

Inside-Outside

by Philip José Farmer

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Back Cover:

Doyou know that there is a tunnel under Hell? That this Universe is a toy? That the hideous Saviors rule, and have ruled, since Time began three Time-beginnings back? That they formed Man and Earth, body disc and soul print, and alien too? And that they made mistakes?

Oh, they made terrible mistakes! With such teeth. . .

For George Scheetz

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Two floated in the twilight void.

Arms around each other, the chin of each resting on the shoulder of the other, they spun around a common axis and turned over and over, heads over heels.

Around them (there was no above or below) was nothing. Only the invisible air pushing them towards the sun in the center of the sphere. The sun was obscured by a cloud of dust.

Jack Cull held Phyllis Nilstrom tightly while he stared past her. Presently, for he had no means of telling time in a world where the sun never moved, he saw a speck appear. His heart beat many times. Then, the speck was much larger. Before long, he knew that the object was not heading straight for them. Nor was it, as he had first thought, part of the debris left after the cataclysm; a building or a tree or a chunk of ripped-apart mountain. Its shape was that of a living thing, although not like any creature he had ever seen in this world.

The thing changed course and swept around in an arc, obviously after having sighted the two human beings. It came closer, and then Cull knew that it must be a member of the newcomer species, the third group to become tenants of this world.

He was not unnerved at seeing the monstrous shape. He had gone through too much too recently to be shaken. He was not even giving the creature his full attention but was thinking of an Earth that he remembered but had never seen, had hoped briefly to see, and now knew that he would never see.

And he thought of that time, not so long ago as men counted time by sleeps and awakenings, when events had been different. Then, not knowing the truth, wanting to know the truth, he had hoped. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, he had found it difficult to believe that he could be in Hell. This was no supernatural world. It was hard as rock, dirty as earth, stinking as garbage and un-washed bodies, a physical world obeying physical laws. . . though some things were not easily explainable.

Now, he knew that it was not metaphysical, that everything had an explanation and operated by valid principles. The same cause and effect that ruled on Earth ruled here.

But, on that day of which he was thinking, he had not been so sure.

* * *

The Deadly Desert was the old Hell with its fires burned out. So said the old-timers. Jack Cull had studied the Deadly Desert so often from his apartment window high up in the tower that he could understand what they meant. While having coffee (instant ersatz made from crumbled rocktree leaves) in the morning (?), he stared over the city roofs, over the city walls, and out across the desert.

For as far as he could see (there was no horizon), the sands stretched. Here and there, mountains abruptly rose from the flatness. The mountains, like the desert, were treeless, shrubless, grassless. Around them was nothing but sand and sunshine and vapors of poisonous gases from potholes.

Infrequently, a "dragon" or a "cerebus" cranked along like an old bus on its way to the junkheap. Once, Cull saw a sway-backed "cen-taur."

Even at that distance, it looked hopelessly down at the hooves; grimy and gray and broken-spirited, as only the long unemployed could be. Every now and then, he had heard, one came into the city. He carried, not a bow and arrow with which to torment the damned, but a stone alms-bowl.

Mixed-up proverb. If horses were beggars. . .

This morning(?) he was, as usual, looking *up* past the desert at the mountains and wondering if what they said about the mountains could be true. This city was a bloody flux of rumors; nothing, or very little, could be believed. But you liked to hold a rumor to your chest, cherish it, warm it, breathe life into it with your little hope. And this rumor said that if a man could get across the desert to the mountains, he could get away from Hell itself. Otherwise, if he couldn't, why had a barrier been put between the city and the mountains?

The main trouble about that rumor, for which he had paid much, was that he could see for himself that there was nothing beyond the desert.

No, he'd correct that. He could not see beyond the sands. The sands curved upward and upward until the desert became a blur.

No sky. Rather, there was a sky, but it was a continuation of the earth.

This was a world where the sky *wasnot* blue, where there was no sky, where the sun was always exactly overhead, where the only shadow was beneath a roof or beside a leaning wall.

Once, a man could fall off the edge of the world. So an old-timer had told him. But, he said, things have changed. Not for the better. Hell is a compromise of terrestrial ideas and infernal facts. And, here, compromises always seemed to work out for the worst.

Cull muttered, "Take your compromise and stick it!"

No use. He was stuck with it. He returned to his breakfast. And he gazed with revulsion at his apartment: Four stone walls (which did not a prison make), a stone bed, a stone bench, a stone table, made of granite, diorite, volcanic tuff, limestone, respectively. The stone table with grooves in it where "fiends" had planted chitinous elbows for eons(?). The stone bench with a depression in its middle where scaly or horny buttocks had rubbed back and forth for many a millimillennia.

His breakfast. A quartz bowl filled with manna soup and with coarse brown fibers, like hairy noodles, of rocktree leaves. These constituted the only vegetation, and that was only permitted, he supposed, because human beings needed roughage. They were not ectoplasm but flesh and blood. They breathed and bled, had mouths, teeth, and bowels, and so needed food with bulk. The rocktrees also existed because a generator of oxygen and consumer of carbon dioxide was needed. This was a physical universe, even if en-closed, just as physical as the Earth from which they came.

After eating the soup and drinking another cup of coffee, he started to shave with a flint razor. One had to keep up appearances; pride was not denied, especially here. And moustaches were In.

But, during the second scrape of his flint razor, another earthquake struck. The floor heaved. The blocks composing the walls parted slightly. He steadied himself against the table and continued scraping off the whiskers. The bastards were not going to unnerve him. Let the universe expand. He was not going to allow them to know he was breaking. As if they cared.

Result: he gashed his throat. But he was unlucky (was he?) and missed the jugular by a hair.

Swearing, he walked to the window and looked out.

Here it came! All hell breaking loose!

From far away (remember, no horizon) a thin line appeared. It shot toward him, toward the city, grew larger as it came closer, expanded and resolved into two walls forming a sharp corner, like the prow of a ship. And, like a ship, it roared over the sands of the desert, pushing up great waves in front of it and clouds of dust on each side, a ship of the desert sailing under the wind of God's fury. Behind the prow rose towers of stone like tall masts. Out of the windows and doors of the towers shot flames. A stone vessel on fire sliding over the sands on a collision course with the city in which he lived.

"Here it comes!" he screamed. It'll smash into us, tons and tons and tons of giant blocks of granite ramming at sixty miles an hour into the city, which is also tons and tons and tons of stone blocks. He screamed; he who had seen so much he thought he could no longer scream. He screamed. Even though he had seen this before and knew, or thought he knew, that the collision would never happen.

Nor did it. The great city, seemingly bent on plowing into him and grinding his flesh between and under the masses of falling granite, suddenly stopped. Its walls were less than a quarter of a mile away.

There was a hush as the shouts and yells from the streets below his window ceased. Then, the great city built like a boat began to recede. Rather, as he knew from past experience, it *seemed* to recede, just as it had seemed to sail toward them. It was a mirage, a reflection of a metropolis only God knew how many thousands of miles away. Sometimes, during the earthquakes, strange atmospheric disturbances occurred. Once, it had been his own city that had charged across the sands. That was when he had seen himself staring horrifiedly out of his own window in the tower.

Now, the city with flaming towers was gone. It would never do to allow commerce, intercourse, among Christian and Buddhist. Each must suffer his own Hell. The Authorities would see to that.

If The Authorities were so smart, he thought, why didn't they make this place big enough in the first place? Or did they make this setup so that human beings would be frightened (not to death), horror-stricken, never knowing if this time the two Hells might crash?

It was then that he put his hand on his face and felt the wetness. He had cut himself with the flint and had forgotten about the cut.

He, licked the blood off his finger and thought intensely about its slight saltiness, its redness, and how it was his blood, his own. Pleasures were few here, and you had to do strange things to get your kicks. He knew a man who could lie on his back, practically bend himself double, and then could. . . well, he had better not go on. It did not bear thinking about. Not because it was in bad taste or vulgar or against current mores, but because he hated that man for being able to get a kick that he could not.

The blood kept trickling. Although he was not worried about bleeding to death, Cull did want to repair the damage. The Exchange, where he worked, insisted on its employees looking presentable. Besides, prowling the streets were men and women who might become overly excited at the sight of blood and cause him no end of trouble and even pain.

He telephoned his doctor, who lived in a small room in the lowest sub-basement of the apartment. (Telephones in Hell? Why not? They were the work of those who had been here before man, the "demons." There was a vast complex of lines over the city; lines strung, not on wooden poles, but on the gargoyle faces that jutted in profusion on the front of every building or else on the branches of the rocktrees.)

The doctor, poor devil, was busy with another case. But, since Cull was a more important

patient, the doctor arrived within five minutes. Doctor B.O., as he was called, was tired and haggard. He had once been a handsome specimen, a giant with a magnificent physique. But he was tired in body, and his spirit, which was the same thing as his body, was, if not crushed, crumpled.

He opened his little black bag, slapped something on the wound to close it up, and covered it with a salve.

"What caused the earthquake this time?" Cull said.

The doctor replied with chips of weariness drop-ping off his voice and flakes of sullenness darting from his manure-brown eyes.

"Another famine in China."

His voice croaked with exhaustion as he gave his Lewisian explanation. Half a million souls, en-cased in solid flesh, had moved into Hell over-night. And Hell had expanded to make room for them. Hence, the stretching of the unlimited yet bounded universe. Hence, the outward thrust of the Buddhist city, the crevasses in the earth, the buildings reeling and sometimes toppling. The other city was a mirage? Oh, no! Never!

The doctor knew what this meant for him and his fellows. More work. No sleep. He was so tired that he even dared complain to Cull. Of course, he knew how lenient Cull was and that he would not, probably, turn him in. He even suspected him, wrongly, of being a member of the underground abolitionist society.

"Don't bitch to me," Cull said. "We're all in the same boat."

"Yes," the demon whined as he snapped his little black bag shut and walked toward the phone, knowing it would ring for him in a few seconds.

"Yes. We're in the same boat. But you hold the position of a first-class passenger on a luxury liner. While I, you might say, am only a coal shoveler in the black gang."

"There was a time when it was the other way around," Cull said.

The phone rang, and Cull answered it. He decided to let Doctor B.O. leave. Why argue? Once, when this world had been a small place, constructed according to the Ptolemaic model, the "devils" -- or *Arganus* as they called them-selves -- outnumbered man. They ruled as any strongly prejudiced and arrogant majority always does. Then, when this place -- call it Hell -- was re-formed to the Copernican structure, and mankind on Earth began breeding in geometrical progression, though no less passionately than before, the fiends were suddenly in the minority.

Topsy-turvy. Even here things changed. They had to because Hell was a reflection, if distorted, of Earth.

But changes do not have to be for the better. According to the fiends, they were for the worse. Now, the fiends were only a fraction of the population. Might makes right. The fiends, once masters, became slaves. Oh, slavery was legal and rightly so, for only human beings should have civil rights. And the fiends were not human beings. Even they, liars that they were, would not claim that. They had their pride. Besides, if it were not for the fiends, would human beings have been in Hell?

Doctor B.O. put down the phone and ran out of the room. He was a flash of red edged with the blue of autointoxication.

He had left the receiver off the hook, for which oversight he would pay later. Curiosity had not slackened so much in Cull that he no longer took up the tension when he had a chance. He picked up the phone and listened, hoping to hear something out of the ordinary. Something to give him a kick. There was the hum of a line waiting to be used. Then, a voice with a Slavic accent, saying, ". . . somewhere deep below. It has to be because that's the only place we've never been. Look in the sewers."

There was a click. Cull put the receiver back on the hook, picked up his briefcase, and walked out. *Look in the sewers*, he thought. What the Hell was behind that remark? Look for what? Then, as he went out into the street, he forgot about it.

The street was blocked by a crowd that had gathered around a corpse half-hidden beneath a block of granite tumbled by the quake. Death did not awe or attract them. It was what death brought running that made them stand around and wait when they probably had urgent business elsewhere.

He waited, too. He was late for work as it was, but he was not going to miss out on this even if he were fired. He would have hated dismissal, since being out of a job was Hell. But he wanted to see what death would bring.

From far away, he heard the first faint wheeeee of the siren. It was distant, so he knew he had time to step into a store and buy, or try to buy, a package of Roll-your-own. The owner was not in sight. The slave, a huge black fiend who insisted on being called Uncle Tom, was replacing various items that had been shaken off the shelves and counter. Stooping over, he looked up at Cull and grinned, his toothpaste-white fangs gleaming against the inkblack face. He was far darker than any Negro, for the darkest Negroes were not actually black but a deep brown. His hair was wooly and cropped close to his head, and his lips were so thick as to be a caricature of a Congolese.

"Yassah, Marse Cull," he said. "Whuffo yo comes in heah for, suh, massah, yo lawdship?"

"Uncle Tom," Cull said. "How would you like to be kicked in the ass?"

And he felt angry at himself for saying that, because Uncle Tom had incited him into doing so, had hoped he would.

"Oh, lawdy, Marse Cull, Ah doan mean no of-fense, nowhow, no suh. Ah's jes a poah ole dahkie, yo lawdship, tryin' to get along wif mah white bettahs. Ah's so sah'y Ah hu't yo feelin's, massah. Please doan beat me, Marse. Ah'll lick yo boots and kiss yo ass, massah, jes lahk us no-good culluhd folks is supposed to do. Ah'm jes a po ole dahkie."

"For God's sake cut it out," Cull said. He was frustrated. The fiend had found a way to needle and taunt the human beings, and when they told him he wasn't human and wasn't supposed to talk like a Negro, he would remind them that they had always said Negroes weren't human either.

Besides, he was a nigger angel (his own words), and before The Fall he had always talked thus. Been St. Michael's own houseboy, he said. Then, he would laugh -- fangs flashing in the frame of that genuinely black face -- and say that The Fall had been no comedown for him. In Heaven, he'd been no better off. Well, maybe, because St. Michael was real quality-folks, and down here he had to serve white trash.

By then, he did get a boot in the rear, which did not hurt him one bit, but usually caused the kicker to yell with pain. If angry enough, the kicker would threaten to lynch him. This caused another embarrassing scene, where Uncle Tom would get down on his knees and lift his hands in prayer to his threatener and go into a dramatic scene, pleading and begging for mercy. All the time he was enjoying himself thoroughly, and his threatener knew it and could do little about it besides curse and threaten some more. If a lynching were organized, it would be broken up in a short time by The Authorities, and the mob severely punished. There was Law here as elsewhere.

On the other hand, Uncle Tom did not dare walk off his job. The Law applied to him, too.

"Where's the owner?" Cull said, knowing that Uncle Tom was laughing inside himself at Cull's red face.

"Lawzy, massah, dat him outside! Undah de block! Po massah, he soon be in de cole dahk grave!"

Which statement was a lie, and he knew it as well as Cull. No grave for anybody in this self-enclosed world. Not for long anyway.

He might be lying about the identity of the body under the stone, too.

"You black devil," Cull said. "You're trying to tempt me to grab a handful of tobacco and run down the street with it, aren't you? And, of course, as soon as I did, you'd start hollering, 'Stop, thief!'"

Uncle Tom's eyes grew big with pretended in-nocence. "Oh, no, boss! Not dis poah debbil! Ah nebber say no such t'ing, 'n yo-all know it! If yo was to bring dis heah case to co't, massah, yo'd get trown out a co't, beggin' yo pahdon fo sayin so, boss! Dis heah po dahkie done learned his lesson, sahib! He ain' nebbah again goin' to tempt a human! No, sah, Ah done learned my place in sassiety!"

Cull was tempted. He sweated, and he looked the store over. Could it be done? Maybe he could make a deal with Uncle Tom.

No! He'd learned the hard way. The Authorities could locate you any time They wanted you.

"I want some tobacco," he said. "And this is the only place I can get it between here and work. Can you sell me some?"

Uncle Tom grinned slyly. "Yo know us poah debbils ain' allowed to trade in nothin' wif yo white folks. We's jes de moppers 'n de dusters, de hewers o' wood and de drawers o' watah. No, sah, Ah cain' t sell yo nothin'."

"You mean I got to go without a smoke today?" Cull said, choking with the helplessness and anger of the situation.

"Dat's up to yo, bwana. Nuffin Ah can do. Ah'm so sah'y." And he grinned and resumed his picking up of the articles.

By now, the siren had become very loud. Cull said, "Isn't he living with a woman? Maybe I could make a bargain with her?"

"Oh, Lawdy," Uncle Tom said, and he laughed a high-pitched laugh. "De Massah was a bery

religious man, he was. He say dat, since dere ain' no givin' or takin' in marriage heah, jus as in Heaven, he ain' gonna lib in sin wif no woman!"

"You make me sick," Cull said, and he went out onto the street.

The siren was much louder. In a few seconds, the ambulance came around the corner. The crowd drew back to make way for it. The ambulance stopped a few feet from the block, and the siren's wail died out. The driver and a passenger got down out of the front seat. Two men climbed out of the rear. One carried a folded-up stretcher; the other, two crowbars.

Cull was disappointed, as was everybody else in the crowd.

X had not come this time.

If Cull was disappointed, he was also relieved. Twice he had seen X, and both times he was awed. The hair had stood up on the back of his neck; a chill had run over his skin.

Now, he walked away, for he did not care to spend time idly watching four men(?) lift the block up and place the corpse in the rear of the ambulance. He had witnessed similar scenes too many times. Within a few hours, the dead man -- no longer dead -- would be back tending his store. Death, nonexistence, call it what you will, was a luxury not allowed them for long in this place.

Where did the ambulance come from? Who made it? Where was it made? What was its method of propulsion? Who knew? It resembled, superficially, the automobiles of Earth -- as Cull dimly remembered them. It had a black chassis of metal or plastic, a windshield, four wheels with rubber or plastic tires, a steering wheel, a hood. But what kind of motor lay under that hood, no one knew. There was no grill, nothing to indicate a radiator. And the motor was absolutely soundless.

Who knew what was going on in this world? Cull did not. He'd been here. . . how long? Two years or twenty?

The sun hung in the middle of the sky, and the sky was no sky but a continuation of the earth. The earth curved up and away and rounded upon itself and became the heaven. If you had a telescope powerful enough to pierce the atmosphere, so they said, you could see people walking upside down over your head and towers with their points hanging down like stalactites. If you could walk around this world, you would find yourself at a point where you could look upward at the very spot from which you had taken your first step on your journey.

If. . . if. . . if. No telescopes, of course, though it was theoretically possible to build them. And no walking up the horizon. That was just not possible, not across the no longer burning but still deadly desert.

It was enough to stare from a tower window and see the city itself curving upward. Enough to scare the. . . what would you call it?. . . out of you.

Naked, with a briefcase, he walked the streets of the city. Others, naked too, thronged the wide thoroughfares between the towering buildings. All were men and women of various ages from twenty or upward. There were no infants, children, or adolescents here. Where were they? In some other city? Or elsewhere, outside this ingrown world?

The adults arrived here in the same body, or similar body, as that they had possessed on the

other world of Earth. They were the same age they had been when they died. Cull had memories, vague as most of his memories of the previous life, of having died in an automobile accident. He had been, he thought, about thirty years old. He had had a wife, three children, aged eight, six, and three. His wife was blonde, good-looking, and something of a shrew. He could not remember her face accurately, though it seemed to him that she had a nice nose, overfull lips, a rounded chin, and a dimple on one of her cheeks.

His profession? Questioned, he would have replied that he had been an electronic engineer and marketing supervisor, but he remembered very little of electronics. When the fatal accident happened, he was on his way upward in the great organization to which he belonged. The other car (it had run a stop light, or had he?) cut off his hopes forever. Not just his hopes of rising high in the company, of getting rich and powerful, but also his hopes of going to Heaven. If he had not been so full of hate for his boss at the moment he was killed, if he had had a chance to cool off, to forgive his boss, to regain the love he was supposed to feel for all humanity (which, unfortunately, included his boss), and if he had not also at that moment been hating his wife, whom he suspected of infidelity, though he had no proof whatsoever, and if he had not at that particular second also turned his head to watch the sway of hips of a long-legged brunette on the side walk, if . . . if . . .

It was not fair. He had been a good man; he had led a Christian life, had actively supported the Church, been chairman of several philanthropic and social welfare committees, he had never killed except while defending his country in wartime, he had never. . .

What use to think about it? He thought, we grow no older. And this is strange, for our physical state is much the same as on Earth. We eat and excrete, copulate (without children being produced), suffer pain and feel pleasure, bleed, even die. Something has been altered in us to defeat aging and to sterilize us.

Something but not everything. Just enough. The toothless who had false teeth on Earth had false teeth here. Cull still had a gold bridge between two teeth. If a man lacked a finger, a hand, an arm, a leg, an eye, a testicle on Earth, he also lacked it here. But there was some law of equity, for a total amputee on Earth found that one leg and one arm had been restored. The totally Terrestrial blind had one eye, invariably the left.

And the insane, the idiotic, the senile, those suffering with St. Vitus' dance, paralysis agitans, scrofula, elephantiasis, syphilis, multiple sclerosis, and so on were cured. Nor did these diseases come back.

Those who had lost eye or limb complained, of course, that it was not fair. If the diseased and senile could be wholly repaired, why were they, the halt and lame, discriminated against? No answer. Who said anything about this setup *was* fair?

Nothing bore thinking about, yet he could not keep from thinking about it.

And so, thinking, he went around the corner and found himself, as every morning(?), before the Exchange.

This was housed in one of those tremendous and fantastic (until he got used to it) buildings that abounded in this city. The building reared at least two thousand feet, which was not as tall as many buildings on Earth. But it was a mile wide and composed of the most colossal stone blocks he -- or anyone else -- had ever seen. Each block, hewn from granite, porphyry, diorite, basalt, or marble, was a fifty-foot cube. They had been piled on top of each other without mortar and, every two blocks, were stepped back so the entire structure resembled a hanging garden of Babylon. On every block were

carved thousands of faces and little statues. No gargoyles, as you would expect, but human faces; faces with every shade of every emotion known to mankind.

Fiends had carved those features. But neither man nor devil had quarried those cliff-high blocks and piled them one on the other. Who? Nobody knew. The fiends claimed they had found the city built thus. And had moved in. This was when the country outside the city walls burned with what seemed an eternal flame, and the human beings who came to live there roasted without dying.

On either side of the great building, towering even above it, were two statues. These looked as if they were intended to represent toads halfway in the process of turning into men, or vice versa.

Their great mouths gaped open, and into them, or out of them, rushed air. Everywhere through the city were statues like these, and they provided the background noise for the city. Rumble and whoosh of hot air going into the mouths of some; rumble and whoosh of cold air out of the mouths of others.

Over the tremendous arch of the portal of his destination were carved (by human hands and in Hebrew letters): DO NOT ABANDON HOPE. He stepped through the portal and into a hallway a hundred feet wide and three hundred feet high, however, the corridor was no more than three hundred yards long, then, through a hundred-foot high but ten-foot wide entrance into the Exchange itself.

The room was carved out of a single piece of stone, a titanic block hollowed so that the interior resembled the inside of a basketball. The seats and the aisles between the seats started from the bottom and ran up along the curve of the ball. Up and over the ceiling so that some of the fiends, who had once used this room, must have sat quite upside down. Or else the carvers had chiseled out those ceiling-seats because of a distorted sense of humor. The human beings had never found out. Any fiend questioned would reply that he was only an ignorant demon and couldn't remember.

However, men and women could sit only to the point at which the walls began to curve inward near the ceilings. And in almost every seat was a human being who held a phone in one hand and in the other, a graphite-and-plastic pencil with which he was busily writing on a sheet of parchment. The parchment was tanned human skin from which the hairs had been removed. White or light brown skin, of course, because black skin made the graphite marks almost invisible. And skin, of course, because there was no paper. No trees except for the rocktrees, and the rocktree leaves made poor paper.

The skin was supplied to the Exchange by various agents. The Exchange asked no questions but paid off with the various and strange commodities the suppliers demanded. Occasionally, The Authorities caught up with the suppliers. Then, there was a shortage of paper for a while until the skinners could recruit and train new workers. The Authorities could, it was supposed, break up the organization from top to bottom if They wanted to put forth the effort. But They did not work by magic; They used human or fiendish hands. And the human agents for The Authorities had a habit of being stoned to death on the streets or caught and tortured before being torn apart.

The people before the phones scribbled their notes, then summoned a runner. The runner raced up the steps of the aisle, took the note, and ran down to the bottom of the bowl. This was occupied, except for a broad aisle around the bottom, by a large platform of stone. Workers sat at stone tables at the foot of the platform and answered telephones. These were the screeners. They took messages from the people on the seats along the wall. If they thought a message important, they handed a note to a runner. He took the note to the Chairman.

The Chairman sat on a huge polished diorite throne in the center of the platform. The throne was very plain, very massive, yet could be rotated by a gentle push of the occupant's foot. There was no

perceptible distance between the chair, which must have weighed two tons, and the platform on which the throne rested. Yet, the throne must have had little friction between its under surface and the platform, or else machinery existed beneath. Efforts to lift the throne had failed, but it turned easily and would spin swiftly if pushed hard.

On the throne sat the Chairman. He was a big man, claiming to be seventy years old physically but 1700 chronologically. That is, relative to Cull's time, and exclusive of Hell's own time, which was no time or forever. The Chairman's head and face were covered with long white hair; his beard fell to his skinny ankles, his beard in which he wrapped himself as in a robe and covered his (reputedly) withered sex. He called himself Angelo -- a strange name for a denizen of hell. It was rumored that he knew Dante, who was also said to be a citizen of this city.

But Hell was a bloody flux of rumor and counter-rumor. Who should know better than Cull, who dealt in them?

As Cull stepped inside he was greeted by a blast of voices, the ringing of a hundred phones. Since he was late, according to the huge hourglass by the doorway, he would have hurried to his seat. But he looked up at the faces in the chamber, and he halted, horrified. It was true, though he could not at first believe it. Every man in the chamber, except the Chairman, was clean-shaven! There was not a single moustache anywhere!

He felt humiliated, ridiculous, and, above all, betrayed. Why had not any of his so-called friends told him that moustaches were Out? Some friends! They wanted to get him just as much as his enemies.

Now, he was not only conspicuous because he was late; he was being laughed at.

There was nothing he could do. To turn tail and run for home to shave off the out-of-fashion moustache would make him even later, and the Chairman certainly would not like that. Moreover, the others would laugh at him just that much more.

Head down, cheeks burning, he climbed up the steps between the rows and slid into his own seat behind his own table. His phone was ringing as if the person on the other end had world-shaking news. Perhaps he did.

He lifted the phone and said, "Hello? Who is it? Anything good?"

The voice at the other end spoke in pidgin Hebrew and with a Swedish lilt. "Agent Sven Jalmar speaking. From sector XXB-8N/B."

Cull had memorized the great map in the next room; he knew where Sven was. Or approximately, because the map of the city would have changed somewhat since its recent expansion. He had expected the telephone lines to be down because of the quake, but the break must have been swiftly repaired.

"Sure, I got something good," said Sven. "How many fallen angels can stand on the point of a needle?"

"You dumb Scandinavian joker," Cull said. "You know we're busy. Did you call up just to pass the time with your dull jests?"

"Time? Here? Now you're the clown. No, Agent Cull, I didn't call just to hear your insults. I've

got something hot. Or, at least, I think it is."

"You think it is?" Cull said. "You'd better have some validation! I'll report you for wasting my time before I'll stick my neck out on a wild goose chase!"

"Heavens!" Sven said. "And mixed meta-phors, too. How much validation can you get here? I said I got a hot lead, but I can't bring you sworn, signed, and witnessed evidence. For all I know, this guy may be a nut. The Devil knows there are plenty here."

"Guy?" Cull said. "What guy?"

"He won't give any name but Fyodor. Calls himself God's Idiot Slav. A baldheaded long-bearded coot. Looks like he had gone through hell before he ever left Earth. He can talk to you him-self. He rambles a bit, but he's convincing, con-vincing as Satan Himself. Wait a minute! Don't hangup! I'll get him!"

He left before Cull could yell at him not to tie up the line. The Chairman was looking at him, giving him the look that rattled the bones inside Cull. He knew then that Sven would have to produce something extraordinary or both of them would be in -- perhaps literally -- hot water. The Exchange had terrible and effective ways of en-forcing discipline or punishing mistakes. And you could not hide. Who should know better than he, who had tracked down some of those who had decided to quit working for the Exchange? Once you hired in and learned the secrets, you were *in*. No way out.

Cull drummed his fingers on the stone desk before him and bit his lips until he could taste the blood. Then, he regretted the taste because it reminded him of a punishment he had seen in-flicted on a man who had angered the Chairman.

He was sweating, too, despite the cool flow of air from the ancient and invisible but ever-effective air conditioning system. After what seemed an hour (and may have been), Sven's voice boomed in his ear.

"Sorry to take so long, Cull. Here he is! Fyodor!"

"Fyodor, God's Idiot Slav, here!" said a high-pitched voice. "I bring you good news, great news!"

Another nut, Cull thought. "Be brief," he said. "You've already tied up the line too long. Just give me the gist of your message. If I think what you have to say is worthwhile, you can give me more detail."

Then, he said, "Haven't you called before? You sound vaguely familiar."

"Never," Fyodor said. "You're the first man with the name of Cull that I ever talked to."

"O.K. Shoot."

"Listen," said Fyodor excitedly, "you know the theory of Translation? That is, that birth is a translation into one tongue, life, from another tongue, life? And that death is still another trans-lation? Into one of two possible speeches? Heaven or Hell? Or, possibly, three, for you must not overlook Limbo? Or, maybe, four, since Purgatory must also be considered, although there is no evidence that a Purgatory exists."

"On the other hand, perhaps this world is Purgatory and not Hell. If this is true, we have hope. But, if this is Purgatory, why haven't we been told so, so we may know *why* we're suffering and what we have to do to get out.

"But, the same reasoning holds true if this is Hell. Why haven't we been told *why* we're here and *where* we're going, if anywhere.

"Of course, you can say that the same held true on Earth. There we did not know *where* we came from, *why* we were there, or *where* we were going. But, if you say that, I say that we did have the means of finding out what so many regarded as mysteries. The Church told us what was what, and the Church derived its knowledge and consequent authority from the Sacred Books, which were dictated by God, in a manner of speaking. Oh, the Church could not tell us the details, nor, in many cases, even the bare outlines. But it could tell us enough to furnish an anchor to which we could tie our faith, a point from which our faith, thrown into the winds of doubt like a spider's exploring filament, could. . ."

"Get to the point," Cull said. But he could not resist the inevitable riposte. "Why are *you* here?"

"I do not know why -- if this is Hell. For I believed, and I do believe. And I was a miserable sneaking wretch of a sinner. A sinner, I tell you! But I believed, and I loved Him! And I loved Man, too. Or Him in Man. And Man in Him."

"Never mind your personal troubles," Cull said. "Give me something worthwhile."

"And by worthwhile," he continued, "I mean one or both of two things. Two things we want to know. One, the exact location and identity of the man or woman who could not be here if this were Hell. Two, the identity of X, the Dark Messiah, the Bastard Christ."

The third, he did not mention.

Fyodor did not resume talking at once, but Cull could hear his heavy breathing.

"Speak up!" he said, terrified because the Chairman's eyes were again upon him. "What's the matter?"

"Perhaps," said Fyodor, "I can help you. But I must digress a bit. Rather, not digress but build up to my point. My point would be quite lost without prelude, a foundation, as it were. You must be patient. Why not? When we have eternity. . ."

"You may. I don't," Cull said, feeling the sweat pouring from his armpits and flowing over his ribs.

"You know for a fact," said Fyodor, "that Christ visited Hell for three days while His body was in the tomb. Three days while He preached the True God and so liberated all the virtuous pagans and pre-Savior Jews who had been condemned to suffer Hell until He came. And He freed them, His presence and appearance allowed them to go to Heaven. So, Abraham, Moses, Socrates; Gautama, all these and many more who had sought the True Light but were unable to see It because He had not come yet -- all these believed Him and so were able to pass out of the gates of Hell. . ."

"I've heard all that," said Cull, "but I've never found a person who could tell of seeing any of these pre-Christians actually leave Hell. Come to think of it, nobody has ever seen a pre-Christian in The City. Or, if he did tell of such a thing, his story couldn't bear up under any scientific scrutiny. Liars all. And God knows I've talked to enough, traveled thousands of footsore miles, located and interviewed thousands of

men and women who were here when the Christ -- or someone claiming to be Him -- came here."

"But did He leave?" cried Fyodor shrilly. "Did He leave?"

"What in Hell are you talking about?"

"Suppose that there was a man who had re-pented of his sins? But too late? And he had heard from the fallen angels that Christ would come and stay for three days? And so he, with good aforethought, cleverly turned his hand to evil, distinguished himself among the professional malevolents -- the fiends? Remember, this was in the days when the fiends outnumbered man. And this man was honored -- or dishonored -- by being initiated into demonhood, an event causing great rejoicing in Hell?"

"And so Christ came down and was captured and imprisoned by means we can't guess but which we may surmise were not beyond the powers of the devils. Of course, they could not im-prison Him without His consent. But He tacitly gave it for reasons of His own.

"And the Evil Man -- this Human-Turned-Fiend, was chosen to represent the person who would masquerade as Christ-Returned-To-Earth. But, once surfaced, reterrestrialized, as it were, he played double-crosser. Played traitor to Hell, this time, and refused to carry out the infernal plans. And was he, as his reward from Heaven, allowed to make the actual ascension? While the True Christ, for the sake of one sacred soul thought lost forever, gladly remained in His prison in Hell?"

"Or, if not in prison, in Hell's boundaries? And became X, the Dark Messiah, the Black Savior?"

"And the man who had come out of the tomb in the garden did not let Mary touch him --*Noli me tangere!* - - because he was yet in a demon's state. Mary's hand would have touched off from his robe, not a strengthening discharge of virtue, but a searing flash of evil. And Doubting Thomas was not destroyed because the celestial authorities -- or Authority -- had by then decided on the dis-position of the false Christ. And had switched the tremendous potential investing his robe and flesh from evil to good. Although, that is a weak point in my hypothesis, because only through a man's free will can a man change from good to evil.

"And, of course, all I have told you is only speculation, surmise. Possibly, the false Christ had made a mistake when he perpetrated evil in Hell in order to do good on Earth and in Heaven. He may have found out that the end does not justify the means, that doing evil in Hell -- even if to sinners who are perpetually condemned to suffer in any case -- is yet evil. And he had been allowed to escape briefly only to make his punish-ment even more severe and desolate.

"He was returned to Hell after a taste of Earth. And the Ascension was a pious fraud -- for Christ was still here, that is, in Hell -- during which the apostles thought He went up but in which, in reality, he (the escapee) went down. A sort of celestial-terrestrial-infernal relativity theory, as it were."

"Oh, my God," Cull thought. "I've wasted all this time with this nut!"

And then he thought, "Wait a minute! What am I thinking of? This is really wonderful!" Wonderful, not because of two reasons Cull had given Fyodor but because of the unmentioned third.

"Hold on," he said. "We'll be temporarily disconnected, but the operator will hook us in again. Just don't hang up."

He clicked off, then pressed a button in the base of the phone. Doing this put him in direct

contact with Stengarius, one of the men sitting at the table below the platform. He summarized Fyodor's story for Stengarius. After hearing that Stengarius was interested, Cull gave it to him in full detail.

"Think the Chairman'll buy it?" Cull said. "Myself, I see at least four distinct markets -- rich markets -- in Fyodor's stuff. And God knows what else can be squeezed out of it."

"I agree, Cull," said Stengarius. "But, it's up *tohim*."

Stengarius cut Cull off and put in a call to the Chairman. This call had to go through the Chair-man's Secretary; he sat on a basalt chair carved out of the steps of the platform. Cull watched him answer Stengarius, then cut Stengarius off, and put in a call to the Chairman.

The old man kept the phone hidden under his beard. He reached into the white tangled mass -- like a nest of uncooked spaghetti or pale worms -- and pulled out the phone. For a long time he listened without speaking, or, at least, without moving his lips, while Stengarius talked. Then, suddenly, the long long hairs over his upper lip parted a little, and a black hole appeared beneath them. He turned his head toward Cull -- the upside-down scimitar of a nose briefly profiled -- and his black eyes stared at Cull. Cull knew a man's eyes did not shine from reflected light as a cat's, but he could swear he saw the old man's shine. Perhaps, it was terror reflected from Cull, the bright nightlight of terror.

The Chairman phoned to Stengarius, and Stengarius looked up at Cull and gestured with the thumb and forefinger meeting to make an O.

Cull smiled. If this worked out, he might be ad-vanced, might even find himself on a seat on the bottom row. Maybe, some day, to the Secretary-ship. Possibly -- though not probably -- to the Chairmanship. The Chairman had been on the throne for a long long time.

Fyodor's voice roused Cull from his dream. "Mr. Cull, I haven't finished. Not by a long way."

Suddenly, Cull knew why the voice had seemed familiar. Of course! He had heard that same voice only a short time ago in his apartment when he had started to replace the phone after Doctor B.O. had left.

"Down in the sewers!" said Cull. Breath sucked in on the other end. A pause. Then, a stammering in some Slavic tongue -- probably Russian. He must have been shocked to have reverted to his native speech. Finally, he said, in Hebrew, "What do you mean?"

"There was an accidental connection on the phone earlier today," Cull said. "I heard you. Which reminds me. You're not a member of the Exchange. What were you doing on the phone?"

Cull did not tell him he had heard only the final part of the conversation and only his voice. Let panic shake what Cull did not know out of Fyodor. Rotten apples blown down by the wind of guilt. Or so he hoped.

"Mr. Cull," Fyodor said, "I don't know how much you heard. Or whose side you're on." He said nothing of why he was using the phone.

"Man's side," Cull said. "You surely don't think I'm a stinking Judas? I wouldn't work for The Authorities, damn them!"

"I don't want to say any more over the phone," Fyodor said excitedly. "I never thought of it

before. But The Authorities could be tapping this line."

"If they are, they've never given any evidence of it yet," Cull said. "The Exchange has been operating for a long time, and They've never in-terfered with anything. At least, Their in-terference, if any, was indirect."

Again, he began sweating. From time to time, men disappeared. Perhaps, the Authorities, whom nobody had ever seen but who had to exist. . . ?

"You know where I am," said Fyodor. "I'll wait for you here."

The phone clicked off.

Cull did not try to call Sven back. He decided, instead, to go directly to where Sven and Fyodor were. He had to ask permission to leave. But, after he had explained that this Fyodor was a possible treasure house, he was told to go ahead. Find out everything.

"If you really dig up something for the good of the Exchange, you'll be a big man in the organization," said Stengarius. "Bigger, anyway. Only, don't get too big for your britches. You'll get whittled down so fast you won't know where the knives come from. I'd take this assignment myself, but I'm too busy now."

What he meant was that he did not dare to leave for fear of the machinations of his colleagues. Once a man worked his way up to First Telephoner, he became a prisoner. He could not chance leaving his post. But there were com-pensations.

One of the compensations was Phyllis Nilstrom. She was standing in the lobby, talking to Robert-son, First Telephoner of the Second Shift, when Cull left the Exchange Floor. She was a beautiful woman of medium height. Her hair was ash-blonde, pulled back tightly from her broad forehead and fastened in a large Psyche knot. She had long slim legs, curving firm buttocks, a narrow waist, flat stomach, and breasts that were firm and full but not vulgarly so. Her voice was husky.

Cull loathed her.

Shortly after he had joined Exchange, he had gone to a party given by Cardinal, Head Telephoner of Sector XXB-1A/A. He was in-troduced to Phyllis by Cardinal, who informed him he could shake hands with her but that was to be his last intimate contact with her. Cull had dutifully laughed, but, during the rest of the party, he could not keep his eyes off her. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman. But he was no fool; he did not make it ap-parent. Every chance he got thereafter, he managed to talk to her, in the Exchange lobby, at parties, sometimes, when he contrived "ac-cidental" meetings. Then, when he had worked his way up to Head Telephoner for sector XXB-8N/B and could offer her something to rank with Cardinal's position, he had nerved himself to tell her he loved her. Knowledge of her relationship at that time with Cardinal had helped him gain courage, for he knew that the two were unhappy with each other.

To his surprise and delight, Phyllis had re-sponded. She had told him that she'd love to move into his apartment. That is, if something hap-pened that would demote Cardinal. At present, Cardinal still held much power. If she left him for Cull, she might disappear, murdered and dropped into the sewers by Cardinal's agents. Cull did not have enough power to protect her.

A short time later, Zabbini, Telephoner for one of the smaller sectors, was caught by two of

Cardinal's bodyguards in Cardinal's apartment. They killed him and then searched for their boss. Not finding him in his rooms, though they knew he had not left, they looked out the window. A crowd gathered around a body showed them what had happened. Zabbini had defenestrated Cardinal.

Phyllis came home a little later and expressed much surprise but little grief. After the inquest conducted by the Exchange First Detective, Phyllis was absolved of any direct blame. It was revealed that Zabbini had been in love with Phyllis and that he must have killed Cardinal with the expectation of getting her as his mistress.

Cull had been a little shocked at this. He had no doubt that Phyllis had encouraged Zabbini to kill Cardinal so that she could get rid of him and also become Cull's mistress.

But he forgot about that when he took her to bed. She was the most passionate woman he had ever known.

Or so he thought until the day she left him for Stengarius, the First Telephoner. Cull had made a big scene, had called her every name he could think of in Hebrew, English, and demon-speech. Phyllis had then told him that she was frigid, that she had to force herself to let any man touch her. But she wanted all the good things of life -- her words -- and she could get them easily by allowing men to get excited over her beauty and by pre-tending passion.

Cull had threatened to tell Stengarius this fact. She had laughed and said that, if he did, she'd tell Stengarius that he was lying and that he was scheming to get her back. How long would he last after that?

Now, as he passed her in the lobby, she spoke to him.

Cull said, "How are you?" and went to pass by.

"I'm fine," she replied, and she smiled. She had very white teeth.

"I want to speak to you alone," she said.

Robertson looked startled. He glanced with narrowed eyes at Cull, then said, "Be seeing you, Phyl."

"Not for some time," she answered. She reached out and placed her hand on Cull's arm.

"I understand you're taking a long trip," she said. "Way out."

He trembled a little at the touch of her hand, and he became sick with the pain of wanting her. He loathed her, but he wanted her back.

"It's. . . it's. . . a business. . . tr. . . trip," he said, hating himself because his stammer was betraying him.

She smiled coolly and said, "Don't be nervous. Stengarius knows I'll be talking to you. He won't think the wrong thing. You have nothing to worry about. I convinced him that you and I are through."

"I'm not the least bit worried about *him*," Cull said. He hoped his voice did not sound as hollow to her as to him.

"I'm sure you're not," she said, her smile leaving no doubt that she thought him scared out of his skin.

"Damn it, I'm not!" he said harshly.

"I didn't stop you to discuss your state of terror. So drop it. The facts are these. The Chair-man wants me to go to the same sector you're going to. You are to be my bodyguard. Or," she smiled again but with an unpleasant curl of lip, "my watchdog. Stengarius didn't want me to go, but the Chairman ordered it. So, he had to swallow the bitter pill. But he's trying to put a little sugar on it. You're the sugar."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, suddenly speaking in English, "that he thinks I'm perfectly safe with you. He knows what an eager beaver you are to advance yourself and how you'd do nothing to jeopardize your chances. Also, that you wouldn't have the guts to make a pass at me."

Cull felt the heat climbing up his face. He tried to laugh but failed.

"Perhaps," she said, "beaver was the wrong description of you. Wouldn't jackal be the better term? A jackal among the lions, Jack Cull?"

For a moment, he did not understand her. It had been so long since he had spoken English that he had almost forgotten its use. Moreover, his memory was dim. What were lions? What was a jackal?

Then, the images of the beasts came. They were blurred but not so much that he did not feel the sting of the metaphor. And he knew why she had used English. Only with it could she make a pun on his name.

Why, you bitch, you frigid Stengarian whore! he thought. His face was composed though he knew his flush exposed the anger within.

"Well, Jack Cull, shall we go?" she said. She beckoned to a servant. The fellow picked up her briefcase, and he and Cull followed her out of the Exchange.

A palanquin sat on the street between its four carriers. It was constructed on long bones cleverly fitted together and covered with skin. The four men, seeing Phyllis, lifted the palanquin off the street. The servant placed her briefcase on one end. She climbed into the palanquin and sat up, her back supported by a pile of cushions formed of skin and stuffed with rocktree leaves.

Phyllis said, "Let's go." The servant began trotting ahead of the palanquin, and he shouted, "Way for the Exchange! Way for the lady of the Exchange!"

The crowd in the street parted to form an aisle for her passage. To them, sight of the telephone receiver waved in the servant's hand was enough. The Exchange was not to be trifled with.

Cull had to take another means of transportation. Under other conditions, he would have been proud of this. For the first time, he was on a mission important enough for him to be given a ticket on the Piggyback Express.

But, now, he shone only with reflected luster. To ride on a man's back while she, the deepfreeze

bitch, was carried on a palanquin was to be struck in the face.

He jumped upon the back of the first pony, a big Negro with long muscular legs. Cull's legs went around the man's waist and both arms went over his shoulders. The Negro hooked his arms under Cull's legs to support him, and off he ran at full speed.

For about half a mile he ran, going fast the first quarter mile, then slowing down at an exponential rate the last quarter. By the time they had reached the next pony, he was breathing noisily as a steam engine. After he had let Cull down off his back, he fell on the stone of the street. He had given all he had.

Cull jumped up on the next man, a short but muscular blond, and he, too, ran as fast and as far as he could until his legs almost gave way. And he stopped suddenly and dropped his arms and allowed Cull to slip off his back. So it went, mile after mile as people scattered to make way for them. Piggyback after piggyback, while the leaning granite buildings and gargoyle faces spun by.

Long before Cull had reached the end of the line, he had decided that, prestige or no, it was a hell of a way to travel. Tough enough on the human steeds, for they often dropped in their tracks after unloading him. But they were in condition, would recover quickly, and did not have far to go. He was not in condition, and he had a long distance to travel. By the time he had reached the destination, he would be so stiff and sore his muscles would creak. The skin on the inner part of his thighs, where they had rubbed against the arms of his carriers, was burning. And he was seasick or bouncesick, whatever you please. Three times he had to halt his ponies while he got rid of his soup and bread. And the sun suddenly became weak, dim, as it did every twelve hours by the hourglass. It was not black but a faintly lit orb, a sun become a moon. All night he rode, hanging on, legs burning, stomach oscillating like a pendulum. All night, and then the sun suddenly flared up again (no dawn or dusk here). He rode all the next day, stopping only once to eat and then too tired to do it. Lifting a stone spoon to his lips, he fell asleep. His pony woke him at once and said they had to go. Orders. Then he found out that, if you were tired enough, you could sleep under almost any conditions.

But what a sleep! He would mount drowsily on the back of his pony and sink into joggled unconsciousness. The trouble was that the sleep lasted no more than a few minutes. When his carrier reached the end of his run, he would release his hold. Cull would fall off the man's back, crash into the stone, and wake with a jar. Before he recovered from the shock, he would climb, with assistance, onto the next back. His swiftly beating heart and overdriven adrenalin system would keep him awake for perhaps ten or fifteen seconds. Then, he would slide into unconsciousness again, only to be hurled up out of the deeps by another painful impact as his pony loosed him.

Nor did complaints help him. The pony would reply that it was not his duty to ease Cull gently to the ground, to baby him so he was not aware of being transferred to another carrier. The pony had not been so instructed. It became evident that every one of Cull's beasts of burden disliked his job, regarded it as humiliating and degrading. The only reasons they had hired on were (1) jobs were so scarce that any job was better than nothing and (2) the job was a means of getting into the organization and possible promotion in the Ex-change.

But Cull was sick and tired, and he did not see why his status was not now high enough to permit certain privileges. So, at one stop, where an Ex-change telephone was nearby, he phoned Stengarius. He complained bitterly, in a hoarse voice, itemizing the rude abandonments, consequent shocks and skinned elbows, knees, and nose, and his burned thighs. A man in his position should not have to put up with such indignities. By treating Cull so cavalierly, the ponies were expressing their contempt of the Exchange, and this should not be permitted.

This last argument convinced Stengarius. He called the local supervisor and told him what he must do. Without any backtalk, the supervisor agreed. And he phoned ahead to various super-visors. After that, the ponies slid Cull gently to the street and hoisted him onto the back of the fresh runner. By then, he began wondering why he did not, as Phyllis did, rate a palanquin. He could sleep through the whole journey while stretched out on a soft seat.

He phoned again at another stop. Stengarius ex-ploded. "Who in hell do you think you are? Only a First Phoner rates a palanquin. And you're a long ways from that! Get back in the saddle, Cull, and ride like blazes! You're wasting the Ex-change's time! And don't think this out-of-line request won't be held against you at your next merit review!"

"Yes, sir," Cull said humbly. He didn't dare to mention that the First Phoner's mistress had a palanquin. Back to the backs he went. By then, he was so tired he did not wake even during the transfers. How far he went in that condition, he didn't know. Then, he was shaken awake and saw Sven's broad red face with its thick orange moustache hovering over him.

"Rough, ain't it?" he said grinning. "Think it's worth it?"

"It'd better be," Cull said as he rose painfully. "Got any coffee?"

"Fyodor's waiting at the cafe," Sven said. "Come along."

The earthquake struck before they had taken six steps. The stone slab beneath their feet trembled. A low rumbling came a few seconds later. The buildings on both sides of the street began swaying.

Cull threw himself on the stone, digging into it with his fingers. His eyes were closed, and he was praying that the buildings would not fall. Massive as they were, they had been known to collapse.

He did not know why he prayed to be spared. Death would have been a merciful -- if temporary -- escape. Of course, he would wake up again, and he would be where he had been before. Well, not quite, for he might, in the meantime, have been discharged from death at a place far from here and would find himself out of a job with the Exchange. Because of the maneuvering that went on in the organization, twenty-four hours' absence could get you out into the cold. That is, not kicked out of it, just a loss of seniority.

The shaking and growling did not last more than thirty seconds. Afterward, there was silence. Nobody cared to speak; they were too busy being relieved. Or they might have been afraid that even the vibration of a voice would tip over a delicately balanced block of stone.

He rose and looked around. Not too much damage. Here and there, in the faces of the buildings, a block of granite had shoved forward and hung out over the street. A woman had leaped out of a window in her panic and was a mess on the street. Some slabs in the street had thrust up-ward, looking like half-opened doors to tombs. Some telephone lines were down, hanging from the gargoyles on the building's where they had been strung.

Sven said, softly, "Have you noticed that the quakes have been getting more frequent lately? Perhaps what that demon told me is true."

"What demon?" Cull said.

"You know what liars they are. But, some-times, they do tell you the truth, if only to make you think it's a lie. Anyway, he says that Earth is in the throes of an atomic war. That the immigration from there is so heavy that almost all of the population must be dying. Or maybe all. There's no way of determining at what time events take place on Earth. The terrestrial and infernal chronologies are not geared together. Not in a one-to-one ratio, anyway."

"Yeah," Cull said. "If what I've been told is true, there's a lag. I met an old fellow once who told me that he knows for a fact that those who died in the last half of the sixteenth century im-migrated here before those who died in the first half. How do you figure that?"

"Who in Hell knows!" said Sven, his face becoming even redder. "Things here are just as obscure, puzzling, and unanswerable as they were on Earth. I think that's part of our punishment. Keep us guessing, keep us insecure. If only we knew! But we don't! Ever!"

"Is it better not to have been born and thus never have existed?" Cull said. "Sometimes, many times, I think so. But, even with all the miseries, frustrations, humiliations, anxieties, and pains that we had on Earth and have here, we still get a chuckle, a good belly-laugh, a piece of ass. And we're aware. Not a nothingness, a zero, floating in a vacuum."

"You don't believe that," Sven said.

They had to slow down for a moment. A manna cloud had been forming for some time over this area, and now the filaments had begun pre-cipitating. They fluttered down, whipping this way and that, while people ran back and forth below them. One struck not twenty yards away from them, and they watched while a mob gathered around it and tore away large chunks of greyish-brown waffle-like material or strings of spaghetti-stuff. As soon as anyone had a handful or an armful, he ran. Some got away with their loot; others had to drop it and flee for their lives when faced with the local official gatherers. Every neighborhood had its official gatherers. Other-wise, there'd be absolute chaos. Some would get more than enough. Others would go hungry until the next cloud dropped its nutritious load or they could barter something precious for the manna.

Cull thought, what a hell of a way to provide food for a world! And he wondered again, for the ten thousandth time, what made the manna clouds form and what constituted their chemical make-up. He thanked himself that he worked for the Ex-change and didn't have to depend on his neigh-borhood suppliers for manna. You got some very vicious controllers sometimes; they demanded rather peculiar services for an extra share. He knew; hungry, he'd given in to some of the demands before he smartened up and joined the Exchange.

By then, they had come to one of the sidewalk cafes found everywhere in The City. The earth-quake had tumbled some of the stone tables, but these were being set up again. The demon waiter was serving the customers rocktree coffee. Seven stopped by one of the round tables (supported by a single thick stone pedestal) around which five men sat. One rose to greet them, and Cull knew by his voice that he was Fyodor.

Fyodor was a thick-bodied short man with a big bald round head and an uncut untrimmed grey-shot beard that hung down to his waist. His forehead was tall; his eyebrows, bushy. He had little blue eyes above a blob of a nose, high and prominent cheekbones, and thick red lips. His temples were deeply indented, as if they had caved in. Deep blue shadows and pouches under his eyes made him look as if he seldom slept and that uneasily.

"Ah, Mr. Cull," he said in a thin high-pitched voice as he shook Cull's hand with a thick stubby

hand. "Sit down, have a cup of coffee with me."

"I'd rather talk in private," Cull said, looking at the men around the table.

At the same time, they heard a siren wailing in the distance and knew that They were coming for the dead woman in the streets.

"Get the Exchange on the phone," Cull said to Sven. "If X shows, we can notify the Exchange."

"Why should Sven do that?" said Fyodor.

"None of your business," Cull replied. "But I'll tell you anyway. Whenever X appears, we drop all other business and hold the lines open. We are trying to determine if X is more than one person. If He should appear simultaneously in two or more places in the City, we will know it because of our phone reports."

"Very clever," said Fyodor. "And so far?"

"So far, He's shown up in one place at a time," Cull said sourly. "But, quite often, He'll pick up a corpse in one section of the City, and then, a short time later, He'll be in another section as far as a hundred miles away. It's difficult to determine simultaneity because of the lack of accurate clocks. How can you synchronize two hourglasses in widely separated locations when a difference of environmental moisture or size of sand grains may cause one to lag the other? And you can't use sun dials when the sun never moves."

"If X were to appear in two areas at the exact moment when the sun died down or became bright again, then you'd know," said Fyodor.

"You're a gold mine," Cull said. He told Sven he would make the call. And he did, for he wanted to tell Stengarius of Fyodor's idea and so get the credit. But, before the lines could be cleared, he hung up. He had a second thought. The chances of X's showing in more than one spot, just at flareup or diedown time, were very remote. And the Exchange, in order to make sure of getting the reports in, would have to tie up the lines every time the sun darkened or brightened. It would be too expensive and too exasperating an operation. And, if it did not pay off within a short time, he'd be the goat for suggesting the plan.

The sirens wailed louder, and the ambulance sped around the corner. With a ripsaw cry, the wheels locked and the vehicle skidded to a stop just short of the dead woman. The pervert who had been on her jumped up and ran away with both of his bloodied hands held high above his head. He was laughing so shrilly he almost screamed. The spectators, according to their natures, laughed at him or looked sick or cursed him. Cull knew the fellow would not get too far. He had undoubtedly been noted by one of the Ex-change's agents and would soon find himself in its hands. The Exchange did not tolerate perverts of any kind, harmless or otherwise. But they were not killed, for then they might be out of reach.

So, the Exchange castrated them, cut out their tongues, amputated all four limbs, and thus made them unable to offend or harm anybody, even themselves. Nor were they rolled out upon the streets to shift for themselves. The Exchange took care of their simple wants at its own expense, kept them alive and clean, even gave them coffee now and then or a cigarette. The average citizen would be surprised at the vast numbers of sexless, tongueless, handless, and footless men and women hidden from public view in the City. If he knew, he would have even more respect for the ability of the Exchange to keep law, order, and decency.

The doors of the ambulance slid into the chassis, and three men got out of the driver's cab. Two, the driver and his assistant, were dressed in tight-fitting scarlet uniforms with gold braid and big shiny black buttons and fur shakos. These marked them as servants of The Authorities, because such clothes were unavailable to anybody else. The third man, undeniably X, was dressed in the white robe He wore in the conventional por-traits of Him (if it were He) on Earth. His reddish hair was long, and his reddish beard fell to just below his chest. His muscular and well-shaped legs were bare, and he wore sandals. The face was the face most people think Christ should have. But -- a jarring note -- he wore dark glasses. Nobody, as far as the Exchange could determine, had ever seen him without the eye-concealing devices. And this was driving its agents crazy. Why should X wear dark glasses?

Another mystery was why He -- or he -- bothered to appear. He never resurrected in public or performed any miracles. He merely supervised the placing of the body in the ambulance. Occasionally, he made a short speech. It was always the same. And this was one of the times, for, after the body had been placed inside the vehicle, he began talking. His voice was high and sweet, and he spoke the pidgin Hebrew in which all except the newcomers were fluent.

"Once there was a man who lived a good life. Or so he thought, and as a man thinks, so he is, isn't he?"

"This man grew white-haired and wrinkled while the results of a good life piled up around him. He owned a big home, and he had a faithful and uncomplaining wife, many friends, many honors, many sons and daughters, even more grandchildren, and some great-grandchildren. But, as all men do, he came to the end of his days and lay on his deathbed. He could afford the best doctors and medicine on Earth, but these could help him no more than the worst of quacks and best of placebos. The only thing they could do for him was to place the crucifix in his hands, the crucifix which bore the figure of the God-man he had adored and obeyed all his long life.

"The man died but he woke up in a strange place and facing a stranger.

" 'So this is heaven,' said the old man.

" 'That depends,' said the stranger. He handed the old man a long two-edged sword. 'To get into Heaven, you must use this sword. If you refuse, you will be in Hell.'

" 'And what must I do with the sword?' said the old man.

" 'You will follow that path,' said the stranger, pointing to a trail through the woods. 'It leads to a brook. Beside it, playing on the banks, will be a beautiful little girl of six. She seems to be all purity, merriment, and innocence now. But, when she becomes a woman, she will be as evil as it is possible for a human being to be. She will cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children. She will order the tortures of hundreds and will enjoy the screams. Moreover, she will have a boy baby who will grow up to be as evil as she.

" 'You will kill this little girl. Now.'

" 'Kill her!' said the old man. 'Surely, you must be joking, although I do not see the humor. Or is this some sort of final test for me?'

" 'It is a test,' said the stranger. 'And, believe me, I am not joking. I cannot. You will not be able to get into Heaven unless you kill this child.'

"Look around you. Do you recognize your country estate? You are yet on Earth, the crossroads between Heaven and Hell. Which path you take from here is up to you. That is, whether you choose to crush the seed of great evil now, before it has a chance to burst the shell, and therefore do a great and good act. Or if you place mundane morality above the love for man and God."

"But I am a good man!" said the old man. "You want me to do an evil to prove I am good!"

"Surely," said the stranger, "you must have read and heard that no man is good? Only God is good. Those are the words of Christ, who denied that even He was good."

"Saying which, the stranger walked away. The old man watched him, expecting him to sprout wings and fly away. Or, perhaps, to grow horns, hooves, tails, and plunge into a gap in the earth suddenly appearing below him. For the thought had come to him that the stranger could be an angel but a fallen angel.

"However, surely Heaven would not allow him to be confronted by a demon. Not after he had successfully resisted the Devil all his life and clung to the ways of God. It would not be fair to expose him to evil after he had died. It would be unfair. Unheard of. Never had the priests mentioned such a possibility nor had he read of such an event.

"Nevertheless, unfair, unjust as it seemed, he was holding a sharp sword in his hand, and he had been told what to do. Slowly, he walked over the path and soon came to the little girl playing by the brook. And he recognized her as his own great-grandchild, daughter of his favorite grandson. She was a happy, a beautiful, and an exceptionally in-telligent child. How could she ever become what the stranger had predicted?

"Predicted? If the future could be foretold, if it were already determined, then this little girl had no choice of action, no free will. She was a puppet jerking on the strings of God. Why kill her for evil she was doomed to commit?"

"But, then, he remembered what a priest had once told him and what he had also read. That, though the future may be hidden to men, it has long ago been unrolled before the eyes of God. He has seen it all from the beginning to end; time, in the human sense, does not exist for Him; Alpha and Omega can be scanned in one sweep of the divine eye. Men do have free will, but they do not know what they are going to do.

"But that cannot be, thought the old man. If I kill this child, then she will not commit those great evils in the future. So, she will die an innocent, and the future that God sees now is without her. Therefore, how can He see her and her actions in the future? He cannot. The future is not unveiled to Him, but He has ordained the path it must take. He has ordained that this sweet child must die now or else grow up to be a monster. We are predestined.

"If that is so, thought the old man, why did God create us in the first place? At the moment he molded Adam's clay, He knew that billions would go to Hell and some few to Heaven. Did He create because the little good outweighs the vast evil? Or because He is the Creator and cannot help creating, no matter what the consequences to His helpless creations?"

"The old man did not know. To think only con-fused matters. For every thought there was a counterthought, and, for each counterthought, another. The fact was that, to do good, he must do evil. That was that. The only way a man could act was to abandon thought and have faith.

"So the old man walked softly up to the little girl, whose back was to him. He raised the sword.

"Then, another thought came to him. . ."

Here X always ended his speech. Fyodor, who had been standing at Cull's side, began sobbing loudly. Tears ran down his cheeks and soaked his beard.

"I've heard him tell that story at least twelve times," he said. "And I am sure now that if I could correctly finish the story, I'd be free, out of this place!"

"It's just another trick to keep us guessing, hoping," Cull said, looking at X and hating him.

"What do you mean?" said Fyodor, grasping Cull's arm with both his hands and staring at him with wet eyes.

"He's another of the false prophets," Cull said. And then he began to wonder if X was not the agent for an organization similar to the Exchange but unknown to it. If that were so, what profit did X and his organization derive? And why had He been given the power to raise the dead if He were only a man?

Fyodor continued to ask what Cull meant. But he could not explain to Fyodor that the Exchange developed rumors into new religions and profited by the power it wielded over the converts and their contributions to the Exchange. Even now, men and women all over the City were preparing sermons based on the first of the surmises Fyodor had told him over the phone. They would bring the Good News. And people, who craved hope more than food, would listen and believe. Then, when faith began to flag because of lack of fulfillment of promises, a new hope would be presented to them. And they would be converted again.

Of course, there was always a knot of diehards who clung to the old. These, too, were manipulated by the Exchange. Fingers in every theological pie. . .

"This must be He!" said Fyodor. "There *is* hope! All is not lost! Cull, you know that time here seems to have little relation to Earth-time. We know that He came to Hell for three days. Three terrestrial days, yes! But how many infernal days? Or purgatorial days, which I prefer. Perhaps, He may be here until the last man on Earth has died. Yet, on Earth, He long long ago rose from the tomb and ascended to Heaven. Why not? Can you prove I'm wrong? Wouldn't it be more humane, the fairest thing to do? To give us another chance?"

"You're insane," Cull said while he wondered how soon he could get to the phone and tell Stengarius of this new concept. "I can't prove you're wrong, but you can't prove you're right. It was that way on Earth, and it's that way here."

"Faith! Faith is the only way! Love for Him!" cried Fyodor, and he rushed forward until he reached X, knelt down, and grabbed the hem of X's robe and began kissing it.

"Master!" he shouted. "Tell me I am here only to be purged of my sins and my doubts! You know that I have always loved You! I would love You even if You were wrong! If you were condemned to eternal exile here or chose to stay forever because of Your love for man, then I would gladly forego Heaven and stay by Your side throughout eternity!"

X looked kindly at Fyodor and touched him lightly on the head. But he passed him without a

word.

Cull could not explain why Fyodor enraged him. But he picked up a fist-sized piece of basalt, chipped off a fallen gargoyle, and threw it. The stone hit Fyodor in the back of the head, and he fell forward on his face. Blood trickled from the cut.

At sight of the blood, the crowd gave a roar. Sullen but silent in the presence of X, it now came to life and loudness. It surged forward, seized the two aides and X, and also began rocking the ambulance. Within three minutes, the ambulance was lying on its side. There was nothing left of the two aides and X but scattered pieces of flesh and clothing and three mutilated heads.

Abruptly, the mob fell silent. Men and women stared at each other. Their hands, dripping blood, dropping fragments of flesh from the fingernails, were held away from their bodies. Some had blood on their mouths. Suddenly, panic swept them away down the street as if they were dried leaves blown by a wind. Fyodor and Cull were the only ones left.

By then, Fyodor was sitting up, feeling the back of his head and groaning.

"You really started something," Cull said. "You shouldn't have hailed him as the true Christ. That made everybody mad, you know. Nobody likes blasphemy."

Accusing him was not unjust, for he really had instigated the whole affair. If he had not done what he did, he would not have enraged Cull. Anyway, what was the difference? If X was a man or a demon, he would be resurrected again. No lasting harm done. If X was the One Fyodor thought He was, He would not be harmed.

"Stay here," Cull said to Fyodor. He went to the building where the Exchange had its local phone. Nobody was in the office. The lynching must have scared the Exchange agents, too. What did they think they were running away from? Lightning? An avenging God? Nothing would happen. Even as he lifted the phone, he could hear sirens wailing in the distance.

Cull began to tell Stengarius what had happened. But Stengarius said, "Where's Phyllis? Is she all right? Put her on the line."

Cull was taken aback. "I . . . I don't know. She's on a palanquin, you know. So, she's not traveling as fast as I. Although," he added, maliciously, "much more comfortably."

"O.K." said Stengarius irritably. "I'll ring up some posts on the way, find out if they've seen her. And don't get smart with us, Cull."

"Sorry, sir," said Cull. "I didn't mean to give that impression. I was just commenting, that's all."

"Don't let it happen again. The moment Phyllis gets in, tell her to call me."

"Yes, sir. Did you get any reports of X appearing elsewhere?"

"We just finished checking out the last twenty reports," said Stengarius. "According to our hourglass, about ten minutes has elapsed between each appearance of X. This includes your area."

"Hold the phone a minute," Cull said. "Here comes another ambulance. I'll see if X is with it." He stepped over to the huge glassless window and leaned out. The ambulance whipped around the corner

so fast that it scraped against a building and skidded to a stop just short of Fyodor. He was sitting in the street and holding the head of X against his chest.

Two men jumped out of the ambulance. Neither was X. Cull was going to return to the phone to report when he noticed that the men were very sloppily dressed. One wore no headcovering, and his coat was unbuttoned. The other was barefooted and was clenching a half-smoked cigar between his teeth. This unheard-of slovenliness was strange enough. But when they began eating the gobbets of flesh -- raw -- he knew something was wrong. And when he saw them drag the body of the woman out of the first ambulance and begin to cut her up with a knife one of them took from his pocket, he became alarmed.

Stengarius, hearing his report, also became excited. "I just had reports of two other ambulance personnel behaving extraordinarily," he said. "Moreover, there are many corpses that haven't been taken away for some time. What is going on?"

"No sign of X?" Cull said.

"You're the last to see him. I don't know. Something funny happening, only it's not so funny. Also, according to the Statistics Department, the influx of newcomers has dropped to almost zero. This happened a few hours ago. It's as if the door to Earth had been slammed shut."

"No explanation?"

"Only thing we can figure out is that the last of those killed in the nuclear war on Earth have come in."

Cull was chilled.

"You mean that all of humanity is dead?"

"It's too early to say."

"Listen, Stengarius."

"Quit breathing so hard."

"You're panting yourself. What I was going to say. . . the last time immigration was cut off so drastically was when the fires went out. Before that, when this place was changed from a Copernican to an Einsteinian universe. Before that, when the Ptolemaic structure was reorganized into a Copernican. The two former changes were catastrophic."

"What're you trying to say?" shouted Stengarius. "That we're about to go through another cataclysm? You must be crazy! You're saying that Einstein was wrong and that. . . listen, you'd better quit talking so crazy. You trying to undermine the Exchange? You. . ."

"I was just speculating," Cull said. "That's what I get paid for. Here's what I'm going to do, if you permit me to, of course. I'm getting this Fyodor ape on his feet, and we're going to get to the bottom of this world. Maybe literally. He said something about looking in the sewers, and I think he may have something hot. You got any orders for me before I leave?"

"Just keep in touch. God knows what's going on. Oh, yeah, don't forget about Phyllis."

Cull returned to the street and found Fyodor standing with the head of X in his arms. The two ambulance personnel -- demons, not men, he supposed -- were leaning against the hood of the vehicle and munching away. They paid no attention to the two men.

It took some time for Cull to get Fyodor to leave the head of X. He kept babbling of the blessed blood, and it was then that Cull saw that his face and beard were smeared with wet red.

"Do you believe in magic?" Cull said. "Do you think you'll become holy now because you're covered with his blood? Next, you'll be drinking it like wine."

"I did, I did!" Fyodor cried, looking rap-turous.

"And I suppose you ate some of his flesh?"

"Yes! And I could feel the divinity flowing in my veins. It was like lightning streaking down my throat, searing through the flesh. I felt like a god. No, that's blasphemy. I felt part of Him."

"So, now you're X," Cull said. "Do you plan on taking His place?"

And he stopped walking, stood there while Fyodor walked on several steps before he turned to see what was delaying Cull.

Cull wondered why he had not thought of this before? Why had no one else? Or had they, and was X living (though now dead) proof of this? But, if he were, he belonged to an organization with resources unavailable to the Exchange.

Of course, this would not keep the Exchange from dealing in false X's. They could then pick up the dead and dispose of them through the various black markets. And when the genuine X showed up, he would be accused by Exchange agents of being a fake. Organized mob violence would tear the real article apart just as he had been torn apart here. Before you could say XYZ, the Exchange would have eliminated the opposition.

Only. . . if X was one of the never-seen Authorities, or one of Their agents, then The Authorities would come down on the Exchange. So far, They had never interfered with its operations. But, the Exchange had never in-terfered with Theirs.

Oh, yes, it had. X had been mobbed and killed before. But that had been spontaneous violence. Yet the killers, as far as was known, had never been punished.

Maybe there were no Authorities.

There had to be. No human agency was capable of resurrecting the dead or getting to the scene of death so quickly. Or could it be that The Authorities had given certain human beings certain powers -- or scientific devices -- which enabled them to perform resurrec-tion? And then the Authorities had gone back to wherever they had come from?

There was one way to find out. He was a fool for not having thought of it before.

Fyodor, alarmed at Cull's sudden departure, called, "Where are you going?"

"To get X's head," Cull shouted.

It was still in the middle of the street where Fyodor had tenderly placed it. It lay on its back with the face turned upward. The dark glasses, despite the violence, had not come loose. At the time, Cull's excitement had made him overlook this fact. Now, he thought, I'll remove the glasses. See the eyes of X, if I have to lift the eyelids myself.

Why should X wear dark glasses? Was he a demon? Demons, no matter what their form, human or monster, had eyes like cats or wolves. They shone in the dark when a light was turned on them. "

Angels, so he had been told by a man who claimed to have seen one, had the same type of eyes. This was logical. Angels were unfallen demons. If Cull took X's head into a dark room and shone a light into the eyes, and the eyes re-lected the light, he still would not know if X was a celestial or an infernal. But he would know that he had not been human.

He thought, do not tell me that angels cannot be hurt or killed. I know better. Ask the man who is in Hell. Angels are flesh and blood like us. Or are when they walk among us. Remember that Adam was created in Our (God's and the angels') image. The sons of God (fallen angels) found the daughters of men fair and took them to wife. Fallen angel and human female had children. So, even the angels had sex and spermatozoa and genes and all that goes with the biological paraphernalia. And where angels are mentioned in the Scriptures they look, by implication, just like men.

Who had ever heard of a female angel? Yet they must exist, for what use a male without a female? And if male angels can cohabit with the daughters of men and beget, then a male angel must be able to cohabit with a female angel and beget, and a man cohabit with a female angel and beget.

And if the fallen sons of God had children, then we human beings must have angelic genes. But the genes for light-reflecting eyes must be recessive, maybe lost, for no human beings with photo-reflective eyes have ever been discovered.

One of the ambulance attendants quit leaning against the hood. He stared at Cull. Then, divining Cull's intention, he ran to the head, scooped it up, spun like a halfback, reversing the field, and sped away. But not before Cull saw him grin and saw the long canines -- unhumanly long -- in his mouth.

"Stop!" Cull shouted. "I'll have you skinned alive for this, you bastard, if you don't stop!"

He turned his head to laugh at Cull and kept on running. Cull was determined to catch him, not only to get the head but to find out why he was so disobedient. Many strange things had come about, and he wanted to get at least a clue as to why.

By then, the streets were beginning to fill up again. The demon cut through the crowd. They scattered when they saw the thing he was carrying, like a football, in the crook of his arm.

Cull began to fall back behind the demon. His muscles were stiff, and he was exhausted from the long piggyback trip. If the demon had kept run-ning, he would soon have put him out of eye-range. But the demon stopped to lift up a very heavy stone manhole-cover in the middle of the street with one hand. Down the sewer entrance he went. By the time Cull got above the hole, he could see nothing but the darkness that began about twelve feet down.

About thirty seconds later, Fyodor, panting, arrived. Gasping, he asked why Cull wanted the head. Cull told him some of his reasons.

"But," Cull said, "we might as well give up. We can't follow him down there."

"Oh, yes, we can," said Fyodor, smiling strangely. "And now is as good a time as any. We had to go down, anyway."

He lowered himself into the hole and began climbing down the stone ladder leading into the depths.

"Are you crazy?" Cull said.

Fyodor stopped just as his head was below the street level, and he looked up at Cull with his small blue-grey eyes, his wide rubbery mouth twisted in a smile.

"Perhaps. But this, my friend, is the only way to penetrate into the mysteries and puzzles of this world. I decided that some time ago. Especially after encountering several very curious characters emerging from or climbing into sewer entrances while I was roaming the street during the dark. I thought then that it was possible that one might gain entrance to the House of X. Or, as some say, the House of the Dead, by coming up from beneath.

"So, to prepare for the lightless ways and the dangers that wait -- and, believe me, there are plenty -- I have cached many things underneath. In a fine and private place."

The stench that leaped upward from the hole in the street made Cull want to puke.

"Come on down," said Fyodor. "The odor won't kill you. Only half-kill. Did you think you could get to the bottom of anything without wading through much crap and corruption?"

"Wait a minute," Cull said. "I want to phone in."

"No time, no time," said Fyodor's voice, fainter and more hollow. "Hurry up, or we'll lose the head."

"We'll lose our own heads," Cull said, but he began to climb down the ladder.

Just as his eyes were about to pass below the pavingstones of the street, he saw a woman and four men run from around the corner of the street intersection. The woman was running as swiftly as she could. She was not making much speed, however, for it was evident that her arms and legs were heavy with fatigue. She staggered and stumbled, several times almost falling down. A few more steps, and she would be through running.

"Phyllis!" said Cull. He stopped his descent.

Behind Phyllis and the four palanquin-bearers, strung out in groups determined by their innate ability to run, were men and women. These were, obviously, the pursuers. They screamed at the pursued, yelled insults and threats, waved fists and weapons.

Some of the men running with the woman turned and fought the first of the pursuers. For a few seconds, they held them back. Then, when the second group caught up with the first, the defenders went down.

It was then that Cull recognized that the woman was Phyllis Nilstrom.

He froze, so horrified was he. It was not so much her immediate danger, though that was terrible enough, as it was the implications of the scene. If a mob dared attack the agents of the Ex-change, conditions were indeed topsy-turvy and strange and fearful things must be taking place. The world, as he knew it, was going to pieces.

Phyllis ran toward him, her eyes staring, her mouth wide open, deep lines of strain in her face, her breath rasping so loudly he could hear it.

"Hold it!" Cull said to Fyodor, and he climbed out of the manhole. Phyllis, seeing the figure rise before her, seemingly from the pavement itself, put out her hands as if to ward him off. She also tried to change her course, but, instead, staggered headlong into his arms. There she collapsed.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the manhole. After lowering her to Fyodor, he jumped down the hole, almost missing the ladder and tumbling onto the floor. But he caught him-self in time, though not without scraping skin off his knees and hands. Frantically, he replaced the cover on the hole. Phyllis between them, they went through the darkness. He was in a panic that the crowd might come down the ladder after them. For a moment, he thought of leaving her behind. He would be justified; had she not abandoned him?

But the manhole cover was not lifted. In a few seconds, they were out of range of the shrieks and cries coming from above.

After they had gone approximately five hundred steps in the darkness, Fyodor said, "Stop! It should be just about here."

He lowered Phyllis' legs to the floor, and Cull did likewise with the upper part of her body. She lay there, wheezing as if she could never get enough air into her lungs.

Fyodor said, "Don't move, either of you. A few steps in the wrong direction, and you could fall into the sewage."

Cull shivered, though he was hot and sweating, because he could hear the clotted current burbling a few feet away. Suddenly, the compact stench and heat pressed in on him, and he wanted to run away. There was nothing to keep him from quit-ting Fyodor and Phyllis; he could easily make his way back to the ladder and climb back up into the light and fresh air of the street. By now, the mob must have passed on. Or, even if they were there, he could join them. How would they know that he was responsible for having cheated them of a victim?

Moreover, if he stayed here, he would be in Fyodor's power. For all he knew, Fyodor might have lured him down here only to lose him or kill him. Who knew what went on in a man's mind, especially a fanatic like Fyodor? The little fellow was weak and, probably, a coward. He must loathe the man who had insulted his belief in X, who had, in fact, been the cause for inciting the mob into attacking X.

Take it easy, Cull cautioned himself. Take it easy. Maybe I'm the one who's the coward. Logically, Fyodor doesn't have any reason for doing me harm. Would he have invited me to come along with him if he hadn't sincerely wanted companionship and help in these dark and dangerous tunnels? Doesn't he really believe in all that crap about the brotherhood of man and the love one must bear for the other because the Great Father wants it so?

Phyllis, who had by then recovered her breath, said, "Jack? Was it really you who saved me? What are we going to do now?"

"Sure, I did," he said. "Though I don't know why. I should have watched you being torn apart; it would only have been justice to let them do it. But I didn't."

"You still love me," she said, wonderingly.

"Don't you believe it," he replied harshly. "I love your body. What man wouldn't? But I hate you. What would you expect after your telling me how much you hated me, how frigid you are, how you acted so passionately only to advance yourself to another man who could do you more good? You bitch!"

Fyodor's voice came out of the darkness. "Step inside, brother Cull and sister Nilstrom. Take my hand; follow me. I found the place where I've stored my supplies."

This was the first indication Cull had that Fyodor had been absent. He was very much at the mercy of the little man.

Phyllis rose and took Cull's hand. He groped around until his hand met Fyodor's, and he allowed Fyodor to lead him for about thirty steps more. Then, Fyodor turned into what seemed to be a recess in the wall.

"There are many of these little rooms throughout the sewage system," said Fyodor. "What their original purpose was, I don't know. But I use this one as a storage room. I hope no one has found it and looted it. If they have, we might as well return to the street. Don't move."

He stopped and released Cull's hand. A moment later, he breathed, "Ah, still here!"

Cull smelled sulfuric acid, and a light flared from a stick held in Fyodor's hand. "For-tunately," he said, "there is plenty of sulfur in Hell. Wrap some dried rocktree leaves, the only readily flammable substance in this world, around a sliver of bone (human, of course), form a tip of potassium chlorate and sugar, derived from urine or organs, etcetera. Unfortunately, obtaining sulfuric acid and other chemicals is very difficult. Evil men control the supply and I had to do some very distasteful, even wicked acts, in order to buy these substances. Some of the acts involved the ex-ploitation of. . . well, never mind, it is a wicked-ness to even recount wickednesses. But I needed the acids to do good, to do what I think is good, anyway. And pardon me for this lecture.

"To obtain these materials, I had to consider that the end justifies the means. But have I made the end evil by using evil means? I do not know and cannot bear contemplating that such a possibility exists.

"Thus, you see, morality threads throughout the fabric of both the physical and spiritual universes. Chemistry involves ethics. There is no separation of the two, or, indeed, of anything. What do you think?"

"We must do what we have to do," Cull said, watching him apply the long thick malodorous match to a torch. The torch caught fire quickly and gave a bright flame but also much smoke.

"Ah, but do *we* have to do what we do?" Fyodor said. He lit a second torch from the first and handed the second to Cull. A third, he gave to Phyllis. Then, he picked up two bundles of torches and gave Cull one. These were bound by skin and could be carried over the left shoulder by a strip of leather. Three more sacks, containing food and clay bottles filled with water, went over their right shoulder.

"Bags of human skin," said Fyodor. "By purchasing these, I encouraged the illicit and murderous trade in such articles. True, I did not myself cut the throats of men and women from whom these skins were gotten. But I paid to have the deed done, even if it was already done. Yet, I need the skins, just as I need the matches, to further my goals. Is not my goal to determine what's good, good?"

"What's the difference if you kill or not?" Cull said. "A man does not stay dead. Killing somebody only means they get to sleep a little while. For that, they should thank you."

"Ah, but you could say the same thing about killing on Earth. If a man has an afterlife, why is it a sin to kill him? He will rise again. No, even here murder is interference with a man's business and destiny. It is blocking a man's free will. As long as a man's business is not harmful to others, he should be allowed to do what he will."

"Why?" Cull said.

"Ah, I do not know. Not really. Except that that is the way it has always been on Earth. Why not here? It's a matter of self-preservation. Each self wants to be free of interference and to develop to the full his length of life and his capabilities. So, all selves make a social contract. Murder is illegal, a sin against self and community, therefore, against God.

"Enough of talk. The demon must be far ahead by now. Of course, he can't see without light any more than we can. But he may be familiar with this area and steer swiftly through the darkness with ears and finger tips. Let's go."

They plunged into a world bounded by white metallic walls on the right and the outermost glow of the flickering torches on the left. The walk along the curving walls was about three feet wide. Six feet below it, the sewage ran thickly. Cull could not see the other side of the canal or the wall that bounded it.

"Isn't there danger of our torches causing heavy concentrations of sewage gas to explode?" he said.

"There is," said Fyodor. "But it is not the greatest danger down here."

"Oh?" Cull said, but he did not ask him for more specific information. He was scared enough. "Who built these sewers?"

"Don't know. Demons, probably. Under the direction of The Authorities, I suppose. After the last reconstruction of this world -- the Einsteinian."

Presently, they came to a place where the canal narrowed and a white metal bridge led over the canal to the other side.

"The canal branches off here," said Fyodor. "We have to take the further branch."

He walked across the bridge, which was a strip only two feet wide and without railings.

"Hmmm! Evidently, the recent quake has widened the canal. Fortunately, though unexplainedly, the metal seems to stretch. To what limits, I don't know and hope I never do."

They crossed the bridge and went around a corner and into another tunnel. After crossing a

second bridge, they walked down the left side of the tunnel.

"How do you know the demon went this way?" Cull said.

"I don't. But I'm gambling that he returned to the House of the Dead from which he came. If he did return, he can be followed."

Cull did not understand fully what he meant, but he would follow Fyodor. By now, he had no choice. Fyodor knew where he was going; Cull did not. And, after they took another turn, he was not sure of getting back.

It was then that he began to wonder if Fyodor might not be a demon.

He might be leading them to torture. Cull cursed himself for not having thought of this earlier. He dropped back about forty feet and then called, "Fyodor!" The little Slav turned abruptly so that his torch was held high behind him and Cull's was the only light in his eyes.

"What?" he cried.

"Nothing," Cull said. "I just thought I saw something move in the shadows." He sighed with relief. Fyodor's eyes had not shone.

"If you see anything," Fyodor said, "yell! I'll do the same. That way, if one of us is attacked or overpowered, the others may have time to defend themselves."

"You're very encouraging," Cull said.

Phyllis moaned and said in a low voice to Cull, "Please! Do we have to go on? I'm so scared."

"Would you rather go back and be torn to pieces?"

"I'd rather take that chance. At least, I'd know what I was facing. But down here! There might be worse things than being ripped to shreds. Besides, the Exchange may have things in hand again."

"I doubt it," said Cull. "There's something very bad, very powerful, going on. Anyway, I want to find out Who or What is running this inferno."

"You fool!" she said. "I'll tell Stengarius you neglected your duties! You neglected me! He'll have your tongue ripped out, your balls cut off, your hands and feet smashed! He'll have your eyes gouged out!"

"-- Stengarius!" said Cull. "And you, too, you lying whore!"

Phyllis gasped. For a moment, she was silent. The flickering torchlight illuminated a pale skin, staring eyes, and lines on her forehead and between her nose and mouth. She looked much older.

She raised her hand to throw her features into the shadows, and she said, "Please, Jack! Take me back up! Please! I'm so scared. Listen. . ."

She hesitated, then said, softly, "I'll do anything you want. Anything."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"No," he said. "Not even for the chance to make you suffer. I'm on the trail of something even more desirable than revenge."

"You bastard!" she said. "I hate your slimy guts! Forget about what I said. And don't ever try to touch me; you make my flesh crawl."

"Then," he said evenly, though it cost him much effort, "you wouldn't have done everything I wanted. For I wanted you to love me; I wanted you to give yourself willingly, gladly, eagerly to me, and to enjoy doing it. But I should have known better. That is one thing you can't possibly do, even if you wanted to."

She did not reply. Cull turned away from her. Fyodor gave a little cry and said, "We're not far from our destination! Here's the outer wall of a cool-air shaft. Feel it. If I'm not mistaken, the House is right next to it."

"What's your plan?" Cull asked.

"Obviously, there's no entrance along this walk. So, we must go below. If there's an entrance, it has to be further down."

"If?" said Cull. "You've brought me to this stinking lousy place on an if?"

"There has to be an entrance down there! Otherwise, how do they get supplies? X and his aides never leave the House except to pick up the dead. Don't tell me they just live there. The House is too small for them to be cooped up in all the time. Follow me. I know where the downward entrance is, but I've never had the courage to take it. Now, I've someone with me."

"A poor substitute for courage," Cull said. "How can the lack of something fill a void?"

Around the vast curve they walked until the curve began to straighten out. Here, in the middle of the walk, was a hole just wide enough for a man with a pack on his back to insert himself. In the middle of the tube leading down from the hole was a white metal pole. Cull put his hands around the pole, and his fingertips almost met. The metal looked dry but felt greasy.

"Like a fireman's pole," he said. "Where does it lead to? The fire?"

The light of his torch illuminated the tube downward for some distance. He could see no bottom, but there must be one to support the base of the pole. Or must there?

"Easy to get down," he said. "How do we get back up? We might not be strong enough to haul ourselves up hand over hand. And the pole's slick."

"We can always brace ourselves against the wall of the tube," Fyodor said. "Don't you see that this confirms my theory? If it is so hard to get back up the pole, then those who go down must have another way to get back up...."

"Perhaps. You first."

Fyodor sat down on the edge of the tube and extended his legs to reach the other side. He scooted forward until his buttocks slid off the edge and down into the opening. His knees went upward as his legs bent to give him room to fit into the tube.

"I have to hold the torch with one hand and the pole with the other," he said. "But I can't brace myself with my back against the side because I'd make the pack on my back ride up too high. Might tear it off. So, I'll just have to trust to one hand to hold me."

"You can't," Cull said. "Don't be a damn fool."

He lit another torch and dropped it between Fyodor's legs. The torch fell without turning over, the heavy flaming downward end holding it steady. The walls near them lit up, then darkened as the torch plunged away and became smaller, smaller.

"How far down?" Cull said.

"Who knows? Only one way to tell."

The torch, now a tiny spark, suddenly went out. Whether it had struck bottom and rolled to one side and out of sight, or whether it had fallen so far they just could not see it, Cull did not know. As Fyodor said, there was only one way. Down.

Fyodor slid on down, holding to the pole with one hand, the other holding a torch, and his legs wrapped around the pole. Awkwardly, Cull grabbed the pole. "You coming?" he said to Phyllis without turning his head. Her voice was shaky, but her words were brave. "I can go any place you can, jackal. And a lot farther."

He smiled slightly, and he slid down the pole. Fortunately, it had a slick feeling; there did not seem to be much friction. Of course, there was some. Otherwise, they would have shot down like express trains, unable to hold themselves back. But there wasn't enough friction to burn legs and hand, just enough so they could hold back with a tight squeeze and journey downward at a fair rate of speed. It seemed a long time until he reached bottom.

Actually, it took about ninety seconds, if his rate of counting was correct. He found Fyodor waiting for him, holding his torch high and peering around. The light showed more tunnels and canals, just like those above. The torch he'd dropped was nowhere in sight. He presumed it had bounced off the walk and dropped into the sewage, just six feet below.

"The air got cooler as we came down," he said. "Feel that draft? And where's the stink?"

"Maybe we're used to it by now," said Fyodor.

"No, it's been replaced by a perfume. Can't you smell it?"

Fyodor shook his head. "I never did have much of a nose. I'm odordeaf, if you will pardon the term."

He wasn't deaf to sound. He reacted just as quickly as Cull did to the vast bellow.

"God's sake!" Cull gasped. "What is it? Where. . .?"

"That way, I think," said Fyodor, pointing with his free hand down the tunnel behind Cull. His hand shook. He shook all over; his teeth chattered. Phyllis clung to the pole.

"Let's go the other way," Cull said.

Another bellow boomed along the tunnel. This one came from the opposite direction in which Fyodor had pointed.

Cull dropped the torch, pushed Phyllis so hard she sprawled on the floor, leaped upward and grabbed the pole. Surprisingly, the pole now felt dry; it furnished a good grip. He swarmed upward for about twenty feet, then stopped to look down. Fyodor was not following him but was standing beside the pole and looking up the shaft.

"Now that you know you can get back up easily," he said, "why don't you come back down?"

"Didn't you hear that?"

"I'm not going to quit now. If you quit, I'm going on alone. But I'd feel much better, braver, if you were with me."

Cull didn't know why he did not keep on climbing. He didn't really care about Fyodor's opinion of him. Perhaps he was scared of going back to the surface alone. Or his curiosity may have been stronger than fear. He knew he'd never be satisfied unless he found out what was going on in the bowels of this world. So he slid back. And noted, as he did, that the pole became slick. Bipolarity of lubrication.

Phyllis was on her feet again and holding her torch. After one glance at her scorn, he turned away.

Fyodor leading, they went along the tunnel, which became wider with every few steps. Soon, the torches could not penetrate far enough for them to distinguish the other side. Suddenly, they were standing on a narrow ledge. About twenty feet below, a black sluggish river moved. Bubbles arose from its depths. Then, a bubble, larger than all the rest put together, rose. It was followed by a head.

The head was about six times as large as Cull's -- a slanting forehead and no hair and four elephantine ears, two enormous black eyes. No nose. The mouth was broad, thick-lipped, and open, revealing a row of tigerlike teeth and two curving canines. The tongue ran out, seemingly endless, and its tip finally fell into the water. And they saw that the tongue was covered with hundreds of tiny sharp teeth.

It was a demon, for the eyes shone in the torchlight as it turned its head.

Cull didn't know how deep the river was or how tall the monster might be. It was possible that it could jump out of the water, seize the edge of the walk, and pull itself up on to the walk.

Just as he thought of that, the demon lifted its right hand out of the water. Rather, it was not a hand but a paw. The paw held a human leg. While they watched, the paw dropped the leg onto the tongue, and the tongue began running back into the mouth until it was well within the cavern of the mouth. Then, the lips closed, and there was a crunching as the lower jaw began grinding. The eyes, at least six inches wide, stared upward at them. They seemed to say, Next?

Slowly, the three human beings began to move away, walking sideways while they watched it, afraid to take their eyes off it. They could have run, but there was nothing to keep it from swimming along in place with them, for the walk and the river followed the same tunnel.

"Maybe that leg belongs to the demon we were chasing," said Fyodor in a very low voice. "Demon eats demon. A demon will eat anybody or anything, given a chance."

"Let's not give it a chance," Cull whispered. He kept edging away. Suddenly, the monster opened its mouth and bellowed with laughter. Laughter! That was all that was needed. Panic overwhelmed them and they ran until their lungs burned; they sobbed, and their legs were turned into the jelly of utter fatigue.

Then, sitting down, breaths soughing, they looked back along the oily water. No sign of the demon. But he could be under the surface just below them.

When Fyodor's panting had slowed enough for him to gasp out words, he said, "Demons have to eat. And there can't be enough human flesh available for them. So. . ."

He pointed at some excrement floating by, and said, "I think they must be scavengers. Keep the sewage fairly clean, anyway."

He was, Cull supposed, right. But that didn't lessen the danger.

Later, he knew that it wasn't only demons that performed in these tunnels as sparrows, vultures, jackals, hyenas. They had resumed walking for about two miles when they heard voices. There was only one thing to do, keep going toward the source of the voices, which was ahead. And presently, they were looking down on four human beings(?) standing in water up to their chests. Two men, two women. All holding their hands over their eyes against the glare of the torches.

Near them, about fifty yards away, was the first of the many islands they were to see in the river. This was an oval flat-topped island of the same greyish metal as the tunnel. It was fifty feet across and rose from the surface to a height of about a foot.

What set Cull quivering was the thought that the fate of these people might be his. Had they, too, climbed into the sewers to discover what mysteries they held? And had they been unable to get out, become lost, been forced to live in the dark and to eat whatever was nourishing, if nauseating, that came along to them by the bounty of the sewage? Was this to be his doom?

No, he swore, I'd drown myself in the river, fill my lungs with that loathsome clotted water before I'd become like them. Blind gropers for crap to eat, wet and shivering, stinking and half-sick.

But what if they *had* drowned themselves, only to find themselves resurrected in the same place? What if no way out existed?

Fyodor advanced to the edge of the walk. Leaning over, he said, "Don't be afraid. We won't harm you. In fact, we want to help. We have rope. We'll let it down and pull you out of there."

"Are you out of your mind?" Cull whispered savagely. "They'll take our food away from us. Maybe throw us into the river and leave us there. We can't take a chance. Let's beat it!"

There was no reply for a moment from the waders. They peered at them through the cracks between their fingers, as if their eyes were becoming somewhat adjusted to what must at first have been

an intolerable glare. To them, the three must have been shadowy figures vaguely discerned in a painful blaze. But they must have seen those on the walk well enough for their purposes. One of the men reached out and grabbed an exceptionally large piece of dung. He hurled it at Fyodor. The Slav, too surprised to dodge swiftly enough, was struck in the beard and chest.

Howling and hooting with laughter, the others imitated their companion. Cull and Phyllis ran out of range, but Fyodor was caught in the barrage.

Speechless, quivering, his face red in the torch-light, Fyodor stood with his hands around the rope, half-uncoiled from its position around his waist. Then, when the four in the river reached for other means of bombardment, he ran.

Cull expected him to start cursing, but Fyodor was praying softly, if somewhat incoherently. He seemed to be asking for mercy and deliverance for those who had attacked him after he had offered help.

"Poor devils, Hell!" Cull said. "They're not crazy. They like it here, they like what they have to eat! They didn't want you to rescue them. You were a danger to them."

Fyodor's little blue eyes became wide, and he said, "You must be mistaken."

"Believe what you want to," Cull said. "But I know that type of pervert."

"We must get them out, help them, even if they don't want us to," Fyodor said. He started to walk back toward them.

But he stopped as a shriek came from one of the group. Cull looked down into the river and could just make out, near the edge of the light cast by the torches, what was happening. The sewage-dwellers, excited by the intrusion, had forgotten their customary vigilance. Now, a monstrous head had appeared above the surface, followed by the top of a long limbless body that ended in porpoise-like fins. The yardlong tongue of the demon had lashed out and wrapped around the arm of one of the women. The hundreds of tiny teeth on the tongue were hooked into the flesh of the victim, and the woman was being pulled into the deeper regions of the water. (Evidently, the bottom was shallow near the oval island.) The others, screaming and flailing their arms in the water, were wading toward the island as swiftly as they were able.

The demon propelled himself backward into the deep, drawing the woman with him. He disappeared, and her head went under after him, cutting off a scream in the middle. A few bubbles, and that was that.

Or so Cull thought. Some seconds later, she reappeared and began thrashing toward the island. Blood flowed from wounds all over her body, lancing the black waters with red.

No use. The tongue twisted around one of her legs, back she went, and, in a short time, she was under again. The three waited for several minutes but saw no more of her.

"Now," Fyodor shouted, "will you let us help you?"

"Go to Hell!" shrieked one of the men.

Cull took Fyodor's hand and pulled him, still protesting, on down the walk. Afterward, when he

had quit sobbing and was calm enough to listen, Cull talked to him.

"See. They enjoy their degradation."

"Why did she fight so hard for her life?" Fyodor said. "Wouldn't you think she'd be glad to die?"

"No, I wouldn't."

He looked searchingly at Cull, then said, "Why don't you think so? Is it because you're too much like them? Would you be the same if you stayed down here?"

Cull didn't answer.

A moment later, he brushed against the wall of the tunnel. And he jumped as if bitten. Or burned.

"The wall's hot," he said. "Well, not hot. Warm. Very warm."

From that point on, he kept the fingertips of his right hand on the wall. The warmth continued for about two hundred yards. Then, the temperature changed to normal. This lasted about two hundred yards. Suddenly, the wall became cold. Icy. With balloons of moisture clinging to the metal -- if it were metal.

For the next two hundred yards, the wall was cold. Then, neutral. Then, very warm again. After that, neutral. Then, cold. And so on.

"Parts of these walls," said Cull, "are the walls of hot or cold air shafts. They must be. It's only logical. You know that many of the statues in the city contain ventilation shafts. Hot air goes into some. Cold air comes out of others. I always knew that and also knew why. This is an enclosed world with light furnished by a cold sun and heat provided by the radiation from billions of warm bodies. If there weren't some means of cooling the air, we'd have all been cooked to death long ago from the accumulated heat of our own bodies.

"Where does the cold air come from? Are there gigantic refrigeration devices buried deep below the surface? Or are other means used?"

"There's only one thing wrong with your theory," said Fyodor. "When this world expands, and the cities are dislodged from their places on the surface, the air shafts would snap off. However, this doesn't, obviously, happen. The hot-cold balance is maintained. So. . .?"

"Sharp. Good point. Since the ventilation isn't cut off, the shafts don't break. If they do, they're repaired or replaced. That doesn't seem likely when you consider the enormous labor and materials involved. Not to mention the time. So. . ."

"So?"

"So I'd guess that. . ."

Cull stopped because the metal beneath his feet was quivering. Fyodor's eyes ballooned. Cull's and Phyllis' were bulging with panic, too. His hand, placed against the wall to steady himself, to combat the dizziness caused by the undulations of the floor, felt the wall also shake. And, looking down the tunnel as far as their torchlight shone, he could see a swell passing along the floor, a wave of metal.

Moreover, the corner where the tunnel took an almost right-angle turn was going inward toward the other side. Then, like a stretched rubber band released, it snapped back to its original position. A second later, it again shot toward the other side. Or the other side was moving toward this side. Or both actions were taking place.

He had a terrifying vision of the tunnel col-lapsing, burying them beneath the millions of tons of dirt and rock above them. Perhaps, the whole city would slide into a chasm suddenly opened beneath it, and they. . .

No place to run. Besides, they had enough trouble keeping their balance; they could not have fled more than a few steps without falling down.

All three shrieked with horror as the floor rose and twisted, and they fell from the floor against the side of the tunnel. The wall had suddenly become the floor.

They continued shrieking as the river water poured over them. They fought to claw a hold in the metal to keep from being swept away in the current of the river.

The water rose over their heads. Willynilly, they began floating alongside the wall.

Just as abruptly as it had come, the water fell away from the wall, the three with it, and they were on a wave roaring toward the other wall. Cull could see what was happening. Though Fyodor's torch had been doused, Cull had managed to hold his above the water with one hand while he thrashed with the other to keep him-self afloat. Fyodor was to Cull's right and a yard or so ahead of him so that Cull saw the other wall rushing at him. He could not find Phyllis. He struggled to get his feet in front:of him to enable them to take the impact.

Then, just as he was about to crash, the water ran away from him. His momentum brushed him gently against the wall, he sank, and found him-self standing on the walk alongside the wall. He also could, see by his torch that Fyodor (he was right beside him) was standing too and that the tunnel was righting itself. Phyllis, minus her torch, was a few yards away.

They had quit shrieking; now, they were breathing harshly. Cull was, anyway. Fyodor's mouth was open, and his chest was rapidly rising and falling. But Cull couldn't hear him, for the river water was twisting and roiling too noisily.

Then the turbulence began to lessen and the water started to regain its former oily smoothness. After a few minutes Cull could hear Fyodor gasping.

"That answers your question about why the tunnels and shafts don't snap," Cull said between sobs. "This stuff stretches, bends, twists as no material ever built by man does. And it has a built-in self-alignment. Or so it seems."

"But isn't there a limit to its ability to stretch?" Fyodor said. "I would think that. . ."

The floor began to shake again. Cull started to get seasick. Swellsick, rather.

It was like being inside a monster snake when the snake is going over the top of a steep sharp-peaked hill. The tunnel -- their part of it -- slanted upward. Ahead of them, about two hundred yards away, the tunnel straightened out for about forty yards. Then, it dipped out of sight, apparently

bending downward.

Immediately afterward, the tunnel slanted sideways. They yelled again as they slid across the walk. Just as they could no longer cling to the surface and were about to slide into the river, the slanting motion stopped. The tunnel straightened out. And the river, five feet higher than it had been before, a racing wall, roared down the tunnel.

They were almost swept away. But they'd scrambled up to the wall as far away from the water as possible, and, though the edge of the water struck them and almost knocked them loose, they succeeded in not being carried off.

With the abruptness of an elevator dropping, the tunnel leveled out and began righting itself.

Fyodor screamed. Phyllis screamed.

Cull whirled, and he screamed.

The backward race of the river, caused by the leveling of the tunnel, had left behind a fearsome jetsam. A river demon was clutching the edge of the walk with its paws. Its lower jaw rested on the walk, and its tongue was curled around Phyllis' right leg.

Cull, shrieking with hate and hysterical fear, leaped at the huge head and kicked furiously at one of the great eyes. One of? The eye. It was a Cyclops; a single eye glared in the middle of its low brow.

His toe drove into the eyeball. Again and again. The eyeball burst.

Wheezing, the demon uncoiled the tongue from around Phyllis' leg. The whale-like body rolled over, exposing a wound about a foot in diameter, a hole out of which blood gushed. This was what had saved them, not Cull's blinding it. Crashed against some projection -- probably an island -- by the irresistible flood, the demon had been mortally wounded. Its grabbing of the woman had been a dying reflex.

They hurried away. Something struck Cull's head, and he cried with fear. Earth and smashed rocks fell around him.

He jumped back, striking Phyllis, and looked upward. A large hole had been rent in the grey metal; out of it had fallen the dirt and rocks. But, as he looked, the wound in the metal began to heal. Slowly, the edges crawled toward the center.

"In about five minutes," he said, "the hole'll be closed."

"Have you noticed how warm the metal is?" said Fyodor.

"Friction. Heat from stretching and contracting."

They walked on for a minute, with Phyllis sobbing uncontrollably. Then Fyodor stopped.

"Here's a tremendous hole," he said. He thrust the torch into the rent but snatched it back as its flame almost went out.

"An air shaft."

Without sticking his head inside the shaft, Cull could feel the cold air. After estimating the rate of closure of the grey stuff, he put his head into the hole. There was light inside, enough for him to see to the top of the shaft and to the bottom. At the top was a great square of bright light, the outlet. It was so far above that the lower part of the shaft should have been in blackness. But it was not. Below, it was like twilight. Perhaps the interior of the shaft was coated with a light-reflecting agent. Moreover, from top to bottom, along one wall, within reach, was a series of rungs.

He withdrew his head, told Fyodor what he'd seen, and waited while Fyodor verified his story. Then Cull said, "Let's go down the rungs. We can always go back to the top if we have to. Anyway, this shaft may go to the bottom of this whole world."

Before Fyodor could object -- if he intended to -- Cull had stepped out and was on the rungs. Fyodor and Phyllis followed without comment as Cull began climbing downward. Above them, the edges of the hole through which they had passed crept silently toward each other. But Cull didn't think that the hole could be entirely closed; it was just too large. There had to be limits to the self-repairing capabilities of the grey stuff.

That thought gave him another, a chillier one. The grey stuff must have been designed to withstand normal quakes. What was happening to make quakes of such magnitude? What did the city above look like now? What else was in store?

No use thinking about it. Just climb on down as swiftly as they could.

The air, moving upward, was about a thirty-mile an hour wind, so they had to cling tightly to the rungs. It was cold. Before they reached bot-tom, their teeth were chattering, and their fingers and feet were icy. Cull was glad he was wearing sandals. The water on their bodies made them even colder. But, fortunately, the air was dry and soon took the moisture off.

When they got to the end of the rungs, they found that they had to drop about seven feet to the floor of the tunnel. The shaft was the focus of four horizontal tunnels. Air rushed from each and upward through the shaft toward the outlet at the top. The dim twilight prevailed in the tunnels.

"Let's take the nearest tunnel," Cull said to forestall any long and agonizing debate. He started walking, bent against the wind down the tunnel. By now, the flame of Fyodor's torch had been whipped into blackness. Their breaths steamed and were swept away behind them. If the temperature dropped much lower, Cull thought, they'd soon become statues of ice, food for any demons that might be prowling this cold Hell.

After walking three or four miles, Cull began looking at the other two, wondering if they'd break first and suggest going back. But they didn't, and Cull refused to admit they were stronger than he.

Every four hundred yards, they came to the bot-tom of a shaft. Each was the junction for two tunnels at right angles to each other.

"I don't get the system," Cull said. "Where do the hot-air shafts go to? You'd think the hot air would come directly down here and be cooled off. But it looks as if there might be a network of horizontal tunnels just above these. Maybe the hot air is then led along a horizontal system for a while before it goes down to this level. I don't know. Also, what happens to the moisture precipitated by the cooling air? It must be disposed of somehow. Otherwise, the tunnels would have long ago been plugged with ice."

Fyodor shrugged, Phyllis was silent. The teeth of all chattered.

They walked on without a drop in temperature or rise in wind velocity. Cull was just on the point of selling himself the idea that their courage and hardihood were really stupidity. They should climb back up a shaft. No, that wouldn't work. How could they get down off the outlet to the shaft without jumping to their deaths? And, if they could not find another break in the shaft-wall, how could they get back to the sewage tun-nel? Apparently, the airshaft system and the sewage system were sealed off from each other.

So . . . ?

"So!" wheezed Fyodor. He stopped. Phyllis, following closely, bumped into him. Cull stopped, too, to stare at an archway in the side of the tun-nel. The chamber inside the archway was about forty feet wide and bare of any furnishings. But, at a level with his eyes, hanging against the op-posite wall of the chamber, was a tiny bright light. Or a spark, for it threw no beam. He walked on in and found that the air was much warmer than that in the tunnel. The wind was gone too. It was as if they'd come through an invisible intangible door in the archway.

The others followed him. Then, Cull stopped. The light was on the other side of a window. The window was a circle cut into the wall.

He looked through the window while his heart beat fast because there was something odd and frightening about the aperture.

There was the globe of light he'd first seen. To one side was another globe. And, way below, a cluster of a dozen or so lights.

"What are they?" murmured Phyllis.

"Stars," Cull said.

The bright sparks were drifting off to the right now. A huge blue star (how many lightyears away?) came into view. Then, above it, a white shimmering cloud with even whiter knots im-bedded within the shimmering gas. The blue star and the galaxy or gas cloud, whatever it was, crawled to the right, and a huge black mass ap-peared. Th<re was enough illumination for Cull to see that the mass must have been made by hands (or equivalent thereof), for it was shaped like an elliptical concave mirror and antennas with strange outlines sprouted from all around the edges of the device.

Then it too drifted off to the right. A few more stars slid before him. Another device of the same apparent size and configuration as the first came into view. More stars. Not many. Another device. A few stars. Another device. Or was it the one he had first seen?

"We're looking through a port in the outer shell of an artificial satellite," Cull said. "But a satellite of what? Of our galaxy?"

"I don't understand," said Fyodor.

"I don't either," Cull said.

He extended his finger*past* the window. He ex-pected it to freeze with the near-absolute zero of

space. But he felt neither warmth nor cold. There was a resistance. Just a sensation of resistance, that's all. His finger went *past* the window about half an inch, then began meeting resistance. He withdrew the finger, and he slammed his fist into the invisible stuff. The fist drove past the window as far as his wrist and stopped. Cull withdrew the fist.

"This shell or field or whatever it is must en-close this whole world," he said. "But if it does, it must allow heat dissipation -- except in the im-mediate area of this window. That is how the hot air inside this world is cooled. By contact with the cold shell of this. . . world, Hell, what-do-you-call-it?"

"What could those machines, those. . . devices, floating by up here be for?" said Phyllis.

Cull shrugged his shoulders. Silently, for a long time, all three watched the universe spin by. Once, the floor and walls quivered for a minute, and they knew that the earth and rock above them, rather, inward, must be shifting.

After the tremors ceased, Cull said, "You've talked to some of those who lived on Earth in the ancient days. They said that this was a flat world. Then, it was reshaped during a series of cataclysms into its present form. Some time later it began to expand. About the time that mid-twentieth century people began arriving."

Fyodor did not reply. Phyllis continued gazing out.

There was a boom down the tunnel, and the room shook again.

"Let's get out of here," Cull said. "I think we've found out all we can."

They returned the way they'd come. But, on arriving at the second conjunction of tunnels from the chamber, they discovered the cause of the noise. Rocks had fallen in through the shaft and plugged up any exit in that direction.

Cull didn't waste time but turned back to the shaft behind them. There they threw away the sacks of food and water, keeping only the ropes and two torches and some matches. They jumped up, grabbed the bottom rung, pulled themselves up to the next, and began climbing. Once, a quar-ter of the way up, they stopped climbing to cling tightly to the rungs while the walls of the shaft swayed. Above them, something exploded, and rocks fell down. Fortunately, the hole was created in the opposite side of the shaft, and so the rocks did not strike them. Or Cull thought it was only the opposite side until they got to the rent. Then, he saw that the shaft had been ripped open along at least three-quarters of its circumference. The jagged termination of one end of the split had thrust between the rungs. They had time, if they dared to take it, to crawl through the opening into a horizontal tunnel. Cull decided to dare.

Fyodor followed with several inches to spare around him. Phyllis got through just as the grey stuff began to meet. Her foot scraped against the jags and began bleeding.

Cull didn't wait to examine the injuries but began walking swiftly down the tunnel. They were close enough to the surface, he thought, for them to locate an exit. The cracking open of the shaft was lucky. He didn't fancy climbing to the top of the shaft only to be trapped there, unable to get down to the ground without leaping a hundred feet or maybe a thousand feet. Or else having to wait until the shaft toppled over.

He was right in his estimate. They came across a pole. It led up a shaft about sixty feet and ended in another tunnel. There was daylight at one end of the tunnel. They trotted toward it, but they

stopped before reaching it.

They had come to the beginning of a long line of stone statues.

Idols. Broken idols.

The first was a squat semihuman figure roughly cut out of granite. Below its bulging belly were enormous male and female primary sex organs, the female just above the male.

The next two idols were more human and were nonhermaphroditic. The male sported a tremendous phallus, and the female had huge breasts, a swelling abdomen, and very thick hips and legs. These two and the androgynous statue were the only ones in the entire line that were not headless. The rest consisted of trunks and jagged necks with the broken-off heads lying on the floor near their feet.

It was evident, from the cracks completely en-circling the short thick necks of the first three statues, that the heads had also been broken off at one time. But they had been refitted to the necks. Cull supposed that some sort of gluing agent had been used. This meant that demons had done the job, for glues of any strength were not available to humans.

They walked in silent review of the silent ranks. Past human and half-human torsos, past stone heads of bulls, lions, hawks, ibises, jackals, past the trunks of gods and goddesses and demons with six arms and four arms and eight legs. Past the bearded and the beardless heads on the floor.

Four times, they came across the mummified and stiff corpses of men propped against the wall. These were not headless.

Then, at the end of the line, near the tunnel entrance, was a head.

The head of X, torn not too long ago from the corpse, rested on the floor and stared out the entrance.

Fyodor began weeping.

"Let's not have another maudlin scene," Cull said. "We've more important things to do. Such as finding out what's going on here."

He walked on past the head and out of the entrance. He was standing on the slope of a hill. The hill was outside the walls of the city. And the city was a shambles. The walls had fallen outward, and their tumble revealed the dashing of towers to the ground, the shattering of the great buildings. The Brobdingnagian blocks comprising the walls and towers had slid apart as if made of hollow blocks of balsa. And the blocks forming the statues or cylinders around the air shafts had fallen away and exposed the twisted, bent grey stuff.

The surface of the desert was split open, cracked. One wide, crooked fissure ran from underneath the city and across the plain for as far as he could see. And there were thousands of shorter, thinner crazes.

Abruptly, the tunnel from which they had just emerged was undulating like an eel, and the thunder of the quake was filling it as if it were a Titan's megaphone. Yet, Cull could hear even above the bellow, a high-pitched hyenalike laughter. The series of loud cachinnations was only a few feet behind him.

They came from a demon. The same one who had fled down the sewage tunnels with the head of X. He was standing not a foot away, his hands on his hips, his head thrown back, his mouth wide. Laughing.

Before Cull could do anything, he was shoved to one side by Fyodor. Fyodor hurled himself on the demon, bore him down, and began banging the demon's head on the floor.

"X! X! X!" he screamed. "Why X? What is X? Who? Who?!"

Cull ran up to the two, then sat on the floor and seized the demon's arms to help Fyodor hold him down. Suddenly, the demon quit laughing, tears welled from his eyes, and he sobbed.

This surprised Fyodor so much that he quit pounding the demon's head. It surprised Cull, too. He'd never seen a demon weep.

"Men," the demon said, crying, "I know some things you don't know. But there's a lot I don't know. And I am, basically, as helpless, and as hopeless, as you."

"Well?" Cull said.

"Well, I'm not a demon. Not in the sense you mean. I'm a member of a race, species, what you'd call an extraterrestrial. The people of our planet resemble yours, physically. Except that, on our world, many are given shapes not intended by Nature. Genetic manipulation, direct transmutation of protoplasmic configurations, reworking of cells at a microscopic level. We have our reasons for doing this. I won't go into them."

Cull was beginning to get seasick from the combined roll, pitch, and yaw of the tunnel. But he fought it, for he had to find out all the demon could tell them.

"This place is Hell for us, too," it said. "But there aren't so many of us here because we ceased to exist on our planet, became extinct, long ago. Just as we were getting started, getting civilized. What we'd call civilized, not you."

"O.K., O.K.," Cull said. "But what about those machines surrounding this sphere? Who put them there? What's their purpose?"

"Who?" it howled. "The Others! The Others!"

"What Others?" Cull howled back at him. The roar, rumble, and shriek outside were deafening. And the contortions of the tunnel were becoming even more violent.

"Another type of sapient! Immeasurably older than either of us! More knowledgeable, more powerful by far! We offended them, and this is our punishment!"

"But what about us?" Cull yelled. "What about. . .?"

"You offended them, too! Early, early!"

"How? We don't even know them!"

"Your primitive ancestors did!"

"How could they? And who are the Others?"

"I can't tell you! I can't! I can't! That's part of our punishment! We've been treated, inhibited! We're under a compulsion! We know, but we can't tell *you*! I've told you all I can! And if I weren't so terrified, I couldn't tell you this much!"

"But those machines? Our physical resurrec-tion? The fabrication of this world! How? Why?"

"It's not metaphysical or supernatural! It's physical. Obeys the laws, principles, of the uni-verse we knew. Some laws we don't know! But They do! They've got Power! Power we would have had some day, if we hadn't been wiped out through our own arrogance and foolishness! Power you Terrestrials could have, if you could overcome your own type of damned foolishness!"

"Tell me! Tell me!" Cull screamed. But Fyodor began banging the demon's head on the floor while he shouted, "X! X! X! Tell me about X!"

Suddenly, with that instability of mood and irrationality of behavior that made these creatures so terrifying to human beings -- before man out-numbered demon -- he began laughing. It wasn't hysterical laughter. It was genuine amusement.

He laughed until he choked. Then, recovering, he said, "Would you believe me if I told you that X was a human traitor? That he helped us because he wanted to torment you with a hopeless hope?"

"No, I wouldn't!" bellowed Fyodor.

"Would you believe it if I told you he is the Savior you hope for? But, in this pocket of the universe, he has to behave as the Others tell him? Obey Their laws?"

"No, no!"

The demon started laughing again. After which, he cried, "Would you believe it if I told you everything I've said was a lie? That everything I'll tell you from now on is a lie? Or that, just maybe, there'll be one or two truths among all the lies? Why not? You Earthlings and your truth! You make me sick! What is truth?"

Cull meant to kill him then. He was out of his mind. Fyodor was, too. He gripped the demon's throat and began choking him. Fyodor's own face was as purple as the demon's. And Cull stood up, swaying, and tried to stomp the demon on his face. He wanted to break bone under his foot, mash the nose, kick the teeth out, break the ear-drums, burst the eyeballs.

There was a sound as of a giant tree being broken in two. Cull was hurled against the side of the tunnel. Stunned, he vaguely realized that this portion of the tunnel had been ripped off and that it had been thrown, sideways, down the hill.

Over and over it rolled. Its occupants, Fyodor, Phyllis, the demon, himself, the stone trunks, the stone heads, the desiccated corpses, the head of X, rolled with it. Down the hill the cylindrical tunnel rolled, and over and over the occupants slid and fell. Why the four weren't crushed by the statues, Cull didn't know. But they weren't, though, once, an idol slid by him, so close it scraped his shoulder. He did tangle with the demon, and it grabbed Cull in his arms, pinning him and making him helpless.

"Ah, you beautiful thing, you!" he chanted.

"This world is Hell! It is supernatural! What you saw through the window is only an illusion to keep you going in your search for the truth and the escape!

"Lies, lies, lies! But maybe one truth, or half-truth, concealed in the midst!"

There was a crash as the tunnel stopped rolling. The demon was torn from Cull. Before Cull could recover from his stunned condition and attack him, the demon leaped up. It bent over and bit Cull savagely on the shoulder.

Cull was too deadened to feel much pain at that moment. Later, it was almost more than he could stand.

"The Mark of Cain!" the demon shouted, Cull's blood on his mouth. "Signature of Satan! Bite of Baal! Or what have you! Kiss your bald-headed friend, seeker of X, for me! Tell him that X still lives, that X will give him salvation, paradise, if he can find X!

"Lies, lies, lies! Maybe! So long, brother!"

Howling like a wolf, he ran from the mouth of the tunnel across the heaving desert. But he did not get far. Abruptly, a crack opened beside him, a crack that zigzagged like lightning across the field of vision, that widened as it ran and sent out branches to every side. One of these opened beneath the demon's feet. He threw up his arms, whirled to run away, could not go swiftly enough, and fell backwards, his mouth open in a scream they would have heard except for the thunder. His body flopped, his feet were the last thing of him that they saw.

Immediately thereafter, the tunnel lurched for-ward, apparently rising on the crest of a wave passing across the land, an earthwave.

Around and around, the broken segment of tunnel, no longer a tunnel but a pipe, spun. Not so swiftly that the three occupants could not keep from tumbling by running with it, by moving their feet and staying upright, squirrels in a stone wheel.

But they could not keep up the pace. Their legs became too heavy, and they slowed down. Then, the rotation caught up with them, swept them up-ward until they fell off the sides and back onto the part below them. Only to be carried upward and dropped again. They crashed to a stop.

For several moments, they could only lie flat, whimpering or moaning. But Cull sprang up and said, gasping, "We've got to get rid of these statues! So far, we've been lucky. But if this starts rolling again, and it sure as hell will, we might not be so lucky next time."

Phyllis lay sobbing, but Fyodor struggled up. His skin was bruised and bloody, and his face was a red mass. Cull knew he did not look any better; he appreciated the effort the little Slav was going through just to get up because his own muscles seemed to be caked with the beating they had taken. Yet he forced himself to move, to grip the statues and roll them out toward the mouth of the cylinder. Heavy as these were, and angular, they did not yield easily. Only by combined pushing and straining could the two roll the first statue to the lip of the pipe. It was a gross-bodied thing with the head of a crocodile and long jaws, which, at right angles to the body, presented a problem. Each time the jaws came into contact with the floor, its upper part had to be raised, with the jaws as a lever. Then, the upper part would fall with a crash. Fortunately, they only had to roll it completely three times before it was out of the tunnel.

Panting, quivering with fatigue, they stood facing each other. Neither wanted to make the first move to renew the work.

"Two more to go," said Cull. He looked out of the cylinder, hoping that he would see some other refuge, one that would not require moving masses of stone. One not open at both ends and rolling along at the slightest force. One in which he could curl up snugly, secure, safe. . .

He was appalled at what he saw outside. The same force that had sent their cylinder whirling over and over had also ripped up great blocks of sand and stone and piled them in heaps. Their cylinder had come to rest near the top of one of the now motionless waves of land. Beyond them were rows on rows of earth, sand, and crumbled rocks, all mixed with torn-off and twisted metal tubes, huge blocks of granite, basalt, and diorite that had once been piled in orderly rows to form tremendous buildings. Also, those buildings that had been carved out of Brobdingnagian boulders lay at all angles; some straight up; some on their sides; some upside down; some half-buried, their tops showing above the cracks into which the larger part had fallen or their sides projecting above the crevasses or their bottoms showing.

Everywhere were bodies of human beings and demons, or parts of them, lying where falling rocks had smashed them or hurtling stones had sheared them. Rocktrees, torn from the soil or from the sides of buildings, were scattered everywhere. So strong' were the forces some of the almost-indestructible trees had met, they had been cracked or even shattered.

"What's doing it?" whimpered Fyodor behind Cull. "What's making the world come to an end?"

"Something's slowing the rotation of the shell that forms the peripheral foundation of this world," said Cull. "And every time the shell slows, the rock and the sand on the shell's inner surface slides over it. And the stuff tends to pile up here and there. The friction of unimaginable tons of rock and sand sliding is causing heat, too. Have you noticed how hot it is?"

Sweat matted his hair and beaded his body. And for the first time, he noticed that he, or one of them, maybe all three, had fouled the interior of the cylinder with their excrement. Sheer terror had forced its expulsion.

"Let's get the other two statues out of the way," Cull said. "The rotation may slow down again any minute now. Or begin speeding up. God knows what's going to happen."

"What's the use," said Fyodor dully. "We'll be ground to bits, just like those. . . those. . ."

He pointed at several bodies nearby. They looked as if a steamroller had passed over them and, then, a harrow.

"Maybe we don't have a chance," said Cull. "But we have to act as if we did. While there's life. . ."

"Why should we be spared?" said Fyodor. "We're sinners. We ought. . ."

"Sinners," whimpered Phyllis. "Oh, God, we've sinned, and now we have to pay. Oh, God, truly I'm sorry, sorry. . ."

"Shut up!" said Cull. "Both of you! If you don't quit blubbering like two hysterical old women, and help me get these idols out of the way, I'll kick your asses right out of this tunnel. And you can take

your chances, which'll be nil, nothing, nada, zero, kaput, out in the open. What in hell's the matter with you? You want to commit suicide? You know what a sin that is. Well, if you just sit down, quit trying, you'll be doing the same as killing yourself. Quitting is suicide, you know that. Fyodor, what's got into you? You're the guy that kept me going. Now, all of a sudden, you haven't got any guts."

"It's Apocalypse," he muttered, his rubbery lips writhing, his little eyes rolling. "The Judgment Day. Who can stand before the wrath of God?"

"You know nothing about the wrath of God," Cull said. "Help me move these idols, or you'll feel the wrath of God, right on your butt from the end of my foot."

"All I have to do is walk away," Fyodor said. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Good," replied Cull. "Now, will you help? Help *me*? Your brother human being? "

Silently, he bent over and began shoving. Fyodor, still sobbing, came to his aid. The second idol was not as large as the first and it did not have any oversized projections. With much grunting and panting, they managed to drag it, feet-first, to the mouth of the cylinder.

But the third statue was the largest, the furthest from the entrance, and its hand extended out from the body and downward, as if it clutched the metal and did not want to let loose. The two men moved it slowly and had to rest between each effort. Then, Cull cursed Phyllis and told her to get up and help. She moaned and raised her head to look at him; the tangled and dirty blonde hair fell over her face so that she stared at him through the strands. The skin below was dirty and bloody; her lips were swollen from a blow; one of her breasts was half-covered by a dark red blotch.

"I'm so tired," she moaned. "I can't help you. Anyway, why struggle? Fyodor's right. We're doomed."

Cull placed his foot against her shoulder, raised the foot and her body with it and, at the same time, kicked. She rolled over on her back and stared up at him.

"Get off your back, you dirty whore," Cull said. "You may have gotten all you wanted in life so far by taking that position. But those days are over! Get up. Or I'll kick you where you're missing your balls!"

She tried to spit at him, but all that came out of her mouth was a stringy darkbrown spittle that flopped, like a rope tied at one end, onto her chin. "You and your miserable skin," she said croakingly. "That's all you think about. Why don't you die and end your miserable existence?"

"Because I don't want to," he said. "Now, get up."

He leaned forward and grabbed her under the armpits and heaved her up and onto her feet. She swayed and would have fallen if he had not held her. Her body was slippery and cold with sweat; she trembled; she stank of terror.

"I didn't mean it!" she sobbed. "It's just that I've gone through more than I can stand. I just wish it'd be over!"

"I didn't mean it, either," Cull said. "I had to say something to get you going. Now, help us. Every little bit helps."

Phyllis was not much aid. The first time they tried to roll the idol, her hands slipped and she fell onto the stone.

"I hurt my breast again," she said, whimpering.

Cull lifted her again and said, "Just this once."

They heaved simultaneously, and the statue turned on its side. Cull was panting, and he could hear the others breathing heavily. But he swore at them and shouted with as much strength as he could muster, "We may not have much time before another quake comes! If we start rolling again, we may be crushed this time. Now! Once more!"

The idol rolled, slowly, raised upon one of its hands, then fell with a bang against the grey material. It was halfway out of the mouth of the cylinder.

"Once more," said Cull, but he did not sound enthusiastic. He realized that he had very little strength left. And with his strength, his will had almost gone.

Nevertheless, he could not quit now. To do so would be to waste all his efforts so far. He had wasted too much of them in his lifetime, given up too many times when he could have striven just a little more and won what he wanted. Or had he really wanted? Had he always quit because he was afraid of winning?

He stepped over the statue and out into the sand. The dust was thicker here; he began to cough. His lungs felt as if a hot hand were squeezing them. He managed to quit coughing, to swallow back the convulsions inside him.

He bent down and grabbed hold of the idol's head and said, "Push. I'll pull. We'll drag him out easily."

"All right, brother," said Fyodor. "If you want so desperately to live, I won't be an obstacle. Maybe God has sent you to help me. So, I will help you."

"-- you and your God," said Cull.

Fyodor gasped, but the idol began to slide out of the mouth and onto the sand. Cull grinned weakly and thought that his remark may have angered Fyodor so much it gave him strength. Certainly, the idol was moving more swiftly than he had thought possible. This despite the fact that the sand impeded the progress of the statue. Also, certainly, he had not planned to make that remark just to stimulate the outpour of Fyodor's adrenalin. He had meant it.

He rose and said, with a weak triumph, "There! She's out. I told you we. . ."

He stopped, for he could feel through the soles of his feet the tiniest of vibrations, the forerunner of the big ones to come. He leaped over the statue and into the entrance of the cylinder and ran past Fyodor and Phyllis to the center. He turned and shouted, "Come here! Hurry!"

He lay down on the floor and, when the two were near him, he said, "Lie down! You, Fyodor, so you're sitting halfway up the side and so I can grab your ankles! Phyllis, you lie down on the other side of me. Grab my ankles."

He did not need again to tell them to hurry. They could feel the shaking of the cylinder.

"When we start rolling," he said, "stiffen your-selves. Maybe we can form a kind of rigid sup-port, keep from sliding and falling all over the place. Brace yourselves good. This is going to be the big granddaddy of them all; I feel it!"

He had no sooner spoken than the cylinder lurched and began rolling. It made a half-turn slowly, so slowly that he realized they would not be able to keep themselves rigid. When they reached the top, and the floor became ceiling, they must fall in a heap.

But, before the cylinder had completed a half-turn, there was a rumble and then a roar that deafened them, and dust blew in through the cylinder and blinded them. The cylinder snapped on over so swiftly he was not aware of what had happened until it had spun two or three more times. Now, it was spinning so rapidly that he must be passing the same point within a second, doing one rpm per second. Or so it seemed. He really had no reference point, no accurate con-ception of the passage of time. All he could know was that they were rotating so quickly that the cen-trifugal force was gluing them to the sides of the cylinder. They could not have moved even if they had wanted to.

What would happen if they struck something going at this speed? They would be crushed. Bones broken in a hundred places; flesh squeezed beyond endurance; blood forced out through broken veins and arteries.

It was then that he realized that the bumping and lurching that had first accompanied the whirling had ceased. The spinning was smooth as if the cylinder were moving through air.

He turned his head and opened his eyes to look along the tunnel and out its mouth. At first, he could see nothing but dust; his eyes stung and watered. Then, for a few seconds, the dust disap-peared, blown by a wind from somewhere. And he could see for some distance past greyish-brown clouds that seemed to go around and around.

It was difficult to grasp what he was seeing, for it was so unexpected, so alien.

Then, he reorientated. And he knew that their progress was so smooth, as if on air, because they *were* in the air.

Through the avenue momentarily cut by the parting of the clouds of dust, he saw the ground. Rather, the surface of the sphere that formed the walls of their world, the boundaries between them and interstellar space. The walls of the sphere had been stripped clean of the sand, the rock, the tunnels that had coated them. Now, a greyish opaque substance was revealed.

And the coating of sand and rock that had once formed the ground? Gone. Whirled up into the at-mosphere, just as they had been whirled.

The sphere must have been speeded up, through some means, through some incredibly titanic force. Just as quickly and just as incredibly, the sphere had been slowed, perhaps stopped com-pletely. And the silicon coating on the interior of the sphere and all the beings on that coating and the buildings in which they dwelt, these had been peeled, too.

Ripped away from the surface and sent flying. Nor would they fall back if what he suspected was true. For, if the sphere had quit rotating, and if the centrifugal force he had once thought of as gravity had

ceased, then he and the millions of other objects now in the atmosphere would not fall back.

They would keep going in the direction they were now taking until they collided with another object. And, obeying Newton's second principle, they would be diverted into another direction and their speed would be slowed up or increased, the resultant vector depending on the original vectors of the two (or more) objects.

They would slow down some, because they were not in the near-vacuum of space but in a thick at-mosphere. The friction of air would cause the cylinder to decelerate. He doubted if it would be enough. Given a straight path, the cylinder would eventually crash into the inner wall of the sphere. And they'd be smashed.

It was then his fading mind realized that, long before the big stop, they would be dead. Even now, the whirling was driving the blood from the forepart of his brain and front part of his body. The blood was draining toward the posterior of his body. He was fainting, fading away. Soon, he'd pass out; then, his oxygen-deprived brain would die; he'd quit breathing; he'd. . .

Jack Cull awoke and knew that they were, for the moment at least, saved. The cylinder was not rotating. He was sprawled on the floor with Phyllis half on him and Fyodor's feet touching his head. He saw Phyllis' eyelids flutter; her blue eyes were staring at him.

"What happened?" she said faintly and thickly. Her throat, like his, was dry and hot with dust.

"Something stopped us whirling," he said.

The interior of the cylinder was dimly lit, but it was not dust that was cutting off the light. Brownish semi-gelatinous filaments of some ma-terial were crawling toward them from both ends. He did not recognize it. But, when the stuff was close enough for him to reach out and touch it, and he had cautiously tasted it, he knew what it was.

"We're inside a cloud of manna," he said. "We must've collided with one just beginning to form. It's soft enough so we stopped slowly."

He laughed shortly and brittlely, "Now, all we have to worry about is being choked to death."

Fyodor said, "Maybe we can eat our way out."

Jack Cull began laughing. Suddenly, he could not stop laughing.

Phyllis sat up and slapped him hard. The results were unexpected and frightening. Her palm connected with his face, but she rose into the air, turning over as she did so, and collided with the opposite side of the wall. She bounced a few inches off at an angle. There, she struggled fran-tically but succeeded only in turning herself upside down and in setting herself drifting down toward the manna at the other end.

Cull had been equally surprised, though he should not have been. The force of the blow had driven him a few inches off the floor in the op-posite direction from Phyllis. He slid slowly above the floor until he drove into the manna at the other end and was spreadeagled, facing toward the center of the pipe, against the mass.

"We're in no-gravity now," he said. "Fyodor, move very slowly! Phyllis, quit fighting against it!

You'll just get in a worse mess. And, by the way, thanks. You stopped my hysteria."

He grimaced at the pain from stiffened muscles and the burning knot in the back of his neck. He also had a headache; his skull felt as if it had been stepped on by an elephant.

By then, the manna had built up so that both ends of the cylinder were completely blocked. The growth was pushing Cull and Phyllis toward the center, bearing them on its face. His hands plunged into the warm jelly-like substance, and the filaments began to climb over his shoulders and face. There was nothing for him to do but kick against the soggy stuff and propel himself down the tunnel.

Fyodor, disobeying Cull's order to move cautiously, leaped up to catch him. As a result, Fyodor shot up and banged his head against the ceiling, and he yelped with surprise and pain. But Cull's progress was slowed by his collision immediately thereafter with Fyodor, and they floated toward Phyllis.

After some experimenting, the three found that they could control their movements and direction if they did things very slowly. Fortunately, the tunnel was only about twelve feet wide, so they could propel themselves from one side to the other easily. If one became suspended in the middle and could not reach the walls, another could push off from a wall and thus also push the other against the opposite side.

"We can only hope the manna'll stop growing," Cull said. "Whoever would have thought we'd have more than we could eat or that too much would kill us?"

"Couldn't we dig our way out?" said Fyodor. "We could hold our breaths long enough to get into the open. Even if we died trying, it'd be better than just allowing ourselves to smother."

"Don't you understand?" said Cull. "So we did succeed in digging through? One awkward movement might send us flying out of this cylinder. Then what? We'd be helpless, floating in a sphere that's thousands of miles across."

Phyllis shuddered as if she were cold, though it was hot in the cylinder, and she said, "I don't want to go floating through the air. I'd be absolutely helpless. And I'd go crazy with the earth way below me; I'd think I was falling all the time. I don't want to fall forever. No, I'm staying. At least, this cylinder is something solid. A home of sorts."

"I think the manna's stopped growing," said Fyodor. "Maybe it's a good thing we didn't panic and try to dig our way out. Sometimes, it's better to sit and think about something a while. Time then takes care of the problem."

"You're right. This time, anyway," said Cull. "It has stopped."

He licked off the thin white filaments that formed the larger darker ones and then, slowly, scooped up a handful and put it in his mouth.

"You better get this stuff before it solidifies," he said to the other two. "It'll melt in your mouth now, and you can get some liquid into your bodies."

He did not tell them that the manna in the cylinder might be the last they would ever get because he did not want to depress them even further. This cloud could be the final one to form. It was possible that whatever had always made manna and distributed it throughout the sphere was still functioning but would soon quit. Everything else had, so why not this?

They followed his example. By the time they had swallowed several mouthfuls and their thirst was gone, the manna had darkened throughout and had shrunk and separated into hundreds of solid threads, each thick as a spaghetti string. These, they began to eat.

"I wish I had a container," said Cull. He shrugged, then said, "No use wishing. Come on. Help me pilot this stuff to the middle of the cylinder. We'll pile it on both sides, leave an aisle so we can pass through. Maybe we can drag in some more from the cloud, build up a stockpile. We may need it."

Though all were weak, the food had strengthened them. They were able to pull loose strings of the manna, but the effort drove the lower parts of their bodies into the stuff. Then, while one picked, the other two worked as shuttles, holding balls of manna in their hands and zigzagging from wall to wall until they got to the center. Luckily, the manna was wet and sticky and stayed on the walls where it was thrown.

Even so, the two carriers went through some strange maneuvers. They found themselves propelled against the walls when they did not so wish or were turned upside down or twisted over and over until brought up against the soft mass at the other end.

After they had gotten the hang of things, Fyodor and Phyllis worked at one end; Cull at the other. The shrinking of the manna allowed light to come in, and they could see that the cloud had fallen away, rather, drifted away, from the cylinder.

Cull was happy to see this and to feel air moving over his sweating body. That meant that winds still existed, that the air in the sphere had not become one motionless mass. Pressure differentials existed.

Fyodor and Phyllis, working together, made faster progress than Cull. Also, he was slowed when his hand was stopped by something hard in the mass. He scraped the strings away from the material until he could see what it was. A branch of a rocktree was pointing straight at his belly; leaves, wet with manna, still clung to the branchlets on the big branch.

He did not say anything to the others but continued scraping. Presently, he had exposed another branch. The second one was broken off; it was about two feet long. Deciding that this find was important, he called the two to help him. They began to carry off what he had scraped away to give him room to work. In another fifteen minutes, he had reached the end of the cylinder. And he understood what had happened.

A freak of the catastrophe had jammed several branches of an uprooted rocktree into this end of the huge pipe. They were covered with manna strands. Also tangled in the branches was a line of telephone wire of indeterminate length.

He paused for a while to get his breath back. Then he crawled between two branches, and scraped away more manna.

In a minute, his head was poking out of the opening. He was looking out past the trunk and roots of the tree into space.

Nearby, slowly drifting away, was a large mass of manna. This was no longer a cloud but a conglomeration of wormy objects snarled together. Beyond it was another portion of the original cloud.

He turned over to look above or what seemed to be above. About twenty yards away, keeping pace with the cylinder, was a huge boulder. Near it rotated the body of a woman; she was badly mangled; dried blood coated her body.

Beyond the body and boulder floated other objects. A large clump of dirt. A stone table, one end broken off, turning slowly. A stone bowl, spinning much more swiftly, was above the table, just beyond the rotating ends. A little way past the table was another uprooted rocktree, much larger than the one jammed into the cylinder. It revolved very slowly, which accounted for the ability of the man in the branches to cling to them. He was a dark man with prominent epicanthial folds, a Chinese or Japanese. He saw Cull's head sticking out, and his eyes widened. He waved at Cull and called something. He did not speak in Hebrew. Then, the tree had turned so that he was hidden by the trunk.

Cull waited until the man was in view again, and he shouted to him in Hebrew and in the few English words he remembered. The man shouted back in what Cull now was sure was Chinese. The tree turned again, and this time, when the man came into view, he was crouched down, tense and poised.

Cull yelled at him not to take a chance. But the Chinese launched himself outward just as the tree swung upward. Evidently, he had estimated the second when he should leave the tree and had hoped that his estimate would be correct. Propelled by his kick and the force of the up-swinging tree, he sailed toward Cull. His arms were outstretched, reaching for the branches of the tree projecting from the cylinder.

Cull found himself scrambling out onto the biggest branch and then onto the trunk. He went on all fours, clinging to the stony and slippery corrugations of the trunk with fingers and toes. Then, he was in the roots of the tree and he had hooked his feet between the forks of a big root and was standing upward. He stretched as far as he dared and reached his arms upward toward the man. But the man flew over him, just a foot away. The man screamed when he realized that he had missed, and he was still screaming as he flew on-ward. Abruptly, as his head disappeared into a huge ball of manna, the scream was cut off. He plunged into the hardening but still soft mass up to his knees. His legs and feet thrashed violently for a minute while Cull shouted at him to straighten himself out, that there was still hope that he could get out and try another leap.

The feet quit moving. The slowly turning mass took them from Cull's view. Sick, he watched until the feet came into his sight again. The impact of the Chinese had given the big ball a shove, it was slowly drifting away. For that Cull was thankful. This incident had made him sick, even though, compared to so many others he had witnessed very recently, it was little.

Perhaps he was so shaken because he had tried to involve himself in the fellow's fate, had tried to change the course of events. For a moment, that man's terror had been his, and consequently so had his death.

Now, thinking this, he looked downward or past his feet, and he became paralyzed with fright. The abyss was below him; he was standing on a narrow piece of rock over miles of nothing.

For a minute, he could not force himself to move. His heart rammed against his breast, and he breathed hoarsely. His bones felt cold.

Then, knowing that he could not stay there forever, that he *had* to get back within the cylinder, he bent his knees slowly. When he was within reach of the root, he seized it tightly and clung on. His feet came loose and an involuntary movement of his legs straightened his body out, and he was hanging above the nothingness with his hands around the stony root. Not hanging downward, relative to the root, but

straight outward as if he had no weight. Which, he told himself, he *did not* have. He was in no danger as long as he did things carefully and slowly and thought out the consequences of his actions beforehand.

For every action, an opposite and equal re-action, he muttered to himself. It had always been true, but, down there on the surface, when gravity -- or its equivalent in centrifugal force -- had existed, he had acted automatically and surely. Here he had to learn new rules.

He was in interplanetary space. Except that he had air to breathe and there were no planets.

Cull advanced each hand and took firm hold of a projection, a rootlet, a groove, and then advanced the other hand for a new hold. Once, he looked up and saw that Fyodor and Phyllis were hovering within the cylinder, suspended between the sides of the cylinder, and were staring at him. They were as terrified as he. Perhaps they were even more so, for they probably did not yet realize all the aspects of their situation. Well, by watching him, they would learn swiftly.

He gave a little pull and shot into the cylinder. Phyllis was in his way; he put out his hands and clamped them down on her shoulders. She moved backward; her body and his were in line with the axis of the cylinder. They would have continued floating out the other end and into space if he had not somehow twisted himself and gotten his feet onto the floor. There, the friction of his feet stopped them.

"You must be careful," he said to her. "I thought I'd made that clear."

Her eyes were very wide as she said, "What are we going to do? Float around forever? Or until our food gives out and we die?"

"We have food," he said. "We can get some more."

He twisted around and gave himself a little shove from the wall and floated toward the end through which he had just come. His hand closed around the branch, and he stopped himself. "I think we'd better stay at this end," he said. "We've got an anchor."

He looked out of the opening for a moment. The big ball of manna was still whirling; the feet of the dead man were just disappearing from view around its bulge. The ball was smaller than before. It was drifting away, driven by the impact of the Chinese.

"I have to think," he said. "But I'm too tired. We're all too tired. We need to sleep, then eat some more, get our strength back."

"How can you sleep," said Phyllis, "knowing that there's nothing below you, nothing between you and a fall of maybe thousands of miles except the thin walls of this metal?"

"I've slept on airplanes," he answered, "and we're a hell of a lot safer in this than in one of those crates. We won't fall. Not in the sense you mean, anyway. No, the only thing I'm worried about is drifting out of the tube while I'm sleeping. So, let's find something to tie us down."

There was only one answer, and that was the telephone wire snarled among the roots of the rocktree. To get it, he would have to crawl out again. He hesitated. He had not gotten over the reaction of hanging above the nothingness, and he would have preferred to sleep and then to eat before facing that necessity. But necessity it was, an immediate one.

He thought of asking Fyodor or Phyllis to go out for the wire, but he rejected that idea. They just

were not in shape to do it now. And they did not know enough about handling themselves in free fall to be trusted. One slip, and they would be gone.

He sighed, told them what he intended doing, and began hand-over-handing along the tree. This time he kept his eyes straight ahead although he was not helped much by this device. No matter which way he looked, above, below, or straight ahead, he was looking "down." But, he reassured himself, he knew what he was doing, he was in no danger whatever if he kept his grip, and he had to have the wire.

In half an hour, he was back inside the cylinder with the sixty feet or so of wire trailing him. Though he was shaking with fear and exhaustion, streaked with dirt and sweat, he continued working until he had coiled the wire into a large circle. Then, with the help of the other two, he looped parts of it around the outside edge of the cylinder and also around the tree trunk. After making sure that these were secured tightly, he formed three small loops. Into these they fitted themselves and pulled the loops more tightly around their waists.

"Now," said Cull, "we can sleep safely. On a bed softer than any king ever had. On air. But it may not be a comfortable sleep, despite that. There's no gravity to make the secretions from your sinus and nasal passages drain. The stuff may accumulate in one place and choke you. So, don't be alarmed if you wake up and can't get your breath. Blow the stuff out. Pleasant dreams."

He closed his eyes and was instantly asleep. When he awoke, he knew that something was wrong. He stared straight up at the "ceiling" of the cylinder, for he was stretched out along the longitudinal axis of the cylinder. His heart was beating fast; something had alarmed him, and he did not know what.

The interior of the big pipe was dim, so he knew that the sun had lessened its radiance for the half-night. Raising his head slightly and slowly, he looked down the tunnel. He saw a shape at the other end, something filling the O and blocking off most of the light. The outlines were those of a human or something resembling a human. Except that blackness rose from its back, a silhouette of folded wings.

He knew instantly that it must be a "demon." He remembered seeing a creature like this several times before in the streets, when streets had existed. Then, the wings had been mere exotic or awesome appendages, useless. Now, with no gravity, they should be able to function, to fulfill the promise of their form.

Cull turned his head and saw the floating bodies of his companions, still held by the wires. Fyodor was snoring; Phyllis was breathing raspily.

Below Phyllis was the broken-off branch of the rocktree. It floated an inch off the "floor."

The demon was moving slowly down the tunnel now. He was crouched so that the tops of his half-folded and slightly beating wings would not scrape against the ceiling, and he held in one hand a stone knife. His mouth was open enough for the dim light to show two long, white canines against the sootiness of his skin.

Cull suddenly turned within the loop and reached down. His fingers closed on the broken branch, and he rotated again inside the circle of wire and raised the branch so that it pointed toward the figure at the other end. With all his force, he launched it down the tunnel. Then, not waiting to see if it was going straight, he grasped the loop with both hands and pulled outward. He slid out from the stretched wire easily and was trying to find something solid to use as a launch for himself, when he heard the branch strike. There was a thump, and the demon said, "Whoosh!" as the air was driven from him by the impact of silicon-impregnated wood against his solar plexus. He threw up his hands, the knife flew from his

grasp, and he moved backward. If he had not involuntarily extended his wings so that they scraped against the walls of the cylinder, he would have sailed backward from the open end and out into space. But the friction of the wings held him, and he floated face up.

Cull progressed toward him swiftly but in zigzag fashion by shooting from one wall to the other, like a ricocheting bullet. If he had dived straight ahead down the pipe, he would have rammed into the demon and both would have gone on out into the airy void. There, he would have been helpless, whereas the winged demon, once recovered, could have maneuvered as he pleased.

Cull reached out a hand as he pushed from one wall to another and plucked the flint knife out of the air. When he came down against the demon, he put one arm around his neck and with the knife hand he began sawing against the jugular vein. The demon opened his eyes then and started to twist to get away. Cull turned with him, intent on his cutting and hoping he could sever the vein before the demon could bring his powerful muscles into full and effective action. Or before he could shove with his feet against the wall and drive them both out.

Suddenly, Cull's neck and shoulders felt wet and warm, and he knew that the jugular blood was squirting over him. He kept cutting, for the demon had not quit struggling; he had the vitality of a tiger. Sharp nails raked Cull's ribs, and the demon bent his neck and tried to force the ends of his canines into Cull's throat. Cull pressed closer to the demon so that he could not bend his neck at an angle and use his teeth. The creature stopped clawing Cull's side and reached down to seize his genitals. Cull, knowing that one squeeze of those superhumanly strong hands would cripple or kill him, brought his knees up and shoved away from him. However, he did not shove backward along the longitudinal axis of the cylinder but at an angle which brought him with a thump against the wall. The force of his drive bounced him off that wall and across the cylinder into the opposite side. But he stopped moving.

The reaction of his shove had pushed his an-tagonist also against the wall and kept him from sliding all the way outward. Now the demon was upside down, his body limp and his outstretched wings against the walls. Cautiously, Cull moved toward him by jumps which used only the power of his toes to propel him from one side to the next. He held his legs stiff and straight and his arms out-stretched. Reaching the mouth of the cylinder, he seized an ankle of the corpse and then pulled it backward and toward the other end. Halfway along the length, he moved more swiftly, knowing that he could grab the wire loop and stop himself and demon from shooting out of that mouth.

Suddenly, the interior brightened. He knew that, the "sun" had glowed into "daytime." It was not as bright as it had been before the catastrophe, for the dust in the air cut down on its light. But it was no longer twilight outside.

Phyllis opened her eyes. Then she screamed. Fyodor was also staring at the corpse, and he sat up within the wire loop and put out his hands as if he would ward off an attack by the dead thing.

"Take it easy," said Cull. "It's all over. For him, anyway."

"For God's sake," said Phyllis, "get rid of it! Push it out! It's making me sick!"

Then, she stopped, and her eyes became even wider. "Are you hurt, Jack? Oh my God, you're blood all over! Don't die, Jack, don't die and leave me all alone!"

"And don't you start getting hysterical," said Cull. "No, I'm not hurt. Not seriously, anyway, although the demon did scratch my ribs pretty badly. Most of the blood is his. And be careful if you go to the other end. There's a lot of his blood floating around or smeared on the sides."

"Why don't you get rid of him?" said Phyllis.

"Because I -- we -- can use him. Or part of him, anyway. Before he came along, we were trapped inside the cylinder. We had no mobility. Now, well, you'll see."

He made the two get out of their loops, and he snugged the body tightly inside Phyllis' wire. "You two get out on the tree and bring back as much manna as you can carry. We won't use our stockpile; we'll keep that for our storehouse. I want the stuff from outside to mop up the mess I'm going to make."

He studied the body. The demon was about his own height, which he thought he remembered as being about six feet. The body was human enough except for the enormous and warted genitals, which many demons seemed to have only to affront humankind with their obscenity. The skin was slate colored; the nails on hands and feet were so long and sharp they could have been defined as claws. The wings were batlike, leathery looking. They extended from his shoulderbones and were, as Cull had noted, useless when this world had gravity. The face was human enough, too, except for the tigerish canines and the nose. This was flat, smudged, with the nostrils parallel with the face. His ears were those of a wolf's; the head was bald and had a crest of bone running from brow to rear.

He looked at Phyllis and Fyodor. Hesitantly, they were advancing on the tree toward the spaghetti-like masses of manna clinging wetly to the branches of the rocktree. By the time they returned, he should be fairly far along on his work.

The knife had a keen edge, but it would dull quickly enough once he got to work. The most important things would have to be dealt with first. Then, if the knife became too dull, he could abandon completion of this project.

The skin of the wings cut easily enough; its attachment to the back of the demon was soon freed. But the wing-bones joined to the shoulder-bones were another matter. Moreover, the muscles of the back were very hard and there were many more than there would have been in a human being. These muscles seemed to have been specialized for moving the wings. Once he sawed through the wing-muscles, he found that he would have to break the wing-bones at their jointure with the shoulder-bones. And the only tool he had was his knife.

"Come back!" he called to Fyodor and Phyllis. Slowly, they crawled along the tree and into the cylinder. There, they stared at what he had done.

"If he could use those wings to fly, so can I," said Cull. "Now, you two brace yourselves against the sides of the tunnel on each side of him. Hold him down; keep him from moving while I work on the bones."

Phyllis could not bring herself to touch the demon. Only harsh words from Cull and a threat to push her out into space made her cooperate. While the two kept the corpse from moving as much as they were able, Cull seized the right wing-bone close to its union with the shoulder-bone. He began working it back and forth with the intention of breaking it off. After a few minutes, he quit. He was panting with the effort; sweat, mingled with blood, coated his body. There was one thing about the sweat, though. It did not run down into his eyes because of the lack of gravity. It did, however, collect in beads on his body and face. From time to time, he brushed his hand across his face, collected the perspiration, and flicked it out of the cylinder mouth.

"Rub me with the manna," he said, panting, to the other two. "It'll soak up the blood and sweat."

Then, throw it away. I have to get cleaned up, or I'll smell like a slaughterhouse."

After they had mopped him, he resumed work. This time, he tried to wrench the wing-bone a few inches above the juncture where it was thinner. There was a snap, and the bone was broken. Then, though he hated to do so because it would rob the knife of its keenness, he sawed at the break. The bone resisted but flakes of grey powder appeared around the knife. He stopped from time to time to brush away the bone dust; it flew away from his hand and drifted outward. Some of it went up Fyodor's nose; he sneezed and blew part of the dust back into Cull's face. Cull also sneezed and then cursed Fyodor and told him to blow the stuff outward, not toward him.

Finally, thinking he had weakened the bone enough, he quit sawing and began working the wing back and forth. Suddenly, it came loose.

In another fifteen minutes, he had also freed the left wing-bone. But he was tired and breathing heavily, and he had to be mopped off again.

"I had intended to do a thorough dissection," he said. "I wanted to use his legbones as spear-shafts; cut out his canines and mount them on the ends of the thighbone. They'd have made weapons. Maybe not very good weapons, but they'd still be better than nothing."

"You've got the wings," said Phyllis. "Isn't that enough? Let's get rid of him."

Surprisingly, Fyodor wanted to continue. "No use quitting now," he said. "I'll spell you. First, the canines."

Willingly, Cull gave him the knife and watched while Fyodor cut into the gums around the roots of the two teeth. After these were exposed, Fyodor wiggled them until he loosened them. Then, he used the knife again to dig into the bony sockets. Finally, after much panting and frequent rests, he had two long, sharp, and slightly curved fangs in his hand.

Phyllis, muttering, "I can't take it anymore," left her post and went to the middle of the tunnel. Here, she turned her back to them and stretched out, floating, her arm over her eyes.

Cull watched her leave. He growled, "By God, I'm captain of this ship. . ."

Fyodor said, "True, true, my friend. But a cap-tain has due regard for the health and welfare of his crew. Phyllis, you might say, is seasick."

"I suppose I can't blame her," said Cull. He narrowed his eyes. "You aren't smirking, are you?"

"No, no, heaven forbid," said Fyodor, bob-bing his head up and down. "Why should I mock you?"

"Maybe I was being a little ridiculous com-paring myself to a captain of a ship," said Cull. "Some ship! An open-ended cylinder drifting through air with no rudder to guide her or sails to propel her! Some crew! A half-mad Christ-loving feeble excuse for a man and a frigid weak-bellied spineless social climber! And a hypocrite, just as much a social climber as whorish Phyllis! A bootlicker, anyway!"

Fyodor raised his bushy eyebrows. "Ah, then you know your faults? Better still, you admit them to yourself and to others! You have made a step forward, my friend. A vast, a league-devouring step. One step closer, my friend."

"Closer to what?" said Cull, staring angrily at Fyodor. "To my death? So I know myself! So what! Do I know one bit more about why I'm here or what this *here* is? Hell, no! Or where I'm going, if there is such a thing as life after death?"

"But you do know, you do know," said Fyodor in a shrill voice. "You lived on Earth and you died. You doubted, really, that you'd live after your death. Yet, you are here! Doesn't that prove to you that there is a great design? That you're part of it, even if only a small cog? That you're an immortal cog?"

"I'd rather be dead than live as I have lived here," said Cull.

"No, you wouldn't. Not really. Are things here any worse than they were on Earth? I say no! And there is always hope. Hope!"

"Of what? You can't get any answers to your questions here any more than you could on Earth."

He fell silent. Fyodor scratched his bald head and looked out of the corners of his eyes at Cull, then looked away.

"Let's get this thighbone cut," said Cull.

It took them another hour. They cut the flesh away from the lower legs and cast the hunks out of the cylinder mouth. The gobbets and strips flew out and continued straight until they were out of sight. But there were pieces that they missed and beads of blood, all floating around them like a swarm of flies. Then, suddenly, these drifted away, taken by a wind that had sprung up.

Cull quit scraping the naked bone and looked outward. He could see nothing except the jetsam and flotsam: rocktrees, a huge building in the distance, a coil of manna, bodies or parts of bodies of men and women. All turning over and over.

What about the wind? It was not much of a wind, yet it helped. It dried off the sweat; it took away the carbon dioxide that otherwise tended to collect around their heads. And, now that he thought about it, it was strange that they had no wind at all before. The cylinder was, presumably, moving, so that its progress through the at-mosphere should have made a slight wind. Though not detectable, some wind must have existed. Otherwise, the carbon dioxide they breathed out would have collected in the cylinder, and they would have been asphyxiated long ago.

That current of air, however, had not been distinguishable. This one was. So what caused the breeze to become stronger? A temperature dif-ferential must be taking place somewhere in the sphere.

Of course! The same thing that had made it before. Only now, the thin wall of the sphere was naked to the air; it had no thick layer of rock and dirt over it. Therefore, warm moisture-laden air, on coming into contact with the space-cold wall, must be giving up its water-vapor content. Ice would be forming on the inner walls of the sphere. The air next to it would condense into a high-pressure area.

He was not sure of his meteorology. Would winds caused by the high-pressure colder air move toward the center of the sphere and thus push floating objects toward the sun? Or would the warmer air expand to fill the volume left empty by the condensing cold air and thus bear floating ob-jects toward the wall?

Cull resumed work. Together, the two men freed the thighbones from the pelvis and the knees.

They now had two thighbones to be used as clubs and also tibiae and fibulae. These would have to be scraped clean, a task which, at the moment, neither could face.

"O.K.," said Cull. "Phyllis wanted us to give the old heave-ho to the body. Let's do it."

Without waiting for Fyodor to help, he loosened the wire loop around the corpse's waist. He pulled it out toward him and then turned the body so he could place both hands on its back. Bracing his feet against the rocktree branch, he shoved. The demon, rolling because the push had not been equally shared by both of Cull's hands, slid through the air away from the cylinder. Almost, it was caught by a projecting branch of the tree. But it missed by a skin's thickness and continued. Within a few minutes the turning corpse had dwindled to a doll-size.

"It's too bad I had to kill him," said Cull.

"Why?" said Fyodor sharply. He was at once alert, his neck muscles quivering and making his head shake.

"Don't get so upset because you don't know what's going on. Have a little patience. Let me get the thing out of my mouth before you start quaking. I would rather have made him a prisoner, but I wasn't in any position to do so. But the next demon we get hold of -- if we ever do -- we'll take alive. And we'll force the truth from him if we have to cut it out of his brains -- literally."

"What makes you think they know the truth?" said Fyodor.

"If they don't, they'll die trying to tell it to us."

They cleaned themselves off as best they could and threw away some more dirtied manna. Cull studied the problem of attaching the severed wings to himself. He stepped out onto the rocktree with an ankle held by a loop of wire. The other end of the wire was bent around the branch within the cylinder. Moving carefully so that he would not accidentally let loose of the wings, he tried one on for size.

"It'll be O.K.," he said to Fyodor. "We can make holes in the skin next to the wing-bones. We'll loop wire through them, and I can fit my arms into the loops. The lower ends of the wings can be held by wires fastened around my thighs. But we'll have to do something to keep the wings from folding at the joints."

He stood for a moment, gazing absently into the abyss. Then, "We'll have to split the fibia. Straighten out the wings at the joints and place the slivers on both sides of the joints. Then wire the two slivers together around the wing-bone. That should keep the wings stiff."

He returned to the cylinder. There, by kinking lengths of the wire back and forth and sawing at the weakened bends, he succeeded in cutting off pieces. The fibias did not split as easily as he thought they would. Only after much cursing, sweating, and persistence in bearing down on the flint knife, he did accomplish his task. Then, he had to whittle away until he had four pieces short enough and rounded enough at the ends. Finally, he had what he needed. This time, when he went out upon the rocktree, he stayed until he was finished.

The faces of Phyllis and Fyodor were ap-prehensive. "If you can't fly with those," said Phyllis, "we'll lose you. We'll never see you again."

"I didn't think you really cared," said Cull. "Or is it that you're worried about losing a provider

and defender?"

Phyllis shrugged. Cull, looking at her, wondered why he had once thought he would sell his soul to have her in his bed.

He fastened the wings to a branch, pulled him-self back into the cylinder, and then slid into the big loop.

"I'm too worn out to try flying," he said. "I've got to get some sleep. But you two take turns guarding. We don't want any more flying demons taking us unaware."

He dropped off immediately. When he awoke, he saw that both of his companions were up. They were sitting on the branch, held to it by wire, their legs suspended over the abyss. Apparently, they had gotten over some of their fear of the emp-tiness.

Phyllis, seeing him turn his head, smiled and said, "Good morning! You feel better?"

"I had a dream of Earth," he said. "Rather, I dreamed I was asleep on Earth and was dreaming. It was a dream within a dream. An old dream. You know, everybody has it one time or another, sometimes, often. I dreamed I could fly just by flapping my arms. It was wonderful. I've never felt so free, so glorious. So. . . superhuman."

"I'm glad," said Phyllis. "If I had to fly with those wings when I woke up, I'd dream that other dream that's not so nice. You know, the one where you fall and fall and scream and scream. . ."

"Maybe it's a good omen, your having that dream and not the one Phyllis speaks of," said Fyodor.

"Yes," said Phyllis, "that's it. A good omen."

Cull grunted and gave them a sour look. He smacked his lips and said, "I got a bad taste in my mouth. I feel crummy. I must look crummy. And I stink. Just like you two stink. I wish, you wouldn't be upwind to me."

Phyllis began crying. She said, "Aren't things bad enough without you picking on me? I try to be nice, to say good morning to you. And you. . . you're just an old grouch."

"Phyllis," he said, "you're a mess. You ought to see yourself. Your hair's dirty and matted. Your face is streaked, half-clean, half-dirt. And your body's grimy. Look at your belly, your legs. You can see for yourself."

"What do you expect?" she said angrily. "You look like a bum yourself. What's wrong with you, anyway?"

"Perhaps," said Fyodor, "he's scared about what he's going to do. The flying, I mean. You can't blame him, Phyllis. My teeth chatter just to think about him jumping into the void. God knows what a state I'd be in if I had to do it."

"Is that it?" said Phyllis. "You don't really hate me? You're just nervous?"

"You mean you care if I hate you?" he said. "I thought you only cared about the feelings of

whoever happened to be First Telephoner?"

She turned her face away from him. Snorting with derision, he propelled himself in zigzag fashion down the cylinder to the other end. Here he twisted himself until he was upright and facing the outside and no longer moving. While relieving himself, he congratulated himself that this act used pressure. Thus, the water shot away, and there was no problem of disposal. Moreover, the reaction drove him back toward the middle of the cylinder, away from the exit and the abyss.

Cull removed some of the stockpile of manna and cleaned himself off with that and threw it out. He returned to the others, who were silent.

"Too bad that what puts me in a good humor makes you two mad," he said. "I think I'd better use the extra wire and fix up a safety fence at the other end like we have here."

This completed, he went out upon the rocktree and ate his breakfast. The manna was now going from its meat-phase into its sauce-form. Soon, it would turn into water, and the wind would blow it off the branches. He wished he had some sort of container to store the stuff. The manna which was piled up in the center of the cylinder, once it had become water, would also be taken away by the wind. If only he had some means of tanning, he would have flayed the demon and used the skin for waterbags. Perhaps, he should have done it anyway. Turned inside out ... no, he didn't have anything with which to sew the edges of the skin together. Still, the stomach of the demon would have made a natural bag. Too late now to think of that.

For some time, an object had been coming toward him. Minute at first, it was now big enough to disclose its identity. It was one of the hundreds of thousands of buildings that had been carved out of a titanic boulder. He could see the dark rows that must be windows and doors. It was turning over and over. Presently, it would be very close to the cylinder. Perhaps the two might be on a collision course.

Phyllis and Fyodor returned and came out on the rocktree to eat with him. He pointed out the building to them and told them his predictions.

"Maybe we could jump to it when it comes close enough," said Phyllis.

"Maybe," he said. "On the other hand, there may be occupants we wouldn't care to meet. No, I think I'd better fly over to it."

"And what happens if the cylinder passes by it while you're in the building?" said Fyodor. "Do you think you can flap those wings fast enough to catchup with us?"

Cull said, slowly, "I might be able to. I don't know how fast the cylinder is going. The building's coming up swiftly. You have to figure its path, too. No, if we're going to stick together, we'd better go together. Or else all stay here."

He looked at the building again and said, "I don't think we're going to collide. We'll pass close to it, above it or below it, depending on the frame of reference of some hypothetical observer."

"We'll have to take off some time before our paths cross," said Phyllis. "If we wait until the building gets close, it may be going so fast it'll outrun us. And we might not be able to get back to the cylinder, either."

"Are you willing to trust yourself to me and my wings?" said Cull. "Remember, I'll be trying to

learn how to handle the wings for the first time. It'll be a solo without any previous lessons. Come to think of it," he added, and he chuckled hollowly, "it won't really be a solo. I'll have passengers."

While he was talking, he had bent a length of wire around his waist. After fastening it in front, he made two loops on the sides. In one he stuck the flint knife and squeezed the wire to hold it tightly. He did the same to the other loop but in-serted the demon's thighbone in it. Around his ankle he fastened another wire. This had a free length of about two feet. At its end, he formed another loop.

"You make an ankle-loop, too," he said to Fyodor. And he began to put on the wings. When he was sure that all preparations were complete, he gave a very slight push with his foot against the rocktree. He rose, and Fyodor gripped the wire around Cull's ankle with one hand. Fyodor fell free of the rocktree; Phyllis had one hand grasping the wire around his ankle.

Cull looked along the axis of his body to make sure that everybody had a firm hold and was properly strung out in train fashion. Then, he began flapping the wings. Knowing that if he held the plane of the wings at right angles to his body and moved them up and down he would only go up and down with each respective movement, he tilted the wings at an angle. Now, he was sure, he was making forward progress; he could feel the wings scooping the air and pushing it behind him. But it was tiring work even if he and his passengers were weightless; resistance of air meant more than he had thought it would. Moreover, he did not always get the angle of the wings right. They had a tendency to turn against his control.

Within a few minutes, he saw that he was not going at a good enough pace. The building would pass him by, leave him behind. And, glancing over his shoulder as he brought the wing down, he saw that he had little chance to return to the cylinder.

He tried to keep up the pace, to raise and lower his arms as fast as possible, to rotate them so that the angle of attack of the wings would be correct. He was breathing heavily and sweating profusely.

For a moment, as panic struck, he thought of abandoning Fyodor and Phyllis. Released from the additional air resistance of their bodies, he might be able to increase his speed enough. . .

No! He would not leave them to float helpless in the void. Besides, how could he get Fyodor to let his grip loose? To pause in his flying and kick against Fyodor's hand would mean delay. Delay that he could not afford.

He held his left arm straight out and maneuvered the right pinion so that he could turn and follow. And he kept on pumping, raising and lowering the contraptions of skin and bone even after the huge structure was a hundred yards ahead of him.

"It's no use," called Fyodor behind him. "We can't make it. Save your strength, Jack."

Cull stared after the carved and windowed mass of rock. He saw the heads of men and women sticking from the window. Some of them were waving at him. Then, sobbing with exhaustion and rage, he quit. His arms lay out on both sides of him, and he sailed on with the man and the woman hooked to him.

There was silence for a while except for the rasp of Cull's breath. Then, when even that was quietened, there was only a slight flapping sound as the wind ruffled the edges of the batlike wings.

Finally, Fyodor said, "What do we do now?"

Cull was startled. He had been thinking so long about that very question that he had forgotten the other two.

"We'll just have to drift for a while," he called back. "Hope something happens. . ."

"Before we starve to death?" said Phyllis.

"Always the optimist," Cull said. "Good old Phyllis with her word of cheer."

He did not say more about it. What she suggested was very likely to happen. They had to have something, however, to take their minds from that eventuality.

After withdrawing his arms from the loops along the wing-bones, he managed to twist around and face them. He ordered Fyodor to remove the coil of wire from around his waist. That was not easily done, for Fyodor could use only one hand, the other being held by the wire around Cull's ankle. Cull stopped him and had him loosen the loop on his ankle. He then crawled down Fyodor's body and took hold of one end of the long coil. With Phyllis' help, they managed to arrange a sort of *bos'n's* chair. The wire was bent into a double circle, a difficult task with nothing for them to brace against. Three big loops were then made, and into these they slipped their bodies. Securing was done with smaller lengths of wire. Now, they sat facing each other.

"Three men in a tub," said Cull, trying to laugh. "One of them a dishwater-blonde bitch."

"Oh, Jack!" said Phyllis. She looked as if she were going to cry.

"O.K., O.K., you're not a bitch. We're all knights of the Round Table."

The others looked blankly at him, and it was a moment before he realized that they did not recognize the reference. Come to think of it, neither did he. It was one of those tag phrases that popped into his mind without his being able to define its meaning or source.

"At least we can talk now," he said. "Face to face."

There was silence. A long silence.

Finally, Cull could stand it no longer. "Well, Fyodor," he said, "do you still think that X, your Savior, will find you in the midst of airy nothing and rescue you?"

"X can do anything," said Fyodor, some of the spirit showing through his fatigue and despair. "If I am worth saving, X will save me."

"And if you aren't?"

"I must be!" cried Fyodor. "I must be! Just as you must be! And Phyllis! We are all God's children!"

"Maybe He's left His children on some celestial doorstep," said Cull. "Abandoned us."

"Never!" shouted Fyodor. "As long as one man remembers Him, He will not forget man!"

"He or X or somebody had better start doing something pretty. . ."

Cull stopped. He stared at the figure slowly cartwheeling toward them. For some time, he had seen the body of the man coming on a course toward them. But, until now, he had not been able to make out any details.

It was X, X spreadeagled and turning over and over, the dirtied white robe trailing, the long hair and beard matted, the mouth open, the eyes open. One foot was crushed, and dried blood stained the robe halfway up his legs.

Fyodor turned to stare also. He gave a long un-dulating scream, then put his hands over his eyes.

"You see, X is dead," said Cull, not unkindly. He wished he had not brought the subject up. But he had only meant to blow some fire into the ashes of Fyodor's spirit, to make him quit thinking about their doom.

"There's a cloud forming ahead," he said. Fyodor did not remove the hands. Phyllis glanced apathetically, then looked "down."

"We'll have food and drink, anyway," he said. "We won't starve."

"That's not what I want," moaned Fyodor.

"That's what you're going to get, anyway," replied Cull savagely. "Why did I have to be stuck with you two for company?"

"You're too dumb to know when you're licked," said Phyllis.

"I'll know I'm licked when I'm dead," he said. "And then it'll be too late to know it."

He said nothing more while the cloud built up and became darker. Presently, he did not know in what length of time, it could have been a half hour or three hours, they passed into the wall of the cloud. At once, they were in darkness and they felt resistance. Whispers of softness covered their bodies, made them wet. Cull felt tiny airy tendrils slide over him and slip like a mask over his face. He wiped them away and batted with his hands to clear an area in which to breathe. A cry came from Phyllis, and it sounded faroff and faint, as if there were many thin veils between them.

He shouted out encouragement to her and continued to push the manna away. Several dark, thicker, and more solid strings draped his shoulders and one lay across his forehead. He wiped these away, opened another brief space before him. Then, he began to eat the strands he scraped from his face. If he did not choke to death, and if he came out of the other side of the cloud before it became so solid it stopped them, he would, at least, have filled his belly. And thus given himself an extension on life.

But the strands became more numerous; tendrils coiled about him on all sides. Now, as fast as he pushed the manna away, more formed and seemed to swell into the air pockets he created. He had a definite sensation of being suspended, of his forward motion ceasing, though he had nothing on which to base a reference. If he was stopped, the carbon dioxide he was breathing out would form a halo around him. And he would quickly pass out and shortly thereafter die.

He gave one final bellow of rage and resentment. Then, he saw something coming through the cloud, a shape perceived only because it was darker than the cloud. It was huge, and it rushed upon him before he could brace himself for the collision.

He was struck a blow that knocked the breath from him and sent him spinning through the cloud, tearing away the brown strands. Again, he was struck, and again he bounced.

This time, his flailing hands felt something, something familiar. Flesh. And he knew from her cries that it was Phyllis. Apparently, the blow had bent the circle of wire and brought her by his side.

She was screaming so loudly that he could not make himself heard. But he tried. He opened his mouth to tell her to shut up, and he was struck again. This blow was not as hard as the first, or the second, which had been softer than the first.

The darkness fell away and with it the cloud. They were out in the bright air now and turning over. He knew he was revolving because of the big ball beneath him. It spun, or he spun, or both were spinning. Over and over he went, seeing the huge black object appear over his feet and then disappear and then reappear.

It came speedily and struck once more. But this time, he reached out a hand and seized the edge of something. All of a sudden, he was not turning. He was on solid ground. His fingers were closed about the edge of a great pipe. It was a cylinder much like the one they had traveled in, and it emerged, or went into, the ball of earth on which they had stuck.

He clung tightly to the edge while he checked out their situation. Phyllis and Fyodor were both near him, the double circle of wire having held them all together. The place was not, as he had first thought, a big spheroid. It was, he could tell from the many tunnels projecting here and there, a complex of sewage tunnels and shafts. The complex must have been torn apart from its connections at various points, lifted bodily, hurled into the air. Large masses of earth and rock had stuck to it and given it the roughly round shape that had made him mistake it for a part of a mountain.

About a hundred yards away, a tower stuck out, its top had been sheared off, and much of the facade of mortared rock around it had dropped off. But the stone around an entrance still remained, and he saw over it, carved on the rock, the words: AND THE LIFE.

"One of the houses of X," he muttered. "The house of the dead."

"What?" said Phyllis, still dazed.

"Never mind. Follow me. Do what I say."

Carefully, he rid himself of the wire that held him, all the time grasping with one hand the edge of the tunnel. Then, he helped the other two out, and he shed his wings. But he did not throw them away; he hurled them down the tunnel. Peering down or into it, he saw by the dim light that they struck the floor, bounced and slowly began drifting back "up." He told the others what he meant to do and how they must imitate him if they did not want to go flying away from the complex.

He used both hands to grab the edge, pulled himself over, and shoved himself into the tunnel mouth and down its length. He brought up hard against the wall, or the floor, depending upon what you wanted to call it. His hands, held out in front of him, took the impact; his arms bent to receive the energy; his shoulder crashed into the wall. But he was not hurt, and he was safely within the tunnel.

In the next moment, he wondered about his use of the thought "safely." Before he could get out of the way, he was struck by Phyllis, and both hit the wall. Just as they bounced, they collided with Fyodor.

Fyodor complained of bruises on his head and his heels, both of which had banged into the walls while he was turning over and over coming down the tunnel. He had lost control and bumped into the sides at various points. However, the friction of the contacts had slowed him down somewhat so that he had not hit as hard as the first two.

Cull did not wait to assess the damages. He began the ricochet-like method of travel that was the only way along these smooth round pipes. Shove off at an angle from a wall. Shoot for a distance until you came in against the other wall at an angle. Slap your hands down just before your body made contact, get a fleeting but effective contact, and change your direction of attack toward the other wall.

He made mistakes. His efforts to twist sometimes turned him around or sideways, and he bounced off the walls with a jar that would leave bruises. Then he had to start all over again. But he began to gain skill, a skill the principles of which he had learned while in the other cylinder. Phyllis and Fyodor were not too far behind him. In a short time, they were making coordinated zigzags along the tunnel and were very much aware of how they must control their muscles in a nongravity environment.

They came to a branching of the tunnel. He led them to the left, and they went like human light-ning streaks, though not nearly as swiftly, straight down the pipe. The total darkness they had expected after making the turn was not there. In-stead, they saw, far down the end, a round blaze of light. It was strong enough to give the distant half of the tunnel the illumination of day and to make this half easily navigable. Cull slowed him-self down before getting to the bull's eye of the en-trance. He grasped the edge and pulled himself slowly around, ready to push himself back into the tunnel if he saw anything dangerous.

What he saw was a vast room, empty of human beings or demons. The purpose of the many and strange-looking apparatuses was something only experimentation and time could determine, if ever. Besides the way through which they had just come, there was a door at the far end, and another at the top of a spiralling staircase at the opposite end of the room. The light had no visible source; it shone with equal intensity throughout.

The room was, he estimated, a cube about three hundred yards on one side. Arranged in the room, in no pattern that he could detect, were many tall cabinets of metal. Cull propelled himself gently and cautiously from one to another. On the fronts of these were grey-faced windows, knobs, push-buttons, and other instruments of indication or control. Most of these were associated with metal nameplates which bore lettering in an alien script. Many of the cabinets were attached to thick in-sulated cables; many also seemed to have no power connections.

Cull pushed himself through the air from cabinet to cabinet. He paused at some and tried to determine their purpose. None of them equated with the electronic devices he had known on Earth. The memory of those had always been shadowy and, with the passage of time in this world, they had grown even dimmer. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps if I could remember well, I'd be able to guess what some of these are supposed to do.

There was one that gave him pause because he thought he could, at least, experiment with it. It was a cabinet twice as tall as he and as wide as it was high. On a ledge projecting from it were a dozen or so black discs. These were oval-shaped, about two inches in diameter and one-sixteenth of an inch thick. They lay just below a slot in the face of the cabinet. This had only two controls. One was a very large knob with a white pointer. Around the knob were many thin markers. There was also a pushbutton.

He maneuvered until he was clinging to the shelf with one hand, and then he tried to insert one of

the black discs in the slot. It was too big to drop in, nor could it be forced.

Cull pushed the button, and the button glowed. Immediately, a disc fell out of the slot. The button ceased to be lit.

Another depression of the button got a like response. The button glowed, and a second disc was ejected onto the shelf.

Cull turned the knob several markers and pushed the button. This time, six discs fell out before the light went out.

He picked up three of the discs in one hand and pushed himself to the neighboring cabinet. This had a small shelf on one wall and a slot, but it differed in being open on the side next to the shelf. The cavity was more than large enough for a man to stand within but still occupied only a small space in the enormous cabinet. Cull inserted one of the discs into the slot, and he waited.

At once, the interior of the coffin-shaped cavity was filled with dazzling lines. The lines zigzagged like lightning and in all directions, seeming to project from the back and the sides of the cavity. They criss-crossed each other and became entangled in a snarl.

He noticed that the light from the twisting threads was shining on something he had not seen before. The front of the cavity was not open as he had thought but was sealed with a transparent vitreous stuff.

The lightning streaks continued to interplay, but now something was materializing in the cabinet. He shielded his eyes and narrowed them and peered into the glare. He could make out nothing except a darkness in the light, a man-shape. For a second, he thought he saw a skeleton standing before him, then, the bones were clothed in muscles, and organs were suspended in the cage of bones; lungs, heart, viscera. Abruptly, there was a sheath of muscles over all. Finally, skin. But it happened so swiftly he could not be sure; the whole process could have been a hallucination induced by the flicker and dazzle.

A moment later, he knew it was no false image. There was a man standing in the cavity; he could see him clearly because the lightnings had ceased as suddenly as they had begun. The entrance to the cavity now seemed to be gone; there was no reflection of his figure on glassy stuff.

The man was tall and well built and had long auburn hair and a long auburn beard. His face was young, that of a man of thirty, and he was handsome as a hawk is handsome.

"X!" said Cull.

X smiled and stepped out of the cabinet. He looked around him and blinked a few times as if he were awakening. From the other end of the room came Fyodor's cry: "It's X!"

Fyodor shouted, "I'm coming, Master!" and he pushed violently against a cabinet and spread his arms out so as to enfold X at the end of his launch. He had forgotten caution, however, with the result that he shot at a slight upward angle and so passed X about two feet above his head. Wailing, waving his arms, he soared on up across the enormous chamber until he rammed into the wall. He screamed just before he struck; there was a thud, and he bounced off the wall. Unconscious, he drifted back toward them. Blood oozed from cuts on his face and forehead and collected in beads.

Cull's first thought was to try to rescue Fyodor. Then, he remembered the little man's adoration

of X. Anything that he, Cull, might say or do to X could result in Fyodor's interfering. Better to let him float there, helpless.

X stepped out of the cabinet and said to Cull, "My son, what can I do for you?"

"The first thing you can do is forget that sonny stuff!" snarled Cull. "Let's be honest. At least, you try to be honest. Tell me the truth."

X said, "What. . ."

"Yeah, I know," said Cull. "The same old runaround. What is truth? O.K. Tell me about me. What am I doing here? Tell me about this place. What is it? Why is it?"

X frowned slightly, then smiled again.

"Once there was a man who lived a good life. Or so he thought, and as a man thinks, so is he, isn't he?"

"This man grew white-haired and wrinkled while the results of a good life piled up around him. He owned a big home, he had a faithful and uncomplaining wife, many friends, many honors, many sons and daughters, even more grand-children, and some great-grandchildren. But, as all men do, he came to the end of his days and lay on his deathbed. He could afford the best doctors and medicine on Earth, but these. . ."

"Hold it! Hold it!" said Cull. "I've heard that one before. More than once. Look! I don't want any of your canned speeches, any of your deep dark riddles. I want answers to my questions. Plain simple easy-to-understand answers! If anyone has them, you do. So, start talking!"

He glared at X and clenched his free fist. Then, the glare faded away, his eyes widened, his jaw dropped.

He said, "You walked out of the cabinet! You're not floating! You're standing there!"

"He who has faith," said X, "may walk where other men fly."

Cull had to fight to keep from breaking into hysterical laughter. "I don't want proverbs or parables!" he howled. "I want answers to my questions!"

"First," said X, "you must learn to phrase your questions properly. And that, my son, takes patience, labor, and wisdom. And it also takes faith. . ."

"Faith that there are any answers?" said Cull. "I said I didn't want any double-talk. I want to know! Now!"

X stretched out his hands in a benediction and said, "Once there was a man who lived a good life. Or so he thought, and, as a man thinks, so is he, isn't he?"

"This man grew white-haired and wrinkled while the results. . ."

Cull screamed and launched himself at X. As he shot through the air, he pulled the flint knife from the wire belt.

X did not move. He continued talking.

Then Cull had gripped him with one arm around his neck. Both went down, with Cull striking with the knife as they fell. They struck the floor hard, but Cull did not let loose, fearing that he would propel himself away from X and drift helplessly in the air. X seemed to have weight, and Cull wanted to cling to that weight. Meanwhile, he drove with the flint into X's breast, again and again.

Blood spurted out from just below the beard, collected in globules, and floated away. X tried to say something but choked from the unrelenting pressure of the arm around his neck.

Cull stabbed lower down on X's body, into the solar plexus. Blood bubbled in X's throat, and then it gushed out of his mouth.

Cull became aware of someone screaming. It was Phyllis.

He pushed himself away from X toward a tall cabinet and grabbed it to hold himself. He looked back at X. X was dead, and, dead, had lost his weight. With the push given him by Cull as Cull had propelled himself away, he now drifted, face down, a few inches off the floor. Presently, he nudged gently into a cabinet, and all motion ceased.

Cull shouted at Phyllis, "Shut up! Shut up!"

Phyllis, some distance away, clinging to another cabinet, stopped screaming but she was sobbing. She looked terrified.

"Don't worry!" he called. "I killed him, and there is no lightning from the sky! I killed him, you understand? I can do better than that! Watch!"

He shoved another black disc into the slot, and he watched while the fibers of light danced and twisted around each other. Then, brief flickers of bone, of organs, of veins and arteries, of muscles.

Finally, the cessation of light and another X. Or one who looked exactly like him.

As soon as he saw the bearded man step out of the cabinet, Cull pressed a third disc into the receptacle. A fourth. Within several minutes, three X's stood outside the cabinet.

"All right!" shouted Cull. "Why don't all of you, the Holy Trinity, start giving each other the old spiel? That'd be a new experience, wouldn't it? Having to hear the canned speech you've been handing out to so many people? So, maybe you can answer each other, and I can eavesdrop on the end of the story, find out what the old man should've done?"

"Or don't you know, either?"

"What is it?" cried Phyllis. "I don't understand this! What are you doing? Where'd they come from?"

"I don't know," he shouted back. "But I'm going to find out if I have to skin them alive, take them apart piece by piece, unravel their nerves nerve by nerve, tear the truth out of their guts!"

The three X's turned to face Cull, and their mouths, moving in unison, said, "That won't be

necessary. I'll tell you now what you would have heard very soon. Although it won't allow you to carry the story to others. You can't be a prophet here. Any more than the so-called demons could."

Cull grasped immediately that someone was using the three as transmitters and speakers. Also, as receivers.

"Who are you?" he said. "Where are you?"

"Just outside the shell of your world, man," said the X's. "I was on the point of entering when an alarm lit up. I investigated the source and found that some obviously unauthorized person was using the X-discs. The soul-body transducer doesn't normally turn out that many X's in such a short time. So, I used the proper instrument -- its title would mean nothing to you -- and placed myself in rapport with the X's."

Cull said, "You answered the second question. But who are you?"

"Immortal?" said the X's. "It'd be an exact title for my group but it wouldn't distinguish us from you. Precursors? That would be a partial description only. Ethicals? Apt but not inclusive. Let's say: Saviors."

"Saviors?" repeated Cull. "In what way do you save? And whom do you save?"

There was a long silence. The three bearded men stood mutely, looking at Cull with expressions that he thought resembled those of sad sheep. Their arms hung by their sides, and they looked through him.

Then, just as Cull was beginning to think that communication was cut off and that he'd better be getting out of this place before the so-called savior appeared, the X's spoke.

"I have been wrestling with the temptation to appear in person, and I have won. I will not show myself, for I would be so horrible in the flesh to you that you could not bear it. Not that I find you at all appealing, physically, though I love you as a being. I will continue to speak through these machines."

"Machines?" said Cull slowly.

"Automatons of flesh and metal. Yes, these agents are synthetic and have no souls -- right word? -- because they are too simple to have any genuine intelligence. They do not have even a rudiment of self-consciousness. Their nervous system is as fully developed as any genuine human being's, but they have almost no brain, as you know it. And when they act without control on our part, they do so automatically.

"They are able to walk on the floor, for in-stance, because they have a very small gravity-governing unit imbedded in their bodies. If you were to dissect one of three, you would think that the unit was an organ."

Cull looked speculatively at the dead X floating above the floor.

The X's said, "Do not try to cut the unit from that body. You could not use it unless it were hooked to your nervous system. And, anyway, it will be destroyed by remote control."

So suddenly that it startled Cull and left him shaking, two of the X's rose from the floor and

soared toward the exit at the head of the stairs near the opposite end of the room. One paused briefly to examine Fyodor, still floating un-conscious, then flew on.

"They have gone to locate other survivors of the cataclysm," said the remaining X. "This one will remain to instruct you in what you have doubtless so long desired to know. I fear, however, that you will find that you were happier when ignorant."

Again, Cull was startled. Someone touched him, and he turned so swiftly and flung his hands up so violently that he would have propelled him-self helplessly above the machines. But Phyllis' hand grabbed his wrist, and she pulled him back to the shelf to which she was clinging.

"I'm sorry I scared you," she said. "I heard everything. All of a sudden, I felt very much alone all by myself. I had to be near you. I'm so frightened."

He breathed deeply several times and then he recovered. And he felt love and compassion for her flood through him and out to her. They were two pitifully small and helpless beings who needed each other as much as any two in all the universe had ever needed.

He turned to the beautiful and intelligent-looking automaton, and he spoke very boldly, knowing that he had to do so to keep his terror hidden from the speaker and far away from him-self.

He said, "Why have you dared to do this to us? To treat us as if we were automatons like X? You spoke of the soul a moment ago. You said that sentient beings had one. If so, Phyllis has a soul. I have one. So, why did you place us here without our permission or without even bothering to tell us why? Why?"

"It had to be that way," said the X. "As for souls, there are no such things. Not naturally. Beings are born; they live; they die. That is their end forever. Or it would be if it were not for us.

"I'll try to make this short but clear. I won't answer all your questions. If I did, I'd be here from now until halfway into eternity. It's enough for me, and will have to be for you, when I say that my people originated on a planet in a Galaxy thrice removed in time from this one. Three times. Our Galaxy died and was disintegrated and a new Galaxy was born from the ashes of the old one. And the second died, and a third was born.

"My planet gave birth to a sentient species, my people, about 50 billion of your years ago. It was not until we had had a civilization for about 10,000 of your years, however, that we had a technology advanced enough to devise an artificial soul, a scientific method of ensuring immortality.

"It is a terrible thing to contemplate that many billions of my people died and were lost forever in the annals of eternity before we discovered the synthetic soul. It does not seem fair, but this is not a fair universe. Besides, we have not given up hope of some day giving these lost ones souls. There are certain means. . . but I will not go into these.

"We are what you would call highly ethical beings. We are not just interested in our own kind and its preservation. We love life and its products; we hold life sacred. This, in a universe that seems to breed and kill billions upon billions upon billions as if beings were a mere by-product of some cosmic process. .

"Having discovered the means to do so, we determined that every sentient being throughout the universe. . . yes, and even the pets among our animals. . . and a number of representatives of every

species on every world. . . should have souls. These specimens of the so-called lower animals include every species: worms, sharks, amoebae, flies, elephants. . . but I digress, I promised to stick to the point."

Cull looked up at Fyodor and wished that he would regain consciousness. The little man had wanted so much to know, he had such faith in the supernatural, in his X. And then Cull thought that it was better this way. For Fyodor would not receive the final word in the form for which he had hoped so devoutly. To find that his beloved X was only a brainless artifice of flesh and metal, that would be too much.

"Soul is the term I use," said the X. "But, what is this soul? Is it a particle? A wave? It is not elec-tromagnetic but a form of energy your kind does not even as yet suspect. When they do, they, too, will be able to invent the soul, but their work will be only duplicating ours and will be useless.

"We'll call the soul a quantum. And the devices which originate and transmit them, quantum-generators. We built these generators, made them indestructible and planted them in many locations in the universe so that, even if some were destroyed by means of which we cannot conceive, others would continue to do their work.

"These generators continuously transmit the soul-quanta, which are not bound by the speed of light but pass around the universe in less than one Earthly hour. They fill the universe, so that no sentient being can be born and not encounter one at the appropriate time.

"Each quantum contains a built-in factor which makes it 'hook' into a newly formed sentient, a baby yet in the womb. It stops at once when it en-counters the neural pattern of this sentient and remains with the sentient as long as it lives.

"And, once it 'hooks' itself to the flesh, no other soul-quantum can enter. Theoretically, at least, though it may happen that more than one does enter, thus accounting for certain types of schizophrenia.

"Once attached to the body, the quantum im-mediately begins to record everything about the individual. The constantly shifting molecules of the cells, the electrochemical energy changes, nerve messages, everything. And, as it records, it stores the recordings temporarily, then discharges these for new ones. It does this until the body suf-fers a physical death and irreversible decom-position sets in.

"The final recording is the one stored per-manently in the quantum. Decomposition releases the quantum. Full of recordings of the physical being that once lived, it races again through the universe. And, eventually, it is detected by our soul-receivers and captured. Once caught, its recordings are 'played' into a receptacle like one of those black discs you inserted into the re-creation machine.

"The soul, to all effects, is now the individual as he was at the moment of his death, containing all the individual contained.

"When we so wish, we can insert the disc into a -- what would you call it? -- a resurrection machine. This reproduces the protoplasm of the body, and all that the body was, from the data in the disc.

"Thus, you see, there is life after death. And it is not done through supernatural means, such as primitives hope for, but through the science of sentients."

Cull and Phyllis were silent for a long time. Then, Cull, haltingly, as if he had been stunned, said,

"But. . . I am not resurrected. Not the real I. . . me. . . This thing that I am, it's just a re-cording embodied in a shape that looked as I once did. It's not me. . ."

"You are wrong," said the X. "The soul-quantum is as much you as the skin which was torn and grows again. It is more than an ex-crescence which is only temporarily attached to you. Would you say that a supernaturally en-dowed soul, slipped into your body, is not you? Then, why say that a scientifically endowed soul is not? Would you, if you had been knocked un-conscious, say that you, on regaining con-sciousness, were not the same individual? The soul is you; it continues as you; the death of your body is only a temporary state; a sleep. Passage from a physical body to a physically unperceivable con-dition and back to a physical body is merely changing one state for another. The you remains."

Cull was silent for a few seconds. There were so many questions, and he did not know which to voice first. Phyllis spoke for him. In a high-pitched and trembling voice, she said, "What is happening now? Why are we being destroyed, I mean, why the earthquakes, the cataclysm, the. . . the killing of all of us? Why. . ."

"Because. . ."

The X stopped, and he turned his head slightly sidewise to look up at the entrance above the stair-way. Cull looked also; he saw a demon floating in the doorway. He had a scarlet skin and four thin spiraling horns projecting from the top of a hairless head. Instead of arms, he had two long batlike wings. A tail also projected from his but-tocks; it seemed to be two vanes of leather sup-ported by two rays of cartilage radiating from his buttocks.

"Here is one," said the X, "who will answer your questions. He has been released now from the bonds of silence -- as far as you two are concerned. He recognizes you as one of him."

"What do you mean?" said Cull hoarsely.

The X did not reply but rose from the floor and soared toward the demon. The winged creature flapped away from the approaching figure and allowed it to fly through the entrance. Then, it came toward them, extending its wings out slowly, turning them to act as scoops, and pushing the air behind it. Coming near them, it maneuvered its wings in reverse and halted only a few feet away. Cull, despite his dismay at the X's departure, ad-mired the thing's superb control. It was very dif-ficult to fly under no-gravity conditions.

The demon grinned, showing broad thick teeth, and said, "Welcome, brother! And sister!"

"What do you mean by that?" said Cull. "Brother?"

The thing did not answer. Instead, it gazed around and then, finally, said, "Noticed how hot it's suddenly become? The generators are melting. The Immortals are destroying their equipment. We'd better get out of here before we cook. I like it hot, but not this hot."

Cull knew that, for the first time in his ex-perience, a demon had spoken the truth. The room was getting hot, and it was evident that the cabinets were the source of the rise in temperature.

"They're melting," said the demon. He flew over to Cull, managing to turn while doing so and presenting his backside to the man. "Here, you two grab hold of my tail. I'll pull you out of here, and one of you pick up your unconscious friend on the way out."

A few minutes later, the train of four, the demon acting as engine, sailed out of the doorway and up a tunnel. Then, they were out in the void again, and the complex was whirling away from them.

"We'll be without a roof over our head for a long time," he said cheerfully to them. "Then, when the Immortals have rearranged all the debris into many large masses of materials, rotating in defined paths, we'll settle down on one. And we'll start our damned and doomed work."

"We?" said Cull. "Would you mind explaining. . . brother?"

"How much do you know?" said the thing.

Cull told him what he had heard from the X's. The demon laughed, and he said, "So, now you know why we couldn't tell you the truth. Any more than you'll be able to tell the newcomers the truth."

"Newcomers?"

"Oh, yes. Those who will begin to repopulate this sphere. They're a species who evolved inside just such a sphere as this. Only, the sphere was natural, not artificial. And it rotated just enough to generate a centrifugal force equivalent to about one-fiftieth of what your Earth had.

"So, their forms are very different from ours. They don't have wings; they propel themselves by taking in air through an orifice and expelling it forcibly through a cartilaginous tube. They travel backward, and, not needing limbs stiffened with bone, to act as levers against gravity, they have tentacles. But you will meet them in due time, and you will be as monstrous to them as we so-called demons were to you."

Phyllis said, "That. . . that X didn't answer my question. I asked him why our world was changed so suddenly, why so many of us were killed and the rest left to die?"

"Because the same thing will have happened, rather, is going to happen, to your Earth as it did to our planet. Through some agency which I don't know, perhaps an atomic or biological warfare, perhaps an explosion of the sun, perhaps. . . I don't know. My own people were exterminated when they sterilized themselves through the overuse of chemicals meant to destroy all harmful insects. By the time they realized what they were doing, it was too late.

"As a matter of fact, the Immortals themselves must not have realized what was happening. Otherwise, I and many of my fellows would not have been left over."

He was quiet for a minute, then he said, "The Immortals have great wisdom. But they're not in-fallible. We are evidence of that. They miscalculated the numbers that were to be born, and we were the unlucky ones in the surplus."

"I don't understand you at all," said Cull. "Left over? To be born? Surplus?"

The demon laughed uproariously, so much so that he was not able to move his wings efficiently, and the train bobbed up and down.

Cull gritted his teeth and wished he could kill the thing. But he was helpless.

"You will pardon me," said the demon. "I should not laugh. I can still remember, after all this time, how I felt when I first heard the truth. It was too much to bear -- though I did bear it -- that I should be a victim of statistics. One of the unavoidable surplus.

"I'll tell you, brother, something that will completely shatter you. And make you what it made me, that is a truly demonic creature.

"You thought, after the Immortal spoke to you, that you had lived on Earth and died. And that this was the afterlife prepared for you by the Immortals, a strange sort of Heaven or Hell, to say the least.

"You were wrong! You haven't been born yet!"

Phyllis gave a cry, but it was not the words of the demon that caused it. She said, "Fyodor just died, Jack! He opened his eyes, looked at me, sighed, and asked where he was. Before I could answer, he died!"

Cull did not look back. He said, "Let him go, Phyllis. He's one of the lucky."

"How right you are, brother," said the demon. "Just as you will be if you are killed or find the courage to kill yourself. Then, you'll be sent forth as a soul. But you won't fulfill your natural destiny. Your kind are dead; you'll have to attach yourself to some alien species. And it will be your fate never to feel at home, always to be a stranger."

"What in Hell are you talking about?" screamed Cull.

"Calm down. Listen. The Immortals couldn't let well enough alone. Having invented the artificial soul to ensure that all sentients should also be immortal, they then conceived of pre-birth conditioning. Why not, they said to themselves, build a prenatal world? Give the soul a body such as the soul is likely to have when it attaches itself to the as-yet-unborn body on the natural planet? Give its brain some synthetic memories, so that it thinks it has existed before? And then attempt to install an ethics before it is born?

"The idea was that the creature would have a difficult enough time on Earth; it would find it hard to act ethically, as the Immortals conceive ethics and as much of mankind conceives it. Same on my planet. It would be a sort of before-Terrestrial-existence reflex conditioning.

"The creature would go through a span of life in this sphere. And, there, through the lectures of the various X's, it would be given a guidance pattern for its next life. This ethical foundation, would, of course, be subconscious. The soul, sent forth again to attach itself to an Earthly body, would have no conscious memories of the pre-Terran life. But there would be an unconscious urging to act ethically.

"To put it in the words of your own Western ethics, mankind is doomed to fall from grace. But, thanks to the seeds implanted in the earlier life, he might rise again, be reborn the ethical man.

"Don't ask me what happens after a man has been born on Earth and then dies. The Immortals have planned another world for him, but it's one I won't know in this world. Nor the next."

Cull tried desperately to think straight. He said, "But what's to keep me from being attached to a non-Western body? To a Confucianist Chinese? To an idol-worshipping African? Or, even, why should I end up on Earth? If it's pure chance that determines what body I land in, why can't I be 'hooked' onto some thing that lives on a planet a million lightyears away from Earth?"

"Because, first, your soul will be -- would have been -- released in the vicinity of Earth, beamed toward it. Maybe you would have been a Hindu. So what? You'd still have the subconscious urgings to

act ethically, to be good. In short, to follow the golden rule. The name of your particular god and the taboos and prejudices you'd have would have been determined by the race and culture in which you were raised."

Cull looked back at Phyllis. She was staring at him as if she'd gone into shock. Her skin was bluish-white; her eyes, glazed. Beyond her, a small figure now, floated Fyodor.

Cull thought, if Fyodor had been conscious and had heard all this, he would have denied the reason for this world. He would have said that the Immortals were atheists and blasphemers, that they lacked faith in God. Therefore, they were trying to do His work by creating these souls. Besides being atheists, they were being redundant, for the Creator had already fashioned souls. And to create a multitude of saviors to make sure that at least one got to Earth was even more shocking.

Fyodor would have rejected everything the Immortals stood for and did. To him, they would have been the true demons, the Old Enemy, the Fathers of Lies.

"If," Cull said, "we're really in some sort of pre-Terrestrial existence, how do the Immortals know what memories to give us? How do they know what form life will take on Earth?"

"Oh, they keep several decades ahead of Earth's expanding population. They supply souls faster than man can breed. And they know, of course, all about the cultures and languages and. . . everything. Now, you and the woman, for instance, were probably scheduled to spend about fifty Earth years inside this sphere. If you were killed here before the time was up, you'd have been resurrected as many times as was needed. Then, conditioning presumably having taken effect, you'd have been recorded and released as quanta or whatever you want to call them.

"But, even the unforeseen can happen to the Immortals. Mankind on Earth came to a sudden end, just as my people did.

"So, I was left here as surplus, as a sort of God's gadfly, and the pre-birth Earthlings found me here and called me demon. Just as the new species to come here will rank you as demons.

"You see, the subconscious memory the soul-quantum takes to Earth brings with it more than an ethical urging. It also brings with it memories of demons, giants, weird anthropomorphic beasts. Hence, mythology and the various archetypes and devils of various religions."

Cull burst out, "If this is true, and I'm still not sure you're not tormenting me, why don't you kill yourself? Release yourself from this hell?"

"Because my body is a physical body. Its cells want to survive. I can't bring myself to commit suicide. Not yet, anyway, not until the pressures get too great. Maybe you'll be able to kill yourself. But I doubt it. You've survived all this; you're too tough. You want to live.

"Even all I've told you and all you've seen won't quite convince you that there is another life. Just as I'm almost, but not quite, convinced. I want to live in the world I know. So, brother, we go merrily through hell together. Defeating the purpose of the Immortals by getting meaner and more vicious and cynical and sadistic. By the time we're killed, we'll be so set in our ways, that a thousand cycles of births and rebirths wouldn't straighten us out."

"Then," said Cull, "maybe the Immortals haven't told you the truth either. Maybe you're lying, and. . ."

"Go to hell, brother," said the thing, and it kicked violently against Cull's grip on its tail and broke free.

Away it winged while Cull and Phyllis hung in the dimly lit void.

They clung together while the wreckage of a world drifted by. She wept softly for a while. Cull held her tightly and patted her shoulder or stroked her head. But he was not thinking of her. He was thinking that they would be blown by the winds. But which way, in what general direction?

Between the interior of this sphere and space was a thin wall. The cold of space was seeping through, and the air layer next to the wall would be precipitating its moisture. Ice would form on the wall. The air next to it would cool and con-dense, thus forming a high-pressure area. The hotter air near the center of the sphere would make a low-pressure area. So, winds would be generated by the cold high-pressure air moving toward the center into the warm low-pressure region.

This meant that he and Phyllis would not be blown against the ice-packed fog-surrounded walls. On the contrary, they'd be blown inward, toward the sun. But what kind of turbulence would be created inside this perfect sphere with winds moving inward with equal force from every square centimeter of sphere surface? If what the Immortal said was true, then the sphere would be given a slight spin. Air would have weight; so, also, the objects now floating. He and Phyllis would have a tendency to drift toward the wall. However, the inward-blowing winds would be more than strong enough to drive them away.

So, a great whirlpool of air would be formed near the center. Would not he and Phyllis be caught in this and carried around and around and around?

He did not know. He could not remember enough of meteorology to predict accurately.

If they died from starvation or collision with debris, their souls, or quanta, would be released and then detected by the Immortals' receivers. The Immortals would do whatever they did with recaptured souls and would later release them. They would go flying through the cosmos, ricocheting off the corners of the universe, go wherever chance took them. He and Phyllis would be separated, forever. He would be captured by a physical being whose form and neural structure attracted his soul. She, also, but perhaps at another area of the world, millions of lightyears away.

He would be born again, this time in a nonhuman body, though it would have to have some resemblances to a human shape to 'catch' his soul-quantum. And his original destiny would have been thwarted. Never for him the planet of Earth. The memories he carried, even if he could recall them in his future being, would be false. But, he would not remember. That was the beauty of it. He would not remember. Even if, through some chance, he and Phyllis were reborn on the same planet, perhaps, even in the same womb as twins, neither would know the other.

But would they dream strange dreams, glimpse terrifying yet half-familiar vistas thrust up by the unconscious during their sleep? Would they, if they did meet, feel an unexplainable affinity? And would anything they had learned about good and evil in this world influence them in the next?

He did not know.

There was more than one question he had not had time to ask. For instance, why had X worn dark glasses? Also, what was the origin and purpose of those stone idols Cull had found in the tunnel?

Perhaps, the rumor about the dark glasses had come closer to the truth than one might expect. This said that X wore them to hide or shield the too-powerful glare of divinity shining from his eyes. This, of course, was false, but X could have used the glasses to create an even stronger nimbus of awe about him. Men looking at him would imagine the fearful burning-bright eyes behind the black spectacles.

As for the idols, a tale was told about them, too. It said that, long ago, when the "demons" had been the majority, they had imposed demon-worship on the human beings. Idols were used by the demons in "churches." When man became numerous enough to overthrow the demons, he had demolished the idols.

Perhaps, the demons had managed to hide some of these and had been planning to bring them out when another cataclysm would so thin out and disorganize mankind that the demons could reinstate their rule and religion.

Unfortunately for the demons, they had been almost all killed, too.

He opened his mouth to speak about his thoughts to Phyllis, and then he found that he could not. The words would not come. The silence imposed by the Immortals extended even to a fellow-"demon?"

She looked at him through tears and said, "What were you going to say, Jack?"

"I love you," he said, and he kissed her.

Later, while he gazed over her shoulder, he thought how easily those words had come. It was true that he had spoken partly to allay her fears and to make her feel protected and a little more secure. Yet, did not this desire to do so mean that he loved her? Not a love based only on sexual attraction, though that was part of it, but a love based on her being human.

"Here comes another lost soul," he said.

Phyllis twisted around in his embrace so that she could see also.

In so doing, she imparted even more spin to their already rotating state. As they turned head over heels and around and around, they saw the newcomer get larger and larger until, presently, they perceived every detail of its body.

It had a long tubular body, brown and yellow, with six slim tentacles at one end, six fins project-ing at various angles from various places, and a fringe of serrated skin at the other. On the end nearest the two people were two thick fleshy stalks, one on each side of the body. Each of these stalks bore two eyes in deep sockets, and Cull got the impression that they could focus as well as his own eyes. There was an opening in the end pointed at them; it had two thick crimson-colored lips that parted and closed. These, Cull surmised, were the valves for the air-compression tube that the creature would use in its jet-propulsion through the atmosphere.

Presently, the thing was circling them cautiously. Then, apparently having decided they could do it no harm, it shot up to them and gently flicked Phyllis with one of the three slim tips of a tentacle.

Phyllis screamed.

The thing screamed also, and it sped away.

"It'll come back," said Cull. "Sooner or later, we'll be its slaves, just as the 'demons' were ours."

He tried to tell Phyllis what he was thinking but found again the obligation of silence was on him.

Now I know how the demons felt, he thought. I want to warn these creatures that their actions here will influence their lives in another world. But I won't be able to. And so I'll get exasperated because they can't see what I so plainly see. I'll become angry with them because they're so blind, so stupid. And so, wanting them to do the right thing, I'll hate them because they're being selfish, cruel, indifferent, arrogant, petty. I'll hate them. But, at the same time, I'll love them.

They'll ask me, What is truth?

And I will not be able to tell them because they already know.