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FEBRUARY

35¢



THE PRIESTS OF PSI

by Frank Herbert

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He was sent to test the powers of the Fanatic Planet...to learn its secrets. And in The Ordeal, he trembled on the edge of the Ultimate Secret.

THE instant he stepped out of the transport's shields into Amel's sunlight warm on the exit ramp Lewis Orne felt the psi fields. He caught the hand rail in sudden dizziness, stared down some two hundred meters at the glassy tricrete of the space port. Heat waves shimmered off the glistening surface, baking the air even up to this height. There was no wind except inside him where the hidden gusts of the psi fields howled against his recently awakened senses.

The techs who had trained Orne in the use of the flesh-buried psi detection instruments had given him a small foretaste of this sensation back in the laboratory on Marak. It had been far short of this reality. The first sharp signal of the primary detector concealed in his neck had been replaced by the full spectrum of psi awareness.

Orne shuddered. Amel crawled with skin-creeping sensations. Weird urges flickered through his mind like flashes of heat lightning. He wanted to grunt like a wallowing *kiriffa*, and in the next instant felt laughter welling in him while a sob tore at his throat.

I knew it was going to be bad, he thought. They warned me.

The counter conditioning only made this moment worse because now he was *aware*. Without the psi training, he

knew that his mind would have confused the discreet sensations into a combined awe-fear — perfectly logical emotions for him to feel when debarking on the priest planet.

This was holy ground: sanctuary of all the religions in the known universe (and, some said, of all the religions in the *unknown* universe).



Only Orne could save Bakrish from the blazing inferno which threatened to envelop him.

Orne forced his attention onto the inner focus as the techs had taught him. Slowly, psi awareness dimmed to

background annoyance. He drew in a deep breath of the hot, dry air, It was vaguely unsatisfying as though lacking some essential element to which his lungs were accustomed.

Still holding the rail, he waited to make certain he had subdued the ghost urges within him. Across the ramp, the glistening inner surface of the opened port reflected his image, distorting it slightly in a way that accented his differences from the lean, striding norm. He looked like a demigod reincarnated out of this world's ancient past: square and solid with the corded neck muscles of a heavy-gray native. A faint scar demarked the brow line of his close-cropped red hair. Other fine scars on his bull-dog face were visible because he knew where to look, and his memory told of more scars on his heavy body. There was a half-humorous saying in Investigation & Adjustment that senior field agents could be detected by the number of scars and medical patches they carried.

Orne tugged at the black belt on his aqua toga, feeling uncomfortable in this garment that all "students" on Amel had to wear.

The yellow sun, Dubhe, hung at the meridian in a cloudless blue sky. It hammered through the toga with oppressive warmth. Orne felt the perspiration slick on his body. One step away the escalfield hummed softly, ready to drop him into the bustle visible at the foot of the transport. Priests and passengers were engaged in some kind of ceremony down there—initiation of the new students. Faintly to his ears came a throbbing drumchant and a singsong keening almost hidden beneath the port's machinery clatter.

Orne studied the scene around him, still waiting to make sure he would not be tray his awareness. The transport's ramp commanded a sweeping view: a fantastic scratchwork of towers, belfries, steeples, monoliths, domes, ziggurats, pagodas. stupas, minarets, dagobas. They cluttered a flat plain that stretched to a horizon dancing in the heat waves.

Golden sunlight danced off bright primary colors and weathered pastels—buildings in tile and stone, tricare and plasteel, and the synthetics of a thousand thousand civilizations.

Staring out at the religious warren, Orne experienced an abrupt feeling of dread at the unknown things that could be waiting in those narrow, twisted streets and jumbled buildings. The stories that leaked out of Amel always carried a hint of forbidden mystery, and Orne knew his emotions were bound to be tainted by some of that mystery. But his sudden dread shifted subtly to a special kind of fear.

This peculiar fear, coming out of his new awareness, had begun back on Marak. Orne had been seated at the desk in his bachelor officer quarters, staring out at the park-like landscape of the I-A university grounds. Marak's green sun hung low in the afternoon quadrant. Orne had been filling in as a lecturer on "Exotic Clues to War Tendencies" while waiting for his wedding to Diana Bullone. He was scheduled to marry the High Commissioner's daughter in only three weeks, and after a honey moon on Kirachin he was expecting permanent assignment to the anti-war college. He could look forward to a life of training new I-A agents in the arts of seeking out and destroying the seeds that could grow into another Rim War.

That had been his concept of the future that afternoon on Marak. But suddenly he had turned away from his desk to frown at the stiffly regulation room. Something was awry. He studied the gray walls, the sharp angles of the bunk, the white bed—cover with its blue I-A mono gram: the crossed sword and stylus. The room's other chair stood backed against the foot of the bunk, leaving a three-centimeter clearance for the gray flatness of the closet door.

Something he could not define was making him restless—call it premonition.

Abruptly, the hall door hanged open. Umbo Stetson, Orne's superior officer, strode into the room. The section

chief wore his characteristic patched blue fatigues. His only badge of rank, golden I-A emblems on his collar and uniform cap, looked faintly corroded. Orne wondered when they had last been polished, then he pushed the thought aside. Stetson reserved all of his polish for his mind.

Behind the I-A officer rolled a mechanocart piled with cramtapes, microfilms and even some old style books. It trundled itself into the room, its wheels rumbling as it cleared the doorsill. The door closed itself.

Good Lord! thought Orne. *Not an assignment! Not now.* He got to his feet, looked first at the cart, then at Stetson. There was an edge of uneasiness in Orne's voice as he asked: "What's this, Stet?"

Stetson pulled out the chair from the foot of the bunk, straddled it, sailed his cap on to the blanket. His dark hair straggled in an uncombed muss. His eyelids drooped, accenting his usual look of haughty superciliousness.

"You've had enough assignments to know what this is," he growled. A wry smile touched his lips. "Got a little job for you."

"Don't I have any say in this anymore?" asked Orne.

"Well now, things may've changed a bit, and then again maybe they haven't," said Stetson.

"I'm getting married in three weeks," said Orne. "To the daughter of the High Commissioner."

"Your wedding is being postponed," said Stetson. He held up a hand as Orne's face darkened. "Wait a bit. Just postponed. Emergency. The High Commissioner sent his daughter off today on a job we just trumped up for the purpose."

Orne's voice was dangerously low: "What purpose?"

"The purpose of getting her out of your hair. You're leaving for Amel in six days and there's lots to be done before you're ready to go."

Orne drummed his fingers on the desk. "Just like that. Wedding's off. I'm assigned to a . . . Amel?"

"Yes."

"What is this, Stet? Amel's a picnic ground."

"Well . . ." Stetson shook his head. "Maybe not."

A sudden fear struck Orne. "Whose job was trumped up?" he demanded. "Has Diana . . ."

"She's off to Franchi Primus to help design a new uniform for the I-A women," said Stetson. "That safe enough for you?"

"But why so sudden?"

"We have to get you ready for Amel, Miss Bullone would have wasted time, diverted your attention. She knows something's up, but she takes orders just like the rest of us in the I-A. Have I made myself clear?"

"No notice. No nothing. Oh, this I-A is real fun! I must recommend it every time I find a young fellow looking for a job!"

"Mrs. Bullone will bring a note from Diana tonight," said Stetson. "She's perfectly safe. You can get married when this is over."

"Provided the I-A doesn't dream up some new emergency for me!" marked Orne.

"You're the ones who took the I-A oath," said Stetson. "You knew when you took it that this sort of thing could happen."

"I'm going to rewrite the oath," said Orne. "To the words. 'I pledge my life and my sacred honor to seek out and destroy the seeds of war wherever they may be found.' let us add: 'and I will sacrifice anything and anybody in the process.' "

"Not a bad addition," said Stetson. "Why don't you recommend it when you get back?"

"If I get back! What's the emergency this time?"

"This emergency must be hunting for you specifically," said Stetson.

"How thoughtful of it."

"Your name's on the list for the latest summoning to Amel."

"A religious student? But I've never applied for . . ."

"But your name's on the list. Nice great big letters. List signed by Halmyrach Abbod himself."

"There has to be a mistake. It's obviously a confusion of names with . . ."

"You've been specifically identified by family and current abode. No mistake."

Orne pushed himself away from the desk. "But there has to be! I tell you I've never applied for . . ." He broke off.

"Anyway, what's the difference? The I-A couldn't be interested in Amel. Never been a war anywhere near the place. The big shots were always afraid of offending their gods."

Stetson pointed to the mechanocart. "I don't have much time for this briefing, so stop interrupting. You're going to need everything on this cart and more. You're going to the medics this evening for a quick-heal operation. Some very hush-hush . . ." He frowned, repeated himself: . . very hush-hush equipment is to be hidden under your skin. Do you know anything about psi powers and what they involve ?"

The change of pace caused Orne to blink. He wet his lips with his tongue. "You mean like that fellow on Wessen who was supposed to be able to jump to any planet in the universe without a ship?"

"Something like that."

"Say, what ever happened to him? All the stories, then . . ."

"Maybe it was a fake," said Stetson. "Maybe it wasn't. We hope you can find out. Our techs will be showing you some psi equipment later. An amplifier. . ."

"But how does this connect with Amel?"

"You're going to tell us . . . we hope. You see, Lew, we just had the confirmation early this morning. At the next session of the Assembly there's going to be a motion to do away

with the I-A, turn all of our functions over to Rediscovery & Re-education."

"Put us under Tyler Gemine? That political hack! Half our problems come from Rah & Rah stupidities! They've damn' near bumbled us into another Rim War a dozen times!"

"Mmmmm, hmmm," said Stetson. "And the next session of the Assembly is just over the horizon—five months."

"But . . . , but a motion like that wouldn't stand a chance! It's assinine! I mean, look at the . . ."

"You'll be interested to know, Lew, that the pressure for this change comes from the priests of Amel. There does not seem to be any doubt that religious heat can put it over."

"Which sect of the priests?"

"All of them."

Orne shook his head. "But there are thousands of sects on Amel . . . millions, maybe. Under the Ecumenical Truce they . . ."

"All of them," repeated Stetson.

Orne frowned. "None of this fits. If the priests are gunning for us, why should they invite a I-A field agent onto their planet at the same time? That doesn't . . ."

"Exactly," said Stetson. "I'm sure you'll jump with joy when you learn that no body—repeat: nobody!—has ever before been able to put an agent into Amel. Not the I-A. Not the old Marakian Secret Service. Not even the Nathians. All attempts have been met with polite rejections. No agent's ever gotten farther than their landing field." Stetson got to his feet, glared down at Orne. "You'd better get started on this back ground material I brought. Your first session with the techs is tonight after the medics get through with you."

"What provision will there be for getting me off if Amel goes sour?" asked Orne.

"None."

Orne bounced to his feet. "None?"

"Our best information indicates that your training— they call it 'The Ordeal'— takes about six months. If there's no report from you within that limit, we'll make inquiries."

“Like: ‘*What’ve you done with the body?*’ “ snarled Orne. “Hell! There might not even be any I-A to make an inquiry in six months!”

Stetson shrugged. “I know this is sudden, and our data’s skimpy where it . . .”

“This is like a last resort!”

“Exactly, Lew. But we have to find out why the galactic center of all religions had turned against us. We have no hope of going in there and subduing them. It’d start religious uprisings all through the galaxy. Make the Rim War look like a game of ball at a girls’ school. I’m not even certain we could get enough volunteers to do the job. We never qualify an agent because of his religion, but I’m damned sure they’d qualify us on that score. No. We have to find out why! Maybe we can change whatever’s bothering them. It’s our only hope. May be they don’t understa . . .”

“What if they have plans for conquest by war? That then, Stet? A new faction could’ve come to power on Amel. Why not?”

Stetson looked sad, shrugged. “If you could prove it . . .” He shook his head.

“When am I going to the medics?”

“They’ll come for you.”

“Yeah. Somebody already came for me. . . it looks like.”

It was early evening in Orne’s hospital room at the I-A medical center—the quiet time between dinner and visiting hours. The nurse had turned on the light beside his bed, it cast a soothing reflection from the green walls. The induction bandage felt bulky under his chin, but the characteristic quick-heal itching had not yet started.

Being in a hospital room made him vaguely uneasy. He knew why: the smells and the sounds reminded him of all the months he’d spent creeping back from death after his injuries in the Heleb uprising. Heleb had been another planet where war just could not start. Like Amel.

The door to his hospital room opened. A tech officer strode through, closed the door. The man's uniform bore odd forked lightning insignia. Orne had never seen the emblem before. *Psi?* he wondered. The officer stopped at the foot of the bed, leaned on the cross bar. His face was bird like. There was a long nose, pointed chin, narrow mouth. The eyes made quick, darting movements. He was tall, bone skinny, and when he lifted his right hand in a mock salute, the gesture appeared to be fluttery.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Ag Emolirdo, head of our Psi Section. The Ag is for Agony."

Unable to move his head because of the induction bandage, Orne stared down the length of the bed at Emolirdo. The officer carried an aura of . . . confidence, *knowing* confidence. He reminded Orne of a priest back on Orne's home planet, Chargon. This idea made Orne uneasy. He said: "how d'you do."

"This will have to move rather rapidly," said the tech. He smiled. "You'll be into parahypnoid sessions by midnight."

"Join the I-A and learn the mysteries of the universe," quipped Orne.

Emolirdo cocked one eye brow. "Were you aware that you're a psi focus?"

"A what?" Orne tried to sit up, but the bandage restraints held him fast.

"Psi focus," said Emolirdo. "You'll understand it later. Briefly, you're an island of order in a disordered universe. Four times since you came to the attention of the I-A you've done the impossible. Any one of the incidents you tackled should have led to ferment and then general war. You've brought order out of..."

"So I did what I was trained to do."

"Trained? By whom?"

"By my government . . . by the I-A. That's a stupid question."

"Is it?" Emolirdo found a chair, sat down, his head level with Orne's. "Well, we won't argue the point. The chief thing now is that you know consciously the broad areas to be covered. You understand?"

"I know the parahypnoid technique," said Orne.

"First, psi focus," said Emolirdo. "Let us define life as a bridge between Order and Chaos. Then, let us define Chaos as raw energy available to anything that can subdue it—that is, to anything that can put it into some order. Life, then, becomes stored Chaos. You follow?"

"I hear you. Get on with it."

"Ah, the impatience of the non-adept," murmured Emolirdo. He cleared his throat. "To restate the situation, Life feeds on Chaos, but must exist in Order. An apparent paradox. This brings us to the condition called stasis. Stasis is like a magnet. It attracts free energy to itself until the pressure becomes too great and it explodes . . . and, exploding, goes back to Chaos. One is left with the unavoidable conclusion that stasis leads always to Chaos."

"That's dandy," said Orne.

Emolirdo frowned. "This rule is true on both the levels of chemical-inanimate and chemical-animate, Mr. Orne. For example, ice, the stasis of water, explodes when brought into abrupt contact with extreme heat. The frozen society explodes when exposed suddenly to the chaos of war or the *apparent* chaos of a strange new society. Nature abhors stasis."

"Like a vacuum," said Orne.

"Precisely."

"Outside of the vacuum in my head, what other little problems do we have?" asked Orne.

"Amel."

"Oh, yes. Another vacuum?"

"Apparently a stasis that does not explode."

"Then perhaps it isn't static."

"You're very astute, Mr. Orne."

"Golly . . . thanks."

"You think you're being very humorous, don't you, Mr. Orne?"

"I thought you were the prize joker here. What's all this have to do with Amel?"

"Miracles," said Emolirdo. "You obviously were summoned to Amel because they consider you a worker of miracles."

The pain stabbed through Orne's bandaged neck as he tried to turn his head. "Miracles?" he croaked.

"Substitute psi for miracle," said the tech. "Psi focus, to be more precise." A weird half smile flickered across Emolirdo's mouth. It was as though he had fought down an internal dispute on whether to laugh or cry, solved it by doing neither.

Orne felt confused, uneasy. He said: "You've left me."

"Psi focus is the scientific label for miracle," said Emolirdo. "It's something that happens outside of recognized channels, in spite of accepted rules. Religions say it's a miracle. Certain scientists say we have encountered a psi focus. That can be either a person or a locale."

"I'm not reading you at all," muttered Orne.

"You've heard of the ancient miracle caverns on the older planets?"

Orne blinked. "I've heard the legends."

"We're convinced that they concealed shapes . . . convolutions that projected out of our apparent Universe. Except at these focus points, the raw energy of outer Chaos cannot be bent to our needs. But *at* these focus points, Chaos—the wild energy—is richly available in a way that can be tamed. It may be moulded in unique ways that defy ordinary rules." Emolirdo's eyes blazed. He seemed to be fighting a great inner excitement.

Orne then wet his lips. "Shapes?"

“Men have bent wires, coiled them, carved hits of plastic, jumbled together odd assortments of completely unrelated objects. And weird things happen. A smooth piece of metal becomes tacky, as though you’d smeared it with glue. A man draws a pentagram on a certain floor, and flame dances within it. Smoke curls from a strangely shaped bottle and does another man’s bidding, obeys his will. Then there are certain men who conceal this focus within themselves. They walk into . . . nothing, and reappear light years away. They look at a person suffering from an incurable disease. The incurable is cured. They raise the dead. They read minds.”

Orne tried to swallow in a dry throat. “All this is psi?”

“We believe SO.” Emolirdo bent toward Orne’s bedside light, thrust a fist in between the light and the green wall. “Look at the wall.”

“I can’t turn my head,” said Orne.

“Sorry. Just a shadow.” Emolirdo withdrew his hand. “But let us say there were sentient beings confined to the flat plane of that wall. Let us say they saw the shadow of my fist. Could a genius among them imagine the shape that cast the shadow—a shape that projected outside of his dimensions?”

“Good question,” said Orne.

“That if the being in the wall fashioned a device that projected into our dimension?” asked Emolirdo. “He would be like the blind men studying the legendary elephant. His device would respond in ways that do not fit his dimension. He would have to set up all kinds of new postulates.”

Under the bandage, the skin of Orne’s neck began to itch maddeningly. He resisted the desire to probe there with a finger. Bits of the folklore from Chargon flitted through his memory: the magicians, the little people who granted wishes in a way that made the wisher regret his desires, the cavern where the sick were cured. The quick-heal itching lured his finger with almost irresistible force. He

groped for a pill on his bed-stand, gulped it down, waited for the relief.

Presently, Orne said: "What's this thing you've put in my neck?"

"It has a dual purpose," said Emolirdo. "It signals the presence of psi activity—psi *fields*, we call them. And it's an amplifier, giving a boost to any latent. . . ah, talents you may have. it'll often permit a novice to produce some of the minor psi effects."

Orne rubbed the outside of his neck bandage, forced his hand away. "Such as what?"

"Oh . . . resisting psi- induced emotions, detecting motivation in others through some of their emotions. It may give a small degree of prescience. You'd be able to detect extremes of personal danger when they were still some distance off in time. You'll understand about this after the parahypnoid session we're going to give you."

Orne felt something tingling in his neck. There was a vacant sensation in the pit of his stomach. "Prescience?"

"You'd recognize it at first as a kind of fear. . . a *peculiar* kind of fear. Sometimes it's like hunger, though you've just eaten. Something feels like it's lacking . . . inside you, or in the air you breathe. If you feel it, you'll recognize it. it'll always be a warning of danger. Very trust worthy."

Orne's skin felt clammy. There was the vacant sensation in his stomach. The air of the room tasted stale. His immediate reaction was to reject the sensations and all of the suggestive conversation, but there was still the fact of Stetson. Nobody in the I-A was more coldly objective or quicker to toss out mumbo- jumbo. And Stetson obviously accepted this psi thing. Stet son could be trusted. That was the major fact keeping Orne from booting this. , . this. . .

"You look a little pale" said Emolirdo.

"Probably." Orne managed a tight smile. "I think I feel your prescience thing right now."

"Describe your sensations."

Orne obeyed.

"You feel irritated, jumpy without apparent reason," said Emolirido. "Odd that it should happen so soon, before the training, that is. Unless . . ." He pursed his lips.

"Unless what?"

"Unless your . . . ah, talent were quite strong. And unless psi training itself were actually dangerous to you. Wouldn't that be interesting, though?"

"Yeah. Fascinating. I can hardly wait to get through this training and be on my way to Amel."

It was reluctance, Orne decided. There was no real excuse to wait up here on the transport's ramp any longer. Obviously, he had overcome the first staggering impact of the psi fields of Amel. There was still the prescient awareness of danger—like a sore tooth signaling its presence. The day was hot, and the toga was too heavy. He was soaked in perspiration.

Damn! If I wait too long they'll get suspicious.

He took a half step toward the escalfield, still fighting the reluctance. His nostrils caught an acrid bite of incense that had evaded the oil-and-ozone dominance of the landing area. In spite of counter conditioning and carefully nurtured agnosticism, he felt an abrupt sensation of awe. Amel exuded an aura of magic that defied cynical disbelief. The chanting and keening that lifted fog-like from the religious warren sparked memory fragments. Shards of his childhood on Chargon tumbled through Orne's mind: the religious processions on holy days . . . the image of Mahmud glowering down from the kiblah . . . and the azan ringing out across the great square on the day of Bairam—

"Let no blasphemy occur nor permit a blasphemer to live! May such a one be accursed of God and of the blessed from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, sleeping and waking, sitting and standing . . ."

Orne shook his head.

Yes, bow down to Ullua, the star wanderer of the Ayrbs, he thought. Now would be a great time for him to get religion!

But the roots were deep. He tightened the belt of his toga, strode forward into the escalfield. Its feathery touch dropped him to the ground, disgorged him beside a covered walkway. A cluster of priests and students were pressed in to the thin shade of the cover. They began to separate as Orne approached, leaving in pairs—a white-clad priest with each student.

One priest remained facing Orne. He was tall and with a thick body. There was a heavy feeling about him as though the ground would shudder when he walked. His head was shaved bald. Deep lines scratched patterns on his wide, jowled face. Dark eyes glowered from beneath over hanging grey brows.

“Are you Orne?” the priest rumbled

Orne stepped under the walkway. “That’s right.” There was a yellowish gleam to the priest’s skin.

“I am Bakrish,” said the priest. He put his slab hands on his hips, glared at Orne. “You missed the ceremony of lustration.”

Something about the heavy figure, the glowering face reminded Orne abruptly of an I-A gunnery sergeant he had known. The thought restored Orne’s sense of balance, brought a grin to his face.

“Sorry,” said Orne. “I was enjoying the view.”

“You find something amusing?” demanded Bakrish.

“This humble face reflects happiness,” said Orne, “Happiness to be on Amel.”

“Oh. Well, come along.” Bakrish turned away, strode off under the covered walk, not looking to see if Orne followed.

Orne shrugged, set off after the priest, found that he had to force himself to a half trot to keep up with the other’s long-legged stride.

No moving walks, no hop—alongs, thought Orne. *This place is primitive.*

The walk jutted like a long beak from a windowless, low stone building. Double doors opened into a dim hail. The doors had to be opened manually, and one of them creaked. Bakrish led the way past rows of narrow cells open to the hail, came finally to another door. It let them into a cell slightly larger than the others, big enough to accommodate one small desk and two chairs. Pink light filled the room from concealed excitors.

Bakrish crossed the cell ahead of Orne, crunched into the chair behind the desk, motioned for Orne to take the other seat. "Sit down."

Orne complied, but with a sudden feeling of wariness. Something here failed to add up for his highly tuned senses.

"As you know, we here on Amel live under the Ecumenical Truce," said Bakrish. "Your intelligence service will have briefed you on some of the significance behind that fact, of course."

Orne concealed his surprise at this turn in the conversation. He nodded.

Bakrish smiled. "The main thing you need to understand about it now is that there is nothing unusual in my being assigned as your guru."

"I *don't* understand."

"You are a follower of Mahmud. I am a Hynd and a *Wali*, under divine protection. Under the Truce, all of us serve the one God who has many names. You understand?"

"I see."

Bakrish nodded. "When Emolirido told us about you, we had to see for ourselves, of course. That is why you are here."

Emolirido a traitor! Iron control kept Orne from revealing his shock.

"You pose a fascinating problem," said Bakrish.

Anger coursed through Orne. *What a foul up!* He set his face in a wolfish grin, probed with his newly awakened psi awareness for some weakness here, an emotion, a clue to the feeling of oddness about the room. "I'm so happy you've found something to keep you occupied," he said with resentment.

Bakrish leaned forward, glanced behind Orne, nodded. In the same instant, Orne felt the sensation of oddness dissipate. Fie whirled, caught a flicker of robe and a wheeled object being pulled away from the open door.

"That's better," said Bakrish. "Now we have the tensor phase pattern of your booster equipment. We can nullify it at will, or destroy you with it."

Orne froze. *What kind of a bomb did Emolirido have the medics plant in me?*

"However, we do not wish to destroy you," said Bakrish. "For the time being we will not tamper with your equipment. We *want* you to use it."

Orne drew two deep breaths. Without volition, his psi training took over. He concentrated on the inner focus for calmness. It came like a wash of cool water: icy, observant calm.

Boxed! All it took was one traitor! The thoughts blazed through his mind. But outwardly he remained calm, alert.

"Have you nothing to say?" asked Bakrish.

"Yes." Orne cleared his throat. "I want to see the Halmyrach Abbod. I've got to find out why you're trying to destroy the . . ."

"All in due time," said Bakrish.

"Where's the Abbod?"

"Nearby. When the time comes for you to have your audience with him it will be arranged."

"Meanwhile, I just wait for you to blow me up!"

"Blow you . . ." Bakrish looked puzzled. "Believe me, my young friend, we have no desire to cause your destruction. That is merely a necessary precaution. Now, there two facts

here: You want to find out about us, and we want to find out about you. The best way for both of us to accomplish our aims would be for you to submit to your ordeal. You really don't have any choice, of course."

"You mean I let you lead me around like a *grifka* being brought to the slaughter house! That or you put an end to me immediately!"

"It would be better if you just looked on this as an interesting test," murmured Bakrish. "Your bloody thoughts really aren't suitable."

"Somehow, I'm going to find out what makes you tick," grated Orne. "When I do, I'm going to smash your main spring!"

Bakrish frowned, swallowed. "You *must* be exposed to the holy mysteries," he said. His yellow skin paled.

Orne leaned back. His sudden burst of bravado had left an aftermath of embarrassment. He thought: *This joker should've laughed at me. He's in the driver's seat, But my threat frightened him. Why?*

"Do you submit to your ordeal?" asked Bakrish.

Orne pushed himself up out of the chair. "You said it for me: I really don't have any choice."

"This is the cell of meditation-on-faith," said Bakrish. "Stretch out on the floor, flat on your back. Do not try to sit up or stand until I give you permission. It is very dangerous."

"Why?" Orne looked around the room. It was high and narrow. Walls, floor and ceiling looked like white stone veined by thin brown lines like insect tracks. Pale white light, sourceless and as flat as skimmed milk, tilled the room. A damp stone smell permeated the place.

"Flat on your back you are relatively safe," said Bakrish. "Accept my word for it. I have seen the results of disbelief."

Orne cleared his throat, feeling suddenly cold. He sat down, stretched out on the floor. The stone was chill against his back.

"Once started on your ordeal, the only way out is to go through it," said Bakrish.

"Have you been through this?" asked Orne.

"But of course."

Orne probed for the other's motive-emotions, met a sense of cold sympathy . . . if the psi awareness could be trusted. After all, much of it had come from Emolirdo, a traitor. "So I've crawled into your tunnel . . . or is it a cave?" said Orne. "What's at the other end?"

"That's for you to discover."

"You're using me to find out something, Bakrish. What if I refuse to cooperate? Is that stalemate?"

A sense of tentative regret radiated from Bakrish. "When the scientist sees that his experiment has failed, he is not necessarily barred from further experiments . . . with new equipment. You truly have no choice."

"Then let's get on with it."

"As you will." Bakrish moved to the end wall. It swung open to reveal the outer hallway, closed behind the priest. There was an abrupt feeling of increased pressure.

Orne studied the cell. It appeared to be about four meters long, two meters wide, some ten meters high. But the mottled stone ceiling appeared blurred. Perhaps the room was higher. The pale lighting could be designed for confusing the senses. He probed the prescient sense, felt its amorphous twinge—peril.

The priest's voice suddenly filled the room, booming from a concealed speaker: "You are enclosed within a psi machine. This ordeal is ancient and exacting: to test the quality of your faith. Failure means loss of your life, your soul or both."

Orne clenched his hands. Perspiration made his palms oily. An abrupt increase in background psi activity registered on his booster.

"Immerse yourself in the mystical stream," said Bakrish. "Of what are you afraid?"

Orne thought of the pressures focused on him, all the evidence of deep and hidden intent. "I don't like to act just on faith. I like to know where I'm going."

"Sometimes you must go for the sake of going," said Bakrish. "In fact, you do this all the time when . . ."

"Nuts!"

"When you press the stud to turn on a room's lights, you act on faith that there will be light," said Bakrish.

"Faith in past experience."

"And what about the first time?"

"I guess I must've been surprised at the light."

"Then prepare yourself for surprises, because there is no lighting mechanism in your cell. The light you see there exists because you desire it, and for no other reason."

"What . . ."

Darkness engulfed the room.

Bakrish's voice filed the darkness with a husky whisper. "Have faith."

The prescient warning gripped Orne: writhing terror. He fought down the desire to jump up and dash for the door-wall. The priest's warning, grimly matter of fact, had rung true. Death lay in flight.

Smokey glowing appeared near the ceiling, coiled down toward Orne.

Light?

Orne lifted his right hand. He couldn't see the hand. The radiance cast no light into the rest of the cell. The sense of pressure in the cell increased with each heartbeat.

Light if I wish it? Well . . . it became dark when I doubted. He thought of the milky light.

A shadowless illumination flickered into being, but near the ceiling where he had seen the glowing radiance there boiled a black cloud. It beckoned like the outer darkness of space.

Orne froze, staring.

Darkness filled the room.

Again, radiance glowed at the ceiling.

The claxon of prescient fear cried through Orne. He closed his eyes in the effort of concentration. Immediately fear lessened. His eyes snapped open in shock.

Fear!

And the ghostly glowing crawled nearer.

Eyes closed.

Still the sense of peril, but without immediacy.

Fear equals darkness. Even in the light, darkness beckons. He stilled his breathing, concentrated on the inner focus. *Faith? Blind faith? What do they want of me? Fear brings the dark.*

He forced his eyes to open, stared into the lightless void of the cell. Radiance coiling downward. *Even in the darkness there is light. But it's not really light because I can't see by it.*

It was like a time he could remember—long ago in childhood: darkness in his own bedroom. Mooncast shadows, transmuted to monsters. He had clenched his eyes tightly closed, fearful that if he opened them he would see a thing too horrible to face.

Orne stared up at the coiling radiance. *False light. Like false hope.* The radiance coiled backward into itself, receding. *Utter Darkness equals utter fear.*

The radiance winked out.

Dank, stone-smelling dark ness permeated the cell, a darkness infected with creeping sounds—claw scrabbles and hisses, little slitherings...

Orne invested the sounds with every shape of terror his imagination could produce; poisonous lizards, insane monsters . . . The peril sense en folded him, and he hung there suspended in it.

Bakrish's hoarse whisper snaked through the darkness: "Orne? Are your eyes open?"

His lips trembled with the effort to speak: "Yes."

"What do you see, Orne?"

An image suddenly danced onto the black field in front of Orne: Bakrish in an eerie red light, leaping and capering, grimacing . . .

"What do you see?" hissed Bakrish.

"You. I see you in Sadun's inferno."

"The hell of Mahmud?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Orne, do you not prefer the light?"

"Why do I see you?"

"Orne, I *beg* of you! Choose the . . ."

"Why do I see you in . . ." Orne broke off. He had the feeling that something peered inside him with heavy deliberation, checked his thoughts, his vital processes, weighed them. He knew suddenly that if he willed it, Bakrish would be cast into the deepest torture pit dreamed of in Mahmud's nightmares. *Why not? Then again: why? Who am I to decide? He may not be the right one. Perhaps the Halmyrach Abbod . . .*

Groaning, creaking filled the stones of the cell. A tongue of flame lanced out of the darkness above Orne, poised. It cast a ruddy glow on the stone walls.

Prescient fear clawed at him.

Faith? He had the inner knowledge—not faith—that in this instant he could do a dangerous and devilish thing: cast a man into eternal torture. *Which man and why? No man.* He rejected the choice.

Above him, the dancing flame receded, winked out, leaving only darkness and its slithering noises. Realization swept over Orne: he felt his own fingernails trembling and scrabbling against the stone floor—claws! He laughed aloud, stilled his hands. The claw sound stopped. He felt his feet writhing with involuntary efforts at flight. He stilled his feet, recognized the absence of the suggestive slithering sound. And the hissing! He focused on it, realized that it was his own breath fighting through clenched teeth.

Orne laughed.

Light?

In sudden perversity, he rejected the idea of light. Somehow, he knew this machine was responding to his inner most wishes, but only to those wishes uncensored by a doubting consciousness. Light was his for the willing of it, but he chose the darkness, and in the sudden release of tension, ignored Bakrish's warning, got to his feet. He smiled into the darkness, said: "Open the door, Bakrish."

Again, Orne felt something peer inside him, and recognized it for a psi probe—greatly magnified from the training probe used by Emolirdo. Someone was checking his motives.

"I'm not afraid," said Orne. "Open the door."

A scraping sound grated in the cell. Light fanned inward from the hall as the end wall swung open. Orne looked out at Bakrish, a shadow framed against the light like a robed statue.

The Hynd stepped forward jerked to a halt as he saw Orne standing.

"Did you not prefer the light, Orne?"

"But you must have under stood this test: you're standing. . . unafraid of my warning."

"This machine obeys my uncensored will," said Orne. "That's faith: the uncensored will."

"You *do* understand. And still you preferred the dark?"

"Does that bother you, Bakrish?"

"Yes, it does."

"Good."

"I see." Bakrish bowed. "Thank you for sparing me."

"You know about that?"

"I felt flames and heat, smelled the burning. . ." The priest shook his head. "The life of a guru here is not safe. Too many possibilities."

"You were safe," said Orne. "I censored my will."

"The most enlightened degree of faith," murmured Bakrish.

"Is that all there is to my ordeal?" Orne then glanced around at the darkened cell walls.

"Merely the first step," said Bakrish. "There are seven steps in all: the test of faith, the test of the miracle's two faces, the test of dogma and ceremony, the test of ethics, the test of the religious ideal, the test of service to life, and the test of the mystical experience. They do not necessarily fall in that order."

Orne felt the absence of immediate prescient fear. He tasted a sense of exhilaration. "Then let's get on with it."

Bakrish sighed. "Holy Empress defend me," he muttered, then: "Yes, of course. Your next step: the miracle's two faces."

And the prescient sense of peril began to flicker within Orne. Angrily, he put it aside. *I have faith*, he thought. *Faith in myself. I've proved I can conquer my fear.*

"Well what're we waiting for?" he demanded.

"Come along," said Bakrish. He turned with a swirl of his white robe, led the way down the hall.

Orne followed. "By miracle, do you mean psi focus?"

"What difference does it make what we call it?" asked Bakrish.

"If I solve all your riddles, do you take the heat off the I-A?" asked Orne.

"The heat... Oh, you mean . . . That is a question for the Halmyrach Abbod to decide."

"He's nearby, eh?"

"Very near."

Bakrish stopped before a heavy bronze door at the end of the hall, turned an ornate handle at one side, threw his shoulder against the door. It creaked open. "We generally don't come this way," he said. "These two tests seldom are included in the same ordeal."

Orne blinked, followed the priest through the door into a gigantic round room. Stone walls curved away to a domed ceiling far above them. In the high curve of the ceiling slit windows admitted thin shafts of light that glittered downward through gilt dust. Orne followed the light downward to its focus on a straight barrier wall about twenty meters high and forty or fifty meters long, chopped off and looking incomplete in the middle of the room. The wall was dwarfed in the immensity of the domed space.

Bakrish circled around behind Orne, swung the heavy door closed, nodded toward the central barrier. "We go over there." He led the way.

Their slapping footsteps echoed off the walls. The damp stone smell was strong, like a bitter taste. Orne glanced left, saw doors evenly spaced around the room's perimeter, bronze doors like the one they had entered.

As they approached the barrier, Orne centered his attention on it. The surface looked to be a smooth gray plastic—featureless, but somehow menacing.

Bakrish stopped about ten meters from the middle of the wall. Orne stopped beside him, became conscious of prescient fear: something to do with the wall. Within him there was a surging and receding like waves on a beach. Emolirido had described this sensation and interpreted it: *Infinite possibilities in a situation basically perilous.*

A blank wall?

"Orne, is it not true that a man should obey the orders of his superiors?" Bakrish's voice carried a hollow echo in the immensity of the room.

Orne's throat felt dry. He cleared it, rasped: "I suppose so . . . if the orders make sense. Why?"

"You were sent here as a spy, Orne. By rights, anything that happens to you is no concern of ours. Is that not so?"

Orne tensed. "What're you driving at?"

Bakrish looked down at Orne, large eyes dark and glistening. "Sometimes these machines frighten us. Their

methods are so unpredictable, and anyone who comes within the field of one of them can be subjected to its power."

"Like back there in that cell when you hung at the edge of the inferno?" Bakrish shuddered. "Yes."

"But I still have to go through with this thing?"

"You must. It is the only way you will accomplish what you were sent here to do . . . and . . . you could not stop now, anyway. The hail is rolling down the hill. You don't even want to stop."

Orne tested this against his own feelings, shrugged. "*I am* curious."

"The thing is, Orne, .you suspect us and fear us. These lead to hate. We saw that back there at the cell. But hate can be supremely dangerous to you in this present test. You . . . "

A scraping sound behind them brought Orne's attention around. Two oblate brothers deposited a heavy, square-armed chair on the stone floor facing the wall. They cast frightened glances at Orne, the wall, turned and scampered toward one of the heavy bronze doors.

"As I was saying, Orne, I am merely following orders here. I beg of you not to hate me, nor to hate anyone. You should not harbor hate during this test."

"What frightened those two fellows who brought that chair?" asked Orne. He watched the pair scurry through their door, slam it behind them.

"They know the reputation of this test. The very fabric of our world is woven into it. Many things can hang in the balance here. Infinite Possibilities."

Cautiously, Orne probed for Bakrish's motives. The priest obviously sensed the probe. He said: "I am afraid, Orne, is that what you wanted to know?"

"Why are you afraid?"

"In *my*, ordeal, this test proved nearly fatal. I had sequestered a core of hate. This place clutches at me even

now." He shivered.

Orne found the priest's fright unsteady. He looked at the chair. It was squat, ugly. An inverted metallic bowl projected on an arm over the seat. "What's the chair?"

"You must sit down in it."

Orne glanced at the gray wall, at Bakrish, back to the chair. There was tension here as though each heartbeat pumped pressure into the room. The surging and receding of his prescient sense in creased, but he felt himself committed to this blind course.

"Sometimes we must go for the sake of going." The words rang in his memory. Who had said them?

He crossed to the chair, turned, sat down. In the act of sitting, the prescient sense of peril came to full surge, stayed. But there was no time for a change of heart. Metal bands leaped from concealed openings in the chair, pinned his arms, circled his chest and legs. Orne surged against them, twisting.

"Do not struggle," warned Bakrish. "You cannot escape."

Orne sank back.

"Please, Orne: you must not hate us. Your danger is magnified manyfold if you do. Hate could make you fail."

"Dragging you down with me, eh?"

"Quite possibly," muttered Bakrish. "One never quite escapes the consequences of his hate." He stepped behind the chair, lowered the inverted bowl over Orne's head. "If you move suddenly or try to jerk away the microfilament probes within this bowl will cause you great pain."

Orne felt something touch his scalp, crawling, tickling. "What is this?"

"One of the great psi machines." Bakrish adjusted something on the chair. Metal clicked. "Observe the wall. It can manifest your most latent urges. You can bring about miracles, call forth the dead, do many wonders. You may be on the brink of a deep mystical experience."

Orne swallowed in a dry throat. "You mean if I wanted my father to appear here he would?"

"He is deceased?"

"Yes."

"Then it could happen. But I must caution you. The things you see here will not be hallucination. And one thing more: If you are successful in calling forth the dead, you must realize that what you call forth will be that dead person, and yet not that dead person."

The back of Orne's right arm itched. He longed to scratch it. "How can . . . "

"The paradox is like this: any living creature manifested here through your will must be invested with your psyche as well as its own. The original matter is not present. Therefore, the new matter will impinge on your matter. All of your memories will be available to whatever living flesh you call forth."

"But . . . "

"Hear me out, Orne. In some cases, your *creates* may fully understand their duallity. Others will reject your half out of hand because they have not the capacity. Some may even lack sentience."

Orne felt the fear driving Bakrish's words, sensed truth in them. *He believes this, anyway*. He said: "But why trap me here in this chair?"

"It's important that you do not run away from yourself." Bakrish's hand fell on Orne's shoulder. "I must leave you now. May grace guide you." There was a swishing of robes as the priest strode away. Presently, a door closed, its sound a hollow sharpness. Orne felt infinitely alone.

A faint humming became audible—distant bee sound. The booster in his neck tugged sharply, and he felt the flare of a psi field around him. The barrier wall blinked alive to the color of grass green, and immediately began to crawl with iridescent purple lines. They squirmed and writhed like countless glowing worms trapped in a visquid green aquarium.

Orne drew in a shuddering breath. Prescient fear hammered at him. The crawling purple lines held hypnotic fascination. Some appeared to waft out toward him. The shape of Diana's face glowed momentarily among them. He tried to hold the image, saw it melt away.

Because she's alive? he wondered.

Shapeless deformities squirmed across the wall, coalesced abruptly into the outline of a *shrigger*, the saw-toothed lizard that Chargonian mothers invoked to frighten their children into obedience. The image took on more substance, developed yellow scale plates, stalk eyes.

Time suddenly slowed to a grinding, creeping pace within Orne, he thought back to his childhood on Chargon: terror memories.

But even then shrigger were extinct, he told himself.

Memory persisted down a long corridor full of empty echoes that suggested gibbering insanity. Down . . . down . . . down . . . He remembered childish laughter, a kitchen, his mother. And there were his sisters screaming derisively. And he remembered himself cowering, ashamed. He couldn't have been more than three years old. He had come running into the house to babble that he had seen a *shrigger*... in the deep shadows of the creek gully.

Laughing girls! Hateful little girls! "He thinks he saw a shrigger!" "Hush now, you two!"

On the green wall, the *shrigger* outline bulged outward. A taloned foot extended, It stepped from the wall onto the stone floor: half again as tall as a man, stalked eyes swivelling right, left . . .

Orne jerked out of his reverie, felt sudden throbbing in his head as movement disturbed the microfilament probes.

There was the scratching of talons on stone as the *shrigger* took three tentative steps away from the wall. Orne tasted the fear within himself, thought: *Some ancestor of mine was hunted by such a creature! The panic goes too deep!* It was a clear thought that flickered

through his mind while every sense remained focused on the nightmare lizard.

Its yellow scales rasped with every breath it took. The narrow, birdlike head twisted to one side, lowered. Its beak mouth opened to reveal a forked tongue and saw teeth.

Primordial instinct pressed Orne back in his chair. He smelled the stink of the creature: sickly sweet with overtones of sour cheese.

The *shrigger* bobbed its head, coughed : “*Chunk!*” its stalk eyes moved, centered on Orne. One taloned foot lifted and it plunged into motion to ward the figure trapped in the chair. Its high-stepping lope stopped about four meters away, and the lizard rocked its head to one side while it examined Orne.

He stared up at it, his only bodily sensation a vague awareness of tightness across chest and stomach. The beast stink was almost overpowering. Behind the *shrigger*, the green wall continued to wriggle with iridescent purple lines. It was a background blur on Orne’s eyes. The lizard moved closer, and he smelled a draft of breath as fetid as swamp ooze.

No matter what Bakrish said, this has to be hallucination, he told himself. *Shrigger* have been extinct for centuries. But then another thought blinked at him: *The priests could have bred zoo specimens to maintain the species. How does anyone know what’s been done here in the name of religion?*

The *shrigger* cocked its head to the other side.

At the green wall, lines solidified. Two children dressed in scanty sun aprons skipped out onto the stone floor. Their footsteps echoed, and childish giggling sounded in the vast emptiness. One child appeared to be about five years old, the other slightly older— possibly eight. The older child carried a small bucket with a toy shovel protruding from it. They stopped, looked around, confused.

The *shrigger* turned its head, bent its stalk eyes toward them. It swivelled its body back toward the wall, poised one foot, lunged into its high-stepping lope.

The youngest child looked up, squealed.

The *shrigger* increased its speed.

Shocked, Orne recognized the children: his two sisters, the ones who had laughed at his fearful cries on that long ago day. It was as though he had brought this incident to life for the sole purpose of venting his hate, inflicting on these children the thing they had derided.

The lizard swooped down, blocked the children from view. Orne tried to close his eyes, could not. There came a shriek cut off with abrupt finality. Unable to stop, the *shrigger* hit the green wall, *melted into it!*

The older child lay sprawled on the floor still clutching her bucket and toy shovel. A red smear spread across the stones beside her. She stared across the room at Orne, slowly got to her feet.

No matter what Bakrish, said, this can't be real, thought Orne. Yet he felt an odd wash of relief that the *shrigger* had vanished.

The child began walking toward Orne, swinging her bucket. Her right hand clutched the toy shovel. She stared fixedly at Orne. He brought her name into his mind: *Lurie, my sister, Lurie. But she's a grown woman now, married and with children of her own.*

Flecks of sand marked the child's legs and cheeks. One of her two blonde braids hung down partly undone. She looked angry, shivering with an eight-year-old's fury. About two meters away she stopped.

"You did that!" she screamed.

Orne shuddered at the madness in the child voice. She lifted the bucket, hurled its contents at him. He shut his eyes, felt coarse sand deluge his face, pelt the silver dome, run down his cheeks. Pain coursed through him as he shook his head, disrupting the microfilaments against his scalp.

Through slitted eyes he saw the dancing lines on the green wall leap into wild motion—bending, twisting, flinging. Orne stared at the purple frenzy through a red haze of pain. And he remembered the guru's warning that any life he called forth here would contain his own psyche as well as its own.

"Lurie," he said, "please try to. . ."

"You tried to get into my head !" she screamed. "But I Pushed you out!"

Bakrish had said it: "*Others will reject your half out of hand because they have not the capacity.*" This dual create had rejected him because her eight-year-old mind could not accept such an experience. And Orne realized that he was taking this scene as reality and not as hallucination.

"I'm going to kill you!" screamed Lurie.

She hurled herself at him, the toy shovel swinging. Light glinted from the tiny blade. It slashed down on his right arm. *Abrupt pain!* Blood darkened the sleeve of his gown.

Orne felt himself caught up in a nightmare. Words leaped to his lips: "Stop that. Lurie! God will punish you!"

Movement behind the child. He looked up.

A toga-clad figure in red turban came striding out of the green wall: a tall man with gleaming eyes, the face of a tortured ascetic—long gray beard parted in the *sufi* manner.

Orne whispered the name: "Mahmud!"

A gigantic tri-di of that face dominated the inner mosque of Chargon.

God will punish you!

Orne remembered standing beside his father, staring up at the image in the mosque, bowing to it.

The Mahmud figure strode up behind Lurie, caught her arm as she started another blow. She turned, struggling, but he held her, twisted the arm slowly, methodically. A bone snapped with sickening sharpness. The child screamed and screamed and kept screaming.

"Don't!" protested Orne.

Mahmud had a low, rumbling voice. He said: "One does not command God's agent to stop His just punishment." He held the child's hair, stooped, caught up the fallen shovel, slashed it across her neck. The screaming stopped. Blood spurted over his gown. He let the now limp figure fall to the floor, dropped the shovel, turned to Orne.

Nightmare! thought Orne. *This has to be a nightmare!*

"You are thinking this is a nightmare," rumbled Mahmud.

And Orne remembered: this creature, too, if it were real, could think with his reactions and memories. He rejected the thought. "You *are* a nightmare!"

"Your *create* had done its work," said Mahmud. "It had to be disposed of, you know, because it was embodied by hate, not by love."

Orne felt sickened, guilty, angry. He remembered that this test involved understanding miracles. "This was a miracle?" he demanded.

"What is a miracle?" asked Mahmud.

Abruptly, an air of suspense enclosed Orne. Prescient fear sucked at his vitals.

"What is a miracle?" repeated Mahmud.

Orne felt his heart hammering. He couldn't seem to focus on the words, stammered: "Are you really an agent of God?"

"Quibbles and labels!" barked Mahmud. "Don't you know about labels? An expediency! There's something *beyond* your labels. Where the zone of the word stops, something else begins."

A tingling sense of madness prickled through Orne. He felt himself balanced on the edge of chaos. "What is a miracle?" he whispered. And he thought back to Emolirido: *words . . . chaos . . . energy. Psi equals miracle! No. More labels. Energy.* "Energy from chaos moulded into duration," he said.

"Very close for words," murmured Mahmud. "Is a miracle good or evil?"

"Everybody says miracles are good." Orne took a deep breath. "But they don't have to be either. Good and evil are all tied up in motives."

"Man has motives," said Mahmud.

"Man can be good or evil in his miracles by any definition he wants," said Orne.

Mahmud lifted his head, stared down his nose at Orne. "Yes?"

After a moment of tension, Orne returned the stare. Success in this test had taken on a deep meaning for him. He could feel the inner goading. "Do you want me to say that men create gods to enforce their definitions of good and evil?"

"Do I?"

"So I've said it!"

"Is that all you have to say?"

Orne had to force his attention onto the meanings of words. It was like wading up stream in a swift river. So easy to relax and forget it all. his thoughts showed a tendency to scatter. *Is what all I have to say?*

"What is it about men's creations?" demanded Mahmud. "What is it about any creation?"

Orne recalled the nightmare sequence of events in this test. He wondered: *Could this psi machine amplify the energy we call religion? Bakrish said I could bring the dead to life here. Religion's supposed to have a monopoly on that. And the original Mahmud's certainly dead. Been dead for centuries. Provided it isn't hallucination, this whole thing makes a peculiar kind of sense. Even then . . .*

"You know the answer," said Mahmud.

Orne nodded. "Creations may act independently of their creators."

"Ah-hah! You have learned this lesson!"

Mahmud stooped, lifted the dead child figure. There was an odd tenderness to his motions. He turned away, marched back into the writhings of the green wall. Silence blanketed

the room. The dancing purple lines became almost static, moved in viscous torpor.

Orne felt drained of energy. His arms and legs ached as though he had been using their muscles to the absolute limit. He felt that he must rest for awhile.

A bronze clangor echoed behind him, and the green wall returned to its feature less gray. Footsteps slapped against the stone floor. Hands worked at the metallic bowl, lifted it off his head. The straps that held him to the chair fell away. Bakrish came around to stand in front of Orne.

"Did I pass this test?" asked Orne.

"You are alive and still in possession of your soul, are you not?"

"How do I know if I still have my soul?"

"One knows by the absence," murmured Bakrish. He glanced down at Orne's wounded arm. "We must get that bandaged. it's night and time for the next step in your ordeal."

"Night?" Orne glanced up at the slitted windows in the dome, saw darkness punctured by stars. He looked around, realized that shadowless exciter light had replaced the daylight. "Time goes quickly here."

"For some. . . not for others."

"I feel so tired."

"We'll give you an energy pill when we fix the arm. Come along."

"What's this next test?"

"You must walk through the shadow of dogma and ceremony, Orne. For it is written that motive is the father of ethics, and caution is the brother of fear . . ." he paused ". . . and fear is the daughter of pain."

There was a nip of chill in the night air. Orne felt thankful now for the thickness of the robe around him. A cooing of birds sounded from the deeper shadows of a park area ahead. Beyond the park arose a hill outlined against the

stars, and up the hill marched a snake-track of moving lights.

Bakrish spoke from beside Orne. "The lights are carried by students. Each student has a pole, and on its top a translucent box. The four sides of the boxes each show a different color: red, blue, yellow and green."

Orne watched the lights. They flickered like weird phosphorescent insects in the dark. "What's the reason for that?"

"They show their piety."

"I mean the four colors?"

"Ah. Red for the blood you dedicate to your god, blue for the truth, yellow for the richness of religious experience, and green for the growth of that experience."

"So they march up the mountain."

"Yes. To show their piety." Bakrish took Orne's arm. "The procession is coming out of the city through a gate in the wall over here. There will be a light for you there. Come along."

They crossed the park, stopped by a narrow gate. Bakrish took a pole from a rack beside the wall, twisted the handle and light glowed at the top. "Here."

The pole felt slippery smooth in Orne's hand. The light above him was turned to cast a red glow on the people passing through the gate: a student, then a priest, a student, then a priest . . . Their faces carried a uniform gravity.

The end of the procession appeared. "Stay behind that priest," said Bakrish. He urged Orne into the line, fell in behind.

Immediately, prescient fear tugged at Orne's energy. He stumbled, faltered, heard Bakrish grunt: "Keep up! Keep up!"

Orne recovered his balance. His light cast a dull green reflection off the back of the priest ahead. A murmuring, shuffling sounded from the procession. Insects chattered in

the tall grass beside their trail. Orne looked up. The bobbing lights wove a meander line up the hill.

The prescient fear grew stronger. Orne felt fragmented. Part of him cowered sickly with the thought that he could fail here. Another part groped out for the chimera of this ordeal. He sensed tremendous elation only a heartbeat away, but this only piled fuel on his fear. It was as though he struggled to awaken from a nightmare within a nightmare, knowing that the pseudo-awakening would only precipitate him into new terror.

The line halted. Orne stumbled to a stop, focused on what was happening around him. Students bunched into a semicircle. Their lights bounced multicolored gleams off a stone stupa about twice the height of a man. A bearded priest, his head covered by a red three-cornered hat, his body vague motions under a long black robe, stood in front of the stupa like a dark judge at some mysterious trial.

Orne found a place in the outer ring of students, peered between two of them.

The red-hatted priest bowed, spoke in a resonant bass voice: "You stand before the shrine of purity and the law, the two inseparables of all true belief. Here before you is a key to the great mystery that can lead you to paradise. Observe well."

Orne felt tension, then the impact of a strong Psi field, realized abruptly that this psi field was different. It beat like a metronome with the cadence of the priest's words rising with the passion of his speech.

"...the immortal goodness and purity of all the great prophets!" he was saying. "Conceived in purity, born in purity, their thoughts ever bathed in goodness! Untouched by base nature in all their aspects!"

With a shock, Orne realized that this psi field around him arose not from some machine, but from a blending of emotions in the rapt students here. The emotions he sensed played subtle harmonics on the overriding field, it was as

though the priest played these people as a musician might play his instrument.

. . the eternal truth of this divine dogma!" shouted the priest.

Incense wafted across Orne's nostrils. A hidden voder began to emit low organ notes: a rumbling, sonorous melody. To the right, Orne saw a graveman circling the ring of students and priests waving a censer. Blue smoke hung over the mass of people in ghostly curls. From off in the darkness a bell tinkled seven times.

Orne felt like a man hypnotized, thinking: *Massed emotions act like a psi field! Great God! What is a psi field?*

The priest raised both arms, fists clenched. "Eternal paradise to all true believers! Eternal damnation to all unbelievers !" His voice lowered. "You students seeking the eternal truth, fall down to your knees and beg for enlightenment. Pray for the veil to be lifted from your eyes."

There was a shuffling and whisper of robes as the students around Orne sank to their knees. Still Orne stared ahead, all attention caught up in his discovery. *Massed emotions act like a psi field!*

A muttering sound passed through the students.

What is a psi field? Orne asked himself. He felt an answer lurking in a hidden corner of his mind.

Angry glances were directed at Orne from the kneeling students. The muttering grew louder. Belatedly, Orne became aware of danger. Prescient fear was like a claxon roaring within him.

Bakrish leaned close, whispered: "There's a trail into the woods off to your right. Better start working toward it."

At the far side of the kneeling crowd a student lifted an arm, pointed at Orne. "What about him? He's a student!"

Someone lost in the mass of people shouted: "Unbeliever!" Others took it up like a mindless chant.

Orne grasped his light standard tightly, began inching his way to the right. Tension in the crowd was like a fuse

smoking and sizzling toward a mass of explosives.

The red-hatted priest glared at Orne, dark face contorted in the kaleidoscopic gleams of the students' lights. He thrust out an arm toward Orne. "Death to unbelievers!"

Students began climbing to their feet.

Orne moved faster, stumbling back into the darkness beyond the lights, realized he still carried his own light like a waving beacon. Its colored reflections picked out a side trail leading off into blackness.

The priest's voice behind him leaped to an insane pitch: "Bring me the head of that blasphemer!"

Orne hurled his light standard like a spear at the suddenly congested group behind him, whirled, fled along the trail.

A ragged, demoniacal yell lifted into the night from the mass of students. A thunder of footsteps pounded after him.

Orne put on more speed. His eyes adjusted to the starlight, and he could just make out the line of the trail curving around the slope to the left. A blotch of deeper blackness loomed ahead.

The woods?

The scrambling mob sound filled the night behind him.

Under Orne's feet, the path became uneven, twisted to the right down to a steep slope, turned left. He tripped, almost fell. His robe caught on bushes, and he lost seconds freeing himself, glanced back. Another few seconds and the lights of the mob would reveal him. He came to a split second decision, plunged off the trail downhill to the right and parallel to the line of trees. Bushes snagged his robe. He fumbled with the belt, shed the robe.

"I hear him!" someone screamed from above.

The mob came to a plunging stop, held silent. Orne's crashing progress dominated the night sounds.

"Down there!"

And they were after him.

"His head!" someone screamed. "Tear his head off him!"

Orne plunged on, feeling cold and exposed in nothing but sandals and the light shorts he had worn beneath the robe. The mob was a crashing avalanche on the hill above him: curses, thumps and tearing sounds, waving lights. Abruptly, Orne stumbled onto another trail, was almost across it before he could turn left. His legs ached. There was a tight band across his chest. He plunged into deeper darkness, glanced up to see trees outlined against the stars. The mob was a confused clamor behind him.

Orne stopped, listened to the voices: "Part of you go that way! We'll go this way!"

He drew in gasping breaths, looked around. *Like a hunted animal!* he thought. And he remembered Bakrish's words: ". . . *caution is the brother of fear.* . . ." He smiled grimly, slipped off the trail downhill to the right, ducked beneath low limbs, crawled behind a log. Moving softly, silently, he dug dirt from beside the log, smeared it over his face and chest.

Lights came closer along the trail. He heard the angry voices.

Keeping his head down, Orne wriggled deeper into the trees, arose to his knees, slid down a hill. He worked his way to the right down the hill. The mob sounds grew dim, faded. He crossed another trail, melted through more trees and bushes. His wounded arm ached, and unaccountably this reminded him of the itching sensation he had felt while strapped in the chair . . . *an itching like a healing wound but before the wound!* He felt that he had met another clue, but its meaning baffled him.

The trees thinned, bushes grew farther apart. He came out onto the flat park area, a lawn underfoot. Beyond the park he saw the wall, and above that streetlights and glowing windows.

Bakrish said the Halmyrach Abbod is in this city, thought Orne. *Why bother with the lower echelons? I'm a field agent of the I-A. It's time I got down to work.* And in the

back of his mind another thought niggled: *Did I pass that last test?* Angrily, he pushed the thought aside, crouched as footsteps sounded on a path to his left.

Through the thin starlight filtered by scattered trees he saw a priest in white walking along the path. Orne flattened himself against a tree, waited. Fragrance of night blooming flowers crossed his nostrils. Birds whirring and rustling sounded from the branches overhead. The footsteps came closer.

Orne waited for the priest to pass, slipped out behind him.

Presently, Orne strode toward the wall and the street lights. The priest's robe hung a little long. He tucked a fold under the belt, smiled. In the dark bushes at the edge of the park lay an unconscious figure bound and gagged with strips torn from his own underclothing.

Now, we see what makes this place tick, thought Orne. He paused while still in the shadows of the park, scrubbed at the dirt on his face and chest with an undercorner of the robe, then continued on his way calmly—a priest out on normal business. Or so it would seem.

No movement showed beyond the low wall. Orne walked along it, entered by a gate, crossed to an alley. A sour smell of cooking tainted the narrow way. The slapping of his sandalled feet made a double echo off the stone walls. Ahead, a standard light showed the crossing of another narrow alley.

Orne stopped as thin shadows projected across the intersection. Two priests strode into view. Orne hurried ahead, recalled a religious greeting from his own childhood training on Chargon. "Shari'a, gentle sirs," he said. "God grant you peace."

The pair stopped with their faces in shadows, half turned in his direction. The near one spoke: "May you follow the highway of divine command and guidance." The other said: "May we be of service?"

"I am from another sector and have been summoned to the Halmyrach Abbod," said Orne. "I seem to have lost my way." He waited, alert to every movement from the pair.

"These alleys are like a maze," said the nearest priest. "But you are near." He turned, and the street light revealed a pinched-in face, narrow eyes. "Take the next turning to your right. Follow that way to the third turning left. That street ends at the court of the Abbod."

"I am grateful," murmured Orne.

"A service to one of God's creatures is a service to God," said the priest. "May you find wisdom." The pair bowed, passed around Orne, went on their way.

Orne smiled into the darkness, thinking: *Old I-A maxim — Go straight to the top.*

The street of the Abbod proved to be even narrower than the others. Orne could have stretched out his arms to touch both walls. At the end of the alley a door glowed dimly grey in reflected starlight. The door proved to be locked. *A locked door?* he thought. *Can all be sweetness and purity here?* He stepped back, peered up at the wall. Dark irregularities there suggested spikes or a similar barrier. His thought was cynically amused : *Such civilized appointments on this peaceful planet!*

A glance back up the alley showed it still empty. He shed the priestly robe, swung a hemmed corner up onto the wall, pulled. The robe slipped back slightly, caught. There was a small tearing sound as he tested it, but the robe held. He tried his weight on it. The fabric stretched, but remained firmly caught.

Scrabbling sounds marked his passage up the wall. He avoided sharp spikes on the top, crouched there. One window in the building wall opposite him glowed with a dim rose color behind loose draperies. He glanced down, saw a starlit courtyard, tall pots in rows topped with flowering bushes. Another glance at the window, and he felt the

abrupt stab of prescient fear. *Danger there!* An air of tension hung over the courtyard.

Orne freed the robe from the spike, dropped into the courtyard, crouched in shad while he slipped back into the priest's garment. One deep breath, and he began working his way around the courtyard to the left, hugging the shadows. Vines dropped from a balcony below the lighted window. He tested one, found it too fragile, moved farther along the wall. A draft touched his left cheek. Darker blackness there—an open door.

Prescient fear tingled along his nerves. Angrily, he put down the fear, slipped through the door into the hall.

Light glared in the hall!

Orne froze, then suppressed laughter as he saw the beam switch beside the door. He stepped back: darkness. Forward: light.

Stairs climbed curving to the left at the end of the hall. Orne moved quietly along the hall, paused at the foot of the stairs, looked up at a heavy wooden door with golden initials on it in bas relief:

“H.A.”

Halmyrach Abbod! Right to the top!

He slipped up the stairs, cautiously gripped the door handle, turned it with the gentlest of pressure. The lock clicked. He threw the door open, lunged through, slammed the door behind him.

“Ah, Mr. Orne. Very resourceful of you.” It was a faintly tenor masculine voice with just an edge of quaver to it.

Orne slewed around, saw a wide hooded bed. Remote in the bed like a dark-skinned doll sat a man in a nightshirt. He was propped up by a mound of pillows. The face looked familiar. It was narrow, smooth-skinned with a nose that hung like a precipice over a wide mouth. His head was polished dark baldness.

The wide mouth moved, and the faintly quavering tenor voice said: “I am the Halmyrach Abbod. You wished to see

me?”

An aura of oldness hung over the man in the bed like an ancient odor of parchment. Orne took two steps toward the bed, his prescient fear clamoring. He paused, recalling the resemblance. “You look like Emolirido.”

“My younger brother, Mr. Orne. Do be seated.” He gestured toward a chair beside the bed. “Forgive me for receiving you this way, but I find myself jealous of my rest in these later years.”

Orne moved to the chair. Something about this skinny ancient spoke of deadliness beyond anything Orne had ever before encountered. He glanced around the room, saw dark hangings on the walls covered with weird shapes: curves and squares, pyramids, swastikas and a repetitive symbol like an anchor—a vertical line with an arc at its base. The floor was black and white tile of gigantic pentagonal pieces, each at least two meters across. Furniture of polished woods was crowded into the corners: a desk, a low table, chairs, a tape rack and a stand in the shape of a spiral staircase.

“Have you already summoned your guards’?” asked Orne.

“I have no need of them, Mr. Orne. Please sit down.”
Again the skeletal arm gestured toward the chair.

Orne looked at the chair. It had no arms to conceal secret bindings.

“The chair is just a chair,” said the Abbod.

Orne sat down like a man plunging into cold water, tensed.

The Abbod smiled. “You see?”

Orne wet his lips with his tongue. Something was wrong here. This was not working out at all as he had imagined. “I came here to find out some things,” he said.

“Good. We shall share information.”

“Why’re you people out to get the I-A?”

“First things first, Mr. Orne. Have you deciphered the intent of your ordeal?” The Abbod’s large eyes, brown and

glossy, stared at Orne. "Do you know why you cooperated with us?"

"What else could I do?"

"Many things, as you have demonstrated just this night."

"All right, I was curious."

"About what?"

Orne lowered his eyes, felt something quicken within himself.

"Be honest with yourself, Mr. Orne."

"I . . . I suspected you were teaching me things about myself that . . . that I didn't already know."

"Superb!" The Abbod was smiling. "But you were a product of the Marakian civilization. All aberative tendencies had been removed at an early age by microsurgical *atenture*. How, then, could there be left anything about yourself that you did not know?"

"There just *was*. I found out I could be afraid without knowing why. I . . ."

"Had you ever heard of the thaumaturgic psychiatrists of the ancient Christian era?"

"What era was that?"

"Long ago. So long ago that there are left only small, tantalizing fragments to tell us of those days. The Christeros religion derives from that period."

"What about it?"

"You have not heard of these ancient practices?"

"I know there were mental sciences before the microsurgical techniques were developed. Is that what you mean?"

"In a way." The Abbod fell silent, waiting.

Orne swallowed. This was not going the way it should have gone. He felt on the defensive, and all he faced was one skinny old man in a ridiculous nightshirt. Anger swelled in Orne. "I came here to find out if you people were fomenting war!"

"And what if we were? What then? Were you prepared to be the surgeon, to cut out the infection and leave society in

its former health?"

Orne's anger receded.

"Do you not see the parallel, Mr. Orne?" The Abbod frowned. "The best of a supreme mechanistic science worked you over and declared you sane, balanced, clear. Yet there remained something more that they had not touched."

"Then there's something the I-A isn't . . . touching?"

"But of course."

"What?"

"Most of every iceberg is beneath the surface of the sea," said the Abbod.

A tiny wave of Orne's anger surged back. "Now what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Then let us approach it this way," said the Abbod. "The Guru called Pasawan, who led the Ramakrishnans into the Great Unifying we know as the Ecumenical Truce, was a follower of the Hynd doctrine. This has always taught the divinity of the soul, the unity of all existence, the oneness of the Godhead and the harmony of all religions."

Orne stiffened. "You're not going to get anywhere trying to force a lot of religious pap down my throat!"

"One does not successfully force religion onto anyone," murmured the Abbod. "If it pleases you to do so, you may consider this in the nature of a history lesson."

Orne sank back in the chair. "So get on with it."

"Thanks to Pasawan, we believe we have developed here a science of religion. The discovery of psi powers and an interpretation of their significance tends to confirm our postulates."

"Which are?"

"That mankind, acting somewhat as a great psi machine, does create a force, an energy system. We may refer to this system as religion, and invest it with an independent focus of action which we will call God. But remember that a god without discipline faces the same fate as the merest human

under the same circumstances. It is unfortunate that mankind has always been so attracted by visions of absolutes—even in his gods.”

Orne recalled his experience that night when he had felt a psi field surging out of the emotions in the massed students. He rubbed his chin.

“Let us consider this idea of absolutes,” said the Abbod. “Let us postulate a finite system in which a given being may exhaust all avenues of knowledge—know everything, as it were.”

In an intuitive leap, Orne saw the image being painted by the Abbod’s words. He blurted: “It’d be worse than death!”

“Unutterable, deadly boredom would face such a being. It’s future would be endless repetition, replaying all of its old tapes. A boredom worse than extinction.”

“But boredom is a kind of stasis,” said Orne. “Stasis would lead to chaos.”

“And what do we have?” asked the Abbod. “We have chaos: an infinite system where anything can happen— a place of constant change. And let us recognize one of the inevitable properties of this infinite system. If anything can happen, then our hypothetical being *could* be extinguished. Quite a price to pay to escape boredom, eh’?”

“All right. I’ll go along with your game and your hypothetical being. Couldn’t it find some kind of . . . well, insurance?”

“Such as scattering its eggs in an infinite number of baskets, eh?”

“Life’s done just that, hasn’t it? it’s scattered all over the universe in billions of forms.”

“Yet *anything* can happen,” murmured the Abbod. “So we have two choices: infinite boredom or infinite chance.”

“So what?”

“Do you wish me to continue with the history lesson?”

“Go ahead.”

"Now, behind or beneath or projecting into this scattered *Life*, let us postulate a kind of Consciousness that . . ." He raised a hand as Orne's face darkened. "Hear me out, Mr. Orne. This *other* consciousness has been suspected for countless centuries. It has been called such things as 'collective unconscious', 'the paramatman', 'urgrund', 'sanatana dharma', 'super mind', 'ober palliat' . . . It has been called many things."

"None of which makes it any more real!" snapped Orne. "Let's not mistake *clear* reasoning for *correct* reasoning. The fact that a name exists for something doesn't mean that thing exists."

"You are then an empiricist," said the Abbod. "Good. Did you ever hear the legend of Doubting Thomas?"

"No matter," said the Abbod. "He was always one of my favorite characters. He refused to take crucial facts on faith."

"Sounds to me like a wise man."

The Abbod smiled. "A moment ago I said that mankind generates a power we may call religion, and within that religion a focus of independent action you may refer to as God."

"Are you sure it isn't the other way around?"

"That's of no importance at the moment, Mr. Orne. Let us go on to a corollary of the original postulate, which is that mankind also generates prophets in the same way— men who point out the paths that lead to degeneracy and failure. And here we come to a function of our order as we see it. We find these prophets and educate them."

"You educate men like Mahmud?"

"Mahmud escaped us."

Orne suddenly sat up straight. "Are you implying that *I'm* a prophet?"

"But of course you are. You're a man with extraordinary powers. Psi instruments have only sharpened and brought to focus what was already there, latent within you."

Orne slapped a hand onto his right knee. "If this isn't the wildest train of. . ."

"I'm serious, Mr. Orne. In the past, prophets have tended to preach without restriction—uninhibited and really undisciplined. The results were always the same: temporary order that climbed toward greater and greater power, then the inevitable degeneration. We, on the other hand, have another method. We seek the slow, self-disciplined accumulation of data that will extend our science of religion. The broad course ahead of us is already be coming..."

"Do you mean to tell me that you people presume to educate prophets?"

An inner light glittered in the Abbod's glossy eyes. "Mr. Orne, have you any idea how many innocents have been tortured to death in the name of religion during the course of Man's bloody history?"

Orne shrugged. "There's no way of knowing how many."

"Countless?"

"Certainly."

"That is one of the things which always happens when religions run wild, Mr. Orne. War and bloodshed of countless sorts develop from undisciplined religion."

"And you think I'm a prophet?"

"We *know* you are. It is uncertain whether you could start a new religion, but you are a prophet. We had you out on that mountainside tonight for just one purpose. Your fellow students did not turn out to be prophets. They will never rise above the oblate brotherhood. We know their character, however, and we know your character. Put the two together, and you should have learned a lesson."

"Sure! That I could get my head torn off by a mob!"

"That would have meant you failed the test," said the Abbod. "Now, please be calm and tell me the basic significance of your experience out there."

"Wait a minute," said Orne. "How'd you know what happened out there?"

"I knew within seconds when you ran away from the mob," said the Abbod. "I was waiting for the report. We suspected you would come here."

"Of course. And you just sat here and waited for me."

"Of course. Now answer the question: What's the basic significance of your experience?"

Orne turned his head, looked out of the corners of his eyes at the Abbod. "That there's a great amount of explosive energy in religion. That's what I learned."

"You already knew this, naturally."

"Yes. You just made the fact important to me."

"Mr. Orne, I will tell you about just one of the many prophets we have on Amel. His talents are extreme. He can cause a glowing aura to appear around his body. He can levitate. What we understand as space does not exist for him. Seemingly, he can step from planet to planet as easily as a normal person would cross the street. He can . . ."

"Is this that fellow who was on Wessen? The one the feature scribes went nuts over when . . ."

"I see you've heard of him. We got to him barely in time. Mr. Orne. I ask you now: What would happen if he were to appear to a crowd, say, on Marak, that enlightened center of our government, and display there his full powers?"

Orne frowned.

"Is it likely they would put a religious interpretation on his activities?" demanded the Abbod.

"Well . . . probably."

"Most certainly! And what if he did not fully understand his own talents. Picture it. He knows the true from the false by some inner sense—call it instinct. Around him he sees much that is false. What's he likely to do?"

"All right!" barked Orne. "He'd probably start a new religion! You've made your point."

"A *wild* religion," corrected the Abbod. He glared at Orne, pointed to Orne's left, "Look there!"

Orne turned, saw a dancing sword of flame about two meters away. Its point was aimed at his head. He shivered, felt perspiration drench his body. Prescient fear screamed within him.

"The first lone man to tap that source of energy was burned alive as a sorcerer by his fellow humans," said the Abbod. "The ancients thought that flame was alive. They gave it religious significance, called it a *salamander*. They thought of it as a demon. And when you don't know how to control it, the thing does act like a wild demon with a life and will of its own. It's raw energy, Mr. Orne. I direct it through a psi focus. You act so superior. You think of yourself as a servant of a great organization that prevents war. Yet I—one man alone—could utterly annihilate any military force you could bring against me—and I would use nothing but this ancient discovery!" The old man sank back against his pillows, closed his eyes. Presently, he opened his eyes, said: "Sometimes I forget my years, but they never forget me."

Orne drew in a ragged breath. The deadliness that he had suspected in this skeletal human had taken on form and dimension: deadliness magnified to *new* dimensions.

"When Emolirido informed us of you, we had to bring you here, test you, see for ourselves," murmured the Abbod. "So many do not test out. In your case, though, the tests proved Emolirido correct. You . . ."

"I did things Emolirido taught me how to do, and with equipment he had put in my body!"

"Your *equipment* has been nullified by a dampening projection since your interview with Bakrish at your arrival," said the Abbod.

Orne opened his mouth to protest, closed it. He recalled his sensation of strangeness during that first interview. *Nullified*? Yet he still sensed danger all around.

"What Emolirido did was to force you to accept the things you already could do," said the Abbod. "Your first lesson:

faith in yourself." He looked grimly amused. "But it is plain that you still cherish doubts."

"You're damn' right I do! I think this whole hocus pocus was designed to confuse me, put me off the track!"

"You doubt the existence of a superior consciousness that manifests itself in gods and prophets and even sometimes in our machines," said the Abbod.

"I think you may have stumbled onto something with your psi powers, but you've mucked it up with your mystical hogwash! There's a scientific explanation for these things that'd appear if you blew away all this fog!"

"The empiricist demands his demonstration," murmured the Abbod. "Very well. Let us introduce you to the graduate school, Mr. Orne. Thus far, you've been playing with toys. Let's see how you react when we threaten the basic fiber of your being!"

Orne pushed himself to his feet, reached behind for the back of the chair. He glanced left at the dancing point of flame, saw it sweep around in front of his eyes. Burning, prickling sensations crawled along his skin. The flame grew to a ball almost a meter in diameter, pressed forward. Orne stumbled backward, knocked over the chair. Heat blasted his face.

"How now?" cried the Abbod.

He's trying to panic me, thought Orne. This could be an illusion. He darted to the left, and the flame shot ahead of him, cutting him off, pressed even closer.

Orne retreated. His face burned where the flame seared against it.

"Is this illusion, Mr. Orne?" called the Abbod.

Doggedly, Orne shook his head. His eyes smarted. The flaming ball pressed him back ward. He shook perspiration from his head, glanced down at the floor. *Pentagonal tiles. Giant pentagonal tiles at least two meters across.* He stepped to the center of a white tile, immediately felt the heat diminish.

"Psi must be faced with psi," called the Abbod.

Orne nodded, wet his lips with his tongue, swallowed. He tried to focus on the inner awareness as Emolirido had taught him. Nothing. He closed his eyes, concentrated, felt something give.

Somewhere, there was a great howling of not-sound. He was being pulled inward, distorted. Twisted in a vortex that sucked him down . . . down . . . down . . . down . . .

The thought of ticking seconds blazed within him.

TIME!

No sensation except a dim touch of the pentagram as though it pressed against his body at every point: a pentagram, a box, a cage. And the ticking seconds. His mind boiled with the thought of TIME!

Time and tension, he thought. And his mind juggled symbols like blocks of energy, manipulated energy like discreet signals. There was a problem. That was it, a problem. *Tension! Tension = energy source. Energy + opposition = growth of energy. To strengthen a thing, oppose it. Growth of energy + opposition = opposites blending into a new identity.*

"You become like the worst in what you oppose," he thought. It was a quotation. He had heard it somewhere. *Priest slips into evil. The great degenerates into the small.*

And he remembered his wounded arm, the itching before the wound.

TIME!

Beyond the pentagram he sensed a place where chaotic energy flowed. A great blank not-darkness filled with not-light and a ceaseless flowing. And he felt himself as on a mountaintop—as though he were the mountaintop. Pressing upward but still connected to a living earth below. Some where he felt the touch of the pentagram: a shape that could be remembered and located.

A voice came from below the mountain: "Mr. Orne?"

He felt the pentagram press more tightly.

"Mr. Orne?"

The Abbod's voice.

Orne felt himself flowing back, compressed, twisted. The shape of his body became a new distortion to his senses. He wanted to resist.

"Don't fight it, Mr. Orne."

Pressure against side and arms: the floor. He opened his eyes, found that he was stretched out on the tiles, his head at one corner of the white pentagram, his feet at the opposite corner. The Abbod stood over him in a belted white robe: a dark, monkey-like creature with overlarge, staring eyes.

"What did you see, Mr. Orne?"

Orne drew in a deep, gasping breath. He felt dizzy, weak. "Nothing," he gasped.

"Oh, yes. You *saw* with every sense you possess. One does not walk without seeing the path."

Walk? Path? Orne remembered the sense of flowing chaos. He pulled his arms back, pushed himself up. The floor felt cold against his palms. The wound in his arm itched. He shook his head. "What do you *want* from me?"

The Abbod's gaze bored in to him. "*You* tell me."

Orne swallowed in a dry throat. "I saw chaos."

The Abbod leaned forward. "And *where* is this chaos?"

Orne looked down at his feet extended along the floor, glanced around the room, back to the Abbod. "Here. It was this world, this universe, this . . ."

"Why could you see it as chaos?"

Orne shook his head. *Why? I was threatened. I . . . TIME!* He looked up. "It has something to do with time."

"Mr. Orne, have you ever seen a jungle?"

"Yes."

"The plant life, its growth is not immediately apparent to your senses, is it?"

“Not . . . immediately. But over a period of days, of course, you . . .” He broke off.

“Precisely !” barked the Abbod. “If you could, as it were, speed up the jungle, it would become a place of writhing contention. Vines would shoot up like snakes to clutch and strangle the trees. Plants would leap upward, blast forth with pods, hurl out their seeds. You would see a great strangling battle for sun light.”

“Time,” said Orne. And he recalled Emolirido’s analogy: the three-dimensional shadow cast into the two-dimensional world. “How does the person in the two-dimensional world interpret the shadow of a three-dimensional object?” he murmured.

The Abbod smiled. “Emolirido so enjoys that analogy.”

“The two-dimensional being can interpolate,” said Orne. “He can stretch his imagination to create . . . *things* that reach into the other dimension.”

“So?”

Orne felt the tension. Nerves trembled along his arms. “Psi machines!” he blurted. “They manipulate time!”

“Psi phenomena are time phenomena,” said the Abbod.

It was like veils falling away from Orne’s senses. He remembered his wounded arm, the itching he had felt before the arm was wounded in that exact place. He recalled a small psi instrument that Emolirido had displayed: loops, condensers, electronic tubes, all focusing on a thin square of plastic. Rubbed one way, the plastic felt tacky. Rubbed the other way, the plastic felt as slick as glass, greased.

In a half-musing way, he said: “There was a thin layer of time flow along the plastic. One direction, my hand moved with the flow; the other direction, my hand opposed the flow.”

“Eh?” The Abbod looked puzzled.

“I was remembering something,” said Orne.

“Oh.” The Abbod turned, shuffled back to his bed, sat on the edge. His robe opened, revealing thin shanks under his

nightshirt. He looked incredibly old and tired.

Orne felt a pang of sympathy for the old man. The sense of dread that had surrounded this place was gone. In its place he felt an awakening akin to awe.

"Life projects matter through the dimension of time," said the Abbod.

"A kind of time machine?"

The Abbod nodded. "Yes. Our awareness is split. It exists within these three dimensions and outside of them. We have known this for centuries. Thoughts can blaze through a lifetime in the merest fraction of a second. Threaten the human life, and you can force awareness to retreat into no-time. One can weigh countless alternatives, select the course of action that has the greatest survival potential. All of this you can do while time in this dimension stands still."

Orne took a deep breath. He knew this was true. He recalled that final terrible instant in the Heleb uprising. There he had sat at the controls of his escape ship while around him great weapons swung about to bear on the vessel's flimsy walls. There had seemed no way to avoid blasting energies that were sure to come. And he remembered the myriad alternatives that had flitted through his mind while outside the terrible weapons seemed to hang frozen. And he *had* escaped. The one sure way had been seen.

The Abbod pushed himself back into the bed, pulled covers over his legs. "I am a very old man." He looked sideways at Orne. "But it still pleasures me to see a person make the *old* discovery."

Orne took a step forward. "Old?"

"Ancient. Thousands of years before the first man ventured into space from the original home world, a scattered few were discovering this way of looking at the universe. They called it *Mayá*. The tongue was Sanskrit. Our view of the matter is a little more . . . sophisticated. But there's no essential difference. The ancients said:

'Abandon forms; direct yourself toward temporal reality.'
You know, Mr. Orne, it's amazing. Man has such an . . .
appetite to encompass . . . everything."

Like a sleep walker, Orne moved forward, righted the chair beside the bed, sank into it. Extensions of his awakening captured his attention. "The prophet who calls forth the dead," he said. "He returns the matter of the body to a time when it was alive. That flame you threatened me with. You bring it out of a time when the matter around us was gaseous incandescence. The man from Wessen who walks from planet to planet like you would cross a stream on stepping stones." Orne held up his hands. "Of course. Without time to stretch across it, there can be no space. To him, time is a specific location!"

"Think of the universe as an expanding balloon," said the Abbod. "A balloon of weird shape and unexplored convolutions. Suppose you have a transparent grid, three-dimensional. Like graph paper. You look through it at the universe. It is a matrix against which you can plot out the shapes and motions of the universe."

"Education," said Orne.

The Abbod spoke like a teacher praising a pupil. "Very good!" He smiled. "This grid, this matrix is trained into human beings. They project it onto the universe. With this matrix they break nature into bits. Usable bits. But, somehow, they too often get the idea that nature . . . the universe is the bits. The matrix is so very useful, permitting us to communicate our ideas, for example. But it is so near-sighted. It's like an old man reading script with his nose pressed almost to the page. He sees one thing at a time. But our universe is not one thing at a time. It's an enormous complex. Still we concentrate on the bits." He shook his head. "Do you know how we see the bits, Mr. Orne?"

Orne snapped out of a half-reverie in which the Abbod's words had been like gross areas of understanding that

flowed into his awareness. "We see them by contrast. Each bit moves differently, has a different color, or . . ."

"Very good! We see them by contrast. To see a bit we must see also its background. Bit and background are inseparable. Without one you cannot discern the other. Without evil you cannot determine good. Without war, you cannot determine peace. Without . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Orne jerked to attention. "Is that why you're out to ruin the I-A?"

"Mr. Orne, a compulsive peace is not peace. To compel peace, you must use warlike methods. It is nonsense to think that you can get rid of one of a pair and possess only the other. You are doing this by force! You create a vacuum into which chaos will flow."

Orne shook his head. He felt trapped in a maze, caught by the idea that something had to be wrong with the Abbod's words.

"It is like a drug habit," said the Abbod. "If you enforce peace, it will take greater and greater amounts of peace to satisfy you. And you will use more and more violence to obtain it. The cycle will end in cataclysm. Think rather of how light reaches your eyes. When you are reading you do not seek out, striving for the light. In the same way, peace comes to your senses. Pleasure comes to you. Good comes to you. As the light comes to your eyes. These are functions of your nerves. You cannot make an effort with your nerves. You can make an effort with your muscles. That is the way it is with our universe. Our matrix must be a direct function of reality, of actual matter. In this, it is like our nerves. If we distort the matrix, we do not change reality, but only our way of seeing it. If we destroy one half of a pair, the remaining half overwhelms us. Take away the predator, and the creature preyed upon undergoes a population explosion. All of these things fit the basic law."

"And the I-A has broken that law?"

"It has." The Abbod frowned. "You see, peace is an internal matter. It's a self-discipline. It must come from within. If you set up an outside power to enforce peace, that outside power grows stronger and stronger. It must. Inevitably, it degenerates. Comes the cataclysm."

"You people on Amel look on yourselves as a kind of super I-A, don't you."

"In a sense," the Abbod agreed. "But we want to go to the root. We wish to plant the seed of self-discipline wherever it will take root. And to do this, we prepare certain ground for cultivation."

"Ground?"

"Worlds. Societies." The Abbod stared at Orne. "And we desperately need farmers, Mr. Orne."

"Meaning me?"

"Would you care to enlist?"

Orne cleared his throat, broke his attention away from the Abbod's intent gaze. He felt that he was being stampeded.

The Abbod's voice intruded. "This is a chaotic universe, Mr. Orne. Things are changing. Things *will* change. There is an instinct in human beings that realizes this. Our instinct foments a feeling of insecurity. We seek something unchanging. Beliefs are temporary because the bits we believe about are in motion. They change. And periodically, we go through the cataclysm. We tear down the things that refuse to work. They don't do what we expect them to do, and we become children, smashing the toys that refuse to obey. In such times, the teachers of self-discipline are much needed."

"You say we're approaching some great smashing up, some cataclysm?"

"We are always approaching it. Always ahead of us is the great burning from which the Phoenix arises. Only one thing endures: Faith. The object changes, but faith endures. It's the absolute we yearn after in a changing universe."

Orne felt overwhelmed by a sense of outrage. "Faith? That's nonsense! There's no logic, no scientific . . ."

"Trust your senses!" barked the Abbod. "Do not try to distort the matrix to fit what you want to believe! You have experienced another dimension. Many have done this without realizing it. You realize it."

"But . . . faith? In what?"

"In our appetite. Faith that we will encompass this other dimension and find there a new area of mystery to beckon our senses. Faith that there is something enduring in all this chaos . . . and if not, that we can create a thing that will endure. *That* faith, Mr. Orne."

Orne lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry. I . . . didn't understand."

The Abbod's voice lowered almost to a whisper. "Of course you didn't. You had not heard our simple definition of a religion. A religion is the faith that something will endure beyond the apparent chaos surrounding us. The central concepts are Faith and Endurance."

Orne turned the thought over in his mind.

"Our faith here is in the linear endurance of human kind," said the Abbod. "On Amel we call it the Great Continuity. It is our faith that there will always be a descendant of humankind— evolved, changed, unrecognizable to today's humans, no matter what, but still our descendant."

Cynicism, his most dependable defense, took over Orne's thinking. "Very high sounding," he said. "And if that's what you're really doing here. quite attractive. But how can I be certain what you're doing? You use lots of words. Some even make sense."

"But all it takes is one weak link, eh?"

Orne shrugged.

"That's why we seek out only the strong, the prophets," said the Abbod. "That is why the testing and the education. If we tame the wild religions and harness their energies to our purpose, that makes sense, doesn't it?"

“Certainly.”

“Then we will give you this, Mr. Orne: You may go anywhere on Amel, ask any questions, look at any records, request any cooperation that does not oppose our purpose. Satisfy yourself. And even then, you do not have to decide to stay with us. You may return to any of the outer worlds, to Marak, to Chargon, wherever you wish to go. We insist only that you subject your talents to our instructions, that you permit us to show you how they may be tamed.”

Orne wet his lips with his tongue. A tentative probe at the Abbod’s emotions revealed candor and faint amusement. The amusement annoyed Orne. He had the feeling that this was an old story to the Abbod, that the reactions of one Lewis Orne could be classified as type such and so. A kind of pique made him say: “Aren’t you afraid I might . . . well, double-cross you once I was off Amel?”

“We have faith in you, Mr. Orne. Your ordeal has given us grounds for that, at least. We are not worried.”

Orne chuckled. “The least I can do is return the favor, eh?”

“After you’ve pried and tested us to your satisfaction, yes. You said it yourself, you know: Faith is the uncensored will. Doubt is a censor we’d rather you didn’t have.”

Orne nodded, and a new thought hit him. “Do you have enough faith in me to let me return to Marak and make over the I-A along lines you’d approve?”

The Abbod shook his head. “Faith in you, we have that. But your I-A has gone too far along the road to power. You understand, my son, that a bureau is like an individual. it will fight for survival. It will seek power. Your I-A has a personality made up of all its parts. Some such as yourself we would trust. Others ... I’m afraid not. No. Before we permit you to leave here, the I-A will be dead, and other bureaus will be feeding on the remains.”

Orne stared at the ancient face. Presently, he said: “I guess I failed them.”

“Perhaps not. Your original purpose is still intact. Peace as a self-discipline can be more gratifying than any other kind. It grows more slowly, to be sure, but it’s confident growth that counts.”

Orne still tasted a certain bitterness. “You seem pretty *confident* that I’ll join you.”

“You’ve already passed that decision,” murmured the Abbod. “When you asked to return and make over the I-A.”

This time Orne’s chuckle was aimed at himself. “Know me pretty well, don’t you.”

“We know your purpose, your religion, as it were. You share our faith in humankind. When we learned that, we knew you were already one of us.” The Abbod smiled, and the old face seemed to light up. “There’s much ground to prepare, and we have need of many farmers.”

“Yeah, I’m a hayseed, all right,” said Orne.

“After you have pried into Amel to your heart’s content, come back and talk to me. I know there’s a certain young lady awaiting you on Marak. Perhaps we could discuss your returning to another bureau— Recovery & Re-education.”

“R & R! Those bumbleheads! They’re the . . . ”

“You have an interesting conditioned reaction there,” said the Abbod. “For now, I will only remind you that any bureau is the sum of its parts.”

In his office on Marak, Tyler Gemine, director of Rediscovery & Re-education, faced Orne across an immense black wood desk. Behind Gemine a wide window looked out on the packed office buildings of Marak’s central government quarter. The director was a rounded outline against the window, a fat anti genial surface with smiling mouth and hard eyes. Frown wrinkles creased his forehead.

The office fitted Gemine. On the surface it seemed built for comfort: soft chairs, thick carpet, unobtrusive lighting. But three walls held file cases geared to a remote search control at the desk. Six autosecretaries flanked the desk.

Sitting opposite the director, Orne still wore his aquatoga from Amel. R & R security police had rushed him here from the spaceport, giving him no time to change his garb.

"All of this haste must appear unseemly to you, Mr. Orne," said Gemine. "Separating you from your fiancée at the spaceport like that. Rude of us." The hard eyes bored into Orne.

Orne hid his amusement under a mask of concern. "I know you must have good reasons, sir."

Gemine leaned back. "In deed we do." He pulled a stack of papers toward him on the desk, squared them. "Before the I-A took you away from us, Mr. Orne, you were an agent of the R & R."

"Yes, sir. They drafted me."

"That unfortunate business on Hamal!"

"There was nothing I could do, sir."

"No blame attaches to you, Mr. Orne. But you understand that we do have some curiosity about you now that we have superseded the I-A."

"You want to know where my loyalties are?"

"Precisely."

"The R & R's purpose is still my purpose, sir."

"Good! Good !" Gemine patted the stack of papers in front of him. "Ahhh, this mission to Amel. What about that?"

"Why was I sent?"

Gemine's stare was cold and measuring, "Yes."

"It was very simple. The I-A executive staff heard about the move to do away with their department. They had reason to believe the priests were a prime factor in the move. I was sent to Amel to see if they could be circumvented."

"And you failed." It was a flat statement.

"Sir, I beg to remind you that I once volunteered for the R & R. I was one of your agents before the I-A took me away from you." He managed a tight smile. "And it didn't take a giant brain to realize that you would take over the I-A's functions once they were out of the way."

Gemine's eyes clouded with thought. He cleared his throat. "What about this psi thing? In the final audit of I-A we came across this odd department. Unfortunately . . . "Gemine studied a paper in front of him. ". . . the director, one Ag Emolirido, has disappeared. There were records, though, showing that you were trained by him before your recent . . . ah, mission."

So Agony took it on the lam, thought Orne. Gone home to report, no doubt. He said: "It was a questionable field. Oriented along ESP lines." (And he thought: *That'll fit this little hack's executive logic!*) "They were looking for rules to explain certain non-chance phenomena," he went on. "Their results were debatable."

Gemine restacked the papers in front of him. "As I suspected. Well... we can go into it in more detail later. I confess it sounded extremely far-fetched in outline. Typical of I-A wastefulness." He leaned back, steepled his hands in front of him. "Now, Mr. Orne, as you know, we are taking over the key functions of the I-A. But we're running into stupid resistance. That's where I've hoped you could come in."

"My record with R & R is clear, sir."

Gemine swivelled his chair, looked out the window at Marak's executive warren. "You know both the R & R and the I-A, Mr. Orne. It's in my mind to attach you to my office—as a special executive assistant. Your duties would be to facilitate absorption of the I-A." He turned back to look at Orne. "What would you say to that?"

Orne hesitated just the right length of time. "I'd . . . I'd consider that an honor, sir."

"Excellent!" Gemine bent forward. "You'll want to get situated first, of course." his manner became more confidential. "You'll be getting married, I understand. Take what time you need. Say, a month. How's that sound?"

"That's very kind of you, sir."

"Not at all. I want you to be happy with us." He wet his lips with his tongue. "Miss Bullone may not have had the time to tell you . . . about her father, that is. He is no longer our high commissioner. Lost out in the recent shake-up. A pity after so many years of excellent service."

"Has he stayed on in the Assembly?"

"Oh, yes. He's still an important member. Minority leader." Gemine stared at Orne. "We'd like to have you act—unofficially, you understand—as a sort of liaison with Mr. Bullone."

"I'm sure something could be worked out, sir."

Gemine smiled, relaxed. He nodded.

Orne said: "What about my staff, sir?"

"Staff?"

"I'll need assistants of my own if I'm to do this job correctly."

Sudden tension filled the room. "Anyone special in mind?"

Gently, thought Orne. *This is the delicate part*. He said: "All the time I was in the I-A, I was directly under one man. When he said frog, I jumped. Wherever he pointed, that's where I went."

"Ahhh... Mr. Umbo Stetson."

"I see you know him."

"Know him? He's a major source of resistance!"

"That'd make it even more pleasant," said Orne.

Gemine chortled. He radiated gleeful sadism. "Take him! Any authority you need to whip him into line, it's yours!"

Orne matched Gemine's smile. "This is going to be even more fun than I thought."

Gemine arose. "I'll have an office fitted for you next to mine, Lewis. Want everything cozy and neat." He nodded.

"I think this is going to work out very well. Indeed I do."

Orne stood up. "I hope I'll live up to all your expectations, sir."

"You already are, my boy! You know what's expected of you, and you know how to deliver." He gave Orne a

knowing smile. "And I won't soon forget your failure on Amel." He chortled. "Eh?"

From the secret report: Lewis Orne to the Halmyrach Abbod:

"Gemine was every bit as easy as you said he would be. He has already given me Stetson, and through Stetson I'll bring in the others. This is fallow ground, indeed. Needs the ministrations of a trained farmer.

"It was fascinating to talk to Gemine. There was the pattern just as you anticipated it. The weak was absorbing the strong, completely unaware that the strong could eat it up from within. But this time, only a selective seed of the strong.

"Stetson raised no objections at all. The idea he found particularly intriguing was this: *We must find a way of preventing war without making war impossible*. For myself, I find this no paradox. In a universe without limits, Life must grow through self-imposed limits. Every teaching turns on its *discipline*. And what is a discipline but a limit self-imposed for the benefits derived? My new *matrix* needs no distortion to encompass this concept.

"Out of all this, one thought keeps coming back to me. I will mention it this once. It occurs to me that the most effective government is that one where the governed do not know they are being governed, but believe they govern themselves.

"Your obed't farmer,

"Lewis Orne."

THE END