

Bloodstalk by Ron Goulart

## PROLOGUE

Sleet knifed down through the dying day, slashing across the grey and darkening sky. The cold hard rain pelted the weedy fields which surrounded the ramshackle carnival grounds. The chill wind made the once bright and gaudy banners flap like the battle flags of an army defeated long ago. While pellets of ice danced and clattered on the swayback roofs of the carnival concessions, the insinuating wind caused the old timbers to creak and groan. Through the rainswept gloom the lights of Blackston's Mammoth Carnival showed dim and hazy. Dark, hunched birds roosted on the slanting plank fences.

The old man who ran the shooting gallery had bright clothes and a dead-white face. He huddled beneath his tattered canvas awning, leaning heavily on his yellow cane. He made no attempt to attract the few carnival patrons who came wandering by. Farther down the midway the strong-man sat in a folding chair in the front of the Freak Show tent, reading a discarded newspaper. The tattooed lady, wrapped in a loose-fitting rayon robe, stood watching the muddy street through a flap in the canvas. The magic show was housed in a paint-peeling wooden shed. "*See The Great Pendragon!*" invited a weatherbeaten sign. The string of lights over the entry door was dark, and the sleety wind rattled the padlock.

Wild laughter sounded above the howling of the wind - a few harsh notes of laughter repeated again and again. "*Fun House!*" read the neon sign over the freshly painted two-storey building. "*Thrills! Laughs! Chills! Don't Miss the Mirror Maze!*" Sitting in the ticket booth was a thickset smiling man. He wore a straw hat and a checked suit. The smile never left his face. Thrills! Laughs! Chills!" he called out, echoing the electric signs. "Don't miss the mirror Maze!"

A lone figure, a middle-aged man in a wrinkled suit, stepped up to hand the smiling man a ticket. "Might as well," he said. "Though, if you ask me, this is a pretty dead carnival."

"Rainy night, friend." The smiling man ripped the ticket in half.

"This better be fun or -"

"Nothing like it on the face of the earth, friend," promised the smiling man.

"We'll see." The middle-aged man walked up the wooden gangway and through the arched entrance of the Fun House.

The wild laughter swirled all around him, coming at him from everywhere in the dark corridor.

"Don't let it bother you," he told himself. "They're only trying to scare you."

He felt out, groping like a newly-blinded man, and found a doorknob.

There was light on the other side of the door. Glaring light on hundreds of images of himself.

His left side, his right side, all reflected over and over in the glittering glass.

"Wait a minute." Out of the corner of his eye he noticed an image that wasn't right. It was his reflection,

but not the way he looked now.

He spun around. The image was gone.

Some kind of trick, an illusion. But it had certainly seemed to be the young man he had been more than twenty-five years ago, back when he'd known -

There she is!"

It was the girl, the girl he'd known then. Her image glowing in one of the mirrors. Looking exactly as she had that last time, but smiling, holding out her arms to him.

He made his way among the images of himself toward the image of the girl. Halting before the beckoning image of the girl, he held out his hand to touch the mirror surface.

But there was no surface. His hand went through the image. Then something seized his wrist.

A moment later the mirrors reflected no one.

The blind man looked toward the hazy afternoon sky. "He won't be here," he said to his son.

Adam Van Helsing said, "Plane's delayed by bad weather, that's all, Dad." Adam was dark-haired, wide-shouldered, in his late twenties. A glass of Chivas Regal Scotch sat on the licorice-coloured glass table before him.

His gaunt face still turned toward the window of the airport cocktail lounge, Conrad Van Helsing replied, "I don't like to play the old blind prophet all the time, Adam, but I do have a fair amount of extrasensory ability."

His son frowned at him. "Didn't realize that's what you meant," he said. "You feel something's happened to Uncle Kurt's plane?"

The blind old man nodded. "Not yet, but very soon," he answered. "Too late to warn anyone now, we can only sit here and wait for the news."

"A crash?"

"Yes, in the mountains. I see the airliner going down in the mountains, breaking to pieces in the snow."

"And Uncle Kurt?"

"Some of the passengers will... no, only two of them will survive." Van Helsing touched his fingertips to his dark glasses. "My brother is one of -" He gave a sudden cry of pain and clutched at his chest.

"Dad, what is it?"

"Something wrong, sir?" A red-coated waiter had come trotting over to their table.

Slowly the blind man placed his hands on the table top. "Nothing serious," he said.

When the waiter was gone, Adam asked in a low voice, "What did you see?"

Van Helsing reached out and took hold of his son's hand. "A vampire," he said in a whisper. "A vampire..."

After the enormous, shattering crash there was a great silence. A white silence engulfing her. Silence fragmenting into thousands of tiny pieces, drifting down on her. Slowly, patiently, covering her.

Vampirella tried to sit up. The falling snow seemed to weigh her down, forcing her to remain sprawled on the ground, legs spread wide, leopard-skin coat tangled around her.

She must rise. She opened her eyes wider. It was growing dark; the day was ending. Night was coming, and with it hunger.

Vampirella pushed herself to her knees. Hundreds of yards uphill, mangled, ripped in half, was the carcass of the airliner she'd been flying in, flying to California. Only silence there. She sensed at once there could be no one left alive in the wreck.

"I was thrown clear," she realized.

But what good did that do? She was alone here, somewhere in the mountains. Night would soon close in, night and the need to -

Someone moaned.

Another survivor?

Unsteadily, the long-legged girl stood up.

"Yes, there he is. Down there."

About two hundred feet downhill, half buried in the thick snow, a man lay. He was tall, thin, grey-haired. And still alive.

Weaving, stumbling, Vampirella made her way down through the snow to the injured passenger.

He sensed her bending over him. "Can you... help me... to..."

The dark-haired girl's eyes glowed. She knelt beside the man. She grasped his shoulders and sank her teeth into his throat.

## CHAPTER ONE

The uniform crackled as the slim, blonde nurse slipped out of it. Hanging round her neck on a golden chain, resting between her breasts, was a gold medallion. The head of a strange horned creature was carved on the medallion and a circle cut in half by a bolt of lightning.

Naked, the girl crossed the bedroom. She stood beside one high, leaded window and drew back a thick drapery. Snow still fell heavily, and night was advancing. There were no lights out there, nothing, no other sign of life. The sanitarium stood solitary at the foot of the mountains, twenty miles from the nearest town.

Fingering the medallion, stroking its golden face, Lenore Goodwin went to the large four-poster bed in

the shadowy corner of the room. She turned down the sheets and climbed in. She settled into the soft mattress, waiting.

Dr. Tyler Westron liked things this way. Liked to find Lenore waiting for him like this when he reached the bedroom. After dinner and before...

Lenore folded her hands over her smooth bare stomach. The warmth of the quilt and the heat of the room made her quickly drowsy. Her eyes gradually closed.

Time drifted by. Night pressed against the windows.

All at once Lenore sat up. Without her glasses she couldn't see the bureau clock. She swung out of bed to take a look.

"Ten-thirty?" she said aloud, surprised. "Then where the hell is he?"

Black and white. The snowflakes forever flickering down across the night. Nothing else anywhere. Vampirella stumbled again and fell to her knees. Her face was streaked with blood; blood caked the corners of her mouth. Her hands were bloody, too, knuckles smeared, fingernails encrusted.

"There was nothing else to do," she told herself as she struggled down through the night darkness. "If you are to go on living, you must have... blood."

A tremendous gust of wind came sweeping across the mountainside. It caught the long-legged girl and threw her to the snowy ground.

She got up once more. Limping, she continued downward.

"The middle of nowhere," she said. "That's where I am. Not a light, not a house."

Snow and wind swirled around her, snatching at the skirt of her crimson dress, ballooning the leopard-skin coat.

The storm went on and on. She stumbled, fell, rose again. The cold stalked her.

The fury went on and on. Then, a long way off, lights. Small narrow strips of light hanging far off in the black of night.

"Got to be something there," Vampirella murmured, lips cracked. The dried blood was black against her chill, white skin. "Lights mean people... shelter."

The ground was leveling off. Trees thrust up around her, stiff and leafless.

The dry branches creaked as the snowy wind worried at them. "And I expected to be on some sun-drenched beach by now," the dark-haired girl said. She steadied herself by resting a hand against a tree trunk.

There was a house up ahead, on the other side of this stark dead forest. A large house, peaked with spires and cupolas. A house in the style they called Victorian. It had many windows, and several of them had lights beyond them.

Vampirella took a deep breath of icy air and then pushed on. How far away was the house? Not more than half a mile surely.

She pushed on - walking, fighting against the wind, resting beside a tree.

"It must be there, it can't be an illusion," Vampirella told herself.

Someone was watching her. She was suddenly aware of eyes watching. Over there, among those trees.

Vampirella stared through the spinning snow. There was no one there now.

She kept walking. Then another glimpse. Yes, there was someone. A man, a big man.

"Can you help me get to the house?" Vampirella called out.

The wind swallowed her words.

She shouted again. "Please, can you help me?"

The big man was moving among the trees, watching her, but coming no closer. He had great hunched shoulders, and he was shaggy-haired and bearded.

Vampirella got a better look at him. He had no face. She could see only thick matted fur and two narrow, yellowish eyes staring at her. Staring at her from a dozen yards away.

The girl straightened and put her hands on her hips.

The creature moved away, backing in among the trees.

Vampirella continued on toward the huge old Victorian house.

She could see the wide, wooden porch, the steps leading up to a thick carved-wood door. But she found she could scarcely move; her legs ached. Vampirella took a few more tottering steps and fell to the ground.

She heard a crunching on the snow; someone was coming closer.

Then someone was looking down at her. The man with no face.

## CHAPTER TWO

Blood.

Blood raining down from the scarlet skies, flowing in streams down rocky hillsides.

Blood to drink, to give life.

Twin suns blazing in the sky. Burning away everything, killing the planet.

Not this planet, no.

A distant planet, in a distant system. Drakulon.

The double sun. Burning, burning.

The thirst, the hunger, the craving for blood.

Fireworks.

A rocket blazing away from Drakulon.

Alone.

The blood raining down.

No, not here. Here you must kill for blood.

Kill humans, people so much like yourself.

No other way. No other way, except to die.

I don't want to die!

Falling. Falling down through space and time.

Falling to Earth.

I don't want to die!

Falling toward the giant mountains.

The plane is going to crash!

No, that's not...

Everything is swirling, mixing, coming together and falling apart. Memories fall like snowflakes. Hundred of remembrances flickering.

Landing on Earth. That was... months ago.

Blood.

If I don't get it, I'll die!

The plane is going to crash! Crash into the jagged mountains.

I won't die!

A man in the snow. Saying something. Don't listen. Don't listen!

He's rising up.

He has no face! Not a man... some kind of beast. Huge, with great pawlike hands reaching out.

Don't touch me!

Falling. Falling down through darkness. Home is lost forever.

There is no home. Except here on Earth.

I didn't want to kill him!

No other way. It's that or -

"How are you feeling this afternoon?"

Someone out there. Is that a voice you can trust? Yes, but -

"I think you're looking much better. These past few days I've been very concerned, but I feel confident now."

Days? Vampirella opened her eyes. A lean-faced blond man with rimless plastic glasses was watching her from the side of the bed. "I'm afraid," she said, "that I don't -"

"We found you wandering in the snow, last week," said the man. "I'm Tyler Westron, a doctor."

She sat up in the four-poster bed, looking around the room. "Am I... is this the old house I saw?"

"Yes, you're a guest at the Westron Sanitarium," explained the doctor. "This house was built in the 1880s by a very wealthy, and very antisocial, copper millionaire. He had his reasons for wanting isolation; so do I."

"A sanitarium? For what sort of patients?"

"Wealthy ones, mostly." Westron smiled down at her. "My specialty is orthomolecular psychiatry. Which is why your case is so interesting to me."

Vampirella placed a hand to her breasts and noticed she'd been undressed and a lacy nightdress had been put on her. "My case? You mean the effects of the exposure and the crash I -"

"I mean the vampirism." Westron's smile grew a little strange around the edges. Seating himself on the edge of the bed, he began, "It's been quite fascinating. So much of what we do here has become routine. A case like -"

She stiffened. "How do you know about me?"

"You talked considerably in your delirium, Vampirella," Dr. Westron answered with a smile, "aided at times by certain drugs. At first I thought it was nothing more than babbling, fever dreams. Then, after a few tests, I became convinced that what you were saying was absolutely true." He reached out to the carved bedside table to pick up a small beaker. "Here, drink this."

"What is it?"

"Medicine. Take it."

Somewhat reluctantly, the dark-haired girl swallowed the thick, scarlet liquid.

"Very good," said Westron. "You are now freed of your greatest worry, Vampirella."

"What do you mean?"

"Freed, I hasten to add, so long as you remain on friendly terms with me." He smiled again, watching her. "What you've just drunk is a blood-substitute serum... a little invention of my own. You must drink... let's not be too technical... let's say a shot glass full every twenty-four hours. Do that, and you will have absolutely no craving for human blood." He leaned closer. "That will save you a good deal of embarrassment, won't it?"

She was not certain he was telling the truth. "Why have you -"

"Why have I cooked up the serum? The challenge of the problem, of finding the right molecule, as it were. For another, I find you a very attractive young woman. I want to help you."

"I see."

"Yes, I imagine you do," said Westron. "The situation, to make everything perfectly clear, is this,

Vampirella... you are to remain here, and to be, shall we say, obliging to me. Do that and you get your blood-sub. Otherwise it's out in the snow with you." He laughed.

"You want me to be your mistress," said Vampirella. "What did you do before I arrived?"

"I have been involved with... one of my nurses," said the doctor. "Lenore, I'm afraid, has grown increasingly tedious. Lord, if you knew how long I've actually had to... no matter. All you need concern yourself with is pleasing me. Since you're still recuperating I won't make any demands on you as yet." Dr. Westron put one hand on her shoulder, the other inside Vampirella's nightdress. He fondled her breasts as he kissed her.

She allowed that.

"Oh, and one other thing," he said, getting off the four-poster. "There have been some peculiar rumors about the recent crash of that airliner up in the mountains. The condition of one of the passengers was very strange. Seemed the poor devil lost an enormous amount of blood... and yet there was no blood at all around the place where he was found. Things like that do happen with a crash, I suppose, and yet..." He bowed in her direction. "Ah, but so long as you're pleasant and well-behaved, Vampirella, no one need know what really happened up there in the mountains." With a smile he left her.

### CHAPTER THREE

The murmurings drifted up to her from far below.

Silently, the long-legged Vampirella left her bed to cross the night-dark bedroom. Wearing only the nightdress, she eased the door open and stepped into the hallway.

Shuffling feet, droning voices. Down on the first floor of the old Victorian mansion.



It must be nearly midnight, a strange hour for Dr. Westron's patients to be up and about.

Vampirella moved to the banister and looked down. At least a dozen men and women, fully dressed, were marching slowly along the ground floor hallway. Each carried a lighted candle. In the yellow flames the golden medallions worn around each neck flashed and sparkled.

The figures passed out of view. Then there was only silence from below.

Vampirella started down the curving staircase.

"Midnight parades aren't standard therapy," the dark-haired girl told herself as she descended. "Something more than psychiatry is going on here."

A footstep, a creaking floor board.

Vampirella, halfway down the stairs, pressed back against the wall.

A pretty blonde girl had stepped out of a room on the first floor. She clutched a thick, ancient-looking book beneath her arm. She, too, wore a gold medallion around her neck.

Vampirella was close enough to discern the medallion's design - a strange horned head, a severed circle.

As she watched, the blonde walked directly up to a buff-colored wall. The wall swung open, and the girl stepped through.

Vampirella waited until the wall had closed before continuing on downstairs.

Although she didn't think much of Dr. Westron's bedside manner, she'd come to realize in the past few hours that his blood-substitute serum actually worked. She had felt absolutely no craving for blood since drinking the serum, not even any anxiety. If she could take the serum every day, then she could live as she pleased. No more fears, no more guilts. Well, yes, guilt over what had already been done. *That* she'd never really get rid of, but from today on, she wouldn't have to worry.

"But I can't accept the good doctor's terms," Vampirella thought. "I wonder if that blonde with the book is Lenore, the one I'm supposed to replace."

She reached the doorway the blonde girl had come out of. After listening, Vampirella opened the door and crossed the threshold. She found herself in a large library, a book-walled room lit by a single Tiffany lamp which sat on a heavy-footed circular reading table.

"No desk in here," Vampirella soon determined. "So Dr. Westron must keep his notes in his office or his lab. Have to find out where they are. If I can get hold of a copy of that formula, I can -"

"Suffering from a touch of insomnia?" It was Tyler Westron. He had stepped from behind a high bookcase in one corner of the room.

"I thought I heard some noise down here."

"No doubt you did." He smiled, crossing to her. "A sanitarium is never completely quiet." He drew a pill bottle from his pocket. "I'll give you something to help you sleep, Vampirella."

"I don't need anything."

Westron shook two capsules into the palm of his hand. "Take these." His free hand gripped her arm.

Vampirella was confident she could defend herself against him. The thing was, until she found out the secret of the blood-substitute serum she had to remain here inside the sanitarium. No use tossing Dr. Westron into the wall and walking off. "All right," she said, plucking the capsules from his palm and swallowing them.

"Now I'll escort you up to your room, Vampirella." Westron gripped her bare arm. "You mustn't let anything about my sanitarium frighten you." He led her upstairs to the door of her bedroom, opened the door, and gestured for her to enter. "Good night. I have some other duties to attend to tonight."

When she was back inside the bedroom, Vampirella heard him lock the heavy door.

Grey dawn showed at the leaded windows.

"Wake up, you little slut!"

A hand was shaking her by the shoulder. Vampirella sat up, awake. "Don't do that," she warned the blonde who stood over her.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Probably Lenore."

Lenore Goodwin was holding the ancient book. She slammed it angrily down on the bedside table. "He's told you about me, then?" she said. "I thought he had. He was late last night for the... he was with you last night, wasn't he?"

"I saw Dr. Westron for a few minutes last night, around aboutmidnight."

"A few minutes?" Lenore's nostrils flared. "I'm warning you, Vampirella, thatTyleris mine. Mine now and mine as far back as... you're to leave him alone!"

"You're shouting at the wrong side of the triangle," Vampirella advised her. "I suggest you talk to Dr. Westron."

"Don't patronize me, you little bitch!" The blonde nurse slapped Vampirella across the face.

After a second of hesitation, Vampirella slapped her in return.

Lenore, surprised, went stumbling away from the bed. Her face went white, then blazing red. She fell backwards over a footstool. The golden medallion danced on its chain as she hit the floor. "I... I'm warning-"

"Let me warnyou ." Vampirella was standing beside the bed, hands on hips. "Any problem you have with the good doctor, you take up with him. Come near me again, Lenore, and I'll toss you out."

Lenore, pale again, rose from the thick rug and smoothed her dress. "I'll see to it that you..." The

sentence was swallowed in an angry snarl. The blonde turned away, stalked from the room, and slammed the door.

After watching the door for a moment, Vampirella smiled. Her strength was coming back. She picked up the thick old book Lenore had left behind. Burned into the cover were the words *The Crimson Chronicles*. Below the title was a drawing, a drawing of the horned creature and the broken circle.

Vampirella opened the heavy book. Though she still had much to learn about the history of her adopted planet, the raven-haired girl knew this volume was centuries old. It had not been printed, but was lettered by hand. The first letter of each paragraph was illuminated, decorated with tiny demons, night shapes, graveyard haunts.

Lowering herself to the edge of the four-poster, Vampirella began to skim through the pages. "... And the Great God Chaos, as well as his seven demonic servants, was defeated and exiled to the Nethervoid... But these chronicles survive for those who would serve his cause. Those who would achieve incredible power, those who would work for the day when Chaos and his Seven Servants shall gain strength. The day of triumph when Chaos shall war again and win and thereafter rule all -"

"Not the sort of light reading I recommend for patients on the mend." Dr. Westron had entered her room, but not by way of the door. He took *The Crimson Chronicles* from her hands. "A book Lenore borrowed from my collection of occult materials, Vampirella. Much too unpleasant for you."

"How did you get in?"

"This is an old house," replied the doctor. "They were very fond of secret passages in the last century. Now, I advise you to get a bit more rest before breakfast. We don't want you suffering a relapse."

#### CHAPTER FOUR

Thunder rumbled on the other side of the dark hills. The rain fell heavily, splashing on the cracked marble headstones and the forlorn plaster angels. The two men made their way along the iron fence of the graveyard and into the shingled chapel next to it.

Adam Van Helsing helped his blind father out of his raincoat and got out of his. He hung the dripping coats on a brass hat tree in the chapel foyer. "Nobody around," he said.

"He's in the embalming room," said his father. He clutched a small black satchel in both hands.

Rain drummed on the chapel roof. A distant door creaked open and slammed shut. Another door did the same. A plump young man in a tight-fitting dark suit appeared in the foyer. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting on this sad - son of a bitch!" He swatted suddenly at the top of his curly blond head and glared up at the ceiling. "Another goddamn leak." Wiping the rain from his head, he shifted position. "You must be the beloved kin of the late, lamented Kurt Van Helsing."

"We are," replied Adam.

"If you'll follow me, we will view his - watch out for that goddamn slippery spot!" The young man led them down a dim hallway. Taking hold of a doorknob, he said, "I think you'll find him looking very peaceful and serene, considering - shit! These goddamn doors either flap open all the time or they stick shut tighter than -"

"Let me try it." Adam reached around the plump mortician and opened the door.

"I only bought this setup three months ago." The young man ushered them into a small, pink-walled room. "Figured that with a location like this, practically on top of the goddamn cemetery, I'd do a land-office business. But -"

"Would you leave us alone now?" requested old Van Helsing.

"Certainly. I understand your desire to be in privacy with your dear late brother," said the mortician. "I did want to explain, before you get a good look at him, that because you requested no embalming and no cosmetic -"

"We understand," said Adam.

"We've had him on ice since he was brought down from the mountains. Even so, I think maybe -"

"Getting up to the accident site took longer than we'd anticipated," said the blind man. "And now..."

"Yes, certainly." He bowed out into the hall. "If you need me for anything else, you'll have to give a holler. The goddamn buzzers aren't working."

Adam closed the door on him. He crossed to the wheeled table which held the coffin of his uncle. "The sheriff's account was right, Dad. The body is nearly bloodless."

"The marks," said the old man as he approached the open coffin. "Look for the marks, Adam."

His son was leaning over the corpse. "Yes, there are two small punctures in the throat, in the jugular vein," he said. "No one without reason to look would have noticed them."

A pained sigh escaped from the blind man. "Then it is exactly as I foresaw." He unsnapped his small black satchel and withdrew two things from it - a heavy hammer and a sharp wooden spike. He let the satchel drop to the floor.

"You're sure you have to do this, Dad?"

The blind man nodded. "It must be done, Adam, or Kurt's body will never rest in its grave," he told his son. "He has been attacked by a vampire, thus there is a strong possibility that he will become a vampire, too. Unless..." He reached out over the body of his brother. "After this is done, we will close the coffin and seal it."

"Yes, that's all been arranged already."

"Is the stake directly over Kurt's heart?"

"Yes."

Van Helsing swung the hammer.

## CHAPTER FIVE

She couldn't find her way out through the wall. The door of her bedroom was once again locked.

Vampirella prowled the midnight room. She knew she was completely recovered from the effects of the plane crash and exposure and from the drugs which Dr. Westron had administered to her while she was still only half-conscious. Westron must be aware of her recovery, too, and he'd soon be making further demands on her.

"Better find that formula right now," Vampirella told herself, "and then bid the good doctor a fond farewell."

The leaded windows were barred. No one could get out that way.

No person, at least.

Now that she was completely recuperated, Vampirella could use all her powers and abilities.

She opened one of the barred windows a few inches.

Wind and drizzling rain rushed in from the darkness outside.

The dark-haired girl took a step back. She narrowed her eyes and concentrated.

Her voluptuous body seemed to shimmer. Then the girl was gone. In her place a large black bat hovered a few feet above the floor.

The winged creature flapped toward the open window and flew out into the rainy night.

Dr. Westron put his pen aside when the mantel clock struck midnight. Already he could hear the shuffling footsteps in the corridor outside. He pushed back from his desk. The fireplace was much too smoky tonight. He went to a window across from his desk and opened it.

After taking in a deep breath of the chill air, Dr. Westron left the room.

A moment later a large black bat swooped in.

And a moment after that, Vampirella stood on the thick rug beside the doctor's carved-wood desk.

"The formula for the blood-substitute serum is in this desk." That much she'd been able to read from the doctor's mind as he'd sat at his desk.

Kneeling, the long-legged girl began to search through the drawers. The topmost was filled with old letters.

"The good doctor really lets his mail pile up," remarked Vampirella. The letter in her hand was dated 1696, addressed to an Ethan Todd. It dealt with a secret meeting of the Cult of Chaos.

No time for this now. The formula must be found.

Shutting the drawer, she opened the one beneath it.

"Ah, here's his journal." Vampirella grabbed up the fat black notebook. The middle pages, devoted to the past few days, contained a good many references to her. And to Westron's plans for her.

She skimmed over the explicit details. "Good, this is it." Westron had written the blood-substitute formula in his journal. Vampirella ripped out the page.

"Tyler, it's time you... what are you doing here?"

"Good evening, Lenore." Vampirella stood up and faced the nurse.

"Did Tyler bring you here?" Lenore, face pale, fingers rubbing at the golden medallion, came across the room.

"I invited myself."

"What were you two doing?"

"No idea what Tyler's been up to," answered Vampirella. "As for myself, I've been looking for something. Since I've found it, I'll be -"

"What's that in your hand? You've taken something of Tyler's!"

"Something of mine, really." Vampirella folded the page in half.

"You're not to remove anything from his room!" Making an angry sound, Lenore threw herself at Vampirella.

Vampirella sidestepped. The nurse hit against the heavy desk and stumbled.

"You little bitch!" Lenore caught hold of Vampirella's hair and yanked.

Vampirella lost her balance, but managed to strike out at the nurse as she fell.

Lenore took up a heavy stone paperweight from the desk and swung on Vampirella.

It struck the raven-haired girl in the temple.

Then Lenore was on her, reaching for her throat. Her strong fingers tightened around Vampirella's neck.

"No, don't." A rough, chesty voice had spoken. Someone else had come into the room.

Vampirella kicked and tried to get Lenore off her, to break her hold.

The fingers kept tightening, choking her.

Behind Lenore Vampirella glimpsed someone. It was the faceless man.

## CHAPTER SIX

The chanting filled the place. It bounced off the jagged stone walls of the cavern and echoed down the shadowy tunnels.

"We are the Companions of Chaos! We serve the Seven who serve the Master!"

Black, sooty smoke drifted across the high rock ceiling of the underground cave, spiraling up from the burning torches thrust in black iron brackets in the stone walls.

"We are the Companions of Chaos! We serve the Seven who serve the Master!"

Vampirella lay on her back, arms and legs spread wide, chained to a stone altar. She had passed out up in Dr. Westron's study and awakened here.

"We are the Companions of Chaos! We serve the Seven who serve the Master!"

Robed and cowed figures ringed the stone room, faces hidden by the shadows cast by their dark hoods. Twenty or more of them, chanting, repeating the words again and again.

"We are the Companions of Chaos! We serve the Seven who serve the Master!"

Each wore a gold medallion on a chain around his neck. And drawn huge on one of the walls of the cave was that same horned head and severed circle which was inscribed on each medallion. Painted in scarlet.

"We are the Companions of Chaos! We serve the Seven who serve the Master!"

Though much of her strength had returned, Vampirella could not burst the chains which held her to the stone altar.

"We are the Companions of Chaos! We serve the Seven who serve the Master!"

Someone else was chained nearby, linked to a heavy metal ring fixed to the stone floor. A huddled figure, large. The faceless man, the shaggy creature Vampirella had seen twice now. He crouched near the foot of the altar, weighted down with chains.

"We are the Companions of Chaos! We serve the Seven who serve the Master!"

A robed figure approached the altar, carrying *The Crimson Chronicles*. The chanting abruptly stopped.

"It is the time of sacrifice!" Lenore announced. "It is time for the Ceremony of the Second Soul!"

A few seconds of silence, then the others shouted, "Nuberus, second servant of Chaos, keeper of souls, come forth from the Nethervoid!"

A brazier was lit in front of the sacrificial altar. Incense began to splutter and burn.

"Nuberus, second servant of Chaos, keeper of souls, come forth from the Nethervoid!"

"No," croaked the shaggy man, "you can't do this!"

After placing the ancient book upon the altar, Lenore took a long-bladed knife from within the folds of her robe. Its handle was gold, encrusted with gems. "The bargain must be sealed!" said the blonde girl, face flushed, nostrils flaring. "The exchange must be made complete!"

"Nuberus, second servant of Chaos, keeper of souls, come forth from the Nethervoid!"

Chained as she was, Vampirella could not transform herself, could not change her shape. But she had

other powers, powers she felt she was again ready to use. "Look at me, Lenore!"

"Oh, mighty Nuberus, prepare to receive the Second Soul!" Lenore raised the knife, grasped in both hands, high above her.

"Look at me!" Vampirella's eyes were glowing. She caught the eyes of the blonde and held her gaze. "Look at me, and listen. I control your mind. You must do what I -"

"No!" Lenore strained, breathing hard. She tore her gaze from Vampirella's hypnotic eyes. "You shall be sacrificed! Your soul must be given to Nuberus!" The knife began to descend.

"Nuberus, second servant of Chaos, keeper of souls, come forth from the Nethervoid!"

A hand caught Lenore's wrist when the blade was but inches from Vampirella's heart.

"How dare you defy me?" Lenore cried.

"This girl must not die," said Tyler Westron. Robed and hooded, he had come up to the altar to halt the sacrifice. "If I hadn't been delayed upstairs you'd -"

"Nuberus must have a second soul. You know that." The blonde girl's hood fell back as she struggled to break Westron's hold, to plunge the knife into Vampirella's flesh.

"I have other plans for Vampirella," said Westron. "You won't kill her, Nuberus will not have her soul!"

"He must have a soul! And this little slut's will do as -"

"Let him have yours!" Westron twisted her arm and plunged the blade into Lenore's chest.

Lenore toppled back and away from him as the blood began to stain her robe. "Ethan, I did so much for..." Death kept her from saying anything more.

Westron raised both hands high. "Nuberus has his second soul. The pact is completed."

Vampirella turned her head, watching him. "She called you Ethan."

Westron strode closer to the sacrificial altar. "I am Ethan Todd," he told her. "I was a warlock, a sorcerer, in 17th-century New England. It was I who started the Cult of Chaos in this country, although it has a long and illustrious history in the Old World. I have stayed alive all these years by sacrificing souls to Nuberus. Lenore and I were lovers then, in Salem, and we've been together ever since." He bent over Vampirella and placed a hand on her bare arm. His fingers were red with Lenore's blood. "After all these centuries... well, who can blame me for growing bored with poor

Lenore? Nuberus requires two souls for each new life he grants. The soul which was to be sacrificed tonight was the final payment for more years of life for me. Lenore wanted that soul to be yours, Vampirella." From under his robe he brought a key. He began unlocking the chains which held her down.

"What about the real Tyler Westron?"

"Oh," said the warlock, laughing, "you've met him. In fact, he's taken quite a fancy to you. Broke out to come looking for you." He nodded at the shaggy man. "I really am a physician, you know. Your



blood-sub is one proof of my ability. With Westron I tried out a different sort of experiment."

The chains fell away from her body. "What do you have in mind for me?"

"Nothing unpleasant, I assure you," said Ethan Todd. "You will stay here with me; with our powers, yours and mine, combined, we can do incredible things. We will see that the Cult of Chaos grows and -"

"I want no part of this, Ethan Todd." She sat up on the altar.

"Ah, but you have no choice, Vampirella. Do I have to remind you that without my serum you will go back to being what you were, nothing more than a bloodsucking little savage? Your life will be -"

"Even so, I won't serve you!" She took up *The Crimson Chronicles*, which Lenore had placed on the altar, and threw it toward the flaming brazier.

The ancient book landed on the blazing coals and began to crackle and burn.

"You idiot! If that book is destroyed..." The sorcerer pushed her aside and ran to grab the book from the flames.

The shaggy man gave a tremendous growl. The chains which restrained him burst. He hurled himself at Ethan Todd, at the man who had taken his place and made him into what he now was.

The two went stumbling across the cavern floor.

The followers of the sorcerer began to shout, to surge forward.

The pair fell across the body of Lenore. Blood streaked them as they fought and struggled.

"I should have killed you long ago." The warlock grasped the handle of the sacrificial knife which was still in Lenore's body and pulled it free. It made a rasping, grinding sound.

"Now you will die at last!"

Ethan Todd stabbed at the shaggy creature he had created. When the blade sank into the body, blood spilled out, matting the thick hair.

"Stop!" Vampirella, leaping from the altar, started for them.

The cave started to rumble. The stone walls shook.

"Nuberus is set free!" cried the robed figures. "The book is burned! He is free!"

Jagged stones rained down. The great circle inscribed on the wall split open, and the rocks broke apart. Roaring flames flowed through the enormous fissure. Flames which burned both scarlet and black.

The flames spilled out over the cavern floor. In the giant split in the circle a huge figure began to take shape.

"He is unleashed!" The worshippers scattered, running for the tunnel exits.

The flames, pursuing, caught at their robes and turned them into torches. Torches that screamed, burning with a night-black flame.

"I'll get you out." The shaggy man scooped Vampirella up in his arms.

She had been watching the demon materialize and had lost track of Ethan Todd and the faceless man. "Where is Ethan Todd?"

"In hell by now."

Vampirella caught a glimpse of the broken body of the ancient sorcerer sprawled on the cavern floor. Then she was in a narrow tunnel, being carried upward.

The flames, spreading up through most of the tunnels, had eaten away at the old Victorian house. Now, as the first light of day spread, the sanitarium was gone, a burned-out tangle of blackened collapsed beams and walls. A charcoal scrawl across the white of the fields.

Vampirella stood watching the fire die out as the last of the old house fell in on itself. She turned to the figure of the man who had been Dr. Tyler Westron. "Please. Let me go for help for you -"

Westron was on the cold ground, propped against a tree. "I told you, Vampirella, I'm about done. I'm a doctor and I know... those knife wounds..." He reached into a pocket of his tattered trousers. "Here... I... saved this after Lenore tried to take it away from you..."

It was the sheet of journal paper which held the formula for the blood-substitute serum. "Thank you," the dark-haired girl said, taking the sheet. "That... that demon down there. Will he come looking for us?"

"Not now. I think he got his fill of souls in the cavern. He'll return to where he came from, to the Nethervoid... until someone else summons him. Him and the rest of the Servants of Chaos." The croaking voice was growing weaker.

"But Ethan Todd and Lenore are dead, and *The Crimson Chronicles* burned to ashes."

"There are other branches of the cult, other copies of that book... Ethan Todd was in communication with a group as near as Feldenville." She knelt beside him and took his gnarled, hairy hand in hers. "They'll have to be stopped."

"You... maybe you can do it. He came here... a year ago... he and Lenore... a patient and his special nurse, they said... before I... they took over the place... convened some of my patients and staff... sacrificed the rest... turned me... into this thing..." The voice of the creature got smaller, smaller. "I... could... get loose sometimes... but they... they had... power over me... I saw you... while I was... free... made up my mind... save you... if... I..." His life whispered out of him.

Vampirella stayed there, holding his dead hand, until long after the bleak sun had risen.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The Great Pendragon raised his wand and pointed at the somewhat scruffy top hat on the velvet-covered stage next to him. "Mortal eyes have never witnessed such a miracle (not to mention your piggish little orbs), my dear friends," he announced to the dozen scattered people who comprised the audience in his shed-like magic theatre. "What strange and wondrous things will blossom forth from you

topper (without the aid of one drop of fertilizer), my comrades? Ah, behold!" He gestured at the hat, "Xicara, Xacara, Xadrez!"

Roses, puffy pink-petaled roses, began to grow up out of the hat.

A couple of the carnival patrons made appreciative sounds.

"Incredible, is it not? (A little applause wouldn't be out of order, you rubes!) Yes, this legendary piece of magic has saved the crowned heads of Europe." He made a deep bow, almost losing his balance. "And now, lovers of magic (and bug-eyed cretins), our amazing hour of magic must end. I remain your obedient servant, the Great Pendragon."

Smoke swirled all around him. When it cleared, the magician was gone from the stage.

He emerged in his tiny dressing room, shrugging out of his scarlet-lined cloak and letting it fall to the raw-wood floor. "Lord, I don't mind casting pearls before swine, but those idiots..." From his rickety makeup table he grabbed a fifth of discount Scotch and poured several ounces into an old peanut-butter jar. He gulped most of it down, shuddered, and sighed. He was a tall, lean man, grey-haired and sharp-featured, nearly sixty.

There was a soft tapping on his door.

"Please allow me to wallow until the next show, Blackston," he muttered, refilling the jar with liquor.

"Mr. Pendragon?" A girl's voice, a young girl.

The magician squared his shoulders, blinked, and yawned. "Eh?" He rose, made his way to the door, and opened it a few inches. "Ah, a vision of beauty (and probably collecting for the United Crusade) come to call. What is it you wish, miss?"

The blonde girl said, "I thought... perhaps you might be able to help me."

Pendragon's slightly bloodshot eyes widened. "Child, it's been many years since I came to anyone's aid myself included."

"Don't they ever hear you."

"Eh?"

"Your audiences. When you mutter things like that under your breath," said the girl, who was no more than twenty. "I was sitting in the first row just now and I distinctly caught two of your remarks."

"(Is she implying I talk to myself?) Nonsense, child," he said as he opened the door wider. "People expect a ruined old conjuror to mumble in his beard (or five o'clock shadow, as the case may be). All part of the show. Come in, won't you? I must admit I've grown so indifferent of late that I didn't notice you at all. You were at my last gala performance?"

"Yes, Mr. Pendragon. My name is Eve Millerton and I -"

"Sit down, dear child." He pointed at his chair, the only one in the tiny room.

"Thank you." Eve seated herself, knees pressed tightly together. She was wearing a simple cotton dress and a light coat. "I've been looking around the carnival most of the afternoon and... well, you're the only person I've seen who seems as though he might be... decent."

Blinking, Pendragon reached for his jar of Scotch. "Decent, you say? I don't believe I've been called that in a decade or more, Miss Millerton." He took a long swig.

"Comparatively speaking, I mean," the girl said. "Most of the people who work at this carnival, especially Mr. Blackston, seem... well, frightening, I guess."

Pendragon set the jar aside. "Don't have anything to do with Blackston," he told her in a low voice. "What is it you want here?"

"I'm searching for my uncle," replied Eve. "We were supposed to meet in town nearly a week ago and... well, he never met me. I've been asking around, and I found the hotel my uncle was staying at. The clerk said he thought my uncle was going to visit this carnival last week... His name is Warren Millerton." She shook her head. "Whatever Uncle Warren did, Mr. Pendragon, he never came back to the hotel. I wanted to ask them here if they'd perhaps seen him, but when I saw the people..."

Pendragon reached out a thin, knobby hand to touch the girl's shoulder. "You haven't talked to anyone else here, child?"

"No, as I said, I thought you might -"

"You must get out of here, away from this carnival."

"But my uncle. Was he -"

"I'll find out what I can," the magician promised. "Give me your address."

"I'm staying at the Westlake Hotel in town. But I -"

"Go now." He eased her up out of the chair. "The important thing is to get yourself off the carnival grounds. At once."

She studied his tired face. Then, nodding, she said, "Yes, all right, I'll do as you say, Mr. Pendragon. You will let me know if -"

"You have the word of a Pendragon (which is still worth a few pence on the open market), my dear." He urged her to the door. "I implore you, leave quickly. Depart."

When the blonde girl was gone, the magician slumped down into the chair and pressed his hands against his cheekbones. "Lord, how am I ever going to get out of this?"

The blind man pointed. "What's there?"

Adam Van Helsing said, "A grave, a makeshift grave covered over with stones."

Old Van Helsing nodded. "She was here."

"She?"

"Yes, I can sense her aura. The creature who fed on my brother's blood stalked this very spot."

The two of them stood on a stretch of ground which adjoined the ruins of what had been the Westron Sanitarium. A very light snow was falling, covering the black timbers. Several men from the local sheriff's office were going through the remains of the old mansion and the cavern below.

"A girl, then," said Adam. "You're certain, Dad?"

"This gift of mine, this gift I have instead of vision, Adam, it's seldom wrong. The vampire we seek is a girl. She was here at this place, exactly as my earlier hunch told me."

"Okay, you were right about that, about coming here," said his son. "Still, I have a feeling myself. I don't think -"

"I'm right," cut in the old man.

Adam grinned. "Tough enough to argue with the average parent, let alone one who's got second sight."

Van Helsing turned his sightless eyes toward the young man. "I don't mean to sound infallible, Adam. But I'm certain this time. Now we have to move on, to pick up the trail of this deadly girl."

"Any notion where she's -"

"Hey, Dr. Van Helsing!"

"They want you over there by the house, Dad." He took his father by the arm and led him across the snow.

Several bodies had been brought up from below the house. They lay black on the white ground.

One of the deputies was holding a charred book in one hand and a blood-stained knife in the other.

The sheriff, a weathered, white-haired man, took the jewel-handled knife gingerly and wrapped it up in a polka-dot blue bandanna. "Quite a few odd things turning up down there," he said to the two Van Helsing. "Since you're experts on occult stuff... what do you make of that book?"

The deputy handed the book to Adam.

"It's a copy of *The Crimson Chronicles*, Dad."

"I knew it was something like that, the emanations told me."

"That some kind of famous book?" asked the sheriff.

"Infamous," said the old man. "The perverse Bible of the Companions of Chaos."

"Some kind of goofy religion?" asked the sheriff.

Van Helsing said, "A cult, an evil-worshipping cult which I believed long dead. This book here... it means the Cult of Chaos is still alive. And the girl, Adam, she's involved with them in some way."

"We don't know that for sure."

The old man struck his chest. "I know!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The manikins sat, forever smiling, around the patio table, plastic ice in their cocktail glasses, painted grass beneath their feet. The black bat came down through an opening in the department store skylight directly over their heads. It was an overcast night, and the aisles of the deserted store were exceptionally dark.

The bat circled the garden party tableau, then hovered in the air a few feet from the floor. There was a shimmering moment, and Vampirella stood next to a stunning blonde mannikin in a mesh bikini.

"Don't get up," the dark-haired girl said, "I'm only passing through." Hands on hips, Vampirella surveyed the midnight store. "Camping equipment, notions, cameras... ah, apparel."

She walked along a shadowy aisle and into the area which offered women's clothing. After selecting a dress and a belted raincoat and putting them on, Vampirella looked around. "Let's see... shoes over there. Then I'll need a suitcase. Won't look right checking into Feldenville's most fashionable hotel with no luggage."

Within half an hour she'd selected a tan suitcase and filled it with extra clothing and accessories. She'd also borrowed \$112 by rifling several of the cash registers. "Altogether I owe you about \$300," she told the dark and silent store. "You'll get it all back, once I take care of a few more immediate problems."

This particular department store, the largest of the three in the moderate-sized town of Feldenville, had an alarm system which could be switched off from within the store. Vampirella shut the alarms off and carried her suitcase out of a side door into an alley.

She waited until the police patrol car, whose pattern she'd checked before her rather unorthodox entry of the store, had rolled by out on the main street. Then she went striding away, heading for the lights of the centre of town.

"It's a burden," complained the big, sad-faced man. He sat cramped in a bentwood rocker, hugging himself, rocking slowly. His chair was close to a large stone fireplace in which a fire still blazed. Around his thick neck was wrapped a heavy woolen muffler. He had on a peacoat over a thick ski sweater. "That's all it is, Ma, a burden."

"A burden to help your sadly afflicted mother? A burden to look after her in her declining years, Lemuel?" The old woman was thin, with a sunken face of ice-blue color. She rested in an antique wheelchair made of copper and wicker.

"I mean it's all a burden," said her son, "being alive and all. I didn't ask for them to make me alive again."

"Don't let them hear you say that," warned his mother. "You were meant to serve the Master. That's all there is to it."

"Why should I be afraid of them? Worst they can do is make me dead, and I already been that."

The old woman shook her head. "There are worse things than that, Lem. Worse things by far."

The doctor opened the door of his suite. "Yes, what is it?"

"You're the hotel physician?" Vampirella asked him.

"If you're ill, you must contact me through the desk. If you're not, it can wait until tomorrow. It's after one A.M." He was a middle-aged man, too fat.

Vampirella said, "Look at me, doctor."

"I don't have time for..." His eyes were caught by hers.

"Look at me, listen to me. You will do exactly what I ask."

"Yes, I will do what you ask."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, my wife, as usual, is visiting her dreadful mother in New Mexico."

"Do you have a lab here?"

"A small one," answered the now-hypnotized doctor, "adequate."

"Do you have..." She recited the list of ingredients and equipment required to manufacture the blood-substitute serum.

"Yes, I have all that."

"Good, then we'll go to your lab right now." There was a moment, as she followed the doctor into his rooms, when Vampirella felt it would be much simpler to take the blood she needed from him.

But, no. She was going to use the serum from now on. She would not kill again.

## CHAPTER NINE

Professor Crowder thrust his pipe into his tobacco pouch. This may sound strange coming from one whose lifelong special interest has been things occult," he said as he filled the bowl of the pipe. "Still, Van Helsing, I have to admit I don't put much faith in the sort of ESP hunches you operate on."

The blind old man said, "They're considerably more than hunches, Crowder. I have a definite ability in this area."

"Dad's right, Dr. Crowder." Adam was sitting in a comfortable chair near one of the windows of the professor's office. A light morning rain was pattering at the glass. "We've tested this out a good deal ourselves before accepting the fact that Dad's hunches are usually right."

Crowder was a large pink man of fifty. He chuckled, lighting his pipe. "Well, let's pass that matter up for the nonce." He exhaled swirls of smoke. "I am pleased to have men of your reputation visit me here in Feldenville. Since I came to the state university some years back, I've felt a bit cut off from my colleagues

in the field of supernatural studies."

"I'm not here for shop talk," said Van Helsing. "We have good reason to believe the Cult of Chaos is active again."

Crowder puffed and nodded. "Granted, as you told me earlier, you found evidence of at least a small recurrence of the belief in Chaos and his Seven Servants in the ruins of the Westron place, Van Helsing," he said. "I don't see how that leads you here."

"Dad's already explained that, Dr. Crowder. One of his hunches."

"Then I'm correct in assuming you don't have any tangible proof?"

"Tangible enough for me," said the blind one. "I am certain there is cult activity in Feldenville. Furthermore, the girl we're seeking is here."

Professor Crowder removed his pipe from his mouth. "Girl?"

"My brother Kurt was killed by a vampire," said Van Helsing. "We have trailed her here."

"I was sorry to hear about Kurt's death... I didn't realize... the newspaper accounts indicated he'd died as a result of the plane crash."

"All mention of a vampire was kept out of the press," Van Helsing told him. "Adam and I will handle the matter."

"And this vampire is, you say, a girl? A young girl?"

"Yes, a deadly young girl, who must be destroyed."

After a few puffs, the professor asked, "What connection is there between the girl and the cult?"

"We figure she must be one of them," said Adam.

"She was at the sanitarium," Van Helsing added. "We're certain of that."

"Yet from what you told me earlier, the residents of Dr. Westron's unfortunate establishment were all killed. Killed under highly peculiar circumstances." Crowder leaned back in his chair and blew smoke upward at the beamed ceiling. "How did this girl survive?"

Adam said, "That we don't know."

"Perhaps the situation may not be what you think it is, at all, Van Helsing."

"Meaning what exactly, Crowder?"

"Perhaps your lady vampire had something to do with the destruction of the Cult of Chaos," suggested the pink professor. "Perhaps she is not one of them at all."

"The possibility seems highly unlikely to me," said the blind man.



"It is worth thinking about, though," said Adam. "I've been feeling all along that this girl is more than -

"Don't be foolish," said his father. "She's evil, she must be destroyed, and..." The old man stopped speaking. A look of pain spread over his gaunt face. His hands gripped the arms of his chair.

"Dad?"

After a few seconds Van Helsing said, "Nothing serious, Adam. When you reach my age you're subject to an unexpected cramp or twinge now and then." He pushed himself slowly up out of the chair. "I'd hoped you'd be able to tell us something that might help us locate the cult, Crowder, provide us with some clue. But let me thank you at any rate for your time."

"I'd like nothing better than to unearth a full-blown cult right here in my own backyard," Professor Crowder assured him, rising. "But really, Van Helsing, there's nothing of that sort going on around Feldenville and environs. A pity, since this area could do with a little livening up."

"We'll keep you informed of our progress." Unaided, the blind man made his way to the door.

"Thanks, Dr. Crowder." Adam shook hands with the professor, then followed his father outside. When they were crossing the campus, he asked, "What happened back there, Dad?"

"I suddenly got an extrasensory insight," said Van Helsing.

"Figured as much. What was it?"

"There is a branch of the Cult of Chaos here," he said. "And Professor Crowder is one of them."

## CHAPTER TEN

By afternoon the rain was heavier. It came slamming down, splashing high on the flagstone path which led to the front doors of the Jethryn Memorial Library. Vampirella walked briskly up the twisting path, hands deep in the pockets of her borrowed raincoat. She wasn't exactly sure why she had to come here, but something inside her made her feel her search for the Companions of Chaos should begin here.

The library was housed in a large brownstone building, its walls thick with ivy. The heavy wooden door had a circular stained glass window. As Vampirella reached out for the brass door handle she became aware of eyes on the other side of the stained glass.

The door opened inward before she could touch it. "Come in, miss," said a dry, rusty voice.

Vampirella stepped into the dim brown hallway. "Thank you."

A thin, pale man in a dark suit too large for him stood there. His face and neck were splotted with red. He scratched at the crimson patches with knobby fingers. "I'm Mr. Howard, assistant librarian," he said in his rasping voice, which sounded as though it got little use. "May I help you?" Before the girl could reply, he turned and walked into a room off the hall.

Vampirella followed him.

Howard had taken his place at a rolltop desk in the library office. On his blotter a large slice of strawberry ice cream was melting on a china saucer. He picked up a spoon, and ate some before

speaking to her again. "I was having my afternoon snack when I became aware of your approach," he explained, licking the spoon. "May I offer you -"

"No ice cream, only information."

"Of course, miss. Though a privately endowed institution, the Jethryn Memorial Library is here to serve the public." He scratched at his skin rash and ate more of his strawberry ice cream. "What area of research are you interested in?"

"I'm anxious to consult a copy of a book called *The Crimson Chronicles* . Do you have a copy?"

Howard blinked and swallowed. "Why, yes, miss, as a matter of fact, the Jethryn has one of the few known copies." He dropped his spoon to the saucer. "The late Mr. Jethryn was very much interested in the outre sciences, very much. In our occult wing we also have such hard-to-find items as the *Cultes des Goules* , the *Book of Eibon* , the extremely rare *Necronomicon* , the *De Vermis Mysteriis* , a reading copy of "*The Chronicles* will do for now," Vampirella said. "May I see it?"

Howard left his chair. It squeaked. "Why, yes, I see no reason why not," he said. "You understand, of course, that none of our books circulate."

"Yes, I wasn't expecting to check it out."

"Fine, then. Come along this way, won't you?" He led her out into the hall and up a wide, brown-carpeted staircase. "I must say, miss, that we don't often find an attractive young person such as yourself interested in such out-of-the-way topics."

"Oh, really?"

"Most young people these days seem interested in more frivolous things." He unlocked an oaken door and pushed it open. Beyond was a long, narrow room with bookcases climbing high up all its walls. There were no windows; the only light came from three wall bracket lamps. "If you'll seat yourself at that table I'll fetch the book in question."

Vampirella removed her raincoat and took the chair at the long dark table.

The black cat raked its claws up and down along the old woman's leathery arm, drawing blood. Mrs. Jethryn noticed it finally and swatted the animal off her lap and off the ancient wheelchair. "Naughty, naughty," she said.

Her son Lemuel was pacing slowly in front of the fireplace, gloved hands held out toward the flames. "I don't want to do it no more."

"You have nothing to say in the matter. You'll do exactly what you are ordered to do."

"I wish I was dead again." Lemuel kicked at the stones of the fireplace. "All I am is a toady, running errands and killing people. If I was in my grave I wouldn't -"

"Enough, enough. I don't want to hear any more of this morbid talk, Lemuel," his mother told him. "You are to locate the girl the Leader warned us about. Locate her and get rid of her."

"Okay, all right. You don't have to pick on -"

"Hum, ahum." Gaunt Mr. Howard, the corners of his thin mouth smeared with strawberry ice cream, had stepped into the old woman's parlor.

"Yes, what is it?"

The librarian said, "I believe she's actually here, Mrs. Jethryn."

"She? Who?"

The girl we were lately warned of," explained Howard. "She is at this moment in the occult wing consulting a copy of *The Crimson Chronicles* ."

Mrs. Jethryn straightened in her wheelchair. "Indeed? That's very fortunate."

Lemuel kicked at the fireplace once more, muttering to himself.

"What steps," asked Howard, "do you wish taken to -"

"Lemuel, attend to what I say," said the big sad man's mother. "You'll accompany Mr. Howard and observe this girl through one of the spy holes. Then -"

"How do we know it's even the right girl?"

"Don't interrupt your poor afflicted mother when she's speaking. The coincidence would be too incredible, Lemuel. This girl is interested in the Cult of Chaos. It follows, therefore, she is the vixen who destroyed our chapter at the sanitarium before coming to Feldenville." She paused and laughed deep down in her throat. "Even if she isn't, y, it won't hurt to kill her anyway. We don't want anyone poking into the cult and its activities."

Lemuel twisted the hem of his jacket between his thick fingers. "I don't want to do it. I don't want to follow her. I don't want to -"

"Yes, but you will," his mother said. "Now go along with Mr. Howard like a good boy."

Lemuel went.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Somewhere else in the old brownstone mansion a clock struck five. Vampirella closed *The Crimson Chronicles* and pushed back from the reading table. "If Chaos really delivers on all the promises made in this thing," the girl thought to herself, "his followers can do almost anything. Transmute base metal, control the weather, raise the dead -"

"Hem, ahem." The gaunt Mr. Howard had silently entered the room. "We close at five-thirty, miss. I thought I'd best alert you, so that you might begin finishing up your work."

"Yes, thank you. I'm ready to leave now." She stood up and reached for her coat.

"You didn't take any notes?," The librarian carefully picked up the ancient book and returned it to its locked case in one wall.

"I have a very retentive memory."

Rubbing at a scarlet patch on his neck, Howard asked, "Will you be visiting us again, miss?"

"I'm not certain."

"You'll be more than welcome at any time." He escorted her downstairs, then helped her into her coat and out of the house.

"Somebody," thought Vampirella as she walked away through the rain, "was watching me while I read that book. Was it Howard... or someone else?"

Sometimes Vampirella could read the thoughts of those near her. But she'd been unable to get any message while in the Jethryn. Still, she'd sensed eyes, hidden, watching.

The old library stood at the edge of town. Vampirella decided to walk back to her hotel. That would give her a better view of anyone who might attempt to follow her.

"That place has to be involved with the cult," she told herself. "And they're certain to be interested in me now. So let's see what kind of move they make."

Dr. Crowder's nose wrinkled. "No matter what hour of the day I arrive here, Howard, I find you wolfing down ice cream."

The librarian had been bent over a saucer of chocolate ice cream when the professor walked into his office. "Wolfing is hardly the word, sir. I might remind you that I grew up in Rhode Island, where a certain standard of manners was -"

"Yes, yes. I'm sure. Now I want to see the old lady."

"She's up in her parlor, as usual."

"Where is the loutish Lem?"

"Trailing the girl."

"Good. Let's hope he's capable of doing the proper sort of job."

"Oh, Lemuel will kill her. There's no fear of his not."

"I don't want her killed immediately. I want her brought back here, so that she can be questioned."

"Ah, I wasn't aware of that." Howard scratched at his face. "I'm not told everything that's on the agenda apparently. Well, whatever it is you want done, Lem will do. Mrs. Jethryn has no trouble getting him to follow orders."

"I'll go up to her." Crowder left the office and climbed the stairs which led to the top of the old house.

He heard the old woman laughing as he approached the door of her parlor.

"Naughty, puss, naughty," Mrs. Jethryn was saying.

"Cavorting with that dreadful animal again." Crowder pushed into the parlor.

The black cat was clawing at the old woman's blue-white face while she slapped at it.

"He's a much better friend to me than anyone else in my poor lonely existence," the old woman said. "I'd like to remind you that you must knock before barging into a lady's private chambers. Even those of a poor crippled old ruin such as myself."

"Yes, yes." Crowder dropped down into a chair and reached for his pipe and tobacco pouch. "I understand Lemuel is following my instructions as to the girl. What else can you tell me about her?"

"Being only one step from bedridden, I did not have the opportunity to see her myself." Mrs. Jethryn gave the cat a particularly violent slap and sent it spinning, yowling, off her lap to the floor. "From what that imbecile Howard tells me she is quite attractive." The old woman traced the fresh, bleeding scratches on her cheek.

"Your son will bring her back to us?"

"Yes, of course. He's to follow her. When she reaches the place where she's staying, he's to call. Then he's to grab the girl. I will send Howard to meet them with the car, and the girl will be brought here."

Crowder poked his pipe into the pouch. "Yes, that sounds all right," he said. "I'm most anxious to talk to her."

Mrs. Jethryn said, "Who can she be, I wonder?"

The girl who destroyed Ethan Todd."

"I'm aware of that. I meant, *what* is she? An agent for someone, a lone investigator..." She rubbed again at the cat scratches on her face. "You're certain she's not working with Van Helsing and his son?"

"Yes, I'm certain of that."

"They'll have to be taken care of, as well, those two. It won't do to have a pair of such prominent occult investigators snooping about."

Crowder snorted. "I think old Van Helsing's reputation has been considerably exaggerated and inflated by the press," he said. "Certainly the family has had a long tradition of investigating the so-called supernatural, dating back to the last century when their relative went after Count -"

"It's dangerous to underestimate any opponent."

"If Van Helsing and his son remain in town after the girl has been taken care of," promised Crowder, "I will see to it they do not bother us."

"Once you have questioned this girl... what then?"

"Then she will be sacrificed."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The rain clattered on the roof of the rented car. The tree branches whipped in the wind.

"Could be," suggested Adam, "that Professor Crowder is merely doing a little research at the Jethryn Memorial Library."

His Mind father was sitting stiffly in the passenger seat. "No," he said, "this place is connected with the cult."

They were parked across the dark street from the brownstone building, having followed Crowder from the campus.

"You mean they hold meetings here, Dad?"

The old man's black glasses were turned toward the library. "No... I don't get that sort of image... some of the people inside there... they're members of the Companions of Chaos... but they gather elsewhere

... I don't yet have... quite a clear picture of their meeting place."

What about the girl? Is she in there?"

Van Helsing shook his head. "No, she is not. Although she has been."

"You know, talking to Dr. Crowder I got the impression he hadn't heard of the girl we're looking for at all."

"An act on his part; he was dissembling."

Adam scratched at his chin. "You sure about that?"

"Not sure, no. But it's only logical. The old hypocrite wasn't going to come out and admit he knew of the girl."

"Maybe so, but I don't think this girl belongs to the cult at all," Adam persisted. "In fact, she seems to be out to destroy them. First at the sanitarium and now here."

"And perhaps she is not even responsible for turning your uncle into a vampire? Perhaps she's really with some government welfare agency and is traveling the length and breadth of the land doing good deeds."

"You forget, Dad, that I don't get those ESP messages the way you do," said his son. "Or, at least, nowhere near as often. So I have to operate on what I feel... and on what seems to make sense to me. I'm not saying she didn't probably have something to do with Uncle Kurt's death. Still, I don't think this case is as simple, as cut and dried, as you've been making it. She, whoever she is, may well -

"She is a vampire, a blood-drinking monster!" The blind man's hands knotted into fists. "We will find her... and destroy her!"

Adam said nothing more.

Vampirella stripped. She circled her hotel room once, gathered up a shower cap, and strode into the bathroom. The rain beat hard against all the windows.

No one had followed her from the Jethryn Memorial Library. She was certain of that. Even if she hadn't seen anyone, she would have sensed a stalker.

The long-legged, high-breasted girl turned on the shower. "What do they have in mind, then?" she asked herself. "They don't know who I am, have no idea where I am now. Don't tell me I have to go back to that moldy library to get them to act."

When she got the water needling just right, Vampirella stepped into the stall. The pebbled glass door fogged up.

"Damn it, I can't be wrong about that place," reflected the girl as she soaped her rounded stomach and then her thighs. "That guy Howard has to be tied in with the cult, meaning other people at the Jethryn are, too."

After finishing her shower and toweling dry, she put on a short terry robe and returned to the bedroom. It was time to take the blood-substitute serum.

Vampirella crossed to the bureau, pulled out a drawer, and reached in for the bottle of serum. The rain sounded much louder now.

And the room was colder. She glanced over her shoulder. One of the windows was open, the one that opened on the fire escape.

Standing with the small bottle clutched in her hand, she scanned the room. She still couldn't sense the presence of anyone in the room.

"But that window didn't open itself."

Then the closet burst open. A huge, thickset man charged across at her. "I don't have to kill you now," he said in his husky voice.

Vampirella narrowed her eyes. "Look at me, listen to me."

It had no effect on Lemuel. He kept coming. When he hit her, shoulder smashing into her breasts, the bottle of serum went spinning from her hand.

"Don't, damn you!" She made the mistake of grabbing for the fallen bottle. The cork had popped out, and the serum was spilling into the rug.

That gave Lem time to deliver a forceful blow to the side of her head. "Just got to knock you down," he explained. "Knock you out cold, carry you down to Mr. Howard."

Vampirella tried to strike at him, but the blow had dizzied her.

Lem hit her again, again, and twice more. "Knock you cold, wrap you in a blanket. Don't let nobody see me."

The girl collapsed to the floor, her face slamming into the rug inches from the spreading stain of the

spilled serum.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A fly had died in the peanut-butter jar. "Ah, would that I might come to so sweet an end," muttered Pendragon while fishing the dead fly out. He dropped it on the floor of his dressing room and poured fresh Scotch into the jar. The magician stared at himself in the dressing table mirror. After a moment he turned away, picked up the jar, and drank the Scotch down to within an inch of the bottom.

"What a sad picture," said the smiling man who'd come into the little room. "The once renowned Pen-dragon, now a pathetic shell, a pale reflection of his former glory."

"I was never a first-rate magician, Blackston," Pen-dragon said to the carnival owner. "But once (long, long ago) I was one of the best second-rate ones. Now I'm sunk down to being fifth-rate and working for you."

"Have another drink." The smiling Blackston came over and refilled the magician's jar.

"One of the things which keeps me here is -

Blackston slapped the jar out of Pendragon's hand. The liquor splashed the magician's face and stained the starched white front of his shirt. "Listen to me now, you guzzling old sot," Blackston said. "The next time a girl comes nosing around here, you tell me! Try to screw me up one more time and it'll be the end of you. No more free booze, no more room of your own. You'll be lower than a geek."

Taking a stained white towel from his makeup table, Pendragon wiped at his face and clothes. "What girl are you talking about? Can't a matinee idol have a visit from one of his fans without -"

"No more crap!" Blackston, smiling still, put his face inches from the magician's. "I'm talking about Eve Millerton. She was here yesterday searching for her poor missing uncle."

"Oh, so? She mentioned no such mission during our little chat."

"Yes, she did, you lying rummy!" Blackston caught hold of the shiny lapels of the magician's ancient tux. "She asked you about her Uncle Warren. You told her to go away quick, to have nothing to do with me or our little carnival."

Pendragon sighed. "Someone was eavesdropping, I take it."

"Major Archie," smiled Blackston. "He's a very useful little fellow, even though he only got around to telling me today. He got curious when he saw such a pretty young thing paying you a visit, so he climbed up onto your roof to listen."

"He's liable to catch a cold, climbing around in such inclement weather."

"I'd worry about my own health a good deal more, if I were you." Blackston let go of the magician's coat and shoved him against the table. "Good thing the major is essentially loyal, or I might never have found out about Miss Millerton's visit."

"Let her be, Blackston."



"Much too late in the game for you to get sentimental, my friend," the carnival owner told him.

"She's a nice girl, let her go."

"I'll let her go... right where her uncle went."

Pendragon stood up. "No, I won't let you do that."

Blackston's smile widened. "Won't you?" No, I..." Leaving the sentence unfinished, the magician sank back into his chair.

"That's right, Pendragon, you won't do anything except what I tell you," said Blackston. "I've sent Major Archie and some of the other freaks to hunt the girl down. They'll fetch her here, and the usual process will be carried out. The *usual* process."

Pendragon spread his knobby hands wide and let them fall to his knees. "Why can't you -

"You know why I can't. I made a bargain," said the smiling carnival manager. "You made a bargain, too, Pendragon, with me. It's much too late to get out of it." He watched the slumping magician for a few seconds. "Almost time for your next performance. You'll need time to change into some clean clothes. I'll leave you

... When the girl arrives, you'll be among the first to know." With a smile, he left the room.

It was quite a while before she was even aware of them. After having dinner at a small restaurant a few blocks from her hotel, Eve Millerton took a walk in the small park near the centre of Feldenville. The rain was little more than a drizzle now, and the park lamps glowed fuzzy gold.

The gently curving path Eve was following led to a wooden bridge which arched over a pond. The pair of white geese that had been gliding toward the shadowy underside of the bridge made awkward noises and took flight.

"Didn't mean to frighten you," the blonde said.

Across the bridge the path forked. Eve went to the right through a grove of trees. In a clearing beyond the woods was a still and silent merry-go-round.

For a moment Eve had the impression there were children yet at play there, sitting on the wooden horses, lounging in the swan boats. No, as she got closer she saw nothing but the carved wooden figures.

Yet somehow...

One of the rearing wooden horses creaked.

Had it moved?

Eve shook her head. The merry-go-round was closed. Maybe the hazy rain and the muffled light made things, ordinary things, look unusual.

Something in the brush up ahead!

The girl slowed. No, there was no sign of anything. Probably a squirrel, frightened away by her approach.

In large cities, of course, such as the one where she'd lived in the past three years, you didn't walk alone through a park at night. But in a town like Feldenville...

"Maybe it isn't such a simple, God-fearing little town after all," Eve thought. "The carnival... the carnival out there ten miles from town. That's no ordinary small-town carnival. The people out there, the ones who worked for the show, are..."

Well, at least there were other people in the park. That made Eve feel somewhat safer. Yes, there was a woman sitting on the bench over there, well-dressed judging from the back of her. Sitting there and talking to that man. Eve couldn't quite see his face.

As she got closer to the couple she got a better look at the man. "Oh, he..." There was hardly any flesh on his skull.

He turned his death's-head face to her and grinned pleasantly.

The woman turned, too. She had a full, red-brown beard. "Come along with us," she invited, smiling.

"No!" Eve started to run.

The bearded lady and the skeleton man watched her, but made no move to follow her.

"Carnival people," the girl said as she hurried along a tree-lined path. "Carnival people."

That noise in the brush again. Something was in there, keeping pace with her. Eve couldn't see anyone.

"Good evening," said a tiny voice. He'd stepped out of the bushes a few yards ahead of her. A little man not more than three feet high, wearing a dark suit, his hair slicked down and parted in the middle. "We've come to escort you to the carnival, Miss Millerton."

"I don't want to go there." She began to back away from the tiny man.

"Oh, but yes, you do," insisted Major Archie.

Eve spun on her heel, to run away from the major.

There in front of her stood the strongman, grinning.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Vampirella rubbed her fingers up and down along her thighs, repeatedly, harder and harder. She was in an underground room which smelled of damp and earth. She'd awakened here ten minutes earlier. She was thinking not of where she might be or who had her... she thought of blood. Of the blood she must have to live. The long, slender fingers inscribed red lines on her flesh.

Things had been different the past few days, because of the blood-substitute serum. Vampirella had started to believe... no use going over all that again.

"Let's try to keep calm." She felt cold, colder even than she had out on the white mountainside.

The only way to stop the craving was to get out of here.

"So where is here?" She bit her lip, striving to concentrate on the more immediate problem of escape, trying to forget the growing desire for blood.

Most likely this was some place in the Jethryn Memorial library. But how had they found her? Vampirella had been certain no one had followed her from the library to her hotel.

"That big guy who grabbed me," she said to herself. "I didn't sense him at all. I should have got some kind of feeling. It's almost as though he was dead and... Hey! He's dead. That's why I didn't tumble to his following me. The cult did that, brought him back after he died."

Vampirella stood up and began to circle the room. Walls of yellowish brick, much smeared with black mildew. The only door was a thick one made of heavy timbers.

"I've got to get out of here. Got to get out soon." She hugged herself, arms under her breasts.

It kept getting worse, the absolute need for blood. She had to have it, had to.

Vampirella became aware of a sound. Someone was unlocking the door.

Adam remained a moment longer in the thick brush beside the driveway. Then he made his way, unobtrusively, back to the car where his blind father sat waiting.

"What did you learn?" Van Helsing asked as Adam slid in beside him.

"Something's going on," replied Adam. "When the car came back, there was a second guy in it, big hulking lad. And they had a bundle. Large bundle, which I suspect is a human being wrapped up in a blanket."

"It's... it's the girl," said the blind man slowly, "the girl we want."

"In that case she's definitely not one of them," said Adam. "I don't imagine they bring full-fledged members of the cult here trussed up in blankets."

"Perhaps not..." said Van Helsing. "There is... something about the big man... I'm getting a... picture of him... He's the son of the widow Jethryn... and... he's dead."

"Appeared pretty lively not ten minutes ago."

"He's been dead for quite some time. They have been able to reanimate the body."

"A powerful bunch, these Companions of Chaos."

The old man said, "I want that girl. She must not elude us again."

"Okay. Do we go in now?"

"We wait."

"For what?"

"I'm not," said Van Helsing, "certain yet."

Howard held a gun aimed at Vampirella, "You probably weren't expecting to visit us again so soon, miss," he said.

He was alone, a dimly lit corridor behind him.

"I'd like you to come along with me now. They wish to talk to you upstairs."

"Look at me, Howard." Vampirella's eyes glowed. "Listen to what I tell you."

The gaunt librarian could not disobey. He stared into her eyes. "Yes... I will listen."

"You will come in here."

"Yes... miss." He crossed the threshold.

"Where are we?"

"This is the sub-basement of the Jethryn."

"Down the corridor and through that door I can see from here," said Vampirella. "How do I get out of here after that?"

"Climb a stairway and you're in the upper hallway, miss. Then you simply walk out of the front door."

"Anything locked between here and there?"

"The front door is locked, but to open it you have merely to turn the latch."

"All right. You stay right here. I'll be leaving." She plucked the revolver from his hand and dropped it into the pocket of the terry robe which was her only garment.

Vampirella hesitated. Here was a source of blood, blood which she so badly needed.

No, she'd get out of this place. There were other bottles of the blood-substitute serum back in her hotel room. Once she reached there, she'd be all right. She could hold out until then.

Closing the hypnotized librarian into the cell which had been hers, the long-legged girl made her way down the corridor.

She was halfway up the stairway to the ground floor when the door above her opened. Framed by light was the figure of Dr. Crowder.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Crowder started to reach inside his jacket. "You're not going -

Vampirella had come charging up the stairs, hitting him in the chest with her shoulder and in the stomach with her elbow.

The professor toppled backward, into the brown hallway. His pouch flew from a side pocket, scattering flecks of tobacco. "Stop her, Lem!"

The girl leaped over his body. Landing wide-legged on the rug, Vampirella glanced toward the front door. "Him again."

The large Lemuel was between her and the way out. "I got to stop you," he announced.

Crowder was sitting up. Snarling, he made a grab for Vampirella's bare leg.

She kicked him in the side of the head, eluded his grasp, and started for the front door. "Out of the way," she told Lemuel, showing him the .38 revolver she'd taken from Howard downstairs. "Open the door, or I'll have to use this."

"Won't matter none." He kept coming down the hall in her direction. "Bullets can't do nothing but make holes."

"Stop now, stay there!"

The big man ignored the command.

Vampirella pulled the trigger. Then she fired the gun twice more.

Other than causing Lemuel to bounce slightly when they ripped into him, the slugs had no effect. "See? Can't nothing kill me no more."

Vampirella turned in time to dodge Dr. Crowder. He'd gotten to his feet and was stalking nearer, reaching again for his own gun. She sidestepped, shoved the professor into the lumbering Lemuel, and ran for the back stairs.

She bounded upstairs. As she reached the landing a door on her left swung open.

Old Mrs. Jethryn came rolling out. One gnarled hand gripped the arm of the ancient wheelchair; the other held a .32 pistol. "That will be quite enough roughness," said Mrs. Jethryn. "Stop right where you are, miss."

Vampirella ran away from the wheelchair, heading for another stairway.

The gun in the old woman's hand went off.

A large vase a foot to the left of Vampirella exploded into sea-blue shards.

Catching the newel post, Vampirella swung up onto the staircase to the next level. She ran up. There was a door at the top. She took hold of the knob and turned it. The door was locked.

From the landing below came the sound of the wheelchair rolling closer.

Stepping back, Vampirella aimed the gun at the lock. "This always works on television," she said to

herself. "Let's hope real life is the same."

She fired. The bullet missed the lock, but tore a chunk of wood panel out of the door.

Vampirella fired again; the lock was destroyed.

She hit the door and went stumbling out into the rain at the instant Mrs. Jethryn shot at her from below.

She found herself on the roof of the old house. The hazy rain was falling all around.

"At least the old girl won't be able to follow me up here... but the lumbering Lem and his pipe-smoking friend sure will."

There was a chimney rising up a few feet away. Nothing else out here on the flat roof. The black tar paper was shredded and torn in many places, and rain water had collected in the depressed spots.

Vampirella had to get away from here, back to the hotel. Much longer without the blood substitute and...

She slipped out of the robe and stood naked in the rain.

"Now we'll..." began Crowder as he came lunging out onto the roof. When he realized what he was seeing, he halted.

The naked girl seemed to flicker, to blend with the rain. Then she was, absolutely, gone. Where she had stood a large black bat hovered in the air.

"I can get her," offered Lemuel, who'd just joined Dr. Crowder on the roof.

The awed professor said nothing.

The big man went trotting across the rain-swept roof. He made an attempt to capture the bat.

The bat's wings flapped as it rose higher.

Lemuel jumped to try and catch it.

The black bat started to fly away from the rooftop, off into the night.

Lemuel tried again. He missed, and the force of his attempt carried him completely over the edge of the roof. He fell the three storeys down to the driveway without crying out at all. There was no sound until he hit the slick asphalt with-a tremendous smash.

"That's gunfire inside the place," Adam had said moments earlier.

"Yes," said his father. "The girl is trying to escape; they're trying to stop her."

Adam opened the car door. "We don't want them killing her!"

Old Van Helsing caught his arm. "Wait."

"No, Dad, I'm not going to sit by while -"

"She's going up toward the roof," said the blind man. "There'll be a showdown there, perhaps."

Adam was out of the car, having pulled free of his father's restraining hand. "I can get up there by way of that fire escape." Saying no more, he went running across the rainy night street.

He heard, as he ran, more gunshots inside the old mansion, shouting and cursing.

Adam knew he wasn't being very logical. The destruction of the girl, that was supposed to be something he wanted, too. She was a vampire, wasn't she? She'd destroyed his uncle. She, therefore, must be destroyed.

But somehow...

He leaped, got the fire escape ladder, and boosted himself up. As Adam climbed up the ivy-smearred side of the brownstone building he became aware of sounds from the rooftop of the place. Footsteps, running. Someone shouting in a rough voice.

And then something huge and black went plummeting past.

"Good Christ!" Halfway up the side of the building, holding onto the ladder with one hand, Adam looked down. It was a man who'd fallen. He lay on the driveway, broken.

It didn't seem to be Crowder. "No, it's that big guy I saw a while ago. What the hell happened up there?"

Adam went on up the ladder. He stopped at the edge of the roof, listening. Only silence up there now. He pulled himself over.

There was no one on the roof. A door to the inside of the house hung half open, and light spilled out on the slick black roof.

Slowly, alert, Adam walked over to the open door. He was a few feet from it when he heard gunshots again.

Gunshots and a terrible voice crying out. "I loved him, you idiot! He was my firstborn, the only one I really loved!"

"He was dead already, you mindless crone! He's been dead for five years... If we hadn't performed the -"

Two more shots. Crowder screamed.

"All broken to pieces," cried the voice of the vengeful old woman. "My poor boy, you let him fall. Idiot! Fool! He was all I had, all I had to stand between me and the dreadful loneliness of old age. Now he's all smashed beyond repair."

The professor's voice was dying, fading. "He's not... important... We live for... Chaos... for the Companions... of... Chaos... Your only loyalty..." That was all he ever said.

The gun sounded again, and yet again. She was apparently emptying it into the dead body of Dr. Crowder.

When he heard the weapon click, Adam took a deep breath and started down the stairs into the mansion.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

An inch less and Lieutenant Zuber wouldn't have been tall enough to be a policeman at all. He hung up the telephone now in the office of the Jethryn Memorial Library and turned to face the two Van Helsing. "Okay," he told them, "you check out all right."

It was nearly three a.m., raining still. Several other Feldenville police and medical men were wandering through the old mansion.

"I haven't handled too many supernatural cases," admitted the small greying Zuber. "Suppose you tell me what you think has been going on here."

Old Van Helsing was resting in an armchair. He looked very tired. "Adam, why don't you give the lieutenant some of the details."

After looking down at his father with some concern, Adam said, "We're - as we explained and as you've apparently been able to confirm -"

"By waking up a few grouchy people."

"Dad and I are occult investigators," continued Adam. "We came to Feldenville to look into the possibility that a cult was flourishing here."

"Some kind of nutty group?"

After a few thoughtful seconds Adam replied, "You might put it that way, Lieutenant Zuber. This particular group is called the Companions of Chaos... To simplify, they're something akin to devil worshippers."

"Old Mrs. Jethryn was one of 'em?"

"That seems likely. Perhaps you can get her to tell you a -"

"Nope, she's screwier than a Fig Newton. According to Doc Klein, she's likely to stay that way. Babbling. Son of a shame. The Jethryns were a pretty big family hereabouts once." The police lieutenant walked to one of the windows. "Professor Crowder... was he one of these Chaos nuts, too?"

"We suspect he was."

"Saw him give a talk at a J.C. luncheon one time. Sounded like a pretty nice guy, and he wasn't nervous at all. Me, I get up in front of an audience and my knees... well, back to this mess," said Lieutenant Zuber, watching the rain. "I got a few other problems. For instance, I got this pansy Howard, and he's in some kind of trance. Who did that to him?"

Van Helsing shook his head, very briefly, at his son.



"Can't explain that, Lieutenant," said Adam at the policeman's back. "Could be shock. They'll be able to tell you more at the hospital, I imagine."

"If he was in shock about everybody kicking off, how'd he get down into the basement in that little room where my men found him?"

Adam shrugged.

Lieutenant Zuber crossed to perch on the edge of the desk. "You say the old lady shot Crowder because she blamed him for Lem's nose dive off the roof?"

"Remember, Lieutenant, I didn't actually see her shoot him. I heard her accusations, and I heard shots."

"Yeah, okay." Zuber rubbed his small hands together. "Doc Klein told me something funny about Lem. I don't think we're going to mention it at the inquest." He rubbed his palms together a few more times. "Doc Klein says Lem's body looks like the body of somebody who's been dead lots longer than a couple hours. How about that? On top of which he's got bullet holes in him, bullet holes that made wounds that didn't bleed at all."

"Beyond me," said Adam innocently. "Maybe when Dr. Klein gets around to doing an autopsy -

"Yeah, maybe," said Zuber. "Okay, I guess you can take off now. Your old man looks kind of bushed."

"All right, Lieutenant." Adam helped his father to his feet. "You know where to reach us."

"Yeah, and I want to brief you before you say anything at the inquest. This is one case where we don't want the public to get the whole truth and nothing but."

Out in the wet morning Adam asked his father, "Something wrong?"

"I feel very weary," answered Van Helsing. "But I can't rest... not until that girl is run to ground."

At dawn Adam, alone, was back in the neighborhood of the Jethryn Memorial Library. He was approaching the place from the rear, through an overgrown lot. The police investigation was over, but Lieutenant Zuber had left a man to watch the front of the house.

The window which Adam had managed to unlock before calling the police last night was still unlocked. He eased it up and climbed into the mansion from the weedy back garden. Old Van Helsing was certain a copy of *The Crimson Chronicles* existed in the Jethryn house. Adam had come to find it, find it and destroy it.

There was a shadowy silence which filled the huge old house. Adam stood just inside the window, watchful. His father had seen, in his extra-sensory vision, a copy of the ancient book somewhere on the second floor of the Jethryn mansion. That was where Adam would begin his search.

"Hope there's nothing seriously wrong with Dad," he thought as he cautiously climbed the stairs to the second floor. "He's never been so down before, so worn out. This hunt for the girl... obsession, really... it's putting a terrific strain on him."

Creak!

That was from upstairs. Someone was on the second floor, moving very carefully.

The floor boards creaked once more.

"Came from behind this door here." Adam halted in front of the door in question.

It wasn't one of Zuber's men. They'd have no reason to tread so lightly.

Taking hold of the doorknob, Adam began to turn it. The door wasn't locked. He suddenly pushed it open.

There was a dark-haired girl in the room. Very pretty, wearing a belted raincoat. "We're probably after the same thing," she said. "I didn't have a chance to get it earlier." She was holding a copy of a very old book.

Adam, without even seeing the title, knew it was *The Crimson Chronicles*. "You must be the girl we're looking for," he said. "I'd like to talk to -"

"Not now," said Vampirella. Her eyes narrowed and glowed. "Now you will step aside and allow me to leave."

Adam wanted to stop the girl, to keep her here. He was going to say something about it, but a drowsiness hit him. He hadn't had much sleep, but he shouldn't pass out on his feet like this.

Adam shook his head and blinked. There, he was okay now. "You can't simply..." The room was empty.

No pretty raven-haired girl, no copy of *The Crimson Chronicles*.

"But I only lost a few seconds."

He checked his wristwatch. An hour had passed since he'd climbed the stairs to this room.

"Damn," he said.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

None of them moved.

live Millerton was in the middle of them, tied to a straightback wooden chair. They stood in a circle around her, frozen in attitudes of menace. They were dusty, tattered, and a few had arms or legs missing. Jack the Ripper had lost his slashing knife; Dillinger's right hand was gone; Bluebeard's head lay on the platform between his legs.

"*Wax Museum* & fread the torn banner tacked to the far wall. Directly over the girl's head hung a 60-watt bulb with a green shade. The rain was heavy again, or at least it sounded that way on the metal roof of this ruined wax museum.

She'd been brought back to the carnival, obviously. Eve remembered the giant man grabbing her there in the park. Then someone else had hit her. That was... when? Hours ago? It had been hours, yes. Must be

nearly morning now.

"*Whatare* they going to do with me?"

Something had happened to her uncle here at the carnival. Because she started looking for him, they'd come after her.

Crash!

Napoleon had fallen from his throne. Toppled to the dirty wooden floor, his head smashed into tinted bits.

Eve swallowed, eyes turned to the spot where the wax emperor had sat.

Over there! Al Capone had turned and was facing her.

"Terrible things," whispered a voice in the darkness beyond the spill of the overhead bulb. "Terrible things are going to happen to you."

Swish!

A guillotine had come slicing down, beheading a kneeling French aristocrat. The wax head missed the waiting basket. It came rolling along the floor toward Eve and cracked against her leg. The head split in half.

"Terrible, terrible things..."

Eve turned her head slowly, trying to see who was there in the shadows.

"Terrible things... unless..."

The voice was much closer. A hand touched her back.

The girl twisted her head, but saw no one behind her.

"Unless..."

Eve recognized the voice now. It was the midget. Major Archie, that was his name.

Tiny fingers, warm and moist, rubbed at her arm. "I might," whispered the major, "help you."

"Help me to get out of here?"

Major Archie's little hand jumped into the girl's lap and began stroking at the inner side of her thigh. "He's going to do terrible things to you," he said. "And when he's through, he's going to send you... send you where your uncle went."

Controlling herself, the girl said, "Where is that?"

"You don't want to know that." The little man eased his fingertips down to the hem of her skirt. "It's a place... once you go there, there's no coming back. I wouldn't want that to happen to you." The tiny

fingers crawled up under Eve's dress.

"All right, then help me get out of this place."

"Yes, I'll do that," promised the midget. "First, though, you have to be nice to me. You know what I mean? Nice to me, very nice."

"You vicious little bastard!" Blackston appeared out of the darkness, smiling. He gripped Major Archie's little shoulders and jerked him away from Eve. "You stunted little quisling!" With a chuckle, the carnival owner threw the midget away from him.

Major Archie howled as he sailed through the air. He smashed into Pretty Boy Floyd and knocked the desperado's machine gun from his hands. The wax figure and the midget fell together from the platform. Pretty Boy Floyd broke into large chunks. Major Archie hit the floor hard, groaned, and passed out.

"He's a rotten little son of a bitch," remarked Blackston, smiling at Eve. "I hope you'll forgive me for not stopping him sooner."

The girl said nothing.

"There are some things I want to ask you, Miss Millerton," Blackston said. He squatted on the floor next to her chair. "We'll have a nice long private talk now, if you don't mind."

On the floor Major Archie moaned, blood bubbling at his lips.

Pendragon awakened. He'd fallen asleep, tangled in his cloak, on the warped floor of his dressing room. Blinking, he rubbed his furry tongue along his cracked lips. "The chief trouble with this particular brand of oblivion," he muttered, "is that it never lasts long enough." Yawning, rubbing the grit from the corners of his eyes, the magician untangled himself and sat up.

The empty peanut-butter jar lay on its side nearby. He rescued it, tottered to his feet, and located the Scotch bottle.

"For my first trick of the day," he said, pouring the last of the liquor into the jar, "I will perform my famed vanishing booze illusion." Grimacing, he swallowed the Scotch down in one long gulp.

Shivering, Pendragon set the jar down on his makeup table. He avoided looking into the mirror.

A girl screamed.

"None of your business," he cautioned himself.

The scream had come from quite near. And the magician had a fair idea of who it had been.

"Blackston's got Eve Millerton." Pendragon opened the door of his dressing room and was met by the rainy dawn. "He's going to torture her until he's satisfied and then turn her over to..."

It was only a few inches down to the ground outside, but he felt as though that step meant a drop of thousands of feet. Thousands of feet into a black pit.

Pendragon stood on the threshold for a long time.

The girl didn't scream again.

Finally he closed the door, went back, and sat at his makeup table. He still didn't look in the mirror.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was an odd sort of bookmark. Vampirella was fairly certain it had not been between the pages of *The Crimson Chronicles* when she'd looked through the book on her first visit to the Jethryn Memorial Library. A folded handbill it was, advertising Blackston's Mammoth Carnival. Several mystical signs were scrawled in pencil in the margins. Sitting in her hotel room with the sheet of paper in her hand, Vampirella got the feeling she should visit the carnival. Somehow it was linked with the Companions of Chaos.

The cult was, apparently, finished here in Feldenville. Dr. Crowder was dead, Mrs. Jethryn was undoubtedly going to be locked up for life, and her son was dead for good this time. It wasn't until Vampirella had heard a radio news account, much laundered, that she'd learned the names of all the people she had encountered at the old mansion.

Vampirella had also learned the name of the young man she'd met in the library. Adam Van Helsing. His name was vaguely familiar to her. He was attractive and... But she had no time for thoughts like that. She was determined to destroy the rest of the Cult of Chaos.

The old man removed his dark glasses and rubbed at the deep half-moons beneath his sunken eyes. "We're so close, Adam," he said in a very tired voice. "I hate to have to give up now." He was slumped in a chair in their hotel room.

"You're worn out. Resting for a day or two isn't giving up."

"But the girl."

"It's my fault, not yours, she got away from me at the Jethryn place."

"She's a very dangerous adversary." The old man fitted the glasses back over his sightless eyes. "Powerful."

Adam said, "I was a bit groggy by the time I got back to the library. That may be why she had such an easy time of hypnotizing me."

Van Helsing brought one hand up to press against his pale forehead. "I... see her," he said. "I... see her... at... yes, at a carnival."

"Carnival?"

"That's where she'll be tonight."

Crossing to the wastebasket, Adam retrieved the morning paper. "Saw something about a carnival in here." He began going through the second section of the newspaper. "Yeah, here we go. Blackston's Mammoth Carnival. It's set up near here."

"Blackston... Blackston..." Van Helsing massaged his forehead. "He's... dangerous."

"How so?"

"Blackston's involved with the cult. . . and. . ." The blind man grimaced. "I see. . . Asmodeus. . . one of the Seven Servants of Chaos. . . He and Blackston. . ." Van Helsing shook his head. "Blurred. . . everything is blurred."

Adam tossed the paper back into the waste-basket. "I'll be cautious when I check his carnival out."

"Perhaps you ought to wait, wait until I'm up to accompanying you."

"I can handle it, Dad. And if the girl's going to be there tonight, then I ought to be there."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Van Helsing. "And yet. . ."

The day ended as Vampirella entered the carnival grounds. Although it was not raining, the afternoon sky had been a thick grey. The sky now swiftly turned to black. Lights came on all across the carnival, but the blackness of dusk dominated the walkways and the concessions.

Vampirella carried a paper-wrapped parcel. It was the copy of *The Crimson Chronicles* she'd taken from the Jethryn. There were only a few patrons at Blackston's Mammoth Carnival; half the booths were shut up.

A 600-pound woman sat in a folding chair on the platform in front of the freak show. She was smoking a pink cigarette, reading a month-old copy of *Variety*. "Thrills and chills inside, dear," she said to the approaching Vampirella.

The dark-haired girl seated herself on the edge of the platform and crossed her long legs. "How are the chances of getting a job with this outfit?"

The fat lady studied her. "You're okay on looks, and you seem to have a fair set of knockers," she said. "You can do better than this."

"Maybe, but I got stranded in Feldenville. I was working with a team of acrobats who -"

"You can do better than this, dear." The fat lady waved her away and resumed her reading and smoking.

Sighing, Vampirella continued on her way. The job-hunting excuse seemed as good a way as any to cover her investigating around the carnival grounds.

"You should of been around six-seven years ago," the taffy shop man told her when she asked him about a job. "We had us a whole troupe of dancing girls then. Supposed to be the actual wives of an Eastern potentate. Eastern potentates always got a lot of wives, you know. But that was then, now we ain't hiring anybody." He looked at her thoughtfully for a few seconds. "Although it might not hurt to talk to Blackston."

"Yes, I may as well. Where can I find him?"

"He's over at. . . Wait a sec. This old rummy going by can show you." The taffy man hollered, "Hey, Pendragon!"

The magician had been walking by, a bit unsteadily. He stopped, eyebrows arching. "Ah, the voice of an

adoring public calling for me," he said. "What is it, Pinky?"

"This girl is looking for a job. I figure Blackston will maybe want to talk to her, huh?"

Entering the narrow shop, Pendragon caught hold of Vampirella's hand and brought it to his lips. "A pleasure to be of service to you, my dear," he said. "I am the Great Pendragon, famed sorcerer and world-renowned master of the magic arts." He urged her toward the exit. "As a matter of fact, I myself have been toying with the notion of adding an assistant to my awesome act."

"You could use somebody to hold you up," said the taffy man as the magician escorted Vampirella out of his shop.

"Yes, indeed," continued Pendragon, "it would be an excellent opportunity for a young lady wishing to rise in the show business, to sit at the feet of a master and learn all the dark and arcane..." They were now in front of a boarded-up shooting gallery. "Get away from here. Right now! I won't be responsible for another... Never mind. You don't want to see Blackston. Run, depart, flee!"

"Look, Mr. Pendragon, I really need a job. I don't know what kind of dodge you're working, telling me you can use me and then giving me some line about -

"I can't explain. Suffice it to say this is not a safe place for you." The magician gave her a light shove. "Now get thee hence, dear girl."

The shove caused the parcel to fall from Vampirella's grasp.

Pendragon stooped to pick it from the dirt. Some of the wrapping had torn away and he saw part of the cover as he picked up the book. "Great God," he said, staring at her. "What are you doing with

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hands in pockets, Adam strolled the carnival grounds. "A gloomy place," he thought as he passed the faded concessions. There weren't more than a dozen customers tonight, and none of them looked particularly happy.

His father had had no other premonitions, no more extrasensory hunches about Blackston's carnival and the girl they were searching for.

"Got some fairly mixed feelings about her," Adam admitted to himself. "I know how Dad feels about her, but having seen her... She's really an incredibly attractive girl."

Not paying much attention to where he was going, Adam had wandered into a completely deserted sector of the carnival. No lights here at all, no signs of life.

Suddenly a tiny man popped out of a spill of shadows and went scurrying across the night street and into a darkened building. He hadn't noticed Adam some hundred yards away from him.

"Wonder what's in there. And why a guy who obviously works for the carnival has to be so furtive about going in." Adam approached the building the midget had darted into.

The large wooden sign hanging over the entrance announced *'Madame Malley's Wax Museum! Housing the Most Famous Fiends and Murderers of History!'*

Easing into the alley alongside the wax museum, Adam found a window he could look through. At first he saw only darkness. Then a cigarette lighter blossomed, illuminating the tiny man. He was moving, hunched and grinning, toward a figure at the centre of the museum.

A girl... and not a wax figure after all. A live girl, tied to a chair. Welts on her cheeks, jagged red marks on her bare arms.

"I told you, "told you," the midget was saying to the girl. Terrible things, and worse to come."

"Go away," she said in a weak voice.

"Major Archie is your friend. Your only friend. If you're nice to Major Archie, he can help you." The major stopped directly in front of the bound girl. "You can see how tough I am. Not afraid of Blackston, not afraid of... worse things."

Adam left the window and went silently around to the front of the decaying museum. He pushed at the door, which opened soundlessly.

Major Archie was circling the girl in the chair, his flickering lighter held close to her battered face. "When he's through with you," he piped, "then awful, awful things are going to happen to you. Worse than anything so far. There's still time to be nice to me, still time to be nice to Major Archie. Let me... oof."

Strong hands jerked the midget up off the floor. A fist jabbed his tiny chin. Major Archie passed out.

Adam set the midget to rest on a platform next to a broken Mad Dog Coll. "I'm Adam Van Helsing," he said to Eve. "I'll get you out of here."

"Are you... the police?"

"Not exactly." With his pocketknife Adam went to work on the ropes which held her. "But I am investigating Blackston and his carnival."

"Blackston... he's been... torturing me... Asking me questions... I didn't think it would... ever stop..."

Gently he rubbed at her long-bound wrists. Dropping to one knee, Adam cut the ropes away from her ankles and rubbed the circulation back into them. "Any idea what Blackston is up to?"

Eve shook her head. "It doesn't... doesn't all make sense," she said.

"Rest a minute." He used the lengths of cut rope to truss up the midget. He gagged the major with his own necktie. "Okay, that'll keep him quiet for a while. Think you can walk?"

To get away from here, yes." She took the hand Adam held out to her and got to her feet. "Feel as though... I've been in that chair for... days."

"What did Blackston want you to tell him?"

"It's about my uncle, Warren Millerton," the girl explained as Adam helped her walk slowly across the museum. "He disappeared on a visit to this carnival. I was trying to find out something about it."



"Did Blackston admit he knew what'd happened to your uncle?"

"He hinted that he did... and that the same thing would happen to me... when he was through with me... I'm not clear about all of it," Eve said. "It has something to do with the Mirror maze... I don't quite understand why."

Nodding, Adam said, "I'll check out the mirror maze, after I get you away from here. I parked my car about a quarter-mile from here. I'll get you there and come back."

"You shouldn't stay here by yourself," she warned. "The people here, they're all... evil. That's an old-fashioned word, I know, but it fits here. Blackston, Major Archie, the strongman..." She shivered.

Pendragon's fingers were completely steady as he tore the wrapping from the copy of *The Crimson Chronicles* which Vampirella had brought with her. "I had hoped I would never see this foul volume again in this life," he said to her.

They had come into the magician's dressing room, and the dark-haired girl was standing near the doorway. "You've seen a copy of this book before?"

"Ah, yes (much to my sorrow), I have indeed." Pendragon placed the book on his makeup table and leaned over it with his hands gripping the table edges.

This is not the same copy, for that one was destroyed. I would venture to guess that this must be the copy which resided in the late, lamented Jethryn Memorial Library."

"Yes, it is."

The magician turned to study her. "The Companions of Chaos have not fared too well of late," he said. "Would you have anything to do with their misfortunes?"

Vampirella nodded. "Yes. I have made a promise," she told him. "A promise that I will destroy the cult."

Lowering himself into his chair, Pendragon said, "Then it's safe to deduce that you are not a simple unemployed chorus girl. Who are you?"

"My name is Vampirella," Vampirella said. "Now, tell me what you know about *The Crimson Chronicles*, about the Companions of Chaos."

"I fear, my dear girl, I know far too much about both topics." Absently he picked up the jar and filled it with Scotch. "Although I was never as world-renowned as I sometimes claim when the impulse toward self-promotion seizes me, I was, nonetheless, relatively successful in my chosen field." He paused to sip Scotch. "A series of dire and unfortunate events (or so they seemed at the time), climaxed by a none too comforting marriage, led me to the oft-tried ritual of attempting to drown my sorrows. This, eventually, caused me to slip down the ladder of life somewhat, with the result that ten years ago I found myself working in this bedraggled carnival of Blackston's." He sipped more Scotch. "Be patient, dear child, this rambling preamble is a necessary part of my narrative. I learned, soon after signing on, that Blackston's Mammoth Carnival was in worse shape than I was. It was, in point of fact, on the verge of complete and utter collapse. Blackston was desperate, willing to try anything to keep the carnival together. It was then (alas) he stumbled onto a copy of *The Crimson Chronicles*."

"How'd he happen to do that?"

After refilling his jar the magician said, "Alas, dear child, it was chiefly my fault. In an out-of-the-way bookshop in an out-of-the-way town we were playing in I purchased an unsorted crate of allegedly occult books. I had little or no belief in the darker arts then. My intention was simply to make use of the most mystical and mysterious-seeming tomes in my performance, to use them as props for a particular illusion I was contemplating. Among those books (one more, alas, won't be inappropriate) was a copy of *The Crimson Chronicles*. I perused it, noting the fact that it "was not set in type but done by hand in some remote time. Even so, I paid its spells and incantations little heed. With the desperate Blackston, however, it was another story. He noticed the book, took it, and became convinced that all which was promised within its foul pages was true. He felt all his problems could be solved if he but mastered the knowledge contained in its ancient words. And that is what he set out to do."

"I don't know what kind of bargain your Blackston struck with the servants of Chaos," said Vampirella, "but this carnival still looks as though it's one jump ahead of its creditors and on the brink of complete collapse."

The magician's head bobbed up and down. "Outwardly things have changed very little. The carnival has remained, as we roam the country, exactly as it was a decade ago when Blackston first delved into the pages of *The Crimson Chronicles*." He took a large gulp of Scotch. "Allow me to continue my account, my dear, and most, if not all, of your questions will be answered. Blackston, as I say, became obsessed with the belief that the book was gospel (excuse the expression) truth. Finally he persuaded most of the others in our ill-assorted company to go along with him, to commit themselves to the Cult of Chaos."

"That included you?"

"Unfortunately, yes. The fateful night, after our few customers had straggled homeward, I was in a state bordering on stupefaction. Perhaps I sensed what was coming and took extra measures to fortify myself. Be that as it may, when Blackston suggested we attempt to summon up the most powerful servant of Chaos, one Asmodeus by name, I made no protest." The magician's voice had grown dry and raspy. He poured more Scotch down his throat. "We gathered in the freak tent -myself, Major Archie, Jolly Jill the Fat Lady, Tomo the Strongman, and all the rest. Blackston began the incantations, illuminated by the light of the torches which several of us held. He pleaded with mighty Chaos and his Seven Servants to save us from ruin, to keep the carnival going, to keep us all out of debt and eating and working. Minutes passed while the reek of the cheap incense we were burning in two urns filled the tent. Then... ah, yes, I can see it yet. A shape began to form high above us, up in the shadows at the top of the tent. A palpitating shape, blacker than the blackest of shadows, blacker than the deepest of starless nights. A hideous shape, a gigantic caricature of the human form, a thing both male and female, hovering above us. As we stared, a grotesque and distorted hand began to reach down from up there, to stretch toward the droning Blackston. I wouldn't recommend it as a universal cure, but that beginning glimpse of Asmodeus sobered me completely. All I could think of was halting this dreadful ritual, stopping it from continuing a moment longer. I rushed forward, snatched *The Crimson Chronicles* from Blackston's hands, and put the torch to it. But I was seconds too late; those horrible fingers of the demon had touched him. As the book began to burn, a tremendous wind shook the tent and then the black, black shape was gone. I glanced toward Blackston and caught him smiling directly at me. "Too late," he said in a voice I had never heard before, "too late. The bargain is struck." Pendragon sank lower in his chair.

After a silence Vampirella asked, "What is the bargain?"

"We all continue with the carnival, and our needs are looked after," answered the magician. "I've never been exactly certain how it comes about, but Blackston always has sufficient money to pay our wages and to buy whatever supplies we need. Of course, none of us can leave this carnival... ever. Grimaldi the

Clown tried that."

"What happened to him?"

"The same thing which will happen to any of us should we attempt to desert the show. Blackston fed him to the mirrors."

"Mirrors?"

"That's the other side of the bargain. What Asmodeus gets for what he gives. He keeps the carnival going, and Blackston sends victims over to him... over to the Nethervoid. Sends them body and soul, and they never return."

"What do the mirrors have to do with it?"

"They're in the Mirror Maze. You'll note it's the only part of our sorry carnival which isn't in a state of decay. Blackston runs it, and he has an almost unfailing instinct for spotting people who are alone, people without close friends or family to come looking for them after they disappear. When such a person enters the maze, he sees not distorted images of himself in the multitude of mirrors - rather he views some person or moment from out of his past. That is what lures him through the mirror... and into the Nethervoid. It's been going on for years, and I'm too weak to stop it."

"I'll stop it," promised Vampirella.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

There was no one in front of the Mirror Maze as Adam approached, no barker, no ticket taker. The wild laughter poured out of the entrance, to go spilling across the grey night. After surveying the front of the place, the dark-haired young man went inside. At first the laughter was everywhere, echoing up under the beams of the dark ceiling, bouncing off the intricacy of mirrors. Then it stopped.

The tall mirrors immediately around Adam were tarnished and streaked with yellow. "Can't even see yourself in these," he said, moving slowly along a twisting passageway.

All at once a mirror on his left began to glow. Adam stopped to look into it. His image did not look back out at him. Instead, there was a slender auburn-haired girl in a thin summer dress. It was autumn, afternoon, where she was, on a grassy hillside among golden-leaved trees. Ten years ago he'd known the girl, during his second year in college. He'd meant to see more of her, but she'd gone home on a Christmas vacation and never come back. He'd never seen her since. There were always things like that in your life, people you'd wanted to be friends with, girls you'd wanted to sleep with and somehow... somehow it never happened. Then one day, if you ever thought of it again, five years had passed, or ten. Too late, much too late.

Adam hadn't felt, until he came into this maze, that he especially missed this girl. Yet now, seeing her there on that warm, clear hillside, he realized he did have regrets about never having seen her again, never bothering to find out why she hadn't come back.

There was an expression on her pretty face which indicated she understood all that. She smiled at him and motioned him to join her.

Be pleasant to see her again after all these -

"No!" Adam steadied himself.

Whatever he did, he must not try to join the girl on the other side of the mirror. He sensed that very strongly. Adam turned his back on her smiling, beckoning image.

"Keep on walking," he told himself.

Soon another dingy mirror started to glow. Adam refrained from looking toward the glow.

"Adam!" An anxious woman's voice called to him.

He felt suddenly cold, and suddenly twelve years old. Very slowly he turned.

There she was, his mother. Fifteen years dead, buried in the rocky New England hills. But there she was, separated from him by only a thin wall of glass. She was standing at the window of that chalet, that terrible place.

Adam knew what was going to come now, but he could not turn away. His mother, still slender and blonde, not quite thirty-four. At the window of the chalet where they were spending their Balkan vacation. His father hadn't returned yet from the university where he was doing research. Even on vacation he had to dig into old books and archives. If he'd only been home, if only Adam hadn't been twelve and frightened.

Yes, frightened. Scared. When that black shape had appeared at the twilight window. Some giant black bird, he'd thought. Then it had changed, become a man. A dead-white man, smelling of damp earth and decay. A vampire.

"A vampire! Got to run, got to hide!"

That's what Adam had done, he'd run. Run out of the chalet, crying, screaming for help. And finding no one to help, he'd been afraid to go back inside. So he had huddled on the wide shadowy porch of the chalet, waiting for his mother to come out to him.

She hadn't, though.

When his father finally reached home, it was much too late. They wouldn't let Adam see her any more. She was dead, his father told him that. It wasn't until years later, after Adam and his father had wandered the world seeking out and destroying vampires, that he realized what the sounds were that he had heard that night. The sounds he'd heard while shivering in the darkened living room of the chalet. A stake being driven, a stake being driven into -

"It's not going to happen this time!"

There in the mirror Adam was seeing what he'd not seen back then. He saw the vampire struggling with his mother, the yellowed teeth trying for her throat. Adam had another chance.

"Stop!" He rushed at the mirror and passed completely through it.

The images faded, and greyness surrounded him.

Adam realized he was trapped on the wrong side of the mirror.

With a cry of pain the blind man sat up in bed. "Adam?" he called out.

Van Helsing knew his son was not here in the hotel room. No, he was...

"Trapped somewhere."

The old man got out of bed, dressed himself hurriedly and made his way to the phone table. He didn't trouble to turn on the lights.

The image, the psychic vision which had awakened him, was still clear in his mind. Adam was trapped, trapped behind a wall of shining glass.

Van Helsing snatched up the phone and dialed the desk. "I want a cab to meet me in front of the hotel in five minutes."

"Sure thing, Mr. Van Helsing," replied the night clerk. "Uh, where was it you wanted to go? Some drivers'll only take fares within the -"

"I want to go to Blackston's Mammoth Carnival."

"You sure? I mean, from what I hear, that's not much of a show. You won't have much fun there."

"I'm not going for fun," said the old man, and he hung up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Vampirella was seated at the makeup table, the pages of *The Crimson Chronicles* open before her. "Yes, here it is," she said, "an incantation for breaking the hold that Asmodeus seems to have on this carnival."

"That would free us, too, would it not?" Pendragon was leaning against the dressing room wall. He'd been drinking his Scotch directly from the bottle for the past several minutes.

Slender fingers resting on the ancient pages, Vampirella replied, "If this works, the link between the Seven Servants of Chaos and Blackston's Mammoth Carnival will be broken... and the gateway to the Nethervoid which has been set up in the Mirror Maze will be shut down for good and all."

The magician sighed. "Then what will I do, whither will I drift?" he said. "Being absolutely free again... I doubt I can deal with that."

"I think you can." She stood up, using the book's scarlet ribbon bookmark to keep her place in *The Crimson Chronicles*. "A good deal of your claims of cowardice strike me as false."

"Ah, little do you know, dear child."

Vampirella asked, "Where is Blackston likely to be at this hour?"

"If the rogue is not in front of the Mirror Maze luring fresh victims to their doom, he'll be in his office. That's at the rear of the maze building."

"Will you guide me there?"

"Oh, it's not difficult to locate, and besides, I... Yes, I will guide you there, Vampirella." He set the Scotch . aside, executed a near-perfect bow, and opened the dressing room door.

Vampirella smiled at him as she stepped outside. "Thank you."

He joined her in the night, offering his arm.

At that moment lightning zigzagged across the sky, and thunder boomed. Seconds later, rain began to fall.

"Can this," asked the magician, "be an omen?"

A car door swung open. From under the awning of the hotel old Van Helsing said, "That's not my cab."

"It's me," said Lieutenant Zuber of the Feldenville police. "I was just coming over to talk to you."

"I've no time to talk to you now, I must get out to the Blackston carnival at once."

"Okay, I can give you a lift," offered the small policeman. "Hop in, we can talk on the way."

Unaided, the blind man slid into the car and strapped himself in. "I appreciate this, Lieutenant."

"Sure, no trouble." The unmarked police car pulled away from the curb. "What's going on out at that rundown carnival?"

"My son is there."

Lieutenant Zuber studied the blind man out of the corner of his eyes. "Blackston's setup wouldn't be connected with this cult business in any way, would it?"

"Possibly..."

Swinging the car onto the road which led out of town, Zuber said, "They did an autopsy on Mrs. Jethryn's boy, Lemuel. That's one of the reasons I came over to have a chat with you, Mr. Van Helsing."

Thunder rumbled out in the night, and rain came pouring down.

Van Helsing pressed his fingertips against the nose-piece of his dark glasses. "I'm not an expert on forensic medicine, Lieutenant."

"But you are an expert on the supernatural," said the policeman. "Now, according to Doc Klein, this Jethryn lad didn't die when he fell off the roof of that joint. Not at all. Lemuel Jethryn has been dead at least five years."

"Really? That is unusual."

"Doc Klein doesn't want to believe it, but he says every test he could think of to try he's tried. And everything points to Lem's being a corpse... except we've all seen him moping around town. He never

seemed too bright, but stupid is a long way from dead."

The outskirts of Feldenville gave way to fields. The rain was falling heavily.

"What exactly do you expect me to tell you about this, Lieutenant Zuber?" the blind man asked.

"Well, you might help me form some kind of theory. I mean, can you tell me how a man five years dead can still be walking around?"

Van Helsing steepled his fingers beneath his chin. "Quite obviously the man was reanimated," he said. "He was what is popularly known as a zombie, having a semblance of life yet not really living."

Zuber watched the wipers slash back and forth across the windshield. "They had that kind of power, to raise the dead?"

"It's a powerful cult, the Companions of Chaos."

"Yeah, that's powerful, all right. But it's finished now, isn't it? Dr. Crowder is dead, Mrs. Jethryn's safely locked away."

Van Helsing said, "I fear not."

"These carnival people, Blackston and the rest, are they involved, too?"

"Adam journeyed out there earlier to investigate."

"Has he reported to you, told you anything?"

"No, not yet."

"Oh... I figured the way you seemed in such a hurry that you had some kind of tip. Had something urgent to take care of."

"That I do," said the old man.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The sound of crickets had abruptly stopped. After a brief silence, rain and thunder had come. Eve Millenon put one hand up against the fogged window of the auto and rubbed a spot clear. Adam Van Helsing had brought her to his car, which was parked on a side road beside a stand of twisted oak trees. The rain drove down through the tangle of branches overhead to splatter on the car roof.

The blonde girl enlarged the circle on the steamy glass and tried to see out into the rainy night. No cars had passed on the road in the twenty... no, it was thirty now... minutes since she'd been waiting here. It had been, after the long ordeal of the wax museum, almost peaceful.

Eve had not felt particularly fearful as she waited.

She had confidence in the young man who'd saved her from the carnival and its people. There was a chance Adam would be able to locate her uncle, although from the hints Blackston had made... the best she could hope for was to find out what had happened to Uncle Warren. Probably, though, she would

never see him again.

Everything had seemed to be getting so much better when she left the city where she'd been living to come to Feldenville to meet her uncle. They were going to drive out to California together. To California where things would be better.

Lightning flashed across the fields. The sky was, for an instant, white, and the looking figure black.

"Who was that?" She reached out and checked the door. It was locked. All the doors were locked; she'd seen to that when Adam had left her here to wait for his return.

There had definitely been someone standing in that field over there, the lightning had shown her that. An enormous figure... or had the lightning distorted it?"

"It's them again," she realized. "The carnival people."

Quickly Eve slid across the front seat and got behind the wheel. She had been left with the key. She jabbed it into the ignition.

That unexpected flash of lightning had given her an early warning. There was still time to get away.

Eve turned the key. The car made a dry rasping sound. The engine didn't come to life. She tried again, again, pumping the gas pedal. The car wouldn't start.

Another flash of lightning. The huge figure was gone from the field, but smirking at her just on the other side of the car's side window was Major Archie.

"Your pal shouldn't have roughed me up," he squeaked. "I'm not on your side any more. No, not at all. They're going to do more terrible things to you."

Eve ignored him and kept trying to get the motor to start.

Major Archie held his tiny hands up, pressing them against the glass. They were smeared with grease. "I crawled up under your hood, Evie," he shouted in his piping voice. "This crate'll never go now."

The girl rubbed at her thumb and forefinger, which had red notches in them from the repeated efforts with the key. He wasn't bluffing. He'd done something to the car, and it simply wasn't going to start and take her away from here.

"Tied me up like a birthday present, didn't you? You and your handsome pal. Shouldn't have done that, Evie. Shouldn't have tied Major Archie up like a pot roast."

"Go away," said Eve in a voice too low for the laughing midget to hear. "Go away, please."

It was no use. They'd get her eventually. The strongman could probably rip the doors right off the car... Yes, and that was who she'd seen for an instant in the field. He was out there somewhere. And how many others?

"Don't expect your handsome friend to help you this time," hollered Major Archie out there in the rain. "He's dead by now. Dead by now."



Was that true? Had Adam been killed trying to help her? The girl wanted very much to cry. She wouldn't give them that, though.

Eve sat up straight in the seat, hands folded.

She couldn't fight them, but she wouldn't surrender, either. They'd have to break into the car to take her.

Which is exactly what they did.

"This is worse than I expected," remarked Lieutenant Zuber. "What a rundown carnival, boy."

The small policeman and the tall, gaunt occult investigator had entered the main walkway of Blackston's Mammoth Carnival.

"He's here... he's still here," said the blind man.

"Huh? How can you be sure?"

Van Helsing answered, "I simply know."

"You have some kind of ESP going for you, is that it?"

"It can be called that, yes. I see things inside my head." Van Helsing halted, turning his head from side to side. "We want the place called the Mirror Maze... which should be in that direction." He pointed a bony finger.

"Yeah, I can see the sign above some of these other ragtag buildings," said the police lieutenant. "I'll take your arm so I can lead you to -"

"I don't need to be led." The old man started off on his own.

"Has Blackston done something to your son? Is that the kind of hunch you got?"

"Adam is... somehow... trapped inside the maze, if... I'm fortunate... there may be... yet... time to save him."

"Can I help?"

"It may take more than physical help," said Van Helsing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The pelting rain made the puddles in the muddy lane dance. A rising wind shook the shutters which covered the windows of the office at the back of the Mirror Maze building.

Pendragon had abandoned any attempt to avoid puddles and was sloshing straight ahead. Stopping now, he gestured at a wooden door. "Yon portal leads to Blackston's office," he announced in a whisper. "Since the rascal is not on view at the front of this quaint edifice, one can but assume he is within."

Vampirella, saying nothing, pushed by the magician. Her eyes were narrowed, her body alert. She opened the office door and pushed it.

Only darkness inside.

"Beware, my dear, he may be lurking."

"No, he's not here." Vampirella stepped into the office. "I get the feeling he's inside the maze somewhere."

Pendragon groped and caught her arm. "Not safe to venture into that maze, child," he warned.

"If Blackston's there, that's where I'm going." She pulled free of Pendragon and was lost in the darkness.

"Vampirella?"

A door across the room opened briefly. Vampirella had gone into the maze.

The greyness was closing in. It swirled and spun like dense fog, except unlike fog he couldn't feel it at all. Adam clenched his fists again and pounded on the sheet of glass in front of him.

"Got to break this thing," he said. "Only way to get free."

From the wrong side of the mirror he could see out into the maze. The corridor he'd been standing in moments ago was still visible to him. But the glass would not yield. Adam slammed his fists against it repeatedly.

"They lured me good and proper, lured me across the line to here."

And where was here? Adam felt he had crossed over from his own world into the realm of the Seven Servants of Chaos. He was in some kind of limbo now, the greyness pressing at him.

This place, this strange dimension, was not the final stop. This was only a way station. They would come here, early or late, to collect him.

"How long will that be?"

Adam hit the glass again.

Out in the maze a smiling man appeared. "A waste of time and effort, my friend."

Adam made no reply.

"Once you pass through the mirror, there's no returning," said Blackston. "If you weren't so strong-willed, they'd have taken you to the Nethervoid already. You might as well give up, since..." The thickset man let the words trail off. Something had attracted his attention elsewhere. He went hurrying away.

Vampirella came around a bend in a passage, and a mirror started glowing. A picture formed, a picture of a bright midday stretch of landscape which would have been alien to anyone but she. It was Vampirella's home planet of Drakulon, Drakulon as it had been in its agonized last days, before she had departed. In the strange forest of dying trees were several of her people. They were dying, too. They were all staring at her, hands outstretched toward her, begging her for help.

"Now I have another chance to - no!" She shook her head, her rain-wet hair tossing.

This was not really Drakulon she was seeing. It was only a guilty image plucked from her own thoughts. Pendragon had warned her about what the mirrors could do. She'd almost forgotten.

Vampirella, carrying *The Crimson Chronicles*, moved on. Another turn in the maze, and she was confronted by the smiling Blackston.

"So you're the one whose presence I sensed." His smile dropped away. "Yes, and you're the one who destroyed Dr. Crowder and Lemuel and drove old Mrs. Jethryn mad."

"They destroyed themselves," Vampirella told him, "with very little help from me. You, however, Blackston, I have come to destroy. You and this gateway to the Nethervoid."

He laughed. "Destroy me? Such arrogance," he said. "Do you know how powerful I am? I have made a bargain with the servants of Chaos. I have been touched by the hand of Asmodeus himself."

"You are nothing," Vampirella said. "Nothing more than what you were before you read this book. You have simply been a tool of Asmodeus, a collector of souls for that demon."

"The *Chronicles*," said Blackston, realizing what she carried and taking a step toward her. "Where did you get that?"

"I took it out of the library," Vampirella answered. "Now I'm going to -"

The old lady's copy. Yes, that's what you have. I pleaded with her to let me have it, to let me keep it here. But she never would. She made me go crawling to her if I even wanted to look at the book." He came another step nearer. "Now you've brought it to me."

Vampirella opened the book. "*The Crimson Chronicles* helped you set up this soul trap, Blackston," she said, "and now it will destroy you. Since you know the book, you probably know the incantation I am about to read."

"You won't read it!" He raised a hand to point at her.

His voice had changed, deepened. "Asmodeus will help me! My power is too strong for anyone. You will do what I will you to do."

Vampirella's eyes glowed. "No, you cannot control me."

"Obey me! Obey the will of Asmodeus!" He stared at the girl, perspiration blotching his face. "Close the book, hand it to me."

Vampirella began to read the incantation. "Rhasis Ebn-Secharjah Aboubekr Arrasi. My incantation is the incantation of Marduk. I draw the circle of Ea in the air. Samas is before me. Nergal is at my right hand  
\_"

"Stop! I command it. The wrath of the Seven Servants of Chaos will strike you, will break you!"

"Ninib is at my left hand. Annpadaka Atmic Solanot. Issintok Arbatel -"

Blackston hunched, teeth gritting. "Your mind... it's unlike... any other... I can't seem..."

"Hermes Trismegistus Tehuti Eblis."

Thunder roared around the building. The wind shook the walls.

"You... must... break... obey... the... will... of..." Blackston stumbled, fell to the floor.

Nostrils flaring, breasts rising and falling, Vampirella moved back from the fallen man.

The thunder grew louder. Then the mirrors began to break. First one, then another. Cracking, shattering, exploding into thousands of glistening fragments, making a sound like hundreds of wild bells chiming.

#### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR-

"Eh? That sounded like the proverbial bull in the china shop (or a whole herd of them)," said Pendragon, who had been awaiting Vampirella's return just inside the door of Blackston's office. He realized that he felt different. "The mirrors have come tumbling down, and Blackston no longer has power over us." A smile appeared on the magician's face.

"We got her, we got her," piped a tiny voice out in the rain.

"What?"

"We got Eve Millerton," explained Major Archie. "We tracked her down like you told us and brought her back again."

Pendragon hadn't been aware the girl had escaped. Now apparently they'd recaptured her. "Bring her in," he said in a fair imitation of Blackston's voice.

The major came cautiously into the dark office. Behind him was the strongman carrying the unconscious girl.

"*Fiat lux,*" said the magician in his own voice.

The office lights blossomed on. Blinking at him were Major Archie, the strongman, the bearded lady, and the skeleton man.

"What kind of scam is this?" demanded the midget.

"Place the young lady in that chair, oaf," Pendragon told the strongman. "Do it gently."

"He doesn't take orders from you," said the major.

"Allow me to show you another trick." Pendragon rubbed his hands together and a .38 revolver, which until recently had been in a drawer of Blackston's desk, appeared in his right fist. "I'm pleased to be the first to inform you that Blackston's Mammoth Carnival is now defunct and no more. Put the girl in the chair, Tomo."

"Okay, okay," grumbled the strongman. "You don't got to shoot nobody."

"What do you mean about the carnival?" the tiny man wanted to know.

"I mean, you offensive little twit, that Blackston's control over us no longer exists, his long-standing pact with the powers of darkness has been broken."

"Hey, that's what it was!" exclaimed the bearded lady. "I knew I felt something funny a few minutes ago. He can't tell us what to do any more."

"Precisely, dear lady," said Pendragon. "We are all once again free agents." He moved over to Eve, keeping the gun aimed in the direction of the major and Tomo.

"I could go back to Detroit?" asked the strongman. "I don't got to stay here?"

"You are free as a bird."

Then I go." With a shrug, the strongman left them.

The bearded lady and the skeleton man followed.

"What a lousy deal," complained Major Archie. "I had a good position here. Now I got to start pounding the pavement again. You had something to do with this, didn't you, lush?"

"I was merely a cog in the wheel," said the magician modestly. "Now might I suggest that you see to packing up your old kit bag."

"Aw, screw yourself." The major went striding out into the rain.

Pendragon smiled and concentrated on reviving the blonde girl.

A few moments earlier Van Helsing and Lieutenant Zuber had approached the front entrance of the Mirror Maze.

"Not doing what you call a land-office business," the policeman observed.

The blind man said, "Adam is inside." He pulled ahead and entered the building. Inside the maze Van Helsing hesitated before starting down a passageway.

Lieutenant Zuber glanced at the mirrors. "Doesn't seem like anybody's cleaned these since -"

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, nothing really."

"Some picture from a lost time perhaps?" asked the blind man. "Some person you've missed?"

"Well, now you mention it, I did think I saw -"

"Take hold of my arm. We must keep moving on," said Van Helsing. "Whatever you do, don't touch the mirrors. No matter what you see, keep clear."

"Funny," said Lieutenant Zuber as he gripped the old man's arm, "I haven't thought of that girl since... and there she was as plain as day."

They penetrated deeper into the maze of mirrors.

Van Helsing said, "Here. Adam is here."

"What the hell is this? I can see him, but he's on the other side of the mirror. Inside it, like. That's not possible."

"Adam, I'll get you out."

Adam nodded his head, saying something. The words didn't reach this side of the mirror.

From within his overcoat Van Helsing took a heavy mallet. "We'll break the glass and free you." He swung the mallet hard against the face of the mirror.

The glass didn't crack.

Van Helsing delivered repeated blows, with the same result.

"Let me give it a try," offered Zuber. "Could be I can -"

The entire building was shaking; thunder was bombarding it. The mirror behind them burst. The one next to it.

The mirror which had held in Adam now smashed, splashing jagged shards of glass.

"Watch out!" Zuber shielded his face.

Van Helsing stood his ground. "Adam?"

His son stepped onto the flooring of the corridor. "I don't know how you did it, Dad, but thanks," he said, shaking the old man's hand. "I was starting to think I might have -"

"Wait!" said Van Helsing. "She's here, she's very near. I sense it." He withdrew his hand and went running off. The thousands of fragments of mirrors crunched underfoot.

"Dad, wait."

"Ah, yes! At last!"

When Adam caught up to his father, the old man was standing only a few feet away from Vampirella. The body of the unconscious Blackston sprawled on the floor between them.

"At last," repeated the blind man. "I have sought you for many a day, and now I have found you. You must die!" He snatched a stake from inside his coat. "Die with this in your evil heart!"

"I have no quarrel with you," said Vampirella.

"You killed my brother, drank his blood, and left him on the mountainside," accused Van Helsing. "For

that you will die. You are a vampire, and I have made a vow that all such will die."

Vampirella's eyes met Adam's. "I'm sorry about... no, I guess that's not an adequate explanation," she said. "But what happened to your uncle, Adam... Those things will not happen again. That I can promise."

"Here!" The blind man thrust the stake and the heavy mallet into his son's hands. "Avenge him! Kill her! Now!"

Adam stood watching the girl. "No, I can't do that, Dad," he said finally.

"She's hypnotized you again. Give me back the -"

"I haven't been hypnotized. It's simply that I'm not sure if -"

With an angry snarl his father took the stake and the mallet from him. He charged at Vampirella. But he had forgotten the body of the carnival owner. He tripped, fell, and let go the implements of death.

Adam bent to help his father. When he looked up again, the dark-haired girl was gone.

Lieutenant Zuber scribbled in his notebook. The Great Pendragon. Okay, got it. Now suppose you give me your version of what's been happening."

The magician and Eve, conscious now, were in Blackston's office, where the policeman had found them a few minutes ago.

Pendragon handed the girl the glass of water he'd fetched her from the water cooler. "This young lady was kidnapped by Blackston," he said. "I'm sure she will, when she is more fully recovered from her ordeal, give you a detailed and vivid account of all that transpired."

"I want to know about the brunette first," said Lieutenant Zuber. "Only got a glimpse of her back there in the maze. I know she's got something to do with all this business here."

"Brunette?" Pendragon caused his eyebrows to raise. "Could it have been our bearded lady you -"

"No, it wasn't the bearded lady. It was a pretty young dark-haired girl. She was carrying some kind of old book." The policeman shook his head. "I can't get anything more out of the Van Helsings, the old guy or his son. Although the old man made what looked to me like a try to knock off the girl. Called her a vampire."

"A common expression a half-century ago, Lieutenant," said the magician. "Meaning a scheming woman. No doubt this old gentleman had fallen head over heels for our bearded lady only to have her spurn his -"

"We're not talking about the bearded lady." Zuber turned to Eve. "Did you see the girl come through here? I can't figure how else she could have got out."

"I only came to a minute or so before you burst in," answered the blonde. "I didn't see any girl... although..."

"Yeah, what?"

"This probably has nothing to do with anything," said Eve. "Just as I awakened there was a flash of lightning and I have the impression I saw a large black bat go flying out through the open doorway there."

"An obvious hallucination," suggested Pendragon.

"Saw bat fly out door," wrote Zuber. He shut his notebook. "I don't think I'm going to ask any more questions around here. No more questions at all."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The rain had ended a few days before. Bright sunshine filled the parking area next to the small airport.

Lieutenant Zuber started the engine of his car. Thanks for all your help," he said. "And thanks for keeping quiet about all the goofy stuff at the inquests."

Adam waved goodbye. Then he and his father started for the waiting room. "I don't think the lieutenant believes we were completely honest with him."

Van Helsing was tapping the frames of his black glasses. "In our line of work, it's never wise to give away all the details."

"You're still pretty downcast, Dad," said Adam as they entered the airport building. "I thought you understood my position as far as -"

"We don't need to discuss her," said his father. "I wanted to keep on rooting out this Cult of Chaos. Now

... to fritter away weeks of my life in Southern California."

Two different doctors suggested you needed a rest," Adam reminded him. "And two weeks in California isn't the worst sentence to serve."

"I suppose there are worse places," admitted his father. The thing is, Adam, I'm convinced that the Cult of Chaos still flourishes. We've seen the fall of only a small part of it. I want to stop it all."

"So does the girl."

"What her motives are," said Van Helsing, "is certainly not clear. Because you're young and romantic you want to believe -"

"I've told you before, Dad, romance has nothing to do with it," said Adam, angry. "I'm talking about logic. You're the one who's letting his feelings run -"

"I have no feelings. I have only a purpose, a dedication to -"

"In the past few weeks, since we first heard of the girl, she's destroyed three separate branches of the cult. Now we can call ourselves occult investigators and maybe that impresses smalltown cops like Zuber, Dad, but you know as well as I do that it was the girl who toppled them and not -"

"Perhaps you'd rather work with her than -"



"Don't start -"

"Ahum."

Adam turned to see a sharp-faced man in a plaid cloak standing beside him. "Oh, yeah, hello. You're the magician from the carnival. The Great..." He snapped his fingers, trying to remember.

The magician bowed. "The Great Pendragon, at your service," he said. "I, too, am about to embark for warmer climes. I have arranged a two-week engagement in the town of Ventura in a bistro which glories in the name of Pete's Rocket Lounge. It's a portent of better days."

"Glad to hear that," said Adam. "I understand Eve Millerton has already left for California."

"Yes, a sadder but wiser girl." Pendragon tapped Adam very lightly on the elbow. "If I might have a word with you in private."

Frowning, puzzled, Adam said, "Dad, I'll be back in a minute. We still have fifteen minutes before boarding time."

Pendragon led him to the vicinity of the peanut machine. "Forgive me for overhearing your recent discussion with your venerable parent," he said. "Nonetheless, since I did, I have learned (as I already suspected) that you are fond of the dark-haired young lady who recently figured in your affairs."

"You know who she is?"

"Her name is Vampirella."

"Vampirella? That's an odd -"

"You will find her an unusual girl," laid the magician. "I merely wish to provide you with her name... and the hint that you may meet her again."

"How do you know that?"

Pendragon passed a hand across his forehead.

"Perhaps I can look into the future and see the design in the carpet the fates are continually weaving," he said.

"Or perhaps I simply have faith in the old adage that love will find a way. At any rate, should we not get a chance to chat once we are airborne, allow me to wish you a pleasant trip." he bowed again. "Oh, and by the way, you and I will meet again, too."

Adam watched the magician stroll away from him. "Just a carnival magician," said Adam. "But I wonder if he's right about Vampirella."