



Perry Rhodan

Peacelord to the Universe

The Third Power

47

THE SILENCE OF GOM

by Kurt Mahr

EARTH ENDANGERED...

The Awesome spaceship *Titan* blasts off from Laros, the base of the Medical Masters. But the Peacelord's trouble are far from over.

Suddenly, inexplicable forces spirit eight of his Mutants onto the face of the mysterious world of Gom...

The inhabitants are deadly—yet Perry Rhodan must delay his rescue, for the Earth itself is threatened and a deception of cosmic proportions is the only chance of saving the home planet from total destruction...

This is the stirring story of—

THE SILENCE OF GOM

ACTION & ADVENTURE IMMINENTLY AWAIT

Perry Rhodan—Peace-maker of the Spaceways

Reginald Bell—Who frequently has to make his peace with Pucky

Pucky—Happy-go-lucky mouse-beaver with paranormal powers

John Marshall—Telepath in Rhodan's Mutant Corps

Ras Tschubai—Afroterranian teleporter in Mutant Corps

Tama Yokida, Kitai Ishibashi, Wuriu Sengu—Perry's Japanese Mutants

Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin—Rusoterranean twin-headed Mutant in the service of Rhodan

Betty Toufry—Esper extraordinary & youngest of the Mutant Corps

Talamon—Mounder spacefleet commander

Siptar, Vontran & CekzteI—Springer patriarchs

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by Kurt Mahr

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1/ MENACE IN BROWN

MYSTERIOUSLY dragged down from space by an invisible power!

The Terranian spacecraft known as a Gazelle, forced to the surface of the planet Gom, battered, bruised, captive of the weird world's powerful gravitation.

And Reginald Bell and his mutant group, in the service of Perry Rhodan, victims of Gom.

As they had crawled from the wreck to a distant cave, making it just in time to seek refuge from the savagery of the elements when a violent storm struck, a nightmarish howling dervish that lasted 10 hours till, abruptly as it had begun, it ended.

Reginald Bell was the first to speak. "The shadow has moved farther," he observed, pointing to a slender column of stone which had earlier stood in shade near the edge of the horizon. A rare formation considering the massive gravitation of Gom, red sunshine had now crept on several handbreadths over the monolith, illuminating it with crimson.

The fleshy blue-leafed plants which had burrowed into the ground like earthworms a few minutes before the storm loomed on the horizon, crawled from their retreats with scraping noises and stretched along the surface of the ground till they regained their original shape, after which they remained motionless.

More than a day had passed on the Terrestrial time scale since the crash. At that time they had instantly lost all contact with Perry Rhodan, who waited far outside the stellar system of Gonom, aboard the *Titan*, flagship of the Terrestrial Spacefleet; waited anxiously for the success of the mission Reginald Bell and a handful of mutants had courageously undertaken.

It had taken the group a little less than a day to crawl from the place of impact to the sanctuary of the cave. Tako Kakuta was unconscious for hours after the crash and had to be carried. One of Ivan Goratschin's double heads had suffered an injury. Although it was the 'younger' of the two heads which had received the concussion, the mutant's sympathetic nervous system caused the 'older' head a great deal of pain—which was cause for it to severely tongue lash its brother.

Betty Toufry had been the biggest surprise. When they crawled out of the broken body of the dead Gazelle, the men were sure they would have to clamber back and rescue Betty, who was presumably so paralysed by fear and shock that she was unable to move. Instead, after each had emerged from the mass of twisted

plastimetal, stretched out on the ground and gingerly fingered his body with leaden arms, Betty was already outside, some yards distant, leaning nonchalantly against a rock formation and greeting them with a cheery smile. She could read their thoughts and knew what was on their minds, shushing Bell as he began to compliment her on what a courageous girl she was...

The steady wind had blown heat waves as high as 400° F to the site of the crash, forcing them to seek a cooler climate in the twilight zone. At first they walked erect like human beings but soon discovered that their earthly pride was no match for the doubled gravity.

They had just made it to the cave when the storm struck in earnest. They had watched in wonder while the blue flesh-like plants had sought safety in the ground a few minutes before the first gust swept over the high-plain and would have whipped them away but for the fact that they were partially protected as they cowered on the lee side of a rock.

Then they hid in the cave and waited 10 long hours for the tempest to subside.

And now they found themselves—as before—cut off from all communications on a world which was almost twice as big as Saturn, rotated once every 2.4 Terrestrial years as it completed its orbit around its central star Gonom, thus always showing it the same face. However its trajectory was very eccentric so that violent liberations caused periodic changes of the sun's position. Gom had a mantle of oxygen and an air pressure of 20 atmospheres. Its surface gravitation measured 1.9G.

It was a world on which a man could stand erect no longer than a few minutes and where he needed the protection of a spacesuit to keep from being crushed by the enormous pressure; a world on which disgusting, blue, semi-intelligent plants vegetated and where eternal night reigned on one half and constant day on the other; a world from whose twilight zone one perceived nothing but deepest darkness behind and only a weak, blood-red streak of light ahead.

A creation of hell. Such was Gom!

* * * *

“Something is coming,” John Marshall said.

Reginald Bell stared out of the cave's exit. “There's nothing I can see,” he muttered.

“There's nothing to see,” Betty remarked. “What do you think of it, Mr. Marshall?”

Marshall shook his head. “I don't know. It seems to be rather simple minded.”

“Right. Semi-intelligent.”

“Good grief!” Bell growled. “I know you're telepaths but I also want to know what's going on!”

John Marshall leaned forward as he listened. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

“The impulses are stronger than those from the blue plants,” he observed, “but it’s impossible to make sense out of it.”

“Where is it?” Bell demanded.

“Up front!” Marshall pointed in the direction of a flat rock lying a few feet from the entrance to the cave. Bell wanted to ask another question but held his tongue.

In the reddish twilight something crept around the rock. It looked like a plain dark spot of oval outline, perhaps 10 square feet-big. It slithered around the rock and moved toward the cave.

“It wants to come here!” Marshall whispered.

Bell stared at the thing. It didn’t have any definite contours. Wherever it moved it gave the appearance as if the ground had been darkened by a shade.

It was about to creep between two of the blue plants but the plants seemed to fear the dark spot more than the storm. They retreated into the ground with amazing agility and with their scraping noise.

Reginald Bell drew his thermo-weapon, prepared to shoot.

“Don’t!” Marshall ordered. “It’s only curious.”

Then the spot stopped at the entrance to the cave and Bell gawked at it. It looked like a thin layer of dark brown lacquer. Bell felt ill at ease and looked to Marshall for reassurance. “What does it want?”

Marshall shook his head. “Nothing else. It doesn’t find us interesting.”

With a slight scratching noise the spot started to move again. However it didn’t return the same way it had come but wandered to the right around the cliff in which the cave was located. After a few minutes it was out of Bell’s sight. “Good Heavens,” he groaned, “what kind of a world is this?”

Tama Yokida seemed less impressed. “I can bring it back, sir,” he offered. “Do you want me to?”

Bell wearily waved him off. “Let it go! What should we do with it?”

Kitai Ishibashi, the Suggestor, drew Bell’s attention. Kitai lay next to the wall of the cave and stared at the stone wall. “What’s the matter?” Bell wanted to know.”

Kitai sighed and turned around. “I thought I could force my will on it. But it’s probably too dumb to be influenced.”

Bell laughed angrily. “I guess you’re right. It seems to be no smarter than the blue plants that are hiding from the storm.”

He moved back from the cave’s exit and muttered for the second time as he crawled past Marshall: “Good Heavens! What kind of a world did we get into?”

Marshall asked pensively without expecting an answer: “What did you expect to find on Gom?”

Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin, the two-headed mutant, brashly piped up with one of his heads: “Booze and beautiful babes!”

The older head chortled and turned to the side while the younger cocked his head and said mischievously: “It was he who said it.”

Bell gnashed his teeth and commented loud enough for everybody to hear: “Dumped in a desolate hell with a bunch of idiots to depend on!”

* * * *

They tried once more to get in touch with the *Titan*. The most efficient telepath of the Mutant Corps, that little furry animal Pucky, was aboard the *Titan*. Betty and John Marshall joined their efforts to relay a signal to Pucky in order to inform him where and in what predicament they had landed.

But instead of an answer from Pucky they received confusing and senseless thought-impulses of such intensity that Marshall was willing to bet they came from their own planet Gom.

“What do you propose to do now?” Bell asked grimly. “Are you ready to settle down here for life?”

Marshall smiled. “You’re the leader of our group and we thought you’d come up with a good idea.”

“Balderdash!” Bell snorted. “My insignia isn’t going to get us out of this mess but I figured that you with your superbrains would hit on a useful solution in no time at all.”

Betty Toufry interjected: “I don’t believe we can do more than wait. Perry Rhodan knows we’re in danger and he can figure out where we wound up. In my opinion all that matters now is that we survive till the *Titan* lands on Gom.”

“If I only knew how far the libration extends,” Bell murmured. “The edge of the dusky zone has already advanced 300 feet closer to us. If it keeps going like this we’ll have to get out of here in a few more days.”

The red band of light which bordered the twilight zone had moved farther up into the black sky. A constant stream of air had raised the temperature inside the cave from 170 to 200°F. The climate control in their spacesuits worked at top capacity.

40 hours had elapsed since the crash of the *Gazelle*. They had endured the ordeal by watching the blue plants and by tensely waiting for a response to their telepathic calls—which unfortunately never came—and by kidding each other with horseplay.

But now the enforced idleness became unbearable—and yet there was nothing else they could do except wait.

* * * *

All of them slept at the same time. Originally Ivan the older, was assigned guard duty at the entrance to the cave but the two heads were unable to come to an agreement as to who had received the order with the result that they both went to sleep.

Luckily nothing happened.

Bell crawled wearily to the opening and stared out, glancing first at the rocky needle by which he gauged the progress of the libration. His second look was aimed in the direction of the pancaked wreck of the Gazelle.

He rubbed his eyes in panic and his men heard him utter a frightful gasp. He blinked a few times and tried to focus his eyes but the picture remained the same.

The wreck had vanished.

Reginald Bell hesitated for awhile but finally asked the Seer Wuriu. Sengu to search for the wreck under the surface of the plain. He theorized that Gom was subject to volcanic activity and that perhaps a fissure had opened in the ground and swallowed up the Gazelle. Only Wuriu .Sengu, with his para-optical ability of seeing through solid matter as other people look through, clean window glass, was in a position to discover it again.

However Sengu's efforts were in vain. The Gazelle seemed to have disappeared from the face of the planet without a trace.

Bell made another decision, albeit very reluctantly, because it meant placing one of his men in jeopardy again. But in their situation reconnaissance and vital information were of paramount importance.

He turned to Tako Kakuta, the teleporter. "Take a look, Tako!" he ordered. "But don't linger, just give the site a brief inspection. You don't have to conduct a search. Return as quickly as you can."

Tako disappeared and by using his ability of teleportation emerged almost instantly as a little glittering point at the spot where the wreck of the Gazelle had been abandoned.

Bell saw him move around a few steps and then he was gone again. But—he popped up at the same moment at the entrance to the cave. The entire inspection had lasted only 15 seconds.

"Nothing," Tako murmured disappointedly. "The ground is perfectly smooth, almost as if varnished."

Marshall broke in as if electrified: "Varnished, you say; what colour?"

Tako thought for a moment. "I'd say... dark brown."

Bell followed Marshall's deductions. "Would you believe the patch of lacquer devoured & Gazelle?"

"I'm not jumping to any conclusions. But if the ground is dark brown and looks like varnished..."

"How big was the spot?" Bell asked Tako.

Tako didn't know. "I didn't see it all," he admitted.

"More than a few square yards?"

"Sure, much larger than that."

Bell wanted to reply something but at this moment the two-headed mutant Ivan Goratschin, Kitai Ishibashi, Wuriu Sengu and Tama Yokida got up in the rear of the cave. Swaying but erect they moved toward the talking group on their way to

leave the cave.

All this happened so fast and looked so peculiar—as if the men were guided by machines—that Bell didn't recover from his shock until the men were outside the cave. "Stop!" he shouted. "Come back, you idiots!"

But the mutants kept marching on. Apparently they had failed to hear Bell.

Bell crawled out to follow them. However the 4 suddenly seemed to be endowed with enormous strength and the distance between them and Bell rapidly increased.

The mutants headed for the rock behind which the sheet of lacquer had first appeared.

Bell hollered and cursed. Finally he stopped and pulled out his little impulse-beamer, bellowing: "Come back at once or I'll shoot!"

The mutants paid no attention whatsoever. Bell raised his weapon but before he could pull the trigger he heard Marshall cry out in anguish behind him: "Don't shoot! They can't help it!"

Bell rolled over on his side so that he could look back to the cave. "Why? What's the matter with them?"

"Extremely strong hypnotic influence!" Marshall panted. "They've no choice but to obey."

"Then do something about it, for Pete's sake!" Bell screamed.

"There's nothing I can do. I'm glad it didn't catch me too. The force is too great... it's impossible to buck it!"

The 4 mutants disappeared behind the rock. After awhile they came into view again, moving slightly to the right and straight to the place where the Gazelle had been wrecked, still marching erect.

Bell kept staring at them. Then he turned around with much grunting and cussing and returned to the cave. "I'm sorry, Marshall," he murmured, "if I was a little rude. But conditions around this place ran throw you off your rocker."

"Forget it!" Marshall replied. "I'd only like to know who in this forsaken wasteland exercises such strong hypnotic powers."

Bell gave no answer. He observed the mutants who kept plodding across the mesa between the rocks, defying the excessive gravitation in an upright position.

Bell tried to attract their attention by continual shouting and he was sure they could pick it up through their helmet radios. Nevertheless he received no response.

After about 10 minutes a new incident occurred. Ivan Goratschin first staggered, then fell to his knees. The Japanese following closely behind him toppled to the ground. Bell called to them to turn back.

After a few minutes they started to move again but this time on all fours. They succumbed to their weakness and endeavoured to comply with the hypnotic command by crawling.

"It's no use," Marshall said. "They're still mesmerized."

“Can you tell where it comes from?” Bell inquired.

“No, not exactly. It seems to come from the direction where the wreck was.”

An odd thought crossed Bell’s mind. Tako had claimed that the place where the Gazelle had come down was covered by a widespread dark brown sheet and the strange spot they had observed a few hours ago had a similar appearance. Marshall had been able to perceive some of its thoughts, leading him to the conclusion that it was an organic creature of limited intelligence.

If Marshall was right the film of lacquer covering the crash site was nothing but a much more expanded living organism of the same species that—due to its larger size—exuded much greater mental energies.

It was beyond their ability to help the 4 mutants—hard as it was to become reconciled to the futility. It took the mutants one hour to reach the area where they had crash-landed—a truly incredible feat under the paralysing gravitational conditions on Gom.

During that hour Bell had tried without interruption to communicate with the mutants through their helmet, radios with the same lack of success.

When the 4 mutants had crawled to the site of the crash they could be seen in their glittering spacesuits scrambling back and forth as though searching for something. Again Bell looked questioningly at Marshall, who merely shook his head as a sign that the hypnotic influence still prevailed and that the mutants had no chance of regaining their own will.

Their fate was sealed abruptly and inexplicably. Bell had shouted his last warning... and they vanished the next moment.

Reginald Bell’s forehead was bathed in sweat. Without looking at Marshall, he said to him: “Gone like the wreck of the Gazelle. What do you make of it, Marshall?”

“I’ve been giving it some thought,” Marshall replied quickly. “The Gazelle was made of plastic metal which has a high content of carbohydrates. The metallic component served merely as a hardening agent and the substance was 85% organic matter.”

He paused and Bell gaped at him in astonishment. “So what?”

“That monster over there Marshall flipped his head in the direction where they had last seen the mutants, “Must perhaps revamp or replenish its own substance by feeding on organic matter such as plastic metal and—humans.”

Bell’s eyes bulged in amazement. “You’ve got a fantastic imagination!”

Marshall simply shrugged his shoulders but Bell had to admit secretly that his conjectures were not totally absurd.

* * * *

A few more hours went by.

Without talking very much they huddled close together near the exit of the cave

and kept their eyes glued on the spot where the 4 mutants had vanished. It was only 3 or 4 miles from the cave and from their slightly higher vantage point they had a good view of the shapeless dark film which was the subject of Tako's report.

However there was no sign of the mutants and Bell's last hopes came to naught.

They had only one serious discussion when Tako and the African Ras Tschubai besieged Bell for permission to jump together to the brown cover with the intention of obliterating it by using their thermo-beamers on it.

However Bell denied his permission after consulting with Marshall, who stated that while the telepathic command had ceased for the time being, the danger persisted that it could be reinstated any time with the effect that the two teleporters would also succumb to its terrific power.

"Whoever this unknown hypnotist may be," Marshall explained, "he was able to pick up Ivan's, Ishibashi's, Sengu's and Yokida's brainwave patterns across the distance of nearly 4 miles. He probably was helped by some lucky circumstance or we'd have all suffered the same fate; but the danger increases at a closer distance."

This sounded irrefutable. Kakuta and Tschubai were thus dissuaded from their plans.

Marshall and Betty Toufry attempted time and again to get in touch with Pucky aboard the *Titan* but all they could hear was an unintelligible telepathic jabbering.

Meanwhile the edge of the twilight zone had advanced a few more steps toward them.

Bell racked his brain about what he could do to ameliorate the situation of his people but his mind was a blank. There was little to go by and each idea seemed as foolhardy as the other. Waiting still appeared to be their best bet.

Gom's 18 moons followed their paths in the dim sky, sometimes in groups of twos, threes, fours or fives. The largest and most distant one was Laros, where the Springers and the Aras plotted the invasion of Terra.

And still farther out in space, at a distance of 20 light-years, the *Titan* stood by, protected by its anti-detection field.

Bell began to worry about the food. Each spacesuit contained an iron ration which could be consumed by means of a clever arrangement that made it unnecessary for the wearer to open the spacesuit.

Half or two-thirds of the rations—varying with the appetite of the occupant—had already been eaten up. In no more than 20 hours they had to find a place where they could take off their suits. Only then would they be able to use the supply of food they had taken out of the disabled *Gazelle*.

Bell glanced at the watch on his wrist. The second hand crept like a blind caterpillar over the dial and the two coloured illuminated indicators pointed to figures which meant nothing. 9:17... A.M.? P.M.?

Marshall suddenly sat up. At the same moment Betty uttered a soft cry of

surprise.

Bell turned around and asked: “What’s going on?”

Marshall responded only by raising his hand and cocking his head to listen.

Ras Tschubai, the teleporter, who was lying farther ahead, turned his head to look at Marshall and then peered out of the cave.

Ras had keen eyes. He didn’t need binoculars like Bell, who usually pressed them so tightly against his elastic faceplate that he had the eyepieces almost on top of his eyes.

Ras realized what happened.

The dark brown sheet had started to move. It was clearly visible in the semi-darkness against the light-grey rocky ground as it approached the cave.

“There!” Ras exclaimed.

Bell observed it through his binoculars. He took his time until he was sure that the brown substance aimed straight for the cave.

“It’s feeling its way,” Marshall commented. “It’s reaching out for our brains and as soon as it has spotted one it’ll probably send a hypnotic command.”

Bell felt a shudder running down his spine.

The brown mass—mass was the wrong word; the thing was only a wafer thin coating on the rocks—crept closer.

Bell didn’t know much about telepathy but he knew that a telepath with hypnotic capabilities had first to perceive the wave pattern of an alien brain before he could influence it.

The probing for a wave pattern was not so much different from the selection of a certain frequency on a radio receiver. Of course there were no knobs and indicators and the searching brain acted as a tuning circuit. This made matters a little more difficult.

Nevertheless, it was no reason to feel safe. The brown patch kept coming closer at a speed they could never attain themselves under the prevailing conditions of gravity which handicapped them.

Bell made a quick decision. “We’ll get out of here!”

Marshall nodded his agreement. “We haven’t got a chance against this monster.”

They collected their meagre equipment, the food they had brought from the Gazelle, the weapons, the portable radio transmitter whose range far exceeded their helmet sets and the binoculars.

Then they crawled out of the cave and turned around the big cliff into the blackness, moving as fast as they could along the ground.

Not even Ras Tschubai was able to see the brown patch after they left the cave.

“Please keep me informed!” Bell requested the two telepaths. “Let me know if anything new comes up!”

“It’s constantly changing,” Betty panted “The thing is getting nearer... I sense it clearer all the time.”

Bell looked back but could see nothing but the mesa strewn with rocks. There was no glimpse of the brown patch.

They struggled along for half an hour, gaining only about half a mile during that time.

Betty paused for a few seconds and gasped: "I get the impression that we'll soon be able to see it. I can feel it as clearly as if it were right behind me."

Bell chose one of the larger boulders which abounded around them. He raised his hand and pointed toward it! "Ras! Get up there and take a look!"

The Afroterranian disappeared. For a few seconds he was visible on top of the big boulder as he scrutinized the red borderline of the bright zone.

"1000 feet," he reported tersely.

"It'll have caught up with us in a few minutes. We better take cover behind that boulder!" Bell replied.

They crawled over to the same boulder on which Ras Tschubai had stood to scan the horizon. Once they had reached it, they found that it really consisted of two parts, one massive block and a lower needle-like rock raising from the ground next to it. Between the large rock and the needle was a gap of about 18 inches which could serve as an ideal fire slit.

They quickly took their positions. Betty had discovered a little ledge a few feet up on the side of the rock where she could comfortably stretch out. She took her thermo-beamer and dragged herself up to the ledge with a laborious effort. From there she would be able to shoot through the crack above the heads of the others lying below her.

Bell and Marshall staked out behind the crack in such a manner that their lines of fire wouldn't cross. Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai were posted a little farther to the side. Bell hoped that their parapsychological talents could be put to good use during the imminent flight.

A few more minutes elapsed. Though they were only a few, it seemed to be an eternity. Then Betty suddenly cried out: "I can see it now! It's heading straight toward us!"

Bell answered calmly: "Let it come!"

He moved his right arm forward and waited. For awhile the stony desert remained as he had observed it for the past 10 minutes. But then a brown shadow of paper-thin veneer slid across the ground, pushed pebbles out of the way, surmounted others and crept closer, making a scraping noise as it moved along.

"Hold your fire!" Bell growled. "Wait till it gets here!"

He heard Marshall pant and turned around solicitously. When Marshall caught his glance, Bell grinned: "easy does it!"

200 feet... 150 feet... 100...

Bell looked a last time at Betty. She didn't seem to be afraid. She lay quietly and took aim along the barrel of her weapon.

...75 feet... 50...

“Fire!” Bell shouted.

He heard Marshall groan beside him and saw the blinding white beam of concentrated energy shoot from his weapon. He observed where Marshall hit and aimed a few feet to the left. From above Betty raked her fire over the other areas of the aggressor which were outside the range of Bell and Marshall.

The lacquer bulged with hissing bubbles and went up in blue-grey smoke. But other layers advanced, moved over the empty spots and kept coming closer.

“It’s at least a mile long and 300 feet wide!” Betty exclaimed in desperation.

Marshall continued shooting. Bell rose up at the stone needle to get a better view of the battlefield and tried to sever somewhere the long body of their opponent in order to break up all connections between the two parts.

However the attempt was useless because of the enormous width of the body. The gaps Bell created closed up a few seconds later.

He dropped down to his former position when he noticed that Marshall was unable to keep the sheet away from the rock by himself. He kept the trigger of his weapon in permanent firing position and poured a rain of fire on the alien being as if it spouted from a watering can.

He took a little breather and shouted to the two teleporters: “Get out there and see what you can do!”

Tako and Ras had been waiting for the order. They disappeared instantly and a few seconds later blue-grey vapours rose from two different spots on the mesa, showing the result of their work.

However the situation didn’t change drastically. The enemy didn’t seem to care how much substance it lost under the murderous fire and how hot the ground became under its brown belly. It moved toward its target and persevered with so much determination that Bell could count on his fingers the number of minutes it would take before their position at the boulder was overrun.

The telepathic danger which also threatened from the uncanny substance was all but forgotten in the excitement.

“Marshall!” Bell called, “crawl around the left side of the needle and shoot from there! I’ll manage to hold out here.”

Marshall complied at once. He slid past Bell around the needle and planted himself a few feet farther left where the brown layer of veneer almost outflanked the defenders. Bell heard his wild and furious screams as he drove the enemy back with steady fire. Suddenly Marshall interrupted himself and shouted triumphantly: “Here’s a better hide-out! Come over quickly!”

Bell didn’t ask questions. He waved to Betty, moved muttering to the place from which Marshall had called and held the post till Betty reported that she had made it. While keeping up his fire he managed to call back the two teleporters.

Then he crawled over as quickly as he could. Tako Kakuta stood near a hole and motioned to him. A few feet behind Bell the dark brown veneer seeped through the crack between the rocks which he had just left.

Tako held the entrance to the hole open with staccato fire. Bell sent him down and followed after a few more shots.

Up to now there was no time for Bell to wonder about the new hideout. As he dropped down into the hole, he noticed that it was a shaft leading at an angle of about 50° into the ground to a considerable depth. Bell was thrown and bounced till he finally landed with a dull thud—his feet up in the air—among the group that preceded him.

Somebody cried out in pain but Bell quickly got hold of himself again. “Silence!” he commanded.

He turned around and held his head so that the right outer mike aimed upward into the shaft. Holding his breath, he tried to hear what was going on above.

For a few moments everything was quiet. Then a soft scraping became audible, quickly growing louder. Bell held his weapon ready to shoot. But eventually the noise remained at a constant level. Bell kept listening for awhile, finally turned back and growled: “For the love of Mike! Why doesn’t somebody turn on a light?”

Two helmet-lamps lit up. Bell looked around. The room in which they had landed was only the beginning of a horizontal continuation of the shaft leading from the surface of the mesa into the ground.

Bell switched on his own light and turned it into the passage. The light was strong but it didn’t reach to the end of the tunnel, which was semi-circular and had a flat floor. It was 10 feet wide and 5 feet high.

“For the time being we’re safe,” Bell sighed. “The brown thing doesn’t seem to intend to come down here. Now we’ve two possibilities. First: to investigate this tunnel and find out if it has a second exit. Second: wait till the scraping stops and climb out again.”

Betty spoke up: “I can feel that the brown thing is probing for us. It won’t give up its search so quickly. Perhaps it would be better to inspect the tunnel. As long as the enemy lingers up there, we can’t do much anyway.”

Bell agreed. “Let’s get started!” he ordered. “We don’t have any time to lose.”

He took the lead of the little troop. They stooped to enter the tunnel. Bell’s helmet-lamp illuminated the way. It looked as if the shaft stretched for miles under the ground and its straightness made Bell suspect after the first few steps that it was not created by nature.

For the time being there was no other indication for his assumption. He kept it to himself, forgetting that John Marshall and Betty Toufry could read his thoughts very well.

2/ “KILL THE ALIENS!”

The tension grew on board the *Titan*.

For days the mighty ship waited motionlessly in space for a sign—either from Talamon, the Mounder on Laros, or from Reginald Bell.

The *Titan* had come here to use the last chance there was to prevent the attack on Earth threatened by the Springers. The Springer patriarchs had heeded a call from one of their related branches, the Aras, to assemble on Laros. On Laros, the 18th moon of Gom, the Aras had a secret power base.

Perry Rhodan had a single ally in the camp of the Springers. Talamon the Mounder had informed Rhodan that a rejection of the plans for the attack could not be expected. Therefore Rhodan's mutants had infiltrated Laros led by Reginald Bell with the help of Talamon in order to sabotage the conference.

Bell had succeeded in falsifying the program of the only positronic computer left to the Springers which still contained data about the galactic position of Earth in its memory bank. It was part of the positronic equipment of the Springer ship which was owned by the Mounder Tophthor. Tophthor was Talamon's friend but by no means shared his opinions. Tophthor had no inkling that his positronic computer would furnish data about the Earth pointing in the direction of Betelgeuse in case he consulted it but he suspected that Talamon played a perfidious game with the patriarchs and the Aras. Talamon had even admitted it without revealing his secrets and he had managed to keep Tophthor quiet by promising him lucrative profits.

Bell and his men were eventually discovered. They managed to escape in a *Gazelle* taken from Talamon's ship but not without a hard fight. Talamon had great difficulties convincing the patriarchs that he had no knowledge of the aliens' presence.

After their initial triumph with their successful escape, Bell and his mutants were drawn in their craft by a mysterious power to the surface of Gom. Marshall had sent a telepathic emergency call to Rhodan and informed him about the events taken place on Laros, as well as about the altered program of the ship's positronic.

The course of the ill-fated *Gazelle* clearly indicated that it would go down on Gom. Marshall had reported at the end of his message that Betty Toufry believed the power which held their ship in its grip was a telekinetic field.

This was the last word they had received from Bell's group. Rhodan didn't

know whether they had survived the emergency landing on Gom or not. Pucky, the best telepath of the mutant group, thought a few times he could hear signals. But this sector of space was so full of telepathic vibrations that even Pucky was , unable to separate clearly the uncertain signals from the telepathic ‘background noise’.

Still there was hope.

The conference on Laros continued after Talamon had succeeded in dispelling the suspicion he had aroused. The continuation of the conference caused Rhodan to suspend further actions. Remaining motionless in its anti-detection field, the *Titan* was safe. Once it started to move, the risk of being tracked down was imminent and if they were located by Laros it was sure to trigger a chain reaction of highly unpleasant events.

First of all the suspicion against Talamon would be renewed. Secondly, they would start checking the memory bank data of the positronic computer aboard Topthor’s ship. No organic brain was capable of differentiating between two similar stored data concerning galactic positions. A precise galactic position was described by 3 spatial, 3 hyper-impulse—and 2 time-coördinates. In addition it required the so-called ‘beacon determinant’ which fixed the course to the goal from any other galactic position. All this constituted a tangle of figures and imaginary values which defied the capacity of any brain. But the Springers: would, once their suspicion had been stirred, apply a bigger positronic computer to test the programming sequence of Topthor’s equipment. In doing so, Bell’s trick would come to light.

Thus Perry Rhodan was forced—for the sake of the entire Earth—to leave his friend Reginald Bell in the lurch.

* * * *

They proceeded through the tunnel without incidents and as time dragged on it became quite tedious.

John Marshall and Betty Toufry stated that the telepathic probing noises of the brown Gom-being grew weaker all the time—a sure sign that Bell and his people had quickly got away from the spot where they had saved themselves from the beast.

They had noticed that the walls of the passage were seamless and smooth and remarked about its rectilinear direction. Soon they started to grumble that no end to the tunnel was in sight.

The only one who had noticed anything unusual during the past half hour was Bell himself. From time to time he stopped so that the entire file came to a standstill. He stared at his wrist and nobody except the two telepaths could tell whether he looked at his watch, the radiation counter, the manometer or the thermometer. He shook his head in astonishment and mumbled something unintelligible under his breath.

After he had done it for the 10th time, Marshall finally laughed: “Why don’t you also tell Ras and Tako why you’re so amazed?”

Bell looked at him in surprise and shone his helmet lamp directly into his face. “What do you mean, *also*? I didn’t tell you... Oh yes! All you telepaths can go to hell!”

Then he looked again at his wrist. “I’ve observed for some time,” he explained “that the temperature in here is unusually low and unusually constant, too. Since for the last half-hour, I’ve registered slightly more than 57°F, turned the thermometer to its most sensitive range. The temperature has been stable within less than four-hundredths. I consider this very remarkable.”

Marshall easily guessed the full extent of his excited thoughts. “And if you also consider,” he added to Bell’s explanation, “that the shaft appears to have been built artificially, it leaves no other conclusion—but that it serves as a storage area for something which is best kept at 57.7°F for the purpose of preservation or some other reason.

Bell looked at him with an impenetrable expression as he spoke. Finally he corrected him: “57.3, not 57.7. Reading figures isn’t your strongest point!”

Marshall grinned. “But this *is* your theory, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. I’m convinced that something is hidden behind these walls. The tunnel has been constructed by intelligent beings and serves a certain purpose. It apparently connects the subterranean storage rooms with the outside world. The tunnel itself can’t be the storage room or we’d have found something. It probably houses some important objects. That’s why the entrances to the repositories have been concealed. We’ve encountered a number of races in the Galaxy who have shown a preference for seamless invisible doors.”

He moved over to the left side and crawled a few feet along the wall of the tunnel. When this didn’t bring any results he rose up with a sigh and returned in as erect a posture as the low ceiling permitted. Then he tapped against the wall with the gloves of his spacesuit.

The wall was a wall. There was no sign of a secret access to the presumed depots.

Bell went down on his knees again and pondered. “Maybe,” he murmured, “we haven’t reached our goal yet. This tunnel is only effective as a temperature filter if it’s long enough to level out all temperature fluctuations.” He looked at Marshall. “We’ll go on and watch the thermometer. If the temperature changes we’ll have overshot our goal.”

* * * *

3 hours later the temperature still remained at 57.3°F.

The telepathic probing noise of the weird adversary had faded away. Now they could have returned to the entrance of the tunnel and climbed back to the surface

without danger.

However nobody considered it any longer because meanwhile they were overcome by a search fever.

At first only Marshall and Betty Toufry noticed that the hitherto monotonous situation underwent a change. They received thought-impulses which were, however, rather confused and too indistinct to be understood, but they showed, on the other hand, that somewhere in the neighbourhood an at least semi-intelligent being was present.

Unfortunately Betty's and Marshall's capacity of perceiving extraneous thoughts was not direction-oriented in an exact manner. They could do no more than indicate that the strange subject was 'somewhere ahead' and Betty believed she felt that the impulses came from an oblique direction below.

Bell didn't know how to cope with it. He reduced their speed of walking—which could better be called crawling speed—and asked the telepaths to report to him continually.

Betty and Marshall registered that the impulse became more intensified. But the corridor remained empty as far as their lamps reached.

Bell felt uneasy by the second. He had already pulled out his impulse-beamer and kept it in front of him as he advanced farther into the corridor.

He was terribly startled when Marshall suddenly shouted with all his might: "*Look out!*"

He stopped. Lying flat on his belly, he asked: "What's the matter now?"

"Something has detected us," Marshall hastily answered. "I'm getting a regular barrage of hostile impulses."

"Are they more pronounced than what you heard so far?"

"A little, but they're far from clear thoughts."

"Does it want to attack us?"

"Wait a minute... no, I believe it can't do it."

"Great!" Bell rejoiced. "With such..."

Somebody grabbed him by the arm. It was Ras Tschubai. "Quiet!" he whispered. "I hear something."

Bell held his breath. The others didn't react as quickly as he did; he could hear their rapid breathing in his helmet-speaker. But there were also other sounds: scratching and scraping noises such as he had heard before when the Gom monster attacked them a few hours earlier.

"The lacquer is here again!" he snapped angrily. "Hold your weapons ready to shoot but be careful that you don't shoot at each other! Let's go!"

Suddenly he was in a hurry. He crawled through the tunnel as quickly as he could. Marshall's information kept coming at regular intervals with the same monotonous voice: "... stronger... stronger... stronger..."

This referred to the hostile impulses he was receiving. Therefore, danger lay ahead.

What irritated Bell was that the passage still seemed to be completely empty. The scraping and scratching he had heard before must have come from the tunnel itself. But where was whatever caused it?

“... stronger... stronger...” Marshall continued. Then he suddenly paused.

Bell stopped in his tracks again. “What...?”

“There!” Marshall pointed over Bell’s shoulder. Bell saw nothing except a thin black line on the wall of a few feet ahead. “What is it?”

Marshall didn’t answer. He pushed Bell to the side and crawled forward. When he reached the line he stopped and called: “Come here and look at it!”

Bell came closer and the others followed him.

The line was about the width of a finger above the floor of the tunnel. The floor was a little uneven at this spot. It curved up close to the line and obscured it slightly.

It looked as if someone had drawn an 18-inch-long line on the light wall with a sharp pencil. Bell didn’t know what to think of it.

Marshall understood his bewilderment. “Remove the wall around it carefully!” he suggested. “Then you’ll see what it is.”

Bell lifted up his thermo-beamer, raised himself on his elbows and set his beam on the lowest magnitude. Then he aimed the weapon at the small bulge on the floor. The needle-thin energy stream of the beamer melted the substance; it dissolved and spread over the floor, giving off a burst of smoke.

“Higher!” Marshall said.

The beam ate a hole in the wall and Bell could see that a dark surface extended deeper behind the line into the stone.

He continued applying his weapon and burned a hole into the wall and the floor which was big enough to admit his head in his helmet. What appeared as a line before now looked like a dark-brown lid covering the top of the hole and lying under a solid mass of stone.

Suddenly Bell realized what he had exposed. With a grunting sound of surprise he lowered his weapon and switched it off. “A lacquer-flounder!” he moaned.

He pressed his helmet against the floor and was thus able to view the strange creature out of one eye from underneath. He noted that it didn’t move although the temperature of the rock around it probably exceeded many times the level it was used to in its normal surroundings.

A number of theories flashed through Bell’s mind

He turned around to ask Marshall’s opinion but at the same moment Betty called out: “Watch out! Something’s wrong!”

She noticed—as clearly as Marshall—that the hostile impulses so full of hate which had accompanied them the last quarter hour suddenly ebbed away. Something else took their place, giving the impression that the weird being from whom the impulses originated was extremely busy.

A few seconds later the flounder lodged inside the wall began to move.

Scraping softly it retreated deeper into the wall. Bell tried to hold it back but the object smooth as varnish, slipped through his coarse gloves. A few moments later the mysterious object had disappeared.

Almost at the same time a sharp gust of wind whistled through the tunnel. They were caught so unawares that Bell whirled around with a hoarse gasp of amazement and searched the tunnel to find an opening through which the air could have blown in.

There was nothing at all. The wind, which came from nowhere, was very cold as the thermometer indicated. As a result of Bell's discharging his thermo-beamer the temperature at the place in the corridor where they had discovered the flounder had risen to over 100°F. The wind now blowing at a steady velocity through the corridor caused it to sink rapidly. Within a few minutes it was down to 57°F. The wind died down and the thermometer slowly climbed back to 57.3°F. again where it remained. The procedure was so obvious that it took no guesswork: automatic temperature regulation from a reservoir.

What made Bell jittery however was the fact that he neither knew where the reservoir was located nor had any idea how the air was made to flow.

Meanwhile the lacquer-flounder was completely gone. Bell pressed his helmet against the floor and stared into the semi-circular hole he had carved out with his weapon. He made a decision: "We're going to follow that thing. It's going to be a lot of trouble but somehow we've got to determine what we got into."

Marshall read the other thoughts which were also on his mind: there probably are, after all, no hidden doors in the walls of the tunnel. If the installation was indeed constructed by the Gom creatures, then a certain porosity of the walls sufficed to permit passage of the lacquer-flounders whose bodies were less than five-thousandths of an inch thick.

Bell motioned his people to stand aside and began to enlarge the hole with his thermo-beamer. He adjusted the output of the gun to a higher magnitude which not only had the effect of making the hole grow faster than before but also triggered the automatic temperature regulator, causing it to blow such a storm through the passage that they had to brace themselves to keep from being swept away.

Betty Toufry and John Marshall perceived that the feeling of effort and strain emanating from the strange being increased substantially.

Bell followed a definite direction. He branched off from the floor of the shaft at an angle down into the rock. When he had progressed about 15 feet he proved to be right with his assumption: the lacquer-flounder showed up again. The steady fire-ray unearthed a part of its body as it dug in. Now it seemed to dislike the increased heat of its surroundings and it rushed to escape from it.

But Bell stayed on its track. The slanted branch was driven into the stone foot by foot. It was narrow when the flounder moved quicker and became wider when it hesitated.

Then suddenly the energy-beam penetrated, a void. A circular hole emerged at

the end of the shaft. The flounder disappeared through the opening into the darkness which lay behind it.

Bell switched off his weapon when the hole was big enough. He turned around and let his feet dangle into the darkness. Then he bent forward and shone into the opening with his helmet-lamp.

What he saw was part of an apparently circular room which, though not much higher than 6 feet, was remarkably wide. Bell slid forward until he could barely hold on to the edge of the hole; then he dropped down and called to the others: "You can come down! Be careful when you jump!"

While they slipped through the hole one by one, Bell tried to illuminate the entire room. He noticed that in contrast to the tunnel through which they had passed the natural rock was nowhere to be seen. The walls and floor were covered with a dark coating reflecting the light of his lamp as if it were polished.

The flounder they had followed seemed to have vanished. Bell was unable to detect it anywhere.

On the other hand Marshall made a discovery: "It seems to be chockfull of thought-impulses in here as if we were marching right through the brain of some gigantic being."

"Any danger?" Bell inquired.

"No, it has no tendency and doesn't concern us at all."

Bell was dissatisfied. "Now we trudged half a day long through the rock and chewed our way in here by the sweat of our brow. All this only to land in a subterranean room? Where the devil did that flounder go that led us here?"

Marshall opined: "It might very well be right around here. It would be hard to recognize against this dark background."

Bell skidded around on his knees, searching the floor inch by inch. Ras Tschubai. and Tako Kakuta wanted to help him but at this moment a high-pitched rustling sound came from the low ceiling. Bell rolled over on his side to look up. He saw a piece of the shiny coating peeled off the ceiling and started to float down.

It fell to the floor between Marshall and the Japanese—a 50-square-foot big paper-thin sheet. It immediately broke up in 4 parts which hastily got on the move again. Scraping and rustling they slid across the floor to the nearest wall.

Bell was so flabbergasted, seeing them vanish through the dark coating into the wall-like the lacquer-flounder that had shown them the way to this room—that he was barely able to control his reactions. "Flounders!" he shouted. "The whole *room* is made of flounders!"

He turned around and looked up to the ceiling. The spot from where the 4 weird Gom creatures had dropped down looked exactly as the other surfaces of the ceiling, walls and floor. However this didn't shake Bell's theory one whit.

Marshall and the two teleporters had given up their search. Marshall probed the environs but was unable to sense anything other than the indecipherable

conglomeration of thoughts. “What do you make of it?” he asked Bell.

“Nothing,” Bell replied impulsively, “except that it must be the flounders’ idea of fun to paper the walls of this room with their own bodies.”

“And for what purpose?”

“Who can tell?”

Marshall shrugged his shoulders. He was about to ask something else but Betty broke in: “I can’t help the feeling,” she said in a low but rather excited voice, “that there’s a third type of individual in the vicinity. Somewhere over there...” She waved her hand across a wide area of the wall.

Bell perked up at once. “Marshall?”

Marshall shook his head. “No, I don’t notice a thing. But don’t let that bother you: Betty has always been a better telepath than I.”

Bell crawled to the place Betty had pointed out. Warily he raised his hand to tap against the wall. His first try already caused him to shrink away with an outcry.

His hand had found almost no resistance. It sounded as if he had torn tissue paper when he made a hole. “This way!” Bell panted. “This is where it goes on!”

He hit other areas of the wall with the same result. Wherever he touched it, he ripped it apart and it was easy to pull the edges of the tear open. In less than a minute he made a hole big enough for a man to pass through.

He inquired suspiciously: “Marshall, didn’t you notice anything yet?”

Marshall answered in the negative.

“Strange, extremely strange,” Bell murmured.

They crawled through the opening in the wall and entered a room which looked exactly like the one they had just left—with one small exception.

They noticed the small detail only after they had repeatedly inspected the room by the light of their helmet lamps. It was no more than a slight roughness in the rear of the room.

“I believe that’s where it comes from,” Betty said a little uncertainly.

Marshall focused on it. “Yes, she’s right. I can feel it too. It resembles the bad dream of a sleeper.”

Bell crawled toward the slight mound.

After his experience with the wall it was simple for him to remove the floor covering. Bell impatiently ripped it off with his sturdy gloves.

At first he exposed a piece of grey leather-like material. Remnants of a once silvery cover were attached to some portions of it; this was the first sign which fascinated his imagination.

With a few quick rips he unearthed what resembled a human torso.

One more tug—and a head became visible. The head was inside a space helmet. The faceplate was a bit turbid but the likeness of the man was easily recognized.

It was Ivanovich’s face.

Bell heard gasps of surprise behind him. A few seconds later he had also laid

bare the head of Ivan the elder and from then on it didn't take long till the two-headed mutant was completely freed from his living encasement.

The eyes of both heads were tightly closed but they could see the nostrils move rhythmically: the mutant was breathing.

Bell tried to awaken him. He slapped his shoulders and pulled his legs.

Marshall finally interrupted him. "I don't think it'll be that simple. He's probably still under some post-hypnotic influence."

"But how did he get here, for heaven's sake?" Bell exclaimed desperately. "And where are the other 3: Ishibashi, Sengu, Yokida?"

He kept looking around. The headlamps filled the round room with bright light. There were no more mounds on the floor. The 3 mutants were certainly not in this room, if they were down here at all.

"Look at his spacesuit!" Marshall murmured. "Doesn't it look as if they'd tried to decompose it?"

Bell agreed, shaking his head.

Meanwhile Tako Kakuta had begun to scrutinize the fragments of the dark encasing which Bell had pulled off and thrown away. "Flounders, without doubt," he claimed. "I'm surprised you had no trouble tearing it off, sir."

"Surprised? Why?"

Tako showed him one of the pieces. "They can be torn only in one direction, like this... Look! Not in the other. You must always pull in the right direction."

Bell nodded thoughtfully. Then he turned his attention again to Goratschin and pulled him to the side with Marshall's help. In doing so they found that the mutant didn't lie on the bare floor but on another dark brown layer of living flounders.

"A weird world!" Bell marvelled. "If I could only understand what they're trying to do!"

"Maybe Goratschin can tell us more about it when he regains consciousness," Marshall speculated.

"We've got to get him out of here. I doubt he'll ever recover down here. When I..."

Betty interrupted him in the middle of his sentence with a frightened scream. "Watch out! We're going to be attacked."

Marshall tensed up and listened. "She's right!" he gasped, horrified. "Let's get out of here! The flounders want to hold us back."

"Betty first!" Bell ordered. "All others will help me with Ivan!"

Betty crawled away as quickly as she could. When she reached the wall—she called back: "I can't find the break any more."

"Make a new one!" Bell instructed her.

Betty went to work. However, for some reason she didn't get anywhere. Either the flounders had undergone some change in the meantime or she didn't have the same knack as Reginald Bell for this kind of work.

When the men with the motionless Goratschin caught up with her, she sobbed

in frustration: "I can't do it!"

Without a word Bell let go of the arm by which he had pulled the mutant and slammed his clenched fist against the wall. He felt it first give under his punch like a loose rubber sheet and then it promptly bounced back.

Bell got up on his knees and flung himself full force against the wall but his luck was no better than hers was.

Obviously something had indeed changed the texture of the flounders in the meantime.

"Stand back!" Bell shouted. "We'll have to shoot our way out!"

However before he could aim his thermo-beamer, it began to rustle and rasp behind him. Bell didn't let the noise deter him but the others looked back and Marshall shouted: "They're after us! They're leaving the walls, the ceiling and the floor in droves. Hurry up!"

Bell fired. The changed substance of the flounders was unable to withstand the hissing blast of the raygun and Bell burned out a hole big enough for Goratschin's huge body in a hurry.

A few seconds later they were on the other side.

Then they noticed the same rustling grating noise they had heard in the room they just left and they saw by the light of their helmet-lamps gobs of flounders float down from the ceiling, slide down the walls and detach themselves from the floor. The hole, which Bell had burned out behind them, suddenly grew larger. Some of the flounders that had combined to form the thin wall rearranged themselves to extend the opening to the floor in order to permit access to the other flounders poised for attack in the other room.

"Keep going!" Bell ordered. "We've got to try to find the entrance on the surface through which we came in."

They strenuously pushed the two-headed mutant in front of them. Bell kept his thermo-beamer handy and shot at the Gom beings without hesitation whenever they crowded too closely around them.

There was still no hint why the flounders acted in this manner.

They had no weapons—neither natural nor artificial ones. They had no arms, no legs and no teeth.

Yet nobody had any illusions as to their ability to conquer an opponent after they had seen what they did to the chewed up spacesuit of Goratschin.

Shoving the heavy body of the mutant before them, they reached the centre of the room. Betty used the searchlight to illuminate every inch of the room but was unable to find the hole through which they had entered.

Marshall assisted with the search while Bell and the two teleporters held the advancing flounders in check with short bursts of low-yield energy.

After one minute it had become clear: the hole no longer existed. The flounders had moved in to close it up.

"Bell's forehead broke out in sweat. "We must dig another shaft," he decided.

“Let’s get cracking! Put Ivan next to the wall over there!”

He rushed ahead and put his raygun to work. He disregarded the heat exuding from the melting stone which now was not carried away by a cooling storm. The outside temperature climbed to nearly 600°F, raising the heat inside the spacesuits to more than 100° despite the heat controls working at capacity.

But the temperature also got too much for the flounders. They formed a semi-circle around the group who watched Bell blasting away and at the same time kept a wary eye on the flounders, ready to shoot if they attacked anew.

The exit grew deeper foot by foot. First Goratschin was pushed in behind Bell and the others followed. When the flounders started to move in behind them, Marshall blasted them with a steady fire and killed so many that the others lost interest in the pursuit.

Meanwhile Bell remembered that he would have to slant his shaft upward in order to get to the main tunnel. He tried to guess the proper angle and began to cut steps into the rock.

The extra work didn’t matter much more since Marshall had apparently succeeded in preventing the flounders from following them.

Nonetheless Betty maintained that the telepathic command to continue the attack remained in effect without pause.

Therefore Marshall stayed behind—on the first step to avoid any unnecessary risk from the flounders. Bell had cut each step about one foot wide and five feet high. Marshall was able to lie down comfortably by pulling in his legs a little.

Above him Bell, Betty and the two teleporters climbed up on the steps they laboured to build, dragging the unconscious Goratschin with them. After awhile he saw only the irregular swinging of their lamps.

His own shone straight ahead into the shaft.

Nothing happened in the next quarter hour. But finally his helmet-mike began to pick up the creepy scraping, sending shudders down his spine.

The flounders were on the march!

Marshall calmly watched them as they moved into the light-cone of his lamp. He couldn’t judge whether they noticed the light. In any case the grating noise continued unchanged.

He held his gun in his hand, ready to shoot, but he waited patiently till the first flounder reached the step. He wanted to trigger his gun because he was certain that the step would not hamper its advance and that it soon would creep up on it.

But he didn’t press the trigger when he saw that the odd creature touched the rock with its forward edge, slid back a few inches and stopped its motion completely.

Other flounders crept closer and slid over each other since the shaft was rather narrow. But none of them behaved differently from the first one. They all collided with the stone, fell back and remained motionless a small distance away.

Marshall tried an experiment. He put his weapon down for a moment, picked

up the uppermost flounder, making sure that none of the others stuck to it, and lifted it up to his step while he moved up one more step.

The Gom creature was almost as big as the top of the step. He watched as it wandered in confusion a few inches back and forth and skidded against the stone underneath his foot. Then it slid backward till it hung over the edge of the step. When more than half of its body extended into the air, it lost its balance. It flipped over and fell on top of its fellow creatures lying at the bottom of the lowest step.

Marshall picked up the flounder once again and placed it on the first step as before. It was repugnant to his scientific mind to draw far-reaching conclusions from a single experiment.

However, he was distracted in the middle of his investigation. At first he thought he'd heard a scream. But when the strange noise was repeated, he realized that it was a telepathic signal. In contrast to the jumbled impulses emanating from the circular rooms, the strong hostile signal calling the flounders to attack and the distant but easily understandable thoughts of his comrades, the latest message gave the impression of coming from a brain which was similar to that of humans, albeit extremely awkward, the gist of it simply being: "Help us! Kill the aliens!"

Marshall knew Betty would hear the call as clearly as he did but he assumed Bell could use all their weapons when it came to a confrontation. He was convinced the call originated from the flounders—or to be precise: from the total collective of flounders assembled in this place—and was directed to a brain that did not respond well to the telepathy of the Gom creatures, thus resembling in this respect the human brain too.

Fanning his fire he killed all the flounders crowded around the lowest step. Then he turned around and clambered up the steps, rushing to the best of his ability. On his way he communicated with Betty. Betty had also received the call for help and immediately informed Bell. But so far there was no indication that anyone intended to come to the aid of the flounders.

* * * *

Bell had already given up the hope of ever reaching the horizontal tunnel through which they had made their way into the subterranean layout when the front wall of the man made shaft broke into large pieces under big sizzling shots and suddenly a dark hole with ragged edges opened up. The room behind it seemed to have a low air pressure. A sharp gust of hot air almost propelled Bell through the hole and hurled dust and stones around him.

At the same moment Betty heard the desperate cry: "They're in the western reservoir!"

She was not quite certain that what she had understood as 'western' actually meant 'western.' But that was how she translated it to Bell.

"Suppose," Bell growled, "they mean us by 'they and aliens,' then we'll soon be very busy. I'm curious who the flounders down there expect to help them."

He hadn't finished saying the two words "down there" before the light of one of the helmet-lamps fell on a wall of the spacious room in which they stood. Most of these walls, as well as the floor, consisted of bare rocks but at the spot which Ras Tschubai now illuminated was some kind of a curtain made of the dark shiny substance of the flounders' bodies.

Bell didn't doubt for a moment that the odd curtain covered an exit—probably to a shaft serving the ventilation and maintaining the constant temperature of the subterranean system.

He looked in dismay at the unconscious Goratschin and grumbled: "It's hopeless, we've got to drag him out. Over there!"

He pointed to the curtain. Tako Kakuta crawled to the curtain and threw a punch at it but found that the bodies of the Gom creatures had as yet lost nothing of their newly-acquired elasticity.

Bell's fusillade quickly turned the lacquer disks into hissing vapours and fiery drops which cascaded to the floor where they solidified.

Bell held the unconscious mutant by the left arm while he fired and hastily dragged him forward when the hole was big enough to show the endless depth of a dark tunnel behind it.

But a second later he recoiled in horror. There they came through the tunnel: stomping cohorts with legs like columns, carrying bulky, massive bodies. Bodies with 4 arms and round heads from which dull eyes bulged with a blank stare.

At least 20 of them, Bell estimated. They stooped forward as they approached since they were 10 feet tall whereas the tunnel was only 6 feet high. They carried weapons, each of which was so heavy that Bell and everybody else would have trouble lifting one of them.

They were Bios—repulsive artificial creations that were bred by the Aras on Laros. Bell had once caught sight of them on Laros, making him wish he would never get embroiled with them in earnest.

At the moment, however, it didn't look as if his wish would be granted.

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Marshall felt Bell's terror as he rested, breathing heavily, on one of the steps. He tried to get up and hurry on but his arms buckled and failed to support him.

As he stayed down he tried to determine if the new opponents radiated any impulses. Bell's thoughts made it apparent that he was facing a group of Bios. Their makers, the Aras, had provided them with a slight measure of intelligence—just enough of what they required for functioning as willing and undemanding slaves.

But for the time being Marshall perceived only the various terror-stricken thoughts of his comrades.

When his arms supported him again he raised himself up and climbed under groaning two more steps. Then he was forced to pause again.

While he took another breather he received the first signal from the new enemy: "We've reached them!"

The telepathic answer came back promptly: "Kill them! They're destroying the climate control system!"

And Bell's order followed swiftly: "Fire! Drive them back!"

The first salvo seemed to be effective; Bell's thoughts were triumphant but Marshall sensed that he no longer held any hope for the final success.

Then and there Marshall was struck by an idea. He called Betty, who answered at once although the skirmish that had broken out required all her concentration.

"They're weak telepaths, Betty!" Marshall transmitted. "We'll have to try to influence them."

"Do you think we can do it?" Betty asked.

"Let's give it a try!"

"I've already tried to wrench their weapons from their ghastly clutches—but they're terribly strong and I can't concentrate enough."

Betty had two different parapsychological gifts: she was a telepath as well as a telekin. Given enough time, she was able to break up a mile-high mountain into its elements without touching it.

However she lacked time and the Bios apparently held their weapons tighter than a mountain its stone.

"We want to drive them back into the tunnel," Marshall proposed after Betty

had quickly described the situation to him. “We want to give them orders to turn around and not to harm Bell.”

Shaken by fear, Betty agreed. “Bell has driven them back a few feet. We now have taken up positions at both sides of the exit so that they’ll have to come in to do their shooting. Now... now they’re attacking again!”

Marshall forced himself to be calm. “Let’s begin, Betty! Give it all you’ve got, girl!”

* * * *

Reginald Bell was pretty sure that he was about to fight the last battle of his life.

The weapons of the Bios were so powerful that he and his little band would be doomed once the Bios succeeded in leaving the tunnel and gained access to the reservoir.

At the initial onslaught Bell had killed two Bios with deft shots, which had scared the others so much that they retreated into the tunnel. Yet it could only be a matter of a few moments, despite the fact that their brains were so primitive, till they got the idea that there was no need for them to open themselves to a direct attack. They could burn a second shaft through the rock and enter the reservoir at any place of their choice.

“They’re coming again!” Betty warned.

Staying close to the ground, Bell stuck his helmeted head just far enough past the wall to see the Bios move in. They held their weapons with the two forward arms. The others were hanging down and swinging from their odd shapeless torsos.

Bell slid his hand holding his weapon around the edge of the wall and winked encouragingly to the two teleporters. “Let ’em come within 15 feet, boys! That’s the deadliest range.”

Gradually he increased the pressure on the button which turned on the continuous fire as he observed the Bios lifting their weapons and touching the triggers.

Suddenly the first one stopped in his tracks. Since the tunnel was so narrow that they had to march behind each other, the next one bumped into him. But he stood fast and could not be thrown off balance. His wide jaw dropped open as if he had to gasp for air and, his dimwitted looking face took on an expression momentary of bewilderment.

The Bios wore no spacesuits. Their bodies were so crude and undiversified that it mattered little to which kind of environment they were exposed as long as the purely mechanical stress was not excessive.

Bell saw clearly how the legs of the first colossus began to quaver. He took a step to the side and awkwardly turned around. Bell heard him utter a barely

articulated cry and then the entire heap got into reverse motion and retreated with plodding steps into the dark tunnel.

Bell stared at them, dumbfounded. He crept forward a little and shone his lamp into the tunnel, watching the Bios disappear after a few moments.

“They’re beating it!” Betty rejoiced telepathically so that nobody but John Marshall could notice it.

Marshall breathed easier and suddenly found strength again to climb up a few more steps. A few minutes later he saw their faint light and he soon crawled, severely panting, into the large hall where Bell and his fighting team had so miraculously survived the attack of the Bios.

Of course Bell was quickly informed how the ‘miracle’ had come about. He shook his head in astonishment and muttered: “As you know, Marshall, I’ve always been a little sceptical toward you mutants...” He looked at Marshall and, winked an eye. “But I must say my respects!”

Marshall waved him off. “Now I’ll see what else I can do for our common good,” he mused, causing everybody to listen attentively.

“Did you get another inspiration? How about telling us where the flounders are hiding our 3 lost buddies?”

Marshall shook his head. “No, not that. I hardly believe we’ll be able to find them, relying on our resources alone. These installations down here seem to be immense.”

He paused as if reflecting about something. “No,” he finally continued, “I’ve given the subject of the flounders some more thought. By the way, don’t you think we ought to find a better name for them? As individuals they’re at best semi-intelligent. But by joining physically with others they can form units of any size, enabling them to perform remarkable feats, as you’ve already witnessed.”

“Yes, of course,” Bell replied, “and something else.”

“Namely?”

“The floun... or how shall we call them? The *Goms*? How do you like that? Well, they must be in touch with the Aras on Laros. Otherwise they couldn’t have obtained help from there.”

“Right! Do you have any idea why they do it?”

“Not the slightest,” Bell confessed.

“Think for a moment of Goratschin!” Marshall suggested. “Obviously the Goms were in the process of ingesting him. Then think of the Goms that suddenly dropped down from the ceiling. don’t you get the impression that we were in some kind of a birth-station and that the Goms attempted to feed their embryos—or whatever you want to call their fetus—with organic substances?”

Bell looked startled. “Right! That could be the explanation. Go on, mastermind!”

Marshall went on undaunted. “The Goms are therefore specially suited to assimilate organic substances—presumably not limited to their birth-stations. You

remember how our Gazelle disappeared. The fully grown Goms probably devour them too. Now what could be more ideal for the Aras than obtaining the substance they need for the creation of the Bios right here on Gom? Here they've a natural source and on Laros they'd have to build complicated facilities to accomplish the same purpose. I'll go further than that: the Aras have located their Bio fortress on Laros for the only reason that the Goms are in convenient reach."

A silence occupied with many thoughts followed. Finally Bell commented. "You may be right. It all sounds very plausible." He suddenly threw up his head. "But..."

"But I mentioned I might be able to do something for us. Is that it?"

"Precisely!"

Marshall had guessed his thoughts and smiled. "Very well. In the meantime we've found out that we're now inside an air-reservoir of the climate control system. Evidently the Goms multiply best at the temperature of 57.3°F., which we measured a few hours ago. The way I picture such a climate system, there must be somewhere a vacuum chamber to equalize the increase of the air pressure and for the adiabatic reduction of overheated air. Don't you agree?"

Bell grinned: "Your deductions are very convincing. We're obliged to follow you implicitly."

Marshall thanked him for the compliment with a smile. "Now we should make it our business to find this vacuum chamber," he proposed, "but we have to watch out for the Bios."

"Why, if you can order them around so easily?"

"Easy!" Marshall laughed. "Betty and I are no suggestors after all. We couldn't have done it without our share of luck." But he quickly became serious again. "No, don't take it for granted that we've nothing to fear from the Bios. If we happen to run into a formation that's big enough—say 50 creatures—then we won't be able to accomplish much with telepathy."

Bell shook his head dubiously. "I don't believe the Aras have sent over more than this one group."

"Neither do I but we don't know for sure."

Bell admitted it and quickly spurred them on with: "Now let's go looking for the vacuum chamber! Where do you suppose it is?"

Marshall pointed into the tunnel. "Somewhere out there! You must have noticed this corridor is higher and, wider than the first one we saw. It probably branches out farther back and is connected with other branches which will have to be searched."

They crawled out into the tunnel in pairs. Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta worked hard, pushing the two-headed mutant ahead.

After three-quarter hours they indeed reached the entrance to a lower tunnel on the left and another 300 feet ahead their lamps revealed a second branch.

"O.K., Marshall! So far your theory is correct," Bell acknowledged.

Marshall muttered: "Of course!" and then added. "By the way... something else occurred to me."

"What's that?"

"How do you figure the Bios got here from Laros? On foot?"

Bell exhaled audibly. "Oh yes," he admitted. "What a brainstorm! But first we must have a chance to get something in our stomachs, then we can look for the spaceship on which the Bios must have arrived—if it's still around."

Marshall smiled in bemusement. He knelt in front of the entrance to the side tunnel and Bell saw him raising his thermo-beamer and firing a 5-second-long shot against one of its walls.

Bell crawled over to him and stared at the target. Soon a gentle but clearly noticeable draft of air came blowing in from the branch corridor into the main tunnel.

"You see," Marshall explained, "this is the wrong corridor. If the vacuum chamber were at the other end, the wind would blow in the opposite direction."

Bell gaped at him with open mouth and big eyes. "If you keep this up," he snapped, "I'll let you have my job as soon as we get back to the *Titan*."

* * * *

Marshall's method eliminated the necessity of searching the full length of each of the side corridors they found afterwards. It was a surefire method, as everybody readily admitted.

Within a distance of half a mile a total of 15 shafts ended in the main tunnel. The 12th shaft was the one Marshall was looking for.

After he fired his test shot into the wall they distinctly noticed an air current flowing into the branch.

They crawled into the shaft and it didn't take long till they reached an airtight obstacle in their path—a curtain of shiny dark-brown Goms barring their way.

Bell, who followed closely behind Marshall, raised his weapon to remove the barrier but Marshall pushed his arm down to the floor. "Not this way, please!" he urged. "We'll have to apply a different approach if we want to use the vacuum chamber."

He drew his own weapon and held it against the wall. Before he pulled the trigger he warned: "Be ready! We may have to slip through like weasels."

Bell understood what he meant. When Marshall went to work on the wall with his concentrated energy-ray, Bell had already grabbed Goratschin by the sleeve of his half-decomposed spacesuit and when the Gom curtain lifted to let the developing heat escape into the side of the shaft, which was under lower air pressure, he shoved Ivan's heavy body so forcefully that it skidded several feet into the shaft.

As Marshall had anticipated, the curtain was lifted for only a few seconds. Then

it dropped again and sealed the two sides of the shaft hermetically from each other.

But the short interval was long enough for Bell's crew. They laboured mightily under the strain imposed on them by the excessive gravity and managed to get in under the curtain.

A few feet farther on there was another curtain, also consisting of living Goms like the preceding one. Marshall made it rise in the same manner.

Bell carefully watched the manometer on his wrist. He determined that the air pressure was a few atmospheres lower behind each of the 5 curtains they encountered.

In the 5th section the pressure amounted to only 2.5 atmospheres. This was still too high to take off their spacesuits but it was only one-tenth of the normal pressure prevailing on Gom.

Behind the last curtain the shaft continued, winding like a snake. The Goms had applied the simplest and most sensible method of preventing the abrupt pressure drop of the air current from causing any damage: it was forced to meander along the shaft and thereby to lose its velocity.

Almost two hours elapsed before another Gom curtain came in sight behind a turn of the shaft. It appeared to be far more solid than those they had passed through before and when Bell hit it with his fist he found that the Goms had no intention of yielding like rubber as before but reacted as if it were a massive concrete wall.

"Little wonder," Marshall pointed out, "they're probably closing off a large vacuum chamber behind and it must withstand considerable pressure."

Marshall's proven method brought results here too. A short bombardment caused the curtain to slide up and to suck the heated air into the chamber. Bell and his little band succeeded in squeezing into the chamber without difficulties before the temperature was equalized—having already gained some experience.

Only Marshall remained outside.

Bell checked his manometer, which registered 0.05 atmospheres. The elastic spacesuits, which under the enormous pressure had closely fitted their bodies over a thin layer of air, were now blown up like grotesque balloons.

"Five-hundredths!" Bell called to the waiting Marshall. "We need 20 times as much!"

Under Marshall's searing raygun the Gom curtain went up again and permitted a hissing stream of air to enter. Bell observed that his manometer moved up from 0.05 to 0.6 atmospheres. "Another small dose," he requested of Marshall.

Marshall complied and ducked under the curtain going up for the third time. He glanced at his own manometer and saw that his last shot had been sufficient to raise the pressure inside the chamber to 0.97 atmospheres.

The probing light of their helmet-lamps revealed that the chamber was not as large as they had imagined. It had a circular outline—the Goms seemed to have a

preference for round buildings—with a diameter of 50 feet and 60 feet high.

The walls were not bare as in the air-filled reservoir where they had been attacked by the Bios. Three-quarters of the surface was covered with dark-brown Goms. Marshall stated unabashedly: “Just about as I pictured it. The Goms don’t have an infinite number of vacuum chambers. When one of them gets partially filled with air, they’re compelled to pump it out in time. They don’t have mechanical means as we’ve already observed. How else can they remove the air unless they use a chemical reaction—or rather a series of reactions—which consumes the air?”

Bell pondered. “Makes sense. And the Goms perform these reactions themselves?”

“Doubtlessly. They drape themselves like curtains in the passages—why shouldn’t they also be able to initiate and regulate chemical reactions with their own bodies? Let’s wait a little; according to my theory the pressure should decrease in here is due time—probably slowly but steadily.”

Bell was the first to carefully strip off his suit. He realized that the Gom atmosphere was nearly identical with that on Earth but he didn’t know the composition of the air inside the subterranean system.

He breathed slowly and looked around. “It stinks,” the others heard him announce, “but it’s breathable!”

They hastily peeled off their spacesuits and put their helmets down in such a way that the lamps were directed against the walls, creating some indirect lighting.

It really smelled. An unfamiliar unpleasant odour permeated the air, probably due to the excretions of the Goms’ bodies.

The meal they gulped down was anything but sumptuous. It mainly consisted of concentrated food, preparations which alleviated their hunger and thirst and supplied their bodies’ requirements for two weeks. As dessert Bell passed around tidbits of chocolate from a bar he had found in his spacesuit.

They remained in the chamber as long as Bell thought they could afford to linger. They enjoyed the feeling of lying in fairly fresh air without their restricting spacesuits, the more so since they no longer found the odour given off by the Goms so offensive.

In the course of the 3 hours during which they lazily lolled on the floor gazing into the light of their helmet lamps, the pressure in the chamber dropped from its original level down to 0.75 atmospheres. The Goms clinging to the walls became covered with a grey-brown coating which crackled and fell piecemeal to the floor from time to time. Thus the pressure-reducing reaction indeed took place on the body surface of the strange creatures.

“One has to admire Nature that produces such beings,” Marshall said thoughtfully. “In their own way they’re as perfect as humans.”

Marshall sat up. “Let’s recapitulate what we already know about the Goms. First, as an individual being it’s completely harmless. It doesn’t possess tools and

therefore no weapons either. It is only semi-intelligent as long as it isn't directed by someone else."

"Second: the joining of several Goms into a—let's call it a Super-Gom—effects a summation of their intelligence and creates a being that is not only capable of independent thought but also possesses without a doubt parapsychological powers. Remember, for instance, what a strong telekinetic ability it must have required to force our Gazelle to land from thousands of miles."

"Third: the logic governing the Super-Gom is very alien to the human mind. Therefore the Super-Gom doesn't follow the ethics of mankind. Thus we mustn't expect, for instance, that they're grateful for a favour rendered to them in the human fashion. Neither can we assume that they'll always remain hostile after we've inflicted damage on them."

"Fourth: the Super-Gom is able to communicate with other beings whose brains resemble our own; I mean the Bios. By this I don't mean to compare ourselves with them but the fact remains that what little brain they've got is similar to the brain of the Aras and consequently functions in some respects like the human brain. So the possibility must exist that we can communicate with the Goms and it's up to us to find a way."

Bell had listened attentively. "And what do you hope to accomplish if you find it?" he inquired.

Marshall raised his shoulders. "First of all, we want to get out of here. I'd very much prefer it if we could manage to do this without burning dozens of holes in the walls. For this purpose we need the assistance of the Goms. And furthermore it's quite possible that the Goms have a good idea how we can leave this hellish planet the quickest way. If we're right in assuming that the Aras get their basic organic material from the Goms, then they must send spaceships to Gom. If we're lucky one of their ships will be due during the next few days and we can capture it from the Aras... provided the Bios have already returned or in the event we can't detect their vehicles."

Bell gave it some thought. "It's alright with me," he finally said. "Do you really think you can make contact with the Goms?"

"I'll certainly try," Marshall responded.

"Where do you suppose this Super-Gom, as you call it, is located? We all agree that this whole system is directed by such a conglomeration of Goms, don't we?" Bell asked.

"I'm quite sure of it but I don't know how many Goms constitute a Super-Gom. Two or three would certainly not be enough. But couldn't those we've seen in the circular rooms down below be a Super-Gom? It must have contained at least 10,000 individual creatures."

"Possibly," Bell agreed. "But it really doesn't matter. You better try to make your idea work!"

Marshall looked at Betty, who responded to his glance and then turned away to avoid being disturbed in her concentration by the sight of her fellow sufferers.

Marshall did the same and also moved closer to Betty to have better contact for their shared endeavour.

The task was far from easy. Marshall was firmly convinced that the Goms were no more in a position to understand human thoughts than the Terranians were to decipher their thought-impulses. It was therefore impractical to hope that the Goms could guess his intentions and establish contact with him of their own volition.

He would have to call them and he had to do it in the same manner as the Goms had called the Bios. Yet it was most difficult for a human to formulate a thought in a prescribed but unaccustomed genre. It is already difficult for the vocal organs to form foreign sounds and it's virtually impossible to think alien thoughts.

Nevertheless Marshall made a determined effort, thinking: *I'm calling you!*

The Super-Gom failed to answer. Marshall kept calling 10 times at regular intervals and after the 10th trial he got the feeling—that a far distant thought was trying to reach him.

He expressed his thought in a slightly different form and emitted it for the 11th time. The remote thought answered again, this time a little clearer than before.

Marshall expressed his message in a variety of ways and it seemed to have a favourable effect as the response was getting more lucid all the time.

I'm here. What do you want stranger? Marshall received.

Betty had understood the same response and looked hopefully at Marshall.

We were forced to hurt you because we got lost in these tunnels, Marshall thought. We'd be happy if we could avoid any harm to you. Can't you show us the way out?

The answer came promptly. **Yes, unless I succeed in killing you.**

The illogical reply took Marshall aback and he hesitated for awhile till he found the right modulation again. *Why do you want to kill us? Our death will do you no good—on the contrary, we'll defend ourselves and destroy your installations.*

You can't do that, they're much too big. You're a foreign body in our midst and I'm trying to eliminate you because I can't take any risks.

You won't take a risk if you don't kill us. We've only one desire: to leave this place and your planet.

The reply conveyed the curiosity of the Super-Gom to Marshall: **Where do you come from?**

From a far land. Marshall tried to evade the question. *We wouldn't have come to Gom if you hadn't forced us to land here.*

Yes. The Aras have demanded it.

The Aras? Are they friends of yours?

I'm working with them, came the diplomatic answer. **I supply the organic substance and they build the subterranean system for me which enables me to produce a greater amount of the organic substance.**

Marshall sensed a faint undertone of disaffection ringing through the thought.

Evidently the relationship between the Goms and the Aras was not ideal. Therefore Marshall stated frankly: *The Aras hate us. They plan to attack our home world and we're trying to protect ourselves.*

The Goms listened with great interest and countered: **Will you be able to do this?**

We certainly hope so.

Are you going to destroy the Aras? The question was loaded with speculation.

Perhaps we won't destroy them but we'll drive them from their base on Laros, Marshall contended.

A period of silence followed and Marshall believed he could feel a wave of satisfaction coming from the Goms. He took this as a confirmation that he was right about his assumption concerning the relations between the Aras and the Goms and he decided to take advantage of the auspicious circumstances. *Three of my friends, he cautiously intimated, are still in your custody. I'm sure they'll be of no value to you. Please return them to us!*

He failed to get an answer.

Marshall repeated his plea but the Goms remained mute. He considered requesting a third time when the Goms sent a message, completely ignoring the inquiry about his friends. **I'll show you the way. You can leave the network if you follow it. I'm going to inform my—**here followed an expression which could have meant something like brothers or friends; in any case he obviously referred to other units of Goms—**so that they'll not molest you. Perhaps they can even give you advice as to how you can leave our planet.**

Marshall decided to ask no further questions concerning the whereabouts of Ishibashi, Yokida and Sengu. Apparently the Goms wouldn't hear of it and for the time being it was more important that they found their way back to the surface than to liberate the 3 prisoners. Therefore Marshall simply said: *Thank you!*

But as he had already anticipated, the Goms didn't know what the expression implied. The world of the Goms was based to a much greater degree on teleological principles than the human philosophy of life. Concepts like gratitude, love, hate and anger were unknown to them.

The Goms gave Marshall a description of the way out for his mates and promised that the valve curtains would be operated in the desired direction. Marshall repeated the instructions thought-for-thought and thereby made sure that he avoided errors.

Then the connection broke off. There were no good-byes. The Goms simply noted that Marshall had understood their description and terminated the communication.

Marshall was exhausted by the thought exchange. His head hurt from the extraordinary effort. He turned around on his back and lay still for some time before he gave his report to Bell.

Bell saved his commentary. He slapped Marshall on the shoulder and looked at

him appreciatively. That was all.

Bell told everybody to put on the spacesuits. Time was running out. The pressure in the chamber had dropped to 0.6 atmospheres and breathing had become as difficult as on the highest mountaintops.

The Goms seemed to know exactly when the group started to move. The curtain separating the chamber from the shaft began to rise simultaneously and equalized the pressure differential between the chamber and the adjacent section of the shaft.

The other valve curtains reacted in the same manner as soon as Bell's people approached. They proceeded without incident.

They reached the more than 6-foot-high main corridor in a relatively short time. From there they went back to one of the branches through which Bell's team had passed before. The branch ran horizontally for awhile and then began to rise. Four hours after Marshall had concluded his memorable discussion with the Goms the red circle of light shed by the sun Gonom on the edge of the twilight zone appeared in the distance.

The corridor rose gradually and ended in a funnel-shaped cave, its walls becoming higher and receding to the sides.

Bell attempted to orient himself but aside from the fact that the twilight zone was about 5 miles away, he recognized nothing familiar. The plateau with its stones and boulders distributed at random and the blue fleshy plants appeared to be the same everywhere on Gom.

"Under the circumstances," Bell said with a sigh of relief, "I'd say that we can catch up on our sleep. Maybe this two-headed fellow will have recovered by the time we wake up."

He stepped once more to the exit of the cave as a routine followed by every responsible leader before ordering his men to sleep in dangerous surroundings.

But it turned out to be more than a routine.

The others heard him utter a loud gasp. As he stood there half erect, he obstructed their view but they could see a bright light glistening outside and felt the ground vibrate under their feet a few seconds afterwards.

Bell turned around and announced: "Too bad we won't get our sleep. We're having visitors!"

He dropped to the floor and crawled to the side so they all could look out. They leaned forward and saw medium-sized, disk-shaped spaceships dropping from the dark sides by the dozen. Blasting glowing particle-streams from their forward jets, the disks braked their speed and landed smoothly.

The vehicles formed a wide semi-circle around the rock which sheltered Bell and his companions. The semi-circle had a radius of about 2 miles.

For awhile nothing else happened but then they noticed some movement around the disks. Bell picked up his binoculars and pressed them against his helmet.

What he saw was not very encouraging: 5 of the monstrous Bios bred by the Aras on Laros disembarked from each ship. Since a total of 40 craft had arrived it

was easy to figure out that a fighting force of about 200 of these repulsive creations had been assembled.

They seemed to know their target and marched from all sides to a point which was only a few hundred feet away from the cave. From there they advanced straight to the cave with their weapons ready to shoot.

“It appears,” Bell said nonchalantly, attempting not to betray his anxiety, “there’s going to be some trouble.”

4/ BATTLE WITH THE BIOS

The relationship between the Aras and the Goms was of a far more complicated nature than Marshall had heretofore assumed. The Goms were an extremely important source of organic matter for the Aras, enabling them to breed their abominable test-tube products. The Aras were not satisfied with collecting from the Goms what they could under natural conditions without destroying the species. They determined the most favourable environment for the rapid proliferation of the Goms and deployed the 'newly-born' Bios to construct a system which permitted the Goms to multiply at a terrific rate, ensuring an abundant supply of organic material.

The possibilities of communication between the Aras and the Goms were, however, strictly limited. The Aras were no telepaths but they knew that the Goms possessed this and other parapsychological gifts and they realized that their own artificial creatures, the Bios, who were made of the same basic substance as the Goms, also were endowed with certain telepathic features.

The first facilities installed by the Aras on Gom were immediately taken over by the Goms. As soon as the Aras became aware that it was possible for them to communicate with the alien Goms by using the Bios, they applied their knowledge effectively.

By this method they began to learn some definite facts about the peculiar beings they dealt with. They found that the Goms could not be considered primitive creatures when joined together in a unit and that they might represent a danger even to the Aras. True to their mentality the Aras regarded the Goms from then on not simply as suppliers of cell-plasma but also as potential enemies who deserved special attention because of the vital importance of their base on Laros.

Since that time a group consisting of 20 man-made Bios was permanently stationed on Gom for the purpose of maintaining and enlarging the underground birthplaces. At least this was the version told the Goms. Actually the Bios watched the Goms and constantly sent up-to-date information about the events on Gom to the Aras on Laros via efficient transmitters built into their bodies without their knowledge.

The Super-Gom located in the section of the widespread subterranean layout where Bell's troop had intruded had called for the assistance of these 20 Bios at the moment of dire peril. When Marshall succeeded in turning the Bios around, the Aras on Laros instantly learned by means of the automatic transmitter what

was happening on Gom. It didn't take much to connect this information to the suspicion that the Bios had run into the same people who had recently caused such havoc on Laros and were forced by the Goms during their flight to land on that planet.

The Aras reported the news to the assembled Springer patriarchs, whereupon the patriarchs deemed it advisable to deploy the Bios of the Aras in order to apprehend the fugitives.

Consequently the Bios boarded a small fleet of patrol ships on Laros and flew to Gom where they put down exactly on the spot where the little party had been pinpointed by highly sensitive direction finders.

Nobody on Laros had any doubts about the outcome. They were familiar with the conditions on Gom and they knew that the fugitives were unaccustomed to the harsh life there. They considered it a miracle that the escaped men had survived as long as they had and nobody expected much resistance to the Bios, who were at home on Gom and equipped with heavy weapons.

The only difficulty that could possibly arise stemmed from the order the patriarchs had given to capture at least one of the fugitives alive. They needed somebody for interrogation. This order had been clearly impressed on the Bios and they knew how to proceed.

* * * *

Bell was tempted to withdraw with his party into the airshaft. However he would thereby forfeit the possibility of capturing one or two of the enemy's craft and lose the chance of final departure from Gom.

This latter prospect caused him to make his stand in the cave.

The peculiar behaviour displayed by the Bios after they had approached the cave within 600 feet reinforced his intention. Instead of opening the attack and using the best chance their superior power offered them, the androids took up positions behind big boulders and remained out of sight for the next few hours.

Marshall and Betty tried to read their thoughts. However the brains of the Bios were so small that it was impossible to contact them telepathically over a distance exceeding several yards unless a special effort were made. They did receive some isolated thought-impulses from time to time whenever one of the Bios suffered pain because he fell down or was burned, for example, inducing his brain to emit stronger waves, but this did nothing to enlighten them about their plans.

More revealing were the swirling vapours rising at times from behind the rocks where the Bios had taken cover. Bell drew the conclusion that their opponents were busy driving underground shafts toward the cave and after he had wracked his brain over this unexpected precaution he got the idea that the Bios had instructions to capture their victims alive and to take them to Laros for questioning.

He discussed it with Marshall, who lent credence to his hypothesis.

“They’ve got different types of weapons,” Bell noted. “This cloud of stone dust is probably caused by a disintegrator. I’d say that these fellows will pop out of the ground right under our noses in about half an hour.”

Marshall couldn’t help noticing that Bell took a lot of time with his preparations in spite of the alarming aspects of their situation. He assigned everybody a place near the exit and advised Betty Toufry to keep an eye on the rear of the cave because nobody could predict where the Bios would emerge. He talked so slowly that he gave the impression of wrestling with some problems between his words.

This was indeed the case as Marshall realized after his thoughts had reached a certain degree of articulation. Marshall admired Bell’s sense of responsibility when he finally came to a decision somebody else would have taken without further reflection.

“Tako!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Would you be able to hop into one of these disks with one jump?”

The Japanese closed his eyes to narrow slits and peered at the little spaceships. “If I can have 5 minutes for concentration I can probably do it.”

Bell looked pleased. “Very good. Then we’ll make it snappy. I imagine that the vehicles are not empty. I guess that at least one Bio stands guard in each ship because the Aras and the Springers must have caught on to our tricks by now. Be sure to have your weapon ready when you make your jump!”

“Yes, sir. What am I supposed to do with the ship when I’ve gained possession?”

Bell’s eyes bulged in astonishment. “What are you supposed to do with it?” he roared. “Bring it here, of course, so we can say goodbye to this hellhole as soon as possible!”

Tako grinned amiably. Then he squatted in a corner from where he could see a number of the disk-shaped vehicles and concentrated.

The others took up their positions as instructed by Bell. Nobody had to tell them that now all depended on how quickly Tako seized one of the spaceships. If he failed there would be nothing left to do but to await his return and try their luck by fleeing.

Meanwhile Marshall listened attentively to the Goms in the depth of the ground below hoping to hear something from them. They made no sound and when he received no response after his desperate telepathic efforts, he conceded that his hope for intervention on their behalf in the impending struggle was preposterous. Therefore he concentrated his attention on the clouds of dust and steam erupting from several spots behind the large boulders, which became thinner the farther the Bios dug forward under the ground.

Tako vanished silently and without prior warning. His place was suddenly empty.

Marshall had watched him and kept his eyes glued on the row of flying disks. Of course it was difficult to take them all in at once but Marshall was fairly certain that the Japanese had reached his goal in a single jump since he didn't show up anywhere on the rocky plain.

Bell, who was lying at the front of the cave, didn't notice when Tako left. He stared out, bored by waiting, and noticed that one of the creeping blue plants rooted near the entrance of the cave began to move.

He looked around and saw that all other plants similarly bestirred themselves; they retreated with jerky movements into the holes in the ground from which they grew.

Bell studied the horizon and discovered a small spot in the left quarter of the horizon where the red circle of light drawn by the sun Gonom looked more washed out than normal. The light seemed to rise higher than elsewhere as if coming, from a far distant fire. Bell turned around and called to his companions: "There's a storm brewing! This could mean our salvation!"

The blurred spot at the horizon kept growing at first; then it paled against the horizon and a few seconds later the towering cloud of dust, and pebbles raised by the storm became clearly visible.

"Everybody back 6 feet!" Bell ordered. "Remember each stone weighs twice as much here as on Earth!"

As Bell crawled back he noticed that Tako was gone. Marshall told him that the Japanese had already left 5 minutes ago.

"Good grief!" Bell spluttered. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner? What's he doing now?"

He called the Japanese but Tako didn't answer.

Bell reached for the small transmitter and switched it on because he believed the range of his helmet-radio might be too short to reach the little spaceships, particularly if they were protected by defence shields.

In the excitement over the disappeared Japanese everybody's attention was diverted for a few seconds from the upcoming storm. Now it was suddenly upon them and the sharp but short trembling of the ground barely enough to warn the occupants of the cave.

Instantly a wall of dust and stones was thrown up so high before the cave's entrance that it hid the dark sky. The rocks and stones released from the power of the storm pelted the ground before the cave with a thunderous roar, raised new swirls of dust and blotted out what had been left of the dim light.

The noise in the helmet-mikes grew with such infernal fury from one second to the next that Bell's order "Tone down outside mikes!" was understood only after the second repetition and by Bell's wild gestures.

The sudden quiet was a welcome relief. In reality the vibrating air outside filled each helmet with a muffled droning but tortured ears could no longer perceive it.

"Switch on your lamps!" Bell yelled at the top of his voice. He had already lost

his feel for appropriate level of sound.

The lamps lit up but didn't penetrate very far into the grinding mass the storm had driven in and around the cave, covering their spacesuits with a thick layer of dust.

"I don't believe..." Bell blurted and the continuation of the sentence was supposed to be reassuring.

But Betty screamed a wild anguished cry in the middle of his remark: "The Bios! Over there!"

In the dusty haze filling the cave Bell could barely see Betty, who was stationed farthest behind at the other end. He vaguely made out her arm pointing stiffly somewhere to the rear in a frozen gesture. But he distinctly recognized the round flat face of a Bio emerging for the fraction of a second in a break of the turbulent eddies of dust.

An instant later it was blocked out again but soon the grey-skinned arm, thick as a tree trunk, poked out of the dust and Bell saw how the hairless robust paw of the artificial monster turned up the barrel of his weapon.

Bell was overcome by an uncontrollable rage. "Fire!" he roared with a breaking voice.

Simultaneously he blasted away. The glaring energy beam shot into the whirling dusty darkness with a hiss that made the dead outside mikes of their helmets reverberate. A drawn-out tortured shriek was the response.

"There're more of them!" Betty cried out. "They're coming from all sides."

Bell had intended to fall back to catch his breath for a few seconds. But wherever he swerved his head the lamp in his helmet revealed the fuzzy outlines of the huge grey figures stomping closer.

He kept shooting, twirling around like a top, unaware that he was screaming like a madman and not hearing the terrible outbursts of the wounded though they were shrill and loud enough to be picked up by the mikes despite their being almost completely toned down. When he later thought back, it seemed a miracle to him that he hadn't killed his own people in this furious last-ditch fight for his life.

He ignored everybody else. He wasn't interested whether they still defended themselves or had crumbled under the onslaught.

The first line of Bios was slaughtered as quickly as they came in. But for each one put out of action two new ones took their place. The ring around the desperate little band drew tighter and it seemed only a matter of minutes till the artificial giants would reach out and knock the weapons out of their hands, ending the struggle.

The fact that it *didn't* end just that way amounted to a veritable miracle.

Ever since the walls of the cave had been destroyed by their attackers Bell had had to fight two enemies: the Bios, who maintained their advance with undiminished tenacity, and the force of the storm, threatening to sweep him away

although he pressed with all his might against the ground. As soon as he had his first breathing spell he tried to sneak behind a boulder which seemed to be massive enough to withstand the fury of the elements but he had barely started to move when suddenly a broad-shouldered shadow loomed next to him in a crouching stance.

Bell pulled his gun around and simultaneously turned his head in its direction, causing his helmet-lamp to hit the shadow and letting him see two heads in the darkness. "Ivan!" Bell shouted ecstatically. "You came at the right moment!"

Ivan Goratschin seemed to hear nothing. He rose like a somnambulist, took a few faltering steps forward, then stood like a rock.

Somewhere behind the shroud of darkness, dust and stones, a streak of lightning flashed so strongly that the blackness was turned into bright daylight for a moment. Somewhere out of the chaos burst a roar louder than anything that had come through the microphones until now and whirling masses of hot air seized Bell and his people, carried them upwards and hurled them again to the ground a few yards away.

Then it was quiet—impenetrable black silence.

* * * *

The first sensation Bell experienced after a long time was a feeling that his body had disintegrated in a heap of painful parts. After he regained consciousness he barely dared breathe because the slightest movement hurt him unbearably.

He opened his eyes and saw that the usual dusk of the twilight zone had returned.

Where were the Bios? What happened to the storm?

Bell rolled over on his side and tried to recognize the red rim of the sunlight but all he could see was a faint red shimmer high on the firmament and a black, dense wall below it.

There was no trace of the Bios.

"Marshall? Betty...?"

He really didn't expect an answer but he had hardly called the names when 4 voices simultaneously replied: "Here, sir! I'm all right! Where are you?"

The voices sounded strong and happy. Bell was pleased to detect a note of having been missed. "I'm here!" he exclaimed. "That's about all I can say."

He raised himself with great effort, groaning under the pain it caused him. Then he supported himself on a flat rock, peering over its top. About 150 feet away he detected the double-headed Ivan, who stared back at him from a similar cover. "I'm coming," Bell muttered.

At the sight of Ivan he suddenly remembered the miracle which had saved their lives from the ferocious Bios.

Ivan had suddenly recovered. He got up and apparently intuitively grasped the

situation in an instant.

Ivan's most remarkable distinction as a mutant was not the fact that he possessed two heads but his capability of acting like a living fuse. It was a simple matter for him to initiate by sheer will-power the fusion process of the atomic nuclei of carbon or calcium. The result was a hydrogen-like explosion whenever the mass of the two elements became critical.

Doubtlessly Ivan had applied this method to repulse the Bios. The Aras' fierce fighting force of 200 giants had become an atomic torch under Ivan's powerful will and only the fact that calcium- and carbon-fusions take place at a much slower rate than that of hydrogen had spared Ivan's companions from perishing in the blast the same way as the artificial creatures of the Aras.

Bell reflected on this aspect as he awkwardly crawled toward the rock behind which the two-headed mutant had sought shelter. A shudder ran down his spine when it dawned on him how closely he had treaded the deep abyss of death this time.

It took him half an hour to cover the 150 feet. He edged around the rock and dropped down at its back to catch his breath and give his tortured body a rest.

His 4 faithful friends were assembled behind the rock: Ivan, Marshall, Betty and Ras Tschubai. Marshall and the Afroterranian leaned with their shoulders against the rock. Ivan and Betty were stretched out on the ground.

"Next time," Bell glowered at the two-headed mutant after he had recovered a little from the ordeal of his trip, "I want you two to wake up half an hour earlier and start your fireworks when the target is still at a safe distance, got it?"

Ivan the elder's face broke into a grin. Ivanovich, the younger, acted guiltily: "I was already awake a few seconds before Ivan," he said accusingly. "But the old cretin wouldn't wake up."

"Hey!" Ivan snapped. "Did you hear that? He finally admits that I'm the older one. He never..."

"Oh, shut up!" Bell bellowed. "You were both magnificent! I don't think any of us would be alive without you."

He turned around and looked at Marshall. "How did we get this wall over there?" he queried.

Marshall looked mysterious and hesitated to answer. Finally he came out with it: "The Goms!"

Bell gasped for air. "The Goms...?" he rasped. "What are they doing here?"

Up to now he had paid little attention to the dark wall. Now that he studied it, he noticed that it rose from the ground at a slight angle, using the boulders scattered everywhere as anchoring bases. The highest edge of the baffling wall was about 20 feet up and no more than 30 feet away.

Bell turned around on his back and stared into the sky. Suddenly he realized what the Goms wanted to do.

The storm raged on with unabated fury. It blew an endless stream of dust over

the top of the wall and when he turned up the outer mike a little he could hear it howl and thunder.

The wall created a windbreak on a long narrow stretch lying on the leeward side. The Goms had come to protect Bell and his party from being blown away by the tornado.

“Incredible!” Bell was astounded. “Why are they doing it?”

“It’s really unbelievable,” Marshall admitted. “They contacted me after I came to. Their impulses were extremely precise. There must be an enormous number of Goms that got together here. But all they said was that they had built a barrier against the storm and would stay here till the storm blows over. If you ask me *why* they’re doing this, you’ve come to the wrong address.”

“Then why didn’t *you* ask them?”

Marshall grained somewhat embarrassedly. “That’s the trouble. When I ask them why they do it, they answer that they want to protect us from the storm. They don’t understand that ‘why’ can have another meaning.”

Bell muttered bemusedly: “Fascinating creatures!”

“And how did you get away from the blast?” Bell inquired, changing the subject. “Were you also blown away?”

He addressed his question to all of them. They affirmed that this was indeed the case and Betty explained with a smile: “I really sailed through the air. But I must have made a very soft landing. When I woke up I was deposited over there near the Gom wall. The others were already here, so I came over.”

“Looks like we all were lucky this time,” Bell commented. “It could have been a lot worse...” He interrupted himself in the middle of the sentence, stared around with wide eyes and groaned.

“That’s right,” Marshall interjected. “Everything would be dandy... if we only knew what happened to Tako!”

Bell raised his hand in a futile gesture to beat against his forehead—he merely knocked his helmet instead. “For heaven’s sake,” he grumbled. “I really must have bumped my head; how else could I forget about him?”

* * * *

The moment Tako Kakuta entered the small space disk, he realized that he had fallen into a trap.

The inside of the vehicle was round like the outside. There were neither windows nor observation screens. Nothing except a smooth floor, unadorned walls, a plain ceiling and a bench running full circle around the wall.

There was nobody inside. Reginald Bell’s guess that the Bios had left at least one of them in each ship had obviously fallen flat

Tako felt a gentle push when the ship started to move as soon as he was aboard. He gathered that some extraneous mechanism had registered his arrival and that

he was about to be kidnapped.

Tako took his time making a decision. There were two possibilities: leave the little spaceship the same way he had come or wait and see where it would take him.

After awhile Tako concluded that it would be too dangerous and serve no purpose to find out where the ship was headed. The craft had come from Laros and was evidently steered by remote control from there. How could there be any doubt that it was bound to return there?

But another possibility intrigued the Japanese. He was trained as a mechanical engineer and worked in this profession long before he had been discovered by Rhodan's staff. Was it feasible to examine the remote control steering mechanism and to deactivate the receiving device, thus enabling himself to pilot the ship? Was the technology of the Aras really basically so different from the Terranian methods that an Earthling had no way of knowing it?

Tako knew this was not the case. The technology of the Aras was derived from that of the Arkonides with which he was thoroughly familiar.

He made up his mind to hang on. His little thermo-beamer had been set for a widespread fanning operation in order to catch at once all the Bios who might have occupied the craft; he now adjusted it to a low-energy pinpoint ray and began to detach the cover plates from their mountings underneath the bench around the walls.

Plate after plate toppled and clattered on the floor. The more progress he made the more it became obvious that his choice had been right. He soon surveyed not only the entire drive assembly including the receiver for the remote control signals but also the generator for the artificial gravity field inside the cabin, the television camera sending its impulses to the picture screen of the distant controller and finally the field component of the two heavy disintegrators built into the outer surface of the spaceship.

He was aware that he had made an important discovery but he realized at the same time that all depended now on how to secure it.

The distance from Gom to Laros could be negotiated by this type of spacecraft in less than one hour. If he didn't wish to skirt too closely the dangerous vicinity of the base, he better act fast.

With a few quick operations he severed the connection to the remote control receiver and broke all contacts so that the drive assembly could no longer react to outside signals.

Then he checked the drive assembly and determined that it had stopped working at the same time.

The little craft was moving through space in free fall.

The first and most important thing Tako had to do now was to find out in which direction he was moving.

* * * *

Bell tried to get in touch with the Japanese for half an hour. Then he gave up in dismay. Marshall figured that the Corns would know what became of Tako but he received no answer to his query.

The reason seemed to be that they were apparently extremely busy at this particular time. Marshall picked up a multitude of impulses against which his weak call could not prevail.

He was unable to make out what was on the mind of the Goms but after awhile it became evident.

The wall began to shrink. The dust clouds raised by the storm high above the narrow calm strip became lighter. The storm abated and the Goms relinquished their posts.

Marshall turned up his outer mike and clearly heard the rustling noise caused by the swarm of, Goms moving over the stones.

A few minutes later the wall had disappeared and an endless mass of dark-brown Goms blanketed the roughness of the terrain.

As they crept away it became clear that the Goms had merely buried the roughness of the terrain and not smoothed or removed it. The rocks passed over by the front of the moving blanket later appeared again at the rear, unscathed.

The Goms made no attempt to approach the space disks in which the Bios had arrived. Bell kept his eyes glued to the ships. "We're going to get one of them," he growled. "I don't think they can do much; it may take us 2 or 3 weeks to reach the *Titan* but it'll still be better than nothing."

"You better figure on more," Marshall advised. "We've got to make a tremendous detour if we don't want to fall into the clutches of the Aras or the Springers. I don't believe that these little tubs are armed. By the way—don't you notice anything?"

"No, what?"

"There were 40 ships when the Bios came. Now there are only 39 left."

Bell counted them. Marshall was correct. "Perhaps the Goms have eaten one of them after all," he speculated uncertainly.

"I hardly believe that," Marshall countered. "I'd guess Tako had filched one of the disks."

* * * *

Laros received the news about the fate of the 200 Bios seconds after Ivan Goratschin had put his talents to work.

The only reaction it elicited from the 3 patriarchs Siptar, Vontran and Cekztel consisted of the friendly advice to the Aras: "Well, you didn't have enough of an army over there. Send a thousand across and lees see what they can do!"

The Aras were more sceptical. Although they didn't admit it to the Springers, the loss of 200 Bios was a severe setback for them. There were only 700 of these artificial monsters on Laros and now their number had been reduced by 200. Thus the Aras were not even in a position to follow the advice of the Springer patriarchs and they preferred to keep it a secret from their partners.

Moreover it dawned on the Aras that they had met an adversary who was not to be underestimated. The base on Laros, situated far from all trade routes, was of considerable importance to them as a secret laboratory and shipping point of the Bios whose sale brought in a constant stream of welcome money. For these reasons they reacted very sharply when someone wanted to meddle in their affairs on Laros.

And now someone had landed on Gom, who was not content with meddling in their affairs but seemed to be determined to force the expenditure of all their Bios. And this despite the fact that they had been compelled to crash on Gom by its inhabitants on orders of the Aras.

A few of the Aras harboured the suspicion that the Goms made common cause with the fugitives. However they were unable to communicate with the Goms without the link of the Bios and it was therefore very difficult for them to obtain any indication confirming or denying their suspicion.

In their predicament the Aras decided to risk 400 more Bios. In addition they did something they had hitherto avoided during the entire period of their 'collaboration' with the Goms: they commanded the Goms under threat of draconian punishment to seize the fugitives and hand them over to the Bios.

Several Bios transmitted this order by means of an electronic telepathy amplifier from Laros to Gom. The punishment the Aras contemplated was carefully spelled out: destruction of at least half the Goms' substance by nuclear bombs.

Gom gave no answer. The Aras were aware that their message could only be received when somewhere on the surface of Gom a sufficient number had coalesced into one unit to accumulate enough intelligence. The statistic probability, however, was such that at any chosen time such a 'brain-trust' existed on Gom.

Notwithstanding the fact that their order had failed to be acknowledged, the Aras were convinced that they had been perfectly understood.

One minor incident occurred without being given special attention in the hectic crush and mental torment they went through: the remote-control relay-station registered that at least part of the crew had returned to one of the space disks which had landed on Gom. Since about half of the time the Aras had allotted for the expedition of the Bios had already elapsed, the relay station started the ship on the way back to Laros. However about half an hour after the takeoff the little ship wandered away and the remote control lost it altogether.

The relay-station reported the strange incident and the message aroused some curiosity. However when the news broke that all 200 Bios had been annihilated by

their opponents, nobody raised much fuss about such an insignificant matter as a puny lost vehicle which was, according to the report of the relay-station, probably occupied by only a single Bio.

5/ BATTLE WITH THE BIOS

Tako Kakuta had finally solved his most, urgent problem in the simplest way. Since he wore a spacesuit it presented no further difficulty for him to remove as many plates as necessary from the upper section of the circular wall to provide a lookout at least each 30°. The air was instantly sucked out from the vehicle through the first hole he cut but this did not affect the functioning of the engine nor any other equipment and armament. Tako was very careful with his drastic measures to avoid any damage to such parts of the ship as were essential for the stability of the craft.

Now he was able to see that Gom was so far away that the huge planet looked as small as an orange. Ahead of him—in the direction of the moving vehicle—appeared a somewhat smaller, yellowish-white celestial body which Tako recognized as Laros. Since he knew the relative sizes of the planet and its 18th moon, it was easy for him to make a fairly accurate guess that he had already travelled about three-quarters of the distance between Gom. and Laros.

Gom's strong gravity exerted its constant pull on the momentum the spaceship still had. Tako estimated it would take about 30 minutes until the ship came to a standstill and started to fall back on Gom. There was no possibility it would ever reach Laros.

Nevertheless Tako had no intention of waiting that long. He felt sure he could start the engine again and manipulate the steering controls himself.

He purposely refrained from considering the perils such a flight under these primitive conditions would entail. He was afraid of his own courage and that he would lose his nerve if he clearly analysed the slim prospects of a man trying to fly an impaired spaceship to its destination by sight alone.

So he went to work to get the engine back into operation.

* * * *

Bell and his people needed 5 hours to reach one of the space-disks. The Goms had left long ago and remained uncommunicative.

There were no signs of other Bios. The grey sky was devoid of foreign objects. Only the stars displayed their diffused splendour.

As soon as they had approached their target within 600 feet Bell instructed

Betty Toufry: “Take that thing apart, Betty! We want to see what’s inside.”

He estimated in his mind the distance from the ship to the one next to it. Once Betty had broken down the first vehicle it would be useless to them. The distance was considerable. It would require at least 2 hours to reach the next ship. Ras Tschubai was too fatigued to transport them to their desired goal by teleporting them.

Betty lay prone on the ground and pressed the faceplate of her helmet against a flat slab of stone. A few minutes went by without visible results.

Then the ship began to sway. Bell watched as an irregularly shaped piece was pried loose from the hull, crashed to the ground and shattered. “Keep it up!” he exclaimed.

Betty was unperturbed. The tremendous exercise of her telekinetic power dismantled sheet after sheet of the sidewalls till finally the roof had lost all support, buckled and tipped down to the rear.

The round cabin thus exposed was empty.

Bell sighed. “We could’ve saved ourselves the trouble. There’s nothing we can do with it now. We’ll have to crawl to the next ship.”

Marshall sensed his concern. “Don’t let it get you down!” he consoled him. “We couldn’t have done otherwise in good conscience.”

“Thank you!” Bell replied in disgust. “Let’s get on our way!”

* * * *

The message of the Aras had unmistakably been received by the Goms. Since so many of them—about 100,000—had assembled to shield the aliens from the storm because they had wiped out the cruel Bios, the Goms understood at once what the warning meant.

They were not unaware that the Aras had terrible means of destruction at their disposal although they themselves had no knowledge of technology. They realized that the fate of the Gom race would be sealed except for a tiny remnant if they didn’t obey the command of the Aras.

The Goms hurriedly broadcast a signal to join together and to meet as quickly as possible at their assembly places. A regular network of places used for their union was distributed over the entire surface of the planet.

The answers came from all points and when they arrived at the rendezvous, several hundred thousand had already congregated and waited—according to their instructions—in separate areas. The pragmatic experience of the Goms had taught them that the intelligence of the largest unit dominated the final assembly. At this time it mattered most what the 100,000 Goms had learned from the Aras. Therefore the other smaller combinations waited for the arrival of the 100,000 and joined them one by one, so that the mental content of the first 100,000 remained preponderant.

In this fashion it required more than 20 hours till a Super-Gom was formed that could take the action the Aras demanded. It was the greatest conglomeration the Super-Gom could recall. This was the more remarkable as the Goms awareness of their own history had a collective base which was in some respects more dependable than written records.

At any rate, more than one *billion* Goms were locked together, complying with the orders of the Aras. They covered an area of approximately 400 square miles.

It represented a truly formidable array. Although the vast dark-brown sea of Goms was no more than a few thousandths of an inch thick at any one place, the ground reverberated when the mass moved.

* * * *

Bell had miscalculated. The tremendous explosion created by Ivan Goratschin which had whirled them like feathers in all directions, caused them to feel as tired and beaten after each movement as if they had marched a whole day.

The strain of crawling the distance to the space-disk Betty had put asunder was the last effort their bruised bodies could make without a pause for rest.

They had barely covered one-quarter of the distance to, the next ship when Bell had to order a halt because they simply were unable to go on.

They reclined where they had stopped and promptly fell asleep.

When they woke again from a deep slumber, 5 hours had passed. Marshall raised his head and murmured: "For Pete's sake, what's going on?"

Bell looked around but noticed nothing out of the ordinary. He had slept like dead and now felt more frisky than ever before on Gom.

A few moments later Betty was startled from her sleep, uttering a half-suppressed fearful cry. She sat up and asked, her wide eyes expressing terror: "What's the matter!"

Bell looked at Marshall. "What the devil has happened now?"

Marshall shook his head and gazed into the grey sky. "Everything seems to have gone to hell!" he muttered. "Goms in overwhelming masses! If there's such a thing as telepathic ether, it must be exploding with all these thoughts!"

"And what are they thinking?"

Marshall helplessly shrugged his shoulders. "You know I can't understand them unless they formulate their thoughts especially for me."

Bell waved his hand nonchalantly. "Oh, forget it! What are you worrying about? The Goms have saved us from the storm. As far as I'm concerned they can bunch up by the millions."

"That's what you think!" Marshall countered. "How do you know that the Goms haven't changed their mind?"

Bell had a scornful riposte on the tip of his tongue but swallowed it at the last moment. He remembered that Marshall had been right before about the Goms.

It was after all not impossible that the Goms had a change of heart. Nobody could really tell for sure what took place on Gom. and neither could they claim to understand the Goms.

“Oh well!” Bell snorted. “Then we’ll try to get to the ship as quick as we can. If the Goms have made a turnabout we can thumb our noses at them.”

Marshall couldn’t agree more. The disturbance of the telepathic ether, as he had called it, was extremely disquieting.

They resumed their crawling and now made much better time than before. The saucer-like ship came visibly closer.

During their advance Marshall paused every so often to listen. He kept Bell abreast of the telepathic turmoil in the surroundings which grew by leaps and bounds. “I get the impression,” he explained a little breathlessly, “that a huge strike force of Goms is assembling not far from here. I wish I knew what they’re up to.”

They reached the spaceship 2 hours after their last stop. Spurred on by the dire situation, Bell wasted no time investigating whether the ship was empty or not. He found the sole airlock after a short search and not much later the mechanism operating the hatch.

The hatch slid open and exposed an airlock which was roomy enough to hold 5 Bios and therefore more than big enough for Bell and his 4 stragglers. The only difficulty was how to reach the 3-foot-high threshold and to drag their exhausted bodies over it.

They finally made it with the help of Goratschin, whose robust physique had suffered least under the harsh rigours of the past hours. But they needed half an hour of precious time to recover from the strain. During that time, Marshall informed them, the telepathic disturbance of the ether had swelled to an uproar.

“I’m afraid,” Marshall confessed, “if their preparations are intended against us, we’ll perish like mankind in the deluge. We don’t have adequate defences to combat it.”

Bell had already mulled over the dilemma. For awhile he had thought they were immune to the danger as long as Ivan Goratschin was on his toes and prepared to unleash his stupendous might when the threat became too ominous. The Goms consisted of organic substances mostly of the same material the Bios were made of. Ivan had the power to trigger a C or Ca fusion in the bodies of the Goms and to destroy them. But if the Goms had really formed such a tremendous combination as Marshall suspected, Ivan’s explosion could exterminate himself, his companions and perhaps the whole planet.

So Ivan was out. Their hope shrank to the small rayguns they carried and the ship on which they had clambered.

The gravity inside the ship was the same as outside. Their expectation that they could move around easier in the vehicle than on the rocky plain was soon disappointed.

Near the end of their strength, the group entered the cabin through the airlock

and discovered what Tako had found out 20 hours ago: there was no provision for piloting the vehicle internally.

The shock was so enervating that they remained flat on the floor after they had crawled in.

Bell's courage was the first to buck up again. It was courage born of sheer willpower and mixed with the fury of a man driven into a corner. Bell soon drew the same conclusion as Tako before him: "There must be an engine in here," he rasped. "It's probably remote-controlled but we should be able to take it apart and put it together again so that we can use it. Don't hang your heads, boys! Remove the plates from under the bench. Get the lead out, guys! Or do you plan to remain in a stupor forever?"

True enough—no sensible exhortation could have accomplished it but Bell's bellowing voice jarred them out of their lethargic state. They sat up with a wan hopeless smile. Then they took their rayguns and detached all plates under the bench with a low-energy beam.

* * * *

The remote control relay-station on Laros had monitored the fact that someone had returned after 20 hours to the second of the space-disks dispatched to Gom. This time, however, the station took no action of its own; it merely made a report to the command centre and received instructions to leave the ship where it was.

At this point the time was so ridden with tension due to the imminent decisions which had to be made by the Aras that nobody was in the mood to worry about an expendable little ship with one or two Bios who might have escaped the holocaust.

In contrast to the Aras who were awaiting a momentous decision, the Springers acted totally unperturbed. So unperturbed, indeed, that they issued orders to start the rest of the fleet under the command of the Mounders that had remained behind on Laros after most of the Springer patriarchs had departed.

The Aras were rather pleased to see the Springers leave. They could expect no help from the Springers for their battle on Gom and they preferred anyway that the Springers learned as little as possible about the trouble the handful of fugitives had caused them.

The Aras were anxious to be regarded as equal partners in their negotiations with the Springers and this claim for equality would have been seriously prejudiced if the Springers had been cognizant of how easily the Ara base on Laros could be jeopardized.

* * * *

Aboard the *Titan* the departure of the remainder of the Mounders fleet

presented the first change after a succession of dull days and endless waiting. At first Perry Rhodan was sceptical. He figured that another fleet would replace the one leaving Laros. However after the space structure disturbances of the transitioning ships had been duly registered and no other disturbances were monitored anywhere else, he surmised that the great conference on Laros was finally finished and that the time had come to go to the rescue of those stranded on Gom.

Talamon, who had left Laros with Topthor's fleet, had sent no more word. Rhodan, who trusted Talamon up to a degree, took this as a sign that the Springers hadn't merely relieved their guard on Laros but had left the moon for good. The precaution Rhodan had taken when he dispatched the *Ganymede* together with a heavy cruiser of Talamon's fleet from the Arkon system into hyperspace in order to feign the departure of two Terranian spaceships seemed to have paid off. Neither the Aras nor the Springers suspected that any danger lurked in their vicinity.

However there could be little doubt that the *Titan* would be spotted when it got close to Gom. The protection of the anti-detection field was not complete.

But Rhodan was not intimidated by the patrol ships in the system of the Aras.

* * * *

Bell's contingent had worked for 10 hours straight but they were at least twice that much away from their goal. The trouble was that only one man could work at any one time on the connections and switching units of the engine assembly so that the fact that they were 5 didn't help much.

Marshall had for awhile kept watch with his telepathic sensory perception to find out what developed in the neighbourhood. But all he could determine was that the number of Goms out there continued to grow.

Finally he started to work on a unit which ordinarily served to transmit position signals to the relay-station. Since the space-disk was used only for routes in the lunar system of Gom, the signal transmitter consisted merely of the usual electromagnetic frequency modulator.

Ras Tschubai assisted Marshall with his work. Bell's eyes smarted and his hands failed to obey him after 10 hours. When he realized that he was still far from achieving his purpose, Marshall and the African had already converted the sender to emitting signals of variable wavelengths.

It had been Marshall's idea that this might enable them to get in touch with the *Titan*. The spaceship was 20 light years away and the radio signals would require that many hours to reach the *Titan*. Still slow communication would be better than none at all.

He wanted to consult Bell about it when he crawled out of the engine compartment, flopped down on the floor and groaned miserably.

Before Marshall could open his mouth an external inhuman thought struck him

with such force that the pain nearly split his head and bowled him over, groaning pitifully.

It was the same with Betty but, her capacity being greater than Marshall's she felt only a moderate headache and she understood the external message that was beamed to her.

Bell became alarmed. He crawled over to Marshall and helped him to sit up.

"The Goms... !" Marshall gasped with frightened eyes, "they say they're going to attack us now."

Bell narrowed his eyes. "Attack us? After they saved us from the storm?"

Marshall only nodded.

"He's right, sir!" Betty piped up with a tremulous voice. "That's exactly what they said."

"Well then," Bell counselled, much calmer than he really felt, "we'll give them a hot reception. We can't get the engine going anyway. We've got to fight back!"

"But we've got the sender!" Marshall pointed out. "We can call the *Titan*."

This was news to Bell and Marshall had to tell him all about it in a few words.

"I won't stop you from sending your message," Bell consented sceptically. "It'll take 20 hours to reach the battleship and then it'll be very questionable if anybody aboard the *Titan* pays attention to Morse signals."

Marshall and Ras Tschubai put the finishing touches on their work and tapped out the Morse call: "SOS... IN MORTAL DANGER ON GOM... NORTHERN HEMISPHERE TWILIGHT ZONE, SEVERAL MILES FROM BORDERLINE. BELL."

He sent the message 3 times. When he repeated it for the 4th time he heard a horrified scream from the outer airlock where Bell stood guard and bellowed: "It's not only the Goms, there's a whole army of Bios on the march! Grab your guns, men, and get out of here!"

Tako Kakuta couldn't remember that he ever had worked so long without a break.

He had the advantage over Bell, who was also trying at that time to solve the same problem, that in his space disk the equivalent of the gravitation of Laros had been restored since it left Gom.

Otherwise Tako could never have achieved his task.

But now he was ready to operate the engine and put the 2 disintegrators into service as well.

Meanwhile the craft had made considerable headway toward Gom. Spurred by the strong pull of the big planet, it had reached a velocity of 3 miles per second in the direction of its centre of gravity.

Tako accelerated this speed with a few bursts from the engine and was ready for the diving manoeuvre as soon as the ship touched the outer limit of the atmosphere which extended far out into the void.

* * * *

Driven by a trail of white-hot particles, the space disks emerged from the grey sky and landed in the same neighbourhood where the first taskforce of the Bios had been exterminated by Ivan Goratschin.

If Bell still held any doubts that the Goms were in cahoots with the Aras, they were now totally put to rest. The Bios landed so that they encircled their victims in cooperation with the Goms.

The tactic of the Bios was identical with that of their previous attack. They disembarked from their vehicles and bore down on the ship where Bell's fighters were lying in wait.

But this time there were 400 of them and no sign of a storm to bail out the beleaguered detachment.

After the roar of the ships' motors had died down, they heard from the opposite side a steadily growing rumble which made the ground tremble.

The Goms were on the march. The shaking ground proved to Bell that Marshall had been dead right: there were indeed countless masses.

However Bell was not overly worried about the Bios. Now Ivan Goratschin was wide awake. Bell summoned him to the hatch and showed him the rows of marching monsters. Both heads of the mutant broke into a ferocious grin. A few moments later a brilliant explosion spread over the right flank of the Bios and sent a glowing white cloud of smoke up into the air, consuming the artificial lives of 100 aggressors.

Ivan Goratschin zeroed in on the centre of the column but at the same instant Ras Tschubai, who was stationed at the highest point of the disk, shouted: "The Goms are coming! I can see them!"

The airlock faced the direction from which the Bios approached. In Bell's judgment the danger threatening from the Bios was—despite their formidable weapons—not as critical as that from the Goms. Therefore he sent his men up to Ras Tschubai's vantagepoint and instructed Betty: "You better stay inside, little girl! We'll have a hot time out here."

But Betty flashed her angry eyes. "I can stand the heat, sir, and I don't want anybody to call me a coward!"

And before Bell could stop here, she slipped past him and climbed up the outside of the ship to join the others. There was nothing left for Bell to do but to follow her.

Before he had reached the top, Ivan Goratschin had blown up a second quarter of the stubbornly advancing Bios in a roaring detonation.

From above he could see that the Goms approached at a speed of about 12 miles per hour. This was slower than they had moved after the storm and Bell couldn't help notice the implications.

The frontal line of the immense expanse of Goms, which stretched as far as the

eye could see, was only 2 miles away, leaving Bell and his valiant troop only 10 more minutes.

“You see,” Bell mentioned to Marshall, “right now your message to the *Titan* has travelled one-hundredth of the way. Do you think we’ll still be alive after the other 99-hundredths?”

But then he quickly gave his orders. “We’ll start shooting as soon as we get them as close as half a mile. Our guns will reach just about as far as that”

* * * *

When Marshall sent his call to the *Titan*, the battleship was already on its way. It approached Gom from the side where it had least to fear detection by the *Aras*. Marshall’s message in Morse took really no more than a minute and a half to reach the *Titan*. However some time elapsed before they paid attention to it. It had been registered and recorded by the automatic receiver, but it was at first mistaken for a radio disturbance.

Until somebody went to the trouble of analysing the dots and dashes and recognized they were Morse signals.

Perry Rhodan was immediately notified and he stepped up the speed of the ship at once. He had no illusions as to the difficulty of finding his men with nothing more to go on than the vague clue that they were located along a line stretching over 30,000 miles.

* * * *

“Fire, everybody, Fire!” Bell shouted defiantly.

They aimed at the mass of the Super-Gom and began to blast away when the front had approached within half a mile. At this distance their little rayguns would not have had much effect on a solid target such as a Bio or a man but the thin film of the Goms was easily consumed by the energy rays. The centre of the front line was thus prevented from advancing whereas both flanks kept pushing forward and formed a semi-circle around the defenders.

For awhile Bell had weighed the idea of sending Ras Tschubai, who had meanwhile regained his teleporting ability, to the left and the right flanks but he realized that Ras could guess the accurate distance separating them from the mass of Goms no better than himself. If he miscalculated his jump and landed amidst the Goms, he would be finished.

In the meantime Ivan Goratschin had taken care of many more Bios. Right now there were only 50 left alive but they were also far more dispersed and when Ivan exploded one of them, the others got away. The wholesale killing had become an individual hunt and the remaining Bios closed in too fast for Bell’s comfort.

“Don’t go to sleep, you. two!” Bell bawled out the two-headed mutant. “We

don't have time galore for the Bios!"

The older Ivan groaned loudly. "We can't work any faster, sir!" he protested. "We need time to focus on each one separately."

Bell knew that he was right. He turned halfway around and suspiciously eyed the drawn-out line of Bios.

He wanted to caution Ivan that a Bio had ventured too far forward but at this moment the Bio seemed to be seized by an invisible force and hurled high up into the air. He plumped down again hard and fast and remained motionlessly on the ground.

Bell let out a scream of surprise: "Ivan..."

"Yes, sir, that's..."

A second Bio was lifted from the ground, propelled into the air and plummeted back. He, too, seemed to be shattered by the impact and failed to bestir himself.

Bell was dumbfounded. He looked at Betty, who was busy working the Goms over with her thermo-beamer. She obviously was unable to spare the time for telekinetic tricks.

But who else...?

At this time about 20 Bios deserted their covers together. Bell observed with breathless wonder how they threw down their weapons and turned around to head back to the row of space-disks.

In a flash it dawned on Bell what had happened and when he noticed that Ivan and Ivanovich targeted one of the returning Bios he uttered a terrified cry: "Don't! For heaven's sake!"

The mutant looked at him, thunderstruck. Bell ignored him and began to call so that everybody could hear him: "Ishibashi! Sengu! Yokida! Answer me!"

Marshall whipped around with a puzzled look but Bell motioned to him and barked: "Keep shooting!"

From somewhere came a feeble voice. Only half the words were audible: "...2000 feet from you... suits in poor shape... we're coming over..."

Soon 3 dark points emerged from behind a low flat rock and began to move slowly toward the space-disk. Evidently the 3 captives had fared no better than Ivan Goratschin. The gleaming polish of their suits was a thing of the, past and they had to look very hard to see the 3 little points in the twilight.

Bell would have liked to ask a great many questions but he went back to his most crucial business: to eliminate as many Goms as possible.

The 3 mutants required 30 more minutes to get back. They had hardly any strength left to climb aboard. Their faces were hollow and Ishibashi's voice sounded strained when he tried to make a report.

Bell waved him off. "Okay! We don't have time for long speeches. Pitch in against the Goms! Let Sengu help Ivan if he's still in shape to fight! Pour it on, men!"

Bell was shaken by a grim rage when he thought of the 3 men who had gained

their freedom only to be smothered by the Goms and were doomed to die
Unless a miracle happened...

* * * *

Tako came in low. He had managed to pull his ship out of the dive shortly before crashing on the surface of the planet Gom and to veer off in horizontal flight. That he just happened to execute his manoeuvre in the vicinity of the lethal battle now in progress was due to a combination of luck and technical genius.

Tako's vehicle moved at a speed of 1.2 mach and at a height of 2½ miles. Since the vehicle was not equipped with wings, he used some of its power to maintain his altitude firing down from his vertical jets.

From this low altitude the Japanese had an excellent view of the battle arena.

He saw that the defenders were in trouble and that the danger came from the Goms. He made his craft describe a wide loop and returned lower and slower.

When the ship had decelerated to 400 miles per hour and flew a mere 3000 feet above the battleground and within perfect firing range, he set the auto-pilot and moved into the gunner's station, hoping that the steering mechanism would maintain its given flight path while he got busy with the disintegrators.

Reginald Bell caught his first glimpse of Tako's ship when it streaked across the sky, lit up by the light of the red sun. He paid little attention to it because he assumed it was manned by the Bios.

But then it came back lower than before and when the flanks of the Super-Gom had already advanced far beyond the front at the centre and threatened to encircle them completely.

Bell had no time to watch the spaceship. Each shot he missed cost him a few seconds of precious time.

Betty was the first to stop shooting and look up to the ship. Bell glanced at her and saw that she wanted to say something. However before she could speak a word, two arm-thick, pale green rays shot down from the strange vehicle and hit the top of the Super-Gom a few hundred yards ahead of them, cutting long steaming furrows through the sentient carpet.

"Tako!" Bell shouted with a cracking voice. "He's captured a ship!"

They held their fire and watched the little saucer-like ship. Tako Kakuta—if that's who he was—seemed to follow a certain pattern with his blasts. The green rays of the double disintegrators circled over the Super-Gom and cut an almost perfectly round section out of the huge being in less than 10 seconds.

Marshall saw that confusion rapidly spread amongst the Goms. He expected to see the severed section reunite at once with the main mass but nothing of the sort happened. The circular piece remained disconnected from the huge flat body and continued its advance toward the ship where Bell's brave gang had intended to make its last futile stand.

The disintegrators kept strafing the Goms and Tako broke the immense sheet up into many pieces after it had almost completely choked off Bell's last refuge. The confusion of the Goms spread like wildfire.

* * * *

Tako noticed at the last moment that his ship was nose-diving. He left his battle station and rushed as fast as he could to the engine controls as the ship's jets drove it down in a steep curve.

He succeeded in averting a crash but was unable to pull the ship higher up into the air again.

Tako continued on a tight curve, thereby losing more speed. He saw the rocky ground rush up to him and braked with a final thrust from his forward jets, eyes closed, trusting his luck for whatever might come.

He heard the crash of the violent impact, the buckling and ripping of metal. Then he saw clouds of dust coming in through the cracked hull and felt himself gyrating around his axis.

Suddenly it was all over. Although he was not knocked out, the oppressive gravity of Gom rendered him nearly helpless for awhile.

Eventually he climbed out. Now he heard for the first time that the air was filled with a din so loud that he could not hope to hear his companions if they called him. He turned down his outer mike but even then felt the excessively noisy vibration transmitted by the shaking ground to his spacesuit.

The huge billows of dust raised by his emergency landing had settled again. Tako could see the vehicle Bell's people had occupied at a distance of a mile and a little farther behind the glaring flash of a tremendous explosion which seared him so that he ducked behind a big boulder. He couldn't know that Ivan Goratschin had just made Bio #387 bite the dust.

* * * *

The action of the Goms lost its coordination after Tako Kakuta had decimated them and cut their frontal assault up in a depth of several miles. They wandered around in all directions and were slow in approaching the ship where Bell had made his fighting retreat. The memory of the divided parts apparently no longer forced them to abide by the orders of the Aras.

They had witnessed Tako's crash from their ship. Bell sighed with relief when he saw the Japanese abandon the wreck, evidently unhurt. He watched him crouch behind the cover when the two-headed mutant detonated the last explosion and was on the verge of calling him when Marshall grabbed his arm and pointed to the right side, shouting: there! The Goms!"

Bell spotted them at once. They were a fragment of the former great mass and

seemed to have detected the Japanese. The subdivision was made up of at least 50,000 Goms. It was on its way to attack Tako and it was certainly powerful enough to overwhelm him.

“Tako!” Bell shouted. “Watch out for the Goms!”

Tako heard the warning. He raised his head and looked around. All he could see from his low perspective was a dark wiggly line, moving about 300 feet away.

He crawled away although he knew that the Goms were too fast for him. He was scared out of his wits and failed to heed the warnings coming from his helmet receiver. Only after Marshall’s angry voice rose to a crescendo— “Stop where you are and climb up on the rock!”—did he come to his senses.

He saw before his eyes a rock sloping into the sky and began to scale it. But Marshall shouted quickly: “Not that one! The one to the right!”

Tako slid down again and looked back to see that the Goms had already surged forward within 60 feet of him.

The shock gave him the strength of a giant. He stood up, ran in a mad dash to the other rock and clambered up with lightning-speed, since there was too little time for him to concentrate on performing a good teleporting jump.

* * * *

“Why did it have to be that particular rock?” Bell asked, baffled. “Do you think the Goms won’t get up just as easy on that one as all the others?”

“They won’t make it up there!” Marshall replied.

Bell was taken aback. “What makes you think so?”

“You remember that I stayed behind after we left the birth station of the Goms? Well, I had occasion to watch the Goms bump into the steps you had cut into the rock. They never gave up. All they could notice was that the world had come to an end and they stopped right there. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“The Goms are something like two-dimensional beings. They can only see what is in the same plane as their bodies, although that isn’t quite exact. I estimate their angle of sight amounts to a few minutes, or at most half a degree, in the vertical direction from their bodies. If they come up against an object which is not completely vertical they can recognize it well enough to mount. But a vertical wall means the end of the world to them. Take a look for yourself! Tako is already out of their sight.”

The 50,000 Goms had surrounded Tako’s rock. To judge from their aimless milling around, it was fairly clear that they didn’t know what to do. They shifted back and forth for awhile and soon shoved off, leaving the rock and the Japanese behind.

“But...” Bell mumbled flabbergasted.

“I know what bothers you,” Marshall interrupted him. “In very large

agglomerations, when the Super-Gom has surpassed a certain level of intelligence, he's also capable of recognizing 3 dimensions. We've experienced a demonstration of that ourselves when they erected a wall to shield us from the storm. But the first Super-Gom that chased us shortly after we were forced down on Gom, and which we escaped by slipping into the subterranean tunnel, was about as big as the one that went after Tako. As you recall, the Goms didn't succeed then in finding the entrance to the tunnel because it's impossible for them to see what's above or below them. They can only see—as the expression is commonly used—what's before and behind them. If we figure that the Super-Gom out there numbered about 50,000 individuals, we can deduce that the transition from the 2- to the 3-dimensional world occurs between 50,000 and 100,000 Goms.”

Bell looked at him, still amazed, and blurted: “Fantasy!”

Without a hint of trouble Marshall's head suddenly drooped and he rested his helmet on the floor with a whimper.

Bell was upset and exclaimed anxiously: “What's up now?”

Betty's jubilant voice answered: “It's Pucky! The *Titan* is not far from here. Pucky is telling the Goms to scam!”

* * * *

They had entirely missed seeing the arrival of the red sphere slowly floating over the horizon.

But then Pucky sent his message via a telepathic amplifier. He gave an ultimatum to the Goms on orders of Perry Rhodan that they had one hour to pull back from the beleaguered group so that the gigantic ship could land in the ring and pick up the members of its crew.

Pucky made it clear that the Goms were inviting disaster if they failed to obey the warning.

His message had been heard by Marshall and Betty Toufry. They watched joyously as the spherical spaceship slowly descended over the plateau and came to a halt close above the surface.

The response of the huge Super-Goms was remarkable. Not only was there no attempt to use their telepathic power on the *Titan* but they abided unhesitatingly by the given command.

The immense body retreated in all outward directions and left the scene quicker than it had appeared, so that the rocky plain soon looked as deserted as before.

Half an hour after Pucky's call the *Titan* touched down without hindrance.

Bell and his people were taken aboard. Perry Rhodan took time out to embrace his old comrades-in-arms and to shake their hands.

The *Titan* took off at once.

Bell's team was not allowed to relax. They were asked to make their reports

while their impressions were still fresh in their minds. The scientists were extremely anxious to learn all they could about the Goms.

Everybody contributed what he knew. The sum total of their knowledge didn't add up to very much, Marshall, who had been the keenest observer, furnished 70% of the information.

It was noteworthy that Kitai Ishibashi, Tama Yokida and Wuriu Sengu as well as Ivan Goratschin, who were for a time all trapped by the Goms, had almost nothing to report. Their memory was blotted out the moment they got up from the rear of the cave and walked out to the spot where the wreck of the Gazelle had been. Their memory returned when they woke up from a deep stupor and found that they were held in a low, circular, windowless room and that the world around them was dark and full of eerie noises.

Bell and Marshall concluded that the 3 mutants had been taken to one of the underground birth-stations like Ivan Goratschin and that they woke up when the Goms left their subterranean retreat to join the huge Super-Gom.

Ishibashi, Yokida and Sengu were amazed to see that the silvery coating had disappeared from their spacesuits and that the plastic fabric had become very mushy. The Goms had tried to ingest the men and their suits. But obviously it was easier for them to devour dead than living substances—as shown by the example of the cracked-up Gazelle which was gone in a few hours.

Sengu then looked through the walls and quickly found the way out. The 3 mutants made it back to the surface without further incidents and arrived just in time to intervene in the fierce struggle.

As to the subject of Goms, they knew next to nothing.

The guesswork about the unsolved questions remained a most persistent result of the Gom adventure's aftermath. Theories were proposed, debated and discarded again. They could reach no consensus on a creature that had no concept of 'gratitude' but permitted itself to be burned in square miles of flames during the attack they committed at the instigation of the Aras on peril of death. Why did the Goms refrain from using their parapsychic powers as they had so effectively done in their first encounter when they caused the Gazelle to smash up?

They realized that the creatures they had met on Gom had nothing in common with any other known forms of life; moreover their mentality was as alien as if it had come from another universe.

Rhodan was beseeched from all sides to delay their departure and to spend more time on Gom. But Rhodan declared with a benevolent smile that under the prevailing circumstances science had to take second place to affairs of state. He intimated he would have no objections to visiting Gom again at some time in the future.

* * * *

One hour later the *Titan* put in an appearance over the moon Laros after it had

rammed mercilessly through a chain of Aras outposts and destroyed a string of automatic defence bases bristling with nuclear rockets, mammoth disintegrators and thermo-launchers for the interception of foreign objects.

Rhodan deposited an Arkon bomb on the moon with the fuse set for atomic number 14.

The bomb initiated the fusion process for the silicon atoms in its vicinity and this process gradually spread over the entire face of Laros.

The atomic fire it created was slow yet uncontrollable. It would take the Aras three weeks to notice the existence of the bomb unless they happened to find out about it sooner by some lucky coincidence. From then on they had 3 more months to flee from Laros. At the close of that period no spark of life would be left on the moon.

It meant the end of the Aras' bastion in the Gonom system.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan's men kept a sharp lookout for stray Springer ships as the *Titan* prepared to quit the Gonom system but none were detected.

When the great spaceship finally accelerated out of the alien system, Bell and his companions were at last able to relax. Mentally and physically exhausted from the trying events, they slept the sleep of the dead for 15 hours.

Shortly after Reg awakened he was summoned to the Command Centre, where he was surprised to observe that all officers were on duty and activity everywhere crackled electrically in the air.

Rhodan regarded Bell gravely from his pilot seat. "Did you have a good snooze, butterball?" he asked, mock-solicitously.

"Listen!" Bell protested, "I didn't sleep a wink for 4 days between those biological monstrosities and that creepy goop that crawled around on Gom. I had to keep my eyes peeled for 96 hours!"

"I know and I'm glad you're in the pink again. But what I'd like to know is, are you sure the Springers didn't discover the misprogramming of Topthor's tron? They didn't make any corrections, did they?"

Bell's brow wrinkled. The secret of the positronicon discovered? He seriously doubted it, therefore he replied: "As positive as anybody could be.—Why?"

"Because," Perry dropped the bombshell, "Talamon reported a few moments ago by hypercom-beam that *a decision has been taken to invade Terra and attack is imminent!* We're safe *provided* they don't begin to have doubts about the programming of Topthor's computer.

"But we can't be certain.

"We'll return to Earth. The quicker the better!"

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