

The Gift of Mercy

Anonymous

!MESSAGE BEGINS

We made a mistake. That is the simple, undeniable truth of the matter, however painful it might be. The flaw was not in our Observatories, for those machines were as perfect as we could make, and they showed us only the unfiltered light of truth. The flaw was not in the Predictor, for it is a device of pure, infallible logic, turning raw data into meaningful information without the taint of emotion or bias. No, the flaw was within us, the Orchestrators of this disaster, the sentients who thought themselves beyond such failings. We are responsible.

It began a short while ago, as these things are measured, less than 6^6 Deeli ago, though I suspect our systems of measure will mean very little by the time anyone receives this transmission. We detected faint radio signals from a blossoming intelligence 2^{14} Deelis outward from the Galactic Core, as photons travel. At first crude and unstructured, these leaking broadcasts quickly grew in complexity and strength, as did the messages they carried. Through our Observatories we watched a world of strife and violence, populated by a barbaric race of short-lived, fast breeding vermin. They were brutal and uncultured things which stabbed and shot and burned each other with no regard for life or purpose. Even their concepts of Art spoke of conflict and pain. They divided themselves according to some bizarre cultural patterns and set their every industry to cause of death.

They terrified us, but we were older and wiser and so very far away, so we did not fret. Then we watched them split the atom and breach the heavens within the breadth of one of their single, short generations, and we began to worry. When they began actively transmitting messages and greetings into space, we felt fear and horror. Their transmissions promised peace and camaraderie to any who were listening, but we had watched them for too long to buy into such transparent deceptions. They knew we were out here, and they were coming for us.

The Orchestrators consulted the Predictor, and the output was dire. They would multiply and grow and flood out of their home system like some uncountable tide of Devourer worms, consuming all that lay in their path. It might take 6^8 Deelis, but they would destroy us if left unchecked. With aching carapaces we decided to act, and sealed our fate.

The Gift of Mercy was 8^4 strides long with a mouth $2/4$ that in diameter, filled with many 4^4 weights of machinery, fuel, and ballast. It would push itself up to $2/8$ th of light speed with its onboard fuel, and then begin to consume interstellar Primary Element $2/2$ to feed its unlimited acceleration. It would be traveling at nearly light speed when it hit. They would never see it coming. Its launch was a day of mourning, celebration, and reflection. The horror of the act we had committed weighted heavily upon us all; the necessity of our crime did little to comfort us.

The Gift had barely cleared the outer cometary halo when the mistake was realized, but it was too late. The Gift could not be caught, could not be recalled or diverted from its path. The architects and work crews, horrified at the awful power of the thing upon which they labored, had quietly self-terminated in droves, walking unshielded into radiation zones, neglecting proper null pressure safety or simply ceasing their nutrient consumption until their metabolic functions stopped. The appalling cost in lives had forced the Orchestrators to streamline the Gift's design and construction. There had been no time for the design or implementation of anything beyond the simple, massive engines and the stabilizing systems. We could only watch in shame and horror as the light of genocide faded into infrared against the distant void.

They grew, and they changed, in a handful of lifetimes they abolished war, abandoned their violent tendencies and turned themselves to the grand purposes of life and Art. We watched them remake first themselves, and then their world. Their frail, soft bodies gave way to gleaming metals and plastics, they unified their people through an omnipresent communications grid and produced Art of such power and emotion, the likes of which the Galaxy has never seen before. Or again, because of us.

They converted their home world into a paradise (by their standards) and many 10^6 s of them poured out into the surrounding system with a rapidity and vigor that we could only envy. With bodies built to survive every environment from the day lit surface of their innermost world, to the atmosphere of their largest gas giant and the cold void in-between, they set out to sculpt their system into something beautiful. At first we thought them simple miners, stripping the rocky planets and moons for vital resources, but then we began to see the purpose to their constructions, the artworks carved into every surface, and traced across the system in glittering lights and dancing fusion trails. And still, our terrible Gift approached.

They had less than 2^2 Deeli to see it, following so closely on the tail of its own light. In that time, oh so brief even by their fleeting lives, more than 10^{10} sentients prepared for death. Lovers exchanged last words, separated by worlds and the tyranny of light

speed. Their planetside engineers worked frantically to build sufficient transmission infrastructure to upload the countless masses with the necessary neural modifications, while those above dumped lifetimes of music and literature from their databanks to make room for passengers. Those lacking the required hardware or the time to acquire it consigned themselves to death, lashed out in fear and pain, or simply went about their lives as best they could under the circumstances.

The Gift arrived suddenly, the light of its impact visible in our skies, shining bright and cruel even to the unaugmented ocular receptor. We watched and we wept for our victims, dead so many Deelis before the light of their doom had even reached us. Many 6^4 s of those who had been directly or even tangentially involved in the creation of the Gift sealed their spiracles with paste as a final penance for the small roles they had played in this atrocity. The light dimmed, the dust cleared, and our Observatories refocused upon the place where their shining blue world had once hung in the void, and found only dust and the pale gleam of an orphaned moon, wrapped in a thin, burning wisp of atmosphere that had once belonged to its parent.

Radiation and relativistic shrapnel had wiped out much of the inner system, and continent sized chunks of molten rock carried screaming ghosts outward at interstellar escape velocities, damned to wander the great void for an eternity. The damage was apocalyptic, but not complete, from the shadows of the outer worlds, tiny points of light emerged, thousands of fusion trails of single ships and world ships and everything in between, many 10^6 s of survivors in flesh and steel and memory banks, ready to rebuild. For a few moments we felt relief, even joy, and we were filled with the hope that their culture and Art would survive the terrible blow we had dealt them. Then came the message, tightly focused at our star, transmitted simultaneously by hundreds of their ships.

"We know you are out there, and we are coming for you."

!MESSAGE ENDS