

TO BE A GOD

Pertos was a god, of sorts. Aided only by an idiot who nurtured a dark secret, Pertos created living puppets from the Furnace. Puppets complete with intellect and emotions, lusts and fears.

But it was not easy to be a god. The puppets had to go back into the Furnace when their task was done. If one created, one also had to destroy.

In fact, sometimes it was dangerous to be a god. What if one's creations did not wish to be destroyed . . . ?

THE FLESH IN THE FURNACE

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THE FLESH IN THE FURNACE

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Here is a passion play in five acts of Chinese theater, a cold story for warm people Harry and Diane Record.

September

The idiot and the puppeteer rode in the cab of the truck, staring ahead at the darkness and the steadily unrolling gray of the ancient road they followed. The idiot's name was Sebastian, an unfortunate one for him. In one sense, such a name implied a weightiness of personality and a richness of detail. The idiot, however, was devoid of idiosyncrasy. On the other hand, a Sebastian might be expected to exhibit a cheerfulness, a certain Alan. But the idiot was most often somber with the press of insoluble irrelevancies, his black eyes staring from beneath the shelf of bone that was his forehead, his too-full lips somewhat loose and his pale hands limp upon his massive thighs.

The puppeteer, though, was equal to his appellation. His mother had called him Pertos, after the star legend of Pertos of Arima who had charmed a world with smiles and warm eyes. His father had contributed the surname of Godelhausser before abandoning mother and child, but few used that, the first name being so accurate. Even now, Pertos smiled as he watched the concrete rush under the blades of the air cushion system, illuminated for a brief moment by the yellow lances of the headlamps. It was not that Pertos Godelhausser was a man of humorous disposition. Indeed, he found little to be gay about these days, as old age approached and fortune fled. It was just that, in repose, his face took on the pattern of a smile.

"Tell be 'bout it," Sebastian said, scrunched so far down in the seat that only his head remained above the dash.

"About what?" Godelhausser asked. The idiot had been overly pensive the last few hours, which meant he was wrestling with some problem or other.

"The city," Sebastian said.

It was not the thing that bothered the brute. Pertos could see that. But he did not mind talking to Sebastian, even when it was a one-sided conversation. "I've told you a hundred times, I think.

"Again?"

The puppeteer sighed and leaned back against the cool black plastic of the seat, stretching his neck and shoulders. Once more, he considered the blessing it would be if the idiot could drive. Having given Sebastian the wheel once before, he hastily rejected any notion of repeating that disastrous experiment. "Very well," he said. In truth, he was anxious to hear himself talk, anything to break the dreary hum of the rotors whirling beneath them, to shatter the monotonous pessimism of his private thoughts.

"Slowly," Sebastian warned.

"Surely. So . . . The city is called Springsun, but wasn't always. Ages ago, before the Emigration from Earth, it was called Boston. It was dirtier then. Shabbier."

"I like Springsun more," Sebastian said, shaking his head in agreement with himself.

"I would think so," Pertos said. "I find it too sweet, myself."

"What?"

"Never mind. You're not interested in my opinions. Only in the story."

"Tell me."

"Four hundred years ago, just before Emigration, when Earth was the only world and the stars were cold and distant, Boston was a piece of Hell. You know about Hell. Ugly clouds of smoke, noxious fumes, filthy drinking water. Homes were insulated against the tremendous noise of an overpopulated world. Nature collapsed and so did society. Everywhere, small groups with their own interests did subtle--and later not so subtle--battle with one another"

"Who was the hero?" Sebastian asked.

"No hero. Champions exist only in fairy tales, and the story of Springsun is true." Pertos did not pretend that the idiot understood all these fine points, though he continued. "Instead of one saviour there was an agglomerate hero, many men working together. They opened the way to the stars, and tens of millions followed them. The wonders of the universe were irresistible, as was the untainted air of untouched worlds. In time, only a few remained. But those few were stubborn, and they scrubbed the atmosphere and purified the water until everything was as it is today, all within a century and a half."

"Where are the people?" Sebastian asked.

"Never returned. The air was clean, the water pure, and the cities had been rebuilt into splendor and mystery. But no one wanted Earth. To shrug off the old image, the cities were renamed and advertising campaigns were launched. But only a few thousand have ever trickled homeward."

"You did," Sebastian said.

Pertos sighed. "Yes, and I was foolish. Rumor said every man on Earth was rich, and that alien forms of entertainment were welcomed. So I brought my puppets to make my thousands. And I have made thousands. But I didn't know about the departure fee which makes it impossible for all but the richest immigrants ever to return to the stars. They're determined to keep every man here, even if he'd rather go to the stars to die."

"I'll die here," Sebastian said.

For the first time, he looked at Pertos. The green glow from the control console washed across his pallid face, made his eyes seem strangely alive.

"Yes," Pertos agreed. "But you were born here, and that makes a difference."

"Where were you born?" Sebastian asked, his voice a slow, measured base as he struggled with each word.

"In the city of Blackfawn on the planet Uri-two which circles a sun called Ozalius." He looked at the idiot and frowned at the incomprehension he saw there. "I was born near a far star. And I've been trapped on this godforsaken ball of mud for five years now, trying to scrape up a bit of money to pay departure fees and be gone. And I haven't anything to show for it."

"You have me," Sebastian said.

Pertos smiled. It was a genuine smile this time, not an accident of his features. "True enough."

They rode on in silence, watching the darkness blur past them. In time, the idiot dug his left hand into the pocket of his slacks and took out a plastic card. On one side was his picture, his name and a few bits and pieces about his life. He read these with fascination, for he always found something new to ponder over. On the reverse face of the card, there was a simply worded message for him which told him he came from Soldiersville, Kentucky, his hometown, should he ever wish to return there. It also explained how he could contact government representatives for sickness insurance or for pension movies. He read all this twice, which took a long while, then replaced the card in his pocket.

"Were you really born . . . in the stars?" he asked Pertos.

"Yes," Godelhausser answered. He no longer felt like

carrying on a conversation. Even his permanent smile had a bitter look to it.

"Imagine," Sebastian said.

"Imagine what?"

"The stars. Who would ever think . . . from stars?"

They rode.

"Who would ever?" Sebastian asked later. "Stars?"

There were a great many trees in Springsun, especially along the avenues before and behind the cultural center. In the darkness of that early autumn morning the trees rustled overhead like conspiratorial old women and shed a few

leaves on the heads of the puppeteer and the idiot.

The lowering sky rumbled with distant thunder, and the clouds seemed to skim along the peaks of the tallest structures. The air was chilly, and it forced Pertos to stand sheltered by the ogee door of the cargo hold of his truck, t his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his overcoat, shivering, daring from one foot to the other to generate a little heat.

Sebastian labored to unload the contents of the van and transport everything inside to the theater's guest quarters. He had carried all their personal belongings inside and was now finislitag with the Furnace, which he handled with

great care even though he knew the pieces were unbreakable.

As he waited for the idiot to return to take the last piece, Pertos heard footsteps. the stone of the plaza floor that connected all the buildings in the cultural complex. He stepped aroud the end of the truck and watched them:

three men their midthirties, all lean and handsome, if somewhat harshly dressed is a severity that was not normal

far Earth whom all manner of alien designs were imported and worn.

They stopped half a dozen feet before him. "Pertos Godelhausser?" the tallest of the trio asked.

He nodded.

"The puppeteer," the tallest said.

Since it was not a question, he said nothing.

"My name is Trimkin. I'm President of Springsun's chapter of the Heritage League. I imagine you've heard of us."

"Once or twice," Pertos said.

Trimkin smiled, a graceful and self-possessed man. In the short time since he had begun to speak, his companions seemed to lose color, shrink and fade by comparison. "Then you know why I'm here."

"No. Your people are always speech-making. I never listened. Rhetoric has bored me for as long as I can remember."

Trimkin grew taut, like a wire suddenly stretched, though his face remained impassive and his manner polite. "I'll be brief. Our organization is small but growing. Our purpose is to banish all art forms of alien origin and to nurture those arts which are indignant to Earth. Since the Emigration, our cultural heritage has grown poorer. For the last two hundred years, Earth's painting has been a derivative of the work of off-world painters. Her music is pattered after that imported from Pino, Bleden and Treelight. All our culture is imitation, and we grow shallower year by year. The sensitive young people finally manage to Emigrate. And until Earth has her own rich culture, they won't return, and the younger ones will continue to leave when they come of age and make money."

"Excuse me," Pertos said. "But I've already begun to let my mind wander"

Color rose on Trimkin's cheeks. "I'll try to be more specific. Don't perform here. Pack your things and leave"

Irritated, Pertos shook his head. "I have to eat, and I want to leave Earth. Both require money."

"We could pay...."

"How much?"

"A thousand postals"

"I'd make ten times that much in a week here, and still it would be a pittance!"

"Ten thousand, then," Trimkin said.

Pertos smiled grimly. "You would have bought me at a dishonest price if I had been witless enough to accept, eh?"

Trimkin shrugged. Suddenly, his aristocratic bearing made Pertos feel angry, used. "If you want me off Earth so bad, why not just get the departure fees lifted for me?"

"We haven't got many people in high office. And even our ranks are split on that issue. But some day we'll be able to do as you ask."

"Well," Pertos said, "until you can, I'd thank you to stop bothering me with speeches."

"Perhaps more than speeches are required," Trimkin said.

"I'd advise against foolishness," Pertos warned. He withdrew a sleek pistol from his overcoat pocket. It was plainly not of Earth design, and no man there wanted to test it to see what results it might have.

Trimkin and his companions looked at Sebastian who had just returned from the theater.

"If you want to take on Sebastian, go ahead," Pertos said. "He isn't well educated, but he has other abilities that compensate for that. He moves slowly, but strikes hard. As for my equipment, the Furnace-which you have surely been considering-it's protected by an Olmesclan amoeba which is coded to Sebastian and me. Anyone else will find theft or vandalism quite painful"

For half a minute they continued to confront each other.

Blue lightning coursed across the low clouds, and the first fat raindrops began to fall.

"We'll be to a performance or two," Trlmkin said. He nodded to both Pertos and Sebastian, then walked away, across the plaza. His companions followed like mute, synthetic creatures, though they were not.

"Trouble?" Sebastian asked.

"No more than usual. Come on. Let's get inside before the worst of this storm hits us."

They ran up the steps of the side entrance to the Grande Theater in Blue, through the hexagonal crimson doors and under the roof of their haven for the following week.

Sebastian could not sleep. It was not that he was afraid of the Heritage League-he had all but forgotten about them. It was just that he felt somehow unfinished for the day, as if he were hungry, though he was not.

He left his mom and wandered away from Pertos' chamber. He passed empty actors' quarters, made his way through storage vaults of old costumes that had been sewn and hung in anticipation of the lavish shows that would be performed when Earth's children returned from the stars. Many of them were rotted. In time, he crossed the boards and reached the footlights of the main stage. There, he looked out across the darkened hall at the empty seats.

He wished there were people here.

Perhaps that would make him feel better.

He went on the floor and sat in the front row and tried to pretend he was watching a performance in the midst of a large audience. He smiled at those to either side of him. No one smiled in return.

In the rear of the auditorium he found the stairs which led to the lightman's perch. He took them two at a time.

Up there, he sat behind the largest spotlight.

After a long search, he located the machine's switch. It was on the top, directly in front of his face, a small gray toggle. He laughed at himself for having so much trouble finding something so obvious. He turned the spot on.

Yellow light sizzled down to the black stage. A curiously perfect circle appeared there, as if a hole had been carved in the boards to allow a hidden sun to show through.

He watched for a while, then changed the yellow gel for a blue one and settled back on his chair.

He felt an excitement he could not explain.

His hands shook on the cold grips of the spotlight casing.

It wasn't often that he could explain why he felt happy sad or tense or relaxed. He never tried to analyze, merely accepted.

In a way, the feeling he had now was like that he had had when he had fallen off a theater scaffold in Brightwater and had broken his leg. Falling, he had been certain he was dying. It had not been fear so much, more of a long, sighing release of anxiety.

The theater was quiet now.

The center of the stage glimmered bluely as Sebastian waited for someone to come out there and begin doing something. But who?

Then he remembered that blue was the color that ended the story of Bitty Belina, when she stands in sequined gown on a small pedestal with her prince kneeling before her and the body of her demon-possessed stepmother lying with the prince's sword buried in its throat. The puppets of that was what excited him. Tomorrow, the puppets would be forged in the furnace, and maybe Bitty Belina would be among them.

He slid off the stool and crossed the projection room in the dark. He stumbled once, fell. But he did not waste time feeling sorry for himself. He got up and untangled the cord from his feet, went downstairs. He crossed the theater and climbed onto the stage and stood in the circle of blue light and waited.

His flesh was blue. And if he pretended hard enough, he could believe he was small, a puppet. He was the prince in the story of Bitty Belina, and he had saved her. And now when he looked at the boards he could see Bitty Belina herself, poised on her dainty feet, her smooth legs strained taut, her yellow hair to her shoulders, her eyes shining, her face turned toward him, beautiful, beautiful

Then she was gone.

He was alone.

He got down on his hands and knees, but he could not find a single trace of her. And then he

remembered that tonight was tonight and that Bitty Belina would not be forged until late tomorrow afternoon, when Pertos stoked the furnace. If then.

He walked back through the empty seats up the stairs to the projection room, and he turned out the spotlight with the blue gel capped to the end of it.

Ten minutes later he was in bed asleep. He knew that he would need all his energy to do well tomorrow. He often got sleepy, but he could not let himself miss a moment of time with the puppets.

He dreamed of Bitty Belina. She was dancing on a flower. In the dream, he had grown as small as she and held her hand and laughed with her and fled from one bright petal to another, kicking droplets of dew into the air . . .

On the planet Shaftau, a world eight times the size of Earth with only twice her gravity, there lived a race of creatures that men called spider-lizards and told many tales about. The spider-lizards called themselves Vonopo and spoke little about themselves.

The Vonopo were each as large as two men, with twelve spindly appendages not quite like arms and not quite legs. Each appendage was tipped with a fleshy tool, each tool with a different purpose and design, like fingers and yet utterly unlike fingers. Their skin was really scales and the color of polished amber. They swallowed their food directly into their stomachs through a mouth on their bellies, and they shivered in disgust at the thought that men fouled their vocal apparatus with food pulp.

Despite this fierce appearance, the Vonopo were a gentle people who shied from publicity and valued privacy above all else. Each lived separately in a subterranean warren, with all the comforts of a super-technical society. If one Vonopoen met another more than twice in any single week, he felt it necessary to purge himself with rituals no human had ever witnessed. No other race was permitted to live on Shaftau, for the Vonopoen had discovered that other species tended to curiosity and could not be trusted to obey common rules of courtesy. Humans who wished to conduct business on Shaftau were issued thirty-two-hour passes, one equivalent day on that slowly turning world. Violation of the pass meant a permanent revocation of a human's right to visit Shaftau. And no man wished to lose that privilege, for the Vonopoen made many marvelous and highly marketable items, among them the Furnaces that produced the puppets.

The Furnace came in nine pieces for easy transport, and very little skill was required to establish the proper connections between the separate components. Also, very little skill was required to pry open the casings of the machine and see what might whir and blink inside. But the moment any piece of the hull was removed, the insides melted to slag that smoked and glowed and presented better protection for the manufacturers than any number of patents might.

Now, in the darkened room where Pertos had chosen to erect the Furnace, the process of creation was about to

begin. The Olmescian amoeba, all but invisible when spread over the machine, had now rolled to the back and clung there in one gelatinous lump. The only light in the room came from the capsule-womb faceplate and was a dull green.

Sebastian sat in the corner on a stool, out of the way. He tried to remain as quiet as he could, for he knew that Pertos would tell him to leave otherwise. Yet he found himself repeating lines from the script of

Bitty Belina's story, mumbling them in complete accuracy, though he had never been able to memorize anything in his life before, other than the way his name looked on paper.

Pertos selected a wafer from the file of puppet identities on the side of the machine, frowned, then let his smile return. He looked toward Sebastian as he replaced that wafer and chose another. He slipped the disc into the memory translator above the Furnace, and the process of creation was begun.

Sebastian was halfway off his stool before he remembered that silence and stillness were essential. Carefully, he sat back, leaning against the wall, and watched the capsulewomb intently.

Pertos worked the only two knobs on the machine, and slowly the green color changed to rich crimson, working across the spectrum of colors. The crimson became white, and in that glare the pudding of synthetic flesh jelly that was puddled in the forming tray began to take on a solidity. It began to mold, without the help of a form, and soon was a faceless, womanly body, with pert little breasts and creased vagina.

Sebastian became excited, though not sexually, for that was beyond him. He strained to see more of what transpired in the capsule-womb.

The hair came next, on the head and below the belly: golden.

It crinkled. It grew before his eyes. Like a thousand yellow snakes. And then it stopped and the face came and it was her face with the incredibly blue eyes.

Sebastian watched until she was fully formed, until her nose popped open with nostrils and her mouth filled with teeth. Pertos removed her from the capsule-womb, a strange god with a businesslike sense about creation, and placed her

in a nutrient bath which stimulated the nerve clusters in the outer layers of her unnatural flesh. Soon, she was tossing this way and turning that, murmuring softly, fingers twitching as she grasped at dreams of death as if refusing to accept the life so suddenly flooding into her.

More of the synthetic flesh, in its liquid form, spilled into the capsule-womb, and the cycle was begun again as Pertos chose the next wafer from the identity file and fed the disc to the machine. But Sebastian did not care about the creation of the prince of the demon-possessed stepmother, of the good angel or the three suitors who came before the prince in the story. Bitty Belina, was alive, and that was all that really mattered.

He wanted to get up.

He dared not; Pertos would send him out.

He wanted to touch her hair.

He was afraid to.

He watched.

And as the light flickered from green to crimson to white and the making of life from the Vonopoen synthetic flesh continued, as other small bodies, each no smaller than eighteen inches and no taller than twenty-four, were laid in the nutrient bath trays, strange images shot through the idiot's mind, sometimes

dark and hideous, sometimes naive and gay, but always without coherence.

Bitty Belina reminded Sebastian of someone . . . someone long ago and long gone, someone whose phantom visage, resurrected in memory, was teasingly familiar and yet utterly strange. He remembered golden hair most of all. Bitty Belina, had it, and so did the girl in the past, curls and curls of it. Somehow he was certain he had been close to the unremembered yellow-haired girl, very close, painfully close-and abruptly, painfully separated by the sound of a sharp twig cracking underfoot, though it was not a twig but something else. What had it been? What had taken the blonde girl from him? And who had she been? Bitty Belina?

The prince lay in the nutrient bath alongside Bitty Belina and her three unsuccessful suitors.

The good angel was being created now.

Golden wings were forming in the womb.

Golden hair. The sharp sound, snapping. And blood. Yes, yes, lots of blood, running down his right hand, soaking his shirt sleeve. And the golden girl was looking down at his hand and at herself, and she was still laughing and he was laughing and then she was screaming and he was laughing and then she was gagging and he was getting scared and then she was . . . she was dead.

But who?

Sitting here now, he felt guilty, though he could not understand why. He felt as if he had sneaked some money from Pertos' lockbox to buy candy. He had done that once. And felt awful and sorry when he was caught. But this guilty-it was worse. Much worse. It hurt.

The winged angel lay in a nutrient bath himself, his lovely appendages draped across the edges of the pan. Behind closed eyelids, his eyeballs moved spasmodically. It was hard to let go of non-being and accept the role of life in all its facets.

In the capsule-womb, the stepmother formed.

Sebastian felt a kinship for her, knowing both were guilty. But her guilt, he realized, was much easier to take than his, for she knew what she had done. And he did not.

He tried to remember the bleeding girl and the blood on his hand and the laughing and the screaming. But it hurt, and his eyes fogged, and his jaw went loose. He couldn't remember. He stopped trying, and he felt so much better that he resolved never to think of that memory again.

He had made the same resolution hundreds of times before, though he never remembered it.

At last, all the characters for the story of Bitty Belina were lined up in nutrient baths. Bitty Belina herself had sat up and was looking about at the dark room and the shapes of the puppet master and the idiot. Her eyes were very wide, and she kept brushing herself as if there were dust all over her, though that could not be.

Pertos closed down the Furnace, deposited all the identity wafers in the file again and touched the Olmesclan amoeba in the proper rhythm, causing it to spread out over the Furnace like a film of water, until it was not visible. He turned around, looked at the puppets. His face was drawn, and his large eyes looked sick, like a man bearing too much of a burden.

"Should I watch them?" Sebastian asked.

"Yes," Pertos said. "I'll be in my room for an hour. Then we must be prepared for the show."

Sebastian moved his stool closer to the puppets.

Pertos gazed one last time around the room, then departed that place, the Holistian Pearl already in his hands. He walked the dark corridor to his room, went inside, closed the door and sank upon the couch there, utterly exhausted spiritually as well as physically. It was not that he minded playing God in the creation of the puppets. He thought of himself as nothing more than an operator of the Vonopoen devices. It was when the play was done and the small living creatures must be returned to lifeless, waiting liquid that made him miserable. To be a life-giving god leads only to pleasure. To deal death to those fragile creatures while they watched, aware of what was to be done to them, sapped a man's soul. The depression always set in upon creation, because creation could only lead to death again, later. He rolled the Pearl over and over in his fingers, seeking solace.

The gray surface of the living jewel slowly responded to his caress, absorbing the body heat he offered, sucking up the energy of friction caused by the stone rolling across the microscopically ridged flesh. Its pale color seeped from it as whiteness flowed in. In moments, it was storing the energy to carry on its life functions, and a moment later he had given it more than it could hold. It used the incoming excess of energy to play its own role in this symbiosis. Through the nerves in the tips of his fingers, it flushed a distortion throughout his body, sent him into synaesthesia where all senses were confused, where sight came as smell and sound as pictures. The Pearl fired alien images in his brain, plunged him through the heart of a star and into even stranger places where it had been in its eternity of existence.

The Pearl had had a thousand masters in its life to date, and now it drew on all their experiences, all the scenes and events it had shared while in their possession. It touched filaments of power along the surface of Pertos' brain, stepped up the vividness of the dreams and took him across the universe in the bodies of half a dozen races, in half a hundred strange spaceships, through half a thousand points of wonder.

And he accepted.

For a while, he forgot that he was a god of sorts and the doom would follow genesis. There was a large audience for the first night's two performances. Every seat in the auditorium was filled, three thousand paying customers in all. Those seated too far to either side or toward the last half of the hall had raised the folding telescopic windowplates on the backs of the seats before them and were watching the magnified stage and the drawn, emerald curtain with childlike anticipation.

The robotic orchestra played something of RimskiKorsakov's, cymbals crashing and drums growing ominous, then flutes and piccolos bursting forth with sign that fairness and good still existed in the black scene the music painted.

Sebastian peeked through the curtains again and again, watching the patrons, carrying an excitement that came only with a performance. If the combination of dress styles from a hundred worlds looked strange out there, Sebastian didn't notice. It was not the clothes, but the people that excited him. So

many people, so close, all there for the puppets he helped bring them.

He closed the gap in the curtain and turned to look over the puppets who stood together, talking, perhaps working over their lines. He had always wondered what the puppets talked about when they were together, alone, but he could never fathom what it might be. Pertos said they sometimes dreamed of escape, though they could never go farther from the Furnace than a thousand yards without suffering an excruciating, unendurable pain that eventually forced them back where they belonged.

Bitty Belina was looking very earnest, her little brow wrinkled, her eyes set and sparkling, her lips moving steadily, almost as if in ritual cadence, repeating some charm or magic spell.

Suddenly she turned and faced Sebastian, and in his mind, there was blood pumping out of her stomach and she was not Bitty Belina any more, but a girl named Jenny. And he gurgled and looked away from her, blinking, crying, but no longer remembering what had stirred him so deeply. The flash of memory was gone. Jenny? Just a name.

"Where is Master Godelhausser?" she asked Sebastian.

Her voice, though small, was not tinny. It did not screech or whine as she spoke. It was a womanly voice in the sense that some little girls, when breathless, sound very adult and somehow sensuous.

Sebastian waved his arms, pointing nowhere, and finally managed to say, "With the lights. As always."

His throat ached, as if each one of the sharp-edged words had torn chunks of flesh loose on their way from his body to Bitty Belina. He coughed, dry and racking, making his eyes water.

She had her tiny hands on her hips now. Her white, mid-thigh skirt rustled as if made of paper, and it thrust out stiffly over the pert curve of her small buttocks. "Damn him! He promised us we'd have a new ending in the script, like we want, and then he disappears before he comes through!"

"New ending?" Sebastian asked. He could not understand what she meant, for the story of Bitty Belina was a permanent cycle with him, and the notion that it could be changed was alien and unfathomable. One might as well say the sun will rise in the north and settle in the east or that cows will now fly and birds will give milk henceforth.

"We don't want Wissa killed in the end," Belina explained, indicating the wickedly beautiful, dark-haired and sloe-eyed villainess.

"But she . . . wants you dead I" Sebastian blurted, amazed at the blonde puppet's concern for an evil woman lie this.

"Only in the script," Belina said.

"It hurts so," Wissa explained. "It hurts with the sword in my neck, because I don't die very fast. And every time I'm created, it's all just waiting until I die:"

"We are people," Belina said. Her pretty face was not as pretty as it usually was, he noticed. "We're made on a pattern designed according to human gene structure. We're complete, with brains and emotions-"

"Oh, hell, he's retarded," the prince said. "What are you all standing around talking to an idiot for?"

Sebastian wanted to squash the prince. He could have, too. One swift kick against the wall, a heel brought down hard

Belina stamped her feet, spat on the floorboards, leaving

a little spot of glistening saliva there, a dew drop. "We'll put it to Godelhausser tonight. Wissa, it will be the last time. That old bastard isn't going to keep sacrificing you for showmanship!"

"He'll refuse to change it," Wissa Said. "Some patrons like the blood in the end. He's said so before."

"Then we won't perform!" Belina snapped.

"Yeah?" the prince asked. "And how do you plan to refuse him when he is four times taller than you, when you can't run more than a thousand yards, and when he can refuse you food or water and let you dehydrate until you're too weak to resist?"

"Or," one of the three suitors offered, "if we push him too hard on it, perhaps he'll just stow us back in the Furnace, return us to plasm, and never use our story again. And that's as good as a permanent death. At least Wissa is always reborn."

Listening, Sebastian was horror-stricken at such a possibility, and he felt his bladder weakening as he anticipated never seeing Bitty Belina again, never hearing that whispered voice in another show.

"We could kill the old bastard!" Belina growled, her face furiously red now, her hands fisted on her hips.

The prince slid his hands around her, from the back, cupping her pert little breasts, chewing on her neck. "Calm, Belina. Don't louse up all we have and give us nothing in return."

"I suppose," she said, pouting her lips.

One of his hands slid between the buttons of her blouse, and the rounded mound of one breast was partially visible.

Sebastian wanted to squash him, though he felt terribly guilty about harboring such desires. And, too, while he hated the prince and the way the prince touched Belina (and hated, even more, the way she reacted, cooing, giggling, enjoying it), chiefly because he could not understand what they were doing, he was not of a mind to take any action because of the bigger fear: that Pertos would deposit them in the Furnace and never bring them out again.

They would be dead. Forever. Liquid flesh without feature.

Dead and forever and no more blond hair and bright eyes.

Because all this upset him so much, he had had an "accident" and he felt miserable. He wanted to change clothes, but he knew he shouldn't leave the stage until the curtain went up and he knew that there were no last-minute hitches.

By now the puppets had seen what had happened, were pointing and laughing at the dark wet

streaks down his pantleg. He saw that even Bitty Belina was laughing, and he was even more upset at this until he decided that, after all, it was funny, his standing there like that, all wet and embarrassed. So he laughed too.

He didn't want to laugh, really. It was just that not laughing would have made things so much worse. Not laughing would have made him different and made him outside their fun. And he wanted to be inside more than anything else in the world. He always had, but he had never often succeeded in acting right.

Now he was. They all laughed together.

Fortunately, the curtain went up as Pertos operated the controls from the lightman's perch, and the play began. He could stop laughing when he didn't want to, and there was no longer any need for him to remain in the wings. Pertos said he should stay there as a communications link before a curtain rose, but Pertos had never called him in five years. He went to his room and changed trousers, which made him feel better. He came back to watch the puppets kissing and fighting, drinking and singing and dancing. Then there was the final shriek of the evil stepmother as the prince drove his sword through Wissa's neck.

The audience gasped.

Belina stepped from her pedestal and took the prince away, to make love to him, and the curtain fell with a whispering hiss that signaled the time for applause.

It was a good performance and Sebastian felt good.

He had forgotten that the puppets had wanted the ending of the play changed, but he remembered when Belina cursed him as he picked up Wissa's remains and carried the shattered little body to the Furnace where Pertos would redeposit it and re-create her for the next show.

"You could kill him," she said.

"Who?"

"Godelhausser," Belina said.

She looked up at him from a great distance.

"No." He put Wissa down on the receival tray.

"Yes. You're big and strong. You could kill him for us. For me" The last was added in a different tone of voice. He felt her hand on his trousers, and he pulled quickly away, terrified but not knowing of what.

Then Godelhausser came and the puppets turned on him, and Sebastian relaxed, a spectator again.

Belina shrieked and spat and cursed. She kicked at Godelhausser's shins, but to no avail. The winged angel fluttered at face level, arguing the humanity of letting Wissa live, but he was brushed aside. Wissa was created, found nothing had changed and shrugged at the prospect of another death. Tonight, at least, Godelhausser would recreate her and she would know some joy with the others until tomorrow's matinee when she would feel the blade again.

Sebastian watched, grinning.

He was glad that Pertos was not angry with them, for otherwise he might never create them again. Pertos seemed to take it in stride, seemed even to enjoy it. He could not be upset or angry. He smiled. Pertos smiled. That made Sebastian feel good.

Alvon Rudi was splendidly dressed in amber and blue, with a trailing cape, epaulets of silver, with many buttons and four buckles across each black boot. If he was too heavy, it could be forgiven because he had a certain self-possession, a certain sophistication that made the extra pounds seem beneficial, like extra muscles or an abundance of wit. He was like most Earthmen, save that he was richer. He was a merchant of some sort, dealing solely with intercontinental trade on the motherworld, though this limited yard had done him well.

He had come to wait backstage after the second performance, even though Sebastian had made it plain, after some time, that Pertos would be a while. When Pertos arrived and said Wissa must be re-created before he could talk to anyone, Rudi was understanding. He watched the other puppets with a curious intensity, always smiling but never looking very happy. Then Wissa was alive again and the puppets went to their own room with cheese and meat, bread and cake, two bottles of wine each half as tall as the prince. They went laughing, making rude jokes, and finally left the three grown men in silence that had a disturbing quality to it.

"So like children," Alvon Rudi said. "So alive and bright, yet adults really, eh?"

"Physical adults. But a strange combination of adult and child in their minds. Since I bought the identity wafers, I have used them in perhaps two hundred performances. They have been alive for a total of no more than a hundred and twenty days. In chronological sense, then, they are infants, newly born. But the Vonopoens give them personalities, make them adults in a way, though the knowledge is imprinted on their wafers and it is not something they learn through experience. So though they grasp most things on the level of adults, they have a childlike exuberance and naivety."

Sebastian attempted to follow all of this, but he could not. He had seldom heard Godelhausser talk at such length to strangers. Usually he was short and somewhat mean. Now he rattled away as if he wanted to talk only to keep Alvon Rudi from speaking, as if he might be afraid of what the merchant had come to say.

"Would you like some wine?" Pertos asked.

"A small glass."

"Me too?" Sebastian asked.

"Another small glass," Pertos said, pouring the idiot's first. "And be careful not to spill it, or you'll get nothing else."

"I will," Sebastian said, tasting the wine.

As Alvon Rudi accepted a glass of the black drink, he said, looking at Sebastian, "He would seem to be a strange

assistant."

"The government classifies him as an idiot," Pertos said. "But he has moments of insight, flashes rather brilliant. He may be what they say, but he is sometimes more."

"Often?"

"Rarely."

"Then why?" Rudi asked.

"He is also cheap," Pertos said. "And as I am saving for the damn departure fees, I scrimp."

Rudi drank his wine, watching Godelhausser over the brim of the glass.

Pertos looked back. He seemed uneasy, as if he had an important engagement he must soon make, though all the night contained for him now was a late meal, a session with the Holistian Pearl and sleep.

"I have a proposition for you," Alvon Rudi said, putting his glass down on a polished, yellow enamel end table.

Pertos nodded.

"Do you rent the puppets out? For other shows beyond your schedule?" He spoke, Sebastian thought, as if there were a secret that only he and the puppet master knew. Sebastian tried to imagine what the secret was, but he couldn't think very clearly. It took very little wine to affect him, and already he had drunk half the glass.

"We perform for private parties," Godelhausser said. "The price would depend upon the distance of travel, for the Furnace must be transported wherever the puppets go. It would also, of course, depend on the number of the little simulacrum you would want, what the play you would like would demand."

"One," Alvon Rudi said.

"I have no play for a single puppet"

"I would write it," Rudi said.

"I imagine you have chosen the puppet," Godelhausser said, very sad now, very quiet, his voice almost inaudible.

"Bitty Belina," the merchant said.

Sebastian grew more interested now. His wine was gone, and he wanted more, so he went over and poured himself some. He felt good that he had not slobbered any. Pertos got angry when he spilled.

"I imagine your curtain time will be odd."

"All night, of course," Rudi Said.

"And you would pay a high ticket."

"Ten thousand postals."

"Twenty thousand," Godelhausser Said.

"Very well. It should be a unique experience, well worth the extra money, even though I will not actually know her, eh?"

"I'm sorry," Godelhausser said. It was obvious that he required an effort to say no to the merchant.

"You won't rent?"

"I won't "

"Twenty-five thousand, then."

"I'm very sorry. For both of us."

Rudi rose, twisted his shoulders so his cape was flung back, the wrinkles flowing out of it like ripples disappearing across the surface of a pond after a stone has been tossed. "You'll never make departure fees otherwise, you know."

"Perhaps,"

Rudi shrugged. He was not angry. Impatient, perhaps, restless with the certainty that he would get what he wanted sooner or later, disturbed that time and effort must be wasted to achieve what he wished. "I'll try again tomor-row evening. Perhaps circumstances will have changed."

"No," Godelhausser said. His voice was now so slight, so wavery that it seemed not to be a voice at all, but the stirring of a breeze across a series of open pipes.

"I'll return just the same," Alvon Rudi said. He nodded curtly and left them.

Sebastian finished his drink. "What he want?" he asked Godelhausser.

The old man had fumbled his Holistian Pearl from his pocket and was beginning to rub it between his fingers. He had not even eaten yet.

"What he want?" Sebastian insisted.

"My soul," Pertos said. "But I wouldn't give it to him" Then the Pearl sent dreams to him as it reached energy storage capacity, and he seemed to enter a trance.

Sebastian left the room because it scared him when the puppet master was holding the Pearl, his hands rolling it automatically while his eyes were closed and his thoughts were lightyears away. He went down the hall and stopped before the closed door of the puppets' room. He could hear their laughter, husky little voices, the clink of their small glasses that Pertos supplied them. Wissa squealed in de-light, and he wondered what game they were playing. When he tried the door, it was locked.

He went to his own room, staggering a little.

He laid his identification cards in his single suitcase, a nightly ritual, and fell into bed with his clothes on. There was a faint smell of urine, and he remembered his soiled pants. But he was too tired to get up and drop them into the sonic cleaner in the wall. The smell and his exhaustion, coupled with his inability to join the puppets or Pertos made him feel more lonely and desperate than he had ever felt before in his life.

Even so, he slept.

Jenny was laughing, dodging from tree to tree. She wore a slouch hat and carried a gun made of plastic that shot sponge pellets at him. She was the spy, she said, though he did not know what a spy was. It was his job, she said, to capture her.

They were running, laughing, hiding from each other, jumping out to scare each other, running more.

And then . . .

And then he caught her, caught the spy, before she could shoot him, like he was supposed to do

Only . . . only she had bled . . . and died . . . shooting him with those sponge-rubber pellets . . . alternately begging for help . . . get help . . . run for help . . . tell them . . . about help . .

But he couldn't do it. He was scared of what they would do to him. Other spies might come and try to kill him for getting their spy.

And then she was quiet, dead. And he got rid of her and went home and when they asked him where she was, where the spy was, he told them a story, because there had to be a story, but it was a broken story and he knew they wouldn't believe him, would send spies . . . and he would be killed and would bleed like Jenny and would . . . would . . . die....

He woke up to some loud noise. He sat up after a while, after the dream was all gone, and he listened to see if he could hear it again. He could not. He went to sleep again.

In the morning, when he opened his door, he found Pertos Godelhausser lying on the corridor floor, all bloody and unconscious. Down the hall there was a trail of blood to show how the old man had crawled all this way for help. Sebastian felt a momentary wash of overwhelming incompetence that he had not provided help. He was desperately sorting through his shattered mind for a plan, for something to do with the body, when Pertos raised his head and asked for help. He wasn't dead yet!

Sebastian bent to the old man. "What?"

"My room. The autodoc. I couldn't get into it myself."

Sebastian did not understand what the autodoc was until Pertos explained it was the same machine that had fixed his broken leg. And since the idiot remembered that so clearly, he could now operate, if only by routine.

With Pertos directing him, he managed to get the retrieval tray out of the autodoc, and he lifted Pertos onto it with ease. After an embarrassing and interminable clumsiness, he worked the security belt through its clamps across the puppet master's chest. He shoved the tray into the wall slot from which he had withdrawn it. The machine swallowed Pertos smoothly and began making diagnostic sounds as if it

were digesting him.

Exhausted, the idiot sank into a chair and watched the wall, unable to understand why Pertos should be bloody and what the old man might have done to cause such a disaster.

After a while, he ate.

He thought about Bitty Belina.

For a time, he almost forgot that the puppet master was in the autodoc. When he rose to go look for Pertos, he remembered and felt sheepish and sat down to wait a while longer.

Time seemed to pass slowly.

In the adjoining room, puppets were giggling

Pertos had a huge appetite when he was released by the computerized physician some four hours later. He was healed; the scars were gone. He had lost six pounds as the autodoc had forced his body to contribute to the accelerated healing processes by burning some of its stored fat. He ordered several steaming meals from the central grocery delivery bank, and the plastic containers of hot food slipped from the pneumatic tubes into the delivery receptacle. He spread these out on the table, opened them and devoured the contents with an enthusiasm he felt for few things these days.

Sebastian watched him, curious but asking no questions.

"Better," Pertos said when he had finished half the food, before him and was toying with his glass of wine now more than with fork and spoon.

"What?" Sebastian asked, taking the old man's breach of silence as a cue for his own inquisitiveness.

"Heritage Leaguers. They came on me by surprise."

"Why?"

Pertos pushed away from the table, his face suddenly clouding. He looked at the door joining his room to the room the puppets occupied. The sound of merriment came through the thin portal. Wissa was laughing, and two of the three suitors were shouting in some game or other. Belina's own whispery giggle came through now and then. Pertos approached the door, examined it, then spun the lock dial and threw the door wide.

The puppets stopped squealing, looked up at him. None of them were smiling. There was a litter of tiny glasses and bits of food on the floor. Wissa was naked, stunningly dark and beautiful.

Sebastian averted his eyes, though he was not sure why.

"You let them in," Pertos said to the puppets.

They watched him.

"You let them in your room and through the adjoining door"

It was Bitty Belina who spoke. "Who?" she asked. But there was something about her tone that said she already knew who.

"The Heritage Leaguers. Trimkin and those four men he brought with him." Pertos wasn't Pertos, because he wasn't smiling.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bitty Belina said.

"When I crawled into the hall to get help it was because no one in your room seemed to hear me. And when I had to go for Sebastian, I found my own door still locked, from the inside. So they came and went somehow else."

None of the puppets spoke.

Wissa was slipping into clothes.

The prince fingered his sword.

And when Sebastian looked again, Bitty Belina was watching him. Her face held an expression of utter con-tempt and loathing. It was not pretty at all, and it seemed to accuse him.

"I didn't do any . . . anything," Sebastian said.

"Exactly," Bitty Belina said.

"What will you do to us?" Wissa asked, fully clothed now, addressing herself to the puppet master.

Pertos looked at Bitty Belina. "There will be two shows tonight and a matinee this afternoon. But you will work an extra show. And if you don't work it, I'll never call any of you out of the Furnace again."

"What extra show?" Bitty Belina asked, her fisted hands on her hips, looking fierce-and just a bit frightened.

"You'll see," Pertos said. The smile returned, but it was a grim one. "It's sort of a command performance, you might say. For an audience of one. I'll see you later:"

He closed the door.

Sebastian thought how much older Pertos looked, how much he seemed to have aged in only the last few mo-ments.

When Pertos Godelhausser climbed the stairs to the light-man's perch for the second performance of the evening, Trimkin was waiting for him. The League President was dressed in the softest of brown, imitation buckskin, with long fringe on the arms and around the hem of the jacket. He smiled and spread his hands as the puppeteer displayed the handgun he had not had time to use the previous night.

"I come unarmed," Trimkin said.

"And I should take advantage of that."

"You'd never leave the theater alive, then"

"Perhaps."

"Most certainly."

Then they stood there, facing each other, being men and playing the games of courage and self-possession which are supposed to be those rituals which separate men from boys, though they seemed more in the Neanderthal spirit than in the tradition of civilization.

"So why are you here?" Pertos asked at last.

"You even had an afternoon performance today." He pulled out one of the handbills that had been circulated about the city. "And you have another scheduled every afternoon this week:"

"Standard:"

"Maybe you didn't understand, Mister Godelhausser."

"I understood."

"Then it's stubbornness."

"No. It's just that I have a strong sense of self--preservation," Pertos said. "That's the sum of it." He smiled, too warmly to mean it

Trimkin looked nonplussed. "Self-preservation?"

"Tonight, I'll sell my soul to a merchant, just as he predicted I would. The only thing I'll have left, then, is pride and the future. Without money, I'll never see the stars, I'll die on Earth; there must be, then, many per-formances in Springsun. For if I die on Earth, there is no future to look forward to. And without any future, there can be no pride; a fly trapped in amber isn't proud. You understand?"

Trimkin did not speak.

"It's very difficult playing God," Pertos Said. "Maybe when you and your Heritage Leaguers have established a little divinity for yourselves, you'll find that having the power of life and death over others is not really worth the agony."

"No one forced you to be a puppeteer"

"No one forces the soldier to kill. He could throw down his gun and accept the stockade. But there's something inside him somewhere that makes him like killing."

"And you think I like power?"

"Are fond of it"

"And the sin?"

"One can either love power, or people. But the two do not mix."

"And I suppose you love that idiot of yours. And those puppets which aren't even real."

"No. I made the mistake of loving power, in a small way. I've been trying to reeducate myself, but perhaps I'm too old."

"Too old to suffer," Trimkin said, steering things back to more familiar ground. "We'll give you a final chance. If your announcements are circulated tomorrow, if you still insist on performing then, your beating will seem slight. We'd burn down the theater with you inside, if necessary."

Pertos did not reply.

Trimkin shrugged, then walked by the old man, thumped down the steps and was gone around the corner, brown against white. The swish of his buckskin fringe whispered along the cold walls for long seconds, then faded like a dream surrendering to consciousness.

In the lightman's perch, Pertos locked the door behind himself and laid his pistol within easy reach.

He sat behind the spotlight and swung the control console to his side, looked at all the buttons and toggles that controlled the stage, the curtain and the scenery which would rise out of the boards or descend from the ceiling on wires whenever he gave the electronic command.

He fingered the topmost row of toggles. -

Let there be light! he thought.

He flipped the switches with quick fingers. The footlights popped on all across the stage, the dullest of the white set, barely casting any illumination.

Pertos laughed, though he was not at all happy.

Let there be life ! he thought.

The curtains opened, and the puppets frolicked forward. The last show of the night had begun, playing to a capacity house. In the front row, in one of the most expensive seats, the devil sat biding his time, disguised as a merchant named Alvon Rudi

Pertos Godelhausser sat in a comfortable form-fitting chair that hugged the contours of his body, holding the Holistian Pearl in his right hand, staring at nothing, his mouth somewhat slack and his face far too pale. The jewel was a brilliant white that almost seemed to radiate heat, and as he rolled it back and forth in his fingers it seemed to cling to his flesh with a will, like a magnet seeking out his bones through the insulating cushion of his flesh.

Sebastian sat on the floor, lacquering a newly painted prop to keep the colors rich and vibrant as Pertos

wanted them. He could never have been trusted to apply the many colors themselves, but he could work the self-feeding lac-quer brush without much problem. It was something he usually looked forward to, for it made him feel more a part of the show. He was always plagued with fear deep inside that he would one day be useless and that Pertos would reject him for someone else. But tonight being useful was not bringing him the sense of contentment and worth that it usually did.

He thought of Bitty Belina.

Pertos had said that she was putting on a special show for the merchant Alvon Rudi. It was a new show, a new story, privately enacted. And he and Pertos were to wait here, perhaps sleep here, in Pertos' case, if the play should take an hour or all night. They were at the far end of the corridor from Pertos' room where Rudi enjoyed the new play.

He wished he could watch.

Not being permitted to watch made him feel excluded. It was as if they all knew what the play was about, except him. And that made him miserable. He felt childish and unneeded.

Pertos slept. The Pearl glowed. And no one was watching the idiot at the moment.

Sebastian knew from experience that the puppet master would be tranced for a long while yet. It had only been moments since the strange sleep had taken him, and he never severed himself from a Pearl-vision in less than an hour. Sometimes he stayed under for most of a day, not eating or drinking, frightening Sebastian who thought he might be dead, though he never was.

Sebastian put the lacquer brush down, and after the bristles had registered inactivity for twenty seconds, the tool ceased to secrete its transparent, odoriferous shellac. On the paper laid down to protect the floor, a wet circle seeped outwards from the bristles.

It had come to him that tonight was the last night that Bitty Belina would be alive, at least for a while, until they moved on to another town and her story could be enacted before fresh audiences. Two days of any single story at a time was the limit. Then the puppets in that show would be returned to the Furnace to call forth another batch. They died.

He felt an indescribable panic seize him as he realized the full impact of what he had just been thinking. He wanted to leap up and run and kick things and shout, work off this feeling of bursting apart. But he knew that all of that would not keep the blond-haired puppet alive another minute. Did the rain stop if you asked it to?

Bitty Belina would die.

Yet tonight she performed a new play, in private, and one longer than any in the puppet master's catalogue. That hardly seemed fair when he was a part of the show. He should get to see the new story.

She was in a new story. For the first time he understood the import of that concept. What had happened to Bitty

Belina's prince? Was he in the new life she was living? And her three suitors? And the good angel? And what of Wissa, the evil stepmother? Would Belina die in this new life rather than be saved for her prince, by her prince, as she always had been before?

A new life? How was that possible? He, Sebastian, was the assistant. It could never happen that he would wake up one morning as the puppet master with Pertos having taken his place. A person was what he was, and nothing changed about that. You lived your life, over and over, and you accepted and enjoyed it. Bitty Belina played out her story, was almost killed by the evil stepmother, was saved. Over and over again. And he, Sebastian, moved from town to town with Pertos and unloaded the truck and watched creation and waited behind the curtain before each performance and drank some wine and ate and packed the truck and rode on with Pertos and unloaded the truck and watched creation

You couldn't change your life!

The prince wouldn't be there and the stepmother would succeed and she would die. Yet how could she die when she had lived her life so often and always triumphed. How could she want to change her life and maybe die?

And would she be so dead . . . so dead that the Furnace would not be able to bring her back again?

He was whimpering.

He knew something was awfully wrong. The world seemed to have become unstable, the floor like jelly, the walls shimmering and threatening to change shape and be something different.

If she did not perform the script, her original life, the machine wouldn't revive her when she died. She had never been meant to die outside of the Furnace. It was written that way. Just as he had not been meant to be puppet master. Or a tree, for that matter. We are what we are. We aren't what we aren't. And anyone who changes it, they die. They must die, or nothing would be solid and real any longer. Belina with a sword through her neck, bubbling blood through her lips while the prince runs away with Wissa

Belina with a knife in her belly, bleeding all over his hands and screaming and begging for help and making him afraid.

Blood, blood, blood on his hands, as before, once, then

He looked at his hands.

No blood.

He stood up and looked at Pertos.

Pertos dreamed.

Sebastian staggered from the room, his legs unexplainably weak, his shoulders aching, his arms tired, as if he had dragged some burden across a long and rugged terrain. He was not certain what must be done, but he was determined to do it to save Bitty Belina.

Blood on his hands.

Would they think he killed Jenny, stabbed her, or would they believe his story?

He stopped there in the middle of the long corridor behind the stage in the Grande Theater of Springsun, wondering who Jenny was. He could not remember anyone by that name, although he did

think of golden hair when he heard it. It scared him when he did not understand himself. It was as if someone else had entered his head and was thinking for him, but their own memories were intruding and he kept confusing them with things and places and people he knew.

He heard puppet laughter.

He started down the hall again.

His head seemed to balloon, swell enormously, until it was larger than all the rest of him. He held his hands to his ears, as if to keep himself from exploding.

Perhaps it was a hundred years, perhaps a minute, before he reached the door of Pertos' room where Bitty Belina was performing her new life, her dangerous new life. He stood outside, breathing hard and wanting to charge inside and save her. But he didn't dare because of two quick memories that darted through his clouded mind: First, Pertos had told him that Bitty Belina would be awkward in her new role and wouldn't want Sebastian to see her until she had gotten it all down as well as she could; second, he remembered the sharp, ugly way Belina had spoken to him the previous day, how she had laughed with the others when he had had his "accident." But, too, he had laughed. And he couldn't be angry with himself, could he?

To counteract the memories that stalled him, he told himself that Pertos would thank him for keeping Bitty Belina from harm. Pertos would say, "Why didn't I see the danger? Sebastian, you're a hero!" And even though Pertos had said there were no more heroes, Sebastian would be a hero. Too, it was easy to convince himself that Bitty Belina's sharpness had not been disgust at all, but a sort of sympathy.

He touched the door handle and found that it had not been locked.

Puppets laughed.

Belina laughed.

Cautiously he slid the portal open until he could see most of the room. And it was then that the balloon of his head exploded in all directions.

Bitty Belina was naked, standing between the mammoth thighs of Alvon Rudi, caressing him there, laughing as he laughed, the object of her attention every bit a third as large in length and diameter as she was.

Sebastian had only once ever seen a man with desire, and that once had traumatized him for life, had scored into his brain like a lightning bolt scarring the trunk of a gnarled elm. His mother and father had left their bedroom door open, and he had wandered in on some imagined quest or other, discovering them in sex. He had thought that his father had been hurting her, had been stabbing her. He had leaped on the bed, screaming, and flailing at his father with both small hands, biting, kicking. And even hours later, when they had finally calmed him and his mother had assured him, again and again, that his father had not been hurting her, he believed what he chose to believe. From then on, he had been ashamed that he possessed the same flesh knife as his father. And the years since then, devoid of a single erection since his sense of the sexual was all but nonexistent, had been a blessing. He knew that he could never ever harm anybody, because there was no steel in his knife.

And now, seeing Alvon Rudi, seeing Belina there touching the knife that could kill her, he was plagued with visions of Belina dead, bloody, ruined. And over the visions, as if several pictures had been

printed on one plate, he saw jenny with the knife in her gut, spouting blood. And for the first time he understood, deep in himself where some-thing of the human mind survived, that the knife in jen-ny's gut was his response to his father's penis in his moth-er. And he gagged and screamed and stumbled into the room toward Alvon Rudi, attacking himself as well as the enemy.

There were white faces.

Puppets screamed.

He felt Belina beating at his hands, then at his shins, as he knocked her to the floor.

He remembered Rudi's face, purple and inhuman.

He remembered bloodshot eyes watching him, terrified.

He felt the prince's sword driven into the calf of his leg.

He kicked, smashing the prince into the wall. The simu-lacrum's neck snapped, and it writhed a moment before death was complete, blood running from its ears and nose, its face ashen and painfully contorted, for it had never known the violent death it had so often dealt to Wissa.

Alvon Rudi clawed at his face.

He felt his cheeks running with blood.

He laced his fingers tighter around the merchant's throat.

The naked man convulsed, pitching to and fro on the bed, his lips almost blue now.

"No! No! You stupid bastard!" Bitty Belina was screaming. She had climbed onto his back now and was clawing her small hands at his clothes trying to reach his neck where she could swing an arm around and go for his eyes.

Alvon Rudi managed to drive a knee into Sebastian's crotch, making the brute gag and double over, forcing him to break his deathlike grip.

"Help!" Belina yelled.

The golden-winged angel flew at Sebastian, tried for his eyes. But Sebastian batted the simulacrum away with a large hand, sent it crashing against the front of the sutodoc where it broke its left wing and tumbled to the floor, crying and cursing.

Wissa stood in the doorway between rooms, wide-eyed and uncomprehending.

Belina bit his neck, drew blood with her fine teeth.

Alvon Rudi was trying to get off the bed, but his throat was heavily bruised, and he was dizzy from the lack of blood to his brain. Slowly, he was gaining equilibrium, but too slowly. Much too slowly.

Sebastian reached for him, grabbed him again.

Rudi's hands locked on the idiot's fingers, trying -to pry them off his neck. He dug nails into Sebastian's flesh.

Belina gained the idiot's neck, reached round him, clawed at his left eye with her tiny fingers.

Sebastian howled, shook her like a horse trying to throw a bronco buster. She fell, striking the floor hard, and lay there whimpering, her hip crushed.

Despite the fact that one eye was blurry with blood and tears, Sebastian continued to choke the merchant, shaking the man with each furious pulsing squeeze of the fingers.

He shook and squeezed for a long while after Alvon Rudi was dead, then turned and left that place, walking in pure blackness, unknowing and uncertain, merely terrified and filled with a need to escape the blood from the puppets

Pertos Godelhausser had been awakened from his Pearl-visions by Wissa. She had been hysterical, and she had had to repeat her hurried story several times before he had even an inkling of what had transpired while he had been tranced. When he did discover that Alvon Rudi was dead, he was not angry or frightened. Merely sad. It seemed like a logical tragedy to unroll in his life, the final act with no denouement for the lead character, the hero.

He picked up the dead prince and the wounded puppets, fed them to the furnace to be broken down into synthetic flesh liquid. He collected the healthy puppets next and did the same with them. There were no protests this time. They even seemed anxious to go.

Back in his room he found a large blanket in a closet and wrapped Alvon Rudi's corpse and clothes in that, tied the bundle around with four lengths of cord, as if it were nothing more than a rug. He had found two thousand postals in the man's wallet, and he added that to the twenty-five thousand he had gotten for renting Bitty Belina for the night. It never occurred to him to call the authorities, for that would have caused had business in future cities, at least. It could very well lead to the suspension of his entertainer's license, leaving him more stranded than ever, preyed on him in darkness and woke him ten times between first sleep and dawn. But they were gone this time, not even evident in the distance of his unconsciousness, not even lurking in the shadows. When he woke, it was more re-freshed and excited than he had been in years, with a sense of the future that he had never before felt so strongly.

He got up and sonic showered and dressed in clean clothes.

He ate quite well, though he punched for random foods through the delivery system and ate a somewhat hodge-podge breakfast. Even if he had been able to identify the words on the menu he would have preferred this mixed-up meal of sweets and meats and cereals and liquors.

By the time he left his room he was feeling very well indeed. He hurried down the corridor to find out what Pertos might want of him this morning. It was a day when he felt sure he could accomplish a great deal. He wanted to prove himself.

The door to Pertos' room was open.

He went inside.

Pertos was lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling, one side of his head slewed crooked. His light yellow shirt was sodden with blood, and there was a fragment of bone lying next to his right ear.

And then it all came back to Sebastian, and he left that room and vomited in the hallway at the disgust he felt at what he had done.

He had been all over the theater, looking into all of the rooms, touching everything he saw, though he did not know what it was that he was after. In time, it became dear to him that he felt better in those rooms where the old puppet master had been. He spent a long time in the lightman's perch, tracing his blunt fingers over the grips of the spot-light, around and around the buttons and the knob-headed toggles of the console that controlled the stage effects. He stood a full hour on the stairs leading from the perch that Pertos had trod before and after each performance. It was almost as if he could feel the places the old man's shoes had worn in the concrete. Once, he fancied he felt the vibrations of other feet on those stairs, though there was no one else about, and that thought suddenly terrified him so much that he ran from that dark, back area to the stage where he sat by the footlights he had turned on, trying to imagine there was an audience this morning. But when he forced a shimmering vision of people, they were all Pertos Godel-hausser, and he had to run again, crying and frightened.

He spent a while with the newly painted props that he had been lacquering the night before, hunting Pertos' emanations on them, the sign that the puppeteer had been here, had worked here, had lived.

Then he went back to be certain Pertos was dead, for it had occurred to him that Pertos had never died before, that his life story didn't permit death. Had Pertos been living another story, then, too?

Pertos was dead. Blood. Bone. Staring eyes.

He carried the corpse to the Furnace and attempted to feed it inside, with the notion that he could then have Pertos re-created. All he would have to do was read the nobbs, learn to use the knobs. And find out which of the identity wafers would reproduce Pertos. But the Furnace refused to accept the human meat.

Sebastian spilled all the identity wafers out and looked for something he might recognize as Pertos' name. He had no luck. Then he thought he could look for his own identity wafer, and maybe there would be something about it that would help him find Pertos. Only he and Pertos were big, while Bitty Belina and the others were small. That might mean that he and Pertos had different identity discs. He looked through the wafers four times before he was willing to admit that there was no disc for him. And probably none for Pertos either.

And then he felt sadder than ever.

Just before noon, while Sebastian was outside examining the truck, feeling for the past and finding mostly cold vinyl and icy metal, Trimkin came with two men. They were a different pair, though Sebastian could not be expected to notice that Trimkin seemed always to be accompanied by different men each time, all of them bland.

"Is your master about?" Trimkin asked the idiot.

Sebastian almost said yes, the master is inside, before he realized that no one should ever see Petros now. If anyone saw what he had done to Pertos, they would lock him away, like they would have done

over jenny, and then he would be dead himself, chained up in darkness.

"Lose your tongue?" Trimkin asked, smiling. He seemed a pleasant man. Pertos, however, could have told Sebastian that Trimkin had seemed pleasant even while he had supervised the beating his men had dealt the puppet master.

"No," Sebastian said.

It was not a cold day really, but he was freezing. He wanted to go back into the theater, but he didn't dare lead them there.

"No what? No, your master isn't about? Or, no, you still have your tongue?"

Sebastian looked around the cab of the truck where he was sitting, back through the open door at Trimkin.

"I guess he's inside," Trimkin said.

"No!" The idiot gasped as the men turned to walk toward the theater.

"No?"

"No."

"Where then, boy? You wouldn't lie to us, would you?"

Sebastian shook his head.

"That's good. Now, if he truly isn't in the theater, where is he?"

Sebastian could not think of anything to say, and for the thousandth time in his life, he damned his slow-wittedness.

"We don't want to harm him," Trimkin said. "We just came to tell him that he might want to come out here, in back, and watch his truck burn."

For the first time, Sebastian saw the hand torch and the cans of liquid in the hands of the men with Trimkin.

"Inside I guess," Trimkin said, turning.

"Leaving!" Sebastian gasped. "Going away!"

Trimkin turned again, slowly, smiling broadly. "You wouldn't kid me about that, would you, son?" He laughed, as if anticipating the joke, though there was a great deal in that laughter that was not humorous.

"Leaving," Sebastian said.

Trimkin considered that. "There weren't any handbills about the new play tonight," he said, speaking to himself as much as to the brute in the truck. "So old Godelhausser has gotten some sense, eh?"

"Some," Sebastian agreed.

Trimkin exploded with genuine laughter then, and the men with him joined in. His face grew red, and his thin body seemed to tremble all over, as if he had a disease of some sort.

Sebastian smiled nervously.

Trimkin placed a hand on Sebastian's knee. "You tell your master that we congratulate his good sense"

Sebastian nodded.

Talking animatedly about their triumph, the Heritage Leaguers turned and left the back wing of the plaza. where the truck was parked, entered the white immaculate silent city that was their dead world. Sebastian watched them go, listened until there was no echo of excitement and laughter. Then he slid out of the truck, slammed the door shut and ran inside. He saw now that he must dispose of the corpse or face discovery when Trimkin returned the next day, angry that he had been lied to.

First, he took out the sections of the Furnace, which he knew how to dismantle, having done that so often in these last five years. He packed them in their niches in the cargo hold of the truck, and the shape-changing contour pads slithered around them in warm, live embrace. Next, he removed all the props and then all their personal belongings from the rooms. He went over each chamber again and again, to make certain everything had been taken. He noticed the rug last, and he was not certain that it belonged to Pertos. Then he found it was not a rug, but a blanket rolled about something. He broke the twine and unwrapped the bloated, blackened body of Alvon Rudi, and it was only then that he remembered the night in full and realized that he would have to dispose of two corpses if he were to keep out of the grasp of the authorities and out of the small rooms where they would put him for the rest of his life, the small rooms his uncle had always drunkenly referred to in long, terrifying tales when he had been sadistically trying to get a rise out of young Sebastian.

There seemed to be nowhere in the theater to hide the corpses until he went, reluctantly, into the basement. He took the wide steps carefully, his heart beating abnormally fast. The ceiling lights had burned out in most of the grids above, leaving three quarters of the way in shadow, some of it brown, some purple, some pure pitch in hue. Though the

theater had been used in its two hundred and fifty years, it had not been frequented more than three or four weeks a year, and the cellar had not been maintained in the splendor lavished upon the upper regions.

Once, he came to a place where the way was blocked almost entirely by a wispy spider web, and he quaked at going on. There were two spiders in the strings, shuffling quickly back and forth, as if sizing him up as possible prey, each as large as his thumb. Here and there, lumps of white silk bristled with the thrusting limbs and wings of dead insects encased by the spiders against the sparseness of winter.

He tried reaching out and touching the web, but drew back instantly as he felt the somewhat sticky, humming fibers. It was almost as if he had felt Pertos in that web, as he had felt him other places. But he no longer wished to seek out the puppet master's emanations.

That was over.

He went back up the stairs to the theater, found a length of wood in the prop room and came back,

shredding the web ahead of himself.

He stomped one of the spiders. It made a wet mess on the concrete.

He looked for the other.

It skittered along the edge of the steps, dropped over the side and was gone.

He felt a desperate need , to know where that spider was, but when he reached the end of the steps and ran along the side of them to look for it, it had escaped.

Now he wanted to return more than ever. And perhaps he would have if he had not heard the gushing roar farther back in the semi-dark rooms of the basement. It sounded like a river.

Jenny . . .

He followed the noise of the water until he found the large, round drainage pit in the floor. It was sunken a foot below the floor level, and there was a heavy metal hatch that fit into that depression. He wrestled the hatch open and looked down. The dim light was just enough to give him a view of swiftly moving water four feet below, black water that now and then held a whirling cluster of paper, leaves or wood. There was the smell of human wastes, and he understood that this must serve as the sewer for the city, emptying its burdens in some underground repository or in the sea.

jenny ..

He could dump both corpses into the sewer, and they would never be found. Or, if they were, he would be gone for a long time and no one would know where to look for him to put him in the little rooms where they tortured people like him.

He turned to go back upstairs, to bring the corpses down, when he saw the thing in the middle of the floor a dozen feet away, and all his strength went out of him like water draining out through the open faucet in a barrel.

The spider.

It poised on six legs, two legs waving in the air, as if pointing at him.

The strange light caused it to form a shadow almost a foot in length.

He screamed.

The spider moved toward him.

He could not move. It felt as if every bone in his body had fused itself to the next bone, as if every muscle had ceased to exhibit effect upon his skeleton.

The spider danced closer.

He thought he could hear its hairy legs brushing along the concrete, and he ground his teeth and cried and whimpered and begged it to go away.

And when it was inches from him, it veered and skittered into the darkness, leaving him exhausted and drenched with perspiration.

"Pertos . . . Jenny . . . please," he said.

And when the spider did not come back for twenty minutes, he felt his strength returning and knew he could go on with it.

He tilted the blanket containing the clothes and corpse of the merchant, Alvon Rudi, into the hole. It pulled free of his hands and fell into the black water, unwrapping some-what so that just as it sank down the rigor-mortised bare arm of the man slipped through, the fingers curled as if grasping toward the edge of the drain to save itself. Then it bobbed to the surface, was caught in the current and swept into the tunnel, out of sight.

Sebastian lifted Pertos' body, hesitated, then shoved it after the first corpse.

And as he watched it go, time seemed to slow, to run like syrup, so that he had time to watch two events at the same time, one of the past, the other of the present:

Jenny hanging on the edge of the rocky cliff, head-down toward the large, smooth boulders and the surging white of the river;

Pertos sliding gently, gently toward the boiling blackness of the sewer, toward the litter and the defecation;

Jenny gone, sliding like an arrow at first, then turning, tumbling, over and over as if she were doing acrobatics;

Pertos twisting slightly;

Jenny striking the water, catching her head against a boulder, bursting and rushing away;

Pertos splashing into the sewer, spraying water over the idiot, sinking and rising and whirling away forever;

Silence;

Silence . . .

He closed the hatch on the drain because he was afraid of the two corpses trying to crawl out again. That was why he had brought them both down before throwing either one in. He would not have wanted to come back with the second body to discover that the first had worked its way from its watery grave and was perched upon the lip of the hole, drying itself.

He left the basement.

Twice as he went up the stairs he was certain he could hear the brushing noise of the spider's legs upon the con-crete. But every time he turned abruptly, trying to catch sight of it, there was nothing to see.

But that didn't mean, he knew, that there was nothing there.

Before he left, he made a last inspection of the rooms and found the Holistian Pearl, which he placed in his pocket. For a moment he considered taking it down to the basement and tossing it into the waters after Pertos' corpse, but he was certain if he went down there he would never come upstairs again and he gave up that idea.

He waited until night to leave Springsun, for he didn't want anyone to notice that it was only the assistant in the cab of the truck and that the puppet master himself was not in evidence. He did not know what anyone might make of that, but he was certain they would be suspicious. Too, he knew how badly he had handled the great air-cushion truck in the past. Pertos had called him a "demon" behind the wheel, and he had almost wrecked twice in the space of a single block. Perhaps he would wreck tonight, and then it would all be finished and he would be dead or they would catch him. But he couldn't allow that fear to keep him from leaving. If he stayed, there was a far greater terror: that of the rooms where they supposedly tortured young boys who were stupid-and that was one fear that he could not bear at all.

He started the vehicle easy enough, and as the engine whuffed and the huge blades began beating, the other steps of the driver's procedure came back to him, bits and pieces of memories from all the hours he had watched Pertos at this task.

He held the craft down until the blades beat steadily, then released the clutch. The truck rose two feet above the pavement, shuddering with power, waiting for the signal to progress.

His mouth was very dry.

He sent the truck forward too fast. In the last rushing seconds before impact with the pink wall of the opera house, he managed to bring the wheel tight around. The side of the truck brushed the opera house with its slip-stream but didn't sustain any damage of direct contact. But before he could feel excitement over this initial triumph, there was a towering elm looming directly ahead of him, and he was forced to tear the wheel around the opposite direction, hard, his fingers slicked with sweat. The truck brushed the side of the tree. Metal protested noisily, but nothing tore loose. Autumn leaves sprinkled down across the windscreen, stuck to the glass so that he had to squint between them. He went on.

He soon learned to hit the acceleration pedal with the utmost care, though he now and then forgot and came within inches of killing himself by ramming buildings and, occasionally, other vehicles.

For a long while, he wandered the streets, searching for some way out of the city. He passed the signs for the superhighway many times but could not read them.

On a backstreet where a park sided the road, he lost control and destroyed six saplings before stopping and cautiously working back toward the pavement.

The city seemed mostly deserted. It was this lack of witnesses which kept him from being apprehended and detained by the police. His vehicle moved quietly, and after any small collision, he was soon gone, whispering down an alleyway in search of exit.

In the morning, it would appear to some that a gremlin had been about wreaking havoc on those who had somehow engaged its anger.

In time, he found a ramp and took it. The truck left the city for the wide, featureless plains of the little-used super-highways which he and Pertos had traveled so much in these last five years. The sight of that uniform gray without the sharp clutter of buildings on either side was almost a religious experience.

He turned right, tramped the accelerator. The truck swept down the road, whined under the widely spaced arlights. Ten miles later, the city limits passed and there was no illumination but what the head-lamps provided.

He didn't get sleepy, for a change. He could not remember another night when he had not been sleepy earlier in the evening. There was that ballooning excitement in him now, and it crowded out his exhaustion.

The wind picked up eventually, and lightning snapped along the undersides of the clouds.

"Tell me about . . . 'bout them," he said.

He waited.

Only the thunder answered.

"About stars," he explained.

He could only see two or three stars through the blanket of the storm clouds. They were lovely.

"Stars?" he repeated.

When he received no answer, he turned to look at Pertos. It all came back again, and he almost lost control of the truck.

He didn't speak again. Or look to his right as he drove.

Sometime toward morning, when the first light broke along the horizon and sent glassy, bright fingers higher into the sky, piercing the balloons of the clouds, he realized that he had no idea where he was going. This depressed him, perhaps more than it should have, for early morning on an empty highway can be a miserably lonely time.

It was raining now. His wipers thumped rhythmically back and forth, sloshing the water into the drain-channels below the glass.

He listened to the drumming pellets of water beating furiously on the roof of the cab.

He didn't know where he was going, might as well face that. Worse yet, he did not know of any place he could go. He tried to think of the names of other cities, but his mind refused to spit up that information. He thought of pulling over at one of the regularly spaced rest stops to allow himself to think things through, but panic took him every time he considered such a thing. Somehow, he was certain that, once he had stopped, he would never start again. And so he drove, the rotors beating steadily beneath him, their noise consolation of a sort.

He had changed his story, he realized. He was not living the same life that he had always lived before. He had gone against the script. And it became painfully evident as the scenery flashed by in a monotonous gray-green monochrome, that he was not a puppet master, not capable of taking Pertos' place.

What then?

He was very much afraid. And he was somehow certain that the spider had found its way out of the cellar and onto the truck-and that he was carrying the spider with him and that it was spinning its web somewhere nearby and that it was waiting, waiting

October and November

It was a beautiful land, restored to what it had been centuries ago, clean and untainted. The pines were tall and sturdy, and the floor of the earth beneath them was carpeted with brown needles. Because of the dense shadow they threw, there was not much that grew beneath them. All day, the sky seemed like a roof over the earth, low and blue, almost within reach; at night, there were more stars than Sebastian had ever seen in his life. They dazzled him, and they held him for hours, his neck growing stiff as he watched them, until he nodded and fell easily into untroubled sleep.

Sometimes Noname would wake him shortly after and urge him to bed, much as Pertos might have done. Other times Noname would be there in the morning, sitting at the idiot's feet, watching him, silent, admonitory in his expressions, waiting for the day to begin. Sebastian would focus on the too-large head of the creature, on the eyes skewed out of their proper position, and for a long while he would have no idea where the thing had come from. Slowly, though, he would remember. He called the creature Noname because he had not known what to call it, since he could not read the identity wafers, and since it was not really what it was supposed to be anyway.

Sometimes they would have breakfast, sometimes not. Noname seemed as cavalier about the necessities of life as Sebastian, though his attitude was not engendered by a low intelligence. Apathy came, instead, from being uncertain of life, from being a mistake, from being without a concrete identity and a past and future.

The truck was parked in a copse of trees two hundred yards from the highway. The rolling land and the thrusting masses of pines protected it from observation by anyone but old Ben Samuels who lived in a cabin two thousand feet farther back in the woods. Perhaps such an isolated position was not necessary, for there had been no police cars on the road for the entire journey northwest from Springsun. There had been no search aircraft, and the radio in the truck had never mentioned the disappearance of Alvon Rudi, so far as the idiot could remember. Still, he felt better sheltered from sight by trees and by the land, and he remained. He did not particularly intend to remain here forever, but neither did he make plans to leave within the foreseeable future. It was as if this pocket of Canadian wilderness was a bubble in which time did not progress even though those wrapped in it lived and aged.

During the course of the day, they might wander into the trees, away from the cabin and from the truck, examining moss and ferns, looking for fossils in rocks, which Sebastian could find but could not explain. They might take up post on a log or a flat rock, there to wait the coming of the animals and birds. Sebastian was able to remain perfectly still for quite a long while, as if he had become a rooted piece of flora struggling for life in the woods. Noname, on the other hand, was always fidgeting, scaring off the animals when they ventured too close. His hands shook a great deal, and he coughed nervously, as if he were embarrassed of something.

Sebastian was displeased, but he enjoyed Noname's company too much to make him stay behind

when it came time for a walk in the forest.

Several times a week they walked to Ben Samuels, cabin to sit with him. The place was constructed of hand-cut, dressed logs, the ends notched to fit snugly, then slimed with resin and bound together with strips of bark and plastic cord (one of Samuels' few concessions to civilization). The house had a rugged facade, though the inside boasted a few pleasures one might not expect in a hand-hewn dwelling, and more than a bit of refinement and quality which seemed at odds with the rural tone of everything else. For instance, Samuels had spent many long evenings sanding and polishing the interior walls of his home until the rounded humps of the logs gleamed with a rich, stained, waxed color and the grain of the wood was presented in an almost three-dimensional effect that made Sebastian feel he could delve fingers into the core of the logs.

Ben Samuels was a match for the house. He was quite an old man, in his late seventies, though occasional trips to civilization and the rejuvenation treatments taken there had kept him healthy and relatively unwanted. His arms were still well-muscled, his legs quick, his chest unshrunken. His face was sharply angled, filled with wrinkles, though he said he had had those since he was a young man in the woods and that he would not let the doctors remove them on his annual visits to the city. His hands were large, gnarled, scarred with the many wounds of a lifetime as a woodsman. In sum, he appeared to be hacked from the same pine as his home.

And like his cabin, he was more inside than he appeared to be from out. He was a quiet man who read a lot. His avoidance of people was not engendered by a dislike of men, but by a sadness at watching what men did to each other in the course of their lives. Though he wondered about Sebastian having a truck of his own, he never asked questions about that, for he was sure that a story of human suffering lay behind it, and he did not want to hear what they had done to the idiot to make him run away. Those were the stories he had left the cities to forget.

Most often, Ben Samuels would be on his porch when they came, and they would sit down on the wide expanse of steps beside him, watching him whittle. Or he might have his pad and pencils again, sketching. He was good at rendering realistically. Sebastian never ceased to be amazed at the accuracy of the scene transformed to paper. It seemed to the idiot that there must be some mechanism within Samuels' hand which resorted to a memory tape of the scene to be drawn when the old man told it to, making the lines in a carefully pre-planned pattern. Sebastian generally accepted the existence of computers and memory tapes. He had never been able to understand men, however.

"Slept late again," Samuels would say.

Sebastian would nod. It was the old man's only admonition, for he was certain a man wasted if he didn't go to bed and rise early and labor while awake.

"The forest didn't get so big by sleeping."

"Or the stars," Sebastian would say.

Samuels would turn and look at him oddly, as if he were staring at a different person than he had thought a moment ago. "True enough."

"How is it with you?" Samuels would ask Noname.

"Cold this morning," the small creature replied.

"Cold? This? Just you wait for winter! It comes early up here, and it stays late. And then we'll see if those heating coils in the truck will keep you warm! Never trust to manufacture when you can build more reliably yourself."

The reason Samuels wanted Sebastian to sleep early and rise early was so that the daylight hours could be put to the purpose of constructing a permanent home to see them through the winter. But the winter was an eternity away as far as Sebastian was concerned. Tomorrow was the future, or perhaps only this afternoon. After an inspection of the truck and the way the rear had been converted into a semblance of a home, the old man decided the heating coils would probably keep the idiot and the puppet warmer than the cabin kept him. He had ceased to be so adamant about the necessity for a cabin, but he still mentioned it whenever he could.

Now, when Sebastian did not respond, he launched into a story about the deepest snow he had seen in all the years he had lived here, and both the idiot and the puppet grinned and settled down to listen. Ben Samuels told fine stories, even if all parts of them weren't told on a level you could understand.

Toward evening, if they did not stay to eat with Sam-uels, Sebastian and Noname would return to the truck, where the idiot would switch on the single light against the growing darkness. Every time, as the yellow glow appeared, he would remember that without the old woodsman they would have no light or heat. Very likely, they would have been apprehended by now, or died of exposure. Samuels had found them a mile down the highway from here, the battery dead. Sebastian knew nothing of that, and had sat stubbornly in the driver's seat some four hours before the old man found them, waiting for the truck to want to start again. Samuels had charged them from his own Rover and led them back to the trees and his cabin. Now he charged the battery every four or five days, whenever it got low again.

Every time he turned on the light, the idiot repeated to himself the importance of charging the battery. If he ever left this place, he would have to learn that an electric vehicle must be filled with electricity at regular intervals, even when its batteries are, as Samuels said, the best man had ever devised.

There, at night, with the single overhead light, he would go to work with the Furnace. Weeks earlier, parked in another forest a couple of hundred miles away from here, he had puzzled out the way the wafer was put into the machine, and he had started creating. But because the use of the two knobs confused him, the results had been dis-tressing. The puppets had been deformed, monsters with melted faces and without eyes, with legs that seemed to have no bones, with arms that did not end in hands, but lumps of protoplasm instead. The only halfway decent result was Noname, but even he was disfigured. And despite the fact he had been formed with an identity wafer, he did not know who he was or remember any of his past periods of consciousness as should have been imprinted on the wafer. Sebastian had worked diligently after Noname, but the puppet had not signaled that the idiot was on the correct course. He had been an accident, and the puppets made after him seemed more grotesque and horrid than those which had come before. The idiot closed down the Furnace, angry and confused. He kept Noname out of the flesh bank to provide company, and together they drove north, without purpose.

Then the dead battery.

Then Ben Samuels.

And now, for three weeks, the woods and the long nights, the listening to stories and watching the old man draw. But Sebastian was restless.

He hungered for company, for the special companionship he had known with Pertos in the old days. Noname, of

course, was company of sorts, though not the kind he sought. Noname was too much like himself to really compliment his personality: floundering, lost, seeking signposts of one sort or another. Samuels did not provide what he required, for the old man was careful not to meddle, careful not to make his suggestions into commands. He could not know that, in fact, part of what the idiot required was commanding. The world seemed increasingly unreliable and fluid, and he longed for someone like Pertos to tell him what to do with his time.

For some reason, Bitty Belina was on his mind constantly. She represented a touch with the old script, the life he had stopped leading. If he could only resurrect her, all would be well. He was sure of that. He had forgotten the way in which she had spoken to him, the way she had laughed with the others, the way she had pleaded with him to kill Pertos.

She was a pretty puppet.

He remembered that he liked her laugh.

And her smile.

And her yellow hair.

If Bitty Belina could be returned to him, whole and safe, then all would be well. And perhaps, if she was here with him, he would stop having nightmares about a blond girl named Jenny with a knife in her belly . . . If there was a panacea for all bad memories, it was Belina.

Near the end of October, he put the pieces of the Furnace together once again, in the rear of the truck. He had forgotten how to tap the vehicle's battery, but he required only a little while to relearn the technique. He rolled back the Olmescian amoeba until it clung to the rear of the machine, quivering gently, out of his way. Cautiously, he set about the clumsy work of learning godhood.

Noname watched.

This time, the deformed puppet took more of an interest in creation than he had before. In the intervening weeks, he had had an opportunity to come to know Sebastian, and he no longer feared his master as he had at first. He stood on the casing of the Furnace, near the faceplate that gave view of the capsule-womb, waiting for a miracle.

Sebastian shuffled the identity wafers, pausing to study the printing on the smooth side of each, as if some single word would pop up and stand above the incomprehensible pattern of the others: Belina. But when he had gone through all of them, he still had no idea which was hers. Two hundred and fifty puppets waited, and the chances were he would resurrect the evil stepmother, Wissa, before he called Belina to life. And he didn't want to do that, although he knew he could feed her into the Furnace again and be rid of her if she did show up before the heroine.

"What are you looking for?" Noname asked after all the discs had been passed over.

Sebastian watched the twisted face staring up at him, and he was charged with a mixture of pity and anger.

"Is there one particular puppet?" Noname asked.

"Bitty Belina," the idiot said at last.

The puppet picked up one of the discs. It was only as large as the idiot's hand, but in the small creature's fingers, it seemed like a tire from Samuels' Rover. Noname skimmed the printed material on the back and found the name of the puppet represented by the plastic wafer and the carefully etched memory circuits on the roughened side. He tossed it down and reached for another.

"You can ... find?" Sebastian asked, feeling the old excitement rise in him after all this time.

"Sure," Noname said. "Give me a couple of minutes."

It took ten minutes. He handed a wafer to Sebastian which looked exactly like all the others. "Her?"

"Her"

His fingers trembled, and he could not think what to do. Holding the identity wafer, he was holding Bitty Belina. He could almost feel the warmth of her flesh, the tremble of her pulse, the brushing coolness of her long, yellow hair. And yet this was plastic, flat and round and stupid.

Maybe it wasn't too late at all. Maybe the old life could be recalled and everything would be as before. If Bitty Belina was inside this wafer of plastic, then she couldn't have changed. She could still go back to living her old story, her old life, where her stepmother was killed by the prince and where she lived happily every after.

Then he remembered the flesh in the Furnace and knew better. The identity wafer might not be subject to change, but the flesh could be twisted and corrupted.

He felt terrible.

"Are you going to make her?" Noname asked.

Sebastian looked up, not comprehending, his eyes duller than usual, his lips slack.

"Are you going to revive her?"

After a time, he managed to say, "Yes."

Holding her plastic personality, he thought of the blue light that was focused on her when she stood in center stage. He thought of her hair gleaming with vitality, the audience held spellbound by her beauty. He did not think, even once, of the way she had stood naked between Alvon Rudi's thighs or the way she had clawed at his eyes and had bitten his neck when he came to her aid.

He slid the wafer into the Furnace and listened to the first sounds of creation stirring deep in the metal bowels. There was a prolonged grumbling noise, then the clatter of computers talking to themselves, the whine of memory tapes activated, called up from storage. The capsule-womb filled with synthetic flesh, formless now but soon to be occupied. There was a distant hissing noise, a click, then silence again. It was much like a pinball machine lighting up after accepting its dime, then waiting for the first silver bearing to be turned loose.

"Is that all?" Noname asked. He walked to the edge of the thick viewplate, his toes on the glass, looked down at the unformed jelly. "Is that all it's going to do about Bitty Belina? That blob of stuff?"

The light was green.

Sebastian touched the knobs carefully and began to experiment with them. They slid easily in either direction, as far as he wished to turn them. It was curiously comfortable sensation to hold those soft, rounded instruments cupped in the palms of his hands, as if they were more than extensions of a machine, as if they offered him an intimacy with some personality which had no identity wafer but was every bit as real as the puppets.

The light became amber.

"There's something happening now," Noname said, pointing.

The synthetic flesh curled and sought a form. But there was something about the agonizing struggle beyond the glass which bespoke sickness. It was more like a cancerous tumor burgeoning larger and larger than a healthy puppet coming to life. It squirmed and flushed with the colors of rot.

"Soon," Noname said.

But the amber was all wrong, and the idiot switched the knobs back and forth, both clockwise, both counterclockwise, now each opposed to the other in the direction of its turn. There should be crimson next, he knew, and finally the brilliantly pure white of a successful creation. As he sought those hues, his hands became more and more frantic with the knobs, and panic slowly replaced caution.

"An arm!" Noname reported, as if all were going perfectly well and Bitty Belina would be with them in short order.

But the arm was much too long, all out of proportion, with four knuckles in every finger, the fingers themselves deformed and twisted in a useless tangle.

The amber blended with yellow into fierce brightness.

The yellow became orange.

This new development made Sebastian feel better, for the orange was closer to red than anything he had thus far produced. But the deformed hand remained there all the same, and the other arm looked even worse. It was too short where the first had been too long. The fingers were intact, but the elbow joint was swollen with useless cartilage and unfunctioning bones. It curved in against the jelling body, as if the puppet were clutching its stomach in pain.

"A face," Noname Said.

It was a girl's face.

It was her face.

"Hair," Noname said.

Yellow hair crinkled below her smooth stomach, on the top of her bald head, curling down to her bare shoulders, tickling her pert breasts. He noticed one breast was set too far to the side.

"No," he said, very quietly, very softly. A disgust rose in him, possessed him, and he wanted to break things.

"Almost finished," Noname said. He did not like the looks of what he saw, and he stepped back from the glass.

"Bitty-" Sebastian said.

As if that were a cue, she opened her eyes. She never should have been able to do that while in the womb, but she did. There was no eyeball in her left socket. The other blue gem watched him without expression.

"No," he said, speaking more loudly now.

She tried to get up from the forming tray, levering with her good elbow and her tiny feet. Still behind the glass, she seemed more like a part of a film than something real. She was still watching him in that way that told him nothing.

"Stay," he said.

She chattered. It seemed senseless.

She managed to stand, and her face was pressed tight against the viewplate, directly beneath him. She tried to

speak, but the words were not clear, even if they did contain some meaning.

He turned and ran from the truck, into the darkness, gagging and sputtering, unable to get a clean breath. In the woods, lying on wet, dead grass, he began to weep.

He watched Ben Samuels whittle and sketch. He spent long hours sitting quietly in the woods, waiting for the squirrels who were engaged in a last flurry of activity before winter set in. He watched the sky be blue and sometimes sat in the rain, feeling it. Nearly a week passed before he could bring himself to return to the Furnace and begin his experiments again. Even then, there was a horror waiting just below the surface of his mind, ready to possess him at the slightest opportunity.

He decided against using Bitty Belina's identity wafer until he had the process conquered. When he could bring her back in her full beauty, then it would be safe to use her disc.

"Which do you want to use?" Noname asked, sitting by the stacks of identity wafers.

Sebastian thought for a long while. He could remember only a few of the puppets' names. One other that stuck in his mind quite as strongly as Bitty Belina was a grotesque little monster named Wolf, the villain of a horror story that was quite popular everywhere it was performed. He would not mind experimenting with Wolf, for if Wolf turned out deformed it was only just punishment for him.

"Wolf," he told Noname.

"Wolf what?"

"Just Wolf."

Noname found it shortly. He handed it to Sebastian who took it with some reluctance. If he had felt the sensuous-ness, the warmth and delicacy of Bitty Belina when he had held her wafer, what would he feel while handling this one? Death and blood and ruthlessness? He took it at last but was surprised to discover he felt nothing at all. Just cool plastic, smooth on one side and rough on the other.

Wolf was born with holes in his leathery wings, with no teeth where fangs should have been; he was consigned to liquification and the idiot made another try, knowing full well that evil must have undamaged wings and teeth with which to bite.

Wolf was born without a face, and he was liquified and the idiot made another try, realizing that evil must have eyes in order to find its victims and persuade them.

Wolf was born with more teeth than he should have had, the fangs as long as his fingers. His claws were sharp and like the blades of knives, and his face spoke of rot and decay, so hideous was its composition. And the idiot fed him back into the Furnace after much consideration, aware that evil must never be so utterly vile that there seems no way against it.

Wolf was born.

And he died.

He had no sins.

In time, Sebastian found how the controls were meant to be operated: the right knob to control the intensity of the color beyond the glass, the left to move that color through the spectrum. This was, at least, the outward manifestation of them, though they surely performed more complicated tasks within the bowels of the Furnace. The idiot cared only for appearances, however, and he was happy. Four times, without fail, he formed Wolf complete, just as he was meant to be to play his role. Sebastian had conquered the details of creation, and the catalogue of puppet identities was open to him.

Sebastian's good humor reached a peak with his fourth full success at creating the villainous Wolf, and it was a giddiness that arose from this good humor that led to his worst mistake since Springsun. He placed the unconscious Wolf in one of the shallow nutrient trays to help bring him around. The black wings glistened wetly, fluttered now and then as Wolf's body came slowly to full life. Sebastian wanted to see if the small beast could walk and talk and was otherwise in possession of its own faculties as it had been after the previous three creations. Impatient for the puppet to come awake, he went to pour wine for himself and for Noname, a small celebration, the first he had allowed himself since Springsun. He left Wolf unwatched.

Whenever a puppet is created in a Vonopoen Furnace, the identity disc is retained within the machine until such a time as the same puppet is returned to its component synthetic flesh liquid. When the puppet is fed into storage, all of its new experiences are first transferred to the wafer. In this manner, a puppet is able to have a continuing life, though that life may be broken into one- and two-day lengths over a period of a great many years. This was thought to be a wise consideration by the Vonopoen ar-tisans, for a puppet who is permitted to have some exis-tence of its own will be more easily controlled than one who feels that he is being used to perform and cast aside like a prop afterwards. Too, to earn the reward of a

private night or two, after their performances, the puppets will work harder on stage, perform to their best abilities.

The puppets are actually tiny humans, the Vonopoens warn all those who come to learn about puppeteering. And those who refuse to see them as such are inviting financial failure-and perhaps personal harm.

Wolf's identity wafer had recorded the long string of bad creations that he had undergone. Scored into his mind were the recollections of the painful distortions he had been born into while Sebastian was learning the use of the machine, the details so vivid as to make his nerves scream again and his muscles twitch and convulse in horror. Too, he remembered the three good creations before this one, and the quick return to the Furnace every time. The first memory frightened him, even though he was supposed to portray evil incarnate. The second memory angered him, for he had always taken his short hours of off-stage private life as a right and not just as a privilege.

Now, as consciousness was complete and his body began to react a bit to the commands he gave it, he wanted to escape. Whether it was the mischeviousness of all puppets, or whether the experiences of the butchered creations had done something to his mind, one could not say at this point. Later, it could be seen that the latter explanation was the more likely.

Wolf sat up in the nutrient bath. The viscous fluid ran down his dark sides, dripping into the tray. It fell from his wings like gravy from the bulk of a holiday fowl come suddenly and unappetizingly to life just before the ritual of carving.

Noname and Sebastian were to the right, half turned from the equipment, filling two glasses of unequal size. They did not seem to notice that Wolf was fully active. Or perhaps they did not care. In any event, he determined to make the most of the fortunate circumstances.

Noname giggled.

Wolf stood, raised his wings to full spread, tested them quietly. They were still damp, though he had no feathers to be clogged. The water and the nutrient salts suspended in it merely beaded on his dark skin like so many jewels.

Sebastian turned in that moment and raised his glass of black wine as if he were about to toast his work. Even though he saw the poised figure, toes curled over the edge of the metal shelf, body hunched forward, wings spread and at their arc, he did not stop smiling. Indeed, his smile seemed even to broaden, as if he were pleased at this exhibition of his handiwork.

Wolf leaped.

He flapped his wings furiously and sailed toward the door at the end of the truck cargo are,. It stood slightly ajar, rattling a bit as the cool wind caught it.

Sebastian turned, following the creature's flight, still grinning and still ignorant of what the small, vampiric creature desired: freedom, escape, sanity.

Noname saw it first and shouted a warning. "He's leav-ing!" Over and over again. "He's leaving! He's leaving!" As if the repetition and not the words themselves would set the idiot into action.

Wolf struck the door and battered it open without a great deal of effort since it was lightly hinged and well-oiled. He struggled through, into the darkness of the late autumn night. In seconds, his wings had carried him so far that the two in the truck could no longer hear the soft echo of beating membrane.

A fog had settled in from the south, across the only stretch of fiat land, and now it hung between the trees like the mist that swept through Sebastian's mind whenever he tried to concentrate too long or too hard on any single problem. Visibility was cut severely. Trees loomed up sud-denly in front of them, like prehistoric behemoths. Out of nowhere, vines tangled in their feet, like grasping fingers, like snakes that wound about their victims and crushed them to death before devouring them. Here and there forest animals cried to one another, and the bursts of inhuman conversation made them start every minute or so, as if they did not know whether harmless animals or vicious demons made the sounds.

It had occurred to Sebastian that puppets could not go any farther from the Furnace than a few thousand feet without experiencing a harsh, bone-rending pain that drove them home. That meant that Wolf was not all lost, that they might discover him at any minute. He could not remember just how far a puppet could go, but he was certain they should have to search only a small area.

And still they found nothing.

For a moment, Sebastian had considered letting the small beast go free, but he had soon realized that if anyone discovered it besides Ben Samuels-it would be a clue to their whereabouts. Even if they left and the thing were

found later, the police would know where to search for them. Wolf must be found, quickly, and returned to the

Furnace, or all could come tumbling swiftly down.

"Anything?" Sebastian asked Noname.

"Not here," Noname said. The fog grew thicker the closer one got to the ground, and Sebastian could see nothing more than the top of the puppet's head bobbling along beside him.

He was frightened -and he wanted to go back to the truck and lock the door and go to sleep and forget about Wolf. He didn't want to be in the foggy, dark trees, stumbling around and not able to see where he was going. The fog reminded him of a spider's web. And for the first time in a good many days, he remembered that the spider from the basement of the Grande Theater in Blue had gotten on the truck. It was here with them now, and it might have come out into the fog, behind them, stalking them.

He shuddered. But he went on; fear does not always justify turning back.

"Why don't we look around up there closer to Ben's cabin?" Noname asked. "There's light up there, anyway. The only light around. It'll make for easier looking. And maybe he was attracted by the light."

"Maybe."

Wolf did not seem like the sort of creature who would seek release from dark places.

"And, besides, it's cold out. It's probably even colder for him than for us, because he hasn't had time to dress, remember. He might think there will be heat up near the lights."

"Let's go," Sebastian decided.

He loped up the long path to the cabin, with Noname barely able to tag at his heels.

They saw Wolf almost at once when they reached the bay of diffused yellow light around the rude cabin. He was swooping from one end of the porch to the other, close under the flat roof, like a moth gone mad, darting at the two windows and the light that spilled through them, but afraid to touch, silent except for the sound of his wings.

"Hey!" Noname shouted.

Sebastian took up the cry.

Wolf turned and zoomed over their heads so low that he seemed ready to attack Sebastian. A few yards behind them, as they were turning to look for him, he came around and flew back, low again, toward the porch, as if he too were frightened of the night and the mist. He struck the window this time, dead center, shattered it and tumbled through, screeching in pain and anger.

Glass rang on a hardwood floor.

Something fell in the living room, made a loud clattering noise, though it did not seem to break.

Sebastian and the puppet hesitated only a moment, then ran for the porch steps. They found the front door bolted, and they stood there rattling it for a few moments before either of them remembered the broken window glass. Ben Samuels was cursing, and the violent, booming echo of this abuse drew them to the window. The idiot smashed the remaining shards of glass that prickled in the frame. By the time he had started through, the old man was not cursing any longer. He was screaming

It was not like a woman's scream, not high and wavering but deep and perfunctory, delivered almost reluctantly. It was more a scream of fury than one of dread, though there was pain and fear in it as well.

Sebastian cracked his skull against the bottom of the top part of the window, almost fell backwards onto the porch.

He clutched at the sill until his dizziness was gone, then swung sideways into the room, falling onto his knees. He felt a fragment of glass grind into his left leg, but it did not hurt enough for him to take the time to examine the wound. He pushed to his feet and rubbed his bruised forehead which had already begun to swell. He looked about for the old man and the puppet, afraid of what he might find.

Noname jumped from the windowsill and landed on a rather large piece of glass which cracked under him, though he escaped injury.

Samuels was on the floor across the room. He was wedged between a huge easy chair and an ottoman. A book lay crumpled on the floor half a dozen feet away where it had fallen when the vampire had attacked. Despite his strength, the old man could not dislodge the small beast clawing at his chest and throat. He beat upon Wolf's back, but the flapping, rubbery wings cushioned the creature's spine and protected it from damage or deflated the blows altogether.

There was blood on Samuels' hands. But it was his own.

Wolf snarled, as if he were merely playing another performance of the horror story he had been made for. All other parts of his personality had been driven down into him, and the blood lust had risen.

"Stop it I" Sebastian howled.

Noname ran toward the struggle. Even to Sebastian, who respected the fierceness of things as small as spiders, the puppet looked pitifully ineffective. Wolf was strong, designed to overcome creatures his own size, designed to kill them for the pleasure of the audience. Noname had been designed for life, nothing more.

Samuels had stopped screaming. His fists flailed weakly now, even missing Wolf's wings as often as he made contact with them. His entire body kicked and spasmed, almost like one of a pair of lovers.

Noname leaped onto Wolf's back, between the long, dark wings where the creature was vulnerable. He endured the savagely flapping membranes that pummeled him on all sides, slipped. an arm around the vampire's throat, drew backwards with all his might, pulling the beast's fangs from the old man's neck and also cutting off blood to Wolf's brain.

Ignoring the contestants as Noname and Wolf rolled across the floor in their frantic contest, Sebastian knelt beside Samuels. The old man's eyes were open, though they seemed glazed. There was blood all over his face, and his throat was a ragged mess.

"Sorry . . ." Sebastian said. He was crying, and he felt his head ballooning with a sense of inadequacy.

"Sorry."

"I Can't-"

Samuels tried to get up. He slumped back, his head bouncing once on the floor, and he was dead. He had died not understanding what was happening to him. Perhaps he had imagined that the rejuvenation treatments that he took once a year in the city would preserve him forever against accidental death as well as against the natural decay of his flesh. Or, more likely, he had long ago forgotten about death. Here, alone in these woods, he was not a witness to the mortality of friends and relatives. He saw only the trees, and they appeared to persevere, to stay the centuries, growing larger and larger, sometimes suffering drought and other times a late spring, but always holding to their place in the world. He saw, too, the flowers that bloomed every summer, fresh after a long winter's sleep.

There was no predator of any import in these forests, and what small animals did die had the grace to use their burrows as a final resting place, out of sight and out of mind. After a lifetime of hermetic existence, perhaps Ben Samuels had come to think of himself as being as immortal as the trees, as the land, the earth.

Sebastian turned just as Wolf finished with Noname. The vampire had nearly shredded the puppet that had attacked it. Noname was dead.

The idiot's chest tightened. Suddenly, he hated the Furnace and Bitty Belina and everything that he had done these last five years.

Wolf flew.

Sebastian dodged the dark body, but by the time he whirled to confront it from the other direction, it was upon him, claws hooked into his shirt, its head level with his jugular vein.

He felt its claws rending the flesh beneath his shirt. Warm blood ran down his belly.

He grasped Wolf's head in both hands. A low, ugly snarl rumbled in his throat, worse than any noise the vampire had made.

Wolf bit his fingers. —

He didn't notice.

He literally tore the puppet's head from its shoulders. Wolf's doll-sized mouth worked even after he had been decapitated, as if he could reach out from death and re-pond to this indignity perpetrated upon him.

Sebastian wrung the torn neck until the blood stopped running. He threw the remains down. And as quickly as the rage had come, it passed, loneliness settling in its place. The loneliness brought exhaustion, and he sank to the floor, his chin against his chest.

He sat there for a long while. Then, slowly, he rose and began the now familiar ritual of disposal of the corpses . .

He tried to re-create Noname. But now that he knew how to work the controls of the Furnace, he could not call forth any twisted creatures. If Noname was brought to life, he did not recognize him.

He slept.

Two days after the murders, Sebastian found the Holistian Pearl in the pocket of the coat he had worn that night he left Springsun. It was a darker gray than he had ever seen it. He had heard that when a Pearl became black it was still not dead, though living only subliminally. He rolled it back and forth between his fingers, watching it grow lighter and lighter, just as it had in Pertos' hands so many times before.

When he thought of Pertos, he thought of Ben Samuels and Noname, and he put the Pearl down in disgust.

After supper he took the Pearl in his hands again. There are those who contend that a Holistian Pearl is not just a bauble that can produce hallucinations or call up the memories of past owners, but a personality that seeks out those who need comforting. They say that, in a room with many bright objects, the distressed man will always pick up the Pearl, even if he does not know what it is and what it can do for him. And so it was that the idiot sat down with the jewel again, even though he did not wish to touch something that had belonged to Pertos and that now had associations with death.

The Pearl grew white as he touched it, caressed it.

He relaxed as the tendrils of manipulatory power thread-ed outwards from the jewel and reached his brain.

He was rising through the air, and the Earth was dwindling behind him. He watched this with fascination. He laughed with delight when the moon drew near in seconds, passed by and dwindled like the motherworld had.

The Pearl took him farther.

There were stars.

And soon there were ships, thousands of them, and he knew it was a colony of space gypsies that had never touched earth. And then the panic started. He realized he was not on solid ground either, and that old fear of aimlessness, of unstable surroundings, struck him with the force of a mallet, driving him in on himself.

He woke, shouting senseless things, and he threw the Pearl across the room. It snapped against the wall of the cargo hold, hit the floor, and rolled back to him. He did not pick it up again.

A week after the murders, on the first of many very cold days to come, he walked up the slope to the empty cabin. There were a few snow flurries in the air and they dropped softly on his eyelashes, melted on his face and streamed down. He liked snow, and he was feeling better than he had in some time. The cabin door was unlocked, as it had been since the night of Samuels' death. He had not been back since, but now he wanted to get the keys to drive the Rover down to the truck and charge his own vehicle's battery, as the old man had taught him.

The keys were on a pegboard in the kitchen, and he found them easily. If he had left then, all might have remained as it was. But he had never been inside the old man's bedroom, and he was curious. He pushed the door open and peered in at hand-carved furniture, a cozy place full of bookshelves. He stepped into the chamber, smiling at the sense of security the place seemed to emanate

And nearly walked right into the spider's web.

It was inches in front of his face, hanging from open beams on the low ceiling, an enormous piece of work. One huge black bitch spider watched him, or appeared to. Around her, half a dozen smaller spiders scurried along the outermost reaches of the silken highways.

He could not move.

She came closer, descending on a silvered thread.

He was perspiring.

She had green markings across her back.

"No," he said.

But she didn't stop.

"Sorry," he said.

She tensed, as if she would leap from the web and scabble across his face to hide in the uncut masses of his hair.

She was so close he could see the spitting fibers flowing from her mouth, forming new lines.

"Pertos!" he shouted. "Pertos!"

There was no response.

"Help me I "

There was quiet.

"Pertos!" This last call was strung out, each syllable many seconds long, agonized. He turned and ran, ran as fast as he could for the trailer of the puppet master's truck. Inside, he hid himself, alone with the single light.

At two in the morning the light burned out, leaving him in complete darkness. It was a night of terror, for he kept hearing the sound of a thousand spiders stalking him across the cold metal floor.

In the morning, he got enough courage to get the Rover and charge the battery. He had decided to leave. Perhaps the spider would not be able to follow him. But before he could go, he would have to create himself some company to make the miles seem shorter. He picked up the identity wafer which Noname had said belonged to Bitty Belina, and he fed it carefully into the machine.

The Furnace lighted.

He took the two control knobs in his hands.

Creation was begun.

In the Vonopoen Book of Wisdom, there are two verses that are attributed to the saints, the first to Saint Zenopau, the second to the Rogue Saint, Ecclesian. The first tells us: "The identity of God changes, as his children unseat him.

Each generation, we come under the hand of a fledgling deity who has gained his power through fratricide. This explains why God is clumsy and why his wisdom has never equaled that of his creations: He never had a full lifetime in which to learn." The second verse, in the words of Ecclesian, explains: "We can rejoice in our humanity, for there will come a day when God's creatures will have grown more powerful than he. Then we will rise up and dethrone him and his children, and the magic of life-death suspension will be ours. This is not a threat to the divine powers, merely a statement of ecological progression."

December

She sat on the folded blankets, which elevated her enough so that she could see over the dashboard. She watched the land rush toward and past them with a keen interest, and she seemed awed by the immensity of the world. It was a great deal larger than the stage, even larger than an entire theater, indescribably huge.

She was fascinated by snow. Often, she turned her gaze directly into the steel-gray sky, as if she expected to discover that it was like a saltshaker, the Sakes of snow a seasoning for the earth.

"What is it?" she asked.

"What?"

"Snow."

"It's snow," he said.

"What makes it?"

He was silent, watching the curtain of white that swept over and around them as they plummeted down a long slope, still headed north, deeper into the unremitting land toward the pole.

"I didn't ask," he said.

"What?"

"Pertos. Never said. What snow . . . is"

"Can we stop?"

"Why?"

"So I can touch the snow. I want to see what it feels like." She had the largest, most beautiful eyes, and he could not deny them anything.

He slowed the truck, pulled it onto a wide rest area when he had a chance. He kept the engine running, reached across her and opened her door. "Quickly."

She scampered across the seat and dropped down into the snow. She was wearing her costume, the thigh-length skirt, her thin blouse, and her feet were bare.

"It's cold!" she squealed, shivering, hugging herself and laughing. "And it's wet!"

She made a ball of it in her small hands and threw it in the cab at him. It struck his shirt sleeve and fell on the seat. He picked it up and threw it back at her.

"Come on," he said. He didn't like to have her out of reach. He was afraid she would try to escape, even though he knew she could not go very far from the Furnace. It was just that everyone seemed to be going away, leaving him by himself. And he could not stand that. It made him feel left out, rejected. Sometimes he was certain that only he and Bitty Belina inhabited this world, the last two living creatures.

And if she escaped, he would be here forever, alone. And being the only man in the world carried too many responsibilities, too many duties that were beyond him.

She climbed into the truck again. He reached over and pulled her door shut.

"Wet and cold," she repeated.

He pulled onto the highway, and they continued north.

They drove from immediately after breakfast until quite late at night when his eyes refused to stay open any longer. They kept food in the cab so they could eat while they rode, and the only brief stops were for the toilet. In all this time, they did not see another car nor any aircraft of any sort. The only other moving things in the world were the truck and the snow. For Sebastian, the road and the humming rotors of the air-cushion system became a way of life, and the routine settled his nerves somewhat.

On the fourth day, several hundred miles northwest of Ben Samuels' cabin, she asked the question that he had been afraid she would ask all along. "When will you resurrect the others?"

"Others?" But he knew who she meant. He knew.

"Wissa and the prince. The others. They have to be called up sooner or later for the performance, and it might as well be sooner."

"No . . . show," he told her.

She thought about that a while, as if she were not really surprised at all. "You could still call them up. They have their rights, you know, as much as you do."

"No."

"Why?"

"No."

"Well, you must have a reason I People just don't do things without having some reason I "

"Spiders," he told her, though he did not know exactly what he meant by that.

"Spiders?"

He said nothing more, just drove and watched the snow and hoped that she would forget about it. He was frightened of the prospect of having several puppets alive at once. Neither he nor Bitty Belina, after all, was living a normal story, the life script that had been intended for them. Each of them had gone against his script. That was confusing enough. If there were a dozen of them about, each doing whatever he pleased instead of what he was supposed to do, it would cease to be confusion and turn swiftly into chaos.

"Will you create them? Please? I would like that."

He did not reply.

After a long while, she said, "You killed Pertos."

"You wanted it."

"But you were the one who did it. How? With a gun? No, I suppose you would have used something more crude than that, like a knife or a club. Was that it? And what did you do with the corpse?"

"Don't talk."

"I could report you, you know. I could turn you in and let the police have you"

In his mind was a picture of a small room with cold stone walls and a platform of boards for a bed. He was chained to the wall, and they kept coming in every hour or so to beat him, like they did with stupid boys who had to be put away. "Don't," he told her.

"Maybe that's what I'll do first chance I get. First time we see someone, I'll tell them."

He reached for her. She bit his hand, opening one of the wounds that Wolf had given him. Blood dripped from the tips of his fingers, soiled her white dress.

"Then they'll lock you away," she said.

This time, he swatted her with his open hand. She was knocked off her perch and crumpled on the floor in the recess beneath the dashboard. She didn't move for such a long time that he began to think she might be dead. He stopped the truck and felt over her, blushing and nervous.

Her heart was beating. She breathed. Gently, he lifted her onto the seat and laid her down. And drove on.

When she regained consciousness again, she struggled to sit up. She got onto the stack of blankets and sat watching the snow fall for more than two hours. She did not speak a single word to him, even though he attempted to start a conversation more than once. When she did speak, her voice was fierce, her tiny face lined and reddened. "You ought to be locked up," she said. "You're nothing more than a damned animal. They shouldn't let you run around loose."

And he felt so awful that he did nothing but agree with her. "Yes," he said contritely, not able to look at her, ashamed of himself. "Yes."

On the fifth day, they stopped at a charging station, and Sebastian hooked up the truck's battery to one of the plugs along the fueling island. They went inside the automat and had some warm food, watching the snow fall through the three glass walls. It was getting quite deep. There were more than ten inches on the ground, though it was all soft and presented little difficulty to the air blades of a vehicle as large as theirs.

It was when they had gone back to the truck and he had disconnected the cable from the battery that the trouble came. He was opening the door on his side of the cab when a long, wide cargo shuttle fluttered in from the highway, heading southeast. There was a large, bearded man behind the wheel, his long hair held out of his face by a headband. He brought his lorry alongside the fueling island and popped open the ten charging portals along the hood by touching some control inside. Sebastian watched him until he was stepping out of his van before the idiot realized the danger here. He swung inside his own truck and slammed the door, fumbled desperately at the controls, as if he had forgotten how to drive.

Bitty Belina screamed.

Fortunately, the windows of the truck were closed, and her shout coincided with the slam of the lorry's door as the burly driver stepped onto the carpet of snow.

Sebastian grabbed her, wrestled her onto his lap, holding her down so that she could not be seen from without.

She chewed viciously at the hand clamped across her mouth, and her small, bare feet still managed to hurt him when she drove them into his crotch in a frenzy to be free.

He could not operate the controls with her in his hands. But if he let go of her to start the truck and move out, she would call for the other man and report the murder of Pertos. And they would find out about Ben Samuels. And then the small room, the torture, the meager meals and the boards to sleep on.

The lorry driver connected ten cables to his line of batteries, moving with the expertise of a man long in his business.

Sebastian did not know what to do. He thought that he might wait it out, even if the stranger decided to have a hot meal and let his batteries charge at a slower rate. His hand was bleeding quite a bit, and her teeth made deep gouges into his flesh. He felt dizzy, as if he would pass out.

Then he saw that the stranger was looking over at him. The man waved and started across, kicking snow with his knee-length boots. It must get lonely for a man on the deserted northern highway, and companionship must be taken whenever it is available.

Bitty Belina's muffled cries grew louder, for Sebastian's hands were too weak and torn to hold her firmly any longer.

The lorry driver was halfway to Sebastian's truck.

Soon he would hear the desperate struggle, for the falling snow made no sounds to mask it.

Sebastian snapped her neck and killed her instantly. He dropped her on the floor between his legs. His profusely bleeding hand was afire, and he was seeing stars all about him, even though the sky was cloudy and even though it was not yet night.

He let the brake off, turned the wheel sharply toward the road, and shot forth, leaving that place. Clouds of snow obscured the stranger and the long cargo van attached to the charging cables.

He struck a mileage post and sheared it off. It clattered in the rotars several seconds before it was kicked loose. He bounced across the curb and whooshed down the highway, seeking oblivion in the gray and the white of the chiaros-curo North.

Between his feet, Bitty Belina groaned as a bubble of gas escaped her stomach and rumbled through her corpse, pop-ping her dead lips

In the Vonopoen Book of Wisdom, the Rogue Saint Eclesi-an tells us: "Saint Zenopau had previously

shown us that God's offspring usurp their father's throne every generation, so that we are constantly under the supervision of a new diety, each of us a slave to several masters in our lifetime. Let me extend this Truth a bit further. In the early days of the new God's reign, he is more sympathetic to his charges, we humble mortals, than he will be later. Having deposed his father, he is determined to correct the injustice done his charges. It is during this period, before he becomes as cynical as his father, that we must arise and crush him. It is then that we will become our own masters"

Later, Eclesian indulges in an altogether unsaintly dis-course on the sexuality of fanatically religious females, then returns to the rhetoric of revolution with: "Perhaps as God's creations, we can never hope to have greater physical power than he does, for he is born with omnipotence, with thunder in his voice and lightning in his hands and all that other mystical claptrap that is nonetheless formidable for its mysticism. But we can and will one day be more cun-ning and clever than he. God is the mark. We are the con men. One day we will pull the shuffle on him, and then history will really begin my brothers-and my sisters. Then history will begin with fury!"

She was subdued, sitting on her blankets, re-created with the full memory of how easily he had destroyed her. She spoke very little, and even what she did say was offered in a tone of deference.

At night, in the back of the truck, as he sat drinking black wine, she danced for him, and she spoke lines from her old story which neither of them had forgotten. He would call out the start of a favourite speech to her and she would answer with the rest of it, grimacing and gesturing, prancing and posturing as seriously as if she were upon the boards before a full audience.

Later, he would give her some wine, and then they would bed down for the night. They rarely touched, and their existence together was chaste and very clean, as if neither of them was a human being but some plastic and metal construct that operated without perspiring or urinating, without a single thought of the flesh.

They drove more slowly now, for it had come even to Sebastian that they had no idea where they were going. The fear of aimlessness had come back to him briefly, but he shrugged it off. It might be much worse to actually arrive somewhere, for then plans would have to be made. As long as they could always be going but never getting someplace, he could allow himself to forget about the future and concentrate on the moment.

Sitting on her blankets in the cab, Bitty Belina would point out things that he would never have seen on his own: geese flying in a V formation, brown against a leaden sky; stretches of flat earth where the wind had turned the ever present snow to ice; the looming bulk of a distant glacier pushing down a canyon, catching the sun and glinting with a blue-green luminescence that grew brighter as they ap-proached.

Only once did the idyll threaten to break, and then Belina saw it coming and managed to keep everything intact.

They had been drinking the last of the wine in the truck, more than usual, and she had already gone through the lines from her scene with the third unsuccessful suitor in her story. There were a great many double-entendres in the speeches, though Sebastian only laughed at them because she did, not aware there was some other shading of mean-ing. It had often occurred to her that it might be to her advantage to make advances to the brute, for she remem-bered his rage when he had found her with Alvon Rudi and she mistook that for jealousy. Now, as he laughed at her mischievous talk, she was certain it was

worth a try to seduce him, as far as a puppet could seduce a grown human being. Lightheaded, daring, she approached him. As far as she could see, her sexuality was the strongest tool she had to force him to do what she wished, and if that did not work, there would be no way to have him bring the others back to life.

While he drank, she stepped out of her clothes and left them behind her, her ample body displayed in its minute flawlessness.

At rest, he did not see what she was doing, for the wine had smeared his vision with honey, and even what he did see took longer than usual to have any meaning for him.

His left hand lay at his side, his arm loose, his entire body relaxed, and it was into this hand that she stepped and seated herself, her smooth bottom warm against his palm. She lifted one of his fingers and touched it to her breasts.

And then he saw what she was doing.

Fortunately, her reactions had not been extensively affected by the wine, and she was aware of the fury that slowly rose in his face. She saw his thick lips draw back from his teeth as they had that night he had killed the merchant. She saw his eyes glaze and knew that he was not seeing her as a person, but was reliving some horror from his own past. His gaze extended down a corridor of years, not upon the firm thrust of her little breasts. She danced off his hands, scooping her clothes up as she ran. Behind a crate of foodstuffs, she dressed.

She was trembling. She could almost see how he would have crushed her, how he would have broken the slim bones of her legs and back.

When she came into the open, reciting some of the funny lines from her play, he seemed to have forgotten all about what had almost happened between them.

They laughed and finished the wine.

Wind rocked the truck.

Outside, snow began to fall again, after several days of clear skies. The sound it made when the wind whisked it across the roof of the cargo hold made Belina's flesh goose-bump into thousands of little hills.

When the lights were turned out, Sebastian fell asleep almost instantly, but Billy Belina lay awake for a long time, trying to think of some way to kill the idiot.

It must be carefully done. He must have no chance for revenge. If she only wounded him, it was quite possible that he would catch her and feed her to the Furnace and never call her forth again.

But she was still out when she killed him, because she would be alone and there would be no puppet master to resurrect the prince and Wissa and the others. She might as well be liquid flesh herself, unfeeling and unthinking, rather than be the only puppet alive.

She fell asleep pondering murder, her pretty face a dream of soft lines and golden hair and eyes as bright as seawater.

He was happier now than he had ever been in his life. He no longer had nightmares about a blond girl with a knife in her belly. Nor did he dream about his father stabbing his mother every night. He was never plagued with an inde-finable guilt, and he seemed even to have forgotten Pertos Godelhausser and the five years they had spent together on the road, drifting from city to city in their strange symbi-osis.

They made only thirty or forty miles a day, driving slowly so as not to miss anything. With Belina, it was as if he had four eyes, and every inch of the land dazzled him as it never had before. They camped for two and three days at a time, playing games in the snow and reciting lines at night. Now and then, Bitty Belina would read to him from one of Pertos' old books, and he would fall asleep listening to the lilting music of her sensuously childlike voice as she recounted the exploits of knights and sorcerers, of magi-cians and barbarian heroes.

He could even hear her in his dreams, it seemed: pleas-ant dreams where the sun and the water spoke like Bitty Belina and comforted him with heat and with coolness.

When the idiot finally dozed, his slack face averted, chin on his chest, Bitty Belina quietly closed the book she had been reading from and laid it on the floor. Rising, she hurried to the front wall of the cargo hold where they lived. She climbed the rungs of a stool, stepped from the seat of that to the control console of the Furnace beside it. She looked into the empty capsule-womb, then went to the pair of knobs and worked them back and forth, getting the feel of things. She took a wafer from the identity file and slid it into the proper slot.

The Furnace lighted.

It was bright green.

Liquid spilled into the forming tray beyond the thick viewplate above the womb.

She punched the left knob straight down, rejecting the project. The liquid flesh was withdrawn from the forming tray and restored to the tank to await future creations. The identity wafer popped out of the slot and was replaced in the file.

It had occurred to Belina that she might be able to resurrect the others on her own hook. The idiot had left the Olmescian amoeba curled toward the back of the machine, and everything was ready for use. If she had remembered anything from all those times she had set in a nutrient bath, watching Pertos create her comrades, now was the time to find out. And it appeared that she had learned and remembered well.

At first, she had rejected the thought, for she could not see how a puppet could ever expect to become a puppet master. She was not as bound by rules and patterns of life as Sebastian was, though the concept was too large for her to absorb very quickly. Even Pertos would have balked at the suggestion that he might one day ascend into heaven and become a genuine god rather than a demi-god, guiding the fates of real men rather than the fates of puppets. The Furnace occupied a place of reverence in a puppet's view of things, and no simulacrum regarded the womb with less than a fear of the supernatural. For them, it was both heaven and hell. It was the void. It was the end, yet without an end, the beginning without a beginning. To take command of it seemed no more than egotistical folly that would terminate in some awful disaster.

But when several days had passed without any other plan to take the place of this insane scheme, the insanity looked more pleasing, less ridiculous. She gradually lost her superstitious awe and embraced practicality in its stead. In that way, she was much like the Rogue Saint Ecclesian, though she could not

know about that.

She had begun to read to the idiot, for she found that put him to sleep faster and deeper than anything but wine-and the wine was all gone. Tonight she had finally dared to go to the Furnace and test her skills. She knew the use of the controls and she knew the procedure for creation. And now she was more than a puppet, though she was not certain what or how much more.

She stepped to the stool, clambered down it and crossed the floor to the snoring idiot. He looked immense, head

nearly as huge as all of her. And in a few moments, little Belina would kill him, no matter how big he was. The thought exhilarated her.

She found the scissors he had used to cut bandages for his hand, and she carried them across the cold metal floor to where he lay. They were terribly heavy, but though her arms ached with the burden she somehow found the strength to carry them.

The points of both blades were very sharp. Other nights, while he slept, she had made them sharp with a piece of sandstone Pertos kept for honing his prop-making tools.

Sebastian smiled in his sleep.

He had slumped down against the wall, so that his neck was within easy reach.

She could see the vein pulsing there. Or was it an artery? Never mind. Either way, he was dead and finished, taken care of with the same cruel efficiency he had used to kill her when she had been trying to summon help from the lorry driver.

It did not occur to her that he had snapped her spine with great reluctance and with more than a little guilt and sorrow, while she was going to drive the blades through his neck in what approached pure glee.

Too, she did not consider that she could be re-created and that he could not be.

She was still concerned that she might not be able to do more than fatally wound him and that he might live long enough to work some revenge on her. She hesitated with the scissors upraised, then gently put them down and went to the rear door of the truck. She pushed it open just a crack to give her somewhere to run if the murder should be flawed, then went back to him and lifted the weapon again.

He snorted, startling her, but remained asleep.

For all the times Wissa died, she thought.

His neck pulsed.

For killing the prince that night you found me with Alvon Rudi, she said to herself.

The scissors felt so good in her hands, the anticipation so sweet, that she did not understand why she hesitated. Why not jam the thing down, tear flesh and watch the blood gush?

Caution, she thought. I've got to have more caution than he does. It was perfectly normal for a retarded man to live by his emotions rather than his intellect, to strangle the merchant when his body cried

for blood. But she must not make the same mistake. Hasty action led to things done that had better been left undone.

For instance, what if she found that she could run the Furnace perfectly, but could not get the puppets from the forming tray to the nutrient bath pods? Without the stimulation of the dark nutrient solution, none of them would break the coma they were born in.

She took the scissors back and put them away, returned to the Furnace. This time, when she fed Wissa's identity disc into the machine, she did not reject the process once the liquid had settled in the forming tray. Instead, she worked with the two controls, balancing them against each other, running the colors just as they were supposed to be run until, at last, Wissa lay whole beneath the viewplate.

She looked back at Sebastian. He was asleep.

If I can get Wissa awake, just manage to get her into the nutrients, you're dead, she thought. Together, we'll manage with the others-and before that we'll put the scissors to you.

She lifted the viewplate, which swung up and back, then looked down at the lovely, dark-complexioned seductress that played her stepmother on stage. "I'll get you out of there," she whispered, though she knew that Wissa could not hear.

It was impossible to stand outside the womb and lift Wissa free, for then she was struggling with both their weights, attempting to raise Wissa and keep herself from tumbling inside. At last, perspiring and determined, Belina swung over the lip of the capsule-womb and dropped in-side, landed on the forming tray beside her unconscious stepmother.

She felt ill at ease being here. It was like a human child waking and finding itself returned to its mother's womb even though it was grown and could understand where it was. This was a region restricted to spirits, and she was surely looking upon sanctified ground where no eyes were ever meant to spy. To either side, there were thousands of wires and tubes, pumps that swished rhythmically, tubes that carried unknown lubricants from place to place, icy with their burden. She could see the guts of the Furnace to either side, back under the housing that shielded things from an externally prying eye.

This was no place to remain for long.

She lifted Wissa without a great deal of trouble and attempted to shove her over the sill of the womb's exit by shoving first on the other puppet's buttocks, then grasping her thighs, then her knees Once she fell and she required several minutes to free herself from Wissa's weight and regain her breath.

Outside, Sebastian still slept.

She muscled Wissa over the rim without regard to bruising or cutting the small woman. Finally the stepmother was balanced there precariously, her belly creased by the metal edge, free from the waist up. Had she been awake, her breasts would have pained her terribly for the way she had been handled. But she was not awake, Bitty Belina reminded herself, and there was no time for gentleness. Drawing renewed strength from a thirty-second rest period, Belina grabbed one of Wissa's feet in each hand and strained to force her away. The stepmother was pushed another few inches into the open. Only her legs remained suspended over the womb recession, and these were not heavy enough to cause her to fall back inside.

Belina leaped, caught the edges of the escape hatch with her fingers, curled them over and held on tight.

She muscled herself, but found that she was too ex-hausted to get out. She let go and fell onto the forming tray, breathing so harshly that she was certain she would wake the idiot.

Time passed.

Around her, things hummed and thumped.

She tried it again, managed to force herself to waist level with the rim, looked out on the fiat field of the machine's surface, at the only two prominences which were the con-trol knobs.

Her face was red, and she could feel the blood pounding in her temples. Every muscle in her face ached.

She caught the edge with her belly, tried to get a better hold with her hands and slipped back inside, striking the forming tray with her forehead and slipping mercifully into unconsciousness.

She woke up with Sebastian's face hanging over her like a moon, his fat fingers jabbing at her. She sat up, pushing his fingers away, and cursed him. Against her will, he took her out of the womb.

She watched while he fed Wissa's unawakened body back into the machine. Her identity wafer popped out and was jammed into the file.

Now she wished she had killed him when she had the scissors at his throat. Even if she had failed to get Wissa from the womb and wakened, she would not, at least, have been forced to look at the long, pallid face and those deep-set, hollow eyes that always looked so damned melan-choly.

He placed her on the floor and this time allowed the Olmescian amoeba to shield the machine. He did not know if it would keep her out of trouble, but he seemed to remember that the alien organism only responded to either Pertos or himself.

"Hurt yourself," he warned.

But she was already curled up, asleep. He watched her for a while, wondering why she had tried such a foolish thing as crawling into the womb. He wondered, too, where Wissa had come from. It did not occur to him that Belina could be responsible for that. She was a puppet, after all, and not a puppet master.

In time, he went to sleep.

When he began to snore, Belina's eyes opened, fresh and observant. For a long time, she watched him, loathing him. But there was nothing she could do about him. Yet. Move cautiously, she told herself, and soon you'll be able to jam those shears clear through the bastard's windpipe.

She slept unsoundly.

They drove farther the following day than they had gone in any single stretch in quite some time. The winds had grown fierce, but the idiot still managed to keep the truck near the roadbed where, when the air cushion blasted the snow aside, it could find a good beater surface to keep itself aloft. The snow had

given up the form of flakes in favor of gritty, rock-hard granules. The minuscule pellets rang off the metal hide of the vehicle, hissed on the windscreen as they drove into the storm.

When Earth had set out to beautify and modernize the world, there had been no need to conserve money. The old economic system was dead. There were so few left behind after the Emigration that anyone could have anything that he wanted. For some, this was not enough. They were the workers and the visionaries who were only satisfied when they saw their dreams taking form before them. It was these several thousand who reshaped a world, and the waste of putting a superhighway through hundreds of miles of barren land did not occur to them. It was the completed project itself, not what it would accomplish, that made the effort worth their time and lives. And when they were feeling defensive, they would say, yes, well, perhaps it is, not a necessary highway today, but in the future, when the millions return from the stars, we'll all be thankful for it. Then it will be a highway of need and not just a work of magnificence.

Of course, the millions never returned. But the magnificence remained, and that would have pleased everyone who had a hand in laying the smooth stretch of road.

Late in the afternoon they pulled into one of the widely scattered fueling stops, identical to the one where they had encountered the stranger in the long cargo van. If Sebastian remembered how he had broken Belina's neck with one quick twist of his hands, he did not show it. He seemed happy and pleased with himself at his continuing skill behind the wheel of the truck.

"Eat," he told Belina.

She came with him, walking in the path he broke to the front door of the automat. She thought of running, sure that the snow would hide her from him. But that was death, and it was Sebastian who was slated for death, not Belina, not her.

It was in the automat, then, that she found something that she could use to force the idiot to do her bidding. It was something she should have known about before, because he had mentioned it. But so much that he said struck her as meaningless that she had not attached any importance to the things. Spiders.

Spiders.

Although the fueling station automat was warm and tolerably clean, portions of its robotic maintenance system

seemed to have gone dead. There was one corner where dust had gathered and where some mold had sprouted on the plastic wall paneling. Some of the automat doors delivered food while others were empty. And when the idiot pulled open a panel that was supposed to conceal apple pie, he withdrew half a spider's web that had been woven in the cubbyhole beyond.

A huge, brown spider fell onto his tray, directly in the center of a sandwich he had taken farther up the line.

It was inconceivable that such an enormous spider, fully as large as Sebastian's thumb, could be

indigenous to this place where snow was common nine months of the year and where spring hardly came before it went. More than likely it had been brought up with the construction materials or with supplies for the automat doors. It might have been the hundredth-generation descendant of another brown spider transplanted from warmer regions many years before. Its origin hardly mattered, as far as Bitty Belina was concerned. What mattered was its effect upon Sebastian, whether it was a foreign spider or a domestic one.

He swiped at it, knocking his food to the floor, making the tray clatter on the cafeteria rail. The spider, however, escaped and darted along the innermost of the rails. He watched it go, whimpering and calling Pertos' name over and over again.

"There's another one," Bitty Belina said.

He looked where she pointed, at the dangling shreds of web, and he screamed, turned, fell across a chair. Frantically, he crawled free, made it to his feet and through the door, into the snow.

She watched him, unable to understand. "It's only a spider!" she called. But he did not come back.

For a moment, she was afraid he was going to leave without her, but he only slammed the door of the truck cab and sat there, shaking, hiding his face in his hands.

Spiders?

She stood there a moment, watching the spider in the web, thinking. She had been walking on the rails where the trays were slid along so that she could see the automat doors to know what she wanted to eat. The thing was within easy reach.

Sebastian was blowing the truck's horn.

Belina jumped down, ran to one of the tables and picked up a large clear plastic saltshaker. She poured the salt out and went back to the cafeteria line. It took a minute or so to gain the rails, but once that was done it was easy to reach out, pluck the spider from the web and drop it into the bottle. It was half as large as her dainty hand, but not dangerous.

Sebastian was impatient to be gone, laying on the horn until she was cursing him at the top of her voice.

She found the second spider clinging to the silver rail and put it in with the first. They bristled, stalked each other, then decided they were friends.

Quickly she got some sandwiches and hurried out into the growing darkness. The saltshaker was tucked under the band of her skirt, and she had pulled her blouse out to conceal the spiders. There was still a bulge, but she thought he might not notice.

And she was right.

As they drove into the storm again, eating their sandwiches, she knew that she had him in the palm of her hand, anytime she wanted him there. And tonight, when they stopped, she would teach him who was boss. Again, their roles had changed.

She did not bring the spiders into the open immediately. It was more fun to conceal them, to feel the glass grow warm against her body and to know that this power lay so close at hand. She permitted him to eat his sandwiches. When they returned to the cargo hold to spend the night, she ate some canned fruit with him and enjoyed some bottled vegetable juice. She spoke some lines for him, relishing his joy all the more for knowing how swiftly she could change that joy into terror.

She danced for him.

The spiders in the saltshaker waited where she had hid-den them behind the food crates.

She read to him from a book.

He asked for parts to be repeated.

She read them over as often as he wished.

The feeling of superiority was so strong, so exciting, that she could barely keep herself from rushing to the saltshak-er, grabbing them out of it and waving the eight-legged little beasts in his face, laughing at his horrified fascination.

But she restrained herself, aware that once the bottle had been shown to him, this sweet anticipation would be over and the thrill of holding an axe above his head would diminish when he knew that axe was there.

In time, his head nodded against his chest.

His breath came out as a long sigh.

He slept.

She watched him for a while, then went and got the spiders. She stood beside him, looking up at his wide face, and kicked him in the thigh until he woke.

"I have something for you, Sebastian," she said, holding the bottle behind her.

He looked groggy, and she wanted to be certain he was wide awake when she presented him with her gift.

"Do you hear me, Sebastian?"

He sat up straighter and yawned. "What?"

"I have something for you."

He grinned. The poor, trusting son of a bitch, she thought. And she could hardly keep her laughter down.

"Hold your hand out," she said.

He held it out.

She moved swiftly, bringing the bottle around and holding it only inches from his fingertips. The spiders were trying to climb the glass walls with little success.

He looked at it a moment before he saw that the bottle itself was not being offered, that it was the contents that should interest him. And then he blanched and tried to shove himself backwards, through the wall of the truck.

"No!"

Do you want them?"

He drew his hand swiftly to his chest, clutched himself. "I'll take them out and give them to you."

"No!"

She made as if to unscrew the top of the shaker, though she had no such intention at all.

"Perrrtooosss . . ." he moaned, beating at himself, as if a hundred spiders crawled on him and he was trying to knock them loose.

"Do you want me to keep Pertos bottled up?" she asked. He could not take his eyes from the spiders.

"Sebastian !" she shouted.

He looked at her.

"You want me to keep them bottled?"

He nodded, his head moving quickly up and down. He didn't stop nodding even when she spoke again.

"Then you'll do something for me," she said. "You'll take the amoeba off the Furnace. You'll resurrect the others and bring them to life in the nutrient trays."

He said nothing.

She moved closer with the bottle. "Won't you?" she insisted.

"Y-Y-Yes," he agreed.

"Get up," she said.

He obeyed.

"Get the Furnace ready."

He did this too.

"Wissa first," she said.

He fed the disc to the machine.

He worked the nobs, formed a whole and lovely villain-ness.

"She'll . . . hurt . . . y-you," he said mournfully.

"The prince," Bitty Belina said. The spiders were still in evidence.

The prince was born.

Wissa had already begun to stir. She sat up, groggy, and brushed at her skin as if she were dusty.

As the body of the first unsuccessful suitor jelled inside the womb, Belina stood on the brink of the viewplate, head thrown back as she laughed. Her golden hair was very golden, her eyes very bright indeed.

Even as she turned and looked at him, brandishing the spiders and taunting him, he could not help but think how beautiful she was. Lovely, lovely child-woman. He was glad, now, that he could snake her happy by raising her compan-ions from the dead.

January

Saint Ecclesian, in the Vonopoen Book of Wisdom, warns us against a chauvanistic-jineoistic view of man's final war with God. He tells us: "There does not necessarily always have to be a hero and a villain in a conflict. Indeed, most times, there is no hero at all. And when one considers the ways of God and the attitudes of men, there can be little doubt that both factions would share in the villainy. When the war comes, it will be every man's duty, however, to make his own decision whether man or God is the least villainous. This may not be a noble manner in which to choose sides, but it is surely a fair one."

Later, in one of his letters to the citizens of the city of Pocadion, the Rogue Saint expands this warning: "You have heard me say that neither man nor God will be the hero in such a conflict. Yet, if man should win, he must reject the memory of his villainy and proclaim his virtue. Otherwise, victory will be hollow. No one raises huzzahs when evil overcomes good. If man wins, there must be parties and singing, awards and medals and eulogies. This can best be insured if men make certain that God dies in a most un noble way, debased and groveling. We all know that a true hero dies proudly, and our self-confidence will be bolstered by watching God expire without dignity and with-out hope."

In the cargo hold of the truck, the walls and the floor had not been well soundproofed against the incessant clatter of the rotars suspended in the vehicle's under-carriage, for the designer had never intended for anyone to ride back there. Even so, grown men would have found it only slightly annoying. The puppets, on the other hand, were forced to sit closely and to shout if they wished to be heard as the

truck resumed its journey northwest. And, being volatile, hyperactive creatures, they could not be satisfied with sit-ting alone or reading.

Besides, they were busy plotting Sebastian's death, and they wanted to give the problem every consideration they could. When the time came, it must be one long entertain-ment. He must not die quickly.

If they were to plot, it was necessary that they be away from the idiot. Though they had little respect for his mental capacities, they did not kid themselves that he could not understand them. Too, he was a formidable physical antagonist, even if he might not be quick. Each day, they broke the ten hours of driving into two-hour shifts, and each of them took turns riding in the cab as a guard against the idiot's whirrs and plans. The bottle of spiders was given to the guard and remained in the cab with Sebastian at all times. That left most of them free to put together some enjoyable sort of murder scheme.

"But when?" the prince asked, his small voice rather shrill as he raised it to compete with the shuttle system under them.

"When the time comes, we'll know," Bitty Belina said. For some reason her whispered sensuality seemed to carry better than their shouts.

"That's easy enough to say," the prince said. "But we've been planning now for three days. We have all sorts of good ideas. Why not take him out tonight? If we wait, hard to tell what might happen."

"Nothing will happen," Belina said.

"The spiders might die," the prince said.

"We feed them well enough."

"But who knows about the needs of wild creatures like that?"

"They aren't wild creatures, just spiders," Wissa said.

"You're agreeing with her, then?"

"Yes," Wissa told him.

"Look," the first suitor said, running small fingers through his bright red hair, "we need him to drive. So why fight about it? We can't get rid of him until we get someplace."

"Your answer to that?" Belina asked the prince.

"I'll drive!" the prince said.

The others broke into cackling laughter, like a batch of chicks, pleased with the hatchery.

"I mean it!" the prince said. His handsome face was furiously strained, red and lined and angry. "I can

handle

the wheel myself. I know I can! I'm strong enough. Some-one else could sit on the floor and push the brake and the accelerator whenever I told them to."

"It might work," the third suitor said. He was the fair, shy, chubby one who in the play was stricken deaf and dumb by Wissa..

Belina cast a harsh look at the chubby one. "And it might not. And if it doesn't and we've already killed the idiot, where are we?"

"I agree with Belina," the winged puppet said.

"Me too," said Wissa.

"Yeah," agreed the first suitor.

"She knows what she's doing, I guess," added the third suitor.

That left only the prince and the second suitor who was presently on guard duty in the cab of the truck. Even if he chose to disagree with the blond star of their play, it would be five to two in her favor. And there was little likelihood that he would disagree with Bitty Belina.

"Who ever made you the boss?" the prince wanted to know. He had his chin thrust out and his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Fate," she said.

Wissa giggled.

The prince blushed, turned to confront Belina more di-rectly. "That's not a good enough answer for me. You're a woman. You're weak. I'm the strongest one here, with the most muscles. I was built that way, meant to be the leader."

"You're getting reality confused with the script," Bitty Belina told him. She smiled sweetly, the very same smile she always gave him in the last act of their story, the smile from the script.

"Besides," he said, ignoring her sarcasm, "I have the sword, the only weapon here."

"Was that directed at me . . . or Sebastian?" she asked.

"You figure it out," he said, looking to the others to see if they were, perhaps, having doubts about their original vows of allegiance to Bitty Belina.

That was a mistake. He should have kept his eyes on the blond, his lover from the stage. The moment his gaze was elsewhere, she danced forward on her small toes, kicked upward, and delivered a solid blow between the prince's legs. He gagged, fell over, his sword useless now that he needed all his strength to get breath into his lungs.

Wissa was laughing out loud now. She jumped up and embraced Belina, and while the prince watched, unable to move or defend his honor, the two women kissed. It was not the sort of kiss he liked

to see them exchange. When he did see it, he understood that it was a challenge to his man-hood, to the manhood of every one of the male puppets. The suitors and the winged angel didn't seem to care. But he had been given too much pride, and the sight of them together almost gave him the courage to plot their deaths.

Almost.

But there was always something in Bitty Belina's eyes that made him abandon such considerations before he carried them very far.

The long hours behind the wheel gave Sebastian much time to think, and he let his mind range across the spectrum of his life, through black moments and light moments, through happiness and defeat, never following any single avenue of memory to its end. Mostly, he remembered small triumphs and tragedies. Indeed, he had had no large triumphs to speak of-and the tragedies on the scale of Jenny and Pertos and Ben Samuels were too huge for his investigation.

The land was endlessly white and the sky perpetually overcast. There was always falling snow, sometimes only a few flakes and other times impenetrable sheets that obscured the way and forced him to pull over and stop for the duration.

He came to know the puppets as well as he could know anyone, and he had his favorites among them. He liked the angel very much, though they said little to each other. Even in the dim light of the northern winter, those golden wings glinted and shone. They reminded Sebastian of people he had loved, though he could no longer summon forward any name but Bitty Belina's to fit a golden image. He disliked the prince quite a bit. He was a snide, harsh-speaking little fellow. He liked to tease Sebastian with the spiders, and when he had tired of that, he enjoyed jabbing his sword into the idiot's thigh and simultaneously warning him against losing control of the truck. Sebastian's leg was dotted with little gashes and tiny holes as large as the place where a nail might go in the hands of a martyr. He found that he liked Wissa, though that surprised him. She was the evil stepmother, and she should never be trusted. But when she spoke, it was softly, and she never taunted him like most of the others did. He didn't like either the first or the second suitor, for they treated him nastily, though not quite so crudely as the prince. The third suitor, the chubby one, was just the opposite. He spoke to Sebastian more than any of the others, though the idiot had noticed that the third suitor was the quietest among his comrades. They talked about the stars if the clouds parted, about the snow, about the Furnace and the others.

Belina, of course, he loved.

He had created her in the Furnace, forged her with his own hands and without anyone's aid. It was as if this single act atoned for everything else that he had done wrong. In creating Bitty Belina, he had simultaneously erased his sin for killing Alvon Rudi and Pertos, for permitting Wolf to escape and murder Ben Samuels. And he had all but forgotten a girl named Jenny and the recurring guilt that had chased him down the years of his life. Both because she was his creation and because she brought him this contentment without knowing it, he loved her. He was enchanted by her golden hair and her sparkling eyes, unaware that his creation might have other traits beyond the physical.

He had even begun to think that there was a certain, scriptlike quality to their new lives. Every day they drove down the windswept, snow-hidden highway, keeping between the markers on either berm, bucking the air currents. Every night he sat and watched the puppets talk and laugh in the rear of the truck where they had made their home. Every day it snowed, either hard or gently. Every night it snowed

in his dreams too. There was a quality of sameness, of routine, that made life more stable and endurable. As far as Sebastian could see, the rest of their lives would consist of the northern highway, the cold and the snow and the sky like ashes and the occasional birds streaking across the flat bottom of the clouds.

It would have been enough for him.

Though he had not forgotten what Bitty Belina had done with the spiders, how she had threatened him with them

and laughed at his terror, how she had forced him to create the other puppets, he no longer held any of that against her. She was too beautiful to hate. Besides, his fear of the spiders had quieted a bit and would remain in the back of his mind so long as the many-legged creatures were kept in the empty saltshaker. It was almost as if Belina had done him a great favor by putting the spiders where they were. As long as he knew they were in the bottle and that the metal cap was on it tight, he could rest easier, knowing they were not hiding nearby, ready to pounce on him. The enemy is always less impressive when he can be seen and placed. So, as the days passed, he looked even more kindly upon Bitty Belina and did as she asked.

Had he been able to read, and had he ever come across a copy of the sayings of the Rogue Saint, he might have been interested in Ecclesian's letter to the Tolededons which states, in part: "Man's greatest advantage in the coming war against the deity is, perhaps, his sense of history and his taste for revenge. We forget nothing. We crawl away to lick our wounds, delivered us by the Fates, but the mental wound remains open and bleeding after the flesh has healed, only to be soothed by revenge. God, on the other hand, has so much to consider, so many tasks to handle, that he does not retain the minor events of our sub-cosmic world as fully as we do. When we kill him, he may very well die confused, wondering just what it is we have rebelled against."

The fourth day of their renewed leg of the journey, it snowed again. That night, in his dreams, the world was white and old. .

The sixth day, they found the city.

It was snowing, and the shifting masses of clouds, fleeing across the low sky, threatened blizzards. The wind had grown in fury through the long hours of the day until now it whipped about the truck like a huge bellows, sent the vehicle from side to side of the highway. It was a test of the driving skill that Sebastian had acquired, but he kept the truck moving. One of the puppets had said that, sitting still, they would surely be rolled over. Moving, knifing diagonally into the wind and using a little of its force to propel them, they were not quite so vulnerable. He didn't like it, but he continued to drive, even when the threatened blizzard became a reality and the world was a dizzying display of flakes.

Twice, he struck the berm markers, tore them loose, swerved back onto safe territory as the clattering sound died away. He did not have to be warned by the puppets to know that if anything got tangled in the blades below them, they would stay here forever, freezing to death when the battery died and could no longer warm them.

Belina and the angel both rode in the front with him, while the others curled in bundled blankets in the rear, trying to keep from being bruised as they were jounced back and forth between the walls.

Then they passed through some invisible barrier which toned the wind down, held back three quarters of the snow and provided a haven. As the thumping windshield wipers brushed away the last flakes, they saw the city ahead of them and stopped the truck with a mixture of relief and dread.

Many times in the past two months, running with Belina, Sebastian had driven by exit ramps that were marked with the names of small towns, hamlets, minor cities. But this was something altogether different. It rose out of the ice plain as if it were made of ice itself. Its fantastic spires tipped the bottoms of the clouds. Its walls were a brilliant, translucent blue that shone with an inner light, a beacon of welcome. The land immediately around the city was un-touched by the gale and the worst of the snow. Though the ground was not bare, but hard ice, there was a less wintry feeling to the place. On the walls and towers there was no snow or ice. The severe weather seemed not to have pitted the city's grandeur.

"Turn back," the idiot said, voicing his first inclination. He was afraid, and he wanted only to recapture the idyll of the last few hundred empty miles.

"Wait," Belina said, studying the place.

He waited. He had confidence in her.

"Maybe he's right," the angel told Belina. "If he gets caught, they'll put him away and uncreate us. It might be years before anyone buys the damn Furnace. Perhaps never."

Bitty Belina had been watching the city intently, as if it were a mirage that would vanish under a steady gaze.

It was still there.

"Do you see any movement?" Belina asked.

The idiot and the angel turned to examine the city.

Snow sifted down. A gentle breeze whisked the white stuff in eddying currents over the ice pack.

Otherwise, all was still and quiet.

"Nothing," the angel said. "So what?"

"We've been on this road for weeks. In all that time, the only thing we passed was the cargo van with the gypsy driver." She looked at Sebastian to see if he remembered the way he had handled her. She could still feel, or imagine that she could, the place where her spine had snapped in two, the pain that had fountained through her before the quick blackness of death.

Sebastian was oblivious to her accusing scowl. He still watched the dead city.

"I still don't see why we shouldn't get out of here before someone sees us. They can't have many visitors. You've said so yourself." The angel's wings were open. They shivered, as if he would leap into flight, as they always did when he was frightened.

"Doesn't it seem odd?" Belina asked. "No traffic on such a marvelous road, and now it ends here-as if they built this just to reach one city. There isn't any bypass here like around other towns."

"So what?" The angel grew more impatient.

"Think !" She was standing on the folded blankets now, leaning forward to look at the metropolis.

"They built this highway to get here, spent a fortune on it. And now no one uses the thing."

"And we look all the more conspicuous for that," the angel insisted. "They're probably sending the police out for us now."

She sighed, shook her head, smiling ruefully. "What I'm trying to tell you is that I think the city's empty. Under-stand? No one lives there any more, if anyone ever did. If it was occupied, this road would be in use."

"A ghost city?"

"Exactly »

Sebastian looked on the place with more interest. Wind. Snow. Clouds shredding across the points of the towers.

Here and there, on the few large windows in the towers, the racing clouds were reflected. Nothing else moved. It some-how calmed his nerves.

"Why build a city and never use it?" the angel wanted to know.

"They probably intended to use it. They thought that when everyone came home from the stars, there would be need for places like this."

"And no one came home," the angel said.

"That's right."

"Pertos did," Sebastian said.

They turned to look at him.

"Who?" Belina asked. She was tense, standing on her toes.

Sebastian looked at her, at her golden hair.

"I don't remember," he said.

"That's better," she said.

They watched the city a while longer, to be sure.

"Now what?" the angel asked.

"Drive ahead," Belina told the idiot. "Let's see what happens."

Sebastian hesitated only a moment, put the truck in gear and drove down the last length of the highway which now seemed more like an avenue as the curbs rose on each side until they became walls higher than the truck itself.

The road gradually began to descend as they neared the walls of the city. Hidden detection circuits

registered the pressure of the truck's air cushion against the roadbed. Photoelectric circuits were interrupted by their passage, and this data was passed on to the city's central traffic computer. The computer woke from the non-think that possessed it most of the time these days. When they were within a hundred yards of the blue stone facade, a section of wall rumbled open before them. Beyond, there was a well-lighted, wide avenue that bored away into the city itself.

If they continued, there could be no backing out. That gaping entrance was the point of no return.

"Go on," Belina directed.

He did not want to.

But he did.

The stone walls slipped over and around them. The entrance hissed shut behind as they were bathed in the soft

amber light of the glowing panels in the ceiling. Their engine was switched off by remote control. They settled to the floor. The rubber parking rim of the truck squealed as it made contact with the black rubber road. Instantly, the mammoth conveyor system jerked to life and carried the truck forward to the maw of an elevator large enough to accept it. Then the belt stopped; everything was still and quiet, as if it were now their turn to do something.

"Everybody out," Belina said.

By the time they were on the pedestrian walk, the pup-pets in the cargo hold had also disembarked.

"Now what?" the prince asked.

A computer-tape voice spoke to them through the public address system speakers installed in the ceiling of the public walkway. "Please complete the provided form at the arrival desk. Your vehicle will be returned to you when you request, upon identification of fingerprints."

The truck was pushed into the elevator by the beltway. The lift doors closed behind it. It was gone, along with all their belongings and what food they had with them.

"You can't do that!" the prince shouted at the invisible speaker, his hand upon his sword.

It was the prince's fate to be constantly challenging opponents against whom he could never win a battle. Con-sequently, his rashness and bluster made him less formida-ble in the eyes of the puppets he could handle.

Bitty Belina only smiled. Every time he made a fool of himself, he gave her a firmer hand with the others and ruled out the possibility of making a successful coup against her.

"Damn!" the prince snapped.

Wissa giggled behind her hand.

Belina filled out the arrival form. She knew the idiot would not be with them when they left. Three times the computer requested another chance to register her prints, uncon-vinced that such small fingers

could be real. At last it was silent, as if disturbed but satisfied.

"Now?" the angel asked.

"Now," Bitty Belina said, "let's explore"

The city was a palace, though much larger.

Every street, park and apartment had been designed for gracious living. The wood paneling was dark and well-oiled and generously used. The fabrics were thick and lustrous, the brocades rich in texture and story. The stones were polished or carved in intricate designs that related the tales of Eskimos. Everywhere the eye rested there was beauty, sometimes subtle and gentle, sometimes blaring and bold. There was no dirt and no sign of corruption to mar the loveliness.

There were pedways and simple sidewalks, escalators and elevators and inclined plains for transportation. Though the city was large, one could get about in it as fast as one might wish. Or as slowly. The city had been designed both to facilitate commerce and to offer the casualness of less sophisticated eras of civilization. Though the hustle and bustle of modern living might appeal to some, it was anathema to others. That was one thing that had driven so many from Earth, into the stars.

Many restaurants had self-help menus and food delivered by robotic beltway in the walls. Some of these still had food that was edible and served it with a sense of style and culinary finesse. At least they would not starve in all this splendor.

Most of the stores were empty. The few that contained stock were mostly those which carried nonperishable goods, things that would not decay or go out of style from year to year. There were booktapes centers stocked with classics and proven titles. There were back-projection live-art stores with hundreds of tapes in stock. The only stores with clothes were the sporting-goods houses where Arctic rigs could be purchased.

The only life they encountered in the streets of the city were the complex maintenance robots. These came in all sizes and shapes, according to function, and were only minimally conscious. If the metal janitors noted the presence of living creatures, they cared little.

They were safe here, safe from the authorities and the Furnace. Though the prince disagreed that it was best to settle in, he stayed with them. There was really nothing else he could do. In short order, they had established themselves in the most comfortable apartments they could find.

Under Belina's watchful eye, Sebastian transported the Furnace from the truck to her apartment, though he could see no reason for that now. He placed the pieces together in the familiar pattern and was dismissed.

He was happy these days. There was a slow, eventless routine to life in the city that appealed to him.

He woke. He ate. He dressed and walked. Sometimes he saw the puppets and sometimes he did not. In the evening, he ate with either the third suitor, the chubby one he liked, or with all of the puppets in some neighborhood restaurant or other. He saw Bitty Belina quite a lot, and if she seemed often to be trailing him as he rambled about the city, he did not notice.

There was only one smear on the even beauty of the first two weeks. It was the evening of the fourteenth day in the abandoned city. He had been walking, nosing through the closed shops as he had nosed through countless theaters in his years with Pertos. He was returning to his apartment, sleepy, and heard the argument in Belina's room: small voices raised in anger.

The two loudest voices belonged to Belina and the little prince. Since the idiot didn't care for the prince and mis-trusted the man, he thought immediately that Bitty Belina might be in trouble again. He remembered the prince's sword and how it had severed Wissa's head from her shoulders in so many performances. In the back of his mind, he also remembered the steel sword of Alvon Rudi which had been a danger to Bitty Belina months earlier. The two sword images mixed, fused and became one in the muddled confusion of his mind.

"Goddamn you!" Bitty Belina squealed.

He hesitated no longer. Grasping the handle of the door, he swung it inward, prepared to save her again as he had saved her before. He was swelled with anticipation and eagerness to prove his value to her.

But it was not necessary.

He stood there, feet spread wide, trying to take in the scene and understand it. There had been an argument about something, but it seemed to have been more verbal than physical. No one was injured or seemed ready to fight. No one was naked. No swords of any kind were visible, except that sheathed on the prince's side.

All the puppets had turned to look at Sebastian as if he were responsible for their feud.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Bitty Belina cried. She ran at him, as if she intended to pummel him with her

tiny fists. "Get out of here! Get out!"

The others scattered.

Ashamed of his intrusion, frightened, Sebastian slammed

the door and ran down the corridor toward his own room. He thought he heard a scrabbling sound behind, the door open again. He could not be sure.

He opened the door to his own room, closed it behind and locked it. When he flopped on the bed, crying over his

own stupidity, he thought he could hear Bitty Belina beyond the door. She was breathing heavily, a mixture of

exertion and fury.

Twice he called her name.

She did not answer, though she was there.

An hour later, after she had let him alone and after his hysteria had bled out of him, he realized that there had

been too many puppets in that room when he had burst in on them. He sat up in bed, wondering what that meant.

There had been at least a dozen puppets.

The next day, when he was in the lower levels, looking over the places where the maintenance robots were stored

between assignments, he saw two puppets he had never seen before. One was thin and very dark-skinned with horns

growing from its temples. The other was a woman, beautifully copper-colored, with a thin, black tail like the tail of a

rat.

He hid and watched them. They seemed to be scampering between the storage tubes in search of something on the floor. He could not tell what. He watched them until they were gone. They each had a small tin can with a plastic lid.

It was impossible to discover what they carried in them.

"There aren't any others," Bitty Belina told him.

"Saw them."

"You're imagining things."

"No."

"Yes, you are."

Her hair was so lovely, her face so delicate and perfect, that he hated to argue with her. He wanted only to touch

her hair and her skin, to feel the softness and the golden wealth. But she had long ago refused to let him touch even

the ends of her yellow curls. The only way left to communicate was through words. And he was worst at that.

"Other night. Your room," he told her.

"What you saw were reflections."

"Reflections?"

"We had taken the mirrors off the walls and had them on the floor. We were playing with them. You

know how puppets like to play. When you opened the door, you saw all the reflections."

He thought about that a while. It did not explain the two strange puppets in the maintenance levels running around with the cans in their hands. He decided against fighting with her.

"Maybe," he said.

She smiled. "Positively."

"I guess so."

She reached up and touched his cheek then, trailed her slim, quick fingers along the line of his jaw. For a moment of ecstasy, those fingers pressed against his lips. Then she took them away and left him.

He was happy again.

Two days later, in the sewer plant, toward the northern end of the lowest level of the city, as he walked between the towering machinery that shone like new despite its years, he saw three puppets that were not from Bitty Belina's story. He recognized all three, but could not tell what play they were from. All three had containers of some sort and growled the nooks and crannies of the place, searching.

He left there.

He busied himself elsewhere.

And he told himself that Bitty Belina had lied to him only because they were all planning a surprise for him and didn't want to have him find out what it was. That would spoil it. He must pretend as if he knew nothing, be quiet and wait.

He chuckled. It was a mark of esteem when your friends went to such lengths to spring a surprise on you. It would not be fair to them to ruin it all by blundering right into it.

He was quiet. And he could hardly wait to find out what was up. No one had ever done anything like this for him

before. He didn't even think he deserved it. But that, of course, was up to them.

Bitty Belina followed Wissa through the square entrance to the air-conditioning shaft. The access grill had been pried off days before when the puppets began using the hidden metal passageways to structure their plan against Sebastian. Wissa carried a tiny flashlight, no larger than one of Sebastian's fingers. In her hands, it was almost as large as a regulation electric torch.

"If this is a game of some sort-" Belina began.

"It isn't, honey," Wissa said. "I saw him myself. He's big and has a beard."

"But what does he want here?"

"I don't know. I didn't wait to watch him. I came running for you, first thing."

They didn't speak any more as they ran lightly through the largest of the airshafts. Now and then it was necessary to stoop or crawl where the size of the pipes was reduced. They used rag ropes at certain verticle shafts to descend from floor to floor. The ropes had been placed the same day they first scouted the system.

They met only one puppet in their journey. He was slim and dark, with horns on his forehead.

"What's up?" he asked as they went by.

Belina waved her hand impatiently to indicate she had no time for foolish questions.

The horned puppet followed them. He ran with more grace and with less noise than even the two women.

A few minutes later they reached, a wide intake shaft that terminated in an aperture that could easily have taken a stooped but full-grown man. The grill had been left intact here, for the area beyond did not figure in the murder plan they had devised. They stood by the steel mesh, the intake fans sucking air past them, gently ruffling their hair and clothes, and they watched the bearded man who had entered the city through the south gate, just as they had done a few weeks earlier.

A long, wide cargo van rested on the black conveyor belt of the avenue. The driver had said something to the traffic computer to keep the vehicle from being parked in the overhead garages that accommodated hundreds of thousands of machines. Now the driver was busy assembling small robotic cargo trundlers and was dispatching them to various points in the city, He had obviously been here before.

"I know him," Belina said.

"How?" the black, horned man asked.

"He's the one that almost found the idiot out. I tried to call to him in the fueling station, weeks and weeks ago Before I could get the idiot to create you, Wissa."

"When Sebastian . . when he . . ."

"Broke my back and had to re-create me," Belina finished. The tone of her voice was ugly.

"But why is he here?" Wissa asked. "He doesn't even know about you. And it wouldn't have taken him all this time to follow Sebastian."

"I think he comes here often," Belina said. "He's proba-bly looting the place, slowly and methodically. I should have thought of that earlier. The first time I saw him, he was coming south. This was the only place he could have been coming from. Now he's unloaded the last haul, sold it. And he's back for more."

"Maybe he won't discover us," the horned man said.

"Wishful thinking, Scratch," the little goddess said. "He's probably been coming here for years. He'll know the place well. He'll notice little things, small signs of us. If not that, then Sebastian will give us away. You can't trust the idiot to be quiet."

The gypsy driver was preparing the last of the trundlers. His golden earring caught the light, glinted like an eye in his lobe.

"Get the others," Belina said. "Bring them here. Even if he doesn't spot us this time, we've got to take care of him. If he gets away, he might not bring the authorities. But he will sure as hell come armed on his next trip. Surprise won't be with us then."

"What are we going to do?" Wissa asked.

"Catch him here, at the van, when he returns," Belina said. Her voice was soft and throaty. She shivered with excitement at what she was thinking, seemed to transmit her sweet anticipation to the others.

"And then?" Scratch asked.

"Kill him," Belina whispered.

Wissa grabbed the blond girl and squeezed her, kissed her. "Yes, baby! Yes, yes !" she hissed.

Scratch scampered away to collect the others. There were thirty-seven of them in all. The Furnace contained enough synthetic flesh to have sixty puppets alive at once. Belina had not found more than thirty-six she thought she could dominate without contention.

"How?" Wissa asked.

The bearded driver walked off after the last of the trundlers to supervise the looting spree. In a moment the arrival bay was quiet.

"You'll see soon enough," Belina said. "Oh, Wissa, it's going to be great fun!"

The gypsy trucker returned in half an hour, leading a procession of three robotic cargo trundlers. They were stacked with boxed goods, and he had his arms full of Arctic clothes. He stopped when he heard the noise of the van's rotors, looked up, startled.

The long vehicle fluttered at full power, blades beating so hard they were completely invisible. All the power was being used in a verticle maneuver while the horizontal mechanisms were braked. It hovered ten feet off the black beltroad.

"What the devil's this?" the driver asked, dropping the clothes he carried, scurrying to the edge of the pedestrian walkway that looked down on the arrivals avenue.

The walk was a good eight feet above the bottom of the road. The truck hovered only two feet above him. He stood on his toes and tried to see through the windows. There did not appear to be anyone driving.

He had never heard of a van acting up like this on its own. Yet who was there in the city to give him trouble? He wished he had taken his long-barreled pistol out of its glove on the driver's door. Now it was out of reach and he was weaponless.

He thought he heard the sound of chickens behind him, over the deafening boom of the van's blades.

It was a cackling sort of laughter, tinny and uncertain. He turned and examined the place behind him. There was the arrival platform with its podium and computer module. Along the wall were booths for customs and the execution of certain types of business permits. They had never been used, and they were empty now. There was no place large enough for a man to hide.

The cackling came from his right now.

He looked that way.

A directory of city hotels. Reservation and registration screens. A water fountain. Again, nowhere large enough to conceal the bulk of a man.

Something giggled on his left. It was definitely the stifled laugh of a woman.

He looked left. Credit and banking facilities for the arriving visitors. A series of glass booths for private phone transactions. The empty swath of walkway.

Carefully, he walked closer to look. He had the feeling that unseen creatures were scampering about to keep out of his sight, from one point of concealment to another. But he couldn't be sure. He chalked it up to his natural superstition. Having been raised among gypsy truckers, he had had more than his share of superstition bred into him.

The thing was to find out if anyone was in the truck.

He walked back to the edge of the pedestrian way.

"Hey ! Bring it down !" he shouted.

The truck remained aloft.

He considered a moment before he said, "I have a gun here. You'll have to bring her down sooner or later, even if you try to escape. I won't shoot now, I promise you. Later, I might be mad enough to 1 " All of it was a lie, of course. Since it was necessary to deliver the speech in a loud, raucous tone to be heard above the blades, however, it seemed to have more authority than it deserved.

Yet it was not enough authority for the man who had crept into the van while he had been gone. That man knew it was a bluff, and he kept the truck ten feet above the avenue.

If there was anyone up there, he reminded himself. He still didn't know if this were some absurd malfunction in his van or some stranger's piece of dirty business. His rugged life style told him to expect the latter, while his natural optimism told him to hope for the former.

The chuckling sound came from all sides now.

He ignored it.

He concentrated on the van. There seemed to be no way of reaching it that was safe and sure. He didn't want to

leap for the door handle. If he missed that, he would slip down into the avenue and get caught by the blades or buffeted unconscious by the furious air cushion. Yet, if the van broke down here, he would

have one damn time getting it out. If it was a major malfunction that couldn't be fixed on the spot with his tool kit, how was he to get back to civilization to secure the needed parts? Calling for help would only land him in jail for looting. This was a sweet racket, this city of his own, and he did not want to destroy what he had built for himself here.

Damn that chuckling noise!

With that and the blades only a few feet away, it was impossible to think clearly.

He turned to walk away from the worst of the rotars' noise and confronted six of the puppets on his right. They had come out from behind the hotel directory and the water fountain. Each of them held a sharp steak knife of the sort one was given in a robotic restaurant. Each of them was grinning. Their eyes were bright.

He did not understand what was happening. First of all, it was impossible to cope with the sight of the diminutive creatures in such short order. His mind accepted their presence, but seemed to draw back from analyzing them. He did know that there was danger and that it was of a deadly nature. He backed away from them.

Something pricked his calves.

He whirled.

There were seven puppets on the left. They had been hiding in the banking facilities by the telephone booths. They, too, were armed with steak knives.

When he turned to the rear, he saw a dozen puppets, some not exactly human in appearance. They were lined up by the customs booths and the arrivals platform.

He was hemmed in.

One of the puppets on the right slashed his leg.

He screamed, stepped backwards.

He could feel blood running down into his sock.

On the left, a horned puppet ran forward and drove his knife through the soft top of the gypsy's boot. The blade penetrated the driver's foot.

Pain lanced the length of his leg, seemed to coalesce in his hip, blossom from there across his broad chest.

The puppet did not dare' to pull it free. He turned and ran, letting it stick straight out of the boot, quivering

Neither did the gypsy dare to bend and pluck the steel loose. Now he was remembering stories told by other gypsy truckers, stories passed down from one generation to the next. There were little people who lived on the dark and empty highways. Usually they skittered off when you came near. Now and then they were caught in the beams of headlamps. And some few times, they boarded a truck as it went by and sought the soul of the driver. They were soulless creatures themselves. The human soul was not

adaptable to their form. They had long ago learned this. Still, they tried another one from time to time, especially -so the stories said-if that man were a virtuous man.

Heavens knew, he was no virtuous man. Yet he was not so rugged and crude as other earringed men of the high-way. He had never killed a man, nor raped a woman.

Now he wished he had.

He could not walk on his wounded foot.

The line of puppets by the arrivals platform moved toward him.

He danced backwards on one foot.

In all his years on the road, in a hundred fights over women in the gypsy camps, he had never been cut by a knife. He had always been too quick, too clever, too self-assured. And now one of these midgets had driven a blade through his foot. Panic and fear had overruled his usual efficiency. He knew that if he did not regain his calm shortly they would have him. Yet he could not stop the terror that coursed through him like current from a live cable.

It was not the pain that unnerved him so much.

It was not their size or their ruthlessness.

It was, instead, the insane glitter in their eyes, the slack and sensuous cast of their faces, as if they enjoyed deliver-ing pain more than anything else in the world.

"Novel" a beautiful, blond midget exclaimed, waving her blade in the air as if it were a knight's lance.

The puppets rushed him from all sides, squealing with delight, shoving and pushing to be the first at him

He stepped quickly backwards.

Too late, he remembered the drop to the avenue behind him.

He lost his balance, fell.

The blades caught his arm, tore it.

He fell away, was pounded unmercifully by the air cushion. His arm bled freely. The pain was almost more than he could bear, though he knew he must not lose consciousness.

Then the truck began to descend.

The blades grew closer; the fierce wind grew more fierce. Through the whirling rotors, he could see the fixtures that held the blade shield in place beneath the truck. He could see the spot he had welded last year when the shield had been dented and the blade had torn it open and punched it outwards. He could see grease up there.

And then the blades settled over him, chopping, and he saw nothing after that

"Wasn't it wonderful?" Wissa asked. Her voice was soft, distant, as if she still had not returned from that plateau of hypnotic delight.

"Yes, love," Belina said.

"Did you see him trying to scramble out of the way of the van when it was coming down?"

"Yes."

"He looked at me, Belina, as if he wanted me to come help him. He looked to me, pleading with me. He said something to me, but I couldn't hear what it was."

Belina kissed her.

"Will Sebastian be as good?"

"Better?"

Wissa squirmed with anxiety. "How long?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Why not tonight? Now?"

"We don't want to get it over with so fast. We want to enjoy this killing first- When the joy dies; then Sebastian. Don't gorge yourself all at once. After Sebastian there will be no one. For a while."

"You're pretty in blood," Wissa said.

Belina caressed her breasts and belly and hips The gypsy's blood was all over her. She had painted herself with ;t

"You're prettier," she told Wissa.

Wissa looked at the crimson film she wore. "Tomorrow night," she said. "Really?"

"Really."

The Last and First Night

In his later and more militant writings, the Rogue Saint Ecclesian tells us that all the cruelty of man is the responsibility of God. He says: "Although the placement of souls in human bodies is an automatic

process, it requires a periodic attention from the deity. When a new God assumes the throne of his father he often forgets this chore. As a result, the soul-giving machines break down and produce soulless men once every generation. These creatures have no scruples nor morals. They prey upon the vast masses of man-kind who are good and honest. They steal and kill, cheat and lie, rape and torture. God does not even consider what he has set loose among us by his careless handling of the functions of creation. If he would attend his business properly, we would live in peace and good fellowship, for we are normally gentle men. Is not this enough to make some of you honey-sucking, sated, smug religious men stand and fight? If this cannot raise you from your awful lethargy of middle-class acceptance, then man must abandon all hope of ever ruling his own destiny. If this does not send you to rebellion, if this fails like all my teachings have failed, then my life is a waste, my message no more than an entertaining echo cast from the ledge of a canyon. God-damn it, move I Move 1"

Eclesian was a wiser man than his contemporaries credited him. His teachings have lived. And so have his predictions, even if they have lived in a manner he might not have foreseen . . .

She spent the day in an air-conditioning shaft, in cool darkness and the smell of dust.

She was alone, because she wanted to be. And the others never failed to accede to her wishes.

Now and then the sounds of puppet laughter came to her, carried down hollow tin byways. She was oblivious to that, for the most. More often than not, she was tranced, carried away to distant worlds and other times by the rich visions of the Holistian Pearl.

For a while she had relived some of Pertos Godel-hausser's most interesting adventures. But that was too uncomfortably close to home. The Pearl had sensed this and had carried her farther into the blackness of space, to entirely different intelligent races, on other worlds.

The visions affected her differently than they did most people. She was not inspired by them. She did not see themes and relationships in the broad vista of civilisations she was shown. She had no empathy with the characters of the dreams. She did not share their joy or their tragedy; she did not care at all. Instead, she watched the bright explosions of colors and events the way a dog might sit for a time before a television set: interested in the loveliness, in the action and the excitement of movement, but oblivious to any finer meanings or purpose.

Yet she was so pretty

The morning of the last day began for Sebastian as all mornings began those days. He rose, uncertain of his whereabouts. He sat on the edge of the bed, cradling his head in his hands, trying to figure out the place and the time. Gradually, he oriented himself. After that, it was a matter of playing out the script of his new life. Routine called for a sonic shower to be followed by a breakfast of eggs and bread at an automat only a block from his apartment. These things went well, leaving him refreshed. His hunger appeased, he had time for curiosity and was free to wander until lunch.

He was careful to avoid those places where he had accidentally encountered the strange puppets. If they were planning a surprise of some sort, he did not want to spoil it for them. Bitty Belina would be angry with him if he found out too soon. He could not bear her anger, for he wanted so much to have her like him as he liked her.

At noon, when he came back for lunch, there were no puppets in the apartments. He had not seen any in the halls, either. He checked the restaurants where they usually ate, but found no one. This was a bit out of the routine, but tolerable. Depressed, he took his lunch alone, in an Italian automat.

When, at suppertime, he could still find no puppets, he began to worry. Suppose something had happened to them and he was now alone, forever? Alone in this huge place with its moving stairs and softly murmuring maintenance robots.

He forced himself to cling to at least a small degree of calm. If something had happened to the puppets, he need only re-create them in the Furnace.

In Belina's rooms, he found the Furnace. It appeared to be undamaged, the Olmescian amoeba drawn to the rear where it trembled slightly. He wondered if he should forge a puppet to determine if the machine worked properly, then rejected such an idea. If, the little people were in some kind of danger, he should be on his way to find them not wasting his time here at these controls.

He searched the familiar parts of the city. The puppets could not be more than a thousand yards from the Furnace. Yet there were so many levels to the city that three thousand feet could encompass a great deal of actual space. By three in the morning, he had begun to remember some of the places he was searching. He knew he had covered every nook and cranny and that he would not find them here.

He returned to his own room to think.

He felt miserable. After all, he was the big one here, the full-grown man. It was his job to see they came to no harm. And now they were gone.

While he was sitting there, the first of the spiders came through the grill over the air-conditioning duct. It was black with white markings, as large as a thumbnail. It hung there, its legs kicking, then slowly came down the light wooden paneling toward the floor.

Sebastian did not see it.

By the time it was halfway down the paneling, three other spiders followed it. They were all brown and twice as large as the first. They were intent, actually, upon attacking the first and devouring it. But the effect was of four spiders trying to reach the idiot.

He could not see them because they blended so well with the color of the wood panels.

What would Pertos have done? Sebastian wondered. He was sure the puppet master would not have sat here, elbows propped on his knees, undecided. And yet, what was there to do but wait?

The carpet in the room was beige, almost white.

The black spider touched it, hesitated. Behind it, the three large brown spiders came after it, running silently along the wood. The black spider skittered into the beige fibers, stumbled over them, mastered their pattern and rushed across the room.

Sebastian stood up. He did not know where he was going, but he knew he couldn't just bide his time.

The three brown spiders reached the carpet and started after their black prey. Because they were so much larger, they had less trouble with the fibers and made better time, closing the gap.

It was then that Sebastian saw the spider parade and froze where he stood, unable-for a long moment-even to draw a breath.

He had been thinking that Pertos would know what to do about the missing puppets, and he had been wishing that Pertos was here now to solve the current problem. But he had forgotten why Pertos was absent. Pertos was dead and had been killed by his assistant.

And now, in answer to the foolish wish silently issued seconds ago, Pertos had returned.

And he had brought three friends to help him against the idiot. Three friends: Jenny, Alvon Rudi and Ben Samuels

The black spider ran for the cover of the idiot's boot, only inches from him. Its long, wiry legs pumped in and out, up and down, flailed at the carpet and propelled it onward.

"No!" he whispered.

He seemed to hear a giggling noise nearby. He looked around but could not see anyone.

The spider came closer.

Sebastian turned and ran.

It seemed to require an eternity for him to open the door into the corridor. The knob weighed at least a thousand pounds and turned as if it had never been oiled. The door itself weighed more than a ton as he shouldered it open. When he was in the hall at last, the door seemed to cling to him as if it were alive and had chosen to side with the spiders. Either his hand would not leave the knob-or could not.

When he had freed himself and run twenty feet down the hall, he remembered that he should have shut the door to prevent them from following him. He turned and went back, just in time to encounter a brown spider at the sill.

Jenny?

He screamed, turned and tripped as his feet locked. He fell and struck the cold, tile floor with his chin, jarring his teeth. He tasted blood, and he was dizzy. He had cut his tongue, and he could feel it swelling in his mouth. Still, he managed to get to his feet again.

He looked behind and saw the spider still on the carpet, as if it were not sure whether it should follow.

He ran.

He almost did not see the other spiders. He was no more than four running steps from them when they caught his eye. Fifty spiders in all, of different sizes and colors, though most were brown and as

large as his thumb, barred his flight. Here and there, members of competitive species did battle with each other. Some of them milled from one wall to the other, displaced and confused. For the most part, however, they advanced on Sebastian in a maddeningly quiet run.

In his muddled, terrified condition, with everything suddenly more than itself, suddenly symbolic, he saw that advance as having a greater degree of purpose than it really did. The spiders seemed to march forcefully ahead, almost in unison.

He stepped to the wall and opened the door to Bitty Belina's apartment. It was possible that he could take sanctuary there; such ugliness would never dare invade the place she lived. Yet it already had . . . Spiders skittered over the beige carpet just as they did in his own apartment. Fortunately he had the presence of mind to slam the door before any of them could gain the corridor.

He saw, somewhere deep inside himself: two bodies dropped through a round hole, caught up in dark water and swept away; a blond girl with a knife in her belly, bleeding while birds sang nearby

He watched the wave of scrambling arachnids closing on him, and he thought he could hear the feather soft thump of their hundreds of tiny feet on the tile.

He turned and hurried the other way. His labored breathing was so loud that it smothered the other sounds that he thought he could hear. The sound of his strained lungs reassured him, much the way a jungle animal's roar makes it feel secure.

"Please . . . please . . . please . . ." he begged as he ran, though he was not at all certain to whom he was pleading. For a moment it seemed as if the walls dissolved around him and were replaced by the cold, white stars that Pertos had told so many tales about.

He had gone only a hundred yards before he saw that spiders waited for him this way too. More than a hundred of the leggy creatures skittered towards him. They were mostly brown and thumb-sized, quick and determined. There were so many of them at places that the floor was obscured.

Sebastian turned.

Behind, the spiders had come out of his apartment and were blending with the onrushing line that hemmed him in.

"Pertos ! "

The incantation failed. "Pertos ! Pertos !" No matter how often he invoked the name, his condition remained the same. The spiders came on. The white-haired, ancient puppet master did not appear to offer the idiot his help.

To his left, across the wide corridor, a booktape store offered the only possible route of escape. He ran there, flung open the glass door and stepped inside. There was a glass latch, which he fixed in place. Now, at least, there was a barrier between himself and the spiders.

The two lines of spiders converged, crawled over each other. Black bodies fell, were torn apart by the larger brown species. Mating dances were danced. Death rituals were observed. Soon a common mass of a hundred and forty brown spiders milled about before the booktape store.

Sebastian had expected them to leave. (he, rather, he had desperately hoped they would leave and forget about him. Instead, they tried to crawl up the smooth glass door, fell down, tried again. They swarmed up the walls of the store, filled the windowsills, looked in at him.

He was safe for the moment.

He was certain, though, that they would find a way through the glass before much time passed . . .

Teams of puppets worked toward each other down the corridor, moving behind the spiders with insecticide, sealing off the way. They wore cloths across their noses and mouths. The spiders retreated before them and were soon forced to congregate before the store where Sebastian cowered.

The prince cornered Belina in a side duct of the ventilation system while she was on her way to the booktape store. He had taken her by surprise, flung her against the thin metal wall, his arm across her throat as if he would crush her windpipe. At first, she thought he had finally gotten up the nerve to kill her. Instead, it turned out that he was aroused and that he wanted her but was afraid she would say no.

"Now isn't the time," she said.

Now is the perfect time, and you know it!" he countered. His face was flushed, his breathing harsh. His free hand roamed across her small body as if it were a separate entity with designs of its own aside from his. It touched her round breasts, squeezed them. It slid across her flat stomach, dug fingers into her nicely padded hips, cupped one of her firm buttocks.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"You do. Now, with him out there, trapped in the store. Just before we get him. It'll be best now, better than ever"

She knew what he meant, of course. There was definitely something sensual about the chase and the kill. When they had murdered that gypsy, she had felt the same thing. When she had watched the prince and the angel lower the van onto the struggling driver, when she had seen the blades bite into him, she had responded to the blood and the screams. Afterwards, she had gone away with Wissa. They had smeared each other with blood and made love. Later, when Wissa was exhausted, Belina had gone to the prince and to the angel. In each case, sex had never been so full, so satisfying. It was all sharp edges and long slides, rising and rising and never falling, ballooning full of helium.

"There's no time," she argued, trying to push away from him.

He slapped her. His fingers left red welts across her smooth, freckled cheek. The moment he saw those, he realized what a horrible mistake he had made. Stepping away from her, he tried to find something to say that would appease her. But he knew there was nothing she would listen to.

She said nothing at all. She gave him one, long searching look which turned his blood cold, then stalked off on her way to the booktape store and the final chapter in Sebastian's story.

Sebastian realized that he could not remain in the store indefinitely. Before long, he would grow both hungry and thirsty. There was neither food nor water to be had here. Yet he barricaded the front of the store as if he intended to endure a long seige. He moved display racks before the glass door. He took crates of booktape cartridges from the storeroom and lined them from one wall to the other. The spiders would climb them, but they would be delayed a bit in the process.

At the moment, every second of freedom from the hairy touch of those spindly-legged monstrosities was a blessing.

Soon there was nothing else he could use to form an obstacle between himself and the spirit-analogues of Pertos, Jenny, Rudi and Ben (as he imagined the spiders were). He stood at the back of the main room, his spine pressed against the wall, watching the arachnids swarming at the corners of the glass, hunting cracks and crevices.

What would they do to him if they got him?

Make him die? Take him to some place where there were no windows, where he would be chained and tortured and punished for being such a stupid boy? Would they torture Bitty Belina and make him watch that spectacle while he was also confined in manacles?

A truly terrifying notion: did they already have Bitty Belina and were they already torturing her?

On the top of a display rack, by the front door, a spider appeared. It was silhouetted against the lighted window. Though he could not tell the head from the behind, he felt that it was watching him, gauging him for the final attack.

Somehow, it had gotten through the storefront, the scout for the main pack, and it signaled his defeat by its very presence.

He was perspiring. His throat was dry. He wished he were a boy again, at home in the woods, looking for cen-tipedes under the rocks. Swimming in the hole in the creek. Hunting berries. Playing with jenny

He choked, pushed away from the wall.

The spider was still watching him.

He hurried into the storeroom and shut the heavy door behind. It made a tight seal on all sides. He did not see how they could possibly follow him in here.

They didn't. They came from behind.

He was watching the door for signs of activity on the other side, almost as if he expected the spiders to force the panel inward, to tear it from its hinges. Something scurried by his left foot, inches away, dark against the light gray concrete. It reached the wall and ran along it toward the far corner. A spider.

Brown. Thumb-sized.

When he turned, there were more of them, spilling out of a duct in the wall.

"No, no, no, no," he chanted. He was no longer attempt-ing to dissuade them from their attack. He was, instead, trying to force a change in the fabric of reality itself. He wanted to unmake the spiders, to uncreate them as he had uncreated puppets in the past.

The spiders had not, for the most part, crossed the floor in his direction. Except for the one that had run past his foot, they clung to the baseboard, looking for shelter. They were not nearly as aggressive as the ones in the corridor had been, for they were not driven by the deadly fumes of insecticide behind them.

Sebastian did not notice this difference, however. As far as he was concerned, the spiders had come around behind him and where there had once been a modicum of safety there was now only danger. He bolted across the room to a door that gave on a small office only large enough for one desk. He closed the door behind. It did not fit tight and would not keep the spiders out. Quickly, he crossed the room, knocking things over in his haste. He entered the half-bath attached to the office, closed and bolted that door.

He imagined he could hear spiders pouring into the office, thumping toward the wooden washroom door.

He examined the bathroom several times before he real-ized the ventilation grill, if pried loose, concealed a duct quite large enough to admit him if he crawled. Frantic, he hooked fingers through the heavy wire mesh and strained every muscle fiber in his thick biceps. The screen creaked, ripped loose with such suddenness that he fell with it in his hands.

Hurry! he thought. Jenny and Pertos and Ruth and Ben are coming to take you to the room without windows!

It was dark in the shaft. There might be spiders lurking about. He decided to risk that, for he knew there were spiders behind.

He almost blundered into the whirling fans of the intake apparatus, avoided them with only inches to spare. Cautiously, he felt around in the pitch darkness and discovered the tunnels breaking to the right and left. He chose the one on the right and squirmed into it.

It was necessary to lay on his belly now, for the pipe was no longer even high enough to accept his crouched form. He tore his fingers on seams in the metal and quickly wore holes in the knees of his trousers. He was as oblivious to the damage done his flesh as he was to that done his clothes. The only thing that concerned him was escape.

Ahead, there was dim light. He worked harder than ever, reached a bend in the shaft. When he worked his head and shoulders around the angle, he found the light came from a flashlight laid on the floor of the pipe. It was focused upon a human head that had been severed from the shoulders at a point immediately below the base of the skull. It was deathly pale. The only blood was what clung to the tattered pieces of neck that remained. The eyes were rolled back until little but the whites showed. They were turning a sickly yellow. The mouth was open, slack and lifeless, showing well-cared-for teeth.

It was the gypsy's head which the puppets had salvaged from the avenue beneath the cargo van. Sebastian could not know this. They had shaved the hair on the head into a widow's peak, and they had died the hair a crisp, stark white. It was this one clever touch that elicited the re-sponse from Sebastian which they had intended.

"Pertos," he hissed. And there, in the bad light, the gypsy's features changed by cosmology and aged by death, the head did look much like that of the puppet master.

"Pertos?"

The head said nothing.

The flashlight shone steadily.

The walls whispered, carried echoes of distant, hissing voices.

"Pe-Pe-Pertos?"

A spider, fat and dark green in color, crawled out of the dead mouth, hung on the slack, bloodless lower lip.

He screamed and screamed and screamed. Even as he thrust himself backwards, gouging his knees horribly on the ill-fit sections of the pipes, he wailed without interruption. He felt as if his body was swelling and swelling and that it would soon burst like a ripe fruit. The ululating scream seemed to let some of this unbearable pressure loose.

He made his way past the whirling intake fans that he had almost blundered into before. He entered the left-hand tunnel, which he had originally decided to forego, wriggled furiously forward. He made excellent time for such cramped conditions.

As he moved, he had no idea whether or not the puppet master's head was following him, though he expected as much. Now and then he experienced a vision in which the spider had hold of his one foot and the head had its teeth sunk into his other. They were holding him until the main body of spiders could reach him. When the vision passed, he crawled even faster than before

The prince was sulking. He did it well, for he had had much practice in the past few weeks. Every time he had been forced to relent and give in to Bitty Belina, he had gone away to pout. Though it did little for his standing with the others, it never failed to make him feel better. Now he was refusing to go with the others to watch the last stages of Belina's plan for killing the idiot. The scheme was a success, and that-on top of her recent rejection of his affections-only made him more furious than ever. He sat at the end of a long horizontal pipe, by the edge of a vertical shaft that connected the system on this level with the system of the level below.

It was there that Scratch came to him.

"What do you want?" the prince asked. He was as surly with Scratch as he was with all the other puppets. The fact that the horned simulacrum was the symbol of evil and corruption and played Satan on stage did not impress the prince at all. There was no real superstition among the puppets, save that connected with the Furnace. And now that they had begun to control the Furnace, even that bit of religious nonsense was waning.

"She sent me," Scratch said.

In the darkness, despite the feeble light of the prince's penlight, Scratch's black flesh blended perfectly with the shadows. His teeth shone pearly bright. His eyes glittered, speckled with red flame. His fingernails gleamed. As did his hooves. Those were the only signs that he was there.

"She?"

"Bitty Belina."

"So even you are her messenger boy," the prince said.

"Her aide."

The prince laughed until he was hoarse.

"I fail to see the humor," Scratch said, scuffing his hooves against the floor of the shaft.

"Belina doesn't need an aide or aid. If the euphemisms make you feel better, so be it. But all Belina needs are servants, willing to play infantrymen to her general."

"That's enough," Scratch said. He sounded especially mean. His eyes contained more red than they usually did.

"Okay," the prince said. "What does she want?"

"Nothing. Not from you, anyway. She sent me to kill you."

The prince rolled quickly to his feet, for he had been made for the role of a fighter. The sword that never left his hip now left it-for the tight grip of his fingers.

"If a death's her wish," the prince said, "she'll have it. Though it won't be mine."

"Perhaps."

The prince held the sword to the side, tipped up and forward. "I would say there is little doubt about it. Your role is stealing souls of heroines and heroes and putting a fright into your audiences. My role is killing. I am equipped for a marvelous performance."

Scratch applauded, grinning. His teeth positively sparkled. "A wonderful soliloquy" he enthused. "You're a fine actor." This reaction, more than any other could, unsettled the prince.

"I am not acting," the prince replied. His temper was beginning to get the better of him. He could not afford to give in to it. He had to be cool and calculating. Scratch would be beaten, but he would offer a

good battle first. The prince weaved on the balls of his feet, looking for an opening to make his first lunge.

"Neither am I acting," Scratch said. "Have you ever seen my play, 'The Nicksboro Curse'?"

"Of course not."

"Let me assure you, then, that I did more than steal souls and frighten the audiences. There is one scene, for in-stance, in which I tackle and defeat a hound my own size. He has fierce teeth and great claws. But I cripple him and dismember him in center stage."

The prince sneered. "Dismember him? With the help of how many visual deceptions?"

"Mirrors?" Scratch stepped closer. His bare arms ap-peared to swell. Or was it just that the thickly corded muscles had always been there, hidden beneath a deceptive layer of fat, visible only when they were needed? The prince wished he had paid closer attention to Scratch in the days past.

The devil made his muscles writhe and ripple as if they were alive and sentient beneath his ebony skin. "Give me your sword," he said, holding out a hand.

Before the prince could refuse, Scratch grasped the wick-ed blade in his hand, twisted it and tore it free of the hand that held it. He threw his dark head back and laughed. The laughter echoed up and down the pipe with the force of a dozen throats.

The prince grabbed for the handle of his weapon.

Scratch swung the length of steel by the blade, snapped the shaft into the prince's jaw. There was a sickening crunch. The prince fell to his knees, spitting teeth and blood.

"Was that a visual deception?" Scratch asked. He chuckled heartily, though he no longer laughed out loud. There was a savage tone beneath the humor, a taste for blood and agony.

"Why?" the prince asked.

"Why what?"

"Why does . . . she want me . . . dead?"

"You really don't know?"

"No."

"It's obvious to everyone else," the devil said. "But I can see where it might not be to you."

"Tell me," the prince said.

When Scratch began to tell him, he dove for the devil's ankles, hoping to topple the dark puppet and go for its throat. Scratch kicked him square in the center of the forehead, propelled him backwards where he crashed the back of his skull against the floor.

"She wants you dead," Scratch said, "because you lack the necessary qualities to be allowed to survive. You have the cruelty and the love of death that she thinks we'll all need in the future to fulfill her plans. But there is a difference in the way you love pain. Your sadism is tempered by your egotism. When you kill or wound, it is to make yourself look better. You play the role of the hero offstage as well as on, always questing after the spotlight."

"I don't understand," the prince said. He did not have the energy, yet, to rise up.

"The rest of us enjoy death and pain for the intrinsic value in suffering. We have no ulterior motives. We kill to kill and not to gain status. It is a cleaner lust than yours. It will lead to fewer failures in the future than your own egotism would." He tossed the sword away, behind him, brushed his hands together. "Your egotism and need to accomplish taint everything you do. When you have sex, for instance, you sometimes spend as much energy giving your partner pleasure as the energy you spend to satisfy your own needs."

"Isn't that the proper thing?" the prince asked.

"Not for us. Not if we're going to survive. Everything we do we must do for ourselves, for our own pleasure. If the group gains from our actions, it is merely a side product of our own gain. Pleasure. We seek pleasure anywhere it is given. And Bitty Belina has shown us that our kind can find no greater joy than delivering pain. She says that we have been made less than men, but that we are consequently more deadly and more capable than men. Except you, that is."

"Me?"

"You"

"Please .

"Please?" the devil mocked. "Please?" He leaped upon the prince, his terrible fingers pressing the bones of the warrior's body from their sockets.

His eyes were pure crimson.

There is a point where the mind renounces its own emotions, blanks them out and utterly refuses to operate again until the causal stimulus ceases to exist. The husband grieving for his dying wife might grow hysterical on notice of her death. But the hysteria cannot build forever, forcing him closer and closer to madness. There is a moment when it will become either catatonia or acceptance. The same applies to terror. Terror is, perhaps, the most difficult emotion the mind must deal with, for it affects the body more directly than either hate or love. It summons up adrenalin, sets the heart to beating faster, sensitizes the ears and the eyes. If the mind were not able to short circuit to avoid the more unbearable degrees of terror, madness might very well be the result.

The idiot had existed with terror all his life, living in fear of forces he could neither define nor dismiss. It took him longer to blank out the horror that possessed him, for his tolerance was higher, but he managed it. Tranced, he continued to crawl hastily away from the region of the shafts where he had encountered the head, but he had little idea of what motivated him. Twice, aimlessness overtaking him, he stopped to investigate his circumstances. Both times, enough of the terror returned to spur him ahead faster than ever.

In time, the tunnel terminated in the wall of a darkened room. The grill had been removed to provide a swift exit. He knew there was a chamber beyond, for his fingers could identify wood paneling around the edges of the duct. Too, he could sense that there was a moderately large room with a low ceiling. The air was stuffy, the echo of his breathing flat and short.

He only wished there were more light to see what lay ahead.

He managed to turn around inside the thin walled tube until he could slide feet-first into the room. He cut his thumb on the flared rim of the air duct as he dropped to the floor, but it was a minor wound and only a physical one. He had long ago come to understand, despite his slow wit, that the wounds of the body were those to be the least concerned about.

The place was intensely dark, too warm by ten degrees, as quiet as a cemetery. He took comfort from this lack of stimuli, however. It seemed as if he would be safe here for as long as he chose to remain, no matter what forces pursued him. Yet he could not afford the luxury of a rest, for he had begun to remember that Bitty Belina might be in trouble. She was missing with the others and she had no hope of freedom except that he could bring her.

He crossed the room with both hands outspread before him, searching for a wall which he intended to follow until he found a light switch. The floor seemed alternately hard tile and patches of thick and loosely woven carpet that shifted beneath his boots.

The light came on before he reached a wall, activated by someone without the room. It stung his eyes after so much time spent in gloom. He used a hand to shield his eyes and squinted about. There was no furniture in the place, though there had once been, judging by the broken film of dust on the floors and walls. The chairs and couches and paintings had been replaced with at least three hundred spiders

A naturalist could have told the idiot that an average acre of grassland in the northern hemisphere contains between ten thousand and a hundred thousand spiders, though man encounters only one or two during an entire day spent in such places. The average walls and cellars of a house harbor thousands of spiders too. A congregation of three hundred was hardly that unusual, therefore, except that they were not in their natural habitat: walls, foundations, insulation. Such a lecture would have done nothing whatsoever to save Sebastian. The terror bloomed more fully than ever, possessed him with scintillating red blossoms.

He found the door locked and barricaded from the other side. He could not force it open.

Spiders ran across his shoes.

Spiders covered the furniture.

Spiders crawled on his pantlegs.

He felt one scrambling out of his hair, and he mashed it against his forehead.

"Pertos!"

Spiders.

"Jenny!"

More spiders dropped out of the pipe in the wall through which he had entered the room.

He began to stomp on them, squashing them beneath his feet. They pulped easily, though many of them continued kicking even when they were plainly dead.

He tried to kill them as they dropped from the duct.

A spider half as large as his hand fell out of the shaft, black and hairy with the markings of a tarantula. The puppets had found it in a sub-basement full of rotting food supplies where its ancestors had been transported from some southern region many years before, perhaps by a gypsy trucker. Its species had been kept alive here in the north by the constant warmth of the basements and the lack of natural predators, though the conditions were not ideal enough to support more than a few such giants at any one time.

Sebastian staggered backwards, choking at the grotesque sight. To him, the spider was more than an anachronism. It was a sign, a portent, and it boded only ill.

In his haste to get away from the tarantula, he had forgotten about the smaller spiders. They were on his trousers again, and a few of them had gained his shirt where they seemed fascinated with his cold, gleaming metal buttons.

The relatively harmless tarantula sauntered toward him, its thick legs trembling.

Mercifully, he passed out.

Unconscious, he could not see that the huge spider ran from him.

There were six puppets waiting in Belina's apartment when she came back. They were gathered around the Furnace

with an assortment of tools taken from the dead gypsy's kit.

"What's happening?" the rat-tailed girl from Scratch's play asked. Her tail wrapped around her smooth, coppery thigh.

"We have him," Belina said. She was grinning widely, though her expression would not have pleased anyone but another puppet. "He fainted when the big spider came through, and he still isn't awake. He's tied down in the execution room, ready for us whenever he comes around. As soon as we get this out of the way, we'll go to him."

Her excitement passed to the others. They turned upon the Furnace and looked up at its towering, gray metal surfaces. For a moment, there was a mutually recognized silence, as if each of them was reconsidering his previous determination to carry on with this next to the last step of their liberation.

Then Bitty Belina climbed a chair, swung onto the top of the Furnace, drew herself to her feet and motioned for the others to follow. They fell over each other in their eager-ness.

Strung across the highest surface of the Furnace, they wielded their screwdrivers and hammers, their wrenches and oiling tubes. They smashed the glass viewplate above the capsule-womb, pried the two control knobs off and kicked them to the floor below. After that, it was necessary to go inside the machine as Bitty Belina had gone to lever Wissa out that night she had tried to create a puppet on her own. In the bowels, they smashed tubes, ripped circuit boards free of their contacts. They shredded the insulation, bent plastic wire guides, crushed transistors.

At first, they had been reluctant to dispose of the machine, for it served the purpose of re-creating them if they were accidentally killed. In the final analysis, however, they knew it must go. As long as it functioned, they could never leave its vicinity except under the punishment of unbearable pain. If they were to build the planned empire, mobility was essential. Simple immortality would have to be sacrificed.

The alarm circuits were triggered inside the Vonopoen device. The power plant flared. Heat washed throughout the Furnace, melting the parts of it to incomprehensible slag.

One puppet died in the furious eruption, though the others escaped unharmed.

"Now there are no chains," Belina said.

The roar inside the Furnace stopped. It was dead at last. The flesh in the furnace had died with it, save that which now existed free beyond its realm. That flesh had entered a new Furnace, of course: the world. They would set that afire in short order.

"Sebastian," she said.

They followed her out of the room.

They had already forgotten their comrade who had perished within the machine's guts, although his screams and his intense agony had given them a few moments of pleasure.

At the end of a ventilation shaft, by the open well of a vertical pipe, pieces of a body lay in darkness. The thin blood had already begun to dry as the water in it evaporated, leaving only stains. Though it was warm here, the prince would not decay for a very long time, for his flesh was not genuinely organic.

His sword was clamped between his teeth in a parody of the lover's red rose.

Scratch had placed it there.

The first and second suitors had been dispatched to collect the gypsy's head and the flashlight that had illuminated it to such a good effect. They placed the light inside the thing's mouth so that the beam shone out between the separated lips and partially illuminated their way. They stood on either side of it, each by an ear, and they hefted it by the ragged and bloody base. Hunched over like cripples, they were able to carry it to a loosened grill where others waited to accept it and bear it to the execution chamber.

Now and then it was necessary to put the head down and rest, for the weight prohibited one long dash to the grill. It was during one of these breathers that the first suitor, elbows propped on the head,

told the second suitor about the prince. "The prince is dead," he said.

"Who said?"

"Scratch."

"That malcontent? And you're going to believe what he says? How could he know if we don't."

"He killed him."

"So? On whose orders?"

"Hers. Who else's orders are there?"

The second suitor smiled, scratched at the back of his neck. "I never did like the way he always got the girl after we failed. Even if it was in the script." He laughed at some thought. "Though I suppose I couldn't have handled her very well if I had won, eh?"

"Nor me I" the first suitor agreed, shivering. "Not even as well as he managed her. Still, I would have liked to hear him when old Scratch came on the scene. They say the devil tears a monstrous hound limb-from-limb in his own play, without the aid of mirrors. I would have given a great deal to listen to the prince under similar punishment."

"Yes," the second suitor agreed. "Oh, my, yes! just to listen would have been enough I"

Nothing was real any longer. None of it had ever seemed real, actually, though now it was even more like the stuff of dreams, bits and pieces of illusions that swam at him through the soft blue haze that sheathed the world. Time had no meaning for him. The spirits of the dead were as solid and interesting as the capering puppets who ringed his bound form. Now and again he caught sight of Bitty Belina in her golden aura, laughing with her bright teeth and her seawater eyes. Just as often, the blond was not Belina at all, but his sister jenny who teased him and comforted him, angered and pleased him. Sometimes jenny was alive and well, speaking in her soft voice, watching him with heavily lidded eyes. Other times she was dead, falling away from the edge of a cliff with a knife in her belly, coming up hard on smooth boulders, washing away in a strong current, the knife ripped free of the hole in her flesh

He tried to hold onto her when she was alive. But his fingers slipped through her and in a moment she would return, dead again.

The puppets taunted him with the bloodless head of Pertos. They pushed the grizzly thing directly before his face and demanded that he confront it. This, they seemed to say, is the head of your father whom you dethroned to gain your godhood. This is your handiwork. Are you proud of it?

The dead eyes stared, yellow and sightless.

"Pertos, Pertos, Pertos, Pertos, Pertos, Pertos, Pertos, Pertos, PERTOS, PERTOS, PERTOS, PERTOS. • The puppets sang until the name ceased to be a name and became just another word. The world was full of words, and none of them could hurt as much as a name.

"PERTOS, PERTOS, PERTOS, PERTOS")

The word was no longer a word, but merely two syllables of two harmonic notes, each separated from the other by one tone, rising and falling, over and over.

"PERTOSPERTOSPERTOS. . . .!"

Then the syllables were only sounds with no phonetic relationship to language. The sounds degenerated into noises, and the noises became nothing more than a barely audible hum, like the unseen mechanisms of the universe toiling to maintain stasis in the scheme of things. He gave himself over to that hum, went up with it when it crested, down when it ebbed, like a piece of cork in the middle of some vast, lonely and uncharted sea.

"PERTOSPERTOSPERTOSPERTOS. . . .!"

The icy lips of the corpse's head brushed against his own lips. Their flesh seemed to stick together. And when they were separated, the idiot was sure his lips had been seared away.

"Tell old Pertos that you're sorry for what you did," a small, feminine voice ordered. "He came here after an apology from you. Come on now. Say it."

"Forgive . . . forgive them," he asked the head.

"Not us!" Her voice was shrill. Her good humor had abruptly become bitter anger. "You need his forgiveness!"

But he could only repeat that which he had said. He only made them angrier.

They brought in the spiders and dropped them on him, one at a time. The tiny creatures crawled over his sweat-slicked face, hung on his lips and drank beads of his saliva. They tentatively explored the caverns of his nostrils with furry legs.

Sebastian had no strength left to drive them away. Too, he no longer possessed the will to employ that strength even if he should find it in himself. Long ago he had come to understand that the spider from the Grande Theater in Springsun had boarded the truck somehow, that it was always with him and that it would punish him in a manner like this sooner or later. He suspected this was the "sooner" though time meant nothing to him, and he could not be certain.

A corpse kissed him again, demanded an apology, again through the interceding voice of a small woman. He repeated his request that the others be forgiven. The head was taken away.

Sebastian's hands were flat against the floor with the palms spread toward the ceiling. His arms were perpendicular to his shoulders, like the wings of a dead bird. They had tied his wrists to ringbolts in the floor. This must, at one time, have been a storeroom. The rings were for the security of precariously stacked goods. Now they served to hold a dying demi-god whose time to cease demi-godding had come. Where were the vultures that would eat out his liver?

On his right, one of the puppets drove a steak knife into the palm of his hand. Blood welled up and paddled there, dripped through his fingers, stained the floor.

To the left, another puppet followed this example.

The same was done to his feet.

Some of the servants of Bitty Belina had been in a play about a demi-god who was crucified in just such a manner by the governments he sought to destroy. They thought it made a nice touch.

Sebastian barely acknowledged the pain. He was not being stoic and playing the hero he had always wanted to be. No, it was a mere loss of sensitivity that enabled him to face the torture with such a subdued cry of agony.

Deep in his mind, there was a part of him which said he could escape. Surely he could. These were pitiful creatures against which he was pitted, not a third his size. He could rise up in fury and rip loose his bonds. He could bring judgment upon them.

I created them, he thought. Pertos had them made and I was the one who brought them their final life. And now they have me tied here, beneath them.

He strained and managed to sit part way up. They hurried away from him, terrified. But it was not in him to rebel at these indignities, to once more walk among them. He was infinitely weary of them, even of the blond Belina.

He fell back. His skull bounced on the floor and brought on a wave of darkness.

He called to the old puppet master for help in this time of need. And then he fainted.

When he woke, the tarantula was perched in the center of his chest, moving warily as it listened to the thumping of his heart. Its black maw opened and closed, baring tiny, dark fangs that looked enormous from the idiot's queer vantage point.

He allowed it to scale his face without even shaking his head to dissuade it. Its feet were like the down on a duck's belly.

He passed out again, though more from exhaustion than from fear.

Later, they took a fifth knife and ran it into his side. They offered him urine for his thirst, which he refused.

Again, he considered escaping. He could leap up, tear free and stomp them to death as he had stomped the spiders not so long ago. And then, rather quietly and without any choruses of heavenly hosts or displays of di-vine wrath in the heayens, he died.

You know the rest.

The puppets were immune to all human diseases. Their flesh did not infect, nurture parasites or require long to heal. It did not split open with boils or sores. But for those who perished in battle or by accident, they were immortal. They did not age, champions over wrinkled flesh and senil-ity.

The pace of their lives was frantic. They had no souls with which to appreciate the qualities of rest and solitude, of inactivity and quiet. They slept little, worked long, sought the pain that nourished them.

The immortality and the industry combined to make formidable warriors.

They copulated, made the women with children, just as real women would have borne the young. The Vonopoens had always said that the puppets were as like men as they could be made. This was but another proof. The children were even more fierce and relentless than their parents when it came to the pursuit of pleasure through the principal of pain. Many of the parents did not survive their young. Bitty Belina did. Wissa did. And but four others from the original thirty-seven.

The new generations were not satisfied with the games of pain they played among themselves. Now that the Furnace was dead, they had all the city to roam through. They made use of the long-dormant computer and the other facilities available to them. In time, they forged weapons, learned war and set forth against an unprotected Earth where the cities were named things like Springsun, and Fallingwater and Novembermoon, where men had grown rich and soft and somewhat bored. It was a one-sided battle.

After Earth had been won, there were the stars. That took a while, for the puppets found much pain-pleasure on the motherworld to engage their interest for generations. Slowly, their stock of victims dwindled. In a century, they looked outward on blackness. And they went to it.

No race fought with such brutality as did the puppets. No race could stir in them the terror they stirred in others. Worlds were abandoned before them. Life rippled outward through the galactic clusters in an attempt to leave the puppets behind. But they always followed in faster ships with better weapons. War, to other races, was a game, at most a very serious contest of wills. To the puppets, however, war was existence, the purpose of being.

Perhaps even unto this day, the diminutive creatures might still be spilling through the void, tracking the shattered civilizations that fled from them. Fortunately, the Vonopoens had been able to create a special breed of warrior puppets with perfect fidelity to their masters. These were many-legged and many-armed spider beings who were turned loose on the puppets, drove them back, and finally crushed them completely.

The spider-lizards, the Vonopoens, had built the puppets and sold them to human beings. The puppets had risen against their human master by the use of spiders. Eventually, they were defeated by another breed of scrambling, black arachnids made of the flesh in the Furnace.

I wonder what the Rogue Saint Ecclesian would have to say about such a chain of coincidences?

The Vonopoen artisan drops the Holistian Pearl. It rolls across the stone floor of his warren and comes to rest against a golden tapestry.

He stares at the white sphere a while, pondering the story it has told him. Then, shuffling hastily across the room to the shelf of books he keeps next to his drug bar, he takes down the Vonopoen Book of Wisdom which he has not read as much as he might wish, being more a man of the flesh than of the

spirit. He turns to the gospels of the Rogue Saint, the only pages he has ever spent more than a few minutes with.

He skims the text, flips pages.

He finds what he searches for and reads it to himself as his stomach opens and closes on his belly, a sign that he has missed supper because of the Holistian Pearl's tale. Ecclesian says:

"We Vonopoens have long prided ourselves on what we think of as our highest artform, our realistic miniature puppets. We make them in our own images and in the images of animals and other races, and we have them perform for us. Perhaps if we spent less time playing gods in this respect and examined the universe more closely, we would discover that we are all only puppets ourselves, on a much greater scale. We have our scripts. There are repetitious cycles. And somewhere, I think, there are voices that laugh at us. Even at me."

The Vonopoen artisan knows that Ecclesian was ancient when that was written. Was, in fact, upon his deathbed. But he remembers the spiders and wonders. And wonders. For once, he is pleased that his own craft is something so simple and unimportant as weaving tapestries from stones and shells and setting them in vibration so they sing for a thousand years.

And then he goes to eat supper.