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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"On the back of each flying reptile was a saddle, and a human rider."

World of the Dark Dwellers

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A thrilling weird-scientific tale of a distant world and the dreadful creatures that tyrannized over its human subjects—a story of the heroic Brotherhood of the Redeemer

1. The Call to Krann

MY FATHER was dying. I bent over his bed, with an aching misery in my heart and a hard, strangling lump in my throat. I felt hot, stinging tears behind my eyelids.

In the carven bed my father continued

to gasp out his life. A mere, withered shell of a man now, but with something in his great, gaunt figure and wasted, dark face that made it seem that I looked at myself grown older. For we were two of the same breed, a breed hard and strong and somehow a little strange.

"Father?" My voice was almost harsh

in my attempts to keep it level. "You wanted to tell me something?"

"Yes, Eric." James North, my father, gasped the words in a hoarse whisper, with agonized effort. His eyes were hypnotic, widened black pools of pain and desperate resolve. "Must tell you before I die—the great secret of our race—the secret of two worlds——"

"Don't try to talk, father, if it hurts you," I said, forcing down the choking lump in my throat.

"*Must* tell you!" My father's voice was a thick, strangled stuttering now. "Eric, listen closely. You know that since your childhood you have been instructed in speaking and reading a strange language, unlike any language known on Earth."

"Yes, father. You never would tell me why I had to learn it, and all the other things." Even in this moment of aching grief, I felt a little of the puzzlement that had clouded my mind so long.

How I had puzzled over it, during all these years! That utterly strange language which my father had carefully taught me, a language the like of which I had never since discovered among Earth's past or present tongues. Weird, alien language from the unknown! And my father also insisted on my learning expert swordsmanship, on my choosing a scientific career; never explaining the reason, saying only, "You'll learn why later, Eric."

And now the time for explanations had come at last. My father's dying moments! Only this morning the telegram had summoned me from the New York university where I was a rising young physicist, up here to the old Connecticut family estate, where my father lay suddenly stricken. My father, drifting out of life, wanting desperately before he died to explain something to me.

His dying eyes were ghastly in their

brilliance, as though life was flaming up in them one last time before going out.

He whispered, "The chain—the chain around my neck, Eric. Take it off."

My fingers fumbled under his pajama jacket, and I drew from around his neck the thin chain there. At its end was a curious little emblem or medallion of gray, shining metal like platinum.

The emblem consisted merely of three interlinked pentagons. It was cool in my grasp, and I felt somehow an electric thrill from holding it, a strange sense of new power, as though alien forces rushed into me from the little emblem.

"Put it around your neck," gasped my father. "Wear it while you live, and before you die, give it to *your* son. It has come down thus in our house for countless generations—it is the ancient symbol of kingship in the world of Krann."

His speech became a wild, gasping rattle and he clutched my arm convulsively. "The scroll—the scroll you will find in the coffer in my safe—it will tell you the story, the great secret of our house, and why some day one of our race must go back to Krann. I hoped to be that one, but my scientific knowledge was not great enough. Perhaps, after all these generations, you will be the one."

His eyes burned into my face. "Somehow I think you *will* be the one who at last goes back to that other world! But if you go—beware the Dwellers in Darkness—the warning in the scroll——"

Quite suddenly and softly, my father was dead. He had simply relaxed in my arms, his voice ceasing, his brilliant, burning eyes dulling into an empty stare.

TEARS struggled into my eyes as I lowered his pitifully wasted figure back onto the bed. The strain of hard, rigid self-control in my nature made me fight back those tears as I went slowly to the door and called the waiting physician.

"He's gone, doctor," I said tonelessly.

The doctor nodded soberly. "It was only will-power that kept him alive this long. He said he must see you before he died." He added sympathetically, "I would try to get a little rest, Eric, if I were you."

I nodded, my lips tightly compressed, and went down the dusky, echoing stairs of the old house and slowly entered the library. The twilight outside made the book-lined room a place of gloom and whispers as I sat down at the desk.

Even my aching grief could not conquer the wonder and doubt in my mind. What strange thing had my dying father tried to tell me, about another world called Krann, and about a great secret connected with our family and with the strange language I had been taught in childhood? What did it mean? Had my father been delirious?

I could not believe that. I inspected the emblem I had hung around my neck, the three interlinked pentagons of gleaming gray metal. Weird, odd-looking thing! What had my father said—that it was a sign, a symbol of kingship in that other world?

Then I suddenly remembered my father's other dying words. The coffer in his safe—the coffer that contained the scroll. What scroll? I had never heard of it before, any more than I had heard of this odd emblem. But I sensed that in the coffer might be—explanation.

Rapidly I crossed the dusky room to the library safe. It was locked, but I knew the combination, and opened it. A brief search of the interior discovered the coffer. I carried it over to the desk and sat for a moment staring at the thing in the dusky gloom.

It was an oblong box of black metal, with a hinged lid. The box was light, lighter than any metal thing its size should have been. My scientifically

trained eyes saw instantly that the black metal of this coffer was no metal known on Earth.

I swung back the lid eagerly. My grief, real and aching though it was, had for the time receded into the back of my brain. I felt on the brink of tremendous mystery. My nostrils quivered to a faint, baffling, alien scent that drifted out of the open coffer.

In the black metal box was but one thing—a roll of brown, parchment-like material. My fingers felt its texture as I drew it forth. It was thin, tanned skin of some kind, but not any skin I had ever encountered—a finely grained parchment of extraordinary toughness and durability. Yet even so, it was worn and frayed and grimed, as though by the hands of many generations.

I unrolled it. In the dusk, rows of large red characters stood out dimly on the worn brown scroll. Hastily I snapped on the desk lamp. My eyes flew over the first lines of letters. Odd, stiff-looking letters they were, more like the ancient Egyptian hieratic writing than anything else, but different from that—far different from any writing known to men of this day.

Yet I could read those dim characters, for they were in the strange language my father had so patiently taught me in my childhood; the language I had never found anywhere else in the world, and had so often puzzled about. I trembled with excitement as I read the first lines.

"From Nort Norus, rightful Khal of Krann, to his sons and sons' sons and all generations that shall come after them—greetings!"

A cold breath of the alien unknown seemed to blow through the lamplit library upon me. I suddenly knew, with a shiver of awesome certainty, that out of these dim crimson letters a voice was

speaking to me from across unthinkable ages of time.

Yet I read swiftly on, my heart pounding with excitement, as that long-dead ancestor spoke through the parchment across the great gulf of time.

YOU who read this will be a child of Earth," I read, "and will not know of any other world. But learn that I, Nort Norus, your ancestor, was not born on this world but on a world that lies unthinkably far across the starry universe from Earth. That other world, which revolves around a dying red sun, is called Krann.

"I, Nort Norus, was Khal of Krann, its supreme king and ruler like my fathers before me. I ruled all the cities and peoples on the surface of Krann. In the cavernous interior of our world lived the dreaded Dwellers in Darkness, creatures unhuman and evil whose power and craft are greater than that of any human. But the Dwellers in Darkness could never emerge onto the surface, since sunlight or moonlight kills them; so they could not attack us, and my people lived in peace and plenty.

"I was a just and kind ruler and my people loved me. In my reigning city of Zinziba, I occupied my leisure in searching for wisdom, delving into the secrets of nature. In that search I discovered that points in the universe far separated three-dimensionally may be very close in other dimensions, and I saw that it would be possible to short-cut through those other dimensions to worlds far, far across the cosmos from Krann. But I thought no more of my discovery, for my duty was on Krann.

"Then came — rebellion! A distant cousin of mine aspired to be Khal of Krann in my place. He knew he and his few plotting followers could not by themselves supplant me, loved and revered as

I was by my people. So in his resolve to usurp my throne, this plotter did an accursed and awful thing. He went secretly down into the dark bowels of Krann where no man had ever dared go before, to the Dwellers in Darkness. And he made a compact with the dread unhuman ones that if they helped him supplant me, he would give them anything they desired in return.

"The Dwellers in Darkness accepted the unholy compact. They lent the usurper strange and superhuman powers, and in return asked that when he came to the kingship he would deliver them each year as sacrifices a certain number of his human subjects. For the Dwellers in Darkness for some reason crave the brains of humans for their purposes. The usurper swore to deliver them the sacrifices they asked.

"With the powers they had given him, the usurper and his followers swept all before them and at last besieged my capital city Zinziba. My family and few surviving followers were hemmed in, and I saw we must flee. To no place in Krann could we flee; so hastily I prepared a mechanism that would hurl us across the universe to another world, by short-cutting through dimensions. That mechanism, whose plan is at the end of this writing, succeeded and in an instant flung us far across the starry universe onto this savage, alien world of Earth. The usurper could not follow us here, but we were fugitives on a strange world, attacked by brute-like men and monstrous beasts. We fought to survive, and I, Nort Norus, burned always with the resolve to return some day to Krann, crush the usurper, and stop the delivery of my people as sacrifices to the evil Dwellers in Darkness.

"But I could not do it! I, Nort Norus, was already old and had to exert all my powers to keep my faithful followers

from perishing, on this wild world of Earth. Now I am dying, but I write this message to be handed down as a sacred trust to my son and his sons after him. Let them cherish the scroll from generation to generation, it and the sacred symbol which is the sign of kingship of the Khal of Krann. Let them teach their sons the language of my people that they may read the scroll. And some day surely one of my descendants will be able to return to Krann and cast down the usurper's successors and stop the unholy sacrifices.

"You, who now read my words after perhaps many ages, may be the one to go. If you have the knowledge and power to go back to Krann, I solemnly charge you, go! Do not fail your enslaved people on distant Krann; for they are still your people, you are their rightful Khal, though ages have passed before you read this. It may be you will perish hideously in the quest, for awful are the powers of the Dwellers in Darkness that are allies to the usurper's house. But right shall arm you, and if you die, you die in defense of right. And know that if you go, there goes with you the spirit of your dead ancestor, Nort Norus, Khal of Krann."

I LAID down the scroll. My brain was stunned with wonder. The lettered words had seemed like a clear, loud voice speaking in my ear, a sharp cry out of the long-dead past, a solemn message that had been passed down from generation to generation.

Could it all be true, I asked myself? Another peopled world, far across the universe, from which long ago the ancestors of my family had come to Earth? A world peopled by civilized humans, haunted by fear of a dark, powerful, unhuman race beneath?

The strange coffer and scroll, and the emblem around my neck, could have come only from another world, surely. I

snatched up the scroll again, unrolled it past the end of the writing. There was the plan Nort Norus had mentioned, a diagram of a mechanism clear enough to me as a modern physicist. A way to short-cut across the universe's dimensions, by generating a super-vibratory force that would thrust the machine through the continuum of ordinary gravitational space. . . .

I could build that machine, could flash across the universe in an instant to that other world, with this plan before me! My imagination fired to the incredible adventure. To leap to that distant world, a weird, alien world of which I was rightful ruler! To win back the kingship that my long-dead ancestor had lost, and break the black yoke of dread evil that had been placed upon my people!

Yes, they were *my* people. For I, Eric North, was rightful Khal of Krann, and around my neck swung the emblem of kingship. And from that emblem subtle currents of power and confidence seemed rushing into me. By heaven, I would pull down the usurpers who long ago had driven our house from the throne! I would destroy them for daring to deliver my people as sacrifices to the evil ones of the dark spaces inside Krann!

For a moment, a cold doubt chilled my leaping blood. Those dark, unhuman creatures of the interior—after all, their aid to the usurper had been too much for my ancestor long ago. He himself had had to flee that world, and in the scroll had warned, "Awful are the powers of the Dwellers in Darkness." And my father had repeated that warning as he lay dying. Could I hope to win against them when Nort Norus himself had lost?

I forced back that chilling doubt. My mind had set in unchangeable resolve. I was going to accept the tremendous adventure, go to that world and fight to break that black tyranny over my people.

There waited for me either a hideous, awful death or the kingship of a world.

I spoke aloud, in a low, tense voice, as though to someone in the dusky room with me.

"I'm going, Nort Norus," I said. "One of your sons is going back at last—to Krann."

2. *The Brotherhood of the Redeemer*

I STOOD upon the flat metal top of the squat, square mechanism that had taken me three months to build, the mechanism that was to hurl me far across the universe to another world!

"Zero hour," I muttered to myself, my hand slowly lifting toward the little control panel.

The machine was five feet square and two feet high. Inside its metal case were the batteries and transformers and great vacuum tubes whose radiated force, when turned on, would rip ordinary space and hurl the machine and any matter on it into a distant quarter of the gravitational continuum. It stood here in a corner of the lamplit library of the old house, my makeshift laboratory.

It had taken all my scientific knowledge to build the thing, even with the diagram's guidance. And even yet I was haunted by doubts. If the machine failed to operate as I expected, it might fling me clear out of our spatial universe altogether. Or if its adjustments were not quite right, it might hurl me to a different world than distant Krann.

That terrible doubt was a dark shadow over me as I hesitated with hands on the switch. In a mirror across the room I glimpsed myself—a strange figure. My tall, great-limbed figure clad in khaki shirt and shorts, at my belt a long sword such as my father had taught me to use, my black head bare. That strong doubt visible on my dark, aquiline face.

I bit my lip and gritted, "No time for doubts now. It's a gamble—with my life staked on a chance of reaching Krann."

My heart pounded as I gripped the switch. I whispered, "In the next moment, Krann or death. Here goes."

I snapped the switch shut. Instantly a terrific force struck me a stunning blow. All went black and I knew nothing more.

WHEN I awoke, I was first aware that I lay prone on the top of the machine. I opened my eyes, then blinked them in the sunlight. It was dark red sunlight—over my head stretched an unearthly other sky in which burned a huge, dying, smoldering deep crimson sun.

I staggered to my feet and stared around in stupefied awe. A weird jungle towered around me, a vast, solemnly silent forest whose black-trunked trees rose high into the dusky air, bearing masses of crimson foliage. Between the dark trunks were growths of bright scarlet shrubbery. My machine rested in a small natural clearing.

The soil under it was jet-black. Black were the rocks that showed here and there from it, and inky black were the waters of a small stream that chuckled near by. This was indeed a black world, its somber hue relieved only by the blood-like color of the thick vegetation. A dark, unearthly, red-splashed landscape, stretching under the other sky.

"Krann!" I whispered to myself. "I'm in Krann. But where are the cities and the people—my people?"

My heart was throbbing with superhuman excitement. In this weird world my ancestors long ago had been kings, and into it I had adventured in reckless quest to regain that long-lost kingship.

"Have to be careful," I muttered to myself. "Find out first how much this

world has changed, before I try to do anything."

Then subtle confidence and power seemed to flow into me again from the symbol inside my shirt. "By heaven, I'll act when the time comes. This world—it's *my* world, by right!"

My first thought was to hide the machine. I got off it and dragged it toward a near-by cluster of thick scarlet shrubbery, over which towered a tall tree with smooth, leafless black branches. Then as I dragged the machine into hiding under this tree, a horrible thing happened.

The black branches of the tree reached down like great tentacles and grasped me! They started to draw me into the glossy trunk. I uttered a hoarse cry and jerked back. Just in time I tore loose from those branch-tentacles before others seized me. The limbs of the octopus-tree whipped wildly and baffledly after me, seeking again to clutch me.

I wiped my brow, stood trembling. In sick horror I stared at the diabolical thing. Now I saw that there were other of the leafless, glossy black trees in the red jungle, and divined that they were half animal and half plant, rooted but able to seize and devour prey.

Suddenly across the brooding silence of this dusky landscape came a sharp cry of horror in a human voice.

I whirled, stared tensely in that direction. The cry came again, shriller, an agonized call for help.

I hesitated no longer, but plunged through the thick jungle in that direction. The horror and agony in that call had been too great to resist. Through thorny underbrush I fought, hacking my way with my sword, avoiding the black devil-trees. Then as I crashed into another small natural glade, I stopped horrified for a moment.

In this glade grew another of the octo-

pus-trees, and its myriad supple tentacle-branches held a human victim, drawing the hapless human toward the central trunk where a gaping slit had opened. The tree was about to devour its victim.

And the victim was a girl! A slender girl clad in white shirt and shorts much like my own, her eyes dark pools of horror in her white face as she twisted frantically in the devil-tree's grasp. She was vainly trying to use a dagger, but her white arms and limbs were held helpless.

I plunged forward with a yell, and my upraised sword came down in terrific strokes on the tentacles that clutched the girl. The blade hacked through half of them and they oozed black blood or sap. But others whipped out angrily to grasp me. I tore my sword-arm free from them and struck again, severing more of the branches that held the girl. One more swift stroke sliced the last tentacle coiled around her.

Before other branches could grasp us I tore the girl away from the devilish thing. I staggered with her safely out of reach of it, and then stopped, panting.

I gasped, speaking the language of Krann taught me so long ago, "That was close! The thing nearly had us both."

The girl, with stunning unexpectedness, stabbed at my heart with the dagger in her hand!

My instinctive backward leap just saved me. Her keen dagger tore down through the front of my shirt.

I cried, "What in the world's the matter with——"

The girl, dark eyes blazing out of her taut white face, struck at me again before I could finish the words.

This time, better prepared, I knocked her arm aside and seized her. She twisted like a wildcat in my grip but I held her.

"Is this the gratitude I get for saving your life?" I cried wrathfully.

The girl blazed, "You saved me only

to take me back to Zinziba a prisoner, guard!"

I understood her speech, though her language was slightly different from that I had learned. The ancient language of Krann had changed some during the long ages, but apparently not much.

One word in her speech caught me. Zinziba! The chief city of this world, where long ago my forefathers had reigned as the Khals of Krann!

I said, puzzled, "I am no guard, and have no desire to take you prisoner. I only wanted——"

Suddenly two brawny arms seized me from behind! Instantly I released my hold on the girl and sought to turn with my sword on my unseen attacker, but could not. Those huge arms held me helpless.

I SQUIRMED my head a little around. It was a giant of a man who had gripped me, a towering, craggy-faced warrior with eyes hard and merciless as gray steel. A great sword swung at his belt.

Beside him was another man. He was older, his hair gray, his thin face deeply lined and wrinkled, his faded eyes searching.

The giant who held me boomed to the girl, "Use your dagger on him, Lura. Quick, before other guards come after him!"

The girl Lura hesitated. "He says he is no guard, Herk Ell."

Herk Ell, the giant holding me, belated, "He's lying, of course! He's one of those cursed spawn from Zinziba who have been hunting us."

The gray-haired older man said quickly, "Maybe the man speaks truth, Herk Ell. He may be of our Brotherhood."

I did not understand what he meant, but I sensed my imminent danger and exclaimed, "I'm no guard—I don't even

know who the guards are. And I've never been in Zinziba."

Herk Ell, still holding me like a baby in those huge arms, laughed raspily. "Hear the liar," grated the giant. "Wal Az, look at the sole of his foot and see if he be of the Brotherhood."

Wal Az, the gray-haired older man, bent down and to my amazement slipped the sandals off my feet. He examined my soles.

Then the older man straightened, and his lined face too became bleak and merciless. He said metallicly, "The sign in not on his foot. He is not of the Brotherhood."

"I knew he was of the guards!" boomed Herk Ell triumphantly. "Quick, put your dagger in his heart, Lura."

My brain whirled dizzily from the stunning turn of events. I saw the girl Lura come forward with dagger upraised. Her white, soft face had hardened in the same merciless hate of me the others showed. And though her mouth quivered, her dark eyes were relentless in resolve.

I struggled madly to break loose, to fight, but was helpless in the giant's mighty arms. Lura raised her dagger, and involuntarily I closed my eyes. This was the end of my adventure, at the very beginning! Wild regret surged through my heart. That I, descendant of the ancient Khals, should at last come back to Krann only to stumble into death!

I did not feel any stabbing strike, and re-opened my eyes. Lura was still standing with the dagger upraised, but appeared frozen motionless. She was staring at my breast, where her former attack had ripped open my shirt. Her face was suddenly dead-white with fear and awe.

"Strike, girl!" snarled Herk Ell over my shoulder. "What delays you?"

Lura pointed a trembling finger at my

breast. Her frozen lips could utter but a whisper. "Look——"

Herk Ell craned his huge head over my shoulder to look down at my breast, and the gray-haired Wal Az also leaned to stare. And I saw the same incredulous awe in the girl's face falling upon their faces.

They stared at my breast like men who behold something they know cannot be real. The arms of Herk Ell fell limply from me.

The craggy-faced giant muttered slowly, "Gods of Krann—the sign of the Redeemer!"

Wal Az's faded eyes shone at me in almost superhuman awe and exaltation. He cried, "The Redeemer! He has come at last!"

And suddenly, I understood. They were all three gazing in awe at the gray metal symbol of interlinked pentagons which swung around my neck and which the ripping of my shirt had disclosed: the sign of the ancient Khals of Krann. It was still remembered, then, by the people of Krann! Sudden strong confidence swept away my daze as I stood there beneath the awed gaze of the three.

Lura whispered to me, "You *are* the Redeemer, are you not? He whom generations have prayed might come back to Krann, from whatever far place the great Khal Nort Norus went to long ago?"

I answered, "I am Eric, one of the sons of Nort Norus. I have come back to take my rightful place as Khal of Krann."

The giant Herk Ell raised his sword and cried exultantly, "Let me be first to hail you, Khal Erik! And know that I and all of the Brotherhood will follow you to death."

"The Brotherhood?" I said questioningly.

Lura explained with throbbing eagerness. "The Brotherhood of the Re-

deemer, Khal Erik! For ever since that long-dead night when the great Nort Norus and his family vanished from this world, many have believed that some day one of his sons would come back to destroy the evil that now rules here, and rule us again in peaceful justice. We of the secret Brotherhood who believe that have on our foot-soles a secret sign. We thought that you, who bore no such sign on your foot, must be our enemy."

I asked quickly, "Do the successors of the usurpers still rule? Do the sacrifices to the Dwellers in Darkness still go on?"

"They do, Khal Erik." There was dim horror and quivering new hope in Lura's shining dark eyes. "In the city Zinziba, Gor Om, descendant of the usurper, sits and rules this world. And once each month he delivers many of us into the car that takes the human sacrifices down into the black spaces inside this world, to the Dwellers in Darkness."

She added, "We three would have been numbered this time among the sacrifices, for it was discovered that we belong to the secret Brotherhood of the Redeemer which Gor Om hates and tries to root out. But we escaped Zinziba and have hidden in these jungles. Guards have constantly sought to recapture us, flying over the jungles on their rhors, searching for us. We thought you one of them."

I thought quickly and then told them decisively, "I must go to Zinziba and there make myself known to those of your Brotherhood, rally them secretly so that we may sweep Gor Om from his throne——"

"*Into the jungle—the guards come!*" hissed Wal Az at that instant, pointing wildly upward. Herk Ell's great sword leaped out and Lura uttered a cry as we looked up.

Up there had appeared a score of great flying creatures, flapping swiftly across the ocher sky, low over the red roof

of the forest. They were huge, gray-green flying reptiles like winged dinosaurs, with great heads, fanged jaws, and long bodies with enormous wings.

And on the back of each flying reptile was a saddle and a human rider! Men up there, black-armored men riding the winged reptiles across the sky, peering searchingly downward as they flapped on.

We bolted across the open glade toward the shelter of the jungle. But Wal Az cried despairingly, "Too late—they've seen us!"

For the peering eyes of one of the riders up there had discerned us running across the glade. He shouted loudly to his companions, and at the same time turned his flying steed in the air by manipulating the reins that ran to its head.

Instantly the other reptilian flying-creatures were turned by their riders also. With a wild whirl of wings and chorus of triumphant yells, the whole nightmare company of steeds and riders rushed down from the heavens after us.

3. *In the Black City*

WE NEVER reached the edge of the jungle. Before we came near it, the armored riders swooped down into the glade, threw themselves from their weird winged steeds, and were upon us. We had just time to turn and raise our swords to meet their rush.

They came at us with ferocious shouts, a wolfish-faced crew led by a helmeted captain. The winged reptiles from which they had dismounted remained resting with folded wings on the ground behind them. Herk Ell and old Wal Az and I had thrust the girl behind us.

"Cursed slaves of Gor Om, take *that!*" yelled Herk Ell, eyes blazing, as he swung his huge sword in a tremendous sweep.

The terrific slicing blow sent the head

of one of the guards leaping from his shoulders. At the same time I stabbed fiercely at the throat of another, and saw him reel back, mortally wounded.

"Alive—take them alive!" bawled the captain of our black-armored attackers.

Then for a few moments it was a mad bedlam of clashing steel and ringing shouts of rage and fear. Herk Ell downed another guard but got a thrust through his shoulder in return. Wal Az had fallen, stunned by a blow from the flat of a sword blade.

The wild *mêlée* could have lasted but a few minutes. In that time I got my sword-point between the armor of another of our attackers. But half the guards had worked around to our rear. I heard Lura scream, and turned to find her struggling in the grip of two of the guards.

I sprang to help her, but at that moment was seized by others at my own back. They bore me down by weight of numbers, and I felt them pinioning my hands and feet with thongs. Herk Ell still fought wildly, roaring defiance as he swung his huge blade. But in a moment he too was borne down by overpowering numbers.

When he also had been bound into a helpless log, the helmeted captain of the guards struck him across his bloody, bruised face.

"Scum of the Brotherhood," snarled the officer. "Gor Om's heart will be glad when we bring you back to Zinziba."

A guard who stood over me asked his superior, "What of this one? He is not one of those we were sent out to recapture, so we may as well kill him here."

His sword was poised over my heart. The symbol I wore around my neck, the ancient pentagonal emblem, had in the struggle slipped around to my back so that it could no longer be seen.

The captain rasped, "No, we take him

with the others. He is undoubtedly one of their cursed secret society who has been helping them hide, and the great Gor Om will reward him for that kindness."

A bestial roar of laughter went up from the others at the cruel jest. The captain ordered, "We return to Zinziba! Each of you four take one of the prisoners with you on your rhors."

The four guards he indicated dragged our helpless forms toward their waiting winged steeds. The rhors, as the flying reptiles were called, crouched awaiting their masters, and as I was dragged toward one by my immediate captor, I glimpsed the creature's grotesqueness more closely.

I was dumped across the front of the saddle, and my guard clambered astride the saddle itself. Lying there, I could see that there were stirrups for his feet like those of any saddle, and tough leather reins that ran to metal rings embedded in the rhor's jawbones. My three fellow prisoners' trussed forms were similarly slung across saddles; then the captain shouted and the creatures rose with a thunder of flapping wings.

The rhors flew with immense power, climbing steeply into the dusky red sunlight. The helmeted officer flew ahead, leading the troop. At a height of a thousand feet we flew across the red jungles, a strange cavalcade in the sky.

My heart was like lead. My brief dream of gathering the Brotherhood of the Redeemer to my standard and plucking Gor Om from his throne in Zinziba seemed shattered. I was going to Zinziba, yes, but as an ignominious prisoner dragged to a nameless fate instead of as Khal of Krann claiming my rightful throne.

Yet I still did not despair. The subtle confidence that seemed to flow into me from the symbol inside my shirt still

hardened me. And though hideous doom loomed ahead, I was still grim in my determination to free my people, when we came at last into sight of the towers of Zinziba.

It was like a black fairy city, rising from the red vegetation of this somber black world! For the city was of black metal, a close-clustered mass of slim, ebon spires that vied with one another in climbing into the dusky sunset. A dark, high wall enclosed it from the surrounding forest, and I perceived that the city was a perfect pentagon in shape.

We flew closer, and I could see many rhors with riders flapping to and fro over the black spires. Lights were winking forth in the city as the sun sank. Now I perceived that at the mathematical center of the pentagonal metropolis was a tapering black tower that was also pentagonal in cross-section and climbed higher than any of the other pinnacles.

OUR rhors glided down with rigid wings amid the tremendous spires. I glimpsed throngs of white-clothed men and women in the darkening streets below. Our winged steeds swept toward the base of the highest central tower, and in a walled courtyard behind that tower I had brief vision of a great, round opening in the black pavement, a dark well that seemed like the entrance to lightless spaces underneath.

Our rhors swept over the enclosure of that ominous opening, and alighted in another walled court just beside the wall of the enormous pentagonal tower. There were other rhors resting here, and black-armored attendants who ran forward to us.

One of them exclaimed to our captors' captain, "You recaptured the fugitives, then? The Khal Gor Om will be greatly pleased."

The helmeted captain declared, "I take

them before the Khal for judgment now. Untie their bonds."

We were yanked off the rhors and our bonds were loosed. Herk Ell stretched his great arms ominously, and the score of guards around us raised their swords threateningly.

"March!" snarled the helmeted captain to us, pointing. "One move to resist, and you'll die here."

"Better die so than wait for the black car of the Dwellers in Darkness," muttered Herk Ell, bunching his great muscles to fight.

I whispered swiftly to him, "No, don't resist! While we live, there is a chance, for I have something in mind if they take us before Gor Om as they say."

"There is no escape for us now," the giant muttered, and I saw the same hopelessness reflected on the faces of Lura and old Wal Az.

Nevertheless, Herk Ell refrained from attacking the guards. With their naked swords raised alertly around us, and the captain leading, we were conducted into the huge pentagonal tower.

We passed through halls and corridors of ebon metal, softly illuminated by indirect light. My heart throbbed with strange emotion. This was the palace of the Khals, where my forefathers had once reigned.

We were halted by guards at a great double door, while our captain stated his business. Soon one of our challengers returned and said, "The Khal Gor Om will see and judge the prisoners now."

THE huge doors swung wide. Before us opened a vast pentagonal chamber at the center of the tower. Softly illuminated with almost liquid light, its somber black walls rose far overhead. Dim, throbbing music from an unseen source drifted through it.

At luxurious tables sat fully two hun-

dred men and women, the nobles of Krann. All were dark-haired and white-skinned, and all dressed in the brief white garments, the men wearing swords. Their laughing chatter died and they stared at us as we were marched toward the raised table at one side where sat the Khal himself.

Gor Om, usurping Khal whose ancestors had long ago supplanted my own forefathers! As we faced him across the table, my heart throbbed with ancient hate of this upstart race who had for ages held my people in hideous bondage to the dark creatures of evil inside this world. And Gor Om's gaze rested on my face, drawn by my burning eyes.

Utterly gross in appearance was Gor Om, a bloated obese man of forty whose vast, flabby bulk overflowed the throne in which he sat, whose ringed, puffy hands rested as though borne down by their own weight. His thick black hair was oiled and curled, and the great rolls of fat on his face almost hid his shrewd, small black eyes. For there was shrewdness in those eyes, yes, and power in that gross, obscene body.

He shifted his gaze to the captain who had brought us and said in a thick, husky voice, "You have done well to recapture Herk Ell and Wal Az and the girl, who have long plotted with their cursed Brotherhood against me. But who is this other?"

He flicked his thumb at me. The captain explained, "We found him with the fugitives, and he fought at their side. Undoubtedly he too belongs to the Brotherhood."

"Then he shall share their fate," Gor Om stated. "At dawn the black car of the mighty ones, the Dwellers in Darkness, comes up through the sacred pit for this month's sacrifices. These four will be of the sacrifices, and will go down to meet the mighty ones."

I thought that a cold shiver ran through the gay crowd of nobles who listened, at the mention of the dreaded Dwellers in Darkness. But Gor Om was speaking on, ironical amusement on his gross face.

"Surely," he said mockingly to us, "such a quick end is better for you of the Brotherhood of the Redeemer, as you call yourselves, than to wait longer for a Redeemer who, alas, never comes."

A shout of laughter came from the listening men and women at the tables, at this jest. I saw that Herk Ell was grinding his teeth and that Lura was looking at me, her white face strange, appealing.

My own heart was seething with wrath. Yet when I spoke, I kept my voice soft.

I said, "You are wrong, Gor Om. The Brotherhood has not waited all these ages in vain."

The usurper's small eyes twinkled. "You still believe that your fabled Redeemer will come?"

I said deliberately, "The Redeemer has come."

By heaven, there was an electric hush through that vast chamber! Every soul in it was suddenly tense, leaning forward, staring at me astoundedly. Yet I kept my burning gaze on Gor Om.

The folds of fat on his bloated face wrinkled into a smile. He said, "Where is this Redeemer, then? Why does he not show himself in Zinziba?"

"*He is here!*" I exclaimed. And I jerked out the pentagonal symbol inside my shirt and held it up for all to see.

A great sigh went over the room. Every man and woman in it seemed frozen to stone as their eyes beheld the ancient, sacred symbol. There was utter, awed amazement on their faces.

Gor Om half raised from his seat, his small eyes bulging. In that instant, before he could control his features, I saw fear on his bloated face.

I exclaimed, "Gor Om, your rule approaches its end! Yes, and the rule of all your house that for ages has tyrannized over this world and delivered its people to the dark, evil ones. I am son to Nort Norus, the great Khal who long ago departed from this world. I have come back, to reclaim his throne and destroy this evil tyranny."

And before any could stop me, I spun toward the petrified people at the tables and cried, "Nobles of Krann, you have beheld the symbol and you know that I speak truth. Rise and follow me and we will kill this obscene despot and stop the black sacrifices for ever!"

Some of the nobles leaped to their feet, and for a moment I had the wild hope that they were about to join me. But Gor Om had recovered himself and his husky voice bellowed quickly.

"Guards! Seize this impostor!"

The black-armored guards behind me seized me and my fellow prisoners instantly. And other guards came running into the chamber. The nobles remained erect, staring tensely at me.

Gor Om told them smoothly, "This is but a lying slave who comes here with his tale of being Nort Norus' descendant. Nort Norus vanished and died ages ago, as all know. This fellow has made a counterfeit symbol like the ancient lost one, and seeks to play the Redeemer."

"You lie yourself!" shouted Herk Ell, straining to get free, his craggy face crimson. "The Khal Erik tells the truth and the symbol is the true one. For well do you all know that on all this world the only gray metal like that was in the emblem worn by the ancient Khals."

Gor Om commanded, "Take them down to the dungeons. When the car of sacrifices comes up at dawn, they go into it with the other chosen ones. The Dwellers in Darkness will know how to deal

with such an impostor. Let the feast go on!"

Quickly we were dragged out of the great chamber. We were hustled through halls and corridors and then down a stair into a dimly lit lower level. Along a passage were cells with heavily barred doors, and into one of these we were thrust, the bar clanging shut outside.

The cell was a small one, utterly dark. Its only opening was a tiny window, a foot square, high in its metal wall on a level with the ground outside. Through that opening we could look up into the walled courtyard of the black pit.

Herk Ell sat his huge form down and said heavily, "It was a good try you made to stir the nobles, Khal Erik. But they feared the guards of Gor Om too much to follow you, those who wished to."

Wal Az exclaimed, "The usurper fears you, Khal Erik! He knows well that you *are* the Redeemer."

I ranged the cell like a captive wild beast. "We've got to get out of here somehow!"

"Impossible," said the old man hopelessly. "No one has ever yet escaped these dungeons, locked and with guards outside. And we've but a few hours before we go into the car of the sacrifices."

Lura spoke low-voiced from the dark corner where she sat. She whispered, "I am afraid—afraid to go down to the Dwellers in Darkness."

I sat down beside her, put my arm around her slim shoulders. She clung to me, no longer the fierce fighting maiden I had met in the jungle, but merely a shaken, frightened girl, recoiling in horror from the hideous, mysterious fate that was soon to be ours.

Bitterly I cursed my own helplessness. It came over me strongly how much blind faith she and the others had had in me, the Redeemer whose coming had been prayed for by a horror-ridden people for

ages. It had been the dream of their lives that some day, somehow, I might come and deliver them from their black bondage to the dreaded things of the dark underworld. Now I had come at last, and had failed them, had shattered their age-old dream, was doomed even as they were.

4. *The Car of the Sacrifices*

FOR hours I sat wrapped in that black gloom in the equal darkness of the little cell, Lura nestled fearfully against me. There was no sound in all that time but the occasional footsteps of the two guards on watch in the outer passage.

Then Herk Ell stirred, went to the window and peered up and outward. Dawn was coming, paling the starry sky with dull pink streaks against which the looming spires of Zinziba stood out blackly.

Herk Ell said suddenly, "The car of the sacrifices comes!"

We hastened to his side, peered up through the little window into the walled courtyard of the pit. Something was coming up out of the dark, unfathomable well at the courtyard's center.

It was a strange black craft, a big disk with a low wall around its edge. There was no one on it, no sound or evidence of motive power about it, but it rose up out of the depths of the pit like a dark phantom craft and stopped, level with the pit's edge.

"Yes, the car of the sacrifices," said Wal Az with horror throbbing in his voice. "Soon we shall be on it with the other doomed ones, going down into the depths to awful doom."

Lura's slim figure trembled convulsively beside me. I tightened my arm around her, my heart swollen with futile rage.

Suddenly we all stiffened, listening.

From the passage outside the door of our cell, a low voice was whispering stealthily to us.

"Khal Erik! Khal Erik!"

I sprang to the locked door. In a low voice, I demanded, "Who is there?"

The whispering voice on the other side asked quickly, "Are you he who calls himself Khal Erik? The Redeemer?"

At my quick affirmative, the one outside swiftly unbarred and opened the door. In the dim-lit passage we beheld a half-dozen men, naked swords in their hands, their faces excited.

Wal Az exclaimed to me, "I know these men! They are of our Brotherhood!"

"Yes," said their leader. "We belong to the guards of this palace but are secret members of the Brotherhood, and resolved to free you. We killed the two sentries in this passage."

I cried, "How did you know that we were here?"

The man answered, "All Zinziba is buzzing with news that the Redeemer has returned and that Gor Om has prisoned him to be sent with the sacrifices to the evil ones. Tell me, lord, are you really the Redeemer?"

For answer, I held up the symbol around my neck. The men sank to their knees, awe in their shining eyes.

They cried, "You *are* he! We follow you to the death, Khal Erik! And all in the Brotherhood and many others too in Zinziba are ready at this moment to rise with you and overthrow Gor Om."

"We must be swift, then," I exclaimed, my blood racing with excitement. "Where are your forces? How many do they number?"

He told me, "At least ten thousand of the Brotherhood have gathered secretly outside the palace, Khal. But they cannot enter because the great palace doors are still barred, with a dozen guards inside

each door. We must overcome those guards and open the doors to let the attackers in. Then with their attack all Zinziba will rise, yes, and every other city on Krann when it receives the news."

As he spoke he was handing us swords which they had brought for us. I gripped mine and cried, "Up, then, to the doors! We'll cut down the guards inside them and open to those outside!"

Herk Ell exclaimed joyfully, flourishing his sword, "Now we settle accounts with the tyrant, once and for all."

I told the girl quickly, "Lura, you stay here. I won't have you endangered in this fighting."

Her eyes flashed. "Where you go, I'll follow, Khal Erik!" There was no time to protest—action was a paramount need.

WE HURRIED out into the passage and along the dim-lit corridor, tripping over the bodies of guards whom our rescuers had slain. Then we were hastening up the winding stair that led to the ground floor of the great building.

Emerging into a great hall, lit by the reddening light of dawn, we hurried after our guides toward a door beyond which a corridor led to the great outer doors of the palace. We had just entered that corridor, when from the opposite side of the great hall we had just crossed, there came out Gor Om himself and a score of guards.

Gor Om, as they entered the hall, was ordering, "Bring the prisoners from the dungeons at once so that we may put them in the car of sacrifices. Hurry, the mighty ones below brook no delays."

Then he glimpsed us and yelled, "They are escaping! After them!"

His men leaped after us with unsheathed swords.

I cried to Herk Ell and the others, "Get to the great doors and open them

to the forces outside! Wal Az and I will hold back these guards from following you."

The giant cried, "But Khal Erik, they're too many for you——"

"Go!" I yelled fiercely at him. "Unless you manage to admit the men outside, our chance is gone!"

Herk Ell obeyed, he and our half-dozen rescuers racing down the corridor, heading toward the great doors of the palace which could not be opened to the forces without until the guards stationed inside them had been overpowered. I snatched Lura behind me, and Wal Az and I raised our swords to meet the rush of Gor Om's guards.

The obese usurper himself did not join in the attack but remained in the background, urging them on. All twenty of them came at us, but in the narrow corridor which we were defending, they could not come at us all together.

That fact was all that saved us in the first rush. Wal Az and I struck at the same time at the crowding, onrushing men, and two of them crumpled from our tearing stabs. I got another man in the neck with a lightning slice, and the rest recoiled from our fierce defense.

"Take them, cowards!" shouted Gor Om to his men, his bloated face red with rage.

"Come and try it yourself, false Khal!" I challenged.

But the guards came at us again, spurred by their master's raging order. Again blade clashed on blade, and this time Wal Az went down with a sword-thrust through his thigh.

A blade stabbed to finish him—but I knocked it up and shore the head of its wielder from his neck. Another attacker leaped inside my guard, with shortened sword raised to stab me, but Lura had snatched up Wal Az's weapon and buried it in the man's throat.

But I was fighting alone now, keeping the girl behind me, my sword ringing against the blades that sought to reach me. Then I stumbled on the slippery, blood-wet floor and before I could recover my balance, a whirling blade grazed my skull and I went down.

As I fell, a second sword pierced the flesh of my shoulder. My body nerveless, my consciousness dimmed, I saw Lura seized by the guards, though she was fighting like a wildcat.

Gor Om had hurried forward and now called to his panting men, "Go after the others who fled down this corridor!"

But at that moment came a wild shout down the long passageway, and a guard reeling and covered with blood staggered toward us yelling, "The palace is attacked! The doors have been opened and thousands of the Brotherhood are pouring in!"

Dimly I saw Gor Om's face become ghastly in its rage. He shouted, thickly, "Sound the alarm to summon my guards from all the city!"

The wounded man cried, "Khal, it is too late—all Zinziba has risen and everywhere your guards are going down before the rebels or else are joining them. They shout that the Redeemer has come, and in a few moments their hordes will reach this place. Your only safety is in flight!"

Gor Om's eyes burned with unholy, raging fires. He exclaimed to his men, "Quick, then, to the car of sacrifices! We will escape down to the Dwellers in Darkness, who will give me powers to come back with and crush these cursed rebels.

"Bring these two with you as food for the mighty ones—quickly!" he shouted.

Dimly I felt them dragging me and the struggling Lura across the hall, Gor Om's obese figure hurrying ahead with incredible speed. I tried to struggle too,

but dazed and weak from loss of blood, could make no single effort.

I could dully hear the roaring voices of a great crowd approaching from the outer parts of the pentagonal palace, and could even distinguish Herk Ell's bull voice over them, leading them on. Then Gor Om's men dragged us out of a door into the walled courtyard of the pit.

There gaped the ominous dark well, black in the ruddy light of dawn, with the low, flat car of the sacrifices floating in it level with the pavement. Hastily Lura's struggling form and my stunned, nerveless one were hustled into the car by two of Gor Om's men. The bloated usurper sprang onto the car also, but the others of his men hung back.

They cried terrifiedly, "Khal, we dare not go down into the dark underworld—we fear the Dwellers in Darkness."

Gor Om exclaimed, "The Dwellers are my friends and allies and will not harm you. They will give me weapons with which I shall return up here and quell this revolt. But if you remain here you will be slain."

They rolled their eyes in extremity of terror, and one exclaimed, "It is better to die here than to go down into the dark haunts of the mighty ones!"

At that moment Herk Ell and a raging mob of men with waving swords burst out of the tower into the courtyard. The giant saw us in the car, and he yelled and leaped forward.

Too late! At that instant, without any signal or warning, without any visible sign of guidance or motive power, the black car began to drop smoothly into the dark pit. Down and down it sank into unplumbed blackness.

Then it seemed to my dazed brain that the car turned and sped obliquely, almost horizontally, in the darkness. Through that stygian obscurity it moved under the crust of Krann, drawn and guided by the

mysterious beings of these cavernous depths, bearing us on as silently and strangely as some ship of the dead.

5. *The Dwellers in Darkness*

GRADUALLY my head began to clear. I found that Lura, crouching beside me on the floor of the car, had managed to staunch the flow of blood from my wounds. I still felt dreadfully weak from loss of blood, but contrived with an effort to sit up.

And I discovered that now we could see, a little. These black depths were not wholly lightless, though on first plunging into them from the sunlight they had seemed so. There was a faint, drifting luminescence in them, an uncanny, feeble light that had its source in a weakly radioactive gas which filled the air. As my eyes accustomed themselves to it, I could discern things about me.

The two guards stood over us with swords in their hands, ready to stab us at the slightest sign of resistance. Gor Om himself hunched at the low rail of the car, gazing tensely forward. There was apprehension on the usurper's bloated face, as though he was none too sure of himself in venturing into these dreaded depths, even though the things that peopled them were his allies.

The car was moving smoothly, silently forward down a titanic natural tunnel beneath the crust of this world. High overhead vaulted its jagged roof of black rock, great stalactites pointing down like huge fingers at our passing car. An awful silence filled this buried place, as the car steadily and softly moved along it.

Lura was almost sobbing to me. "Khal Erik, I feared you were killed!"

Gor Om heard and turned, a dreadful smile on his puffy face. "You will wish that you had been killed, both of you, be-

fore long, when you face the Dwellers in Darkness."

Rage again twisted his bloated features, and he snarled, "So will they above who revolted wish they were dead when I return with weapons furnished by the mighty ones, and grind them again into submission."

Lura whispered, "He will do it, Khal Erik! He will get dark powers from the Dwellers and return above."

"Not if I can help it," I said desperately. My eyes measured the swords poised over me, estimating my chances of overcoming these men in my present weakened condition.

One of the guards had turned and was asking Gor Om fearfully, "What appearance have the mighty ones, Khal?"

Gor Om, that apprehension flickering again on his face momentarily, said, "I know not, for never have I or any other man gone down to them and returned, except my long-dead ancestor who ages ago made the great compact with them. But fear not—they will know me and they know that I am their ally."

The car continued to speed smoothly forward down that eery, dimly lit tunnel. I bunched my muscles for a desperate leap forward. I knew that nothing could save Lura and me—we could not halt or turn back the car—but I was determined that Gor Om should never return back up to reimpose his tyranny on my people.

In the next moment I would have made the desperate attack. But at that instant, the car suddenly emerged from the tunnel into a gigantic cavern, the unexpectedness of which petrified me.

Far, far overhead loomed the vaulted rock roof of that colossal chamber. Its dim depths receded out of sight ahead. And on its metal floor were looming structures and machines, strange things of purpose incalculable, crowding, grotesque metal mechanisms. And moving

among them I glimpsed living creatures of some kind.

The car swept smoothly down through the feeble glow over the enigmatic machines, whose soft whirring and clicking came to our ears. The disk-shaped craft came to rest in a perfectly circular clear space on the metal floor. All around us in the faint light towered the giant mechanisms. And out onto the clear floor to meet us came—

"The Dwellers in Darkness!" exclaimed Gor Om hoarsely, his small eyes bulging terrifiedly as he saw the advancing creatures.

"Gods of Krann—save us from them!" sobbed one of his two horrified men.

I felt Lura stiffen in utter dread against me, felt my own blood chill, as I looked on those awful things advancing through the feeble glow.

The Dwellers in Darkness were—worm-creatures. Like huge white worms they were, ten feet in length and two in diameter, wriggling smoothly forward from all around us in the forest of mighty mechanisms.

But—and this was most horrible about them—they were also at the same time *man-like*. Not their hideous vermiform bodies, no, but their faces. For faces they had in the front of their upreared blunt heads, with two superhumanly huge, glowing eyes, slit-like mouths, and tiny ear-apertures. From below the blunt head projected what looked like tiny, rudimentary arms.

GOR OM, shaken with fear and horror as we were, stepped off the disk to meet the advancing Dwellers. I almost admired the obese usurper in that moment for the courage that he showed.

He said in a shaken voice to the awful, staring creatures, "Mighty ones, you who know all things must know who I am, the Khal of Krann who each month has

sent you down your sacrifices as my ancestors swore to do long ago."

One of the crowd of dreadful worm-creatures, one whose head reared higher than any of the others and who seemed their leader or spokesman, answered in a hissing voice that came strangely from its slit-like mouth.

"We know you," the thing said. "But why have you not sent down the victims this time, as usual? All our race is gathered here waiting for them as we gather each month—for though we are mighty, we are numbered only in hundreds. Where are the usual victims, and why have you come down yourself?"

Gor Om explained swiftly. "The people of my cities have risen against me. I fled down here to you, mighty ones, so that you may give to me powers with which to return and crush the revolt. Then I shall once more rule above, and again shall send down your sacrifices each month. Say, will you give me those powers?"

There was a silence, in which the obese usurper trembled in suspense. Then the leader of the Dwellers spoke.

"We will give you the powers you ask," he hissed, "powers that will enable you easily to reconquer your people. For we do not wish the sacrifices to be halted. Learn that we utilize the brains of the human victims sent down to us, adding the cortex-matter of them surgically to our own brains and thus constantly enlarging the capacity and power of our minds."

The leader of the Dwellers continued, "We can do this because our brain-matter is similar to that of humans, for the reason that *long ago we too were men*. Yes, we were a human race living on the surface of Krann, like other humans, but because of war we retreated into these dark depths and here our bodies changed and our minds developed. Now we can-

not any longer venture onto the surface, for sunlight and even moonlight instantly slay us, so accustomed to the dark has our race become during the eons. Therefore the victims whose brain-matter we crave must be sent down to us from above, and for that reason we will grant you the powers that you ask."

Triumph flared in Gor Om's bloated face, and he turned to where Lura and I stood on the disk beneath the menacing swords of his guards.

He told the hideous worm-thing leader, "I have not come entirely without victims, even this time, mighty ones. These two I have brought for you."

"That is well," hissed the cool voice of the Dweller. "We will remove their brain-matter now for our use, and then will prepare for you the powerful weapons which you ask."

Lura uttered a fainting cry of horror as a group of the terrible creatures came wriggling forward to the car. I saw Gor Om grinning in evil triumph, and I was about to try to wrench a sword from one of the two guards and fight to the end, when a crazy, dreadful expedient suddenly flashed across my mind.

I cried to the Dweller leader, "Wait! Mighty ones, I can give to you a tremendous secret if you will spare me and this girl!"

And as the advancing horrors paused, I said swiftly, "The secret I can give you would enable you to leap in an instant to other worlds, from these dark caves. There must be many dark planets in the universe peopled by living creatures, and all those dark worlds would be yours to visit and conquer, then! It was by that secret that I came to Krann myself from an unthinkable distant world."

Lura cried to me in horror, "Khal Erik, you would not do such a thing—you would not loose these creatures upon other worlds merely to save ourselves?"

Gor Om snarled angrily, "This slave is lying—he did not come from another world."

The leader of the Dwellers was surveying me with his huge, glowing eyes. He hissed calmly, "The man speaks truth—he comes from another world, for I can discern many great differences between his body and that of the men of this planet."

"Yes, I speak truth," I said quickly, "and I can show you how to build a mechanism that will transfer you instantly to worlds far across the universe."

"Khal Erik, do not do it!" cried Lura brokenly.

The Dweller leader's great eyes seemed to brood on me. The creature finally said, "It would be well for us to have such power. It would give us all the dark worlds of the universe for our domain. You will show us now how to build the mechanism."

"Only if you promise to let this girl and me go free!" I reminded him.

The Dweller hissed, "You will show us how to build the mechanism. After you have shown us, you and the other victim will be treated as we treat all humans sent down to us."

"No!" I cried. "In that case, I will show you nothing."

One of the creatures at once wriggled forward with a small box-like apparatus. He simply held it toward me. And fiery, agonizing pain leaped through every nerve in my body, somehow induced electrically by the apparatus.

I gasped, "Stop—stop it! I will show you!"

The pain ceased as the apparatus was withdrawn.

Gor Om chuckled, "You thought to bargain with the mighty ones, slave—see now the results of your bargain."

I stepped off the car, into the midst of the worm-like horde. There, weak and

still gasping from that moment of awful torture, I told the leader of the Dwellers the various mechanisms that would be necessary to build the dimension-crossing machine. Dwellers hurried away in all directions to bring the necessary parts, and I began instructing them in the assembly of the parts.

WEIRD, incredible scene! The vast, dim-lit cavern whose spaces stretched far away and whose rock roof vaulted high overhead. The looming, enigmatic mechanisms towering around us, and the hideous white worm-like creatures busy under my direction putting together the parts of my mechanism. The Dwellers' leader watching with his unhuman eyes, while Gor Om's obese figure waited impatiently, and while Lura shrank back and looked on my work in horror.

The Dwellers were assembling a machine that was identical with that which I had used to flash from Earth to Krann, except that it was many times larger. A huge, flat, square mechanism, it almost filled the circular clearing, and was capable of generating a force that would thrust almost any amount of matter clear out of the ordinary dimensional universe. The wild hope in my heart strengthened as the machine approached completion.

I asked the Dwellers' leader, "How thick is the rocky roof above this cavern?"

His glowing eyes fastened on mine and for a moment I thought he had become suspicious. "Why do you ask?" he hissed.

"It is necessary for me to know so that I may make allowance for its gravitational influence," I lied.

He said, "It is but a thousand feet in thickness, for these dark spaces lie close beneath the crust of Krann." Then he added, "Do not think that there is any chance of your escaping on that mechan-

ism. You will not be allowed to operate it—we will do that under your direction, the first time."

Hours had passed. It should be mid-day on the surface of Krann, a quarter-mile above. The great square mechanism was completed, finished in incredibly short time by these super-scientific beings. The force-producing units had been set at the points I specified.

Now, my heart beating wildly, I said, "There is one connection yet to be made—a wire between those two points."

A connection made between those two points would be equivalent to closing the switch of the mechanism. And it had been so set at my direction that the terrific radiant force from it would thrust upward and would hurl the whole roof of the cavern out of ordinary space!

A Dweller approached and began to fasten the wire as I directed. But the Dweller leader, whose huge eyes had been carefully inspecting the mechanism, suddenly hissed, "It is a trick! Do not——"

Before he could finish, the connection was made. And instantly, as the soundless, awful forces from that mechanism thrust upward, the whole rock roof of the cavern vanished, whiffed instantly outside the continuum of ordinary space!

The cavern, its roof gone, was open to the sky. And up there blazed the crimson sun, pouring a sudden blinding flood of light and heat down into these dim spaces that never before had known light.

The Dwellers in Darkness cried out wildly in hissing terror as the dazzling sunlight struck them. They tried to writhe out of it, to gain the shelter of darkness, but could not. For almost instantly their white worm-bodies were turning black. They were dying, slain

by the sunlight that was fatal to their dark race.

Yes, the mad chance on which I had gambled had succeeded and all the race of the Dwellers, gathered here for their human victims, was dead now and would never again shadow this world with dread.

Gor Om and his two guards and Lura too, stood there benumbed with stupefaction in the flood of crimson sunlight. I snatched a sword from the nearest of the two men. Before I could use it, he and the other guard fled shrieking with terror away through the looming mechanisms and litter of dead black worm-bodies.

But Gor Om, even now, had the courage to draw his sword. Blade clashed on blade while Lura watched, stunned. Weak as I was, hardly able to stand, I yet pressed the obese one back and back, until a last fierce lunge sent my blade through his gross throat.

Then Lura ran to me, sobbing, "Khal Erik—look!"

She pointed up. Men mounted on rhors were winging fearfully, cautiously, down from the sunlight into the vast, newly unroofed cavern.

Their winged reptilian steeds alighted near us, and one man ran to us, shouting. It was big Herk Ell.

He cried, "Khal Erik—you're still alive! We thought you gone for ever; then a few minutes ago we saw this vast space suddenly open not far from Zinziba, and came to investigate. Gor Om——"

"Gor Om is dead," I said weakly, "and so too are the Dwellers in Darkness, dead and gone for ever."

They brought me one of the rhors and I mounted it, holding Lura tightly in front of me. With flapping of wings, we rose on our steeds up out of that place

accursed, up into the blessed air and sunlight above that vast crater that yawned now in the red jungles.

We flew straight toward Zinziba's towers. And as we winged down amid the spires toward the palace of the Khal of

Krann—*my* palace—the populace saw and recognized me with wild shouts.

"The Redeemer! The Redeemer!"

And as I flew down thus to claim my heritage, Lura's quivering form was sweet and warm in my arms.