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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DEATH'S WISHER ***



DEATH'S WISHER

BY JIM WANNAMAKER

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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***There's just one way to disarm a bomb—be
at least a step ahead of it—but what if
it's always at least a step ahead of you?***

Flinn took the seat that Wilmer indicated, dropped his overnight bag beside it, and tried to relax. He'd had five hours of inactivity on the plane, but the peremptory manner with which he had been routed out of his California apartment and conveyed to Washington, D. C., had so filled his mind with unanswered questions that he still found rest to be impossible. He had been told simply that the government needed him; and when federal wheels started turning, there wasn't much a private citizen could do to stop them.

He watched the tall, lean, dark-haired man, who had been introduced as Dr. Jackson Wilmer, nuclear physicist, disappear through a door.

Flinn looked around.

The room in which he sat—comparatively small, one of hundreds in the vastness of the Pentagon—seemed to be a sort of minor office. At least there were several desks and filing cabinets. Besides himself, there were now only two other men in the room.

One, a complete stranger, sat at a desk across the room with his back turned toward Flinn.

The other leaned against the wall near the door. All Flinn knew about him, despite the fact that they had been as close as boy and dog for the past seven hours, was that his name was Hayes and that he was a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There was a muscular hardness about this young man that betrayed an athletic background. He was about thirty, had a craggy face beneath short brown hair, hard gray eyes, and his nose had been broken at least once. There was a light trace of beard beginning to show on the agent's face, but his brown summer suit still looked neat, and the man himself seemed something less than tired.

Looking at him, Flinn felt a sense of his own shabbiness. He needed a shave as badly as his slacks and sports jacket needed pressing.

At forty-two, Flinn was somewhat taller than average and slightly underweight from overwork and the irregularities of a bachelor existence. His black hair, beginning to recede a little, was peppered with silver, and his normally relaxed face was now tight, and the whites of his hazel eyes were bloodshot.

The door beside Hayes opened and Wilmer entered, carrying a brown folder. He was in his shirtsleeves, his necktie pulled down and his collar open, and, as he approached, Flinn noted that the deeply tanned face of the physicist was as stubbled and tired-looking as his own felt. He was about the same age as Flinn.

Wilmer tossed the folder on the desk in front of Flinn and then perched on one corner of the desk. He gazed at the parapsychologist for a long few seconds, his eyes startingly ice-blue in his dark face.

"Well," he said presently, "I guess you're wondering what this is all about."

"Yes, I guess I am," Flinn said wryly. "This bird dog—" he indicated Hayes with a nod of his head, and the agent retaliated with a flash of teeth—"hauls me away from an important experiment, loads me on an Air Force jet, and, after a high-altitude flight at God only knows what kind of fantastic speeds, I find myself in the holiest of holies, surrounded by MPs and—yes, you might say I'm wondering what this is all about."

Wilmer nodded patiently and rubbed one hand across his eyes.

"When you find out, you'll understand the reason for the secrecy." He faced Hayes. "How long have we been on this thing now, Fred? It seems like weeks."

"Ten days," the FBI man answered.

Wilmer shook his head slowly, then reached for the folder, opened it, and took out several scientific journals that Flinn recognized instantly. The physicist opened one of them.

"Advanced Experiments in TP, by Patrick Flinn," he read. He laid the publication aside and picked up another. "A Monograph on the Probabilities of TH,' same author."

He quoted at random from the introductory page: "It is therefore my belief, based upon recent preliminary experimentation, that not only can one mind be used to scan the thoughts of another, but that ideas and suggestions may be implanted upon another's mind without the knowledge of the receptor. This is not to be confused with simple telepathic 'sending,' where the receptor is completely aware of the other's transmission. This to which I refer may, at least in one phase, be described as hypnotic in effect. The possibilities of such influence over the mind-matter of another are more than somewhat considerable...."

He paused, lowered the journal and gazed speculatively at Patrick Flinn. "Telepathy, telehypnosis," he said, rolling out the words as if they left a strange taste in his mouth. "Very interesting. Just how much truth is there in all this stuff? I mean, how far along are you, really?"

Flinn considered the question for a few seconds. It was one he had heard often, especially from his colleagues at the small California college where he held an assistantship in psychology. But after twenty years of skepticism—he had first discovered his rudimentary telepathic abilities just after graduating from college, and had been experimenting and advancing ever since—he had become immune to criticism.

"Very few people bother to read my articles," Flinn said evenly, "and still fewer understand them, and the *fewest* believe. But I can tell you I'm far enough along in my research to know that the human mind has latent powers that are, to quote my article, more than somewhat considerable."

Wilmer and Hayes exchanged glances.

"That's fine," Wilmer said, "but abstruse, wouldn't you say? What I'm getting at is, I want to see a practical demonstration."

"Put up or shut up, eh?" Flinn said.

"I'd rather call it an examining of credentials," the physicist countered.

"All right. I don't see any connection between my work and nuclear physics, but what do you want me to do? First, though, I'd better explain that I might fail. I'm really just on the threshold."

"Granted. So I'll make it easy. Suppose—" He looked over his shoulder, faced Flinn again, and continued in a low voice: "Suppose you tell me what the man at the far desk is thinking."

Flinn glanced past the physicist at the stranger across the room. The man seemed completely unaware of the others. He was poring over some papers that were spread out upon the desk.

Flinn focused his eyes upon the man's head. His mind was really too steeped in fatigue for this sort of thing, but it was a chance not to be missed, a chance to demonstrate his talents in the presence of a responsible scientist, so he willed himself into a gradually deepening concentration. His eyes seemed to go myopic, out of focus. A gray, ethereal haze came into his consciousness, like swirling smoke. *Easy?* But presently a picture began to form, blurred at first, then fragmentary, then coming into identifiable clarity.

Flinn held it for a moment, before snapping back into objective consciousness. He was grinning slightly as his eyes refocused and came to rest on Wilmer.

"Well?" the physicist asked.

"What's his name?" Flinn said.

"Barnes. Robert Barnes."

"Say, Bob!" Flinn called out. The smallish, partially bald man at the far desk looked up and swiveled around to face him. "Tell me something, Bob," Flinn went on. "Do you act that way with all women, or just blondes?"

Barnes' placid face suddenly underwent a marvelous transformation. First he blushed furiously. Then his jaw dropped open and the high color began to drain away. He stared across the room, his face pallid.

"My God!" he managed to blurt in a stricken voice.

There was dead silence in the room as Wilmer and Hayes looked from Barnes' shocked face to Flinn's smiling one.

"I think it's obvious—" Hayes started to say.

"Me, too," Wilmer agreed. He looked sharply at Flinn. "Can you tell what I'm thinking at this moment?"

Flinn shrugged. "Not without a special effort, and I'm not going to make that effort unless I have to."

The physicist sighed and his tanned face relaxed a little. He looked at Flinn with a new respect. "I guess I'd better put you in the picture." He reopened the folder and extracted several newspaper clippings. "What I'm about to divulge is so unbelievable that—well, I'd best break it to you gradually. You know my job. That fact and this tan—" he pointed to his face—"should give you an inkling of what I've been up to the last few weeks."

Flinn thought, and nodded. "I'm to assume that you've been out in the Pacific, is that right?"

"Yes," Wilmer said. "Eniwetok. Have you been following our progress in the papers?"

"Not really. I've been a little too busy, I'm afraid."

"No matter." The physicist handed the clippings to Flinn. "Read these."

Flinn scanned the first clipping. It bore a recent date.

"... Reliable sources," he read aloud, "report that a civilian, believed to be a scientist, is being held incommunicado in the Pentagon. All efforts on the part of newsmen to gain additional information have been met with polite but firm rebuffs. Spokesmen from the AEC have refused to confirm or deny theories that the man's detention is in some way connected with the recent fiasco at Eniwetok Atoll ..."

He read the second. It was date-lined Honolulu, a week before the other.

"Beyond the terse comment that there were "no casualties," all official sources are silent today concerning the news leak of the failure of a nuclear device in our Pacific Test Area. It has been understood that this device, the third in a series of thermonuclear test shots, failed to detonate. Since this test was scheduled to have been a "tower shot," under rigid instrumental control, much speculation has arisen ..."

Flinn looked up hopelessly. "I don't understand. Does this concern you? I mean—"

"It concerns *all* of us," Wilmer said grimly. "But I know what you're getting at. No, I'm not the man they mention. I was in charge of that particular test."

Hayes cleared his throat abruptly and Wilmer nodded.

"I want you to understand, Mr. Flinn, before we go any further, that everything you hear and see, and have heard and seen from the time Fred first contacted you, is to be held in the strictest confidence. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"All right. How much do you know about atomic physics?"

Flinn spread his hands. "I'm somewhat past the Democritus stage, but I don't claim to be an expert."

"Well, basically, in a thermonuclear explosive device, hydrogen is transformed into helium," said Hayes. "In the process there is a loss of mass. This loss results in a tremendous and sudden release of energy. Are you familiar with the energy-mass relationship, $E = MC^2$?"

Flinn nodded.

"Okay. In other words, the nuclei of hydrogen atoms are fused under the influence of great heat, resulting in a different element, less mass, a release of energy, and an explosion."

"I'm with you so far," Flinn said.

"Then you realize that once this fusion process commences, nothing in God's great universe can stop it?"

"Yes."

"And that after certain things are done, fusion *must* result?"

"Surely."

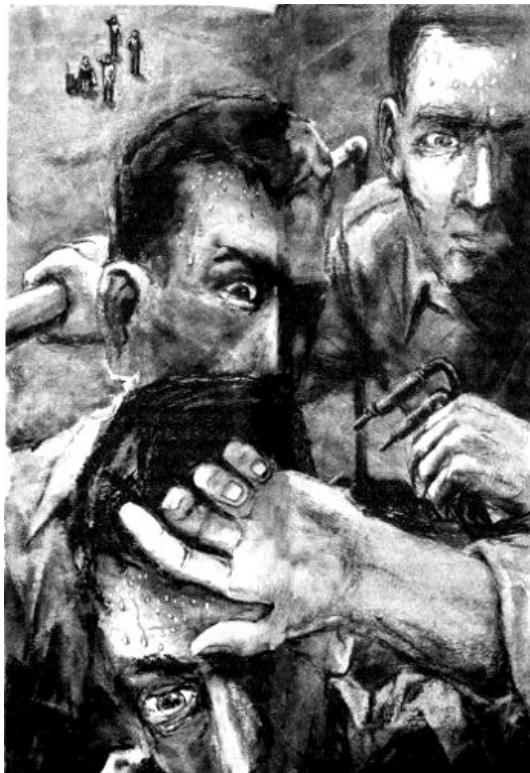
"Well, so all of us believed, too. But we were wrong about it."

"I don't understand. You just said—"

"So I *said*. But let me try to describe to you the situation as it happened." He paused, not for dramatic effect, but to take a moment to force himself to recall what Flinn could see must have been a very painful experience.

"We are on the command ship," Wilmer continued, "at a safe distance from the atoll. Everything is in readiness, checked and double-checked by me, personally. The automatic firing process is in progress. The last countdown has commenced. Five, four, three, two, one, zero. *Nothing happens*."

"I'll simplify the subsequent chain of events. After a reasonable interval, a volunteer pilot and myself and one other man fly by helicopter to the atoll. We climb the tower. I'm sweating and so are the others. We're standing beside a *live hydrogen bomb*. I disconnect the power sources and do various things to render the device safe. Then we check. Everything—*everything*—is in working order. There is absolutely no reason why the thing failed to detonate. Yet it did fail."



"We fly back to the command ship. We hold an emergency conference. We're sitting there staring at each other. Then this—this man, Dobbs, starts to laugh. We think it is hysterics, due to the tremendous strain that everyone has been under. But apparently it isn't. He laughs and laughs and laughs. Finally he manages to say: 'You can't figure it out, can you? Well, I know. Old Dobbsie knows. *It didn't explode because I willed it not to!*'"

Flinn's mind was almost too tired to accept what he had heard. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"Figure it out for yourself," Wilmer said flatly. "It's your field. Telepathy, telehypnosis, and what's left?"

"*Psychokinesis*," Flinn said in a stifled voice.

"Right. Psychokinesis. Mind over matter."

Ordinarily, Patrick Flinn would have used the morning ride over Washington's broad avenues to good advantage—this was his first visit to the nation's capital—but his mind was too filled with the preceding day's revelations to permit anything save minimal sightseeing.

"I hate to keep repeating myself," Wilmer was saying, "but I must be certain you understand what's at stake here."

"I know," Flinn answered with some impatience. "I'm not to reveal, under any circumstances, the fact that I have telepathic powers."

"Correct." The physicist sat in the seat beside Flinn, and Hayes was in front beside the driver. "Your job is to find out just how much this man can do. We'd like to know the *way* he does it, too, but that's secondary."

"It strikes me," Flinn mused, "that anyone who can influence a fusion bomb can do anything."

"That's what we're afraid of." Wilmer looked soberly at the parapsychologist. "I think I can understand what's going on in your mind. This is your special love and you're finding it difficult to divorce yourself from pure clinical investigation. You want, really, to talk to Dobbs as one scientist to another. But I must warn you that this is impossible. If he gets the least inkling that you're a special mind, something disastrous may result. As long as he gets what he wants, fine, but rub him the wrong way and—"

"And yet you have him a virtual prisoner and he doesn't object?"

"Well, at least not strenuously," Wilmer said. "I don't profess to understand a warped mind, but apparently Dobbs realizes that his confinement is mostly protective custody. It's to his own advantage. After all, he doesn't have to stand up at a public forum and shout threats. All he has to do is contact the few to reach the many. And if he has the powers he says he has, full use of them would result in his own destruction. And he doesn't want that. He's too interested, right now, in satisfying his own animal appetites. But faced with losing everything—"

"Our biggest immediate worry," Hayes said from the front seat, "is keeping all this from the public. That's why we put Dobbs out of sight in a hurry. There have been some leaks already, but

so far most people consider the papers' theories as just so much wild speculation. And thank God for that. You can understand why all recognizable public figures are keeping as far away from Dobbs as possible."

Flinn nodded; it was self-evident. There were other phases of the problem that bothered him more. He was still vaguely and, as it seemed, illogically worried about the several questions he had raised the day before.

The fact that Dobbs might have read his articles and hence might put two and two together, despite a cover identity, was the least of them. Flinn had never lectured in public, his efforts had received no publicity except in specialized psychological circles, and his latest monograph on TH had been published when Dobbs was working at the atoll.

Wilmer, Hayes, and others had managed to assuage reasonable fears on the other point. Flinn had always assumed that psychokinesis would be the logical result of advanced telepathy, that they were links in the same chain. Now it seemed that a person could be one without the other. Either you possessed a latent ability to scan mind-matter, or an affinity for material substance, but not necessarily both.

Earlier, Wilmer and Hayes had devised a test to check the possibility that Dobbs was an advanced telepath. They had mentally vilified him beyond the ability of even an accomplished actor to resist, over prolonged periods of time, and yet Dobbs had shown not the least indication that he had intercepted their thoughts. But there was one additional point.

"You used the expression 'warped mind' in describing Dobbs," Flinn said to Wilmer. "Is it your opinion then that he is definitely psychopathic? The reason I ask is that scanning a confused mind may prove to be more than I can handle."

"I used that expression for want of a better," Wilmer answered cautiously. "Put it this way—suppose you suddenly found you were able to control, even in a minor way, the stuff of the universe; would you use those powers for the benefit of mankind, or would you leap over the traces and reach for all the things that had been denied you over the years for moral, or legal, or whatever reasons?"

"You paint a lurid picture," Flinn said.

They turned down a side street in a residential district and drew up in front of what appeared to be a large two-story private home.

Flinn took a deep breath. He was rested now, but still uncertain whether he was up to what lay ahead.

After the preliminary discussion with Wilmer, Hayes, and Barnes—the latter had proved to be a military intelligence man—the previous afternoon, Flinn had been closeted immediately with a number of generals, admirals, and high-ranking civilians from both houses of Congress, the Defense Department, the Department of State, and various security agencies.

There had been the usual skepticism until he had performed some simple but histrionic "mind-reading" feats, and then there had been much talk about the responsibilities that had now become incumbent upon him and how perhaps even the fate of the nation was in his hands. It had left him wandering in a jungle of doubts and fears. Yet he had managed to sleep.

"The wonderful ability of the human mind to reject unpleasantness," he had told himself.

As a matter of fact, he had fallen into deep, untroubled unconsciousness within an hour of the time his head had first touched the pillow in the comfortable hotel room the government had provided. Hayes had been with him. "Security," Hayes had said.

And now, clean-shaven, his clothes neatly pressed, the substantial breakfast still warm in his stomach, and fatigue no longer in his muscles and nerves, Flinn told himself that he was as ready as he would ever be.

They got out of the conservative, unmarked sedan and approached the house. There was a man mowing the lawn, another clipping hedges, and still another polishing a car that was parked in the driveway just outside the spacious garage.

"How's it going?" Hayes said to the hedge trimmer.

"All quiet," the man answered without looking up.

They went around the house and entered unchallenged through a side door. It was all very casual, yet Flinn did not have to be told that they were under constant scrutiny.

The room in which he found himself was just off the kitchen. Three men in working clothes sat around a table, drinking coffee. They looked up and nodded. They seemed to be cut from much the same cloth as Fred Hayes, even to the expression.

"Well, well," one of them said, "the brain trust." He surveyed Flinn with frank interest, then faced Hayes. "Say, buddy, how does a man get a transfer out of this outfit?"

Hayes grinned his wolfish grin. "All in good time, partner." He pointed with his chin upstairs and raised his eyebrows.

The man who had spoken, a large, broad-shouldered youngster with an affably homely face, got up, stepped back from the table, and went into a vaudevillian travesty of a bow. "The great man has been prepared and awaits your presence." Then his expression changed. "What a party! I never saw so much liquor in my life! It's a lucky thing the rumpus room is soundproof."

"And girls!" one of the seated men said. "Man, oh, man!"

Flinn looked at Wilmer, and Wilmer shrugged as if to say, "That's the way it is."

"Just don't forget what you're here for," Hayes said harshly.

"Don't fret," the big man said. "None of us touched a drop."

"Neither did Dobbs," one of the seated men interjected. "I guess that's the only reason he's alive today." He guffawed loudly and suggestively.

Hayes leading, they entered a hallway and turned toward a flight of stairs.

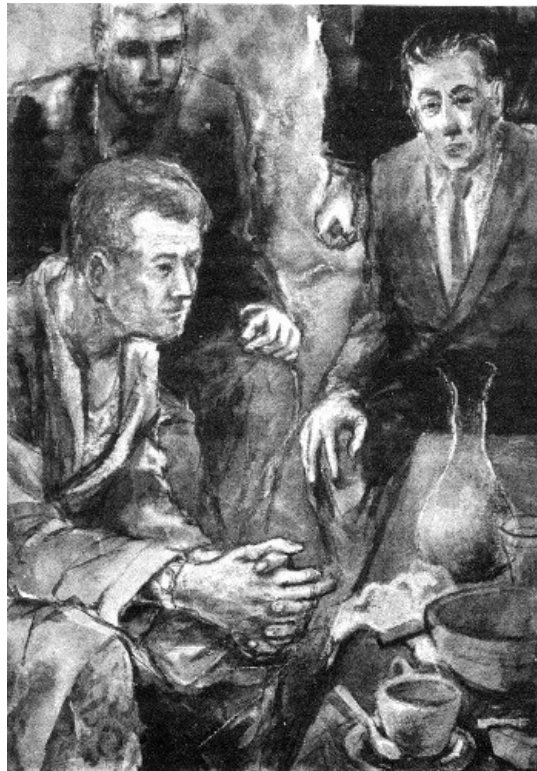
"Your boys seemed very off-hand about all this," Flinn said to the government agent.

"Don't kid yourself," Hayes replied. "They're as nervous as cats."

"Come in, gentlemen," Dobbs called amiably from the rear of the spacious bedroom. There was an unobtrusive man in a dark suit with him, but he left immediately.

Now that he was face to face with the enigmatic Mr. Dobbs, Flinn felt a momentary sense of disappointment.

Malcolm Dobbs sat in a straight-backed chair beside the large bed. Next to him was a table laden with empty breakfast dishes. Dobbs was dressed in an ordinary bathrobe. He appeared to be in his mid-forties and had a full head of dark hair, slightly gray at the temples. His mild, undistinguished face was only slightly less tanned than Wilmer's, and he was of average size and weight. His dark eyes were the only things that belied the man's composed exterior; they were intelligent, interested, and intently watchful. A tiny smile lingered upon Dobbs' lips, as if he were sharing only with himself some form of immensely funny but eminently private joke.



Flinn's total impression of the man was that he was not the sort one would look at twice in a crowded room—under different circumstances.

"Another delegation?" Dobbs asked. "Hello, Jack, Hayes."

"Mal this is Mr. Dugan," Wilmer said, indicating Flinn. "He's from the government."

Even as he acknowledged the introduction, Flinn paused momentarily over the casual familiarity between the physicist and the apparent psychokinetic, until he was reminded that they were both

nuclear physicists and had been together for weeks at the atoll. Flinn found himself wondering how close they had been and what thoughts must be going through Wilmer's mind at the moment. But he squelched his curiosity. He was here to scan Dobbs' mind, nobody else's.

"Be unobtrusive," he had been warned. "Stay in the background as much as possible and let Wilmer and Hayes carry the ball. And do the job quickly."

Dobbs looked Flinn over carefully, then seemed to dismiss him from his mind, as if he had decided Flinn was of no particular importance—or no immediate threat.

"You boys should have been here last night," Dobbs smiled. "We had quite a party." His smile faded and he added petulantly: "The only thing—some of the girls weren't as cooperative as I had hoped."

"We'll be more selective next time," Hayes promised quickly.

"See to it," Dobbs said.

They seated themselves, Hayes and Wilmer close to Dobbs, and Flinn just far enough away to seem deferential without raising suspicion.

"Now, what can I do for you?" Dobbs queried. "Another demonstration, I assume?"

"That's right," Wilmer said. "How about that disappearance thing again?"

Dobbs sighed. "You boys just can't get it through your skulls that what I do isn't some sort of trick, can you? Even faced with the evidence of the bomb."

Wilmer raised his hands. "It's not that so much, although what you can do, you'll have to admit, is rather unbelievable. It's the fact that Mr. Dugan here has never seen any evidence of your powers, and the report he will deliver to his superiors may cause even more commotion in high places—to your advantage."

Flinn was amazed that such a flimsy appeal to the appetites and ego of a man as intelligent as Malcolm Dobbs could be successful. Yet it not only could, it was.

Dobbs looked again at Flinn, the strange smile playing upon his lips; then he reached across the table, picked up an opaque glass water carafe, poured out its remaining liquid into an empty cereal bowl, and replaced it on the table.

"We don't want water spilled over everything, do we?" he said.

Wilmer slipped one arm behind the back of his chair and signaled urgently to Flinn.

Since entering the room, Flinn had been gathering all his resources for a quick and powerful effort, and, at the sight of Wilmer's waving fingers, he began.

He was startled that, despite the interaction and interference of the other thought patterns in the room, he was able to make so quick a contact. Just before reaching Dobbs' mind, the thought impressed itself upon Flinn that the reason was the immense mental power that was building within, and generating from, Dobbs. It was the simplest piece of telepathic scanning with which Flinn had ever been involved.

For a matter of seconds, nothing happened. Then the water carafe abruptly disappeared, its passage into apparent nothingness coincident with a faint "pop" as the air of the room rushed in to fill the vacuum.

Dobbs turned triumphantly and saw Flinn still in the trancelike stupor of the telepath-in-contact. Hayes stood up to screen him, but Flinn shook his head and managed to clear his mind quickly.

"Your friend seems somewhat astounded," Dobbs chuckled.

"My God!" was all Flinn could say.

Wilmer and Hayes looked at him questioningly, and Hayes muttered: "I think he's seen enough. Let's get out of here."

"Come back anytime, gentlemen," Dobbs said.

His laughter followed them as they retreated through the door and down the hall to the stairs.

"Well?" Wilmer said.

They sat around the table in the room just off the kitchen, steaming cups of coffee in front of them. The three security agents who had been in the room were gone now to their respective duties.

Flinn gazed down into the dark depths of the coffee, trying to organize his thoughts; trying to interpret and evaluate what he had seen.

Wilmer and Hayes sipped their coffee, waiting with forced patience for the parapsychologist to speak.

Presently, Flinn shivered and looked up at them. "If he says he can control a critical mass, or

erase Washington, D. C., or destroy the nation, you'd better believe him."

"He's telling the truth then," Hayes said grimly.

"Yes," Flinn answered. "Here are my findings. Somehow Dobbs has established rapport with the atom. Any atom. Probably any number of atoms. I doubt if he can move one single mass in the ordinary conception of psychokinesis. That is, I doubt if he can cause a pebble, say, to shift one millimeter. What he *can* control are the forces that bind atoms into molecular structures, or that hold nuclei together. Do you understand what I mean? For example, what he did up there just now was to get rid of the space between atoms in the molecules of that water carafe. I saw it clearly; there's no mistake. The space ceased to exist, the atoms crashed in upon each other, and the carafe seemed to disappear. The mass is the same. It's simply in a different form."

He paused and scanned the numb faces of the government agent and the nuclear physicist beside him.

"Let's get down to specifics," he continued. "What's his trump card? What is it he's holding over our heads?"

"The atmosphere," Wilmer said painfully.

"Oxygen," Flinn mused. "Suppose Dobbs concentrated upon the oxygen atoms all around us and caused their nuclei suddenly to fuse. What would happen?"

"Nobody on the face of the Earth would know what hit him," Wilmer said. "The Moon would probably be blasted out of its orbit. And if there is any intelligent life on Mars, they'd be treated to a sight they'd never forget—if they survived it."

"Well, then," Flinn said, "we've done what we came here to do. What's the answer?"

Hayes' face set into a hard mask. "There'll be a meeting of the brass, of course. But I can tell you what the result will be. I'll be assigned to kill him."

A buzz of excited conversation filled the Pentagon conference room. Flinn sat in one of the several dozen chairs between Wilmer and Hayes and looked at a glass ashtray that lay on the part of the long table just in front of him. One day perhaps he, too, might be able to influence the molecular structure of such an object. Or, more likely, one of his descendants, because he would never be able to discover the short-cuts now.

Planned murder. All the resources and brains of the government, the champion of the rights and dignity of the individual, gathered together to plot the deliberate destruction of one man.

It filled Flinn with sadness. It was inevitable. It had to be done. No one had the right to put himself above the rules of social conduct and the welfare of several billion innocent souls. And yet—

He found himself wondering what the Founding Fathers would think of such a move. "... all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights ... Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Executions of criminals were the result of lengthy legal processes, during which all the rights of the individual were scrupulously observed. But this—was he also one of the judges? Let the punishment fit the crime. What about the judging?

"Isn't there some other way?" Wilmer broke into his thoughts. "That's what you're thinking, correct?"

Flinn managed a faint smile. "And I'm supposed to be the telepath."

"Let's be entirely rational about it," Wilmer said. "Dobbs is a brilliant man, granted. But he is also a lecher and a coward."

"There's some of the pig and the wolf in every man," Flinn said.

"Depends on the extent," Wilmer went on. "Dobbs is way overboard. And he's a craven. I know it's hard to picture a man who voluntarily crosses a bridge into the unknown as anything but brave. I suppose there is a sort of bravado in it. But when he turns that bridge into a club to threaten the rest of mankind—is this courage?" He turned to the FBI man. "What do you think about it, Fred?"

Hayes pulled himself out of the shell of disciplined impassivity into which he had retreated shortly after passing his own unofficial death sentence upon Dobbs. He looked at the physicist and the parapsychologist.

"Nothing," Hayes said bluntly. "Absolutely nothing. I'm just one of the expendables."

"Aren't we all?" Wilmer said. He shrugged at Flinn. "That's why we were chosen originally. Me because I was there at the atoll when all this started, and was acquainted with Dobbs, and capable of understanding the implications of his acts. Hayes because—"

"Because I've a good enough record to be above suspicion, and because I'm young enough not to be missed," the agent said.

"And you, Pat," the physicist said to Flinn, "because of your unique talents. But now we're all under the gun."

There was a lapse in the background noise, and the three turned to see the President's representative rise and signal for order. He was a tall, graying man, beautifully dressed, and, as he spoke, there was a note of sad resignation in his voice.

"So, gentlemen, since reasoning with Dobbs has proven to be useless, we find ourselves in agreement. All that remains is to select the time and the method. And, by the way, Mr. Hilliard—" he nodded at the Director of the FBI—"has assured me there is no need to deviate from our original plan, at least so far as the human element is concerned. Agent Hayes will remain our—messenger. He seems to be ideally suited for the job."

There was a visible stir down the length of the table as the top men from the government tried not to look at Fred Hayes. None of them succeeded. Under their brief, self-conscious but probing scrutiny, Hayes' hard face betrayed not a flicker of emotion.

"And now the time and the method." The Presidential assistant cleared his throat and scanned the faces of the men before him. "I should think as soon as possible." A murmur of assent swept the room. "There remains the problem of method. Dr. Wilmer cautions that it must be done very efficiently. If Dobbs even suspects that his life is to be forfeit at a predictable time—well, I hardly need tell you the danger. Director Hilliard suggests that we leave it up to Agent Hayes, since he knows his own capabilities better than anyone else. Mr. Hayes?"

The tall, athletic agent rose, reached under his coat to his right hip and produced a short-barreled revolver. He held it up. "With this," he said laconically. "In the head. Death will be instantaneous."

There were sudden protests from the military representatives.

Hayes holstered the revolver and looked at his chief. Hilliard nodded, and Hayes walked to the end of the room. From a carton, he lifted a small bullet trap and placed it against the wall. The safe area inside the trap was about the size of an opened magazine. Then he moved to the conference table, picked up one of the ashtrays, returned to the trap, and propped the tray against it.

Appropriately, the tray was about the width of a man's head.

Agent Hayes stood up, buttoned his coat and began walking leisurely away from the trap. At twenty paces, he whirled. It was almost too fast for the eye to follow, but the individual actions were these:

With his left hand, Hayes unbuttoned his coat. With his right, he swept open the coat, turned in a crouch, simultaneously drew the revolver, and fired. The ashtray assumed a new identity—a scattered pile of broken glass.

It all happened in measurably less than a second.

There was a collective expiration of breath from the men around the table.

Before breakfast the next morning, there wasn't a single one of the small group of men intimately involved with the top-priority problem who did not know that Hayes had failed.

This was shocking enough in itself, but what made it even more so was the fact that Hayes was still alive to tell it—and that anyone else was there to hear him.

"I came as close as hell to swearing," Hayes said dully to Wilmer and Flinn.

Neither of them needed any special powers of observation to see that the young agent was shaken. The three sat in the small Pentagon office. Coffee had been served, and they were waiting now for a quorum of the governmental officials to gather.

"I had it lined," Hayes continued. "I'd waited half the night for everything to be just right. I was in a good position, close and to one side. Dobbs was as relaxed as I've ever seen him. I was just telling myself '*Now*' when Dobbs looked directly at me and grinned. 'If you're planning on doing anything rash, my friend, don't. You can't possibly kill me swiftly enough to keep from destroying yourself, every person in this room, every man, woman, and child in this city, and every living thing on the face of this Earth.' *What could I do?*"

"Thank God you didn't figure it was just a bluff!" Wilmer exclaimed. "Pulling that trigger would have been the greatest blunder in history."

"Move and countermove," Flinn mused. "It was our gambit and we were checked before we started."

"So I got on the open line and told the boys to fetch Flinn as quickly as possible," Hayes went on. "But I still don't understand. I'd swear that man read my mind."

"I don't think so," Flinn said. "I've had two mental contacts with Dobbs, and neither time did I get the least suggestion that he was telepathic."

"No need for him to be," Wilmer said. "It doesn't take a smart man to put two and two together and arrive at four. And this man is more than merely smart."

"I suppose you're right," Hayes said, "but it sure knocked the props out from under me."

They were all in attendance, most of them looking ruffled and gritty from lack of sleep and the realization that they had been beaten.

"I just don't know," a senator said wearily. "First a man who can influence matter, then one who reads minds, and now the latter tells us the former is inviolable. It's too much for me."

"I refuse to accept defeat!" a fleet admiral thundered, bringing his fist down upon the table explosively. He was an erect, bristling man with an aggressive combat record in two wars. "We've lost the first round—so what? There will be others."

"I quite agree," the Presidential assistant said. "This man *must* be destroyed. Already he's beginning to make impossible demands."

"But how do we go about it?" a congressman said. "Personally, I think we're licked. As far as I can see, the best thing to do is let him have his head and hope for the best."

"*Hope for the best?*" a man from a security agency echoed incredulously. "It's power Dobbs wants—recognized power. He wants to be feared and worshipped. Sooner or later he'll let everyone know. His egotism will force it. Can you conceive of what that would mean? For myself, I'd rather see the entire human race disappear in one flash of fire without ever knowing what hit it than live under the thumb of the fear of destruction!"

"Gentlemen!" The Presidential assistant rapped for order. "Let's examine the situation rationally and seek out the flaws. There must be some somewhere. Nothing in the mind of man is perfect."

"Well, this comes as close as anything," Wilmer interjected. "You ask what's wrong with the direct approach—why not shoot him while he sleeps? Well, I'll answer with some questions. Have any of you died as the result of a bullet in the brain? Have you ever questioned anyone who has been killed in that manner? Then how do we know there isn't a microsecond of awareness before life is extinguished? And even—or especially—on the subconscious level, isn't this enough time for a preset signal? What's the time-lag between countdown zero and the explosion of a thermonuclear bomb?"

"Apparently he has us blocked in every way," Flinn picked up Wilmer's argument. "Asleep or awake. Conscious or unconscious. It's all the same. Think of it as a special circuit in his mind. Destroy Dobbs, the circuit shorts, and this preset signal to the oxygen atoms is sent, their nuclei fuse, and that's the end of everything."

He scanned the faces of the men around the conference table. "Or think of it as a hypnotic suggestion. Under hypnosis, an individual is given a certain order that he is to carry out whenever a certain set of circumstances or stimuli occurs. No matter when this happens, no matter what he is doing or thinking when the moment arrives, the subject reacts according to the order buried in his subconscious."

"But for every move there is a countermove," the admiral argued. "This is a situation. A fantastic one, but a situation. There has to be an answer."

"I think there is," Flinn said carefully, "but it could be very risky."

It was up to the committee now. The decision rested squarely in the lap of the United States Government. Flinn had stated his ideas, presented his plan, and tried to give the odds—although in his heart he knew that was impossible—so it was now out of his hands.

Or was it?

The parapsychologist lay on the bed in his hotel room, trying to relax, trying to store up energy for the ordeal that might be imminent. Hayes and Wilmer were in the room, too, awaiting word from the heavily guarded conference chamber in the Pentagon.

The thin physicist paced up and down, his tanned face a study in strain. Wilmer had been with this as long as anyone, except Dobbs, and Flinn found himself wondering what deep inner resources the man had tapped to retain his sanity.

The big federal agent slouched in a chair, looking at nothing. He had lapsed again into the welcome protection of training and discipline.

Several times during the past thirty hours, since presenting his plan, Flinn had had to restrain himself from probing the minds of his two associates. At a time like this, no one had the right to invade another's privacy. And curiosity had to give way for another reason—just one look into either of their minds might be enough to weaken or shatter his own resolve.

The classic dilemma. Do nothing and face a living hell. Act and court destruction. The very simplicity of the alternatives made the problem intolerable.

Telehypnosis—the untried hypothesis.

Good Lord! Flinn told himself. *I'm not even proficient as a telepath yet!*

Outside, he could hear the murmur of the city—the traffic, the people, moving along their separate paths to their own destinations in the humid afternoon heat.

Well, anyway, once the complete curtain of security had fallen, there had been no more leaks. Proving that if a secret was big enough, it could be kept.

Another classic problem. Do the people have the right to be informed? Does forewarned really

mean forearmed? And how about the other nations of the world?

An hour after the dinner dishes had been cleared away by the government agent dubbing as a room-service waiter, the telephone rang with an awful insistency.

Wilmer was the closest, but Hayes beat him to it by a full stride.

After identifying himself, Hayes listened in silence. Then he said, "All right," and replaced the receiver.

He nodded at Wilmer and Flinn.

"It's go ahead." He paused and his face seemed to change—to relent somehow. "And they wanted me to relay this message: The President says, 'May God be with you.'"

Flinn felt very alone and very close to something terrible.

In the gloom of the darkened bedroom that adjoined Dobbs', he could see Wilmer silhouetted against the meager light that came through the curtained window from the street lamp outside and Hayes was out in the hall. But the knowledge of the proximity of the two men did nothing to lessen Flinn's loneliness. The committee had even couched it as an order, trying to relieve him of that small burden, but if he failed, who would remain to accept the blame?

A few times in his forty-two years had Flinn wondered how it would feel to have the fate of the world riding upon his shoulders. Now he knew and wished he didn't.

The door opened silently and Hayes eased in.

"He's asleep," the agent breathed in a barely audible voice. "You can start anytime now."

The plan was simple, deceptively so.

Since Dobbs' block was a kind of self-hypnotic thing, why not countermand it with a deeper hypnotic suggestion introduced by telepathy? If it could be done and was strong enough, the second would counteract the first. At least for a short time.

There were terrifying flaws—the first one obvious, the second not so easily seen.

Suppose Dobbs' block had inherent within it an anti-disturbance feature that might react to any interference, including hypnotism in any form? Then the result would be an immediate "short-circuit" and—disaster.

Trembling with the responsibility that was upon him, Flinn forced himself into a deep concentration, an almost cataleptic trance. All details of the room faded from his consciousness. There was the familiar gray, swirling mist, and, for what seemed an intolerably long time, he fought to make contact with the sleeping man's mind. He almost sobbed aloud from the effort.

Then at last he found it, entered, and gradually pushed down through the subconscious.

He was seeking now, probing for the deep-seated level of the block that he had discovered the second time he had investigated Dobbs' mind.

It was very difficult with the sleeping man and, before he found it, more than once he felt himself standing on the precipice of the unknown, close to slipping away into a fright-filled nothingness.



Finally, he had it, clear and cold. The strange, unhuman, inscrutable area that was in diabolical rapport with the basic stuff of one element of the atmosphere. Flinn lingered there for a while, wondering again why he could not read it completely, then forced himself on and on, deeper and deeper, until at last he felt the limit had been reached.

His own warning thought intruded, telling him that this was the place. And the time for the first test was at hand. He could not afford the luxury of another pause. His resolve might crack....

The thought arced like a high-voltage spark, the preamble of the counter-suggestion: *You are to do nothing. No matter what happens, no matter what is done to you, you are to take no action whatsoever. You are not to react. You are to do nothing. You are to disregard every thought but this.*

The battle had been joined. The interference had bridged the gap—yet the block remained dormant!

The first hurdle had been cleared.

For the better part of three hours, Flinn continued to transmit the counter-suggestion. Although he was not aware of it, sweat rolled from every pore of his body and his nerves spasmed in unfelt agony.

Something happened.

Flinn lost contact as a shrill of warnings welled through Dobbs' mind.

A second later, the door opened and Hayes' voice hissed: "He's awake!"

Flinn returned to awareness slowly. First he was conscious only of how tired he was, and then he knew that a voice was trying to reach him, and he felt a handkerchief swabbing at his face.

Wilmer bent over him in the gloom.

Hayes said in Flinn's ear: "Dobbs is awake. He knows something's wrong. He's moving around in there."

"Then go ahead," Flinn heard his voice say. "There won't be a better time."

"Maybe we should wait," Wilmer cautioned.

"No! Do it now. Hurry!"

The agent stiffened, stepped back, and disappeared.

They heard the door to Dobbs' room open and close and the sound of voices.

There was an exclamation, then Dobb's voice shouting: "What are you doing? Are you crazy? I warn you, *I'll take every one of you with me!*" Then a sudden explosion, muffled, but still shockingly loud, and the thump of a heavy object falling.

Flinn could not bring himself to move a muscle.

The silence seemed absolute. It was as if even the house itself were listening, straining, preparing itself for the inevitable.

One second passed.

Two.

Five.

Ten.

Nothing happened.

Abruptly, Wilmer shouted: "It's all over!"

Flinn heard footfalls upon the stairs and the sound of excited voices.

Hayes burst into the room and turned on the light, the .357 magnum still in his hand. His face was pale; his mouth worked, but no sound emerged.

Flinn found that his muscles would obey him now, and he stood up and headed for the door. He felt numb, drained. He stepped out into the hall. Every special agent and security man on the premises was crowded there.

Flinn turned back to Hayes.

"I never thought to ask before," Flinn said. "Dobbs—did he have any close living relatives? A wife? Children?"

Hayes shook his head.

"Thank God for that!" Flinn said.

He started down the hall toward the stairs. The men there grew silent as he approached and moved soundlessly out of his way.

He went down the stairs, through the room off the kitchen, and outside to the driveway. He looked up at the dark sky.

It's over, he told himself. And now I'm a murderer. All of us are. A guilt shared by the few to save the many. But the few are the product of the many, just as each individual is, so where are we to place the blame?

Twenty years of research, and where had it led?

Somewhere he had failed as society had failed, and, even in success, Flinn could feel no flush of victory.

The Earth was safe, but every human upon it had died a little without even knowing it.

Yes, it's over, Flinn thought finally. For now. Until the next time.

He could see no stars. In a while it would be dawn.

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