

Chapter 1

“I can beat you!”

“Big problem, Big solution”

His heart was pounding and his chest was heaving. He ignored the pain in his feet and knees as he ran. He had only one thing on his mind. He knew that he was strong enough, this time he would succeed. He had been training for three months now and finally believed that he was ready. The grass was whipping at his knees and he could feel the cold wind flowing through his shortly cropped hair as he crested the hill and started making his way down the other side.

“Your garden needs some tending too”, Lili told Max as they stood in his back yard. “I can help your Grandpa with it a bit if he wants”.

“I think he likes tending to it the old fashioned way”, Max said as he walked towards the table where their lunch was being set out. Lili, a good looking girl with long blond hair, was wearing a blue and white outfit that consisted of blue pants, black leather shoes and a white shirt that had the Dremos Academy insignia, “*Strive for excellence*”, on it. Max wore a similar outfit with one addition – a black leather pouch that he kept strapped to his right leg. They were both sixteen years old and three months earlier had finished their third year at the academy. It was the last day of the holiday season and lessons were due to start the next day.

The food set out on the table consisted of a large herb sour dough bread, cheese and some fruit preserves along with a wide variety of cured meats and flavoured water. The family housekeeper, Mrs Block, and her house aids had set out the meal. The woman and her servants busied themselves with the final preparations for the midday meal. Max and Lili approached the table and could hear her muttering to herself about the short notice given to prepare a meal for the head of the Dremos.

Lili looked towards the house where Max’s grandfather and Minister Harris, the leader of the Dremos and the head teacher of the Academy, had been talking for the past hour.

“I wonder what they are talking about”? “It must be very serious by the looks on their faces”.

“Yup it must be Dremos business, Minister Harris often asks Grandpa for advise”, Max said as he reached for a small meat pie.

“DON’T YOU DARE”!!

Max pulled his hand back as quick as he could but Mrs Block was too fast for him. His hand stung from the assault that Mrs Block unleashed on him. Max could not believe how fast Mrs Block had reacted, he was positive that she was looking the other direction. *How did she see that?* Max pondered.

“Don’t touch anything until your Grandpa and Minister Harris get here”, Mrs Block said with an irritated tone. Lili chuckled to herself; *she really does have fast reactions for an old lady*, she thought.

Max noticed somebody run over the hill and down the slope towards him. After watching for a moment he recognized that it was his cousin Gordon. His red hair was a dead giveaway. Lili walked over to Max.

“What are you looking at”? Max looked at Lili.

“It looks like Gordon, he seems to be in a big hurry to get here”.

“Oh great, what does he want now? It’s the last day of holidays can’t he be normal and chill out like the rest of us?” Lili said with a large amount of irritation in her voice.

Gordon was nearing the bottom of the hill and could see his grandfathers house about five hundred metres away. He stopped to catch his breath and let his joints recover. He looked at the house and saw that there was a flurry of activity, he wondered what was happening and why had he not been invited. The pain in his knees, ankles and lungs started to subside so he made his way towards the house at a medium paced jog. Three minutes later Gordon jumped over the perimeter fence into his grandfather's yard and jogged up to his cousin and Lili who seemed to be waiting for him. "Max, Max, Max", he shouted "I'm gonna beat you this time I've been working on this for the last month... Oh yeah, what's going on here? Why was I not invited for lunch?"

Lili sighed and looked over at Gordon with mild irritation. "Would you please keep quiet, your Grandfather and Minister Harris are having an important meeting inside".

"So what's going on"? Gordon asked in a whisper.

"We don't know but they will be coming out for lunch soon", Max said as he walked further away from the house.

"Oh great, that means that we still have time".

"Have time for what"? Lili asked with more than just a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"I've been practising a new skill I developed and I call it *The Phoenix!*"

"Oh Really"? Lili asked sarcastically. "So what happened to the *Fire Rat*, *Lava ball* and *Wave of Death*"?

"Well that was then and this is now", Gordon retorted.

Inside the house Minister Harris and Grandpa Mo, as he liked to be called, were finishing off their discussion. "I can't believe that it has come to this. Is there nothing that we can do to stop him"?

Minister Harris replied with a simple sigh. "To be honest Mo we have been using all our resources to stop Klato but he seems to be recruiting more and more fighters from the rebel provinces, we have sent envoys to try recruit for us also but they have not succeeded as we thought they would. We have also bolstered our ranks by extensive training, we now have over twenty level 5 fighters and along with you and me there are only five level 6 fighters. Our intelligence department tells me that Klato has seven level 6 fighters and definitely over twenty-five level 5 fighters. We are outnumbered by far at the moment. The weird thing is that we are not seeing a lot of action from the upper level fighters. However if the training programme continues producing results this well we will be able to match Klato's army in about six months".

"That is good news but do we have six months"?

"Well that is why we want some of the academy students to fill some of the gaps in our forces and free up our Level 3 through level 5 fighters for more action".

"Well how many of the students do you need"?

"We have already recruited the seventh and sixth and fifth year students and we want to get the top half of the fourth year students".

Grandpa Mo didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't think and didn't open his eyes for over three minutes. "I can't align myself with this. They are just children, we can't expect them to serve at that level. I just can't put my voice behind this idea," Grandpa Mo whispered.

"Please don't say that until I have explained how it will work," said Minister Harris. "As of now we have assigned the other students in pairs and have assigned each pair to a Level 4 or Level 5 agent. They then execute their missions as a team". "What we want to do with the Fourth year students is assign three of them to a Level 5 agent we only want to form four teams and their missions will be limited to a maximum of Level 3". "That way they will not be in any serious danger". "Having these four teams will help to free up some of the elite teams". Grandpa Mo looked at his friend and said; "well as long as they are only doing low level missions then I will back you".

“We will need to talk to Max though and get him to spread the word among the students as they will need to get permission from their parents”. “I want to start the selection process tomorrow morning”, added Minister Harris.

Gordon and Max made their way onto the sparring area that Grandpa Mo had setup for them two years before, Max had decided to let Gordon show off his new skill. Max and Gordon shared more than just places on the Tarmo family tree; they also share the Energy manipulation skill that comes with it.

The only difference between the two of them is the elements that they use with their energy. The Tarmo energy fighters have the ability to mould energy from within themselves into shapes objects or even animals or people. They can also infuse elements into their energy attacks such as; wind, earth, fire, water or lightning to amplify their attacks. Max and Gordon had both inherited different elemental abilities, Max inherited his father’s ability to infuse water into his attacks and Gordon had inherited Grandpa Mo’s ability to use fire with his attacks. Gordon shifted his stance and closed his hands; drawing raw energy from within himself he concentrated on forming it into a form that Max could not quite make out. Gordon looked at Max and with a toothy grin on his face, shifted his stance again and extended his hands and revealed a small red bird like creature. Max could feel the energy pulsating off the creature as it took to the air and flew higher and higher above the pair of boys.

Grandpa Mo looked out the window and saw his two grandsons in the sparring area. He wondered if there was there was anything that he could have done to avoid the upcoming events. He turned his attention back to his friend, “look at them out there, they are always sparring with each other and practising all the time”. “They are getting stronger every day”. “That is part of why we have decided to take a chance on them, Max’s class is the most advanced we have seen in the academy for years, they have perfected techniques that some of the fifth year students have not even begun to think about learning”. “If I could move them up two years in their studies I believe that they would all cope with the pressure save maybe one or two students”. “That may be true but can they really handle the pressure of active duty”? Grandpa Mo asked.

Gordon’s apparition continued to fly higher as the two old men watched from the confines of the living room. Outside the air buzzed with energy from the two boys. Max opened his stance slightly in preparation of the impending assault. Gordon looked at Max and then at the creature he had created. He took a deep breath and poured energy into the bird and shouted at the top of his lungs “BURN PHOENIX BURN”! The phoenix grew ten times its former size in a matter of seconds and then burst into flames. Lili who was standing more than ten metres away could feel the intense heat that radiated from the phoenix, she took a few steps backwards when she noticed the pungent smell of burnt hair.

“Look at that”! Said Minister Harris, “that is exactly what I am talking about, look at the power and energy that he has moulded into that attack and Gordon is one of the weakest students in the class”.

“I still don’t believe that they need to be exposed to fighting at that level”. “They might have to kill in order to complete their missions”, said grandpa Mo. “They might even be killed”!

“Yes I realise that it will be hard but we don’t really have a choice”.

Grandpa Mo looked outside again and erected an energy barrier around the house protecting it against the heat radiating off the phoenix.

Outside the phoenix dived at Max leaving a trail of flames behind it, Max dived to his left just as the phoenix was about to collide with him. Max noticed that Gordon’s attack was faster than he expected. He jumped to his feet formed, compressed and infused energy and water, Max’s natural

element, into two 15-centimetre spheres. The process of compressing the water before infusing it into the energy ball was a skill that Max had only perfected a few days ago and it took him longer than he expected and had to dodge another swooping attack from Gordon's phoenix. The phoenix ascended. Max saw his chance and launched his two energy balls at the phoenix, quick as a flash Max formed two more energy spheres and threw them after the first two at the phoenix. The first two energy spheres hit the phoenix with a huge explosion of steam that pushed the second attack of course and into the side of the hill creating two large craters.

"I need your support on this Mo", "If you don't let Max join us then there is no hope of us being able to convince the other parents to let their children join". "If don't get these kids into active service we have no chance of defeating Klato", Minister Harris concluded.

Max let out a sigh, *that was close*, he thought. Gordon had lost his smile and was staring up at the sky. "What did you do"? "I, I, I can't believe that you".... Gordon didn't finish his sentence before he hit the ground. Mrs Block who had been watching the fight from a distance rushed towards closely followed by three of her aids. Mrs Block knelt down next to Gordon and checked for life signs, for a moment she was worried until she felt a weak but regular pulse. *You really overdid yourself this time Gordon*, she thought. "Lets get him inside so that we can get him fixed up". Mrs Block and her aids picked Gordon up and rushed him inside just as Grandpa Mo and Minister Harris made their way outside.

Minister Harris and Grandpa Mo joined Max and Lili showing no concern regarding Gordon's condition. Lili ventured forward and asked Grandpa Mo if Gordon was going to be all right. "Don't worry about that my dear", Grandpa Mo replied. "He is in good hands". What he neglected to mention was that Mrs Block was a specialist healer. "Now where is my pipe"? One of the aids moved forward bringing Grandpa Mo's Hookah pipe and placing a newly lit coal onto the head. A hissing and bubbling sound erupted as Grandpa Mo took the first drag on the pipe. As he exhaled a plume of smoke filled the air in front of him. "Max" he said, as the last of the smoke escaped his mouth, "we need to have a chat". A thick cherry aroma filled the air as Grandpa Mo continued to puff on his pipe. "But first lets eat". A flurry of activity ensued as the house aids placed napkins on their laps and poured out the refreshments for them. The four started to dish out and enjoy the lavish meal set out before them. Once they had all eaten their fill Grandpa Mo took another drag on his pipe savouring the flavour of the smoke. "Lili would you please excuse us for a while there is something that we would like to talk to Max about. I'm sure that Max will tell you about this when we are done here," with that Grandpa Mo took a long drag on his pipe. Lili stood up, "Max I'll be in the training area. See you later Max. Goodbye Minister Harris, goodbye Grandpa Mo." With that Lili disappeared. Grandpa Mo smiled, "that girl is getting faster and faster every day, she is really improving. Max sighed, "its just a trick, she is quick but makes herself faster by running in a side to side motion and tricking the eye. That way you can't see her." Minister Harris chuckled. "Well then that girl is smart too. However we didn't need to speak to you about Lili."

"Max, Grandpa Mo said, Minister Harris and I have been talking for the last few hours about this and we have decided to let you have a part in the decision that needs to be made."

Travelling for over three weeks they had made their way over mountains, rivers, through deserts and now were resting on soft grass in the *Valley Of Life*. Their mission was of top importance and secrecy. Bossak was a quiet person his whole life. His childhood had been tough, his family were involved in protecting the scrolls of death for seven generations. Enemy agents looking to destroy the scrolls his family was bound to protect massacred his whole family in the war. As heir to the Nygra family fortune, land and reputation people stayed away from him. He grew into a strong fighter with both the best and the worst of the Nygra traits and skills. His hatred for his family's

killers is what kept him alive and gave him the inspiration to become stronger, so that he could avenge his family. Bossak and his two companions had been resting for all of ten minutes when he opened his bag and took out the last of their food and shared it among his companions.

“The *Dremos* are suffering, we are losing the fight against Klato.” Minister Harris explained that he wanted to bolster the *Dremos* ranks with the students that are currently above year three in the academy. Grandpa Mo’s pipe had been restocked with an apple tobacco and a fresh coal. He puffed away while his former apprentice and good friend Minister Harris explained the problems that the *Dremos* were currently facing.

Pain coursed through his body, Gordon could feel every nerve, fibre and every muscle in his body. His head was throbbing with the worst headache he had ever had. He didn’t dare open his eyes. A door opened quietly and somebody entered the room. “Who’s there?” He asked. “Ahh you are awake, said a warm motherly voice, you really overdid yourself this time didn’t you.” Mrs Block took the cloth off Gordon’s forehead and placed her hand on his head. “Now Gordon you have managed damage yourself very badly and I’m going to fix you up.” Gordon felt a wave of heat flow from the hand on his head down his neck and into the rest of his body all the way to his feet. Mrs Block started moving her energy through Gordon’s body repairing and damage she found. She found over thirty separate areas within his energy system where he had managed to destroy the pathways in which his energy travelled. She took great care to repair the damaged tissues and return them to their original state. Once she had completed the work she made one final pass through the energy pathways and energy core making sure that she didn’t miss anything. She was half way through her inspection when a puzzled look crossed her face. She finished up and withdrew her energy from his body. She stood up and washed her hands in the basin and dried them on the soft towel that was placed next to it. Gordon felt as if a weight had been lifted off of him. He sat up and saw Mrs Block drying her hands across the room. “Uhm, Mrs Block,” Gordon stuttered “What just happened? I could feel you flowing through my veins.” “Yes you did, I had to repair the damage that you did to yourself while fighting Max. See Gordon, everybody has a store of energy inside them, however in order to be able use it to its full potential you need to train your body and become stronger or else you end up damaging yourself like you did today by releasing more energy than your body can handle.”

Max sat back in his chair and let out a sigh. “So why are you talking to me about this?” Grandpa Mo took a drag on his pipe and coughed slightly. “Max we need you and your Grandpa to support this decision or else the parents of the other students might not be willing to let their children join us. So before we announce it we want you to sign up first. You need to understand though that even though you will be doing low ranked missions there might come a time where you will be in real danger. You and your classmates might be required to kill in order to complete your missions and also there is a real chance that you might be killed trying to complete a mission.”

“Grandpa what do you think of this?” Max asked.

Well I am not happy about sending you into battle so young, but Minister Harris has assured me that you and your friends will only be assigned missions you can handle and if that helps us put a stop to Klato then I will lend my support to the cause.”

“Ok, what do we do now?” Max asked.

Minister Harris stood up, “Max could you please go and tell all the fourth year students exactly what I have told you. Get them all to tell their parents and have them assemble at the academy training arena tomorrow morning at eight am sharp.”

When Max got to the training ground no body noticed him, this was one of his favourite skills, he has the uncanny ability to make himself invisible to people senses. This is not to be confused with the ability to bend and refract light around oneself. Everybody alive makes an impact on their

surroundings. This is known as your presence. Max is able to hide his presence from people. Max positioned himself three metres away from Lili and leaned against a large pine tree. Lili was talking to Nigel, another student also about to start his fourth year at the academy. Lili was telling him about Gordon and Max's fight earlier. "I must admit," Lili said, "Gordon has gotten a lot stronger during these holidays."

"I think that he has increased his strength at least ten percent," Max observed. Lili jumped off the log she was sitting on and let out a shrill yelp.

"Max! You know I hate it when you sneak up on me like that! I'm sure that one day you will give me a heart..." Lili stopped in mid sentence. "Hey what did your Grandpa want to speak to you about?" Lili asked.

"I was wondering how long it would take for you to ask. But first, how are you doing Nigel?"

"Hey Max, I'm just chilling," Nigel replied with a small chuckle.

Max smiled, "I'm sure you are." While all this was going on a small crowd of their classmates had gathered around the three of them. Max looked around and said, "I see that Lili has been talking again."

"Me? Well, Uhm, well yes I might have mentioned that something interesting was going on," She retorted.

"Well then lets get this over and done with, Listen closely everybody because I'm only telling you once." Max began to relay what Minister Harris had told him earlier.

Gordon's cheek was stinging and his wrist was aching. Mrs Block stood in front of him and said, "when I was looking at your energy system I saw something that didn't make sense. You use fire with your energy attacks right?" Gordon looked at Mrs Block and nodded.

"Your family has a very unique ability, being able to mould energy outside of your bodies and then also being able to infuse different elements into that energy. I have trained many of your family members including your mother, Max's Father and two of your cousins that have the *Tarmo* family abilities. I even helped your Grandfather unlock his full potential while we were training and working for the Dremos. Now as you know you don't have a choice as to what element you use, it chooses you and with every different element comes a slightly different energy system." Mrs Block walked over to Gordon and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Gordon I saw something else while I was repairing your energy system. Gordon moved away from Mrs Block.

"You need to mind your own business, my thoughts are my own and you don't have the right to be nosy and go through them while I was unconscious."

"Gordon please let me explain."

"No, no, no, don't try and make me feel better about it."

"Please let me explain." Mrs Block spoke very calmly to him. Gordon made his way to the door but Mrs Block was too quick for him. She grabbed him by the wrist with her left hand and slapped him with her right hand. "Will you just shut up and listen to me! I can't read your thoughts or emotions. I'm talking about the abilities that you are using."

Max relayed what Minister Harris and Grandpa Mo had discussed with him earlier. The more he talked, the more shocked and excited the crowd became. "So," Max concluded, "there are only twelve places available. There will be a selection process that we will have to go through in order to get in."

"What will we have to do?" Nigel asked.

"I don't know, but make sure that you come fully prepared for anything, we might be put on active duty tomorrow, but then I suppose we will find out tomorrow," Max replied.

Mrs Block looked at the young boy in front of her. She believed that he could be one of the legendary *Kuera* – a name given to *Tarmo* family fighters with the ability to use more than just

one element in their attacks. From her research the last known *Kuera* died over sixty years ago. That person was Gordon and Max's great, great grandfather. "Gordon I want you to come with me, I believe that you could be a *Kuera*."

"Me?" Gordon asked. The surprise in his voice very noticeable. "I can't be, I have the same skill as my Grandpa."

"I think that fire is not your primary element, from what I saw in your energy system, you are more suited to wind manipulation than fire. I want you to come with me and see if I am right. Also if I am right you could become stronger than Max." With that Gordon jumped to his feet and asked, "Where do we start?"