

## A Choice of Eternities

By Eric Brown

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*Eric Brown has two novels out this year: Bengal Station in the US and, in Britain, New York Dreams, the third book in the Virex trilogy. 'A Choice of Eternities' is the latest in a series of stories that is less about the science and technology of alien contact and more about the effect that the aliens and their gift of immortality have on everyday life in a near future West Yorkshire, where he lives. Eric is married to the writer and mediaevalist Finn Sinclair, and the couple are expecting their first child in September.*

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I was in the fleece on Tuesday night when Richard Lincoln but-tonholed me about old Mrs Emmett. I'd arrived at seven and ordered a braised pork chop with roast potatoes and a pint of Taylor's Landlord.

Samantha was serving behind the bar. "You're early, Khalid."

"Hard day at the mill," I quipped. "I need to wind down."

"Well, the Landlord's on form tonight, according to Old Wilf. I'll just go put your order in."

She disappeared into the kitchen and I took a long draft of ale. Old Wilf was right—it was like nectar.

I'd had a tiring day at the hospital. Usually the implantation process went like a dream but that afternoon, just as I was about to start the last implanta-tion, the patient decided that he'd had second thoughts. He wanted a little time to consider what he was doing. It had been after six before I'd been able to get away.

I was the first of the Tuesday night crowd to arrive, but the others were not far behind. Ben and Elisabeth came in first, looking frozen stiff after the long walk through the snow; then the ferrymen Richard Lincoln and Dan Chester blew in, talking shop as usual. Next came the latest recruit to Tuesday night, Doug Standish, the police Inspector from Bradley. Last of all came Samantha's husband, Stuart Kingsley, and Samantha finished her shift at the bar and joined us.

I thought of Zara, and the many happy Tuesday nights we'd spent at the Fleece with our friends, before my wife walked out on me and I killed myself, over a year ago now.

I'd never thought I would get over losing Zara, but I'd learned a lot about myself, and human relations, on the homeplanet of the Kéthani.

I was on my third pint when Richard Lincoln returned from the bar with a round and sat down beside me.

Richard was a big, bluff, grey-haired man in his fifties. He wore old-fashioned tweeds and liked his beer, but far from being the conservative country-type he so much resembled, I found him liberal and open-minded. He lived next door to me along the street from the Fleece, and I considered him my best friend. Certainly he was the only person I'd told about what had really happened last year.

"Cheers, Khalid," Richard said, dispatching a good quarter of his pint in one swallow. "I wanted to talk to you about something. Another reluctant customer."

A year ago, on my return from Kéthan, I'd told Richard about the events surrounding my suicide, and had gone on to say that I'd decided to stay on Earth and spread the good word about the implantation process. From time to time he put me on to people he came across in his line of work who were reluctant, for various reasons, to undergo the implantation.

"Old Mrs Emmett, up at High Fold Farm beyond Hawley," Richard said. "She has a son, Davey. He's mentally handicapped."

"And he isn't implanted, right?"

"That's the thing. Mrs Emmett isn't implanted, either. She's no fool, Khalid. No addled hermit living on the moors. She might be in her eighties, but she's all there. A retired university lecturer. She isn't implanted on religious grounds."

“Always the hardest to convert,” I said.

“The thing is, Davey is dying. Leukaemia. He was diagnosed a couple of months ago. I sent a counsellor from Onward Station to talk to Mrs Emmett last week, but she was having none of it.”

“And you think I might be able to talk her round?”

“Well, she does think highly of you,” Richard said.

I looked at him, surprised. “She does?”

“You were her GP twelve years ago, apparently. She remembers you. I saw her in town last week and happened to mention your name. Actually, I asked her if you could come and talk to her about the Kéthani.”

I smiled at his presumption. “And she agreed?”

“When she heard your name, she relented. I was wondering, if you didn’t have a lot on...”

“Why not? You never know ...” I thought hard, but couldn’t put a face to the name. It had been twelve years ago, after all, and the workload of your average country doctor even back then had militated against the recollection of every patient.

Last orders were called and the final round bought, and it was well after midnight before the meeting broke up for another week.

When I said goodbye to Richard outside my front door, I told him I’d visit Mrs Emmett at the weekend.

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High Fold was no longer a working farm. Like many once-thriving sheep farms in the area, it had suffered with the rest of the industry in the economic recession of 2008. Its owners had sold up and moved away, and Mrs Emmett had bought the farm, had it converted at great expense, and now lived there in retirement with her son.

The snow was so bad on the Saturday morning that I had to leave the car on the main road above the farm. I struggled down the snow-filled track, towards the sprawling stone-built house on the hillside overlooking Oxenworth. By the time I reached the front door I knew I would never be cut out to be an Arctic explorer.

Mrs Emmett answered my summons promptly, took one look at my bedraggled figure, and smiled. It was only then that I recalled the woman I had treated as a patient all those years ago.

The smile. Some people smile with just their mouths, others with their entire faces. Mrs Emmett's smile encompassed the whole of her face and emanated genuine warmth. I recalled the experience of feeling like a favourite nephew as she welcomed me.

"Dr Azzam!" she said. "Khalid, it's lovely to see you. Come in. It's terrible out there."

I stepped into a spacious hall, removed my coat and stamped the snow from my boots on the mat, then followed her into a lounge where a wood-burning stove belted out a fierce, furnace heat.

"I seem to remember you prefer coffee. I'll just go and put it on. You know Davey of course."

She left the room, and I sketched a smile and a wave at the man seated at a small table beside the stove.

He looked up briefly, but didn't respond. He was absorbed in a world of his own. Davey Emmett was nearing fifty now, a chubby, childlike man, in both appearance and manner. I had never treated Davey—his affairs were looked after by a doctor at Bradley General—so I had no idea of his medical history, whether his condition was congenital or the result of some childhood illness.

He rarely spoke, as I recalled, and had a mental age of a young child. He was obsessed with collecting stamps—he was poring over a thick album now. I remembered looking at his albums years ago when called out to treat his mother. He collected stamps not by country or subjects depicted, as is common with philatelists, but by size and shape and colour.

Now he lowered his head short-sightedly over the page, a big Tweedledee absorbed in the polychromatic pattern of stamps before him.

As I watched him, I wondered if Davey was aware of his life-threatening illness.

Mrs Emmett returned bearing a tray. For a woman in her mid-eighties, she was remarkably upright and spry—and mentally sharp, as I found out.

She sat down and poured two coffees, then gave me a penetrating sidewise glance. “It must be very hard for people wholly convinced of the benefits the Kéthani have bestowed,” she said, “to comprehend the stance taken by the few dissenters amongst us.” She spoke eloquently, in a soft voice free of accent or dialect.

I found myself fingering the implant at my temple. “Well, we do live in an increasingly secular age,” I began.

“The two sides cannot be reconciled,” she went on. “We with faith are wholly convinced of the truth of our views, while those that hold with the Kéthani pity us for our ignorance, for our choice of passing up the opportunity of certain immortality.” She paused and smiled. “Those with scientific certainty fail to understand the certainty of those with true faith...”

I smiled. “You’re telling me, politely, to mind my own business.”

She laughed, the sound like a cut-glass chime. “Of course not, Khalid. I’m merely stating my position. I’d be genuinely interested in hearing your argument.”

I took a sip of the excellent coffee. “Well, it’s an argument based not so much on faith or theory,” I said, “as on my own experience.”

She inclined her head. “I understand that you now work on the implant ward at Bradley.”

“I do, but that isn’t the experience I was referring to. You see ...” I paused, choosing my words carefully. “Last year, Mrs Emmett, I died.” I elected to leave out the messy personal details of my death. “I was resurrected on the homeplanet of the Kéthani and...instructed, I suppose is the best way to put it. I’ve only a vague recollection of what happened in the Kéthani domes—apparently that’s a common

experience among resurrectees. But I have nebulous memories, images. What I do retain is the sensation of rebirth, the wonder of renewed life and the sense of Rightness that accompanied my resurrection. I knew so much more. I became—and this is ironic, as it's the result of an alien process—more human. I was convinced of the Rightness of what I had undergone, and the genuine sense of destiny I was to undergo. I knew I had to return to Earth and spread the word of the implantation process—”

Mrs Emmett interrupted, “If you don't mind my saying, Khalid, what you have said so far sounds not so much a matter of reason, but of faith.”

I smiled. “I suppose it does.” I paused, marshalling my thoughts. “But the Kéthani no longer believe in a continuation of the spirit...the afterlife, if you like. They know that the foundation of the universe is purely materialistic, and that their process of resurrection after death is the only true hope of continued existence.”

“Or that,” she stated, again with that sweet smile, “is what they told you.”

“Not so much told,” I countered, “as showed. I find it hard to explain, but at the end of the process, I *knew* they were right.”

“Just as, at the culmination of my years of instruction with my Rimpoche,” Mrs Emmett said, “I *knew* that the way of Buddha was, for me, the true and right path.” Her bright blue eyes twinkled at me. “Faith, Khalid.”

I had to smile. “Touché,” I said.

“But...” she began.

I looked up at her. “But?” I echoed, encouraged.

“But, Khalid, I presume you didn't come here to try to save my life.” She was ahead of me, and knew it, and I couldn't help but admire her intelligence.

I looked across at Davey, who was thoroughly absorbed in his stamp collection. “Richard told me that Davey is ill,” I began, uncomfortable about discussing the man in his presence.

“And you think I should have Davey implanted for his own good?”

I nodded and looked her in the eye. “Irrespective of your own beliefs,” I said, “I think you should give Davey the chance to decide for himself whether he would like the opportunity of virtual immortality.”

She looked at me sharply. “The opportunity?” she said. “But if I agree now to have him implanted, how would that be giving Davey the chance to decide for himself?”

I smiled. I could see the way ahead, the chance to save Davey from the imposition of his mother’s trenchantly held beliefs. Was that arrogant of me, small-minded?

I went on, “You see, if Davey is implanted, then when he dies and is taken to Kéthan he will be resurrected not as he is now, but with certain...how should I put it?...*changes*. He will still be Davey, still intrinsically himself, but his intelligence and understanding will be boosted. The Kéthan will implant new memories based on those he has now. He will be the Davey who you would have had if not for...”

I stopped, for I saw a flicker of pain in her expression. She said, “That might be a difficult fact to face, Khalid. To have Davey as I might have had him for all these years.”

“But,” I persisted, “wouldn’t it be better for him to be cured, to live a full and extended life?”

“That is to assume that what he experiences now is not full and rewarding, Khalid. All experience is relative and valid, as Buddha teaches us.”

“Then perhaps it would be a valid experience to allow Davey the opportunity of resurrection,” I countered.

She looked at me, assessing. “But, Khalid, forgive me—you haven’t answered my question. You said that I should give Davey the opportunity to make his own choice. But if I did agree to have him implanted, then I would be making the choice for him.”

I moved forward, sat on the edge of the chair in my desire to win the argument. “But you see, when Davey returns from Kéthan, resurrected, he would still be implanted. Returnees aren’t suddenly rendered

immortal. They still have the implant which will keep them alive should they ‘die’ again, before they are taken to Kéthan for a second, or third or fourth, resurrec-tion.”

“And ...” Mrs Emmett began, a dawning light in her eyes.

I nodded. “That’s right, when Davey returns from Kéthan, he will be implanted—and if he so wishes he can have the implant removed. If he shares your faith, then he can make a choice based on a full understanding of all the factors involved.”

I stopped there, almost breathless, and watched Mrs Emmett closely to see how she had taken my argument.

She was staring at her empty coffee cup, frowning slightly. At last she looked up and nodded. “You present a very interesting scenario, Khalid,” She said at last. “It is certainly something I need to think about.”

I nodded and finished my coffee. I should have realised that nothing I could have said would have made her change her mind there and then.

I wondered if, when I left, she would rationalise the discussion and allow her faith to maintain the status quo.

As she showed me to the door a little later, she touched my arm and said, “Buddha taught that there is no objective truth, Khalid. Each of us car-ries within us a subjective truth, if only we can find it.”

I smiled.

“Perhaps Davey,” she said, “should be given the opportunity to discover his own truth.”

I made the long trek back to the car and drove home, happy with the morning’s work.

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I had quite forgotten about Mrs Emmett and Davey when, three days later, my secretary received a call. She put her head around the door. "There's a Mrs Emmett on the line," she said. "She won't be put off. Shall I tell her you're busy?"

"Emmett? No, put her through."

I picked up the phone. "Mrs Emmett?" I fully expected her to tell me that she had had second thoughts, and that our little talk had done nothing to change her mind. "How can I help?"

She came straight to the point. "Khalid, I've been giving due consideration to our little talk the other day, and under the circumstances I think it might be in Davey's best possible inter-ests if he were implanted."

I refrained from punching the air in triumph, but I could feel myself grinning idiotically. "That's good news, Mrs Emmett."

"Davey's at home with me at the moment," she said. "But he's taken a turn for the worse and he's due to be admitted into Bradley tomorrow."

"I'll arrange for him to come straight to the implant ward," I told her.

She hesitated. "Would I... That is, could I be present when Davey is implanted?"

"By all means. I'll arrange every-thing and see you tomorrow."

"Thank you very much for your help, Khalid."

I smiled and cut the connection.

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The following afternoon I ushered Mrs Emmett and Davey into my surgery and explained the implantation procedure. Davey sat clutching a stamp album, oblivious that we were dis-cussing his future.

Mrs Emmett was surprised that the operation would be over so quickly. "I thought it would be performed under general anaesthetic," she said.

I smiled. "No, local. It takes about ten minutes. I simply make an incision in the skin of the temple and insert the implant. I seal the wound, and the implant does the rest. It releases nano-machines into the subject's body, which monitor the metabolism. When the subject 'dies', the implant takes over and revives the system. The body is then taken to the Onward Station and beamed to an orbiting Kéthani star-ship. Six months later the subject is returned to Earth, renewed."

Mrs Emmett was shaking her head. "And then, when Davey is returned, he can make his decision as to whether or not he wishes to retain the implant?"

I nodded. "That's right. Now, if you'd care to step this way."

Davey proved to be a docile patient. A nurse administered a sedative and a local anaesthetic, and while Davey lay on the couch with his head turned to the left, I made the slit in his right temple, eased the implant home, and sealed the wound.

Mrs Emmett perched on a stool, watching intently.

I looked up and smiled. "There, done."

"Quite amazing, Khalid."

While Davey was drinking a cup of sugary tea, Mrs Emmett confided her concerns to me. "It will be a very strange experience, Khalid, when Davey returns, to see him as he might have been if not for..." She smiled, sadly. "You see, so much of my life has been taken up with his welfare. I retired early in order to keep him with me. I could have sent him to a care home, but after my husband died... well, Davey was all I had."

She fell silent, her gaze distant, perhaps considering how her life might have worked out had it not been for Davey's handicap.

I realised, then, that Davey's return would be at once a cause for celebra-tion and, for Mrs Emmett, much soul searching.

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Once Davey was implanted, he was spared the treatment he would have undergone for his condition. A month after his implant, he passed away in hospital. Richard Lincoln, accompanied by Mrs Emmett and myself, drove the body up to the Onward Station in his Range Rover. There was a small, secular ceremony of leave-taking, and then Davey was beamed aboard the waiting Kéthani starship. I drove Mrs Emmett home, promising to accompany her to the ceremony that would greet Davey's return to Earth in six months' time.

That year, winter hung on well into April. There was a late fall of snow at Easter, transforming the land with its total and pristine beauty. Life pro-ceeded as normal, a round of work and Tuesday night sessions at the Fleece. They were the highlight of the week, a few hours of relaxation among good friends.

I saw Zara once in Bradley, and that was painful. She was walking arm in arm with her new man, on the opposite side of the street. They didn't see me, for which I was thankful. The sight of her, tall and beautiful and seemingly happy, released a slew of painful memories. I went over and over our final days together, and Zara's accusations. I was a bastard, she had said, a domineering, selfish, bigoted, sexist bastard.

Not long after that I had killed myself, and been resurrected on Kéthan. On my return to Earth I had resumed my old life and examined what Zara had said. Her accusations caused me to look again at the person I was, how I had *become* the person I was, and I repented. By that time, of course, it had been too late to affect my relation-ship with Zara, but I had promised myself that I would not make the same mistake in future relationships.

A few months after Davey Emmett's death, Richard Lincoln took me to one side in the Fleece and told me that Mrs Emmett was in hospital.

"I saw her yesterday while I was making a pick up," he said. "She has cancer. It's terminal. She said she wanted to see you."

I looked at him. "You don't think...?" I began.

"What, that she wants to be implanted? A conversion at the eleventh hour? I doubt it, not our Mrs

Emmett.”

“I’ll drop by and see her tomorrow,” I promised, and returned to my pint, wondering what the old lady might want to see me about.

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She was in a private room on the oncology ward, sitting up in bed and hooked up to a bank of machines. If I had expected a feeble, self-sorry old woman who had given up all hope, then I had grossly underestimated Mrs Katherine Emmett.

She gave a cheery smile when I hes-itantly entered the room. “Khalid, pull up a chair. How are you?”

I smiled and shook my head. “Isn’t it me who should be asking you how you are?”

She laughed. “I’m fine, Khalid. Oddly enough, given the circum-stances, I’ve really never felt better.”

I took her hand. “You’re an amazing woman,” I found myself saying.

She laughed again, mockingly this time. “I’m eighty-six, Khalid, and I’ve had a full and eventful life. I’m quite prepared for the end of this stage of existence.”

I gestured at the equipment sur-rounding the bed. “They’re doing their damnest to keep you alive.”

She leaned forward and whispered, mock-conspiratorially, “It’s because I’m not implanted, Khalid. They’re frightened to death of death. They’re trying to do everything they can to squeeze a few more weeks of life from me. But as I’ve told them over and over, I’m ready to go.”

“They haven’t tried to get you to agree to an implant?”

“Of course they have. I had some young thing down here just yesterday. He didn’t know his theology, though— I tied him up in knots.”

“So it’d be useless if I tried to ... “

“Absolutely and categorically futile, Khalid, my friend.”

I tried another tack. “How long do they give you?”

“Perhaps a month. The liver, you see.”

“So,” I interrupted, “you won’t be around to see Davey when he returns?”

She allowed a few seconds to elapse before she replied—sufficient time to make me regret the question.

“No,” she said, “I won’t be around. And do you know something? I don’t want to be around, to be honest.”

I stared at her. “Surely—” I began, and stopped myself.

She leaned forward. “Khalid, I want to tell you something. I’ve never told another living soul this, and I want to get it off my chest, before I go.” I smiled at her, wondering what I was about to hear.

“Khalid, do you know what was wrong with Davey? I mean, what was responsible for his condition?”

I shook my head. “His medical records would have been privy only to his own doctor,” I began.

She smiled, returning the pressure of my hand. “It was an accident, Khalid. When he was two years old. I’d taken him out shopping. If only I’d delayed going out, or not gone at all... But we can’t undo the past, can we? Oh, I’ve often wondered how what happened might have been the reper-cussions of sins I might have committed in a previous life. That was the only part of Buddhist theory that I found hard to accept.” She laughed, sourly. “For obvious reasons, Khalid! Anyway, you see, it was my fault... the accident. We had stopped at the side of the road, and Davey got away from me ... ran straight into the road, in front of...” She paused, gathering herself, and then went on. “The doctors said it was miracle that Davey sur-vived, even though he was severely brain damaged.”

She stopped, and the silence seemed to ring like an alarm. When I looked up at her, I saw tears streaming unchecked down her wrinkled cheeks. I found a tissue and passed it to her, and she blotted the tears with a gesture at once dignified and pitiful.

“I’ve had to live with the guilt for so long,” she said. “So do you see why I couldn’t bear to see Davey when he returned? He will be how he would have been, were it not for my neglect. The sight of him, so changed, will remind me not only of my foolishness, but of the Davey I should have been able to love, growing up like other children.”

She was crying again, and all I could do was grip her hand.

At last, tentatively, I said, “But if you were to be implanted, you would be able to share his life from now on.”

She smiled at me through her tears. She lifted my hand and kissed my knuckles. “You’re a good man, Khalid. You mean well. But Davey would be a stranger to me. It wasn’t meant to be. Did you know,” she said, more brightly now, “that scientists opposed to the Kéthani have developed a new theory of consciousness?”

I smiled. “They have?”

She nodded, enthusiastic. “You see, they posit that our consciousness, the very essence that makes us ourselves, resides on some infinitesimally small, quantum level, a level that permeates the cosmos. And when we die, we don’t just fizzle out like a spent match, but our consciousness remains integrated with the matrix of existence ...” She laughed to herself. “It’s what Buddha said all those hundreds of years ago, Khalid!”

“Well, what do you know, Mrs Emmett,” I said with a smile.

Before I left, promising to pop in the following day, she restrained me with a fierce grip. “Khalid, when Davey returns, will you meet him at the Station, explain what happened, why I couldn’t be there for him? Will you make sure that he understands, Khalid?”

“Of course I will.”

“And...something else.” She reached across to the bedside table, and gave me a sealed letter. “Will you give this to him, Khalid? It’s an explanation of my belief. I want him to consider everything, so that he can decide for himself whether he wants to retain his implant.”

I squeezed her hand, and promised that I would give him the letter, then said goodbye and slipped from the room.

I did return the following day, only to learn that Mrs Emmett had died peacefully in the early hours of the morning.

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Three months later, in the middle of October, a heavy fall of snow heralded Davey Emmett’s return to Earth.

I was just one of three people gathered at the Onward Station to greet him. The other two were care-assis-tants who had worked with Davey over the years. They had never, they said, met a returnee: I refrained from telling them that I had died and been resur-rected by the Kéthani.

I recalled my own transformation last year, both mentally and physically, and wondered how the Kéthani might have remade Davey Emmett.

Five minutes later we found out. We were in a small reception lounge furnished with a few chairs and a table bearing wine and fruit juice. Normally, more people would attend a returning ceremony, and a larger lounge would be required: but Davey had made few friends during his fifty years on Earth.

The sliding door at the back of the room opened, and Davey stepped through. The woman beside me gasped, and I understood her reaction. Even I, who had been expecting a marked metamorphosis, was taken aback.

Gone was the overweight adult-child, the sallow-faced, balding misfit unable to establish eye contact or hold a conversation.

Davey Emmett seemed taller, and slimmer. His face was lean, even handsome; he appeared to be in his late thirties. He wore a neat suit and strode purposefully into the room, smiling.

He shook our hands, greeting us by name. "It's good to see you, Khalid."

We exchanged inane pleasantries for a while. I recalled my own resurrection ceremony and the mutual inability of the returnee to express quite what he had been through, and the circumsppection of the celebrants faced with the miracle of someone returned from the dead.

"Director Masters informed me of my mother's passing," Davey said. Masters was head of the Onward Station. "Khalid, if you could drive me home via the cemetery...?"

"Of course."

The meeting broke up five minutes later and I drove Davey from the towering crystal obelisk of the Station, through the snow-covered landscape towards Oxenworth.

After a minute, I broke the silence. "I saw your mother during her illness, Davey. She wasn't in pain, and didn't fear death. She had her own strong faith."

Davey nodded. "I know. I remember her telling me all about it."

I glanced across at him. "How much do you recall from...from before?"

He considered for a second or two, frowning. "It's strange, but I recall everything. Who I was, my thoughts and reactions. But it's very much like an adult looking back on his childhood. We have only a refracted, blurred image of who that person was. It's almost like looking back at the life of a stranger."

He was silent for a while, staring out at the snow-softened landscape undulating to the distant moorland horizon.

"The Kéthani remade me completely, Khalid. They took what they had, the fundamental David Emmett, and rebuilt a fully functioning, intelligent human being from the unpromising raw material. The odd thing is, I feel that they maintained a continuity. I am David Emmett, but whole, now."



I nodded. "I think I know what you mean, Davey. I died last year. The person who came back... well, he was much changed, too."

We came to the cemetery and I turned into the long drive.

We climbed from the car, into the teeth of the sub-zero wind, and I led Davey across to where his mother was interred.

Her grey marble headstone projected from the fleecy snow, bearing her name, date of birth and death, and a line from a Buddhist text: *We each of us have a choice of eternities.*

There were few deaths these days, and the cemetery was little used. The headstone next to Mrs Emmett's recorded that Claudine Hainault had been buried there ten years previously.

I felt tears stinging my eyes.

Davey stood at the foot of his mother's grave, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. The cold wind stirred his full head of black hair.

I said, "Your mother asked me to explain why she couldn't be here to meet you, Davey. And she asked me to give you this." I passed him the letter Mrs Emmett had given me.

He took it and looked at me. "You mean, why she couldn't face the person I would be—the person I might have been, but for the accident?"

I smiled to myself. He was ahead of me, and had saved me from an awkward explanation.

"Do you understand how it must have been, from her point of view?" I said inadequately.

"I understand," he said. "I just wonder how much her belief system was a result of the guilt she felt after the accident. I wonder if she rationalised that she was atoning in this life for sins accrued in a previous one...and if she believed in reincarnation in the hope that my next existence might be a better one." He

smiled to himself. "This was all before the coming of the Kéthani, of course."

I shook my hand and shrugged, smiling sadly at the thought of Mrs Emmett.

"The terrible thing was," Davey went on, "that my mother wasn't responsible for the accident. We were standing at the side of the road and I just pulled my hand from hers and ran off, into the path of a car... Thanks to the Kéthani, I remember everything."

He paused, then said, "My mother blamed herself, of course."

He lifted his head and stared into the heavens, and I saw that his eyes were filmed with tears.

"I wonder if she'd forgive me?" he asked at last.

"Your mother was a good and for-giving person," I said. "Of course she would."

He stared at the cold, grey head-stone. "But would things have turned out differently, for her, if the accident had not happened?"

I said at last, "Who can tell?"

"I wonder if she is happy, wherever she is?"

I let that question blow away on the cold wind, and said instead, "Can I drive you home?"

He hesitated. "No. No, thanks, Khalid." He pointed across the valley, to High Fold Farm. "It's not far, I'll walk."

I nodded, shook his hand and made my way back to the car.

I thought of the way the Kéthani had remade us, and then it came to me that, since my return, I had never

con-tacted Zara to apologise for how I had treated her over the years. I knew in my heart that it was my duty to do so, but even then I honestly doubted whether I would be man enough to go through with it.

The Kéthani improve us all, to varying degrees.

I drove from the cemetery, then braked on the road that climbs over the moors. I gazed down at the desolate scene of continuous snow and rank upon rank of headstones, those terrible reminders of the dead.

Davey Emmett was the only living figure in the vast and inimical landscape. As I watched, he opened the letter from his mother and read it slowly. Then he raised his head and stared into the sky, at the stars just beginning to appear in the heavens.

I looked at the road ahead, then started the car and drove towards Oxenworth and the Fleece.

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