

Prequel novella to Fear's Union | draft 2.0

Mandestroy

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More information and further sample chapters are
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THE MOMENT

Death rained down unceasingly from above, a storm of arrows spearing the deep mists of the ravaged battlefield. The sound of the heavy shafts thudding into lifeless corpses reminded the sergeant of the forge back home. Each strike struck a disturbing sequence of thud; chime; sigh; an echo of a past he didn't dare cling onto. It was almost comforting, but there was nothing like the cry of the barely-living to hammer a sense of reality into proceedings. This was war, and there was nothing comforting about it.

And you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

He stood defiant nonetheless, for it was also his moment. It could be the making of him, this opportunity; it could be the path to greatness, but then it could just as equally be no path at all. But no, hold on. That statement at least was not the complete truth, for the odds were not balanced. The path to obliteration was far more likely.

Because you can't beat a Mandahoi.

His heart was hammering to the rhythm of the smith, bullying his ears, like the sound of an ocean swelling and crashing against the cliffs of his inner skull. It was almost unbearable, the dominating toll of it, but it was abating. His pulse was easing. This cardiological anomaly had come to define him, a calm driven by something deep and raw. It was as if his body hunkered down, preparing for the inevitable, and as preparations commenced, he knew there was no choice. Fame or failure; that was his motto, or perhaps it would be one day. That was if he were to survive at all, and the odds were stacked against him.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

His arms were steady, fresh as they were, and they were focussed by the anomalous vigour that flowed through him. His muscles tautened; he stretched his arms; and he punished the sweaty leather bound handle of his great-sword, gripping it like a dying man clings to life; or like a lover holds his woman, as if the world would fail without her. He licked his lips and caught the light of the thing, the multi-coloured smirk of his fine weapon. Oh she really was beautiful, and deadly, but she needed to be.

For you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

The tip of the weapon flickered upwards as his body reacted, a sign of the blade's eagerness to release its potential; but it was not yet time. Not yet, not quite. Cheating death required a very special touch, and immaculate execution, and he knew deep within, buried right at the pit of his raw gut, that the moment was still to pass. He had time, time to reconsider.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

"Get out of here you idiot; save yourself"

The words fluttered to the cusp of his being, and they sounded almost surreal; as if spoken by a ghost. Time ebbed delicately by, the inevitable tipping point drawing in, but there was still a moment, still time for contemplation, and so he cast a brief glance to his commanding officer; to his audience and his hope. To his Prince.

Who couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

The officer was trapped, deflated and defeated, and his hard words came from a despairing face. Because he was more than just an officer: he was the future king. He was the heir, and he was the sergeant's charge; a charge that could never be paid.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi, and the future king screamed in agony. There could be only failure.

As the pain subsided, the heir looked to the sergeant, rabid authority in his eyes. He was trapped beneath the dying bulk of his horse, and he was pointing aggressively in the direction of flight; in the direction pursued by every other. But that was not the way to greatness. It was in fact the exact opposite direction to greatness, and it was a strange quirk that the pinnacle and the depth both held the same directional quality – one could not be reached without flirting at the edge of the other. That was the informed view, or perhaps it was the insane view. The distinction was irrelevant; the sergeant prepared to face the chaos.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

Calm was required, silence and concentration, so to stem the interference from his audience, the sergeant smiled sickeningly, a manic edge to the pert rising of his lips. The effect was instantaneous, and his fallen future king's face contorted very quickly from desperation to disgust. Time marched on, a shiver going through the sergeant, a quiver to the weapon poised delicately before him. He turned from his officer with slick anticipation and eager readiness. His legs parted ever so slightly, that extra stability essential, and as he rolled his shoulders, he took in the scene before him. He slid his tongue about his mouth and clenched his hips as he always did when danger encroached. And danger did approach.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

Bodies lay everywhere, corpses littering the brownish field of heat-blistered grass. A sickly veil had been thrown up before him, a great cannon-fog which concealed the horrors beyond. The cannon had not been the answer, and the relentless bite of the Mandari had done its work; the work it always did – a random scattering of human waste spread about the trampled earth. Wind whipped through the scene, sending the fog swirling in elaborate designs, but it

soon dispersed into a blank threat. Shadows danced in that veil of mist; shadows that told of something foreboding; shadows that foretold oblivion. There could be only one outcome.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

A soldier burst from the vapid blanket, and then a second shadow turned solid and whole. They were allies, the petrified wreckages of men who had only a morning before marched confident of an elusive victory. But how the tide had turned. After all, the tide always turns where the Mandari were concerned. As one of his allies grew suddenly still, eyes wide as the arrow worked its way between his shoulders, the sergeant smiled once more. The odds were stacked against him, insanity was on the cusp of taking over, but that was acceptable. More than that: it was designed.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

The other shadows, the ominous spectres, continued on: growing in size; growing in stature; growing in threat. The second ally had made it past him, screamed at him to save himself, echoing the desperate pleas of the future king, but none of this mattered. None of this mattered at all. As time ticked gradually to the tipping point, the first harbinger finally melted from the cloud bank, strolling from the grey mist to reveal the equally grey appearance. They were the stuff of nightmares; the bain; the eternal rot – they were the Mandahoi.

And they would not be beaten.

The sergeant felt anger in his throat, acidic, and he let it drive his confidence. Something had to drive that misplaced confidence. He took in the presence of his foe.

The untouchable Mandahoi threat.

The uniform was all-concealing, revealing only sharp eyes from behind a tight fitting hood and a polished silver mask depicting a bear. The arms were naked, littered with heavy

rings, and the rest of the body was concealed beneath the loose fitting grey material. At the end of each arm was a weapon, one slight, and one a brute of a thing. The weapons themselves looked bad enough, but the sergeant knew how this man could handle them – how all Mandahoi could handle them. They were killers, nothing more and nothing less. It was more than a trade to them; it was an art. They were cold, mechanical, deadly, and brilliant, and he hated them for this. It was the Mandahoi who denied Delfinia its rightful claim, and it was time to put that right. The odds were stacked against him.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi; and the odds were growing longer.

The first demon was upon him, striding confidently after his blood, eager for his scalp, but two further shadows phased into flesh, a further pair of Mandahoi intent upon his death. Strange lights flickered through the fog, casting the scene in eerie illumination, and as the three killers stalked forward, the sergeant's heart slowed to a near stop. Time shuffled by, responsive to his intent, and his breath rasped against the dry chasm of his throat. It was a struggle to draw the air through, his body prickling with sweat and fear, but that was good; that was natural for him.

Fame or failure, greatness or insanity, immortality or death; these were the choices that faced the sergeant of the Delfinian army, the sergeant who now found himself amongst fleeing allies and facing the very personification of death. The grey wraiths moved threateningly towards him, almost spectral in their surety, but the choice was already made. He was Adnan ap Kantal, and he chose the barely trodden path. As the emotion flared, stoked by the shuddering eruption of his heart from its state of near stillness, Kantal burst towards the harbingers and bought himself the immortality he so desperately sought. Whether others would see it in the

same light was now down to the hand of the Gods, and to the strength of Kantal's stubborn resolve.

THE NOW

ONE

Some people actually liked riding, but not him. Definitely not him. Some people must have immunity to the pain and discomfort, but for him it was like a form of slow torture. The act of sitting in a saddle started a steady descent in comfort, each moment sliding immaculately into the more painful next. And the flavours of punishment were exquisite too: there were aches; sharp pains; dull throbs; numbness; those terrible pins at the other end of the spectrum. The only reprise was to stand in the stirrups, cocking one's arse at the riders behind, but even then legs would grow tired; the saddle was always calling, and so was the punishment.

"Pfff."

The only man riding ahead of him turned and offered a disapproving glance, a look which caused him to go stiff with unease; pain gnawing at his consciousness. He was still in awe of this man, even despite the years behind them. He was immediately obedient.

"Are we boring you, General?"

The authority in the stare unnerved him – he was not used to that look, being as he was a favourite of the man. He stuttered for a moment, before wheeling out the correct response.

"Of course not, Highness. I am entranced by your wise direction. I only exhaled at my unfortunate discomfort."

The words came out smoothly enough, but each one grated on his throat. He was unused to such delicacy, and his common accent butchered the finesse.

"Do not oil your words, Kantal; it doesn't suit you. What's wrong?"

Kantal felt the snigger at his back; the twitter of a dozen scheming aristocrats. He was the one out of place, the commoner amongst the elite, but he had every right. No, he had more

than every right. The king, his master, put up with him because he was worth putting up with. Kantal turned to the powdered fools and sneered. When he turned back, the king still glared.

"My arse hurts."

There was just the tiniest elevation in the right side of his lip, his blond moustache tilting in consequence. The authority didn't leave the man's face, and the twittering fools expressed their shock before whispering against Kantal's vulgar words. They would be calling him a fool, uncouth, a piece of gutter scum. He wasn't good enough to grace their company, let alone lead their army, and for the most awkward moment, he believed them. The king stared on with stony friction, displeasure rampant on his face.

And then it contorted, ready to strike. Kantal gulped.

The royal mouth opened wide, his eyes closed, and the king let out an almighty roar. When he'd finished laughing, he wiped the spittle from his lips, and Kantal stopped clenching his buttocks – old habits die hard.

"I do so love your honesty, Kantal. My arse hurts too."

Kantal grunted in pleasure, relief spreading through him. The peacocks were muttering disappointedly under their breath.

"It's not natural to straddle such beasts."

The king dropped back, and Kantal moved into step.

"Maybe not, but man has been doing it for long enough. And besides, how else would we make this journey?"

That was true enough. Kantal looked about, taking in the surroundings. To his right was a sharp mountain range; stark against the pan flat lands about them. All but at the Finder, the scrubbed brown plains of Mikaeta stretched away, a subtle heat haze rustling the horizon. But

ato Friendly, the mountains stood like sentinels, protecting the luscious lands behind. That was Ahan, a glorious gem amongst a world of decay, and it had been snatched away from Delfinia; from Kantal's king; from Delfin's legacy; and therefore from Kantal himself.

But you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

"Kantal?"

"Sorry, Highness. I agree unfortunately. Horses are a necessary evil."

The king slapped him on the back, and Kantal could hear the renewed disappointment from the 'cocks behind.

"A horse is a fine friend in combat too – let's not forget that."

An image flashed through Kantal's head; a grey wraith in a whirlwind of steel. The enemy; the scourge.

"Not against the Mandahoi, Highness." Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi. His lip slid over his front teeth, and he recognised the sharp relief of the gold replacement. His mind wandered, only to be torn back by his king.

"No; quite. Most weapons are useless against that particular foe. Most nights I wonder how we'll ever overcome them."

This was Kantal's territory, but even he couldn't be confident. Against the grey, confidence only accelerated the downfall.

"There are ways, but they are," he licked his lips once more, "hard."

A grunt. There was little more to say on the matter. Instead, they could only speak of the wealth that lay beyond those mountains; a wealth forever outside their grasp. Or was it? That was what they were out to change after all.

"You do trust me don't you, Highness?"

The ruler of Delfinia stared wistfully to the barren plains of Mikaeta; enemy territory. Well, perhaps enemy was too much, but not friends; not any more. They were civil neighbours once – Delfinia was once even a part of the greater Mikaetan Empire – but that civility had long passed, sliding with the decay and jealousy of this once famous civilisation. Mikaeta was now in a sorry state.

And to emphasise the point, the travelling party started past a great rent in the encircling mountains of the Adunas Encolae; the entrance to the valley called Aperta. Where he had been made. Enemy eyes would be all over them – Mikaetan; Gorfinian; and even Mandari – but they held open hands and would not be endangered. Kantal looked upon the wretched defences the sorry Mikaetan army still barracked, and balked at their neglected state: flags hung shredded and limp; outposts sat in disrepair and weather-beaten; and any sight of metal was accompanied by riotous rust. Images of battlefield defeats intoxicated Kantal's thoughts, and he dragged his eyes away. His king had still not responded.

"Highness?"

"Of course I trust you, Kantal; of course I do. I only wonder. For five hundred years we have been trying to lever that limpet from our territories, and yet five hundred years have passed without success. To say that I am confident would be a lie."

He had a point. Many had tried to break the steely resolve of the Mandari, but none had succeeded. There were moments of fleeting gain, but ultimately it had been a story of utter defeat. Kantal was the latest to try.

"I am not confident either."

After all; you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

His king turned to him, alarmed and questioning. "If anyone should be confident—"

"My king, forgive me, but confidence with respect the Mandahoi is entirely misplaced. Remove the Mandahoi from my path, and then I will be confident."

The king clucked to himself.

"Yes, indeed. That is why we are here, after all."

"Yes, my King. We are here to make sure that we can take the chance." How they would earn the chance was still to be determined.

After all; you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

Mother Bright was dipping against the Finder as they came around the angle of the mountains. The creamy stone of the Beha Lomal glowed with a fiery quality as Mother bathed them in her tiredness, and the sight took Kantal's breath. The sky at once was darkening, a rich bruising to the cosmos as the stars finally revealed themselves. Shadows were long, and it seemed that Kantal's horse stepped over burning coals as the dry scrub absorbed the dying rays of the sun. He scanned the roots of the mountain, sure he must see his goal, nerves flourishing at the prospect. They only deepened when the place didn't appear to him.

But then it did, and the nerves grew cold. It was a marvel of the past, a relic of the old Mikaetan power, and it absently crushed his residual confidence. He found himself shrinking upon the back of his horse as he spoke its name.

"Maegwyn."

Every time he came to this place, he wondered if this was how Elai had felt. A true marvel; and a daunting nightmare. It was a place of poisonous politics, and this time Kantal was to be at the centre of that storm. He would rather face a Mandahoi.

And you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

Then again, you couldn't beat Maegwyn either. She was impenetrable.

It was a fortress of impossible proportions, embedded in the elbow of two mountains. A great ring formed the periphery, many stories high, palace-thick, and a city in itself; the walls were the most daunting siege prospect in the known world. But those encircling arms protected a condensed city of wealth and purpose – a symbol of Mikaetan history now garrisoned by Gorfinian tyranny. And that wasn't the greatest part either; the tower at the rear of the complex soared into the sky, numerous floors spearing rebelliously into the heavens. As they approached the fortress, it was almost as if the tower surpassed the mountains themselves, and Kantal felt his breath catch. The wind whipped, and he shivered – yet his cloak was thick.

Yes, this was definitely how Elai would have felt – terror and awe. It was catching.

The gargantuan gates, themselves at least four stories in height, opened just a crack, barely discernible in the detail of the silhouette. Soon, as true darkness started to creep over the landscape, riders could be seen galloping at pace in their direction. Kantal tensed, but there was no reason for that; they were invited. After all, what chance of a Gorfinian betraying the trust of another? Kantal laughed to himself, and his king flicked a look.

"Sorry, Highness – a private joke."

There was no easing of his king's rebuke this time.

"Keep it to yourself, General. The Gorfinians are not famed for their sense of humour." He let it sink in before stating the obvious. "The doormen have come to greet us. Let us meet them with open palms."

And at that, the king sped off with his chief banner-men, leaving Kantal to ponder the wisdom of his plan. Many had tried, and all had failed; why would he be different?

After all, you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

Illustrious company indeed. It was a wonder Kantal wasn't nervous. Oh hang on, he was rubbing his sweaty hands together. Of course the nerves had got to him; he was terrified.

He would rather face a Mandahoi.

"My lord, we are grateful for your invitation."

Kantal's king was leading proceedings – the greater of the two men where etiquette was concerned. Kantal would likely be utterly impotent in any case. He wasn't sure his nerves would permit a coherent sentence. He tried muttering under-breath to reassure himself. It was not the desired outcome, so he kept his head bowed, eyes darting from their cover. This was truly an impenetrable problem. Thank Ero his king was here to support him.

No – he was here to lead in this place.

The ruler of Delfinia, his king, sat at the far end of the table, to the right of their host, and opposite a man of grand proportions. Kantal and another were the only others in attendance, and yet the table would seat thirty. The vast chamber was oppressive, which did nothing to stymie Kantal's nerves. And then there was the attire. The damned attire.

A man in a deep hooded cloak – near-black; wool of some sort; very austere – leaned towards the man that he flanked; their host. If anything, the king of Gorfinia's cloak was even plainer than his servant's. This was the tyrant himself; the ruler of Maegwyn; the hooded king; yet no-one ever heard him speak. The translator, though translator was not the correct term, straightened and relayed the whispered words of the king.

"My lord would like to remind you that you invited yourselves."

A shiver. If he wasn't sure before, he now knew for certain that they were not amongst friends.

"Of course, Lord Gorfin. Then we are grateful for your acceptance."

The king's hood was so deep that it projected to near elbow length from his face. What of the inner could be seen was only black, and his features were entirely concealed. That was the fear of the hooded king – no-one knew what lay inside. With that simple mechanism, he kept a kingdom in check. Fear was a wonderful thing.

Kantal gulped and noted that the hood of the servant was very deep also. It was a badge of honour for these strange people; the depth of the hood determining social standing. So even the servant was probably a high-up aide, or perhaps even Gorfianian nobility, whatever that entailed. He gulped once more, forcing himself to stop fiddling with his hands. As he looked away from the Gorfianian horror, he came face to face with the man opposite him. Another hood; another cloaked existence. He felt suddenly naked and pushed his eyes to the ground.

The man opposite was no Gorfianian, but in many ways, he was even more unnerving. And worse than that – Kantal had invited him. He had ways, which was why he was here, but with that usefulness came a threatening shroud. Here, he fit right in.

A tap grabbed Kantal's ear, and he turned to see the aide lean in once more. When he pulled away, the clammy sense of foreboding hung around Kantal's neck, restricting his breath.

"My lord asks if you are in need of refreshment."

He exhaled and pulled his hand from the belt he'd been fiddling. His king nodded passively, and with the subtle elevation of a hand, curtains were thrown aside at the perimeters of the room, revealing a battalion of servants. They scurried about, turning the vast table into an exquisite example of casual feasting. The only stretch of polished – what was this table made from? Bone? – surface that remained uncluttered was the section that held the wide map of the near world. They would be needing that.

The room was incredible – taller than most houses; lined with pillars; draped with a host of varying but equally dour family banners. At the far end, behind the Gorfinian king, the room was entirely open, bare to the inner circle of Maegwyn. The views from up here were frankly incredible – he thought he could see even to the northern lands of Rhagastos, though he couldn't be certain. This was the old centre of the Mikaetan Empire at its greatest, and it was also the place where Delfin had challenged her father and splintered the country that Kantal now served. The place reeked of history, incredible stories infecting him with every breath, and he felt overwhelmed to be a part of it.

If he needed any other reason to sweat, then the sheer weight of the surroundings would do it. Unfortunately, none of the other guests seemed to share his nerves.

If anything, the final table-guest – the man opposite Kantal's king and to the left of the tyrant – was the most agitated. And rightly so, for he was the grandest of the lot. He wore an over-elaborate crown of dubious construction, and he fidgeted with a plethora of rings, each one housing jewels that appeared to be of great value – though to the trained eye, were actually cheap replicas. He was a large man, and as one of those in attendance without a hood, Kantal could take in his features. He was softer than he'd expected.

"A fine spread, lord."

As he spoke the words, his chin quivered. Not the sign of a strong man. His face was smooth and unblemished, his cheeks rosy red like a virgin's. His eyes danced with nerves, and every time he spoke, he did so with a deeply retrenched fretful edge. He portrayed power through his dress and his actions, but he could not hide the weakness – not truly. This man was the polished symbol of Mikaetan decay; he was the Emperor.

And this was the seat of his ancestors. He must be fuming.

The servants continued to scuttle about, darting back and forth from the wings of the room, and conversation continued around them; fear was a powerful tool. Kantal gulped once more, and he thought he could sense the man opposite him snigger. He straightened his back instinctively. The bastard.

The aide pressed the direction of the discussion.

"Your Highness, Lord of the esteemed lands of Delfinia – what is it we can help with?"

Everyone in the room knew why they were here, but it appeared that the Gorfianians wanted to labour the point. Only the Mikaetan Emperor seemed oblivious to the forced tension, gluttonous as he was upon the spread before him. Kantal's king wiped his mouth, removing a dribble of wine, and then stood to address the audience. Rather formal, Kantal thought, but then what did he know? He was way beyond his comforts.

As the King of Delfinia passed Kantal on his way to the map, he offered the slightest touch. It cut right through him, and Kantal cowed under the cloaked gaze of the tyrant. He wanted this over.

"We come asking for assistance. We come for your help."

The statement was simple, clear, but in a room-full of vipers, it was guaranteed to shock. The Emperor slammed a flabby fist onto the table, and stated his objection. That wobbly strike impacted Kantal even more than the sharp steel of a Mandahoi could.

And you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

"And why should we offer you help? What has Delfinia ever done for us – apart from splintering our great nation in the first place?"

His king stumbled over his attempt to regain control.

"Your Excellency, if you please. Will you let me explain—"

"What sort of help is it that you're after? I have an idea, but please elaborate."

This was the worst of it – it was like asking a cripple for a leg-up.

"We want military support."

"Ha! I have a mind to leave now." The Emperor rose from his seat and feigned leaving, the greed and hunger in his eyes betraying the false intentions. He was ushered back by the calm palm of Gorfin, an unnecessary show given the preposterous transparency of the Emperor's feint. "We have pleaded for assistance from Delfinia for centuries, and what have we earned? Nothing. Not even a damned response. Do not forget, Highness, it is Mikaeta that still holds the flood of the Centro from your gates. Never forget this."

The King fought his corner well. "And do not forget, Emperor, that it is Delfinia that keeps you free of the burnt people. We too have borders to hold."

"The burnt people are nothing compared to the Centro—"

"Please!" The aide spoke in response to the Gorfinian king's elevated hand. "Let the king of Delfinia speak."

The Emperor nestled back into his comfortable chair, firing a spiky glance at the usurper as he rammed more food into his mouth. The Gorfinian king's head did not even move, and there was no sign of emotion – how could there be in a black space? That was the power of Gorfin.

"Thank you, Lord. As I was saying, we request your military support for an assault on Ahan." A disrespecting snort from the Emperor, but Kantal's king continued. This was Kantal's plan, his genius, and each detail made him shudder inexplicably. He was being laid out for all to see, and it thoroughly discomfited him.

"We have established a plan of immense merit, but what we have in ingenuity, we lack in resources. However, with your help, we believe that we can make the move that will crack that nut – we believe that we can take Ahan."

Kantal was sweating. His hands pumped uncontrollably, and he was mouthing with his king. These were his words.

But the Emperor was clearly not impressed – hardly surprising – and Gorfin remained still. Intentions laid out, it was time for the challenge. He wanted to crawl under the table, even though the eyes were off of him.

It was the Emperor who staked the first objection.

"And how many have tried in the past? Ahan has been a locked realm for five hundred years, and yet you come here with promises of success. How naive, Highness. You do realise that we three nations once formed an alliance, but even with such combined authority, entry was denied."

"Yes, indeed, and we shall form an alliance once more, but this time with success. Please, I implore you to entertain the proposal at the very least."

The Emperor was about to speak, but he was stalled by the Gorfinian king. He leaned into his aide, who spoke on his behalf.

"What makes you think that you have a successful design where all others have failed?"

"Because I believe in the man who came up with it."

Oh no – that wasn't part of his speech. The king had all the facts, so why would he alter the focus? Kantal could now sense the lingering eyes upon him.

"And this is the man that conjured this miracle?" Each word of the aide speared Kantal's faltering confidence, and he could feel his face darken in embarrassment. This was not how it was supposed to be. He was never designed for this.

The king nodded subtly, and the transfer was complete. He had to justify himself, and that would be tough. He had never managed to do that – not even to himself.

"And you are?"

When Kantal got around to speaking, he knew he would sound common, and that was the final nail in his resolve – he could not spar with these oiled serpents, masters of tongue and politics. What right did he have to talk back? He puckered his arse, succumbing to that same cowardice that identified his childhood. His hands fidgeted, and when he did manage to blurt out his name, it sounded childish. Oh so childish.

"I am General Adnan ap Kantal of the Delfinian army."

And foolish. That too. Definitely foolish.

Tension rose even further and he gulped – he knew they could see it in him; knew they were sniggering at his impotence. When the Gorfian king raised his fist, Kantal assumed it was for the ear of his aide. Instead he thumped it down with stony authority, noise crashing through the room, shredding Kantal's residual nerve. He was a ghost now, and the aide's words sliced into him.

"Tell me, general. What makes you think that you have earned the right to gamble with my Lord's property?"

It was a good question, and if Kantal couldn't answer this, then he deserved to fail. He looked to his own remarkable story.

THE THEN

TWO | 20YRS AGO

Being the fifth son of a blacksmith was tough work. It was really tough work, and not because of the labour; quite the opposite in fact. And with his name, it was even tougher. He had a girl's name.

No, honestly. His mother had been desperate for a daughter, and when she fell pregnant for the fifth time, she was determined that it would be a girl and insisted on the name. He'd come out with a winkle, a one-eyed snake pointing right at her, but still she persisted – he kept the damned girl's name, and the thing had cursed him ever since.

If he'd been a girl, then his life would have been a whole lot easier.

His oldest brother was king, obviously – being the heir to the smithy empire – and he bore the arrogance to go with. Damn, did he wear that badly? But in some ways that wasn't surprising; because though he was the oldest, he certainly wasn't the best. That was son number two; the gifted child. He had a bright future, if only as usurper of his reprobate older brother, but that was something at least.

The third son was well-placed too, somewhat eccentric, but somehow, somehow, he'd established himself a slice of the future. He'd pioneered a 'mobile' furnace and he serviced remote demand whilst hooking up with his father and brothers for heavier work. He was often away with the army, lugging that great ceramic wagon with him, but he'd always return – and the wealth flowed plenty. Ironically, it was probably 'strange' number three who would be most successful. That was funny.

Even son number four had something, if only a mediocre education. At least their father was paying for a fourth education, threadbare as it was given the gold that flowed to the priests.

Number five had nothing. He was nothing, the boy who wasn't a girl, and he had to live with that every day: every day for ten years. And counting.

But he did have something more than all of that. He had intrigue, like Delfin herself. And he had passion. He had unjustified and incredible passion. He just had nothing to focus that passion on.

"Oi, Jossie."

And his passion counted for nothing when he was called Jossie. That name would always curse him.

He kept walking, sped up even. Someone calling his name could only mean one thing – bad news. No-one knew his name, unless it was to mock. And mockery usually became plain ol' bullying soon enough. He would keep his head low; like he always did.

He was weaving through the early morning streets of Triosec, as he always did, trying desperately to avoid his 'observers'. He kept his head low, hitting the main artery and targeting a slightly set back and yet magnificent building: all stone, with a shallow but elegant sloping roof. That was his home, or at least his spiritual home, and that was where he was headed – the oasis of his torment. It was his sanctuary.

But it was also where his passion manifested itself most fully, for it was the library, and in those dusty old tomes, he was even able to dream. Those times galvanised him for what lay without – in the smithy; at home. The life he tried to forget about.

He shook his head and thumbed the book in his hand, appreciating the relief of the leather. There was such artistry, even in the construction of the volume, and the passion that such perfection drove in him was insatiable.

"Oi, Jossie."

The streets were near empty, which was the point. But not empty enough. He looked down to the dust-caked mud-veined stone road and wondered at the decay of this place – of this centre of Delfinian power. He glanced left and right, almost despairing of the poor maintenance, even at his young age. All it would take to re-affix that door was a well placed hammer and a true nail. But iron was expensive, and steel was nearly precious, so the door just leaned there instead, against the frame. Barely a door at all. But the streets were still busy, and the ignorant strolled by with barely any recognition of the perishing town about them.

And this was the hub of Delfinia. So sad.

But perhaps these people didn't have his learning? Which was strange given that they were so old and he so young, but they all had bones to chase, and he had none. But if he had somewhere to focus his passion then he could surely do great things, so why did these others not think that way? If he dreamed about, he may even imagine raising this city from the sad ashes of its distress. Or at the very least, he could fix that door.

"Oi, Jossie. Get back here!"

Of course, it was the Mandari who had left the fine nation in this state, stealing as they had the finest principality of Delfinia: Ahan. He had read that as part of his learning, of his study if you will, and that story strung a sharp note; one he could not pinpoint. Ahan had been lost five hundred years ago, a long time for acceptance, but the loss was still raw in the Delfinian psyche. And more than that; Ahan was where it all began for Delfinia. That was where Queen Delfin launched her revolution. That loss was therefore a wound that would never heal, and the more that Jossie considered it, the keener it resonated. Perhaps if Ahan had not fallen, then Delfinia might not be in this state, and he may not be the fifth failure of a blacksmith.

Perhaps; perhaps not. Could he really blame the Mandari for his own sad predicament?

"Now!"

Fists swept from the alley and handled his sad shirt, trapping him to their will. Why had he not spotted the ploy? He turned to face his captor, and he gulped. But it was not unexpected.

"Hello little Jossie."

The boy of sixteen sneered at him, all rancid breath – like he'd been long on the booze – and a sad row of desiccated teeth; all yellow and brown. Jossie gulped. It had been a while, he supposed. He had to look on the bright side.

The filthy alley seemed to darken, and Jossie knew that the henchmen had closed off the exit. The biggest, a young man of nineteen called Beef – a reference to his intelligence perhaps – lay his hands on Jossie's shoulders, resting his block of a jaw on Jossie's black mop of hair. Jossie instinctively puckered his arse. He might be needing that later.

"Be gentle, Chick. This one's delicate." In his head, Jossie liked to call them the Farmyard Friends. He'd never actually say that though.

A hand left his right shoulder, and Jossie tensed instinctively. He gulped, not taking his eyes off Beef. The pain scorched his lower back, and he crumpled immediately to the floor. The laughter was foul.

"Whoops – I broke her."

The sniggering from the group crawled all over him. He was nine years Beef's junior; how was it that this idiot still sought out the pleasures of the bully? Jossie supposed that even the low filth had the pleasure of wiping their feet on the lower scum. Jossie was rock bottom, and the best solution was to stay concealed. It had become a game of ignorance and deception, this dance with the Farmyard Friends, and he was quite good at it. But not good enough. They always found him, eventually.

"Are you going to take her?"

That voice crawled out of the shadows and grabbed Jossie by the throat. It was familiar; too familiar.

Brother four, Brin, stooped out of the gloom and pulled up behind the gang leader. Jossie's breath would have caught, if he hadn't been winded moments before. That was his brother!

But then, the young man he knew as a brother was strangely absent. This sad creature had a disturbing lust in his eyes – not the downtrodden glare that brother four normally wore.

"Nah, not this morning. I had my fill last night. You wanna go, Brin?"

The look in his brother sharpened for the briefest moment, but then subsided to what could only be construed as disappointment. In a way, that constituted a moral standard, of sorts. The only certainty was that Beef was ignorant of their family ties. Or he was sick.

Finally, after considering something worrying, his brother shook his head. The rest of the group turned down the offer too, which was nice; he let his sphincter relax, and may have actually smiled. The Farmyard Friends probably didn't even know what a sphincter was.

"Let's just punish her for the insolence, then."

What insolence? At least this was the easy way out.

When the young men had finished with him – Jossie's brother at least restrained from pummelling him – he was barely left with any milky flesh. One eye was swollen shut, and the other was a weeping mass of pain and scorched light. He was certain that a rib or two were cracked, and as his near-crippled hand clawed at the dusty ground, his attackers sniggered at their victory. One final jab to the lower back made him vomit instinctively, and as he laid his face in the acidic discharge, the group laughed harder.

"Come on boys. I think she's had enough for one morning."

So much pain; so much humiliation; so much hatred. As he tried to lift his cheek from the vomit puddle, red-hot tremors scorched, and he dropped his head with a defeated slap. As his vision faded, he saw that his library book had been ground into the dirt. In some ways, the desecration of that fine artistry was the saddest part of all. A tear left him as his vision faded to black.

When he awoke, the city was alive with noise. The heat on him suggested it was near to midday, if not early afternoon, but there was no way to tell. Not while he was still face down in vomit.

To be fair, the sick had dried now, and he was almost comfortable on the sandy ground; if he didn't move, the pain stayed quiet. Feet moved horizontally and absently across his vision, the busy patter of shoppers and self-important people. None noticed Jossie; none noticed the near-to-death ten year old laying at the side of the road. And why would they? They were busy.

He reached out for the ruined carcass of his book, and as he did, a woman in a long colourful robe – a fashion which was perversely imported from Mandari Ahan – tripped, and hopped herself to rights. She spun around scowling, and looked right at him, witnessed the state he was in, and scowled.

"Watch it."

Most likely she thought he was a drunk; a ten year-old drunk. Looking at Jossie, what was there to help? He was beyond help. He couldn't blame her. There was no point in any case. The anger swelled deep within, feeding his passion, fuelling the stubborn resolve to consume all he was offered. But on the outside, to the world that mocked him, he was maudlin. Sad. What good could come from his outward objection?

It was definitely mid-afternoon by the time he dragged his sorry ass into the library. He knew because he recognised the librarian at the front desk, peering over pretentiously small spectacles. Yes – Jossie knew what pretention was. The clerk welcomed him as he would any other visitor.

"Good afternoon. Please make sure to keep the noise down."

He tried to respond with words, but only a faint hiss seeped out of his fat mouth, spittle flying randomly. He held up the battered book, and when the librarian recognised its state, Ero himself seemed to rain down his Godly magnificence. The clerk would punish this sacrilege.

"How dare you disrespect—"

"Leave him alone. Can you not see that the child is in a state?"

The librarian snapped his head to the interventionist. He was about to berate the insolence, but the flushed anger quickly subsided to a shade of submission. "I was about to suggest that he should not be permitted entry in that state, but—"

"That's not what I mean, idiot. He's been beaten up."

The new voice materialised next to Jossie, closely followed by a body; a strange gangly body with odd protrusions in any place it was possible. He was Bulge, the head librarian, and he was Jossie's friend; if that was right. His only friend if truth be told, so he should grab hold of that label even if he doubted its truth. But sometimes Bulge had a strange look in his eyes, and in fact, it was similar to what he saw in brother four that morning. That chilled him.

But Bulge would never act forcefully, and that was the difference. He trusted his only friend.

Bulge laid a gentle hand on Jossie's shoulder, and he challenged the junior librarian with his gaze. The other peered menacingly over those pathetic spectacles, unwilling to break the order, but desperate to do so. He found a valid route of attack.

"Look at the state of this book."

"It is a copy, fool. Anyone worth their scholarship should see that straight off. I do not let Jossie leave with anything of value because, unfortunately for the poor pup, this is a frequent outcome."

The other was resisting his reprimand. "He looks like he deserves it to me."

Bulge evidently wanted the last word, but as he went to fight back, his tongue failed him and just sort of flopped out of his mouth. He scratched at the bloated curve of his stomach – how he got his name – and promptly turned and dragged Jossie down the hall. The desk was left sneering after them, albeit with a submissive veneer.

It was a great building, the library; simple and solidly built. So much of Triosec was temporary, rushed, infected with premature decay, but the library was a shining exception. A box of a building, it was lined with regiment after regiment of polished wooden shelves, each heaving with books; scrolls; parchments; leather wallets; tomes; leather journals; rolled maps; and just about everything in-between. Well-oiled roller-steps lived in each aisle, and between the ranks of literature, fine leather bound reading seats were placed with precision. They were often vacant.

There was also a mezzanine about the higher part of the room which housed some of the finer collections, and this was now where Jossie sat; Bulge tending to his wounds. It was testament to the frequency of the beatings that Bulge moved with a practised hand and barely a question. He was not trained in healing.

"Was it the animals again?"

Bulge couldn't bring himself to call them the Farmyard Friends when their acts were so ghastly. Jossie didn't insist in any case. He nodded quietly.

"You must tell your father."

He wanted to reply that his father didn't even notice that he was home unless he got under people's feet. He wanted to say that his father was likely to join Beef, and that Jossie was better off limiting himself to the attentions of the juveniles. He wanted to eloquently lay out the sad reality of his life, but it was not to be so.

"Ny-oh goo—"

His power over language had been beaten from him.

"What about your brothers?"

That was depressing. What Bulge was suggesting as remedial action, Jossie already knew was actually now a contributing element. The memory of his brother's meek and fetid person behind Beef made him almost gag. Bulge caught his eye, and wise man as he was, knew immediately. It remained unsaid between them.

Noise disturbed them, which was probably good – best to avoid awkward questions. His eyes – no, eye – was drawn up, to a gallery even higher than his one. He had never seen it anything but silent before, but stood there now was a man. A magnificent looking man; a man of authority, even beyond Bulge.

It was the Royal Gallery, and that was the King.

Jossie instinctively tensed and puckered his arse – that would never leave him. The King shook his head ever so, and turned his eyes away briefly, only to pull them back, mild disgust in their set. Beside him was a young man of Jossie's age, but the gulf between the two youngsters

was inconceivable. He was everything Jossie was not, and he knew it in his smile. He was Prince of Delfinia, and he was looking upon the scum. That was amusing, in a way, that the entire span of social class was represented in this small space. Jossie wanted to smile just a bit, but he equally didn't want to offend his King. Or his Prince. He had nothing to thank them for, but he wasn't an idiot.

"Aye, the King is in today. Pain in the crotch that is for all involved. Keeps us from our damned jobs."

Jossie was shocked at this attitude, but Bulge shrugged, and stared blandly at the monarch at the bannister. It was a stand-off, of sorts, a challenge between the regal ruler – with his fine shape, glossy hair, powerful presence, and magnificent son – and the man they called Bulge for all the wrong reasons – even Bulge's loose sack-ropes couldn't hide his ridiculous shape. No contest really.

But the librarian didn't care, and that was awesome. Jossie liked Bulge, but in that moment he utterly adored him, thinking of him in the same shade as he considered Delfin, the greatest revolutionary of them all. Bulge was the father he'd never had, and he would even stand up to the King in Jossie's defence. The monarch turned from the balustrade, and this time Jossie did smile, only to regret the use of those muscles. He saw the Prince smirk as he followed his father into the hidden luxury of the Royal Gallery.

"Whass he doon he-e." Not exactly eloquent, but Bulge seemed to understand.

"Planning war. That's all he ever does."

"Wa-urr 'gainsht oo?"

"The Mandari – always the Mandari."

It was a stupid question when he thought about. But then he considered another angle, and his face contorted in confusion. War? In a place of books? That didn't make sense.

"Oh it makes perfect sense, young Jossie." Had Bulge just read his face? "Conflict is as much about the thinking as it is about the doing, and what better place to think than here. Silence is an idea's best friend."

That resonated. Jossie had always loved the silence. It was a time when he could be entirely himself, and he thought that perhaps he was even slightly smart with it; ideas flowering that others might not find. He was certainly passionate to know things, and he didn't like to consider that there were limits to his quiet reflection. But war? Here? It was such a potent concept that it didn't seem like it should have a right to this sanctuary of reflection. But Bulge wouldn't lie. What would be the point?

As the oil passed over a particularly deep gash, he winced, and wished he could expand his smarts into the real world. If only he could teach himself to fight. He looked longingly to the Royal Gallery, and turned to Bulge with barely a question on his lip.

"I thought you'd never ask. Come with me."

And he did. As he flicked through the books, he could feel the bruises easing.

Two years. Two long years of study; repetition; exercise; study; practise; failure; practise; study; and moderate success. His learning of all else had petered to nothing – the occasional foray into his favoured archives. But his passion was unquenchable, and the arts were a way to focus that passion. He was consuming all he could in order to avoid the beatings. Could this really work? If there was a chance, then it must be worth it. It had to be worth it.

He consumed with burning greed, and absorbed with startling capacity. At first, everything he read had been new; and with it came stumbling difficulty. But the more he read, the more the pieces fit together. It was like a great and bloody puzzle.

And still the beatings continued. Of course they did – he would not reveal himself until success was assured.

Solo practical exercises were easily fulfilled in the cavernous and sadly empty library. Realistic practise with others was, unfortunately, harder to come by; Bulge was hardly a suitable partner. And that was the worst of it; the fact that for all the academic and exercise-based research he could muster, he would never know the reality. He had to be sure, had to be utterly sure that he would succeed, or else he may not come out the other side – such was the spite of his bullies. And to be certain took time; a lot of time.

He found himself sneaking out at night, watching bar-room brawls, analysing them until he could plan and successfully imagine his resistance; his interpretation. And soon, such drunken scraps were not worth the effort. He needed something faster, more refined, with greater leverage. He needed to watch the professionals.

And so he did. He found nooks in the crumbling periphery of the Fields; the training sphere for the Royal Guard of Delfinia. There he absorbed the greater challenges, watching duels, flashing blades, impossible skill and dexterity, and he would act along, in the shadows. At first he imagined winning the fight with his own sword and shield, and then he knew he could do it with his bare hands. He was quick, and his mind was shrewd and path-rich. He was a match for a master of Delfinia; or at least he was in his imagination. He must surely be a match for a bunch of sad bullies. Surely? Was he certain?

"Oi, Jossie."

Two years had passed, two years of lifting, pumping books, and climbing monkey-like through the library. He was even now able to scale the walls to the Royal Gallery, and had once snuck in to sample the opulence. It left him breathless. He even found maps sprawled, plans for the latest actions against the Mandari. He was desperate to consume that high-end military theory, but he knew his time was short. Maybe one day. Maybe one day.

"Get here you little girl."

Was two years enough? Surely it must be. He didn't feel certain, but then what did certainty feel like? He had never encountered it before.

"GET—" his training danced through his mind, and little Jossie side-stepped neatly, twisting around until Chick stumbled and hit the floor. "—HIM!"

He turned to face the approaching Beef, now twenty-one and still fucking children. He puckered his arse; that reflex would never leave him.

Chick pulled himself from the floor, wiping sandy filth from his face. Beef came up alongside, and Jossie knew that the third gang member would be blocking his rear. His brother, Brin, was sniggering in the shadows, and Jossie knew he should be angry. But he wasn't. His heart pumped and something deep within squirmed – the same thing that propelled him in his imaginings. But it was constrained by something. Something held him back.

It was the senior gang member who cajoled first.

"What's the matter, little Jossie? Grown some balls?"

He stroked the leather-bound book, another copy, and he could feel the cold spread through him. He wanted to antagonise, to get them frothy before he beat the shit into them, but the confidence wasn't there. What right did he have? He was scum.

He placed the cheap copy on the dusty floor and tried to dredge his learning from the remnants of his fractured mind. But it was gone – lost to the isolation in which he flourished. Here he recognised his worth, and that made him pliant. He exhaled visibly.

“No – no I haven’t.” A tear escaped, and that was a first. He was not crying for these bullies, no indeed; he was crying because he had failed, and he always would. Once on the bottom, always on the bottom. He’d read that somewhere.

A blow to the stomach doubled him over, and despite the silent pleas of his fuming conscious, he couldn’t do anything. He didn’t have the right.

When they’d finished with him, he wished he’d been a girl after all. At least then it would have been remotely natural.

As the bullies left, he watched his brother grind the book into the dust of the streets, tearing the pages with the action. The darkness came, as it always did, but this time he clung to an idea, repeating it in his head so he would recall it on the other side. ‘Worship the page.’ It was something Bulge had taught him.

This was his favourite book. He eyed it with nothing short of wonder as the volume sat snugly in his grubby little hands. There was a ripe bruise across his lower arm, a present from that last beating, but it was starting to fade now. Just.

As he focussed back on the book, he recognised that it was plainer than the copies; just a chord bound collection of yellow and crumbly papers. There were two coarse pieces of card sandwiching the papers, but there was no spine, and frequently the pages were out of order. And indeed, page identifiers were completely missing, meaning that there was a very real risk of the volume being rendered useless.

But when you knew the words as well as Jossie did, it didn't matter. He knew them word for word.

Because they were Delfin's words, by her own hand, and Jossie was in awe of her. What she had done made anything possible. He had to cling onto that.

And these were the original documents, by her own quill, and that made the experience of reading the volume all the more powerful. There were smudge marks where she'd cried; sharp deviations where she'd hurried away; crossings out and annotations; the very mind of Delfinia's foundation in these pages. He was in awe of being able to touch these at all.

As he walked to the clerk's desk, he opened the front board and started reading. He didn't need to see the page, and his lips moved with a practised rhythm. The first page may even be his favourite.

He only drew his eyes up when he reached the front desk. The clerk looked at him over those spectacles and offered the usual scorn. Jossie gulped, and held up the volume.

"I would like to borrow—"

Rage was not a sufficient word. The clerk deemed it necessary to draw himself around the desk and attempted to wrestle the precious volume from him, but as things were about to get out of hand, Bulge intervened.

"What is going on here?"

"This ... vagabond is trying to steal Delfin's journal."

"Borrow! Not steal."

"You've seen what happen when he take books from this place. They come back ruined. This is a national treasure." And undervalued at that, Jossie thought.

Bulge leaned over his belly and peered into Jossie's eyes. "Why, Jossie? We have lots of copies of the text."

He gulped, but retained his composure. "I cannot escape without it; I need to worship the page."

Bulge stood back to his full height, sadness and fear in his face. Then he turned to the clerk.

"Let him go. I will take full responsibility."

Jossie left to the chaotic sound of the clerk's vociferous protestations.

"Oi, Jossie."

He fingered the desperately valuable collection of papers and felt heat swell through him. Beef was before him, and he already knew that the rest of his Farmyard Friends were coming up behind. This was soon, even for them, but that was nice in a way. He was still heated by the melee to get the book out at all, and as the Friends rounded on him, he could feel the anger rising.

He may be scum, but this book was the very definition of value. The ignorance of these beasts must not be allowed to soil such artistry, and he was the guardian. He was the guardian.

He walked to the side of the alley, and placed the literature delicately on the floor. Then he returned to face the bastards. They looked confused.

"Now I've grown some balls, and you're not having them."

Beef sniggered. "It's not your balls I'm after." He pulled at his sleeves, and stepped slowly forward.

And this time he was certain. The anger coursed through him, and he balled his fists.

"Are you going to resist, princess? Come now; pull those trousers down—"

A red haze flashed; his right hand was plank straight; and he jabbed with such ferocity at Beef's apple that the man recoiled with a spasm. Hot breath ejected itself at Jossie, but he was not distracted. His fury was focussing; his guardianship gratifying; and as he watched Beef wriggle on the ground, he smiled manically. He had never smiled like that before – it was the product of what lay deep within. It was his passion and his fury, and it drove him on.

"You git!" Chick came at him, restraint in his purpose, but Jossie was beyond. As Chick's right hand extended, Jossie shifted and forced Chick to follow his momentum until he crashed into the third thug coming in behind. Their skulls cracked satisfactorily, but they soon had their senses, for what that was worth.

Chick was the first to taste real punishment as a swift kick to the balls doubled him over; and there was real savagery in the strike, such was Jossie's hatred of those genitals. As the thug was bent double, Jossie thrust a well pointed knee at his nose. Blood exploded as Chick spilled to the ground, conscious movement entirely absent. Jossie may have killed him, but he didn't care. The fury still coursed.

Third thug – who Jossie noted that he'd never known the name of – was still, but the twitch of his eye told another story. Jossie ducked, and as Beef's fist flew over his head, he grabbed the forearm and hit the elbow with as much as he could muster. It turned out it was a lot, and the arm sheared exquisitely. As Beef fell to the floor, wailing, Jossie screamed. His fury was broken, but as the third Friend upped and ran, so were his enemies. Only brother four remained – rooted.

"I AM NOT JOSSIE." His brother ran, and brother five smiled. He spoke only to himself, though he knew that Beef heard. "From now on, I am only Kantal." He was the smith.

As the bully lay whining on the floor, and the other thug still dribbled blood onto the dirty ground, Kantal went to get his book, and dusted it down. He was the guardian, and Delfin's words would now offer him his purpose.

Purpose. It was something he'd never thought on because he'd never considered that he had it, but it turned out that he did; his purpose was to fight back. But now that he had succeeded, he had to aim higher; to find a new purpose. And in that he was lost.

He opened the first page, to Delfin's preliminary, and there, scrawled at the bottom, were six words that he'd never noticed before – they were not by Delfin's hand. It took a moment to decipher them, but once he'd identified the faint path of the letters, he spoke the words to himself.

“Even you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.”

It was an attack on Delfin, and in that it was an attack on Kantal. He walked to the smithy with purpose flourishing in his mind.

THREE | 15YRS AGO

It was fair to say that a reputation as a bitch-kicking juvenile didn't win Kantal the affections of his family. Quite the opposite in fact – he was treated like a rabid dog. The smithy seemed such a small space.

At the age of fifteen, he was still, technically, the least educated sibling in the household – but he was definitely the most learned. Conversation with his family was like counting sand, and he felt consistently wasted. When he wasn't reading his book, his thumbs twitched impatiently. Damn, he hated this place.

"Oi, Joss." They had taken to calling him that. It was marginally less insulting than Jossie, but it was hardly the rough title he deserved. He refused to respond to any name other than his surname. It was that or nothing.

Although he did really need a forename. His father had a point.

No! It was a girl's name! He would not wear it.

His eyes continued to tweak the words from the pages of ageing paper, layering them expertly in his mind and conjuring the imagery around them. It was the work of the woman called Delfin – the Queen Delfin; mother of modern day Delfinia. It was her story, by her hand, and it was a rare piece of prose. No, more than that. It was the priceless original; Bulge had let him keep it. That he owned such a thing was unfathomable. She was his guide.

And his family didn't even recognise its value. The old adage was true: 'ignorance is blinding'.

So much of Delfin's life painted her as a traitorous bitch or a magnanimous monarch, but the reality was so stark; so different. She was confused, and she was scared. But she was also curious, and that's what drove her to greatness. She was not content with the answer she was

given, even when her father insisted. She had to find out for herself. She was always scratching; always searching; always probing. It was her strength, and it defined her.

And it was this strength of character that splintered the eternal Empire of Mikaeta. She broke the very lineage of written history just by being curious, and that only encouraged Kantal. He liked to think he had that same quality inside him. Now he just needed to prove it.

"Joss!"

No. He would not recognise that name. He would not. He focussed his attention on the page before him and he recognised its very shape. The book was called 'the dark side of the stone', and Kantal had now read it hundreds of times. He never grew bored of its inspiration, and he consumed the familiar prose hungrily.

"For Ero's sake, Kantal, will you listen to me?"

He turned with a smirk on his face. He loved winding his thick old father up.

"Ah, father – I didn't notice you there."

"I was calling yer name, for Brother's sake."

Kantal was exercising his linguistic skills more and more, though he hated the common twang of his accent. Nonetheless, he sounded fresher than the rest of the household combined.

"Apologies, father. All I heard was the whispering shadow of my past." Perhaps that was too much?

"You are a girl after all."

Not the response he was hoping for. "Care to say that to my face?"

His father was huge – fifty times the proposition of Beef, who was, in reality, a sallow and flabby excuse of a juvenile. No, his smith of a father was still in remarkable shape for his age; arms like fence posts and legs to match. He could swing a hook with the best of them.

They had come to blows twice: the first time, when Kantal was thirteen, he had been humbled into submission by the sheer weight of his father. Last time, a year ago, he'd left with a black eye and two broken ribs. But he'd also left with pride, because his father was sprawled on the floor without his wits. Since then, he had insisted on Kantal.

"Son – you cannot call yourself by your surname. It's dumb! We are all Kantal."

"But I am THE Kantal."

"No, Joss, I am THE Kantal. I am senior, and I also live the name. You're a cocky li'l prick."

Unfortunately he could hardly argue with that – his father, and his brothers in fact, did live the name, and he didn't. To be Kantal was to be the smith, and he was no smith. He should have used a different name, a forename perhaps, but the moment had taken him and he was now too far down the road. He needed to persist, so he would.

And he needed to not have this discussion.

"What do you want?" Perfect distraction.

"I want you to learn the meaning of your name. I want you to help me."

That was surely a loaded request? His father hated him, and he hated his father. It was really that simple, and it was only because of the roof that they shared any proximity whatsoever.

Kantal scowled at his father suspiciously.

"What?"

"Come and be a smith you precious little bitch. Come – now!"

There was the tiniest appeal in that suggestion, but even greater loathing. He was an outcast in the Kantal family, so why taunt him with this suggestion? Usually his father laid into

what he called the ‘scrawny shard’ of Kantal’s frame, though it was this scrawny shard that had toppled his huge father the year before. The bastard; why was he saying this?

He was sure he didn’t mouth the question, but his father responded.

"It's because the others are out, and I have a real important job to finish. I only need yer help this morning. You can return to yer sulking this afternoon."

"It is not—"

"I don't have time for yer bollocks, Joss. Get out here."

Almost every fibre of his being told him to sod the bastard, but one chord pulled in the other direction – his inquisitive streak; what would Delfin do? He may not crave a career in metal, but he was intrigued to see the trade in action; to be a part of it. It could hardly do harm to learn. That’s what his queen would do after all.

And so he followed.

He’d expected to walk right into the forge room, where the action happens, but instead he was levered into a storeroom out back. He laughed to himself and earned a scowl from his up-high father – the man dwarfed him.

They stopped over a mess of bitter and scorched iron compound, twisted and deformed where the heat had contorted the material. It was huge, the size of his father plus one, and it was entirely underwhelming – whatever it was. Kantal's shoulders hung, and he asked the obvious question.

"What is it?"

His father was gazing at the thing as if it were offspring – a look Kantal had never felt. It seemed utterly absurd to idolise such scrap; that was, until his father spoke.

"It is a Mahani steel bloom. This is the raw material for the finest swordsmithery the world has ever known. This is Mandari steel, my son."

You couldn't beat a Mandahoi; and this was one of the reasons.

His father smiled, a broad thing that stung Kantal's pride. He felt himself looking at the metallic mess – all black stains and flashes of light – and found his own jaw dropping. He couldn't see how, but he believed his father. And he hated him for it. Did his father know what lay in his heart? That scrawled phrase still haunted him.

"How did you get it?"

"I didn't – the customer did. This bloom of steel is more valuable than everything I own."

Damn. "Who is the client?"

"It is the king himself who has ordered this work."

Kantal's breath caught, and he recalled the brief moment he had stared upon the ruler and his son in the library. Since when was his father taking commissions from the king?

But a more immediate question jumped forth as he looked upon the twisted mess: how would it become a thing of beauty? And more than that.

"How many swords are you expecting to make? This is a lot of steel."

When his father spoke, it took his breath away.

"One. Just a single blade. I am nervous, Joss."

For once he didn't correct the use of his name – his mind was otherwise engaged. He could see the trepidation on his father's face, and very suddenly he felt fifteen. This was entirely daunting for his apparently famous father, and he felt very suddenly small in consequence. The urge to succumb to his father's word was absolute, and it now walked hand in hand with his insatiable thirst for learning. This was a fine opportunity.

"What do we do first?"

His father smiled, but it was as much a grimace if truth be told. "We break this bastard up. Only a third of this bloom is fit for use, and we need to ease that third out. And we need to split that third into three piles: char-rich; char-poor; and char-neutral. It'll take all morning, but only then can we begin."

His father lied – it took them all day.

When Kantal's oldest brother returned home, he laughed at the sight of li'l Josie with his top off, and sauntered straight through to the forge room. Brother two was barely more sympathetic, but Kantal didn't care. He may have actually been enjoying himself. He and his father would take it in turns to angle the crowbar into the metallic mess, targeting clear points of differential. The other would then use a heavy mallet to force the bar in, and the material apart. By the time the sun was sinking, they had three very distinct piles of impossibly valuable material, and a rather larger one of waste. It was satisfying. He could get used to that sensation.

And he ached all over, already, having repeatedly exercised muscles that were only sporadically used – at least, he rarely used them. His father seemed unaffected by the exertion. When his father finally dragged his eyes from the piles of metal, Mother was deep and Kantal could barely make out the expression in the shadow of dusk. Somehow though, it shone through. It was a smile.

"Did you enjoy the work?"

He nodded hungrily, revelling in the delicate thread that had been woven between them. Until this moment, he had been the bastard who'd refused his role as a daughter; and a rebellious little vandal at that. Here and now, for just the briefest moment, he was a son. He almost wanted to cry, but that was not for now. That would be for later.

His father came over and slapped him on the shoulder. The smile was now hidden, only sharpening one side of his face, but somehow that was even greater. That was a smile reserved for the finest deeds of offspring. And it was pointed at Jossie. He shivered.

"Perhaps we will work this blade together. Would you like that?"

Yes he bloody well would. In that moment, it was all he could think about.

And he did grow to love the work. It suited his inquisitive side, and in all honesty, it fanned the child in him. He had spent all fifteen years of his youth playing the adult; hiding from the bullies and hiding from his family. Here though, he was his father's son. Here he was a young smith hoping to inherit a great trade. Here, temporarily, he found happiness. Genuine happiness.

And he found purpose too. He barely read Delfin's scrawl.

It was just a shame it couldn't last. Dear Mother, he hoped it could last.

His brothers both refused to work Mahani steel. They considered it a terribly poor substitute, and as Kantal quickly learned, it was. The Mandari did not have easy access to the great iron ore supplies of the Gorfinian Black Mountains; nor the Dead Sentinels even further left of, in the desolate hunting grounds of the Rhagastos. They would not even have much access to that immaculate steel imported from the Other World, though no doubt they caught some. No, the Mandari were mineral poor, and as a consequence – the blooms being formed of iron dust at best – were patchy and sub-standard.

And yet somehow they made the finest weapons in the known world. How?

It was something his brothers had no time for. They were too busy rushing through trade; drinking; whoring; and every now and then, visiting their wives. They reluctantly helped their

father when he insisted, but it was always begrudging – and they would not learn. The Mandari ways stayed without their grasp.

But Kantal was hungry, and he absorbed the lessons like a sponge. Each meticulous stage was a miracle, because what they did with the steel was incredible. Beauty from a beastly mass of ore – there was magic in the act.

First the char-poor steel was smithed through an unrelenting process. It took an age, to bash that piece of metal until it was near enough a quarter of its original size. But it was essential, because with the heating and hammering, impurities were ejected, and faults were closed up. The steel was made strong, and complete, the heart of a weapon, and because this was char-poor, the steel was remarkably flexible.

And then the real work began.

The other two steel compounds, char-rich and char-neutral, were heated and layered, bashed also, but folded over one another, reheated, and forge welded into a single piece of gleaming steel. The folding created an impossible balance between deadly hard but subtly flexible. And then, because the folding was done in perpendicular layers, the toughness of the resulting steel was – according to his father – staggering; in this exercise Kantal was the ignoramus, but he hungered to learn and that was what differentiated him. He drank the knowledge and digested it in his sleep. The whole process consumed him.

After ten days and nights, and from an eye-watering volume of base metal, they had forged a single edged sabre of exceptional quality; made from materials that should not have been usable. And with each passing day, his brothers' smirks slid into something else entirely – jealousy perhaps. That triggered a smirk on Kantal's own face, and he wore it often when his father stood proudly beside him.

This was one of those moments: late evening; smithy illuminated by torches; a cold wind bringing bumps to the skin; his brothers staring upon what they'd made. Kantal's father spoke with a mischievous quality.

"Go fetch some rusty old steel for me, will you Joss."

Oh the gift! Oh the bloody gift! He walked right across the forge-room and picked up a bland looking broadsword that Jeb had been working on and only recently finished. As he called to his father – his father! – to confirm its appropriateness, he struck brother one a venomous gaze.

"Will this do?"

"Aye – that looks good." His brother's eyes were like spitting furnaces as Jossie walked past, but he had the immunity of his father – not that he feared Jeb in any case. His father made him hold out the weapon, firm as he could, and Kantal braced himself as his father slashed down with the new forged Mandari steel. It bit deeply into the broadsword – a mighty gash in the body of the thing. Jeb would need to re-work it, and Jossie laughed.

His father offered his eldest a knowing smile. "Still think this is sub-standard steel?"

Oh the joy. Oh the humanity! Was this the crest of a wave?

As Kantal left the forge-room, Jeb hissed in his ear. "I'll get you for this."

But he didn't care. In that moment, he was invincible. In that moment, and perhaps forever.

His whimpering prayers morphed jarringly into a screaming whimper, and all went dark around him. No, it was not light before. But he could see his attackers, and now he couldn't. Moisture graced his brow, sweat turning his clothes clingy; but his clothes were still on.

Including his trousers. His arse relaxed.

He was in bed. The scant sheet was piled limply on the floor. It was the middle of the night, and all was dark around him.

What was that? A dream? A nightmare?

It had all seemed so real; the Farmyard Friends all over him. Punishing him. His breath raced away and he tried to slow it; forcing his lungs to a steady rhythm. His hands were crushing the rough canvas sheet that covered the straw of his bedding. This was most peculiar. And scary.

And he was scared. Scared and angry.

How many years of his life had been scarred by that history? And he had been without that humiliation for two years – free of the horror of the Friends. And yet he'd never had a nightmare. Not one. Something hot and aggressive coursed through him, and he recognised it. It was the same thing that had driven him in his revelation. It was an inner sensation that drove him to succeed. A fear of loss.

Only, what did he have to lose? He had never had anything to lose before, except Delfin's words, but they were safe beneath his bed. Where his head should be. He lay back down, breath settling, but realised he was now entirely conscious. His eyes grew to recognise the deep shadows of the midnight stretch, and they were suddenly dragged.

All was not dark.

As he tiptoed from the room, a thought struck him, and his fear swelled up – like acid in his throat. He knew immediately, and it scared him. He did have something to lose now.

His father was in the forge room; just sat there under the dancing light of a single candle. The orange glow invaded the corners of the room, and strange shadows stalked the perimeter

where tools hung. As Kantal stalked in, nerves took him, but wherever he looked, there was only familiarity. He caressed the situation.

“Pa.”

His father seemed surprised by the intrusion, and when his eyes settled on Joss, they took a moment to settle. He had been disturbed from thought.

And then Kantal saw why. The blade lay before him, reflecting the candle with awesome majesty, and the dance of the metal was almost overwhelming. The patterns were astonishing.

Kantal found himself drawn to the steel – like a helpless moth. If he loved her before, then now he was obsessed. He lusted for that thing.

“Beautiful isn’t she.” He could only nod. “I was wondering whether I could take her for myself.”

“You can’t! Can you?” Kantal’s words were edged with poorly concealed hope. No – his father wanted the blade. There was a natural order to things, and Jossie was still bottom of the pile. His arse puckered.

“No son, I can’t. I could try to repay the cost, but the only thing I have that is valuable enough is this bloody weapon. It will be heartache to give her away.”

The king was coming tomorrow, and such was Kantal’s obsession that his fear spat at him, lighting a flash of anger. His fists balled and his father noticed. They were sat side by side, and the man he only now knew placed an impossibly gentle hand over his fist. It was entirely covered in the act.

“What’s wrong, Joss. Why are you up?”

There was no option now – the possessive streak had flared, and his emotions were running hot. He felt small and frightened – frightened of a life where he had substance.

Frightened of a life where he had a father, and where he wasn't bottom. He was scared because it was the life he would never have; only now he did. As he looked at the blade before him, he knew that lump of Mandari steel had turned his life. And now it was leaving him.

You couldn't beat a Mandahoi. But maybe Jossie didn't need to. He had another purpose now, didn't he?

"Come on, son. What is it?"

His face scrunched as the nightmare surfaced in his conscious self; he knew he would have to share. It would consume him otherwise.

And besides; his father needed to know. He was responsible as anyone.

"You know I've been bullied all my life."

He gulped; audible tension in the grating of his throat. "I'm sorry, son. Brin told me he had seen some things. Said he couldn't help you."

The rage flared beautifully. "Help me? He was part of the gang."

Silence for a long while. The shadows continued to dance the perimeter. When his father spoke, it was tinged with embarrassment,

"I have failed you, son. I'm sorry. I never should have let your mother name you."

All fifteen years of his life were forcing their way inexplicably into his head; every painful moment. All those moments he had repressed and ignored; filed away for the preservation of his continued sense. But here, now, when he was on the cusp of something normal; here it consumed him. No – it devoured him. He may have even loved his father these last days; but he hated him certainly. Hated him with a passion. He had to know.

"Do you know what they did to me, father?"

Tears screamed for release, but he would not permit it. Not yet. There would be time for that when he was allowed to have his childhood. But here, he was still the bullied. Here he must be strong.

Because his father was wilting.

“I’m sorry. Of course I know what they did. You came home covered in bruises.” There may have been a reflective glint on his cheek. “And I will repay them with everything they did to you; and worse.”

The tears started rolling as the memory of his violations surfaced. His whole body tensed at the memory, and he knew that intimacy would forever be his worst enemy. He pulled his fist from his father’s grip.

“No, father you won’t. There’s no way you can inflict that punishment.”

He seemed incensed – angry, and desperate to repay. “I will, son; there is no punishment that I will not repay a thousand times over! What could they possibly have done that you consider untouchable?”

It was all but over – he would not last much longer. He had to say it; and then he had to go.

“They used me like a woman, father. They used me like the woman that my name dictates.”

Never before had his father stared at him like that; and never again neither. Jossie got up and walked to his room. When he had finished pummeling he wall, his fist was bloodied. He only got back to sleep when the tears of his childhood dried up.



When the king turned up the following day, an entire entourage with him, Kantal was expecting the order to retreat to the bowels of the smithy. But despite the tension that separated him from his father, he was allowed to stay. His father wanted him by his side; partial payment for his suffering perhaps. No! He would not let anger ruin this path to purpose – his life was on track because of this blade; and he needed to keep it that way. This was a turning point.

He kneeled as etiquette dictated.

The King stood before them, looking remarkably plain if truth be told. He was ageing, snow spreading through his thick beard and cascading about the gold crown. His cloak was white-gold, Delfinia's colours – the colour of Delfin's hair, but beneath that fine garment, he appeared to be wearing rather plain garb. Only the high leather boots told of obvious wealth.

"I hear it's a fine weapon." News travels.

"Aye, she's a beauty." Everyone in the smithy was on their knees, all but his father, but Kantal was forward – visible. A rarity in his short life. The King's guard – arrayed in their immaculately polished plate – stood still, but their eyes darted this way and that, searching for threats. Kantal was only offered infrequent glances from his low vantage, but soon he would be offered a better view. A heavy hand squeezed his shoulder, and he was ushered up. And then he was there, standing before the King. Only the second time in his life.

The last time he was sitting, and he was beaten to the brink. The King would not see that same soft child. Here he could be proud. Proud.

"This is my son..." His father was about to say the name, but he relented. Damn, that was warming. He may entirely forgive his father; right there. His father continued, "he helped with the work."

And then the young man stepped forward. The youth – in similar robes and arguably more elaborate underclothes – was a mimic of the older man facially; tapered chin and high cheek bones. His hair was still dark and thick, and the fairness of his skin suggested he was little older than Kantal, if at all. And with a flash of a smile, he suddenly recognised the boy.

He had been there at the library too. He was the son – the heir.

"Then I thank you." There was the faintest whiff of recognition in the eyes of the Prince, and for a moment Kantal feared the consequences. His heart skipped and his anger warmed his gut, but then the heir turned away – nothing said; nothing recognised. Perhaps.

"I offer this fine decorative dagger as a gift for the work. It would not stand up to your fine craftsmanship, but it has its own subtle worth, I'm sure you'll agree."

Hardly subtle: it was glittering with jewels. His father was rendered speechless. He took the blade hungrily; and Jossie was momentarily jealous.

But Kantal did not need that symbol of recognition. He had the firm hand of his father, and the knowing smile of the heir of Delfinia. He had never felt so good. And perhaps more than that; he had his purpose, a genuine purpose. His life had turned for the good. Damn be to the Mandahoi.

He may never beat a Mandahoi, and for that he was sorry. But he could damn well make weapons as good as they could, and in the end, that was enough. He actually smiled.

As he followed his father to the rear of the smithy for a drink – a celebratory drink! – his eldest brother offered a threatening smile. But he would not let it get to him. Not now at least. He was king of the smithy world.

He woke to chaos. He often woke to chaos, but this was different.

"WHERE IS IT?"

Usually it was the dull clang of steel on near molten steel that stirred him in the morning – the sound of his brothers starting their day. To be fair to the idiots, they did have a remarkable capacity for early schedules even after late festivities, but it could hardly be called a quality. Today was different; his father was angry.

"WHERE!"

Kantal did not have a big room out back in the smithy, and the one source of light was through the chimney of the small hearth. There was a blood red glow to the scant illumination, and that forebode. He stretched his shoulders, creasing the sleep ache out of his neck, and then threw his legs over the side of the bed. Damn he had slept well. It must have been the fire-liquor he'd shared with his father.

"COME ON YOU BASTARDS, WHERE IS IT?"

His eyes would barely open; such was his grog. He never felt like this. He was hardly the sprightliest morning creature, but he was no slug either; the constant threat of bullies drilled that into you. He tried to shake sense into himself and he barely heard his brother's whimpering response. What had they done? He wanted to laugh at their pathetic display, but tiredness would not allow him that luxury. No, he was feeling mighty shit if truth be told.

And then his door cracked open, and his father marched in. The fury was rabid on his face.

"Still here, then?"

The question was aimed at him, but he couldn't work out for the Mother what it meant. He tried to shake the weariness away once more, and from the shadows behind his father, he

caught a whiff of something putrid. Jeb was smiling cruelly at him; the same smile he'd worn last night. Now he was alert. He stood immediately straight.

"Of course I'm still here. Why would I be anywhere else?"

His father flicked his eyes, and Jossie was drawn to a packed rucksack. His packed rucksack. The sour smile stretched in the shadows, and he felt the cruel menace of the bullies once more. His arse puckered. He had not been subject to that cruelty for three years, but that sense was returning. It was returning fast.

"I don't know what that's doing there."

"Well, let's just have a look inside then."

No! That was the worst thing that could happen, though he did not know why. His legs moved, but they were not in agreement with each other, and he fell to his knees. A snigger from the bastard, and it was starting to make sense. They had drugged him. And his father was ripping the items from the bag, feeling about for something in particular. Looking for whatever he had lost.

And Kantal knew what it was before he even found it. He also knew it was there, and the rising sense in his pit let him see the reality. He could not survive this. His father would not allow it.

So he ran.

As he pushed between his sneering brothers, he turned back to see the father – the same man who may have actually loved him yesterday – with venom oozing from his eyes. He held the jewelled dagger aloft, and cried after Kantal in something between desperation and mourning.

"After everything I did for you, Jossie. Why would you repay me like this?"

He could not answer because his brothers had it planned. He would never be allowed in this place again.

As he raced through the living space, he snatched up 'the dark side of the stone'. It was the only thing he owned, a gift from Bulge before he'd died, and he was buggered if he was leaving it to the idiots. And besides – he had nothing else, now. Not even a place to sleep.

FOUR | 13YRS AGO

It turned out that living on the streets was rough. Even compared to a life of misery, this was worse. Perhaps not worse than the abuse of his past, but not much better. And anyway, at least back then he had had the friendship of Bulge to keep him buoyed – now he was just lonely. Damned lonely.

And frustrated. Two years ago he had been on the cusp of a life. A life with purpose; intent; substance; and perhaps even love. Now he had nothing. It was like being starved, then being given the very tiniest morsel of food, before finally having it pulled mercilessly away. It drove one insane. But alas, such was the curse of his existence. In some ways he was more comfortable in misery. At least it was familiar.

He'd left the smithy in such a hurry that he'd been entirely unprepared for a life of rough, but a child of his background was nothing if not resourceful. Within a cycle of Fortune, he had his routine down to a pinch. In time, he may even learn to flourish in the squalor. And if he knew Triosec well before, then he held her secrets in his pockets now. In many ways, he had become the king of the damned city; though in most ways, he was mere gutter scum.

And yet he retained a sense of personal pride, refusing to be sucked into the vortex of self-deprecation that seemed to plague a majority of the city's "lost"; though "lost" seemed entirely inappropriate when the unfortunate population were actually one of the more common sights in the city. They were visible, but they were not noticed.

Which was why Kantal fitted in so well.

His hair was long, scraped into a tight tail which hung from the base of his neck, secured with a hempen chord. He had patchy and wispy facial hair sprouting, young man of seventeen as he was, and he would dearly love to shave it off. But a clean-shaved waif was noticeable, and

invisibility was useful. The sad wafting beard gave him a perverse freedom, and so he stuck with it. Even if it did annoy him intently.

And if the freedom was good for anything, then it was good for fuelling his incessant hunger for learning. A life of purpose may have been fleeting, but it was profound, and it had taught him one thing; that there must always be something worth pursuing. And he was setting his sights on the high arts.

The art of war; because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

And the more he looked at that leaded scrawl at the base of the first page, the more he saw it as an insult to Delfin herself. Who could possibly have right to that slight? No – it wouldn't do. And in Kantal's head, he was fighting for her.

At least she never shunned him.

But it was always worth having smaller goals – after all, overcoming the Mandahoi was somewhat celestial as an objective. And so he set about learning all the subtle tricks that his father had only fleetingly taught him – all those subtle Mandari methods. Because if one thing crawled over his mind like that pencilled statement, it was the sight of that blade. Damn she was lovely, and he would have his own. He would have his own one day.

The only trouble with Mandari art – it was not well known outside Mandaria.

But he had to start somewhere, and the library was good as any. Fortunately, Delfinia's ignorant wallowing meant that it was an unguarded proposition – at least it was for someone as resourceful as he was.

His unsolicited access to the building was through a window that seemed to remain perennially unlocked about the upper gantry. It was still early morning, but as he edged his way

closer to the top of the wall, perspiration softened his grip, and he looked back with a nervous edge. There were people down there now.

He shook the idea from his head, revelling in the challenge of the climb. As a slap of wind unsettled him, his moist palm threatened to give, but a forceful extension of his knees projected his other limb the final distance; he was all but assured safety. He found himself gulping as he hauled himself onto the roof.

Of course, he would much rather have made the climb early in the day, before the threat of city life was abound, but he'd run into trouble. It turned out that the baker he'd stolen from the night previous was not one to let a financial loss lie, and he'd hunted Kantal all night with the Wings in tow. As Kantal was emerging into the barely-light to make his way to his beloved temple, the bastard City Guard had descended upon him with the baker screaming for his head. It took all of Kantal's wit, and no small amount of his pocket aggression, to get out of that one. But by the time he'd shaken his tail, the early chance was gone.

Better if he were to lay low a few days, to be honest. Better to be in the library. No-one would think to look there.

He eased the creaking window open, its filthy glazing barely reflecting the bright daylight. The silence of the place always offered danger with any movement, but he had to take the chance. And besides, once inside, he could conceal himself from anyone. Bulge had taught him all the places – and he meant all the places; he instinctively rubbed his posterior – but as he hauled his meagre sack of possessions behind him, it was evident that he was alone. The library should be open by now, but such was the lack of demand, the new chief-librarian often forgot to air the doors at all.

As he closed the window with barely a care, he thought he heard the inflamed cry of the baker. That man truly did hold a grudge, and Kantal allowed himself a chuckle as he popped a morsel of the stolen bread into his mouth. And with that satisfaction, and the waning of the ecstasy of flight, he felt tired. He appreciated the deathly isolation and found himself looking to the Royal Gallery. If anywhere was likely to house comfy surroundings, then...

He was almost licking his lips at the prospect of cushioning. After all, he was almost a king in this place anyway.

Turns out that climbing to that place was a bit of a bugger, especially with aching limbs. He managed it by clawing his way across the far wall of the library, gripping barely proud bricks with an unnatural purchase. But halfway across the void, he regretted choosing this moment to slake his investigative streak – he was still aching from the climb. Once he'd placed his hand on the rail, he exhaled, and smiled. Ha – king after all!

"What do you think you're doing?"

“Shit!” If he hadn't been holding the rail, he would now be dead. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure that wasn't still the case. A hand extended, offering leverage over the banister, but Kantal did not know what to expect on the other side. When he found it, it did not bode well.

The young man was pristine – utterly pristine. He wore simple black trousers, pressed to a dangerous edge, and a shirt of such whiteness that it actually pained Kantal's eyes; it had been a long time since he'd seen anything that clean. His hair was glossy and well ordered, his face trimmed deadly tight, and he had deep eyes which betrayed a remarkable confidence – remarkable because it seemed so out of place on a man so young. And yet Kantal knew this man, and knew it was not misplaced. He looked to the belt, and saw the sabre that he'd helped forge with his very own hands. It was an effort to draw his eyes away.

"I said, what are you doing?"

He remembered himself, and dropped to a knee. "Apologies, Highness." Urgency rose in him, and with it came that consuming and possessive fear. He dearly hoped he would not need it.

"Oh, get up. And I'm not 'Highness'. I am the heir; not the king."

Could he get up? Could he stand gaze to gaze with the future head of his nation? He was Kantal, and he'd always battled the odds. The deeper shades of his character unwound further, but they were well in check. The sense translated into a confidence of his own, and he extended himself, standing almost toe to toe with the heir.

Only then did embarrassment strike. He was a state. He was sure he could make out his own dishevelled reflection in the man's teeth. For Ero's sake!

"So?" The Prince tapped a foot, as if impatient, and then reinforced the question a seemingly final time. "What are you doing here?"

What better way to shock than with the truth?

"I hear that my King has an excellent collection on military mechanics. I have come to indulge." And perhaps have a nap? No – that was too much truth.

Those deep eyes had firmed in the two years since they'd last come face to face, and the expression was certainly hard. But Kantal had grown too, rougher certainly, and he held his own firm defiance. The heir stated the obvious.

"What makes you think you have a right of access to these archives?"

Bulge escaped his lips, "the library, and all its contents, is for the people. And besides; what possible harm is there in perusing these volumes when no other bugger is looking at them?"

He regretted the use of the word almost instantly, but his coiled anger stopped him from apologising.

"This bugger minds." Stern authority and a hand on the hilt of the magnificent weapon diluted Kantal's resolve ever so, but then that stony face melted into something else. The heir laughed. "Oh, don't worry about it. There's nothing but dull statistics in these tomes anyway. This is no way to win a fight. This is." He tapped the pommel of his precious sabre.

Kantal gazed longingly once more. He spoke absently.

"I beg to differ, my Prince. The maths behind the mayhem is of utmost importance."

The Prince turned about and strutted into the room. Kantal followed.

"Nonsense; it is an easy equation. If I have a thousand fine men with fine weapons, and you have a thousand modest men with modest weapons, then I am victorious. The equation is therefore simple: take more men with finer weapons. Victory is assured."

The ignorance was exquisite. Kantal could not proclaim authority on the matter, but he had read enough over the years to know the basics.

"And from where will all these fine men come?"

The Prince swept about the room, and Kantal's eyes followed him loosely, taking in the sight of the room as they went. There truly were some treasures here – and a comfy looking lounge in the corner. His tiredness heaved at that.

"Well, I shall train and arm them of course."

"And do you think your opponent sits idly while you train your away?"

The face had turned stony once more. Kantal suddenly understood why the Prince was here – he was supposed to be learning. But he evidently already considered himself an expert, which was folly. He was anything but.

"The borders will be defended by the other forces."

Kantal jumped hungrily into debate. If he had lacked intelligent discourse at the smithy, then the streets were barren. His pulse raced. "And if these other, presumably 'inferior', forces are pounced upon by the enemy, will they not be defeated by your very logic?"

He was evidently not used to being attacked; especially not by rabid looking vagabonds. Come to think of it, he hadn't even offered recognition. He must be unaware of their previous encounter.

"They will be in defensible positions."

"And when you assault with your 'finery', is there not a chance that your enemy digs themselves into defence? Are you still assured victory?"

"Well yes, I must admit that this does—"

"And even in open combat; what about the lay of the land? And the most unforgiving of all masters – Father Fortune himself? What if the Father is against you? And while these 'fine men' are about their business, what happens to the heartland? And even despite all of this, even if you have all in hand, what if the enemy have a Mand—"

"Yes, please, stop." Kantal had been raising his voice, almost to the point of anger, and he now flushed. It would not do to have a go at one's future king. He hung his head and mumbled an apology.

But he had a point. You couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

"No – not at all. How is it that one so bedraggled comes to have such an intimate understanding of military mechanics?"

He shook his head. "I don't, my lord. That's why I'm here." That and swordsmithery. He found himself looking to the weapon once more.

"Then you should stay. And you should teach me." A door slapped shut down below, but when Kantal turned to look over the banister, to the body of the library, he recognised that the doors remained closed. The prince explained. "Though perhaps some other time – my father is here, and he is rather less tolerant than I am."

Shit! The King, here! What was going to happen? The Prince stepped forward, towards Kantal, arms reaching for him; threatening to grab. He was going to be handed over to the Wings. No! He wouldn't succumb. He slapped the Prince's hand away.

And stayed silent. It was mighty bold to strike one's future king.

The Prince looked affronted, and as Kantal edged towards the banister, he felt a sudden urge to pause. The heir spoke.

"I only wanted to show you this."

With a kick of a lever, a trapdoor sprung, and a ladder ran smoothly down to the library floor below. Oh blessed relief! He didn't know whether he could struggle across the precarious wall once more. His tiredness was dragging.

As he started down the steps, his head just above the floor of the gallery, he paused once more. He could hear voices – he didn't have much time.

"Sorry, Lord Prince. I meant no offence." It was not in his nature to apologise, but on this occasion...

"No need. Go. Flee." He took the first steps down to safety. "Oh, and Kantal. I will see you at the Fields at noon tomorrow."

That he was not expecting. Turns out that he was more recognisable than he gave himself credit for.

“What are you doing here, you little shit?”

He hadn't been expecting Friendly in the Fields, but this? This was just plain aggression.

"I was told to come." And bloody regretting it. He threw his gaze to the heir, a man standing on the other side of the open courtyard – colonel already, despite his clearly inadequate learning. Military science was a mystery to the man, and yet there he was; lording. Kantal meanwhile, a learned tramp, was being drenched in the spittle of a disciplinarian. It appeared the man had a real problem with his own poor looks, and revelled in the aggression he could exercise. He turned to the cluster of officers, and then turned back on Kantal, eyes narrowed menacingly.

"Told or ordered? Either way, you have some sense at least."

What was he supposed to say to that? "Thank you."

The ugly bastard flared up. "Or maybe not! Did I ask you to speak?"

This was going to be tough. Kantal had been obedient to no-one at any point in his life: he'd floored his mountain of a father, for Ero's sake! This, frankly, scrawny sergeant would not quell the fire in his gut. His edge was alert, but Kantal wouldn't need it yet. He would handle this the proper way. He gulped down the anger.

"Good. When to shut up and when to whimper are important lessons. We'll beat that into you."

He nodded, unsure whether this was a moment for silence or squeaky submission. He almost sniggered, which would definitely have been the wrong option.

"You don't have anything to say?"

He'd got it wrong. Of course. His eyes flicked back to his Prince, but the young colonel didn't seem to care.

"No."

"NO WHAT?"

His face was near drenched, and he now knew that this authority figure had an oral hygiene problem. That made them closer than anyone else that Kantal knew. How sad was that?

"No sir."

He was riled, but that was clearly the correct etiquette. The whole of the Fields – so named because it was the only open stretch in Triosec, save for the gardens about the Senate – had come to a halt. The fact that his sponsor was here was reassuring, in part, but no-one else seemed to be expecting him. He didn't even know what to ask.

Actually, of course he did. There was no other reason to come here.

He'd never considered it before, which was strange. He'd come here and watched drills as an eleven year old, absorbing the movements of the trained soldiers until he was sure he could overcome. And since then, nothing. And yet, if he knew he was better than the military, why not flaunt it? Maybe it was because he was eager not to lay himself out as a piece of dirt. Not that he wasn't used to it.

"What are you doing here, you shit?"

Not a little shit anymore. Progress?

"I've come to join the Royal Guard." I've come to beat the Mandahoi.

Silence for a moment, but not for long. What was he expecting? A slap on the back?

The laughter rolled through the open space, and the petty sergeant's guffaw was taken up by all and misc. And looking about, Kantal judged there was more than a sprinkling of miscellany. This was supposed to be the finest that Delfinia had to offer, and yet Kantal felt embarrassed. No wonder the Mandahoi held such sway.

You couldn't beat a Mandahoi – not with this lot.

"Think you can fight, I s'pose?" The bastard was barely coherent.

"I've had my moments."

He'd forgotten to say 'sir', but he didn't care.

"Corporal Sluuger – come and show this shit what's required of the Royal Guard."

His interrogator walked off – only that – and a hulking bastard came over to take his place. Kantal looked to the heir, who was still gazing intently; he offered the slightest nod. What was he doing? Did he want to join the army? He wanted revenge, though he didn't know what for. He wanted to fight the Mandari – yes, that was it. He wanted to fight for his beloved Delfin. After all, she was the only one who had stuck with him. It didn't matter that she'd been dead a thousand years; they still had an understanding. That was why he was joining the army, wasn't it?

Suddenly it didn't matter. This was a matter of pride. And survival.

"You little shit."

The hulking git recognised him, and it was reciprocal. Beef stood before him, now a full grown adult, but none the wiser for it. He hauled a brutish lump of metal from his side, and grimaced. His teeth were rotting – perhaps that was a requirement of the Royal Guard? – and he hissed from between the browned enamels.

"Chick never moved again. You left him a vegetable, you little fuck."

How dare he? "Well, my arse has never been the same, so call it evens?"

He lurched, and Kantal knew he would have the better of this encounter. But as he sidled past and jabbed at the exposed neck, Beef spun and came again. Kantal dropped to the self-same arse, and exhaled.

"Ha. Arse of a girl; technique of a woman. You're no Guardsman. You're dead meat."

He was actually quite quick, which was surprising given the considerable bulk, and as Kantal danced out of the line of pain, he hatched a plan. With the Prince looking on, and Delfin in his thoughts, his possessive edge was now screaming within; but it was Kantal's particular skill – a derivative of his survival instinct – that allowed him to channel without conceding. If he had something to fight for, then the anger fuelled him – and here he was searching for purpose once more. You couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

As he squatted down and forced his shoulder into the man's stomach, he screamed in brief concession – but it was controlled. When Beef was on the dusty ground looking into his eyes, he showed genuine shock. And then the lumbering idiot came again.

And Kantal was frustrated. He had greater deeds in mind, and this flailing heap of lard was just a sad obstacle in his path. With an abrupt acceleration, he snapped the corporal's arm to a painful angle, and levered the dull steel from his grip. When those shocked eyes – ghosts from Kantal's past – looked upon him once more, he slapped the side of his head with heavy steel. Blood trickled over the sand as Kantal gazed down without a pinch of remorse. It had been a while since he'd done that.

And this time there were witnesses. A lot of witnesses.

"You sneaky shit. You give that here."

The tendons in his wrists flexed as the disciplinarian came for him, but as he was about to start a chain of carnage, he recognised the tiniest shake of the head in the corner of his vision. Such a small gesture; such a huge effect.

He dropped the poor lump of metal.

When the petty officer had him by his shirt, knuckles white with fury, Kantal offered a fake whimper; and the bastard knew it was fake. That was fine.

"You bastard. I will—"

"Sergeant: you will find a place for him. I suspect he will prove useful."

The eyes of the man told Kantal everything he needed to know – true hatred, right there. But a colonel's word, and the Prince of Delfinia no less, outweighed any personal intentions the man might have. Authority smothered the temper, and Kantal was given back his ability to breathe.

"Yes, I'm sure we can. You can clean the fucking mess. Now!"

As Kantal walked past his sponsor, he felt a surge of gratitude mingle with something close to animosity – it was the Prince's fault he was here at all. But without that man, his temper would probably have got him killed. And besides, it was almost like the Prince was looking out for him; perhaps they shared a goal.

A flash of light caught his eye, and he turned to see his sabre being shown off. Bastard. Even if they did have some sort of shared goal, they wouldn't share that sword. That annoyed him deeply.

Boot polishing duty. Not again. Twenty Fortune cycles now, and all he'd done was shine stuff: floors; boots; crockery; cutlery; other people's steel; and almost a handful of cocks, though he'd managed to duck that responsibility. Being a twelve-year old recipient of buggery was one thing. Taking cock in mouth at eighteen was quite another.

He would have bitten the fucker off.

The Royal Guard was, of course, extremely proud – and rightly so. They were utterly meticulous in their demonstration of marching capabilities, and could switch a right angle to near mathematical perfection. Everything about the bastards was polished – their weapons; their uniforms; their facial hair; even the abuse they handed out to the minor staff had a honed edge to it. The word shit could be made to sound almost divine.

But Kantal had never lived a life of embellishment, and he saw right through the veneer. He hated this place.

How in bugging hell had he ended up here?

The first cycle was probably bearable, but that was only because he was still learning. As an eternal resident of Triosec, he'd assumed that the Fields was where the finest of the military came to practise. The Royal Guard, right? The pinnacle.

It turned out that anyone worth their steel was a long distance away. If you were good, then you were sent straight to the borders. To die. It seemed madness, but rather than the borders bend to the force of the Mandahoi.

After all, you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

He looked back at himself in the outrageously reflective leather of the boots he was shining. He had been working on the toe for an undefined period of time, and he suspected his thoughts had dragged him somewhat. This would probably mean a beating of some sort – there was usually a beating. It was fair to say that he wasn't popular.

"And your father's okay with this?"

The accent was polished, and Kantal jumped to immediate attention. His own ill-fitting uniform looked embarrassing compared to the fine officer's garb arrayed about the room. It was

ironic that he spent so much of his time within reach of the finery, and yet he was the lowest scum on site. When the second man spoke, a shot of acidic spittle burned his throat.

"It was his idea. I need to earn my wings." The Prince.

"You're not a Wing – you're a colonel of the Royal Guard."

The Prince strutted confidently ahead of his companion, and his eyes were focused directly ahead. There was no way the bastard would see Kantal; even less recognise him. They'd had no contact in twenty cycles, and the dull dislike for the man was turning ever sourer. It was this man's fault he was stuck here.

And the bastard had his sword.

"You know what I mean. My father is an embattled war veteran. I am a raw pup. I need to see the blood, and I need to see the horror of the Mandari war machine. How else am I to succeed as a ruler?"

They were in line with him, strutting past like superior peacocks. The bastards.

"Morning Kantal. I trust you are well?"

He was, quite literally, blown dumb. The words stuttered from his throat, like alien entities, and the apathy melted back to mild distaste.

"Y-y-y-es, my lord."

"Not lord, Kantal – colonel." He hadn't looked at him once, but he didn't need to. His companion offered a spiteful glance, but it didn't matter. He had been recognised by the senior man. He might have actually smiled.

"Back to work, Kantal."

Appreciation over; it was fleeting, but thoroughly enjoyable.

The two senior officers then proceeded to have a protracted argument while they adorned their polished appearance with the final immaculate touches. The Prince came over and took the boots off Kantal, complimenting him on his work – he was a clever bugger – before returning to his increasingly vocal companion. It was only when the junior officer's voice was thoroughly raised that he could make out the detail.

"It's madness! You can't beat a Mandahoi."

The words left him before he could rein them in. He didn't even believe them. "Yes you can." Then he found himself stroking the priceless book in his inner pocket, and he thought he might understand. It may be a mad purpose, but perhaps it was his purpose. Anything was better than shining stuff, wasn't it?

The two officers looked sternly in his direction, but he did not meet their eyes. He had to make sense of what had popped from his mouth.

"Kantal? You've never argued that truth before."

The other officer seemed to sense an injustice, and laid the obvious bullied path. "My Prince, you do not speak to this filth. He had no right to speak. This boy will be—"

"Boy? He is the same age as I am. Am I a boy, captain?"

The captain spluttered just as Kantal turned to face his shadow – the Prince. Why was it that their fates were seemingly entwined? He was not complaining. His Prince asked once more.

"You've never disagreed before, Kantal. Why would you say that now?"

Because he was an idiot – that was it. You couldn't beat a Mandahoi; it was a universal truth. True enough, Mandahoi died like any other, and in the complex front of a battle, Father Fortune was ruthless with his judgement; but beat a Mandahoi, one on one? Never.

"Sorry sir."

"It's Prince to you—"

"Shut up captain. What do you have to say, Kantal?"

But the truth was he had nothing to say. He looked about the room and took in the fine stonework; the oiled wood; the polished metal – so much polish. And such a nice weapon staring back at him from the Prince's side. He had an idea.

"They die like the rest of us. Give a practised man a Mandari edge, and with the Father in his court, he may just succeed. They are fast, but they are human."

The captain clearly disagreed. He spat as he dismissed the idea. "Pah; Mandari steel is second rate. They are freakish ghouls; that's what makes them so potent. It's like fighting a ghost."

The Prince stood, and smoothly removed the steel from her home. Kantal lusted as he looked upon the thing his hands had made. The folding caused the blade to reflect glorious patterns – like she was burning.

"Offer your fine Delfinian steel, captain."

The other ticked his gaze between the two men, astonished by his Prince's show and disgusted by Kantal's interference. Eventually he stood and swept out a length of dull grey steel. It was well-forged.

"It is Gorfinian."

The Prince nodded, then swept his own weapon back, before pushing it forward. The Gorfinian steel – some of the finest metal in the world – was cleaved clean in half. The Prince smirked.

"This is Mandari steel, but more than that. It was Delfinian made. And by him." His hand pointed out Kantal, and the ever so tearful captain chewed his lip.

"Sorry sir." He was clearly at a loss for what was going on, but the loss of his fine steel was worse. In all honesty, the fact that it sheared as it did suggested it was a fake, but Kantal was not about to ruin the Prince's exhibition.

"Mandari steel is the finest not because it has the purest raw materials – it doesn't. It is the finest because it is infused with love of perfection. It is infused with the gift of time, and time, captain, is the ultimate scarce resource."

A part of Kantal wanted to believe that he'd read that somewhere else, but he knew he hadn't. It was beautiful.

And time was a scarce resource. And he was wasting his time here.

"Sir – let me come with you."

He didn't even know where 'where' was, but anything was better than this infuriating stagnation. He had enjoyed showing Beef up again, but that had been one exhibition almost a year back. It was not a reason to stay.

"Yes – I think you should. You seem to be wasted here."

YES! His relationship with this prince was ever confounding, but it seemed to yield unexpectedly positive results. Presumably the Prince got something out of it too?

Kantal gulped. Perhaps that was still to come.

"Come, Kantal. Let's see if we can equip you for the future."

FIVE | 12YRS AGO

Here was not where he expected 'where' to be. The breath caught in his throat, and he didn't think he'd ever been so nervous. Or was it excitement?
It was certainly madness.

A plain old street, oddly familiar, though not forged of pleasant memories. Citizens bustled past him, not noticing him; ignoring him. Nothing seemed to change, but he had – he was sure of it. It was a warm afternoon, the late season, and there was to be one final push. But before that push, he needed to be here. At least, that's what the Prince decreed. Kantal wasn't so sure.

The building looked noticeably finer than his last attendance, three years prior. They had spent the earnings well, and a congregation of military types evidenced the flourishing business. He spotted familiar faces in amongst the punters, and a jet of cold went through him. He quite literally had no idea how this would pan out.

"Joss!"

He turned to the screech, and found his mother near hanging from an open ground floor window. Her lined old face was edged with a combination of joy and fear, and it occurred to Kantal that he knew so little of her that he couldn't place the basis for either emotion. He reached out his right hand and brushed her outstretched palm; his nerves tingling to the touch. She smiled. He was her little girl, and he was back. He wanted to be angry, but he couldn't. He may have even missed her.

"Little Jossie. You're back."

"Brother?"

It was his waste of a fourth brother, Brin, looking as meaningless as he ever did. He was still bigger than Kantal by some distance, but he had never been stronger. Not since the days of the violation. Kantal released his mother's hand, and in her delight – a delight that wasn't mirrored in Brin – she proceeded to gallop through the smithy. As Kantal walked past his bully of a brother, he recognised two things: he was entirely ambivalent to the presence of his brother, and it was barely worth paying him attention at all. Even his coiled anger, which he was mastering to greater effect with each passing day, did little more than simmer. That was how irrelevant Brin was, because it was not Brin that he needed to be scared of.

You couldn't beat a Mandahoi, but Kantal was going to try.

"What clothes is them? You pretending to be a soldier now?" Not even worth humouring the words with a response.

"Joss – you really shouldn't be here. Father'll go mad."

Brother two: the rational column. His air of confidence suggested that he was now adopting his rightful place as the head of the smithy, usurping the older but less useful brother. That brought a smile to Kantal's – to little Jossie's – face. He turned to his brother and smiled.

But he wasn't smiling inside. He had to ball his fists to stop them from shaking. The shadow of his father was looming.

"Father will understand."

"UNDERSTAND WHAT?"

And there he was; the huge frame of his parent. His fear. He stayed within the bounds of the smithy, and the shadow hid his features; but it was clear that joy was absent. Kantal's mother hung at his left, pleading for mercy which was strangely satisfying. In one corner, he had never felt so wanted, and in the other, he knew he was loathed. He gulped.

And standing at the father's right-hand was brother one; the failing brother. He wore that same sultry face, but this time it was not baked with mischief. No; Kantal was the mischief maker this day.

"What do you want, little Jossie."

His father was trying to sound patronising, and it worked. Kantal rubbed at a rib, and suddenly he recalled where that ache had come from – his father had given it to him during their almighty scrap. But that was an important day, because Kantal had won. Here was his chance to force the victory.

"I am in the army now, father. I am of the Royal Guard."

A hand was waved dismissively in Kantal's direction. "The Royal Guard is full of crooks. No wonder they took you in."

There was visible disbelief on a number of the loitering clients, and one man even huffed and strolled off. His father must have really wanted to dig if he was willing to lose business over the insult.

"And soon to be journeying to the borders. To the Mandari borders."

His father gulped, his apple highlighted by the sinking sun. A touch of something softer perhaps?

"Then death awaits you. The deserved fate of a crook."

His mother whimpered and he may have actually been starting to relish her affection. How had he never seen this before? Most likely because it had never been there. Maturity did wonderful things to a man, and he was only just maturing. Brin shifted at his side – he would never mature.

"I am no crook." Of course, that wasn't entirely true. He was absolutely a crook – just ask the baker. But he hadn't been a crook until his brothers had set him up and chased him from the smithy. His father's eyes shifted in the shadows.

"You were going to leave with my property. That is theft."

He didn't really want to argue about this – that wasn't why he was here – but he felt that one effort to pave the truth was worthwhile.

"If I had been looking to steal your property, I would have been gone before the sun was up. I would have succeeded, father."

His right fist flexed, and Kantal could feel the perspiration coalesce. Rarely did he get so tense these days.

"Are you trying to blame—"

"I am not trying to blame anyone. I was merely attempting to communicate the truth. But if the only way down that path is via the song of violence, then I will forego the pleasantries. Let's get down to business."

Confusion reigned, which was much warmer on Kantal's confidence than the threatening air.

"What business?"

And this was why he needed his father; because he was a fabulous blacksmith.

"I need you to make me a sword. I need you to make me a Mandari forged blade."

Silence prevailed: the hushed chatter of the punters and general din of the city being overwhelmed by the acute tension. It lasted, elongating with each heartbeat; every moment heavier than the last. Kantal raised his left hand, a heavy velvet purse gripped within it. The

Prince's money, all the Prince's money, and Kantal could see his father's eyes switch. The pressure went up a notch, before it broke. And oh how it broke.

He had never heard his father like that before. Laughter had not been a big part of his life.

"You want me to make you a sword? After what you did to me? You are mad, son."

Had he ever been called son before? Yes, in those days of perfection, but it had never burrowed like it did in that moment. It was sour.

"I have coin." He shook the purse, and the gold inside chinked. But his father was immovable.

"Coin is of no use if you don't have my respect. I will not help you."

Kantal's shadow shifted as he rocked from side to side, and his eyes dropped. How could he have been so stupid? Some grudges ran too deep, and an arrowed peek to brother one earned that same self-satisfied smile – he had been beaten three years ago, and he could not turn the tide today.

But then the smile went, and Kantal's shadow did something else. It morphed and warped, and stretched to the side; breaking. And then there were two, and Kantal's shadow spoke.

And he knew he had won.

"Master Kantal senior, how pleasant to see you again. After your previous fine work, I would dearly like to commission you for a piece of similar quality for my squire here." The Prince edged the sabre from its house, and Kantal recognised a bright flash of a smile. "You would not deny a Prince, would you?"

His mother curtsied and ejected a little yelp of joy.

Brin's jaw dropped, and he melted into kneeling submission.

Brother one ducked back into the darkness, and hid himself as he knelt.

The entire population of the street struck formal postures.

And his father softened. Oh how he softened.

"Of course, Prince. I would be delighted to accept your commission."

The Prince took the coin from Kantal's hand and threw it over. "This needs to be extra special. I want a double edged straight blade; an infantry blade. But it needs to be light as the wind, and strong as the Mandari resistance. And I need it forged in five days."

His father looked flustered.

"My Prince: where in l'Unna would I get that much Mandari steel?"

"Already sorted," and with an extension of his hand, a cart trundled into view of Kantal's father. Only then did Kantal allow himself a smile.

"Come. We have preparations to make. We are going to war."

Suddenly those sunny days with his father melted into the meaningless. This was what it was to be happy. Of course, he was still not entirely sure why the Prince was supporting him, but he would not dwell on that now.

As they walked from the smithy, the Prince enquired.

"Why were they calling you Jossie?"

Bugger. "Because that is my name. My mother wanted a daughter."

He didn't know what to expect. Mocking laughter perhaps?

"Well it isn't any more. I think our fates are entwined, young Kantal, and I think that we should recognise that shared direction. From now on you shall be Adnan ap Kantal. We are brothers in arms, and brothers in name."

Kantal's breath caught. If he had wondered before, then now he was certain. Their fates were entwined, and it was all because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi. But Kantal was willing to try.

He gulped. What had he done?

So; this was war. What an absolute bastard. As Kantal stared at the mess before him, he permitted himself a moment of reflection. Ahan really was a fortress.

Before him was the 'Main Gate' – the ever violent Valley of Aperta. It was a natural gash forged through the encircling mountain ranges of the Encolae and the Beha Lomal, and despite the rapidly flowing Maremante which called the valley home, this was the only open gate; it was the easy option.

The scene before him belayed the facts; it was still hell on l'Unna.

The king had invested in a group of Southern entrepreneurs who'd appeared in Triosec sporting the most fabulous contraption ever seen. It was fuelled by black magic, and the great metal throat would spew cast iron at a terrible velocity. The thing coughed almighty plumes of sulphured smoke, a grey mist which hung about after the immediate event, and when the weapons had left a modest wall severely damaged, the king was quick to pledge a hefty reward for the effective neutralisation of the Mandari resistance. The Southerners – with their rich golden skin, gold piercings, and strange blue markings all over their near naked bodies – hungrily accepted the generous offer, and so war was planned.

And the king, with a clear sub-text of retreat in mind – he had only the lightest faith in the offerings of the Southerners – had invited his son along. His blessed son who would reign one

day; what a fabulous day to offer him first combat. And because the Prince was in attendance, so was Kantal.

And so was his Mandari forged broadsword. He eyed it hungrily.

"What do you see, Kantal?"

Not a bloody lot was the answer. The small pack of cannon had been hauled into place, and the king's 'light' force – although Kantal balked at the numbers – pulled up behind. The cannon were allowed to spew hell once, twice, three times, and only after this third barrage did the king begin to believe. He ordered a squadron of cavalry to advance into the mist; it was all Kantal could see.

"A grey canvas."

"What are you? An artist?"

Does an artist carry a weapon like this? Yes.

He turned the blade over, marvelling at the incredible patterns along its length. The sabre he had helped forge was a narrow weapon, single-edged, and as such the heavenly patterning from the Mandari techniques was only visible on close inspection. With this beautiful weapon, the artistry was not so subtle. It burned with the reflection of the canvas, enriching the flat with the delicate weave of her forging. He watched the patterns swirl once more as he rotated the weapon onto its vertex.

"Kantal – I fear you may have fallen in love."

The Prince's amusement was plain, and Kantal was suddenly defensive. "I have never loved." Sadly, that was true.

"Well, it appears that you have now." His eyes were drawn as Kantal continued to rotate the weapon. "She is a really fine blade. Your father is an excellent blacksmith."

"And I will do the piece justice."

The Prince's easy look hardened instantly. "That is unlikely, I fear. I'm afraid retreat is the likely order of the day."

Kantal nodded reluctantly, but added his own perspective. "Of course, retreat is not a straight-forward affair."

"You will not be rash with your life, Kantal. I rather like to think that you are quite useful, and it would be a shame to lose you to arrogance. You do understand me, don't you?" His face was rather serious, but there was also the subtlest shade of suggestion – an unspoken understanding between the two men. At least, that's what Kantal saw.

"Of course, my Prince. I will not take undue risk." Kantal may have smiled then, but he quickly smothered that indulgence. The Prince saw it, shrewd as he was.

"And that sword is not insurance."

Wasn't that the truth – there was no insurance against a Mandahoi. But Kantal suspected that although this truth was the frequent outcome, there must always be anomalies. And for whatever reason, he knew that he was an anomaly. As he thumbed the pommel of his great-sword, that sense flourished inside him.

"The cavalry have made good progress. Perhaps these cannons really are the answer."

Perhaps – though it seemed unlikely. The scene before them was matt grey, a deep fog of deception made by the Southerners' magic. Two hundred mounted horse were making their way gingerly into that abyss, and the King's spirits were so buoyed that he even ordered a thousand infantry to advance. Kantal and the Prince watched with bated breath as the mass of men swarmed around them and into the fog, and when the rearmost infantry were barely visible, Kantal may have also been about to believe. His breath caught.

The Mandari were battered; the gate was open; and the Mandahoi were toothless. Victory was possible, and victory was near, but something subtle caught in the back of Kantal's throat – something almost disappointing as he thumbed his sword. Oh how he longed to use her.

But you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

The whistling caught the very edge of his hearing, and for the briefest moment, he ignored it. But then it triggered as unnatural, and his naturally inquisitive mind set to working it out. At first he thought it could be a swarm of insects of some sort, but that was out of place. Perhaps it was some sort of military instrument; a reed flute to direct the Mandari. But he would have heard of such a piece, and why was the sound intensifying? It was only when the heads started to burst from the lingering cloak that he married his understanding with what he was seeing. This was the bite of the enemy.

Archery on a scale unprecedented. If hell hath a fury, then this was it.

The first arrow hit the ground with a brutal thwack, and it blew away all prior misconceptions that Kantal had. His only experience of the drawn projectile had been in the Fields. The act looked impressive – the quivering tail of the stubby arrow protruding from the heart of the target – but he now saw that village trick for what it was; novelty. This was projectile death, a masterful demonstration of archer authority, and it was so overwhelming that Kantal almost forgot about his sword.

Almost.

The missile that struck just paces ahead of him was almost three quarters the length of a man, and its shaft was as thick as Kantal's wrists. It didn't quiver spectacularly like the pathetic arrows in the fields; instead it burrowed into the ground with a mole-like hunger. The ground

subtly rebelled at the intrusion, objecting at the penetrating action, and Kantal dropped instinctively into a squat. His breath caught.

He spoke obvious. "The cannons are not the answer, are they?"

The Prince looked down at him from his confident position atop his horse, and answered without speaking. He would answer, but not before the screams went up.

"No, they are not."

The Delfinian force had been consumed by the cannon fog, and the bite of the Mandari was upon them.

And Kantal felt cheated. 'You couldn't beat a Mandahoi' – that is what they said. But on the evidence of this, you didn't need to. The archers would do their work for them.

In mere heartbeats, the crazed remnants of a cavalry advance burst through the fog, many beasts lacking their riders or trailing corpses. But the beasts were few in number if truth be told, because the flank of a horse was a comically easy target for an archer. And what made the Mandari archers unique was their ability to fire long; fire hard; and fire frequently. The field-archers were freaks: unnaturally strong; unwaveringly persistent; and where a swarm of crossbows could offer up a drizzle of death, the relentless work of the archers brought a storm.

And even tightly packed infantry was next to useless against this barrage. The Delfinian advance was quickly turned to a reverse, and hundreds of veteran soldiers fled with blind terror on their faces. And frustration too; many of them had been here before.

And all the while, the rhythmic thud of the arrows struck home with devastating regularity.

"We should leave. This is no place for us."

Kantal rose, tightening and loosing his grip on the great-sword rhythmically. As he stared into the mist, he knew that his future was coming; yet it wasn't coming fast enough. But he couldn't refuse the word of his master, and there would be a next time. There would have to be.

And there would be. You couldn't beat a Mandahoi, but you could keep on trying.

He turned to face the Prince as infantry swarmed past betraying a collective squeal of fear. His master offered an almost apologetic smile, but it was still a smile. This man seemed to know Kantal better than anyone. That probably made him lucky.

"Yes, let's—"

It was just a spearing blur, but then it was chaos. All-consuming chaos. Men were dying around him, their screams blending with the horrifying patter of the onslaught. But it was the scream of the mare that was most startling, and as the Prince's horse reared up, Kantal knew that his master was in trouble. A black stab was burrowing its way into the flank of the white mount, and the poor beast shrieked in agony as it slumped to the ground; defeated.

The Prince was shocked by the turn of events; but only for a fragment. Then he cried his own pain, scorched as he was by the trapped limb beneath the horse's bulk. Kantal rushed forward, and he gripped his sword tighter. He might be needing it after all.

He smiled, but only for a moment.

"My Prince." A quick test told him that there was no dragging the man free; at least not quickly. Pockets of fleeing infantry streaked past, and part of Kantal urged him to cry out; but another part overruled. The Prince was wide-eyed, but there was something else there too. When the heir of Delfinia spoke, Kantal knew he meant otherwise – or perhaps he was warping the words to his own intentions?

"Flee Kantal, flee. They are coming."

Yes, indeed they were. He grinned, and then he turned to face his destiny. The anger inside him swelled, and he allowed it to flourish. He would be needing that.

Death rained down unceasingly from above, a storm of arrows spearing the deep mists of the ravaged battlefield. The sound of the heavy shafts thudding into lifeless corpses reminded Kantal of the forge back home. Each strike struck a disturbing sequence of thud; chime; sigh; an echo of a past he didn't dare cling onto. It was almost comforting, but there was nothing like the cry of the barely-living to hammer a sense of reality into proceedings. This was war, and there was nothing comforting about it.

And you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

He stood defiant nonetheless, for it was also his moment. It could be the making of him, this opportunity; it could be the path to greatness, but then it could just as equally be no path at all. But no, hold on. That statement at least was not the complete truth, for the odds were not balanced. The path to obliteration was far more likely.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

His heart was hammering to the rhythm of the smith, bullying his ears, like the sound of an ocean swelling and crashing against the cliffs of his inner skull. It was almost unbearable, the dominating toll of it, but it was abating. His pulse was easing. This cardiological anomaly had come to define him, a calm driven by something deep and raw. It was as if his body hunkered down, preparing for the inevitable, and as preparations commenced, he knew there was no choice. Fame or failure; that was his motto, or perhaps it would be one day. That was if he were to survive at all, and the odds were stacked against him.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

His arms were steady, fresh as they were, and they were focussed by the anomalous vigour that flowed through him. His muscles tautened; he stretched his arms; and he punished the sweaty leather bound handle of his great-sword, gripping it like a dying man clings to life; or like a lover holds his woman, as if the world would fail without her. He licked his lips and caught the light of the thing, the multi-coloured smirk of his fine weapon. Oh she really was beautiful, and deadly, but she needed to be.

For you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

The tip of the weapon flickered upwards as his body reacted, a sign of the blade's eagerness to release its potential; but it was not yet time. Not yet, not quite. Cheating death required a very special touch, and immaculate execution, and he knew deep within, buried right at the pit of his raw gut, that the moment was still to pass. He had time, time to reconsider.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

"Get out of here you idiot; save yourself"

The words fluttered to the cusp of his being, and they sounded almost surreal; as if spoken by a ghost. Time ebbed delicately by, the inevitable tipping point drawing in, but there was still a moment, still time for contemplation, and so he cast a brief glance to his commanding officer; to his audience and his hope. To his Prince.

Who couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

The officer was trapped, deflated and defeated, and his hard words came from a despairing face. Because he was more than just an officer: he was the future king. He was the heir, and he was the sergeant's charge; a charge that could never be paid.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi, and the future king screamed in agony. There could be only failure.

As the pain subsided, the heir looked to the sergeant, rabid authority in his eyes. He was trapped beneath the dying bulk of his horse, and he was pointing aggressively in the direction of flight; in the direction pursued by every other. But that was not the way to greatness. It was in fact the exact opposite direction to greatness, and it was a strange quirk that the pinnacle and the depth both held the same directional quality – one could not be reached without flirting at the edge of the other. That was the informed view, or perhaps it was the insane view. The distinction was irrelevant; the sergeant prepared to face the chaos.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

Calm was required, silence and concentration, so to stem the interference from his audience, the sergeant smiled sickeningly, a manic edge to the pert rising of his lips. The effect was instantaneous, and his fallen future king's face contorted very quickly from desperation to disgust. Time marched on, a shiver going through the sergeant, a quiver to the weapon poised delicately before him. He turned from his officer with slick anticipation and eager readiness. His legs parted ever so slightly, that extra stability essential, and as he rolled his shoulders, he took in the scene before him. He slid his tongue about his mouth and clenched his hips as he always did when danger approached. And danger did approach.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

Bodies lay everywhere, corpses littering the brownish field of heat-blistered grass. A sickly veil had been thrown up before him, a great cannon-fog which concealed the horrors beyond. The cannon had not been the answer, and the relentless bite of the Mandari had done its work; the work it always did – a random scattering of human waste spread about the trampled

earth. Wind whipped through the scene, sending the fog swirling in elaborate designs, but it soon dispersed into a blank threat. Shadows danced in that veil of mist; shadows that told of something foreboding; shadows that foretold oblivion. There could be only one outcome.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

A soldier burst from the vapid blanket, and then a second shadow turned solid and whole. They were allies, the petrified wreckages of men who had only a morning before marched confident of an elusive victory. But how the tide had turned. After all, the tide always turns where the Mandari were concerned. As one of his allies grew suddenly still, eyes wide as the arrow worked its way between his shoulders, the sergeant smiled once more. The odds were stacked against him, insanity was on the cusp of taking over, but that was acceptable. More than that: it was designed.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi.

The other shadows, the ominous spectres, continued on: growing in size; growing in stature; growing in threat. The second ally had made it past him, screamed at him to save himself, echoing the desperate pleas of the future king, but none of this mattered. None of this mattered at all. As time ticked gradually to the tipping point, the first harbinger finally melted from the cloud bank, strolling from the grey mist to reveal the equally grey appearance. They were the stuff of nightmares; the bain; the eternal rot – they were the Mandahoi.

And they would not be beaten.

The sergeant felt anger in his throat, acidic, and he let it drive his confidence. Something had to drive that misplaced confidence. He took in the presence of his foe.

The untouchable Mandahoi threat.

The uniform was all-concealing, revealing only sharp eyes from behind a tight fitting hood and a polished silver mask depicting a bear. The arms were naked, littered with heavy rings, and the rest of the body was concealed beneath the loose fitting grey material. At the end of each arm was a weapon, one slight, and one a brute of a thing. The weapons themselves looked bad enough, but the sergeant knew how this man could handle them – how all Mandahoi could handle them. They were killers, nothing more and nothing less. It was more than a trade to them; it was an art. They were cold, mechanical, deadly, and brilliant, and he hated them for this. It was the Mandahoi who denied Delfinia its rightful claim, and it was time to put that right. The odds were stacked against him, but Delfin's honour was at stake.

Because she couldn't beat a Mandahoi; and the odds were growing longer.

The first demon was upon him, striding confidently after his blood, eager for his scalp, but two further shadows phased into flesh, a further pair of Mandahoi intent upon his death. Strange lights flickered through the fog, casting the scene in eerie illumination, and as the three killers stalked forward, the sergeant's heart slowed to a near stop. Time shuffled by, responsive to his intent, and his breath rasped against the dry chasm of his throat. It was a struggle to draw the air through, his body prickling with sweat and fear, but that was good; that was natural for him.

Fame or failure, greatness or insanity, immortality or death; these were the choices that faced the sergeant of the Delfinian army, the sergeant who now found himself amongst fleeing allies and facing the very personification of death. The grey wraiths moved threateningly towards him, almost spectral in their surety, but the choice was already made. He was Adnan ap Kantal, and he chose the barely trodden path. As the emotion flared, stoked by the shuddering eruption of his heart from its state of near stillness, Kantal burst towards the harbingers and

bought himself the immortality he so desperately sought. Whether others would see it in the same light was now down to the hand of the Gods, and to the strength of Kantal's stubborn resolve.

His hand clawed at the dry earth, the tips of his fingers stinging where he'd scraped them raw. That was the least of his problems. The spearing sensation would just not abate. It turned out that steel in the gut was just as painful as it looked.

"Arrgh!" It jolted his back into an arch as the punishment flooded his senses. Punishment because he'd faced the ridiculous, and this was the price. A part of him thought he was foolish, but another part soothed that concern away. It had been the only thing to do.

The shooting agony eased, and his body flopped gratefully in response. He opened his barely functioning eyes, noting the vision before him – his goal. Salvation; perhaps. His Prince was still alive, still trapped beneath his dying mare, but the tide had now turned. His master was the strength, and he was the weakness. He was dragging himself towards a scant sanctuary; he was dragging himself to his...

Could he call him a friend? Certainly not, that was too far, but he was dragging himself to the only place he now knew. He needed help, desperate help, and the Prince seemed to have been there recently. Only here and now, they were alone. So utterly alone. What could the Prince realistically do?

The taste like rust in his mouth made him retch, and as his wounded stomach scraped across the parched earth, he all but vomited. It took an almighty effort to stop himself – a strength of will that he barely had left in him. His jerking motion dislodged something from the

crease about his tongue, and as he shifted it around his stained mouth, he thought it could be only one thing; flesh. They didn't tell you about that in the books.

The Prince looked sadly at him, sorrow in those eyes where his predicament should really permit more selfish concerns. Fear and pain, perhaps? But Kantal was the weakness, and the Prince was well ordained. The flesh in his mouth forced a heave once more, and he ejected the offending item involuntarily. And a tooth went with it. He checked with his tongue and confirmed. The second upper right incisor was gone.

And he'd always been so proud of his fine teeth.

His head left him for a moment, a symbolic grey haze shrouding his senses, and when it cleared, he was face first in the dirt. His tongue was in direct contact with the ground, and the grainy taste of the world was upon him. It mingled with the residual flesh and blood to leave a horrifying taste – but there was precious little he could do about it. He clawed with his right hand and felt a nail bend back on itself. That pain barely registered.

"Kantal!"

His Prince! Of course, yes of course. He was returning to his charge. As he lifted his head, it was like leveraging the world itself. When he finally managed to centre the trapped man in his sights, the vision swayed from side to side. He couldn't keep his damned head still. The man was so close now – big in his vision – but the voice seemed still distant; like the cry was from another time and place. Kantal shook his head, but that was not a good idea. The dizziness was overwhelming, and he conceded once more. When he next opened his eyes, he could taste the stomach acids mingling with the other horrors in his mouth. Would that ever wash out?

But no! He had come this far. He was still alive, and that was something. A lot really. He remembered that he had legs, and with every effort in his capacity, he forced himself onto all

fours. The feeling of air on the deep gash to his stomach was like molten steel – but euphoric at the same time. His head left him again, but he retained his knees, and was soon able to force forward movement. It was slow progress.

By the time he reached his Prince, it was almost as if the sun had departed. But that was clearly an illusion – a consequence of the cannon wastage. In this veil, the sun may as well never have come up. Time had no meaning in this nightmare. And it was a nightmare.

"Kantal." The Prince broke into a deep cough – one of those that sounds like the very lung will pop out. Too much smoke perhaps? Then why was Kantal not coughing? Spoke too soon, and when it did come, it was like he'd reached down his throat and was throttling his guts. The back of his acid stained throat tickled, and he dreaded the next incidence. Best to sleep perhaps? He closed his eyes.

"No, you must not! We must get help."

What help? He obeyed – of course he did – and managed a laugh; an actual chuckle. The battlefield was empty but for their near corpses. Delfinia must surely have departed, and they would be left to rot in the eternal graveyard that was the Central Gate. They were doomed, and no amount of royal optimism would change that.

But this was no bad thing. He would die trying; a purpose to the act. That was more than he could have ever asked.

"Thank you, sir." To speak was to drain what little reserves he had. His head crashed back to the dry ground, and he could feel himself slipping. His eyes were heavy. So heavy.

"No Kantal; open your eyes! That is an order."

It was futile, but he obeyed. He was conditioned. The Prince's face was vibrating, juddering from side to side – made him feel sick to be honest. He didn't think he had any sick left.

The juddering turned into a shudder.

And the shudder turned into a tremor.

And then the tremor consumed his tired thoughts, and he may have even recognised. The Prince smiled knowingly, and he knew he was a fool.

They were being rescued.

The heir actually managed a smile, though it was heavily filtered with less savoury observations. He looked at Kantal with sadness in his features.

"I have never seen you like that before."

Wasn't that the truth? It was not a sustainable state. He managed to forge words through his swollen lips.

"I was saving it." The 's' came out as a whistle where his tooth was missing, and he scowled at himself. How would he afford to get that replaced? Perhaps he wouldn't need to. He may well still die.

Because you couldn't beat a Mandahoi. There was always a price.

The Prince locked him with a gaze and echoed his thoughts. "You can't beat a Mandahoi, Kantal."

A pulse of energy raced through him, and he may have actually curled his lips into a smile. Was that pride? How would he know? His Prince continued.

"But you, sir, can beat three."

He managed to turn his head to the haze, to the battlefield behind him. There, from where he had hauled his devastated body, lay a pile of grey. And spearing the tower of corpses was one hell of a blade. His blade. The bastards had near killed him, but he had the last. He had proved his point, and he had saved his Prince.

The sight of the blade caught him, and he knew then that it was pride. She looked good there, speared through the bodies of her victims, but she would be better by his side.

"You won't let them leave..."

His voice trailed off as a screaming darkness consumed. As he slipped into the protective ignorance, he thought he saw the prince nod in understanding. By Ero, he hoped he did.

THE NOW

SIX

"Tell me, general. What makes you think that you have earned the right to gamble with my Lord's property?" He fingered the pommel of his beloved sword. This was not his arena.

Tension filled the space, refusing to leak out of the wide window at the far end of the room. If he spoke wrong, they would be out of here, and he didn't believe that Gorfinian hospitality could be relied upon either; there was genuine danger in this room. As he rose from his seat, he looked to the open end of the room, considering the height of the tower and thinking back to all the fools who'd been thrown out; many of them for declaring things of far more substance than this. A king of Gorfinia ruled with fear, so when he was irked, the retribution could be steep. Kantal gulped.

And the aide pressed his nerves. "Come, general. Stop wasting our time. Why should we trust you?"

It was time to speak. It was time to believe in his feats. It was time to be his reputation.

"Because I am the man they call Mandestroy."

Silence prevailed; compounding the tension; filling the room with suffocating pressure. When the king of Gorfinia raised his hand, Kantal feared he'd drop it in anger. But he didn't. Instead, the aide spoke.

"We will hear your plans."

The pressure evaporated, and it was as if the moons suddenly illuminated the sky; he'd barely noticed the depth of the night. Kantal found he was holding his breath, and he exhaled deeply as he returned to his seat. His king squeezed his shoulder as he walked past.

After a hearty draught of water, a bit tepid for his liking, he inhaled deeply and pulled his lips over his gums. He had to be confident with the telling, even if that same assurance wasn't coursing through him. At least it wasn't at this moment; it had been when he'd conjured the idea. And it was well considered his plan, and it should work. He would be the one to break the cycle.

"We will attack all three gates at once. We will attack in unison, stretching the Mandari resistance thin. And when their line is thinnest, we will strike. We will jump at their soft underbelly with a rabid knife in our hands. They will bleed from within."

The more he said it, the more he liked it. It was a good plan. Damn, but he might just have it.

It was the jealous Emperor who spoke; unashamed confusion and – what was that? Disappointment? – on his face.

"There is nothing new there, general. That is a plan that has failed a hundred times before."

Was it? Then why hadn't he read about it? He had devoured the military journals in the library, so why didn't he know this? Heat coloured his cheeks.

Fortunately, it was his king who dragged proceedings back.

"Forgive us, Excellency, but you have not heard the detail."

The wobbly dictator rose, his chair tipping and crashing to the ground. By the time the Mikaetan superior was laying into the King of Delfinia, a servant had whipped out of the shadows and righted the fallen furniture.

"I don't need the bloody detail! The union at its height could not crack those gates, so what do you expect our current splintered faction to achieve? If anything, the locks are now

tighter, so what do you think has changed that you can come here and claim elevation above the greatest in history? What?"

Kantal's king looked affronted. The Mikaetan Empire may be waning, but it was still the largest of the three neighbours; the Emperor held a certain weight. Kantal recognised the subtle movement in the man sat opposite him – his guest – and he knew it was time. He scowled with the introduction.

"May I introduce to you, the Lord of Chance."

The non-Gorfinian – and therefore non-necessitated – hooded freak moved ever so slightly; just enough to suggest that he was looking upon the others in the room. No-one could tell, of course, because the damned cloak covered most of the face. Unfortunately, the jaw was just visible.

It made Kantal shudder.

Half of the chin was covered by heavy iron; a mask of some sort. But not a full mask; rather a semi-concealing piece. The right hemisphere of his face was open to the elements, and what a shame that was. The skin was brown and mottled, as if scarred, but worse than that; it was as if it had always been like that. There was something lizard-like about the appearance, and Kantal might believe that this was a lizard if it wasn't for the disappointingly human hands. The scaly flesh of the face must be some abnormality. And unfortunately, the facial disfigurement had soured the man's personality.

Yet he was here at Kantal's bidding. How the world worked was truly mysterious.

The Gorfinian aide gazed with piercing blankness; his deep hood betraying nothing of his facial features. All these abstract monsters were really getting to Kantal, and he rolled his shoulders in involuntary reaction. Their host broke the silence.

"Gorfinia greets you, Lord of Chance. And may we compliment you on your excellent choice of attire."

Freaks stick with freaks.

The man that Kantal hated and feared in equal measures spoke with an irritating and soul grating tone – he lisped where the deformity restricted his facial dexterity. It was almost serpentine, and disturbingly complimented the warped skin of his face.

"I am honoured to be here, Lord."

The aide nodded acceptingly, but there was not the slightest hint of recognition on the blank canvas of the king. Further, it was the aide who darkened the room with aggression, not even pausing to consult with his master. That was curious.

"And who, 'Lord of Chance', do you think you are to adorn yourself with that title?"

He spat the words, and Kantal was bowled by the disdain. He knew it was there – he had felt it himself after all – but the king's non-involvement in the verbal assault was stark. It spoke of either remarkable cohesion between the two men, or it sang of a balance of that was entirely at odds with the perception. Both outcomes were rather concerning.

Gorfinia was feared, but from where did that fear originate?

Lord Chance straightened himself like a snake readying to bite – or throw poison. His words were measured, and confident. And they were venomous.

"I am to fortune what this man is to the Mandahoi." With his open palm, he gestured to Kantal.

He had to speak. He felt like he was being mocked, and his pulse peaked. It was the same emotional crest that he touched before a fight – the crazy before the calm; the madness that

he coils within and releases to invaluable effect. Only here, now, he was around a table; and he was confronted by the bastard he'd invited along. This was not his territory.

"And what am I to the Mandahoi?"

The hooded face turned, and the visible jaw grated up in a wicked smile.

"Why, you are the scourge."

"Hear the man! Yes, indeed." It was his king, attempting to diffuse the tension. Kantal knew that he had the look of a cobra when his blood was up. It must be plainly obvious he was about to erupt. If only he'd worn a deep hood like these others.

No, never.

The aide pushed on, and for that Kantal was grateful. His emotions were beyond constraint.

"So, scourge of Fortune – why are you here?"

Each moment ticked jarringly into the next; the rhythmic scraping of his jaw infecting his mind. He wouldn't, couldn't, take his eyes off of the man – his damned guest. He was idly fingering the pommel of his magnificent blade, and he was dimly aware that he had levered her subtly from her sheath. Don't be such a fool – spilling blood in this place was guaranteed to lead to a swift exit; through that window most likely. He ground his teeth and growled.

And the Lord of Chance ignored his threat, turned to the congregation, and pulled a smile onto his puckered lips. Kantal hated the man. But he was useful; very useful.

"I come before you to offer a fourth way. I hold the key to the fourth gate of Ahan."

Gasps from the Emperor, and even the aide gave weight to the man's presence. It was so frustrating that the freak held such power in his words, but this had never been Kantal's arena. The Emperor stated the obvious.

"There is no fourth way."

The hooded guest – who also titled himself the Enabler – leaned forward, clasping his hands together; two index fingers pointed to the ceiling. He was going to enjoy his moment.

"The fourth way is by sea."

"It is guarded; it always has been. That archipelago makes it near impossible to gain meaningful leverage. It is useless."

Kantal let the odd-ball weave his magic, calming himself in response to the pleading stare of his King. He could not afford to bear anger in this place where he was inferior; he would be punished like the common stock he was.

But as he looked around, he realised that he disliked every one of his allies. How curious that was. But they had a common purpose, and that was what bound them. He hoped it was sufficient. The Enabler continued to wave his wand.

"But what if you could coerce a Mandari cell to your cause? A suitably positioned ally in the Mandari ranks could open that gate."

"Pah. The Mandari are no more likely to sell-out than I am to offer my assistance in this madness. Tell me; who do you think you can worry over to our side?" It was the Emperor who offered the protest. The Gorfinian symbiosis of king and aide appeared to listen intently, and Kantal's own king knew the details already. This was the crux of it, and Kantal held his breath.

"The Nadari have been desperate to defect for generations. They believe in one currency and one currency alone."

"And what currency is that?" The Emperor sneered, though it was pathetic when visualised with the wobbling jowls. Kantal's mood picked up, and he even smiled at the Enabler's taunting suggestions.

"Why gold of course. Is there another currency?"

That actually got a snort from the aide, and he had to slide a hand over the gaping space of his hood. The Emperor nestled back into his chair. The mocking suggestion had flushed his cheeks, and he stayed silent – jowls wobbling gently. Kantal needed this done, if only for his sanity, so he sucked up his discomfort and summarised.

"And that is the plan. We harry the three gates, drawing resources to the borders and exposing the soft belly of Ahan. I, meanwhile, will lead a Delfinian force through the back door, and we will strike right at the heart of the enemy. Altunia will fall."

"And why is it that Delfinia places the stake through the heart? Why is it not a unified force?"

The flabby face was angry once more, and Kantal was immediately frustrated. But actually, the Emperor was fishing for acclaim; positive in a way because it meant he was considering. Mostly though, it was offensive, and Kantal had to hold his calm exterior.

"Forgive my terse observation, but we hardly feel like a unified force." The Emperor offered that flabby sneer once more. "And besides – it is Delfinia's plan, and it is only right that Delfinia takes the lead."

That was a victory for the briefest moment, but then it was only a source of friction. So much friction – and they were supposed to be allies! This was the pivot of discussion – the real reason they were here.

It was the aide who posed the obvious question. "And who is it that is paying for this passage to the fourth gate?"

It was Kantal's king's turn.

"The price demanded by the Nadari for their treachery is high indeed. I accept the price of this as reflecting the plans that have been drawn up, but seek support from my allies in meeting this cost. We would be putting Delfinia under great financial duress were we to meet this cost in isolation, and so I ask you, friends; what share of the notoriety would you be willing to invest?"

If ever there was a time to leave a room, then this was it.

"How dare you! You mock me, sir, to come here and ask me, the Emperor of the Great Mikaetan Empire, for money. Pah. Soldiers I may spare, but not money. How dare you. Your coffers are heaving with stolen Mikaetan stallions – you will have nothing from me."

A disappointing start – Kantal was sweating. His plans to take the chance were wilting, but he still needed to earn the chance. Without forthcoming financial assistance, he would have a very awkward discussion with his King in the near future.

His king exhaled and reclined. Gorfinia had not made a move, which Kantal couldn't decipher, but it didn't appear to be forthcoming. This was where his King needed to throw in his weight. Kantal was at a loss – he hoped his King wasn't.

"Then share of notoriety, and indeed the spoils, resides with us. You will be compensated for any military contribution in some small way, but the prize of Ahan sits exclusively with Delfinia. These will be the terms of our engagement, unless anyone wants to reconsider."

He had never seen such greed in a man. The Emperor was moist where his wicked little mind was teasing him with the wealth that he forwent by his refusal to contribute. Ahan was the jewel of the near world – of the world as far as Kantal recognised – and to forgo that prize was

expensive indeed. But Kantal could see doubt in the eyes of the man. He was no risk-taker; he was barely a taker at all. Kantal laughed, and the jowls turned upon him.

"You mock me?"

"No, Excellency, of course not." He could not keep the smile off the edge of his lips and his King shot him a threatening look. Jowls was obviously trying to leverage a beneficial compromise in his head, but he couldn't think fast enough. He had to say something.

"Mikaeta will commit her men, but I am unsure what more we can offer. The terms of settlement would need to be prearranged before we confirm – and the terms will need to be generous to balance the risk." Kantal's king nodded. He too was sweating, but Kantal knew it was a consequence of financial insecurity. He would be committing a lot here, and Kantal was glad his king trusted him.

"Does Gorfinia commit troops?" The hooded king nodded solemnly. Kantal had to ask; "and what about funds?" The shake of the head was not surprising – Gorfinia barely dealt in currency anyway. His king's burden of coin was going to be heavy indeed.

Especially when they still needed to earn the chance. That too would be expensive.

But this was a moment of victory! Of sorts. Kantal had his plan, and he had his somewhat reluctant players. His dream was marching to firmness, and as he finally allowed himself to take alcohol. He may have even smiled as his King offered a friendly hand to the Emperor.

And then the freak spoke.

"General; I have some residual concerns with your theory." Now? Kantal knew that the freak was doing this to wind him up, and he felt the heat rise once more. The goblet twisted as

his grip tightened. "Your manoeuvre will draw the heavy forces certainly, but you forget the finer barbs."

They still needed to earn the chance, but he didn't want to talk on this now. Because you couldn't beat a...

"And what barbs are those?"

His words slivered, like the snake that spoke them. "Why the Mandahoi, of course. The Academy is bloated with competency, and forgive my interjection, but you are no more capable of felling a troop of Mandahoi than I am of absolute foresight. A single Mandahoi; perhaps, yes. But a troop? I fear you could be foiled."

He hated the bastard even more in that moment; but this time it was different. This time he hated him because he was right.

He had thought about it; of course he had. What sort of military tactician would he be if he hadn't? It had niggled in the back of his thoughts; intoxicated his confidence; drained him. As he ran his hand over his unruly stubble, appreciating the coarseness, he narrowed his eyes. Was this to be his undoing?

"Did you know this?"

His king looked most displeased.

"It had crossed my mind."

They were riding south, signed agreements in their possession subject to some bartering on the proceeds of victory. If victory was coming at all. Nerves fluttered in Kantal. Damn it; nerves never fluttered in him.

"So this plan we have may not even work."

He exhaled, which hardly exuded confidence.

The day was bright; another scorching afternoon on the baked plains of Mikaeta. The journey back to the heart of Delfinia would be several days, mainly because the pace needed to be so sedate. No-one could ride full pace in this heat. Kantal was sweating profusely, his back drenched and uncomfortable. The peacocks didn't seem to care, and as he flicked his gaze at the manicured tail, he found himself envying the preposterous sun shades they had at their disposal. He would not be seen dead with such luxury, but that didn't mean he didn't miss it.

"It will work." The confidence was not forthcoming and his voice wavered. He shifted uncomfortably in the saddle, revealing a pocket of sticky sweat that had been lodged between his testicles and his leg. Now he was even less comfortable. Bugger this.

Of course, he knew exactly what needed to be done – remove the Mandahoi and you have a chance; a chance. What Kantal had designed was a way to exploit the chance, but he had not yet created the chance. That was the flaw in his plan. It was quite a big one.

"You do realise that we are not proceeding unless I am entirely convinced – and you're not exactly selling at the moment. This is going to clean Delfinia out."

And this was the problem. This was the absolute crux of the problem. He gulped.

So much of his plan, now that he thought about it, relied on money – bloody money. His political insights were short of necessity, and where he'd set out for Maegwyn with hopes of securing substantial funds, his plans now appeared to be in danger.

Because he did know how to foil the damned Mandahoi. The only problem: he needed more money.

Damn the cheap Mikaetans, and damn the strange hand of Gorfina. He did not know how to tell his master.

"For Ero's sake, Kantal! Convince me."

There was no option; not any more. His entire life had been leading to this point, and so he needed to craft the path. Everything he had done, even the exploits that named his notoriety, all of it was leading to this point. To maim a handful of the grey was ultimately meaningless. To dislodge the limpet-like Mandari from Delfinian land was his true calling. He would free the Motherland.

But he needed money, and he needed lots of it.

"You are right to be nervous," the monarch threw his hands up in disgust, but Kantal soothed himself and continued, "but there is a way. We spoke before Maegwyn about the need to disrupt the Mandahoi – to occupy them some way. Well, the alliance we have crafted will not do the trick. But there is something that will."

The display of disdain ceased for a moment, and those piercing eyes took on a rather sceptical sense. "What will work?"

This was going to sound ridiculous. This was going to sound utterly ridiculous.

"Dragons."

Scepticism morphed into outright mockery.

"What are you talking of? Dragons are just stories."

"Well yes, err, not quite dragons." Good showing, you idiot. Confidence damn it! "I have it on very fine intelligence that there are dragon-like creatures for sale." His king did not seem to bite. "They may not offer all the gilt of the myth, but they are, by all accounts, very large and very vicious lizards. And they can fly."

He wasn't sure that he believed it now that he'd said it, but then he remembered the man and knew that it was not a scam. How he came to meet the shady character was anyone's guess –

they just seemed to end up speaking in a tavern – but at the end of a night of intense discourse, they determined that Kantal needed something and that the other had access to it.

It was chance, utter chance, but every victory needs its touch from the Father, didn't it? He thought of the Lord of Chance and shuddered.

"And what makes you trust this opportunist?" His king was not convinced.

"No, Highness, I believe him. He was very clear that he would evidence the tools before any deal is made. He was also very generous in his terms of credit, and if I were to be pushed, I would go further and suggest that he is of very old lineage." Did old suggest honourable? Maybe the opposite in fact, but it would add weight.

That indeed got his king's attention.

"You mean ancient old?"

"I would say so, yes." It was difficult to tell with the deep cloak, but there had been something distinctly alien about the man – as if he was from another time. It was known that they continued to haunt the shadows of the world – Maegwyn employed a small host for example – yet few were known to openly interact. But who else could harness control over the dragons? No! Not dragons. They were sendeté, apparently.

Kantal could see the shrewd ruler cooling, warming to this opportunity. Kantal knew that he could take the chance if he could earn it, and he knew that two sendeté could knot the Mandahoi for many days and moons. The confidence started to ooze once more. There was just one last stumbling block, and he knew his master would not miss it.

"How much for these services?"

Kantal licked his lips. "The overall cost of the exercise will, err, double."

"Argh!" He was not happy, and rightly so. "I am already scraping the chest for those damned Nadari! Where do you expect me to find that sort of coin?"

He was hoping that Gorfinia would bend, but failing that he had no idea; absolutely no idea. It didn't sit well with him. But he was not a treasurer; he was a soldier, and a tactician. He had the tactics to do the impossible, but he needed others to play their part. It was up to his king.

"I am not endowed with that information, Highness."

"You will bankrupt the crown at this rate!" He sensed the shock in the peacocks, and couldn't help a little smile. "You think this funny?"

"On the contrary, Highness. I was hoping for more support from our, ah, allies."

The look he was given wiped any smugness right up his gullet. He was incredibly uncomfortable; and yet this was not his part of the game.

"We will have to call it off."

"Your Highness, I beg—"

"I cannot commit that sort of money! You have been a fool, Kantal; a fool. I cannot bankrupt the crown on a whim. And, before you speak, despite its merits, this is a damned whim. A whim!" He had the agreements in his hand, the fruits of many years of Kantal's scheming, and he was about to cast them aside. And yet he paused – waiting.

And Kantal took his chance.

"You remember that battlefield, Highness; the one where you were trapped beneath the dying horse." The king turned, and his sour mood was stalled. Kantal drove home. "That was a whim, Sire, and you know what happened that day."

Kantal had played his last card.

THE FUTURE | 1YR LATER

It was success; utter success. Of course it was success – he had planned the whole thing meticulously. He rode, straight backed, confident and eager, through the streets of Altunia, and he could feel the victory stepping closer. Success! It enriched his soul, and he thrust his great-sword into the air, roaring nothing more than a guttural scream. Two thousand voices echoed the victory; two thousand bodies that followed him to success.

Something crawled down his back, and he attributed it as sweat. But it was the late season, and it wasn't that warm; at least it wasn't in Ahan. He felt his brow, and noted that it was dry. But beneath the layers of leather and steel, he could be sweating, couldn't he? Yes, that was it. It definitely wasn't doubt.

But things were easier than he'd expected. He was quite literally strolling his horse through the lower reaches of the Old Town, stepping the mare carefully over the rounded cobbles. He had expected a fight at the gates, a chaos of citizens and steel, but instead he'd got only nothing.

They were later than expected, floating into the estuary close to midday rather than at dawn as he'd hoped. That would have given the population sight of his coming, given them a chance to hunker down or flee. That was it, for certain. The island citadel that the Mandari called Sentience – but which had been called the Foundation Isle when the Delfinians were still custodians – showed clear signs of defiance; a handful of house guards littering the gatehouse. The showing was weak as expected – the Mandari were embroiled in the diversionary tactics of his genius – but he'd expected a greater weight of civilians. He had not expected to be able to walk straight up to the gatehouse. No; this was much easier than expected.

But was that a construct of his genius? Had he exceeded even his own expectations? That was rare. He had always been able to dream. At many points of his life, it was all he had.

"Sir."

The interruption came from the guiding hand of his colonel, but before he responded, his mind wandered. He was drawn back to his time of becoming, to that moment on the fields of Aperta where he had faced the ashen breath of death and survived. More than survived. He'd become Mandestroy. That day he'd acted for the benefit of the colonel, intending to win favour with the untouchable echelons of the military hierarchy. Now he looked down to the colonel, and he recognised how far he'd come. Maybe he had exceeded expectations.

"Yes?"

He was already following the suggestion of the extended arm, but he wanted his officer's view in any case. The sweat trickled, and he started to reconsider his views. That was not expected.

"Smoke. It's coming from the estuary."

And it was smoke; a great fountain of it spewing into the heavens; staining the sky as the higher winds blew it aloft. It was impossible to see exactly what the source was, but it didn't require much in the way of genius to work it out. There was only one thing in the estuary that would burn so well – a fleet. Was it the Mandari fleet? Unlikely, and that meant it was his own fleet. His means of escape was going up in flames.

For just the slightest of moments he shivered, but he would not let it show. He pulled his eyes away, not wanting to be infected by events. It was irrelevant. He had considered this a one-way journey in any case.

And so what if his fleet was burning? The rewards would outweigh that cost. Enough had been paid in any case. He peered straight ahead, saving his eyes from the smoke smeared sky by the wings of his hood. He continued doggedly on.

Yes indeed; he was now adorning a hood. It seemed that all the world's most fearsome combatants were doing it, so why not he? At least his troops could still see his face.

"Sir."

"It is unfortunate, but it will not stop us. Now, let's focus on the task at hand."

His colonel resumed obedience, and Kantal feigned determination. But the truth was otherwise. He was still sweating, or in fact, what he now recognised was that he wasn't sweating at all. He was tingling right down his spine, and he knew why. He was nervous.

He grunted, the noise emanating from the corner of his mouth. His leather bound hand scratched at the stubble which was as good as a beard, and the satisfying sound eased him slightly – but only slightly.

This was not the time. As they rounded the height of the incline of the Old Town and hit upon the Nerve, Kantal thrust his arm into the air and received a welcome confidence boost from his troops. He permitted himself a smile.

And he had good reason to smile. As he looked upon the gatehouse of the Foundation Isle, he saw only a smattering of guardsmen. He turned to look upon his well-ordered men, and smiled more broadly as he took in their sight. Two thousand of the bastards, each of them hand-picked and ruthless. They were seasoned siege experts, and they were coming upon a place that was barely guarded – and all because of Kantal's genius. He looked back and smiled once more. It would take a hundred Mandahoi to stop them now.

He gulped.

Time in conflict took on a strange quality, as if it relaxed its formal definition and took a new, volatile one. It seemed to take on one of only two characteristics as the fight flourished: it would either stagger slowly, achingly, from minutiae to moment; or it would take on the pace of a stallion, rushing by with just the barest perception. Kantal could not tell which form it had taken, but as he looked to the sky, he knew that it was the former. The journey through Altunia had been stretched in his perception, but Mother Bright told the truth – it was not long past midday.

And then they were at the bridge that led to the Foundation Isle; the one named after Jinal, the invader.

His troops tramped either side of him as he stalled his horse on the near side of the bridge. No need to take her any further; she would be useless. As his potent force settled into formation – rigid rows of surly looking men in well-made flexible armour, ready to assault – he couldn't help but smile. He jumped from his fine mare, giving her a pat on the neck before he rubbed the inside of his thighs. He still hated riding. He walked through the ranks, slaps on the shoulder encouraging him forward, but he didn't let his gaze waver. He halted about half-way across the bridge, and leaned his head back, eyes at the gatehouse, surveying the resistance. There was almost none. The city guard looked forlorn.

Almost none; not none. At the heart of the defence, right at the centre of the resistance, stood a man. A big man. A very big man.

And he was wearing the grey.

Kantal cursed to himself before he dropped his hood. One Mandahoi; so what? He would have the bastard for breakfast. Or lunch in fact. They were late.

His words travelled, like a well flighted arrow.

"You are defeated. Resistance would be wasteful. Open your gates and none shall be butchered."

He'd chosen the words carefully; he didn't want to lie.

It was the mandahoi who responded, and Kantal recognised him. The Mandahoi wore grey uniforms and cloaked their face, and yet he recognised this single man. He bloody well recognised him.

"The gates will stay locked. Leave, while you still have time."

He thought of the plume of smoke; looked for it in fact. From the bridge it was possible to make out the flames. Definitely his fleet. One boat seemed unmolested, sailing out of the estuary, but that was irrelevant. They were here, and the boat was there. Kantal had a job to do and a king's trust to repay.

He turned back to Keles – the Mandahoi who had become a legend in his short years of service – and offered up his final piece of advice.

"Come, Keles, even you are not fool enough to think that you can win this alone."

Just the subtlest movement, as if he snorted; in amusement perhaps? Then, with barely a command, the walls crawled with movement, and grey wraiths melted out of the parapets. There were dozens of them, a hundred perhaps, and Kantal felt a shiver go through his men. He would need to stay confident. He had to.

'Remove the Mandahoi and you have a chance.' But the Mandahoi were here, and yet he still had a chance. It was just incredibly thin.

He had barely any time to make his choice; you didn't on a battlefield. Dally and you die. But the reality was that there was no choice. He spoke at the top of his lungs, infecting his troops with confidence.

"You have brought this upon yourselves."

But there were no truths on the battlefield. Only opportunities, however remote they may seem. His men attacked.