

Shock Absorber

E. G. Von Wald

The background features a vibrant green field with several blue geometric shapes: a large inverted triangle in the top left, a horizontal bar in the middle left, a curved bar in the middle right, a vertical bar in the bottom left, and another large inverted triangle in the bottom right.

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SHOCK ABSORBER

BY E. G. VON WALD

Illustrated by van Dongen

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A man acts on what he believes the facts are, not on the facts. He lives or dies by what the facts are. Now sometimes you don't have time to correct a man's beliefs, yet he must act correctly....



The aging little psychologist looked down at the captain's insignia on his sleeve and scowled.

"I know it's a lousy, fouled-up situation, commander," he said with evident irony. "You speak of discipline. Well, it's bad enough here on Mars, where a junior officer like you feels free to argue with a full captain like me, but out there with the fleet, discipline is now virtually nonexistent."

He looked up again and quickly added, "Oh, of course there is a discipline of a sort, and in its own way it is quite effective. Strict, too, as you will find. But it has few of the marks of the military academy, of which the regular officers were so fond. Perhaps that was the reason why they let the situation get away from them, and why we are in charge of it now."

"I still think—" the commander started, but he was interrupted again.

"I know what you think, commander. You can forget it. It's wishful thinking and we cannot permit such daydreaming in our precarious condition. Face the facts

as they exist in the present. After we kick the aliens out of our solar system, maybe we can go back to the old ideas again. Maybe. I'm not even very sure of that. But as for now, the characteristic of despair is the lowest common denominator among the combat patrols, and we therefore have mutinies, disobedience of orders, defections of every variety. That is a real situation, and it will persist until we can induce the men to accept tactical leadership that can cope with the enemy.

"Actually, it is not very remarkable that this situation developed. Strategy is still a rational computable quantity, but the actual tactics of fighting is something else entirely. The aliens have an intellectual response that is in full truth alien to us. It simply cannot be comprehended rationally by a human being, although they manage to guess pretty well the responses of our own fighters. Naturally, the result has been that in the past our losses were almost ninety per cent whenever a patrol actually engaged in a firefight with the enemy.

"Fortunately, the aliens are much too far from their home to possess anything like the number of personnel and other resources that we have. Otherwise, they would have beaten us long ago. Completely wiped us out. And all because an ordinary, intelligent human being cannot learn any patterns by which the aliens operate, and by which he can fight them successfully."

"I know that," the commander muttered. "I spent plenty of time out there before I got tapped for this new branch of service." He rubbed the moist palms of his hands together nervously.

"Certainly you did," the captain acknowledged absently. Then he continued his explanation. "Fortunately, there was a small body of information on extra-rational mental faculties that had been developed over the past century, and as soon as we expanded it sufficiently, we were able to form this new branch of service you now belong to. But unfortunately, some idiot in the Information Service released a popularization of the data on the new branch. That was ill-advised. The veterans who had survived so far had their own way of accounting for their survival, and that did not include what that silly description alluded to as 'blind guessing' by commanders of 'exceptional psychic gifts.'

"Like most popularizations, the description was grossly inaccurate, and was promptly withdrawn; but the damage had already been done. The damage was completed by another idiot who named the new branch the Psi Corps, merely because the basic capacity for extra-rational mental faculties is technically

signified by the Greek letter 'psi.' The name was slightly mispronounced by the men, and that automatically produced that nasty little nickname, which has stuck, and which expresses very well the attitude of the men toward the new service.

"As I say, fleet discipline is very bad, and the men simply would not accept orders from such officers. There are numerous cases on record where they killed them when there was no other way out.

"Now, as far as discipline itself is concerned, the best procedure would be to pull an entire fleet out of the defense perimeter and retrain them, because the newly trained recruits can be made to accept Psi Corps officers as commanders. But our situation is far too desperate to permit anything like that. Therefore, we must use whatever devices we can think of to do the job.

"The ship you are going to is staffed by veterans. They were incredibly lucky. From the outset, they had a CO who was a man highly gifted in psi without he or anyone else knowing about it until a few months ago when we ran a quiet little survey. But he got killed in a recent encounter, along with their executive officer, so we are now sending them a new captain and a new exec as well. But those men simply will not accept orders from a Psi Corps officer. Furthermore, they have heard the rumors—soundly based—that the Psi Corps, as a result of its opposition, has gone underground, so to speak. They know that its personnel has been largely disguised by giving them special commissions in the regular Space Combat Service. As a result, they will most certainly suspect any new commanding officer no matter what insignia he wears.

"Of course, now and then you will find one of the old hands who will accept the Psi Corps, so long as it isn't jammed down his throat. Just pray that you have somebody like that aboard your new ship, although I must admit, it isn't very likely."

"All right, all right," the commander growled with irritation. "But—with your permission, sir—I still think my particular method of assignment is a lousy approach and I don't like it. I still think it will make for very bad discipline."

"Whether you like it or not, commander, that is the way it will have to be accomplished. We are simply recognizing a real situation for what it is, and compromising with it."

"But couldn't this change in command personnel be postponed until—"

"If it could be postponed," the captain replied acidly, "you may rest assured we would not be employing disagreeable—and somewhat questionable—devices to speed it up. Unfortunately, our outlying detectors have identified the approach of a fleet of starships. They can only be reinforcements for the aliens, about equal to what they already have here, and they will arrive in two years. If those two forces can join each other, there will be no need to worry further about discipline among the humans. There will shortly be no humans left. So we are preparing a full-scale assault against those aliens now within our system in the very near future. And we simply must have all tactical combat devices commanded by men with extra-rational mental abilities in order to deal with them effectively."

"Effectively?" the commander snorted. "Thirty-two per cent effective, according to the figures they gave us in the Psi school."

"That is considerably better than twelve per cent, which is the statistical likelihood of survival in combat without it," the captain retorted.

Nervously, the commander scratched the back of his thin neck, grimaced and nodded.

"The first and most important problem for you is to gain the confidence of your crew. They will be worse than useless to you without it, and it will be a very difficult job, even with all the advice and help our men can give you. And you will have to be careful—don't forget what I said about assassinations. The way we are going about it, that you find so disagreeable, should minimize that danger, but you can't ever tell what will happen."

He held up his hand to forestall a comment from the other and continued on. "There are conditions for everything, commander. Men react according to certain patterns, given the proper circumstances. It is characteristic of the sort of men you will encounter on your new ship that they are unlikely to take the initiative in such matters, partly from their early training and partly from their association with a CO who pretty well dominated them. However, they will readily condone it if somebody else does take the initiative in their behalf. Particularly, if that man has some official authority over them, and there is always somebody like that. They will not only condone the action, they will positively be happy about it, because it will tend to bolster their sense of security—such as it is. You know the sort of thing—father hunger. Somebody to take care of them the way their old CO did."

The captain sighed. "So you see, commander, you are going into a double-edged

situation. Everything in it that can accrue to your advantage, could also get you promptly killed."

"I see. First I fight with my men," the commander said bitterly. "And if I win that battle, I will be permitted to fight the aliens with a thirty-two per cent possibility of living through the first encounter of that."

"It's always been that way to some extent," the captain replied sympathetically, "in every command situation since the world began. Only right now is a little worse than anyone can remember."



The commander departed. But about a month later, ensuing circumstances brought one Lieutenant Maise to the same office building. He was not, of course, ushered into the august presence of the captain, who was seeing more important people than lieutenants that day.

Maise had been there for several hours every day for the previous three, and he went immediately to the desk of the Special Reports Officer. The SR Officer was a lieutenant also, a combination of psychologist and writer, whose business it was to make sure that Special Reports on morale matters were presented in the properly dramatic fashion so that that indefinable aura of reality, customarily omitted from official historical documents, could be included. The Evaluation Division, back on Earth, was very fussy about that "aura."

"Ah, good afternoon sir," the SR Officer greeted him. "Glad to see you again."

Maise nodded curtly and took a seat beside the desk.

"I think we are pretty well finished now—"

"We better be," Maise interrupted. "My ship is pulling out in four hours."

"Right on the button, eh?" said the SR Officer. He fumbled in a desk drawer and withdrew a bulky folder, from which he extracted a smaller manuscript, and handed it to Maise. "I think you will find it complete and suitably expressive, now, sir."

Maise scowled as he accepted the document. "It makes no difference to me. I didn't want to get involved with the report in the first place."

"I know," the SR Officer nodded agreeably. "But don't worry. Nobody is going to prefer any charges against anybody in any case. What they want back on Earth is all the information they can get on morale problems, so that they can more effectively implement their planning. You know how it is."

"How would *I* know?"

The SR Officer snapped, "I can understand your sentiments, but don't blame me. Remember, I'm just a lieutenant, and I just work here in Morale."

"Sure," Maise said, cracking a grin on his stiff lips. "Sorry. I know it isn't your fault."

He opened the report, and commenced reading.



TITLE:

SPECIAL CONFIDENTIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL REPORT,
prepared in collaboration with Lieutenant E. G. von Wald, Special
Reports Officer, Mars XLV Base.

TO:

COMMANDING OFFICER
Psychological Study and Evaluation District
Central Command Authority
Unified Human Defense Forces

FROM:

LIEUTENANT ALTON A. B. MAISE
Executive Officer
Space Combat Device LMB-43534
Seventh Space Fleet

SUBJECT:

ATTEMPTED BACTERIOLOGICAL POISONING OF
COMMANDER THOMAS L. FRENDON, recently assigned
captain of above-mentioned Combat Device. As per Special Order

PSIC334349, dated 23 July 2013.

On 17 October 2015, Space Combat Device LMB-43534 was detached from the Seventh Fleet and returned to the Martian XLV Docks for general overhauling and refitting with new equipment. This period extended for two months, and was followed by a seven-day course of rechecking by the crew.

I was assigned to the ship as Executive Officer on 21 November following detachment, and was in command of the ship during most of the above-mentioned operations. The men were extremely hostile toward me, owing to their fear that I was a Psi Corps officer acting under a special commission in the SCS, but no overt signs of mutiny took place, perhaps because we were still in port. Needless to say, I was very glad when the message arrived informing us of the assignment of Commander Frendon as captain, inasmuch as the situation made clearly evident that I could not expect to be able to assume tactical command of the ship myself when it was returned to combat, the attitude of the crew being what it was.

Almost immediately upon receipt of the message, some of the animosity toward me lifted, but hardly enough for me to consider myself accepted as a member of the crew, although there was a good deal more work done after that.

Six days before our scheduled departure date, Commander Frendon arrived. I was in the control cabin with Lieutenant Spender, Third Officer, when Lieutenant Harding, the Astrogator entered. He limped around the little room a couple of times and then slumped dejectedly into a chair. "Well," he said, "we've had it, boys."

Spender looked around at him quickly, saying, "What's that?"

"I said we've had it. I just saw the new CO, walking over from the Operations office."

"What about it?" I asked sharply.

Harding shook his heavy, balding head, staring at the floor. "It's written all over him," he said bitterly.

"No!" muttered Spender.

"Yep," Harding growled. "Just wait until you lay eyes on him."

He stood up and faced me, his expression bleak and cold. "A sickman, Mr. Exec," he snarled. "Just as sure as death."

As previously noted, discipline was very lax, but I had been trying to restore it as much as possible. So I said, "I don't know whether the new CO is a member of the Psi Corps or not, Harding, but cut out this nickname of 'sick.'"

Harding mumbled: "That's what everybody calls them. I didn't invent the name. But I think it is plenty appropriate."

"Well cut it out."

Harding glared at me. "I suppose you're glad to have one of the guess-kids running this ship."

"Nobody wants to be involved in any guessing games, but we're not running the war here, so stow it."

Spender broke in then with his customary cold, quiet speech. "A sickman, eh? Then we have approximately one chance in three of living through our first encounter with the enemy when we leave here. That is according to the statistics, I believe. But to the best of my recollection, our previous captain brought us through eighty-eight skirmishes before anyone got hurt." He shook his head and thoughtfully contemplated the big, raw knuckles of his hand.

As is perfectly obvious from the above, the situation was ill-suited for a new officer to take command of the ship. I would have liked to settle the matter a little more before he got there, but there was nothing I could do about it then. Besides, it wasn't my worry any more, I realized gratefully. The problem of loyalty and confidence was now the business of the new CO. I did not envy him his job, but it had to be done.

At the very first glance, you could see what Harding had been talking about. Commander Frenon was the absolute epitome of every popular physiological cliché associated with people of unusual psi endowment for the past century that it has been known. At least ten years younger than any of the rest of us, he was of medium height, extremely skinny and nervous, his eyes glancing about with a restless uncertainty. It seemed almost too obvious on him, I thought, and wondered who had been responsible for assigning him to anything at all in the armed forces.

He grinned slightly at us when he came in, dearly unsure of himself, and made a

valiant but artificial-sounding effort. "Hello men," he said. "My name is Frendon. I'm the new CO."

"Yeah," muttered Harding, "we see that you are."

"What's that lieutenant?" Frendon's voice was suddenly sharp, and the wavering grin had vanished.

"I said, yes sir," Harding replied sullenly. "Welcome aboard."

Frendon nodded curtly, and glanced around at the rest of us, at no time looking anyone directly in the eyes. I stood up and held out my hand. "Maise, here," I said. "Your Exec." And naturally I added the traditional welcome.

Spender introduced himself, and as he was speaking, the remaining crew man walked in to find out what was up. He took one look at Frendon, understood, and turned to leave again.

"And the man in the lead-lined tunic is Lieutenant Korsakov," I said quickly. "He's your engineer."

Korsakov sullenly said hello and waited. And Frendon also waited, all the time standing stiff and sensitive. One got the impression that he was in a nervous agony, but unable to help himself or to receive help from anybody else. When the introductions were long since completed, Frendon still stood uncertainly, and an unpleasant silence developed.

"Sit down, captain," I suggested. "How about some coffee?"

Frendon nodded and jerkily moved to the seat I had vacated. The eyes of the other men followed him, studying his uniform. Although it was clear by now that he was wearing the ordinary insignia of the SCS, nobody was particularly reassured, because we had all heard of the new arrangement under which the Psi Corps operated.

So Frendon sat. The silence continued. Everybody stared at him, and he looked helplessly around. I worked up what I felt was a friendly grin, and his gaze finally found itself on me and stayed there, almost pleading.

"You'll have to forgive us, captain," I told him. "We're an old bunch of mangy veterans, and it's going to be a little strange for a while having a bright new captain."

"Certainly," Frendon said, his voice hardly above a whisper. "I understand." He hesitated and then added in a quick defensive rush of words, "But, of course, you must understand that this isn't the first ship I've commanded, and I've been in combat before too, and so I don't see why I should be so doggone strange."

That's what he said. Doggone.

"Well," I murmured and cleared my throat. "Of course, captain."

Harding broke off his steady, hostile glare, and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

"Captain," he started, a little uncertainly, which was unusual for Harding, "can I ask you a frank question?"

"Huh?" Frendon looked at the Astrogator blankly. "Why ... why, er, certainly, lieutenant. Harding you say your name is? Certainly, Harding, go right ahead."

Lieutenant Harding carefully lighted his cigarette. Then he said, "Captain, will you tell us whether or not you are a sickman—I mean a Psi Corps officer?"

"Why?" Frendon leaned forward tensely, then relaxed self-consciously. "Why do you ask that, Harding? Aren't you familiar with the insignia of your own branch of service?"

"Yes, sir," Harding replied blandly, "but there have been a number of reports that they were going to assign a sick ... I mean a Psi Corps officer to the command of all new Combat Devices, only they would be wearing SCS insignia. Since we have been outfitted fresh and all, we probably come under the heading of new Devices."

"What if I were a Psi Corps officer?" Frendon demanded truculently, his long, skinny frame taut with excitement.

Harding considered that question, or rather statement, and puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. Finally he shrugged. He reached over and meticulously crushed out the cigarette in an ash tray.

"For the benefit of you, lieutenant"—Frendon's bitter gaze swept the entire room—"and the rest of you, I am not now nor have I ever been a member of the Psi Corps. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, sir," I said quickly. Nobody else said anything.

Frendon stood up and stalked tensely to the door. There he spun around and said, "But there is a branch of the military service designated as the Psi Corps, and if you wish to discuss it in the future, kindly refer to it by its official title or abbreviation, and not by that atrocious nickname of 'sick.' I am sure the Central Command Authority knows what it is doing, and if they did intend to assign such personnel they must have very good reasons for it. Understand?"

There was a general nodding of heads and a scattered, sullen, "Yes, sir."

"Now then, you may call out the ship's company, Mr. Maise," Frendon said to me.

"Well, captain," I replied, "we're all here." Then sure enough, Frendon made us all stand at attention while he read his orders to us, just like it says in the book at the academy. After which, happily, he went to his cabin, and let us go back to our work.



That was the introduction of Commander Frendon to the crew. He made a distinct impression. Entirely bad. Veteran small-ship personnel in this war have shown themselves to be extremely clannish, at best, deriving their principal sense of security not from the strength of the fleet which they never see and rarely contact, but from their familiarity with and confidence in each other's capabilities. Now these men had a new CO who was not only a stranger, but one who they felt sure was a member of the feared and mistrusted Psi Corps, a sickman, a man whose battle tactics were reputedly nothing but a bunch of blind, wild guesses. Previously, I had been the unwanted and suspected stranger, so I knew how Frendon would feel.

The situation developed rapidly, probably because we had only six days before our scheduled departure into the combat zone. That afternoon, Korsakov and Harding were supposed to be checking the wiring of fire-control circuits. Base mechanics had installed the gear and tested it, but it is standard operating procedure for the ship's crew to do their own checking afterwards, the quality of the work by electronics mechanics on planetary assignment being what it is these days.

I found them sitting on the deck, engaged in a desultory, low-voiced conversation. They had stripped the conduit ducts of plating, but there was no

sign that they had done anything further.

"All right, you guys," I said. "Get up and finish that check. We may have to use those missiles one day soon, and I'd like to be sure they go where they are sent."

Korsakov looked up at me, his broad, thick mouth spread in an unpleasant toothy grin and his bushy eyebrows raised. "What difference will it make, my friend?"

"None," supplied Harding. Then he added, "As a matter of fact, it might even be better to leave them scrambled. If we strike an alien, our new captain is going to close his eyes and punch buttons at random, probably. Why shouldn't we leave the fire controls at random, too?"



"They might," Korsakov said, still grinning inanely, "even cancel out his error."

"Cut it out," I said. "You know better than that."

"Maybe you do, Maise." Harding replied, "but we don't."

My face must have telegraphed my mood, because he lurched to his feet and quickly added, "Now wait a minute, Maise. Don't get excited. You're not in command any more, so you don't have to stick to that authority line now. Oh sure, I know you're the Exec, but what the hell, Maise."

I stared at him for a moment, then said quietly, "Come on Kors. On your feet, too. Get that work done."

"Ha," said Korsakov, but he stood up.



Harding moved closer to me. "Confidentially, Maise," he said, "what do you really think?"

"About what?"

"You know—Frendon."

I shrugged. "What am I supposed to think?"

"You know as well as I do that he's a sickman."

"I told you not to use that nickname around me," I replied with annoyance. "Naturally you're going to mistrust them if you tie them up in your mind with a name like that."

"Do you trust them?"

I suddenly wasn't sure myself, so I evaded by saying, "Frendon told us he wasn't one, anyway."

"Did you expect him to tell the truth?" Korsakov sneered. "After going to the trouble of getting an auxiliary commission in the SCS? He knows what we think."

"Sickman," Harding repeated, watching me carefully. "And I'm plenty sick of having the brass hats handing us junk like that. It used to be that the worst we'd get would be fouled up equipment that we'd have to check and rewire ourselves, like these fire controls. Now they give us a fouled-up captain."

"Look," I said. "I want you to cut that talk out, Harding. That's an order. And if you think I can't pour it on you guys, just try me once."

Korsakov, who had been staring morosely into the wiring duct, turned around to face me. He had that nasty grin on his face again.

The best thing I could think of to do at that moment was to pretend I assumed that they would obey and go on back to the control room. I knew they wouldn't pay much attention to the order, but the stand had to be taken. I was still pretty much a stranger myself, but I wasn't going to let them think they could sell me their friendship at the cost of the captain's authority.

One thing I did accomplish, however, was the completion of the fire-control checkout. There was a lot of rewiring to do, but they had it finished in two hours, and everything was perfect.

Frendon went off to the city that evening, and didn't show up the next day except for about an hour. Apparently, he had been talking to a Psychological Advice officer or somebody like that, and now proceeded to interview each of us in private, quite obviously trying to gain some kind of rapport with us. It didn't

work. Even if it hadn't been so obviously what it was, it wouldn't have worked. The men couldn't stand simply having him around, and their conviction that he was a Psi Corps officer merely grew stronger.

When he left for the day, it was a relief. You couldn't like the guy, but you couldn't help but feel sorry for him—at least, I couldn't.



That evening, since we were still docked on Mars, I went to the Base service club for dinner. Sitting in a booth there I found the three of them—Harding, Spender and Korsakov. For the first time, they actually seemed happy to see me, and the usual animosity I had experienced from them had almost vanished. Of course, I knew what the reason was. They could now hate somebody else, and since I was in the same dismal situation that they were in, they generously permitted me to share their gloom.

I ordered some good Earthside bourbon, and sat down with them. Harding had apparently been making a little speech, which I had interrupted, and which he now concluded to me.

"So what do you think we can do?"

"About what?" I said.

"You know about what."

I shrugged and reached for my drink off the servidore.

"I know you don't like to talk about it, Maise," Harding said, "but we have to. Something has to be done."

I started to say something, but he raised a hand and hurried on. "I know, I know," he growled, "command authority, dignity of rank and all that sort of nonsense and tradition. Sure, I'd like to see some of it, too. But this is a hopeless case, Maise. Frenon is a sickman. Or a Psi Corps man if you prefer. Undoubtedly they have some awfully clever fellows back on Earth to do our thinking for us, but as far as I am concerned, they might as well have sent us an idiot child to run the ship in combat. Don't you understand?"

He was looking at me earnestly, the deep concern he felt plain on his face. I

already knew that Harding could be depended upon to reflect the sentiments of the group, and to say exactly what he felt. It was a useful bit of knowledge.

"I know what you mean, Harding," I said, "but—"

"Well, think about it then, man," he interrupted sharply. "You're in the same ship, you know. When we blow up, you do, too. And it isn't just that we'll all be killed with this incompetent guess-kid in command—we probably would anyway, sooner or later. But it's the waste of a good ship. You know as well as I do that it stands to reason combat can't be run as a game of blind man's bluff. And that's just what Frenon will make it. If you're going to make proper use of your military potential it takes brains, like our old skipper had."

"They say the Psi Corps training brings out the most sensitive intellectual capacities of a man," I replied, quoting from the old publicity releases on it and keeping my voice level and dispassionate. "The Central Command Authority believes that it will raise the possibility of survival from twelve to thirty-two per cent in actual combat."

Korsakov giggled, belched, hiccupped and finished his drink. "Thirty-two per cent," he said. "That is one chance in three."

"You don't understand," Harding insisted. "Maybe the guessing games and tests they run back on Earth do give the sickmen one chance in three of being right by blind guessing. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about us—on our ship in combat and not in a laboratory back on Earth. We had a captain who ran the ship well, ran it in eighty-seven separate forays with the aliens and brought us back each time. He got killed himself on the eighty-eighth. That's the sort of captain we want, Maise. A man who can use his head and who can bring the ship through eighty-odd runs safely. And that is going to take something besides guesswork. Don't forget—if you like to believe in mathematical probability statistics—our chances should be getting slender after all our combat experience. Yours, too, for that matter."

"Maybe," I hedged, "your previous captain was a Psi Corps man in disguise."

"No, he wasn't," Spender cut in calmly. "I knew him for years. We went through the same service training and served together every minute of the war. And they didn't start this sick-business until three years or so ago."

"Well, they say there are natural Psi men who don't need the training so much."

"Fairy tales," snorted Harding. "That stuff doesn't go. I don't believe it."

That was clear. And no argument would convince him otherwise, even if I had felt inclined to give him one, which I didn't.

Korsakov, the silent Russian, thoughtfully rubbed his thick hands together, and then punched the button calling for another drink. "Once in three times," he said. "It's all been proved. Out of the next three missions we go out on, we come back only once." His homely face broke into a tired grin.

I laughed with him, but Harding did not like the joke. "It isn't funny," he growled. "If they can't find a decent captain to send us, why can't they move up one of us that has at least served with a good commander in combat, and maybe learned some of his tricks from him. Not that I would want the job. But it would be better than Frendon. Anything would."

I raised my eyebrows at him skeptically. He got the idea and swore. "You know I didn't mean that I want the job, so don't go goggling your righteous eyes at me, Maise. I know my limitations, but I also know a good captain when I see one. And what do they send us? A kid who not only is a nut, but he's already so scared he—"

"Once in three times," Korsakov said loudly. He was apparently getting pretty drunk. "Their computing machines would need an aspirin to handle that situation. We go out three times but we only come back once." He turned and peered intently at me, his heavy bushy eyebrows drawn severely down and wiggling. "Puzzle: complete the figure without retracing any lines or lifting the pencil from the paper. How do we manage to go out there the third time when we haven't yet come back from the second mission, huh?"

"Shut up, Kors," Spender said without emotion. "You're getting a fixation."

"I'm not the astrogator," Korsakov muttered, laying his head down on the table. "If you want a fix on our position, you will have to call on Mr. Harding."

My bourbon was probably good, but I couldn't taste it. There was too much else to think about. I said, "Well, what are you going to do if he really is a Psi Corps man?"

"That," Harding said thoughtfully, "is the question."

"Maise, you're the Exec," Spender commented. "It's up to you to work us a replacement."

"Didn't you see his orders?" I snapped. "They're dated from Central Command Authority itself. Even if I did know somebody here in Mars Command—which I don't—it wouldn't do any good."

"He's right," Harding grumbled. "Everybody knows that once they've assigned a sickman, the only people who can get him reassigned are the sickmen themselves. Maise couldn't do anything about it unless he was a member of the Corps himself. But that settles it, though—his orders being from Central, I mean. Nobody but a sickman would have his orders cut at Central for a puny little ship like ours. It proves what we thought about him, anyway."

"I don't think it proves anything," I retorted angrily. "I don't think the question is whether or not Frendon is a sick—now you've got me saying it—a Psi Corps man. The question is whether we're going to settle down and stop whining just because we got a new CO we don't like, and that we can't do anything about. We're not running this war. They're running it back on Earth."

"We're fighting it," Spender commented, chewing on a big, raw knuckle.

Harding looked at me skeptically. "How much space-combat have you seen, Maise?"

"Six years, more or less," I told him. "I've seen plenty of the stuff. I'd just as soon let somebody else do it from now on in, but nobody asked me."

Harding grunted: "Well, tell me, have you ever served under a sick skipper?"

"No."

"Do you want to?"

"Why not? Besides—what can I do about it?"



Harding leaned back and sipped away on the straight whiskey he was drinking, watching me over the top of the glass and talking directly into it, making his voice sound muffled and sinister. "You know, Maise, sometimes you make me tired. Frankly, when they first sent us you, I didn't like it. None of us did. You were CO then, and we thought maybe you were a sickman even if you didn't look like it, and you kept sort of sticking up for the sick corps whenever it was mentioned. Well, that's all right. New officer in charge, trying to stiffen up discipline, et cetera and so forth. But now we've got Frenon for CO. You're in the same boat as the rest of us, and you still keep insisting that the sickmen are O.K. But you're a liar and you know it."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I shouted angrily. "Poison the guy?"

There was a sudden sharp hush. Even Korsakov lifted his head from the table, and looked around with bleary, bloodshot eyes. "Poison?" he said. Then, as if the effort of thinking was too much, he lay down again and muttered. "Once in three times. It's a puzzle question, men. Figure it out."

"Of course, entirely aside from the present argument," Spender stated in his cold, emotionless voice, staring into his empty glass, "but I do seem to recall an incident like that. Seems there was a ship just about like ours. About three months ago. A mechanic told me about it. Seems they got a new CO assigned to it who was obviously a sickman, just like us. Somebody managed to sneak a few of the dormant spores lying around outside the dome into him. Then the sickman really was sick."

I licked my lips. "I didn't mean that," I said. "Besides, they could always tell if you did anything like that."

"How?" asked Spender.

Harding was listening intently, watching both of us, but he didn't say anything.

"They can identify the organisms," I pointed out.

"Sure. Easy. But how do they know where he picked them up? They're laying all around outside the domes here on Mars ever since the first assault by the aliens twelve years ago. Nobody's had time to decontaminate this whole planet like they did Earth. Easiest thing in the world for a new officer on Mars to take a little sight-seeing excursion outside the domes and to be a little careless."

"There would be an epidemic if he brought back a lot of spores," I suggested.

"Besides, it's out of bounds to leave the dome."

Spender shook his head. "You can get around that out-of-bounds business without any trouble," he said. "And there are decontamination chambers in the air locks, which would clean up anything he brought in; so there would be no epidemic. The exposure would take place outside of the domes—say if he opened his helmet to smell the perfume of the famous hypnotic marspoppy, or something like that. Then he would be infected, and after that it's non-contagious. All we need is somebody to buddy up to him, and take him out there. Nature and the poppy will do the rest."

"Look," I said angrily, "cut that stuff out, Spender. If you're looking to me to disable the guy, forget about it. I won't. And I'm telling you right now that if I find anybody else does, I'll report it."



For once Spender laughed. He turned to face me, and his blue eyes were dancing in his scarred, old face. He was laughing at me and my belligerent righteousness, but the real joke, of course, was that unless somebody actually caught him talking Frendon into going out there, there wouldn't be the slightest chance of proving he had done it. It was the simplest thing in the world to sneak out and back without being observed, and we both knew it.

"All right," I said then. "Have your laugh, Spender. And you, too, Harding. I don't like the nut we've got any more than you do, but what you're talking about is mutiny and murder—"

"Oh, he wouldn't necessarily die," Harding commented thoughtfully. "If he gets the serum within a few hours of the first symptoms, he probably would be just a very sick man for about a month. Too long to take the ship out with us when we go." He grinned at me. "And as for mutiny, nobody would be using any physical force on him. Nor—when you come right down to the specific matter of his commanding his ship—would there be any moral force employed either."

"Have it any way you like," I said, standing up. "I don't care for the tone of this discussion, and I'm getting out of it."

Harding laughed again at that. "O.K., Maise," he said in a friendly tone of voice. "Sorry. I guess you're right at that." I stood glaring at him. "Come on, sit down,"

he continued. "I know there isn't anything else for you to say about it. Being Exec and all, you pretty well have to stick up for him, and we don't hold it against you. And don't worry about us doing anything to your precious Frendon."

His face darkened as he said it, though, and he swore. "Not right now, anyway. Still, that spore business isn't such a bad—"

"Let it go," Spender cut him off with a mixture of irritation and affection. "Somebody told me about it, and so I just passed it on. It isn't as easy as it sounds, because that stuff can kill, and you stand a pretty good chance of making a mistake and catching it yourself." Then he looked up at me and smiled again. "You might as well stick around with us tonight and get drunk, Maise. No place else to go."

I hesitated. It was a genuine offer of comradeship, and God knows I wanted it. I had been an outcast among these men too long. So I grinned back at him and slid down into the booth again, pressing the button for another drink. "I'll have one more, but then I think I have some work to do. Got to see a man about something."

Korsakov stirred himself. He wasn't as drunk as he seemed, I think. He raised his head and looked at me carefully for a moment, but then he mumbled, "Once in three times. How do you figure it?"



I left them soon after, located and spoke to Frendon, and then returned to the ship. The following morning at nine thirty Commander Frendon suddenly complained of a fever, and said he was going to the hospital.

A couple of hours later, we received notification of his condition from the hospital, and at the same time orders from CINCMARS.

Korsakov, eyes still bloodshot from his hangover, took the message out of the scanner and stared at it. Then he wordlessly handed it over to me.

I read it. It said that Commander Frendon had contracted the spore disease, but that his condition was satisfactory due to the speedy treatment. He would, however, be confined to the hospital for one month.

There was an empty space of three lines, and the orders followed, addressed to Frendon, to prepare to lift off planet in three days and rejoin the Seventh Fleet.

Harding, Spender and Korsakov stared at me with awe when I read them the information. Nobody said anything for a full minute.

"All right," I snapped finally. "Kors, ship out a quickie to CINCMARS and notify him that we can't join the fleet, because we don't have a captain, and the orders are to him, personally, and not the ship. Something has to be changed."

Korsakov thoughtfully pulled on his shaggy, graying eyebrows with his thick fingers. "Why don't we wait until just before lift time," he suggested. "Then they won't have time to fish us out another sickman, and you'll be the skipper, Maise. What do you think of that?"

"Lousy," I said. "A delay like that when they already must have that information kicking around somewhere might just be the thing to foul up the deal. This has to be played straight. Besides, I don't think they are likely to have any unassigned sick—I mean Psi Corps men around on Mars. Go chop out that report."

He was reluctant, but he didn't waste any time about it. And almost immediately the reply came back ordering me to report to the Base Morale Officer and account for Frendon's sudden illness, or accident, or whatever it was. In the old days, that might not have meant so much; but now, of course, the Morale Officer is the whole works.

"Well," I said then, "looks like the soup is hot. They're suspicious." Nobody said anything. They were all waiting, looking at me. "Who," I continued slowly and carefully, "do you suppose slipped Frendon the spore? They'll want to know, maybe."

"Why, Maise," Harding said garrulously, "just like Spender told us. He went outside, the dome on a sight-seeing trip and made the mistake of looking at a marspoppy without an antihypnotic color filter. He just accidentally happened to expose himself."

"He might not have gone alone," I suggested. "They'll want to know who went with him, since he probably didn't know anybody else on the Base."

Korsakov grinned hugely. "We all did, skipper," he said. "They can't court-martial the whole crew for going out of bounds with him, can they? It would take a valuable ship out of action."

"They might." I stood up, frowning. "Well, it all depends upon what Frendon told them, but, of course, he might have been drunk himself at the time, and a man like him would hesitate to admit something like that. That shouldn't be too hard to demonstrate. In which case," I added, letting them see a grin on my face, "he might have gone by himself after all, and then none of us would have to be even slightly implicated. Like for instance, if he spent some time with us drinking, and then went off by himself, how would we know where he was going?"

They all laughed with evident relief. It would be a good story. They all knew that none of them had induced Frendon to disable himself, and for them that settled the question of who did it. Their willingness to take a full share of the blame off me settled the only other question I myself was concerned about.

And this morning, when CINCMARS confirmed my acting captain status, and sent us a raw recruit for third officer replacement after moving Harding up to acting Exec, everybody was satisfied and happy.

As happy as any small group of reluctant soldiers about to go into battle is ever likely to get, anyway.



Lieutenant Maise dropped the report back on the SR Officer's desk when he had finished reading it.

"How did you like it?" the SR wanted to know.

"All right," Maise murmured. "It covers it. I just hope they can make some use of it, so that in the future the assignment of a Psi Corps officer won't be a general signal for a small-time mutiny."

"That's the whole point of making these reports. They'll work out something."

Maise nodded. "Where's Frendon now?"

"He was transferred to XXX Base three days ago, right after he left your ship. Couldn't let him run around here for a while. Not after the trouble with your crew—somebody might recognize him. Besides, he already has another assignment there."

"I think it was a pretty stupid thing," Maise grumbled. "He was so obvious. And suppose I hadn't warned him about it that night, or that I hadn't been there when the spore-poisoning idea came to a head among the crew? They might really have tried to get him outside the dome, or to get a spore culture inside. And then we'd all be sick or dead."

"Not likely, sir," the SR Officer said with a polite, knowing smile. "You see, the aliens are presumably susceptible to their own bacteriological weapons. At least we think so from the way they went about it. They want our planets, and they didn't want to have to decontaminate them when they took them over. Besides, it's practically impossible to decontaminate an entire planet, anyway."

"But we did it with Earth."

"For morale purposes, Central Authority let it be known that they were able to decontaminate it, but what actually happened was that the spores lost their effectiveness within a few years of their original seeding. I'm surprised they didn't tell you that in the beginning—" He caught himself suddenly, then shrugged and smiled again.

"Maybe you aren't supposed to be told," he continued without embarrassment. "It's sometimes hard for me to know about such things. You have no idea how confused the directives can get in an organization this large. Anyway, as you can see, your men couldn't have poisoned Frendon or themselves or anybody else with those spores. That's why we have been using that particular form of suggested violence in this unpleasant business. If, as you pointed out, something unexpected did happen, it would be absolutely harmless. Naturally," he added, "we wouldn't like to risk unnecessarily a professional actor with such a remarkably suitable physical appearance as Commander Frendon—even if the poor fellow doesn't have the slightest trace of psi ability."

Maise gaped at him for a moment as he comprehended the careful, knowledgeable planning behind the ruse, much of which had not been explained to him before in his briefings. He said, "And I guess there is still a lot more about it that I don't know."

The SR Officer nodded agreement. "Neither you nor I," he replied in bald understatement. "After all, there are some pretty intelligent men in charge of this last-ditch defense of our species, and they do keep a few of the more important things to themselves. For your own safety among your crew, I suggest that you keep this spore business equally secret."

"I don't need your advice for that," Maise said with a low voice and a wry grin on his face. But the grin vanished as he stood up to go. He hesitated and shook his head uncertainly.

"So that takes care of that," the SR concluded. "Now you're all set, aren't you?"

"All set?" Maise murmured, half to himself. "Hell, I'm just starting, and I'm scared. When the boys asked me if I trusted the intuition of the Psi Corps men, I suddenly realized that I really wasn't quite sure myself. I've studied and worked for two solid years under extraordinary teachers, and back on Earth they said I was unusually good. But now that men's lives will depend on it, it almost seems like something out of a joke book." He stopped talking and sighed. "Well, that's the way it has to be, I guess."

He turned to go, but the SR Officer called him back. "Just a minute, sir," he said. "You forgot to sign this report. You are the originating officer, you know."

"Oh, yes." Maise went back to the desk. He picked up a pen and riffled through the pages to the last one. There he signed his name, scribbling rapidly,

"Alton A. B. Maise, Acting Lieutenant SCS Commander, Psi Corps."

"There you are, lieutenant," he muttered, and started walking on back to the field where his ship was waiting.

THE END

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