

MANDESTROY



Mandestroy

Prequel novella to Fear's Union | draft 4.3

By James Hockley

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Website Sample Chapter

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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 wrinkle, a one-eyed snake pointing right at her, but still she persisted – he kept the damned girl's name. 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 – being heir to the smithy empire – and he bore the arrogance to go with it. 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 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 brother 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 a curious side to him, 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 old bullying soon enough. He would keep his head low; like he always did.

He was weaving through the early morning streets of Triosec, trying desperately to avoid those who taunted him. He kept his head low, hitting the main artery and targeting a 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; because that building was the library, and in those dusty old tomes even he was able to dream. Those times galvanised him for what lay without – in the smithy; at home; the life he tried to forget.

He shook his head and thumbed the book in his hand, appreciating the relief of the leather. There was such artistry here, 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 evidently not empty enough. He looked down to the dust-caked mud-veined 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 in use, and the ignorant strolled by with barely any recognition of the perishing town about them.

And this was the hub of Delfinia. It was so sad.

Perhaps other people were too busy to notice the decay; they certainly rushed around a lot. But the neglect in the city suggested a lack of pride in its people, and to Jossie that was strange. These citizens had great potential ahead of them - far more than Jossie did - so why did their passion not burn bright? Even Jossie could, at a stretch, 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 his great nation in this state, stealing as they had the finest principality: Ahan. He had read that as part of his learning, of his study, and that story resonated with him in an unrecognisable way. Ahan had been lost five hundred years previous - 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, 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 grabbed at 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 browned. 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? – came up behind and laid 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 Chick, but sensing Beef behind him. The expected punch came soon enough, and the pain scorched his lower back such that 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, so how was it that this idiot still sought out the pleasures of the bully? Jossie supposed that even 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. That was his brother!

But the young man he knew from the smithy was actually 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 interpreted as disappointment. Presumably then, Beef was unaware of their family ties. Either that or he was sick, which was, admittedly, not without the bounds.

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 then he had to smother a laugh as a cough. The Farmyard Friends probably didn't even know what a sphincter was.

"Let's just punish her for the insolence, shall we?"

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 the beating – his entire body was a rich tapestry of punishment. 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 lay 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. His vision faded, and the last thing he noticed was 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 escaped him as his mind 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 now dried, and he was almost comfortable on the sandy ground; if he didn't move, the pain stayed quiet. Feet moved horizontally and absently in front of his eyes; 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, 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? And besides; he didn't have the right. He kept his anger coiled deep within, as he always had done.

It was definitely mid-afternoon by the time he dragged his sorry carcass into the library. He knew that 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."

Jossie tried to respond with words, but only a faint hiss seeped out of his fat lips, spittle flying randomly. He held up the battered book, and when the librarian recognised its state, Mother herself seemed to rain down her 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 friend was the right term. In fact, he was Jossie's only near-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'd seen 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 man peered defiantly over those pathetic spectacles, unwilling to break the order of authority and yet 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 occurrence."

The junior librarian 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 clerk 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; journals; rolled maps; and just about everything in-between. Well-oiled roller-steps lived in each aisle, and between the ranks of literature, fine reading seats were placed with precision. They were often vacant.

There was also a gallery about the higher part of the library, which housed some of the finer collections, and this was now where Jossie sat whilst Bulge tended 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, but he was experienced.

"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 more likely to join Beef in the beatings, and that Jossie was better off limiting himself to the attentions of the juveniles. He wanted to eloquently lay down the sad reality of his life, but that was unfortunately not what came out of his mouth.

"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 now knew was actually a contributing element. The memory of his brother’s meek and fetid appearance made him almost gag. Bulge caught his eye, and wise man as he was, understood immediately. It remained unsaid between them.

Noise disturbed them, which was probably good – best to avoid awkward questions. His eyes, or at least his one good eye was drawn up to a gallery even higher than where he sat with Bulge. He had never seen that place anything but silent before, but stood there now was a man. He was a magnificent looking man, a man of authority, and Jossie knew immediately who it was. That was the Royal Gallery, and that man was therefore the King of Delfinia.

Jossie instinctively tensed and puckered his arse – that reflex would never leave him. The king shook his head subtly and turned his eyes away, 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 his satisfaction with this fact was clear 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 equally, he 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 just shrugged and stared confidently at the monarch. 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. It was 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 on Jossie’s behalf. 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 back as the heir turned to followed his father into the hidden luxury of the Royal Gallery, but there had been something else in the eye of the prince too – something Jossie didn’t recognise.

"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 it. 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? War was such a potent concept that it didn’t seem like it should have a place in this sanctuary of reflection. But Bulge wouldn’t lie. What would be the point?

As the oil passed over a particularly deep gash, Jossie 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 lips before the librarian interrupted him.

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

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

Two years passed. 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; only Delfin herself renewed his attentions. But his passion was unquenchable, and the military arts were a way to focus that passion. He was consuming all he could in order to ultimately 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 the theory with burning greed, and absorbed the texts with a 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 fitted together. It was like a great and bloody puzzle.

But still the beatings continued. He would not reveal his learning 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 sparring 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 certain that he would succeed, or such was the spite of his bullies, he may not come out the other side. 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 and more refined. He needed to watch the professionals. And so he did.

He found nooks in the crumbling periphery of the Fields; the training grounds for the Royal Guard of Delfinia. There he absorbed the greater challenges; watching duels and flashing blades, marvelling at 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 now even 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 over a table, 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.

"Get here you little girl."

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

"GET—" Jossie's training reactively danced through his head, and he 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 filth from his face. Beef came up alongside, and Jossie knew that the third gang member would be blocking the exit. 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 inside him squirmed; the same thing that propelled him in his imaginings. But it was constrained. Something held him back.

It was the senior gang member who cajoled first.

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

Jossie 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 the lowest scum, after all.

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 audibly before he spoke.

"No, no I haven't." A tear escaped him, 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 constrained anger, 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 him on the ground, he watched his brother grind the book into the dust of the street, 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 that 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 the volume with nothing short of wonder as it sat snugly in his grubby little hands. There was a ripe bruise across his lower arm, a gift from that last beating, but it was starting to fade. 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 so the pages had a habit of muddling themselves up. And indeed, any sort of indexing was completely absent, meaning that there was a very real risk of the volume being rendered useless.

But when you knew the words 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 to 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 them 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 expression of the clerk's reaction. He deemed it necessary to draw himself around the desk, and attempted to wrestle the precious volume from Jossie, but as things were about to get out of hand, Bulge intervened.

“What is going on here?”

“This, this vagabond is trying to steal Delfin’s journal.”

“Borrow!”

“You’ve seen what happens when he takes 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 that 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 sounds of the clerk’s incredulous objection. He would have to thank Bulge for this.

“Oi, Jossie.”

He fingered the desperately valuable collection of papers, and felt the heat swell through him. Beef was before him, and he already knew that the rest of the Farmyard Friends were coming up behind. This was soon, even for them, but that was nice in a way. He was still warmed by the drama of extracting the precious volume, 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 Jossie 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 veil dropped, 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 was ejected 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 the anger that lay within, an anger that was usually cloaked. 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 prepared. 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, movement entirely absent in the victim. Jossie may have killed him, but he didn't care. The fury still coursed.

The third thug – who Jossie noted he'd never known the name of – was motionless on the ground,

but the twitch of an eye gave the game away. 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 that 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 member of the Farmyard Friends scrambled to his feet and ran, so were his enemies. Only brother four remained – rooted.

"I AM NOT JOSSIE." His brother ran, and brother five now 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 chief bully lay whining on the floor, Kantal went to get his book and dusted it down. He was the guardian, and Delfin's words would now offer him a purpose.

Purpose. It was something he'd never thought about 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 five 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 leaded 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 was her guardian, and he walked to the smithy with a tangible purpose flourishing in his mind.

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James Hockley

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