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Brother Jarles, priest of the First and Outermost Circle, novice in the Hierarchy, swallowed hard against his churning anger; bent every effort to make his face a mask—not only to the commoners, for that was something every member of the Hierarchy was taught to do, but to his brother priests as well.

Any priest who hated the Hierarchy as he did during these frightening spasms of rage must be mad.

But priests could not go mad—at least, not without the Hierarchy knowing of it, as it knew of everything else.

A misfit then? But a priest was fitted to his job with infinite precision and foresight, the very outlines of his personality measured as if with an atomic probe. A priest could not hate his work.

No, he must be mad. And the Hierarchy must be concealing the fact from him for its own inscrutable purposes.

Or else—everything to the contrary—he was right.

At the touch of that sickening thought, the Great Square of Megathopolis seemed to haze and bloat before his eyes. The commoners became drab blurs; the priests here and there, scarlet ones, topped with the healthy

pink of well-fed faces.

Fighting for composure and vision itself, he forced himself to focus on the year-stone of a recently-built dwelling in the commoners' section. The inscription read, "139 G.G."

He sought to maintain calm by a calculation. The year 139 of the Great God would be the year 206 of the Golden Age, except that Golden Age dates were not recognized. It would also be the year 360 of the Atomic Age. And finally the year 2305 of the Dawn Civilization and—what was the god called?—Christ.

"Hamser Chohn, Commoner of the Fifth Ward! Stand forward, my son."

Brother Jarles winced. In moods like this, that reedy voice grated unendurably on him. Why had he been paired with Brother Chulian! Why, for that matter, must priests never work alone, but always by twos!

But he knew the reason. It was so they might spy on each other, make detailed reports on each other. So that the Hierarchy would know of everything.

Fighting every instant to maintain the mask, he turned back. His eyes automatically dodged the fourth face in the queue of commoners lined up before himself and Brother Chulian.

That fat, blue-eyed, soft-cheeked, shaven priest was consulting the work lists, which were printed in primitive style for the benefit of the commoners, who did not know—and were not supposed to know—anything of reading tapes. Really, there was no reason to hate Brother Chulian especially. Just a rank-and-file priest of the Second Circle. Just a bloated baby.

But you could hate a bloated baby when he exercised over adult commoners the powers of schoolmaster, minister, and parent.

Only one good thing—this particular job, so distasteful to Jarles, tickled Brother Chulian's sense of self-importance so much that he was willing to do it all by himself.

The little fat priest looked up from the work lists at the stalwart young commoner nervously twisting a shapeless hat in big, horny hands, pausing every second to wipe one of them against a home-woven smock.

"My son," he piped benignly, "you are to work for the next three months in the mines. That will reduce your contribution to the Hierarchy to a mere half of your private earnings. You will report here to the appropriate deacon at dawn tomorrow. Hamser Dom!"

The young commoner gulped, nodded twice, and quickly stepped aside.

Jarles' anger flared anew. The mines! Worse than the fields, or even the roads! Surely the man must know. And yet, when he had heard, he had looked grateful—that same fawning look the old books were always attributing to a faithful domestic animal of the genus *Canis*, now extinct.

Jarles wrenched his gaze away, again skipping the same face, now third in line. It was that of a woman.

The sinking sun sent rich shadows across the Great Square. The crowd was thinning. Only the tail-ends of a few wards were still waiting to hear what the work lists held in store. Here and there smocked or bloused commoners—the men in clumsy leggings, the women in heavy skirts—were gathering up the leftovers of homemade goods they had brought to barter or sell, loading them onto their own backs or those of small, burly mules, then trailing off into the narrow, cobbled streets of the commoners' section. Some wore broad-brimmed hats of a coarse felt. Others had already pulled up their hoods, although the chill of evening had not yet arrived.

Looking toward the commoners' section of Megatheopolis, Jarles was reminded of pictures he had seen of the cities of the Black Ages, or Middle Ages—or whatever that period of the Dawn Civilization had been called. Except that the houses here were mostly one-story and windowless, and everything was very neat and clean. Although he was only a priest of the First Circle, he knew that the resemblance was no coincidence. The Hierarchy did not tolerate coincidence. It had a reason for everything.

An old crone in ragged garments and a peaked hat hobbled past. The other commoners drew away from her. A small boy yelled, "Mother Juji! Witch! Witch!" shied a stone at her and raced off. But Jarles smiled at her faintly. And she smiled back—an unpleasant grimacing of wrinkled lips over toothless gums during which her hooked nose and jutting chin seemed about to meet. Then she was on her way again, feeling with her cane for secure places between the cobbles.

In the other direction, Megatheopolis was magically different. For there rose the gleaming buildings of the Sanctuary, topped by the incredible structure of the Cathedral, which fronted the Great Square.

Jades looked up at the Great God, and for a moment felt fingering through his anger a touch of the same pious fear that vast idol had awakened in him when he was only a commoner's child—long before he had passed the tests and begun to learn the secrets of the priests. Could the Great God see his blasphemous rage, with those huge, searching, slightly frowning eyes? But such a superstitious fancy was unworthy even of a novice in the Hierarchy.

Without the Great God, the Cathedral was still a mighty structure of soaring columns and peaked windows tall as pine trees. But where one might expect a steeple or a pair of towers, began the figure of the Great God—the upper half of a gigantic human form, terrible in its dignity and serenity. It did not clash with the structure below. The heavy folds of its drapery became the columns of the Cathedral, and it was built of the same gray plastic.

It dominated all Megatheopolis, like some unbelievable centaur. There was hardly an alley from which one could not glimpse the stem yet benignant face with the glowing nimbus of blue light.

One felt that the Great God was minutely studying every pygmy

creature that crossed the Great Square, as if he could at any moment reach down and pick one up for a closer scrutiny.

As if? Every commoner knew there was no "as if" about it!

But that massive figure did not rouse in Jarles one atom of pride at the glory and grandeur of the Hierarchy and his great good fortune in having been chosen to become part of it. Instead, his anger thickened and tightened, becoming an intolerable shell about his emotions—as red and oppressive as the scarlet robe he wore.

"Sharlson Naurya!"

Jarles flinched at the name chirruped by Brother Chulian. But now the moment had arrived; he realized he would have to look at her. Not to, would be cowardly. Every novice priest experienced great difficulties before he finally succeeded in breaking all emotional ties that linked him to the commoners—to family and friends, and more than friends. Face the fact: Naurya could never mean anything to him.

Nor he to her, he realized with something of a shock as he quickly slewed his head around so that he was looking up into her face. For she did not seem to recognize him or take note of him, although, save for his robe and shaven pate, he was the same as ever. She stood there quietly, showing none of the cringing nervousness of the men. Her hands, calloused by the loom, were folded at her waist. Her face, paler for the masses of dark hair, was without emotion—or else a better mask than his own.

Something—the way she threw her shoulders back—the air of hidden purpose sunk deep, deep in her green eyes—thrust through the shell of his anger and prodded his heart.

"My little daughter, Naurya," Chulian cooed importantly, "I have good news for you. A great honor is yours. For the next six months you are to serve in the Sanctuary."

There was no change in her expression, no outward indication of her reaction, but it was a few seconds before she replied.

"It is too great an honor. I am unworthy. Such holy work is not for the likes of a simple weaver."

"That is true," said Chulian judiciously, bobbing his chubby hairless head up and down within the stiff funnel of his collar. "But the Hierarchy may lift up whom it will, even from the ranks of the most humble. It has deemed you worthy for the holy work. Rejoice, my daughter. Rejoice."

Her voice was as quiet and grave as when she first replied. "But I am still unworthy. I know it in my heart. I cannot do it."

"Cannot, my daughter?" Abruptly Chulian's voice became querulously stern. "Do you mean 'will not'?"

Almost imperceptibly, Naurya nodded. The eyes of the commoners behind her grew wide, and they stopped their nervous fumbblings.

Brother Chulian's soft little mouth set in an implacable pout. The work lists crackled loudly as he clenched them in his red-gloved hand.

"You understand what you are doing, daughter? You understand that you are disobeying a command of the Hierarchy, and of the Great God the Hierarchy serves?"

"I know in my heart that I am unworthy. I cannot."

But this time the nod was very definite. Again Jarles felt something thrusting at his ribs.

Chulian bounced up from the bench he shared with Jarles. "No commoner may question the judgments of the Hierarchy, for they are right! I sense more here than simple stubbornness, more even than sinful obstinacy. There is only one sort of commoner who would fear to enter the Sanctuary when bidden. I sense—witchcraft," he announced dramatically, and struck his chest with the flat of his hand. Instantly his scarlet robe ballooned out tautly, until it stood a handbreadth away from his body at every point. The effect was frighteningly grotesque, like a scarlet pouter pigeon. And above his shaven head a violet halo glowed.

The faces of the commoners grew more pale. But Naurya only smiled very faintly, and her green eyes seemed to bore into Chulian.

"And that, once sensed, is easily discovered!" the swollen little priest continued triumphantly.

He stepped quickly forward. His puffy scarlet glove clutched at her shoulder without seeming quite to touch it, yet Jarles saw her bite her lips against sudden hurt. Then the scarlet glove flirted downward, ripping the heavy smock, so that the shoulder was uncovered.

There were three circular marks on the white skin. One burned angry red. The others were rapidly becoming so.

Jarles thought that Chulian hesitated a moment and stared puzzledly at them, before gathering himself and shrilling out, "Witchmarks! Proof!"

Unsteadily Jarles got to his feet. His anger made him retch, a nauseating force. He slapped his own chest, felt the uniform inward pressure of the field at every point of his body, like a bath of warm wax; saw from the corner of his eye the gleam of his halo. Then he launched his fist at Chulian's neck.

The slow-looking blow did not seem to reach its mark, but Chulian tumbled down and rolled over twice. Even as he rolled, his robe stood out between him and the ground, as if he were inside a red rubber ball.

Again Jarles slapped his own chest. His robe went limp and his halo vanished. And in that instant his anger exploded hotly, burning the mask of hypocrisy from his face.

Let them blast him! Let them blind and deafen him with excommunication! Let them drag him screaming to the crypts below the Sanctuary! The Hierarchy had seen fit to let him go mad without interfering. Very well, then!