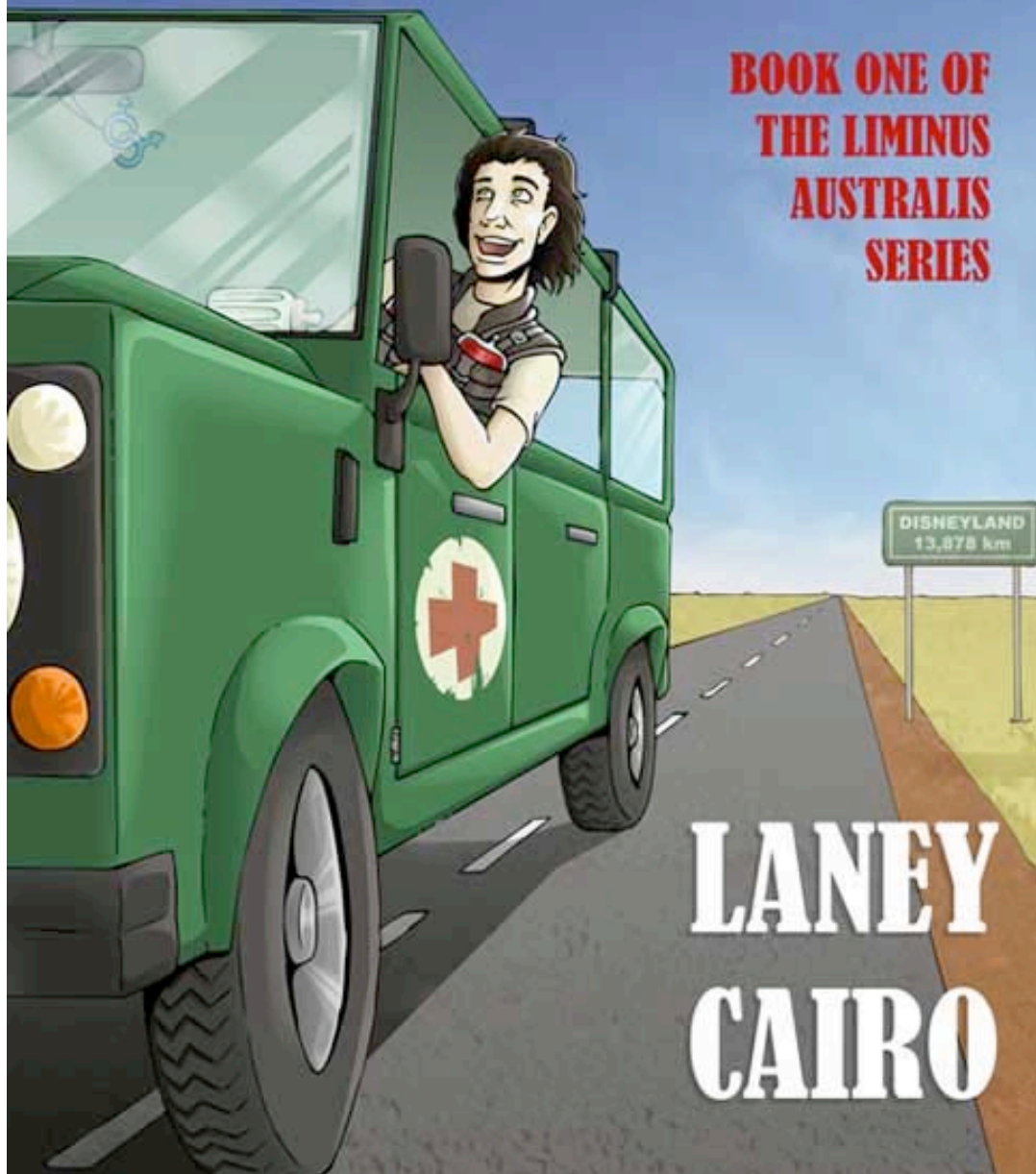


RUNNING THE NULLARBOR

BOOK ONE OF
THE LIMINUS
AUSTRALIS
SERIES



LANEY
CAIRO

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Running the Nullarbor

SCREWDRIVER

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Chapter One

The rumble of automatic fire faded, a Doppler shift of reassurance as the rolling street combat moved away from Dan's house. He put down his Steyr rifle, checked the locks on his steel-plated door, then slumped back into the chair, gun within easy reach and his damaged leg propped up on the sticky surface of the kitchen table, easing the gnawing ache in his knee.

He could tell, based on the sporadic thwumps, that it was a street gang engaged with the military; too much petrol, not enough automatic weapons' fire.

Idiots, wasting petrol.

He had some power, the electric light overhead flickered between yellow and brown, but it wasn't enough to run his short wave radio set. That would take hand cranking, but he didn't mind doing it by hand if it kept him in contact with the rest of the world.

The radio set hummed, building up charge as he primed the crank, and he began the slow scan of the bands, looking for his regular contacts.

Mikey, cab driver and blackmarketeer, mad enough to run blockades while charging by the kilometer, ran his empire by shortwave radio. Dan's parents had a radio, too, in the four wheel drive they'd fled east in. Dan's father, a 'Nam veteran, had packed up Dan's mother, the two farm dogs, and all the food they could carry and headed for safety after the first bombing run. Dan didn't expect to be able to make radio contact with them any time soon. The Red Cross base at the Merredin refugee camp had a listening post. And there was Jake, his ex, who would be on patrol with his unit, somewhere in the city.

The set crackled, and Jake's voice was tinny. "Hey," Jake said. "I've been waiting for you to appear."

"Sorry," Dan said. "But someone was trying to blow up my neighborhood. Glad you waited around for me."

The set crackled and hummed, switching back to Jake. "Have you got room at the moment?" Jake asked. "For a baby?"

This was what Dan did; he fostered children orphaned by the hostilities: police action, not war. No one was supposed to call the war a war. He could have been safe on his parents' abandoned farm at Wyalkatchem, but the only orphans out there were lambs, and he was over lambs.

"Sure," Dan said, and the set hissed and spat, then went silent.

Jake hadn't said when he'd bring the child over, but Dan wouldn't have minded betting that he'd be caring for a traumatized toddler for the rest of that night.

It took him time, hobbling with a walking stick, to check the spare bedroom. He had a clean bed, made up ready, and a cot, too. He had a pile of cloth squares, familiar khaki made from cut up sheets, which worked as nappies. The Red Cross kept him supplied with formula. They considered Dan a field worker and delivered food and essentials erratically.

He put the water on to boil and added a second pan on, too. He dropped his meager supply of feeding bottles and teats in. Jake had said 'baby,' but Dan knew that Jake called everyone under the age of twelve a baby. Still, it wouldn't hurt to be prepared, and sometimes an older child who was deeply shocked wanted a bottle for the comfort.

The water had just started to roil around the glass bottles when Dan caught the sound of an APC approaching, rumbling closer, and then grinding to a halt outside his house. The rest of the street was unoccupied; he was the only resident left, but he still picked up his rifle, and checked that his ex-Army Browning pistol was tucked into his belt.

He didn't have electronic security, but that was definitely Jake's pound on the door, three thuds, two, and then four. The steel bar across the door was heavy to lift one-handed, but even if he'd doubted the thuds, there was a persistent wail from an infant coming through the steel.

"All right," he called out, propping the bar against the wall, and then pulling the door open. "All right."

Jake's eyes were visible through the flipped-up visor of his helmet, but it was the baby in Jake's arms that Dan was interested in.

"Hey, sweetie," he crooned, taking the infant, wrapped in someone's sweater, out of Jake's arms. "Don't be scared, you're safe now."

Safer. There wasn't anywhere in the city that was actually safe.

The baby's face was wrinkled, bright red from crying, eyes scrunched shut and mouth open in a wail. Dan tucked the little one against his chest so the baby's face was against his neck, and said, "Come on in."

"Can't stay," Jake said, and Dan could make out the shadowy shapes of Jake's patrol partners and the faint gleam of moonlight on weapons.

“Is the baby hurt?” Dan asked as Jake turned to leave. “Do you know anything about the baby?”

Jake shrugged. “Our medic checked her over, said she was good. We pulled her from the wreck of a car on the outskirts of the city, looked like the vehicle had been hit by a mortar round. The other occupants were dead.”

Dan nodded. It happened all the time, people attempting to flee the danger in the city found worse danger elsewhere.

“I’ll look after her,” he said, lifting his voice over the baby’s cries. “Until someone claims her.”

Jake nodded and melted back into the darkness, and the APC rumbled away a moment later.

Dan had to put the baby down to secure his door, then he scooped her back up again, holding her close.

“Hungry?” he asked gently. “Shall we do something about that?”

He’d had more than one tiny baby pass through his safe house before, so he knew how to pop the top off a can of formula one-handed, add the scoops of powder to the sterilized bottle, and pour in the boiled water.

He shook the bottle thoroughly, the baby’s cries becoming increasingly desperate, and in the absence of a free hand to check the temperature of the formula, he splashed some on his cheek.

“Good enough,” he told the baby in his arms.

He kept a creaky rocking chair, salvaged from a bombed house, in the spare room, so he settled on that, sore leg propped on the bed, baby tucked into the crook of one arm.

The baby took the bottle instantly, dragging at the teat with desperation, and he murmured, “You were just hungry, weren’t you? They just didn’t know what to do.”

The fact that Dan did was not something he’d expected from his life. He’d been a mechanic before the conflict started, and then he’d been an infantryman, patrolling a mine site in the far north, getting shot at intermittently, tormented by flies and insane heat.

One of those shots had done his knee in, and he’d come back to the city to be close to soft-hearted Jake, who kept bringing him children to care for.

Not in the game plan at all.

The baby’s eyes were closing, easing shut, the bottle nearly empty, so Dan dragged his leg off the bed and levered himself back up again. The room held a table, folded nappies down one side, towel spread out, and Dan carefully laid the baby down and unfolded the sweater.

Under the sweater, covered by handprints of gun oil and cordite, the baby was wearing delicate lace, pale lemon and mint. “Well, well,” Dan whispered. “You were all dressed up, sweetie, weren’t you?”

He had to roll the infant onto her side to unbutton the clothing, and then slide it off her arms.

She wasn’t a chubby baby, her arms were spindly and thin, but her nappy was thoroughly soiled. “Might be why you were crying,” he whispered. “That, and your empty tummy.”

The medic had been right, she was a little girl, far too small for the hastily folded cloth that Dan pinned around her, and for the all-in-one outfit he slid her arms and legs into. “Never mind,” he murmured. “I’ll roll the cuffs up, as long as you promise to be careful and not trip over them.”

Dressed again, the baby kept up a sustained grizzle, even when Dan held the bottle, with the last dregs of formula still in it, up to her mouth.

“Had a bad day,” he said consolingly, settling back in the rocker, semi and pistol within reach, baby and himself both wrapped in a blanket. He undid his shirt and eased the baby into the warmth, against his chest.

He had bad days, too, when all he really wanted was a good cuddle, so he was sympathetic.

The baby woke him just as dawn was lighting the edge of the curtains, and he had to put her down in the cot because his leg had seized up too thoroughly for him to be able to carry her far.

The hobble out to the kitchen was absolute fucking agony, each step reminding him that he still had bits of shell in his knee, and that while bone healed, cartilage never really did.

The baby had worked her way up to a real shriek by the time Dan, holding onto the walls in an attempt to take some of his weight off his knee, limped back into the spare room.

No point in trying to soothe a starving infant, so he picked up the baby and lowered himself back onto the spare bed. If he’d done that earlier, his leg might actually be working.

“You and me,” he said to the baby as she set about draining the bottle. “We need to name you. What would you like your name to be?”

The baby’s eyes slid shut, bliss on her face as the milk splashed into her belly so hard that Dan could hear it. “You look like a Kelly to me,” he told her, tucking the blanket around her securely. “So, Kelly, how about a bit of a lie-in?”

Dan filled both of his saucepans, thankful that he still had running water, and put them on to heat, doubly grateful for the bottled LPG that the Red Cross supplied him. Kelly, squirming and indignant, voiced her disapproval loudly from her spot on the kitchen table.

“Bath time,” Dan told her, picking her up again. “You should be glad I’ve practiced on another baby, because the first time I bathed him was a disaster.”

At least he now knew that a baby slipping out of his hands and under the water wasn’t a catastrophe.

Kelly hiccupped and sighed against Dan’s chest. “Someone will be looking for you,” he told her, finding the poppers on the oversized outfit and undoing them without putting Kelly back down again. “Someone has to be looking for you.”

In the thin daylight through the steel grille of the kitchen window, as warm water and a sliver of soap washed away the accumulated grime of a car accident and a trip in an APC with an infantry team, Dan had a chance to really look at the little girl.

She had dark hair, the cowlicks and clumps washing out. She was small enough that Dan’s two hands held her securely, her head cupped in one hand, thin little body supported by the other. And her eyes were a distinctive and delicate pale green. Cat’s eyes, looking up at Dan, watching his face as he cooed to her, infant smile spreading across her face as she splashed her hands in the warm water and kicked her feet.

Dan was getting used to Kelly, and she to him. He now knew that she drained her bottles fast, liked to be wrapped up tightly, and preferred to sleep against his chest. She looked for him when he walked into the room, smiles of recognition for his face. Someone had to be desperate to find such a beautiful child.

Tuesday came and went: a blur of feeds and hand-washing of nappies. Tuesday was supposed to be supply-and-handover day, where the regional Red Cross coordinator would arrive, bringing formula and food, swapping the supplies for the children that Dan had accumulated during the previous week. That Tuesday, however, also seemed to be local turf war day, small arms fire interspersed with loud thuds and the squeal of bike tires.

The bikes worried Dan. He knew the local gangs, had an understanding with them based upon a steady supply of black market ammo from Mikey and some military experience with sniping. They didn’t approach his place; he’d try not to shoot any of them.

But outsiders, roaring into the area on bikes rigged with armor and firm-mounted weapons, might not respect his personal space adequately. Outsiders were bad news. Worse news.

Kelly was tucked inside Dan’s shirt, her preferred place for napping, and Dan was fine with that. It left both of his hands free, and they were currently holding his semi as he peered through the slit in the steel plate that covered what had been his front window.

A haze of smoke partially obscured the late afternoon light, and he could smell burning plastic and fuel, but the bangbangbang of the chopper overhead was reassuring, signaling that the defense forces had noticed the spot blazes and small arms fire of the turf war.

The chopper circled, engine and blade noise fading, then strengthening, and the boom of heavy artillery shook the metal plate Dan was pressed against, making Kelly whimper in her sleep.

“Shhh,” he whispered reassuringly. “It’s only a police action, no need to be worried, not like we’re at war or anything.”

The chopper buzzed low, firing off a few RPGs, and a heavy silence settled over the area. With luck, the forced peace would hold through the night, and with more luck Kelly would sleep for longer than twenty minutes, then Dan would actually get some rest.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, Kelly in his shirt with a bottle in her mouth, spooning his reconstituted baked beans and potato ration pack mix into his own mouth, when he first heard the steady hum of the motor bike.

Single bike, approaching at speed, dropping back through the gears to corner, and then accelerating again. The street echoed with one shot that sounded like it was from a pistol, but no returning fire.

The thrum of the bike motor picked up, cornered, and then drove down Dan’s street slowly.

Dan pushed himself to his feet, arm securely around Kelly, and picked up his semi. He had spare magazines in his pocket, and the safety was off.

The tick of the bike’s engine was audible, as was the rattle of tires over debris, and Dan peered through the slit, resting the nose of his semi on a gun port he’d drilled through the steel plate.

The bike idled to a halt outside Dan’s house, and the single rider kicked the stand down and slung a leg over the tank.

Male, long-legged in filthy jeans, pistol in a holster at his hip, the rider took off his bike helmet, wiped his nose on the sleeve of his heavy jacket. His jacket was bulky with plastron inserts.

He looked right at Dan and lifted both hands, and in the slant of the setting sun, Dan could see his hands were grubby but empty.

The street was silent again, now the bike had stopped, and the rider called out, “I’ve come to collect the child!”

Chapter Two

“Who are you?” Dan called back.

The man walked closer, across what once had been lawn but was now a charred expanse of dirt, hands still held out, until he was only a matter of feet away from the steel plate and gun port.

Dan shifted the line of the rifle so it pointed right at the man.

The man dragged his helmet off and leaned forward. “Look!” he said urgently.

He had pale eyes, too, the same green. The same dark hair, though the rider’s was matted and lank. It was possible, if the rider washed, he’d have the milky skin that Kelly did.

Kelly stirred inside Dan’s shirt, murmuring and squirming.

“Disarm,” Dan said. “Jacket, too. Then I’ll let you in.”

Dan levered the bar off the steel door, and opened it carefully, rifle securely in hand.

The man dropped his jacket on the doorstep, and then his HK-4 pistol. He lifted his hands and turned around slowly; his jeans were so tight that there was no chance he had anything hidden in them. If he’d just painted dirt on himself, it would give the same effect.

“Alright,” Dan said, stepping back and pulling the door open, then pushing it shut again behind the man.

“My stuff...” the rider said. “It’ll get stolen.”

“We’ll hear them take your bike first,” Dan said, putting his rifle down and shoving the bar back in its brackets. “I’m Dan.”

“Sid,” the rider said, and his eyes were on the bulge in Dan’s shirt. Then Kelly moved and cried.

“Feeding time,” Dan said, over the escalating sobs. “Take a seat, I need to feed Kelly.”

“Aishlinn,” Sid said, raising his voice. “Her name’s Aishlinn.”

Dan looked up from scooping formula. “Oh,” he said. “She’s not your child, is she?” A parent would have wrenched the baby from Dan’s arms, and certainly wouldn’t have been more interested in inspecting Dan’s books and papers than in their child.

“No,” Sid said, and he poked at the ration pack that Dan had been eating earlier. He was thin, and probably hungry. “She’s my cousin’s child. The family sent me to collect her.” His oil-smudged fingers toyed with the wrapper of a meal bar.

“Eat it if you want,” Dan said. “Do you want to hold her while I make her bottle?”

Sid looked uncertain when Dan lifted the shouting baby out of his shirt and handed her across to him. Sid’s hands circled Kelly... Aishlinn’s waist uncertainly, and the baby wobbled and picked up the tone of her cries to something piercing.

“No,” Dan said, taking Aishlinn back. “Like this. Hold out your arms.”

Sid stretched his arms out and Dan laid the baby across them. “Now hold her close.”

Dan left Sid, baby tucked squawking against the front of his sweater, and went back to making the bottle. That was the only thing that was going to stop her at that moment.

Watching Sid, ration bar still stuck in his mouth, hold Aishlinn and a bottle, while she drained it, was quite possibly the most amusing thing Dan had seen for a while, and he was glad there was enough electricity in the grid to run his lights adequately.

Sid did have Aishlinn’s pale skin, though the only place that was obvious was in the creases around his eyes and where the neck of his shirt stood open, showing smooth skin, at least to the point at which his biker jacket had no longer covered him and the grime started. His eyes in the electric light were oddly opaque, as though the color of the iris was imagined rather than real.

Aishlinn squirmed and farted, a loud rumbling, and a look of horror passed across Sid’s face. Dan had to laugh, though it wasn’t that long ago that infant digestive systems had dismayed him, too.

“I’ll change her in a moment,” Dan said, and Sid nodded around the bar in his mouth.

“Thanks,” he said indistinctly.

“Tip the bottle a little,” Dan said, and he frowned. “How exactly where you planning on taking Aishlinn away with you? She won’t cope with the bike.”

Sid looked up at Dan, and the half-eaten bar dropped out of his mouth onto the baby. “Oh,” he said. “Guess I was more worried with finding her in the first place. I’ll steal a car. It’ll be a relief not to have to ride a bike back over the Nullarbor.”

It was Dan’s turn to stare. “You’ve come from over east?” he asked.

“There was no one here to collect her,” Sid said. “So someone had to drive over.”

The enormity of what Sid had done made Dan blink. The road was rumored to be mined, the train track, too. There was some kind of military installation at Eucla that Dan had heard rumors of when he’d served. No one just drove over the Nullarbor anymore. It was four thousand kilometers of desert, military checkpoints, aerial surveillance and no fuel.

Sid’s eyes were on Aishlinn, who was drowsing toward the end of her bottle, so Dan could study him carefully. What sort of person got on a bike to ride across the country, across the fucking world almost, to rescue Aishlinn, but knew nothing about babies? Was Sid sent, or did he choose to come? And how the hell was he going to get a restless and fretful baby back again?

There was another squelching gurgle, and Sid paled further. And how exactly was Sid planning on changing her nappies?

Dan stood up, his dodgy knee locking for a moment, so he had to wrench the leg to get it to move. “You’d better learn about nappies,” Dan said, taking Aishlinn out of Sid’s arms and hobbling toward the spare room. “Wash your hands,” he said over his shoulder.

Sid looked around the spare room, at the shelf of folded children’s clothes, the cot and bed, the nappies waiting, and Aishlinn grumped as Dan put her down onto the table.

“Come closer,” Dan said, and Sid hovered behind him, close enough that Dan could smell the soap he’d just washed his hands in, sweet rose over the smell of sweat and motor oil.

Aishlinn screamed when Dan undid her oversize clothes and her wriggling and kicking spread the poo further, down one leg and across her belly.

Dan thought that maybe Sid had retched.

Dan kept a pile of cloths and a bowl of water for just such an emergency, and he wiped Aishlinn down quickly, bundling the soiled nappy up and putting it aside, ready to be scrubbed.

Her clothes were stained, too, so Dan stripped her off. “Pass me the baby clothes on the shelf,” he said without looking at Sid.

“Oh,” Sid said, and when Dan glanced over from wiping Aishlinn clean, Sid was reverently holding the baby clothes Aishlinn had arrived in. “My grandmother made this,” Sid said. “All the lace is hers.”

“You can tell?” Dan asked, taking the outfit and beginning the process of inserting a squirming and unhappy infant into it. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of a man who appreciated lace.

“Her initials are embroidered into the lace.”

Aishlinn shrieked at being dressed, and didn't stop until Dan picked her up and held her against his shoulder and began to hobble up and down the room.

"You can't take her," Dan said, shuffling past Sid. "You don't know anything about babies."

"But..." Sid said, and Dan gestured at the rocking chair.

"Sit down," he said. "Let me think about this."

Sid sat, and for a moment Dan thought he saw amusement on Sid's face, then it creased in thought again.

"I don't know anything," Sid admitted.

Aishlinn's cries faded, settling down to a sleepy whimper, and in the distance, Dan could hear the steady boom of shelling.

"She belongs with your family," Dan said, keeping his voice low because of Aishlinn.

The shelling moved closer, and Aishlinn jolted in Dan's arms, spreading pre-used formula over his shoulder and arm.

Sid made a sound of revulsion, but Dan ignored it as he reached for a cloth from the nappy change table to wipe himself and Aishlinn with, still thinking.

"I don't think the Red Cross will fly her across the country, not now. All the children are just being taken to refugee camps inland, to be guarded."

"I can take her," Sid insisted. "I have to."

When Dan looked up from wiping the last of the vomit off Aishlinn's neck and clothes, Sid was pale, with fine beads of sweat standing across his forehead. Dan knew what someone who was about to throw up looked like; he'd eaten a lot of Defence Force cafeteria cooking.

"So you're planning on taking her back across the country, four thousand kilometers, and you're going to hope during that time that she doesn't dirty a nappy or puke?" Dan asked. "What if she gets motion sick, and vomits constantly?"

Sid had the look of someone who was swallowing hard, and Dan resisted the urge to be cruel and unwrap the nappy that was waiting to be cleaned.

"Toilet's the next room, on the right," he said.

Sid bolted from the room, banging the loo door open, and Dan patted Aishlinn's back soothingly. "Are all your relatives this squeamish?" he whispered. "Don't worry; I'm not going to let Sid leave you in the same nappy for four days."

Sid retched, the loo flushed, and Dan could hear the tap running in the bathroom.

“Don’t drink the water!” he called out, and Sid appeared in the doorway, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“Sorry,” Sid said. “Guess I’m not much good with babies.”

“Or sick people?” Dan asked, bending down as well as he could to slide the settled baby into her cot, and then tucking her blanket over her.

Dan drew the spare room door closed, and hobbled out to the kitchen, almost collapsing onto a kitchen chair and grimacing as he lifted his damaged leg up onto another chair.

Sid sat down opposite, still looking peaky. The distant fighting seemed to be moving closer, screaming motors, choppers in the air getting louder.

“May I bring my gun and jacket inside now?” Sid asked. “If you feel threatened by me, I’m sure you could just wave Aishlinn at me, make me throw up again.”

Dan rummaged around in the mess on the table and found his bunch of keys. They were a long way down; he never left the house anymore, so there was no need to lock up. “There’s a secure garage beside the house, the big key opens it. Move your bike in there.”

Sid took the keys, fingers on the back of Dan’s hand, and his hands were smooth and undamaged. This was someone who had never been conscripted; the military ruined a person’s hands forever. Dan had a badly-set index finger on his left hand, compliments of trying to keep the APC running.

Sid had hefted the bar off the door and slipped outside into the darkness before Dan could work out how to ask him how he’d dodged the draft.

Sid might not be military trained, but he knew enough not to start the bike to move it, and Dan could hear the squeak and crunch of the wheels on the dirt outside, and the rattle of his garage door opening, and then closing a moment later.

Sid closed the door to the house, sliding the bar back on its brackets before tossing his jacket and pistol onto the couch.

He sat down at the table across from Dan, and despite the way his dark hair was sweat clumped and the smell of clothes that hadn’t been changed for weeks, he was damned attractive.

“You’ve got a car,” Sid said. “Give me your car.”

Dan shook his head. “I’m not letting you take Aishlinn away by yourself. You haven’t got a clue how to look after her, and you’ll hurt her. Maybe kill her.”

“What if I just steal your car?” Sid asked. “You’re lame, I’m quick.”

“It’s missing a certain key component,” Dan said. “How much do you know about vehicles?” The component was fuel, but there was no need to mention that.

Sid’s shoulders dropped. “Oh, fuck, you win,” Sid said. “I was never any good at intimidating people; I rely on charming them. Would you like to be charmed out of your car?”

He smiled, sweet and beguiling, and Dan had to smile back, though all he could think of was how Sid hadn’t bathed for ages, but still managed to be clean-shaven. Grubby-shaven?

“Fuck off,” Dan said mildly.

An explosion rocked the house. A flash of painfully bright white light lit the room, a concussion wave shook the walls, and the electricity went off.

Aishlinn cried, sharp and frightened, and Dan dragged his reluctant leg off the chair and stumbled through the sudden darkness, crashing into furniture and the door frame, until he clutched at the cot rail, leaning his weight against it and lifting the baby out.

“Shhh,” he urged the baby. “Let me hear what’s going on.”

The air raid sirens wailed, the eerie rise and fall of sound echoing through the empty streets, and there was a hum of aircraft overhead.

“What’s happening?” Sid asked, his voice a surprise in the dark.

“Bombing run,” Dan said. “Must be an outside antagonist; the military here wouldn’t be bombing an inhabited city, not without warning.”

“You trust them?” Sid asked.

Dan lifted Aishlinn onto his shoulder and patted her back while she sobbed.

“I was part of them,” Dan said. “I trust them not to destroy their own resources unless they think the resource is about to be taken by an opponent.”

The sirens wailed, and there was a single pistol shot. The loudspeaker closest to the house, one street over, went silent, leaving only the more distant sound of the air raid siren, echoing slightly.

“So that’s your opinion?” Sid asked, and Dan could hear the rocking chair squeaking faintly now that Aishlinn had stopped crying.

“What is?” Dan asked, holding the baby with one hand, using the other to feel along the wall to find the spare bed, and then sitting down.

“Either the bombing is from one of the countries we’re currently at war with, or the city is about to be invaded, and the bombing is to prevent it being taken intact.”

Another boom sounded, the loud bang of an above ground explosion, not as close as the first bomb, but still rattling the old house.

“That’s a cluster bomb,” Dan said. “Probably a Rockeye II.”

Then another boom, this one far enough away that the house didn't shake. “You know,” Sid said, “I don't much care who it is that's bombing us. It really doesn't make a difference. I'm all about equal opportunity.”

Sid sounded terrified, his voice much closer in the inky darkness than before, but there was a bitterness to his voice that appealed to Dan. Dan was a bitter man, too, when he had time.

“Hold Aishlinn,” Dan said. “I've gotta make a call.”

“Make a call?” Sid squeaked, but his arms were solid in the darkness, sliding around Aishlinn beside Dan’s, the bed dipping under his weight as Dan half fell off the end.

The last person Dan had spoken to on the radio had been Jake, so he didn't have to reset the frequency in the dark, just crank the handle and hope like crazy Jake could answer.

It took time, sitting there in the darkness, listening to planes passing over the city, and the persistent air raid siren, and Dan had begun to despair. He needed to piss, needed to get another bottle ready for Aishlinn, and really could do with something to eat, but he kept on cranking and calling.

The radio crackled, Jake's voice sounded thin, and Dan could hear the boom of the APC's artillery firing, almost drowning Jake's voice.

“Run!” Jake shouted. “Get out of the city!”

Dan heard a dreadful bang, and Jake's signal disappeared.

It was too dark to reset the frequency, and his hands were too sweaty with fear to get a match to light first, second or third go.

Mikey. He had to find Mikey. Mikey would have petrol.

Chapter Three

“No!” Sid said, managing to put emphatic determination into a whisper. “No, you cannot trade my bike for fuel.”

“You can’t take Aishlinn on the bike.” Sid could hear that Dan’s teeth were gritted. “You can’t look after her without me.”

“I actually bought that bike.” Sid sounded perilously close to whining, even to himself. “It’s not even stolen. I gave a bloke in a pub cash for it.”

There was silence, and Sid could hear the overhead burr of planes, now the air raid sirens had stopped.

“Do it,” he said. “But I want to say goodbye first.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Dan muttered. “We have to get ready, there’s no time.”

A single candle guttered in the middle of the room Aishlinn’s cot was in, casting Dan’s face in half-golden light, accentuating the hollows of his cheeks and his sunken eye sockets, his full beard a heavy shadow. The man was half-mad, of course, but Sid could work with that.

“What needs doing?” Sid asked.

“You need to shower,” Dan said. “I’m not spending a week in an enclosed space with you unless you wash.”

Sid lifted his arm and sniffed experimentally. “Oh. Then what?”

“Boil water, as much as you can fit into the plastic carriers stacked in the kitchen. I’ve got to go get the car road-ready.”

“Take the light.” Sid picked up the candle, holding it out for Dan. “I can manage without.”

The ambient light seeping through the windows was more than enough for Sid, even with the pall of smoke drifting over the city and obscuring the moon.

He moved Aishlinn, still asleep, back to her cot, and then dumped his clothes onto the bathroom floor. Dan might be right about the shower; Sid couldn't actually remember the last time he'd bathed. There'd been a girl in Kalgoorlie, but she hadn't had any running water...

Dan's water was cold, and the soap toxically scented, so Sid plunged through the shower, rinsing the worst of the sweat and oil off himself, before rubbing soap over his hair and rinsing it quickly. He smelled like a hooker's fanny, even when he'd pulled his own clothes back on.

He'd got two saucepans and a baking dish full of water over the gas flames when Dan opened the front door again and said, "Sid? Could you give me a hand?"

Sid had lost track of time, but it must have been early hours of the morning. The entire city was blacked out, the air thick with smoke, fires burning and making the smoke glow vicious orange. Taking a brief pause, Sid couldn't hear any planes overhead.

Dan had dragged the dust sheet off the car in the garage, and Sid froze in place, mouth gaping open, at the vehicle that was revealed.

"Still rather ride the bike?" Dan asked, and Sid shook his head.

"Not a chance."

Sid squatted down and nodded appreciatively at the front of the four wheel drive. There was a row of spotlights on the steel roo bar across the front of the car, and when he craned his head to look underneath, he saw a solid metal pan protected the base of the engine bay.

The windscreen was armored, steel mesh embedded in the glass, with a port big enough for the rifle Dan had threatened Sid with the day before on the passenger side. But it was the gun mounted on top of the big car that filled Sid with deep happiness.

With that... thing, they could drive across the Nullarbor with impunity.

"What is it?" Sid asked, awe in his voice. If he only had one of those on his bike...

"An XM307," Dan said. "Stop drooling at it, and come and work the jack."

Of course, Dan couldn't walk; no way could he use a jack.

The car was balanced on stands, wheels off the gravel, and Sid had to partly scramble under the vehicle to get the jack in place, and then get back under to remove the stands.

It took time, and he had the vehicle on the ground before Dan had finished pumping up the tires with a foot pump, his weight held by his hands wrapped around the roof rack, working his uninjured leg hard.

“Now what?” Sid peered into the interior of the vehicle, making out the bulk of canvas bundles in the back.

“Pack the car,” Dan said. “Water, all the food I have, the radio, baby supplies.”

“Water!” Sid exclaimed, dashing back into the house, to find pans boiling over and the air wet with steam.

They worked frantically, Dan with Aishlinn tucked inside his shirt once she’d woken. Dan pointed with his walking stick; Sid picked up the object and lugged it out to the vehicle, packing the storage area at the back of the vehicle fuller and fuller: clothes, food and formula, baby bottles and nappies, towels and blankets, boxes of ammo. The radio on the kitchen table slid into brackets beneath the dashboard; a folder of army topological maps went on the dash. Spare tire hooked on the bracket on the back door; additional water carriers were roped onto the roof rack, behind the cannon.

Light was stealing across the sky when a taxi pulled up outside the house, followed by a truck, and when Sid pulled his pistol out of its holster, Dan’s hand on his arm made him re-holster it.

“That’s Mikey,” Dan said, walking out to greet the man in the cab driver’s uniform who climbed out of the cab.

A stout woman in overalls dropped down out of the truck cab, and there was silent hand-shaking all round.

“You’re the man with the bike?” Mikey asked Sid, and Sid nodded.

“You’re the man with the petrol?” Sid asked.

“Could be,” Mikey said. “Show me your bike. Anita will tell you which drums you can take from the truck.”

Sid didn’t point out to Mikey that there was a corpse in the taxi. Mikey probably already knew that.

“Mikey’s last fare,” Anita said, waving a hand at the gore spattered on the back window of the taxi. “Take these drums here.”

She pointed at one forty-four gallon drum, and three smaller petrol jerry cans, and stood back, watching disinterestedly as Sid hopped up into the back of the truck and rocked the largest can across to the edge.

The back of the truck behind the cans was packed full of crates of army rations, sacks of wheat and boxes of medical supplies. Sid was impressed, in the kind of way that didn’t actually make it any easier to lower the drum over the truck, and he was relieved when Mikey appeared and helped ease the weight down.

Sid rolled the drum of fuel across the dirt by himself, because if Dan could manage to lug a car restraint for a baby from the back of the taxi to the garage by himself while using a walking stick, big tough Sid wasn't in any position to complain.

Dan had a hand siphon, making the job of filling the tank easier for Sid, who listened to the glug of fuel into the tank carefully, waiting for the note to change to indicate the tank was full. He had fond memories of fuel pumps and unrationed petrol, service stations that sold chocolate and hot pies. His stomach growled.

Dan clambered around inside the vehicle, at first fitting the child restraint into the back seat, and then sliding a sleepy Aishlinn into the capsule. He then fiddled with the belt on the big gun by opening the sun roof and standing on the back seat, swiveling it and clicking things around.

Dan bent back down and looked at Sid through the back window. "Do you know how to operate a belt-fed auto cannon that's been modded to single shot?"

Sid grimaced and pulled the siphon tubing out of the tank, breaking the suction. "Um, I can reliably reload the slide on my pistol. Does that count?"

"You drive," Dan said. "I'll ride shotgun."

It was fully daylight by then, sun behind a pall of smoke and clouds. The fuel drum and cans were stashed on the backseat behind the child restraint and on the floor. Sid scooped up his jacket and helmet and tossed them into the vehicle as Dan locked the front door.

The truck was still out the front, Mikey and Anita busy loading the bike into the back, then draining petrol and oil out of the taxi and transferring it to the truck.

"Are they coming, too?" Sid asked Dan as he turned the ignition, making the motor give a faint cough. "Is there any go in this battery?"

"A bike doesn't buy fuel and an infant car restraint, not today," Dan said, undoing his seat belt and opening his door. "I guaranteed them the cannon and an escort out of the city and south. The bike was just the sweetener. Now, get out and push."

The fully-laden vehicle was a nightmare to push-start, even with two of them, and sweat was trickling into Sid's eyes before they'd pushed it fast enough for Sid to be able to leap into it and successfully get the motor to catch. He eased the clutch in and pushed it into neutral, tapping the brakes to drop the speed enough for a hobbling Dan to catch up and scramble in.

Dan was breathing hard, and when Sid glanced across at him, he was gripping his lame leg, his face a funny green color.

"You right, mate?" Sid asked.

Dan said, “Just fucking drive. Don’t lose the truck, and don’t stop for anyone.”

Sid locked his door, and reached behind himself to lock the back door behind him. He did his seatbelt up, too, because if they were going to be doing anything fancy in the way of evasive action, he didn’t want to be thrown out of the vehicle.

The vehicle went into first gear with a thud, and when Sid glanced in the rear view mirror, the truck was trundling up the road behind them, picking up speed, so he dumped the clutch and took off. He guessed the taxi and the corpse weren’t joining them.

The streets weren’t deserted, not once they got out of the area that had been bombed the night before. People lined the streets, or rushed out of their houses at the sounds of the engines, waving handfuls of money, holding their babies out.

They weren’t his people, he had Aishlinn safe in the back of the vehicle, and a bloody big gun on top, and this was a situation he felt comfortable with. Sid didn’t actually care whether the truck kept up with them as he careened around corners, following the instructions that Dan shouted over the top of the engine noise, but Dan had made a deal with them, and he could understand Dan wanting to keep his word.

“So,” Sid shouted over the roar of the motor and shake of the gear box. “Did you steal the gun? Or get it from Mikey?”

“Stole it,” Dan shouted back. “And the car. You got a problem with this?”

“Fuck no,” Sid said.

Sid didn’t actually run anyone over, though he didn’t swerve to avoid anyone either, and each time he checked his mirror, the truck was right there.

There were sirens in the distance, choppers in the air, and other cars and bikes on the road, too, but Sid just kept on going, diving around slow moving trucks and bicycles, slowing down to go through intersections, dodging and weaving.

Dan shouted directions, craning around to keep an eye on the streets they were charging through, one hand on the rifle that rested on the dashboard, its muzzle through a gun port.

The vehicle slid around an intersection, almost sideswiping a bulldozer that was lumbering around the corner in the opposite direction, and they were onto a wider road, three lanes in each direction, cars heading out of the city occupying all six lanes, a traffic arrangement that made Sid’s anarchic heart happier, even with a truck glued to his back bumper.

“Reckon there’ll be a road block?” he shouted to Dan, who was leaning over to the back seat, holding a bottle of formula for Aishlinn, who’d begun to cry

“Not yet,” Dan said. “There will be once we get past the refugee camps. If you come to one, just take off into the bush and go around it.”

“Sure,” Sid said, wriggling his fingers on the steering wheel to improve his circulation. “I like your attitude.”

“I haven’t shot anyone yet,” Dan said, and while Sid couldn’t see Dan’s face because his eyes were glued to the road, dodging trucks and buses, and squeezing through gaps in the traffic flow, he would hear the amusement in Dan’s voice.

“I’ll probably still like it then,” Sid said, and Dan laughed out loud.

There might not have been roadblocks, but there were frequent car pileups, where overstuffed cars towing over laden trailers jack-knifed, where cars had broken down or run out of petrol and the traffic hadn’t slowed, where people had been stupid.

Sid knew how to drive, and it wasn’t as if he was afraid of anything, careening across the road shoulders, around crumpled cars, pushing his way into the traffic flow, and ignoring police attempts to pull them over.

They bullied their way out onto Albany Highway, and even if Sid hadn’t been absolutely determined to elbow a space in the traffic snarl for himself, Mikey, at the wheel of the truck, was physically shoving the car out into the traffic, the truck’s bumper hard against the rear of the car.

The vehicle jammed against the side of a crowded bus, until Sid got enough swing on the wheel to bring it back into a space that had opened up. He wasn’t sure if it was the gun or the maniac driving the truck that had created the gap, and he didn’t argue about it, just hauled the vehicle back so it was heading straight, the truck right behind it.

They plodded along, never getting out of second gear for what felt like hours, only it couldn’t have been because Dan didn’t have to give a second bottle to Aishlinn. Maybe the baby liked the motion of the car.

There was a huge traffic snarl where the freeway ended on the edge of the city, with soldiers and tanks attempting to direct traffic, trucks and cars spread over several hectares of road and verge, choppers overhead.

“Fuck this for a joke,” Dan said, as a soldier with a Steyr slung across his front made his way through the tangle of cars, pointing meaningfully at Dan’s car.

He guessed an illegal and stolen autocannon bolted to the top of it wasn’t particularly discreet.

Sid had brought the vehicle to a halt on the shoulder of the freeway, and they were jammed between a domestic fence and another bus, the truck right behind them, leaving them not a lot of room to move.

Dan wound his window down and leaned out, and Sid could hear him exchanging shouts with Anita, then he sat back down again.

“Anita says to go through the fence, but to bear hard right,” Dan said.

The soldier with the Steyr pushed his way through the gap at the front of the bus just as Sid whooped and dropped the clutch, swinging hard on the wheel of the car, bashing the roo bar against the fibro sheeting of the fence. He crashed a hole in the fibro, before pushing the entire fence over, creating an opening into the area behind the fence.

Sid dragged the steering wheel hard right, stopping the car from nose diving into the drainage ditch, and took off, crashing through the bushes that grew down the side of the ditch, and then through the fence that separated the ditch from a suburban road, dragging chain link down the road for fifty meters until it unwound itself from the roo bar.

“Where now?” Sid asked, pushing the car into second gear and taking off up the street, as the truck behind them dodged the flying chain link. “And is that chopper all for us?”

“Could be,” Dan said, winding his window down and craning his head out. He pulled his head back in and wound the window back up. “Work your way east and south, and we’ll pick up Albany Highway again eventually. And don’t worry about the chopper; they’ll get called back in a moment. Choppers always do.”

“They do?” Sid said.

“Aerial support never is,” Dan said. “Any infantryman knows that.”

Sid went straight over the top of a paved roundabout, jolting the adults and making Aishlinn grumble. The oppressive smell of smoke had cleared, and the clouds were lower, dark grey underneath, spitting rain. The lack of smoke was a good sign they were moving through an unbombed area.

“Bloody rain,” Sid said. “Where’re your windscreen wipers?”

“Rain’s good.” Dan reached across, flicking a switch and making the wipers start. “No one wants to stand out in the rain, so we’ll have less trouble with road blocks and questions.”

The truck behind them beeped impatiently.

“Hadn’t thought of that,” Sid said, planting his foot to the floor, sending the vehicle roaring down a two lane road, whizzing past a lumbering car packed with people, and what looked like an entire houseful of furniture strapped to the top.

“You’re remarkably proficient at this for someone with no military experience,” Dan said.

“At what?” Sid asked, grinning sideways at Dan. “Screaming around in a laden car, baby in the back and fucking big gun on top, evading the military and the police?”

“Yeah.” Dan leaned back over the seat to soothe Aishlinn. “That. How did you avoid being drafted?” He sounded disapproving.

“I don’t exist,” Sid said. “If I don’t exist, there’s no way any government can make me do National Service, or pay taxes.”

“You’re an illegal?” Dan asked. “You sound like you’ve been here a long time; I can’t hear an accent in your voice.”

“Born here.” Sid swung the wheel to send the car skittering around a bend, narrowly missing an APC that was partially blocking the road. Their vehicle mounted a curb, and then Sid yanked the wheel, taking them back onto the road.

“Faster!” Dan shouted. “It’s a Piranha, the top speed is useless.”

Top gear and the vehicle shot down the road, engine winding out, entire car shaking and juddering, the truck rumbling behind them still.

Dan shouted, “Slow down, we’re about to reach Albany Highway.”

“Which way?” Sid asked, braking with the gears, not the brakes, dumping speed hard. There was no APC in the rear view mirror, which was completely filled with a truck doing emergency braking, much to his relief. It’s always possible the APC wasn’t actually there for them; he had no intention of going back and asking.

“Left,” Dan said, clutching at the dash as Sid threw the car out into the flow of traffic, making the sedan he cut off brake hard, with a sound of crunching metal coming from behind them as the truck claimed road space, too.

“Oops,” Sid said, slinging the vehicle into third gear and picking up speed again.

They were back in the mass exodus from the city, four lanes of solid traffic, everyone determined to get the hell out of there, as quickly as possible. The military presence seemed to have disappeared, there were no flashing blue police lights either, just enough rain to make the roads slippery and more traffic than Sid had ever seen before in his life, and he remembered Melbourne before the war started.

Of course, it was impossible that their luck would hold.

Chapter Four

Sid was a complete fucking lunatic, driving down the footpath whenever the traffic slowed, tipping over rubbish bins, scraping against trees and abandoned cars, making Dan clutch onto the dash whenever he wasn't trying to stop Aishlinn from crying.

They were making decent time; it had only taken them a couple of hours to break their way out of the city, now they were threading their way up into the hills, away from the main roads.

Dan had an ordinance map on his knees and was shouting directions to Sid, who had been forced to drop speed because the truck couldn't keep up.

The compass on the dash swung slightly as they crested a hill and the road curved, dropping down to farmlands, out of the national park. Dan didn't need to check the map against the compass; he could see the brighter patch of rain clouds where the sun was, and the road wasn't too twisty. They were a hundred kilometers from the city, moving toward the wheat belt and Beverly, where Mikey had family.

It was as they crested the next hill that Dan became aware of the thudthud of a chopper over the roar of their engine.

"Company!" he shouted, as the chopper rose up over the treed ridge, hovering menacingly, its guns bristling through the ports.

Sid dropped speed momentarily, and then floored it, spraying roly-poly gravel from the road back over the truck behind him as the chopper opened fire upon them.

"Stop!" a voice boomed over a megaphone from the chopper, and the bullets sprayed the car, banging against the steel panels, pitting the bullet-proof glass of the screen.

"Watch out!" Sid shouted as Dan reached up to slide the sun roof open, in preparation for using the autocannon.

Bullets sprayed against the roof of the car, making Dan exceedingly glad the people in the chopper were using a rifle, rather than something nastier. Conserve ammo, that was the rule, and it was damned good thing they were following it, since a grenade would have been really messy.

Dan glanced behind them through the back window of the car. The truck was falling behind, its window shot out, the chopper swinging back to engage the truck, no longer firing on the car.

“Tell me what to do!” Sid said. “Do you want to save them?!”

“Yes,” Dan shouted back, and he reached back up for the sun roof as Sid slammed the car back through the gears.

He’d got up as far as a crouch when Sid’s hand grabbed the front of his shirt, wrenching him across, smashing their mouths together.

Dan went to protest, he didn’t actually think they were about to die so there wasn’t a need for a farewell kiss, but Sid’s mouth stole his complaints, a solid swipe of tongue and mash of lips.

Sid let go of him and the steering wheel, sending the car rumbling randomly off the road into the scrub, then moved fast, out of his seatbelt and up, so that half of him disappeared out the sun roof.

The noise of the chopper ceased, the silence sudden, and the automatic fire stopped a moment later. Aishlinn squealed, a high pitched sound like a cat, and the car crashed to a halt against the fence separating a paddock from the road.

The world was behind a veil, distant and watery, and Dan’s mind quite irrationally informed him that the compass on the dash was spinning wildly, the needle wobbling and whirring.

Even sounds were muted, the crash of the chopper plummeting to the ground a distant bang, felt rather than heard.

Sid dropped back into the car, grabbed his jacket out from under Dan’s feet, and he was off, bounding through the scrub, running back toward the truck, which was leaning alarmingly, partly in the drainage ditch beside the road.

Dan shook his head, and the watery feeling faded as his training kicked in. He slid the rifle out of its soft mount, leapt out of the car and set about securing the area.

The chopper was a twisted mess, smoke billowing from it a couple of hundred meters across the paddock. No one seemed to have responded to the crash or smoke, apart from a few hundred concerned sheep in the paddock. Dan ducked behind the side of the car, resting the rifle across the hood, safety off.

A figure stumbled out of the wreck, collapsing down on the ground, and Dan held off shooting him. He was a decent shot, and the range was good, but he had personal issues with killing an injured soldier who wasn’t actually firing back. It was just bad form.

The figure didn't move, and no one else scrambled out of the wreck, then the fuel tank went whoomp, sending debris across the paddock, bits of metal and fiberglass, making Dan duck behind the car for cover.

"Dan!" Sid shouted, and once the shrapnel from the chopper had stopped falling, Dan flicked the safety back on the rifle, and hobbled up the hill to the truck as fast as he could.

Mikey was sitting on the road beside the truck, Sid crouching beside him, medical kit in his hands.

"He's got some cuts," Sid said, standing up and handing the medical kit to Dan. "I don't know how to use one of these things."

There was blood soaking through Sid's jacket, dripping down his hand, saturating his jeans, too, but he was moving well, so Dan half-fell down onto the road, kit in his hands.

"Anita's dead, isn't she?" Mikey asked, looking up at Sid.

Sid nodded. "She took a direct hit, I think. I couldn't find a pulse."

That would explain the blood.

Mikey's shoulder was mashed, blood soaking into torn fabric, but when Dan ripped the material to slap a field dressing on it, there was no entry or exit wound.

"We need to move," Dan said, securing the field dressing, just because he couldn't quite believe there was so much mess without a wound. "Before someone comes to investigate." The smoke from the burning chopper was rising fast, and even with the cloud cover, someone would notice. "Think you can drive, Mikey?"

Mikey, white-faced and red-eyed, shook his head. "God... sorry..."

Dan looked up at the cab, then reached up and grabbed at Sid, who helped him to his feet.

"I can drive the truck," Sid said. "You drive the car. We'll just have to assume we aren't going to need the autocannon. Do you want me to leave the body here?"

Mikey gave a suppressed sob. "Please, no, let me bury her properly."

"Dead bodies don't worry me," Sid said. "Just look after Aishlinn."

They were back on the road, the rising smoke from the chopper thankfully masked by the rain that had started again. In the rear view mirror, Dan could see Sid driving the truck, hard on their heels, the huddled shape of Anita's corpse, covered by a tarp, beside him.

The compass on the dash was reassuringly steady again, and it wasn't until Mikey asked, "What the fuck happened back there?" that Dan tried to get his head around it.

"Don't know." Dan glanced sideways at Mikey, who was wedged halfway over the seat, holding a bottle in Aishlinn's mouth.

"The chopper was firing at us, and then it kind of circled and wobbled, before crashing," Mikey said.

Dan shrugged. "Not enough maintenance," he suggested. "Bloody choppers fall from the sky all the time."

They were running out of daylight by the time they rumbled the vehicles over the rutted dirt track, the gums that completely covered the access road to Mikey's uncle's farm scraping and battering at the truck.

People poured out of buildings, and Dan watched them move from ecstatic joy that the truck of supplies had arrived, to grief over Anita's death.

Dan levered himself out of the car and undid the rear door, lifting Aishlinn out of her capsule, wet to her armpits and smelling bad.

She grizzled fretfully, and he crooned to her, hobbling across to where Sid had parked the truck beside the shearing shed.

"We need to get the vehicles undercover," he said to Sid. "Can you do that while I give Aishlinn a bath?"

Sid nodded and patted Aishlinn's back gently, hand covered in dried blood.

"Are you sure you weren't hit," Dan asked.

"Quite sure," Sid said cheerfully. "Go on inside, I'll hide the vehicles."

The farmhouse was crowded with adults and children, none of whom Dan recognized, all of them crying and talking. One of the mamas took Dan through to the laundry and ran a trough of water, finding him soap and a cloth, then a towel.

Aishlinn cried through the whole process, rising wails that went straight through Dan's head, making him realize exactly how tired he was.

When he hobbled out into the steady drizzle of the early evening, a bawling Aishlinn over his shoulder and his leg pretty much useless, he couldn't find either of the vehicles. He needed to locate his own car where the formula and bottles were.

Standing in the rain, one hand over Aishlinn's head to shelter her, the clatter of dinner being prepared echoing out of the farmhouse, Dan thought about crying himself.

Sid appeared at his elbow, all cheerful enthusiasm. "This way. We're in what I think used to be the milking shed."

"Shearing shed," Dan said when Sid opened the smaller of the doors, and the reek of a century of lanolin hit his senses.

"Stinks," Sid said. "But it's out of sight."

The truck was jammed into the loading bay, where the wool truck would usually reverse in to collect the clip, only the truck was sideways and completely inside the building. It was a nice piece of parking, whoever'd done it.

Dan's car had been driven up the ramp onto the sorting floor, and there was a tent set up beside it, ready for Dan, lit from within by the LPG light from the car. "Thanks," Dan said. "Thank you for everything."

"I put one of the containers of boiled water in there," Sid said. "And the box of baby supplies. Figured Aishlinn would be starving."

Sid took Aishlinn off Dan's shoulder and held her awkwardly. "She is." Dan crouched down with difficulty and crawled into the tent. Sid had laid a sleeping bag out ready for him, and a left a blanket folded ready for the baby.

Sid crawled into the tent, too, Aishlinn held securely under his arm, and he sat cross-legged with her in his lap while Dan scooped formula into the bottle and added the boiled water. It would be cold, but he didn't think Aishlinn would mind.

"What about you?" Dan asked, once Aishlinn was working on draining the bottle. "There's only one sleeping bag in here."

"Don't sleep much," Sid said. "Thought I'd keep watch, make sure we're safe."

The smell of the blood on Sid's clothes was metallic in the tent, biting at Dan's memory, making him reach out a hand to grab Sid's jacket, to stop him from leaving.

"Wait," Dan said, tightening his grip. "Why did you kiss me?"

The jacket beneath Dan's hand was squishy, like a hot water bottle perhaps, and Sid pulled away from him as far as he could in the tent.

"Let it go," Sid said, and Dan wasn't sure if he was referring to the jacket or the topic.

Dan tugged on the armored jacket, only it wasn't armor in the inserts, it was something wet in a bag.

"Oh my God," Dan said, sliding a drowsy Aishlinn and her bottle down onto the sleeping bag and using both hands to pull at Sid's jacket.

"Stop," Sid said. "I'll tell you, if you want."

Dan didn't stop, he opened the insert pocket and pulled out something he knew well from when he'd seen active service: a bag of citrated blood, ready for transfusion.

"Blood!" Dan hissed, and even that was enough to make Aishlinn grizzle. "You're fucking well carrying blood around?"

Sid took the bag back and stuck it in the armor insert pocket it had come from. "It's complicated," he said, shrugging the jacket back onto his shoulders.

"Try explaining," Dan said. "Do you have an obscure blood type? Are you part of the black market in blood?"

Sid laughed, sounding genuinely amused. "Fuck no, but they're excellent suggestions for cover stories for the future." His teeth were white in the portable LPG light. "I can alter electro-magnetism and do other stuff, but I have to have donated body fluids to make that happen, and I was pretty sure you wanted me to kiss you. But I'd used up the kiss, and you weren't within reach, so I had to use one of the units of blood I'd bought on the black market to keep Mikey alive, hence the mess." His smile melted away. "I couldn't help Anita though, she was already dead. I'm so sorry about that."

Dan blinked, and then swallowed, trying to sort out the nonsense of Sid's words. "Wait... You're saying you made some kind of sacrifice with the blood, and that saved Mikey?"

"You're adorable when you're thinking," Sid said, then he leaned across the confined space of the tent and pressed his mouth against Dan's again, only this time his lips were soft, moving gently against Dan's until Dan suppressed a moan and let his mouth open.

Dan was exhausted, his leg was burning, deep down inside it, from the day's exertions, and he might just be going mad, because the sweetness of the kiss was melting him.

Sid was right, of course; Dan had wanted them to kiss.

Aishlinn cried, the sound sharp and unhappy, and Dan pulled away reluctantly, his head spinning. He picked her up again, the world glassy and distant and not quite real.

She'd pulled her knees up against her chest and was grimacing and squirming in his arms. "Shh," Sid murmured, and he stroked a grubby hand over her dark hair.

Aishlinn relaxed, her legs falling back, and she sighed sleepily, her eyes shining in the light from the lamp.

Dan glanced up at Sid, and almost dropped Aishlinn. He hadn't heard Sid leave, the tent flap hadn't rustled, and his heat sense insisted there was a warm body right in front of him, but Sid wasn't there.

"Sid?" Dan whispered, and something shifted, a shadow lifted, or Dan's eyes cleared, and Sid was back again.

"Right here, Dan," Sid said. "I needed to do something to show you that it works."

Sid grinned in a way that Dan was already familiar with. "Well?" Sid asked.

Dan shook his head, trying to work out what the hell he could say. "Is that, um, magic?" he finally asked.

Sid shrugged. "Magic is kind of a dirty word where I'm from. Think of it as a transaction with the universe." He sighed and patted Aishlinn gently. "She keeps looking for her parents, and they're not there. That's why it makes her cry."

"You know there's a simple explanation for this; I just don't know what it is." Dan watched Sid's fingers caress Aishlinn's dark hair, lulling her to sleep.

"Sure," Sid said. "You don't have to understand."

Dan looked up at Sid, whose gaze was on the baby. His hair was standing up in tufts, the blood streaked on his neck had dried to black, and he looked comfortingly normal, because Dan was having trouble getting his head around what might have happened.

He touched Sid's neck, traced a fingertip down the skin, and Sid lifted his head slowly to look at Dan.

This time, Dan slid Aishlinn down onto the sleeping bag and covered her with the blanket, then followed Sid out of the tent.

The shearing shed was shadowy, the light shining through the canvas of the tent filling the shed with strange shapes that moved and made the walls ripple. The car was solid and substantial behind Dan, holding him steady.

Dan needed that, because Sid was in front of him, pulling their mouths together again, kissing him hard, one hand in Dan's hair, the other squeezing his arse through his jeans. Dan needed to be kissed, too, over and over, to feel something other than pain and fear and hunger, to feel Sid's skin under his hands, his muscles moving with recondite messages, mirroring the feel of Sid's hand scratching at Dan's lower back, working its way under layers of clothes.

Dan had to close his eyes, just to hang onto the feeling, and he cried out loud, against Sid's mouth, when Sid's fingers slid into the crack of his arse.

Sid's cock was jabbing insistently at Dan's belly through layers of clothing until he pulled back, giving Dan enough room to shove his hands between their bodies and locate the zip of Sid's jeans.

He found bare skin immediately, and they both moaned when Dan curled a hand around the length of Sid's cock.

"We can't do this..." Sid said, mouth against Dan's ear, one fingertip easing into Dan's arse.

"Why not?" Dan asked, because he didn't think there was much he could do to make the invitation clearer, except possibly turn around, hang onto the wing of the car, and spread.

"Because someone is standing in the doorway, trying to work out how to interrupt us," Sid murmured. "Of course, since this might just be the hottest moment ever, they could just be watching us, but I doubt that."

Dan groaned, because even without any lube, Sid's finger was doing amazing things to him, and it had been a damned long time since someone had touched him like that.

"So, are you going to stop?" Dan whispered, because if they weren't going to take this all the way, he'd like to know in advance. It was that, or get his own cock out in a hurry.

"Stopping," Sid said disappointedly, pulling his hand away and wiping it on his own jacket. "You going to stop, too, or am I just going to come everywhere?"

Dan reluctantly let go of Sid's cock, and Sid tucked himself back in and zipped his jeans up.

There was a red-faced young woman standing outside the shed when Dan opened the door, Aishlinn against his shoulder.

"Um, sorry," the woman said. "Dinner's ready, and Mikey says please can you be there because he wants to say a few words about Anita."

Sid sauntered along beside Dan in the dark, head ducked to keep his face out of the rain, whistling under his breath to himself, so damned cheerful and confident, and Dan found that some of it had rubbed off on him, too. They'd made it out of the city, and even if they'd lost Anita, they'd had spectacular luck with the chopper crashing.

In the wash room, watching Sid wash his hands, then handing Aishlinn over so he could wash his hands, too, Dan couldn't help but remember the crazily spinning compass.

What if Sid wasn't actually mad?

Sid grinned at Dan over the top of a grizzling Aishlinn, and Dan just wanted to kiss him again.

Chapter Five

The rain had picked up and lightning danced in the darkness, flashes of acid white followed by low rumbles, when they eventually ran back through the wet and cold to the shearing shed and the tent.

Aishlinn was tucked inside Dan's jacket, out of the weather, having spent the evening being passed from one ample matronly lap to another. Mikey's family had continued to trickle in from the city through the evening, cousins and aunts, lovers and friends, until there were thirty people crowded into the kitchen, eating roast mutton and mashed potatoes.

During Mikey's brief eulogy for Anita, when he spoke of families chosen and families created, Aishlinn sprawled across Sid's shoulder, gooing at the fat woman behind them. Sid had actually felt a flicker of regret. He'd not seen his own family for a long time, and the sudden request to come and retrieve Aishlinn had been his sole contact with them for a decade. If they made it back to Hawthorn, then he'd have to face the extended family, and it would be nowhere near as pleasant as an unsentimental memorial service in a warm kitchen after a substantial meal.

When he died, he wanted a memorial service like that one: flagon of grappa passed around, a minimum of tears, and the potential for a really good fuck lined up afterward for the attendees.

He'd missed the memorial service for Aishlinn's parents, too.

Aishlinn was swaddled in her blanket, eyes blissfully closed, warm and content, safely secured in her car restraint, and they had the tent to themselves. Sid lowered himself over Dan, chasing kisses, making sure Dan could feel how much he wanted this.

Dan wanted it, too, hands pulling at Sid's clothes, making Sid kick and squirm his jeans down around his knees. Sid lifted his weight for a moment, listening to the rasp of Dan's zip, and then the rough sound of jeans being pushed down.

The first delicious moment of contact made Sid want to scream, the feeling of their cocks dragging together, the heat from Dan's belly working its way into Sid.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” Sid whispered, because there was fluid leaking out of Dan’s cock, smearing across Sid’s skin, making him want to wind things around them, wrap the pair of them up securely.

Dan’s whiskers were rough against Sid’s neck, his teeth nipping, and then he whispered, “Yeah.”

Sid had condoms in his jacket, and lube, and he knelt up, head brushing against the canvas of the tent, while he rummaged for them.

Dan didn’t know that Sid could see well in low light, so it was a chance to see Dan with his not-insignificant guard down, to look at the real him. Dan, with his unexpected altruism, ferocious courage and gentle eyes, might just be someone Sid could like.

Dan’s face was turned to one side, teeth biting at his upper lip, face slack with desire. His cock, hard and eager, rode low across his belly, liquid pooling on his hip.

Sid leaned forward as he rolled the condom on himself, licking up the precious fluid, taking Dan into his mouth. The part of him that hungered for power and control wanted to keep going like that, to make Dan come in his mouth, and Sid had to argue with himself about it.

This wasn’t supposed to be about power or control; it was supposed to be about how Dan made him hard, made him think of how good it would be to have Dan’s cock deep inside him.

Dan grunted, teeth gritted together, his hands pulling at Sid’s shoulders through his shirt, tugging his mouth away, saving Sid from any further argument with himself.

The world shrank in around them, the rain and lightning falling away, silence shimmering into place. Sid crawled forward, between Dan’s knees which were still partly trapped in jeans, one hand guiding his cock, nudging between the cheeks of Dan’s arse.

It took some fumbling, lube spreading everywhere, and then Dan gasped and tipped his head back. Sid held his breath, kept his fingers still, and then he was sliding inside, no chance of keeping his eyes open to watch Dan’s face any longer.

Dan’s hand jerked at his cock, between their bellies, more reassurance than any words that it was feeling good for him, too.

Sid slid his hand out of the way, settling all the way inside, so close to the thrumming heat of Dan’s body, the life blood coursing through his arteries and veins, the essential fire of him.

Sid’s geas, the price he paid for his abilities, had sounded like a good idea at the time, a fabulous excuse to spend his whole life fucking, using that to fuel his power and get away from home, but now the longing to subvert his lovers, to ride the power, ate away at him, making it so hard to just please someone.

“What’s wrong?” Dan whispered, his hands reaching out to touch Sid’s shoulders.

Sid looked down at Dan, and smiled even though Dan wouldn't be able to see him in the dark. "You ready for me?" he whispered back.

"Do it," Dan said.

Sid slid, slowly and carefully, pushing into Dan gently, coaxing moans from Dan, from himself, too, rocking them both together in a delicate dance that took Sid further and further away from the hunger inside him. It moved them both closer to a place where the burning tightness could no longer be denied, until Dan was gasping, come slipping between their bodies, soaking into clothes and sleeping bag, where it could no longer torment Sid.

He came, too, buried deep inside Dan, and it felt so good to just have that pleasure.

He pulled out, before his breathing had slowed again, grabbing at the condom before it could slip off completely. Dan's arms were solid and inviting, wrapped around Sid's shoulders, pulling him down into Dan's embrace.

"That was good," Dan whispered, his fingers ruffling Sid's hair, making Sid smile in the dark.

"Fucking fabulous," Sid agreed.

It was always painful when the world came back, reminding Sid someone else's sweat was cooling on his skin as the fever passed, but Dan's leg was sprawled across both of Sid's in an extended embrace.

"Lift your leg," Sid murmured. "So I can reach it."

Dan grunted and slid his leg up Sid's thighs. Sid eased Dan's jeans down further and ran an exploratory hand over his knee. It was pitted and gnarled with scar tissue, and Sid could feel the metal pins that held it all together. Sid traced the incision lines, feeling each dimple where a suture had been, then worked his fingers around the back of the knee, where it no longer felt like live flesh.

"Dodgy repair job," Dan said, his voice sleepy.

Sid kissed Dan's forehead. "Don't think I can fix it for you," he said. "Why don't you get some sleep, and I'll go have a scout around outside, make sure there's no trouble on the way."

Sid eased himself out of Dan's arms and wriggled his own clothes back into place, then crawled out of the tent.

It took a moment to zip himself up, drag his jacket back on and take his pistol out of the car and holster it, then he peered through the car window at Aishlinn, still blissfully asleep, and blew her a kiss.

It was raining steadily when Sid pushed the shed door open, drenching and cold, so he flipped up the collar of his jacket and did the zip up. One of the farm dogs rushed over to him, and bolted off again when he hissed at it.

Someone was on guard duty, sitting in the cab of one of the farm vehicles, rifle across the steering wheel, but Sid stayed out of their sight, slipping around the back of the shed and past a tractor.

Sheep lowed in the distance, the soil smelled wet and clean, and no one noticed Sid as he moved past the farmhouse and down the track. He wanted to have a look at the road they'd driven in on, just to make sure they weren't being followed.

Kangaroos looked up at Sid curiously, smaller wallabies hopped away from him, and there were bloody rabbits everywhere when Sid made his way down the fence line of the road, the rabbits skittering around his feet annoyingly. Overhead, up very high, planes flew through the night, moving from east to west. Surveillance planes perhaps, but he didn't know who they belonged to.

The swish of a vehicle moving fast broke the wet of the night, headlights slicing through the rain, and a feral cat startled, diving for cover amongst the wattle scrub beside the road.

Sid was just as quick, sliding across the wet dirt, so he was hidden behind a fallen karri log, small round kangaroo turds under his knees, hand on a bag of blood.

The car hurtled past, traveling fast, engine barely ticking, and Sid stayed where he was for several long seconds, listening to the car, tracing its path in his imagination, until it was long past the turn off to the farm.

He regretted making the chopper crash; it had been a reckless thing to do, and the ripples from the action were still spreading out, just at the edge of his senses. And if he could feel it, then others would, too, and there was a whole mess of problems he'd been hoping to avoid.

He trekked back through the darkness, rain sliding down inside his jacket, worry creeping into his mind. It had been one thing to ride across the country on a bike by himself, dodging the military, stealing petrol, coercing people out of their body fluids, relying on speed and luck. This was something completely different now. He had a baby and a companion, the turmoil gripping the country was deepening, and someone had noticed him.

Dan was asleep in the sleeping bag when Sid took his boots off and lifted the flap of the tent. Aishlinn was beside Dan, fist pushed in her mouth as she dozed, empty bottle rolling across the tent ground sheet.

Sid let them be and sat down against the front tire of Dan's vehicle, pistol in his hands, to wait for the dawn.

The dirt heaped over Anita's grave was raw and red, the rain falling steadily, and Sid let Dan walk ahead of him, back toward the farmhouse.

They left through the driving rain, gaffer tape over the mounting plate where the autocannon had been bolted on to keep the rain out, rinsed-out nappies draped across the luggage in the back in an attempt to get them dry.

Sid was disappointed the cannon was gone, he hadn't had a chance to fire it, and he wasn't likely to ever get his hands on another one. Dan was right, though. The roadblocks that Sid had skirted on his way west across the Nullarbor would be difficult to sneak a cannon back through. The Red Cross markings on the car, painted on before the burial, while the car was still in the shed, were more likely to get them past. Assuming the rain didn't wash the paint off.

At least with the rain, their water would last longer.

Dan drove, rattling the vehicle over gravel roads through the forest, winding down into sheep-and-wheat valleys and back out again, spraying red mud behind them. The car handled better without the weight of the cannon on the roof, no longer swaying through cornering.

Sid kept his attention on the road ahead of them, looking for some kind of evidence of the car from the night before, even though he knew it was irrational.

Dan, who had a sleepy smile on his face, touched Sid's knee. "Calm down," he said. "We'll have a clear run through to Lake Dumbleyung; there're no refugee camps between here and there."

"Why Lake Dumbleyung?" Sid asked, unfolding the map and propping it on the dashboard.

"Because if we keep heading west, there's a track from Newdegate right through to Norseman," Dan said. "We don't need to go anywhere near Kalgoorlie, and the camps there."

"Do you have a plan?" Sid asked. "You know, an actual idea of how to do this?"

Dan's smile was warm, and Sid had to smile back. "Yeah," Dan said. "Didn't you? To get across the Nullarbor and find Aishlinn?"

"Fuck, no," Sid said. "I just bought a bike and rode it over here. Found the Red Cross on the outskirts of the city, told them I was looking for an orphaned baby. They gave me a map, with places the baby might be marked on it."

"And you went to them all?" Dan asked. "Despite the turf wars?"

Sid shrugged. "You were the fifth place I tried, but I knew you had Aishlinn, once I turned down that street."

Dan's glance was skeptical, but Sid just wrinkled his nose at the man, then turned his attention back to the road ahead of them. "Where are all the people?" he asked. "There're farms and sheep and stuff, but no people."

"They've left," Dan said. "Or they're hiding from us, in case we're looking for trouble."

Sid touched Dan's cheek, reaching across the cab of the car, and then dropped his hand back again.

Chapter Six

“Is this a good idea?” Sid asked, leaning his head out of the car window in the dusk.

“Got a better one?” Dan wiped rain from his eyes, and the bolt-cutters finally cracked the metal hasp of the padlock.

The gate swung open, and Sid drove the car through and across the stock grid.

Dan dragged the gate closed again, looping the chain back around the post and slipping the cut lock through the links. If he’d really planned ahead, he’d have bought replacement padlocks with him, and there’d be no sign that they’d passed through the gate at all.

Dan clambered back in the car. “Should we be here?” Sid asked. “What if the farm isn’t really abandoned? What if it only looks abandoned?”

The farm was completely deserted. Each paddock had a blackened and charred mound of partially burnt sheep carcasses in the middle. They rattled over the dirt tracks and stock grids, past cylinders of hay wrapped in tattered plastic and a derelict farmhouse.

The shearing shed was the next paddock over, doors standing open, windmill ticking overhead. Everything on the farm dripped rain: the eucalypts straggling along the fence lines, the eaves of the shed, the barbed wire fencing. Overhead, the late afternoon sky was completely obliterated by grey clouds, rolling across the land in waves.

Dan lowered himself out of the passenger side of the car again, easing his weight onto his sore leg. Damn, but the cold ate away at him. He hobbled over to the shearing shed, holding his weight up on the door and pulling it open.

A wave of disgust washed over him at the smell, and he could hear Sid retching behind him.

Dan pushed the door closed again, and limped over to pat Sid on the back. “You do have a weak stomach, don’t you?” Dan said. “It was just some dead sheep.”

“We’re not camping in there,” Sid said.

“No,” Dan agreed. “Be different if they’d been slaughtered months ago, but there was still fly activity on that lot.”

He looked around, at the farmhouse with its caved in roof, then at the rusted water tanks and crumbling sheds while black cockatoos circled overhead, eerie calls filling the dusk, even though Dan couldn't actually make out their shapes in the gloom and rain.

The laundry shed was the most intact, with its concrete troughs and old copper tub over a sooty fireplace. Dan pulled up some floorboards from the house and dragged them back to the shed. If he could get a fire going, it would save using the LPG for lighting.

Sid set the tent up inside the shed, and Dan sat with Aishlinn on his lap, beside the fire. He wiped her over with a wet cloth, something that she was deeply unhappy about, and then once she was dressed again, slipped her inside his shirt, out of the cold wind that whistled through the broken window panes and empty doorframe.

Sid handed Dan a ration pack and sat down beside the man, his own pack in his hands and a jerry of water between them.

"Where are we?" Sid asked.

Dan popped the top off the vacuum-sealed pack of tinned peaches. "Roughly? Or exactly?"

Sid opened his vacuum pack and poked at the contents. "Either. Is this really meat?" he asked.

Dan leaned over and peered at the pack. "That's braised steak and onions," he said knowledgeably. "Just eat it fast, don't try and chew. Roughly, we're about 25 kilometers north-northeast of Wagin. I could probably manage latitude and longitude within about five kilometers too, if you need it. Why?"

Sid swallowed a lump from his pack and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Just feels like we didn't make it very far today. I thought we might have been over the border."

Dan added a chunk of floorboard to the fire. "Two flat tires, four nappy changes. Three piss stops. And we didn't get moving early, because of burying Anita. Tomorrow, with luck, we'll get as far as Norseman."

Sid nodded, looking unhappy, and outside a fox yipped close by.

After eating, Dan dragged the two flat tires into the shed and propped them against the wall. The fire cast enough light that he could see to repair them. Dan thought he could, in a crisis, repair a tire in the dark, but it was pleasant not to be establishing that first-hand.

Sid rocked Aishlinn, crooning to her, and it was the first time Dan had seen Sid being anything like comfortable with her. He remembered that feeling, as well, when he'd first been handed a screaming infant by a distraught mother, and it made him smile to see Sid getting past the panic and finding out how to hold Aishlinn.

Poor kid, getting stuck with a name like that. She'd have to be called Ash at school.

Dan used a pair of pliers to remove the spike of metal that had punctured the first tire, and Sid looked up as the metal clattered onto the concrete floor. There was a plug about the right size in the kit, so Dan used the pliers to shape the plug, and then bashed it into the puncture mark.

Sid was humming, singing to the baby, when Dan cleaned the area around the puncture with water, then packed the tread around the repair with contact cement. "What are you singing?" Dan asked as he spread the contact cement on the patch.

"A song her mother would have sung her," Sid said, sounding wistful. "It's called *Homeward Bound*."

Dan listened more carefully while he checked the cement was ready, and then smoothed the patch onto the tire, working the cement and patch into the tread carefully. "What language is that?" he asked, rolling the repaired tire backward and forward.

When Dan glanced over, Aishlinn was on her back on her blanket squirming and working up to crying, and Sid was gone.

Dan picked Aishlinn up and propped her against his shoulder. "Your relatives are odd," he told her, and she found her mouth with her fist and sucked on her fingers, big pale eyes staring back at him.

Sid was outside, under the eaves of the shed, watching the rain.

"You wouldn't understand," Sid said.

"Try me," Dan said. "While I fix the next tire."

Sid nodded and ducked back inside the shed.

The second tire was harder to repair, with a deep crack in the rubber, the inner tube flopping uselessly inside, so Dan dug the tire levers out of his tool kit and started to prize the tire off the rim.

"It's complicated," Sid said. "And it's not really my story to tell. My family... clan, came here several generations ago. Like everyone else, we were escaping the potato famine, looking for somewhere with some space, where it didn't rain all the time."

Sid looked up at the tin roof, the sound of rain drumming against it loud. "Usually it's dry here," Sid added.

"So, is that Gaelic you're singing?" Dan asked.

“I guess so,” Sid said. “Though I’ve never met anyone else who speaks it, apart from the extended clan. My family is, um, odd. Very odd. They take themselves far too seriously.”

The rim pulled free of the tire, and Dan freed the valve and slid the inner tube out. “And?” he asked.

Aishlinn gurgled on Sid’s knee, and when Dan glanced over, Sid was looking down at her. “We’re different,” he said. “That’s all.”

“Are you talking about that... stuff you did yesterday?” Dan asked. “Because something made the compass in the car go crazy, and if I hadn’t seen that, I’d been taking the piss out of you for even thinking you can do magic.”

For someone usually talkative and cheerful, Sid was morosely silent.

“I’m sorry I got you into this,” Sid said eventually, interrupting Dan’s efforts to locate the split on the inside the tire. “If you want to stop here, you can. I think I can cope with Aishlinn by myself now.”

Dan swore under his breath at the length of the breach in the tire.

“I’m willing to admit there’re weird things happening,” Dan said, rummaging around in his car repair crate to find an inner tube still in its packaging. “Things I don’t understand, and you don’t want to talk about. And that you might just be able to cope with a baby by yourself now.”

Sid’s eyes were serious when Dan looked up from the tire again.

“But, unless I’m hallucinating, we fucked last night, and that counts for something with me,” Dan said. “And I think you’re going to need a hand to get across the desert, even if you are some kind of a magician.”

“Don’t call me that,” Sid said, leaning forward over Aishlinn.

Dan shook his head, even though Sid couldn’t see him. It wasn’t like Dan talked about his family at all, no reason for Sid to be loquacious about his, even if he was about everything else.

Dan left Sid working away at the foot pump, putting air back in the repaired tires, bouncing dementedly on the pump in a way that made Dan smile and Aishlinn gurgle.

The tools and the crate of car supplies went back in the car, and by the time Dan had topped up the petrol and checked under the bonnet, he was soaked through by the persistent rain.

When Dan took out his toothpaste and toothbrush back in his personal kit, he picked up the bar of soap. It made sense to make the most of the rain, so he stripped off quickly in the doorway of the shed and stepped back out into the rain naked.

The shed roof sloped unevenly, giving a decent flow of water off the roof, enough to be able to soap up and then rinse off. It shouldn't have been a surprise to turn around and find Sid, lit from the side by the orange glow of the fire, standing in the doorway, watching him. It was, however, and Dan found himself flustered by it.

He didn't think of himself as attractive, never paid much attention to his body, except when his leg hurt, and the idea that someone might want to watch him naked, might even desire him, was new. Not even Jake had looked at him the way Sid was.

Sid lifted his eyes slowly, letting them drift up Dan's body, until he met Dan's gaze.

"Aishlinn's asleep," Sid said.

Dan crouched dripping in front of the fire, and Sid took the small towel from Dan's personal kit and knelt down beside him. He wiped the towel over Dan's shoulders and down his back, across his chest, over his thighs, pausing to wring the towel out when it was soaked. Dan was cold, his knee didn't like bending as much as it was, and the return to combat conditions -- not enough sleep, grinding fear, constant movement -- was wearing at him. But Sid's hand was gentle, his mouth even more so, and if Dan was about to die trying to cross the Nullarbor, he was glad that Sid had kissed him.

"Are you still cold?" Sid murmured, and Dan had to swallow before his voice would work.

"Yes," he said.

Sid grinned and kissed the tip of his nose. "Then I'd better warm you up."

The floor wasn't an option, it was gritty with dried rat droppings, but the wall Sid leaned Dan against seemed stable enough. Dan wound his fingers around the cross strut to hold himself steady, and looked down at Sid, kneeling in front of him.

He wasn't cold anymore, despite the chill creeping in from outside and the rainwater still dripping from his hair. The fire in the grate was nothing compared to the fire inside Dan, raging through his body as Sid bit gently on his nipples then dropped to his knees in front of Dan.

"Oh, fuck," Dan whispered when Sid licked at the tip of his cock. Sid's eyes were closed, a look of bliss on his face as he slowly slid Dan's cock into his mouth, his fingers cradling Dan's balls, then sliding behind them, making Dan gasp.

Sid pulled back, so Dan's cock rested against his cheek, shining wetly in the firelight. "Are you sore?" Sid asked. "From last night?"

Dan touched Sid's hair, stroked his cheek. "A little," he whispered. "But don't stop."

Sid smiled, crinkling the corners of his eyes, and reached into his jacket with his free hand and took out a tube of lube.

The lube was cold on Dan's skin, but Sid's mouth was hot, distracting Dan from the sting of the finger sliding into him, at least until Sid curled his finger and made Dan groan. "Please," Dan whimpered, and Sid pressed harder, sending desire so intense it was almost painful through Dan's groin.

Dan would have been quite happy to come at that moment and thought he was going to, but Sid dragged his mouth off Dan's cock, slid his finger out of Dan's arse, and said, "Turn around."

Dan paused, watching while Sid unzipped himself and pushed his jeans down, his cock springing free, and Sid met Dan's gaze, this time his face was serious.

Sid touched Dan's lips with his fingers, and said, "You're so beautiful."

Dan shook his head briefly, but he didn't argue with Sid. "So are you," he said.

"Yeah, but I know I'm gorgeous," Sid said, this time with his irrepressible grin. "Everyone loves me, at least for a while."

Dan laughed and turned to face the wall, hands on the cross stud again, legs spread.

Fuck, if Sid made everyone else feel as good as Dan did right at that moment, there was a reason they all loved him.

Sid slid in slowly, making Dan grunt. Then, when he was all the way in, Sid held still, belly pressed against Dan's back, arms around him, his breath loud against Dan's neck.

Ten seconds. Twenty seconds, then Dan said, "Yeah, it's good now."

One hand curled around Dan's cock, the other gripped his hip, holding them both steady, then Sid rocked forward slowly, shifting them both forward, then backward, not really thrusting, just moving enough inside Dan to make him gasp.

"Good?" Sid asked, mouth against Dan's shoulder.

"Fuck, yeah," Dan breathed. His knee didn't even hurt, right at that moment.

Sid chuckled, his fingers sliding over Dan's cock, still slippery with the lube he'd used on himself, and Dan breathed in deeply and tried to hold onto some kind of control.

Holding back when Sid was rocking with him was almost impossible, the feelings were too intense, too sharp and sweet to deny, the building tightness in his balls irresistible. Sid said, "Let go, just let go," so Dan did, groaning and swiveling his hips, trying to make his hands keep hold of the wood that was holding him steady, trying desperately not to scream.

The rain had eased at some stage, the pounding of water on the tin roof fading, leaving just the tinkle of rain from the edge of the roof, the whistle of the wind rising outside, and the combined sound of them groaning.

Dan came hard, shooting against the wall in front of him, Sid's hand jerking at him, sending drops of come flying. He fell down the other side, breath rough in his throat, Sid moaning loudly and jabbing into him.

Dan got dressed slowly, limbs like lead, head fuzzy with tiredness and pleasure, but he didn't realize how fuzzy until Sid's hands grabbed him and stopped him from stumbling as he pulled his jeans up.

"Go to bed," Sid said gently. "I'll pack the car up, and have a look around."

"You need to sleep, too," Dan protested, but he didn't stop Sid from pushing him toward the tent and the sleeping bag.

"No, I don't," Sid said. "Stop fussing."

Aishlinn woke Dan a couple of times during the night, and each time he lit the LPG light, Sid appeared at the tent flap, smiling cheerfully.

"If you don't sleep, why am I the one looking after Aishlinn during the night?" Dan asked tiredly, shifting a squirming and crying baby between his knees on the sleeping bag and reaching for the last bottle she'd had to refill it. "Remind me to wash and boil bottles for her tomorrow."

Sid squatted down at the end of the sleeping bags, and Aishlinn half-rolled, craning back to see him, fist stuffed in her mouth and tears trickling down her face.

"Tomorrow night?" Sid said. "It actually hadn't occurred to me, but you're right."

Dan screwed the cap back on the bottle and shook it hard, then held it out to Sid.

"You do that end, I'll change her," he said.

Sid smelled of rain and cold night air, bending forward and holding the bottle for Aishlinn while Dan bundled up the wet nappy and pinned a clean one around her. He'd have to wash nappies again, too, he didn't have enough to drive right the way across Australia without multiple washes.

"It's dawn," Sid said when Dan took the bottle off him and scooped Aishlinn up into his arms. "We should get moving."

Some distance past Lake King, with nothing but endless miles of sandy saltbush country spotted with temporary lakes around them, Sid stopped being quite so restless.

He dropped back into the cab of the car and slid the sun roof closed, propping Dan's binoculars on the dash and leaning back to tickle Aishlinn, who burbled back at him.

Pelicans flew overhead, dropping down to settle in the salt lakes, then taking off again, and the sky was overcast and grey, but at least the rain had stopped.

"See anything?" Dan asked, and Sid shook his head.

"Well, not apart from birds and water and clouds," Sid said. "No farms, and there're no vehicles around either."

"We're a long way from anywhere," Dan said. The road they were bouncing along was unsealed, deeply corrugated and riddled with potholes, and no one had driven down it since the rain had started, the surface pristine sand and mud. "Were you worried we were being followed?"

"What gave you that idea?" Sid asked, and he sounded like he was pouting.

When Dan glanced at him, he was.

"You kept looking behind us, not in front," Dan said. "I could tell by which way your knees were pointed."

"You were looking at my knees?" Sid teased.

"If you insist on standing with the top of half of you out of the sun roof, leaving your crotch level with my face, I'm going to notice these things."

Sid leaned across and ruffled Dan's hair. "I'd forgotten that. Where are we?"

"East of Lake King," Dan said. "That was the stack of wheat silos, with the closed petrol station, that we drove past a while ago. We have to travel due east for about another twenty kilometers, then the road bends northeast, then southeast again, and some time this afternoon, we'll run into the Coolgardie-Esperance Highway, close to Norseman."

"Over the border tonight?"

"Exactly how fast did you ride that bike of yours?" Dan asked. "Because it's a long piece of road from Norseman to the border."

"Fast," Sid admitted. "Really fast."

“You might not have had trouble with checkpoints, but we’re not going to get this car through as easily.”

“Checkpoints, pfff,” Sid said, making a flicking motion with his fingers. “They’re for other people.”

The checkpoint was visible on the horizon in the clear air, a snaking line of cars, buses and trucks.

Dan put down the binoculars and said, “Pull over.”

The car rumbled across the hard gravel of the shoulder, and the car behind them shot past, spraying gravel so that Dan had to put his hand up to the windscreen to dampen it. Even reinforced glass would shake itself to pieces eventually.

“You have a look, tell me what you see,” Dan said, handing the binoculars over to Sid.

Sid wound the passenger’s window down and leaned out of it.

“Bugger,” he said, pulling his head back into the car. “That wasn’t there when I rode through. There’s some kind of fencing beside the road, stretching off as far as I can see, both directions, and a few tanks at a checkpoint. Can we go around it?”

Dan took the binoculars back and peered at the horizon, then at the terrain.

“We might be able to,” he said. “The car will go across the scrub fine, that’s what it’s a four wheel drive for. I’m more worried about mines and sinkholes.”

Sid’s eyebrows shot up. “Mines! They’d blow us up?”

A chopper lifted up from the checkpoint, a small shape lifting up and swinging around, catching the late afternoon sunlight creeping under the clouds.

“Do we want to risk it?” Dan asked.

“I can do this,” Sid said. “Hide the pistols and the semi. And me, too, since I don’t have an ID card.”

Dan glanced at Sid, and he looked just plain terrified.

“If I burst a bag of blood, it’s going to make a hell of a mess for you to explain away,” Sid said. “And old blood doesn’t work as well as fresh blood.”

“There’s a grenade launcher in the wooden box behind your seat. That’ll need hiding too.”

Sid nodded, and Dan held out his hand, pulling his sleeve up.

He didn't believe. He didn't believe.

Sid pulled a small knife out of his boot, and sharp pain slit at Dan's skin, on the palm of his hand. "Act casual, and do it quickly," Sid said, and then he reached up and slid the sun roof open and clambered up out onto the roof of the car, making the vehicle rock with his weight.

Blood welled freely out of Dan's hand, dripping down his arm, splashing on his legs as he put the car back into gear, Aishlinn's voice a rising cry.

"Drive," Sid's voice called as Aishlinn wailed in the back seat, escalating sobs that drowned everything out.

The chopper moved closer, edging into M134 range -- four kilometers away, three -- lifting to a few hundred feet, then dropping down again, and Dan picked up speed, trying to keep the gear changes smooth, acutely aware that Sid must be hanging onto the roof rack, doing whatever it was that made Aishlinn cry.

Then the noise eased, Aishlinn's cries coming from further and further away, and the road ahead of Dan began to shimmer and move, as though it was mid-summer rather than a cold, overcast afternoon in August.

He drove, keeping his speed down, watching the chopper pass overhead, close enough he could see the shapes of the crew through the chopper windows. Someone waved to Dan, and then the chopper lifted altitude and swung back to the checkpoint. It made sense; an army chopper would check that a Red Cross vehicle on the side of the road hadn't broken down.

The traffic snarl at the checkpoint seemed to mostly be off to one side, where vehicle searches were being conducted. Dan slowed down, trundling along in second gear, and a soldier with a light wand gestured for him to pull across, onto the shoulder, behind a city transit bus full of people.

"Stop!" one of the soldiers called and Dan could just about make out one stripe on his uniform.

"Not moving, Corporal," Dan called back.

"Identify yourself," the corporal said, bending down to peer through Dan's open window. "And get out of the car."

"Dan Kingsley," Dan said. "Former corporal with the 6th Battalion, supporting the 7th Brigade. Red Cross field worker." After sleeping rough and driving all day, Dan had to hang onto the car door for support, until he could get his leg to take his weight.

The corporal patted him down. "Got some ID?"

“Glove box,” Dan said.

“Get it.”

Dan turned back toward the car and leaned across to the glove box, retrieving them.

The rear car door beside Aishlinn creaked, and Aishlinn’s screams eased, making Dan scramble back out.

“Poor baby,” the corporal said soothingly, leaning across the car restraint to tickle Aishlinn’s cheek. “Don’t cry, sweetie.”

“Here they are,” Dan said, handing his cards, now blood-streaked, over to the corporal.

The corporal examined them briefly. “How did you hurt your hand?” he asked. “Do you have identification for the baby?”

Dan wiped his hand on his jacket. “Changing a tire, cut myself on the jack handle. And I don’t have anything for the baby, but if you look, I’m carrying Red Cross fieldworker identification. She’s an orphan I’m taking east, to her remaining family.”

The corporal flicked through Dan’s cards again, nodding behind the visor of his helmet.

“Mind if I take a look around the car?” he said, shoving the cards back at Dan, and not waiting for permission before he leaned in the driver’s side door.

Fuck, fuck, fuck; there was the rifle on the dash, resting in the soft mount there. Only there wasn’t, when Dan looked over the soldier’s shoulder. The mount was empty, or at least it appeared so.

The soldier looked at the inside of the car’s roof, poking at the welded plates that had been the hard point mount for the autocannon. “This a military vehicle?” he asked.

“Used to be,” Dan said. “Army decommed it after it got washed away in a flood up north. I bought the wreck and fixed it up.”

“Hmm,” the soldier said, but he clambered out of the cab and strolled around the back of the car. “Open the back up.”

Dan unlatched the back of the car and pulled the rear door open, showing a wild jumble of jerry cans of fuel and water, packed beside one of the spare tires and boxes of food.

“Looks alright,” the soldier said, and he reached for the walkie talkie on his shoulder. “Clear here, no weapons. The man’s an ex-digger, conveying an infant to safety; see if you can get them waved through at the checkpoint, his identification is all good.”

“Thanks,” Dan said, and the soldier held out his hand for Dan to shake it.

“Get as far east as you can,” the soldier said. “We’re pulling back, abandoning the west.”

“There’re a million people in refugee camps,” Dan said, horrified. “You can’t leave them there.”

“That’s our orders,” the corporal said. “Hold here, until we’re asked to pull back. You’d better cover as much ground as you can, while you can.”

Dan hobbled back to the driver’s door and clambered in, his mind a jumble of dismay. All those people, just left to live or die. Jake, too, if he was still alive, was somewhere to the west of them. Abandoned by the federal government...

Dan turned the ignition key, and the car lurched into life.

Sid’s voice, echoing as though it was a long way away, said, “I’m running out of blood here.”

“We have to get through the actual checkpoint,” Dan said, pushing the car into second gear. “Does it work if I do it myself?” he called out, leaning across to rummage around in the glove box for something sharp.

“Hurry!” Sid called back, and Dan’s fingers curled around a screwdriver. It would have to do.

He stuck the screwdriver the back of his left hand, where it gripped onto the steering wheel, and fresh blood leaked down his hand, coursing over the dried brown blood from earlier.

Aishlinn’s screams picked up a notch again, and Dan twisted the screwdriver in his hand, digging at the flesh, making more blood flow.

It hurt, but not as much as being shot in the knee had.

Dan tossed the screwdriver onto the passenger seat and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. He still didn’t believe in magic, he just plain refused to.

A line of cars waited at the checkpoint barrier, but another soldier with a light wand directed Dan across onto the empty shoulder of the road and pointed at the gates.

The car trundled along the shoulder, past the row of cars and buses, all full of refugees, all the refugees staring at Dan and the car.

Another soldier, with a Steyr cocked, held up his free hand for Dan to stop. He peered into the back of the car, made goong noises at the distraught Aishlinn, and then waved Dan forward again.

At the actual gates, with tanks pointing at them, people were standing beside their cars, being patted down and having their identities checked, while children played in the dirt in the last of the sunlight and soldiers stood around chatting.

Dan halted the car, and a soldier saluted him and pushed up the massive bar that was the physical barrier. Dan drove the car through, out to freedom and the other side of the checkpoint.

He accelerated, trying to keep the gear changes as smooth as possible for Sid, who must have been hanging on for his life, and just kept driving as the dusk deepened.

Ten kilometers past the checkpoint, almost over the horizon from it and on a deserted stretch of the highway, Dan glanced at the dashboard, and the rifle was back.

He braked, as carefully as he could, and Sid slid headfirst back through the sun roof, collapsing down into the foot well of the passenger side, kicking Dan solidly in the side of the head.

The car stopped, and Sid untangled himself, clambering back into the seat, then slumping back, eyes closed, mouth open and gasping.

Dan doused the car lights, plunging them into darkness.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“No,” Sid said. “Of course I’m not. Now drive as fast as you possibly can.”

Chapter Seven

Sid drove without lights, a fact that reduced Dan to screaming hysterics at first, until Sid's ability to dodge wombats in the dark was well-established.

He also drove with the accelerator to the floor, exuding a kind of determined panic that scared Dan even more than the driving-in-the-dark.

"What are we running from?" Dan asked again, from where he was wedged between the two front seats, giving Aishlinn a bottle. "Apart from the military's attempt to close the borders and an impending humanitarian catastrophe?"

"You don't want to know," Sid said, sounding grim in the dark.

Aishlinn grizzled, indicating she'd emptied her bottle, so Dan took it out of her mouth and sat back in the passenger seat.

"I really do want to know," he insisted. "I'd also like to know how the fuck you made the guns disappear, and how you can see in the dark."

"My family," Sid said, swinging on the wheel, steering around something Dan couldn't see. "My family are kind of like an organized crime family, only they're not criminals. Well, not much. But there are other groups that my family is in dispute with. Unfortunately, every time I do something, um, magical, they can find me. It's like setting off a flare, or causing a seismic event. By now, even my own family will be aware that I'm making a fuss out here, and they're thousands of kilometers away."

"And they're chasing you? These other groups?"

"I'm keen on not finding out," Sid said. "Though I'm hoping I'm not important enough to be worth the effort."

"And the magic?" Dan asked. "Which, by the way, I'm still not believing in, despite overwhelming evidence. Hasn't anyone noticed all these magicians running around spraying blood everywhere?"

With the car at full speed, wind howling through dodgy door seals, everything shaking and rattling from the engine vibrations, Dan wasn't sure that Sid had heard him, because he didn't answer.

"I'm the only one who uses donated body fluids," Sid eventually said. "Each person has a different geas, or cost, to their magic. Most people chose something less, um, messy."

"You chose to use body fluids!" Dan shouted, over the roar of the engine.

"I thought it would be a good excuse to have a lot of sex," Sid said.

"Instead of?" Dan asked.

"It just had to be something that made the magic difficult," Sid said. "Like, um, always having to have my hair braided a certain way, or having to sing in Gaelic when doing the magic."

"I had to fucking stick a screwdriver in my hand because you thought it would be fun to fuck a lot of people!" Dan shouted.

"Sorry," Sid said, and he sounded contrite in the darkness. "Believe me; I didn't plan any of this."

Dan rubbed at the back of his left hand, flaking the blood off. "And these people that you hope aren't chasing us; they have braided hair and speak Gaelic?"

"I don't know," Sid said. "All I know is that they're driving a very black, very fast car. At least, they were when I saw them near Mikey's farm."

"Oh God," Dan said. "And you didn't think it was worth telling me?"

Sid was silent, and Dan shifted his attention back to the road. The white lines down the middle of the road were a faint flicker, and everything else was darkness. If the cloud cover lifted, there'd be some ambient light at least, instead of the oppressive darkness, but until then, they were hidden from sight.

The lights of the car in front of them shone through the blackness, bright red at the rear, pools of white moving in front of it. Sid ran the car up close behind it, then pulled out and overtook without indicating, and Dan wondered what the people in the other car made of a rumbling, rattling four wheel drive overtaking them without lights. It was the stuff legends were made of, certainly.

"Gonna need to refuel soon," Sid said, making Dan jolt awake suddenly.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked, rubbing at his face and peering out into the darkness.

The white lines flickered, same as before, and nothing else had changed.

“About an hour,” Sid said, taking his foot off the accelerator and letting the car slow. “You snored.”

“Said with the virtuous tones of someone who doesn’t,” Dan said. “Bastard.”

The car rumbled and slowed, then halted, on the shoulder of the road, and Aishlinn murmured. “You refuel, I’ll change her nappy,” Dan said. “Can I put the interior light on?”

Sid opened the car door and stepped out, letting a blast of chilled air in. “Can you use a torch?” he asked. “We’ll be less obvious from the air that way.”

“We’re being chased by magicians in a fucking plane?” Dan said.

“Actually, I was thinking of the bombings,” Sid said.

“Point,” Dan agreed, finding a torch in the glove box.

Aishlinn was a bundle of squirming unhappiness on the front passenger seat, fretting and whining while Dan changed her nappy by the illumination of the penlight held in his teeth. “I know, sweetie,” he murmured. “You just want a good night’s sleep, same as me.”

Aishlinn cried, little pathetic sobs, when Dan slid her back into her restraint, then turned the torch off and closed the door.

He pissed, off the road, listening to the cold wind running in from the coast not too far away. It was late in the night, and the road was empty. They might as well have been a million miles from civilization, not just a thousand.

“Want me to drive?” Dan asked as Sid slid the drum of petrol, sloshing loudly, back into the car. They were going to have to do something about stealing some fuel eventually, if the drum was emptying.

“Better if I do,” Sid said. “Then we don’t need lights.”

“It looks suspicious,” Dan said. “That driving in the dark thing.”

Sid kissed Dan quickly, smelling of petrol and sweat. “Sleep while you can,” Sid said. “Because this is not going to end well.”

“Somehow, I don’t think sleep is possible anymore, not with that cheering news.” Dan clambered back into the passenger side anyway, leaving Sid to drive.

He didn't sleep, but the motor noise and the darkness lulled Dan, letting his mind drift away from the craziness they were involved in to somewhere peaceful.

Aishlinn squealed, high and painful, jerking Dan fully awake again, to find Sid hunched over the wheel, obviously trying to will the car to go faster, the inside of the car lit by another car's headlights.

Something luminously pink and slick slid through the air past them, tendrils curling away from the main mass, splashing against the side of the car, making it rock and swerve, so that Sid had to work hard, braking and steering, to keep them on the road.

The pink stuff fell behind them, leaving the stench of burned paint, and Dan craned around in his seat.

There was a car behind them, halogen headlights burning into the back of their car. The car was something slick and low slung, hugging the road, its brake lights also visible as it slowed to avoid running into Dan's car.

"That's a VE Commodore," Dan said. "It's a standard pursuit vehicle, beloved of just about everyone. Top speed three times that of this car."

This time, the stuff was bright green, banging at the back of their car, shining through the windows, turning Sid's face even greener.

Dan took a deep breath in and *thought*, making himself focus on the situation, looking at assets, turning the situation over. They had one advantage; they had a decent four wheel drive vehicle.

"Slow down!" Dan shouted over the noise of Aishlinn screaming. "Right down to second gear!"

Sid shouted back. "Why!"

"Because we're going bush!"

Sid slammed on the brakes, making the tires hiss on the bitumen, and Dan could hear the Commodore's tires squealing, too.

"Which way?" Sid asked, and Dan pointed inland. He wasn't sure exactly where they were on the map, but at least if they went inland, then they wouldn't accidentally plunge over the cliffs of the Great Australian Bight.

They surged off the road into the scrub, Sid swinging the wheel hard, backward and forward, sending them bounding into the darkness, away from the road and danger. The wheels thudded into rabbit holes, the spinifex buffeted at the car, and the next explosion, or attack, or whatever, rained down around them, setting fire to the spinifex and saltbush, filling the car with fumes from burning rubber.

The fires flared bright orange, falling behind the car as Sid steered it in a mad dance through the dark, thudding the roo bar into rocks, spinning the wheels in sand.

Aishlinn whimpered forlornly, and Dan turned as far around in his seat as he could, peering out the back window, scrabbling in the mess behind his seat for the box of grenades.

The scrub fires were spreading, lighting the night, flames licking up the Paterson's curse and igniting the plants, catching the wattle scrub on fire, too.

And behind them, like a zeppelin and lit below by the flames, was a black sedan making short bounding leaps across the scrub, lurching up into the air, wallowing gracelessly, then thudding back into the sand.

"They're fucking flying that car!" Dan said as Sid dropped one of the front wheels into a deep hole, and the other three wheels spun then caught, dragging the car back out again.

"Yeah!" Sid said. "And it's taking all of their effort. Noticed that they've stopped trying to kill us?"

Dan didn't need to urge Sid to go faster; he was doing a creditable job of putting as much distance between them and Commodore as possible.

"How far behind us are they?" Dan called, unbuckling his seatbelt and reaching up to slide the sun roof open.

"How far do you need them to be?" Sid shouted back, sending the car sliding down a sandy slope, slewing and fishtailing, then rattling it back up the other side of the gully, hampering Dan's attempts to jam the grenade launcher under the barrel of his Steyr.

"Give me a hundred meters if you can," Dan said, standing up between the seats and maneuvering his upper body out of the sun roof.

The Steyr was a decent rifle, but there were times when it was a little too subtle and you needed something with a bit more bang.

The cartridge slid into breech, and Dan jammed the breech closed again, then shoved spare rounds into his jacket pocket.

"Bring her around!" Dan shouted down through the sun roof, and the car skittered around in the scrub, so that Dan could see the spot fires and the Commodore, close enough to be within grenade range.

The Commodore floated about two meters above the scrub, lit from behind by the fires, and Dan sighted and hit the trigger.

The grenade was a HE, detonating with a boom near the Commodore, the recoil thudding into Dan's shoulder, slowing him down as he yanked the breech open, ready for another round.

A blast of whatever it was that the pursuer's had used on Dan and Sid burned through the dark, slamming into their car and tossing Dan against the car roof, just as he got the breech jammed shut again.

A moment, just one breath to sight, and the boom this time was accompanied by rending metal, the round hitting the Commodore solidly on the bonnet, just as the recoil jerked Dan backwards.

A third round, further back down the car, went into the metal as the car dropped to the ground.

Dan fell back into the car awkwardly, sure he'd cracked some ribs.

"Drive," he shouted, and there was a second explosion as the fuel tank on the Commodore went up, too.

Sid's face was white, sweat trickled down his face, and the car motor groaned in protest, and then lurched forward through the darkness.

Dan swore, and he could smell petrol, close and fresh, and not from the Commodore.

Sid was hunched forward over the steering wheel, peering in front of them, and Dan clutched onto the dash, willing the car forward, too.

They dropped down one last graveled slope, and onto the shoulder of the deserted road, the car making one last gasping rattle before the motor died.

They sat for a moment, the motor ticking and Aishlinn sobbing, and then Dan opened the passenger door.

"Let's see how bad it is," he said, taking the torch out of the glove box and picking up the Steyr.

The fires were a glow on the horizon, orange and distant, the only light in the desert, apart from Dan's torch.

Sid swore, at the back of the car, and Dan made his leg work and hobbled around, free hand held against where his ribs had collided with the car.

In the torchlight, the bottom half of the back of the car was blackened and charred, paint blistered off, the rear tires were shredded, and when Dan squatted down and shone the light under the back of the car, the long range fuel tank, solid steel, welded and riveted, was ripped open, the last of the fuel in it dripping onto the road.

He didn't have profanities strong enough for the occasion.

“How come it didn’t explode?” Sid asked.

“Fuel tanks rarely do, except in the movies or if you hit them with an explosive round. Can you make it fly?” Dan asked, poking at the edge of the tank.

“No,” Sid said. “This might not be the right moment to tell you, but I’m not actually a very good magician. Can you fix this?”

Dan shone the torch at the undercarriage of the four wheel drive.

“The tank, perhaps, when there’s daylight,” he said. “And the back axle is intact. The tires however...”

One of the spares had been bolted to the rear of the car, and was a molten mess. The other, inside the back of the car, had hopefully survived, but that still left them with only three functional tires.

Sid’s hand patted Dan’s shoulder, and he said, “What happens?”

“We try and get someone to stop,” Dan said, straightening up carefully and peering west, back up the road. “And if no one will, then we’ll have to make someone help us.”

Sid was looking inland, to where the scrub fire glowed faintly. “Bet the people whose car we blew up are annoyed.”

“They should be dead,” Dan said, picking a chunk of melted rubber off the spare tire on the back of the car.

“They won’t be,” Sid said. He sounded cheerful, but the click of the safety on his pistol was loud.

The orange glow of the fires faded, and the horizon to the east became a line of silver, and cars and trucks roared past them, ignoring Sid’s arm waving and the arc of the torch. Dan didn’t blame the people; he wouldn’t have stopped to help either under the circumstances.

Aishlinn had another bottle, and a clean nappy, and was propped against Dan’s shoulder, fretting, when they next heard the distant rumble of an approaching vehicle.

Sid, who was on top of the vehicle, with a better view, jumped lightly back down onto the roadside.

“Convoy of trucks,” Sid Said, reaching for the torch and flicking it on.

“A big diesel,” Dan said, taking a couple of steps away from the road and tightening his grip on both Aishlinn and his own pistol.

The rumble grew, too deep for one truck only, and the growing daylight showed a convoy of trucks and APCs, traveling slow, moving toward them.

Dan tossed his rifle into the back of the car and shoved his pistol deeper into his jacket pocket.

The binoculars were on the dash, and he reached in for them. The lead truck was a kilometer away, not yet close enough for Dan to make out any markings, though he'd bet that it was a infantry division, just on the basis of the ratio of APCs to trucks.

Sid stepped out onto the road when the truck was closer, waving his arms then pointing at the remaining half of the Red Cross painted on the back of their car, and Dan peered through the binoculars again.

The emblem on the front of the lead truck had a kangaroo in front of crossed rifles, and it was just about the sweetest sight Dan had ever seen.

"This is the battalion I served with," Dan said. "The Sixth must be pulling out of Western Australia. There's supposed to be some kind of installation at Eucla, they might be headed there."

The truck flashed its headlights, moving across onto the shoulder of the road and slowing down, the rest of the convoy pulling out to overtake it.

"Think they'll help?" Sid asked, glancing over his shoulder, back at Dan.

"Think you could act sick?" Dan asked, reaching into the glove box for his own cards.

Aishlinn squealed, digging her knees into Dan's chest, and when Dan looked back up, Sid was holding onto the back of the car, pale and trembling, slumped against the door.

Dan swore, and only just made it around the car before Sid began to slide down the blackened metal.

"Sick enough?" Sid croaked, as Dan grabbed at him to hold him upright.

"What happened?" Dan asked, as the truck rumbled to a halt behind their car. "Are you alright?"

"Just a little un-healing," Sid whispered. "Nothing to worry about."

Steyr rifles pointed out of both sides of the truck cab, directed at the three of them, and a soldier wearing a flak jacket jumped out of the back of the truck and ran toward them.

Aishlinn screamed inconsolably, and Sid fell to the road, beside the wreck of their car.

"You fellas in a bit trouble?" the soldier asked, taking Dan's cards.

“Dan Kingsley, former sergeant with the Sixth,” Dan said. “I’m with the Red Cross, trying to evacuate these refugees east.”

The soldier squatted down beside Sid and examined his face briefly, then looked at the damage to the car in the early morning light.

“Looks like you hit a mine,” the soldier said, and Dan didn’t disabuse him of that idea, even though he’d never personally seen a mine do so little damage to a vehicle.

“Any chance of a hand?” Dan asked. “If you could just get us as far as wherever the Sixth is encamped, I’m sure someone will get a message to my captain.”

The soldier stood up and waved at the truck, Dan’s cards still in his hand.

A sergeant clambered out of the cab and slung his rifle across his back.

“What’s the problem?” the sergeant asked, strolling across to join them.

“Driver used to be one of us, sir,” the soldier said. “Looks like the Red Cross vehicle has taken a bit of damage.”

The sergeant examined Dan’s cards, and then peered down at Sid. “What about you?” the sergeant asked.

“No identification,” Dan said, and Sid shook his head. “He lost them in the bombings.”

The sergeant looked at Dan carefully. “Where were you stationed?”

“Port Hedland, sir,” Dan said. “With Captain Morrow.”

The sergeant’s gaze went back to the damage to their car. “I can take you as far as Eucla,” he said. “Morrow’s there and he can deal with you after that. Soldier, get this vehicle mobile.”

Dan held a hand out to Sid, who gripped it and let Dan pull him up to his feet. “You might want to get out of the way,” Dan said, as three more soldiers, bearing cabling and tool boxes clambered off the back of the truck.

Dan stood back, Sid leaning against him and Aishlinn fretting, and khaki clad men jacked both ends of their car up, transferring the intact front tires to the rear in about thirty seconds, then moving the truck in front of the car and attaching the elevated front of the car to the back of the truck.

“Vehicle’s ready, sir,” the first soldier said to Dan. “Please climb on in, and we’ll be on our way.”

It took both Dan and the soldier to get Sid into the passenger seat; he was so weak and frail.

With the front of the car hitched to the back of the truck, and a dozen soldiers watching through the windscreen, Dan helped Sid do up his seat belt, then checked Aishlinn was secure in her restraint. Dan wanted to ask Sid questions, find out exactly what he'd done to himself, but that would have to wait until they had a touch more privacy. For now, they were safe and on the move again. Even if the people in the Commodore had survived the explosion, they weren't going to be able to touch Dan, Sid and Aishlinn while they were under military guard.

The sun had risen completely, and was fighting its way through the cloud cover before there was any sign of the military base. Sid pointed through the windscreen at a battered hand-painted road sign, pocked by shotgun pellets, as it whooshed past.

"Disneyland, 13,878 kilometers," Sid read. "Eucla Camp, ten kilometers."

"Hear that, Aishlinn?" Dan called over his shoulder. "We're going to Disneyland."

The camp was a smudge on the horizon: rows and rows of demountable buildings, an airstrip with a wind sock flapping at one end, mounds of indeterminate shapes that Dan knew from experience were piles of equipment covered in camouflage mesh. The truck towing them slowed down and turned off the highway onto the access road of crushed limestone, heading inland away from the sea and toward the transcontinental train line.

The truck and car bumped over the limestone and gravel, past the warning signs for mines, explosives and intruders, and right on through the steel and barbed wire gates to the camp, without any need for lies or bribes.

Sid looked back over his shoulder as the gates closed behind them, then at Dan.

Dan shrugged. With the car wrecked, there weren't a lot of options.

The truck towed them through the camp, past rows of demountable buildings, piles of equipment and fuel tanks, and lines of soldiers, weapons over their shoulders, marching past.

The trucks stopped, beside a cluster of buildings and a parade ground with troops drilling, and the soldiers on the back of the truck began to clamber down, stretching themselves then unloading their packs from the truck.

"What happens now?" Sid asked, and Aishlinn cried, sounding hungry.

"We leave our weapons here and get out of the car," Dan said, as a soldier walked toward their car, speaking into his walkie talkie. "Where're your bags of blood?"

"Off," Sid said. "So I left them beside the road where we broke down."

"Good thinking," Dan murmured, and the soldier opened his door.

Chapter Eight

Sid really did feel dreadful, like he was about to faint or throw up, or both. It had been a rough ten days or so, and after a long period of time in his life without using his abilities in anything except the most minor ways, the control he'd used was hammering him.

The truck had stopped beside a solid bank of buildings, beneath a flutter of flags: one large Australian flag, and a row of smaller ones.

The mass of men marching closest to the car halted, spun and marched off. The hair on the back of Sid's neck stood up, and he lifted himself up, peering over the parade ground.

There was something about the soldiers, above and beyond Sid's personal dislike of conformity, that didn't sit well.

A soldier who had approached them saluted and a bloke in a uniform appeared from one of the large demountable buildings, barreling down the steps, middle-aged and gruff, saluting and being all military. It was a hell of a shock to see Dan hobble out of the car and snap a salute back at the man.

Then there was hugging and embracing and back-slapping, which made more sense to Sid, who finally opened the car door and lowered his feet carefully to the ground.

Pain shot up his legs, either from his un-healing or from some unknown power in the ground, and he had a sudden moment of empathy for Dan, who felt like that all the time. The first soldier rushed up to Sid and steadied him. "Can you walk, mate?" the soldier asked, and Sid nodded.

"Just don't ask me to run." Sid hung onto the hood of the car, creeping around to where Dan, Aishlinn in his arms, was talking to the older bloke.

"This is Sid," Dan said. "I gave him a lift."

"So what do you need?" the older bloke asked, and he must have been someone important to have that many bits sewn onto his uniform.

"Somewhere to sleep, Captain Morrow," Dan said. "I need to wash nappies and bottles, and bathe the baby. Then I need to repair the car."

Morrow looked at Sid appraisingly. “Might get one of our medics to check Sid and the baby over, too.”

Medics? Sid had to put up with a doctor poking at him?

Dan patted his arm. “Let them check you out,” he said quietly.

Sid nodded, and made himself not smile. It wasn’t like he was actually sick. Only infectious thing about him was his good nature, though when he felt as crap as he did, he wasn’t sure he was that sweet-tempered after all.

The marching soldiers stomped and turned across the stony ground that steamed faintly from earlier rain, in weak morning sunshine. Sid followed Dan to a series of connected portable buildings, humming with activity and air-conditioning.

Sid paused on the steps up into the demountable, looking back over his shoulder to the marching soldiers, who were wearing grooves into the dirt in a way that made Sid feel like throwing up.

“The infirmary,” the soldier with all the bits on his uniform said, drawing Sid’s attention back as he opened a door for them. “We’re a bit busy at the moment, with the convoys arriving, but I’ll let the staff know you’re here.”

The room was a waiting room with chairs around the edge and piles of tatty magazines, and a nurse in khaki bustled into the room, saluting the soldier, then turning her attention to Aishlinn.

“A baby!” she said, smiling at Aishlinn, who stopped crying and peered back at her.

“Could you make sure our visitors get the care they need?” the soldier said. “While I see about some accommodation for them.”

“Yes, sir,” the nurse said, and she took Aishlinn out of Dan’s arms. “Sit down, both of you, and I’ll get some more staff in here.” She patted Aishlinn’s back and propped her against a shoulder, then reached for the telephone.

The medic that examined Sid was a tall, lovely woman, full-hipped in her uniform, with kind hands and a gentle smile. If Sid had been his usual self, he might have tried to pick her up. Only he wasn’t his usual self, and he suspected Dan might object, based on what he’d said at the abandoned farm. That was all right, Sid kind of liked the idea of having a lover like Dan.

“Have you been sleeping?” the medic asked Sid, unwrapping the blood pressure cuff and taking the stethoscope out of her ears.

Sid shook his head. “No,” he said. “We’ve been on the run, there’s not been time.”

“What have you been eating?” she asked, pushing a thermometer into his mouth, before checking his hands, examining his grubby nails, then his palms.

“What Dan had hoarded,” Sid said, around the thermometer in his mouth, which the medic removed and examined. “Muesli bars and tins of meat.”

Her hand circled his wrist, probing at the bones, and then pushing his sleeve up to look at his arm. “Before that?” she asked.

“Whatever I could get,” Sid said. If she chose to assume that he’d been living in a war zone, then that was her business.

“I’ll need to take some blood,” she said. “Check your white blood cell count, as well as a couple of other things, but you don’t have a fever, so I don’t think you’ve got an infection. I think you might just be exhausted and malnourished.”

Sid tried to look pathetic, and he must have succeeded because she patted his hand. “Let me take some blood, then you go have a meal and a sleep, see if that helps.”

Aishlinn cried in the next room, and the medic looked up from the needle she was slotting onto a syringe. “Don’t worry about her, she’ll need to have her immunizations and a thorough check up. You’ve done really well to get her this far.”

The needle sliced into Sid’s arm, straight into a vein, and he had to look away. It was inconsistent, when he put so much effort into stealing donated blood, but he hated to have blood taken.

The medic pulled the needle out and pressed a bandaid over Sid’s hand. “Go and find your little girl,” she said. “I’m sure she’ll be happier with you there.”

Aishlinn was lying on a set of scales, squawking and wagging her arms and legs around, and Dan waved Sid in.

“How old is she?” the nurse asked, tinkering with the settings of scales.

“Um, I’m not sure,” Sid said, thinking back. “I think she’s about three months old.”

The nurse picked Aishlinn up and wrapped her in a blanket. “She’s too small,” the nurse said.

Sid shuffled uncomfortably. “We’re a tall and skinny family,” he said. “Slow growers.”

The nurse handed Aishlinn back to Dan. “I know this isn’t ideal circumstances, but please make sure she gets lots and lots of feeds. Do you have an age appropriate formula for her?”

“I have no idea,” Dan said. “It’s what the Red Cross supplies me with.”

The nurse shook her head. “I’ll have a word with the quartermaster, see if we’ve got something better for her.”

Aishlinn found her fist with her mouth and made a sucking noise, pale green eyes following the nurse as she moved around the room.

“Do you have somewhere I can bathe her?” Dan asked. “She’s not had a proper wash for days.”

Aishlinn floated in the sink, held securely by Dan’s hands, but Sid had to sit down, too dizzy to stand for any longer.

Dan looked across at him worriedly, and Sid shook his head slightly. If this was how the rest of the world felt, then Sid wasn’t impressed. His feet hurt, the light was too bright, and he wanted to lie down somewhere dark for a long, long time.

The nurse bustled back in, carrying a pack of disposable nappies, some clothes for Aishlinn and a tin of formula. “There you go,” the nurse said, peering over Dan’s shoulder at the baby and smiling, making Aishlinn smile and gurgle back. “I’ve got some bottles in the autoclave at the moment. Soon as they’re done, she can have another feed.”

They were shown to yet another demountable building by a painfully young man in uniform who carried the baby supplies. Dan handed Aishlinn and her bottle to Sid and said, “Go and lie down with her, I’ve got to retrieve stuff from the car.”

The soldier held the door open, and took Sid’s elbow in his hand and helped him up the steps. “Officer’s quarters,” he said. “I’ll bring your meal.”

There were two folding beds in the building, and a door to a small bathroom. Sid put Aishlinn down on one of the beds and sat beside her tiredly.

“Hey, sweetie,” he said, lying back and pulling her close, dislodging her bottle temporarily, making her grump before he got the teat back in.

“You and me need to have a little chat,” he said. Her eyes were wide, and it was eerie to see his own green irises there, after a decade of only seeing his reflection and no one else from his clan. “Things are a bit sticky at the moment, and I don’t imagine they’re going to get any better.”

Aishlinn sucked industriously at her bottle, and he smiled at her. “You stay close to Dan if anything happens. He’s a good bloke, and he knows where to take you.”

The tickle of her presence in his mind flared brighter for a moment, and he kissed her forehead. “That’s my good little telepath,” he murmured. “You just keep right on calling for the family, and eventually your gran will come striding through that door, bossing people around and telling you what to do. Just remember, she’s a softie for a few tears.”

Footsteps outside made Sid tuck a grey blanket around the mostly-asleep Aishlinn and stumble to the doorway as Dan carried a crate of supplies up the steps.

“Car’s been searched, at least superficially, our weapons are gone,” he murmured as he passed Sid. “Surveillance.”

It would explain the delay before they were shown to the demountable, certainly.

A soldier trotted across the bare sand of the rudimentary camp road, two trays in his hands. “Your meals, sir,” he said, handing the trays to Sid. “Pleasant eating.”

“Thank you, Private,” Dan said, taking the trays and putting them on the folding table in the room, then closing the door.

Dan slid his arms around Sid’s neck, hugging him, and Sid hugged him back.

“Is it safe to eat?” Sid whispered.

Dan nuzzled Sid’s neck. “As safe as army food ever is,” Dan whispered back. “This would just be routine procedures, not an assassination attempt.”

“Suspicious bastards,” Sid said, his mouth pressed against Dan’s ear. “Think we could shower first?”

“Feeling better?” Dan asked, and Sid could feel him grinning against Sid’s neck.

“Will be in a moment,” Sid answered. “Just need a shower.”

Dan chuckled, his hands sliding down to squeeze Sid’s arse. “Me, too.”

Dan closed the door to the demountable, and wedged a chair against it, then tucked a blanket securely around Aishlinn. “To stop her rolling off the bed,” Dan said.

Sid nodded and opened the bathroom door.

There was a toilet, a shower cubicle the size of a fridge, and a sink, but the water that ran out of the shower head was hot, and Sid wasn’t sure when he’d last had a hot shower. It had been weeks.

Dan leaned against the doorway while Sid dragged his clothes off, and his eyes were speculative. “I don’t think I’ve actually seen you naked,” Dan said, as Sid stepped out of his jeans.

“I’ve seen you naked,” Sid said, stepping into the shower. “You going to join me?”

“For sure,” Dan said, unbuttoning his shirt.

Sid stood under the hot water, mouth open, then spat the water out and grimaced.

“Tastes of salt.”

Dan slid into the shower cubicle beside him and pointed at the sign. “Not potable,” Dan read. “You were warned.”

“Is this a good idea?” Sid asked, before pressing his mouth against Dan’s. It wasn’t just that he wanted to kiss Dan, though the idea was appealing. Just a bit of saliva would be enough to undo his earlier un-healing, turn him back into his usual self.

“It’s the army,” Dan said, when Sid stopped kissing him long enough to let him draw breath. “If they don’t know what men do in showers together, then it’s time they found out.”

“Really?” Sid said, smiling. He had to close his eyes at that point, while his body found its equilibrium again, wellness rushing through him, like bubbles in champagne. He’d just about kill for a decent glass of champagne.

Dan’s hand, trailing soap, slid across Sid’s chest, his body responding to the touch, lust making him gasp.

“Do you like me naked?” Sid asked, having to open his eyes and look as Dan’s hand slid lower, down across his belly.

“You need a decent feed,” Dan said, his hand curling around the point of Sid’s hip, pressing against the skin where the bone stretched it tight. “But apart from that, you might just be perfect.”

Sid touched Dan’s chest, running wet fingertips across the chest hair, and then sliding his arms around Dan, pulling their bodies together.

“You’re a little thin yourself,” Sid said, mouth against Dan’s neck. “But you’re still the toughest, smartest bloke I’ve met for a long time.”

“Are you alright?” Dan asked when Sid hugged him tightly.

“Right enough,” Sid said, lifting his mouth from Dan’s neck and looked at him through the steam of the shower. “If something happens, promise you’ll take Aishlinn to Hawthorn for me.”

“Of course,” Dan said. “I promise. Aren’t you being a little dramatic here?”

Sid smiled, but worry still ate at him as waves of power moved beneath the ground of the camp. “Who me?” he asked. “Never.”

He reached behind himself and turned the shower off, then dropped to his knees in the confined space. Dan's cock, thick and hard, pressed against Sid's cheek, and then Dan's fingers guided it into Sid's mouth.

Sid glanced up at Dan, who gazed back down at Sid and said, "Do it."

Hunger, raw and deep, made Sid close his eyes as he slid the length of Dan's cock into his mouth; the head pushing against his palate, the sliding and sucking along Dan's cock made him feel ravenous.

It wasn't until Dan had grunted and begun to come, pushing his cock deep into Sid's mouth, and Sid had started to absorb the power in the come that Sid realized that he was unbearably turned on, too. Most of the time he regretted the choices he'd made and the way they confused sex for him, but sometimes, especially with Dan, it was intoxicating when desire, power and hunger combined.

Dan's legs wobbled and he leaned back against the wall of the shower unsteadily while Sid clambered back to his feet.

"One day," Sid murmured, turning the water back on. "You're going to come inside my arse. That's my promise to you."

"Deal," Dan said, and his hand pumped at Sid's cock, making Sid groan with frustration. "Are you going to fuck me with this, or do you want something else?"

Sid straightened his back, rolling his shoulders against the drum of the water. "Gonna fuck you," he said. "Just give me a moment to go find a condom."

There wasn't a lot of room in the shower, but the idea was to get pretty close to each other anyway, so Sid didn't complain.

He could get used to the feeling of pushing into Dan, get used to the way Dan felt to hold, the way he twisted and ground back down against Sid's cock.

"Touch me," Dan groaned, letting go of his grip on the soap dish long enough to grab Sid's hand where it clutched at Dan's chest and push it lower.

Sid groaned, too, at the combination of being buried deep inside Dan and the feel of Dan's cock, already hard again.

He could get used to a lot of things about Dan.

Aishlinn cried, of course, before Sid had really finished kissing Dan, and Dan wrenched himself away.

"Stay and enjoy the hot water," Dan said, hand on Sid's cheek. "I'll go get her."

Her wails rose in pitch, and Dan's fingers rubbed against Sid's jaw line. "You don't grow a beard?" he asked, and Sid shook his head.

"I'm too young," Sid said. "I've got years ahead of me before I have to."

Dan rubbed at his own not-insignificant beard. "Lucky bastard," Dan said, opening the shower cubicle and stepping out. "Hang on, sweetie," he called out to Aishlinn. "I'm on my way."

Sid stayed where he was, dopey grin on his face, rubbing away ineffectually with the bar of soap, not managing to raise suds in the salty water. If things were about to get worse, then at least he'd had Dan one more time.

He did eventually get out of the shower, once his hands had wrinkled. His clothes were grubby, so he left them on the floor and settled for draping a towel around his hips only. He was sure he'd seen clothes of Dan's in the car; perhaps Dan would lend him some.

He didn't need to sleep anymore, not after refueling, but it was still pleasant to lie down on one of the folding beds and watch Dan and Aishlinn snoozing together. This was perhaps the best part about not getting tired; he got to watch people sleep. They were all so cute, faces slack, bodies relaxed. It was much better than pre-war late night television had been.

The footsteps crunching over the dirt outside stirred Sid from his reverie, making him jump off the bed he'd been stretched out on and grab his jeans from the floor.

He got them on, and done up, and his arms in his sleeves, before the bang on the door came.

Three bangs, two, then four, and before the last of the thuds Dan was awake and across the room, dragging the chair out of the way and wrenching the door open.

"Jake!" he cried, and the soldier on the steps hugged Dan hard, picking him up and swinging him around, then putting him back on his feet.

"Dan!" Jake said, and Sid made himself busy with his shirt buttons, giving them a moment of relative privacy.

"The Captain said you were here," Jake said, beaming at Dan, and then shifting his gaze to Aishlinn. "Oh," he said his voice dropping.

Aishlinn gurgled and squirmed as Dan picked her up, smiling at Jake, making him smile back, and then Jake's gaze finally took in Sid. "Hi there," Sid said. "I'm Sid."

"Good to see you, I'm Jake," Jake said. He looked back at Dan, and said, "I heard you came in with a baby and a refugee, both sick," he said, and there was a question in his voice.

“Sid needed a meal and some sleep,” Dan said. His voice dropped lower. “I’m glad you got out, I didn’t think you’d made it.”

“It was touch and go,” Jake said. “The company had a bit of trouble, but we’re here awaiting redeployment. How did you manage to get here?”

“The hard way,” Dan said. “You really don’t want to know.”

Aishlinn grizzled, rubbing her face against Dan’s shirt, squirming and wriggling, and Dan handed her to Sid. “Bottle time,” he said, rummaging through the crate the medical staff had supplied and finding a bottle. “Have a seat, Jake, and tell me what’s been going on while I get this sorted.”

Jake sat on the folding bed beside Sid, and tickled Aishlinn’s stomach. “Davo’s here,” he said. “And so is Baz.”

Dan screwed the cap on the bottle and shook it vigorously, then handed it to Sid. “What about Wrongway?” Dan asked.

Aishlinn latched onto the bottle and closed her eyes in bliss, and Sid tuned out Dan and Jake’s conversation about army buddies and dismemberment, and concentrated on Aishlinn. Maybe it wasn’t dismemberment they were talking about, but it might have been.

A trumpet sounded somewhere in the camp, or perhaps a recording of a trumpet. Sid’s ideas about the military were based almost entirely upon watching MASH and shagging reservists, so he was hazy about the details.

Jake stood up from the bed. “I have to go,” he said, and he leaned down and touched Aishlinn’s cheek. “I’m glad she made out, that you all did,” he said, then he hugged Dan and left.

“Who’s Jake?” Sid asked, looking up at Dan.

“We served in the same platoon, and he found Aishlinn,” Dan said. “And brought her to me for safety.”

Sid nodded. “He’s a good man, isn’t he?”

“He is,” Dan said. “Damned good.”

“So are you,” Sid said.

Aishlinn sighed and grimaced, pulling her knees up to her tummy and making rumbling noises, but Sid managed not to flinch.

“I just do what I have to,” Dan said quietly, but his gaze had an intensity that Sid found unsettling.

Sid thought about handing Aishlinn over to Dan, filled nappy and all, but he had an inkling that just maybe, it was time he did this himself.

The food on the trays was congealed and horrid, so Sid took the muesli bar Dan handed him instead. It was dark outside, the camp settling down for the night, and Aishlinn had worn herself out by attempting to roll over from her belly to her back, eventually collapsing into a puddle of contentment on one of the beds, wrapped in a blanket.

With the light turned off, Dan's face was vulnerable, not knowing Sid could see him. The bed was narrow, even with them wound around each other, but Sid didn't complain. How could he when Dan was so warm and alive against him, mouth open, and breath loud over the rising wind outside? There was more weather blowing in, rattling at the corners of the demountable, and filling the night with strange creaks and whistles.

They weren't really fucking, just kissing, but Dan's hand was inside Sid's jeans, curled around his cock, making him rock his hips, eyes closed and teeth dragging over Dan's neck.

Aishlinn cried, her sharp distressed wail, and the door blew open, in spite of the chair wedged under the handle.

Sid dragged his zip up, catching skin, making him stumble as he jumped off the bed, and the light flared on.

A man and a woman stood in the doorway: the woman dressed in black and white robes, the man in military uniform adorned with ornate trim, a long staff of gold in his hand, and Sid's stomach threatened to leave the building. Dan struggled to his feet, and Sid said, "See? These people are magicians. No class at all."

Aishlinn screamed, shrill and piercing and Dan lunged across the room and scooped her into his arms.

Sid had a mouthful of Dan's spit still, enough to get one really good blast off, if he actually was any good at that kind of thing.

But he wasn't, and the woman lifted her hand.

Sid's eyesight was acute enough to see the flicker of power racing toward him, the crackle and hiss of ozone, then the pain hit him, worse than any un-healing, as bad as when he'd wrapped a car around a tree as a teenager.

Only this time there was no irate parent to rescue him, and he toppled forward onto the worn, cheap carpet of the demountable, scraping skin off his nose and cheek.

Then someone hit him on the back of the head. Hard.

Waking up hurt.

Sid's head hurt, the kind of stinging, burning pain that meant there was blood caked in his hair, and it was his own for a change.

He opened his eyes and found himself looking at the inside of a blindfold.

His hands were bound, hard metal sliding around his wrist bones as he twisted his hands, and his legs were bound, too.

He'd woken up with worse hangovers, but this was obviously someone else's bizarre bondage fantasy, and he didn't appreciate it.

"So what would your name be?" a female voice asked.

Sid tried out his mouth, checking for missing teeth. Still felt like he had a full quota. Something hard cracked him on a kneecap, and he reconsidered his decision not to speak.

"Sid."

He could hear movement, and flinched, but another blow didn't fall. Instead, a hand grabbed the back of his shirt and hauled him upright temporarily, before he slumped back onto the floor.

"And who the fuck are you, Sid?"

He thought about answering truthfully, but there didn't seem to be any tactical advantage in disclosing anything, and no one was rummaging around in his head, so he stayed silent.

"And the fireworks last night?" a male voice asked. "Was that you?"

"Fuck, no," Sid said. "I was the explosion; the other bastards were throwing the plasma blasts at me."

He heard footsteps, a pause, and then a solid blow hit his ribs. "Do you know who they were?"

"Some moronic, no-style magicians," Sid said, and then had to hold his breath to ride out another blow. These magicians were touchy about their status. Arseholes. There was a reason magicians were the subject of ridicule.

"How the fuck should I know who they were?" Sid continued. "It's not like they introduced themselves, or asked permission to attack me. They had a fast black car, could have come from the fucking moon for all I know."

There was silence, and Sid wondered if he'd said the right thing by chance. Then he wondered how many ribs were broken.

"So," Sid said conversationally. "You'd be Golden Dawn magicians, right?"

Nancies, prancing around in stupid robes, worrying about the fucking made-up words.

Another blow hit him, and he heard the bone break that time. He might just have said that aloud.

Next time he woke up, he was going to remember not to say anything inflammatory out loud.

Bright lights, burning through his eyelids, proof the blindfold had been removed. Someone was leaning over him, and Sid peered through the slits of his eyelids cautiously.

It was the medic from the camp hospital, and she said, "Woken up now?"

"No," Sid replied. "Is anyone about to kick me?"

"Not right at this moment," the medic said, and Sid opened his eyes all the way.

"Thank fuck for that." Not a demountable this time, there was a silence about the room that indicated thick, substantial walls, and the temperature lacked the chill of the desert night. Just a bed in the room, chairs against a far wall, but the walls bore the black and white pillars of a Golden Dawn temple, and subtler marks, squiggles and runes. Sid had failed Runes.

He was restrained, hands and feet, shackled to the bed frame, and when he shifted his weight, the bed didn't move, but at least he had some movement. He'd fucked a bondage master once, and he'd had a room like this one, apart from the dinky religious symbols of course.

"Try not to move," the medic said. "You've cracked some ribs." Hands pressed over his ribcage, making Sid aware he was naked, something he hadn't noticed last time.

"Believe me, it wasn't me that cracked the ribs," Sid said.

The medic seemed disinterested, which disappointed Sid.

"Aren't you just a bit outraged?" Sid asked. "Here I am, chained and beaten."

"You've been detained under the Anti-Terrorism Act," the medic said. "Any civil rights you had are no longer valid. Now shush while I put some strapping on your chest."

Sid stayed still while the medic taped thick adhesive strips around his ribs, digesting this information.

“Who by?” he asked when the medic straightened up and put the tape away.

“What?” she asked.

“Who am I detained by? It’s a reasonable question.”

She smiled faintly. “AAIO,” she said. “Australian Army Intelligence Operations.”

“Fucking spooks,” Sid said, letting his head drop back against the mattress beneath him. “Oh joy.”

“Cooperate,” the medic said. “Then you won’t need frequent visits from me.”

She opened the door, and said to someone out of sight, “He’s yours.”

Sid closed his eyes and let himself feel gently around himself.

He wasn’t a telepath, not like Aishlinn, but he had some rudimentary abilities. The guard outside was bored and cold. He could feel the two magicians that had... arrested him; he was stolid and obsessive, she was quicker and meaner. And there was someone else there, too, a huge and implacable shape, no light penetrating through.

Sid heard feet on the synthetic carpet

He thought about ignoring them, but his ribs and head hurt too much to risk that.

“Good morning,” the male magician said. “The Colonel would like a few words with you, Sid.”

The Colonel’s barrel-chest strained at his uniform and his hair bristled ineffectually, but his eyes were dark and sharp. Sid knew about fanatics -- he was related to a few -- and he recognized the look.

The Colonel stood at the foot of Sid’s bed, and Sid decided that they’d put so much effort into intimidating him that he’d better appreciate their efforts, in case someone felt the need to break some more of him.

He was still prepared to bet he had the biggest todger in the room.

“Where are you from?” the Colonel asked. “Who sent you here?”

Whack.

“Answer promptly,” the male magician warned.

“Like every other person who’s attempting to get across the Nullarbor, I’m trying not to get bombed or shot,” Sid said. “Avoiding magicians in poncy cars seemed important, too, especially when they seemed to want to kill me. Can’t say I knew the army was dabbling.”

“And the ex-soldier and the baby?” the female magician asked.

“They gave me a lift,” Sid said.

“And your relationship with the ex-soldier?” she asked.

“Mutually satisfying,” Sid said. “Though you must know that since you had the room bugged.”

The Colonel sniffed disapprovingly, and turned to the male magician.

“Make him talk.”

The door closed after him, and the magicians pulled chairs across and sat on either side of Sid.

“Who trained you?” the woman asked.

Sid scowled, and then screamed when the woman pointed at his thigh, and the sensation of a knife slicing through flesh writhed through his skin.

It was more subtle than kicking him, and unless he actually died from cardiac arrest caused by the pain, non-lethal.

She angled her hand up, sending the sensation up into his groin.

Psychological torture was just that -- psychological -- and Sid focused on telling his body that it wasn’t manifest, that it could turn off the adrenaline and shunt the sensation elsewhere, out of his body and into the room.

“Fucking magicians,” Sid said. “Fucking, moronic control freaks with delusions of grandeur. Hyper-inflated egos, inadequate libidos, thinking that if they just grovel at the fucking altar, that they’d actually know any fucking thing. Driving their fancy fucking cars, driving their fancy fucking spells. Powerless wannabes that think because some fuckers called Mathers and Westcott made up some fucking rules...”

He had to stop while the pain sliced through his cock, though it was some satisfaction to see the male magician flinch and avert his eyes. The Colonel might think the male was in control, but the male knew who the real powerbroker was.

The woman lifted her hand, the pain stopped, and the relief made Sid wet himself, his urine trickling and seeping down between his thighs. The woman wiped her hand over her robe, distaste on her face, and Sid drew breath in and prepared to resume his diatribe, then stopped when the woman lifted a finger in warning.

“I gather you don’t like magicians,” she said. “So perhaps you’d like to explain the trail of magic you’ve left behind you, right across a few thousand kilometers, from when you rode past last here last week, to the coast and back again.”

Sid closed his mouth resolutely.

“I thought as much,” the woman said. She smiled, and it was a good facsimile of a real, engaging smile. “Perhaps we started this off wrong. We have access to resources, the army is interested in recruiting people with abilities; we can get you out of here, to somewhere safe. War is coming to this country, not just the annexed west. We can offer you safety and protection. You and your lover.”

“Arseholes,” Sid swore. “Thought you’d try pain first, because it’s cheaper than bribing me.”

The man struck him, across the face, and there was something solid and hard in his hand.

“Pain is free,” the man said. “And I liked that car.”

“Death is free, too,” the woman added, standing up and looking down at Sid. “Water, however, will cost you dearly.”

A moment later, when the door closed behind them both, Sid let out the breath he’d been holding and tried to get his heart rate to slow down. He needed to think.

It took three minutes to run through the options. If he spoke under torture and threat of death, he betrayed his family. He held his silence, and his family would eventually trace him and retrieve him, thereby disclosing the existence of the clan.

Sid wasn’t keen on pain. It was right up there with hard work and hair care products as things he expended considerable personal energy avoiding. But pain was temporary, and he needed to focus on the bigger picture, on the flicker of Aishlinn’s presence, right on the edge of his inadequate psychic range, proof she was still unharmed.

He wasn’t keen on his family either, on being told how to dress and behave, and having the importance of their history drummed into him. But there was a difference between disliking them and betraying them, and he would keep his silence.

Chapter Nine

The moment the magicians had dragged an unconscious Sid out, Dan grabbed the box of baby supplies the nurse had given with his free arm.

If he was lucky, very lucky, there'd be a moment of command vacuum, between Sid being snatched and anyone realizing he and Aishlinn should be detained, too, and he wanted to get the hell out of there. He could steal a vehicle...

Three military police officers with Steyrs lifted their weapons at Dan the moment he opened the door.

He stepped back carefully, backing up into the demountable, Aishlinn screaming at him.

"Apologies, Sergeant," one of the MPs said. "We'd appreciate it if you didn't try and leave just yet."

Dan sat down on one of the beds, box of supplies beside him, and cradled Aishlinn against his shoulder, rocking her gently. "Hang in there," he whispered to her, mindful of the bugs in the room. "We'll sort this out."

Aishlinn eventually cried herself to sleep, held against Dan's chest, and he wondered whether the Intelligence officers stuck with the listening to the bugs had eventually given up listening to her scream.

Dan stroked Aishlinn's hair, and she murmured in her sleep. He was going to get them both out of this somehow.

Dan had hoped that air raid sirens were behind him, but the wail of the sirens matched Aishlinn's cries, dragging him awake again, just as Jake pounded on the door.

When Dan opened the door, the night sky was lit by flames, and Dan could hear choppers taking off and SAMs firing.

Jake said, "Let's get you out of here."

Dan grabbed Jake's arm as Jake picked up the carton of supplies. "Thanks," he said, and Jake nodded.

Jake threw open the rear door of a Bushmaster transport vehicle and slid the carton across the floor of the transport, then jumped in himself.

Dan clambered in, Aishlinn in his arms, and slammed the door shut. The transport wasn't designed for moving an infant in, so Dan yanked a blanket out of a supply locker and swaddled Aishlinn, then strapped her into one of the rear seats in the Bushmaster as best he could.

Jake threw the vehicle into gear, and Dan had to grab at a rail to stop himself falling.

"Where are we going?" Dan asked, dropping into the forward facing seat beside Jake.

"To get your friend," Jake said. "I know where they're holding him."

"I can't ask you to do this," Dan said, but Jake shook his head.

Overhead, aircraft hummed in the darkness. Personnel were scrambling for air raid bunkers, flares lit up the sky, tracer rounds painting magnesium strands in the sky, but no one tried to stop them. Dan grabbed the FN MAG off the weapons rack, slapped a grenade launcher on to it, and flipped the hatch up. The Bushmaster wouldn't have been left around with ammo in it, but Jake was smart enough to know that, and he pointed at the cab floor under Dan's feet, where a cardboard carton rattled.

"Poor kid," Dan said to himself, slipping the end of a belt of 7.62 cartridges into the MAG, and pocketing some grenades. Aishlinn might be young, but she'd survived a mortar attack, and was entering her second fire fight. She'd seen more action than most reservists.

Jake drove through the camp, dodging APCs and infantry soldiers, past long rows of camouflaged equipment, neatly avoiding a collision with a fire truck heading away from the highway, back through a landscape that the fires, flak and tracer rounds showed was pocked by mine shafts and the long sandstone mounds of earthworks. The army was dug in deep.

A long, low bunker loomed ahead of them, an APC parked outside, and something about the building creeped Dan out. Aishlinn cried, what he'd come to think of as her warning cry, and the sound went right through his head, even with the background noise.

"I'm working on it, sweetie," Dan said under his breath.

The car stopped, and Jake patted Dan's leg, making Dan squat down so he could hear him.

"That bunker leads to an underground railway to the main train track," Jake said. "It's where Army Intelligence operates from. That's where he'll be."

Dan nodded and stood up again. He had options. He could just let rip with some HE grenades into the bunker, take out some walls, but if Sid was in there, he could be injured or killed. And if he had the wrong building, other people, other prisoners, might be killed.

The APC, however, looked like fair game.

He put a grenade into the open door of the APC, and it blew up with a satisfying bang.

The FN MAG wasn't a great weapon for accuracy, but he was good and close, and he was a decent shot.

The bunker door opened, and soldiers appeared. Aishlinn's cry sharpened, cutting right through his head, and the woman in the black and white robes that had abducted Sid strode out into the night.

He shot her, nice clean head shot.

She didn't fall, just lifted her arm, and a ball of plasma, deeply purple and glowing, formed on her hand.

"Drive!" Dan shouted, and Jake spun the wheels as Dan ducked back into the Bushmaster, falling into the front seat.

There was a spray of gravel from the road, and Jake swung on the steering wheel, but the purple light hurtled toward them still, and Dan could almost feel Aishlinn writhing and squirming in her bundled blanket.

The plasma went straight through the armored glass and rocked the car sideways, slamming Jake across into Dan, his weight trapping the MAG uselessly against Dan's side.

Dan lifted his hands up into sight, feeling Jake's blood seep into his jeans and trickle down his leg.

He didn't think he could keep running, not right then.

Dan had to wait for someone to clamber in the back of the Bushmaster and then lift Jake's dead weight off him, leaving him to crawl out of the vehicle and stagger down the step.

The woman walked up to him, underneath the apocalyptic sky, and shook her head.

"Put him in a pen," she said, turning to leave, Aishlinn's wails rising higher and higher.

"What about the baby?" one of the soldiers asked.

She looked back and shrugged. "Put it in with him," she said. "None of you are to waste any time caring for the brat."

“I’ll need bottles and formula for her,” he said to the private who had his gun pointed at Dan.
“And nappies.”

“Ma’am didn’t say anything about that,” the private said, wagging the muzzle of his sidearm at Dan, gesturing for him to move away from the car.

A soldier shoved Aishlinn into Dan’s arms, and Dan cradled her close, one hand over the back of her head, the other across her back. He stumbled across the tumbled sandstone building site, pushed along from behind by the nose of someone’s weapon, trying to keep his sore leg moving.

They left Jake in the Bushmaster.

The door to the bunker was draped in thick black velvet blackout curtains, a surprisingly theatrical touch on an army base, but it wasn’t the curtains that stopped Dan. It was the way the woman he’d shot at walked through the fabric without disturbing it. No wonder his head shot had been unsuccessful, the woman wasn’t real.

One of the soldiers held aside the curtain for Dan, and he hobbled down steps hewn into the soft limestone of the Nullarbor plain, the soldier behind him jabbing the muzzle of his pistol into Dan’s back when his knee refused to bend.

Unencumbered, he’d have taken out someone who stood that close behind him with a weapon, but with Aishlinn in his arms he was helpless to fight back, unable to resist being pushed into a windowless concrete cell.

The door shut, and Dan staggered across to the wooden bench he’d glimpsed before he was plunged into darkness, and lowered himself and Aishlinn down onto it.

Aishlinn was inconsolable, sobbing unbearably in his arms while he rocked her and cried, too.

Chapter Ten

Aishlinn's screams penetrated the solid walls of Sid's cell, resonating through his head, too, right inside his mind. It was a bleak time, lying shackled in the gloom, listening to the proof of his failure wailing somewhere nearby.

There were levels of failure, most of which Sid was previously acquainted with, but this was a new low. He'd handed himself, Aishlinn and Dan over to the military, got them locked in cells, hopelessly trapped.

It was in the depths of recrimination that Sid found himself staring at the patterns on the walls, painted black on black and presumably invisible to most people. But not to Sid, which the military didn't know. In fact, there was a great deal they didn't know about Sid, and Aishlinn, and possibly even Dan.

They didn't understand about non-Golden Dawn non-magic. They didn't know he could see despite the darkness. And they seemed to not have a clue about Aishlinn.

Sid, however, was aware of her, above and beyond her screeching.

He wasn't dehydrated, despite the threats of depriving him of water; it was far too soon for that. However, he found hunger and thirst creeping into his head, along with Aishlinn's cries. He could feel it radiating out from somewhere nearby, waves of primal longing, of uncomprehending and desperate need.

The cries faded eventually, settling down to hiccupping sobs, then whimpers, but Sid had lost track of time, it all felt like an eternity.

He had to find a chance, a way out, for all of them.

Footsteps outside his cell had him instantly alert, listening intently to the lifting of a bar and the humming of an electronic lock, then light flooded in, making him wince and screw his eyes shut for the time it took his retinas to adjust to light vision.

When he opened them again, the two magicians were staring him down at him again.

"Your friend is here," the man said, and Sid felt a surge of strength at the confirmation that Dan was alive and nearby.

“And the baby,” the woman said.

Sid reached for Aishlinn, following the feel of her, stirring her, trying to make her cry. If he could hear which direction she was in...

It worked, she cried sharply, just once. She was to the left, but not on the same corridor.

“We thought if you didn’t mind being hurt yourself, your friend might not be so kinky,” the man sneered.

“Oh he likes it, too,” Sid said smugly, the beginnings of an idea coming to him. “You wouldn’t believe what he likes me to do to him.”

Disgust passed across the man’s face, and he turned away. “Bet you’d like to do that to me,” Sid taunted. “Bet you get off on the idea.”

The man turned back, anger in the set of his shoulders beneath his uniform, and he struck Sid in the face, bare knuckles tearing the skin over Sid’s cheekbone.

“Stop it,” the woman said disinterestedly, sounding bored, and the man shook his hand and stepped back.

Sid fought back the disappointment; he’d been hoping to persuade the man to split a knuckle.

Instead he said, “Does she know about the porn?” Sid thought he’d made a blind guess, but it was just possible he’d sensed something, caught a flicker of imagery from the man during the moment of physical contact between Sid’s face and the man’s hand.

The man’s face showed an involuntary flash of acknowledgement, then he spat on Sid, a solid dollop of saliva on his belly.

Sid held his breath while the man stalked out of the room, leaving the cell door banging, but the woman stayed, eyeing Sid speculatively for a moment.

She didn’t say anything, just nodded slightly at Sid, a brief moment of communication, before following the man out of the room.

The lock hummed, and the bar slid into place, but Sid waited until the light went out before exhaling with relief.

It wasn’t much; he couldn’t do a lot with just a grudging spit, so he had to make the most of it, and quickly before the power in it faded.

The shackles twisted and split, the surge of power through them fragmenting the molecular bonds, making the metal brittle enough that it shattered when Sid bashed each wrist restraint against the metal of the restraint base.

The foot shackles were harder to break, the chains shorter so there was less room for Sid to line the metal and frame up together, but he managed, and all it cost him was his blood, from where the shackles had torn his skin.

That left him naked and still locked and barred in the room, and out of saliva.

The sigils were palpable, raised ridges of something underneath the layer of black paint. It was all terribly gothic and arcane, but not perfect by any means.

The trouble with magicians was they were technicians, nothing more. The good thing about magicians was they were technicians, nothing more.

In the darkness, feeling the shape of the runes, Sid found the answer to one question at least. The drilling soldiers, marching around and around in the dirt? They were driving these same runes deeper and deeper into the earth, drawing out power with them.

The wrist shackles had sharp edges, which probably contravened the Geneva Convention, or the Kyoto Protocols, or something, but it did mean that Sid could gouge through the layer of black paint, to the layer of whatever it was underneath. It might be magnetic paint, it might be a painted-on layer of clay or mud, it might be gold leaf.

Or it might just be some wanky magician's idea of a sacrifice, and be part of his own body.

Or hers.

The paint flaked and chipped, and between scrapes, Sid licked at the wall, feeling the power seep into him. It was old, had been there for months, but it had been specifically dedicated to the task, meaning it had lasted and lasted.

No wonder Sid had been able to see the sigils through the paint, they were a huge fucking beacon for him.

His body soaked up the power, and he let it seep through him, curing his thirst, healing his ribs and face, until his body hummed with the need to move, to do something constructive. Destructively constructive.

The Army Intelligence Acquisition Association, or whoever they were, wouldn't fuck with one of Sid's people ever again, if Sid had his way.

Sid flexed his fingers against the door, letting himself feel the curl of the electricity in the lock. Electronic locks looked complicated, but they really only had two settings; open or closed. There

was the lock component, and there was the latch, and Sid reached for the latch and popped it open.

That was the latch, now for the bar.

Sid wasn't into telekinesis, but there were more ways to open a door than with a sledgehammer. The bar in the door at Dan's house had been a simple affair, two brackets screwed into the wall, a solid bar across door and frame. If the army had taught Dan how to secure a door, then this one would be the same.

The concrete skin of the room covered a limestone wall, hacked out of the living rock of the desert, and the other side was the same, so the brackets would be screwed into the concrete skin.

Finding the brackets was a matter of guesswork, and setting up the twisting magnetic field only took a minute or two.

What took the time was realizing that he'd set the twist on the field in the wrong direction. The clatter of the bracket and bar hitting the ground was loud to Sid, but he hoped that excellent soundproofing would work in his favor this time. If you can't hear prisoners scream as they're tortured, you can't hear them escape either.

Aishlinn was crying again, her distress a beacon for Sid, leading him at a run down the corridor, and around a corner. A guard looked up from the ration pack he was gorging himself on in response to Aishlinn's hunger, reaching for his sidearm at the sight of a naked Sid hurtling around the corner, and Sid lifted his hand and let rip.

He didn't do plasma, he didn't do plasma.

The field that left his hand and curled and slid through the air toward the guard was a piss poor affair, the kind of effort that would get Sid mocked and thrown out of the clan, just an ineffectual blob of energy.

It smacked into the guard's face, like a bowl of custard, and about as harmful, but he still shrieked and dropped his pistol, clawing at his face, trying to remove the plasma.

Sid found Dan's cell by Aishlinn's wails, yanking the bar off then flicking the electronic lock.

The door burst open, sending Sid flying back against the corridor wall.

Dan grabbed his arms and pulled him back to his feet, then smashed their mouths together.

There was so much relief and joy and fear in the kiss, searing and intense, as brief as it was, then Dan dove back into the cell and snatched Aishlinn up in his arms.

"Here," Dan said, handing her to Sid, then he grabbed the pistol that the guard who had fallen to the floor was fumbling for blindly.

Dan hit the guard with the butt of the gun, a solid blow to the head, and he fell back to the floor.

“What do you reckon the chances are that we can get out of here?” Dan asked.

“Let’s find out,” Sid said, hugging Aishlinn closely, feeling her so close to his skin, her hunger and distress easing.

Dan seemed to know the way out, running awkwardly away from their cells, not pausing even when an alarm sounded, high-pitched and piercing.

The next corner brought them face-to-face with three guards, all with raised weapons. It was what was behind the guards that made Sid’s heart drop again.

A dog stood behind them, a mastiff the size of a horse, slobbering and growling. Fucking, bastard, asshole magicians, and their fucking ability to build and summon spirits. Sid was really pissed off with them now.

Dan, gorgeous, quick-thinking Dan, did something to himself so that the tang of blood filled the corridor.

Aishlinn lifted her head from Sid’s bare shoulder, and he felt her fully for the first time, more than just a flicker or a mood state, she was his cousin’s child and the strength of the whole family was in her, too.

Sid lifted his hand, and this time the plasma burned bright enough to light the room, arcing through the air, and he had a mental flash, a sudden startling image, of his own mother standing with her arm raised, her power feeding into him

The guards went down, crumpling to the floor, and Sid almost followed, feeling his power drain out through his arm, leaving him weak and dizzy.

The dog growled, rumbling like an earthquake, and Dan shot it. Bullets wouldn’t work, though Dan didn’t know that.

The crackle of ozone behind Sid made him turn, then duck, shielding Aishlinn from the plasma blast from the female magician, who was running up the corridor behind them.

Sid’s skin peeled off his flesh, the stench of burning hair filled the corridor, and this time it wasn’t non-corporeal pain, this was the feeling of his body dying.

Dan’s pistol shot was loud over Sid’s head.

Sid opened his eyes, expecting to see a non-corporeal shape advancing toward him, intent upon tearing what was left of his life from him, but the woman fell to the ground, blood flowing freely from her chest.

The mastiff leapt forward, and there was a muffled explosion from the bunker doors behind him.

The heavy velvet curtains fluttered like lace, daylight poured into the room, and the dog's body dispersed in the pale light, shreds and wisps, banished by sunlight.

Soldiers stampeded in, but Sid was all out of fight, all out of strength.

Dan's hands moved Sid's shoulders, bending over him, and he was crying, salt water running down his face, dripping onto Sid and Aishlinn.

"No, no, no," he kept saying. "No, no."

Sid wasn't sure anyone had ever cried for him before, not like that, not with fire burning in their chest and a broken voice. Sid made his arms work long enough to hand Aishlinn over to Dan, but Dan didn't take her, keeping his arms around Sid, holding both Sid and Aishlinn against his chest.

Chapter Eleven

The first infantryman through the curtains dropped to his knees, rifle held ready against his shoulder, the two behind him pushed forward past him, past Dan and Sid, moving down the semi-subterranean corridor. "Entrance secure," the kneeling soldier shouted, and he dropped the nose of the rifle and lifted his visor. "Good to see you again, Sergeant," Captain Morrow said. "Let's get the three of you out of here and into the daylight."

Dan looked down at Sid, now thankfully unconscious, burns charring his face, Aishlinn howling against Sid's chest.

"I think we need a medic," Dan said, but as he watched, the blackened patches of burn, the sloughed skin and torn flesh was beginning to knit and smooth.

More of Dan's former company moved past them, but Dan didn't pay them any attention, even when one of them patted his shoulder reassuringly. Instead he unwound Sid's arm from Aishlinn, lowering Sid to the ground and lifting the baby up against his shoulder.

People brought a stretcher in and moved Sid's naked body onto it and Dan grabbed hold of his former captain and let the man help him upright.

He limped up the steps, and out into the bright daylight. "How come..." Dan asked Morrow, looking at the APCs lined up outside, and the soldiers under guard, restrained.

Morrow clapped a hand on Dan's shoulder. "They left Jake for dead in the Bushmaster, and he managed to radio our signalman and call for help."

"I need formula for Aishlinn," Dan said. "They wouldn't give her anything to eat or drink."

The Bushmaster was where he'd last seen it, outside the bunker. Dan watched Sid being carried across to the division ambulance, while a private hefted the box of baby supplies back from the armored vehicle. "Go with your friend," Morrow said. "We'll hold the bunker until someone with some authority arrives here."

The idea that Captain Morrow, a dozen infantry and three APCs lacked authority was amusing, but Dan didn't try to explain.

"Jake?" he asked. "Is he alright?"

“In our infirmary,” Morrow said, and he sounded grim. “There was no way I’d let Jake be taken into the main hospital, not after what happened here.”

Dan thought of asking about the woman he’d shot, but decided he didn’t want to know.

The ambulance had bags of sterile water, so Dan balanced Aishlinn, who was howling afresh at the sight of Dan holding a bottle beside him on the empty stretcher, then squeezed sterile water into a bottle and added formula.

Aishlinn wrapped her gums around the teat ferociously and set about emptying the bottle in record time, giving Dan a chance to glance across at Sid.

Sid was still unconscious, and the infantry medic was putting up a bag of fluid, priming an IV line ready.

“Do you have any packed cells?” Dan asked urgently. “Any blood products at all?”

“No whole blood,” the medic said. “And I’d need to cross match him for that anyway, since he’s a non-combatant and I don’t have access to his typing. I’ve got plasma, would that do?”

Dan nodded, and then looked down at the smelly, soaking wet baby in his arms, who was closing her eyes in bliss at the bottle.

“Oh, God,” he whispered. They’d made it out of there.

The medic took a bag of plasma out of the medical fridge in the ambulance, gave it a thorough squeezing, then put the bag up on the hook above Sid’s stretcher and connected the tubing.

“This is against regs,” the medic said to Dan. “But so are many things, like trying to kill one of our own, and holding a baby in detention without feeds, so I’m just going to take your word for it.”

The plasma ran into Sid smoothly, and the medic stared in amazement as Sid’s wounds began to close and heal, skin repairing itself, burns melting away.

“What...?” the medic said in disbelief. “How come...?”

Sid’s eyes opened, suddenly.

“That feels better,” he said, and he propped himself up on one elbow and grinned across the ambulance at Dan and Aishlinn. “Damn, but that was close.”

Dan nodded, and it really was too much to cope with. He wasn’t sure he could do it any longer.

Aishlinn spat out the teat of her empty bottle and let out a deep sigh of contentment, and Dan stroked her hair and lifted her up against his chest. He knelt down, injured knee agony on the grooved metal floor of the APC, and held Aishlinn close enough for Sid to touch, too.

“It can’t possibly get any worse,” Sid said. “Whatever happens, at least it will be easier.”

The company infirmary was a converted shipping container packed with injured personnel from the air raid the night before, but it looked like heaven to Dan. The company nurse was a tall, gangly young man named Johnno, prone to obscenities, but he’d looked after Dan when he’d been shot, and Dan trusted him completely. It was comforting to know that Baz was on guard outside, and that the Bushmaster and an APC were bracketing the infirmary. It seemed that his old platoon took the attack on Jake personally. Jake himself was out of it on painkillers on the stretcher beside Dan, nursing a broken collarbone and a concussion.

Sid, dressed in clothes of Dan’s from the car, sat cross-legged on a canvas bed and ate hungrily from a ration pack.

Captain Morrow and a Defence Department military attaché, who Morrow had found in the camp guest quarters drinking scotch and schmoozing the brass, sat on another canvas bed, the attaché with a tape recorder running and a notebook open.

“Can you describe this colonel?” the attaché asked Sid.

Sid chewed the muesli bar for a moment, then said, “Large, but not fat. Short hair that stuck up. He was wearing a Rosicrucian badge, along with his ordinary army stuff. Bloody Rosicrucians, they’re worse than the Freemasons.”

“Colonel Parkes,” the operative said. “He’s heading the R and D department, with the goats.”

“With the what?” Dan asked, because it looked like Sid was going to choke on his ration bar if he tried to speak.

“Goats,” the operative repeated. “There’s a paddock of them, out the back of the department offices in Canberra. Word is that the goats are for testing some kind of secret weapons. No one can touch R and D, no one can get inside it, so I’m just guessing here.”

Sid put his ration pack down and rubbed at his temples with his fingertips. “Poor goats,” he said. “So the research and development department recruited a couple of Golden Dawn magicians, and turned them loose.”

“R and D have been recruiting a lot of people,” the attaché said. “Things are not going well, and I think the hope was that R and D would find something that would tip the balance in our favor.”

Sid shook his head. “You have to make them stop,” he said. “Using that kind of power is a tricky and delicate thing, and they’re just bloody amateurs. The drilling in sigils to raise power? Completely crazy; this is an old land, and it’s not asleep. They’ll wake something up, and then it’ll be a mess.”

“This is something you know about?” the operative asked.

“I’m the wrong person, too,” Sid said. “This is Australia; I’m just an intruder here.”

The attaché looked at Sid steadily, and Sid met his gaze.

“No,” Sid said. “No way.”

Dan frowned, and Aishlinn stirred in her blanket nest beside him.

“Things are bad,” the attaché said.

“We noticed,” Dan said.

“They’re worse than you imagine,” the attaché said. “We’re not going to be able to hold at this point, we’re going to fall back to the Brisbane Line, and try and save the major cities. Best case scenario is that most of Australia is annexed, but most of the population is saved, even if we lose all the natural resources.”

“Things are always worse than I imagine,” Dan said. “I was infantry. So what are you going to do about this? They attacked us, left Jake for dead, and imprisoned three civilians without food or water, one of whom was an infant.”

“I’m going to have a confidential chat with General York,” the attaché said. “By scrambler, right now.”

The convoy rattled and rumbled over the access road to the camp: four trucks carrying armaments, a line of APCs, and a bus that the platoon had commandeered to help their flight from the bombing.

And Dan’s car, new tires and petrol tank, now with the 6th Battalion insignia stuck to the doors. They were headed east again, this time surrounded by people Dan trusted.

The gates to the camp clanged closed behind them, and Sid’s hand squeezed Dan’s thigh.

They weren’t going to be moving fast, the APCs had a top speed of about sixty, but Dan didn’t care. There was a Leopard tank on the back of one of the trucks, and there was a lot to be said for that kind of protection.

Aishlinn, newly washed and fed, gurgled at the washed-out ration trays that now dangled over her restraint. Dan had formula for her, clean bottles, and more nappies.

Thirteen kilometers past the Eucla camp, they drove through Border Town and over the border into South Australia.

Dan, at the wheel, glanced across at Sid, who smiled back at him. “Don’t think I’ve ever been quite so glad to leave a place,” Dan said.

“I spent four weeks in Manchester,” Sid said. “In winter. But apart from that, I can agree with you.”

Dan laughed, and Sid’s cheeks creased as he smiled wider.

“How far is the convoy going?” Sid asked. “I found the bit where you all peered at maps unintelligible.”

“They’re going to Bendigo,” Dan said. “If we want to head north to your family, Captain will radio around, let us know what the roads are like.”

Sid nodded, and then leaned back between the seats to poke Aishlinn with his fingers, making her giggle and babble.

“You had a long chat with the attaché,” Dan said. “While the platoon packed up. That wasn’t just avoiding having to lift crates of ammo, was it?”

Sid stopped tickling Aishlinn and turned in his seat to look at Dan better. “What’s it like being in the army?” he asked, instead of answering Dan’s question. “Did you actually enjoy it?”

“I’m not sure enjoy is the right word,” Dan said. “I was conscripted, so I wasn’t a career soldier, not like most of the officers. But Australia is under attack, right now, and if we don’t defend it, we may all die. We certainly will live harder, poorer lives if the invasion succeeds.”

“But was it all being shot at and eating bad food?” Sid asked.

The day was warm, the previous day’s cloud cover long gone, so Dan wound down his window and rested his elbow on the door.

“No,” Dan said. “There were good moments, with Jake, and with other people that became my friends. I trusted them; we all trusted each other, because otherwise we’d die. Why are you asking this?”

“The attaché wants me to become some kind of advisor to the sane people in the army, telling them about magic, and why giving a bunch of power-crazed idiots a budget and a whole load of goats is a bad thing.”

When Dan glanced away from the road to Sid, Sid was looking out the passenger window, but Dan could see enough of his face reflected in the glass to see that Sid looked worried.

“Are you going to?” Dan asked.

“I said I had to take Aishlinn back to my family first,” Sid said, pulling his feet up onto the seat and wrapping his arms around them.

“And?” Dan asked. “After that?”

“I can’t do anything like that without my family’s permission,” Sid said. “And I can’t imagine they’d give consent. I’m kind of the runt of the family, and I’m sure that even if they agree in principle that we should be helping the defense of the country that they’ll want someone with some real ability to go instead of me.”

“You broke out of shackles, and then a cell, while naked. You opened your cell, subdued a guard, opened my cell, then rescued Aishlinn and I. And still, you think you don’t have any ability?” Dan said.

“If it had been my mother, she would have done that, sorted out the décor of the camp, made everyone have a bath, and spanked the magicians as well,” Sid said. “There wouldn’t have been any doubt at all that things had been resolved, and she certainly wouldn’t have needed a transfusion afterward.”

“Then why wasn’t she there?” Dan asked. “Why you and not her?”

Sid did look at Dan then. “That might be a good question,” Sid admitted. “How come I was the person that got sent to collect Aishlinn?”

“What did they tell you?” Dan asked.

“That I was the only one of us out in the world,” Sid said. “That I was a thousand kilometers closer to her than anyone else, since they were all at Hawthorn.”

“And you did it,” Dan said. “You rode a bike all the way across the Nullarbor, found her, and got the three of us out of the city. I don’t think that is an insignificant task, or that your family will treat it lightly.”

Sid shook his head, obviously unconvinced, and Dan let the subject drop.

They drove on, taking turns at the wheel, the desert rolling past them, an expanse of scrub and sand as far as the horizon. Their convoy was part of a larger convoy, thousands of vehicles streaming across the desert, buses and trucks.

Inevitably, cars were abandoned beside the road, too, out of petrol or with failed suspensions, or wrecked by wombats or roos.

There was a pattern to the convoy that Dan already knew. Drive for three hours, stop all the vehicles so everyone could piss, refuel vehicles from the drums on the trucks, rotate drivers. It was a pleasant change from their headlong flight across the country, and Aishlinn was more cheerful about it, too, barely crying at all, content to watch the patterns of reflected light from the makeshift toy or to doze while one of them shooed the flies off her face.

Nighttime came, and they stopped for half an hour for a meal, behind a perimeter of infantryman with rifles. It looked over-dramatic, but they were in the middle of nowhere, part way between the East of Nullarbor Roadhouse, which was now a burnt out shell of a building with no petrol, and Yalata. The scrub was taller, and the ground was still oppressively hot from the daytime, even though the air was cooling fast as night fell.

Dan changed Aishlinn's nappy and sat with her on his lap, feeding her a bottle while he ate a ration pack.

Sid was restless, pacing around the temporary campsite, dodging soldiers with foot pumps refueling the vehicles, and then squatting briefly beside Dan.

Dan grabbed his elbow, pulling him down to sit properly. "Stop it," Dan said. "You're making me restless, too."

Sid shrugged, and then leaned across to pull a face at Aishlinn, who made a sleepy noise back at him. "There's magic here," he said in a low voice to Dan. "Not magicians, just magic."

"We'll be moving in a few minutes," Dan said. "Do you want me to warn Captain Morrow? Get us moving faster?"

"There's no threat," Sid said. "It's just kind of like having your neighbors playing music quietly when you really want to sleep. You know, not worth going around and complaining about, but still enough to bug you."

"You said something yesterday that I didn't understand," Dan said quietly. "Something about being the wrong too?"

"Too-a," Sid said. "Spelled t-u-a-t-h. It means something bigger than a family, more like a small feudal kingdom. This is why I said that," Sid said, waving his hand at the desert through the darkness. "This is not my place, this is not my power."

"Because the traditional land owners are here?" Dan asked.

Sid nodded. "I'm all about green and lush," he said. "Dry red desert sand scares me, gets into my bones and head, makes me thirsty."

Dan nodded. Sid looked so serious that Dan didn't want to point out that he'd done everything he had the day before in the middle of the desert.

“We’re moving,” someone shouted through the darkness, and Dan handed the sleepy Aishlinn up to Sid, then let Sid haul him to his feet.

“Your turn to drive,” Dan said wearily. “I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to staying in one place for more than a few hours.”

Sid looked down at Aishlinn, who had fallen asleep, arm flung out wide. “Some privacy would be good,” Sid said.

Dan nodded and opened the rear car door for Sid to slide Aishlinn into her restraint.

They took the inland road at Ceduna, and Dan was driving when dawn came, lighting rolling wheat fields scattered with clacking windmills, and it looked like they hadn’t made any progress from the sheep-and-wheat district of Western Australia.

Sid stretched beside Dan, arms above head and pressing against the inside of the car roof, and then dropped a hand onto Dan’s arm.

“Good morning,” Dan said, dropping the sun visor down and reaching for his sunglasses on the dash as the bright red round of the sun slid up over the horizon.

“It is good,” Sid said, leaning back between to peer at Aishlinn. “Hello, baby,” he said, and Aishlinn gurgled back at him.

“Feeling better than last night?” Dan asked, squinting into the rising sun.

“Yeah,” Sid said. “Sorry about freaking out on you.”

“Hey,” Dan said. “After everything, you get as much freaking out allowances as you need.”

Sid leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. “Are we there yet?” he asked plaintively.

“Don’t you dare teach Aishlinn to say that,” Dan said, and Sid grinned in his direction without opening his eyes.

“Promise not to,” Sid said.

They swung south-east at Port Augusta, instead of south to Adelaide. It would be quicker heading inland, and the traffic on the radio indicated that there were less problems that way, less rioting and confusion, much less traffic and a stronger military presence.

It was a pleasant change to be able to think of military presence as a good thing, but it was at that moment. There had been problems, desperate people who had run out of fuel and food, but Dan and Sid had stayed locked in their car while the platoon sorted out the worst of the conflict, using

the APCs to stop cars and make them take extra passengers, taking food off trucks and handing it around.

Dan had liked that kind of work, the chance to make a difference and bring some order into the lives of people in crisis.

The wheat gave way to orchards and vineyards, and they crossed the Murray at Morgan, then again at Barmera and Renmark, as the river wound its way through the flat flood plains.

It was late afternoon, and Sid was driving, when Aishlinn began shouting, more excited than panicked, in her child restraint.

Dan, sitting passenger, reached for his borrowed rifle where it was resting on the dash, but Sid held up his hand.

“She’s not upset,” he said, and he looked smug. “Looks like the túath is about to arrive.”

Sid signaled and pulled over into the next lay-by he found, a bitumen parking area beside a shimmering green paddock of lupins, the rest of their part of the convoy pulling over gradually, into the lay-by and ahead of them on the road shoulder.

Sid switched the motor off, and got out, then lifted Aishlinn out of her child restraint. Dan limped around the car to stand beside him, following his gaze up the road, where they had been heading.

Morrow clambered out of the command APC and strode back down the convoy to Dan and Sid, and said, “Problems? Or is this a baby break?”

“Kind of a baby break,” Sid said.

“We’ll make camp here,” Morrow said. “I wasn’t planning on spending a second night on the road if I could help it.”

Sid craned past Morrow to gaze up the highway to where a truck was disappearing into the haze of the distance. “Here they are.”

Dan shaded his eyes and peered into the distance, where there was a smudge on the horizon.

“Are you sure that’s them?” he asked, but one glance at Aishlinn, squirming and burbling in Sid’s arms answered the question. She was one happy baby.

Sid kissed her forehead, and said, “Poor baby, you’ve been so alone, but that’ll be better in a little while.”

The smudge turned into a dot, then a string of dots. Sid and Aishlinn stayed where they were, watching the oncoming vehicles, while the rest of the platoon took a piss break and stretched their legs.

Dan stood beside Sid and put a hand on his back, and was surprised to find the muscles like steel, locked solid.

“Are you alright?” he asked, and when Sid turned to look at Dan, his eyes were suspiciously damp.

“It’s been a long time,” he said. “Since I’ve seen anyone.”

The dots proved to be a string of cars, with a sleek red Porsche at the front, and three sedans behind.

The Porsche parked carefully on the opposite shoulder of the road, and the door opened. A tall and elegant woman, with long dark hair clipped back and huge sunglasses, unfolded herself from behind the wheel and stood up, a full head taller than Sid.

Sid bowed his head momentarily, and the woman smiled beneath her sunglasses, a gentle condescending quirk of her lips.

“Charlemagne Hyacinth,” she said, and Dan had to suppress a snort at the idea that might Sid’s real name.

Sid smiled, and said, “Mother.”

The car behind, a large family sedan, caught up with the Porsche, skittering to a halt behind it, and people poured out of the car, the woman from the backseat running across the road, shirt flapping against her sides, then coming to a halt in front of Sid and Aishlinn.

“Oh, for goodness sake, Aideen,” she said, holding her arms out for the squirming Aishlinn. “He’s your son; the least you can do is embrace him.”

Aideen stepped forward and held her arms out to Sid, who hugged her briefly, before she disentangled herself and turned her attention to Aishlinn.

Aishlinn laid her head down on the shoulder of the woman who was holding her, bliss on her face, and the woman crooned to her. Other people, all bearing a strong resemblance to Sid, clambered out of cars, milling around Aishlinn, slapping Sid on the back, and Dan found himself moved.

It had been such a struggle to get as far as they had, to get Aishlinn back to her family, and now it was happening, it was hard to believe it.

A circle of people formed around Aishlinn and her carer, all crooning and talking and patting her, and Sid stepped back, coming to stand beside Dan again.

“Is that it?” Dan asked in a low voice. “And is your name really Charlemagne?”

“That’s not it, by any means,” Sid said, voice also low. “They’re just behaving because of all the people with guns watching them.”

“What would they be doing otherwise?” Dan asked, prepared to let the issue of Sid’s name slide for the moment. Charlemagne was a hell of a good reason to call yourself Sid and never see your family. Hyacinth was a stinker of a family name, too.

“Bitch-slapping me,” Sid said. “For a start.”

Sid shoved his hands in his pockets, looking glum, and Dan left him to mope. He needed to unpack some stuff from the car. If Aishlinn’s family were about to take her away, they’d need all her equipment.

Sid.

Dan hobbled back to Sid, who was standing morosely, and slid an arm around his waist. “Do you want me to come with you?” he asked.

Sid turned his head, his pale green eyes wide with surprise. “What?” he said.

“You implied earlier you were going back to your family, at least to talk to them. I could come with you, if you’d like the company.”

Sid just blinked, and Dan got the feeling that Sid was floundering.

Aishlinn cried, sounding tired and grumpy, and the woman from the second car, who had taken possession of Aishlinn, walked back across to Sid and Dan.

“She’s asking for someone,” the woman said. “I think it might be your friend, Charlemagne.”

Dan held out his arms and Aishlinn went across to him willingly. “Dan,” Sid said. “My friend’s name is Dan. He’ll be coming with us, too.”

The woman spoke rapidly in a language that Dan didn’t understand, and Sid looked even unhappier.

“He’s my dintyer,” Sid said, presumably using a word in the same language.

Her eyes narrowed, but Dan could tell when he was being snubbed, and he just held her gaze, jiggling Aishlinn in his arms.

“Oh,” she said. “I’ll let Aileen know.”

Dan looked up from where he was changing Aishlinn’s nappy on the front seat. “Your what?” he asked, and Sid looked bashful.

“Does it matter?” Sid asked.

Dan held Aishlinn’s feet up for her to grip, and she managed to get one in her mouth. “No,” Dan said. “Guess it doesn’t.”

Sid’s hand on his back was firm, fingers pressing through Dan’s shirt as Dan wrestled a clean nappy onto Aishlinn. “Here,” he said, lifting Aishlinn up and handing her to Sid. “I’ll make a bottle and you can give it to her while I go talk to Captain Morrow.”

Sid nodded and held Aishlinn against his hip. “I guess I’d better go talk to the relatives,” he said. “It has to be done eventually.”

The convoy of Sid’s family left, back in the direction they’d come from, after dark. Dan was kind of disappointed; he’d really wanted a decent night’s sleep, preferably on the ground, even more preferably in a tent with Sid wrapped around him.

Driving through the night, and driving fast, might just get them back to the family homes sometime the next day. Then Dan was going to shower, change his clothes, and sleep for a week, once Aishlinn was settled with her relatives.

She’d shown a decided preference for him, grizzling even in her grandmother’s arms until she was handed back to him. He couldn’t blame her, given that all of Sid’s relatives seemed to be completely mad.

Sid’s mother, driving the Porsche at the front, kept roaring away until she was several kilometers ahead of them, then dawdling impatiently while the rest of the cars caught up.

Of the ten relatives that had set out to rescue Sid and Aishlinn, only Aishlinn’s grandmother had actually spoken to Dan, and Dan had not been privy to the intense, low-voiced argument Sid had had with the huddled adults.

Even now, with Dan at the wheel and only the dash lights for illumination, Sid was staring out the passenger window, avoiding Dan’s gaze.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to meet my family,” Dan said.

“I am, too,” Sid said. “They can’t possibly be as scary as mine.”

“No,” Dan agreed. “Though my father has his moments. My mother would have fussed over you, made you eat far too much, possibly bullied you into taking some of my father’s old clothes to wear.”

Sid sighed. “You don’t have to come with me,” he said.

Dan touched Sid’s thigh, trailing fingertips across the denim of his jeans. “Is this all too difficult?” he asked. “Are you trying to tell me you want me to go?”

Sid’s hand covered his in the darkness, squeezing his fingers. “Fuck, no,” he said urgently. “Not until we’ve shagged each other senseless, at the minimum. It’s just that my family are worse than I’d remembered them being, and that’s saying something. It just seems cruel to subject anyone else, particularly you, to extended contact with them.”

Sid’s hand guided Dan’s fingers into his crotch, and Dan rubbed against the bump beneath his jeans. “Assume I can cope with them” Dan said, and he could hear Sid’s breathing catch in response to his touch. “Assume that we’re going to get some time alone, preferably with hot and cold running water.”

“Lots of hot water,” Sid said, spreading his legs to give Dan better access. “Do you think all that gorgeous hair happens without hot water?”

“Didn’t notice the hair,” Dan said, cupping Sid’s balls through his jeans. “Apart from the kid with the amazing braids. Is your name really Charlemagne?”

“Charlemagne Hyacinth Luachaire,” Sid said. “Not that I’ll answer to it if you try and call me that. I’m sure it could have been worse, but I can’t imagine how.”

Dan shook his head, and didn’t try and hide his smile. “At least only the surname is Gaelic,” he said.

When he glanced at Sid, Sid was gazing out into the dark, so Dan didn’t persist. Sid couldn’t be held responsible for his relatives. At least Aishlinn seemed fine.

Aishlinn murmured in the back seat, from her child restraint, and Dan had to smile. She was a bright little one, recognizing her name.

Only he hadn’t said it out loud.

They drove on through the night, heading east, then north-east across the Murray basin, a watery shimmer of magic partially obscuring the towns and farms they slid past. When Dan drove, his car was the only one with lights on. And when Sid took over, once the monotony of the flickering white line was no longer sufficiently alleviated by the random stark terror of roos appearing beside the road, the entire convoy ran in darkness.

“Go to sleep,” Sid said, when Dan had jerked awake from a doze for the third time. “We’re safe here, there’s enough firepower here to take on an army of Freemasons.”

“Really?” Dan asked.

“Really,” Sid said. “I told you, I’m this pathetic weakling with no ability whatsoever. Every other member of the túath could disable a tank by blinking,”

Sid’s voice was grim in the dark, so Dan ran a fingertip across his shoulder. “If that’s true, then it makes what you did so much more amazing.”

Sid was silent, the hum of the motor and the cries of a flock of black cockatoos somewhere nearby the only sound.

“Sid?” Dan asked, and Sid sniffed.

“Go back to sleep,” Sid said. “You’re safe now.”

Dan picked his jacket up off the floor and wadded it up, then shoved it between his head and the passenger window. He needed to sleep, and to stop pestering Sid.

The sun rose behind the Blue Mountains, delicate pink behind the rising peaks. The car was in third gear, working hard at the incline, so they were out of the foothills, somewhere south of Sydney and east of Canberra, by Dan’s best guess.

“We’re nearly there,” Sid said, and Dan craned around to look out the back of the car, at the sedan following them, then ahead at the empty road.

“The others have gone on ahead,” Sid said. “To open the gates.”

The sky had turned from blush to stonewash blue, and the rising slopes of gum trees were alive with wheeling clouds of cockatoos when Sid slowed down and turned the left hand indicator on.

“This is our valley,” Sid said, and he was smiling nostalgically when Dan looked at him.

Aishlinn gurgled as Sid turned off the main road onto a dirt track, pitted and corrugated. Dan wondered for a moment how the Porsche dealt with the surface, then thought of the Commodore levitating across the Nullarbor scrub.

Sid guided the car around a pothole the size of the car. “How pretentious is it to live somewhere with an access road like this one, and to drive something with a ten centimeter suspension clearance?” Sid asked.

The road narrowed, curling its way down the valley, the grey gum trees and forest red gums towering over them, forming a damp, leafy tunnel.

The valley bottom was cleared of gums, the rough track ending at a dirt car park, the trees closing in around the area. Sid turned the car around and backed it under a tree, so it was out of sight from the air and pointed in the right direction for a speedy exit.

“Nice,” Dan said.

Sid smiled at him. “I think you might have taught me something about being ready,” Sid said, and people began to appear, pouring out of a narrow path through the trees, at least twenty of them, all waving and calling.

Sid got out of the car quickly and slid a happily squealing Aishlinn out of her restraint, just as the first of the people rushed up to the car.

Dan got out of the car more slowly, standing back and watching Sid and Aishlinn, and their family.

Not everyone was dark-haired, there was a scattering of blonde curls in the crowd, too, but almost everyone was clean, attractive and well-dressed in the understated way that used to make Dan avoid gay bars in the city.

He felt just as much of an outsider right at that moment.

He’d unpacked Aishlinn’s supplies from the car, stacking the battered box and crate on the hood of the car, and then found his own bag of clothes. He needed a shower and to sleep somewhere flat that wasn’t moving; he was too tired to cope with the noise of a family reunion.

A young woman, dark hair in a braid wound around her head, the same pale green eyes as everyone else, came over and took the bag out of Dan’s hands.

“I’ll show you where you’ll be staying,” she said. “Call me Kit. Please forgive the family their rudeness, I’m not even going to try and make excuses for them. Sid can do that.”

A fox trotted out of the undergrowth, drops of dew or rain trapped in its glossy red fur, its tongue hanging out of its mouth.

Dan watched entranced as the fox glided up to Kit and pushed its nose into her hand, and she patted it and tugged its ear affectionately. “And this is Marlowe,” she said.

“I’m Dan.”

Kit smiled. “Welcome to the túath. And thank you for bringing Aishlinn back to us.”

The path led through the trees and across a bridge over a creek and into another clearing, through a wild tangle of vines and roses gone straggly, all overgrown with weeds.

They crossed another bridge, and they were on an expanse of lawn, overgrown and clogged with weeds, with houses fronting onto it, nestled back in the trees.

The houses were timber, brick and tin, a bizarre assortment of styles and materials, the gutters sprouting weeds. It was shabby and rundown, but there was a beauty to it too, above and beyond the walls of the valley being thickly clad in gum trees and the tinkle of the creek that ran through the clearing.

“Not what you were expecting?” Kit asked, and Dan had to nod.

“This is... lived-in,” Dan said.

“It’s falling to pieces,” Kit said. “You’re in the empty house at the end.”

They walked across the grass, the fox bounding ahead of them happily, Kit chatting about the houses, telling Dan who lived in each.

“... and that’s Aideen’s place,” she finished, pointing at the house closest to them. “And you’re in here.”

The steps to the door of the house creaked when Dan stepped on each one, and he had to half pull his weight up them by using the railing.

Kit held the front door open for him, and he stepped into a plain, clean home. There was a fireplace in the front room, and two armchairs. The kitchen had a wood stove, table and chairs, and bare pine cupboards.

The bedroom was empty apart from a double bed with an ornate wrought iron and brass bed head. Kit dropped Dan’s bag on the bed. “Bathroom is there,” she said, pointing at a door off the kitchen. “There’ll be some kind of meal later, to celebrate Aishlinn making it here.”

“What about Sid?” Dan asked. “He said he hadn’t been home for ten years. Aren’t your family glad to see him again?”

Kit shrugged. “He left under bad circumstances. I was just a kid, so I don’t remember the details, but I know Aideen was furious with him. She probably still is. Do you need anything else?”

Dan shook his head, and Kit scooped Marlowe up from where the fox had jumped on Dan’s bed. “I’ll come and get you later, for the meal.”

“Thank you,” Dan said, and Kit smiled, the same cheeky grin that Sid had, then she and fox were gone.

Dan opened the bathroom door and sighed with pleasure. There was a huge bathtub, and when he turned on the taps, hot water gushed out.

He put the plug in the bath and left it to fill, and went and retrieved clean clothes and his kit from his bag.

The hot water was blissful to lower himself into, filling the bathroom with condensation, and Dan felt the muscles in his leg begin to let go for the first time in ages, perhaps even since he'd been shot.

He almost dozed off, feet propped on the edge of the bath, ears humming with the sensation of no longer moving, when footsteps in the house made him open his eyes, and the bathroom door opened.

"I escaped," Sid said. "Made it out of there alive."

Dan held a hand out to Sid, who took it.

"Join me?" Dan asked. "There'd be room here for two."

Sid squatted down beside the bath, unbuttoning his shirt. "You look exhausted," he said. "Why don't you go crawl into bed, while I get clean?"

Dan touched a soapy hand to Sid's chest, and his body was right there, ready to go, but he had to suppress a yawn. "I'll fall asleep."

"I could wake you up," Sid said, pulling an arm out of his shirt. "I can think of at least seven ways to wake you that you'll like."

Sid dropped his shirt on the bathroom floor and held out his hand to Dan, who took it and let Sid pull him up out of the bath. "You must have a million questions," Sid said, as Dan stepped out of the bath.

"I do," Dan agreed. "But none of them need answering now."

Sid undid his jeans, and kicked them and his boots off, then stepped into the hot water.

"Aren't you going to bed?" Sid asked, closing his eyes and lying back in the bath.

"I'm waiting for you," Dan said, taking a towel off the stack beside the basin and wrapping it around his hips, leaving the rest of him to drip. "So hurry up."

Sid ducked his head under the water briefly then reached for one of the many bottles of shampoo on the edge of the bath. He might be right about the obsession with hair care, judging by the options covered.

“You said there were gates,” Dan said. “But I didn’t see any.”

“They’re metaphorical gates,” Sid said. “At least, I think they are. I’m hazy on the details.”

Sid soaped his hair, and then rinsed it off in the bath quickly. Dan handed Sid a bar of soap, and said, “They’re not happy about me being here, are they?”

“Hello, Mum,” Sid said, speaking to the bar of soap in his hand. “Not only have I returned, ten years later, after leaving because of refusing to participate in an arranged marriage with some bint from Ireland I’d never met, and refusing to undergo any training, but I’ve come back with my non-skilled same-sex perhaps-lover.”

“Oh,” Dan said, and Sid soaped under his arms with the bar of soap.

“Sorry,” Sid said. “That was possibly more than you needed to know.”

“They really wanted you to have an arranged marriage?” Dan asked, loading his toothbrush with toothpaste.

“Oh, it wasn’t called that, and I got to go to Ireland and meet her first. She quite rightly ran screaming from me, and married my cousin instead. Aishlinn’s her child, and she’s dead now.”

Dan spat into the basin and looked at Sid, who shrugged and stood up in the bath, water sluicing off his lean body, his cock half hard as he tugged on it gently.

Dan put his toothbrush down and handed Sid a towel, who wiped his face on it. “So that’s why no one is exactly happy to see me, or you,” Sid said. “Don’t think I’ll be staying for long this time either.”

Sid’s smile wasn’t very steady, but his mouth was eager when Dan draped his arms around Sid’s neck and kissed him.

“Come to bed,” Dan said. “Before I fall over.”

Sid tossed Dan’s bag on the floor, then drew the faded and patched curtains closed, turning the room to twilight.

When Dan stripped back the covers, the sheets were clean and crisp, smelling of sunshine and fresh air, instead of sweat and fear, and it was a luxury to lie down on them, feeling the cotton crinkle against his skin.

Sid rubbed at his hair ineffectually with the towel, then tossed it onto the floor and knelt on the bed, leaning forward over Dan to kiss him.

Sid’s skin was still warm from the bath, and he tasted of soap, letting Dan roll him onto his back, then kiss his way down Sid’s body.

Sid's cock was hard when Dan flicked his tongue over the tip, and Sid's hands gripped Dan's shoulder and thigh, pushing him forward so that all of Sid's cock was in his mouth.

"Yes," Sid gasped, and he moved his thigh under Dan, opening his legs wide.

Sometimes, things were clear.

Dan lifted his mouth from Sid's cock long enough to spit on his finger, Sid's fingernails digging into his skin. This was how it should always be.

Sid was tight, so tight that Dan lifted his mouth again to check Sid's face. "Do you want me to stop?" he asked. "Is this what you want?"

Then Sid opened his eyes, and there was so much hunger in them that Dan had to smile. "Don't you dare stop," Sid gasped. "Where's my lube?"

Sid's jacket was draped over the end of the bed, so Sid must have put it there before he opened the bathroom door. Forward planning on Sid's behalf, obviously. Dan reached out and unhooked the jacket from the bottom of the bed and handed it across to Sid.

Sid rummaged through the packets urgently, then handed Dan a tube of lube.

Dan took it, and there was a moment's pause, then Sid tossed his jacket on the floor, out of reach. "Please," Sid said, and Dan knew what he's asking for.

They stayed like that, the tube in Dan's hand, Sid almost trembling with need, and then Dan nodded.

Sid let out a huge breath and fell back on the pillow behind him, legs splayed wide. With him like that, naked and clean and gorgeous, Dan didn't have a chance of resisting. He didn't want to either.

It took time, circling Sid's arse, then easing a finger in carefully, before Sid began to let go, groaning and gripping onto Dan again, shoving his cock hard into Dan's mouth.

Dan looked up again, two fingers deep inside Sid, at Sid's face twisted with desire, and said, "Wait for me."

"Quickly, then," Sid gasped, voice raw with need.

Having seen what they'd been through over the past few days, Dan thought he might have a glimmer of an idea of what Sid desired, why his fingernails were digging into Dan biceps while Dan positioned himself over Sid, lube dripping from his bare cock.

It was so primal, so intense, to be pushing into Sid. He should have been slower, held himself back, waited for Sid to tell him he was ready, but fuck, the feel of Sid's body, excruciatingly tight around Dan's cock, was too much.

Dan pushed in hard, unable to hold back, and Sid arched, hands flailing at Dan's back, then gripping on tightly, stopping Dan from pulling back.

Sid's face, his beautiful pale eyes staring back at Dan, his mouth open, breath loud in the room: it was all so perfect.

Sid was inside Dan's head, too, right there, and the feeling of being touched in his mind made Dan gasp.

"Move!" Sid shouted, only his mouth didn't move, and Dan didn't stand a chance of resisting.

The bed head crashed into the wall, and Sid wound his legs around Dan's back, gripping tight, urging him on. Not even the slicing pain in Dan's knee could make him stop, not when Sid was fucking begging him to go harder and harder, so that Dan's body was burning, deep inside, with the need to come.

Sid yelled, twisting underneath Dan, come spreading over both of their bellies, making Dan hang on for one long, desperate minute so Sid could finish coming and collapse back onto the bed, then Dan ground in hard, pulled back, and then he was riding a fucking tornado, every nerve cell screaming, pumping into Sid.

It took time, lying sprawled across Sid, Sid's fingers working into Dan's hair, for Dan to be able to lift his head and look at Sid.

Sid had such a deep look of bliss on his face, such contentment and peace that Dan just put his head back down again.

He eventually slid out of Sid, half-asleep and so relaxed he could barely move. Sid sighed and pulled some bedding over both of them, then settled his head on Dan's shoulder, still so close Dan was uncertain where their respective skins began and ended.

Dan didn't try and work it out, or stay awake. It was easier to fall into a dreamless sleep, freed at last from the persistent hum and creak of the car engine.

He woke briefly, when Sid slid out of the bed. "Go back to sleep," Sid said. "I'm going to have a quick rinse off, then find some food."

"Not rations?" Dan asked sleepily, and Sid tucked the bedding around his shoulders.

"Not rations, I promise," Sid said, and he kissed Dan's forehead. "Sleep for as long as you need to, love."

Dan smiled at Sid. With a belly full of happiness right at that moment, he didn't need food, not for a long time.

Sid pulled on a pair of jeans, perhaps Dan's, and opened the bedroom door.

It was just possible that Dan was perfectly happy at that moment, with the door ajar to show Sid pottering around in the kitchen, lighting the wood stove and filling a kettle. He wanted to stay awake, make the feeling last, but his eyes wouldn't stay open a moment later.

Chapter Twelve

The bedroom was filled with a golden light, sunlight bursting around the faded curtains and dust floating in the air, when Dan woke. He was still tired, was definitely hungry, but he was also a great deal content.

The bed beside him was empty, so he rolled off the bed and dragged on a pair of jeans and a shirt, both relatively clean.

The house was also empty, the fire in the kitchen grate a warm glow only, so Dan added some kindling from the basket beside the stove and pushed the kettle onto the heat.

Someone had left a loaf of bread on a chopping board on the table, and there was a pot of jam beside it, more than ample invitation to eat.

The kitchen window facing out the back of the house looked out on the heavily treed slope. Brown barrel gums and white-topped box towered over the house and a dense undergrowth of acacias. A kangaroo appeared at the edge of the bush, only a few meters from the kitchen window and then loped off back into the scrub.

A kookaburra laughed nearby, afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees, and a deep sense of peace settled over Dan. This was what he needed after everything they'd been through.

The kettle boiled so Dan found some tea in a cupboard and made himself a cup and then cut a slab of bread and spread it with jam.

The front door pushed open, the Do Not Disturb sign fluttering, and Kit looked up from her seat on the steps.

"Hello," she said cheerfully. "Sid sent me to make sure you had everything you need."

Dan put his tea and bread on the top step and carefully lowered himself down to sit beside her, and Kit held Marlowe back to stop the fox from stealing Dan's bread.

"Where's Sid?" Dan asked, sipping at his tea, and letting out an appreciative sigh.

"He's with Aideen," Kit said.

Dan bit into his bread, then broke a corner off and held it out for Marlowe, who snapped it out of his fingers.

“A fox is unusual as a pet,” he said. “Though I guess they’re a bit like dogs, being pack animals.”

Marlowe licked Kit’s face, and she laughed. “I guess he is a pet, but he’s mostly my dintyer,” she said.

Dan stared at her, and the fox squirming across her lap. “Your what?” he said.

“My donor, my geas for using power,” Kit said, and Marlowe bounded out of her lap, and took off through the long grass, chasing a flicker of movement that might just be a rabbit. “I’d better go and get Marlowe, before he gets into trouble. I’ll be around if you do need something, so just wave.”

“Um, alright,” Dan said, and Kit took off after Marlowe, her long braid escaping from its pins and flapping along behind her.

He was Sid’s pet? His milk cow?

The bread didn’t taste so good anymore, not when all he could think of was the look of hunger that had been on Sid’s face that morning.

Dan pushed himself upright, using the railing, and hobbled back into the little house. He picked up his clothes from the bathroom floor, stuffed them and his kit into his bag. He still had fuel in the drum and jerry cans. Captain Morrow had made sure they were refilled before they’d left Eucla Camp. He had drinking water too. There might be metaphysical gates on the valley, but no gate was going to stop him.

He stalked across the overgrown grass, not caring if Kit was calling his name and running across the grass.

It was easy to find the path, and the second clearing, but the track to the car park wasn’t where he expected it to be. The bush was dense there, thick with grevilleas that scratched at his arms and face when he tried to push through them, no matter how he twisted and turned.

“Dan!” Sid called behind him, plunging into the bush, too, but Dan kept on pushing, even though his face was scratched and there was no easy path forward.

“Dan!” This time Sid was much closer, crashing through the undergrowth behind him, catching up fast.

Dan swore at his leg, stumbling to a halt, but he didn’t turn to face Sid.

One final crash of branches, and Sid grabbed hold of Dan’s arm and turned him around.

“Why are you leaving?” Sid asked, and when Dan lifted his eyes to look at Sid, Sid’s face was as scratched as his own. “What’s wrong?”

“Your dinter?” Dan asked, knowing he was mangling the pronunciation.

Sid flinched.

“You didn’t think I’d find out, did you?” Dan asked, and Sid shook his head.

“No,” he admitted. “If I’d told them the truth, they would never have let you in here. But if you’re my dintyer, then they kind of have to.”

“Truth?” Dan asked.

Sid leaned forward and pressed his lips against Dan’s. There was nothing demanding about the kiss, it was just the feather of skin against skin, but it made Dan’s chest tighten and his breath catch. Sid’s fingers touched Dan’s neck, his cheek, and Dan had to close his eyes for a moment.

Overhead, a lorikeet shrieked, and Sid lifted his mouth off Dan’s. “See?” Sid said. “How could I explain this to them? They’re not going to understand how kind you are, the way you cared for Aishlinn, and for me, how strong you are, how you keep going, no matter how much pain you’re in.”

“Tell them,” Dan said. “I don’t want to stay here with them thinking I’m some kind of milch cow for you.”

Sid rested a hand against the box gum behind Dan, and looked down at the damp ground beneath their feet, where ants the size of mice scurried around and over their shoes.

“It’s not easy,” Sid said, and Dan touched his neck.

“Try,” Dan said. “If it doesn’t work, we’ll just leave again. Assuming I can ever find a way out of this place.”

Sid sighed. “Alright,” he said. “If it all goes horribly wrong, we’ll leave.”

Dan dropped his bag and grabbed at Sid, pulling him close, and then pushing him back against the box gum. “So,” he said against Sid’s ear, pushing his damaged knee between Sid’s legs, spreading them, and then rocking forward so his thigh pressed against Sid’s groin. “Anything else you need to tell me, while we’re sorting this out?”

“Does wanting you to fuck me again count?” Sid gasped, and Dan nuzzled in against Sid’s neck, biting at the skin.

“Depends,” Dan said, between nips at the fine skin of Sid’s neck. “Are you on some kind of power trip here?”

Sid groaned, wriggling his hips so Dan could feel the hard length of his cock straining at his jeans. “If you’re asking if I have the control to feel you come inside me and not take the power, then I don’t think I can.”

“Just tell me that even if you were just an ordinary person, you’d still want it,” Dan said, breathing in the smell of Sid’s skin, lingering soap and warmth.

“If I could just be me,” Sid whispered. “Not like this, then I’d want to spend every night with you, and when we were too tired to fuck, I’d still want to curl up beside you, just to feel your warmth.”

Dan laid his head on Sid’s shoulder, nuzzling at the material of his own blue shirt that Sid had borrowed, and he nodded, unsure that his voice would work at all.

“So come back to the house with me,” Sid said. “So we can fuck without Kit and Marlowe watching from a discreet distance. Then I’ll go talk to my mother again, and you can come with me.”

“Kit’s watching?” Dan said, suppressing the urge to groan.

“Yep,” Sid said. “Not pruriently, but you scared her by bolting off like that when she was supposed to be looking after you. Fear of what I might do to her seemed utmost in her concern, and she was worried that she’d said something that upset you.”

“The bit where I found out she used the same word for her fox as you’d used to describe me,” Dan said.

“Yeah, well, if I’d said that you were this hot stud with a really great cock, it might not have been as well received, but I can understand your issues with it.”

Dan let go of Sid, then bent down and picked up his bag again. “Let’s go back,” Dan said, and a smile of relief lit Sid’s face.

The bedroom, now flooded with afternoon sunshine through the curtains, smelled of sex and comfort, and it was a relief for Dan to drop his bag on the floor and fall onto the bed, legs tangled with Sid’s.

The bed creaked under them, and the earlier golden joy of the afternoon was back, making Dan laugh when Sid’s hands slid across his ribs, under his shirt.

“Laugh some more,” Sid said, pushing Dan’s shirt open and rubbing a cheek against his chest hair, while one hand found the button of his fly and popped it open. “I love hearing you laugh.”

Sid’s fingers insinuated themselves into Dan’s clothing, fumbling through layers until they found his cock, and both of them sighed.

“Don’t think I can laugh now,” Dan said. “Later?”

“Later,” Sid agreed, lifting his weight up so Dan could get his fly undone, too. “It might be unseemly, perhaps, if we don’t take our clothes off. Anybody would think we were still on the road.”

Dan rocked his weight, digging his feet into the mattress to brace himself better. The bed creaked and thudded. “This is a bed,” he agreed. “Naked would be better.”

Sid knelt up and pulled his shirt over his head, and the sight of his belly and chest, trail of hair leading from his belly button down to where his cock jutted out of his jeans, filled Dan with lust.

“Do you still want me to fuck you?” he asked, hands sliding up Sid’s belly to rub across his nipples.

“Into the mattress,” Sid said.

Naked in the daylight, his ribs visible ridges under his milky skin, Sid was unimaginably beautiful, so that Dan had to pause for a moment, tube of lube in his hand.

He dropped the tube and ran his fingers slowly down the ridge of Sid’s spine as Sid rolled onto his side, sprawling forward, the knee of his top leg pulled up to his chest.

Dan kissed the knobs of vertebrae at the top of Sid’s back and slid his hand across Sid’s arse, cupping his buttock, and then letting his fingers find Sid’s arsehole.

“Sore?” Dan asked, and Sid was loose enough that his finger slid in easily.

“All healed,” Sid said. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

It took a moment to locate the lube again, and then Dan smeared some on Sid’s arse, and painted his cock with the rest.

This time Dan took it slowly, touching the tip of his cock to Sid’s body, then easing forward, gliding the head of his cock in. He held his breath until Sid sighed and his body let go, then slid in slowly, until all of his cock was buried deep inside Sid.

“Yes,” Sid whispered, reaching his hand back to grip Dan’s thigh, holding him right where he was. It was easier to not lose control that time, so that Dan could move gently, fucking Sid with care, waiting for the fire to begin to burn for both of them.

It did, uncoiling deep inside Dan's groin, winding around his spine just as Sid began to groan with each thrust. It took time, with the burning spreading through his legs, for Dan to realize that he could feel Sid's body, too, feel how tight Sid's balls were, and the scrape of Sid's hand on his own cock.

Sid gasped, the bed creaked, and it all began to fall into place. Dan needed this, Sid needed this, they needed to keep doing this.

Dan came first, sweating and twisting on the bed, trying to get as deep into Sid as he possibly could. The power flared in Sid, waves and waves of it screaming through Dan's body, too, and then Sid was coming.

Dan slumped against Sid's back, tasting the sweat of Sid's skin, feeling the last thrum of his body, delicious and deep, winding his arm around Sid's chest and holding him tightly.

He didn't really sleep, just drifted, his mind blank and body relaxed, holding Sid closely, listening to Sid breathe, feeling his ribs moving gently with each inspiration.

Sid moved eventually, rolling over to face Dan, touching his cheek.

"We need to go to the túath dinner," Sid said. "At sunset. Bath first?"

"I thought you were allergic to water," Dan teased, pulling Sid close for a brief kiss.

"Water is fine," Sid said. "Especially if it's hot. It's the ghastly soap and shampoo I object to."

At dusk, the valley looked far less disreputable. With the sky violet overhead, fine lines of aircraft exhaust hatching the sunset, and kangaroos grazing the long grass, the clearing was peaceful.

Lorikeets wheeled overhead, flashes of red and green calling to each other, and kookaburras cackled in the forest out of sight.

Kit, Marlowe bounding along behind her, came to meet them part way across the clearing. "Aideen sent me to get you," she said, tucking wisps of black hair behind her ears.

"Good timing," Sid said, and he bent down and picked up Marlowe. "Hello there," he said, and Marlowe yipped and squirmed out of his arms, leaping off through the grass to chase a rabbit that had appeared.

"Why are there no lights in the windows?" Dan asked. "Is there no electricity?"

“No electricity,” Sid confirmed. “When I was a child, there wasn’t even water piped to the houses. One of my jobs was to take buckets around to each dwelling every morning. Aileen decided she wanted a shower installed, so we all got water before I left.”

Kit tugged on Sid’s elbow, stopping him. “I want to leave, too,” she said. “Take me with you, Sid. Don’t make me stay here.”

Dan stopped as well and watched Sid shake his head. “I don’t know that I can, Kitty,” he said. “Things are already bad enough with the family.”

Kit looked pleadingly at Sid. “Please,” she begged. “Don’t make me stay here.”

Sid squeezed Kit’s shoulder. “If I can, I will,” he said. “But I’m about to upset them even more than they already are. Even if I can’t take you, you can still get out.”

Marlowe bounded back with a carcass of a rabbit in his mouth, and Kit sighed. “Please try,” she said, and Sid patted her cheek.

“C’mon,” he said. “Let’s go upset the family some more.”

Aileen’s house had a large front room with a huge antique wooden table down the middle of the room, surrounded by chairs.

Aileen smiled distantly at Dan, and turned and spoke in Gaelic to Sid.

“No!” Sid said. “Unless you speak English, I’m leaving right now.”

“Charlemagne,” Aileen said, caution in her voice, then she pasted a smile on. “We’re ready to eat.”

Aishlinn’s grandmother walked into the front room, Aishlinn in her arms, and she smiled warmly at Sid and Dan.

“Aishlinn said you were here,” she said, handing Aishlinn over to Dan. “I think she’s missed you.”

Dan gathered Aishlinn up in his arms, cradling her and the drapes of lace she was dressed in close.

“Hello, darling,” he said to her, and she nestled in against his shirt.

Aileen tutted under her breath, then said, “Come and sit down. Kitty, take that animal outside, then wash your hands and start bringing the food out.”

Kit shooed Marlowe out and closed the front door. Soon people began to pour through the doors to the front room, sat at the table and began chatting in Gaelic.

Dan handed Aishlinn back to her grandmother and let Sid guide him to two empty seats at the table. In the gloom of the room, with the sun fully set outside and no interior lights, Dan wasn't sure exactly how many people were there, but there must have been about thirty people.

Kit came back with a candle in a candle stick in her hand, which she lit by touching the tip of her finger to the wick, then set in front of Dan.

"Thank you," Dan said to her, and she smiled back at him, and then ducked out of the room again.

Dinner was bowls of stew, the meat unidentifiable in the half-dark, with steaming bowls of mashed potatoes on the table as accompaniment, and slabs of dark, moist bread.

The conversation ebbed and flowed around Dan, most of it in Gaelic, and no one seemed to speak to either Sid or himself, apart from Kit who was seated at the end of the table, so she could be ready to dive out the door whenever something else was needed from the kitchen.

The food was substantial and tasted decent, but somehow or other, it was not what Dan would have expected from the group that wielded the kind of power Sid had implied they had. There was nothing champagne-like about the meal; it was more army than gourmet.

Sid patted Dan's thigh under the table, and Dan smiled at him. "It's good," Dan said quietly.

Sid nodded, and the single candle left half his face in shadow.

The plates were cleared away, and Aileen said, "Charlemagne wishes to speak to the túath, on the subject of his future plans."

Sid stood up. "I have several subjects to broach, none of which any of you are going to want to listen to. Firstly, I have misrepresented Dan to the túath, in order to be allowed to bring him with me. He is my lover, not my pet."

Kit beamed at Dan across the table as she sat back down again, but apart from that, unhappy silence filled the room.

"Well, that was well received," Sid said. "I know I've told Aileen how much we all owe Dan for keeping Aishlinn safe, and for bringing her here. You all need to hear what he did."

"Dan is a Red Cross worker. He took in orphaned and displaced children and cared for them until the Red Cross could take them to safety. When the bombing started, he packed Aishlinn and me into his car, traded for some petrol, and drove us out of there."

Aishlinn's grandmother said, "Thank you, Dan, on behalf of Aishlinn's immediate family. Charlemagne, do you know what happened to her parents?"

Sid shrugged. "I thought for a while that the magicians we tangled with had killed them, perhaps as part of one of the many areas of conflict this túath has with other groups, but I now suspect it was a genuine accident, and they were killed as part of the war."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and then Sid said, "And speaking of the war, and the Defence Force's madness in using Golden Dawn magicians..."

"Charlemagne Hyacinth," Aideen said, her voice cutting through Sid's speech.

"Do be quiet, Aideen," a woman said. "You can tell Charlie off later, but we want to hear what he has to say."

"Thank you," Sid said. "Though less with the calling me Charlie, please. After wrestling the magicians, and Dan turning one of them into a deceased magician, I was offered a position as an advisor to the armed forces on magical matters. I'm asking for the túath's permission to take this role."

Dan blinked. He reached up and took hold of Sid's hand, squeezing his fingers in silent approval, and Sid glanced down at Dan.

"Why?" Aideen asked, sounding impatient in the gloom. "You would be exposing esoteric knowledge to public comment, breaching the rules of the túath yet again, and compromising our safety."

Dan stood up beside Sid, unable to stay quiet a moment longer.

"Your safety is already compromised," Dan said. "Don't you understand that? The military is pulling out of Western Australia, and handing it over to the enemy. There are a million people there in refugee camps, not knowing whether they are going to be subject to genocide, or forcefully resettled."

"We're safe here," Aideen said. "This valley is heavily protected, as you found out this afternoon when you and Charlemagne had some kind of tiff."

Dan had been a sergeant in the infantry; he was not going to have someone without brass condescend to him.

"Those streaks in the sky this afternoon were bombers making runs east to stop the invasion. What happens when the bombers are flying in the opposite direction? When this valley is bombed? When the forest around you is alight and there is no one to come and rescue you?" Dan said.

"What would you have us do?" a young man down the end of the table asked.

"Contribute," Dan said. "What if the invading army has magicians, too? Or people like you? Sid has a chance to help the Australian Defence Force prepare for that. The army is planning on

holding at the Brisbane Line, which is a line of defenses from a point just above Brisbane, and across to Ceduna in South Australia, including the Roxby Downs mine site. Do you really think we can hold that line with a couple of hundred thousand conscripts and a paltry career service? Not without the kind of assistance that people like Sid can give.”

Dan banged the table with his fist, smarting his hand, and there was silence as the thud of flesh on wood faded.

“I want to go, too,” Kit said, breaking into the silence. “Sid and I together. Let us go and help defend our country. We were born here, not in Ireland; this is our home.”

“Let them,” Dan said. “They may well be all that is standing between us and life as a conquered country.”

“Do you have so little faith in your friends in the forces?” Aideen asked.

“I have little faith in the armed forces’ ability to deal with a potential threat it does not understand,” Dan said. “Sid and Kit, between them, can make a difference.”

Dan’s leg hurt, right at that moment. Starbursts of pain shot through his knee cap, slivers of pain dug into his calf muscles, and he could feel the memory of actually being shot, of lying in the red dust, eyes closed while his leg was ripped apart. One day, he’d like the chance to have post-traumatic stress disorder, but that wasn’t the moment, so he sat down again wearily before he fell.

Sid knelt beside Dan, his hand spread over Dan’s knee, and Dan remembered that Sid was just a bit inside his head already.

“Don’t hide the pain,” Sid said, and one of the young men from the far end of the table, the one with the intricately wound braids, squatted down on the other side of Dan.

“Has no one ever healed this?” the man said, and Dan realized that falling over with pain in a room of telepaths was not a private event. He just hoped they could read other things about him, that he was speaking the truth about their potential future.

“Charlie, bring Dan to my house,” the man said, standing up again. He turned to face the room. “You can all sit here and make the wrong decision; I have work to do.”

Dan’s knee really didn’t want to bend enough for him to stand up, and he had to wrench it, just to straighten his leg.

He shuffled out of the dining room, and down the front steps of Aideen’s house, each step agony, even with Sid holding him upright, arm wrapped securely around his waist.

Kit and Marlowe followed them uninvited, the fox bumbling underfoot.

The young man paused at the steps to a house across the clearing from Aideen and said, "I'm Glendan. I have no light in my house for you to see with, but perhaps Kit will illuminate the way for you."

"Yes, Glendan," Kit said, and she lifted her hand in the starlight of the clearing, and light pooled in her hand, trickling down her arm, glowing brighter and brighter. She walked ahead of them up the steps to Glendan's home, a flickering source of light that let shadows leap behind Dan as he crept up the steps and into the simple front room.

Glendan pointed at the long couch, and Sid lowered Dan down onto it. "I'll need you to take your jeans off," Glendan said, fiddling around with jars on a shelf beside the couch. "Kit, please look away."

Kit harrumphed, but turned around while Dan undid his jeans, and Sid slid them down and covered Dan up with a rug from the back of the couch.

"Done," Sid said, and Kit turned back, bringing the light with her.

Dan looked down at his knee when Glendan pushed the blanket up to expose it.

"I can't believe you can walk with this," Glendan said, kneeling down beside the couch and placing his hands over the puckered and torn flesh, tracing the incision scars, pressing against the knee joint from underneath, making the pain ten times worse.

"Gnghh," Dan gasped, more light in his eyes as Kit leaned over Glendan's shoulder and peered at the scarring.

"Wow," she said. "What happened to you?"

"I was shot," Dan said.

"Did it hurt?" Kit asked, and Glendan shushed her.

"Of course it did," Sid said.

Dan felt around for Sid's hand and gripped it tightly. "What happens now?" Dan asked.

Sid squeezed his hand. "I don't know. I told you that I'm an untalented failure, this is the sort of thing that I have no idea about."

"I need to find out what the damage is, and repair it," Glendan said distractedly, his eyes half-closed, both hands burning hot against Dan's skin.

Kit lifted her hand higher, Marlowe jumping up at her hand to try and reach the light, and Dan watched with intrigue as hairs began to escape from Glendan's woven braids, individual hairs curling free, pulling out of the braids.

The mass of hair on the back of Glendan's hair, looped in a huge Celtic knot, became covered with a fine frizz of loose hair, and the end of one braid popped free, dropping down to rest on his shoulder.

Something sharp and sudden happened inside Dan's knee, and Glendan held up a fragment of a bullet, which Kit took with her free hand, then handed to Dan.

"No wonder that hurt," Sid said, poking at the fragment on Dan's palm with his free hand.

"Here's another one," Glendan said, as another braid tumbled down, the end beginning to unravel.

The second fragment was bigger, and both bits were coated with a shiny skin, like a pearl. "What's this stuff?" Dan asked, holding the fragments out to Glendan.

"That's a fibrous collagen coating," Glendan said. Another braid fell down, its ends unwinding. "There, try moving your knee now."

Dan flexed his leg experimentally, and there was no crunch or sharp pain. "That's amazing," Dan said.

Glendan pushed at the hair falling across his face. "Rest there for a moment, give your body a chance to adjust and for the healing to complete. Your knee isn't perfect, but you should have less pain now."

Raised voices carried across the clearing, shrill and angry, and Sid shrugged. "Thank you, Glen. I think we'll hide here for a while, until the conversation at Aideen's calms down."

"Kit knows where the wine is. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go re-braid my hair."

Kit dove off into the back of the house, taking the light with her, and Sid sat on the edge of the couch, his teeth white in the gloom. "I knew someone here could fix your knee," he said, and a loud screeching voice carried across the clearing. "Sorry that I couldn't fix it for you, after everything you did for me."

"That hair thing..." Dan began, and Sid's smile widened.

"Yeah. It sounds like a cheap geas, but it's not. None of them are."

"What about Aideen?" Dan asked, and Kit and the light came back into the room, the line shining through a bottle of wine in her lit hand, wine glasses chiming in the other.

"What about Aideen?" Kit asked, putting the glasses down, the light through the wine casting a maroon glow in the room, at least until she began to pour the wine.

“What’s her geas?” Dan asked.

“Being herself,” Kit said, and she sounded dejected.

Sid patted Kit’s shoulder and took the wine she handed him, passing it to Dan. “Don’t worry, kiddo,” he said. “You’re almost old enough to leave here.”

“You are going to take me, aren’t you?” Kit asked pleadingly as she passed another glass of wine to Sid.

“I’d love to,” Sid said. “But I don’t want to alienate you from Aideen the way I have myself.”

“She already hates me,” Kit said, her voice low, and the light flickered and faded for a moment, until Marlowe’s nose butted against Kit’s chin.

“She doesn’t hate either of us,” Sid said. “She’s just not very good at unconditional love.”

The wine was honey sweet, sliding down Dan’s throat, tasting of blossoms, sunshine and plums. Dan sighed with contentment, just as the dizziness hit his head and he gasped.

“Good, isn’t it?” Sid said, and Dan leaned his head against Sid’s shoulder and closed his eyes for a moment, just until the fireworks stopped going off in his brain.

“Fabulous,” he said, and when he opened his eyes again, Sid and Kit were grinning at him.

Glendan stepped into the pool of light, his hair no longer woven into an intricate braid, just two simple rows of plaits.

“Try standing up,” Glendan said to Dan.

“Not sure I can after the wine,” Dan said, but he levered himself off the couch cautiously, until he was standing with Sid’s hand on his back holding him steady.

“How does it feel?” Glendan asked.

“It works!” Dan said. “It doesn’t hurt...” He bent his knees experimentally, and then straightened back up. “This is amazing!”

Glendan looked pleased. “Of course, if I could have treated you immediately after the injury, the repair would have been complete.”

Sid took his hand away from Dan and slapped Glendan on the back solidly. “You’re wasted here,” he said. “Come with us, too.”

Glendan shook his head. “I’m content here,” he said. “I think I’d find the outside world too loud and harsh.”

Sid nodded and hugged Glendan. "It can be," he said. "But there are people like Dan out there, too."

The clearing, lit only by the crescent moon that had lifted above the surrounding mountains and the bobbing light in Kit's hand, was beautiful and calm. The shabbiness of the houses and the weeds everywhere were hidden by the silver light.

Dan took Sid's hand, and they walked slowly up the valley to their house, Kit and the fox wandering ahead, spotting rabbits.

"What will happen?" Dan asked. Even walking away from Aideen's house, the noise of arguing still followed them.

"We'll leave soon," Sid said. "Once you've had a chance to rest a bit. I want to take Kit with us, just for her own sake. She's the same age I was when I left; it's time for her to step out into the world."

"Where will you go?" Dan asked.

"With you." Sid said. "If that wasn't clear. I'd like to go to Canberra, help the war effort where I can. Will you come with me if I do?"

Dan kicked his leg out, and let go of Sid's hand to run a few paces, then waited for Sid to catch up with him again.

"I'll have to re-enlist," Dan said. "Once I've got my fitness levels back up. If I'm able-bodied, I have to serve."

Sid took Dan's hand again. "See? This is why I love you. You're so damned noble, in a way that my dreadful family, with all their genealogy, just aren't."

There were a couple of really big ideas in that sentence, and Dan stopped walking and just stared at Sid.

"Oh," Dan said, and Sid lifted their hands to his mouth and kissed Dan's fingers.

"You must have known," Sid said, smiling at Dan over the top of their hands. "I've got this neon sign over my head, telling the whole world."

Dan smiled back, unable to resist Sid, certain he had the same flashing neon sign, too. "Guess I did."

The fox yipped, and Kit waved goodbye from the edge of the forest, the last of the light in her hand making an arc of silver in the gloom, then she was gone, and Dan and Sid were at the steps of their house.

It was unbelievably good to walk up the steps to the house with his knee working, not even needing to hold the railing, and Dan grinned in the dark as he stepped into the house.

Sid's hand guided Dan through the kitchen to the bedroom, the sheets a lighter expanse in the darkness. Dan squatted down to unlace his boots, just for the sheer pleasure in being able to bend his knee. The muscles in his calf and thigh were complaining, having lost all their strength and stretch since the injury, but strength and stretch were things Dan could rebuild.

Sid stepped out of his jeans, leaving them in a pile with his own boots, and then threw himself at the bed, springs squeaking, making Dan laugh out loud.

"Don't you need to go back to Aideen's?" he asked. "Since they're still arguing."

"It won't make any difference," Sid said. "I spent the whole day arguing with her. I'll have to rely on the rest of the túath voting against her, and shaming her into agreeing."

Dan added his own clothes to the pile on the floor and climbed onto the bed beside Sid.

Sid's hands were gentle on Dan's chest, smoothing down, and one hand slid across Dan's hip and down his healed leg. "Feels better," Sid said, and it wasn't a question.

Dan sighed, letting out a breath slowly. "It does," he admitted. "Thank you."

"I didn't fix it," Sid said, the hand trailing back up Dan's leg, up the back of his thigh.

"You brought me here," Dan said.

Sid's mouth was warm when Dan kissed him, and it was good to be able to kiss Sid when he wasn't blinded by lust. They'd fucked twice already that day, and Dan's body was merely suffused with a warm glow, rather than wracked with lust.

Sid rested his head on Dan's shoulder, and Dan stroked his back, tracing over the ridges of his ribs, rubbing beside his spine.

"Sleep," Sid said. "There's no need to stay awake."

"Will you be here when I wake?" Dan asked, suppressing a yawn.

"Right here," Sid said. "Waiting for you."

Chapter Thirteen

It wasn't that Sid didn't sleep, it was just that he didn't have to sleep. However, lying in the dim room, Dan breathing slowly beside him, the warmth of Dan's body permeating the bedding and right through Sid's skin, made him sleepy.

He woke, sometime around dawn, and slipped out from under the covers. After going to the bathroom, Sid pulled on a pair of Dan's jeans and opened the front door.

There'd been a frost during the night, and the sun was rising over a clearing spangled with ice, so that the grass shimmered and glistened.

This was too beautiful not to share.

Dan stumbled out of bed and pulled jeans on uncomplainingly, then followed Sid out onto the front steps.

The sky was coloring from peach through to delicate blue, and the tips of the mountains behind them were tinged with gold as the sun rose, out to the east. The forest, crowding down the slopes, was still shadowed, and above them somewhere Sid could hear a hawk circling, its cries a distant scrape of sound.

Dan took hold of Sid's hand, and the pair of them sat on the top step, arms around each other for warmth as the frosty air touched their bare skin.

The long grass was white and crisp, the only disruption the trail left behind Marlowe as the fox crossed the clearing in long, loping jumps.

Dan's breath was a cloud of condensation in front of him, a visible reminder of the heat that filled him, drawing Sid to him over and over.

"Tea?" Sid asked, pressing his lips against the bare skin of Dan's shoulder. He needed to move, break the moment, before he became unable to ever leave the valley again.

"Please," Dan said, and he caught hold of Sid's elbow, stopping him from standing, unspoken question in his eyes.

"I miss this place every moment I'm away," Sid said, and Dan nodded.

And each time, leaving became harder and harder. That was in part what had kept Sid away so long, the fear that he might never be able to leave again.

It took time, fiddling with lighting the wood stove, and Sid was still crouched in front of the grate, blowing on the flicker of flame, coaxing it, when Dan padded into the kitchen.

“Let me,” he said, and Sid kept blowing while Dan went and rummaged through his bag.

He was back a moment later, a bottle in his hands. Sid knelt back, and Dan splashed something from the bottle onto the fire, making the flames leap up, crackling and hissing.

“And there I was, feeling inadequate because I hadn’t been able to use any power to make the fire catch,” Sid said, pulling himself to his feet and peering into the grate again.

He shoved some more kindling into the flames then dragged the kettle across so it was over the flames.

“All you needed was a little alcohol,” Dan said, waving the hip flask at Sid. “You could have asked.”

“Didn’t want to disturb your morning,” Sid said, looping his arms around Dan’s neck contentedly.

They stayed like that, not kissing, just touching, until Sid took a step back.

“Do you think you can be ready to leave later?” Sid asked.

Dan nodded, and he looked so wistful that Sid had to touch his cheek, where his beard edged up his skin.

“We’ve handed Aishlinn over, and that was always the plan,” Dan said. “And if you need to go, then we will. If we don’t leave today, can you walk me to the car? I want to try calling my parents, see if they’re within range.”

“Of course,” Sid said. “I’m sorry I didn’t think of that myself. You must be worried about them.”

Dan shrugged. “They had a tank of fuel on the farm, a couple of four wheel drive vehicles, plenty of shotguns and food. I just hope they found somewhere to run to.”

Sid turned to look out the kitchen window, following Dan’s gaze, out at the forest crowding against the clearing. It was morning outside, sunlight working its way deep into the forest.

“Do you want to go and get them?” Sid asked.

Dan said, “If they’re stuck somewhere, yes. But my gut-feeling is that they’re fine.”

Sid slung an arm around Dan's shoulder, pressing his forehead against Dan's hair, where it grew dark and shaggy down his neck. He could feel Dan all the time now, like a radio playing softly in another room, too quiet for the melody to be heard, but a constant hum anyway.

Close and quiet, Dan was clearer though, not as close as when they were in bed, but Sid could almost hear the words.

"Trust that feeling," Sid said.

The kettle hissed, spitting water from its spout onto the stove, and there was a gentle tap at the front door.

"Hello?" Kit called out.

"Come in," Sid called back, and the front door creaked and Marlowe shot into the room, jumping up at both of them, and then snagging a piece of bread off the table.

"Marlowe," Kit said sternly, and the fox dropped to the floor, bread in mouth.

"Morning," Sid said. "Want some tea?"

"Please," Kit said, helping herself to a piece of the bread. "Have you heard anything yet?"

"No," Sid said. "Did you go back and listen to the discussion?"

"Argument," Kit said. "Couldn't help it, the noise carried right down the valley."

"Did they reach a conclusion?" Dan asked.

Kit sat on the edge of the table, swinging her bare feet, her skirt wet around the hem from the dew.

"They stopped me from eavesdropping, put some wards up, but I think there is still only Aideen holding out against you helping the army. I don't know whether they'll let me go or not."

"You're an adult, aren't you?" Dan asked.

"I'm nineteen," Kit said. "I don't think that makes me an adult here, but it would out in the world."

"Then leave," Dan said, and Sid grinned.

"Dan's right," Sid said. "Even if you and I are banned from assisting the armed forces as advisors, we can still enlist."

“Join the army?” Kit said, her eyes wide. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“The fox might be a problem,” Dan said, taking three mugs off the shelf and picking up the kettle. “You might be able to enlist, despite not having an ID card but Marlowe won’t pass the medical.”

Marlowe looked up, and Sid tossed the fox another scrap of bread.

Kit’s eyes filled with unshed tears, and she looked down at the fox. “Oh,” she said.

“You don’t have to enlist,” Dan said. “You could go and work on a farm, do your bit toward feeding the army, too.”

Kit nodded, but she didn’t take her eyes off Marlowe.

“Or we could defy the túath,” Sid said. “Not like I haven’t done it before. I’m only ever one step away from being disowned anyway.”

Kit sighed. “That’s a big step. We might never be able to come back here.”

“If it’s bombed or set alight, you won’t be able to anyway,” Dan said. “Remember, the place I lived has been either bombed or invaded. It might happen here, too.”

Dan spooned tea into the mugs of hot water and handed Kit and Sid theirs. “What do you think, Dan?” Kit asked. “What should we do?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Dan said. “But I can tell you that whatever happens, I’ll be rejoining the forces in some capacity. If Sid goes to Canberra as an advisor, I’ll go with him. If he doesn’t, I’ll be re-enlisting.”

“I’ll be enlisting, too,” Sid said.

Marlowe’s ears pricked up, and Kit turned her head. “That’s Mama calling for me.”

She bounced off the table, paused only to kiss Sid’s cheek, and then bolted out of the house, front door banging after her, Marlowe right behind her.

Sid took a sip of his tea, his eyes on Dan over the rim of his mug, and Dan smiled back at him.

“What?” Dan asked, making Sid smile.

“Nothing,” Sid said.

The front door banged again, and Kit appeared in the doorway, hair escaping from its plait, curling wildly.

“Aideen wants to talk to you both,” she said breathlessly. “And me, too.”

“We’re coming,” Sid said, putting down his mug. “As soon as we’re dressed.”

The sun had risen in the gap between two mountains, flooding the clearing with light, melting the frost and taking the edge off the earlier chill. It was a beautiful morning, walking through the long grass, Dan’s hand in his own, but none of the peace touched Sid. He was heading toward being frankly panicked at another confrontation with Aideen, especially since Dan would be there, too. Best case scenario was that she’d rant at him in Gaelic, saving Dan from having to understand the words.

Aideen’s front room, with the long table where she specialized in torturing people, was crowded, and Sid’s spirits picked up. If it was a gathering of the entire túath, there would be less invective. Sure, Aideen would sublimate that all into manipulation, but Sid could deal.

Dan followed Sid in to the room, and Aideen waved a hand at two empty chairs part way down the table.

Kit was opposite them, Marlowe on her lap, hugging the fox, and her eyes twinkled at Sid over Marlowe’s thick pelt.

“Good morning Charlemagne, Dan,” Aideen said, her mouth folding primly between words. “After vigorous debate, the túath has made a decision.”

Vigorous debate? Sid resisted the urge to check under the table to see if there was any blood on the faded carpet.

Mairead, Aishlinn’s grandmother and the person Sid suspected was his strongest ally, said, “We don’t all agree on the best course of action, but we do agree there needs to be action.”

Sid looked up the table to Aideen, who nodded her head slightly.

Mairead continued. “Dubhlainn left the valley last night and drove into Robertson, returning today with some newspapers.”

Dan looked up. “You have news?”

Mairead nodded. “Dan’s assessment is supported by the newspapers. Western Australia is to be abandoned. There is a mass exodus eastward; over a million people are fleeing, many of them on foot. The Brisbane Line is mentioned as a defensive strategy. We are being warned to prepare for a sustained conflict. Australia is officially at war.”

“And?” Kit demanded. “What are we going to do about this?”

“We don’t know,” Mairead said. “Kitten, please don’t insist on going with Charlemagne and Dan. You’re needed here.”

“You mean I’m breeding stock,” Kit said. “And the túath can’t afford to lose another woman of childbearing age.”

“If the túath is to survive in the long term, yes,” Aileen said. “We can spare Charlemagne, but not you.”

Kit rubbed at her face with the back of her hand, looking like she was about to cry, then stood up, depositing Marlowe onto the carpet. “No,” she said.

Aileen said, “Sit down, and stop being so dramatic. You’ve always known your responsibility to the túath was to child bear.”

Kit sat down again, radiating waves of rebellion, and Marlowe jumped back into her lap, hiding his head in her armpit.

Dan touched Sid’s knee, undercover of the table, and Sid pressed his hand over Dan’s.

“The majority decision of the túath is to give Charlemagne limited permission to assist in the defense of the country,” Mairead said. “With the expectation that he will not disclose the existence of this valley or community. In return, we require him to advise us if defeat is imminent, and to assist us in fleeing to Ireland.”

“Agreed, but Kit comes, too,” Sid said. He stood up, as stern and dignified as he could manage, and walked sedately out of the room, and the house, Dan beside him, Kit clinging onto his other arm.

He got halfway across the clearing before Kit burst into tears and hugged him. “We’re going now,” he said, kissing her cheek. “Run and get your things; I’ll need you to open the gate if they’re going to prevent me.”

“We’re taking Kit?” Dan asked, and Sid broke into a run across the clearing, confident that Dan, with his healed knee, could keep up.

“You heard them, they want her to stay here and have babies, whether she wants to or not,” Sid said, taking the steps to their house in one bound.

“After the bit about the newspapers, I heard a lot of Gaelic,” Dan said, following Sid into the bedroom and bending down to stuff the clothes from the floor into his bag. “Did they really say Kit had to stay here and have babies?”

“Sure did,” Sid said, tossing his clothes over to Dan then disappearing into the bathroom, returning with Dan’s toiletries and hands full of shampoo and hair treatments.

Dan took them without comment, stuffing them into the bag.

“Food?” he asked, and Sid grabbed the bread and jam from the kitchen. There wasn’t anything else to take, apart from tea.

“Let’s go,” Sid said, plunging back out of the little house and into the clearing.

The pair of them ran across the clearing, past Aideen’s house, where Mairead stood crying in the doorway, Aishlinn on her hip, and Aideen’s voice carried clearly from the front room, where she was shouting.

Kit dashed out of the house beside Aideen’s, bag in each hand, Marlowe streaking ahead of her.

“Kit!” Mairead called out, and Sid watched as Kit paused, dropped both bags and rushed up the steps to embrace both Mairead and Aishlinn.

Aishlinn cried, too, her wails loud over the top of the shouting, and Dan said, “I need to say goodbye to her.”

Sid nodded, and Dan ran through the long grass, to join Kit on the steps, Sid right behind him.

“Come back soon,” Mairead said tearfully, as Dan took Aishlinn out of Mairead’s arms and cuddled her, then handed her sobbing to Sid.

Sid kissed her cheeks, and said, “We’ll come back soon, little girl. Promise you.”

“Don’t leave it ten years this time, Sid,” Mairead said, and Sid kissed her cheek, too.

“Promise I’ll bring Kit back safely,” he said. “Take care of Aideen?”

“If you insist,” Mairead said.

Sid slid past the knot of people on the steps and into Aideen’s front room.

Aideen turned around, blinking her eyes.

“Goodbye,” Sid said. “Until next time.”

“Goodbye, Charlemagne,” Aideen said, wiping her face. She moved toward Sid, he met her halfway and they hugged.

“I’m proud of you,” Aideen said. “Proud of who you’ve become. Don’t stay away so long this time.”

The three of them and the fox didn’t run the rest of the way to the car, there wasn’t any need.

The gate was standing open, the path to the car park wide enough for the three of them to walk side-by-side.

Dan opened the rear car door, reached in and unhooked the child restraint that was still there, while Sid put Dan's bags in the back of the car.

Dan put the child restraint beside the sedan Mairead drove, while Kit and Marlowe clambered in to Dan's car.

Kit sniffled in the backseat, so Sid didn't look back at her, just jumped in the passenger seat and leaned across to kiss Dan.

"Back out onto the main road," Sid said, pointing back up the rutted track they'd drive in on the day before. "Then hang a right. Canberra's not far, only a couple of hundred kilometers, so we should be there this afternoon."

Dan turned the ignition, and the car rumbled into life. "First I'm going to call my parents," he said, reaching over and picking up the mike of the radio, and flicking the radio on.

He had to lean across Sid's knees to adjust the frequency, and Sid stroked his back gently through his shirt.

They sat there like that, listening to the radio crackle and Dan attempt to call his parents for several minutes, until Kit leaned over the back of Sid's seat and looked at them curiously.

"Do you know where they are?" Kit asked.

"No," Sid said, and she reached out and touched Dan's back. Sid felt her make contact with Dan.

Power rippled around the car, Marlowe yipped and bounced between the seats, half landing on Dan, and Kit said, "They're in a big car, like this one. I can't tell anything else."

Dan hung the mike back on its hook and sat up slowly, turning to look at Kit in disbelief.

Kit had her eyes closed, sweat beading her brow. "They're driving," she said. "The road is dusty, and there're mountains in front of them."

She opened her eyes and smiled at Dan. "If you need me to talk to them for you..."

Dan shook his head. "As long as they're safe."

"I told you I was a failure," Sid said, patting Kit's hand where it rested on the cracked vinyl upholstery of the seat. "Kit here has ability."

Dan squeezed Kit's shoulder. "I had no idea..." he began, and then he shook his head. "No, I think if they start receiving telepathic messages, they might panic. Can you find them for me again?"

“Any time,” Kit said. “You just let me know. And I was just going to kind of manifest in front of them, let them know you were safe and well.”

Dan shifted his gaze from Kit to Sid, and Sid said, “Might be a good idea not to be doing too much manifesting unexpectedly. It’s not common out here.”

Kit smiled and shrugged. “Sorry,” she said. “I don’t know much about out here.”

“Have you never left the valley?” Dan asked.

“Of course I have,” Kit said. “I even went to school out here, for a while. Mama took me to Sydney last year, for my birthday.”

The car rattled and rumbled over the last of the track, and out onto the sealed road. Dan turned right, onto the bitumen, and the car picked up speed.

“What will happen in Canberra?” Kit asked.

“We have to find the person who tried to recruit Sid at the army camp,” Dan said. “If we can find him easily, then he’ll give us food and somewhere to stay while everything gets sorted out. If we can’t find him, we sleep in the car and the tent, and keep looking for him.”

They drove on, down winding roads, working their way south and west, through densely forested countryside, with almost nobody else on the roads.

It was inevitable that, once they got onto the Hume Highway, there’d be checkpoints. Canberra would be in lockdown, blacked out and sealed up, for security reasons.

“What are our options?” Dan asked, pulling the car over on the shoulder of the highway, with the traffic snarl of the checkpoint still several kilometers in front of them, over another large hill. He turned to look at Sid, and then at Kit, who was sprawled in the backseat, Marlowe in her lap.

“Kit?” Sid asked. “Can you make us invisible?”

“The whole car? Or just you, Marlowe and I?” Kit asked.

“Which would be best, Dan?” Sid asked.

Dan took binoculars out of the glove box and peered at the checkpoint.

“All of us and the car,” Dan said. “We can just drive around the checkpoint, it’s not mined.”

“Are you sure?” Sid asked. “I’m not keen on being blown up.”

Dan handed Sid the binoculars and smiled at him affectionately. “You’re lovely when you whine,” he said. “Now watch the jeep, off to the left. See how it’s driving on a track around the checkpoint?”

Sid fiddled with the binoculars and said, “Yep, can see that.”

“That’s one of our jeeps,” Dan said. “You can tell by the way no one is shooting at it. In fact, the folks with guns are waving at it.”

“Hey!” Sid said. “They are, too.”

“If the track was mined, the people waving would be rushing at the car, to get it to stop.”

Sid handed the binoculars back to Dan. “Guess so,” he said cheerfully.

“Kit?” Dan asked. “Can you make us invisible now, and keep us invisible until we’re past the checkpoint? Without me having to stick a screwdriver in my hand?”

“Ewww,” Kit said. “That’s really disgusting. No problems with keeping us invisible, right until Marlowe has to be let out of the car to pee. Soon as I let go of him, the invisibility will drop.”

“We’re held hostage by a fox’s bladder,” Sid said. “Let’s do this, and no one is to give Marlowe a drink, right?”

They rolled slowly past the checkpoint, Kit’s arms wrapped securely around Marlowe, the power that was making them invisible shimmering around them, making the hairs on Sid’s arms prickle and stand upright.

The engine was loud, ticking and puttering, but Sid only spotted one person who heard and who stared at the car, peering and then shaking his head and turning back to the vehicle he was leaning against.

They rolled out, behind the checkpoint, and Dan pulled off the road a couple of kilometers later and said, “Right, no one is watching, make us visible now.”

Kit’s voice was strained, and she said, “Thanks.”

The shimmering left, the world becoming substantial around them again, and Kit leaned weakly back in the back seat, wiping sweat from her face and letting go of Marlowe, who bounded over her, yipping.

“Was that your first real try at using power outside of the valley?” Sid asked, handing a bottle of water back to Kit.

“Yes,” she said. “That was hard work.”

“Not something you’re familiar with?” Sid teased as Dan pulled the car back out onto the Hume Highway.

Kit flipped her finger at him, grinning, too.

“Like you know about hard work either,” she said.

Sid sat back in the front passenger seat. “I have lived out in the world for ten years,” he said. “But I don’t think I’d ever done anything difficult until I hooked up with Dan.”

“Look at it from my point of view,” Dan said as they drove past a sign that said *Canberra 50 kms*. “You’ve been nothing but trouble since the moment you roared up to my house on your bike, all swagger and dirt.”

“War’s not my fault,” Sid said. “You can’t blame me for the bombings.”

“I think the irate magicians were your fault,” Dan said.

“But you love me anyway,” Sid said, and Kit made a retching noise in the back seat.

“You didn’t say I’d have to put up with that,” she said. “I’m good with threats to my life, and physical deprivation, even if the food is as bad as Sid says. But I’m not putting up with that sentimental stuff.”

Sid glanced back at Kit, who stuck her tongue out at him.

Dan said, “I saw that in the rear vision mirror. I don’t think you’re going to be joining the forces a moment too late. Not even special, secret advisors get to be rude.”

Sid laughed at the look at Kit’s face; she was frowning, obviously contemplating a life of politeness and discipline.

“It’ll be just like having Aideen around all the time,” Sid said. “But no one will be able to read your mind, so you can think as horrible thoughts as you want to, without consequence.”

“Is there any food?” Kit asked. “Are we there yet?”

Dan groaned. “I had no idea the two of you were so alike.”

They drove into Canberra in the afternoon, through peaceful middleclass suburbs, where the eucalypts crowded right up to the houses and no one looked twice at a battered and filthy four wheel drive bearing 6th battalion badges.

Dan had been to Canberra for basic training and to sit his exams to make sergeant, so he knew where the Forces’ headquarters were.

The army administration was housed at Duntroon, along with the training facilities, and that was the address on the business card the attaché had given Sid. Dan didn't have a plan beyond just driving up to the gates and holding the card out.

He just hoped that no one took it into their head to turn away the four of them. He was an ex-soldier, Sid and Kit were identification-less, and the fox was vermin.

The attaché's secretary was a brisk young man, neatly groomed and most apologetic, waving them into a meeting room, then disappearing to rustle up biscuits and mugs of tea.

Kit paced the room unhappily, peering through the double-glazed windows at the barren courtyard outside, and then trying each chair in turn.

"What's wrong?" Sid asked.

"We're being watched," she said. "And I can't tell where from."

The door opened again, and the assistant carried in a tray with three mugs, a plate of biscuits, a bowl of water and a tin of dog food.

"The attaché is in a meeting at this moment, but he is about to stand up a general to join you. He extends his greetings in absentia, and says I am to make you all comfortable," the assistant said.

"But he'd prefer we didn't leave?" Sid asked, opening the door and waving to the armed guard outside, then closing the door again.

"He is very much looking forward to forging a mutually beneficial relationship," the assistant said. "You're free to leave anytime you wish."

Sid opened the door a crack, and the guard was still there, staring back at Sid with a bored look on his face.

"We're not leaving," Sid said, coming back to the table and sitting beside Dan.

The tea was good, hot and sweet, and the biscuits not stale. It boded well for their dinner.

"We want to help the war effort," Kit told the assistant. "Anyway we can."

Dan put his empty mug on the table and smiled at Sid. "And we've driven a damned long way to get here," he said.