

A Novelette of
World Conquest



The ASTOUNDING EXODUS

CHAPTER I A Dying World

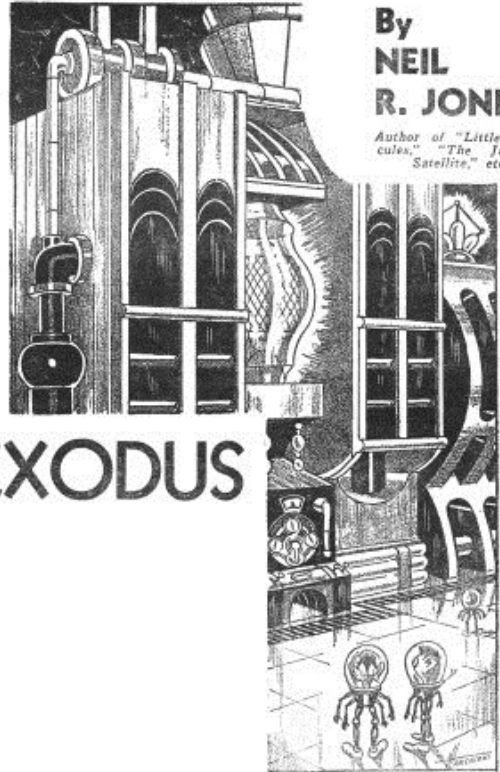
MERNOQ stood alone upon the balcony. At his back towered the observatory with its mammoth telescope. Below the balcony, rough, rocky cliffs fell away to meet the restless sea which rolled and tossed fretfully.

He swept the vast panorama before him with lidless eyes. From this prominence the country was visible for miles. Off to one side, in the distance, loomed jagged peaks. On one of these stood a power plant, an energy radiator, one of the countless broadcasters which dotted Earth in the portions still inhabited by men.

The man, if such he could be called, gazed into the darkening heavens.

Behind the observatory the sun hung low in the sky. It had been that way for several hours, its slow movement barely perceptible. Earth's rotation was many times slower after five million years.

Mernoq himself represented an amazing spectacle. He was a man whom his ancestors of five million years before would have disowned as an incredible monster. Given a latitude of fifty thousand centuries, evolution had worked strange pranks on



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The weird cavalcade filed inside the illuminated chamber

mankind. The biped which had held reign over Earth's dominions for the greater share of his long, varied existence was much unlike his predecessors of the remotely distant mechanical age.

Was it fate, coincidence, or a dominating, undying spark which had seen mankind triumphant over all obstacles which had beset his path? Since the mechanical age, man had alternately scaled the heights of Utopia and had tasted the dregs of chaos and degeneration. Oblivion's stark shadow had fallen often across the portals of civilization, yet the human race had proved itself undying.

Years of worldly strife had come and gone, insect scourges had threatened and nearly won, pestilence had waved its grimy scepter throughout the Solar System, and there had been interplanetary warfare. Worst of all, there had come invasion by space wanderers, creatures from the far-off stars, nearly invincible and equally as threatening. Mankind on its planets and moons of the Solar

System had suffered enslavement. Only by the destruction of Venus' entire atmosphere had mankind destroyed the invaders. This had happened long ago, yet the Earthmen remembered.

Mernoq was a typical Earthman. He stood between four and five feet in height. Standing upright on two legs which were jointed to move in either of two directions, he had four arms, two on each side, each member terminating in eight fingers. The legs were much longer than the body. During the last hundred thousand years or more, the body had grown smaller, due to the increasing diminution and final disappearance of the digestive tract and organs of respiration.

To keep alive, humanity no longer found it necessary to eat and breathe. Science had supplanted the comparatively short existence of the gastric organs with a more practical means of sustenance. Man's radioactive blood was kept charged with energy from the huge broadcasting units. Oxygen was superfluous. In this manner the life span had been materially increased until a life of ten thousand years had become common.

The head of Mernoq had neither mouth nor nostrils. Like the appendix of man, the unused mouth had finally disappeared. Food no longer existed, and articulate speech had long since yielded to mental telepathy. On either side of the head were slightly elongated ears, curved to catch the slightest of sounds. Two black, lidless eyes peered intently from the face, intelligence radiating from their depths. Humanity had done away with sleep. Like food and oxygen, it was no longer necessary. The energy broadcasters recharged the body constantly.

Hair, that telltale mark of barbarism, had become unknown among Earthmen. Instead of hair, there arose from the head fully two dozen antennae. These served a double purpose. They picked up the thought waves of their fellow men and also received the

broadcasted energy which supplied their bodies.

Mernoq stood looking at the distant broadcaster which threw pink waves of light in every direction. From this station he and the members of the observatory staff received the energy their bodies required. Reception, except in the case of the more powerful broadcasters, was limited to a thousand miles or less.

THE number of broadcasters in one vicinity varied in accordance with the amount of population. There were few spots on Earth's surface where one stood in danger of starvation.

Turning, Mernoq entered the observatory, climbing a few short steps to where several of his companions were grouped about a table. Upon it stood intricate machines. Several of the Earthmen were gazing at a large screen upon which the great telescope projected what it saw. A large pair of fiery stars occupied the center of the field. Mernoq spoke mentally. The antennae of his comrades quivered slightly in attentiveness.

"The long night will soon be upon us with its terrible coldness. Then we must retreat into the sealed chambers."

"Sirius is now nearing the zenith."

Eloow indicated the bright double star with a wave of his arm.

"It is time that Uljoph returned," said one of the others. "He has been gone over thirty-five years on his expedition to the twin suns of Sirius."

"A rumor has come to me," said Mernoq. "Do not yet fear that the expedition has become lost in space. Perhaps tonight our telescope may pick up the returning space ship."

"A rumor—what have you heard?"

Manipulating a set of controls at his side, Eloow looked up inquiringly into the face of Mernoq. The rest watched the screen eagerly. Sirius dimmed away into the distance

as the telescopic field was brought closer to Earth. Vacuum yawned blackly at them.

“Black—and empty!” Reod exclaimed.

Mernoq remained silent in spite of this gloomy remark. He was thinking deeply. Earth was a dying planet. A space expedition had been sent to Alpha Centauri in an effort to find a planet outside the dead Solar System to which mankind might migrate. Alpha Centauri was found to possess sixteen planets—none of them, however, suitable for habitation. The expedition to Sirius had immediately followed.

“We shall wait five years more,” said Mernoq, “and then another expedition will start out for still another star.”

“But where?”

“It has not been definitely decided. Many of the nearer stars have been suggested. But we shall give this expedition time to prove itself. Both Uljoph and Aamon are among the best commanders of the Earthmen.”

“Why didn’t you go yourself instead of Aamon? He has always seemed bitter against you for your unparalleled success, especially because the Earthmen have placed their faith and reliance in you to lead them.”

“I know,” Mernoq replied. “That is the very reason I sent him. I gave him the chance to distinguish himself along with Uljoph. Aamon is a mental genius and should be encouraged!”

“What of tonight?” Eloow wanted to know. “You said you had had word.”

“We have observed nothing with our telescope,” replied Mernoq. “The observatory at Yigni, however, has sent me strange reports. As you are probably aware, they not only have the most powerful telescope in the world, but the most erratic one. They have sacrificed clarity for greater magnification. I received a report from Bralel who is stationed there. He reports seeing a flash of the expedition’s space ship returning from Sirius. The vision blotted and faded. He gave me his telescopic figures. If those at Yigni really saw

the space ship coming home, I calculated that it would show up on our screen either today or else tonight.”

THIS information acted as balm for the impatience of the Earthmen. But fully two months were to elapse before the space ship actually arrived. Radio communication at that distance was impossible. Civilization waited expectantly—and anxiously. Failure had crowned a previous effort. Optimism, however, ruled to such a marked extent that partial preparations had been made for a departure from Earth. The laboratories and workshops were kept busy. One question was uppermost in the minds of all. Had Uljoph and Aamon found a perfect world in the system of Sirius, or had failure fallen upon the Earthmen once more?

And then one day the ship arrived, plumbng Earth’s waning atmosphere at a greatly reduced speed. Out of it poured the forces of Uljoph and Aamon. They were unusually jubilant and seemed glad to be among their own kind once more after a departure of three and a half decades. They immediately joined Mernoq.

“Why did you not radio?” he asked them.

“Our proximity with Sirius destroyed many vital parts of our sending apparatus, but we heard your messages before entering the Solar System,” Uljoph replied.

“It will be necessary to construct our sending apparatus on different principles when we return once more within the influence of Sirius,” stated Aamon.

“Return?” echoed Mernoq. “Then you have been successful!”

“We have!” was the enthusiastic reply.

It was a colorful story which Uljoph related. After fifteen years of space flight, they had reached Sirius, discovering that it possessed twenty-seven planets. The planets, varying in size, presented varying conditions. Many of them had moons. Commencing from

the innermost planet, the Earthmen had explored them all, even to the outermost world distantly removed from the dazzling orbs of Sirius.

Two worlds had been found to be ideal. They were the sixth and eighth planets. The seventh world was habitable but was overrun with rank vegetation and loathsome forms of life. Zyse, the sixth planet, was much to be preferred. Bexn, the eighth world, teemed with animal life, boasting a strange race of intelligent creatures. Zyse was by far the most beautiful world of the entire system.

"We must desert this worn-out world," said Mernoq. "The vanguard of our people will soon start for Zyse."

"But there must be more preparations made," Aamon argued, "We cannot start at once."

Mernoq saw with disappointment that Aamon's attitude was antagonistic. He saw enmity in his glance, the enmity which Mernoq hoped he would have lost on the trip to Sirius. The great leader's reply, however, was conciliatory.

"Yes, preparations are indeed necessary before the greater share of us leave for the new world," he admitted. "Yet, during your absence, our optimism led us to construct many space ships. A vast fleet of them is equipped and ready now on Mars."

"No. I do not intend leaving for the new system until the last contingent goes. That will be a long time yet. I shall go with the last ships which are to carry the valuable *kletin* metal now stored on Venus."

Months later, the waiting space ships on the planet Mars headed for Zyse. They were the forerunners of the exodus, the first ships to leave the old System. From that time on, ships continually left for the new home planet until several years later there were but a few left. Strangely enough, Aamon showed no desire to head contingents to Zyse. Mernoq was glad, for Aamon was valuable and seemed to have got over his old envy.

CHAPTER II Beneath the Monolith

EARTH had become nearly abandoned as Mernoq and two hundred of his men stood on the desolate planet Venus. The sun's huge globe hung just at the edge of the horizon. Venus had ceased rotating. One side forever faced the sun, a red, hot hemisphere. The other side, frozen cold by the temperature of space, lay dark and as equally deserted.

The atmosphere was gone. A terrific war with the invaders from a distant star had destroyed the envelope of air, ripped open fissures in the planet, released the inner elements and had blown the cruel invaders into eternity.

Venus was as dead and deserted as Earth's moon—or Mars. Stars shone crystal clear all about the sun, gleaming and twinkling. In space suits, the forces of Mernoq walked over the cold surface of the planet. Mernoq had brought the space ship to rest upon the narrow, thousand mile strip of shadowland between the cold and flaming hemispheres of the dead world. Mernoq now gave instructions to Aamon.

"Stay with the ship while we descend into the underground chambers after the *kletin* metal. Be sure that the energy broadcaster continues to function properly. We shall be back shortly."

Enclosed in the bulky space suits with their multitude of exterior apparatus, the Earthmen headed for a tall monolith rising from a clump of rocks which strewed its base. Reod shone a peculiar ray of green intensity from his space suit upon the broad base of the tower. Almost immediately a doorway opened. In a long line the weird cavalcade filed inside and down a broad flight of steps into a large chamber. The walls glowed, radiating an ethereal light of their own.

In the center of the chamber stood a massive machine, its various parts formed of intricate apparatus. This was the auxiliary

energy broadcaster to be used in case the one on the space ship failed, or in the event that the space ship was moved away from the vicinity. The sides of the vast chamber were pierced with small doorways leading to the storerooms of the *kletin*. When charged with a peculiar force of light produced by the Earthmen, this metal furnished gravity for the floors of space ships. It was to be found in large quantities upon the planet Uranus, and the Earthmen had mined considerable of it on this far planet and moved it to Venus for storage.

In groups, the Earthmen entered the storerooms and started the removal of the *kletin*. Mernoq saw one of the Earthmen walk toward him with a load in his four arms. It was Ibaeg, and his action seemed a strange one. Others were also emerging from the storerooms with the metal, but with the exception of Ibaeg they were all heading for the broad stairway leading to the surface.

"Ibaeg, where are you taking that?" The man made no reply, but hurried his pace. He ran straight for the energy broadcaster. Mernoq and his subordinates were standing at the opposite end of the machine. Ibaeg was approaching from the other side. Sensing trouble of some sort, Uljoph hurried toward Ibaeg, seeking to intercept him. But he was not quick enough. Striding up to the dormant energy plant, Ibaeg threw with all four arms his load of metal into the mechanism. There came a crashing note of twisted parts.

MERNOQ stared aghast at this strange action, uncomprehending. The miscreant legged it for the flight of stairs, those near him too surprised to think of pursuit. Besides, Aamon and more of the Earthmen were in the space ship outside. Ibaeg could not escape. His action had been that of a madman. It was seemingly pointless.

At the foot of the stairs, Uljoph stopped and stared upward.

"Are you mad?" he demanded.

Ibaeg made no reply. He was nearly to the doorway which led from the monolith's base when a terrific roar shook the subterranean chamber. Then came a mighty concussion as if a gigantic body had thudded against the ground far above. With a frightful crash and billowing accompaniment of dust, a great white boulder swept Ibaeg off his feet and beneath it, rolling down the stone steps, grinding them to powder and smashing into the rocky wall. Uljoph leaped out of the way just in time.

The curtain of rock dust spread like a veil as large pieces fell from the fractured wall blocking the upward passage completely.

"The monolith has fallen!" exclaimed Reod. He stared at the ruins in dismay. "There was an explosion!"

All became quiet. The rock dust settled slowly. For a moment the Earthmen surveyed the clogged passage in mental silence. Not a square foot of opening was left. They were sealed as if in a tomb.

"We must signal Aamon! He can dig us out with disintegrators."

A call was sent out to Aamon. The reply which came back jarred the sensibilities of the Earthman worse than had the strange action of Ibaeg or the succeeding explosion of the monolith.

"Mernoq—your reign is at an end!" came his vindictive thought waves. "Ibaeg did his work well! The broadcaster is broken, and you are entombed! When I leave for Earth, you will all die! I shall be free to build my own empire in the new system of planets!"

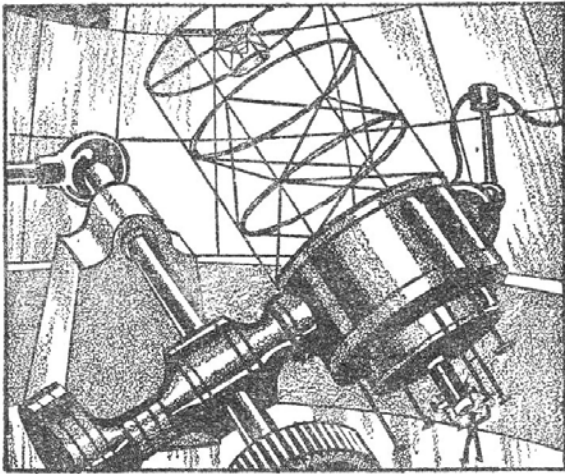
"But my men—I have loyal men aboard ship!" exclaimed Mernoq, more out of surprise and consternation than contradiction.

"Dead, Mernoq, all dead—just as you shall soon be!" gloated Aamon. "My supporters are many! I now return to Earth where I shall set a time explosion to detonate the Earth's atmosphere in the same manner employed by the Earthmen who destroyed the atmosphere of Venus ages ago!"

"You are mad, Aamon!"

"I shall be safe—far beyond the Solar System—when the cataclysm takes place! When I reach Zyse I shall conquer the Martian vanguard of ships and all other ships which have left since then! I, alone, shall be all powerful! Now die, Mernoq, you and all your puppets!"

Mernoq looked around at his companions who were stricken dumb by the rapid succession of events all planned so well by the evil genius of Aamon. In each other's eyes they read the agreement of the certain doom to befall them. The space ship, containing the source of their sustenance, was gone. The auxiliary plant in the chamber where they stood was wrecked. Their situation was truly desperate.



"WE have two hours in which to live," was Mernoq's quiet, yet deadly ultimatum. "We may be able to repair the damage which Ibaeg did, but, unless we hurry such repairs—"

Several of the Earthmen who were skilled mechanics set to work on the damaged broadcaster. They worked steadily, removing the damaged parts and repairing them. Time moved by. An insidious sensation of weakness commenced creeping over the Earthmen.

Suddenly one workman swayed dizzily. Another workman sprang to the task, taking the place of his fallen comrade. Mernoq experienced a strong urge to sit down. His legs seemed no longer capable of holding his body

upright. He fought desperately against this urge. When his knees sagged, he was promptly caught in the arms of a companion who eased him gently to the floor.

"The time?" he inquired. "How long have we?"

"Less than half an hour for most of us," was the grim reply. "A few of us may last even longer than that."

Mernoq felt himself lapsing into unconsciousness. Fully three-quarters of the Earthmen had weakened and fallen. Some retained their senses yet were too feeble to move. The lack of energy was making itself felt.

"The—the lever," came the weak, mental communication from one of the Earthmen who staggered to the machine with the two remaining parts. Two of his companions weaved in the direction of the starting lever while the other stood at his side to assist him.

Behind them, Mernoq rose weakly upon his four hands. A strong, subconscious prompting had returned him to consciousness. He seemed unable to rise. He watched Cyonom reach for the lever with one hand, his remaining three arms clinging to various nearby portions of the machine to support his sagging body.

Yxlese reeled helplessly against his fellow mechanic, dropping the remaining bit of apparatus in its place. The piece had only to be fastened. Yxlese reached out weakly to give the necessary twist. His arms stiffened and never reached the mechanism, for his supporting comrade fell, Yxlese slumping across his inert body.

Through a haze of semi-consciousness, Cyonom watched Mernoq crawl forward through an effort of tremendous will power, reach the machine and pull himself slowly upward. A dizzy mist obscured the vision of Cyonom. When it cleared, he saw Mernoq sag backward and hit the floor. Cyonom's heart sank. At the last vital moment, failure

had mocked them. He was the only one left with his senses—part of them—and they were rapidly leaving him. He clung tight, but seemed too weak to hang on any longer. He felt his grip weakening.

His eyes wandered to the part which Mernoq had made one final effort to reach and turn. His heart skipped a beat. It was fastened! Mernoq had reached it! A darkness overwhelmed Cyponom. The final order from his brain commanded three reluctant arms to drop their holds and seize the lever which the other arm held with its eight fingers.

As Cyponom fell, the weight of his body pulled the lever. A grinding noise issued from the machine. Pink vibrations of light danced from the apparatus, forming a shimmer of color around it. Strewed about the vast chamber lay nearly two hundred unconscious Earthmen, many of them close to death.

CHAPTER III

Entombed

THE broadcaster roared into action. Soon the reviving Earth-men, their antennae picking up the energy from the waves which penetrated their space, suits, commenced to rise.

“How much better off are we now?” lamented Reod. “We are entombed!”

“We are alive,” returned Mernoq spiritedly, “and while life still exists within our bodies we may yet dare to hope.”

The philosophy of Mernoq was sound. Upon this philosophy mankind had clung tenaciously to life throughout the ages in the face of adversity.

“How are we to reach Earth without space ships, even if we do escape this place?” queried Uljoph.

“Reaching Earth is but half as important as sending out a warning of Aamon’s treachery and his plans to explode the atmosphere.”

“But we have no way of getting to

Earth, nor any way of signaling, in time to forestall Aamon’s plan,” said Uljoph.

“I have a plan,” Mernoq told them, “a desperate plan, one depending upon close calculations and long chances, but first we must get free of this place.”

Mernoq would not divulge his hopes. First, he said, they must win through to the surface of Venus. The outlook was discouraging. On three sides solid rock surrounded them. The bowels of the planet lay beneath their feet, while overhead lay heavy strata of mantle rock. The avenue before them was blocked with massive fragments of the great monolith interspersed with rock debris from the cracked walls of the passage.

“I once heard of a secret exit from this place,” said Nenerm.

“Where is it?”

“I do not know,” was the uncertain reply. “These chambers are old. No one alive can remember when they were built. There is a legend telling of an attempted escape of the space invaders long ago. A group of them burrowed deep inside Venus. They were all destroyed by the earthquakes which followed the destruction of the atmosphere. A passage from these caverns is supposed to lead through their secret exit.”

“Then why were these caverns not destroyed by the quakes?” asked Mernoq.

“That is what throws doubt on the truth of the legend,” replied Nenerm, “yet the legend exists.”

Mernoq at once ordered his men to tap the rock walls in search of hollows beyond. The Earthmen spread out into small groups, searching carefully the adjoining storerooms as well as the central chamber. Both wall and floor space was nearly covered before an excited, telepathic communication burned itself upon his brain.

“We have found it!”

Mernoq and his subordinate officers hurried to the spot. Several of the Earthmen held back a section of rock which balanced

nicely on a convex axis. A dark passageway lay beyond. Uljoph advanced into it, but Mernoq motioned him back.

"Let the stone swing into place," he said. "We must be sure that it is dependable and will open at the right time in case we must return this way."

THE stone swung back. As Mernoq had feared, the opening of the secret door had been gropingly accidental. After much experiment, the concealed exit was reopened. A combination of pressure movements on the nearby wall was necessary, Mernoq and his men took careful note of these. He was then satisfied to enter. He detailed twenty of the Earth-men to stay with the energy broadcaster and keep it working properly.

"Watch it carefully. Our lives and yours depend upon it. We shall follow this passage to the end. If we fail to reach the surface, we shall return. If we win through, we shall communicate with you when we arrive back at the spot where the monolith stood."

With these parting instructions, Mernoq and the remainder of the Earthmen snapped on the glowing lights of their space suits and filed into the cavity out of sight around a bend in the tunnel. The opening was closed softly behind them.

They tramped for miles through the interior of Venus, the tunnel sloping gradually downward. Mernoq commenced to despair of ever reaching the surface, yet he was determined to follow the tunnel to its termination. It became warm, excessively so. Although the surface of Venus was dead and cold, the interior was not. The Earthmen became aware of this more than ever as the passage continued its downward slant.

Then through the gloom ahead of them they saw the end of the subterranean passage. It ended blankly, yet, as they approached nearer, and their lights dispelled the shadows, they saw faint, square outlines of a huge door. A vague murmur beyond made them pause

and grow apprehensive. Mernoq broke the suspense by ordering it opened.

Several of the Earthmen seized the huge, metal pull, shaking loose from it the dust of ages. No lock was in evidence. Constructed of stone and metal, the door was massively built, towering far above the height of the Earthmen who tugged at it. Contrary to the expectations of Mernoq, however, the door opened easily, partly of its own volition, so it seemed, as if it had waited patiently through the long centuries. Had the Earth-men only known it, the door had remained closed for more than a quarter million years.

A black dust vomited forth from the doorway, whirling and falling among the Earthmen. There followed a rumble like a thunderclap. Beyond the doorway lay a vast cavern whose high walls threw back the red and green glow of lurid flames. To their startled eyes were revealed long tongues of fire shooting up to lick the ceiling. They were no such flames as the burning of oxygen might produce. The flames were red, and terminated in oval tips edged with a blue-green luminosity.

"Come!"

Mernoq strode fearlessly in the direction of the raging inferno. His men followed. In warm, palpable dust which rose nearly to their knees, they walked slowly toward the brilliant fire which, as they approached nearer, they found issuing from a broad, deep crevice in the cavern floor.

"The internal fires of Venus!"

"I never believed they came so close to the surface."

They stopped at the edge of the fire pit and looked across to where the cavern stretched away into the gloom. Dimly visible were several rocky corridors. Mernoq lingered for a moment, undecided as to directions, but he saw that one end of the crevice might be skirted, and ordered the corridors to be explored. They circled the flaming cauldron to see what lay beyond. Uljoph drew Mernoq's

attention to the cavern ceiling.

IT was perfectly circular. The cavern was not artificial. An intelligence had constructed it. Was the legend true? Had the invaders fashioned this place as a tomb or hideaway, or had mankind made their way to the internal fires long ago in the forgotten past? Mernoq wondered. They walked close to the ragged edge of the crevice and peered downward. The fiery hell was fully a hundred yards across, lurid flames obscuring the bottom. Hidden by the flames, a boiling inferno of molten rock gushed in and out of the planet's interior.

A mental cry of terror issued from across the darting flames. The antennae on Mernoq's head told him the directions from which the cry had come. Rapidly, he and his companions circled the fire pit and raced into the corridor from which the cry had issued. Other Earthmen were excitedly milling about inside.

In the center of the throng they came upon a ghastly scene. Seven Earthmen lay dead, mutilated, their space suits crushed and ripped. The bodies had been torn to shreds.

For a moment, in the horror of the situation, no one saw the large boxes whose ends flanked the passage. They lay on shelves. Uljoph was first to discover them. He climbed over the side of one and looked down into the metal container. His mind ejaculated one thought.

"Empty!"

Meanwhile, others were examining more of the strange boxes. Reod's warning came too late, for a long tentacle slid up over the side of a container, sharp, metal claws embracing an inquisitive and unsuspecting Earthman. Zougme wriggled to free himself. A monstrous body surmounted by a hideous head lifted up, and more tentacles waved wildly, menacingly, as the creature glared balefully at the surrounding Earthmen.

Six snaky arms writhed from the black, repulsive body protected by an artificial shell

of metal. The tentacle ends were tipped with metal sharpened to razor-edged cutting power. A head with an eye in front and an eye in back of the oval cranium turned from side to side. The eyes stared intently, exuding a cold, crafty expression of intelligence. A blunt snout sniffed inquisitively. Several of the nearer Earthmen sprang to the aid of their stricken comrade, but it was too late. Three more tentacles curled themselves around the doomed man, cutting his body to pieces.

"Get out of here—quick!" urged Mernoq. "We are powerless to combat them!"

Down the corridors ambled five of the insidious creatures. More of them were emerging from the metal containers. The Earthmen raced to the comparative safety of the fire cavern.

"What are they?"

"The invaders!" exclaimed Mernoq. "The things that conquered the Solar System ages ago! We thought them all dead!"

"Impossible!" deplored Reod. "How could they have lived?"

"Suspended animation!" replied Mernoq, whose astute mind had conceived the truth of the situation. "When we opened that door it released forces automatically which were necessary to bring them out of their sleep! Air machines were set to working, too! See! There is air down here, now!"

MERNOQ pointed to the leaping flames which seethed outward from the pit, the blue-green luminosity changing in color as it yielded to red and white heat. A tremendous wave of hot air sent them scurrying backward, making them aware of its warmth even through their space suits.

"We are weaponless against them!" cried Uljoph.

Mernoq realized this fact keenly. The space invaders were not only armored but doubtlessly possessed weapons, too. Mernoq hurriedly led the way around the fire pit and into that black section of the cavern which lay

ahead. He was hoping against hope. They must go that way and hope for a continuance of the tunnel. To return the way they had come would ultimately mean finding themselves trapped. These thoughts flew swiftly among them.

"What of the twenty men we left with the energy broadcaster?" Uljoph suggested. "Suppose they attack in that direction?"

"The tunnel rises that way! The air will die out in the upper levels!"

"But if their air machines generate more air?"

The ominous question remained unanswered as the Earthmen set out on a run past the fire pit, the increased heat of the flames driving them far to one side near the wall. Mernoq's apprehensions grew less as he saw ahead of them the continuation of the tunnel. He had begun to fear that the cavern marked the tunnel's end. The Earthmen became weary after a mile or more of rapid running.

It was the desire of Mernoq to put a goodly amount of distance between them and the hateful creatures of the fire cavern. The latter had suspended themselves in a living death to bridge the ages with their menace.

CHAPTER IV Subterranean Battle

TO the satisfaction of the Earthmen, the tunnel struck a steep incline, much steeper than the one they had recently descended on leaving the *kletin* storerooms. In some places steps had been cut because of the tendency toward perpendicular ascent. The climb was a long one. Soon they found that the air manufactured below them was dying out. They were once more in the usual vacuum. The lower levels had been left behind.

They came to a long flight of steps up which they climbed to find themselves in another large cavern. All around them lay water. They were on an island in a

subterranean lake. Their bright lights revealed shore little more than a hundred yards away. The island lay in nearly the exact center of the lake, several hundred feet from shore. It bore evidences of having been purposely constructed. The water, or fluid of the lake, which was closely akin to water, took on a peculiar appearance to the eyes of the Earthmen. It appeared dull and without luster. This was due largely to a lack of atmosphere.

"How can we cross?" queried Uljoph. "We can hardly swim with our space suits."

"If the water is not too deep or the bottom is not full of holes, we can walk across."

"If we could but drain the lake down through the passage, why—"

Reod's original idea was lost in a brilliant burst of inspiration. His sudden enthusiasm was shared by the rest.

"Drain the lake into the internal fires! Kill the monsters!"

For a moment Mernoq felt himself overwhelmed by the possibilities of the daring plan. In his mind's eye he saw the waters of the lake rushing down the long tunnel, filling the lower level and cascading into the molten pit of fire. There would be boiling chaos, clouds of steam, the long dormant invaders scalded to death. His indecision was short.

"Cut a channel!"

The Earthmen set to work with a will, rapidly cutting a ditch from the lake to the orifice of the tunnel in the island's center. Luckily they possessed the rock picks which made up an essential part of their space suit equipment. Rapid headway was made, for the rock was a soft type peculiar to Venus. A large group started working from the tunnel entrance, while others worked up to their heads in water at the lake's edge, their globed helmets rising out of the water only to disappear again. Mernoq sent one of his men to gauge the depth of the lake. The man walked out of sight, the water swirling above his head. From time to time he radiated reports to his

comrades above. His space helmet finally broke the surface of the water near the farther shore where their lights had revealed a continuance of the tunnel. The lake was comparatively shallow.

"We can all walk across," said Mernoq.

"When this water starts draining into the lower levels, we must hurry," warned Reod. "Steam will be forced back this way."

"What of those we left in the chamber of the broadcaster?" Uljoph inquired. "If the steam rises, they will die, too."

"The steam will seek the nearest and easiest exit," said Mernoq. "Besides, remember the heavy stone blocking the entrance to the secret tunnel. It will resist tremendous steam pressure."

ONE of the Earthmen made a startling discovery. "Air is blowing up the shaft! It is rising into this cavern!"

It was true. A strong current of air blew up the tunnel, bringing a thin veil of dust with it. Mernoq feared the coming of the interstellar invaders. More atmosphere was being generated from the corridors leading off from the fire cavern.

"We must hurry!"

Only a thin slice of rock separated the two channels which were nearly converged. The Earthmen chopped madly with their picks. They had worked frantically in shifts, only a fraction of their number being able to work unhampered in the ditch. A scout Mernoq had sent down the tunnel now returned.

"They are coming! They have weapons!"

A trickle of water burst over the lip of the tunnel leading from the island to the lower levels. The alarm spurred the laboring Earthmen to desperate measures in a superhuman effort to send the lake rushing down the tunnel before their ancient enemies could emerge. Upon the rising current of air came a deathly cry which the radiophone ears

of the space helmets readily picked up. It was eerie and chilling like no sound the Earthmen had ever before heard. One of the terrible things they had unwittingly revived strode into view below them on short, squat legs. In several of his long tentacles, he carried gleaming discs.

The Earthmen stood at the top of the shaft with upraised picks, the only weapons they possessed. These were crude, indeed, compared to the destructive weapons which Aamon had carried away on the space ship. Two of the pale, disc beams fell on the nearer of the Earthmen, focusing for but a brief moment. A round portion of each space suit glowed red, then disappeared. Underneath, the flesh of the Earthmen shone a ruddy hue, iridescent sparks shedding themselves rapidly.

The unfortunate men fell dead while the discs of fire continued to burn completely through their bodies. The disc beams flicked upon others of the band. One of them staggered toward the water. Another sank to his knees beside the tunnel.

"Back!" he cried. With all four arms, he brushed and struck madly at the glowing spot which ate through his space suit. "Don't let them—"

He rose suddenly and jumped down upon the advancing monster in a despairing leap as he felt the death ray eating swiftly into his vitals. His impetuous leap hurled back the interstellar invader upon four or five more who came crowding up from behind. For a moment all was confusion in the tunnel. Metal-tipped tentacles hastened the death of the martyred man who had used his rapidly expiring body to the greatest advantage.

Extricating themselves from the tangle of bodies and tentacles, the terrible creatures of the fire pit scuffled up the shaft, their disc rays waving wildly. A deluge of rushing water met them, hurling them backward. One survivor clung with his tentacles to the lip of the tunnel opening. With mighty strength he pulled himself out of the strong current. Fully

a hundred picks hacked his tentacles as all four arms of the nearer Earthmen rose and fell. The dismembered body, devoid of anything with which to cling, yielded to the strong pull of the current. The shrieking head with its hateful, venomous eyes, disappeared beneath the cascading water, the horrid screeching muffled to a frantic gurgle.

FOR a moment the Earthmen seemed rooted to the spot. Several of their number lay dead, victims of the disc beams. Yet the Earthmen had triumphed.

Reod shook his head ruefully.

"I fear for those we left in the chamber of the energy broadcaster."

"We must get back to where the space ship landed," said Mernoq. "Then we shall learn if they are safe."

Directions were quickly found, and they headed for the distant monolith which lay broken and wrecked because of the treacherous attempt Aamon had made to send them all into eternity. Even now, unsuspecting humanity upon the Earth prepared for further contingents of the exodus while Aamon was laying his plans. The thought urged Mernoq to greater haste. He had a plan in mind.

It was not long before the jagged remnants of the great monolith became visible upon the horizon. The Earthmen hurried to the spot. Where the entrance to the subterranean chambers had been located was now but a tumbled mass of rock. Mernoq sent out a call to those they had left imprisoned in the *kletin* chambers with the energy broadcaster. It was answered. Their comrades were alive, and the mechanism was functioning perfectly.

"How are we to communicate with Earth and warn them of Aamon's treachery?" queried Reod. "We have no equipment."

"Do you realize what type of explosive Aamon employed in destroying the monolith?"

"Why—yes. The explosive was annite. I recognized it when I heard the blast."

The mind of Mernoq still remained reservedly inscrutable. "Annite," he continued, "is a queer explosive."

"What do you mean?"

"Its destructive forces are tremendous yet it has a peculiar fault when exploded in space or upon a planet which has no atmosphere."

"Why, yes, fragments of it are generally blown off it and fail to explode."

"Exactly. Mostly through a lack of barometric pressure."

"And what good will that do us?" asked Uljoph.

"In one of these large rocks we are going to hollow out a crude form of rocket gun," Mernoq explained. "We shall charge it with the fragments of unexploded annite which is strewn about here on the ground."

In a brief flash they recognized Mernoq's purpose. They were going to rocket a warning to the Earth, hoping it would reach there in time to prevent the cataclysm which Aamon had planned.

CHAPTER V

Rocket Messages

PREPARATIONS were hastily made. With their picks, the Earthmen commenced fashioning a rocket gun in the side of a huge slab which faced away at the desired angle Mernoq wanted. For the construction of the rocket itself, Mernoq searched among the ruins at the monolith's base for metal stanchions which had previously been built into the entranceway. It was here that he made a discovery which he considered fortunate.

"There is sufficient metal to build three rockets for dispatch to Earth if we can gather annite to power all three."

"Can we send a message without its destruction when the rocket crashes against Earth?"

"Arrange parachutes to be released when the rockets hit Earth's atmosphere,"

suggested Uljoph.

“Or we may be able to fix reverse annite charges in various positions so that the increasing friction with Earth’s atmosphere will explode them and slow up the rocket’s speed.”

By searching a large part of the vicinity where the explosion of annite had occurred, the Earthmen gathered enough fragments to send off and equip with reverse charges all three of the rockets. Mernoq and his subordinate officers figured the mathematical position of the two planets and their movements quite carefully, also estimating the force of the annite. The rockets would hit their target.

“It is a long chance, these rockets,” Uljoph said grimly. “What if none of them are found, or suppose they land in an ocean where they cannot be recovered?”

“In that case,” said Mernoq, “it will mean the destruction of Earth’s atmosphere and all human beings now on the planet.”

“You think that Aamon has done his work and departed for Zyse?”

“He has had time for it. Our only chance is to get word to them in time to charge the atmosphere with a counteracting gas.”

“One of Earth’s telescopes may discover our plight here,” suggested Reod. “Space ships may be sent.”

“I have been thinking the same,” said Mernoq, “yet it is probable that Aamon has a ready story to tell, especially in regard to the demolished monolith.”

Each of the Earthmen measured the possibilities and hoped the gauges at the observatories on the Earth picked up the proximity and composition of all foreign objects entering Earth’s atmosphere. Some of the rockets would be traced and found. The question of timely arrival, however, was uppermost in their minds. In spite of the terrific power and accelerating impetus afforded by annite, it would be a long time

before the projectiles reached Earth.

At Mernoq’s order, the Earthmen set off the first rocket. At long intervals the other two were sent into apace. Off they hurtled in the direction of the green-glowing planet which glowed steadily in the sky. Earth and Venus were nearly in line, and the sun’s position favored the flight of the rockets. Time must pass, time which battled with the time Aamon had set for the destruction of civilization. The rockets not only contained messages relating to Aamon’s perfidy, but they also gave specific directions for charging the atmosphere.

It was at Reod’s suggestion that another chance of salvation was made possible. Mernoq employed this at once. On a sloping wall facing the planet Earth, messages were written in gigantic characters on the chance that Earth telescopes might be trained that way.

Time dragged for the waiting Earthmen. A close watch was kept upon the green star, for the Earthmen were fearful of the telltale flash surrounding the planet which would tell of Aamon’s success.

The Earthmen knew that it would be a long time before the stellar messages reached Earth, a great number of times longer than passage by space ship.

Only a few days had passed when one of the Earthmen issued a mental cry of excitement which brought the general focus of attention immediately upon the green, glowing planet which swung far off in space. Mernoq’s heart chilled with fear. Had the gigantic cataclysm been unloosed at last? His keen eyes searched for the telltale glare of destruction. Instead, he saw several bright specks growing larger in the sky. They expanded to view as they came, and he saw that they were space ships.

Five in number, they cruised about the vicinity of the wrecked monolith, finally settling to rest. The stranded Earthmen

watched in undecided anticipation. Was this help arriving, or had Aamon returned to finish the sinister work which had narrowly failed him the first time? Several figures stepped from the nearest ship and approached them. Mernoq, with gladness in his heart, recognized one of them as Eloow.

"Earth's atmosphere!" cried Mernoq, voicing the apprehension uppermost in his mind. "Is it saved?"

"We do not yet know for certain, but we hope for the best."

"How did you get here so soon? We sent rockets, but that was but a few days ago."

"We read your cliff message from our space ship," said Eloow. "We were already on our way here."

"But Aamon—where is he?"

"On his way to Zyse, but it is a small start he has. We left for Venus secretly almost at the starting moment of Aamon's ship in the direction of Sirius. His course of flight has diverged only at a slight angle from our own. I was suspicious of him when he told how the monolith had been destroyed in blasting a necessary passage into the *kletin* chambers. He reported that you and the others not returned with him had decided to stay and move the *kletin* out upon the surface of Venus before more ships were sent for it."

"WHEN were these ships to come for us?" Mernoq asked.

"Sixteen Earthly days hence."

"When Aamon's destruction of Earth's air was consummated and he was safely on his way out of the Solar System," observed Mernoq.

"And you were found entombed and dead," added Eloow. "When our telescope picked up the inscriptions you made on the cliff, I dispatched one of our ships back to Earth to take preventative measures against Aamon's treachery."

"The formula for charging the air?" Mernoq interrogated eagerly.

"The formula so long preserved and which is entrusted to but a few of us, you, Aamon and myself included. The same formula which our ancient ancestors used in keeping the exploding emanations from Venus' atmosphere harmless when they struck the atmosphere of Earth."

"Then our fears are at rest, for Aamon would not have timed the explosion to occur before he had left the Solar System, and you say that he has but a short start."

"That is so."

"Aamon must never reach Zyse," Mernoq avowed.

"It is unlikely that he shall," replied Eloow. "I have suspected him for a long time. I never placed the trust and confidence in him that you did. On one reason or another, I held up most of the ships which were to leave with Aamon, but I could not manage to delay Aamon himself. I did the next best thing. I placed a man aboard with orders to hamper the speed of his ship in case we wished to catch up."

"Let us give chase at once!"

Mernoq hurried with Eloow to his ship. Four ships rose from the cold, dead surface of airless Venus and raced off into space. The remaining ship stayed while its occupants set to work releasing the score of imprisoned Earthmen attending the energy radiator.

The course of Aamon's ship had led sunward, designed on a straight course to Sirius which would cut close to the orbit of Mercury. Earthmen eagerly scanned the proximity detectors as high speed was attained. The four ships spread out so that they cruised several thousand miles apart. They were nearing Mercury's orbit when the sunward ship of the group first picked up the location of Aamon's slower-moving space ship. The four pursuing ships gradually converged. A message was radiated for Aamon to stop. His answer was a vicious blast of power which narrowly missed the nearest

ship of Eloow's fleet.

Aamon put on a sudden spurt of speed. It was evident that Eloow's minion who had been responsible for the slowing up of Aamon's ship had been detected. That his end had been a swift one neither Eloow nor Mernoq doubted. The four ships kept abreast of Aamon's at a safe distance. Another blaze of power went wide of its mark. Still another and much closer charge caused one of the pursuing ships to tumble crazily in space until it once more righted itself.

"Shall we fire?" asked Eloow, turning to Mernoq.

Mernoq nodded grimly. The order was communicated to all four ships. Simultaneously blasts leaped out at the fleeing craft. Two of them struck. They waited to see the extent of the damage.

AAMON'S ship, demolished at one end, rolled awkwardly off its course, still hurtling at meteoric speed. Mernoq and Eloow watched the proximity detectors. A series of blasts from the space-wrecked craft lashed savagely and spitefully at its avengers. They were ineffectual yet revealed dangerous potentials which were still Aamon's.

"Another barrage will finish him."

Mernoq halted in the act of issuing instructions as Eloow gripped his arm and pointed significantly at the proximity detector.

"Aamon has lost his propulsion power. He is falling into the sun. What end could be more fitting? We have only to stand by at a safe distance and watch him go to a well-merited death."

Mernoq revised his orders to fire.

Instead, his ships formed a funeral consort about the doomed and helpless ship of his arch-enemy whom once he had trusted and encouraged. They cruised too far distant for Aamon to vent any further spite upon them, although he made several vain attempts. Nearer and nearer the great, flaming globe of the sun they raced, the initial momentum of Aamon's ship, at the time he had been struck, swervingly diverted, toward the sun's incandescent mass. He had no power to change the course. The end was inexorable.

So fast were the five ships moving through space that soon the ships of the fleet commenced to feel the tremendous drag of the sun's immense attraction. Aamon's fall was accelerating. He and his faithless crew were consigned to a flaming hell which would consume them long before they ever reached it.

They were to die a horrible, lingering, death of suffocating heat, watching tormentedly the sunward side of their space ship grow red, then white-hot, before they perished miserably. Something of this inevitable doom must have impressed itself on Aamon, for in the middle of the funeral cortege the cosmic coffin with its living and doomed cargo burst suddenly into a bright flash of light.

Where a slow-moving dot had rested on the proximity detectors there were now but a few, tiny specks slowly radiating from a central point. Aamon had chosen the easier way. No longer did he stand as a menace to mankind's peace and security in the exodus to the new world.