

PLANET STORIES



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Warrior of Two Worlds

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

He was the man of two planets, drawn through the blackness of space to save a nation from ruthless invaders. He was Yandro, the Stranger of the Prophecy—and he found that he was destined to fight both sides.

Illustration by RUBIMOR



And then I, Yandro, was upon the officer.

MY SENSES came to me slowly and somehow shyly, as if not sure of their way or welcome. I felt first—pressure on my brow and chest, as if I lay face downward; then the tug and buffet of a strong, probing wind, insistent but not cold, upon my naked skin. Closing my hands, I felt them dig into coarse dirt. I turned my face downwind and opened my eyes. There was little to see, so thick was the dust cloud around me. Words formed themselves on my thick tongue, words that

must have been spoken by so many reviving unfortunates through the ages:

“Where am I?”

And at once there was an answer:

“*You lie upon the world Dondromogon.*”

I knew the language of that answer, but where it came from—above, beneath, or indeed within me—I could not say. I lifted a hand, and knuckled dust from my eyes.

“How did I get here?” I demanded of the speaker.

"It was ordered—by the Masters of the Worlds—that you should be brought from your own home planet, called Earth in the System of the star called Sun. Do you remember Earth?"

And I did not know whether I remembered or not. Vague matters stirred deep in me, but I could not for certain say they were memories. I asked yet again:

"Who am I?"

The voice had a note of triumph. "You do not know that. It is as well, for this will be a birth and beginning of your destined leadership on Dondromogon."

"Destined—leadership—" I began to repeat, and fell silent. I had need to think. The voice was telling me that I had been snatched from worlds away, for a specified purpose here on whatever windswept planet Dondromogon might be. "Birth and beginning—destined leadership—" Fantastic! And yet, for all I could say to the contrary, unvarnishedly true.

"Dondromogon?" I mumbled. "The name is strange to me."

"It is a world the size of your native one," came words of information. "Around a star it spins, light-years away from the world of your birth. One face of Dondromogon ever looks to the light and heat, wherefore its metals run in glowing seas. The other face is ever away in cold darkness, with its air freezing into solid chunks. But because Dondromogon wavers on its axis, there are two lunes of its surface which from time to time shift from night to day. These are habitable."

My eyes were tight shut against the dust, but they saw in imagination such a planet—one-half incandescent, one-half pitchy black. From pole to pole on opposite sides ran the two twilight zones, widest at the equators like the outer rind of two slices of melon. Of course, such areas, between the hot and cold hemispheres, would be buffeted by mighty gales . . . the voice was to be heard again:

"War is fought between the two strips of habitable ground. War, unceasing, bitter, with no quarter asked, given or expected. Dondromogon was found and settled long ago, by adventurers from afar. Now come invaders, to reap the benefits of discovery and toil." A pause. "You find that thought unpleasant? You wish to right that wrong?"

"Anyone would wish that," I replied. "But how—"

"You are going to ask how you were brought here. That is the mystery of the *Masters*." The voice became grand. "Suffice it that you were needed, and that the time was ripe. There is a proper time, like a proper place, for each thing and each happening. Now, go to your destiny."

I rose on my knees, shielding my face from the buffeting wind by lifting a forearm. Somewhere through the murky clouds showed a dim blocky silhouette, a building of sorts.

The voice spoke no more. I had not the time to wonder about it. I got to my feet, bent double to keep from being blown over, and staggered toward the promised haven.

I reached it, groped along until I found a door. There was no latch, handle or entry button, and I pounded heavily on the massive panels. The door opened from within, and I was blown inside, to fall sprawling.

I STRUCK my forehead upon a floor of stone or concrete, and so was half-stunned, but still I could distinguish something like the sound of agitated voices. Then I felt myself grasped, by both shoulders, and drawn roughly erect. The touch restored my senses, and I wrenched myself violently free.

What had seized me? That was my first wonder. On this strange world called Dondromogon, what manner of intelligent life bade defiance to heat and cold and storm, and built these stout structures, and now laid hands—were they hands indeed?—upon me? I swung around, setting my back to a solid wall.

My first glance showed me that my companions were creatures like myself—two-legged, fair-skinned men, shorter and slighter than I, but clad in metal-faced garments and wearing weapons in their girdles. I saw that each bore a swordlike device with a curved guard, set in a narrow sheath as long as my arm. Each also had a shorter weapon, with a curved stock to fit the palm of the hand, borne snugly in a holster. With such arms I had a faint sense of familiarity.

"Who are you, and where are you from?" said one of the two, a broad-faced middle-

aged fellow. "Don't lie any more than you can help."

I felt a stirring of the hair on my neck, but kept my voice mild and level: "Why should I lie? Especially as I don't know who I am, or where I'm from, or anything that has happened longer ago than just a moment. I woke up out there in the dust storm, and I managed to come here for shelter."

"He's a Newcomer spy," quoth the other. "Let's put him under arrest."

"And leave this gate unguarded?" demanded the other. "Sound the signal," and he jerked his head toward a system of levers and gauges on the wall beside the door-jamb.

"There's a bigger reward for capture than for warning," objected his friend in turn, "and whoever comes to take this man will claim 'capture.' I'll guard here, and you take him in, then we'll divide—"

"No. Yours is the idea. I'll guard and you take him in." The second man studied me apprehensively. "He's big, and looks strong, even without weapons."

"Don't be afraid," I urged. "I'll make no resistance, if you'll only conduct me to your commander. I can show him that I'm no spy or enemy."

Both stared narrowly. "No spy? No enemy?" asked the broad-faced one who had first spoken. Then, to his comrade: "No reward, then."

"I think there'll be a reward," was the rejoinder, and the second man's hand stole to the sword-weapon. With a whispering rasp it cleared from its scabbard. "If he's dead, we get pay for both warning and capture—"

His thumb touched a button at the pommel of the hilt. The dull blade suddenly glowed like heated iron, and from it crackled and pulsed little rainbow rays.

There was no time to think or plan or ponder. I moved in, with a knowing speed that surprised me as much as the two guards. Catching the fellow's weapon wrist, I clamped it firmly and bent it back and around. He whimpered and swore, and his glowing sword dropped. Its radiant blade almost fell on my naked foot. Before the clang of its fall was through echoing, I had caught it up, and set the point within inches of its owner's unprotected face.

"Quiet, or I'll roast you," I told him.

The other had drawn a weapon of his own, a pistol-form arrangement. I turned on him, but too late. He pressed the trigger, and from the muzzle came—not a projectile but a flying, spouting filament of cord that seemed to spring on me like a long thin snake and to fasten coil after coil around my body. The stuff that gushed from the gun-muzzle seemed plastic in form, but hardened so quickly upon contact with the air, it bound me like wire. Half a dozen adroit motions of the fellow's gun hand, and my arms were caught to my body. I dropped my sword to prevent it burning me, and tried to break away, but my bonds were too much for me.

"Let me out of this," I growled, and kicked at the man with my still unbound foot. He snapped a half-hitch on my ankle, and threw me heavily. Triumphant laughter came from both adversaries. Then:

"What's this?"

THE challenge was clear, rich, authoritative. Someone else had come, from a rearward door into the stone-walled vestibule where the encounter was taking place.

A woman this time, not of great height, and robust but not heavy. She was dressed for vigorous action in dark slacks with buskins to make them snug around ankles and calves, a jerkin of stout material that was faced with metal armor plates and left bare her round, strong arms. A gold-worked fillet bound her tawny hair back from a rosy, bold-featured face—a nose that was positively regal, a mouth short and firm but not hard, and blue eyes that just now burned and questioned. She wore a holstered pistol, and a cross-belt supported several instruments of a kind I could not remember seeing before. A crimson cloak gave color and dignity to her costume, and plainly she was someone of position, for both the men stiffened to attention.

"A spy," one ventured. "He pushed in, claimed he was no enemy, then tried to attack—"

"They lie," I broke in, very conscious of my naked helplessness before her regard. "They wanted to kill me and be rewarded for a false story of vigilance. I only defended myself."

"Get him on his feet," the young woman

said, and the two guards obeyed. Then her eyes studied me again. "Gods! What a mountain of a man!" she exclaimed. "Can you walk, stranger?"

"Barely, with these bonds."

"Then manage to do so." She flung off her cloak and draped it over my nakedness. "Walk along beside me. No tricks, and I promise you fair hearing."

We went through the door by which she had entered, into a corridor beyond. It was lighted by small, brilliant bulbs at regular intervals. Beyond, it gave into several passages. She chose one of them and conducted me along. "You are surely not of us," she commented. "Men I have seen who are heavier than you, but none taller. Whence came you?"

I remembered the strange voice that had instructed me. "I am from a far world," I replied. "It is called—yes, Earth. Beyond that, I know nothing. Memory left me."

"The story is a strange one," she commented. "And your name?"

"I do not know that, either. Who are you?"

"Doriza—a gentlewoman of the guard. My inspection tour brought me by chance to where you fought my outposts. But it is not for you to ask questions. Enter here."

We passed through another room, and I found myself in an office. A man in richly-embossed armor platings sat there. He had a fringe of pale beard, and his eyes were bluer than the gentlewoman Doriza's.

She made a gesture of salute, hand at shoulder height, and reported the matter. He nodded for her to fall back to a corner.

"Stranger," he said to me, "can you think of no better tale to tell than you now offer?"

"I tell the truth," was my reply, not very gracious.

"You will have to prove that," he admonished me.

"What proof have I?" I demanded. "On this world of yours—Dondromogon, isn't it called?—I'm no more than an hour old. Accident or shock has taken my memory. Let me have a medical examination. A scientist probably can tell what happened to put me in such a condition."

"I am a scientist," offered Doriza, and came forward. Her eyes met mine, sud-

denly flickered and lowered. "His gaze," she muttered.

The officer at the table was touching a button. An attendant appeared, received an order, and vanished again. In a few moments two other men came—one a heavily armed officer of rank, the other an elderly, bearded fellow in a voluminous robe that enfolded him in most dignified manner.

This latter man opened wide his clear old eyes at sight of me.

"The stranger of the prophecy!" he cried, in a voice that made us all jump.

THE OFFICER rose from behind the table. "Are you totally mad, Sporr? You mystic doctors are too apt to become fuddled—"

"But it is, it is!" The graybeard flourished a thin hand at me. "Look at him, you of little faith! Your mind dwells so much on material strength that you lose touch with the spiritual—"

He broke off, and wheeled on the attendant who had led him in. "To my study," he commanded. "On the shelf behind my desk, bring the great gold-bound book that is third from the right." Then he turned back, and bowed toward me. "Surely you are Yandro, the Conquering Stranger," he said, intoning as if in formal prayer. "Pardon these short-sighted ones—deign to save us from our enemies—"

The girl Doriza spoke to the officer: "If Sporr speaks truth, and he generally does, you have committed a blasphemy."

The other made a little grimace. "This may be Yandro, though I'm a plain soldier and follow the classics very little. The First Comers are souls to worship, not to study. If indeed he is Yandro," and he was most respectful, "he will appreciate, like a good military mind, my caution against possible impostors."

"Who might Yandro be?" I demanded, very uncomfortable in my bonds and loose draperies.

Old Sporr almost crowed. "You see? If he was a true imposter, he would come equipped with all plausible knowledge. As it is—"

"As it is, he may remember that the Conquering Stranger is foretold to come with no memory of anything," supplied the officer. "Score one against you, Sporr. You

should have been able to instruct me, not I you."

The attendant reentered, with a big book in his hands. It looked old and well-thumbed, with dim gold traceries on its binding. Sporr snatched it, and turned to a brightly colored picture. He looked once, his beard gaped, and he dropped to his knees.

"Happy, happy the day," he jabbered, "that I was spared to see our great champion come among us in the flesh, as was foretold of ancient time by the First Comers!"

Doriza and the officer crossed to his side, snatching the book. Their bright heads bent above it. Doriza was first to speak. "It is very like," she half-stammered.

The officer faced me, with a sort of baffled respect.

"I still say you will understand my caution," he addressed me, with real respect and shyness this time. "If you are Yandro himself, you can prove it. The prophecy even sketches a thumb-print—" And he held the book toward me.

It contained a full-page likeness, in color, of myself wrapped in a scarlet robe. Under this was considerable printed description, and to one side a thumb-print, or a drawing of one, in black.

"Behold," Doriza was saying, "matters which even expert identification men take into thought. The ears in the picture are like the ears of the real man—"

"That could be plastic surgery," rejoined the officer. "Such things are artfully done by the Newcomers, and the red mantle he wears more easily assumed."

Doriza shook her head. "That happens to be my cloak. I gave it to him because he was naked, and not for any treasonable masquerade. But the thumbprint—"

"Oh, yes, the thumb-print," I repeated wearily. "By all means, study my thumbs, if you'll first take these bonds off of me."

"Bonds," mumbled old Sporr. He got creakily up from his knees and hustled to me. From under his robe he produced a pouch, and took out a pencil-sized rod. gingerly opening the red mantle, he touched my tether in several places with the glowing end of the rod. The coils dropped away from my grateful body and limbs. I thrust out my hands.

"Thumb-prints?" I offered.

Sporr had produced something else, a little vial of dark pigment. He carefully anointed one of my thumbs, and pressed it to the page. All three gazed.

"The same," said Doriza.

And they were all on their knees before me. *

"Forgive me, great Yandro," said the officer thickly. "I did not know."

"Get up," I bade them. "I want to hear why I was first bound, and now worshipped."

II

THEY ROSE, but stood off respectfully. The officer spoke first. "I am Rohbar, field commander of this defense position," he said with crisp respect. "Sporr is a mystic doctor, full of godly wisdom. Doriza, a junior officer and chief of the guard. And you—how could you know? —are sent by the First Comers to save us from our enemies."

"Enemies?" I repeated.

"The Newcomers," supplemented Doriza. "They have taken the "Other Side" of Dondromogon, and would take our side as well. We defend ourselves at the poles. Now," and her voice rang joyously, "you will lead us to defeat and crush them utterly!"

"Not naked like this," I said, and laughed. I must have sounded foolish, but it had its effect.

"Follow me, deign to follow me," Sporr said. "Your clothing, your quarters, your destiny, all await you."

We went out by the door at the rear, and Sporr respectfully gestured me upon a metal-plated platform. Standing beside me, he tinkered with a lever. We dropped smoothly away into a dark corridor, past level after level of light and sound.

"Our cities are below ground," he quavered. "Whipped by winds above, we must scrabble in the depths for life's necessities —chemicals to transmute into food, to weave into clothing, to weld into tools and weapons—"

The mention of food brought to me the thought that I was hungry. I said as much, even as our elevator platform came to the lowest level and stopped.

"I have arranged for that," Sporr be-

gan, then fell silent, fingers combing his beard in embarrassment.

"Arranged food for me?" I prompted sharply. "As if you know I had come? What—"

"Pardon, great Yandro," babbled Sporr. "I was saying that I arranged food, as always, for whatever guest should come. Please follow."

We entered a new small chamber, where a table was set with dishes of porcelain-like plastic. Sporr held a chair for me, and waited on me with the utmost gingerly respect. The food was a pungent and filling jelly, a little bundle of transparent leaves or scraps like cellophane and tasting of spice, and a tumbler of pink juice. I felt refreshed and satisfied, and thanked Sporr, who led me on to the next room.

"Behold!" he said, with a dramatic gesture. "Your garments, even as they have been preserved against your coming!"

It was a sleeping chamber, with a cot made fast to the wall, a metal locker or cupboard, with a glass door through which showed the garments of which Sporr spoke.

The door closed softly behind me—I was left alone.

Knowing that it was expected of me, I went to the locker and opened the door. The garments inside were old, I could see, but well kept and serviceable. I studied their type, and my hands, if not my mind, seemed familiar with them.

There was a kiltlike item, belted at the waist and falling to mid-thigh. A resilient band at the top, with a series of belt-holes, made it adaptable to my own body or to any other. Then came an upper garment, a long strip of soft, close-woven fabric that spiralled around the torso from hip to arm-pit, the end looping over the left shoulder and giving full play to the arms. A gold-worked fillet bound the brows and swept back my longish hair, knotting at the nape of the neck. The only fitted articles were a pair of shoes, metal-soled and soft-uppered, that went on well enough and ran cross-garters up to below the knee, like buskins. The case also held a platinum chain for the neck, a belt-bag, and a handsome sword, with clips to fasten them in place. These things, too, I donned, and closed the glass door.

THE LIGHT struck it at such an angle as to make it serve for a full-length mirror. With some curiosity I gazed at my image.

The close-fitting costume was rich and dark, with bright colors only for edgings and minor accessories. I myself—and it was as if I saw my body for the first time—towered rather bluffly, with great breadth of chest and shoulder, and legs robust enough to carry such bulk. The face was square but haggard, as if from some toil or pain which was now wiped from my recollection. That nose had been even bigger than it was now, but a fracture had shortened it somewhat. The eyes were deep set and dark and moody—small wonder!—the chin heavy, the mouth made grim by a scar at one corner. Black, shaggy hair hung down like brackets. All told, I looked like a proper person for physical labor, or even fierce fighting—but surely no inspirational leader or savior of a distressed people.

I took the military cloak which Doriza had lent me and slung it over my shoulders. Turning, I clanked out on my metal-soled shoes.

Sporr was waiting in the room where I had eaten. His eyes widened at sight of me, something like a grin of triumph flashed through his beard. Then he bowed, supple and humble, his palms together.

"It is indeed Yandro, our great chief," he mumbled. Then he turned and crossed the room. A sort of mouthpiece sprouted from the wall.

"I announce," he intoned into it. "I announce, I, Sporr, the reader and fore-teller of wisdom. Yandro is with us, he awaits his partners and friends. Let them meet him in the audience hall."

Facing me again, he motioned most respectfully toward the door to the hall. I moved to open it, and he followed, muttering.

Outside stood Doriza. Her blue eyes met mine, and her lips moved to frame a word. Then, suddenly, she was on her knee, catching my hand and kissing it.

"I serve Yandro," she vowed tremulously. "Now and forever—and happy that I was fated to live when he returned for the rescue of all Dondromogon."

"Please get up," I bade her, trying not to sound as embarrassed as I felt. "Come

with me. There is still much that I do not understand."

"I am Yandro's orderly and helper," she said. Rising, she ranged herself at my left hand. "Will Yandro come this way? He will be awaited in the audience hall."

It seemed to me then that the corridors were vast and mixed as a labyrinth, but Doriza guided me without the slightest hesitation past one tangled crossway after another. My questions she answered with a mixture of awe and brightness.

"It is necessary that we live like this," she explained. "The hot air of Dondromogon's sunlit face is ever rising, and the cold air from the dark side comes rushing under to fill the vacuum. Naturally, our strip of twilight country is never free of winds too high and fierce to fight. No crops can grow outside, no domestic animals flourish. We must pen ourselves away from the sky and soil, with stout walls and heavy sunken parapets. Our deep mines afford every element for necessities of life."

I LOOKED at my garments, and hers. There were various kinds of fabric, which I now saw plainly to be synthetic. "The other side, where those you call the Newcomers dwell and fight," I reminded. "Is it also windswept? Why can two people not join forces and face toil and nature together? They should fight, not each other, but the elements."

Doriza had no answer that time, but Sporr spoke up behind us: "Great Yandro is wise as well as powerful. But the Newcomers do not want to help, not even to conquer. They want to obliterate us. There is nothing to do—not for lifetimes—but to fight them back at the two poles."

We came to a main corridor. It had a line of armed guards, but no pedestrians or vehicles, though I thought I caught a murmur of far-off traffic. Doriza paused before a great portal, closed by a curtainlike sheet of dull metal. She spoke into a mouthpiece:

"Doriza, gentlewoman of the guard, conducts Yandro, the Conquering Stranger, to greet his lieutenants!"

I have said that the portal was closed by a curtainlike metal sheet; and like a curtain it lifted, letting us through into the auditorium.

That spacious chamber had rows of benches, with galleries above, that might have seated a thousand. However, only a dozen or so were present, on metal chairs ranged across the stage upon which we entered. They were all men but two, and wore robes of black, plum-purple or red. At sight of me, they rose together, most respectfully. They looked at me, and I looked at them.

My first thought was, that if these were people of authority and trust in the nation I seemed destined to save, my work was cut out for me.

Not that they really seemed stupid—none had the look, or the subsequent action, of stupidity. But they were not pleasant. Their dozen pairs of eyes fixed me with some steadiness, but with no frankness anywhere. One man had a round, greedy-seeming face. Another was too narrow and cunning to look it. Of the women, one was nearly as tall as I and nobly proportioned, with hair of a red that would be inspiring were it not so blatantly dyed. The other was a little wisp of a brunette, with teeth too big for her scarlet mouth and bright eyes like some sort of a rodent. They all wore jewelry. Too much jewelry.

My mind flew back to the two scrubby, venial guardsmen who had first welcomed me; to stuffy Rohbar, the commander; to Sporr, spry and clever enough, but somehow unwholesome; Doriza—no, she was not like these others, who may have lived too long in their earth-buried shelters. And Doriza now spoke to the gathering:

"Yandro, folk of the Council! He deigns to give you audience."

"Yandro!"

They all spoke the name in chorus, and bowed toward me.

Silence then, a silence which evidently I must break. I broke it: "Friends, I am among you with no more memory or knowledge than an infant. I hear wonderful things, of which I seem to be the center. Are they true?"

"The tenth part of the wonders which concern mighty Yandro have not been told," intoned Sporr, ducking his bearded head in a bow, but fixing me with his wise old eyes.

One of the group, called Council by Doriza, now moved a pace forward. He was the greedy-faced man, short but plump,

and very conscious of the dignified folds of his purple robe. One carefully-tended hand brushed back his ginger-brown hair, then toyed with a little moustache.

"I am Gederr, senior of this Council," he purred. "If Yandro permits, I will speak simply. Our hopes have been raised by Yandro's return—the return presaged of old by those who could see the future, and more recently by the death in battle of the Newcomer champion, called Barak."

"Barak!" I repeated. "I—I—" And I paused. When I had to learn my own name, how could it be that I sensed memory of another's name?

"Barak was a brute—mighty, but a brute." Thus Gederr continued. "Weapons in his hands were the instruments of fate. His hands alone caused fear and ruin. But it pleased our fortune-bringing stars to encompass his destruction." He grinned, and licked his full lips. "Now, even as they are without their battle-leader, so we have ours."

"You honor me," I told him. "Yet I still know little. It seems that I am expected to aid and lead and save the people of this world called Dondromogon. But I must know them before I can help."

Gederr turned his eyes upon the woman with the red hair, and gestured to her "Tell him, Elonie." Then he faced me. "Have we Yandro's permission to sit?"

"By all means," I granted, a little impatiently, and sat down myself. The others followed suit—the Council on their range of chairs, Doriza on a bench near me, Sporr somewhere behind. The woman called Elonie remained upon her sandalled feet, great eyes the color of deep green water fixed upon me.

ELONIE was taller than any of her fellow Council members, taller than Sporr, almost as tall as I. Her figure was mature, generous, but fine, and set off by a snugly-draped robe as red as her dyed cascade of hair. Red-dyed, too, were the tips of her fingers, and her lips were made vivid and curvy beyond nature by artificial crimson. She made a bow toward me, smiled a little, showing most perfect white teeth. She began:

"Dondromogon began with the First Comers. Many ages they ruled here, the Fifteen of them. Forever they were fif-

teen, for when one died, another was bred; when one was born, the oldest or least useful was eliminated. It was they who planned and began this shelter-city, found the elements that support life and give comfort.

"Others came, from far worlds. The Fifteen changed their policy of a fixed number, and became rulers of the new colonists. But after some study, it was decided to set a new limit. Seven hundred was decided upon, and seven hundred we still remain."

"Wait," I interrupted. "You mean that, when new children are born among you, someone must die?"

She nodded. "Exactly as with the Fifteen. We eliminate the least useful. Sometimes we eliminate the child itself. More often, an older and worn-out individual."

I thought that I sensed an uncomfortable wriggle in Sporr, behind me. "Why is this?" I demanded.

"Because, Yandro, there cannot be room and supplies enough for a greater number."

I scowled to myself. So far I had seen luxury enough in Dondromogon's chambers and tunnels. But there remained so much to learn. "Go on," I bade her.

She nodded again, and obeyed: "Thus we on Dondromogon live and have lived. This world is ours, its good and evil. But," and her voice, from a soft, shy murmur, turned hard, "there are those who do not wish it so. The Newcomers—the invaders!"

"Ill be their fate," growled Gederr beside her, as if rehearsed.

"They came to us, not long ago in years . . . but I forget, Yandro does not know as yet the length of Dondromogon's year, or Dondromogon's day. They came, then, no longer ago than the time needed for a baby to become a child."

Three years of my own reckoning I decided, and wished she had not mentioned babies and children. I still disliked that arbitrary survival-of-the-fittest custom. "Where did they come from?" I asked.

"Who can tell? Perhaps from the forgotten world where came our ancestors. Somehow they had learned of our conquest here, our advances and wealth-gathering in spite of natural obstacles. That is what they hope to plunder from us, these conquering Newcomers!"

"It'll be their fate," repeated Gederr, and two or three of the Council with him.

"But the winds are too high for a final battle to happen quickly. After some fighting, they seized upon the other strip of habitable land, on Dondromogon's other side. We fight them at the two poles—mostly underground. Do you understand?"

"I seem to," I replied. "But now what about me? The story of Yandro?"

"Did not Sporr tell everything?" broke in Gederr. "He should have done so. Sporr, the Council is not pleased."

"I had to go slowly," apologized the old man, and Elonie took up the tale:

"It is known to all on Dondromogon. The days of the First Comers held great minds that could see the future. Then it was foreseen that, in Dondromogon's hour of peril and need, a time set by the desecration of an enemy great and mighty—"

"Barak," I said aloud, still puzzling over that strangely familiar name.

"At that time," finished Elonie, "a leader to be called Yandro, the Conquering Stranger, would come. Even clothing was supplied—clothing not like that we wear today."

HE gestured toward me. Indeed, the garments I wore were different from those of my companions. I shook my head slowly, and tried to digest what I had heard once again. But one bit of it still clamored for rejection.

"About these eliminations," I harked back. "Who decides on which person must die to keep the number down to seven hundred?"

"We do," replied Gederr, almost bleakly.

"And the Newcomers, have they a similar custom?"

"Not they, the greedy interlopers." Gederr looked very greedy himself. "They delve and destroy in Dondromogon, feeding ever new spates of arrivals."

"It seems," I offered, "that you would be well advised to grow in number, and so win this war."

But Gederr shook his head. "We checkmate them at the two poles, where the way into our territory is narrow. And more than seven hundred would be hard to make comfortable."

"Friends, I do not like it," I stated flatly.

"There seems to be ruthlessness, and waste."

"Why waste?" spoke up another of the Council, the narrow man, whose name was Stribakar. "This war has begun only recently, but it will last forever. At least, so I see it."

"Now that Yandro is here, it shall be brought to an end," pronounced Elonie, her green eyes fixed on me. "Will it please Yandro to see something of this war?"

"Since you make it so much my business, I would be pleased indeed," I told her, and Sporr rose from his seat. He went to an oblong of white translucency, on a side wall of the stage within sight of us all. It was about twice a man's height by thrice a man's width.

"The screen of a televiso," he said to me, and touched a dial beside it. The screen lighted, with confused blurrings of color and movement. He dialed quickly and knowingly.

"We see an underground passage," he said, "And those who dispute therein."

I could see a gloomy stretch of earth-walled passage, lighted from somewhere by a yellow radiance that became dim and brown toward one end. I had no way of judging the true size of the object whose image I saw, until I made out stealthy movement at the darker end. Sporr's dialing made parts of the scene clear, and the movement proved to be that of a human figure, prone and partially concealed in a depression of the floor. That figure was no more than half-height, by which I estimated the passage itself to be some fifteen or eighteen feet to the top of its rough-dug ceiling.

"A scout," breathed Doriza beside me, pointing to the prone man. "See, Yandro, he wears earth-colored cloth over his armor, and his arms and face are smeared with mud. The thing he holds is a ray-digger, whereby he burrows his way forward to the enemy."

"Enemy in the same tunnel with him?" I asked.

"Right." I saw her blond head dip. "Our tunnel broke into one of theirs, by accident or plan. At point of contact, both forces are cautious, fearing ambush. Now—"

She said no more. The scout on the screen was apparently creeping forward

through the solid soil of the floor, only the top of his head and shoulders showing. Once or twice I saw the object he employed, a baton-like tool of black metal with a bulb or ball at one end. It emitted faint sparks and shudders of light, which melted or vaporized the earth ahead of him.

"See! He senses danger near."

Indeed he did; for he paused, and took something else from his belt—a disk the size of his palm. This he held close to his face, studying it.

"Televiso," explained Doriza. "It has limited power of identifying both sound and sight near at hand. The scout knows that enemy approach."

STILL working his dials, Sporr made the scene slide along. The bright end of the tunnel came into view for some yards. All who watched leaned forward excitedly.

"Newcomers," breathed Gederr, and added his familiar curse, "ill be their fate! They have one of those vibration-shields."

"Warn the advance party," bade Stribakar, and Sporr, turning from his dials, muttered quickly into a speaking tube.

The situation that thus interested and activated my companions was hard to make out. I saw only an indistinct fuzziness in a sort of niche against the tunnel wall. Doriza pointed.

"A vibration-shield," she told me. "The Newcomers have such things. Some machine or other power stirs the molecules of air to such a new tempo as to create a plane of force. No missile, no light even, can penetrate. They are sheltered and all but indistinguishable. See, they go forward."

The eddying cloud moved along the tunnel. We could see the scout again. He tucked away his disk and employed the ray-digger. Quickly he sank deeper and out of sight.

"Burrowing in," pronounced Gederr. "If he succeeds in what he hopes—"

"Spare him, you mean?" asked Stribakar, and Gederr nodded.

The eddying blotch that marked the power-shield of the invaders came closer. I saw it approach the place where the scout had burrowed away. It paused there, as if those hidden by it were investigating. Then—

"Brave fellow!" cried Elonie, like someone at an exciting sports event or play.

The scout had dug himself a little channel beneath the floor. Now he burst into view, beyond and behind the invaders. He held a pistol-weapon in each hand. One spat sparks—some sort of pellets or projectiles. The other was plainly a web-spinner like the one that first had bound me, and this he poised ready for use.

His projectiles seemed to find an opening behind the power-shield. A human form lurched into view—a glowing, writhing form, like a man of red-hot metal. An agonized leap, a shudder, and the body fell, abruptly falling into clinkered bits. A moment later, the power-shield disturbance vanished, and there stood revealed two others, clad like the scout in earth-colored jumper over armor.

"He got the power-shield man!" exulted Elonie. She was on her feet, applauding wildly. In the same second, I saw the scout point and discharge his spinner-gun. Whirling coils of cord struck, wound and tangled the two foremen. The scout's bearded mouth opened, as if he yelled in exultation.

But that was his last cry and action. Another eddy, larger and swifter, suddenly came into the picture behind him. From it sprang a pale shaft of light. The scout went down on his face as if in sudden prayer. He moved no more.

Toward the dark end, Dondromogon figures seemed to move. There was a great spatter of spark-pellets. But the eddy of the new power-shield had scurried forward, enveloping and vanishing the two bound men. It retired as quickly. No movement, no figure, except those of the dead scout and the charred remains of the man he had killed.

"There will be little action here for some time to come," announced Gederr. "Switch it off, Sporr."

Sporr did so. I shook myself, as if to rid my body of unpleasant dampness and chill.

"Exciting," I said. "Unusual. I suppose this goes on all the time."

"Not all the time," Elonie demurred. "As Yandro has heard, the battle-areas are limited, in the region of the poles. There is much maneuvering, but not too much contact. This incident was an order."

"Order?" I repeated.

"We sent the man you saw, knowing that you would want this televiso view of how we made war."

I snorted and faced her angrily. "You sent him to his death? So that I could see a show? You value life very cheaply, Elonie."

III

SHE SMILED, as if I had complimented her. "Oh, the man was up for elimination. He was supernumerary. Of course, if he had succeeded in his capture of prisoners and one of the devices that make those power-shields—"

I remembered what Stribakar had said to Gederr. "He was brave," I said, "and it was a shame that he had to die. You want me to be a leader in war like that? I have other ideas of warfare."

All of them looked at me, and one spoke from behind Gederr: "We had hoped that Yandro would say that. Yandro means to lead us in person—in a great and decisive battle."

"At least it would be cleaner than this mole-digging and sneaking," I said hotly.

Gederr rose. "Sporr, tune in whatever terminal you can find among the Newcomers. I shall say something to them."

Obediently Sporr manipulated levers, push-buttons and dials near the speaking-tube. Gederr crossed to it and spoke harshly:

"Newcomers, ill be your fate! Your defeat is at hand! We give you warning! Our engines will burrow a mighty cave near the north pole. Let you come there, with all your hosts—and so shall we, so shall we!" His voice rose to a scream. "With us—leading us—comes the greatest fighter that Dondromogon has ever known, and the sight of him shall *break your hearts!*"

My ears rang, as the ears of all listeners must have rung, with those last words. Gederr turned away, and Sporr dialed the power off.

"Now," Gederr said, "is there not some plan for amusement? A pleasant hour in the Pavilion? Great Yandro's heart is troubled—for it is as great as himself—by thoughts of war and its pains. Let him come with us for solace."

"Amen to that," said Elonie, and she walked toward me. I rose, and she slid her bare arm through mine. Her face was close to mine, smiling and full of invitation. It seemed that Doriza was going to say something, but Elonie spoke first: "He will need no military aide, Doriza. Nothing military about the Pavilion, you remember."

We walked out together—Elonie and myself, then the others. We found a wider corridor, and one full of hum and motion. The smooth floor of the passage was seamed with metal-shod grooves, in which moved vehicles—ovoid vehicles, of various sizes, balancing, it seemed, on one whirring wheel apiece. Elonie escorted me to one such car, which stood poised on its wheel like a dancer on tiptoe. There was room inside for the two of us only, among luxurious cushions. At her respectful invitation I sat inside, and she operated controls.

"Thus we travel in this city," she chatted as we rolled along. "Not swiftly, of course, in this nor in our other city, near the South Pole. The real speed is in the way-tunnels between."

"Way-tunnels the width of a world?" I asked, wondering. "How can only seven hundred persons do such work?"

"You saw the ray-digger on the televiso. There are larger and more complex diggers of that type, by which we can journey almost anywhere underground—clear through the core of Dondromogon and up into Newcomer lands, were it not for the inner fires. Perhaps we shall dig them out by the roots in time, despite their defenses."

Once again I thought of so much science and wealth, and of people dying because their rulers thought seven hundred were none too few to enjoy the benefits of a world.

We stopped down a fork of the vehicle-corridor, and Elonie dismounted before another of the metal curtain-doors. At her touch of a button and a word into a speaking tube, it opened to us. We passed into a smaller passageway, and then out into a place of aching beauty.

My first impression was of pastel lights, changing and mingling constantly—blue, violet, pink, green, orchid, pale.

They struck from starlike points in a great domed ceiling, over a floor like a mirror. And the pastel-tinted air was filled with music, soft but penetrating and heady. There was a breeze from somewhere, scented and warm. In and out of other doorways across the floor wandered figures, male and female, murmuring together and helping themselves to cups from great trestles and tables.

"The refreshments are provided," Elonie told me softly. "We need not wait for the others. Come, Yandro. They have poured wine—Yandro knows what wine is? And we have music, perfume, light, laughter, and for companions all of Dondromogon."

"All?" I repeated.

"All save those on guard or garrison duty. Come, mighty one. Know happiness that is worth fighting and conquering to keep."

She tugged at my arm, urging me toward the wine-tables.

And now there was a louder murmur, excitement and even apprehension, at my entrance. I suppose I was an extraordinary figure—taller than any person there, indeed none were anywhere near my height save the nobly proportioned Elonie herself. And I was more sinewy, and darker, as if of another race entirely. Timid memories struggled somewhere within me, as if knocking at the closed doors of my consciousness. Somewhere, somehow in the past, things had happened that might explain so much, make my present position clearer to me.

Gederr was following close behind, muttering something to Doriza. Then he pressed on beyond me, and mounted a sort of dais or platform.

"You of Dondromogon!" he called, and such was his voice, or perhaps the acoustic properties of that hemispheric room, that all could hear him easily. "Have you not heard rumors of a great happening? The ancient legend of a mighty leader to come among us—"

"Yandro!" cried a deep-voiced fellow in the front belt of listeners. His eyes were on me, studying, questioning.

"Yes, Yandro, champion of our cause, sent by the First Comers themselves!" That was Elonie, and with a hand on by elbow she urged me up on the platform beside Gederr.

Applause burst out, some of it a little drunken, but quite hearty and honest. "Yandro!" cried the deep-voiced man again, and others took it up: "Yandro! Yandro!" Whatever my own doubts, they had none.

Gederr held up an authoritative hand for silence. "He came from far in space and time, and one look will assure you of his leadership. The time for deliverance is at hand, men and women of Dondromogon! We trust in mighty Yandro!"

There was louder applause, in the midst of which Gederr sidled close. "Speak to them," he mumbled in my ear.

Like him, I lifted a hand for silence. It came, and I eyed my audience, as I sought for words to speak.

THE FIRST thought that came was that, if Elonie were right and these people were the selected best of the race, then Dondromogon was decadently peopled. Not only were they smallish and mostly frail, but few had a distinguished or aggressive cast of countenance. The Council members had been wise-seeming, perhaps, but even they had not struck me as healthy types. To one side stood Doriza, militarily at attention, blue eyes fast upon me—she was a notable exception, compact and strong and healthy of body and mind, and at the same time quite as feminine as the more flashy and languorous Elonie just beside my platform. Through the rear ranks of listeners moved old white-bearded Sporr, who had much to say to certain members of the throng, perhaps explaining me and my legend.

"Friends," I began at last, "I am new here. A little child might have more experience of your ways and wishes. Yet it becomes apparent that great service is expected of me, and such a service I would greatly love to do."

"Hear! Hear! Wise are the words of Yandro!" Thus went up a new chorus. I felt reassured, and spoke more confidently.

"Your Council has explained much. Now I come to the people represented by that Council. If I am to help, you are to explain how. For the voice of a people is seldom wrong or foolish."

"Wise are the words!" They chorused again, and the man with the deep voice suddenly put up his hand and moved for-

ward. I saw that he had the armor and weapons of a soldier, and in one hand he held a cup, from which he had been drinking. He was fairly well knit for a Dondromogonian, and, though his face was simple, it was manly enough. He cleared his throat diffidently.

"We have been told of Yandro's coming, throughout our halls and dwellings," he began. "That he should ask for our word is an honor. But since he asks, I make bold to reply—" He choked a little. "Peace!" he cried hoarsely. "Peace—and comfort—"

"Peace! Peace!" cried the others around him, and "Peace!" bellowed hundreds of voices.

I was a little perplexed. After the war-like talk of the Council, this was different, and disturbing. But Gederr, beside me was not at a loss.

"Peace you shall have, as Yandro's gift!" he cried. "The Newcombers—ill be their fate—have been warned and promised of his coming, and now they shake in dread! He shall lead you to victory, complete victory, and the fruits of victory!"

It was powerfully said, and the cheering was greater than ever. Under cover of the din, Gederr took my elbow and escorted me from the platform.

"They have been despondent, Yandro. They grow unwilling to face death and wounds. But you have changed all that. Hark to their cries of your name! Now there shall be no more speaking, only happiness."

Elonie had joined us again. Her hand dropped warmly over mine. "This way," she bade. "This wine is for the Council only—the best on Dondromogon. Honor us by taking some."

She gave me a goblet, of some transparent substance clasped in bright metal, and brimming with a red liquor. I took it with a bow, and she lifted her own goblet. As we drank together, I had another impression of Doriza's studying, wondering eyes. Did the warrior-woman, appointed as my military aide, disapprove? But the wine was excellent, and my spirits rose.

"Come," said Elonie. Her arm was through mine again, warm and gently urging. She led me toward a niche, set deep and shadowy into the wall. There was a divan with cushions, and a table

with cups and flagons for drinking. The music had begun again, and some of the people were dancing together.

"Yandro is gracious to grant me these moments alone," purred Elonie. "Yandro is overwhelming."

"Can't we drop the third person?" I asked. "I do not feel much taste for formalities."

She clutched at that with a little cry of gladness and her eyes and smile were radiant. "You offer me intimacy!" she exclaimed. "It's honor—it thrills—" She lifted her glass. "Drink again, I beg you! You and I shall drink to each other."

"Why not?" I said, and touched her glass with mine. "To you, Elonie."

"To you, Yandro, my dear lord!"

THE WINE was galvanizingly strong. I felt my ears ring a little, and—why not admit it?—Elonie's nearness and adulation were wine in themselves. She leaned toward me on the divan, so that our bare shoulders touched. Her lips, full and trembling, were very close.

"Yandro," she whispered. "Yandro . . . you could make me happy, and yourself happy, too . . ."

Suddenly I shook my head a little, to clear it. For her eyes, a moment ago so fascinating, suddenly made me uneasy. It was as if claws had reached from their brightness and fastened upon me. She steadfastly fixed my gaze with hers.

"Yandro . . ." Her voice was soft, monotonous. "All is well with you . . . trust us, trust me, Elonie . . . I shall guide you to victory, you need have no qualms . . ."

Her arm stole across my chest, curved around my neck. She drew my head toward hers. Her brilliant eyes seemed to fill the whole field of my vision, impelling, hypnotic—

Hypnotic—that was it!

The strange half-lost thoughts from my unknown former life sized the idea and held it up to me. Danger, danger, they were crying at me. Most ungallantly I took her wrist and disengaged myself from her embrace.

"Since I am destined for war, is there time for this?" I asked, trying to laugh.

"Is there not?" she murmured.

I rose from where I sat, and sipped more

wine. Where it had fuddled me before, it cleared me now. "Elonie, you are charming. I do not know whether I have standards by which to judge, but you do things to men. Perhaps I should have time to make up my own mind."

"If I have offended—" she began to stammer.

"Oh, not in the least. But there is so much for me to be sure of."

She, too, rose, and left me without a word. Had I made her angry? Yet her last words had been of apology. I sat down again, alone and mystified.

But I did not remain alone for more than two minutes. Outside the niche, Elonie was talking to Gederr. Gederr scowled, nodded, then with an air of inspiration beckoned to Doriza. Doriza joined them, listened respectfully to Gederr. Finally she nodded, as if in acceptance of orders, and walked toward me.

I rose to meet her. She looked me steadily in the eye, but when she spoke it was hesitantly, and with a shyness most womanly, too womanly for a military person.

"Great Yandro is not pleased with Elonie of the Council. Is it possible that he would prefer another woman—me?"

Just like that, she offered herself. And if ever I had made up my mind in a hurry, it had been to the effect that Doriza was nothing but reserve and prudence.

What answer I might be able to give was suddenly unnecessary.

Just outside the niche angry voices rose. An officer, all fair beard and flapping cloak, was accosting Gederr with something less than the respect due a member of the Council.

"I say, she was promised to me—to me! And to me she goes, for my part in bringing him to you!"

"Silence, Rohbar," commanded Gederr in a voice as sharp as a dagger, but the officer pushed him roughly aside and strode into the niche.

It was the man who had interviewed me after my first capture. His pale eyes gave off sparks in the subdued light, and one hand sought the hilt of his pistol.

"Yandro, they call you!" he flung out. "Yandro, sent from out of space and time to Dondromogon! Well, be that true or no, Doriza is not for you—and deny me

if you dare! I'll send you back out of space and time, with whatever weapon you choose!"

IV

ROHBAR glared, but I could have smiled. Smiled in welcome. He was extricating me from a most embarrassing position. I faced him and spoke steadily.

"My friend, you were rude to me at our first meeting. Now you threaten. I begin to think you don't like me, and that we'll only be happy shedding each other's blood."

"Amen to that!" he snarled. And to Doriza: "Get out, get away from him."

I moved a step closer, and rapped him on the chest with my knuckles. "She came to speak courteously to me, and she shall go only if she so desires." As I spoke, I reflected that she might be worth fighting for, after all. I turned to her.

"Doriza, is this true? Do you belong to Rohbar."

She shook her bright head, and for once her eyes did not meet mine. I felt a sudden joy and relief, such as Elonie's frank throwing of herself at my head could not bring.

But Rohbar had drawn his pistol-weapon. Another moment, and he would have brought it in line with my chest. But I caught his weapon wrist in my left hand, and with the heel of my right I whacked him solidly on his bearded chin. His head bobbed, and a moment later I had twisted the pistol away from him, throwing it back into the niche. A moment later, Gederr and several others had hurried in, seizing him. He struggled and cursed.

"Put him under arrest!" Gederr bade, and Rohbar ceased struggling. He drew himself up.

"So that's it!" he roared. "Do you think you dare treat me thus, Gederr? I do not care if you're of the Council—I know a secret very close and very valuable—"

"Stop his mouth!" Elonie was imploring, and he cursed her, too.

"It seems," I put in, "that Rohbar makes a practice of rudeness to women."

I got smiles from Elonie and Doriza both, and Rohbar fairly blackened in the face as he strove to pull free and get at me.

"You!" he choked. "Yandro you call yourself—you're a fraud, a figurehead, foisted by these scheming, sneaking Council folk—a living lie!"

"Let him go," I bade those who held him. "Nobody says 'lie' to me and goes unpunished."

There was silence, as far as my voice had reached. Only in the background did music and pleasant conversation continue. It was Elionie who spoke first:

"Yandro, you have privileged me in my speech to you. May I dare point out that this is dangerous—that Rohbar, long a guard officer, is skilled in every weapon—"

"Elionie, you now make it impossible for me to withdraw, without being thought cowardly," I said. I put my hand to the saber I wore. "Is there a quiet place apart? Let the two of us fight."

Rohbar was quiet again, in the hands of his captors. He now spoke, almost as gently as Elionie: "I have no friends here. The fight might not be fair."

"Nonsense," I snapped, and looked past the little group. There was a face I knew—the man with the deep voice. "You," I hailed him, "come here."

He came respectfully, and stood at attention.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Klob is my name, great Yandro. Under-officer of the guard."

"Klob, do you know Rohbar?"

"I do, sir."

"If I, Yandro, ordered you to act as second for a man in a duel, would you perform the office faithfully?"

He braced more stiffly to attention. "Though I died for it, sir."

"You shall not die, but be commended if you do well. Represent Rohbar in the formal duel he is about to fight."

"As Yandro commands. And his adversary—the man he will fight?"

"Me."

KLOB was embarrassed, and so were the others. I spoke sharply. "Am I the one you take for your war leader? Then obey. This man has threatened me. I have been placed in a position where I must fight or be thought cowardly. Come into this passageway."

They followed me. Nobody was in the corridor. I spoke again, and they released

Rohbar. "What weapon?" I asked him.

"Ray-sabers," he growled, and drew his. A touch of his thumb on the hilt-stud, and it glowed brilliantly.

"I shall be second to Yandro, if it pleases him." That was Doriza, my appointed aide. But I waved her back.

"Since we fight, partially at least, for you, it is not well that you take sides," I reminded. "I need no seconds. If play does not continue fair, I can change it."

I drew my own ray-saber. My thumb, seemingly wiser than my blank brain, touched the stud and the blade pulsed out its heat-rays. Those of the Council who had come along moved back out of the way. Rohbar and I touched blades, and the fight was on.

From the first, it was no contest.

Rohbar wore armor, on chest and head, while I fought without. He was in a cold rage, and I was only puzzled. Despite his lesser height, he had strangely long arms, that gave him an inch or two of reach beyond mine. But he was like a child before me. Indeed, I had leisure to observe myself, to wonder and puzzle over my own skill. I knew this weapon, that should be strange to me, as if it were born a part of me. Rohbar slashed and fenced; I parried easily, almost effortlessly. Avoiding an engagement, I clanged home against his armored flank. He moaned and swore, for even through that metal protection the heat of the blade must have hurt him. A moment later I sped a back-hand blow that knocked his helmet flying. He threw caution to the winds, and charged close. So sudden was his attack that I was caught almost unawares, and parried his blade within inches of my own chin. Our blades crossed, close to the guards, and we stood for a moment looking into each other's eyes at a bare foot's distance.

"You ignorant fool!" he spat at me. "To be made a tool, and then to *believe*—"

"Silence, you crawling informer!" bawled Gederr, and his deadly warning startled Rohbar, who sprang back from me. At the same time I advanced in my turn, touched his blade as if to engage, then cut under quickly and came solidly home where the neck and shoulders join.

The ray-mechanism in my weapon hummed and sang. A great red spark

leaped from the point of contact, and Rohbar, stricken with heat and current alike, spun around like a top. His saber fell, and he went down beside it. There was life in him, for he struggled up on an elbow, turning an agonized face toward me.

"You haven't forgotten *that* skill!" he cried, as if charging me with a crime. "Have you forgotten anything, then? Are you truly here without memory, or are you a traitor to—"

Gederr stepped close to him. He leveled a pistol-device, which threw rays. Rohbar suddenly lacked a head.

"That was the most merciful thing to do," said Gederr, holstering his weapon. "Send someone to drag the rest of him away." He faced me. "Yandro will please accept my admiring congratulations. What better proof of his great gifts and high destiny than this easy conquest of one who was judged skilful with the ray-saber." He strode toward the sound of faint music. "Come, you others. The entertainment has certainly not been spoiled."

I SWITCHED off my saber's power, and sheathed it. I had just killed a man, because I felt I had to, but I had no sense of triumph. I walked at the rear of the group, Doriza moving respectfully beside me.

"Doriza," I said, "he tried to tell me something. What?"

She shook her head. "I did not know Rohbar's mind."

"Yet he felt close to you. Wanted to fight to keep you from me. That's another thing. Why did you ask me if I wanted you?"

She smiled a little, with a certain shy humor. "Do not all things on Dondromogon belong to Yandro?"

I smiled back. "Doriza, perhaps I should act complimented. Yet it seems to me that Gederr and Elonie told you to make the offer. And I'm not sure—I can say this to my personal aide, can't I?—that I want any favors at their hands."

"Or at mine?" And she smiled again.

"Come off it, Doriza, you're not the best of flirts. Shall we take a drink together? It wasn't pleasant, killing that man, though you don't seem to mourn him."

Back in the great chamber, a sort of cloud of light was thrown in the center by several reflectors, and a sort of motion picture show was going on in the midst of it. I drank much, but the wine did not affect me greatly. Finally I felt tired, and said so. Gederr and Doriza escorted me to sumptuous apartments, where I quickly slept.

I do not know how many hours I lay asleep, but I woke refreshed. A breakfast of strange synthetic foods was waiting, on a lift that rode up in a slot of the wall. I ate with relish, took a brisk shower in a room behind my sleeping quarters, and resumed the costume of Yandro. Then came a buzz at the door, and a voice came through a speaker system: "Gederr requests that Yandro admit him."

I opened the door. Gederr was there, and Doriza behind him. I felt the gaze of her blue eyes, very soft and pretty. Gederr smiled respectfully.

"We have talked much about the duel, we of the Council. It is agreed that great Yandro's value is more than inspirational. If a single combat could be arranged, with some champion of the Newcomers, ill be their fate! Some boasting successor to Barak—"

"Barak," I repeated and wondered again why his name stuck so in my fogged mind. "I—I do not know how to say it, but I seek no quarrel with Barak. I do not fear him, or anyone else; but I do not wish to fight him."

"Barak is dead," snapped Gederr, quite ungraciously. "Yandro need have no apprehensions."

"I have said I fear nobody," I reminded, stiff and lofty.

Gederr bowed. "Who could doubt it? But to return to our talk of battle; at the South Pole an inner blaze of flame from within Dondromogon has kept opposing forces from contacting each other. Only here at the North Pole can we fight, and there has been a lull since—since the destruction of their champion, Barak. We have taken advantage to hollow out a great pocket underground. See, I will show you."

He went to a little televiso screen, and switched on the power, then dialed. I saw a great domed cavern, larger than the hemisphere room of last night's recreation

period. Around its edges toiled men with ray-batons, shaping and enlarging.

"Elsewhere we have set up cunning defenses," explained Gederr. "Great force-fields, that interfere with their digging advance. But at one point we have purposely allowed their advance tunnels to come along easily. What you see here is behind that point. We fall back—"

"Fall back?" I repeated.

GEDERR winked. "Their forces will follow, and fill this chamber. Beyond, we have entrenchments, sortie tunnels, weapons. And the floor of the chamber is mined—enough explosive even to wreck those power-shields. Their van, with its heavy equipment, will perish. We'll wipe out the others easily!"

"How many?" ventured Doriza.

"Who can say?" Gederr responded. "They are many, but most of them must work to sustain life and action in the section of Dondromogon they have seized. They have not the sunken cities, the synthesizing advances, the other time-seasoned devices for living that we have developed. Several hundred fighting men, not many more than ours, are all that can be sent against us."

"Are they brave?" I demanded.

"They have stubborn courage. They will rush after their comrades who fall. Perhaps if we capture a few, they will try a rescue. It will bring them to defeat—us to glory!"

His voice rose in exultation, and I chose to disagree.

"Not glory, Gederr. We can claim cunning for such a plan—yes. The pride of successful ambush and deceit—yes. But there is hardly any glory in trickery. Not as I see it, anyway."

He bowed again. "Great Yandro is bravest of the brave, but his thoughts are those of the First Comers, ages ago. He does not understand modern sophistication and practicality."

"I understand the practicality," I assured him, "but I don't glory in it. A fair combat, like the one last night with Rohbar, is like a game—grim, but like a game. Not so these strategems and pitfalls, which are only an unpleasant job to be done."

"The strategems need not affect Yandro," stated Gederr. "As for a simple

single combat, I say that will be arranged. We broadcast, Yandro will remember, a warning and a challenge. The enemy has sent back a message that they are making ready a fighter to face anyone we can furnish."

"I see," said I. "Well, they speak my language." Both Doriza and Gederr started violently, and stared. "Probably they are simple of battle-viewpoint, like me. They'll blunder easily into your trap." I said those last two words to assure Gederr that I considered the whole deception his. "Now, when is all this to happen?"

"Perhaps within twenty hours. Perhaps within thirty."

"I feel like a puppet," I said. "Like the figurehead poor Rhobar called me. Perhaps I am, and perhaps it is as well, because I'm not in tune with your strategy. Understand me, I see its need and its practicability. That is all I see, though."

"Will Yandro walk forth?" asked Doriza. "There are troops waiting to be reviewed."

We went into a corridor, and entered one of the purring vehicles. It took us away—toward the fighting sector, I judged—and I dismounted in a great low stretch of subterranean cavern. This was lighted by great glowing bulbs hung to the ceiling, and men were drawn up in triple rows, armed and at attention. An officer was speaking to them, and toward one side stood the two unarmed men, under guard.

"Not yet, mighty Yandro," counselled Doriza beside me. "There is—a ceremony."

I could hear the officer speaking, though not clearly:

"In this moment, the eve of certain triumph over the enemy, two men see fit to circulate lies that calculate to dismay and destroy our plans. For them is only one fate, as judged by the Council. Attention to that fate!"

The two unarmed men were marched forward. I stared and scowled.

"I've seen them before," I said to Doriza. "The broad face of one—the figure of the other! Aren't they—"

"Yes!" Doriza said tonelessly.

The officer lifted his hand, with a disintegrator pistol in it. Pale green rays leaped. The two familiar figures gyrated, great parts of them vanished. They fell,

and two men carried the bodies away.

"They were the two guards I first met!" I cried.

"Yes," she agreed softly. "Men who served under Rohbar, and who spoke rebelliously because Yandro killed him. They said that Yandro was not Yandro."

I smiled ruefully. "From the first they didn't seem to believe that. Nor did Rohbar. Nor did you, until Sporr identified me." I looked into her blue eyes, calculatingly. "It comes to mind, Doriza, that of all who doubted me you are the only one left alive."

"I, too, have thought that," she said, and her voice was quiet but not frightened. "Perhaps my turn is next."

I shook my head. "I seem to have power on Dondromogon, and I will not let you be destroyed without more warrant than I see now."

"Yandro is kind," she said.

"And Doriza is attractive," I rejoined. "Well, that unpleasant little formality seems to be at an end. Shall we inspect the troops?"

SO SAYING, I moved forward. The officer in charge saluted and accompanied me on my inspection. The first two ranks of soldiers were men of various builds and feature, solemn-looking fellows for the most part. The first rank was headed by Klob, whom I had named for Rohbar's second last night. I was struck by the efficient air of their armor and equipment, as contrasted with their almost frail physiques. Again I thought, the stock of Dondromogon's natives must be running down.

The third rank was women.

They, too, wore armor, and bore weapons and tools, but I judged that they were more of a reserve than a first fighting force. More thoughts coursed through my head—if my earlier memories were departed, they left the more room for recent happenings and speeches. The Council had insisted that it was necessary to keep the population of Dondromogon small, for the sake of good living. Yet it seemed false reasoning if even women must be armed for battle. And the women, on the whole, were better specimens than the men. They were not large—none anywhere near as tall as Elonie or as com-

pactly vigorous as Doriza—but seemed healthy and intelligent for the most part, and some were even handsome. One or two gave me an appraising, admiring look, such as soldiers should not give frankly to commanders.

I concluded the inspection, and returned to a position in front of the force. "At ease," I bade them. "I have words to say.

"Some, at least, must have seen me last night at the recreation hour. I spoke then as to the general population of Dondromogon. Now I speak to you specifically, as soldiers facing battle duty. Your commanders think that the time is at hand for a victorious termination of the war with those strangers you call the Newcomers."

I paused, and watched the expressions of my listeners. At the phrase, "termination of the war," some of them positively yearned. As Gederr had admitted, the commoners of Dondromogon wanted no more fighting. Perhaps my coming was indeed by providence, to bring peace. A better peace, I now decided, than they had ever known.

"When the war is over," I went on, "I propose to lead you still. Since I am accepted as a leader, I have a right to do that. It seems that your health and happiness will be bettered if, in some way, we achieve a new conquest—conquest of the outdoors. There may be storms, but there are also natural sunlight and fresh air. Yes, and perhaps fresh natural foods, that will strengthen you more than synthetics. Does that appeal to you?"

Plainly it did.

"As to the Newcomers, I do not know them. Yet it seems that, with the fighting ended, some friendly agreement may be reached. If they do not harm us, they may help us. That will follow victory. I feel thus assured. That is all I have to say." I faced the officer in charge. "Take over."

Doriza and I walked away, back to our vehicle. "Where now?" I asked.

For answer, she pointed to a white oblong on the inner wall of the vehicle. It was a little screen, on which figures appeared. "Gederr requests that we return to him. He feels that we may be too close to possible violent action, and he is not yet ready that Yandro risk himself."

We rolled back toward the main passages of the community, and eventually to an office, where Gederr was in close, muttered conversation with Sporr and Elonie. They greeted my entrance in various ways—Sporr with a senile smirk that he hoped was ingratiating, Elonie with a most inviting smile, Gederr with blank embarrassment. Gederr bowed and gestured toward an inner door. "Will Yandro pleasure me with a private conference?"

I bowed in turn, and followed him in.

"I heard Yandro's words to the troops, by speaker system," he began silkily. "Eloquent and inspiring—but Yandro must realize some salient facts."

"Such as?" I prompted.

"The talk of friendly agreement with the Newcomers—ill be their fate! They must be wiped clean off of Dondromogon."

"Perhaps," I agreed, and he smiled.

"I am honored that Yandro agrees so quickly—"

"I said, perhaps. Because I do not know the Newcomers as yet. It may be that they deserve death to the last man. But they may also deserve honorable treatment, alliance even."

He opened his mouth to speak again, but interruption came from outside. Sounds of struggle, and the cry of Doriza:

"Help me—help!"

I bounded to the door and tore it open, injuring the automatic lock. An officer stood in the outer office, and two soldiers had Doriza by the wrists. I made a lunge, knocked one of them spinning against a wall. "What is this?" I roared. "She is my aide."

"Her arrest has been commanded," spoke up Elonie in a sullen voice.

"Who commanded it? I counterman it!" I faced the roomful of protesting faces. "You call me Yandro, your leader from divine source. Let me say that nothing will happen to Doriza except by my will."

Gederr spoke from the inner doorway: "Great Yandro speaks in riddles. I had thought that he had no attachment for Doriza."

"Oh, you tried to make me a gift of her last night," I exploded, "but that has nothing to do with the present case. Doriza lives. She remains free. Understand?"

"Perhaps," mused Sporr, as if to him-

self. "There have been accidents. . . ."

"Come," I said to Doriza. "To my quarters." I faced the others again. "Danger to her shall be answered by me. Is it understood?"

We rode silently in the vehicle, and came to the rooms set aside for me. Once inside, I made sure that speaking tubes and television were turned off. Then:

"Doriza! There are things I do not know. Tell them to me."

She hung her head. "They would have seen me dead, like the others, to shut my mouth."

"And I saved you. Now speak. All I seem to find familiar is the name of Barak."

She looked up again. "You remember the name?"

"Faintly. Vaguely. But what is happening just beyond my knowledge?"

She caught me by the forearm, her small, strong hands gripped like vises.

"I'll tell you! Tell you everything! Those devils of the Council have long exploited and drained Dondromogon—with lies about the First Comers, and the exclusive use of science! The Newcomers are to be trapped through you, the natives deluded through you! But you—you are to die when your usefulness is through!"

"They'd do that?" I demanded. "After they name me as Yandro, their legendary hero?"

"That's part of the great lie!" And Doriza was sobbing. "You aren't Yandro—you're Barak of the Newcomers!"

V

I STARED at her, astounded, shocked—and suddenly remembering things.

"Barak," I repeated foolishly. "Barak. Yes, I am Barak. I—how did I get here? Things are still so shadowy—but I'm beginning to recollect—"

"Try," she begged. "Try hard. It's the only way you can save yourself. Let me remind you; this world called Dondromogon was settled long ago by adventurers. For centuries their descendants built up a luxurious way of living. Messages filtered back to the old home planet—Earth, in the Solar System—"

"I remember that much," I told her. "Something about a group of chiefs grow-

ing fat on the labor of the community, and killing those who threatened to rival them?"

"Yes. Calling those deaths necessary for the good of the race, but preserving really the soft and easily ruled of the race. And an expedition was sent, to point out that Dondromogon really was a colony of Mother Earth. Gederr received the Newcomers with false welcome, and tried to have them assassinated. But reinforcements arrived, and the war goes on—"

Again I did not let her finish. "And Gederr has been deceiving his followers, by the line of talk I heard from him! That the Newcomers are not rescuers or dealers of justice; but invaders and destroyers! I remember that, too!"

"Do you remember yourself?" she demanded. "Barak, the wonder warrior, who met the enemy by twos and threes, and conquered them like flies, like puffs of wind? Barrak, mighty in battle, who offered to fight the whole Council of Dondromogon single-handed? Who led one digging assault after another, and who fell only to a stupid trick?"

"I don't remember that last," I confessed. "It is in my mind that I was somewhat rash, and had skill and luck enough to live in spite of my rashness, through several combats."

"No time for modesty!" she chided me, and smiled despite the desperation of our plight. "You were a natural engine of warfare, Barak. And once you pursued your retreating adversaries far—too far—until it was Gederr himself who squirted anaesthetic gas upon you and felled you, senseless. Then they gathered around you, like carrion feeders, that whole Council, to see how they could profit best. And Gederr and Elonie, with Sporr's help, made the decision."

Her eyes held mine earnestly. "As you began to revive, with your wits still unguarded and baffled, Sporr and Elonie hypnotized you. They both know how to do that—"

"I fought off Elonie's hypnotism last night," I remembered.

"Because your knowledge of its danger remained in your subconscious. After that, you were placed outside—naked, without memory or knowledge. And a speaking device brought what would sound like a

cosmic voice of destiny. After that, all was prepared to draw you into their plot as a tool."

I groaned. It had been as simple and raw as all that. "But the legend of Yandro?" I asked.

She waved it aside. "Someone named Yandro did exist, in the old days when Dondromogon was not Council-ridden. When he died, it was suggested that he would return again in time of need. Many a time did Gederr inspire some better-than-ordinary fighting man to face you, Barak, by telling him that the soul of Yandro had wakened in him. But when you fell into their hands and they decided to use you, they twisted the legend to suit your coming—even with a picture and your own thumb print to help convince you." She sighed. "Very few had seen your capture. Only Rohbar and the two guards you saw die would recognize you. Those three men, and myself, were in the farce."

"YOU!" I said, and gazed at her. That lost former life was creeping back, like a dream becoming plain and fusing into reality.

"You, Doriza! I—remember you—"

"You should," she murmured, pink-cheeked. "We used to say kind things to each other. With the Newcomers—remember?"

"You were one of us—a year ago! A technician in the synthetics department! But you vanished—and now you're here! Why?"

"I—I—oh, don't ask me that!"

I clutched her elbow, so fiercely that she whimpered. "Did you turn traitor? Answer me, Doriza!"

"You hurt me—don't—Barak, before you call me a traitor, answer this. Are you wholly for destruction of this people of Dondromogon? Haven't you changed?"

"Why—why—" And I paused. "I want to crush the Council, but the people—"

"Barak, I want to help them, too! The people—and you, Barak!" She looked at me beseechingly. "Can't you trust me?"

My heart flopped over and over, like a falling leaf, but I could not steel myself against her. "You were sweet once, Doriza, though you went away from

me." As if by long practice, my arm encircled her.

"Believe me, I'm not a traitor," she whispered against my shoulder. "I want to save you—and others—and myself—"

I shook my head. "They want to kill you. They shan't. Let's defend ourselves."

For answer, she pointed to the door. A quiet humming sounded. I saw that a panel bulged and vibrated.

"Disintegrator," she whispered in my ear.

I thrust her into a corner and moved close to the door-jamb. A moment later the rayed panel fell away in flakes, and a man stepped through, the officer who had tried to arrest Doriza.

I clutched the wrist of the hand that held his disintegrator pistol, and almost tore his head off with an uppercut. He went down, and Doriza caught up his weapon as it fell. There was a spatter of sparks as someone fired through the hole with electro-automatic pellets, but already Doriza was using the ray to knock a lock from a door beyond.

"One side," I heard Gederr growl from the corridor. "I have a disintegrator, too. I'll open a hole too big for him to defend!"

But we had hurried through the door Doriza opened. Beyond was a vehicle, the same that had carried us earlier in the day. "In," she said, took the controls.

We rumbled away, not daring to speed and thus attract too much attention. Doriza drove us toward the point where conflict was being centered, and at a deserted stretch of the tunnelway braked us to a halt.

"We must know what they're doing about us," she said, and began to tune the televiso apparatus.

Figures leaped into view on the screen. I stared. Members of the Council—I recognized them—were marshalled against a wall, as if for a firing squad. And a firing squad faced them. Someone lifted a hand as a signal. The line of soldiers lifted their electro-automatics. I saw the play of sparks, heard the whip and thud of pellets. A form fell, another, another.

"They're rebelling!" I cried. "Overthrowing the Council! Somehow," and my heart sang wildly, "they know the truth!"

But Doriza put her hand on mine, and it trembled. "No, Barak. Watch."

One of the riddled forms floundered and tried to rise. Elonie, no longer lovely, but an agonized and gory victim. Someone stepped forward and coolly shot her through the head. It was Gederr.

He faced forward. They brought broadcasting equipment to him, and he suddenly grew huge on the screen.

"Attention," he bawled, "all true people of Dondromogon! We do not hesitate to kill traitors, even the highest of rank! Those false folk who made up the Council—they have died!"

He paused, glared, and swallowed. "I, Gederr, have discovered their plot! They foisted off upon us a man of the Newcomers as Yandro—caused us to accept him as a hero, when he was only the tool of their plan to betray and sell us!"

A cheer came from somewhere, and he went on.

"They are dead! I remain to lead and protect you! And my command is, find the false spy we accepted as Yandro! Search for him, find him and kill him!"

DORIZA and I looked at each other. "Where now?" she asked.

"Toward the battle zones," I replied. She closed a circuit and steered us away.

The main corridor was almost deserted—apparently non-combatants had been cleared out in anticipation of the battle. Again the speaker began to yammer, Gederr speaking again:

"All defenses on alert! Watch for this man, falsely called Yandro—very tall, strongly made, dark, young, scar on chin. He wears a red cloak. With him is a woman of medium height, young, light brown hair, blue eyes, more robust than common—"

"Not flattering, are they?" Doriza said, and smiled.

Up ahead, two guards gestured and bawled. One pressed a wall-button, and a folding barrier crept across our way. "Vehicles out of running," said a guard as we slowed up.

"We're on the trail of those spies!" I yelled from the dark interior. "Get that barrier out of our way!"

They hesitated, and Doriza threw in the speed-ahead lever. We smashed through

and away. Cries rang in our wake, and slugs struck the rear of the vehicle. Two burned clear through the metal. I opened a panel to kick them out, and they scorched my foot, clear through the stout shoe sole.

"We must abandon this car, it's marked." Doriza was cutting speed. "Let's jump, here in the shadows."

I jumped through the open panel, and managed to stay on my feet, catching and helping Doriza as she jumped after me. The car hummed onward, and smashed loudly into the wall beyond. Guards ran into view from a doorway, chattering loudly.

Every back was toward us. We stole forward, and into the guardroom they had abandoned. I saw dials and mechanism of both televiso and speaker system. A couple of twists and pulls, and I had them out of commission.

"Slovenly discipline," I growled. "They should have left at least one man in charge."

Dropping the telltale red cloak Doriza had given me—how long ago? Yesterday? —I caught up instead a blue military cape, the property of some officer. There was also an ornate helmet, which I jammed on my head. "Stoop," Doriza counseled. "You're taller than any man on Dondromogon. Now, maybe you'll get away with —whatever you're getting away with."

Emerging, I strode toward the wreck. A man saw my cape and helmet of authority. "Attention!" he called, and they stiffened respectfully.

"How close is the point of contact with the enemy?" I demanded with official brusqueness.

One pointed the way. "Not far, sir. We're the last message-relay station. Everything's in order, and—"

"Thanks," I said, and beckoned Doriza. We walked past. I wondered what I could have done if these men had paused to think I might be the culprit for whom Gederr was clamoring.

Up ahead was a cross-tunnel, and beyond that a fork. We heard men talking and moving in the distance. Doriza pointed to an inscribed door.

"The way to the works below. I've seen it on the televiso. The mined floor of the main chamber has a second cavern below."

I scowled. "As I remember, Gederr said he had blocked all advance tunnels of the Newcomers, except at one spot. What kind of explosives will he use?"

"Glare-rays," said Doriza. "You wouldn't know, Barak, the Newcomers haven't any such. It's a special vibration-speed that sets atoms at a pitch ready to fly violently apart. Anything it involves can be exploded at the first touch of fire."

"Anything?" I repeated. "Weapons, men, earth? Doriza, can you operate such a ray?"

"I think I can."

"Then come," and I pushed open the panel.

The elevator cage was waiting, and its operation not hard to study out. Quickly we sped down and stepped forth into another great chamber, bright and echoing. A sentry confronted us.

"Your pass?" he demanded.

I chose to bluster it out. "What kind of idling goes on here?" I snapped at him. "I'm from the Council, to see if the report is true—that you haven't made all ready for the ambush."

"But we have," he protested.

"You give me arguments, you insolent upstart? Where's your commander?" I turned to face an officer that hurried up. "This sentry needs to be disciplined, taught respect for his superiors," I scolded. "What have you to say, sir, about the laxity and slowness of work here?"

"But we're ready and more than ready," the officer assured me. "Look, sir," and he pointed. "This whole cavern is dug out to completion, the overhead roof thinned for the explosion. See the play of glares upon it."

I LOOKED, and nodded as if in sour agreement. The earth floor was a maze of cables and coils, and here and there, strategically placed, were little wheeled stands with mechanisms atop. From each of these beat upward a cone of glaring golden light against the rough ceiling. It blinded me to look at them.

"The glares," Doriza murmured.

I gazed at the men on duty. "Is nobody armed? What if the Newcomers get in here?"

The officer shook his head. "You know that weapons would be our own destruc-

tion. Electro-automatics, disintegrators, ray-sabers—they all give off flame. And a touch of flame in any one of these glare-fields would explode the whole chamber, and the solid soil around it, into atoms."

I glanced toward the far end. "Up yonder I see no glares."

"Of course not. Beyond and above is the point that coincides with the narrow approach left for the Newcomers." The officer studied me narrowly. "If you are from the Council, why are you ignorant of all these things?"

It would be a difficult question to answer plausibly, but I was spared the task. Someone hurried from a little televiso shack and saluted the officer.

"Orders, sir. Important. We're to withdraw immediately. The Newcomers are advancing, and the forces above will take over operation."

"Of course," the officer said, and turned from me to shout commands. Men began to hurry away past us, toward the elevator, eager to quit the post of danger.

"Come, Doriza," I said softly, and she followed me along a wall. "Here's one of those explosion mechanisms. If we can bring it between us—"

She did something to turn it off, and we trundled it along on its wheels. I pointed to the spot above which the entry-point was said to be, and toward it we went, unchallenged and unnoticed. We reached the earthy far wall, and it was steep, but with the point of my ray-saber I dug pits for hands and toes. Up I scrambled to the ceiling. There I paused, hanging like a bat.

"Disintegrator," I called down to her.

"Dare we?"

"We must dare!"

She tossed me the disintegrator pistol. I turned it on and fate favored me once again. No explosion occurred. I tunnelled upward, upward, and climbed up the slanting chimney-like tunnel I made. Moments later, I broke into open air above.

I was in a necklike passage. Lying flat, I looked each way. To one hand was a great cavern, the ambush-space, in which Dondromogon's warriors were cautiously ranging themselves. Opposite was a wide tunnel, empty as yet—a work of the Newcomers, into which this passage had been invitingly opened by the defenders. I was

not observed as, rising to my knees, I tore my cape into strips and knotted them into a line.

I lowered it. "Fasten on the glare-ray," I told Doriza, and when she had done so I drew it up. After it climbed Doriza herself.

"Now what?" she demanded. "I haven't had time to ask."

"Turn on the glare. Like that, yes—set it against one wall, and let it fall on the opposite, to fill this little passageway through which they must pass to fight each other."

The golden glow sprang into being. At the same moment a shout rose from the direction of the corridor. A patrol of Newcomers appeared, and others behind.

I sprang erect.

"Attention, all!" I roared at the top of my lungs. "Fire no shots, send no rays, or you will all perish in the explosion! You came to fight, exterminate! But I—I, Barak, the foremost fighter on this planet—am here to see that it does not happen!"

And I drew the saber at my side.

VI

I STRUCK a pose as I stood there. I hoped that a grim and heroic attitude might give them pause.

"It's Barak!" said an officer at the forefront of the Newcomers.

"Barak!" echoed a warrior of Dondromogon. I heard a rattle and clink of weapons.

"Remember," I made haste to call out, "a bullet or ray will tear this place—and both forces—to bits! I'll perish, and so will every man on either side, as far as the explosion reaches!"

The Newcomers were only a trifle mystified, but the Dondromogon party, which knew what was beneath us, wavered. Those in the front rank appeared to give back a little. The Newcomers saw this beyond me, and made to move forward. Their officer, he who had recognized me, gestured outward with his arms to make some sort of battle formation. "Rush through," he said, "and fight it out in the clear beyond."

"Come on if you dare!" blared an officer of Dondromogon.

"Let nobody dare," I said, "unless he thinks he can fight his way past me."

The Newcomers paused in turn. "Barak," said the officer, "don't you know us? Don't you know me?"

I did know him, now that he spoke again. "You're Harvison, aren't you?" I hailed him. "Don't be the first I must kill." I wheeled around. "My challenge isn't to the Newcomers alone. I said, nobody shall pass through. My sword, if not my voice, will stop this war, here and now."

I heard a laugh, deep and familiar. Gederr had come among his troops.

"That's logic for you!" he mocked me. "Barak was always a man of blood! He'll kill us all to stop this slaughter. Someone finish him."

One of his lieutenants spoke to two of the foremost men, who stepped forward, rifles at the ready.

"If they shoot—" began Doriza tremulously.

"If they do, they destroy everyone!" I reminded yet again. "Come, who dares. Swords if you will, but no fire!"

The officer who had given the order stepped between the two soldiers, saber drawn. "Ready to rush," he said. "My blade, your butts—"

They approached, side by side. Their faces were set, grim. They faltered for only a moment at the entry to the glare field.

In that moment I rushed them.

They hadn't expected, three against one. I shouted, and hurled myself at the soldier on the left. He made to dodge, and the officer opposed his own saber; but I spun away from it and before the other soldier knew my mind I was upon him. I could not use the ray in my blade, but it drove past his hastily lifted gun-barrel and struck his mailed shoulder so heavily that he dropped his weapon. Stepping in close, I uppercut him with the curved hilt as with a mailed fist.

Leaping over his falling form, I was upon the officer. A single twist, and I had his saber in my left hand. Two blows sent him staggering back. I parried a blow from the rifle-stock of the remaining soldier with my left-hand blade, while with my right I stabbed him in the side. He, too, retreated, clutching his wound. I

waved my blood-streaming weapons.

"Who next?" I called.

Harvison made stout reply:

"You're mad, Barak. I know I'm no match for you, nobody is—but here I come!"

He came, and his fellows. They all tried to crowd at once into that narrow corridor, and hampered each other. I had a mighty sweep with both my swords, spanning twelve full feet with them—enough for my purpose. At my first parry I turned aside three points at once, disengaged, and got home on poor Harvison, through the shoulder. He sank to one knee, and further impeded his friends. I made a sweeping cut with both blades, and despite themselves they gave back.

"This is monotonous," I taunted them. "Make it exciting."

"Rush at his back," I heard Gederr yelling.

"Careful!" Doriza warned me. And then another voice I knew, deep and stout:

"I won't let them! Yandro, or Barak, or whoever you are—I'm with you!"

"Klob!" I yelled joyously over my shoulder. "I should have known I could count on you!"

He had rushed, facing about at my very shoulder-blades. I heard the snick of his glade against another weapon. Doriza again cried a warning, to Klob this time, and he scored on his adversary, for he snorted triumphantly. Then the Newcomers surged at me again.

I COULD not kill my own people. I strove to wound only. Three staggered back, out of the fight, but the others pressed me bravely. Both my swords must be everywhere at once. My breath began to come quickly, my mind floundered here and there for new stratagems. The saving answer came, not from my own brain, but from Klob.

"You!" I heard him address a new adversary. "You want to kill me? Truly?"

"Why—" panted the other. "Why, no—Klob—why kill—"

"You were my friend!" Klob harangued him. "Turn here with me! A chance for an end of war! Will you—won't you? If not, defend yourself, and I could always fence better—"

"I'm with you, Klob," the other agreed,

rather sullenly. And then he stood by Klob.

At that moment I beat the biggest of my own adversaries to his knees, and the others stood off. I stole a quick glance around. Klob had been joined by his late opponent, a short but well-knit warrior armed with both sword and rifle. It gave me hope and an inspiration.

"Fools!" I said, pointing my swords. "You won't trust me, when I only want to help you, and these other fools who have been fighting you! You can't conquer me! So join me!"

"Why?"

That was Harvison, again on his feet, holding a bloody hand to his wound. The query was enough to slow up the others. They listened, and I had time and wit to reply.

"A handful of rulers, with blind ambition, caused the war. They're mostly gone. I want peace, a chance to bring both sides together."

"Stop his traitor mouth!" cried someone far back.

"Who's afraid to hear?" I yelled. "You almost walked into a trap, and I stopped you. These defenders have mined the cavern beyond—"

"He tells the truth, you Newcomers!" Klob seconded me. "If you can't understand truth and tell it from lies—*look out*, they come!"

He meant his own late comrades. Gederr had urged a fresh body at us.

"Quick!" I cried. "They heard me tell of their ambush, they want to silence me! Won't anyone help!"

"I will," gurgled Harvison, wounded as he was. He stepped past me, sword in his left hand, and engaged a Dondromogon warrior. Another big Newcomer leaped forward to do likewise. I seized my opportunity.

"Don't move without my order!" I addressed the remainder of Harvison's party, as if they were my allies again. "These defenders have the advantage of you in their planted explosives!"

"Then destroy them some other way," growled an under-officer.

I whirled toward the Dondromogon front. The attackers fell back.

"You still scare any man you look at, Barak," said Harvison. He was a little tottery from loss of blood, but game. "Well,

shall we charge?" He managed a grin.

"I've been trying to keep you from doing that," I groaned. "I don't want tragedy here and extermination afterward. Can't this world stand peace—"

"If you can do it," someone said behind me, "I give you full authority."

I knew him. He was Dr. Thorald—high in the Newcomer command. With him were the other leaders, Parkeson and Captain Cross.

"Danger!" I gasped at them. "Don't come through here. Doriza, see that they do not—" I looked for her. She was not there.

"She slipped away while we fought," said Klob. "First setting the glare-lamp to run—"

My heart sank. "Which way did she go? Toward the Newcomers, or toward Dondromogon?"

"Toward Dondromogon," he said, and my heart sank the rest of the way.

She had decided to betray me after all.

"Wait here, all," I commanded, and moved clear of the glare-field. Moved straight toward the host of Dondromogon.

Gederr laughed again. I could read his thoughts. He had clinched his own power by judicious murders. Now he thought I was in his hands. "Shoot him down," he bade.

"Let no man shoot," I warned. "A pellet flying past me will strike and set off the glare-field. It's still swords, and in the open we can use their rays."

I flicked on my own. The blade glowed like hot iron.

"Come and fight," I invited. "All of you. Or withdraw and explode this trap on me alone."

"He's tired of life," snarled Gederr, hidden in the ranks.

"I'm tired of this fighting," was my reply. "If I die alone, the Newcomer force remains intact. It can move upon you and force you to peace. Men of Dondromogon, overthrow this coward tyrant Gederr, who defends his pride and power with your bodies!"

I think they indicated that they knew the truth of that, and Gederr knew it, too. At any rate, he moved boldly to reestablish his influence.

"I'll prove he lies! I hide nowhere!" The words fairly rang out. "Retreat,

quickly, to the positions behind. Leave me to face him."

THEY FELL back, quickly and orderly. Of a sudden I found myself in that big cave, and Gederr before me, no more than twenty paces distant. He held his ray-saber, glowing and ready, in his right hand. In his left was some sort of silvery cylinder. He grinned murderously.

"You offer yourself as a sacrifice," he said, "and I accept you."

I moved toward him, my body in line with the glare-field.

"You overgrown bully-swordsman," he taunted. "An ounce of my brain can defeat a ton of your big lumpy muscles."

"Explode the mine," I said. "It will take us both. You can't retreat out of both my reach and the explosion's."

"Can't I?"

He held up his cylinder. "Here's the fuse. By remote control it can set off all, or any part I select. Understand before you die, Barak. I'll blow up a small area, and you with it, as soon as you set foot where I want."

His broad face sniggered. "Oh, you've played into my hands from the first! You tried to disrupt—you only gave me an excuse to wipe out the rest of that Council, and take all power for myself. Now I'll kill you. Will you come on? Or retreat, and die as you flee? Or just stand there, like a captive statue?"

I continued my advance upon him. "You're lying," I said, but my heart told me that for once he was not.

"Your life is in my hands," he said. "You don't know what moment will see your own feet carrying you to your death. Come, pursue me, brave Barak, stupid Barak. Let your last thought be this—your death helps me immeasurably."

"You're lying," I said again, and he laughed again.

"Reflect. Let your thick skull filter these facts. I shall destroy you. To my followers I will be a hero. Your own Newcomers will pause and wonder. I can re-order my defenses, and most of the planted mines will remain to check any advance—"

Forgetting all caution, all planning, I charged him. He turned and ran like Don-dromogon's outer winds.

But I had taken no more than half a dozen steps in pursuit when all the thunders and lightnings of the universe seemed to burst around me.

I fell, swiftly and deeply, into black nothingness.

I WAS able to establish which way was up, which down, and that I lay horizontally, as if floating in liquid or upon clouds. My ears hummed a trifle, and a voice spoke.

"He will be all right."

Dr. Thorald! I opened my eyes, and they were blurred. I lifted a hand to them, and moaned despite myself.

"Were you killed, too?" I muttered.

"Killed? Not me. Nobody was killed, except that fat pig you met in the cavern. Not enough of him left to make a funeral worth while." Thorald looked behind him. "Ahoy, Parkeson! Cross! Barak's going to be all right."

The other two heads of the Newcomer expedition pushed into view, and looked down upon me where I lay.

"High time," grumbled Parkeson. "They're yelling for him—both sides. Barak, you'll have to drop all your weapons and take up political economy. I greatly fear you'll have a world to run."

"World?" I echoed stupidly. "What world?" My head cleared a bit. "Where's Doriza?"

"The fighting's over," Parkeson soothed me. "Just as you forced it to be. I'm still trying to decide whether you were an epic hero or an epic idiot, there at the cross-ways of battle, making us all stop, or fight you! But your hunch paid off. The entire Council of Dondromogon is dead, and—"

"Doriza," I said again.

"Somebody named Klob, a sturdy soldierly chap, is taking charge. An old sneak named Sporr tried to foment a counter-rising, but Klob disintegrated him. However, the army of Dondromogon still holds an inner defense—says it doesn't trust us quite. Wants only you to assure it that we mean peace. Feel like getting up, Barak?"

Dr. Thorald leaned over. "You've engineered this yourself, Barak, or maybe you didn't engineer it—maybe you only bulled

it through. So I won't put words in your mouth, or thoughts in your head. But tell those deluded people to start by trusting us. And you know that they can. Nobody wanted war less than I. Peacetime endeavor on Dondromogon is quite difficult and exciting enough."

"Doriza," I said yet again, and then, "All right, gentlemen. You won't tell me about her. Maybe you don't dare. But how did I survive?"

"Oh, that?" put in Captain Cross. "Don't you know? The explosion was set off prematurely, to trap and destroy Gederr. It blew him to atoms, but you were clear of it. You had a bad tumble into the lower chamber—"

Now I sat up. "Never tell me that he bungled it that badly! Gederr was a tyrant and coward and murderer, but not a bungler!"

"He was to some extent. Is your head clear? Now we can begin to explain."

Cross subsided, and Dr. Thorald took up the tale: "We sent a spy among them, a long time back, a spy that would pretend to be renegading from us. The spy was good, but got a rather visionary idea, like your own—that peace was better than war between us."

"Practically treason," opined Parkeson sagely.

"We might have held a court-martial and an execution," went on Dr. Thorald, "but for you. Because you seemed to plan out all this Horatius-at-the-bridge coup. And just when we thought it had achieved success—we thought you were failing."

"And up bobs our ex-spy, and sets off the explosion," chimed in Cross. "Sets it off to destroy Gederr and save you. And that left them without a leader to order battle, and they were more than glad to talk peace."

"What," I growled, "has all this to do with Doriza?"

"Why," grinned Dr. Thorald, "they're yelling for her, too, to lead in the final peace talks. Because, you see, she was our spy, our pseudo-renegade, who set off the explosion!"

Doriza came forward to where I had sagged back on the pillows. At sight of her smile, I thought no more of strife and wounds and worries.