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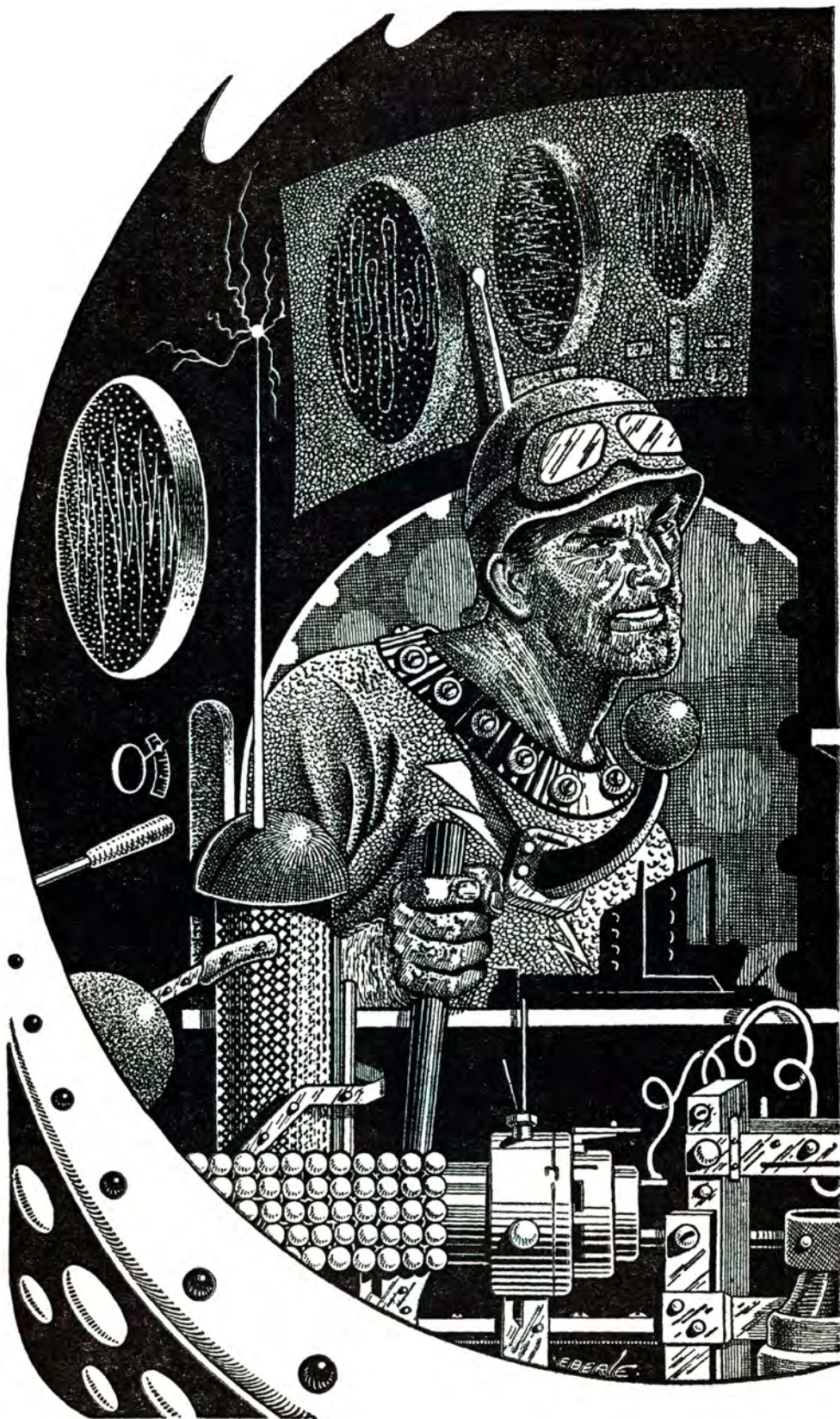
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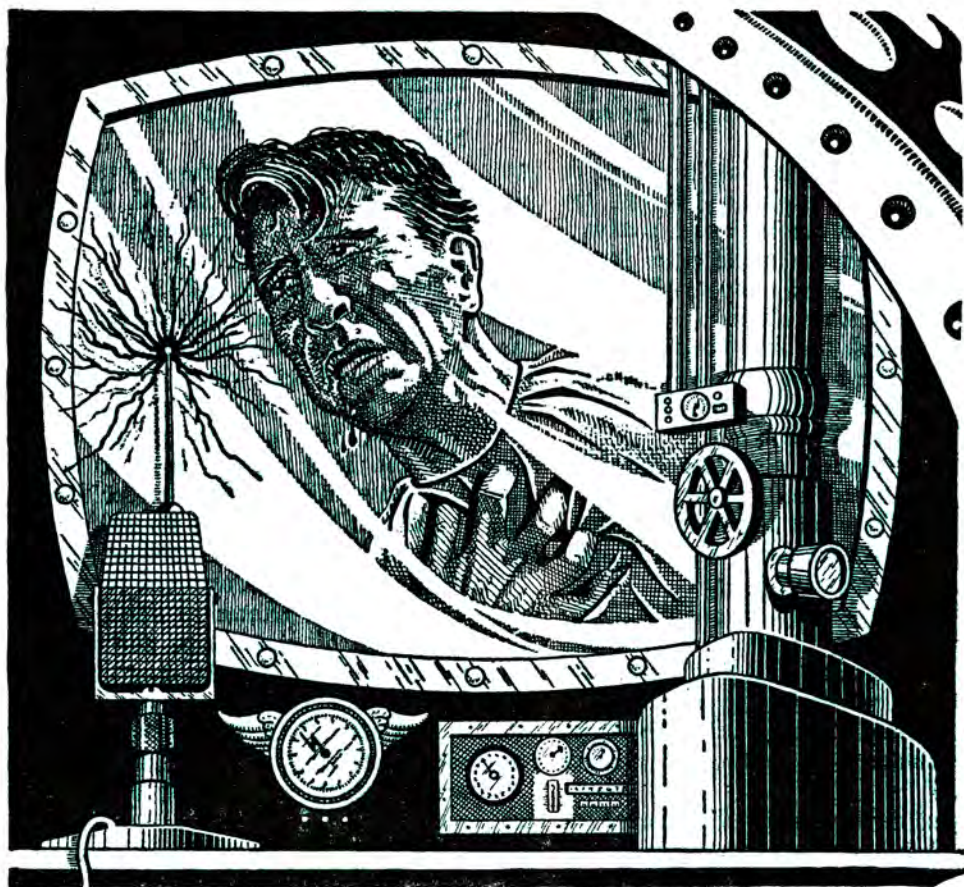
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THE PRIMUS CURSE

By BILL WESLEY

That the psychology boys had been right again, annoyed the veteran captain. He'd felt like a mechanical man all the time. Never would have believed he could send men to their death like that. And the ship! He might have lost everything!

“WELL, Skipper, we'll be in Mercury's com zone in ten hours, plus or minus a half.”

Captain Evan Grimes eyed his chief engineer sternly. “How'd you know I wouldn't have the recorder turned on, Manson? That could have cost you a week's pay.”

“Sorry, sir,” Bill Manson saluted, still smiling.

“I don't mean the salutation, your bone-head. It's been five years since the Service

banned the name Mercury for Primus, and I've heard it used at least three times on this trip.”

“I'll make out a voluntary on it.”

“Forget it. I don't like those spying recorders any more than you do, but I don't like to see a man throwing his money away either. Especially when he's on a job where he'll probably earn every dollar of it.”

Manson pulled a fade-away chair from its wall socket and pressed the green button.

He waited two seconds for the cushion to inflate, then relaxed in it. "So you really think it's going to be rough," he said casually.

Grimes swung his chair ninety degrees and studied the planet, Primus, looming ever larger on the television screen. There were small breaks in the cloud formations, but it was still too early to glimpse any of the compact little cities.

"We aren't the first group to tackle this mystery, you know, and we'd be hard put to prove we were the best, from what I've read of the reports."

The engineer scratched his carefully trimmed beard and didn't appear at all worried. "If you'd like to know how I feel about it," he grinned, "my wedding date's already set for next June."

The captain had to smile. "I attribute your optimism to your inexperience," he said. "Even assuming that we escape with our necks, what makes you think we'll have it cleared up before June? I've got a reputation for doing things the cautious way, you know."

Manson shrugged. "I've heard of that code they drum into you at Space Academy. Your ship is your life. Every speck of meteoric dust that sticks to its hide is your responsibility. And right along with the ship comes the crew. Each member a ten million dollar investment—not one hair of his head to be risked unnecessarily."

"You're a little inaccurate in the phraseology, but go on. What are you driving at?"

"Nothing special. That's all fine and dandy for escorting bug-hunters around Mars, but this is a combat mission. First one in a hundred years. Not a man in the Service has ever been on a combat mission. I'd give plenty to hear what's on the tape this time."

"What makes you think there is a tape?"

Manson pushed the red button on the chair and let it slide out from under him, deflating itself with a swoosh. "There's always a tape. This one should be a lulu. I won't be surprised to see you storm out of here in about nine hours with blood in your eye and X pistols hanging on both hips."

"And I won't be surprised to see you flying out of here head first in about two

seconds," Grimes shouted. "I'll accept your maximum estimate of ten and a half hours. That'll be soon enough to establish contact. Now get out."

Manson paused in the doorway. "It's just one forty and three," he said. "Shall I write in the journal that the engineer was commended for the fast trip?"

"We aren't in yet. All I said was get out."

The engineer scurried through the door, leaving behind a more pleased commander than he had been given reason to suspect.

One hundred and forty days to Primus! The boy had a right to gloat, Grimes thought. If it wasn't a top secret mission the trip would go into the record book.

He slid his desk into its wall socket and opened a camouflaged compartment alongside it by playing a complex tattoo with his fingers on the unmarked surface. He drew out a reel of plastic tape and a sealed envelope, then pushed the door gently, listening for the faint sound of the tumblers falling into place, locking it. He switched off the main light, leaving only a pale blue ceiling glow, and retired to his sleeping quarters.

No hurry on the tape—he was glad of that. Shouldn't take more than ten minutes. Plenty of time for a shower and a movie. Then the service could have his subconscious. At least they spared him those long-winded tapes he had heard about. A restless man sometimes had to take a sleeping pill to give the tape time to play itself out. Grimes had been around too long to let it bother him that much, but he always felt a certain resentment when they handed him one of their psychological gimmicks.

What the devil could be on this one? The orders were the clearest he had ever received. Drastic, all right, but no room for misinterpretation. Here he was Number Three Commander in the service, and they didn't trust him to come in out of the rain. Maybe Manson was trying to drop a hint. Didn't think he was capable of leading a combat mission. Maybe the whole crew was uneasy.

A hard smile forced itself across his face. They'd know in the next fifteen or twenty hours who their leader was.

It was just one-forty and six when Grimes switched off his microfilm pro-

jector and returned the movie canister to his library.

Okay, big shots, one of your little toy soldiers is ready for the psych treatment, he thought sourly as he dropped the plastic tape onto the player and positioned the governor electrodes over his bed. I'd like to have the guy by the throat who invented this gadget, he muttered.

The tape only played when the electrodes picked up radiation from the brain telling that the subject was asleep; then the information became a part of his subconscious only. If he awoke, the player simply stopped until he went back to sleep. The results were frequently amazing. Blundering old space veterans had been converted overnight into smooth diplomats for negotiating with the sensitive Venusians. Timid souls had been fired up to brave the risks of delicate landings on tiny asteroids. And now it was his turn. What kind of pep talk did the psychology brain trust think he needed? Afraid he'd make a fool of himself in front of his crew?

He switched on the player savagely and set the volume level to suit a light sleeper; then he slit open the envelope and read the few imprinted lines.

"CAPTAIN GRIMES, SPACESHIP VULCAN, EN ROUTE PRIMUS. REVIEW OF ORDERS. ESTABLISH COMMUNICATIONS WITH PRIMUS CITIES NEPHELE, ESTIVAL. DETERMINE CAUSE OF DEATHS OF PREVIOUS EXPLORERS. INVESTIGATE EXHAUSTIVELY, RUTHLESSLY. COMPLETE EXPLANATION ABSOLUTELY IMPERATIVE. YOUR SUCCESS MAY FORESTALL EXPEDITIONARY FORCE. UNITED NATIONS SERVICE HEAD-QUARTERS, PARIS."

He pushed the cold-blooded message through a discard slot and turned down the bed clothes. He hopped between the sheets and took a deep breath. Modern science was wonderful, he mused, but it hadn't yet found a substitute for a pair of clean sheets.

EXACTLY seven hours later Captain Grimes stepped into the pilot's room and nodded seriously at the men gathered

about the radio receiver. Aside from the operator there was Dr. Keith Johnson, the chief medical officer; Kai-Ling, the soft spoken pilot; and Engineer Bill Manson.

"We're still dark, sir," the radio operator explained. "Just listening to land transmissions."

Grimes noted the red light in the center of the ceiling, indicating that the service recorder was operating.

"What's the time to go?" he asked Manson.

"Half hour, sir," the engineer said, glancing at the radar scope for verification.

"Cruise between Nephele and Estival at a hundred thousand," Grimes told the pilot.

The man was still wearing part of his traditional garments and part of his service uniform. Grimes made signs at him, at the same time pointing to the red light. The pilot grinned broadly and began to shed the Oriental half of his garb on the spot.

"All right, Johnny," Grimes addressed the radio operator. "I want to talk with the Mayor of Estival and I don't want to be by-passed by any army or air force official or anybody else."

The boy's fingers flew over his controls and in a matter of seconds he had the Estival Telephone Exchange. The first operator spoke no Terranian languages at all. The second one could only speak French and German. Then the chief operator took over and filled the room with the peculiar sing song quality of a Priman speaking English.

Grimes reminded himself that the Primans had done a miraculous job in learning any Terranian tongues at all, considering the terrific strain under which the teaching had taken place. They had been taught from the air by Dr. Allen Russell, after the first Terranian exploration had ended in a hundred per cent fatalities. Then the famous doctor himself had landed and had never made it back to his ship. That had set off the clamor at home for direct action against the dark skinned people of Primus. Mobs had actually stormed the UN building in Paris demanding blood.

Grimes aroused himself with a contemptuous shrug. Blood! The imbeciles! Most of them didn't know enough about Primans to know if they even had any blood; yet they were sure it was a case of wholesale

murder. The Primans didn't want anybody to get their precious uranium ore—that was the popular belief. And he had to risk the lives of the best space crew ever assembled to satisfy their impatience or the UN would be forced into a full scale attack.

"Here's the Mayor of Estival, sir," the radio operator said.

Grimes took a handset. "Captain Grimes . . . Spaceship Vulcan . . . Mister."

He waited for the acknowledgement. The mayor's voice was high pitched and unsteady, but his command of English was more than satisfactory.

"Mister of Estival," he said. "Greetings, Captain Grimes. Will you land?"

"We . . . will . . . not . . . land . . . at . . . once. Our . . . mission . . . may . . . be . . . the . . . last . . . peaceful . . . one . . . to . . . visit . . . Primus . . . if . . . the . . . mystery . . . of . . . the . . . Terranians' . . . deaths . . . is . . . not . . . solved."

"I understand you very well, Captain. You may speak more readily with me. What can I do to help you?"

Grimes relaxed and winked encouragingly at the doctor and Manson, then turned his attention back to the radio.

"We want a complete explanation of the cause of death of all Terranians who have landed on Primus. Have you performed autopsies on any of the bodies?"

"We are not equipped to operate as you are, Captain. We have almost no medical science on Primus. We are doing what we can but so far we have discovered nothing."

"My orders are to exploit every possibility. After us will come only a task force, Mayor of Estival."

THE mayor's voice carried a certain anxiety in spite of its sing-song quality. "Of course we will try to defend ourselves, but it would be hopeless. Our civilization is much further advanced than yours in many ways, but we have none of your weapons of war. We wouldn't even know how to take care of our wounded."

"My service knows that, Mister. But we can't reason with a mob, and that's what we have against us at home. I have expert medical personnel with me and a completely equipped laboratory. We intend to experiment extensively, both on your people and

on our own. I am authorized to demand your full cooperation."

"Cooperation is freely offered, Captain, but coercion is unknown on Primus. I cannot make personal bargains for the citizens of Estival."

"You won't need to. We'll make our own bargains, and at the end of an X gun if necessary. What have you done since the last expedition was here?"

"We have given the lie detector test to every Priman over the age of twenty—that is approximately five of your years—and no one has any knowledge of the Terranians' deaths. There is nothing toxic on Primus. We have not had a disease or an infection within the memory of any of our people. We don't know what else to do."

"All right, I believe you, but that won't slow us down a bit. Now listen to our plan. We are going to land one man at a time and have him report back to the ship at short intervals. Under no circumstances must any Priman come near this man or pay any attention to him. Is that clear?"

"That is clear, Captain; but I cannot accept your proposals in the form of ultimata. The people of Primus . . ."

Captain Grimes' voice hardened. "You'll do exactly as I tell you or there won't be an Estival much longer. Is that understood?"

The reply was slow in coming. "I understand, Captain. I will have the information broadcast immediately. I suggest you give me at least one of your hours."

"Make it two. Thanks for your cooperation, Mister. Good-bye."

Grimes tossed the handset to the radio operator. "Send a recording of that conversation to the Mayor of Nephele," he said.

The boy nodded and began calling the Nephele exchange. Grimes turned to Dr. Johnson.

"I want a man for a dangerous job that will require mental alertness at all times. Who would you recommend?"

Manson spoke up before the doctor could make up his mind. "Myself, sir," he said.

Grimes dismissed the engineer without even looking at him. "Need you here, Manson. How about Fuqua?" he asked the doctor.

"I would suggest Lerner, your assistant astro-navigator. He's the healthiest specimen

aboard and genuinely courageous, I'm quite certain."

"Call Lerner on the inter-com, Johnny," Grimes told the radio operator. Then to Bill Manson he said, "Get a Mars kit ready for him, and then have one TV camera equipped with a long boy. I want to be able to watch every step Lerner takes, just as if I were alongside him."

He then strode rapidly to the pilot's desk and called Kai-Ling to a window.

Somewhere in the back of his brain something was worrying him. All along he had pictured himself leading a half dozen of his crew in a sort of battle formation from one sector of the city to the next, alert to catch a Priman sniper or uncover a booby-trap. Now here he was making plans to send one man out alone—probably to certain death. What did he expect to gain from that? Was he softening under pressure? Or was he really applying reason, as he tried to convince himself?

"I want you to hover ten feet above that end of the airstrip," he told the pilot, pointing. "We'll drop Lerner from that height. But don't go down until I tell you."

When he returned to the doctor's side, the two of them were temporarily alone. Grimes sat down heavily and leaned toward the doctor.

"This is a ticklish situation, Doc. I've got a wonderful bunch of kids on this ship, but not many mature, level heads. I'm not sure they'll see eye to eye with my tactics."

Dr. Johnson studied him for a moment. "That's always important with you, isn't it?"

Grimes half evaded the older man's eyes. "It always has been in the past, but something's different this time. I think that damn tape must have done something to me. The only thing I seem to think about now is results. To be frank, Doc, I'm a lot more worried about how we're going to get to the bottom of this business than I am about how many men we'll lose in the process. And that doesn't sound like the Grimes I used to be at all."

"You've never had a job like this one. You don't know yet how you'll react to the developments."

Grimes snorted. "Don't worry, I'll react effectively all right. The psychology boys took care of that."

"Navigator Lerner, sir."

Grimes returned the salute and looked the boy over quickly. Not more than twenty-three, tall, not the least muscular; and not the least worried, if the eyes told anything.

"This is big stuff, Lerner," Grimes said seriously. "That's why I didn't ask for a volunteer. I have to have the best man, whether he's eager or not. You'll take a radio and a direct-view explosive pistol. You'll start toward the city from where we drop you and do nothing but observe until you receive an order from me. If anything happens to your radio reception you'll return to the ship immediately. Any questions so far?"

"No, sir."

Grimes studied the confident features almost enviously. "Keep your eyes and ears open and report anything that interests you immediately. We'll follow you on TV and try to anticipate your needs." He had to bite his lip to continue the instructions. "Be sure to let us know instantly if you feel any of the usual symptoms."

Lerner's eyes remained steady as he nodded.

A few minutes later he dropped lightly to the surface of the planet and waited for his first instructions.

"Stay on the hard surface of the airstrip," Grimes ordered. "Don't kick up any dust as you walk. Don't touch anything with your exposed skin."

THE navigator started toward the buildings at the far end of the airstrip. He wore a light linen suit that looked more like an eighteenth century houri's costume than anything an inter-planetary explorer might wear. It was belted around the waist and again at the ankles, and thin enough to reveal the athletic supporter which was his only undergarment. He carried the receiver-transmitter over one shoulder and held the X pistol, with its brightly focussed target scope, ready in his hand. He had slid some "Uneasy" pills from a Mars kit under the strap of his wristwatch. They were a great help in combating nausea during the first few hours on the light planet. The UN labs were working on a special kit for use on Primus, but in the meantime the Mars kit seemed to be a satisfactory substitute. The

reduced gravitational pull of the smaller planets worked strange tricks on a man's insides and most explorers resorted freely to the pills, which they had nicknamed "Uneasy."

"There's a vegetable growth of some kind in the cracks along the airstrip here," Lerner's voice came steadily over the loud speaker.

"Don't touch it with your bare skin," Grimes said quickly. "They probably haven't used the airstrip since the last expedition from Terra. Is there any odor rising from it?"

He watched the young navigator dip into a semi-crouch. "Nothing that I can detect, sir."

"All right, got on. Go inside the UN building and see if it's empty. If there's anybody there, come out immediately. Keep talking all the time you're inside. I want a word picture of everything you see."

As Lerner approached the buildings about a half mile away, Grimes switched from a direct view to the television screen that maintained a life-size close-up. He felt a momentary urge to organize a small force and lead it up to the navigator's position. What kept him back? That was the way he had planned it before the tape had gone to work on him. What were Manson and the others thinking now?

"The photo-electric cell is still operating the door," Lerner said. "I don't see anybody around."

The television camera still showed the front of the building. There was no window through which it could scan the inside.

"Look around carefully and don't move until you're sure of yourself," Grimes ordered. "According to the reports, you should be in a lobby surrounded by glass-walled offices. Is that the picture?"

"That is correct, sir. I don't see any signs of anybody. Wait . . ." The voice stopped for a minute. Captain Grimes leaned forward tensely. Then Lerner began to speak again, hesitantly.

"I see . . . I see a costume hanging . . . hanging in one of the offices. There might be somebody there . . . probably just wearing shorts or something. I don't feel so good . . ."

"Get out of there quick," Grimes shouted.

"Yes, sir," came the reply, weakly. "There is someone here. He sees me but I don't think he . . . I don't know if he's coming down. Yes, I guess he is. He's only wearing shorts. He's . . . what did you say, Captain?"

"I said get out of there. Get out of there at once, Lerner."

"I can't make you out, sir. My head hurts. I'm coming out. I feel sick at my stomach. I . . ."

The voice trailed off and after a moment Lerner stumbled into the field of the TV camera and stood unsteadily before the big UN building. Then his scream of pain came vibrating from the speaker.

"Captain Grimes! Larsen! Somebody, stop it. For God's sake, shoot!"

He pointed his pistol excitedly in all directions, firing wildly with the high-explosive bullets. Grimes turned from the TV screen to the window, grabbing a pair of binoculars. All he could see was the staggering figure of the navigator, stabbing the space around him with his pistol and screaming over the radio.

"Stop it, Lerner. Stop that firing and screaming. There's nothing bothering you. Get back here immediately. On the double."

Even as he shouted the futile orders, Grimes saw the boy slump to the ground writhing and clutching at his insides. In five seconds it was all over. The brutal telescopic lens of the TV camera showed the blood spilling from his open mouth—there was no other motion.

Then the camera picked up the figure of the Priman as he popped into view from inside the building. There was a moment of shocked silence inside the spaceship.

Then three things happened at once.

Somebody snarled, "Get that rat!" There was a flash from a high-powered rifle and the resultant explosion of the bullet against the front of the UN building, too high to do any damage. There was the leap of the startled Priman backward through the door.

Grimes jumped to the communication panel and grabbed a handset. "Stop that firing. Fall in for inspection of firearms immediately. Lieutenant Ramsey, conduct the inspection. Place the man who fired that round in confinement. Lieutenant Fuqua,

position your gunners and give orders to fire only at my command."

He threw the handset back in its place and then grabbed it again immediately. "Start scanning the area with the TV camera. Get off that body. There's nothing new there."

"The mayor's on again," the radio operator broke in.

Grimes switched handsets and growled his greeting.

"Captain Grimes," the undulating voice said excitedly. "I have just received a call from the airfield. It seems that one of our citizens was fired upon. We cannot allow that kind of . . ."

"You'll allow anything that you can't help. One of my men is dead. I can't allow that either, but what can I do about it?" He caught the anxious expression on Dr. Johnson's face and calmed down somewhat. "I'm sorry, Mister, about the firing. The man is being punished. What did your citizen report? Did he do anything?"

"He did nothing. The Terranian entered the building without first reporting to the sanitation chambers. We will resist this sort of thing to our utmost, Captain."

"All right, you've said that before. I've got nothing against you, Mister—at least, nothing that I can prove, but if I don't get to the bottom of this trouble you'll soon find yourself putting up the most futile resistance in solar history. Now listen to me. Get everybody out of the UN building. What we're looking for must be right there. That may not be the only place, but it'll do for a starter."

"I will have the building vacated, Captain. Will you please observe the sanitation procedure? We must not have any germ diseases transmitted on Primus."

"If we pollute you we'll cure you. Quit worrying about it. Do as I tell you."

THERE was no reply. The transmission went dead. Grimes watched the TV screen which again showed the UN building. After a while three Primans scurried through the door and ran toward the city, not even glancing at the crumpled figure of the navigator.

Grimes turned to Dr. Johnson, about to suggest that he name another man for the

outside job when he noticed Bill Manson calmly adjusting the receiver-transmitter over his shoulder. He had already selected several items from the Mars kit spread out on the floor, and had slipped them into a plastic case strapped above one knee.

"All right, Manson; you win," Grimes said gratefully. "But take it easy. There's no hurry. Examine everything inside that lobby before you take two steps away from the door. Better yet, stay outside for a while. He might have picked up some poison before he went in."

"I'll do my best, Captain. Don't worry, I'll be back. Remember, I'm the boy who's getting married next June."

The captain said nothing. He felt he was hitting a new low now—sending Manson out. Still it was the only sensible thing to do.

What good would it do for him to be out there convulsing on the ground? Who could take over and run the ship any better if he did sacrifice himself?

He snapped out of it and concentrated on watching the engineer's figure retreating down the long Priman airstrip.

Except for the insignificant fungus growing out of the cracks, there was nothing of interest between the spaceship and the buildings and Manson hardly paused until he was opposite Lerner's body.

"Don't touch him," Grimes ordered. "We'll look at him later if possible. And stand around for a while before you go any further. Is there anything peculiar at all? Any small animal life? Any strange smells?"

"Just this stinking atmosphere. I don't see a thing, sir. There's no doubt that Lerner's dead."

Grimes watched the engineer stroll around aimlessly in front of the UN building for a full twenty minutes and then finally gave him permission to enter.

"I'm propping the door open," Manson said. "There's nothing in the lobby. Looks like there were tables and chairs here at one time, but they've been taken out."

The voice prattled on and Grimes tried to relax while listening, but he found himself tensing with the beginning of each sentence.

"I feel a little woozy," Manson said all of a sudden. "It's just the light gravity, I

know. I've been on Mars—it's the same sensation."

"Nevertheless, get out of that building immediately," Grimes shouted.

The engineer's figure appeared at once on the TV screen and Grimes breathed a sigh of relief. Just the same he reassured himself with a pair of binoculars that Manson was all right, as though he didn't trust the electronic image.

"How do you feel?" he asked anxiously.

"Not so good. I never really got used to walking on Mars, and I was there a dozen times or more. I never stopped taking the Uneasy pills, though I got so I used to bite 'em in half and take . . . just . . . a . . . part . . ."

"What's the matter with you?" Grimes yelled, though he could see readily enough what was the matter. The boy was doubled over in pain. His lips moved frantically in an effort to talk, but no sound came out. He tried to straighten once but a new attack seized him and he half fell to the ground. His screams of pain filled the spaceship until Grimes could stand it no longer.

"Get down there quick," he commanded the pilot. "And shut off that speaker," he hollered at the radio operator.

Now what was he doing? Risking the entire ship and crew. And for what? To try to save one man? He knew better. That would have been his reason in the old days—now he wasn't thinking of the man. He was thinking of results. He had to know what was happening. One thing kept hammering in his brain. His mission. He had a mission, and it was more important than one man or a whole crew of men.

The big ship moved silently and rapidly to the other end of the runway. Grimes had the exit port open by the time they stopped beside the twisting body of the engineer.

He grabbed the medium sized figure under the armpits and pulled his head and shoulders up inside the ship. Dr. Johnson gave a hand and they soon had Manson laid out on the floor of the pilot's room. A hypodermic appeared almost magically in the doctor's hand.

"There's nothing left to do," he said to the excited captain.

"Get away from him," Grimes shouted fiendishly, jumping forward and pushing

the doctor back. "He's got to talk. He's got to."

"My God, Captain, he's dying with pain," a third voice broke in.

Grimes looked up to see the angry face of Lieutenant Ramsey glaring at him. Behind Ramsey, several other crew members stared unbelievably from their commander's face to the tortured body on the floor.

GRIMES didn't know exactly what he was doing, but he did it effectively just the same. He shot a right cross that caught Ramsey on the jaw and knocked him senseless. Then he knelt beside his chief engineer.

"Who did it, boy? What did it? You've got to tell me. Do you understand—you've got to talk."

Manson tried. When he opened his mouth Grimes could see the blood gathering and it nearly made him sick. He thought his own insides would burst with each convulsion of the younger man's body.

"It was . . . I think it was . . ."

The voice trailed off in a new spasm that ended in a violent kicking of his arms and legs as if he were fighting off an attacking animal. Then he vomited hideously and slowly relaxed.

Grimes looked at the doctor and beyond him could see the men still glowering at him accusingly.

"It's too late now," Dr. Johnson shook his head.

"I guess we don't know any more than we did," Grimes said weakly. "Make it easy for him if you can."

He spun around and concentrated on the radar map with no real interest. A crash of something fragile caused him to turn again toward the figure on the floor. Bill Manson had knocked the needle from the doctor's hand and was struggling to speak.

Grimes leaped to his side instantly and cradled the boy's head in his hands. "Speak up, Bill."

"It was . . . the pill. I'm sure it was the pill," Manson said. He shook his head and the glaze partly left his eyes. "I only took half a pill, like I used to on Mars; I couldn't help it. . . . I was getting sick. I felt it almost at once, then it really hit me after about two minutes."

"What pill? The Uneasy pill?" Grimes couldn't believe in so simple an explanation. "They've been checked at home for years."

"Must be a slip somewhere. They weren't designed for Primus. I'll bet my life it was the pill."

"Never mind betting your life any more now. You get some rest."

He snapped to his feet. "Give him something," he told the doctor. "And take care of him. We'll analyze those pills ourselves. There's going to be hell to pay if he's right, and just this minute I'm betting that he is."

"Betting your life, Captain?"

Grimes spun to find Lieutenant Ramsey rubbing his jaw and eyeing him bitterly.

"Yes, Lieutenant, betting my life." He ran to a wall cabinet and jerked out a Mars kit and suit. He tore open the kit and threw out the Uneasy pills; then he hurriedly donned the suit. Maybe that was the answer after all, he mused grimly. Something in the atmosphere reacted with the pill. They had never been declared official for Primus. No time to worry about that now however.

He dropped to the surface of the planet and ran to the UN building. He flung himself inside and ran wildly up and down the stair, shouting like a vacation-crazed school-boy. From the first building he went on to the others, and then into the city, stopping to be sick when he felt the urge and actually enjoying the pain.

Hours later an exhausted Captain Grimes returned to his spaceship to be greeted by an apologetic and happier crew.

"The boy's going to be all right," Dr. Johnson told him. "He thinks he owes his life to the fact that he only took half a pill, but I don't know. I'd say it was just plain old guts."

"How about the pills?"

"No doubt about them, but I haven't pinned it down yet. We put a pump on Manson and found some sodium chlorate in his stomach. That's NaClO_3 , you know, and you could get it from ordinary table salt, NaCl , and ozone, O_3 , if you could combine them. The Uneasy pill has the NaCl all right, and there's plenty of ozone in the atmosphere here—you've smelled it, of course. Smells like chlorine.

Grimes nodded impatiently. "But you

couldn't get enough sodium chlorate to kill a man from one medium size pill, could you?"

"No, you couldn't. It is poisonous, however. It's used as an insecticide and as a weed-killer. But it's highly unstable and I don't know how it could have been formed from such a stable substance as sodium chloride. But we've never really had a chance to analyze this atmosphere. I'll work on it on the way back. Whatever the catalyst is, it must have allowed some other ozonides to form, and many of them are highly explosive. A man could literally have been blown to pieces from the inside. It must have been something that could produce hallucinations too, judging from Lerner's actions."

Grimes laughed bitterly, but with relief. "Man, do we owe the Primans an apology! I better draft something quick; then we'll shove off."

Lieutenant Ramsey was the only one who managed to speak.

"I insist on making out a voluntary on my actions, sir. I don't know what came over me."

The captain pushed him aside. "There'll be no voluntaries passed across my desk. I'm capable of reporting on conditions in my ship."

He went on to his private quarters.

Well, it was over, he thought wearily. The psychology boys had been right again. He had felt like a mechanical man all the time. He never would have believed he could send men out like that—and the ship! He could have lost everything.

He glanced at the tape player still in position at his bedside. Suddenly, on impulse, he dived at it and threw it open at the top. He shorted out the governor circuits and then re-wound the tape to the playing position. He had heard of commanders doing it before, and vaguely he was aware that there was an order forbidding it, but he replayed the tape anyway—this time to his conscious mind.

There was some soft, dreamy music for a couple of minutes, then a feminine voice whispered, "Sleep well, Captain Grimes. Sleep well." That was all, except for some more music.