

Planet Stories, Fall, 1945

The Last Monster

by Gardner F. Fox



IRGI WAS the last of his race. There was no one else, now; there had been no others for hundreds and hundreds of years. Irgi had lost count of time dwelling alone amid the marble halls of the eon-ancient city, but he knew that much. There were no others.

Only Irgi, alone.

He moved now along the ebony flooring, past the white marble walls hung with golden

drapes that never withered or shed their aurate luster in the opalescent mists that bathed the city in shimmering whiteness. They hung low, those wispy tendrils of mist, clasping everything in their clinging shelter, destroying dust and germs. Irgi had discovered the mist many years ago, when it was too late to save his kind.

He had flung a vast globe of transparent metal above this greatest of the cities of the Urg

and filled it with the mist, and in it he had stored the treasures of his people. From Bar Nomala, from Faryl, and from the far-off jungle city of Kreed had he brought the riches of the Urg and set them up. Irgi enjoyed beauty, and he enjoyed work. It was the combination of both that kept him sane.

Toward a mighty bronze doorway he went, and as his body passed an invisible beam, the bronze portals slid apart, noiselessly, opening to reveal a vast circular chamber that hummed and throbbed, and was filled with a pale blue luminescence that glimmered upon metal rods and bars and ten tall cones of steelite.

In the doorway, Irgi paused and ran his eyes about the chamber, sighing.

This was his life work, this blue hum and throb. Those ten cones lifting their disced tips toward a circular roof bathed in, and drew their power from, a huge block of radiant white matter that hung suspended between the cones, in midair. All power did the cones and the block possess. There was nothing they could not do, if Irgi so willed. It was another discovery that came too late to save the Urg.

Irgi moved across the room. He pressed glittering jewels inset in a control panel on the wall, one after another, in proper sequence.

The blue opalescence deepened, grew dark and vivid. The hum broadened into a hoarse roar. And standing out, startlingly white against the blue, was the queer block of shining metal, shimmering and pulsing.

Irgi drew himself upwards, slowly turning, laving in the quivering bands of cobalt that sped outward from the cones. He preened his body in their patterns of color, watching it splash and spread over his chest and torso. Where it touched, a faint tingle lingered; then spread outwards, all over his huge form.

Irgi was immortal, and the blue light made him so.

"There, it is done," he whispered to himself. "Now for another oval I can roam all

Urg as I will, for the life spark in me has been cleansed and nourished."

He touched the jeweled controls, shutting the power to a low murmur. He turned to the bronze doors, passed through and into the misty halls.

"I must speak," Irgi said as he moved along the corridor. "I have not spoken for many weeks. I must exercise my voice, or lose it. That is the law of nature. It would atrophy, otherwise.

"Yes, I will use my voice tonight, and I will go out under the dome and look up at the stars and the other planets that swing near Urg, and I will talk to them and tell them how lonely Irgi is."

He turned and went along a hall that opened into a broad balcony which stood forth directly beneath a segment of the mighty dome. He stared upwards, craning all his eyes to see through the darkness pressing down upon dim.

"Stars," he whispered, "listen to me once again. I am lonely, stars, and the name and fame of Irgi means nothing to the walls of my city, nor to the Chamber of the Cones, nor even—at times—to Irgi himself."

He paused and his eyes widened, staring upwards.

"By the Block," he said to the silence about him. "There is something up there that is not a star, nor a planet, nor yet a meteor."

It was a spaceship.

EMERSON took his hands from the controls of the gigantic ship that hurtled through space, and wiped his sweaty palms on his thighs. His grey eyes bored like a steel awl downward at the mighty globe swinging in the void.

"The last planet in our course," he breathed. "Maybe it has the radium!"

"Yes," whispered the man beside him, wetting his lips with his tongue. "No use to

think of failure. If it hasn't, we'll die ourselves, down there."

Radium. And the Plague. It had come on Earth suddenly, had the Plague, back in the first days of space travel, after Quigg, the American research scientist at Cal Tech, discovered a way to lift a rocket ship off the Earth, and propel it to the Moon.

They had been slow, lumbering vessels, those first spaceships; not at all like the sleek craft that plied the voids today. But it had been a beginning. And no one had thought anything of it when Quigg, who had made the first flight through space, died of cancer.

As the years passed to a decade, and the ships of Earth rode to Mars and Venus, it began to be apparent that a lifetime of space travel meant a hideous death. Scientists attributed it to the cosmic rays, for out in space there was no blanketing layer of atmosphere to protect the fleshy tissues of man from their piercing power. It had long been a theory that cosmic rays were related to the birth of new life in the cosmos; perhaps they were, said some, the direct cause of life. Thus by causing the unordered growth of new cells that man called cancer, the cosmic rays were destroying the life they had created.

It meant death to travel in space, and only the stupendous fees paid to the young men who believed in a short life and a merry one, kept the ships plying between Mars and Earth and Venus. Lead kept out the cosmic rays, but lead would not stand the terrific speed required to lift a craft free of planetary gravity; and an inner coating of lead brought men into port raving with lead poisoning illusions.

Cancer cases increased on Earth. It was learned that the virulent form of space cancer, as it was called, was in some peculiar manner, contagious to a certain extent. The alarm spread. Men who voyaged in space were segregated, but the damage had been done.

The Plague spread, and ravaged the peoples of three planets.

Hospitals were set up, and precious radium used for the fight. But the radium was hard to come by. There was just not enough for the job.

A ship was built, the fastest vessel ever made by man. It was designed for speed. It made the swiftest interplanetary craft seem a lumbering barge by comparison. And mankind gave it to Valentine Emerson to take it out among the stars to find the precious radium in sufficient quantities to halt the Plague.

It had not been easy to find a crew. The three worlds knew the men were going to their doom. It would be a miracle if ever they reached a single planet, if they did not perish of space cancer before their first goal. Carson Nichols, whose wife and children were dying of the Plague, begged him for a chance. A murderer convicted to the Martian salt mines, Karl Musssdorf, grudgingly agreed to go along on the promise that he won a pardon if he ever came back. With Musssdorf went a little, wry-faced man named Tilford Gunn, who knew radio, cookery, and the fine art of pocket-picking. The two seemed inseparable.

Now Emerson was breathing softly, "Yes, it had better be there, or else we die."

He ran quivering fingers over his forearm, felt the strange lumps that heralded cancer. Involuntarily, he shuddered.

Steps clanged on the metal runway beneath them. Musssdorf pushed up through the trap and got to his feet. He was as big as Emerson, bulky where Emerson was lithe, granite where Emerson was chiseled steel. His hair was black, and his brows shaggy. A stubborn jaw shot out under thin, hard lips.

"There it is, Karl," said Nichols. "Start hoping."

Musssdorf scowled darkly, and spat.

"A hell of a way to spend my last days," he growled. "I'm dying on my feet, and I've got to be a martyr to a billion people who don't know I'm alive."

"You know a better way to die, of course,"

replied Emerson.

“You bet I do. There’s a sweet little redhead in New Mars. She’d make dying a pleasure. In fact,” he chuckled softly, “that’s just the way I’d let her kill me.”

EMERSON snorted, glancing down at the controls. Beneath his steady fingers, the ship sideslipped into the gravity tug of the looming orb, shuddered a moment, then eased downward.

“Tell Gunn to come up,” ordered Emerson. “No need for him to be below.”

Mussdorf dropped to the floor lowered his shaggy head through the open trap, and bellowed. A hail from the depths of the ship answered him. A moment later, Gunn stood with the others: a little man with a wry smile twisting his features to a hard mask.

“Think she’s got the stuff, skipper?” he asked Emerson.

“The spectroscope’ll tell us. Break it out.”

“You bet.”

The ship rocked gently as Emerson set it down on a flat, rocky plain between two high, craggy mountains that rose abruptly from the tiny valley. It was just lighting as the faint rays of the suns that served this planet nosed their way above the peaks. Like a silver needle on a floor of black rock, the spacecraft bounced once, twice; then lay still.

Within her gleaming walls, four men bent with hard faces over gleaming bands of color on a spectroscopic screen. With quivering fingers, Emerson twisted dials and switches.

“Hell!” exploded Mussdorf. “I might have known it. Not a trace.”

Emerson touched his forearm gently, and shuddered.

Nichols bit his lips, and thought of Marge and the kids; Gunn licked his lips with a dry tongue and kept looking at Emerson.

With one sweep of his brawny arm, Mussdorf sent the apparatus flying against the

far wall to shatter in shards.

No one said a word.

Something whispered in the ship. They jerked their heads up, stood listening. The faint susurrations swept all about them, questioning, curious. It came again, imperative; suddenly demanding.

“Gawd,” whispered Gunn. “Wot is it, guv’nor?”

Emerson shook his head, frowning, suddenly glad that the others had heard it, too.

“Maybe somebody trying to speak to us,” stated Nichols.

The whispers grew louder and harsher. Angry.

“Take it easy,” yelled Mussdorf savagely. “We don’t know what you’re talking about. How can we answer you, you stupid lug?”

Gunn giggled hysterically, “We can’t even ’alf talk ’is bloomin’ language.”

The rustle ceased. The silence hung eerily in the ship. The men looked at one another, curious; somehow, a little nervous.

“What a radio he must have,” said Emerson softly. “The metal of our hull is his loudspeaker. That’s why we heard him in all directions.”

Mussdorf nodded, shaggy brows knotted.

“We’ll see what his next move is,” he muttered. “If he gets too fresh, we’ll try a sun-blaster out on him.”

The ship began to glow softly, flushing a soft, delicate green. The light bathed the interior, turning the men a ghastly hue. Gunn shivered and looked at Emerson, who went to the port window; stood staring out, gasping.

“Wot’s happenin’ now?” choked Gunn.

“We’re off the ground! Whatever it is, it’s lifting us.”

The others crowded about him, looking out. Here the green was more vivid, intense. They could feel its surging power tingling on their skins. Beneath them, the jagged peak of the mountain almost grazed the hull. Spread out under their eyes was the panorama of a dead

planet.

Great rocks lay split and tumbled over one another in a black desolation. Sunlight glinting on their jagged edges, made harsh shadows. Far to the north a mountain range shrugged its snow-topped peaks to a sullen sky. To the south, beyond the rocks, lay a white waste of desert. To the west—

“A city,” yelled Nichols. “The place is inhabited. Thank God, thank God—”

Mussdorf erupted laughter.

“For what? How do we know what they’re like? An inhabited planet doesn’t mean men. We found that out—several times.”

“We can hope,” said Emerson sharply. “Maybe they have some radium, stored so that our spectroscope couldn’t pick it up.”

The mighty globe that hung over the city glimmered in the morning suns. Beneath it, the white towers and spires of the city reared in alien loveliness above graceful buildings and rounded roofs. A faint mist seemed to hang in the city streets.

“It’s empty,” said Nichols heavily. “Deserted.”

“Something’s alive,” protested Emerson. “Something that spoke to us, that is controlling this green beam.”

A SECTION of the globe slid back, and the spaceship moved through the opening. The globe slipped back and locked after it.

“They have us now,” grunted Mussdorf. He slid his fingers along the transparent window, pressing hard, the skin showing white as his knuckles lifted. He said swiftly, “You guys can stay here if you want, but I’m getting myself a sun-blaster. Two of them. I’m not going to be caught short when the time for action comes.”

He swung through the trap and out of sight. They heard him running below; heard the slam of opened doors, the withdrawal of the guns. They could imagine him belting them about his waist.

“Bring us some,” cried Emerson suddenly, and turned again to look out the window.

The spaceship settled down on the white flagging of an immense square. The green beam was gone, suddenly. The uncanny silence of the place pressed in on them.

“Think it’s safe to go out?” asked Nichols.

“Try the atmospheric recorder,” said Emerson. “If the air’s okay, I’d like to stretch my own legs.”

Nichols twisted chrome wheels, staring at a red line that wavered on a plastic screen, then straightened abruptly, rigid.

“Hey,” yelled Nichols excitedly. “It’s pure. I mean actually pure. No germs. No dust. Just clean air!”

Emerson leaped to his side, staring, frowning.

“No germs. No dust. Why—that means there’s no disease in this place! No disease.”

He began to laugh, then caught himself.

“No disease,” he whispered, “and every one of us is going to die of cancer.”

Mussdorf came up through the trap and passed out the sun-blasters. They buckled them around their waists while Mussdorf swung the bolts of the door. He threw it open, and clean air, and faint tendrils of whitish mist came swirling into the ship.

Nichols took a deep breath and his boyish face split with a grin.

“I feel like a kid again on a Spring day back on Earth. You know, with a ball and a glove under your arm, with the sun beating down on you, swinging a bat and whistling. You felt good. You were young. Young! I feel like that now.”

They grinned and went through the door, dropping to the street.

They turned.

It was coming across the square, flowing along on vast black tentacles towering over twenty feet high, with a great torso seemingly sculpted out of living black marble. A head that

held ten staring eyes looked down at them. Six arms thrust out of the torso, moving like tentacles, fringed with cilia thick as fingers.

“Lord,” whispered Mussdorf. “What is it?”

“Don’t know,” said Emerson. “Maybe it’s friendly—”

“Friendly?” queried Mussdorf harshly. “That doesn’t know the meaning of the word! I’m going to let it taste a blast—”

His hand dove for the sun-blaster in his holster; yanked it free and upward, firing brilliant yellow jets as he jerked the trigger.

“Look out!” yelled Emerson.

The thing twisted sideways with an eerie grace, dodging the amber beams of solar power that sizzled past its bulbous head. As it moved, its tentacled arms and legs slithered out with unthinkable rapidity, fell and wrapped around Mussdorf.

The big Earthman was lifted high into the air, squeezed until his lungs nearly collapsed, he hung limp in a gigantic tentacle as Emerson ran to one side, trying for a shot without hitting Mussdorf. But the thing was diabolically clever. It held Mussdorf aloft, between itself and Emerson, while its other arms stabbed out at Gunn and Nichols, catching them up and shaking them as a terrier shakes a rat.

“Hold on,” called Emerson, dodging and twisting, gun in hand, seeking a spot to fire at.

The thing dropped the Earthmen suddenly; its legs gathered beneath it and launched it full at Emerson. Caught off guard, the Earthman lifted his sun-blaster—felt it ripped from his fingers, knew a hard blackness thrashing down at him. He went backwards, sickened. . . .

IRGI STARED at the things that lay on the white flagging. Queer beings they were, unlike anything Irgi had ever conceived. Only two legs, only two arms. And such weak little limbs! Why, an Urganian cat would make short work of them if an Urganian cat existed any more, and Irgi had never rated cats very highly.

He looked at the spaceship, ran exploring feelers over it. He cast a glance back at the creatures again, and shook his head. Strange beings they might be, but they had mastered interplanetary travel. Well, he’d always maintained that life would be different on other worlds. Life here on Urgan took different patterns.

Irgi bent to wrap long arms about the queer beings, lifting them. His eyes were caught suddenly by the lumps protruding from their arms and legs, from face and chest. The growth disease! That was bad, but Irgi knew a way to cure it. Irgi knew a way to cure anything.

He slid swiftly across the square and onto a flat, glittering ramp that stretched upward toward an arched doorway set like a jewel of light in a long, low building next to the vast, round Chamber of the Cones. He carried these creatures easily, without trouble. The ease of his passage gave him time to think.

He had been glad to find these creatures. They were someone to converse with after centuries of loneliness. But as he approached them there in the square, calling out gladly to them, they could not hear him. His voice was pitched eight vibrations to the second. He wondered idly if that was beyond the hearing range of these two-legged things. He ought to check that, to be sure. Still, they had heard him on their ship. He had caught a confused, angry murmur on the radiation recorder. Perhaps the metal of the hull had in some manner made his voice audible to them, speeded up the vibrations to twelve or fifteen a second.

Then there was the matter of the growth disease. He could eliminate that easily enough, in the Chamber of the Cones. But first they would have to be prepared. And the preparation—hurt. Well, better a few moments of agony than a death through a worse.

And if he could not speak to them, they could speak to him, through their minds. Once unconscious, he could tap their memories with an electrigraph screen. That should be

absorbing. It made Irgi happy, reflecting upon it, and Irgi had not known happiness for a long time.

From the passage he hurried into a large white room, fitted with glass vials and ovules and glittering metal instruments, so many in number that the room seemed a jungle of metal. Down on flat, smooth tables Irgi dropped his burdens. With quick tendrils he adjusted straps to them, bound them securely. From a small, wheeled vehicle he took a metal rod and touched it to their foreheads. As it met the flesh, it hummed once faintly.

“It’s short-circuited their nervous systems for a while, absorbed the electric charges all intelligent beings cast,” Irgi said aloud, glad at this chance to exercise his voice. “They won’t be able to feel for some time. When the worst pain will have passed, they will recover. And now to examine their minds—”

He fitted metal clamps over their heads and screwed them tight. He wheeled forward a glassy screen; plugged in the cords that dangled from its frame to the metal clamps.

“I wonder if they’ve perfected this,” Irgi mused. “They must be aware that the brain gives off electrical waves. Perhaps they can chart those waves on graphs. But do they know that each curve and bend of those waves represents a picture? I can translate those waves into pictures—but can they?”

He slouched a little on his tentacles, squatting, gazing at the screen as he flipped over a lever.

A picture quivered on the screen; grew nebulous, then cleared. Irgi found himself staring at a city far vaster than Urg. Grim white towers peaked high into the air, and broad, flat ramps circled them, interwoven like ribbons in the sunlight. On the tallest and largest buildings were great fields of metal painted a dull luster, where queerly wrought flying ships landed and took off.

The scene changed suddenly. He looked into

a hospital room and watched a pretty young woman smiling up at him. She too, had the growth disease. Now he beheld the mighty salt mines where naked men swung huge picks at the crusted crystals, sweating and dying under a strange sun. Even these remnants of humanity festered with the growth.

A tall, lean man in white looked out at him. His lips moved, and Irgi read their meaning. This man spoke to one named Emerson, commissioning him with a spaceship, reciting the need of radium, the dread of the plague. The thoughts of this Emerson were coming in clearer, as Irgi in sudden interest, flipped over different dials. The unspoken thoughts pouring into his brain through the screen continued. The words he did not understand, but the necessity for radium, and the danger of the growth disease he did. The pictures jumbled, grew chameleonesque—

Irgi stared upward at a colossal figure graven in lucent white marble. He made out the letters chiseled into the base: GEORGE WASHINGTON. He wondered idly what this Washington had done, to merit such undying fame. He must have created a nation, or saved it. He wished there were Urgians alive to build a statue to him.

He rose suddenly, standing upright on his tentacles, swaying gently. Why, he had the power to make himself immortal! These creatures would gladly build statues to him! True, he could not create a nation—but *he could save it!*

Irgi unfastened clamps, and rolled the screen aside. He reached to a series of black knobs inset in the wall, and turned them carefully. Turning, he saw the figures of the four men stiffen to rigidity as a red aura drifted upward from the table-top, passing through them as if they were mist, rising upwards to dissipate in the air near the ceiling.

“That will prepare their bodies for the Chamber of the Cones,” he said. “When they

realize that I am their friend, they will gladly hear my counsels!"

Opening the laboratory door, Irgi passed out and closed it behind him.

IT WAS the sweat of agony trickling down his forehead and over his eyes and cheeks that woke Emerson. He opened his eyes, then clamped them shut as his body writhed in pain.

"Oh, Lord!" He whimpered, bloodying his mouth where his teeth sank into his lips.

In every fibre of his body sharp lancets cut and dug. In arms and legs and chest and belly they twisted and tore. Into the tissues beneath his skin, all along the muscles and the bone, the fiery torment played. He could not stand it; he could not—

He flipped his head to right, to left; saw the others stretched out and strapped even as he. They were unconscious. What right had they to ignore this agony? Why didn't they share it with him? He opened his lips to shriek; then bit down again, hard.

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Nichols screamed suddenly, his body aching.

It woke the others. They too, bellowed and screamed and sobbed, and their arms and legs writhed like wild things in a trap.

"Got to get free," Emerson panted, straining against the wristbands. The hard muscles of his arms ridged with effort, but the straps held. He dropped back, sobbing.

"That fiend," yelled Musssdorf. "That ten-eyed, octopus-legged, black-hearted spawn of a mismated monster did this to us. Damn him! Damn him! If I ever get loose I'll cut his heart out and make him eat it."

"Maybe—maybe he's vivisectioning us," moaned Nichols. "With rays or—something—aagh! I can't stand it!"

"Hang on, kid," gritted Emerson, fighting the straps. "I think it's lessening. Yeah, yeah—it is. It doesn't hurt so much now."

Musssdorf grunted astonishment.

"You're right. It is lessening. And—hey, one of my arm buckles is coming loose. It's torn a little. Maybe I can work it free."

They turned their heads to watch, biting their lips, the sweat standing in colorless beads on their pale foreheads. Musssdorf's thick arm bulged its muscles as he wrenched and tugged, panting. A buckle swung outward, clanging against the table-top as it ripped loose. Musssdorf held his arm aloft and laughed harsh triumph.

"I'll have you all loose in a second," he grunted, ripping straps from his body.

He leaped from the table and stretched. He grinned into their faces.

"You know, it's funny—but I feel great. Huh, I must've sweated all the aches out of me. Here, Gunn—you first."

"Thanks, Karl. We're still pals, aren't we?"

When Gunn was free, Musssdorf came to stand over Emerson, looking down at him. His eyes narrowed suddenly. He grinned a little, twisting his lips.

"Maybe you fellows ought to stay tied up," he said. "In case that—that thing comes back. He won't blame us all for the break we're making."

"Not on your life," said Emerson.

But Musssdorf shook his head, and his lips tightened.

"No. No, I think it's better the way I say."

"Don't be a fool, Musssdorf," snapped Emerson savagely. "It isn't your place to think, anyhow. That's mine. I'm commander of this force. What I say is an order."

Musssdorf grinned dryly. Into his eyes came a glint of hot, sullen anger.

"You were our commander—out there, in space. We're on a planet now. Things are different. I want to learn the secret of those mists, Emerson. Something tells me I'd get a fortune for it, on Earth."

Emerson squirmed helplessly, cursing him, saying, "What's gotten into you?"

“Nothing new. Remember me, Karl Mussdorf? I’m a convict, I am. A salt mine convict. I’d have done anything to get out of that boiling hell. I volunteered to go with you for the radium. Me and Gunn. Nichols doesn’t count. He came on account of his wife and kids. We were the only two who’d come. Convicts, both of us.”

MUSSDORF drew air into his lungs until his ribs showed against the rips in his jacket.

He went on slowly, “All along I’ve thought that if we ever did discover radium in any quantity to cure the folks of space out of it. I want to be that somebody, Emerson. With my pardon and that profit, I could be a boss on Mars. And you know what it’s like to be a boss on Mars.”

Emerson writhed in his straps, wrenching and twisting until his muscles crackled, seeking freedom. His lips snarled oaths at the big criminal.

“If I ever get out of this, I’ll teach you who’s boss—right here!”

Mussdorf laughed his confidence, “Don’t worry. You won’t. Those straps are pretty secure. I’m lucky one of mine was ripped.”

The big man turned to Gunn; looked down at him, curiously.

“You with me, Til?”

Gunn looked at Emerson; looked up at Mussdorf, nodding.

“I think we got a chance, guv’nor,” he muttered softly. “Them mists that don’t ’ave germs. They’re worth lots. People will pay plenty for h’air without germs.”

The big man and the little man swung toward the door. They paused at the threshold and glanced back.

“We’ll give you a chance to think it over, Emerson,” Mussdorf grated. “You can use a few billions, same as us. We aren’t hogs. We’re willing to share—”

“Get out!” Emerson spat.

Mussdorf shrugged and followed Gunn into the corridor, carefully closing the door behind him. He glanced both ways frowning.

“We don’t know this space,” he said slowly. “Stick close to me, Til. We might meet some more of that beast’s pals. He’s too much for us physically, but damned if I don’t believe we got more grey matter than him and his whole tribe, if we use it right!”

They went along the black marble flooring for long minutes. The thick drapes along the walls muffled their footsteps, but they cast anxious glances behind them. The eerie silence that overhung the place scratched at their uneasy nerves.

Mussdorf’s hand vised on Gunn until the little man whimpered.

Behind them there was he slow shuffle of a mighty body.

“In here,” snapped Mussdorf, drawing Gunn with him into a niche sculpted in the marble wall. They pressed back, drawing the drapes about them. Biting on their tongues, they held their breaths.

The huge black body trod past, stirring the drapes and uncovering the feet of the Earthmen. But he did not glance aside. Mussdorf and Gunn let their breath out slowly, silently. They did not know that Irgi was the last of his race, that he was used to loneliness, that he was not given to looking away from his objective.

They peered out: saw the monster nearing two great bronze doors sculpted with forms of alien beauty. Watching breathlessly, they saw the doors slide open untouched.

“Light beam,” whispered Mussdorf. They caught a glimpse of the Chamber of the Cones through the doorway; saw with awe the great block of glimmering white, pulsing with an inner fire. The ten glittering cones with their rings of shimmering light made them gape.

They eased forward, and halted at the doors. The black thing was pressing levers,

working them swiftly. The great cones began to hum softly, began to throb. They could feel that terrific power pulsating through the room, making them quiver in rhythm though they stood beyond its range. The faint azure haze darkened; grew deeper, a dark blue. In broad bands of light the blue leaped from the cones, poured outward over the room.

Irgi too, they saw. He lifted himself to his full height, turning and pirouetting gracefully despite his bulk. He bathed in the light, and it sprayed over and covered him.

"He's h'on h'a bat," croaked Gunn in hoarse excitement. "'E's getting drunk on that stuff, whatever it is. A bender, a rip-snorting tear 'e's 'avin' for himself. Look at him. Like it was champagne he was wallowin' in. Gawd—I could stand a snootful of that myself?"

He leaped swiftly, before Musssdorf could stop him.

Past the big man's outstretched arm he charged, full into the beating bands of blue.

"Oh good Lord!" whispered Musssdorf.

BEFORE his eyes little Gunn stiffened in intolerable agony, straight up, rigid. He hung that way for one long instant, immobile.

Then Gunn—disappeared.

Musssdorf blinked, and looked. The little pickpocket had been right before him an instant ago. Now where he had been was nothing but those pulsing ribbons on cobalt, pounding, beating, throbbing.

He's gone right in front of my eyes, Musssdorf thought. Evaporated. Into thin air. No, not into air. Into that blue color. It just absorbed him, like a blotter sops up ink!

Musssdorf knew cold fright, shuddering. He whirled and ran, straight up the corridor toward the laboratory door. It shot back before the thrust of his arms. He leaped for the white tables as Emerson and Nichols stared at him, wandering at his pale face.

Big brown hands seized on the straps that held Emerson, fighting to burst them.

"Calm down, man," said Emerson evenly. "If those things could break, I'd have broken them, Undo the buckles."

"Yeah, yeah. You're right," sobbed the big convict.

"What happened to you?"

"Not to me. To Gunn. Little Tilford Gunn. Gone. That—that damned black beast killed him with his blue color. Right in front of my eyes. It's going to take all of us to lick him. That's why I came back."

"What are you babbling about?" said Emerson softly. "Take your time, man. What blue color?"

"In the big room up the corridor. There's a deep roar and splashes of this deep light, as dark as a sapphire. Caught him, it did. Melted him into nothing at all. I—I can't forget it."

He unsnapped the last buckle and stood silent as Emerson got up and stretched. His chest heaved as he gasped for air.

He said suddenly, "We might as well get out of here while we can. If that thing wants to experiment on us any more—the hell with him. Let's go, and fast."

Emerson was freeing Nichols, smiling thinly, "What about your fortune, Musssdorf? What about being a boss on Mars?"

Musssdorf licked his lips, whispering, "Hell with that. I just want to get away from here, that's all. That black thing has power we've never seen, never dreamed of. I tell you, those blue bands—"

Musssdorf swore.

Emerson whirled, reaching for his solar gun.

Irgi stood in the doorway, brooding at them. Almost he seemed to shake his vast head, sadly.

"Stop him, one of you," babbled Musssdorf, striving to get past them. "Maybe one of us can get away."

The thing stretched out his tentacles so swiftly that Emerson rasped curses as his gun-

arm was clapped and held tight against his side. Nichols writhed beside him in another viselike arm. Mussdorf had fainted.

Looking down at him, Emerson smiled thinly, and said to Nichols, "Whatever happened to Gunn must have been pretty bad. They told me at New Mars that Karl Mussdorf was pretty tough."

"Yeah," whispered Nichols.

Emerson looked up at the thing, studying it, thinking: maybe I can get it to listen to me. Maybe it will even let us go free if I can communicate with it.

"What're you going to do with us?" he questioned as calmly as he could.

The thing looked at him, and the thin mouth moved, but Valentine Emerson heard no sound. The thing shook his head again, sadly.

HE COULD NOT make these beings understand that he was helping them, Irgi realized. They cannot hear my voice because it is pitched lower than their ears can detect. And even if they heard me, they would not understand. I shall cure them of the growth disease. By that act, they will know I am friendly. Time enough then to discuss other matters. Matters like the building of a great statue to him, Irgi, greatest of the Urg.

He carried them into the Chamber of the Cones; set them down gently.

The large one with the black hair and the shaggy brows was screaming something. He was undergoing an emotion: anger. And fright, too. Yes, the black haired one was frightened. More frightened than he was angry. Irgi watched him curiously. He must have seen the little one blasted when the Cones were pulsing.

It was too bad about that, Irgi thought as he trussed them up. But these beings were so impetuous, almost childlike in their emotional hysteria. He could not let them know that the Cones were set to pulse in rhythm with his own body, not theirs. And anything foreign to that

peculiar vibration—perished. It simply ceased to exist, wiped out by the flood of power loosed by the white block.

Irgi twisted dials on the instrument panel. He knew the rhythm of these creatures, and adjusted to allow for it. This time the blue beam would not harm them. Instead they would blast into nothingness the growth disease that was slowly eating away their lives.

There was danger for Irgi, too, in this. He could not remain in the Chamber to watch them. He must leave. He set the automatic regulators to begin in five para-zaw, last for one azaw, then switch back. After that time, he could safely return, for the dark blue light and the roaring hum would cease, and the cones would be idle.

Irgi glanced at the three beings. The black-haired one still raved, but the others lay silent, watching him. He nodded approval. The black-haired being was trying to loosen within the others the storms of emotions that held him thrall, but they were of different stuff.

He went through the doors, and the doors slid shut.

EMERSON rasped, "Shut up!" They lay silent for long moments. Emerson was studying the white block and the cones and the spiraling, gleaming rings. He frowned, trying to imagine their use. A tremendous powerhouse, of some sort. Probably atomic power sucked from the white rock in some alien manner. Atomic power that beat outward from the cones in bands of visible color. Could it be a bath of atoms, bombarding everything in the room?

Mussdorf snarled, "I tell you he's going to do away with us like he did with Gunn."

"Don't be a fool, man," answered Emerson wearily. "He wouldn't go to all this trouble just to kill us. One quick wrench with those tentacles of his, and we'd be dead ducks. He's got us in here for some reason. I'm not denying

he may be experimenting on us. But there ought to be others joining with him in it. Funny, we haven't seen any others like him."

"Look," said Nichols abruptly.

The white block was radiating, pulsing, casting forth bluish beams that swept to the cones and fled outward in ever expanding arcs to splash against the walls. The blue light deepened, grew violet. It pulsed faster, swifter. And the humming of the cones was deafening.

"I don't feel anything," said Emerson. "I can still see you fellows. Whatever it was happened to Gunn isn't happening to us."

He turned; found himself free of the straps, sat up. He clambered to his feet and looked around.

"The straps that held us are gone. Disappeared. Like Gunn."

Mussdorf murmured oaths but he too got to his feet, asking, "What do we do now?"

"Stay here and see what's next on the program. I still don't believe that thing's out to harm us."

"Ahh, you always were a soft-hearted fool," Mussdorf snarled. "Why's he going to all this bother to save us? It doesn't add up. This is some fool scheme of his mad brain. He's no altruist. Not that black octopus. Gad, what a shape!"

Nichols smiled wryly, "I believe we're just as peculiar to him as he is to us. He talks and we can't even hear his voice. He may hear us, but it's a cinch he doesn't know what we're talking about. Huh, it's somewhat of a 'Never the twain shall meet' angle. East and West, and that sort of thing."

"Only it's solar and star system," agreed Emerson, walking toward the intricate control panels on the wall. He stretched an arm toward a dial—

He paused, staring.

His arm. Good Lord, his *arm!*

"Nichols! Mussdorf," he shouted, leaping for them. "Let me see your arms, your faces.

Yes, you see? Mine, too. Free. Free of the lumps. They're *gone!* The lumps that mean cancer—gone. We're cured!"

They stared in awed fascination at themselves. Nichols ripped at his jacket, pulled it open, ran exploring hands over his skin, he sobbed suddenly; began hysterically to cry, shoulders shaking.

"Whoever it is, it's cured us," whispered Emerson, turning to stare upwards at the great glittering cones, that towered high above him.

"Ada and the kids," Nichols sobbed. "If they were here we could cure them too."

"The world can be freed from the Plague," Emerson breathed.

"A fortune," grinned Mussdorf, eyes glinting.

Emerson said, "If we knew how this thing worked, we could set it up on Earth. Duplicate it."

Mussdorf slid a hand over the butt of his solar gun. He smiled grimly. "At a price, commander. Think of it. We'll be billionaires. That girl in New Mars— hah! I could have girls ten times better than her, just throwing themselves at me."

"We came to do a job," Emerson said flatly, "and we're going to see it through."

Mussdorf lugged at his gun, lifting it, aiming it at Emerson's broad chest.

"I'm tired of these damned ideals of yours," he grated savagery. "You'll never change. Neither will I. The time for words is past. I'm acting—"

His finger tightened on the trigger.

And Emerson dove in at him, like a fullback at the line.

The bolt of yellow never left the muzzle of the gun. It was smothered in a cobalt-dark spray of angry color. Color that sizzled.

EMERSON brought his fist up hard, caught the big adventurer alongside his jaw, snapping his head back viciously. With

hard lefts and rights, Emerson banged his fists mercilessly, swarming over Musssdorf, bruising his ribs, thudding home his big fists on jaw and belly.

Musssdorf dropped, rolled over, lashed upward with both feet.

Emerson sideswayed, drove in. His fists battered Musssdorf's jaw, rolling his head from side to side. His knuckles gashed the tight skin and drew blobs of blood. Musssdorf staggered dizzily, and pitched forward as Emerson hammered his head again.

"I put up with you long enough," he spat at the prostrate man. "After this, when I give an order, you—obey!"

Emerson bent, ripped the gun from Musssdorf; thrust it into his belt.

"But this is what we came to get," Nichols said. "This means life—security—wealth—freedom from cancer—for all the people on Earth and Mars."

"I know," Emerson nodded. "We'll have to take it."

He glanced up at the cones and shook his head. They were far too vast to carry in the spaceship. He might duplicate them if he knew how they worked, though.

"Quick," he rasped at Nichols. "Start hunting for plans—blue-prints—anything that might tell what this apparatus is, how it works, what its principle is."

They sprang about the room, searching the scrolls that hung on the walls, the inscriptions graven in stone and metal. Off in one corner, a great leaden casket lay in a niche. It was Emerson who found it, and his yelp of delight brought Nichols running.

"It's here, all here. Diagrams. Calculations. All of them worked out mathematically. They don't use our system, but it'll be easy enough to decipher theirs. We've got it, Car!"

Nichols stood with head bent, lips soundlessly moving.

"It's atomic power, all right," assured

Emerson, "with that block as its source. But lord, what tremendous advances from the atomic power we know. The block is acted upon by the cones which cause it to send out streams of radio-active atoms, throwing them back to the cones that take them up in turn to hurl them all around the room.

"Matter is constantly in motion, thanks to the molecules that comprise it. They keep moving about one another eternally; in the case of solids, they just about make it. That motion is carried on at a certain rate of speed. To an extent, you might say it vibrates at a certain pulse. If the atoms are attuned to that pulse, they feed and nourish. If the matter vibrates at a different rate than the atoms, the atoms destroy it. The straps that bound us are gone, but our clothes are unaffected. Perhaps that's because the things we wear are tuned in some manner to our own vibratory rate. Maybe it's because what we wear comes from Earth, and things from Earth have their own peculiar motion. I'm not sure, yet. But I do know anything that's in this room when the cones are set at a certain pulse either vibrates in harmony with that pulse or is wiped out of existence by the atoms that hit it. Like Gunn. Like the cancer cells that vibrated differently from our otherwise healthy bodies!"

"The block," whispered Nichols. "We'll need the block!"

"Certainly. It's radium, in all probability—perhaps treated in some manner we don't know of. But we can take it. It'll fit into this box. The box was made for it. It's lead."

The doors were opening soundlessly. Warned by eyes upon him, Emerson whirled and dove for the cone controls; he set a hand on a lever and turned to face the thing.

"I don't know whether you can hear me, fella," he grated, "But this thing is tuned to *our* bodies now, not yours. We want that block—" jerking his head toward the shimmering white square, "—to take with us. If you don't step aside—you die!"

“Kill him anyhow,” whispered Nichols.

“Yes, you soft fool,” snarled Musssdorf through swollen, cut lips from the floor. “Pull the lever and do away with him.”

Emerson shook his head, still looking at the thing that stood so still in the doorway, staring back at him.

“That would be murder. He’s an intelligent being. If he doesn’t interfere, he stays alive.”

The black monster turned, and moved off down the corridor. Emerson exhaled with relief, found his palm wet and sticky. He rubbed it on his thigh, turning to the others.

“Snap into it,” he barked. “Get off the floor, Musssdorf, and give Nichols a hand. Lug that leaden box between the cones, beneath the block. I’m going to release the pressure that keeps it suspended. We want that block. We need it. We can build the cones and the rings back on Earth, but there isn’t anything like that block anywhere else in all the Universe!”

THEY worked feverishly, sliding the box across the floor. Emerson studied the control panels, sweat beading his brow with the effort of his concentration. He summoned the years of his tutelage under the world’s greatest physicists at Earth University, the years of knowledge acquired in laboratory and spaceship on Earth and in the great red city of New Mars. He only had one chance here. It had to be successful. If he made a mistake, he was like to draw on them the concentrated fury of a billion annihilating atoms.

He touched levers hesitantly, frowning, striving to remember the diagrams etched in metal on the box. Here, this one. This should be it. He wrapped his fingers carefully about the gleaming white knob, turned it with infinitesimal slowness, looking at the great white block. He saw it quiver, settle slowly floorwards.

“It’s in,” yelled Nichols, slamming the leaden cover down and locking it.

It took the three of them to budge it, to slide

it across the floor.

“Hell,” panted Musssdorf. “We’ll never make it. Once we get it into the corridor, that black fiend’ll be on top of us again.”

Somehow they got it out of the Chamber, and scraped it along the corridor. Luckily, the way was level, and the ramp that led from the Chamber of the Cones to the great square was smooth. But in the square they ran into an unsurmountable difficulty. There was no way to lift it into the spaceship.

“We can’t do it,” acknowledged Emerson glumly. “It would take a crane to lift that.”

Musssdorf kicked at the box, and swore. Nichols ran quivering fingers through his hair, trembling.

Then Emerson started to grin.

“A crane, sure. We have one here, if we can only make it work. The thing, the black thing. He’s as strong as any crane I ever saw!”

“Think he’ll do it?” asked Musssdorf.

“I can try. Maybe a threat to use the solar blasters on him will do the trick.”

He really didn’t think so, recalling the way the black being had sidestepped the bolts before; but it was their only hope. He pulled his two guns and turned; stopped short, staring.

The black creature was coming down the ramp, slithering his great bulk toward them. He ignored them, heading directly toward the leaden box.

Irgi lifted the leaden casket in three of his rippling tentacles, balancing it. He moved toward the spaceship, thrust the box through the open door.

Emerson frowned. He went to the thing, touching it and looking upward into its eyes.

The thing looked down at Emerson unblinking. It pointed to the transparent globe above, then patted Emerson on his wrist with a force that nearly snapped it.

“He’s going to open the globe for us. He’s going to set us free!”

IRGI WATCHED the ship twinkle to a glittering dot high in the heavens. Sadly he turned and moved back along the empty corridors, once again alone.

He wished they were still here, even though he never could understand them. At least they were beings who moved, and talked among themselves, showed emotions. But what a strange world they came from! A world where heroes were worshiped, where tall strong statues were built to the great men of their race. Irgi liked that idea, though it was foreign to Urg. He rather thought there would be a statue to him, there on that planet called Earth. Yes, for the beings would tell how Irgi helped them, how he gave them the white block that would save them from extinction, even though it meant his own death, eventually.

Irgi was happy. There was no doubt of it. There would be a fine statue to him on that distant planet. Irgi, savior of the race called men. A hero to mankind, to be worshiped. He wished wistfully that he could have been there to see it. But he was afraid of unleashing those creatures' terror. They might even have done something rash to themselves, if he had crowded his bulk into the spacecraft.

No, it was better this way.

AND in the spaceship, Emerson and Musssdorf and Nichols squatted over the leaden casket, commenting on it, copying the alien symbols and designs for study.

Emerson frowned thoughtfully, choosing his words.

"As near as I can judge, it's a form of atomic bombardment of matter. Suppose its rate of vibration is adjusted to matter *a*. Anything other than matter *a*, such as foreign substance *b*, is hit so swiftly and so often by those hurtling atoms that they simply wipe it out of existence.

"Back in the twentieth century, they were using just this principle to cure cancer. They bombarded the cancer with radioactive atoms—

overcrowding the atoms with neutrons beyond their ability to hold them for very long—and the atoms ate away the cancer. I think they treated other diseases too, with some success. Goiter, for one. And, if I recall rightly, the atoms could build up blood cells or eliminate them.

"But this block and the cones seem to be the ultimate perfection of that idea. Maybe atoms possess some degree of intellect, for all we know. We'll never really be sure. They do have a power of attraction, and appear to be drawn to the danger spot as though magnetized to it."

They were silent, thoughtful.

"Yeah," said Musssdorf at last. "It begins to trickle through. Gunn wasn't in harmony with that black beast, so he went out of existence immediately. Gunn was human and the other wasn't."

Emerson nodded, and his eyes widened.

"My God!" he whispered. "This block and the cones could make a man immortal!"

Musssdorf gagged; laughed suddenly.

"Then why did that thing let us cart it off right from under its nose? Why, he even helped us."

"I wish I knew," muttered Emerson, troubled. "I wish I knew."

Musssdorf scowled; looked at him sideways, clearing his throat.

"I'm sorry I went off my nut back there," he mumbled. "The thought of all the dough this thing was worth sort of slapped me haywire. Why, just to be free of space cancer, Val—and hell! They'll give us pensions for this job. I'm sorry."

"Skip it," said Emerson. "That black thing was enough to make us all jittery. He seemed a good enough egg, though! But I was a little disappointed in him. He sure was bluffed when I touched that lever. Boy, he turned tail fast enough."

"Maybe he was just what he looked like, Val," murmured Nichols thoughtfully. "An animal—left by the real builders of the Cones to

turn it over to someone like us, with a use for it.”

“Sure,” nodded Mussdorf. “That’s what he was. Car’s hit it. Just a big animal who knew enough to work the things, and no more.”

IRGI was alone, and cold. It would get steadily colder for him, without the block to feed his body. But Irgi kept smiling. He would be a hero someday. There would be a statue to him.

Again he wished that he could see it. But he knew he would never be happy on Earth. There would always be the fear that the earthmen seemed to have. To Irgi, it seemed a silly sort of fright, too. They were always on the verge of harming themselves. As in the Chamber of the Cones when that one had placed his hand on the lever to loose the fury of the cones. Why had he done that? And those others urging him to pull it! Did fear turn those beings into madmen?

Didn’t they know that they would have blasted themselves to nothingness? They must have known that the controls would automatically shift back to his own vibratory rate, not theirs. The machine had been built for him. In rest, it was tuned to his pulse.

He had been afraid for them, and so had gone away, leaving them to slide the box as best they could. He had meant to carry it for them, since it was best that a race carry on instead of one lone Urgian. For Irgi would die without the block. Well, it was like exchanging one form of immortality for another. But he still wished he could have seen that statue.

“An animal,” said Emerson heavily. *“Well, maybe you’re right. Just an animal, scared of three men. Let’s forget him.”*

Irgi shivered.

It was growing colder. . . .