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A Story of Astronomical Doom

By ANTHONY RUD

MENACE FROM THE MICROCOSM

A Novelette of Worlds Within Worlds

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

STRANGER THAN TRUTH

THE CHESSBOARD OF MARS

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Publisher's Note:

As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout, and have added a table of contents.

About halfway through Chapter I, the printed copy on which this ebook is based has a blank area in "If necessary, this state could be continued indefinitely": the word "state" is our restoration for the blank area.

MENACE FROM the MICROCOsm

A Complete Novelette of Worlds
Within Worlds

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

Author of "Brain of Venus," "Mathematica Plus," etc.

**An Earthman Descends Into Smallness When
Humanity is Imperiled by Atomic Invasion!**

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CHAPTER I

Men of Uk

Kerry Justin, pilot LV-2 of the Interatomic Corporation, looked in puzzlement at his route-checkers. Up to now everything had been proceeding smoothly. He, his partner, and the machine itself had decreased steadily downward from Earth, had crossed the electronic gulf of space, had conformed exactly to all the usual influences of the *Dunsite* plates. There had been the same odd sickness and paralysis occasioned by the reduction. But now the small freight machine, carrying merchandise from Earth to Micropolis, was being drawn aside relentlessly by an immensely superior gravitational field.

Justin's gaze swung to his observation screens; his lips tightened as he beheld the cloudy, yellow world of Uk ahead of him. Planet of menace, bearing on its drably unpleasant surface the sworn enemies of Kraj.

"Say, Kerry, what do you make of it?"

It was Lance Albridge who spoke, the massive co-pilot of the machine and Kerry's closest friend. His pugnacious face was strained with sudden alarm; hairy fists were clamped on the switches of the propulsion engines.

"Damned if I know!" Justin still stared perplexedly into the screens. "This is the first time we've been detoured while heading for Micropolis. Normally there's little gravitational effect from Uk; this time we're being swung aside. The whole thing is obviously scientifically arranged. I don't like it, Lance! The Ukians are absolute devils according to all accounts. But why they want us heaven alone knows. Try your left-sector propulsion plates and see what happens. We might pull away."

"O.K." Albridge's hands threw in the switches, then grasped the heavy steering mechanism. It moved easily enough; the meters revealed the surging of power—but otherwise nothing happened.

"Hell!" he gasped out. "Whatever it is that's dragging us has got our propulsor system licked to blazes! The limit of our power makes no impression at all."

Justin frowned.

"Better close your switches and cut the power out. No use wasting it. These Ukians are trapping us for some reason; perhaps they think they can get some information from us about the Krajians. If so, they've got another think coming."

With that he turned actively aside to the machine's defensive equipment, fingered the deadly molecular gun, major weapon of destruction, lovingly. If it was fight the Ukians wanted they'd get it!

Albridge cut off the power, then joined his friend by the observation screens. His blue eyes glanced at the deadly gun.

"Going to pepper 'em?"

Justin nodded grimly.

"If I get the chance, yes." Then he became silent again.

The machine, pursuing now a perfectly normal space flight, was traveling with ever increasing velocity toward the yellow planet. Far away to the right lay Kraj itself, a dark blue ball in the infinity, receding as the distance from it increased toward Uk.

The two men stood silent, waiting tensely, staring into the observation screens. As yet it was impossible to use their weapons; the dense clouds of Uk shielded the planet's surface completely. Within twelve more minutes they were cutting through them. They stood, set-faced, waiting for the apparently inevitable crash—then to their infinite relief the ship suddenly slackened in its onward rush, lost speed rapidly, and finally dropped as lightly as a feather from the clouds to the atomic planet itself. A jerk, and then the machine was still.

Albridge glanced at the exterior instruments and took their readings.

"Atmosphere and density same as Kraj," he reported. "You stay here and use the mol-gun; I'm using my own weapons." He jumped over to the airlock and swung the massive-hinged operculum inward, gazing out on the landscape. Then he took down his magnetic gun from its holster and surveyed the scenery from the safety of the ship. Justin swung his gun around and opened up a firing sector in the wall, leaving free passage for the deadly radiations the moment firing became necessary.

Then a voice spoke, in a pidgin form of the Krajian language.

"Stand exactly where you are! Take your hands from your guns!"

Justin obeyed, turned to face the commander. Albridge's gun dropped with a crash. In silence the two stared, for the first time, at the men of Uk.

They were not unlike the Krajians—bulbous-headed, blue-skinned, and possessed of four arms. There were the same flapping gashes of mouths, the same absence of nose and hair. One large, faceted eye reposed in the center of the unearthly faces.

In all there were six men present, attired in one-piece scarlet tunics, with bright belts loaded with scientific weapons and instruments about their waists. In each of their four hands they held deadly weapons of their own

science, unlike anything the puzzled Earthmen had ever seen before, even on Kraj.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" Kerry Justin demanded curtly, after a while, using the language of Kraj. "You have no right to waylay an Earth-Micropolis trading vessel!"

"It is not a question of right when the men of Uk desire something," the leader answered coldly. "My name is Kanos. You may know of me from our enemies on Kraj?" Justin nodded grimly.

"I know of you all right. They call you the celestial butcher!"

"Do they really? On that case you will be aware of the fact that our science is completely merciless, devoted only to achievement and ultimate destruction of the accursed men of Kraj. We waylaid you both for a very definite purpose—not because it happened to be you in particular, but because you were the first to appear on the scene within the range of our magnetic plates. That was how we snared you here—artificial gravitation, or magnetism. We watched your progress, of course, by the very ancient method of spatial television. However, we have use for you both."

"By all the planets, if I could only—" Albridge began wrathfully.

"Silence! You are not dealing with brute force, but with science of a very high degree. One false move and you will be subjected to anesthesia—not death, because you are needed. Come here, both of you. The fourth dimensional machine which gave us entry to this vessel is about ready to reverse action and return us to the city. Stand here—instantly!"

With compressed lips the two obeyed. They knew better than to argue with the men of Uk. Hardly had they stood in position than the fourth dimensional machine reversed its influence and the two found themselves suffering sensations akin to those in a rapidly descending elevator. An opaque fog, vaguely luminous, writhed about them and their captors. When at last it cleared away they were within the central scientific laboratory of these strange and determined people. Towering above them was the shining mass of the fourth dimensional machine itself.

In silence they regarded the incomprehensible machinery, tried vainly to figure things out. A jab from the leader's weapon sent them moving forward. They paused at last in the center of the enormous edifice at a sharp command. Others of the race, as expressionless and hideous as their fellows, came from the remoter reaches of the colossal place as Kanos curtly summoned them.

It was in 2742 that Professor Dunstan discovered the secret of interatomic travel. His metal, Dunsite, was the product of nearly fifty-five years of sustained research and, when subjected to various electrical fields, was found to be capable of reducing its electronic orbits to absolute minimum, bringing about a state of near coincidence between electron and proton. If necessary, this state could be continued indefinitely, beyond the annihilation of electron and proton into energy and into the next stage of electrons within electrons, a new-found condition of ultimate matter, existing within the released energy itself.

Everything within the influence of Dunsite decreased in proportion as the metal itself decreased, both organic and inorganic. Humans found themselves capable of sinking within a machine of Dunsite to a point far less than that of an electron—finding that electron to be a planet—by the process of the electrons of their own bodies merging, upon annihilation, into the second stage of electronic smallness. Beyond a brief period of unconsciousness there were apparently no ill-effects. Only weight was lost steadily as the size decreased, but since at the journey's end everything was found to be relative, there was little cognizance of this.

In 2750 the first interatomic trip was made from Earth. An immense unit, comprised within its massively shielded core, of an infinitesimal piece of potassium was used, and the first machine descended into its mysteries—to find a solar system of nine worlds, corresponding with the nine

electrons of potassium, wherein the protonic nucleus became a sun.

Seven of the worlds were barren. The eighth, and principal one, was found to be known as Kraj, populated by a scientific race about equal with Earth, while the ninth planet—and nearest neighbor—known as Uk, was populated entirely by one-time denizens of Kraj, colonists, turned now to bitter enemies of their mother planet by the persistent influence of scientific achievement and desire for conquest.

So, between Kraj and Earth there sprang up trade and steady communication. The potassium unit was guarded with infinite care. Within the metal's confines were several molecular universes, but of them all, though they teemed with worlds, only Kraj and Uk appeared to hold life.

The Interatomic Travel Corporation came into being, possessing—on Earth—one Raymond Price as its chief engineer. The Corporation owned a large fleet of Dunsite machines, varying from passenger liners to scouts and freighters, all of them possessed of the necessary apparatus to sink into unknown smallness, in the state beyond electronic electrons even, should the occasion ever arise—which, so far, it had not.

Interatomic travel to Micropolis—as Earthlings called the chief city of Kraj—finally became as popular as old time world tours. Even the conquest of space, an accepted fact now for more than three hundred years, paled into insignificance. The interstellar spaces were known; but the microcosmic were not.

The two Earthmen waited tensely, fists clenched, as the beings gathered about them.

"If ideas for an attempted escape are forming in your minds you may as well dispense with them," Kanos remarked grimly, lowering his weapon. "You are being held to the ground by magnetic devices, similar, on a smaller scale to the ones which trapped your space machine. I believe you are aware that the Krajians are our sworn enemies? That they have so far beaten every effort we have made to subdue them?"

"Go on!" Justin snapped. "Get it over with, can't you?"

"We realize the impossibility of trying to beat the Krajians by ordinary methods. The only way is to learn all their plans by secret methods. To that end we have studied the manner by which your ships cross from the big to the small and have succeeded, by duplicating the system in living beings—ourselves, in narrowing down our own bodies to infinitesimal proportions. Further, our bodies, when treated by various antitoxins, can live in human blood—which, of course, is a mixture of water, fibrine, albumen, phosphates and so forth. Our size can be decreased so that we become smaller than blood corpuscles themselves. You will realize thereby how many of us could be encompassed within two human beings the size, say, of you two!"

"Good God, you don't mean—" Albridge began hoarsely.

"I mean that you two will be used to carry some fifty thousand of our race back to earth in your bodies! Your normal blood will be drained off and a substitute supplied, in which our microscopic race will live. Your bodies will live long enough to take you back home, but your minds will be dead to your normal will. Therefore, hypnotic orders will be impressed on your brains before you leave. When you arrive back on Earth your bodies will burst asunder, mainly because the artificial blood you will be supplied with will at that period, become highly oxygenated and thereby explode, releasing our fellows. They will escape, unseen, each in possession of their own normal will-power."

"But your purpose behind this ghastly idea?" Justin demanded thickly.

"Our purpose? Simple enough. Thousands of people travel every Earthly month between Micropolis and Earth. These people will have one of our number inside, all unaware of the fact, commanding their brains what to do. They

will quarrel with the Krajians and precipitate, no doubt, a war. On Earth we shall set men and women against each other by the same method and make them exterminate each other. Ultimately, when the human race is wiped out, we shall take over control, thereby gaining both Kraj and Earth. Other Earthmen will be snared down here as you have been to take still further supplies of our fellows to continue the work on Earth; still other Earthmen will be captured as you were and used for vivisectional purposes. That is highly necessary, so that we can study earthly organisms and learn how to convert ourselves when the time comes for us to control Earth as well as Kraj. You understand?"

"You can't do it!" Albridge shouted desperately. "It's massacre—hypnotic massacre!" He struggled desperately and futilely to break free of the magnetic radiation pinioning him. "You can't, I tell you!"

"The operation will proceed," Kanos announced implacably, and made a motion to his assembled men.

The magnetism was released and the two Earthmen promptly seized. They gave a brief but futile account of themselves, then they were whirled helplessly toward the opposite end of the laboratory.

Without pause they were taken to two of a series of operating tables and there strapped immovably upon them. They shouted, they cursed, they strained muscles and thews to the uttermost, all to no avail. Then anesthetic cones were clapped over their faces and their senses reeled into unconsciousness.

With the same ordered precision, Kanos directing the proceedings, the surgeons moved to an immense transparent bowl filled with blue fluid, and rapidly connected to it a series of immaculately clean pipes, all leading to one main nozzle of glitteringly bright metal. Within the bowl, reduced to infinite smallness, alive and healthy within the elements of human blood—blue only because of the highly oxygenated content—reposed the fifty thousand Ukians.

"Proceed!" Kanos ordered impassively, and immediately his assistants prepared for action, laid their gleaming scientific instruments on the tables.

Draining tubes were placed into position, surgically spotless drains were opened in the floor. Then the operation began, proceeded with steady, skilful speed that betokened the supreme knowledge of these master surgeons. First the hearts of the two Earthmen were removed and transferred to a machine filled with solution, in the depths of which they continued to beat steadily, supplied by artificial arteries.

Once this was done every drop of blood in the two men's bodies was drained off through the tubes and down the grids, afterward being replaced by seventy-five percent synthetic blue fluid from an enormous nearby tank, and the remaining fifteen percent made up from the contents of the bowl. Then the hearts were replaced, skilfully reconnected, and set beating. The incisions instantly healed under powerful solutions. After being treated with strong stimulants Justin and Albridge began to stir slowly out of unconsciousness.

Presently their bleary eyes swung to Kanos, but in their respective gazes there was no trace of recollection. They were hardly even conscious of the fact that they were alive; their minds were completely in the grip of the master of Uki.

"Understand, Earthmen, that you are merely motivated machines—flesh and blood instruments of our purposes," he said implacably. "Within each of your bodies are twenty-five thousands of our race. You will drive them to Earth. That is all. Release them!"

The straps were unbuckled. Dazedly, heavily, the two got to their feet and stood momentarily passive, then they turned and walked mechanically from the laboratory, walked steadily through the various corridors and at last into the open. Straight as dies, eyes fixed in front of them, they moved toward the spot where the freighter atomic machine lay in the yellow grass of this strange and terrible world.

Still with the motions of automatons they passed within the machine through the open air-lock, closed it, then moved to the control board. Within a few minutes the ship was hurtling upwards towards the yellow clouds, passed through them, and onwards into the intra-atomic space, driving steadily back toward Earth with the queerest menace

that had ever arisen from the realms of the infinite small.

CHAPTER II

Murder Lust

Raymond Price, the young engineer-in-chief of the Interatomic Corporation, looked up sharply as the warning arrival gong suddenly rang stridently.

It was the signal for his sub-engineers to get busy immediately and obey his orders! He turned to the microphone connecting him with the instruction loudspeakers dotted in various parts of the mighty terminal building—perhaps one of the most strangely designed buildings on Earth, and gave brief, pointed orders.

The terminal's dimensions were staggeringly large, seeming more so by reason of the emptiness of the place. Price's position, within a small raised building not unlike a railway signal box, commanded a view of the entire place in all directions.

Running on either side of the vast sunken pit from which the atomic machines departed and arrived, were the platforms, while in the center of the pit, automatically controlled, lay the priceless potassium unit containing multi-atomic universes, wherein lay the worlds of Uk and Kraj.

The arrival gong, actuated by electrical repercussion when a vessel was on the borderline of departure or arrival, was the signal for the unit casings to be slowly sunken into the metal floor. As they sank a blurry, misty speck came into being, gradually taking form, appearing from microscopic size to full dimensions, until, within five minutes of the gong's ringing the atomic freighter merged from tininess to its complete size. Price frowned as he surveyed the machine, then turned to his nearest assistant.

"Say, what in hell is 45-Z doing back so soon? Should be tomorrow."

"Right enough." The assistant surveyed the schedule sheet. "Fourteen hours forty tomorrow."

Price said no more. He left the controlling office at a run and hurried along the platform. The door of the ship was already opening and Kerry and Albridge came staggering out. Price stopped dead; the workers about him shouted in horror.

"Kerry!" Price gasped hoarsely, staring at the glassy-eyed wreck who had so jovially departed not fifty hours before. "Kerry! Lance! What on earth has happened to you?"

Neither of the two answered. Instead they seemed to grow larger! An expression of misery, the dumb, speechless misery of a tortured animal, was on their faces.

Price gripped Justin's wrist, then fell back astounded. It was no solid flesh he touched; instead a bloated mass like an inflated bladder. He stared unbelieving,—then stepped back in sheer horror. The two men were still enlarging, and—suddenly and amazingly both of them ripped asunder!

Their flesh tore like rotten rubber, stripped to the bone. The purple fluid that had taken the place of normal blood gushed out in a flood, poured along the platform and into the unit-pit. Albridge's mighty form staggered, collapsed limply. Not a second afterward Justin followed suit. His body, a mere bag of bones draped with crinkled, deflated flesh sagged heavily over the platform edge and vanished in the pit itself.

"God!" Price breathed, sickened and nauseated. He looked about him helplessly, then down at the spreading pool at his feet. With a sudden terrific effort he took possession of himself. "Quickly!" he ordered. "Express ambulance! Send orders for the Atomic Patrol to make immediate investigation of all atomic ways leading to Micropolis! Something is devilishly wrong."

Activity swept into the startled group, Price himself in the midst of it.

He hardly remembered how he got through the remainder of the day. The horror of his friends' deaths and the mystery behind them was still dinging through his brain.

The purple fluid was cleared away after investigation; it revealed nothing. The remains of the two men were rayed out of existence, and the Atomic Patrol set off to investigate. But it was too late then. The fifty thousand invaders were already abroad, released from their incredible transport, putting into action their subtle, unseen plans for the conquest of two worlds.

The Atomic Patrol never returned. What fate it encountered in the unknown spaces of the small could not be imagined, and indeed Price had little time to conjecture. Something was already strangely amiss in the usually perfectly running methods of New York. In three days a change had come about.

From every quarter of the city came news of inexplicable happenings, of genius changing to insanity, of love turning to hate, of men and women doing things they normally would have shuddered at. Some malevolent and unknown disease was infecting the heads of industry and power and yet, so far, mysteriously missing the masses. Always it started in the same way, by a peculiar cut occasioned somehow on the flesh, followed by a strange mental metamorphosis wherein the victim lost all touch with himself and instead became guided, apparently, by an infinitely stronger will than his own.

In consequence of these vast and terrible changes ordered routine and method began to crumble at the foundations. Price in particular found himself totally unable to keep track of his schedules, or of the departure and arrival of vessels. Everything, it seemed, had gone abruptly mad. People were leaving New York by the thousands, nearly every hour of the day and night. Some came back and burst in the same horrible fashion as had the two pilots. Others never came back. Pilots refused to take orders; they were clearly immovably mesmerized. Price tried to interfere and narrowly escaped violent death. Desperate, he appealed to the Government, with no result. The rulers of the country were as criminally insane in their methods as all other, controlling bodies.

Business came to a standstill; crime flourished as never before. Time and time again Price tried to figure the riddle out, sent messenger scouts to Micropolis, demanding to know the reason for it all, but the messengers never returned.

Then the strange malady spread to England and that indeed started disaster in real earnest. For no reason whatever, apart from the sheer desire for murder and death, the British decided to war with America, so there began the most fiendish battle of extermination in Earthly history. The masses themselves, unaffected in the main by the disease, as yet, were all against it, but the iron control of their blood-mad leaders forced them into the war before they could realize what was happening. And, after a day of two, Europe added her forces to the struggle.

In less than a week after Justin's and Albridge's mysterious arrival from the atomic universe the world was madly at war; the masses were now infected with a craving for slaughter and battle.

Finally, forced out by brute control, Price gave up the task of trying to govern the destinies of the Interatomic Corporation, but he did wonder why nobody, for all their insanity, endeavored to attack the potassium unit. This always remained untouched. His mood was bitter, resentful. On the following day he had to join up and add his small share to the unreasoning chaos.

"The thing's so—so sudden!" he declared feelingly to Irene Edwards, his fiancée, while having cocktails with her at her modernistic apartment in the smart quarter of the city. "Something has happened out in intra-atomic space to cause all this, but I'm damned if I know what. I've seriously thought of taking one of the emergency ships and finding out for myself. So far nobody seems to know about those, and I'm the only one with the lock combination."

"And why don't you?" the girl asked, her steady dark eyes upon him.

"Because I realize I wouldn't stand a chance," he replied moodily. "If the whole Atomic Patrol has failed what

good could I do? Alone? Besides, what would be the use? War is here! Before I could learn anything and get back the world would be destroyed!"

Irene said nothing, but her dark head inclined in acquiescence.

"There's so many things I can't understand," Price went on worriedly. "The way the machine pilots behave, for instance. They've been smitten with this disease, too, yet it hasn't changed them into criminals like the rest. Instead they simply go on as before. The only difference is that they won't obey orders and tirelessly go on driving machines to the atomic universe and back again, presumably to reach Micropolis. Thousands of people will be gone by the end of a month—if there is any humanity left by then. But what is it all for?"

"Are you sure it is Micropolis that's behind all this?" the girl asked quietly.

"What else can it be?"

"But it's against their interests to quarrel with Earthmen. What about the rest of their system? Uk, for instance?"

"I've thought of that. It's the only other planet populated—but they'd never attack us in this fashion. They want to overthrow Kraj, yes—but not us."

"Suppose, though, that they've somehow overwhelmed Micropolis and are striking at us with a view to future conquest, or something of that sort?"

Price shook his head slowly.

"No, that doesn't fit in somehow. The people of Kraj are far ahead of those of Uk in any case. You know that as well as I do." He stopped and shrugged. "I guess there's nothing we can do, Irene. I'm on the verge of joining up, and you're to be in the women's section the day afterward. It's the parting of the ways. And to think we reckoned we'd outlawed war for all time!"

That same night, just after eleven o'clock, war came into the heart of New York.

Although the populace had to some extent been expecting it, they were certainly not prepared for such a terrific display of military power. Overhead fleets rained bombs on the metropolis; below, invaders were surging in a mad, murder-driven multitude through the streets. The air was hideous with the din of heavy artillery, the roars of motors, explosions and disintegrators, and the yelling of human voices.

Even more incredible was the fact that this insane tide was not sharply defined into attackers and defenders. Both were mixed up together, each fighting the other. Americans were slaying Americans, and British, Britishers. The thing was mad, an all-consuming lust for slaughter without sense or reason.

Price, who had left Irene's apartment not an hour before the major drive, was packing his clothes for the next day's departure to the war when the sounds of battle reached him. The girl was the first concern that flew to his mind. He must find her—rescue her from the insane mob before they tore her limb from limb.

He swung away from the window, then staggered slightly at a sudden wave of intense giddiness. Almost subconsciously he looked down at his hand; it was smarting sharply. Funny! He hadn't remembered scratching it like that. The blood was oozing gently from a long incision on his thumb. Subconsciously he knew that he had been stricken down by the mysterious disease, but so rapidly was his mentality being overcome by the force of the minute creature that had entered his body, he was losing a grip on his normal will.

In the space of fifteen minutes he was no longer the normal Raymond Price, but a murder-mad fiend like the

rest of the swarming hordes. He still realized he must find Irene—but not in the same fashion as before. He must find her, yes—and exterminate her. Not only her, but everybody who got in his way!

This was the only thought in his mind as he left his apartment and went through the main streets toward her home. Furiously he battled his way through the hordes of people surging in the roadway outside, people armed with knives and all the dangerous implements they could lay hands on. Twice he barely missed destruction, then he reached the vicinity of Irene's apartment. About the place surged swarms of yelling, armed men and, in the midst of them, along with many other hapless men and women, Irene herself, held in an iron grip.

Her clothing was torn and rumpled, her dark hair disordered. Her expression of utter terror changed when she caught sight of Price's blood-streaked figure before her. Her eyes lighted with sudden hope.

"Ray!" she shouted hoarsely, striving vainly to tear free from the merciless grip on her arms. "Ray! Save me! They're taking me away—to Micropolis! I must—Oh, Ray—" She fell forward, jerking and straining.

Price grinned ghoulishly at her, leaped toward her. Whatever it was that was in his mind—and probably it was murder—never materialized. Something struck him violently on the head and he pitched helplessly into darkness.

CHAPTER III

Yuk

Price came to with an aching head, looked about him in the damp darkness of early morning.

The yelling hordes, the massacre of the previous night, had ended—or else passed further westward. The sky was free of planes; the bombardment had ceased. In the waxing light he beheld the corpses of slain men and women, shattered buildings, gaping craters in the road. As he got weakly to his feet it came to him that his escape had obviously been because he had been believed dead and not merely stunned.

His hand went to his still slightly bleeding head; he winced painfully. Then suddenly, like a pouring tide, he remembered what had happened—his insanity—Irene's desperate pleas—the blood-mad devils who had captured her. Micropolis!

"God!" he breathed huskily. "Irene! Taken by those butchers!"

He did not hesitate another moment. He turned and sped through the corpse- and debris-ridden streets toward his own apartment house. He found it had escaped the bombardment but was empty of people.

With pounding feet he went up the staircase to his room, and entered. A decisive plan was in his mind. He would bathe his wound, dress in fresh clothes, then head for Micropolis in one of the fast emergency machines, granting they hadn't already been discovered in their private hangar adjoining the terminal building.

Hastily he began to bathe his wound in cold water, wincing at the pain. Then as he wrung out the rag into the bowl he stared in astonishment. The rising sun played directly upon it and revealed, amidst the water and crimson blood streaks, an inconceivably tiny object making desperate efforts to gain the bowl side. For a moment he mistook it for an insect, then as he looked closer the rag dropped from his hand in utter amazement. It was not an insect but an incredibly small four-armed being, obviously washed from the wound on his head.

Immediately the scientist in him came uppermost. He jumped across to a case of instruments and brought out a microscope. With infinite care he scooped the object up and laid it on a slide, then peered at it amazedly. Under the power of the lenses it was now clearly visible—it was a still living creature, not unlike the Krajan race, and obviously on the verge of death. It was manifestly severely wounded, evidently had been hurt by the vibration of the blow that had cleaved Price's own skull. At that instant it had been in his blood stream almost upon the spot where the wound had been inflicted. Then, washed into the bowl, the shock of the water had brought it back to momentary

life again.

"Not a Krajian, but an Ukian!" Price muttered, his eyes narrowing. "I'd know one anywhere."

Viciously he squeezed the luckless creature into extinction beneath finger and thumb, then gave himself up to brief thought. Slowly, gradually, the immense purpose behind this strange invasion began to filter into his mind. Piece by piece, as the moments slid by, it all became clear to him.

Every person that had been afflicted by the strange disease must, then, have had one of these devilish Ukians inside him! That explained the mysterious cuts just before the disease started—obviously they had been caused by the Ukians themselves, no doubt with tiny instruments. It also explained the nauseating body-burstings.

"Am I lucky!" Price breathed at last, straightening up. "I'd never have found it but for that blow last night. Obviously when the little devil was half killed his influence over my brain failed, otherwise heaven knows how far I might have gone. Of all the damnable ways to win a war! But what's it all for?"

He couldn't fathom that point. His mind swung back to Irene. Grimly he resumed his interrupted bathing, then changed and made for the emergency hangars.

As he had hoped the emergency hangars were untouched. The massive doors were closed as securely as they had always been. Rapidly he swung the dials to the required combination numbers, then flung the doors wide. Without a pause he headed for the foremost machine, entered, and closed the air-locks.

The engines started up reassuringly enough under his touch at the controls. Quickly he drove the machine forward on its land wheels and soon covered the brief distance into the main terminal building. An intense fear was in his heart that perhaps the priceless potassium unit would have been destroyed in the air raid of the night before, but to his infinite relief he found it still there, sunken deep into the pit. Evidently the guiding minds behind the onslaught had taken care to prevent anything happening to the one spot wherein lay their universe.

Price paused only long enough to make the necessary calculations on how far away he would be from Kraj when he had descended into the infinitesimal—for he was starting this time from a point some ten yards away from the potassium unit, which in the aggregate would total up to millions of spatial miles. He debated too, whether he ought to visit Kraj or Uk, then remembering Irene's words about Micropolis he decided on the former, though he had a distinct feeling that the Ukians alone were to blame.

Satisfied at last he threw in the main switches and watched the mighty building grow incredibly vast about him.

He was seething with impatience as he drove steadily downward. Every second of the trip, which usually occupied eight hours, seemed to him an infinity. The only relief he obtained was when the unconsciousness of transit to the ultra-small claimed him for a brief period. Then he was alert again, expecting danger, expecting every moment to be wiped out of being as had those of the Atomic Patrol. But gradually, as the time for the journey's end drew near and nothing unexpected happened he began to realize why it was so. He was not taking the normal route to Micropolis!

He was pursuing a track some eighty thousand miles away from it, which was due entirely to his different starting point. Whatever it had been that had presumably destroyed the Atomic Patrol fleet had evidently been set directly in the normal route, and he, by means of his deviation, was missing it. Convinced this was the case he made an even wider detour to gain Kraj, reaching it finally from the north cosmic point instead of the south. And at last he dropped gently on the main landing ground of Micropolis itself.

To his astonishment, upon alighting from the machine, he beheld a veritable sea of atomic fliers waiting as though for a given signal. Silvery, snub-nosed vessels gleaming under the blue-white effulgence of the sun, actually the nucleus of the potassium. For a while he stood looking at them in puzzlement, noting the busy figures of Krajians teeming about them, then, after a glance upward at the cloudy yellow world of Uk, some 200,000 miles distant, he made his way rapidly to the main administrative building.

Yuk, ruler of Kraj and master of Micropolis, was just descending the broad steps of the building in company with his immediate advisers as Price prepared to mount them. They met half-way up.

Without hesitation Yuk made a quick signal to his men and Price was firmly seized.

"So, my friend, whoever you may be, you Earthmen have turned traitors?" Yuk inquired bitterly, his single eye glowing malevolently. "You send us cargoes of Earthmen who try to learn our innermost secrets and attempt to destroy us! We thought better of Earthmen than that! You see those machines assembled there? We are ready to launch our attack to exterminate every living being on Earth. Normally we are not a warlike race, but this time it is different. It is clearly them—or us!"

"But—but you don't understand!" Price gasped hoarsely. "Listen—I beg of you! We on Earth have nearly all been slain by warfare! Only a few hours ago I discovered that it was caused by a microscopic being—an Ukian, controlling our minds by living in our blood streams. Thousands upon thousands of them have reached Earth recently. The whole thing started with Kerry Justin and his partner Albridge. You remember them? The pilots of Freighter LV-2."

Yuk's immense eye revealed that he was thinking. He made a motion and Price was released.

"Tell me more!" he ordered.

Quickly and concisely Price went through the whole story, and when he had finished Yuk's eye was filled with a devouring hate.

"I see it all now," he muttered. "This is clearly the work of those accursed Ukians—a clever attempt to destroy not only us but Earthmen as well—to gain control over both worlds. On your world they set Earthmen at each other's throats. Others they send ostensibly to here, but waylay them on the journey. During the waylaying process they place one of their damned spies in human bodies, then the humans continue their journey here, finding out all they can by the dictates of the miniature beings inside them. By this they accomplish the dual move of learning our secrets, for naturally the Ukians waylay them on the return journey—and also they have excited our hatred against Earthmen for we, finding out, have believed Earthmen to be at fault."

"That's exactly it," Price nodded in relief. "There's one other thing, though, Earthmen don't return to Earth once they've left it, or if they do it is only to burst and release more of these microscopic spies. It can only mean that those who don't return are incarcerated on Uk, or else something decidedly worse. I'm seeking Irene, my betrothed. I understood she'd been brought here. Evidently she was under a misapprehension, or else had been deliberately led to believe the wrong thing. She must be on Uk, and if I tear the whole infernal planet in pieces I mean to find her! Granting, that is, that I'm not too late. If I am—"

Yuk's immense head slowly nodded.

"I understand. Your coming here has cleared up many things we did not fathom; why we could not get any news from Earth, for one thing. We shall now change our attack from Earth to Uk. We leave immediately!"

Price nodded eagerly.

"I'm with you, Yuk. I'll use my own machine. You lead and I'll follow."

CHAPTER IV

Avengers of Kraj

Within ten minutes Price was back again in his machine, waiting tensely at the controls, watching as the immense Krajan fleet rose in orderly formation into the air and streaked rapidly toward the sparse clouds. When at last they had all gone, a vast and avenging armada, he shot upward in their wake, hung closely to the tail of the rearmost machine.

Uk, yellow world of peril, was clearly visible the instant the atmosphere of Kraj had been left behind. Already the trifling 200,000 miles distance was decreasing. The Krajan fleet broke up into sectors, linked together by spatial radio. Only one machine remained in the forefront—an empty machine, controlled remotely by Yuk himself—the point ship of the armada. It was as well the ruler's foresight had led him to adopt this method, for suddenly and mysteriously, when the halfway line between Uk and Kraj had been gained, the machine jolted violently and rebounded back into space, gradually dissolving into molten metal.

"To the left!" thundered Yuk's voice, clearly audible in Price's own loudspeaker. "Electric barrier! Bear left and bring on neutralizer rays—frequency nineteen. Only way to get through. Prepare for recoil."

Price smiled grimly to himself.

"So that's where the Atomic Patrol went to!" he muttered. "Electric barrier that shatters the construction of a ship and changes it into energy. I guessed at something like that. Only removed when necessary, I suppose."

True to orders the fleet turned aside, but only for a while, then space was alive with emerald green rays, hurling their stupendous power—technically known to the Krajians as frequency 19—at the invisible barrier. So far as Price could figure out the rays were duplicating the same power as the barrier itself, working on the principle of like repulsing like. Whatever it was, beams stabbing the infinite, the machines swept through the invisible wall and went streaking onward toward the yellow planet. Price, himself, having no such rays, slid through under the ray protection of the last ship.

Evidently, however, the smashing of the barrier had warned the Ukians what to expect, or else they had already seen the invaders through their high-powered telescope and had machines ready for action. The fact remained that from Uk's yellow surface there suddenly began to spew a fleet of gleaming space machines, villainous energy-rays faintly visible against the ebon dark of infinity.

Price set his lips as he clenched his controls. He wished he had an assistant to aid him. The machine was equipped with deadly weapons enough, all controllable from his main switchboard, but none the less he realized he would have all his work cut out to carve a way through the horde and give battle at the same time.

Tensely he watched the opening attack, saw Krajan and Ukian ships swarm into conflict. Infinity blazed with light as two machines cannoned into each other, to sink back into dripping debris gravitating, about the whole ruptured mass. The combatants were pretty nearly equal, but the scientific power was on the side of the merciless Ukians. Time and time again their disruptive radiations stabbed out into space, flicking pieces off the Krajan machines and, more rarely, annihilating them altogether.

For quite ten minutes the swirling chaos continued, then Price found his attention forced away from the observation screens as one of the machines suddenly made a direct dive toward him. Instantly he dived downward, held his breath, and shot beneath the very belly of the hurtling monster. An energy ray peeled the top plates off his vessel like skin from an orange. His eyes narrowed as he clutched the molecular gun, most deadly weapon in Earthly science.

He swung around again, circled warily, and dodged another attack of rays. Then he maneuvered until he had the invading machine dead across the sight of the gun. The Ukian vessel, by far the clumsier, struggled mightily to swing to one side, and indeed had half succeeded when Price, eyes shining like steel across the sights, pressed the firing button.

Instantly the terrible weapon shot back on its powerful springs with the recoil. The opposing machine, being on one side, half vaporized—belched outward in a tumbling mass of rending, dripping metal, the molecules of its formation utterly blasted into a gaseous state. But the remaining section, a conical hulk, floated lazily away, those in its interior only saved from instant death in space by the automatic compartment doors.

Price swung his gun again to finish his task, then paused. Within that hulk there would undoubtedly be some men left. They might know where Irene was! Hardly had the thought passed through his mind than he switched on the twin space anchors, hooked the derelict to his own ship, and set off for Uk at top speed.

His journey took him around the edge of the battle, the most desperate journey he had ever known. Time and time again pieces of his machine were torn away; once the vessel was hit so hard he thought it would crumble in pieces, then he realized it had only been a reflected beam and not a direct one.

So, little by little, edging his way around, only sparing himself time enough to note that Yuk was slowly and resolutely gaining the upper hand, mainly because of the swifter nature of his machine, he circuited the space battle and ultimately gained the dense clouds of the Ukian atmosphere. Then only did he slow down, switch his gravitators to full strength, and draw the hulk into contact with his own machine.

Grimly he flicked on the radio transmitting equipment.

"Ukians!" he snapped into the microphone, using the Krajian language. "Do you hear me?"

A pause followed, then an Ukian's halting voice answered.

"We hear!"

"Good! Now listen to me! You will answer a question. If you do that I will spare the lot of you; if you don't I'll blast you clean to hell. I'm seeking the Earthmen who were snared to your planet—one in particular, a woman by the name of Irene Edwards. Tell me where she is and you will come to no harm."

There was a long pause, then the voice resumed.

"We don't know the particular Earthling you name, but we do know where they all are. It is the plan of Kanos, our master, to examine their various organs, to find how best to convert ourselves when we take over Earth—"

Price became desperate with sudden fear.

"Where are they? Blast you to hell, *where?*" he snarled.

"In the prison adjoining the surgical laboratories."

"O.K. We'll head for the place and you'll direct me as I drag you along. I'll let you go when I'm sure you've told the truth."

Savagely he turned aside and flung in his switches once more, dropped through the clouds at a dizzying rate. Then the tremendous city of the Ukians burst into view. The voice of the Ukian within the derelict spoke at intervals, directing the course, until at last Price beheld the enormous prison and laboratories stretched in a two mile enormity below him, apart from the main city's curious, straddling reaches.

"Right!" he snapped. "Now we'll see if you're telling the truth."

He dropped down within three hundred feet of the crystalline roof. Staring through the floor observation plates he distinctly beheld below him the vast hall of science and, more dimly beyond, close banked masses that he assumed were Earthmen! Evidently the Ukian had spoken the truth.

Satisfied, he swung away, swept five miles southward with devastating speed, and there dropped the derelict.

With a grim smile he switched on his molecular gun and cut a two hundred foot deep chasm all the way around the wreck, marooning the Ukians completely as they suddenly poured from the hulk in an effort at escape. Then, cutting the power down, he half melted the derelict and left it there, satisfied that the beings could not give any warnings, either by radio or personal touch.

As he flew close to the laboratories again, Price put his pre-devised plans into action. Quickly he moved his minimizing switches, waited while he and the ship contracted to the uttermost limits, shrank down to the electron within an electron state. As the process proceeded he lowered the vessel slowly, waiting until at last it was tiny enough to pass through the enormous tunnel which actually comprised the airlet hole of a roof ventilator.

Gently he eased the machine through, then stopped the decrease. He burst at last into the stupendous immensity of the laboratory, unseen and silent, no larger than a wasp. Grimly he looked about him.

On every hand were giants, colossal Ukians as they appeared, proceeding with their vivisection operations, so intent on their tasks they never, even glimpsed the tiny cylindrical flyer zooming swiftly over their heads.

Price shuddered at the things he beheld. Twenty-four operating tables were in action, and upon them lay Earthmen in various stages of vivisection—some dead, others mere butchered mounds of flesh craving for the extinction that was mercilessly withheld.

Hopefully Price searched the area wherein further Earthmen were waiting for experiment—colossal men and women they seemed, jammed tightly together within the monstrous cage of a prison. Price went high above them, peered down on their enormous, terror-stricken faces, but he failed to behold the features of Irene. The thought that she was perhaps already dead or torn in pieces by these inhuman fiends sickened and stupefied him for a moment; then he went on again, ceaselessly, desperately, following the line of operating tables.

Abruptly his breath caught; he stared fixedly into his observation reflector, trained on the seventh table. There was the girl herself, conscious, utterly overcome with fear, strapped down by a massive leather harness.

About her, arranging their instruments for action, were the Ukian surgeons.

"Irene!" he shouted hoarsely, only to realize she couldn't possibly hear him.

Fiercely he swung the miniature machine down, swept over the hill that comprised the girl's supine body, dropped, then maneuvered around to face the chief operating surgeon—Kanos himself, had he but known it. With rapid movements Price focused his molecular gun and pressed the button. Being reduced in size its area of efficiency was likewise shortened, but none the less its power was just as devastating on a small scale. The beam, no thicker than a lead pencil, stabbed into the enormous face of the ruler of Uk, drove clean into his single eye and through it into the depths of his fiendish brain.

He dropped without a sound, stone dead.

Irene twisted her head about; her eyes seemed the size of lakes as Price shot over her face like an angry wasp. The surgeons turned, astounded, tried to locate the hovering, darting terror—but on account of its small size they were utterly unable to catch it with their flailing arms. Time and time again its vicious molecular gun stabbed out, tore pieces out of the men, blinded them, killed them.

No larger than an insect, and yet it wreaked death and havoc everywhere it touched.

Pandemonium spread over the laboratory. The surgeons raced up and down desperately, tried everything they could to wipe the machine out. They realized now what it really was. Price went on grimly, waited until he had at last forced all the Ukians into a corner of the immense place; then he gradually enlarged the size of the vessel to normal. It grew steadily, filling all the space, spreading outward, smashing down instruments, finally reaching up to the ceiling.

"Listen, Ukians!" Price thundered, connecting the external loudspeaker. "I've got the lot of you in a corner and you can't get out. One move and I'll blast the lot of you."

CHAPTER V

Return to Earth

The trapped surgeons said nothing, could only look futilely at the enormity of curved, shining wall hemming them in. They realized clearly that the Earthman would carry out his threat without hesitation if necessary, so they waited in sullen silence.

Price exited the machine by the opposite door and raced across to the pinioned girl. In an instant he had her free, gathered her to him tenderly.

"Ray! Oh—Ray—" Her voice broke huskily; then from sheer reaction she fainted dead away. Quick as a flash Price swept her up in his arms, laid her carefully on the ship's wall bunk, then returned to the cage. In a moment he had the clamps unfastened and released the Earthmen in a shouting, joyous flood.

"Any others?" he asked curtly, and a tall, bald-headed man stopped to answer him.

"Butchered," he said hoarsely. "We're all that's left. Thank God you came."

"Never mind that," Price interrupted. "I had a personal reason. We'll have to release these others and give those poor butchered devils over there a quick dose of lethal gas. They're beyond hope. We'll need a fleet of ships, too, to get all of you back to Earth."

He paused grimly and edged back toward the vessel as the surgery doors suddenly crashed open. Tensely he waited, then relaxed. It was Yuk and his men—a victorious mob. The Krajan paused at last as he beheld Price.

"So you succeeded too!" he exclaimed in obvious delight. "Splendid, Earthman! We finally overcame the Ukian space-fliers—their ships were too clumsy. We have the city guarded at every point; twenty space machines are hovering with disintegrator rays ready for action. I left this building untouched when I discovered its nature—realized you would rather have it that way. The victory is ours, my friend." He paused and looked about him. "The surgeons?" he asked in surprise. "What has become of them all?"

Briefly Price told him.

"They are prisoners," Yuk announced grimly. "Bring them forward. We will attend to them."

"First I want something from them," Price answered quietly. "I want an antidote by which I can kill their miniature spies within human beings without harming human beings themselves. There must be something."

With that he turned aside, entered the ship, and threw open the opposite air-lock. Covering the surgeons with his ray-gun he forced them through to the surgery.

"We heard your request, Earthman," one of them remarked. "You want an antidote. If we provide it will you allow us freedom? Freedom to visit other worlds and leave Uk behind?"

"It is not in my power to give you that," Price returned. "I want an antidote and I mean to have it. You are Yuk's prisoners, not mine. It's up to him."

"Your request is granted," the Krajan ruler said calmly. "Give the Earthman what he desires."

The surgeon turned aside and extracted a metal sheet from a complicated filing cabinet. In silence he handed it to Price.

"That is a method we invented in case we had need of it," he said after a while. "What we have done we can also undo. Follow out those instructions, build the required generators, and you will be able to disseminate an electrical field which will apparently paralyze human beings for a brief period. What really happens is that mild electric currents pass through their bodies. On account of their size they can stand it, but to the infinitely smaller Ukians imprisoned within them it will be the equivalent of extreme high tension voltage."

"Right," Price said crisply, turned aside, and put the sheet carefully away.

"That leaves little more here," Yuk commented, and tugged out his own ray-gun. Before the surgeons had the least chance to move away the ray had swept the length of the line. They fell like so many ninepins, killed instantly.

Price gazed blankly. "But—but, Yuk, you promised them—"

"I made a promise I had no intention of keeping," Yuk answered implacably. "These Ukians have no honor, no soul. They give a formula that means the destruction of their fellow spies on Earth without a qualm, purely to save their own skins. So—extermination is the best policy. A Krajan never makes conditions. All or nothing!"

Price shrugged.

"The law of Kraj is ruthlessly efficient, anyhow," he remarked. "Perhaps you'll give me a hand to attend to these other unfortunate ones?"

"Willingly. You will require machines to return to Earth. You have my permission to use my space ships for the time being; we will be staying here for a while."

An hour later Price was heading a dozen ships back from the infinitely small to his own beloved Earth. Beside him sat Irene. She dwelt but little on the horrors she had undergone, only upon the peace and security that lay in the future.

And peace and security it proved to be. The electrical system was duly put into operation at the earliest moment. For two days paralysis spread over the still war-mongering hordes of Earth, but when they awoke those strange and belligerent urges had gone. They were normal again, shaken human beings, but prepared to take up the threads of their war-shattered lives once more.

So, ultimately, the balance was restored. The wreckage was cleared away; rebuilding took place; journeyings between Micropolis and Uk became even more frequent now that the beaten planet was annexed by the Krajans. In five years it was hard to tell that there had ever been an invasion from the microcosm; indeed only a few seemed to remember it. But Raymond Price, the new chief of Interatomic Corporation, and his lovely young wife, never forgot it.

[End of *Menace from the Microcosm*, by John Russell Fearn]