the Circle, Updated

by FletcherHonorama

Summary

same kids, our world.
Preludes

Sandrilene fa Toren wants to help people. Of course she does! Sandry travels with her family all around the world for that exact reason. Her parents spend a lot of time in meetings and taking photos and making speeches about how important it is to help others. Sandry knows how terrible people’s lives are all over the world and thinks it’s very sad, but whenever she tries to help somebody she seems to get in trouble with her parents. Pirisi (Sandry’s tutor) always says to listen and to be kind and to give to those people who are in need. Her parents tell Sandry that she’s very sweet and has lovely ideas, but she really needs to get more of an education and grow up some more before she can really make a difference like they do.

Sandry feels like when she gave her lunch to the little shoeless girl wandering the streets and her even littler sister to share last week, that made a difference. She was hungry all the way up until dinner time but she knew it was worth it. She made a little finger-woven bracelet (Pirisi had shown her how) for a boy whose mother was dead and whose father was dying and he’d hugged her so tight she’d nearly popped. He said don’t go, don’t go, but Sandry is eleven and she doesn’t get to decide her itinerary.

Daja Kisubo will be going into the family business as soon as she’s old enough. Her parents always talk about how they started their consulting company in the first place for her and her brother Uneny’s sake, so they would have an income to inherit and be able to support their families in the future. That kind of talk makes Uneny lazy and complacent; it makes Daja’s eyes glaze over. She doesn’t want to sit in front of a computer and make conference calls and crunch numbers all her life, which is all her parents ever seem to do.

Daja dreams of real work, of great steel bridges and freight trains and the cranes that dominate city skylines. But there’s no way into that world from where Daja’s sitting and her parents tut at her disapprovingly if she ever mentions that kind of thing. There’s no long-term future in manual labour or in construction: it’s all going to be outsourced, automated, undervalued. Much better to be the person behind the computer screen in charge of the system than just another cog in the wheel.

Wheels don’t have cogs, Daja wants to say. That doesn’t make any sense. She bites her lip instead and gazes wistfully upwards when the aeroplanes fly by.

Roach spends school hours and most nights lairing in parks, gardens, abandoned buildings. His mates join him whenever they’re shit out of luck and can’t find couches to crash on. Most of Roach’s mates technically have some kind of family, even if half the time they’re not welcome in it. Some of them even go to school from time to time. Roach has no need for school or family. He’s got his people and he knows how to look after himself.

He made a living dealing for older kids for a few years but since that blew up he’s stayed his own boss. He lays low and bounces from dumpster-diving to theft to odd jobs and the occasional roof over his head and a hot meal when the stars align for him.

Roach does his best work when it’s just him on his own: a small silent shadow finding his way into places where bigger, louder or lazier kids wouldn’t have a hope of reaching. Sometimes he’s there to steal for himself, but more often he’s just casing for other amateur burglars. The work’s not bad – it puts cash straight into Roach’s hands as long as he doesn’t make any mistakes and he keeps his mouth shut about it.
He’ll have to re-think some things in a few years, when a mistake might lead him straight to jail rather than diversion programs and foster care. Roach doesn’t know which would be worse – he’s heard horror stories from foster kids and jailbirds alike. He knows what one mistake can do to a person, when they take you away. So his knife sits heavy in his pocket, close to hand until the day he dies.

Trisana Chandler is smarter than everyone. It’s just a fact of life that being smart never made anyone popular. Tris hears voices on the wind and feels the earth move under her feet from time to time and when she gets angry - really, really angry -

Nobody wants Tris in their home. Not her parents, not her aunts, uncles, grandparents, not foster carers - nobody.

Nobody wants her, but they’ll keep her while she makes herself useful, sometimes for as long as a couple of months before everything inevitably goes pear-shaped. Tris is a smart girl: she dusts, scrubs, vacuums, polishes, tidies, washes - and when she’s done every single duty assigned to her she finds a quiet spot and she reads. They call her a good girl, a lovely helpful girl, but Tris knows perfectly well it’s not true. No matter how hard she fights to keep her temper down, as long as the world surrounds her with stupid, cruel people Tris can never be a really good girl.

Good girls, proper and decent girls, don’t bring anger and property damage with them wherever they go. Good girls feel guilty when their hurricanes leave bruises and when sparks fly from their fingertips. Tris doesn’t. She never wants these things to happen, exactly, but it does only ever happen to people who deserve it.

Tris knows she’s better than any of these people but there’s long, long years to wait until she will be free from them all. All she needs is for people to leave her alone so she can get on with her education and get into a good high school. From there, the sky’s the limit.
Trouble

Sandry sat in the corner of the little storage room with her knees tucked up under her chin and her blue eyes wide in fear. The ground was hard and cold; the stacked crates she was hiding behind loomed large and heavy over her head.

The whole building was in a blackout: no lights, no heating, no anything. And there were no windows in this room, let alone ones to outside. The only light source was Sandry’s iPhone, sitting on her neat white canvas shoes and glowing coolly up at her. It was a new phone - only a couple of months old. Her background picture was the first photo she’d taken with it: Sandry and Pirisi holding up the scarf they’d just finished knitting together. Sandry had knitted the yellow stripes and Pirisi had done the red ones.

It was six o’clock in the evening. Sandry had been waiting for Pirisi to return for an hour and a half. She would be back soon, once she’d found a safe way out that they could take together. The noise had mostly died down now - Sandry hadn’t heard any gunfire in a long while. Nobody was shouting or screaming any more. But there were still heavy footsteps every now and then and the occasional crash or thud to catch Sandry’s imagination and make her blood run cold.

Time and time again Sandry picked up her phone and found Pirisi’s number, her mother’s number, her father’s number. Time and time again she set the phone back down unused. What if her parents were hiding just like her and she gave away their hiding spot? She daren’t even send a text. Sandry had her own phone on silent but her parents didn’t always think about small details like that. One time Sandry had sent her dad a lot of pictures of a puppy she’d made friends with on her walk with Pirisi. Because he hadn’t put his phone on silent, the presentation he’d been making had been interrupted multiple times by his message tone: ten seconds of four-year-old Sandry laughing hysterically, and loudly. He hadn’t been cross with Sandry about it but she knew it had been very embarrassing for him.

Sometimes Sandry was a bit scatterbrained like her father but she didn’t feel that way now. She was thinking very sensibly. Sandry wanted very much to be rescued but she also didn’t want anyone to get hurt because they were trying to rescue her. She wanted to leave this little room and run to safety but she didn’t know anywhere she could run to.

Sandry just wanted to be home again. She wanted Pirisi to come back and for them to escape together and find her parents and go back home.

Thinking of her tutor and friend, Sandry took out her little craft bag and rifled through it. She squinted in the dim light to identify the bracelet she had been working on for her mum. Pirisi had taught Sandry a lot about patience and composure and it was craftwork that always settled the girl’s nerves.

At half past seven the battery charge slipped under 10%. Sandry had finished the bracelet for her mother and was a fair way through another one. She would give this one to Pirisi when she arrived.

Sandry’s bottom was numb and her back was getting stiff from sitting for so long without moving. Her mouth was dry as sand. She needed to go to the toilet. Nobody had phoned or messaged her in - Sandry sometimes messed up her sums but it must have been at least three hours since the alarms had first sounded. And nobody had tried to contact Sandry in all that time.

Her small mouth quivered; she gripped her work tightly. Come back, Pirisi, she pleaded silently. Please come back for me soon.
It was completely silent now: Sandry could hear her own shallow breathing and little else. She lay a trembling hand on the crate nearest her and raised herself slowly to her feet. Her legs were shaky but they held her upright for the moment. She glanced at her phone one last time (battery 9%) and slid it into her skirt pocket, leaving the room in absolute darkness.

Sandry stood quietly for a moment. Her heart pitter-pattered at the thought of going out into the corridor all on her own. She felt her way slowly and carefully around the crates and shuffled towards the door.

If Pirisi was going to come back for her, she would have been back by now. She would never leave Sandry alone like this. The girl felt hot tears well up in her eyes and spill over. She wiped them away with the back of her hand and sniffed quietly, blinking hard. It was down to Sandry now to save herself. She may not know where to run to, but she couldn’t bear sitting around feeling sorry for herself for a minute longer. Sandry licked her dry lips and laid one hand on the door handle.

Then she plunged it back into her pocket, took out her phone and called Pirisi. She called her mother. She called her father. She called the emergency number her father had entered into her phone. She called Anthony, her mother’s personal assistant. Nobody answered her.

The battery was down to 3% now. Sandry was starving and desperately thirsty and needed very badly to go to the toilet. Her head ached, her neck ached, her back ached.

The pale, shaking young girl lifted her chin, set her shoulders and pushed the door handle straight down.

The door moved barely a centimetre before hitting something solid and bouncing back. No matter how hard she strained, Sandry couldn’t budge it any further. With every effort she made she became more and more light-headed. This is it, she thought faintly. There’s nothing else I can do.

Daja had worked on her parents for months to convince them to bring her and her brother on their next business trip. Uneny wasn’t as quite as keen as she was, but he wouldn’t say no to finishing the school year early so he backed her up like they always backed each other up. Daja had tried very hard to seem sincerely interested in their Brisbane clients and the networking they were going to do. Her parents had either believed her or simply respected the effort and decided she and her brother could come along. So now the whole family was on the plane (Daja at the window, then Uneny, then Mum, then Dad across the aisle) and waiting for takeoff. Daja supposed she’d have a pretty nice time in Brisbane but the aeroplane rides were definitely going to be the highlight. She couldn’t wait.

Mum and Dad were both working calmly on their computers because they were both workaholics and old hands at plane trips. Uneny was concentrating intensely on a strategy game on his tablet. His mouth twisted one way then the other, showing up the dimples in his cheeks that Uneny was certain would have old rich people lining up to marry him and leave him all their wealth when they died.

So Daja was left to her own devices, just like she’d hoped. She pressed one dark hand firmly against the pale grey wall and leaned forwards so her nose very nearly touched the glass window. The plane hummed gently and Daja watched the tarmac slide backwards underneath them, soon to be left far below after take-off.

Daja’s lips parted in a wide smile when their speed started to pick up; the moment they achieved liftoff her heart soared joyously to match. She felt the air rushing at incredible speeds over and under the wings and out the back of the plane. All the machinery fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.
Everything came together perfectly, and they flew.

The city quickly passed by underneath Daja’s window; before she knew it they were speeding silently over the countryside. The steady working of the machine and the land passing underneath her was so hypnotic she drifted off into half-dreaming, still with a smile on her face.

Daja wasn’t sure what had woken her, at first. Something gnawed at her insides as the plane jumped and shifted oddly in the air.

“It’s just a spot of turbulence,” said Uneny, who’d flown a grand total of once in his entire lifetime, same as Daja. He was three years older than his sister but sometimes he acted like it was ten years. “Just chill out.”

“Aa, piss off,” Daja muttered quiet enough that Mum wouldn’t hear it.

“Ooooo.” Uneny glanced meaningfully across at their parents and raised his eyebrows.

Daja had more important things on her mind than Uneny’s childish taunting. “Can’t you feel it?” She shifted uncertainly in her seat. “I think something’s come loose.”

Uneny scrunched up his face. “What are you on about?”

Daja put her face right up to the window and tried to look along both sides of the plane. She couldn’t see much out of the tiny window, but there was definitely something wrong. It was the way the plane was moving. The wind was getting into places it shouldn’t.

*Just as we’re flying over the mountains,* Daja thought. *Of course. Murphy’s Law.*

When she turned away from the window Uneny was back playing his game, their conversation forgotten. Daja sat ill at ease for a good ten minutes before she couldn’t take it any more.

“No, listen,” she said to her brother. “There’s something wrong with the plane.”

The seatbelt light came on. They were going through some turbulence, the announcement said, and as a standard precaution all passengers were required to return to their seats and fasten their seatbelts.

Uneny’s golden brown eyes showed a flicker of concern, then he shook it away. He didn’t look at Daja when he clipped his own seatbelt tight, but he did reach over and check that she’d done hers up properly. “It’s just turbulence,” he said again. His fingers tapped nervously against his thighs.

Daja’s knuckles paled as she clenched her hands into fists. *This isn’t turbulence. We’re in big trouble.*

She tried to stand, but was caught by the seatbelt she’d only just put on but which had somehow slipped her mind. Daja sat back down quickly, putting her embarrassment aside, and raised her hand instead. Uneny scoffed at her and pulled her hand down. “You press the button,” he reminded her, “and the flight attendant comes.” He paused. “What are you going to say to them?”

Daja pressed the button. The flight attendant was a very thin white man with slicked back brown hair and a friendly smile. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“There’s something wrong with the plane,” Daja told him, her voice strong and clear.

Mum and Dad threw her identically bemused looks. Uneny looked at the flight attendant with a
“Anything I can help you with?” said the man. “Is your air not working?”

Daja frowned at him. Was he even listening to her? “Something’s come loose near the wing. It’s getting worse.”

“Hush, child,” Dad said sternly.

“I’m sorry,” Mum said to the flight attendant. “My girl thinks she knows everything about planes. One flight doesn’t make you an expert, darling.”

“I’m sure everything’s working just fine,” the man said to Daja.

“Planes sometimes do fly when they shouldn’t, though,” said Uneny. “They don’t check them all thoroughly. I read about it.”

“Hush!” Mum snapped. “This is no time for your nonsense.” She smiled tightly at their attendant. “Thank you, sir, we’re doing just fine. Thank you.”

The flight attendant smiled, nodded and walked back down the aisle.

“Sometimes planes land and they find out it flew with oil problems or a faulty engine or something,” Uneny continued.

Dad pointed a finger out across the aisle right at Uneny and Daja. “Nothing can be done now except you two starting a panic on the flight,” he scolded. “If there is any fault with the plane, they will detect it and they will fix it. So do as your mother says and hush.”

Uneny looked down and scratched the back of his head. When Dad’s attention was back on his computer Uneny muttered, “Or it carks it and we crash.”

Daja knew that her father was right. She knew that the plane had a problem, but if nobody else agreed there was no point in keeping on about it. She pulled out the emergency procedures sheet from the pocket in front of her and committed it very firmly to memory.

Twenty-seven minutes later, the plane shook, groaned and veered.

From far off the gap in the hedge looked tiny but Roach slipped through it with no worries at all, shoulder bag tucked into his side. The grass was crisp and cool against his bare feet as he slipped across the front lawn and around behind the house.

Roach had scouted this house about a month back. A man and a woman lived here with two teenage kids, two shiny cars and a ginger cat they called Snaggles. The cat was skittish and slap-brained; the humans were always out of the house by eight on a weekday morning.

His mate Slug was set up across the street to let him know when they’d all pissed off to work or school or wherever. Roach had a couple dollars credit on his old beat up phone still; Slug had nicked a phone from somewhere just for this job and promised he’d ditch it after. Roach had done jobs with partners before, and he’d done jobs he planned out himself before, but this was the first one that was both things together.

Slug wasn’t a close mate of Roach’s but he was pretty hard-up after being kicked out of home a couple weeks ago so Roach had let him in on it, strictly as lookout. The real work was all up to
Roach. Slug didn’t have much in the way of brains and when the pressure was on you could rely on him to go to pieces in three seconds flat.

Roach ducked in behind the bushes in the back corner of the yard. Laying low here he could spy out between the leaves but nobody could really see in, and he was right next to the fence for if he needed to get lost in a hurry.

It was a cool and damp little spot even in this warm weather. There was moss growing on the flat rocks up by the fence that had grown along to cover even more ground since Roach was here last. He cleared a couple spiderwebs out of his way with a stick and planted himself on the biggest rock to wait for a call from Slug to tell him the coast was clear.

There was spiky oval-shaped red flowers growing on the bushes. Roach knew from his last stay they were way softer than they looked - and the birds around here really loved them. The wood was light brown and felt brittle and fragile, growing out in sharp angles and sprouting thin green leaves in just about every direction.

Roach poured out half his water over where the trunks of the bushes met the ground. The other half went onto the patches of moss that felt the driest. He’d refill the bottle with tap water once he was inside. Hopefully the drink would make up for any hassle Roach caused this little green corner.

He laid his hands flat on the moss as it drank up his water. It shared its easy calm with the boy burglar, softening and soothing the deep gouges in his palms from that one thorny motherfucker that had flat-out refused to let him go a few years back. He’d sworn violent vengeance on that bloody bush for ripping into him like it did. Not only had it torn up his hands, it had wrecked his clothes and gotten him nearly nabbed by the cops. It had all been a seriously big deal with his boss at the time.

These days Roach knew better than to put his hands all over strange plants when he was on the job. Quickly in, quickly out. Don’t get distracted, don’t get tangled up in green things.

Roach’s phone buzzed and jerked around where he’d left it on the dirt. He wiped his hands on his pants and pressed the green button.

“Second car’s gone,” Slug said. “No-one’s pegged me. Go in.”

Roach crept quickly across the back lawn of the house and up the steps. The back door was his first port of call, seeing as how on one of the three days he’d been staking the place out, it had been left unlocked all day. If they’d done the same thing again this was gonna be embarrassingly easy.

And so it was. Roach slid through the door and closed it quietly behind him. The house was his - time to get to work.

Five minutes later, on his way out of the study, Roach had one silver laptop and its cables, a big hard drive, and some usb sticks in his bag. Hard drives were good value if you had the right kind of contacts: you never knew what you’d find on them things and there were people willing to pay good money to find out.

Roach had stopped a moment to poke at a little potted cactus on a shelf when he heard a siren wailing faintly in the distance. He quickly checked his phone to make sure he hadn’t missed anything from Slug. The screen just showed the time and the battery and the reception so Roach headed towards the master bedroom as planned.

It was hard to concentrate with the siren getting loud real quick and Roach didn’t like taking
chances. He punched in the number for Slug’s stolen phone and went into the bedroom. It was heaps messy for such middle-class professional folk: drawers half-open, clothes tossed across beds and the floor, unpaired shoes in seriously weird places. Roach took it all in and moved straight to the flat black jewellery box on top of the chest of drawers.

“Yo,” answered Slug, finally.

“What’s up with the siren?” Roach asked. The jewellery box wouldn’t open so he put the whole thing in his bag with the other stuff. “Is it near here? Is it cops?”

“Dunno,” Slug replied. “I can’t see what it is. For sure it’s getting closer.”

“Shit,” said Roach. “I’m out. Meet you later.” He stuffed the phone back in his pocket and made a slapdash search of the top drawers, just in case. He found socks, socks, and more socks and slammed them shut again.

The phone buzzed in his pocket. “Yeah?”

“Hurry!” Slug shouted, gasping for breath. Roach could tell he was running hard. “They’re here for us! Run!”

Roach made a dash for the back door. He could still jump the fence with what he had and they wouldn’t follow quick enough to catch him. Especially if they were chasing Slug already, there was no way they’d get onto Roach.

But the back door was locked. He rattled it violently in disbelief. Shit, shit, fucking fuck shit. Someone had to be in here with him. Someone had locked him in. Roach turned around and ran for the front door.

Tris didn’t get her own room in this new place, which was just typical. Three girls lived in this house already and they were all younger than Tris. They whispered behind their hands and gave her mean looks and then acted like little angels whenever the adults were nearby.

There were no adults nearby now. The four children were all supposed to be doing their homework at the big kitchen table; Tris was the only one who even had a book open.

“I like your dress Trisana,” said the youngest one, Ayesha. She was a sweet-looking Indian girl with glossy black hair and big brown eyes. Tris guessed she was about ten. “It’s really pretty.”

The dress Tris had on was old, brown, woollen and horrendously ugly. It had been a gift from her grandmother, before she and Tris’s grandfather decided the “trouble” Tris caused was too much for them to handle. It was much too tight around the waist, and it itched, but it was Tris’s dress and nobody was going to stop her wearing it.

“What are you from, like, the olden days?” Dani sneered. She was a wearing baggy jeans and a heavy grey hooded jumper and had heavy black makeup all around her eyes, so Tris didn’t think she should really be throwing stones when it came to personal appearance. Her question didn’t even make grammatical sense. Nor was it technically an insult: in the “olden days” at least girls had better manners.

“Leave me alone,” Tris snapped. “I’m not troubling you.”

The last girl, Hannah, tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder and tilted her head impertinently. “Oh yes, you are,” she said. “Looking at you I’m about to sick up.”
Ayesha made retching noises and the other two joined in, a merry little trio of self-satisfied witches who found tremendous pleasure in tormenting others.

This was always going to happen. Tris wasn’t surprised when the pages of her exercise book started to flip over, slowly at first, then all in a hurry. The book slid across the table to clunk against the wall and all the books and stationery on the table soon followed. The three younger girls leapt out of their seats; Hannah and Ayesha squealed as they did. A second gust of wind sent pens and pencils pouring off the opposite side of the table to Tris. Hannah shuffled sideways away from where they’d landed, and where a couple of loose sheets of paper were drifting down to the floor after them.

“What the f—rick?!!” said Dani. “Was that a tornado??!”

Ayesha was staring at Tris. “Did you do that?” she whispered.

“No,” said Tris. Her thick red curls, which had held perfectly still during the whirlwind, flattened and tickled at her ears. “Excuse me.” She collected all her own things and went straight to her and Hannah’s room. She closed the door behind her and sat down on the bottom bunk. Whispers of the girls’ hushed conversation still reached her, though.

_‘She’s a witch!’_

_Don’t be stupid, she can’t be a witch._

_It was magic! I’m telling Mr and Mrs Breen. They need to know._

Tris wrenched open her science book and started to read at a random page. It didn’t help shut out the voices.

_There’s no such thing as a witch, you idiot. It was just a weird draft._

_I don’t want her sleeping in the same room as me. What if she does a spell on me? What if she murders me?_

_God, you two. Witches aren’t real! She’s not a witch!_

_Then is she ... do you think ..._

_I think she’s a demon._

_What should we do?_

_You LEAVE ME ALONE!_ Tris thought furiously to herself. Her face was hot and she could feel the tears coming. Could she never have just a few days to herself in a new place before people had to ruin it for her? She hated children, and old people, and superstitious idiots who jumped to all kinds of brainless conclusions and used them as an excuse to get rid of her.

Sometimes Tris thought the whole world was made up of doors opening before her and slamming themselves in her face. She knew she’d be somewhere else by the end of the week, somewhere else stupid and hateful and hopeless.

The bedroom door eased open slowly. Tris was paying very close attention to the history of space travel. _Maybe space travel is the secret, Tris thought. If I go into space perhaps people will finally stop bothering me._
“Um, Trisana? Tris?”

Tris turned a page.

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings.” It was Hannah and there was no chance she was truly sorry
about Tris’s feelings. She was afraid because Tris was a monster to her now.

“Fine,” Tris said. “Go away.” She adjusted her glasses and glared at a chart that showed the
distance of all the planets in the solar system from the sun. Neptune looked the most appealing: 4
billion kilometres was a nice easy distance to be settled from all these people.

Hannah was still lingering in the doorway. Tris very pointedly kept reading until she went away
again. She wasn’t going to be here much longer anyway, so what sense was there in trying?
Deep Trouble

Sandry still had a few unopened packets of thread she’d been saving for the trip home. Waiting around in airports and quiet stuffy plane trips always tried Sandry’s patience. What she wouldn’t give to be safely bored out of her mind in such a place now!

All she could do now was pass the time, and hope. If she used her imagination a little it wasn’t so different here as waiting to board a flight. Sandry opened a packet of thread slowly and carefully. This thread was sky blue, but in the dim light of her phone Sandry could only perceive it as a washed-out, ghostly grey.

Her battery was at 2%. Nervously, subconsciously, she started to twist the thread together in her fingers. How would anyone be able find her once her phone was finally dead? Was there something else more important she should be doing with her last moments of light?

Sandry just couldn’t think of anything. Moving on autopilot, she pulled all her packets of thread open (four, in all). One was blue, one yellow, one pink, and the last was white. Sandry separated the strands from each other and tied them off in groups of four.

“Patience,” she told herself. “Someone will come.”

1%. Any second now she would be all alone in the darkness. Sandry sat facing one crate. She settled the knots of her threads underneath it and tugged at them firmly to make sure they wouldn’t come loose. She forced herself into patience and composure and her hands began to work in familiar patterns. She worked neatly, fixing the colours of the threads as firmly as possible in her mind so that she wouldn’t forget what they looked like once the light went out.

The colours shone fiercely in her mind’s eye as she meticulously crossed, neatened, tightened. Pink, yellow, blue, white, pink, yellow, blue, white, over and over and over again.

Sandry glanced up when she got to the end of the thread. Her eyes were getting tired from squinting and focusing.

The battery was at ... Sandry glanced across at her phone, which was long dead. Of course it was - she’d been working for a good long while now. Sandry turned her head very, very slowly back around.

Her light source for some time had been her own craftwork: it was glowing. Not brightly, and not in the glow-in-the-dark toy kind of way either. Each thread radiated its own colour with an artificial sickness; their light, like smartphone screens, barely lit up more than five centimetres outwards.

Sandry reached out to touch the shining braid lightly with her finger. She frowned, her mouth tight and eyebrows drawn together. Had she gone mad so easily, so quickly? How long had it been since her screen went dead? Sandry didn’t think she was hallucinating…

Delusional or not, Sandry still desperately needed to go to the toilet, however disgusting the idea was. She did her business in a dark corner and hurried back, trying not to think about when the room was going to start to smell.

When Sandry sat back down to her work the light looked fainter. Without hesitation she picked up the next collection of threads in line.
Over the next little while Sandry found that the work always faded if she left it alone too long. So once she had braided all of her bunches she simply went back, untied the ones that had fallen into shadow and set to re-braiding them. It may have been Sandry’s imagination but they did seem to shine brighter the second time around … and even brighter the third. By then her eyelids were drooping and her throat was so dry she was afraid to swallow for fear something would rip.

There was only so long an exhausted eleven-year-old girl could stay awake and working. Sandry didn’t remember falling asleep and for a moment upon waking didn’t remember why her world was pitch-black. The second her mind caught up with recent events she threw her hands out desperately to find her bits of thread and get the light going again.

Once she had her hands on some unwoven threads she set straight to work. She concentrated hard and worked neatly but no light appeared to break the cold, absolute darkness. Maybe it had never been real in the first place. How had Sandry ever believed she had been creating light from bits and pieces of thread? It was ridiculous! Just her foolish hope, thinking things would be okay because they always had been before.

She sat there in the dark, whimpering over thread and feeling like the silly little girl she had never wanted to be.

Sandy stumped to her feet. She didn’t have to become that silly little girl, however hopeless things got. She didn’t have to give up unless she wanted to. She hurried towards the door but bounced off a shelf - her radar was way off. So then she moved more slowly, feeling her way in the dark until she found the light switch right by the door. The power might have come back on while she was asleep. It was definitely possible.

She flipped the switch and the room stayed dark. Sandry closed her eyes and tried to think of something else she could do before she became too weak to move. It was either give up, or keep trying. Simple as that.

Sandy thought furiously, trying to come up with some kind of plan, something she could do … but then she was distracted by a tapping noise … was that … could Sandy hear footsteps? It had been so long since she’d heard anything at all…

“Pirisi,” she whispered. The name caught in her throat and she had to clench her throat violently to hold back a cough.

“This way,” somebody commanded nearby. Sandry heard it mostly as an echo, probably as a dream. It sounded a little like her father, perhaps. Or there were people right outside her door. Was she imagining things again?

“Move it, hurry up!” the voice snapped. “Yes, you two!”

There was a loud scrape and then a crash. Sandry froze in place.

The door swung away from her as she stood there. There was light now, and a gun. A stocky brown-skinned man in uniform and helmet. He pushed past her. Then another man, tall and thin with dark hair tied back in a long ponytail. He stepped into the room. He wasn’t wearing a uniform. He looked down at Sandry and bent at the knees to crouch before her and offer her his hand. “You are safe, now.” he said. Sandry looked into his deep-set black eyes and started sobbing.

Daja woke up slowly. She was lying face-down on a curved metal surface that was faintly warm from the sun. She was aching fiercely from head to toe and there was an odd ringing in her ears.
When she lifted a hand to flick a stray braid behind her ear a sharp pain dug into her shoulder.

She remembered falling, and praying. She didn’t remember landing on this huge piece of debris, suspended in mid-air where she lay metres from another fall.

It took a few minutes for Daja to wriggle her way to the edge of the metal (it felt like aluminium, perhaps). It swayed under her as she moved so after each small effort she let it settle by taking a rest. She would not be taking even the smallest risk when her survival this far was already wildly improbable. She would not waste the good fortune she’d been granted.

When Daja reached the edge of her gently swaying metal she set her chin down onto her hands and looked out across the mountains. It was a beautiful sight, but Daja had never really been one to be captivated by the beauty of nature. She looked straight down only once, just to see what would have happened to her if she’d kept falling. The mountain was steep and rocky, with patches of green here and there that would do nothing to protect a girl plummeting downwards.

That was more than enough of that kind of thinking. Daja took her time again and rolled to look upwards, to see how on earth she was still alive.

Her metal sheet was narrower than she expected. the shape it was bent into reminded Daja of a fishhook, or a treble clef. It was caught somewhere on the mountain, somehow, jutting outwards and was curled around not to impale Daja but to collect her … to protect her?

“Thank you,” Daja whispered. She lay both palms flat against the metal, her arms straight by her sides. “Now hold steady for me, please.”

The sun was low in the sky. Daja suspected it got mighty cold up here in the nighttime. She might have survived the plane crash only to die of exposure on the very same night.

Maybe it would be less painful to leap out into the air and get it over with, but if Daja was the last living Kisubo (please God, don’t let it be true) she was going to bring honour to her family history, not shame. And if any of her family had survived, heaven and earth wouldn’t stop Daja from rejoining them.

If only she could get back onto land, she might be able to find a little nook or a hollow to shelter in for the night. There would be rescue crews after a crash, but Daja didn’t know how many, where they would look or how thoroughly they would be searching. If she was hiding from the elements, would the helicopters just pass her by?

Daja rolled over again and raised herself slowly to her knees. “Hold steady,” she repeated. She shuffled carefully to where the sheet of metal rose upwards towards the mountainside. She held her left elbow in close to her side hoping her shoulder wouldn’t hurt too much that she wouldn’t be able to climb on it, or catch hold of something to prevent a deadly fall. If it came to that.

There was maybe five metres of thin air between Daja and the mountain face. There were scrub trees growing on the mountain and little ledges here and there that she might be able to rest on while searching for a safe spot for the night. They were just as exposed to the open air as her curved piece of debris, but at least they resembled solid ground a little more closely.

It was the five metres distance that was the problem. Jumping off the side hoping to die was one thing, but jumping off and hoping to land safely and live? That was a lot harder. Daja didn’t know if she had the strength in her right now.

Was whatever kept the metal sheet clinging onto the mountain sturdy enough for Daja to swing off
it? That would give her more momentum to make the distance. She had already seen what would become of the two of them if it came loose and they fell.

Daja decided she could do it. She had to do it if she didn’t want to be stuck up here all night.

It wasn’t easy to get a grip on the edge of the metal and even harder to lower herself down into the empty air trusting that neither hand would slip. She started to swing from side to side gently, ignoring the stabbing pain in her left shoulder and continuing her mantra *hold steady hold steady hold steady*. It was just like the monkeybars. Yes, just exactly the same. Daja beat Uneny at monkeybar kickboxing every time.

She was going to have to let go soon whether she felt ready to make the distance or not. Something gave way above Daja when she was still swinging away from the mountain for what she’d decided was the last time. “No!” she snapped. The metal steadied again and she took two more swings. *Let me reach it,* she thought. *You protected me from the fall, now finish the job and get me to safety.*

Daja curved her body as far up as it would go on the backswing; she was going to fly at the mountain with all the momentum she could muster. A split second before she let go the metal bucked and snapped back towards the mountain. She flew out faster than she was expecting and couldn’t turn her body quickly enough to avoid slamming into a tree trunk right on her bad side. She gave the tree the bear hug to rule all bear hugs, accepting and absorbing the pain in her shoulder and arm. Her feet dangled into nothingness.

When she felt the strength leaving her arms Daja *heaved* herself up with a final effort that left her muscles straining and shoulder screaming. She scrambled for footing and found it. Daja stared at her metal sheet, which had bent itself again so it was now a warped Z shape.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m sorry that your plane went all to pieces.”

Then she heard the helicopter. Daja stood on the side of the mountain and waved her right arm weakly above her head. She felt so small and so tired that she wouldn’t be surprised if the helicopter missed her altogether. It had such a huge area to scan. Daja didn’t know if it was funny or tragic that they would be able to see her much more easily if she was back up on her perch.

But the helicopter wasn’t doing a scan. It made a beeline to Daja’s sheet of metal and hovered. She could see people moving around up there waving their own arms.

Giddy with relief, Daja watched a figure get lowered from the helicopter on a cable. They hung in the air as the helicopter was manoeuvred over to Daja bit by bit. When they were close enough Daja could see that her rescuer was a stocky woman with short brown hair and muscular arms. Daja couldn’t hear her very well over the sound of the helicopter but it was easy enough to follow the woman’s gestures and get the two of them strapped together securely.

Up in the helicopter there was a middle-aged white man in blue jeans and a white shirt who leaned out to help pull the two of them in. Daja accepted his help and the water he handed her, drinking it slowly so as not to get sick. Once Daja was unstrapped from the woman, the man helped strap her into a seat.

“How did you know?” Daja’s rescuer shouted over the helicopters rotors. “How the hell did you know?”

The white man shook his head and helped Daja’s rescuer with her own gear. Then he turned back to Daja. “My name is Niko,” he said. “I’m very glad to have found you.”
Daja craned her neck to get one last look at her twisted metallic saviour as the helicopter rose and bore her away.

Roach slouched down in the shitty plastic chair and waited. The woman sitting next to him was supposed to be on his side but she yammered on exactly like the rest of them and honestly Roach couldn’t be bothered trying to tell any of them apart. The room smelled like fish and old eggs and the computer on the desk was a useless old pile of crap.

They’d nabbed him still inside the house and Roach had the bruises to show for it. The cut on his temple had only stopped bleeding when he’d taken off his shirt to hold against it. He had it cleaned up and hidden by the time all these interchangeable white people had turned up to babble at each other and fuss over him. Blood didn’t show up that well in hair as thick and black and long as his.

He could kill Slug right now for getting him into this mess. Both cars are gone, well whoop-di-doo, you fucking genius, try counting how many people in them next time. What a useless piece of shit. Roach just hoped his “mate” had gotten away without being seen so he wouldn’t get the chance to fuck up Roach’s day any more than he already had.

The whole being arrested thing was all incredibly boring and wasn’t going to get better any time soon because they couldn’t find Roach in a single one of their computer systems. They started off asking for a home address and parents’ names and got even more bamboozled from there. “Roach” wasn’t the answer they were looking for when they asked for his name. Too bad for them - Roach couldn’t help what he was called. It hadn’t been his call. He watched their faces fall when he told them he lived nowhere, had no family, no nothing.

The good thing about it was that if he could make a quick getaway, they’d have nothing to go on to find him again. But there was a million people in this damn building, half of them in this room alone. There wouldn’t be an easy escape so Roach would have to stay cool and wait until he had even a half-chance.

Another knock on the door, another face peering in. How many people were on Roach’s case anyway? Wasn’t this maybe a tiny bit of overkill?

This new goonbag waved everyone out of the room except Roach and his minder. Then he stood aside for another white guy to come in. He was old with a fucking awful moustache and ponytail but at least he wasn’t in a suit or a uniform like everyone else in this damn place. And he had a tray of food with him: burger, chips, apple, drink.

The man walked into the room and set the tray on the desk. Fine by Roach. He grabbed it and set to. Roach’s minder got up and wandered off to the window.

“My name’s Niko,” the old guy said. “I hear yours is Roach.”

“People get the names they get,” Roach mumbled through his mouthful. “Who cares?”

Niko settled into the seat that the minder had been sitting in. He had black eyes and a piercing stare. In the fifteen seconds he’d been in the room he’d already paid closer attention to Roach than any of the drones had. Roach wasn’t keen on that kind of scrutiny.

“I’m not interested in your exploits today,” Niko said. “That’s nothing to do with me, frankly. It’s my job to think about where you’ll go next.”

What did he want, a medal? You didn’t have to be a cop to be the enemy.
“I was thinking, have you ever lived in the countryside?”

Roach slurped his drink loudly through the straw.

“I’m not much of a fan of country living myself, to be honest,” the man continued. “There’s not much to look at unless you’re an afficionado of our native and imported flora and fauna.”

Roach stared at the man beside him, grey-green eyes contemptuous.

“Plants and animals,” Niko clarified. “I must admit, I do seek out artwork and photography of rural areas. Artists can capture all the beauty of the wilderness and save me from venturing into the forests or farmland myself. I can appreciate the majesty of the alpine wilderness without having to deal with snow. Ingenious, no?”

Roach scowled. This was just about the most self-satisfied, incomprehensible gabble he’d ever heard. He’d sooner have the uniforms back than keep listening to bleating nonsense like this. “Is there any more food?”

“In a moment,” Niko’s voice was a bit more serious now. Whatever the game had been, looked like it was over. “We need to arrange guardianship for you, as well as a safe place to stay.”

“In the country.”

Niko nodded. “In the country.”

“Like … living in the bush.” Roach licked his salty fingers and tried to imagine what that would be like. How big would the trees be, out where they didn’t have to get chopped up for power lines? Was the outback just one massive Botanical Gardens? Roach had spent the night in there one time and it had been some of the soundest sleep he ever got. “That’s a stupid idea. I don’t know how to do that.”

“No, I’m not talking about living off the land. The powers that be take their responsibilities towards vulnerable children a little more seriously than that.”

Responsibilities? Roach snorted. Opportunities, more like.

“I think you’d do better away from the city and its vices,” said Niko. Roach raised his eyebrows doubtfully. Niko smiled a tiny smile and he let his gaze drift to the window, where Roach’s minder was pretending very hard that she wasn’t listening to any of it. Niko lowered his voice. “Just think, if you move to the country you’ll have a whole new set of vices to master.”

Roach didn’t care. If they sent him somewhere okay maybe he’d stay a bit, take a bit of a holiday. See if Niko was just talking bullshit about the majesty of the alpine wilderness. But if it sucked he’d be gone quick as blinking. He’d be back in the city with all his mates where he belonged and he’d hunt down Slug and kick his arse just like he deserved.

“Yeah, whatever,” the boy said. “Can I get another burger?”

Tris sat hunched over in her chair reading a ratty old paperback they had in the waiting room collection. Her two bags were set neatly by the chair, people came and went and looked happy or sad and cried and had their lives changed and it was all frightfully tedious. Her book was possibly even more boring - an old British children’s adventure story - but at least it didn’t require Tris to care.
Last night was the third time someone had made an attempt to exorcise Tris. The three girls had tried it in the dead of night using scented candles, freshly boiled water and some kind of fake gibberish Latin. They had probably googled “exorcism” and gone with the first result. It hadn’t been scary like that time with the priest and the lightning but Tris could still feel the humiliation of it in every fibre of her being.

But of course Tris was the one who was in trouble and had to leave, not Hannah, Dani or Ayesha. Tris had trashed her room and scared the girls. They’d apparently done nothing wrong.

Tris’s caseworker Wendy was a fat old lady with bad teeth, a curly black wig and swollen ankles. She called Tris “poor dear” and “sweet little thing” constantly; Tris avoided her whenever she could. She was the one person who’d stayed associated with Tris for any length of time but there was something Tris just didn’t like about her. She was running late today, probably some crisis with her dog, or her nephew, or her terrible, terrible driving.

A small dark-haired child ran up to Tris and poked her knee. Tris stared at it, not knowing what to do. “Go away,” she said.

The child stared at her expectantly for a few seconds, then its eyes lost focus and it wandered off again. Tris returned to reading her book.

“Trisana Chandler,” someone called out after about half an hour. Tris glanced up to see a young woman poking her head out of a door and scanning the waiting room. “Trisana Chandler?”

Tris got up and carried her things over. “Wendy’s running a little late, Tris,” the woman said. “We do have another caseworker here who’s available to sit in with you until she arrives. Is that alright with you?”

“Fine,” said Tris.

“He’ll be here shortly. I’m just popping out for a moment. Come on in, take a seat. Would you like something to drink?”

Tris shook her head. She left her bags just inside the door and sat in the horrible plastic chair that was left for her. She took her book out again and continued reading. The farm dog was about to give birth to puppies, and all the children were tremendously excited about it. No doubt it would be very emotional and all the children would learn a lesson about the joy and fragility of life. Tris was definitely in for sappy nonsense of some kind.

“Excuse me – Trisana?”

Tris glanced up at the doorway and immediately narrowed her eyes suspiciously. The man who’d spoken was not the kind of person she expected to see in a place like this. He was tall and lean, his long black hair was going grey, he had thick eyebrows and a heavy moustache. He was wearing corduroy trousers and a button-up shirt and he looked about sixty years old. Tris thought perhaps she should be calling the police.

“My name is Niko,” he said, stepping into the room and leaving the door open behind him. “Is this seat taken?”

He was pointing at the chair behind the desk.

“You’re not wearing a nametag,” Tris commented warily.

Niko glanced down at his own chest. “No,” he agreed.
“I don’t think you should be in here with me. There are regulations.”

“Quite right,” Niko said. He reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet. “Would you like to see my identification?”

Tris hunched over in her seat. “Go away.”

Niko didn’t move for a moment, then nodded and put his wallet away again. “My apologies,” he said. He stepped out of the room and out of Tris’s sight. She scowled down at her book, which wasn’t getting any more interesting the longer she put off reading it. Tris was hungry and thirsty and tired and so, so sick of being in this stupid place.

The woman from before – Sally, according to her nametag – came back and held out a cup of water to Tris. “I said no,” she said. “I’m not thirsty.”

Sally nodded and sat down at her computer. “I’m sure he won’t be a moment,” she said to Tris.

Tris caught whispers on the breeze. She looked at her open book, but didn’t pay any attention to the words.

The first voice was Niko’s, light and male and educated. Mrs Croft?

Wendy answered him, sounding stressed and out of breath. Yes, sorry, I’m running very late. What’s this about?

My name is Dr Niklaren Goldeye. I’m involved in Trisana Chandler’s case.

Oh my goodness! Is she alright? I didn’t hear anything about —

No, no, I’m not a medical doctor. Trisana is fine.

Good lord, you nearly gave me a heart attack! Oh, what a day!

I know of a home I think will be suitable for Trisana and I’ve arranged to sit in on your meeting, if that’s acceptable to you.

Why yes, of course! The poor dear has such trouble with these things, I really think she’s treated very unfairly. Certainly, please, come along...

Tris hurriedly flipped a page when the voices were so close she could hear them the usual way. Yes, as she’d expected, the dog was giving birth and the girls were crying and one of them had fainted. The boys were pale and manfully solemn. Tris didn’t look up when Niko and Wendy walked into the room together. If there was a new home for her, Tris had no option but to go where they said. It’s not like she was spoiled for choice.

“I’m so sorry to be this late, dear,” Wendy said to Tris. “I had car trouble; I had to get the bus.”

Niko followed her in. Tris could feel his eyes on her. She placed her book gently on the desk and stood up to face him. “I’ll see your identification now,” she demanded. Niko handed her his wallet, open to his photo ID.

“What are you a doctor of?” Tris asked, giving it back.

“Theoretical physics.” Tris’s grey eyes widened in surprise and Niko smiled. What an earth was a theoretical physician doing messing around in the foster care system? Was it anything to do with Tris, and the things that happened around her? Did he want to study her for his next paper?
“So you’ve got a proposal, Dr Goldeye?” Wendy said.

Tris sat back down and listened carefully.
Moving

It was the longest car ride of Tris’s life. The day was sunny, much warmer than usual even for late spring and the air conditioning in Niko’s car was broken. Tris was coping by rolling her window down all the way and leaning her head right next to it. This had the added benefit of drowning out most of the babbling coming from the other girl in the car with her.

The girl’s name was Sandry and she was everything Tris wasn’t. She was small and cute, with light brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a pleated navy blue skirt and a white blouse. She was the kind of girl who everyone just automatically liked, so it was no wonder that she assumed she and Tris were immediately the best of pals and up for three solid hours of meaningless conversation trapped in this car together.

Tris had lived all over Melbourne; she’d never been outside of it before. The countryside was a wide expanse of brown and green dotted with sheep and horses and trees. It was all the same, kilometre after kilometre after kilometre. There were towns to drive through and drive past but they all looked identical to Tris’s eyes. The heat draped over everything like a blanket. Tris felt a pang of homesickness for her home city, full of people she despised but also a place where the vagaries of the weather stood in a kind of solidarity with Tris’s own temperament.

At least Tris would have something to look forward to when she inevitably had to pack up and leave this new place. Maybe the sting of rejection and the long, miserable trip back through all this empty space wouldn’t be so bad when her home city was on the end of it. Tris closed her eyes and tried to pretend that the air coming in through her window was real wind driven by the strength of the sun instead of still hot air disturbed by high-speed traffic.

Tris woke from her doze when the wind on her face dropped from gale force to strong breeze. She opened her eyes to see that they’d left the highway and were driving through a built-up area - it looked almost like a real city. There were no skyscrapers or anything, but it was definitely bigger than anywhere else they’d gone through.

“Is this it?” Sandry asked. “Are we here?”

Niko glanced at them in the rear-view mirror and made a left turn off the main road. “Not quite. This is Wangaratta; we’re going through here and about ten minutes out the other side. How are you both doing back there?”

“Good thanks,” Sandry said dutifully. “It’s nice to be able to hear again.” Tris noticed the other girl’s sidelong glance and pointedly ignored it.

“Tris?” Niko said.

“Fine.”

Niko turned right. They drove through suburbia for a while, which was a bit of a shock to the system after such a long time on the highway. It was like they were right back where they’d started. Tris watched the houses fly by, with their fences and trees and front lawns and all the hidden ugliness inside. Then, just like Niko had said, they were out the other side of the town and back to driving past fields. But up ahead it looked wilder, with hills and thick trees and much less in the way of farmland.

Sandry was asking “Is that it?” about every house she saw, and every turn-off from the road they
were on. Tris shared the sentiment but had the manners to keep her mouth shut. Apparently Niko
had some manners of his own, too: he didn’t snap at Sandry even after the twentieth time, just
murmured “no” and kept driving.

Finally Niko said, “Yes, this is it.” He turned right into a wide dirt road, which Tris soon realised
was actually a very long driveway. Sandry was looking out of Tris’s open window, blue eyes wide
and excited. She caught Tris’s eye and grinned. Tris glowered at her unwarranted enthusiasm and
turned her head to look at her new home, for the time being.

It was a two-storey house made of red bricks with a grey tiled roof. The driveway continued along
the right side of the house; the lawn out the front was smooth and green. There were little bushes
and trees scattered around all the way up to the house and flowerbeds under the big windows on
either side of the front door.

“It’s pretty!” Sandry exclaimed. “Tris, look!”

Tris was already looking. She’d spotted a boy in the front garden, hunkered down in a flowerbed
by the left front window. “Who’s that?” Tris demanded. Nobody had told her there would be boys
living here. Hopefully he was some kind of intruder and would soon be sent on his way.

“You’ll meet him soon enough,” said Niko. Tris huffed and scowled at the back of Niko’s head.
This place was going to be every bit as awful as she’d expected.

The boy in the garden reminded Sandry of far away places she’d been. The streets and public
places had been filled with boys and girls who looked just like him. He was brown-skinned and
scrawny and his dark hair was cut so close to his head he was nearly bald. He wore only shorts and
a white singlet - no shoes and no hat, even in this sun. Sandry tsked at him under her breath.

When their car was nearly up to the house the boy startled and looked quickly over his shoulder
before vanishing around to the left. Niko stopped the car around to the right of the house, where the
driveway curled around a little add-on to the house made of weatherboard and with a tin roof.
Further along out the back Sandry could see two more cars: one old white ute and a dusty grey
four-wheel drive.

Niko turned around in his seat to look at the two girls. “Ready to go in?”

Sandy undid her seatbelt and got out of the car with nervous excitement. Niko had said she would
like it here and Sandry just knew she was going to. They all closed their car doors at the exact
same time, making Sandry giggle. “Would you like some help carrying in our things?” she asked
Niko.

“No, no.” Niko waved his hand to beckon Tris, who was already halfway around to the boot.
“We’ll go in first. Come along, we’ll go in the front.”

It was wonderful being outside again in the warm sun and fresh air. It was very kind of Niko to
drive Sandry and Tris all the way out here, but Sandry would have preferred it if he had a more
modern car with better air conditioning. Sandry let out some of her pent-up energy by running to
the front porch. She skipped up the wooden steps and peered eagerly in through the screen door.

The house had a staircase to the second storey right in the foyer, a little to the right as you went in.
Straight ahead the opening corridor went on past a lot of doors before broadening into a bigger
room. There was a scattering of shoes and boots on the left of the staircase, as well as a coatrack
and a little bit of wood with sets of keys hanging from hooks.
It was exciting to think that this would soon become familiar and everyday to Sandry. She couldn’t wait to see more.

“Don’t just stand there, ring the doorbell,” Tris said irritably from behind her. The red-haired girl had been grumpy for the whole trip up here, barely speaking to Sandry unless she had to. Sandry understood that - she didn’t much like travelling either. Tris would feel better once they were settled in.

Sandry turned around to see Tris standing just at the top of the steps, with Niko behind her. He looked like a big old sheepdog, ushering the reluctant girl up through the gate. “There isn’t a bell,” Sandry explained to her new housemate. “Or I’d ring it.”

Niko squeezed past Tris, reached over Sandry’s head and knocked on the glass beside the door. “Hello!” he called out.

A tall woman with golden-brown skin and curly black hair came quickly into view from Sandry’s right, smiling widely. “Tris, Sandry, welcome!” she said. She was wearing a v-necked yellow cotton top and white cotton shorts without a speck of dust on them. She had beautiful dark eyes and she moved very gracefully, like a dancer.

Sandry stepped quickly back so the woman could open the door, accidentally jolting Niko back into Tris as she did. Sandry turned around to apologise but Tris was already staring daggers at her so Sandry whipped her head quickly back around to avoid a confrontation.

“This is Lark, girls,” Niko said. “Lark, I’d like you to meet Trisana Chandler and Sandrilene fa Toren.”

“It’s lovely to meet you both,” said Lark with a truly welcoming smile. “Come in, please.”

Sandry beamed, practically dancing over the threshold and into her new home.

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This house is so big it must be a nightmare to keep clean, Tris thought as she followed Lark past the stairs on her right, three doors on her left and out into what looked like the living room. There were drafts running all through this house, from windows and doors left wide open. Looking up, she couldn’t see any cobwebs in ceiling corners, which was a relief. There was nothing worse than living in places where people were too lazy to clean properly.

In the living room there was a lot of empty floorspace, the only pieces of furniture being a large brown couch, two armchairs, an enormous wooden table and a television in the far corner. Almost the entire back wall was taken up by full-length windows so Tris had a perfect view not of a small, contained backyard but a back garden that looked like it went on all the way to the horizon. Tris just hoped she wouldn’t be roped into doing any gardening - she hated dirt. It was all closed doors along the left side of the living room; on the right was a little breakfast room, which was connected to the kitchen on one side and the back door on the other.

“Briar! Daja!” Lark called out. Sandry was standing confidently beside Niko with her hands clasped neatly in front of her. Tris hung back awkwardly. She hated the meeting-people part of getting a new foster home. Hated hated hated it.

The same brown-skinned boy she’d seen before padded in from the kitchen suspiciously quickly. He had an Asian-looking face but a thin, normal nose; his eyes were greenish grey instead of being brown like she’d expected. Just above his left eyebrow there was a scabbed-over cut surrounded by a pale old bruise. Tris didn’t like the look of him at all. He looked Tris and Sandry up and down
and wrinkled his nose, even though he was the one with the dirty feet.

“They’re living here now too?” the boy asked nobody in particular. He spoke very quickly and without putting any effort into articulating his words.

“Sandry, Tris, this is Briar,” said Lark.

The boy – Briar – scowled and scuffed a bare foot against the floor. He ran a hand over his severe buzz cut. “More girls…”

A tall black girl with a round face and neat short braids wandered in the same way Tris and the others had come - maybe she’d been upstairs? “Oh good, more girls,” she said with a lilting accent and a wry grin. She was wearing above-the-knee denim shorts, a dark red t-shirt and a red headband to match. Her skin was dark, but not quite as dark as some of the African migrants Tris had seen in the western suburbs. She didn’t sound much like they did either. If anything, she sounded Scottish, or Irish. Tris usually couldn’t tell the difference and it annoyed her no end.

Lark looked between Briar and Daja with a small smile. “And this is–”

“Daja!” exclaimed Sandry.

The black girl started and stared at Sandry in surprise. “Pardon?”

“I remember, you were in my grade when I went to school here last year,” said Sandry, getting excited. “You were new at the same time as me!”

“Oh,” said Daja. “Yeah, you had the funny name.”

Sandry’s face fell a bit. Tris giggled. Daja smiled across at her, but Tris looked away before their eyes could meet.

“Well, great,” said Briar with heavy sarcasm. He turned on his heel but was held up by Lark’s voice.

“Briar, Daja, can you please help Sandry and Tris carry their bags in from the car?”

“I’ve got to make a phone call,” Niko said quickly. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Lark watched him go with fond exasperation. “He’ll be back the moment all the moving is done,” she said. “That man is allergic to hard work.”

“I only have two bags,” Tris announced. “I don’t need any help with them.” She didn’t want anyone touching her things, especially not the rude barefoot boy who for some reason lived in this place. Boys like him were nothing but trouble.

“We’ve got one room upstairs, and one downstairs,” said Lark. “Girls, any preference?”

“Upstairs,” Tris said immediately. She hurried out to Niko’s car. He’d opened the boot and was standing a little distance off with his phone to his ear, shaking his head. Tris grabbed her bags out of the boot and hauled them around to the front door.

She passed Daja and Sandry on their way to the car but the boy didn’t seem to be coming with them. That was no big surprise. But then Tris nearly had a head-on collision with him right at the front door; he was slouching out to “help” at the same moment Tris was barrelling through at high speed so she could set her bags down and rest her arms as soon as possible.
They glared at each other. Neither would stand aside. Tris shoved her heavier bag right at him so he had to either take it from her or step out of her way.

Briar pulled a face at her and took the bag from her hand. “I’ll show you the room,” he said. He lugged the bag awkwardly at his side briefly and then slung it over his shoulder instead. Tris followed him, watching as he struggled his way up the steps under its weight.

“You got bricks in here, or what?” he said once they were up the landing and he could dump the bag on the floor.

“None of your business,” Tris told her. “Which room is mine?”

Briar picked the bag up again in both hands and shook it speculatively, his skinny arms straining. “Gold bars?” he guessed. “Box wine?”

“Stop that!” Tris snapped. She tried to snatch it back from him but he turned his back to her and kept shaking it, walking in short steps to one of the three closed doors you could see from the top of the stairs.

Briar dropped Tris’s bag with a thump outside the second door on the right. “Here.”

“Careful!” Tris cried, even though all she had in there were books. “What is the matter with you?”

Briar showed all his teeth in a combative grin. “Ain’t house-trained,” he said. “See ya.” He bounded down the stairs, leaving Tris standing outside her new room with everything she owned at her feet.

Again.

Daja was a lot bigger and stronger than Sandry and seemed willing to carry most of Sandry’s heavier things. Since Tris didn’t come back out to help them and Briar never showed his face at all, it took them four trips into the foyer with all Sandry’s bags and bits and pieces. Once everything was piled up inside the doorway Daja shook out her arms and rolled her shoulders back and forth carefully. Sandry couldn’t remember much about this girl – she met so many people and knew them for such a short time that sometimes it was hard to remember what detail applied to what person.

Daja pointed at the doorway right beside the stairs at the right of the house, where Lark had been when Niko had knocked on the door. “This is the free room. Your room.”

Sandry picked her way through bags and boxes to push the door open. Inside her new room there was a simple bed with white sheets and a blue bedspread, a faded old wooden wardrobe and a table and chair pushed up next to the window. The window took up almost all of the front wall, like the windows in the family room. There was an open door on Sandry’s left – peeking through it Sandry could see the laundry room to the right and a closed door straight ahead that Sandry guessed opened up into the kitchen.

“They weren’t expecting you this soon,” Daja said from the doorway to Sandry’s room. “Lark’s been fixing up some curtains for the window, and they’re going to put a lock on that other door to save you from people taking shortcuts through here.”

Sandry turned away from the door and jumped up to sit cross-legged on her bed. “So what’s it like here?” she asked.
“Oh, I only came a couple of days ago,” Daja replied. “So far it’s been quiet, but maybe not for much longer.”

“Why not?”

Daja’s lips parted in a teasing smile. “I do remember you from that school. Quiet isn’t the word I’d use.”

There was something very quiet about Daja, certainly. She spoke very evenly in her soft Irish accent and all her movements were careful and deliberate. She was still standing in the doorway of Sandry’s new room and it didn’t look like she’d be moving from there without an invitation. Perhaps she didn’t want to keep hanging around Sandry but was too polite to get out of the conversation. Sandry knew that Tris would be long gone by now if she were in Daja’s place.

Sandry hopped off her bed and went to pick up the backpack she’d had with her in Niko’s car. Daja moved out of her way then followed Sandry back into her room with the smaller girl’s craft kit in one hand and the handle to one of the wheelie bags in the other. “Thanks so much for helping me with all this,” Sandry said. “I feel like I’ve brought too much, but sometimes I get so attached to things, and I just can’t bear to not have them with me!”

Daja nodded. “It’s hard, moving.”

Sandry dropped her backpack on the floor and sat back up on the bed, kicking her feet back and forth idly. Daja, after a moment’s pause, pulled out the chair from the table and sat on it, facing Sandry at a slight angle. Her red shirt and the beads in her braids shone brightly in the sunlight. She looked pretty in this light, and very sad.

“I used to travel a lot with my mum and dad,” Sandry volunteered, her voice hardly shaking at all. “I should be good at packing and moving, but I’ve never quite got the hang of it.”

“This is only my second time.” Daja’s eyes and her voice were equally distant. “When I met you we had just arrived here. From Ireland, you know. We left things behind in that move. And now there’s this.”

Sandry slid down off the bed again and walked across to Daja. Daja glanced up at her and got to her feet just in time for Sandry to throw her arms around Daja’s middle. Daja returned the hug slowly at first and then squeezed the other girl tight.

It had been a long time since Sandry had had a real hug – was it one of her parents? Pirisi? – and she was still reluctant to let go even when Daja’s grip loosened and she raised her head off Sandry’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” said Daja. “We’ll be okay.”

Sandry let her arms fall to her sides. Scrubbing away tears only ever made her eyes even more red and puffy – she’d stopped doing it a long time ago. “Let’s be friends here,” she said. “Let’s be best friends.”

Daja blinked away her own tears and looked right into Sandry’s eyes for the very first time. Hers were large and dark and very serious. “Okay, sure.”

Sandry smiled and they hugged quickly one more time before getting back to Sandry’s piles of possessions.
Roach danced his way around bags and boxes at the bottom of the stairs and slipped out the front door again. He had to get out of the house before anyone could nab him and force him to help them with something.

He’d forgotten that Niko was standing out the front, doing the exact same thing as he was. And not only that, Daja and Sandry were unloading even more stuff from the boot of the car. It was not an escape route. Roach did a quick about-face and was just going to hole up in his room for a bit instead when Lark stuck her head out from down the kitchen corridor and called out to him.

“Briar, will you please go and find Rosethorn and bring her in for lunch?”

Well, fuck. From what Roach had seen Rosethorn spent every second of her free time outside in her garden. She was actually in love with it. If Roach tried to “bring” her anywhere else she’d probably bite his head off … or worse.

“Make sure you wear your hat, please. And something on your feet.”

Roach shoved his feet into a pair of old runners by the door – he didn’t know whose they were and he didn’t care. If anyone got upset about it, it was Lark’s damn fault for making him wear shoes in the first place. The hat idea was dead in the water. Roach wouldn’t be caught dead wearing a bloody boater, like the private school boys in their ties and blazers and white socks and shiny black shoes. He had his pride.

To avoid Niko, Lark and the girls Roach had to go through what was going to be Sandry’s room to get to the laundry and out the side of the house. He breathed in deeply as the screen door swung closed behind him. Something was different about the air out here compared to back home. Roach just couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

Roach walked around Lark’s workshop, past the car port and the lawn, out to where the vegetable garden started. In this garden Rosethorn kept all the good dirt in boxes with planks of wood, like every group of plants had its own sandpit to live in. Some of them were big, strong plants growing on stakes or all over wooden grids, some of them were just little green leaves and grass bursting up from the soil all on their own.

There wasn’t time to puzzle out why everything was set up as it was, unless Roach wanted to get in trouble for not fetching Rosethorn. Reasoning that it would be easier to avoid stepping on anything important this way, he stepped out of his borrowed shoes and walked through to the knee-high stone wall dividing this bit from Roach’s favourite part of the gardens.

Roach had spent a lot of times in gardens and parks. None of those were anything like this. Most of the dirt here was pale and slightly red-coloured, not like the dark brown kind in the sandpit boxes. There were a couple of trees, sure, but the space was mostly left free for little shrubs and long grass, and so many flowers of all different shapes and colours. There were fuzzy yellow flowers, round pink ones, bright red and pure white. Their joy at living so freely amongst each other under the sun was so powerful Roach felt it right down to his bones. It would be a good life, he thought. Sun yourself for a day, go to sleep at night. Rinse and repeat until you return to the earth.

He knelt in the reddish dirt to look at a tiny little plant growing by his right foot. It had dark green leaves and pink flowers that were shaped like pinecones but with soft, fuzzy petals growing out of the sides instead. There were bigger versions of this plant scattered all through the garden – this
one was just a baby with dreams of bigger things.

When Rosethorn spoke from right nearby Roach just about jumped out of his skin.

“So,” she said. Rosethorn was a short, solid white woman with a strong jaw and dark brown eyes. Today she was wearing long pants all covered in dust and dirt, a light long-sleeved shirt and a floppy straw hat over her dark red hair. “Here you are.”

Roach licked his lips and avoided her eyes. She’d never said specifically what would happen if Roach or Daja went mucking around in the garden but she’d given them a fair idea. Roach stayed kneeling; that way he could start up at a sprint if he had to. “I was looking for you,” he said. “Lark said to.”

From the corner of his eye Roach saw her stroll closer, then stop. He glanced up and saw she was frowning at his legs.

Roach followed her gaze and saw that thin brown stalks and flat green leaves had wrapped themselves loosely around his calves and feet. Every so often there was a white flower or a thick green bulb. Roach’s guess was that the flowers grew out of the bulbs, but he had no way to know for sure. The plant around his legs stretched out along the ground to where it was twined around a purple-flowered bush a couple of metres away. Roach could have sworn it hadn’t been so close to him when he’d first knelt down.

He’d be paying for this one. Dead set. And he couldn’t make a run for it without hurting one of Rosethorn’s plants. His heart pounded. Always getting tangled up in green things, that was him. What kind of a numbskull kept on doing the same stupid shit like this? Utterly slap-brained.

“Come on, let’s go in,” Rosethorn said. “You’ve found me.”

Roach tried to ease the tendrils away from his legs without letting Rosethorn out of his sight. Instead of slipping off and onto the ground, they reached out to his fingers eagerly. Roach jerked his hand back and tried wiggling his legs to shake them off instead.

“Alright, that’s enough of that.” Rosethorn walked right up to Roach. He didn’t move a muscle as she knelt by his side and eased the thing gently off him. Soon enough the plant was back laying flat on the ground and Roach’s legs were free.

Rosethorn didn’t seem like she was angry, but Roach knew better than to trust in that. It didn’t mean anything except that he shouldn’t let down his guard. When Rosethorn got back to her feet Roach took the opportunity to jump up and back away from her, out of arm’s reach.

“Did Lark send you out here with no hat and shoes?” Rosethorn asked, one eyebrow lifting up to the brim of her hat.

“Forgot about a hat.”

Rosethorn pursed her lip and beckoned him closer with one finger. “Come here.”

Even if she hit him, he’d live. Roach had copped a beating or two in his time. He unlocked his knees and stepped a little closer, clenching his jaw and staring vaguely at the dirt smeared across Rosethorn’s right cheek.

Rosethorn reached one hand out to grab his chin. Roach stopped himself from flinching, mostly. She tilted his head upwards a little and stared right into his eyes, brown eyes serious. Roach didn’t know what she was seeing, and he didn’t think he wanted to. After a moment she let him go and
stepped back.

Just as Roach was breathing again and swallowing away his nerves Rosethorn took her straw hat off and dropped it on top of his head. It slid down over his eyes straight away - it was too big for him, especially since they’d shorn all his hair off for their bullshit “health reasons” before he’d come here.

“Wear a hat next time,” Rosethorn said. Rosethorn set off towards the house as Roach tilted the hat back so he could see again. He paused a moment then traileled after her.

When Daja and Sandry had finished setting the table Lark asked Sandry to help her carry the food out, and Daja to go up and tell Tris it was time for lunch. Daja made her way slowly up the stairs, to the floor that had been all her own until this morning. She knocked softly on the closed door of the spare room.

“Tris?”

There was no answer. Daja knocked harder, irrationally angry that she had to do this. She’d never asked for a new family; she’d barely been paying attention when Niko had arranged for her to come here. She wasn’t ready for a pretend new family and she hated how much it hurt to hammer on a complete stranger’s door to get them to come out for a family meal. Daja didn’t know any of these people. Why should she have to run around after them?

The door yanked open under Daja’s fist. Tris, a good head shorter than Daja, glared up at her from behind her small round glasses. “What do you want?” she snapped.

“It’s lunchtime,” Daja told her. “They want us downstairs.”

“Did they ask you to break down my door?”

“Yes, they asked me to break down your door.”

Tris huffed and stared at Daja sourly. “There’s no need to be sarcastic.”

Daja shrugged and turned away from her. There’d been no need to ask the stupid question in the first place, but Daja wasn’t going to say anything about it. There was no winning arguments with these kinds of people.

Niko came in the front door as Daja and Tris reached the bottom of the stairs. “Tris, can I have a quick word?” he asked.

Daja dragged herself through to the family room. Sandry and Lark were sitting at the table talking and smiling. Briar and Rosethorn came in through the kitchen a moment later. Briar was frowning and scratching his scalp; Rosethorn exchanged a subtle look with Lark and then sat opposite her at the table. Briar was hovering awkwardly; Daja went around to take the chair on Sandry’s side of the table so he didn’t have to choose a side himself. There were three chairs set out along the empty side of the table; Briar walked casually over to sit on Rosethorn’s end and directly opposite Daja.

“Is Tris coming?” Lark asked Daja.

“She’s just talking to Niko.”

When Tris and Niko made it to the table Tris hurried forwards to take the empty seat one away from Briar. Niko squeezed in between the two of them and then they were all seven of them around
a table really only big enough for six. Laid out on the table were salads, sausages, sliced meat, buttered bread, pieces of fruit. Daja had never been less hungry in her life, far from home and surrounded by strangers.

Sandry was chatting brightly to Niko about the livestock they’d seen on their drive here, of all things. Niko didn’t look interested, but he was listening. Lark was trying to draw Tris out in conversation but the red-haired girl was barely contributing syllables. Right across from Daja, Briar was scoffing food down at world-record pace with occasional pauses to take in the state of play around the table. Rosethorn was eating quietly and watching all of them, but especially Briar. Daja wasn’t sure if the boy noticed how often Rosethorn glanced his way.

Daja ate slowly, barely tasting the food. Recently time had been escaping Daja without her notice. Yesterday afternoon three hours had passed that she barely remembered. It was like being on standby; there was just nothing to do here and nobody to talk to. If she went outside, everything was quiet and still and empty. She wasn’t going to school. All there was to do was think, but thinking about the past made Daja’s heart hurt and she couldn’t bear to think about her future.

There were a million reasons Daja couldn’t go back home to live with her uncle or her grandparents: Mum and Dad had completely incinerated that bridge before the move. Uneny had been Daja’s best friend for all the time they’d been in Australia - she hadn’t needed anybody else. Now he was gone and Daja was cast adrift.

Daja’s thoughts were cut off by the sudden appearance of a platter of sausages right under her nose.

“Would you mind, please?” Rosethorn asked pointedly. She nodded meaningfully towards Lark.

Daja grabbed the plate in both hands and passed it down to Sandry, who passed it on to Lark.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“These are really good sausages,” Sandry commented.

Daja wouldn’t know. They’d never had sausages at home. Dad had always said that if he wanted to eat offal, he’d order in from Scotland. They’d gotten all their meat from Jamil, who wasn’t the closest butcher to home, but Mum and Dad both swore he was the best. Uneny and Daja had heard the mantra countless times: support Black business, support Black business, support Black business. They’d always joked that Mum and Dad would move heaven and earth to make sure those words would be engraved on their headstones for the benefit of all the future generations of Kisubos.

“Where did you get the sausages?” she asked Lark, who’d taken one sausage and passed the platter on to Tris.

“From Ellen’s butcher, in Wangaratta,” Lark said. “All the meat is grass-fed, and as environmentally responsible as is possible these days.”

“The meat’s grass fed?” Briar asked, halfway through a mouthful of egg. He scowled down at his plate when everybody looked at him. He didn’t usually have much to say at the table.

“The animals are grass-fed,” Lark explained. “A lot of animals are fattened with corn and soy before being killed. I prefer to not buy that kind of meat.” She passed the platter to Niko, who put it back down up Rosethorn’s end of the table where it had come from. Briar reached out and grabbed the last three sausages all at once, dumping them on the bits of torn bread and meat he still had left on his plate.
“That’s rude,” said Sandry indignantly. “What if someone wanted one of those?”

Briar stared at her insolently and took a bite out of one of them. “Then I’d say they’re shit outta luck.”

“And they wouldn’t be the only one,” Rosethorn said sternly. “You’ll be helping with clean-up here, young man, as soon as we’re done.”

“We’ve talked about this, Briar,” added Lark. “You need to watch your language at the table.”

Briar bit down whatever he wanted to say and stuck to scoffing down the sausages and shooting dirty looks at Sandry. Daja realised she was smiling and the moment immediately lost its joy. Briar and Sandry weren’t brother and sister, and they definitely weren’t Uneny and Daja. Everyone kept eating quietly except for Niko and Rosethorn, who were already finished. Daja forced herself to finish the sliced tomato and cucumber left on her plate.

Sandry broke the silence, pointedly asking, “Would anyone like this last bit of ham?”

“Yeah,” Briar said instantly. “I would.”

Sandry paused a moment, brow furrowed in thought, then nodded. “We’ll go halves.”

“He’s still got ham on his plate,” complained Tris. “He doesn’t need any more.”

“She didn’t say does anyone need this last bit of ham,” said Briar, watching Sandry cut the slice of ham in half. “What’s it to you?”

“I don’t like living with savages,” Tris said, her face turning bright red.

“I don’t like living with prissy whiny girls,” Briar retorted. He grabbed half of the ham and dumped it on his plate defiantly. “And I was here first, so you can–”

“That is enough,” said Rosethorn. Her voice was quiet but the table went completely still. Everyone waited, watching Rosethorn, but she didn’t seem to have anything more to say. Daja sipped at her water and wished she could turn back time.
Moved In

Chapter Notes

hello everyone, sorry this has taken so long to update but I got struck down with a bad case of perfectionism and got a bit blocked. it's going better now, so enjoy!

“I think everything will be cleaned up faster if we all help,” Sandry announced as soon as Briar’s plate was empty. She ignored the skeptical looks from Rosethorn and Daja and the sour ones from Briar and Tris. Sometimes making friends was hard work and Sandry was used to not having much encouragement. It had never stopped her before and it wouldn’t stop her now.

“Knock yourself out,” Briar drawled. He hauled himself up to his feet, took the pile of plates that Niko had gathered together and balanced them on his palm. Then he grabbed his, Niko’s and Rosethorn’s empty glasses from the top, all in his other hand. Sandry watched him saunter carelessly into the kitchen. She held her breath, waiting for a crash.

When Briar came back empty-handed out of the kitchen without having broken anything Sandry looked at him with disbelief and a little bit of envy. She definitely would have caused a disaster if she’d tried that. Then she remembered that it was rude to stare, and that she’d been the one to offer to help with the clearing up. Tris was already scraping bits of food off of crockery and salvaging anything that could be kept as leftovers. Daja had gone into the kitchen after Briar. Sandry quickly picked up some of the big plates from the middle of the table and carried them in to Daja, who was loading the dishwasher up.

Sandy had to concentrate hard to keep up with all the others in the cleanup. Daja and Tris were far better at this than Sandry was - Tris in particular was like a machine. Briar bustled around busily, but Sandry suspected that all he was doing was getting in people’s way and very quickly getting out of it again.

Before Sandry knew it, the dining table and the kitchen were clear and clean. Taking the opportunity to finally look around and breathe, Sandry belatedly realised that none of the adults were anywhere to be seen.

Tris handed her a teatowel to wipe her hands. “They’re out the front of the house, talking about us.”

“Whatever, I’m outta here,” said Briar. “I’ll catch youse later.”

“No, wait!” said Sandry. “Shouldn’t we get to know each other a bit better? We’re living together!”

“No,” Tris and Briar said at the exact same time. Neither one acknowledged that it had happened.

“But—”

“I’m not interested in hanging around with a bunch of girls,” Briar said flatly. He turned on his heel and walked out the back door.

“I’m going to unpack.” Tris headed towards the stairs.
Sandry sighed and watched them go. “I suppose I’ll unpack as well,” she said to Daja.

“I’ll see you later, then,” Daja said before Sandry could invite the other girl to join her.

The two of them walked together down the corridor. When Daja turned to head up the stairs Sandry continued on to her room.

There was so much for Sandry to unpack. She hadn’t wanted to leave anything of hers behind when she moved, but she didn’t want to go through it all now either. She already felt lonely most of the time, she was sick and tired of it, and she knew that unpacking would make her feel worse.

Sandry hadn’t done anything except try to be friendly to her new housemates but they seemed determined not to like her. It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair. She thought she’d made friends with Daja but the other girl was still acting the same as she was before they had hugged. Sandry was trying to be patient but it was just so hard to always be good.

With a little huff Sandry walked out of her room and back to the kitchen to get herself a glass of water. She drank slowly and calmly. She was going to stop feeling sorry for herself and think of a plan to make friends with Briar and Tris. She’d work on the plan while she unpacked.

Sandry marched back towards her room full of purpose. The door to Lark’s workroom, which had been ajar when she’d passed it before, was half-open. Sandry’s feet drew her towards it, half-empty glass in hand. She wasn’t usually a girl who pried in other people’s business, but Niko had told Sandry a little bit about what Lark did, and surely it wasn’t wrong to just stand in front of an open doorway.

The sight took Sandry’s breath away.

Two small windows on the right wall, covered with sheer fabric, let light and a gentle breeze into the room. The walls were pale yellow and the floor was made of smooth lacquered wood. The left wall was completely taken up with deep shelving packed full of clear plastic boxes holding all kinds of fabrics, in every colour Sandry could imagine.

The long wooden table in the middle of the room was crowded with baskets and boxes and all kinds of craft equipment and projects. Behind the table there was an empty loom sitting on the floor, and two hanging ones. One of them had some partially-completed weaving that fascinated Sandry: she’d seen pictures of looms before but she hadn’t the faintest idea how they were meant to be used.

Sitting nearby there were two spinning wheels: one larger and shaped like Sleeping Beauty’s and the other not even up to Sandry’s waist. On the smaller one, the wheel was located completely inside the wooden frame.

“Come in, if you like,” Lark said from close behind Sandry. The girl jumped guiltily and stepped out of the doorway. Then her mind caught up with what Lark had actually said and she looked up at her with a hopeful smile. Lark nodded. “Go ahead, find yourself a seat.”

Sandry walked straight in and hopped up onto one of the stools at the table. Lark brought over another stool to sit beside her. She turned to face Sandry and asked, “How are you doing?”

Having someone who was talking to Sandry of her own accord was such a relief that the girl’s thoughts flew out of her mouth like they’d been waiting for hours. “I don’t think any of them like me.”

“You’ve been here for three hours,” Lark said gently. She clasped Sandry’s hand lightly in hers. “It
will take some time to settle in, for all of you.”

Sandry nodded. *Patience. Of course.* “Do you do all this? The stuff in here? It’s all so lovely.”

Lark smiled. She had such warm brown eyes. “Yes, this is my little hideaway.”

“It’s wonderful.” Sandry sighed happily.

“I’m very glad you like it. You’re always welcome to join me in here, when you have some time to spare.”

“I know how to do some things, like knitting, and I’ve done some embroidery before. I’ve never done any weaving; it looks so pretty. I haven’t had a chance to learn very much but I’m always practising. I can show you some photos of things I’ve made, all my best ones I’ve given away, sometimes I keep the ones that can’t be presents because of mistakes, I still love them but people might think it’s an insult to get a messed-up pattern or something that doesn’t quite fight right, so I keep them so I can remember making them.” Sandry abruptly realised she was babbling and fell silent.

Lark shuffled through one of the plastic containers on the table and held up a small wooden object. “Do you know what this is?”

Still a bit embarrassed, Sandry nodded and answered quietly. “It’s a spindle.”

“Have you used one before?”

“I’ve only seen youtube videos. Do you spin?”

Lark didn’t mind the silly question. “I do … would you like to try?”

Sandry squeaked with excitement. “Yes!”

Sandry had watched so many how-to-spin videos on youtube that she could easily explain the technique to Lark. She knew the names of everything and she knew exactly how every step in the process went.

And now she was going to get to do it herself! Sandry took the leader that Lark gave her and tied it securely onto the spindle. The unspun wool that Lark offered her clung on to her hands whenever she tried to handle it.

“Stop it!” Sandry whispered under her breath. “Behave!”

Sandry was nervous and her mind was always three steps ahead of her hands. It didn’t help that her hands, which weren’t naturally well co-ordinated at the best of times, were struggling to get the spindle turning without also making everything sway out of her control.

Lark put a hand on Sandry’s shoulder and suggested that Sandry could slow down and they could start from the beginning. Sandry shook her head - she didn’t want to offend Lark, but she felt so close to getting it, to finding a rhythm. This is something she knew she would be able to do, she just had to get the knack of it.

Lark shifted her stool around to face Sandry. She didn’t make Sandry stop or scold her for not listening; she picked up some work of her own and offered Sandry quiet suggestions from time to time. Sandry tried to take the advice on board but she was increasingly caught up in the feeling that the yarn she was supposed to be working with felt like it was working against her, unspinning itself
against her will over and over again. It was all coming unspun and the solution was just out of Sandry’s reach.

As far as Roach was concerned when the sun was this high in the sky it was either time to go on the prowl, or it was time for a nap. Lark and Rosethorn frowned on his habit of nodding off when the sun was up but it was deliciously warm out here and there was no-one here to nab him or stomp him.

He had just found a shady spot under a tree with thick, spreading branches where no-one would find him and was settling down when Rosethorn showed up right in front of him. She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head to size him up.

“Got nothing to do, boy?”

Rosethorn was always asking him questions there was no good answer to. She took some kind of sick joy in it.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Roach shrugged. “I just finished clearing up in the kitchen.”

“All by yourself, I’m sure.”

“Well …”

She crooked her finger at Roach. “Up you get. Follow me.”

The seventh time her work came undone and clattered to the floor Sandry gathered it all up and set the spindle down in her lap with a sigh. It was hard to admit defeat, but spinning had gotten the best of Sandry for the time being. She watched Lark for a moment - she had everything under control. It always looked easy when someone else did it.

“Don’t mind so much about the end product,” Lark said for about the tenth time, winding up her latest stretch of yarn. “Focus on what you’re physically doing with your hands in the moment. When you’re spinning well the result looks after itself.”

“Patience,” Sandry murmured. Everything she’d learned had taken time, but she always struggled to find patience. Lark seemed to have an endless supply of it.

“Patience, and calm,” Lark said. “There’s no need to fret about mistakes - you can always try again. Try not to think of the future, or the past. Simply be where you are. Sometimes you can even forget where you are.”

“Patience,” Sandry repeated under her breath. It always came back to patience.

Lark set aside her own work and got to her feet. “Here,” she said. “Let’s start over. I’ll show you…”

Tris didn’t usually unpack her things. Anything she needed before she changed homes she took straight out of her bag and if she didn’t need it out any more she repacked it. So she left her two bags on the floor just inside the door and pushed the table under the window. She took off her shoes and climbed up to sit cross-legged on the table and get a look at the view.
The window was just to the left of the add-on they had at the right of the house. If Tris wasn’t fat and clumsy she might be able to climb out of the window onto that roof and then use the tree next to it to get down to ground level. She’d probably end up paralysed if she tried.

She could see all the way out to the road from her window to her right, and to the left was farmland as far as the eye could see. Straight ahead there was a line of trees and through it Tris could see another house, quite a distance away. The mountains she’d seen from the road must be in the opposite direction.

It was hard not to feel trapped.

There was a knock on the door. If it was that Daja girl Tris would not be answering it again. Let her knock the whole thing down, see how willing these people were to kick people out for property damage.

“Trisana?”

That was Niko. Tris frowned. She didn’t know if she had to answer to him any more now she was here. Hadn’t custody been transferred to Lark, and Rosethorn? He’d said before lunch that she would need to work on her self-control and that the women here would help her. It had sounded like a polite farewell.

With a huff of expelled breath Tris slid off the table and bent down to put her shoes back on. When she opened the door Niko was standing a few steps away with his hands in his pockets, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling.

“It’s Tris,” Tris informed him.

Niko nodded his acknowledgement. “I thought we could get started,” he said.

“Started with what?”

Niko took a step back and indicated that Tris should lead him into the open space just past the room they’d put her in.

It was quite a large area, taking up about a quarter of the second storey. There was a widescreen TV on one wall, and some game consoles gathering dust underneath. A squishy blue mat took up a lot of the floor space and there were a few beanbags piled up in the corner. Niko bent down slowly to grab a corner of one green beanbag and tossed it over to Tris. She didn’t even bother trying to catch it.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as the beanbag sagged slowly against her leg.

“Take a seat, please.”

“Why?”

Niko straightened up with another beanbag in his hands and fixed her with a solemn black stare. “Can you not simply do as I ask?”

Tris plopped down into the beanbag. She felt ridiculous and couldn’t find a way to settle in comfortably. She watched with no small pleasure as Niko tried to arrange himself in a beanbag: his long, lanky limbs were no more suited to it than Tris’s short fat figure.

Niko smiled ruefully, his moustache twitching. “These aren’t ideal conditions, I know.”
“For what?”

His smile faded into something more pitying and personal. Tris looked away.

“For learning to meditate. As we spoke of earlier.”

Tris wriggled around in her beanbag. Niko had mentioned meditation, but Tris hadn’t taken him seriously … meditation … why didn’t he just say he had no idea how to fix her? They might as well try another exorcism for all that meditation was going to help.

“When you sit still, like you are, and think about nothing … what do you feel?”

Don’t mind so much about the end product, Lark said, her voice wafting up distantly from downstairs, Focus on what you’re physically doing with your hands in the moment.

Tris blinked. “Nothing.”

“Tris, please … can you not trust me enough to try this?”

Anger simmered somewhere just under the surface. Tris tried to think past it and answer the question she’d been asked. “Well normally I can feel the wind and I can tell whether or not it’s going to rain soon, and sometimes I can feel the ocean, if I’m close enough. But now you’ve brought me out here, I feel nothing. That’s the truth.”

“Alright.” Niko nodded. “We’re going to try and find those things out here.”

Tris scowled. This was not theoretical physics.

“Try,” Niko said. “Try this once. For my sake, and for yours. Close your eyes, and focus on only my voice. Breathe in, slowly…”

Daja lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. She hadn’t been in this house all that long and she’d never exactly liked it, but she already found herself missing the peace and quiet there’d been when it was just her and Briar. They’d left each other alone. Daja didn’t need two spoiled little girls coming in and running rampant all over the place.

There was no reason at all to like Tris but Daja knew she wasn’t being fair to Sandry. Sandry was nice, from what Daja remembered of her. She was a nice, cheerful girl who was kind to everybody and loved to share. Like most white people, she had a habit of considering other people’s business her own. She had very loud feelings; Daja kept hers quiet. The two of them were not the same however much Sandry assumed that they were.

Mum and Dad wouldn’t want Daja to be friends with any one of them. Sandry was the oblivious kind of white girl who would always cause trouble, Tris was spiteful and mean and probably racist, Briar was poor and uneducated and had no potential. They might like Lark, but Rosethorn was right out.

It was easy to know what Daja’s parents would think of her situation, but much harder to know what they thought she should be doing about it. Normally when Daja didn’t know the right thing to do she’d go to Uneny. Even when he couldn’t be bothered to listen to his little sister he’d still been there. Talking to Uneny helped Daja work out her own solutions to things. When he wasn’t really listening it meant Daja could be completely honest and there would be nobody to remember what she’d said and judge her for it.
The absolute non-negotiables were that Daja had to work hard and respect the people who provided for her. Beyond that she just didn’t know.

Roach had made a mistake starting his sweeping in the entryway. Once he’d cleared most of that dirt out the front door he had to sweep up the corridor and into the kitchen, which was away from the front door, which was where he’d been planning to escape out of if Rosethorn showed up again and looked like giving him more housecleaning jobs to do.

It was a pointless job anyway, like when older kids made you go down to the shop for something they didn’t even want. Rosethorn just wanted to show him who was boss. Roach hated that shit and he was getting mighty fed up with sweeping. He’d go straight up the corridor quick as he could, dump the dirt out the back door and go for a stroll, far far away from Rosethorn this time. That would be a job well done in his book.

Roach was heading back over the swept floor to make sure that hadn’t missed any bits when he noticed Daja sitting on the second-bottom stair watching him. She rested her elbows on her knees and her jaw in her hands.

“Working hard?” she asked.

“Harder than you.”

Daja flashed him a wide, sinister grin, but halfway through she seemed to lose the energy for it and her face settled back into its studied calm.

“Where am I supposed to sweep this dirt?” Roach asked her after a moment.

“There’s a dustpan in the cupboard with all the other cleaning stuff,” said Daja. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

“I know where that stuff is,” Roach told her, but he went along with her up the corridor anyway. Daja opened the cleaning cupboard, moved some stuff around and presented Roach with a little dustpan and brush. He grabbed it off her with a sigh. “This is bullshit, I never had to do any of this before you lot came.”

“What, afraid of a little housework are you?”

“You wanna go?” Roach puffed out his chest and brandished the brush. A bit of a tussle would do wonders for his mood.

Daja narrowed her eyes. It looked like she was considering it. She was bigger than Roach but no way she’d be quick enough to take him. “No I don’t think so,” she said. Then, with a small wicked smile, “Maybe when you’ve finished your chores.”

Roach rolled his eyes. “Bullshit,” he groused.

After dinner that evening Niko made his farewells and drove off back to Melbourne. Sandry’s lip trembled a little as she watched the old car vanish down the highway. Tris couldn’t decipher Briar and Daja’s guarded expressions so she busied herself sneering at Sandry. She didn’t want to think about how oddly hollow she felt at seeing Niko leave.

“Let’s go into the family room and have a little meeting,” said Lark. “We’ll all have some adjustments to make so we’ll need to discuss some things. I know you’re all tired, it’s been a long
Briar sat cross-legged on the floor with his back to the wall just by the kitchen. He looked bored and sleepy, nothing new there. Tris sat at the edge of the couch; Daja and Sandry shared it with her, with Sandry in the middle. Rosethorn and Lark each sat in one of the armchairs. Tris couldn’t be bothered with any of it: she already knew every welcoming speech and every arbitrary rule a household could ever impose on a foster child.

“We only have a few simple rules, staying here,” said Lark. “First and foremost, one of us is to know where you are at all times. You’ll have freedom to roam, but not without permission. Secondly, there is no place at all for aggressive, hurtful or violent behaviour under this roof. We can all respect each other, and we can all get along. Not perfectly, perhaps—” here she glanced sidelong at Rosethorn, “—but I want you to do your best.”

“Problems go to Lark,” Rosethorn added. “When I’m working in the garden, I’m not to be disturbed. If you have any questions - ask Lark. Settle your own problems when you can. I’m sure we’ll get along, in these circumstances. Any questions? No? Excellent.”

She got to her feet, nodded at the room in general and walked out the back.

“Well, then. There won’t be a lot of chores, but this is everyone’s home and it needs to be kept habitable. Daja, Tris, as you’re living upstairs I’m giving you the responsibility of keeping it tidy, as well as your own rooms. Everyone is responsible for his or her room. Sandry and Briar you’re not expected to cover the entire bottom floor, but there are some areas you’ll be looking after.”

“Grand,” muttered Briar. Then he yawned massively, which set off Tris and Sandry as well.

“Bedtime, I think,” said Lark with a smile. “I’ll see you all in the morning.”
The next morning was another fine and sunny one. Tris had seen as much while meditating with Niko the day before, but it was still a disappointment. Tris didn’t have much tolerance for summer and it looked like a long, hot, stuffy one was on its way.

After breakfast Lark, Sandry and Daja went to put curtains up in Sandry’s room and Rosethorn headed straight out into the garden. Tris didn’t see where Briar went - he had a knack for vanishing that made Tris nervous, and he moved so quietly that sometimes even her sharp ears missed his footsteps.

Left to her own devices Tris would normally find a quiet spot to read a book. The possibility of finding new books to read was one of the few things Tris had to look forward to at a new place and she hadn’t had a chance to go looking yet. It was the price you paid for having manners: unlike some, Tris wasn’t going to go nosing around in someone else’s house without their permission.

Instead, she decided to go upstairs and try to meditate again. It had been strangely relaxing yesterday, and if it worked as well again today then Tris would be able to tell if it was going to cool down, or rain later in the day. That way she might have something to look forward to.

Caught up in her own thoughts, Tris’s feet carried her along the landing to the same location as yesterday; she looked up to see Briar already there, curled up in a beanbag under the window. At first she thought he was asleep but his eyes were only half shut; he was doing something on a tablet, earbuds in and finger lightly flickering across the screen.

Tris hesitated, torn between telling him to find somewhere else to be and just going to her room to avoid contact with him completely.

It looked to Tris like he hadn’t noticed her, but after a moment he glanced up and said, “Bugger off, will you.”

“I’m not bothering you; I’m literally just standing here.”

“You’re bugging me. I found this spot days ago, find somewhere else to be.”

“I have just as much right to be here as you do. This place is right next to my room!”

“Whatsoever, just stop yapping at me.”

Tris marched to the beanbag furthest away from him and dropped into it defiantly. “You’re the one who started talking to me, why don’t you leave me alone?”

“Love to, cheers.”

Tris closed her eyes and did her utmost to forget the boy was in the room. She breathed in slowly, held the breath, then let it out as slowly as she could. Was that moisture she could feel on the air? She strained to touch it, lost the rhythm in her breathing and opened her eyes again to find that Briar was watching her.

Tris closed her eyes, rid him from her mind again and started over. When a voice - Sandry’s, perhaps - drifted over to her on the wind saying thank you so much, they’re lovely, Tris listened, breathed, and moved on.
“Are you awake?”

Tris ignored him. She felt like she was getting somewhere, like maybe this meditation idea wasn’t a lot of nonsense after all. She felt warm and comfy and nearly certain that there would be rain by the end of the day.

“What are you doing just sitting there?”

“I’m meditating,” Tris snapped, her eyes still firmly closed. “Stop bothering me.”

Briar snorted. “Meditating, right.”

Tris squinted at him. Why couldn’t he just stay silent and invisible? “What are you doing up here?”

“My income tax return.”

“If me sitting here not doing anything and not making any noise is so distracting to you, you could do ‘your income tax return’ anywhere.” If Tris was so vulgar as to make air quotes with her fingers, she would have in that moment. “Like in your own room.”

“Get lost, I was here first.”

Tris was going to reply but closed her mouth when she heard Sandry’s voice and two pairs of footsteps coming from the stairs. Briar glanced in that direction and then back at Tris. Silently they dropped the argument - the last thing either of them wanted was for Sandry to think there was any conversation going on that she could invite herself into.

“Oh, so this is where the two of you got to!” exclaimed Sandry as soon as she saw them. “We were looking for you; Lark said we’ll be going in to town tomorrow so if there’s anything you want to do in there to let her or Rosethorn know so they can plan for it.”

Library books, Tris thought immediately.

“Me and Daja already went the other day,” Briar said. “We don’t have to go again.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Daja. “It’s a waste of breath anyway; they said we were definitely all going in together.”

Briar scowled.

“Okay, thanks.” Tris closed her eyes again and ignored them.

“Ooh, does this work?” Sandry asked.

“It works, but the games are crap,” said Daja. “It’s all kids’ games.”

Sandry laughed. “And what are you, twenty-three?”

“I’ve got — I had a big brother, remember. I graduated from little kids games when he did.”

“This could be fun,” Sandry insisted. “There’s four of us! We could find a multiplayer game - Briar, Tris, come on!” Tris heard Briar get up out of his beanbag. “Tris?”

“I’m trying to meditate,” Tris snapped.

“Don’t bother,” Briar said to the girls. “She won’t listen.”
Anger spiked in Tris and something went ‘pop’ from across the room.

“Oh shit!” exclaimed Briar. “What was that?”

Tris opened her eyes and got to her feet. Briar, Sandry and Daja were crowded around the game console, which was smoking slightly. Tris was about to head off to her room when she noticed that Briar had left his tablet sitting on the beanbag.

“Turn it off at the wall,” Daja said to Briar. The boy leaned around the back of the tv to find the powerpoint.

Tris moved quickly across the room and picked up the tablet. She turned the screen on to find that Briar had been using a read & write app that looked like it was for little kids. He was eleven flashcards through a set of twenty and had been halfway through tracing the word “what” when he’d put it down.

It didn’t surprise Tris at all. Of course Briar could barely read or write. Tris had taught herself to read, but obviously most children weren’t anywhere near smart enough for that. And children in the foster system were especially hopeless.

Daja was fiddling with cables behind the television, with Sandry watching attentively. Briar glared at Tris, his face a thundercloud. Tris didn’t know what to say so she dropped the tablet, turned away from him and went back to her room.

Tris lay back on her bed with her door firmly closed. Briar was rude and annoying and completely disruptive. But on the other hand, he could barely read. It made Tris sick to try to imagine a world without books.

It was no wonder boys like Briar always turned out so horribly when that was the world they had to live in. Tris sighed and closed her eyes, breathing in.

The only consolation Roach took in his second ever visit to the doctor was that Rosethorn seemed to be enjoying it just about as much as he was. She listened stonefaced to the doctor reporting back on Roach’s blood test, watched every move the doctor made with eagle eyes and rolled her eyes whenever the doctor tried to baby him or talk down to her.

Roach would have loved to act cool like that but there wasn’t much that was spookier than a woman in rubber gloves standing between you and the door and trying to jab a syringe into your arm. If there was one thing Roach knew it was that needles were the devil. And he was a sitting duck in here.

The doctor patted him on the shoulder and told him not to worry and that he’d get a lollipop afterwards, like that was gonna make a difference. Roach’s arm clenched up every time the needle approached so eventually the doctor stopped trying to make him relax and just went ahead with it anyway.

When it was done Roach pocketed the lollipop and tried not to think about the sick feeling in his gut. The stinging in his arm was nothing next to that. He slouched out of the room after Rosethorn feeling tired and gross and leaned resentfully against the counter while they waited at reception. His new runners stood out, white and orange against the black and blue carpet.

He felt like he’d been branded. Roach knew how to be a houseguest; he could help out around the house, sleep in spare rooms and accept free food right up with the best of them.
This wasn’t like that. He wasn’t a guest; these people practically owned him and they could do whatever they wanted.

Fucking Slug, man.

Rosethorn got a text just as they were leaving. Roach hurried ahead of her to get outside so he could breathe a bit more freely. As soon as Rosethorn caught up to him she said, “The others are still at the library, so we’ll head right over.”

If they’d just give Roach like half an hour off the leash he could come up with a getaway plan and they’d have one less kid to bother with. He had no business getting stabbed with needles at the doctor, hanging out at a library, living in a house all full of civilised bloody girls.

Rosethorn leaned across from the driver’s seat to unlock the passenger door. Roach slid in next to her and slammed the door shut behind him. Rosethorn couldn’t tell him off for that one - it was a bung door and it had to be slammed or it wouldn’t shut properly.

“I’m all good with the doctor now, right?” he asked Rosethorn as she started up the ute. “I don’t have to go back there any more.”

“You’ll go when there’s a need to.” Roach opened his mouth but she didn’t give him a chance to speak. “There’s no argument to be had here, boy. Lark and I are not medical professionals, so when you need medical attention you will go to the doctor. End of story.”

“I didn’t need one today, or last time,” Roach argued. “I’m not sick.”

Rosethorn gave him a sidelong glance. “All the information on the paperwork we’re taking home suggests otherwise. It mightn’t mean much to you now, but it will down the track. People can spend their lives miserable, dealing with the repercussions of a difficult childhood that was beyond their control. That will not be happening to you.”

Funny, it was only just now that Roach’s life was running out of his control. He’d been managing just fine before and he was going to deal with adulthood when he got to it, if he ever did. “Yeah, but I’m not even sick.”

Her lips quirked in amusement as they pulled out of the car park. “You think it’s bad now - just wait until your dentist appointment comes around.”

Sandry and Daja waited together at the library bench while Lark went to fetch Tris. Rosethorn and Briar would be there in ten minutes or so, according to Lark. Sandry flipped idly through the graphic novel she was going to borrow and snuck a peek at Daja’s books. She tilted her head to read the spines: “Super Structures”, “Sleepers and Tracks”, “Spans and Supports” and “Engineer’s Illustrated Thesaurus”. Daja kept laying her hand on the pile of books, looking around and then standing back from them again.

Sandry was just going to ask Daja what was wrong when she saw Lark coming over, followed by Tris who was carrying an enormous tower of books out in front of her.

“They usually only let you borrow twelve,” Tris informed the two staring girls. Then she went right in front of them, dumped her stack of books and presented her new card to the librarian.

Sandry felt a bit silly coming after Tris and Daja with her one comic book but the librarian scanned it through quickly and smiled at her so she didn’t worry about it.
“I can carry some of those if you like,” Sandry offered Tris as they walked to the car. The redhead was leaning back slightly as she walked, so the stack of books settled precariously on her chest and between her arms - the top book was actually touching her nose.

Tris scowled and kept moving forwards. When Lark unlocked the car with the remote Sandry hurried forwards and opened the back door so Tris could put her books in straight away.

Rosethorn’s ute pulled up in the parking spot next to them as the three girls piled their books up in the back of Lark’s 4WD. Lark walked around to the driver’s side of the ute to talk to Rosethorn. Briar was slouched so slow in the front seat that Sandry could only see the very top of his head.

Lark came back around the ute. “Alright, I’ve got a quick errand to run a little out of town,” she said. “I’ll see you all for lunch.” Rosethorn got out of the ute and a second later Briar opened his door and slid out.

Rosethorn switched keys with Lark and then looked intently at each of the children. She wasn’t frightening, exactly, but Sandry much preferred it when she was looking at somebody else. “Get in, then, you lot.”

Sandy didn’t think she was imagining it that when Lark said, “Behave,” before she drove off, it was directed just as much to Rosethorn as the four of them.

Rosethorn drove them to what looked like a main road, parked, and led them all into the newsagent. “If you need something, I’ll consider buying it,” she said. “Otherwise, window shopping only. I want to be out of here in ten minutes.”

There was nothing Sandry needed from here so she wandered over to look at the magazines. Daja did as well, but she wasn’t looking through the style magazines like Sandry was; she was looking at cars. Racing cars, Sandry guessed, though honestly she didn’t have a clue.

Every once in a while Sandry saw something really exciting in a fashion magazine, but it was a rare thing. Magazines were very mainstream fashion - especially the ones sold in newsagents. Sandry really needed to catch up on all the blogs she usually read. Other than Lark’s laptop and the iPad Briar had been using Sandry hadn’t seen much in the way of computers in her new house. She didn’t want to seem ungrateful and ask about it though, not when she had her own phone she could go on. It was just that the screen wasn’t very big and it didn’t do most of the pictures justice.

There was nothing really in the magazines to catch Sandry’s interest. She walked back towards the front of the shop to see if Rosethorn needed any help with anything, but she couldn’t see her anywhere. Tris was there, looking through calendars with some exercise books and a packet of pencils in her hand.

Sandy checked the rest of the shop, but Rosethorn was nowhere to be seen.

“Excuse me,” a woman said loudly from the front counter. She looked pretty young, with thick freckles, a no-nonsense black ponytail and a suspicious frown. “Where do you think you’re going with that?”

Sandy hurried right up there to see Briar standing frozen at the front of the shop, caught between fight and flight with something silvery in his hand. Tris was watching indifferently.

“That’s my brother,” Sandry declared. “I asked him to find a nice keyring for me. Thanks, Briar.”

Tris snorted. “Brother?”
“Hand it over right now,” the woman demanded.

Briar glanced at Sandry and then at the shop person. He relaxed a little and wandered back in. “Yeah, if I was shoplifting I’d take something good.”

“He’s still inside the shop, so it’s not stealing,” Sandry said. “We can buy it. I’ll buy it.”

“Nah, it’s junk.” Briar tossed it onto the counter, where it landed with a quiet clunk.

Sandry took out her purse and went straight past her $10 and $20 notes, pulling out a $50 and handing it to the lady. “I’ll take it please.”

Briar rolled his eyes and wandered out of the shop. Daja went with him.

The keyring Briar had taken was round and grey and it had some kind of a fern pattern set in it, like a fossil in a rock. It was pretty enough, Sandry supposed.

Sandry watched very closely as the saleswoman counted out forty-seven dollars and five cents change, and made sure she counted it out herself before tucking it into her purse.

“Would you like a bag?” the woman asked through gritted teeth.

“Yes please, and a receipt too.” Sandry smiled sweetly at her, took the paper bag and marched out of the shop.

Daja and Briar were talking to Rosethorn out on the footpath. Their foster carer had her mobile in one hand and the other one in a fist on her hip and she did not look impressed with what she was hearing.

Sandry joined them and offered the bag to Briar. “Here.”

“I said I don’t want it, what a bloody waste of three bucks.”

“Then why were you carrying it around, if you didn’t want it?” Sandry argued. “That’s silly.”

“None of your—”

“Quiet,” ordered Rosethorn. “You three stay put out here. Do not cause any more trouble. Understand?”

Sandry was going to tell Rosethorn that they hadn’t been the ones causing trouble but a quick shake of the head from Daja shut her up.

As soon as Rosethorn went back into the newsagents Briar shoved his hands in his pockets and ambled across the street.

“She said stay put - do you understand English?” Daja called out to him.

Briar yelled back at her in a language Sandry didn’t know.

“That boy is no good,” Daja said, shaking her head. “He was stealing that keyring, you know - why on earth would you buy it for him?”

“He wasn’t stealing it,” said Sandry. “I know he wasn’t. Come on, we can’t just let him go off on his own.”
“You’re as bad as he is,” Daja complained.

“We’re in everyone’s way standing out here.”

Daja stared at her - not a single person had gone past since they’d been out here. Sandry happily ignored this fact and in the next gap in traffic she and Daja went after Briar.

The boy had sat down in the shade of a big tree across the road, lain back with his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. When Sandry reached him she dropped the bag with the keyring on his stomach and sat right next to him.

“I was just going to ask Rosethorn what it was,” Briar admitted. “Like, if it was real or what.”

“I didn’t get a good look at it, hand it over.”

Briar cracked one eye open to glare at her. “Get stuffed, you’ve got hands.”

Daja was still standing up and pacing a little. She looked at the three of them and then at the building next door. She hesitated. “I’ll be back in a moment,” she said.

The tree Briar had parked himself under was part of a line of trees that ran between a joinery and this metal shop. The metal shop was on the corner. It was a tall blue building with two roll-up garage doors - one was closed and the other one was two-thirds open. The driveway was paved but everything else out the front was light brown dirt or loose gravel.

Rosethorn had said to stay put and Daja knew it wasn’t responsible of her to leave the other two, especially when “I thought we should stay together” was the only excuse she had for leaving the newsagency in the first place.

But this was as close as she’d ever come to a place like this with nobody around who would drag her away. Daja could still see Sandry and Briar, so they could still see her and everything was perfectly safe.

A chain link fence ran around the building, with barbed wire all along the top. It was wide open across the driveway though, so Daja went closer, drawn in like the Pied Piper was playing in the open doorway. She passed a white ute with a shiny metal canopy, and a blue dumpster right by the door. The place smelled of hot metal and chemicals. Daja peered in through the doorway.

Sparks were flying up the back of the building, where a tall man in what looked like a Ned Kelly helmet was doing some welding. He was mostly surrounded by curtains; Daja could just catch a glimpse of him and his work. The rest of the building was very dimly lit in comparison to the brilliant light back there. Daja could make out shapes that looked like workbenches and a few unfamiliar machines. She longed to get a closer look.

The noise and light from the welding stopped. The welder flipped the mask and visor up off his face. Daja had been going to sidle away to avoid notice but she stopped in her tracks when she saw that the welder was a tall Black man with a thick, wiry beard. He was the only other Black person she’d seen in all her time in Wangaratta.

“Kirel!” the man bellowed. “Turn the lights back up!”

Daja glanced around - there was nobody else here.

“Argh, bugger,” the man grumbled. He pulled at one of his thick gloves, tugging it off.
Daja spotted what looked like light switches just a few steps away from her.

“Er, I could … if you like,” she said to him, pointing.

“Ah, thank you,” he said. His voice was deep and friendly. “Flick ‘em both, if you’d be so kind.”

Daja walked under the roller door and carefully turned both switches on. Two long, bright lights flickered on far overhead. Now Daja could see everything in here and all she wanted to do was look more closely. She wandered casually closer to a huge silvery cabinet whose front was lifted up and held up by lengths of steel. Had he made this? It had shelves inside but there was nothing on them.

From behind Daja a mobile phone started ringing shrilly. “Quick, chuck it over,” the man said. “That’ll be Marty.”

Daja grabbed the phone from where it sat next to an open netbook on a low table up the front of the building and ran it over to him. When she got there he had one glove off ready to answer the phone.

“G’day, Marty,” he said. He gave Daja a thumbs-up with his gloved hand and a nodded thank-you.

This close Daja could see that he had a wide mouth underneath his wild beard and a soft, smooth nose that was large at the bottom and perfectly flat up between his deep-set eyes. He was very tall but the heavy clothes and apron he was wearing made it difficult for Daja to know what his build was like. She guessed he’d have to be very strong to do this kind of work. Daja ran her fingers lightly over the pole he’d been welding, which was held in some kind of clamp and which had a ragged line of something - Daja tried to remember what she’d read about welding, and how it worked. It looked like he’d spread this stuff over the gap to join the bits together. Was it all made of the same material? Daja poked gently at it.

“That’s the slag,” the man said. Daja glanced up at him in surprise. He’d walked back over and was looking at her fingers on his work. Daja jerked her hand back, feeling her face heating up. She knew better than to go poking around in other people’s things. But the man just smiled at her. “I’m not trying to be rude,” he said. “That’s just what it’s called, God only knows why.”

Daja couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Well strike me for a ninny, I am being rude,” he said. “My name’s Frostpine, pleased to meet you.” He offered her his hand. Daja took it. His grip was strong and he shook her hand firmly.

“I’m Daja.”

“Well, Daja, do you have any particular business here in my magnificent metal emporium?” It wasn’t asked in a rude way. He’d looked like he was in a hurry to keep working before but now he was taking off his other glove and pushing all the curtains back from the work bench. He took the helmet all the way off and set it down - he was completely bald on top but the rest of his hair matched his beard for volume.

“No, I was just … curious.” Daja’s face was still burning hot. If her parents could see her now they’d be horrified. She’d be grounded for months, maybe years.

“Frostpine, I ran into Tim around the corner and he wants to know if you can come and look at his uncle’s tractor on Sunday arvo, he says it’s fucked. Oh …”

The white boy who’d just run into the building looked about sixteen or seventeen years old. He
was tall and he was built but still had a boy’s face under his floppy blond hair. His eyes were a clear blue and they were fixed on Daja in surprise.

“This is Kirel, my apprentice,” said Frostpine. “Kirel, I’d like you to meet Daja. She’s very interested in metalwork.”

Kirel glanced between the two of them. He looked like his mind was ticking over. “Very interested … like, very interested? Like…”

“So it would seem,” said Frostpine. “Daja, are your parents around? Do they know where you are?”

Daja’s tongue tied itself up briefly then she recovered. “My friends are just outside,” she said. “We’re going to get picked up soon.”

Frostpine nodded. “Kirel, do me a favour and finish up here,” he said. “Marty says he’s sent us an email about next week and he needs a reply ASAP, so I need to get on that.”

Daja ducked out of his way as he passed her. Her leg knocked into a heavy pipe that was lying on the ground. The metal felt odd against her calf. “Is this…”

Frostpine turned back to her. “Eh?”

“No, nothing.” Something about that pipe wasn’t like any other metal Daja had ever come across. It felt like it was humming - singing, almost, into her skin. Daja, unnerved, inched away from it.

“So, you’re English?” Kirel asked Daja.

Daja gave him a flat stare. “No. Irish.”

“Oh shit, whoops,” he said with a sheepish smile. “That’s, like, the worst possible mistake I could have made?”

“No, there’s worse,” Daja murmured. “Lots worse.”

“Kirel!” Frostpine shouted. “Today!”

Kirel winced, nodded briskly at Daja and hurried off behind the curtains. Frostpine looked comically huge sitting at the low little table with the mini laptop on it. He hadn’t told Daja to leave but he looked pretty busy.

Daja wanted to just slip out but instead she walked up to him, nervousness be damned. “Excuse me, Frostpine?”

“Mm?”

“Thanks very much for showing me your work. It was great.”

The big man turned around in his chair. “You gotta go, then?”

“Well…”

“Come back, if you like,” he said. “It’s nice to meet a youngun who shows interest in *real* work, for a change.” He winked conspiratorially at Daja, drawing a smile out of her. “Always welcome, kiddo.”
Daja walked out of the shop just about bursting with happiness. There was no weight on her shoulders for the first time in ages; she was walking on air.
Stepping out of Frospine’s workshop was like walking away from a dream and back into the real world. It would be very childish to fear that the big blue building and the man inside it would vanish if she didn’t turn back to see it; Daja didn’t entertain the notion for much longer than a second. Instead she set her shoulders square and headed over to where Sandry, Briar, Tris and Rosethorn were all gathered together and waiting for her.

Sandry and Briar were on their feet now, and from their body language Daja could tell that Rosethorn had already had words with them. Tris was standing a small distance away with a paper bag in her hand and a slightly smug expression on her face.

“So, Daja, when I said stay put, what exactly did you think I meant by it?”

Usually Rosethorn was cross with Briar; Daja wasn’t sure what to do now she was in his place. When Rosethorn was annoyed she asked impossible questions and then forced you to try and answer them. Daja had never been very quick with words.

“We thought we should all stay together,” Sandry said helpfully.

Rosethorn, hands on hips, transferred her glare from Daja to Sandry. Daja drew in a grateful breath.

“You did, did you?” Rosethorn’s voice was heavy with scorn. And fair enough, too – Daja was glad that Sandry had spoken up but it hadn’t been the most sensible thing to say, considering the circumstances. “And this was your best attempt?”

Sandry opened her mouth, got stuck and closed it again. She nudged Briar, who was staring at the sky with a long, seedy stalk of grass in his mouth. He might as well have been a statue for all the help he was willing to offer.

“For goodness’s sake, I wouldn’t have thought ‘stay together’ would be too difficult a concept for the four of you, but I see I’ll have to adjust my expectations. Do I need to speak more slowly?” She did so, her country accent broadening almost into parody. “Shall I make you repeat instructions back to me as we go, like you’re–”

Daja was looking down at her feet. She felt strange, being told off for something she’d done wrong but didn’t regret. She’d done something rash and she’d enjoyed it. It wasn’t like her. And that was what gave Daja the courage to interrupt, when ordinarily she’d never dare to.

“I’m sorry. It was me that walked off, I didn’t mean to be gone so long.”

Rosethorn looked ready to go off on Daja for interrupting her but instead she let up, saying simply, “Hm.”

“I’m sorry too,” Sandry said. “I just think that shop lady was really horrible, and we shouldn’t have stayed near the shop in case she accused us of doing something else.”

Rosethorn was still looking at Daja critically. “You enjoyed yourself, then?”

“Yes,” said Daja. “I was helping the man in there.” She pointed to Frospine’s shop and wondered if Kirel had finished his welding yet.

Rosethorn followed Daja’s gesture. Her eyes lingered briefly on the building before returning to
the children. Specifically, to Briar.

“Let’s see it, then.” She held out her hand. “The famous stolen keyring. The grand prize.”

Briar took the grass out of his mouth. “It’s Sandry’s, she’s got it.”

“We bought it,” Sandry said in frustration. “Nobody stole anything!”

Tris, who had been standing quietly enjoying all the rest of them getting told off, rolled her eyes at that, and they ended up on Daja. The two girls had a moment of shared exasperation at their high-drama housemates, then remembered they weren’t friends and looked away.

Daja had other things to think about anyway. As soon as they met up with Lark again she would ask when she could go back to visit Frostpine. She smiled just thinking of it.

They met Lark outside a café for lunch in spite of Briar’s repeated demands for Hungry Jack’s. Lark smiled and asked them all what kind of a time they’d had. Before anyone could answer an old lady who was walking by stopped and said, “Lark, my dear!” and started talking to her excitedly about sheep.

“Oh come on, I’m starving,” said Briar impatiently, but not so loudly that Lark or Rosethorn would hear him. “Let’s go in already.”

He strolled over to the door just as two older white kids, probably brother and sister, were coming along the footpath towards the café, jostling each other as they went. Their parents were a little bit behind them and not really watching their kids.

Daja, thinking about their last attempt to stay together, grabbed Sandry and Tris and headed after him. Tris shook herself free immediately and hurried ahead like it was completely her own idea. This set her on a collision course with the two other kids.

It seemed like the two of them expected Tris to slow down and let them through first, but she just didn’t. She barged on ahead in a straight line, knocking into one of them as she pushed through the doorway with her head held high.

Daja wasn’t far behind her. She grabbed the door before it closed all the way and pushed it open again for Sandry and all the grown-ups. So she was the only other one who heard it when the girl, inside the café now, called Tris a “stupid fat ranga waste of space” and her brother echoed it with “ranga pig”.

“That’s rich coming from a pair of pasty knock-kneed jellyfish chinless Rodney and Delilah motherfuckers like yourselves,” Briar snapped back almost before the two of them had finished their own insults.

Daja stared at him with wide eyes as everyone else came in past her. She barely heard the thank-you she got from Lark for holding the door. Unbelievably, it seemed like nobody else had heard what Briar said, and all the kids were herded away by their respective grown-ups as though nothing had happened. As she walked Tris was staring at Briar like he’d grown tentacles, but he seemed to have forgotten the incident as soon as it had happened.

“I want a burger,” he announced, claiming a seat. “They do burgers here?”

“Just look at the – ” Tris said, before cutting herself off abruptly.
“I’m sure they do,” Lark said.

Daja was hungry, for the first time in a while. It seemed like she’d forgotten to be alive these past weeks, and now her stomach was letting her know about it. A burger sounded like a very good idea.

When the food came Daja ate slowly even though she felt like scoffing hers down as quickly as Briar did his. She savoured it instead, enjoying the tricky task of eating a burger with her hands without half the fillings falling out as she ate.

“So how are you all finding this part of the world?” Lark asked after a while.

“It’s lovely,” Sandry enthused.

Briar snorted, licking his fingers. “I’ve slept in graveyards livelier than this dozy old glorified suburb.”

“You’ve what?”

The boy shrugged and filched a chip off Daja’s plate.

“We’ve got a real city mouse on our hands here,” Lark said with a grin. Rosethorn rolled her eyes and dumped most of her salad on Briar’s empty plate. The boy gave her an incredulous look, but since she completely ignored him, he gave up on it and ate a shred of carrot.

“It is quiet,” Daja said. “I’ve only ever lived in a big city before. Everything here is so wide open. There’s so much empty space.”

“Have you really slept in a graveyard?” Sandry asked Briar curiously.

“Of course he hasn’t, it’s a figure of speech,” Tris snapped.

Briar stuffed his mouth full of lettuce and made a face at Tris.

Daja honestly couldn’t be bothered with any more arguments today. “I met a man called Frostpine, in a metal shop,” she told Lark. “He said I could come back some time and look at his work if I liked. May I?”

Lark and Rosethorn exchanged a quick look. “I don’t see why not,” Lark said. “Frostpine lives up our way, we know him quite well.”

Daja smiled widely before feeling a sudden paralysing stab of guilt. She had been thinking she was finally free of her parents, that now things were different she could finally do as she liked. What kind of a daughter celebrated the death of her entire family? What had she been thinking?

She clenched her stomach and took a deep breath. She had to change the subject, she couldn’t keep on talking about this. “Do we have much else to do in town?”

That evening after an hour or so procrastinating in her room, Daja made up her mind and headed downstairs. She didn’t have Uneny to talk to any more, and she didn’t have her mother and father. Daja liked Sandry, for sure, but she would have her own problems – she didn’t need to be burdened with Daja’s.

The door to Lark’s workshop was ajar. Daja looked in and was relieved to see Lark in there on her own. The woman was sweeping the floor rhythmically, humming quietly to herself and throwing in
a dance step every once in a while. Daja hesitated with her hand raised to knock on the door. She tried to think of how a kind, cheerful woman like Lark had ended up living with the terror that was Rosethorn. Then she shook her head and knocked. It was none of her business.

Lark lifted her head and smiled when she saw Daja. “Please, come in.”

Daja stepped inside, careful not to mess up Lark’s cleaning. “May I talk with you for a moment?”

“Of course.” Lark rested the broom up against the table and sat down. Daja hesitated then sat on a stool opposite her. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m not sure if I’m doing the right thing.” Daja said, hardly even knowing what she was saying. “They wouldn’t like me doing this, meeting Frostpine and going into his shop and everything. I know they wouldn’t let me. But I really want to, I just feel … like … I’m so eager to let them down.”

“Your parents?” Lark asked.

Daja nodded. She had run out of words, used them all up in that first uncontrolled burst. Lark didn’t say or do anything, but instead of a nerve-wracking silence Daja felt it was a soothing one.

The seconds ticked by, and finally Daja was able to speak again. “I was so happy in there … I’ve always wanted to learn about it, but … I can’t be happy about them being dead … I just can’t … I don’t know what to do.”

Lark reached across and put her hand over both of Daja’s, which she’d been twisting together nervously. Lark’s hand was pale compared to Daja’s own dark skin, but still unmistakably golden-brown. She had long fingers, rougher than Daja expected but strong, and firm, and safe.

“Let me ask you something – would you have given up?”

It took Daja a moment to understand the question. She had too many thoughts, and not enough time to sort them all out. So she went with her instinctive answer and hoped it was the truth. “No.” She shook her head. “I wasn’t going to.”

Lark nodded. “It’s no disrespect to your parents, Daja, to follow your own dreams in life. No matter how much a parent loves a child, they will never quite understand what it is like to be that child. Yes?”

Daja nodded.

“I’m so sorry that you will never have the opportunity to change their minds, and to earn their respect for the choices that you make – but Daja, I absolutely believe that you would have done, given the chance.”

Daja realised she was crying, and in front of anyone else but Sandry she would be embarrassed about it. But not with Lark. With Lark, it would feel dishonest not to express her confusion and her devastation. “I wish I could,” she whispered through the tears. “I wish I could go back.”

Lark squeezed Daja’s hands very gently. “You can only live the life that’s in front of you, my dear. And that’s a hard thing to hear, and a much harder thing to learn. Some of us never quite manage it.” She had an odd half-smile on her face, a kind of wistful remembering.

Daja sniffed. Lark let go of her hands so she could wipe her face. “I can’t just forget them and move on.”
“Goodness, no,” said Lark. “I never meant to suggest something like that. But you don’t have to live the exact life your parents imagined for you to make them proud. I think some independence and determination would make them all the prouder.”

Daja wasn’t sure about that. Independence and disobedience were very nearly the same word in her family.

Lark went on. “I think your parents have raised you with very strong values,” she said. “You’re a kind, helpful, responsible girl and I think you’re doing extraordinarily well in a very difficult situation. I am proud of you, and I hope you can be proud of yourself.”

Daja appreciated everything Lark was saying to her, and felt there was some healing in the words, but still she felt it didn’t all ring true. Lark said that parents never quite knew what it was like to be their children – similarly Lark herself didn’t really know Daja. She wasn’t a Kisubo, she didn’t really understand.

Daja had never thought to hear herself sharing so much with this new family, but there was a sudden urge to make Lark understand, just a little better.

“My mum explained it to me once,” she said. “She tried to - I was young. She said that her job was to protect me and that the world was so dangerous, and … we all had to stick together, that all – well, all us Black folk had to look out for each other as nobody else could always be trusted to. And she said that, how many Black women do you see in charge on building sites, or running science labs. She said she couldn’t bear if I was stuck doing gruntwork, that I was better than that. She said she didn’t want me to suffer so much and never be appreciated for what I can do.”

She didn’t want to meet Lark’s eyes after that. It was a weight off her shoulders, but all the same – her own mother’s words said she shouldn’t be talking about things like that. If Lark got offended and turned against her, then where would she be?

“I’m not going to contradict your mum,” said Lark. “I’m not going to agree with her either. I don’t know. These will be your decisions, when the time comes.”

Daja held back a sigh. That was the problem. Now everything was her decision, and she never knew which was the right one to make.

One night just before bedtime someone tapped softly on Tris’s door. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed flipping through the atlas she’d taken from the main bookshelf, trying to find clues on maps that would explain what caused cyclones, and monsoons, and tornadoes. She knew about air pressure being different at different elevations, but there had to be more to it than that, or there’d be weird weather everywhere that had hills and mountains and none anywhere else.

The knock came again, louder. “Can I come in, please?”

Tris sighed and set aside the atlas. Sandry wasn’t the kind of girl who would give up and go away.

When Tris opened the door Sandry was standing in her red and yellow striped pyjamas with her hands behind her back. Tris’s heart started to patter – was this going to be the start of the cruel tricks and practical jokes from Sandry? Would Tris be on her way back to Melbourne on the train tomorrow morning?

She kept her face calm and blank as Sandry drew out her gift and handed it to Tris.

“I made this for you,” the girl said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I hope you like it.”
Tris took the wooden hoop gently in her hand. On the flat fabric inside was an embroidered blue
wren perching on a brown stick, with lovely textured feathers and extremely accurate colouring.
“What am I supposed to do with this?” Tris asked, still waiting for the punchline.

“I just wanted to make you something. So we can be friends.”

Tris laughed at her. “Excuse me, we met six days ago. And you’re already friends with Daja, so
forgive me if I don’t believe you want me for a friend as well. Don’t waste your breath.”

“I don’t see why you’re so offended over someone doing something nice for you,” Sandry
complained. “I don’t see why you can’t try to be nice.”

“Well, you wouldn’t, would you,” said Tris. “That’s the whole point.”

Sandry stared at her in bewilderment. “Fine. Be mean for no reason. I’ll see you tomorrow. Good
night.”

Tris closed the door firmly and carried her present over to her bed. Sandry had forgotten to ask for
it back, so as far as Tris was concerned it was hers to keep now, having been a gift and all.

Surely Sandry hadn’t made this herself. No girl her age had the skill or the patience for this kind of
work - she’d probably bought it. Tris was never going to forget the stunt Sandry had pulled back at
the newsagent, so everyone would know she had money. And now she was trying to buy Tris’s
goodwill. Why was she even here, when she could clearly afford not to be?

There was a small print of a creek and gum trees hanging on Tris’s wall; Tris lifted it off, set it
carefully down on the table and hung the embroidery up in its place. She could almost see the little
bird flicking its head around, hopping across footpaths and fluttering around in bushes. It was such
a beautiful blue.

Instead of going back down to her room Sandry walked across to Daja’s and knocked on the door.
If Daja was the only friend Sandry was allowed to have, then fine. Sandry would be the best friend
she ever had.

It was like Tris wanted to be angry all the time and to hate everybody. There was no other reason
why she would still be so cold and so mean after Sandry had been trying so hard. Sandry didn’t
understand it. And she was running out of ideas.

Daja was in her pyjamas as well but she didn’t look sleepy. Sandry looked at her and suddenly felt
very shy. She’d never had a sister, or even a sleep-over, to know if it was okay to just go in
someone else’s room. She wasn’t used to other people in their pyjamas.

Daja smiled at her. “No luck with the snapping turtle?”

Sandry sighed. Daja didn’t know why Sandry still tried with Tris, even after Sandry had tried to
explain it.

“Come in, if you like.”

Once Sandry was in the room she stopped feeling nervous – it was her and Daja and they were best
friends, after all. They sat on Daja’s bed with their backs against the wall and their feet straight out
in front of them. Daja was a lot taller than Sandry; her feet nearly reached the edge of the mattress
and Sandry’s were nowhere near it.
Seeing one of the books Daja had borrowed from the library on her bedside table made Sandry curious all over again. They were the strangest books for a girl to want to read in her free time. “Are you going to be an engineer?”

Sandry felt Daja go tense beside her. “What?”

“I just – the books, and going into that factory like you did the other day. Are you going be an engineer when you grow up?”

“I don’t know,” Daja said slowly. “I’m thinking about it.”

“I think you’d be good at it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I just think you would. Don’t you?”

Instead of answering that question, Daja asked one back. “Do you ever worry about what your parents might think about the choices you make?”

It was the realest question Daja had ever asked Sandry. They hadn’t talked about that kind of thing since that first day. “Sometimes,” she said in a small voice. “I wonder if they’d like me being here … or if I should go and live with Uncle, since he’s family. I like it here, though…”

“You still have family?” Daja seemed to find that almost offensive … sometimes Sandry did wonder if she was cheating, having somewhere else she could go instead.

“His health isn’t very good,” Sandry said, thinking of last time she’d visited Uncle Vedris and how he’d gotten so tired so quickly. “I’d probably be too much for him. My mum always said I was a lot of work.”

Daja smiled at that, and Sandry couldn’t help smiling as well. She was still sad about Mum and Dad and Pirisi all the time but at least there was someone here who understood.

After a while Daja broke the silence. “I’m glad you’re here, anyway.”

Sandry smiled and leaned over to rest her head on Daja’s shoulder. “Me too.”
The days went by, and Tris didn’t know how it had happened, but the two of them living on the second floor were getting along just fine. Without ever having actual conversations, she and Daja had decided who was responsible for cleaning what, who got to use the bathroom when and where they kept things in it, how much noise was too much and that they would not be covering for each other if anyone got in trouble. Daja seemed as happy to stay clear of Tris as Tris was to stay clear of Daja.

Small mercies, Tris thought. She wouldn’t have as easy a time of it if she’d been stuck in close quarters with Sandry or, god forbid, Briar. The two of them and all the ruckus they were always causing could stay downstairs where Tris was usually able to block it out with meditation.

Lark and Rosethorn kept saying that Niko would come back to visit, but it had been two weeks now since he said he’d return “soon” so Tris wasn’t holding her breath. At least he’d taught her about meditation before he left. She was getting a lot better at it without any help from him anyway. He’d only been interested in handing her over and nothing else, which was no great surprise to Tris.

She was getting a feel for this place now. It certainly wasn’t the worst house she had lived in. There wasn’t as much for her to hear on the wind but Tris liked it that way. There was nothing more boring than other people’s business. The most striking thing about being here was the air itself – Tris knew all the facts about pollution but she’d never really grasped the sickness of it until she’d come out to the country and realised it was gone.

Tris missed sea breezes but there was a kind of peace in the mostly still air out here that was satisfying in its own way. And best of all, the sky held so many birds, drifting and coasting and soaring on the wind high above them all. Tris couldn’t get a close look at them, so the birdwatching books around the house didn’t do her much good. There were plenty of birds Tris already knew: cockatoos, magpies, ravens, blackbirds, and so on. But raptors, the birds that lived in the wind and saw the whole world, were something else altogether.

Sometimes when the house was quiet and she soared on the wind with the birds, Tris truly forgot that she was the fat little red-haired girl with the bad temper who nobody wanted. It seemed like she was only ever that girl when there were people around and she couldn’t be anything else. So with Briar constantly harassing her about nothing and Sandry always nagging her to come and play a game or look at a piece of string or some other kind of nonsense, Tris stayed in her room unless one of Lark or Rosethorn asked her to come out.

They asked her to come out quite often, and when that happened Tris would bring a book with her and sit downstairs reading instead of sitting and reading in her room. They never made her join in with things if she didn’t want to – and she never did – which Tris found more than a little suspicious. If they didn’t want her to “get involved” then why not just leave her alone in the first place? It would be a lot simpler that way.

Tris was never going to forget the looks on those horrible children’s faces when Briar had stood up for her that time in town. And Sandry’s embroidery was by far the most beautiful thing in Tris’s room, possibly in the whole house. Much as Tris hated to admit it, Daja was the least disruptive housemate she had ever lived with. These things niggled at Tris sometimes, one by one or all together, but she didn’t let it get to her. It wasn’t like she’d be staying long enough for any of it to matter.
Roach woke up in the dead of night with a gnawing in his stomach and a feeling in his bones that something was about to go down, soon, and for real. Whenever he got a bit of peace and quiet in his life he always got like this. It was like how he sometimes had to keep pinching himself or flicking his temple on a long stakeout to stay alert, keeping moving all the time to stop his head from drooping. Except this he wasn’t even doing on purpose and it pissed him off that he could never just relax.

He hadn’t been able to sleep a single night through in this place. It was just too damn quiet and too still, too far away from anywhere Roach knew. The house was full of people but none of them were his kind of people. If shit hit the fan Roach was on his own and he had a bloody long way to travel before he could get back on his own turf. It was kind of nice to have food and water and clothes and bedding all given to him but he didn’t kid himself he was getting it no strings attached.

Roach climbed out of bed, bringing a blanket with him and wrapping it around his shoulders as he did a quick check on his getaway bag. Instead of turning on the lamp beside his bed he grabbed the little torch he kept under his pillow and clicked it on.

The blue backpack under Roach’s bed had more stuff in it than he’d owned at one time in the whole rest of his life. He had two full water bottles and a fair heap of food: muesli bars and packets of chips and lollies and some of those tiny little single-serve packets of cereal. Stuff that would go off too fast he kept in a drawer for midnight snacks and the like. In one of the side zip pockets was his money, with the twenty bucks he pretended he’d lost the first time he went shopping with Lark as well as a bunch of coins he’d saved or snatched since then. Probably about thirty bucks total, which should be enough to get him home if he played it smart. As well there was a set of clothes he was keeping spotless so he could wear it and not get too much attention on his way home.

He’d wrapped one of his knives up in the pair of blue jeans. The other one was inside his mattress where he could grab it from in bed if he needed. He hadn’t been so stupid as to take any knives from the kitchen, or any tools from the shed. They’d keep an eye on that stuff. But on his second day in the house Roach had found two nice cutlery sets in a cupboard upstairs that it looked like no one ever used. He’d grabbed the steak knife out of each of them and stashed them away. There was a fair chance no one would ever realise they were missing.

It was the middle of the night but Roach was wide awake. He put his bag back into the cupboard he kept it in when he was out of his room, shoved casually under a bunch of clothes and stuff so no one would notice it. Then he moved over to the window, pushing the curtain over a smidge to look out in front of the house.

He couldn’t see shit. That was another weird thing about this place: it got so dark Roach knew the view out of this window by heart – if he knew how to draw he’d get it down perfectly – but there was hardly even any moonlight to see anything by.

Roach shivered. He wasn’t cold, but who knew what was out there in the middle of the night, where anyone could do anything and no one would know.

He’d would rather go where there were signs of life. And he was thirsty. So he slowly eased his door open, slipped out, and closed it again without a sound. Right opposite him Sandry’s door was partways open, like always. The glow of her little night light lit Roach’s path halfway to the kitchen; he went the rest of the way by touch and memory.

It wasn’t completely pitch black in the kitchen, but it was pretty close. Roach knew his way around by now so he only needed a couple flashes of torchlight, first to make sure he got a cup off of the drying rack without knocking against anything, and then to find the tin of biscuits Lark left out on the counter and dump his blanket on a clear space nearby.
Roach drank two cupfuls of water then put the cup back upside-down on the drying rack where he’d gotten it from. He very carefully and quietly levered off the lid of the biscuit tin, relieved when it came off with only a very faint rasping sound.

Lark called these anzac biscuits and they were one of the best things Roach had ever eaten. They were thick and chewy, with oats all the way through and a bit of sweetness to keep them tasty. Roach had two in his belly before he thought to count how many were left. He had to make sure there was still enough in there so no one would complain. Roach had helped Lark make these with Sandry and Daja so they were kind of his anyway, but you could never be too careful.

He was just trying to decide if he’d take one or two back to his room with him when he heard movement. Someone was coming out from Lark and Rosethorn’s room and here was Roach standing with his hand in the cookie jar.

Roach dropped into a crouch, steadying himself very lightly with one hand. The counter stood on its own in the middle of the kitchen, so if he was quiet he should be able to stay hidden just by keeping it between him and whoever was out there.

The fluoro light over Roach’s head flickered a couple times and then came on properly. He closed his eyes at the first flash but even through his eyelids it was bright enough to make him wince.

“Come on up here, boy,” Rosethorn said.

Roach considered his options. He didn’t really have any. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. That was this place all over. He cracked his eyes open and blinked hard a few times against the dazzling light.

“It’s Briar,” he grumbled, getting to his feet. Too late he realised he was still holding the open biscuit tin. And the lid was on the counter next to his blanket, which stood out like a sore thumb now he could actually see it. It was almost Stickers levels of sloppiness, and Roach remembered too damn well how that dude had ended up.

Rosethorn was lounging against the wall by the kitchen table, right by the light switch. Her hair was all mussed up, she was wearing pyjama pants and a tank top, but she looked more alert now than she sometimes did in the daytime. And she wasn’t a tall woman, but those muscles in her arms were no joke.

She sat down at the table and waved Roach over. He shuffled slowly towards her. He still had the table between him and her, so he should be okay for the moment. She was tough, but Roach didn’t think she was fast.

“Sit,” she said. “Pass that here.”

Roach sat down in the chair exactly opposite Rosethorn’s. He put the tin on the table and shoved it across to her. The thing with Rosethorn was that she looked kind of pissed off just about all the time, so it was hard for Roach to tell if he was in trouble or not.

Rosethorn chose a biscuit and took a bite out of it, still eyeing Roach. He was trying not to get all twitchy but not all the curtains were closed and it was never a good idea to have a light on like this at night when everything else was dark.

But it didn’t seem to bother Rosethorn at all. She pushed the tin back over to him and leaned back in her chair. Roach didn’t know what it was with these people: first Niko, then Rosethorn, and sometimes Lark as well, they looked at you like they had x-ray vision. They shot clean through
every distraction and straight to the soul. Not that Roach was big on souls, but if he did have one he’d bet his right arm that Rosethorn was looking at it right now.

“We’re not feeding you enough during the daytime?”

“No, you do,” Roach said immediately. “Heaps. Loads.” He watched her chew, swallow, take another bite. There were still half a dozen biscuits in the tin so he reached in for another one. He might as well, since she’d given them back to him.

“I don’t want you hiding in corners in the dark because you’re feeling peckish,” said Rosethorn. “If you’re hungry, you’re hungry. There’s no shame in that.”

Roach could feel his face getting hot even as his chest and arms were chilled. He swallowed his mouthful of biscuit over a lump in his throat.

“Where’s your pyjama top?”

“My room.”

“Hm.”

When Roach had finished his biscuit and not taken another one Rosethorn got to her feet. She moved a bit stiffly but Roach couldn’t tell if she had a bad back or she was just tired. “Come on, my lad,” she said. “Time to get some more sleep.”

Roach picked up the biscuit tin and went back to the kitchen counter. He slung the blanket over his shoulder and then put the lid neatly back on the biscuit tin. Rosethorn kept watching him as he padded around the counter to put the tin back exactly where he’d gotten it from.

When he set off to go back to his room Rosethorn stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder. He looked up in surprise, and accidentally met her dark brown eyes with his for a second before looking away again. “There will always be food for you here,” she said slowly. “Believe me when I say you will not go hungry again.”

Roach stood there waiting for the catch, but Rosethorn was done. No “as long as there’s no fuckups” or “if you do exactly what you’re told”, no nothing. Nothing out loud and Roach couldn’t hear anything like that behind her words either. Roach’s instincts were good – it was why he was still alive – and they were letting him relax right there where he stood.

He was low-key aware that Lark was just a couple of rooms away, Sandry was down the corridor, Daja and Tris were somewhere up above them. He didn’t know what to say and he was so far out of his element he might as well have been in outer space.

“You hear me, boy?”

“It’s Briar,” he repeated without thinking.

“I know your name, boy,” she said with a funny little smile. She looked a lot different when she was smiling. Briar had only really seen her smile at Lark before.

He stepped forward, wrapped his arms around her middle, squeezed her just about as tightly as he was clenching his jaw, then after a moment pulled away and took off for his room. The blanket slipped off his shoulder when he started off but hell if he was going to turn around and go back for it.
He closed the door after him and hopped straight into bed, completely forgetting to move his getaway bag back within reach before he dropped off to sleep again.

Someone was moving just outside the door. Sandry nearly fell on her face rushing out of bed, surely the door would open for her this time, surely. She’d been waiting and waiting, and now was her chance –

She reached out to try the handle and walked right into the edge of the door which was, of course, already open. Sandry came fully awake as her eyes started to water from the shock of the collision. She rubbed at her forehead.

Sandry had had this dream a few times, and she got tricked by it every time. They weren’t as bad now as they’d used to be, especially now she had her night light and a room with a big window. But that just made Sandry feel even sillier for standing at her bedroom door in the middle of the night over nothing, really. And now she had a headache as well.

Everything got suddenly darker and Sandry’s heart skipped a beat. Maybe she was still asleep, maybe it was still happening – but no, she could still see, her night light was on and the door was open. It was just darker, because there had been another light on somewhere in the house and now it was off.

Sandry stepped outside her room, just to prove that she could. And if someone really had been walking around near her room, then it wasn’t so bad that she thought someone had been. She’d been right. She was fine.

Everything was quiet now. Sandry opened her door a little wider and walked back into her room. Just to be sure, she opened the second door as well, the one that opened into the little hallway leading to the kitchen, and the laundry. Sandry could go into the laundry and outside the house in ten seconds if she wanted to.

There were lots of exits, and plenty of light. Sandry snuggled back into her bed and lay awake for a while, until she could forget about her dream and her headache and fall slowly back to sleep.

Briar had the house layout down pat by now but he still needed to take every chance he got to scope out all the land around it. If this was going to be his territory then he was going to know it inside out and back to front.

So when they all had free time to play outside, Rosethorn was way out back and Lark was inside talking on the phone he told the girls he had to piss and walked out the front of the house.

Not much went on around here. The road was a bit bendy but still plenty wide enough for a high speed limit. A stroll downhill took Briar past a few driveways and some pretty fucked-up letterboxes. The houses were built so far back from the road that Briar couldn’t see much of most of them, not with the way the land sloped and with all the smallish trees just kind of growing wherever.

What Briar didn’t know was if all the land around actually belonged to the properties in it. Like, there were a lot of cool places he could go exploring but if he was going to get nabbed for trespassing then he’d give it a miss.

He walked down the road for a little while, enjoying the sunshine and the fresh air and the freedom. But he couldn’t swing being away for more than about twenty minutes and get away with
it, not when it was the one big rule Lark had told them right off the bat.

He was nearly back to the house when he saw two boys a little ways off the road. They were probably technically in the front yard of somebody’s house. They hadn’t been there when Briar had passed by before.

They were older white boys, Briar guessed brothers, with identical floppy haircuts. They were crouching over something, poking at it and laughing. When Briar saw that it was a dog with weakly twitching limbs he came to a dead halt.

There were some nice things about living out here in woop-woop but right now Roach would have traded them all for one alley to duck into and vanish. There was no chance he was getting sucked into this. If there was one kind of kid you never, ever messed around with it was the kind that hurt animals for kicks.

But then one of them looked up and saw him.

Roach tried the friendly country-boy nod and went to walk right past, but the smaller one hurried up the slope and held a phone out to him. He had a pointy little possum face and big brown eyes. Roach guessed he was about fourteen. “Take a video for us, mate,” he said. “It’s gonna be sweet.”

Roach glanced down at the dog. It was pretty much a ball of white fluff lying on its back, but too big for Roach to call it a puppy. He’d never really liked dogs; it was the people he was worried about. If he was taking the video then it stood to reason he wouldn’t be in it, whatever happened. He could help them out and be on his way and stay on their good side for later …

“What’s the matter with you, fucking take it. Before someone comes.”

Roach glanced back down at the dog. There was a red stain on one of its back legs. The bigger brother stood up and planted his foot lightly over the dog’s chest. It lay perfectly still. “Fuck off,” Roach said. “Take your own video.”

Possum-face noticed something behind Roach and sighed in frustration. “Ah shit, there’s girls coming,” he said. “Mitch, take –”

“Scared of a bunch of girls?” said Roach before he could help himself. “Fuck me.”

The boy scowled. “Briar!” Sandry called out from behind Roach. “You’re not supposed to be out here! What are you – what are you doing!?”

Roach glanced quickly over his shoulder. All three of them had come out to get him, like some kind of god damn taskforce. Tris was hanging back – Roach couldn’t help wondering why she was there at all.

“Alright, I’m coming,” he said. He backed up a few steps and was going to turn around and leave when suddenly Sandry had gone past him and Daja was right by his side.

Sandry fronted up to this boy a head taller than she was and twice as wide, with her hands on her hips, and asked him, “What do you think you’re doing to that poor little puppy?”

“None of your business,” the boy said. “Get out of here.”

“Sandry, c’mon,” Roach tried.

“You know she won’t listen,” Daja said from beside him.
“Why isn’t it moving? Move your foot! Oh my God!”

The boy downhill, Mitch, was starting to look a bit nervous. “It’s our dog, princess,” he said. “Run along.”

“Yeah, and this is our property,” said Possum-face. “We could call the cops on you all right now.”

“Go ahead!” said Sandry. “You’ll be arrested for animal abuse! How dare you!”

Possum-face squared up to her. “Look, piss off or we’ll make you.”

Anyone but Sandry would have backed off – it was just a stupid dog, and the boys were right. If it was their dog, it was their business. But Roach had known Sandry for long enough, and so had Daja. They looked at each other, understood one another, and made their move.

The plan was to take Sandry by one arm each, and drag her away if they had to. But the boys missed the memo: Possum-face flung a fist at Roach’s face as soon as he moved slightly forwards. His brother lowered his head and charged up the hill at Daja.

Roach ducked the punch and backed up a little - if he could get this one following him the other three between them should be able to handle Mitch. If someone could only talk some sense into Sandry they could all be out of there before things got ugly.

Daja had done a neat sidestep and helped the boy charging at her to fly past her and fall flat on his face. Roach admired the move and dodged a second punch, which was exactly the same as the first. Then another – Roach had fought smarter kids than this who could barely put two words together.

Sandry dashed right in between the two fights and tried to pick up the dog. Roach shouted at her not to, but like always Sandry knew better.

The dog let out a shriek that chilled Roach’s spine. Sandry jumped back from it with a little squeal. Possum-face turned away from Roach to run at her. Roach grabbed him by the back of his shirt collar and tugged back as savagely as he could. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Daja wrestling with the other kid on the ground.

This was not how Roach had wanted his little trip to go. When Possum-face ripped himself out of Roach’s grip and spun back around, his face was bright red with fury – and hopefully suffocation as well. As he wound up a fourth identical punch Roach scooped up some dirt and chucked it in his eyes, then followed up with a solid knee to the balls and a shove to put him on his arse.

“Let’s go!” he shouted at Sandry. “Come on!”

“It’s hurt! We can’t leave it!” She tiptoed closer to the animal again.

“For fuck’s sake! It’s just gonna bite you!”

The wind picked up suddenly and viciously. Roach barely had time to pull his shirt up in front of his face before he was pelted with dirt and pebbles and bits of grass. Without thinking he offered his hand to the boy on the ground – a bit of a tussle was one thing, but shit like this was a whole other deal.

Usually a willy-willy would settle down after a few seconds but when Roach was nearly blown off his feet by a second surge of wind he thought twice about helping the other boy up and thought maybe it would be smarter to drop himself down instead.
Even though he couldn’t see, Roach still remembered roughly where Daja had been. He crawled over to her on his belly and tugged at the arm he came across. “Off the road,” he shouted as loud as he could, hoping he could be heard over the wind and through his shirt. “Roll down.”

He risked a peek and in the moment before his eyes got clouded with dust he saw he’d been talking to the boy Mitch, who did exactly as he’d suggested. Roach followed him, eyes watering like mad. Down further from the road where it was more sheltered with trees the air cleared a bit. Roach swore and rubbed at his eyes with the inside of his shirt.

He could hear the wind still blowing hard up over the road. Roach uncovered his face and spat over and over again, trying to get all the dirt and grass and tiny rocks out his mouth.

The two boys were nowhere to be seen. Sandry was hunched over the dog, not getting too close but ready to shield it from anything she had to. Daja was crouching as well, but she was staring up. Roach followed her gaze.

Roach didn’t know how big a willy-willy had to be before you called it a tornado, but this one was at least as tall as the house he was living in and it looked like it was still picking up speed.

“Fuck me,” he said.

“Tris,” said Daja suddenly. Her braids were all over the shop and coated with dust. That was gonna be a nightmare to clean. “Tris was with us.”

“She wouldn’t have stuck around in this,” Roach said. “She’s back at the house I bet.”

And then, like magic, the spinning slowed and stopped and all the shit in the air dropped straight back down to the ground. And then everything was quiet.

Roach wiped his face off one last time with his shirt. Weirder things had happened, probably.

Now the air had cleared Roach could see Tris standing a little ways down the road, with Lark near her and Rosethorn a bit further back. “I hope you’re happy now,” he grumbled at Sandry. “We’d all be back at the house safe and sound if you hadn’t gotten all excited. Now look.”

“Funny how all your stuff-ups end up being somehow Sandry’s fault,” Daja said mildly, brushing off her shirt.

“You left the house, Briar, not me,” Sandry said huffily. “Anyway, do you really wish those two horrible boys had kept on torturing this poor puppy?”

Yeah, when it came down to it, he’d rather that than this. But you couldn’t say that kind of thing to Sandry, not when she was in righteous mode. Which meant you couldn’t ever.

“How are you all over there?” Lark called across to them.

“Fine,” Daja replied.

“There’s a puppy, it’s hurt,” Sandry announced. “They were hurting it.”

Roach hunched his shoulders and made his way back up to the road. He had no idea how they were going to talk their way out of this one.

Tris stared at the debris scattered all along the road with a dull sort of disappointed confusion. Thoughts moved slowly through her mind, so slowly that it took her a while to recognise Lark’s
voice when she asked Tris something, and to respond to her gentle pushes by moving in the corresponding direction.

She felt empty and bone-weary. A brown-skinned boy with short black hair and no shoes picked his way carefully down the road towards her. She watched him come and only when he’d nearly reached her did her sluggish thoughts identify him as Briar.

“I got her,” he said, and slung one of Tris’s arms around his neck.

Lark moved away.

“It’s just a freak of nature, or whatever,” Briar said. “I bet it happens all the time. You wanna sit down?”

Sitting down sounded nice but sitting down meant standing up again later and the thought made Tris’s head swim. “I want to go back,” she said thickly.

“Alrighty,” said Briar. “Come on then.” He turned her around and they set off back to the house.

Tris couldn’t hold her head up all the way so she watched each step they took. Shabby black T-bar shoes and scratched-up bare feet.

“Why don’t you ever wear shoes?” she asked.

“Don’t like ‘em,” he replied. “Why don’t you ever wear pants?”

Ugh, that old question. “Don’t like ‘em.”

“Yeah fair enough.”

They trudged on. They made it to the house and up the stairs. Briar opened the door for Tris. She had already collapsed onto her beautifully soft bed by the time she realised he hadn’t closed it again. And now he was gone.

Tris was too tired to call out for him to close it and far too tired to even think about getting up again. So she closed her eyes, breathed out and fell asleep.
Daja’s throat was sore where the boy had elbowed her. She’d jarred her arm wrestling with him on the ground as well, but it wasn’t too bad. She had dirt in her eyes, her mouth, her hair and her clothes, and yet the air around her was peaceful and calm. Standing there in the gentle warmth of the sun it seemed impossible that not two minutes ago they’d been caught in a vicious whirlwind that had then died as suddenly as it had appeared. But Daja wasn’t a girl used to doubting the evidence of her own senses. She didn’t have the kind of imagination to invent something like this.

The combination of confusion and certainty was painfully familiar to Daja. She hadn’t mentioned the thing she’d done after her plane crashed to anybody, because nobody had really asked. And there had been far more important things to occupy her thoughts and dreams. At least this time nobody had been hurt. Nobody was dead. Nothing had changed.

“Are you okay?” Sandry asked. She was sitting down near the dog, but not close enough any more that it would snarl or snap at her.

“Yes. How are you?”

“It didn’t come down here, I’m just a bit dirty.” Sandry went back to staring at the dog, looking furious and heartbroken. It didn’t surprise Daja that Sandry was far more upset about a hurt animal than she was about the upheaval in nature they’d just witnessed. “It’s against the law, it must be!”

The boys had fled, but that didn’t mean this was over. Daja wished Briar would have stayed but she didn’t blame him for making a quick exit, under the circumstances. Anyway, Lark and Rosethorn were close by now, which meant Daja would be able to stand down. Hopefully soon she would stop feeling so horribly exposed.

Lark came down the hill towards them. Daja was struck by how stiffly she was walking; normally Lark moved like her feet were barely touching the ground.

“What was it?” Daja asked her quietly.

Lark smiled a weary smile. “We’ll discuss it all together, in a while.”

Daja tried not to be frustrated by the non-answer. Lark’s eyes were tired and her shoulders ever-so-slightly slumped. So Daja nodded and moved aside, inviting the woman to go and check on Sandry and the dog. Questions could wait.

“I think they broke his leg,” said Sandry indignantly. “Lark, look!”

Lark moved past Daja and crouched down next to Sandry, resting a hand on the girl’s shoulder partly to reassure her, and partly to balance herself.

Daja was still a little on edge. She looked back around to see Rosethorn coming down as well. There was no sign of Briar or Tris anywhere. Nothing was happening but Daja felt very strongly that there was unfinished business in the air. She was on the brink of something. She stood still and concentrated, trying to flick the switch in her mind.

She knew better than to ask Rosethorn. She was a prickly woman at the best of times, and this was far from being the best of times.
“Go on up,” she told Daja once she’d reached them. “Go back to the house.”

Daja hesitated. If she left now she might never understand it.

“Hey!” a man shouted from a bit further downhill. The house down there was mostly hidden from view behind a scattering of trees and bushes. Daja hadn’t thought much about neighbours out here. There were too many new people to get to know in the same house as her to spare a thought for all the others living nearby.

But she was meeting one now: a white middle-aged man with short brown hair and beard was marching up to them so forcefully his boots might have been filled with lead. He clenched and unclenched his fists as he came. Daja took half a step back, where she bumped into Rosethorn, recovered and held firm.

“Steve —” said Lark.

The man didn’t let her continue. He wasn’t quite shouting, but he was close enough to it to make Daja nervous. He spoke directly to Lark. “Look, I know you’ve got your stuff that you do, which is fine, but this is not okay. These kids on my land – my boys were out here you know, they’re shaken up like you wouldn’t believe. They don’t know about it of course – from what you always said I’d never have to tell them – I always heard it was safe, that’s what you said, but by God…”

He ran out of words and just stood there fuming, hands on his hips and red in the face. He wasn’t only angry, Daja thought. He was afraid.

Lark got to her feet slowly. “Are your boys hurt, Steve?”

Steve shook his head briskly. “Scrapes and bruises, that’s not what I’m worried about. My boys were attacked on my land, Lark. I never agreed to this.”

“They attacked us!” Sandry protested. Daja could tell she’d been biting her tongue this whole time. “Look what they were doing!”

She pointed at the dog, who was curled up now trying to protect its hurt leg. Daja winced and looked away.

Steve followed Sandry’s gesture and the anger on his face transformed swiftly into shock. “What the —”

“That’s what they were doing, those boys. That’s why we came onto your property! Look!”

The man paused, then clenched his jaw and looked from Sandry to Daja. He shook his head again. His eyes kept flicking back to the puppy; he had to keep dragging them away. The surety left his voice. “My boys are good boys. They don’t fight, and they don’t do … this. They said there was a boy here, some little Arab fella who was provoking them.”

“I beg your pardon!” snapped Rosethorn. Daja stepped sideways away from her.

Steve winced. “I don’t mean anything by it, Rosethorn, that’s just what they said.”

Daja knew from experience that Rosethorn wouldn’t let anyone get away with that kind of weaselling. “And what do you mean, exactly, by parroting it straight back? What did they mean by it, exactly? Any ideas?”

Daja took another sideways step.
“My boys are not trouble,” Steve said, more brittle than firm. “They were attacked, by that boy who’s run away and these girls that were with him.”

His gaze went to Daja, not Sandry. Daja was cool, hard titanium and he couldn’t make a dent in her.

“It’s not true!” Sandry protested. “They’re guilty! They’re guilty of animal abuse and they’re trying to cover it up!”

“Sandry,” said Lark, half-turning towards her. Sandry subsided.

“Look, whatever’s happened with Buddy, I don’t know,” said Steve. “I’ll get him to the vet in half a tick. But first I want whichever one of these kids was responsible for that … tornado or whatever it was, to come clean right now!”

“Responsible?” Sandry squeaked. Daja kept her own mouth shut as gears shifted in her mind.

“Steve,” said Lark. “I promise you, we will sit down and discuss this. Every one of us will be held accountable. Tempers are high, people are worried. The only one who’s physically hurt, though, is Buddy. We’ll still be here when you get back from the vet, and we’ll all have clearer heads. We’ll sort it out.”

Steve’s face was turning sourer with every glance at his dog. He glared at Lark for a few more seconds, then the last of the fight went out of him in a rush. “Yeah. I’ll be seeing you shortly then.”

Lark turned away. She had to pull Sandry gently along with her, as the girl was dragging her heels and shooting worried glances backwards. Daja followed in their wake, not in a mood to look at anybody. As the anger had faded from Neighbour Steve, the tension had seeped out of her and left her empty.

“How can a person be responsible for this?” she asked Sandry once they were back up on the road. She kept her voice low. Lark and Rosethorn were walking together just ahead of the two girls, having their own private conversation.

“I don’t know,” Sandry whispered back. “I don’t know what he meant. Do you?”

“It’s strange,” Daja said. She felt a little guilty for dodging the question. She didn’t absolutely know what he’d meant, but she wouldn’t say she didn’t know either. She just had a very strong feeling.

“Do you – oh!” A car honked at them on its way past. “That’s Niko’s car!” Sandry exclaimed. “Isn’t it?”

Daja glanced up to see Niko’s old blue Citroën drive on down the road and turn up into their driveway. “It’s Niko,” she confirmed.

Sandry beamed.

“Great bloody timing as usual,” Rosethorn said from up ahead. Lark nudged her with an elbow.

They got to the house just as Niko was walking back to the front from the carport. He walked slowly, twisting his back and stretching his arms out after the long drive.

“So the prodigal professor returns,” Rosethorn said, her voice sharp.
He paused with his long arms still in the air, then slowly brought them down. “Why, what’s happened?”

“Let’s go inside,” said Lark. “Daja, Sandry, I’m guessing you’d like to clean up a little bit.”

“Hi Niko,” Sandry said with a little smile, before going inside and heading to the downstairs bathroom. Daja nodded at him in passing and went straight upstairs.

Tris’s bedroom door was open, for once. Passing by, Daja saw her curled up on her side, eyes closed and motionless. For a sudden, terrible moment Daja thought she was dead.

“She’s fine,” said Briar, appearing from nowhere and making Daja jump. “She’s asleep.”

“The man next door thinks one of us did it,” said Daja. “And those boys are blaming you for the fight.”

“I didn’t touch that damn dog,” said Briar heatedly. “I’m not sick like that.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean the dog,” said Daja. “I meant the whirlwind.”

He just stared at her, grey-green eyes wide in his golden-brown face. “Say what?”

“He said whichever one of us was responsible for it was going to be in trouble.” Daja headed to her room to get some clean clothes. “He thinks it’s you or me.”

Briar snorted, tagging along after her. “He’s nuts.”

“Okay, so why is Tris fast asleep in the middle of the day, when she was fine this morning? Lark’s suddenly exhausted for no reason as well.”

“I dunno, people are sick sometimes. I look like a doctor to you?”

If she was going to have to defend herself against Steve and his sons Daja would have to look composed and respectable. Instead of jeans or shorts and a t-shirt she picked out some nice dress pants and a white blouse. “What were you talking to them about, anyway?”

“They wanted me to take a video for them,” Briar said darkly. “I’d been there like two seconds when you lot turned up.”

Daja sighed and moved past him to her and Tris’s bathroom.

“They’re not pinning this on me,” Briar said, still following her. “You saw I didn’t do anything, right?”

“I’m going to have a shower,” Daja said. “You could stand to do the same.”

Briar scoffed at her half-heartedly. Daja closed the door on him and went to get clean.

Sandry had meant to have a quick shower, but once she was under the water she was enjoying it so much she decided to wash her hair as well. There was dust in it, after all, and it was such a warm afternoon that it would be mostly dry by bedtime. She was looking forward to summer so much.

But there was still Buddy to worry about, Sandry just hoped that Steve wouldn’t let his sons anywhere near the puppy for now. Then when they all had a talk she could convince him to give it to a family who would love the poor thing instead of torturing it. No animal was safe living with
those terrible, terrible boys.

Sandry hung her towels out to dry and then looked around to see where everyone had got to. Someone was taking a shower upstairs; none of the adults were anywhere to be found. Sandry needed to make sure they understood what had happened. She walked into the main room and out the back door. Usually Rosethorn was out back when she wasn’t needed indoors, but Sandry couldn’t see her anywhere in the garden.

She slipped her feet into a pair of thongs on the patio and went searching. She walked past the three cars parked at the end of the driveway, and around the side of the house. She peered into one of the windows of Lark’s workroom on the way but there was nobody in there.

Lark, Rosethorn and Niko were standing on the front lawn having what looked like a very serious conversation. Sandry hovered at the corner of the house, just outside her own bedroom window. She didn’t want to interrupt, since you weren’t supposed to when adults were talking, but she didn’t want them to think she was spying either.

Niko and Rosethorn were doing most of the talking. Rosethorn had her arm around Lark’s waist, and Lark’s was around Rosethorn’s shoulder. Niko was looking defensive: he was shaking his head a lot and waving his hands around.

He caught sight of Sandry after a moment and waved her over. “Everything all right?”

Sandry nodded.

“I’ll go and check on Tris,” said Lark. She smiled at Sandry, extricated herself from Rosethorn and went up the porch steps.

Sandry frowned. “What’s wrong with Tris?”

“She’s tired,” said Rosethorn in a tone of voice that told Sandry she would be keeping the rest of her questions to herself.

“Let’s go inside,” said Niko. Sandry followed him in. Rosethorn stayed where she was.

“Why don’t you go upstairs,” Lark suggested, coming back down them herself. Sandry was going to ask her how Tris was, but if she was being sent upstairs she could find that out for herself.

She did as she was told, reluctantly. The upstairs shower had stopped but the bathroom door was still closed. Tris’s door was closed nearly all the way as well. The only person Sandry could see was Briar, sitting on a beanbag where he could see through to the top of the stairs as well as sit in the sun. He looked like he was glowing in the sunlight, but his expression was grim.

A loud knock came from downstairs. Briar jumped to his feet and stuck his head out of the window, trying to twist around to get a look at the back door. Then he gave up on that and just stood very still, listening intently.

“It’s him,” he said.

“Already? Then he hasn’t taken the puppy to the vet!” Sandry hadn’t been in the shower that long. All kinds of horrible ideas were popping up in her head, of all the things that he might have done to it to destroy the evidence. Sandry couldn’t believe that he could have fooled them all like that. She couldn’t believe she’d trusted him, after what his own children had done!

“Can you just shut up about that fucking dog.” Briar came away from the window and sat back
down in a huff.

“No,” said Sandry. She went and sat down right next to him in the sun to start her hair drying. Daja emerged from the bathroom as she did, and after hanging her towels came and sat with them.

“I’m worried about leaving Buddy with them,” Sandry said to Briar. “Everyone’s all worried about themselves, but we’re all fine!”

“Maybe you’re gonna be fine,” said Briar. “Don’t assume the rest of us are.”

“What? None of us did anything!”

Briar looked at Daja, then sat back and jammed his mouth shut.

Sandry was confused. “Daja?”

Daja shook her head. “Let’s just see how it pans out.”

Sandry shook her head right back. “Lark and Rosethorn won’t believe those liars,” she said with certainty. “Neither will Niko.”

“What’s Niko got to do with it?” said Briar testily.

Tris came out of her room then, looking a little unsteady on her feet. She looked down to the stairs, then around the other way and saw the three of them sitting there. She came over slowly. Her hair was a terrible mess.

“How are you feeling?” Sandry asked.

Tris ignored the question. “Why are you all up here?”

“Court’s in session downstairs,” said Briar. “Closed session.”

Daja got up and pulled the last beanbag over to the rest of them. “Come sit down.”

Tris sank into the beanbag like she intended to live there for the rest of her life. She wasn’t normally what Sandry would call a lively kind of person, but now she looked absolutely exhausted and pale as a ghost.

“Should you go to the doctor?” Sandry asked.

Tris just stared at her with cold grey eyes, then closed them.

“When my family’s plane went down I did something impossible,” Daja said out of nowhere. Her words were slow and focused. “I bent a huge sheet of metal. I’d landed on it, when I was falling, and it saved my life. Then I had to get back to solid ground and I needed more momentum and it helped throw me. Because I asked it to.”

Sandry stared at her friend. Daja had never told her anything about the plane crash; she’d assumed it was too painful for the Irish girl to think about. Like Sandry didn’t like remembering her time in that room. How she’d gone round the bend, imagining things…

Tris had her eyes open again and directed suspiciously at Daja. Briar was looking at Daja too, with doubt and scorn. Sandry didn’t know why Daja had said what she did, but she couldn’t stand the way the other two were looking at her because of it.
So she spoke up. “I was trapped in a locked supply room. All the power was out. I thought I was going to go crazy, there all on my own in the dark. I … I made light, with …” Saying it out loud, Sandry knew how it sounded. How had Daja done it, just said something like that out loud like it was a fact?

At least Daja would believe her. And that was enough for Sandry. “I did some braids, with some spare thread I had, and I made them glow so I wasn’t left in the dark. It’s impossible but I did it.” There. She’d said it. She smiled at Daja, but her friend was still watching Tris.

“That’s not funny,” the red-haired girl said thickly.

“Bloody right it’s not, no wonder —”

Daja punched Briar in the arm, and not gently. “I’m not joking,” she said. “Sandry, are you joking?”

Sandry lifted her chin. “No.”

“There you go,” said Daja. “We all agree it’s not funny.”

Briar got up. “I’m outta here,” he said.

“You never did anything like that?” Sandry asked. She was starting to follow Daja’s line of thinking. It made a funny kind of sense. “Anything impossible, that no-one would believe?”

“No, sorry, my life is real,” he said. “And I oughtta be elsewhere.”

“How did you get here, though?” Sandry pressed. If they’d all done something impossible, it meant she definitely had. It meant she wasn’t crazy after all. “You have to have done something.”

“Look, I’m going to do you all a favour,” said Briar. “Free advice. When you get lifted from your old life and taken somewhere in the arse-end of nowhere, and people are nice to you for no reason, and then you get to thinking like you’re important or something and these are the people that finally understand you? Don’t fall for that shit. Once you’re in it you can’t get out of it and sooner or later it turns on you and then you’re fucked. If something’s too good to be true, then it’s bullshit. Have a nice life.”

“Where are you going?”

“What do you care?”

“It’s real, Briar. You were there! You saw it!”

“It’s gonna take more than a bit of a dust-up to get me to join a cult.” He turned to go. Sandry sprang up and grabbed his hand but he ripped it away sharply. “Fuck off!”

Sandry was just about to swear right back at him when Rosethorn came up the stairs. “I beg your pardon?” she said.

Briar went very still, then swung around to lean against the wall with his hands in his pockets. As innocent looks went, it wasn’t a very good one. He exhaled slowly and stared at his feet, which were still coated in dirt like the rest of him.

Rosethorn gave him a long, hard look and pursed her lips. “If you’d all like to come downstairs, we have some things to straighten out.”
Daja stood. She offered Tris a hand up, which after a moment the other girl accepted. Sandry looked at Briar anxiously. “Go on,” said Rosethorn. “They’re waiting for you."

“He didn’t mean it,” Sandry said. “We were arguing.”

Rosethorn’s expression didn’t change. “Do you need directions?”

Sandry couldn’t think of anything else to say, so she went on downstairs after Daja and Tris. She just hoped that Rosethorn didn’t flay Briar all the way down to the bone.

Steve was sitting in one armchair and Lark was in the other. Sandry led the way to the couch where she, Tris and Daja all squeezed in next to each other, with Tris in the middle. Sandry looked around for Niko but couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Mr Wells has some questions for you,” said Lark. “Can you please answer honestly, and fairly, and we’ll resolve this.”

“I’ll hear from that one,” he said, pointing at Daja. “Tell me what happened.” Sandry didn’t like his tone, but she bit her tongue. It wasn’t her turn yet.

“Daja,” Lark said in gentle invitation.

Daja didn’t say anything straight away. When she did her voice was clear and businesslike. “We – Sandry, Tris and I – weren’t sure where Briar was, so we went out the front to look for him. We didn’t go far, just a couple of houses down, and we saw him on the road with one of your sons.” She looked at Mr Wells, who was watching her intently. “I don’t know what they were talking about. We were going to get Briar to come back inside, but then Sandry saw the puppy down off the road. She confronted the boys about it and they told us to go away. They threatened to call the police. Sandry wasn’t scared, but they were a lot bigger than her and they looked angry. So Briar and I went to pull her away until everyone was more calm, but the one up on the road with us tried to punch Briar and the other one ran up the hill and attacked me.”

Mr Wells cut in quickly. “What about this other one? Tris?”

Sandry reached for Tris’s hand but Tris snatched it away. Sandry tucked both her hands in between her knees and tried to pretend that it hadn’t stung.

“Tris hadn’t come all the way with us,” said Daja. “She didn’t get involved. So we were defending ourselves. Briar was still trying to convince Sandry to go back home. And then the whirlwind started and everyone ducked for cover until it was over. By the time I could see again the boys were gone. That’s it.”

“And where is the boy? Run away again, has he?”

“I didn’t run away. I was helping Tris home,” said Briar. He was coming reluctantly down the stairs with Rosethorn at his heels. He looked embarrassed and surly. “Daja’s got it all exactly right.”

“What about before the girls arrived?” Lark asked him.

“They wanted me to take a video of whatever sick shit they were doing to their dog,” said Briar. “I told them f— I said I wouldn’t.” Him and Rosethorn reached the ground floor and stood together at the bottom of the stairs.

“And the magic wind was what? This one?”
Everyone looked at Tris. Sandry’s heart was in her mouth. *Magic, magic, magic.*

“I didn’t mean to do anything that big,” said Tris. Her face was turning pink as she spoke. “I wanted — I wanted to help, but I don’t like fighting, I think it’s stupid. I was trying to think of ideas to stop the fight. I was just trying to throw dirt in their eyes, it’s what Briar did when he was being attacked.”

“Good lord, he’s setting an example for them,” said Rosethorn.

“It’s smart fighting,” Briar said resentfully. Rosethorn elbowed him gently in the back; he stood straighter and pressed his lips together.

“I just wanted to give them a chance to get away. I’d never done anything on purpose before; I didn’t know how big it would get. I never meant for it to be so big.”

Mr Wells sat back triumphantly. “So there you have it. She’s done some kind of spell at my boys, on purpose, and I want to know what my recourse is.”

“It’s Possum-face threw the first punch,” said Briar. “Not Tris.”

“Quiet,” Rosethorn ordered.

It looked like it was killing Briar to keep quiet. Sandry didn’t want him to get in any more trouble, not after he’d just gotten in a fight to help her. “They’re a lot bigger than us, those boys,” Sandry pointed out. “If Tris hadn’t scared them off we really would have been hurt.”

Briar snorted and shook his head. Daja didn’t look happy with the assessment either but she just gave Sandry a sidelong glance and kept quiet about it.

“And so would Buddy,” Sandry continued, going back to what everyone else had forgotten about. “How is Buddy? Is he at the vet? You must have driven pretty quick to get there and back so fast.” She was trying to keep a polite tone of voice but she couldn’t believe the nerve of him.

Mr Wells gave her a sympathetic look. “He’s at the vet, girl, my cousin drove him in. I’ll be heading there as soon as we’re done here.”

“He can’t go home with you,” said Sandry. “They’ll do it again! You know they will!”

“I’ll look after him,” said Mr Wells. “I promise.”

That wasn’t the point; he couldn’t always be home supervising his children. “What about them? Will they promise? Who’s your cousin anyway?”

“All you lot back upstairs now,” said Rosethorn. “Now.”

Briar couldn’t leave quickly enough, ducking around Rosethorn and vanishing up the stairs. Daja offered Tris another hand up and the two of them followed him more slowly. Sandry knew she should go with them, but she still didn’t think Mr Wells realised how dangerous his home was for his puppy.

“Go on up, Sandry,” said Lark. “It will be fine.”

“I hope Buddy gets better soon,” Sandry said to Mr Wells. Then she did as she was told and left the adults to it. She’d have to trust that Lark and Rosethorn had something up their sleeves.
All Tris wanted to do was go back to her room and go to sleep, but she knew the others would want to talk. They always wanted to talk. She was too tired to think too hard about what Daja and Sandry had said, and what she’d said, and she didn’t much want to try to convince Briar of anything either, because he never listened.

Quiet words drifted up from the adults’ conversation. Niko’s voice, then Lark’s.

— unexpected circumstances.

We all have areas that —

Tris shook her head and tried to block it out. She didn’t need to hear all the details of another group of people deciding she needed to be sent packing. For once she was glad when Sandry started talking.

“Do you believe it now, Briar? Everyone knows it.”

Briar whirled to face her. “Knows what, exactly? Lay it on me.”

“Well —” Sandry looked at Daja.

“It’s physics,” Tris said. “I’m going to bed.”

“What do you mean, it’s physics?” Daja asked.

Tris sighed. “Niko’s got a PhD in physics, I guess he studies anomalies like this. Like us.”

“How do you know that?” asked Sandry.

“He told me so.”

“He never told me that.”

“Well, did you ask him?”

“No…”

Why Sandry thought Niko would go around telling children about his doctorate Tris had no idea.

“What’s that mean, anomaly?” Briar demanded.

Tris waited to see if either of the other two knew before she answered. “It’s something that doesn’t fit a pattern. Something outside the rules.”

“And Niko’s like a scientist or something…”

Tris was too tired to take any more pity on Briar for today. “Ask him yourself. Like I said, I’m going to bed.”

“You really did it, huh.” Briar didn’t seem to be talking to anyone in particular but something in his quiet voice turned Tris around again.

“Yes. I did it.”

“Well, ta,” he said. “But maybe next time you can find some other way to help.”

“Next time, is it?” said Daja. “You’ve changed your tune.”
“Yeah, well—”

“Briar!” Rosethorn called from just under the window. The boy jumped. “Sun’s going down!”

Briar didn’t spare the rest of them another glance. He was downstairs in a flash and out the back within seconds.

For the third time in as many minutes Tris set off for her room, and this time nobody said anything to pull her back. She sighed in relief as she closed her door behind her, then hopped up onto the table by the window. She was tired, but now she’d been up for a while she was thinking too much to be able to get back to sleep.

Daja and Sandry had gone into Daja’s room, like they did sometimes. Tris could hear them talking but not what they were talking about. Probably about Tris. She sat by her window and watched night fall.

Someone knocked on the door. Niko or Daja, it sounded like.

She’d have to get off the table to go to bed anyway, so she might as well do it now. She landed with a thump on the floor and dragged herself the few metres to her door.

It was Niko.

“Dinner will be in about half an hour,” he said. “Can we talk for a moment?”

Here it was. Good thing Tris hadn’t bothered unpacking her bags. “When am I going?” It was probably too much to hope for, but Tris could really do with a night’s sleep before her relocation.

Niko had a strained look on his face that showed up the lines on his cheeks and forehead. “Pardon?”

Was he stupid? “Well I’m not staying.”

“Of course you are.”

Tris was too tired, she had to be missing something. “Pardon?” she managed to say.

“I told you, didn’t I, that you’d be looked after here?”

“No.” It was a lie but Tris didn’t care. Her neck was getting sore from looking up at Niko, who was approximately giraffe-sized.

Niko sighed. “Let’s talk,” he said. “Can I come in, or shall we go somewhere else?”

Tris walked out of her room and shut the door. Niko nodded and led her around the corner, back to where he’d taught her to meditate. There was no more noise coming from Daja’s room, so either it was empty or Daja was in there alone.

If Daja heard anything, she would pretend she hadn’t. Tris was nearly certain of it.

Niko sat down. Already thinking of how many more times she’d have to sit down and stand up before the end of the day, Tris sank down beside him.

“Trisana … Tris,” said Niko. “What happened today is my fault entirely. I never intended to be gone for so long, and I owe you an apology for not working harder to return to you sooner.”
Well if Tris was already asleep and dreaming, she wouldn’t have to worry about standing up at all. Not until the morning, anyway. That was very good news for her trembling legs and dizzy head. Maybe the whole thing had been a dream, maybe –

“Tris?”

“What?”

Niko had trouble finding his next words. Eventually he just shook his head sadly and said, “I’m sorry.”

Tris shrugged, uncomfortable. “I didn’t really expect you back.”

As soon as she’d said it she desperately wished she hadn’t. Niko was looked at her with so much guilt and pity that Tris would have given anything to dissolve into particles and fly away on the wind. She could feel her face burning red and her stomach churning.

“I daresay you’ve taken to meditation rather naturally,” he said, suddenly all business. “From what I hear, what you did today was deliberate and powerful. You’ve been working hard.”

Tris shrugged again.

“Shall we?”

Tris closed her eyes and started her breathing. This was easy. But when Niko started talking and counting he made it harder for Tris to fly like she usually did. She felt weighted down. Whenever she was getting free he would tell her to pull back, fold her wings, to take her power and draw it into herself. It was difficult and frustrating and Tris couldn’t be bothered with it.

She opened her eyes to tell Niko so, but choked in inarticulate shock instead. Niko was shining like the sun, a brilliant white light that completely washed out all other colours in the room around them. Tris leaned back away from him and put both hands up to shield her eyes.

The light faded. Tris squeezed her eyes closed tightly, though she knew it wouldn’t help with the heavy shadows left on her retinas.

“This is what we’ll be working on,” Niko said casually, as though he hadn’t just literally lit up the room. “All summer.”

Tris stared at him, the shape of him matching the dark patches in her vision. “Do I do that?”

Niko shook his head. “Your power is a trickier prospect than mine,” he said. “It takes some searching for.”

That was nonsense. “I never had to search for it,” Tris said frankly.

“You would be surprised, I think, to learn just how much of your power is out of your reach,” he said. “When upset or angry you can cause destruction, yes?”

Old instincts told Tris to deny it, to always deny it was anything to do with her.

“Tris?”

“Yes,” she said through gritted teeth. “I can.”

“I can tell you now, that will not be happening again. It is the very least, the easiest and most
unreliable manifestation of your power. You’re selling yourself short, Tris, if you think it is the sum of what you can do.”

“What else?”

Niko tried to lean forwards, but the beanbag sagged underneath him and he had to shift around to get settled again.

Tris snorted, but the indignity of the beanbag didn’t lessen in any way the impact of the grave expression he sent her way. “You will learn to control your power, Trisana, before you even think of expanding it. I promise you that.”

That sounded a lot like hard work. Tris yawned.

“But first, dinner,” he said. It took him three goes, but eventually he pushed himself to his feet. Then he leaned down to offer Tris a hand up. There was a lot of that going on lately. Tris might have resented it had she not actually needed it.

Niko pulled her upright and made sure she was steady before moving away. “You’ll make it down the stairs?”

“Of course I will.” Niko could be as officious as he liked out of guilt; Tris was still capable of walking, and soon she’d be able to fly.
They always ate breakfast scattered between the kitchen island, the table and outside on the patio. The patio was almost always Briar, who always made multiple trips back and forwards to reload. Sometimes Sandry went out and sat with him and sometimes she sat with Daja. Tris never went outside; she always sat at the exact same spot at the table with a book and never said anything to anybody.

Daja quite enjoyed mornings in her new home now that there was a settled routine. She liked to sit up on one of the tall chairs and eat her fruit and muesli, and eggs if someone was making some. There was always so much food people rarely argued over it, and nobody was ever in a hurry.

When she got up to put her empty bowl in the sink, Daja saw Niko’s Citroën rolling slowly down the driveway, past the window. Instead of going upstairs to brush her teeth she sat back down to wait and see what was going to happen.

Niko stopped for a while to talk to Lark, who was sitting outside with Briar. Briar didn’t stick around with them; he came straight back inside to put some more bread in the toaster.

“What’s going on?” Daja asked him. Sandry got up from the table to join them, leaving Rosethorn and Tris to eat in silence.

“Niko says someone called Moonstream’s gonna talk to that Steve guy, he says everything’s gonna be fine.” Briar tapped his foot impatiently, watching the toaster.

Sandry stood right next to him, ignoring the sideways glance he gave her. “Everything’s going to be fine? What does that mean?”

Lark and Niko were still talking, repeatedly looking inside at the three of them. Daja pulled out her phone and fiddled with it to stop herself from staring back at them.

Briar wandered around Sandry and over to the fridge, but Rosethorn spoke up before he could open the door. “No more juice, you’ve had two cups. Drink some water.”

Briar turned around to face her. “Juice is healthier, but. It’s got fruit in it.”

“Two cups is more than enough. You could always have a drink of milk, for your bones.”

There was a very brief stare-off, then Briar twisted his face up in disgust and went to fill his cup with water instead. He sculled it thoughtlessly and filled it right back up again.

Sandry watched him curiously. She was always so interested in the details of what other people did. Daja didn’t mind too much, but it could get tiresome. Briar and Tris had no tolerance whatsoever for Sandry’s meddling, but that never stopped Sandry. “Drinking too much water can make you sick.”

Briar rolled his eyes. “Since when?”

“My dad always said it did.”

“I don’t run my life on your dad’s say-so.” The toaster popped. Briar downed his second cup of water and went to grab his toast.
Niko and Lark came inside. Daja slipped her phone back into her pocket. She folded her hands to discourage them from trembling. There was no need to be so nervous.

“Are we finished breakfast?” Niko asked.

“Except for the bottomless pit over there,” said Rosethorn, nodding her head at Briar.

“How’s Buddy?” Sandry asked Niko.

“Mr Wells has asked me to share his suggestion with everyone here,” said Niko. “He doesn’t think he will be able to give Buddy enough care at home to recover from his injury, so –”

Sandry was bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet. “We’ll look after him!”

“That is the suggestion, yes.”

“It will be a family decision,” Lark said, before Sandry could get too excited. “Care of an animal is a real commitment.”

“Especially an injured animal,” added Rosethorn. “It’s no small responsibility.”

“We can do it,” Sandry said with absolute certainty. “There’s so many of us.”


“Yes,” said Tris, not even looking up from her book. That surprised Daja. Tris never struck her as someone who’d have any time for animals.

Daja shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

All eyes turned to Briar, standing stiffly by the toaster. “If you treat a dog bad it goes bad for good,” he said defensively. “And dogs go real bad.”

“It’s just a puppy!” Sandry protested. “A baby!”

“Puppy would have bit you if you got close enough the other day.”

“It was scared!”

“Yeah well it’s always gonna be scared, it’s been scared shitless from day dot by those sick fu—”

Tris cut in loudly. “Do you want to leave it with them to keep being terrorised, then?”

A heavy silence fell over the room. Daja looked at the adults. Rosethorn was leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed, watching them all with interest. Niko was looking thoughtfully between Tris and Briar. Lark was watching Daja watching, which made her jump and look away.

If the adults were intentionally letting the four of them settle things between them, then they should get on and settle them. “I don’t think it will be dangerous,” Daja said. “It’s only little.”

“I’m not scared of it,” Briar scoffed. But Daja didn’t quite believe him.

“We have other things to discuss, anyway,” said Lark. “We’ll talk about this again in a little while when we’ve all had some time to think about it.”

“Clean up in here, brush your teeth and so on,” said Rosethorn. “And then we’ll deal with the
Whenever Sandry was upset her teeth thanked her, because they got such a vigorous and thorough scrubbing no germs or plaque would dare stand against it.

It was so selfish of Briar, when everyone else wanted to welcome the puppy into their home. Sandry had always wanted a pet, but her mum and dad said that they travelled too much for it to be worth it. Briar didn’t even have a good reason to say no, other than that made-up nonsense about how dangerous it would be to have a cute little puppy living with them in their home. A little dog like that never hurt anybody.

Briar had been in their shared bathroom a couple of minutes ago, scraped his toothbrush weakly against his teeth for about two seconds and then gone off again like usual without saying anything. Sandry tried to always think well of people, but sometimes Briar got on her nerves.

She would find him, and talk him around. Everyone would be happier with a dog in the house, she was sure of it. Why else did people have pets?

Sandry walked out of her room and towards the back of the house where Rosethorn was wiping down the kitchen table. Rosethorn looked up to see Sandry and jerked her head upwards. “Niko and the others are upstairs.”

Realising she was probably keeping them all waiting, Sandry turned back around and hurried up the stairs. Niko, Daja, Tris and Briar were all sitting in the beanbags gathered together in the middle of the floor, with one empty spot between Niko and Briar.

How long had they been waiting for Sandry as she had brushed her teeth and felt sorry for herself in the bathroom? With a bit of a blush, Sandry stepped around the exercise book and pen next to Niko and quickly sat down.

“I daresay you’ve been talking amongst yourselves about what happened yesterday,” said Niko.

“It’s magic,” said Briar. “We know.”


Briar went on anyway. “They all say they can do magic.”

Niko took a deep breath. “You all can,” he said. “It’s how I found you.”

Sandry felt terrible, even though she knew she was supposed to feel happy. It didn’t seem fair that Niko had known about it all this time and had never said anything to her. How long had Sandry feared that she was losing her mind, and been afraid that people would think she was crazy? Niko had helped her get back to Australia, he’d looked after her and been kind to her, but he had also been hiding something from her and it was hard not to feel hurt.

“So this is a cult,” said Briar. “I knew it.”

Sandry decided that ignoring him would be best. “Is that why we’re living here?”

“I thought it was odd, being sent so far from the city,” said Daja.

Briar muttered something under his breath so quietly that Sandry didn’t hear.
“I brought you here to live with Lark and Rosethorn, who aside from being your guardians, are also accomplished mages and excellent teachers.”

“Frostpine as well?” said Daja.

Niko nodded.

Daja looked away and smiled quietly to herself.

Sandry couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Why didn’t you say anything to us before?”

Niko looked a little bit embarrassed, but he still met her eyes. “We wanted you to have some time to find your feet here and get settled in. You were all in a fair state of upheaval and I didn’t want to risk overloading you.” He glanced at Tris. “That being said, I did intend to have this conversation earlier than it has transpired. Lark and Rosethorn agreed, reluctantly, to wait for my return, and I left it too long.”

That made sense to Sandry but she still felt rotten about it. She didn’t like thinking about Niko or Lark keeping secrets from her. Especially Lark.

“That’s okay,” said Daja. “We didn’t know there was anything to wait for.”

“I wish I’d known sooner,” Sandry said quietly. She felt bad for saying it, but if she stayed quiet now it would eat at her inside.

Niko reached out and took her hand. “I’m sorry for that,” he said. “Truly.”

Sandry blinked the tears out of her eyes and smiled up at him. He did look very sorry, and none of the others seemed to mind. “It’s okay.”

“Nothing really bad came of it,” said Daja.

Sandry and Tris looked at her in surprise.

“What was yesterday, a romp in the park?” said Briar. “Those two guys are gonna hate us forever, especially if we steal their own dog from under them. Them and their prick dad. We live right next to them, so that’s bad if you ask me.”

“Nobody did ask you,” said Tris.

“I think we should just agree that it wasn’t good, and move on,” said Sandry before they could start bickering again. “Niko apologised and we really are alright, aren’t we?”

“We’re fine,” said Daja.

“Yes,” agreed Tris.

Briar sighed. “Like pigs in shit.”

“Right then,” said Niko with a bit of a funny look at Briar. “Moving forwards, I will be teaching you meditation, along with a few other useful skills. Chiefly though you will learn from someone whose magic is the same as yours, to give you the best possible instruction.”

*Lark*, Sandry thought with delight. *Lark will be teaching me!* She thought of the spinning they’d done together, and the looms in Lark’s workroom, and couldn’t wait to really properly get started. She would make up for every second of lost time. She couldn’t wait.
Lark was going to teach Sandry, Rosethorn would handle Briar and this Frostpine person would teach Daja. That much was obvious.

There was the straightforward and obvious, and then there was Tris.

“Who has the same magic as me?” she asked Niko.

“A weather mage is a hard thing to tie down,” said Niko. “I have been looking, and I will continue to do so. In the meantime, I will do my best to teach you.”

So the others all had everything they needed within arms reach and, surprise surprise, Tris didn’t. She might be staying in a fairly decent place now, but some things were true everywhere, and Tris always getting the short end of the stick was one of them.

It wasn’t really Niko’s fault, so Tris made a real attempt at a smile for his sake. But all she could think about was getting an education one step lower than the others. What if it meant she could never be as good?

But that wouldn’t happen. If Niko couldn’t teach her everything, Tris would teach herself. She’d done it before. She would be able to outdo Briar, at the very least.

Niko filled the awkward silence. “As for the meditation, that starts now.”

“Meditation’s a scam,” announced Briar.

“How so?”

“There’s no such a thing as enlightenment. They tell you give us money and sit around and meditate and you’ll reach nirvana or whatever, and then later they tell you it’s impossible. So why bother? And it’s dead boring anyway.”

“Can you just shut up and stop complaining?” snapped Tris. “Some of us want to learn.”

“What, you still listen when he talks?” Daja asked.

The longer they lived together the harder it was getting to tell when Daja was joking, if she ever did. Tris didn’t know how to reply, so she looked back at Niko and waited for him to continue.

“There are a great many benefits to meditation,” Niko said in his teaching voice. “Some secular, some spiritual, some magical, and sometimes a combination of the three. Simply put, meditation will help you to control and develop your power.”

“How?” Daja asked quietly.

Niko picked up the exercise book and carefully tore out one sheet of paper. “How far do you think I can throw this piece of paper as it is?”

“Nowhere,” said Briar immediately. “It’s just gonna flutter and flap.”

“Care to try?”

Briar took the sheet of paper and looked at it thoughtfully. He put it horizontally and tried to flick it like a frisbee; it went about twenty centimetres, flipped itself upright, fell downwards to the floor and slid back towards him.
“What can you do to fix that?” Niko asked them all.

“Scrunch it up?” said Sandry.

“Paper plane,” said Daja after a moment. Tris kicked herself for not thinking of that first.

Niko handed them each their own piece of paper. “Show me.”

Tris saw Sandry scrunch the paper up as tightly as she could, but watched Daja’s hands moving slowly and surely to fold up her own piece into a paper plane.

Tris been frustrated when Niko had told her to fold in on herself and make herself small when they’d last meditated. It had seemed so counterproductive. She’d never thought of it like this before, that packing all her power tightly in together could make her fly further and faster. Could he not have explained it to her properly then?

Sandry held her wad of paper tightly in her fist as she waited for Daja to be done.

Once she was, Niko said, "Briar?” The boy picked up his sheet. “All three of you, against the far wall there. Tris, stay with me and we’ll watch the results.”

The three others moved to the far end of the corridor. Tris and Niko stood at the top of the stairs. “Tris?”

“Go,” said Tris loudly.

Briar flung his paper half-heartedly in front of him; this time it came all the way back to knock into his shins. Sandry threw hers with all her might, and it made it past the bean bag room before bouncing to a halt just in front of Tris and Niko. Daja flicked her wrist to send her plane flying, and it cruised effortlessly, levelly towards them. It would have flown over Tris’s head and down the stairs if Niko hadn’t held out his long arm and caught it as it passed him.

He smiled, which made his moustache shift and deepened all his wrinkles. “And there you have it. The untrained mind, the controlled mind, the organised mind. Perfectly illustrated, thank you all very much.”

“Yeah if your brain’s made of paper,” said Briar. “Can I see that plane?”

“After the session,” said Niko. “Now everyone sit down, get as comfortable as you can.”

Everyone did as he said, even if Briar gave him the stink-eye before doing so.

“Now I don’t want anyone attempting any paper planes today,” said Niko. “As Briar has so helpfully pointed out, the human mind is not made of paper. It’s not a perfect analogy. Just get comfortable, relax, and listen as I speak, and we’ll make a start.”

Niko walked a slow circle around them. His speech was familiar, and the breathing pattern was second nature to Tris after all her practice. And now that she knew what she was supposed to get out of it Tris didn’t have a problem with trying to compress her sense of herself in her mind.

It was over almost before it began. With all the others being new to it Niko must not be sure if they could handle what Tris could. It was just disappointing to not get the chance to try to go further yet.

As soon as Niko told them they could open their eyes Tris snapped hers open to check how the
others had fared. Daja looked a little nervous; Sandry had a crinkle on her forehead. Briar was more than half asleep. Certainly none of them were glowing like Niko had.

Tris looked up at him, standing a little way away from them with his hands behind his back, and her sense of triumph faded with the warning look in his eyes.

“Not a bad start,” he said to them all. “We’ll build on that tomorrow.”

“Joy,” said Briar through a huge yawn.

“That was strange,” said Sandry. “Does it really help?”

“It does,” said Niko. “I guarantee it. And now, back downstairs.”

Lark and Rosethorn were sitting together drinking tea at the kitchen table. Rosethorn watched Niko as they approached; Lark looked over the four children, like she was making sure they were each still in one piece.

“No casualties, then?” Rosethorn asked wryly.

“All unscathed,” Niko said. “I don’t suppose you have any coffee here?”

Lark glanced at Rosethorn, who shook her head. Niko sighed heavily. “A living space entirely without coffee is highly unnatural,” he complained. “Think of your poor guests.”

“You’re spending far too much time with academics,” said Lark, her tone mildly scolding.

“And uni students,” added Rosethorn. “I suppose you’re addicted to those vile energy drinks as well, are you?”

“No, in fact, I am not addicted to energy drinks. I’m surprised you even know about them,” said Niko.

Lark laughed. “Niko, we go to the supermarket just like anyone else.”

“And people throw their cans away in the middle of national parks,” added Rosethorn bitterly.

“Can we go?” asked Briar.

“No,” said Rosethorn. “You four, listen up. You’re going to do meditation with Niko every morning, without fail. In the afternoons you’ll each be working on your own summer project, which you’ll develop in consultation with your teacher. You’re all off school early this year, but that’s no reason to stop learning and growing. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. Any questions?”

Even if Tris had had a question, she wouldn’t be asking Rosethorn. It all sounded fine anyway – like school, but without all the useless subjects, and without all the children outnumbering the adults. Niko was smart and educated and he was going to teach her, and the others would all be off learning their own things and wouldn’t get in her way.

“Anybody? No?”

Briar felt like he had questions, loads of questions right up the back of his mind, but he couldn’t put any of them into words. He shook his head and so did the girls.

“Alright then, scram. One hour until lunch.”
Sandry and Daja swapped one of their mind-reading looks and went off to Sandry’s room. Tris went right upstairs.

Briar wasn’t allowed out in the garden without Rosethorn, so he wouldn’t try it with her right there watching him. He didn’t want to hang out near Sandry and Daja and all their girl-talk, so his room was out as well. He killed a bit of time off down the hall until he knew Tris would be barricaded in her room, then headed upstairs up to the spot he still thought of as his, even if everyone had been trampling all around in it lately.

It really seemed like Rosethorn and Lark wanted to keep him here. He’d had a sense of it for a fair while, but now they were making summer plans and talking about school and all that it looked like a done deal. They thought he was going to be here, like, from now on. Next year. Maybe even longer.

It was way too late for Briar to try for the housebound life, even if any family or school would take him. Longest he’d ever done was like three weeks with Duong and that was forever ago now. No one else here seemed to realise that Briar was just biding his time here. They all thought he was fitting in.

There was a whole summer to go before they might try and make him go to school. A lot could happen between now and then, so Briar decided not to worry about it. He was still groggy anyway after nodding off during the so-called meditation. A quick nap, then downstairs for lunch, then maybe he could go out in the garden again with Rosethorn for the afternoon. Find out what the hell she meant by saying he had to do a summer project, which sounded kind of like work.

But that was later, after lunch. Briar settled back and closed his eyes.

The problem with napping upstairs was that Tris was always barging in and acting all like he was in her way. His finders keepers claim on the place was getting weaker and weaker the longer Tris and the others lived here with him, but Briar was going to use it until his dying day, just to annoy her.

“Dude, leave me alone,” he said the moment he heard her door open. He cracked his eyes open to see her mess of red hair poke out her bedroom doorway.

She took one look at him then made a beeline to the beanbag closest to him, just to make sure he knew she wasn’t letting him hustle her out of the area. And then she opened her book and totally ignored him. Briar closed his eyes again. Two could play at that game.

He’d been all for learning reading and writing when Lark first said he could, but it hadn’t been as easy as he thought. He’d known the alphabet since forever, and he could memorise the spelling of words when he had to, but they always slipped out of his mind after a little while and he had to learn them all over again.

But it couldn’t be all that hard, if all the girls could do it. Briar listened to the pages flip, just about faster than he could believe. Flip flip flip, pause, flip, pause, flip flip flip. It was enough to do your head in.

He snuck a peek. She was just turning pages back and forwards, not even reading anything.

“I don’t really know shit about reading, but I reckon you’re supposed to read all the words in a row,” he said. “Not just piss about turning pages.”

Tris looked down her nose at him then went back to flipping pages. But then she stopped and
closed the book, leaving a finger in the middle somewhere. She looked at him closely, like she was
trying to be Niko. She had a decent crack at it but didn’t come close.

“Do you not know how to read at all?”

Briar looked away. “Not really.”

“Did you even try and learn?”

Where did she get off with that patronising shit? “Did you even try and learn to mind your own
personal business?”

Tris rolled her eyes. “Well I’m certainly not going to help you if you don’t really want to learn. I’m
not going to waste my time.”

Briar’s response was out of his mouth before her sideways offer of help cleared his ears. “Good, so
stop wasting mine.”

Her eyes were all buggy behind her glasses. “Did you never listen in school?”

Briar yawned. “Never went.”

That shut her up. For a second, anyway. “You never went to school? Ever?” Briar shrugged. Tris
stared at him like he’d just told her he was from Mars. “How is that possible? How can you –
how?”

“Well, I had other stuff to do.”

Tris let that info settle, put down her book and stood up. “You’re Rosethorn’s student, so I guess
you like … plants?”

Briar shrugged. Sometimes Tris made way more sense than he was comfortable with, and
sometimes she talked absolute random crap.

“Right, wait here.”

She went downstairs. Briar reached across and picked up her book. It was a thick ragged old thing
with three birds on the cover. One of them was a galah, he didn’t know the other two. Briar made
an educated guess that the biggest word on the cover said birds as well. Started with B, anyway.

He opened the front cover. There was a big map of Australia on the first page, then the next one
was blank. On the top left someone had written something there in blue but it was scribbled out
hard in black.

Briar flicked through the book. Most of it was just a whole bunch of words, but in the middle there
was a big chunk of glossy pages with pictures of birds on them, in colour and everything.

Tris came stomping back up the stairs with a book in her hand, then went into her room and came
out with another one.

“We’re supposed to be on holiday,” Briar said quickly, tossing the book back where he got it. He’d
come up here to sleep, not to have his first day at school.

Tris stared meaningfully at the book he’d been nosing around in, then back at him. Briar leaned
back and closed his eyes. “I didn’t know you were big into birds,” he said.
He heard Tris sit down and then felt the two books land on his chest. What was it with girls and putting things on him? He wasn’t a bloody table.

Tris didn’t say anything, just started flipping pages again. Briar waited for a while then his curiosity got the better of him. He shifted back up to sitting, catching the two books before they slid off him.

“One of them’s a novel and the other one’s non-fiction,” Tris said absently. “I don’t know which you’d prefer.”

It was hard to decide between two words that meant nothing to Briar. So he looked a bit more closely at the books. One of them had a picture of a girl on the front, and the other one had a tree and grass.

Girls or trees, tough choice. Briar opened the first book to the front page. Someone had written something in here, too, in neat print letters. He mouthed the letters to himself, and once he had the first word down he could guess the rest. “Tris Chandler,” he said. “This is yours?”

Tris fixed her eyes suspiciously on Briar’s face. “I thought you said you couldn’t read.”

“I know the letters, T-R-I-S.”

“And the second word?”

Briar shrugged. “It’s your name, so Chandler.”

Tris put down her book. “Spell it out.”

“Why? I already know what it says.”

“The other book will teach you a lot about plants once you can read it,” Tris said craftily. “That’s what you want, right?”

“Rosethorn’s gonna teach me all about plants anyway,” Briar said. He wondered if she was out in the garden right now, in the sun and fresh air and not stuck up here with Professor Chandler.

“It’s better if you can read,” said Tris. “You don’t have to rely on anyone to teach you if you can teach yourself.”

That was true, but it wasn’t like Briar would be getting his hands on any books if he was gone from here. Nobody had any. What was the point?

“Spell it out,” Tris insisted. “If you know all the letters you can read anything, you just have to learn to put them together in the right way.”


Tris wriggled over closer. “C and H together are usually that ch sound, remember that one. If a word ends in E-R you just say uh. That’s an Australian thing; in America they’d say err, more like how it looks.”

Briar looked at the word. “Chandler,” he repeated. He could see how that all worked, just about. “Cool.”

“Can you spell your name?”
Well that depended what his name was when you asked. Briar shook his head. He’d barely been
Briar for a second, no time to learn to spell it.

“Try.”

He ran through the alphabet a bunch of times until he’d matched the sounds to the letters as best he

Tris grinned. “Close. It’s an A, not an E.”

Briar scowled. “You said E - R makes the uh sound.”

“Well sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn’t, and sometimes other things do as well.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“That’s how it is,” said Tris. “Too bad.”

Yeah, sometimes Tris made way more sense than Briar liked to admit.
Steve dropped off Buddy, and his dog food, and his bed, and his leash, and his paperwork, and his medication, and a cardboard box of dog toys the next morning before heading off to work. Tris could hardly believe he’d gone through with it: no parents she knew of would be willing to admit any fault in their own children, not when there were others that could be blamed instead.

That was not going to be one happy family any time soon. Tris felt sorry for the father, but not the sons. They deserved whatever they got.

“Let him settle in quietly,” Lark told them all, while Rosethorn tied the puppy’s leash to part of the patio, where it could stay outside or go partway into the kitchen if it wanted. “This is a very new place for a very young dog.”

“No fear,” said Briar, eyeing the puppy suspiciously. Tris took the water bowl, filled it up in the kitchen and set it back down outside in the shade. The puppy didn’t move, just lifted its head a little off its paws to watch her walking, then settled back down again afterwards.

Lark seemed to know what do with dogs, but Tris wasn’t sure if any of the others did. She wished they would all just go away. Tris would make herself scarce, but she didn’t want to abandon Buddy here, in a strange place, with people – Sandry – who she knew wouldn’t be able to give it space if it was upset.

There was no trouble of that with Briar, who was clearly scared of dogs and only still standing out on the patio with them because he didn’t want everyone to know it. As if everybody didn’t know already. Buddy probably could tell just from the smell of him, and it would know, just like Tris did, that when people were scared that’s when they were most dangerous. Briar should just swallow his pride and get lost, for both their sakes.

“His coat is so fluffy!” Sandry exclaimed. “I can’t wait to brush him, does he like it? Did Steve bring a brush?”

Lark smiled. “Quietly, I said.”

“Hey Briar,” said Daja. “Come and look at this.” Briar sidled further away from the puppy to stand next to Daja. She held her phone in front of his face. “You’ll want to make friends with him now before it’s too late, I think.”

“Whoa,” said Briar, taking two steps further back, narrowly avoiding walking into Lark. “Are you sure that’s a dog and not a fu— a fricken bear? Are you shitting me? This thing’s gonna grow up and eat the lot of us for breakfast!”

“What?” said Tris, going over to look as well. Daja must have looked through the paperwork, because she’d googled “Great Pyrenees” and, well, it wasn’t what Tris would call a small dog breed. And it definitely wasn’t a dog for a warm climate. “Why on earth would they bring that kind of dog out here?”

“Yeah, it’s practically a polar bear,” said Daja.

“Are you a little bear?” Sandry said to the puppy, in a horrible cutesy little-kid voice. She knelt down beside it, pausing for a moment before reaching out her hand to ruffle its ears. “Are you?”
Briar looked like he was going to be sick. “Okay, see ya,” he said. He walked inside and away towards his room, with a stiff kind of slowness that Tris knew meant he’d rather be running.

It looked like Sandry was going to practically sit on the puppy all day. Tris couldn’t very well tell her to go away and let Tris spend time with Buddy. Sandry seemed to be doing okay for now, but she’d get bored of it soon enough and until then there was no need for Tris to be hanging around as well.

“Do you like dogs, then?” Daja asked.

Tris turned back around in surprise. It wasn’t like Daja to start up a conversation like that. “So what?”

Daja sighed. “Never mind.”

They stood in silence for a moment. “Do you?”

Daja looked at it for a moment. “I don’t know.”

And this was why the two of them shouldn’t bother talking to each other. Tris wished she’d walked off when Briar had.

“Daja!” said Sandry. “Come and look at him, he’s so cute!”

“I suppose I’ll be finding out,” said Daja. She smiled politely but coolly at Tris and went to join her friend.

Having a puppy in the house changed things, but it didn’t exactly bring them all together like Sandry had imagined.

Tris came out of her room a lot more without being asked to, but all she did in the living room was sit and read. Briar was a lot quieter than before and tended to stay away from the main parts of the house. He was always either upstairs, in his room or outside, all places where the puppy couldn’t get to. Daja’s behaviour didn’t change much at all: she helped out when she was asked to, but otherwise she didn’t seem to notice there was a dog in the house now. It was disappointing, but Sandry no way regretted that they’d saved him and adopted him. He was safe now.

The name Buddy had been forgotten by Tuesday. Tris had decided that it was a name associated with fear for the puppy, and refused to call him by it. That made sense to Sandry. She still hated to be called Sandrilene, because she had only ever been called that when her parents or Pirisi were really seriously cross with her. It took her back to all the worst scoldings. So it made sense that the old name might remind the puppy of its old, cruel owners.

Lark had been calling him “the little bear” ever since Daja’s and Sandry’s comments on that first day. Rosethorn and Daja had quickly followed suit. By Thursday everyone except Briar called him Little Bear without thinking twice about it. Briar still called him “the dog”, when he had to admit he existed at all.

“You don’t have to be scared of him,” Sandry had said when Rosethorn asked Briar to check on Little Bear’s water and he’d tried not to wince. “He’s not scary at all.”

“I’m not scared,” Briar insisted, but whenever he was close to Little Bear he walked very lightly and carefully, and his eyes were always fixed on the fluffy white puppy.
Sandry knew that Lark had spoken to Briar about Little Bear, and Rosethorn probably did as well while the two of them were out in the garden in the afternoons. Sandry had come across him and Tris one time sitting on the couch in the living room arguing about dog body language and behaviour. Tris had known so much about it that Sandry wanted to learn, but when she went to join them Briar threw down his book and went off to his room, keeping a careful distance between his feet and the sleeping puppy on the floor.

Tris and Sandry made it their project to start training Little Bear, because a dog that was going to grow up to be just about person-sized would have to be very well-behaved and obedient. Daja joined in sometimes and she seemed to like Little Bear well enough too. Tris seemed friendlier when Little Bear was around than when it was only humans. She barely said anything mean or argued with them at all, even when Daja was there.

Sandry was so glad that they’d taken him in. She was so glad about it that it barely even made her jealous that Little Bear liked Tris best out of anyone. She just hoped that Briar would change his mind soon, because if he didn’t they might have to give the puppy away. Sandry couldn’t imagine Lark doing that, but since she and Rosethorn were Briar’s guardians they would probably have to if Little Bear was bad for him.

If only there was such an easy way to get rid of Sandry’s own fear. It wasn’t like Briar and Little Bear; there was nowhere Sandry could go to get away from her dreams. Lark couldn’t send them away to make her feel safe, just like that. Sandry had to be brave, and get tougher by herself. She just wished she knew how long it would take.

For her summer project Sandry wanted to figure out how to put light into her work again, and then make some clothes to wear – maybe gloves – so she could never be left in the dark again. She hadn’t mentioned to Lark that it was because she was still scared of the dark. By the time it got cold enough to wear gloves again, maybe she wouldn’t be afraid any longer.

On Sunday they were all going to go to Frostpine’s house for a barbecue, and Daja couldn’t wait. It was so frustrating all week: every afternoon Briar went off into the garden with Rosethorn, Sandry sat with Lark spinning and knitting and mending things for hours, and Niko stayed around to work with Tris. He and Lark always asked if Daja would like to join them, but Daja always said no. She couldn’t think of anything more frustrating than wanting to see Frostpine, and work with him, and learn from him, and have to instead tag along to someone else’s magic lesson.

She had permission to go on the computer though, so as well as reading the books she’d borrowed from the library Daja was able to do research online. According to her research, as things stood she wouldn’t be able to officially work with Frostpine until she was fifteen unless she got a permit, and even if with a permit she could only do “light work”, which didn’t include anything Daja was interested in.

So if she couldn’t become an apprentice like Kirel for four whole years, what was she going to do in the meantime? Sandry and Briar would be fine, because they lived with their teachers, and what they did was safe for children anyway. Tris’s magic wasn’t even work. Maybe Daja could go and live with Frostpine instead – that way she would be able to learn a lot more, straight away.

Daja reminded herself every day that she’d only met Frostpine once. She barely knew him. Maybe later, if they got along well, she could think about it. She absolutely couldn’t ask Lark about it, not when she and Rosethorn had done so much for Daja already, and Daja was grateful for it. It was just that Daja didn’t have a place here, in this country, in this town, even here in this house. The only time she’d really felt comfortable had been in Frostpine’s workshop, and that had lasted for all of twenty minutes before she’d had to leave.
It was a bizarre reversal, holding out all week for Sunday morning, when for so long she and Uneny had dreaded Sundays, constantly trying to think up ways to get out of going to church. Constantly trying, and consistently failing. And then as a family they’d stopped going, cold turkey, after all the things people said when word got out Uneny had kissed Riordan Bell, who was cute and also white and also the nephew of one of the biggest donors to their church.

Daja had been nine then, and she’d just been glad to stop having to go. Now she wondered if maybe she missed it after all. She bookmarked an online directory of churches in Wangaratta and tried to forget about it. It wasn’t church she missed; it was the family she’d gone with. And they weren’t coming back.

On Sunday morning Niko came over straight after breakfast. They did their meditation session – Daja found it unusually difficult to concentrate – then Niko stayed behind to look after Little Bear and the rest of them bundled into the two cars and headed down to Frostpine’s.

Daja paid very careful attention as they drove: if she could memorise the way there, maybe she would be able to get a bike and ride down herself, for lessons. It was a long way, and to get back to the house would be a tough ride uphill, but if she did it a lot she’d get used to it. She was sitting around too much these days. She felt stagnant, and lazy. Useless.

Once they were down out of the hills they drove for about five minutes down the long, straight road – Wangandary Rd, Daja remembered – before turning right, going through one intersection, and then left into a driveway and they were there. All the land around them was wide open and brown, and though there weren’t any complicated directions to remember Daja didn’t know if she would be able to tell one road from another if she was out here on her own. She’d have to turn on the GPS on her phone for the trip back, to see if it would cover the whole journey.

But for now she was here, finally, at Frostpine’s house. The driveway was even longer than the one at Lark and Rosethorn’s and it even had an intersection: you could turn right and pull up by the beaten old weatherboard house, or continue straight ahead to a tin shed on the left and a motley collection of machinery. Straight ahead was just dry brown grass and a whole lot of trees as far as Daja’s eye could see.

Daja wanted to go and see what was in the shed but Lark and Rosethorn set off together towards the house so she had to follow them with the others. As they walked along the side of the house Rosethorn started to veer off sideways, but Lark took her by the elbow and kept her on track. Daja looked where Rosethorn had been going but it was just a whole lot of bushes and some trees there. Daja didn’t see the appeal.

They rounded the corner around to the side of the house. Frostpine was wearing shorts and a button-up shirt, sitting in a deckchair by the pool, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and drinking a glass of something. The lawn was cut neat and short and there was a shadecloth attached to the side of the house and a nearby tree that cast a fair chunk of the backyard into shade. There was a barbecue set up just by the house and an esky beside it.

Tris came to a dead halt and even took a couple of steps back. Briar, who’d been walking behind her, shoved her back forwards to where she’d been. Daja smiled at Frostpine; he grinned widely back. Daja hadn’t quite remembered how huge his beard was, nor how long he grew his hair.

“G’day, g’day, g’day,” he said, putting down his glass and launching himself to his feet. “How are we all? Rosethorn, Lark. Daja.”

“G’day,” said Rosethorn easily, and though Daja hadn’t heard her say it before, it sounded natural for her. Usually Daja only heard people say g’day in a kind of sarcastic way, but not Frostpine and
Frostpine looked at the other kids. “Now this lot I haven’t met.”

“This is Sandry, Briar and Tris,” said Daja. “We all live together.”

“Sandry, Briar, Tris,” repeated Frostpine, with a little nod for each of them. “My name’s Frostpine, you’re all very welcome here. Drinks are in the esky, snacks on the table inside. We’ll fire up the old prawn scorcher in a little bit.”

Briar wandered very casually over to go inside the house, where the food was, surprising no-one. Rosethorn looked around at them all, then without a word turned around and went back the way they came.

“She’ll be off to critique my vegie patch,” Frostpine said cheerfully. “It never stops.”

“May I get a drink, please?” Sandry asked politely.

Frostpine lifted the lid off the esky for Sandry, who jogged up to it and fossicked around. Tris hung back behind Daja and Lark.

“He won’t bite,” Daja said irritably, turning around. Tris wouldn’t meet her eyes. Daja looked at her for a moment and felt her stomach start to churn.

Lark laid a hand on Daja’s shoulder.

“Who else wants one?” Sandry called out. Daja gladly removed her eyes from Tris’s face and marched over to join her teacher and her friend.

Frostpine’s house was way more cluttered than Lark and Rosethorn’s, with weird shit just sitting all over the place. Briar didn’t realise how much he’d gotten used to all the space in the palace of a house he was living in – Frostpine’s was nowhere near small but Briar ran out of places to stick his nose in way sooner than he expected. Especially since he’d made himself a new rule that if a door was closed he wasn’t going to open it.

Basically there was hand tools and boxes and bits of paper all over the place but not much that Briar could really put a value on. He had taken a tiny peek behind a couple of closed doors and found Frostpine’s bedroom and his office, but he hadn’t gone into them. That was something like civilised behaviour, Briar was pretty sure. That was respecting private property. He was really making them proud.

There was a drumkit in one room, pretty old and beaten up but not dusty. That might be worth something, if you could move it. Briar knew a guy with a van, but last Briar knew he lived in Collingwood, so he wouldn’t likely be keen on the drive. If Briar was desperate he’d probably grab the X-Box and the set-top box and clear out the bathroom cabinet. Not a big score, but quick and dirty would do the trick.

And then it was just what he’d eat. If there was any cooked leftovers they’d be in the fridge, so Roach started there. He hadn’t eaten in hours, and you never knew when you’d hit a shit run of luck. It wasn’t every day you got to make off with a home-cooked meal, so if you had the chance you went for it.

Roach froze with his hand just touching a tupperware container with some kind of brown sauce in it. You get three home-cooked meals a day, he thought. You dimwit!
He closed the door quickly, wiping his hands off on his shirt. No big deal, nobody had seen him. And they wouldn’t throw him in jail, anyways, for looking in a man’s fridge.

Briar rubbed his hand over his short, bristly hair. Things had changed. These days there were people looking out for him, people who’d likely come looking for him soon. If it wasn’t Rosethorn it’d be Lark, and if it wasn’t Lark, it’d be Sandry. Briar shook his head, grabbed a handful of chips from a bowl on the kitchen table and went back outside.

Sandry, Daja, Lark and Frostpine were kicking a soccer ball around a little way off from the house. Tris hadn’t been allowed to bring a book with her but somehow she had one in her hands already and was sitting in the shade reading.

Rosethorn was sitting off on her own in the deckchair Frostpine had been in when they got there. Her eyes were closed, her hands folded across her stomach. Briar had never before in his life wanted so badly to go and talk to someone and at the exact same time to leave them peaceful and undisturbed forever. Maybe he should take a nap too, like any reasonable person would be doing getting to the hottest part of a day like this one.

“Heads up!” shouted Daja. Briar turned to see her kick the ball at him like she was taking one of those kicks for goal.

He had to hustle sideways a couple steps to cut off the low kick, but he trapped it neatly enough and dribbled it back towards them. He only hoped they were messing around and not playing real soccer: Briar didn’t know the proper rules. The games he played in always ended up as fights; he’d have to be careful not to be too rough with the girls.

“Keepings off Frostpine!” Lark shouted.

Well, Briar knew this game. He kicked the ball out the side of Sandry, as far away from Frostpine as he could get. Sandry passed it to Lark, who passed to Daja, who when Frostpine charged at her faked one way, then faked the other, ran around him and kicked it round the corner back to Briar.

“Nice!” said Sandry. Briar was impressed himself, but couldn’t waste time thinking about it with Frostpine closing in on him. He didn’t have actual skills like Daja so he just kicked it away from Frostpine as soon as possible, not much caring how close it went to any of the others. If he didn’t have the ball, it wasn’t his problem.

Frostpine didn’t have a lot of books in the public parts of his house, but Tris had found a nice heavy hardcover sitting out on a table that she’d scooped up and taken back out to read. It was about the history of cars, which didn’t interest Tris in the slightest, but if this was all the choice she had, she couldn’t be picky.

The soccer players were getting louder and louder as they sucked more victims into their circle. Briar was the last to go, snapped up almost as soon as he came out of the house. Soon enough only Tris and Rosethorn were left by the pool, and Rosethorn looked like she was fast asleep.

Tris turned page after page. Bits from the tree above her kept falling onto it, and pollen and yellow bits of wattle as well. This was why Tris hated the outdoors. And really, books about cars that were so old they only had black and white photos of them were really not much use to Tris; more and more she found herself looking up to watch the others. Just out of boredom, of course. She’d rather read vapid zero-IQ books about vampires, fairies and unicorns than join in that unbearable excuse for a leisure activity.
She watched Daja try to get past Briar with the ball. The boy yelled “Shoelaces!” just when she nearly past him. Daja hesitated and looked down, so Briar ducked in and stole the ball from her. He whooped, turned back around and kicked the thing towards Lark and Sandry. Then he spread his arms wide, puffed his chest out, and spun slowly in a circle. Of course he’d be loving himself for playing dirty. Of course.

“Daja in the middle!” Lark called out. They all rearranged themselves into a circle but Sandry left and ran over to Tris. She was very pink-cheeked and more of her fine brown hair was out of her braids than in them.

“Come and play!” she said.

Tris looked over. Daja was trying to get the ball from Frostpine; the big black man was holding her away from him with one straight arm, trying to keep the ball under his control.

“No,” said Tris.

“Why not?” Sandry was puffing a little and her eyes were bright. Tris scowled and looked back down at her book.

“I’m busy.”

“Why, what are you reading?”

“You wouldn’t be interested.”

Sandry looked at Tris sympathetically. “It’s just a game.”

Tris took her glasses off to clean them. The world sunk into a vague blur.

“Are you sure?” Sandry wheedled. “It’s fun.”

Tris ignored her, rubbing her sleeve carefully over the lenses. Sandry sighed heavily and then ran off back to the others.

Tris put her glasses back on and saw Rosethorn watching them play, now with her hands behind her head. She got the sense Rosethorn had been watching her, just a second ago. She didn’t like the feeling.

She concentrated on the book after that, only looking up once when someone let out a wail like a drowning cat. She looked up as Briar collapsed dramatically onto the ground with his arms and legs spread wide. All the others laughed; Sandry had the ball. Both Lark and Daja gave Sandry a high five at the same time.

After about ten more minutes Lark called time for a break and they all came trooping back over. They all looked hot and tired, which made Tris feel very good about her decision to sit and read. Rosethorn had made them all put on sunscreen before they came, but there was only so much protection it could give you. Tris wouldn’t risk going out in the sun – she hated getting sunburned.

Rosethorn got up and started tinkering with the barbecue. Lark walked over to talk to her. Frostpine, Daja and Sandry went indoors. Briar came straight up to Tris, with grass and dirt all over him and in his hair. “Thought you weren’t allowed books,” he said.

“They said not to bring any books with me,” Tris corrected him.
“Sounds to me like you’re equivocating,” Briar declared.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, don’t you know what it means?”

“Of course I know what it means,” said Tris. “Do you?”

Briar’s eyes slid to the right. “Yes.”

Tris looked over where he was looking, at Rosethorn and Lark. “Rosethorn told you you were equivocating one time and you have no idea what it means,” Tris guessed.

Briar scowled at her. Tris grinned, put the book aside and got up. “Oh well,” she said. “It was a nice try.”

“Come on, just tell us,” he said. “I’m asking nicely.”

“No you’re not.”

“Yes I am!”

“You haven’t even asked at all.”

Briar groaned. “You’re the worst.”

“I’m going to help with the food,” Tris said. “So should you.”

They sat around the big plastic table, the girls and Rosethorn, drinking water and soft drinks as the smell of the barbecue drifted over to them. Briar had sat down with them, but gotten up again almost straight away to hover over Lark and Frostpine as they cooked.

“I haven’t played football in ages,” said Daja, spinning her can around in her hands. “That was fun.”

“You’re really good,” Sandry told her. “You should join a team here.”

Daja shrugged. “Maybe.” She took a sip of her drink and then stared at the can in her hands.

Sandry thought she looked sad, sadder than usual. Maybe she was missing her team back in Ireland. “Can we join a soccer team, Lark?”

“Certainly, next year when the season starts,” said Lark. “That sounds like a good idea.”

It sounded like fun to Sandry. By that time maybe she could talk Tris into joining as well – they could all play together. “Do you like any sports, Tris?”

Tris gave her a what-do-you-think look and looked away again.

Briar, wandering back over to grab a handful of chips, shared his opinion. “Sports are a waste of time. Learn to fight, like Krav Maga or some shit. Stop you starting cyclones all over the place.”

He stuffed all the chips in his mouth, did an exaggerated martial arts move that knocked the heel of his hand into the back of her head and then turned around to go.

“Briar,” said Lark quietly. Tris’s mouth was set tightly and her ears were going red.
“What?” Briar turned around, looked at Lark, then over at Tris. “That wasn’t anything.”

“Briar,” Lark said again, more reprovingly.

“Geez, I never knew I was so bloody dangerous,” Briar said insincerely. “Sorry.”

Lark got to her feet and drew Briar away with her.

“He’s so annoying,” Sandry said, feeling bad for Tris. “I wish he didn’t do things like that.”

“He barely touched her,” said Daja. “It’s not like he’s trying to hurt anyone.” Tris jerked her head up to glare at her. Daja glared right back resentfully. Sandry had never seen that from Daja before.

“It’s just rude,” said Sandry. “He threw grass in my face before, when we were playing.”

“Oh, how dreadful.”

Sandry had no idea why Daja was so mad, especially when it was nothing to do with her. Daja wouldn’t usually step in and defend Briar, let alone snap at Sandry. But then again, Daja was still looking at Tris, not Sandry at all…

Frostpine came over with a tray of burgers and sausages at the same time as Lark and Briar also returned to the table. Briar grabbed a chair and squeezed in next to Tris, so Sandry shunted herself sideways to make room. Tris leaned away from Briar, and Frostpine as he leaned over to put the tray on the table. She stayed leaned to the side when the big man rested one hand on the back of her chair and Briar’s.

“You’ve got regular snags, regular burgers, vegie burgers on the side there. White bread, brown bread, onions, cheese, sauce. Go for it.”

Briar was fastest. He took two burgers, burning his fingers as he did, and grabbed about five pieces of bread all at once. He had all of it on his plate before Frostpine had gone around the table to sit down next to Daja. Once Briar was done the others more casually took what they wanted. Tris finally sat up straight again.

Sandry took the best-looking vegie burger, some onion and some cheese and made herself a sandwich. Daja ate silently opposite her. Sandry wracked her brain. Nothing bad had happened to Daja that she could think of. They were at Frostpine’s house, which she’d been looking forward to all week, they’d had a great time playing soccer, lunch seemed pretty good. Tris was being cranky, but that wasn’t new.

The adults were talking amongst themselves about adult things: business, people they knew, the weather. Sandry tried to think of a topic that would cheer everyone up, but she didn’t know what Daja was upset about and that made it hard. If only they could talk alone for a moment, maybe Daja would explain what was wrong.

“I’m sorry for hitting you,” Briar mumbled to Tris, half a second before he took a big bite out of his second pile of food. Tris ignored him and used a plastic knife and fork to cut her sausage.

If only they’d brought Little Bear with them, Tris at least would be happier. But then Briar would be on edge. And it probably wouldn’t help cheer Daja up either. Sandry would rather have a puppy to play with than have to wrangle all her friends to try and have a nice lunch together.

After lunch Frostpine told Daja he needed a few minutes on the computer to do some work, then
he’d take her to look around at some of the work he had here. He handed out icypoles to the four of them then vanished indoors. Lark and Rosethorn had gone for a walk, leaving just the four children out the back.

So for the moment Daja walked with her three housemates to sit under the shade with their icypoles. Briar immediately flopped onto his stomach, propping his head up on one hand to suck noisily on his red icypole. Tris sat stiffly cross-legged beside him, not even eating hers. Sandry sat with her knees up and her ankles neatly together, trying to pretend like she wasn’t using her phone.

“Frostpine’s cool, ay,” Briar said to Daja. “Pretty sweet place here.”

“I don’t know,” said Daja. “What do you think, Tris?” It was petty, but Daja felt petty. This was supposed to be a great day and Tris had made it miserable.

Tris turned red and glared at her ankles.

“What’s going on?” said Sandry, sounding frustrated. Daja felt a little sorry for her, but only a little. None of this was going to hurt Sandry.

Daja shrugged and looked away. If Tris wasn’t going to say anything, neither was Daja.

“He’s not Tris’s kind of people,” said Briar knowingly. Daja wasn’t surprised he knew what was going on; what surprised her that he hadn’t said anything blunt and horrible. He was being almost diplomatic. Even so, she’d rather he hadn’t said anything at all. Unpleasant silences were a lot easier than painful conversations.

“Why, what do you mean?”

Briar glanced at Daja, and he must have read her mind. “Tris probably never met a bloke before who works with his hands,” he said. “Not even a bookshelf in the house that I saw. All Tris likes is books, and she hates doing literally anything, so the two of them got absolutely zero in common.”

“Oh,” said Sandry. “Well, I’m sure they’ll get to know each other better soon.”

Briar rolled his eyes and tilted his empty strip of plastic up so he could get all the juice out. “You just gonna let that melt, Bluey?”

Tris looked a bit lost. Briar swiped her icypole and bit some off.

“Daja! You ready?” Frostpine called from the house. Daja could not stand up quickly enough.

“Bye Daja,” said Sandry.

“Have fun,” Briar sang out after her.

Daja sighed. *Fun*. If only.
Here it is, finally another chapter! I never meant for these to be spaced out so far from each other but I got a job that takes up a lot of my time and my brainfocus and I haven't worked out yet how to fit this into my regular schedule in a way that keeps it at the quality I want it to be. I will, though! This story is never far from my thoughts and it's very close to my heart. Thank you to everyone who's given kudos and comments; you make me even more determined to keep this coming for you all, however slow it has to be.

On Tuesday Rosethorn went out all day to work and took Briar with her, leaving the three girls and Lark with the house to themselves. This was Sandry’s chance: maybe her and Lark between them could help Tris and Daja end the cold war they had going on. Or at least lend some diplomatic assistance.

Not that Sandry had anything against Briar or Rosethorn, of course, but if anyone was going to ruin a nice moment or a reconciliation it would be one of those two. Rosethorn never really helped anyone with anything, and even though Briar and Tris spent a fair amount of time with each other, all they ever did was argue. They were very bad influences on each other.

Briar and Rosethorn must have eaten a very early breakfast because they were leaving the house just as Sandry was waking up. She heard the ute growl its way slowly past her room to the front of the house and then the sound of it faded into the distance. Sandry rolled over and closed her eyes again but she knew she wouldn’t be going back to sleep. Her mind was already wrestling with the problem of Daja and Tris.

Breakfast was a very quiet affair without Briar popping in and out all the time, constantly making toast and opening and closing the fridge. That was, until Sandry realised that without Briar there they could have Little Bear with them in the kitchen. As soon as Lark gave her permission Sandry went and got him.

The little white puppy trotted back and forth between Daja and Sandry, who were sitting up at the counter, and Lark and Tris at the kitchen table, his tail wagging hopefully whenever anyone so much as looked at him. There was a rule against feeding him people food but Sandry supposed he didn’t know that. She didn’t really think he would much enjoy her cereal anyway.

“What are we going to do today?” Sandry asked as she put her dishes into the sink, being careful to step around Little Bear and not knock against his bad leg.

Tris turned a page in her book.

“The same as we always do?” said Daja.

“I thought with Briar away, we could have a day for us girls,” said Sandry. “What do you think?”
“Niko’s coming over later,” Tris pointed out. “He’s not a girl.”

“After that, then,” said Sandry. “We could watch a movie.”

“A ladies afternoon, you think?” said Lark. She finished her cup of tea and stood up, and Little Bear let out a little excited yelp. Lark smiled at him. “Yes, dogs get breakfast too.” The moment she took a step towards the laundry Little Bear ran there as fast as his leg would allow him, which wasn’t very fast at all. Lark followed him out of the room.

“I don’t want to do that,” said Tris. “I have work to do.”

“What kind of work? Maybe we can all do our work together?” said Sandry. “Like a study group.”

Tris looked at her with an oddly blank expression. Usually her looks were glares or stares or glowers but it looked like she just didn’t have anything to say.

“That sounds good,” said Daja.

Sandry was relieved. It was something. It was a start. “And then once we’re all done we can—“

“Paint our nails and braid each others’ hair?” snapped Tris. “No thank you.”

“We can do whatever we all want to do,” Sandry told her. Doing each others’ hair had been pretty high on her list of ideas, but they didn’t have to do it. There were always other things they could do.

“Then why is it a girls afternoon? How is it different from any other afternoon when we’re all in the same place and can do whatever we want to do? We can tell Briar to go away whenever we want, that’s nothing special. All you have to do is sit near Little Bear and he’ll leave you alone.”

Sandry just didn’t know what to say. The nicer she tried to be, the more Tris seemed to hate her.

“Why are you so angry?” Sandry asked helplessly.

Tris looked back down at her book. “I’m not.”

“You are,” said Daja. “You’re shouting at Sandry for having a nice idea.”

“I wasn’t shouting.”

Lark came back in the room then. Sandry thought she must have heard them arguing, but she didn’t say anything about it. “If you like, we could spend some time in town this morning and take Little Bear to the park. What do you think?”

“Shouldn’t he stay home a little longer?” said Tris. “He’s still really only walking on three legs.”

“I won’t have him running laps,” Lark assured her. “I think he’s ready for some time in a fresh environment. We’ll all be looking out for him.”

And just like that, Lark had solved it. Tris would go if it was good for Little Bear and if Tris, Sandry and Lark were all going then Daja would come along as well. It was such a good idea. What Sandry really admired was that unless you knew what Lark was like, you might not even realise she was being tricky. Not like Sandry, who was still terrible at being cunning even with her very best plans.

“Ohkay,” said Tris. “I need to return some books to the library anyway.”
“Can I go and see Frostpine for a while, then?” asked Daja. Sandry pressed her lips together firmly to keep from sighing. Perhaps even Lark’s plans couldn’t do much when two girls were both determined not to spend time with each other.

“If it’s okay with him, it’s okay with me,” said Lark. “Why don’t you give him a ring after you’ve brushed your teeth?”

Daja nodded and got up to put her bowl in the sink.

Rows and rows and rows of little trees all tied together, exactly the same height and evenly spaced out, perfectly in line. Briar had never seen anything like it before in his life. Well, he kind of had, actually, but that and this was diamantes to diamonds. “Holy shit,” said Briar. “Who does this?”

“People who want to make wine,” Rosethorn replied. She was different out here, where there was nothing but plants to be seen. She wasn’t on edge so much and that made Briar feel better too.

“What do you know about wine?”

Briar shrugged. “It’s disgusting?”

Rosethorn looked at him sideways.

“What?”

“Drink a lot of wine, do you?”

“Nah, not really.” There was probably good wine, Briar supposed, it was just that all anyone ever drank around him was the cheap shit. “So this is where you make bank?”

“I’m paid to consult, if that’s your question. We’re here to check on the health of these plants —“

“What, all of them?” Briar looked dubiously out over all the plants. Those perfectly straight rows stretched out just about forever. There’d been others as well that they drove through on the way in. “Today?”

“Yes.”

“Shit.”

Rosethorn glanced at him coolly. “Try a little harder to keep a civil tongue, my boy.”

Technically Briar hadn’t understood what she’d said but he couldn’t pretend like he didn’t know what she meant. “I have been,” he said. She looked down at him and raised one eyebrow. Briar huffed out a frustrated breath. He hadn’t said any real swear words around Rosethorn for days, and here she was going on about a word like “shit”, which was nothing. Briar might as well not speak at all if half what he said was going to be against the rules.

“Try harder,” said Rosethorn. “Now, I’ve got a few things to read back on, so you familiarise yourself with these young things while I’m doing that.” She pulled a little notebook out of her pocket and started to flick through it.

Briar stepped towards the nearest plant. It did look just like a baby tree, with a little thin trunk and spreading leaves up the top. There were little budding grapes growing in clusters, a slightly darker green shade than the leaves. Briar looked both ways along the row. Every single one looked just exactly like this one. They were growing in a perfectly straight row because they were all grabbing
onto the same long fence thing which kept them in line.

It must have taken forever to get this field all set up just right. Briar shuddered to think of the work it would take hammering in the posts and doing all the tying up and planting each single plant exactly the right distance from the next one.

“Right,” said Rosethorn. “Now, what did I say we were here for?”

“To check they’re all healthy.”

Rosethorn nodded. “Go on, then.”

Briar looked from Rosethorn to the masses and masses of plants all around them. “All of them? How do I know?”

“Has Niko been teaching you anything in all those lessons you’ve been having?”

Niko hadn’t taught Briar anything like this — only to breathe slowly and make himself small. Maybe he could crumple up his mind like a smashed up ball of paper and throw himself down each row, or something.

Or he could just start with one. Briar reached out and touched his fingers lightly to the trunk, trying to breathe in the counts of seven Niko had taught them. He could feel the plant breathing too — a different kind of breathing, but breathing all the same. It didn’t seem sick or hurt in any way but how was he supposed to tell for sure?

If Rosethorn had told him to do this though, he better do everything he could. He concentrated on pulling himself close together like the tightly-packed hedges that grew all in on themselves, the ones so dense even Briar could never find a way through them.

As Briar felt himself shrink further and further out of the way of his own senses he felt the plants grow larger around him in his mind. He felt the connections between them, under and above ground. He could feel the neighbours of this plant, and their neighbours, and their neighbours after that. Briar packed himself tighter and tighter and spread himself thin across the ground so that he could range not only from plant to plant but from row to row as well.

It made him kind of queasy at first, them all being the same, lined up and tied up and locked in. But it did make it easier to let his mind run along each row and see if there was anything that didn’t feel just like all the others. And they didn’t seem to mind it. They were happy.

After a while Briar couldn’t tell any more what was one individual plant and what was a row, or a series of rows, or an entire field. He just sank into their existence all together, feeling them drawing strength out of the soil and power down from the sun and just absolutely fucking thriving. If Rosethorn hadn’t made him keep his shoes on and wear a hat Briar would be doing the same, sinking into the earth and basking in the sun, one single being hidden among many, never bothered or singled out or —

_That’s enough_, Rosethorn said, her voice seemingly as entwined with the plants as Briar was himself.

The boy cracked open his eyes and slowly let his joining with the vines fade. He looked around, but looking was nothing like what he’d just done. Looking at them they were individual plants: stalk, leaves, roots, fruit. Each one was all complicated and detailed in itself. He couldn’t see with his eyes what he’d been able to feel with —
“And that’s magic?” He was surprised by how raw his throat felt. He had that painfully alive, half-dreaming feeling like he’d been up and on the move for days and hadn’t found anywhere yet to rest. But the sun had barely moved in the sky.

Rosethorn nodded. “And we, my boy, are the lucky few to have it as a part of us as well.” She handed him his bottle of water.

Briar took long, slow gulps of water. “So they don’t — people don’t realise plants are like that. They don’t know.”

Rosethorn looked out across the field. “Some do. They may not be able to work with it or feel it in the same way, but they still know it’s there. Most, however — no. Most don’t.”

Huh. So maybe that was why even in the warm months when the weather was good for it, none of his mates had ever been keen like he was to spend the night out of doors among green things. They were like Westy, who was deaf and always slept holding hands with someone so he couldn’t get caught unawares. Like little Rami who straight-up fell to pieces in the dark if he didn’t have his torch with him. Where Briar knew he was safe, they all still felt exposed as hell.

Magic, though. Briar shook his head. Could you really call it magic?

“Magic’s just a word we humans put on it,” said Rosethorn. “It is what it is, whatever name we give it.”

Briar glanced up at her suspiciously. Was she reading his mind now?

“What’s your assessment, then, boy? All in order out here?”

Briar looked around himself and tried to match up what he’d felt with what he saw. “I think they’re fine.”

Rosethorn nodded. “Let’s move on.”

Frostpine greeted Daja with a clap on the back, grey earmuffs and a pair of bright yellow safety goggles. “These are on ya any time there’s work going on,” he said. “Got it?”

“Got it,” said Daja. “Hi, Kirel.”

“Hey Daja,” said Kirel, who was frowning over some bits of paper. “Back for more, huh?”

Daja nodded. “Yes.”

Kirel paused and looked up. “Don’t you have school?”

“I only just moved here,” said Daja, hoping that was enough of an explanation. “I’m not enrolled for this year.”

“And it’s only November … far out, I’d kill to have that kind of a holiday,” he said, shaking his head.

“Yet here she is, ready to work,” said Frostpine.

Kirel gave Frostpine a funny look. “To work? What is she, like, thirteen?”

“I’m eleven,” said Daja. People were always getting her age wrong. They always thought she was
older than she really was. Just because Daja was tall and tended to keep her thoughts to herself didn’t make her older or wiser or tougher than anyone else. If she grew like her Mum and Dad people would probably think she was fully grown by the time she really was thirteen. Maybe she could just start working with Frostpine then and nobody would even realise she was too young.

“Eleven? Shit.”

“Think of her as more of a guest,” said Frostpine. “A site inspector, so we’ll have to be on our best behaviour.”

Kirel grinned and threw him a sharp salute. “Always, boss.”

For Daja, the next two hours went by like lightning. Kirel was working the brake press on his own for most of the morning, while Frostpine was doing what he called “tinkering” with an old plough. Daja went and got tools for them, helped them move things if they needed, turned machines on and off as requested. The most challenging task she had was making sense of the garbled explanations Kirel came out with whenever Frostpine asked him to talk her through something he was doing.

“Tinkering’s his code word for magic,” Kirel told Daja when they took a break at about midday. “But when he’s actually just tinkering, he calls that tinkering too. So you’ve really just got to guess.”

“I’m communicating on a whole other level over here,” said Frostpine, leaning back and brushing his hands on his knees. “Got to keep you young guns guessing.”

“You were doing magic?” Daja asked, her eyes wide. It had looked to her like he’d just been taking the plough apart slowly and putting it back together again. It had looked totally normal. Thinking about it, though, she had no idea what she thought magic would look like. It made her wonder what it had looked like when she had done hers.

“Well, in a manner of speaking,” said Frostpine. “Kirel, do you want to nick off a bit early for lunch? I’m going to talk shop with Daja here for a bit and we’ll need a bit of quiet.”

“Sure,” said Kirel. “Do you want anything from the shop when I come back?”

Frostpine looked at Daja.

“I don’t know if I’m staying for lunch,” she said. “I think maybe we’re only in town this morning.”

“Nothing for me thanks mate,” said Frostpine.

“Okay, give us a ring if you change your mind.” And Kirel ducked out.

It was suddenly very quiet, with Kirel gone and no work being done. Daja took off her earmuffs and glasses, setting them carefully on the table by the computer. Frostpine put his boots up on the plough and regarded her with a twinkle in his eye. “Still keen?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Daja without a doubt in her mind.

“That’s the spirit. Good on ya.”

“Were you really doing magic all that time?”

Frostpine pointed at the little chair by the computer, so Daja brought it over and sat by him. She looked carefully at the plough but it didn’t look much different to how it had in the beginning. She
still wasn’t sure which end of it was up…

“The thing is, Daja, for you and me the work and the magic are one and the same thing. There’s a lot of semantic debate about the exact scientific process of the magic we do – that’s what our mate Niko spends all his time arguing about, with other people who know just as little about it as anybody. But practically speaking our magic works in the metal, the heat, the tools. We’re using those things, our magic is alive and working. That’s my take on it.”

Daja sat quietly to think about that. Frostpine watched her as she did.

“And Kirel doesn’t have that,” she said.

Frostpine shook his head. “Ripper bloke, Kirel. Not a trace of magic in him, or interest in it either.”

“So to learn magic, I just have to learn metalwork,” said Daja, feeling her heart sink. She wouldn’t be allowed to do that for years and years. It was hardly better than never being allowed to do it at all.

Frostpine shook his head. “You’ll learn metalwork and you’ll also learn magic,” he said. “You’re already working with Niko on some magical principles, yeah?”

Daja nodded.

“Think of magic as another layer of skill to learn on top of what Kirel learns. Adds another dimension to the work. There’s a lot to be done on that front, don’t you worry about that.”

“And I can learn that right away?”

Frostpine tilted his head to look at her. “Is something worrying you?”

Daja looked down. “It’s just, I’m only eleven.”

Frostpine nodded. “I know. It’ll be frustrating, no doubt. When I’m officially at work there’s not much I can have you do with me. And you’re only a little thing yet. But most of the time you’ll have school anyway and the time we’ll have together will be out of hours, so we’ll have a little more freedom. We’ll work it out.”

Daja dreaded going to school here. Dreaded it deeply. And it was getting closer every day.

“Daja?”

“Have you always lived here?” Daja asked him, trying uselessly to force her hammering heart to settle.

“In Wanga?” said Frostpine. “Nah. I’m more of a travelling man. Though not so much nowadays, I guess. It’s been some years.”

“Did you ever go to Ireland?”

Frostpine looked at her, his brown eyes sympathetic. “I was in Kildare a little while. For a couple of months, way back. Before your time, I think.”

Daja curled her ankles around the legs of the chair. She hadn’t known Frostpine for very long, maybe it would be rude … she didn’t even know where he was from …

“It can be hard out here for us blackfellas,” Frostpine said easily. “We’re not exactly thick on the
Now he’d brought it up, Daja felt her chest ease. “I used to go everywhere with Uneny,” she said. “He’s my brother. At home we didn’t have a lot of friends, at school or anything. Mum said we’d do our family proud and to forget about the white folks. Dad said all the white man will do is smile to your face and kick your feet out from under you.”

“And now you’re out in the sticks surrounded by white devils,” said Frostpine, chuckling with more sympathy than humour. “I know the feeling.”

“It’s lonely,” Daja admitted, as much to herself as to the big metalsmith. “I don’t think any of them understand that.”

Frostpine sighed. “Of course they don’t,” he said, getting to his feet. “No more than you and I understand them.” He offered Daja a hand up. “That doesn’t mean we can’t show them a few things.”

Daja took his hand and he hauled her up like she weighed nothing at all. Frostpine tugged one of her braids and winked at her. “We’ll be right, tid.”

Daja didn’t know the word, but she could feel the sentiment behind it deep inside of her. She smiled at Frostpine and he matched it, warm brown eyes in a warm black face.

“I’ve got a bit of an event in mind for us if you’re up for it,” he said. “A day trip over in Eldorado to see the old gold dredge. Amazing machine.”

“I’d love to come,” said Daja eagerly. “When?”

“Sunday, I’m thinking.”

Daja nodded. “I’ll ask.”

With that settled, Frostpine gave Daja her first real job to do. With Frostpine watching on and giving her a bit of direction Daja started to draw up some plans for her very own toolbox.

Tris had thought they would just wait in the car for Daja to come out of Frostpine’s shop, but when they pulled up and Lark took the keys out of the ignition Sandry jumped right out straight away.

Lark got out of the car but didn’t close her door behind her, instead looking in at Tris. “I’ll stay with Little Bear,” Tris said.

“He should meet Frostpine,” said Sandry. “Then he can visit with us!”

“That’s a good idea,” Lark said. “Tris, can you please help Little Bear out of the car?”

Tris couldn’t really say no. She got out of the car, walked around to the back, opened the cage, clipped on the dog’s leash and lifted him down to the ground. “It’s okay,” she told him. “You just have to meet one new person, one of Daja’s friends. Then we can go home.”

Lark and Sandry had gone ahead in the shop. Little Bear was tired from hobbling around at the park but he stayed beside Tris as she ambled halfheartedly in that direction. She wished she hadn’t even made that much effort when she saw Frostpine come out of his shop. She stopped dead as he walked up to the two of them.

Frostpine crouched down and held out a hand to Little Bear, who Tris would describe as more
overstimulated than excited to meet him. “Hey fella,” said Frostpine. He glanced up at Tris. “Little Bear, yes?”

Tris nodded.

Frostpine looked back at the puppy. “Hey Little Bear.” His hand was dark and huge against Little Bear’s snow white fur. The little dog was trying clumsily to jump up onto Frostpine’s knees so Tris knelt down and held him by the collar before he could hurt himself.

“Daja tells me you four rescued him from a pretty bad situation.” Tris nodded again. “Good for you.” He put his fingers under Little Bear’s chin and tilted his head up a little, then scratched him there. “You’ve found yourself a good home there, mate. You’re a lucky fella.”

He was so big. Not just tall, like Niko. Niko was a neat, dignified man: he tied back his hair neatly, his moustache was neat, his clothes were always well-presented and appropriate. He was professional and contained. Frostpine’s head and hair and beard together were almost the entire size of Tris. This close, she could see how wiry his beard was and that he had a bald spot on top. His clothes were grimy with substances Tris didn’t want to think about.

“Don’t lick,” she scolded Little Bear, to no effect. Frostpine just grinned at Tris and shook the puppy playfully around the shoulders with his huge hands.

“Nah, he’s right,” he said. “I don’t need clean hands this time of day.”

“He has to learn not to lick people,” said Tris on reflex, thinking of hygiene and also of Briar, who was scared of dogs. He was far from alone in that, and Little Bear wasn’t going to be little for all that long. “It’s bad manners.”

“That’s true enough,” said Frostpine. He took his attention away from Little Bear and put it onto Tris, but he didn’t stand up so neither did she. “How are you doing settling into ye olde Wangaratta? Town treating you all right?”

“It’s okay,” said Tris. “The library is nice.”

“Isn’t it,” agreed Frostpine. “It’s a lovely little building.”

Daja, Lark and Sandry came out and Tris nearly breathed her sigh of relief out loud. Little Bear seemed to like Frostpine but he was still a total stranger and Tris was running out of things to say to him. Frostpine gave Little Bear one final pat and got all the way up to his feet. Tris got up too and looked past him to the others.

“Lark says I can come,” said Daja to Frostpine with a huge grin.

Frostpine held his hand out and Daja gave him a high five. “Deadly,” he said.

It looked like they were about to head off so Tris told Little Bear to come and led him back around behind the car. To her surprise, Sandry followed her and pulled Daja along with her.

“He’s so cute!” Sandry said under her breath to Daja. “Is he there all the time?”

“He’s seventeen,” Daja said dubiously.

“Yes, I know,” Sandry said. “But he has really pretty eyes, don’t you think?”

“Oh, ‘cause they’re the exact same blue as yours?” teased Daja.
“What! No, I … do I have pretty eyes?”

This was turning into a girls night right before Tris’s own eyes. She wanted to slam the cage door shut but it might have frightened Little Bear.

Daja laughed. “You do have pretty eyes,” she said. “I don’t know if they’re prettier than Kirel’s, though … maybe you should have a competition.”

Sandry giggled. “An eye-off?”

It was nonsense. Tris never wasted her time judging people by their eyes. She shut the back of the car softly and got into the back seat. She picked up her book but couldn’t help watching Frostpine and Lark talking, out the front of his workshop.

Frostpine laughed at something Lark said and scratched his beard. Lark did a funny little two-step sideways and back again. Frostpine put his hand on her shoulder to keep her still, laughing and shaking his head. Lark broke out into laughter herself, patting his hand with her own.

Tris was trying so hard to ignore the odd ache in her heart that when the door opposite her opened she jumped and felt her magic sizzle a little under her skin.

“Why didn’t you come in?” said Sandry, pulling the door closed after her. “I’ve never been in a place like that before, it’s so interesting.”

“What’s interesting about it?”

“It’s …” Sandry floundered for a moment. “It’s full of machines and bits of metal that’s all going to be made into things. Daja showed me the plans for the toolbox she’s going to make. It looks so hard!”

Daja was walking back to Frostpine and Lark. Tris turned around in her seat to check on Little Bear. His eyes were nearly all the way closed; he’d be asleep before long.

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings this morning,” said Sandry. “Did I say something wrong?”

Tris’s throat caught. She was trapped in here now; she should have stayed outside. “I just don’t want to do … girl stuff with you.”

Sandry paused then asked very quietly. “Why not?”

“I just don’t. You and Daja can have it.”

“I’m not just friends with Daja, you know. I’m friends with you as well.”

“We might be friends,” said Tris, though she doubted it, “but that doesn’t make me one of your girl friends, for girl things. I don’t do those.”

“You could if you wanted.”

“Well, I don’t want.”

Sandry’s forehead wrinkled. “Don’t you like being a girl?”

“That’s not – I didn’t say that.”

Sandry reached across and took Tris’s hand before she could pull it away. But she only squeezed it
once and then let go. And unusually for her she kept quiet after that. When Daja and Lark got in the car they set off without a fuss.

Rosethorn didn’t let up when they were eating their sandwiches for lunch. And she wasn’t just telling him plant stuff either, he was supposed to remember all this babble about soil and rocks and weather and bloody chemistry like she wanted him to get a wriggle on and start up his own winery tomorrow.

Some of it was a bit familiar to Briar, like pH and watering and putting nutrients in the soil, but Rosethorn knew a shitload more about that stuff than that Casey shitbag ever did. She went on and on and on telling him stuff and then turning around and testing him on it before he had time to breathe. Briar had been grilled pretty heavy before in much nastier spots than this but not on stuff he’d just heard for the first time like one second ago while he was trying to eat.

And then she put on more sunscreen and made him do the same and they were back out in the fields, doing tests and retying plants and pulling out weeds here and there where they popped up. Rosethorn wrote stuff in her little notebook sometimes but Briar didn’t ask what she was writing. He had too much to think about already in his own head.

Rosethorn only looked at her watch once it started to get dark. Then she looked at Briar. “It’s seven o’clock,” she said.

Didn’t mean much to Briar. It was seven o’clock every day. He was examining a leaf right at the top of one of the plants, wondering if it was going a little bit yellow or if it was just that the light was a different colour now it was twilight.

“Not hungry yet?”

Well, Briar had been hungry for hours but hunger didn’t mean a whole lot to him when he was working. It was more weird to work when he wasn’t hungry, since after eating usually came sleeping. Like, there was no need to work when you had a full stomach. It made it hard to concentrate. It had never crossed his mind to interrupt Rosethorn’s work just to tell her he was hungry, but like … of course he was hungry. If Rosethorn’d let him use certain words, he’d tell her just how hungry he was.

Rosethorn narrowed her eyes and took off her hat. She got out her phone and called Lark. Briar could tell it was Lark because anyone else it always took her like a minute to get to the number and she always looked super annoyed she had to bother.

He walked along the row with his hand out, brushing across the leaves and buds, trying to imagine not being able to feel the life and the growth and the joy of them. How anyone could stand here where he was and just … not care. Not know. No wonder people used to look at him funny.

When he heard Rosethorn’s voice he inched his way back towards her, listening. “Hi, have you eaten? I know, yes. I thought I’d take him to Gorse’s, and if you hadn’t … how did they go? Good. Okay, okay. Yeah. Not for a while. Exactly, yeah. Okay, see you in a while. You too. Bye.”

Briar grabbed the menu as soon as he sat down. “What can I get?”

“All you like.”

He grinned. “Their finest wine?”
Rosethorn didn’t bother answering him so Briar just stuck his head into the menu, looking for stuff he recognised.

The young guy who’d shown them to a table didn’t come back to take their order. It was an older man instead, maybe forty or something. Briar’d bet his nads this was Gorse.

“Rosethorn, hello,” he said. “This must be Briar.”

“Yeah,” said Briar. He hadn’t realised he was famous. “You’re Gorse?”

“Indeed I am,” said Gorse. “Pleased to meet you. What can I get for you this evening?”

Briar whipped through the menu one last time. Rosethorn had said he could get whatever he wanted, but that wouldn’t stop her getting involved if she didn’t approve of even the slightest thing about what he got. She was always telling him to eat vegetables and calcium and whatever else and that he ate way too much stuff full of sugar.

But if Briar didn’t order in English then she wouldn’t know anything about anything until it was too late to change. So he ordered in Chinese, which he was more comfortable with anyway for Chinese food, and Gorse smiled wider and wider the longer the order went on.

“So is that an order for one or for two?” Rosethorn asked once he was done. She knew what he was up to, no question. But Briar got the feeling he was going to get away with it.

“I don’t know what you like,” Briar said innocently. “So…"

So Rosethorn ordered some weird mushroom soup thing and then asked if they could get tea.

“I already said tea,” Briar informed her.

“Did you.”

Gorse chuckled. He read Briar’s order back and then Rosethorn’s, and when they both nodded he went back to the kitchen. Now that he knew food was coming and he could smell it in the air, Briar was so hungry it was making his head hurt.

In no time at all they had tea and dumplings brought out by the first waiter guy. Briar had ordered the dumplings but he offered them to Rosethorn as soon as he’d taken a few. She was paying, after all, and Briar had plenty food to come.

“These are incredible,” he said around a mouthful. “You know, my mate Turtle was mad for dumplings. There’s this place on Exhibition St used to give us a bag if we came by around closing time so long as we didn’t put the word out they were like a free kitchen or anything. Turtle said no one time to a job paying like fifty bucks ‘cos he’d miss going by and getting his dumplings. Kid was all about dumplings, you wouldn’t believe. They were good, but these ones are better. I don’t —”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Rosethorn said.

Briar finished what he had and thought about the two that were left on the plate. Rosethorn might want them, but if he offered them to her to be polite, she might actually take them.

“Go ahead,” she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

Briar did. And then the rest of the food started turning up, and maybe it had just been a long time
since he’d eaten Chinese food, but he’d just about never eaten anything better in his life.

With food inside of him now it was just about a perfect day. He shared every dish he got with Rosethorn but she mostly just ate her own. And then Gorse started bringing them food personally and Briar was pretty sure they were just random dishes, stuff neither of them had ordered at all. He winked at Briar with each new plate and announced it in both English and Chinese.

Rosethorn was done eating by that stage but Briar was up for all of it. This was the best food in the history of food. They were coming here every day from now on, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And morning tea, and afternoon tea, and midnight snacks. Actually, Briar wasn’t sure he’d be able to bring himself to leave. Rosethorn would have to drag him out by his ears.

He was full to busting by the time the food stopped coming, but still scraped everything left off of every plate into his bowl. If food was there for the taking, you took it. He could still fit this in.

Rosethorn got up from the table then so Briar stopped worrying about table manners and just stuffed his face full until every last bit was inside his belly. He closed his eyes and relished the feeling. Warm, tired, full.

“Wake up,” said Rosethorn from beside him. “Home time.”

Briar was on his feet before he was all the way awake – he hadn’t been actually asleep but he hadn’t been far off it either. His thoughts whirled for a couple of seconds before he remembered that all he had to do for the rest of the day was get in the ute and sit there for a while and then he could go to bed. Shit, how’d he luck into this life?

It was a short drive home but Briar still managed to fall asleep before the end of it. Rosethorn poked him awake and he followed her into the house. He was kind of surprised to see the girls there, and Lark. It was so weird to always be with the same people all the time, every day, in the same place. Weird way to live.

“Brush your teeth, and off to bed,” Rosethorn said to him. Briar ignored Sandry’s attempt to talk to him and went and lay down on his bed.

Rosethorn shook him awake. “I said brush your teeth, my lad.”

“I did,” he groaned.

“You did not. Up.”

Rosethorn didn’t let him lie down again until he’d gone into the bathroom, gotten changed into pyjamas and brushed his teeth and put his dirty clothes in the washing basket. Once he’d finally done all that and was allowed to get into bed she turned off his light and closed the door quietly behind her. And then Briar was asleep before he knew it.
Chapter 14

Uneny was arguing with Dad again. Daja couldn’t hear much more than the murmur of their voices from her brother’s room, but she could hear just enough to know what it was about. They were always arguing these days, because Uneny had decided on his fourteenth birthday he was grown up now and didn’t have to do what he was told by anybody, least of all his parents. It was exhausting.

And then Daja was suddenly in Uneny’s room with them, but none of the furniture looked quite right and Uneny himself was all fuzzy and wobbly, not all there, and when Daja looked at her father he turned on her, furious, and then he opened his mouth to say something, sinking from view as he did, and the floor vanished from underneath Daja’s feet and she fell, yet again -

She was being jostled gently by the shoulder. “Daja.”

And then Daja was awake. She opened her eyes to tell her mother about her dream, but it wasn’t her mother who was standing by her bed. Daja felt like she was falling all over again, but try as she might she couldn’t wake up for a second time.

“Frostpine will be here in forty minutes or so,” Rosethorn said. “Breakfast will be ready for you when you’re ready for it.”

Daja nodded. She was glad she would be going out with Frostpine today, but she still more than half-wanted to hide under her covers and go back home in her dreams. They didn’t always end so badly.

“Need help waking up?” Rosethorn asked, in an odd tone of voice.

Maybe Daja didn’t want to get up, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t able to. She was alive, after all, and all her limbs were in working order. “No.” Then, a moment later, “Thank you.”

Rosethorn nodded.

“I’ll see you downstairs, then.” She walked out of the room, leaving the door only slightly ajar. Daja heard her walk downstairs, and that was what brought her fully into the present. They’d lived in an apartment at home and a one-storey house when they’d moved to Australia. The only place there was a downstairs was here, and now.

Daja rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, took off her scarf, unpinned her braids, pulled her slippers out from under her bed, then paused. Acting by rote she knelt down, dropped her slippers back to the floor, sat back on her feet and laid her hands on her knees.

It had been a long time since Daja had last prayed. When her family had stopped going to church, she hadn’t wanted to anger God by keeping on asking for things when she was giving nothing in return. That was an old fear, Daja now realised, not a real one any more. A much stronger one had
taken its place.

She drew in a shaking breath. “Please look after them all in heaven,” she whispered. “I know we stopped going to church but it wasn’t because of you. It was for Uneny, because people were cruel to him. It was the people there, and not because of you. Please keep looking after him, and my mother and father. Tell them not to feel guilty for dying, because I know it wasn’t their fault. Even if they had believed me, there was nothing they could have done about it. I know that. Please make sure they know that. And please show me how I can make them proud, or at least could you explain to them for me that I’m trying very hard.”

That was what had been rumbling inside of Daja for weeks, and the words had formed themselves as easy as breathing. Her next words she had to think about, and came out in a slow murmur.

“Thank you for your grace and your kindness in finding me a place to live and people to look after me. Thank you for showing me into Frostpine’s shop and thank you for Sandry, who is a better friend than I thought I would find here. Please be good to her. I don’t know if she believes in you but her parents have died too and she’s trying much harder than I am to be good to others. Please be good to Briar, too. He makes trouble, but I think he’s all right. And if you could find another place for Tris to live, that would be tremendous and I would appreciate it. I’m not saying to kick her out but just find somewhere else, please, for her to go. She doesn’t even like it here.”

Daja heard the footsteps only when they were right by her door again, not in time to get back to her feet.

“Still awake?” Rosethorn asked, knocking on the door. It opened as she did.

Daja turned her head sideways and nodded.

“Half an hour now,” Rosethorn said, and then she was gone again.

Daja climbed back to her feet. She’d have to hurry to get ready now, but she didn’t regret taking the time. She felt better and her dream had faded. She was going to see a goldmining machine with Frostpine today. He was going to be Daja’s teacher. She was going to learn metalwork and she was going to learn magic.

Daja could only live the life that was in front of her, and she had half an hour to get ready for the day. She put her slippers back on, hurried past Tris’s closed door and down the stairs.

Briar woke up with a start to a knocking sound just a few metres away. He shoved the sheets off him and landed lightly on the floor, looking to see what ways out he had.

Then he realised where he was.

“Yeah?” he tried, feeling thick. Since when did he sleep in till it was fully light outside?

“Breakfast time,” said Lark through the door.

Shit, and he was missing breakfast? Briar grabbed his pyjama top in case he’d get told off for not wearing it and have to come back and get it. He just barely missed barging into Lark in his doorway, ducking past her at a decent speed and making it into the kitchen as quick as he could.

Sandry and Tris were there, both sitting at the table. Daja and Rosethorn weren’t there.

“Good morning,” Sandry said.
Lark came up behind Briar and walked past them all out the back.

“Did you have a nice day yesterday?” said Sandry.

“Fine,” said Briar, heading for the fridge.

“What did you do?”

“Looked at plants.” Briar grabbed juice, bread, butter, jam and a banana, dumped them all on the bench and turned back to the fridge.

“Did you do magic?”

Briar spun back around to tell Sandry to mind her own business, saw Lark and Rosethorn coming up to the back door, changed his mind about it and said, “Maybe.”

“Fridge door,” said Rosethorn.

Briar glared at Sandry for distracting him and closed the door. He’d been going to have a better look at what was in there, but now it was too late because apparently the world ended if you kept the fridge door open too long in hot weather. Why could that girl just never keep her mouth shut? It wasn’t even that hot.

“Can we have Little Bear in here for breakfast again?” Sandry asked. “I think he liked it yesterday. He was so happy.”

Oh, so that’s how it was? Briar felt like throwing the jam at Sandry, but then they wouldn’t let him eat any of it.

“Any objections?” said Lark.

Briar poured himself a glass of juice, then looked up like he hadn’t realised they were all looking at him. “Nah,” he said breezily. “No worries.”

Sandry hurried off to get the stupid thing. Briar got all his stuff together and went out onto the porch like usual. Let them get all excited about having a miniature murderous dog-bear roaming the kitchen; Briar had his breakfast to eat.

They’d only been driving for about five minutes when Frostpine realised he’d forgotten to send an important email, so they turned around and went to his place.

“Come in, come in,” Frostpine said, getting out of the car. “I shouldn’t be more than five or so.” Daja followed him into the house and was surprised to see Kirel there, scratching his head over a textbook.

“Attaboy, hard at work,” said Frostpine. “Set a good example for young Daja here.”

Kirel leaned forward slowly to rest his face against the open book. “My brain is dying.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Frostpine. “Hang on Daja, won’t be a tick.” He went off into another room.

“Hi Kirel,” Daja said, trying not to sound as awkward as she felt. Did he live here? There’d been no sign of him at the barbecue, but here he was studying at Frostpine’s kitchen table, just like Uneny and Daja used to do at theirs. He was wearing red shorts and a grey tank top and looked very much at home.
He lifted his head again. “Hey Daja,” he said. “Want to do my homework for me?”

Daja smiled, feeling an odd twisting sadness. That had been one of Uneny’s favourite questions. She supposed it would always live on in teenage boys everywhere. “Not really.”

“Ah well, worth a try.”

“Do you live here?” Daja asked, hoping it wasn’t too rude a question.

“Pretty much,” said Kirel. “Technically I go home on weekends, but I rather stay here anyway.”

“Oh,” said Daja.

“You know, where you start off isn’t always where you want to end up.” Kirel shrugged and pushed his hair up off his forehead. Daja had never seen his hair without gel in it before. It looked pretty silly, drooping where it was supposed to swoop.

The pause was a bit awkward so even though Daja didn’t know what she should say next, she had to say something. “It must be good to live with Frostpine,” she said.

“It’s a dream,” announced Frostpine, coming back into the kitchen. “My greatest regret in life is that I will never be able to experience the pinnacle of human pleasure and live with me myself.”

That shook Kirel out of the slight gloom he was in, and he grinned broadly. “Life’s a bitch,” he agreed, then actually jumped in his seat and looked guiltily at Daja. “Sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay,” said Daja automatically.

Kirel just looked at Frostpine.

“I don’t agree,” said Frostpine. “But we can have a yap about it later, you and me. We’re already behind schedule and the road is calling.”

“Frostpine, you’re not going to make her shoe horses today, are you?”

“Would I ever inflict such terrible pain on a loyal apprentice? Kirel, my man, you wound me.”

Kirel turned around in his chair to fully face Daja. “Last year he took me to see this bloke out by Glenrowan with a fair dinkum forge - I’m talking hammer and anvil here - and we spent the whole day making horseshoes from scratch. Actual horseshoes, for horses. All day. Don’t ask me why.”

“Really, horseshoes?” said Daja, taken aback. She’d seen a lot of horses around in the country here but somehow it never had occurred to her people still had to make horseshoes. It was an odd thought. But she supposed they still needed making, and someone had to do it. “Was it a coal forge, or gas?”

Frostpine chuckled and Kirel sighed. “I see how it is,” he said. “Enjoy your trip then, you massive nerds.”

“Kirel, I am told, isn’t really gung-ho about the scientific advances made in the late Bronze age,” said Frostpine. “If you say ‘Hittite’, he says ‘bless you’. And the ancient, enduring design of the horseshoe moves him not.”

Daja had been trying not to laugh, but couldn’t help it.

“No metalworker has ever suffered from learning too much about metal,” Frostpine said wisely.
“I’ve got a pounding headache that says otherwise,” said Kirel, glaring bitterly at his textbook.

“We’ll let you get on with it then,” said Frostpine. “Drink some of Rosethorn’s tea for your poor aching head. It’s on the bench. Come on, Daja, off we trot.”

Sandry was getting a fair bit better at spinning now that she mostly had the hang of meditating at the same time. It had taken a lot of practice but she was finally getting it. Her first attempt - the lumpy bit of string from that first day with Lark - went everywhere with her to remind her of her first success. Just looking at it or running her fingers along it brought back that beautiful feeling inside her where she was calm and in control and could do whatever she put her mind to. It helped a lot when she got frustrated.

Lark did a lot of different things while Sandry practised her spinning and Sandry always forced herself not to ask Lark about them or try to watch too closely. She was determined to be patient and not get distracted. If she concentrated on one thing at a time she would be able to get properly better at it. Much as she would like to, Sandry knew she couldn’t learn everything at once.

Even so, she couldn’t help noticing things. Lark usually worked with the radio on, and when it was music playing it was a normal volume but when it was cricket, which it often was, she kept the volume low. Sandry was curious, but hadn’t asked about it. Today there was some kind of jazz playing, with saxophones. Sandry didn’t know much about that kind of music but it was quite nice to work to.

Another thing was that Lark was rarely as still and calm as Sandry always imagined you had to be when you were working. When Sandry was concentrating hard, she worked on blocking out everything around her so she could really focus on the work she was doing. She couldn’t imagine Lark ever getting a cramp in her foot or a crick in her neck like Sandry did from working, because even when Lark was only working with her hands, her feet would be tapping out a rhythm, her head might bob from side to side, and whenever she could work standing up she would, and then her body would move to the beat of any music that was playing. Sometimes she would dance even when there was no music at all. Sandry would have loved to join in, but she knew that as soon as she tried it, she’d be picking up her spinning from the floor and starting all over again.

But what surprised Sandry most was that so much of what Lark seemed to do in this room was mending. Sandry had only ever learned to make things, and that was how she had done her first real magic. Was there magic in mending, or only in making? Maybe Lark was just fixing things.

The question niggled at Sandry until she had to ask.

“It’s one and the same thing,” Lark said, thimble in hand. “Everything on this earth has its own magic, Sandry. It doesn’t get turned on and off depending on what we do with it.”

“There’s magic in us, though - things that we do. Niko said so.”

Lark nodded. “Niko’s an academic and a mage with decades of experience and study, but if you ask him, for example, what magic is, he won’t have a neat definition for you. The word magic means something different to everyone, and everyone has their own way of understanding what it is to them.”

Sandry thought about that as she spun her yarn, trying to breathe correctly without thinking too hard about it. When she felt comfortable in her rhythm, she asked, “Is it like magnets?”

Lark tilted her head. Her hair bounced a little. “How do you mean?”
“I learned in school about magnets. We did experiments. One magnet on its own doesn’t do anything, because it’s just a piece of metal. But when you have two magnets together, suddenly they’re properly magnets. So there can be magic in this wool, like you said, but it can’t do anything unless you have someone with the same kind of magic inside of them. And then they can connect, and things happen.” Not to mention that sometimes Sandry felt like she really was a magnet, the way bits of fluff zoomed and latched onto her, or how sometimes when she was touching something she or Lark had made, she found it really, really hard to let go.

Lark looked at her thoughtfully. “I think that’s a fair way of looking at it. It’s an interesting theory. I’m sure Niko would love to discuss it with you as well. Just don’t let him start talking at you instead of to you – he’s notorious for it.”

Sandry had been going to mention it to Daja, since she might know more about magnets, but she’d talk to Niko about it too if he had the time. Except for when he was teaching them meditation, he spent most of his time with Tris. It was fair enough; he was her teacher, not Sandry’s.

“Something to think about and fit into your theory.” Lark offered after a moment. “What else can two magnets do if they’re brought close to each other?”

Sandry’s heart sank. She hadn’t thought of that. “They push each other away,” she said. “Does that happen with magic?”

“Not in my experience,” said Lark. “But then, I’m only a stitch witch.”


“It’s one of my favourites.”

Sandry smiled. “What does that make the others? Is Daja a metal witch?”

“A technician magician?”

“A machine-agician?”

Lark chuckled. “I think Frostpine calls himself a smith mage - he’s old-fashioned like that - but who knows what Daja will consider herself to be. You’d better share your ideas with her before she settles on one.”

“We wouldn’t want her to miss out,” said Sandry with a grin.

“Definitely not,” said Lark.

Sandry could feel her hands getting tired, so she concentrated on spinning as steadily as she could before she’d have to give up. Lark worked beside her, humming along to bits and pieces of the music.

It wasn’t long before Sandry caught her spindle, preferring to call it quits on her own terms rather than having to salvage her work once it had spun out of control.

“That was very good,” said Lark warmly. “I’d say that’s a good half hour’s spinning.”

Sandry grinned. “I’m getting a lot better,” she said. “It doesn’t feel nearly as stressful to talk and spin at the same time any more.”

“I can tell,” said Lark. She bent down to pick something out from the basket at her feet. It was a
pair of blue jeans with a long gash across one of the knees and down the front of the leg, so cleanly cut it must have been done with very sharp scissors or a knife.

“Are those yours?” Sandry asked. They looked too big for anyone else in the house, but she couldn’t imagine how something like that would happen to something of Lark’s.

“No, they’re not,” said Lark. “They belong to a friend of mine.”

Sandry was just so happy that she’d come to live with Lark, who was so kind that she looked after children with no families and did mending for her friends. It was a bit silly of Sandry, really, to be sitting around spinning all day when Lark was doing so much work for other people - work that Sandry was sure she could do after a bit of time to work it out.

“Can I learn about mending things next?” she asked. “I never learned anything like that, and it feels a bit silly to make able to make things without being able to fix them.”

“Of course,” said Lark. She turned the jeans over in her hands. “These are going to have to be shorts, I think. I don’t think enormous patches on jeans are really in any more.”

“Could you patch it?”

“I could, if I could dig up a bit of denim the right size for it. Go and have a look in the bucket second from the left on the floor there, if you like, and see what you can find. We can have a go at patching it for practice before the big chop.”

Sandry hopped up, set her spinning carefully on the table and walked over to the bucket Lark had pointed out. It was full of scrap fabric, from cotton to linen to denim to satin and silk. Sandry knelt down and started to rummage through.

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Tris immediately recognised the footsteps coming upstairs; Rosethorn and Niko had the heaviest steps, and Rosethorn never came up two stairs at a time. So Tris had already put her book away under her pillow and slipped her shoes on by the time the knock came on her door.

“I’ve got something for you,” Niko said almost before the door was open. He was trying not to smile, Tris could tell, but his moustache gave him away.

“What is it?”

The last thing Tris needed in her life was any more surprises, but instead of answering her question Niko asked one of his own. “Do you need permission before you can go on the computer?”

Tris didn’t know and didn’t care. Daja and Sandry sometimes went on the computer in the spare room upstairs but Tris had no desire to. She had books enough in her own room, and she didn’t trust computers anyway. Their obnoxiousness far outweighed their value.

“Tris?”

“I suppose so.”

Niko considered her for a moment. “Would you please find Lark or Rosethorn and ask for that permission? I really do think you’ll enjoy this.”

The more he said it, the more Tris felt certain she wouldn’t. Maybe Niko wouldn’t be mean to her on purpose, but that didn’t mean he really knew about Tris or what she liked. It was beyond
unlikely that Niko would give her something she liked or wanted. Nobody ever did, really.

Except there was that blue wren in her room that Sandry claimed to have made, and Lark had given Tris three new dresses last weekend that Tris didn’t hate wearing.

Tris plodded downstairs and hoped to find Lark, but it was Rosethorn she came across first, standing in the kitchen just staring at the kettle. Tris didn’t realise she was staring herself until Rosethorn looked up, saw her standing there and said, “Something I can do for you?”

“Niko wants to know if we can go on the computer,” Tris said.

“Are you asking my permission?” Rosethorn asked. She picked up the kettle and poured steaming water into her cup.

“Yes.”

Rosethorn nodded. “Then you have it.”

Tris looked at the kettle, which was just an ordinary white kettle, then back at Rosethorn.

“Anything else? A cup of tea?”

“No thank you,” Tris said, and hurried back upstairs.

Niko was standing in front of the television looking at the games scattered across the shelf. “Do you play these?” he asked, sounding amused.

“No,” said Tris. “Rosethorn said we can use the computer.”

There were three chairs in the computer room: one big swivel chair with a curved back and armrests, one smaller cheaper swivel chair and an ordinary kitchen-type one. Niko waved for Tris to sit at the computer so she dragged up the kitchen chair and searched for the power button for the computer. Niko, after a moment, took the fancy chair. Tris found the button and jabbed at it with her thumb.

“First things first,” said Niko as the computer whirred. “Do you have a Skype account?”

“No.”

“A Facebook account?”

“No.”

“An email address?”

“No.”

“Have you ever used a computer before?”

Tris glared at Niko. Was he teasing her? “Yes.” She realised the screen wasn’t on and pressed the button for that too. Of course she knew how to use a computer. She didn’t like doing it, but that didn’t make her incompetent. She was born in the 21st century, after all.

Niko nodded. “As you know, I have time commitments which mean I won’t always be available to teach you face-to-face. One of the many joys of the modern age is that we are all now available to everyone else, all the time. I’m sorry to have to drag you into the digital world, but in our situation
there’s nothing else for it. It hasn’t killed me yet, and it won’t kill you.”

The login screen came up. The user that came up in the box was Daja. Tris hadn’t even known Daja had her own setup on the computer.

When she realised Niko was just sitting there expecting her to do everything, Tris clicked to switch user. The choices that came up were Daja, Sandry, Admin and Guest. Tris looked over the four options and frowned.

She didn’t realise how long she’d been sitting there feeling odd until Niko cleared his throat softly.

“She’ll set up an account for you?”

Tris hastily clicked on Guest. It didn’t ask her for a password.

Niko picked up where he’d left off in his speech. “We can correspond by email, and that’s what we’ll have to do if I’m on the road. Document sharing, too. And if I’m stuck somewhere for a while for work, we can have lessons over Skype.”

Tris absolutely hated the sound of that. “Can’t you just give me books to read?”

Niko’s mouth twitched. “I can do better than that,” he said. “Let’s get some accounts set up for you and we can go from there.”

The way Frostpine drove reminded Daja of the way he sat in his deckchair. He had the fingers of his left hand on the bottom of the steering wheel and his right elbow was out the window, his forearm resting on the top of the door. He only put his right hand on the wheel when he had to change gears with his left, and sometimes not even then. He drove like the car was an old friend of his who he knew could be trusted to do the right thing, leaving him at perfect leisure to enjoy the ride.

“Now, Daja,” he said once they’d passed through town and were out the other side. “We’re going to see a mighty old machine here, a real triumph of human achievement. It’s really something, you know, what humanity’s able to achieve with engineering, ingenuity, coordination, determination and bloody appalling labour practices, and in time you’ll learn about all those things as they relate to modern mining. But there’s one thing, Daja, I want you to always remember about mining in this country specifically.”

Daja nodded.

“It’s all stolen land,” said Frostpine.

It didn’t really sink in for Daja until she realised that was all he was going to say about it - that those four words were all that needed to be said. She looked out her window at the long grass and scrubby trees whizzing past, the dry brown land that seemed to go on forever. Fenced off, a lot of it, with cows and horses, sheep, bales of hay inside. Stolen, Daja thought.

The trip from Sydney to Wangaratta had been more than 600 kilometres long. Daja had looked it up when Niko had told her where they were going. That distance was longer than Ireland was, and yet so small compared to the whole of Australia. It’s all stolen land, Daja thought. She turned around in her seat to look behind them, then she looked out the front again. What year had white people come to Australia? It was one of those things Australian children would know, but Daja had different dates hammered into her mind: 1845-1849, 1921, 1972, 1998. All that felt a world away, and yet it was the English all the same, hard at work on both sides of the globe. Everywhere she went, it was the English.
Frostpine glanced over at Daja. He looked solemn, and older. There was so much Daja felt she should say, but nothing came to mind. “I’ll remember,” she promised.

Frostpine smiled, but not happily, and nodded. “Attagirl,” he said. “Now, have you ever heard of Eldorado before?”

“No,” said Daja. “Is it famous?”

Frostpine chuckled. “Not this one, it isn’t. It’s a Spanish name, El Dorado. When the Spanish were tearing their way through the Americas they saw so much gold and so many precious things that they thought there must be a palace or a city in South America stuffed full of it, and they called this imaginary city El Dorado. The Golden One, it means. They didn’t have much gold in Spain, so they got very, very excited about how much there was of it in their so-called New World.”

“Gold is lovely, though,” said Daja.

“It is, it is,” said Frostpine. “No argument here. Beautiful stuff, and an absolute pleasure to work with. Not worth, in my opinion, the nonsense that’s historically been perpetrated by people desperate to get their hands on it. But that’s another matter for another day. Fact is, you’ll find places called El Dorado all around the place. It’s an easy name to give a mining town. Gives it a bit of a shine.”

“And they mined gold there? Here, I mean?”

“That they did, for a good hundred years or so. What we’re looking at today is the last phase of it. And here we are.”

They turned off the main road onto a smaller gravel one, following a blue sign that said “DREDGE”. It wasn’t long before Daja could see what looked like the top of a rusted old crane, and then when they got into the parking area she could see it what looked like an enormous old tin shed to its left. It was in three parts, like an Olympic podium: highest in the middle and lowest on the right. On the side of the highest part there was graffiti that said “ELDY WARRIORS”. There was a little metal ramp leading up to the front.

“And there she is,” said Frostpine. “Put out to pasture, but you can imagine the life she led. Now hold on a tick. You put on sunscreen before you left home?”

Daja nodded.

“You’ve got a hat?”

She held it up.

“Just the bug spray, then, and we’re good. Best put that on outside the car, if you don’t mind.”

Daja opened her door and was immediately hit by the sound of what must have been thousands and thousands of insects humming and creaking. Daja had heard plenty of cicadas around these parts before, but nothing this loud and at this time of day.

Frostpine smiled. “Dredge is sitting on still water,” he said. “Bug city out here, and frogs too. Then you’ve got the birds to keep them in check, twittering away to their hearts’ content. No danger of loneliness out here.”

Frostpine showed her how to spray her arms and legs directly, then spray her hands to wipe her face. He suggested spraying her hat as well to discourage the insects even more, but Daja didn’t
want it to smell like bug spray forever. “If you change your mind, just let me know,” said Frostpine. “Not too many biting bugs here, you’ll find, but they can give you the irrits all the same.”

Daja supposed she’d get used to the noise. What she was really interested in was this enormous goldmining machine and the little metal ramp leading up into it.

“Go for your life,” said Frostpine. “Just don’t go where the signs say don’t go.”

Tris stared at the long, long list in front of her. “Is this all peer-reviewed?” she asked.

Niko nodded, suppressing another smile.

Tris clicked on an article and it started to download onto the computer. “I should have to pay for this,” she said, watching it.

“I pulled some strings.”

Niko seemed to have a terrific number of strings to pull. He’d pulled strings to have Tris sent to this house, he’d pulled strings to get time off from his university to stay up here for a while, and now he was pulling strings to give Tris access to a treasure trove of academic resources. Tris itched with impatience for the day to come when she could move in his world. He did as he pleased and had access to everything. Tris hadn’t even graduated primary school.

“You got a lot of strings,” came a voice from the doorway. Tris expelled an irritated breath. Did that boy not have anything better to do with his time than eavesdrop on other people’s conversations and add his own inane remarks to them?

Niko swivelled in his chair. “I do.”

Briar’s suspicious look lingered on Niko and then switched to Tris. “I thought you only did books, not computers. You said you hate computers.”

Did he never shut up? “Do you have a point?”

“My point is Lark’s gonna take Little Bear for a walk and she said to see if you wanted to go.”

“No.”

“Sandry’s not going.”

“So what?”

Briar shrugged. “You’re welcome,” he said, and wandered off.

Niko watched him go.

_Did you have to bring him here too?_ Tris wanted to ask. _And Sandry, Daja - couldn’t I have just come here on my own to learn?_

“I hear you’re teaching him to read,” said Niko.

Tris bit back the “so what” that was on her lips. Niko could still take all this back if he wanted to. “He says he never went to school,” she said. “Isn’t that illegal?”
“Not on his part,” said Niko. “But it’s not an ideal circumstance.”

“And speaking of school,” said Niko, “I want there to be no doubt in your mind that when the school year starts that is going to be your focus academically. Your education with me is not a substitute for your general education.”

“I always do my schoolwork,” said Tris.

“I’m not saying you don’t. However, I imagine until now you never had much in the way of an alternative.”

“All right,” said Niko. “Now, over the next week or so I’m going to draw you up a syllabus and share it with you online. I’m not going anywhere yet, but sooner or later I’ll have to show my face at work and various other places and when that happens I want us to be very used to working remotely with each other. So familiarise yourself with what we’ve looked at today, have a bit of a play around. If you have any problems, we’ll talk about it next time.”

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“Okay.”

“And don’t hog the computer too badly.”

Tris scowled. As if she would be able to, in this house.

“And don’t neglect your books, either. We wouldn’t want them to feel like they’ve been replaced by this newfangled computer machine.”

“Not funny,” Tris grumbled.

Niko laughed. “I’ve got a conference call coming up, so I need to be on my way,” he said. “Unless you have any questions?”

Tris shook her head.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He nodded at her, stood up and pushed his chair neatly back where he’d got it from.

Tris knew she was supposed to say thank you, but it stuck in her throat.

Niko smiled. “Have a good day,” he said, and left.

Sandry was helping Rosethorn with lunch, Niko and Tris were doing secret computer business and Daja was off looking for buried treasure or whatever. So when Lark invited Briar to come with her to walk Little Bear, he figured it wasn’t so much an invitation as it was a trap closing in. He went up and invited Tris when Lark asked him to, but Tris wouldn’t hardly ever go outside unless you dragged her, and Lark knew it.

Not that there was any danger going for a walk, or with the dog or anything. It actually sounded like a nice way to spend the middle of the day, since it wasn’t too hot and he didn’t get to spend that time sleeping any more. It was just that Lark was always so nice and it stressed Briar out massively. He knew as well as anyone that if you didn’t know what part of a person was ugly, it got you bigtime when it finally happened. As long as Briar had been here he’d seen nothing except
kindness from Lark, and the longer it went on the stronger he smelled a rat.

But he stuffed his feet into some shoes, didn’t argue about the hat and went out the front with her and the dog, who went sniffing around as far as the leash would let him, all excited like he’d never been outside before in his life.

It had been long enough that Briar wasn’t expecting Little Bear to go feral and attack him any more, but that didn’t mean he liked having the dog around. Little Bear probably wasn’t going to bite anyone, but that didn’t mean he definitely wouldn’t. In any case, Briar was holding his position on it, keeping the told-you-so in his pocket just in case someone did get bit.

When they walked out to the front of the house a car turned into the Wells house. Briar saw one of the brother’s faces looking at them before the car went all the way down the driveway.

“They’re gonna come after us for this, you know,” Briar said. “We smashed them right in their pride and nicked their favourite toy.”

“It’s an experience they might learn from,” said Lark.

“I don’t want them to learn,” said Briar. “Let deadshits stay deadshits, why make ’em dangerous.”

“If you want peace between you, it might be better to get out of the habit of calling them names,” Lark pointed out.

“They’ll hate us no matter what I call them so long as we keep their dog,” said Briar. “They’re pissed.”

Little Bear made an impatient little whining sound and three of them set off uphill. “I always like to get the tough bit of a walk out of the way to begin with,” Lark said with a smile. She even looked nice, all the time. When Briar was little and still sometimes imagined his mum turning up and living with him, he used to imagine someone a lot like Lark. Like, they’d told him his mum was dead, but he was just a little kid, and little kids are really fucking stupid a lot of the time.

Anyway, that was forever ago now. He’d grown out of it long before he was Roach, and now he wasn’t even Roach any more. No point even thinking about it.

“How are you finding living here?” Lark asked after a while, as Little Bear stopped to sniff at tuft of yellow grass.

“It’s fine,” said Briar. “Bit hilly.”

“Nothing bothering you?”

Briar shrugged. “Not really.”

“If you’re having trouble with anything or there’s something you’d like to ask for, you’re certainly free to bring it up,” said Lark. “Okay?”

Briar shrugged again. What would he even ask for? None of it was worth the hassle. They gave him plenty enough.

“I know it’s odd to ask if you’re not used to asking,” said Lark. “But you always can, if anything occurs to you.”

“Okay,” said Briar. He wondered how long this walk was supposed to be. He was getting hungry,
and the further they walked up the hill the longer it would take them to come back down it. “How long till lunch?”

“Would you like to turn back or go a little further?” Lark asked.

“Go back,” said Briar.

“All right then,” Lark said, and they turned around.

Daja had gone out with Frostpine and would be gone all morning. Lark had been out the front on the phone for about half an hour. Tris was on the computer with Niko and had been for at least an hour. When Sandry knocked on Briar’s closed door there was nothing but silence. He might be somewhere else, but it was just as likely that he was in there and ignoring her.

Sandy wasn’t alone in the house at all, but she still felt lonely. Thinking maybe Briar was out the back, Sandy headed off down the corridor.

Rosethorn looked up from where she was arranging vegetables on the kitchen counter and said, “Looking for someone?”

“Would you like some help?” Sandry said. It must be a lot of work to cook for six people in every meal, and everyone else was definitely busy.

“Sure,” said Rosethorn. She waved a red vegetable peeler at the carrots and potatoes in the middle of the counter.

Sandy quickly went and took the peeler from her. “What are you making? Is this lunch?” She saw the two pie tins over by the oven. “Vegetable pie?”

Rosethorn nodded.

Sandy racked her brain for something to say while she was peeling. She didn’t know anything much about Rosethorn, except that she liked gardening and didn’t like talking to people. But Pirisi always said that the only way to get to know somebody was to get to know them, so Sandy tried to think of something to say.

“Is all of this from the garden?” she asked.

“Carrots, peas, fennel, onion, parsley, chives, potatoes, yes. Mushrooms, flour, milk, no.”

“The eggs?”

Rosethorn looked sidelong at her. “No.”

“Why don’t you grow mushrooms?”

“You’re welcome to if you’d like to,” Rosethorn replied. “I don’t like them much myself.”

Sandy put all the peelings into the compost bucket. Before she could ask what to do next, Rosethorn pulled the chopping board over to her and cut up one bit of a carrot. “Like that,” she said, and passed it back to Sandy. “Potatoes the same size, if you can, or a bit bigger.” She moved her own chopping board way over to the other side of the counter and picked up one of the onions.

Sandy was too busy concentrating on cutting the carrot neatly to carry on the conversation right then, but once she was finished she had her question ready.
“Is it okay having us all here?”

Rosethorn looked up at her across her onion. “Yes,” she said decisively.

*You don’t seem to like it,* Sandry thought, but didn’t dare to say. “Oh,” she said instead. She pushed all the carrot bits into a neat pile. “It must be hard to cook for so many people every day.”

Rosethorn snorted, but Sandry didn’t know what the joke was. “Isn’t it?”

Rosethorn put down her knife. “You’ve met all your housemates, Sandry,” she said, one eyebrow raised. “You live in this house. Do you think I’m worried about the cooking?”

“Why, what’s wrong with us?” Maybe it had been sarcasm before. Maybe Rosethorn didn’t like having them around at all.

“There’s nothing wrong with you at all,” said Rosethorn. “There are some challenges. Cooking, I assure you, is not one of them.”

Sandry breathed a bit easier. It did seem like Rosethorn meant what she said. It was just so hard to talk to her; Briar seemed like the only one of them who knew how to do it.

“Thank you for your help,” Rosethorn added after a moment.

Sandry looked up at her in surprise, then smiled. “You’re welcome. Thank you for letting us all live with you.”

Rosethorn pursed her lips for a moment then started chopping. “You’re welcome,” she said.

Sandry picked up a potato.

Maybe it was what Frostpine had said about mining and stolen land, but the closer Daja got to the dredge the more unfriendly it felt to her. Partly shrouded behind trees and bushes, it put Daja in mind of a fossil of a big hulking metal dinosaur, put in a lake and left to decompose. The endless vibrations of the insects and croaking of frogs didn’t help Daja shake the impression.

Daja stepped over the two dead fish on the ramp, not interested in wondering how they had got there, and walked partway up the ramp to get a good look at the mechanisms at the front of the dredge. She could feel the rust and rot on the air, could see plants growing in the big buckets that ran in a smooth line all the way from the very top of the dredge down into the water. Daja supposed they were what had scooped up the earth, and then they were dragged up into the main body of the thing so people could look through them for gold, like a big conveyor belt of mud and water. Supporting that system was a large intricate arrangement of beams and pulleys, wires, scoops, weights and ladders.

“What do you think?” said Frostpine a little way behind her. He kicked the fish off the ramp and into some nearby reeds.

“When did they make this?”

Frostpine grinned. “To think of all the time these poor Parks Victoria people spent making these beautiful informative signs for the sightseers to read, only for them to be utterly disregarded.”

Daja hadn’t even noticed there were signs.

“1936, from memory,” said Frostpine. “Ran until ’54. Old beast dug up millions of dollars worth of
“Gold in that time. Millions.”

“Whose land was it?”

“This is Yorta Yorta territory,” said Frostpine. “Same as the land we both live on.”

“Yorta Yorta,” Daja repeated. She committed that to memory and then walked the rest of the way up the ramp into the body of the dredge itself. It was big and dark and musty, and when Daja looked down through the grill under her feet and the spiderwebs under that she could see light reflected against the water way down below.

Almost everything inside the dredge was fenced off. Some sections were crammed with junk; others were completely empty. In the front there was a line of about a dozen levers almost as tall as Daja - no doubt where the operator would stand.

Walking further towards the back of the dredge it only got darker. Before she even got to the section with the highest roof, Daja was brought up short by a sign reading “ASBESTOS HAZARD”. She backed away quickly. She didn’t know exactly what asbestos was, but she knew it was definitely bad.

Frostpine was reading a sign back towards the entrance, so Daja went to join him. “I feel like I’m walking around in a dead thing,” she said. “Does it feel that way to you?”

Frostpine looked around himself then down at Daja. “Long-dead,” he said. “There’s no harm in it.”

“Only asbestos.”

“I wouldn’t recommend moving in.”

Daja shuddered to think of it.

“See here,” said Frostpine, pointing. “Five- to thirteen-man crew, three shifts a day for eighteen years straight.”

Daja laid her hand gingerly on some of the rusted metal in front of her, trying to get a sense of the eighteen years of hard work carried out by the machine she was standing in. It had been still for so long, sitting here motionless on the water that Daja struggled to bring it to working order in her mind. She wondered if the men living on it had loved it or hated it. They must have looked after it well, to have kept it working so hard for so long.

Daja felt a little pang of sympathy. A thing so beautifully built, probably very advanced for its time, now left in a dead old pond to sit idle and decompose because the world had moved on. Not that Daja thought they should still be dredging gold with it, but she didn’t like to see it useless.

“So what do you think?” said Frostpine.

“Long-dead,” said Daja. “I wish I could have seen it running.”

“Poor old dinosaur,” said Frostpine. “Not the most glamorous retirement I can think of.”

“No,” agreed Daja.

“Now do Parks Victoria a good turn and have a quick squizz of all these very educational signs, if you don’t mind, and we’ll go from there.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

And another chapter! Thanks for comments, kudos and for reading, everyone :)
“Saving yourself?”

“Sacrificing myself,” said Daja crankily. “So if I fall on my head and die, you’ll know what not to do.”

“Didn’t you do backflips off a mountain or something one time?”

“And that may be all my luck used up.”

“Luck is nonsense,” Tris informed her. “So you can’t run out of it.”

Daja had been getting grumpier and grumpier, but at Tris’s second comment she looked surprised and laughed. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“So are you going or not?”

Daja shook her head but walked up to the ladder. She knelt down, spun around on her knees and felt down with one foot for a rung on the ladder.

Tris moved beside Daja so she could see. “It’s about ten more centimetres,” she said. “You’re lined up right in the middle.”

Daja lowered her foot until it touched down. “Thanks,” she said. Then, holding on to the two top bits of the ladder, she pushed her body up and out to free up her other foot to join the first one. Then she descended carefully down the ladder.

It didn’t look difficult. That didn’t mean Tris would be able to do it, of course. Gritting her teeth, she moved to where Daja had been, knelt down, spun around and let one foot out to dangle down behind her into the empty air.

“Further,” Daja called out from the ground. “A bit further.”

Tris let her foot down as far as it would go and still found nothing. Didn’t they know Tris had short legs?

“Move your foot back towards the house,” said Daja. “Towards you.”

Tris moved her leg forward and felt her ankle hit metal. She fumbled a bit to raise it up and place her foot on the rung.

That was step one. Then what had Daja done next?

Palms sweating, Tris gripped the top of the ladder. It was just a matter of getting her other leg out from under her, then she’d be on the ladder and could make her way down. Anyone could climb down a ladder.

Suddenly sick to death of the whole thing, Tris pushed out with her arms, freed her other leg and started down the ladder before she could even tell if she was properly balanced. She stumbled on the first two steps but just kept on going and was on the ground before she knew it.

When she turned around from the ladder she found everyone standing there, not just Daja and Rosethorn. Briar and Sandry each held one handle of a big black bag, and Lark had Little Bear on a lead. Tris scowled. She hoped they’d all enjoyed the show.

“And then what?” said Rosethorn.
“To the cars,” said Daja. “Then we go.”

It felt like a waste of time to Tris. They’d done the hard part, and it wasn’t like they needed to practise walking to the cars and driving away from the house. They did that all the time. It wasn’t difficult.

“We are allowed to break windows in a real fire, though, right?” said Briar. “Like, it’s gonna be faster and you don’t get stuck.”

“You’ll cut yourself on the glass,” said Rosethorn. “No.”

Briar shook his head. “You can get it all out of the windowframe, then you drop something outside to land on if you have to. Like since we’re supposed to have a blanket for the smoke, you drop that out onto the glass and then you don’t stand on glass and you’re good.”

“No,” Rosethorn said again.

Briar rolled his eyes, but he turned away from Rosethorn before he did it. Tris fought the urge to roll her own. Trust Briar to think that breaking a window was a totally practical and sensible thing to do. What was worse, he sounded like he’d had a lot of practice doing it.

When they reached the cars, Lark said, “Count off.”

Tris eyed her disbelievingly. There were six of them. They could all see that there were six of them there. Did they really have to count off like little children?

“One,” said Rosethorn.

“Two,” said Lark.

“Three,” said Briar.

“Four,” said Daja.

“Five,” said Sandry.

“Six,” muttered Tris.

“And Little Bear is seven,” said Sandry.

“Do we have the emergency kit?”

Sandry and Briar lifted up the big bag a little between them. Again, everyone could see perfectly well that they had it with them. Stupid questions, waste of time.

“And in we go,” said Rosethorn. “Two with me, two with Lark. Dog with Lark.”

Naturally, Sandry moved to Lark and Briar went to Rosethorn. Naturally, Daja joined Sandry, helping her with the bag after Briar dropped his half. Tris followed Rosethorn and Briar to the ute and slammed the door behind her, as you had to for it to close properly. To her surprise, Rosethorn started the car and set off down the driveway.

“Where are we going?” asked Tris. “Aren’t we finished?”

“Cars aren’t fire-proof,” said Rosethorn, indicating right and heading out onto the road. “It’s not over yet.”
Daja and Sandry sat together in the middle of the car, with Little Bear in his cage at the back. Lark was following Rosethorn up through the hills. They were going to Glenrowan, according to the plan Sandry had on her phone. It was one of their Neighbourhood Safer Places.

Sandry knew this was just for practice. It wasn’t real, but she couldn’t stop imagining that her new home was burning up behind her: Lark’s workroom, Rosethorn’s garden, all of Sandry’s things. Where would they go then? Would Sandry have to start all over again all over again? Was she going to lose this new family as well as her old one? No, she wouldn’t. She couldn’t. Not again.

She interlocked her ankles to keep from jiggling her feet. She forced her hands to relax so they were clasping each other gently, not in a death-grip. This was only for practice. Everything was fine, everyone was fine, and everything would be fine. Nobody else was worried, so why was Sandry? There was nothing to be afraid of.

“How likely is it this will really happen?” asked Daja. She had her phone out and was frowning at it in a thoughtful way.

*Maybe Daja is afraid too,* Sandry thought hopefully. Then she felt absolutely horrible for wanting such a thing.

“A risk of fire is likely,” said Lark from up the front. “A fire reaching our property isn’t likely, but it’s certainly possible.”

“It’s odd that people live here,” said Daja, sounding like she was thinking out loud, “knowing all the time that their houses might get burned down.”

“Did you know Glenrowan is where they captured Ned Kelly?” Sandry interrupted. Better to talk about where they were going than what they were leaving behind.

Daja shook her head. “I didn’t know that.”

“He was the only one of his gang who survived the fight with the police, but then they hanged him anyway for his crimes.”

Daja looked out the window. “It’s funny to think of that as really happening, once upon a time,” she said. “It feels made up.”

“Did you learn about Ned Kelly in school? He was Irish, wasn’t he?”

“Not really. I mean, yeah, I guess he was Irish, but I don’t really know much about him. I always just remember the armour he made, like he was Iron Man years and years and years before Iron Man existed.”

“I don’t think he’d appreciate you saying so,” said Lark. Sandry could hear the smile in her voice. “Ned Kelly would have despised Iron Man.”

“Would he?” asked Sandry, curious.

“Definitely,” said Lark.

“He could take some tips from him on armour design, though,” said Daja.

“If Ned Kelly could have flown, he’d have gotten away,” agreed Sandry.

“If only he’d been able to fly, he could have had his very own comic book.”
Sandry giggled, imagining the looks on the police officers’ faces if they had Ned Kelly cornered and then whoosh! he flew over their heads and away to freedom. It would make a funny comic book.

But Daja still had other things on her mind. “If there’s a bushfire or a bushfire warning, does Frostpine leave his house too?” she asked.

Sandry looked out the window, trying to imagine armoured outlaws galloping across the countryside instead of fire crackling and burning it up. They were nearly in town now, if you could call it that. The one main street they were on looked like the only big road there was.

“Usually he just moves into the CFA,” said Lark.

“The what?”

“The firefighters,” said Sandry.

“Oh,” said Daja. “I didn’t know Frostpine was a firefighter.”

“He’d laugh if you called him one,” said Lark. “But he’s invaluable to them, and he’ll always be there when he’s needed.”

“There he is!” said Sandry, pointing.

“Frostpine?” said Daja.

“No, look. Ned Kelly.”

Daja looked where Sandry was pointing. “I didn’t realise he was so tall,” she said.

The statue of Ned Kelly was twice as high as the building it stood in front of. There was a small cluster of people at the foot of it taking photos.

“If he was that tall maybe he wouldn’t even need to fly,” said Sandry. Daja smiled.

They drove on for about thirty seconds and then turned left and pulled into the carpark of a football field next to Rosethorn, Briar and Tris.

“Here we are,” said Lark.

“Here?” said Daja.

“Here.”

Sandry looked around. It didn’t look like there was anything at all to stop a fire coming roaring up and burning the whole ground. “Why here?”

“Let’s get Little Bear out and we can all talk about it together,” said Lark.

“I don’t care about all that radiant heat crap,” Briar announced as soon as Lark walked a little way away on the phone. “If shit starts burning, I’m not standing out here in the open air like a chump. Plenty of lakes and rivers around to jump into.”

“You can breathe underwater, can you?” said Daja. “Interesting.”
“This is a lot safer, scientifically,” said Tris. “The fire won’t come here if there’s nothing to burn along the way.”

“I don’t think there’s even going to be a fire,” said Sandry.

“Fire’s supposed to happen, but,” said Briar. “Rosethorn says the land here needs fire, because otherwise seeds and stuff don’t work right. Like, they’ve got to be busted open with fire to start growing. So there’s always gonna be fires.”

Sandry was looking upset, and Daja didn’t blame her. It was madness to make a home where it could so easily be destroyed, and Sandry seemed a lot more attached to this new one than Daja was.

“They control the fires, though,” said Tris. “They start them on purpose so that when there are real wild bushfires they can’t do as much damage. It’s called burning off.”

“Yes, we can read, too, thank you,” said Daja. Then she remembered Briar couldn’t, really, and bit her tongue. She didn’t usually speak without thinking, but she was just so, so sick of Tris.

Normally Sandry jumped in whenever things got awkward like this, but she was biting her lip and looking out across the field, her eyes worried. She didn’t seem to be listening at all. Briar just stood there with his hands in his pockets, shoulders slouched, eyes scanning the grass around their feet. It was hard to tell if Daja had hurt his feelings or not.

Tris was looking at Daja disapprovingly, her grey eyes cold and her mess of red hair waving in the wind. Like Daja, who had made one little mistake and been insensitive towards Briar, had more to be ashamed of than Tris, who was just continually mean.

Rosethorn came back from the bathroom before Lark was finished on the phone. “All four of you still here,” she said. “Wonders never cease.”

“We just love each other so much,” said Briar, wiping a fake tear from his eye.

“Wild horses couldn’t drag you away, I’m sure,” said Rosethorn.

“Are we finished now?” Sandry asked.

“We’re finished here. We’ll do a bit of shopping in town, get some lunch and then back home. I think Niko wants to fit in some work with you all this afternoon.”

When Rosethorn gave them all money to go and buy lunch, Briar was way too hungry to think about hoarding it. The girls all stopped in front of the bakery but Briar had something better in mind. He went right on past them, went and got two burgers, chips, nuggets and a drink and strolled down along a side road to find somewhere to set down and eat it where he wouldn’t have to share. He found a bit of green space, planted himself under a tree and got stuck in.

If he’d gone back and ate lunch with the girls they’d have been all over him like seagulls for a chip or a chicken nugget or a bite of one of his burgers.

Briar ate his lunch in peace and then stuffed the empty bag into one of the gaps in the bench before getting up. It was starting to feel like naptime, but it was only about ten minutes before they were supposed to meet back up. Technically probably he hadn’t been supposed to go off on his own, but for once neither Rosethorn or Lark had actually told them all to stay together, so Briar figured his
defence was okay.

It wasn’t often he got much time to himself down here in town, and ten minutes was plenty time to have a bit of a look around and suss out this area a bit. He was about five minutes east of the police station, he knew, and the train station was north across the main road maybe five or ten minutes. Hospitals were up that way too, and so was the library. South-west past the cops you got to Frostpine’s shop, a lot of parkland, the cemetary. But that was really all he knew, and it wasn’t much. It was nowhere close to being enough.

Briar headed south, following the little creek than ran from who-knew-where underneath the main road and down through this suburb. Everything was pretty much the same all down the street. Kind of shabby houses, old cars, overgrown lawns, dodgy road surface. Probably an okay spot to base yourself, but not much to see. What Briar really needed was proper time to explore, get his bearings, map the place out. Like, hours, so he could get a chance to really see how it all fit together. That’d never happen, though.

When Briar saw a little wooden bridge over the creek he walked across to take the other side back, just to cover a bit more different ground. This was definitely the nicer side. Better cars, bigger gardens, solar panels, and a few were even double-storey, which Briar had hardly seen any of out here. He noticed a few of the houses had motion-sensor lights on their front paths and at the door. Most of them had walls or fences. Plenty had those stickers that meant they had a security system, or at least they’d thought ahead enough to make it look like they had one. One house, a big double-storey grey and silver slab of a building, had a boat in the driveway behind a big black gate with an intercom.

Looked like he’d found the swank. This was the Toorak of Wangaratta. It wasn’t much, but it stood out like dogs balls in such a slow, sleepy city. If you could call it a city.

Briar turned what he figured was the last corner before he’d be back out on the main road and he was brought up short by the absolute most beautiful tree he’d seen in his whole life. It had a pale trunk and spreading branches and the sun hit the flowers dead-on. They were more red than Briar had ever thought red could be. For a second Briar thought he was dreaming. It was just unreal.

If there was one thing Briar could give rich people credit for, it was the quality of their gardens. This red tree was on the nature strip next to a really nice one, too. Briar unstuck his feet from the ground and walked up closer. Once he was up closer under the shade of the tree, he could see properly into it. It was the most perfectly arranged garden you could just about ever see. The colours changed in real gradual shades as you looked around the garden, and the heights of the plants made slopes and patterns in it that Briar followed over and over again with his eyes, mesmerised. The grass was short and managed to be bright green, unlike just about all the other grass you could find in this town. There was even a little fountain thing that Briar would swear was marble. Too heavy to move, obviously, but seriously pricey shit.

The blinds were half-open on the window facing the street, and so was the window. When the blinds fluttered in the breeze Briar saw something that made his jaw drop.

At the window…

It was sitting on a little table in the middle of the room. It was a kind of pot plant maybe half a metre tall with big wide dark green leaves. They looked like they were kind of stripy. Briar hadn’t seen this kind of plant before, but that wasn’t what had grabbed at him.

The plant had four really tall spikes growing up out of it too, orange and yellow and dead-set glowing. It wasn’t that dark in the room, but this plant had spikes that shone bright enough to catch
Briar’s eye from metres away outside the fence.

That didn’t happen. Briar could swear that didn’t happen. Even the blindingly red tree he was standing under didn’t literally glow. Unless maybe he was doing something magic without realising. It had happened before, if you believed Rosethorn. Briar mostly did.

*Cut it out*, Briar pleaded with it, straining his mind towards the plant. *Dim that shit.*

If anything, the plant glowed brighter. Briar gritted his teeth, jumped the fence and hurried across the soft grass towards the window, thinking all the smothering thoughts he could. *Go out, go out, go out.*

The inside of the house was exactly what Briar expected it to be once he’d seen the garden. Every single thing he could lay his eye on was mad expensive, from the low couches to the shelving to the rugs, ornaments, lights. The painting on the wall would be too, Briar would bet, even though he couldn’t really tell what it was supposed to be of. Not that that was what he was here for, of course. Briar tried to settle down, breathe slowly in and out, focus himself on undoing whatever it was he’d done here. *Go out, go to sleep, whatever,* he thought. *I didn’t mean to do it.*

Nothing changed. The spikes kept glowing.

There was nothing more he could do, Briar decided. He’d tried and it didn’t work. Time to cut his losses. He took a few steps back from the window, the grass firm under his feet. He watched for a couple more seconds, hoping maybe him moving further away would help. But it just shone on, like a bloody streetlight.

It didn’t *feel* any different to a regular plant. Everything was probably fine.

*Fucking relax,* he thought, partly to himself and partly to the plant. He turned around to leave and met eyes with the man coming out the front door.

Seemed like all Briar ever did these days was kick himself.

Briar was late back from lunch and no one was surprised. Rosethorn was miffed and Lark looked a little anxious. They kept looking at each other in between looking around for Briar. Tris couldn’t read what it was they were communicating. Maybe they were rethinking the policy of letting any of their charges out of their sight, considering how many times it had gone wrong. It was really only Briar they needed to keep an eye on more, but Tris just knew if there was a change in the rules it would apply to all of them. It wasn’t like she ever got rewarded for her own good behaviour.

Sandry was looking around with a little frown, like she was trying to summon Briar from out of a shop or around a corner. It was energy wasted, but there was no point telling her so. All Sandry ever did was think about other people, which Tris thought might work better for her if she’d actually listen to them once in a while as well.

“Don’t worry,” Daja said to Sandry. “He’s probably just getting into a fight or getting accused of shoplifting again.”

Sandry spun around to face her. “That’s not funny!”

Tris thought it was a little bit funny but she was careful not to smile.

Lark passed Little Bear’s leash to Tris and looked at her watch. Rosethorn tapped her foot furiously on the footpath. Sandry walked down a little way again to look down another street.
“There he is!” exclaimed Sandry. Lark quickly moved towards her. A second later Briar was on the scene, running like the devil himself was after him. It looked like he didn’t even notice Sandry as he ran past her but he could hardly miss Lark, who had a bit more time to react and moved in front of him so he’d have to either stop or run right into her.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go,” said Briar. His eyes were wide and his chest was heaving. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Sandry went and stood by his side. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. Sorry I’m late.”

There must be something seriously wrong if Briar was apologising. He moved quickly to join Tris, Daja and Rosethorn, looking extraordinarily edgy and suspicious. Lark and Sandry followed him with one on either side.

Rosethorn went in the other direction, walking briskly to where Briar had come from and looking down the street. She looked a bit surprised, her head jolting back a little. Then she seemed to brace herself and put her hands on her hips. “Raising a sweat, Crane?” she said. “How novel for you.”

Tris and Daja exchanged a puzzled look, then shared it with Sandry. Tris heard Lark sigh very, very, very quietly. She doubted the other two even heard it.

“The police have been contacted and are on their way,” a dry voice announced. Then he came into view, panting slightly but standing very upright and walking with his nose in the air. He certainly didn’t look like the kind of man who ran a lot, being very thin, very pale and dressed immaculately in dark trousers, a soft yellow shirt and shiny black shoes.

“You can call them right back off again,” said Rosethorn. The mocking tone had gone from her voice. Now she sounded murderous.

“Oh, he’s yours?” said the man Crane. He looked around and saw Briar standing with all the others, glared at them all and then back at Rosethorn. “I dare say you thought I’d be elsewhere, and so you sent him scurrying along to gather intelligence.”

Rosethorn looked at him with an utterly disbelieving expression. It was the first time Tris had ever seen her lost for words.

Tris looked at Daja to see if this was making any sense at all to her. Daja just shook her head.

“Who is that?” Sandry whispered to Briar, but he had his eyes fixed on Rosethorn and Crane. His feet were twitching around on the ground. Lark was standing behind him with her hands on his shoulders, rubbing them gently. Tris stared for a moment then looked away.

Rosethorn found her voice again. “Crane,” she said eventually, shaking her head. “That is ridiculous.”

“Is it? Is it indeed? Why else would he have been prowling around in my garden, peering through my window, if not to report back to somebody with an interest in my work?”

Rosethorn snorted. “Crane, listen to yourself.”

“I’ll thank you to listen to me, Rosethorn,” Crane said, his breathing now steady and his diction even sharper. “That – that –”

“Yes?” said Rosethorn, dangerously sweet.
Crane decided against choosing a noun. “I thought better of you, Rosethorn,” he said. “To send –”

“Clearly, you didn’t,” Rosethorn interrupted. “I don’t know where you think you’re going with this, Crane, but I can tell you right now –”

Lark let go of Briar very slowly. “Stay here,” she murmured. “Everything will be fine.” She patted him on the shoulder one more time as she walked past him to join the other adults. After a moment Briar seemed to wake up, and he took two slow steps backwards.

“Where are you going to run to?” Daja asked him. “That would be real trouble.”

For half a second Tris was convinced Briar was going to start crying right there in front of them. Then he got that look in his eye that meant he’d decided to be cool Briar, tough Briar, untouchable Briar. So there was no point talking to him, but he probably wasn’t going to run. Tris turned back to the adults to see that Lark had switched places with Rosethorn, who was now coming back towards them. No wonder the conversation had become much, much quieter.

When Rosethorn got to them, she didn’t take any chances. She gripped Briar by one shoulder and jammed him in against her side. Tris hoped she was willing to keep that up 24/7, because it was starting to look like that’s what was going to be needed. Tris had a lot of complaints about a lot of the homes she’d been forced to live in, but at least up until now she’d largely managed to avoid boys.

When the police officer arrived they all went back to Mr Crane’s house where there wouldn’t be so many people staring and they wouldn’t be causing such a nuisance. But then Crane decided he didn’t want to invite them inside, so they moved again and sat around a table and bench in a nearby park.

Sandry, Daja, Tris and Little Bear sat together around one table. Around the other bench Crane, the police officer and Lark had one side each and Rosethorn and Briar sat next to each other on the other one.

Sandry and Daja sat so they could watch the conversation the others were having. Tris sat with her back to it. It was audible anyway as long as they all stayed quiet and no cars drove by. Sandry knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but if it was a private conversation wouldn’t someone have told the rest of them to sit in the car?

Briar spoke through gritted teeth. “I just looked in the window because there was a plant that looked like it was glowing and I wanted to see if it was.”

The officer looked from Briar to Rosethorn to Crane and back to Briar. “A glowing plant?”

“My Vriesea Splendens,” said Crane. “It’s bioluminescent.”

“I didn’t know plants could glow,” Briar growled. Sandry wished she could see Crane’s face, but he was the one sitting with his back to them. Surely he was realising that he had overreacted?

“So you popped over the fence to have a look?” the police officer said, writing something down.

Briar didn’t say anything.

“Look – what’s your name? Briar?”

“Briar,” said Lark, nodding.
“Look, Briar, mate—”

“He is not your ‘mate’, officer,” said Crane. “He is a suspected—”

“Oh, give it a rest,” said Rosethorn. “He stood on your grass, Crane. He looked at a plant you have out on display.”

“He ran,” said Crane decisively. “That—”

“Who can blame him? I could go on the record with dozens who run screaming just at the mention of your name.”

“My dear—“

“All right,” said the officer, getting to his feet. “I’ll let you talk this over. See if this can be sorted out without police involvement.”

Sandry let out her breath in relief.

“Don’t cheer just yet,” Daja murmured. “That man Crane has to agree.”

Sandry didn’t see a problem there. Briar had a good explanation and the police officer didn’t seem to think there was anything to worry about. Crane was upset, but Lark would talk to him and he’d come around.

“Why does he do this?” Tris said suddenly. “Does he want to be in trouble everywhere he goes?”

Sandry looked at Briar thoughtfully. He was sullen now, staring at the table while all the adults talked around him. She’d seen that look on him before. There was no way he had wanted this to happen. “Sometimes I still bite my nails,” she said.

“It’s not quite the same thing,” said Daja, still in that very low voice.

“We shouldn’t have let him go off on his own,” Sandry said, feeling miserable about it. “We’re supposed to stay together.”

“He walked off without saying anything,” Daja pointed out. “What are we supposed to do?”

Tris huffed. “I’m certainly not going to follow him around to try and stop him getting into trouble,” she declared. “If he can’t help himself then I’d be wasting my time.”

Sandry disagreed so strongly that she reached out and touched Tris on the arm before she remembered Tris didn’t like that. “Sorry,” she said, moving her hand.

“What?” said Tris.

“People who can’t help themselves are the ones who most need help from other people,” said Sandry. “If you’re helping someone who doesn’t need your help in the first place, then how is that even helping?” The words came out a bit muddled, but this was one of the things Sandry absolutely knew was true and it sounded like Tris didn’t know it yet.

Tris just scowled at her and looked away.

Sandry looked at Daja. She hoped that her friend would agree with her, but sometimes Daja wasn’t at all like Sandry expected.
“It’s not our job to help him,” Daja said. “It’s Lark’s and Rosethorn’s job, and they’re doing it. You’re not responsible for him, so stop worrying about it.”

“But if we all help each other –”

“Please, not now,” said Daja. “Can it wait until this is over?”

It seemed like it was over to Sandry, or nearly over, but since neither of the others wanted to have a conversation, Sandry could wait. She was making great strides with patience.

“Why is it taking so long?” asked Sandry. Of course she hadn’t taken Daja’s advice at all about not worrying.

Truth was, Daja was starting to worry a bit herself. Even considering the twin troubles of policemen and rich men who felt wronged, it was taking a long time for them to come to any kind of agreement. Briar was only a child, and Crane had admitted all Briar had done was trespass on his property – and only his front lawn, too – but still, it seemed that things were being taken very seriously.

“He must have a real grudge against Rosethorn,” said Daja. It was the only explanation that really made sense.

“That’s not Briar’s fault,” said Sandry indignantly. “He looks so scared.”

Daja looked at Briar, trying to see fear on his face. All she saw was endurance.

“It’s natural for a criminal to be scared of the police,” said Tris.

“A criminal?”

“It’s natural for a lot of people to be scared of the police,” Daja cut in.

“No it isn’t,” said Tris.

“Yes. It is.”

“Briar’s not a –“ Sandry tried.

“This is obviously normal for him,” said Tris. “I don’t know why you’re trying so hard to pretend otherwise. He never went to school. He doesn’t know how to behave. He’s obviously broken the law before, and now he has again. Why are you surprised?”

“I thought you liked him,” said Sandry, frowning.

“Why?”

“You’re –“

“He did something wrong and there’s going to be consequences,” Tris interrupted. “I’m not saying I want him to get in trouble, but no one else gets to get away with doing the wrong thing. Why should he?”

“You don’t even have a heart at all, do you?” Daja said, her anger seeping through to the surface. “You’re just cold straight through.”
Tris went whiter than white. Daja’s ears popped.

“Don’t,” said Sandry. “Please don’t.”

“I am so sick of this,” said Daja. She looked Tris dead in the eye. “You got away with creating a magical whirlwind and putting everyone in a lot of danger and you got rewarded with a pet dog.”

“She did that to help us,” Sandry pointed out, but Daja wasn’t finished.

“You get away with being rude to everyone all the time. You look down on everyone who you think isn’t as smart as you and everyone just lets you do it.”

“She helps Briar with his reading all the time.”

“You were horrible to Frostpine at his house and there weren’t any consequences for that.”

“What?”

Tris finally spoke. “I don’t like people.”

“Shocker,” said Daja.

“I can’t help it. There’s no rule that says I have to like people. I never asked to come here with all of you.”

Daja felt sick. “None of us asked to come here. Do you think I asked to come here?”

“If you’re upset about being sent here don’t yell at me about it. I was sent here just the same.”

“I’m not upset about having to come and live here. I’m upset about having to come and live here with a racist. And that is your fault, because it’s you.”

“Tris isn’t a racist!” said Sandry.

“No offence, Sandry, but how would you know?”

Sandry opened her mouth and closed it a few times.

“Briar thinks so too,” said Daja. “Ask him.”

“I know that,” said Tris.

Daja did a double-take. “You what?”

“I know he thinks that.”

Tris’s eyes met Daja’s, her cheeks bright red and mouth tight. Daja had expected a denial. She didn’t know what to do with a – confession? Was this a confession? “How?”

“The first book I was reading with him was The Secret Garden. He hated it from the start. He hated Mary Lennox. I argued with him about it. We changed books.”

Daja had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

“What does that mean?” asked Sandry. “Who’s Mary Lennox?”

Tris scowled at her. She didn’t seem to want to look at Daja any more. “It means he ruined my
favourite book,” she said. “And I wasn’t trying to be rude to Frostpine, you know. I’m not stupid.”

For the first time ever, Daja wanted Tris to keep talking. Normally Tris just seemed to say what she thought directly, rudely. It made it even more infuriating that she was dancing around the point now.

The others were getting up from the bench behind Tris. Daja leaned forward, “What do you mean?” she asked.

Tris answered so quietly that Daja couldn’t hear all of what she said. All she heard was mumble, mumble, “know everything”.

“Let’s go home,” said Lark from behind Tris, her hand on Briar’s arm.

None of the girls moved, at first. Tris was bright red and refusing to look up. Sandry’s eyes were flickering around over everyone, like she didn’t quite know what anyone was doing and therefore what she should be doing. Daja wanted to keep at Tris, drag an explanation out of her. But when she looked up and saw Briar, still as stone, jaw set and looking at nothing, and Lark, who had already looked worried before and now was realising something was wrong at this table as well, Daja knew it would all have to wait.

She stood up and headed off for the car. It was all too much for one day. She needed some time to think.

Rosethorn seemed to be staying behind and talking to Crane and the policeman, so they all piled into Lark’s car. Tris put Little Bear into his cage in grim silence, then helped herself to the front passenger seat. Sandry wriggled her way into the middle seat next to Daja and Briar came in behind her. Lark got in last, closed her door and started up the engine.

“Are you okay?” Sandry asked Briar, which was very Sandry: the very best intentions, but definitely not going to help.

“Shut your mouth,” Briar snapped, not moving from where he was slumped into the corner and staring out the window.

Daja was surprised that Lark didn’t say anything, but then Tris twisted around in her seat to glare at Briar. “Sandry’s the only one who actually cares if you get arrested or not, so if you’re not completely brain-dead I suggest you shut your own mouth before she changes her mind and you’re on your own.” She turned back to face the front again.

“Sandry is not the only person who cares what happens to Briar,” Lark said firmly. “Far from it. So let’s all not take out our own worries on those around us. We’ll get home and unwind a little.”

Daja spoke into the silence that was left. “It’s an interesting bushfire preparedness plan, that’s for sure.”

Tris snorted loudly from the front seat. Daja saw Lark smile. Sandry and Briar turned their heads in sync and gave Daja twin bemused looks.

“I’d rather the bushfire,” Briar muttered.

Sandry sighed, leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Daja knew the feeling.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Another chapter for your reading pleasure! Special thanks on this one to my friend Jess for contributing expertise, enthusiasm, floor space and fibre to the cause. And thank you to everyone, as always, for reading, liking and commenting. You make it all worth it.

It was the same dream as always, except this time there was smoke in the air. Sandry woke sitting up, gasping for breath and looking around frantically for the way out. Her eyes were stinging fiercely and it took a moment for them to settle on her little glowing nightlight and from there to move to the open door of her bedroom. Sandry’s eyes jumped from shadow to shadow, putting together the shape of her room in her mind, slowly convincing herself that this room was not that room.

This was the worst one she’d had in a while, and it made her want to scream and cry. It had been scary in that room, but she wasn’t there any more. It had been months ago, and she would never be there again. The whole thing would be over by now if only she could stop dreaming about it. Sandry gathered all her sheets and blankets together and sat up against the headboard, leaning back against it and letting the shakes gradually roll out of her body. She could still taste the smoke in the back of her throat.

There was a soft clunk from somewhere past her door, and with her dream still lurking in the back of her mind, for a moment Sandry thought, Niko, and her legs told her to lunge forward to meet him at the door, so he would know she was here, so he wouldn’t go past and leave her all alone again.

Sandry shook her head roughly, trying to shake away all the memories. She didn’t want them, so why did they have to stick around? That noise would have just been Briar getting up and wandering around like he always did.

Usually he went into the kitchen, though, and now Sandry thought about it, that noise had sounded an awful lot like the front door closing.

In a flash, Sandry hopped out of bed, grabbing her dressing gown and stuffing her feet into her slippers as she went. She stumbled out of her bedroom, and opposite her door Briar’s door was open. It was never open when he was in there.

A horrible cold feeling came over Sandry. She hurried to the front door and opened it, but everything was pitch-black outside. It was a cool, overcast night and all she could hear were leaves rustling very quietly in the trees. There was no moon and no stars to help her.

“You just gonna stand there?”

Sandry’s body sagged in relief. Briar’s voice had come from just in front of her somewhere, low down. It sounded like he was sitting on the steps. “What are you doing out here?”

There was a pause before he answered. “Minding my own business.”
“Aren’t you cold?”

“This isn’t cold.”

It felt quite cool to Sandry, but maybe she was just shaking a bit still from her nightmare. She closed the door behind her and then shuffled slowly forwards. She could see a little bit more now than she could at the start, but it was still only vague shapes and she wasn’t sure she could remember how long the porch was.

“You’re planning to walk right up and fall down the steps?” Briar said, which was helpful, because from that Sandry could narrow down where he was sitting. She walked to where his voice had come from and fumbled her way to sit down beside him on the top step. He was sitting very still and breathing slowly. Sandry relaxed all the way, then. He seemed fine.

“Why are you sitting out here?”

Sandry felt Briar shrug. His arm felt bare against the sleeve of her dressing gown, so she shifted a teensy bit closer. He must be at least a little bit cold.

“Didn’t want to be in there,” he said.

“But you’re not going to run away?”

“I look like I’m running?”

Maybe he wasn’t fine after all. Sandry had never heard Briar like this before, sounding so flat and sad. Even when Briar was tired or grumpy, he never sounded like this. It was like a whole different person was sitting next to Sandry, and she couldn’t think of anything to say to him.

At least he was here, though, and not locked up in a police station or running away all alone. Sandry thought about that and about how she really didn’t want to go back to her room, not yet, and so she sat there quietly with Briar and watched the world take shape around her as her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

“How’d you even know I was out here?” Briar asked after a little while. “You got a trace on me or what?”

“No. I was awake and I heard you.”

Briar sniffed. “And you thought I was running away?”

“Maybe.”

“What for?”

Wasn’t it obvious? “I don’t want you to leave.”
Briar turned his head toward her and tilted it. He shifted slightly away from her. “Because we’re such close mates? You’d miss me so much?” His voice was scornful, and it did sting a little but more importantly it sounded like the Briar Sandry knew. This Briar she knew how to talk to.

“We could be,” she said, edging closer to him as if it would somehow make her words more powerful. “I don’t see why you’re treating it like a joke. How can we live together and learn magic together and not be friends?”

“You know,” said Briar, so loudly Sandry jumped a little and sat back where she had been, “if you’re ride or die all the time, if people don’t wanna risk dying then they’re not gonna ride with you.”

Sandy tried to work that out, but she couldn’t make sense of it. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Briar sighed. His feet shuffled on the step. “You throw in with high stakes all the time and you get pissed when people won’t match it.”

Sandy didn’t want to admit she still wasn’t following, but her brain was so tired that instead of sitting and working it out, she just sat there and did nothing. He seemed to be accusing her of something, but Sandy hadn’t the faintest idea what.

“Look,” Briar said after a long pause. “Obviously you just get free shit and people being nice to you all the time. That’s how you live. Fine. It’s fucked up to expect it from everyone, but. No one’s trying to offend you by not acting the exact same way as you. You take it personally for no reason.”

Either Sandy still wasn’t understanding him or Briar was just completely, totally wrong. “I’m not offended,” Sandy told him. “I’m not saying everyone has to act like me. I’m just trying to help.”

“Help what?”

That was – “You. Everyone. I’m just trying to help everyone.”

“Yeah and who fucking asked you to?”

“It’s basic human decency,” said Sandy. “You shouldn’t have to ask for that.”

“It’s not basic human decency. That’s my point. You think it is but it’s not.”

“I don’t –”

“Look, you asked, I told you. You don’t like the answer, not my problem.”

Sandy realised she had asked the wrong kind of question. Lark said that asking negative questions was asking for negative answers, and that was exactly what Sandy had gotten. So what she had to do was ask the positive question instead. Not how could we not be friends, but —

“So how can we be friends?”

Sandy and her questions. You answer one, up sprung the next one. How can we be friends? Briar had never heard a more embarrassing question in his life. And what was worse, she was staring at him like he was supposed to go right ahead and answer it.

“Just bloody relax about it,” he said. “Like, unless you’re getting a bonus for beating a deadline or something, I dunno why you’re on this friendship trip so hard.”
Sandry didn’t say anything, and Briar wondered for half a second if that actually was what was happening here. He’d seen that kind of thing before. People wouldn’t cause friction or turn on the big guy if it was going to hurt their own mates along the way, so the bigwigs always sent someone along with smiles and favours and love to make sure they got you tied down right from the start… Sandry was so shithouse at it though that there was no way. Not a chance. Briar felt like giving himself an uppercut for considering it for even the half-second he had.

“Things don’t just happen just because you want them, though,” said Sandry. “You only get out what you put in.”

“Say what?”

“You only get out what you put in,” Sandry repeated.

“Nah,” said Briar. “Bullshit.”

“Bullshit yourself,” Sandry snapped back, like he’d hurt her feelings or something.

“It is bullshit. Maybe you don’t realise, but I’m telling you there’s plenty people getting jack shit back no matter what they put in.”

“It’s not going to get better if you just don’t try, though. That’s what I’m saying.”

Shows what Sandry knew. “This is the best place I ever lived, and I never tried to get here,” said Briar. “I was trying not to. Explain that shit.”

“I don’t know!”

“I don’t know!” Briar echoed, mimicking Sandry’s whine. “Exactly. You act like you’re in charge of us all and you try and make the rules but you don’t know shit.”

“I’m not in charge,” Sandry scoffed.

“Yeah no shit you’re not.”

“But neither are you. You try and make the rules too, and I don’t have to do what you think I should either.”

“Like you ever would.”

“Like you ever would.”

“Yeah well –”

“You know what?” said Sandry. “I will. I’ll prove it to you.”

Briar’s brain was playing dead, acting like it was roadkill. Briar didn’t blame it for trying to get out of this bullshit conversation, but he gave it a kick anyway. “Prove what?”

“That I’m not in charge.”

Unbelievable. “I already said you’re not. You can’t prove something to me I already said is right.”

“Tell me what I do that makes you think I think I’m in charge.”
“Jesus,” said Briar. “Do you ever stop?”

“No,” said Sandry.

Briar believed her. If she really thought something so absolutely batshit as, “You only get out what you put in,” then no wonder she was like this. “Okay,” he said. This was his opportunity, then. Some peace from Sandry at his fingertips, offered at a bargain price. “You can prove it. Don’t tell me what to do,” he said. “And I don’t mean just don’t tell me, I mean fully get off my back. Let me be.”

“So you can electrocute yourself with the toaster like you almost did the other day?”

“Yup.”

“That’s not me being bossy, that’s me saving your life!”

“Who ever died from a toaster?”

“You probably would have if I didn’t warn you!”

“So you’re saying you can’t do it, then?”

“Ugh!” said Sandry. “This is so silly.”

At least she realised that much. “Yeah and whose idea was it?”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll stop trying to tell you things unless I think you’re in real danger. That’s fair.”

“You think toasters can kill and drinking water is bad for you,” said Briar. “No deal.”

“I never said drinking water is bad for you!”

Briar was pretty sure she had a while ago, but he couldn’t really remember the details. “If you go one week without giving me any advice, talking to me about right and wrong, or telling me to do or not do anything, I’ll be your friend,” said Briar, trying not to choke on the words. It was all for the greater good. “Swear to god.”

“Do you believe in god?”

“Can you do it or not?”

“Of course I can do it!”

“So there we go.”

“What, you just — you just gamble friendship? Like a bet?”

“Why,” said Briar pointedly, “Is that wrong?”

He could feel her thinking next to him. Her voice came out determined. “I couldn’t tell you.”

Briar grinned. It wasn’t all the time such an obvious win-win proposition came his way. “It’s a deal, then.” He got up, more than ready for a good, long sleep until at least autumn. Maybe around to next summer. Sandry jumped to her feet and held out her hand. Briar squinted at it in the dark. There was daggy, and then there was Sandry. “Really?”
“To make it official.”

At least she wasn’t asking him to sign anything. Briar wouldn’t put it past her, if she got the idea in her head, so he shook her hand and they headed back inside.

“Good night,” said Sandry.

“Yeah,” said Briar. “Night night.”

Sandy went into her room, leaving her door about a hand or two open. Briar went into his own room and closed the door behind him. He vaguely wondered what Sandy had been doing awake in the middle of the night in the first place, but there was a million possible reasons and it wasn’t really that interesting of a question.

What was interesting, Briar thought as he got into his bed, was that she’d thought he was running away. He’d run straight back to them all when he was in trouble instead of bolting for the train station, and he’d stayed put when Crane and the cops were putting him on the spot, and he’d gotten into the car and come all the way back up here, and he’d had dinner and been good and not even put a foot wrong, and Sandy thought after all that he was going to run away into the fucking bush in the middle of the night like a dead set chump with a deathwish.

Nope. Briar knew a lost cause when he saw one, and he got a good look at this one every day in the bathroom mirror. He’d known this would happen, told himself not to let it happen, felt it happening and he’d done sweet fuck all about it. He’d gone soft, lost his edge, gotten sucked in, blah blah blah.

He also slept in a warm bed every night in his own room where nobody bothered him, got three meals a day plus snacks and he was learning to read. Just the other day he’d planted his very own apple berry plant, and he wanted to watch it grow. He knew more about plants now than he’d ever learned about anything in all the rest of his life, and he still didn’t barely know anything.

Briar’s chest tightened suddenly and he flipped around to lie on his other side. If he had to go back to how things had been before, it would kill him. It would actually kill him. If he had to go back and fight and work and scrap and starve like before, he wouldn’t be able to do it without thinking about how he’d been here learning things with Rosethorn and living like a king, and it would eat at him every second and he’d just slowly wither away and die.

Briar flipped around again, cursing himself for starting thinking, of all the damn things, when he was dead tired in the middle of the night and could be sleeping instead. Another shitty habit this place had given him that would fuck him up if he had to go back. It was a massively long list already, and everything on it was another reason he wouldn’t be running, ever.

Probably.

Tris didn’t usually lie awake at night. Night-time was for reading and sleeping, not lying awake watching the clock. But when three hours of lying motionless and wide awake had passed and the numbers were suddenly all zeroes, Tris had to admit sleep might be a lost cause for the time being.

There was a heaviness to Tris’s arms and legs and in her chest that she wasn’t used to, as well as an odd sticky feeling in her throat. Guilt, she thought suddenly, but pushed it away. She didn’t have anything to be guilty about.

It was just infuriating to Tris that with all the of the things she had done that had supposedly upset Daja, the girl had never thought to mention any of them to Tris before. If she wanted to keep her
complaints to herself, then it was common courtesy for her not to then start complaining about how many complaints she had piled up over time in secret. Even Briar was better at constructive criticism than Daja, and he was needlessly combative, rude and couldn’t structure an argument to save his life. At least he bothered to use words in the first place.

It was a mess. Lark and Rosethorn would side with Daja if there was a fight. That was obvious. If Daja was going to call Tris a racist, then how could she ever deny it? And if she couldn’t deny it, then they’d kick her out, because you couldn’t have a racist living with a black girl who didn’t like her. An orphaned black girl, no less. It was going to be Tris on the losing end here just like everywhere. Making it through the crisis with the mini-tornado was just another cruel trick, raising her hopes despite everything, and she’d been a complete fool to think it meant she would be able to stay.

Tris needed some air. She needed to move. She dragged herself out of bed and went and went to sit on her table under the window. She had set it up a little bit back a little from the wall so that she could sit on it with her legs down in front of her and look directly out. Not that she could see anything, without her glasses in the middle of the night, but Tris was using her eyes less and less each time she looked out this window. There was so much more out there than anyone could ever physically see.

Tris breathed in slowly, counting. She held her breath. She breathed out again, controlling her breathing, her mind and her magic. A familiar voice came up to her on the breeze from somewhere nearby — “How can we live together and learn magic together and not be friends?” —

Tris slid the window shut harder than she’d meant to. She sat there, too angry, tired, resentful, disappointed to move or think. Sometimes when she was meditating she felt like she was slipping out of existence, lost on the wind and weightless in the air. This was the polar opposite of that. She was graceless and misshapen and stuck where she was.

“Are you awake?”

It wasn’t really a question. Tris read enough books to know subtext when she heard it. What Daja was saying was, I know you’re awake. I heard you. So Tris didn’t bother answering. She swung around on the table, pushed herself onto the floor, marched up to the door and opened it.

The vague red blur before her eyes was Daja, presumably.

“Do —“

“Wait,” said Tris. She turned away, picked up her glasses from the head of her bed, smoothed over her doona and returned to the door. “I’m turning the light on,” she said, and did. She put on her glasses to see Daja standing there in her smooth red pyjamas and headscarf. “It’s past midnight.”

Daja nodded. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Join the club, Tris thought, but that was just a result of too much interaction with Briar. Instead, she said, “We’ll get in trouble.”

“For what? We don’t even have a bedtime.”

Technically they did, and it was whenever Lark or Rosethorn announced it was time for bed, but Tris had never actually seen it enforced. “What do you want, then?”

Daja cleared her throat softly. She looked Tris right in the eye. “What were you saying this afternoon? I didn’t hear you.”
“Yesterday afternoon,” Tris corrected her.

Daja’s jaw clenched and her eyes narrowed. She stood stewing for a moment or two. “I am trying to make a home here,” she said eventually through gritted teeth. “I don’t want to, but I have to. Do you even realise that? You act like nothing matters around here except you and your books and your bloody dog. This is all I have now, you know. You obviously don’t want me to be here, but you’re not going to drive me away, so you can stop trying.”

Tris tried not to laugh, but that was the most ridiculous thing she’d heard in a very long time.

“And it’s a joke to you,” Daja said, steady once again. She crossed her arms over her chest. “Okay.”

“Drive you away?” said Tris. “That’s the joke. What could I do to drive you away? You’re the last one they’d ever send away from here.”

“You’re wrong,” said Daja. “Do you want to know why?”

Now that was a question worthy of Rosethorn. If Tris said she did want to know, she’d be as good as admitting she was wrong. A kinder person than Daja would have kept talking and not made Tris answer. Daja just stood there and waited.

“Why?” said Tris.

“You can’t guess?”

Tris wished she was taller. She was sick of Daja looking down on her. “Tell me.”

“Because I’m black and I’m foreign and it’s easier if I’m gone.”

That was what Tris had thought she would say. It was too predictable. “It’s the opposite,” she retorted. “How bad would they look for getting rid of you?”

“Look bad to who, exactly? They’d get a round of applause from most people in this dungheap and you’re a fool if you think otherwise,” said Daja.

“Sandry would fight tooth and nail for you.”

Daja nodded. “She’d do the exact same for you or Briar, it’s just the two of you wouldn’t appreciate it.”

“Not the exact same. She’d take your side over mine.”

“Oh, would she?”

Daja was getting ironic, which was hardly justified. It was obvious Sandry liked Daja the best out of all of them.

“Remember that conversation we had this – sorry, yesterday afternoon? I know it was so long ago, being yesterday, but try. Did Sandry stop to consider for one second what I was saying before she jumped to back you up? She defended you even before you did!”

Tris had forgotten Sandry had even been there for that conversation, but now she thought back, Daja was right. Tris isn’t a racist, she’d said. Even Tris wouldn’t have been willing to go that far. “No,” she said. “I remember.”
“So if I were you I’d stop assuming you magically know what would happen in every single hypothetical scenario and start paying attention to what actually does happen, you know, in reality,” said Daja. “It might not be as easy as talking completely out your arse, but you might be right a little bit more often.”

“That’s good advice,” said Tris. What else could she say? She didn’t like it, but it was.

“Oh,” said Daja. “Good.”

“Did you have anything else to say?”

“Yes,” said Daja. “But now I can’t remember it.”

“Then I’m going to sleep,” said Tris. “It’s past midnight.”

“Wait,” Daja said before Tris could close the door.

Tris waited.

“What were you saying yesterday?”

Tris felt like saying she didn’t remember, but she didn’t have the energy to lie. “If you must know,” she said, “I was saying I don’t actually know everything. I can make mistakes. So if I’m offending you, just tell me. I might have magic powers but I’m not a mind reader. Good night.”

Tris closed the door and closed her eyes tight. She turned the light off and took off her glasses as if that would cool her burning face down faster.

“If you won’t bite my head off,” Daja said through the door, “I’d be happy to.”

“I’m not Godzilla.”

There was silence from the other side of the door. Tris realised she was counting as she breathed and her anger was slipping away from her instead of building up. Whoever would have thought that meditation had its uses after all?

“All right,” said Daja after a long pause. “Good night, then.”

“Good night,” said Tris. She listened to Daja’s footsteps receding and she listened to her own heart beating. The thought crept into her mind that maybe that was two crises averted in this house. That was two more than ever had been before.

Instead of dwelling on that, Tris went back to bed and concentrated on containing her thoughts and controlling her emotions, breathing deeply in and slowly back out again until finally she dropped into sleep.

Daja came down to breakfast late, having spent a good amount of time stuck trying to work out what on earth it was she should even be praying for these days.

“Good morning,” said Tris, who was sitting at the kitchen table reading a book. She did look up from it, though, which was a fair acknowledgement from her.

“Good morning,” said Daja. She considered trying to work up a smile, but since Tris looked down straight away and turned a page she didn’t bother. “Where’s —”

“Briar and Sandry are eating outside. Rosethorn’s in the garden. Lark’s getting Little Bear.”
“Right.” Daja walked to the back window to look. She couldn’t see Rosethorn anywhere but she did see Briar and Sandry sitting facing each other on the deck. Their plates and bowls were empty, and Briar had an empty banana peel in one hand and a big cup in the other.

When Daja got to the door, Briar was swirling the cup and breathing it in like it was wine.

“That’s revolting,” Sandry said, like she was holding back laughter.

“Hey Daja,” said Briar.

“I can’t watch this,” said Sandry, getting to her feet.

“Why?” said Briar innocently. “Am I doing something wrong?”

Daja expected to hear one of Sandry’s firmer opinions, but she just glared at Briar with her mouth closed tight.

“Bottoms up,” said Briar, taking a long swig and smacking his lips. Sandry just about gagged watching him.

“What’s in that?” said Daja.

“It was juice,” said Sandry.

“It’s not juice if you’ve put egg in it,” said Sandry. “Or jam. Or –”

“It’s good as,” declared Briar after taking a sip and smacking his lips. “Try it.”

Sandry reached down and took the cup from Briar with a defiant toss of the head. Daja was starting to think she was biologically incapable of backing down from a challenge.

“Scull, scull, scull, scull,” Briar started chanting, wiping mashed-up banana off his hands onto the banana peel.

Sandry swallowed, took a deep breath, and she did. Briar watched her, rapt. It was only a few swallows, but Daja could see that it pained Sandry to drink it.

“That,” Sandry said thickly, “is *not* juice.”

“It’s fuckin rank,” agreed Briar. “Like spew.”

Sandry gave him back the cup. “Serve you right if I threw it up all over you,” she said.

Briar just laughed. “Do you reckon I could eat this banana peel?”

Before they could put her off her own breakfast completely, Daja turned to go back into the kitchen. She and Lark crossed over at the doorway and exchanged their own good mornings. Little Bear was begging at Tris’s chair, which was a waste of time if there ever was one.

And maybe he knew it by now, because as soon as Daja was in the kitchen he started sniffing around her feet, his tail wagging hard and his tongue out. “Do you know what’s going on out there?” Daja asked Tris, walking at half speed so as not to walk into the puppy.

“No,” said Tris, not looking.
“They seem like they’re having fun. It’s unnerving.” Daja couldn’t begin to work out why Briar would be in such high spirits after what had happened to him just the day before.

Tris nodded. “I told Sandry this morning that I was your best friend now, after the talk we had, so now she’s made the switch to Briar.”

“Funny,” said Daja, because it was.

“Thank you,” said Tris.

Little Bear jumped up on Daja then, his paws scrabbling at her knees. Daja nudged him away with her foot and looked over at Tris. “Aren’t you meant to be training this dog?”

“Little Bear,” Tris called out sternly. She clicked her fingers down by the side of her chair. The puppy looked towards her and trotted a couple of steps then turned back to look up at Daja.

“I’m not giving you anything,” she informed the dog. “Go bother Tris.”

“Little Bear.” Tris clicked her fingers again. Little Bear gave up on Daja and went to try Tris again.

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The other four came in all together. Sandry and Briar went to the sink with their dishes. Rosethorn just stood there looking at them all with her arms crossed. Lark went and put the kettle on and said to Sandry, “Will you be ready in about half an hour?”

Sandry spun around with her bowl still in her hands. “We’re still going?”

“Of course,” said Lark. “Unless you don’t want to?”

“Oh, no,” said Sandry quickly. “I do. I just thought –“

“I’ll manage this lot somehow,” said Rosethorn wryly.

Sandry went pink.

“I don’t think there’s a need to change our plans,” said Lark. “I’ve been looking forward to the visit.”

“Me too,” said Sandry. “But –”

“You should go,” said Briar seriously, taking Sandry’s bowl from her and stacking it on two others. “Alpaca farming is so important, and you did already say you’d go.”

Tris snorted. Sandry glared at Briar. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, if you say you’ll do something, and then you don’t do it, that’s bad,” he explained, rinsing out his cup. “Right?”

“That’s enough of that,” said Rosethorn. Daja wasn’t sure what was going on, but she agreed there had been enough of it. Briar was always baiting Sandry, but usually he had at least a tiny bit of caution about it, and usually Sandry gave as good as she got. Something was very odd between the two of them, and Daja didn’t like it.

“I can be ready in half an hour,” said Sandry.
“I have some reading to do for Niko,” said Tris. “May I be excused?”

“You may,” said Lark. Sandry brushed past Briar and hurried to her room. Tris stomped off upstairs.

“You, with me,” Rosethorn said to Briar, and they both went back outside. Little Bear was going to follow them but Rosethorn kept him out with a foot and a glare and closed the door behind them. So he trotted back over to Daja and made puppy-dog eyes at her.

“You wouldn’t even like muesli,” Daja told him. “It’s not dog food.”

“Technically, isn’t anything that a dog eats dog food in the end?” said Lark.

Daja nodded. “And that’s why this isn’t dog food.”

Lark laughed and poured two cups of tea. She came over to give one to Daja and sat down across the table from her.

“When we come back this afternoon, would you like to have a talk?”

“No thank you,” said Daja. “It’s all right.”

Lark looked at her carefully then nodded and stood up again.

“And you don’t need to say anything to Tris either,” Daja added.

That brought a slight frown to Lark’s face. “Would you like me not to?”

Daja nodded.

“Then I won’t,” said Lark. “But if you change your mind –”

“I’ll tell you,” said Daja. “Thank you.”

Lark walked all the way around to Daja, put a hand on her shoulder and dropped a kiss on the top of her head before heading off after Sandry with her cup of tea in her hand. Daja watched her go with an odd little jitter in her heart.

Sandry felt a bit bad thinking it, but it was nice to get away from the house with Lark and go on their own adventure with just the two of them. She didn’t much like riding in the ute, which was noisy and bumpy and you had to wind the windows up and down by hand, but since there was only the two of them it was probably better that they took it and left the real car for the others.

It got especially bumpy once Lark turned off the main road and onto a one-lane dirt road that went up between two big, brown fields. Sandry saw a man standing by a gate up ahead and to their right. When the man waved, Lark honked the horn. “That’s Kelly,” she said.

As they got nearer Sandry got a better look at him. He was short with a big belly, and he was wearing what Sandry considered proper farmer’s clothes: blue jeans, a plaid shirt, brown boots and an Akubra. At the end of Sandry’s long struggle to decide what to wear, she’d ended up with something very similar. It was just a shame she didn’t have the right kind of hat.

Kelly swung open the gate and waved them through. Sandry waved at him through the window. He had a very wrinkly face and big ears. Sandry liked the look of him.
On their way around the back of the house Sandry caught her first glimpse of the alpacas. There was about ten of them standing together under a big shadecloth, and they turned their heads to watch as Sandry and Lark drove past.

They looked to Sandry like little fluffy camels. “Do alpacas spit?” she said in sudden worry. When she’d gone on a camel ride a few years ago, one of the camels had spat right into her hair and Sandry had spent the whole ride holding back tears. She’d been a lot younger then, but she still didn’t like the idea of being spat on.

“At each other, sometimes,” said Lark. “They won’t usually spit at people.”

They pulled in beside two utes and a campervan. There was a big building in front of them – Sandry thought maybe a barn – and then fields all around. Sandry slammed her door shut and followed Lark back around to the front of the house.

Kelly met them just as they got there. “Afternoon,” he said. He had a hoarse voice and a British accent that made the “oo” into two separate sounds.

“Good afternoon,” said Lark. “This is Sandry.”

“Good afternoon,” said Sandry.

“Kelly,” he said. He wiped his hand on his hip and held it out. Sandry shook it, making sure her grip was firm. “Welcome to the farm.”

“Thank you! It’s lovely.”

“Well, you haven’t seen much of it yet,” he said with a wink. “I’m guessing we want to go straight to the beasties?”

“Yes, please.”

He held out his arm back towards the barn and tipped his hat to her. “After you.”

Sandry grinned and started walking. “How many alpacas do you have?”

“About a hundred and fifty or so.”

“Wow. Do you look after them all yourself?”

“Well, me and the wife are always here. Our boys live locally and our daughter’s not too far away, so there’s kids and grandkids around. In the school holidays we’ve got a boy who comes out and lends a hand.”

Sandry tried to imagine looking after a hundred and fifty Little Bears and felt her head spin a little bit.

“First, you’re going to meet our boy Cyrus. He’s been winning ribbons probably as long as you’ve been alive. Possibly longer.”

“I’m eleven,” said Sandry.

He chuckled. “Longer, then. Cyrus had his sixteenth birthday in September.”

Kelly held the barn door open for Sandry and Lark and followed after them. The barn smelled like poo and straw, so Sandry was glad when they walked straight through it and out the other side.
There was a little enclosure all in the shade of the barn, and there were three alpacas standing beside the wall: one black, one fawn, and one russet.

“Cyrus, Chirp, Copper,” said Kelly. “Meet Sandry.”

The three of them edged forward a little. They still looked like camels up close, but a bit dopey rather than mean.

“Can I pat one?”

“You go right ahead.”

The black one had come forward the furthest, so Sandry walked slowly towards it with her hand held out.

“This is Cyrus,” said Kelly.

Sandry let out her breath softly as her fingers ran through the fleece on the alpaca’s long neck. “This is beautiful.”

“Careful how sweet you talk about him, he’ll get a big head.”

“A little late for that, isn’t it?” said Lark.

“Aye, maybe. Maybe.”

“Why don’t we use alpaca wool for everything?” said Sandry, reluctantly pulling her hand away. “If it’s warmer, softer, water-resistant, no lanolin…”

“Oh, there’s a few reasons,” said Kelly. “There’s a fair few more sheep than alpacas in the world, for one thing. A lot more industry set up to support wool than alpaca. A lot of livelihoods tied up in sheep.”

That was certainly true. Until Sandry had started living in Wangaratta, she hadn’t quite realised the enormous numbers of sheep that lived in the country or imagined how much wool they would produce. On the other hand, she hadn’t seen any alpacas at all until now.

“They’re hardier, too, sheep. If you want to keep alpacas in Australia, you’ve got to make up for the fact that this is nothing like the climate they naturally live in.

“In South America?”

Kelly nodded. “You’d need to climb more than twice as high as the peak of Kosciuszko to get to the kind of altitude that these animals naturally live at.”

Sandry buried her hand in the soft black fur again, and it twisted gently around her fingers. “No wonder they need this.”

Kelly nodded. “But here they need looking after in the heat, and especially when it gets humid. They’re tough creatures, but sheep are much better suited to our climate. They look after themselves a bit more. And of course, some folks do prefer to work with wool. There’s no accounting for taste.”

Sandry had been thinking about how wonderfully warm a jumper made of alpaca fleece would be, but it wouldn’t be wonderfully warm at all if you were forced to wear it in the middle of summer. It would be horrible.
Cyrus started to back away from her, and it was only when Sandry tried to lift up her hand away that she realised how tightly her fingers were caught up in his fleece, and that nearby fibres were laying flat against his skin to try and reach her. When he pulled away again, this time suddenly, Sandry had to go with him to save her fingers getting dislocated.

Kelly and Lark both stepped forward quickly. “Hey, boy,” said Kelly, putting himself right next to Cyrus’s head, in between it and Sandry.

Lark just put her hand over Sandry’s, and Sandry felt the fibres relax and let her go. Lark’s hand closed around hers and the two of them stepped back and away.

“How’s it going?” said Sandry. “I didn’t realise.”

“No stress,” Kelly called out. “No harm done. He’s a drama queen, really. High-strung.”

“I didn’t think I could do anything when it was still growing on him,” Sandry said quietly to Lark, embarrassed. She shivered, imagining how it must have felt for Cyrus to have his own coat acting so strangely and out of his control.

“You’ll know for next time,” said Lark. “Something to be aware of.”

Sandry nodded. She would definitely be a lot more careful from now on. Even around Little Bear, though she’d definitely never heard of anyone trying to spin dog fur before. Little Bear had had enough scares in his life already.

“Here we are,” said Kelly. Sandry looked up. She didn’t know where they’d come from, but now he was holding out two big spray bottles full of water. Sandry took one, curious. Chirp and Copper wandered closer.

“It’s a warmish day,” said Kelly. “They like it. Cyrus will forgive you in a flash if give him a good watering.” He handed the other bottle to Lark. “I’ve got some bits and bobs to do around the place. Lark, you know where to find whatever you need?”

Lark nodded. Kelly gave Cyrus a little pat and went off back the way they had come in. Lark and Sandry sat back to back under the shadecloth, spraying the alpacas as they edged nearer and nearer. Cyrus was staying around Lark’s side, but Chirp was very keen to get right as close to Sandry’s bottle as possible.

“They should get a sprinkler,” said Sandry, spraying him up on the front of his neck. “One of those ones that spins around.”

“It would be fun,” said Lark. “But my guess is that it wouldn’t be worth the water it would use up. There’s a lot of demand for water out here, and often there’s not a lot of it.”

Sandry thought about that. “It would take a lot of water for all of the alpacas to drink, wouldn’t it, if there’s a hundred and fifty of them?”

“Definitely.”

“And for looking after all the plants and everything.”

“And the people.”

Copper nudged his way forward, seeming sick of waiting for Chirp’s turn to be over. They didn’t fight, though. They just stood there together. Sandry tried to spray both of them the same.
“I thought I was just going to learn craftwork,” Sandry admitted. “I didn’t know it was about animals as well. I thought that was a different thing.”

“Well,” said Lark, “if you look close enough into anything, you’ll find all kinds of surprising connections. There’s nothing that truly stands on its own in this world. You can specialise, but the more you understand and respect the connections between things, the more thoroughly you understand the things that are closest to you.”

Sandry thought about connections. “Briar and Rosethorn grow plants and we can work with them, like with cotton and flax, and you need plants as well to feed animals so that we get fleeces and so on.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Tris has magic with the weather, and you said weather affects plants and animals, and then it’s the same thing.”

“Mm-hm.”

Sandry thought about Daja. She didn’t really know quite what it was Daja did, but Lark had said before that textiles was connected a lot with engineering nowadays, so there must be some good connections between them as well. Daja and Frostpine made things, like Sandry and Lark did. Out of metal, that was all.

“I didn’t really think it was a useful thing to do,” said Sandry. “Mum and Dad used to say Pirisi spent too much time doing knitting and needlepoint with me instead of teaching me all my things for school. They said that was for playtime and I had to learn how to study.”

“You certainly need a balanced education,” said Lark, “but there’s no reason work can’t be fun.”

“This is fun,” said Sandry. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“You’re very welcome,” said Lark. “I like it here too.”

“I’m running out of water.”

Lark laughed. “No wonder they’re all around your side,” she said. “You’ve been working away and I’ve been slacking off.”

Sandry realised Cyrus was hovering in her peripheral vision, and Chirp and Copper were still standing right in front of her soaking out the spray.

“Here,” said Lark. Sandry half-spun around to see Lark hold out her bottle, which was still about a third full.

“Are you sure?” said Sandry.

Lark just held out the bottle a little further, so Sandry took it. They sat shoulder to shoulder instead of back to back and Sandry set herself to making it up to Cyrus for frightening him earlier.

Rosethorn didn’t really say anything to Briar about what a grade-A champion numbskull he’d been the day before. Once Lark and Sandry had gone, they just got on with the weeding. Rosethorn quizzed him on every damn plant he pulled out of the ground and every one he didn’t, too. If any kind of bug went past, she told him what it was and what plants it liked and what birds liked it.
And spiders – Briar’s habit of smashing every spider he saw was over, according to Rosethorn. So he was supposed to learn by heart good spiders from bad spiders on top of every other damn thing.

In the end, he brought up what had happened yesterday just to give his poor drowning brain a rest. “Who was that dude?” he asked, nice and casually, watching a worm he’d just disturbed try and find its way underground again.

“That dude,” said Rosethorn.

“Yeah,” said Briar. “That Crane dude.”

“He’s a botanist.”

That wasn’t what Briar had meant. Obviously he was some kind of plant guy. He’d meant more like what is his problem?

“He won’t be pressing charges, don’t you worry about that,” said Rosethorn.

Briar didn’t think she was lying to him, but…

“No, I know,” Rosethorn said. “You’re right. It’s not out of the goodness of his heart.”

That was interesting. She either had dirt on him or was giving something up. Either way, Briar wanted to know what it was. And Rosethorn didn’t always answer the questions he asked her, but she never had a go at him for asking them them either. “What for then?”

“I’m going to collaborate with him on a paper,” said Rosethorn. “He’s been nagging me about it for years.”

Briar didn’t like asking her stupid questions, but it was better than not knowing shit. “A paper?”

“We’re going to do some research and produce a report.”

“On what?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Rosethorn. “Something hideously modern, no doubt. We’ll have microscopes and molecules coming out of our ears.”

“How long for?”

“Well, that all depends how long it takes.”

Sounded like hell. “I don’t think he can even press charges anyway. If they didn’t charge me for burglary when they had me cold, they’re not going to for just trespass. If I’m not fourteen yet they have to have a really tight case, and this one’s junk.”

“Your point being?”

“You don’t have to do the paper, if it’s like a trade or whatever.”

“The deal is done,” said Rosethorn. “If you’re not going to use that trowel, hand it over.”

Briar passed the little spade back. He’d lost track of the worm, he realised. Once they got underground, you’d never find them again. Briar knew all about that. He’d been Roach, not Worm, but he felt like most people wouldn’t make much of a difference about it. One kind of pest was like whatever other kind of pest if you had big boots on.
“You’re not listening,” said Rosethorn. Briar looked up from the ground to see Rosethorn staring right at him. “You’re overtired,” she said after a moment.

Briar let out a little sceptical huff. Overtired? He’d slept last night, and the night before that, and the night before that. He was better slept than he just about ever was before he came here. He’d handled that thing with the thing that time without sleeping in four days. He could sure as hell still manage to –


“You either listen to what I’m saying or you go and take a nap,” she said. “I don’t talk just to hear the sound of my own voice, and I don’t want to waste both our time if you’re not learning anything.”

Briar was torn. He could keep going, easy, but how braindead would he have to be to turn down a nap if she was offering?

“Go on,” said Rosethorn. “I’ll come and get you in an hour. Wash your hands before you go in.”

Briar didn’t need telling twice. He washed his hands, ditched his shoes, made to sure to close the door behind him. When he was inside he heard voices from upstairs, which was pretty weird when Sandry wasn’t even in the house. It was Daja and Tris - talking to each other? With no one forcing them? Briar crept up a few stairs and stood still as stone.

“IT’s there. There.”

“Where?”

“Right there. You click that and – do you want me to do it?”

“I’m doing it.”

“It takes four times as long if you only use a quarter of your fingers. Do they not teach typing in schools in Australia?”

“There’s a difference between telling and teaching,” muttered Tris.

Briar was about to creep up a couple more stairs so he could hear better, but then he realised he didn’t actually care about what the were saying, at all. If he wanted to listen to girls bickering he’d do it later, when it wouldn’t be eating into his naptime. He slipped quietly back down the stairs, into his room and flopped onto his bed like a dead thing.

Kelly insisted on doing all the cleaning up after lunch, so Lark and Sandry went out and explored the farm for a while. Sandry liked it, but there wasn’t very much interesting to see. There were lots of groups of alpacas all in different enclosures, and there were water and food troughs under shadecloths for all of them.

When Kelly came out to find them, Sandry was standing up on a fencepost, with Lark steadying her, and reaching up to examine the material of one of the shadecloths. “Where does flax grow?” she asked. Then she thought for a moment. “And what is it?”

“It’s a plant with very pretty blue flowers,” said Lark. “The fibres comes from the stem of the plant. We get linseed oil from flax, as well. As to where it grows, it’s perhaps best to ask
Rosethorn. I don’t think they grow much of it around here at all. Ready to hop down?”

Sandry landed on the ground just as Kelly reached them. He was holding what looked like a big, thick blanket folded up in his arms. “I thought you might like a look at this,” he said.

Before taking it from him, Sandry hopped back up to sit on the fence. That way she could spread it out over her knees and have a proper look at it.

It was enormous. Sandry could only unfold it twice, because otherwise it would be too big for her to manage. The fleece was a mixture of grey and white, not in particular patterns but beautiful all the same. And not only was it soft and smooth and very warm, in Sandry’s hands it felt strong as well, even though she could tell it was years and years and years old.

“It’s nothing like as sophisticated as a lot you’ll find,” Kelly said. “Certainly not like the two of you could make. This is from Lady Marmalade, who’s sadly passed. Funny old lady she was, too. My youngest loved her. Beautiful fleece on her.”

“Did you spin it all yourself?”

He nodded. “Just about wore out the old footpedal, that one did.”

Sandry ran her hands over it. “It’s so lovely and smooth. Did you do the knitting too?”

He looked very pleased. “That I did. The wife said back then I should have gone with a seed stitch, but I wanted to finish the thing before Doomsday. Looking back, of course, I could have taken the extra time. There was no real hurry. But there you go. That’s hindsight.”

Sandry was listening, but she was also busy thinking about what it would take for her to make her own blanket, and how soon she could start. “And then you crocheted all the squares together?”

“Well, some of it. Some of it. Some of it’s the wife, some of it’s young Eloise trying her hand. Mostly the wife, if I’m telling the truth. All of the edging’s her work. I came to crocheting late in life, and there was a bloody lot of it needed to be done, if you’ll pardon my French.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Sandry. She didn’t want to let it go. “I would love to make something like this. I’ve only ever knitted sheep’s wool before, and that was from a shop. I don’t know how to crochet very well either.”

“You will soon, I’m sure.”

Sandry felt a sudden urge to rush back home and get to work straight away. It took so much work and learning to be able to do one thing well. It would take her a good long while to be able to produce something like this blanket, but it was all she could think about doing. Nobody could be cold at night with a thick, warm alpaca blanket on the bed. She could make hats, scarves, gloves, socks…

It all just took time. Sometimes Sandry did get depressed about how much time everything would take, but at the moment, sitting next to this old man with so much pride and experience, she looked forward to the day when she could be just like him. She had a long time, and like Kelly said, there was no real hurry, even if right now it felt like there was.

Kelly was looking at the blanket with a fond smile. Then he looked at Sandry and she saw there were tears in his eyes. “No, no,” he said, waving his hand at her. “Don’t mind me. I’m an old man, and you’re looking just like my daughter when she was a young thing like you, and her daughter
too. Warms my heart to see it.”

Sandry felt like she needed to say something nice to him, but she didn’t know what was the right thing.

“How old is Eloise now?” said Lark, so Sandry wouldn’t have to say anything.

“University next year,” Kelly said proudly. “Eighteen years old.”

“What’s she going to study?”

“Computer science. She’s a real whiz.”

Sandry was interested in the conversation, she really was, but it wasn’t the most interesting thing she had in front of her.

The blanket was strong, but it wasn’t completely even. Mostly you wouldn’t be able to tell how old it was, but there was one border in particular Sandry could easily tell had been a learner’s work. It hadn’t held together as well as the rest of the blanket, but it wasn’t just that. It felt different. Some of the other ones had a bit of this feeling to them, but this one was the strongest. Frowning, she ran her hand over the top, trying to pinpoint where someone else’s hands had come in with support. It didn’t take her long, not with how often she and Pirisi used to trade off sections of knitting.

A wave of sadness came over Sandry as she sat there. She wished it was Kelly’s kind of sadness, the kind that made you smile, but it wasn’t. He had something he could hold in his hands, put over his knees, over the bed to sleep at night, that would remind him of his family, who were out in the world and raising families and going to university. Sandry loved Pirisi very much, but something inside her was still so sad that she would never have anything like this with her own parents. She had photos and memories, but she would never be able to hold them in her hands and feel the love they had for her and for each other. They were just gone.

Sandry folded up the blanket again and held it out to Kelly. “Thank you,” she said with her best manners and politest smile. “It’s really nice.”

He took it from her with a bit of a confused look and tucked it under his arm. “Thank you,” he said. “I’m glad you think so.”

“Are you ready to go home?” Lark asked. “It’s probably about that time.”

“Oh,” said Sandry, not wanting to seem rude but definitely ready to leave. “Yes, okay.”

“You’ll be wanting to pick up your bags, then,” said Kelly. “I’ve made up four for you?”

“Lovely,” said Lark. “Thank you very much.”

“You know where to find it. I’ll just drop this back inside, you drive around and I’ll be right with you.”

He headed off back to the house. Lark put her arm around Sandry’s shoulders and they headed back to the ute.

“What are the bags?” Sandry asked, leaning into Lark as they walked.

“A present for Rosethorn,” Lark said with a smile.

Lark drove around so they backed up beside a shed. As soon as Sandry hopped out, she smelled it.
She tried not to wrinkle her nose. “This is why we brought the ute,” she said.

“Exactly,” said Lark.

They were big bags, so Sandry just helped Kelly and Lark hoist them up into the back. Then they all washed their hands at a little garden tap.

“I’ll remember you next spring,” Kelly said, holding his hand out for Sandry to shake again. “Shearing season.”

“Thank you,” Sandry said. “Thank you very much for having us.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he said. “It’s a quiet day for me when Bev’s out visiting and the boys are away. I appreciate the company.”

“You have a lovely farm.”

He smiled a wide, proud smile. “Thank you.”

SANDRY felt better now, but she was still glad to get up into the ute again and set off home. The late night she’d had last night was definitely catching up with her. “He’s nice,” she said softly. “I like him.”

“So do I,” said Lark.

SANDRY watched the country pass by them on the short drive home. Sheep, sheep, cows, sheep, horses, cows, sheep. More cows. More sheep. Then hills, trees, bush. Then home.
Hello again! I may be breaking some sort of personal record, with a new chapter up only a month after the last one, but that's what a couple of days sick off work can do for you! I highly recommend it. Thanks again to everyone who's read, liked and/or commented, and here you go!

As far as Tris could tell, the difference between her and the other children she was living with was that they got to practise magic and develop their skills with each of their teachers straight away – every day, for Briar and Sandry – while Niko seemed more interested in taking Tris on long drives for hours and hours at a time, all over the countryside, just to illustrate his extremely repetitive point about the power of the elements.

First it was a four-hour drive to a little place called Leonards Hill that had two wind turbines that Tris was allowed to look at and feel the workings of but not interfere with. Two weeks after that, they took a tour of the area affected by a series of fires started by lightning in 2003 that burned for two months. It covered a lot of land and was hours and hours of driving, and Tris never got to do a single thing. Next, Niko had had Tris research the floods of 2011, which Tris did vaguely remember from when the banks of the Yarra had broken and they’d had flooding all through Melbourne. Again, that lesson was a lot of listening and not a lot of doing.

Today Tris had had to get up at a truly disgraceful hour in the morning because Niko wanted to fit in a trip to both William Hovell Dam and Hume Dam in the one day so they could discuss rivers and hydroelectricity.

If Niko was so concerned about the environment, Tris had to wonder why he was so blasé about burning all that petrol in his big old growling car. They must have covered hundreds of kilometres on these tours already, with hours more to come today, and there was no way that his car was anywhere near properly fuel-efficient.

But Tris didn’t say anything about it, because despite the heat and the sun and the extreme stuffiness of the car, these trips were always the highlight of her week. The house wasn’t a bad place to live, as such, but it did tend to wear Tris down if she was stuck there for too long without a break. On her trips with Niko he was the only person she had to deal with, and he tended to actually have interesting things to say most of the time.

Tris just hoped that soon they would be going to the coast. She missed the ocean almost more than she could bear. She wanted to stand out on the rocks with the tide coming in, wind whipping around her head and birds crying. She wanted to watch the clouds coming in over the bay, bringing rain falling in such heavy sheets that you could almost believe the sky had become part of the ocean. Those were the moments when Tris felt alive.

For now, she drank some more water and wound her window down even further. They’d been in the car for forty minutes now, and the only magic Niko’s car had was that it managed to somehow absorb every iota of heat from the sun and store it, leaving its inhabitants sweltering. They might as
well make the trip on an oven with wheels.

When the road started to go uphill, it wasn’t wide enough for two proper lanes, so whenever a car came the other way both cars would have to veer sideways and crawl along the very edge of the road until they’d passed each other. And then sometimes there were cyclists as well, and one time there were three black cows standing by the side of the road, on the wrong side of the fence. Niko veered out carefully around them. They stared vacantly at the car as it passed, their jaws moving in slow, steady crunches.

“I assume those are not supposed to be there,” Niko said, getting back up to normal speed again.

“There was a goat before, just lying down on the other side,” Tris mentioned.

Niko shook his head. “Tris, I hope you won’t think worse of me if I admit that these rural areas are not my preferred environment.”

That much was obvious. It was a wonder to Tris that he kept coming up, multiple times a week, just to teach meditation to the four of them and to take Tris out on the road. He’d be as relieved as Tris when he finally found a weather mage he could hand her over to. Then he could go back to his city and his university and back to his normal life, where presumably he wouldn’t have to dodge cows on his way to work.

“How are you finding it?” asked Niko.

If you took away the farm animals and all the dirt, Tris thought it might be nice to live somewhere out here where you could have your own space and there weren’t always so many people everywhere getting in your way. But that wouldn’t be what Niko meant. It was a welfare question, and he would have had to ask it because he was the one who had put her here in the first place. “I’m fine here.”

“You don’t miss the hustle and bustle of the city?”

“There’s plenty of hustle and bustle in the house.”

“I dare say.”

The road they were climbing got suddenly steeper, twistier and bumpier and within a minute they were completely closed in by trees on both sides. Tris gritted her teeth and locked her stomach down. She closed her eyes when a small white car came racing down the other way far faster than was legal or safe, and she kept them closed all the way until Niko said, “Here we are,” and the car shuddered to a stop.

There was one other car parked in the car park: a white four-wheel drive so completely covered in mud it might as well be brown. Tris leaned over to glance at the time. It wasn’t even eight o’clock yet.

“Lake William Hovell,” said Niko. “Let’s have a look.”

Behind them there were a few small administrative-looking buildings, and behind those just tree-covered hills. Ahead of them was a downhill slope leading to a wide, flat area with some pavilions and a toilet block, and then further down from there was the lake. Tris could smell the water on the air.

She started off towards the lake but was brought up short by the hundreds of ants swarming over the ground just past the car park.
“I can only apologise,” said Niko, picking his way awkwardly past them. “Try not to rile them up.”

These ants were about five times as big as normal ants, and Tris imagined their bites would hurt about ten times as much. She hurried quickly to follow in Niko’s footsteps, glad she was wearing proper shoes and thick socks. She would rather be uncomfortably warm all day than be covered in insect bites.

There was a boat out on the lake, bobbing up and down on the very gentle waves. Tris spotted the dam wall out further to the left, a low grey stone wall with a dip in the middle. Beyond that, endless wooded hills.

Niko had walked over to the big plaque in the middle of the area. Tris went to join him. It read:

\begin{quote}
THIS RESERVOIR IMPOUNDS THE WATERS OF THE KING RIVER FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE VALLEY.
\end{quote}

The numbers on it, to Tris’s disgust, were in imperial measurements. Whatever an acre-foot was, the lake’s capacity was ten thousand of them. Maximum depth was 97 feet, which Tris thought might be 40 metres or so, but she wasn’t sure. The lake had a surface area of 280 acres and catchment area of 141 square miles. Hadn’t Australia progressed into the future enough that they could put metric equivalents on their signs from ancient history? None of this meant anything to Tris.

It occurred to Tris that Niko was a fairly old man. He might have been alive back when they had made the switch. “Do you know the conversion rates for these?” she asked.

“3.3 feet to a metre. An acre’s 4000 square metres. Square miles… I think one square mile is two or two and a half square kilometres. Acre-feet, I couldn’t begin to tell you.”

Tris wrote all the numbers down in her notebook. She’d work it all out later. She also copied down the historical note on the plaque, just in case. She had no great interest in 19th-century explorers, but it would probably come up in some history class or other.

“Shall we?” said Niko, holding his arm out towards the lakeshore.

Further around to their right the lakeshore was effectively a beach, but in this area there was an embankment with little wooden fences and shrubbery discouraging anyone from going all the way down. Tris and Niko sat on one of the nearby benches and looked out over the lake. The sun was shining onto the water at the worst possible angle, so Tris had to scrunch up her eyes if she didn’t want to be blinded.

“Sunglasses?” offered Niko.

“No,” said Tris.

“I trust you did all the reading I sent you?” Niko said, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Tris didn’t dignify that with an answer.

“What I would like you to do,” said Niko, “is think about those numbers you just saw. Have a look out across the water, and think about those numbers.”

Tris looked out across the water. She thought about the numbers. Two ravens had a very loud exchange of ideas somewhere nearby.
Niko waited until they’d finished. “What do you think?”

“It’s a lot of water,” said Tris. “That’s the point of the dam. The more water there is, the more they have saved for the farms and the more energy they can make from it.”

Niko nodded. “Do you know how tall you are?”

Tris frowned.

“It’s not an idle question,” Niko said.

It might not be idle, but was it really necessary? Tris knew she was short, and Niko knew it too. “A hundred and thirty-two centimetres three months ago.”

“And your weight?”

“Forty kilograms,” Tris ground out, staring fixedly at the distant green trees.

“How much do you think all this water weighs, that’s being held back by that wall?”

“I might know if they didn’t measure it in acre-feet,” Tris snapped.

“Mmm,” said Niko, rubbing his moustache. “Fair point.”

Tris knew what he was getting at, but she didn’t feel like being generous and saying so. They sat for a moment longer, then Niko stood up. “Let’s have a closer look at this wall, then.”

Instead of walking around the lake, Niko headed back up to the car. They pulled out of the car park and drove downhill for about two minutes before making a very unpleasant right-hand turn of about 40 degrees and rolling down a little side-road that ended in about three parking spaces.

“Here?” said Tris.

“Here,” Niko replied.

Tris got out of the car again. She followed the sound of gushing water in her ears and found herself on a little platform looking towards the business side of the dam wall. On this side it was rocky and brown, with a path for vehicles zig-zagging along it. It even had small trees growing toward the bottom. To the left of them was the spillway, wide and concrete and bone-dry. The roaring noise was coming from an outlet right at the bottom of the wall, where water burst out and rejoined the river, having gone through the generator inside the wall. It seemed to Tris a tiny, tiny proportion of the water up in the lake, but then again, that was probably the point. They were saving water as well as generating electricity from it, so they would only let through as much as they thought necessary.

Niko came and stood beside her. “Now I’m no engineer,” he said, “but I wouldn’t be putting something a hundred and thirty-two centimetres tall and weighing forty kilograms in between that lake and this river.”

Tris was certain magical power wasn’t calculated by a person’s physical dimensions, so Niko’s point seemed fairly weak to her. His whole philosophy was that from compression and discipline she would get more control and power out of her magic. If anything, the smaller the person, the more magic they may have.

Of course, Tris wouldn’t involve herself with anything of this magnitude now, but she was
improving every day. Once she’d grown in her power, there would be more things she could do. She started her meditative breathing, reaching out to the flow of water and the humming of electricity it generated through the —


Tris dragged her focus away from the falling water and buzz of power and onto Niko’s face. He was frowning, big eyebrows hovering over his eyes and concerned wrinkles on his forehead.

“I was just looking,” said Tris, exasperated. Did he think she was stupid?

“I might not have been making myself clear,” said Niko, standing up tall. “It may have seemed flippant, but being the size we are, as human beings, puts us in a very vulnerable position when it comes to any sizeable working of power. The personal cost to you of overreach may be devastating.”

Tris opened her mouth, but Niko wasn’t finished.

“And have you considered the cost to others that could result from your interfering in such a system? Human life all over the country depends on the functioning of its infrastructure and the safe generation of power. Even if you were to escape permanent consequences, can you guarantee the same for those around you? Did you not consider yourself in control of the simple whirlwind you made not so long ago?”

“I didn’t know what I was doing then,” said Tris, biting back the words because of you. Niko was smart. He knew whose fault it had been; he’d even admitted it.

“Tris,” said Niko firmly. “You don’t know what you’re doing now.”

Well, that was his opinion. Tris supposed he was entitled to one. He wasn’t the one with weather magic though. It wasn’t like he knew everything there was to know about her power. “Why did you bring me out here if I’m not allowed to do any magic?” she asked. “I could have just looked all of this up.”

“You can do magic,” he said. “With me to supervise and look after you. Not on a whim, unguided. I made an error in not supervising you closely enough earlier, and it’s not an error I intend to make again. Understand?”

“Yes,” said Tris grudgingly. “What are we going to do then?”

“First, make yourself comfortable.”

Tris looked around. There was nothing that looked comfortable within view. “I’ll stand,” she said.

“Right,” said Niko. “Now, all I want you to do is follow along with the process from the intake tower down to the river. No exploration, no investigation, no alteration. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“I’ll be with you all the way.”

They followed the water down three times. The first time was over almost before Tris realised it had started, like she’d been thrown blindly down a waterslide without even a chance to take a breath. Tris felt Niko hovering, softening every bump and shielding her from the shock.
The second time, she had her wits around her a little more and could brace for the turbine and hold herself together through it, and it was almost a nice sensation to shoot back out into the river.

The third time, Niko pulled her out as soon as they hit the turbine and he felt her very slight straining away from the water and towards the generator.

“That’s exploration, Tris,” he said, with no trace of humour.

Tris felt a little battered, oddly heavy on the ground. It was hard to tell if there was a roaring in her ears or if it was just the sound of the water hitting the river.

“Here.” Niko held out her bottle of water.

Tris drank some water, despite feeling vaguely cannibalistic about it. After swallowing a few times, her head cleared. Niko was looking very, very stern. “I see what you mean,” she said.

“I should hope so.”

Tris didn’t like repeating herself, but Niko didn’t look satisfied. “I do understand,” she said. “I’m not going to kill myself trying things I’m not ready for.”

“And you will trust in my judgement when it comes to what it is you are ready for, and what you are not.”

Tris was starting to wish they’d only gone down twice. It had been exhilarating at the time, but it wasn’t even nine o’clock in the morning yet and Tris wouldn’t say no to a good night’s sleep. She watched the water gush out from the wall and then flow gently down the river. “I will,” she said.

It had been three days since Sandry and Briar had made their deal. Briar had been a real ratbag the last two days, enough that Sandry sometimes felt like slapping him, but so far on the third day he seemed to be back to his normal self, so it seemed to Sandry that she might have made it through. Maybe Briar had realised that Sandry wasn’t going to just throw away a bet like that just because of his bad manners and annoying face.

It was a relief that he’d stopped, though, especially since Sandry had much more important things on her mind today. She had a two o’clock appointment to speak with her uncle, and even though she used to video chat him all the time and had even stayed with him for a couple of weeks after everything had happened, she felt oddly jittery about what was coming up.

“May I be excused?” Sandry said as soon as she’d finished eating lunch. “I want to make sure everything’s working with the computer so I don’t end up late.”

Rosethorn nodded.

“Do you want any help?” asked Daja.

Sandry wasn’t sure. Daja was the exact opposite of Briar – calm, helpful – but Uncle Vedris was Sandry’s family and she didn’t know if that would make Daja angry or sad. It had upset her last time Sandry brought it up.

“I’ll come up with you,” said Daja, and got to her feet.

“May Daja be excused?” Briar said.

Everyone looked at Daja.
“May I be excused?” Daja said, just managing to be polite.

“You may,” said Lark. “If you need any help, just call down.”

“Thank you,” said Sandry, and the two girls headed upstairs.

Daja didn’t say very much. She checked all the settings, made sure the headset was working and left Sandry to it. Sandry had been wondering if she should introduce Daja to her uncle, but it didn’t seem like Daja would want that. Maybe another time.

Uncle Vedris called at exactly two o’clock, and suddenly all Sandry’s nerves were gone and she was just excited to talk to him again.

“Hi,” she said once the video had come through.

“Good morning,” said Uncle Vedris. He was sitting back in his brown chair, quite far from the webcam, but he had a headset on too so his voice came through clear as day.

Sandry gave her uncle her biggest smile. “How are you?”

“Better now I’ve seen you,” he said. Sandry couldn’t see a smile on him, but she could hear one in his voice. “You’re looking well.”

“So are you,” said Sandry, though really he was sitting too far back for her to tell. He sounded well, anyway.

“And everything’s going well down there?”

Sandry nodded. “It’s very good.”

Uncle Vedris let out a quiet breath and leaned back further in his chair. “Good,” he said. “I’m glad.”

“Is Franzen still living with you?”

Her uncle shook his head. “Not for a while.”

Sandry frowned. “Why not? Where did he go? Who’s staying with you?”

“He had a business opportunity in Germany,” said Uncle Vedris. “I’m managing.”

“But it’s only been –“

“Sandry, my dear, I love you very much and I appreciate your concern, but you’re not my doctor. You’re my niece.”

“Franzen is your son,” Sandry said furiously before she could clamp down on the words.

“Let’s not discuss it,” said Uncle Vedris softly. “Tell me about your new home.”

Sandry had never liked her cousin Franzen, but she was still shocked that he would go all the way to the other side of the world when his father was ill. But she brushed angry tears out of her eyes and respected her uncle’s wishes. “It’s good. I live with Lark and Rosethorn, who you talked to, and there’s three other kids here too: Daja, Tris and Briar. We’re all the same age and we get along really well, and we have a puppy, too, called Little Bear. Niko visits a lot and we’re all really happy. I’m learning spinning from Lark. She’s so nice, Uncle, and she’s going to teach me
“It sounds like you’re in the right place,” said Uncle Vedris. “I’ll concede defeat to Niko next time I see him.”

“If I’d stayed I could look after you, though. You –”

“Sandry,” he said again, leaning forward in his chair. Sandry bit her tongue. “I’m recovering. I don’t need a caretaker, and if I did, I wouldn’t be asking it of you. I offered you a home so I could look after you, not the other way around. I think we can both agree that this is a better solution for both of us.”

Sandry knew it was, but she hated to think of her uncle all alone in his big empty house. That would be bad enough even if he was healthy. “But are you okay?”

“I’m doing well enough.”

Sandry nodded. She didn’t like the answer, but it was better than getting a cheerful lie.

“Now tell me more about this spinning business,” her uncle said. “You haven’t been pricking yourself on any spinning wheels, have you?”

Sandry groaned at his joke, but she couldn’t help smiling. “I’m not even using a spinning wheel at all. I’m learning with a drop spindle, where you just drop it out in front of you and spin it around.”

“Sounds tricky.”

“It is! But I’m getting the hang of it now. And next year I’m going to get my very own alpaca fleece from Kelly, and I’m going to spin it myself and I’ll make you something out of it, Uncle.”

“Alpacas, eh?”

Sandry told her uncle all about Kelly, and the alpacas, and the blanket, and everything Lark had taught her. She thought it might be a bit boring for her uncle, who worked in politics and not textiles, but he listened carefully and asked her questions and seemed interested all the way through.

Sandry had just started telling him the story about Little Bear when an alarm went off on his computer and he heaved himself to his feet to turn it off. “Sorry, Sandry,” he said in her ear while she stared at his blue jumper taking up her whole screen. “That’s for me to take my medication.”

“Oh!” said Sandry. “That’s okay. You should go and take it.”

Uncle Vedris sat back down again. “I will,” he said. “You’ll have to tell me the rest of the story another time.”

“Let’s talk again soon.”

“I’d like that.”

“Next week?”

Vedris nodded. “Lock it in.”

“It’s good to see you, Uncle.”
“It’s good to see you, Sandry. I’m glad to hear you’re doing so well.”

Sandy couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Tell Franzen from me he’s a bum,” she said.

Uncle Vedris smiled slowly, his eyes glinting. “I might just tell him that on my own behalf,” he said. “A very good idea.”

Sandy felt her frown change itself into a matching smile. If she could make him smile, that was all she wanted. He used to smile so much more. “I’ll see you next week!”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Sandy ended the call and took off her headset then just sat there feeling warm. Maybe it was unfair on Daja and the others if Sandy still had family she could talk to and they didn’t, but Sandy couldn’t help that. Maybe Uncle Vedris’s own children were willing to leave him behind and only think about their own lives, but Sandy wasn’t. She’d left behind enough already.

Daja needed something to do. She was happy for Sandy, of course, but sitting alone in her room while Sandy spoke to her uncle right nearby was bringing out her most bitter, selfish thoughts. Daja didn’t like dwelling in those. She tried reading, listening to music, doing push-ups like Uneny used to when he got mad, but nothing was working. She needed something bigger to do so she could drive the thoughts out, at least for the time being.

Going downstairs, Daja couldn’t find anyone at all. Briar and Rosethorn would be outside in the garden, she supposed, and Tris was off somewhere with Niko for the day. Lark would be around, though. Daja really didn’t feel like having a conversation with anyone at the moment, but if she did talk to Lark she was sure to feel better afterwards.

Before she made up her mind to go and check Lark’s workroom, Daja caught a glimpse out the window of Rosethorn outside standing beside the ute, which had its bonnet up.

That was more like what Daja was looking for. Forgetting her usual caution about Rosethorn, Daja slipped her feet into her thongs by the door and went right outside. The ute was already dripping with water, but the hose was flat on the ground and turned off for the time being. Rosethorn was in gumboots and rubber gloves and there were two big buckets of soapy water by her feet.

When she looked up and saw Daja, Rosethorn just stood there, like she was expecting Daja to be bringing a message or something. Daja very nearly turned around and went back inside. Seeing her hesitate, Rosethorn’s expression changed and she nodded.

“Looking for something to do?” she asked, sounding like she knew the answer already.

Daja walked up and joined her at the car. “Do you need any help with this?”

“As a matter of fact I don’t, but by all means feel free to join in.”

Daja looked down at the clean yellow shirt and grey shorts she was wearing. “Should I change?”

Rosethorn considered the question. “Do you like those clothes?”

Daja didn’t, particularly, but she didn’t like giving people tricky clothes to wash when it came laundry time either. If Rosethorn and Lark were the ones who bought her clothes nowadays, Daja didn’t want to get into the habit of ruining them.
“I’ll be back quickly,” she promised, and hurried back inside. She ran into Briar on his way out, who was holding a big translucent bottle of clear liquid.

“What’s your hurry?” he said, looking at her funny. “Rosethorn say something mean?”

“I’m going to help her wash the car,” said Daja. “What’s that for?”

Briar looked at the bottle in his hand. “Fancy water for the battery.”

“Distilled water?”

“I don’t know, whatever.”

Daja didn’t waste any more time with him. She ran up the stairs, quickly changed into jeans and her old football top and put on boots on her way back out instead of thongs.

Rosethorn was standing by the ute and listening to Briar, who was talking very earnestly and waving his hand around the air in some kind of spiral as he did. He stopped before Daja got into proper earshot, and leaned casually against the ute next to Rosethorn. He wrinkled his nose when he realised it was wet.

If Briar really thought everyone hadn’t figured out by now that he was a massive dork when it came to plants then he was thicker than Daja thought, but she didn’t need to embarrass him by saying so.

“Go and stand by the tap,” Rosethorn told him. “I’ll need you to turn it on or off when I say.”

“Cars don’t need water,” said Briar, doing as she said. “Plants do.”

“The tanks are nearly full,” said Rosethorn. “We don’t need to worry about wasting it.”

“I’m not worried,” said Briar. “I’m just saying.”

“Cars need to be washed, or they get damaged more,” Daja informed him. “First the paint, and then rust can get in. Especially when it drives through as much dirt and mud as this one.”

“Not to mention bird droppings, tree sap and other gunk from plants, insects…” said Rosethorn.

“That’s why the city’s better,” said Briar. “You don’t even need a car, you don’t have to bother with all this stuff.”

Briar was always talking about his great life back in Melbourne. *Why don’t you just go back then?* Daja thought, and she knew it was a wrong thought, and a misdirected one, but it lingered all the same.

“We’ll see what you have to say about that in a few years,” said Rosethorn.

Daja heard Briar doubtfully saying *will we?* in her head and it took her a moment or two to realise that for once he hadn’t said it out loud. Instead he sat down by the tap with his elbows on his knees and his head tipped back against the wall.

He definitely wasn’t one to be concerned about clean clothes.

“Alright, well, we don’t have all day,” Rosethorn said to Daja. “Take that bucket and sponge, and start with the roof. If you can’t reach anything, climb up in the tray. No point coming to me about it, you’re as tall as I am already.”
Daja picked up the bucket and put it into the tray, then climbed up afterwards. She wasn’t quite sure if there was a right or wrong way to do this, since Mum and Dad had always had their cars professionally cleaned. Doubtless Rosethorn would be quick to let her know if she was doing it wrong.

Daja grabbed the big soft sponge out of the bucket and squeezed some of the water out of it before dumping it on the cab roof and setting herself to start wiping.

“In circles,” said Rosethorn.

Daja set to work. The ute was dusty, but it didn’t seem to have any real set-in dirt or gunk. She finished the top of the roof then wiped down the back window of the cab.

Once that was done, Daja looked up and saw Briar still sitting where he had been, eyes half-shut as he watched them. “You’re just going to sit there?”

“I’m in position,” he said, motionless. “Ready for action. Hup-two hup-two.”

“Daja, if you’re finished up there we’ll give it a hose-down before getting to the rest,” said Rosethorn. “It’s fairly warm, I don’t want the soap drying.”

Daja handed her the bucket and took the hand she offered to help her down out of the tray. Rosethorn picked up the nozzle of the hose and pointed it at the ute. Daja stepped well back. “Now,” said Rosethorn.

Briar reached up and twirled the tap around a few times then let his hand drop down again as the water came bursting out of the hose. Rosethorn didn’t take long to rinse all the soapy water down from the car. “That’s enough.”

Briar turned off the water again.

“You take the left side,” Rosethorn said to Daja. “I’ll take the right.”

“Great job, Briar,” said Briar. “Terrific form. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Rosethorn slid Daja a little sideways look, and without saying anything they each moved to clean their own side of the ute. The water in Daja’s bucket was a little grey now, but she supposed that wouldn’t matter too much. If Rosethorn wanted a spotless clean, she could have sent it off to get one.

Somehow, Daja doubted she ever would. Daja wouldn’t, if she had her own car to look after. This was good, relaxing work. Something useful and easy to do that took her mind off things. Daja had an inkling that Rosethorn might see it the same way.

Daja didn’t know if it was magic or just common sense that she knew the ute belonged to Rosethorn. Both women drove both cars as and when needed, but there was no doubt in Daja’s mind that this was Rosethorn’s vehicle. They just matched. Something about the door that didn’t close properly unless you slammed it and the faint smell of dirt and manure that lingered in the tray even after a complete wash. Something about the way she looked at it.

“What are you doing?” said Sandry from somewhere behind Daja.

“The dishes,” said Briar through a yawn.

“Wow, you’re so funny.”
“I know.”

Daja turned her head to see Briar idly flick a stick off the ground at Sandry’s legs, who was standing a little way away from him. Then she didn’t worry about them any more and kept cleaning her way around to the bonnet. Rosethorn was leaning over doing the half of the windscreen she could reach, so Daja matched her from the other side.

They were down to the headlights and numberplate when Sandry finally came over. Daja found herself glad the other girl had waited that long.

“It looks great!” said Sandry.

“How’s your uncle?” Daja asked.

“Good,” said Sandry with a big grin.

“Unless you want a hosing, I’d move out of the way,” said Rosethorn, getting slowly to her feet. “You can put your things away, Daja, that’ll do it for today. Sandry, you take this one. Leave them by Briar.”

Daja put her sponge in the bucket and lifted it up, and Sandry took Rosethorn’s from her. “Thanks,” Daja said to Rosethorn. She knew it was an odd thing to do when she’d been the one helping, but she did feel better now, and she felt like Rosethorn should know that.

Rosethorn didn’t laugh at her. She just nodded and waved them away.

Of all the things that Tris’s life was cursed with, carsickness was among the worst. This was the perfect time to do some reading, and she had so many books waiting on her to-read list, but if she so much as read a sentence she’d feel horrifically ill for the whole rest of the journey.

Niko had recommended dozing, as it was a long, long drive to their next destination. It was a nice thought, and Tris was fairly tired, but she really hated sleeping in cars. Sleep was what beds were for.

So she kept her eyes open and sat while Niko’s car ate up the countryside. For a while he tested her on the reading she had done before the trip, then after that he talked about various hydroelectricity projects in Australia – advising Tris to be wary of bringing up the Snowy scheme anywhere near Rosethorn – then wind power, then solar power, then nuclear power. After a while he seemed to forget that Tris was a child still in primary school, and although Tris could follow some of the things he was saying, she certainly wasn’t taking much of it in.

Time flew by fairly pleasantly though. Tris would much rather have him lecturing way over her head about science than talking about a great many other things or, even worse, asking her questions about them.

It was very different approach up to Lake Hume than it had been to Lake Hovell. Tris had almost forgotten what developed areas looked like. They drove on big, clear grey freeways, had to merge in and out of major roads before heading up on a smaller road – still a sealed road, though – to get to the lake.

And it wasn’t just the approach that was different. How embarrassing for William Hovell to have the last tiny dam named after him while his friend Hume got this one. Niko parked the car in a big proper car park, among about a dozen others. Where Lake Hovell had been closed in by hills and trees, this land was broad and flat and spacious, with only a few hills nearby and a couple of peaks
on the horizon.

The wall was an order of magnitude bigger than the one at Hovell. It was tall, thin and long and it made Tris think of ancient monuments, with its tall concrete pillars and rough gravel slopes sliding into the water.

Tris saw a big yard down to the right as well, with little metal sheds and rows of transformers and towers and gently curving power lines. Taking a few slow, steady breaths, Tris could feel the force of it all the way from the car park.

Before Niko could tell her what they were going to do first, Tris started up the slope to go onto the wall. There were a fair few other people around, including joggers and cyclists crossing over the wall as though they were crossing the street. Tris had about as much interest in them as they seemed to have in the beauty and power of the place they were passing through.

On the left side of the wall the water was dark blue with white-capped waves and rocky beaches. It went on and on and on, around behind hills and as far as Tris could see. On the right of the wall was a wide, calm bifurcated river surrounded and split by grass and trees and patrolled by dozens upon dozens of birds soaring high up over the water, gliding on draughts of air and swooping down to catch insects.

On this side, far down at the bottom right was the outlet for the water. It was a strong flow, audible to Tris even from the top of the wall and much, much bigger than the one she’d seen that morning, but it barely made a ripple in the river it was joining. Down around the base of the wall were countless gulls, pelicans and other small birds Tris couldn’t see clearly enough to identify.

After having delved into the workings of the Hovell Dam, Tris barely needed to expend any effort to get a sense of the transition of the higher, rougher water from the lake down through the penstock, through the generator and out into the river. The electricity was generated, transformed, sent on its way. The river flowed on. Tris’s knees were weak enough already from her efforts with the miniature version for her to know that she wouldn’t be interacting with this one at all today. But she would definitely be coming back.

She watched the dozens and dozens of birds — hawks? kestrels? kites? — flying far up above the river, trying not to lose sight of them when they flew in front of the trees. They didn’t know anything about the large-scale conversion of potential energy to kinetic energy to electrical energy that Tris felt in her bones. They just flew, as easy as breathing.

She listened to the rough waves behind her and watched the idyllic calm ahead. Tris, standing on top of the wall dividing the two, was acutely conscious of her heart beating and her lungs working and she felt, for once, like she belonged. She stood very, very still and breathed it all in.

After a while she realised Niko was standing next to her. He stood very upright, with his feet planted at shoulder’s width and his hands behind his back. His hair was tied back, so the wind that was playing with Tris’s hair didn’t get much hold of his. He was inscrutable, but somehow Tris wasn’t afraid to talk to him all the same.

“I understand the metaphor,” she said.

He tilted his head to look down and across at her. “Metaphor?” he said vaguely.

Tris met his eyes. He smiled slightly and looked back up over the river.

Tris looked at his stern, strong profile and the grey streaks in his hair, and the thought came to her,
He’s a wizard. Out here, the idea didn’t seem as ridiculous to her as it usually did, when he was sitting in a beanbag arguing with Briar about irrelevant semantics or he was folding himself up into his car and trying to remember if he’d brought his sunglasses and which pocket his car keys were in.

Out here, he could be who he was. Out here where everything felt enormous and problems that usually seemed overwhelming were just shadows of themselves, Tris could really believe that Niko was a wizard. Before very long, Tris would be one too.

The two of them stood there for a long time, unmoving. Tris got to know the pattern of the currents up in the air over the water, and she marvelled at the ease with which the birds slipped between them, diving to catch something and soaring back up with barely a twitch of the wings. She’d never known birds of prey to flock together like this and hunt so peacefully in each other’s company.

Sandry, Daja and Lark were upstairs doing Daja’s hair, which took forever. Rosethorn was in town doing some paperwork thing. Little Bear was lying asleep on the couch. Briar was free to do completely whatever he wanted, no questions asked, but what he really felt like doing was practising reading some more, and Tris wasn’t around to help him with it.

What the hell had happened to him that he was standing around missing Tris Chandler?

Slightly disgusted with himself, Briar’s eyes fell on Little Bear. There was something else he’d rather do with no one around, and he had been waiting for the chance. He tiptoed over to the couch and sat down very softly next to the dog, whose paws twitched. So far, so good.

“Hey dipshit,” he said. The dog snored on. How were you supposed to wake up a dog? Back in the day, the only kind of dog Briar liked better than a sleeping dog was a dead dog. How was he supposed to know how to wake one up nicely without getting his hand bitten off?

Back of the neck was probably the safest place. Briar reached his hand around and kind of shook the back of its skull. The dog opened its eyes, blinked a couple of times then twisted around and just went nuts licking Briar’s hand.


He’d been bracing for it, so when Little Bear decided to get up and climb on him and go for his face with its tongue, he was ready. He didn’t panic, made no sudden movements. It was a bloody heavy puppy, and it was gross getting dog spit all over his face, but he had it all under control and that was the main thing. He had this.

“All right,” he said after a moment. “Get off.”

Briar got paws in his chest and even more licking. “I hate dogs, you know,” he said, turning his face away. “I could rip your guts out and feed it to the birds.” He slowly pushed the dog sideways away from him, back where it had been sleeping. It wriggled around trying to get back to him, but as soon as his lap was clear Briar was on his feet and a few steps back from the couch. Little Bear leapt onto the ground and started jumping up at his legs, wagging his tail so fast Briar could barely see it.

Briar had never asked for this shit. He’d had a close encounter and hadn’t flipped out and killed it, it hadn’t flipped out and killed him. That was all he’d been looking for, not this best friends forever malarkey. He got enough of that from Sandry.

What did Tris do when Little Bear was like this?
“Sit,” Briar said, and it was like he hadn’t said a word.

“Stay?” Nothing.

“Fuck off?” The dog ran three times around him and started jumping again.

“Tris will kill you for this,” said Daja from the bottom of the stairs. “She says every time you let a dog break the rules it’s twice as hard to enforce them next time.”

“You stop it then.”

Daja shrugged. “Don’t know how.”

“Yes you do, I’ve seen you do it.”

Sandry brushed a few steps past Daja. “Little Bear!” she called out. “Here, Little Bear!”

The dog went galumphing off to her.

Sandry lifted her hand in the air. “Sit!”

Little Bear stopped in front of her, but he didn’t sit. He just stood there with his mouth wide open and his tongue out, wagging his tail.

“Sit!” Sandry repeated. “Sit!”

Briar took his chance while he had it and ducked out back of the house, making sure he closed the door behind him. That had gone a fair bit better than he thought it might, but he sure hoped Tris would be doing a whole lot more training before the dog got bear-size. That, he did not want to deal with.

On the way back, Tris really was tired. It had been a very long day, and a big day, too, in a way Tris couldn’t quite define.

Niko seemed to feel the same way, or at least realised that Tris did. He drove quietly, only occasionally cursing at the sun getting in his eyes, too low in the sky to be blocked by the sun visor. Tris just closed her eyes against it.

When the sun had set, she opened them again. The question was there in her mind straight away, like it had been sitting there waiting for her.

“Are you going to be able to find a weather mage to teach me?”

Niko puffed out a little breath. He took off his sunglasses and put them up on the dash. “I’ve been making enquiries,” he said. Then, after a moment, “In all likelihood, I won’t be able to.”

Instead of the disappointment she’d expected, Tris’s heart skipped in relief. She frowned. That wasn’t right at all. It was a bad, bad thing not to get a proper teacher. She’d been dreading it.

“There are obligations, of course, for a mage to teach a student who needs teaching, but the de facto situation is a little different,” Niko continued apologetically. “There’s few enough known weather mages in the world, and they’re notoriously transient people at the best of times. Certainly, none are likely to commit to spending extended periods of time in Australia in the near future.”

Tris still wasn’t upset. It stung, in the way rejection always stung, but somehow it didn’t seem a
catastrophic loss. When Tris was grown up and a weather mage she would have better things to do with her time as well.

“So it will be me for the foreseeable future, I’m afraid.”

“Okay,” said Tris.

“Okay?” Niko glanced sidelong at Tris but quickly put his eyes back on the road.

“I don’t like meeting new people anyway.”

Niko looked away from Tris, checking his mirrors, but she saw him smiling.

Feeling herself go pink, Tris looked out her own window at the trees whizzing by. “Are you going to fix your air conditioning?”

Niko sighed. “Theoretically.”

Tris wound down the window and closed her eyes again.

After dinner, when they were all sitting around together downstairs for no reason, the dog walked around between the lot of them and, of course, hopped up beside Briar on the couch to use him as its pillow for the evening. Compared to that afternoon, it wasn’t really so bad to have its brick-heavy head on his leg, so Briar put up with it.

Sandry was sitting on the ground practising her spinning, and Daja was lying on her back next to her, staring at the ceiling. Lark and Rosethorn were sitting in the armchairs by the window, talking about a whole lot of people Briar didn’t know and didn’t care about. Glenys and Mark and whoever.

Briar wasn’t really sure what he was supposed to be doing. No one had said anything about having a conversation or doing anything particular after dinner, but here they were all killing time together in the same room but not really all paying attention to each other. It had a weird vibe about it. There was just … nothing going on.

Kind of like things had been with him, Nasri and Turtle, before Nasri got snatched back and Turtle –

Briar patted the dog on the head and tried not to think about it. He was just tired. If they were just going to sit around here and do nothing, he might as well go to bed.

Little Bear woke up with a start, flopped his way off the couch and ran to the window, his tail waving slightly from side to side and his ears pricked straight up.

“Don’t bark,” said Rosethorn.

Briar slid down off the couch to sit with Sandry and Daja. Daja rolled her head to the side to see what he was doing then faced back up to the ceiling again. Sandry was concentrating on her spinning.

Briar had had enough silence. “What’s the point of that, what you’re doing? Can’t you just buy string?”

“It doesn’t grow on trees, you know,” said Daja. Sandry giggled.
Briar poked at the piles of fluff in Sandry’s basket. “It’s cool though, how you pack all this into that with, like, a spinning top or whatever.”

“A spindle,” said Sandry. “It’s a lot like what we do in meditation with Niko, don’t you think? Sometimes if I’m doing both at once it feels like they’re the exact same thing.”

“Oh, so that’s why you don’t just buy proper string in the first place?” said Briar. “This is like a magic thing.”

Sandry frowned. “Well—”

“For Sandry and I, yes,” said Lark. “But not always, and for most people not at all. I’d be very happy to teach you to spin, Briar, and anyone else who wants to learn.”

Sandry handed her spindle over to him. He took it and turned it around in his hands. He tossed it back to her. How much string could one person need? “Maybe later. I’m wrecked, I’m going to bed.”

“Good night, then,” said Lark.

Briar mumbled something that she could think was “good night” if she wanted to, then he was out of there.

Tris saw Niko off from the front porch and then went upstairs to get the bird book to try and identify the soaring birds she had seen. She was so absorbed flipping through the pages, standing next to the bookshelf, that she didn’t notice Rosethorn walk by and then stick her head in the room until the woman spoke.

“Bird problems?”

“No, I was just looking,” Tris said awkwardly.

Rosethorn turned to leave, then paused and turned back again. “Any particular bird you’re looking for?”

Tris hesitated. “It’s a raptor. We went up to Lake Hume today, and there were dozens of them all soaring and hunting together over the water. I didn’t think birds of prey did that. I’ve never seen so many all together in one place.”

Rosethorn held her hand out for the book. Tris handed it over. “They were brown or black, and I think they had forked tails, but it was hard to tell when they were all so far away.”

Rosethorn had been flipping quickly through pages almost as soon as Tris had started speaking. By the time Tris had finished, she had two pages ready to hold out and show her.

“Black kite,” said Rosethorn. “Number 137. Yes?”

Tris took the book and looked first at the colour page, with the birds sitting, and then at the black-and-white drawings of them in flight. It said fork-tailed kite, but it was definitely the right bird. “Yes.”

“They can be hypnotising,” said Rosethorn. “Beautiful in flight.”

Tris was too surprised to say anything. She thought Rosethorn only liked plants, Lark and Briar.
“Niko couldn’t even tell you that much, eh?” Rosethorn said then, and Tris jumped back to earth. “Lived here a good forty-five years and still couldn’t tell a kite from a pelican.”

“Niko doesn’t really like –” Tris searched for the right word “— wildlife.”

Rosethorn snorted. “You noticed.”

Tris looked back down at the book and flicked to the description section. Long forked tail, which it twists and tilts in its particularly effortless floating flight, it said. Singly, but usually in loose flocks. Hundreds climb sky in slow-wheeling companies. That brought them back to Tris’s mind’s eye, and she smiled.

“I have some binoculars somewhere,” Rosethorn said. “I’ll dig them up for you for next time.”

“Oh,” said Tris, taken by surprise by the offer.

“Any more questions?” asked Rosethorn.

Tris shook her head, and Rosethorn left.

She hadn’t even used the index to find the right pages, Tris thought, flicking idly through the book. It must be hers. Tris suddenly felt guilty for using it, even though the bookshelf was in a public room and Rosethorn hadn’t seemed to mind. It felt like prying. Tris would hate it if people went nosing around in her own books. Well, she did hate it when people went nosing around in her books. At least nobody here had tried that yet.

That reminded Tris, with the whole day away from the house she had a lot of reading she needed to do. She put the bird book back on the shelf and went back into her room. She wanted to finish Essentials of Meteorology within the week.
Chapter 18

The next day, after their session with Niko him and Tris went straight into the computer room for a lesson. Rosethorn had said that after Niko, they were going to bring in all the sheets and towels off the line and make their beds afresh, and so Briar definitely wasn’t in a hurry to go back downstairs. Since Niko and Tris hadn’t gone down either, probably Rosethorn wouldn’t even realise the session was done.

Briar was getting used to meditating now that he stopped letting it put him to sleep every time. Niko said he was getting better at it too, but Briar had no idea how he’d even know. Probably just hot air to pump him up.

“I think we should do something tomorrow,” announced Sandry. “We could go and see a movie or something, or go shopping.”

Briar closed his eyes. Sounded like naptime.

“I was going to ask if I could go to Frostpine’s tomorrow,” said Daja. “He said I could on a weekend if he was free, and I think he’s free tomorrow.”

“For a lesson?”

Daja sounded a bit miffed when she answered. “Just for a visit.”

“Do you think I could come? I like Frostpine.”

“I suppose.”

Briar threw up horns on both hands. “Party at Frostpiiiiiine’s, woooooo.” Then he yawned.

“Well, I haven’t asked anyone yet,” said Daja.

“Tris will have to come if we all go,” said Sandry.

Briar hadn’t exactly invited himself, but he wasn’t going to argue about it. He was too comfy.

“She won’t have to come,” said Daja.

“We can’t just leave her here all alone, though,” said Sandry even though they could easily do exactly that if they wanted and it was probably just what Tris wanted as well.

“How do you trick her into going, then?” Briar asked.
“I’ll just invite her,” said Daja. “She can come if she wants.”

“We should ask Lark and Rosethorn,” said Sandry.

“And Frostpine.”

“You ask him, and I’ll ask them.”

“Aye aye, captain.”

“Sorry. I mean if that’s okay with you.”

They must have just sorted it out with body language, because Briar just heard them get up off the beanbags and head downstairs. He curled up to get more comfortable in his and started to doze off.

About twenty seconds later, Rosethorn’s footsteps were coming up the stairs. Briar reached out blindly for the beanbag next to him and threw it over himself. Maybe she wouldn’t see him.

It had been a good idea of Daja’s for them all to go to Frostpine’s place. The more time Daja got to spend with her teacher the better, and it was good for them to all get out and go places together. Today Lark and Rosethorn could have a rest at home while everyone was at Frostpine’s, and then tomorrow they were going out for a picnic in the bush, and they were going to take Little Bear with them and give him a lot of really good exercise now his leg was better.

Sandry was looking forward to it. Daja was really looking forward to going to Frostpines, Briar was excited to go out into the bush, and Tris was going along with both ideas without complaining much about it at all. It seemed like she didn’t have a problem with Frostpine, anyway, and she and Daja were getting along better, which was a relief. Sandry didn’t like it when her friends were fighting.

They arrived at Frostpine’s in the late morning. Rosethorn dropped them off, had a short conversation with Frostpine and then drove off again, telling them all to be good and not to cause trouble for him. Frostpine waved that off as he waved her off, saying he was sure they would be a joy and a delight. Sandry didn’t quite catch Rosethorn’s reply.

Frostpine gave them the run of the house and the property after showing them the boundaries of what was his land and his neighbours’. Tris wanted to go inside straight away and read, but Frostpine said he hadn’t quite had enough time to tidy everything up properly, so if they didn’t mind entertaining themselves outside for a short time he’d fix that and then they’d be welcome to do as they wished.

“I wanna see how he sets out his vegie patch,” said Briar. “I didn’t get to last time.”

“That’s boring,” said Daja. “Let’s go and look in the shed.”

“We can do both,” Sandry pointed out. “We have time.”

“That’s okay, let’s do the shed,” said Briar. “I’ll wait till Frostpine’s around and ask him about it anyway.”

Tris had assumed that all of the scattered machinery outside of the shed was overflow and that the inside of it would be packed full of similar mysterious metal framework as well as tools and working machines. To her surprise, half of it had shelves, full of tools and tins and bottles as
expected, but the other half was cleared out and taken over by gym equipment. That had been the last thing she’d expected to see, from the look of Frostpine.

“Nice,” said Briar, wandering over to the punching bag.

“That’s Kirel’s stuff,” said Daja.

“Kirel’s? Does he live here?” said Sandry, sounding surprised.

Tris vaguely remembered that Kirel was Frostpine’s employee, but she’d never met him and had no interest in him so she walked over to join Briar instead of listening to that conversation.

“Here’s your chance, Bluey old mate,” said Briar, and Tris immediately wished she’d stayed with Sandry and Daja. She’d been called worse, yes, but nothing quite so ridiculous.

“For what?”

Briar punched the bag twice with his left fist and once with the right, then kicked it absent-mindedly. “Your first lesson.”

He’d been offering to teach Tris how to fight for ages now, just about every time he did any reading with her, like he needed to do something to balance the scales between them. Tris was interested, but she wasn’t quite sure what she’d be getting herself into, so she’d never explicitly agreed to doing it.

But now was as good a time as ever, she supposed. “Okay,” she said. “Teach me.”

Briar stood a bit taller and puffed out his chest a bit. “The main thing that’s important is you’ve got to know how you want to win,” he said. “Like if you want to get something off someone, get away from someone, stop them from doing something, beat the crap out of them just for effect or to really hurt ‘em, fight for pride or for rep or just because you’re bored as shit. If you just want to learn, like, self-defence and how to get away from someone coming at you, that’s its own thing. If you want to learn how to really fuck someone up, it’s something else.”

Tris’s stomach squirmed. This may have been a bad idea. She didn’t want to be helpless in a fight, but she felt sick inside at the thought of real physical violence. Briar sounded like he was just warming up.

“What on earth are you talking about?” said Sandry from nearby.

“Is this fight club?” said Daja, walking over.

“I said to Tris before I’d teach her how to fight so she doesn’t have to, like, create natural disasters whenever there’s a bit of a scuffle. If youse two want in, that’s cool.”

“What do you mean, how to fight?” said Sandry.

“Like if there’s a fight, how to win. How to get away if someone comes after you. How to hit someone so it hurts.”

“No offence,” said Daja, “but I’d rather learn self-defence from a proper trained instructor than from you.”

“Then go join a class,” Briar retorted. “The thing is with you people is when they teach you fighting they still don’t teach you to hurt people when you have to. You don’t learn that, and then
when the time comes, you freeze up. I’ve seen it.”

“That’s why they call it self-defence,” said Daja, “not Assault Class.”

“I want to avoid hurting people,” said Tris. “That’s the point.”

Briar scoffed. “Don’t be such a girl.”

Tris felt her heart skip and shudder but she slammed it down.

“Stop saying that!” said Sandry, before Tris could say anything at all.

“I knew it,” said Briar. “I knew you couldn’t do it.”

Sandry looked at him, still offended but now puzzled on top of it. “What?”

“It’s been five days,” he said.

“Oh,” said Sandry.

“What’s been five days?” said Daja. She looked at Tris, but Tris didn’t have any idea what they were talking about. She frankly didn’t care what they were talking about.

“You know what?” said Sandry. “I don’t care. I don’t want to be friends with you if you’re going to say things like that. Why would I?”

Briar scowled. “It was your idea in the first place. You think I’m just dying to be friends with a bunch of soft, house-trained, whining fucking girls? You think I give a fuck?”

“What is your problem with girls?” said Sandry indignantly.

“I don’t see who else you’re going to be friends with,” said Daja. “I don’t see any other boys in our house. Do you?”

“See, this is what I mean about girls,” said Briar. “You think –”

“You’re seriously going to keep digging?”

Briar scowled at Daja, and Daja gazed calmly back. Sandry was still glaring at Briar as well. Tris was sick of the argument. Briar was wrong, but it was hardly a revelation of any kind. Were they expecting a feminist out of a boy?

“Go on,” said Sandry, her jaw set. “What do you mean about girls?”

Briar hesitated.

“What do you even know about girls?” said Daja.

“You all bloody talk too much, is what,” said Briar, sounding defeated.

Tris snorted.

“You should apologise to Tris,” said Sandry.

“No,” said Tris.

Everyone looked at her.
“He should,” said Sandry. “He was rude.”

“He didn’t insult me,” said Tris. “He said girls don’t want to hurt people.”

“He said it to you, though,” said Sandry, “as an insult.”

“Look,” said Briar. “I apologise to all girls, all right? For hurting all your feelings. Do you want me to teach you or what?”

“Actually, I have a question,” said Sandry.

Briar leaned over and pressed his face against the punching bag. His voice came out muffled and soft. “What?”

“Did you do that on purpose to make me lose the bet?”

Briar pushed back off the bag and turned back to her. “What if I did?”

“Did you?”

Briar looked over all three of them, clearly trying to decide what the better answer would be.

“Just answer” said Tris, “and we can get on with this.”

“He didn’t,” said Daja. “If he did, he’d say so straight away to give himself an excuse.”

Briar scowled at her.

“So you meant it,” Sandry said to him. “About girls.”

“Yeah,” said Briar. “I guess.”

Sandry shook her head disapprovingly.

“And I said sorry too.”

“But you didn’t mean that.”

“Argue about it later,” said Tris. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Okay,” said Briar. “So what do you do if I do this?”

Before Tris realised what he was doing, he’d reached out and grabbed her by the wrist, tight enough that it hurt. Tris wrenched her hand back, but his grip was too tight.

“You see?” he said. “If you pull back towards yourself, all you do is bring me closer, and unless you’ve got a plan for that, it’s a bad move.”

“Let go,” said Tris.

Briar just stood there, holding on. “Make me.”

Tris felt ridiculous. His grip was tight, and Tris wasn’t strong.

“Go for a weak spot,” said Briar. “You’ve gotta get out of it yourself or you’ve gotta make me let go. However you can think of.”
“Go for the nuts,” suggested Daja. “He’d let go then.”

Briar shrugged. “You can try.”

The problem was whatever Tris might try, Briar would be able to stop her. And anyway, she didn’t know if she could bring herself to hit him. It was such a barbaric way to solve a problem. Violence always only led to more violence.

“Or you can just stand there like a lump,” he said. “It’s your funeral.”

“I don’t see how hitting you is going to help,” Tris said. “You’d just hit back.”

“You’re fucked before you start if you’re not ever going to hit anyone,” said Briar. “Look, I’ll give you one free hit. Go for your best shot and get away. I can’t hit you back if you’re gone.”

“Nuts, nuts, nuts,” chanted Daja softly.

“Yeah or knees, nose, eyes, neck. Knock the wind out. Anything.”

“You’re not a real attacker though,” said Sandry. “Nobody wants to hit their friends.”

“If you can’t hit someone you like then you’re going to be shit at self-defence,” Briar retorted.

“Why would you ever hit someone you like?”

“People you like don’t always like you,” said Briar. “What if right now I charged at you and tried to bash your brains out? Do you hit me or not?”

Sandry shook her head. “You wouldn’t.”

“I said what if, though.”

“But you wouldn’t.”

Tris tugged her hand sharply away from Briar. She got him off-balance, but he tightened his grip and hung on.

“Yeah,” he said. “But you’ve got to pull through my fingers. Don’t try and pull your whole arm away from me, just pull your hand out of my hand. Then you can run away.”

Tris looked at their hands. Briar had his hand over the top of her wrist with her hand facing downwards. So –

She pulled straight down with her hand, and she felt his fingers slipping. With one last sharp tug, her hand was free.

“There you go,” said Briar. “Easy.”

Tris rubbed her wrist. It was faintly pink where his fingers had dug in.

“Should have kicked him,” said Daja.

“Do it again,” said Tris, ignoring her. It was hard to tell if Daja meant what she was saying or if she was just trying to prove to Briar that girls did like the idea of causing pain after all. Possibly, it was both.
Briar grabbed Tris’s other wrist this time and pulled it up towards him. Tris came close to hitting herself in the face with how sharply she pulled away.

“Nice,” he said. “If you do that so fast they can’t grab on for more than a second, you’re set. Just get the right angle. Practise a lot.”

“Practise how?”

Briar shrugged. “We can practise whenever you want. Keeps us sharp.”

“We don’t need to be sharp,” said Daja. “We’re not steak knives.”

Briar shook his head. “If you get slack, you get slow, and if you’re slow, you’re stuffed. If someone’s coming to snatch you or fuck you up, you can’t be thinking, ‘Oh, what am I supposed to do again?’ You’ve got to go bang.” Briar snapped his fingers. “You’ve got to be in the zone.”

Daja’s eyes widened a little, but she looked away. Maybe she was finally realising it. Tris had always been able to tell Daja and Sandry didn’t really get it. They treated Briar as if he was like them deep down inside, and they did the same to Tris. That’s why it was so horrible for them when Briar spouted random sexist nonsense or Tris didn’t smile and chat and meet them halfway. They just had no idea how much it changed you to have grown up happy. They didn’t realise it wasn’t normal.

When Briar called them all house-trained, the two of them heard an insult. What Tris heard was Briar pointing out to them, clear as day, that he never had a home, and that was why he was the way he was. They just didn’t hear it. Sandry seemed to think it was horribly rude of Tris to point out that Briar was a criminal, but it was just the truth, and they’d have to face it sooner or later. Tris preferred sooner. She didn’t like to kid herself.

“We should go back outside,” said Sandry. “Frostpine will come and look for us if he doesn’t know where we are.”

“You don’t want a go?” said Briar.

“No,” said Sandry. “I don’t fight my friends.”

Sandry walked back outside like she thought she’d scored some kind of point. Daja followed after her. It was a bit rich for Sandry to get on her high horse like, “Why would I want to be friends with you?” and then two seconds later announce they were friends like it was a fact, but the weird shit she did didn’t really surprise Briar that much any more. People who got mad easily and then forgot about it were the easiest people to deal with anyway.

“Well, look at that,” Tris said to him. “You made a friend.”

Sandry walked back inside, stood for a moment frowning, then walked back out. Briar looked at Tris to check if she knew what was going on, then went over. Daja was sitting just on the edges of the shade of the big gum tree, on some kind of metal pole with bits sticking down out of it, watching Sandry. Sandry walked into the shed and back out of it again.

“It is hotter outside than in,” she said. “Is there air conditioning in there?”

“No,” said Tris.

“It’ll be magic,” said Briar.
“Oh,” said Sandry. “Sometimes I forget.” She went and sat next to Daja but jumped up again straight away.

“Ow!” she said. “That’s –” She broke off and stared at Daja, who just sat there and looked confused. Sandry bent down and put her finger lightly on the pole. She jolted it up again. “How are you sitting there?” she said.

Briar walked over and tested it himself. It wasn’t burning hot, but it was plenty hot. Too hot to sit on, anyhow.

Daja put her hand full onto it next to her, palm down. “It’s a bit warm,” she said. “So?”

Sandry grabbed Daja’s hand and turned it around to look at the palm. She tested the heat of it with her fingers. “You’re still cool!” she said.

“Thank you,” said Daja.

“Is that part of your magic?” Tris asked. “You’re heatproof?”

Daja considered that. “I guess I’ve never been burned. So maybe.”

Sandry touched it one more time, shaking her head in disbelief.

“It’s too hot for you?” said Daja.

“Way too hot,” said Sandry. “It’s been in the sun all morning.”

Daja got up and brushed her hand along the metal. “Let me see if I can…”

She stood still for a moment, breathing in that same pattern Niko made them use. She showed a bit of strain around the eyes then lifted her hand up again, shaking it out and breathing on it. “Now try.”

Sandry brushed her hand along like Daja had done, and her eyes widened. “Wow!” she said. She spun around and sat down, wiggling a bit to get comfortable. “Thanks!”

Now that was useful. That was heaps useful. “Mate,” said Briar. “I wish I knew you two years ago.”

“I couldn’t do that two years ago,” Daja pointed out. “So it wouldn’t have done you much good.”

Briar was going to ask what her problem was, but it was probably that comment he’d made about girls, and he didn’t really want to bring that up again. She must have taken it personally. Pity not everyone was like Sandry when it came to grudges.

“Whatever,” he said, and sat down the other side of Daja where it was a little bit deeper in the shade. Tris stomped over and sat beside him too. So there they were sitting all in a row, saying nothing.

Sandry spoke up first, of course. “What games do people know?”

Briar thought of some games he knew, and what kind of girls he was sitting with. Maybe better if he just sat quiet.

“There’s forty-forty,” said Sandry. “Or tiggy.”
“It’s hot,” said Daja.

“Hide and seek?”

“No,” said Tris.

“What, then?”

“Something we can play sitting here and not moving,” said Daja.

“We don’t have to play anything at all,” said Tris.

“Okay,” said Sandry. “I spy, with my little eye –”

“No,” said Tris.

“– something beginning with … R.”

Briar followed where her eyes had been. She’d been looking at Frostpine’s house. What were some words that started with –

“Roof,” said Tris.

“Yes!” said Sandry. “Your turn.”

“Ha ha, sucked in,” said Briar.

“Fine,” said Tris. “I spy with my little eye something beginning with H.”

“House,” said Briar.

“No.

“Hat,” said Sandry.

“No.”

Briar couldn’t see anything else starting with H. H was a shit letter anyway, it hardly even made a real sound.

“Heel,” said Sandry.

“No.”

“Hem.”

“No.”

“Hand.”

“No.”

Briar was falling asleep. “Wow, this is a great game,” he said. “I’ve never had more fun in my life.”

“Give us a hint,” said Sandry. “Is it close by?”
“No.”

“Far away?”

“Yes.”

“How far?”

“Very, very far.”

Briar scanned the horizon. There were buildings off to the left, but you couldn’t really tell what they were. Then it was just other houses and paddocks and shit. A bunch of trees.

Daja was looking around in the sky.

“It’s not in the sky,” said Tris, sounding smug. “Or at least it’s not up in the sky.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Briar looked around the horizon again, and then he realised. “Horizon,” he said. “Is it horizon?”

Tris smiled a smug little smile. “Yes.”

“Ha,” said Briar, feeling super smart.

Then they were all looking at him. Damn. He looked around for something he knew for sure how to spell.

“All right,” he said. “K.”

“If I had to say the whole thing, you have to say the whole thing,” said Tris.

“No one made you say it,” Briar pointed out.

“What starts with a K?” said Daja, looking around. “Are you sure it’s K?”

“Yup.”

“Kangaroo?” said Sandry.

“There’s no kangaroos here,” said Tris.

“I thought he might be able to see one.”

“It’s not kangaroo,” said Briar, trying not to laugh. He was set. They’d never guess it.

“Koala?”

“There’s no koalas either,” said Daja. “Is it knees?”

Well, there was another word with a damn silent K on it to add to the list. “No,” he said.

“It’s going to be some kind of obscure plant name, isn’t it?” said Tris.

Briar smiled his own smug little smile. “Yup.”

“We’re not going to be able to get it then,” said Daja.
“It’s a shit game anyway.”

Tris was still looking around trying to find something. She must hate it Briar was beating her at a spelling game.

“Frospine’s coming!” said Sandry. “He’ll know!” She got up and ran over to Frospine, who was just leaving the house and heading over towards them.

“Give us a hint,” said Daja. “She can’t just get it from Frospine and win.”

Briar couldn’t argue with that. “You got half of it already and the second word starts with G.”

“Koala … gum?” said Daja.

“Kangaroo grass,” said Tris. “You never said it was two words.”

“Never said it wasn’t either.”

Sandry came running up ahead of Frospine. “Frospine says kangaroo grass! Is it kangaroo grass?”

“Nah,” said Briar. “Koala gum.”

Daja elbowed him.

“It was kangaroo grass,” said Tris.

“What’s koala gum?” said Sandry. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s the ones with koala nests in ‘em,” Briar said. “For the baby koalas.”

“Koala gum’s got nothing on the mighty Dropbear Eucalypt,” said Frospine. He hoisted himself up onto the bar next to Tris. “What a majestic tree that is. Haven’t seen one since I was a little boy. Less of them around now than there used to be.”

Briar looked both ways to see if any of the girls were fooled. Daja looked suspicious. Sandry wasn’t sure.

Tris just looked like Tris always did. “Less than zero,” she said. “Impressive.”

Frospine’s beard shook when he laughed. “I’ll have to get up earlier in the morning to fool you, kiddo,” he said.

Tris looked a bit embarrassed then. “I’ve heard it before,” she mumbled.

“So what are we going to do now?” said Daja. “No more I Spy.”

“I’ve had a bit of a rummage around, found a bat and a ball,” said Frospine. “Do we want to play a bit of French cricket?”

Daja nodded. “Okay.”

“I thought it was too hot,” Briar said.

Daja elbowed him again and stood up.

By the end of the game Daja was hot, tired and her shoulder was sore again but somehow she was
in a much better mood than she had been at the start. She’d gotten Briar out a bunch of times, which helped, and Tris hadn’t refused to play or been weird about Frostpine. She’d actually been pretty good at batting, and if she ever bothered to go for the ball at faster than a grudging walk, she wouldn’t be too bad at fielding either. Sandry was absolute rubbish at the game, but if you got points for effort she was Kevin O’Brien.

When Niko’s big blue car rolled up the driveway the game was called off in an instant, because that meant lunch. Briar and Sandry tore across the grass towards him, and Daja followed them. She hadn’t realised how hungry was until the thought of lunch had come into her mind.

Briar gave Niko the traditional Briar greeting right at his car door: “Ya bring food?”

“Lovely to see you, Briar, as always,” said Niko. He leaned back into his car to pick up a freezer bag from the passenger seat, which he handed to Briar, and then a grocery bag, which Sandry took. By that time Frostpine and Tris had reached them as well.

“Good afternoon,” said Niko.

“G’day,” said Frostpine.

Daja stayed back a moment when all the others went inside.

She laid a hand on the wide bonnet of the car and closed her eyes. The car was still humming a little from its long-ish journey, and it was soaked in warmth from both its engine and the sun.

It was a beautiful old car with what seemed like all its original parts, and it wasn’t perfectly maintained, but it was functional. If anything all the long drives it had been doing recently had been good for it, as it settled into regular use after having spent so much time sitting in garages and making only short occasional trips.

How she knew that, Daja couldn’t quite say. It might be assumptions she was making from what she knew about Niko, but it might well be magic. It was hard to tell where the line was drawn, or if there even was one.

She was considering trying to work it out by delving a bit deeper into the workings of the car and seeing what she could find, but then her stomach growled and she remembered about lunch.

By the time Daja went inside there was already chaos in the kitchen. It looked like everything Niko had brought had been scattered all over every surface of Frostpine’s fairly small kitchen. Briar had his head in the fridge, Sandry was rummaging through cupboards, Tris was standing in a corner steadily grating cheese, Frostpine was fiddling with the stovetop and Niko was standing somewhat to the side, watching it all with a slightly bewildered expression.

The end result was tacos, and they were very, very good, even if it did take some tactical manoeuvring and elbowing to get to what you wanted. Food had never been like this in Daja’s family or at Lark and Rosethorn’s, but she didn’t really mind it. It was kind of fun.

Tris was settled in one of Frostpine’s deckchairs reading about plate tectonics, having finally convinced everyone she had no interest whatsoever in swimming, when Frostpine came and settled into the chair next to her. “Beautiful day,” he said, putting his feet up and two bottles of ginger beer on the little table in between them.

Tris looked up from her book. It was a quite a nice day. Warm and with a touch of wind but not so much that she had to constantly hold the pages of her book down. Briar, Sandry and Daja were
splashing around in the pool, but none of the splashes made it anywhere near Tris. Niko had taken them through their meditation and was on his way back to Melbourne, so there was no more work to be done for the day.

“There’s a heatwave coming,” said Tris. “On the weather they’re saying by mid-week next week, but I think it’s coming faster than that.”

“Scorchers are coming earlier every year,” said Frostpine. “And for longer.”

Tris nodded. Didn’t she know it. It stood to reason that her least favourite season would be the one set to take over the world.

That was probably enough conversation to be polite. Tris looked down and kept reading. Frostpine picked up one of the bottles and opened it. “Second one’s for you,” he said. “Would you like me to open it?”

“No, thank you.”

“Rightio.”

Tris looked over the centre spread of her book, trying to remember all of the places notorious for their earthquakes and matching them to the plate boundaries on the map. She knew about Japan and California, but from the map it looked like there would be a lot in South America, South Asia and the Middle East as well. Presumably some earthquakes got more publicity than others, so she’d have to look it up online when they got back to the house.

When her eyes and mind needed a short break, Tris put the book to one side and reached for her drink. Frostpine was still there, with his hat half-down over his face so that it looked like his beard was growing out of it.

“Would you say chats about the weather are small talk or real talk for you?” he said.

“I don’t do small talk,” said Tris.

Frostpine chuckled and pushed his hat back up to the top of his head. “Now there’s some real talk.”

“I don’t want to encourage people to talk to me if they don’t have anything to say.”

“Ah, well, point taken,” said Frostpine.

He was so calm about it that it took Tris a moment with her words sitting in the air to realise that it had probably come out ruder than she’d meant it, especially when he’d waited until she wasn’t reading any more before talking to her again.

It was still true, though. “I wasn’t talking about you specifically,” she managed.

“I don’t mind honesty,” said Frostpine. “If I’m upsetting you, I’d rather know, so I can stop.”

“You don’t upset me,” said Tris.

“Not even coming here and making small talk while you’re trying to read?”

“It’s not upsetting. It’s annoying.”

“Then you’re being very generous in indulging me. A sign of character.”
Tris had nothing to say to that, so she focused on opening her bottle without it fizzing everywhere.

“So how’s Little Bear, then?”

Tris had a drink and put the bottle back down.

One thing Tris noticed was that his questions sat more open than questions from Lark or Rosethorn or even Niko. They all actively expected answers, in their own way. Tris was starting to realise that conversation with Frostpine was different. His questions seemed to fill space rather than necessarily compelling an immediate response.

It made them easier to answer. “He’s good,” said Tris. “He can move properly again, and he knows sit and stay and I’m teaching him heel.”

“Deadly,” said Frostpine.

“We were going to bring him but you don’t have fences. We didn’t want to have him tied up all day.”

“You don’t have fences at yours either, though, do you?”

“We’re going to put some up, because he’ll need a lot more room when he’s bigger. They’re planning it now.”

“Right, good stuff.”

Tris picked up her book again. She had a fair bit to get through.

Frostpine sat up slowly, then got to his feet. “Thanks for having a bit of a yap with me,” he said. “I like to, as a host.”

“That’s okay,” said Tris. “It’s your house.”

Frostpine nodded. “I like your manners, girl,” he said. “You’re welcome any time.”

Tris hadn’t minded the conversation, but suddenly she was sick of it. “Thank you,” she said stiffly.

Frostpine looked at her and rubbed his beard. “Ah, you don’t like that? Sorry.”

Tris looked up, startled. “What?”

Frostpine looked at her, and she looked back at him, trying to stamp down the butterflies in her stomach and the thumping in her chest. It had taken so little to spin a polite, nothing conversation into this absurdity.

Frostpine had mercy on her and shifted to looking over her shoulder rather than right at her. “If you don’t like me calling you girl, I won’t do it,” he said.

“Good,” Tris said automatically.

“I’m sorry that I did.”

Tris nodded and tried to focus on her book. She felt sick.

“I’ll be rounding up these kids out of the pool in a moment,” he said, in a completely normal tone. “So brace yourself.”
A horrible thought occurred to Tris. “Don’t tell them,” she said.

Frostpine had been walking away, but at that he turned back around. “Them?” he said, waving a hand toward the pool.

“Any of them. Anyone.”

He nodded. “Your business is your business. Not a word.”

“Thank you.”

He didn’t come any closer, but he crouched down so his head was right in Tris’s eyeline. Reluctantly, she looked at him again. Underneath his big black beard he had quite a soft face, Tris realised. He was wild on the outside but he looked at her with calm, kind eyes.

“You’re welcome any time, kiddo,” he said firmly. “And it won’t happen again.” He paused for a moment in case Tris wanted to say anything, and then he stood up and left.

Tris stared at her book and couldn’t read a thing.

During the whole time Daja, Sandry and Briar had been swimming, Tris had been sitting alone by the side of the pool reading, except that Frostpine had come over and sat with her for a little bit before he’d gotten them all out of the pool. Daja had forced herself not to pay too much attention to them, but she was burning with curiosity about what had been said.

The whole time Daja was drying off and changing back into her clothes, she was wondering. No doubt it had just been another of those times when someone tried to make polite conversation with Tris and Tris put up with it until they went away. It wasn’t like the two of them had anything in common they could talk about, anyway.

She decided not to bring it up and headed back outside. Tris was still in the same spot, reading, and nobody else was around, so Daja walked up and took the seat next to her.

“Hello,” said Tris.

“Hi,” said Daja, closing her eyes. Then she opened them again as she thought of something else she’d been meaning to say. “You know, if you want to learn self-defence, you don’t have to do it Briar’s way.”

Tris looked up and met Daja’s eyes. “And?”

“There’s proper ways you can learn. You could do a class, or one of the adults could teach you. I could teach you.”

“I don’t want to do a class, and Briar would be a better teacher than you.”

Daja raised her eyebrows at that. “Would he? Why?”

“He’s not supercilious.”

“He’s not –“

“Supercilious. It means he doesn’t think he’s better than me.”

What kind of a condescending – “Oh, right. Do you know what hypocrite means?”
“Yes.”

Tris looked out coldly from behind her glasses. Daja didn’t know why she even bothered, if this was what she got when she was just trying to be helpful.

“Wow you two have so much in common,” said Briar from behind them. Daja jumped. Tris didn’t.

“Shut up,” said Tris.

“No,” said Briar. “I’m right.”

Daja refused to even think about whether that was true. Best just to ignore it. “Where’s Sandry?”

Briar made a disgusted expression. “Jigsaw puzzles,” he said.

“What?”

“Her and Frostpine found some jigsaw puzzles in a cupboard. She thinks it’ll be fun if we do one together. So I escaped.”

“There’s no escaping Sandry,” said Daja. “We might as well go in.”

“Pissweak,” said Briar. “Where’s ya fighting spirit.”

“I don’t fight my friends,” said Daja. “Sorry if that’s too girly.”

Jigsaws sounded like no fun at all, but Daja would rather be spending time with Sandry than either of these two right now. She went back into the house.

There was absolutely no point Briar could see to doing a jigsaw puzzle. It took forever, wasn’t fun and achieved nothing except you ended up with a picture you already could have seen if you just looked at the box the puzzle came out of.

Sandry, of course, picked literally the biggest one Frostpine had, took over the entire kitchen table and roped everyone into helping her finish it. It was a picture of some kind of billabong or lagoon or something, with a bunch of birds and animals and a crocodile. Most of the pieces looked the same as each other, so Briar pretty much just sat around and pretended to look through the pile and thought about how to explain to Daja that he didn’t have a problem with girls, exactly, but it was just –

He didn’t know how to put it. It wasn’t something you were supposed to have to explain. Like if you called a boy girly, you weren’t actually saying he was a girl, you were just –

Daja wasn’t even a girly girl anyway. She was fine. He didn’t know why she was so mad, when he hadn’t even been talking about her in the first place. Sandry got over it fine, and Tris hadn’t even been mad at all.

“At least sort them or something,” said Daja. “You know, fur or feather or water or ground or sky.”

“I’ll sort your face,” Briar said. It was a lazy comeback, but it was a lazy kind of a day.

“Look,” said Sandry. “There’s piles.”

Briar looked. There was piles. He grabbed a piece, and it looked like water, so he chucked it in the water pile. “There. I helped.”
“Can you please help? Actually?” said Sandry. “Or we won’t finish it.”

“We won’t finish it anyway,” said Tris. “Look how long it took just to do all the edge bits.”

Sandry sighed.

“We can ask to stay longer,” said Daja. “Frostpine won’t mind.”

Sandry sat bolt upright. “Could we stay over, do you think?”

She said it loudly enough that Frostpine must have heard. He was sitting over the other side of the room working on his computer, but he didn’t look up from it.

Daja shrugged. “Ask.”

“Excuse me, Frostpine,” said Sandry. “Can we please stay over tonight?”

He came over and picked up a puzzle piece. “Can you?” He twirled the piece in his fingers thoughtfully. “Well, I wouldn’t say no to it, but I’d have to talk to Lark and Rosethorn first. Tell you what, I’ll sound them out and you have a chat amongst yourselves and we’ll see what comes of it.”

As soon as he was out of the room, Tris said, “I’d rather go back.”

“I want to stay,” said Daja.

“Me too,” said Sandry. “This is fun.”

Briar liked the idea. About time he changed things up a bit. It was never good to get too settled in one place, and he had been for a while. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m in.”

“I don’t like sleepovers,” said Tris.

“You wanna go back and third wheel all by yourself, then?” said Briar. “Dick move.”

Tris looked annoyed. “I live there.”


No way. Did he really need to spell it out for her?

Daja laughed suddenly, then covered her mouth. Tris was slightly pink.

“Oh,” said Sandry. “Are Lark and –” Her voice trailed off as she thought.

“Are you serious?” said Briar. “Are you seriously serious?”

“I didn’t even think about it.”

“Close your mouth,” said Tris. “You look like a fish.”

Well that was uncalled for. “Least I’m not planning to ruin the only night alone those two poor women have had since you all came storming in to live with them.”

“You were there first,” said Daja. “You started it.”

“And I’m not the one planning to ruin it, am I?”
Everyone looked at Tris.

“I live there,” she said. “You can’t shame me out of wanting to sleep in my own bed.”

“Can’t we?” said Daja.

“I think we can,” said Briar.

It was funny for Sandry to be so quiet when there was an argument going on. She just sat there staring at the big hole in the middle of the puzzle.

Daja’s attention slowly shifted from Tris to Sandry as well. “Is there a problem?” she asked.

Christ, if Sandry was –

“What?” said Sandry. “No. I was just thinking.”

“What?”

Sandry shook her head. “I just feel silly for not realising. Did you all realise?”

Frostpine stuck his head back in the room with his phone held slightly away from his ear. “Consensus?” he said.

Everyone looked at Tris. Tris’s mouth stayed shut.

“No consensus?” said Frostpine.

“We haven’t decided yet,” said Sandry.

“No consensus,” Frostpine said into the phone, then walked away again.

Frostpine came back into the room a couple of minutes later. “If you want to stay, here’s what I can do,” he said. “The sofa folds out, and I’ve got a couple of lilos somewhere I can dig out.”

“I don’t mind sleeping on the floor,” said Sandry quickly.

“What’s a lilo?” asked Daja.

“Inflatable mattress,” Frostpine said.

“Floor’s fine,” said Briar.

Daja didn’t want to sleep on the floor, but a mattress on the floor should be okay. “I can use a lilo,” she said.

“We don’t have any pyjamas,” said Tris.

“You’ll just have to stay awake forever,” said Briar, “without the magical sleeping clothes.”

“It’s called personal hygiene,” said Tris. “I doubt you’ve heard of it.”

“Steady now,” said Frostpine. “No need for a bloodbath.”

Briar and Tris both piped down.
“Could we ask for some things brought over?” said Daja. “Someone was going to have to come and pick us up anyway.”

“Let’s make a list,” said Sandry. “And then we can phone and ask for them.”

“Good idea,” said Frostpine. “I’ll let you lot brainstorm and see if I can scare up those lilos.”

As he walked out of the room, Sandry took out her phone and started the list. “Pyjamas,” she said. “Toothbrushes.”

“My scarf and pillow,” said Daja.

“I don’t know why you need anything,” said Briar. “It’s just sleeping.”

Well he wouldn’t know, would he, when he wouldn’t even shower without being reminded. Daja just waited for him to make another daft comment about girls, but this time he kept his mouth shut. Good.

“Oh,” said Sandry suddenly. “Tris, if you get the sofa and your pyjamas and everything, will you stay? Is it okay?”

Tris closed her eyes and sighed like it was some kind of huge sacrifice to make. “Okay.”

“Yay!” said Sandry, grinning from ear to ear.

“Consensus!” Briar called out in Frostpine’s vague direction.

A few moments later Frostpine came back with two deflated mattresses and two sleeping bags.

“Right,” he said. “Then let’s get cracking.”

They ordered dinner in because no one had the energy to go through the cooking process again, let alone the cleaning process, and besides, they’d already eaten everything Niko had brought. Sandry had wanted some of that Chinese food that Briar was always talking about, but in the end they settled on pizza.

Halfway through dinner, the doorbell rang. Rosethorn had brought all the things they’d asked for, and Sandry wished so badly that she’d just gone ahead and asked for her night light, even though all the others had been listening. She didn’t want to have a nightmare on the first sleepover they had together. She didn’t want to have a nightmare at all!

They went into the main room, where the lilos were laid out and the sofa was folded open, and Rosethorn handed a bag to Briar, one to Daja, one to Tris and one to Sandry. Everyone said thank you except for Briar, who said, “I didn’t ask for anything, but.”

“Then it’s your lucky day, isn’t it,” said Rosethorn. “You lot are all set, then?”

Sandy rumbled through her bag. Pyjamas, toothbrush and toothpaste, hairbrush, phone charger, clean clothes for the next day. And her night light.

She suddenly wanted to cry.

“Thank you,” said Daja. “Yes.”

“Want a cuppa, Rosethorn?” Frostpine called out from the kitchen. “A piece of pizza?”
“Thank you, no,” she said. “I’ve eaten.”

“Thank you,” Sandry managed to say.

Rosethorn looked at her, and she must have noticed the tears in Sandry’s eyes, but she just nodded and said, “You’re welcome,” and then she stuck her head into the kitchen to say goodbye to Frostpine and was gone again.

“It’s a lovely clear night,” said Frostpine when they all came back into the kitchen. “Too nice to waste, I say. What do you say we finish off this pizza outside? It’s a very new moon, quite a sight.”

“Al fresco,” said Briar. “Snazzy.”

Frostpine joined the tips of his thumb and forefinger and kissed them theatrically. “Only the best chez Frostpine,” he said. “To be honest, I’ve lost track of how many Michelin stars they’ve given me.”

They all lay on their backs in a line across Frostpine’s lawn: Tris, Daja, Frostpine, Sandry, Briar. The ground was still warm even though it was full dark, and there was no sun to give Daja heatstroke. Once she’d shifted away from the prickle that had been digging into her shoulderblade, the grass was even comfortable to lie on.

“I never saw this many stars till I came out here,” said Briar. “I didn’t know there was so many.”

“It’s the light pollution from the city,” said Tris. “It blocks them out.”

“There’s Orion,” said Sandry. “And Sirius.”

“There’s a lot of light pollution over Dublin as well,” said Daja. “I never much looked at the stars.”

“Do you have the same constellations over there?” Sandry asked. “Do you have the Big Dipper?”

“I think that’s the same as the Plough,” said Daja. “That’s what we call it.”

“It’s the same,” Tris confirmed. Of course she would know.

“You don’t have the Southern Cross, though, do you?” said Sandry.

“No.”

“The Southern Cross can get fucked,” said Briar sourly. “Doesn’t even point south anyway.”

“Doesn’t it?” said Daja. “I always heard it did.”

“Me too,” said Sandry.

“It doesn’t point south, but you can use it to find south,” said Frostpine.

“How?” asked Tris.

“Who cares?” said Briar. “It’s fucked.”

“I know where you’re coming from, kiddo,” said Frostpine. “But these stars are a fair bit older than white Australia, and they’ll be here long after it’s gone. They didn’t ask for any of this.”

“Yeah, well neither did I.”
There was a little silence. “What are you talking about?” Tris asked cautiously.

Daja had the exact same question.

“Southern Cross stands for white pride,” said Briar. “Because it’s from the flag and that.”

“That’s horrible,” said Sandry. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Because it’s from the flag? The Australian flag?”

“Uh huh.”

“But –”

“Thank you,” said Tris. “I didn’t know that.”

She was trying, Daja would give her that. She was really trying.

“The pointers themselves don’t point south,” Frostpine said after a couple of moments. “That’s what stuffs most people up.”

“Then why are they called the pointers?” Sandry asked.

“They point to the cross,” said Tris.

“Right,” said Frostpine. “The simplest way to tell south is to take the longer line of the cross and extend it out four and half times its length. Then you just go in a straight line down to the horizon, and you’ve got south, easy as you like.”

It was hard to just measure the distance with her eyes, so Daja tried to imagine laying a ruler down along the cross and drawing a line across the sky. She’d hate to rely on that kind of guesswork to not get lost out in the bush or something.

“If you’re not confident on judging the four and a half, there’s other things you can do, like joining that line up with a line out perpendicular from the pointers. And there’s another star, whose name I forget, that you can connect up to the pointers, and halfway along that line is your south as well.”

“Is that magnetic south?” Tris asked.

“Nope. I don’t think it’s exactly bang on celestial south either, but I’m not an astronomer or an ancient mariner so the details escape me.”

Daja stared up into the glittering sky and wondered what kind of divine inspiration early humans must have had, to be able to look up into the night sky, at the stars and moon and planets, and somehow understand that there was a map there that would guide them through their own world. It was one thing to make up a story about a giant hunter and his dog, but it was something much more wondrous to read the heavens like a book and use it to sail your ship safely home.

“There,” said Briar suddenly. “Those ones up there. That’s a middle finger to the Southern Cross.”

“No one can see where you’re pointing,” said Tris.

“I don’t care. I’m calling it The Bird.”
It had been a big day, and Daja was tired, but the lilo wasn’t all that comfortable and she was having trouble dropping off to sleep. It didn’t help that Frostpine had left a light on out in the hallway, either. He said it was because they weren’t used to the house and he didn’t want anyone to stumble and hurt themselves, but all it was doing for Daja was keeping her awake.

That, and Tris’s snoring from up on the sofa. It wasn’t that loud, but it was annoying. Daja did think it was good that Lark and Rosethorn got a night to themselves, but that meant the rest of them had to put up with Tris, and she just wasn’t sure if it was worth it.

It was absolutely unbelievable, what Briar had said. Daja struggled to think of a single thing she and Tris had in common. They both squeezed their toothpaste from the bottom of the tube, and that was about it. Tris said Daja was supercilious, but that was just because Daja knew rudeness and racism when she saw it. Tris herself had admitted she’d been in the wrong, so how was Daja supercilious for pointing it out?

Daja remembered what Tris had said, though: *it means he doesn’t think he’s better than me.*

It had been Daja who had tried to be friendly in the beginning, and Tris hadn’t wanted a bar of it. It was Tris who was snappish and rude and always wanted to be alone, and Daja never stood in the way of that, unlike Sandry and Briar, who Tris seemed to like better. Tris had been literally afraid of Frostpine because he was a Black man and had called Briar a criminal who deserved to be afraid of the police.

So why wouldn’t Daja think she was better than Tris? Wasn’t she? Tris might be making more of an effort now about some things, but Daja was allowed to have a memory. Forgiveness was a Christian value, but Daja didn’t believe in spreading it around like confetti. And she certainly didn’t owe Tris any kind of friendship. Tris wasn’t like Sandry; she even looked mean. Daja just couldn’t see her as a friend.

“Daja,” said Briar softly. “You’re awake, yeah?”

Daja rolled over to face him, thankful for the distraction. He wasn’t on a lilo, just lying on his back on the floor covered with a single blanket. It was an awkward angle to look down at him. “Yeah,” she said, keeping her voice low.

“I know it’s not you all being girls thats the difference,” he said.

Daja didn’t really feel like having this conversation, but at least it was better than the one she’d been having with herself. Much better.

“It’s what kind of girls,” Briar continued. “There’s not a word for it.”

Well, there were. He’d used them, and Daja remembered. “Soft. House-trained.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Whining.”

He sighed. “Sometimes. I know there’s girls that’s not. I’ve run with a few girls before.”

“So when you say, ‘Don’t be such a girl,’ what’s it supposed to mean then?”

“It’s like a metaphor.”

That wasn’t what Daja had expected to hear, at all. She was surprised he knew the word. “What?”
“Like, it just means don’t be girly. Don’t be soft.”

She’d been wrong. The conversation she’d been having with herself seemed like a much better bet at this point. “Just call people soft, if that’s what you mean. You don’t need to bring sexist nonsense into it.”

Briar was quiet.

“It’s foolish enough to talk shit about girls at all when there are five of us and one of you, but if you know it’s not what you actually mean, it’s beyond daft.”

“I guess.”

They both lay there quietly. Tris kept snoring. Daja had no idea if Sandry was awake or not. It probably was weird for Briar, surrounded by girls when seemingly before he’d only ever known “a few”. Daja had never really thought about what kind of company he used to keep. She didn’t really want to think about it, even now.

But she was thinking about it all the same.

“You know,” she said, “I don’t know what kind of dickhead boys you used to hang around with, but you don’t actually have to defend yourself against any of us, you know? It’s not like you’re going to be attacked in your own house. Surely you can tell that by now.”

Daja heard him moving under his blanket. He curled up a little. “I’ve been wrong before. Can’t be too careful.”

For a moment Daja thought he must be joking. It just didn’t make any sense. There was caution, and then there was outright paranoia. Briar just didn’t seem the paranoid type. “You’ve been wrong before?”

He didn’t answer. Daja forced herself not to start imagining what he might be talking about. “I’m sorry,” she said, not really sure what she meant by it.

“Don’t cry all over me,” warned Briar.

“I’m not,” said Daja quickly, glad of the out he was giving her, “and I never will.”

“Good.”

Daja lay and listened to the whirring of Frostpine’s fridge. She thought about Briar, who didn’t seem to have a care in the world half the time, secretly distrusting everyone and everything around him, just that little bit. Daja understood how he might watch himself around Rosethorn, perhaps, but even –

“Even Lark?”

Briar didn’t answer. Maybe he’d fallen asleep.

Daja rolled to face away from him again. Tris snored away somewhere above her head. Daja started to count her breathing, emptying her mind and absolutely refusing to think about either one of them. They had their problems, she had hers. They’d all still be there in the morning.
It seemed like Tris had been wrong about the weather, and it wasn’t improving her mood. Bad enough that they had to go out in the bush like this because just some of them would enjoy it, worse still with the air warm and stifling and so unnaturally still. Everyone smelled of sunscreen and flyspray and they were all stuffed in tight in the same car. Tris would have sat in the back with Little Bear, but then she’d be sick, which wouldn’t exactly help matters.

In the middle of the car were Sandry, Briar and Daja, and they were still arguing about whether doing star signs by the month or the year was a better system. Sandry said monthly “because the stars actually change”, which was just complete nonsense. Daja said they were both just made up but at least when you did it monthly you got more variety, which was technically correct but well outside the spirit of the argument. Briar said Chinese astrology was more accurate because he “knew a guy who was born in the year of the dog and he was a real piece of shit”, which somehow managed to be even more rubbish than Sandry’s argument. Tris absolutely refused to get involved.

When they turned into the big open gravel section that Tris supposed was the car park and pulled into a spot in the one corner that was under some shade, Briar and Sandry practically burst out of the car. Tris went straight around to the back to help Lark let Little Bear out of his cage and make sure his lead was attached properly. He snuffled and sneezed and whacked his tail hard against Tris’s legs, but he didn’t try to run off anywhere and drag Tris along with him.

“Good boy,” said Tris. “Good.”

He whuffed at her and immediately started dragging on the lead.

“No,” said Tris. “Heel.”

Lark handed Tris the dog treats, and when Little Bear settled back down Tris gave him a pat and a treat.

“You can take him around this open area,” said Lark, “but not down any of the walking tracks or into the bush.”

Tris knew that already, but she nodded.

Daja had been helping Rosethorn put the reflective screen up inside the windscreen and taking everything they’d need out of the car. When Tris came around with Little Bear, she was standing with a hand up to shield her eyes. The little bucket hat she was wearing didn’t do anywhere near enough.

“Are Briar and Sandry gone forever?” Daja said.

“Hopefully,” Tris replied.
“Oh, they’re over there.”

Tris looked where Daja was pointing and saw the other two way over the other side of the clearing, walking along a big fallen log with their arms out like tightrope walkers.

“Let’s go over,” said Daja.

“You can explore, but if you plan to go anywhere out of sight, come and let us know,” said Rosethorn. “Tell those two as well.”

Tris and Daja walked over the gravel towards Briar and Sandry. It took a long time, because every time Little Bear started to pull on the lead they had to stop, call him back and then start again. Daja didn’t walk ahead, though; she kept pace patiently with Tris on the other side of Little Bear, which kept him in heel a lot better than he would otherwise be. Tris wasn’t sure if Daja was doing that on purpose or if she just didn’t want to walk next to Tris.

By the time they made it to the others, Sandry was wobbling dangerously on one leg, waving her arms around to try and keep balance. Briar was standing next to her on both his legs, counting. He was just about to hit thirty when Sandry said, “Damn!” and jumped off the log.

“Daja, go,” said Briar. “The record’s fifty-eight.”

“I was counting fast,” said Sandry. “You counted slower.”

“Yeah,” said Briar. “Sucks to be you.”

“It’s actually good,” Sandry told him, then stuck out her tongue. Briar pulled a face back at her.

“Go on,” Tris said to Daja. “Beat him.”

Daja smiled a small smile and hopped up onto the log. “Time it on your phone,” she said to Sandry.

“Damn!” said Sandry again. “I didn’t think of that.”

Little Bear was getting restless, so Tris didn’t stay around to watch. She and Little Bear walked all the way around the car park, slowly at first for him to practise walking at heel and then faster so he could get some energy out.

Once they’d gone around once they stopped back by the car, where there was a water bowl set out for Little Bear and water bottles for the human beings. Lark and Rosethorn were sitting on the back of the car facing outwards, drinking iced tea and watching Briar, Daja and Sandry over on the other side. They looked happy. Rosethorn was almost smiling when she looked up and saw Tris walking by.

“You’re doing a great job with him,” said Lark.

“He likes having real owners,” said Tris.

“And you’re doing a great job,” Lark repeated.

Tris watched Little Bear lapping up water. She was really only doing the bare minimum a dog owner should, but you couldn’t really turn down a compliment twice in a row, even if it was undeserved. “The others are helping,” she said.

“All the same,” said Lark, but she left it at that.
“You can leave him here for a while,” said Rosethorn, “if you want to go and practise your stork imitation.”

Tris looked up. The other three were still doing that competition. She looked back at Rosethorn, who just grinned and said nothing.

“I’ll take him around again,” said Tris. “Then he can have a rest.”

“Keep this up and he’ll be Best in Show before we know it,” said Rosethorn.

Tris set off again.

Briar won in the end, but only by three seconds. Sandry was sure if Daja had tried harder she could have beaten him, but Daja didn’t seem to mind losing, even to Briar. When they decided to head back and Briar yelled out, “Race you!” Daja started off at a sprint but ended up jogging to the car when Sandry and Briar were already sucking down water.

“This would be a good place for French cricket,” said Sandry.

“It’s a bit big,” said Daja. “You could just about play real cricket here, if it wasn’t all gravel.”

That was true. And you’d probably lose the ball pretty easily if anyone hit it too far. But there were a lot of other games they could play. “What should we do next?”

“Sleep,” said Briar. “It’s hot.”

Tris came back from her second circle then, and Little Bear was walking a lot more floppily than before. He lapped at his water and then lay himself down next to it, panting.

“See?” said Briar. “He knows.”

“We’ll get lunch together in about an hour,” said Lark. “Why don’t you go for a bit of a walk, while Little Bear’s too tired to want to go with you?”

“Walk where?” said Briar.

“There’s a few trails you can follow,” said Rosethorn. “Pull out any blackberries you see. And do not split up.”

“And thistles?”

“And thistles, unless they’re too spiky.”

“Okay,” said Briar.

“How far can we go?” Sandry asked.

“Well, no further than half an hour,” said Lark. “Unless you want to be late for lunch.”

“Cool!” Sandry turned to her friends. “Which way do we want to go?”

“I saw a path over there,” said Daja, pointing out in the opposite direction to the way they’d come in by car.

“Okay!” Sandry set off in that direction with Daja by her side. She knew Briar would come, and
hopefully if they were all going Tris would come along as well. She hadn’t had any fights with anyone in a while as far as Sandry knew, and the sleepover seemed to have gone fine.

“I have to re-apply sunscreen first,” said Tris.

Daja stopped. Sandry stopped. Briar kept walking for a few steps then sighed and stopped. “Really?” he said.

Rosethorn pulled out the sunscreen from behind her and held it out to Tris, who walked around to the side mirror and started to apply it. Sandry went and stood behind her to wait for her turn. It hadn’t been long since they first put it on, but it couldn’t hurt to be extra careful.

“You two as well,” said Rosethorn.

“We’re going into the shade, but.”

“Right,” said Rosethorn. “And first you’re putting more sunscreen on.”

“And take some water, as well,” said Lark. “There are bottles here.”

“And any of you who’ve lost your hats, I recommend you find them again.”

She meant Briar, of course. He grumbled and complained and went all the way back across to the log to get his hat, which he’d dumped on the ground claiming it put off his balance and then never picked up again. By the time he came back all the girls had hats, sunscreen and water bottles and were ready to go. Sandry handed him the sunscreen bottle and Lark passed him a bottle of water.

“Boys always take so long to get ready,” Daja commented.

“Have a cry,” Briar suggested.

After Briar had reapplied his sunscreen to Rosethorn’s satisfaction, the four of them set off into the bush, with Briar leading the way and Tris bringing up the rear. It was a narrow beaten path with really only room for single file, with yellow grass to the sides and little gum trees spread all around them. The trees didn’t offer much shade at all, so Sandry was glad they all had extra sun protection.

Briar kept speeding up, and Daja, Tris and Sandry kept on having to call ahead for him to slow down.

“Aren’t you supposed to be looking out for blackberries?” said Daja. “And thistles?”

“She just said if I see it,” said Briar called back. “I’m not weed patrol.”

“Why are you supposed to pull out blackberries anyway?” said Sandry. “Blackberries are delicious.”

Briar stopped and turned around, a little way ahead. “They’re weeds,” he said. “They stuff up all the real plants that try and live here.”

“So weeds aren’t real plants?” said Tris.

“You know what I mean.”

“How can berries be weeds?” said Sandry. “They’re food.”
Briar started walking backwards as the rest of them got closer. “They’re weeds because they grow everywhere but they’re not a proper part of the – the ecosystem. Like parasites.”

He swung back around and kept hustling along the path.

“What’s his hurry?” said Daja.


Sandry yelled out, “Rosethorn said don’t split up.”

“Well if you’d all get a wriggle on,” said Briar, turning around yet again. “I’m looking for lichen.”

“Who cares,” Tris muttered again.

They came across a long, low raised wooden walkway, which Sandry thought was pretty funny considering the ground was perfectly dry and all looked pretty flat to her. After walking on bare ground, their footsteps sounded so loud thudding against the wood. It made Sandry feel a bit like they were invaders, stomping their way into foreign, peaceful land.

The walkway was about a hundred metres long, and then after one step down it was back to the pale, narrow path. The trees were even more spaced out, and the sun beat right down on them. It was very calm weather and Sandry could hear a lot of birds singing and chirping, but she didn’t know the names of any of them. The only ones she recognised were crows, with their loud, hoarse calls.

Briar veered off the path after a while and crouched down by a bush. “See, here’s a thistle.” He moved his hand around it a bit, trying to get a good angle where he wouldn’t get pricked.

“Dig it up from underneath,” suggested Tris as they all caught up to him.

“Yeah I don’t carry a trowel on me, but.”

“Can’t you just use magic so it doesn’t prick you?” said Daja.

Briar looked up at her, frowning. “I dunno,” he said. “Rosethorn never does. She just says wear gloves.”

“Try it,” said Sandry. She’d never seen Briar do any magic before.

Briar looked at the thistle. It was hard to tell what he was thinking. “Nah,” he said. “If I’m gonna kill it I’m not asking it to help.”

“We can just keep going, then,” said Tris. “It’s just a thistle.”

Briar took off his shirt and wrapped it a few times around his hand.

“Really?” said Daja.

Briar grabbed the thistle again, wriggled his hand around a bit, round in circles and side to side, then pulled slowly and steadily upwards. “Gotcha,” he said. Then he shook out his shirt and the thistle fell out of it. He shook his hand, too. He must have been pricked a bit. “Not bad.”

“Congratulations,” said Tris. “You killed it.”

Briar pulled the shirt back over his head and started walking again.
“Are you going to do that every time you see a thistle?” said Daja.

Briar turned around. “Why?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Do you want me to?”

Sandry felt herself going pink. Tris was staring up at the sky with a faint frown on her face. Daja just stared at Briar with her deadpan expression.

He grinned. “I can’t help it that I’m beautiful,” he said, and started back along the path.

Sandry followed him. Daja followed her. Sandry turned around to check that Tris was okay. She was still standing where she’d been before looking upwards and around.

“Tris!” Sandry called. “What’s wrong?”

Tris didn’t move. Sandry hurried past Daja and back to Tris. It looked like she might be in a trance or something, but when Sandry reached her she seemed to come back to herself a bit.

“What are you doing?” said Sandry.

“It’s so still,” said Tris. “It wasn’t supposed to be.”

“What do you mean? What’s still?”

“There’s no wind.”

Sandry looked around. The leaves were hardly moving at all. “Isn’t that good?”

“It’s not bad, exactly. It’s just wrong.”

“How is it wrong?”

Tris just scowled. “I’m trying to work it out.”

“Are you coming?” Briar bellowed, from where him and Daja had gone a fair way further along the path.

Sandry looked at Tris, who shook her head but started walking again. Sandry wanted to walk beside her, but there wasn’t room on the path so she just walked behind. “What’s your favourite kind of weather?”

“Storms,” said Tris.

“What’s your least favourite kind of weather?”

“This.”

“I think my favourite weather is spring,” said Sandry. “It’s getting warm but it’s not too hot and you can have sunshowers and all the plants have flowers and the birds have babies.”

Tris didn’t say anything, so Sandry didn’t try to make any conversation until they caught up with the others.

“What’s up with you?” Briar said to Tris.

Tris said, “I was thinking,” without looking at him.

“Thinking makes your legs stop working?”
Tris pushed past him and said nothing.

“Oh no, the silent treatment,” said Briar. “Devo.”

“She doesn’t like there being no wind,” Sandry said. “She thinks it’s wrong.”

“Suits me fine,” said Briar.

“Same,” said Daja.

After they’d walked a little bit longer, they came to a cleared-out section with a shed in the middle of it. It looked like someone had taken scrap bits of corrugated iron, stuck them together like a patchwork quilt in a vaguely rectangle shape and then left the whole thing to go to rust. On the ground a little way away from it was what looked like the remains of a bonfire, charred black against the yellow ground.

Sandry could see the path start up again on the other side of the clearing, but Daja was already walking through the thin undergrowth towards the shed, with Briar trailing after her.

“I’m going to sit in the shade for a bit,” said Sandry. She went back and sat down on the clearest patch of ground she could find back near where they’d come out from. Tris followed her and sat down as well.

Sandry took out her phone. She’d got some signal in bits and pieces along the walk, and even a few seconds of internet at one point. There was nothing now, though. Just the time.

“We’ve been going for twenty minutes,” she told Tris. “So when they’re finished there we should probably head back.”

“Fine,” said Tris. She still seemed distracted.

Sandry looked around. It was very still, with the leaves on the trees barely moving at all. “How can you tell it’s supposed to be windy?” she asked.

“I just expected it,” said Tris. “It’s hard to explain.”

It must be strange to have magic that was on all the time. There was always weather, so did Tris always feel like Sandry did when she was doing her crafts?

Tris kept talking, to Sandry’s surprise, but it was more like she was thinking aloud than actually talking to Sandry. “The forecast said there would be windy days at the start of next week, but I was sure it was going to be earlier. I thought it was going to be today. I felt it coming when I was meditating.”

“Maybe it changed since then. Maybe it’s just going to come later today.”

Tris shook her head. “I never get it wrong. Even when I didn’t know how to meditate or that I had magic, I was never this wrong. I can’t work it out.”

Tris definitely didn’t like being wrong. It would probably be best just to change the subject. What were Daja and Briar even doing? Sandry supposed they must still be inside the shed. “Lucky there isn’t any wind,” she said. “It looks like you could knock that thing over with a feather.”

Tris didn’t say anything.

“It doesn’t seem that interesting to look at. I wonder if they’ve found anything in there?”
“You can go over there if you want,” said Tris. “I won’t be offended.”

Sandry had wanted to, but she still felt like it would be rude. “That’s okay,” she said. “It would be really hot in there as well. It’s right in the sun.”

“Not as hot for Daja.”

“Oh yeah.”

Sandry checked her phone again. “I think –”

“Complete bust,” announced Briar coming out from behind the shed. “Empty bloody shack.”

“Not bloody,” said Daja, right behind him. “But empty.”

“We could probably go back now,” said Sandry. “We have to turn back soon anyway.”

“How long has it been?” said Briar.

Sandry checked her phone. “Twenty-five minutes.”

“Five more minutes then. I wanted to find some lichen.”

“Why?”

“Rosethorn said about it the other day but I didn’t get to see any.”

“What does it look like?” said Sandry.

“Like –” Briar moved his hands in a little fan-type movement. “Like moss, I guess. On trees and that.”

He didn’t want to turn back, and since they technically hadn’t reached thirty minutes yet, Sandry didn’t think it would be fair to argue with him about it. “We can all look,” she said. “See if someone can spot some in five minutes.”

Tris still had her head in the clouds – or she would, if there was any – and she stumbled over nothing at all on the path right in front of Briar. He grabbed her arm to keep her upright, but she didn’t rebalance herself like she should.

“Hey,” he said.

“Do you –” she said.

“What’s wrong?” said Sandry.


 “Another one of those damn whirlwinds?” said Briar. “Come on. Why would you do that?”

“No,” said Tris. “Not that.”

“Look,” said Daja from behind them. Briar let Tris go and turned around. Daja was facing sideways and pointing up over the treeline.

Oh, fuck.
“We have to go,” said Tris. “Hurry.”

“It’s still a way away,” said Daja.

“No,” said Tris firmly. “The wind.”

The wind had come up pretty quick, and it was starting to really blow. Briar could smell it now, as well as see the smoke and where it was heading.

“What are youse waiting for?” he said. “We have to go.”

Sandry nodded and started to pull Tris along the path. Tris dug her heels in. “Wait. Let me –”

“Fuck waiting,” said Briar. He pushed her from behind while Sandry tugged forwards. “We get back to the car and we’re out of here.”

A burst of practically gale-force wind rushed over them, blowing them sideways on the path. Then another one came at them head-on.

“What the fuck?” said Briar, keeping on pushing at Tris. “You’re seriously not doing this?”

“Not me,” said Tris, finally starting to move her feet. The smoke up over the trees was spinning out in all different directions. Briar strained his ears for the crackle of fire.

Daja was trying to do something on her phone but it didn’t look like it was going well. “Do you have any signal?” she said to Sandry.

Daja took Tris’s other arm so Sandry could take out her own phone. “A message from Lark,” she said. “Five minutes ago. It says there’s no emergency but there’s reports of a fire having started much further up north, but since the weather is calm just make sure we go back straight away and we’ll pack up and leave.”

Another gust of wind hit, and nearly knocked them off their feet.

“Yeah, super-calm fucking weather,” said Briar.

“Can you blow it away and make sure we get to the car?” Sandry said to Tris.

“Let go of me!”

Daja and Briar let go.

“Do you remember the last time I tried moving air around to help us?” snapped Tris.

“You’re better at it now,” said Briar.

“Yes,” said Tris. “I know. That’s why I know it would be a terrible idea to throw power into this. For one thing –”

“Yeah mate it’s a terrible idea to fucking burn to death also,” Briar pointed out. “All we’ve got to do is make it back to the car.” He tugged at her sleeve but she threw him off, just like he taught her the exact bloody day before.

“They might have evacuated,” said Daja. “Look where the smoke’s heading now.”

Sandry was running from side to side and jumping up in the air with her phone up high, getting
steadily further and further away.

“What’s that going to do?” said Daja. “Who would you even call?”

“It’s coming,” said Tris. “Fast.”

“Okay,” said Briar. “So we make it to the clearing. No trees to burn, and no radiant heat? Right?”

Sandry squealed. “I got a bar!” She tapped the screen a few times and put the phone to her ear.

“Into the shed,” said Daja.

Into the – “That’s the stupidest thing I have heard in my whole life,” Briar declared. “And I’ve heard some stupid shit.”

Sandry did a Sandry-swear and stared at her phone like it had betrayed her. “I lost it.” She stamped her foot and started moving around again.

Daja shook her head, braids flying. “It’s not stupid. I can push the heat out of the metal, I can keep it cool.”

“Are you serious? There’s a million gaps in that thing. It’ll collapse on top of us before we even get a chance to roast alive.”

“I can keep the heat out, and Tris can keep the fire away. We don’t have to do it forever, just until it’s burnt everything up and dies down. Just blow the flame to keep it back.”

“And then we’ll have no air and we’ll suffocate,” said Tris. “Good thinking.”

Briar grabbed Tris by the arm and tugged. “C’mon, we gotta go.”

She shook him off, looking at Daja. “But fire needs oxygen to live too,” she said. “If there’s no oxygen it won’t come too close.”

“It’ll eat all our oxygen, and then we’ll suffocate, and die,” said Briar. “Are you kidding me?”

Sandry stopped dead and turned towards them. “Wait, what? What are we talking about?”

“They want us to hide from a bushfire in the old tin shack.”

“In there?” Sandry shook her head hard. “No way. We’ll be trapped. No. No way. No.”

“You can’t outrun a bushfire,” Daja said. “Lark and Rosethorn told us it was nearly impossible in a car, and we don’t even have that! If we try and run all the way we’ll get caught in the open and that will be that. Look at the smoke.”

Briar hadn’t even thought about Lark and Rosethorn, except that they needed to get to them and then escape. What if they were trapped as well? What if – “What if they’re coming in for us?”

Sandry’s mouth dropped open. Daja went like she was about to say something, but then didn’t. Tris went very still then shook her head. “Unless they’re expecting us to run through fire to them, I don’t think that’s happening,” said Tris. “They’ll have gone for help.”

Briar bloody well hoped so.

Sandry was staring at the gathering smoke. Daja nodded. “We have to survive,” she said. “They’re
mages, and we are too. We can make it, and they’ll make it. Everyone will.”

“I’m not going in there,” Sandry said. “I won’t.”

“Thank you!” said Briar.

“I am,” said Daja. “It’s our best chance.”

Briar was trying to think of ten million things at once, and none of them were better ideas. But it was just – that plan would not work.

“There’s oxygen in soil,” said Tris. “Right, Briar?”

He turned on her angrily. “So what?”

“We can do it,” said Daja.

“I can see the fire,” said Sandry quietly. “It’s big.”

They ran.

Briar had seen some shit in his time. He’d been in a fair bit of shit in his time, and the only way he’d gotten out of it was by quick thinking and a quick exit. This was stupid, this was the most dimwitted harebrained bullshit plan of action since Silver Ilia and his pathetic attempt at reverse psychology on the boat that winter.

It was an empty old rickety tin shed with a dirt floor and wobbly walls to start off with. Maybe Daja could heat-proof metal and maybe Tris could chuck air around a bit, but from everything they’d all been told about bushfires, that just wasn’t gonna cut it. Nowhere near. Might as well try pouring the water from their bottles out onto the fire and hoping it just gave up and died.

But hell, they were here now, and when you were knee-deep in shit all you could do was try climbing out of it.

“Oxygen in the earth,” he said. “We’re gonna breathe dirt?”

“Quickly,” said Tris. “We only have a few minutes before it’s here.”

Briar kicked off his shoes and stood barefoot on the warm dirt floor. He sent his magic downwards, through the soles of his feet and into the earth. There was oxygen down here, sure, but he couldn’t move it. He was a plant mage, not air boy.

Daja was walking around the shed, her hand trailing along all the sheets of corrugated iron. Tris had her eyes closed and she was breathing smoothly, forehead wrinkled in thought. Sandry stared at nothing with her hands clenched into fists in her pockets. She looked like she might faint.

Briar quested further out, through the web of roots. When he could feel the fire, as a prickling, hot menace tearing into everything green it found, he didn’t go any further in that direction. That wasn’t gonna help anyone.

If he could sink deep enough into the ground, if the roots could make a little hollow for him, maybe they’d share their oxygen with him until the fire was gone. The earth would shield him from the heat, and the flames. Hopefully.

He was just going to ask them, nicely, when Daja tapped him on the shoulder. “Help lift me up,”
she said. “I need to touch the roof.”

Briar looked up. The rusty roof was about twice his height at its lowest point, and three times at the highest.

“Sandry,” he said. “Help us out.”

She wasn’t listening to him.

“Tris,” he tried. “Hey, Tris.”

“Ninety seconds,” she said sleepily. “I’m nearly ready.”

Whatever. Briar went and knelt down by the wall. “Get on my shoulders,” he said. “Get balanced and then I’ll stand up.”

Daja would have a hell of an easier time lifting Briar than he would her, but this was how it was. Once she was set Briar imagined himself a thick oak tree, growing slow and strong, and forced his back upright and his legs straight. He didn’t think he was going to make it, but once his legs and spine were upright he could hold her okay.

“Be quick,” he grunted with the little breath he had left. He already had smoke in his lungs, probably. There was a hell of a lot more to come. “You’re heavy.”

“I know,” said Daja. “Hush.”

Tris came to stand next to Briar after a moment, offering Daja a hand so she could get back down to the ground without killing herself or Briar.

“I can keep it cool,” said Daja. “Tris, can you deal with the cracks?”

Sandry was still just standing there. Briar didn’t know if she could do anything to help, but damn, she could at least make an effort.

“Hey,” he said. He walked over to her and snapped his fingers in front of her face.

“Can we get out of here now?” she said weakly.

Trust that the fearless bossy know-it-all of a girl was the one to go to water in a crisis. It was so bloody typical. All talk and then a pile of mush when the chips were down. Briar was shitting bricks, sure, but at least he was trying.

“No we can’t, Sandry, sorry,” he told her. “We can’t get out of here, because there’s a great big bloody bushfire just chomping at the bit to get at us, and these couple of geniuses decided they wanted us to spend our last minutes on this earth in a ramshackle tin bloody deathtrap … ! There’s air in the ground, where we can’t breathe it, and heat-repelling metal with gaps all in it, and this is where we’re stuck! So nah, we’re not getting out of here!”

Sandry blinked her blue eyes and focused on his face. “Why can’t we breathe the air?”

Briar could feel the pain in the ground coming closer, the trees groaning and withstanding the nearby flames. “Because it’s all locked up underground, and we’re not trees, is why!”

“I could try to draw some up,” said Tris calmly. “If you can find it.”

“You’re gonna be busy, though, huffing and puffing the fire out of here. We’re gonna be
Daja spoke up. “Sandry, can you do anything?”

Briar laughed. Maybe it was mean, or rude, but who gave a fuck. Things had just been turning around for him, and now he was done for. There were so many other, easier ways he could have kicked it before now, but no, he just had to hold out and survive so he could enjoy burning to death in the end. Sick bloody joke, was what it was. One last way the world was going to fuck him over. Bloody typical.

Sandry pulled her hands out of her pockets. She had her phone in one hand and that spindle thing in the other. “I was getting quite good at spinning,” she said softly.

“Whoop-di-doo,” said Briar, and gave up on her. He walked a little way off and started reaching out to the nearest roots. It was more peaceful down where they were, insulated from most of the heat and pain.

Daja laid her hand flat against one of the walls of the shed. It was thin and old and more than a little bit rusty, but at least the whole thing was small enough that she could walk around it in no more than a few seconds. Like Briar had said, there wasn’t much nearby that would bring the fire to their door, but that didn’t mean the heat wouldn’t reach them.

It would reach the shed, but Daja was determined it wouldn’t make its way inside. It wasn’t that hard to cool metal down; it was just a matter of moving the heat elsewhere, and there was a lot of ground all around them that was going to be burnt to a crisp as it was.

Daja’s heart hammered in her chest, but she felt ready. She had survived the plane crash, and God willing she would survive this too. This time, though, knowing what she knew now, it was going to be different. This time she wasn’t going to be the only survivor.

“I swear it,” she murmured under her breath. “I won’t waste what you’ve given me. I swear.”

Sandry was standing with her spindle in one hand and her phone in the other, but she wasn’t looking at either one of them. Her eyes were wide and completely unfocused. Daja had seen Sandry teary before, but now she seemed to be upset beyond tears. She looked like a zombie.

“What magic do you do with that?” Daja asked. Putting light into thread might not be much use here, but Sandry had better do something, or start thinking about what she could do – or start thinking, at the very least.

“I just … I just make things, from …” said Sandry.

Tris stood right in the middle of the room with her eyes closed and her hat off. Daja felt the air flow away from her, pushing the smoke back from all the cracks and gaps in the shed, and that was something else to worry about. How soon would they run out of air? Briar said he couldn’t move what he’d found underground, and that was the only idea Daja could think of that would keep them breathing. When Tris had said they could use that oxygen that had been the point where Daja truly believed they would survive. But if they couldn’t …
She didn’t know what Briar was doing; he was just standing there with his hands behind his back and his chin on his chest, motionless. Not much better than Sandry, really.

One or two minutes passed, with Daja and Tris working and Sandry and Briar standing around. Daja wanted to tell them she wasn’t happy with the roof, that she couldn’t work on it properly. She ought to tell them, but she’d promised she’d be able to hold the heat out, and that’s why they were all in here, and so –

Daja felt the earth ripple under her feet, like something was moving down there. She stumbled, but didn’t fall and was back pacing within half a second.

“What was that?” Tris snapped. “Is that one of you?”

Nobody said anything. Then it happened again.

“That’s not an earthquake, what the hell is that?” demanded Tris, eyes wild and hair flying.

“Roots,” mumbled Briar. “I’m moving ‘em over here.”

“You’re what?”

“Shh,” he said. “It’s hard.”

“You think this is easy?” Tris said. “I’m trying to concentrate, and having the ground moving under me is not helping!”

“I think the roof might collapse,” said Daja. “It’s getting too hot.”

Nobody spoke after that.

It wasn’t a question of if someone would snap, but who would snap first. Daja was pacing around the wall of the shed with her eyes closed, her face strained and her shoulders tight. Briar’s mouth was moving like he was talking, but Sandry couldn’t hear a thing over the roar of the fire. He’d been still before, but now his fingers were twitching and his legs were jiggling. Tris was back frozen in place, eyes closed and expression blank. Sandry had no idea if she was even aware of anything around her.

Her hair felt damp, despite the hot air. She felt herself sweating, but her throat was dry. For all that there were four of them and not just Sandry on her own, it felt no different than before. It was just the same. Magic or no, Sandry was still that same girl who didn’t know anything except how to sit around and hope for somebody to rescue her. Sandry didn’t want this. She wanted to wake up. The others were trying, they were doing more than she was – which was nothing – but Sandry felt doom in the air and knew it was only a matter of time until they snapped, one by one.

And that gave Sandry her idea.

“If I can spin us all together, we would be stronger,” Sandry said softly into the silence. “An individual thread can snap, but when you spin it together it’s tougher. It’s stronger.”

“What can’t you cool down the roof?” Tris asked Daja.

“All the bits of metal are separate, I can’t do it all at once,” Daja replied. Tris’s voice had been calm, and so would Daja’s be. Maybe Tris really was as smart as she thought she was and would be
able to work it out. “There’s no link between them, I can’t spread myself thinly enough to cover it all at once. I have to keep moving around.”

“I can spin us together,” repeated Sandry, a little bit louder. “I’ve got this bit of thread, with lumps…”

“We better start digging,” said Briar. “This shack collapses, we’re kaput.”

“Listen!” said Sandry. “I have an idea.”

Daja turned to look at Sandry. She was red in the face and her hands were trembling, but the tone of her voice said she’d decided to fight whatever ghost was haunting her.

“What idea?” said Briar.

“I’m going to make us stronger. Everyone come here.”

Daja shook her head. The wall of the shed was warm under her hand. “You come here. I can’t stop this, or we’ll cook.”

Sandry stumbled across to Daja, fumbling to put her phone away in her pocket. Briar started over, then went back to nudge Tris over towards them as well. “What idea?” he said again.

Sandry took a deep breath. The other three all looked distracted, busy, impatient. They had things to do, they were working to keep everyone alive, doing everything they could, and there was nothing Sandry could do to help except this. So it was going to work. There was no question about it. They were all going to get out of this together.

“Daja, give me your hand.”

Daja held out her left hand. “I can’t stay still for too long. I need to get the other side.”

That was true, but Sandry couldn’t afford to rush this. Patience. She could feel her heart beating in her chest, her neck, her ears.

“What’s the idea?” said Briar again.

“Come closer. Take this.” Sandry held the thread out to both of them. “Take one lump each.”

Daja closed her hand firmly around one of the lumps. She closed her eyes, and Sandry could see the strain in her face.

Briar took the next one, watching Sandry closely like he was trying to work out her plan just from the look on her face.

Tris took the third lump without having to be asked. Her eyes were out of focus and she looked more than half-asleep. Sandry remembered from last time how tired Tris got after doing magic.

She shifted her hand along the thread a little so it covered the fourth lump. “Now put a bit of your magic in the lump you’ve got,” she said. “Something that’s a part of you, a part of what you’re doing.”

“How?” asked Daja and Tris together.

Sandry didn’t know. She didn’t know if they could do it, only that they had to. “Like Niko showed
us, through meditation. Fold yourself into it.”

“Into a bit of string?” Briar said dubiously.

“There’s no time to argue about it,” said Daja. “Let’s go.”

The four of them breathed in to the count of seven, held their breath, and exhaled slowly. And again, and again, and again. Sandry felt the air grow warmer around them as they stood there, and the smell of smoke got heavier. If she’d taken Daja and Tris from what they were doing just to try an idea that might not work –

“Now go,” she said, trying to put that quiet, final note of authority into her voice like Niko did when he taught them. “Do it.”

Tris was still trying to throw air out through cracks in the shed walls to keep the smoke out, but without giving it her full concentration she was falling behind. Putting part of herself and her magic into the string as Sandry had said would be putting herself in Sandry’s hands, but she just couldn’t spare the attention to carefully consider what was safe to share, what wasn’t, what was private and always should be. The air around them was filling with smoke.

So she threw it all in: the tension of an oncoming storm and the glorious crashing reality of it; the earth shaking under everyone’s feet, at the same time both minute and monumental; lightning strikes both inside and out; flying high with the birds, drifting and spinning and diving; voices on the wind she could never escape; standing watching the waves crash on the beach and somehow feeling free. When it came down to it, those were the only moments when Tris felt herself.

Who she was the rest of the time, she just couldn’t say.

Tris squeezed herself down to her essentials and passed it all into a lump in a piece of string, then took a step back in her mind and realised something about herself.

Briar knew they weren’t getting out of this alive, and it was bitter in his mouth. What was he supposed to put into this string? Part of himself? Part of Briar, part of Roach? Part of every name he’d ever answered to, part of that kid who was so damn smart he’d survived everything life had thrown at him so far but had somehow managed to forget his own fucking name?

But then, it was only people who needed names, knew you by name, gave you a name. Names only mattered to people, and people weren’t everything. He thought of the solidity and comfort of big old trees and pushed that into his lump. He put in climbing, growing, exploring green things, scratchy bushes, soft moss and tall grass, weeds always finding ways to grow where no one wanted them and no one would ever look after them. He rubbed the tips of his fingers over the scars on his palms and threw in the pain and hurt, the savagery of thorns and strangling vines and stinging nettles. He was going to die, why not leave something to remember him by.

Who she was and what she was doing … Daja was the little girl who dragged her feet behind her parents when they crossed the Ha’penny Bridge because of the big smile it always put on her face. She was the annoying little sister who could spend hours looking at old shields and helmets when Uneny wanted to go to Merrion Square and look at the skeletons. She was the only survivor of a disastrous plane crash, saved by her faith and her magic with metal.

Daja poured that faith and that molten magic into her lump. She gave it her hopes and dreams for the toolbox she was making, the jump in her heart whenever she got to hold unshaped metal in her
bare hands. She gave it the soft flexibility of gold and the brittle persistence of rusted old corrugated iron, the sleek power of steel and the bright energy of copper. She gave it that feeling she had felt as long as she could remember but still had no way of describing: the pull there had always been deep down inside her that she was just beginning to realise she didn’t have to push back against any more.

Daja knew she was only beginning the start of a very long journey, but she was certain she was on the right path. For a moment when she breathed she didn’t smell the bitter smoke or the desperation in the little tin shed: she was in Frostpine’s workshop, and there was work to be done.

Sandry held her lump loosely in her fist, remembering the frustration of her first attempt at spinning, Lark’s gentleness and patience in guiding her, and the shock and triumph she’d felt when she opened her eyes and saw this, her first ever thread. She’d been glad there were lumps in it – it didn’t have any use, nobody else would want it, so she could keep it forever and ever and treasure the memory. Sandry kept that moment in her mind, letting it settle her.

There was nothing more magical than the act of making, and then giving. Sandry couldn’t separate her magic from the people who had taught her, and so she wouldn’t try. She put in some of her earliest memories, of crochet and finger-knitting when she was young, with Pirisi watching over her and telling her stories and telling her patience, patience, patience when she tried to go faster but her fingers struggled to keep up with her racing mind. She put in her friend Emma from the one term she spent in school in grade 3, who had beautiful long brown hair and let Sandry practise her French braiding with it every day at lunchtime.

She put in the hours she spent watching videos on her phone, pausing and replaying and fumbling over technique when Pirisi was back visiting her family and Sandry had nobody left to talk to. She put in darkness and silence, faintly glowing threads lined up on the floor in front of her, the smell of urine and sweat and fear.

Sandry took a deep breath. Along the thread, she could faintly feel power moving from Daja, Tris and Briar into their own lumps. She wasn’t alone, here. This was going to be different.

Sandry brought to mind the warm light and fresh air of Lark’s workroom, and its many noises. Sandry could almost hear the clicking of knitting needles, the buzz of the sewing machine, the tap-tap-tap of Lark’s foot on the treadle of the Ashford Elizabeth, the swish of the broom across the floor after every session, when Sandry had a new length of string in her hands, each time longer and more even than ever before.

When she opened her eyes, she saw the other three watching her. She nodded, and they all let go of their lumps. Sandry felt their presence still, their magic sitting there ready and waiting for her. She felt sweat running down her forehead and into her eyebrows and the stink of smoke now settled in her nose. She had almost gotten used to the sound of the fire roaring around them – it wasn’t what was important any more.

“You have to stay for a moment,” she said. “Everyone needs to link up.”

Sandry attached the magic-laden thread to her spindle. She hadn’t done much spinning standing up before, but she’d done it a couple of times and she’d rather her legs get tired instead of her arms, if she was going to have to do this for a long time. So rather than sit down on the ground, she stood with her feet at shoulder-width and her back straight.

Daja reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. “Is that okay?” she said. Sandry nodded, and Daja held her other hand out to Tris. Tris and Briar knocked their hands against each other before trying
again and clasping them together. Briar grabbed Sandry’s other shoulder, tight.

From the sense of Briar she had in her thread, she reached out with her mind and drew a thin thread of green magic from him where he stood. Tris’s magic was a cool blue; Daja’s was a deep orange-red. Finally Sandry pulled out a thread of her own magic, which was a soft, smooth yellow.

She collected the four threads between her fingers and fed them into her leader, each lump connecting with the person it had come from through the slender thread. She felt them humming so intensely under her fingertips – Briar, Tris, Daja – that for a moment she was overwhelmed by the strength of the feelings and the power they had put in her hands.

They had trusted her. They had all three trusted her with so much all at once that Sandry couldn’t begin to make head nor tail of any of it. Sandry herself and her own magic sat alongside them, and all that was left was to do what she’d promised.

Sandry took a deep breath, and she started to spin.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The pain hit Briar like a brick wall. He’d felt it before, a bit, but then he’d been able to ignore it. Not any more. The trees stood groaning in the middle of the fire, and the scrub and the grasses died sudden, flashing, agonising deaths. Everything he’d felt around him was suddenly in his head and his heart down to his fingers and his toes. He tried to push it away, shove it to the back of his mind like he had been before, but there was so fucking much of it just screaming right through him that it was hard to keep from screaming himself.

Tris shot up straight into the air, through the flames and the smoke, and sat up in the sky above it all, suddenly unbound from her body and light as a feather. The fire was a giant pinwheel down below, flying out in huge curved lines starting from a single point somewhere to the north-west, like a roaring red and black flower of fire. If Tris wasn’t trapped within it herself, she might call it beautiful.

Daja felt her power grow and she grew with it, spreading wider and wider through the crackling, furious flames. The heat in the air by her body faded away from her. She felt crisp and alive. The shed was suddenly tiny, insignificant, and Daja set to fusing its gaps with barely more effort than it took her to breathe, expelling heat from it in steady, repeated bursts.

*Don’t close too many,* Tris warned her. *I still need some air vents.*

Daja slowed down. She left a few slits in each side for Tris and settled into a rhythm, methodically dragging the heat from their metal enclosure and sending it deep down underground.

Briar felt better, slowly. It still hurt, but less, and he had room in his mind to reach down into the roots, drawing power from some and giving to others, trying to find air, somehow – something, anything for them to breathe.

*Hey Tris,* he said. *Check this out.*

*What?*

*Actually, Daja. Are you throwing heat into the ground? Can you not?*

*What?*

*It’s really fucking hot!*

*I’ve got to put it somewhere. Where do you suggest?*

*Briar, what did you want? Did you find something?*

*Yeah. I think I found what we need but I can’t move it. Can you help?*

*Seriously, where else do you want me to put this scorching deadly heat?*

*I can help. You can move the roots, right? I can pull up oxygen if you show it to me.*

*Here. All through here.*
Okay. Give me a second to work this out.

Daja! It’s hot! What are you doing?

Where the fuck else do you want me to put it, Briar?

Not down here where we are!

Everything is on fire, you realise. The ground’s hot because it’s already hot! I’m just trying to stop this from melting onto us!

Shhhhh, said Sandry. Shhhhh.

Daja opened her eyes, and it took her a moment to orient herself back to meatspace. The first thing she noticed was that it was dark. Sandry was standing right in the middle of the shed, spinning a glowing strip of light with her eyes closed, and that was just about all the light they could see by. Briar and Tris were standing right next to each other with their eyes closed and their faces tilted down towards the ground.

Daja didn’t feel hot at all, and none of the others felt hot to her either, but the earth and the roots and the air all around them was at roasting temperature. The plants knew it, and so did Briar, and so did she.

“I think it got too hot while we set Sandry up,” she said. Her voice caught, and she coughed. Tris and Briar looked up slowly, blinking. “I can stop it getting hotter through the shed, but I can’t cool down all the ground and I can’t turn warm, smoky air into cool air again.”

Briar sniffed and then wrinkled his nose. “Tris?”

“I’m recirculating as much as I can,” she said. “But it’s not like there are reserves of clear mountain air just waiting outside for us. We’ve only got what we can find in the ground. The fire will take everything else.”

Briar knew, just like Tris knew and Daja knew and Sandry knew, that they were all going to wear down long before the fire did. He swept through the earth with Tris, looking for gases she could drag them up for the four of them to breathe. It wouldn’t last, but. They’d have to go further and further to find what they needed, and they’d get weaker and weaker as they did. They were okay for now, but no one could tread water forever.

What are you doing? Tris asked when he came to a sudden stop and just hovered, thinking.

He’s right, said Daja. We need to get out of here.

What do you suggest? Blasting into the air like a rocketship?

Underground. We gotta tunnel underground. But I don’t know how deep.

We can’t. Sandry has to keep spinning. We need her to keep spinning.

I can do it, said Sandry, fighting against everything inside her that told her she couldn’t. She couldn’t be trapped again. Not in the dark. I can do it! Not all closed in, not again. I can do it! I just need to stay steady and concentrate. Don’t send me down there. I can’t.

Briar, Daja and Tris all looked at each other.

“What’s that mean?” said Briar. “She can or she—”
Daja frowned. “I –”

I can do it.

Tris knew Briar and Daja were right. They did have to get away somehow, and the only possible direction to go in was down. If Sandry said she’d be able to hold herself together and keep spinning, then Tris had no choice but to believe her, even if she didn’t believe in herself.

I do, Sandry insisted. I can. In the deep, deep darkness, the threads of their magic shone brightly in her hands as she worked. She stood and spun with her back straight and her jaw set. Everything was possible as long as she stayed focused and steady. She had friends all around her. She was far from alone. I can do it. Show me where we’re going.

Briar stood tall and zoomed down. He felt Sandry close by, her fear and panic pushed all the way to the back of her mind where they belonged. Daja and Tris were just about too busy to be afraid, splitting their attention between the work they were doing upstairs to protect all their bodies and their exploration with Briar and Sandry of what they had beneath their feet.

He fed power into the roots he’d already called over, explaining as well as he could that these were his mates and that if they were going to survive, they needed to get down underground out of the fire.

A lattice, said Sandry.

A what? said Briar.

A lattice, she repeated. Made out of roots, as a platform for us to stand on. Then we can just go slowly downwards together.

Like a box, said Daja. An underground lift.

Exactly.

Show me, Briar demanded. Let me explain it to ‘em.

I just need solid ground, said Sandry. If I stumble, it might all come undone.

Okay so make a floor out of roots to stand on and then we’ll go straight down, nice and slow, said Briar. Right?

Sandry showed him the pattern she had in mind. They need to grow like this.

Tris left them to it. It was essential that Sandry got steady ground beneath her feet, but if they couldn’t find a way to actually get underground, it would all be academic. Daja had said it would be like a lift, but there was still the problem of all the soil in the way underneath them. It wouldn’t just disappear.

We gotta clear it out, said Briar. I don’t know if I can do it, but. Takes all the roots I called over just to make this lattice thing.

Tris could tell that already. They were in a clearing, not a thick forest, so Briar’s resources were seriously limited. Tris couldn’t puff earth out of their way like she could do with smoke. For the most part, it lay inert and uncooperative beneath her.

What about just tamping it down? said Daja. If we push, won’t it compress?
We’re doing that already sucking the air out from everywhere, Briar pointed out. So just pull the air up from right under and it makes space, and then we can push down into it.

Daja could help with that. It wasn’t exactly metal as she knew it, but when she’d latched onto Briar and Tris every once in a while she’d come across what felt to her like aluminium, magnesium and iron spread through the ground, and she knew that they would move for her.

Will that do it? she asked Tris.

It might. We shouldn’t have to go in too deep. Smoke rises, and heat from a bushfire never makes it that far underground, I don’t think.

Unless someone’s putting it there on purpose, said Briar pointedly but without real feeling. He was too busy guiding the roots to weave in and out across each other under Sandry’s direction.

Daja didn’t bother responding, but she did start pushing the heat she was taking from the shed further to the side rather than straight down beneath them. It was a fair point he was making.

We’re ready, said Sandry.

Lattice is only like yea big, said Briar. So we gotta huddle up a bit.

The two of them had woven a mat of roots about a hand’s length under the ground, with the middle of it right under Sandry’s feet. It was about three metres by three metres. It wasn’t much room, if they were all to stay out of Sandry’s way.

It could be bigger if you wanted it shitter, said Briar. We had to weave ‘em real tight together, else there’d be too many gaps.

I need to be standing on it directly now, said Sandry. Can you bring it up?

It wasn’t raising their little platform that worried Briar. He did that easy. They all wobbled a little as the ground they were standing on raised up under their feet and became hard, lumpy wood rather than smooth, flat dirt.

It was going down that was going to be the tricky bit. Roots were supposed to get longer from the end, but all the ends of them were tied up in the lattice they’d made. If they grew out at the ends, it would stuff the lattice and still not take them anywhere. He was gonna have to somehow get them to grow from the middle so the whole thing could go further and further down into the ground.

But you can do it? said Daja.

Or die trying.

They were ready. The air was hot, smoky and getting darker and darker and darker. The darker it got, the brighter Sandry’s work seemed to glow.

Tris pulled up everything breathable she and Briar could find underneath them. Daja called to everything down there that would respond to her, pushing it all out of the way to make space for their platform of roots that Briar was pushing steadily downwards. Sandry tried not to pay attention to any of it, concentrating with all her might on staying balanced, steady and focused.

They slid downwards, slowly. Before they had gone much more than ankle-deep, the ground at the edge of the lattice started to crumble at the edges and spill down onto the woven roots.
Uh, said Briar. So –

Here, said Tris. She reached out to whatever moisture she could find nearby, with Briar’s help. The second it reached the unstable dirt around the edges, Daja scorched it all with the next wave of heat she took out of the shed. The earth hardened and did not move.

Nice, said Briar. Makes more room under us too, if you can do water.

We need to go faster, said Tris. I can’t keep doing smoke duty and vacuum duty and now watering duty all at once.

There’s more for me to work with a bit deeper, said Daja.

And less for me, said Tris.

Just keep going.

Sandry spun. They were in this deep now, and she could not stop. The roots were behaving beautifully, accepting the power Briar gave them and growing in a completely alien way to them so they could send their woven-together ends deeper and deeper into the earth. Tris and Daja developed a steady rhythm of making more space beneath them and dampening and then blasting the walls all around them to make sure they didn’t collapse.

They were knee-deep, then waist-deep, moving fairly steadily with only a few jerks and short drops when the others didn’t quite coordinate themselves perfectly. As Sandry’s shoulders sank below the surface, she felt her hands start to shake. She knew the others were trying to keep their worries from her, but she didn’t miss Tris’s increasing exhaustion and how much Daja was feeding strength to her or Briar’s idle half-hallucination that they were sinking into their own graves.

I can't help it, he told her apologetically. It’s creepy as.

Stop worrying, said Tris.

Great advice, said Daja. Helpful.

You know, said Briar. You keep roasting all the earth all around us, these roots aren’t going to go so well following us down through it. Hard enough already with everything packed so tight together.

He threw more power into the roots, and Daja pushed hard with her mind to clear out everything underneath them that she could possibly convince to move. Tris pulled up air and water, but that was getting thinner the deeper they went, and though they were still growing in strength, it wasn’t happening as quickly as it had been in the beginning. They must be approaching the limit of what Sandry spinning could do.

They all kept working, going slower and slower and slower but never stopping. Gradually Daja was losing her grip on the shed; Tris didn’t need to blow away smoke any more but had to work a lot hard to find oxygen and bring it up to them. Briar’s work convincing the roots to grow from the middle rather than the end was getting harder and harder as they sank into denser and denser earth. It was a lot to ask of them when the tops of them were still burning up above ground, but Briar pushed and he pulled and did everything he could to keep them going.

Daja had no idea how deep they were by the time the earth finally felt cool around them. She had to strain a bit to reach up to the fire now, rather than having it at her fingertips like before. It felt like they were miles below ground, but every inch they’d sunk had been so painstaking that it
surely couldn’t be that far.

But it was so dark, and the earth felt so close in around them. She could hear all their breathing, ragged but still in sync. Sandry was next to her, and then past her was Briar and Tris, all within touching distance of each other but somehow so much closer than that.

*Daja,* said Sandry. *I think it’s time for your plan.*

*Good,* said Briar, breathing out in heavy relief. *I’m stuffed.*

*We could do with something to keep the oxygen down with us,* agreed Tris.

Daja hadn’t even told them the idea she’d had. She hadn’t really even thought about it properly. It didn’t seem that that sort of thing was necessary any more.

*Help me reach up,* she said.

Briar let go of the roots, with a final thank you. Tris came up from beneath them with more air to breathe, and then she was ready. Sandry was very nearly beyond thought, but she was there, and she kept going.

Daja reached up one last time towards the fire, and with all of their strength together she sucked in every bit of heat she could find and she slammed it into the melting heap of metal that was all that was left of their shed, drawing it together into a red-hot mass ready for her to give a new shape to.

She pulled it to the top of their hole, shaping it with Tris’s help into a broad flat cone, square around the edges, that perfectly fit the dimensions of the pit they had made. Then she and Tris brought it down to them, painstakingly resisting gravity so it would come down safely and slowly towards them.

When it was only a couple of metres above their heads, the two of them made some last adjustments to the shape, stretching out the edges so they dug slightly into the walls, and then Daja ripped the heat out of it all at once, freezing it in place. Frostpine would probably cry to see her treating metal that way, but Daja had no apologies to make. This was survival.

A smattering of dirt fell on top of it, and then a few heavier clumps. For a moment it seemed like Daja’s fortification of the walls would come completely undone, but after a few more seconds of what sounded – cruelly – like rain falling above their heads, it fell silent once again.

*Well, we’re not cooking any more,* Briar said cheerfully. *Love to be buried alive, me.*

Sandry tried not to think about it. She tried not to think about it. She tried not to think about it.

*Everyone breathe slowly,* said Tris. *Don’t use too much air. Anything we get will stay down here with us now, but it still won’t be that much.*

*Let’s get some more then,* said Briar. *We can check how big the fire is too. Daja?*

The three of them set out again, but upwards this time. Sandry wanted to go with them and be free, but she knew she’d be no real use to them. She had to put everything she had into what she was doing here. This was her part to play.

She wondered if having four of them all together, actually doing magic, would make it easier for Niko to find them, if he was looking. He’d found her before when she was all on her own, and this time he had a much better idea of where to look for her. If they couldn’t find a way to get out of the
tiny little hole they’d put themselves in, surely he would come and find them.

_The fire will go out soon enough_, said Daja as the three of them came back. _It’s not really growing any more, just burning where it is. There’s not much Niko can do till it goes down._

_He’s back in Melbourne today anyway_, added Tris. _So he might come, but it won’t be for a while._

Briar wasn’t worried about the four of them any more. They’d solved their problem, they were bunkered down, and now all they had to do was wait. Make sure they had enough air to breathe, sure, but otherwise just wait for the fire to burn out. What he was thinking about was Rosethorn and Lark and how quick it had come up in the first place…

Sandry’s hands shook. She couldn’t –

_They’re better mages than us_, said Tris quickly. _And they had a car._

_Yeah and did they have anyone with them to make sure that car didn’t toast them right in it?_ said Briar. _They’re neither of them Daja._

_They know about bushfires as well_, Daja added. _They’re fine._

_If you say so._

In trying not to think about Lark and Rosethorn, for Sandry’s sake, Tris’s mind kept leaping to the way the fire had looked from high above, and the strange power she’d felt in the wind before it came. She had been vindicated, she supposed, in her doubts about the weather that morning, but she still didn’t have any real answers. It nagged at her.

_If someone did this shit on purpose I’m gonna –_”

_Let’s not_, said Daja.

Tris agreed, despite herself. What they needed to do more than anything was to stay calm. Anything else used up too much air. _Talk about something else_, she said. _Anything._

_Oh, so now you want a conversation_, said Daja. _Only took a natural disaster and near-death experience._

_Not so natural disaster, seems like_, Briar added darkly.

Sandry spun on, but she could feel herself starting to fumble – not badly, but often enough to know that soon she would be stopping whether she wanted to or not. And then what would they do?

_More oxygen while we can_, said Tris. _Let’s go, Briar._

_We could make us a business out of this, you know. Pretty good market for oxygen._

_I don’t want to know what you mean by that_, Tris said.

_Good, cuz I don’t wanna tell ya._

The two of them moved out again.

All Daja was doing now was checking on the roof she’d made, making sure it wasn’t overheating or looking to break. She could still feel Briar and Tris, like they were in her peripheral vision and all she’d have to do if she wanted them closer was just turn her head. In actual fact, they were
within touching distance of Daja, but they felt further away. It was so strange…

*It was a good idea you had,* she said to Sandry. She moved to stand closer, but not too close. She didn’t want to get in the way.

*We’ll get out, won’t we?*

*Of course. The fire won’t burn forever.*

*Hey,* said Briar. *Tris says it might go on for a little while yet, so we wanna open like an airway into some good air somewhere so we don’t have to keep doing magic to be able to breathe. She’s looking now.*

Sandy felt like she’d been running for hours on a downhill track but the track was getting steeper and steeper and her legs were getting so tired that all they could do now was try desperately to keep up with the momentum that was building up. It was starting to get out of control …

*One last burst,* said Daja. *One last big effort to give us an air supply, and that’ll be the end of the last danger we have. We’ll have nothing to worry about once we know we can breathe.*

*Speak for yourself,* said Briar. *I’m worried some genius is gonna start up I Spy and we just have to play it with D for darkness over and over and over again.*

*I know another word that starts with D,* said Daja, *and it’s drama queen.*

*That’s two words.*

*How about dawdle,* said Tris.

*Mate, we are waiting for you.*

There was an odd pause.

*What’s wrong?* said Sandry.

It was a moment before Tris replied. *It’ll be dangerous. We can’t just use gravity, like we did going down. I’m going to have to make a kind of vortex, like the whirlwind before but much smaller and faster, so that we can dig a tunnel up to the surface. But it can’t get out of control. Not with this fire around.*

Briar didn’t like it. When you were right at your physical limit, stopping momentum was just about the hardest thing there was. Pushing forward just took bloody-mindedness; stopping needed control. He knew which one they had more of.

*I know,* said Tris tetchily. *That’s why I’m asking for help. Lark was the one who pulled my old whirlwind apart. If she could do it, all of us joined together like we are should be able to as well.*

*How did she?* said Briar. *I never saw that.*

*With a spindle.*

Sandry tried not to flinch. It made perfect sense to unwind magic that had been done by unwinding thread that had been spun, but this thread? After everything they’d done?

*If we have to do it, we have to do it,* said Daja. *But only if it comes to that.*
You can do it, Sandry? said Tris.

We’d all have to do it, Sandry replied reluctantly. We’re all bound up together in this, and we’d all have to help pull it apart.

But we can.

Sandry nodded. To pull this thread apart now would just about kill her, but she couldn’t argue. If it would prevent adding more magical fuel to this fire, she’d have to do it. There wouldn’t be a choice.

We’re just doing the same as last time? Daja checked. Just upwards, not downwards. And smaller.

Yes. Aiming for here. Tris showed them the point she’d decided to aim for. It was beyond the fire, which seemed like an almost unbelievable concept, but really it was less than a kilometre away. The wind had been fierce in the beginning, but it had died down now. Tris doubted the fire would jump the road that was between it and the spot she had in mind for the outlet of their air vent.

Lemme warn off the roots on the way, said Briar. Just a little tunnel, yeah?

Yes.

Daja sighed. She’d need to draw down more heat, again, if she was going to bake the walls of the tunnel solid.

Least you don’t have to look far, said Briar.

Sandry had spun them so tight together that she was starting to lose track of who was who. Tris had their destination in mind, as well as the process they was going to use to drill through the earth, and so they all knew it without her having to explain. In Briar’s bones he felt the dull persistent pain of all the plants that had survived this long and were just sitting helplessly suffering flames, and so they all did. Daja was white-hot, full to bursting with raw heat from the fire with not much else left inside of her, and so they all were. Sandry was dog-tired and terrified of what would happen if they had to unravel everything by force, and so they all were.

Someone said, Let’s go, but Daja wasn’t sure who it had been. Maybe even she’d said it. Maybe they all had. It didn’t really make that much difference, in the end.

They started to spin a little pocket of air around in a tight circle, small and compact and increasingly powerful.

Niko would be proud, someone thought. Less is more.

It didn’t take any words or conscious decision. When it was time, they pushed it into the wall, hard. Grains of stray earth got swept up immediately into the vortex, adding to its friction and its digging power. It spun and spun and drove its way upwards and outwards, nearly outstripping the gathering of moisture and the blasts of heat that shored up the walls in its wake.

It’s going too fast.

It’s getting too big.

Slow down, slow down.
There’s someone up there.

Frostpine. It’s Frostpine.

Can you tell where he is?

Forget it. Forget him. We’re going to burst through any second now. Be ready.

Ready.

There was a short, heavy moment in which the fire burned, the vortex spun, and nobody had a single thought to share. Then it breached the surface, spraying air and dirt and everything everywhere, and with a single mind they tore it down, sharply reversing its spin and slamming it back down to the ground in a heavy, bone-crushing corkscrew.

That’s enough.

Sandry tried to catch her spindle, but it had been so long since she’d done anything other than spinning that her hand seemed to have forgotten how to do anything else. Her fingers knocked against the spindle instead of catching it, and it bounced away from her and started to spin backwards slowly, so slowly – but the effect of it was the most horrible whiplash.

Feeling like she herself was starting to come unspun along with the thread she had made, Sandry tried again. It felt like she was moving in sludge, and it took her two more tries before she could catch the spindle and stop its backwards spin.

Sit down, someone said. Sandry thought it might be Daja. Her ears were ringing and her hands burned. You can sit down.

That is the best idea you have ever had, said someone else. Briar?

Someone tugged at Sandry’s shirt. She went in that direction for a couple of steps, and then she was standing facing the wall, and then she turned around and slid down it. Her legs gave out halfway there and she landed heavily on her bum, but she barely noticed. The thread on her spindle wasn’t glowing any more, and everything around her was pitch-black.

The moment Sandry’s head stopped spinning, she took her phone out of her pocket and set it down on the ground in front of her, resting on her shoe. It was 12.29 pm. She had 80 percent battery.

There’s not going to be reception underground, Daja said.

Sandry just sat there, looking at herself and Pirisi smiling back at her. She was so tired. She wasn’t supposed to have to do this again.

Tris was sitting on Sandry’s left-hand side, Daja on her right. Briar had laid himself out on his back, spread-eagled, taking up almost the whole rest of the floor.

Probably didn’t need to pull that thistle, ay, he said. It’s toast one way or the other.

You did it a kindness, then, said Tris.

Didn’t feel like one.

I spy with my little eye, said Daja.
No.
No.

Something beginning with P.

It’s phone.

Phone.

Reading my mind is cheating.

Briar burst out laughing, and then he was coughing.

You’re using too much air.

Fight me.

Daja leaned forward and hit him in the sternum a few times with a closed fist. How’s that?

Briar sputtered a few times then cleared his throat. Perfect. Thank you.

One of the drink bottles is here, said Tris. I don’t know where the others went.

So pass it round.

The water was warm, and Tris couldn’t stand to drink more than a trickle, but just the act of drinking it gave her a little bit of energy, a bit of life.

Sandry struggled to hold on when Tris passed the bottle to her. Her hands screamed at her whenever she tried to move them too much, and she couldn’t bring herself to let go of her spindle either.

Daja helped Sandry take a small drink and then took a sip herself. She held it out to Briar, giving him a little mental nudge in case he couldn’t see it.

None of you better have any fucked up diseases, he said, waving his hand around until he found the bottle and could grab on. I didn’t survive this shit just to get hepatitis or whatever.

You can’t get hepatitis from sharing a drink bottle, said Daja. It’s a myth.

Briar poured a little bit of water into his mouth, then another bit again. It was only a little bottle, and two-thirds empty now. He held it back up towards the others. Done.

Sandry was fiddling with her shoelaces, so Tris took the bottle from Briar and put the lid back on.

How much longer are we going to be down here? said Sandry. The battery was down to 78 percent now.

Tris scowled. Why were they all waiting on her?

Because you’re the fire whisperer, said Briar.

I’m not. If anyone’s the fire whisperer, it’s Daja, and anyway, you’re the one who can talk to trees.
Briar winced. He was trying his damnedest not to listen in on the roots underneath his back. Since Sandry stopped spinning, it wasn’t all up in his face any more, but last thing he wanted to do was reach out, even a little bit, for another taste. If he could do something to help them, maybe he’d try, but right now he was stuffed. They all were.

_Frostpine’s out there, said Daja. I’m sure it was him._

_Yeah._

Sandry dragged her eyes away from her phone to peer at Daja in the dark. _Do you think he could tell that we were there, like we felt him? Is he coming to find us?_

_Fucking wicked to just straight-up walk through fire. You gonna learn that, Daja?_

_Oh, I can already do that. I just enjoy your company so much I thought I’d stay._

Briar snorted. _Big of you._

_He would have noticed what we were doing, said Tris. He couldn’t have missed it, surely._

_He’ll come, Daja said. We just have to wait._

_How long? said Sandry. Her phone battery was at 77 percent._

_Here, said Daja. Let’s use mine. She dug into her pocket and took out her own phone, which she’d all but forgotten about. Save yours. You get better reception. She quickly set her background to the lightest-colour default one there was, so it would make the most light, and then changed the settings so the screen wouldn’t automatically turn itself off._

Sandry picked up her own phone reluctantly and put it back in her pocket. She still hadn’t let go of the spindle in her left hand.

_It won’t be that long, said Tris. I doubt we’ll run out of light even from one phone, let alone two._

_If we do I’ll have a go at that bioluminescence thing, said Briar. But maybe a little nap first._

_We can’t sleep! said Sandry. She was too tired for panic, but the shadows of it were still in her mind. What if Frostpine comes looking and we miss him?_

_Niko made a beeline for me in a helicopter in the middle of the Blue Mountains, said Daja. I don’t think we need to worry about it._

_Stay awake all you want, said Briar. I’m not. If no one comes for us, we can dig ourselves out later if we need to._

_They’ll come, said Daja._

To Tris’s great surprise, she agreed with Daja. Niko would come to find them, no question about it. He’d done it once already. Frostpine was already close by, and he would come for Daja at the very least. Lark and Rosethorn –

_If they’re alive, they’ll come, said Briar. He didn’t sound optimistic. If they can._

It just made Tris so angry. The fire hadn’t been natural – or the wind hadn’t been natural, and if the four of them hadn’t had magic, they’d be dead, and Briar was right, Lark and Rosethorn had had no Daja to protect them from the heat, and –
Stop it, said Sandry. Stop it.

Daja folded her hands together. Let them live. Let them live. Let them live. Please God, let them live. They’ve done so much for us, and they’re good people, and they deserve to live. I kept my promise to you. Please let them live.

_Amen_, said Sandry, halfway between real prayer and simple mundane agreement.

Tris couldn’t pray. She wasn’t a liar, and she wouldn’t pretend. All she could do was hope.

Briar let the – let Daja, Sandry and Tris do all the hoping, all the praying. He’d had enough of that shit not working out and he wasn’t going to get into it again. All four of them had made it, and that was better than you’d ever expect things to be. They’d come out on top, however the rest of it might turn out.

_I’m so glad you’re all here with me_, said Sandry. _I’m so glad._

_Yeah_, said Briar. _Same._

_So am I_, said Tris.

_So am I_, said Daja.

Briar started awake when he felt the ground twitch underneath him. He tried to get up but somehow smashed his head into Sandry’s knee instead. It was so dark the only reason he knew it was her knee was because of the little annoyed sound she made when it happened.

He couldn’t see any of the – well, any of Daja, Sandry or Tris, but it was all such close-quarters stuff that he could hear them breathing, all sitting in a line along the wall. All still asleep, seemed like.

_I’m awake_, said Tris. _What’s happening with the roots?_

Briar didn’t bother trying to get up again. He just put the palms of his hands on the roots he was lying on, closed his eyes and –

_Briar._

It hit him like a sledgehammer. He felt his chest choke up, and he had to hold his breath and squeeze his eyes and fists tight to shut it back down. Now was no time to start bawling like a baby. What good was that gonna do anybody? _Yeah. Hi._

_Are you all –_

_Rosethorn?_ said Daja sleepily.

They all felt Rosethorn’s sharp surprise, and then it cut off like it had been turned off.

_Yeah we’re all here_, said Briar quickly. _It’s all good. We’re okay._

_Good_, said Rosethorn. _We’re pulling you back up in a couple of minutes, Frostpine and I. Don’t worry, don’t interfere. Get in the middle, away from the walls. I’ll be seeing you in no time._

And then she was gone.
Whoever had been leaning on Sandry’s left shoulder raised their head up, and she didn’t like the cold feeling it left behind. Whoever was holding her right hand tugged at it, pulling her forwards. It hurt.

*Stop it,* she said. *I was dreaming. Rosethorn came and found us, and we were saved.*

*Welcome to reality,* said Briar. *Now move off the wall before they start lifting us up and you get your back shredded all to bits.*

Sandry’s eyes snapped open, but she might as well not have bothered. She couldn’t see a thing.

Before anyone could pull or push at her some more, Sandry wriggled her way into the middle of their little cave. Her heart was pounding, and her mouth was so dry.

*I can’t wait to breathe real air again,* said Daja. *No offence, Tris.*

*None taken.*

They sat together in a tight little circle, facing outwards. Sandry slipped her hand into her pocket and brushed her fingers over the four lumps in their thread. *We’re nearly there,* she said. *We’ve nearly made it.*

It was the roof over their heads that moved first, as Daja supposed she should have expected. It rose slowly and steadily, under the weight of the dirt that had fallen on top. Then the four of them rose up underneath it.

*Just like you said,* said Sandry. *Like a lift.*

It seemed aeons ago to Daja that they’d been above ground, frantically trying to think of a way out of the fire. She’d gotten used to their tiny little hole in the ground, where they had no physical room whatsoever but they’d gone so far and done so much.

*It’s going to be bright outside,* said Daja. *Compared to this.*

*Unless it’s night-time,* said Briar.

That was a very good point. Daja had completely lost track of time. Her phone must be here somewhere, she realised. She’d left it on for light, so it had presumably died out by now.

*Here,* said Sandry. Her phone screen lit up, and Daja, sitting next to her, looked away quickly so she wouldn’t be dazzled. *It’s half past four.*

Daja blinked. *In the afternoon?*

*Yes.*

*What day?* said Tris slowly.

*Um,* said Sandry. *Today? Sunday?*

Daja leaned over to look at Sandry’s phone. Not that she thought she was lying, but –

*It hasn’t even been five hours,* said Tris. *We might make it home for dinner.*

*Missed lunch,* but, said Briar.
They stopped moving just near the surface. Tris covered her eyes with one hand and laid the other one next to her to brace herself against whatever was going to happen next.

Their metal roof lifted all the way up, and it was very suddenly daylight. Smoky, heavy daylight, but after being shut up underground it was –

_Fuck!_ said Briar. _What clown invited the sun to this party?_

Tris felt Sandry start to physically shake right beside her. She reached out towards her, but had no idea what to do or to say and put her hand back down.

_I’m okay,_ Sandry said to them all. _I’m okay._

But she was crying. Tris couldn’t just hear it; she could _feel_ it: terror, shock, relief. Tris wasn’t really equipped to deal with emotions much at all, especially not in others, but she supposed that didn’t mean she couldn’t stand as witness to them. She sat with Sandry and she didn’t shy away.

They moved up nearly to ground level. Tris looked along the surface of the earth when it was at eye-level and saw burnt up metal, blackened ground, a pair of steel-capped workers boots.

“G’day,” said Frostpine. “It’s bloody good to see you all.”

“Right back atcha,” Briar mumbled, but his heart wasn’t in it. He was looking at the scorched trees, the bare grey earth. The trees looked funny to him – kind of squished and crumpled as well as charred black. Last time he’d been breathing the open air, he’d practically been in paradise. Now he was back in exactly the same place, just a few hours later, and he couldn’t even recognise it.

Daja was the first to get her feet underneath her, and Frostpine moved to help her up. Rosethorn went and knelt by Sandry, who leaned forward into her and cried and cried and cried.

Daja didn’t want to say it, but she had to. She got up on her tiptoes and asked Frostpine as quietly as she could. “Where’s Lark?”

“She’s fine,” he said, putting an arm around her and hugging her roughly to his side. “She’s safe in town, cursing her asthma.”

Daja let out a long, shaky breath. Thank God for that. _Thank you, thank you, thank you._

Frostpine gave her one last squeeze then crouched down and offered Tris a hand. Tris took it, and he pulled her up to her feet. She wobbled, and he steadied her. “All right, kiddo?”

Tris didn’t look all right to Daja. None of them looked all right to Daja. Frostpine sounded quiet, and his face looked long and tired. Rosethorn, still kneeling down and hugging Sandry, looked white as a ghost. Sandry Daja couldn’t see, but she could hear her, and that was all she needed to know. Briar was just sitting cross-legged with his head in his hands, still as stone.

Frostpine went around to him and clapped him on the shoulder lightly. “Briar, boyo.”

Briar took his hand away from his face and took the hand Frostpine offered him. He looked grey and sick.

“_I’ll bring the car,_” said Frostpine.

Briar barely heard him. He was standing in a goddamn graveyard, except way worse than an actual graveyard. All a graveyard was was a bunch of rocks. Maybe there was dead people under them,
yeah, but like when it came down to it, all you ever saw was the rocks. Here he could see the skeletons of the trees, and he could still hear them screaming in the back of his mind. Or maybe that was Sandry crying, too. Shit.

Rosethorn helped Sandry to her feet, slowly. Sandry sniffed and wiped her stinging eyes with the back of her hand. She was okay now. The fire was gone and they were out of the ground. Rosethorn was here, and Frostpine –

_Lark’s all right_, said Daja. _Frostpine told me. She just can’t be here because of asthma._

Sandry nearly started crying again. She forced her wavering mouth into a smile and tried to stand confidently enough that Rosethorn could stop looking after her for a bit. Briar looked like he needed a hug as well, and if there was anyone in the world he’d let hug him, it was Rosethorn.

Tris stood with Daja and watched the four-wheel drive come slowly towards them. “Did you really think we’d make it?” Daja asked quietly. “You thought the plan would work?”

“I don’t know,” said Tris. “But nothing else was going to.”

Sandry came over to join them, walking stiffly and slowly. It was a long time since they’d had this much room to move. Daja reached out and pulled her into a hug. Tris stood next to them and closed her eyes.

Briar looked at Rosethorn, but she was looking at his feet. “Why am I not surprised,” she said.

She looked up at his face, and she looked pretty wrecked, but there was humour in her eyes. Briar tried to think what had happened to his shoes. He had no idea when he’d lost them, and he didn’t care. He was breathing, and she was here. “I guess they burned up,” he said with all the cheer he could muster. “Too bad.”

Frostpine drove right up to them, parked and got out again. “All aboard,” he said, handing the keys to Rosethorn.

“You’re not coming?” said Daja.

Frostpine shook his head. “More to be done here yet.”

“Without a car?” said Daja.

“How will you get back?” said Tris.

“There’s people about,” he said. “And if it comes down to it, Shanks’ pony’s never let me down yet.”

“Let’s go,” said Rosethorn briskly. “This is a rescue, not an afternoon tea.” She opened a side door and stood there with it open. Briar got in first and slid all the way across to the other side, and Sandry heaved herself in after him. After a moment, Tris turned and trudged towards the front passenger door.

“Go,” Frostpine told Daja. “There’s nothing here to hurt me. Not many can say that.”

“And so you have to stay and help,” she said. “I know.”

He grinned a weary grin. “Attagirl.”

“Thanks for coming to find us.”
“Wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise.”

Rosethorn cleared her throat pointedly.

“I’ll see you soon,” said Frostpine. “Go be rescued.”

Rosethorn turned off the main road even before they’d made it into town.

“There’s a little camp set up at the university,” she said. “Lark’s here, you can get checked out here, and we’ll stay for a little while. The dog’s here, down in the stables.”

*What kind of a university has stables?* said Sandry.

*Horse university*, said Daja, who didn’t care.

They turned right, then right again, and pulled into an area with a few low, flat buildings set in a flat, wide-open space. There were three cars parked close together under the only bit of shade available.

*This is a university?* said Tris.

“Is this a university?” Sandry asked for her.

“It’s a rural campus,” said Rosethorn. “Not every university can be Melbourne University. Not every university *wants* to be Melbourne University” She pulled around and parked next to all the other cars, but hesitated with her hand at the ignition and then put the car into reverse. “I’ll drive you to the door.”

She drove right up to the big T-shaped building on their right and parked the car just next to the front door. Before anyone had a chance to so much as take off their seatbelt, the door opened.

Lark’s smile shone brighter than the sun. Sandry completely forgot she was exhausted, and as soon as Daja had gotten out of the car Sandry hurried after her and joined the big hug she was having with Lark. She felt dizzy with relief. They were all here now.

Tris got out of the front and closed both her door and the one Sandry had left open behind her. Then she stood and waited for them to be finished. It was wonderful to see Lark again, and of course Sandry and Daja were happy to see her as well, but three was a crowd and four would be mayhem.

Briar got out the other side, behind Rosethorn, and took the chance, while no one was paying attention to him, to wrap his arms around her middle and thank the gods he hadn’t bothered to pray to for keeping her safe. Rosethorn squeezed him tight for a moment or two then guided him around to the others, where even Tris was willing to spend a couple of seconds in a hug with Lark, and even hugged her back a little bit.

Well, times had changed.

After Lark had squeezed all the air out of Briar’s lungs as well, she ushered everyone inside the building. They walked through a big grey hallway and into what looked like a library or study room that had all its furniture pushed back to the walls and half a dozen camp beds set up in the middle.

Briar made a beeline for the closest one, and the others followed suit.
“I’ll find Val,” said Lark, and walked out of the room.

Rosethorn brought them water, but only a little bit. Briar was just about to ask for more when a short, middle-aged woman with a long braid and a little bag came into the room. “These them?” she asked Rosethorn.

“They are,” said Rosethorn, sitting on one of the empty beds.

While the woman was going around to each of them, doing little tests, asking them questions, listening to their breathing, Lark came back in as well. “Your Uncle Vedris rang,” she said to Sandry. “I’ve told him that you’re safe, but he’d like to hear from you. You could talk to him tomorrow, if it’s too much now.”

“I think so,” said Sandry. “But please tell him I’m fine.”

“I wouldn’t say fine,” said Val. “Your hands, they’re hurting you?”

“A little bit.”

“How much is a little bit?” said Rosethorn.

“Not a lot.”

Liar, said Daja.

“There doesn’t seem to be any injury or structural damage,” said Val. “If they’re just tender, I can wrap them for you, and you’ll need to rest them as much as possible.”

“Don’t wrap them, please,” said Sandry. “I’ll just be careful.”

Val considered that then shrugged. “If you’re happy with that, I’m happy with that.” She got to her feet and collected all her things. “Exhaustion,” she said to Lark and Rosethorn. “Rest, rest, and more rest. Hospital’s unnecessary, I think. You’ve got my number, Moonstream’s number if anything comes up. I don’t think it will.”

“Thank you,” said Sandry.

“Thank you,” said Daja.

Val shook hands with Lark and bustled out again.

“Does that mean we can go? Can we go home?” said Sandry as soon as the door closed behind her.

Lark shook her head. “Not until tomorrow,” she said. “We’re not close to the fire that’s still burning, but still too close to be completely safe. We’ll reassess in the morning.”

Another sleepover, then, said Tris.

Let the good times roll, said Briar through a yawn.

When Lark and Rosethorn had drawn the curtains and left the room, Sandry wanted to sleep, but it was like finally lying down in a bed and getting a chance to rest had given all the things that had been in the back of her mind the opportunity to jump up and demand her attention. She checked to make sure her spindle and the thread with the lumps were still in her pocket, put her phone onto its lowest possible power setting so it would survive through to the morning. She felt a bit bad about
not phoning her uncle when he must be worried about her, so she sent him a quick text despite the
strain it put on her hands: I’m okay, Uncle, and I’ll speak to you tomorrow. Love, Sandry.

She really wanted to see Little Bear as well, but Rosethorn had said he was in the stables, and of
course he’d be safe there. She wanted to see him, but she didn’t want to have to deal with him, so
perhaps it would be better to wait until the morning, after they’d rested.

Then there was one other big thing on her mind.

Do you think we should say anything? she said to Daja. To Tris, I mean.

I can hear you, you know, said Tris. We can all hear you.

Oh. Well –

Hey Tris, said Briar. I’m sorry for calling you a girl all those times.

I call myself a girl, Tris said dryly. You weren’t to know. I didn’t even realise myself. Don’t worry
about it.

Are you going to tell Lark and Rosethorn? said Sandry.

No, said Tris sharply, like lightning. And neither are you.

Calm your farm, said Briar. No one’s gonna say anything.

They wouldn’t mind, said Daja. I’m not saying tell them if you don’t want to, but I’m sure they
wouldn’t mind.

If I’m telling anyone anything, it’ll be when I’ve had a chance to think about it for slightly more
than five extremely distracting hours and I’ve worked out what there actually is to tell, said Tris.
Unless Sandry’s planning to spin me together with the whole world, I’m going to have to work out
how to put this into words.

You really didn’t know until today? said Sandry. How can you not know?

Give me a chance to think about it first before I have to discuss it, said Tris. Even with you.

Okay, said Sandry.

It’s still wrong to say girl as an insult, though, no matter who you’re talking to, said Daja. Tris is
different, but me and Sandry are still girls and you’re not allowed to be sexist to us either.

Or any girls at all, said Sandry.

Yeah okay, but it’s not the same, said Briar. I knew this girl Carla, toughest chick in the world, ice
in her veins, and if you called her a boy she cried. It’s a different thing.

But they both matter, said Sandry.

Yeah okay, said Briar. I hear you.

If we’re quite finished, I’m going to sleep now, said Tris. Or possibly into some kind of coma.

Good idea, said Daja. Very good idea.
Tris wasn’t good at sleeping in strange places, let alone in big open rooms with other people, and so even though she was more tired than she’d ever been in her life before, she kept half-waking up and having to fall back asleep. It didn’t help that it was still so early in the evening and well before nightfall. The curtains were closed, but Tris could still tell.

The first few times she woke everything was quiet and she’d slipped back to sleep without too much difficulty. But this time, when Tris started registering what was around her, she heard voices out in the hallway. The conversation was quiet, but Tris had sharp ears.

“Pull up a chair,” said Frostpine.

It was Niko who answered, and Tris smiled a little to hear his voice. “Can I see them?”

“They’re sleeping,” said Rosethorn. “There’s not much to see.”

Tris heard a plastic chair slide across the ground. “What’s the latest toll?”

“Nine, including Huath,” said a deep voice Tris didn’t recognise.

Something moved to Tris’ right. She turned her head to see Daja crossing herself.

“So where was his team?” said Frostpine. “This is the exact kind of thing they were supposed to stop.”

“They told him no so many times he stopped bothering to ask,” said the unknown voice. “He went out there alone and none of them knew a thing.”

“If he wasn’t dead already…” said Rosethorn grimly.

“He should have to live with this,” said Lark, her tone matching Rosethorn’s. “Like the rest of us do.”

*Jeez,* said Briar. *Some anger outta Lark. If I was that Huath, I’d be glad I was dead.*

“Do you have any answers for us, Niko?” said the stranger.

“Nothing definite,” he said. “I think it can be pieced together, given time. Those four in the next room may well know more than I do, at this stage.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” the stranger said. “They’ve done a real special thing out there.”

“Indeed they have.”

“I don’t suppose you have any answers about that either?” said Rosethorn.

“None.”

“Hm.”

“Let’s look to recovery before answers,” said Lark. “Investigation can wait. They’ve been through a lot.”

“Of course,” said Niko.

“On that note,” said Frostpine, “I think I’m better off starting early next morning than running myself down tonight. Unless there’s any more business—”
“No,” said the stranger. “I think you’re right.”

“Let me just duck in and take a peep at them,” said Frostpine. “I could do with a bit of seeing is believing.”

In a couple of seconds the door eased open. Frostpine saw they were awake and rippled his fingers in a quiet wave. He left the doorway, and then Niko filled it. He leaned back into the other room and said, “Sleeping, eh?”

_Niko’s got a big mouth_, said Briar.

Tris sighed, sat up and put her glasses on. The others propped themselves up as well.

Niko came into the room, followed by Lark and a thickset dark-skinned woman wearing a long blue dress and sandals and with her hair pulled back into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. She looked very calm and serious.

“Kids, this is Moonstream,” she said. “Moonstream, meet Tris, Daja, Sandry and Briar.”

“I’m very happy to see you all,” said Moonstream, standing with her hands clasped together in front of her and looking over them all, one by one. Her voice was very deep and completely calm, and they found themselves hanging on her every word. “Given us a blessing on a cursed day.”

“There was magic in the wind,” Tris said abruptly. “I think someone held it back all morning, and then it got loose.”

Moonstream nodded. Her expression didn’t change.

“A man called Huath,” said Niko. “He is what happens when ambition isn’t tempered by common sense.”

“And that’s why you stomp on me,” said Tris. “I know.”

“I would much rather have done without the object lesson.”

_What the hell does that mean?_ said Briar. _Does he know words are supposed to mean things?_ _It means this was a perfect example of what he’s been saying but he wishes it hadn’t happened_, said Tris.

_Could have just said that._

“Thanks for letting us have Little Bear,” Sandry said suddenly.

Moonstream looked at her, and there was a slight smile around her eyes. “He was never my dog to let you have,” she said. “But I’m happy to have been able to help him find a home with you.”

Sandry nodded and lay back down in her bed. “We’re taking him home tomorrow, right?”

“Right,” said Lark.

_Good_, said Sandry, closing her eyes.

“And I think that’s good night,” said Lark. “Unless anyone needs anything?”

“No thank you,” said Daja.
“I’ll see you all tomorrow,” said Niko.

Who’d a thunk there’d be a tomorrow, said Briar, flopping back onto his pillow.

Happy days, said Daja.

Tris took her glasses back off. “Good night,” she said.

Daja looked at Moonstream, and Moonstream met her eyes and nodded. “It’s nice to meet you,” said Daja. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Moonstream said. “Sleep well.”

Lark went out last and closed the door behind her.

“You don’t need to go upstairs unless you want to,” said Lark. “We can set you up in the lounge room, or you can share rooms if you’d like.”

Daja and Tris exchanged a look. So did Briar and Sandry.

“We can go up,” said Tris.

“We don’t mind sharing,” said Sandry.

Lark smiled. “Well, if you need anything moved or organised, let me know. I’ve got some repair work to do, so I’ll be in my workroom but very interruptable. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Sandry.

Lark lingered for a moment, looking at them each in turn as if to double-check that they were all there and conscious and capable of looking after themselves. Then she nodded, smiled again and went away to her workroom.

The four looked at each other.

“I’m going to get changed,” said Sandry. “I feel grotty.”

“Good idea,” said Daja.

Sandry went into her room. Daja and Tris turned to go up the stairs.

Briar just stood there. He didn’t really know what to do with himself. The sensible thing was to go to his room and go straight back to sleep, but he kind of felt like the whole house might zip out of existence if he closed his eyes even for a second.

It was just ridiculous that after all that, he was back here again, and everything was just exactly how it always was. His bedroom was right there next to him. Down the hallway you got the main room, the kitchen, the back door. He knew there’d be food in the kitchen without even having to check.

Out the back was Rosethorn’s garden, which would need weeding by now for sure. His baby apple berry plant was out there too, in the spot he’d picked for it.

He almost didn’t dare blink.
Tris and Daja walked up the stairs side by side. Neither one wanted to be the one to fall behind, and so they both made it to the top together.

“Home sweet home,” said Daja.

“I suppose so,” said Tris.

A moment stretched out between them.

“I don’t really want to have a conversation,” said Tris.

“Neither do I,” agreed Daja.

Tris nodded, but neither of them moved. The moment stretched on.

“I do mean it, though,” said Daja.

“Mean what?”

“Maybe it’s not sweet, but it’s home.”

“I’m not denying it.”

A slow smile spread across Daja’s face. “Welcome home, then.”

Tris met Daja’s eyes. She didn’t smile, but she wasn’t frowning. “I’m glad we made it back. Thank you for everything you did.”

“Same to you.”

“I’ve lived in a lot of homes,” Tris said suddenly, abruptly. “This one’s not fairy floss, but it’s the sweetest I’ve been in.”

“Yeah,” said Daja. “I understand.”

Tris looked at Daja and shook her head slowly. “You don’t really, but thanks anyway.”

“Okay. You’re right. I understand better now.”

Tris nodded. “Same to you.”

Hey guys? Can you come to my room for a second please?

The look Daja and Tris were sharing changed to one of exasperation in an instant.

We just made it up these stairs, you realise, said Daja.

I’m not coming and hugging anyone, warned Briar. I don’t care how many emotions you have.

I only have three, said Tris. Don’t worry.

Okay, said Sandry. I’ll come up to you. Come on, Briar. I need to show everyone something.

If I collapse and die going up there, you better all be making formal apologies at my funeral.

Briar Moss, said Daja. Conqueror of Melbourne, magic and bushfires. Defeated by stairs.
Tris snorted. She and Daja took the two best beanbags and got themselves settled. A few moments later Briar and Sandry came very slowly up the stairs and joined them.

“Okay so what is it?” said Briar, collapsing dramatically into his own beanbag.

Sandry pulled another beanbag over and put it so they were all four in a circle and cautiously lowered herself down into it. “Look,” she said.

She pulled out the lumpy piece of thread.

“Hey,” said Briar. “Whoa.”

“Can I see?” said Tris.

Sandry passed it over.

Tris ran one finger all the way around the thread, looking for the spot where the two ends had fused together to create the unbroken circle she held in her hands.

“There’s no join,” said Sandry. “I looked.”

Tris passed the circle to Daja.

“What does it mean?” Daja asked Sandry.

“I’m not sure,” said Sandry.

Daja turned the string over in her hands a few times and then passed it to Briar. “Think it’ll wear off?” he said.

“Do you think that circle’s going to come apart?” said Tris.

Briar tugged at it gently, then a little bit harder.

Sandry watched him without a hint of concern.

“Nope,” he said, and tossed it to her.

“Then no,” said Tris. “I don’t think so.”

“I’m not going to show them,” said Sandry. “I don’t want them to take it away.”

“Rosethorn knows something’s up,” said Briar. “She heard Daja.”

“I think it’s fairly obvious something’s up,” said Daja. “It doesn’t take a genius.”

“They’ll almost certainly work out that we’re connected, but this is ours,” said Tris. “We’re not obliged to show anyone anything.”

“It’s not just ours,” said Sandry. “It’s us.”

“Exactly.”

Sandry held the circle tight in her hand for a moment then tucked it back into her pocket. “I’ll keep it safe,” she said. “I promise.”

They all sat where they were, too exhausted to move.
“I can’t believe you made me come upstairs for this,” said Briar. “Do you know how far away from here my bed is?”

“Just yesterday you slept trapped in an underground box during a magic-powered bushfire that nearly killed us all,” said Daja. “This is fine.”

“We did good with that, ay?” said Briar. “I reckon we should get medals.”

“They don’t hand out medals for saving your own skin,” said Tris.

“We saved all each other's skins as well though,” said Sandry.

“I’ll make us medals,” Daja said through a yawn. “Tell me what you want engraved.”

“Put –”

“Later,” she said quickly, cutting Briar off. “Tell me later, when I’ve got a chance of remembering.”

“I’ll let you know thirty years from now, when I wake up,” he said, yawning himself.

“Deal.”

It didn’t take long until they were all yawning.

“My bed is about ten metres away,” said Tris.

“Sleep in a beanbag,” said Briar. “Live a little.”

“Oh, I couldn’t move if you paid me,” said Tris. “I’m just pointing it out.”

“Good night, then,” Briar said, and closed his eyes.

Tris took her glasses off and put them as far as she could reach from her beanbag. “Good night,” she said.

“It’s morning,” said Daja. “But good night.”

Sandry held their circle one more time through the outside of her pocket, then let go. “Good night,” she said. “Sweet dreams.”

Chapter End Notes

so there it is.

there will be a little epilogue in the next couple of days, which will basically be a flimsy pretext for me to write some proper author's notes. i set myself the goal of finishing this today, and i've done it (woo!) and so i'm publishing it, but i'm not in the right frame of mind right now to write the kind of author's notes that i want to, hence a little add-on when i am, hopefully tomorrow or soon after.

but basically just thank you everyone so much. i couldn't have done it without you <3
Epilogue & Author's Notes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sandry was curled comfortably up into Lark’s side on the couch, watching her demonstrate the brioche stitch. Sandry still wasn’t supposed to be using her hands too much, even though they were mostly better now, but she loved to watch Lark work almost as much as she loved to do her own. There was something so lovely and relaxing about watching an expert do the things that they did best. And especially Lark, when everything she did was beautiful already.

Sandry had been watching this one for a while, though, and her eyes were starting to wander. They wandered to Briar, sprawled out on his stomach on the floor by the window with Little Bear’s head resting on the back of his legs as the dog dozed. Briar was concentrating intently on slowly tracing the printouts of trees and different-shaped leaves that Daja and Rosethorn had found for him. He still wasn’t very good with a pencil, but he was getting better all the time, especially now that he was drawing instead of trying to write. He needed to take baby steps, Sandry supposed, though he’d hate to hear it described that way.

Over in the kitchen, Rosethorn had cornered Niko and made him help her with cleanup. He was leaning over the sink and reluctantly washing dishes, with Rosethorn rinsing them once he was done and handing them straight back to him if she didn’t think they were clean enough. Sandry felt a little bit sorry for Niko, but it was pretty funny to see Rosethorn treating him just the same way as she treated the four of them. And it was about time Niko took his turn, anyway.

And then Frostpine, Daja and Tris were sitting around the kitchen table with a beautiful old barometer that Frostpine said he’d borrowed from a friend of his. Daja and Tris didn’t have all of their strength back yet, but if Sandry concentrated, she could feel Tris experimenting with the air pressure and Daja riding up and down with the mercury. When Sandry thought about it, it was probably a good thing they weren’t at full strength. It looked like fun, but Sandry was very comfy where she was.

Take a picture, Tris said. It’ll last longer.

Tris was being sarcastic, but that didn’t stop it from being a good idea. Sandry shifted around to get her phone out of her pocket, but Tris quickly spoke again. I didn’t mean it. Don’t.

Sandry settled back down again. Okay.

“You all right?” said Lark.

“Mm-hmm,” said Sandry, nodding.

Sandry looked from Tris, Daja and Frostpine across to Rosethorn and Niko at the sink and then down to Briar and Little Bear on the floor, and she smiled happily to herself. This was home.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I’ll be honest: when I started this story I did not expect it to take two years,
forty weeks and six days to write. I’m not sure what I did expect, but I’m absolutely certain it was not that.

It’s pretty much the love of my life, and my best achievement, and I’m very proud and happy to have finished what I set out to do and, much more importantly, to have made something that so many people have read and enjoyed and been super-patient in waiting for updates on time and time again!

It feels very strange to have finally finished it, but even when it was nowhere near done I was thinking about what I was going to do next. (This may or may not be one of the reasons why the story came out so slowly. The future is *distracting*.)

My position is basically this: I have way, way too many ideas to just say the universe is over now that this one story has finished. I also have way, way too many ideas to have a clear idea of where I’m going to go next. I don’t think direct adaptations of any of the rest of the books are likely. I don’t even know if anything else I write will be novel-length. Three years is a long, long time to be writing one story.

Like I have ideas about Flick, Pasco, Rizu, Keth, Evvy, Nia and Jory, even Aymery Chandler, but it’s how to turn the ideas into writing that I’ll have to think about for a while.

So all I can really say, for those people who have asked, is that I intend to write more but I honestly can’t tell you exactly what or when. I might be writing a few other non-Emelan bits and pieces first, which I banned myself from to make sure this got done, but this universe will always be on the horizon. So that’s where I’m at.

And now for my Oscars speech. I would like to thank:

Tamora Pierce, for giving me this sandpit to play in.

My friend Jess, for support, enthusiasm, information, conversation, proofreading, feedback and friendship.

My mum, for fielding random questions about the natural sciences and running through bizarre hypotheticals with me with little to no context at all.

Wangaratta and its surrounds, for bringing my idle musings about a modern-day Emelan into a brighter, clearer form in my mind. This story is nothing without its setting.

On that note, I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners and custodians of the land in and around Wangaratta, that I live on in Melbourne and everywhere else around the country, and to Elders past and present. I’ve done the best I can in this story, and I will always try and do better. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

To tumblr user minuiko, whose Emelan art brought me back to these books after many years’ absence. Thank you for all of it, but so so much for this post in particular: http://minuiko.tumblr.com/post/81831716884/master-and-student

To all the other people on tumblr whose analysis, headcanons, art and general discussion ended up a part of what I’ve made here. Please consider this entire story a way of returning the favour.
To whoever made this ambient mix, which helped me focus and concentrate and put me in the frame of mind to write on countless, countless days: http://countryside.ambient.mixer.com/winding-circle-day

To Scrivener, for making my writing process so much more natural and flexible and organised, without which I would never ever be able to write a story this long.

I would like also to thank my brain, for never letting this idea and story stray far from my thoughts.

Thanks to all you readers, for your invaluable and unmeasurable contributions. I couldn’t have kept this going if not for you.

And I think that’s it, except of course I’ve probably forgotten somebody or something, as you do.

Any requests or suggestions or ideas for what subject or form the next step takes, or even requests for oneshots in the meantime, I am very happy to take on board. No promises, of course, but when I have only vague ideas myself, it can only help for me to get some idea of what people would like to see come next, to clarify my own thoughts if nothing else.

I can be contacted on here, of course, but if anyone wants to make comments or ask me any questions I’m on tumblr as well, url galahheadgalahad. I don’t post a whole lot, but I’m on there a bunch and so it’s probably the best place to find me.

I’m not too far off the character limit for author’s notes, so it’s probably best if I leave it there. Again, thank you so much to everyone, and I hope you’ve enjoyed reading this even half as much as I’ve enjoyed making it happen. This is my greatest writing achievement (life achievement?) and I’m very happy to have been able to share it with you all.

<3

Alex

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!