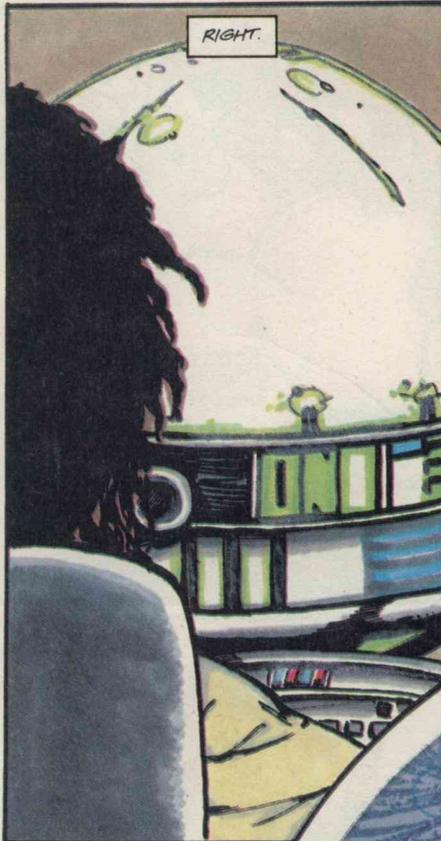


YEAH, SO LALALAND-- THE PLANET OF THE PERPETUAL PLUS PARTY-- TURNED OUT TO BE KINDA FLIN. SO WHAT. I WAS STILL GLAD TO BE BACK HOME, AND DAMN GLAD TO BE BACK IN MY NORMAL FORM. I MEAN, THIS OLD BODY NOW FELT POSITIVELY ANOREXIC!

BUT I WAS ALSO EXHAUSTED, AND WITH ALL THE CHANGING I HAD AHEAD OF ME-- I STILL DIDN'T KNOW EXACTLY HOW MANY-- I KNEW I WAS GONNA BE WIPED OUT BY THE TIME THIS JOB WAS DONE.



SOMETHING TOLD ME I WAS REALLY GONNA NEED COCA-FARBEN'S LIFE-PROLONGING CONCOCTION WHEN ALL THIS WAS THROUGH.



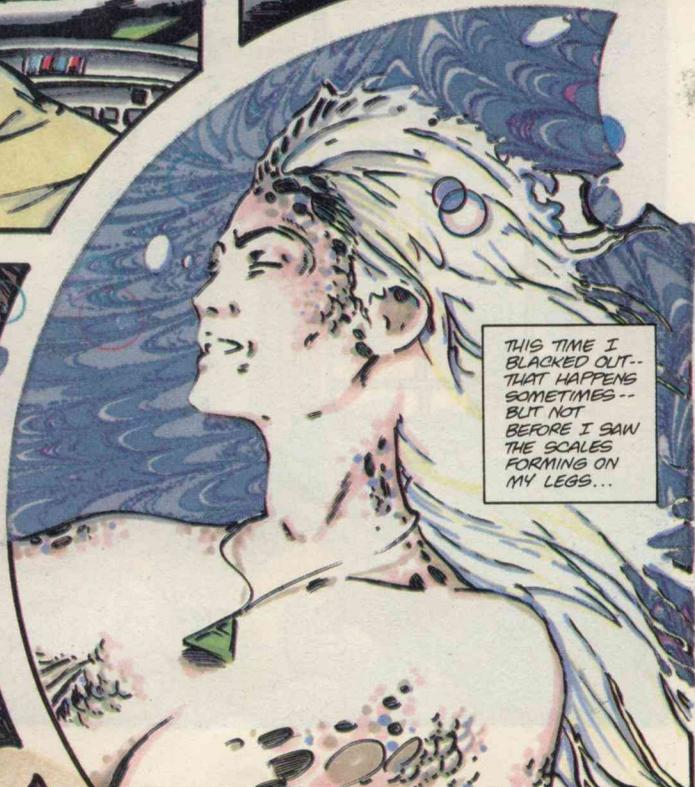
RIGHT.



IF ONLY I KNEW THEN.... BUT I DIDN'T, DID I ?



SO, IN MY BLISSFUL IGNORANCE, I TELE-FAKED A BRIEF REPORT ON MY LALALAND ADVENTURES TO THE DIRECTOR-- THE LESS I HAD TO DEAL DIRECTLY WITH THAT CREEP THE BETTER-- AND MADE READY FOR MY NEXT TRANSFORMATION.

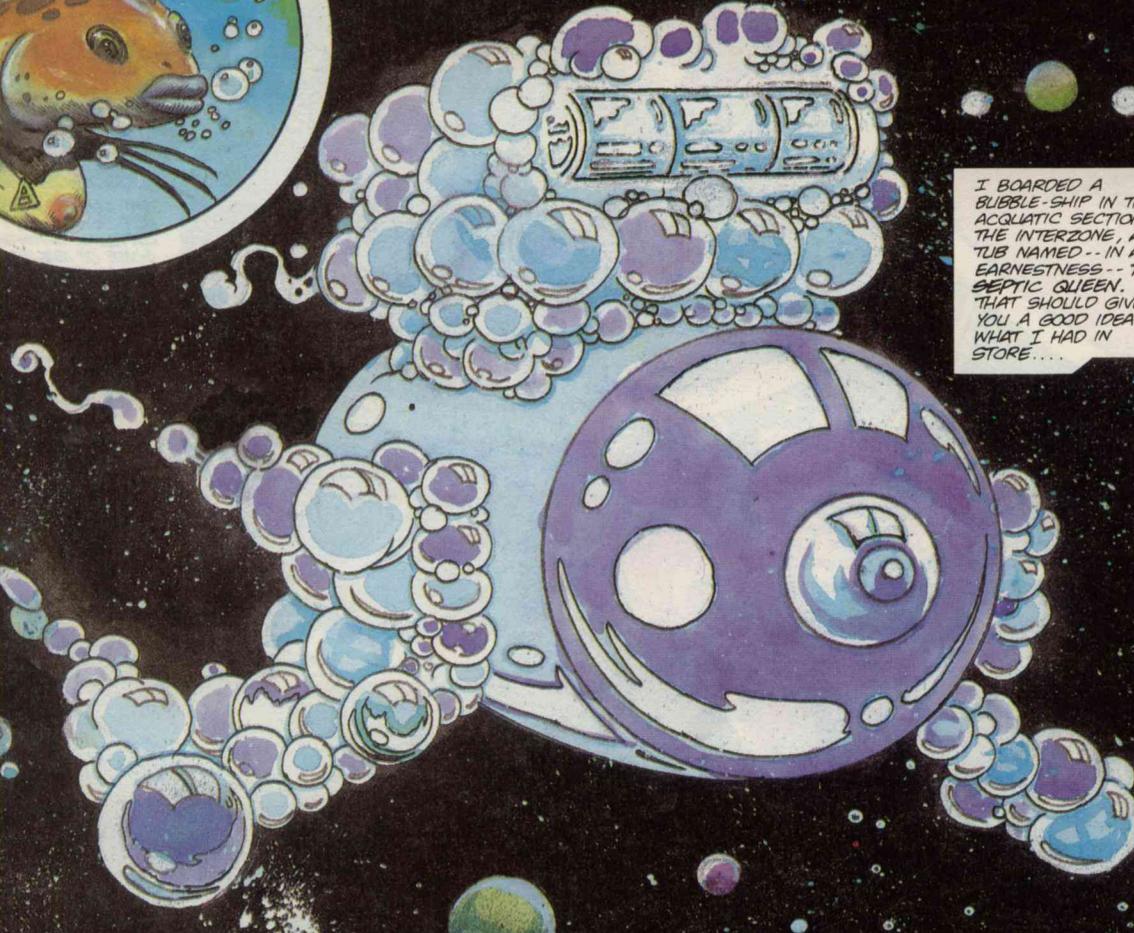


THIS TIME I BLACKED OUT-- THAT HAPPENS SOMETIMES-- BUT NOT BEFORE I SAW THE SCALES FORMING ON MY LEGS...



...AND WOKE UP A
GODDAMN FISH.

WHICH WASN'T THE WORST OF IT,
NOT BY A LONG SHOT. IT WAS THE
KIND OF FISH I WAS WHICH WAS
THE PROBLEM....



I BOARDED A
BUBBLE-SHIP IN THE
AQUATIC SECTION OF
THE INTERZONE, A
TUB NAMED -- IN ALL
EARNESTNESS -- THE
SEPTIC QUEEN.
THAT SHOULD GIVE
YOU A GOOD IDEA OF
WHAT I HAD IN
STORE....

WE WERE HEADED FOR A LIQUID-COVERED PLANET
THAT HAS NO PROPER VERBAL NAME, SINCE THE
REPTILIAN INHABITANTS COMMUNICATE NOT BY
SPEECH BUT SMELL. THEY'VE GOT AN EXTREMELY
SENSITIVE OLFACTORY SYSTEM, AND A COMPLEX,
ODOR-PRODUCING GLANDULAR SYSTEM -- BOTH
LOCATED IN THE SKIN COVERING THEIR ENTIRE
BODY.

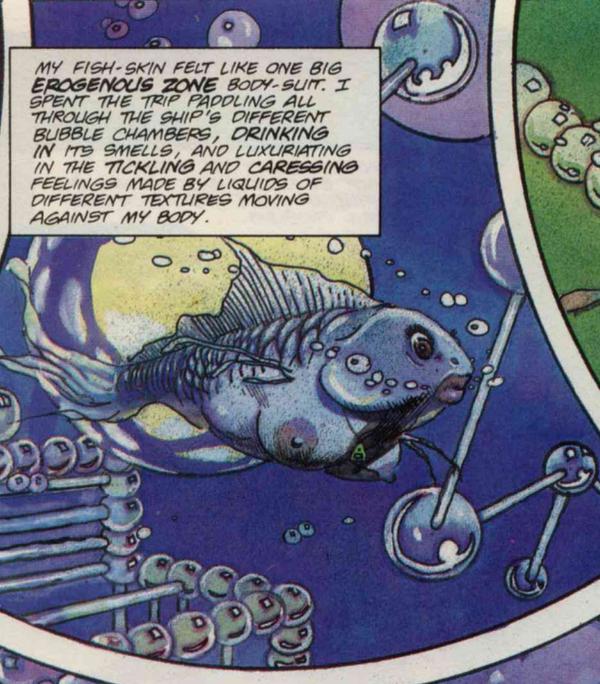


TRAVELERS THAT DO SPEAK HAVE
LOTS OF IMPROPER NAMES FOR
THE PLACE -- LIKE THE STINKHOLE,
OR NOSE HEAVEN, DEPENDING ON
THEIR PROCLINITIES.

THE LOCALS HAVE QUITE A NICE STENCH
FOR IT, SORTA WARM AND NOSTALGIC.
IT'S HARD TO DESCRIBE, BUT IT'S LIKE
A MIXTURE OF OILED WOOD, SOFT
LEATHER, AND MOM'S HOME COOKING.



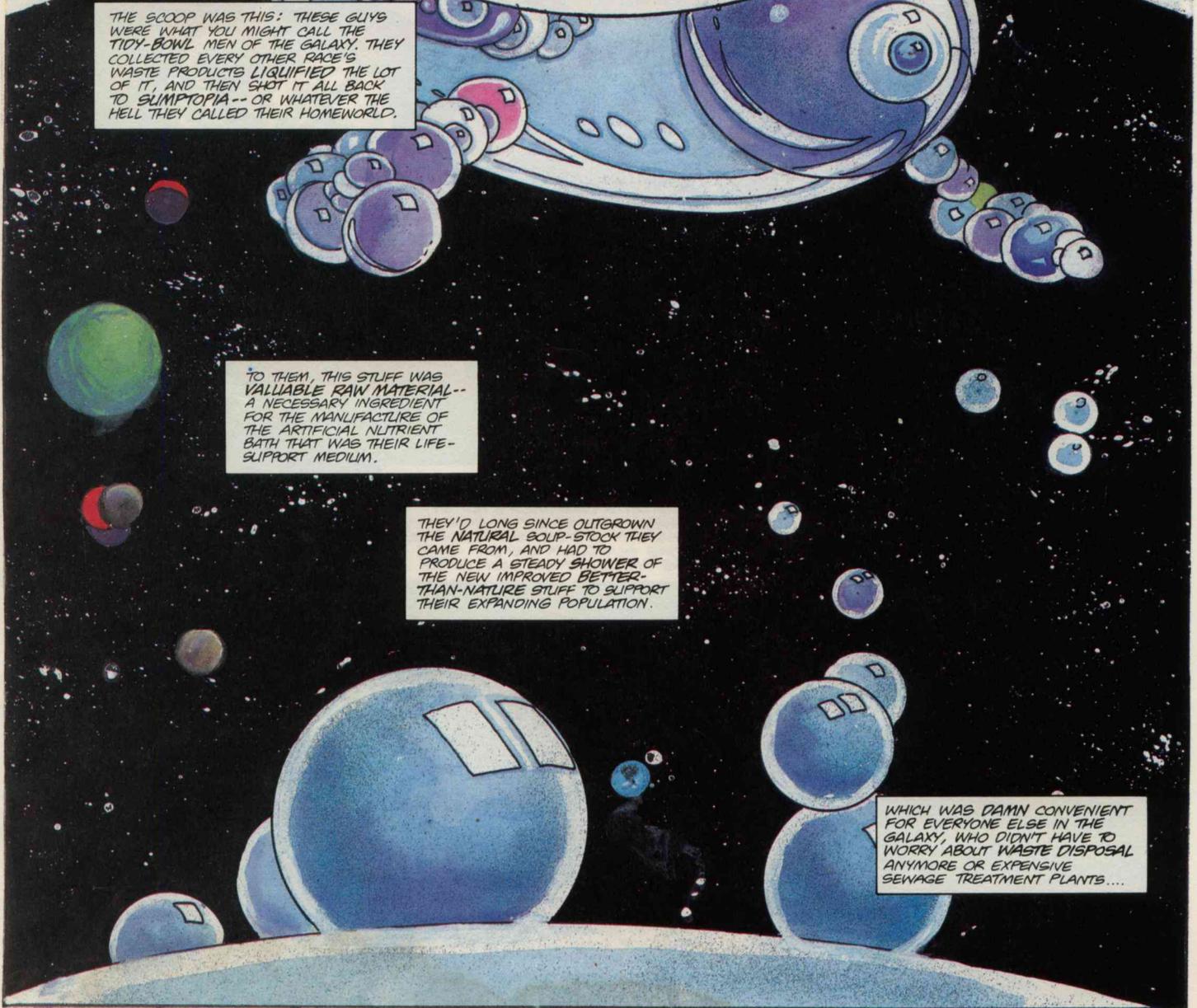
NEW BODIES ALWAYS TAKE SOME GETTING USED TO, ESPECIALLY WHEN ONE OF THE SENSES IS PARTICULARLY INTENSE. BUT THE SHOCK OF NEW, VIVIDLY EXPERIENCED SENSATIONS IS ONE OF THE FEW THINGS THAT'S FUN ABOUT THIS CHAMELEON BUSINESS.



MY FISH-SKIN FELT LIKE ONE BIG EROGENOUS ZONE BODY-SUIT. I SPENT THE TRIP PADDLING ALL THROUGH THE SHIP'S DIFFERENT BUBBLE CHAMBERS, DRINKING IN ITS SMELLS, AND LUXURIATING IN THE TICKLING AND CARESSING FEELINGS MADE BY LIQUIDS OF DIFFERENT TEXTURES MOVING AGAINST MY BODY.



THE ODORS WERE STRONG, BUT GENERALLY PLEASANT. UNTIL I SWISHED INTO SOME OF THE SEPTIC QUEEN'S CARGO TANKS, AND GOT A SNOOTFUL OF SOME OF THE SLOP THESE WACKY SCALE-TAILS WERE SHIPPING BACK HOME. YOW!

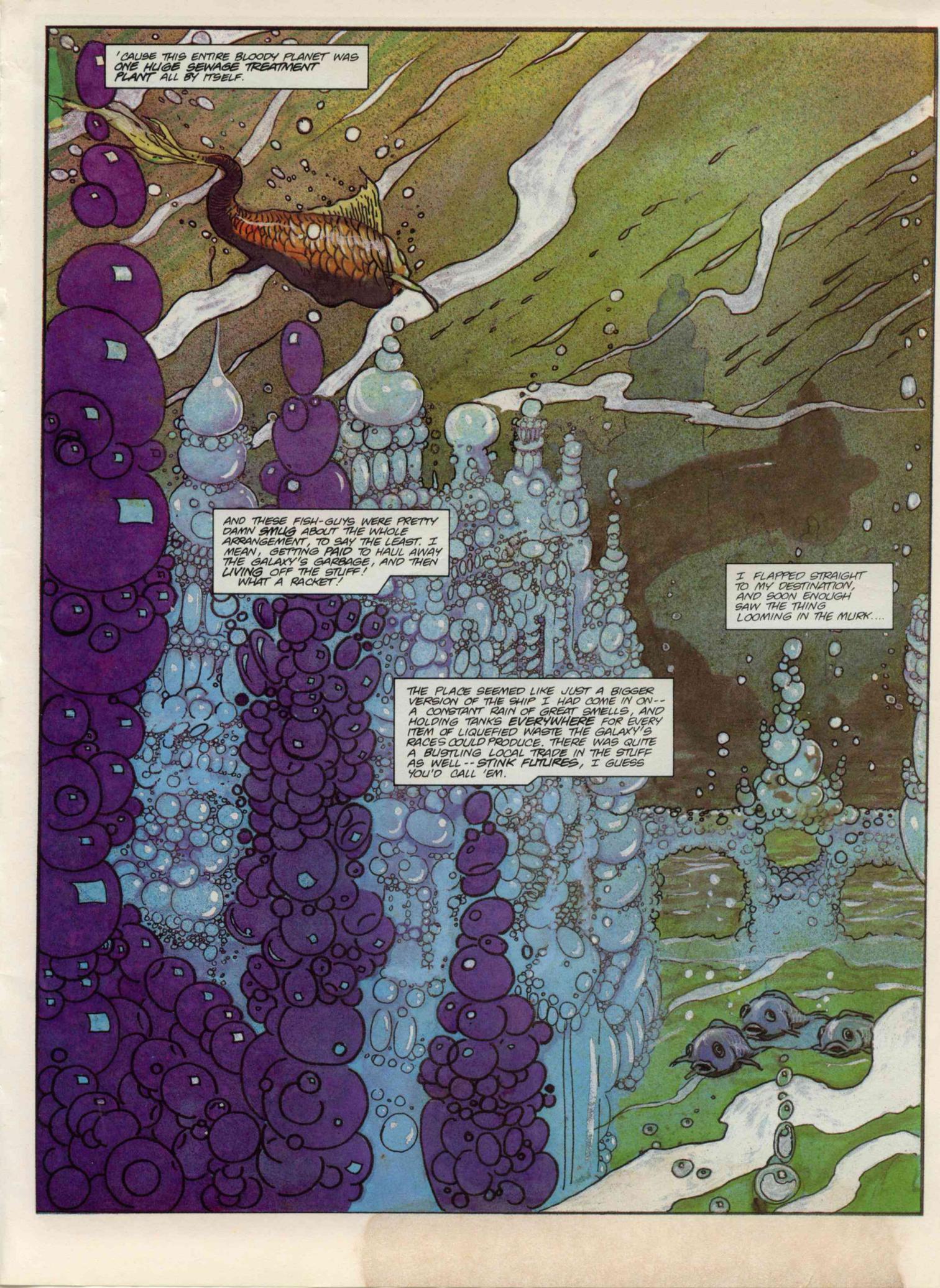


THE SCOOP WAS THIS: THESE GUYS WERE WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL THE TIDY-BOWL MEN OF THE GALAXY. THEY COLLECTED EVERY OTHER RACE'S WASTE PRODUCTS LIQUIFIED THE LOT OF IT, AND THEN SHOT IT ALL BACK TO SLUMPTOPIA-- OR WHATEVER THE HELL THEY CALLED THEIR HOMEWORLD.

TO THEM, THIS STUFF WAS VALUABLE RAW MATERIAL-- A NECESSARY INGREDIENT FOR THE MANUFACTURE OF THE ARTIFICIAL NUTRIENT BATH THAT WAS THEIR LIFE-SUPPORT MEDIUM.

THEY'D LONG SINCE OUTGROWN THE NATURAL SOUP-STOCK THEY CAME FROM, AND HAD TO PRODUCE A STEADY SHOWER OF THE NEW IMPROVED BETTER-THAN-NATURE STUFF TO SUPPORT THEIR EXPANDING POPULATION.

WHICH WAS DAMN CONVENIENT FOR EVERYONE ELSE IN THE GALAXY, WHO DIDN'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT WASTE DISPOSAL ANYMORE OR EXPENSIVE SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANTS....

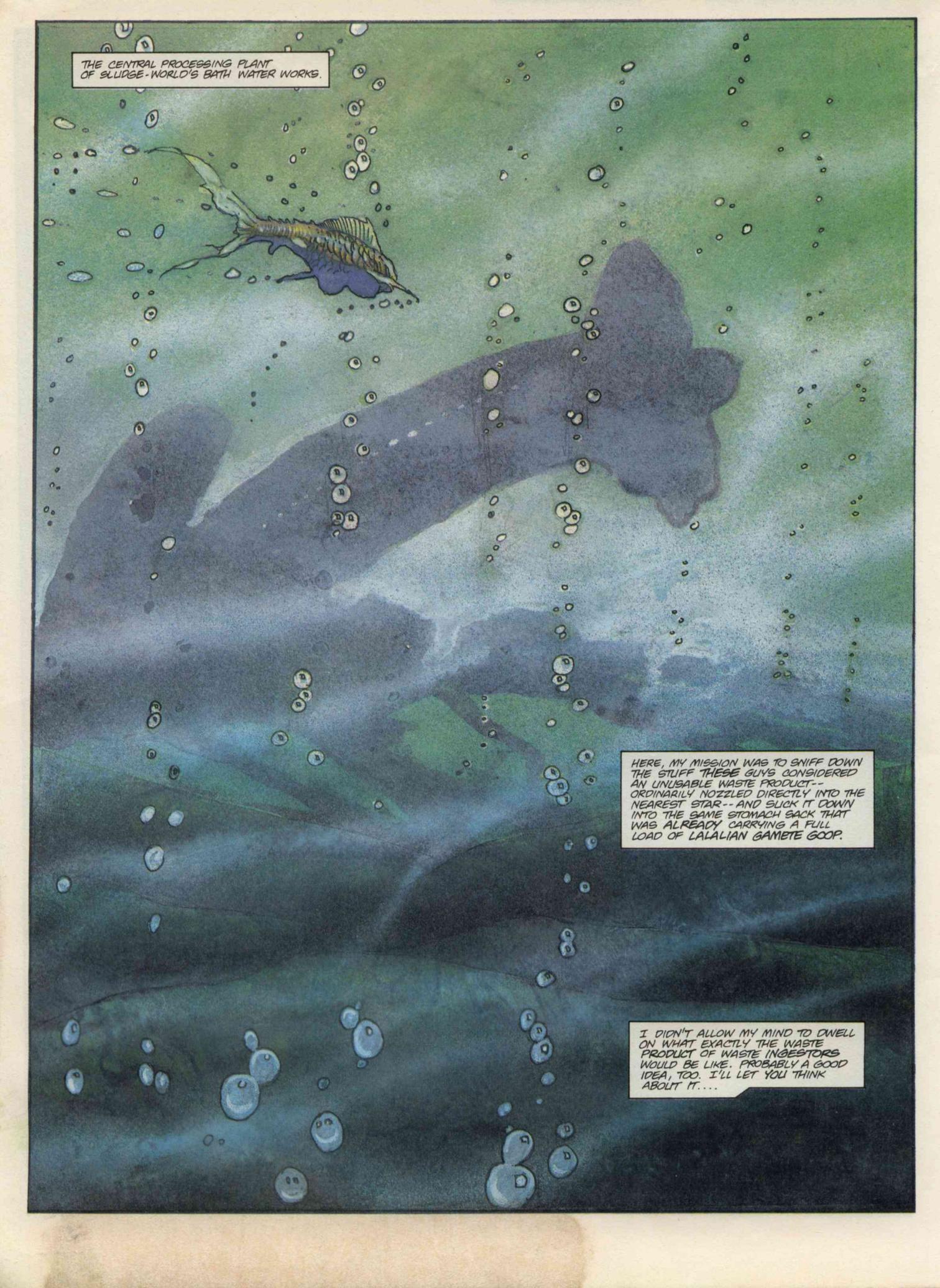


'CAUSE THIS ENTIRE BLOODY PLANET WAS ONE HUGE SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT ALL BY ITSELF.

AND THESE FISH-GUYS WERE PRETTY DAMN SMUG ABOUT THE WHOLE ARRANGEMENT, TO SAY THE LEAST. I MEAN, GETTING PAID TO HAUL AWAY THE GALAXY'S GARBAGE, AND THEN LIVING OFF THE STUFF! WHAT A RACKET!

I FLAPPED STRAIGHT TO MY DESTINATION, AND SOON ENOUGH SAW THE THING LOOMING IN THE MURK....

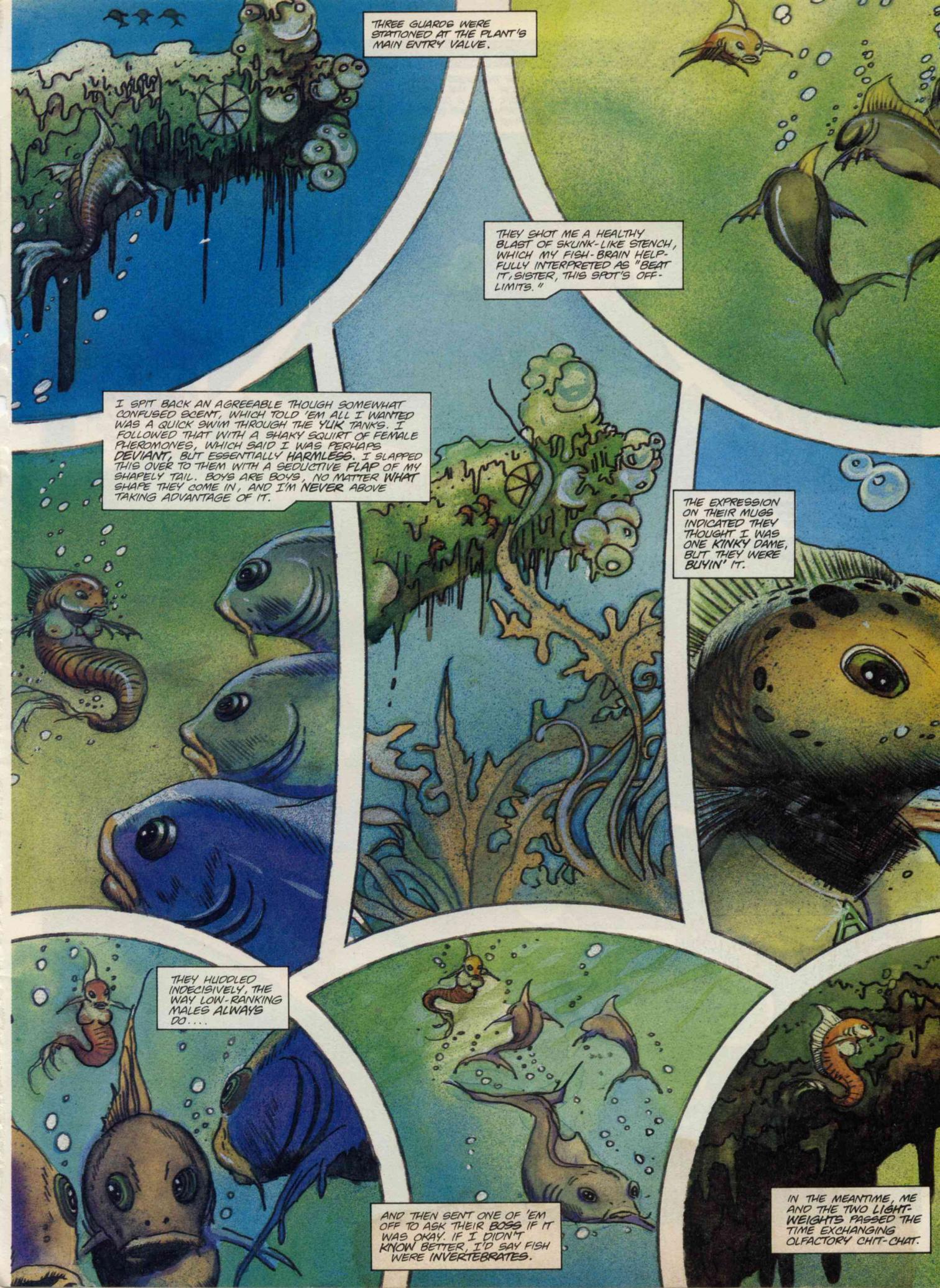
THE PLACE SEEMED LIKE JUST A BIGGER VERSION OF THE SHIP I HAD COME IN ON-- A CONSTANT RAIN OF GREAT SMELLS, AND HOLDING TANKS EVERYWHERE FOR EVERY ITEM OF LIQUEFIED WASTE THE GALAXY'S RACES COULD PRODUCE. THERE WAS QUITE A BUSTLING LOCAL TRADE IN THE STUFF AS WELL-- STINK FUTURES, I GUESS YOU'D CALL 'EM.



THE CENTRAL PROCESSING PLANT
OF SLUDGE-WORLD'S BATH WATER WORKS.

HERE, MY MISSION WAS TO SNIFF DOWN
THE STUFF THESE GUYS CONSIDERED
AN UNUSABLE WASTE PRODUCT--
ORDINARILY NOZZLED DIRECTLY INTO THE
NEAREST STAR-- AND SUCK IT DOWN
INTO THE SAME STOMACH SACK THAT
WAS ALREADY CARRYING A FULL
LOAD OF LALALIAN GAMETE GOOP.

I DIDN'T ALLOW MY MIND TO DWELL
ON WHAT EXACTLY THE WASTE
PRODUCT OF WASTE INGESTORS
WOULD BE LIKE. PROBABLY A GOOD
IDEA, TOO. I'LL LET YOU THINK
ABOUT IT....



THREE GUARDS WERE STATIONED AT THE PLANT'S MAIN ENTRY VALVE.

THEY SHOT ME A HEALTHY BLAST OF SKUNK-LIKE STENCH, WHICH MY FISH-BRAIN HELPFULLY INTERPRETED AS "BEAT IT, SISTER, THIS SPOT'S OFF-LIMITS."

I SPIT BACK AN AGREEABLE THOUGH SOMEWHAT CONFUSED SCENT, WHICH TOLD 'EM ALL I WANTED WAS A QUICK SWIM THROUGH THE YUK TANKS. I FOLLOWED THAT WITH A SHAKY SQUIRT OF FEMALE PHEROMONES, WHICH SAID I WAS PERHAPS DEVIANT, BUT ESSENTIALLY HARMLESS. I SLAPPED THIS OVER TO THEM WITH A SEDUCTIVE FLAP OF MY SHAPELY TAIL. BOYS ARE BOYS, NO MATTER WHAT SHAPE THEY COME IN, AND I'M NEVER ABOVE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF IT.

THE EXPRESSION ON THEIR MUGS INDICATED THEY THOUGHT I WAS ONE KINKY DAME, BUT THEY WERE BUYIN' IT.

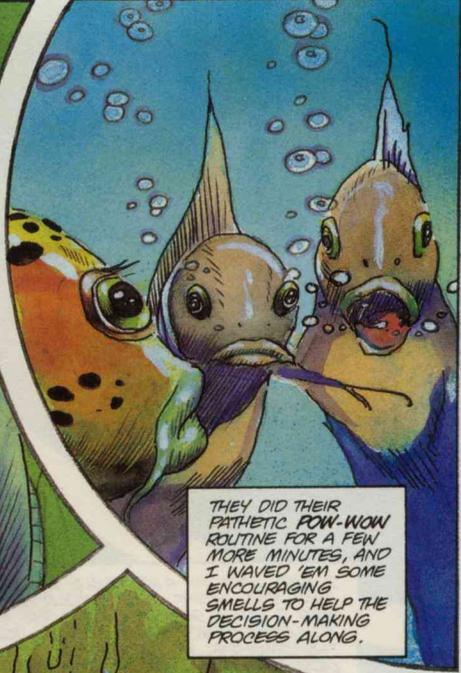
THEY HUDDLED INDECISIVELY, THE WAY LOW-RANKING MALES ALWAYS DO....

AND THEN SENT ONE OF 'EM OFF TO ASK THEIR BOSS IF IT WAS OKAY. IF I DIDN'T KNOW BETTER, I'D SAY FISH WERE INVERTEBRATES.

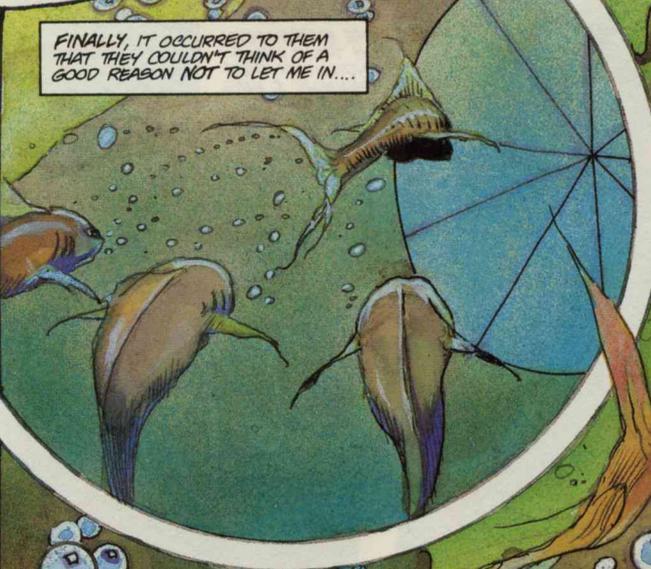
IN THE MEANTIME, ME AND THE TWO LIGHT-WEIGHTS PASSED THE TIME EXCHANGING OLFACTORY CHIT-CHAT.



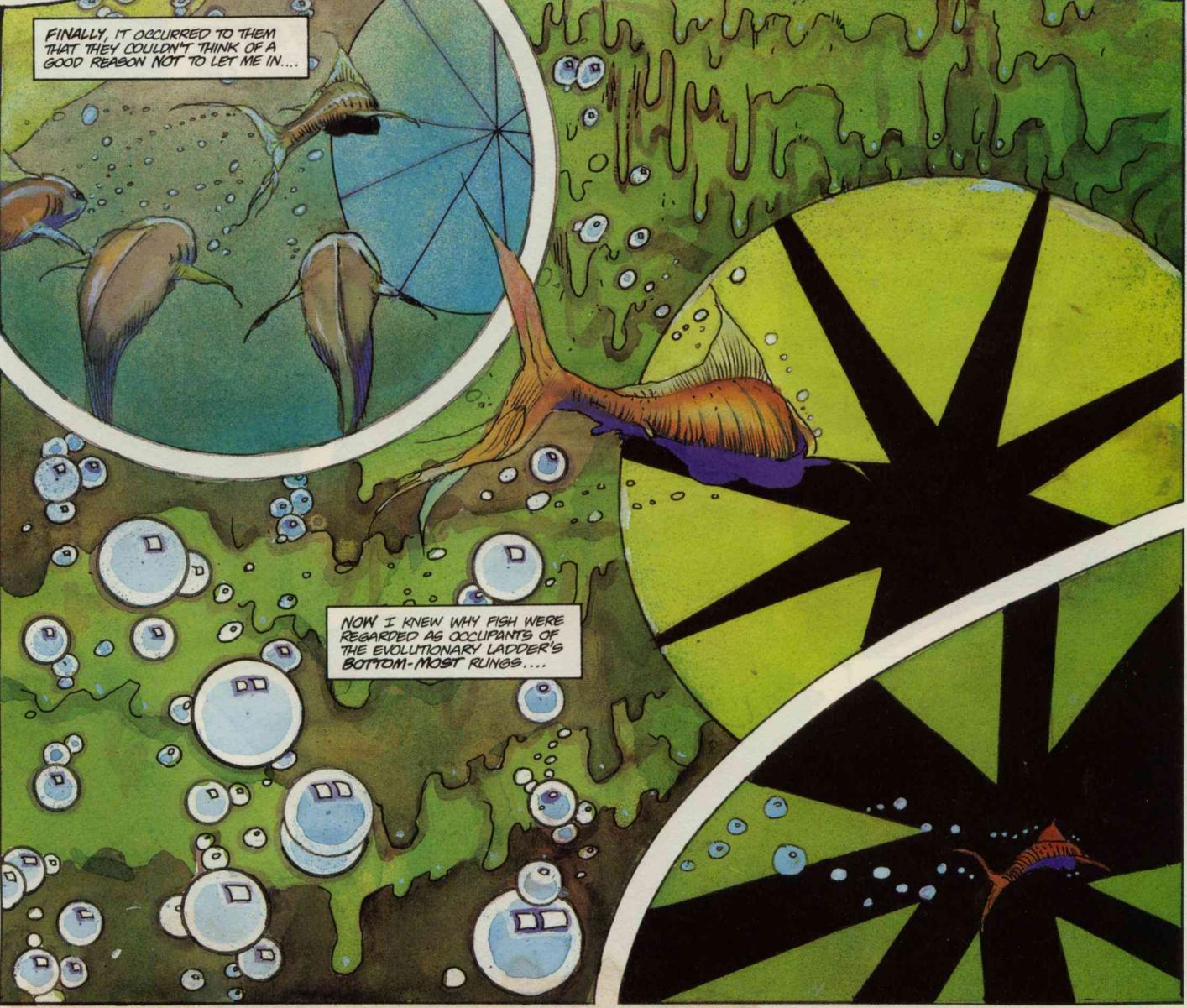
MESSENGER-BOY CAME BACK WITH THE WORD FROM AN EQUALLY SPINELESS SUPERIOR--TO THE EFFECT OF, "SURE, LET THE EGG-LAYER TAKE A DIP IN THE POO-POO POOL, BUT IF ANYTHING GOES WRONG, IT'S ON YOUR DORSALS, NOT MINE!"



THEY DID THEIR PATHETIC POW-WOW ROUTINE FOR A FEW MORE MINUTES, AND I WAVED 'EM SOME ENCOURAGING SMELLS TO HELP THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS ALONG.



FINALLY, IT OCCURRED TO THEM THAT THEY COULDN'T THINK OF A GOOD REASON NOT TO LET ME IN....



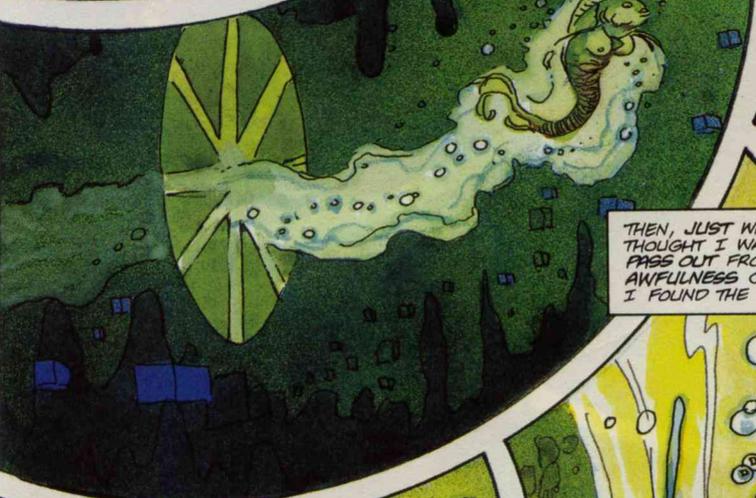
NOW I KNEW WHY FISH WERE REGARDED AS OCCUPANTS OF THE EVOLUTIONARY LADDER'S BOTTOM-MOST RINGS....



THE SCAVENGER HUNT WAS ON....



I WENT FROM CHAMBER TO CHAMBER, DEEPER INTO THIS DUMP'S MURKY DEPTHS. THE STINK GOT WORSE AND WORSE, BUT IT STILL WASN'T THE JUNK I NEEDED. MUSTARD GAS HAD NOTHING ON THIS STUFF.



THEN, JUST WHEN I THOUGHT I WAS GONNA PASS OUT FROM THE AWFULNESS OF IT ALL, I FOUND THE RIGHT ONE.

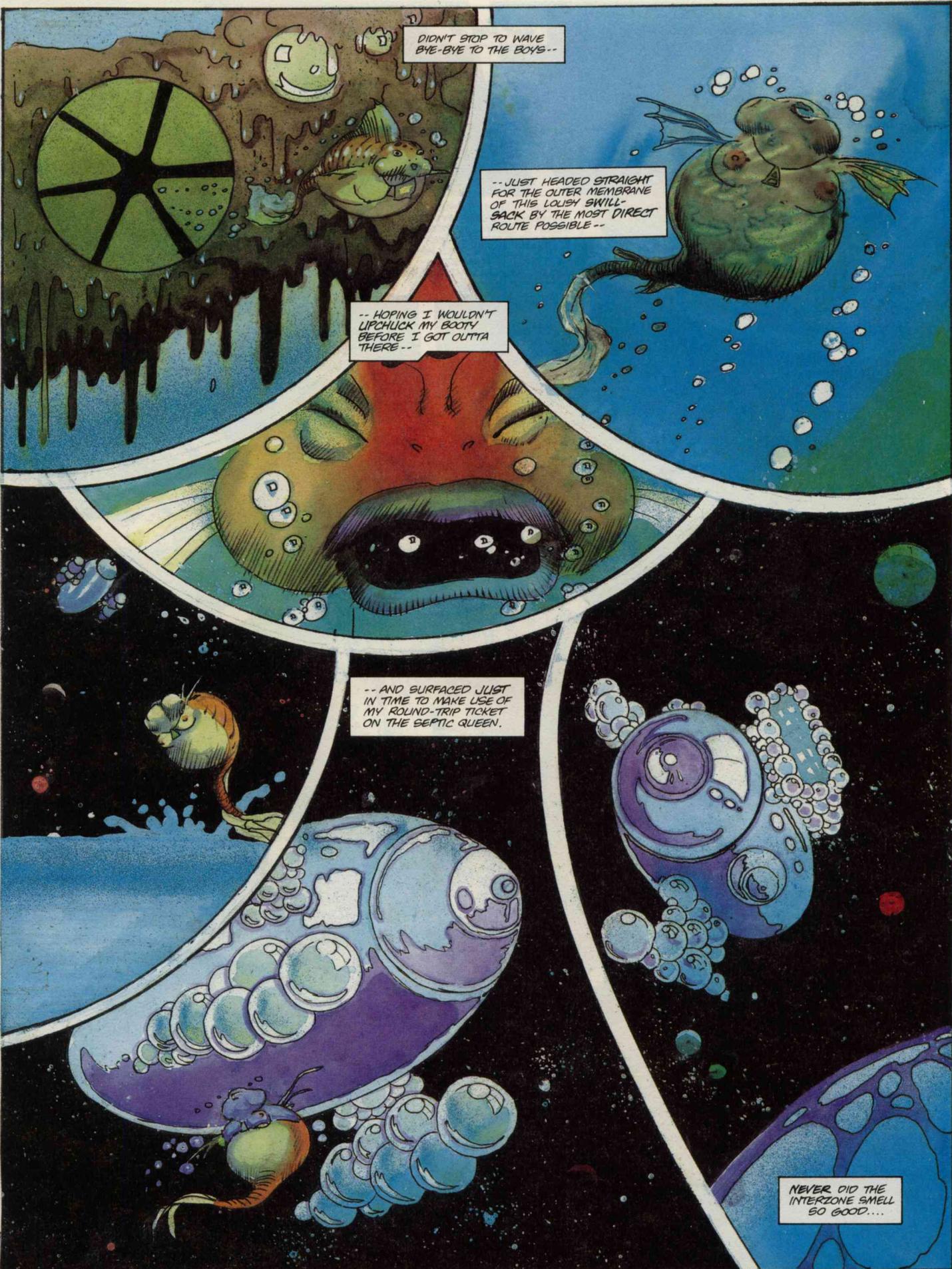


SMELLING IT WAS BAD ENOUGH. GOBBLING IT WAS FAR WORSE.



BUT GOBBLE IT I DID, AND THEN ZOOMED FOR THE EXIT.





DIDN'T STOP TO WAVE
BYE-BYE TO THE BOYS--

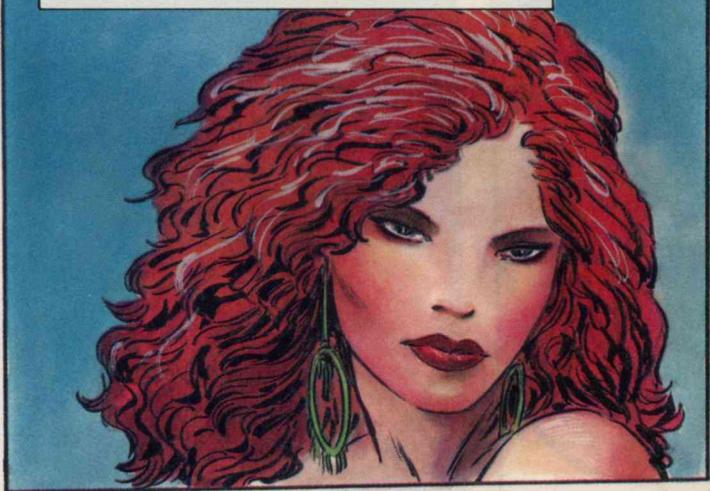
-- JUST HEADED STRAIGHT
FOR THE OUTER MEMBRANE
OF THIS LOUSY SWILL-
SACK BY THE MOST DIRECT
ROUTE POSSIBLE --

-- HOPING I WOULDN'T
LIPCHUCK MY BOOTY
BEFORE I GOT OUTTA
THERE --

-- AND SURFACED JUST
IN TIME TO MAKE USE OF
MY ROUND-TRIP TICKET
ON THE SEPTIC QUEEN.

NEVER DID THE
INTERZONE SMELL
SO GOOD....

TOO BAD I DIDN'T GET TIME TO ENJOY IT. WITHIN HOURS, I HAD DIGESTED THE NEXT BATCH OF BODY-SPECS ON MY TIME-RELEASE DATA-CHIP, AND TURNED INTO THIS CURVY, BIMBO-LOOKING BABE. BEAUTIFUL VACUITY IS SOMETIMES THE BEST DISGUISE -- NO ONE TAKES YOU SERIOUSLY ENOUGH TO FEEL THREATENED.



THE PLACE WAS HORRIBLY COZY, AND WE WERE ALL SUPPOSED TO BE ONE BIG, HAPPY FAMILY -- WITH LOVABLE, PROTECTIVE DAD TAKING CARE OF THINGS FOR US.



YES, MY FRIENDS, WE ARE TRULY ONE HAPPY WORLD...

HE CALLED HIMSELF THE BIG GUY, AND KEPT TELLING EVERYONE NOT TO WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING.



... WHERE PEACE, PROSPERITY, AND CONTENTMENT ARE GUARANTEED FOR ALL.

GUYS WHO SPOUT REASSURING SHIT LIKE THAT ONLY MAKE ME SUSPICIOUS. I NOTICED NO ONE ELSE AROUND ME SEEMED TO THINK ANYTHING WAS WRONG....

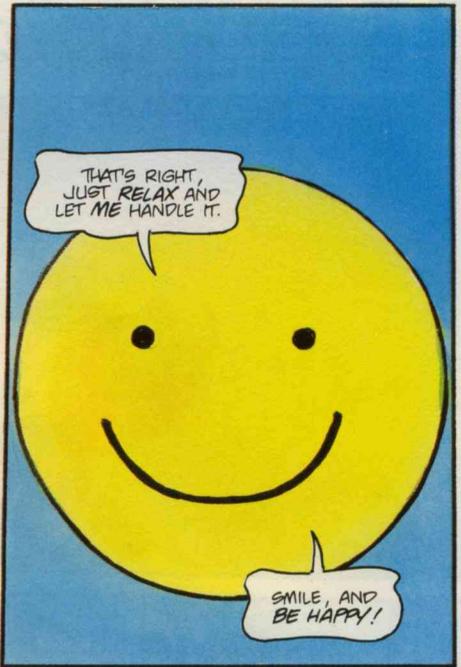


YES, MY FRIENDS, DON'T WORRY ABOUT ALL THE LITTLE DETAILS. JUST LEAVE THAT SILLY, BOTHERSOME STUFF TO ME.

I'LL TAKE CARE OF EVERYTHING FOR YOU.

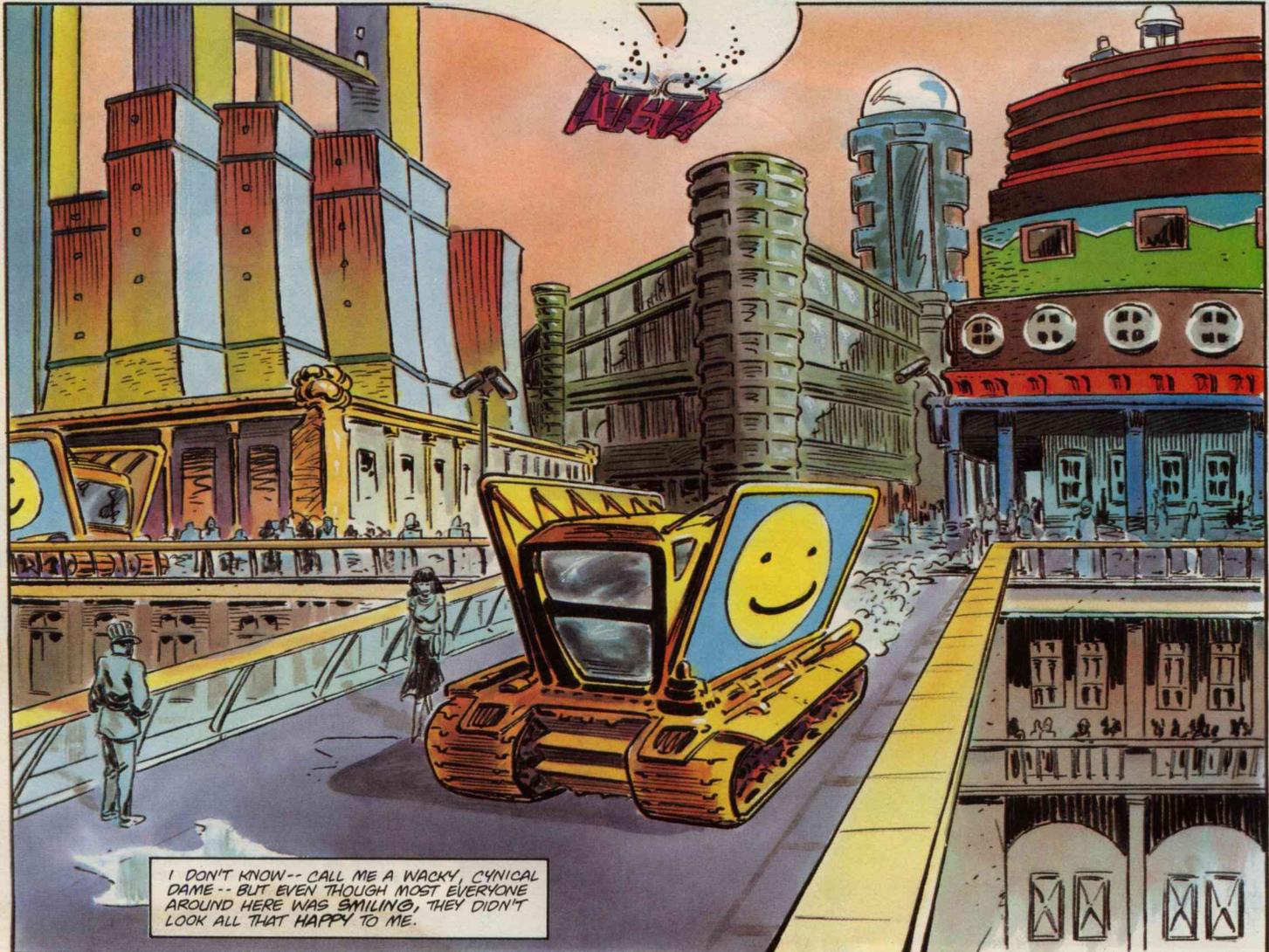


TRUST ME.



THAT'S RIGHT, JUST RELAX AND LET ME HANDLE IT.

SMILE, AND BE HAPPY!

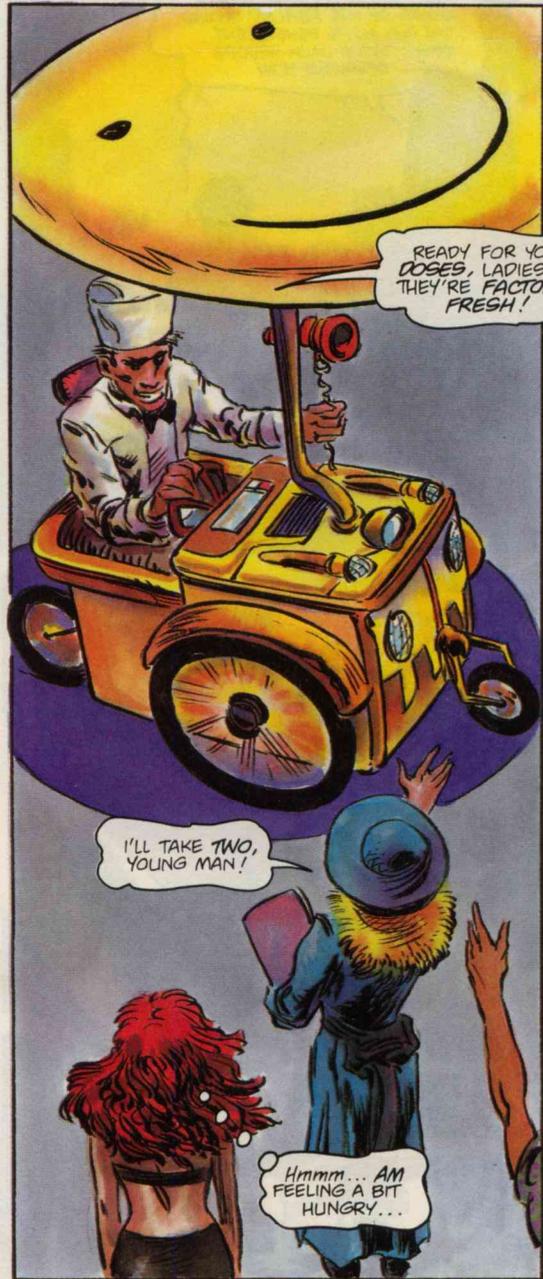


I DON'T KNOW-- CALL ME A WACKY, CYNICAL DAME -- BUT EVEN THOUGH MOST EVERYONE AROUND HERE WAS SMILING, THEY DIDN'T LOOK ALL THAT HAPPY TO ME.



BLIT HEY, SCOPING OUT THE TRUE FEELINGS OF THE LOCAL POPULACE WASN'T IN MY JOB DESCRIPTION THIS TIME OUT. I HAD MY OWN-- MORE PRESSING-- PROBLEMS TO WORRY ABOUT, LIKE SECURING THE SYNTHESIZED NEURO-CHEMICALS PRODUCED HERE ON HAPPYWORLD.

GET YOUR WONDER WAFERS! CAN'T BE HAPPY WITHOUT YOUR WONDER WAFERS!



READY FOR YOUR DOSES, LADIES? THEY'RE FACTORY FRESH!

I'LL TAKE TWO, YOUNG MAN!

Hmmm... AM FEELING A BIT HUNGRY...



WONDER IF THIS BOMBHELL BODY OF MINE HAS TO WATCH HER DIET-- HUH?

DON'T!



DO YOU REALIZE WHAT YOU'RE EATING? DON'T YOU KNOW THAT CRAP IS THE SOURCE OF ALL OUR PROBLEMS?

I BEG YOUR PARDON!

I'M REALLY SORRY I WAS SO RUDE TO YOU BACK THERE -- I GOT CARRIED AWAY, I GUESS. I JUST WANTED TO CATCH YOU BEFORE YOU ATE ANY OF THAT WONDER WAFER-- THEY'RE ADDICTIVE, YOU KNOW.

ADDICTIVE? BUT, I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST SOME KIND OF CANDY-- THE WAY THEY WERE SELLING IT ON THE STREET!

I PRESUMED FROM YOUR UNGLAZED EYES YOU WERE NEW AROUND HERE-- NOW I KNOW IT! DON'T YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON?

NO, I'M FROM OFF-PLANET. JUST ARRIVED TODAY.

'EVENING FOWLER. NEW RECRUIT, OR JUST ANOTHER NEW GIRLFRIEND?

HMMM, SOMETHING TELLS ME SUBVERSION'S IN THE AIR!

YOU COULD SAY THAT-- WE'RE JUST TRYING TO MAKE PEOPLE AWARE OF THE REALITY BEHIND THE BIG GUY'S BENEVOLENT MASK. THAT'S JACK ISIDORE SPEAKING NOW....

NEITHER, SMART GUY-- IT'S MY MOTHER, SO ZIP YOUR PANTS.

IT'S WONDER WAFERS THAT'RE THE OPIATE OF OUR PEOPLE--

--AND THEY'VE SAPPED US OF OUR WILL TO RESIST, OUR DESIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL THOUGHT AND ACTION, AND WE WILL CONTINUE TO BE THE MINDLESS SLAVES OF OUR SELF-APPOINTED LEADERS UNTIL WE BREAK EVERY-ONE OF THE WONDER WAFER HABIT!

JACK'S QUITE A RABBLE-ROUSER, eh?

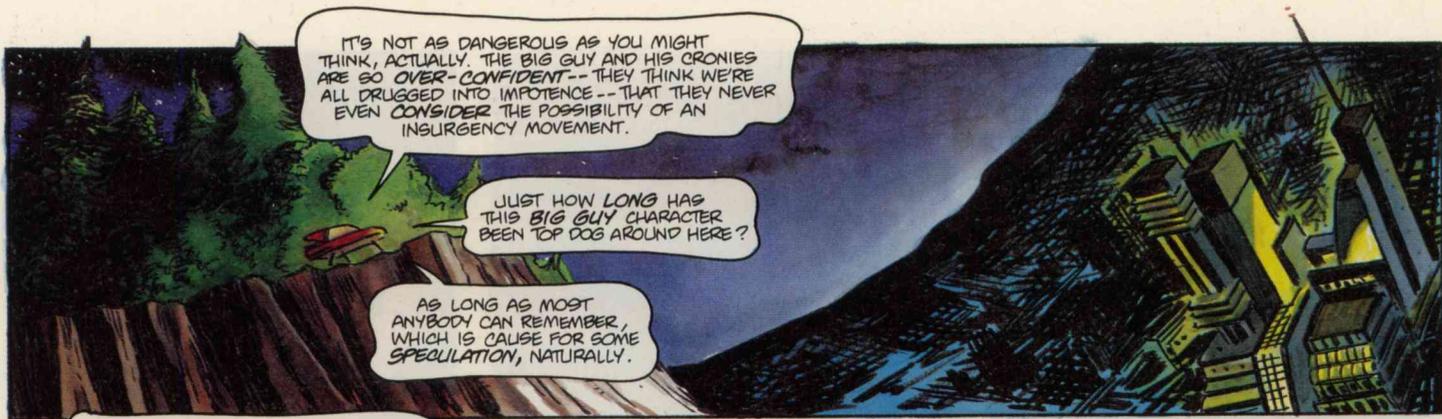
UH, FOWLER, COULD WE GO SOMEWHERE QUIETER AND TALK?

SURE, IF YOU LIKE....

SO WHAT KIND OF REVOLUTION ARE YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS TRYING TO PULL OFF, ANYWAY?

NOTHING TOO AMBITIOUS-- JUST THE TOTAL OVERTHROW OF THE PLANETARY GOVERNMENT, THAT'S ALL.

OH.



IT'S NOT AS DANGEROUS AS YOU MIGHT THINK, ACTUALLY. THE BIG GUY AND HIS CRONIES ARE SO OVER-CONFIDENT-- THEY THINK WE'RE ALL DRUGGED INTO IMPOTENCE-- THAT THEY NEVER EVEN CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY OF AN INSURGENCY MOVEMENT.

JUST HOW LONG HAS THIS BIG GUY CHARACTER BEEN TOP DOG AROUND HERE?

AS LONG AS MOST ANYBODY CAN REMEMBER, WHICH IS CAUSE FOR SOME SPECULATION, NATURALLY.



OBVIOUSLY, HE'S NO ORDINARY HUMAN-TYPE BEING. MY GUESS IS THAT HE DOESN'T EVEN EXIST IN ANY TRUE CORPOREAL FORM. MOST LIKELY, HE'S JUST SOME VIDEO CONSTRUCT-- A DIGITAL SIMULACRUM IF YOU WILL-- THAT THEY USE AS A KIND OF VISUAL SEDATIVE, COMPLEMENTING THE CHEMICAL ONE THEY PUT IN THEIR WONDER WAFERS.

AND WHO'S "THEM"-- WHO REALLY RUNS HAPPYWORLD?



GOOD QUESTION. NO ONE ON THE OUTSIDE REALLY KNOWS. JUST SOME FACELESS BUNCH OF BUSINESSMEN WHO'VE RULED OVER A DRUGGED-OUT PLANET OF CONSPICUOUS-CONSUMING SLAVE LABOR FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS!

AND YOU THINK THESE HAPPY, COMPLACENT SHEEP WILL RISE UP AT YOUR URGING AND THROW OFF THEIR CHAINS? WHY SHOULD THEY? I'LL BET THEY PREFER IT THIS WAY!



HOW COULD THEY PREFER IT, GIVEN AN HONEST CHOICE? WHAT'S MORE REAL AND GRATIFYING THAN A LIFE OF PASSION THAT ALSO HAS PAIN? WHERE'S THE HUMANITY IN THE BLAND, REGULATED LIVES THEY LEAD NOW?

JEEZ-- HE SURE IS CLITE WHEN HE GETS WORKED UP.

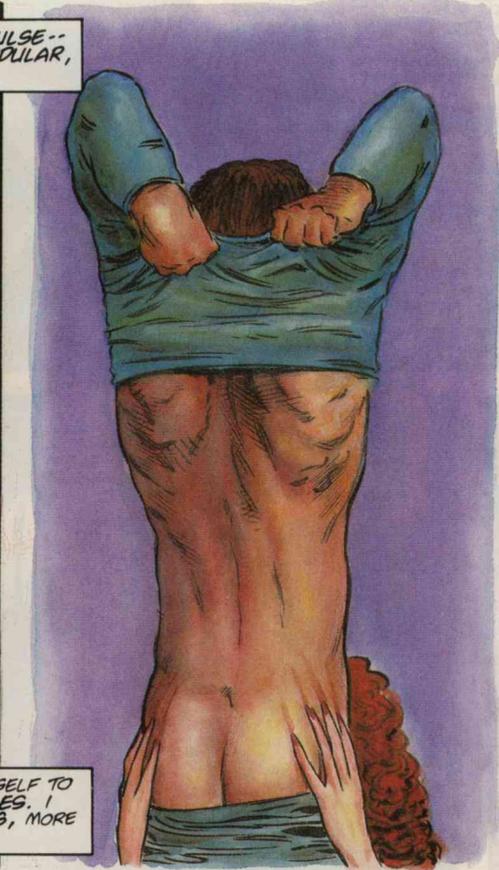


OF COURSE. I AGREE WITH YOU, FOWLER-- I GUESS I'VE JUST GOT A LOT LESS FAITH IN HUMAN NATURE THAN YOU. I THINK MOST PEOPLE WOULD MUCH RATHER BE HAPPY ROBOTS THAN MANIC DEPRESSIVE FREE MEN....

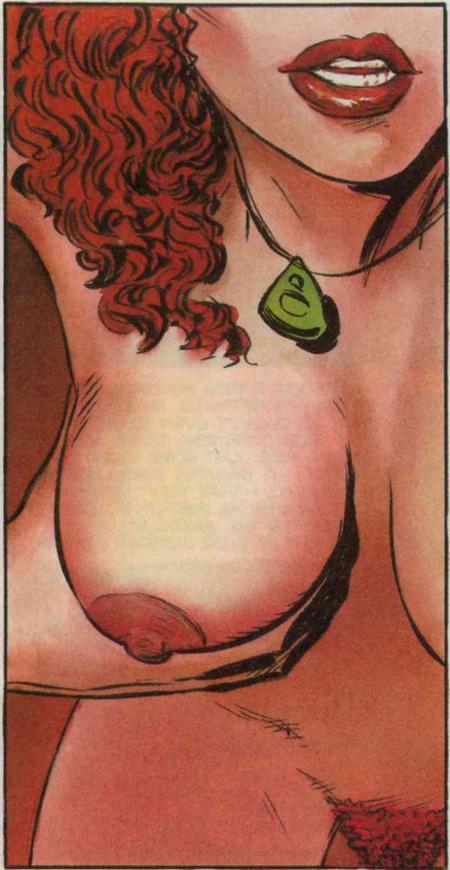
IF I BELIEVED THAT, I'D PROBABLY COMMIT SUICIDE.



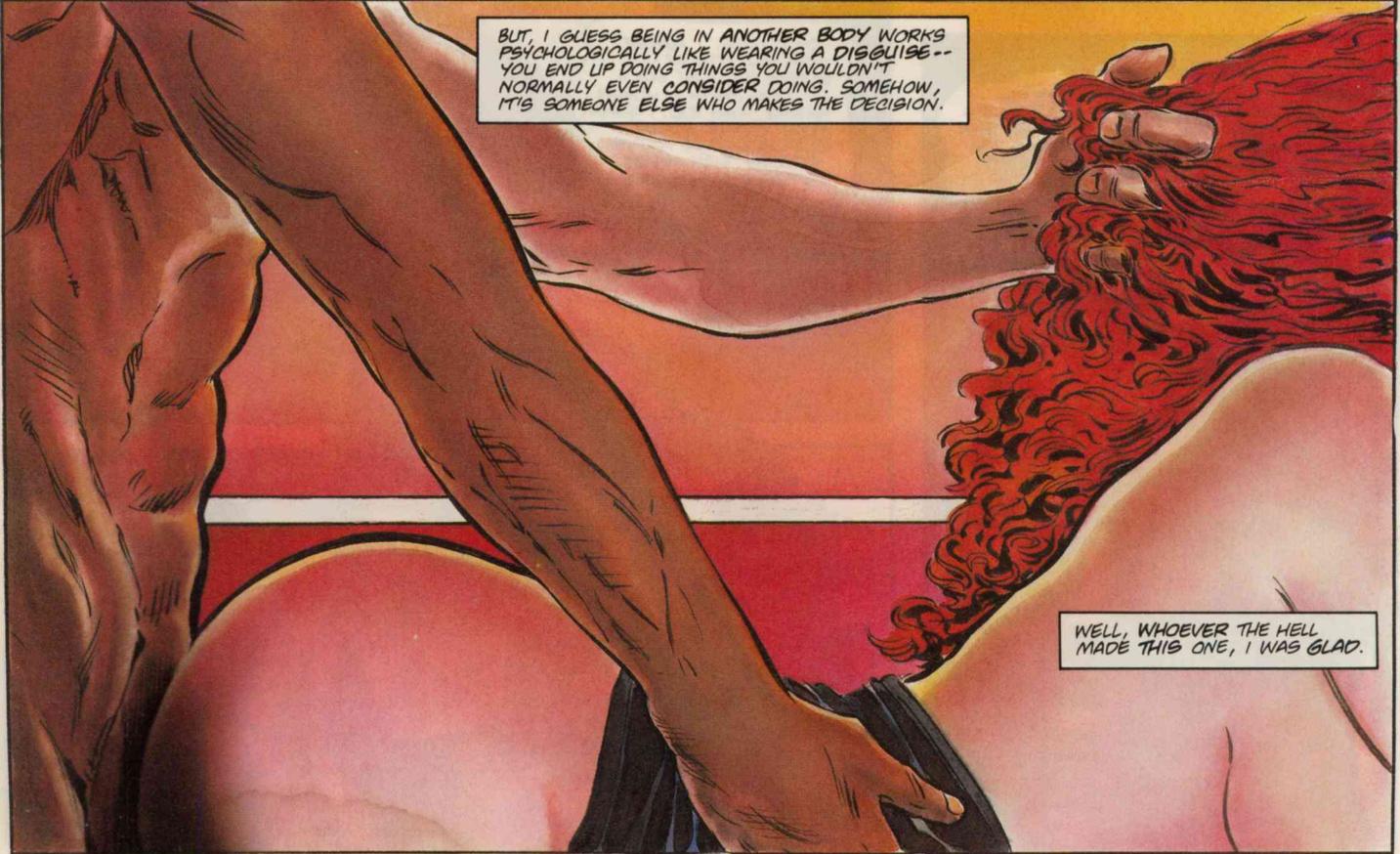
PLEASE, NOT JUST YET....



I WAS ACTING ON PURE IMPULSE--
EITHER EMOTIONAL OR GLANDULAR,
I'M NOT SURE WHICH.



I DON'T USUALLY ALLOW MYSELF TO
GIVE IN TO ANY SUDDEN LURGES. I
TEND TO BE MORE CAUTIOUS, MORE
DELIBERATE.



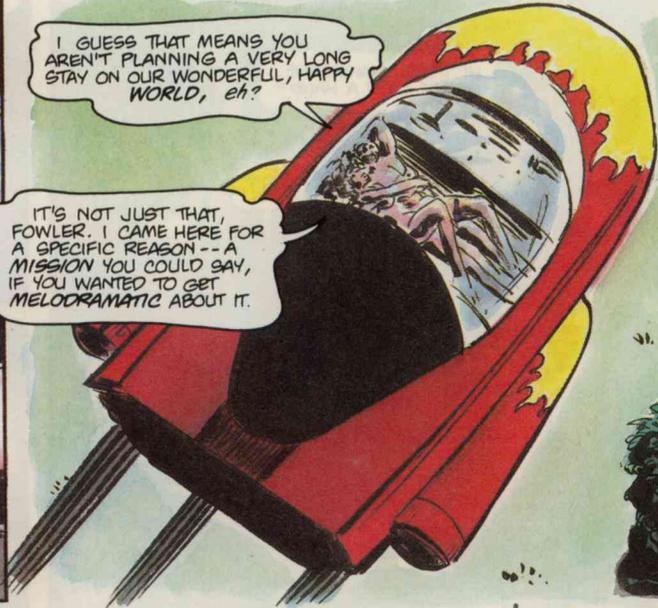
BUT, I GUESS BEING IN ANOTHER BODY WORKS
PSYCHOLOGICALLY LIKE WEARING A DISGUISE--
YOU END UP DOING THINGS YOU WOULDN'T
NORMALLY EVEN CONSIDER DOING. SOMEHOW,
IT'S SOMEONE ELSE WHO MAKES THE DECISION.

WELL, WHOEVER THE HELL
MADE THIS ONE, I WAS GLAD.



UH, YOU DON'T WASTE MUCH TIME, DO YOU?

I DON'T HAVE THAT LUXURY, NO.



I GUESS THAT MEANS YOU AREN'T PLANNING A VERY LONG STAY ON OUR WONDERFUL, HAPPY WORLD, EH?

IT'S NOT JUST THAT, FOWLER. I CAME HERE FOR A SPECIFIC REASON-- A MISSION YOU COULD SAY, IF YOU WANTED TO GET MELODRAMATIC ABOUT IT.



A JOB IS PROBABLY MORE ACCURATE.

I'VE BEEN HIRED TO STEAL SOME OF THE NEUROCHEMICALS THAT ARE USED IN THE MANUFACTURE OF YOUR WONDER WAFERS.

THOSE SUBSTANCES, WHEN COMBINED WITH OTHERS-- SOME THAT I'VE ALREADY GOTTEN, OTHERS THAT I'VE YET TO-- WILL FORM A SORT OF LIVING DRUG, AN ORGANISM THAT WILL PROLONG LIFE WHEN INTRODUCED INTO A HOST BODY.



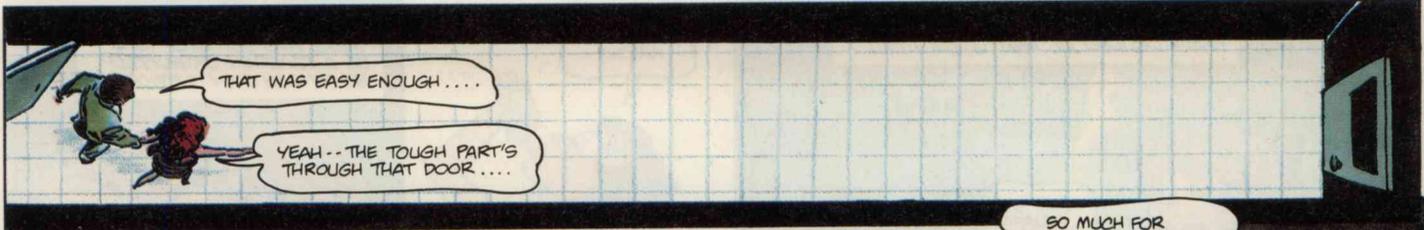
AND I'LL BET YOU WANT ME TO LIBERATE THESE CHEMICALS FOR YOU FROM THE WAFER WORKS DOWN THERE, EH?

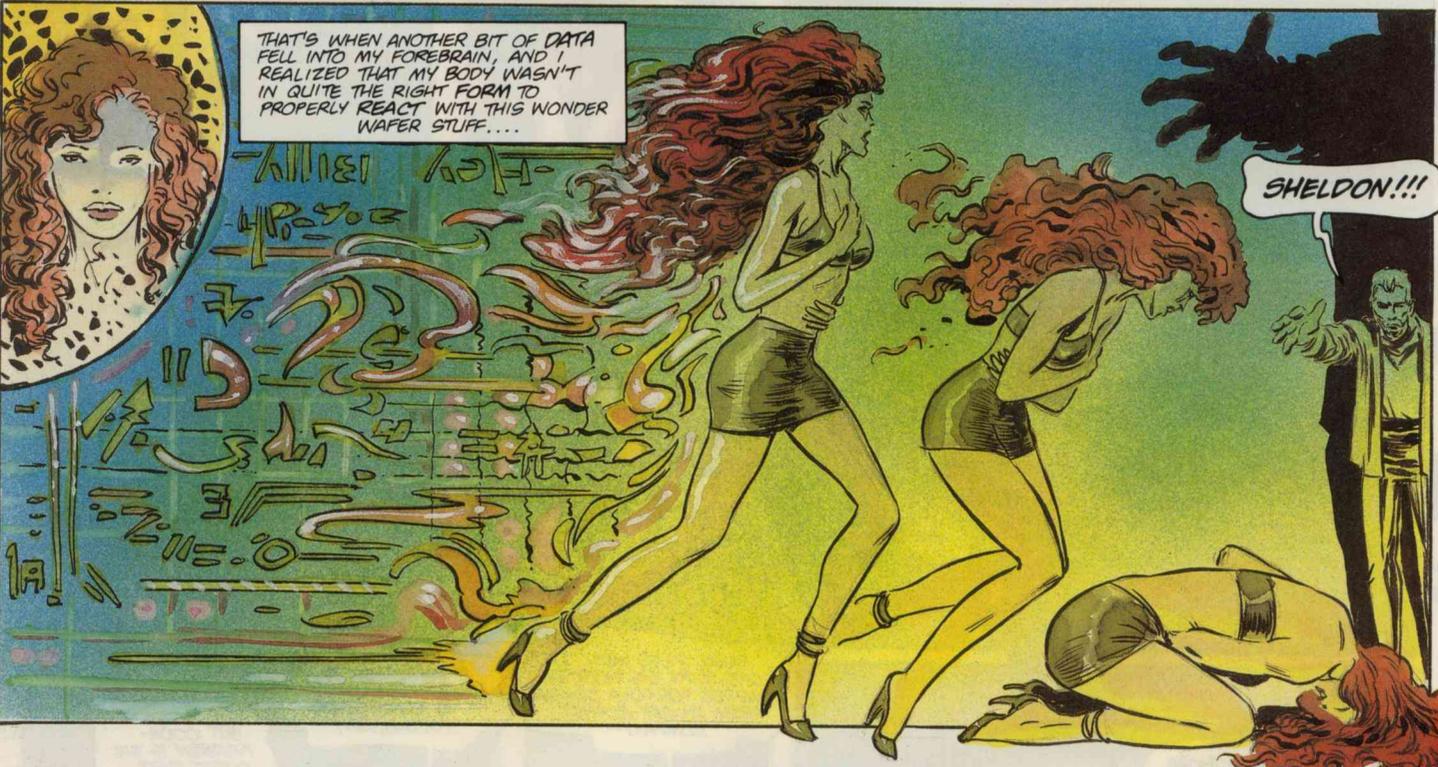
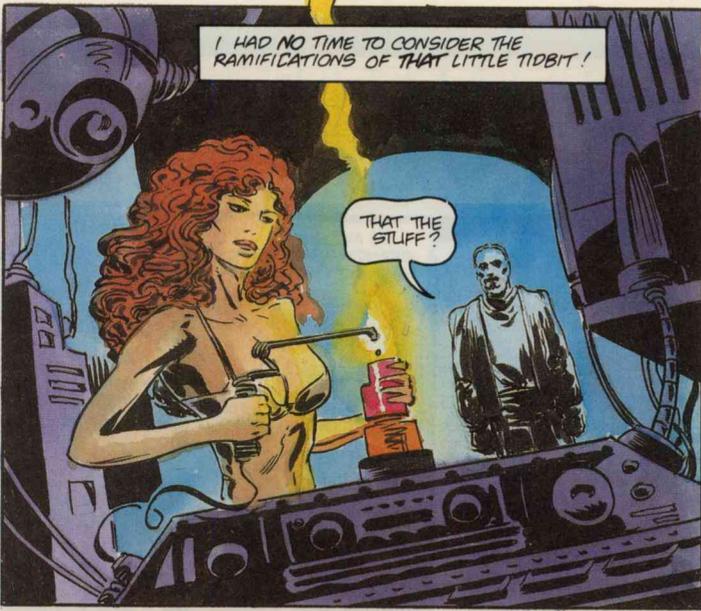
NOT EXACTLY-- I'M PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF DOING IT MYSELF, BUT I COULD STAND SOME HELP IF YOU'RE UP TO IT...



AND HOW COULD I REFUSE?



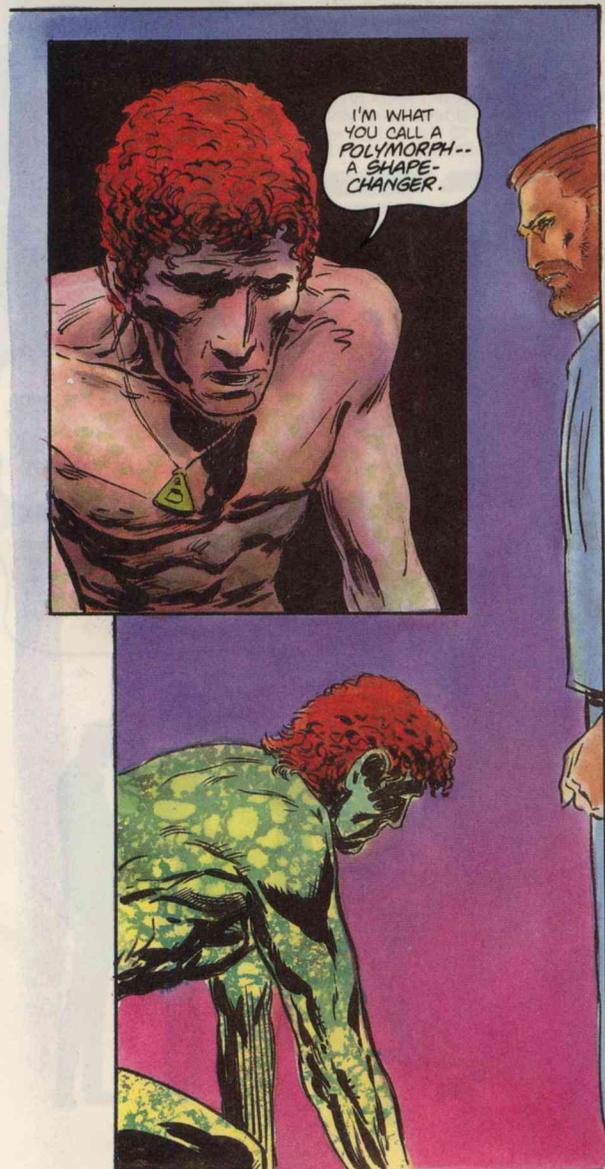




--INTO A MAN, OF ALL GODDAMN THINGS. THIS PROCESS WOULD HAVE TO REQUIRE TESTOSTERONE, WOULDN'T IT?

SHELDON?

UH, YOU'RE NOT GONNA BELIEVE THIS, FOWLER....





FOWLER, PLEASE DON'T LOOK AT ME THAT WAY--IT DOESN'T MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE, REALLY. I'M STILL HUMAN.

ARE YOU?



WHAT THE HELL'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN? OF COURSE I AM!

WELL, I'M NOT SO SURE... I MEAN, I JUST HAD SEX WITH SOMEONE WHO AFTERWARD CHANGED INTO A MAN BEFORE MY EYES, AND THEN TELLS ME SHE DOES IT ALL THE TIME-- CHANGING, THAT IS. SO HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW JUST WHO--OR WHAT-- YOU ARE?

COULD YOU AT LEAST GIVE ME A MINUTE TO EXPLAIN?

I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU POSSIBLY COULD, BUT I GUESS I CAN LET YOU TRY.



IT GOES BACK TO WHEN I WAS A KID... I WAS ABANDONED IN THE INTERZONE-- NEVER KNEW MY PARENTS, OR EVEN IF I HAD ANY-- AND GREW UP ON THE RUN, GOING BACK AND FORTH FROM THE TUNNELS TO THE HOLDING TANKS TO THE CORPORATE BREEDING SHELTERS...

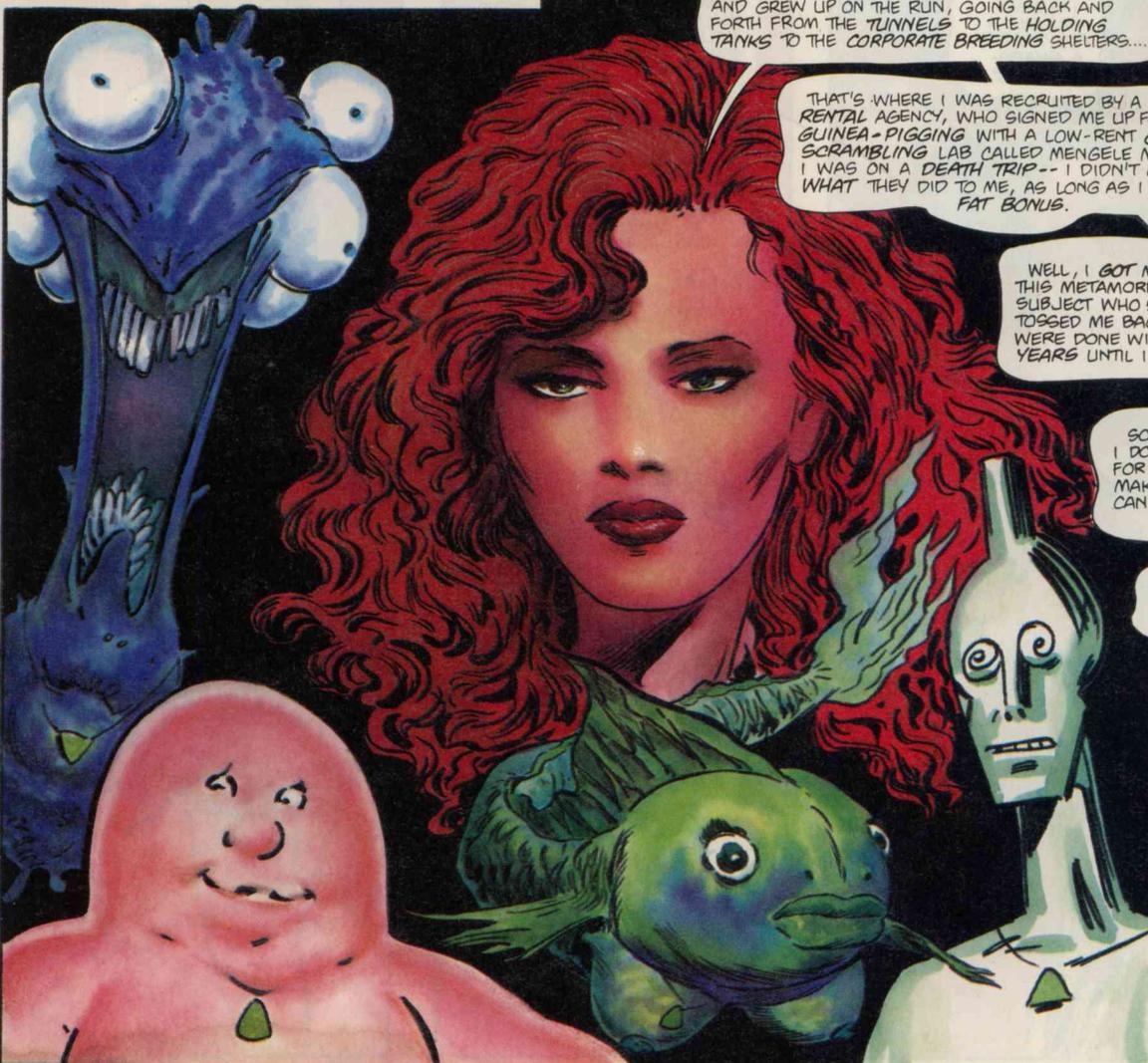
THAT'S WHERE I WAS RECRUITED BY A BODY-RENTAL AGENCY, WHO SIGNED ME UP FOR SOME GUINEA-PIGGING WITH A LOW-RENT GENE-SCRAMBLING LAB CALLED MENGELE MUTATIONS. I WAS ON A DEATH TRIP-- I DIDN'T CARE WHAT THEY DID TO ME, AS LONG AS I GOT A FAT BONUS.

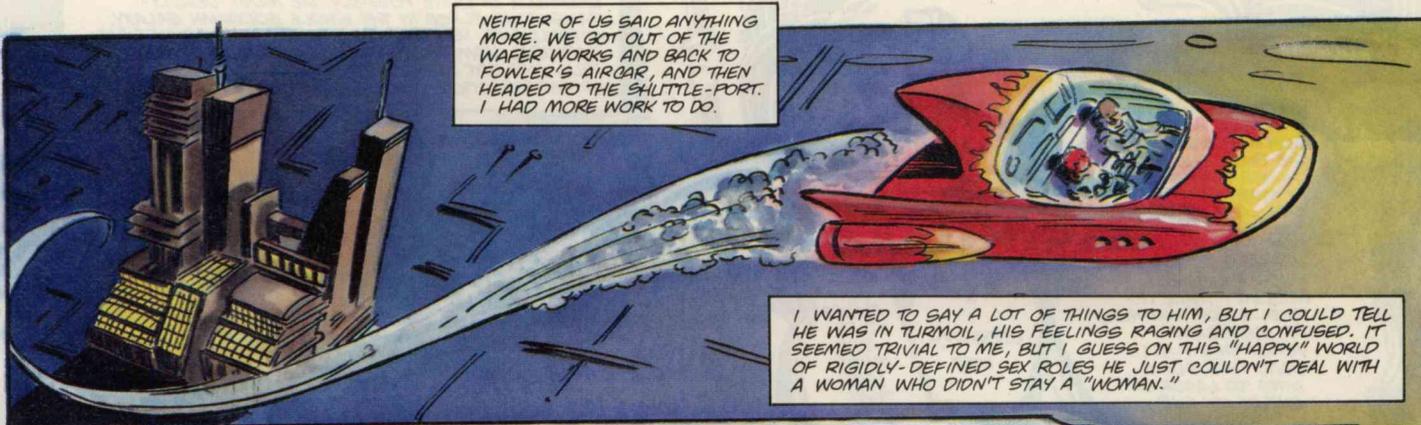
WELL, I GOT MY BONUS-- BUT I ALSO GOT THIS METAMORPHIC CURSE. I WAS THE ONLY SUBJECT WHO SURVIVED THE TEST-- AND THEY TOSSED ME BACK INTO THE STREET WHEN THEY WERE DONE WITH ME. I WAS MISERABLE FOR YEARS UNTIL I DECIDED TO MAKE THE BEST OF IT.

SO I TAKE THESE JOBS, WHERE I DO MY TRANSFORMATION ACT FOR SOME PURPOSE-- SO I CAN MAKE A LIVING, AND ALSO SO I CAN DO SOME GOOD. CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?



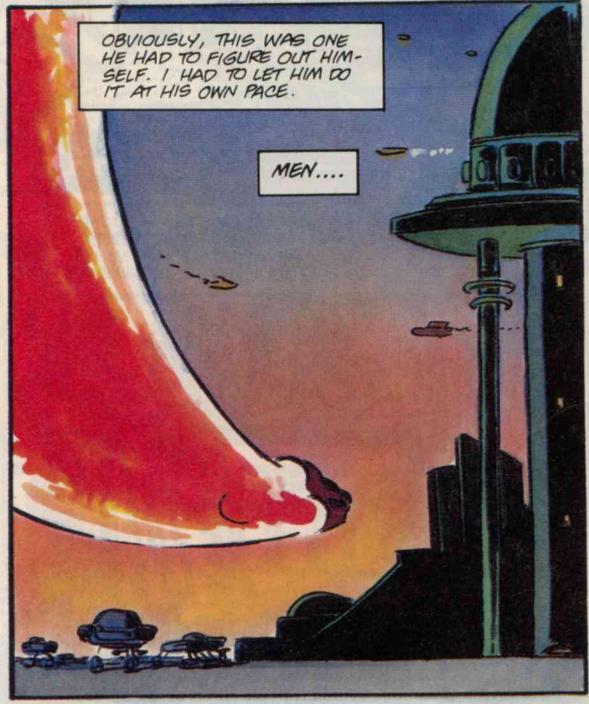
I'M SORRY-- I JUST DON'T KNOW....





NEITHER OF US SAID ANYTHING MORE. WE GOT OUT OF THE WAFER WORKS AND BACK TO FOWLER'S AIRCAR, AND THEN HEADED TO THE SHUTTLE-PORT. I HAD MORE WORK TO DO.

I WANTED TO SAY A LOT OF THINGS TO HIM, BUT I COULD TELL HE WAS IN TURMOIL, HIS FEELINGS RAGING AND CONFUSED. IT SEEMED TRIVIAL TO ME, BUT I GUESS ON THIS "HAPPY" WORLD OF RIGIDLY-DEFINED SEX ROLES HE JUST COULDN'T DEAL WITH A WOMAN WHO DIDN'T STAY A "WOMAN."



OBVIOUSLY, THIS WAS ONE HE HAD TO FIGURE OUT HIMSELF. I HAD TO LET HIM DO IT AT HIS OWN PACE.

MEN....



YOUR SHUTTLE BOARDS OVER THERE, IT LEAVES IN HALF AN HOUR.

WILL YOU STAY HERE AND WAIT WITH ME?

NO-- I'VE GOT TO GET BACK. I WANT TO SHOW ISIDORE WHAT WE FOUND AT THE WAFER WORKS.

WHAT ABOUT WHEN ALL THIS IS OVER? WILL I SEE YOU AGAIN?



HE DIDN'T ANSWER MY QUESTION. HE JUST SHRUGGED HIS SHOULDERS AND WALKED AWAY.

THE BASTARD....



I CAUGHT THE NEXT SHUTTLE AND GOT THE HELL OUT OF THERE.



THIS FUCKING JOB WAS RIPPING THE HELL OUT OF ME. I'D EXPECTED THE PHYSICAL DOWNSIDE-- I WAS GETTING WEAKER ALL THE TIME, AND EACH CHANGE WAS INFINITELY MORE PAINFUL THAN THE LAST. IT WAS THE EMOTIONAL RAVAGING THAT I WASN'T PREPARED FOR, AND WHAT MADE ME THINK I WOULDN'T MAKE IT, PLUS, A BURNING NODE OF SUSPICION ABOUT THIS WHOLE DEAL WAS BEGINNING TO LASER UP OUT OF MY SUB-CONSCIOUS, MAKING ME DISTINCTLY LINEASY.

SO HERE I WAS-- A BURNED-OUT WRECK-- ON A PLANET WHERE I COULD NOT AFFORD TO BE ANYTHING LESS THAN TOTALLY VIGILANT. GREAT.

DON'T LET THE INNOCUOUS-SOUNDING NAME FOOL YOU-- CARMILLA IS QUITE POSSIBLY THE MOST DEADLY, DANGEROUS PLACE IN THE WHOLE GODDAMN GALAXY. CARMILLIANS YOU SEE, ARE YOUR BASIC MONOSEXUAL CARNIBAL VAMPIRES-- WHICH MEANS THEY HUNT, KILL, AND EAT EACH OTHER FOR THE COMBINED PURPOSES OF REPRODUCTION, NOURISHMENT, AND COMPUSSION.



AND LATELY-- THE LAST FEW THOUSAND YEARS OR SO-- THEY'VE EXPANDED THEIR HORIZONS INTO THE SPORTING, SCIENTIFIC, ARTISTIC, AND COMMERCIAL ASPECTS OF KILLING AS WELL.



CHARMING BLINCH OF GUYS, EH?



THEY'VE MARKETED THEIR BELLIGERENCE TO THE REST OF THE GALAXY-- SUPPLYING, FOR A VERY STEEP PRICE, THE LESS INGENUOUS AMONG US WITH THE SKILLS AND TECHNOLOGY OF GENOCIDE.



THERE'S IS A COMMODITY FOR WHICH DEMAND ALWAYS OUT-STRIPS SUPPLY.



AND, YOU GOTTA GIVE IT TO 'EM--



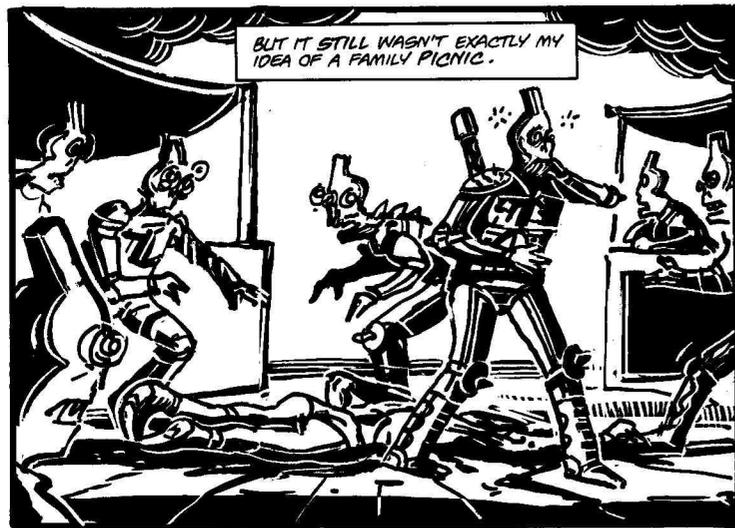
-- THEY DO SHOW AN UNEQUALLED ENTHUSIASM FOR THEIR WORK....



THEY ALSO SEEM TO SEE THINGS ONLY IN MONO-CHROMES, WHICH IS LUCKY FOR ME.



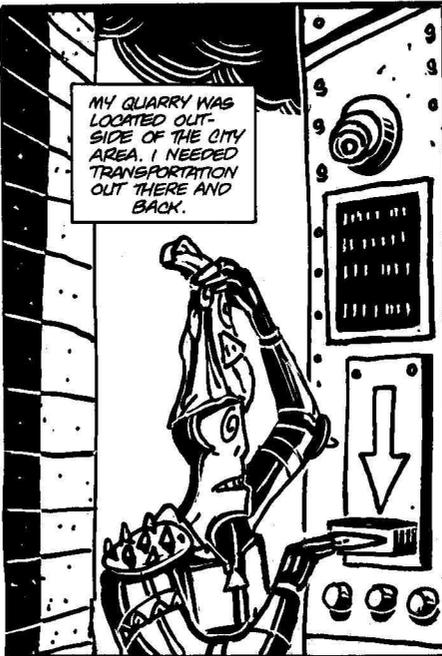
I DON'T THINK I COULD'VE TAKEN THE SIGHT OF ALL THAT BLOOD AND SAVAGERY, IF THE STUFF HAD BEEN RED. I CAN'T REALLY EXPLAIN IT, BUT SOMEHOW, BLOOD THAT'S RED SEEMS WORSE...



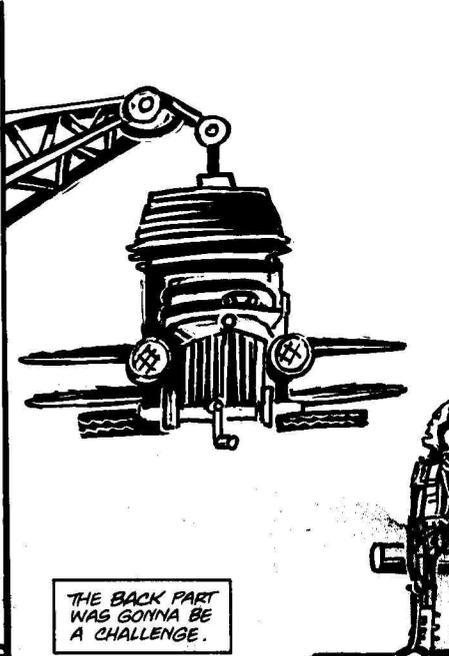
BUT IT STILL WASN'T EXACTLY MY IDEA OF A FAMILY PICNIC.



OBVIOUSLY, I HELD A MINORITY VIEWPOINT.



MY QUARRY WAS LOCATED OUT-SIDE OF THE CITY AREA. I NEEDED TRANSPORTATION OUT THERE AND BACK.



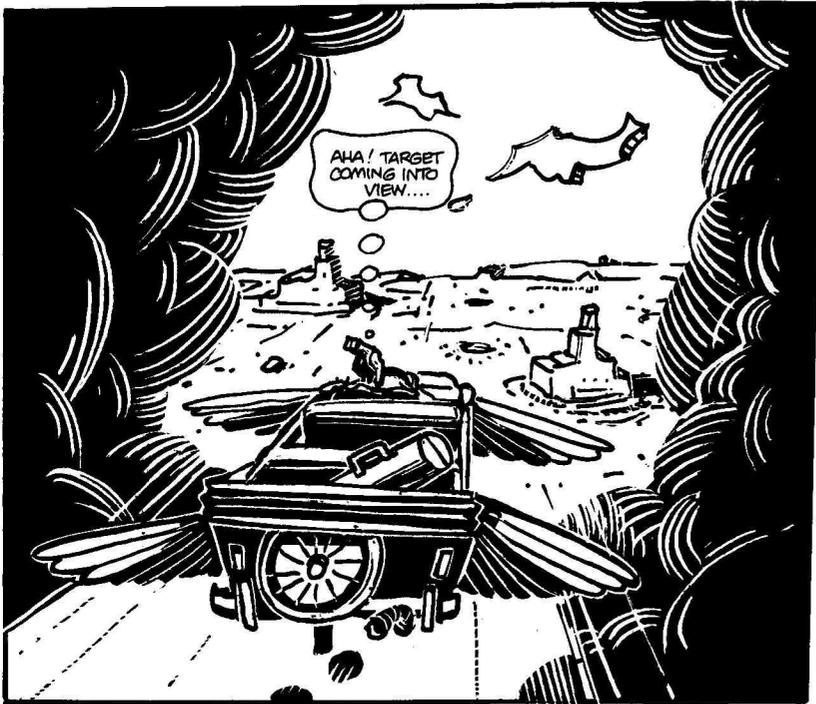
THE BACK PART WAS GONNA BE A CHALLENGE.

SO, OFF I WENT,
INTO THE WILD
BLACK YONDER...

...AND HAD MYSELF A
TYPICAL, UNEVENTFUL
DRIVE IN THE HUMDRUM
CARMILLAN SKY.

YOU THINK MAYBE I SHOULD'VE FORMED
OVER THE EXTRA DOUGH AND GOTTEN
THE ONE WITH THE TWIN 50-CALIBERS?

NEXT TIME,
I'LL KNOW....



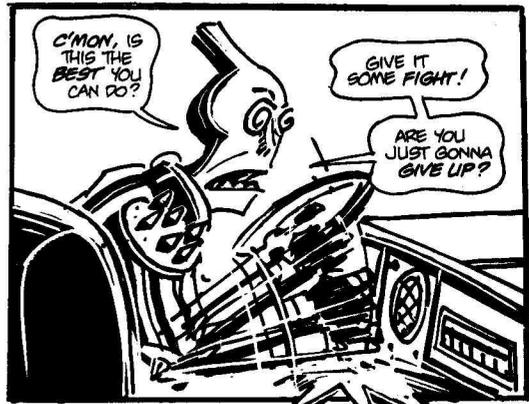
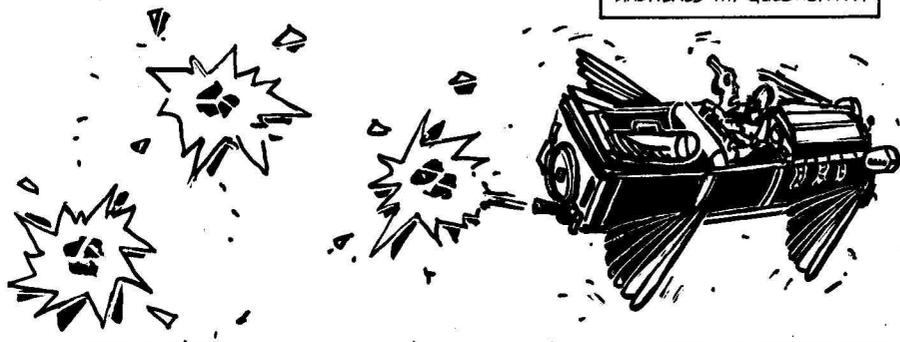
AHA! TARGET COMING INTO VIEW....



UNIDENTIFIED INTRUDER! YOU ARE APPROACHING A SECURED DEFENSE PERIMETER! PLEASE ALTER YOUR COURSE BEFORE APPROPRIATE ACTION IS TAKEN! THIS WILL BE YOUR ONLY WARNING!

UH, WHAT'S 'APPROPRIATE'?

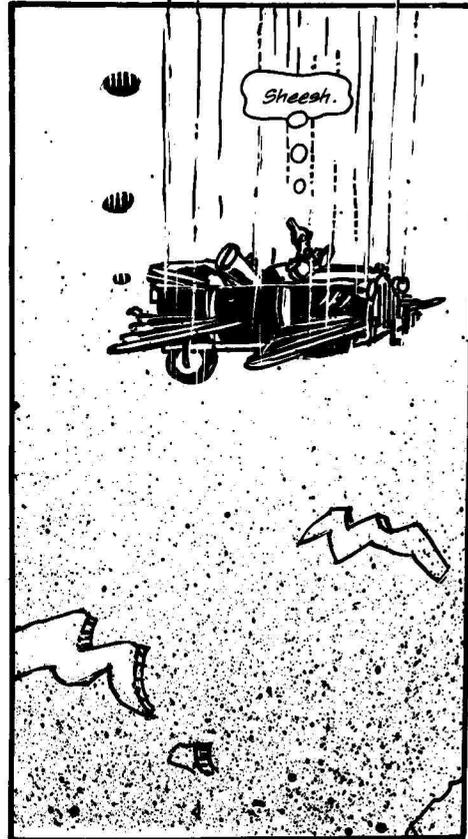
ANSWERED MY QUESTION....



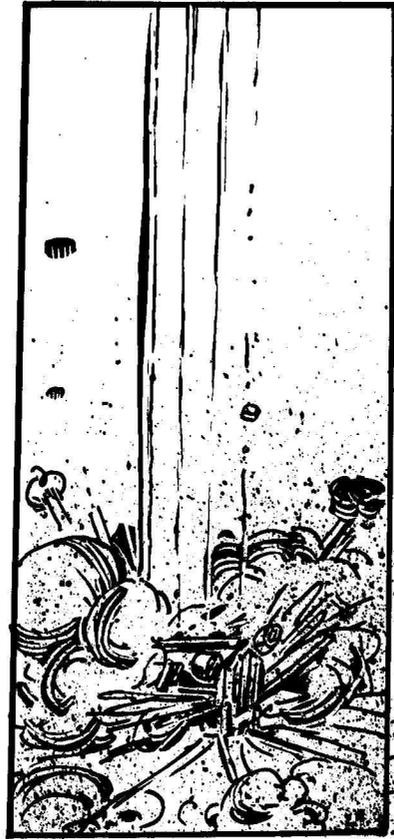
C'MON, IS THIS THE BEST YOU CAN DO?

GIVE IT SOME FIGHT!

ARE YOU JUST GONNA GIVE UP?



Sheesh.



NEXT TIME, I DEFINITELY SPRING FOR THE DELUXE MODEL, EXPENSE ACCOUNT OR NOT....

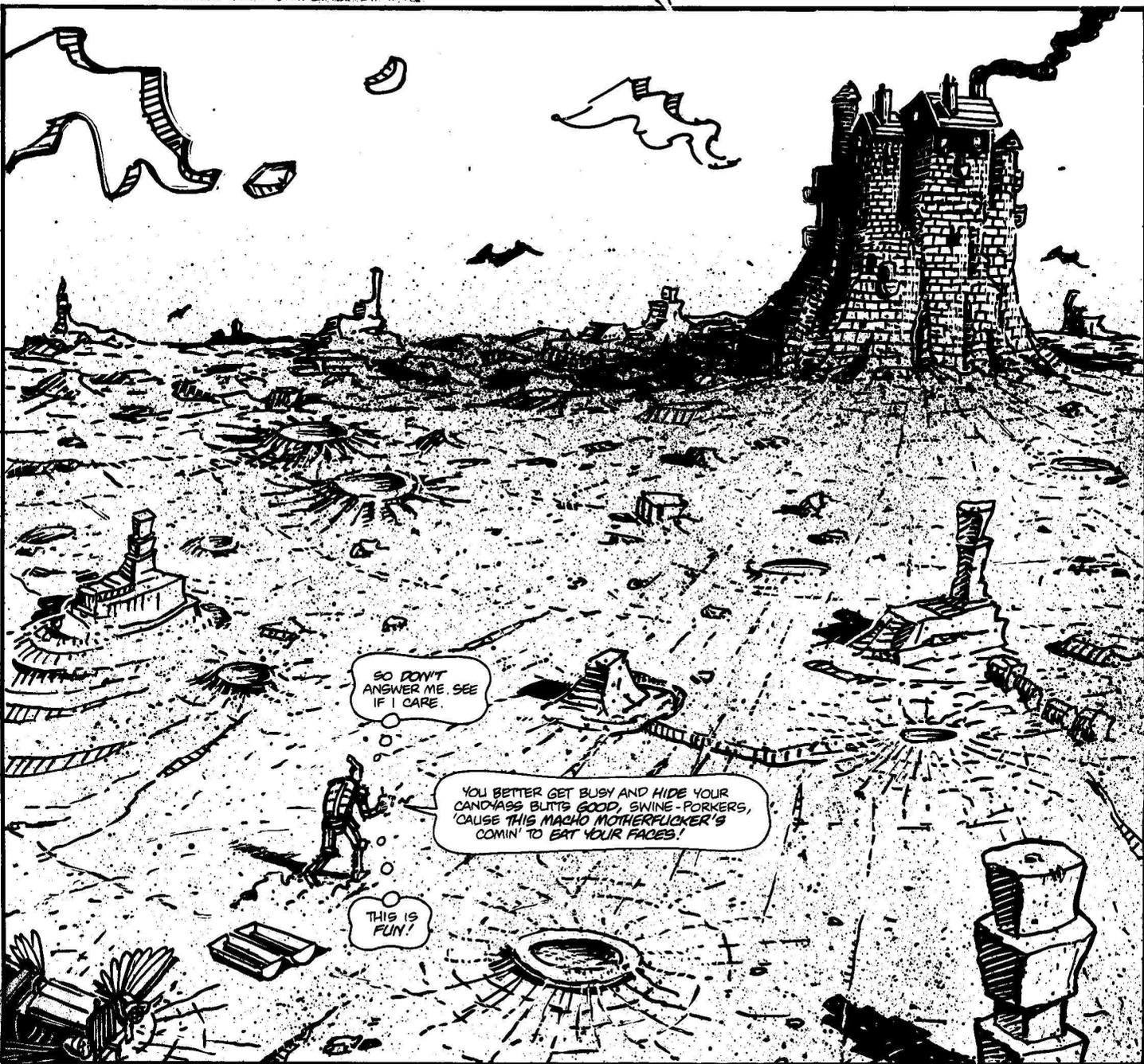


GUESS I SHOULD WHIP OUT THE ARSENAL, AND BE READY FOR WHAT-
EVER ELSE IS WAITING FOR ME...

OH BOY!

LETHAL TOYS
KINDA BRING
OUT THE
BEAST IN A
FELLAH,
DON'T THEY?

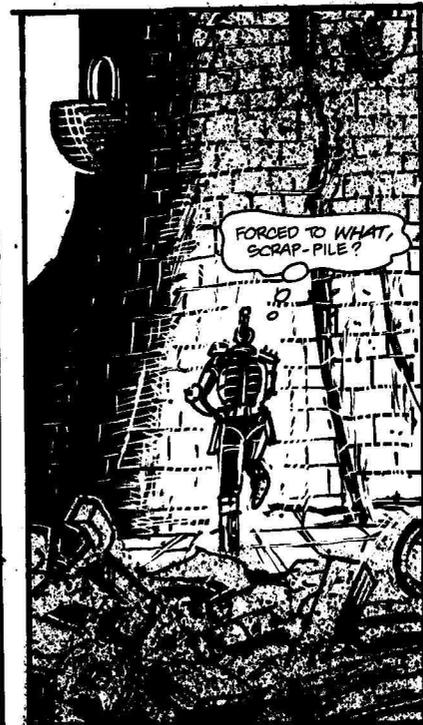
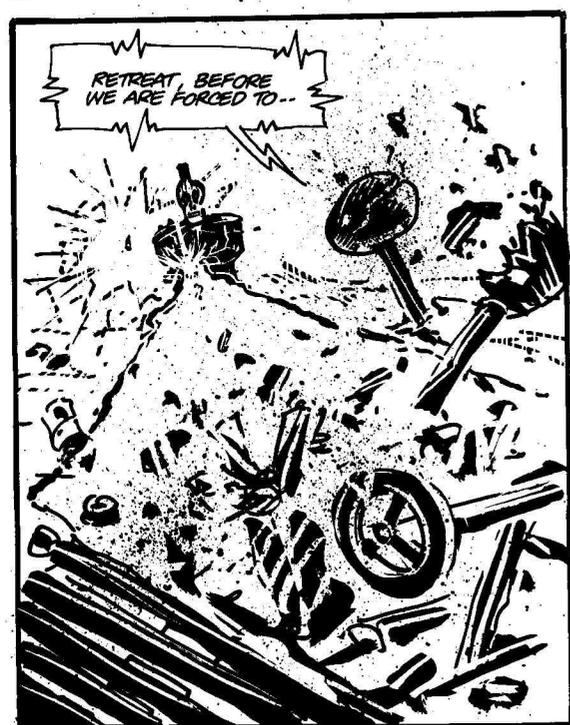
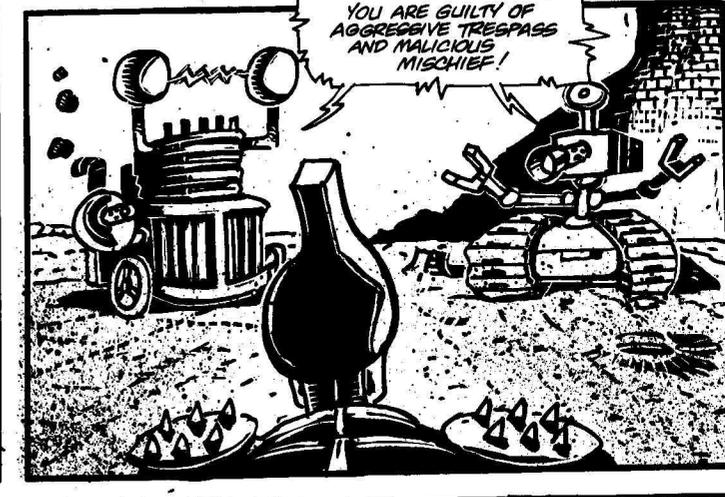
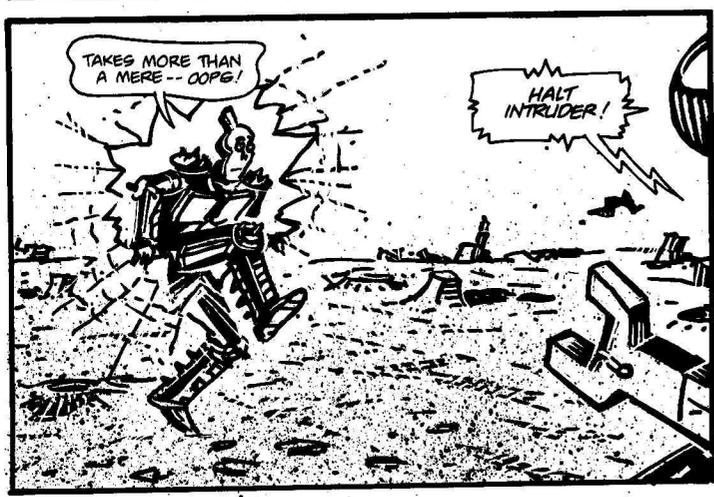
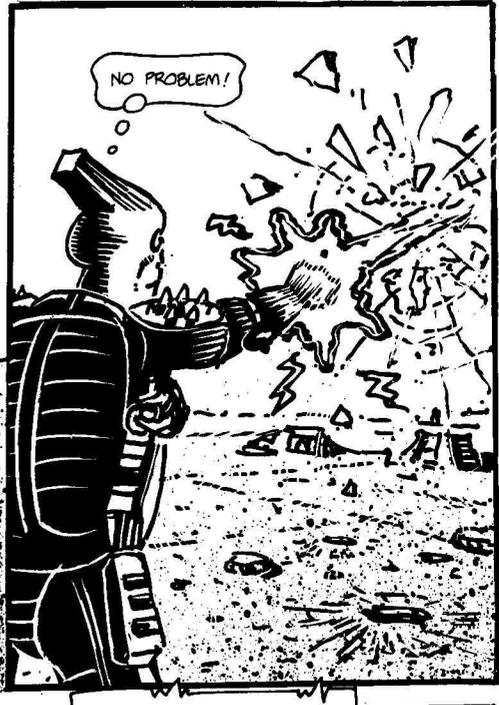
OHAY YOU CORPSE-
GRINDING BLOOD-SUCKING
FREAKS! TAKE YOUR
BEST SHOT! I'M READY
FOR YA!

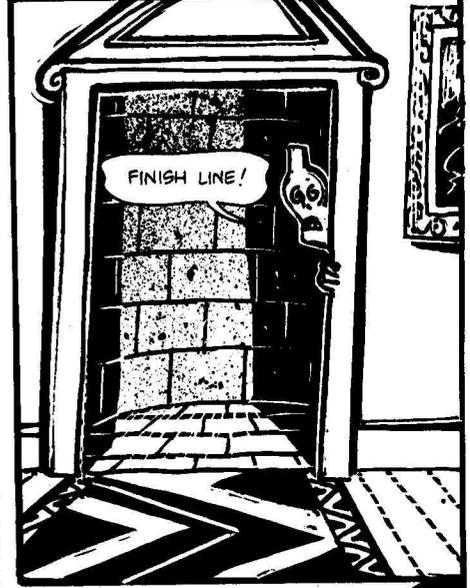
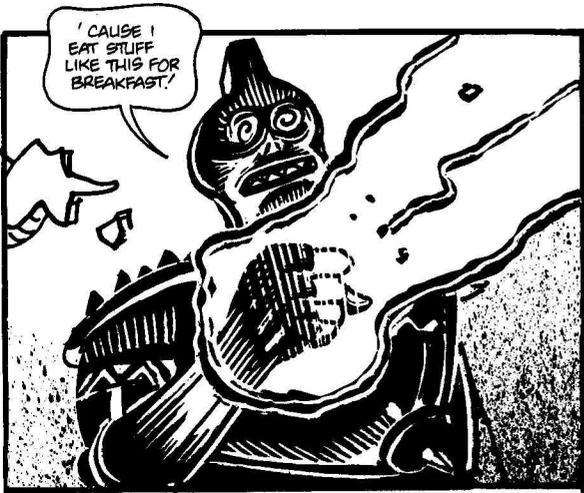


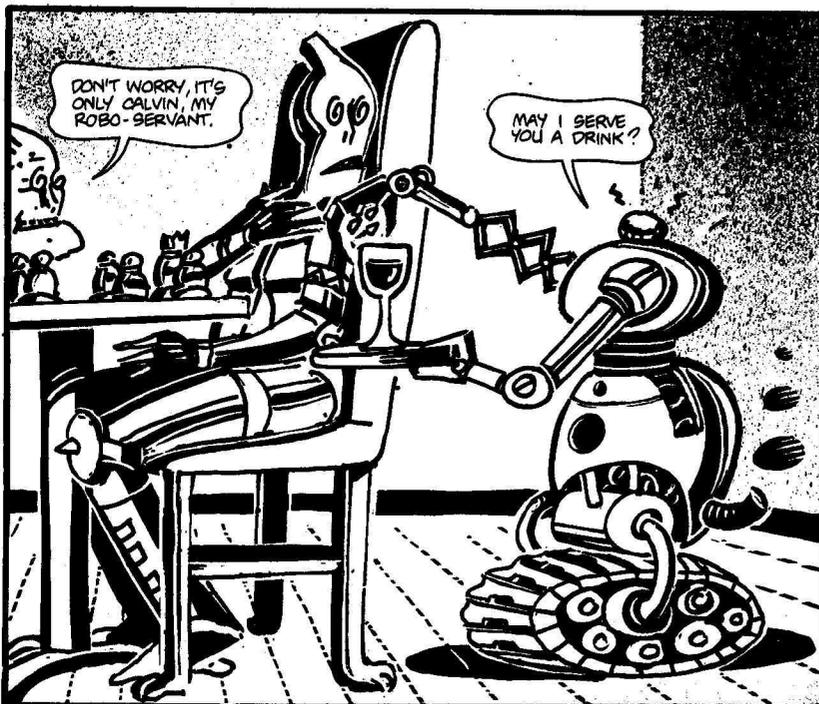
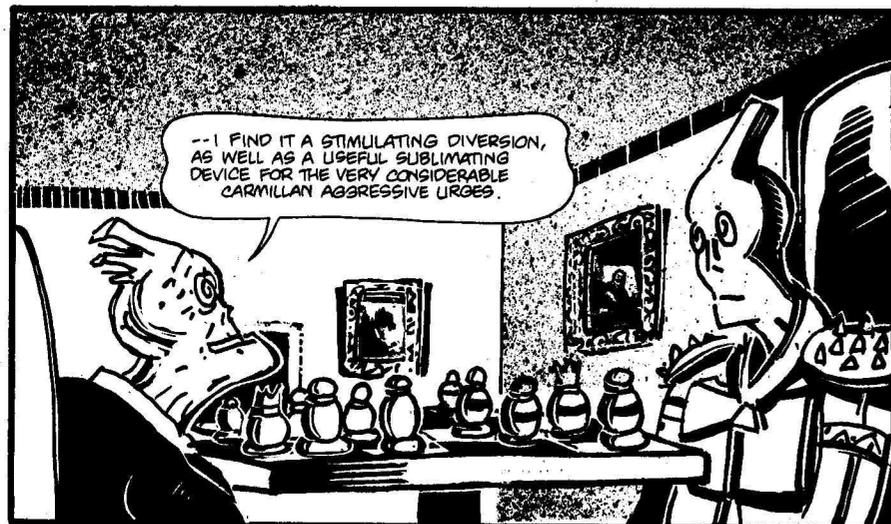
SO DON'T
ANSWER ME, SEE
IF I CARE.

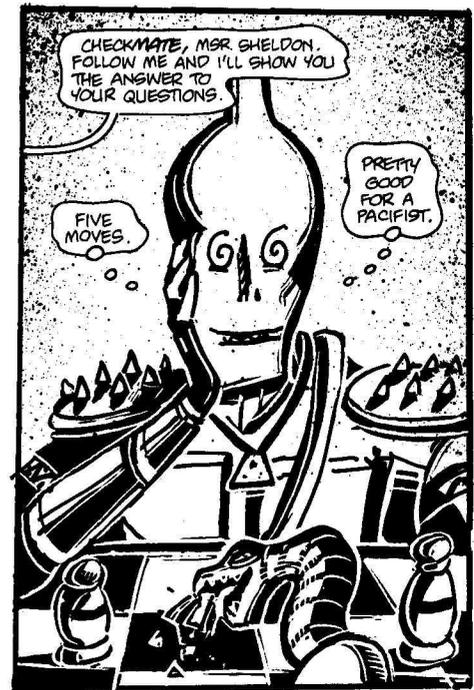
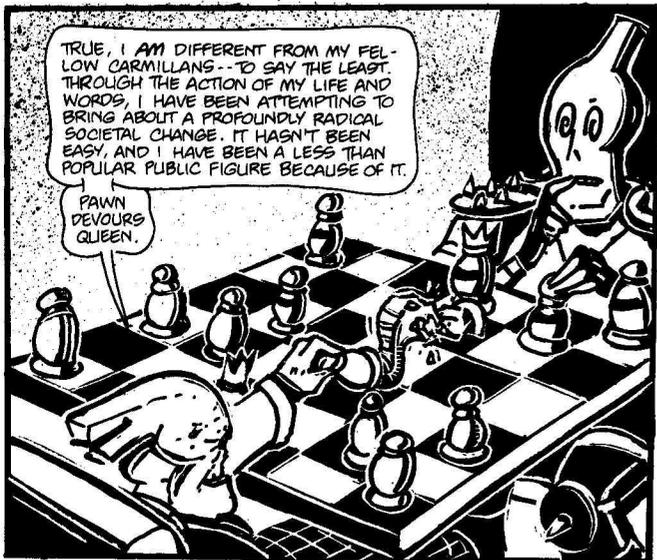
YOU BETTER GET BUSY AND HIDE YOUR
CANDY-ASS BUTTS GOOD, SWINE-PORKERS,
'CAUSE THIS MACHO MOTHERFUCKER'S
COMIN' TO EAT YOUR FACES!

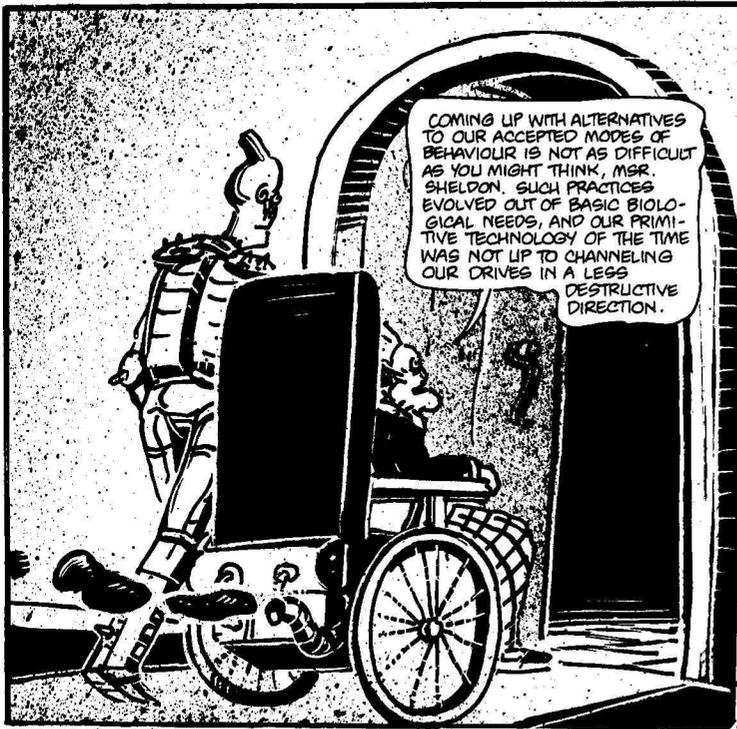
THIS IS
FUN!











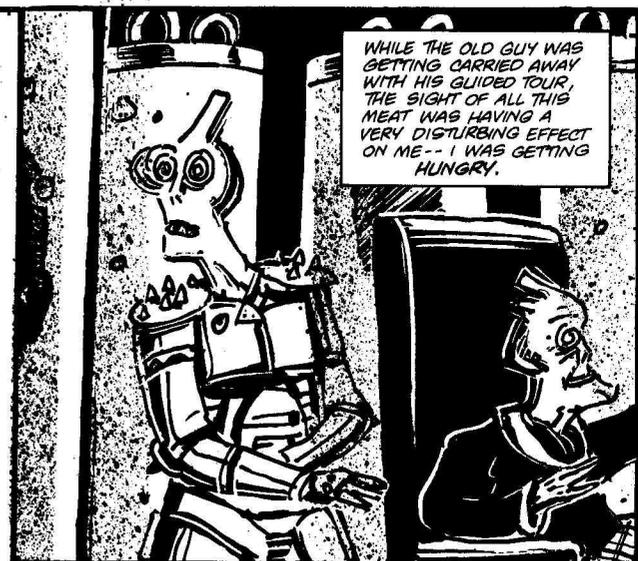
COMING UP WITH ALTERNATIVES TO OUR ACCEPTED MODES OF BEHAVIOUR IS NOT AS DIFFICULT AS YOU MIGHT THINK, MGR. SHELDON. SUCH PRACTICES EVOLVED OUT OF BASIC BIOLOGICAL NEEDS, AND OUR PRIMITIVE TECHNOLOGY OF THE TIME WAS NOT LIP TO CHANNELING OUR DRIVES IN A LESS DESTRUCTIVE DIRECTION.



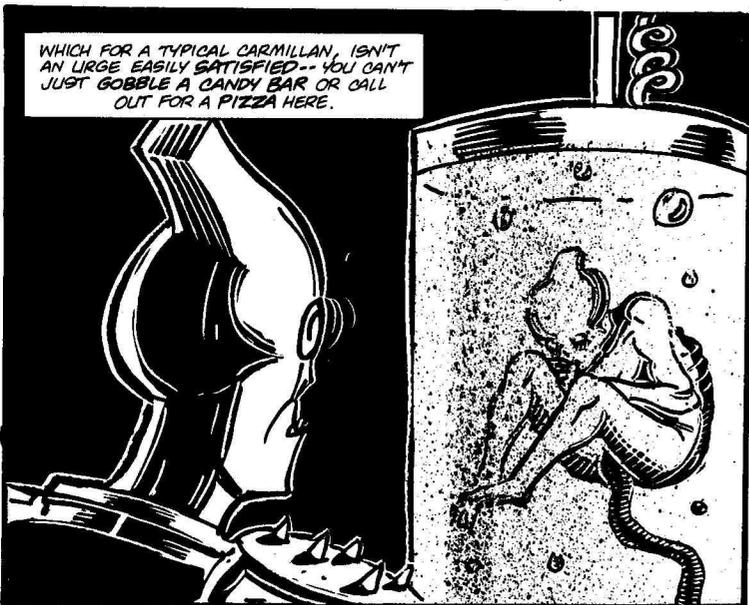
THAT'S NOT TRUE ANYMORE-- CLONING, EX-VITRO FERTILIZATION TECHNOLOGY, AND CHEMICALLY ACCELERATED GROWTH PROCESSES HAVE ADVANCED TO THE POINT WHERE KILLING FOR FOOD AND GENETIC TRANSFER IS NO LONGER NECESSARY.



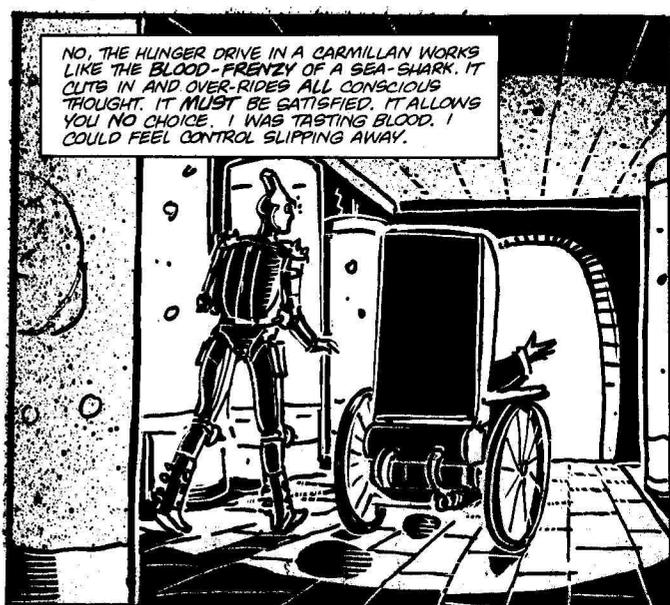
HERE IN READILY-AVAILABLE, MASS-PRODUCED, AUTOMATICALLY MONITORED UNITS, FLESH FOR CONSUMPTION CAN BE GROWN IN SPECIAL ELECTRO-CHEMICAL BATHS....



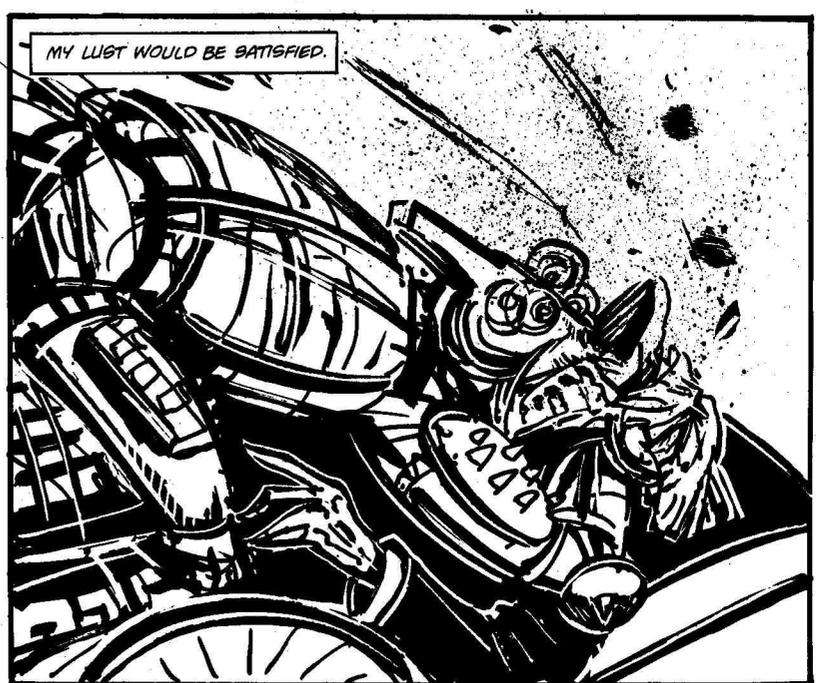
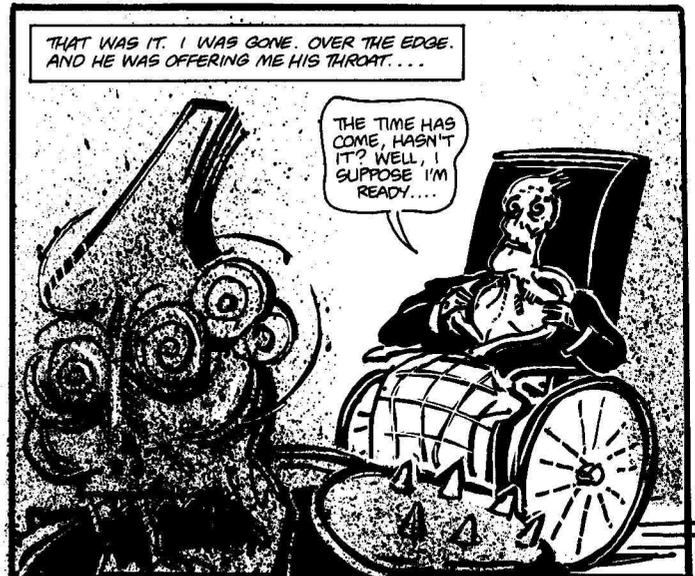
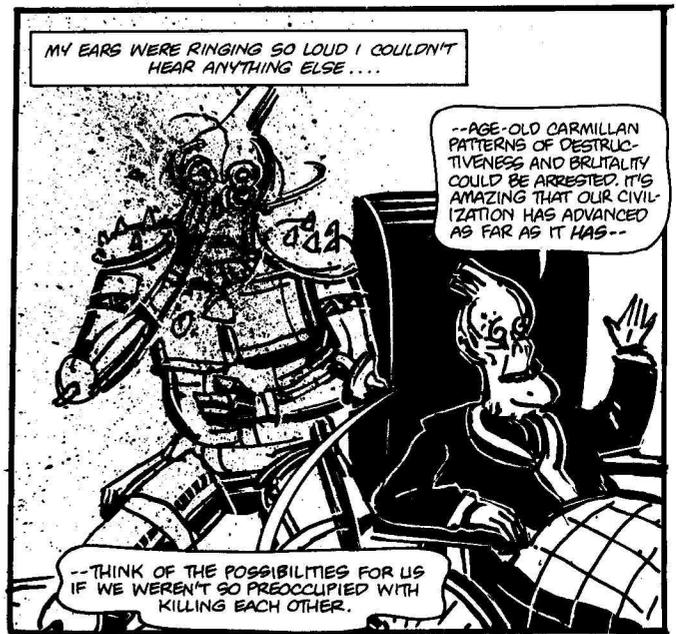
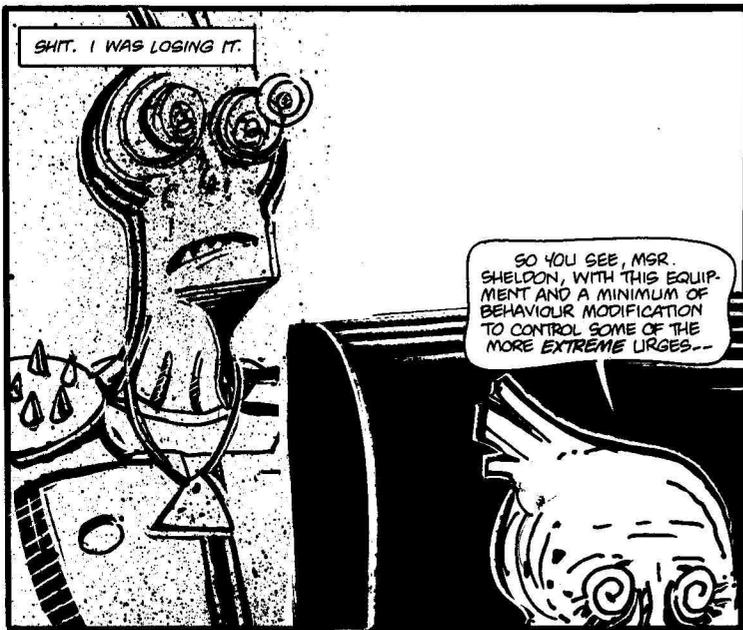
WHILE THE OLD GUY WAS GETTING CARRIED AWAY WITH HIS GLIDED TOUR, THE SIGHT OF ALL THIS MEAT WAS HAVING A VERY DISTURBING EFFECT ON ME-- I WAS GETTING HUNGRY.



WHICH FOR A TYPICAL CARMILLAN, ISN'T AN URGE EASILY SATISFIED-- YOU CAN'T JUST GOBBLE A CANDY BAR OR CALL OUT FOR A PIZZA HERE.



NO, THE HUNGER DRIVE IN A CARMILLAN WORKS LIKE THE BLOOD-FRENZY OF A SEA-SHARK. IT CUTS IN AND OVER-RIDES ALL CONSCIOUS THOUGHT. IT MUST BE SATISFIED. IT ALLOWS YOU NO CHOICE. I WAS TASTING BLOOD. I COULD FEEL CONTROL SLIPPING AWAY.



IT WAS LIKE WATCHING SOME DISTANT, FLICKERING MOVIE. I FELT NOTHING, TASTED NOTHING. IT WAS HAPPENING SOMEWHERE ELSE.



I HEARD THE RIPPING AND TEARING SOUNDS, THE OLD MAN'S DYING SCREAMS, THE GREEDY SLURPING OF MY STARVED MOUTH...



SUDDENLY, I TASTED THE BLOOD AND FLESH. FELT THE TEXTURE, THE SLICKNESS OF IT ON MY LIPS.



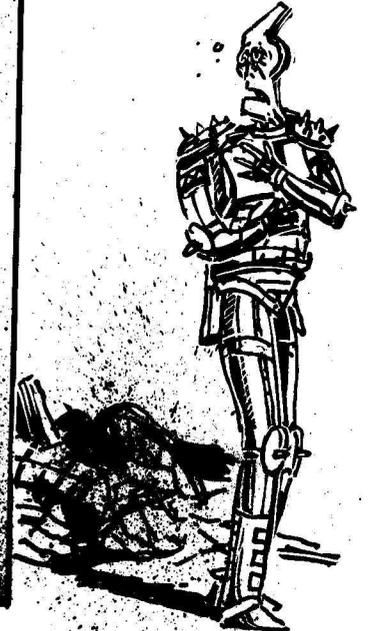
CONSCIOUSNESS HAD RETURNED TO ME, ALONG WITH THE AWARENESS OF WHAT I'D DONE.



I WAS SICK, REVOLTED. MY THROAT CONVULSED, TRYING TO VOMIT. NOTHING CAME UP.

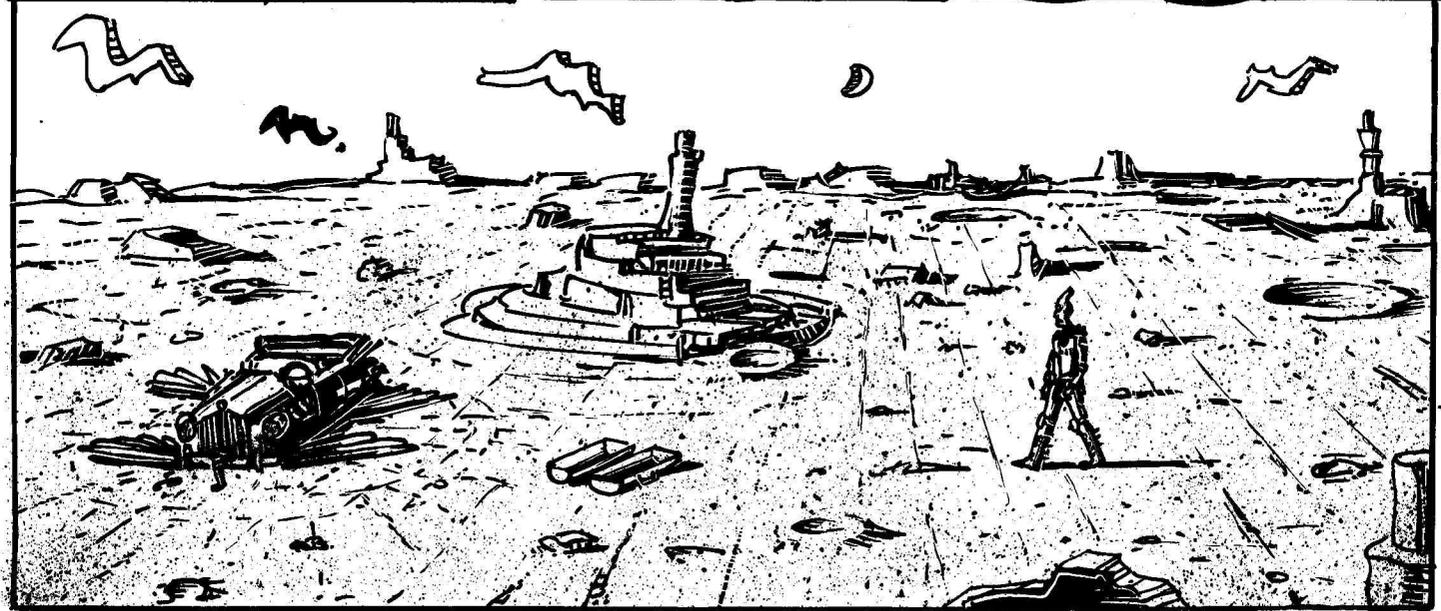
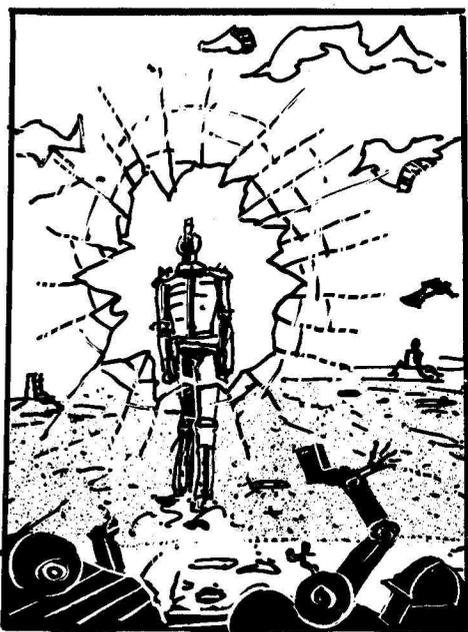
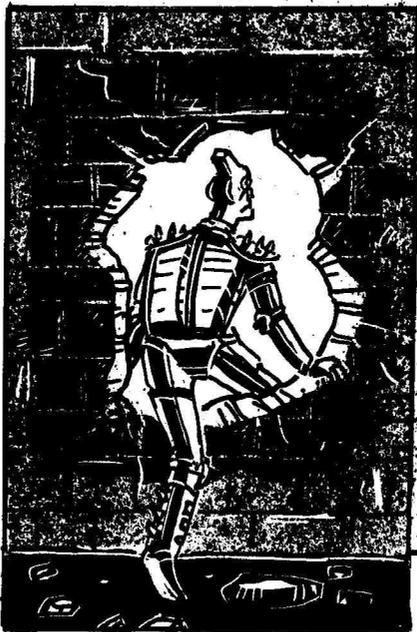


MY BODY HAD WHAT IT WANTED, AND IT WASN'T ABOUT TO GIVE IT UP. MY "MISSION" WAS ACCOMPLISHED.



I HAD KILLED THE ONE PERSON WHO
COULD'VE MADE A DIFFERENCE ON THIS
FUCKED UP PLANET. THAT WAS NO
COINCIDENCE, I FELT SURE. I WASN'T
THE LEAST BIT HAPPY WITH MYSELF ABOUT
ALL THIS, BUT I WAS DAMNED IF I WAS
GONNA TAKE ANY OF THE BLAME. I HAD
DONE THAT TO MYSELF FOR FAR TOO
LONG IN MY LIFE. THIS TIME, SOMEONE
ELSE WAS GONNA PAY, BUT RIGHT
THEN, ALL I WANTED WAS TO GET THE
FUCK OUT OF THERE....

SORRY OLD MAN.
YOU DIDN'T DESERVE
THIS... AND NEITHER
DID I.



MY FIRST LOOK IN A MIRROR ON MY RETURN TO THE INTERZONE WAS NOT A PRETTY SIGHT....

JEEZ, WHAT A WRECK!

AND I FELT WORSE THAN I LOOKED, IF YOU CAN BELIEVE THAT. THE THING IN MY STOMACH HAD REACHED SOME KIND OF CRITICAL MASS -- I COULD FEEL IT BULGING DOWN THERE LIKE SOME MUTANT MONSTER HELL-KID KICKING TO ANNOUNCE ITS IMMINENT BIRTH. WHATEVER THE DAMN THING WAS, IT WAS ALMOST READY TO POP OUT OF THE OVEN AND WAVE HELLO.

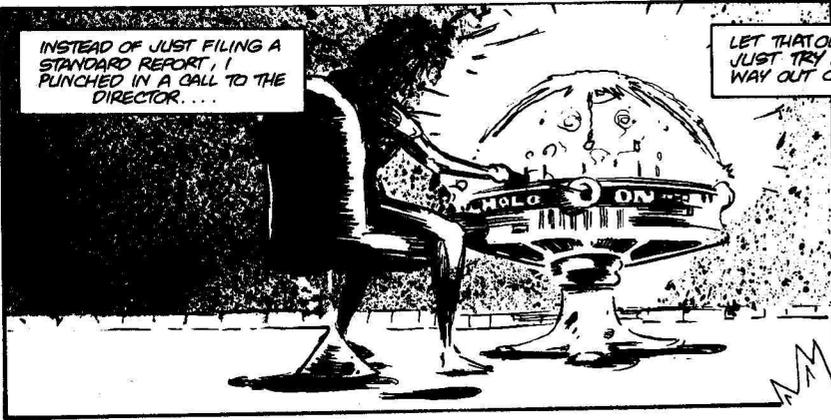
BUT THE SHITTINESS I FELT, COURTESY OF THE STRAIN THAT THING PUT ON MY BODY AS WELL AS ALL THE CHANGING I'D HAD TO DO -- THE LATTER MADE MANIFEST BY THE CARMILLAN BLACK-AND-WHITE MADE MY BRAIN SEEMED TO BE STILL STUCK IN -- WAS NOTHING COMPARED TO HOW PISSED OFF I WAS.

I WAS DAMN TIRED OF BEING USED, AND EVEN WORSE, BEING KEPT IN THE DARK ABOUT WHAT I WAS BEING USED FOR.

IT WAS TIME FOR SOME ANSWERS.

INSTEAD OF JUST FILING A STANDARD REPORT, I PUNCHED IN A CALL TO THE DIRECTOR....

LET THAT OLD ZOMBIE-FART JUST TRY AND WEASEL HIS WAY OUT OF THIS.



THAT HORRIBLE LITTLE DOGBOT ANSWERED.



IT'S SHELDON. PUT THE DIRECTOR ON.

I'M SORRY, MRS. SHELDON, BUT THE DIRECTOR IS UNABLE TO SPEAK WITH YOU AT THE MOMENT. MAY I CONVEY A MESSAGE?

YEAH, BONE-BREATH, YOU CAN CONVEY A MESSAGE-- TELL 'IM I WANT TO TALK TO HIM NOW.



THAT IS QUITE IMPOSSIBLE I'M AFRAID. HE IS UNDERGOING A RADICAL REJUVENATION PROCEDURE AT THIS TIME, AND IS-- AS I SAID-- UNABLE TO SPEAK WITH YOU.

IS THERE A PROBLEM WITH YOUR ASSIGNMENT?

YOU BET THERE'S A PROBLEM....

THE PROBLEM, DOBFACE, IS THIS WHOLE DAMN JOB. IT STINKS LIKE HELL, AND I'M DAMN TIRED OF NOT KNOWING WHAT'S GOING ON. I WANT THE TRUTH ABOUT THIS "ASSIGNMENT" RIGHT NOW!



YOU'VE BEEN TOLD EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW, MRS. SHELDON! YOU NEEDN'T WORRY ABOUT THE REST.



BULLSHIT! I'M RISKING MY ASS OUT HERE AND I'M BEGINNING TO REALIZE THAT I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M RISKING IT FOR.



AND I'VE HAD IT!

CALM YOURSELF, MRS. SHELDON! YOU ACCEPTED THIS ASSIGNMENT WITHOUT REGISTERING A COMPLAINT, AND YOUR OBLIGATION IS TO --

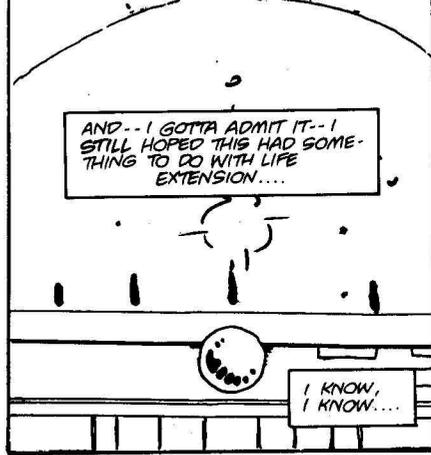


I CUT THE LITTLE SHIT OFF. OBVIOUSLY, I WAS GOING TO GET NOWHERE WITH HIM. I BRIEFLY CONSIDERED CHUCKING THE WHOLE GIG -- I SURE WAS PISSED ENOUGH -- BUT I REALIZED THAT'D LEAVE ME NOWHERE. AT LEAST IF I KEPT GOING, I'D HAVE A CHANCE OF GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF IT. IF I SURVIVED.

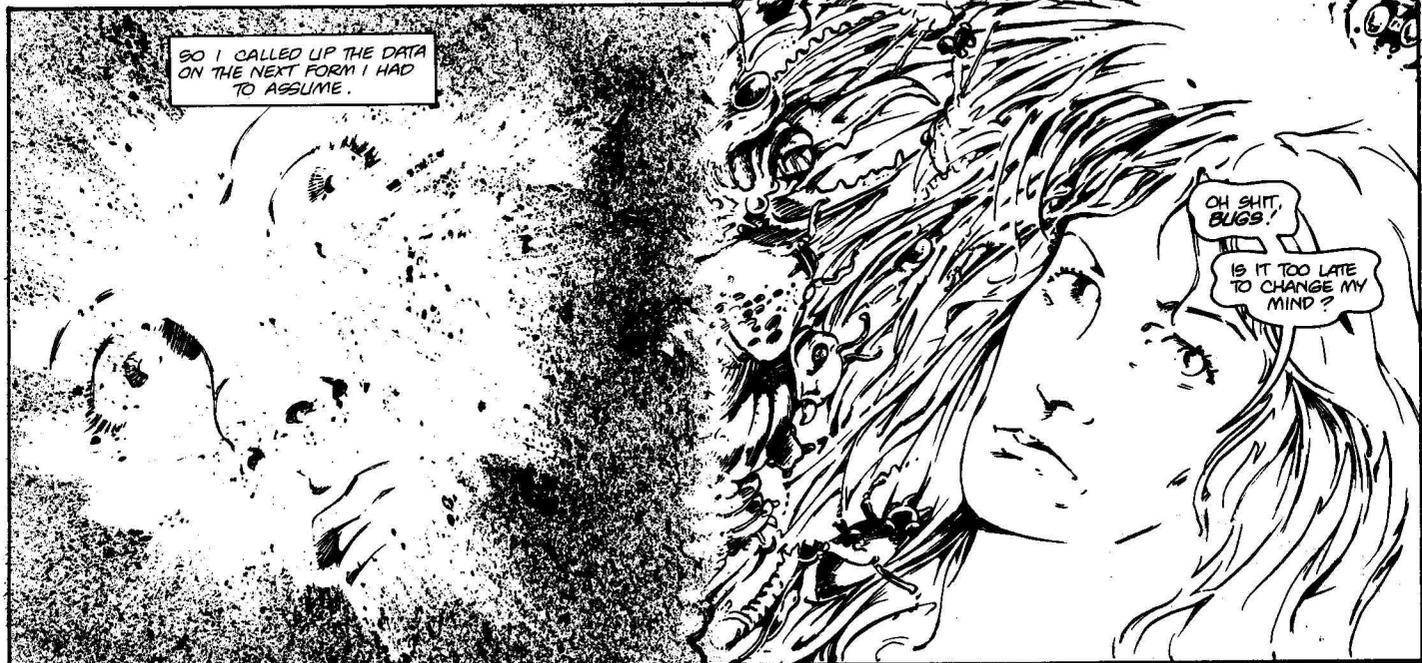


AND -- I GOTTA ADMIT IT -- I STILL HOPED THIS HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH LIFE EXTENSION....

I KNOW, I KNOW....



SO I CALLED UP THE DATA ON THE NEXT FORM I HAD TO ASSUME.



OH SHIT, BUGS!

IS IT TOO LATE TO CHANGE MY MIND?



ON MY LIST OF LEAST FAVORITE LIFE-FORMS, BUGS ARE UP THERE IN THE TOP FIVE. MAKE THAT THE TOP TWO. THERE'S JUST SOMETHING ABOUT A SEGMENTED BODY AND LOTS OF LEGS THAT GIVES ME THE CREEPS. I CAN'T EXPLAIN IT. JUST INSTINCTIVE DISGUST, I GUESS.

SO, OF COURSE I HAD TO BECOME ONE OF THE WIGGLY LITTLE THINGS, RIGHT?

RIGHT.

BUG-WORLD BECKONED....

AND, SWALLOWING MY WILLIES, I ANSWERED THE HIVE-MAIDENS' SIREN CALL--OR, MORE PROPERLY, SQUEAKS AND BUZZES, AS BUGS COMMUNICATE THROUGH A COMBINATION OF BODY MOVEMENTS, HIGH-PITCHED WHINES, AND WING-GENERATED HUMS. KINDA LIKE SOMEBODY TRYING TO TELL A STORY BY TAP DANCING AND PLAYING A KAZOO. GOOFY, BUT I GUESS IT GETS THE JOB DONE.

THE PLACE WASN'T A PLANET, REALLY--MORE A CONGLOMERATION OF HIVES CLUMPED TOGETHER TO FORM A WORLD. SOCIO-POLITICALLY, IT WAS A LOOSE CONFEDERATION OF FEUDAL CITY-STATES THAT HAD AS LITTLE TO DO WITH EACH OTHER AS THEY COULD GET AWAY WITH. MAIN OCCUPATION WAS KEEPING EACH HIVE'S QUEEN FAT, WARM, AND HAPPY. MY JOB WAS TO PENETRATE ONE OF SAID QUEEN'S BOLDIORS AND HELP MYSELF TO SEVERAL MOUTHFULS OF THE GOOPY NECTAR BREWED UP SPECIAL FOR THE OLD GIRL'S DELECTATION.

WHICH PROMISED, NO DOUBT, TO BE YET ANOTHER PALATE-PLEASING PREPARATION, WHICH THIS "ASSIGNMENT" SEEMED TO HAVE NO END OF. I COULDN'T WAIT TO TASTE IT....

Kenneth Smith



THE HIVE WAS CRAWLING WITH DRONES, SCURRYING EVERYWHERE IN SERVICE OF THE LOCAL FAT LADY'S WHIMS. HORDS OF THE INDUSTRIOUS LITTLE BUGGERS WERE FLEEING THE PREMISES ON POLLEN-HUNTS, SWARMING BACK LATER WITH POUCHES BULGING.

THE CROWD REMINDED ME OF AN INTERZONE CONDOM GIVE-AWAY. I DECIDED TO JOIN IT AND SCOPE THE PLACE OUT.

AT THE MOMENT, IT LOOKED LIKE THE FLEET WAS IN-- DRONES WERE LINED UP BY THE THOUSAND, WAITING FOR THEIR TURN TO SQUEEZE THEIR BULBOS BUG-BAGS INTO THE HEAD HONCHITA'S FEEDING TROUGH.

DRONES, BEING SINGLE-MINDED BEASTS OF RATHER LIMITED MENTAL ABILITIES, LACK THE NECIRAL SOFTWARE REQUIRED TO CONCENTRATE ON MORE THAN ONE THING AT A TIME. CONSEQUENTLY, MY RATHER OBVIOUS PRESENCE AMONG THEM WENT UNNOTICED. I JUST KEPT MY TRAP SHUT AND WENT WITH THE FLOW. PRETTY SOON, I SPOTTED THE FRONT OF THE LINE.

THE BUG-JUICE TANK APPEARED TO BE REACHING ITS HIGH WATER MARK. THAT MEANT ALL THE WORKER ANTS WOULD BE HITTING THE HAY ANY MINUTE NOW. I DECIDED TO BIDE MY TIME AND COME BACK LATER FOR MY BREW-SLURPING, WHEN THINGS WOULD BE LESS HECTIC.

AH YES, MUCH BETTER.

I WAS STILL HAVING A HELLUVA TIME GETTING THE HANG OF THIS DAMN INSECT SUIT, THOUGH. WHAT WITH THE OVER-STARCHED EXO-SKELETON AND ATTRACTIVELY BLIMP-LIKE THORAX, IT WAS A WONDER I COULD EVEN TAKE TWO CONSECUTIVE STEPS WITHOUT FALLING FLAT ON MY BUG-MUG.

YOW!

NOW WHY DID I JUST KNOW THAT WAS GONNA HAPPEN?

SURE HOPE THIS THING FLOATS...

SURPRISE! IT GOES DOWN FASTER THAN A LALALIAN ON STEROIDS!

AT LEAST BUGS HAVE BETTER TASTE IN GOOP THAN FISH!

WONDER IF THIS LITTLE WADING POOL HAS A BOTTOM....

FOUND IT!

OH, GREAT! I HAD POPPED THROUGH THE FEEDING SAC MEMBRANE INTO THE OLD BROAD'S LAP!

SCREEEEEEEE!

YAAH!

ULP!

HI THERE, QUEENIE-- HOPE I DIDN'T WAKE YOU.

SCREEEEEEEEEEEE!

CHEEE!

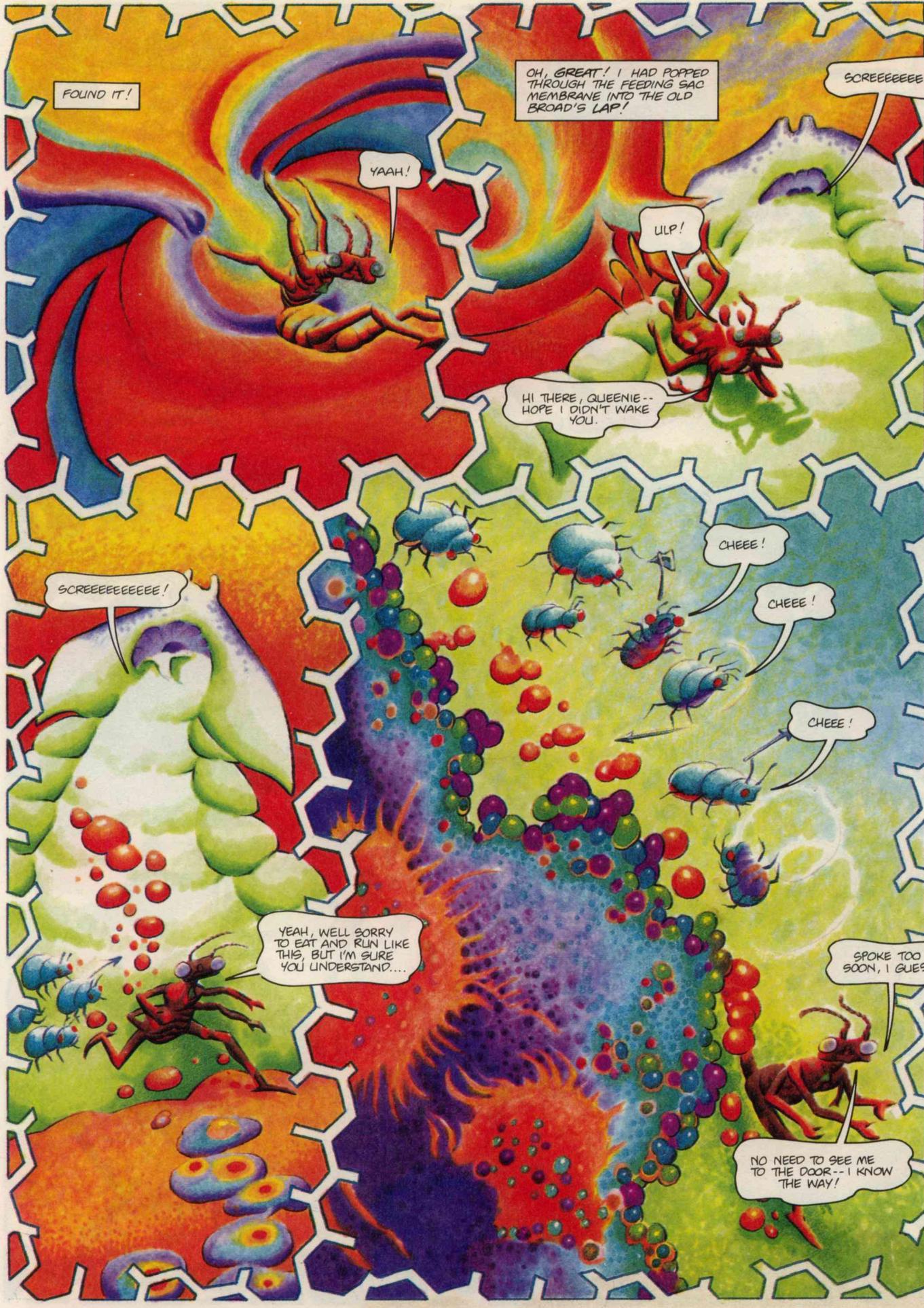
CHEEE!

CHEEE!

YEAH, WELL SORRY TO EAT AND RUN LIKE THIS, BUT I'M SURE YOU UNDERSTAND....

SPOKE TOO SOON, I GUESS.

NO NEED TO SEE ME TO THE DOOR-- I KNOW THE WAY!





SCREEEEEEEE!

UH OH, LOOKS LIKE THE WHOLE DAMN HIVE IS ABOUT TO GET INTO THE ACT.

HONEST-- THERE'S NO NEED FOR ALL THIS FUSS!

LEMME OUTTA HERE!

THE SURFACE-- THANK GOD!

THINGS WERE LOOKING PRETTY GRIM. I FELT LIKE I WAS STUCK IN SOME HORRIBLE NIGHTMARE -- PURSUED BY A FACELESS BUG-HORDE INTENT ON DRAGGING ME INTO THE NEAREST ROACH MOTEL, UNABLE TO MOVE MY LEGS FAST ENOUGH TO ESCAPE....

WHEN SUDDENLY--

YO! I'VE GOT WINGS!

FOLLOWED BY THE WORST CASE OF SOUR STOMACH I'VE EVER HAD!

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS GONNA DO ME IN FIRST-- THE INDIGESTION OR THE PISSED-OFF BUZZING SWARM NIPPING AT MY CHITINOUS BUTT.

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK, EH?



ONCE UP ON THE HIVE-WORLD'S SURFACE,
IT WAS ONLY A SHORT FLAP TO MY NEXT
DESTINATION-- THE HUGE PLANET LOOMING
OVER ME THAT SERVED AS THE BUGS'
ENTRY-PORT TO THE INTERZONE.

AS I USED MY WINGS MORE, AND GOT
USED TO 'EM, I SAW HOW-- IF I SOMEHOW
GOT STUCK IN THIS BUG FORM-- I COULD
GROW QUITE FOND OF THE THINGS. IT MAKES
FLEEING A DEATH-HUNGRY MOB SO MUCH
EASIER, AND GOD KNOWS I'D BEEN DOING
A LOT OF THAT!

ESCAPE WAS AT HAND....



JUST IN TIME -- A CROWD OF INTERZONE-BOUND FUN-SEEKERS TO LOSE MYSELF IN. YEAH, SO THEY WEREN'T A PARTICULARLY ATTRACTIVE BUNCH OF BEINGS, BUT-- HEY-- WAS I COMPLAINING? IT WAS CAMOUFLAGE I WAS LOOKING FOR, NOT AN AESTHETICALLY PLEASING LIFE-PAL.

THERE WAS PLENTY OF TIME FOR THAT PARTICULARLY DEPRESSING ACTIVITY LATER ON....

RIGHT NOW, JUST A COUPLE OF SHORT STEPS SEPARATED ME FROM EITHER A CRUSHED-BUG FUTURE, OR THE MUCH MORE PREFERABLE ONE AS HAPPIER-THAN-SHIT, JOB-WELL-DONE, BACK-IN-FLEXIBLE-FLESH SHELDON.

MY DOGGED PURSUERS APPEARED TO HAVE GOTTEN LOST IN THE SHUFFLE. SWELL. I WAS BEGINNING TO SMELL THE INTERZONE'S WONDERFUL FART-CLOUD ATMOSPHERE -- ONE SO TASTY YOU HAD TO WEAR AN AIRTIGHT MASK TO KEEP IT OUT OF YOUR MOUTH.

LIKE DOROTHY SAID, "THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME" EH?

GOT THROUGH THE GATES WITH NO PROBLEM, AND DUCKED INTO THE FIRST UNOCCUPIED ALLEY I COULD FIND. THE DRONE-BOYS WERE STILL OUT THERE LOOKING FOR ME, SO I FIGURED THE TIME WAS RIGHT FOR A LITTLE CHANGE OF APPEARANCE.

BUT THE STUFF IN MY STOMACH HAD OTHER IDEAS.

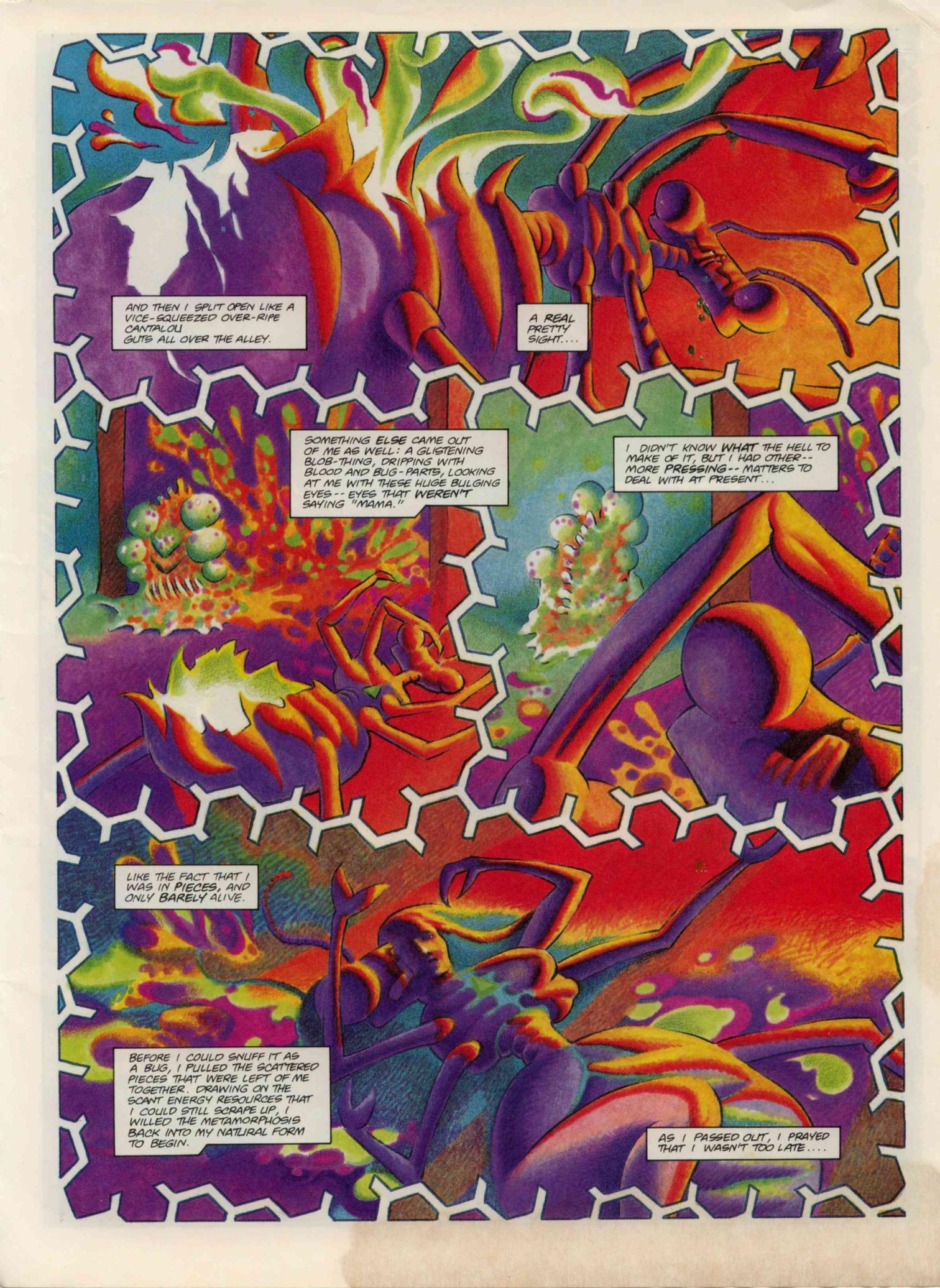
EVEN THOUGH MY ABDOMEN ALREADY FELT SWOLLEN TO ITS INFLEXIBLE SKIN'S STRETCHED-OUT LIMITS, IT KEPT GETTING BIGGER.

SCREEEEEEEE!

IT WAS HURTING LIKE HELL-- AND PUFFED-UP ENOUGH TO BURST.

THAT'S WHEN THE EXO-SKELETON STARTED TO CRACK.





AND THEN I SPLIT OPEN LIKE A VICE-SQUEEZED OVER-RIPE CANTALOU GUTS ALL OVER THE ALLEY.

A REAL PRETTY SIGHT....

SOMETHING ELSE CAME OUT OF ME AS WELL: A GLISTENING BLOB-THING, DRIPPING WITH BLOOD AND BUG-PARTS, LOOKING AT ME WITH THESE HUGE BULGING EYES-- EYES THAT WEREN'T SAYING "MAMA."

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL TO MAKE OF IT, BUT I HAD OTHER-- MORE PRESSING-- MATTERS TO DEAL WITH AT PRESENT...

LIKE THE FACT THAT I WAS IN PIECES, AND ONLY BARELY ALIVE.

BEFORE I COULD SNUFF IT AS A BUG, I PULLED THE SCATTERED PIECES THAT WERE LEFT OF ME TOGETHER. DRAWING ON THE SCANT ENERGY RESOURCES THAT I COULD STILL SCRAPE UP, I WILLED THE METAMORPHOSIS BACK INTO MY NATURAL FORM TO BEGIN.

AS I PASSED OUT, I PRAYED THAT I WASN'T TOO LATE....

I STILL FELT LIKE SHIT WHEN I WOKE UP, BUT AT LEAST I WAS ME AGAIN.

IT TOOK A REALLY LONG TIME FOR ME TO COME AROUND...

EVERYTHING CAME INTO FOCUS SLOWLY ... I LOOKED AROUND FOR THE BLOB. IT WAS GONE. BUT IT'D LEFT ITS MARK...

IT WAS CARNAGE LIKE I'D NEVER SEEN. LIKE NOBODY'D EVER SEEN, I SUSPECTED.

SUDDENLY, IT ALL BECAME CLEAR TO ME, JUMPING FULLY FORMED INTO MY FOREBRAIN. FINALLY I KNEW WHAT THE SCORE WAS -- FINALLY.

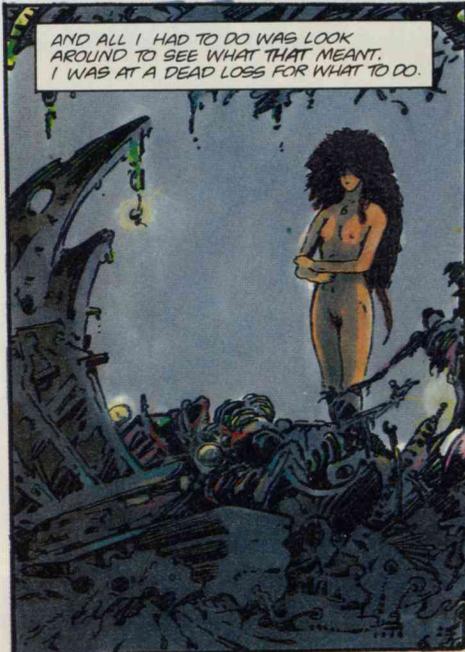
I HAD BEEN TAKEN FOR A SUCKER, ALL RIGHT. IN A BIG WAY.



THE BIG REVELATION? THE BLOB-THING THAT I'D JUST GIVEN BIRTH TO WAS-- DEAD OBVIOUS TO ME NOW-- A PIECE OF KILLER BIOTECH. THAT "LIFE-PROLONGING" JIVE THE DIRECTOR HAD HANDED ME WAS ONE HUGE FREIGHTER-LOAD OF BULLSHIT, CALCULATED TO INSURE MY EAGER COOPERATION. YEAH, IT WAS ALL REAL CLEAR TO ME NOW. I HAD BEEN PLAYED FOR A PRIME SUCKER-- MANIPULATED SO THAT I WOULD SURREPTITIOUSLY ASSEMBLE A LIVING WEAPON THAT THE CORPORATE WARLORDS OF COCA-FARBEN DIDN'T WANT TO BE OFFICIALLY ASSOCIATED WITH. ME AND MY WONDERFUL "TALENT" CAME MADE-TO-ORDER FOR THEIR NEEDS. ALL THEY HAD TO DO WAS PUSH MY BUTTONS-- WERE MY WEAKNESSES REALLY THAT OBVIOUS?-- AND I WAS OFF AND RUNNING.

THAT WAS SOME PRETTY TERRIBLE SHIT-- I WAS HORRIFIED, BUT I COULD DEAL WITH IT.

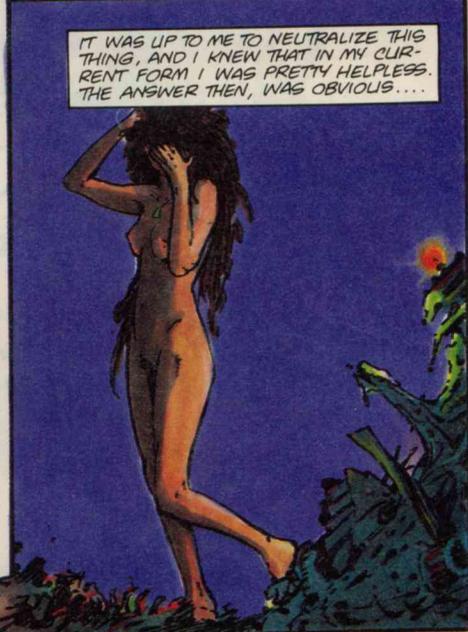
WHAT REALLY BURNED MY ASS ABOUT THIS WAS THAT I'D JUST LOOSED THE FUCKING THING ON THE INTERZONE. IT WAS A SENTIENT VECTOR OF DESTRUCTION, TOTALLY OUT OF ANYONE'S CONTROL.



AND ALL I HAD TO DO WAS LOOK AROUND TO SEE WHAT THAT MEANT. I WAS AT A DEAD LOSS FOR WHAT TO DO.



IT TOOK ME A FEW SECONDS TO GET OVER MY INITIAL SHOCK AND OUTRAGE... AND TO SHIFT THE BRUNT OF MY ANGER AWAY FROM ITS USUAL PRIMARY TARGET-- MYSELF (A BAD HABIT I'VE YET TO BREAK)-- AND TOWARD THE BASTARDS WHO REALLY DESERVED IT. ONCE I DID THAT, THE PIECES STARTED COMING TOGETHER IN MY HEAD. PRETTY SOON, I KNEW WHAT I HAD TO DO.



IT WAS UP TO ME TO NEUTRALIZE THIS THING, AND I KNEW THAT IN MY CURRENT FORM I WAS PRETTY HELPLESS. THE ANSWER THEN, WAS OBVIOUS...



IT TAKES A BLOB TO CATCH A BLOB, EH?

I GOT DOWN TO BUSINESS....

YO-HO-HO, A BLOBBING WE WILL GO....

ORIENTATION TO THIS--ER, UNUSUAL BODY-FORM TOOK SOME TIME. I HAD TO GET USED TO MY RATHER FLIMSY BLOB-BRAIN -- WHICH ITSELF REQUIRED A COUPLE OF SECONDS TO FIND--AND THE WACKY INPUT IT RECEIVED FROM A CONSTANTLY CHANGING CONFIGURATION OF SENSORY ORGANS.

I MEAN, TALK ABOUT ROVING EYES!

BUT ONCE I GOT THAT TRICK DOWN, BEING A BLOB WAS A SNAP.

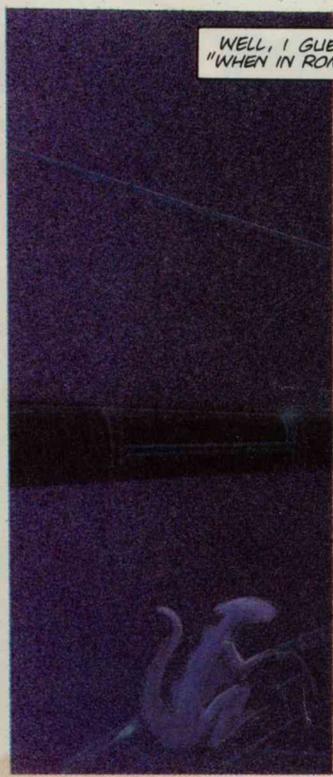
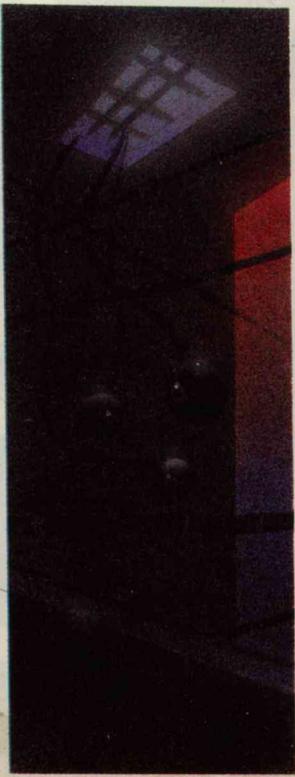
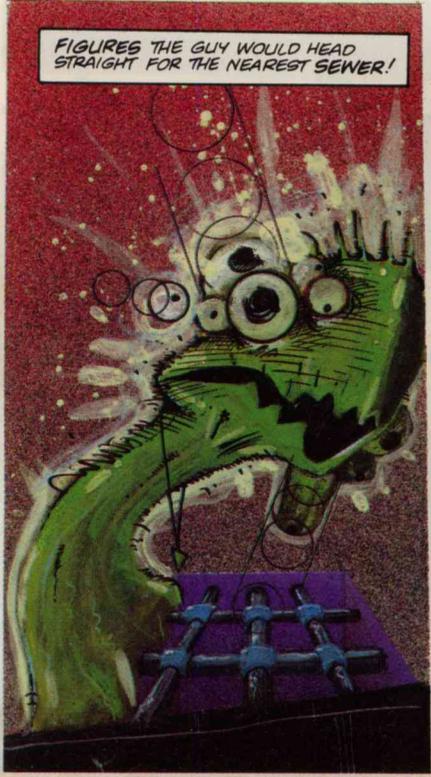
IN FACT, IT WOULD'VE BEEN FUN IF NOT FOR THE UNSIGHTLY AND UNSANITARY SLIME-TRAIL MY BIG GELATINOUS BODY LEFT BEHIND IT, WHICH ACTUALLY TURNED OUT TO BE RATHER HANDY, AS IT GAVE ME A REAL OBVIOUS -- IF SMELLY -- WAY TO TRACK MY QUARRY.

FOLLOW THAT JELLY-SMEAR!

FIGURES THE GUY WOULD HEAD STRAIGHT FOR THE NEAREST SEWER!

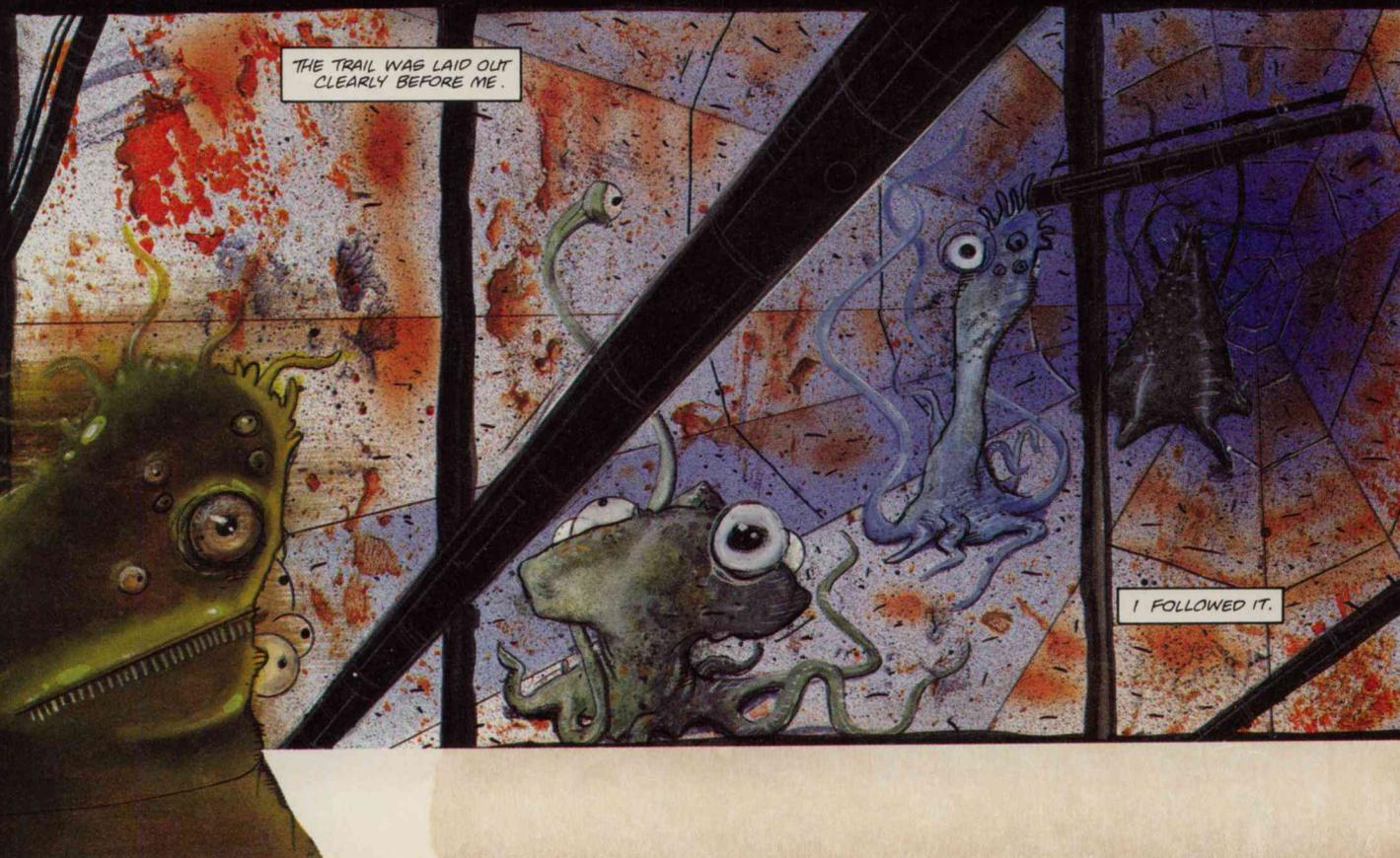
WELL, I GUESS IT'S "WHEN IN ROME" TIME....

YOW! THAT TICKLES!



THE INTERZONE, BEING A PRODIGIOUS WASTE-PRODUCING ENTITY, HAS AN EXTENSIVE GARBAGE DISPOSAL/TREATMENT/RECYCLING SYSTEM. HUGE SEWER-LIKE DUCTS HONEY-COMB THE MEGA-STRUCTURE, SUCKING IN ALL THE VARIOUS UNDESIRABLE SUBSTANCES AND DISCARDED OBJECTS YOUR TYPICAL GALAXY. SPANNING POST-INDUSTRIAL CIVILIZATION SPEWS OUT, TRANSPORTING IT ALL TO A VAST CENTRAL PROCESSING FACILITY.

MY BLOB-BABY WAS MAKING ITS WAY THROUGH THE SEWERS, IN A SEEMINGLY RANDOM FASHION, BUT DEFINITELY BOUND FOR THE INTERZONE'S GREAT COSMIC CESSPOOL--THE ULTIMATE DESTINATION FOR EVERYTHING IN THIS HELL-ON-EARTH.



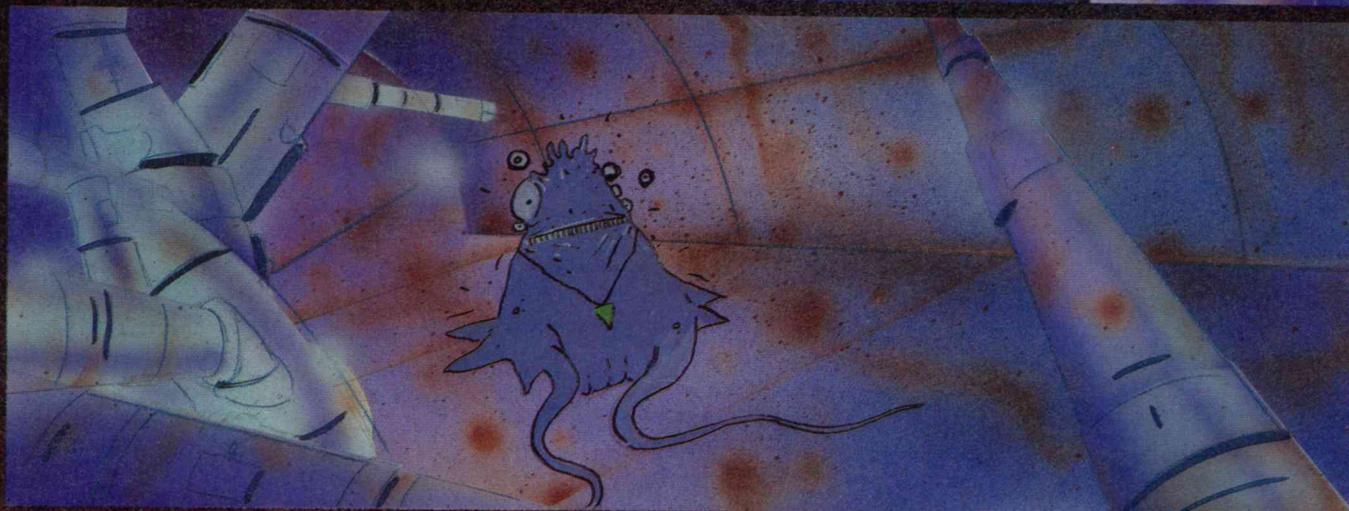
THE TRAIL WAS LAID OUT CLEARLY BEFORE ME.

I FOLLOWED IT.

THE FACILITY'S NERVE CENTER
STOOD BEFORE ME. SUDDENLY,
I REALIZED THE CONCEPTUAL
POTTY-JOKE SOME SMART-
ASSSED DESIGNER HAD PER-
PETRATED.

YUK-YUK.

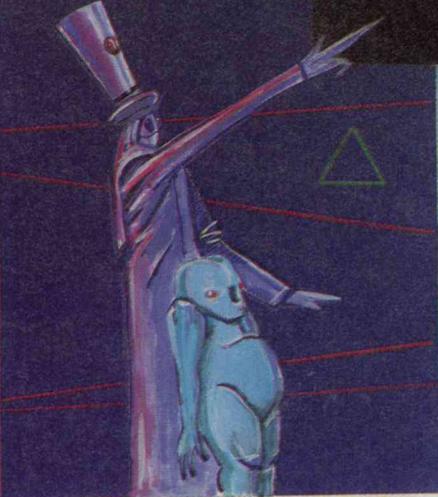
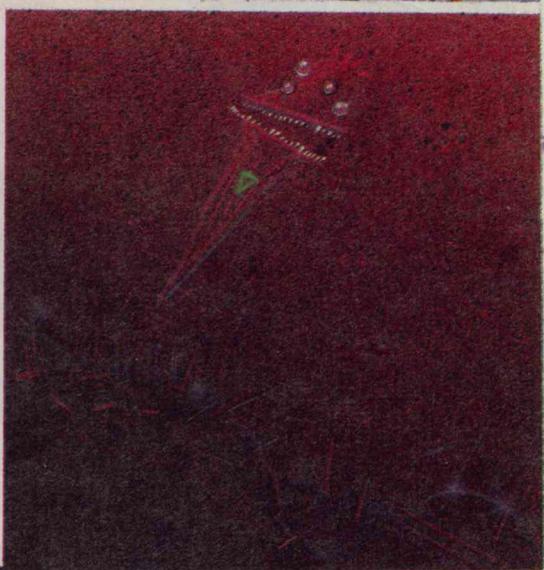
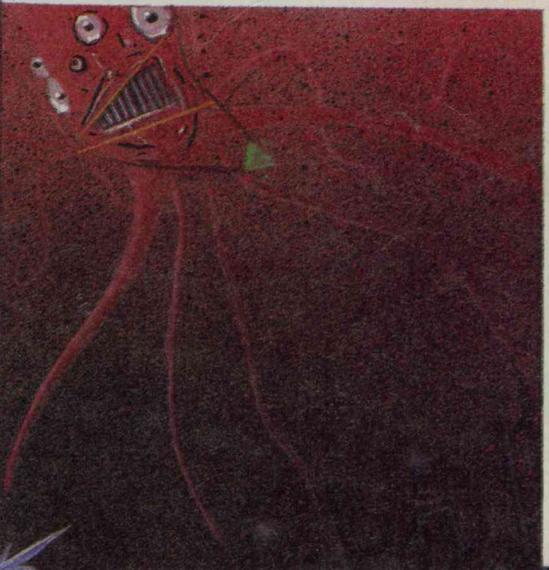
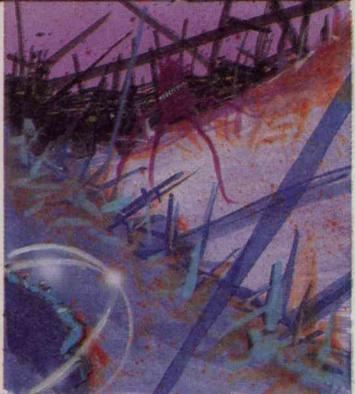
SO MUCH FOR
THAT. I HEADED
INSIDE.



AND BREACHED THE
CORE OF THE UNIVERSAL
COLLECTION UNIT.



THE INTERZONE'S JUNKYARD--THE HOLE: WHERE TECHNO-VULTURES COME TO FEED ON A GLUTTONOUS SOCIETY'S RICH CAST-OFFS; A SCRAP-HEAP SHANTY-TOWN OF PLANETARY PROPORTIONS, HOME TO SCAVENGING MILLIONS SWARMING LIKE SO MANY COCKROACHES ON A PILE OF MEAL-CRUMBS.

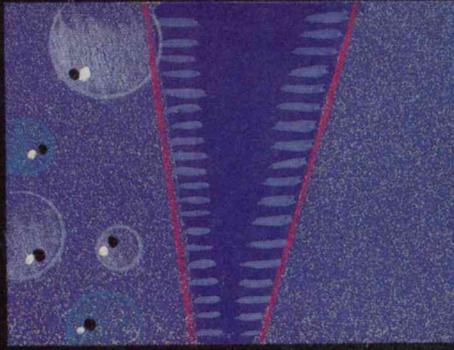




INSIDE THE SUN-SIZED HOLLOW
SPHERE IS A VAST SARGASSO OF
TRASH, SPIRALLING INTO THE
VORTEX OBLIVION OF A BLACK
HOLE'S GRAVITATIONAL EMBRACE.

HERE, DURING THE SLOW TUMBLE
INTO THE MAW OF THE ULTIMATE
TRASH COMPACTER, ALL SOLID
OBJECTS ARE STRIPPED OF ANY
USABLE PARTS BY THE HOLE'S
HORDE OF PIRANHA-LIKE
INHABITANTS.

AND HERE, TOO, WAS MY GUY--
SITTING STATIONARY OUT THERE
ON THE RIVER OF REFUSE, LIKE
SOME ERRANT KID WAITING TO BE
SCOOPED UP BY HIS WORRIED
MOTHER.



BUT BASICALLY, THE THING DID NOTHING FOR MY MATERNAL INSTINCTS. I WANTED HIM FOR QUITE ANOTHER REASON. . . .



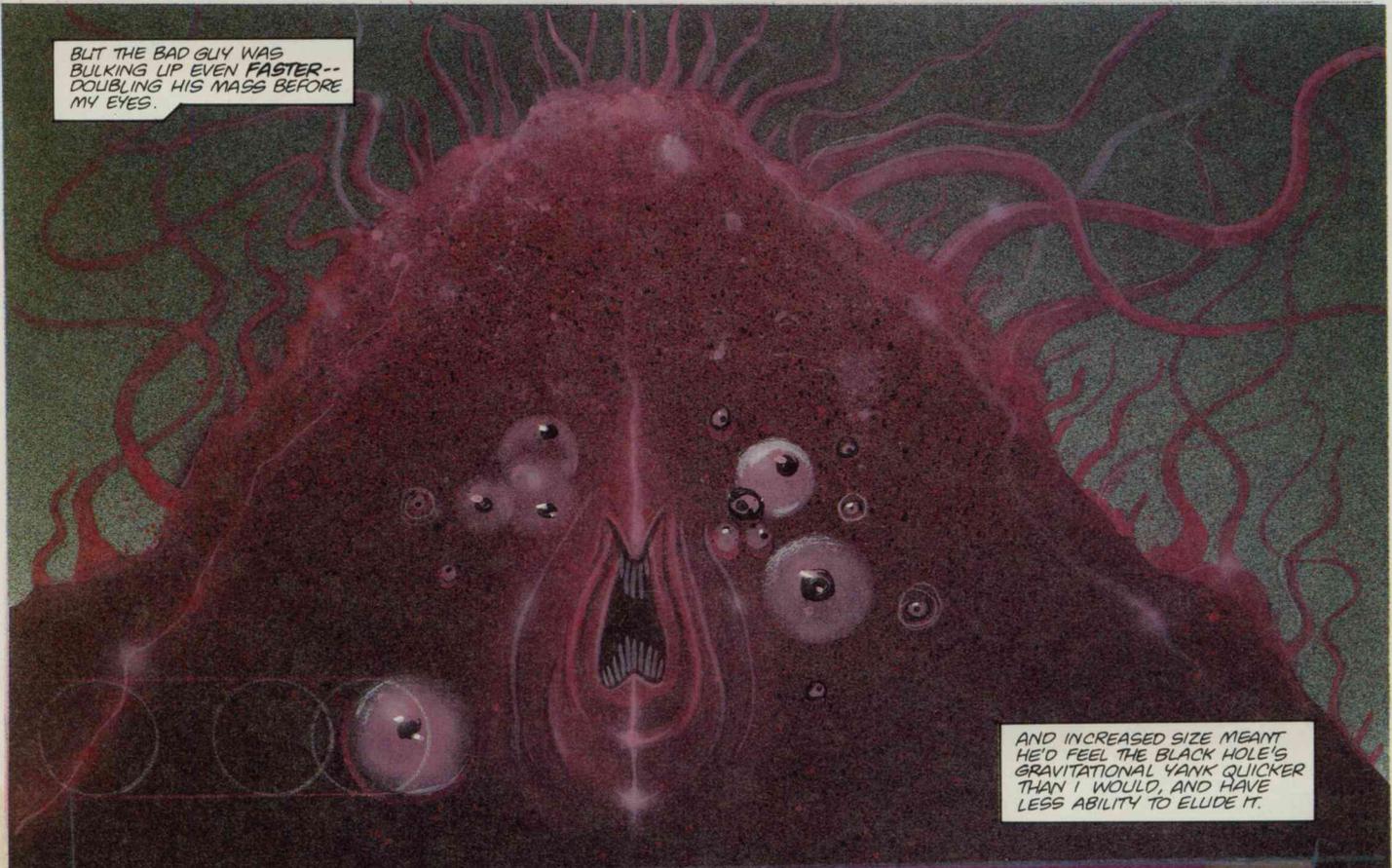
I MOVED IN FOR THE SNATCH--



-- HOPPING FROM ONE FLOATING CHUNK OF DEBRIS TO ANOTHER.



EACH MOVE FED ME A BIT, WHICH ADDED TO MY BULK.

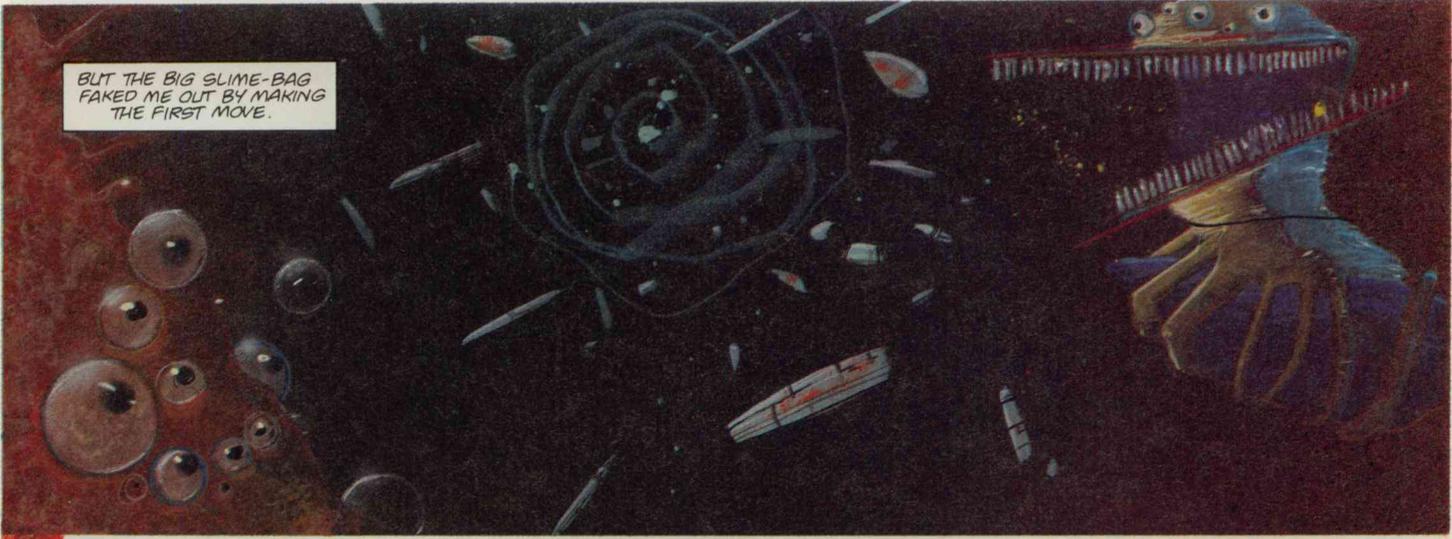


BUT THE BAD GUY WAS BULKING UP EVEN **FASTER**-- DOUBLING HIS MASS BEFORE MY EYES.

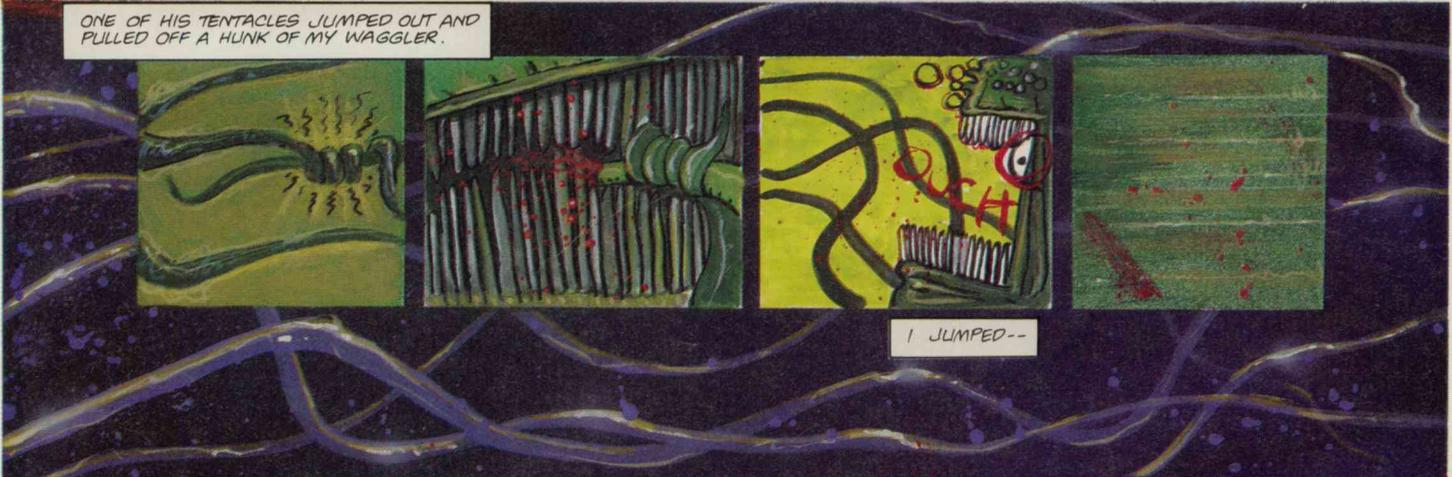
AND INCREASED SIZE MEANT HE'D FEEL THE BLACK HOLE'S GRAVITATIONAL YANK QUICKER THAN I WOULD, AND HAVE LESS ABILITY TO ELUDE IT.



I'D HAVE TO GRAB HIS BUTT FAST IF I WAS TO GET HIM BEFORE THE BIG SEWER-SUCKER DID.



BUT THE BIG SLIME-BAG
FAKED ME OUT BY MAKING
THE FIRST MOVE.

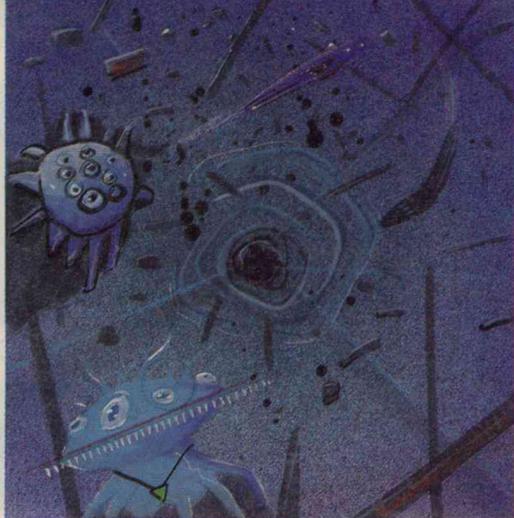
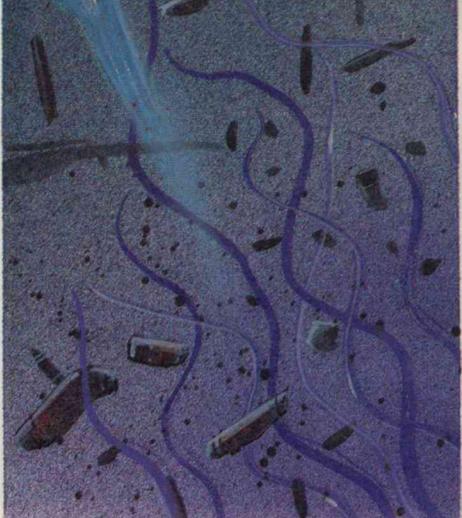


ONE OF HIS TENTACLES JUMPED OUT AND
PULLED OFF A HUNK OF MY WAGGLER.

I JUMPED--



--TRYING TO
GET AWAY.



HE CAME
AFTER ME.

BUT HIS BULBOUS BABY-FAT BETRAYED HIM.

THE POOR PIECE OF PROTOPLASM GOT HIS ASS SUCKED UP BY THE BLACK HOLE LIKE SPILLED BLOOD BY A DRACULA SPONGE.

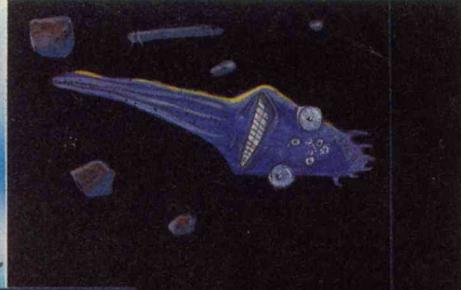
BUT BEFORE HE COULD GET COMPLETELY SWALLOWED, I TOOK MY PIECE OUT OF HIM AND GOBBLED IT. IT WOULD BE SUFFICIENT FOR WHAT I HAD IN MIND.

I WATCHED THE FOUL THING DISAPPEAR.

IT WAS THE SWELLEST THING I'D SEEN IN WEEKS.

THE
BEST
OF
THE
BEST
OF
THE
BEST
OF
THE
BEST

SO NOW THAT THAT BIT OF
UGLINESS WAS TAKEN CARE OF...



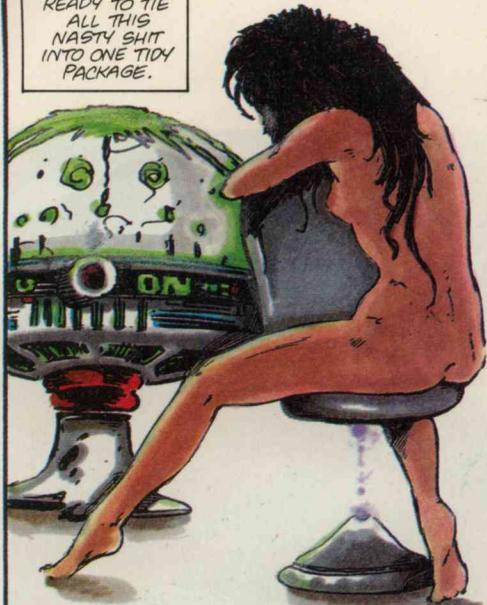
...AND MY CRACKERJACKS
PRIZE WAS STOWED SAFELY
INSIDE ME, I AMOEBAED
THROUGH THE JUNK-SPRAWL
TOWARD THE NEAREST EXIT.



MY "ASSIGNMENT"
MIGHT BE HISTORY,
BUT I STILL HAD
ONE TINY BIT OF
UNFINISHED BUSI-
NESS LEFT TO
ATTEND TO....



NOW I WAS
READY TO TIE
ALL THIS
NASTY SHIT
INTO ONE TIDY
PACKAGE.



FIRST, BUZZ THE
DIRECTOR'S
PRIVATE LINE....

SHELDON HERE, YOUR
RUTHLESSNESS-- I'VE GOT SOME
GOOD NEWS FOR BOTH OF US. I'VE
COMPLETED THE JOB.



WHY, THAT'S
WONDERFUL
MSR. SHELDON!

I TRUST THAT THE--
UH-- PRODUCT IS SAFELY
CONTAINED INSIDE YOU?



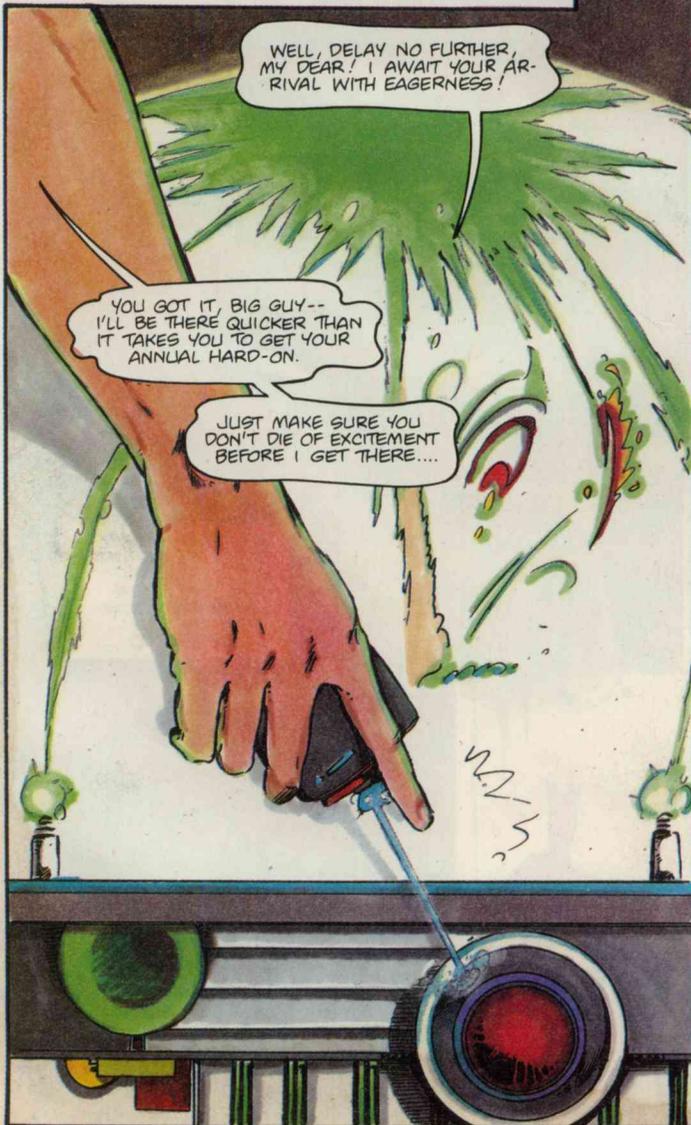
YOU
BET.

EXCELLENT,
EXCELLENT!

WELL, DELAY NO FURTHER,
MY DEAR! I AWAIT YOUR AR-
RIVAL WITH EAGERNESS!

YOU GOT IT, BIG GUY--
I'LL BE THERE QUICKER THAN
IT TAKES YOU TO GET YOUR
ANNUAL HARD-ON.

JUST MAKE SURE YOU
DON'T DIE OF EXCITEMENT
BEFORE I GET THERE....



... 'CAUSE I GOT ALL
KINDS OF SURPRISES WAITING
IN MY BULGING BELLY FOR YOU.





COME RIGHT IN, MSR. SHELDON!
IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU LOOKING SO
WELL AFTER SUCH AN ARDUOUS
ASSIGNMENT. WOULD YOU CARE TO
JOIN ME IN THE REJUV-BATH? IT'S
EXTREMELY REFRESHING.

I THINK I MIGHT JUST
DO THAT, YOUR DECREPITUDE.
I COULD USE A LITTLE PICK-
ME UP RIGHT ABOUT NOW.

WELL, JUST
REMOVE YOUR
CLOTHES AND
STEP RIGHT IN!

BE WITH YOU IN A
JIFFY, HOT STUFF.



HOPE THE PIG'S WEARING
HIS DROOL CUP-- HE'S READY
TO SLOBBER ALL OVER THE
PLACE.

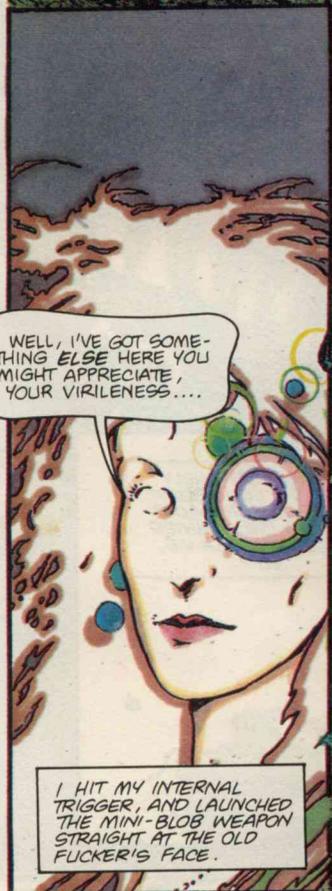


THIS IS
GONNA BE FLIN....



IS THAT A FAUCET
IN YOUR BATHTUB OR
ARE YOU JUST GLAD
TO SEE ME?

YOU NEEDN'T BE FLIP,
MSR. SHELDON. YOU ARE
INDEED A VERY ATTRAC-
TIVE WOMAN--AND
THERE IS STILL ENOUGH
LIFE LEFT IN MY OLD
BODY TO APPRECIATE
THAT.



WELL, I'VE GOT SOME-
THING ELSE HERE YOU
MIGHT APPRECIATE,
YOUR VIRILENESS....

I HIT MY INTERNAL
TRIGGER, AND LAUNCHED
THE MINI-BLOB WEAPON
STRAIGHT AT THE OLD
FLICKER'S FACE.



AAAAAAAAA !!!

SCREEEEEE!!!!

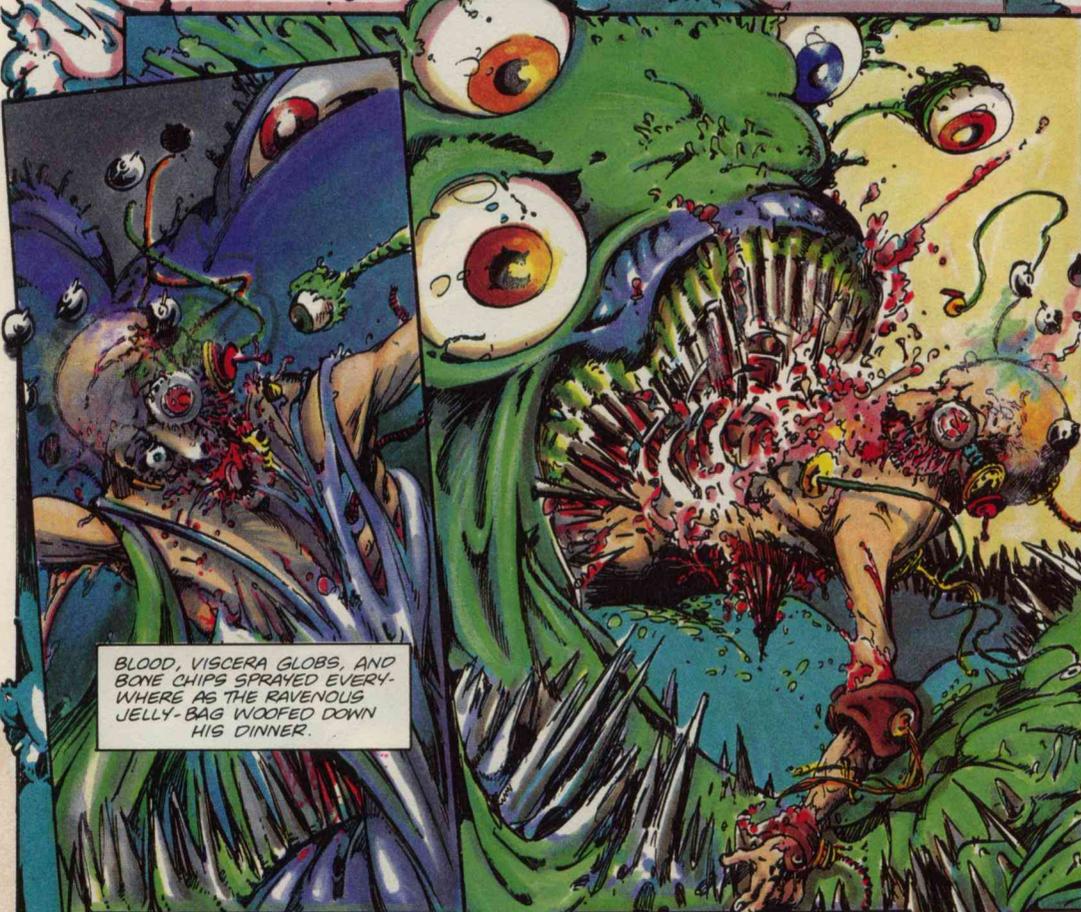
AS SOON AS IT WAS CLEAR OF
ME, I SEALED THE EXIT WOUND,
AND SAT BACK TO WATCH THE
CARNAGE....



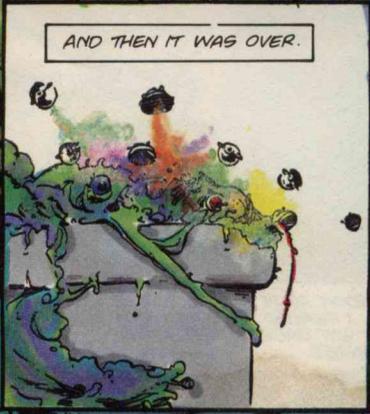
IT WAS A GRUESOME SIGHT-- BUT I SAVORED EVERY BEAUTIFUL SECOND OF IT. KINDA LIKE THAT SPECIAL TAPE YOU KEEP IN THE ARCHIVES, RUNNING IT OVER AND OVER AGAIN ON SLO-MO.

THE OLD BASTARD DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TIME TO SCREAM....

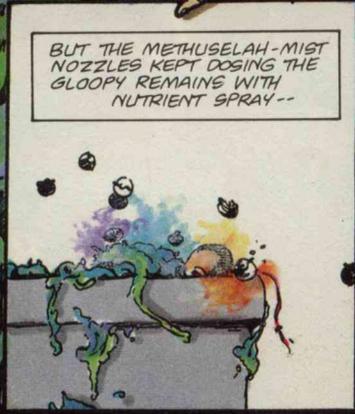
THE BLOB WAS TEARING INTO HIM BEFORE HE KNEW WHAT WAS HAPPENING. HE WAS LUNCH-MEAT WITHIN MILLISECONDS.



BLOOD, VISCERA GLOBS, AND BONE CHIPS SPRAYED EVERYWHERE AS THE RAVENOUS JELLY-BAG WOOFED DOWN HIS DINNER.



AND THEN IT WAS OVER.

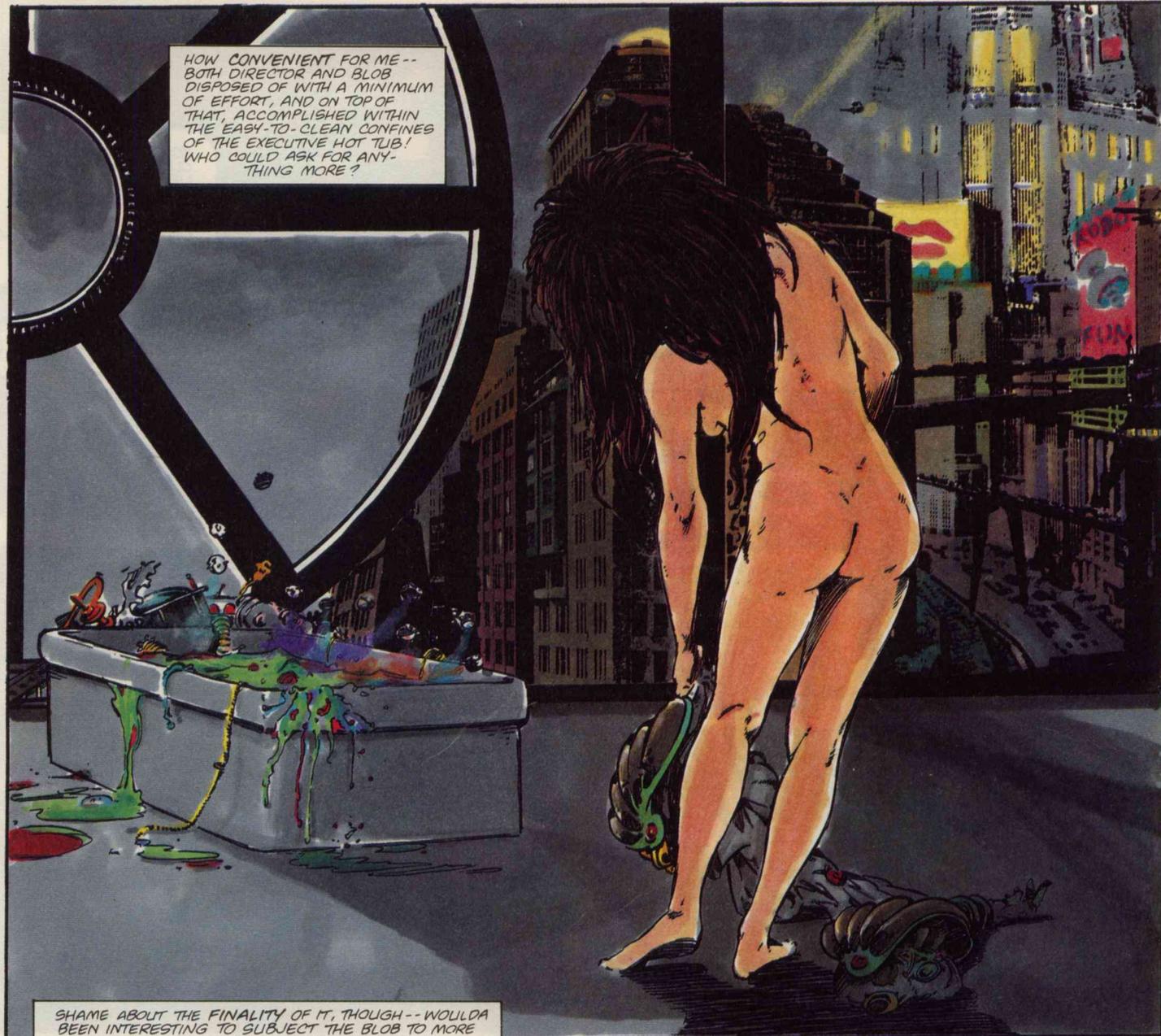


BUT THE METHUSELAH-MIST NOZZLES KEPT DOSING THE GLOOPY REMAINS WITH NUTRIENT SPRAY--

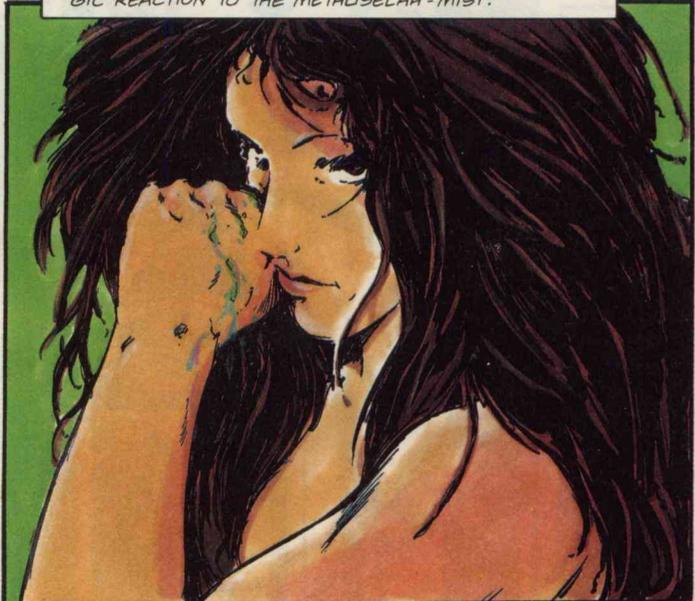


-- WHICH OBVIOUSLY WAS THE EQUIVALENT OF SULPHURIC ACID TO THE UNLAMENTED BLOB. C'EST LA VIE, EH?

HOW CONVENIENT FOR ME--
BOTH DIRECTOR AND BLOB
DISPOSED OF WITH A MINIMUM
OF EFFORT, AND ON TOP OF
THAT, ACCOMPLISHED WITHIN
THE EASY-TO-CLEAN CONFINES
OF THE EXECUTIVE HOT TUB!
WHO COULD ASK FOR ANY-
THING MORE?



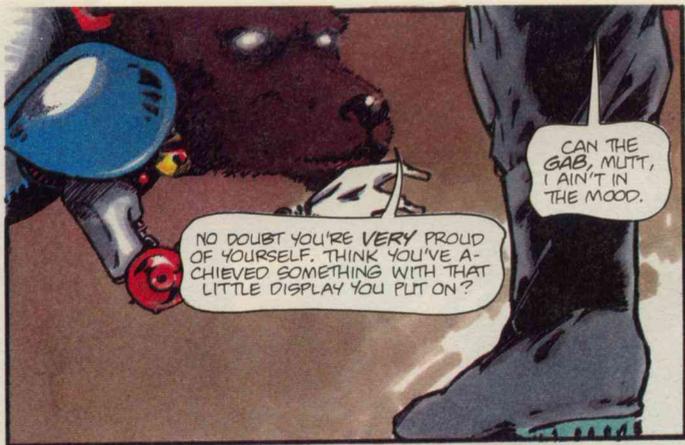
SHAME ABOUT THE FINALITY OF IT, THOUGH-- WOULD'VE
BEEN INTERESTING TO SUBJECT THE BLOB TO MORE
EXTENSIVE FIELD TESTING. MAYBE SOMETHING
COULDA BEEN DONE ABOUT ITS UNFORTUNATE ALLER-
GIC REACTION TO THE METHUSELAH-MIST.



SOME OTHER LIFETIME, I GUESS.
AND SOME OTHER SUCKER



DON'T LOOK
SO SMUG, MSR.
SHELDON ...



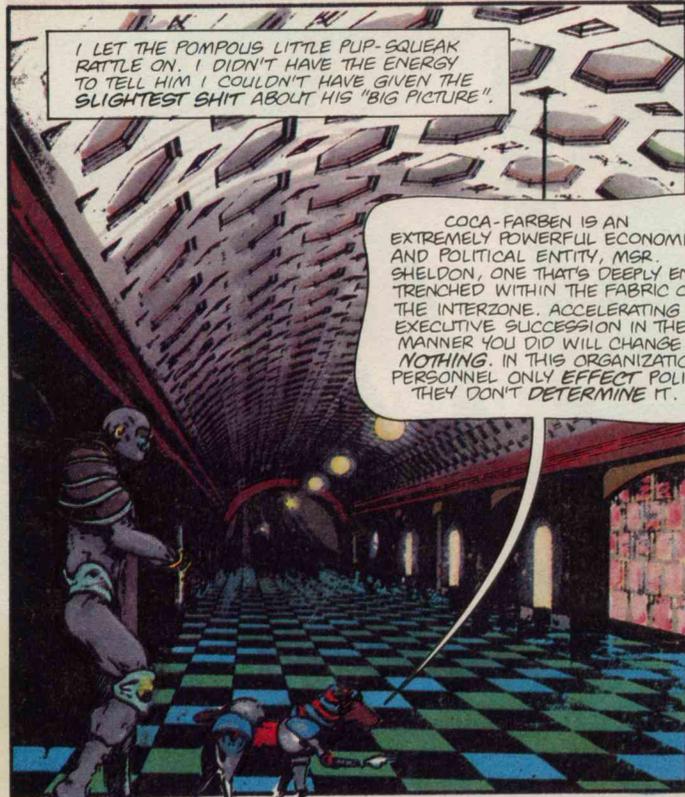
NO DOUBT YOU'RE VERY PROUD OF YOURSELF. THINK YOU'VE ACHIEVED SOMETHING WITH THAT LITTLE DISPLAY YOU PUT ON?

CAN THE GAB, MUTT, I AIN'T IN THE MOOD.



YOU MAY BE STROLLING OUT OF HERE WITH YOUR LIFE, MY ARROGANT HUMAN FRIEND, BUT DON'T FLATTER YOURSELF BY THINKING THAT YOUR ELIMINATION OF ONE AGING FIGUREHEAD WILL HAVE ANY EFFECT ON THE BIG PICTURE.

YOU CAN TAKE MY WORD FOR IT--IT WON'T.



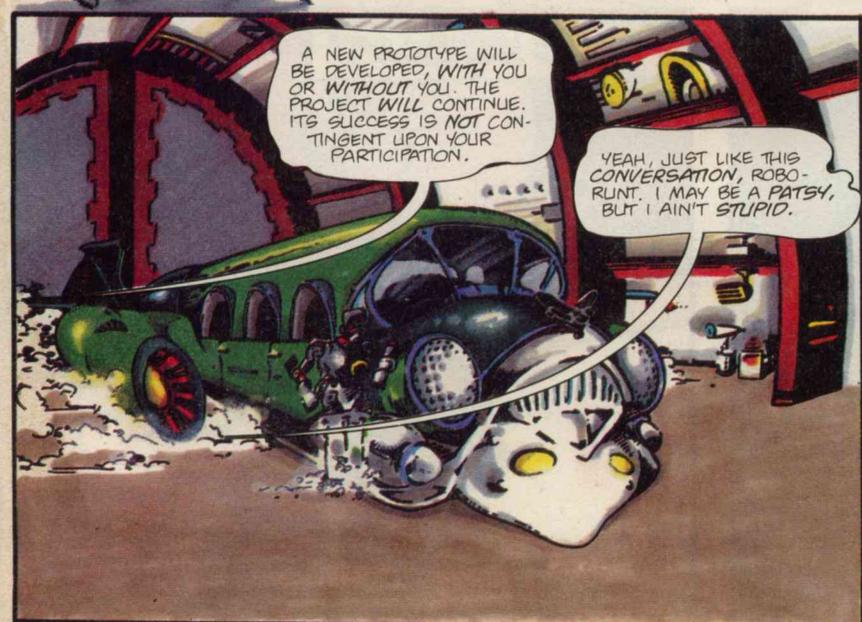
I LET THE POMPUS LITTLE PUP-SQUEAK RATTLE ON. I DIDN'T HAVE THE ENERGY TO TELL HIM I COULDN'T HAVE GIVEN THE SLIGHTEST SHIT ABOUT HIS "BIG PICTURE."

COCA-FARBEN IS AN EXTREMELY POWERFUL ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ENTITY, MGR. SHELDON, ONE THAT'S DEEPLY EN-TRENCHED WITHIN THE FABRIC OF THE INTERZONE. ACCELERATING EXECUTIVE SUCCESSION IN THE MANNER YOU DID WILL CHANGE NOTHING. IN THIS ORGANIZATION, PERSONNEL ONLY EFFECT POLICY; THEY DON'T DETERMINE IT.



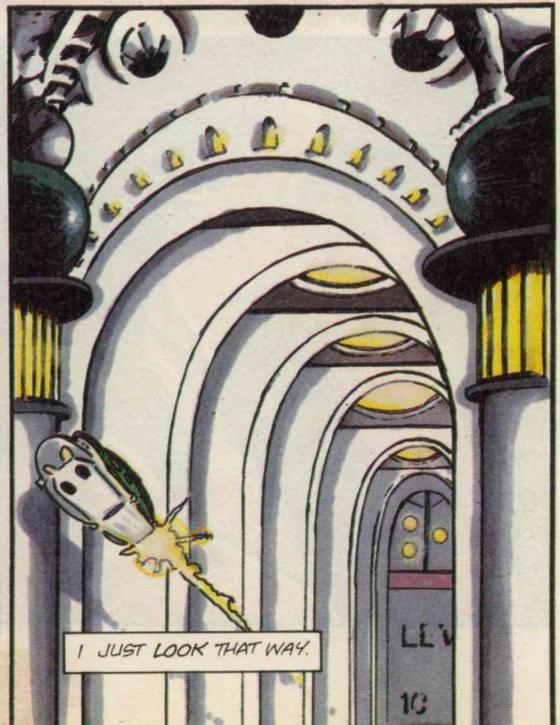
THE LITTLE HYDRANT-HOSER WAS ON A ROLL. I LET 'IM GO. SOONER OR LATER HE'D RUN OUT OF JUICE.

YES, YOU MAY HAVE PROMPTED ONE EARLY RETIREMENT AND REMOVED A PRODUCT PROTOTYPE FROM PRE-MARKET TESTING-- BUT THAT IS ONLY A MERE SPEED-BUMP ON THE HIGHWAY OF COCA-FARBEN'S CORPORATE MOMENTUM.



A NEW PROTOTYPE WILL BE DEVELOPED, WITH YOU OR WITHOUT YOU. THE PROJECT WILL CONTINUE. ITS SUCCESS IS NOT CON-TINGENT UPON YOUR PARTICIPATION.

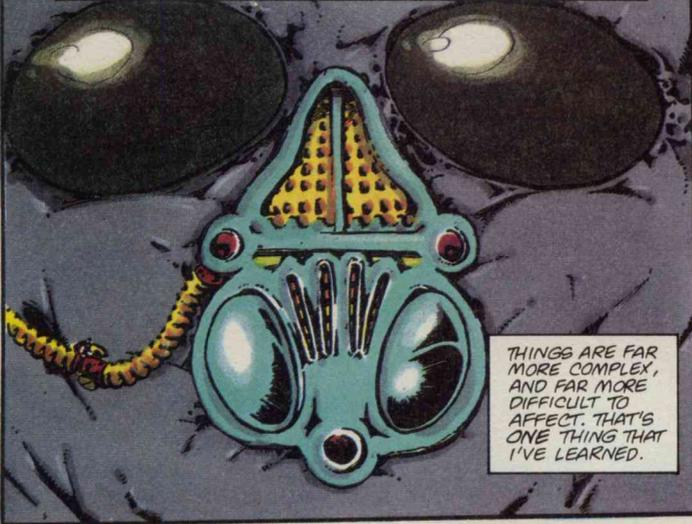
YEAH, JUST LIKE THIS CONVERSATION, ROBO-RUNT. I MAY BE A PATSY, BUT I AIN'T STUPID.



I JUST LOOK THAT WAY.

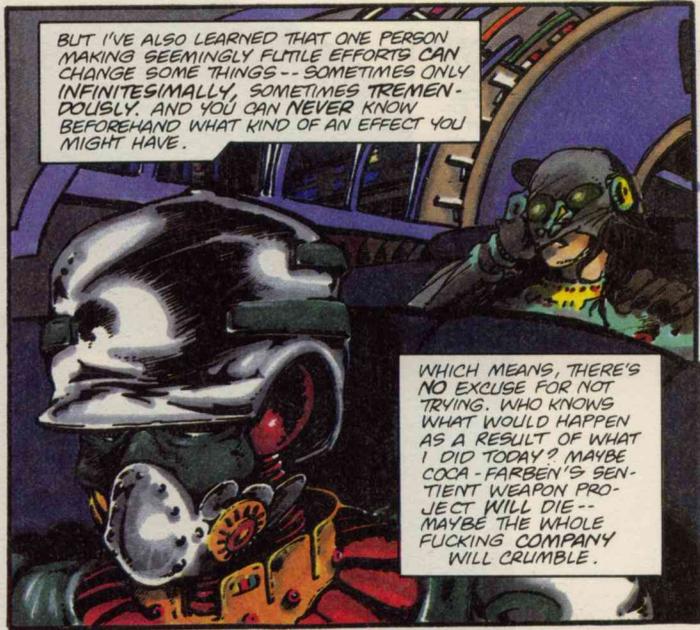
LEV
10

NO, EVEN I'M NOT DUMB ENOUGH TO THINK I CAN STOP A PLANET-CRUSHING BEHEMOTH LIKE COCA-FARBEN ON ITS QUEST FOR MARKET SUPREMACY, MERELY BY KILLING ONE TOOL AND SLOWING DEVELOPMENT OF ANOTHER.



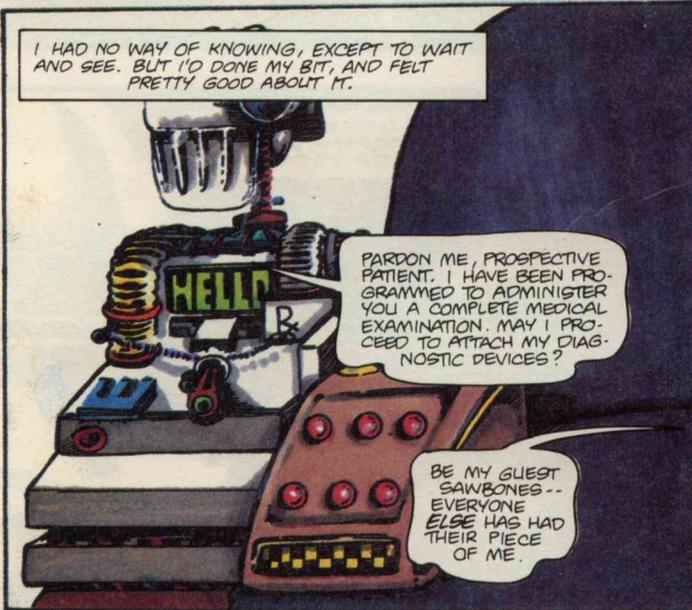
THINGS ARE FAR MORE COMPLEX, AND FAR MORE DIFFICULT TO AFFECT. THAT'S ONE THING THAT I'VE LEARNED.

BUT I'VE ALSO LEARNED THAT ONE PERSON MAKING SEEMINGLY FLITTE EFFORTS CAN CHANGE SOME THINGS--SOMETIMES ONLY INFINITESIMALLY, SOMETIMES TREMENDOUSLY. AND YOU CAN NEVER KNOW BEFOREHAND WHAT KIND OF AN EFFECT YOU MIGHT HAVE.



WHICH MEANS, THERE'S NO EXCUSE FOR NOT TRYING. WHO KNOWS WHAT WOULD HAPPEN AS A RESULT OF WHAT I DID TODAY? MAYBE COCA-FARBEN'S SENTIENT WEAPON PROJECT WILL DIE--MAYBE THE WHOLE FUCKING COMPANY WILL CRUMBLE.

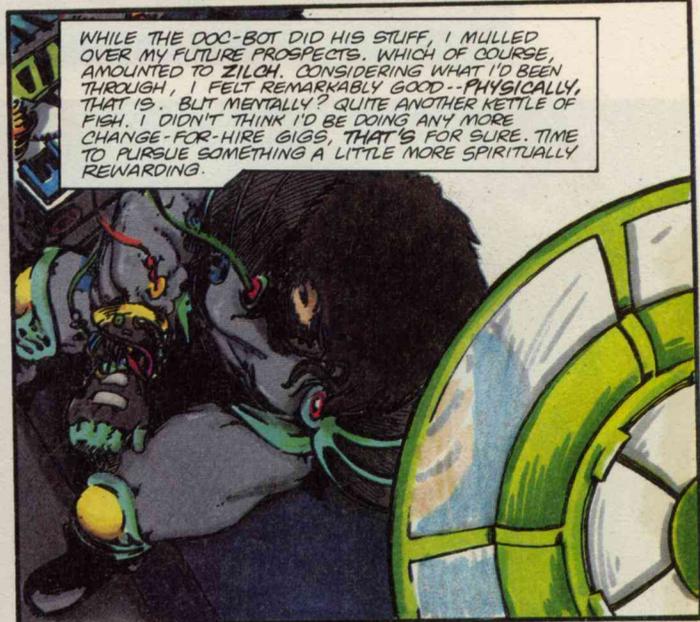
I HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING, EXCEPT TO WAIT AND SEE. BUT I'D DONE MY BIT, AND FELT PRETTY GOOD ABOUT IT.



PARDON ME, PROSPECTIVE PATIENT. I HAVE BEEN PROGRAMMED TO ADMINISTER YOU A COMPLETE MEDICAL EXAMINATION. MAY I PROCEED TO ATTACH MY DIAGNOSTIC DEVICES?

BE MY GUEST SAWBONES--EVERYONE ELSE HAS HAD THEIR PIECE OF ME.

WHILE THE DOC-BOT DID HIS STUFF, I MULLED OVER MY FUTURE PROSPECTS. WHICH OF COURSE, AMOUNTED TO ZILCH. CONSIDERING WHAT I'D BEEN THROUGH, I FELT REMARKABLY GOOD--PHYSICALLY, THAT IS. BUT MENTALLY? QUITE ANOTHER KETTLE OF FISH. I DIDN'T THINK I'D BE DOING ANY MORE CHANGE-FOR-HIRE GIGS, THAT'S FOR SURE. TIME TO PURSUE SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE SPIRITUALLY REWARDING.



WELL, HUMAN FEMALE PATIENT, I AM QUITE HAPPY TO INFORM YOU THAT YOU ARE IN EXCELLENT PHYSICAL CONDITION. ADDITIONALLY--AND BEYOND MY LIMITED NEURAL CAPACITY TO EXPLAIN OR UNDERSTAND--YOU HAVE UNDERGONE A SUBSTANTIAL SYSTEMIC CHEMICAL CHANGE SOMETIME SINCE YOUR LAST RECORDED MEDICAL EXAMINATION.

WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?

IT MEANS, MADAM, THAT CERTAIN CELLULAR IDIOSYNCRASIES INDICATED BY PREVIOUS DIAGNOSTIC DATA HAVE BEEN CORRECTED.

WHAT? YOU MEAN I'M CURED--I'M NORMAL?

SO THE DATA WOULD INDICATE.

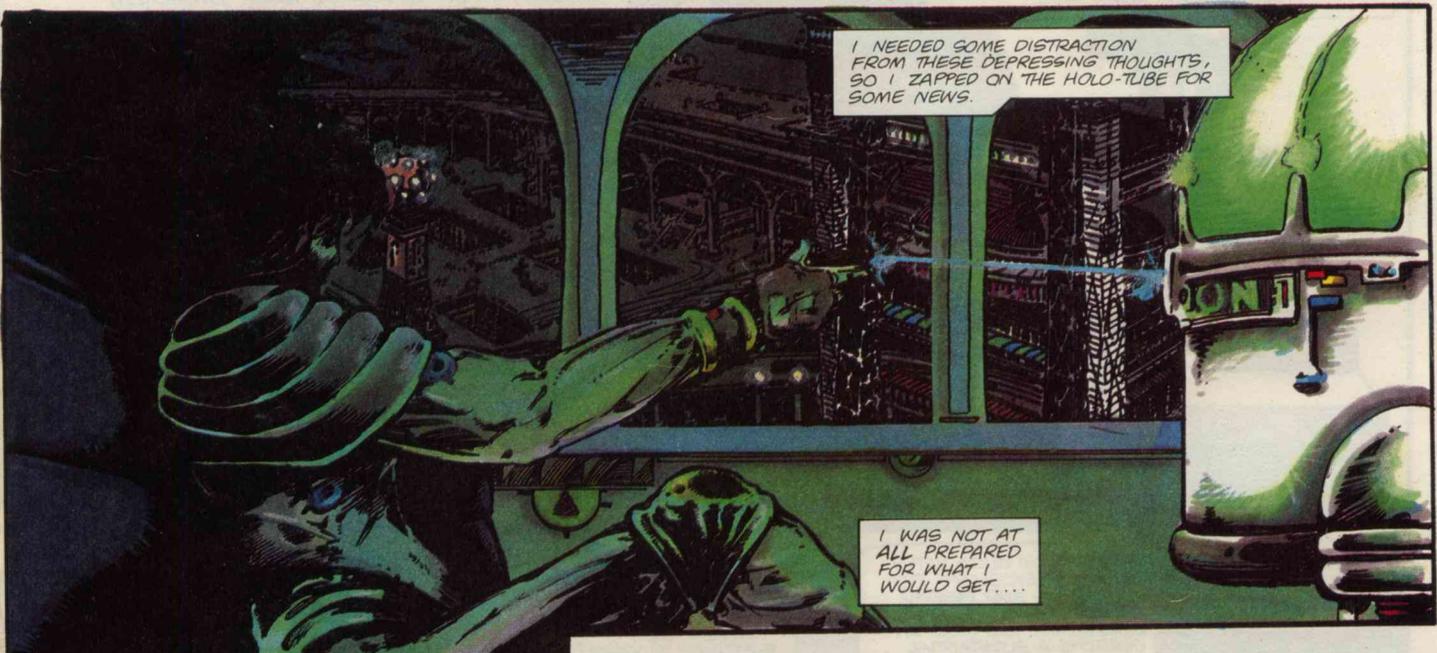
I WAS STUNNED. AFTER THE INITIAL NUMBNESS, I FELT A GROWING, WARMING RELIEF. BEFORE I KNEW IT, I WAS GRINNING LIKE A SHITHEAD. MAYBE THINGS WEREN'T SO BAD AFTER ALL.



BUT A LOOK OUT THE WINDOW AT THE AGGRESSIVE SICKNESS OF THE INTERZONE COOLED ME RIGHT DOWN. THE PLACE CAN HAVE THAT EFFECT ON YOU. IT JUST DOESN'T LET YOU GET TOO HAPPY.



UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S ALSO THE ONLY PLACE IN THE GALAXY WHERE I CAN FEEL COMFORTABLE -- EVEN IF I DO HATE EVERY CUBIC INCH OF IT.



I NEEDED SOME DISTRACTION FROM THESE DEPRESSING THOUGHTS, SO I ZAPPED ON THE HOLO-TUBE FOR SOME NEWS.

I WAS NOT AT ALL PREPARED FOR WHAT I WOULD GET...



-- INFORMED SOURCES ON HAPPYWORLD SAY THE REVOLT IS BEING LED BY ONE FOWLER DIX, AN UNEMPLOYED ITINERANT STORE CLERK AND SOME-TIME WRITER. AUTHORITIES THERE DON'T TAKE THE THREAT POSED BY DIX AND HIS FOLLOWERS TOO SERIOUSLY, BLIT--

HOLY SHIT....

S NEWS UPDA RIOTING • EA



--THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS OF WIDE-SPREAD RIOTING, STRIKES, AND CALLS FOR NEW, UNREGULATED ELECTIONS. HAPPYWORLD AUTHORITIES WOULDN'T COMMENT ON WHAT IT WAS THAT TRIGGERED THE UNREST, BUT UNCONFIRMED REPORTS INDICATE REVELATIONS OF A MULTI-PLANET SCANDAL THAT THREATENS TO TOPPLE THE PREVIOUSLY SECURE HAPPY-WORLD ADMINISTRATION.

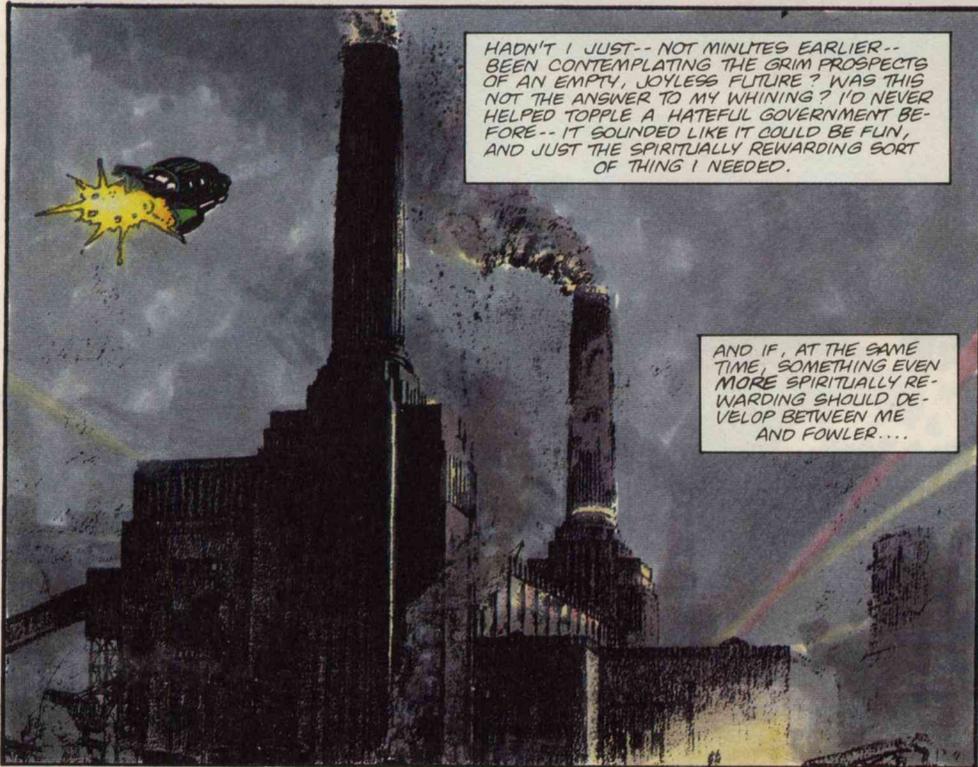
FOWLER DIX HIMSELF REMAINS UNAVAILABLE TO ZONE-NET CAMERAS, THOUGH WE DO EXPECT TO HAVE AN INTERVIEW WITH THE INSURGENT LEADER FOR YOU SHORTLY. STAY TUNED FOR:-



FOWLER! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! HE'S USING WHAT WE FOUND AT THAT FACTORY TO GET RID OF THE BIG GUY! MAYBE HE'S NOT SUCH A WIMPY BASTARD AFTER ALL....

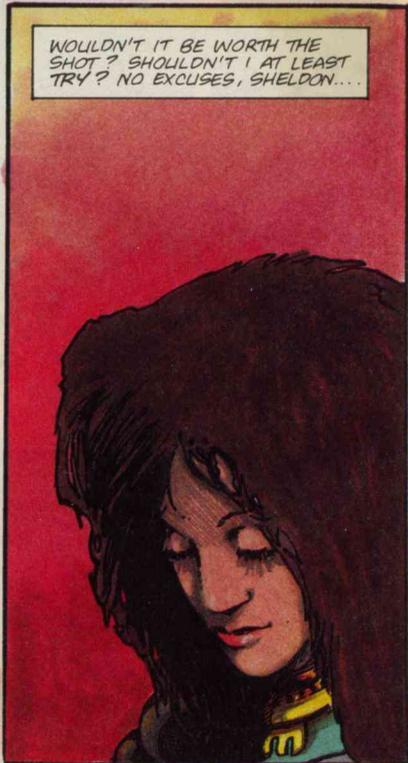


THIS UNFORSEEN BIT OF NEWS INTRODUCED A WHOLE NEW ARRAY OF ELEMENTS INTO MY ALREADY COMPLICATED LIFE-EQUATION. BUT HELL, WHAT GOOD IS LIFE IF IT AIN'T COMPLICATED, EH?



HADN'T I JUST-- NOT MINUTES EARLIER-- BEEN CONTEMPLATING THE GRIM PROSPECTS OF AN EMPTY, JOYLESS FUTURE? WAS THIS NOT THE ANSWER TO MY WHINING? I'D NEVER HELPED TOPPLE A HATEFUL GOVERNMENT BEFORE-- IT SOUNDED LIKE IT COULD BE FUN, AND JUST THE SPIRITUALLY REWARDING SORT OF THING I NEEDED.

AND IF, AT THE SAME TIME, SOMETHING EVEN MORE SPIRITUALLY REWARDING SHOULD DEVELOP BETWEEN ME AND FOWLER....



WOULDN'T IT BE WORTH THE SHOT? SHOULDN'T I AT LEAST TRY? NO EXCUSES, SHELDON....

YEAH, NO EXCUSES
YOU EMOTIONAL
COWARD.

I REPROGRAMMED THE AIRCAR
FOR MY NEW DESTINATION. ONE
HAPPY WORLD WAS ABOUT TO
BECOME ONE CHAOTIC WORLD,
AND I WAS ONLY TOO PLEASED
TO PARTICIPATE IN ITS ROCKY
TRANSFORMATION.

IT WAS ABOUT TIME SOME-
THING OTHER THAN ME DID
THE CHANGING AROUND HERE.
LET'S SEE HOW BIG MACHO
FOWLER HANDLES THAT....

I THINK MAYBE I'M
GONNA LIKE THIS
NEW NORMAL LIFE....

END.

Brought to you by the people of

Coca-Farben