

THE ERA OF HUMANITY

In which epoch 'Guilt' is just a word

THE COMING OF GUILT

The Coming is most certainly the single most significant event for humans in many hundreds of years, if not the entire history of modern Homo sapiens.

The first pictures showed something that might have been a plane, a bird, an asteroid, or a bit of dirt on the camera lens: a fuzzy, indeterminate shape just over the horizon. Just a small blur at some unknown distance. A small number of people took it to be a UFO - incontrovertible proof of the existence of life on other worlds - but most imagined it to be nothing at all.

The next day, though, it was closer.

Almost anyone with a high enough vantage point in the northern hemisphere could see it for themselves if they looked out to space as the rotation of the planet brought the thing into their line of sight. It was still small, hard to make out, and even those with telescopes couldn't ascertain with any degree of certainty what it might be. Magnified, it was a hazy blob that kept no fixed shape, perhaps spinning or perhaps shifting, and the flashes of bright light that kept shining from parts of it didn't make examination any easier.

It wasn't long, though, before it was near enough for someone with a good observatory to identify what it was: a whale, a humpbacked leviathan the size of a small moon swimming slowly, effortlessly through the cosmos and travelling - indubitably - towards the Earth. Ahead were three smaller objects, things with reflective surfaces that flew like an advance guard before it.

A range of reactions roared up around the world, disbelief perhaps chief among them. People around the world began to send each other messages in enormous volumes, transmitting words and pictures and ideas in invisible waves that crashed around the planet. They didn't have much time to talk about it, though.

The three things preceding the whale split off as they approached Earth; pictures and videos circulating around the Internet with the force of a horde of stampeding rhinoceros showed them breaking formation to fly off their separate ways. It was hard to tell, but in some pictures the three gleamed discernibly different hues: a red, a blue, and a silver. Information flowed fast and heavy between the technologically prosperous hubs of human civilisation.

On that day, those who were near one of the three most populous hotspots - the places where the transmission and reception of digital information was the most concentrated - could have looked to the sky and seen a red, blue, or silver streak of light growing rapidly larger. A clip from one such person's livestream was viewed over half a billion times within half an hour of being uploaded: the blue sky disappearing rapidly behind a red metal sheen moving too fast to be clearly visible, growing larger than everything until nothing else could be seen, and then the video cut off abruptly. There were recordings of the unearthly booms and the quaking of the earth, and there were pictures from outside the cities: whole landscapes covered by enormous shining plates of steel, entire settlements simply gone underneath the gleaming vistas.

More pictures flooded the airwaves: the blue, silver, and red things descending on places, destroying them entirely, and then climbing up from the ruins and taking off on mile-wide wings. Some unimaginative soul named them: Malice, the red; Calamity, the blue; and Dread, the silver. It didn't matter what their names were, though; the fact was that each of them was a dragon made of gargantuan plates and struts of solid metal, each so large that they were capable of putting an end to cities at a time simply by landing on them.

It took longer than it should have for people to realise that those who were sending the pictures almost invariably became uncontactable shortly afterwards, and longer after that to notice that the three metal dragons continued to descend on places where there was a high level of wireless transmission. The world stopped communicating, but not soon enough.

Once the messages ceased, the three creatures slowed down, as if they knew their job was done. A few of the surviving places started transmitting again - hoping that the dragons had simply done enough, that they had ticked off every act of destruction on their lists - but they were immediately wiped out. The rest of those who were left were either sensible enough not to attempt communication at all or lucky enough to receive something that made it clear to them that they could either switch it all off at that very moment or be crushed under a mass of silver, red, or blue.

When the links that once connected the world were truly and finally broken, the three dragons departed. Those who caught a glimpse of a glittering catastrophe flying overhead felt the breath leave their bodies at the sight of an enormous sparkling skeleton soaring through the air: each creature's head was pointed with jagged jaws, eyes alight with some unearthly flame, and each body was a wide oval with a long tail ending in a diamond fin. Each wing was a splayed fan of long, many-jointed fingers, between which was stretched a skin of sharp-edged, interlocking scales.

Many assumed that the three destroyers had left the planet, but people in three remote parts of the world were astonished to witness a blue, red, or silver demon come screeching from the sky and settle itself down to sleep, becoming a metal mountain in the process.

In the chaos, the whale itself had been almost forgotten, even as it continued on its slow, inexorable path towards the planet, growing ever larger in the sky. When the dragons were gone, though, all thoughts turned to the much larger thing that came behind them. Though the disparate pockets of humanity that remained could no longer speak to each other from a distance, the name 'Guilt' spread throughout the largest network of nearby settlements that remained: Guilt, they thought, was the memory of what humanity had done wrong, and the whale hardly seemed as if it could be anything other than the embodiment of their failures, come to balance the scales.

Guilt found a path around the Earth, a cosmic current through which it could lazily travel. It swam miles above the surface of the planet, orbiting effortlessly; it cast a shadow the size of a small country that passed slowly around the world below. That which the Shadow of Guilt shrouded in darkness was *changed*. The things that humans had made began to lose the shapes they had been given, whether by crumbling or by warping; the living things that fell under the Shadow found their bodies or their minds shifting; new creatures sprang up from the darkness and walked the Earth. The things spawned from the Shadow, and seemingly formed from nothing but the will of the whale, were called the Children of Guilt by some; they named the three dragons the First Children of Guilt.

This is the chronicle of the world overseen by Guilt, inhabited by its Children and those left from the human world that came before.

THE FIRST ERA OF GUILT

In which epoch Guilt is a thing most new and peculiar

CHILDREN

What more could there be to say on the topic of the metal wyrms than the plaintive cries uttered by the entire planet at their arrival?

It was impossible, but it was happening.

Suresh had felt a similar way when Eva had first told him they were going to have a child - surely it couldn't be, there must be some mistake, hadn't all previous evidence suggested that such a thing could never be? - but the sight of the city-dwarfing calamity of blue metal turned his stomach over in entirely less joyful ways.

He stood in the middle of a street at the edge of the city, looking inwards towards where the gigantic, gleaming, screeching dragon was laying waste to everything, and he did the only thing he could think to do. He ran towards it.

Eva was there; Abby was there - Abby, who he could have sworn was so tiny only yesterday and who could now run all on her own, and she would need to run now. Somewhere underneath the thing that was turning the place they called home into shadows and dust, his Eva and his Abby waited for him. What else was there to do?

What could you even do? asked an excruciatingly unhelpful part of his mind, some voice of terrible pragmatism. Suresh didn't even have the ability to answer it; every other mental faculty that might have responded was overwhelmingly dedicated to simply reaching his family. *What do you think'll happen? What do you think you'll find?*

Suresh, unable to stop his traitorous brain from throwing doubts at him and at the same time unable to slow down so that he could ask it politely to stop, simply ran.

There were paths beneath his feet, but the buildings that had run alongside them were gone, often giving him a clear line of sight through miles of destruction. All was in shadow, except for the occasional flashes of reflected light off blue metal: above him, the monstrous shape dominated every inch of the skyscape.

He sprinted through streets he'd known well, but no more. He knew the city now only as one who has known a perfectly presented meal knows a dirty plate.

All that mattered was that he knew the way home - and that knowledge was burned into him, was inextricably intertwined with the sound of his daughter crying, laughing, burbling. The air was thick with a wall of sounds like piercing blades: appalling scraping, screaming, metal on metal as the dragon did its work. Below it, a constant rumble: Suresh could hear - could feel, in the trembling of the earth - whole rows of buildings coming down under the thing's limbs and wings and maw. Homes, offices, hospitals, schools.

That was the office block he'd worked in for years to save enough money that he and Eva could buy their first home together. There was the church where her parents had insisted Abby be christened. This used to be the shop he'd been to dozens of times in the middle of the night when Eva awoke craving sweet chilli crisps. To him, it was a life story. To the blue catastrophe, everything was simply rubble that hadn't realised it was rubble yet.

Everyone else was running the other way - ones or twos at a time, the initial throngs having escaped or been crushed by now - or they were already dead. Suresh sprinted past people he might have known, but couldn't stop to check; where a low wall made of a dozen

bodies, all bearing angry marks left by falling bricks, loomed in his way, he simply jumped over it. Some part of him made a note to ask their souls for forgiveness later.

When Suresh came to the place where his house should have been, he finally stopped running and fell to his knees. He would have stayed there until the dragon crushed him or something fell on him if not for the faint sound of someone hissing his name.

‘Suresh!’

If he’d thought about it, he might have disbelieved it - might have passed off the half-whisper as another of those useless voices in his own mind or as a mirage of the constant metal screaming, might have bowed his head and wept until the end - but he didn’t stop to think. He stared wildly in the direction from which the sound had come, and beyond all despair there she was: Eva, dust-stained and huddled within a tight gap between fallen slabs of brick and wood.

‘Eva!’

He crawled to her, first with overwhelming relief and then, when he saw his little Abby half-hidden behind Eva - covered, like her mother, in the aftermath of the dragon, but standing on her own two feet and not lying motionless somewhere as he’d feared - with urgent desperation.

Abby’s eyes, already so big and beautiful, widened at the sight of her father, and she tottered to him with all the haste she could manage. His daughter half-fell into his arms, and the tears of pain and terror Suresh had been holding back emerged as drops of joy.

Then he looked over at Eva, and felt cold.

He’d thought she was simply huddling within the rubble for shelter, such as it was, but now he could see the place where several hard, heavy blocks converged on her arm, crushing everything from the elbow down and holding her in place.

‘Get her out of here,’ Eva said. She spoke quietly, so quietly that Suresh couldn’t really hear the words over the sound of the dragon and the city falling, but, as he looked into her face, her meaning was hideously clear.

‘No.’

Abby, who had had her face buried in her father’s shoulder, looked up at him and then back at her mother.

‘I’m not leaving you,’ Suresh told his wife. ‘I’m not doing that.’

‘You have to, or all three of us die together.’ Her gaze, as unyielding as the dragon’s great wings, compelled him. ‘Save our daughter.’

Suresh, one arm still around Abby, pulled out his phone with his free hand. He had a signal, somehow; his mind raced through who could possibly help. Anyone who lived in the city would be dead or dealing with their own problems; anyone from outside would never make it in time; in the end, knowing it was pointless but unable to stop himself from trying, he simply dialled 999.

In one ear, he heard a grating tone: call failed. In the other ear, though he was barely aware of it at this point, the noise of the dragon ground to a halt.

‘Stop!’ Eva yelled; Suresh tried the number again. Again, nothing. ‘You have to stop!’

He looked at his wife, then turned in the direction she was staring.

The dragon had stopped its wanton carnage. Its head, the size of ten passenger planes, had lifted into the air as if listening.

Then it stared straight at him.

‘Suresh,’ Eva whispered.

He dropped the phone and crushed it under a rock, but the mountainous shape of the creature was still, unmistakably, looking right in his direction. At him; at his wife, at his daughter.

‘Go,’ Eva said quietly, and this time Suresh listened to his wife. He picked up his daughter and he ran again, ran back through the streets. He heard the crash behind him; he felt the world quaking with the force of it, but he kept running.

Only when things fell silent again did he stop and turn, cradling Abby to his chest. The enormous shining thing’s attention had been captured by some other poor fool with a phone or a computer; it stood up, stretching its body upwards and its wings outwards until it was scraping the clouds and casting a shadow many miles wide, and then it fell back down once more.

Then it was quiet again, dust rising into the air. Absurdly, Suresh thought of icing sugar, dispersed into the atmosphere by Abby clapping her powdered hands. After a moment of silence, the dragon gave a final scream and flung itself skyward, vanishing towards the horizon.

Suresh watched it go, barely even registering the much further-off, much larger shape flying through the faraway layers of the sky. All he knew was that his world had changed, and that that was nothing compared to the change that had come to the world of all humans.

It was over. That much was clear.

But... no, as he looked into his daughter’s terrified, distraught, beautiful face, it seemed to him that it might still go on forever. Changed but not ended; marred but not broken.

Then he thought of his wife, somewhere in the flattened rubble, and then the thought that he still needed to get his daughter to safety was the only thing that stopped him from falling to the ground and crying.

Around the world, the First Children of Guilt did their work. If they thought anything at all, thoughts of a man named Suresh and a woman named Eva would surely never have occurred to them.