

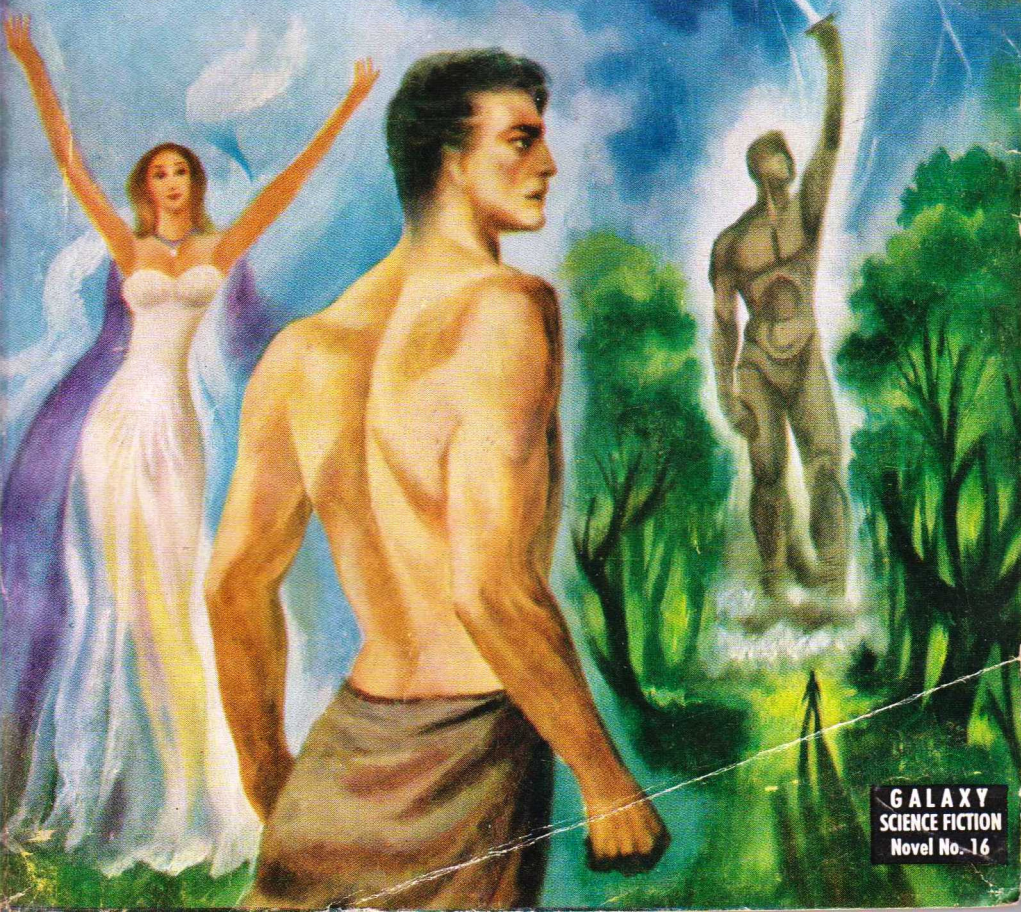
A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

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The Warriors Of Day

JAMES BLISH

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SCIENCE FICTION
Novel No. 16

THE WARRIORS OF DAY

by
JAMES BLISH



GALAXY Science Fiction Novel #16.



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CHAPTER ONE—*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 left collar-bone. Blood matted the silvery black fur in forked trails.

Tipton backed toward the slim spruce trunk, moving with careful smoothness. The beast 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 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 gash. 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. His 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 knife 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 this 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 tape 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 Kodiak 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, lash-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—law enforcement, or prowling Byronically like a comic book hero, single-handedly Righting Wrongs—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, 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 slower 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 con-

tinued 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—yes, 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 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 forces 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, a 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.

CHAPTER TWO — *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 soughing 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 at 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 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 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 to 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 was 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 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—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, 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 thickets. 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 *punkah* 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 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 then 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 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 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 no 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 intangibles. 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 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 the mysterious energy, like a living accumulator waiting to be tapped. The question was: tapped by what? 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 of 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 who 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.

CHAPTER THREE — *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 Kodiak 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-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 set up repetition 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 echolaliac 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 to 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, yare, 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 lie 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

sounds 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 that 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 in which he was walking was becoming bigger and bigger with every step. He did not quite realize when 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 their 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 sun 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 courses 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 only 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 assump-

tion 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 “a 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 bitter, 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 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 to the dreamer had shaped his own mind towards sympathy with the patterns of Mahrt's thought—had 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.

CHAPTER FOUR — *The Sword of Mahrt*

TIPTON'S progress back toward the spot where his feet had first touched the ambiguous soil of Xota 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 six 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, chattering. 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, at 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 heal 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 its 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, unnatu-

rally, 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 idiot 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 come 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 a 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 is the true Sword

of Mahrt—if, I say—then he will be very dangerous indeed, once his strength is allowed to return. Kill him, I say!”

“Let’s not be hasty,” the first soldier said, nudging Tipton through the gate with a sword-point in the kidneys. “Suppose that this blank-minded man is indeed the Sword? If he is, then the crisis is at 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 bumbled 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 one 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 pellet as small and hard as a dried pea. That he had not noticed it, the moment that the girl had pressed it 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 the 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 telepath-

ically 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, 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 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, Yrinon," 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."

Yrinon 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 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. 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 a 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 *rapport* 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. It 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 six 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 space-ships, 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 pre-

sent 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.

CHAPTER FIVE — *"The Beasts Will Have Your Heart!"*

THE room into which the three guards locked Tipton was more like a palace room reserved for a minor duke than like a prison cell. It was high up in the Council building, in one of the four minaret-like towers flanking the central dome; from its broad window Tipton could see much of the rest of the city, the forest, and the broad sloping plain leading up to the plateau where Mahrt slumbered, hidden in greenery.

The room was richly hung with tapestries, and boasted as well deep-piled rugs. The quasi-barbaric trappings which seemed to be part of the culture of Xota had led Tipton unconsciously to expect an animal skin, but a moment's thought brought home to him the impossibility of such a thing in a civilization where a representative of the beasts was a major voice on the Council.

He wondered how the food problem had been solved: was there some kind of agreement, for instance, by which food plants were reconciled to being harvested when the time came?

It seemed unlikely. Tipton guessed that such apparently intelligent activity as he had seen evinced by the forest around the figure of Mahrt did not come from the intelligence of any individual plant participant, since the actual intelligence of any given tree would have to be very low; probably far below the level of detectability. Some kind of telepathic pooling of intent over a wide area would be necessary to trigger even very simple actions on the part of a virtually non-sentient being, such as a vine or tree.

He returned to his survey of the room. There was little else to be seen, except for the enormous bed. The window proved to be made of some kind of transparent plastic, im-

possible to break or to open; furthermore, the stone of which the tower was made was rosy and smooth, resembling fine marble, and offered no possibilities for a handhold, even to Tipton.

The entrance, of course, was locked; he had heard the guards shoot the bolt as they left. With either of his knives, he might have been able to do something about that, but of course he had been relieved of both weapons.

Later he would have to check behind each of the tapestries, in the faint hope of finding some exit there. At the moment, however, the time had definitely come for a bath. He had been left a change of clothing, bizarre to his Earth-educated taste, but quite serviceable—and if he did not free himself soon from the hardened blood of the bear, he might very easily lose both feet.

He undressed with considerable difficulty, wishing again for the knives as he attacked the job of unlacing his boots. At long last, he was free of the ruined clothing and able to climb into the deep circular tub.

Afterwards, feeling greatly refreshed, he climbed into the short jerkin and kilt that had been left for him, and strapped on the silver sandals. He was about to throw his old clothing through the trash-hole when he remembered his compass and his matches; in the process of locating these, he found in the other shirt pocket the tiny wad of paper which the street beggar had thrust into his hand.

Evidently he was even tireder than he had realized, to have forgotten a thing of such high potential importance. Quickly he opened the little scrap.

It contained just three words: "Die in silence."

There was nothing else on the note at all but a hieroglyph, a stylized image of a closed eye. Tipton looked at it ruefully. He had no intention of dying as yet, but when the time came, the note's injunction would probably be very easy to obey: He had nothing to tell.

The only feeble expedient toward making good whatever secrecy had been requested of him that he could think of was to destroy the note. He got out the matches, and burned the

scrap over the tub, afterwards flushing the ashes down the drain.

That was the end of that. He wondered if he would ever know what the street beggar had meant, or whom she had mistaken him for.

When he turned back into the room, the cat-creature Chrestos was seated upon the rug, watching him.

How much had Chrestos seen? It was impossible to tell; the beast was wearing his usual air of slightly amused indifference, and said nothing, but simply continued to watch Tipton.

Tipton sat down on the bed. "What do you want, Chrestos?" he said. "I've told you everything I know, I assure you."

"That may well be," Chrestos rumbled. "I am aware, at least, that you have told us everything you choose to tell us at this time. You are protected from more heroic measures of exacting information, by the mere possibility that you may be the Sword of Mahrt."

"And what would it mean if I were?" Tipton said.

"More than you imagine, I believe," Chrestos said. "If you are only a chance wanderer, brought here by some unguessable inter-dimensional trick, you have arrived at a most inopportune time for the forces which matter in this world. No mere man can be expected to resist them for long."

"I have had plenty of evidence," Tipton said bitterly, "that I am not an ordinary man."

Chrestos nodded his heavy head. "I am aware of that," the beast said. "But are you prepared to carry on your shoulders the full weight of the most stupendous conflict the history of Xota will ever bring forth?"

"I know nothing of all this," Tipton said, shrugging.

"You have heard the Council speak of the Warriors of Day, and you have heard Mahrt, by your own testimony."

Tipton inspected the cat-creature closely. At last he said, "I believe that you knew that I had heard Mahrt, before that question was asked. Will you tell me whether or not that is correct?"

"Quite correct."

"How did you know?"

"All the beasts know," Chrestos said, "for they visit the temple, as men do not. Mahrt was renounced and buried many centuries back, and is abhorred by men, but the beasts have their own standards. When someone visits Mahrt, the beasts know."

Tipton nodded thoughtfully. "I confess that I do not understand how so powerful a presence could be kept buried."

"Mahrt is asleep against the day when he will be needed," Chrestos said, settling himself comfortably on the rug, his great hind pads stretched out, the tip of his tail twitching gently. "He sleeps, but he dreams, and his dreams have compassed the whole history of the conflict with the Warriors, yes, even far into the future. Anyone who wishes, and who has the courage, may enter the temple, and may eavesdrop upon his own part in that history in Mahrt's own presence."

"I got very little information from my eavesdropping at the temple," Tipton pointed out. "Yet I also got the impression that my own part in the history of the Warriors will not be inconsiderable. I can't quite reconcile the two."

Chrestos nodded, looking slightly more amused than before. "Contact with the dreams of Mahrt can overload the mind, if the eavesdropper becomes closely enough *en rapport* with Mahrt to catch any hint of the dreamer's true concerns. In your case, these concerns are probably intimately bound up with you—when you are ready to take a part in them, not before. Oh, you will hear from Mahrt again, Tipton Bond; you will not enjoy that day when it comes, but it will come, as inevitably as the stopping of the stars."

Tipton leaned forward. "I draw two conclusions from all this," he said, looking at Chrestos steadily. "You may check me if you will.

"First of all, then, you accept me as the true Sword of Mahrt, and you do not necessarily regard Mahrt as evil, as do the men of Xota."

"Correct," said Chrestos, slitting his eyes.

"Good. Secondly, these things being true, you, and the beasts for whom you speak, are bound over to help me, wher-

ever possible. If this were not true, you would have no reason to offer me so much information—information which I suspect the remainder of the Council would rather not have me have."

"Again correct," Chrestos agreed.

Tipton sat back, grinning. "I never thought the time would come," he said, "when I would encounter more enmity than I liked. But I must say that it's pleasant to have at least one friend on this strange world."

Chrestos, with a lightning-like movement, sprang to his feet and emitted a roar of pure feline fury. Tipton found himself on the other side of the bed, a hand snatching for his missing knife, without being conscious of any intervening motion whatsoever.

Chrestos paced back and forth on the other side of the bed, the muscles rippling underneath his tawny hide, keeping his head always turned toward Tipton. His great yellow eyes blazed frighteningly.

"A friend! A friend!" Chrestos roared. "Tipton Bond, the beasts all hate you. They have reasons. The superstitious dread in which most of the men here hold you is nothing compared to the reasons for hatred which we have! Only Mahrt himself protects you from us."

"Why?"

"You are the last entity in the universe to whom I would give that information," Chrestos snarled, still pacing. A quick lash of his tail swept a low table clean of bric-a-brac. "Let it be said only that your appearance as the Sword of Mahrt is the most bitter humiliation the beasts of Xota have suffered since the days before we had won our hard-fought representation on the Council. A friend? Never, from now to the very stopping of the stars! We are bound over to help you, that we cannot avoid, that much you may accept as your due.

"But take warning, Tipton Bond. If you are found to be *not* the true Sword of Mahrt—the beasts will have your heart, upon the instant!"

They stood glaring at each other, man and beast, frozen in fury, for an aeon-long instant.

Then Tipton grinned. The enmity of beasts was no novelty to him. His soul drew its strength, in the last analysis, from the enmity of powerful entities—the more powerful the enemy, the greater the strength.

Chrestos glared at him a moment more. Then, deliberately, he sat down, and bared his long fangs satanically.

Tipton threw back his head and laughed. "I believe we understand each other, Chrestos," he said.

"You are without doubt an extraordinary man," Chrestos said. "It is a pity that we could not have met under better circumstances. But you are right, Tipton Bond, we understand each other; that is all the present situation requires."

"We are allies, then," Tipton said. "Bound, shall we say, by our mutual willingness to hate."

"Exactly so," Chrestos said, grinning his upsetting grin once more. "You must realize, however, that that being the case, you are currently my creature, not I yours. You are bound to make the moves in the game which I decree, until the time when you in your turn have the upper hand—as you surely will, if you are indeed the true Sword."

"I see little choice for me," Tipton admitted. "What have you in mind?"

Chrestos arose. "Come with me. Evil, as every beast knows, is often best defeated by letting it have its own way."

"What do you mean? Where are we going?"

"I am giving you over to the Warriors," Chrestos said. "But I was not, I am afraid, quite honest with you when I said that we expected you as the true Sword. There is still doubt, necessarily, and there is only one way to resolve it. We will let the Warriors have you. If you are the true Sword, you will be back. And if you are not—the beasts will fetch you back—dead."

"And if I refuse to go?"

"That," Chrestos said calmly, "was anticipated."

With the fastest motion that Tipton had ever seen, one great paw swept toward him. He sprang away, but Chrestos was faster than he was.

The blow when it landed was nothing at all—merely a

scratch from a single claw. Two steps later, a waterfall roared in Tipton's ears, the room whirled, and blackness fell over him like an enormous shroud.

CHAPTER SIX—*The Warriors Laugh*

WHEN Tipton was first able to open his eyes, he had the instant impression that he had been abandoned on a bare, flat plain, and was staring straight up at a leaden sky. It was many minutes before his drug-numbed sense could register the thought that the irregularities in what he took to be clouds did not move, and bore a fixed mathematical relationship to each other.

Even after he realized that he was in a room of some sort, he refused to accept its apparent size. That rivet-studded ceiling looked to be over a mile away—he hardly dared estimate how much over a mile. The surface under him, he discovered, was metal.

Then a Face bent over him.

Tipton jerked himself to a sitting position. The Face was—tremendous.

There were several others of the figures in view now. Tipton could not repress a gasp. He had been warned that the Warriors of Day were giants, but he had not expected any such size as this. Any one of these immense beings could pick him up in one hand without the least difficulty; they were as big as the statue of Mahrt.

Two of the remote, god-like faces turned and looked at each other. Then both bent blazing eyes upon Tipton. Immense lips moved.

"Who are you, infinitesimal? How did you come here?"

The voice beat about him like thunder, wave upon wave.

"How did you board our ship? Where have you been hiding? Answer!"

Tipton felt his hackles rising. He stood up. Colossal instruments littered the surface about him, and far away in the distance he could see a circular port, with star-spangled blackness beyond it.

"Answer!"

Tipton threw back his head. "Who are you to question me?" he shouted defiantly. "Suppose you tell me where I am!"

There was a moment of incredulous silence. Then the Warriors began to laugh.

The sound grew and grew. The universe rocked and reeled with it. Beneath Tipton's feet, the very metal of the surface on which he was standing shuddered with it. Its intensity rose and rose, past the bearing point, and still rose.

Tipton crouched down, covering his ears, his entire body shaking with a fury that he had never felt before. The tremendous waves of sound bruised and buffeted him.

I will pay you for this. Oh, I will pay you for this, my ultimate enemies! Laugh, you half-gods. Laugh—but let me be the Sword of Mahrt, to put the bubble of blood in that laughter!

The Olympian jollification died away gradually. High aloft, there was a last snicker, most un-godlike. Tipton stood up, legs braced, hands on hips, his head thrown back. He filled his lungs.

"Are you through with your idiot giggling?" he shouted. "If so, answer the question!"

One of the giants' faces bent over him again, sardonically benign. "All in good time, little human electron," the slow thunder said. "So you would know by what right we question you? By the right of knowledge, then. And by the right of power.

"You are an Earthman, little human electron. You are a denizen of a planet which the Warriors of Day will reach and engulf, in a bare thousand years. We question you by right of conquest, a conquest as inevitable as the passage of the stars in their courses. Did you think to escape us by coming to Xota? Were you proud of that feat of science? It is a very tiny feat, of no real interest. And you have brought yourself only much closer to the thing which you thought to escape. You will share in the general holocaust, when the Wild Star arrives!"

Tipton noted with grim interest that the Warriors' pre-

tense of omniscience was already wearing thin. They did not know how he had come to Xota, and they were crediting him with far more information than he had. Giants they might be, but they too had limitations.

"What is this Wild Star?" he called.

Again the Warriors laughed.

"The Wild Star," the slow thunder said, "should be no stranger to you, tiny Earthman. It is a minute, almost lightless body, known to the scientists of your own Earth as van Maanen's runaway sun. It is only slightly larger than the little Earth itself—but it is the most condensed of all the white dwarfs, almost pure neutronium throughout. You understand that?"

Tipton wondered whether or not to admit to understanding the proposition; it might be well to let these giants underestimate him as far as possible. However, the Warriors took his silence for assent.

"Very well," the great voice boomed. "Answer us this, then: what makes a sun a runaway sun? The answer, little one, is very simple; the answer is: *The Warriors of Day*. This tiny, ultimately heavy star the Warriors long ago deflected from its original course, and sent it hurtling toward the system of Xota. Even now it draws near to Xota's own sun, herded by a cloud of battleships, each one of which could contain the largest Earthly city. Do you know what that means?"

Tipton took gratefully the choice for dissembling offered him. He shook his head.

The thunder said, "The introduction of the Wild Star into any normal planetary system will cause complete disruption of that system. And you, Earthman, are as powerless as any Xotan to affect the outcome. You are alone, weak, weaponless, hated—for your mind is closed, a circumstance which must frighten the telepaths.

"And you are of no interest whatsoever to the Warriors of Day. We are kind, where it suits us to be kind, Earthman. This is not your battle. Go back to Earth, and die in comfort on a planet which will not see the Warriors of Day for a little while."

"And how could I do that?"

"We will carry you, if you wish, in one of our scouting disks."

"I don't want to go back to Earth," Tipton said flatly. "I have a function here."

"A function?" the nearest giant boomed. "To share the fear of Xota? To tremble when the others tremble? To mouth futile defiance? Have you a name for this function, Earthman?"

"Yes," Tipton said. "The name is: *the Sword of Mahrt.*"

The blast of laughter threw Tipton heavily. For a moment he thought his eardrums had burst. Again he felt possessed by that most complete and utter hatred he had ever experienced.

"Mahrt! Mahrt!" the Warrior spokesman shouted. "Little one, we should hold you for our entertainment on dull days! This business of incessant and easy victory sometimes needs enlivening. Mahrt! Mahrt is a fiction. Mahrt is our fiction, an artistic triumph of our own!"

The laughter erupted again. It took a long while, this time, for the reverberations to diminish toward the silence Tipton awaited with clenched teeth.

Then the slow thunder began again.

"Mahrt is a fiction, little one. Five hundred years ago, when it was determined that Xota should be a part of our empire, the Warriors had to consider for the first time the military problems of conquering a totally telepathic planet; the question had never come up before. It was not a grave question; it was simply a question of a time-table. Xota is an insignificant planet, and we did not care to see it consume as much of our time in reduction as would a planet of real power and size.

"We therefore created the mythology of Mahrt. That myth had only one purpose: to short-circuit any possibility that the total, mass mental power of Xota could be brought to bear against us. By artful suggestion, by a synthetic construct of symbols and legends, we caused the Xotans to bury, in the allegorical figure of Mahrt, their ability to act with the beasts

and the plants in total *rapport*. More than that: we have planted the notion that such *rapport* was evil, and unclean. As for the prophecy of the Sword, for that we can claim no credit. It is purely a creation of the Xotans, born of the Warrior-created superstition that there is really such an entity as Mahrt. We predicted that such a prophecy would arise, and since it offered hope where there was no hope, we did nothing to stop its growth.

"But be warned, Earthman. You are not the Sword, not only because there is no Sword, but also because there is no one to wield it. Mahrt is a fiction, a myth. You are but making your own way harder by adopting this role, a role in a saga foisted upon Xota from outside.

"We are not cruel, Earthman. That you should suffer with the Xotans is no part of our plan. You may suffer at your own choice; but if you wish to escape the holocaust, we will grant you that boon. This is the only time that we will offer you this choice."

The thunder ceased.

Tipton stood silent, sifting the information carefully. He knew that Mahrt was real. For within the allegorical symbol, the temple—and in the Warrior's story of the allegory Tipton detected the unmistakable ring of authentic truth—there was, nevertheless, an actual presence of some kind—and a powerful one.

On this score, then, the Warriors were lying. Mahrt was no fiction, despite the apparent fact that the Warriors had created him—had caused him to be created as an entity separate from the main body of Xotan thought.

And beings as powerful as the Warriors should have no need to lie—except in areas where they were weak.

"Your magnanimity is a gesture of cowardice!" he shouted at the distant heads. "My business on Earth is done. My business *for* Earth is only begun. The Warriors of Day will never pass Xota; this I prophesy as the Sword of Mahrt; this I prophesy as Mahrt's own utterance—the utterance of a real giant, a real god, of an entity who laughs at such idiot children's toys as wild stars, even as you laugh at me!"

The statement, Tipton knew, was paranoid in content, and highly provocative in tone. He had chosen both content and tone deliberately, as the only way to startle out of these great confident egomaniacs any information which he would be able to use.

Throughout the speech of the giants, it had been borne in upon him, with increasing force, that his situation was desperately serious. He had no idea how Chrestos had sent him here. For all he knew, Chrestos could have used teleportation, an art about which Tipton knew nothing. If, on the other hand, Chrestos had used some mechanical means, that too was just as inaccessible and just as unknown to Tipton.

Something drastic, therefore, had to be done, and done rapidly, not only to prevent the Warriors from sending Tipton back to Earth, but to insure their sending him back to Xota. The only hope that he saw for provoking the Warriors into such a move was to attack them upon their own terms—to attack their own dramatization of their role; force them to reassert it, and to return him to await exactly the fate with which they had threatened him.

For a long instant, the giants remained frozen, like a statuary group designed for some inconceivably immense war memorial. Coldly, Tipton timed the silence, using his own metabolic rate as a clock. The moment for the giants to move, to explode into furious action, to hurl him, in a single raging gesture, back to Xota, came . . .

And passed.

Tipton's heart sank. Somewhere, somehow, he had overdone it. It had been a long gamble—stabbing the psychological push-buttons of half-gods, even insane half-gods, could not realistically have been expected to produce the same reaction as would have been forthcoming from the normal, aberrated human being.

The Warrior who had throughout acted as spokesman of the group sighed, and looked down at Tipton, smiling.

"You make great claims, little human electron," the enormous vote said, almost gently. "It is easier to promise than to deliver—but the Warriors of Day demand delivery, on time,

and in full. Let us now see what objective reality lies behind your bragging."

They bent over him, all five of them, and suddenly Tipton felt as if his skull had been completely stripped away from his brain. There was a glare in his mind, penetrating down to the very bottom.

The blazing minds of the Warriors were invading his memory.

It would be all over within a few moments. Evidently the barriers which made Tipton's mind inaccessible to the Xotans were as flimsy as tissue paper to the Warriors of Day—indeed, they had already passed them. Within moments, they would have at their command everything that Tipton knew—including his entire knowledge of Mahrt.

Die in silence.

Suddenly he knew the meaning of the injunction. It had been signed with a closed eye, which could only be the insignia of the Dreamer, Mahrt, himself. The Warriors must not know that Mahrt, whom they thought they had created only as a fiction, actually existed and was gaining power. In this extreme situation, Tipton himself did not matter. All that mattered was that he—die in silence!

The searing blaze of the mental regard of the Warriors blasted deeper and deeper into his mind. How to die—how to die *now*—die before the Warriors found that crucial repository of information, die so rapidly as to prevent the Warriors from touching that repository during the last fading seconds?

The blaze seared deeper. The five great heads bent ever closer. If he could throw himself completely *en rapport* with Mahrt—

That was it, if it could be done. Such deep mental contact with the Dreamer would blast his mind instantly, wipe it out as a hot poker wipes out a raindrop.

Return to the temple. Back to the temple. Go back, go back!

The savage mental order threw him back almost bodily. From the blackened wells of his mind, the great cold force came welling up toward the fury and brilliance of the Warriors' attack. Then the coldness and the brilliance met.

The rending, soundless blast wiped the whole universe away into clean nothingness.

CHAPTER SEVEN — *The Dark Worship*

TIPTON'S first conscious sensation was a feeling of blank incredulity at finding himself still alive. Then the blankness was suddenly driven out by shock as his brain registered the messages being delivered to it by his eyes.

There was almost no sensation of time lapse between the present moment and that instant of rending contact between the force that was Mahrt and the minds of the Warriors—that moment that should have killed him, or at the very least, changed him to a drooling idiot. Yet this was certainly no part of any space vessel of the Warriors.

Evidently, he had been teleported here out of the Warriors' ship. But where was *here*? In order to throw himself *en rapport* with Mahrt, he had given himself the command, "Return to the temple," a trick for re-living an experience which he had at command for as long as he could remember, but one which he had not actually expected to work as a telepathy command.

Well, it had worked. It had not only put him *en rapport* with the Dreamer, it had actually, physically, "returned" him to—somewhere.

For this was certainly not the Temple. For one thing, it was wet. The cramped stone room was damp and musty, and the light from the single shaded bulb glowing on the bare wooden table glistened on patches and trickles of moisture on the wall. Somewhere there was a quiet ticking of dripping water; not, apparently, in the room, but in the dark corridor outside.

Tipton had given up smoking ten years ago, out of the simple conviction that it was a non-survival habit to carry into the savage kind of life he had then begun to lead. The pervasive mustiness of this place, nevertheless, made him long to light a cigarette, simply to interject a note of dryness into the damp odor's cellar-like monotony.

And there was plenty of other evidence that he was not in the Temple in the woods. The sleeping figure had been made of masonry: the stone blocks which had gone into building this room were huge, and appeared to be even older than the centuries-old image of Mahrt. The air was quite still, without any hint of the multifarious murmurings that were Mahrt's thoughts overheard at a distance. Finally, and most conclusively, there was no hint here of the immense and bitter force which filled the Temple in the woods—only intense, aching dampness.

Cautiously he reconnoitred the room. It had no door, but only a narrow archway, and there seemed to be no reason why he could not leave it and wander away to freedom; but he was wary of stepping out into any possible trap, and most unwilling to attempt flight through a structure of whose nature he knew next to nothing. Furthermore, corridors, by their very nature, are featureless. Only the rooms to which they lead contain clues as to the purpose and function of the building as a whole.

Yet there was very little to be found in this room. The table was bare, and roughhewn; except for the light, it bore nothing but scattered pieces of jewelry of no apparent worth or significance. Nearby there was a three-legged chair, over which had been thrown a cloak of some fine-woven material which Tipton could not identify. Material of that quality, nevertheless, would disintegrate if left for long in such mildew-ridden humidity; the presence of the light argued that the room was used, but the fine cloak indicated that it was used only in passing, as a place to leave things for a few hours at most—it was, Tipton decided presently, a dressing-room. Its inherent unfitness for such a purpose—for its design and cruel inconvenience suggested nothing so much as a dungeon cell—further suggested that it was being used now only under the pressure of high necessity, and clandestinely at that.

He was turning one of the ambiguous bits of jewelry over in his hand under the light of the dim bulb when a small intermittent sound brought him erect and tense. Quickly he moved out of the range of the small globe into the darkest

corner of the room, pressing his back against the cold stone.

The footsteps drew closer, tentative and discreet, almost whispering. The walker, Tipton decided, was barefoot, approaching swiftly and almost on tiptoe. Already the soggy coldness of the rock was penetrating his thin Xotan clothing along his shoulders, and a rill of coldness descended maddeningly down his backbone.

Then the girl stepped through the doorway, and paused.

For a moment, Tipton didn't recognize her. He saw her only in profile, almost haloed in the hazy air, one leg lifted slightly, knee forward, only the ball of her foot touching the flagstone, her head lifted, her breast stirring slightly. Then she ran over to the table with a peculiar swift grace, and the motion brought recognition pounding into Tipton's temples. She was the beggar, the street-girl who had thrust into his palm the wadded injunction to die in silence—an injunction signed with the hieroglyph of a closed eye, the insignia of the Dreamer.

While Tipton watched, she started around the table, then turned quickly to bend over it. Even in the inadequate, fuzzy light, her smooth white freshness gleamed under her rags through the fog-bound air. Tentatively, she touched the bit of wrought metal that Tipton had been handling. It seemed to sting her. She took her hand away with a small ritual gesture, turned to the chair, and swept the cloak up and about her shoulders.

"Don't be startled," Tipton said softly. "Would you—"

The warning was useless. The girl emitted a small sound, like an animal in pain, and threw herself backwards into the farthest corner, gathering the incongruously rich cloak tightly about her.

"I'm very sorry," Tipton said, feeling remarkably inadequate. He had then to assume a reassuring reasonable tone, but he was astonished to find that his voice was shaking. "I—I got lost down here, and I was hoping that you could help me."

He came forward, very slowly, so as not to alarm her further, into the faint light. She watched his approach with wide, deep eyes.

As he came into the light, her lips moved.

"The Sword . . . The Sword!"

He had never heard her speak before, and it shook him. He was ready to believe that the whole question of Mahrt, the Warriors, and the Sword, was of no importance compared to the burst of glory that was overwhelming him in this deep crypt.

He said, "They call me that. So far, I have small reason to think it true. But where am I? Who are you? You saved my life with your warning note—without it, I would never have escaped the Warriors."

"The Warriors?" the girl said faintly. "You have seen the Warriors?"

"Yes, I've seen them. Chrestos sent me to them—how, I don't know. They were about to pick my brain when I remembered your order—and when I tried to die, I blacked out and found myself here."

There was a moment of intolerable tension. Then Tipton moved tentatively around the table toward the girl.

With a cry of sheer awe, she flung the cloak wide and threw herself bodily upon the slimy flags.

Appalled, Tipton bent and took her by the shoulders, attempting to raise her to her feet. She buried her face more deeply in her hands, trembling.

"Do not slay me," she whispered brokenly. "I am a true worshipper of Mahrt, though a poor one. Sword, Sword, do not dull your edge upon my clay!"

Tipton lifted the trembling girl gently to her feet. "How can you be sure that I am the Sword?" he whispered. "That I do not know myself."

"You have spoken with the Warriors, and lived," the girl said, her head bowed.

Tipton shrugged and released her, putting his shaking hands behind him. "Very well," he said wryly. "I feel more like a fly, caught squarely by the collision of two planets. But I may be the Sword. If I am, I am a very nicked and dulled blade at the moment. And I'm in trouble; I need your help. Will you give it me?"

The girl did not answer, but every line of her telegraphed

subservience. Angrily, Tipton turned and walked away a few steps, then wheeled upon her again.

"I wish you'd try to treat me as a human being," he said. "I'm damned tired of being a sort of dubious half-god. Would you at least answer a few questions?"

"Spare me, I will answer," the girl whispered.

"All right," Tipton said, beginning to stride up and down. "What is Chrestos? How did he know a route to the Warriors?"

The girl dropped her hands and clasped them before her, but she did not look up. "Chrestos," she murmured, "is the representative of the beasts on the Council; beyond that, little is known of him."

"Who elected him?" Tipton asked.

"Why, the beasts, I suppose; I do not know. His position is one of long standing."

"But can he be trusted?"

The girl laughed, involuntarily, and the laugh was choked off by sheer fright. "No man trusts Chrestos," she said at last. "No one can predict what he will do next. He is a free agent. It is thought that he has little preference between Warriors and men—turning now this way and now that, as the beasts approve or disapprove of the way that men treat them. It was not too many decades ago that the beasts first won representation on the Council, and they still harbor many resentments—as well they might."

Again she gave that involuntary, light laugh. "The time is coming," she said, her voice silvery, "when we may see a nodding stalk of grain taking root in the chambers of the Council!"

Tipton grinned. The girl had courage, and plenty of it.

"Tell me your name," he said. The question was unexpected, even to himself.

The girl looked up briefly at him, and then bowed her head again. "I was never given a name," she said. "I am called Deje."

"Thank you, Deje. Nor have I name of my own; I call myself Tipton Bond."

The girl smiled fleetingly and looked down again at the flagstones. At last she said, "As to how Chrestos knows how to reach the Warriors—"

"Damn Chrestos."

"As you wish," she said submissively.

"Very well," Tipton said. He had never before met a living being who put him so totally at a loss. "What about Chrestos?"

"If anyone on Xota would know how to reach the Warriors," she said, with a curious tranquillity, "Chrestos would know. He is wise, and very subtle. The Cult does not—"

"The Cult?"

The girl raised her head and looked at him again, her glance more open and curious. "Then you do *not* know where you are?"

The word had gone through Tipton like an electric shock. "The Cult?" he echoed again, stunned. The girl gave him another of her curious glances.

"Surely; the Cult of the Dark Worship of Mahrt," she said. Her voice was as subdued as before, but Tipton thought he detected a faint overtone of mischief in it. "Surely the Sword must know its sheath? Perhaps you are testing me—I am honored that so humble a worshipper of Mahrt as I should be thought worthy of the trial."

Tipton heard her, but only in a remote corner of his mind, almost as if the information were reaching him by teletype. So that was it!

He had ordered himself back to the Temple, but he had not specified which Temple; and Mahrt, acting almost as a psycho-therapist in the moment of Tipton's extremest mental agony, had chosen to see to it that he obeyed the letter of the command rather than its spirit—had, without violating the integrity of Tipton's own mind, used it to place Tipton where Mahrt wanted him to go.

This first evidence of direct supervision by the sleeping, powerful entity was decidedly disturbing, and, indeed, more than a little annoying.

Yet Tipton found it difficult to resent—for it had inarguably saved his life.

"You are displeased?" the girl said softly.

"By no means," Tipton said, snapping himself back into the present. "You've given me information which I needed, Deje. You were talking about Chrestos and the Cult; please go on."

The girl smiled, tentatively but beautifully. "Chrestos has never persecuted the Cult," she said. "Thus we cannot feel toward the beast the enmity that we do toward Yrinon and the woman Lanja, who have hounded us at every turn, and seem determined to stamp us out. We know that, if we are to win the coming conflict with the Warriors, Mahrt must be awakened and must fight on our side; but Yrinon and Lanja have rejected Mahrt, as have most of the human beings of Xota."

"What about Elron?" Tipton said. "He has all the earmarks of a 'suspect-everything' personality, and from what I've been able to observe of his intelligence, should be more dangerous than Yrinon and Lanja together. I wouldn't back him against Chrestos, I don't think, but against the two humans he's a sure thing."

Deje's tentative smile became a burst of glory, and Tipton was astonished to feel a premonitory surge of sheer jealousy.

"Elron is our high priest," she said. "Come; let us see him. I was sent here to fetch his robe. We are about to perform the high ceremony of our worship of Mahrt. Your presence will give weight and power to our devotion, and your meeting here with Elron afterwards will symbolize our coming triumph!"

And the Earthman broke upon his knee the worshippers of Mahrt . . .

"Maybe," Tipton said. "Somehow I doubt that I'll be very welcome."

The girl came forward shyly, the cloak floating behind her on the fetor-heavy air. "Perhaps not at first," she said demurely. "Elron does not believe that you are the true Sword. But how else could you have talked with the Warriors and lived? How else could you have found your way here so unerringly? Why would Chrestos have sent you to the War-

rriors, had he not known you to be the Sword? Elron will be convinced—he must be. Come.”

She came forward, a renewed springiness in her step, and grasped his hand with a firm delicacy which was half the tribute of reverence, and half sweet human confidence.

“Come,” she repeated. “Come to our worship; it is to the honor of Mahrt, and to his power. Elron will be pleased.”

“Put him in irons,” Elron said stonily.

The red-head’s face was suffused, his pupils alarmingly large. Though he was speaking quite softly, each word was bitten off with so sharp an edge that it rang like iron in the groined vault of the temple adytum.

Two pairs of hands closed upon Tipton’s forearms upon the instant, but their grip was tentative, as if the two acolytes were afraid that Tipton would explode in their hands. The girl made a small, incoherent noise and took Elron by the sleeve.

“Elron, have you gone mad?” she whispered urgently. “This man is the Sword of Mahrt!”

“He is no more Sword than you are,” Elron ground out, shaking her off. “As you can sense for yourself, he has no mind. Oh, he walks and talks, and acts as well, but there is nothing behind the facade but blankness. He is a creation of the Warriors, that is all; a cunning robot.”

The grip of the acolytes tightened suddenly, spasmodically; if anything, their hands were shaking worse than before, but Elron had given them a new enough fear to make their grip decisive. Tipton knew that he could break both their skulls upon each other with a single concerted motion, but they were innocent; to make any such move now would be outright and unjustifiable murder while the situation was still so fluid.

“You are making a most remarkably grand fool of yourself, Elron,” Tipton said. “You are acting upon no evidence whatsoever. I no more know whether or not I am the Sword than you do; but your reasons for thinking me a creature of the Warriors are equally slim. In either case—listen carefully, Elron—putting me in chains will prove nothing. If the chains

contain me, I am a nobody, not worth chaining in the first place. If I am the Sword of Mahrt, or a robot of the Warriors, no chains can hold me. What would you prove by such a move?"

Elron's brows drew together, but when he spoke, his voice was lightly ironic. "I would not leave you alone in your chains for an instant," he purred. "I am well aware that you have a way of walking through walls when you are left to your own devices. The Council is already in an uproar over your previous disappearance."

"Then just what do you propose?"

"You are about to witness a ceremony of the Dark Worship," Elron said. "At the height of that ceremony, Mahrt himself, if he so wills it, will be with us. If you are the robot you appear to be, Mahrt will destroy you upon the instant. If you are, on the other hand, his Sword, Mahrt will so announce it in unmistakable terms."

"And if neither of these things happens?"

"Then," Elron said, "we will destroy you as a Council spy—but we will apologize, of course, on the bare chance that we may be mistaken."

His glance jerked away from Tipton and fastened upon the older of the two acolytes, who had frozen onto Tipton's left elbow so hysterically that Tipton's wrist and fingers were tingling from the impeded circulation.

"Bind him," Elron said calmly. "Bind him into the niche of the Pillar of Sorrow, manacle his feet and hands, pass the barbed cables over his chest, insert his feet, his thumbs, and his head into the proper receptacles. Both of you will stand over him during the entire ceremony. If you see the slightest sign of movement, if he seems to be fading away, or stepping free of his bonds, or working any other hypnotic trick, stab, and stab hard.

"And do not fear to show me a corpse when I return from my offices. Kill him for any reason that you see, or for no reason at all. It is for survival. I shall be more likely to reward you for a corpse than for a live man—"

The immense, vaguely terrifying shimmering of an enor-

figure of Elron. A low moan of satisfaction and anticipation arose from the mob.

When Tipton saw what the new flames contained, he involuntarily threw himself forward with all the force that his hard muscles could bring to bear in the cramped space. The barbs on the heavy cables roweled his chest and shoulders with insensate viciousness.

For a moment, almost insensible himself, he strained against the cruelty of rock and steel. Then, suddenly, he saw the two acolytes moving into the corners of his vision, moving in on him with frightened determination.

Instantly, Tipton stopped struggling, and fixed the closer of the two men with a cold, unwinking glare. To his gratified surprise—for he had not consciously called upon it—he felt the bitter force which had come to live with him at his first contact with the Temple of Mahrt blasting forth from his pupils in twin glacial torrents.

The acolyte stood frozen for a second. Then he emitted a small involuntary shriek, dropped his knife, and fled.

The other man was made of sterner stuff. He was obviously terrified at the first contact with that outpouring of inhuman force, but he stood his ground, neither advancing nor retreating, still menacing Tipton with his blade.

"I'll strike a bargain with you," Tipton gritted, never moving his eyes away from those of the acolyte for an instant. "If you come a step closer, I'll blast you where you stand. But I have no reason to kill you if you don't menace me, and I've already seen that I can't burst these bonds. Suppose we ignore each other—until the situation changes."

The man eyed him narrowly for a moment. Then he nodded and walked away.

In the Temple proper, the ceremony of the Dark Worship was proceeding. Tipton stood where he was, the blood running down over his ribs, his lips set, and watched it.

It was not pretty.

CHAPTER EIGHT — *The Sword Turns*

WHEN it was all over, Tipton and the Temple were left in complete and abysmal darkness, silent except for the distant echoing tick of dripping water.

The Temple was empty. The immense flame had died away to a sickly shimmering and had gone out; there had been the shuffling of more than a hundred pairs of sandals, and the sated murmuring of receding voices; then, nothing. Even the remaining acolyte had gone, leaving Tipton prisoned in the living rock, the barbs of the cable roweling him at each quick, spasmodic breath.

Yet Tipton knew that he was not alone.

The appearance of Mahrt, prophesied for the height of the ceremony, had not come off. There had been, true, a long moment of orgiastic hysteria at the moment when the victims in the flame had played their brief, unwilling, pitiable role in the ceremony of the Dark Worship; but no one who had known the cold grandeur of direct contact with Mahrt, even for only a few moments, could have mistaken that sadistic seizure for a visitation from the buried godling of Xota.

Now, however, Mahrt was here.

Or, rather: he had been here from the beginning. His presence was evident, although not manifest. Tipton's own recent, and puzzlingly non-fatal, rapport with Mahrt had left a residue in his psyche, a sense of being, however partially, constantly and ineluctably in audience with that vast intelligence—a sense which he would never lose until he died, and which in darkness, silence and isolation would remind him forcibly that Mahrt was here, whether he willed it or no.

There was a small stir of movement in the dank blackness behind him, and then a metallic sound. He stiffened rigidly back into the stone alcove. The barbed cables sagged slightly; then one fell away completely from his chest, with a thick whisper and a scraping impact.

Seconds later, all the cables were lying coiled around the base of the pillar, venomous, entangled and quiescent, like a nest of copulating cobras. Someone was still moving nearby,

but Tipton held himself sealed to the stone; he was still closely manacled, and knew better than to expect any clemency from the fanatics of this cult. Nothing was expectable but that the laws of the cult's ritual forbade the murder of a completely helpless prisoner—the vivid evidence for such a conclusion was far more recent in his memory than any other fact.

Fingers touched his instep, and he heard again the small metallic sound. At once there was a sharp, brittle snap, and the opening jaws of the manacle around his left ankle scraped his flesh.

Another snap. The right leg-iron was open. A hand touched his forearm and traced down to the wrist.

Tipton's whole body went as rigid and as elastic as a chrome steel bar. In the next second, Elron's blade would find his heart—the defection of his subordinates would have left him no choice but to hurry to the Pillar of Sorrow, as rapidly as he could reach it after the ceremony, to administer the *coup de grace* himself. Elron had not looked to be as superstitious as his followers, but it might still be that he would feel himself bound by the ritual, might feel himself obligated to unbind Tipton completely—except for the confining effect of the form-fitting rock niche—before striking.

And the moment the first wrist-gyre was released—

The hand found the steel bracelet, which clinked slightly against the stone. Another hand came in to fumble with the mechanism.

Now!

A shriek of terror and pleading ran through the Temple. Instantly Tipton realized that his fingers were entangled in a mass of long hair, too silky and uncontrolled to be anything but the hair of a woman. But women, too, have killed—

His captive did not writhe or struggle in his grip, but sank without resistance. She had begun to sob. The sound of her voice hit him like a hammer blow.

It was Deje.

Her wet cheek came to rest helplessly against his knee, and he realized that he was suspending her by her scalp. There was certainly no overtone of murder in the sound of her weep-

ing. He released her hastily, but she continued to embrace his calves, and shake herself and him with sobs of the purest terror.

"I'm sorry, Deje," he whispered inadequately. "I was expecting Elron, and a long knife. Can you free my other hand?"

For answer, she only clung more tightly to his knees. Her tears came more quietly, but even her ragged breathing was magnified alarmingly in the enclosed vastness of the underground hall.

The sobbing stopped, although Tipton could still feel the convulsive shudders wracking the girl's body. He tried futilely to touch her. The alcove did not allow him to bend far enough.

"Hurry, Deje. Unless I miss my guess, Elron will be here at any moment."

Silently, the girl released his legs, and a moment later her small hands freed him of the remaining gyre with withdrawn efficiency. He lowered the other arm cautiously, and eased himself out of the stony embrace of the Pillar of Sorrow. His muscles ached; each movement brought a stab of stiffness.

He stood for a moment, flexing his muscles, trying to conquer the giddy, prickling sensation of returning freedom and warmth. There was neither sound nor sign from the girl, except for a short, heavy, suspiciously even breathing at a little distance from him.

"Thank you, Deje," he said softly.

"We must leave at once," she said, with an enforced and remote coldness. "It is a long route back to the surface, by a way that has not been traveled in many years. And someone here in the Temple must have heard."

"Yes, certainly. I beg your forgiveness, Deje."

"Take my hand, please," she said.

Tipton groped. His hand found her wrist, and their fingers locked.

"Deje—"

"We must go," she said, "or we will die in the flames of the worship."

Her grip tightened and tugged, but only to lead him. Feel-

ing curiously desolate, Tipton followed her unseeable steps away from the Pillar of Sorrow into the muffled darkness.

Insofar as he could judge by the crude sonar of the echoes, the way led directly out across the open temple floor, toward the altar itself. Since that way assuredly also led toward whatever hidden chamber Elron used to cleanse himself of the marks of the recent ceremony, it made Tipton uneasy, but he had no course now but to trust the girl implicitly. Without hesitation, she drew him deeper into the domed chamber.

At last she stopped and uttered softly a single, meaningless syllable. A split second later, the sound came back to them, almost with its original volume, quite recognizable and undistorted. This, then, was the exact center of the chamber; for Deje, it seemed to be a landmark of sorts. At once she made a ninety-degree turn to the right and pulled him along again. A few steps later, she halted again, and bent to the floor. There was a low muffled grinding.

"This is our escape way," she whispered. "So far, it has never been needed, and in late years Elron has neglected to tell new worshippers of its existence. There are no steps; you must slide down the face of the stone."

"And you?"

"I must remain here," she said. "There is no way to close the slab except from above."

"But won't Elron realize that it was you who freed me?"

"Most surely, if I disappear with you," she whispered urgently. "The way to the surface is long, and my absence would be noticed. As it is, he may think you freed yourself, as you seemed to do in the palace of the Council; he will blame Voscander and his student for deserting you. Voscander believed you to be unconscious, but that will be no excuse for Elron. Now go, quickly."

On a sudden impulse, Tipton swept the girl against him and kissed her gently. She did not resist, but neither did she respond. He held her for a moment longer in the enveloping blackness, then released her.

"I owe you more thanks than you know," he said, very quietly. "Later you may have cause to think ill of me. Believe,

"If you can, that what I do is for the ultimate good of us both; and, if you cannot, try to remember that the Sword of Mahrt and Tipton Bond are not always and in everything the same person."

He sat down at the edge of the opening and swung his weight over onto the sloping stone. A moment later, the great slab was grating shut above him.

Deje had been right; the way was long. It seemed to wind endlessly under the city. Since it was also completely dark, narrow and featureless, it gave Tipton plenty of time to think.

He thought that he could see, in fairly complete detail, the reasons why Mahrt had wanted him to visit the temple of the Dark Worship. Chrestos had already said that the beasts hated Tipton because he had been appointed the Sword of Mahrt; he had spoken of it as a bitter humiliation, and though he had refused to give the reason, it was a safe guess that jealousy played some part, probably a major part, in that humiliation.

Similarly, it seemed very likely that Elron, high priest of the Dark Worship, had hoped to be the Sword. It was a common-place in all religions that the priesthood regarded itself as the instrument of deity, and where the legend promised the coming of a supreme prophet or saviour, the temptation of the head priest to identify himself with the forthcoming deliverer was invariably stronger than human reason could resist. It was not surprising, then, that Elron had refused to accept Tipton as the Sword of Mahrt—no amount of evidence, with the possible exception of direct intervention by Mahrt himself, could ever convince Elron of so humiliating a fact.

Tipton chuckled in the narrow, empty tunnel. Elron's position was even worse than he had supposed. When a man has built up an elaborate organization, founded in the hope of perpetuating itself forever, the arrival of an event which promises to deprive that organization of meaning within a year or so could hardly be welcome.

A faint sense of pressure warned him that he was coming to a sharp turn. He slowed his steps and proceeded with one hand against the stone, the other one ahead of him. Almost

immediately, the outstretched hand touched a sheer wall.

Quick exploration revealed the fact that he was in a *cul de sac*. The passage simply stopped here. There was no turn-off no door. It was the end of the line.

Tipton's mind raced. Obviously, a passage as long as this and as difficult to construct, did not go nowhere. Either it had been bricked off for a reason, in which case he would simply have to go back to the temple, or else there was, after all, an exit, and a way of finding it.

There was no point in considering the first possibility until the other one had been explored thoroughly. Any exits, there would have to be either above or below him. If above, there would be almost certainly a ladder of some kind to reach it.

He found the ladder quickly enough. It was rudimentary but effective. Bricks had been omitted from the forward wall in an alternating pattern. He had only to use the hand and footholds offered. The question of what he was to do when he reached the roof of the passage remained unsolved, however.

A thought struck him, and he whistled gently. The sound did not bounce directly back at him as he had expected, but instead simply died, as if it had been decapitated at the top of its rise. Smiling, he went up the in-set ladder.

The passageway here had no roof. He continued to climb in the darkness up the stony chimney, for what he estimated to be about a hundred feet. At the top, the passageway continued. Here it moved in a long, very gentle curve.

As a trap, it was perfect. Anyone attempting to raid the temple from the other end of this escape passageway would be lured to greater and greater speed as he progressed inward along the curve—especially since the floor, too, slanted gently—and would be more than likely to step over the edge into the chimney before he could check himself.

Looked at from the opposite end, the device was equally ingenious. Fleeing worshippers coming down the passageway would know of the chimney and could clamber it quickly—after which they could stand at the top and calmly kick off any pursuers who might follow them from the direction of

the Temple. They could even, if they so chose, bomb the chimney.

Tipton resumed walking, smiling grimly. Mahrt had known what he was doing. As events had fallen out, Tipton knew more about the Cult than the Cult members themselves knew. He knew, for instance, that the repulsive ceremony which he had just witnessed, and the Satanist conception of the nature and history of Mahrt which it embodied, was more faithful to Mahrt's real nature than was the conception of the Warriors.

To this extent, the Warriors had told the truth: the Cult of the Dark Worship of Mahrt was a myth system, the very myth system which the Warriors of Day had themselves planted and fostered. In this sense, Elron, who had accused Tipton of being a robot of the Warriors, was himself far more a servant of the Warriors than any other person on Xota!

Thus far, then, the Warriors told the truth. Their lie was their claim that this mythology, this cult, constituted the whole truth of the story of Mahrt.

A faint trace of light began to show in the curving, upward-tilting corridor. Tipton could not yet tell where it was coming from, for it was still so dim as to reveal nothing but the general shape of the passage. Again he felt a slight sense of pressure, which told him that he was coming to another dead end. The curve began to straighten out.

At its end was another shaft, not nearly so high as the first. At the top of the chimney, a single stone had been removed, through which daylight was coming. That small chink was the most cheerful sight Tipton had encountered since the moment, so immeasurably long ago, when he had discovered that his palace prison-room included a bathtub.

A few moments later, he was standing in a dusty storeroom of the Palace of the Council.

Tipton wasted no time. He could now see, albeit dimly, the shape of the coming conflict between Xota and the Warriors, and had already decided upon a course of action. He was thoroughly tired of being pushed around, and, at long last, felt ready to shape events as he would like them to go, rather than

as these high-handed animals and men and star-conquering giants would have them go. He moved swiftly among the dusty crates to the nearest door and threw it open.

The sleepy guard outside nearly died on the spot of sheer fright.

"I won't hurt you," Tipton barked impatiently. "I wouldn't have bothered you at all if I were telepathic. I want Chrestos. If you know where he is, take me to him; if you don't, put yourself *en rapport* with him—and tell him that the Sword of Mahrt is looking for him."

Trembling, the man nodded, and a kind of veil came over his eyes. Almost immediately, it went away.

"The beast is on his way," he quavered. "The shock of seeing you—he detected it, and started here upon the instant—I must have mentated all over the palace." He looked as miserably embarrassed as if he'd been stripped naked.

"Damn," Tipton said. For his part, he felt as if he'd absentmindedly warbled Yankee Doodle while stalking bear—except that he would never have so blundered in the old environment. "I should have thought of that. Well, it can't be helped. There'll have to be a show-down sooner or later."

He had hardly finished speaking when the tawny mass of Chrestos loped into view at the far end of the corridor, the incoming sunlight dappling him as he moved. As he saw Tipton, he slowed, baring his polished tusks slightly. The guard backed off in the opposite direction; evidently he was more afraid of Chrestos than he was of Tipton, if such a thing were possible.

"I am sorry you escaped the Warriors," Chrestos said without preamble. "It forces me much closer to believing that you are the true Sword. But I expected you to return—if you did return—through the matter transmitter; how did you manage to turn up in this old store-room?"

"Roundabout," Tipton said tersely. "Listen, Chrestos; our time is short, and there is a great deal to be done. Can you close your mind upon the rest of the Council?"

"Yes," Chrestos said calmly. "But I would not depend upon the mind-screen of that animal." He turned his great head

suddenly to glare at the guard, who retreated still further. "Go away. Go a long way away. We do not need you further."

The guard nodded, turned, and went away at a comical scamper.

"Now then," Chrestos said, sitting down, and twitching his tail gently. "What have you to offer?"

"The location of the Cult of the Dark Worship," Tipton said.

The Great Cat bent his golden regard directly into Tipton's eyes. "That is something the Sword should know," he said flatly. "But not something I would expect the Sword to betray. You should be aware of the fact that the Council will stamp out the Cult mercilessly, to the last man, the moment it is located; they have been searching for it—not only this Council but all previous Councils—ever since it became known that there was such a cult.

Tipton nodded. "That's my expectation," he said. "This is why I wanted you to hear of it before the rest of the Council. You are, I have good reason to think, much closer to Mahrt than are Yrinon and Lanja. I want you to check my reasoning."

"Out with it," Chrestos said, his frighteningly intelligent face expressionless. "They will be down upon us in a pack at any moment."

Tipton said, "The telepaths, beasts and men alike, cannot fight the Warriors and each other at the same time. What I have seen of the Cult convinces me that it is simply a dissident force, which no more represents Mahrt's real interests than does the Council—you can see, I think, why I wanted you, as a Council member, to hear this before Lanja and Yrinon did. The Cult is a distortion. I have good reasons—reasons which I obtained, without much consent on my part, through your sending me to the Warriors—to believe that the Cult is of more benefit to the Warriors than it is to Xota as a whole.

"And I have other reasons, also, for believing that the breaking-up of the Cult, even though it appears to worship Mahrt, would be more to Mahrt's ultimate interests than the perpetuating of it."

Chrestos lifted his upper lip on one side. "That may well be," he said, still expressionlessly. "You seem well convinced that the interests of Mahrt correspond point for point to the interests of Xota."

"Of course," Tipton said, surprised. "Aren't you?"

Chrestos shrugged his massive shoulders. "Of course," he echoed. "Nevertheless, your willingness to see the Cult destroyed puts teeth into Elron's theory that you may be a robot of the Warriors. If you are the Sword of Mahrt, you must act in Mahrt's interests, or be crushed; whether or not Mahrt is a real representation of Xota's interests; that I understand. And I agree with it. But—betray the Cult? I myself think that we would be better off without the Cult, and yet I cannot believe that the one group upon all Xota—that is, among the human beings—which accepts Mahrt can at the same time be contrary to his interests."

"Elron," Tipton said, preparing his bombshell carefully, "is the high priest of the Cult."

The reaction was unexpected. Chrestos hunched his shoulders, threw back his head, and emitted a great hissing roar of laughter.

"Ideal," he said at last. "Ideal. I had never suspected it, but it is perfect; it all ties in. Now I understand Elron! Tipton Bond, do you know *exactly* the location of the temple of the Cult?"

"Most exactly," Tipton said. "And I can show you their escape route, and map it accurately. It contains a booby trap that the Council should know about. I think I know also where, approximately, under the city, the temple itself is located. If it is raided from both ends simultaneously, the Council should make a clean sweep."

"Ideal," Chrestos repeated. "You have won my approval, Tipton Bond. Your treachery is almost cold-blooded enough to be worthy of the beasts. Come; I have already called an extraordinary session of the Council; they are waiting. And the soldiers are converging upon us." He passed an enormous tongue over his chops and nose. "I believe the Palace Council will long remember this day's work."

And not only the Palace, thought Tipton bitterly. Deje, too, would remember it. If she survived at all the vengeful ferocity of Yrinon and Lanja, and, for that matter, of Chrestos, she would hate Tipton Bond—and for good reason.

And Tipton Bond, who had known all his life nothing but the ultimate in loneliness, had known since he had first heard Deje speak that he loved her; unwillingly, but quite helplessly.

There was neither glory nor joy in being the emissary of a buried god. After one had found love, it was purest misery.

Tipton followed the soft padding of Chrestos' footsteps toward the Council chamber.

The new suite of rooms which the Council had assigned Tipton in the Palace was not much more sumptuous than the chambers in which he had been imprisoned—that would scarcely have been possible—but there was one enormous difference: the door was not locked.

Tipton had taken occupancy of the suite scarcely three hours before he discovered that the unlocked—and unlockable—door is not always a blessing.

Already he had again used the tub, to his considerable need and pleasure, and had eaten his way slowly and luxuriously through the meal which had been brought him by suddenly-obsequious retainers. The foodstuffs were all unfamiliar, as was to have been expected, and were all vegetables to boot; but, since it was the first meal he had eaten since he had come to Xota, he was not inclined to be critical.

Besides, some of the dishes were as rich and exotic as any sybarite could ask: highly-spiced, high-protein delicacies as satisfying as any steak, like the finest daydream ever dreamt by a vegetarian browsing on a nutburger. There was also an assortment of wines which might have been the boast of Earth's oldest and greatest cellar; even to Tipton, who normally shunned alcohol as an impediment to sharp, high-speed thinking, their quality and variety was evident at first taste, and the gentle relaxation they induced was most pleasant.

Afterwards, he lay down. He had not done that before on Xota, either—at least, not except when he had been knocked

down. The sensation was delicious. The flunkies had provided him with various ointments and other medicines for the treatment of his many bruises, slashes, barb-wounds, friction burns, and other souvenirs of Xota's esteem, up to and including the cracked ribs. He had applied these dutifully, but his own inherent ability to review the moments during which he had sustained the actual injuries, and thus bleed off the compulsively repetitious perpetuation of the pain, had already brought the healing processes close to completion.

All in all, it was a new experience for Tipton Bond, hunter, exile, outlaw: to lie sprawled on the soft bed of a prince, completely relaxed and content, bathed in moist warm air laden with an odor almost like violets . . .

He did not know quite when he realized that Lanja was in the room.

When he sensed her presence at last, his first thought was that he had betrayed himself. He had been caught completely off guard, completely vulnerable to the slightest treachery. The wavefront of the shock, of course, was being surprised by a woman, in violation of Earthly tabus, while he was virtually naked. That such a tabu could trouble him at all was a good measure of the degree to which he had allowed his attention to be diverted.

Part of that shock passed harmlessly, however, as he rose to one elbow and got a completer view of the raven-haired woman of the Council. Her own costume was anything but proper for visiting, by Earthly standards. It consisted only of a transparent skirt of some silken stuff, split on one side to her waist, fastened by a shimmering blue cord with two ornate tassels; of a pair of sandals with silvery buckles; and of a cloud of musky perfume.

She had designed herself to be looked at. After his first start, Tipton looked at her, with all the care she seemed to invite. She stood for a moment under his regard, and then drew her unbound hair slowly forward over her shoulders and breasts.

Tipton had seldom seen a gesture so purely ritual and meaningless.

"Will you offer me no welcome?" she said at last.

"You're a little late for dinner," Tipton said. "But you're at least as welcome here as I am. I owe you thanks, I suppose, for the wines which allowed you to surprise me in this fashion."

She smiled lazily and came forward, seating herself beside Tipton. "Your mind is very direct beneath its impenetrable cap," she said, swinging her legs to parallel the side of the bed and crossing her hands upon them. "You are, I see now, an even more amazing man than I had at first supposed."

"My talents," Tipton said dryly, "are notable for being both hidden and useless, most of the time. You'll excuse me if I say that that's no news to me. I'll be direct, since it pleases you to be pleased by my directness. My question is: did you come here just to praise Caesar—or to bury him?"

"Caesar?" Lanja said. "The word means nothing to me. But your question deserves an answer—"

She bent over him suddenly, her hair falling about him, her heavy lips seeking his. Tipton met her half-way, returning the attack with all the violence his inflamed, exacerbated senses demanded . . .

After a while, he straightened up and looked down at her. She returned his gaze with a heavy-lidded contentment all the more calculating for its laziness.

"Everyone on this planet," Tipton said, "seems to be in a terrible rush to make me stop thinking. Suppose you tell me, now, what this is all about."

She smiled and stretched. "Isn't it obvious?"

"By no means. I'm not a boy, Lanja. You had this carefully planned. Up to this point I've been willing to go along with you. But now I want to know what it means."

"It still seems very obvious to me," Lanja said, sitting up also and rising with an easy, voluptuous swing. She went over to the window and looked out, putting her hair back in rough order with conscious care. "Don't undervalue my feeling for you, Tipton; it's ferocious, more now than before, since I know more now than I did before. Bear that in mind, and don't forget it.

"The rest of my desire is very simple. I want to be the absolute ruler of Xota. I'm tired of Yrinon's stuffiness, I hate Chrestos, and I'm delighted that sanctimonious Elron has turned out to be a traitor. But more than that, much more than that, above all, *I want to rule Xota*. With you, I can do it. I don't think that I can handle it by myself."

She swung toward him suddenly, the transparent skirt swirling against the light. "Does that answer your question, my man of the black mind and iron arms?"

"It answers one question," Tipton said, maintaining his composure with difficulty. "Now explain how you've kept a desire as great as this concealed from your fellow-telepaths, and I might even believe you're telling the truth."

"That's very easy. Too much mental intimacy is suspect here; it is more immoral than quick physical intimacy—how otherwise could I have come to you when the need arose? No Xotan dares to penetrate deeply into another's mind, down to the level where the motives for action lie." She strode back across the room again, looking down upon Tipton with glowing eyes which reminded him instantly of the sheer animal radiance of Chrestos. "Do you know why? You should."

"It's not a difficult riddle," Tipton grinned, moved to admiration for her superb body and the directness of her passion. "I suppose real rapport makes one suspect of sympathy with Mahrt."

"Of course," she said. She sat down beside him again. "And you, my stony lover, are the perfect answer to the dilemma of power. Think: you can handle the politics of this planet, in whatever way we think they should go, protected from any possible probe. Your mind seems to be naturally unreadable. I can stay behind the scenes, and be yours, my own poor vulnerable mind protected from—well—from unscrupulous persons—"

Tipton smiled ironically.

"Very well, you take my meaning," she said, not at all disturbed. "I will have the power I want, and you; and you will be a king, instead of a monster, and will have me. You do not seem to have found me wanting!"

"Not so far," Tipton said, treading carefully. It was like tracking a bear. This woman had no notion of how much of her was already dead; she was an animal. Chrestos was more human. But it would be fatal even to broach the one subject that made the difference.

"And the Warriors?" he said .

"The Warriors?" Her eyelids drooped slightly, and she began once more to preen herself. "Well, I don't pretend that it will last forever. Even you will show some flaws in the end. But the Warriors will probably arrive before that happens."

"What then?"

"Why, we'll escape. Chrestos has some exit; I don't know where it leads, but I've seen him use it, and so have my spies. When the Warriors arrive, we'll simply step through Chrestos' matter transmitter to whatever haven he has provided for himself—we can't let him live, after all—and let Mahrt protect Xota, if he can."

"I think perhaps he can," Tipton said. The statement did not advance the conversation in exactly the direction in which he wished it to go; it was simply the best emotionally neutral remark he had been able to formulate with the necessary speed.

This naive campaign of Lanja's was not even very effective as a sexual appeal, except insofar as she was beautifully endowed to enter such an appeal—not an endowment for which she could take any credit. The actual appeal itself was too visibly corrupted by power-lust to have even the charm of naivete.

Lanja, had, as a matter of fact, defeated herself within the first ten minutes. Beside even the memory of the grave figure and voice of Deje, Lanja's glowing, vibrant, animal presence was downright ghostlike. It was also incredibly dangerous. Lanja attracted Tipton; that was putting it mildly; but that was the one and only reason for taking the bait she offered, and it was not nearly good enough.

But to reject it outright would be foolhardy. Neither his feeling for Deje, nor his assessment of the coming conflict between Xota and the Warriors, made it possible for him to

go along with her. To deny her now would make her his most dangerous enemy, at the first moment since he had come to Xota that he appeared to be making some headway.

"You're temporizing," she said suddenly, swinging upon him.

"So I am," Tipton said. "One doesn't swallow a proposition of this magnitude down all at one gulp, after all, Lanja. You are talking to whatever I have in me that is human. I don't know how much of me that is—up until I heard Mahrt I had supposed that I was all human. Or almost all. But now I have to think of what I'd be giving up, as well as of what I'd be gaining."

This did not appear to be quite the proper line to take. Lanja faced him, her hands on her hips, her eyes feral.

"Let Mahrt rest; he is only an excuse," she said, breathing heavily. "Since you so kindly betrayed the Cult of the Dark Worship to us, I have been made aware of your dirty little beggar girl. It does not seem to me that a true son of Mahrt would reject a bargain of kings for a momentary stir of sentimentality."

She swept her hair forward over her breasts, and strode to the door, with lithe, unhurried, catlike dignity. As her hands touched the latch, she said, without turning:

"See that you do not wait until the Sword that you claim to represent is cleaving your own flesh, Tipton Bond. The longer your decision is delayed—the less I shall care what it is."

She was gone, leaving behind her only an odor of mischief.

CHAPTER NINE—*The Dreamer Stirs*

AFTER the air-car had overshot the clearing nearest to the sleeping stone giant four times, Tipton was forced to order it ignominiously back to the city. The limited freedoms offered him, in his new role as favorite enemy of Xota, continued to have major disadvantages, becoming more apparent and more crippling with every day.

The raid upon the Temple had come off beautifully—far

better, he realized afterward, than he had hoped it would come off—and, as a result, Chrestos, Lanja and Yrinon were tolerating him, for their several reasons. It had at first seemed the height of simplicity to commandeer an air-car, and revisit Mahrt in the hope of obtaining more information—indeed, the need for more information was acute.

This decision of Tipton's was not resisted openly, nor, he was sure, deliberately; but the obstacles thrown in its way by the peculiarities of Xotan culture managed, nonetheless, to make a mockery of his apparent freedom.

He had at first attempted to direct his pilot to take him to Mahrt. The only result of this order was the precipitous desertion of the pilot.

Tipton had then attempted to puzzle out the workings of the air-car by himself, only to find that it had no manual controls whatsoever, nor any dials or other means of conveying information to its operator. It had been designed, after all, to be operated by Xotans. It was given its orders telephatically, and probably gave back its information as to where it was and how well it was running by the same method, without the need for such crude intermediaries as dial faces, buzzers and the like.

When he came to ask for a new pilot, there did not seem to be any pilots available, even for taxi work. Despite telepathy, the average Xotan citizen did not seem to repose much trust in his Council; and the news that the rangy stranger who might be the Sword of Mahrt was planning to return to Mahrt produced such a famine of pilots that Tipton had only to approach a landing field to disrupt completely even the normal commercial traffic of Xota. He was finally reduced to asking the Council to assign him a pilot under direct Council orders.

He spent the rest of that day cruising back and forth above the approximate area of the forest where he imagined that the giant might lie. He had assumed that the sprawling stone figure would be easily visible from the air, and that he would recognize the shape of the terrain around it. As it turned out, however, he was quite unable to make sense of the lumpy geog-

raphy from any decent height, and the air-car could not fly slow enough to allow him to examine the terrain in detail from a low altitude.

During the one low altitude sweep which the car made over the forest, its course was followed by such a tossing wake of agitation among the trees that Tipton was afraid to ask his pilot to land in the nearest clearing. It seemed evident that he would be asking the man to commit suicide.

In the end, Tipton Bond made his pilgrimage to Mahrt alone and on foot, just as before.

As he climbed the long slope, the forest stirred violently, in a groaning tempest of protest; but by the time he had reached its boundaries, it was still again, as if it had been reproved. Within it, the giant, the great recumbent man of masonry, waited for him as always—but it was now alive.

It was hard to say wherein the difference lay. The stone figure still lay in the same position, on its back, the great blind head staring upward at the sky. It had not changed. But there was a stirring within it; Tipton could feel it with every step. Its aura of gathering vitality reached farther; the cleared area around it was deeper, newly deeper, and on its fringes the trees looked withered, and bore drooping leaves of yellow and scarlet and tartan, incongruous autumnal spangles upon their summer cloaks of deep green.

The Dreamer was stirring.

Tipton prowled the sandy boundaries, seeking the wound in the Temple's wrist. The aura poured out around him, shaking him with a manic exhilaration. He stopped and touched the rough wall.

Four clear words shouted in his head, without echo or blurring, each one arriving and possessing his brain as totally as a blow; his skull rang and came close to splitting with each one:

"Welcome, Tipton. Make haste."

Stunned, he clambered up the upturned stone wrist, and tumbled into the blackness, the bitter cold, the sensate throbbing. Great words roared about him. He walked, but only automatically; he was borne along by pulse after pulse of power,

each pulse having meaning, each word thrusting him toward some conclusion as each surge impelled his body toward Mahrt's dark and unguessable heart.

The Dreamer was awake, and stirring.

"Hear me," the thunder said. "This information is for Tipton Bond."

Each word threw Tipton forward into nothingness.

"At a remote time," went the great booming waves, "the Warriors of Day were weak. They sought conquest, but had conquered little. Only a few suns could they call their own, and even in their own corner of the galaxy there was much resistance. But they had cunning.

"Even at that time, they knew of Xota; they were telepathic. And they feared Xota, tiny though it is. They saw, far ahead of them, their task of conquest, and across it, like the pebble that changes the course of empire, was this planet, still unformed, but big with danger.

"The Warriors conferred. Xota must be destroyed, they said, far in advance of much larger and more powerful planets. If the Warriors waited until the systems between Xota and themselves were conquered and consolidated, they would find Xota invulnerable."

The pulses stopped, and Tipton found himself adrift. He was now deeper within the Temple than he had ever been before, but the knowledge was no help to him. He had lost his way. He was where he was for the duration of Mahrt's pleasure, even his enormous will set aside until Mahrt should choose to reinstate it.

The pulses began to come again. Now they had a strangely dry quality, despite the hammering—as if the entity called Mahrt was amused at the littleness of the knowledge he was transmitting.

"The Warriors, even then, had certain gifts," the impartial voice said. "They had ballistics, and they analyzed the area where Xota was, and the areas where it was to be. They found that, shortly before the Warrior wave was due to arrive, the Xotan system would come perilously close to intersecting the orbit of van Maanen's star, a fact, indeed, already known even

to the Xotans. But at this time the Xotans did not know of the Warriors.

"So the Warriors undertook to herd the wild star far enough out of its orbit to direct it through Xota's system. They knew also that this would not be enough, and made a thorough and intensive study of the world of Xota itself. And so it was that they discovered the collective mind.

"Culturally, telepathy is a danger. It prevents study. The Xotans knew nothing of the collective mind, although they used it. The Warriors had telepathy, but they were madmen; they could detect the phenomenon where the Xotans could not. They could see, unlike the Xotans, that among telepaths who were sane, who were peaceful, there was possible an additional thought-dimension, a super-individual mentality, to which every living thing on Xota contributed in some measure.

"This mentality the Warriors could not destroy. It was purely collective in nature, and had no geographical existence. It could not be bombed out, nor dealt with in any other way by physical methods.

"But it could be held down. Its development to a state of consciousness, within each individual Xotan mind, could be repressed, retarded, by the spreading of superstitions which would impede Xota's use of its unit strength. Thus, the cult of Mahrt was born—Mahrt, the evil god; Mahrt, the god who sleeps in the back of every telepath's brain; Mahrt, who impels the Xotans to prying into the minds of others, who drives the Xotans to acts of violence, against the instinct of brotherliness common to all sane telepaths.

"An irony, Tipton Bond: the Xotans 'buried' Mahrt as a symbolic act of peace. In so doing, they lost their first battle with the Warriors of Day."

The pulses stopped and roared away, leaving behind at last a sourceless and static cold, as if Tipton had been thrown defenseless into deep space and abandoned there, without even a moment to look at the unwinking truths of stars before he died.

Gradually, however, the deep need rose within him, driving

before it the tattered legions of his awe. He said:

"Mahrt exists."

The sound went away. For a long while, there was no answer. And then, from the ends of the universe, the answer came. It was not a word. It was simply a single strong pulse through the bitter black cosmos, a deep wave of power, which said more plainly than any word:

Mahrt is here.

"And the Sword?"

The same throb of power.

"Am I the Sword, then?"

There was instantly a flash of light, heat, color, mass, sense of position, sense of form and a hundred other sensory explosions impossible even to imagine. Against that terrible surge, Tipton's will struggled feebly and was wiped away.

"You are the Sword. And the hand of Mahrt has grasped the hilt, Tipton Bond. That hand will never withdraw. Henceforward, the sleeping planetary mind is your mind. You may call upon it. You need never again fear the psychic probes of the Warriors of Day."

Slowly, Tipton became aware that, behind each of the impulses which his mind had been turning into words, were other layers, other dimensions of import which were not reaching him, except as the vaguest and most ambiguous of hints. The phenomenon of levels of meaning in language was nothing new to him; indeed, the use of symbols and synecdoches was the common denominator in all men's thinking. But here, the additional thought-dimensions behind each symbol seemed to number in the thousands, and it was gradually becoming obvious that the entity which called itself Mahrt was pre-selecting among them; was setting bounds beyond which Tipton's mind could not go. At least, not now.

Tipton realized that he had been standing in the darkness for some time since the last pulse had come. Mahrt, evidently, was prepared to volunteer no further information. Tipton forced himself to speak.

"A sword cuts," he said raggedly, "or it is no sword. What are my powers?"

There was silence. It was not, however, the silence of withdrawal; the being called Mahrt was still in contact with him; its silence asked Tipton to answer his own question. After a moment, he had the answer.

"I know my own powers, have known them for many years," he said slowly. "And I have been given a defense, a recourse against the Warriors. Am I to assume, then, that these are sufficient for my task; that I am, in effect, invincible?"

A single heavy wave rolled through the blackness. It said: "No."

Then new waves began to come. "Tipton Bond is the Sword, and the period of the foregoing of the Sword is past. But there are still limitations to be observed, and lines of peril to be crossed when the time for crossing them has come. Until that time, the greatest danger lies in the superstitions of your own people; of these, beware."

"My own people?" Tipton said. "Are these Xotans, then, my own people? Am I not an Earthman, as I seem?"

"You were born on Earth," the soundless thunder said. "You are the Sword. It is not yet time for you to know further who or what you are; for it is not yet time for Tipton Bond to die. Now—

"Go forth."

"To die?" Tipton echoed, stunned.

"Go forth. The Warriors come."

For a moment longer, Tipton stood indecisively, struggling with the implications of those last two calm, flat, doom-fraught pronouncements. Then, from somewhere deep within the Temple, a blast of power like a tornado from the night side of Pluto caught him up, and hurled him back through the corridors like an eggshell.

CHAPTER TEN — *The Warriors Decide*

IT WAS NIGHT WHEN TIPTON emerged from the raw, crumbling wound in the wrist of the Temple. It was such a night as he had never seen, even in dreams.

The sky was in flames. His first thought was that Xota's sun must be located near the center of a star cluster; which in turn must be far closer to the hub of the galaxy than was the star about which the Earth circled. In addition to a heavy concentration of normal-looking stars, the sky of Xota was lit with a thousand brighter scintillations, flickering and flaring like electric arcs, and almost as hard upon the eyes.

Somewhere up there was a tenth-magnitude point of light that was van Maanen's runaway sun, but it was completely lost in this display; even an expert astronomer would have had difficulty in pinning it down.

And yet there was something wrong. Xota's sun was Type I, like Earth's—not a cluster star. Up to now, furthermore, while Tipton had had only a brief glimpse of the night sky of Xota, that glimpse, as far as Tipton could recall it, had revealed nothing extraordinary enough to catch his eye.

Of course, if Xota were in a cluster, all the same, it was possible that it was on the edge rather than in the center, so that this mass display would appear only at certain hours of the night. But the explanation did not satisfy Tipton ballistically; it would not stand up against Occam's Razor, the law of parsimony, that law of science which requires the simplest solution which accounts for all the facts. Too many highly specialized conditions had to be allowed to make the cluster theory acceptable.

There was something he was missing . . . something that had to do with the wild star . . . what had Mahrt said?

The Warriors come . . .

Of course: that was the answer. The Warriors of Day had made their decision. Evidently Tipton's sudden disappearance from their examining table had shaken their egomaniac confidence in the non-existence of Mahrt, shaken them enough to drive them into reconsidering their battle plans.

Tipton set out through the forest. The whole wood was awake and murmuring affrightedly, but it paid no attention to Tipton. He was not surprised. That terrible blazing in the sky heralded an event which all of Xota had been awaiting for many generations; one man, no matter what his possible pow-

ers, could be of less than no interest in the face of it.

And as far as he knew, Tipton thought grimly, the forest was perfectly right in that assumption.

As for the Warriors of Day, it was not difficult to figure out what course their reasoning must have followed. From their point of view, the moment any evidence, no matter how slight, appeared that there really was such an entity as Mahrt, all bets were off, all previous battle plans obsolete. Such a possibility did not demand proof, but only one single indication. After that, it would become absolutely necessary to proceed *as if* Mahrt existed, even if the chances for that existence seemed to be astronomically small. Any other course ran the risk of proving fatal.

If Mahrt existed, the Sword existed. And with the Sword unsheathed, the Warriors could no longer depend upon the wild star alone. Hence the blazing sky—Xota was indeed engulfed, not with stars, but with—

Ships.

That terrific, blazing display hardly encouraged the idea that Xota would be able to put up any sort of resistance. Tipton had no idea what sort of motive power the ships of the Warriors used, but the tremendous amount of it that was being consumed as sheer waste—for it was at least certain that the emission of such blasts of light could serve no purpose, except, just possibly, that of frightening the enemy—suggested that their energy resources were virtually inexhaustible, perhaps feeding on the fabric of space itself.

Tipton wondered abruptly just how far away the Warriors were now. Again the brightness gave him some clue. To be visible at all, the ships had to be within a certain maximum distance; beyond that point, any physical object would have been consumed by the forces necessary to make it visible from Xota at all, unless it were planetary in size. Probably, then, the Warriors were near, or even within, the orbit of Xota's outer moon.

Paradoxically, Tipton hoped that they were well inside that distance. Otherwise, it would mean that the surface of Xota would become an intolerable hell of glare by the time the

great interstellar vessels had entered her atmosphere . . .

Tipton could hear the city while he was still half an hour's walk away from it. It hummed worriedly, ineffectually, and there were occasional harsh, metallic noises, and bursts of deep roaring, as of some kind of engine.

Tipton could see it, too. Incredibly, it was brightly lit. Tipton eyed the glowing domes indignantly. Hadn't even the idea of a blackout ever entered their wooden heads?

Once inside the city, he flagged down an air-car, and ordered it directly to the Council chambers. From the air, it was clear enough that the arsenal of the telepaths was being broken out, and that on a field on the opposite side of the metropolis, a field utterly innocent of camouflage, space-ships were being readied for combat. Neither the ships, nor the weapons that he saw being hurried through the streets, were even vaguely comprehensible to him, nor did he expect them to be; his previous attempt to fly the cab by himself had speedily led him to the conclusion that any weapons possessed by the Xotans would be operated mentally, and would be as useless to him as would a pistol to a man without hands.

The turmoil made him feel more lost than ever, and his usefulness as the Sword of Mahrt still more of a mystery.

But wait a minute. He had already had the plainest indication that his powers as the Sword were co-terminous with the powers he had always had: his nervelessness, his quickness, his love of combat.

The Council chamber—actually, Tipton had found later, the audience chamber—was deserted. The corridors of the palace were jammed with people hurrying to and fro, wearing the desperate expressions of persons purposefully doing something ineffectual.

Tipton found the Council at last, gathered around a large circular table in the west wing of the palace, conferring in low tones. On the surface of the table itself, patterns came and went swiftly. Tipton looked at them, but they were fragmentary and abstract—evidently symbolic keys to thought chains and patterns being controlled by, or reported to, the Council.

"Well, I'm happy to see you have a tank, at least," Tipton said dryly. "By the looks of things outside, I would have guessed that you were flying purely by the seat of your pants."

They swung on him.

"The Sword," Chrestos rumbled. "If you are to prove yourself good for anything, now is the time. There will be no other time!"

"A ten-year-old boy from Earth could do better at this job than you're doing," Tipton said scornfully. "Centuries in which to plan and organize, and all you can do when the crisis actually comes is to stampede in circles, like a flock of terrified chickens! Is that thing a directing tank, or isn't it?"

"The psychetrix?" Yrinon said. "I suppose it might be described as such. As for the activity outside it is not as purposeless as you seem to think, Tipton Bond. For that matter, much of what is going on is inherently undetectable to you, as you must know."

"I can see what's *not* being done," Tipton retorted. "If you're making the same omissions on the telepathic level that you are on the gross physical level, you might as well be laying down the red carpet for the Warriors."

Yrinon was obviously nettled, as Tipton had intended. "The present plan is the product of centuries of work, as you yourself have said. Suppose you tell us how you would improve upon it?"

Tipton strode to the table. "Gladly," he said. "First of all, give me a fast key on these abstract figures. What's that thing passing the limb of the circle on Lanja's side—the triangle with the one curved side—what does that represent? And the green ellipse that's changing size between Lanja and Chrestos?"

Stiffly, Yrinon explained the key. The system was surprisingly simple, based upon modifications of single lines and angles, so that such a figure as the one that had first caught Tipton's eye—the triangle with the one curved side—could convey a surprisingly complex piece of information at a glance. Basically, the method was a grafting of topological

concepts onto the procedures of calculus of statement. Tipton wondered why the obvious military advantages of such a procedure had not occurred to someone on Earth long ago.

"All right," he said finally. "Now I can read the board, but I still can't operate it. You'll have to transmit my orders as I give them."

"Orders?" Yrinon said coldly.

"Yrinon, now is no time to be overcautious or to stand on protocol," Lanja said. "Can't you get it through your head that this man is the Sword of Mahrt? Chrestos, am I right?"

"Let us see what he can do," Chrestos agreed somewhat non-committally.

"Put out the lights," Tipton said flatly. "It's too late to think about blackout curtains now, and besides we can't depend upon everyone's obeying such an order. You'll have to pull the master switch. That goes for every city on this planet."

"Nonsense," Yrinon snorted. "How can we complete any preparations under such conditions?"

"People on Earth did it; so can you. You people are better equipped for operations in the dark than Earthlings. And it's got to be done. Lit up like this, we're perfect targets for a bombing, or whatever the Warriors' equivalent for a bombing may be. If you have auxiliary power sources, you can keep the essential activities going—I can see that from the table. But get those damned lights out, and get 'em out fast."

A moment later, the room lights went out. So did the table.

"That's no good," Tipton said immediately. "Keep the tank. Get it turned on again. Use the palace generator."

The table came on. The faces of the man, the woman, and the beast floated eerily, disembodied, above it. Tipton studied the racing symbols.

Evidently Xota had the equivalent of a radar set. The numbering and positioning of the Warriors' ships were quite precise.

Quite precise enough to show an essentially hopeless situation.

"Start a guided-missile bombardment in half an hour,"

Tipton said finally. "I don't suppose it will do much good, but it will distract them somewhat. I see they've already taken your outer moon. You should have mined the place, but it's too late for that now. Rush a third of your available fighting ships to the inner moon. As soon as the bombardment begins, get them set for a sally in force through the first weakness that shows up in the Warriors' shell. I have a hunch that this is just an advance force, that won't be too happy about being attacked from behind. Stall them for a while."

The symbols raced and fluctuated, criss-crossing among each other. Lanja and Yrinon had their eyes closed, their faces rapt with the intensity of their concentration. Tipton had a sudden vision of the immense complexity of detail which his sweeping general-orders was forcing them to transmit.

Too bad, he thought coldly. It is the penalty they pay for the poor quality of their foreplanning.

The eyes of the beast Chrestos, however, were open, and were staring directly at Tipton. They were green and opalescent in the light from the table. Only a slight veiling, an impression of distance in their fires, showed that Chrestos, too, was sending out indetectable orders to invisible millions of Xotans.

There was no question, however, but that there was plenty of his mind left over for concentrated observation of Tipton.

"Very good," the beast said shortly. "Such a diversion may well work. Have you more to offer?"

"I have one more order," Tipton said. "The most difficult to carry out, and the most essential."

"And that is—?"

Tipton said, "Evacuate the cities."

Lanja's and Yrinon's eyes shot open at that. They looked wildly at Tipton, then at each other, finally at Chrestos.

"Obviously," the beast said.

"Obviously?" Yrinon said. "Then why did you not speak of it before, Chrestos?"

"Because," Chrestos said, "the beasts, my dear Yrinon, do not live in the cities. I suppose I would have mentioned the matter eventually; I was curious to see just how long it would

take it to occur to you or Lanja. You must leave the essential people here, naturally, but the faster the general populace leaves, the more will survive."

"Chrestos, you are a devil," Yrinon whispered.

The beast paid no attention. He looked back to Tipton. "Or, I should say, the more will survive *this* attack. Which brings me to the ultimate question, Tipton Bond: *How does the Sword of Mahrt propose to deal with the wild star?*"

There was only one answer to that. Chrestos knew that answer, and knew that Tipton knew that Chrestos knew. There was no point in pretending or concealing. Tipton said:

"I don't know."

CHAPTER ELEVEN — *The Treachery of Day*

TIPTON WAS ALONE IN THE control tower at the spaceport when Chrestos finally found him.

The breakthrough had gone without a hitch. The swarm of aerial torpedoes, armed with explosions primed to burst within the brains of any living creatures who tripped their proximity fuses—not physical explosions, but irruptions of madness, ineluctable, irreversible—which had stippled the inside of the contracting shell of the Warrior armada, might or might not have caused heavy casualties; it was impossible to tell from the data available in the control tower.

This fact, however, was evident: the bombardment had caused the Warrior ships to regroup somewhat. The hastily assembled Xotan fleet on the inner moon had been launched at once against the thinnest part of the bubble.

The fleet had gotten through. Their own casualties had been enormous, but they had definitely and finally accounted for two of the five-mile-long vessels of the Warriors of Day.

The ratio was ridiculous, and promised ultimate and final defeat for Xota, but for some reason it made an inordinate impression upon the Warrior vanguard. The entire incoming shell halted its advance at once; the spurious stars winked out simultaneously. It was a little alarming to see them disappear, but from the naval point of view, the blackout, ap-

parently caused by the shutdown of the driving energies of the vessels, was of no consequence. The Xotan equivalent of radar-tracking was very precise.

Tipton turned from the control board to see Chrestos watching him. The beast's habit of entering soundlessly while Tipton's back was turned was upsetting.

"Well?" Tipton snapped irritably.

"I hesitated to interrupt the progress of so fine a piece of admiralship," Chrestos said.

Tipton looked at him closely. Apparently, the beast meant what he said, although of course it was impossible to be certain about it.

"However," Chrestos said, "the news I bring is of some import. Certain soldiers of Lanja's personal retinue have for some time been investigating my matter-transmitter, of which they are rather afraid—and with justice. Up to now, I allowed the prowling to proceed unhindered, since I did not wish Lanja to think the transmitter of real importance to me."

"That was the wrong tack, Chrestos," Tipton said. "It might have been better to have moved it."

"It cannot be moved," Chrestos said. "The theory of its operation forbids that. In any event, she is now looking into the matter quite closely—so closely as to jeopardize our entire position with respect to the Warriors. The smallest blunder will reveal the instrument to the Warriors, and they are brilliant enough to understand the principle and to modify it for their own use.

"What the result of that will be, I leave to your imagination."

Very little imagination was necessary to visualize the consequence Chrestos had evoked. Tipton could already see the irruption of the Warrior hordes, pouring through the palace from the transmitter, onto the streets, through the city, and on out over the world, while the great ships pressed down upon Xota from above like a white-hot steel cap.

"Can't you stop her?" Tipton said.

"I?" Chrestos said. "No. To do so would be to openly admit

that the matter-transmitter is mine, which would be tantamount to a confession of treason."

"What do you expect me to do about it, then?" Tipton said. "I have less power on Xota than you do, by far. How can I order Lanja to stop investigating your matter-transmitter? If it seems to you to be necessary to avert the chance that the Warriors may find the transmitter, then turn it off, destroy it, or, if that's not possible, go ahead and admit to treason, in order to avert the greater disaster. I have no sympathy for your predicament, Chrestos, when I remember the manner in which you drugged me and thrust me through this self-same matter-transmitter not so long ago."

"I had no notion that you would," Chrestos said coolly. "Nevertheless, there are many reasons, some of them beyond your comprehension, why no step that I could take would be in the least bit effective. You are the man who must act in this matter. And I did not come unprepared. I bring you an excellent handle whereby the problem may be grasped, without any mention whatsoever of the matter-transmitter being made.

"Are you aware that Lanja has taken charge of the captives from the Cult?"

Tipton felt as if a hot poker had been thrust down his back-bone.

"Chrestos," he said, "if this is a lie that you bring me, I will have your heart—as you once proposed to have mine. I have bested many a beast before, for no better reason than that it gave me pleasure."

"I believe that to be true," Chrestos said, unruffled. "And I do not doubt that you could best me, given a good reason, for the very reason that you are the Sword of Mahrt, not I. Your threat does not greatly impress me, Tipton Bond, for I was aware of it, and had accepted it, from the moment I first saw you.

"Nevertheless, what I tell you is the truth. Lanja has taken charge of the Cult captives, as she was entitled to do. She is holding Elron and the girl for execution. Of course, they should have been executed days ago—Elron in particular,

for his foolishness—but Lanja seems to think that they will serve her better as hostages—*against you*. She does not wish you to become too effective, too much of a motive force upon this world; and the way in which you have taken charge of our preparations for battle against the Warriors has given rise in her to a number of misgivings.

"This, I need hardly point out, is treason in itself. I suggest that you use it as such."

Tipton stood frozen for an instant, hearing in a small part of his mind the groaning roar of the flight of five ships he had just launched, dwindling away into the stratosphere. At last, he said: "I'll check on it, beginning now. And Chrestos, I warn you once more—

"It had better be true!"

Lanja's face was livid. She glared at Tipton across the deep-piled carpet in the foyer of her own sumptuous apartment. While Tipton had been talking, she had snatched the orchid-like flowers from the bowl on the stand before her and had systematically shredded them, petal by petal, frond by frond.

"Well?" Tipton said. He was astonished to find that he, too, was trembling with rage. "Is it true, or isn't it?"

"True?" she cried. "Why should I answer? I should have you slain on the spot for your impertinence, you empty-minded doll! Was it for this that I offered you the kingship of Xota? Did I offer you myself, and the world—to have the accusation of a *beast* brought against me?"

She straightened suddenly and hurled the entire bowl, water, flowers and all, with murderous accuracy at Tipton's head. He caught it and tossed it contemptuously into a corner. For a moment longer she glared at him, her breasts heaving; then she spat at his feet and turned her back.

Tipton said grimly, "Then it is true."

"It is not true," Lanja said, without turning. "You are in love with this beggar girl, or you would not have come to me, to *me*, Tipton Bond!—no, not to me with this fairy tale, upon no evidence but the testimony of a *beast*! You have deserted your post upon her account; ah, you're surprised—it

hadn't occurred to you! But you belonged at the spaceport, Tipton. You belong there by your own orders. Were you any other being but the Sword of Mahrt—if you *are* the Sword of Mahrt—you would be executed, automatically, for such a desertion."

"Lately, nobody around here can open his mouth without the word 'treason' coming out," Tipton said. "There are times when I think the Warriors of Day should have the lot of you. You all behave very much like Earthmen—and that, I would like you to know, is the worst insult in my vocabulary. No accusation of treason could compare with it."

"Go away," she gritted. "Go away. The question is closed, as far as I'm concerned. You are a two-edged sword, turned against all sides at once."

Tipton strode forward, caught her by the scruff, and shook her viciously. She twisted, clawing, and he slapped her, so hard that his palm stung.

"Talk," he said. "Next time I'll use my knuckles. Where's Elron?"

She recoiled and sat down, one hand pressed against her cheek.

"Dead," she said.

"That's better," Tipton said. "It makes better sense than Chrestos' story. I couldn't imagine how you could plan to blackmail me through Elron; he thought that he alone knew everything about Mahrt, but that was his idiocy, not mine. And where is Deje?"

Lanja looked up at him, still caressing her stinging cheek, her eyes burning with somber fury. When she spoke, the sullenness in her voice was tempered with the iron of triumph.

"Gone."

"Gone where? Speak up, damn you, or by all the galaxies I'll turn you over to the Warriors! You can play your little love-games with them—they'll skewer you properly, that I promise you!"

"A-ha," Lanja said, very gently indeed. "So the superman from the planet with the funny name knows Chrestos' little secret? What a fine sense of power that must give him! And

what a delicious joke, when he heard that Lanja thought the matter-transmitter might lead to some place of haven! What a fine game!"

She began to laugh. The laughter rose and rose, bombarding Tipton like an endless series of darts, with poisoned tips and spines. Finally, he closed upon her again, deliberately, and administered another slap, and then another, rocking her head from left to right.

She subsided, still giggling and gasping weakly.

"A fine joke," she said. "A fine joke on the superman. He can no longer trade upon his mysterious disappearance. Someone else knows about Chrestos' matter-transmitter. Someone else knows where it goes.

"And on the other side, on the Warriors' side, is the superman's beggar-girl. The Warriors have her, superman! Does the Sword of Mahrt care so much for a street-slut? How *could* the Sword care? How could such a Sword be a true sword? Let the Warriors extract the truth from her! They have the girl of the Cult; and they are—interested in Mahrt. Soon they will know—may know it already.

So much for the self-called Sword of Mahrt!"

She began to laugh yet again, a mad giggling intermixed with cataclysmic sobs, almost like an epileptic seizure.

Tipton ignored her. He was too stunned to be more than marginally conscious of her presence at all. Deje in the hands of the Warriors—no blinder and more wholly useless piece of suffering could possibly have come out of the struggle for Xota.

The Warriors would attempt to pluck her mind, as a matter of course, and would find nothing, except a flurry of self-contradictory hints, superstitions, ignorances, emotions, and legends. Such a farrago would impel them to go slowly, to investigate more minutely, cell by brain-cell if necessary.

All of which would be the purest and most purposeless torture. Nearly everything that Deje 'knew' about Mahrt and Tipton was wrong. But the Warriors would be unable to believe that. They would probe, and probe, and probe, until there was nothing left of the girl but a red mass of raw pain—

And, for so long as her mind lasted—

A blind faith in the Sword of Mahrt.

A sound behind him spun him about on his heel. Chrestos was there—of course. The sound that he had heard was Yrinon's blundering entry. He realized belatedly that Lanja's hysterics must have broken down her mental control enough to have mentated something of her emotional state, 'broadcast' it as in the case of the storeroom guard; and, at the last, enough of it to make alarm unavoidable on Yrinon's part, and unignorable by Chrestos.

"Lanja, what is this?" Yrinon said anxiously. "Tipton Bond, you are supposed to be at the control tower of the west spaceport. Give an account of yourselves, both of you."

"This woman," Tipton said icily, "has given over one of the captives of the Cult of the Dark Worship to the Warriors of Day. I've accused her of it, and she's admitted it. By my lights, such a thing is high treason."

There was that word again. But sometimes there was no other way to deal with the childish passions of the Xotans except upon the level of their own intrigues.

"How can that be?" Yrinon asked reasonably. "How could Lanja reach the Warriors? The accusation is mad."

And so it was. Tipton, furious at himself, realized that he had been trapped again. On the couch, Lanja lounged lazily, her ankles crossed, one arm behind her head, the corners of her mouth slightly turned up. She seemed to be daring him to mention the matter-transmitter.

"Chrestos!" Tipton said roughly. "The meat of the accusation is yours. I've pulled your chestnuts from the fire." Tipton blinked once, astonished at the form the Earth idiom took in Xotan terms—something about sharpening the big cat's talons with his (Tipton's) bill—but continued doggedly along his own line of thought. Let the strange phrases fall where they might; his meaning was clear. "The rest is up to you."

Chrestos shook his heavy head from side to side, slowly, regretfully.

"Every part of this accusation is new to me," the beast said

calmly. "I had been aware that Lanja had delayed the execution of two of the captives from the Cult, doubtless for her own good reasons. But that she has sent one of them to the Warriors—for that, certainly, there is no proof that I can offer."

"The Sword turns to you, Chrestos," Lanja said mockingly. "Can you offer him no shield?"

"None," Chrestos said, with utter indifference. "If he has proofs of his own, let him offer them."

For a split second, Yrinon's eyes filmed slightly. Tipton knew, as well as he knew his own name, that the big Councilman was calling the guards. Lanja arose and walked by Tipton without looking at him, lounging insolently. At the door she turned, smiled at Tipton, and then at Yrinon. Yrinon looked at Chrestos.

"And the Earthman?"

"I will see that he is confined," Chrestos said. "As closely as a creature of Mahrt can be confined."

Lanja said sweetly, "Would it not be better, Chrestos, to kill him now?"

"No," Chrestos said. "I urge you to take my advice in this matter, Lanja. Otherwise, the results may be—uncomfortable."

The woman's eyes slitted into almost an exact duplicate of Chrestos'. The beast, however, outfaced her easily, almost blithely. She shrugged and went out, Yrinon following patiently, like a Saint Bernard with a mild case of indigestion.

The moment the door had closed, Chrestos leapt with a single bound to the high, broad ledge which ran around the room, and prowled systematically along it, bunting the vases, statuary, and other small impediments from his path with delicate taps of his huge paws.

"You are a bungler, Tipton Bond," he snarled. "Mahrt should have chosen a beast. You are no Sword. You are, at best, a stocking full of wet sand, good enough for a club in the crudest sort of situation, but completely lacking in precision."

He sprang lightly to the floor, his quarter-ton weight

scarcely stirring the individual hairs of the carpet. "Do you know what will happen next?"

"Well, what?"

"Lanja has just ordered her private guards to murder you, the moment that I quit your room."

"How can I believe a word of what you say now?" Tipton said bitterly.

"Use your imagination. How could she allow you to live?"

Could he afford, even now, to disbelieve the creature? The answer was obvious. "Are you offering to hide me, again?" Tipton said.

"If you like."

"If I like? For what other reason did you stay behind? But this time, Chrestos, I go on my own terms—I choose my own hiding-place. Otherwise, I'll stay here, and hereafter you can hone your own talons."

Damn it, he thought; *pull your own chestnuts*. He forced himself to smile, to regain control of the situation. Irritation at the automatic substitution of Xotan fables for the Aesop-tales of his childhood was not real irritation; it was only an index to the tightness of the spot in which he found himself wedged.

"Chrestos," he said quietly, "put me through again—to the Warriors."

CHAPTER TWELVE—*The Onslaught of Day*

IT should not have surprised him, Tipton reflected later, to find that the Xotan end of the matter-transmitter was in his own room—or, rather, the room in which he had been imprisoned, briefly, during his first day on Xota. If he had then had the time to carry through his project of looking behind the hangings for possible exits, he might quite possibly have blundered through it.

He had to admit, however, that possibility was not very great, even had the machine been turned on. Even in operation, it looked just like every other panel in the wall, and for that matter the panel was real enough. The transmitting

field itself was only a thin and perfectly transparent magnetogravitic force-film over the surface of the paneling, emanating from projectors embedded in the floor and ceiling.

Chrestos turned it on—Tipton could not see quite what it was that he did—unsheathed one long saber-curved claw, and thrust it delicately at the paneling. So close was the field to the wood that the claw appeared to sink directly into the wall. The beast grunted non-committally and pulled his claw back again.

"The field is focused in a laboratory on board the Warrior flagship," Chrestos said. "At present I have no way of knowing whether or not that particular ship is a part of the current investment of our planet. If you have access to that information, and can bring it back with you, it would be helpful to know."

"I'll be back," Tipton said grimly. "Provided that the transmitter is still on when the time comes."

"I will see to it that it remains on," Chrestos promised. "Despite your bungling, the very existence of your accusation should be enough to prevent Lanja from disturbing the machine for a while, and I will do my best to discourage her further. Be sure to mark well the spot where you emerge on the ship, for, as you can see, there is no visible evidence of the existence of the field."

"How did you get the receiver on board the ship in the first place?"

"There is no receiver. The field in the ship is not a second field; it is this one here. There would be no point in explaining the mathematics of it to you."

Tipton nodded. "No; it seems obvious on the face of it."

The beast raised his eyebrows. "Obvious? I am afraid you over-estimate yourself, Earthman. How would you go about describing it, then?"

"As a matrix discontinuity, I suppose," Tipton said, frowning. "The same sort of thing that was used to bring me here—unless I brought myself. Probably it could also be described in terms of a fourdimensional fold, but that would be a more complicated way of going about it, without being any more

satisfactory in the end. Still, the end result is the same; it doesn't much matter which way you describe it."

The beast shook his great head in wonderment. It was the first time that Tipton had ever seen Chrestos nonplussed.

"Perhaps I should have left well enough alone," the animal said, with amused ruefulness. "Next you will be giving me the master formula!"

"Why not?" Tipton said, shrugging. He quoted the chain of symbols which had brought him to Xota.

The beast's eyebrows went even higher. "With that much knowledge, you hardly need the machine," he said. Tipton could not tell whether the statement was ironic or was intended to be taken literally.

"We're wasting time," he said. "Thanks for restoring my sheath-knife. I think it'll come in handy."

"It seems rather inadequate," Chrestos said.

"I couldn't handle a Xotan weapon," Tipton pointed out, "and I can't think of anything useful for killing Warriors that would be portable enough to take along. A knife, on the other hand, is only secondarily a weapon; primarily, it's a tool, and a versatile one. Having it, I have everything I'll need or can use."

"It's your—expedition," Chrestos said, shrugging. "Off with you, then."

Tipton took a firm grip on the hilt of the knife and stepped into the panel.

A prolonged, steady, heavy infra-bass throbbing shook the metal surface under him, and made the air about him hot. No one was in the immense chamber, which was in semi-darkness, lit only by a glow from a distant door, a door as big as a triumphal arch. Whatever was beyond that door was hazed by distance, but from the occasional coming and going of immense shadows, and the blur of ambiguous sound that passed with them, Tipton judged that it led to a corridor of some kind.

In the dimness, the stars beyond the porthole were especially brilliant. While Tipton watched, the upper rim of the porthole lit up brightly like a crescent moon. An elliptical

spot of white, actinic light sprang into being on the ceiling. It was so intense as to seem almost solid.

The spot of light crawled obliquely across the ceiling for a few degrees of arc, and then vanished, leaving livid ghost images on Tipton's retinas. Evidently a near-by sister ship had decided to change course, and had put its drive energies into brief activity. It was just as well that it had not been on a direct line with Tipton and the port, or he would have had no eyesight left.

As it was, the brief illumination had served him well. It had allowed him to renew his acquaintanceship with the arrangement of the chamber, and to fix the location of the matter-transmitter field with respect to a characteristic pattern in the metal of the table on which he stood. It revealed also that there was nothing on the table but Tipton himself and a lumpy, amorphous-looking object, a little bigger than he was, lying huddled near the far corner.

He had to get off here before someone came into the laboratory and spotted him. The question was: how could it be done? The gravity seemed to be slightly higher than Xota-normal, which was, in turn, slightly higher than Earth-normal. If he were simply to jump to the floor, he would accomplish nothing but breaking a leg, or perhaps both of them.

He tested the table-top with his knife. As he had suspected, it was much too tough to nick.

He walked cautiously to the edge of the table, lay down, and looked over the edge, in the hope that one of the table-legs would be small enough to make a proper sliding-pole. Unfortunately, the table had no legs; it was supported by a central pedestal.

Tipton kicked himself mentally for not having thought of such a possibility. There are, after all, some situations where a knife could be well supplemented by a coil of rope. He would have to return ignominiously through the screen and get one. And time was very short—

Wait a minute. What was that lumpy-looking object out there on the other corner? If he could make do with the means

that came to hand on board the ship, he could save valuable minutes. He jumped to his feet and strode across the table.

The object was a glove; or rather, a gauntlet, woven of thick, cable-like strands of some metallic material. It was light, but apparently quite strong. Tipton breathed a sigh of relief and got to work on it with his knife. A stroke of luck had rescued him from the consequences of his own bone-headedness.

The strands parted, one by one, each one with a sharp and alarming *ping!* The sounds seemed inordinately loud to Tipton, although his reason told him that no Warrior would be able to hear them unless he had bent his ear close to the table-top.

After a while, Tipton had his coil of rope.

He made a loop with a slip-knot at one end and hooked the loop over a corner of the table, snagging it over what was, from the Warrior point of view, a slight irregularity—from Tipton's, a jagged groove of quite satisfactory depth. Slipping the knife back into its sheath, he lowered himself over the edge, grappled the rope between his legs, and slid himself down it, hand over hand, as fast as he could go without getting burned. He was a little over half way down when an immense shadow occluded the glow from the doorway.

Tipton did not wait for the light to go on. He let go of the rope and dropped. The impact knocked the breath out of him, but did not seem to do any other damage. He threw himself to his feet, grasped the end of the rope, and gave it a hard flap.

The loop came away, and the cable came piling down beside him. Tipton took off for the nearest wall, dragging the rope behind him, coiling it around his free hand as he ran.

The light never did come on. The giant came into the laboratory, fumbled around on a bench-top for something, of the approximate location of which he was apparently already aware, his footsteps shaking the deck. Tipton scuttled along the wall, running one hand along it, until a sudden change in the texture under his fingertips stopped him.

He probed it with the knife, to which it yielded very easily.

It was, he decided, plastic of some sort. What purpose would plastic baseboards have in spaceship construction? The only answer that occurred to him was that it might have been used as a protective covering under a chemicals table, to protect the underlying steel from corrosives. However, the size of the ship being what it was, it was quite possible that there was no underlying steel at this point.

There was not. Five minutes' dogged work with the knife had cut Tipton a roughly circular opening big enough to crawl through. Beyond it was not metal, but only darkness. Another lucky break. It meant that he would be able to work at least part of his way between decks, out of observation of the Warriors.

All this, providing that he could figure out where it was that he wanted to go.

He used the old whistle trick to test the nature of the space around him. The echoes came back in little bursts, all quite feeble: generally open, then, and criss-crossed by supporting members of some sort. Probably most of the girders were broad enough for him to walk on, with plenty of margin to spare; but he would have to be careful, all the same. Turning, he rescued the plug that he had cut and pulled it to after him, turning it until it fitted snugly in the rather irregular hole he had made. Now, unless the Warriors found some reason to look beneath the table and examine the baseboard quite minutely, he was safe for the time being. Even so, they might take it for a filled mousehole.

Now *there* was a thought. If the Warrior ships had mice, they would have mice the size of wildcats. Well, there was always the knife—it would have to serve.

Now, however, the question was—where was Deje?

Under the circumstances, Tipton reasoned, Deje would be more than an ordinary prisoner to be interrogated and forgotten; she was, to some extent at least, an experimental subject. Therefore, she must be somewhere near the laboratory into which he had first emerged. It was more than probable that there was an entire section of the ship given over to experimental work of one kind or another, and that the

chamber in which the matter-transmitting field was located was not the largest—nor, certainly, the busiest—of such laboratories.

That being so, it was now necessary to figure out, if only in a general way, what the plan of this section of the ship might be. It was safe to assume that the ship as a whole was laid out fore-and-aft, and that, since it maintained a "normal" gravity—that is, since the Warriors had gone to the trouble and complication of counterfeiting the gravitational effects to be found in a building on the surface of a planet—that given sections of the ship would be organized radially, rather than along the long axis.

Laboratory chambers just under the skin of the vessel, then, would be largely observational in function, closely tied in with navigational and other practical aspects of astrophysics.

Rooms for the examination of prisoners, and other, more drastic experiments of that sort, would therefore lie closer to the central axis of the ship. Cautiously, Tipton prowled along the webwork, taking an especial interest in the angles at which the beams met each other. It was not too difficult to deduce which of the steel arms led away from the hull, under the floor of the first laboratory, toward the central kelson.

Tipton noticed suddenly that down here the heavy sound of power had quite a different character. The beams did not carry many of the deeper notes which had made the air of the laboratory shudder so heavily. Instead, they sang, producing an eerie whining with many overtones. It sounded like a beehive, or like the noise of many generators heard at a distance or over a telephone line.

He was astonished again at the amount of waste that the Warriors were willing to tolerate in their machinery. All this racket, like the intense flare of light produced by the drive-field, bespoke either the grossest contempt for engineering efficiency, or a complete lack of worry as to the possible exhaustion of the power supply.

Efficiency, however, is an ideal; it can never be completely

realized, the book closed; but can only be approached. Presumably the Warriors had not sprung into the cosmos full-born from the head of some god; they had gone through a history, and had ages ago been less powerful than they were now. In those days they could not possibly have been confident of an inexhaustible source of power—not unless they had discovered the hydrogen-helium reaction before they discovered fire.

The notion made Tipton grin cheerfully as he plodded along the beams into thicker and thicker darkness. There is no power source, he reflected, great enough to allow its user to throw efficiency out the window. A society which no longer cared whether or not it had brought its tools—however powerful they were upon a comparative scale—to their greatest possible perfection, was a society which deserved all possible assistance along the road to the scrapheap.

A slight change in the quality of the incessant, overtone-rich humming warned Tipton that another slab of plastic was somewhere nearby. He crawled cautiously out along an angle-iron, which he had picked by the slightly deadened tone of the sound which it was making in response to the general song. A moment later, he was testing a plastic facing with his knife.

He could at first make no sense of the vast chamber revealed to him through his initial peephole. It was honey-combed, like the interior of a wasps' nest. All the available wall space which was visible to him from here was covered with hexagonal pigeonholes, which were, in turn, covered by coarse screening, like fine copper screen magnified to chicken-wire size.

Inside the pigeonholes, there was movement.

The great room was lit, but again, there was no one in it. Far off to the left, almost at the limit of Tipton's vision, was another enormous pedestal-supported table, this one littered with glittering instruments. Behind that there was a heavy construction whose general shape reminded Tipton of an electron microscope. He felt a vague surprise that the huge Warriors should be conscious of anything so small as the protein

molecule and other objects which the electron microscope could reveal; but there was no real contradiction. Any grasp of basic physical principles—such as would be necessary to launch such a fleet as this—would require a grasp, and a thorough-going one, of sub-microscopic physics.

Then, all at once, the things he was seeing added up, as a pattern of lines on a two-dimensional paper surface fall suddenly into a cube, facing first this way, then that. This enormous chamber was—

An animal room.

Here, in hundreds of numbered hexagonal cages, the Warriors kept their specimens. Somewhere among all those pigeonholes, behind the coarse, coppery netting, was Deje's cell.

The realization made him choke with fury. He thrust the sheath-knife through the peephole and began to saw out a larger opening, working with controlled rage, and as he worked, he noted that a number of the pigeonholes had glass fronts, behind some of which cloudy gases swirled. He wondered what strange creatures from unearthly worlds, loot of the Warriors' previous conquests, awaited their day of vivisection in those clouded, pressurized cells.

The plastic plug fell forward, and Tipton grabbed it by one edge, easing it to the floor. He slipped through to the deck.

So far, no rodents. It might have been a different story, had Deje's prison been closer to the ship's cupboards. The long, rough tunnels through cold-storage insulation which could be expected there would certainly have made passage between decks much easier, but they would also have made combat with the furry riflers virtually inevitable.

But that menace would have been a known one, one that could have been dealt with by the knife. Tipton stood appalled before the prospect of clambering through and exploring the banked tiers of cells which reared above him on every side. It would take him a week, at the least, to find Deje in this wilderness of identical cages.

While he stood indecisively, struggling with the problem, a conversation with Chrestos replayed itself upon the stage of his memory:

This is a fool's errand, Tipton Bond. What, after all, is this ragged female to the Sword of Mahrt? Of what importance can she now be in the coming struggle? She has served her purpose, in leading you to the heartland of the Cult of the Dark Worship. Her usefulness is ended!

Let me remind you, Chrestos, that your knowledge of a way to the Warriors will take a lot of explaining, when explaining-time comes around. For the rest, I have my own reasons for what I do, as you have your reasons. That should be enough.

Yes, those reasons were still more than good enough. But how to implement them? It was easy enough to make high-sounding speeches, but this problem of the multiple pigeon-holes was specific and not to be met by a mere statement of principles.

A better view of the layout as a whole might help. Tipton got to his feet and took one step forward—

At the second step, the lights blinked and went out, and Tipton found himself floating helplessly through the hot air. Across the far bank of hexagonal cells, a spot of brilliant white light crawled implacably, surrounded by haloes of rainbows. Inside the crawling spot, things screamed tinnily with terror and pain.

Facts clicked into place in Tipton's mind so rapidly that he was hardly aware of the process. The loss of gravity, the spot of light, the diffraction of the light around the spot, the sudden deepening of the groan of power which was as much a part of the ship as its atmosphere—all these could mean only one thing: the flagship itself was in motion.

For so long as it lasted, Tipton had an invaluable tool to work with: weightlessness. He doubled up, snatched off his left boot, and threw it away from him, heavily, but with as much control as he could muster. Immediately he began the long drift toward the upper right quadrant of the chamber.

If the ship were to stop moving now, and restore normal gravitation, there would be nothing left of Tipton but a red smear on the already-distant floor. He did not bother to worry about it. He had other things to think about.

Among these was the pattern which had gradually become evident in the arrangement of the pigeonholes. They seemed to be grouped according to time and subject. Most of the glassed-over cells, with the swirling of poisonous gases and the ambiguous occupants, were concentrated in the norther quadrant, and seemed to be classified by some system which could only be the order of conquest. This would be the logical laboratory arrangement for any such animal room, and it was fairly clear that the Warriors were observing this order.

Tipton had used the combination of topology and calculus of statement which the Xotan Psychetrix had taught him to "place," upon the premises of this logic, the general area in which Deje's cell probably would fall. It was toward this area that he had warped himself, and toward which he was now floating as helplessly as a contorted bit of driftwood.

The mouths of the pigeonholes came closer. The individual cells were not small, at least by human standards. They grew and grew, almost like the maws of lunar craters.

One of the glassed-in enclosures drifted past Tipton's face. Inside, a greenish, frigid-looking storm was in circulation. Through it two eyes, red and feral, watched Tipton drifting by, and a tentative and shocking mental finger touched him. By the time he had floated up past the outer limits of that abhorrent regard, Tipton was drenched with sweat—

"The Sword! Sword!"

Tipton twisted himself frantically in flight, looking for the source of the voice.

"Here, here I am, next to the cold creature that lives in the pink gas! Hurry, if you can! These periods of no-weight only last for minutes!"

Tipton spotted the cell with the pink gas, looking at him like the eye of an albino elephant. He threw himself onto a line with it, pulled off the other boot, and swung it away from him.

After that, there was the maddeningly long period of drifting. He could see Deje's white form, pressed close against the wire.

Then he, too, was clinging to the wire, clambering slowly,

crabwise, down it toward Deje, his knife already busy.

It took them more than twice as long to return to the laboratory of the matter-transmitter as it had taken Tipton to reach Deje. Weight had returned before Tipton had completely cut away the netting before Deje's cell, the ship's brief maneuver completed, forcing them to climb down the face of the netting to the deck. Some of the things they were forced to see on the way were—unspeakable. The last third of the climb, Tipton had to clutch with one hand and support the unconscious girl on the other arm.

Once safely in the darkness again, Tipton waited until she revived. During the waiting period, a new difficulty made itself known: spasmodic, brief losses of weight, seldom lasting for more than two seconds, occurring at unpredictable intervals. Each one was accompanied by a siren-like electrical scream and a shudder in the metal beneath them heavy enough to throw Tipton the first time it happened.

This, he was convinced, was not the result of any motion on the part of the ship. The phenomena all suggested the discharge of some immense weapon. It looked bad for Xota.

It would also be bad for Tipton and Deje, were they to be caught in midstep during one of these bursts. Two seconds of drift away from a beam would be quite enough to float them over a steel-crosshatched pit . . .

Despite the slowness of the method, Tipton ruled that they should make the journey between the hulls entirely on their hands and knees, along the edges of the beams, keeping a tight grip at all times upon the flanges. Even so, they had several near-disasters.

Getting back to the surface of the table was the most serious question of all. Tipton had hoped that the ship would make it easy for them by changing its orbit again, allowing them to jump for it during the period of no-weight; but he was not too disappointed when it did not work out that way. It had been only a forlorn hope in the first place. Jumping during one of the shorter bursts of weightlessness would be fatal; there was no way of predicting when the next one would come, and they lasted only just long enough to allow for a

fair launching—which would be followed immediately by a crashing descent.

Lassoing the rough corner of the table with the cable was also out of the question; the distance was far too great, and the cable lacked the necessary flexibility.

"Now what?" the girl murmured.

"Something almighty dangerous, I'm afraid," Tipton said, peering out of his mouse-hole. "Nobody's out there now. That's the one flaw in the plan—it needs Warrior cooperation. If they really have launched their attack on Xota, nobody is likely to be visiting a minor laboratory for a while. We may have a long wait. Too long. I just hope they don't hit the Palace before we can get back."

"What do you mean?"

"It's too complicated to explain, and I'm not sure I could make it all clear anyhow. But there's a couple of things that you'll have to remember, Deje. First of all, we're going to have to show ourselves to the Warriors."

Deje uttered a muted sound of fright and protest.

"It's absolutely necessary," Tipton insisted. "We must get out there on that floor and stand our ground until a Warrior comes in—and pray that one does come in. He'll grab for us, as soon as he sees us, of course. *Don't run*. Let him grab you. And the other thing: up on top of that table you'll see a big shiny spot in the metal, where it's been crystallized, I suppose by some acid spillage. Near the center of the crystallized spot is a pattern that looks like a lop-sided, six-pointed star—"

"Stars don't have points," Deje said solemnly. "They're round, like balls."

Tipton smiled. "All right, like a hexagram, then. Do you know what that is? Good. All right, the moment you get on that table-top, never mind how, you make for that spot. Don't stop for anything, just run! Understand?"

She nodded mutely.

"All right, then. Let's get out of this hole."

Leaving Deje huddled under the bench by the baseboard, Tipton loped across the deck to the door. It seemed to be miles. When he reached it, he located a bolt-head on one side

of the door, just high enough to be out of his reach; he unshipped the cable from his belt, and made another loop, at the opposite end of the line. At the next no-gravity pulse, he sprang for the bolt-head, attempting to snub the loop around it.

It took him three time-consuming tries, but finally he made it. Quickly he ran the cable across in front of the door and repeated the process on the other side, where he found a heavy lug which served very well as a block around which to draw the line taut.

He was just racing back under the lee of the bench when there was an involuntary shriek from Deje, followed by a heavy, dead-sounding concussion which threw him hard to the deck. An immense voice roared deafening curses. Tipton picked himself up, grinning, and turned around.

The fallen giant was sitting up, nursing his nose in one hand. He looked back incredulously at the door, and then at his outstretched foot, around which the cable had caught and had been pulled away. Then he looked carefully around the room, his great eyes narrowed and furious.

Then he saw Tipton and Deje. Tipton filled his lungs to capacity.

"Lummox!"

The Warrior snarled and lunged forward, grabbing. Tipton's injunction to Deje not to run turned out to have been wholly unnecessary; she seemed frozen solid with fright, and the giant snatched her up at first grab. Tipton dodged once or twice for the showmanship of the thing, then doubled back as if rattled and ran head-on into the giant's rock-hard palm.

The next instant he was being swooped upward through the air with breathtaking speed, the immense hand crushing him until his bones ground together painfully.

The giant face glared down into his, and then the other hand raised Deje nearly to a level with Tipton.

"Now then, midges," the Warrior growled, the sound of his voice battering at Tipton's ears. "We have gamesters among our captives, eh? And you—" Tipton found himself being shaken violently—"where did you come from? We have

no Xotan males among our specimens on the flagship!"

Mentally, Tipton thanked his gods for the paranoia of the Warriors of Day. He had seen this giant before, and the giant had seen him, too; but they had considered him so beneath their notice that they had not bothered to commit his features to memory.

The giant looked them both over carefully, and took an indecisive step. Tipton held his breath. He had guessed wrong on Warrior psychology before; if he was wrong again, it would be the end of Deje and of Tipton Bond.

Another step; two more. Abruptly the Warrior's face began to recede toward the metallic sky.

Then, with a sudden jar, he was standing on the table.

The Warrior studied him a moment more, as if waiting to see what he would do. Tipton balled his fists upon his hips and glared back. After a moment, the Warrior grinned nastily and set Deje down beside him.

Instantly, Tipton burst into action.

"Now, Deje!" he shouted. Galvanized by the note of imperative command in his voice, the girl made for the lopsided star at the center of the table, her white legs twinkling. At the same instant, Tipton set out for the nearest corner of the table, his head lowered, his arms pumping, as if he had every intention of throwing himself over the edge.

The giant let out a roar, paused for a split second as if in indecision, and then grabbed for Tipton. But Tipton had doubled back, out of complete certainty that the giant would reach for him first, as the specimen seemingly closest to self-destruction. The Warrior's hand stuck the table heavily, and Tipton went sprawling. As he raised his head, he caught a brief glimpse of Deje before she whiffed out of existence like an image whose light-source has suddenly been cut off.

He sprang to his feet and faced the Warrior, unable to repress a surge of triumph. The most dangerous part of the game was still to come, but somehow Tipton could feel nothing but an irrational gaiety, as if the victory were already totally his.

He threw himself *en rapport* with the giant.

The surge of power was expected, and this time it did not black him out, although it was a near thing. As for the giant, he straightened as if coming to military attention, and his eyes went completely glassy, the blaze of fury gone from them as if it had never been. The expression of total incredulity upon his face was the last expression he would ever wear. Slowly, he began to topple.

Tipton threw himself down and grasped the edge of the table with both hands. If the giant fell across him—

But he did not. He fell sideways, his right knee buckling first, and only the edge of his shoulder grazed the table. The metal bucked and was still again.

Tipton got cautiously to his feet. The way was open. If he had any sense, he would go back through the matter-transmitter *now*.

But the way the Warrior's body was slumped against the pedestal tempted him. The great being's chest was only a short distance away from him, an easy jump down, and an easy jump back. And—the giant had a weapon in his belt. Tipton did not know what it did, but it was a safe assumption that the thing was destructive.

Tipton eased himself over the edge of the table and jumped, landing lightly on the great rib-cage. From there it was a short and simple trip to the floor.

After some tugging and hauling, Tipton got the weapon free. He propped its muzzle across the Warrior's ankle, so that it pointed out into the corridor, and presumably toward the center-line of the ship. Then he climbed back up on the giant's leg, found the weapon's only possible trigger—a large white button on the upper left side of the barrel—and gave it a sharp kick.

The thing screamed, a miniature of the siren-like howling which accompanied the brief no-gravity pulses, and the far wall of the room turned into flame. Frantically, Tipton clambered. By the time he reached the edge of the table, the entire laboratory seemed to be melting, and the air was almost too hot to breathe. Tipton dived headfirst for the lop-sided star of metal crystals.

Chrestos was waiting for him. "Shut the damn thing off, quick!" Tipton gasped. "I set their laboratory afire, and it'll be backing up through the field any minute!"

"I know it," Chrestos said calmly. "Have no fear, the field is off; I shut it down the moment you came through. There was a period when I thought I was going to have to shut it down *before* you came through. It was altogether a foolhardy thing to do, and you have closed off the last of our spyholes to the Warriors."

"I doubt that you'll need it any more," Tipton said. "That ship is disabled, or I miss my guess. Incidentally, it is a part of our investiture." He paused and stared at Chrestos. "Evidently you were following my movements pretty closely. How were you able to do that?"

"Through Mahrt," the beast said. "He was in touch with you throughout, obviously. The men of Xota, Tipton Bond, are afraid to plumb the minds of the beasts too deeply, for fear of what they might find there. They would find, if they looked, that most of the beasts are in constant contact with Mahrt. Indeed, they once hoped to be his Sword."

"I guessed as much."

"You had hints enough. It was half a century ago, however, that word went out from the Temple that the Sword was being forged in another world, and that the beasts must stand ready to receive him. When the entity turned out to be a human being, some of the beasts, and the plants too, rebelled and attacked him, out of jealousy; you will remember that episode. Those rebellious ones Mahrt will punish in his own good time; some whose minds were too small to understand—the plants, and the lower animals—already have been forgiven.

"But there is no further time for history. The planet is under bombardment. The inner moon has been reduced. Your place is elsewhere."

Deje swayed into Tipton's arms. "Do not go, Sword," she whispered, sobbing, her body shaking with the reaction of her long imprisonment and the nerve-torturing trek back. "Do not go!"

"You must turn the girl over to me," Chrestos continued implacably. "I will press charges of treachery against Lanja, far more effectively than you could do it. I've been collecting evidence against this very day for years, and the girl is final substantiation."

"No, no," the girl sobbed.

Tipton's mind raced. He was reluctant, to say the least, to give Deje over to Chrestos, whom he had little enough reason to trust. If there was still further treachery to come, and he had won her back for nothing—

"Sorry, Chrestos," he said. "Or, to put it more bluntly, go to hell."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the light in the apartment dimmed, and Tipton's brain rang with an immense, summoning tocsin, unmistakable final:

Trust Chrestos; he is of the beasts, and goes his own way. Come at once to the Temple.

Tipton stared wildly at the animal.

"Did you hear? Was that—"

"Yes," Chrestos said, looking at Tipton with grave and steady eyes. "The time has come. The stopping of the stars is at hand. Go at once, Sword—for Mahrt is awakening!"

Deje still clung to him, but gently, Tipton loosened her grip.

"I must go, Deje," he murmured. "But I will be back. I don't know how, or when, but I will return; that I promise. And—then I will never leave you again."

Tipton and his promise went together toward their strange fulfillment.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN—The Awakening of Mahrt

TIPTON had no sooner entered the portal in the wrist of the Temple than it had closed behind him.

It seemed incredible that long-dead ruins could rebuild themselves so, in a matter of seconds. But there was no doubt about it. The light was cut off.

And it was wholly impossible, now, to think of this supine

stone figure as "long-dead." The corridors were lit now, with an eerie, sourceless glow. The walls shivered with gathering vitality. The bitter coldness reached deep into Tipton, made contact with the black reservoir that he had been carrying within his soul ever since he had first touched the stones of the Temple, and merged with it.

Abruptly, it was not cold in the Temple any more.

Slowly, wondering, Tipton began to walk. The sense of the presence of Mahrt was enormously strong, but there were no pulses of power, no immense words roaring inside his skull. Something was being held in abeyance, waiting, waiting . . .

Then, without transition, he was in the adytum, the heart-chamber. There, finally, the pulses began.

But they did not come from outside. They began within himself, at the center of his own being, and went washing out from him in enormous waves, waves which seemed to recede to the uttermost limits of the bubble that was space-time.

Welcome to reality, entity called Tipton Bond, one-time Earthman, one-time Sword of Mahrt. Welcome to wakefulness; welcome to your own body, mind, and heart!

Mine?

No; ours. You are thyself; I am you. We are Mahrt.

No! No, it isn't true!

Yes. You are not, and have never been, either Earthman or Xotan. You have never been human at all, except by the accretions of custom and the limitations imposed upon you by the task to be done. There is no voice speaking to you here. There is no presence, other than yourself. You are fighting only your own knowledge, coming to you from the depth of your own memory. You were your own instrument, a fragment of your own mind, split off to accomplish a part of a purpose. You were the Sword, and yours was the hand that wielded it. You do not now want to surrender that fragmentary individuality, but you must; it is spurious.

The waves came on, shock after shock, spreading and spreading. The universe rang with their pulsations.

This is your knowledge, and it is true knowledge. The suppression of the collective mind, plus the knowledge that it

contained of the nature of the coming onslaught of the Warriors of Day, drove many of the forces which Mahrt contained out of his own world and to Earth. There they became embodied as Tipton Bond, misfit, a man driven by a vocation of combat far beyond the powers of resistance of any Earthly enemy. And, too, far beyond the reach of the minds of the Xotans. Indeed, how could they read your mind? You were a part of their minds which they themselves long ago rejected.

Frantically, Tipton fought, but the rolling, pounding surf of memory would not cease.

And so, at the strategic moment, you found the way to Xota. You were that part of Mahrt which, coming from another world, was not bound, as the whole entity was bound, by the local laws. As such, you were the Sword, the Sword of which it was prophesied that it would cut two ways. The duties of the Sword are now ended, and well ended. The time has come for the entity called Tipton Bond to achieve unity with his twin.

A doorway, like the iris of a great eye, opened before Tipton, and a flood of radiance poured in. No-one, his memory told him—his memory!—had ever travelled this pathway before. It led to the ultimate chamber of the temple: the head of the great stone figure. At the end of that journey was the bright glare which waited to enswathe his mortal form, long maintained at terrible energy cost to the sleeping Mahrt, and cause it to yield up its individual forces to the general personality . . .

"No," Tipton shouted aloud, at the top of his voice. "I reject Mahrt, entirely and utterly! It was by Mahrt's doing that I was never quite a human being. But it was by Mahrt's doing that I accepted as my own the values of human beings. I will not renounce those values, will not renounce my humanity, however partial! I reject the life of an anonymous, bodiless Whole, never to enjoy the sense-impressions which are the boon of a physical individual, never to know the love which I have only just found, which I have been seeking all my death-ridden life!"

The radiance grew brighter; the great iris expanded stead-

ily. With the light came a new flood of unwelcome knowledge.

None of these will be lost. Our mind is not a thing apart from the minds of Xota. We will know these sense-impressions of which you speak, multiplied a million million times, as we knew them from time immemorial. We will know them down to the tiniest desires of the flowers, and up to the most abstract thoughts of human genius. We will be in the mind and heart of Deje; we are a part of her, as we are a part of all living things upon Xota. We will be with them, and with her, as they and she with us, forever.

He struggled once more, but against what, he did not know. His mind was bathed in radiance. He was that radiance. The tiny, split-off entity that he had once made from his life-stuff was dissolving, recombining, becoming whole. He had forgotten the name that he had given himself during that time of privation. He knew only that that personality was spurious and partial, and was now no longer necessary.

He was Mahrt, and must see through his own eyes—

CHAPTER FOURTEEN — *The Stopping of the Stars*

THE glaring radiance deepened, slowly becoming a glowing sapphire. He was lying on his back, looking up through a screen of branches at the sky.

In the blue were other colors, not scores or hundreds, but thousands of them. There was the background radiation, which filled all space, against which the stars showed as dark bodies, in silhouette; which illuminated, not the surface of Xota, but the face of the bedrock forty feet below.

There was starlight, compounded of waves ranging all the way from the gamma rays to the extremely long radio waves of stellar static. Not all of these reached through the atmosphere, but He could detect them by their diffraction-colors. And there was, of course, the sunlight, and the colors of the branches, the leaves, the high-piled clouds . . .

The universe sang magic in a thousand voices.

And somewhere deep within Him, that part of Him which was Deje saw and heard all this, with wonder and love.

Through the great temple-structure ran a surge of power, the gathering power of a whole race, of a whole planet. The invisible, potent force that was Mahrt stirred, and rose.

The ancient masonry crumbled and cascaded away from His body. For a moment the titanic form was limned in a rising haze of brick-dust, all that now remained of the tomb-turned-chrysalis. He looked up.

His gaze penetrated the blue dome easily and swept through space, seeking out the ships of the Warriors of Day. The five-mile metal bubbles gave themselves away by their steady and insane waste of energy. Even in full daylight, to His eyes, they were cancerous blots of flame searing the fabric of space-time. From them, darts of that energy, clumsily and carelessly directed, licked out at Xota, indifferent of what was destroyed so long as the destruction went on.

To His power was added fury. It was time, and past time, for the twilight of the Warriors of Day. He called upon His planet for more power, and still more power—

The clouds grew above His head, higher and higher, deeper and deeper. To all but Him, the sun disappeared. The wind stopped. The forest froze, every branch, paw and blade, in fear and awe, while the darkness deepened.

Do not fear, My children. None shall be harmed. Not so much as a leaf shall die, except at its own natural hour, from this time forth.

The first lightning bolt stuck Him.

The sky opened and rained electrical fire. Bolt after bolt of that bombardment blazed upon the force that was Mahrt. The echoes of the enormous cannonade rolled and roared over the forest, across the plain, through the city. So furious and so concentrated an onslaught should have left nothing below it but a slag-pit, ringed with the char of what had once been living creatures.

After a while the cannonade died away and the clouds began to break up. The forest stood as before. Not even so much as a minor shock had ever reached the ground.

Then there was a final clap of thunder, a doom-trump to make all others puny in the memory forever. Armed with

the lightnings, Mahrt hurtled through space with the speed of thought.

No energies in the universe surpass the power of free thought in free space; but, being a part of the universe, even thought is subject to the universal laws. "The speed of thought" is a mortality-bound concept, and does not describe the thing it attempts to label. Thought has no "speed"; it has only *rate*.

An energy with a finite speed has a finite limit; the greater the distance, the greater the length of time elapsed to cross it. Light, and all other electromagnetic energies, respect this law. But for Mahrt—free thought in free space—all distances were the same; His "speed" in reaching any objective known to Him had no limit, did not really exist except as an abstract and largely inapplicable term. Mahrt's one limit was the *rate* of thought; only that rate separated Him from any objective; a distance of—

Six tenths of one second.

The Warrior ships could not have failed to detect that enormous concentration of force as it approached. Not only the heavy space-time warping created by sheer weight of static electricity, but also the tremendous nexus of thought itself, was accessible to their instruments and minds. But in the time required by their own thought-mechanisms even to detect Him, Mahrt would have been through them and gone.

He stopped short, deliberately, brandishing the fist of His might in their faces. Then He was gone again, rocketing through space in short jumps, 0.6 seconds each apart, to give His flight a "speed" slightly under the top speed of the Warrior ships on overdrive.

The Warrior horde milled, uncertain, panicked. Then a clearer and more powerful mind cut through the mental din.

"After it! Desert the planet! That thing must be reduced, or we lose Xota!"

Mahrt laughed. *You will lose more than that, little giants.*

The Warrior ships were roaring after Him now, in an undisciplined mob, spitting fury at Him across the interplanetary gap. Where there were hits, He added the energy to His

store, but there were few hits. The Warriors' aeon-long contempt for any adversary had bred out of them even the concept of accuracy.

Unerringly, He headed for the wild star, keeping just a little ahead of the horde, leaving behind a spoor of His own contempt, little mocking wavelets of thought to shake and goad the giants as their ships passed through them. Messages passed Him, cries of alarm and warning to the fleet that was herding the wild star toward Xota.

The star-herders flocked in a great, doubleheaded cone toward Mahrt, their movements precise and purposeful, leaving behind the bare minimum number of ships necessary to keep the star itself on course toward Xota. Mahrt laughed again. There was a better mind among those ships than had been findable among the mob investing Xota itself; but no matter; no one mind, no matter how powerful, made a significant difference against the assemblage of powers that was Mahrt.

The double cone began to fire on Him. Bracketed between the salvoes of the two fleets, He became visible, an immense shape outlined in fire. He frolicked for a moment longer in the blazing tornado, waiting for the Warriors to converge upon Him, searching the space beyond them for evidence of new squadrons.

There was none. The main body of the Warrior horde was here.

Instantly He catapulted Himself into the center of the wild star.

For a little while He forgot his mission in the strangeness and fascination of the thing that was van Maanen's runaway sun. It was a little star, smaller even than the planet of Xota, and shone only with a weak white light, scarcely worth noticing in a heaven full of greater luminaries.

But the wild star was heavy. Its core was almost pure neutronium. Its surface temperature would have made the surface of Xota's sun seem pleasantly cool; only the immense gravity prevented such enormous energies from escaping and showing themselves as light and heat.

At the center of the wild star, physical processes impossible

in any lesser furnace ran their full course—not only the hydrogen-helium reaction, but also full conversion of matter into energy—atomic destruction carried to its ultimate end. Only the sheer mass of the wild star could have confined for an instant such a ravening outpouring of power.

Mahrt floated at the core of the wild star, shouting with delight at the incredible fury of the transformations. Far outside the star, the hatred of the Warriors beat in upon Him—but what was the hatred of a few giants compared to the hatred of matter in annihilation?

He summoned that basic, eternal ravenousness. The energies came at His bidding, one by one. Not even their ferocity was proof against His understanding of their natures.

He accepted them and contained them. He became a vessel, a crucible, a furnace of the universal fury. More: He was rich, rich with all the powers the universe offered for command—

For a split second He contained those energies in white-hot, frozen stasis. Then, instantaneously, He released them all.

The wild star went nova.

The Warrior fleet ceased to exist. Tiny puffs of gasified metal rode with the expanding shells of heat for a few seconds, and then even these were dispersed into hazes of stripped atomic nuclei.

Xota had a new sun. It would last for nearly six months, granting Xota a hot, lengthy and unseasonable summer. Then, a scattering cloud of cooling gas, it would sweep past the Xotan system and dwindle away into distant nothingness.

Mahrt was already in flight again. The mind-matrix was searching out the vast and remote planet of Day—searching a distant slavery-ridden limb of the galaxy. As He hunted, world after world, race after race awoke to find itself free, inexplicably rid of the centuries-long yoke of the Warriors.

By the time Mahrt reached the home world of the Warriors, madness reigned there. Pitilessly, Mahrt sought the central fires of Day.

This galaxy would not have the Warriors, and no other galaxy should be cursed with them.

The fist of Mahrt struck; and Day broke . . .

My task is ended, My children. Take Me back unto yourselves, whence I sprang. The stopping of the stars is ended; as is My usefulness. Call Me . . . take Me back . . . It is now time for Mahrt to die. Xotans . . . call Me home!

. . . And it was thus that Tipton Bond was with Deje ever after.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN — *The Anvil of Mahrt*

ON XOTA, THE NAME OF MAHRT is virtually forgotten now. Mahrt had no identity. Mahrt was a figment; a materialization of the racial consciousness which served Xota well at a time of crisis—and Mahrt died as a person on the ancient and remote planet of Day, died with the last of the Warriors, his purpose served.

Or, no; Mahrt did not die. He was never a person, and so could not die. He was, instead, taken back into the minds and hearts of the individuals who made him—

Taken back—and forgotten.

As the crisis passed into history, the racial consciousness of the Xotans began once more to disintegrate. Individual men went on about their private concerns, tending less and less to join their minds in the vast pool of power which had been Mahrt.

Where the rubble of the old, superstition-bound Temple lies scattered, there stands a new monument. It is heroic in size, and its eyes are directed upward in eternal watchfulness. It is a reminder to the telepaths of the destiny they so nearly lost; but it is a reminder neglected.

The men of Xota rarely visit the monument. They are contented, free of strife. Sometimes the younger Xotans say—under their breaths for the most part, but lately more and more dare to say it aloud—that the monument is pure idolatry, and that the very notion of a “racial consciousness” is unworthy of so civilized a people.

Thus the name of Mahrt passes slowly from the minds of the men of Xota. On certain days, however, the beasts still come and sit at the feet of the monument. They bring their

cubs for instruction, and a quarter of their kills for offerings. Now that the humans no longer have the Cult of the Dark Worship to remind them of Mahrt—for the Sword of Mahrt destroyed the Cult—human minds are no longer as great an increment of the general consciousness, and are becoming less and less so each year. Only the beasts make their pilgrimages to the monument, thinking in their slow, savage way of what is soon to come.

For there is word among the beasts that a new Sword is being forged.

A new Sword, it is whispered among the beasts, is being worked upon the anvil of Mahrt, for some still unguessable purpose, for some crisis of which the human beings of Xota know nothing.

A Sword of which the human beings of Xota have proven unworthy, at long last.

The new Sword, it is whispered, will be—

On Earth, a whimpering creature stirs, and opens too-wise eyes upon the forests of the great North. It is tiny now, but in later years it will be great; and a trail to nowhere awaits it.

—A *Kodiak bear*.

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