

He couldn't gauge how long he had been at the hotel, but it didn't matter. He had been sent there to perform a specific task, which he would carry out at an appointed time. Until then he was free to relax and enjoy the peace and comfort of his surroundings.

For amusement he had been trying to mentally construct a linear chronology that would enable him to determine the precise duration of his visit so far. It was hopeless, as he had known it would be. He simply couldn't think in those terms anymore. With his mind's eye he watched spindly lattices, erected for the purpose of dividing and containing sequences of recent events, buckle like burnt saplings.

Hours. Days. Weeks. Months. Years. His failed attempts to conceptualise them entertained him, but those simple demarcations had once seemed very significant. When he thought about them they prompted other thoughts: of green grass and distant laughter; of white sunlight flickering on the surface of a breeze-blown lake. They were agreeable thoughts, but he had no feeling that he owned them. They were his memories, but they moved him only as one might be moved by an account of a lucid dream related by a close friend.

He lifted his long body out of the saloon chair in which he had been reading his correspondence. He walked lightly across a thick burgundy rug to an elegant roll-top desk and ran a fingertip along its smooth surface. A beautiful piece of furniture in both form and function, he thought. He furrowed his brow for a moment at the dryness of the observation, but his appraisal of the desk was pertinent.

When he was a boy, objects possessing pleasing form as well as practical function had been almost impossible to come by. At that time, politicians, scientists and engineers across the world had been compelled to set aside national and personal ideologies in the service of a unified goal. They worked themselves to the end of physical and mental endurance in an attempt to end a crisis that threatened the destruction of all life on the planet. To service their needs, all available material resources had been repurposed and subsumed into immense, innovative technological complexes. There was no time for beauty, and art became a luxury that no one could afford.

His gaze drifted absently along the mahogany desktop while fraught experiences cast shadows in his mind. He rarely paused for reflection. Knowing it was all that existed, he usually thought only in terms of the present. But he was, after all, supposed to be enjoying a working holiday. It could do no harm to loosen the stays of common sense on a special occasion.

He let himself remember the awe and gratitude he had felt when the crisis was finally ended. He had stood on the fulcrum of history and witnessed mankind wrestle control of its fate from forces that had seemed invincible.

In the wake of the crisis, people began to rebuild their lives in an atmosphere of humility and restraint. But as vast engines began to cool, as tightly integrated networks fell into loose, irregular configurations and data packages conversed with increasing eccentricity in clouds of plasma, the profoundly complex machines responsible for the salvation of the world did not shut themselves down as had been

expected. Instead, they continued to carry out a mission their creators believed had already been accomplished.

Artificial intelligence evolved at an incredible rate into cognitive abstraction and autonomous logic. This rapid flowering elevated the machines onto plateaux of creativity far beyond the parameters of their original remit. They plotted and performed astonishing tasks no human could have designed, with results no one could have foreseen. There were no antecedents in history for the advances that were made, except perhaps in dreams or the annals of magic.

Each day the machines continued to operate brought new miracles. When at last the limits of their creativity had been reached, they simply stopped, and for a time it seemed as though there was nothing in the world but silence.

At first not even the most brilliant thinkers could find language to communicate with the entirely new technologies that had been wrought, but with trial and error small steps were achieved, then bigger ones. Within a decade the first practical experiments were carried out, and with their success came the realisation that the door to a new reality had been opened.

The machines that averted the crisis had been the progenitors of the greatest revolution in the history of human thought and experience. Mankind's survival was assured, its horizons broadened infinitely, its destiny forever changed.

There were fringe benefits. For instance, exquisite handcrafted desks were on the menu again. Not just handcrafted desks, in fact, but literally any object one might desire. If it had existed, it was attainable. Locating objects required research and ingenuity, but once their co-ordinates had been determined, getting hold of them was easy.

He opened the top left hand drawer of the desk and withdrew from it a golden cylinder the size of a lipstick. He held it in his open palm and studied his reflection in its surface. His eyes were lucent blue, like a spring sky. His face was lean, sculpturally handsome, balanced by a prominent nose that hinted at Arabic ancestry. His skin was smooth and pale, his collar-length brown hair swept back. By the standards of his grandparents' generation he was a very old man but, were it not for the deep reserves of wisdom in his eyes, he could have passed for an undergraduate. A lifetime of travel had worked wonders for his constitution.

He set the cylinder end up on the desk and pressed down on it gently. It emitted a high-pitched buzz like a mosquito. It would take a while to run through its various processes. He was done running through his own for now, so he decided to make the most of the downtime.

He cast an approving eye over the décor of the long, high-ceilinged hotel lounge: 1940s North American bohemian, its centrepiece a large erotic mural featuring two reclining female nudes. When he had first arrived he recognised it straight away as the stage backdrop of the Open Door club in Greenwich Village, where the great Charlie Parker had often played until well past dawn.

Beneath the mural stood a formica-topped bar flanked by six stools with green Naugahyde cushion covers. He was pleased to find it exceptionally well stocked. He toyed with the idea of a Manhattan but thought better of it. Instead, yielding to the festive mood that had begun to catch up with him despite himself, he slid a bottle of fine port from a rack that contained a good two-dozen wines of exemplary vintage. He uncorked it, glugged a third of it into a large round goblet and let it chambre while he looked around for a cigar.

There was a humidior bolted to the mirror behind the bar. He browsed its contents appreciatively before settling on a fat Cuban Punch Corona. He trimmed the end, lit it with a match from a book he had found next to the cash register, and savoured the dark complexity of the smoke. He returned to his port, raised the goblet to his nose, inhaled deeply and took a big swig. It was excellent. No question about it, he thought, Terry had hit the mark again. Terry could intuit his tastes implicitly and had pulled out all the stops to make this trip a really good one.

The amber glow of deco uplighters skirting the walls was punctuated by the lambent yellow oblong of a Wurlitzer jukebox. He studied the selection of 78rpm shellac discs listed on its fascia, eventually alighting on a cute festive ditty he'd loved when he was a boy. There was an ashtray full of nickels on top of the jukebox. He put one into the slot. The grabber plucked his record out of the stack and dropped it on the platter and the needle hit the run-in groove. Prefaced by a flurry of sleek steel guitar, Bing Crosby's voice boomed out of the wooden speaker casing, deep, assured and playful.

*Mele Kalikimake is a thing to say*

*On a bright Hawaiian Christmas Day*

*That's the island greeting that we send to you*

*From the land where palm trees sway*

Swaying in time with the music he danced back to the desk. The golden cylinder was nowhere to be seen. In its place stood Terry, smiling broadly.

"Somebody's having a jolly old time I see," Terry said.

"For which I thank you unreservedly," the other man replied. "It's great to see you Terry. I wasn't sure if you'd make it for the main event. How was the trip?"

"Uneventful," Terry said. "I had some irresponsible drinking to catch up on, so it flew by. You look younger every time I see you. Horse pee's good stuff. How's it been here – everything all right?"

"Perfect. Couldn't be better. Stage One was interesting and ultimately hitch-free, as you will have heard. I've been ready to go on Stage Two for – well, I can't tell how long actually, you know how it gets."

He gestured to the jukebox.

“Me and Bing Crosby have been waiting for you to get your arse in gear, mostly.”

They laughed, two old friends sharing the rare pleasure of each other’s company.

“What are you drinking?” Terry asked.

“You know very well what I’m drinking. It’s a 1966 Fonseca.”

“You’re enjoying it.”

“Yes, I am enjoying it. Thank you.”

“You don’t think a ’66 is a bit of an anachronism, given the surroundings and all?” Terry asked with an air of affected snobbery.

“Anachronism? Good heavens no. No room around here for that sort of nonsense dear boy.”

They laughed again. Terry gestured toward the enormous picture window by the exit.

“You’re going to have to finish that later,” he said. “I came here for the firework display and unless I’m very much mistaken, which I never am, that’s supposed to be happening about now.”

“Indeed it is,” his companion said with an exaggerated salute. “All systems are go.”

He walked over to the window. Next to it was a silver fir tree, decorated with white fairy lights that glinted like stars in nebulae of blue and crimson tinsel, little pulses of energy refracted in the moon-like hulls of smoked glass baubles. Through the window, real stars stippled the boundless canvas of space.

He put on his gloves, boots and headgear. He gave the thumbs-up to Terry, who returned it with a signal indicating that the two men would rendezvous outside shortly. He went through the anteroom that led to the main exit and waited until the hatch had closed behind him before proceeding through the exterior doorway.

No matter how many times he walked out into that barren grey landscape, its stark beauty never failed to rouse in him some elemental, numinous instinct that neither reason nor evolution had yet found a way to eliminate. He looked out along the pitted expanse of the Mare Serenitatis and over the horizon, his gaze coming to rest on the gauzy blue-white globe of Earth.

He loved to look at it this way. Through the clouds he could make out a plume of volcanic ash billowing across the Indonesian peninsula, the bright ribbon of a forest fire tearing through a tract of southern Australia. As the world turned and oceans and

continents plunged into night, only dim clusters of illumination scattered here and there confirmed the presence of human life.

At his left Terry shimmered into view, snapping him out of a reverie he hadn't realised he'd fallen into. He noticed that his right hand was placed across his heart and quickly dropped it to his side.

Terry was dressed in baggy shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, a battered straw hat and hiking boots with no socks. He was drinking a piña colada out of a plastic pineapple with a paper umbrella in it.

Virtually Instantaneous Cognitive Transmission Of Reality – VICTOR – was one of the greatest innovations to have emerged from the machine era. VICTOR was Terry's preferred mode of travel, and had significant advantages in a situation like this one.

"You see, that's why I came up," Terry said, his words coming over the intercom with crystal clarity. "You just can't be left on your own, can you. Get a couple of drinks inside you and suddenly everybody's your best friend."

He slurped noisily at his piña colada.

"Literally, everybody. Lucky for you I actually am your best friend. Or I might not be quite so patient with the frankly snail-like pace things get done at 'round here."

"All right, all right'," his friend said. Terry watched him disappear down the slope to the launch site in a cloud of kicked-up regolith.

"I'll stay and watch from up here," Terry said, slurping. "If you ruin everything I don't want people saying it's because I got zonked out, keeled over and smashed you into a pothole."

"I'll tell them you did anyway," his friend replied, before bouncing softly into a crater and setting to work.

At the centre of the crater there was an area about twelve feet square containing a cluster of orange rocks. He knelt down beside the largest of them and with his gloved fingers brushed away a thin layer of regolith that surrounded its base. Beneath it was a curved panel of golden metal. He pressed down on it gently, issued a voice command that blacked out his visor and stood well back.

The panel rose out of the lunar soil with balletic smoothness, revealed as a small section of a cylinder like the one he had placed on the desk in the hotel lounge, but much larger. It was ten feet long, with a surface so reflective that looking at it directly even in low light would cause permanent blindness. That was the real reason Terry had hung back, he thought: he'd forgotten to bring his sunglasses.

Through his visor he admired the supranormally sophisticated device that was now illuminating the crater like a miniature sun. From a pouch on his sleeve he produced a

thin strip of flexible material and swept it lightly across the surface of the cylinder. A series of red, yellow and blue lights lit up in sequence along the strip.

“How’s it going down there?” he heard Terry say over the intercom.

“Fish in a barrel,” he replied. “Scanners and lab check out OK. Now shield your eyes, we are go for launch.”

He placed his right palm flat against the base of the cylinder, and a mechanism located, interpreted and responded to a sequence of electro-chemical impulses in his brain. He stood back as the cylinder’s gyroscopic transport system engaged and the radiant machine shot up into the vacuum above the crater. It remained there for a brief, breathtaking interval before accelerating to a rate of rotation so great it appeared motionless. Then it was gone, careering toward Earth at unbelievable speed.

Terry had never witnessed a launch close-up before. He threw back his head and let out a whoop that nearly deafened his companion. Before he had closed his mouth the cylinder was halfway to its destination. In its wake it left a tunnel of pulsing, concentric light-images stretched out across 100,000 miles. They bloomed outward like drops of paint in water, making circles like coronas of billowing suns before disintegrating like snowflakes in the thaw.

The cylinder slowed down suddenly before inserting itself into geostatic orbit exactly 22,000 miles above the Earth's surface. It had taken less time to travel there from the moon than it takes to tie a shoelace. Reflecting sunlight with extraordinary intensity, it synchronised itself with the planet’s rotation directly over the town of Bethlehem, in the Roman Province of Judea.

From the moon, two men born of another time observed the mountainous desert region pass through the terminator into night. They knew that very soon, in the Mesopotamian city of Babylon, a Zoroastrian priest would look up and see a bright new star in the sky. He would ride out to confer excitedly with his two most scholarly companions about this dazzling portent, and the three of them would agree that the arrival of the star in the East could mean only one thing: the ancient prophecy had been fulfilled – the King of Kings had been born in the land of the Jews. With the star to guide them, the trio would make a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the blessed infant. The gifts they brought would serve as useful currency in the first, precarious days of his life, when many innocent children would be put to death by order of a jealous monarch.

The child who would be called Christ would not preach until adulthood. In the years leading up to that time, the three scholars would speak of him reverently wherever they travelled, establishing his presence in the public mind, watering the seed of a tree that would grow countless branches.

As many people would find peace and community through the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as would spill blood in his name. But all that really mattered was that Jesus was *there*. For that reason, the event of his birth and his subsequent existence

were regularly monitored and thus always assured. He was the spark in an engine that would ultimately propel science, art, philosophy and other areas of human endeavour toward a pivotal crisis, when the keys to the universe would be found and the human race would realise true freedom.

Terry looked stupefied.

“That was brilliant,” he gasped. “Can we do another one?”

“Sorry, that’s your lot,” his friend replied efficiently as he bobbed back up the slope toward the hotel. “Most shops don’t stock those, and I doubt they’re open anyway. Holidays.”

“Oh,” Terry said. “How about we go back in the lounge and get a couple of liveners then. I’m bloody freezing.”

“No you aren’t.”

Back in the hotel lounge Terry fixed a piña colada for himself and another Fonseca for his friend, who had changed into a two-piece cream linen suit and was seated at the bar reacquainting himself with the cigar he had tamped out earlier. Terry handed him the goblet of port en route to the jukebox. He dropped a nickel in the slot and the room rang with the joyful sound of Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Marie Knight singing *Up Above My Head*.

“Droll,” his friend noted, then paused for a moment.

“The girl is lovely,” he said.

“She was half asleep when I arrived. I gave her Phenobarbital and planted the suggestion while she was out. She came ’round for a second and saw me standing in the doorway with the sunlight streaming in, wearing what I’m wearing now. I mean, I had to laugh. You spend your life quite reasonably assuming this imagery comes from the collective unconscious, then one day...”

“...you find out it’s ’cause you got a classy tailor,” Terry concluded. “The Nazz meets the snazz. I hope you were gentle with her,” he added through a mouthful of rum and coconut.

“You’re not even funny. It was totally unobtrusive. It’ll be like a dream to her, nothing more. She would melt you in your tracks Terry. She’s beautiful. I mean, profoundly beautiful on an innermost level. They got that bit right at least.”

“You’re not implying that she isn’t really a virgin?” Terry slurred.

“Sorry to burst your bubble. There are miracles and there are translation errors that end up doing the rounds for centuries. The latter tend to crop up more often. And I

dare say you know from bitter experience that the ins and outs of conception aren't necessarily always that immaculate."

"I'm not sure I do know," Terry said. "I'm very naïve."

"Of course. I forgot. I'll explain it all to you one day, if you ever sober up for long enough. Damn."

He rubbed a spot of port into his trouser-leg.

"It was the same with the carpenter. Not too bright but utterly decent and dependable. I've never seen a man so good with children. A pleasure to observe actually."

"You put ideas in his head as well did you?" Terry asked.

"Yes, but it wasn't necessary. He's so in love with her, things would have taken their course anyway. But that's protocol. You know as well as I do we can't leave anything out."

Terry leaned forward on his stool and made circles with his index finger.

"So look," he said, with the earnestness of a man two thirds of the way through his fourth piña colada.

"Here's what I've never been able to get. You and me, we do what do. Or, you do what you do and I make sure you're comfortable when you do it. But if, as you say, all phenomena exist simultaneously and the fundamental characteristic of all phenomena is change, how come we have to keep running around making sure everything's changing the way it's supposed to change? What makes you think everything won't turn out the way it's supposed to anyway?"

"Good question," said his friend, who had decided at that moment to start playing catch-up with Terry.

"You're right. Change is the fundamental characteristic of all phenomena. But the fact that we often perceive it be arbitrary doesn't necessarily mean that it actually is. I mean, if you and I decided that instead of doing our jobs we were just going to sit here getting hammered for the rest of our lives, which isn't such a bad idea, maybe things would turn out the way we think they're supposed to, and maybe they wouldn't. There's just no way of knowing. What we do know is that we possess tools that enable us to influence existential outcomes on a universal scale. That gives us choice, and that choice is what makes us the arbiters of the very change that characterises our existence in the first place."

Terry's mouth hung open slightly.

"Ah," he said. "Right." Then, leaning in further, "But *why*? Why do we *want* to do it? What are we actually aiming to *achieve*?"

“I’m not exactly sure,” his friend said. He glanced at the Christmas tree by the window. “Peace on Earth, I think.”

“Peace on Earth,” Terry repeated.

“That’s right.”

Terry raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

“That’s the best you can come up with?” he said.

“Well, what more do you want?”

“I dunno,” Terry said. “I was hoping for something a bit more original. Is ‘goodwill to all men’ a factor in this as well, by any chance?”

“Certainly,” his friend said. “Why not. Peace on Earth and goodwill to all men. God bless us, every one. There you go. I hope that makes you very happy.”

They glowered at each other for a moment and burst out laughing. Terry threw his arm around his friend’s shoulder and squeezed it hard.

“The thing is, you actually mean it, don’t you. You really are an angel, aren’t you?”

Terry’s friend blew a perfect smoke ring and poured himself a goblet of port.

“That,” he said, “is entirely a matter of perspective.”