

Mel Keegan
WINDRAGE



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WINDRAGE

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft, South Australia

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PROLOG

He knew there was trouble before the big Honda crested the rise. Behind him, Yonderland stretched away apparently to infinity, featureless, barren and forbidding. Before him, the curves of familiar hills rose out of the bleak summer landscape, promising shelter, warmth, human contact. New towns nestled in the valleys, right across the frontier. More settlements began every year, as people headed out to make their own luck where the air and water were clean. But only fools underestimated the risk of being out here.

A pall of smoke stirred on the sharp, cold wind. Scott Warne braked down on the roadside, just short of the top of the rise. As he killed the engine and lifted off his helmet, he heard the sounds of conflict from the slope beyond. He swung off the bike and snaked the last few meters on knees and elbows, in the roadside dirt.

Rifle shots punched out of the distance; engines were idling, and as his narrowed eyes began to make sense of the scene he watched four big bikes and an electric blue pickup truck swing up onto the dirt road leading north. Warne was headed west on East Outbound One, the main highway, where the surface was good enough for a bike go through so fast, a man could outrun trouble — or be gone before it knew he was coming.

The people who lived here were not so fortunate. As the bikes and 4x4 pulled out, he debated the wisdom of trying to open up settlements in Yonderland. Below him was wreckage which had been a croft. The log cabin was so new, the last time Warne had

ridden the highway, he had seen no sign of construction. Now it was burning fiercely, and in a year, after the winter, even the ash would be gone.

The roadies who had attacked the croft were two kilometers away before he returned to the bike. The smell of smoke was acrid in his nose. The Honda started at once. He slackened his weapons in their holsters before he wheeled down the long slope, and he took it slowly. Seldom were there no survivors of a raid, and for days afterward those who survived were likely to shoot anything on two wheels.

A hundred meters from the fire, he stopped and held up both hands, well out from any possible weapon. He cleared his throat of smoke and shouted into the wind, "Is anyone there? You need help? I just got here ... too late to do anything about it, but I can see what happened. Hello!"

He waited several minutes for any response, and then figures moved in the tall grass at the roadside. Warne had expected to be looking down the business-ends of assorted guns, and he was not surprised. He kept his hands up, watching as a very old man, two women and four kids, not one of them over ten, clambered out of the concealment of their tiger trap.

No one knew why the pit in the ground, covered with wooden spars, hides and dirt, was called a tiger trap. Many people, especially the kids, would not even have known what a tiger was, much less why anyone would want to trap them. But many crofters made a hide within running distance of the house, for occasions like this.

The rifles did not waver as he turned off the bike. He looked over the unlikely group and waited for them to speak. The elder of the two women seemed to be in charge. Like the others, she was wild-haired, smudge-faced, clad in denim, leather, a patchwork of rabbit skins; she was probably younger by a decade than she looked. Life beyond the frontier was hard on anyone, and harshest on women.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded.

"A traveler, headed back in." Warne gestured over his shoulder. "I just came across Yonderland, and I saw your smoke."

"Too bad you didn't get here an hour ago," the old man muttered.

"If he had," the woman retorted, "he'd be dead. Or headed in the other direction, fast as he could go." She glared in the wake of the raiders. "You know who they are?"

"Roadies, nomads," Warne guessed vaguely.

"Stone Angels," the woman said disgustedly, and spat into the gravel.

Warne's brows rose. "You sure about that?"

She glared at him now. "I'm stupid, not blind."

"Stupid?" Warne echoed, though he could guess.

"Why else would I be out here?" she demanded. "This has to be the dumbest place to be."

"Then why be here?" Warne looked out across the slope, where the croft's roof had just fallen in. A hectare of ground had been cleared and he thought he saw the green of shoots, perhaps vegetables.

Both the women cackled with laughter, and the elder said acidly, "You'd have to ask my bloody moron of a husband. He was born and raised around here. This was his land, before. All he can think about is getting back out here."

"Too soon," the other woman muttered. "I've been telling him, we all have." She was smaller, with finer bones and clearer eyes than her sister, but Warne saw the family likeness between them. "You said you're headed in, mister?"

"That's the plan." He looked into the north, where the roadies had disappeared. "It's not safe around here. You ought to get out while you can. I, uh, can't take you." He gestured at the bike, which was loaded. "I don't even have space for a passenger, but I'll take a message for you."

The women traded glances; the rifle barrels lowered. The elder passed her weapon to the old man and thrust a hand toward Warne. "I'm Terri Tappan. This is my sister, Phyl. And you've no need to take a message to Windrage on our account — we're watching for our men right now. They went out to trade yesterday, they were due back an hour ago. The stupid buggers can probably see the smoke." She paused, and the brown eyes, nested in deep creases, shifted over Warne's shoulder. "But I'll tell you this, mister ... you better take a message to Windrage anyway. There's going to be hell, and they better know about it."

Hell? Warne's brow creased as he looked over his shoulder, following the line of her eyes. The eastern horizon was blurred and the sky was dark. He swore softly as his belly clenched. "Four hours?"

"Four, four and a half," Terri Tappan agreed. "It's going to be bad."

"Windrage will see it coming, same as we do," Warne began.

But Tappan's head was shaking emphatically. "The storm, sure. But you saw a bunch of the Stones head north on the dirt road. That road, mister, it doesn't go nowhere." She quirked her brows at him. "Penny starting to drop, maybe?"

"Shit," Warne whispered. She was right. Ezekiel Gant's roadie tribe had to be camped a scant few kilometers away, and when the storm hit, like everyone else they would want to be under cover.

The nearest, best cover was Windrage — which meant the storm would drive the Stone Angels right into the town, the way the big blows had driven them into places like Chinatown Creek and Rosalie Valley. The storms went through, weathered well enough by the buildings, but each settlement suffered carnage it would never forget. The Stones always left their mark behind them.

"I can be in Windrage in an hour," he offered. "The least I can do is let them know what's heading toward them ... and if your men are still in town, where would I find them?"

The Tappan sisters snorted, and Phyl said hoarsely, as if there was already dust in her throat, "If the bastards aren't back by now, it's a safe bet they'll be in the pub. Josh Kellerway's Earl of Aberdeen."

"I'll tell them to shift their asses," Warne promised, "but I'll also tell the Citizen's Committee to send a 4x4 out for you, pronto, because you've got kids. Good enough?"

"Good enough." Terri stood aside to clear the road. "Thanks for stopping, mister. Decent of you. When you saw the fire, you could've shot straight through."

The 1100cc engine revved twice, and Warne pulled on his helmet. "Get your crap together, people, be ready to move." He glanced over his shoulder again, at an eastern sky that was filled with malice. "This one's going to be a beast."

He was moving then, and he thanked whatever gods of war

were watching, that the bike was running well. Between here and Windrage, any mistake tonight, any mishap, would be the death of him.

The afternoon shadows were already long. The sun was a dull orange ball suspended over the hills; twilight would be premature and the night would be bitter.



The sky in the east was a heavy brown color that warned of a big wind, and the smell of dust was already on the air. Shutters were going up, and mallets beat a tattoo across Windrage as the warning rushed about. A storm was on its way in, and this one would be bad. Fear was as tangible as the icy wind.

The old Kawasaki Katana coughed and gargled as Jon Cameron kicked it to life. He knocked back the sidestand and swung the machine around in a wide arc, using the whole road. The strip of broken asphalt was deserted. It snaked east into the riverland, and west to the gulf coast, and it crossed over the hill right above the town of Windrage.

The bike had seen much better days. Then again, Cameron thought, hadn't everyone and everything? The 1100cc 'Kwak' was still running, which was a miracle in itself. Most machines had been scrapped long ago, when both the spare parts and the expertise to fix them expired. Mules and bullocks were as common on the road now as they had been several centuries ago.

Below the hill, Windrage nestled in a valley where it was protected from the worst of the elements. From his vantage point by the flagstaff, Cameron saw a hundred gray slate roofs and belching chimneys, and he knew every one of them individually. Vic Morley the baker; Sam Sawyer the gravedigger; Danny Ashmole the teacher; Gemma Fawcett the electrician; Pat Daley the doctor; Mick Bradley the mechanic.

Windrage prided itself on its resources. The town boasted the best of everything — its people were damned lucky, and smart enough to know they had it easy. The majority of the frontier towns were new and raw, with few more comforts than those enjoyed by the nomads who meandered from Mannum to Salisbury and back again twice a year, between late spring and early autumn.

Yet, ironically, Windrage's very wealth of people, services and safety, made the town a natural target for every hoon tribe on the road, and every time the wind turned, there would be trouble. You could count on it, Cameron thought bitterly.

The sky would begin to darken with airborne dust left over from what scientists termed 'the event,' and what ordinary folk thought of as Armageddon. Within an hour, the lookouts would be alert. Weapons were cleaned and loaded, the few machines which were still in working order were fueled and serviced. It was a matter of survival.

A wind out of the south spelled cold, clearer skies and peace. An east wind spelled nothing but trouble, because it brought the killing dust, and it made the nomads dive for cover, anywhere they could find it.

Cameron's back gave him a stab of pain but he ignored it. The ache was not genuine discomfort now, just phantom pangs. Doc Daley called them 'sympathetic pain.' Every time Cameron saw a brown sky he remembered the day, four painful months before, and no matter how well-healed the wound was, it hurt.

The steel cable rang against the flagpole with a sound like a small bell. In the few minutes Cameron had sat beneath it, astride the bike and looking down on the rooftops of the town he thought of as his own, the bell chimes had quickened, and they were louder. The red and white flag of Windrage streamed before a wind that was growing by the moment.

Time to get in, he decided, before the dust came. And the hoons. The Katana gurgled as he took it down into the valley. He was off the asphalt at once, but the dirt road was hard-packed, well maintained. Mick Bradley was one of five mechanics who worked to keep the grader in repair, and when it remilled the surfaces of Windrage's three roads, he drove it.

The big engine missed and hiccupped. Every year, it sounded

more and more like old plumbing. Cameron would have to hunt further afield for the parts to fix it. The hunt could mean an expedition into the city. He had been putting it off for too long, he knew, but no one in his right mind wanted to go to the old city. Cameron had hunted there twice before; the nightmares still came occasionally.

But being caught in the open on a machine that died on him could be dangerous. Lethal. The Stone Angels were not in the business of handing out mercy, especially to men whom they despised. And they despised Jon Cameron.

Being hated was an occupational hazard, he told himself as he turned the big bike into Windrage's main drag. The town had already locked itself down. Every window was covered, firewood had been dragged inside, and not even a chicken was loose. A few people rushed between buildings, carrying jerry cans. Kerosene, water, moonshine. Windrage had put on its grim face, but Cameron did not even notice. The storm would go through fast enough.

He killed the engine and pulled the bike onto the center stand just outside the lockup. The wind was whirling in the street now. Mini-tornadoes, or 'dust-devils,' formed, got up and danced for as long as a minute before they spontaneously dissolved. Every time he looked into the east, the sky was darker, browner. Cameron's whole body shuddered.

"Hey, Officer Cam!"

It was Mick Bradley, the mechanic. He worked nights to keep Windrage's machines running, and the stress of the job showed. He was an olive-skinned little man with heavy eyebrows and a nervous manner. He reminded Cameron of a terminally-worried ferret, but he was clever with any kind of machine. He had a way of diagnosing mechanical ailments just by listening to them, the way a good doctor knew almost instinctively what was wrong with a patient. Cameron had always liked him, since Bradley arrived in Windrage with the monthly bullock wagon, and never left.

He waved. "Yeah, yeah, I can see the weather, Mick, same as you can. You know if Fawcett's got the radio working yet?"

"You have *got* to be kidding," Bradley scoffed. "Ain't no parts for it. You get her the bits and pieces, she'll make it work."

"Scavenging isn't my job," Cameron said acidly. It was the job

he hated most, though he acknowledged the truth — someone had to do it.

“And no bugger else is going to go out hunting for bits. Not in this.” Bradley jerked his thumb at the dark sky. “A rider shot over from Yonderland, t’other side of the river ...we got trouble on its way in, Cam.”

Cameron groaned. “Jesus, what kind?” he asked resignedly, though he could guess.

“Nomads. Roadies. A whole tribe, by the sounds of it.” Bradley fidgeted. “Look, mate, I’d love to help you out, but I already promised Gemma I’d get her chooks in before the dust hits, and —”

“And you’re sweet on Gemma Fawcett. I know.” Cameron looked sourly at the sky. He could see swirl patterns now, which meant the dust was not far away. “This rider from Yonderland, where is he, when did he get in?”

“Maybe a half-hour ago. He’s in the pub.” Bradley coughed as the wind spun an eddy of red dust into his face. “Give it two hours, Cam, and there won’t be much moving on the road. This could be a hard blow. The old folks reckon it could last for days.”

“They always say that, and it always goes through in a few hours,” Cameron argued. “They just can’t forget the way it was, right after Armageddon.”

“Yeah, well.” Bradley pushed his hands into his pockets and scuffed the street’s red dirt with his boots. “Maybe the roadies won’t get here before it hits.”

“You mean, maybe they’ll descend like a flock of bloody vultures on someone else’s town, and pick their bones clean instead?” Cameron gave Bradley a hard look.

“Well, why the hell not?” Bradley demanded belligerently. “We copped it last time — and the time before, an’ you took half a bloody shotgun blast in the back! What the molly frock d’you wanna go up against ‘em again for?” He barked a short laugh, devoid of humor. “Christ, Cam, not even you could be as bastard-mad as that!”

With those words Bradley hurried away towards his house and workshop, a little way down the main drag and on the opposite side from the lockup. Cameron watched him duck inside, heard the door slam and the storm shutters bang down.

Cursing and swearing every pace of the way, he manhandled

the bike into the galvanized-iron shed which had been tacked onto the side of the lockup. The jail was empty. No one had been imprisoned since Kylie Parker's boy had got into a fight with Mayor Morley's lad, and beat him senseless, two months ago. Both kids had both been drinking since the night before. The White Lightning issuing from Ma Hancock's still these days was more potent than last year. Cameron would have to have a word with the publican, Josh Kellerway, about watering it down, before Windrage's young bucks started ripping each other to bits.

The shed was dark and smelt of oil and grease. With the bike safely stowed, Cameron slammed the door, which was made of a single whole ripple-iron panel, and padlocked it. He smelt dust in the air as he stepped out into the street and hurried toward the pub.

Several townsmen doffed their hats to him. The gesture was welcome, but they wore worried, anxious faces and were quick to duck out of the way before he could perhaps petition for anyone's help. Representing law and order in this town bought Cameron a good deal of prestige and respect, but the downside was, when trouble blew up he was expected to go out and *earn* that respect. Which was often easier said than done.

The Earl of Aberdeen was stone-built and Josh Kellerway had lately replaced the roof with the heaviest shingles he could get. He had paid handsomely for them, the last time an expedition was launched to the city, and the scavengers loaded up the bullock wagons with 'the best in the west.' Today, Kellerway was in the street with a mallet and bag of nails, hammering down his shutters. With them secured, the Earl would withstand the storm better than any other place in Windrage, and a large percentage of the townspeople would make for the pub. Despite the incoming storm, Kellerway was grinning. He was going to do spectacular business during the next day or two.

"Giddy, Officer," he said through a mouthful of nails as Cameron approached. He was a big man, with a vast beer gut and a broad backside, and a thick, heavy face which wore a speculative expression. "You'll be looking for the rider from Yonderland, I suppose?"

"The thought occurred to me," Cameron said tersely. "Where would I find him?"

"Upstairs, taking a bath." Kellerway spat the nails back into their pail and dropped his mallet on top of them. With both hands he smoothed down his huge white canvas apron.

"You know the man?" Cameron always believed in being prepared, and was not above paying for information if he had to. As a pub keeper, Kellerway was a rich mine of scuttlebutt.

"I ... just might, at that," Kellerway admitted. He ran his fingers through his sparse graying-blond hair and bit his lip hesitantly for a second. "It's Scott Warne. I'd swear to it, Cam."

The name aroused a shiver along Cameron's spine. "You're positive about that? I mean, dead certain? You've seen the man before, in the flesh?"

For himself, he had only ever seen the 'wanted' posters. Not that Warne was wanted in Windrage, but in Tailern Bend and Summertown he had put himself thoroughly on the wrong side of the Provincial Law. If Warne ever set foot in those towns, there was an excellent chance he would not leave.

Yet Cameron was well aware, provincial justice was arbitrary. An act which was a crime in one town was perfectly legal in another. It was easy to break the law, and some frontier settlements had a ruthless code of punishment that could make even Cameron shudder.

"I saw him, one time," Kellerway said, hushed.

"You saw him fight?" Cameron was skeptical. It would take incredible luck to see Scott Warne in action ... then again, it would take incredible luck to bring Warne to Windrage.

Kellerway wore a bemused face. "I saw him blow a hole in a man, and I swear I didn't even see him get the gun out of his holster. He's got the goddamned weirdest style. Did you ever know Ray Dreyfuss?"

"You mean the loudmouthed moonshine hustler from Summertown?" Cameron's brows rose. "I heard he got himself shot."

"He did." Kellerway nodded towards an upstairs room, over the bar. "Was Scott Warne that shot him, and I seen it done. Mind you, forty people in the street saw Dreyfuss hassle Warne, give him a hard time and force him into it. Any local Summertown bloke would have backed off and let Dreyfuss have his own way, but Warne was a stranger, see. Dreyfuss dug his toes in and didn't

budge." Kellerway patted his chest. "Scott Warne, he uses a shoulder holster, left side."

This astonished Cameron. "That has to be the slowest draw in the book."

"Not the way Warne does it. I never seen nothing faster, and I've seen some real shooters in my time. I've been on the frontier nearly ten years, got up here before Windrage even existed." Kellerway snatched up his mallet and nails as the wind started to swirl again and red dust irritated the sinuses. "Bugger off now, Cam. If I don't get this done we'll all regret it."

Cameron watched as Kellerway attacked the shutters once more, and then he stepped into The Earl of Aberdeen's dark, humid interior. One could never trust the electricity, especially in a storm, so the bar boys and girls were hanging up two score hissing, glowing lamps, which gave the place a cheerful, almost festive aspect and the sharp reek of kerosene.

With the shutters sealed the storm could rage around the building. Inside, music, gambling, beer and Ma's White Lightning would keep out the cold and pass the time. The temperature always dropped like a rock when the sky darkened, but even the old folks — those who had already been adults when Armageddon came — agreed, the cold and dark had been much worse in the past.

The terrible year when Cameron was twelve, the temperature never rose much above freezing from spring to autumn, and when winter struck it dropped to twenty below. Hundreds of thousands of people died. When the late, cold spring arrived, the greatest problem was working out a way to bury the winter's victims in ground that had frozen as hard as iron and refused to thaw though the air temperature rose.

The same memories haunted everyone over twenty years of age. Only the kids, born since 'the event,' had no memory of the world of yesteryear. But even those who, like Cameron, were adolescents or young adults when it happened, were not completely sure of what they had seen, lived through and survived.

The howling of the gale around The Earl's steel-beam eaves brought back fifteen-year-old memories, but Cameron discarded them fast. It was unhealthy to dwell. In the early days, when the winter went on and on, the people who brooded were the ones who

put a gun to their head and blew their brains out — or worse, someone else's brains.

The trick was to focus on the present and wait. After a few minutes of suffocating blankness the memories would fade again, shuffle themselves back into the pigeonholes of the past, like a well-organized and obedient filing system.

He concentrated on the wooden floor under his feet as he walked through the taproom toward the stairs. On the bar, two kegs of Ma's best were already set up, and the regular drinkers had already taken station. They watched Cameron go by with owlish faces, as if they too suspected they knew who was in the room upstairs.

Those stairs were carpeted, but the scarlet fabric was thread-bare. Mice had been chewing on it. Vermin always survived. It was said — and Cameron believed it — that in the end the cockroaches would inherit the Earth.

A maid was working on The Earl's second floor, polishing the mirrors and wiping the banisters. She smiled at him as he approached, fluttered her eyelashes. He returned the smile and ignored the coy invitation.

"G'day, Tina. You're in the best place today. Listen to the wind."

"Do I have a choice?" She pretended to stuff her fingers into her ears to get away from the howling, banshee-like sound. "What can I do for you, Officer?"

"Which room is Warne in?"

Her eyes widened. "For the likes of him? Nothing but the best! Room 7, what else?"

Room 7 had the bath, the view of the street, the hearth, the double bed with the freshly-darned sheets, and the walls which had just been painted. Cameron should have known publican Kellerway would put Scott Warne in his best room. Where else would you accommodate the gunfighter? As if, Cameron thought, there was the subliminal impression that if Warne were annoyed by the service he was likely to pepper the place with 9mm before he got back on his bike and rode out.

Not that Warne — or anyone else — would be going anywhere for a considerable while. The temperature was plummeting. The icy winds from the east coast seemed colder than ever when the sky

darkened with dust. The weather cycles had never been the same since the event.

Just a week before, when the radio was working, Cameron had listened to a pop-science broadcast on the ABC. Specialists in Europe and North America were saying that the high-atmospheric turbulence was beginning to settle at last. The dust was coming down, too, which ought to make the temperature return to a more normal level; but they did not say when. Eventually, winter would be shorter, summer would be longer. Crops might even be grown in the open again.

Wonders would never cease and pigs might fly, but Cameron was prepared to wait and see, and be astonished. Anything had to be better than a man freezing his ass off nine months in the year. The ABC boffins swore, by 2055, ten years down the track, the climate would be 'almost normal.' Whatever that meant.

He remembered childhood days, being warm under a blue sky, and seeing parks girdled by trees — real, natural trees, well grown, not anemic saplings nurtured under glass. With an effort of will he banished the memories again as he came to the door of the best room at The Earl, and applied his knuckles.

2

A voice from within answered, and before he entered, Cameron examined his appearance in the long mirror opposite the door. He looked much the same as ever. He was as tall and broad as his father, with his dark hair roped back for convenience's sake, in a thick ponytail which hung almost to his waist. His skin was dusky, his eyes dark brown, and no matter the length of the winter he was always bronze. His mother's mother was Spanish, his father's father was from Trinidad. They all came together in the fracturing United Kingdom, and his parents had headed south when Europe became very cold, early in the new century. Cameron was born in 'the new country' with twelve years' grace before Armageddon.

As always, he was wearing a battered leather jacket, scuffed biker's boots, blue jeans, tee shirt, almost the uniform of his trade. Out here, close to the frontier, so far from the stinking wreckage of the city, one dressed in clothes that would hold together under rough handling, and to hell with elegance. After a while, leather and denim fused into a style all their own.

"Yeah, come right in," called the voice from Room 7.

Warne. The name made Cameron catch his breath. Scott Warne was notorious in many towns along the frontier. He might not be wanted in Windrage, but surely it was only a matter of time. Over in Strathalbyn, an associate of Cameron's, old Matt Hayes, had tacked up a poster proclaiming that he would pay a small fortune to get his hands on Warne. The gunfighter had shot Matt's kid

brother after a gambling session that went tragically wrong.

The trouble was, Sonny Hayes was an infamous cheat. Everyone knew he dealt off the bottom and kept half a dozen aces up both sleeves, so no one was likely to hand Warne over. Unless Hayes hired himself a bounty hunter, Cameron thought with his hand on the doorknob.

Bounty men were so unscrupulous, they would hunt down an angel and hand him to the devil to get the fee. Hayes was offering four bottles of real scotch whisky, twenty gallons of genuine high-octane gasoline — not the home distilled, chicken-shit, methane-banger brew on which Cameron had been running the Katana, for the last two years — plus six sticks of gelignite and a hundred yards of detonator cord. For that kind of bounty, a lot of men would have a crack at Warne.

Not being a fool, Warne would be acutely aware of his precarious position. He must be wary, every second of every day. New town, old haunt, it made no difference. The frontier was full of nomads, loners and tribes. Everyone out here was hungry for a quick fortune, and some folks did not seem to care what they did to get it.

Carefully, Cameron opened the door, showed his face and both his empty hands ... and just as he had expected, he walked into the room to find himself looking straight down the black steel barrel of a 9mm handgun. The HK sidearm was Scott Warne's patented trademark.

The man was still in the bath. The tub was parked in the middle of the room, and a dozen buckets stood beside it. When he was finished, The Earl's bellboys would troop up to bail it out.

Blue eyes flicked over Cameron from head to foot, missing nothing between. Dark blond hair dripped slightly around his neck as he held the gun level. Pale skin shone in the light of two lamps. Warne was not as young as Cameron had imagined; he was at least thirty. From the stories told of him, Cam had guessed the gunfighter would be in his early twenties, but the blue eyes were filled with a lifetime's bitter experience.

God, Cameron thought as he shut the door behind him — the first thought that raced unbidden through his mind — the man was beautiful.

With apologies the sample of this title ends here.
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