

Manna from Above

by Charlotte Platt

Word Count: 1,500 apx

“The deep ocean is full of surprises. Humanity explored space well before it looked properly to the water, the life within that more alien than anything hurtling at us on a comet.

It was this that gave us the opportunity for the trade system. An unusual benefit of ignorance, not something humans are known to use to our advantage.”

Robert paused, clicking his presentation on to the next section. He had kept the room dark enough for the slides to have impact, vivid on the eyes of the gathered dignitaries.

“With our continued refusal to recognise the long-term impact we had on the world we drove matters to a brink unimagined by generations before us and feared by the new. Total annihilation would be a mercy compared to what we guaranteed ourselves, the dragging downward spiral of humanity on Earth.”

He clicked onto shots of flooding and storms splayed over each other, Andrew, Katrina, Irma, Michael. Bodies floated in water that showed the tips of rooftops peeking through, evacuation centres that were little more than bodies crammed into stadiums.

“Inevitable, without some significant intervention. Space offered nothing divine, and precious little we could use here. Evacuation is decades away, at best, and the few planets we’ve discovered need significant investments we simply don’t have.”

He glanced around the room, a sea of faces with white hair and deep etched frowns. The next slide clicked into place.

“Hunting has been a part of survival for as long as there’s been organisms with a digestive tract. It is not unusual nor cruel, in most instances. Humans, however. We made it sport, a tradition, and drove it to an industrial scale as we do with many things. We upset ecologies, artificially inflated populations so we could cull them, and drove species after species into the dust for our own amusement.”

A slide of ivory poachers and trophy heads came up, stacks of white bones shining against the sand and khaki camo worn by the hunters.

“In our defence of such indulgences we ignored an inevitable truth. Remove the carriers from a system and the systems breaks down. Kill the creatures that turn a cycle and that wheel breaks.”

He clicked another slide on to show the grindadrap, the Faroe Islands whale cull. Their little bay was lush red with blood, heaps of fat black bodies stacked on the shore stones. Some murmurs went through the crowd, one man turned his head in distaste.

“We caused extinction level events for most large mammals in the ocean, through hunting and climate change. We fished and reaped and changed things until the inner ecosystem was in disarray. We stopped the flow of marine snow, something we’d known about since the Eighteen Fifties but didn’t understand.”

“We already know all of this: what is the point? I don’t need a lecture on how I’ve killed my grandchildren’s world,” shouted one man, an American accent if Robert was correct.

“The point, ambassador, is this: without the trade deal we are all, planetarily, fucked.”

Robert let the next slide click over, a mass grave from typhoon Hiyan, bodies wrapped in black plastic and piled like the dead whales before.

“We are being offered a chance to help reset the cycle in the oceans, and in exchange the beings identified as Thales have offered to assist us with geothermal power development and tidal energy. This is the closest we have come to sustainable energy in any lifetime.”

“And in exchange they want our dead,” the same voice called. “What are they going to do with them?”

“To lay them at the areas of the deep ocean, where the whales would have gone when deceased. There is an essential sequence we have disrupted, and that has contributed to the damaging of ecosystems beyond our knowledge.”

“What of those of faith?” A woman’s voice this time, a scholar Robert was pleased to see present.

“Interment would still happen, just at a deep elevation on the ocean floor. Embalming would be discouraged: the natural process of decay is the best release of carbon and nutrients into the area. The lack of grave markings would be an adjustment, but this is a more modern practice in terms of humanity’s acknowledgment of death. Knowing the deceased is allowing the planet to have a future may be sufficient memorial enough, and it’s in keeping with some of the more traditional death rituals.”

Murmurs rippled round the room, hushed discussions in a handful of languages Robert could pick apart by ear. They rose and ebbed for a few minutes, smatters of quick fire arguing between factions beside each other.

“Do we have any guarantee their technology is more advanced than ours?” the American voice called out.

“Yes. We’ve known how to access geothermal power since early Nineteen Hundred but it’s been unable to develop much further. Iceland has made some advancements, but it’s a long way from being sustainable or exportable. Their skills far surpass us in this.”

“And what about those of us who don’t think climate change is real?” A different voice this time, English to Robert’s ear. His colleague sat up at that, head snapping over to Robert. He shrugged, offering her the floor.

“I’d suggest they take that up with the weather,” she said, stepping into the light of the screen. The gasps were masked into a coughs and murmurs as her shape was revealed by the white glow: scaled skin, round eyes, a brimming mouth of teeth that sparkled in the dim light. “Or come and visit some of the villages that don’t exist anymore due to the flooding. You’re from an island, aren’t you, sir? I would have thought you’d appreciate rising sea levels more than the rest of us.”

“My colleagues, please welcome Amaya, one of the research team we’ve been working with,” Robert said, flicking the lights up so she could be seen by all. Her skin shone silver in the direct light, dappled dark markings flanking each side of her face and running down her shoulders. What could be seen of hair was thick and long, two strips running from her temples and down past her collar bones. “She’s been instrumental in assisting with negotiations and is here to answer questions as appropriate.”

“Why now?” The American again Robert noted, biting his tongue.

“Because we’re all going to die if something isn’t done, ambassador, and we would prefer that humanity didn’t take us with you. Since you’re incapable of doing it yourselves a trade seemed mutually beneficial.”

“What do you do with your dead?” asked the scholar.

“The young go into the warmer areas, to be eaten by scavengers, and the older are placed on the sea floor. Your bodies would join those of us who knew the oceans when whales were still common, not just in captivity.”

“What do you hope to achieve with this?” said the Englishman and Amaya’s round eyes sought him out in the crowd.

“How so, sir?”

“Why take the bodies, why not just help us?”

She paused, huffing a breath through the ridges of skin at her throat. “Our entire world was changed by your actions, in a way that removed the main source of energy and food for creatures in the lower water column. We have worked hard to rebuild it, and the conclusion the best among us came to is that adaptation is better than death.” She let a vicious smile come forward, rows of needle thin teeth showing in her too wide mouth. “If this exchange seems unusual to you, I can only suggest that is because you’re used to keeping your dead and collecting others. The whale carcasses, and other large mammals, were like manna from above for our world, a source of energy and carbon that grew unique ecosystems each time one fell. If you require something to convince the sceptics among you, and the inevitable death of your own race isn’t enough, I would propose you focus on the saviour aspect of it. And don’t emphasise that we’re bringing forward technology more advanced than yours could hope to be.”

“I think that’s a good point to stop today’s presentation, we’ll reconvene tomorrow,” Robert said, steering her away from the crowd before she could bruise more egos.

Closing the door of his office he levelled her a look as she perched against his desk.

“That was unnecessary.”

“It was entirely necessary, they were bored with your lecture,” she said, smirking. Her teeth poked through with it, gleaming. “They’ll come back for more.”

“Do you think they’ll be convinced?” he asked, sinking into his chair and watching the amazing woman in front of him. She was older than she looked, the Thales were well lived creatures, and her wisdom was a comfort in the storm of ignorance.

“I think so. If the fear of death isn’t enough then the desire to play hero will be. They’ll be keen to stay here when they realise they call all play god in their own way.”

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