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Author: Roger D. Aycock

Illustrator: Irv Docktor

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ASSIGNMENT'S END ***

ASSIGNMENT'S END

By **ROGER DEE**

Illustrated by **DOCKTOR**

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He was just emerging for the hundredth time during the week from the frightening hallucination that had come to plague him, when Kitty Murchinson came into his office.

"It's almost 15:00, Philip," she said.

When she had entered, her face had taken on the placid look that everyone wore—unwittingly, but inevitably—the instant they came near Alcorn.

Alcorn's wild talent was miraculous ... he brought peace to everybody who came near him. Only one person was exempt—himself!

Finding Kitty's cool blonde loveliness projected so abruptly against the bleak polar plain of his waking dream, he knew how much more she was than either fiancée or secretary alone. She was a beacon of reassurance in a sea of uncertainty.

"Thanks, darling," he said, and looked at his watch. "I'd have woolgathered past my appointment and it's an important one."

He stood up. Kitty came closer and put both hands on his shoulders.

"You've had another of those dreams, haven't you? I wish you'd see a—a doctor about them."

He laughed, and if the sound rang hollow, she seemed not to notice.

"That's why I asked you to call me. I've made an appointment with one."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "I'm glad you're decided. You haven't been yourself at all for a week, Philip, and I couldn't *bear* a honeymoon with a preoccupied husband!"

He managed the appropriate leer, though he had never felt less like it. The apprehension that followed his daytime chimera was on him again, so strongly that what he wanted most to do was to take Kitty's hand tightly, like a frightened child, and run headlong until he was beyond reach of whatever it was that threatened him.

"Small chance," he said, instead. "Any man who'd dream away a honeymoon with you is dead already."

She sighed placidly and turned back to the business at hand. "You won't be late for your 16:00 conference with our Mr. O'Donnell and Director Mulhall of Irradiated Foods, will you? Poor Sean would be lost without you."

He felt the usual nagging dissatisfaction with the peculiar talent that had put him where he was in Consolidated Advertising. "He'd probably lose this case without my soothing presence and CA would pay its first ungrounded refund claim in—" he counted back over the time he had been with Consolidated—"four years and eight months."

Kitty said wistfully, "Shall I see you tonight, Philip?"

He frowned, searching for a way to ease the hurt she would feel later, and finding none. "That depends on the psychiatrist. If he can't help me, I may fly up to my cabin in the Catskills and wrestle this thing out for myself."

Kitty moved to go, and then turned back. "I almost forgot. There was a call for you at noon from a secretary of Victor Jaffers' at Carter International. She seemed to know you'd be out and said that Mr. Jaffers would call again at 15:00."

"Victor Jaffers?" Alcorn repeated. The name added a further premonitory depression. "I think I know what he wants. It's happened before."

When Kitty had gone, Alcorn took a restless turn about the room and was interrupted at once by the gentle buzzing of the radophone unit on his desk. He pressed the receiving stud and found himself facing Victor Jaffers' image.

"Don't bother to record this," Jaffers said without preamble. "Complete arrangements have already been made to prove that I've never spoken to you in my life."

Jaffers was a small, still-faced man who might have been mistaken for a senior accountant's clerk—until the chill force of his eyes made itself felt. Alcorn had seen the Carter International head before only in teleprint pictures, had heard and discounted the stories about the man's studied ruthlessness. But those eyes and the blunt approach made him wonder.

"I've got a place in the contact branch of my organization for your particular talent, Alcorn," Jaffers said flatly. "It will pay you five times what you earn with Consolidated. You understand why I'm taking you on."

"I know." The arrogance wearied rather than angered Alcorn. "I have a gift for arranging fair settlements when both principals are present. Mr. Jaffers, I've never exploited my gift for personal profit. That's a matter of self-protection as well as ethics—I don't like trouble." He reached for the canceling stud to end the interview. "Others have made the same offer before you and there'll be others again. But I won't use my ability unfairly."

Jaffers smiled, unamused. "You do go straight to the point, which saves argument. But you'll work for me, Alcorn. Those others made the mistake of talking to you personally. I know that you can be reached as easily as any other man if my agents keep more than fifty feet away from you." His eyes moved past Alcorn to the window. "Look at the window across the street."

Alcorn, turning, felt his neck prickle. Across the narrow canyon of street, without pretense at concealing himself, a man in gray clothing watched him from an open office window.

"I've had you under surveillance for days," Jeffers' voice said behind him. "I've located two others of your sort since my statisticians brought their existence to my attention, but somehow they slipped through my fingers this week. I'm taking no chances on you."

Alcorn whirled back incredulously. "You've found others? Where and—"

"I'll tell you that when you're on my payroll."

"It's a trick," Alcorn said angrily. "I searched for years before I settled down with Consolidated and I didn't find a trace of anybody like myself. I don't believe there are any."

"Most of them covered themselves better." Jaffers added, with cold finality, "I don't haggle, Alcorn. You'll work for me or for no one."

"The trouble is," Alcorn said, "that I'm different from other people and I have to know why. I know *how* I'm different, but if I knew *why*, I'd never have come to a psychiatrist."

Dr. Hagen rattled the data sheet in his hands and blinked behind his pince-nez like a friendly beagle. He was a very puzzled man, being accustomed to analyzing his own reactions as well as those of his patients. Alcorn could see him struggling to account for the sudden serenity that had come over him the instant Alcorn entered the office—certainly it was not the doctor's usual frame of mind, from the first sour look of him—and failing.

"Different in what way, Mr. Alcorn?"

"I soothe people," Alcorn said. "There's something about me that inspires trust and an eagerness to please. Everyone roughly within a radius of fifty feet—I've checked the limit a thousand times—immediately feels a sort of euphoria. They're as happy as so many children at a picnic and they can't do enough for me or for each other."

Dr. Hagen blinked, but not with disbelief.

"It affects psychiatrists, too," Alcorn went on. "You'd cheerfully waive the fee for this consultation if I asked it, or lend me fifty credits if I were strapped. The point is that people are never difficult when I'm around, because I was born with the unlikely gift of making them happy. That gift is the most valuable asset I own, but I've never understood it—and as long as I don't understand it, there's the chance that it may be a mixed blessing. I think it's backfired on me already in one fashion and possibly in another."

He shook out a cigarette and the psychiatrist obligingly held a lighter to it. Dr. Hagen, Alcorn thought, must normally have been an exceptionally strong-willed man, for he hesitated noticeably before he spun the wheel.



"Actually," Alcorn said, "I've begun to worry about my sanity and I'm afraid my gift is responsible."

For the past week, I've had a recurrent hallucination, a sort of waking nightmare that comes just when I least expect it and leaves me completely unstrung. It's worse than recurrent—it's progressive, and each new seizure leaves me a little closer to something that I'm desperately afraid to face."

The psychiatrist made a judicious tent of his fingers. "Obviously you are an intelligent and conscientious man, Mr. Alcorn, else you would not have contented yourself with your comparatively minor job. But your profession as claims adjustor must impose a considerable strain upon your nervous organization. Add to this that you are a bachelor at the age of thirty-three and the natural conclusion—"

In spite of his mood, Alcorn laughed. "Wrong tack—remember my gift! Besides, I'm engaged to be married next month and I'm quite happy with the prospect. This trouble of mine is something entirely different. It's tied in somehow with my talent for soothing and it scares me."

He could have added that Jaffers' hardly veiled threat on his life disturbed him as well, but saw no point in wasting time on the one danger he understood perfectly.

"This vision," Alcorn said, "and the sensory sharpness and conviction of disaster that come with it—it's no ordinary hallucination. It's as real as my peculiar talent and represents a very real danger. It's working some sort of change in me that I don't like and I've got to find out what that change is or I'm done for. I *feel* that."

Obligingly, the psychiatrist said, "Describe your experience."

Talking about it made perspiration stand out on Alcorn's forehead. "First I'm seized with a sudden sense of abnormally sharpened perception, as if I were on the point of becoming aware of a great many things beyond my immediate awareness. I can feel the emotions of people about me and I have the conviction that, in another moment, I shall be able to feel their thoughts as well.

"Then I seem to be standing alone on a frozen arctic plain, a polar wasteland that should be utterly deserted, but isn't. I've no actual sensations of touch or hearing, yet the scene is visually sharp in every detail.

"There's a small village of corrugated sheet-metal houses just ahead, the sort that engineers on location might raise, and the streets between are packed with snow. Machines loaded with metal boxes crawl up and down those streets, but I've never seen their drivers. Until this morning, I never saw any people at all on the plain."

Dr. Hagen rattled his paper and nodded agreeably. "Go on. What are these people like?"

"I can't tell you that," Alcorn said, "because their images were not complete. There seems to be a sort of relationship between them and myself—a threatening one—but I can't guess what it may be. I can't even tell you what racial type they belong to, because they have no faces."

He crushed out his cigarette and took a deep breath, getting to the worst of it. "I have a distinct conviction during each of these seizures that the people I see are not ordinary human beings, that they're as different from me as I am from everyone else, though not in the same way. It's the difference that makes me uneasy. I can feel the urgency and the resolution in them, as if they were determined to do—or had resigned themselves to doing—something desperately important. And then I know somehow that each of them has made some kind of decision recently, a decision that is responsible for his being what he is and where he is, and that I'll have to make a similar one when the time comes. And the worst of it is that I know no matter which way my choice falls, I'm going to be hideously unhappy."

The psychiatrist asked tranquilly, "You can't guess what choice it is that you must make, or its alternative?"

"I can't. And that's the hell of it—not knowing."

The icy chill of the polar plain touched him and with it came a deeper cold that had not been a part of the dream. At that instant, he might have identified its source, but was afraid to.

"My fear has some relation to whatever it is these people are about to do," he said. "I just realized that. But that doesn't help, because I've no idea what it is."

He glanced at his strap watch, and the time made him stand up before the little psychiatrist could speak again. The hour was 15:57, and he saw in dismay that his 16:00 appointment with Sean O'Donnell and the Irradiated Foods tycoon would be late.

"I don't expect an immediate opinion," he said. "You couldn't reach one as long as I'm here. Add up what I've told you, and if it makes any sort of sense you can radophone me tonight at 19:00. If my apartment doesn't answer, relay the call to my cabin in the Catskills—I've kept the location a secret, for privacy's sake, but the number is on alternate listing."

He paused briefly at the door, touched with an uncharacteristic flash of sour humor. "And telestat your bill to me. If I asked for it now, you'd probably charge nothing."

The mood vanished as soon as he was outside and saw the gray-suited Jaffers operative waiting

with stolid patience on the ramp of a department store across the street.

The shock of reminder brought on a giddy recurrence of his hallucination.

The polar plain yawned before him. The silent machines crept over their snow-packed ways, the faceless people stood in frozen groups.

He emerged from the seizure, shaken and sweating, to find that the Jaffers man had crossed the street and was waiting a safe distance behind. Alcorn fought down a panic desire to run away blindly only because Kitty would be waiting for him at Consolidated—Kitty, his bulwark of reassurance.

The gray-suited man was a deliberate hundred feet behind him when he boarded a tube-car.

Kitty was not in his office and there was no time to ring for her.

Instead, he went through the long accounting room beyond, answering automatically the smiles of a suddenly genial staff and headed for O'Donnell's office.

He saw at once that he was too late.

The CA manager's door was open and O'Donnell and Mulhall of Irradiated Foods were emerging. Both wore street jackets and both men had the unmistakable air of euphoric calm that came within seconds of Alcorn's approach.

O'Donnell gave Alcorn his familiar long-lipped grin, looking, with his thin gentle face and neat brush of ermine-white hair, like an aristocratic Irish saint.

"You missed a pleasant meeting," O'Donnell said. "I've just signed a refund release to Charlie here, and a pleasure it was."

The awareness that they had been calmed before he'd arrived left Alcorn speechless.

"Really shouldn't have accepted," Mulhall said sheepishly. Mulhall was a big, solid man, bald and paunchy and, when his normal instincts were controlled, an argumentative tyrant. "Niggling technicality, I say. Shouldn't have taken a refund, but Sean here insisted."

They laughed together, like children sharing a joke.

"The claim was justified," O'Donnell said firmly. "Once Charlie's secretary explained the case, there was no doubt."

Mulhall grinned at Alcorn. "Remarkable girl, Janice Wynn. She's waiting in Sean's office. Wants to meet you, Philip."

They went toward the lift with their arms about each other, sharing an all-too-brief moment of companionship.

Alcorn hesitated in front of the closed door of O'Donnell's office.

When he entered, Janice Wynn was standing at the window, watching the soundless rush of traffic in the street below. She was dark, not pretty in any conventional sense, but charged with a controlled vitality that made physical beauty unimportant.

Her face was anything but serene, the complex of emotions in her tilted green eyes far removed from the ready placidity he had learned to expect. There was an unmistakable impression of driving urgency—the same urgency, Alcorn thought, that he had felt in the people of his waking dream.

"You're one," he said. His face felt stiff. "After all these years, I've found another one like—"

"Like yourself," she said. "But it's I who have found *you*. Did you really think you were unique, Philip Alcorn?"

He tried to answer and couldn't. The meeting he had dreamed of all his life had come about with precisely the electric suddenness he had imagined, but he felt none of the elation he had anticipated. He felt, instead, a sudden panic.

For behind Mulhall's secretary, he had a shutter-swift glimpse of the frozen plain, starkly clear with its huddle of metal buildings and its faceless people clustered on the snow-packed street.

Janice Wynn gave him no time to flounder for control. "You're the last," she said. "And the most stubborn of the lot. You're lucky that we could find you in the little time we have left."

Alcorn said hoarsely, "I don't know what you mean."

She looked more disappointed than surprised. "You've no inkling *yet?* I've known most of the truth for days, though I still haven't made the change. Your conditioning must have been too thorough or—"

She caught the shift of Alcorn's glance toward the window and turned quickly. The man in gray was watching them intently from the office across the street.

"You're under surveillance!" she said sharply. "By whom and for how long?"

He told her of Jaffers' call, and winced at the sudden dismay in her face.

"At best you've killed an inoffensive psychiatrist with your problem," she said. "At worst—" She came around O'Donnell's desk toward him, her manner abruptly decisive. "We've less time than I hoped. Come out of here, quickly."

In the corridor, she opened her handbag and took out a thick white envelope. "There's no time now for explanations. The clippings will give you an idea of what you're up against. Lose your spy if you can and don't go near your apartment. I'll be at your cabin tonight at 21:00. You'll learn the rest then."

She pressed a stud at the elevator bank and chose an ascending lift. Alcorn realized that there would be a turbo-copter waiting for her on the roof.

She faced Philip before entering the cage. "You have no chance at all except with us. Remember that, or you'll regret it for the rest of your *very* short life."

Alcorn made no attempt to follow.

"... except with us," Janice Wynn had said.

Us?

She was like himself, gifted with his own talent. She was connected somehow with the faceless people of his hallucinations.

Who were they, and where were they, and what did they want of him?

He was still groping for the answers when Kitty came toward him. She gave a little cry of dismay when she saw his face.

"You look simply awful, Philip! Is it another of your—"

With Kitty's arrival, Alcorn's premonition of disaster returned. Something was going to happen to him, *was* happening to him, and unless he moved carefully, it could involve Kitty as well. He had to keep Kitty out of this, which meant that he must stay clear of her until he was safe.

"It's nothing," he said hastily. "I'll call you later, Kitty. I've another appointment now that can't wait."

She put out a hesitant hand. "Philip...."

He wanted desperately to tell her the whole improbable story, to reveal his fears and get the reassurance she was able to give him.

But he couldn't risk involving Kitty in any danger.

"It's nothing," he repeated. He went down the lift quickly because he knew that if he delayed to comfort her, he would never have the courage to go at all.

His only clear thought, as he shouldered his way into the late-afternoon throng outside CA, had been to escape from Kitty and from the too-vivid memory of Janice Wynn. Now that he must choose a course, he was brought up short by the fact that, so long as he was tailed by Jaffers' men, there was literally no place for him to go.

He could not go to his apartment because of Jaffers' surveillance. He had no intention of meeting Janice Wynn at his Catskill cabin at 21:00. Her obvious knowledge—and, therefore, *theirs*—of the location ruled that out as a refuge.

He looked about for the inevitable man in gray and found him following at his careful hundred feet. The crowd caught and bore them both along like chips in a millrace, keeping the interval constant.

Alcorn let himself be carried along, feeling the slow release of tension that spread outward from him through the throng. The physical pressure was also eased. People slowed their dogged pace and smiled at utter strangers.

He had wondered often how the people affected by his circle of calm accounted for their sudden change of mood. He had dreamed that one day he might walk in such a crowd and enter another island of serenity like his own and thus find another human being gifted like himself. Someone with his own needs and longings, who would not melt into ready complaisance when he drew near, but who would speak honestly and clearly, who would understand how he felt and why.

Ironically, when that moment had come in O'Donnell's office, it hadn't brought him the fulfillment he had expected. It had left, instead, a panic beyond belief.

Why? What was he afraid of?

There was nothing evil or dangerous in his own gift—why should he fear another possessing the

same wild talent? Damn it, he thought, what sort of fate could be so terrible that its foreshadowing alone could throw him into such an anxious state?

How could he be sure that the faceless people were hostile? If they were like Janice Wynn, and if Janice were like himself, it might follow naturally that—

The rustle of the envelope in his pocket was like an answer, proving that his problem, if nothing else, was real.

"... for the rest of your *very* short life," she had said.

The sudden sharpening of awareness that preceded a new seizure rasped him again. He felt the tranquillity about him, and then the arctic montage swallowed it all, and once again he stood bodiless on the snow-packed streets of the metal village.

The faceless people moved purposefully now, and beyond them loomed the towering bulk of scaffolding erected about the pit where the great bronze cylinder of a ship lay....

Pit?

Scaffolding?

Ship?

He stopped so abruptly that a man behind him stumbled and regained balance only by clutching Alcorn's shoulder.

"Sorry," the man murmured, and moved on.

The mirage vanished; the crowd behind pushed on, parting politely about Alcorn. The mass farther back surged restlessly, hurrying, grumbling like an impatient corporate organism. The Jaffers agent, caught in the press, was borne helplessly nearer.

Alcorn realized his opportunity and stood fast, waiting while the tide of bodies flowed past. The man in gray saw his intention and struggled frantically to break free of the pinioning crowd.

He failed.

A sort of grim satisfaction fell upon Alcorn when the man's face lost its urgency and settled into smiling unconcern. The gift *was* a weapon of sorts. The way to escape—at least from Jaffers' surveillance—was open.

He fell in beside the spy, paying less attention now to the man himself than to the matter of disposing of him. The garish facade of a nearby joy-bar solved his problem.

"Come with me," Alcorn ordered.

The joy-bar was less than half full at this early hour, but noisy enough for midnight. A concealed battery of robotics ground out a brassy blare of music, integrating random pitches—selected by electronic servo-computers—into the jarring minor cacophony that had become the latest rage.

The early patrons were intently watching the long telescreen above the bar when Alcorn came in. A quarterstaff bout—a frantic, bloody sport revived from God only knew how many centuries before—was in progress there, matching a heavily muscled Nordic with a sandy bristle of hair against a swarthy, hairless Eurasian. The Nordic, from his twisted stance, had a couple of broken ribs already; the Eurasian's right ear dangled redly.

Alcorn seated himself opposite Jaffers' operative in an isolated booth and fed the coin-slot for drinks.

"Drink," he said grimly. "You're going to be drunker, my friend, than you've ever been in your inquisitive life."

The uproar died out before the drinks arrived. Only the blaring music machines and the blood-roar of the telescreen remained, and a suddenly placid bartender turned both down to a murmur.

The rest was routine to Philip Alcorn's experience. Men at the bar turned to each other like old friends, forgetting submerged frustrations as readily as they forgot the vicious slash-and-parry on the screen. The place drowsed in a slow and comfortable silence.

The Jaffers man tossed off his drink and dialed another. Alcorn, raising his own, remembered Janice Wynn's letter in his pocket and set the glass down, untasted.

The clippings, she had said, would give him an idea of what he was up against.

His hands shook so violently when he ripped open the envelope that he almost dropped it.

Eight clippings were inside, small teleprinted scissorings from digest newsheets that were available at any street-corner dispenser. He read them quickly, and was more puzzled than before until he realized that they fell into two general groups of interlocking similarities.

Four were accounts of unexplained disappearances. A moderately successful research chemist named Ellis had vanished from the offices of his New York chemical firm; a neighborhood pharmacist in Minneapolis, a spinster tea-shop proprietress in Atlanta and a female social worker in Los Angeles had disappeared with equal thoroughness, completely baffling the efforts of police to find them.

None of these people had been of more than minor importance, even in his own immediate circle. Alcorn felt that these events had been reported only because the efficiency of missing-persons bureaus made permanent disappearance next to impossible. Even so, only one clipping—that on Ellis, the New York chemist—bothered to run a photograph.

The other four accounts dealt with violent deaths, all rising from sudden outbreaks of mob hysteria. Two of the victims had been small-town clergymen, a profession which made their lynchings as startling as they were inexplicable; both had been respected members of their little communities until the day—the date was less than a week old—their congregations rose up en masse and tore them limb from limb.

The remaining two of the second group had died in different fashions. A doctor in a Nevada mining hamlet, making a late call, had been set upon by the patient's family, knocked unconscious and shot. A Girl Scout leader in Mississippi had been thrown over a cliff by her young charges.

A morbid and pointless collection of horrors, Alcorn thought, until he saw the parallel that related them.

The circumstances were strikingly similar in every case except that the four who disappeared were urbanites, while the murdered ones were all members of small and comparatively isolated communities. Not one of the eight had been over thirty-five; each had been well-liked; none was wealthy, yet all were in comfortable circumstances from vocations that depended upon good will.

A further similarity built up in Alcorn's subconscious, but died unconsidered because at that moment the quarterstaff bout on the screen ended and a brazen-voiced announcer gave the time.

It was 18:30. Dr. Hagen was to call him at his apartment at 19:00.

Alcorn, mulling over the cryptic half-knowledge gained from the clippings, wondered what the little psychiatrist might make of it. Hagen was capable in his field; even with so little to work on, he might possibly come up with the right answer.

Alcorn decided that he could not run from a danger until he knew what the hazard was. He might as well face the issue squarely now and be done with it.

The Jaffers operative, on his ninth drink, had relaxed into a smiling stupor. Alcorn left him snoring in the booth and headed for the public radophone unit beyond the end of the bar. He could not be in his apartment to take Dr. Hagen's call, but he could anticipate it.

The telescreen announcer's voice stopped him short. *"Have you seen this man? Sought by police for the murder earlier this evening of Dr. Bernard Hagen, prominent psychiatrist, he is thought to be at large somewhere in downtown...."*

The screen showed an enlarged full-face photograph of Alcorn.

He was responsible for Hagen's death. But who had wanted the knowledge of Alcorn's gift—or the suppression of that knowledge—badly enough to kill the psychiatrist for it?

Jaffers, or the faceless people behind Janice Wynn?

It had to be Jaffers, he decided, eliminating a possible source of opposition and at the same stroke placing himself still further on the defensive.

Slowly, he became aware that the joy-bar had fallen quiet, that everyone in the place was watching him with a sort of intent sympathy. The bartender left his place and came toward him, his heavy face a study in concern.

"We know you couldn't have done it," the man said. The sway of Alcorn's presence held him hypnotized. "Can we help?"

Alcorn's only thought was of flight. "Have you a turbo-copter?"

"On the roof," the bartender said. "It's yours."

Alcorn took him along to unlock the controls. On the roof landing, a cool evening wind was blowing. There was a dim thin sickle of moon and a pale haze of stars, a wraithlike scattering of

small white clouds that drifted in the reflected spectrum of the city's multicolored glow.

He sat in the turbo-copter with a feeling of incredulous unreality. The vast and shining breadth of the city was spread about him like a monstrous alien puzzle, a light-shot maze without meaning. Where, in that suddenly foreign tangle, could he go?

He set the 'copter off at random, knowing that its owner would have the police on his heels the moment he recovered volition. Alcorn was still trying to settle upon a course when a seizure fell upon him again.

First he had seen the city as something alien; now he felt it, a clamorous surf-roar of conflicting individual emotions, an unresolved ant-hill scurrying of hates and hopes and endless frustrations.

Then he was on the polar plain. The pit and scaffolding were the same, but the enigmatic groupings of people on the streets had changed. Four of them had faces now. Three were unfamiliar, but the fourth he recognized as Ellis, the research chemist who had disappeared from his laboratory in New York City.

By the time Alcorn was composed, he discovered that he had chosen a course without conscious intent. Dark, open country fled past beneath, pricked here and there with racing points of light that marked the main artery of northward surface traffic. Familiar mountain shapes loomed ahead, indicating where he was bound.

He was heading, lemminglike, for his cabin in the Catskills.

The knowledge made him wonder if he could trust the instinct that had decided him. Jaffers might or might not know of the cabin; certainly Janice Wynn knew, for she had said she would pick him up there at 21:00.

Kitty, when he failed to call her as he had promised, would know at once where he had gone, and would either radophone him or come to him quickly.

He frowned unhappily over the possibilities, caught between an eagerness to see Kitty and a dread of having her involved in his trouble. He considered taking Kitty and fleeing in his borrowed turbo-copter to some isolated place where the two of them might make a fresh start, and gave up the idea at once as worse than impractical.

Jaffers would find him without difficulty, now that he knew what to look for. And there was the progressive reality of his visions—for he had ceased to think of them any more as hallucinations. The coming of Janice Wynn and the inexorable sharpening of his awareness proved that reality beyond doubt.

He found the twin-notched peak that landmarked his cabin. The cool of night and the mountain quiet, when he climbed out, were a tonic to his abraded nerves. There was a nostalgic calling of night-birds, the clean breath of pines and, from some tangled rocky slope, the faint pervading perfume of wild honeysuckle.

He had not guessed how sharp his awareness had become until he realized that someone was waiting for him inside the cabin.

He halted outside, feeling like a man just recovering vision after a long blindness. Janice Wynn was in the cabin and she was alone. He knew that as certainly as if he had seen her walk in.



When he went in, she was standing before the wide cold mouth of the cabin's fireplace. She wore the same quiet suit she had worn in O'Donnell's office, and her tilted green eyes were at once relieved and anxious.

"I was afraid you might have lost your head and run away," she said. "It's good you didn't. There wouldn't have been time to find you again—the change is too close on us both."

"Change?"

She gave him a disappointed look. "I thought you'd have guessed by now the relation between ourselves and those people in the clippings. You had another seizure in the 'copter, didn't you?"

He stared, too disconcerted to answer.

"You saw four faces this time," she went on, "where you had seen none before. And you recognized one."

"It was Ellis, the chemist," Alcorn said. And with a numb premonition of the truth, he quietly asked, "How did you know that?"

"You were broadcasting it like a beacon. We're both in the last stages of the change. Now that our conditioning is lifting, we're reverting to our original telepathic nature. That's how *they* found you and me, as they found Ellis and the others—by tracking down our communication auras."

He said slowly, "Those four—why were they mobbed and killed?"

"Because the change caught them too suddenly for escape," she said. "And because, in our natural state, we are incompatible with Man."

"With Man," he repeated. "And what does that make us? Supermen or monsters?"

"You're still blinded by your conditioning," she answered, "or you'd see that we're neither, that we're not even native to this planet. I don't know a great deal more than that myself—I haven't remembered it all yet, because the change isn't complete...."

She broke off and, with both hands above the fireplace, gripped the rough stone of the mantelpiece. Her tilted green eyes burned with a contradictory play of emotions; the soft planes of her face seemed to shift and alter, seeking an impossible balance between ecstasy and terror and a tearing, intolerable agony.

"I'm learning the rest ... now," she whispered. "Sooner than ... I thought."

He sensed the change that possessed her, the struggling of new emotions, the shattering of imposed concepts and conditionings and their realigning to shape a new personality, a new person. He knew from that moment that she had been right, and that what he had feared from the beginning of his first seizure was about to happen to him.

She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them again, Alcorn drew back. Then resentment flared in him and he was suddenly furious, at the alteration of status that left him on the defensive.

He remembered the clippings and understood something of the frustrated rage that must have gripped the howling mobs when they killed the two ministers and the Nevada doctor and the Girl Scout leader.

Janice Wynn straightened from the fireplace, her head tilted as if she were listening to some sound beyond range of his own hearing.

"Someone is coming," she said. Her voice had changed as much as her face; her eyes watched him with a remote yet curiously intimate compassion. "Not our people. It isn't time for them yet."

She was at the cabin door before he realized that she had moved.

"Stay here," she ordered. "Don't open the door for anyone. For *anyone*, do you hear?"

She was gone into the outside darkness.

Alcorn felt it himself then, the indefinable certainty of approach. A turbo-copter, then another, slanting down toward his hideaway, two speeding machines filled with grimly intent men—Jaffers' agents.

The 'copters landed about a hundred yards away from the cabin. There was a dragging silence and then a booming, amplified voice.

"Alcorn, come out!"

He stood fast, feeling above their tension the swift progress of Janice Wynn through the darkness toward them. She was close to the nearer machine when he felt a sudden veering of her attention, followed the direction of her probing, and sensed another 'copter angling down out of the night.

Her mental order was as urgent as a shout: *Let no one in. No one!*

She moved on. The pilot of the third 'copter was only beginning to assume identity to Alcorn's sharpened senses when Janice Wynn drew within effective reach of the nearer grounded machine.

The amplified voice was calling again: "Come out, Alcorn, or we'll have to—"

It broke off short in a scream. There was a flurry of shots, a white flash in the darkness and a concussion that shook the cabin.

He felt Janice turn and run purposefully through the darkness toward the second 'copter.

The third machine was dropping in for landing when he identified its pilot.

"Kitty!" he breathed. "Dear God, Kitty!"

She was at the door, the terror and tenderness of her crying overwhelming his flinching perception. "Philip, let me in! Philip darling, are you all right?"

She was inside and in his arms before he could prevent it.

She clung to him frantically until the effect of his presence calmed her. The terror went out of her eyes slowly, but the tears glistening on her cheeks contradicted her smile of relief.

"Thank God you're safe, Philip! When I heard on the visinews about Dr. Hagen—"

Janice Wynn's silent command was violent in Alcorn's head. *Put her out quickly! Do you want her there when your own change comes?*

He caught Kitty's hands and drew her toward the door.

"You can't stay here, Kitty. There's no time to explain. I'll call later and tell you everything."

She showed her hurt beneath the placidity his gift imposed upon her. "If I must, Philip. But—"

He threw open the door. "Don't argue, Kitty. For God's sake, go!"

The blast of the second turbo-copter's explosion might have precipitated the seizure that took him just then.

The polar plain sprang up about him, more terribly cold and stark than ever, its clustering buildings and metal machines standing out in such clear perspective that he was certain he could have put out a hand and touched them.

But the people were faceless no longer, except for one that knelt before the group in a tense attitude. Janice Wynn stood over that one while its features filled in slowly, line by line, growing more and more familiar as the face neared identity.

By the time Alcorn realized that it was his own face, the change was fully upon him.

A vast icy wind roared in his ears. A force seized and flung him, distorted and disoriented, to infinity. There was darkness and terror and then a chorus of calm voices calling reassurance. Pain gripped him, and panic, and finally an ecstasy of remembering that was beyond imagining.

Dimly, he heard Kitty's screaming. Something struck him furiously on the shoulder and he felt his distant physical body struggle automatically for balance.

A second blow caught him on the temple and he fell heavily, his new awareness flickering toward unconsciousness. There was a confusion of voices about him and Kitty's raw shrilling died away.

He lay still, secure in the certainty that he was no longer alone.

Mind after mind brushed his, lightly, yet more warming than any clasping of hands, and with each touch, he identified and embraced an old friend whose regard was dearer than his own life. He knew who they were. He was one of them—again.

It's over, Janice Wynn's voice said gently. *Do you remember me now, Filrinn?*

Janeen, he said. He stood up slowly.

Her green eyes stirred with an emotion that matched his own. It was incredible that he could ever have forgotten—no matter how thoroughly he had absorbed the protective conditioning—the unity between himself and Janeen.

I remember, he said. The wonder of it still dazed him. *It's good to be myself again.*

She sighed. *It's good to know why they sent me, instead of one of the others, to bring you back. You remember that?*

"I remember," he said aloud, as if he needed to say the words to make it true. "We were together before this assignment for two hundred of these people's years. We'll be together again for hundreds more, now that we're free to go—for when will we ever find another world that needs attention as this one needed it?"

He saw the Earthgirl then, curled limply on the cabin's sofa.

Her stillness left him alarmed, surprised and ashamed that he should so readily have forgotten an obligation.

Her dishevelment, and the heavy brass fireplace poker on the rug beside the couch, told him the story at once.

You came just in time, Janeen. Poor Kitty! You didn't hurt her?

Janeen shook her head. *Of course not, Filrinn. I caught her mind before the shock of your change could derange it and—conditioned her. She'll sleep until we've gone, and tomorrow Philip Alcorn will be no more than a pale memory.*

Either my conditioning still lingers or my empathetic index is too high ... I'd like her to know the truth about us, Janeen, before we go.

He knelt beside the couch and smoothed the fair, tousled hair back from the Earthgirl's quiet face.

"I'm sorry it had to be like this, Kitty," he said. He spoke aloud, but his mind touched hers below the level of consciousness. He felt the slow, bewildered surge of response. "It'll help you to forget, perhaps, if you know that we came here from a star system you'll never hear of in your lifetime, to study your people and to see what we could do to help them.

"Alike in form, we are so far apart in nature that you could not have borne our real presence, so we buried our real selves under a mask of conditioning as deeply as we buried our ship under the ice of your planet's pole. After ten years of study, our conditioning was to lift slowly, so that we would realize who and what we were. But you are more like us than we had thought, and with some of us, the conditioning was too strong to break.

"It may help to know that your likeness to us will bring our people together again when the time is right, that your children's children may meet us on equal terms."

He lifted her from the couch and carried her to her 'copter. He set the machine's controls to automatic and stepped back.

"Good-by, Kitty," he said.

Janeen was waiting for him in the cabin.

The auxiliary shuttle is on its way to pick us up, Filrinn. We'll be gone within the hour.

They stood together, linking their minds, sharing an ecstasy in the meshing of identities that was greater than any physical fulfillment.

But we have that, too, Janeen said for his ears alone. And then, to the calm, smiling faces that lingered in the background of their mingled consciousness: Leave us.

The faces withdrew and left them—like children just grown to awareness of their own marvelous gifts—alone.

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