

Meet Nick

Song Gate: Book One

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Suspension

Nick's uppercut sent Brandon reeling. A left hook followed. He readied his arm to jab again but two of Brandon's mates sprang at him. They dragged Nick away, split his lip, tore his shirt, threw him to the ground, kicked his ribs. They would have done more if a swarm of teachers hadn't erupted from the staffroom.

Thirty minutes later, Nick lingered outside the principal's office. He'd long suspected that the polished bronze plaque on the door was deliberately glued just above eye level so that everyone had to look up in order to read the engraving: *Mrs Laura Cavendish, Principal*. Nick had seen this sign for the first time in Year Seven. He'd been shorter then, and more than a little daunted by the prospect of facing the school's figurehead, but now he was used to the visits.

Nick slapped the dirt off his shorts. When he licked his lips, he tasted blood. That was good. If he looked wounded, Mrs Cavendish might be more sympathetic.

He knocked, waited for the call of 'Enter!', and opened the door. Air conditioning breathed over him like a sigh from the Antarctic.

'Nicholas Williams. Why am I not surprised?'

He sat in one of the shabby chairs facing her desk and propped his elbows on the armrests. Mrs Cavendish studied him as if trying to determine where the streaks of dirt ended and his brown skin began. He realised then that his knuckles were grazed, and he tucked his hands under his armpits.

'Jewellery is not allowed at this school. Take it off.'

He glanced down. The top two buttons of his shirt had been ripped off and his necklace was showing. He picked at the leather knot till it loosened, then slipped the necklace into his pocket. When Mrs Cavendish frowned at the black tattoo on his chest, he folded the tattered remains of his collar together to cover the mark. No amount of blood, it would seem, was going to soothe her temper today.

'You promised me last December, Nick, that this reckless behaviour was not going to continue into Year Ten. Do you remember our conversation?'

Nick sighed. Mía was going to be so angry.

'Well? Do you?' Mrs Cavendish asked.

'Yeah.'

'Remind me what you said.'

'I said I'd think before I act.'

'And?'

'And I'd follow teachers' instructions.'

'And?'

'And I'd stay away from Brandon.'

'So what went wrong?'

Nick remembered how Brandon had shot him a vicious smile and said, 'I heard it's your birthday today, Nick. Why don't you get yourself a decent school uniform? I'm sure the op shop'd have a dress your size.'

Nick slammed his locker shut.

'Whoa,' Brandon said, backing up. 'Hit a nerve there, did I? Just trying to help. I mean, let's face it. You and your crazy aunt need all the charity you can get, since she can't even afford to buy you proper clothes. What'd she give you this year? Another homemade tattoo?'

Mrs Cavendish cleared her throat, cutting into Nick's thoughts. She tapped a long polished fingernail on the piece of paper that lay in front of her, her rings clinking. A gold mine hung off those arthritic fingers.

'It says here on the incident report that you and Brandon spoke to one another, and that you hit him first. Did he provoke you?'

Nick knew from experience that the longer he was silent, the worse the punishment, so he replied, 'He asked me what I got for my birthday.'

'It's your birthday today?'

'Yes. Sixteen.'

'Well, then. Happy birthday.' She didn't sound at all glad for him. 'What else did Brandon say?'

'Just the usual.'

'Remind me.'

'Does it even matter?'

She raised her eyebrows.

'Fine. He called my aunt crazy.'

'And that's why you retaliated?'

Nick wondered if it was a rhetorical question.

'Answer me, please,' she pressed.

'Of course that's why I retaliated! Geez!'

'*Don't* use that tone with me, young man.' Mrs Cavendish propped her glasses on the tip of her nose and scribbled something onto the incident report. 'You lost

control, Nick, and Brandon needs stitches as a result. For that, I'm suspending you for five days.'

Nick ran his hands over his dreadlocks. Five days. The longest he'd ever got before this was three. Mía was going to bury him alive.

Mrs Cavendish opened a folder and dragged her index finger down a list of names and phone numbers.

'Miss, you're not going to call Mía right now, are you?'

'Of course I am. I have to inform her of your suspension.'

'But she doesn't speak much English. Can't I just tell her?'

Mrs Cavendish peered at him over the pink rim of her glasses. 'Her English is perfectly fine. In fact, you can tell her now, if you like. In this office.'

'No, I meant that I could—'

'I know what you meant, Nick. That you could tell her when you got home. The last time I trusted you to tell her something important, you conveniently forgot. Remember the meeting we scheduled last September to discuss your behaviour?'

Nick grunted. Mía had been so furious she'd barely spoken to him for a week. She'd actually walked the five kilometres to school and asked Mrs Cavendish in person to give him extra detentions. Then she'd added some of her own for him at home. He'd learnt a great deal about house cleaning that month. He'd also learnt never to lie to Mía again.

'Your aunt deserves better than to be treated in that appalling manner.' Mrs Cavendish offered him the receiver. 'Do you want to tell her, or shall I?'

'You can.' Nick held his head in his hands and listened to Mrs Cavendish dial his phone number.

'Hello, Mía. This is Laura Cavendish, principal of Buckadgery Creek High School. How are you?' She spoke loudly and clearly, as if she was talking to a deaf person. 'I'm well, thanks. Listen, I've got Nick in my office. He got into a fight at lunchtime and hurt another student.'

Nick imagined Mía's smouldering eyes gouging a hole in the floorboards as she received this news. He clenched his dreadlocks between his fingers.

'Nick's a little bruised. The school nurse has had a look at him and she says he's fine. The other student, however, needs several stitches.' Mrs Cavendish took her glasses off and rested them on the table. 'Yes, this is a serious incident. Nick will be suspended for five days.'

'The suspension will begin tomorrow. So including the weekend that means Nick won't be able to return to school until next Wednesday.' Her gaze flashed to Nick. 'Of course. I'll hand you over.' She held out the receiver.

Drawing a deep breath, Nick put the phone to his ear and said in his own language, 'Hello?'

‘Nicholas Kári.’

He gulped. Mía only ever used his second name when he was in serious trouble. He turned away from Mrs Cavendish. He knew she couldn’t understand what he was saying, but he didn’t want her to see his face.

‘Are you alright?’ Mía asked.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not hurt?’

‘Not much.’

‘What happened? What did you say to that boy?’

‘Nothing. I...I just punched him.’

‘You *punched* him? Why?’

Nick jiggled his foot, not wanting to answer.

‘Why, Nick? Tell me.’

He didn’t want to translate ‘crazy’ into Korelian.

‘Brandon insulted you, Mía. I know you said it doesn’t matter and I should ignore him but I can’t just let him say stuff like that. It’s not right.’

‘Nick, you promised me you’d learned how to walk away from those situations.’

‘I know I did. It’s just...I forgot. I’m sorry, Mía. I really am.’

He felt sick with dread, and he yearned to hear her say that it was alright, that she understood. Instead, he heard her release her breath like a deflating tyre.

‘I’m disappointed in you, Nick. We’ll discuss this more when you get home. I want to speak to your principal again.’

He handed the phone back to Mrs Cavendish then slumped in the chair and stared out the window. As much as he was dying to get out of this office, he was not looking forward to riding home in the heat, especially when he had to face Mía at the end of his journey.

Mrs Cavendish hung up the phone. ‘Okay, Nick. Make sure you take all your homework with you. I don’t want you falling behind so early in the year.’

He picked at a bit of dead skin on his knuckles.

‘Did you hear me?’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Off you go, then.’

As he opened the door, Mrs Cavendish said, ‘Nick?’

He turned.

‘If you’re not careful, this behaviour is going to earn you a lot more than a suspension one day. I’d like to think you’re better than that.’

He left without replying. As he trudged past the front office, he saw the school secretary bent over the photocopier, swearing at it. Her backside wobbled under her mustard yellow dress like a water bomb. Nick chuckled.

‘Did I just hear you volunteer for bin duty?’ she spat, eyeballing him from beneath a sweaty armpit.

‘Shit, no!’ he gasped, scooting away.

He transferred his textbooks and sports uniform from his locker to his school bag and grabbed his bike from the rack outside.

A freckled boy beckoned from an open window. ‘Psst! Williams!’

‘Hey, Paulsen,’ Nick said, leaning against the wall so he was hidden from the teacher.

‘You skipping school again, bludger?’

‘Nah. Got suspended.’

‘Crap. How long for?’

‘Five days.’

‘That’s rough. What’d Brandon get?’

Nick shrugged. ‘You mean apart from stitches?’

Paulsen sniggered then whipped around when the teacher barked his name. ‘Sorry, miss. Just getting some fresh air. I’ve got a headache.’ He turned back and winked. ‘Have a nice holiday, Williams, you lucky bastard.’

Nick grinned, but as he turned out the school gate, dread gripped his chest.

Striker's Run

Nick stopped under the shade cloth of the fruit store and leaned his bike against a crate of oranges. Mangoes were on special, so he bought one that wasn't too bruised, dropped it into his bag, and pedalled towards Canyon Drive.

As the road sloped downwards, he coasted hands-free. He unbuttoned his school shirt, letting it flap open. He loved the feel of the wind on his bare skin. In this stifling small town, it was the closest he could get to freedom. He imagined riding past his front gate, onto the highway, then all the way to the sea. It would take about a week to get there. He'd surf and fish every day, build fires on the beach, and sleep under the stars. He'd have no classes, no homework, no detentions. Just glorious, unburdened days filled with sun, sand, fresh food and sparkling water. But then he thought about how lonely Mía would be without him, and how much he'd miss her, and the dream didn't seem so great anymore.

His peddling slowed. Mía would blast him as soon as he set foot in the house. He wondered if she was angry enough to hit him. She never had, but he saw her hit David once.

David was Mía's cousin, and he'd lived with them until Nick was eight. One day, David had taken Nick out for a horse riding lesson. It was so hot that they'd both taken their shirts off. Nick had often seen the tattoo above David's heart, a black circle balanced on a small, straight line, like a sun just risen. Or maybe about to set.

Nick wanted to have a tattoo as well, and badgered David until he agreed, but it was on the condition that Nick didn't tell Mía until after it was done, because she might not approve.

'And you only get the sun,' David had told Nick. 'Not the horizon underneath.'

When Nick had asked why, David had set his mouth in a grim line and said nothing.

Mía didn't only disapprove, she was enraged. She yelled at David in a language Nick had never heard her speak before, and David snapped back at her in the same foreign tongue. Nick crouched on his bed, hugging a pillow to his chest,

and watched through his bedroom window as they battled it out on the lawn. Their argument went on for ages. Then Mía hit David. Nick recalled the emotion on their faces as they stared at one another. Mía livid and breathing hard. David startled and hurt, holding his cheek and backing away with a forced calmness like he was retreating from a snake. Then he swung onto his horse and bolted.

That was the last time Nick saw him.

Now, every time Mía saw Nick's tattoo, she averted her eyes as if the mark was cursed.

Nick stopped in the shade of a scribbly gum, sat next to his bike, doused his dreads with water, and skinned his mango. Further along Canyon Drive was a track that veered off into the national park. A spray of bullet holes punctured a sign that read: *Striker's Run*. The track was thirty kilometres of corrugated dirt that nudged the western edge of the Spit, a massive ridge that spanned the heart of the national park. It led to the place where his parents had disappeared thirteen years ago. They'd vanished when Nick was three years old. Gone on a bushwalk and never returned. Swallowed by the wild country was Mía's version. Nick had been afraid of Striker's Run ever since. Sometimes, if the wind blew from the north, he heard a faint humming, like the hollow note made when he blew on an empty bottle. When he was younger he'd believed the sound was some sort of ghostly summons. Mía would hear it too, but it didn't seem to frighten her. Instead, she got a look in her eyes like she wanted to follow the music into the hills.

'Once you're in the wild country,' she said, 'it's hard to tear yourself away. It gets into your blood and doesn't let you go.'

He relished her telling him stories of the wild country, with its rhythmic rocks, secretive spirits, and an ancient heartbeat that made the blood pound. Whenever he asked where her stories came from, her expression would close off and she'd respond simply that she'd always known them, as if she'd been born with the knowledge. As if it was in her bones.

As he'd gotten older, Nick had decided that the singing he heard from the north was not the primal call of the wilderness, but simply the wind whistling through the rugged crevices of the Spit.

An urgent thrum of hooves on dirt made Nick look up in time to see a horse burst from Striker's Run and gallop away down Canyon Drive. The rider was no stockman or member of the local pony club. He wore a black uniform, with a lightweight helmet, face mask, and gloves, and rode like a tank was chasing him. Nick tossed the mango pip away and raced after the horse, wanting to see where the rider was headed, but he couldn't keep up and didn't want to tire himself out—he still had Mía's fury to face when he got home—so he slowed down.

Ten minutes later, he turned into his driveway and propped his bike against a veranda post, sending a few lizards scurrying between the floorboards. The

tin roof ticked, and the mercury in the thermometer by the front door was nudging forty-two degrees. As he opened the flyscreen, the hinge pins dislodged and skittered across the boards. He caught the door before it smacked flat on the veranda.

‘Bloody hell. Not again.’

Usually, he left it where it lay, but at this time of day the air was thick with flies and he didn’t want them getting into the house in case Mía had even more reason to be furious with him. He fit the door into place and twisted the pins back into their hinges then peered down the hall, wondering why Mía hadn’t yet called out a greeting, even a cold, curt one. Maybe she was in the laundry and couldn’t hear him.

He shut himself in his bedroom and fished his necklace out of his pocket. Once he’d tied it back around his neck, he examined it for the millionth time. The copper disc was an imperfect circle, about the size of a twenty cent coin, and hung on a frayed leather cord. A rough, five-pointed star had been punched into the surface as if with a hammer and chisel. David had given it to him years ago, before he’d skipped town. He’d said it had once belonged to Nick’s dad. This beaten bit of copper was the only link Nick had to either of his parents. He couldn’t remember them at all. He remembered David, though. For a long while David’s absence had left a gaping hole in Nick’s life. Over time, the hole had closed like an old wound, and now David was little more than a scar.

A floorboard creaked. He watched the door, expecting Mía to whirl into the room and unleash her fury. She could really scream when she wanted to.

Another squeak.

He frowned. Mía never crept around the house. If she knew he was home, she’d drag him into the kitchen and force him to sit at the table while she made a cup of tea. He didn’t like her angry tea-making ceremonies. He was always worried she’d break something, which would upset her even more.

‘Mía?’ he called.

A strange whispering sound, like fingers sliding across paper, came from the hallway. It was followed by a soft, dull ringing. Nick had never heard anything like it before. It certainly wasn’t a Mía noise. He opened the door.

In the hallway, clutching a long steel sword, stood the rider. He was built like an Olympic swimmer, and wore an inky black uniform, with suede gloves and leather boots, fitted jacket and dusty pants. A bow and sheath of arrows hung across his back, a long hunting knife at his thigh. The gap beneath his helmet and above his face mask revealed a hazel stare blazing with murderous intent.

Nick wanted to bolt, to climb out his window and race for the bush, but he couldn’t. His legs were lead stumps, his feet nailed to the floor.

‘Wh- who are you?’ he asked.

The rider tilted his head, as if surprised by the question, and in a deep, quiet voice, asked, 'Don't you speak your parents' language?'

It took Nick several terrified seconds to realise that the words were not English. The man had used Korelian, the language Nick and Mía and David traditionally spoke.

He'd never heard anyone else speak this language.

'Yes,' Nick replied in Korelian. 'I do.'

The rider flicked his blade to Nick's chest, brushed the copper necklace aside, and circled the sundisc tattoo beneath, as if he considered the mark a useful target. Nick broke free of his paralysis and reeled back. He scrambled across his desk in search of any kind of weapon, but all he found were pencils and a bendy ruler. The rider stepped into the room, his head almost brushing the top of the doorframe.

'Your father tried to put up a fight too, Nicholas Kári. He was just as unsuccessful.'

Nick faltered. 'What...? What do you mean my dad put up a fight?'

The rider studied Nick in silence. Then he said, 'You weren't told the history. That's hardly surprising. Your father went too far very fast. He wasn't fast enough for me, though. Now it's your turn.'

'But I...I haven't done anything.'

'No. And you won't get the chance.'

The rider grew tense, preparing to spring. Nick's hands found his cricket bat and he swung it. The rider's blade slashed it clean in half. Nick stumbled against the wall, raised his arms as the sword descended, but he felt nothing. In fact, he was numb. Everything seemed brighter and more sharply defined. The sword swished again. This time it glanced off his shoulder and an electric flash sparked at the point of impact. The force caused him to stagger, but he still felt no pain. Several more swipes of the blade didn't come close to piercing his skin.

With a snarl, the rider sheathed his sword and slipped a knuckle duster onto his fingers. Nick scrambled to open the window but was hauled back. He ducked one blow. The second punched a hole in the wall. When he tried to dart past the rider to get to the door, the man snagged his dreadlocks, pulled him backwards over his desk, and leaned a knee into his stomach, pressing the wind out of him. The shining knuckles soared high. Nick braced for the hit. It came, solid and fast, snapping his head aside and sending his bedroom into a flashing spin.

Then the rider drew his knife.

Trembling, Nick said, 'Please. I haven't done anything. I won't. I don't even know who you are. Please, just let me go. Please.'

The rider angled the blade so Nick could see the oily residue on the metal.

‘All that’s needed to kill you, boy, is a single cut. A scratch. The poison will do the rest.’ His mask shifted, and Nick could’ve sworn he was smiling. ‘But that wouldn’t be any fun, would it?’

Nick gulped. ‘Why are you doing this?’

The rider leaned closer and hissed, ‘Because you exist.’

The flyscreen clattered onto the veranda. Nick looked towards the hall just as someone whipped around the doorway and fired an arrow. The rider ducked, the arrow thudding the wall above him. He flicked his knife and the archer spun away with a muffled grunt. Nick punched the rider as hard as he could and rolled off the desk. He heard the creak of string and wood and something whizzed past his ear. The rider fell against the wall, an arrow in his shoulder. Snarling, he dived out the window and sprinted away. Nick stumbled as he was shoved aside. The archer shot another arrow through the open window. Missed. Seconds later, a horse streaked around the garage and pounded the dirt drive.

The archer dropped his bow and leaned a hand on the windowsill. He was panting hard. When he brushed his scruffy curls off his forehead, his fingers left a trail of blood on his dusky skin. Then he turned, and Nick saw the familiar charcoal eyes.

‘David?’

David’s gaze raked over Nick’s bare chest and neck. ‘Are you hurt?’ he asked in Korelian.

All Nick could do was stare. He hadn’t heard that voice or seen that face in eight long years.

‘Answer me, Nick. Did he cut you?’

Nick shook his head.

‘Thank the gods.’

David glanced about, as if searching for something. He saw Nick’s bedroom mirror and rammed an elbow into the glass. Nick jumped back as shards clattered onto the floorboards.

‘What are you doing?’

David scooped up a splinter of mirror and slipped it into his pocket. ‘I’ll need this later.’ He wound a cloth around his bleeding hand. As he worked, he peered at Nick’s bruised ribs. ‘Are you sure he didn’t hurt you?’

‘No...I don’t think so. He tried to...but I stopped him. If you hadn’t arrived, he would’ve...’

Terror snatched Nick’s breath away.

Mía.

He scrambled past David and through the house. A kitchen chair was overturned. On the bench sat a homemade cherry tart and a handful of candles.

The back door was open and, under the clothesline, Nick could see the empty washing basket rolled on its side. He slapped the damp sheets aside.

Stopped.

Mía lay in the dirt, her grey curls tousled, her dress slashed at the shoulder. Blood seeped from underneath her and pooled at the concrete base of the Hills' Hoist.

'Mía?'

Nick dropped to his knees and reached out, his fingers hovering above her lips. He felt no breath. He checked her neck but couldn't find a pulse either.

'No, no no no no!' He clutched her.

'She's gone, Nick,' David said quietly. 'I'm sorry.'

'No.'

Nick's heart swelled till it choked him. The pain was so raw, so sharp. He sobbed into Mía's hair, wanting the agony to stop, wanting Mía to open her eyes and click her tongue and ask him what all the fuss was about. To scream at him for being suspended, to break a cup as she made a furious pot of tea, to ground him for a month, a year, a lifetime. Anything but this.

David knelt down, freed Mía from Nick's arms, and rested her on the ground.

'Come away, Nick.'

'No. I don't want to leave her. I can't.'

'You have to. Come on. Stand up.'

David lifted Nick to his feet and guided him towards a horse, which stood in the vegetable garden munching its way through the tomato vines. Nick was too numb with shock to resist. As David mounted the horse, Nick's gaze lingered on Mía. She looked so crumpled and alone under the broad whiteness of the sheets. He scrubbed away tears, inadvertently smearing her blood across his cheeks. He started towards her but David steered the horse so that it blocked his path.

'Nick, if you stay, you'll be killed. We have to go.' His voice was thick with some emotion Nick couldn't recognise.

'Who was that man?'

David scanned the fringes of the bush. 'He's an Arai. An assassin. He's here to call in a debt of blood.'

Nick shook his head, struggling to fathom David's explanation. 'Who...what are the Arai? Why are they after me? Why did they do this to Mía?' His voice broke and he fought back a sob.

'I'll tell you,' David replied, still glancing about, 'but not here. The assassin will return, and he won't be alone next time. Come on.'

Nick took David's hand and pulled himself onto the horse. As they rode along Canyon Drive, David kept checking over his shoulder, as if expecting to see the black rider appear with the glint of sunlight on his drawn blade.

When they reached Striker's Run, David steered the horse onto the dirt track. 'Wait, David. This is the wrong way. We have to go into town and tell the police what happened.'

David shook his head. 'There's nothing they can do.'

'What? Then where are we going?'

'Somewhere safe.'

'Safe? Up here? This place isn't safe. My parents disappeared here, remember? David, we have to turn back!'

'We can't. This is our only way out.'

'What do you mean, our only way out?'

But David didn't respond. The faint hum coming from the bush grew louder, making Nick's heart race with panic. He clung to David and tried not to think about what trouble that sound might bring. The farther they rode, the more laboured David's breathing became, as though the hot summer air scoured his lungs. He reined in the horse and dismounted next to a sign that read: *Danger! Unstable cliffs*. Nick gazed up the steep rocky slope of the Spit and thought of a drawbridge tilting towards the sky. The humming sound was much louder now.

'We can't go up there,' Nick said, dismounting.

David didn't seem to hear, just led the horse up towards the ridge. Nick glanced back along Striker's Run. It was ages into town from here, and the masked rider might already be following them up the track. With a shudder, he hurried after David, wishing now that he hadn't got onto the horse at all.

The low, resonant note pulsed in Nick's ears, causing the hairs on his arms and the nape of his neck to lift. Sticks snapped underfoot and cockatoos nattered in the wilting treetops, but the higher they climbed, the louder the drone became till it drowned out all the bush sounds. This wasn't the whistling north wind, Nick decided. It sounded more like a power generator than acoustic rocks.

David stopped before a pair of towering basalt boulders. The horse got skittish and tried to retreat but David kept a firm hold on the bridle. As Nick got closer, he noticed the air between the boulders was flickering like a heat mirage on a tar road.

'Ah...David? I don't think—'

David slapped the horse hard. It snorted, leapt through the gap in the rocks. And vanished.

'Oh, shit.'

Nick tried to run but David was quicker, snatching his arm and yanking him towards the rocks. He struggled, kicked, grabbed at the boulders, his fingernails scraping away chunks of moss, his shoes scrabbling on dry leaves, but David was too strong.

Nick shut his eyes.

For a split second, the droning sound blasted his ears, then it dulled again and David let him go.

Nick scooted away, checking himself over – all limbs accounted for, nose, ears and dreadlocks still attached as well as the other important bits. The basalt boulders, the horse, the bush, the cobalt blue sky and the smoke-smudged horizon looked the same as before. Even the horse was standing there looking relaxed, as though it had never disappeared.

Nick gulped several deep breaths, hoping he wasn't about to hyperventilate.

David thrust the splinter of broken mirror underneath the shimmering curtain of air, which sparkled like electrified tinfoil then puffed out of existence. The bush noises returned. Cicadas buzzed, flies swam through the air, and the horse twitched its flanks like it was throwing off a bad memory.

David collapsed against one of the boulders, shivering.

'What's wrong?' Nick asked. 'Are you sick?'

David's pupils were dilated. He mumbled something incomprehensible and clutched at his bleeding hand. His eyes rolled back in his head.

The assassin's knife. It had been poisoned.

'David? *David!*' Nick shook him, checked his breathing and pulse. Both were erratic.

'Okay, you just...stay here. I'll go and find help.'

Nick swung into the saddle and spurred the horse off the Spit. He swatted branches aside, navigated around rocks and ant hills, crossed a dry creek bed, and reined in the horse. He should've reached Striker's Run by now. They hadn't ventured that far off the road. He couldn't see it though, or the *Danger! Unstable cliffs* sign.

He glanced about, trying to get his bearings, and said aloud, 'Where the hell is the bloody road?'

As if conjured by Nick's voice, a figure detached itself from the trunk of an ancient ironbark. It was a man, with hair in wild knots, pants and boots dusted with red ochre, and a metal-tipped spear aimed straight at Nick.

Nick's story continues...



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