

### **Incarnations I: The Chosen Road**

*Set in a dystopian near future. When a young woman in an impossible situation witnesses a beating, she wishes she could help the victims; then watches as another woman intervenes. Everything is about to change.*

### **Incarnations II: The Garden**

*A curious meeting and powerful connection lead to lives of love and happiness - and a garden.*

### **Incarnations III: Vortices**

*A student at a futuristic university is intrigued by a brilliant but eccentric classmate.*

### **Incarnations IV: Quietness**

*A relentless human weapon meets a young woman who represents the peace that has always eluded her.*

### **Incarnations V: Choosing Littleness**

*A young woman in trouble is helped by a woman who can predict the future.*

### **Incarnations I: The Chosen Road**

By

Icebard

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Uber

Alternative

Cyberpunk (kind of)

Sex: No

Violence: Yes

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I hurry across the dusty street, hoping they will not see me. The air shimmers from the tarmac and the desert, the copper sun's heat blasting down. Sweat is damp upon my skin. Fear coils in my stomach. Perhaps they will let me go. Their attention is on their victims.

I see, even as I run. The victims are three young men, boys really, dressed in simple clothes like farm-workers might. Maybe they came into town because they were desperate and hoped to make some money. Instead they are just the playthings of the gang that surrounds

them, kicking and beating them. Perhaps fifteen men and women, bored and cruel, callous and sadistic.

I wish I could help the boys but I do not think there is anything I can do. Though I'm a rather small woman I'm quite strong, but I have little idea how to fight.

I reach the corner of an abandoned convenience store, its windows and doors gaping. I stop once I am hidden - something makes me look back.

I see her then. She pulls up on a motorcycle, leans it upon its kickstand, swings her leg over the back and steps away. She takes off her helmet and sets it on the back of the bike. Then she regards the gang. Most of the men and women are still intent on their game. Perhaps they are angry with the boys because they had nothing to give them. Those who see her draw the attention of the others.

She simply stands and regards them, seeming entirely unafraid. Behind her the bike's heavy engine rumbles.

Something about her tugs at me. I feel a curious sense of connection to her. I take in her lithe and powerful but feminine frame and limbs. She is wearing oil-stained blue jeans over dark boots, and a faded dark red shirt. Her skin is suntanned. Her hair is long and thick, straight and black and falls loosely down her back. Even from this distance I can see that she is strikingly beautiful. Her eyes are such a brilliant light blue that they are almost like mirrors of ice.

'What do you want?' one of the men growls. 'No matter. Thanks for the gift of the bike. We'll fuck you over it. Think I'll take you first.'

He steps forward, a slim metal pipe in his hand. The others begin to spread out around her. They have knives and baseball bats.

'Leave the boys and I'll leave you alone,' she says. Her calmness is strange. Those in the gang hesitate just a moment. But they are probably too stupid, too cranked or simply too proud to show any caution and risk losing face in front of each other.

'I don't see any guns on you,' a girl, a teenager, calls from the back of the group. I see the malice in her, the lust for violence and pain.

'I don't need any.' The blue-eyed woman's words are soft enough that I barely hear them.

Then an ugly man on her right lunges at her with a knife. So fast that it seems she has moved in a single moment, she reaches out and grabs his wrist. She throws him hard to the side. I hear a dull crack of bone before his scream of pain. Now she holds the knife.

Three of them rush her at once. She kicks high, slashes, deflects, grabs a woman's hair and almost cuts her head from her shoulders with a plunging cut.

Others close in, thinking they can bring her down with their weight and numbers, by grappling her. She knocks two of them down and leaps high. She smashes the heel of her right foot into the side of a man's head, snapping his neck. She flips once in midair before landing easily several steps away. A man on her left swings at her with a baseball bat. She ducks and slams the base of her hand into his sternum so hard that he is catapulted backwards several yards. He lands in a crumpled heap, twitching and dying, his chest crushed.

She stands then, a slight sideways smile upon her face. The rest are uncertain now. An injured woman and man are screaming.

She tips her head sideways at the three boys. 'Go,' she says. Limping, bleeding, they run off.

She watches but she does not seem to have noticed one member of the gang circling behind her. He brings out a handgun to shoot her in the back from just eight or ten feet away.

I am about to call out, to warn her, but somehow she has sensed his intent. She spins low even before he pulls the trigger, moving out of the path of the bullet. She uses her momentum to hurl the knife she is still holding in her right hand. It takes him in the throat and he collapses.

She seems to dismiss them then. She steps back to her motorcycle, dons her helmet and swings her leg over the seat. She nudges the throttle and flips closed the kickstand. Then she drives slowly away, the deep rumble of the engine rising then gradually fading.

My gaze follows her until she is out of sight, then I turn and hurry around the abandoned convenience store. Quickly I make my way home. My mind and emotions are filled with what I have seen. I wish that I had such fearlessness. Even more I wish I had such ability. I have always been so afraid, living here. But there is no way to leave - not without money or papers. And I can be tracked through the implant in my back.

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At home, my father is juiced on some kind of slam cocktail he has injected himself with. It lets him work hard, helps him to survive in the workplace he has to endure, but it makes him aggressive.

I am late and I could not find good food today. As I apologise, he stands and regards me impassively, dark stubble on his broad face, fists like hams clenched at his sides, hate in his eyes, the smell of sour sweat rolling from him. I know what is coming. He takes me by the hair and shakes me. He throws me across the room. A few blows later and he leaves me alone, panting and holding my ribs, blood dripping down the side of my face.

He loved me once. He started to drug himself so that he could work more and bring home enough money for us to eat. I do not know if I am simply sorry for what has happened to him and hence to me, or if I despise him for his weakness.

My mother looks on, empty-eyed, apparently without much reaction at all to what has just happened. She always seems empty these days.

Slowly, painfully, I climb to my feet and go to the bathroom. I wash my face. For long minutes I stare at my reflection, see the hopelessness in my green eyes. I pull back my blonde hair to better examine the bruise around my right eye. It is not so serious and the bleeding has stopped.

I let my head slump forwards and stare into the basin. I so much want to leave this place. But I'll be hunted and killed if I try.

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Three evenings later I head home from my secretarial job at the failing cybernetics business I work at. Passing a garage, I hear the familiar sound of drills and banging. There is a massive truck out front, armed and armoured. The panels on the sides are being replaced.

To my surprise, I see her there. She is lifting one of the immense metal plates. I do not think even the strongest men would find it easy to lift, but she manages it - though I can see it takes great effort. As she holds it steady, a man in overalls drills the bolts into place.

I stand and watch as the last two plates are put back. I like watching her. She is wearing the same jeans and boots I saw her in before, and a sleeveless white t-shirt. Her muscles slide like steel cables beneath lean skin. I like looking at the shape of her breasts as she moves.

When she has finished she steps back and regards her handiwork. The man in overalls retreats to the workshop without saying a word.

I am surprised to find myself walking over to her. She watches me, her face neutral. As I near her I look into her eyes. From so close their colour is quite astonishing. Arctic blue and so reflective; beautiful but disturbing too.

She watches, apparently relaxed, as I reach into my bag. Perhaps she expects me to take out a gun but I guess that, if so, she perceives little danger to herself. Instead I bring out a bottle of water that I have not opened. I offer it to her, just holding it out. I do not say anything.

She regards me, just a hint of puzzlement on her face. I also see something else, and I wonder if perhaps she feels that curious feeling that I felt when I first saw her and which I still feel. Not exactly recognition but some kind of resonance, as if I had been waiting for her, as if something about her fits something that I need.

She reaches out and takes the bottle. She unscrews the sealed cap and it pops as the vacuum within is flooded. She sniffs the water and then drinks. She must have been thirsty and I can see that she enjoys it and is relieved. I am surprised by how happy that makes me.

She hands back the half-empty bottle.

'It's all right,' I say. 'You can have it.'

She gives a tiny nod of thanks, and drains the rest.

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I begin to visit her every day. It takes three such visits before she says a single word to me, but I can see that she likes my company. I tell her funny stories. I have always been good at stories, whether speaking of things that really happened or simply making things up. We usually sit upon a low wall to one side of the garage, and I give her a bottle of water - and now I bring my own too. After a while I tell her that I have to go back home and leave. A couple of times she raises her hand slightly to say goodbye.

On perhaps my eighth visit, she sees the swelling of my broken nose and split lip. I almost decided not to come to her today. I feel ashamed though I know I should not.

Though to most onlookers her face might seem expressionless, I can see a cold fire in her eyes, honed rage. She does not say anything for a while.

As we sit in our usual place, shaded from the blasting heat of the sun, I try to tell her a story. I find it hard to put any positive emotion into it.

'Who did this?' she asks of a sudden when I am halfway through a sentence.

I am silent. I feel confused and look down. 'It doesn't matter,' I say. I am surprised by how hoarse my voice has suddenly become. 'My father did it. The slam he takes has changed him. He loved me and was proud of me before.'

'Why does he take it?'

'He couldn't cope with the work he has to do. He works for Hugo Fall. The man's a total bastard. Has the police in his pocket. If my father tried to quit, Fall would make sure he would never be able to work again. He's effectively just a slave.'

'Are you chipped?' she asks me.

I nod. 'I can't leave.'

She looks straight ahead, thinking. 'Who or what are you chipped to?' she asks after a while.

'Lightsec. No one I know personally.'

She gives a slight nod. I think she has made a decision but I am not sure.

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She is not there the next day, nor for the two days following. I am worried for her, which I tell myself is an exaggeration. Very few people would be able to hurt her if they tried. Then the worry comes back some more.

I am also worried for myself. What if she has simply left? I have no way of finding her. I am angry that I did not have the courage simply to ask her how I might contact her. I guess I had hoped that she would tell me before she left.

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On the fourth morning after I last saw her, I turn on the news. I have a feeling that something has happened that I should know about. I had strange dreams about her last night though I cannot remember more than a sense of a furious struggle, noise, desperation and rage.

I learn that there has been a fire at Fall Industries. Its security has been eliminated. Hugo Fall's head has been found mounted on the gate. The assets of the company have been divided between the employees.

Later in the day I hurry from my job to the garage. I have found it difficult to wait to see if she is there, but whatever may have happened last night, I am still chipped and must go to work. Now I just want to know that she is all right.

When I get there she is waiting for me, sitting at our usual place on the low wall in the hot shade. She seems no different to usual. I smile at her, as I always do, and she gives me a slight sideways smile back. I see what I think is almost a touch of shyness or embarrassment in her expression, though I may be wrong. I love it when she smiles though she does so very rarely.

I am about to reach into my bag to hand her her water, but she beats me by reaching to her side and holding up two bottles - and gives one to me.

'Thank you,' I say, surprised. I sit down.

'There has been a break-in at Lightsec,' she says without preamble. 'They've tried to hide it, but their new tracking equipment won't be up and running for at least two days. So I'm going to take you to a surgeon I know so that you can have your chip removed.'

I stare at her. I knew that she was behind what happened at Fall Industries. I understand she must be the one who broke into Lightsec and wrecked their equipment and its backups.

'All right,' I say, taking a deep breath and letting it out. My words seem pathetic, but she looks at me and smiles again.

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'I need to go with you,' I say to her three days later. My back is still a little sore after the operation but I am recovering quickly.

She looks at me. She is standing by her motorcycle. I am glad that she has come to my family's home - I have no idea how she found it - but I am so afraid that she has only come to say goodbye.

'Is your father better?' she asks.

'He is struggling and very sick, but I think he will be. Mother is taking care of him. She always does, no matter what.' A slight frown touches my brow as I wonder when it was that my mother first started to hate me. It was a long time ago, I think.

Blue eyes regard me then look down. She has said all she wishes to say or knows how to say, I suspect. I know that she would probably find it very difficult to communicate her feelings to me. I think she thinks she just needs to go, that it is best if she goes without me and that she should get on with it.

'I want to go with you,' I say. 'You are reluctant to take me because you know how dangerous it will be. I guess you care about me in some way. But my safety isn't your decision to make. It's mine. It's my life. The only thing I need to know is whether you want me with you. Or even if you'd mind if I followed you.'

She remains silent for a while. 'I wouldn't mind,' she says at length. She makes a small, helpless gesture. 'I'll try to protect you if you want to come.'

'I am only afraid I will put you in danger,' I say. That is actually my main concern - if she gets hurt because she is looking out for me because I cannot look out for myself.

She shakes her head, dismissing my fear. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I want to go away from this place.' I glance away, then just look back at her and say exactly what I feel. 'More than anything, I want to be with you.'

She gives me a wide grin then, the first unrestrained smile I have seen from her. Her eyes are full of light. Then, as her smile relaxes, the ice blue of her gaze softens to an amazing tenderness and warmth. Perhaps I should be surprised that she has that within her, but I am not. 'Then go and get what you need to take,' she says. 'I'll wait here for you.'

I am delighted. I run to the house and take only a few essentials and put them in a small bag I strap across my back. It only takes two or three minutes to do. Then I go to the living room, where my mother is tending my father. He is lying on the sofa and is pale and sweating, but when he looks at me I see more warmth in his gaze than I have seen in a couple of years.

I put an arm around my mother's neck and kiss her temple. Then I lean forward and touch my hand to my father's cheek. I do not feel that there is any need to say anything.

'I'm so sorry,' he says.

I give him a small smile. 'I understand.' I do not say anything more. I do not accept what happened but at least I understand it, I think. I just feel sad, for both of us.

He watches me as I stand up. We hold eye contact for a moment, then I turn and walk through the open front door and close it behind me.

She is sitting astride the motorcycle. She kick-starts it when she sees me and holds her helmet out as I reach her. 'Put this on and climb on the back. We'll go straight to a place that can sell us one for you.'

I take it and slip it over my head and clip it fast. Then I swing my leg over the back of the big bike and settle my feet on the short pipes that jut for the purpose.

'Hold onto me,' she says, glancing back.

I wrap my arms around her waist, leaning forward as she is leaning forward. I feel the press of her back against my chest, the feel of her breathing, her warmth, the strength of her.

'Hold on,' she says again. Then she turns the accelerator and we ease away. For a few seconds she goes quite slowly; and then she speeds up, though I am sure she will drive much more rapidly later, when we have a second helmet and we are out in the desert.

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The End

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**Incarnations II: The Garden**  
By  
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Uber  
Alternative  
Cyberpunk (kind of)  
Sex: No  
Violence: No

Natasha walked towards the back of the shop to fetch some plant pots and balls of string from the storeroom in order to re-stock some shelves. She had been working here for a month and she felt quite happy. It was not a spectacular job but it was easy and quiet and the customers were almost always pleasant. She liked showing them where to find things, helping them in their choices of plants and flowers and giving what assistance she could.

It was a strange shop in some ways, just a converted barn on a fairly small plot of land, with farmland around it. A straight, flat and sometimes busy road led past it. It was partly supplied by the farms that were its neighbours such that out the front in the right seasons, crates of vegetables were displayed for sale - onions, potatoes, carrots, radishes, parsnips. Sometimes there were crates of fruit too - usually raspberries, blackberries, plums, pears and cooking apples. Inside, a mixture of items were for sale: gardening equipment, packets of seeds, a few small barbecues and sacks of charcoal, raincoats and jackets that farmers might wear, assorted tools, and postcards of the picturesque local area - all of which featured images that had been taken by the shop's owner, who was a competent amateur photographer. The shop smelled of wood and earth and candles and leather. It was shady and rather dark because of the small windows and sparse bulbs. Outside the back of the shop was Natasha's favourite area: long rows of potted plants, saplings, herbs and all kinds of flowers of many colours and fragrances, neatly arranged and priced and taken care of - she did her best to tend them as well as she could. They were starting to grow well as the spring weather continued to warm.

She stopped when she saw a young woman examining one of the many racks of seeds that were stacked on long shelves to the left of the door to the storeroom. She was bending down slightly to look at some packets on the lower shelves. Natasha had not seen her enter - she must have been outside tending to another customer when the woman had come in. She took in the long, gauzy grey skirt that was sewn with vines and flowers, the pale green blouse, and the shawl - or very wide knit scarf - of maroon wool that was draped about her shoulders.

Then the woman straightened and turned to her, smiling as she did so. She had green eyes that were warm with humour and light, a lovely face, and fairly short, feathered blonde hair. A simple, open joy was reflected in her expression.

Natasha smiled too. She found herself quite enchanted.

'Hi,' the woman said. She tilted her head a fraction and Natasha was almost sure she was suddenly wondering about her, perhaps startled by her - that she might be about to forget what she had been about to ask.

'Hello,' Natasha replied. 'Can I help you find something?' She could not help it but found a chuckle freeing itself from her throat; yet instead of thinking there was something strange about her, the beautiful young woman chuckled too.

'Yes, please.' Her voice was pleasing, vibrant and just slightly hoarse. 'I was looking for some radish seeds but there are a lot of types here and I'm not sure what the differences are. And I want to grow some courgettes too, and some spinach. I don't have much experience with growing vegetables but I'm looking forward to trying.'

Natasha much enjoyed the simple enthusiasm that the woman seemed to have just in being there to buy some vegetable seeds.

'My name's Nina,' the young woman said then.

'I'm Natasha,' she replied.

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Natasha walked across the lawn behind her and Nina's cottage in the country, about halfway between London and Winchester. They had lived there for twenty years now, and though they had occasionally been away from the place on one small adventure or another, they had always been glad to return. Natasha supposed that their lives had been quieter than most people might want. Neither of them had had very much ambition, they did not care for status, and they only needed enough money to support themselves in their modest lifestyle and maintain their small home. Nina had been given the property when she had been twenty years old, presumably by a relative, though she had had to agree not to try to find out who her benefactor was if she wished to accept the gift.

Natasha had worked in various jobs over the years. From working as a shop assistant when they had met, she had become a truck driver for a while then had worked on a cultivation farm. She had had other jobs too, some good and some best left behind. Nina had mostly painted and sold some of her paintings, never for very large sums, but had made enough to live on.

They had been happy. Ever since they had met, when Natasha had been twenty-nine and Nina had been twenty-five, they had been happy.

As Natasha walked over to the vegetable garden by the old stone wall that divided the property from fallow fields and a woodland, she smiled. She reflected that it was amazing just how much happiness they had shared. Almost every waking moment she had been aware of Nina and her love for Nina, and of Nina's love for her. Every time she looked at her

she felt a glow of warmth, a fascination and awe and a welling of deep emotion - sometimes a profound tenderness and sometimes much desire.

As long as they were together. That was all that had ever seemed to really matter to them. As long as they were together, they felt a felicity and peace, gladness and purpose that was more than either of them had ever hoped for. It did not really matter what they were doing - cooking, or sitting by the fire in silence on a winter evening, or playing some simple game of cards, or talking quietly over breakfast; laughing together in bed as they had a tickle-fight, walking together through nearby fields and woodland, shopping for food or clothes in shops in the nearby village; reading books side by side, or reading a single book together, taking it in turns to be the storyteller. All the little activities and larger activities of their lives had been filled with a glow of magical togetherness and contentment.

Sometimes, of course, they had been apart. When Natasha was at work and Nina was at home, they would always miss each other. When Natasha returned from work, they were always delighted to see each other, and would throw themselves into each others arms, grinning as if they had been apart for weeks.

They had known for a long time that they were different to others. Natasha was forty-nine years old now, Nina forty-five. But for the past ten or twelve years they had not appeared to age at all.

Except that Nina had become ill, two months ago. The doctors did not know what was wrong with her. The illness was getting gradually worse, and Natasha thought that Nina understood now that she was dying - though she had not told Natasha this.

The knowledge lay within Natasha's heart and mind and it was an appalling thing. Nina was her whole life. She knew that she would not want to go on without her.

She stopped, and looked at Nina where she knelt between two rows of vegetables. She was wearing a long brown skirt and a simple blue cardigan. She was picking some spinach and other leaves for salad - a mix that she knew Natasha much liked. Natasha could see the pleasure Nina felt in doing this small thing for her. She marvelled at that small, familiar smile touching her lips.

Nina looked up and her face was lit by the warm summer sunlight. As Nina's smile widened, Natasha returned the grin. It was such an astonishing thing, that just seeing each other could give each other such extraordinary pleasure.

Still, Natasha could see that Nina was in some pain. Her face was drawn and her eyes - still so marvellously bright green - were bloodshot, their surroundings bruised. She had not been sleeping well. There was a sadness in the smile, even through the gladness.

'Hi,' Natasha said, standing before her, looking down, gazing at her love.

'Hi,' Nina said in reply, and a small giggle escaped her, a very characteristic sound of gladness that touched Natasha's heart.

They stayed like that for a little while, just looking at each other in the sunlight, smiling, caught up in each other, deep emotions flowing through them, silently communicating.

Then Natasha knelt down so that they were facing each other. She reached out and cupped Nina's face with her hands. 'Beautiful one,' she said.

She saw the tears well in Nina's eyes then and felt them start in her own. After a moment they leaned together, holding onto each other, and each other's presence was all that mattered.

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'I'm so sorry,' Nina said that night, as they lay together in bed in darkness. It was just after 9pm and Nina had been tired. Natasha did not mind. It was good to be in bed and hold Nina close. She loved the feel of Nina against her, her head upon her shoulder and tucked under her chin.

She did not say anything for a moment. She ran the fingers of her right hand in small, comforting circles upon Nina's back, and smoothed her hair with her left. She kissed the top of her head, inhaling the scent that she loved so much. 'You have nothing to be sorry for,' she said quietly then. She did not ask what Nina thought she was sorry for - she knew well enough.

'But I am. Sorry that I will leave you. It will be easier for me, if there is nothing after death. I cannot believe that I will leave you behind but I do not think I can stop it from happening.'

Natasha held her tight, cradling her as she cried quietly against her. She felt Nina's grip, Nina's arm wrapped around her waist, her face pressed into her chest. She felt as if she was being torn in half, such sorrow welling up within her at Nina's pain.

After some time, Natasha said: 'If it happens, I think . . . I think I may go with you.' Immediately she felt Nina tense, then suddenly relax and cry harder. When she had calmed a little, Natasha pressed on. 'I have been thinking about it,' she said. 'You . . . are everything to me. I never dreamed, when I was young, that I would ever have even a fraction of the love and happiness that I have had with you. I feel that I am the most fortunate person that has ever lived. With what we have shared, there could be nothing more that I might want. You gave me everything. And I think that in making the decision to go with you, I will be accepting and happy. I will be filled with my awareness of the love and bliss that has filled me ever since I met you.'

A little while later, Nina's tears slowed and she gradually relaxed in Natasha's embrace. She rubbed her hand in a small circle in the centre of Natasha's chest, her palm against warm skin. 'We are magical,' she said softly.

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The End

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### **Incarnations III: Vortices**

By

Icebard

Uber

Alternative

Near Future

Sex: No

Violence: No

'She's a bit strange,' said a student - an earnest girl with dark, curly hair and brown eyes. Her words were not said maliciously. They were simply an observation.

A couple of the others murmured agreement, then they quietly went on down the list of those who might be able to join their group for the extensive research project that they were going to undertake.

Aurelie McCleod was sitting at the next table. Like them she was taking advantage of this particularly beautiful room in the university's central science library. She had been reading and taking notes. She was trying to work out a way of creating a prismatic vortex out of minute crystals. The necessary mathematics was proving to be extremely complex. For a while, tired, she had simply sat back, letting her mind wander, knowing that she needed some rest or perhaps just some distance from the problem. Then she had listened to a little of the murmured conversation taking place a few yards from her.

She smiled as she considered the words of the brown-eyed girl. She knew who she was talking about of course. Everyone had spoken in such a way at some time or other about their highly accomplished, highly talented, extraordinary but undoubtedly odd classmate, Katrin Montagu.

Aurelie recalled Katrin walking down one of the stone corridors, where the bones of great thinkers and inquirers long dead had been buried, singing some cheerful song; and the smile she sometimes had for what did not appear to be there; and the fugues of thought that she sometimes went into that were so deep that others found they could not follow her. She remembered when Katrin had stood outside a lecture room one day, juggling a number of different objects with more skill than should have been possible - until she had seen the others watching her and had blushed and dropped everything. And then there

were the long silences, the moroseness and apparent depression, soon followed by sudden delight and laughter in what others did not find amusing or interesting at all. She could be fascinated by what others thought of as simple while at other times she was obviously bored by what others thought of as extraordinary.

The other students had come to accept Katrin but did not pay her much attention. They talked to her when it was necessary for their projects and sometimes asked her for help - which she always gave willingly. But they did not include her in the friendships that they made, or invite her to social gatherings such as at the bars or tea-shops in winter, or at the great bonfires on summer nights.

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At lunchtime the next day, Aurelie sat at a corner table in a café, eating good food and sipping from a large mug of coffee laced with cream and chocolate. Outside, large flakes of snow were falling thickly, settling upon the ground and deepening, though some of the flakes swirled along for a while before they came to rest. The heavy façades of the old, ornate granite buildings opposite, with their carved doorways and windows and the curious abstract images on their walls, were dusted with whiteness. The sky was grey-mauve and the temperature was falling.

Next to her meal were two books she had been reading, closed for now. She preferred to enjoy her food and focus fully upon it before turning her attention to her studies and focusing upon that.

At length she set aside her empty plate and cradled her mug of coffee. As she began to think about what she was working on, she considered as so often before that nothing at the university was merely academic, though much guidance could be given, if requested, to those who needed it. Everything was done with very clear aims. What she was trying to do would yield a new result, no matter whether she was successful or not. Such purposefulness in the studies of students and teachers seemed to permeate the books and architecture and even the walls of the great buildings. All who worked and studied there were so much more focused than most other people. It sometimes seemed an almost mystical thing: the quiet alertness, the calm openness, the respectfulness of everyone.

As Aurelie finished the last of her coffee, the main door to the café opened. She glanced up and saw that Katrin Montagu had entered and was stamping the snow from her boots. She was dressed in a padded blue coat that was rather worn, and padded cream winter leggings over her boots. Pulling back her hood, she shook free her long black hair. Then she walked across to a table against an adjacent wall. Dropping her bag on a chair, she removed her scarf and coat and put them over the back. After taking her wallet from a pocket, she walked over to the counter to place an order.

Aurelie watched, fascinated. There was a strength and grace about Katrin that she had noticed before and which she loved to watch. They spoke of extraordinary physical coordination and awareness that seemed somehow at odds with her rather curious way of

dressing, as if she barely paid attention to that. Aurelie found her more than attractive and very intriguing.

As she returned to her table, Aurelie noticed that she was talking quietly to herself, apparently listing a long string of numbers at high speed. A slight sideways smile touched her lips as she did so.

For five minutes Aurelie stayed where she was. She opened one of her books but did not read a single sentence. Her attention kept returning to Katrin and the way she was eating a bowl of ice-cream with a gusto that seemed both amusing and singularly unlikely given how cold it was outside.

Making a decision, Aurelie put her books back in her bag, picked it and her coat up, and walked over to the table where Katrin was sitting. She stood there for a moment, thinking that Katrin would look up and acknowledge her; but she did not. Yet when Aurelie finally said 'Hi,' she glanced up at her before the syllable was even half formed.

Katrin smiled with what appeared to be a mixture of mischief and delight. 'Hi,' she replied. And Aurelie noticed as she had noticed so often before what an extraordinary colour her light blue eyes were. Ice-blue, brilliant blue, suggestive of clear oceans and reflected winter sunlight.

'I was wondering if I could join you,' Aurelie said. 'If you don't mind my company that is, or if you're not busy thinking about something.'

'Just thinking about the probable patterns of nitrogen bubbles in this ice-cream,' Katrin replied. 'Please join me,' she continued, and gestured to the chair opposite her with her spoon.

'Thanks.' Aurelie sat and regarded her across the small table. She looked into eyes that were curiously still, then which lit up of a sudden as she smiled.

'Oh,' Katrin said. Then, quite unexpectedly: 'You are remarkably beautiful.'

The statement took Aurelie so much by surprise that she found herself blushing. 'You . . . too. We do look a little different to most, don't we?' she said.

Katrin nodded. 'Certainly.' She looked serious for a moment. 'And you know, the other students . . . and the teachers and researchers too . . . think I'm weird.' She said the words quite matter of factly, then grinned, still looking into Aurelie's eyes.

Aurelie could not help but chuckle. Smiling widely, she returned Katrin's gaze.

'Would you like some ice-cream?' Katrin asked after a little while. She seemed almost shy when she said the words, speaking softly and looking away for a moment.

'Thank you. I'll try a little. What is it?' And Katrin told her as she picked up a second spoon so that she could eat some.

Conversation flowed then, and for the following two hours they simply talked. Aurelie realised that she was completely drawn in by Katrin's words and quite captivated by her. As well as that, she thought that she had never felt quite so free, so unjudged, so utterly accepted by anyone. She felt a sense of freedom to be completely herself in Katrin's company. She felt a sense that she was in a safe place and that nothing could hurt her.

Being here with Katrin could not have been more different to the overriding sense of oppression, restrictions and control that had defined much of her early life. She remembered the constant disapproval of her parents, the constant disapproval of her schoolteachers, the way they only wished her to be obedient, to fit the tasks and appearances they wanted her to, and where nothing else was tolerated.

And then, as they talked onwards, Aurelie felt a deep startlement when it suddenly came home to her that Katrin seemed to be as fascinated by her as she was by Katrin.

'You are quite charming,' Katrin said just a moment later.

Aurelie blinked, and smiled, and blushed again. She had an almost irresistible urge to reach out and take Katrin's hands and hold them.

A few more minutes passed and then, finally, they both had to leave. Obligations regarding their studies called them.

'Would you like to meet tomorrow?' Aurelie asked. She felt a mixture of self-consciousness but also ease in asking the question. She knew that Katrin could never think her foolish for asking and that there was no risk in being open and revealing a little of her heart and her wishes. Still, emotions surged within her at the awareness of how excited she felt to be in her company and how excited she was at the thought of seeing her again.

Strange, she thought, how very right this seems. Not just good, but something more, like a memory finally being recalled and marvelled at after decades of forgetfulness.

'I would like that,' Katrin said. 'Are you free after lunch?'

Aurelie nodded.

'In fact, let's meet for lunch, if that's possible?'

Again Aurelie nodded, and this time smiled widely. 'How about here?' she suggested. 'I like the soups and the spiced fish.'

'And I like the ice-cream.'

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Aurelie chose her clothes carefully the next day and spent quite a long time standing in front of the tall mirror in the room that had been hers since she had first come to the university. It had heavy stone walls, deep windows of leaded glass, a deep red and deep blue carpet, and reed scrolls upon the walls in colours that she liked. The many shelves were filled with books. Her desk and sizeable table were scattered with papers and diagrams. The bed, the cupboards and the door to the bathroom were opposite the door to the corridor.

She smiled as she realised she was adjusting her blonde hair for the third time - not really necessary since it was quite short. She felt a pleasant sensation in stomach that was both warm and strange - anticipation mostly. She was glad and slightly surprised that she did not feel more nervous. The confidence and comfort she felt came from Katrin, she was sure, and not from some inner confidence. Katrin just liked her, and did not expect her to act in any way other than genuine.

And I'm attracted to the strangest person in the university, Aurelie mused, and the thought made her smile again.

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Lunch went even better than she had hoped. She loved listening to Katrin talking of all kinds of things - weird humorous ideas she had about patterns of behaviour that they and other students had that reflected the shapes of different animals - and she had a great deal of scientific observation to back up her crazy claim - or gentle reflections upon Aurelie's few words about her poor relationship with her family; or amazing stories of bizarre games she had played as a child, such as one involving fruit.

'I was about four years old I guess,' Katrin explained. 'I was trying to work out if it was possible to prove that I was the only person in the world that was not telepathic and that everyone else had made a secret agreement never to reveal their telepathy to me. I imagined some violet berries to be people I liked, some red apples to be people I disliked, and some oranges to represent abstract concepts. I had quite a few fantasies. It was fun. I think all the pieces of fruit found happiness in the end, after long struggles.'

Aurelie stared at her, shook her head and chuckled. Then she told Katrin some rather curious stories of her own. 'I think my parents thought I might be an alien child,' she said.

'Well, yes, your gaze is more unusual and more beautiful than any human's eyes ever had,' Katrin said. 'Soft, green, the regard of an angel.'

Aurelie marvelled at Katrin's words. There was humour behind them in the suggestion that she might indeed not be human, but there was complete sincerity in them too about how she saw her. As if she was saying: this is what I think, and it is up to you to decide what to

do with it. 'How do you do that?' she asked. 'How do you manage to speak without fear of the response?'

Katrin did not reply for a moment. Then she said, after pondering the matter for a few moments: 'Mostly because it is you. I trust your response, whatever it might be. It would not be cruel or dismissive, but considered. You have innate warmth, though others may sometimes ignore it or dismiss it. But I see it very clearly.' Then, though with a curious and gentle look as if she clearly knew that it must be a sensitive subject, she said: 'So did your parents have any tests done on you to see if you were an alien?'

Aurelie giggled. 'Yes,' she said. 'They took me to the doctor and explained their concerns and he had real trouble keeping a straight face. Then he gave me a few cursory tests and an examination to keep them happy, and proclaimed that I was not an alien. I remember that he winked at me once as if to say it would be our secret that we knew my parents were crazy and that it was advisable not to make crazy people angry. Actually I suspect that they realised that he thought there was something wrong with them, because after the examination they seemed quite offended.' She grinned. 'Unless they were disappointed that I was not an alien.'

'Were you disappointed that you were not an alien?' Katrin asked, her blue eyes full of light. 'Because you know, you might be after all. I mean, just because you have crazy parents doesn't mean you're not an alien.'

On the conversation went, and again Aurelie was delighted by how good it was to talk and to listen like this. She was moved by how deeply attentive Katrin was. But she was still more delighted just simply by Katrin. She was amazed by the way she could shift between moods and manners and subjects, how she could be quiet then vivacious and talkative by turns. Aurelie was absorbed, then enthralled, then thrown off balance by her humour. She was taken to another more emotional place by Katrin's tenderness, then shown a kindness and empathy that let her feel the truth that there were no obligations or expectations, and that however she was, was all right.

Sometimes they found themselves just looking into each other's eyes, with small smiles upon their faces.

At last Aurelie said: 'I'd like to show you what I'm doing in my current project.' For some reason it seemed important that she tell Katrin about it and show her what she had achieved so far. 'Do you have time to come over and have a look?'

'I'd like that,' Katrin replied. 'I could even help you.' She glanced down. 'I mean, if you want help. I could . . .'

Aurelie reached out and placed her hand on the back of Katrin's. It was such a simple gesture but it did not stop the warmth and the tingles that shot through her at the touch. 'I would like that,' she said. 'But come and see, and then decide if you're interested.'

And so they made their way to the small laboratory that Aurelie used, kept just for her on the top floor of one of the wings of Science Building 15. They did not speak much during the twenty minute trip there. They enjoyed the crystalline whiteness of the snow on the old structures of the city and its university, the deep green-grey light that indicated a further drop in temperature, the chill of the air against them. They hurried along a street and onto a golden moving walkway that carried them high over the ground among other long spans and bridges. Aurelie was so very aware of Katrin being at her side. She thought that Katrin was intensely aware of her too.

Before long they reached Aurelie's laboratory, with its sloping ceiling and large, snow-covered skylights. A bird called quietly from where it nested just outside one of them. The benches and walls were covered with equipment and machines connected by pipes and cables. On a stand in the centre, a diamond-shaped crystal container was surrounded by magnetic field generators and more esoteric devices. Aurelie showed Katrin what she had achieved so far for a while they discussed the nature of the hypotheses that the experiment was designed to test.

'I do not know if this will work,' Aurelie said at one point. 'But if it leads me to being able to frame the questions I'm asking with more accuracy and depth, that will be a good result too.'

Katrin nodded, considering. For a while she simply stared at the floor, thinking.

Aurelie just watched her. She saw the occasional fleeting expression touch her face - surprise, amusement, puzzlement, annoyance, hope, curiosity, struggle, delight.

When Katrin looked up she said: 'I want to work with you. I think you are onto something.'

It was a great shame to both of them when, in the early evening, they had to go their separate ways. Aurelie had a meeting with another researcher who was helping her procure and assemble some more machinery she needed, and Katrin was expected at a meeting with senior teachers, including a musicologist who it was thought might introduce a new line of study and inquiry within the science building.

As Katrin shrugged into her coat she said: 'Maybe we could go to North Lake tomorrow and take some fresh readings of vortex activity. It would be a nice outing. If you want . . .'

Aurelie looked up into Katrin's eyes. She did not want her to go but understood that they both had obligations. She was aware that Katrin did not want to go either. And so she took a single step towards her. She reached up and cupped the sides of Katrin's face, her fingertips brushing through her jet black hair. Then she stood up on her toes even as Katrin dipped her head; and very gently, very softly, she kissed her just for a moment, brushing her lips against Katrin's. And then she stepped back, and smiled, and let her hands fall to her sides.

Katrin stood still, looking down at her. And they stared at each other, blue eyes looking into green, green into blue, wondering smiles upon their faces.

'Go,' Aurelie said finally, chuckling, pushing her towards the door. 'It's important that you are not late.'

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At midday the following day Aurelie and Katrin were out on North Lake, twenty miles from the edge of the city. As they climbed out of the snow-car and unloaded their equipment, Aurelie was deeply aware of the feeling that her whole existence had been fundamentally altered. Though they did not speak much as they shrugged into their packs and adjusted their hoods and mittens, she felt so clearly that Katrin was with her, next to her, a warm and strong presence that filled with a sense of belonging, connection and happiness.

She turned to Katrin, peeking beneath the silvery fur edging of her hood. For a moment she took her hand and squeezed it. Then they turned together to the east, side by side, and set off on the walk to their destination.

An hour later, after reaching the place they had decided on, they dug a hole in the ice and lowered one of their sensors into the freezing water. For fifteen minutes they recorded shifts in crystalline patterns of forming and melting ice far beneath the frozen surface.

'Something strange about these readings,' Aurelie said of a sudden. 'The cycle of freezing and melting is rapidly accelerating.'

Moment later, the vortices formed and struck. As wind suddenly howled about them, and Aurelie stumbled and lost her balance, Katrin grabbed her arm and hauled her back from the hole they had dug. As Aurelie looked up, alarmed and startled, she saw the great swirl of mauve and white light and ice forming with extraordinary speed just a hundred yards or so away from them. It glittered in the grey day but it also glowed from within. Within moments it had become a towering, spinning structure. Three more, even larger vortices were forming beyond it. Pulses of brilliant amethyst light stabbed out from them.

Even as they turned to run, one of the spears of light struck Katrin. She cried out as she was thrown sideways, fetching up in the snow, blinking against temporary blindness. Aurelie helped her back onto her feet, and then they were fleeing the swelling masses of energy, crystals and ice. Both of them knew that they were far too close to escape if the nearest vortex began to move in their direction.

Then, through the thick ice beneath them, there was a cracking and rumbling sound, as deep as thunder. From the sky above, a hissing, whirling roar intensified until it was as if they were standing beneath an immense jet turbine. A flickering of mauve lightning raced across the vault followed by a tremendous boom and reverberation.

When the vortex began to move, it did so at an angle to them but they saw that they would be caught at its edge. As Aurelie ran for all she was worth, she was momentarily aware that Katrin was staying at her side even though she must be a faster runner than her. Seconds

later, tendrils of irresistible power, insubstantial as the wind and yet with such force and speed behind them that they could not be fought against, rushed into them and wrapped around them.

Aurelie was aware that she was likely to die. She was even more aware of Katrin being hurled away from her. Moments later a bolt of energy slammed into her back between her shoulder blades. Burning red and violet light exploded about her. With a crushing impact she was thrown into the ice of the lake, that was now buckling and shattering, frothing water surging up from beneath. Pain mixed with confusion and she did not think they would survive this. Even if the vortex did not kill them, they were still miles from the shore, on a lake whose ice was now smashed, their snow-car no doubt wrecked and probably sunk.

As the ice upon which she had been thrown tipped alarmingly, Aurelie struggled to hold on. She felt an appalling agony in her shoulder and left leg. White fire seemed to lance through her head. A moment later she plunged into freezing water. It engulfed her, black and cold, and she barely stopped herself from breathing it in. Looking up, she saw the seething surface above her and it was already very far away, receding as she was dragged down.

And then her existence whited out into nothingness as she collided with a spinning block of ice and received a crushing blow to her head.

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The darkness parted but Aurelie's thoughts were incomplete, her perceptions and awareness utterly confused. Pain mixed with anxiety. She wished for oblivion again. She thought she saw Katrin's face close to hers, so pale that it was almost white, contrasting extraordinarily with her brilliant blue eyes and wet black hair. Then she felt movement, strong arms about her, and found herself looking across the splintered ice of the lake. She felt the press of Katrin's body against her and might have smiled at the thought. Then she sank back into nothingness.

Later, coming partially awake again, she felt very peaceful though rather sleepy. She was staring up into a cold blue-mauve sky and wondered what she was doing there. Then Katrin was beside her again, slipping her arms beneath her shoulders and legs and lifting her up. She groaned at a stab of pain and closed her eyes again to welcome once again the nothingness that had become her friend.

After a much longer time she woke to find herself in bed, warm and comfortable but terribly tired. She was not alert enough to try to work out where she might be. She allowed herself to sleep more, to drift in quiet dreams.

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Much later Aurelie realised that she was in a hospital room. She looked about her as much as she could without moving her head too much. The ceiling was of whitewashed plaster,

shadowy in the dim light from the side of the bed. A scanner was to her right, monitoring her. Beyond them were windows in deep stone frames, but the leaded glass revealed only the darkness of the night. To her left she saw that Katrin was lying upon a couch, her head upon its arm, her chest rising and falling slowly as she slept. She felt relief that she appeared to be all right and a surge of tenderness and warmth towards her.

As she became more alert she more fully realised the extent to which she hurt - how everything hurt. She became aware of the deep ache of her head, the pain that throbbed in her left leg and shoulder. A nagging nausea ate at her. Everything felt wrong.

She lay still, allowing her mind to drift. She could remember only a few confused images and impressions since the vortex had hit them. They seemed dreamlike, unreal, impossible.

After a little while she closed her eyes and slept again.

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When Aurelie next woke she found that Katrin was sitting beside the bed, holding her hand. When she looked into her eyes, Katrin smiled a wide smile that persisted. She looked relieved and happy.

'You're back,' Katrin said. 'I knew you would be.'

Aurelie's lips felt cracked when she managed a faint smile in return.

'Here, would you like some water?' Katrin asked, holding out a glass with a straw.

Aurelie nodded and took a sip. Then she said: 'Sit me up a little? My head is hurting.' Her voice was very hoarse.

Katrin pressed the button that made the upper half of the bed tip upwards. She glanced at Aurelie when she groaned from the movement, but Aurelie encouraged her to continue. After a few moments she was half sitting up.

'Thanks. Better.' Aurelie drank the rest of the water while Katrin held the glass for her. She licked her lips. 'May I have some more?'

Katrin nodded, and poured more from a jug. Aurelie was able to hold the glass in her bruised right hand without difficulty, and drained it in a few gulps.

'Are you all right?' Aurelie asked then.

Katrin tilted her head slightly. 'Yes, I'm fine. A few bumps and a cut on my arm. Nothing serious. How are you feeling?'

'Like I got hit by a vortex and smashed through the ice of a lake. My leg, shoulder and head hurt.'

'The leg and shoulder were broken,' Katrin explained. 'Quite serious fractures, but the surgeon said you'll make a full recovery. The energy of the vortex gave you some heavy bruising around your ribs and right leg. I was most worried about the blow to your head. But I can tell now that you'll be fine.' She smiled and laid her hand upon Aurelie's forearm and ran her thumb over her skin, gentle and reassuring.

Aurelie just looked at her for a while, seeing the tenderness and affection in Katrin's regard. 'You saved my life,' she breathed. 'How did you . . . How did we get out of the lake?'

Katrin shrugged. 'I pulled you from the water and then carried you.'

'You didn't go into the water?'

'Well, I had to, to get to you. You'd been pulled quite a long way down. But I think we were a bit fortunate, because a little way away from where you went in, the ice had broken in long shards, forty or fifty feet long. Stepping between them was not that difficult apart from a few jumps. Closer to the vortex's path, the ice was smashed into blocks and it would have been very difficult to get from one to the next.'

Aurelie reached up and entwined her fingers with Katrin's, savouring the touch. She wondered how Katrin could possibly be able to dive into the surging, freezing water, pull her out onto the ice and then carry her off the lake.

'There's a small observation cabin a few miles south from where we were,' Katrin continued. 'So I took you there to get you warmed up. I could only guess how severe your injuries were but it was clear you were suffering from hypothermia. From there I was able to call for help and an air ambulance came to take us into the city.' She fell silent for a while, just gazing at Aurelie. She reached out and brushed her fingers across her cheek. 'I'm so glad you are all right.'

Aurelie was startled then as she saw the glimmer of tears in Katrin's eyes, a liquid shimmering over extraordinary blue. 'You are amazing,' she said, feeling so much emotion welling up within her that she felt quite choked up.

Katrin merely smiled again and laid her head down on Aurelie's good shoulder, her hand still caressing her cheek.

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The End

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## **Incarnations IV: Quietness**

By

Icebard

noumenal\_rabbit@hotmail.com

Uber

Alternative

Cyberpunk

Violence: Yes, graphic. Please do not read if this is likely to disturb you.

Sex: Briefly explicit

I look into the mirror. Bloodshot blue eyes stare back at me. I tie back my long black hair, then turn on the tap, lean over the basin and splash water on my face.

Over the sound of the water I almost don't hear the quiet tread behind me. I turn just in time, trying to hurl myself sideways. The concussion of the shot is loud. Heat cuts across my cheekbone - the bullet has grazed me but I know it's not serious. The glass of the mirror shatters.

He was intending on shooting me multiple times so I have only a split second before the second bullet is fired. I kick hard. My heel connects with his kneecap, making his leg buckle, making him lose his balance. He gets the second shot off anyway. I'm lucky that it only cuts across the side of my shoulder.

Then I'm on him and the gun is in my grasp. We grapple. I don't try to take it from him but send it flying across the room. He manages to push me off and we come to our feet at the same moment.

Anger flares in me. I've had enough of WetTech and their hit-men and mercenaries. Of their uncaring tests on people who sell their bodies just for a meal. I've had enough of the way they drive areas of the cities into poverty just to make people desperate and easily used. Not that I care all that much - I'm hardly an avenging angel. More a relentless killer that just happens to take on people who thoroughly deserve it. I make a decent enough living out of it. And I wouldn't want to stop. I know I'm addicted to the fighting and the killing. What worries me more is that I'm beginning to like the pain.

Blows are exchanged but we parry them. He's a very big man in a business suit but his shoes are designed to grip the floor. He's fast and his weight and height are advantages. Though I'm a tall woman and powerful I guess I weigh barely half as much as him. I know he's been well-trained. It's likely that he's been fitted with wetware that enhances his reflexes and protein binders to increase his strength and speed.

But I'm better. I grab his wrist as he swings at me, use his momentum and my strength to throw him past. He slams hard into the remaining intact mirror, head-first. It shatters. As he turns he swings a heavy fist backhand at me and I barely avoid it. Blood pours now from a cut over the side of his forehead. Skin flaps loose. He's angry now, and it makes me smile cruelly.

Two exchanged punches, a side-kick, and I catch him at the base of his ribs. I feel the crunch of snapping bone, the grunt of pain as the air leaves him. Even as he falls back against the sink I kick down on his forearm and it breaks.

He charges me then. He has realised he cannot beat me with blows but thinks his weight and strength might save his life. He knows I'll kill him if he fails to kill me.

I turn and we struggle but he can't use his broken arm properly. Pulling him around me I throw him straight through the door of a stall. He falls to his knees over the toilet. I twist his good arm behind him, then pull and feel it dislocate. He groans, hurting and puffing and bleeding, surprised that I beat him, still not quite believing it. There are so many like him, arrogant to the point that they cannot conceive of being bested.

I do not care if he realises the truth of himself or of me. I merely put my hand on the back of his head, pull again on the dislocated arm, then slam his head down three times on the white porcelain edge of the toilet. The first blow cracks his skull, the second caves it in. The third is just because I'm angry.

I step back, staring for a moment at the dead man. His head is over the toilet bowl. The water is red with blood. More blood drips down the white porcelain and pools on the floor.

I return to the sink and wash my hands. Though my knuckles are calloused, one of them is split. I want to check the wound in my shoulder. Though I know it's not serious, it is still bleeding. It'll have to wait.

I walk out of the restroom and across the diner. Half of the customers have fled, no doubt reacting to the shots. A few are hiding and I'm sure the police have been called.

I ignore them, push through the doors and walk to my armoured van. I climb in, start the powerful engine and head out at speed.

The streets flash by under the hot sun of late afternoon. I pay little attention to the houses, businesses and parks. This is an affluent area. But it is not long before I pass the city divide and enter a large district of slums, old tenements and the suburbs of the desperate. It is remarkable how clear the division is. I've sometimes wondered what law the police are following that allows them to arrest people who cross the divide in the other direction - anyone without the relevant papers who goes from poor area to rich. There's no fence or wall of course. The police actually prefer to have more people attempt the crossing. That way they can claim that a crime has been committed. Then they can do whatever they like with the wretch that has now become their victim.

For a while I think I'm being followed. Scopes on the dashboard tell me there are two fliers behind me, but they peel off before long. That makes me wonder. Is it possible that I'm being used somehow, that the police or some other group are deliberately letting me go? I don't know. I do know that my mind spins paranoid webs faster than I can really follow.

I drive down into the familiar underground garage. I lock the van and activate the electrical detonators. Anyone who attempts to break into it will now be electrocuted. If they find a way around that security measure, they'll be electrocuted anyway the moment they climb inside - unless they happen to have my head with them so that the scanner can recognise it and my DNA. In truth I don't value the truck in itself but having such a vehicle is essential in my line of work.

I take the elevator to the eighth floor and let myself into the old workshop that is now my home. It has iron pillars from floor to ceiling, industrial windows divided into small square panes, unvarnished planking on the floor, and white walls. I actually painted them, because I didn't like the oil stains that coated the bare concrete when I chose the place.

I discard my clothes and take a quick shower. It relaxes me until I have a flashback of the previous night. I was in a bar, and I so vividly remember the feeling of my fist pounding the face of the bastard who was using those cyberkids. I let him watch me take out his bodyguards first. Then I beat him to death, but before he died asked him how it felt to know just a little of how his victims felt. I don't know why I bothered. He just spat blood as his head hung limp, obviously still full of hate, convinced of his superiority, convinced that using those kids was his right, that he was entitled to hurt anyone in any way he wanted, convinced that everything was my fault. He'd lost three of his teeth by then. When I slammed his face into the corner of the bar it must have destroyed his vision in one eye. I think I might have got through to him then, but instead I just hit him again and drove his head so far back that his neck broke. His heart stopped before he hit the ground.

I dismiss the images. I finish soaping my body and shampooing my hair. The wound in my shoulder stings but only a little blood runs from it. I stand under the running water for a while.

At length I towel myself dry. I place butterfly plasters and a pad of soft cotton over the cut in my shoulder. Perhaps I should have put stitches in but it is not serious. Then I go to the bed that is in a corner of the large space behind an L-shaped wall. There is no line of sight through any windows to where I sleep.

It's not late - it's still three hours to sunset. But I was up all last night, and I have a few hours before I need to be at a meeting with the fixer who'll pay me for taking out the bastard at the bar. It wasn't much of a job. I'd rather be going after the faceless men and women who run WetTech and NeuroComm and the Schwarz-Geist. I'd rather be going after the assholes that call what they're doing running the country, but I don't know how to get close. I'm good, but I don't have their resources or protections.

I slide between cool cotton sheets and stare up at the reflected sunlight on the ceiling. Then I close my eyes and squeeze my breasts and slide a hand down between my legs, let my fingers explore. I imagine a woman whose face I cannot see, but I know that she is beautiful. I see her breasts above me. After a while she turns and lowers herself down on me and I bury my face in the slick, delicate folds between her legs, taste her and breathe in her scent. My fingers do their work and I ride the explosions. Unbidden images of her abusing me fill my mind.

Eventually I am spent. A light sheen of sweat dampens my flushed skin. I've thrown back the covers and lie still now in the heat.

The sunlight and shadows shift slowly. I'm not sure I will be able to sleep but I close my eyes and deepen and slow my breathing.

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Three days pass. I'm closer to understanding WetTech's corporate structure but the knowledge isn't encouraging. I've also been put on retainer to take out a family that lives in a country mansion upstate. I said I'd take the job but I'll do my own checking first. No way am I going to start killing innocents or children. Of course, they may only barely be human.

I take a new route to one of my weapons caches. I'm not in a hurry and the errand could wait. I want to replace some spent ammunition, but in reality I'm only doing it because I'm restless. I had a workout this morning, including a hundred presses of more than four times my own weight and two hours of other high-intensity exercises, but it's done little to slow me down. Perhaps I'll drive around and pick a fight with some gangbangers if I happen to find any hurting other people - which shouldn't be too hard. A sneer touches my lips and I feel a sudden welling of self-loathing as I consider the ridiculousness of my moral compass.

On the way I stop at a convenience store. I walk around it, choose some bread and cheese and select some vegetables that I'll fry for my evening meal. I take a packet of rice and some frozen fish and chicken. A few packets of tea too - I don't drink coffee.

As I go round the store I'm barely aware of what I'm doing. For some reason I'm thinking about my family - which is rare for me to do. They live on the other side of the country. It's difficult to think of them or their homestead without an intense awareness of what they put me through. I wonder if any of them are dead now. I never really wanted to go over there and confront them. That would have meant they still had a psychological hold over me. When I was much younger I often fantasised about killing them all or becoming strong enough to take over. But I realised soon enough that it wasn't worth it. I don't think about them much at all any more, except when I consider why I am like I am - a reaction against them in many ways.

When I near the counter and look up, my gaze comes to rest upon the young woman standing by the cash register.

I stop. I don't know why I stop. Except that something deep within me must have made me do so. Something about her makes me feel very surprised, though I'm not sure if there is anything obviously surprising about her.

She looks back at me and there is a curious calmness about her. I think that many people might not notice her, might see her just as another quiet, helpful, nameless, insignificant cashier. It is almost as if her manner cloaks the reality of her appearance. I suppose her clothes do not help - the apron she wears with large blue and white checks, the simple white blouse that has seen better days, the skirt that hides her shape. Yet I feel that by peering through the mist of ordinariness that surrounds her I may see something truly amazing underneath.

And in truth there is nothing ordinary at all about her. Her eyes are green, gentle and kind, her regard soft and open. Her eyes are also full of the naïve light of hope and youth. Her hair is blonde and cut quite short. I'm guessing she's in her early twenties, and her open face appears quite unmarked by life. She is very pretty, with a loveliness that is not a classic kind of beauty but all the more appealing for it. For some reason I am suddenly aware that I am about thirty-two years old - I'm not exactly sure. So that would make her maybe ten years younger than me, I think. Then I dismiss the thought. A slight smile touches my face, a moment of amusement at my odd fascination with her. I admit that I find her desirable and . . . more. I feel as if something in her calls to me.

And then I realise that she is staring at me with great interest too, though that is not unusual. I am aware that I look rather striking in some ways and more than a bit intimidating at times. Still, her regard seems to see something else.

I step across to her and begin to unload the shopping basket onto the counter. As I do so she takes the items and passes them before the scanner.

When I look up I see that she has been watching me closely. She glances quickly away and I can see the hint of a blush creeping up her neck and touching her cheeks. For a moment I am slightly saddened, thinking she is embarrassed to have been caught staring at the scar down my cheek and the fierceness of my appearance. Then I see a slight smile tug at her lips and realise that her reaction to me was not a grotesque fascination but a genuine interest. I suspect she is slightly amused at herself as well.

I think she looks charming. I wonder if her interest in me is some kind of attraction. I wonder what she thinks of the danger I might represent and suddenly feel slightly ashamed. Given the location of the store and my appearance, maybe she guesses that I'm someone who lives on both sides of the divide.

She tells me what I owe and I pay cash. 'Thank you,' she says, and looks into my eyes and smiles.

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I have a dream that night, which is nothing unusual. I have dreams almost every night and can usually remember them, which in most cases is less than pleasant. In this one I'm on the run and I can't shake my pursuers. They're all around me no matter what I do, heading me off. Then I duck into the convenience store where she works, though I'm reluctant to because I don't want to put her in danger. Long seconds pass and I expect those who are chasing me to come crashing in after me, shots blasting, weapons swinging. But there's nothing. No sound, no sense of menace. The slanting sunlight through the front windows is cool and pleasant. There is a distinct sense of peace about the place and she is at the centre of it. She is wearing the same clothes I saw her in earlier. She was in the process of stacking some cans in an imaginative way when I burst in. Now she just stands straight and watches me. There's a calmness about her, within her, radiating from her. She smiles gently and I know that I am safe.

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Two days later I'm in the back of a warehouse beyond the north bank of the river. I came here expecting to find the chipping of unwilling subjects. Instead the place turns out to be an old-fashioned slave prison, where the slaves - young women mostly, and some men for manual labour that'll kill them soon enough - are kept before being shipped to wherever they're going. I've killed three guards and I'm tempted to try to take out the rest and just break everyone out. But security is onto me, well-trained mercenaries I suspect, and I don't know the layout of this place. If I take them on I know that it won't stop until either they're all dead or I'm dead, or worse. So I leave, and am able to get away.

I call the police through the identification of a lesser city official that they should take seriously. Then I drive my van to a spot that seems good, and watch and wait for the investigating enforcers to show up. I don't expect more than one car at first, just to authenticate the nature of my call.

No car shows up. But five or more fliers appear overhead, and my van's scopes tell me they're sweeping the area around the warehouse on a certain frequency - the one I used to make the call. I turn off my comm and drive. The police obviously aren't interested in the slaves, only in finding me.

I change channels, turn the comm back on and scramble its frequency even as I head out of there. I put in a call to the city official whose identification I used, thinking I might have time to warn him. I'm told there's been an accident and I know he's already dead. I'm damned glad I kept my distance from the warehouse and the van undercover until the wave of fliers had passed.

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That night I meet a contact in an old park where tech-junkies swap chips and giggle and twitch. I'm trying to find out how the hell I ended up with such bad information about the warehouse.

'You need to take care of that family upstate,' he tells me while staring straight ahead. He's blind but he has implants that reveal to him the proximity of objects. His face is pale and his head is bald. He wears a cheap black suit.

I am not entirely surprised by his statement. I don't know whether he has sold me out or is being threatened himself. I turn and walk away.

Back at the van, I make a decision. I did some checking on the family earlier. The records I accessed suggested they were exactly what I might be most motivated to eliminate: hateful people using people's lives and suffering for profit. But I don't really believe it. It seems more likely that the records were just planted for me to find. I may be wrong. Of course, I also wonder who is setting me up and why they want the family dead.

I drive for six hours, heading to the family's country mansion. The sun rises as I wait outside its immense grounds. The house is extraordinary, with light architecture and huge windows. There's wild forest beyond the walls of the estate. It's a beautiful place.

I do the briefest surveillance. I barely even consider breaking in and trying to learn more about the man and woman - and everyone else there - that I'm supposed to kill. Whoever wants these people dead is keeping their distance from them. I am fairly sure the family has no idea they're in danger.

So at half past eight I just drive up to the gate, press the buzzer, and tell the maid who answers that I have a delivery for the wife. I expect someone to come down to meet me and challenge me, but instead the gate swings open and I drive up the sweeping way to the large open area in front of the house.

The maid meets me at the front door. I notice a security camera and I'm sure there's a guard or two just out of sight. I give the maid a respectful nod and smile and tell her I need to speak to everyone there, including the guards. I tell her everyone here is in danger. I'm unarmed but hell, if I'm wrong and these people really are bastards, I can always change my approach in a moment.

She asks me to wait and closes the door. A couple of minutes later it opens again and one of the guards asks me to come in. He is polite but wary. He ushers me through an airy lobby to a large living room. A distinguished, middle-aged gentleman stands in the centre, watching me as I enter.

'Tell me what it is you have to say,' he says.

I tell him what I know, which is little enough. When he bids me goodbye, he thanks me and assures me he will take the necessary steps to protect his family.

I leave and head back to the city.

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It is late in the afternoon when I get back to the metropolis. I'm tired but I am glad of what I've done. There's more to do though, and I think I should do it before dawn tomorrow. Some suitably placed explosives at the back of the warehouse, some well-timed diversions and feints, followed by an assault from the other side . . . Maybe I'll succeed. The place is going to be guarded like a fortress. They'll have far more security than the last time I was there. But I have a chance. If I make it out of there, I'm leaving the city. If I fail, I hope I'll be dead.

Right now I just need some peace.

I have taken a route that will take me past the convenience store. Soon enough it comes into view and I pull over to one side of it. There's no one there when I enter the place, but the bell over the door rings and a few moments later she comes out from the back. She stops as soon as she sees me.

We stare at each other for a few seconds. I'm surprised and pleased that a small smile touches her lips, though I'm not sure quite what it signifies. I'm not sure why she is seemingly so struck by my presence either. I take the few steps towards her as she makes her way behind the counter.

'Hi,' she says, just as I open my mouth to speak.

'Hi,' I reply. 'I'm in urgent need of a large pot of tea and something to eat. I don't really care what.' I'm surprised that I said that. Perhaps it's just that, if only in this small thing, I want someone else to make a decision for me, as if helping me or relieving me of some tiny responsibility.

'How hungry are you? Something hot?' She looks at me and does not wait for a response. That smile, rather shy this time, returns. Her green eyes have such a curious light to them, a gentleness such that just her regard seems to take away much of the tension in me. 'I'll do what I can,' she says, and I am very grateful.

I sit down on a plastic chair at one of the two small plastic tables near the front of the store. I don't like being so close to the windows but I manage to ignore what would usually cause me anxiety.

After a couple of minutes she comes out carrying a tray. Standing beside me, she sets down a metal pot of tea, a large mug, a pint of milk and a packet of narrow breadsticks. 'It'll take me a few minutes to prepare the rest,' she says. Her voice has such a pleasant timbre. She reaches out as if to touch my forearm, but stops herself.

'Thank you,' I say.

'You are very tired.'

I'm surprised she has said this. Everything about her surprises me. I nod. 'Yes. Didn't get any sleep last night.' Then I see that she winces as she straightens up. I can't see anything wrong with her but I can identify where the pain is hurting her. 'Your back,' I say. 'Your arm.' I look up into her face, concerned. And I am concerned, in a way that feels more real than anything I have felt in a long time. She seems so gentle, so open, so caring, so damned genuine.

She bites her lip, looks ashamed. 'I -'

I can tell she doesn't want to lie but feels compelled not to tell the truth. I'm not sure if she is simply frightened or if she has some kind of misguided loyalty. 'Who hurt you?' I ask.

At my words her expression reveals hurt and confusion. She is shocked that I can guess so much so fast, when her injuries aren't even visible. She averts her gaze. 'The family I'm staying with. They all hurt me.' When she speaks again, it is so softly that I can barely hear her. 'I'm a slave,' she says. She touches the high collar of her blouse and I guess that she is wearing a control collar beneath it.

I reach up and touch her on her good arm. I am amazed when she leans into me slightly. I feel the softness and warmth of her under the cloth of her blouse. Then she moves away a fraction, as if she has suddenly realised that she was unconsciously taking comfort from me and now feels self-conscious.

I would prefer her to lean against me. I realise that I would like to hold her close and comfort her.

When she looks at me again her expression changes, sorrow and humiliation shifting into curiosity and perhaps relief. I think she sees that I could never judge her. Perhaps she sees that my gaze is warm and gentle - at least that's how I feel, though I don't know how it looks. Perhaps I'm not actually capable of looking warm or gentle.

I suspect the injuries are burns though I cannot be sure. 'How long?' I ask.

'Just over a year,' she says. 'They promised me they'd free me after a year, but only made the promise so that it would hurt me more when I found out they have no intention of freeing me. I hope they won't play with me tonight. I guess that they can't hurt me too badly or I won't be able to work.' Her hope is so touching, such a small thing against the darkness that is her life, but the nature of what she hopes against appals me. She looks at me as if to ask me why I want to know, but I say nothing.

I'm not sure what to do. If I take out her owners and manage to get her to a place where I can have her control collar removed without it killing her, at least she'll have a chance of freedom. Not a good one - if she gets caught she'll just be killed and thrown into the rubbish by the enforcers. I could protect her, but I don't want to give her false hopes. I have to survive the attack on the warehouse first - I just can't leave so many people like that.

I am startled by my sudden desire to survive the coming night. Something wells up from within me and I realise that I want to put her first, before even those hundreds in the warehouse.

I'm damn well going to try to do it all. But I can't decide for her, can't put her in such danger without at least asking her if that is what she wants.

'I'll get your food,' she says, and nods to me in a friendly way and then walks through to the back.

Soon enough she returns carrying plates heaped with steaming and fragrant food. As she sets them down on the table I say: 'Will you sit with me for a little while?'

She seems amazed and delighted that I have asked. But she is hesitant. 'I'd like to,' she says. 'Very much,' she says more softly. 'But I'd rather just stand here if you want company. I don't want to appear like I'm not working in case anyone comes in and sees me.'

'I understand.' After a moment I say: 'Would you wish to be set free? The collar removed from your neck? Even with no safety, no one to protect you, the police and enforcers after you?'

She is clearly shocked by my directness. 'Yes,' she says almost without hesitation, and I hear a note of bitter determination in her voice. She bites her lip and says: 'I was . . . thinking of taking my own life.' There are tears in her eyes and her voice is full of grief.

'Where are your owners?' I ask.

'There are three of them. They will be back in an hour or so.'

'Then I'll wait.'

As I drink tea and eat the good food that she has prepared, she stands with me, watching me. I can see the desperate hope in her, the near disbelief, and dread. But she does not question, does not give voice to her fear.

Sometimes as I eat we find ourselves glancing at each other - I find it difficult not to just stare at her. I wonder at the fierce pull she exerts upon me, the curious attraction I feel. It is not just her looks, though to my perceptions she is beyond beautiful. It is something else, something that seems to go much deeper. As if I have known her from another time and she is everything to me, though the memories escape me.

She also has another effect upon me. Usually I am driven, restless, unable to stay in one place, unable to find peace even when I have time to do so. It exhausts me. Yet with her next to me, just being there and doing nothing else at all, I feel a sense of profound quietness. I am filled with calm and wondering emotion. In her presence I am happy just to stay still.

I sip from my final cup of tea after I finish eating. Just as I drain the last of the mug, a pickup truck slows as it passes the storefront. I am aware of her tensing beside me, aware of the fear that she is so determined to keep under control. I watch and listen as the truck pulls into a small garage to one side of the building.

Her owners are here. I am aware of how they can, at a whim, trigger her control collar to inflict terrible pain upon her. Cold fury wells up within me when I think of the times they must have activated it to hurt her. Taking away their ability to control her will be the first thing I do.

And then . . .

When her owners are bleeding at my feet, I wonder if she will want me to kill them. I will not ask her - I do not want to put that burden upon her. I suspect she will just want to leave them behind.

I hear the opening and closing of doors, and footsteps. I stand up and step around her to confront those who are coming. I glance back and indicate that she should stay out of sight. Then I walk towards the counter and the doors to the back.

This first. Then I'll take her to a place where the control collar can be removed and find her a safe place for the night. Afterwards I'll head out to the warehouse.

I am damned well going to make sure that I am still alive tomorrow. Perhaps then we may set out from here together, to go far away, heading for new places and better lives.

And mostly I wonder: will she want to stay with me?

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The End

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## **Incarnations V: Choosing Littleness**

By

Icebard

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Uber  
Alternative  
Near Future  
Sex: Not explicit

Violence: Yes

Kara made her way along the sidewalk. The wind picked up and blew her long black hair into her face, and she pulled it back into a loose knot. Then she walked onwards, long strides carrying her swiftly. She knew that this area of the city was dangerous. It was a run-down district and riddled with crime. She also knew she was more of a danger to anyone who threatened her than they were likely to be to her.

She was on her way back to her cheap, rented apartment after another day at the university. She was twenty-seven and had completed the second of her doctorates three years previously. Her titles meant little to her except in so far as they allowed her to obtain funding for her research projects. She sometimes thought that she would do better to make money in some other and more effective way, such as going into business. But she acknowledged that she had no interest in this and was hence unlikely to be successful.

She turned a corner and made her way down a wide street with tall, narrow houses on each side, all joined together. Just two streetlamps were actually lit and not broken. Their dim light reflected from the water on the ground. It had been raining most of the day.

Ahead of her, three cars were parked at angles in the middle of the road. Between them she saw a number of figures - six or seven men and women - standing around someone, delivering a beating.

She broke into a run. As the huddled form in their midst came into view she saw that it was a woman, blonde and quite small, curled up on the ground, trying unsuccessfully to fend off their blows. They were clearly taking their time with her, wanting to torment her. She did not doubt what the end would be - rape, and then being left dead or dying. She also saw a grim purpose in their actions. She suspected that this had been planned.

She reached them, then ran from the sidewalk and leapt over the hood of one of the cars, landing before them.

'You'll stop that now,' she said quietly. But she knew that they heard her. And they stopped.

Two of the men lunged for her then. Kara felt a curious gladness that now she could release the adrenaline that had surged within her. She struck and kicked high, span and slammed her fist into a face. When bullets were fired she was not where they had been aimed at.

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Eleanor looked up. She saw the chaos of the fight. She took in the lightning swiftness of the woman who fought against her attackers. She heard the crunch of breaking bone, the concussions of guns, the cries and grunts of pain. Then, with astonishing swiftness, all stilled except for moaning gasps from one individual and the dripping of gasoline onto the road.

The woman squatted down beside her and held out her hand to her, gently brushing her fingertips across her cheek. 'You are hurt,' she said. 'But we have to go now.'

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A week later, Kara was in her apartment, going over some data. She had eaten a simple meal that she had cooked herself - not well, she thought, and wished she had ordered take-out. When the phone rang it took her a few seconds to rouse herself from the numbers that filled her mind.

'Hello?' she asked after picking up the phone. It was rare for her to receive a call from anyone. She did not have any friends, and her colleagues only contacted her at her office or laboratory.

'Is this Ms. Barton?' asked a deep but gentle male voice.

'Yes, it is.'

'This is Vincent Weekes. Eleanor's father.'

'Oh, hello,' Kara said. A small smile came to her face. 'Is Eleanor all right?'

'Yes, she's actually doing quite well. I just wanted to thank you for helping her out.'

'It was nothing. I'm just glad I was there.'

'Well, I'd like to thank you properly, and so I'd like to invite you over for dinner. Tomorrow, if you're free. I won't take no for an answer. I don't think Eleanor will either.'

Kara did not reply for a moment. She had very much wanted to contact Eleanor to check on her recovery and to suggest that they meet up for a coffee or for no reason at all except to see her and spend some time with her. But she had not done so. Through the numbers that filled her mind she had glimpsed a possible future that had made her decide to wait for a few days. Now that Eleanor's father had contacted her, various possibilities had collapsed and new ones had appeared. She now felt it would be safe to meet Eleanor and talk with her. 'I'd like that,' she said once she had calculated that this was the case.

'Good. I think Eleanor is hoping you'll like whatever she decides to cook,' said Vincent Weekes, and Kara smiled as she heard embarrassed laughter and protests in background. 'I can send a car for you if you wish.'

'That's all right sir,' Kara said. 'If you could just give me the address and a time. I'm free tomorrow, so I'll be happy to come by.'

A few minutes later, Kara stood and turned the light off, then walked across to a window and stared out into the night. A fine drizzle was falling and the wind was quite strong, gusts and water hissing against the pane. It was early March and there were a few mounds of slushy snow at the edges of the street. The illumination from streetlamps, a set of traffic lights and some neon signs from a couple of shop windows were reflected in uneven paths across wet asphalt. On the corner was small Chinese restaurant she occasionally went to. The few people she could see hurried against the unpleasant weather.

After a while she closed her eyes and allowed numbers she was familiar with to scroll through her mind. She was able to make the calculations that identified the exact nature of the reasons she had not called Eleanor earlier. She was glad that what she had glimpsed was the same as what was now revealed. Had she done anything differently the results would likely have been destructive, and not only to the two of them.

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The following afternoon, Kara took a shower and then dressed to go to the Weekes' place. She managed to annoy herself by taking far longer than usual choosing what to wear. In the end she just chose a pair of new, light blue jeans, a brown leather belt, good boots that came to just above the ankle, a black t-shirt, and a black pullover of loose-knit wool. She wore no make-up or jewellery - she very rarely did. As she left she pulled on her long black coat and took her umbrella with her.

Outside, the cold and blustery wind was quite strong but at least it was not raining for the moment. Walking to a florist a couple of blocks away, she bought a single yellow rose. Then she took a half-hour bus ride to a quiet and leafy suburb, and walked a further mile and a half to the Weekes' residence.

As she neared the place she wondered at the size of the mansions all around and their large, perfectly cared for grounds. She took in the walls and security, expensive cars and other signs of considerable wealth.

The Weekes' place was just over a rise and around a corner in the road such that it had no visible neighbours. Large cypress and oak grew tall near the walls of the estate.

Kara made her way to the gate and pressed on the buzzer. After a few seconds a woman's voice said: 'Weekes' residence. May I help you?'

'Hello, this is Kara Barton. I'm here to see Eleanor and Vincent Weekes.'

'Please come up to the house.'

The gate slid open quietly but Kara noticed that it was of heavy steel and not merely for show. The top was spiked, as were the walls. As she made her way up the curving, tree-lined drive the house came more clearly into view.

It was large but somehow its architecture suggested that it was for comfort and use and not ostentation. She suspected that part of it was quite old, perhaps from around 1900, but that it had been extended and altered. The drive led around the side to some garages.

Kara walked up the front steps and rang the doorbell. A few seconds later a woman of about forty years old answered the door. She was smartly dressed quite attractive.

'Kara Barton?' the woman asked. At Kara's nod she stood back. 'Please come in. I'm Susan. Come through to the living room and I'll let them know you're here.'

Kara shook the woman's hand - which seemed to surprise her slightly - then followed her through the large foyer, past a sweeping staircase and into the living room. She looked about her and saw the tastefulness of the rich furnishings. There was a certain amount of artwork on display but she suspected it was simply what the Weekes liked and that it was not famous or particularly expensive.

'Ah,' said a deep voice, and a man stepped through a wide doorway from what appeared to be a billiard room. 'Ms. Barton I presume?' He was about fifty, tall and rather portly, with thick grey hair that was swept back. His eyes were a clear light brown. He was wearing a tuxedo, the shirt partly undone at the front, the bow tie simply slung about his neck, and had battered, dark green slippers on his feet.

She nodded. 'Call me Kara. Mr Weekes?' she asked.

'Call me Vincent. Sorry about my appearance. Some damn stupid function I had to go to earlier. Has Susan offered you refreshments?' He quirked a grey eyebrow at the woman.

'I was just about to,' said Susan with a smile.

'Oh, I'm all right thank you,' Kara said.

Vincent walked across to her and, after Kara had put down the rose she had been carrying upon a coffee table, he took both of her hands in his - and Kara noticed that Susan made a discreet exit.

'I want to thank you,' he said, shaking her hands with his words for emphasis and looking into her eyes - they were about the same height. 'I cannot tell you how grateful I am for your help, and I will not forget it. My daughter means everything to me. You understand?' He looked intensely at her and she saw the conviction and the kindness in his gaze.

'I'm just happy I was there,' Kara said. 'Although I wish I'd arrived a couple of minutes earlier. Is Eleanor all right?' She had taken her to a hospital to have her checked out and then settled her into a cab to take her home. She had regretted that she had not been able to see her all the way.

'Bruised and a bit shaken up,' he said, glancing away. 'You know her physical injuries weren't serious. Still, such a thing is very traumatic. I think she's been sleeping all right though.'

Kara heard swift footsteps from a hallway off the living room. Then the footsteps slowed and Eleanor Weekes stopped in the doorway. She was wearing a long grey skirt and green blouse, comfortable shoes and a cooking apron. A happy and excited smile lit up her face and her green eyes sparkled. Kara could not miss the genuine delight and pleasure there. Goddess, she seems so pleased to see me, she thought, very surprised. Then she marvelled at Eleanor's beauty, the outer loveliness that she had combined with the beauty that seemed to shine from within. She felt her heart beat more quickly and felt slight warmth come to her face, mirrored in the charming, subtle pink blush that touched Eleanor's cheeks.

After long seconds they looked away from each other. Then Eleanor said: 'Kara.' Her voice was quiet, gentle and kind. 'I'm so glad you could come.'

'I'm happy to be here and see you again,' Kara replied. As Vincent released her hands, she took a couple of steps towards her even as Eleanor walked across the room and stopped in front of her. And they just looked at each other again, smiling.

'I'm sorry I couldn't see you all the way home the other day,' Kara said. 'And I'm sorry I didn't call to check on how you were doing. I . . . ' She trailed off. She wanted to explain but it would be difficult to do so. She wondered if Eleanor would think her crazy.

Eleanor just gave her a smile. 'I understand,' she said, and for a moment Kara wondered if she really did. 'Sit down if you wish, make yourself at home. I think my father wants to interview you, and perhaps he'll entertain you too while I ready the last of the meal. Is that all right?'

Kara smiled and nodded. Then, suddenly remembering, she turned and picked up the yellow rose she had brought, and handed it to Eleanor. 'For you,' she said. 'I just thought . . .' But somehow she did not quite know how to finish the sentence.

'Oh, Kara,' Eleanor said, smiling again, and Kara saw the glimmer of tears in her eyes. 'That is so kind of you.' She looked at it, then raised it to her nose. 'I love yellow roses.' For a few moments, she looked from the rose to Kara and back. And then suddenly she jumped and glanced at her watch. 'Oh, I need to check the meal. I'll get a vase for this too.' Looking into Kara's eyes again she said, softly: 'Thank you.' Then she made her way from the room.

Kara sat at one end of a comfortable leather sofa and Vincent sat in an armchair. He seemed to be thinking about what he had just seen, probably not having missed the emotion that was so obvious between his daughter and Kara, but perhaps not understanding it. Then he seemed to shake himself free of his considerations and said to her: 'Please, tell me about what happened. I'd like to know. Of course, Eleanor has already told me, but I'd like to hear it from your point of view.'

'Well, there's not that much to tell,' Kara said. 'I was walking down the street on the way home from the university and saw these men attacking Eleanor. I chased them off, and hurt one or two of them. I saw three cars, none with number plates. All of them wore masks. You know the shifting type that look like faces constantly melting and being reformed in different ways? I told the police when they interviewed me at hospital but I don't know if they followed anything up.' She glanced about her. 'I didn't know you were wealthy, or what you do. Do you think it was a planned attack?'

'I don't know,' Vincent replied, shaking his head and looking a little afraid. 'It is possible.' Then one side of his mouth twitched and he looked at her sceptically. 'I heard you did rather more than chase them off and hurt one or two of them.'

She shrugged slightly. 'Well. I've trained in various martial arts for a long time. I guess I was just lucky and took them by surprise.'

He regarded her steadily and she knew that he did not believe her, but she did not volunteer any more information and he did not push her.

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Four evenings later, Kara stood by the couch in her living room and looked down at Eleanor's slumbering form. She had suggested that she stay the night, for they had been talking until late. Eleanor had agreed to take Kara's bed but she had fallen asleep as Kara had gone in search of a toothbrush and towel for her.

You are like an angel, Kara thought, taking in the shortish, light blonde hair, the gentle features, the cute nose that sometimes wrinkled charmingly when she smiled, and the eyes that were closed now, hiding her soft green gaze. I met you just a few days ago but I feel so strangely and powerfully connected to you. I've fallen in love with you. She tilted her head then, happily puzzling over the matter. The feeling seemed to be one that was both familiar and ancient, though she knew she had never known it before in her life.

She settled a blanket about Eleanor and a pillow beneath her head, grinning at a sleepy, confused half-question before the blonde settled back into deeper sleep.

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The following Saturday, just before six in the morning, they awoke in Kara's bed. For a while they just lay there together, enjoying the closeness and warmth and sleepy comfort that filled them. Kara lay upon her back, her arms wrapped about Eleanor, while Eleanor lay upon her side, her head upon Kara's shoulder and an arm about her waist.

After a while they got up and showered together. Then, entirely predictably, they found themselves returning to bed to make love at great length. They were passionate and tender, marvelling at each other's beauty, filled with awe and emotion.

Eventually they slept again, holding each other and drifting into happy dreams where they were together.

Once they finally made it out of bed, they prepared and ate a large and leisurely breakfast. They chatted a little, and shared tender looks and touches, both of them amazed and wondering at the newness of what they had found together, the connection that had so quickly formed between them. A curious mixture of vulnerability and excitement mixed in them.

After clearing away the breakfast things they decided to go for a walk. The weather was not good but they were glad to be out in the cold and windy air for a little while. After an hour of strolling in the streets and in a park, they returned home and were glad to get back into the warmth.

They prepared a large pot of tea and chose some snacks, then settled down on the sofa beneath a blanket, snuggled up together, and spent the afternoon watching two films that they chose together, neither of which was very serious but both of which were entertaining.

In the evening Eleanor said that she would like to cook. For a little while Kara simply watched her from the kitchen doorway, fascinated. She saw the small smile that sometimes touched Eleanor's mouth and the glow of happiness that was revealed in her gentle expression. She knew that Eleanor was slightly self-conscious about Kara watching her but she also saw that she was pleased and actually amazed - simply astonished that Kara was so captivated by her and regarded her with such love.

They ate by candlelight and took their time with the good food.

Later they went for another, shorter walk. Then, back home again, they relit some candles and listened to quiet music and cuddled upon the sofa, lying along its length. Soon enough Eleanor fell asleep in Kara's arms, her head upon her chest.

And for a long time, Kara simply lay there and wondered. As the atmospheric music ended, she listened to the wind that buffeted the windows and whined about the building, and to the occasional noise of traffic or sirens in the city. But mostly she listened to Eleanor's slow, quiet breathing, and savoured the press and warmth of her body against her, and was filled with a sense of peace she had never known before.

The dimly flickering light of the last of the candles they had lit burned down. Still Kara did not move, but basked in the warm glow of happiness that filled her. She felt so glad about her life now, so utterly content, so calm and also excited, now that Eleanor was with her. Yet again she watched the sleeping form, the gentle rise and fall of Eleanor's breasts with each breath, the gladness that was revealed in the suggestion of a small contented smile that touched her face even in sleep. She traced the shape of her beautiful face and gently ran her fingers through her blonde hair. She breathed in her lovely scent.

At length Kara closed her eyes. She did not sleep but wondered about the numbers that she could summon, the immense calculations she could execute that could describe and predict so much. She recalled times when she had been lost in deep fugues and had glimpsed distant and sometimes terrible futures. Even now the import of the numbers hammered at her as she sifted through a simple, shifting mass of them, barely pausing in her calculations but merely seeing straight through them.

She saw and understood that she could be something extraordinary. She knew that she could live her life in a way that would make others marvel at her. She wondered if she might even be able to significantly change the future - though she would only do so if she could be sure that her actions would be beneficial to others in the long run, and she was not confident that she ever would be very sure.

But she did not want any of that, though she would do what she could to help others where she might.

She wanted just to be with Eleanor, to have days like this. Even the quiet moments, or just watching videos together, had been blissful. She did not need anything spectacular and did not want it. She rejected some of the paths that she had been heading down. Her life could seem little to others, passing without any real impact, unnoticed - though anyone looking closely would be able to see her happiness. But to her, the apparent littleness that their lives might have would be greater than anything she had ever hoped for.

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The End