

Philip awoke first and immediately began to crawl over to Samuel. He could see the rabbits running, the birds taking flight and the insects scuttling away as quickly as they could to avoid what had been the incoming trio, still moving even though the air had settled down, the travellers having regained their corporeal forms. They had been separated on exiting *transit*, so each lay a few feet away from the others.

His dad was still blacked out, plus now he saw the other cuts and bruises that had been obscured in the smoke back at the restaurant. At least there didn't appear to be anything overly life-threatening. The man behind Philip groaned. The teen turned on the spot and leapt at him, although his opponent managed to raise his fist just in time to knock Philip out of the way, sending him flying. As the undergrowth scattered around Philip the man towered over him.

"I don't want to hurt you," he insisted in what seemed to be desperation.

"Funny, you have a strange way of showing it."

It wasn't clear if this stranger had heard him. Either way he stamped on Philip's hand, breaking a few fingers. As if the rest of the day hadn't been painful enough. The conflagrations that had sprung up in his nerve receptors shot through his arm, quickly going on to overload his brain with agony.

"I need you for a very important mission. I'm trying to protect you from the Brethren Lords. They're the ones trying to hurt you. You have to believe me."

"Unlikely. You just want to kill me."

The man pulled Philip to his feet by his school blazer lapels. He'd been up and down all day long. The canopy above them cut out most of the sunlight, making shadows dance on his captor's face, and any movement seemed to be seen under strobe lighting. Their hair ruffled their faces in the evening breeze. After a short struggle Philip pulled himself out of the adult's grasp. The man wasn't putting much into it. While he perhaps couldn't have been said to have been enjoying this he certainly was getting something out of the rush.

"And why would I do that? Just follow me."

Philip took a further step backwards.

"Fine then."

The man dodged around Philip and walked towards Samuel.

"You won't touch my father!"

He lunged for the man, who swivelled and hit Philip in the chest yet again. In a quick bounce Philip jumped back and aimed at his neck with his unbroken hand. Out of nowhere the man appeared to conjure a ball of energy in the palm of his hand and with a flick of his wrist held it out in front of him. Philip, whose reactions were too slow, ran straight into it. Electricity seemingly coursing through every molecule of his body, Philip stood there comically for a second, rocking back and forth on his heels, a stunned expression on his face. Then he crumpled in a pile on the earth.

Singed slightly, Philip rolled over onto his back to face the patient man. His battered torso rose and fell rapidly as his adversary looked upon his undignified form. *Wham!* Philip's leg connected with the side of the man's shin, making him tumble backwards like a felled tree. Knowing his luck couldn't get him much further, Philip's unbroken hand groped around in the undergrowth for anything useful. In a matter of seconds, under a grimy pile of sodden leaves, his fingers found something hard and covered in insects. With an enormous amount of effort he pulled it towards him, his one last weapon: a thick broken branch. He lifted it over his head and looked for his target. The man was on his knees, wincing as he tried to regain the higher ground. Philip swung the branch such as he'd never swung anything before. His opponent saw it coming a second before collision and, with inhuman bendiness, curved his spine backwards so the branch went above him. He then flung himself over onto his front and found his own branch from the area he was kneeling on. Philip knew that he had but a moment to act, and all he could think about was tricking this madman into going away from his father.

They lunged in the same split second. The thuds of clashing wood echoed through the trees. Neither adversary was generating a proper blow, all attempts being blocked by the other. As the swiftly slowing duel persisted the pair were gradually rising on their injured legs. After they were as high as they could get without leaving the ground they were free to move, jumping out of the way, weaving around each other, though not very fast, seeing as both were getting weaker by the minute. Trying to move in a serpentine manner, thinking that this would make him a harder target to hit, Philip side-stepped the man, believing that he could then draw him in the opposite direction. But out of the blue the stranger dived for Samuel, forcing Philip to desperately pursue. The two of them tussled on the muddy earth, trying with all their might to be the victor.

"How about another little trip?" the man growled.

Philip instantly sensed what he was going to do and focused on the calmest place he could think of. Then he remembered the empty fields outside his grandparents' village. It had been very peaceful there, with barely anyone around. Oh, what had it been called? The Isle of Tیره!

Both of them had been thinking of different locations when they had entered *transit* together. Subsequently they appeared where neither had expected.