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ALL ELSE IS

by E. K. Jarvis

Nobody quarrels particularly with the idea that the dead turn to dust. But what if it starts to happen *BEFORE* you die?

THEY HAD taken the cover off the target box preparatory to making a new run and the beam from the cyclotron was spurting into the air. Through the periscope in the control room, the beam looked like a death ray. In the control room, graduate research assistant Nick Zehr waited for Ed Freuhoff's entrance into the chamber that housed the cyclotron. A frown puckered Nick's forehead. In this place of transition, in this place of hurtling change, a frown was no new sight. Every man who worked here habitually wore one. But Nick Zehr's frown was something special.

Once before he had seen this thing happen, when the target box was disconnected and the beam was spurting into the air, and he had simply refused to believe his eyes. Even in this place of high magic where a new world was in the making—or an old one being destroyed—even in this place where almost anything might happen, there were limits to what one was willing to believe he had seen. Pink elephants, yes. Green diamonds, yes. But this—No!

Freuhoff entered the operating

chamber. In the control room, Nick Zehr, aware of the big man's entrance, glued his eyes to the periscope and held his breath.

Freuhoff shambled as he walked. Slow of speech and slow of movement, he looked a little like an ape that had decided to become a man and then had changed his mind about the whole business when he discovered what being a man meant—but could not quite make up his mind to go back to apehood again. Not too keen, not too alert, what Freuhoff lacked in native intelligence, he made up by plodding work. Day and night, the man worked.

He walked across the operating chamber. As he moved past the purple beam from the cyclotron, the beam curved in an arc and snapped at his back.

In the control room, Nick Zehr froze.

The beam didn't touch Freuhoff. It snapped out behind him and seemed to follow him from the space of inches. When he started to turn his head, it promptly snapped back into its normal position. By the time he got his head around far enough to see it, the beam was again a purple

DUST



Right before their startled eyes, he disintegrated into a golden dust and blew away

glow of ionized air exploding outward from the open target box.

In the control room Nick Zehr said, "This beats the hell out of me!" There was shock and surprise and wonder and awe in his words. And in him was fear.

"The beam snapped at him. But when he turned around to look at it, it jumped back into place."

This was the impression he had gotten. The beam seemed to have taken intelligent action, whether to strike at Freuhoff or to examine him, out of curiosity, Nick Zehr couldn't determine.

Nor could he understand how the beam *could* take intelligent action. The glow was simple ionization, the beam itself was composed of accelerated particles. Neither the beam nor any part of it was intelligent. Not if man really knew anything about the universe! Therefore the beam could not, like a turtle, become curious about a man and stick its head out from under its shell for another look, jerking back under the shell when it was about to be caught in the act of looking.

Nick Zehr shivered and a cold wave seemed to pass over his body. He had seen the beam lick at Freuhoff, not once but twice! What did it mean? Here in this laboratory they were exploring the fringes of the universe. This cyclotron had been part of the Manhattan Project, it had helped produce the hell that had exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki: the atom bomb. But the bomb was not important, not really. At best, it could only be considered a gadget, important only in the fact that it was a landmark on the new voyage of discovery, a signboard pointing the way to new lands that lay afar, a compass to guide a new Columbus. Compared to the things that might follow it, the atom bomb

was about as important and breath-taking as the operation of a mechanical cigarette lighter, the scrape of steel on flint.

The beam licking at Freuhoff could mean anything. Or nothing. But one thing was certain—Ed Freuhoff and everybody else who worked this lab, had to be warned. Nick Zehr reached for the toggle switch on the squawk box, but before his fingers reached it, the telephone buzzed on his desk. He picked up the telephone—and forgot all about Freuhoff and the erratic purple beam spurting from the cyclotron.

HIS WIFE'S voice sounded in his ear. "Nick! Nick! Come home quickly! Oh, Nick—" The voice was suddenly muffled and choked. "Something terrible is happening! Nick—" A clatter came over the wire. Then silence.

"Nancy, what on earth is wrong with you?"

No answer. The line hummed softly to itself, a chorus of drowsy elfin voices humming unknown songs.

"Nancy!" His voice was a shout echoing through the control room. Frantically he jiggled the receiver on the hook. "Nancy! Nancy! Operator, what's wrong with this connection? You cut me off! Operator!"

"I'll check the connection for you," came the cool voice of the operator. The receiver clicked and hummed. "The connection is all right, sir. The trouble seems to be at the other end; the receiver is off the hook."

"Nancy!" Nick Zehr screamed.

There was no answer.

"Shall I try again for you?" the operator asked.

"No. No. I'll go see." He flung the telephone back on its cradle and paused just long enough on his way out to yell at Ray Schmidt to take

over the control panel. Nick's shift was almost over anyhow and Schmidt was just coming on duty.

Nick and Nancy Zehr lived in an efficiency apartment with a pull-down bed. They considered themselves lucky to have even that. Both worked, he as a graduate assistant while he completed the dissertation for his Ph. D., Nancy as a lab assistant in the biology department. As members of the staff of Gilbert University, both enjoyed their work and the way they lived. Until now, there had been no shadow between them and nothing had ever threatened the even tenor of their life together. He could not begin to guess what might have happened to Nancy to force her desperate call to him. "Something terrible is happening!" Her words rang in his ears. He tried to imagine what might have happened to her but his imagination failed him.

Their apartment was on the third floor of a 30-unit building. He almost ran the wheels off his ancient jalopy reaching it. The thought had come to him that perhaps the building might be on fire, but when he reached it he saw with relief that there was no sign of smoke. So far as he could tell, everything was normal in the building. He went up the stairs three at a time.

As he went by on the run, Mrs. Keeney was bringing her baby buggy out of her apartment. She stared at him as if wondering what on earth was the matter. Fuller, the musician, was practicing on his violin. In one of the apartments a child was yelling and in another a dog was barking. The smell of hamburger being fried with onions was in the air. The building, the people, the sounds, even the smells, were normal. In this place where completely sane people led completely sane lives, what could

have happened to Nancy?

Unlocking the door, he yelled for her.

There was no answer.

The room, he thought, was strangely full of dust. It struck in his throat, threatening to choke him, and he coughed. He expected to find his wife slumped down by the telephone in the dressing alcove just off the bathroom. She wasn't there. The bathroom door was open, revealing a tub half filled with soapy water. The telephone, uttering burping squawks, hung from the top of the dresser. Dust covered the floor, dust hung in the air. It spurted up around his feet as he moved. Choking, he opened a window. "Nancy!" he screamed.

The echo of his own voice answered him.

CHAPTER II

HIS WIFE was not in the apartment. He ran into the hall, hoping to find someone who might have seen her. Mrs. Keeney was down at the far end of the hall, waiting patiently for the self-service elevator.

"Mr. Zehr, is something wrong?"

"Have you seen Mrs. Zehr?"

"No. No, I haven't." The elevator arrived. She began automatically to open the doors. The sound of Fuller's violin caught Nick's ears. He knocked on the musician's door. Fuller, in his socks and shirt sleeves, said: "Hello, Zehr. What? No, I haven't seen her." He called over his shoulder. "Honey, have you seen Mrs. Zehr?"

Mrs. Fuller was a bosomy blonde, calendar type. No, she hadn't seen Mrs. Zehr. Was anything wrong?

"I don't know," he admitted. He explained what had happened. They followed him back to his apartment. "Dinner's cooking," Mrs. Fuller said, pointing to the electric roaster in

the kitchenette. "Maybe she stepped out for a salad or for a dessert."

"And maybe she didn't. You don't scream that something terrible is happening and then go trotting off to get a dessert for dinner."

"Maybe—" Mrs. Fuller's breast heaved at the thought. "Maybe—well—maybe she was attacked."

"She wouldn't call up about it," her husband said. He coughed. "Where the hell did all this dust come from, Zehr?"

"I don't know and don't give a damn."

"You better call the police," Fuller said. "If there's nothing wrong, you won't lose anything."

Notified by radio, the police cruiser needed less than ten minutes to reach the building. A sergeant and a corporal came through the open door of the apartment. "Woman missing?" the sergeant said. His attitude indicated that this was an old story. In his days on the force he had heard hundreds of husbands report missing wives, or vice versa. Usually it meant that the little woman had overstayed her time in the local gin mill or in the horse parlor or had stepped out with some lad with wavy hair. If the husband was missing, it might mean a sympathetic blonde or it might mean that he had simply gotten sick and tired of looking at the same woman all the time. Men walked away, so did women. Usually nobody really gave a damn, including the other spouse and the police. Sometimes the walkers stop over at their lawyers' office and go on to the divorce court, sometimes they don't even bother about the lawyer.

All of this was included in the sergeant's attitude and in his voice when he said, "Woman missing? Your wife, huh? Let me have the

name and description, please."

His attitude changed a trifle when Nick Zehr told him about the telephone call. "Something was happening to her, huh? She calls you and tells you its happening? But when you get here, she's gone?"

"That's right."

"Did she say what was happening?"

"No."

The sergeant sneezed violently. "Lot of dust in here." He searched the apartment. "Well, she ain't here, that's a cinch. Anything else missing?"

"Not so far as I can tell."

"All of her clothes here?"

Nick searched. "A tan suit seems to be gone but she might have taken it to the cleaners."

"Uh—" The sergeant hesitated. "She—uh—have any boy friends?"

"Listen—"

"Skip it," the sergeant said. "I got to ask questions. Did she have any boy friends?"

"No," Nick said hotly.

THE SERGEANT scratched his head. "Well, she ain't here and I don't see any evidence to prove anything is wrong. Except for all the dust, the place is in order, nothing missing, no sign of a scrap. What kind of a housekeeper was she, to leave all this dust around?"

"She worked. I guess she hadn't had time to clean it up."

"Okay." The sergeant moved toward the door.

"Is this all you're going to do?" Nick demanded.

"I'll report it," the sergeant answered. "Give me a picture of her. We'll put out a description of her. Chances are, she'll turn up herself in an hour or so. If she don't come back by tomorrow, get in touch with

Lieutenant Cogwell, of the Bureau of Missing Persons."

Taking the photograph Nick gave him, he went out the door.

"Well, if this don't beat anything I ever heard of!" Mrs. Fuller said. Her breasts heaved. "Why, she could have been killed—" She broke off quickly, glancing at Nick. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. I'm sure nothing has happened to her. I mean—there may have been somebody she liked—I mean—"

"Madge, you talk too much," her husband said.

Nick took a firm grip on his temper. "She may have run off with another man," he said. "But I don't believe it. She wouldn't have called me. She wouldn't have left her things. There's her purse on the dresser, dinner was cooking, her clothes are here, except for one suit—I just don't believe it. I don't. I don't." He was almost in hysterics.

"She'll turn up all right," Fuller said soothingly "Mix yourself a big drink and eat your dinner. If there's anything we can do to help, give us a call. Come on, Madge." They left.

"I must be calm," Nick told himself. "I'm just worrying about nothing. She stepped out for a little while. Maybe some friend called and asked her to come over, maybe Jean had an accident, or Helen, and they called her. Maybe that's what she meant when she said something terrible had happened—"

Maybe!

By midnight the *maybe* had become a frightened voice whimpering in the far corners of his mind. He had covered the neighborhood, he had called all the hospitals, he had called her boss who had said she had complained of a headache and had left early, he had called her friends and had gotten negative

answers. For the hundredth time, he had searched the apartment.

Under the dresser, he found something he had missed in his previous searches—a ball about a quarter of an inch in diameter, apparently made of brass. It looked a little like a ball bearing except that bearings were usually made of steel. He rolled it in the palm of his hand, noting its extreme lightness. "Must be hollow," he thought.

A knock sounded on the door. Thinking it might be Nancy, he almost broke a leg getting to the door to open it. "Nancy—"

But it wasn't Nancy. It was Ed Freuhoff.

"Hello, Nick. I couldn't sleep." The man seemed dazed or maybe a little drunk. "May I come in? I—" He put his hand on the back of his head and rubbed his scalp as if something pained there. His eyes were a little out of focus and Nick had the impression that Freuhoff looked at him and through him to worlds far away. He was pathetically glad to see Freuhoff, he would have been glad to see the devil himself. "Come in, Ed."

"Thanks. Uh—" The vacant gaze went around the apartment. "Where's Mrs. Zehr?"

"I wish to hell I knew!" Nick brought glasses and whiskey and told the story. Freuhoff's face showed amazement. "That's too bad," he said. He sipped at his drink. His eyes went over the apartment seeking something, came to rest on the little brass ball which Nick had laid on the end table. He picked it up. "What—what is this?"

NICK ZEHR was silent. And cold. The impression of cold seemed to come from some well inside of him. He felt like a blind man who

has been dropped into a den of snakes and dares not move hand or foot for fear he will be struck. "How—how did you happen to come over, Ed?" he blurted out.

Freuhoff's eyes were on the little brass ball. "I—I couldn't sleep," he said. He turned the ball in his fingers. "An odd thing." His voice was thick and heavy. He glanced sideways at Nick and Nick again had the impression he was a blind man in a den of snakes. The wrong move, the wrong word, and anything might happen. He lit a cigarette and drew smoke into his lungs, wondering why he was scared. He had no reason to be afraid of this big ape. Or did he have a reason? How much did he actually know about this man?

"Do you want to keep this?" Freuhoff asked. He turned the ball in his fingers.

"No," Nick answered. He shrugged, forced a casual note into his voice. "I found it on the floor. It's a ball bearing, or something. It isn't important."

He suspected the moment he spoke that he had betrayed himself, that he had somehow overplayed his casual indifference, that, like the blind man among the snakes, he had not been able to sit completely still. He had moved, he had made a sound, the wrong sound.

But he didn't know where he had failed or how or what difference it made. Some center of his brain shouted a warning to him.

The snake struck.

Very gently Freuhoff laid the brass ball back on the end table. His ham-sized fist moved in a short arc and jammed savagely home against the base of Nick Zehr's jaw.

CHAPTER III

NICK ZEHR regained consciousness to find himself lying on the

floor of his apartment. A bronzed face he had never seen before was looking down at him. "Feeling better?" the mouth in the bronze face asked.

Nick sat up. Two men, strangers, were in the room. One was quietly phoning from the dressing nook. The other was looking down at him.

Freuhoff, a slow writhing passing through his heavy body, was lying on the floor. His hands were caught in an odd position behind his back. As Freuhoff twisted trying to get free, Nick caught the glint of steel on the man's wrists. Handcuffs!

"Zehr? Nicholas Zehr?" the bronze-faced man asked.

Nick nodded.

"Joswell. FBI." He held a cupped hand in front of Nick's eyes. A badge was visible in the palm. "FBI," Nick muttered. "What—what do you want?" His eyes went to Freuhoff, sitting up now and staring vacantly at him. "He—he slugged me," he said.

Joswell nodded. "We heard it," he said.

"Heard it?"

"Uh-huh. How would you like to take a little ride?"

"Huh?" The situation was somehow moving too fast for Nick to grasp it. Where had these men come from? What were they doing here? What did they want? "Am I—under arrest?"

The agent pursed his lips. "That depends on how you want it. Right now you are not under arrest. We want to talk to you and we can arrest you for questioning, but actually we don't want to arrest you at all. If it will make you feel any better, you're not the fish we're trying to fry, but you may—or may not—know something important about those fish. So we want to talk to you. Okay?"

"Sure. I guess so. But—my wife—"

Joswell nodded, as if he understood exactly what Nick wanted to say. "We know she's gone. She is one of the people we want to talk to you about."

"Huh? What—?"

"We'll talk later," the agent said.

At headquarters, the agent Joswell took Nick to a plainly furnished office. Freuhoff was taken elsewhere. "Sit down, Mr. Zehr," Joswell said. Nick slid into the chair. "First of all, where is your wife?"

"I wish to hell I knew. I've been going crazy—" Remembering who this man was, he caught himself. "Do you think I know where she is?" Anger sounded in his voice.

With his hands, Joswell made little apologetic gestures. "Take it easy, Zehr. I'm trying to find out something. When did you see her last?"

"This morning. What difference—"

"When did you talk to her last?"

"This afternoon about four-thirty."

"You haven't seen her since this morning, you haven't talked to her since four-thirty?"

"That's right."

"Has she, in the past few months, dropped any hints that she might be leaving?"

"No. What are you getting at?"

"I wish I knew." The agent sighed. "Has she seemed in any way unusual to you during recent months?"

"No. Look—"

"Take it easy, Mr. Zehr."

"My wife is missing. You seem to know something about her. At any rate, you're damned curious. If you have any information about her, I want it. Right now."

Joswell was silent, the bronze face impassive and quietly sympathetic.

The agent took a deep breath. "I don't know where your wife is. I wish I did. I'm trying to find her. She's a spy."

"A WHAT?" Nick Zehr gasped.

The word hit him harder than had Freuhoff's ham-sized fist. As a worker in atomic energy, he knew the care and caution exercised to keep new discoveries from reaching improper sources. There was no secret of the bomb, maybe not even any secrets of the know-how, but there was a chance that new discoveries were being made. Hence—spies. No intelligent person doubted that spies existed. But Nancy was not an enemy agent. He would bet his soul on her innocence. "You're crazy as a loon! You're talking like a man with his head under water! You're—" Rising from the chair, he shook his fist in Joswell's face.

"Take it easy," the agent said. "It is barely possible that I know what I am talking about. For three months, we have been watching your wife. If you thought it strange that we turned up so quickly after Freuhoff slugged you, it might interest you to know that we've had a hidden mike planted in your apartment for the past six weeks. We were in an apartment in the building. When Freuhoff hit you, I thought it was time to move in; otherwise we might lose an important witness."

His tone left no doubt that the identity of that witness was Nick Zehr.

"You've had our apartment wired? You've been spying!"

The bronze face showed traces of an embarrassed red. "Counter-spying is a better word." From his pocket he took a bright object which he laid on the desk. "Did you ever see this before?" he asked.

Nick stared at the object. "Sure. It's one of Nancy's compacts." She loved compacts and bought a new one almost every month, it seemed. But this one she had kept longer than usual. "Where did you get it?"

"From her purse before you regained consciousness," Joswell said. "Did you ever see her set this compact, open, on the end table beside the sofa and read aloud her notes on the day's work?"

Nick nodded. "Many times. But what has that got to do with—"

Joswell shrugged. "It's not a compact, it's a miniature radio transmitter," he said.

"What?" Cold shock waves passed up Nick Zehr's back. "Are you certain of that?"

"Dead certain. It's a short range ultra high frequency transmitter of an unusual design. And if you doubt that it is a transmitter and that it has been used as such, we have recordings of your wife's voice sent out over this gadget." His finger tapped the brilliant vanity case.

Nick Zehr was past the stage at which his emotional equipment could respond to additional shock. Or as he thought. "Who was she communicating with?"

"We don't know," Joswell answered.

"Where did she get this transmitter? I didn't pay much attention to the compact but I thought she had bought it."

"She didn't buy it," the agent said. "She got it from Freuhoff."

"What?" Nick discovered that his emotional equipment was still capable of registering additional shock. "Are you sure about that?"

"Certain. We saw him slip it to her."

Nick was silent. "I find all of this hard to believe," he said.

JOSWELL'S EYES regarded him with sympathy and compassion. "I'm sorry it has to be this way," he said, and meant it.

"Do you know where she is?"

The agent shook his head. He swore fretfully under his breath. "The part I can't understand is how she knew we were going to arrest her."

"What?"

"If she hadn't skipped out on us, we would have arrested her within the next fifteen minutes. Somehow she got wind of it and pulled the neatest, most successful job of skipping I've ever seen. We heard her make a call to you. Then we heard you arrive and start yelling for her. Right then and there I started five men looking for her. Not one of them got a trace of her. Between the time she called you and the time you arrived, she managed to vanish, not only from you but from us."

"It doesn't make sense!" Nick Zehr whispered.

"You weren't the only one looking for her," Joswell said. "Right now I've got a dragnet out over the whole city. By tomorrow, if we don't find her, the net will go out over the whole country."

"What about Freuhoff?" Nick interrupted. "You've got him. He gave her the radio. Ask him where she is."

"We are asking him," the agent answered. "Right this minute he is being asked—" He broke off as a knock sounded on the door. "Come in."

The man who entered glanced at Nick Zehr. Joswell nodded. "Okay, Wilkinson. It's all right to talk. Has he begun to open up yet?"

Wilkinson said, "He has admitted he gave the radio to Mrs. Zehr. That's enough to hang both of them—" Behind him the door was thrust open.

The man who entered had not bothered to knock. "Chief, come quick!" he gasped.

Like a shot out of a gun, Joswell leaped from the chair. He went through the door. The two agents followed him. Nick Zehr brought up the rear. There was something strange about the man who had entered last, he saw, but in the emotional storm already swirling within him he had difficulty in isolating that strangeness. Then he saw what it was.

From head to toes, the man was covered with golden dust.

At a run, Joswell went down the hallway. From an open door ahead of him, a man looked out, beckoning. His face, his clothes, his hands, were covered with golden dust. He was trying to brush it from his clothes, mechanically, his mind obviously entirely on something else. He stepped aside and they passed through the door.

IT WAS a plain room, with four stiff chairs, a high barred window, and a single ceiling light so bright it hurt the eyes—a room such as countless law breakers know, not as a place of torture, but as a room where a prisoner may be kept and grilled until the hours turn into days and the days turn into nightmares.

The bright light shining from the ceiling was hazed with golden dust. The room seemed filled with a fog, this too was dust. Nick Zehr was aware of men coughing and sneezing, felt a familiar tickle grow in his own throat.

Lying on the floor in front of one of the chairs were two shoes. Lying across the chair and on the floor were a shirt and trousers. Dust-covered, the clothing gave the impression of being riddled with some

kind of fast-spreading dry rot so that now it would crumble at a touch.

"What is it, Kilgore?" Joswell said to the man who had beckoned to them from the door.

Kilgore left off the mechanical brushing of his clothes. He pointed to the chair. His voice rasped mechanically, like a robot repeating to its master the things its eyes had seen. "He was sitting in that chair. Suddenly it looked like dust was spurting out all over him." He stopped speaking and licked dry lips with a nervous tongue.

"Go on," Joswell said.

"By God, right in front of my eyes, he turned to dust!" Kilgore blurted out the words. "It looked like he had turned to dust and then somebody had punched the switch on a million little electric fans inside of him. The fans started turning and blew him away. By God, Chief, that's exactly what it looked like!"

CHAPTER IV

ON KILGORE'S face sweat was turning the yellow dust into mud. He rubbed his hands over his cheeks, stared at the smear on his palms. "This damned stuff, Chief, this is Freuhoff—all that's left of him."

"Damn it, that's not humanly possible!" Joswell said and stopped as Nick Zehr spoke without realizing he was speaking.

"But maybe it's inhumanly possible."

Eyes turned toward him as the words left his lips. The room was silent. Again he felt like a blind man in a snake pit. He stood very still, hardly daring to breathe and not daring to move. Yellow dust

swirled through the room. Joswell looked at him. "I was thinking that," the agent said. "I didn't dare say it."

Joswell's face was gray. A vein throbbed visibly in his forehead. His gaze went around the room as if he was looking for something he suspected might be here, yet afraid he would find it. "All the time I've thought we were chasing a bunch of spies trying to crack our atomic set-up. What a mistake that was!"

Outside was the night, the distant honk of a taxicab. Somewhere tires screeched on asphalt. Again Nick Zehr found himself thinking of alien intelligences using human beings to probe the secrets of a world they could not investigate directly. Human robots! Had Freuhoff been such a robot? Had Nancy— He couldn't even think it.

He had loved her, he had held her in his arms, he had lived with her. He knew everything about her. Or he thought he had known everything.

Joswell's eyes searched the room for something invisible, something intangible, something hidden from the senses, for some alien creature present here invisibly. Knots formed at the corners of his jaw. "Kilgore, set a guard on this room. Roust the chemists out of bed and get 'em up here. I want an analysis of this dust. I want this room searched, walls, ceiling, floor, door, chairs, lights. Don't miss a thing. Move!"

Kilgore was gone.

"Wilkinson, bring all the records on Freuhoff to my office. Move."

Wilkinson moved.

Nick Zehr followed Joswell back to the agent's office. "You saw the room, you heard what happened," the agent said. "What do you think?"

"I don't think. I can't think. It's not possible."

"I know it's not possible. But it

happened. Why did Freuhoff come to your apartment?"

"He said he couldn't sleep."

"Why did he slug you?"

"I have no idea. It was completely unexpected."

Joswell's bronze face had a gray pallor. His eyes were hard and cold. "You and he weren't very friendly, were you?"

"As a matter of fact, we weren't. But we weren't unfriendly either."

"Do you have any information that might help?"

"So far as I know—none."

"Why did you say it might be inhumanly possible for a man to be turned to dust?" Joswell's stare was unwinking.

"I had no reason. The thought just popped into my mind."

For a moment Joswell watched him, then the cold eyes were hooded and the gaze was turned away. "Well, there's no use trying to lick this thing in an hour or two. If I get the job done during the rest of my life, I'll figure I'm lucky. Zehr, where do you want to stay, here or at a hotel? We've got some rooms fitted up with bunks here. You can use one of them if you wish."

Apparently he was giving Nick complete freedom of choice. "Can't I go home instead?" Nick asked.

"That's out," the agent answered. "Personally, if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't go back to that apartment for a million dollars—though I'm damned if I can suggest any other place that's much safer."

"I'll stay here," Nick said.

"Good. You'll at least have somebody within calling distance."

JOSWELL personally took Nick to the room he was to occupy. It was fitted with a double-decker bunk. Lying down, Nick sank instantly into

a deep, drugged slumber through which, like phantoms out of a nightmare, writhed the impossible shapes of alien monsters. At ten o'clock the next morning, Nick was back in the agent's office. "Got anything yet?" he asked.

Joswell looked like a man who has not had much sleep. "A lot of nothing," he said. "I've got two chemists at work on that dust. I had three at first but when I told them what the dust was, the third quit on me. I think he figured the day of Judgment was at hand." Joswell shook his head. "I don't know that he's not right. I've been talking to doctors, physicists, chemists, to any scientist who would hold still long enough to listen to me, and they all say there is no known force—ray, radiation, disease, or what have you—that will turn a man into dust within the space of minutes."

"Did you tell them you had seen it happen?"

"Hell, no!" the agent answered. "I'm not likely to tell that to anybody yet. If the story got around that there is something loose in this town that is turning people into dust we'd have the damnedest panic on our hands you ever saw. People are already scared, of the atom bomb, of bacteriological warfare, of the next depression, of this, that, and something else. I haven't got anything except this, and I don't know what it is."

From his desk drawer he took a small box. Opened, it revealed a brass ball. "I know what *that* is," Nick said. "I found it under the dresser in my apartment. I didn't know you had brought it with you."

"I didn't."

"No? Then where did you get it?"

"Found it in Freuhoff's clothes."

"The devil! Say he *had* been look-

ing at that just before he slugged me. I got the idea he thought it was important, though I don't know why. Maybe he brought it along."

"And maybe he didn't," the agent mused. He picked up the phone on his desk, gave a number to the switchboard operator.

"That's my number you just called," Nick spoke.

"Uh-huh. I've got a man staked out in your place. He doesn't much like being there, either." The receiver rattled and he spoke rapidly into the mouthpiece. He listened, then hung up. "There's another one of these balls at your place," he said.

"Well—" Nick said. He picked up the little brass ball and held it between his thumb and forefinger. Twist and turn it as he might, he could see no importance that could be attached to it. "I don't know. I don't understand. I—" His voice trailed off. His hunch was that the ball was important. But how? He did not know. "What do you want me to do?" he said.

"There are two things I don't want you to do. One is to go back to your apartment, the other is to go back to your job."

"But—" Nick twisted uncomfortably. There was a thought in his mind, a thought he had been trying to avoid. "My wife—"

Joswell nodded. "I know," he said. His voice dropped a notch. "As I recall it, there was a lot of dust in your apartment."

Nick Zehr was on his feet. "No! No! No!"

"So far as my chemists can tell, it is essentially the same as the dust that came from Freuhoff," Joswell said quietly.

"Do you think that Nancy—" But Nick got no farther. His mind blanked out on him and refused

to function. He had been trying to avoid this thought, had been trying to avoid it ever since he had seen the dust in the room where Freuhoff had been questioned. He could avoid it no longer.

"Here's a number," Joswell said. "Call it if you think of something."

He scribbled something on a piece of paper. Nick Zehr took it, turned and walked dumbly from the room.

"Keep in touch with me," Joswell said.

WITH JOSWELL'S words lingering in his ears, he walked out of the gray stone Federal building. Nancy—dust. Nancy—gone. Nancy—dead. Why did he want to stay alive if Nancy was gone? There was nothing left, not even his work. He knew enough about the functioning of security to know that he would not be allowed near a radiation laboratory until Joswell had cleared him. Joswell wasn't going to clear him until the agent was sure of his ground. It was not that Joswell suspected him of being a spy—apparently he was convinced of his innocence—but he had been too close to a woman who operated an illegal transmitter for him to be entirely clear of suspicion. Joswell wouldn't take any chances.

Joswell was a badly scared man. He had seen the equivalent of a ghost and he walked in terror. Somewhere in this city there was an alien creature and Joswell knew it. But where? Or was the alien somewhere else, in some other space-time, manipulating his controls across the gulf of chaos? Who knew? Were the people passing along the street, driving automobiles, riding in street cars, were they walking robots controlled by some creature hiding in another space? Not all of them certainly, but perhaps some of them were such robots. Who knew

which was which? Were they real people, controlled by an alien intelligence, or were they imitations of real people? Nick Zehr had always thought his wife was a real woman but now he was not certain. There had always been something mechanical about Freuhoff's actions. Seen in the light of his new knowledge, Nick realized that Freuhoff had always acted as if he was under the control of some other power. But where was this power hiding? And was he in danger from it?

Inside his mind he was aware of groping pressures. Then a voice whispered far away, "I am your friend. I will help you."

"What?" he said automatically. It was in his mind that someone near him had spoken.

"I am the alien," the whisper said.

A shudder passed over Nick Zehr. He jerked his head around to look behind him. He was on the steps of the Federal building. Story on story, the tall structure rose above him. Pigeons fluttered around the roof. A flag drooped languidly in the still mid-morning air. Cars passed on the street, their tires singing against the asphalt. A man was sniping for cigarette butts along the gutter.

The whole scene looked completely commonplace. There was no person and no thing in sight that could have spoken to him. He reached the immediately obvious decision. "I'm nuts," he thought.

"You are not insane," the prompt answer came. "I exist. I am speaking to you."

"Where are you?"

A WILD light had appeared in Nick Zehr's eyes. He began walking along the street. Somewhere ahead of him a police whistle shrilled and traffic moved in response. He

bumped into a woman and got a curt, "Why don't you look where you're going?" and did not hear a word she said. He was listening to the voice speaking to him.

It was a calm, soothing voice. It said, "I am very near you but you cannot see or feel me. You can hear me speak in your mind. That is all."

Nick Zehr stumbled. The police whistle shrilled again, sharp and indignant. Rubber screamed and a horn blared. He caught a glimpse of a bright chromium bumper swerving to avoid him, the face of the frightened and indignant driver glaring at him from behind the wheel. A hand grabbed his shoulder.

"God damn it, are you trying to commit suicide?" It was the traffic cop. "Watch where you're going!"

Without noticing what he was doing, Nick had walked into the flow of traffic. "I'm sorry—"

"What the hell's the matter with ya? Ya drunk?"

"No. I was thinking. I—wasn't noticing."

"Ya better notice! Get on now. And look where you're going!"

Nick crossed the street. He had scarcely heard the policeman. In his mind a far-away voice was screaming. "You idiot! You almost got yourself killed just the minute I established contact!"

Nick walked on. He kept his eyes rigidly to the front. All over his body, the flesh crawled. He had the impression he was being followed, he was being watched. There was a drug store on the corner. Joswell had said to call him if anything happened. Something certainly had happened. He turned into the drug store to call the Federal agent.

"What are you going to do?" the voice snapped at him.

"Uh—I'm going to make a phone

call. It's something I have to do."

"You're going to call that Joswell!" As the agent's name flowed into his mind, there came with it a blast of burning hate.

"No. That is—"

"You fool, I can read your thoughts! You were going to call Joswell and tell him about me."

"I sure as hell am!" Nick thought.

"Try it and see!"

Nick started toward the phone booths at the rear. In mid-stride, he halted. Something seemed to reach into his mind and seize his will. Desperately he tried to move toward the phone booths. His heart beat climbed, he panted from the effort he was exerting but he didn't move an inch closer to the phones. From her cage, a girl cashier stared wonderingly at him.

"Turn around and walk out of here," the voice said.

He found himself turning around and walking out of the drug store. The far-away voice chuckled—the alien gloating over him. "Call a cab," the voice ordered. "That man Joswell is dangerous. He has to be stopped, quickly. Stopping him is your job and you are going to do it."

CHAPTER V

TWENTY minutes after he hailed the cab and gave the address to the driver, the cab stopped in an old section of the city. All during the ride the alien had been silent. Now Nick hoped that somehow contact had been broken.

It was a frail hope. As soon as the car stopped moving, the voice spoke again. "Get out of the cab."

Nick paid the driver. Completely lost, he stared around him. To his left was a warehouse, apparently abandoned. Directly in front of him

was a small stucco house with a *No Trespassing* sign in front of it.

"Go down the alley beside the warehouse and enter by the side door," the voice said. Nick obeyed. "How—how can you speak my language?" he asked.

"I learned it from you," was the reply.

Nick reached the door of the warehouse, rattled the knob in his hands. The door was locked.

"Unlock it," the voice said.

"How?"

"You have the key on your key ring. It's the same as the key to your apartment. It was made that way, in case you or anybody else got curious. An extra key that seemed to fit nothing might have been hard to explain to Joswell, or to somebody like him, but a key to your own apartment needed no explanation."

Nick fitted the key in the lock. The bolt moved back.

"To the basement," he was ordered.

"This is as far as I am going," Nick said. He planted both feet firmly, intending to move no farther. To his surprise he found himself walking down the basement stairs while a shrill voice like the screaming of an angry bird scolded him. "You utter fool! I can force you to obey me. I can block off your conscious mind so that you will never remember you have obeyed me. You are a robot, a slave. I am your master."

Slave! Robot! The words echoed in his mind. He walked into the basement of the warehouse, unlocked a door that seemed to lead into the furnace room. He was not surprised to discover that the key to the cyclotron lab fitted the furnace room door. Nor was he surprised to discover a well-concealed opening that looked to be a part of the wall of

the coal bin across the big room.

He was now in the basement of a small stucco house next door to the warehouse, in what looked to be a completely equipped laboratory.

"Whose lab is this?" he asked.

"Freuhoff's," the answer came. "And yours."

"Mine?" he gasped. "But I've never been here before. I know nothing of this."

"Consciously you know nothing," the voice said. "But you rented this house and the warehouse, under my control, fitted the locks on the doors and set up the equipment here."

"When was this?" he gasped.

"You did it last summer when Nancy went home to visit her mother," the voice said. "Remember, you had a vacation then but you said you couldn't go with her because you were busy at the lab. This is the lab you were working on. Freuhoff joined you later, after you had completed setting up the equipment here. After Freuhoff joined you, he did all the work and you did not come near the place again, until now." Far away a laugh sounded, not a laugh really, but a feeling of mirth flowing into his brain.

His eyes went around the laboratory seeking the laughter.

"There is no point in trying to find me," the voice whispered in his ear. "If you live a thousand years, you will never find me."

"Where are you?" he whispered hoarsely.

"You will never know."

"Are you in this room?"

"Yes."

"Were you in the cab with me?"

"Certainly."

"Were you with me yesterday?"

"I have been with you for over four of your years. I have watched from your eyes, heard from your ears, puz-

zled out the language that you use, studied your emotions and feelings until I know you better than you know yourself."

"Are you matter as we know matter?"

"Perhaps." A cautious note was creeping into the voice.

"Then why can't I see you? Why can't I feel you?"

"For two reasons—because I am hidden, and because I don't want you to see me. In fact, your seeing me would be disastrous for both of us."

Nick Zehr took a deep breath. "Where are you hidden?" he demanded.

"You asked that once before," the answer came. The voice changed. "This is enough talk. There is work to be done."

"What kind of work?"

"We have to stop Joswell. He knows more than he has hinted to you."

"Maybe you have to stop him, but I don't," Nick Zehr thought. The idea flashed across his mind and was instantly gone as he tried to control his thinking. He was too slow. The alien had caught the thought impression. "You will obey orders," the cold voice said. "Or else! Turn the current into that generator."

THE GENERATOR was a complicated apparatus that looked something like a high frequency, high power radio transmitter. "I don't understand this thing," Nick Zehr muttered.

"You ought to understand it: you built it." The alien laughed. "Of course, you have no memories of building it."

If he had done this, what else had he done? He didn't know and couldn't think. "What does it do?"

"It projects control spheres into

the brain of any person I wish to control," the alien explained.

"Control spheres?" Nick Zehr muttered. Something floated up from his subconscious mind, a description of the control spheres, a mental picture of them. He shivered. "The little brass balls," the alien said. "I see some of your memories are becoming conscious. You found two of them. One came from Freuhoff, after he was disintegrated; the other came from your wife."

A hard core of pain throbbed in Nick Zehr's heart. "Don't be concerned about her," the voice said. "You can get another woman, a hundred if you wish. All you have to do is project a control sphere into their minds and they will come to you, under my direction."

"What?" Nick whispered. The potentialities of this thing were horrifying.

"I needed to use your wife for experimental purposes," the voice went on. "She was the only person whom I could seize that I could also observe, regularly, through your eyes. She was the first person I seized by the control spheres. After her came Freuhoff. Also, I wanted to use her to test the effectiveness of the radio transmitter. The transmissions that the agent detected were actually messages to me, from her. It was an experiment, and a mistake. If those transmissions had not been detected, Joswell would never have known I existed."

"These brass balls are actually placed inside a person's brain? How can you do that?"

"They are synthesized there. A mild anaesthetic is also synthesized at the same time so that no pain is felt. Through the spheres I establish direct contact with the brain of the person I wish to seize. He has no

idea that I am controlling him, reading his mind, ordering his actions. In the case of Freuhoff, I went a little wrong somewhere." Worry crept into the voice. "You noticed the beam of the cyclotron flick toward him as he walked past it. Actually the beam was attracted in some unknown way to the control sphere. When he turned his head, the sphere was out of focus and the beam snapped back into place. I don't understand how this happened but in some ways Freuhoff was a failure. He actually succeeded in thinking in a way that I could not detect, though his thinking led him to the wrong conclusion. He thought you were his enemy and he came to your apartment, determined to kill you. This was the wrong conclusion he had reached, that you had caused something to happen to him."

For a moment, Nich Zehr felt a wild sympathy for Ed Freuhoff. How the man must have struggled, first to grasp the idea that something had happened to him, then to find out what had happened, then to do something about it! Actually he was trying to detect the existence of a control sphere inside his brain. "Was that why he slugged me?" he whispered.

"He meant to do more than slug you," the answer came. "Somehow the control sphere that had come from your wife gave him the final clue he needed."

"And you killed him?"

"I disintegrated him, through the control sphere. He was telling the agents too much and he was about to betray his suspicions of you."

"You sound as if you really want to protect me," Nick said.

"I do," the voice answered.

"And these control spheres, I assume that I—" His voice and his

thoughts faltered. "That I—I have one in my brain, too?"

"What do you think?" the answer came.

NICK KNEW what he thought. What else *could* he think? He had been seized, he was a robot, a slave. He did not know how it had happened, only that it *had* happened. Like a sick dog creeping away to die, desperation moved through his mind. Meanwhile his fingers worked at the generator, largely without conscious direction from him. In effect, he seemed to stand off and watch his fingers work, to see himself as another, different person doing violence against his will. He closed switches. The tubes in the generator warmed to life. In the center of a special tube that seemed to be the heart of the apparatus—caught and held in a vortex of radiation that seemed to pour in on it from a separate source—a tiny brass ball began to take shape—a control sphere in the process of synthesization. The voice was silent. The alien seemed to withdraw from him and to concentrate its attention on the functioning of the generator.

What was this alien that rode him like the Old Man of the sea? Where had it come from? Where was it hidden? He did not know. He had imagined that some humans were robots probing his space-time continuum for information to be radiated back to masters located in other universes. He was familiar with the theory of plural universes, of the fourth, and higher, dimension. Perhaps the alien that controlled him came from some such universe.

How could he seek out and find an alien who might be hidden in some lost infinity? How could he destroy such a creature? He did not

know how, all he knew was that there was in him the fierce desire for destruction. This alien had killed Nancy. Between Nick Zehr and the alien there would never be anything except deadly enmity. He kept such thoughts out of his conscious mind but under the surface they boiled with hurricane violence. Hidden below the threshold of perception, the hate in him was as violent as a miniature atom bomb. Freuhoff must have felt something like this, when he detected that something—he probably never knew exactly what—had seized control of him.

As to what would happen to him, eventually, Nick Zehr had no doubts. He would die. Deep in his mind was the knowledge that he wanted to die.

Inside the tube, the brass ball began to grow to proper size. Nick was aware of irritation. The alien was irked, maybe worried. Something had gone wrong somewhere. The ball stopped growing. Held in the vortex out of which it grew, it remained a waiting bronze ball.

"What is it?" Nick whispered.

The alien spoke. "Joswell is not in his office."

How the alien knew this, Nick did not know. Nor was it explained to him. Perhaps a form of telepathy or clairvoyance was involved. "It is best done when the subject is asleep," the alien spoke. "But asleep or awake, I have to know where the subject is."

"And you don't know where Joswell is?"

"No."

"Too bad," Nick said. Inwardly he was thoroughly glad but he kept his gladness, like his hate, below the surface of his mind. Freuhoff must have operated in this manner, keeping his real thoughts and his real feelings well hidden.

"We will have to wait until I can

find him," the alien said.

From behind Nick Zehr came a soft creak, the sound of an opening door. He spun around.

JOSWELL stood in the door. He had a .45 automatic in his hand. Behind Joswell came two other men, both with drawn guns.

"Get your hands up," Joswell said quietly. He came into the room.

"You—you found me?" Nick Zehr whispered.

"We found this, too," Joswell answered. His glance took in the basement laboratory. "We knew this had to exist somewhere and we suspected you knew where. We thought, if we turned you loose, you would lead us to it."

"Me?" Nick said. He saw that Joswell did not understand. Finding him here in this place, Joswell had assumed he had come here of his own free will. Joswell thought him guilty. He was caught here in this lab. No amount of persuasion would ever offset the fact of his being here.

Nick Zehr knew the consequences of being caught here. Years in prison would be the best he could hope for. It was a fate he could not face. Not now. Somewhere in his soul he found the courage to smile. He knew what he was going to do.

"To hell with you!" he said to Joswell. "You haven't got me yet!"

From the workbench he snatched a pair of pliers. With all his strength, he flung them at the agent.

Joswell dodged.

In Nick Zehr's mind the voice of the alien screamed. "Stop it, you fool. You idiot, you will get both of us killed!" He felt the controls in his mind reach for his will.

"You'll never get me alive," he shouted, and flung himself straight at Joswell.

In the lab, a gun thundered. Nick felt the bullet hit him. It was not Joswell who had fired. Joswell wanted him alive, for questioning. It was Wilkinson who pulled the trigger of the gun. The heavy bullet struck him, spun him backwards, knocked him down. Blood spurted from his chest.

In his mind a frantic voice screamed: "You fool! I could have saved you!"

Nick Zehr answered, "To hell with you!" Here in these last few seconds he had discovered the hiding place of the alien. Its identity he did not know but he knew its hiding place and had horrible suspicions of its real nature. "To hell with you! I got you anyhow!"

Joswell was bending over him. "What?" he asked.

"Not me—" Nick Zehr gasped. "Not me who did this, but something else." The feeble gesture of his hand indicated the equipment in the laboratory. "I found him, Joswell." Something of triumph sounded in his voice. "I found him—the alien—and did all I could."

In the back of his mind the raging voice of the alien was shouting at him. It was growing weaker. Nick knew what that meant. He had licked his enemy. If he had to lose his own life doing it, at least the sacrifice was worth while. In his mind a feeling of triumph came, grew stronger.

"I—I finished the job," he whispered to Joswell. Inside of him the feeling of triumph built up to a paen of victory. As he died, a smile formed on his lips.

CHAPTER VI

IN HIS OFFICE, the amazed agent fumbled sheets of paper. The whole record of Nick Zehr was here

before him, complete in every detail. His birth, the names of his parents, his high school and college records, a photostat of his army service record, the circumstances under which he had met and married his wife—everything. It was as complete and as careful a dossier as could be compiled on any man. There was no hint of disloyalty in it.

Reading the record, Joswell reluctantly let go of the idea that Nick Zehr had been a spy. Whatever he was, whatever he had been, he had not been that. Nor had his wife.

Then what was he?

Again and again the agent read over a single sheet of paper. It was the report of the medical examiner giving the results of the autopsy. The examiner had thoughtfully stripped it of its technical language. One line held Joswell's complete attention.

"Subject was revealed to have been suffering from cancer of the brain. Exploration revealed a mass of extraneous brain tissue big enough to have filled a tea cup."

Nick Zehr had worked in a radiation laboratory and cancer was sometimes known to result from exposure to excessive amounts of radiation. There was nothing in the case history to indicate that Nick Zehr had known he had cancer, which proved nothing. Many people do not know they have cancer.

In effect, this cancer, this extraneous growth, could have been the equivalent of an extra brain. It had formed within the other brain, which meant that normal brain cells had begun to multiply excessively. Therefore the growth was abnormal brain tissue, possibly capable of thought, of rationalization, of other activities.

"I wonder—" Joswell thought. In this moment he was very close to

making the discovery that Nick Zehr had made just before he died—the hiding place of the alien. The agent knew nothing of the voice that had spoken to Nick Zehr but he suspected that something inhuman had been involved in this case. Remembering what had happened to Freuhoff, he felt chill waves pass over his body, as if some alien monster from another universe had paused for a moment, opened his brain and peeped in before passing on into the mysterious void that gave it birth.

Rising from his chair, he strode to the window and stood looking out over the roof tops of the city. "He said he had got the job done," he

thought. "Did he deliberately throw himself at me, hoping I would kill him? Was that the way—the only way—he could destroy the thing that seemed to control him?"

Joswell did not know the answer. If it were true, then Nick Zehr had been a brave man, one of the bravest. Dying, he had taken his enemy down to death with him. Somehow or other, Joswell thought that this was the true solution. If it was true, then his job was complete. Thinking this, he, and a lot of other people could sleep sounder of nights. Abruptly, he turned back to his desk to begin the task of writing his report.

THE END