



A Fire in the Sun

(The second book in the Marid Audran series)

George Alec Effinger

BANTAM BOOKS NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

A FIRE IN THE SUN

A Bantam Spectra Book I April 1990

spectra and the portrayal of a boxed "s" are trademarks of Bantam Books, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 1990 by George Alec Effinger. Cover art copyright © 1990 by Steve and Paul Youll.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information address: Bantam Books.

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

ISBN 0-553-27407-4 Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. Its trademark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a rooster, is Registered in U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and in other countries. Marco Registrada. Bantam Books, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10103.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

My grandfather, George Conrad Effinger, whom I never knew, was a police officer in the city of Cleveland during the Depression. He was killed in the line of duty. This book is dedicated to his memory, growing fainter now each year in the minds of those people who did know him, except for his policeman's shield, Badge #374, hung with pride in a station house in Cleveland.

Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.

—oscar wilde

The Picture of Dorian Gray

He'd ridden for many days out the coast highway toward Mauretania, the part of Algeria where I'd been born. In that time, even at its lethargic pace, the broken-down old bus had carried us from the city to some town forsaken by Allah before it even learned what its name was. Centuries come, centuries go: In the Arab world they arrive and depart loaded on the roofs of shuddering, rattling buses that are more trouble to keep in service than the long parades of camels used to be. I remembered what those bus rides were like from when I was a kid, sitting or standing in the aisle with fifty other boys and men and maybe another two dozen clinging up on the roof. The buses passed by my home then. I saw turbaned heads, heads wearing fezes or knit caps, heads in white or checked keffiyas. All men. That was something I planned to ask my father about, if I ever met him. "O my father," I would say, "tell me why everyone on the bus is a man. Where are their women?"

And I always imagined that my father—I pictured him tall and lean with a fierce dark beard, a hawk or an eagle of a man; he was, in my vision, Arab, although I had my mother's word that he had been a Frenchman—I saw my father gazing thoughtfully into the bright sunlight, framing a careful reply to his young son. "O Marid, my sweet one," he would say—and his voice would be deep and husky, issuing from the back of his throat as if he never used his lips to speak, although my mother said he wasn't like that at all—"Marid, the women will come later. The men will send for them later."

"Ah," I would say. My father could pierce all riddles. I could not pose a question that he did not have a proper answer for. He was wiser than our village shaykh more knowledgeable than the man whose face filled the posters pasted on the wall we were pissing on. "Father," I would ask him, "why are we pissing on this man's face?"

"Because it is idolatrous to put his face on such a poster, and it is fit only for a filthy alley like this, and therefore the Prophet, may the blessing of Allah be on him and peace, tells us that what we are doing to these images is just and right."

"And Father?" I would always have one more question, and he'd always be blissfully patient. He would smile down at me, put one hand fondly behind my head. "Father? I have always wanted to ask you, what do you do when you are pissing and your bladder is so full it feels like it will explode before you can relieve it and while you are pissing, just then, the muezzin—"

Saied hit me hard in the left temple with the palm of his hand. "You sleeping out here?"

I looked up at him. There was glare everywhere. I couldn't remember where the hell we were. "Where the hell are we?" I asked him.

He snorted. "You're the one from the Maghreb, the great, wild west. You tell me."

"Have we got to Algeria yet?" I didn't think so.

"No, stupid. I've been sitting in that goddamn little coffeehouse for three hours charming the warts off this fat fool. His name is Hisham."

"Where are we?"

"Just crossed through Carthage. We're on the outskirts of Old Tunis now. So listen to me. What's the old guy's name?"

"Huh? I don't remember."

He hit me hard in the right temple with the palm of his other hand. I hadn't slept in two nights. I was a little confused. Anyway, he got the easy part of the job: Sitting around the bus stops, drinking mint tea with the local ringleaders and gossiping about the marauding Christians and the marauding Jews and the marauding heathen niggers and just in general being goddamn smooth; and I got the piss-soaked alleys and the flies. I couldn't remember why we divided this business up like that. After all, I was supposed to be in charge—it was my idea to find this woman, it was my trip, we were using my money. But

Saied took the mint tea and the gossip, and I got—well, I don't have to go into that again.

We waited the appropriate amount of time. The sun was disappearing behind a western wall; it was almost time for the sunset call to prayer. I stared at Saied, who was now

dozing. Good, I thought, now I get to hit him in the head. I had just gotten up and taken one little step, when he looked up at me. "It's time, I guess," he said, -yawning. I nodded, didn't have anything to add. So I sat back down, and Saied the Half-Hajj went into his act.

Saied is a natural-born liar, and it's a pleasure to watch him hustle. He had the personality module he liked best plugged into his brain—his heavy-duty, steel-belted, mean mother of a tough-guy moddy. Nobody messed with the Half-Hajj when he was chipping that one in.

Back home in the city, Saied thought it was beneath him to earn money. He liked to sit in the cafes with me and Mahmoud and Jacques, all day and all evening. His little chicken, the American boy everybody called Abdul-Hassan, went out with older men and brought home the rent money. Saied liked to sneer a lot and wear his gal-lebeya cinched with a wide black leather belt, which was decorated with shiny chrome-steel strips and studs. The Half-Hajj was always careful of his appearance.

What he was doing in this vermin-infested roadside slum was what he called fun. I waited a few minutes and followed him around the corner and into the coffeehouse. I shuffled in, unkempt, filthy, and took a chair in a shadowy corner. The proprietor glanced at me, frowned, and turned back to Saied. Nobody ever paid any attention to me. Saied was finishing the tail end of a joke I'd heard him tell a do/en times since we'd left the city. When he came to the payoff, the shopkeeper and the four other men at the long counter burst into laughter. They liked Saied. He could make people like him whenever he wanted. That tilent was programmed into an add-on chip snapped into - badass moddy. With the right moddy and the right iddy chips, it didn't matter where you'd been born or how you'd been raised. You could fit in with any sort of people, you could speak any language, you could handle mrsel in any situation. The information was fed directly to your short-term memory. You could literally become

another person, Ramses II or Buck Rogers in the 25th century, until you popped the moddy and daddies out.

Saied was being rough and dangerous, but he was also being charming, if you can imagine that combination. I watched the shop owner reach and grab the teapot. He poured some into the Half-Hajj's glass, slopping some more on the wooden counter. Nobody moved to mop it up. Saied raised the glass to drink, then slammed it down again. "Yaa salaam!" he roared. He leaped up.

"What is it, O my friend?" asked Hisham, the proprietor.

"My ring!" Saied shouted. He was wearing a large gold ring, and he'd been waving it

under the old man's nose for two solid hours. It had had a big, round diamond in its center.

"What's the matter with your ring?"

"Look for yourself! The stone—my diamond—it's gone!"

Hisham caught Saied's flapping arm and saw that, indeed, the diamond was now missing. "Must have fallen out," the old man said, with the sort of folk wisdom you find only in these petrified provincial villages.

"Yes, fallen out," said Saied, not calmed in the least. "But where?"

"Do you see it?"

Saied made a great show of searching the floor around his stool. "No, I'm sure it's not here," he said at last.

"Then it must be out in the alley. You must've lost it the last time you went out to piss."

Saied slammed the bar with his heavy fist. "And now it's getting dark, and I must catch the bus."

"You still have time to search," said Hisham. He didn't sound very confident.

The Half-Hajj laughed without humor. "A stone like that, worth four thousand Tunisian dinars, looks like a tiny pebble among a million others. In the twilight I'd never find it. What am I to do?"

The old man chewed his lip and thought for a moment. "You're determined to leave on the bus, when it passes through?" he asked.

"I must, O my brother. I have urgent business."

"I'll help you if I can. Perhaps I can find the stone for

you. You must leave your name and address with me; then if I find the diamond, I'll send it to you."

"May the blessings of Allah be on you and on your family!" said Saied. "I have little hope that you'll succeed, but it comforts me to know you will do your best for me. I'm in your debt. We must determine a suitable reward for you."

Hisham looked at Saied with narrowed eyes. "I ask no reward," he said slowly.

"No, of course not, but I insist on offering you one."

"No reward is necessary. I consider it my duty to help you, as a Muslim brother."

"Still," Saied went on, "should you find the wretched stone, I'll give you a thousand Tunisian dinars for the sustenance of your children and the ease of your aged parents."

"Let it be as you wish," said Hisham with a small bow.

"Here," said my friend, "let me write my address for you." While Saied was scribbling his name on a scrap of paper, I heard the rumbling of the bus as it lurched to a stop outside the building.

"May Allah grant you a good journey," said the old man.

"And may He grant you prosperity and peace," said Saied, as he hurried out to the bus.

I waited about three minutes. Now it was my turn. I stood up and staggered a couple of steps. I had a lot of trouble walking in a straight line. I could see the shopkeeper glaring at me in disgust. "The hell do you want, you filthy beggar?" he said.

"Some water," I said.

"Water! Buy something or get out!"

"Once a man asked the Messenger of God, may Allah's blessings be on him, what was the noblest thing a man may do. The reply was 'To give water to he who thirsts.' I ask this of you."

"Ask the Prophet. I'm busy."

I nodded. I didn't expect to get anything free to drink out of this crud. I leaned against his counter and stared at a wall. I couldn't seem to make the place stand still.

"Now what do you want? I told you to go away."

"Trying to remember," I said peevishly. "I had something to tell you. Ah, yes, I know." I reached into a pocket of my jeans and brought out a glittering round stone. "Is this what that man was looking for? I found this out there. Is this—?"

The old man tried to snatch it out of my hand. "Where'd you get that? The alley, right?"

My alley. Then it's mine."

"No, I found it. It's—"

"He said he wanted me to look for it." The shopkeeper was already gazing into the distance, spending the reward money.

"He said he'd pay you money for it."

"That's right. Listen, I've got his address. Stone's no good to you without the address."

I thought about that for a second or two. "Yes, O Shaykh."

"And the address is no good to me without the stone. So here's my offer: I'll give you two hundred dinars for it."

"Two hundred? But he said—"

"He said he'd give me a thousand. Me, you drunken fool. It's worthless to you. Take the two hundred. When was the last time you had two hundred dinars to spend?"

"A long time."

"I'll bet. So?"

"Let me have the money first."

"Let me have the stone."

"The money."

The old man growled something and turned away. He brought a rusty coffee can up from under the counter. There was a thick wad of money in it, and he fished out two hundred dinars in old, worn bills. "Here you are, and damn your mother for a whore."

I took the money and stuffed it into my pocket. Then I gave the stone to Hisham. "If you hurry," I said, slurring my words despite the fact that I hadn't had a drink or any drugs all day, "you'll catch up with him. The bus hasn't left yet."

The man grinned at me. "Let me give you a lesson in shrewd business. The esteemed gentleman offered me a thousand dinars for a four thousand dinar stone. Should I take the reward, or sell the stone for its full value?"

"Selling the stone will bring trouble," I said.

"Let me worry about that. Now you go to hell. I don't ever want to see you around here again."

He needn't worry about that. As I left the decrepit coffeehouse, I popped out the moddy I was wearing. I don't know where the Half-Hajj had gotten it; it had a Malaccan label on it, but I didn't think it was an over-the-counter piece of hardware. It was a dumbing-down moddy; when I chipped it in, it ate about half of my intellect and left me shambling, stupid, and just barely able to carry out my half of the plan. With it out, the world suddenly poured back into my consciousness, and it was like waking from a bleary, drugged sleep. I was always angry for half an hour after I popped that moddy. I hated myself for agreeing to wear it, I hated Saied for conning me into doing it. He wouldn't wear it, not the Half-Hajj and his precious self-image. So I wore it, even though I'm gifted with twice the intracranial modifications of anybody else around, enough daddy capacity to make me the most talented son of a bitch in creation. And still Saied persuaded me to damp myself out to the point of near vegeta-bility.

On the bus, I sat next to him, but I didn't want to talk to him or listen to him gloat.

"What'd we get for that chunk of glass?" he wanted to know. He'd already replaced the real diamond in his ring.

I just handed the money to him. It was his game, it was his score. I couldn't have cared less. I don't even know why I went along with him, except that he'd said he wouldn't come to Algeria with me unless I did.

He counted the bills. "Two hundred? That's all? We got more the last two times. Oh well, what the hell—that's two hundred dinars more we can blow in Algiers. 'Come with me to the Kasbah.' Little do those gazelle-eyed boys know what's stealing toward them even now, through the lemon-scented night."

"This stinking bus, that's what, Saied."

He looked at me with wide eyes, then laughed. "You got no romance in you, Marid," he said. "Ever since you had your brain wired, you been no fun at all."

"How about that." I didn't want to talk anymore. I pretended that I was going to sleep. I just closed my eyes and listened to the bus thumping and thudding over the broken pavement, with the unending arguments and laughter of the other passengers all around me. It was crowded and hot on that reeking bus, but it was carrying

me hour by hour nearer to the solution of my own mystery. I had come to a point in my

life where I needed to find out who I really was.

The bus stopped in the Barbary town of Annaba, and an old man with a grizzled gray beard came aboard selling apricot nectar. I got some for myself and some for the Half-Hajj. Apricots are the pride of Mauretania, and the juice was the first real sign that I was getting close to home. I closed my eyes and inhaled that delicate apricot aroma, then swallowed a mouthful of juice and savored the thick sweetness. Saied just gulped his down with a grunt and gave me a blunt "Thanks." The guy's got all the refinement of a dead bat.

The road angled south, away from the dark, invisible coast toward the city of Constantine. Although it was getting late, almost midnight, I told Saied that I wanted to get off the bus and grab some supper. I hadn't eaten anything since noon. Constantine is built on a high limestone bluff, the only ancient town in eastern Algeria to survive through centuries of foreign invasions. The only thing I cared about, though, was food. There is a local dish in Constantine called chorba beida bel kefta, a meatball soup made with onions, pepper, chickpeas, almonds, and cinnamon. I hadn't tasted it in at least fifteen years, and I didn't care if it meant missing the bus and having to wait until tomorrow for another, I was going to have some. Saied thought I was crazy.

I had my soup, and it was wonderful. Saied just watched me wordlessly and sipped a glass of tea. We got back on the bus in time. I felt good now, comfortably full and warmed by a nostalgic glow. I took the window seat, hoping that I'd be able to see some familiar landscape as we passed through Jijel and Mansouria. Of course, it was as black as the inside of my pocket beyond the glass, and I saw nothing but the moon and the fiercely twinkling stars. Still, I pretended to myself that I could make out landmarks that meant I was drawing closer to Algiers, the city where I had spent a lot of my childhood.

When at last we pulled into Algiers sometime after sunrise, the Half-Hajj shook me awake. I didn't remember falling asleep. I felt terrible. My head felt like it had been crammed full of sharp-edged broken glass, and I had a pinched nerve in my neck, too. I took out my pillcase and

stared into it for a while. Did I prefer to make my entrance into Algiers hallucinating, narcotized, or somnambulant? It was a difficult decision. I went for pain-free but conscious, so I fished out eight tabs of Sonneine. The sunnies obliterated my headache—and every other mildly unpleasant sensation—and I more or less floated from the bus station in Mustapha to a cab.

"You're stoned," said Saied when we got to the back of the taxi. I told the driver to take us to a public data library.

"Me? Stoned? When have you ever known me to be stoned so early in the morning?"

"Yesterday. The day before yesterday. The day before that."

"I mean except for then. I function better with a ton of opiates in me than most people do straight."

"Sure you do."

I stared out the taxi's window. "Anyway," I said, "I've got a rack of daddies that can compensate." There isn't another blazebrain in the Arab world with the custom-made equipment I've got. My special daddies control my hypothalamic functions, so I can tune out fatigue and fear, hunger and thirst and pain. They can boost my sensory input too.

"Marid Audran, Silicon Superman."

"Look," I said, annoyed by Saied's attitude, "for a long time I was terrified of getting wired, but now I don't know how I ever got along without it."

"Then why the hell are you still decimating your brain cells with drugs?" asked the Half-Hajj.

"Call me old-fashioned. Besides, when I pop the daddies out, I feel terrible. All that suppressed fatigue and pain hit me at once."

"And you don't get paybacks with your sunnies and beauties, right? That what you're saying?"

"Shut up, Saied. Why the hell are you so concerned all of a sudden?"

He looked at me sideways and smiled. "The religion has this ban on liquor and hard drugs, you know." And this coming from the Half-Hajj who, if he'd ever been inside a mosque in his life, was there only to check out the boys' school.

So in ten or fifteen minutes the cab driver let us out at

the library. I felt a peculiar nervous excitement, although I didn't understand why. All I was doing was climbing the granite steps of a public building; why should I be so wound up? I tried to occupy my mind with more pleasant thoughts.

Inside, there were a number of terminals vacant. I sat down at the gray screen of a battered Bab el-Marifi. It asked me what sort of search I wanted to conduct. The machine's voice synthesizer had been designed in one of the North American republics,

and it was having a lot of trouble pronouncing Arabic. I said, "Name," then "Enter." When the cursor appeared again, I said, "Monroe comma Angel." The data deck thought about that for a while, then white letters began flicking across its bright face:

Angel Monroe

16, Rue du Sahara '

(Upper) Kasbah

Algiers

Mauretania

04-B-28

I had the machine print out the address. The Half-Hajj raised his eyebrows at me and I nodded. "Looks like I'm gonna get some answers."

"Inshallah," murmured Saied. If God wills.

We went back out into the hot, steamy morning to find another taxi. It didn't take long to get from the library to the Kasbah. There wasn't as much traffic as I remembered from my childhood—not vehicular traffic, anyway; but there was still the slow, unavoidable battalions of I heavily laden donkeys being cajoled through the narrow I streets.

The Rue du Sahara is a mistake. I remember someone telling me long ago that the true name of the street was actually the Rue N'sara, or Street of the Christians. I don't know how it got corrupted. Very little of Algiers has any real connection to the Sahara. After all, it's a hell of a long hike from the Mediterranean port to the desert. It doesn't make any difference these days, though; the new name is the only one anyone ever uses. It's even found its way onto all the official maps, so that closes the matter.

Number 16 was an exhausted, crumbling brick pile

with two bulging upper stories that hung out over the cobbled street. The apartment house across the way did the same, and the two buildings almost kissed above my head, like two dowdy old matrons leaning across a back fence. There was a jumble of mail slots, and I found Angel Monroe's name scrawled on a card in fading ink. I jammed my thumb on her buzzer. There was no lock on the front door, so I went in and climbed the first flight of stairs. Saied was right behind me.

Her apartment turned out to be on the third floor, in the rear. The hallway was carpeted,

if that's the right word, with a dull, gritty fabric that had at one time been maroon. The traffic of uncountable feet had completely worn through the material in many places, so that the dry gray wood of the floor was visible through the holes. The walls were covered with a filthy tan wallpaper, hanging down here and there in forlorn strips. The air had an odd, sour tang to it, as if the building were occupied by people who had come there to die, or who were certainly sick enough to die but instead hung on in lonely misery. From behind one door I could hear a family battle, complete with bellowed threats and crashing crockery, while from another apartment came insane, high-pitched laughter and the sound of flesh loudly smacking flesh. I didn't want to know about it.

I stood outside the shabby door to Angel Monroe's flat and took a deep breath. I glanced at the Half-Hajj, but he just gave me a shrug and pointedly looked away. Some friend. I was on my own. I told myself that nothing weird was going to happen—a lie just to get myself to take the next step—and then I knocked on the door. There was no response. I waited a few seconds and knocked again, louder. This time I heard the rattle and squeak of bedsprings and the sound of someone coming slowly to the door. The door swung open. Angel Monroe stared out, trying very hard to focus her eyes.

She was a full head shorter than me, with bleached blond hair curled tightly into an arrangement I would call "ratty." Her black roots looked as if no one had given them much attention since the Prophet's birthday. Her eyes were banded with dark blue and black makeup, in a manner that brought to mind the more colorful Mediterranean saltwater fish. The rouge she wore was applied

liberally, but not quite in the right places, so she didn't look so much wantonly sexy as she did feverishly ill. Her lipstick, for reasons best known to Allah and Angel Monroe, was a kind of pulpy purple color; her lips looked like she'd bought them first and forgot to put them in the refrigerator while she shopped for the rest of her face.

Her body led me to believe that she was too old to be dressed in anything but the long white Algerian hai'k, with a veil conservatively and firmly in place. The problem was that this body had never seen the inside of a hai'k. She was clad now in shorts so small that her well-rounded belly was bending the waistband over. Her sagging breasts were not quite clothed in a kind of gauzy vest. I knew for certain that if she sat in a chair, you could safely hide the world's most valuable gem in her navel and it would be completely invisible. Her legs were patterned with broken veins like the dry chebka valleys of the Mزاب. On her broad, flat feet she wore tattered slippers with the remains of pink fuzzy bows dangling loose.

To tell the truth, I felt a certain disgust. "Angel Monroe?" I asked. Of course that wasn't her real name. She was at least half Berber, as I am. Her skin was darker than mine, her eyes as black and dull as eroded asphalt.

"Uh huh," she said. "Kind of early, ain't it?" Her voice was sharp and shrill. She was already very drunk. "Who sent you? Did Khalid send you? I told that goddamn bastard I was sick. I ain't supposed to be working today, I told him last night. He said it was all right. And then he sends you. Two of you, yet. Who the hell does he think I am? And it ain't like he don't have no other girls, either. He could have sent you to Efra, that whore, with her plug-in talent. If I ain't feeling good, it don't bother me if he sends you to her. Hell, I don't care. How much you give him, anyway?"

I stood there, looking at her. Saied gave me a jab in the side. "Well, uh, Miss Monroe," I said, but then she started chattering again.

"The hell with it. Come on in. I guess I can use the money. But you tell that son of a bitch Khalid that—" She paused to take a long gulp from the tall glass of whiskey she was holding. "You tell him if he don't care enough about my health, I mean, making me work when I already told him I was sick, then hell, you tell him there are plenty

of others I can go work for. Anytime I want to, you can believe that."

I tried twice to interrupt her, but I didn't have any success. I waited until she stopped to take another drink. While she had her mouth full of the cheap liquor, I said, "Mother?"

She just stared at me for a moment, her filmy eyes wide. "No," she said at last, in a small voice. She looked closer. Then she dropped her whiskey glass to the floor.

Layter, after the return trip from Algiers and Maureta-ia, when I got back home to the city the first place I eaded was the Budayeen. L used to live right in the heart of the walled quarter, but events and fate and Fried-lander Bey had made that impossible now. I used to have a lot of friends in the Budayeen too, and I was welcome anywhere; but now there were really only two people who were generally glad to see me: Saied the Half-Hajj, and Chiriga, who ran a club on the Street halfway between the big stone arch and the cemetery. Chiri's place had always been my home-away-from-home, where I could sit and have a few drinks in peace, hear the gossip, and not get threatened or hustled by the working girls.

Once upon a time I'd had to kill a few people, mostly in self-defense. More than one club owner had told me never to set foot in his bar again. After that, a lot of my friends decided that they could do without my company, but Chiri had more sense.

She's a hard-working woman, a tall black African with ritual facial scars and sharply filed cannibal teeth. To be honest, I don't really know if those canines of hers are mere decoration, like the patterns on her forehead and cheeks, or a sign that dinner at her

house was composed of delicacies implicitly and explicitly forbidden by the noble Qur'n. Chiri's a moddy, but she thinks of herself as a smart moddy. At work, she's always herself. She chips in her fantasies at home, where she won't bother anyone else. I respect that.

When I came through the club's door, I was struck first by a welcome wave of cool air. Her air conditioning, as undependable as all old Russian-made hardware is, was working for a change. I felt better already. Chiri was deep

in conversation with a customer, some bald guy with a bare chest. He was wearing black vinyl pants with the look of real leather, and his left hand was handcuffed behind him to his belt. He had a corymbic implant on the crest of his skull, and a pale green plastic moddy was feeding him somebody else's personality. If Chiri was giving him the time of day, then he couldn't have been dangerous, and probably he wasn't even all that obnoxious.

Chiri doesn't have much patience with the crowd she caters to. Her philosophy is that somebody has to sell them liquor and drugs, but that doesn't mean she has to socialize with them.

I was her old pal, and I knew most of the girls who worked for her. Of course, there were always new faces—and I mean new, carved out of dull, plain faces with surgical skill, turning ordinary looks into enthralling artificial beauty. The old-time employees got fired or quit in a huff on a regular basis; but after working for Frenchy Benoit or Jo-Mama for a while, they circulated back to their former jobs. They left me pretty much alone, because I'd rarely buy them cocktails and I didn't have any use for their professional charms. The new girls could try hustling me, but Chiri usually told them to lay off.

In their unforgiving eyes I'd become the Creature Without A Soul. People like Blanca and Fanya and Yasrnin looked the other way if I caught their eye. Some of the girls didn't know what I'd done or didn't care, and they kept me from feeling like a total outcast. Still, it was a lot quieter and lonelier for me in the Budayeen than it used to be. I tried not to care.

"Jambo, Bwana Marid!" Chiriga called to me when she noticed that I was sitting nearby. She left the handcuffed moddy and drifted slowly down her bar, plopping a cork coaster in front of me. "You come to share your wealth with this poor savage. In my native land, my people have nothing to eat and wander many miles in search of water. Here I have found peace and plenty. I have learned what friendship is. I have found disgusting men who would touch the hidden parts of my body. You will buy me drinks and leave me a huge tip. You will tell all your new friends about my place, and they will come in and

want to touch the hidden parts of my body. I will own many shiny, cheap things. It is all as God wills." •

I stared at her for a few seconds. Sometimes it's hard to figure what kind of mood Chiri's in. "Big nigger girl talk dumb," I said at last.

She grinned and dropped her ignorant Dinka act. "Yeah, you right," she said. "What is it today?"

"Gin," I said. I usually have a shot of gin and a shot of bingara over ice, with a little Rose's lime juice. The drink is my own invention, but I've never gotten around to naming it. Other times I have vodka gimlets, because that's what Philip Marlowe drinks in *The Long Goodbye*. Then on those occasions when I just really want to get loaded fast, I drink from Chiri's private stock of tende, a truly loathsome African liquor from the Sudan or the Congo or someplace, made, I think, from fermented yams and spadefoot toads. If you are ever offered tende, DO NOT TASTE IT. You will be sorry. Allah knows that I am.

The dancer just finishing her last number was an Egyptian girl named Indihar. I'd known her for years. She used to work for Frenchy Benoit, but now she was wiggling her ass in Chiri's club. She came up to me when she got offstage, wrapped now in a pale peach-colored shawl that had little success in concealing her voluptuous body. "Want to tip me for my dancing?" she asked.

"It would give me untold pleasure," I said. I took a kiam bill from my change and stuffed it into her cleavage. If she was going to treat me like a mark, I was going to act like one. "Now," I said, "I won't feel guilty about going home and fantasizing about you all night."

"That'll cost you extra," she said, moving down the bar toward the bare-chested guy in the vinyl pedal pushers.

I watched her walk away. "I like that girl," I said to Chiriga.

"That's our Indihar, one fine package of suntanned fun," said Chiri.

Indihar was a real girl with a real personality, a rarity in that club. Chiri seemed to prefer in her employees the high-velocity prettiness of a sexchange. Chiri told me once that changes take better care of their appearance. Their prefab beauty is their whole life. Allah forbid that a single hair of their eyebrows should be out of place.

By her own standards, Indihar was a good Muslim woman too. She didn't have the head wiring that most

dancers had. The more conservative imams taught that the implants fell under the same prohibition as intoxicants, because some people got their pleasure centers wired and spent the remainder of their short lives amp-1 addicted. Even if, as in my case, the pleasure center is left alone, the use of a moddy submerges your own personality, and that is interpreted as insobriety. Needless to say, while I have nothing but the warmest affection for Allah) and His Messenger, I stop short of being a fanatic about it. I'm with that twentieth-century King Saud who demanded that the Islamic leaders of his country stop dragging their feet when it came to technological progress. I don't see any essential conflict between modern science and a thoughtful approach to religion.

Chiri looked down the bar. "All right," she called out loudly, "which one of you motherfuckers' turn is it? Ja-nelle? I don't want to have to tell you to get up and dance again. If I got to remind you to play your goddamn music one more time, I'm gonna fine you fifty kiam. Now move your fat ass." She looked at me and sighed. "Life is tough," I said. Indihar came back up the bar after collecting whatever she could pry out of the few glum customers. She sat on the stool beside me. Like Chiri, she didn't seem to get nightmares from talking with me. "So what's it like," she asked, "working for Friedlander Bey?"

"You tell me." One way or another, everybody in the Budayeen works for Papa. She shrugged. "I wouldn't take his money if I was starving, in prison, and had cancer."

This, I guessed, was a dig, a not-very-veiled reference to the fact that I had sold out to get my implants. I just swallowed some more gin and bingara.

Maybe one of the reasons I went to Chiri's whenever I needed a little cheering up is that I grew up in places just

like it. My mother had been a dancer when I was a baby, after my father ran off. When the situation got real bad,

she started turning tricks. Some girls in the clubs do that, some don't. My mother had to. When things got even

harder, she sold my little brother. That's something she won't talk about. I won't talk about it, either.

My mother did the best she knew how. The Arab world has never put much value on education for women.

Everybody knows how the more traditional—that is to say, more backward and unregenerate—Arab men treat , their wives and daughters. Their camels get more respect. Now, in the big cities like Damascus and Cairo, you can see modern women wearing Western-style clothing, holding down jobs outside the home, sometimes even smoking cigarettes on the street. In Mauretania, I'd seen that the attitudes there were still rigid. Women wore long white robes and veils, with hoods or kerchiefs covering their hair. Twenty-five years ago, my mother had no place in the legitimate job market. >' But there is always a small population of lost souls, of course—people who scoff at the dictates of the holy Qur'an, men and women who drink alcohol and gamble and indulge in sex for pleasure. There is always a place for a young woman whose morals have been ground away by ' hunger and despair.

When I saw her again in Algiers, my mother's appearance had shocked me. In my imagination, I'd pictured her as a respectable, moderately well-to-do matron living in a comfortable neighborhood. I hadn't seen or spoken to her in years, but I just figured she'd managed to lift herself out of the poverty and degradation. Now I thought maybe she was happy as she was, a haggard, strident old whore. I spent an hour with her, hoping to hear what I'd come to learn, trying to decide how to behave toward her, and being embarrassed by her in front of the Half-Hajj. She didn't want to be troubled by her children. I got the impression that she was sorry she hadn't sold me too, when she'd sold Hussain Abdul-Qahhar, my brother. She didn't like me dropping back into her life after all those years. "Believe me," I told her, "I didn't like hunting you up, either. I only did it because I have to." "Why do you have to?" she wanted to know. She reclined on a musty-smelling, torn old sofa that was covered with cat hair. She'd made herself another drink, but had neglected to offer me or Saied anything.

"It's important to me," I said. I told her about my life in the faraway city, how I'd lived as a subsonic hustler

until Friedlander Bey had chosen me as the instrument of his will.

"You live in the city now?" She said that with a nostalgic longing. I never knew she'd been to the city.

"I lived in the Budayeen," I said, "but Friedlander Bey moved me into his palace."

"You work for him?"

"I had no choice." I shrugged. She nodded. It surprised me that she knew who Papa was too.

"So what did you come for?"

That was going to be hard to explain. "I wanted to find out everything I could about my father."

She looked at me over the rim of her whiskey glass. "You already heard everything," she said.

"I don't think so. How sure are you that this French sailor was my dad?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "His name was Bernard Audran. We met in a coffee shop. I was living in Sidi-bel-Abbes then. He took me to dinner, we liked each other. I moved in with him. We came to live in Algiers after that, and we were together for a year and a half. Then after you was born, one day he just left. I never heard from him again. I don't know where he went."

"I do. Into the ground, that's where. Took me a long time, but I traced Algerian computer records back far enough. There was a Bernard Audran in the navy of Provence, and he was in Mauretania when the French Confederate Union tried to regain control over us. The problem is that his brains were bashed out by some unidentified noraf more than a year before I was born. Maybe you could think back and see if you can get a clearer picture of those events."

That made her furious. She jumped up and flung her half-full glass of liquor at me. It smashed into the already stained and streaked wall to my right. I could smell the pungent, undiluted sharpness of the Irish whiskey. I heard Saied murmuring something beside me, maybe a prayer. My mother took a couple of steps toward me, her face ugly with rage. "You calling me a liar?" she shrieked.

Well, I was. "I'm just telling you that the official records say something different."

"Fuck the official records!"

"The records also say that you were married seven times in two years. No mention of any divorces."

My mother's anger faltered a bit. "How did that get in the computers? I never got officially married, not with no license or nothing."

"I think you underestimate the government's talent for keeping track of people. It's all there for anybody to see."

Now she looked frightened. "What else'd you find out?"

I let her off her own hook. "Nothing else. There wasn't anything more. You want something else to stay buried, you don't have to worry." That was a lie; I had learned plenty more about my mom.

"Good," she said, relieved. "I don't like you prying into what I done. It don't show respect."

I had an answer to that, but I didn't use it. "What started all this nostalgic research," I said in a quiet voice, "was some business I was taking care of for Papa." Everybody in the Budayeen calls Friedlander Bey "Papa." It's an affectionate token of terror. "This police lieutenant who handled matters in the Budayeen died, so Papa decided that we needed a kind of public affairs officer, somebody to keep communications open between him and the police department. He asked me to take the job."

Her mouth twisted. "Oh yeah? You got a gun now? You got a badge?" It was from my mother that I learned my dislike for cops.

"Yeah," I said, "I got a gun and a badge."

"Your badge ain't any good in Algiers, salaud."

"They give me professional courtesy wherever I go." I didn't even know if that was true here. "The point is, while I was deep in the cop comp, I took the opportunity to read my own file and a few others. The funny thing was, my name and Friedlander Bey's kept popping up together. And not just in the records of the last few years. I counted at least eight entries—hints, you understand, but nothing definite—that suggested the two of us were blood kin." That got a loud reaction from the Half-Hajj; maybe I should have told him about all this before.

"So?" said my mother.

"The hell kind of answer is that? So what does it mean? You ever jam Friedlander Bey, back in your golden youth?"

She looked raving mad again. "Hell, I jammed lots of guys. You expect me to remember all of them? I didn't even remember what they looked like while I was jamming them." "You didn't want to get involved, right? You just wanted to be good friends. Were you ever friends enough to give credit? Or did you always ask for the cash up front?"

"Maghrebi," cried Saied, "this is your mother!" I didn't think it was possible to shock him.

"Yeah, it's my mother. Look at her."

She crossed the room in three steps, reached back, and gave me a hard slap across the face. It made me fall back a step. "Get the fuck out of here!" she yelled.

I put my hand to my cheek and glared at her. "You answer one thing first: Could Friedlander Bey be my real father?"

Her hand was poised to deliver another clout. "Yeah, he could be, the way practically any man could be. Go back to the city and climb up on his knee, sonny boy. I don't ever want to see you around here again."

She could rest easy on that score. I turned my back on her and left that repulsive hole in the wall. I didn't bother to shut the door on the way out. The Half-Hajj did, and then he hurried to catch up with me. I was storming down the stairs. "Listen, Marid," he said. "Until he spoke, I didn't realize how wild I was. "I guess all this is a big surprise to you —"

"You do? You're very perceptive today, Saied."

"—but you can't act that way toward your mother. Remember what it says—"

"In the Qur'an? Yeah, I know. Well, what does the Straight Path have to say about, prostitution? What does it have to say about the kind of degenerate my holy mother has turned into?"

"You've got a lot of room to talk. If there was a cheaper hustler in the Budayeen, I never met him."

I smiled coldly. "Thanks a lot, Saied, but I don't live in the Budayeen anymore. You forget? And I don't hustle anybody or anything. I got a steady job."

He spat at my feet. "You used to do nearly anything to make a few kiam."

"Anyway, just because I used to be the scum of the earth, it doesn't make it all right for my mother to be scum too."

"Why don't you just shut up about her? I don't want to hear about it."

"Your empathy just grows and grows, Saied," I said. "You don't know everything I know. My alma mater back there was into renting herself to strangers long before she had to support my brother and me. She wasn't the forlorn heroine she always said she was. She glossed over a lot of the truth."

The Half-Hay looked me hard in the eye for a few seconds. "Yeah?" he said. "Half the