

JAMES BLISH

The Warriors of Day

In a battle for galactic survival—evil had to be met with even greater evil!



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THE WARRIORS OF DAY

The Other World

The Kodiak bear stood on its hind legs, not quite facing Tipton, tiny red eyes peering nearsightedly from the folds of fat above its muzzle. The hilt of the throwing knife protruded just under its lower collar-bone. Blood matted the silvery black fur in forked trails.

Tipton backed toward the slim spruce trunk, moving with careful smoothness. The bear was nearsighted, but sudden movement triggered it, and its hearing was even keener than his own.

That knife should have been in its throat-but its rolling lunge had come after the blade was already cutting the air, too late for Tipton's own reflexes to do anything about it.

Now it was sniffing for him. The hunting knife would have to do. It would be no use to run.

A half-ton of Kodiak bear couldn't be outrun.

The bear snorted frostily. The massive head swung from side to side. Tipton felt the ridged spruce bark grating between his shoulder blades, and took the knife handle in both hands, holding it between his thighs, blade pointed directly at the bear.

Distance: about a dozen feet. If he were to stay absolutely motionless, the bear might lose him even with the imbedded steel to goad it.

"Here we are, Bruin," he said softly. "This way."

The furry giant coughed, its ears erect, and lumbered toward him. It spread huge forepaws wide apart as if to box Tipton's ears. The breath wheezed angrily in its windpipe, and the muted light of an Arctic autumn glistened on the rills of blood.

Tipton had a moment's look into those eyes, and then his face was buried in a warm, reeking mattress of fur. The back of his head banged against the tree trunk, and a sudden terrible pressure collapsed his lungs.

Whorls of livid light shot through his brain, leaving dimming trails. A rib cracked and stabbed him. Through a roaring of agony he could hear the tremendous thrumming of the bear's heart, crushing him with the implacability of a pile driver-

He heaved the knife up from his groin with all his strength. The bear bellowed and the pressure relaxed a little. Gasping, Tipton jerked his face free of the chest fur and forced the blade still farther up. Blood gushed warmly over his whipcords, soaked through, filled his boots.

The bear screamed again and let go, staggering back, its slashed guts spilling from the long gasp. Tipton heaved, sending the point in deep under the sternum, and released the handle of the knife.

Bruin was on all fours now. One step. The massive skull swayed. Pig eyes glared rage and terror toward Tipton. Another step. A shoulder shook the earth; then the hindquarters. Froth smeared from the muzzle onto the brown spruce needles.

It took a long time to die.

Tipton sat down deliberately, and waited for the trembling of his body to go away. It was a natural physiological reaction which he expected, and it had no emotional significance for him. It was the price he paid for a nervous system approximately four times as fast as the norm.

After a while the trembling had almost gone. Tipton stood up and crossed the soaked loam. He

breeches were stiffening, and in his boots his toes stuck together and parted unpleasantly with every step.

The big bear lay quietly, the mad eyes still open, but somehow no longer mad. No longer anything at all. The upper lip was drawn back slightly, exposing the tips of chisel-like teeth.

Tipton heaved a heavy forepaw to one side and found the knives. As he pulled the throwing knives out, one immense haunch kicked violently. A ganglion had been touched; parts of Bruin were still alive, but his organization was gone.

Tipton considered skinning the animal for the bounty. He still had plenty of money, but the solitary, unproductive life would do for it sooner or later. The big beast would bring twenty-five dollars from the authorities at St. Paul, or a month's supplies from the Indians.

Perhaps, on the whole, the Indians would be the better bet. Food was worth more than money on Kadiak, even more than on the Alaskan mainland; and the Indians hated the bears.

Then, too, it had been an Indian who had taught Tipton that trick of putting one's back against a tree. He knew without looking that the other side of the trunk carried eight claw-scars, each one an inch and a half deep. They had been intended for his back.

But Tipton could not bring himself to attack the skinning job. With the death of the bear he had, as always, lost all interest in his victim. He thought grayly, *I didn't kill him for the Indians. I killed him for myself. Let him die.*

So there was nothing to do now but go back to the lodge, get out of these caked clothes, and tap up his bad side. He looked through the branches at dime-sized patches of gray sky. It was not far to go but the island was mountainous here; it should take him nearly two hours by the quickest trail, and the day was almost gone.

He cleaned the knives by sticking them into the sod, and began to walk. His side hurt, and he still felt a little feverish, and quite empty.

The biggest-and smartest-American bear. Big cats; wolves, singly and in packs; now a Kadiak bear. And all without a gun. I don't even own a gun. I suppose next I'll have to leave the North and do elephant-hunting with my bare hands.

The thought caught him by surprise and he laughed. He knew, with a cold frightening certainty that somehow the elephant would lose that battle; without any conscious effort, plans for pitfalls, last-minute traps, balanced logs, river and cliff decoys came swarming into his head; and across his vision, like a net, a diagram of nerves raced, centering on the big ganglion behind the mastoid, where a man might kill an elephant with one hand if he had the courage to drop on its back.

Such courage Tipton had; and yet, oddly, despite over a year of this wild roaming, this long wastage of his accumulated knowledge in one impulse to combat, he still thought of himself as an expert in the theory of irrational numbers-the one thing he had never been.

It had once seemed to him only reasonable to use his gross physical abilities in the biological sciences, where they counted for the most: to use his preternatural deftness in micro-dissection; his instrument-fast reactions, in observing the flickering pulses of colloids. Yet his mind had been dissatisfied. There was something sloppy in the jumbled taxonomy and half-concealed guesswork of biology which repelled him. The rigor of mathematics became his hobby, and for a long time the content-free formalism of numbers and the furling spectra of the aurora borealis helped him to forget his questions about himself.

Yet, in the end, the barriers had broken down again. The uncoiling formulae had loosed his mind into a universe of postulates which did not seem to exist anywhere, and left him once more with nothing to fight. His hunting trips became longer and longer, his choice of weapons more primitive-

Tipton Bond was in the North in search of an enemy.

At night, in the lodge, new formulae would uncoil ceaselessly beneath his pen-point, in search of a universe of postulates where such a being as Tipton Bond might belong. That sense of *not-belonging* had been explained away by half a dozen psychiatrists; it was only natural, according to their propositions, that a parentless man, with no memory even of the orphanage which was his official beginning, should feel isolated and in regressive search for stability.

Perhaps that was so. Tipton hardly cared; the proposition explained, but it did not assuage. The answer, he was convinced, lay elsewhere.

And now he was at a complete impasse. Despite the fantastic sense of fairness which would not allow him to use a gun, he had found himself more than the equal of the most savage of beasts.

Nothing dangerous enough to challenge his sense of peril had cost him a moment's anxiety for himself. The bear was the last term in a fruitless series.

He stopped, leaning against a spruce, and began to chip the dried blood off his boots with the throwing knife. Where was he to go, now? Oh, there was the trail; but the lodge north of Uyak Bay was no longer any sort of starting point. It was a dead end.

The last possibility was not to be found on Kadiak Island. He might take the North Strait steamer out of St. Paul to Homer, on the Alaskan mainland, and from there go on back to the States. Certainly no one need run short of enemies in the cities.

The cities: dirty slush, neon signs, inescapable orders to buy this or that being emitted from a million loudspeakers; pickpockets; tramps-male and female; politicians, fools, liars, imbeciles; all seen through a haze of dirt and dust-

Besides, Tipton was not a criminal, and it took little imagination to visualize what might be produced if he were to turn his crippling talents into any branch of warfare. Any less dangerous game than law enforcement, or prowling Byronically like a comic book hero, single-handedly Righting Wrong could only be anti-climax after this latest victory. Individually, men were startlingly weak. Collectively, they were unsalvageable.

He shifted his weight and got to work on the other boot. Were he now to come into conflict with his last possible enemy, mankind, that enemy would almost certainly lose. Moreover, Tipton Bond would lose something far more important, something which he himself could not describe, but for which he was willing to pay in the ultimate coin-defeat.

He brought himself back to the present with a heavy sigh, of which he was almost unaware. He straightened and resumed walking. The Arctic day, never brilliant at any season, was waning rapidly. Tipton was sure that he could navigate the familiar trail in total darkness, but it would be a slow process, and uncomfortable because of the setting blood on his clothes. He walked faster.

Then he stopped. For a moment he stood wondering what had halted him. He felt a little stunned without quite knowing why. Then he placed it; it was the big mossy rock ahead and to his left.

He did not recognize it.

There should be nothing along this way that he had not seen and recorded before in the bottomless unoccluded repository of his memory. Yet the rock was new. Furthermore, it was quite large, higher than Tipton himself, and veined in a characteristic pattern which should have made it instantly identifiable-

If he had even seen it before.

He had not.

And yet... and yet... the spot itself was familiar. The trees were where they should be, the slope was correct, the color and texture of the soil and its feeling of springiness were exactly as they should

be at this point in the trail. There was only this stony irruption, obtruding blandly into the scene wearing its mossy mask of age, permanence, of having been there always before.

He looked at it for a long time, until he was satisfied that no such thing existed in his memory. Then he shrugged and walked on. It might just possibly be that he had never been looking in that direction during a single one of the many times he had passed this point in the trail. It was not likely but it was possible.

Only a few seconds later he saw the orchid.

At least it looked like an orchid at first. It clung to a small, low fir branch, trailing tendrils, its slightly fleshy petals dawn-pink. Closer inspection revealed that it was anything but an orchid; but it was not anything else that he recognized, either. It was very small and unobtrusive, but to Tipton it could have been no more shocking than had someone suddenly screamed in his ear in the apparent solitude of the forest.

There was something wrong with the trees, too. After a while he decided that it was their hue; the greenness of the needles had lost a little of its blue undertone, had become fresher, more vivid. An inexperienced hunter would have seen none of this for the overwhelming concept of Northernness which still hung over the forest, but Tipton knew at once, and knew flatly, that these things were *wrong*.

Worse followed as he walked. The trees and plants continued to change; small, subtle, violent changes. Even the quality of the light was becoming strange, soft, with a kind of gentle radiance in it. The forest began to murmur with small animal sounds, and that too was wrong, as wrong to Tipton as if he had rounded the path and found himself in the middle of a Times Square crowd.

Tipton Bond was lost. He was the victim of a unique situation—he had taken a path, which, to his encyclopedic knowledge, did not exist in this part of the North.

Is my mind slipping, after all? I suppose it's about time, after the beating I've given it.

And then: Well, not much I can do about it if it's so. I don't think it is. Let's see where it leads.

Certainly everything pointed to the fact that Tipton Bond had taken a turn away from reality as he knew it—though no human being, perhaps, ever knew reality in such intimate detail as he did. It had caught him at a good time, he thought ironically; caught him at the moment of greatest readiness to accept the fantastic—even to welcome it.

He was already wondering: *Where am I going?*

It was now quite dark. Tipton strode steadily forward, his senses sharpened to a greater receptivity than he could remember ever having attained before, with confusing and outright impossible reports pouring into his mind along every channel. Something began to uncoil at the back of his brain, a string of symbols, a pattern, a relationship, a-

A map to nowhere. He felt the change engulf him the moment the complete formula sprang before his mind's eye. It was a formula he had been approaching, unsuccessfully, all last night at the lodge.

The moment his mind hit upon it, he was-

There.

To the sight, *there* was not much different than where he had been before. It was equally dark in both worlds. But his sense of his own weight shifted. He was slightly lighter, and was standing—yet still upon soil, but soil of an utterly different consistency. The air was warmer, and had that quality of radiance in it which beat around his skin as if asking to be let in. He felt that he wanted to let it in, but did not know how to utter the password. And there were new odors, floral, almost tropical, but without the heaviness of tropical perfumes.

This was no longer the sub-polar island of Kadiak.

Another world. There was no arguing it. Every sense but that of sight reported it, reported it in terms so vivid and so detailed that Tipton's brain felt that it must burn out with the sheer speed of its recording, tabulating, and computing upon the new facts.

Nevertheless, he continued to analyze, to sort out the sense impressions which came to him. Although he was as yet unable to give the new world a name, he was determined that it should be as familiar to him in every other respect possible, at the earliest possible moment. With a faint academic amusement, he noted that he was still walking, although he could not see—a circumstance which would have reduced a normal human being to utter immobility and terror.

Well, keep it up, feet, keep it up. We'll see where we're going when we get there.

Abruptly his brain handed him a finished computation. Because of his fetish of combat, he had arrived here injured and nearly weaponless—no matter now where *here* was—and, perhaps more seriously than the novelty of the situation had allowed him to assess, he was fair prey for any force which might resent his presence. At once a surge of new life geysered through him.

Conflict—conflict. There would be conflict here. Perhaps conflict worthy of his utmost—perhaps more than deadly enough to best Tipton Bond.

At the thought, there was a faint stirring in the blackness... a dawn-like glimmering of light, glimmering which came pouring and rushing like a waterfall to full and brilliant day.

He could see.

I am here, my unknown enemy. Wait for me. I will not be long.

The Whisperers

There was resentment a-plenty here; even hatred. Before what he saw had fully registered, Tipton could feel the hatred. He could even hear it.

All around him, things that he was just beginning to recognize as trees and grasses and vines were drawing away from him, in actual physical movement, so much like dowagers at the unexpected entrance of a drunk that he was forced to grin a little. Through the strange woods ran a sudden sighing and whispering and groaning of branches, leaves, myriads of small footsteps.

The sound was so unlike anything in his experience that he knew at once, instinctively, what it was; it was not the random sound of things moved by wind, but a concerted movement, as if... as if everything here were run by one mind, and that a mind which hated Tipton Bond and feared him.

The impression was so strong that Tipton did not think to question it, but instead stood quietly in the blood-boarded fabric of his breeches, watching, listening, sensing.

He stood on the edge of a gentle slope, grassy and spangled with flowers which reminded him a little of daisies, but which were almost cornflower-blue, with an electric green undertone. The whole field swayed slightly, not in ripples as he had seen wheat-fields sway to the passing of a wind, but in unison, back and forth, as if it were the fur of an animal under which some vagrant emotion was passing. At the bottom of the slope was a forest, tall conifers mostly, but again unlike any conifers he had ever seen; vaguely pear-shaped actually, straggling out at the edges. The forest at his side and behind his back broke off almost where he stood.

Overhead was a blue sky. It was a blue equaled by nothing in his experience.

He let his gaze rise over the forest at the foot of the slope, scanned it slowly toward the horizon. About two miles away, there seemed to be a sort of city, rising amid the woods. As far as he could judge, it was a sizable place, for the structures which he could see were very large, and there were quite a few of them. Of course there was no way to tell whether or not the number and massiveness of the large structures was a good index to city-size in this strange world, but it was the only criterion he had available; and by that mundane yardstick there was presumably a great deal more of the city hidden among the distant trees.

While he watched, the forest beside and behind him froze. Down below, the steady waving of the long grasses continued, hypnotic and undisturbed, but the forest had fallen silent and motionless. There was a gentle breeze playing against Tipton's flushed, perspiring forehead, and yet the motionlessness of every single leaf above his head could have been measured with a micrometer. It was as if the entire forest had suddenly taken refuge in a still photograph of itself.

Tipton grinned again. *So you've made up your mind about me, have you? You know now what you see, eh? I wonder what it is. What do you see, anyhow? Is it a man, tall and a little bit thin, with cheekbones like an Indian's, black eyes, a scraggly beard, big hands, bony elbows and knees? Can you tell that he has a bad side? Can you see which shirt cuff is clipped together with metal and which one is simply stitched where the buttons ought to be? Or-do you see only the dried blood on his boots?*

Though he had not spoken aloud, Tipton half expected some response from the woods around him.

so powerful was the impression of sentience which hung in the very air. But there was no change in the eerie Technicolor rigidity of every blade, branch and leaf.

Tipton shrugged and looked down the slope once more. The city, much as he disliked cities in general, was his most immediate obvious goal. It would be the only place where he might hope to find out where he was, in what kind of a world, and for what reason. He could hope also to find out what relationship this world bore to Earth; but he suspected that the hope would go unrealized. Seemingly he had walked two hours and a few miles through a Northern forest-yet he knew that this hillside was staggeringly remote from Kadiak, and that that remoteness was the real actuality.

Perhaps the people who had built that city were men; but even if they turned out to be human, at the last decimal place, Tipton Bond would be profoundly surprised if they had ever heard of such a place as Earth.

Tipton began to walk, then cancelled the impulse before it had actually expressed itself in any motion. It would be best, he thought, to make a last check on the surroundings, to be absolutely certain that the distant city was his optimum present goal.

Almost instantly, he was glad for the second thought. Deep in the forest directly behind him, almost completely shielded by dimness and the intervening shrubbery, trees and vines, there was a wall.

A "normal" human being would never have sensed it at all. Tipton himself caught it only through a brief puzzling textural flash, as of grainy, crumbling stone, which was structurally out of place in the rigid but vital forest. The most intense visual inspection disclosed little more than a patch or two of worn masonry. He realized that, had the forest been in normal motion to the wind, those tiny direct avenues of sight to the wall would have been exposed only by long coincidences, and for periods too brief to make detection of the brickwork possible even for him.

Aha, my horrified friends. You've given something away, haven't you? Or was that what you intended?

He had his answer the moment he turned and began to walk toward the wall. The forest went abruptly in agitated motion again, fluttering and whispering. The sound grew more agitated with every step that he took. At the fourth step there was a nasty whistling sound and something caught him with a blinding blow across the back of his head.

He stumbled to his hands and knees, his ringing skull hanging like a broken bell between his arms. Slowly, very slowly, the pain went away. After awhile he tried to rise again, and discovered with angry astonishment that each of his twelve fingers was wrapped securely against the earth by scores of silken green threads, and that longer grass blades were lapping over the backs of his hands and over his calves.

Wryly, he thought of Gulliver. This would be a stranger end than ever he had foreseen for himself. He had lashed on his hands and knees to starve in a strange forest, by no other power than that inherent in the forest itself.

But his first effort showed that the forest did not have that power. His muscles were stronger than the roots of the grasses that were holding him; the blades clung to him as long as they could, but when his upward surge threatened to tear them from the sod, they released him, with a reluctance which was almost a caress in its sensuousness. He squatted back on his heels and looked up.

The thing which had hit him was a branch. Nothing more than that. Evidently it had been caught and bent out of line behind another branch or set of branches, and only a set of small concerted movements had been necessary to release it and bring it lashing down upon him.

"Fair warning," he said with a slight smile. "Let's see if you can catch me that way again."

He arose cautiously and again began to move toward the wall. It was slow going in the thickest. ~~They clutched at his breeches, at his wrists, at his ankles. As he came within reaching distance of the~~ wall proper, a cloud of tiny insects, like gnats, whirled about his face and ears; they did not seem to have the power to sting, but they did seem to be quite willing to hurl themselves into his eyes, up his nose, into his ears.

While he was batting at them with his hands, he heard again the ominous hiss-and-flutter-he threw himself instantly to the ground, in a sort of flying tackle at the clearest space he could find. He rolled over as he struck, in time to see a thick branch whistling through the place where his neck had been only an instant before. Thanks to the quickness of his training-pattern response, no one was inconvenienced but the cloud of gnats, which was most effectively scattered. That, Tipton thought with amusement, is an innovation every camper has been waiting for-the forest that will act as *punko* for the traveler as he goes.

Here beside the wall, the soil was sandy, and there seemed to be a sort of timber-line. There was a measurable distance of some five or six feet between the wall and where the forest began, as if the growing things observed some sort of respect for the structure-

Or as if something emanated from the ancient bricks which made the area deadly.

Tipton thought at once of radioactivity, but a quick survey of the scraggly plants on the edge of the timberline revealed none of the wild variations in form among the individuals of a given species that he would have expected had any mutation-producing radiation been present. Furthermore, he could himself dimly sense the aura of the old ruin, which certainly would not have been the case had its power to keep the forest at bay been simple radioactivity and nothing more.

Whatever the reason, the cleared space was most convenient, both for the freedom it gave him from the small nuisances the forest was attempting upon him, and for the opportunity it allowed to see more of the true shape of the structure.

For it was not, strictly speaking, a wall, but some sort of building. The bricks above him curved away, as if to make a dome, although he could not see very far along the curve. As he looked up and down the cleared aisle, he saw other places where the "wall" bulged oddly, in definite configurations which he recognized, without being able to put a name to the shapes he saw. The most obvious of these was down the line about five hundred yards, a huge lump of brick marked with four deep ridges both on the side facing him and along its top, which was low compared to the rest of the structure. Curiously he arose and walked toward it.

He was still thirty yards away when he recognized the form of the excrescence.

It had been built in the shape of a clenched fist.

The great stone fist was resting knuckles up, its palm pointed down toward the earth. At once the peculiar curve and sculpturing of the rest of the building came into the pattern, made sense.

The structure was in the form of a recumbent man, lying on his back.

The realization threw Tipton's analyzer into high gear. A structure built in the shape of a human being had, with 99% certainty, been built by human beings. Consequently, this planet either had been or was now occupied by humans, who had been or were now the ruling form.

By human thinking, then, a structure of this shape could be only one of two things, at least in the realm of high probability: it was either an immense tomb, containing the remains of an important personage; or it was a temple made in the shaping of a god, to whom it was dedicated.

There was also an outside chance that the thing was a monument, containing nothing more tangible than a concept, but its supine position seemed to rule against that; the monument's most outstanding characteristic is conspicuousness; had this thing been made as a monument to some hero, it would

have been made standing up. Any race that could shape masonry with such cunning as was evidenced here could as easily have put the figure on its feet as on its back.

Tomb or temple, then? Tipton did not make up his mind at once about it, although he had a good hunch. He walked slowly along the cleared area, making a careful circuit. He went around the great figure with clenched fist and on up the right arm toward the shoulder.

As he rounded that curve, the head came into view.

Tipton studied the enormous features narrowly, both from his position at the shoulder, and the other from directly beside the right ear, scanning the profile against the marvelous blue of the sky. God or hero? In so far as he could make out what expression the face had been intended to carry, it was one of stern watchfulness, as if the being represented were guarding against some threat which was to come from heaven. That, unfortunately, was an expression which might have been given to god or hero alike, impartially, for the concepts of god and hero interpenetrate in the concepts of protection and watchfulness.

There seemed to be no further objective evidence upon which to decide the question, but that by means of the means exhausted all the possibilities of evidence and of experimentation. There was, for instance, the aura.

Short though his stay had been in this world, Tipton had already come to trust such intangible things. His sense of the hostility of the forest had obviously saved his life, and his failure to trust it enough earlier, had nearly gotten him killed. The aura, then, did not strike Tipton as the proper emanation of a tomb, no matter how potent the person entombed might once have been, nor how potent the idea of death to him still was among the living.

Experimentally, Tipton reached out a hand and touched the crumbling masonry.

A shock of stunning violence sprang from the tip of his finger and roared through his body. It was not an electrical shock, and had no convulsive power, but seemed to flood his every cell with some force which they contained as potential, without otherwise being changed. Tipton shorted off the instant impulse to snatch his hand away. If the force were dangerous after all, the damage had already been done; and no danger was apparent yet.

Besides, he was fascinated by the voices.

The voices had come in the moment he had touched the wall. There seemed to be a good many of them, whispering at a great distance. Tipton had a distinct impression of many people murmuring of matters of great importance, some distance beyond the bounds of understandability.

A temple, then. Those could only be the voices of worshippers, perhaps talking among themselves, perhaps taking part in some ceremony somewhere inside the recumbent stone giant. Tipton drew his hand away. He was startled to find that the feeling of great force confined just beneath the surface of his skin did not go away with the breaking of the contact. On the contrary, he felt charged with that mysterious energy, like a living accumulator waiting to be tapped. The question was: tapped by whom? Or by whom? And what would be the outcome?

The cleared area around the temple seemed to speak plainly of death. It might easily be that his entire body was now the repository of some high death potential, awaiting discharge at some unknown hour, under unknown circumstances.

If that were so, Tipton thought wryly, this world had certainly lost no time in piling up handicaps for him. And, certainly, it must have been both a highly advanced and a peculiarly savage sort of civilization which would leave such a death as this appeared to be sprawling concealed in a forest where any chance traveler might blunder against it.

Then he reconsidered. No ordinary chance traveler would have been able to pass the cordon

sentient animosity which the very woods threw up around the temple; and it was probable that the civilized people of this world knew the location of the structure, and enough about it to keep clear of it.

Still, there were the voices of the worshippers inside. Either the charge which Tipton now carried was after all not dangerous, or else those who took part in the ceremonies inside the temple must be protected in some way-might even know how to discharge the force, without injury, to the being which had contracted it.

At any event, it was now absolutely necessary to find out, one way or the other. If there were worshippers inside the temple, they were certain to have one piece of information at least which Tipton lacked-knowledge of a way to get into and out of the building. Temples which are in use must have entrances.

Tipton continued his circuit of the sleeping stone man. The entrance turned out to be quite obvious when he ran upon it, although it was anything but usual. The left hand of the giant lay on its back on the ground, palm up, and high up on the inside of the wrist there was a ragged, narrow opening. The aura was especially strong here, and the forest had drawn back from around the hand to make a clearing of moderate size. The suggestion of the pooling of some invisible vital substance around the wound in the masonry was unavoidable, and distinctly unpleasant.

Without hesitating, Tipton went around the stone fingertips into the space between the wrist and the side of the figure, and climbed up the sloping brickwork toward the opening.

The ragged tear was more than large enough to admit him, as he had been able to judge from the ground. The aura poured out of it with still greater force than ever, though Tipton did not feel any new change in himself through renewed contact with the structure. Inside, the murmuring, although still unintelligible, was louder.

Tipton clung to the edge of the opening with his hands, bracing his knees against the stone, and peered inside. The light from the outside poured into the opening, revealing that the inside walls of the structure were amazingly thin, fragile-seeming. Perhaps ten feet down at this point was the floor, also of masonry.

Except for the daylight itself, the passageway was pitch dark as far as he could see.

It will have to be now, Tipton told himself. Drawing himself up to the edge of the opening, he swung his feet over and dropped into the dimness.

The Strange Giant

The strange force blew like an icy Northern wind through the corridor of the temple, piercing Tipton's body with a dry, bitter cold. He had long ago become accustomed to hunting on Kadiak with no more covering for his arms and back than that provided by a heavy woollen shirt, and so had not felt unduly uncomfortable in the milder climate of the new world; but here in the temple he felt both that he needed to be more heavily clad, and that no clothing, however heavy, could shut out the essential coldness of that great throbbing force.

The voices continued. Tipton walked slowly forward, guiding himself by running his fingers lightly along the wall of the corridor, and by listening to the echoes of his own footsteps. The passage was roughly tubular, and difficult to walk in: one either had to mince along with one's feet very close together, or else expend a great deal of effort to prevent oneself from walking knock-kneed. Tipton began to doubt that the passage had actually been constructed for human beings to walk along; and yet, the voices seemed to indicate that there were human beings somewhere in the building.

At least, one human being-

For as Tipton penetrated deeper and deeper into the frigid, empty ruin, he began to realize that the multifarious murmuring was a kind of echo. It sounded less and less like the murmuring of a crowd and more and more like the sound of a single voice whose every word was being echoed out to infinity.

Curiously, though, there was none of the *lallallallallallal-lal-lal* of a real echo in a large structure. The unintelligible words being spoken were picked up exactly in a long overlapping series, each term of which was quite distinct, and blurred only by interpenetration of those that had preceded it, and of those that were interrupting it before it was quite through being uttered.

The passage turned sharply and became deeper and larger, the curve of the floor becoming less marked, making the walking a little easier. Tipton stopped and stamped one foot tentatively, listening to the echoes rattling away. They gave him a rough sonar assessment of the size of the corridor here, and a reassurance that the behavior of sound inside the sleeping giant was normal despite the continuous soundless roaring of that mysterious force.

And yet the echoes of the great voice did not behave like sound echoes.

He chipped the floor once more with the hobnail at the back of his boot heel. Yes, there went the echoes, rattling away, rounding and losing definition as they went, blending into the usual distant undersea undulation of anonymous vowel sounds. In his mind, the overlapping phrases continued to pass with undiminished power and definition-

In his mind!

That was the answer. The mighty summons was soundless, indifferent to the acoustics of this peculiarly-shaped building. There were no worshippers here. There was no ceremony. There was nothing but the outpouring of some single powerful mind, its thoughts passing through Tipton's brain in an instantly overlapping series because of a time or distance gap, and perhaps also because of some inability on Tipton's own part to grasp what was being said, so that his own brain had get up repetitively

circuits in a futile attempt to unscrew the inscrutable.

The discovery threw wide open, once again, the question of whether or not it was wise to proceed any farther. There were no worshippers here, there was no one from whom the key to discharging the death potential his body carried could be obtained, nor anyone who would be likely to give any information he could understand on the problems which most troubled him.

And this phenomenon of repetition circuits could be fatal if it were to become more intense. Tipton remembered, from his childhood in the gutters of Spokane, a youngster upon whose mind an echolalic command had already fastened like a tormenting leech. In those days the youngster had been compelled to repeat each of his own statements under his breath, much to Tipton's wonderment and the mockery of his playmates. Later, Tipton had seen an asylum case in which that aberration had run its full course: it had been forbidden to speak in front of that miserable thing, for at the mere utterance of such a word as, say, "there," the patient would immediately begin to gabble-"care, swear, share, dare, pear, mare, lair, where, bear, stare, fair, fare, air, are, are, are-"

Tipton's own mind was in a superb state of balance, but he was not so sanguine as to think it lacked a blowout-point. Wherever these immense concepts were being born, they were obviously coming from a mind or an entity far stronger than Tipton's. To approach it more closely might mean the searing into his brain of permanent repetition circuits, reduce him to a gibbering echolalic, to live starving in the cold dark corridors, muttering and mumbling his life away until starvation ruined the splendid body his blasted and parasitized mind could no longer command.

Tipton felt himself begin to sweat with irritation. Indecision was a new phenomenon to him-and yet, the complications of the problem were enormous. It might still be that this powerful inner voice was simply an amplified version of something going on deep within the temple. The fact that sound produced here, by his own heel striking the stone, behaved differently from the way that the voice was behaving, did not necessarily indicate that the voice was soundless, although it did produce the illusion. Even an ordinary voice, after all, might arrive much distorted from a distant point, after having traveled through God only knew what intricate halls and corridors.

Furthermore, the impression of many echoing voices had *diminished*, the more deeply he had penetrated into the temple. At the very least, it was probably safe to go on farther, in the hope of understanding better the content of whatever strange message was coming through. If there was the slightest increase in the number of repetitions-the demon circuits in his mind-he would probably be able to retreat, before the process had rendered him utterly helpless, in the hope of being able to unsnarl most of the repetition patterns by auto-inspection after he had left the temple again. It was, he decided grimly, worth the risk.

He walked slowly forward once more. The echoes of his footsteps told him that the passage through which he was walking was becoming bigger and bigger with every step. He did not quite realize what it was that he noticed that he was debouching upon an immense hall; for, at the same time, the repetitions in his mind had become grouped enough for him to make out individual words despite the still fuzzy outlines. The voice was clear, and frightening, as if he had tuned in upon some god announcing his own destiny to an amphitheatre of subordinate demons.

The voice said:

"And there came to Xota a man of Earth, and consulted with Mahrt, and went away to arm himself with silence and with cunning; for the Warriors of Day were now but moons away, and the wild suns with them, and the Sword was not yet forged..."

A man of Earth! Tipton quickened his step, rushing forward through the bitter blackness. The immense summons took on more and more definition and depth.

"And Mahrt forewent the Sword because of the great need," the vast voice thundered through the blackness. "The Earthman broke upon his knee the worshippers of Mahrt, and went hand-in-hand with the beasts to the ships of the Warriors; and it was decreed that he should stop the stars in their course before his usefulness was ended; and that he should know in good time all the dreams of Mahrt."

Once more, now, the words were beginning to be followed by chains of repetitions, overlapping almost indetectibly, but with the separations between the "echoes" increasing as Tipton pushed on.

"And now at last Mahrt stirred in his sleep," the voice said, "and made the first dream flesh..."

The last clause was almost indistinguishable in the chains of repetitions. Desperately, Tipton pressed on, but he could hear nothing more in the general chaos of mental echoes. Every so often a word came through, sometimes a group of words; but the farther he went, the more intense the voice became, and the stranger and more insane the chance phrases which he caught seemed to become...

He was arrested at last in a place so deep within the temple, and so huge, that he had lost virtually all sense of where he was. The thing which had arrested him had been one final, fragmentary declaration so obviously, violently insane that he knew his own mind would blow all its fuses if he took one more step forward.

Trembling, he began to walk backward. He was still immensely reluctant to turn, to confess that the problem had defeated him, even if only for the time being. But at last he was forced to turn and grope for the path that he had taken.

As he retreated, he underwent the most maddening and the most frightening experience of all. The pronunciamento which he had heard, and had been able to understand, played back at him; not one word by word, but sound by sound, in a running torrent of gibberish which was almost mind-snapping in itself. He was forced to go very slowly, to analyze each reversed and foreign-sounding word combination as it came to him, in order to preserve enough orientation to himself to stay sane.

He was astonished and ruefully pleased to discover that, even under such a frightful mental bombardment, he was able to retrace his steps through the many branching corridors without error. Toward the end of the long route, the voice became once more only a meaningless murmuring, and Tipton saw far ahead, at the end of the tube of masonry, a glow of daylight.

He did not know quite how he reached the edge of the wound in the stone. Intellectually, he knew that he must have jumped for it and clambered out by sheer force, for after he had recovered from his tumble down the side of the great wrist to the sand, he found that his fingers and palms were bruised and bloody and were aching with embedded grains of stone.

He lay on the sand for quite awhile, propping himself up with one elbow. He was astonished to discover how weak he felt; his eavesdropping upon that titanic monologue had exhausted him in a way and to an extent that no form of brute combat or of maximum intellectual effort had ever exhausted him before.

He was still cold, too. The warm, gentle radiance beat once more against his skin, but the feeling that it could go no farther had increased a hundredfold. He felt that he would never be truly warm inside again; the cold force possessed him to his very fingertips.

He noticed the position of his shadow on the ground, and looked up, surprised. This world's sun which differed in no particular that he could make out from Earth's own day-star, was either just approaching its zenith or just passing it—there was of course no way to tell which, without knowing which way was north on this world, and which way the planet revolved. In any event, it was around noon.

He chided himself for an act of snap judgment. The delicate light which he had seen cast over the forest at the moment of his arrival on Xota—there seemed to be no doubt that the great voice had been

applying that name to this world-Tipton Bond had taken for dusk, since it had been evening on Earth when he had last seen Earth. The assumption was a sloppy one, and he was now having his nose rubbed in it.

One thing was clear: Earth and Xota had virtually nothing in common-except Tipton Bond.

He sat up and poured a little of the sand from hand to hand. It was bright and crystalline, like clear quartz, but shot through with color. Soberly he attempted to extract from his sojourn in the temple the few positive things that he had learned. There was not much to go on.

There was the voice, the presence, and its reference to himself-for what else could be meant by "man of Earth"? There was the name of this world, Xota, which might or might not be a useful piece of information, depending on whether or not the human beings here were divided into hostile nations. Knowing the name of the Earth, for example, would hardly be a passport for a stranger to that bitterly bloody little planet.

There was an entity named "Mahrt," and a "Sword" which he had surrendered, or was about to surrender. Mahrt was worshipped; but Mahrt did not expect Tipton to get along very well with his worshippers. Finally, there was a group called the Warriors of Day, about which Tipton had overheard nothing but a vague suggestion that they were approaching, and that they were enemies-

Wait a moment-the Warriors were enemies of Xota. It would make a difference whether or not Xota was the name of the planet, rather than of a single nation; for if "Xota" was the whole world, then the Warriors of Day must be approaching it from outside-and their ships must be-

Spaceships.

And the stone giant lay on his back looking forever skyward...

Tipton left it at that. He would need more information later, but solving that problem was of no present usefulness. It was like Mahrt's reference to "moon"; it told him that this planet had at least one satellite, and that it measured time by its circuit; a bit of information of a very low order of usefulness for a hated fugitive.

But who was Mahrt?

Tipton felt a profound certainty, which he could not otherwise justify, that the voice which he had heard belonged to the creature referred to as Mahrt, and that that presence had been referring to himself in the third person only out of some hieratical tradition which made it customary. All the evidence Tipton had pointed to the conclusion that Mahrt, whoever or whatever he was, was actually imprisoned somewhere inside the temple.

It was also unpleasantly clear that Tipton Bond was known to Mahrt and in some way bound to him-bound to him so securely that Mahrt expected Tipton to accomplish certain duties; expected them with enough confidence to predict them in Tipton's presence.

Or had what Tipton overheard been simply an interior monologue, Mahrt's own thoughts referred to himself? Despite the fact that Tipton had been unable to touch upon the thought processes of the sentient forest about him, it might still be that Mahrt's thoughts could be overheard, even by a non-telepath. But if that were true, it argued for an even greater intimacy between Tipton and Mahrt, a proposition at once alarming and repellent.

That avenue of information, however, had been closed, at least for the present. It was abundantly clear that the more of Mahrt's thoughts one overheard, the more one risked hearing things which might trigger insanity. It was now time to quit the stone figure and the forest on the hill, and to go down to the distant city.

As he rose, Tipton steadied himself by placing the flat of his palm against the brickwork. Once more, he heard the distant murmuring, but more clearly than before. It was as if his close approach

the dreamer had shaped his own mind towards sympathy with the patterns of Mahrt's thought-ha
committed him, willy-nilly, to *participation mystique* with the enormous sleeping presence. —

The multifarious voices whispered:

"The awakening... the awakening of Mahrt... the awakening is almost at hand..."

Tipton took his hand away from the masonry and looked at it a moment, as if it had somehow betrayed him. Then he turned his back upon the image of Mahrt and went toward the city.

The Sword of Mahrt

Tipton's progress back toward the spot where his feet had first touched the ambiguous soil of Xo was like running a gauntlet. The forest had evidently made up its mind to kill him.

The recalcitrance of the forest to his every step was almost unbelievable. The trees lashed at him one after another. Vines knotted and curled and coiled about his knees and feet, or seized upon his elbow the moment he was forced to brush too close against a tree-trunk. A furry, rodent-like creature shot down a slanting branch, leapt onto his shoulder, slashed at his right ear-lobe, and leapt away again.

The moment he entered the original clearing, there was a screeching of birds, and a flight of scarlet and emerald creatures, scarcely bigger than humming-birds, was fluttering about his head, their beaks slashing at his eyes. Their beauty almost prevented him from protecting himself until it was too late-then he made a quick snatch with both hands, and caught one, the hot, delicate body whirring frantically between his cupped palms, the needle-like beak stabbing him repeatedly.

At once the remaining birds drew off, hovering, clattering. He held up his hands and shook the prisoner up a little.

The hovering beauties began to draw in. Tipton made the cup tighter, confining his captive more and more closely, and managed to catch its beak between two fingers. It jerked so violently, however, that he was afraid that it would break its neck in the attempt to pull free, and he released it again, the penalty of renewed furious stabs all along the bases of his fingers.

The others simply hovered, waiting. At last, Tipton eased his prisoner into his left shirt pocket, which contained a flat waterproof match-case which would protect his chest from being made into a punch-board, and buttoned down the flap. Inside, the creature was still fluttering, but it had very little room.

The others drew off. They did not go away. Nevertheless, Tipton doubted that they would molest him again. He had a hostage.

He began to go down the hill, in the bright noon sunlight. The tall grass of the field seethed as he walked through it, but otherwise there was no further opposition. For that, he was sure, he had to thank his captive; for his return passage through the woods had made it evident that he had at last encountered a world which was determined to see him dead.

Or had he simply lost his mind?

The question could not be dismissed lightly. Many madmen are convinced that every hand is turned against them, that everything and everybody is out to get them, that they are the objects of universal persecution. No description could have fitted better Tipton's own assessment of his position.

Yet it was not characteristic of a madman to question his own sanity; such questions would break his dramatization, and leave him defenseless before his own madness. There was some reassurance to be drawn from that. If, however, the reassurance were false-

If it was, there was nothing that Tipton could do about it.

The slope of the hill began to level out, and the new forest, the one which contained the city, was

markedly nearer. Tipton swung along easily, conscious of his small wounds and of his bad side, but again accepting the knowledge that he could do nothing for them now but wait for them to help themselves. Being injured was a problem which he had encountered before, and which contained nothing essentially new.

On the other hand, the concerted attack which had been made upon him up to his capture of the bird posed a very pretty problem, and one well worth mulling over, for the sake of his own survival.

The many evidences of cooperation among all the creatures of this world, right down to the very grass blades, were Inescapable. They had had purpose; they had shared purpose; and they had acted upon it. That purpose had been very simple, but the attempt at its execution had been complex, and very nearly effective.

The creatures of Xota had desired the death of Tipton Bond, and had moved intelligently to realize their desire.

There was only one answer. So much concerted cooperation among so many different kinds of creatures, plant and animal, insect and bird, tree and vine, could not be effected without the most instant kind of telepathic contact among all these living things.

Xota, then, was a world where all living creatures were able, to some extent, to read each other's minds, no matter how rudimentary those minds might be, no matter how simple and savage. In such a world, a non-telepath, such as Tipton Bond, could not but seem the most dangerous of all possible beasts-the wild animal with whom no one could hope to communicate.

In a totally telepathic world, Tipton Bond was the only true wild beast-because his mind could not be read.

"Beware the Sword!"

The inhuman, metallic scream jerked Tipton's gaze skyward. An enormous and gorgeous bird feathered like a cock lyre-bird, but with the livid, insane coloring of a tropical parakeet, was fleeing ahead of him against the sunlight. It screamed again.

"The Sword is coming! Beware the Sword of Mahrt! Beware the Sword!"

The flamboyant creature dwindled in the radiant air, going toward the city, still screaming in warning. Even when it had diminished almost to a dot, its extravagant pinions and tail still made it look like one of Dr. Beebe's most unlikely undersea discoveries.

"Beware the Sword of Mahrt!"

The forest that held the city was peculiarly quiet-as Tipton had learned to re-define quietness in this world of Xota. The forest stood and waited for him, stirred only, unnaturally, by the wind; neither drawing back, nor attacking. Its pretense of indifference might have been convincing, had it not been for the angry fluttering of the captive in Tipton's pocket.

Three men with strong swords waited for him at the gate of the city.

Tipton watched them from cover for a few moments. Their alertness and their confidence bespoke both foreknowledge of his coming and an indefinite number of reinforcements at immediate call. Along the crenellated walls of the city, other guards patrolled, with bows slung over their shoulders, and Tipton could see small block-houses from which the noses of more advanced and more ambiguous weapons poked insolently.

It was easy to see that Tipton Bond would never get into that city by any other avenue than simply by going forward and giving himself up.

He arose from covert, and walked forward into plain view, his hands held out, palms forward.

The soldiers pacing on the walls froze; and the weapon-noses in the block-houses swivelled and snouted toward him.

The three guards at the gate straightened and inspected him critically, then looked at each other.

"~~That the Sword?~~" one of them said, quite clearly. "Pfaa! We are well repaid for believing the idi screaming of a *tonkah*. What a weak, sick, and sorry creature to bear the name of the Sword of Mahrt

"All the more reason to put him to death at once," the second guard said, testing one of the two edges of his sword judiciously with a thumb. "The Sword is not Mahrt. Mahrt would have com himself, were he able."

Tipton stopped and returned frankly the inspection of the guards. "I'm getting a little tired of being spoken of as if I weren't here," he said caustically. "If you really do have minds of your own, make decision and get it over with."

The three men moved smoothly into position to box him in, but took not the slightest notice of his speech.

"Put him to death, I say," the third man said. "Now he is weak and battered and stumbling; if he the true Sword of Mahrt-if, I say-then he will be very dangerous indeed, once his strength is allowe to return. Kill him, I say!"

"Let's not be hasty," the first soldier said, nudging Tipton through the gate with a sword-point to the kidneys. "Suppose that this blank-minded man is indeed the Sword? If he is, then the crisis is hand. The Council should know. And it should learn best from a creature of Mahrt the real nature of the crisis."

"If he will tell," the third guard interjected.

"And if he will not? Nothing is lost."

"Your reasoning," the second guard grumbled, "smacks of the heresies of the Dark Worship."

"You sound like a forensic society," Tipton said. "Where's your superior officer?"

The three men looked blank; underneath their interchange, they seemed to have come to some telepathic agreement; they were herding him with perfect unanimity down a narrow cobbled alley, as if the words that they had spoken during their quarreling had hardly affected their real purpose. Tipton could foresee a long period of reorientation toward a world where communication upon the word level was only apparent-and where communication below the word level was completely closed to him.

"Where are we going?" he said.

"To the Council Chamber. Where else?"

"I wouldn't know," Tipton said reasonably.

One of the guards grunted, but there was no further response. Tipton noted with puzzled interest that none of the citizens whom they passed seemed to see anything out of the ordinary in the spectacle of a man in strange, bloody clothes being herded through their streets at the point of three flat swords. The bazaars continued to operate, ragged men hawked portions of green liquor cupped in transparent skins, small cars shaped like acorns bumped by upon the bumpy cobbles, and not so far up above Tipton's head, someone was singing a sweet, repetitious melody, full of languor and unconcern.

And then, all that was changed, in a single instant.

There was a stir in a narrow doorway, a whirl of graceful movement so quick that it surprised even Tipton. The girl was at his feet, in a haze of rags, almost before he had noticed her at all. She grasped his hand in both of hers, pressed it to her forehead, kissed it, sprang to her feet and raced away in an inexpressibly fluid motion.

"Hold!"

The girl hesitated at the guard's shout, then raced on again. In a moment she was gone, anonymous in the throng around the series of stalls where bright gauzes were being offered.

"Hand it over," the first guard said roughly.

Tipton blinked. "Hand what over?"

"The message."

Tipton cursed to himself. In his right hand, the one that the girl had seized and kissed, was a pelt as small and hard as a dried pea. That he had not noticed it, the moment that the girl had pressed into his palm, made him feel singularly stupid.

"What message?" he said.

"The message you have in your hand. Your mind may be closed to us, but hers was not. She gave you a petition; her whole body screamed prayer. Hand it over."

"Sorry," Tipton said grimly. "She delivered her prayer to me, not you. I'll hang on to it, thank you."

The three men raised their swords suggestively, in unison. "At what price?" one of them said gently.

"At whatever price you'll pay," Tipton snarled abruptly. "The beggar appealed to me, not you. The content of her appeal is none of your business."

Tipton waited, outwardly relaxed, inwardly waiting for whatever would break, ready to carve through three soldiers with their own swords if the situation demanded it. He had still so little information about this world of Xota that he was ready to cling to any scrap that any inhabitant would offer him, and particularly ready to fight for any message offered him in his presumptive avatar of the Sword of Mahrt.

The guards watched him quizzically, but they did not seem disposed to make an issue of it. Again Tipton had the impression that they were consulting with each other telepathically underneath their bland smiles, and that they had agreed to dismiss the incident for the time being.

"Mahrt chooses curious instruments," the first guard said, grinning. "Keep your message, stranger. If her price is too high, or if you are too busy to answer the summons, speak to me; I'll give her a strong man's reasons for thanking the bounty of Mahrt."

Tipton looked at him levelly. "Never fear," he said flatly. "I'll remember you."

To Tipton's surprise-for the hulking soldier had seemed insensitive to any kind of attack but the grossest of physical threats-the man turned as grey as dirty paper.

None of them spoke to him again all the rest of the trip to the Council Chamber.

The Council Chamber was sizable, and its size was augmented by its bareness. Except for the three high-backed carven chairs on the dais opposite the huge folding doors, the hall was quite unfurnished. Tall, narrow windows and an inlaid floor, polished almost to the reflectivity of a mirror, further accentuated the height of the place.

Tipton took in these details almost automatically, for his attention was completely riveted by the strangely assorted group on the dais. Could these four creatures indeed be the Council of Xota?

The two men were expectable enough. Both were quite tall, with postures that bespoke years of command worn easily and well. The blond one had a broken nose, but somehow it did not disfigure him, thanks to an appearance of serenity and strength which seemed to be his natural expression. He was clad in a white robe or toga, fastened with a single clip of some silvery metal, shaped like a stylized sunburst; this device was picked up in gigantic form on the wall behind the chairs.

The red-haired man, whose toga was a deep maroon, was of an entirely different personality type. His expression was closed, hard, secret, as if from long years of keeping his own counsel on matters of the gravest importance. Of the two, he looked the more dangerous. Tipton guessed that he was faster intellectually than his comrade by a fairly wide margin, and that if there were any streak of human kindness in his make-up, he did not allow it to color his official life.

Tipton was interested marginally in the correspondence of complexion and clothing-color

Evidently physical appearance was one criterion, though doubtless not the only one, by which councilors were picked here; the seeming irrationality probably had some symbolic significance which might be useful to know later on.

Certainly, on physical appearance alone, the woman would have graded high in almost any society. She was tall and dark, with a blonde streak—a witch's mark—running through her hair from her forehead to her crown. Her eyes were a smoky violet, flecked with reddish gold; against the clear whiteness of her complexion, the redness of her full, slightly smiling lips was startling.

Her robe was cut to the same style as were those worn by the men, which left her right breast bare. The lines of her body, to which the soft, rich, clinging material conformed closely, revealed a woman just coming into full maturity. The robe itself was patterned with a curious mixture of colors whose total effect was to accentuate, without distorting, the curves beneath.

All very well, Tipton thought; but what about the cat?

The great creature was hardly a housecat, but it did seem to belong to that general family. Although the resemblance was not close, it reminded Tipton most of a tiglon he had once seen in the Berlin zoo. It was a huge thing, tawny, marked by darker stripes which suggested a pattern without actually forming one. Its most curious feature, however, was its upper lip, which was smooth and unmarked by the division common to four-footed animals with which Tipton was familiar.

Tipton felt a sudden shock as his brain brought forward the implications of that datum—This creature could talk.

There was a low chuckle from the red-haired man as the guards brought Tipton closer.

"The stranger seems to recognize you, Chrestos," he said. "Or perhaps he considers you unlikely."

"Perhaps both," the cat-creature said indifferently. It watched Tipton unwinkingly, however, with its wise yellow eyes. Its voice was a powerful bass, obviously very much held in check; Tipton had the impression that it could be heard for miles at full power.

"Well, question him, Yriron," the woman said impatiently.

The blond man nodded. "What is your name, stranger?"

"Tipton Bond."

"Why do you come here?"

"I had no choice," Tipton said. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a puzzle was attempting to work itself out, but he could not yet capture what it was. "I came here from another planet, called Earth, by an accident which I am unable to explain."

Yriron turned and looked at the red-haired man incredulously. "Elron, is there such a place? The name is new to me."

"Naturally," Elron said. "That proves nothing. If his story is true, he could not very well know our name for his world."

"Elron, he speaks our language," the woman objected.

That was it. No, that was not quite it, but it was a part of the puzzle. The heart of the puzzle was why were these telepathic people speaking aloud at all? What additional function did a spoken language have in a telepathic society? Or was there some moral or ethical bias against complete rapport? Another irrationality to be filed for future reference.

"As for the language," Tipton said, "I have no more explanation for that than you have. It occurred to me just about the same time that it occurred to you as a problem; I have been speaking and thinking in your language without realizing it until now, ever since I arrived here. As a matter of fact, I find that I'm having a good deal of difficulty in recalling what my own language was like."

As he spoke, he had been trying to reformulate what he was saying into English. After a long

struggle, the phrases came, but they "sounded" utterly outlandish. They were correct, but they were *wrong*.

"Let us return to that question later, Lanja," Yrinon said. "Tipton Bond, where is your ship?"

"My ship? I have none. I should be the one who is asking the questions, I am afraid. Practically everything that has happened to me recently is a complete mystery to me, ever since I lost my way in the forest."

"Lost your way?" the beast Chrestos said. For some reason, he seemed faintly amused. "This was not a forest on your Earth?"

"That's right. I got lost in a forest on my own planet, and I wound up in a forest on yours. That's the sum total of my information on how I got here."

Yrinon's brow darkened. "In my opinion, this man is indeed the Sword," he said. "This tale of having come from another world by an oblique forest route sounds very like the legends of the Cult of Virtually every ceremony in the Dark Worship of Mahrt makes such a prophecy, in one form or another."

"Who or what is Mahrt, anyhow?" Tipton said. "I had-well, I suppose an 'audition' would be the best word-at his temple almost immediately after I arrived here. I can't say that I learned very much."

"The temple?" Chrestos said, lifting his head suddenly from his heavy forepaws. "You have come out of the temple alive and sane, and do not yet know what Mahrt is?"

"I know nothing about him, except that he's enormously powerful," Tipton said flatly.

"I do not accept that answer," Chrestos said, equally flatly. "However, let us treat it as if it were true saying, for the moment. I propose this to destroy in you any notion that you might gain advantage by pretending to be the Sword, if you are not in fact the Sword."

"Mahrt is the embodiment of all the forces of mental darkness and of evil. He is the blind forces of the tides, of the winds, of the momentum of planets in flight, of the cohesion of the basic rock. Of these Mahrt is compounded, and of all wrong-doing."

His yellow cat-eyes burned into Tipton's.

"Your mind is dark, Tipton Bond. If you are in reality the long-prophesied Sword of Mahrt, you are the emissary of everything that is most repugnant here. You can see, I think, the unwisdom of pretending such a role, if it is not truly yours!"

"Thank you," Tipton said ironically. "I will bear the warning in mind. While you are feeling informative, would you tell me also who are the Warriors of Day?"

The woman, Lanja, shuddered slightly. "Sometimes we think they are gods," she said softly. "They are like men, but they are giants, and their minds blaze with thought and vitality-attempting *rappoport* with them is like looking directly into the noon-day sun."

Chrestos lowered his head back to his paws again. "They are not gods," he said. "But they are dangerous enough. They are the advancing hordes of an interstellar civilization, spreading inward from the outermost limb of the galaxy. Unless something unguessable can be done, they will engulf Xota as they have engulfed a thousand other worlds, and that before too long."

"I no more believe this pretended ignorance than you, Chrestos," Elron said. "Nor do I believe that this blank-minded creature is the Sword. He is a creature of the Warriors, an organic robot of some kind, placed on Xota to further disorganize resistance by posing as the Sword. It is my recommendation that he be destroyed at once."

"What resistance is there possible against the wild star?" the woman pointed out. Tipton noted the reference as one that he had heard before, but he still did not understand it. "The Warriors, it seems to me, would not be likely to encourage a legend which promises Xota full redemption from the threat."

would act to stiffen our resistance, rather than to disorganize it."

~~She smiled suddenly at Tipton. It was a kind of smile that he had seen before, though never with such powerful effect. He filed it under "unfinished business."~~

"Stranger, what do you have in your pocket?" Chrestos asked softly.

Tipton started, and his hand went to the buttoned-down pocket-flap. He had forgotten his captive; evidently it had gone to sleep-or been suffocated.

"I was having a little bit of difficulty with your flora and fauna," he said wryly. "Luckily, I managed to trap myself a hostage."

He lifted the flap. Instantly the bird shot away from him, a streak of color. It circled Chrestos' head twice, and then it was gone.

"They attacked you?" the great cat said, sleepily. "Yes, I can see from the bird's mind that that is true. Very interesting."

"Why is it interesting?" Yrinon said. "What does it tell us, except the obvious?"

"It has inherent interest," Chrestos said, as sleepily as before. "And are you of the opinion, my dear Yrinon, that there is as yet anything obvious about this mystery? Even I can see at least several possibilities, and those are only the immediate and unpleasant ones."

"You are being super-subtle, as usual," Yrinon said, shrugging. "What is obviously before us now is that we should make some decision concerning this man. It is obvious that we dare not destroy him, as Elron suggests; the bare chance that he *is* the Sword prevents us. And the chance that he may be a creature of the Warriors prevents us from allowing him to run free; that, too, is obvious. What other avenues are there open to us?"

"If you have spaceships, you could send me back to my own planet," Tipton suggested. He knew immediately the words were out of his mouth, that he would not go; but he let the question stand, out of interest in the answer,

"That would be possible, were your planet only a few light-years away from here," Elron said. "But Yrinon is right; if you are the true Sword, we dare not let you go. Chrestos, put your subtle mind to work on this proposition: have we not here an ideal instrument for at last capturing the key men of the Cult, and putting an end to the Dark Worship of Mahrt for once and for all? Not until that is done can Xota present a united front to the Warriors, as we all know well."

The cat-creature nodded, his eyes almost closed. "I find that satisfactory," he murmured, deep in his throat. Elron turned to Yrinon.

"And I," Yrinon said.

"And... I," Lanja said softly.

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