

THE ARTIFACT

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The place was a shambles, no doubt about that. A blood-stained saber lying in the middle of the carpet was bad enough, but the killer had gone berserk. Limbs, hands pieces of torso, even fingers and toes had been flung insanelly about the room. Needless to say there was the hell of a lot of blood, much of it splashed up the walls.

An elaborate attempt had been made to set fire to the place by setting fire to the kitchen. An erection of cups, soup plates and jugs filled with spirits, whisky, brandy, and cleaning fluids should have started a blaze capable of gutting the place in less than thirty minutes.

This aspect to me was the worst of all. This was not a single building, this was an apartment, one of eight in the same block—entire families could have died as well.

Fortunately, in this case, the apartment had a damper that snuffed out the fire before it took hold.

Landlords and the owners of tenements often forget to mention they have installed dampers. The device, ideal for snuffing out fires, is also able to detect the presence of human life before it comes into operation but there have been notable cases when it has failed to work. A damper in operation is just as lethal as the fire itself.

A damper, on detecting a fire, does a number of things: it drops concealed shutters over every window and door and floods the place with *Nothreen*. This is a newly discovered gas that destroys oxygen so rapidly in an enclosed space that the fire is snuffed out in minutes.

It is not pleasant to dwell on the deaths of those the device failed to detect. Detective Inspector Ransome looked round the room several times before he spoke. I had worked with him only a few weeks but he was a brilliant detective and I respected him from the first but then, well, I had certain advantages.

His thin sardonic face turned in my direction and he gave me his twisted smile. “Any comments, constable Barret?”

“No, Chief, no yet.”

“Very wise of you, boy, too easy to jump to conclusions but there's something about this set-up which doesn't feel right.”

I agreed with him entirely but it was not, as yet, my place to say so. He and I got on very well outside of work, drank a beer together, discussed sport but mainly music as we both loved the classics. At work however, there was tension, not hostile, but tension nonetheless.

You see, I am the first ‘Sensitive’ to join the Police Department and I am on trial in it. I am that new psychic guy they've just taken on. Fortunately I've been trained for it but I've taken a lot of stick, Constable Weirdo, Magician Barret and “How's your bloody spirit guide today, old son?”

Ransome has been both kind and helpful but I can well understand him being ill at ease.

“Know who the tenant is—or was?” he asked.

“Yes, Chief, according to the lists he is an Ivan Berenof.”

Ransome went over to the visaphone. “I'll check him out.” He dialed a number and a face appeared in

the screen.

“Police Sector Nine—Oh, it's you, Chief. What can I do?”

“I want to know if you have anything on Ivan Berenof listed at this address.”

There was a brief pause then: “According to records here, sir, there's a list of offences as long as your arm, and mine. Actually, sir, forty-four offences—but only one indictment. A smart Alec, Chief, with brains; he got degrees at university. According to this, he specialized in fraud but was also a con artist.”

“Seems he made good money at it—this apartment is no attic.”

“One of three known, Chief, there may be more. No one seems to know when he arrived in this country or where he comes from; nearest guess is mid-European.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, he had a car, wheel-less, of course, but not one of the hover jobs—one of the top flight anti-gravs. Oh! And yes, a squad now searching below you say it's missing.”

Ransome hung up and turned towards me. “Right, looks like an open-and-shut but it isn't, even I see that. Victim goes berserk and murders con-man—how do you feel about that?”

“I share your opinion, chief, just too easy.”

“But your opinion, man! You must have one.”

“My engagement as a sensitive does not permit me to presume, Chief. Procedure is I am only engaged as a consultant.”

He scowled at me. “Oh for Christ's sake, can't we stop pussy-footing around this thing and get down to facts?”

“Very well, Chief, but everything I say will strike you as irrelevant.”

“No matter, I flatter myself I'm open-minded: I'll hear you out.”

“Very well, Chief. There is a small table by the bay window over there. On it is a small vase. I suggest you call in experts to remove it, experts with appropriate gear for the job. That vase should be treated like a radioactive object, removed as such and inspected by experts.”

He scowled again, first at me then at the vase. “That little bronze colored thing?”

“Yes.”

“And you say it's radioactive?”

“I do not say it's radioactive as such, but it's giving off *something* . It's lessening slowly, but I'd prefer not to touch it. I suggest an examination by experts.”

Ransome shrugged. “If you say so—anything else?”

“Yes, the remains of this body: that, too, should be thoroughly examined before being incinerated.”

He looked at me directly. “You sound very sure of yourself. What's the next move?”

“Only advice, Chief, is leave it to the experts. They'll probably have results by morning—you can move on from there.”

Very early next morning, he had me up and dressed just after five.

Alone in his office, he said: “I have the findings, all of them, and the relevant departments are here. You were correct: number one, the vase was giving off some form of radiation but not nuclear, they have no idea what. Number two, and more disturbing, the substance of the vase defies analysis. They have no idea what it is and can only conclude it's totally alien.”

Ransome paused and shuffled papers angrily around. “The report on the human remains is even more disturbing. One hand was complete but the fingers had no prints! They had not been erased—they were just perfectly smooth. The mangled body had no liver or spleen and there was nothing, absolutely *nothing* inside the shattered skull.” He glared at me.

“What do you make of this, Barret—you must have ideas?”

“Well, chief, if the fire had taken place, from common sense alone, we should never have known or suspected that the charred remains were not those of Berenof.”

Ransome nodded slowly. “And that is common sense alone, it has nothing to do with your faculties?”

“No, Chief.”

He nodded, frowning. “Going to be honest with you, boy, it's only fair, although I expect your introduction here has been none too easy. This may hurt, mind you, but it's better you know the truth. When the Police Authority tried to introduce you—and the idea that goes with you—forty-seven precincts in the area turned you, and the idea down flat.

“I'll be frank, I took you on out of pity and a few other things. I felt you should be given a chance if nothing else. I knew you'd put in twelve years training to do whatever it is you do and you ought to be given the chance to use it. To me it looked as if you stood on the brink of redundancy otherwise.”

He paused then continued. “Now we come to the gritty bit. The word ‘sensitive’ means absolutely nothing to me. I am just as ignorant and possibly, just as prejudiced as the precincts which turned you down. I confess, frankly, that their misconceptions are mine. The Police Authority has not been exactly open about your purpose in the force. What you are then, to me and the average mind, is a mixture of clairvoyants, palmists, fortune tellers and aloof mystics.”

He paused again. “I have been honest with you, boy, I don't think it's asking too much to expect the same in return.”

“True, Chief, but if I am to be absolutely honest, you must be prepared for some really drastic surgery. In the first place, as far as I am concerned, nothing is ‘mystic’. All our technical advances would have been regarded as mystic or magic a few hundred years ago. Secondly, speaking for myself, I do not even pretend to be in communication with spirits from the next world or anywhere else. If spirit guides surround me, they failed to make themselves known. In simple words: I am a psychic—*everyone is psychic*. The majority is not aware of it and many, who deny it, unconsciously use it in their daily lives. Very few in our present culture are taught of its existence and trained to use it.”

“Hang on, a moment, constable Barret—are you trying to tell me I'm psychic?”

“No, Chief, I'm not telling you anything, but I will ask you a question. How many times in your many investigations have you acted on a hunch that paid off? How often have you questioned an apparently

innocent man and *knew*, straight away, that he was lying?"

Ransome turned uneasily away, knowing that the answer was very often.

"I have to admit that," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"In short, Chief, you often acted on a hunch—and hunches are psychic."

"Right, you've made your point, constable, but I'd like to hear more about you. Just how do you do whatever it is you do? Without any psychiatric wrapping, please."

"Well, Chief, as I have tried to explain, I don't have any spirit contacts. I am not clairvoyant, no spirit guide whispers facts into my ear and I definitely don't have visions. Boiled down to basics, all I do is *feel* things. You, yourself, admitted when we entered that alleged murder scene, that it didn't feel right. To me, needless to say, the feelings were much more powerful. The radiations from the supposed normal vase were particularly strong. Again, the alleged body, apparently carved to pieces by a berserk, felt very near the theatrical. The whole thing was a set-up which might have worked but for the damper."

"There was no murder at all?"

"Not in my opinion, Chief, no."

"Then the remains were not those of a certain mid-European con-man?"

"I am absolutely certain, Chief, that no one died in that room."

Ransome looked at me directly. "You sound very sure of yourself, constable, and I am prepared to go along with much of what you say but there's a hell of a lot of unfilled gaps. We found an almost complete organic, human body. Just where the hell did it come from? In this part of the world all bodies are cremated by law, no one has been buried for over a hundred years so the corpse was not dug up. Again how the hell did he get it up there—any ideas?"

"Yes, Chief, but with respect, I'd like to keep it to myself until I get more confirmation. What I'm getting now is, even to me, kind of bizarre."

He nodded. "Fair enough. In any case, it seems to me in your business, you have something you can't push."

I thanked him both for his understanding and his patience but he brushed it aside. "Let's run along to the science section and see what they've cooked up."

I was shaken when I got there. In a few short days with a highly elusive subject they had unearthed more about Berenof than he knew himself. What he ate and drank, all his con-techniques and the type of woman he favored.

On top of all this, they had constructed a three-dimensional image which was standing under a light in the show section. A tall, not unhandsome man of about forty, with well-cut features and dark, wavy hair.

"Any idea where he is?" enquired Ransome as we left the building.

"An inclination only, a map would help."

Presented with it, I drew a circle. "I feel he's somewhere in that area."

Ransome frowned at it. "Big, must take in a square K at least. It's well in to the suburbs but close to the

city limits with a main thoroughfare running right through it; a close rat-run that. On the other hand, he can only move around at peak hours in the center of crowds. As a crook he must know that every building in the city is sewn with micro-surveillance units that are now looking for his image. The units only want one clear shot and they'll scream blue murder."

I had to put a lid on his enthusiasm. "Sorry, Chief, but I have the feeling, only the feeling, mind you, that it's not going to be that easy. Further, I feel that time is on his side."

He frowned. "A right barrel of laughs you are." Obviously he was beginning to trust me despite his words. "We'll have to try and smoke him out, flood the area with spy-eyes for a start. A few house to house searches might shift him; that sort of thing gets around like wild fire."

Two days later a likeness was picked by a micro-unit. It was, Ransome admitted, only a likeness and not an outright positive but it was enough to make a move. Our precinct, however, was not the only one to do so.

When we arrived there were at least thirty armed men under the command of District Commander Shering—not a man I cared for. He had a florid, petulant face and deep-set little button eyes. He always bellowed his commands and was known locally as The Bull Frog.

I soon learned, from listening to immediate conversations, that with these men nothing had changed. News from our sector had been ignored; as far as they were concerned Berenof had been done to death and his affairs taken over by an almost exact double.

I watched as armed men encircled a derelict building that had once held furniture. It was a low, discolored plastic building with four steps leading up to wide closed door. Apparently recognizable life emanations were detectable on doors and surrounds.

An emanation is only detectable for thirty minutes, after which it fades. The wanted man must, therefore, be in the building.

"Officer Krole! Officer Martel!" Shering's bellowing voice seemed to fill the entire street. "Enter building and arrest suspect."

I felt and knew at that moment exactly what was going to happen. I broke ranks and ran forward. "Stop! It's a trap."

Shering's bellow seemed almost to wash my warning away. "Place that idiot under restraint—*now!*"

A hand was clapped over my mouth, my arm was twisted behind me and jerked up my back with unnecessary violence.

"See if your bloody spirit guide can get you out of this one," said a voice in my ear.

I realized it was Bruck's voice, the man who jeered at me on every possible occasion but at the time it didn't seem to matter.

I watched the two officers, weapons ready, mount the steps and push open the door.

There was a blue-white flash.

The first officer swirled back into the street as a cloud of ash. What remained of the second, rolled, smoking, down the steps but was consumed by heat before it reached the street.

The hand was taken from my mouth and my arm released. When I turned no one, with exception of Ransome, would face me. Their embarrassment was obvious and acute.

Shering was already climbing into his official car. He knew, as everyone present knew, that this was the end. He would not be dismissed or even face a cut in salary but his active days in the force were over. He had lost credibility and, after this incident, could never regain it. They would give him a civilian suit and a desk job in administration. Many, faced with like circumstances preferred retirement on a reduced pension.

As I walked to my own transport, someone overtook me.

“A moment, please.” It was Bruck, the man with the sneering comments who had viciously twisted my arm.

He didn't speak, he was unable to look me in the face but he put his hand briefly on my shoulder. That touch told me everything; it was an abject apology and a recognition of his bigotry.

I held out my hand and when we shook I knew I had made a friend for life. The atmosphere at work changed also. I took, perhaps, twice the ribbing I had endured before, but now it was friendly and I could reply in kind. I knew, of course, that I would always be known as Psychic Jim but that was a nickname of affection and I was happy to live with it.

I did not have long to enjoy it. Ransome almost pushed me into the waiting staff car. “I thought you ought to see this before forensic take it away for testing.”

Twenty minutes later he was leading me into the same building where the two officers had died.

At the back of the long room was a spiral stairway to a cramped office. Men in white parted rather grudgingly to one side as we entered. They felt, I sensed, that we were intruding into their own speciality.

“Over here.” Ransome pointed. There was a small desk containing four drawers, one of which was open.

Ransome pointed again. There!”

I was a little shaken: in the center of the drawer, palm upward was an open human hand.

I bent closer, shocked, not by the gruesome find but the hand itself. It was a complete unit. It had not been hacked or surgically removed from the parent arm. There was no blood, bare bone or trailing tendons. Where the wound should have been was pink normal flesh, no scar tissue as if the object was a natural thing and life in itself.

I had regained my composure by now. “May I touch it?”

“Now just a minute.” One of the white coats thrust forward. “You could be destroying valuable—”

Ransome cut the sentence short. “Your protocol is showing, Darcy. We are asking you nicely, or would you like me to pull rank?”

White-coat backed down. “I don't suppose it will really do much harm.” Needless to say, the hand when I felt it was as cold and rigid as stone, but it was still flesh.

“Learn anything?” Ransome's face was intent.

“Call it confirmation, but I don't think this is the time and place.”

We left with scowling faces behind our backs; forensic had been hoping for some sort of revelation.

Outside, Ransome said: “Well?” almost aggressively.

“Right, right, but I warned you earlier in this case that my findings might be bizarre. This proves that conclusion—Berenof knows how to create organic life.”

“Oh come on!” Ransome's words were almost an explosion. “Barret, you cannot possibly expect me to believe that.”

“I didn't expect you to believe it. You asked me a direct question and I've answered it in exactly the same way.”

“But it's insane, man. It takes science a year to produce anything organic, such as a kidney and even that is clinically dead. It has to be incorporated in a living body in order to function.”

“I know all the arguments, Chief, and I have a moderate knowledge of the human body, but I cannot change my opinion.”

“But surely you must see—” He appeared to run out of words suddenly and stood there just staring at me.

“I have a choice,” I said. “I have been developed and trained to trust my faculties. Experience has proved to me that they are nearly always correct so what would you do in my position?”

“Sometimes there must be a mistake.”

“The only mistake which ever occurs is in interpretation. I might misunderstand what I feel. Not in this case. I am absolutely clear.”

“But what would be the *point* ?”

“With respect, Chief, consider the matter on a purely criminal level. If a man could create his own physical image he could commit a crime in New York yet furnish an unbreakable alibi that he was in London at the time.”

“I regard the theory as utterly absurd but I follow you.” Ransome had recovered from his initial shock and was thinking clearly again. “Barret, I don't like this at all because your wild theory has got me thinking. Assume, just assume, mind you, that your theory is true. We do know that human parts have been found and that fact is something I cannot dispute. On the other hand, I know damn well that the average man can't make human parts unless, of course, he has help.” He stopped abruptly and glowered at me.

“Right, Barret, I know you're way ahead of me but putting these facts together makes me go cold inside. In comes an alien artifact from God knows where but it ends up in the possession of a well-known con-man. Whereupon, the said con-man develops apparent magical powers in the construction of his own double.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I started, so I'll finish. If there is an alien entity involved in this matter I'm sure it did not confer magical powers on a prospering crook out of the goodness of its heart—if it has one. The target shifts, Barret, from the human to something else. Any ideas about our next move?”

“Yes, I'd like ten minutes alone with that alien vase thing now that it's stopped radiating.”

The science department didn't like our intrusion but they had little choice, with all their equipment they could only repeat it was an alien object, which was hardly informative.

When I took the object in my hands it was a job to hold on to it. My first reaction was not only cold fear, but complete and utter revulsion. Here was an intelligence that had no knowledge of, and worse, could not conceive of, the aspects of life which normal people regard as natural. Loyalty and compassion, to quote two examples, were not emotions it had rejected. These were concepts that it had never known, never considered and could not comprehend.

I, for my part, could not understand the means by which it had reached Earth. All I could get was an impression of distortions and brain-wrenching gulfs. Perhaps it had arrived by space ship or oblique travel through time/space. Whatever it was escaped my understanding.

I did know why it was here and that knowledge too was a numbing shock. For such an immense intelligence to inhabit Earth for such limited ends was beyond my comprehension.

Countless books have been written about aliens seeking to conquer or dominate the Earth but this could not have cared less. It was here only for one purpose, a surfeit of self-indulgence—*it was here to eat*.

Ransome took the information calmly, at first then his face paled.

“Eat what?” Then: “Don't answer that question, I can work out the answer for myself. Did you learn anything about Berenof?”

“Only a little but I feel the alien has faculties for selecting the best subject available for its purpose. Having done so, it provided that subject, with a technical device which altered the owners mental abilities beyond imagination, In short—and you may not believe this—Berenof can now construct organic life by an effort of will.”

“You mean he can make a bloody human being—oh, come on!” Ransome was flushed and slightly breathless.

“Not human life, no. Call it pseudo-life. If it makes it more understandable, call it an organic robot.”

Ransome thought about it, frowning. “Creation by mind power? Many scientific journals have speculated over that possibility over the past hundred years. I can, at least, accept the idea imaginatively. Sadly, I can also see why. No doubt the alien thing has promised Berenof the wealth of the Earth in return for his services, but in the long run it will eat him too. Any idea where it is?”

“Roughly but I need a map, but not one of those wall things. I need a printed map which I can put my hands on and feel.”

He found one and I ran my fingers over it. “Around here.”

“A big area that, must be a square K at least. Can you tell me more about this alien if we find it—weapon power, for example?”

“Yes I did get that, it has only one weapon and—cheer us all up—it only needs one. It can deflect *everything*, thrown stone, spear or missile. A superbomb, for example, it could probably bounce into the center of the nearest city.”

Ransome said: “Thanks,” wearily. “Let us face it, Barret, unless we can find some answers this is the end not from our presumed alien but from ourselves. Sooner or later some mindless high official is going to call in the army. A massed air attack, missiles, we'll lay waste a quarter of the Earth ourselves. Is there

anything more we can do?"

"There might be but you'll have to tread on a lot of corns and bang hard on some sacred doors to get it."

"Just tell me what you want."

"I want everything picked up and held by forensic and like departments known to have belonged to Berenof. Handkerchiefs, tickets, programs, pens, notes on pieces of paper, everything."

"I can try, of course, but why? All, and every one of those articles have been through every conceivable test known. Fingerprints, breath analysis, sweat emanations, magno-pressures, digital photo-sessions etc, etc. There can't be a single thing on those objects left to find."

"Chief, you are raising the very barriers that they are going to raise. They can't find anything so no one can."

He looked at me sharply, then he nodded. "I see your point but you've got a bloody nerve. They're not going to like that, Barret. I have friends upstairs but the others will put you through it. If they can find an excuse they'll block you. Worse, you're on your own. I can't help you directly."

There were men sitting at a long table facing me with a man in a judge's robes sitting in the middle.

"The medicine man has arrived for his bones," said someone nastily.

"If he expects us to give them we want some straight answers. Tell me, my good fellow. Are you a medium, do you see visions or converse with departed spirits?"

"No I am not a medium, I see no visions and I have no connection with departed spirits."

"You claim superiority. You know more about criminal detection than the experts?"

"You conclude that because I wish to try my methods I am disputing yours?"

"Barret, you cannot possibly find anything."

"In which case why the objections? When I fail you can all laugh and say I told you so."

There was a short uncomfortable silence, then: "Do you believe in life after death, medicine man?"

"No, *I know* there is life after death. There is a difference if you think about it."

The man in the judge's robes rose and banged his fist on the table.

"Enough, this has become a farce. The man may be misguided but he's obviously sincere, and as he rightly points out, we can laugh at him later."

He paused and looked at everyone at the table. "We came very damn close there to branding ourselves complete idiots. Give the man all he asks for."

Ransome was smiling when I got back; word had evidently got around very quickly.

"It was not sheer unpleasantness," he said. "They wanted to discredit you. They don't want outsiders, particularly weird outsiders, invading their closed departments; they see themselves as a kind of priesthood."

I began to unpack my collection on my desk and he came closer. "I claim ignorance and on those

grounds hope to be excused. You'd like me to get you some equipment or something?"

I laughed. "Believe it or not, Chief, I am my own equipment."

"You have some mystic application?"

"No, something quite ordinary and ages old. Science has tested on a technical level, materially. I work on a different level of consciousness, I work mentally."

"You're beyond me, Barret."

"I'm not really, Chief. A material hand leaves a material print but it also leaves a psychic one. We had a regular exercise in training, a student would hold a tissue between the palms of his hands for thirty seconds. Another student, preferably unknown to him, would take the tissue and 'read' what he felt. Some of those readings were so accurate and so detailed that they caused red faces."

Most of the articles had not been in Berenof's possession long and the impressions were faint. There was, however, a small notebook that he had used for telephone numbers that handed me information on a platter.

"The alien is part telepathic," I said. "Berenof was the only one susceptible enough, and ruthless enough to suit its purpose. He was guided to the artifact and shown mentally how to use it."

I reached for the printed map. "I know the real area of operation."

Ransome leaned over my shoulder as I ran my fingers over the paper.

"There!"

"That's Graymede Park," he said. "Lived around there as a kid. Know it well, sits on a hill with the old observatory on the top. There's a boating lake for the kids, small covered swimming pool and a couple of tennis courts at the back. Nice lot of trees and grassy slopes, used to have picnics there once."

"This observatory, what is it exactly?"

"Oh, it's an ancient monument now, listed as such by the City Council. It was built well before the millennium, around two hundred and fifty years ago. It has real telescopes in it, tubes with lenses in them, if you know what I mean. None of this radar-satellite technology they use now."

"Does the roof still part for observation?"

"Why, yes, I suppose—" He stopped suddenly. "You're not saying the bloody thing is holed up in that place?"

"I'm not saying anything, yet, Chief, but I think we ought to take a look."

"With armed back-up?"

"I don't think so, what would be the point?"

There was a short paved drive, a path and an area of grass, containing a bench leading up to the park gates.

An elderly man sat on the bench warming himself in the sun. "Local," said Ransome. "A friendly chat will do no harm."

When he returned he said: “Interesting, no one seems to come to the place now, crowds fallen away in the last five years. Two odd things, people used to walk their dogs here once. Now if you try it, you have to drag it in, no dog will go in there willingly. Item number two, look at the trees—note the top branches.”

“Gulls and other sea birds.”

“Yes, the old boy said they've been coming in ones and two's for weeks now. Look at that tree on the left there, must be thirty in it.”

He shook his head frowning. “We're four hundred K's from the sea, large river or lake, makes no damn sense—can you make anything of it?”

“Give me a minute or so, please, Chief.”

I didn't concentrate. A sensitive's faculties don't work like that. One has to let go entirely and sooner or later something will drift into the mind. What comes does not always make sense but, you never question, you accept and wait.

What drifted in my mind were bears. Big bears and small, standing by a swift-moving river.

There was nothing in the river yet but they knew something was coming. Yes, they know, racial memory or animal precognition. I realized suddenly what it was—salmon were coming.

I turned my attention to the birds and realized that en masse, their faculties were greater than my own.

I turned to Ransome. “How was the roof of that observatory opened, Chief?”

“Not quite sure, a simple electrical device, I think.”

“Could the police technical section get it open by remote control?”

“I don't know, is it important?”

“I'm not going to answer that, Chief, you are. In your imagination, walk through those gates, don't think of anything, just feel. Smell the flowers, feel the breeze in your hair, the warmth of the sun on your face and the cry of the gulls.”

He was silent for about fifteen seconds and when he turned towards me he was pale. “The bloody thing is up there isn't it? I understand what you mean now: you can*feel* it.”

He shivered visibly. “Worse than that, I could also*smell* it and it turned my inside over.” He began to make numerous calls to headquarters.

I felt indebted to him as he called, for I knew he liked and trusted me. He was an astute man, but with me he was working in the dark and allowing me to lead him. He was risking his career and reputation on my say-so and it made me feel very humble.

Finally he said: “It will take some setting up but they assure me it will be foolproof by morning—six o'clock. Okay?”

It was summer and it was light by five. At five-thirty the birds started moving.

The observatory has a round dome that parts in the middle in order to raise the telescopes. Surrounding are ornamental rails that rise from the walls.

In ones and twos the gulls and smaller seabirds launched themselves from the trees and settled themselves on the railings. They seemed in no great hurry, they behaved as if they were just resting. They preened themselves, they wiped their beaks on the railings, they inspected their webbed feet and their numbers increased.

Ransome was in a bad way. He divided his time between dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief and glancing at his watch. Science tells us that time is relative; believe me that is true. The last five minutes seemed like a solid hour to both of us.

The dome must have been a little bit rusty for there were a lot of shrill rasping noises when it began to open and I am sure we both prayed that it wouldn't stick.

It must have been worse for Ransome. I knew, or had a rough idea, of what would happen but he was completely in the dark.

The birds waited until the roof was fully open then one of the gulls put its head on one side and looked down. Unhurriedly it spread its wings and sailed downwards.

It was followed two seconds later by two more and then they began to arrow down one after another.

I was braced for a reaction although I had no idea what it would be. When it came I almost went down at first. Ransome, however, had no defense at all and there was nothing I could do to help him.

His face lost color, he put both hands over his ears and dropped to his knees. He looked up at me as if seeking an answer then his eyes closed and he keeled over sideways.

The thing was screaming but it was not the physical anger that ripped at one, it was the sheer, naked malevolence. It hated everything that lived or moved and breathed. It even hated itself: it should have foreseen this. It had taken care of everything this planet could dream up including the solar bomb and biological warfare but it had never conceived of anything like this—a natural, brainless, organic life which would fancy it for food. It had no defense against it and it was being eaten alive.

Gradually the screaming subsided but perhaps I was the only one in the area who knew it was no defense to cover one's ears. This was a telepathic scream and a soundproof room would not have shut it out.

When hooded, protected men went in four days later there was nothing to examine. All that remained were bird droppings, and the building, half-eaten away, was in a state of collapse.

Berenof was found two days later, hacked to pieces by one of his own creations.

There is not much left to tell save aftermath. Understandably the incident never reached the media but word got around with the service.

Within a week, two sensitives were appointed by Tokyo police. London added another two, seven were engaged in various parts of America.

It will not be long now before we enter medicine, big business and finally governments. When that time comes the constitution of the world will begin to change. Ideals, cherished and dreamed of for centuries, will slowly become realities.

Out there, you know, beyond the stars, beyond time/space are vast intelligences waiting to welcome us into a new dispensation.

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