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ROPE

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

Man is a rope... over an abyss.
—Nietsche

MAXIM BORTOFF'S eyes widened in terror.

Down at the end of the long corridor a massive door opened with metallic cries and groans. Once again he thought: *If only they would oil those hinges. I would have less time to think.* Less time to think of what might be in store for him that day. Less time to remember what they had done to him the day before.

Then, down the long corridor, the sound of approaching footsteps. Two pairs of feet. One pair, heavy and hobnailed; the other pair, in a contrapuntal rhythm of terror, the precise, almost mincing *click-click* of Yezhov's leather heels.

He leaned forward on his cot and clutched his head in sweating hands. *How appropriate*, he thought wildly, *that Yezhov should bear the same name as the infamous inquisitor of the early twentieth century.* But this Yezhov would have suavely denied any similarity in function. He was a high member of the *Gospolnauk*, the government agency scientific research. A nice, high-sounding title

for a ruthless research for new techniques that could be ruthlessly applied.

His thoughts broke off as the steps halted at another cell somewhere between the far-off door and his own barred chamber. Perhaps it was not his day! Perhaps they were going to take some other subject for experimentation. He prayed that it might be so, to a God his society had long ago abolished. In the same thought he despised himself for wishing his sufferings off onto a fellow creature.

There was a muttering of conversation in front of that other, distant cage, then the footsteps resumed. *Oh no*, he thought desperately, *not so soon again.* The terror rushed back with a surge, and he tried to push it back out of his consciousness. But the fear had long since ceased to be something of the mind only. It was a knife deep in his viscera, twisting and turning as the mingled steps grew louder.

He tried to summon up the dregs of pride and dignity, to face his tormentors like a man. But he knew he would be betrayed by the shine on his thin face, by the tiny beads of sweat forming at the hair line and creeping down his forehead, by the twitching muscle

in his left cheek. He stood up, trembling, and wiped his palms against the long gray sack they had given him to wear. Once, he had tried to tear it into strips with which to hang himself, but the tough synthetic fabric yielded not one thread to his weakened muscles.

The footsteps stopped.

With a gigantic effort of will, Maxim lifted his head, drew a deep shuddering breath, and looked toward the padded door. (They thought of everything, he had realized dully—how many weeks ago? They would not even let him try to dash his brains out against the hardness of a wall or door.) Through the small grill near the top of the door, a pair of dark, intense eyes regarded him with clinical interest. Then they turned aside to look at the invisible companion, and Maxim heard a softly spoken command. Deceptively soft, like everything else about Yezhov. The old and practiced pose of the man who had power and knew it. The assumed gentleness, the velvet glove concealing the iron hand. The bland mask of sadism, the perversion of cruelty hiding behind the antiseptic skirts of science.

The padded door opened.

Yezhov stood outside, his big, grey-thatched head tilted carelessly to one side. The penetrating eyes looked Maxim up and down thoughtfully, a Gioconda smile quirking the thin lips. Nothing but the eyes distinguished that face, but he knew it well. It hovered close to him in the laboratory, observing his twisted face, listening to his choked groans, watching the instruments attached to his scalp, chest, wrists, diaphragm. Instruments attached by wires that drew his agony from him and recorded it on dispassionate drums; endless jagged lines of ink on graph paper were the signature of pain.

Yes. He knew that face well. No twisted lips here; no cruel, beaked nose; nothing like the imaginary stereotype of the inquisitor. Just a stub-nosed, high-cheeked, broad, peasant's

face. But he had seen it often in his nightmares, too, in almost photographic detail, bland and amiable, eyebrows slightly raised in surprise at his screams of fear and hate.

"Good morning, *gospodin*," the gentle voice said. The oblique mode of greeting was not lost by the prisoner. Yezhov never called him *tovarich* or *grazhdanin*—"comrade" or "citizen." It was always *Gospodin* Bortoff—"Mister" Bortoff—with the veiled sarcasm reserved for foreigners and enemies of the state.

Maxim had tried to escape beyond the Venus version of the Iron Curtain, and thus placed himself outside the mercy or the protection of the classless state. True, the state still needed "corrective" labor battalions, even more so on Venus, where the unending cold war had been transplanted from Earth, and where the free world struggled against the omnipotent state for the rapid development of the shrouded planet.

But Maxim Bortoff was too intelligent for the chains of the hard labor gangs, for the steaming yellow muck of the vast Venusian swamps where a new Czar was attempting to erect a new Petrograd. No, he was much too intelligent to have his life wasted in a few short years of killing labor in the super-heated and humid atmosphere of the Lenin Development. And so the state, in a five minute trial devoted to denunciation without defense, had turned him over to the conditioning experiments of Yezhov's projects.

"Good morning, *gospodin*," the soft voice repeated, but the prisoner remained mute, forcing himself to stand erect and still. He suppressed an impulse to wipe his sticky palms again, but he could not control the twitching facial muscle. Two beads of sweat merged, and a drop trickled down his forehead with agonizing slowness. *Damn him*, he thought despairingly, *I'm afraid and he knows it... he knows it*. The brain wanted to be

brave and dignified, but the body, with vast eons of genetic survival remembered by every cell and every organ, blindly urged him to attack or flee... attack or flee.

There was no road of escape.

There was no mode of attack.

The first week of his confinement in the padded chamber, in an excess of unseeing, unthinking animal fear, he had bowled over Yezhov and assaulted the burly guard. The brute-faced guard, with a grunt of surprise rather than pain, had merely absorbed his frenzied blows, then neatly twisted his arm behind his back and applied pressure on his thumb until he screamed. Yezhov, pursing his lips in disapproval, had motioned to the guard, and the pressure had been lessened. But he never tried escape again.

His body jerked involuntarily as Yezhov snapped his fingers. Two hundred and fifty pounds of eager sadism entered the cell and stamped toward Maxim with booted feet.

"Good morning, comrade doctor," he stammered hastily, and moved forward slowly. "Please," he pleaded, despising himself for the abjectness of his voice. "Please. Don't let him touch me. I'll go with you quietly."

Yezhov gestured to the guard, who stopped and scowled in disappointment. *You dirty pig*, Maxim said silently, sub-vocally, *you'd like me to put up a struggle, wouldn't you?*

"Good," Yezhov smiled, revealing a rare gold tooth—one of the signs, as it had been for several generations, of a member of the ruling class in the classless state. He snapped his fingers again, motioned to the doorway.

"You will proceed first. Alexei and I will follow close behind. I think," he smiled amiably, "that you know the way to the laboratory by now. You also know—need I add?—that there are no avenues of escape."

Maxim's shoulders drooped despairingly, and he shuffled forward between the guard and the doctor. They fell in behind him, and he walked un-

steadily down the long, dim corridor. He heard a brief laugh behind him, and realized that the guard had observed how his legs trembled as he set them down, step after reluctant step.

At the massive door to the cell-row, they paused while the guard drew a magnetized sliver of notched steel and inserted it in a minute slit in the center of the door. It swung open on shrill hinges, and Maxim shuddered. Yezhov noticed his reaction, and there was a glint of amusement in his dark eyes.

"Ah yes," he murmured casually, as if to an entering guest, "we must substitute something non-metallic for those hinges. Most unfortunately, there is air-conditioning only on one side of the door." He wrinkled his nose in distaste as a rank and humid gust of cell-block air puffed past them. "The corrosive atmosphere of this planet," he continued didactically, "has a greedy affinity for metals."

On the other side of the door, the side that Maxim had come to dread, Yezhov motioned courteously to him to proceed to the right. He hesitated, and the huge guard put one hand in the small of his back and shoved. It came without warning, and he realized how weak his knees were as he went sprawling to the floor. A second guard, seated to one side of the door, looked up briefly from his state-approved and state-printed copy of *Interplanetary Dialectics*, and snickered. Yezhov frowned disapprovingly.

"Patience, patience, Alexei." He wagged a finger at the guard. "How many times must I remind you that this is a scientific research center, not a prison." He sighed and murmured to himself. "They *will* send me these former prison guards from Earth."

Maxim picked himself up shakily, and the three men continued toward their destination in the west wing of the low, sprawling structure. Fluorescent lights provided heatless illumination, and air-conditioning vents

in the ceiling breathed out cool, dry air that rapidly drew the moisture from his damp, tangled hair, and helped to banish the stickiness from his palms. But his stomach still churned and his heart pounded rapidly. Once, as a child, he had held an injured bird in his hands and felt its fiercely rapid heart-beat, more like a continuous pulsation than a succession of discrete thumps. It seemed now that the frightened creature was huddled behind his rib box, fluttering with terror.

Maxim felt the blood drain from his face.

They had rounded another corner, and there was the laboratory before him. The long porcelain table with the recording instruments crouching eagerly. The heavy oak chair, bolted to the floor, waiting to embrace him, waiting to pinion him with sweat-stained straps. He stumbled over the threshold, his arms and legs turned to wax.

What will it be this time? he wondered dully, almost depersonalized, as if it were going to happen to someone else. *What will it be today? The dolorimeter, with its invisible beams of infrared rays playing on black-painted spots on his body? Or would it be high voltage currents applied to sensory nerve tracts?* He wanted to shriek to his tormentor not to do those things again, but realized that he preferred the devil known to the devil unknown.

It seemed to Maxim that he had paused in the doorway only a brief moment while the anguished thoughts raced through his mind. But the guard had seized his arms from behind and was now propelling him—for he had no strength or will of his own—toward the waiting chair. Yezhov followed behind anxiously, almost solicitously. Then Maxim heard a quick, sharp intake of breath. His eyes looked apathetically at Yezhov, then followed the latter's surprised gaze toward the far corner of the labora-

tory. The guard looked up, too, and suddenly relaxed his crushing grip. Thus unexpectedly released, Maxim lurched weakly forward a few steps and collapsed gratefully on a porcelainized bench placed against the nearest wall. With the faintest glimmer of interest, he surveyed the newcomer at the other end of the room.

The visitor arose gracefully from his chair, while Yezhov and Alexei seemed frozen in positions of military attention. He could see, too, that sundry technicians and a white-garbed female nurse were standing at their instrument-cluttered benches in respectful silence.

Maxim closed his eyes wearily. *Another and better—or worse—inquisitor?* he wondered gloomily. *Some new scientist from Earth, with better techniques?* Then Yezhov spoke, and Maxim's eyes snapped open again at the flustered tone of respect.

"Welcome, comrade commissar," he exclaimed eagerly. "Welcome to Gospolnauk, Venus. I was not informed of your coming, or of your arrival here. Needless to say," Yezhov continued apologetically, "we would have prepared a suitable reception."

"Of course." The visitor lit a long cigarette, drew deeply, and exhaled, speaking through a fragrant cloud of smoke. A vent drew long, tenuous streamers in Maxim's direction, and he sniffed hungrily at the fragrance of almost-forgotten terrestrial tobacco. The commissar advanced to within a few feet and stared down at him with amused curiosity. Over the left breast of his severely simple, black uniform gleamed a silver hammer-and-sickle, enclosed by a ring of small stars.

"I did not want nor expect a lavish reception," the newcomer continued absently as he studied the prisoner. "In any case, the Central Committee does not announce in advance the comings and goings of its deputies. And banquets are not justified on a

new planet where good food is a luxury. Do you realize the sacrifices made in the mother country to keep the Venus colonies flourishing?"

"Of course, Comrade Grushenko," replied Yezhov hurriedly. "It is just that we would have—"

Grushenko waved his hand. "Who is this man?" he queried abruptly, stabbing his long cigarette in Maxim's direction. "One of your Pavlovian dogs?"

"His name is Maxim Bortoff, comrade commissar." Yezhov changed the subject with relief. "He is the latest subject of our forcing techniques, in which we use scientifically applied pain."

"Ah yes, pain." Grushenko smirked knowingly. "Judiciously applied, it can produce answers." The smile vanished from his thin, pallid features. "May I inquire what answers you expect to get from this subject?" There was a sharpness in his tone that aroused a faint glimmer of unreasoning hope in the man on the bench. Could it be that the visitor from Earth disapproved? Maxim looked up at the elegant, black-clad form with hopeful eyes.

Yezhov frowned slightly, and seemed at a loss for words. "Sir, we are not looking for answers to political questions. It is something quite different."

"Indeed?" Grushenko arched one eyebrow quizzically.

"Yes, comrade." Yezhov's voice grew firmer as he plunged into his subject. "We are, in a word, attempting to force mental growth."

Grushenko flicked ash from his long cigarette, and stared reflectively at the glowing end. He spoke softly, almost to himself. "Mental growth? My dear comrade doctor, I myself am a physician, specializing in neurology. Pain is inhibiting. Since when has it encouraged intellectual development?"

"We are using a combined technique," Yezhov continued doggedly.

"As comrade commissar well knows, there are several psychic energizers in existence today, descendants and offshoots of iproniazid, which stimulate the higher cerebral functions.

"This man Bortoff, although an enemy of the state, possesses an unusually high intelligence quotient, so we find him ideal for our experiments. Naturally, we first extracted all available information as to his political views, and as to any friends or relatives who entertain similar ideas inimical to the people's interplanetary union."

"Naturally." Grushenko looked at Maxim through half-closed eyes. He dropped the cigarette to the floor, and very slowly and deliberately crushed out the glowing ember with his foot. "But if this man is of such high intelligence, why has he not been quickly re-conditioned into a useful tool of the state?"

"He shall, he shall," Yezhov answered hurriedly, wiping his brow. "His brain shall certainly be salvaged for useful tasks. Meanwhile, we are attempting to determine the upper limit of those tasks." He walked to the long table in front of the chair so terribly familiar to Maxim, and pointed to an apparatus of tubes and lenses.

"Comrade commissar will note this device. It is called a dolorimeter, and was first used by the Americans in the middle of the twentieth century to measure gradations in pain."

The tall, black-clad man frowned slightly.

"Naturally," Yezhov continued hastily, "our own scientists improved on it greatly, so that it is practically a completely new instrument, highly simplified and most useful."

"Naturally." Grushenko shrugged indifferently and lit another cigarette. "Please continue, but be brief."

Yezhov wiped his forehead again. "Of course. Of course. The device emits pure infrared radiation of any desired intensity, which can be focused on a given part of the subject's

body. The spot is painted black for more complete absorption of the heat rays.

"Now, the early experimenters with pain found that the sensation could be broken down into twenty-one fairly distinct steps. They consolidated these steps in twos to make a scale ranging from zero to ten and one-half *dols*, or units of pain. We, on the other hand, have multiplied by five to produce approximately one hundred degrees, making computations possible on a percentage basis."

"And what," Grushenko broke in impatiently, blowing smoke through his thin nostrils, "have you accomplished with your improved instrument and scale?"

"We have been testing the subject's ability to think clearly under intense pain," Yezhov hurried on. "This could be a quality of great value to the people's state. In addition, we have been attempting to force the subject to use his cerebral capacity to the utmost. We have first given the subject a powerful psychic energizer, then, little by little, raised the dolorimeter to the hundredth degree, or ten and one-half *dols*, a level of pain reached only in some cases of childbirth. Despite popular conceptions, there is an upper limit to pain, beyond which one cannot go. Crude torture, which involves the emotional complications produced by seeing one's own blood and shattered limbs, really does not go beyond the neater effects produced by the dolorimeter." Yezhov began walking back and forth as he warmed to his subject.

"And so, urged on by the pain, and supported by the euphoric drugs, the subject has solved, mentally, progressively more complex tasks."

Maxim cautiously felt the raw, tender spots on his arms and the ugly, broken blister on his forehead. Oh yes, he solved their problems. He had been a mathematician before he fell afoul of the state, and had attempted to flee to the free world's settlement.

The last problem they had given him, yesterday, was one in calculus, an integration. As the needle on the scale rose higher and higher, they had urged him to solve the equation, promising relief when he gave the correct answer. His brain had seemed aflame, and the images wavered in his mind's eye. And then suddenly there was a clarity that matched the pain in intensity—a pain so out of proportion to the small circle on his forehead. The answer sprang full-fledged into his mind, as Kekule reported having seen the famous benzene ring in a burst of illumination two centuries ago.

He was dimly aware of Yezhov's precise voice, then Grushenko's imperious tone broke in, wrenching his mind back to the present. The commissar had seated himself on a laboratory stool, arms folded, and was staring curiously at him.

"Very interesting. But what started you on this line of investigation?"

Yezhov hesitated, then plunged on. "There was a book written by a man named Heard, in the nineteen-thirties, I believe, in which he voiced unusual opinions about the nature of both sex and pain in human evolution. Naturally, we could not waste a subject's lifetime in experimental sex sublimation, so we decided to concentrate on pain for quicker results.

"This writer maintained that pain was a raw, evolutionary force. He pointed out that both sensitivity and intensity of pain seemed greater in higher types of men. He remarked, of course, how certain ascetics—I believe, they called them yogis—tried to raise the level of consciousness through self-inflicted pain. But their methods were too crude, and the psychic energy released was too great to be controlled and directed. However, they did not have the chemical agents we have today, chemicals which increase mental energy.

"It has also been a commonplace in psychology for over a century that

man uses only a fraction of his potential brain power. It is this potential that we have been trying to raise in the subject." Yezhov paused and drew a deep breath. "That, comrade commissar, is the gist of our experiments."

Grushenko, quite suddenly, threw back his head and laughed. Yezhov's shocked expression seemed only to amuse him more. The laugh stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and the commissar stood up, a frown creasing his brow. He jabbed his cigarette viciously toward Yezhov.

"Comrade," he said in icy tones, "I could almost find you guilty of bourgeois mysticism. You base your experiments on the ramblings of a twentieth century anglo-saxon mystic, and prate vaguely of unused potentialities—that old cliché of vitalists and fuzzy-brained religionists of a bygone century." Yezhov looked stunned, and his face turned white as the voice rose in anger.

"Return to Pavlov, return to the materialistic bases! There is only inhibition and excitation, nothing more. And the so-called unused portions of the brain are only excess tissue, a safety factor typically supplied by what the bourgeois personify as 'nature.' One might think, comrade doctor," he sneered, "that you had been educated in the hormic philosophy of MacDougall and Driesch."

Yezhov stood with head bowed and shoulders sagging under the tirade. Then Grushenko approached him and slapped him on the shoulder. "Come now," he said almost good-naturedly, "I do not intend to report you to the central science committee for deviationism. I do, however, require your assistance in an urgent experiment of my own." He glanced with narrowed eyes in Maxim's direction. "Your highly intelligent guinea pig will do admirably."

Maxim's hope died then, and with it he died a little death. So there would be no relief from the experiments af-

ter all. He looked away apathetically as the bulky figure of the guard came closer and stood glowering over him, cutting off any thoughts of a futile dash to the door. He stared through a haze of fatigue as the commissar drew Yezhov off to one side and talked in low but earnest tones. Then there were instructions to three men, apparently his assistants, who left the laboratory and returned shortly, wheeling in some kind of heavy machine with a large, glass screen resembling a radarscope.

Maxim, half listening, half occupied with his own thoughts—thoughts racing round and round like rats on a wheel—heard snatches of conversation between the two men, while laboratory assistants scuttled about on mysterious tasks.

"...have a fully equipped operating room? I will need..."

And—

"...yes, yes, comrade Grushenko. We will prepare him at once..."

His heart began to leap again, pounding in double time, as if it would leap through his chest, and the stiletto of panic twisted in his stomach.

The white-clad female nurse was approaching with a hypodermic.

The blind animal urge returned again, and he lurched to his feet, his wild eyes darting frantically toward the doorway. The guard stepped forward and drove home a heavy fist to his solar plexus. He gasped, doubled up, and fell back to the bench. Yezhov snapped an angry command, and the red-faced guard, breathing heavily, stepped back reluctantly.

Yezhov and Grushenko stood over him. He looked up at them through a haze of pain, and realized that, more than the eager gleam in his old tormentor's dark eyes, he dreaded the heavy-lidded, dispassionate stare of the visitor. He was vaguely aware that the nurse was rolling back the sleeve of his garment. Then a coolness on his arm, and the pungent odor of anti-

septic. And finally the sharp bite of the needle and the dull ache as it plunged through skin and underlying muscle. A soothing haze settled over him, deepening through shades of gray to velvety blackness.

He slept.

The more mentally active one is, the less he is capable of pain. The aim must be not to get rid of pain, but to achieve a new quality and intensity of awareness...

—G. F. Heard

In the small but well-equipped operating room, in a glareless pool of polarized light, Yezhov and Grushenko stood over the table, now white-gowned, capped and masked. Yezhov watched entranced, as, guided by three-dimensional roentgen-grams of the victim, his superior delicately guided fine wires through a one-inch hole in the occipital region. Then followed two shiny metallic capsules, the size of peas, to which the other ends of the filaments were attached.

Grushenko stepped back, surveyed his handiwork, and sighed. The two-hour operation was complete. He removed his mask and motioned to a subordinate to finish the minor task of closing the cavity and suturing the scalp back in place. He left the operating room, trailed by Yezhov. Divesting themselves of their surgical gowns, they walked down a corridor, entered Yezhov's lavishly furnished private cubicle, and closed the door.

Grushenko lit a long cigarette, seated himself in a leather chair, and smoked in reflective silence. Yezhov restrained his impatient curiosity as long as he could, then ventured timidly: "If Comrade Grushenko would care to explain the nature of this operation?"

Grushenko looked up. "What? Oh yes. Of course. I forget that you are not a neurologist." He leaned back and blew a perfect smoke ring.

"Well. To begin. It is well known

that specific mental and physical functions correspond with more or less definite regions of the brain. True, integrating areas and accessory clusters of neurones complicate the picture and make for ill-defined boundaries. Nevertheless, materialistic neurology tells us that every function, every thought, must be associated with a group or chain of neurones. The basis of all thinking is physical. So it is and so it must be.

"But neurologists began to realize, toward the middle of the twentieth century, that feeling-tone must also be localized. It was found that the brain does have definite loci of pleasure and pain, and these were mapped out."

The commissar viewed Yezhov through a cloud of smoke. "You follow me thus far?"

"Of course, Comrade Grushenko." Yezhov's eyes narrowed. "I begin to see the light."

"To be sure. Now, these loci of pain and pleasure were finally mapped out in the reticular areas of the mid-brain, and with such precision that animals could be subjected to controlled experiment.

"A fine wire could be inserted into the pleasure center of the animal, and a minute electric stimulus be applied. A small treadle was placed in the animal's cage, providing a voluntary switch. By accident, the creature soon found that stepping on the treadle was rewarded by a wave of what must have been intense pleasure.

"The strongest reward, or pleasure, came from stimulation of areas of the hypothalamus and certain mid-brain nuclei—regions which were centers for control of digestive, sexual, and other processes. Animals with electrodes in these areas would stimulate themselves up to five thousand times an hour, the frequency apparently being limited only by the resting periods of the nerve fibers involved.

"Electric stimulation of these regions actually seemed to be more re-

warding to the animals than real food. Hungry rats, for example, ran faster to reach the treadle than they did to reach food. Indeed, a hungry animal often ignored its favorite food in favor of the synthetic pleasure of stimulating itself electrically.

"The experiments were finally extended with success to monkeys, and then"—Grushenko stood up suddenly, a gleam of fanaticism in his eyes—"to the highest primate: man. We have experimented in our terrestrial laboratories with enemies of the state, producing the purest pleasure or pain at will. You see?"

"Of course," Yezhov murmured. "The perfect method of conditioning! The ultimate in Pavlovian technique. Allow me to congratulate you, comrade. This achievement is enormous."

Grushenko methodically ground out his cigarette in an ash tray. "Thank you," he smiled. "Although the achievement is not entirely mine. The electronics group of the central science committee developed the remote-control and signalling power packs which you saw me insert in the subject's cranium."

Yezhov's jaw dropped. "Remote control, comrade?"

"Naturally." Grushenko gestured grandly. "The ultimate achievement in individual control! To be sure, so far the range of the receiving and sending capsules is only fifty miles. But for the present that is sufficient for our purposes."

"To be sure," Yezhov murmured, uncomprehending. Grushenko sat down opposite him and tapped him confidentially on the knee.

"How far away is the western world's settlement?"

"About forty miles."

"Leaving ten miles for the interior radius of the colony. Question number two! What distinguished visitor from the Earth, his country still uncommitted to the ideological struggle,

is due to land at the enemy's spaceport in two weeks?"

"Why, Pandit Gombaria of the Indian Federation." Yezhov's eyes widened.

"Just so." Grushenko nodded and smiled. "Final question: What would be the reaction of the Indian Federation if some man in the welcoming crowd should shoot the Pandit? Of course, some enraged bystander would in turn kill the foul assassin, and on the body would be found papers identifying him as a West European. What then, my dear Yezhov?"

"Of course," breathed Yezhov.

"We have the perfect instrument at hand," the commissar continued triumphantly. "His every action is controllable from a distance. His obedience will be rewarded by intense pleasure. His failure or defiance, by inescapable pain. Short of absolute unconsciousness or death, he cannot avoid our far-flung commands."

He threw back his head and laughed.

"Behold Maxim Bortoff, the Automatic Man!"

Maxim Bortoff stood uneasily at the northern outskirts of Venusberg.

Where his own earlier efforts had failed, he now stood at the door of freedom by Grushenko's design.

But the terrible irony was, that he was not free. They had explained that to him very carefully, with words. With words—and with demonstrations.

Thirty-five miles away from the hated people's settlement, and thirty-five miles from the dreaded laboratories of Yezhov, he was still their prisoner. Prisoner, and agent too, assigned to a loathsome task. To be an assassin, not through principle or fanaticism or even personal gain, but through a degrading compulsion from within, through a surgical-electronic control that made him half

man, half machine—that was the horror of it.

A chill touched his spine as he peered vainly back in the direction from which he had come, but his two silent escorts had vanished into the hot, humid, Venusian night. The high, unbroken cloud barrier, the eternal white shroud that veiled the planet's surface from terrestrial telescopes, let through no gleam of starlight. Blackness lay behind him, covering up the long, slogging route through riotous plant growth and over steaming, quaking bog-land.

Ahead gleamed the lights of Venusberg, the sprawling, growing town started two decades ago by the free nations of Earth. A small piece of each of some dozen nations—those that could afford the cost of transporting men and materials to another planet. Thanks to Heisenberg's unified field theory in 1958, anti-gravity had at last replaced chemical propellants a century later, but the energy consumption was enormous.

Maxim pumped will power into his aching legs and trudged on toward the friendly lights—the goal he had sought so eagerly long weeks ago—the goal that now held dread for him. The state had infallible ways of twisting or crushing aspirations that were not in accord with its needs.

They had prepared him thoroughly for his mission. During the two weeks of recuperation from the operation, he had been pampered like the highest favorite of the classless society. The best of food, daily injections of vitamins and hormones and analeptics, and spaced periods of carefully supervised exercise. And the spaced demonstrations of their control over him. By twisting a knob, they had suffused his body with sheer pleasure.

"This is your reward for faithful service," they smiled.

A slight turn of another knob, and he was racked with agony, greater, they explained, than the withdrawal

agony of old-time drug addicts.

"That is your punishment for disobedience," they threatened.

They had primed his mind with information needed to get about in the enemy's colony. Like all of the professional class, he spoke excellent English; like most of them, he also knew Interlingua. His pockets contained the bills and coins of the free world settlement, and papers showing he was a citizen of the West European Union. And they had given him the location of a small hotel—his contact. Their agents were everywhere. They took pains to impress that on him.

His numbed feet felt a sudden change in the firmness of the ground, and he realized he was now on concrete. He shuffled forward between dark walls of an alley, became bolder as street light moved to meet him. He started as something ran across his path: a rat. Man's ancient, furtive competitor had managed to find its way even to a new planet, hiding in some cargo.

He hesitated as he emerged from the alley into the lights of the street. At this late hour there were still strollers, mostly space-crews, in all stages of intoxication, looking for another tavern or one of the two hundred women of convenience imported by the provisional government.

Maxim cast a furtive glance at his reflection in a darkened store window, and saw an average-looking man with a strong, plain face and dark black hair, dressed in cheap clothes that marked him as a grease-monkey from the spaceport, or perhaps a low-grade clerical worker. Nothing to indicate him to any passerby as an enemy from the other camp.

Drawing a deep breath, he walked casually across the street and entered the lobby of the Old World Hotel.

G r u s h e n k o, seated at the console of dials at the base of the giant screen, looked at his watch. "Our

robot should be there by now," he said to Yezhov, laughing briefly. He motioned his aide to step forward. "Observe." He threw a small switch, and a tiny red light appeared in the center of the screen. "Perfect reception," he murmured with satisfaction, and turned a dial. The dot moved to the top of the screen, paused briefly, and crept a fraction of a centimeter downward.

"That is Bortoff?" Yezhov wondered aloud.

"Quite so. His position at the top of the screen corresponds with his position now in or near the hotel designated. At the bottom of the screen is the location of the spaceport, due south, where he has his rendezvous with destiny. Each square on the grid corresponds approximately with one block in Venusberg. A straight line down the center leads directly from the hotel to the port. As he moves, so moves the light. Any excursions into side streets, or any attempt to double back from the station at the spaceport, will be immediately visible to us."

Yezhov smiled thinly. "And, of course, any deviation from the assigned path tomorrow will be met by corrective measures."

"Of course." Grushenko leaned back in his chair and stretched contentedly like a great black cat. "Naturally, he will also have a companion when he sets out on his mission. We shall also receive reports from a movable short-wave transmitter. We who are trained for the central committee overlook nothing!" He looked up at Yezhov's admiring face and smiled. "You find it strange that an outstanding surgeon should also play the part of special agent. But there are no arbitrary, fixed lines in the inner circle of the party. We do what we are assigned."

He pointed to two dials at the right of the console. "Those two dials, comrade, replace the so-called free will of our emissary. The green dial provides

his reward; the red one will punish him for failure or disobedience." He lit a cigarette, inhaled with satisfaction, and closed his eyes.

"In any case," he mused, "after the arrival of the Pandit tomorrow, he will be beyond pain and pleasure..."

Maxim stepped through the revolving door.

Inside, the sticky heat of the Venusian night was replaced by a blast of cool, dry air. Even in this second-rate hotel, he wondered, they had air-conditioning. He walked across the dingy carpeting and stood before the desk. The clerk turned around. Maxim dried his palms nervously against his trousers and wet his lips.

"I would like a room," he said in a low voice. To himself: *I wonder if my English is good enough. He might detect a slight accent.* The clerk smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Maxim switched to Interlingua and repeated his request.

"Of course. Sorry, sir, but I do not speak English. Myself, I am from France." He turned the registry book around and slid it across the desk to Maxim. "Does the gentleman desire a room with bath?" Maxim nodded assent, and signed the book with slightly trembling fingers. He caught himself as he began to write in his native Slavic script, and signed his new name in carefully formed roman letters: "Max Braun."

The clerk handed him his key. Room 202 on the second floor.

"If the gentleman would like cooling refreshment, there is an adequate bar through the door on the far right."

Maxim looked up, startled. "What? Oh yes, a drink might be nice at that." He strolled casually toward the entrance to the bar, trying to look natural, but the uneasiness was a gnawing thing at the base of his skull. As he walked across the lobby, he glanced anxiously from the corners of his eyes.

A lanky blond man in space-crew uniform, sitting in a leatherette easy chair, reading a newspaper. *Perhaps he is one of them.* He realized he should have thought "one of us," with a shock of despair, understanding for the first time his status as an outcast between two worlds, excommunicated by one and not acceptable by the other. The blond man looked up casually from his newspaper, and Maxim quickly averted his eyes.

He pushed open the swinging door and walked into a subdued hubbub of gay voices and light-hearted laughter. Toward the dimly lighted rear, a garishly illuminated, glass-fronted apparatus was beating out the wildly complicated rhythm of the latest Brazilian craze. He walked self-consciously past a long row of unheeding backs, and gratefully eased himself into an unoccupied booth.

A waiter approached his table, smiling pleasantly. "Good evening," he said in Interlingua, "what will you have to drink?" A German accent was very obvious. Maxim looked quickly at the price list on the table, painfully aware of his unfamiliarity with mixed drinks.

"Vodka," he replied, and instantly wondered if he had made a mistake. The waiter raised one eyebrow.

"Straight?"

"Yes. That's it, straight, with some water," he stammered. The waiter shrugged and departed, then returned a minute later with the vodka and water. Maxim handed him a bill and told him to keep the change. He became effusive.

"Thank you, sir," he smiled. "I do not remember seeing you here before, but you will find it very friendly. Very *gemuetlich*, very nice. You will like it here." He picked up his tray and left.

Maxim tasted his vodka tentatively, then swallowed hungrily. Warmth spread from his stomach out into his veins. For the first time he relaxed, felt almost good. *Perhaps, he*

thought, *they will release me if I perform this mission successfully.* He quickly suppressed the cold voice inside that told him he would never be free. The unaccustomed liquor numbed his doubts, and he leaned back in his seat with closed eyes, dreaming of a life where one could do as he pleased, and even a criminal was still a person. As he mused, he became aware of a rustling sound opposite him, and the table trembled slightly. His nostrils inhaled an exotic, heady perfume.

He was no longer alone.

He opened his eyes slowly, then widened them quickly at the stunning brunette who sat across the table from him. He looked her over slowly, felt himself redden at the sight of rounded breasts almost completely uncovered. It was a long time since he had been in the presence of so beautiful a woman. The sight of her, his own youth, the perfume, the vodka, all combined to send a pleasurable tingle through his body. She smiled at him.

"Hello, dear," she whispered, leaning forward.

"Good evening," he replied, and essayed a timid smile. And then suddenly he felt as though he had stepped into an icy shower. The pleasant illusion of safe isolation collapsed like a punctured balloon. The dimness of the bar became a menacing thing. The coolness became a chill that reached his marrow. A tinkling laugh from somewhere at the bar became a sound of mockery.

He knew what was wrong—terribly wrong. "*Zdrastvuy, moy dorogoy,*" she had said.

She had greeted him in his native tongue.

He looked across at her with sick eyes. "You, too?" he mumbled.

"What do you mean?" Sharply.

"Another guard, another jailer?" He smiled feebly.

She put a hand gently on his, leaned forward as if to murmur an

endearment. "Keep your voice down," she hissed. Then the German waiter approached the table, and she was suddenly smiling and charming again. "A Venus gin mist," she said casually.

The waiter returned with her tall, frosty drink, and Maxim paid. She sipped daintily through a straw, watching him intently. Then he saw her open her glittering purse and fumble inside. He heard a faint click, the barest sound of a hum, and she was bent over the handbag, her lips moving in a whisper, briefly. Then the purse was snapped shut, and she was once more talking to him, the carefully casual, preliminary chit-chat of the typical pick-up.

Miles away, Grushenko smilingly removed a set of earphones and turned to the instrument panel. "It is time for another demonstration," he remarked to Yezhov his hand poised over the red dial.

Maxim tossed off another vodka, recklessly, seeking numbness, trying to turn off thought. He saw that his companion had set down her glass, was looking anxiously at a jeweled wrist watch. He glanced at his own: one a.m. He stood up, swaying slightly.

"Tired," he mumbled. "Better go to bed now." He bowed with exaggerated courtesy. "If you will excuse me, Please?" But he felt suddenly weak, collapse suddenly back on his seat. A sharp pang of fear shot through the fog of alcohol that clouded his brain.

She was looking at him strangely—looking at him with that gleam of clinical interest he had seen before in others. "Now," she whispered softly, and—it—began.

There was a dull ache at the base of his skull, where he knew two seeds of horror lay. The ache radiated sharply, became a pain that cut through the fog like a rapier. A million tiny insects crawled over his

skin. His forehead broke out in cold sweat. He doubled up and leaned forward, and became agonizingly sick. He groaned and cradled his head desperately in his arms. He became dimly aware that the waiter was at the table, talking anxiously to his companion. "I think he has had a little too much," he heard her laugh briefly. "Help me get him out of here." Then he was aware of strong arms supporting him, and he was stumbling through a red mist, out of the bar and through the empty lobby. He was dimly conscious, not caring, that he was being helped up a flight of steps to the second floor. A key turned in a lock, and he was in his room, let down gently on a bed.

She turned around and pressed a bill smilingly into the ready hand of a porter. "I think I better stay with my friend until he is feeling better," she murmured. The porter smirked knowingly, pocketed the bill, and left. She turned the key in the lock, came to the bedside and stood over Maxim, observing him dispassionately.

He writhed on the bed, groaning, buried his head in the pillow, and fought desperately. Then, quite suddenly there was a lifting of enormous pressure, a rapid ebbing of the agony. He turned over on his back and relaxed in utter exhaustion, bathed in sweat. He looked up at his companion with bloodshot eyes, and the coldly beautiful face swam into focus. "Please, Anya," he whispered hoarsely, "get me a glass of water."

She started, her eyes narrowing, then went into the bathroom and returned with a tumbler of water. She supported his head as he drank greedily.

"You know my name," she murmured curiously. "How did you know? Or did they tell you back at headquarters?"

He shook his head and waved her away, falling back on the pillow in

relief. "No, they didn't tell me," he muttered briefly, then looked at her again with eyes that were suddenly clear and bright. He stared incredulously.

Slowly, deliberately, she was removing her clothing.

She saw his stare, and returned it brazenly, smiling. "Every punishment must be coupled with reward," she said in low, gentle tones, "otherwise the conditioning is not complete."

He sat up in disbelief. "If you really think that after all I have just been through—"

But then she had walked to the wall ignoring his protest, and threw the light switch. By the faint light of the hotel's neon sign, filtering through the curtained window, he saw her drop the last garment.

Grushenko's hand reached for the green dial. He looked up at Yezhov, raising a cynical eyebrow. The dial turned, one quarter of the way.

Maxim stared through the gloom of the bedroom as the figure approached his bed, dim reflections of red and green light glimmering softly on ivory skin, accentuating sensually rounded curves and firm breasts. The exotic scent filled his nostrils, and he became suddenly aware of a euphoria that lifted him up on waves of warmth and eager hunger, thrusting back into temporary amnesia his sufferings of a short while ago. Fingers moved swiftly at her coiffure, and lustrous black hair cascaded over ivory shoulders.

Then she was sitting on the bed beside him, the scent of her hair mingling with the heady perfume. Cool fingers caressed his burning face, ran through his damp hair. A corner of his mind reasoned that this was just another part of his conditioning, to make him still more pliable for tomorrow's mission, but it was only a tiny whisper, and he

ignored it. He stretched out hungry arms.

Below, the neon sign went out, and the room was dark and warm.

Maxim became aware of a bright, pearly light filtering through the curtained window and stabbing insistently through his lidded eyes. He opened them abruptly, with an icy shock of dismay—

The day had arrived.

He sat up, looking wildly around the room. He realized, with an unexpected pang, that he was alone. The memories of the night before returned with a rush, and he felt himself wishing for the companionship of Anya. Synthetic the love may have been, but she had filled an aching void, and he needed her.

A key turned in his door, and the knob rattled. He got out of bed quickly, realized he was nude, and donned a robe that had not been there the night before. The door opened.

Anya entered, carrying a small tray. She kicked the door shut behind her, crossed the room and set the tray down on a small table, pulling up two chairs.

"Come," she smiled, extending an arm. "Breakfast. I brought it from my own room. Sit down and eat. You will need strength."

He knotted the sash of his robe and walked to the table slowly, drinking in her body, now smartly clad in a daytime suit. "Good morning," he said hesitatingly, seating himself at the breakfast table. His eyes dropped before her frank, amused gaze, and he felt blood rush to his cheeks. She uncovered a hot plate of bacon and fried eggs and placed it in front of him, then poured a cup of steaming coffee. He ate slowly at first, then faster with increasing appetite. He drained the cup of coffee, luxuriously, to the last drop, leaned back and sighed.

"Good," Anya murmured. She

leaned forward and touched his hand gently, smiling into his eyes. "After—after we have finished what we must do today, there are many good times in store for us. You see," she continued confidentially, "I am high in the party ranks on Venus. I can recommend that you be allowed to remain here and work with me."

Maxim arose and walked to the window. Pulling up the shade, he stared down at the street, now busy with people who seemed to be moving for the most part in one direction—south, to the space port. Gloomily, he counted the fluttering banners of some twelve nations—banners unfurled in a ceremonial, holiday mood. At the corner, a banner stretched from one side of the street to the other: "Welcome, Pandit Gombaria."

He turned his head and looked at her dully. "Must I do this thing?" he exclaimed in sudden anguish. "Why? Why? Why must this kindly old man be shot down? What will his death accomplish for the people's state?" His voice choked on the words. "Like Gandhi in the last century, must the hand of evil reach out and strike down the saint?"

The beautiful dark eyes narrowed, and the sudden mask of coldness was a terrible thing to see. "It is not for us to question the plans of the central committee," she ground out slowly, her voice an icicle that dripped cold words. "And none of us, regardless of his services, is indispensable. What the state has given, the state can take away," she emphasized. "Don't be a fool, Maxim. Perform this errand successfully, and I can promise you that you will have a degree of freedom that few others have. And there will be no more experiments."

He looked up hopefully, and suddenly she arose from the table and stood at his side, slipping her cool hand into his. "Look at me, Maxim," she whispered, her voice soft and

warm again. Her moist eyes looked earnestly into his. "I too am tired of being a high-priced woman of convenience. Perhaps—perhaps I could persuade the party executive committee that we would be useful to them as man and wife, permanently stationed in Venusberg. It could be a good cover for our activities."

"Maxim," she murmured. He looked at her with tortured eyes, and then she had thrown her arms around his neck and pulled his lips down to hers. He clung hungrily. They stood there for a long moment, then Anya pushed him gently back and sighed. She looked at her wrist watch. "Eleven o'clock," she said regretfully. "Time that you got ready," and he felt a chill touch his spine briefly.

She turned away modestly as he dressed, renewing her makeup with the aid of a compact mirror. Maxim entered the bathroom and shaved quickly and brushed his black hair, staring at his reflection with a pang of repugnance. The face was plain and open and strong, though somewhat gaunt. He gave his hands a final drying with the thin hotel towel, reluctantly, listening to Anya humming a melody as she moved restlessly about the bedroom.

There was no use delaying. The time had come. Best get this over with quickly. He threw open the bathroom door and strode into the bedroom, thrusting doubts and compunctions from his mind. "I'm ready," he said crisply. Anya turned to him and held out a dainty white hand.

He stared, feeling sick, at the small black weapon cradled in the soft palm.

She held it up before his eyes. "You understand the working of the Mannheim needle gun?" He shook his head slowly.

"Very well, then," she continued in business-like tones. "It must be fired at comparatively close range. Due to

the small mass of the needle, it can be easily deflected from its course by a strong gust of air. But it has the advantage of silence." She turned the weapon over expertly, pointing to a small lever in the handle. "The safety catch has three positions: off, paralyzing, and lethal." She turned the lever until it clicked into place, the small arrow pointing at a red dot.

"It is now set at *lethal*," she said, and slipped it gently into his right-hand pocket. "Be careful with it," she whispered. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

Maxim felt the small, two-ounce bulge in his pocket with trembling fingers. "What am I to do?" he asked dully.

Anya was abruptly cold and efficient again. "Listen carefully. You will take one of the public buses and proceed directly south to the spaceport, where you will press forward through the crowd until you are close to the entrance. There you will wait for the approach of the Pandit's ground car. It will, of course, be moving slowly, so that he can receive the plaudits of the crowd."

She sneered slightly. "They think they can persuade the Indian Federation to swing into their camp." Her face smoothed out again. "But enough of that. There will, of course, be security agents in the crowd, but they will not be expecting an attack from one of their own people, and they surely have no suspicion of our plans. After all," she smiled, "both sides agreed at a summit conference to keep the cold war off the soil of Venus."

There was a bitter taste in Maxim's mouth, and bitterness clouded his eyes as he regarded Anya, eagerly reciting his instructions. A faint flush of excitement colored her high cheekbones.

"Further," she went on, oblivious of his expression, "our own agents will be in the crowd, close to you."

She emphasized the last phrase, looking into his face significantly. "They will be there to protect you and to assist your escape. At the time that Gombaria's car passes through the gate, a diversion will be supplied in the form of an old-fashioned pistol shot from somewhere in the crowd. Attention will be drawn in that direction, at which time you will fire at the Pandit. Keep the trigger firmly pressed and fan the muzzle slightly in his direction. The full load of twenty needles will thus spread out over a small area, ensuring that at least one will find its target. Then simply drop the Mannheim to the ground and lose yourself in the milling confusion. Return here to me. You understand?"

"I understand," he whispered painfully, his mouth and throat dry with fear.

"Then you are ready," she said, looking again at her wrist watch. "Go now, quickly." She pressed him gently toward the door. Standing on tiptoes, she pressed her lips against his. He returned the kiss mechanically, without warmth, and then he was outside, descending the stairs to the lobby. She stared at the closed door reflectively, eyes narrowed, then hurried to her purse, turned on the miniaturized set inside, and reported rapidly.

Grushenko and Yezhov stood before the great screen, avidly watching the progress of a small red light. Centimeter by centimeter, it crept across the grid in a straight line, from top to bottom. Square by square, it moved inexorably.

Grushenko looked at his watch. "Precisely on schedule," he said triumphantly. "And approximately at noon, a new order in interplanetary relations will dawn."

Yezhov fidgeted nervously. "What if he should have a change of heart at the last minute?"

Grushenko sighed wearily. He tapped the red dial lightly. "My dear Yezhov, we still have the *persuader* at our disposal. Any pronounced deviation from that straight line, or any negative report from an agent, and he is chastised." He caressed the dial with long, loving fingers. "So far, our Conditioned Man has never suffered more than a half-turn of the knob. The full turn is beyond the endurance of any human being. Held in that position long enough, it will also result in the death of the subject through vague depression of heart function."

Grushenko lit a long *papirossa*, and expelled a jet of smoke through pursed lips. "In any case," he added judiciously, "we have a quick method of liquidation at our fingertips, no matter what he does, and even though he should escape our agents." He gazed at the red dial fondly. "You see? There is absolutely no escape for him."

The red light had passed the midpoint of the screen, and was crawling like a deadly insect toward the bottom.

Maxim sat stiffly in the bus, now crawling through thickening crowds of people converging on the spaceport, the driver leaning almost continually on the horn. Maxim sat with the deadly pocket on the window side of the seat, so that no brushing hand or crowding hip should sense the weapon lying there, primed and ready to spit death, needing only the pressure of his index finger to call it to life.

The travelling companion to his left had essayed friendly conversation, but Maxim had looked out the window quickly, shrugging as if he knew neither English nor Interlingua, and the man lapsed again into silence. The bus, like the street, was crowded, and Maxim gazed furtively at the swaying faces above him, look-

ing for signs of his undercover companions that Anya had mentioned.

A pair of hard eyes in a pasty face looked at him sharply, then turned away quickly and read the advertisements with studious intensity. He felt sweat grow under his armpits and trickle slowly down his sides, staining the light shirt. He licked his lips with a dry tongue and turned again to the open window, staring unseeingly at the multicolored flags in the windows and the gay throngs on the sidewalk, hearing without comprehension the confused roar and hubbub of excited voices.

The bus stopped with a jerk that Maxim felt in his stomach. Passengers were starting to crowd toward the bus exits. The driver had stood up, and was calling out words in English and Interlingua. Maxim had awaited it in dread throughout the too-short drive, and now the announcement was like the shock of ice-cold water.

They had arrived at the spaceport.

Maxim stood up, his knees weak, and clutched the chrome stanchion with a slippery hand. He edged into the center aisle, heart pounding, then descended the three steps to the pavement on shaky legs.

The crowd carried him forward toward the steel-wire fence enclosing the spaceport. He tried once to hold back, but felt a significant dig in his right side. He glanced nervously to his right, saw the pasty-faced man staring at him through warning slits, and pressed forward on leaden legs until he stood at the edge of the crowd, held back by hastily improvised rope barriers and the strong backs of the international police force.

The throng laughed and chattered happily, enjoying the break in their heavy work schedule—time out from the exploiting of a new planet to welcome a visitor from the old. The ubiquitous visitors were there, as

they always were and always would be at happy gatherings, hawking their tiny flags and helium-filled balloons for the children, and over-colored touched-up photos and cheap clay busts of the Pandit Gombaria.

Maxim looked up despairingly at the high cloud layer, an almost blinding white curtain that only half shut out the light and heat of a sun thirty-five million miles closer than it was to Earth.

He closed his eyes and formed a wordless prayer, a blind, incoherent plea, fumbling for modes of petition that up to now had been dimly remembered curiosities in old, illuminated books in the state's *byezbozhniy* museums.

There was a muted roar overhead, and the crowd roared in antiphony. Maxim opened his eyes. Thousands of feet above, the vapors swirled and churned, then parted suddenly.

A great spherical shape of gleaming metal lowered rapidly toward the spaceport, then slowed down as its Heisenberg field turned on, and drifted, light as down on a breeze, into the padded, semi-circular berth. The landing was gentle, almost shockless, and the hushed crowd sighed with relief. A fleet of vehicles closed in on the big sphere, trailing the fluttering banners of the free world settlement and the Indian Federation.

Straining over the shoulders of the man in front of him, Maxim could see a lock open in the side of the spaceship. A few small figures stepped forward expectantly on the landing platform, stood in respectful attention. A tall, stooped, white-capped figure emerged from the portal. A lone voice broke the tense silence with a cheer, was caught up and multiplied, spreading rapidly through the crowd. Successive waves of cheering rolled over the field, rose to a throbbing roar as the stooped figure slowly climbed into the lead

vehicle. The vehicle made a wide turn and headed toward the entrance to the port.

Maxim felt the knife of dread twist in his vitals, recalling the hours of horror back in the laboratory. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead, and his hands were clammy. He gazed wildly to right and left, past bright, unseeing faces.

To the right, a few feet behind, the pasty-faced man watched him with cold eyes.

Unseen, a hand dipped furtively into a pocket, found a flat case, and pressed a stud. Miles away, eager ears heard the alerting signal.

The leading vehicle was a few hundred feet from the entrance, crawling at a walking pace as it neared the shouting throngs.

Miles away, answering fingers gave a slight twist to the red dial, held it there briefly, and returned it to zero. It repeated the procedure with the green dial.

Maxim felt a sudden pain rack his body, and his muscles stiffened. A giant vise squeezed his skull, and a wave of nausea swept over him. Then it was gone as quickly as it had come, giving way to a wave of pleasurable warmth, a near-ecstasy. The lesson was not lost on Maxim. His hand dipped reluctantly into his right pocket, curled around the handle of the gun. Without turning around, he knew that his escort was watching him grimly for any signs of hesitation.

The vehicle was at the gate. Gombaria had raised himself cautiously, holding with one hand to the top of the driver's seat, waving with the other hand to the bright faces, almost as if in benediction. Maxim bit his lip, unaware of the warm redness as it trickled down his chin. He hefted the weapon in his pocket, began to draw it forth.

The ground dropped away dizzily beneath his feet.

The Mannheim was heavy in his hand, heavier than he remembered it to be when Anya had handed it to him, back in the hotel. He spread the pocket wide with the back of his hand and looked down quickly.

The Mannheim had been replaced with an old-fashioned pistol, loaded with powder and lead bullets.

Of course, he thought almost impersonally, I am expendable. They planned it this way. They did not think I would notice the difference until the shots rang out and the crowd turned on me.

It became crystal clear, and he knew without knowing how, that after he had shot the Pandit, he in turn would be shot down by Pasty-face, or somebody else. And on his body they would find the damning documents that identified him as a citizen of the West European Union.

He swayed dizzily, his hand still in his pocket. But the sticky fingers relaxed on the gun-grip. Without looking, he knew that his grim escort was seized by a sudden agitation. Precious seconds were passing, and a frantic finger pressed the stud again and again.

Maxim knew what was coming, but he turned around and elbowed his way through the straining crowd, dropping the weapon unnoticed to the earth, and shuffling feet ground it unknowing into the mud. He reached the rear of the throng and staggered out into the open. A figure followed him through the unheeding crowd, breathing laboriously, its eyes narrowed with hate. The moment had passed, unused, and Gombaria disappeared down the long street, the crowd closing in behind the entourage of official vehicles.

Maxim stumbled forward, gasping at the sudden agony that set his body on fire. He leaned weakly against a warehouse wall, his breath whistling through his nostrils, his clothes soaked through.

A nearby woman, falling in with the mob as it followed the procession, noticed him. "You sick, mister?" she asked solicitously.

He shook his head dumbly and staggered blindly into the narrow alley between two long warehouses. The woman shrugged her shoulders and went on her way.

Grushenko stood rigidly in front of the screen, his elegant features livid and twisted with rage, and Yezhov shrank back before the shattering of that vast calm he had come to expect. Grushenko screamed a string of hysterical curses and obscenities at the wobbling red light on the glass grid. He reached down with shaking fingers and turned the red dial all the way to the right, viciously. "Die," he shouted, shaking his fist. "Die, you fool! Die in agony!"

The red light came to a stop near the bottom of the screen, a bare centimeter from the spot where it had stood motionless for the last fifteen minutes. It flickered, went out.

Grushenko, with an immense effort of will, once again put on his mask of composure. With a barely noticeable tremor, he put a cigarette to his lips and lit it, regarding the stunned Yezhov, who could not find words.

Grushenko smiled mirthlessly—a tight, thin-lipped smile. "Of course," he remarked quietly. "There will be an investigation into this failure. You will have much explaining to do."

Yezhov turned completely white. "I—I don't understand, comrade commissar," he stammered weakly. "How am I at fault?"

Grushenko flicked ash, stabbed his cigarette toward the other man. "My dear comrade," he drawled cynically, "inasmuch as we are alone here, I will do you a favor. I will tell you something, and in return you will exculpate me. It is this: the secret of survival is that for every failure there must be a scapegoat. One is

never in error—it is always a subordinate, or some one temporarily in disfavor. You follow?”

“I—I am not sure what you mean,” Yezhov stammered.

Grushenko rubbed his forehead wearily. “You did not take active part in the operation. I did not actually finish it. It was left to a minor member of the staff to close the opening and suture the scalp.” He looked at Yezhov through lowered lids. “Are you sure of the loyalty of this man? Can we be sure that he is not a wrecker—somebody working for the other side?”

Yezhov’s eyes widened in comprehension. Without a word, he turned and left the room abruptly, panic driving him to find his scapegoat. Grushenko followed his hurrying form with cynical eyes, then slowly sank into a chair, staring at the dark screen with an expression of utter disbelief.

Maxim staggered down the narrow alley between the looming warehouses, baking under the pitiless sky-shine, but he was not aware of the external heat. He was consumed by ravaging internal fires. His brain burned with a white heat. The marrow of his bones turned to molten metal. His eyes stared blindly into a writhing fire-mist as his hands felt their way gropingly along the wall of a warehouse; the fine grain of the wood rasped his fingertips like files. The giant vise crushed his skull. He fell to his knees, retching vainly. The agony, already unendurable, rose to a new pitch, and he sank his teeth into his forearm to muffle the scream.

Faces floated through the formless fog of pain: the broad face of Yezhov, the chiseled features of Grushenko, the pasty face with the polished stones for eyes, and Anya—Anya smiling while her lips dripped death.

The fog darkened. His heart tripped weakly, and his breath came now in shallow gasps. He sank com-

pletely to the wet ground, lying prone in the extremity of his agony.

Then thought gave way to an animal craving for escape, for survival. He struck out with the force of the primal will, and the mist lifted a little, the pain retreated. He raised himself to his elbows, the breath whistling with every cell, and the monstrous fist loosened its grip still more. He rolled over on his back, then pushed himself to a sitting position, his back to the wall.

Quite suddenly, it was all over.

He felt, somewhere in his brain, a *reaching*. There was a vague feeling of neural switches closed, and of others opened. Calmly now, hardly knowing what he was doing, he willed his body to wall of the capsules and filaments embedded in his brain, ordered the contacting nerves to disconnect.

They were disconnected.

Maxim opened his eyes slowly as brightness greater than the high noon of Venus around him. He thought with a clarity and precision that he had dreamed of in his mathematical studies, so long ago. With a hand grown suddenly steady, he pushed the sweat-soaked hair back from his forehead.

Without looking, he was aware of another presence at the entrance to the alley, and he knew with absolute certainty who it was. He turned his head slowly. Pasty-face crept silently toward him on the balls of his feet, a Mannheim gun almost swallowed up in one huge hand. Maxim heard a string of curses. Then the mouth opened and the thick lips repeated the words.

Maxim realized with a shock that he had heard the words before they were spoken.

The gross figure stood over him, the polished-stone eyes glinting with hate. “*Traitor, traitor,*” the words came hissing in a linked pair, the silent epithet followed by the audible

one, in a fraction of a second.

Maxim stared desperately into the tiny muzzle of the weapon. The finger tightened. He looked up into the merciless eyes and pushed silently, desperately.

The menacing form relaxed suddenly. The finger slackened. The glaring eyes grew blank. Maxim raised himself cautiously from the ground to a standing position. He reached for the gun and took it from unresisting fingers. He shoved then, and the gross bulk staggered back against the opposite wall and slid down awkwardly on to its haunches. Maxim tossed the Mannheim contemptuously to the ground. Standing there a moment in silence, he meditated while his smoothly-functioning brain provided him with the answers he sought. He turned sharply on his heel, pumping strength into his shaky legs. At the entrance to the alley he was striding firmly, shoulders thrown back and head high.

In the alley, his former pursuer sat laxly with his back to the wall, staring blankly into space. A trickle of saliva dripped slowly from his chin.

In the hotel, Anya, white-faced, was throwing her things into a suitcase with trembling haste. Minutes before, she had seen the triumphal arrival of Gombaria as the procession turned off her street and headed for the civic center. The plot had failed. It was time to disappear, to vanish into anonymity. There were no new orders, and her desperate calls into the portable transmitter had remained unanswered. She wondered, with a vague pang of regret, what had happened to Maxim.

The doorknob rattled slightly, and she whirled around. "Maxim!" she gasped through bloodless lips. He entered and closed the door quietly behind him, and faced her with a sad smile.

Her racing thoughts lay open to him.

"No, Anya, I am not dead," he said softly. Her eyes were dark pools in a chalky face.

"But how? *How?*" she whispered. "I don't understand—"

"No, you wouldn't," he smiled. "But Yezhov might."

"Yezhov—a traitor?"

"Oh no," Maxim laughed briefly. "Not a traitor. It's just that his theory worked too well, though in other hands. They pushed too long and too hard."

His smile faded and the words cracked out like a whiplash before she had completed the movement. "No, Anya, not the gun, and not the transmitter." Her hand froze over her handbag, and she stood paralyzed.

"I don't want them to know I am alive—yet," he added.

He crossed the room and took her face gently in his hands, looking down into the glazed eyes. "Anya, poor Anya," he whispered softly, and messaged her temples with his fingertips. "Forget, Anya, forget. You have never seen me or heard of me. You do not know whether I am alive or dead. You understand?"

She nodded slowly, as if in a dream, and Maxim knew that she did not remember. He walked to the door, opened it, and looked back at her for a moment, then closed the door. She sank slowly to a chair and rocked back and forth, weeping softly for a great but unaccountable loss.

Maxim stood in the hallway for a minute, sensing her mindless grief and listening to her sobs. He realized he should have felt nostalgia or regret, but could not. The memories of joy and sadness, of pain and delight, lay scattered in his memory like a child's broken toys, to be swept up and laid aside. He shrugged briefly and stalked down the stairs, through the lobby, and out of the hotel, into the bright Venusian day.

There was work to be done.