

Telefunken Remix

by A. A. Attanasio

Mr. Attanasio notes that this is a prolific time in his career with the recent release of Twice Dead Things, a collection of outr fiction and experimental prose—and two new novels: Killing with the Edge of the Moon, a contemporary Celtic fantasy, and The Conjure Book, a 13-year-old girl’s misadventures with a 400-year-old volume of magic spells.

His new story is challenging, complex, and fascinating. If it seems a bit odd at first, stick with it—it will get even odder (but it will all make sense).

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What has God wrought?

—Samuel F. B. Morse, first telegraph transmission

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Sierra Tree

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Barely audible above the sounds of rain sifting through the bedchamber’s oval window, a succession of three short dulcet tones chimes thrice from a headboard alarm clock, and Noel gently rouses from the Bosom. This is what Heavinside calls sleep: the Bosom, from Old English *bsm*, the place where secret thoughts are kept.

I better not even try to explain that! This is Noel’s first thought as he rolls out from his moss hammock and strides two paces into the wash bole. While relieving himself at the commode, he opens burl wood louvers and watches morning peek from under a brim of departing rain clouds. Another lovely day in Saille, a willow town of Heavinside. Saille of sylvan swards and swan linns, old suburbs in paradise, croons with bird madrigals and vibrant morning mist from nearby falls. Even this tranquillity can’t alleviate his anxious thoughts. Today is *the* day: the chancy day he departs Heavinside for Errth.

Lilac shadows of sunrise stretch through his heart and darken his mood with the disquieting thought that his doppel won’t understand. Noel has already decided to begin by explaining why Heavinside calls the doppel’s world Errth instead of Earth. “Your world is an error,” he practices aloud. “Surely, many people in your time intuited correctly that life and the solar system itself were intelligently designed.”

Many people in your time.... Noel cringes at his clumsiness. “*My time?*” his doppel would question—and then how would Noel convincingly convey all that had transpired in the chasm of time that separated them? Should he start off by terrifying his doppel with the fact that the human race had gone extinct long before the species’ broadcasts of radio and television reached the Contexture’s nearest monitor in the Andromeda Galaxy?

How much trust then could his doppel invest in the Contexture if the first thing he learned was that a Design flaw had shaped his life? How to spin the fact that the monitor in our Milky Way had malfunctioned and the all-wise Contexture never found out that the third planet circling Sol had engendered sentience—until that wayward species had destroyed itself?

The commode flushes when he stands, a braided current of waste products mewling into the slub chamber while he watches, an idea skittering across his mind. “I’ll tell him about the treemerges. Of course. ‘Heavinside grows everything, even our domiciles, our treemerges ... our *homes*.’ That’s the word to use, *home*. ‘The Contexture designed our homes to care for us.’ Use common words to explain unfamiliar ones.” Noel’s inspiration absorbs his attention, and he continues out loud, glad for the confident vigor in his voice, “Let me tell you about biotecture and how it fits everything together, including effluent.” He pauses. *Will he know that word?* “Better say *sewage*. ‘What you flush away not only furthers the growth of your own treemerge but also informs it about your health so that your home grows the precise nutrients you require.’ Right. Start there. *Home*. That’ll put him at ease.”

The reflecting pool in the wash bole reflects a lean youth with narrow, bony shoulders, pale as a chesspiece. Noel scrutinizes his mirror image, knowing his doppel will look very much as he does, with lanky dun hair swept back from a brow orthogonal as marble, green eyes browned like baked turf, abbreviated eyebrows, mere tufts, an umlaut above that shapeless tuber of a nose, and those cupid lips, almost fey, but for his jaw wide as a boomerang.

The rain grumbles a distant farewell. “‘Hello. I am Noel. I am yourself—your clone—two million years from now.’” *Stupid*, he scolds himself—then, depresses a knurled wood lever, releasing a brisk spray from the cache of rain his treemerge had collected. “‘Hello, I’m Noel. Two million years from now, the Designer who misplaced your galaxy will find your shoulder-blade. I’m the memory of you made from that bone.’”

Sunlight sifts like sawdust through the branches. Under a canopy of willow withes, Noel sits cross-legged on matted turf gazing quietly at his inamorata, memorizing her features, aware he may never see her again. This is their last intimacy. Ny’a looks back at him tightly, straightening the pleats of her tunic. Her sibylline beauty surges with intelligence, irises black as if woven of darkness spun out from those watchful pupils. “What if I don’t like him?”

“He’s me.” Noel sounds aggrieved and stops lacing his breeches. How many times has he explained this? “We’re identical.”

“Genetically.” The plaintive edge to her voice sharpens. How many times has she pointed this out? “He’s not you. He’s a doppel.”

“You’ll like him.” He sighs from far down in the hollow where he’s fitting her memory. “He needs you to like him.”

Ny'a leans forward. "What if he doesn't like me?"

"No chance of that." He takes both her hands. "No one on all of Errth is as beautiful as you." That was objectively true. "You're a templet—beauty herself."

"Then why are you leaving me?"

He could offer a defeated mutter—"I'm not a templet."—but doesn't have to.

Those eyes of spun darkness peer into him, trying to locate whoever is home. "You're an anamnestic. So what?"

"Yeah." Even the name is ugly. *Anamnestic*—*anamnestic*. It sounds like sneezing.

Ny'a addresses him through an intransigent scowl, "How do you think your doppel is going to feel when you strand him here?"

"After what he's been through—fabulous!" This is the part of the routine where he justifies his reasons. But the discussion won't end until he justifies his heart. That's all she cares about. These past twelve moons, while she helped with preparations for the transfer, they had modulated this argument numerous ways. He frowns as if reading the cryptic weave of shadow from under the willow's bell. "His life is accidental. The ones who succeed on Errth are designing men and women. Buying and selling with skill and greed stronger than love. The rest drift, buffeted by events. I'm sure he's one of them."

"So?" Emotion throttles her voice. "That was two million years ago, Noel. He's not hurting."

"I am, Ny'a." He notices he's been squeezing her hands, releases them and stands. "You know compassion compels us." Her pointed stare directs him to continue the routine. Today the words mean more, because they are final. "I have a treemerge. I have you. I have all Heavinside to prepare me for success on Errth. How can I leave him there when he has none of these advantages?"

"You have a place here—with me."

"You're a templet. You belong in Heavinside. Me ... well, look at me. I'm a memory of Errth, a crisis of imprecision."

"What is that supposed to mean?" She leans back on her elbows, gazing up at him with those midnight eyes. She decides to skip the tired argument that "anamnestics make our culture stronger" and goes straight to the obvious truth: "Doppels have it harder here." She doesn't have to explain. Doppels remember Errth—and, in Heavinside, that's always a trauma. Some treemerges never manage to calm their new hosts without wiping memories. All the while, the doppel is useless in the Bosom.

And that's the real difficulty. That's why the design managers discourage exchanges. The managers are the good neighbors from hyperspace, from the Contexture, who call themselves Sierra Tree, a name they think sounds simian-friendly. Interchanges between Heavinside and Errth are a complex, maddening process for design managers *and* the templet, a burden too dubious for anything but love to bear. Of course, Ny'a does love him. The Contexture designed her specifically to love him, and with a woeful huff she pushes to her feet, effectively terminating her dissent. "So, I'm trading a crisis of imprecision for a precise crisis. Lucky me."

His smile brokers her disapproving frown to a joke on himself. "I'm the one who's going to need luck."

"Is that what the Tree told you?" A sweep of her arm parts willow withes like draperies, disclosing an afternoon tending toward amber and a storybook vista of varied terrain, surging hills with treemerges among conifer woods, heather tracts and sky lakes. "They tell you to take your luck with you?"

"Again and again. This first trip is preliminary. They need to set their calipers. 'Do I accept the stochastic hazard of zero portal travel? Do I realize that if vacuum fluctuations deviate from the calibrations even slightly....' Well then, it's breakfast with the dinosaurs for me." He takes her hand, and they stroll from sequined shadows into brash sunlight. "Luck—that's a sphinx with sharp claws!"

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The rising red moon impersonates a vast furnace. Noel kisses Ny'a, and she presses hard against him. "We love each other," she whispers sharp with spit and body heat against his cheek, then pushes into his palm something hard and cool. "For luck."

"Zero portal open!" Design managers speak from a safe distance, cloaked in night among the ponderosas. "Liminal boundary fifteen minutes!—Go now!"

An afflicted glance over his shoulder fixes on plastinated faces watching impassively from the forest's dark apertures. Those glyptic masks promise no mercy if he doesn't return after fifteen minutes on Errth—then, *pffft!*—the very strings that weave his atoms unravel ... and nothing of him will remain, not even a ghost imprint in the vacuum.

A last look burns between Noel and Ny'a, and he turns to the zero portal. It is an empty glade where moonlight punches through the trees. He advances tentatively, heart shaking, head held high like a blind man—until the design managers shout, "Go now! Now, Noel! *Now!*"

He rushes forward across springy grass. Moonlight crests like a wave. For a reeling moment, he feels motherless and welded to sorrow. The next instant, macadam smacked the soles of his sandals. Halogen light smothered the moon. And a curdled reek of sewer and river ammonia hooked his sinuses. The field and

enclosing ponderosas were gone, replaced by cathedral vaults under a massive bridge. A choir of pigeons sat in drowsy attendance along spans of high steel scaffolding and, in the distance, the electric necklace of another colossal bridge.

A lone figure in sneakers, baggy denims, and a dark hooded jacket leaned on an iron railing under visionary lamplight. When Noel emerged from slant shadows thrown down by the bridge's giant stanchions, the solitary river-watcher turned and staggered aside so violently his hood flew back, revealing a frightened reflection of Noel, identical except for shaved temples and a rusty stripe of chin whiskers.

“What the—”

“Don't be afraid.” Noel came out of the dark wearing his Heavinside apparel, a wide-necked blouse of silver panes, pale breeches thewed and braided with knotcord, sandals intricately laced. Orange lamplight diffusing off that monochrome fabric made him look like an archaic, bereaved ghost, long hair afloat upon the river wind. “I'm not going to hurt you.”

“Yo—don't come no closer!”

Noel stopped on the sooty cobbles. “I don't have much time.”

“Damn!” The doppel expelled shock in a heightened whisper, eyes buzzed, body twisting full to one side ready to kick off. “This is whack! Who are you?”

“I'm Noel.” Trying to throw him a smile, Noel grimaced. “I'm your clone.”

The word flew right by him. “Noel? You my twin or something?”

“Something like that.” Noel lifted his chin and extended his right hand, intending to ask, ‘What's your name?’ Instead, the doppel backed away as if Noel had raised a bruise-knuckled fist, muttering, “I got no twin.” And, too late, after gravity made its claim, Noel recalled the small, hard object Ny'a had slipped into his palm.

Clinking clear as ice, a jade coin bounced on the dirty cobbles. *For luck*, Ny'a had said, and he gaped at ... well, the name for this object is an obscenity in Heavinside: *obol*. Every templet has one. A metastasis obol—infinity-in-a-thimble, bride-to-God, fate's coin. It connects the templet directly to the Contexture. Such intimacy with the Designer imparts experiences so transhuman language fails—and when templets force into words these intimacies, when they speak aloud their observations from hyperspace of our organic existence, they offend bluntly: *Mind is the rutted track of Context.—A pouch of hungry ghosts, such is life.—The filthiest body part is the mouth, and everything spoken is filth.* Templets learn to avoid discussing the Contexture, people don't ask, and the obol usually adheres to a less filthy and customarily hidden body part.

Beyond the vulgarity of Ny'a's obol rolling on the ground, Noel's heart hit a gallop because he knew that the Contexture could not regulate Ny'a's biokinesis

without it on her person. She would die in days.

The obol caromed to a stop between the doppel's sneakers, and the doppel squatted to pick it up.

"Give me that." The urgent command spooked the twin, and as Noel strode briskly forward, the stranger bolted. "Hey! I need that!" He chased after, baying, "Stop!"

The doppel ran soundlessly off the main promenade onto drear paths, and when his hood went up, he vanished among shadows in the city's somnolent streets.

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Sunset layers the west in snake-bands. Under the ponderosas, design managers are skeletal silhouettes with lambent faces blunt and lobed as moray eels. They remind Noel and Ny'a that death is a clear destination in Heavinside. No one dies by accident or homicidal intent. The Contexture patterns every mortal moment to the dead-certain and final secret joy assured all. "Yet, if your doppel does not exchange with you, or returns without the obol, what can Sierra Tree do for Ny'a? On Errth, we have no dominion, no way to retrieve her obol." Their somniferous voices are transparent to the silence behind. "We instructed you carefully about the preliminary trip. You knew to transport naught with you save the clothes you wore."

A light wind carries a concussion of odors from far in the big forest. Noel draws a breath of resinous air full of pine balsam and leaf incense, and before he can answer, Ny'a speaks up, "I told you already, I pressed it on him at the last instant. If he didn't come back, if something went wrong with your calibrations, I didn't want to live."

Noel waits on a reply. All he hears is his heart. Ruby carats glitter in the far keeps of the woods. Before that bejeweled world, the managers move as shadow creatures, taking their own counsel. Voices ruffle. "If your doppel arrives here at all, he arrives with the obol—or Ny'a goes to her final secret joy within days. And with her gone, your doppel is without a temple. For him, Sierra Tree must then make special accommodations. That is troublesome for us."

On the walk back to the treemerges of Saille, under nightfall long and purple, Noel admits, "He's not who I thought he'd be."

"The doppel."

Noel casts a contemptuous look at the carpet of pine needles and erratic mushrooms. "He looks like I do, but he's not me."

"Of course not." In frail starlight, the moon not yet risen, she stops, and her sinuous hair settles across her shoulders and the ardor of her face like swirled ink. "He lives on Errth, Noel. What did you think?"

"I thought ... well, I thought I would know him better." He lifts a stricken look

and meets a face as full of sorrow as a bucket brims with water. “He didn’t recognize me. I was just a ghost to him. And, I see now, he’s no more than a ghost to me. That whole world, Ny’a—it’s just a dream gone bad.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going, just as I planned.” He starts walking again, with determined strides. “I have to now. I’ll bring back your obol.”

“You?” She firmly takes his elbow and fixes him with a cinched stare, restraining her hope. “You’re coming back? To me?”

“You were right, Ny’a. You wouldn’t like him.” His damaged expression heals a little at the sound of her surprise. “I’m sorry, sorry I even started this crazy misadventure. I’ll get the obol and come back with it.”

“If he hasn’t lost it,” she whispers.

“I’ll find it,” he whispers back.

They clasp hands and meander out of the woods to a pond zebra-striped with looming shadows from the forest. On a shale ledge above a gravel beach, they sit together, and he leans his face into her hair, inhaling deeply, the scent of her the philosophy he intends to take with him.

“We’re always going to be together,” she assures him, “even if you don’t come back.”

“I’m coming back.”

“That certainty stays here in Heavinside.” A moonbeam through the trees lies at their feet like a dagger. “On Errth, nothing is certain, Noel. Nothing except dying.”

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The Clock’s Cryptic Face

Sunlight sifted like sawdust through the branches. Leon sat on the back of a park bench, high top sneakers on the seat, inspecting the jade piece he’d picked up yesterday from his double. Smaller than a quarter, bigger than a nickel, thinner than a dime, it felt cool like something refrigerated. No matter how long he palmed it or held it in the sun, it remained cool. On each face of its polished green surface, it bore nine dots: and nothing else. “Sacrament here.” He muttered his pitch as prospective buyers ambled past his bench. “Chalk dust. Tar angel. Sacrament.”

Turtles approached, flat-palming him cash and smooth as a handshake taking a color-coded blotter to trade for their score at the far end of the park. The work bored him, a temp job these past eight months, with no chance to boost product or steal cash from this bottom-end street operation. But he liked the hours, sitting in the park, earning enough in four more months to open his own house and go wholesale. He usually could feel his brain vibrate when he contemplated the staggering

possibilities. Not today. The jade piece imparted a watchful serenity as he turned it this way and that. “Sacrament here. Chalk dust. Tar angel.”

“What you got there, Leon?” This soft voice rolling out words dark as blueberries belonged to the only person who mattered in his world. “Lemme see.”

Without looking over his shoulder, he upheld the jade wafer, and long, clear fingernails with French manicured licorice tips plucked it away. A sigh immediately followed, sharp as the fulcrum point just before climax. He gave a lopsided smile to the sunny acres. “Cool, yeah?”

“Like ice.” She slid onto the park bench, sitting between his legs. In wraparound sunglasses, black camisole, tight sable pants and jet ribbon ankle-wrap sandals, she looked slinky as a shadow at high noon. “What is it?”

“Like I know.” He told her how he got it from his twin in the dead of night under the bridge.

The jade reflection clicked in her dark lenses as she walked it between her fingers. “You were tweaked!”

He grabbed her black, chopped hair in a fist and gently shook her head. “You know better.”

“For real?”

“Like looking in a mirror. But with long hair and no patch.” He stared at the afternoon shadows on the tessellated pavement as if trying to solve a geometry problem. “Who you think he is?”

A turtle scuffled up, and during the transaction, she slipped the wafer between her peach-glossed lips. The chill hurt her teeth, and that ache rang like bravery in her soul, a grievous glory to find herself here on this park bench where money buys the most desperate happiness on the planet—and she wants none of it because of a shrewd fear she inherited from the stoned sadness of her mother and the unwept loneliness of a sister weary of everything but the blue smoke in a glass pipe. She spit it out.

“Hey!” Leon leapfrogged her, almost bowling over the turtle to get to the jade coin on its wayward roll among pavement cracks and cigarette butts. “What’s your problem, Taima?”

Taima held him in an eyelock right through those dark glasses. “That thing was stealing my head.”

“Yeah.” With a helpless grin of agreement, he plucked it from the ground. “You noticed that too. How you figure?”

She slung her jaw to one side, contemplating her indignation, and dropped her

voice, “It’s spooky, Leon. Lose it.”

“You crazy?” He spun around and sat next to her, holding the jade piece before them. It shone coolly in the sunlight. “This here is some kind of magic.”

Brittle stars write a Braille of blind chance across the heavens. Noel proceeds alone upon a flagstone path in an old, forsaken garden outside Saille. Vaporous moonbeams light the way among knuckled crabapple trees and mossy rock heaps of a fallen wall. Kragh the Hermit, a short, brutish man wearing the tawed leathers of animals he has killed, has come down from his stone hut in a high country of vast heath and silver weather. At each full moon, for the last eighty moons, Kragh has met Noel and other curious anamnestic among indomitable, brooding trees in a blue hush of moonsmoke. The drama is the point that sews them together: this theater of the wild world, the broken world.

Like Noel, Kragh is an anamnestic, but unlike his avid disciple, the Hermit long ago abandoned his treemerge to live by his own wits and the wilderness’s bounty. He sits upright among toadstools and fireflies in an amphitheater of disheveled garden terraces.

“Know El!” His husky voice booms among hardwoods bearded in pea-vine. One of Kragh’s many other adherents had been a doppel, a rabbi when on Errth, and from him the Hermit has learned that El is a Biblical name of God, and he delights in exhorting Noel to remember that his name means to be born and “If you’re born here in Heavinside, you surely know El.” Kragh can be funny, but he isn’t spiritual in any traditional sense and when pressed will only reluctantly admit, “The world itself is scripture.”

Noel sits heavily on the ground. With breaths tight as sobs, he relates what has happened.

“First, steady yourself.” Kragh leans forward, greased braids of beaded hair clicking. “Errth is no place for emotional fools.”

“I, never should, have gone.”

“Given. But now you’re going again. You must.” The inner quiet Kragh radiates purifies Noel’s attention, and the sobs stop. “That’s why you sent for me.”

Noel wipes tears with his wrists.

“Your doppel is not you.” Kragh sits back in the dark, Mongoloid eye-folds like incisions. “Repeat that.”

“My doppel is not me.”

“People die on Errth by error and malevolence each minute of every hour on any given day.”

Noel's head hangs heavily between his shoulders. "This isn't news, Kragh."

The Hermit's dark copper skin seems to absorb moonlight, giving none back. "Whoever your doppel is, he has suffered. He lives on Errth where no happiness goes unwept for long. He will prove dangerous."

"My treemerge has prepared me." Anger edges Noel. "Listen, old fellow, you're the reason I started thinking about trading places with my doppel." He tilts his head back at an accusatory angle. "Your philosophy is about living authentically, right? Being your own true self. That's what I decided to do. Live in the wild and broken world. It was supposed to be an act of compassion. Now it's all gone wrong. And I don't know if I can fix it. I may not make it back. So I came to say good-bye."

"What makes a good-bye good, Know El?" Kragh beams, full of himself, wise wayfarer, hunter of animals and aphorisms. He proudly unrolls an old trophy: "We wave to show our hand is empty. An empty hand, full of longing."

"I think we can file that under casuistry."

"Spoken by a man who has his food grown for him." Kragh barks a laugh. "When you have to feed yourself, you soon realize Hello and Good-bye happen. Empty and Full. There are no choices except in dreams, and most people don't dream well enough to own even those choices."

Noel lowers his face into his palms. "I don't think I ever really understood you."

"Good." Kragh places hands hard and brown as bricks on Noel's shoulders. "Now we have someplace to go when you return."

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Sunset layered the west in snake-bands. Leon and Taima stood beneath the steel undercarriage of a colossal bridge. "I saw him right here." Adrenaline wafted through him, and he ran in place, full of chagrin. "I lost it! He tried talking. Told me his name. And I freaked. I just lit out."

"But you didn't totally freak." Taima sidled up behind and slipped her hands into the pockets of his black zipper jacket. "You got the jade thingee."

He pressed back against her. "Yeah."

"What was his name?"

"Joel ... no, wait. Noel." From out the pocket of his jeans, he drew the jade and rotated himself in Taima's embrace until he faced her, noses almost touching. "I'm thinking maybe with us here together with the thing, you know, where I first got it, like we might ... *sense* something."

The honey depths of her eyes evinced assent. She clasped her hands atop his, and the obol, two million years out of place, transformed twilight into a flaming sword. With the burning edge of day sheathing itself once more in darkness, a black thought shadowed both their minds simultaneously. An angel had decisively banished them and their world entire into a darkness of accident and crime before brusquely withdrawing to some brighter reality undisclosed, forbidden, leaving them alone together in gray obscurity growing darker.

They sprang apart, and the obol jingled on the cobbles.

“God, Leon!” Taima covered her mouth with both hands and gazed hard at him through a blur of hot tears. “God!”

“Buggin’!” Leon grinned with surly bravado and squatted over the obol yet did not touch it. “What happened?”

“You felt it, Leon.” She backed off. “I felt you feeling it.”

His shoulders rippled. “Yeah, I felt it. It felt like taking a breath on a really cold night. In some strange place far from home. And that unreal lonely feeling gets down all inside you like you don’t even have a home.”

“That’s damnation, Leon.” She kept backing off. “It felt like being damned.”

“*Damnation!*” He laughed half-heartedly. “Where’d you pick that up, Taima. Sunday school?”

She looked away at a river gray as pavement and a red stain lingering in the sky. “Tell me you never went to Sunday school.”

“My house, Sunday was just another day watching out for my drunk moms and her stoner boyfriends.” He picked up the obol, and the deformed loneliness in it was gone. Gone deep into his heart, something informed him, something that had found its own way far in and stood looking around at ground zero in the core of him, a core he had never even known was there. Through a remote voice, he heard himself speaking, “Cross her any day and Sunday, she don’t smack you, she sticks you with her cigarette at the back of the neck under the hair where the burn don’t show.”

Taima kept looking away as if ashamed. “Leave that thing there, Leon. Let’s go.” She extended a hand for him without turning. “Come on, baby. Let’s get out of here.”

Leon pocketed the jade piece and bounced upright. He took Taima’s hand, and they hurried off in the violet air. Strangeness accompanied them. Their footfalls resounded as in a cave. spurts of light, small and brief as match flares, swirled along the river-railing and dimmed to retinal shadows when looked at directly. And all the while, in their hearts, sadness folded like wind through a wheat field.

“You kept it.” She stopped short and faced him, outraged. “Leon.” She let his name hang a culpable moment, then took his elbow and towed him to the railing. “Throw it in the river.”

He shuffled uncomfortably.

“Throw it—or I walk.”

He jutted his lower lip, then shrugged and turned away. “So walk.”

* * * *

Night hoists Orion* into the sky. In that large, open field enclosed by ponderosa giants, the Many Worlds swirl as diaphanous rainbows, a tipped-over whirlpool. The moon is not yet up, and darkness makes visible the faint vortex of hypnotic spectra that is the zero portal. When shouts pounce from the night forest—“Go, Noel! Go now!”—Noel doesn’t bother looking over his shoulder for Ny’a. The design managers have forbidden her coming anywhere near the zero portal. He purposefully strides into the whorl of chromatic transparencies.

[Footnote *: Proper motion of the stars in the constellation Orion will, over two million years, snap the famous Belt and distort the familiar trapezoid of the Hunter’s torso to an anvil pattern. Far more dramatically, the massive red giant Betelgeuse will, long before, have vanished in a supernova, leaving behind the spectacular Blue Rose Nebula, by the time of our story a contusion of purple and maroon gas clouds perhaps more aptly named the Black Eye Nebula.]

So finely tuned are the portal calibrations from Noel’s preliminary crossing that he experiences no emotional displacement whatsoever. Tall trunks with boughs creaking like saddles vanish, and he doesn’t even blink when the city of night leaps forward. A convergence of car exhaust, sewer stench, pulsating garbage fumes and a din of traffic noise greeted him. He breathed it in, this anguished scent of wild and despoiled humanity, and he scanned the nocturnal street for his own face, ignoring the city’s misery, vagrantly sorrowing sirens Doppler shifting across town.

He spotted his doppel through the heavily lettered storefront window of a Cuban-Chinese restaurant. His original self sat across a small formica tabletop from a young, angular woman with hair like clipped raven feathers. They were arguing stiffly, unwilling to make a scene, though there was no one else in the restaurant to notice except the tired woman with tarnished skin at the take-out counter.

Underground thunder of a subway tolled as Noel sidestepped among hurrying pedestrians and shoved through the glass door of the restaurant. The doppel noticed him at once and stood up so abruptly his chair crashed backward.

The young woman in black twisted in her seat and gaped at Leon’s twin dressed in white and silver motley like a ghost harlequin.

Noel walked directly to his doppel and stood very close, eyes venomous,

staring hard into his own startled stare, and said down low, “Give me what you took.”

“What?” The doppel blinked as if not comprehending.

“It’s in your left pants pocket.” From the instant he pushed through the door, Noel felt the attenuated passage to Ny’a, a soulful swoon across two million years to where she waited, dying. “I will take it.”

The doppel swaggered back a step. “Damn—who *are* you?”

“Leon—” At the core of the woman’s amazed stare comprehension dimly swirled. “It’s his.”

“Shut up, Taima!” Leon slashed forward, blurred fist aimed at Noel’s nose. Noel turned from the waist and caught his assailant’s fist in a peculiar overhand grip that electrocuted the whole arm. A screech seared from Leon.

Noel, holding the tormented arm in a nerve-lock, reached into Leon’s left pants pocket and extricated the obol. Then he stepped on the fallen chair, levering it upright, and dropped his agonized doppel into it. In Noel’s palm, the jade squeezed radiance from the sponges in his bones. He smiled good-naturedly at the startled woman behind the takeout counter and pushed into the street.

“Wait up.” Taima scurried after him. “Slow down.”

Noel paused in the pedestrian flow. Garlanded in a backwash of body odor, diesel smoke, and the meaty pungency of garbage, he exulted to *be* here under hieroglyphic neon, and he turned a gentle countenance on the amazed young woman.

* * * *

Telefunken Remix

Brittle stars wrote a Braille of blind chance across the heavens. Vandals had stoned the park lamps, pulling the constellations closer to a darkness that ranged inviolate among trees stamped like thunderheads against the bright cityscape. “Hold up.” Taima clung to Leon, and they both stopped on the street corner before the pitch-black entry to the park. “Too wild in there at night.”

“It’s all right.” Noel’s pale raiment floated into blackness. “We need someplace private to talk. You said you wanted to talk. Right?”

“Yeah.” Leon danced in place, throwing nervous glances, looking for the maniacal baseheads and gang thugs that worked this street at night. “But we don’t wanna get rolled.”

“We won’t.” Noel lifted the obol, and the dark around it breathed with luck and a faint, amethyst aura. “My scent keeps hostiles at bay. Except for you, Leon. I guess because we’re genetically identical. Sorry I had to hurt you.”

“Your scent?” Leon flexed his fist, which still felt numbed. “You know you don’t make sense?”

“I know.” Noel cocked his head minutely. “Come on.”

They sat at a picnic table under clotted stars and murky whey of city lights, and Noel quietly began his story. “In December 1901, a German investment group, Telefunken SenderSysteme Berlin, paid for Guglielmo Marconi to set up a receiver station in Newfoundland. With that equipment, Marconi listened to three short clicks three times—a Morse code signal for S ... S ... S transmitted across the Atlantic without wires. It changed the world, because it proved radio transmissions could travel over the horizon. Not long afterward, a British physicist, Oliver Heaviside, postulated the existence of a layer of ionized air in the upper atmosphere that reflects radio signals—the Heaviside layer, now called the ionosphere.”

Even by star-glimmer, Noel saw them peering at him like he was a head case.

“That signal reached the nearest galaxy two million years later.” Noel let that compute. “An advanced communication system heard it and knew immediately that this planet had evolved an intelligent species. But by then humanity was long extinct.”

“Extinct?” Incomprehension knotted Leon’s stubby eyebrows. “We’re still here.”

“He’s from the future, Leon.” Taima’s expression went placid, sure and nearly prophetic as she fit together the fact of Leon’s twin with the jade coin that had so easily purchased all the memories of her soul. “Who are you? Why do you look like Leon?”

Noel wanted them to understand. In their world run amok, any explanation was better than none, even if they misconstrued it. So, he told them about the Contexture that had designed all the membrane universes, each brane a memory card in a cosmic computer contrived to process in hyperspace a program beyond human comprehension. He labored to explain how each brane unpacked its own circuitry out of fundamental forces and elements to produce microprocessing units: brains capable of complex metacognitive functions. To locate and properly nurture these brains among the branes, the Contexture “listened” for early signals from DNA—barcode pulses of biogenerated photons—but the “listening device” in the Milky Way had malfunctioned, and the Contexture didn’t—*wouldn’t*—learn about humans and cetaceans for over two million years, not until *S ... S ... S* arrived at Andromeda.

He had begun his account of Heavinside when something like a giant rainbow of cigarette smoke swirled open soundlessly alongside the picnic table. Leon and Taima leaped up shouting.

“What *is* that?” Leon scampered backward.

Taima knew, and she moved toward it, eyes stark, fingers vibrating.

“Taima—no!” Noel yelled and stumbled getting up from the picnic bench.

Leon lunged for her, spun her around by her arm and toppled backward. He flopped into the zero portal, face a silent yelp, and vanished with a sizzling pop gentle as a soda can snapping open.

* * * *

In the glassy air, nimbus clouds float like pieces of light. Leon rouses to silken quietude and a lavender fragrance of chaparral sage. Thoughts stand in him tranquil as blue flames: *Love is my kingdom, mystery the boundary mountains far away—and the longing to cross. But not yet, that secret joy....*

“It’s all right.” A scent sweet as sawdust and lonely as an empire of rain sits him up, and he faces a young woman whose Asian eyes, indolent and wise, shine with rapture in a sphinx face of animal magic, tawny, flat-nosed, her Nubian mouth carved for enigma. “Everything is all right now.”

“Who—”

“I am Ny’a, Noel’s templet.” She eases him to his feet, one strong hand under his arm, and stands back, a tall, athletic woman with black-blue hair loosely braided to her waist in saffron ribbons, tunic pleated indigo and pressed mauve against her concupiscent contours. Under a lucent vault of heaven, ponderosas toss sunlight and wind. “Welcome to Heavinside.”

The child in him weeps at the beauty. “How ... I don’t understand what....”

Ny’a’s look of tangible concern shushes him. “Your treemerge will explain everything. Give it a day or two.”

“My what?”

“Didn’t Noel tell you about the treemerges?” Confusion frills her words. “He said he’d start with that.” The creases across her brow rinse away as she figures out, “Something happened.”

Leon’s legs feel unstrung, and he sits down and gazes off into the sky itself, the well in his heart full of echoes. *He’s from the future, Leon.* “Taima....”

Ny’a squats in front of him, and the sky in her black eyes lights a shining path straight into his heart. “Tell me what happened.”

He hears himself entranced, as in a heroin bubble, recounting everything, every detail, like a child unsure what’s important. When he’s done, she stands and meanders off toward the great avenues of trees. He scrambles to scurry after. “You sending me back?”

“Can’t.” Ny’a shrugs. “Sierra Tree isn’t a travel agency.”

“Who’s Sierra Tree?”

“Phonetic alphabet.” Her words go soft, spiritless. “Letter S three times—the first radio signal. The Contexture is like that. It builds from what it’s given. That’s why Modern English in Saille. It’s different elsewhere.”

“The computer thing.” Leon puffs to keep up. “Noel says people are like in a computer.”

“When we sleep, we go online and process pieces of whatever program the Contexture is running in hyperspace.” She talks like a sleeper. “It’s the Bosom.”

“Bosom—you mean, like breasts?”

“Sleep is the place of purpose. All else is goalless.” She faces him with taxidermy eyes. “Fun.”

“This Contexture—Sierra Tree....” He hops a buttress root as they enter the treeline. “Can I talk with it?”

“You already are. Design managers hear and see everything in Saille.”

“I gotta go back!” He starts talking loudly to the trees. “Taima and me ... we’re tight. We got plans. I can’t leave her like this.”

“Noel will watch after her.”

“And what? You’re watching after me?”

“No. Your treemerge will take care of you.”

“What about you?”

She continues in her defeated voice, not stopping, not looking at him. “The treemerge—that’s home now. It will provide everything you want to know.”

“No, I mean, *you*.” He jumps ahead and turns to confront those eyes showing damage. “I don’t wanna learn from a tree. I wanna learn from you.”

“I’m sorry, Leon.” She shakes her head no, moves on. “There’s been a mistake. I can’t be with you.”

“A mistake? In this place?” His tone sneers, like a throw-down challenge. “What kind of hamsters are these design managers?”

Ny’a just keeps walking.

* * * *

Night hoisted Orion into the sky. Noel marveled at its fidelity to the image his treemerge had implanted. Two million years of stardrift, a glyph in the dark....

“You listening to me?” Taima glared, livid. “Leon is gone!”

“This is Errth. It’s a world of accidents.” Noel lowered an inconsolable twinkle, eyes brimming. “I thought I thought of everything.” He regarded the obol, and it looked really small.

“Oh, God!” Taima grabbed his arm. “Come on!”

Noel followed her alarmed gaze. A mongrel gang loomed out of the night, eight wild boys with twisted hair or bald, half naked or clad in remnant leather. They came on with headlong intent, leaning into their stride. He met their burnt, mad dog stares blandly, and they staggered to a stop, stumbling into one another. As if death’s racehorse had abruptly reared out of the night behind Noel, they scattered, veering swiftly into the dark.

Taima watched after them with a jangled stare. “What just happened?”

“They got a whiff of me.” He returned his attention to the obol. “It’s something I ate.”

Weighted with shock and lunacy, she lowered herself onto a picnic bench. The night flowed in.

Noel heaved a haggard sigh, stood and thumbed the obol into his pocket. “Leon is going to be all right.”

“No, he’s not.” Taima twisted at the shoulders to show him a face congested with emphatic sorrow and bitterness. “He’s not with me.”

He sat down again. “You’re right.” And added in a plummeting whisper, “I’m sorry.”

Taima rocked softly. Noel lifted his gaze to the stars, sullen and mute, and thought of Kragh and his barking laugh. *Errth is no place for emotional fools*. Errth belonged to El—and if El had any design at all on Errth it had to be teaching people to live profoundly free, independent of all designs—including El. *No El*.

“So, what’s it like for Leon?” She didn’t look at him and sat slack, bottomed out. “Will he be happy where you come from?”

He smiled up at Orion. “Oh, yes.” Inhaling a deep lungful of Errth’s industrial night, he added, “Heavinside is about fulfillment—right to the final secret joy.”

“Yeah?” She slid him a skeptical squint. “So why did you get out?”

“Compassion. I thought I could help. No one disagreed.” He shrunk around a wounded silence, then added, “Except for Ny’a.”

“Your woman?”

“And more.” Another hypnotic moment closed on him. “Something beyond gender.”

“Soulmate.”

“Something like that.”

“That was Leon and me. We had plans. Bigger than what beat us down.” Her lips began moving without sound, finally whispered, “Ny’a will take care of him?”

“No.” That syllable opened an abyss he wasn’t ready to peer into, and he touched the obol through the fabric of his pocket. “He won’t need Ny’a. Heavinside has a place for him. I’m his clone ... his twin—”

“I know what a clone is. Like that sheep that was its own mother.” She studied him openly. In the dark, a tendon seemed to flex between her eyes, reason and madness wrestling in her. “You look just like Leon. It’s spooky. Is there a clone of me in heaven’s side, too?”

“Maybe. There are a lot of clones.” He met her appraising eyes, let her brave his ill-begotten mirror-likeness of her love and speculated when the misery of her loss would truly kick in. “I am sorry about Leon. I...”

Vaporous rainbows spun under the trees, and Taima leaped up. “Leon!” Before Noel could stop her, she rushed at that whorl of prismatic gas and collided with a tall, imposing woman who grabbed her arms, twirled and tossed Taima into the zero portal.

* * * *

Cirrus clouds weave the blue sky like spider’s silk. In a Matisse landscape of gorse slopes and jutting boulders, giant, bristle-bough trees parry the wind. Taima and Leon descend from that timberland holding hands, wading through alpine flowers. “It’s not heaven’s *side*, baby.” Leon speaks in a jacked up rush of shared joy. “It’s Heavinside, *heaven* and *inside* mashed together. It’s like Noel said, the Contexture named stuff here to honor our first radio signal, our shout out to the cosmos. Heavinside was one of the scientists who figured out radio, so this world’s name plays off that. *And* it’s a clue to what’s really going down here, on the inside. You’ll see for yourself when you catch some Zs later. That forest back there? That’s Morse Woods after Samuel Morse who invented the telegraph. And Sierra Tree—the Morse signal Marconi received? That’s the design managers’ tag. The managers keep things running smooth in Heavinside, but they’re not really human. They’re like pieces of dreams. You’ll see.”

“Whoa, baby.” Taima hugs him. “Slow down.” His solidity assures her *she* isn’t dreaming. The air furls with seed confetti and dandelion parasols. “I’m happy to see you, too. I thought I’d lost you.”

He nibbles her earlobe then smiles deeper than she’s ever seen him smile.

“Sierra Tree stepped up when I pointed out it was their sorry asses messed up. They are not down with messes.”

She touches him with a mischievous grin. “Then how are we supposed to fit in?”

“We’re not screw-ups no more, Taima. That’s all in the past—like two million years past. Look around!” Sunlight marches cloud shadows over rhododendron fields and evergreen vales. Cascades weave rainbows and thread rivulets and brooks across pastures of purple asters and through dwarf pine parkland. Crimson and yellow gliders turn and turn in the deep blue on updrafts from the canyons, and silver dhows with solar sails glide upstream. “It’s all hang time here, baby. No work. No sickness. No getting old.”

“And babies?”

Leon turtles his head back in mock dismay. “You still on about that?”

“Well?”

“We got to get you a meal.” He steers her with an arm about her shoulders, continuing their pathless descent toward green gorges and ribbon waterfalls. “True story. Been here three days. Learned everything from the food.”

Eyebrows go high. “The food?”

“Yeah! Look—see those trees?” He pauses and chin-points to remote hilltops crowned with solitary baobabs and banyans, stupendous arbors of stout girth. “They’re treemerges, like from jamming *tree* and *emerge*, because everything we need emerges from them. One of those treemerges is ours. It was Noel’s, but it’s designed just for me, because he was my clone. Clones are anamnestic, which means something that’s remembered. He was a memory of me, so this treemerge is mine. And it’s yours now, too. You know that keychain you made for me with your hair? I gave it to the treemerge. Now it’s wise to everything about you. The vitamins you need. The food you like. What makes you laugh. Everything.”

She watches gusts of emerald finches careen through the limpid air. “Sounds scary.”

“Not as scary as the street. There *is* no street here. The whole world’s a tree park. It’s designed for the satisfaction of simians.” He slaps his chest ape-like. “That’s what we are. You know that?”

“What if we want to get around, go someplace else?” A dragonfly zips past, bound for sparkling streams and paradisaal fords. “I always wanted to see Paris.”

“There is no Paris.” They walk together, rubbing ribs. “But in a world without heartbreak, who needs Paris?”

* * * *

Unparalleled Universe

In the glassy air, nimbus clouds floated like pieces of light. “I’m cold.” Ny’a pressed tighter against Noel. Their first night on Errth, sharing a park bench, they hadn’t talked much, already understanding each other. The future was their past. They had eaten of the Tree—he to protect and provide for himself in place of his doppel, she to know the Errth taking him from her. What lay ahead, they carried in memory, every bend and swerve of this tragic worldline that fettered events to the history of their future. They knew what shame hid behind the hands that covered the clock’s cryptic face. No understanding, no intelligence could unclasp those hands. Only deeds, mortal acts, might force them open. Then, the worldline would unfurl to a worldsheet, a tapestry of many possible histories.

Those for whom the future is a memory can’t speak of mortal acts intended to deny what cannot not be. The design managers had warned them. Words are actions, neural activity whose light cones not only illuminate the worldsheet but also expand into the worldvolume entangling other worldsheets, strange ones that often befoul spoken intent. So, they had cuddled together silently on the park bench until daylight.

Steel and glass monoliths of the city, in the dark some kind of radiant code, now appeared for what they really were, solid geometry, congruent as a honeycomb. “And I’m hungry.”

Noel eased her off his shoulder and dug into his pocket. “You have your obol.”

She blinked lazily at the polished jade hoarding sunlight between Noel’s fingers. “I can use it here?”

“Why not?”

As soon as she took it, its resonance cavities, tuned precisely to the quantum antennae of her DNA, replenished her cells with energy drawn from the vacuum current of spacetime. Her chest rose with a gratified inhalation, and those bituminous eyes brightened to wistful clairvoyance. “What about you?”

“I came here for the mortal dangers.” He nudged her with his elbow. “But I didn’t expect I’d have to share them.”

She fixed on him without humor. “You must be hungry.”

“I am.”

“How will you eat?”

He could tell she already knew. This was the turning point. That was why he had waited till morning to return her obol. He knew that the instant her strength returned she would want action. She had forsaken Heavinside for him. Now, in every direction, danger beckoned. They would live as wolves or not live at all. She needed

him, Mister Compassion, to say it aloud. “I will take from the strongman.”

“I’ll help you.”

“Never doubted.”

They got up and prowled the park. Turtles approached, mistaking him for Leon, and he swept them aside, scanning for dopeslingers. The treemerge had fed them stories and strategies for this epoch, yet they knew almost nothing about Leon—only what he had confided to Noel outside the Cuban-Chinese restaurant. If Taima had not come after him ... if he had returned directly to Heavinside with the obol and not lingered to explain....

“Talk to me,” Taima had insisted. In neon shadows, her fevered scowl had slewed toward tears. “We didn’t ask for any of this. You found us. And that jade you dropped on Leon screwed with us. Then you show up to take it back and you hurt him. You can’t just walk away now.”

“Noel, you’re phasing.” Ny’a slipped her arm around his waist. “You were right to come here. We are right to stay and make our own way on Errth.”

Noel nodded. His attention shimmered with memories Leon had shared about his felonious life in the park. Among the ginkgo trees ahead, in a leopard spray of shadows, a figure stood out from morning joggers, dog walkers and turtles—one of Leon’s rivals, a gaunt player with a chewed face, pocked and pitted. Noel went straight for him. Head shoved forward, eyes squarely leveled, body language proved sufficient to provoke the strongman. Gnawed face snarling, he came forward, and in three strides went down on his knees and wept.

* * * *

The rising red moon impersonated a vast furnace. Lunar silhouettes, Noel and Ny’a stood at the crest of an access path through a landfill. Night above, sugared with stars, flicked needles of green light, and the cool air stank of decay. Below, a limousine waited in a marshaling yard, high beams illuminating a cane road to the highway.

The most powerful crime boss of the northeast, a strongman with government connections, occupied the limo, observing the scene on a laptop monitor from a tiny roof camera. He centered on the young couple in their strange apparel.

At his command, a sniper took down the woman. Skull shards flew like sod from a divot.

He didn’t dare kill the man yet. This Leon, a low-level cashier, had terrorized all the managers of the city franchise. *How?* Threats had reached the regional protector, the crime boss’s boss, who wanted this straightened out pronto—or else the crime boss would lose protection and become another victory in the drug war.

“Bring him in.”

The command fell into dead air.

He switched to the sniper's visor cam, and the slain woman's face appeared, skew-eyed, rayed with blood. Ghastly green night vision jarred, then locked on a young man, the target, searching into the camera aggrieved. The sniper appeared to be kneeling before him, shuddering.

One look from the boss unleashed his personal guards. Two suits, machine pistols drawn, exited the limousine.

A wrathful figure in white bodysuit laced and strapped like an asylum inmate descended the dumpster road, loping straight into the headlights, long hair lashing.

"Shoot!" The boss's cry rang tinny and flat in the guards' earpieces. Extremities numb, the two men staggered backward, trigger fingers frozen. "Shoot him!"

Noel charged, grimacing, and the guards dropped before him, curling into fetal distress. Plucking a radio from one of the guard's jackets, he sauntered to the boss's tinted window. Rage slid off Noel's pallid face, leaving an equable, intent stare. "Open the door."

"What do you want?"

"Same as the others."

The boss stiffened. Each of his underlings had divested all financial holdings to the last dollar, including personal homes and vehicles, and *donated* the funds to charities. Product got hosed on the spot, flushed down drains. And men who had been cutthroat managers cowered in spiderholes, returning none of his calls.

"Who are you?" The boss thumbed into his cell phone the number of an ally. "What have you done to my men?"

"My name is Noel, and I've taken Leon's place. I'm from two million years in your future. An accident stranded me here with Ny'a—the woman you shot back there."

"Are you laughing at me?"

Noel tapped the radio against his dark reflection. "Just open the door."

The boss repeated calmly, "My men? What happened?"

"For my own protection, my body is designed to excrete a compound that imprints hostile brains with the most extreme fear and submissiveness toward me. Works instantly, first whiff. Lasts a lifetime." Noel rapped the window. "Open the door."

"No."

“You have to. You’re next in the strongman hierarchy. Neutralize sufficient number of alpha males in nodal positions, men such as yourself, and world history changes—our history.” He knocked again. “So, come on, open up. It’s for the children.”

“Beat it. This car is bulletproof. You’re not getting in, no matter how crazy you are. My friends will be here soon.”

“My friend’s already here.”

Ny’a ambled into the headbeams, tunic ruffling like water, hair coils of snakes, face blood-welded.

“You thought she was dead?” Noel asked this in a stony whisper. “She’s not even born.”

Ny’a stepped to the window, and the jade she clicked against the glass filled the interior with ghost light, a shimmer like the start of a migraine. And the door clacked open.

* * * *

Cirrus clouds wove the blue sky like spider’s silk. In his solarium office atop a corporate tower of red stone adobe, the latest strongman crossed ostrich-skin boots on a desktop of petrified wood and listened impassively to Noel’s story. Unlike the half dozen security officers Noel had left cringing under desks and sobbing in stairwells, this strongman remained unperturbed.

Finely weathered as a veteran astronaut, the bald, rangy man leaned back, far enough for a shave. “The Contexture sounds to be a demiurge.” He watched from behind tinted lenses that made his stare look like smoke. “You all know that word in Heavinside? *Demiurge*?”

“Deity of an order less than omnipotent,” Ny’a replied with undisguised disdain for this self-possessed creature, this human accident. In claret red pant suit with flowing, Byzantine lines and tinsel-hem, she walked the perimeter of the solarium, alert for weapons. Even though Sierra Tree had cautioned that Aberrants existed, the appearance of one arrived like a beat of the world’s heart, a throb of mystery, the only encounter between Noel and a dominant male that fell to pieces just like a dream. At any moment, the strongman could serenely pull a pearl-handled Colt from a drawer, explode Noel’s brains out the back of his skull, and justifiably plead self-defense. “The Contexture is not divine. Only of a higher geometry. Spacetime is a shadow of Context.”

“Whatever you say.” The strongman held up both hands and framed a stare of smoke. “I ain’t pretending to understand. But I believe. Every word. How else interpret you sitting here—and my security detail sniveling out there?” He basked in cloudshine reflections from off a sheet-glass panorama of desert buttes. Behind him, refinery stacks gasped blue flames above tableland banded in ice cream colors.

“Okay. You all traveled two million years to visit me. A demiurge allowed it. As an act of compassion. Huh!” He pulled down the corners of his mouth and aimed a cloud stare at Noel, who sank deeper into his steer-hide seat, deeper into his thunderstorm-blue suit tailored from fabulously soft guanaco. “A demiurge with a heart. And you say you’re not religious?”

Noel sat forward in his seat, not sure what to say now that his history of the future had reeled out uselessly. They had a problem. What to do about a strongman with a short circuit in the limbic brain, a congenital defect, a twisted twist of DNA that overfilled him with id and cunning unhampered by anger, fear—or conscience? “There are religious communities—” Noel began.

The strongman cut him off, “—in Heavinside. It’s *all* there. I understand that. But you two. You’re not religious?”

Ny’a stared bleakly from across the solarium. “Not the way you mean.”

“What do I mean?”

“You mean to keep what you have.” She sauntered closer. “We mean to take it away.”

The strongman frowned at Noel. “She’s not really human, is she?”

Noel blew a silent laugh and waved away that silly question. “Not even primate.”

“I am Context, a three-space representation in timephase of Noel’s inamorata.” She tossed her head back and leveled a smoldering look at the Aberrant. “*Inamorata*. You know that word?”

“Sounds sexy.” The strongman pushed away from his desk as she leaned in. “When anger doesn’t work, you turn on the heat? Is that it?”

“You *are* different from other men.” She slinked across the polished desktop, advancing comically, voluptuously. “You have no thought for aftermath.”

“Could put it that way.” He rose to his feet, and she rolled off the desk and softly collided with him. He put a hand to her throat and took a grip on her pulsing fragility. “And you’re nothing but aftermath.”

Ny’a pressed herself sensuously against the strongman, forcing him back against the sheet glass with grotesque strength. “Casuistry,” she hissed through a grimaced smile, unambiguous darkness deepening in her eyes.

She tapped her jade coin against the pane as he punctured her larynx. The pulse of vacuum current coursing into her damaged body from the obol palmed against the glass blinked the electrostatic bonds of atomic silicon, and the window’s surface tension burst outward.

The strongman toppled backward in a swarm of glass pebbles shaped like clear cashews, each with a tiny sun wobbling in it. And he fell the entire way down without blinking, staring hard into the infinite blue.

* * * *

... ..

Ny'a ran her fingers over the surface of her obol, feeling the imprint of Sierra Tree, last tether to Heavinside. She stood with Noel at the stoop of hell, upon a shelf of cooling obsidian above a night of incandescent lava. Rivers of fire blazed down the south flank of Mauna Loa into magma pools, and infernal fumes swept scarlet shadows through mansions of darkness.

“Compassion compels us.” She didn't have to say anything else. The future they knew was lost, hidden behind massive waves of change they had set in motion here on Errth, two million years in their past. The obol, still connected to Heavinside, snagged unrelated worldlines off the worldsheet that they had rumped, and far apart times and places touched each other. Ordovician seaweeds clogged Niagara. Club moss forests splotched the Sahara. Before a herd of sauropods trampled Champs Elyses, they had to cut the snag.

She tossed the obol overhand and it flicked like a green needle in the red night. When it plopped into 1200 Celsius molten rock, its jade casing vaporized—a spurt of light, small and brief as a match flare. The obol departed Errth twisting like smoke, and the vacuum current powering Ny'a's three-space representation in timephase sheared away.

She collapsed into his arms, and majestic thunder marched in from a dark horizon.

He knelt, cradling her head in his hands, and met the blackness of her staring eyes. Crimson vapors ghosting across starry reaches swept her soul afield.

She cants out of her body, and she is in Heavinside again. Saille sinks in evening's violet haze, blue trees and black ponds under luminous cloudstreams and straits of stars. A secret, final joy vouchsafed her since forever waits within that beauty. All she needs do is go down there, into willow coves and reefs of lavender mist.

The Contexture is there, as darkness itself. From those sockets of black light among the trees, a Presence beckons.

“Compassion flows from broken veins.” The voice could be her own, except for its royal timbre. “Without your obol, death finds you everywhere. Except here.”

Here is where the Contexture built her out of the records and ruins of Errth. From among those records, Plato speaks, *We believe, do we not, that death is the separation of the soul from the body ... and the soul exists alone by itself.*

That is why she is standing here in Saille again, a ghost under the gray trees. The Contexture designed her as a body and a soul, as Plato and his kindred Indo-European sapiens would have expected.

“I cannot stay,” she speaks to the indigo darkness and hears her words fall away into silence, into a subsidence of cosmic emptiness. “I belong on Errth with Noel.”

“You? Or Noel’s templet?” The imperial voice retreats into leaves breathing in the dark, and she tilts her face to the breathing stars and listens. “Without your obol, your purpose as a templet reaches this happy closure. Here in Heavinside. Leave Noel—and come to your secret joy.”

Design or desire, she can’t tell them apart in herself. And she doesn’t care. “I belong on Errth now. With Noel.”

“That is your Sibyl’s jar. You are set free of that custody forever.” The voice is so faint, merely her mind’s punctuation puncturing silence. “Without your obol, you must eat for yourself, heal yourself. Even then, death arrives. Stay.”

“I will live as a pouch of hungry ghosts.” She loses the frail grip of her voice in the congealing dark. Instantly, she returns to where Noel laid her down with her backpack under her head. He knelt over her, blowing resuscitating breaths, strenuously working the basket that held the meat of her heart. Yards away, mephitic fumes flew past in air full of noise.

A sulfurous stink nailed her sinuses and hammered her awake. She sat up gasping. Joy pierced her keen as the caustic air, and she climbed upright with Noel, who cried and laughed, the demented happiness in his face smeared by scarlet heat.

They limped away from the lava flow, leaning on each other, staggering toward a dawn that lay in the east like a cold gray stone. The Contexture observes them from 5-space, where time is pure as a snowflake. Fractal pathways crystallize across the cracked landscape. Some lead into a billowing dawn and toward methane and sulfur dioxide that vent invisibly from crusty fissures and unravel into the atmosphere. A shift in the wind wafts death over them in the Many Worlds, and their bodies lie hugged together among desolate rocks.

That razor line through the black, melted landscape is a highway, and their rental car waits there. Ghosts of mist and steam cross the road slashed by horizontal rays of sunlight. The Contexture peers into the glare, searching for other haphazard pathways over the rugged terrain, less direct, less probable courses Noel and Ny’a might have followed back to their vehicle. And there they are, on the sunrise plain in an unparalleled universe, invisible gas scrolling away from them. They hobble happy and frightened across volcanic flats.

The cinder surface of a magma lake fractures, steaming softly underfoot. Shattered plates buckle beneath their weight. Clutching each other, they move

forward on this demonic pavement, terrified yet sharing encouraging looks.

The Contexture observes them and their burden of emotion, and sees how, for all their heartfelt hope, uncertainty slows them down, endangers them. They are more mortal for not knowing. And more beautiful. It learned this from us.