

it was like throwing information into a fire, they said. in ancient blood rituals, a man would give up his life to summon some boon from the heavens. but even as the heirs-apparent to the heavens, our requests for such boons still required sacrifices. only now, the place of a sacrificial blade was taken by a far more advanced machine: the arbitrium.

*at midnight, coordinated global time, in the seventy-third century of the valérian calendar, humanity began recording. studiously, assiduously, we chronicled every variable. from ruminants in untouched hills to cosmonauts in orbit around saturn, each and every being was accounted for. and every one did so willingly.*

travel via the arbitrium was unlike all other forms of time travel. though humanity had mastered the chrono-bauble and the mirror lens decades earlier, no one had yet travelled via this method. but countless previous iterations ensured that it would work. it would work now as it had the past seven times.

*the effort to build the machine had been propelled by a time of war - a time when unity was the last thing in the minds of screaming, terrified soldiers clutching deadly weapons their forefathers had been too scared to use. but inevitably, a calm descended, and moderation became a goal once again. never again, we had sworn, would gaia's people ruin themselves.*

the civilisation that awaited anticipated a burning hermes, bearing the message of man-gods. but the messenger was no man nor god. they were exceptional in their own time - a test pilot for subspace drives whose work would one day carry humanity forward. but now, they carried humanity backward.

*the hard-won peace, as ever, was not promised to last. anyone who made such claims - even the writings of reputable scientists in journals of international renown - were downplayed. the science did not support harmony; to anticipate harmony would be the death of the project.*

the machine had recouped more time than could possibly have been hoped for. its power rivalled that of the gods. or so went the lie that its operators allowed to propagate. as the world prepared for its past to change, celebrations were held. we forgot the crisis that awaited us, because soon, we would be born anew.

*there was a ceremony to receive the ambassador. we knew where and when they would emerge - it had been burned into the mind of every child from the time they were old enough to understand the complexities of time travel. eighty orbits, seven lunations, twenty-one solar cycles. a date chosen by some infernal arithmetic: the day a world would die.*