

Marîd and the Trail of Blood (v1.1)

George Alec Effinger, 1995

There is a saying: "The Budayeen hides from the light." You can interpret that any way you like, but I'm dissolute enough to know *exactly* what it means. There's a certain time of day that always makes me feel as if my blackened soul were just then under the special scrutiny of Allah in Paradise.

It happens in the gray winter mornings just at dawn, when I've spent the entire night drinking in some awful hellhole. When I finally decide it's time to go home and I step outside, instead of the cloaking forgiveness of darkness, there is bright, merciless sun shining on my aching head.

It makes me feel filthy and a little sick, as if I'd been wallowing in a dismal gutter all night. I know I can get pretty goddamn wiped out, but I don't believe I've ever sunk to wallowing; at least, I don't remember it if I did. And all the merchants setting up their stalls in the *souks*, all the men and women rising for morning prayers, they all glare at me with that special expression: they know exactly where I've been. They know I'm drunk and irredeemable. They give freely of contempt that they've been saving for a long time for someone as depraved and worthless as me.

This is not even to mention the disapproving expression on Youssef's face last Tuesday, when he opened the great wooden front door at home. Or my slave, Kmuzu. Both of them knew enough not to say a word out loud, but I got the full treatment from their attitudes, particularly when Kmuzu started slamming down the breakfast things half an hour later. As if I could stand to eat. All I wanted to do was collapse and sleep, but no one in the household would allow it. It was part of my punishment.

So that's how this adventure began. I reluctantly ate a little breakfast, ignored the large quantity of orders, receipts, ledgers, and other correspondence on my desk, and sat back in a padded leather chair wishing my mortal headache would go away.

Now, when I first had my brain wired, I was given a few experimental features. I can chip in a device that makes my body burn alcohol faster than the normal ounce an hour; last night had been a contest between me and my hardware. The liquor won. I could also chip in a pain-blocking daddy, but it wouldn't make me any more sober. For now, in the real world, I was as sick as a plague-stricken wharf rat.

I watched a holoshow about a sub-Saharan reforestation program, with the sound turned off. Before it was over, I lied to myself that I felt just a tiny bit better. I even pretended to act friendly toward Kmuzu. I forgave him, and I forgave myself for what I'd done the night before. I promised both of us that I'd never do it again.

I laughed; Kmuzu didn't. He turned his back and walked out of the room without saying a word.

It was obvious to me that it wasn't a good day to spend around the house. I decided to go back to the Budayeen and open my nightclub at noon, a little early for the day shift. Even if I had to sit there by myself for a couple of hours, it would be better company than I had at home.

About 12:15, Pualani, the beautiful real girl, came in. She was early for work, but she had always been one of the most dependable of the five dancers on the day shift. I said hello, and before she went to the dressing room she sat down beside me at the bar. "You hear what happened to Crazy Vi, who works by Big Al's Old Chicago?"

"No," I said. I can't keep up with what goes on with every girl, deb, and sex-change in the Budayeen.

"She turned up dead yesterday. They say they found her body all drained of blood, and she

had two small puncture marks on her neck. It looks like some kind of vampire jumped on her or something." Pualani shuddered.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my throbbing temples. "There are no such things as vampires," I said. "There are no afrits, no djinn, no werewolves, no succubi, and no trolls. There has to be some other explanation for Vi." I recognized the woman's name, but I couldn't picture her face.

"Like what?"

"I don't know, a murderer with an elaborate scheme to throw suspicion on a supernatural suspect, maybe."

"I don't think so," Pualani said. "I mean, everything just fits."

"Uh-huh," I said.

Pualani went into the back to change into her working outfit. I reached over the bar and filled a tall glass with ice, then poured myself a carbonated soft drink.

Chiriga, my partner, arrived not long after. She owned half the club and acted as daytime barmaid. I was glad to see her, because it meant that I didn't have to watch the place anymore. I rested my head on my arms and let the hangover headache do its throbbing worst.

Nothing felt fatal until someone shook my shoulder. I tried to ignore it, but it wouldn't go away. I sat up and saw Yasmin, one of the dancers. She was brushing her glistening black hair. "You hear about Vi?" she said.

"Uh-huh."

"You know I *warned* Vi about staying out of that alley. She used to go home that way every night. That's what she gets for working at the Old Chicago and going home that way. I must've told her a dozen times."

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Yasmin, the poor girl didn't deserve to die just because she walked home through an alley."

Yasmin cocked her head to one side and looked a time. "Yeah, I know, but still. You hear they think it was Sheba who killed her?"

That was news to me. "Sheba?" I asked. "She worked here maybe eight or nine months ago? *That* Sheba?"

Yasmin nodded. "She's over by Fatima and Nassir's these days, and she *belongs* there."

Chiri wiped the bar beside me and tossed a coaster in front of Yasmin. "Why do you think it was Sheba who killed Crazy Vi?" Chiri asked.

"Cause," Yasmin said in a loud whisper. "Vi was killed by a vampire, right? And you never see Sheba in the daytime. Never. Have you? Think about it. Let me have some peppermint schnapps, Chiri."

I glanced at Chiri, but she only shrugged. I turned back to Yasmin. "First everybody's sure Vi was killed by a vampire, and now you're sure that the vampire is Sheba."

Yasmin raised both hands and tried to look innocent. "I'm not making any of this up," she said. She scooped up her peppermint schnapps and went to sit beside Pualani. No customers had come in yet.

"Well," I said to Chiri, "what do you think?"

Chiri's expression didn't change. "I don't think anything. Do I have to?" Chiri's the only person in the Budayeen with any sense. And that includes me.

The afternoon passed slowly. The other three dancers, Lily, Kitty, and Baby, came in when they felt like it. We made a little money, sold a few drinks, the girls hustled some champagne cocktails. I listened to the same damn Sikh propaganda songs on the holo system and watched my employees parade their talents.

It was getting on toward dinnertime when Lily and Yasmin got into an argument with two poor European marks. I strolled over toward their table, not because I care anything for marks

-- I generally don't -- but because a bad enough argument might send the two guys out into the Street and into somebody else's club.

"Marîd, listen -- " Lily said.

I held up a hand, interrupting her. "Are you two gentlemen enjoying yourselves?" I asked.

They had puzzled looks on their faces, but they nodded. Some people are born marks, others achieve markdom, and some people have markdom thrust upon them.

"What's the problem?" I said in a warning voice. "I can hear you all the way across the bar."

"We were talking about Vi," Lily said. "We were warning Lazaro and Karoly to stay out of that alley."

"We were going to suggest a nice, safe place where we could go," Yasmin said. She tried to look innocent again. Yasmin hasn't been innocent since her baby teeth fell out.

"Look, you two," I said, meaning my two fun-loving hustlers, "let me clear this up right now. I'll call the morgue and find out what they know about Crazy Vi."

"You're gonna call the morgue?" Lily said. She was suddenly very interested.

"Get back to work," I said. I went back to my seat at the bar. I unclipped the phone from my belt and murmured the commcode of the Budayeen's morgue. The medical examiner there, Dr. Besharati, had helped me with a couple of other matters over the years. He was normal enough for a guy who worked surrounded by dead bodies all day. He liked to tootle a jazz trumpet in between autopsies. That was *his* kick.

I got one of his assistants. The coroner was busy putting brains into jars or something. "Yeah? Medical examiner's office."

"I wanted to get some information about one of the, ah, deceased currently in your custody."

"You a family member?"

I blinked. "Sure," I said

"Okay, then. What you want?"

"Young woman, killed last night in an alley in the Budayeen. Her name was Vi."

"Yeah?" He wasn't making it any easier for me.

"We were just wondering if you have determined the cause of death yet."

There was a long pause while the assistant went off to investigate. When he returned he said, "Well, we ain't got to her yet, but she died on account she was murdered. Slashed throat, heavy loss of blood. That'll do it every time."

I grimaced. I could only hope they'd be a little gentler with Vi's real family. "Could you tell me, were there any puncture wounds on the throat?"

"Told you we ain't got to her yet. Don't know. Call again tomorrow maybe. We ought to have her on the slab by then. Do you need to come watch?"

I just hung up after leaving my commcode. I was sure that Lily would have happily viewed the autopsy, but even if I couldn't quite remember who Vi was, she probably deserved better treatment than that.

The two European marks got up and left the club about a half hour later. Yasmin came and leaned against the bar near me. She was brushing her hair again. "What jerks," she said.

They're all jerks, is the general opinion.

"I called about Vi," I said. "No vampire. She was just murdered in the alley."

"Huh," Lily said dubiously. "Like she could bite herself in her own neck."

I spread my hands. "They haven't confirmed the business about the puncture wounds. You're just exaggerating all of this way out of proportion."

Yasmin looked at me knowingly. "You'll see," she said. She turned to Lily, who nodded her agreement. Dealing with my employees is sometimes very hard on my nerves. I thought about having my first drink of the day, but I didn't. I went out to get something to eat instead.

Now, Chiriga's is about halfway between the eastern gate of the Budayeen and the western end -- the cemetery. There are plenty of places to eat along the Street, and on this particular occasion I decided to head toward Kiyoshi's. I hadn't walked far before I saw the Lamb Lady.

"Oh boy," I muttered. Safiyya the Lamb Lady is a regular feature of the Budayeen, one of our favorite odd characters. She's harmless, but she can talk at you so long you're sure you'll never get away. She lives on money people give her and she sleeps wherever anybody will let her. I've let her stay in my club a few times. She's completely honest, just addled a bit. That's why I was surprised to see her wearing a lot of expensive-looking jewelry. She had on eight or ten silver rings, two silver necklaces, silver earrings, and silver bracelets and bangles from her wrists halfway to her elbows.

"Where'd you get all that, Safiyya?" I asked.

"Watch out for the lamb," she said in a hoarse voice. She used to have a lamb that followed her around the Budayeen, but it was accidentally killed. Now Safiyya has an imaginary lamb. I'd almost bumped into it.

"Sorry," I said.

"Isn't this nice stuff?" she said. She jingled her bracelets. "I found it all in the trash."

"In the trash?" The silver she was wearing must have been worth four or five hundred kiam. "Where?"

"Oh, it's all gone now," Safiyya said. "I took it. I'll show you, though, if you want to see." I followed her because I was curious. She led me to the back of a whitewashed, two-story apartment building, where four trash cans had been upended. Garbage was strewn all over the narrow passageway between buildings, but we didn't find any more jewelry.

When Safiyya started showing off all this silver, she would make herself a target for robbery, or worse. I decided to mention this to one of my connections in the police department; they'd keep an eye on Safiyya. With Crazy Vi's unsolved murder the night before, I guessed there'd be a stronger police presence in the Budayeen tonight. I'd hate to see the Lamb Lady become the killer's second victim.

However, the rest of the day passed quietly. Nothing happened to Safiyya, and nothing happened to me. I went home, trimmed my beard, took a long shower, and sat down at my desk to get some of my paperwork done. After a while, Kmuzu interrupted me.

"The master of the house wishes you to meet with him in an hour, *yaa Sidi*," he said.

I nodded. The master of the house was my great-grandfather, Friedlander Bey, who controlled much of the illicit activities in the city. He was a very powerful man, so powerful that he also found it profitable to control the rise and fall of certain nearby nations. It was like a hobby with him.

Forty-five minutes later I was dressed the way Papa liked me to dress, standing at the door to his office. It was guarded by Habib and Labib, Papa's huge, silent bodyguards. I wasn't going in until they felt like letting me go in.

Tariq, Friedlander Bey's secretary and valet, came out and noticed me. "I hope you haven't been waiting long," he said.

I shrugged. "I've just been watching these two guys. You know, they don't move at all. They don't even breathe. How do they manage that?"

Tariq did the smart thing and ignored me. He ushered me into Papa's inner office. Friedlander Bey reclined on a lacquered divan. He indicated that I should seat myself across from him. Between us was a table loaded down with trays of food and fruit, juices and silver coffee things. We chatted informally while we drank the customary cups of coffee. Then, suddenly, Papa was all business.

"You are spending too much time in the Budayeen," he said.

"But O Shaykh, you gave me the nightclub -- "

He raised a hand. I shut up. "There are more important matters. Representatives from the Empire of Parthia will be arriving tomorrow. They wish our support in their expansion into Kush."

"I didn't even know they -- "

"I do not believe we will give them what they desire. Indeed, I think it is time that Parthia be, shall we say, disunited."

What could I do but agree? We discussed these weighty affairs for some time. At last, Papa relaxed. He took an apple and a small paring knife. "You called the medical examiner today, my darling," he said.

I was astonished. "Yes, O Shaykh."

"You are interested in the death of the young dancer. It is of no importance."

Maybe it's because I used to be a poor street kid myself, but the lives and deaths of the people of the Budayeen matter more to me.

Friedlander Bey went on. "Your employees believe in vampires." He was amused. "Lieutenant Giragosian of the police does not." Here his amusement ended. "You will not pursue this further. It is a waste of time, and it is unseemly for you to concern yourself with what is, after all, chiefly a Christian myth."

Crazy Vi's body in the morgue was no myth. And in the Maghreb, the far western part of North Africa where I'd grown up, there are still stories of the Gôla. She is a female djinn, very big and strong, sometimes with goat's feet and covered with hair like an unshorn sheep. Her trick is that she speaks sweetly and gently to people, and then kills them and drinks their blood. The Gôla is usually described as having those familiar long, fierce canine teeth and eyes like blazing fire. Still, I wasn't about to mention any of this to my benefactor.

"You and I will share luncheon tomorrow with the Parthians," Papa said. "Forget about the murdered woman, your nightclub, and the Budayeen for a while."

"As you wish, O Shaykh," I said. Yeah, sure, I thought.

I returned to my suite and relaxed with a detective novel by Lutfy Gad, my favorite Palestinian mystery writer. He'd been dead for decades, so there were no new Gad books, but the old ones were so good I could enjoy them again and again. This one was called *The Deep Cradle*, and if I remembered correctly, it was the one in which Gad's dark and dangerous detective, al-Qaddani, ended up in Breulandy with almost every bone in his body broken.

It's amazing, sometimes, how resilient those paperback detectives are. I wish I knew how they did it.

The phone on my belt rang. That meant the call was probably from one of my disreputable friends and associates; otherwise, the desk phone would have rung. I unclipped it and murmured, "*Marhaba.*"

"Marîd? It's Yasmin, and guess what?"

She actually waited for me to guess. I didn't bother.

"You know that boys' club of yours?" she said. I have a small army of kids who look out for me in the Budayeen, watch me and make sure I'm not being followed by the cops or anything. I throw them a few kiam now and then.

"What about them?" I asked.

"One of 'em's dead and it looks like Sheba all over again. Kid's throat is torn open and before you say anything, I saw the goddamn puncture marks this time, like from fangs. So you're wrong."

It bothered me that her notion about Sheba was more important to her than the death of that poor boy. "Who was it?" I asked. "Anybody you know?"

"Yeah, stupid. *Sheba*, like I been telling you."

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No, not her. The boy. Who was it?"

I could almost hear her shrug. "They have *names*, Marîd? I mean, how would I know?"

I closed my eyes. "Call the police, Yasmin."

"Chin already did."

"All right. I've got to go now."

"Something else, Marîd. Lily and me and this girl you don't know, Natka, and Sheba were all going to have supper after work tonight. At Martyrs-of-Democracy. Anyway, Sheba comes in real late with this lame excuse about having this admiral or something buy her one bottle of champagne after another even though the night shift had come in. What's an admiral doing in the Budayeen in the first place? And I know Sheba's no day-shift girl. So she's all out of breath and she seems really nervous, not just to me, you can ask Lily about it. And you know what? When we ordered the food, she asked me please not to get the pork strings in garlic sauce. That's what I *always* order. So I asked her why, and she said her stomach was bothering her, like maybe she was pregnant or had the flu or something, and the smell of the garlic would make her sick. *Garlic*, Marîd, get it?"

I opened my eyes. "Maybe it wasn't the garlic, sweetheart. Maybe she just remembered that none of you good Muslim women ought to be eating pork, in strings or anyhow."

There was a pause while Yasmin figured if I was kidding her or not. She let it go. "How much more proof do you need, Marîd?" she asked angrily. "You're really being a jackass about this." I heard her slam the phone down. I put mine back on my belt and shook my head.

Behind me, I heard Kmuzu say, "If I may say so, *yaa Sidi*, I have noticed a tendency on your part to hesitate to get involved in such matters until you yourself are personally threatened. In the meantime, innocent lives can be lost. If you think back, I'm sure you'll recall other -- "

"The voice of my conscience," I said wearily, turning to face him. "Thank you so much. Are you telling me I should take this vampire stuff seriously? Especially after Papa specifically told me to ignore it?" You see, Kmuzu wasn't merely my slave; he'd been a "gift" from Friedlander Bey, someone to spy on me and report back to Papa.

He shrugged. "The people of the Budayeen have no one to turn to but you."

"So if I pursued this, you'd help me?"

Kmuzu spread his hands. "Oh no. The master of the house has made his feelings clear. Nevertheless, you could telephone Lieutenant Giragosian and learn what he knows."

I did just that. I called the copshop. "Lieutenant Giragosian's office," a man said.

"I'd like to speak to the lieutenant, please. This is Marîd Audran."

"Audran, son of a bitch. The lieutenant isn't, uh, available right now."

"Who's this, then?"

"This is his executive assistant, Sergeant Catavina." Jeez, the laziest, most easily bought cop in the city. How his star had risen.

"Look, Catavina," I said, "there've been two murders in the Budayeen in the last couple of days. One was a dancer, a real girl named Vi, and the other was a boy. Both had their throats torn out. Know anything about them?"

A pause. "Sure we do." He was playing it cagey. Dumb cagey.

"Look, pal, you want me to have Friedlander Bey send over a couple of guys to question you personal?"

"Take it easy, Audran." There was a gratifying hint of anxiety in Catavina's voice. "What are you looking for?"

"First, what's the ID on the boy?"

"Kid named Mahdi il-Mallah. Eleven years old."

I knew him. He was one of my friends. I felt a familiar coldness in my gut. "What about puncture wounds on the neck?"

"How'd you know? Yeah, that's in the report. Now, I got to tell the lieutenant you called. What you want me to tell him when he asks me what you're up to?"

I sighed. I wasn't happy about this. "Tell him I'm going to catch his vampire for him."

"Vampire! Audran, what are you, crazy?"

I hung up instead of replying.

Kmuzu's expression was difficult to read. I didn't know if he approved or not. I don't know why I cared. "One piece of advice, *yaa Sidi*, if you'll permit me: it would be a mistake to begin your investigation of this woman Sheba tonight."

"Uh-huh. Why do you say that?"

He shrugged again. "If I had to hunt a vampire, I'd do it during the daylight."

Good point. The next day I arose at dawn, made my ritual ablutions and prayed, then set out to begin serious investigations. If Kmuzu wasn't planning to offer any direct assistance -- meaning that he wouldn't even drive me over to the Budayeen -- then I'd have to rely on Bill the cabdriver. Now, if you know Bill, you know how amusing the concept of relying on him is. He's as dependable as a two-legged footstool.

I phoned him from the bathroom, because I didn't want Kmuzu to overhear me. I told Bill to pick me up just outside the high walls that surrounded Friedlander Bey's estate. Bill didn't remember who I was for a while, but that's usual. Bill's about as aware as a sleeping skink. He chose that for himself years ago, buying an expensive bodmod that constantly braised his brain in a very frightening high-tech hallucinogen. It would have driven most people to suicide within a handful of days; in Bill's case, I understand it sort of settled him down.

On the way from Papa's mansion to the eastern gate of the Budayeen, Bill and I had a disjointed conversation about the imminent war with the state of Gadsden. I eventually figured out that he was having some kind of flashback. Before he came to the city he'd lived in America, in the part now called Sovereign Deseret. His skink brain let him believe he was still there.

It was all right because he found the Budayeen easily enough. I gave him enough money so that he'd wait for me and drive me home, after I finished the morning's legwork. I started up the Street, in the direction of the cemetery. I didn't know yet what I wanted to do first. What did I have to go on? Two homicide victims, that's all, with nothing tangible connecting them except in the similarity of method. I had, on one hand, my employees' overheated warning that a vampire was loose around here, and on the other hand, my absolute disbelief in the supernatural.

There was nothing to do but call Chiri. I knew I'd be waking her up. I heard her pick up her phone and say, "Uh. Yeah?"

"Chiri, it's Marîd. I'm not waking you up, am I?"

"No." Her voice was real damn cold.

"Sorry. Listen, do you know where Sheba lives?"

"No, and I don't care, either."

"Then who do we know who could give me the address? I think I need to just drop by and ask Sheba a couple of things."

There was a pause: Chiri was being angry. "Yasmin would know. Or Lily."

"Yasmin or Lily. I probably should've called them first."

Another pause. "Probably."

I grimaced. "Sorry, Chiri. Go back to sleep. I'll see you later." She didn't say anything before she slammed the phone down.

I called Yasmin next, but I didn't get an answer. That didn't surprise me. I remembered from the days when Yasmin and I lived together that she was one of the best little sleepers that Allah ever invented. She could sleep through any major catastrophe except a missed meal. I gave up after listening to the phone ring a dozen and a half times, and then I called Lily. She was just as unhappy to be roused as Chiri, but her tone changed when she found out it was me. Lily has been waiting for me to call for a long time. She's a gorgeous sex-change, and she was well aware that I've never had much success with real women.

She was less happy when I told her I just wanted another girl's address and commcode. I heard ice through the ether again, but she finally gave me the information. It turned out that Sheba didn't live too far from my club.

"And one other thing," Lily said. "We checked by the Red Light Lounge. Sheba couldn't have been late to supper on account of some guy buying her drinks. She doesn't work daytimes, she's *never* worked daytimes -- just like we said. So she lied. You just don't see her around when the sun is up."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

"So what you want to get next to *that* for? If you're spending too much time all by yourself, honey, I'll help you out."

I didn't need this now. "Yasmin would scratch your eyes out, Lily. I've only been protecting you."

"Huh, Yasmin don't remember how to spell your name, Marîd." She slammed the phone down, too. I decided it wouldn't be a good idea to set foot in my own business today. I'd probably be slashed to ribbons.

I found Sheba's apartment building and went up to the second floor. It was an old place with a thin, worn carpet runner on the stairs. The paint on the walls hung down in grimy, blowzy strips. Sheba's front door was painted a dark reddish brown, the color of a bloodstain on clothing. I knocked. There was no response. Well, Sheba was a Budayeen hustler, she was probably asleep. I knocked louder and called her name. Finally I unclipped my phone again and murmured her commcode into it; I could hear the ringing from within the apartment.

It took me perhaps a minute and a half to get past her lock. The first thing I learned was that Sheba wasn't home. The second was that it appeared she hadn't been around for a while -- several envelopes had been pushed beneath her door. One had been closed only with a rubber band. I opened it; it contained a hundred kiam in ten-kiam bills, and a note from some admirer, Clothes, jewelry, stuffed animals, all sorts of things were strewn across the floor of the apartment's large room.

There was a mattress with a single sheet lying tipped up against a wall. The room's only window was standing open, water-stained yellow curtains blowing in on a warm breeze. Below the window was another heap of clothing and personal articles. I brushed the curtains aside and looked out. Below me was a narrow alley leading crookedly in the direction of Ninth Street.

A light was on in the bathroom; when I looked in there, it was as much a mess as the other room. It seemed to me that Sheba had been in a hell of a hurry, had grabbed up a few things, and had gotten out of the apartment as fast as she could. I couldn't guess why.

I looked more closely at what she'd left behind. Near the bathroom was a pile of cellophane and cardboard scraps that Sheba had kicked together. I sorted through the stuff and saw quickly that it was mostly packaging material ripped from several personality modules. I was familiar enough with the blazebrain field to know that some of the moddies Sheba had collected were not your regular commercial releases.

Sheba fancied black market titles, and very dangerous ones, too. She liked illegal underground moddies that fed her feelings of superiority and power; while she was wearing them she'd become these programmed people, and her behavior could range from the merely vicious to the downright sinister and deadly. She could almost certainly become capable of murder.

I recalled that months ago, when she worked for me at Chin's, she was almost always

chipped in to some moddy or other. That wasn't unusual among the dancers, though. I was sure that Sheba wasn't using these hard-core moddies back then, at least not at work. Something had happened in the meantime, something that had drastically changed her, and not for the better.

I put some of the wrappers in my pocket and went back to the window. A niggling thought had been bothering me, and I looked outside again. My attention was drawn to the four trash cans below. They weren't just any trash cans. Safiyya the Lamb Lady had brought me here. She had found all her silver jewelry in Sheba's alley.

I took another look around Sheba's shabby apartment. There were dead flowers shoved into one corner, several books thrown together on the floor, and shattered glass everywhere. I found another double handful of abandoned jewelry, a heap of pendants and necklaces, cheap stuff. Most were decorated with familiar symbols, all jumbled together -- there were a couple of Christian crosses; Islamic crescents and items with Qur'anic inscriptions; a Star of David; an ankh; Buddhist, Hindu, and other Asiatic religious tokens; occult designs; Native American figures; and others I wasn't able to identify. These were the only things I saw that might have had some connection to the vampire mythology, but I still discounted them -- the things might just have been left behind like the rest of the jewelry. I couldn't be sure there was any particular significance to them.

Nothing else set off a bell in my highly perceptive crime-solving mind. The moddies were the best clue, and so my next stop was Laila's modshop on Fourth Street. I was surprised that Laila herself wasn't in when I got there, but I was relieved, too. Laila is almost impossible to deal with. Instead, there was a young woman standing behind the counter.

She smiled at me. She didn't seem crazy at all. She was either wearing a moddy that force-fed her a pleasant personality, or something was definitely not right here. This was not a shop where you met people under the control of their own unaugmented selves.

"Can I help you?" she asked me in English. I don't speak much English, but I have an electronic add-on that takes care of that for me. I kept the language daddy chipped in almost all the time, because there are a lot of important English-speaking people in the city.

I took the wrappers from my pocket. "Sell any of these lately?"

She shuffled the cellophane around on the counter for a few seconds. "Nope," she said brightly. I was positive now that I wasn't dealing with her real personality. She was just too goddamn perky.

"How do you know?" I asked

She shrugged. "This shop and its owner are much too concerned about upholding local ordinances to sell illegal bootleg moddies."

I almost choked. "Yeah you're right," was all I said.

"Anything else I can help you with?" She was deeply concerned, I could tell. That was some moddy Laila had found for her.

"I'll just browse a bit." I went toward the bins of moddies based on characters from old books and holoshows. For some dumb reasons, I couldn't come up with the name of the villain I was looking for. "You know what a vampire is?"

"Sure," she said. "We had to watch that movie in a class in high school." She made a scornful expression. "Twentieth-century Literature."

"What was the vampire's name again?"

"Lestat. They made us watch that movie and another classic. *Airport*, it was. None of us could figure out what they had to do with the real world. I like modern literature better."

I'll bet she did. Lestat wasn't who I was searching for. I browsed through the bins for half an hour before I came across a set of vampire-character moddies. The package had been torn open. I took it to the counter and showed it to the young woman. "Know anything about this?" I asked.

She was upset. "We don't break sets open," she said. "We wouldn't have done that." The

Dracula moddy was missing, leaving the Jonathan Harker, Lucy Westenra, Dr. Van Helsing, and Renfield moddies. I gave a little involuntary shudder. I didn't want to meet the person who'd be eager to chip in Renfield.

"Do you suppose someone could have shoplifted the missing moddy?" I asked.

I almost wished I hadn't said it. The young woman paled. I could see how abhorrent the entire idea was to her. "Perhaps," she murmured. The word she used was "perhaps," not "maybe." That had to be the software talking.

"Forget it," I said, coming to a decision. "I'll buy the rest of the package."

"Even though part of it's been stolen? You know I'm not authorized to offer you a discount."

It took me a little while longer to persuade her to sell me the things, and I was already chipping in Dr. Van Helsing, that fearless old vampire hunter, as I left the shop and headed back toward the eastern gate.

The first thing Audran noticed was that he was somewhat taller and a good deal older. There was a painful twinge in his left shoulder, but he decided it wouldn't hinder him too much. He also felt very Dutch; he -- Van Helsing -- was from Amsterdam, after all.

Audran's own consciousness lurked in a tiny, hidden-away area submerged beneath the overlay of Van Helsing. There he wondered what "feeling Dutch" meant. It was probably just some programmer's laziness. That person had known that Van Helsing was Dutch, but had not bothered to include specific dutchnesses. It was a weakness that Audran despised in poorly written commercial moddies.

It did not take long for Audran's muscles and nerves to compensate for the differences between his own physical body and the one the moddy's manufacturer imagined. As long as the moddy was chipped in, Audran would move, feel, and respond as Van Helsing. There was also an annoying nervous flutter in his right eyelid, and Audran sincerely hoped it would go away as soon as he popped the moddy out.

Van Helsing was still heading east, on the sidewalk; Audran preferred walking in the middle of the street. As he approached the arched gate of the Budayeen, Van Helsing considered the things they had found in Sheba's apartment. Now, with his special knowledge, the evidence took on new significance.

How could Audran be expected to appreciate the absolute horror of what he'd discovered in the abandoned apartment? How could Audran know that the dead flowers, roses, were shunned by all vampires; that the broken glass came from shattered mirrors around the room; that the sacred symbols were powerful weapons against the Un-Dead?

More compelling yet were the books and papers left with seeming carelessness on the floor. They had looked harmless enough to Audran, but Van Helsing knew that within their pages were terrible, evil passages describing rituals through which a living human being could become a vampire, and others that gave instructions for inviting demons to invade and possess one's immortal soul.

Through Audran's inaction, the situation had become dire and deadly; more than human lives were at stake now. An unholy monster was loose among the unsuspecting people of the Budayeen. Once again, it was left to Dr. Van Helsing to restore peace and sanctity, if he could.

Cursing Audran for a fool, Van Helsing quickened his pace.

Audran should've guessed the truth when the young boy had been attacked, Dracula's victim, Lucy, had preyed largely on children. Van Helsing felt an uncomfortable stirring of his emotions. Although he'd never admit the fact to anyone, he was aware of his barely sublimated lust toward female vampires. And now he'd been called upon to battle a new one. He shook his head; at the ultimate moment, he knew, he would be strong enough. He passed through the arch and onto the beautiful Boulevard il-Jameel.

Bill the cabdriver was still waiting for him. He tapped Van Helsing on the shoulder. "Ready

to go?" he asked.

"God in hemel!" Van Helsing exclaimed.

"That's easy for you to say," Bill said. "Get in."

Van Helsing and Audran glanced at the taxi. Together they reached up and popped the moddy out.

"The guy's a total loon," I muttered as I slid into the cab's backseat.

"Got a complaint about me, pal?" Bill asked.

"No," I said, "I'm talking about this Van Helsing jerk. He sees deadly gruesome creatures everywhere he looks."

Bill shrugged. "Well, hell, so do I, but I just steer around 'em." I thought that was a pretty sensible attitude.

Bill delivered me to the front gate of Friedlander Bey's estate. I hurried inside and up to my suite just in time for Kmuzu to remind me about the important luncheon meeting scheduled with Papa and the political representatives of some damn place. I showered again, feeling just a little sullied after letting that repressed Van Helsing character occupy my mind and body. I put on my best *gallebeya* and *keffiya*, going so far as to belt a gorgeous jeweled ceremonial dagger in front at the waist. I looked good, and I knew Papa would be pleased.

The luncheon itself was fine, just fine. I don't even remember what we ate, but there was tons of it and the delegation from Parthia was appropriately impressed. More important, though, was that they were appropriately intimidated. I sat in my chair and looked thoughtful, while Friedlander Bey explained to them the facts of life here in the early years of the twenty-third century of the Christian Era.

What it all amounted to was that the Parthians pretended to be grateful after being denied the help they'd come for. They even tried to bribe Papa further by guaranteeing him exclusive influence with the victorious side in the brand-new Silesian revolt. Since no one at that moment could predict which party would end up in power, and since Papa had little interest in nations beyond the Islamic realm, and since everyone in the room including Habib and Labib knew that the Parthians couldn't deliver on their promise in the first place, we acted as if they hadn't said a word. It was an embarrassing blunder on their part, but Friedlander Bey handled it all with grace and assurance. He just waved to have the coffee and kataifi brought in. Papa's extremely fond of kataifi, a Greek dessert something like baklava, except it looks like shredded wheat. It may be his only worldly weakness.

With all the formal greetings and salutations and invitations and flatteries and thank-yous and blessings and leave-takings, it was about five o'clock before I was able to return to my rooms. I started to tell Kmuzu what had gone on, but naturally he already knew all about it. He even had a little advice for me concerning the people of Kush, who no doubt would soon strike back against the weakened Parthians.

"Fine," I said impatiently. "Thank you, Kmuzu, I don't know what I'd do without you. If you'll just excuse me -- "

"The family of the young murdered boy said they were sorry you couldn't come to the funeral. They know how fond of you he'd been. I explained that you'd been detained by the master of the house."

I regretted missing the service. I wished I could've at least been at the cemetery to offer my condolences.

"I think I'll just relax now," I said. "I'm going to rest for a while, and then I'm going to see how my nightclub is doing without me. That *is* all right, isn't it? I mean, I'm allowed to go down there this evening, aren't I?"

Kmuzu gave me a blank stare for a second or two. "I have been advised otherwise, *yaa Sidi*," he said.

"Oh. Too bad. Then -- "

I was looking at his back. "You have two visitors waiting to speak with you, a man and a boy. They've been here since two o'clock."

"In the anteroom? All this time?" I didn't want to see anyone else, but I couldn't just tell these people to go home and come back tomorrow. "All right, I'll -- " Kmuzu wasn't paying any attention. He was already going toward my office. I followed, trying not to let all this power go to my head.

When I saw who was waiting for me, I was startled. It was Bill the cabdriver and a boy from the Budayeen. Bill was standing up with his back to the room, his hands stretched up as high against the wall as he could reach. Don't ask me why. The kid's name was Musa Ali, and his dirty face was streaked with tears. He was sitting quietly in a chair. I felt sorry for him, having to spend all those hours alone with Bill. I wouldn't have done it.

When I came in, they both began speaking at once. They talked fast and furiously. I couldn't make any sense out of it I signaled to Bill to shut up, and then I let Musa Ali explain things. "My sister," he said, his eyes wide with fear, "she's taken her."

I looked at Bill. "The vampire," he said. Suddenly he was very calm and matter-of-fact. His hands were still raised high, but I didn't hold that against him. You took what you could get with Bill.

Between the two of them, I got an idea of the story. Not the truth, necessarily, but the story. Apparently, just at noon, Sheba, in her vampire form, had stolen another child, Musa Ali's six-year-old sister. Bill had tried to interfere, and a tremendous fight had erupted. On one side was this burly full-grown man, and on the other was a short nightclub dancer burdened with a struggling child in her arms. Bill was covered with dark bruises and bloody cuts and scratches, so I didn't really have to ask which way the conflict had gone.

"She turned into a bunch of mist," Bill said, shrugging. He sounded apologetic. "I couldn't fight a bunch of mist, could I? She just floated away on the breeze. Reminded me of that time this guy from Tunis tried to cheat me out of my fare, and just then I heard this music from Heaven that was too high-pitched for normal humans to hear, see, so I turned around as fast as I could, but he was trying to get out of the cab, so then -- "

I stopped listening to Bill. "Mist?" I asked Musa Ali.

"Uh-huh," the boy said.

So now I was tracking down a fog lady. A murderous vampire fog lady. Suddenly I *really* wanted another piece of kataifi ...

It was getting late. I returned quickly to my apartment, to change clothes again and pick up a few items I thought might be useful. One of those things was the Van Helsing moddy -- after all, the excitable Dutch fanatic knew more about hunting vampires than I ever would. I just had to try to maintain a little rational control, to offset Van Helsing's own serious hangups.

I avoided Kmuzu and hurried back to Bill and Musa Ali, still waiting in my office. With some difficulty, we managed to slip out of the house without any direct interference from Friedlander Bey's staff, and I gave Bill the order to drive us back to the Budayeen. "First I take you over there," Bill complained, "then I bring you back, then I go home, then I come back here, now we go over there again. Maybe I'll be lucky and we'll all get killed tonight. I don't do this driving thing because I *enjoy* it, you know."

Bill can trap you that way, by fooling you into asking the next obvious question. That always leads into an even more bizarre rant, and I've promised myself not to get suckered in anymore. I didn't ask him what he wanted me to ask.

"Are you taking me home?" Musa Ali asked. "I can't go home until I find my sister."

He was a brave kid. "You go home," I said. "We'll find your sister."

"Okay," he said. He was brave, but he wasn't a fool.

"We're going to the cemetery, Bill," said. "It's the only logical place to look for Sheba."

"They won't let me into the cemetery, pal," he said.

"Who won't?"

"The dead people. They won't let me into the cemetery because I'm American."

"They don't have dead people in America?" I asked. I had already forgotten my promise to myself.

"Oh, sure, they do," Bill said. "But the dead people here in the city still hold it against Americans that they have the wrong unlucky number. It's not thirteen, see, like Americans believe, because -- " I stopped listening. I reached up and chipped the Van Helsing moddy in instead.

There was another moment of disorientation, but it passed quickly. "Stakes!" Van Helsing said loudly. "We need sharp wooden stakes! How could Audran have forgotten them? We have to stop and find some!"

"Don't worry about stakes," Bill said calmly. "Got 'em in the trunk. I got some in case I ever get a tent." Van Helsing was wise enough not to pursue it any further.

Because Van Helsing wasn't as familiar with the city as Audran, he didn't notice immediately that Bill, for all his many years of experience, was getting pretty damn lost. The probable explanation was that his invisible evil temptresses were leading him astray. Both Van Helsing and Audran would have understood that. Instead, though, the vampire hunter stared out the taxi's window, watching the neighborhoods slide by.

Time passed, and the sun dropped silently toward the horizon. It was almost dark when Bill finally drove past the Budayeen's eastern gate. He jammed on the brakes, and Van Helsing and he jumped out of the car. More time was spent as Bill searched for the trunk key. At last they armed themselves with the stakes; they couldn't find a hammer, but Bill carried an old, dead battery that could be used for pounding purposes.

"We'll need something to cut off Sheba's head, too," Van Helsing said in a worried voice. "We'll need to get a large cleaver. And garlic to stuff into her mouth."

Bill nodded. "There's an all-night convenience store on our way."

Van Helsing still seemed apprehensive. "Sheba will be at her full powers soon."

"Well," Bill said, smiling broadly, "so am I." That didn't do very much to reassure his companion.

There are sixteen blocks between the eastern gate and the cemetery, the length of the Street, the width of the Budayeen. They hurried as fast as they could, but Bill had never been very agile, and Van Helsing was not a young man anymore. They pushed through the crowds of local folk and foreign tourists with growing desperation, but by the time they arrived at their goal, the sun had set. It was night. They would have to face the full fury of the vampire's power.

"Have no fear," Van Helsing said. "This isn't the first time I've challenged the Un-Dead on their own territory. You have nothing to worry about. "

"That's easy for you to say," Bill said. "You don't have to worry about the ground opening up in horrible fissures right in front of you."

Van Helsing paused. "Bill," he said at last, "the ground isn't opening up."

Bill put a finger alongside his nose. "No, you 're right," he confided, "but that doesn't mean I'm not going to worry about it."

Van Helsing looked up to Heaven, where God was watching. "Come on," he told Bill. "We mustn't be too late to save the little girl."

They arrived at the cemetery. No one else was nearby. Van Helsing saw the flowers and other offerings on the ground near where Mahdi il-Mallah had been laid to rest. The boy's parents couldn't afford an above-ground tomb, so he'd been interred in a small, ovenlike vault built into one of the cemetery's red brick walls.

"Oh my God," Bill cried. He motioned toward the back of the graveyard.

Van Helsing turned and looked where Bill was pointing. He saw Sheba, dressed in a long, filthy black shift. Her hair was wildly disheveled and matted with leaves and twigs. There were streaks of dirt on her face and bare arms. She stared at Van Helsing and snarled. Even from that distance, the Dutchman could see the great, long canine teeth, the mark of the vampire.

"It's her," Van Helsing said in a quiet voice.

"You mean, 'It's she,'" Bill said.

"Or what remains of her earthly body, now inhabited by something of unspeakable foulness. Take warning: remember that she has the strength of a dozen or more normal people." Beneath Van Helsing's overwhelming presence, Audran realized that the vampire moddy was constructed with an endocrine controller, letting a flood of adrenaline loose in Sheba's bloodstream. Whoever was correct -- Audran or Van Helsing, believer in natural law or in evil magic -- it made no difference. The ultimate effect was the same.

"You know," Bill said thoughtfully, "she wouldn't be half-bad looking if she'd just fix herself up a little."

Van Helsing did not deign to reply. He moved toward Sheba, feeling terror, determination, and an odd longing mixed together. Sheba stood before a large whitewashed tomb, its marble front panel removed and cast aside. This was where she'd taken up residence after leaving behind her human dwelling place. There was a vile stench emanating from the tomb. Nevertheless, Van Helsing summoned his courage and stepped nearer.

He heard small rustling noises, and behind Sheba he saw movement. It had to be Musa Ali's sister, still alive, but bound and made captive by this loathsome creature. "Thanks be to all the angels that we are yet in time," he said.

Sheba did not cry out or utter any verbal challenges; it was as if she'd lost the power of speech. Instead, she made harsh, guttural, animal noises deep in her throat.

"Unbind the child and let her go free," Van Helsing demanded.

Once again Sheba bared her perilous fangs and hissed at them, not like a snake, but like a great feral cat. Then she rushed forward more swiftly than even Van Helsing had anticipated and leaped on him, reaching for his unprotected throat with her clawed fingers and savaging him with her demon teeth.

Bill hurried to Van Helsing's defense. "Not again," he said. "Not another one."

"What?" Van Helsing asked.

"Another what-you-call, an abomination. Yeah. Bloodthirsty, too. Bad luck always comes in threes, you know. So the third one is going to be a real showstopper."

Bill attacked first, clouting the hideous thing with all the strength he had. The blow had little effect. Bill lurched backward, shaking his injured hand. His enemy was very tall, lowering over him in a confident slouch. Despite his mental and physical handicaps. Bill was a better boxer than his opponent; he had a quicker punch, and his bob-and-weave was deft by comparison. Again and again Bill struck, but for all the pain he was causing himself, and for the complete lack of results he was achieving against his foe, Bill might as well have been beating up the brick wall.

Meanwhile, Van Helsing had as much as he could handle with Sheba. She fought like a cornered beast, ripping and tearing and biting at him. He ordered her again to release the young girl. Then he tried to reason with Sheba. Finally, he resorted to threats. Nothing worked. She was no longer human, no longer susceptible to his powers of persuasion.

He was covered with his own blood when he finally managed to throw Sheba to the ground. He'd put a foot behind one of hers, then shoved her shoulder heavily. She toppled backward, shrieking in incoherent rage. Van Helsing wasted no time congratulating himself. He reached for one of the sharpened stakes and a loose brick.

Sheba glared up at him, her lips drawn back in an animal growl. She was completely in the power of the vampire now, no longer human in any respect, yet there was also a frightened pleading in her eyes -- or so Van Helsing chose to believe. Audran saw it, too.

"She's as moddy-driven as Van Helsing," Audran thought. "He's a self-righteous, demented maniac, as murderous as she is. Maybe she deserves some compassion." With an exhausting effort of will, Audran and Van Helsing reached up and popped the moddy out.

"Jeez," I muttered, dropping the plastic moddy to the ground. It was a great relief again to be rid of Van Helsing's monomania. Meanwhile, I had little time to think. I was still trying to control the enraged Sheba, who struggled and bucked in my grasp.

Bill had evidently vanquished his enemy. "That's right, pal," he said, reaching for one of the fire-hardened stakes. "You hold her and I'll ostracize her."

The first thing I did, while I ignored Bill, was to pop out Sheba's vampire moddy. The transformation was immediate and dramatic. The knowledge of what she'd done while under its influence flooded in, horrifying her. "I just couldn't take it out," she gasped between loud sobs. "Other moddies I can take or leave alone, but this one was different. I never had anything to say about it. I couldn't control myself. Once I chipped it in, that was it; I became a vampire forever."

"Some irresponsible programmer wrote that into the moddy," I said. I tried to speak in a soothing voice. I no longer feared or hated Sheba; I felt only immense sadness. She just collapsed in tears as if she hadn't heard me.

"Hey," Bill said proudly. "You notice that I took care of my guy all right."

"Bill," I explained wearily, "you were savagely going ten rounds with a date palm."

He stared at me. "A date palm? Well, hell, who knows what afrit was inside it when it hit me. Maybe we should get somebody up here to exorcise that tree."

"It didn't hit you, Bill. I saw the whole thing from the beginning."

Bill scratched uneasily with one foot in the black soil. "Anyway, I think I killed it. Now I'm sorry, if it's only a date palm."

I gave him a reassuring smile, although I didn't really feel like it. "Don't worry, Bill. I'm sure it's only stunned."

He brightened considerably. "That's easy for *you* to say," he said.

I smashed both the Dracula and Van Helsing moddies with the brick. Who can say how much good that did, because the next homicidal blazebrain still had plenty of murderous moddies to choose from, at Laila's store or any of the other mod-shops in the Budayeen. I let out a deep breath in a sigh. I'd worry about those killers when the time came.

I helped Sheba to her feet. She was still hysterical, but now she clung to me for comfort. Her violent sobbing was subsiding. I saw that her vampire's elongated canine teeth were fake, a bodily modification that Sheba had paid for at one of the Budayeen storefront surgical clinics. I reached up slowly and gently and pulled the fangs free.

I knew Sheba had an addictive personality -- there was a lot of that going around the Budayeen these days -- and although she wouldn't wear the vampire moddy again, she was more than likely going to become something just as dangerous to herself and to other people in the near future.

Still, I thought, I could hope that the sudden awareness of what she'd done would get her to seek help. There was nothing more that I could do for her now. The rest was up to Sheba herself.

Just as my own future would be shaped in part by the moddies I bought and wore. Hell, I'd just come very close to killing a seriously troubled young woman while I was under the influence of the Van Helsing moddy. I was certainly in no position to judge her.

That gave me an awful lot to think about, but I could put that off until later, or tomorrow, or some other time. Right then I turned my attention to Musa Ali's little sister. I untied her and satisfied myself that although she was exhausted and terrified, she was otherwise unharmed. Bill bent down and picked her up in his arms. He always got along well with children.

As the Budayeen characters began to arrive at the cemetery, drawn by the shouting and racket of our small war with the Un-Dead, I took Sheba's arm and led her out of the graveyard, back down the Street to her long-unused apartment. As of that moment, all she had was hope.