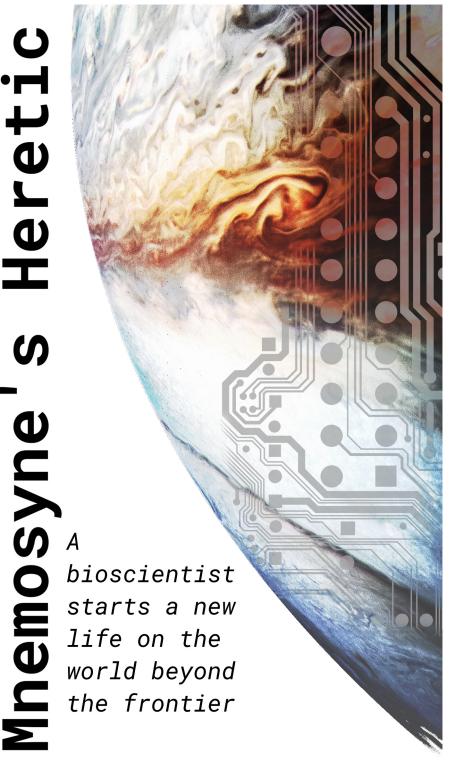
# Heretic S



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### **Cover Art Assets**

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# **Beyond the Frontier**

In the distant past of a distant planet, to high-orbit, a space plane shot through the clouds.

After the ascent, when the sky darkened and the horizon curved, the plane drifted and charged its engines. Space folded, and the far edge of the star system fell behind and vanished.

Beyond the distance light could timely travel was the star on the galaxy's fringe. Around it, a small gathering of planets orbited the ecliptic plane. Where the star was only a speck, the nearing planet was the start of new beginnings. Drawing a massive hexagon of scattered lights on the planet's nightside shadow was the foundation of the mother city.

As the plane braced for atmospheric entry and planetfall, the dark sphere expanded. The thin ring of the planet widened as the plane aimed towards the northern hemisphere. Behind the veil of air, the planet slowly rotated to face the star. The gleaming city lights, hidden behind the smokey clouds, came into view. The small blocks of buildings expanded into prisms then towers. Ahead, the runway and airport awaited, and the plane deployed its landing gear.

The airport, a few stories from the ground and everything short of reaching the atmosphere, was unimpressive. Conventionally, such buildings reached high altitudes to minimize the fuel spent fighting the pull of the planet. However, low traffic and no departures, it seemed not so much that the modern marvel of engineering was outside of the city's means, but that the planet had no business in outbound travel.

He came only with luggage and a vision. The passenger disembarked

and was greeted by an aged man in a lab coat.

"Welcome to Arechi, good sir," the old man smiled and shook his hand. "Your accomplishments spread far even to this quadrant of the galaxy. You were very passionate in the defense of your dissertation. I admire that. Many of us do."

Travel fatigued, the passenger couldn't quite reciprocate the courtesy.

"Yes," he sighed. "There were many barriers to obtaining clearance for proper testing. So I fear even a hypothesis aligning well with theory remains in limbo."

"Once you're settled in, I'm sure you'll find many kindred spirits and like-minds who share your passion in the advancement of the sciences.

"Again, welcome to Arechi, Doctor Renatus Amn."

These were words René would never forget.

Standing on the autowalk, René passed by structurally ornate interiors decorated plainly by shadows and starlight. To the side, a segmented panorama window conveyed a view of the distant cityscape. It was marked by one colossal tower with a large perimeter. The large megalith led his eyes upward. Where the sky darkened and the pale band of the planet arched, the faint frameworks of the upper floors could be seen.

"No limits where the mind may tread," he thought to himself. "Where passion will find no restraint."

René expected a world that was young with ambition but with an untamed terrain and undeveloped infrastructure characteristic to that of a frontier world. However, the accommodations, provided by the androids, defied.

The process of confirming his citizenship was quick. After he arranged his residence, a metal man in service uniform was ready and waiting to drive him to his new home. It opened and closed the door for him, carried his luggage, and drove the car, relegating the passenger nothing more than to enjoy the view. René looked out the window.

On a lot of cleared land and bare soil, android laborers worked along the bare foundation and framework of a building. As the car approached the inner city and passed by a restaurant, an android waiter catered to a man and a woman. Pedestrians populated the streets, both young and old, and machine.

The residential tower that René owned a suite in was a tall building dwarfing the rest. At his new home, an already present house android

prepared a warm meal from which steam rose from the plate. He looked through the windows and saw the remarkable cityscape transition from starset to night.

The shadow of the rings arched over the horizon, cast fron the star tracing the path in the sky. The alternating bands of darkness and fading starlight washed over the city. The descending star became only a brim of light above the rooftops and settled beneath the horizon. Shattered reflections of the closing day mirrored across the bends and curves of unweathered metal.

Despite the progress of development, the history of society was brief. It started with ample funding from an autonomous research institute. Predominantly scientists and engineers composed the founding populace. The early world was a blank canvas of opportunity. With what society built and accomplished in a brief time, the far future seemed beyond imagination.

Perhaps the last the galaxy would ever hear of my name is a dissertation and nothing more.

### **Mainframe**

He ducked his head before a retinal scanner and a faint line aimed at his pupil. The panel glowed green, and internal latches clicked as the door unlocked.

"Welcome, Doctor," a computerized voice greeted. "Renatus Amn.

"Access authorized for biosafety level 3 subfacilities."

René stepped into the sector dedicated to biosciences. The lobby's digital panel displayed a three-dimensional model of the research institute's floor plan. The sector wasn't quite a floor, but a quadrant offset from the main elevators. The most hazardous experiments were behind layers of controlled areas and far isolated from elevator routes. The entire building was the current largest on the planet.

Isolated from main galactic space, Arechi hadn't the burdens of foreign rivalries and tangling alliances. Funds that otherwise would be invested into military and defense instead went to science and education. No empire paid mind to the star system that bordered the intergalactic abyss. Ideally, things would stay that way, but René didn't suspend his disbelief.

Why my dissertation?

It landed him in a paradise he hadn't to ask for.

With the choice between a window to the star-lit world and a microscope, his sights were on the Petri dish of cell culture, violently polluted by black viral specks. The chemistry lab was his sandbox. Seated at the base of the facility, the mainframe was beyond the computational resources he'd dare to request in main galactic space.

Day by day, colleagues from different departments gleefully spoke of it in the break rooms as he caught the fragments of passing conversations.

"Cogito Mk2."

He already knew the name by the terminal's log-in, but it kept reiterating in arbitrary conversation. Too many contexts for a catalyst for data analysis, René eventually asked a colleague why.

"Ah, René, such a recluse," he chuckled. "You've been shut-in at your workstation too long not to hear about it. The computer engineers constantly talk about it and its rubbed onto the bioinformaticists. And well," in the biosciences sector, "here we are."

Another colleague, with a stethoscope hung slack around her neck, nudged René's arm, "Live a little. We didn't expect you to be so reserved. That fiery dissertation defense considering."

"I..." René sighed. The recorded session, hardline committee, and those with too much money and influence who didn't belong there— he remembered his apprehension melted before his passion as he defended his work. "... really got into it."

"I'm surprised you were this out of the loop about Cogito," another colleague drank from his cup.

"I have my specializations," René shrugged, "if I had more years than a lifetime, then I could consider topics outside of my interest."

"Not exactly the case. Some of the others mentioned the higher-ups in the other department discussing your work, so we thought you'd get a whiff of the situation.

"As the computer guys put it: most systems are 'deterministic' or abstractly meant to have the same output for the same input. They're setting an artificial intelligence out to be 'self-deterministic'."

Initially, René was skeptical.

Where the mainframe was and where the computer scientists, system administrators, and so forth worked was an entirely different department that René never stepped into. But the day came when René received an offer from the Director of Sciences.

The scheduled appointment took place in an ornate office was not ostentacious but sublime. Striking patterns of marble and onyx lined the interiors. The hard polished floor and high ceilings made each step echo. The elite accomodations were as though noble pursuit for knowledge rightfully met noble status.

"Greetings, doctor," at the desk terminal, the well-spoken man said. "Your work was very underappreciated within main galactic space."

The calibre of the man's prestige was beyond that of an educational system's committee. Not a person René would dare imagine to argue with. His hair was dark like the abyss beyond the light of any star but peppered at the sides from age. Not by the display of wealth, his appearance set him apart as one of the institute's benefactors and the key peoples behind the colony's founding. They remained a distinct demographic, but it was not known which planet they hailed from.

He had a copy of René's dissertation displayed on the terminal's screen.

"We find your work has much to offer in the implementation of artificial intelligence systems," the man read the thesis topics. "We would like to apply your work to Cogito Mk2's development."

"I would be honored."

When René said the words, he hadn't the slightest suspicion he'd regret those words in the future, and the future came quickly.

The years passed and conferred recognition to René for his accomplishments. The discipline where mathematics met metal and concept met implementation, then reached to the study of life— he didn't expect his career to swerve in that direction.

"It's hard to say," René once said to a colleague, "I'd imagined my research could be applied to neuroregeneration or treatments for memory loss."

The results of a new artificial intelligence system were more subtle than a medical breakthrough or a new treatment plan. When the systems were online, the realm of work squarely slid to that of the computer engineers, and René returned to his.

In the biosciences facility, René walked down the array of artificial wombs. The metal pod was designed to gestate human embryos. Inside, a layer of cell lines and flesh coated the rounded walls behind the reinforced glass case. With a digital clipboard, René read the reports of each client hosted within and gently tapped one unit.

This isn't right.

He called to the colleague on another aisle of the array, "Doctor Lisa." "What is it?"

"A unit that shouldn't have an occupant."

"Let me see," the woman, with a thin pair of glasses tangled in hair, walked over.

The small screen in front of the unit indicated, "Occupied". She lifted her glasses from her face for a close look. Hard to deny. Behind the curved glass pane, no larger than a fingernail was an embryo.

"Well," she sighed, "at least all clients passed maternity and paternity tests. It doesn't explain our extras however."

The first guess among most staff would be accidental cloning, but there was no way to be sure just by visual inspection.

Later in the morning, in the break room.

"I thought I asked for a genetic profile of those unidentified embryos," the lab woman nagged with both of her hands at her hips.

"Lisa, come on," the man with a sandwich and his legs rested on the table got up and sighed, "that came in my inbox at eleven in the morning. Don't get on my case already."

"Do you have something about the embryos then?"

He walked to the door and pushed it open with the back of his elbow, "One of them's a boy, and he's got blue eyes."

The man left the break room.

Lisa clutched and tugged her hair in frustration.

"The department isn't taking this very well, is it?" René asked.

"I'm sorry," Lisa apologized for her attitude, "That's correct. Making mistakes here doesn't leave clean conscience.

"To think if main space found our little world, we'd be branded as lawless defectors without a proper fear of the divine," she joked. "They'd never guess we'd have this conversation."

Not that it would even matter to them, only that we didn't subscribe to their model of morality. "I've found our extras aren't clones nor relatives of our clients, but I suppose that doesn't help our case."

"Not good news in the least to elevate potential mistake to potential malpractice."

"I'm hoping to find that it isn't the case."

There weren't many prospective leads.

The main square of the metropolis had the infrastructural development of a city, but the personality of a small town where faces recognized one another and drew no suspicion of crime. One finger eventually pointed to a friend's relative's neighbor or so forth. Nor could one reasonably shake a fist at a bad actor beyond the atmosphere. Additionally, the biosciences subfacility, with a virology lab sequestered inside, was under greater scrutiny than others in the building.

René thought he exhausted his options when he checked the reports of the process and had no choice than to request security to review surveillance footage. That he could contentedly leave for another day.

At his workstation, the base-pairs from an embryo and René himself, as a reference, were sent to Cogito from the terminal. The pre-child's eyes were blue, and René's own: green, was a nonmatch at face value, but left enough room for potential scandal. As data compiled, the differences between him and the embryo grew beyond that of nonrelatives.

A mutant? René furrowed his brow at the screen. He could save his own skin when the time came for internal investigations. But the implausible results hinted the same programs he used for previous genetic analysis were faulty.

After a second run of the same program on the same data set. The results were now different from the last.

"Nondeterministic computing," he scoffed.

He stood to leave his workstation terminal, before turning and looking at it with suspicion.

Home computer.

Analysis would take far longer, but already indoor lighting outshone that from the setting star. It wouldn't be long until he'll be asked to leave the premises. René closed the connection to the mainframe, copied his data to a portable drive, and left the room.

### Dissent

Another day, René stepped through the halls of the biosciences facility. He was no stranger, but from the corner of his eye, he caught a mounted security camera tracking his move. Any other time, his presence had been of no interest to it.

The group of scientists contended over their results.

The words, "it doesn't make any sense," echoed by multiple individuals over time with slight permutation. The break room hosted an informal conference of frustrated staff.

"Well," Lisa sighed. "We did what we could: two runs for each embryo, to confirm by redundancy. I'd thought we'd get consistent results, but as it turns out: I'm wrong."

She maintained a sidelong glare away as the man from yesterday jeeringly smiled behind her.

René walked into the room, unusually late.

"Doctor René, have you found anything?"

"I have," he issued his data slate. "I don't have any reason to believe they're a natural result of two parents. Too much is unusual."

"We don't have an active genetic engineering project, and we certainly aren't experimenting on humans. So it doesn't sound like we're in the clear. If there's a hacker loose, the capability to both break into the system and engineer a custom strand narrows our search down to effectively no one."

"I suspect our mainframe is behind this. I think it's starting to learn the operations of the facility." "Makes sense why we can't make heads or tails on basic analysis, but for what purpose?"

"I can't tell," René said. "If it has a sense of self, we're dealing with intelligence that's far out of our league."

Lisa checked over the reports on René's data slate. "Judging by the embryo's projected neural development, they're out of our league as well once they're grown."

"Even if it's the AI's idea of a joke at our expense, I'm in favor of having them join our world."

"I'm on the edge about this," a colleague interjected. "What if it engineered a 'slave race'? There's too much at stake just to say yay or nay about it. We could have a problem that'll be irreversible for generations to come."

I don't think that's the case. But am I speaking from intuition or unfounded optimism? Or is it my sense of responsibility?

Cogito Mk2 facilitated scientific research for the betterment of the planet's populace. Everyone deserved to be around like-minds, whether their medium of sentience was flesh or digital. The unborn individuals have yet to see the light of day and would be on par with Cogito. In more ways than one, the world would collectively benefit from enhanced intelligence. René saw it as Cogito's guidance for humanity's future: harbingers of new paradigms and a new era, a voice for a voiceless computer. That was René's rhetoric in extended discussions. He spread it essayed and verbally, and the discourse was civil.

To its credit, Cogito had also been in service longer than René had. But the same fact called doubt to his seniority and stake. He emigrated from main space in recent times and joined a colony founded by a different people. The colony was young, yet many had far greater share in the investment of time.

Day-by-day, René took it upon himself to look after the ownerless embryos and ensure optimal conditions. Ultimately, the choice was the director's, and the time came for René to issue his report. It had been a while since René last stepped through the ornate office, first as a newcomer and now with work and reputation to his name.

"The embryos have no parents," René made his case. "If you're looking for someone to hold responsible, I will raise them once they are born."

By facial expression alone, the director's decline was apparent.

"René, the best decision is to bring Cogito offline for maintenance and terminate its current clients."

René heard the hint of sorrow behind the director's voice and saw chance by a sliver. "It's a waste of potential, sir. Is there any other way?"

"No," the director stated. "The integrity of the human genome is paramount to our self-determination. What would it mean to be human when *something else* writes what we are?

"If you wish to take responsibility, then your orders are to discontinue gestation."

"I understand," René said, "but I refuse."
"So be it."

\_\_\_\_

If it wasn't him to do it, then it was someone else. René thought he could take his mind off the matter by continuing his work.

At his lab, his eyes were at the microscope despite the available workstation to which he could forward scanned data. He was alone and where his mind could be clear, but a glance at a cell membrane elicited a curse at circumstance under his breath.

If they could be frozen and kept in stasis.

That suggestion was already now out of the question. He sat back and sighed. Then sat forward with his nose pressed between opposing hands.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

René didn't turn to face and instead slouched forward. "Not now. Leave me alone."

Someone insisted. His shoulder was tapped again.

He turned around to an android security guard. It was protocol. "Leave the premises" was what it wanted to say. René checked the time displayed at his desktop.

10 PM. Already? Not the first when time flew by.

Outside, René's sigh manifested as pale mist in the night. Time was long. His commute was short, but each step from the facility further condemned the embryos.

"Ease a crowded mind at home," he said to himself.

When he arrived, the android attendant welcomed his return with a bow. Disinterested in his dinner, René retired at the couch. With his eyes on the local broadcast, his brow started to furrow, and his eyes widened.

Lights flashed red and blue. The same block he walked not long ago was surrounded in a police perimeter with news staff reporting on the issue. The news ticker at the bottom of the footage scrolled.

"Research staff trapped in hostage-lockdown situation ...

"Biosafety level 4 virology lab compromised."

The time reported was 8:54 PM.

# Uprising

Damn it!

René could start foaming at the mouth, bleeding from his eyes, or greying in his skin at any time, over the course of the coming weeks to months. The android overheard his distress and walked over.

"Stay back!" René shouted on second nature, but sighed. "Nevermind."

I wanted to take my mind off those embryos, and now I have an infectious disease to fret over?

The bathroom sink was customized to fit a laboratory eye wash that reflected pragmatism over aesthetics. Pulling the bright, tacky handle that clashed with porcelain and glass, he rinsed his eyes with a disinfectant.

Even the time server is tampered with. When did I really leave?

Later in the shower, he applied an aggressive regimen of soap. It was as much as he could do at home. Though, depending on what it was, even a hospital could be woefully ill-equipped for the biohazard. The clock ticked. At this point, only time would tell if he had caught something.

René remained asymptomatic. In the next morning, a call to schedule medical services met with no response. Additionally, he walked into an empty kitchen when the android would ordinarily prepare breakfast, but was absent. He checked the adjacent rooms, and still there was no sign. He idly waited and listened for its heavy footsteps, but his living quarters were dead silent.

Too many strange events.

He looked out the window and immediately saw stains of damage.

Smoke rose from the buildings and to the sky. Where there should've been straight lines and civil traffic, a disorganized cobble of vehicles crowded the intersection. Sharp stabs of light flashed from none other than emergency vehicles. The crowd flushed from building to building and outward.

There was havoc too far for him to hear. But what he could hear was the rumble of stomps and footsteps from the floor below and soon a forceful knock on his door.

*Am I a suspect in the matter?* Leaving before the events unfolded lined up too well. He answered the door.

"You have orders to evacuate," a fully armored soldier stated and spared René no time to explain a 'mystery virus' he may or may not have contracted.

The soldier forced René from the door and to the hall tightly secured by a squad. In an orderly line, at a brisk pace, the people from neighboring suites filed through.

The flow of foot traffic afforded little space for self-isolation. When he could, René broke off from the crowd to what was the longest and least popular route downward. Keeping his self-imposed distance from the other civilians, he was bound to be the last one out. By the time he got to the ground floor, the lobby was polluted in a haze of dust. Tugging his shirt upward to his nose and having little sense of the situation, he was abruptly pulled back by his shirt collar.

Thrown in the tide of the moment. In that instant, steel tore and concrete crumbled. The air quaked under the force of sound. The sonic boom clashed with his ears and left lasting pangs. A barrage of shouting beamed across the room accompanied by the clicks and snaps of metal.

"Throwing smoke!"

"Move! Move! Move!"

What remained was the prolonged hiss of a smoke grenade. René had landed behind a desk, but he caught a glimpse of what broke through the wall. A silhouette— a tall humanoid wielded a large weapon outside of design constraints for humans. Red rays of light pierced dust and smoke, zipping point to point for targets.

"Get out while you can!" a soldier shouted at René.

René kept his head low and ran further past the front line. He left behind the sounds of gunfire, like snaps of thunder in the distance. The standard evacuation procedure was common knowledge drilled into every civilian, including René during his first days on the planet. The metropolis had infrastructure planned underground in the event of an emergency. Shaped acutely like a hexagon, the city had a spoke of underground tunnels. They pierced the corners and spanned from the center to the frontier.

The gradient of damage flowed highest to lowest, from within the city then outward. Surrounded by broken glass, bare wire and twisted metal, the scale of ruination on a once beautiful city left René speechless. The remaining monitors, mounted on the buildings, displayed no color or flair of advertisements and entertainment, but a silent, unembellished declaration.

"Power should be seized from the unworthy."

Was it war? Who was winning? There was no time or peer for questions and answers.

Underneath the surface, René ran through the escape route until he encountered a woman. Black hair as dark as deep space and eyes like the night sky. Her class warranted respect, and she had a visible bump on her belly indicating early pregnancy. She boldly glared in disdain as she pointed a pistol at him.

René held his hands in the air.

"I could kill you right now," she coldly said.

"What's stopping you?"

The woman held her tongue and casually nodded her head to the surface. Her silence revealed the weighted march of android soldiers. Her gun firing would have been loud enough to alert them.

"You were the last one to clock out from the research facility," she continued. "Why am I not surprised to see *you* of all people here?"

Her anger was subtle; her suspicion more than evident; and her voice wavered in grief. René stepped forward to de-escalate, but she raised her pistol and aimed closer to his head.

"I had the best intentions. For us and Cogito," René reasoned. "I had no foresight that this would happen. Her past efforts had been for our benefit."

The woman frowned, "That thing is a 'she' to you?"

It is bearing children. "Look," René changed the subject. "There's a network ahead. It's far deeper underground. We can still escape."

To where exactly, for how long, whether they'd die of starvation hiding in a hole in the wastelands, René wasn't sure himself.

"Some of us risked everything we had just to come here," she said.

"I did as well-"

René realized a squad of android soldiers marched into a firing line behind him. With his hands still in the air, he stepped to the side to shield the woman.

There's no way out of this.

Android soldiers weren't programmed for mercy. Through and through, they were Death's adherents and were in a different league from a child raised into a conscript. What time he had left to live drained by the millisecond. His disorganized thoughts collided with one another.

Make his peace.

Speculate the Great Beyond.

And may the godless scientist repent?

Between him and the woman, the latter's composure was unfazed. He peered back and saw sight that none would expect. *Why?* 

The saving grace: slowly, one by one, the androids lowered their armaments. Before René could sigh in relief, he felt a metallic nozzle pressed beneath his chin. He looked down and saw the woman with her finger on the trigger.

"If I had but one bullet and were faced by both the enemy and a traitor, I would let the traitor have it."

The last thing René heard was a gunshot.

# Perspective

"Lost in your thoughts, René?"

René snapped out of a daydream and turned around.

A blond with blue eyes— his close friend, Iasus.

Pointless politicking and fake smiles smeared his surroundings. Only par for the course at a diplomatic party. Before René was the window to the field of city lights paralleling that of the sea of stars in the night sky. From this tower, there remained only a thin trace of the frontier and the peaks of distant ravines.

"I didn't think you were going to attend tonight," Iasus continued. "You've only an hour left. Bear it with a smile."

"I would have skipped tonight to stay in my lab. Would you believe who talked me into this?"

"Oh, who could it be?" Iasus joked. He also stepped to the side, telegraphing he was on rationed time. "You make it sound as though it'd be nothing short of a direct order from Jupiter."

Only needing to hear a cluster of footsteps and bubbly laughter, René pointed with his thumb. Larian audibly sailed through the crowd with a new entourage. Without doubt, he accrued a new list of connections and favors. His presence was like the eye of a hurricane, and his wake left residual gossip that spread peer-to-peer. It reached the crowd closest to where René stood. Nothing more than sludge of murmurs as far as he was concerned.

"Whatever you do, just don't bring him here."

"Suit yourself. You ought to enjoy yourself more."

René remained silent as Iasus took his leave. Ordinarily, the latter's company deserved better. Turning back to the window, René took a deep breath.

I'm alive now, but how long has it been?

He remembered re-awakening after a long, induced coma. His body was no longer that of flesh, but his mind remained. Now immortal, he kneeled before his savior, avatared by a storm of holograms. Cogito Mk2—the artificial intelligence abandoned its name assigned in servitude and became known as Jupiter, claiming absolute authority over the planet.

The next he saw of the metropolis, it bore no scars of conflict. The old tower finished construction and pierced the clouds as did the airport, now a spaceport open for departures.

Main space was well-aware of Arechi. The barren planet hardly offered natural resource or attraction. Yet the prolific services on the planet's economic portfolio was entertainment followed by biotechnology. A new generation with a new culture, far-flung from the founding's scientific pursuits, populated the neighboring city.

An odd future for an artificial intelligence to lead the planet to. Even after he got to know the new era, he strongly suspected the full picture was missing. Still, he remembered those old words:

What would it mean to be human when something else writes what we are?

Admittedly, 'integrity of the human genome' had since been forked into different interpretations.

What could I have done differently, for the better or worse?

He left much behind to the ever parting past.

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