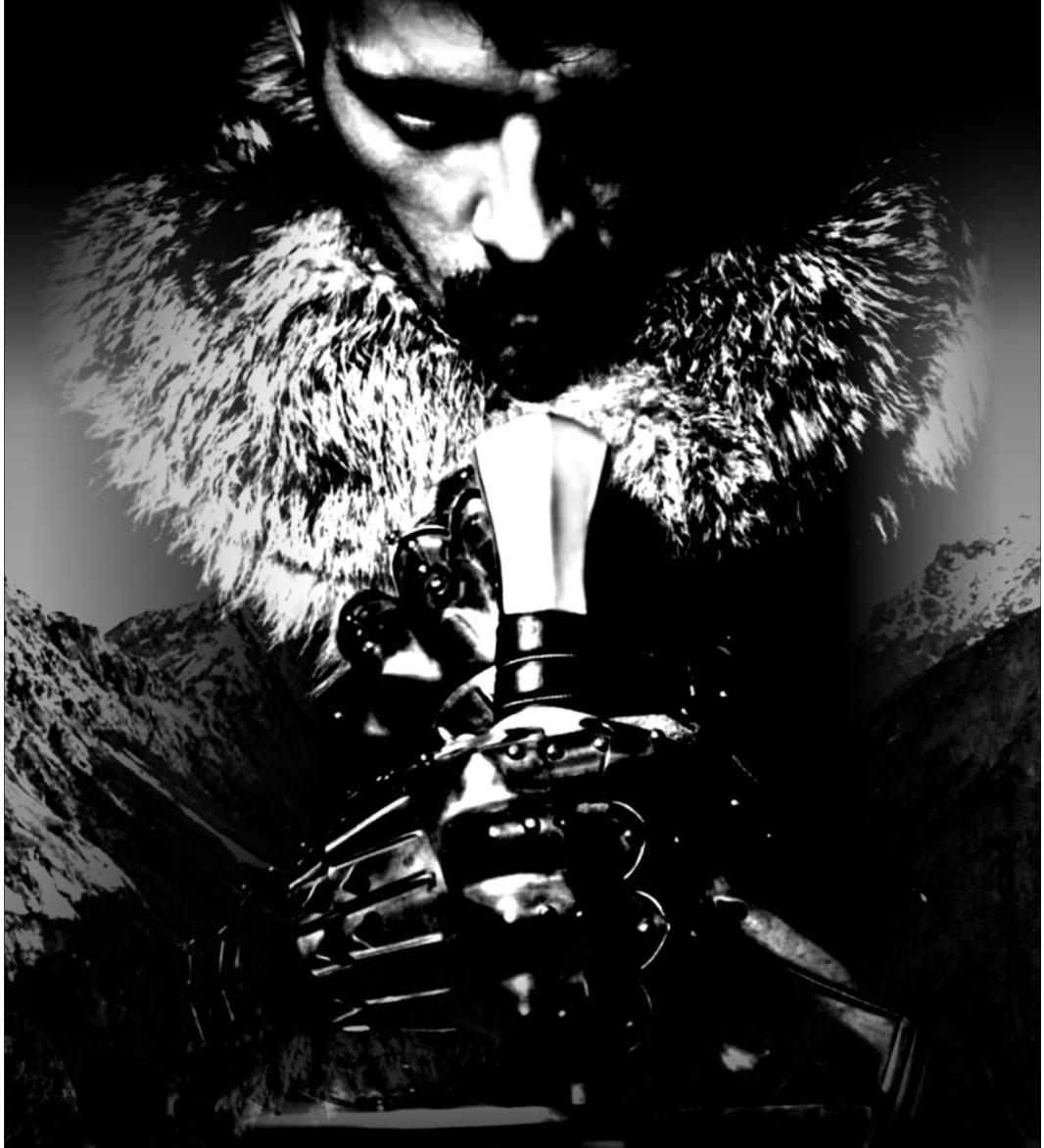


MANDESTROY



EXTENDED CUT

Mandestroy

Prequel novella to Fear's Union | Version 6.4

By James Hockley

Copyright 2017 James Hockley

Website Edition

Website Edition, License Notes

Thank you for downloading this ebook. This book remains the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be redistributed to others for commercial or non-commercial purposes. If you enjoyed this book, please encourage your friends to download their own copy from their favourite authorized retailer. Thank you for your support.

Table of Contents

- [Foreword](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [Map of the near world](#)
- [Prologue | The Moment](#)
- [The Plan](#)
- [Chapter One | The Now](#)
- [Chapter Two | 20yrs ago](#)
- [Chapter Three | 15yrs ago](#)
- [Chapter Four | 13yrs ago](#)
- [Chapter Five | 12yrs ago](#)
- [Chapter Six | The Now](#)
- [The Chance](#)
- [Epilogue | 1yr later](#)
- [Thank you](#)
- [The Story Continues...](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [Connect with me](#)

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Menchu at 99Designs.com for the front cover.

Thanks to Graham Meade for the map font.

And thanks to Joshua C Cook for the invaluable beta read!

The Near World



The Moment

DEATH WAS APPROACHING. This was a battlefield after all. But this was also different. A mandahoi was coming, stalking through the mist, a grey wraith in a grey fog. An ominous shadow. And it was coming for him, but he refused to flee. That was foolish, very foolish.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi.

Arrows flickered infrequently, echoes of the recent devastation. Each missile held destructive potential in its path, but he stood proud nonetheless. The sound of punctured metal audibly tolled, oddly reminiscent of a past he refused to remember. But this was not his end. He was not going to fall to the arrow. The reign of the archer was finished, and the reign of the Grey had begun. He gulped and gripped his weapon, fighting down the nerves. His was a harder path.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi.

Of course, flight was the logical course. This was an enormous proposition, and the odds were stacked. Even in a fair duel the odds were one-sided, but there was no guarantee of equality here. And yet he stayed, firm and defiant. But mostly he was resolute; a product of his past. The easy path was flight, and yet he took the tougher way. He chose to face the Grey, and this was the unlikeliest of successes.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi.

He stared on, absolutely focussed. There was no other way to do this. The fog-bank swirled, pulled this way and that by the wind, but the shadow didn't shift. It was always there, approaching. Approaching him. And he was a seething cauldron. He needed calm like he needed the *Father* behind him, and he hoped it would come. His task was laid out, the path to his future, but he was treading on a knife-edge. He shifted his balance and gulped. It had always been coming, this moment. It had always been in the mists of his fate. And yet, surely this was madness? Surely?

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi.

As he waited, he stood firm. He was ready to dance. His arms were by his side, relaxed. Only his right hand was tense, knuckles wrapped about his great-sword. And damn she was a great sword. He gazed upon her, marvelling at her glorious multi-coloured smirk. Marvelling at the waves of her construction. She was a beautiful thing, made by the hands of his hateful father, and she was a match for the legendary weapons of the Grey. Maybe she was better. But was parity in weaponry enough?

After all, you couldn't beat a mandahoi.

But time was still on his side. Yes, he had a moment. He could see the approach in the fog, but it was not upon him yet. He permitted himself the luxury of reflection. Just for a moment. Just in case this was it. Just in case. It was a knife-edge after all.

Why was he doing this? How had he got here? A great woman once said that

‘Anything could be solved by curiosity’. Well, this is where his curiosity had got him. He had always been heading for this, hurtling towards the flip of a coin. And yet it wasn’t a flip of the coin, because a coin is balanced. No. He was playing the house, and house always wins.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi.

But he was not entirely alone. His master was here, his duty. His patron. That was reassuring. Perhaps not reassuring, but fortunate. That fact gave him purpose.

“Get out of here you fool!” His master sounded desperate, which was hardly surprising when his leg was trapped under a dying horse. But if anything, his master was the fool. They were tied together, a team of two, so he couldn’t leave. He was here, waiting to die. Just like his master. There was no other option. He had a duty to serve, and serve he would. And his duty would lead him straight into the jaws of insanity.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi.

His master looked defeated, ordering flight, but that was just a front. They were one and the same, hand and shield-hand; prince and pauper; fates entwined by the gods. The path to this point had been laid by the regal-hand, but now it was time for the shield-hand to stand tall. It was time to repay his master, and indeed, repay him a thousand times.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi.

Time scraped by in coarse steps. It always seemed to do that when chaos approached. Each moment heaved into the next, stretching the path to death’s door. But time did march forward nonetheless. It always did. He needed calm, and he needed focus. He needed his master to be silent, and yet he couldn’t enforce it. That was a social indiscretion. He did however have a way, and he had to take it, whatever the implications. His manic smile must surely have been terrible, because the prince silenced instantly. It was not right, unsettling one’s master like that, but he needed his focus. He needed the man to be silent.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi.

He turned to the battlefield, taking in the scene of defeat. And it was a defeat – an utter and catastrophic one. The army had approached with hopes that the Freemen’s black magic held the answer, and for the briefest time the cannons seemed to sing. But then the arrows had come, and the reverse was immediate. Cannon-fog now cloaked the field, intoxicating the scene, and the dry scrubland was littered with the feathered markers of defeat. The archers had done their work, Delfinia was in retreat, and now the Grey Plague approached. The Mandahoi were here to mop up, and what a mop to have.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi.

Two men burst from the vapid blanket, desperation on their faces and tiredness in their steps. They were allies, remnants of the shattered infantry, and their faces told the story. It was defeat, and utterly so. A spike of darkness punctured the fog, and one of the men fell forward. There was an arrow lodged in his back. The second infantryman continued on, legs pumping and shock on his face. But was this defeat really so surprising?

After all, you couldn’t beat a mandahoi.

And they were coming. The shadow in the fog was deepening, the form growing

steadily. The fleeing ally echoed the warning of his patron and called for flight, but that was not the way to greatness. That was in fact the opposite way to greatness, because it was a strange quirk that the pinnacle and the abyss existed in the same place. To flirt with one was to face the other. The shadow grew darker, and the chasm opened up. Death was here; the stuff of nightmares; the eternal rot.

The Mandahoi had come, and they had never been beaten.

It burst from the swirling fog, and for just the briefest moment, it seemed mortal. A man approached, grey clothed, bare arms littered with metal rings. A hood concealed him, and most of his face was hidden by a silver mask, but the eyes were visible. He was a dangerous man, yes, but a man nonetheless. And yet reputation was everything, and this was a mandahoi. Death followed where this man led, and the two blades held before him sang of profound ability. If killing was an art, then this man was the master. The odds were long indeed.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi.

And then the odds grew longer. Two further mandahoi melted from the fog-bank, moving forward with terrible surety. The first enemy was upon him, weapons flickering dangerously. Threatening. But he did not falter. His stomach settled and his mind was drained. He was ready. All his life had been moving to this moment, and now it was here. Now it was here. And he smiled. He smiled at death itself, because that was all that was left to do.

For he was Adnan ap Kantal, and he chose the barely trodden path. Eminence or extinction, that was the coin he faced. But it was the path he'd been treading all his life. If he wasn't ready now, then when? The mandahoi approached, and he stepped forward. This was a one-way journey, as it had ever been. It was time to take the path, and it was time to give himself to the one thing he truly believed in. It was time to test the depth of his stubborn resolve.

The Now

The Plan

HE'D DONE IT. He'd bloody well done it. Over a century of failure, and now he, Kantal, the fifth son of a blacksmith, had cracked the nut. He reclined in the luxurious chair, hands clasped behind his head, and smiled. He'd bloody well done it.

"Have you done it?"

The footsteps behind him were whisperingly subtle, but once he recognised them, he went rigid. He turned and came face to face with his king.

"I would never be so bold, your Majesty."

"Yes you would. You're an arrogant sod beneath the façade. And don't call me Majesty. I know you don't mean it."

It was a good thing that he and the King were on good terms. Very good terms.

"Then yes, I believe I have a way."

The regal man came and sat in a recliner to his left. Somehow, the King managed to ease into that furniture whilst also maintaining a frustrating sense of authority. As a result, he could not relax and the ache of his upright position quickly caught him.

"Come on then; tell me. What is it that you've uncovered that any number of military experts have failed to understand in the past?"

"You sound dubious."

"Does that surprise you? I have grown into my reign with an ever-deepening sense that Ahan is the eternally locked realm. It is a belief that has solidified for a hundred and more years, and now you – a street-rat – claim to have the answer. Are you really so surprised?"

"Your Majesty, are we not—"

"This is no time for games, Kantal! Just give me the damn story." The King flared, eyes like pointed daggers. But they were on very good terms. Or was that all an illusion? It didn't matter. It would work, he was sure of it. Of course it would work.

"Well, my king; what do you know of Ahan?" He wasn't sure if the condescending approach was a good idea, but he needed the King to see the merit. He would persist.

"I know it is a fortress." The annoyance simmered.

The King was right; it was a fortress. Ahan was a country within the embrace of two sets of bordering mountains, and access was all but impossible from the north, south and west. And from the east there were only defended waters, so that was no option either. She really was a fortress – his king had that absolutely right.

But all amour has its weak points, so he just needed to exploit this fact. He pushed on.

"And if you were to prise open the defences, how would you do it?"

"I would attack the gates." The frustration in his king was bubbling, but he was playing along for the time being. He needed the man's trust, so this was important. The King needed to see the merit.

And the King had it right; he would attack the gates. The three gates of Ahan. But that

had been tried enough in the past.

The Bloody Gash was the most obvious gate, a single gap forged between the two encircling mountain ranges. Death's Cowl, a thickly wooded forest, was the second gate, difficult to take an army through and infected by Mandahoi. Not a nice option. And then there was the defensive wall to the south. That was a 'gate'. It was a bloody great barrier that was near impassable, and that was called a gate. But such was the scale of Ahan's natural defences that this was true. It really was a fortress.

"And we will attack the gates. We will attack all three simultaneously. That is how we will do this thing."

His king rose, anger burning his face. The man wasn't won over yet, which was hardly surprising. But there was more. He smiled, an attempt at smoothing his king, but it didn't work. He needed the man's trust, and he was losing it fast. They had a hell of a history behind them, but today the king was grim.

"That is not a new option, Kantal! Keep talking, or prepare to be cast down from whence you came."

He had not planned for this.

They were in the Royal Gallery, a place he had coveted in his past. Now he owned the place, setting up almost permanent camp amongst the scrolls and tomes. He read voraciously, seeking the wisdom of the past. After all, the least he could do was avoid making the same mistakes that others had.

And his king was right. This had been done before. But this time, they were doing it his way. There was more.

He placed a hand on a volume to his right, knowing what lay within. It was a hundred years old, and the detailed records of the battle suggested that the tipping point of victory had been very nearly reached. That near-victory would be his inspiration.

"We must re-forged the Tri-liance. With enough weight behind the three gates, the Mandari invaders will be forced to pack their defences in anticipation of the onslaught. They will be drawn to the gates like moths to a candle."

"And you believe the gates will crack? Just like that."

"Of course not." There was still more. He stroked the contract that he'd had written up. This was truly the key. "While the three-speared attack draws the invaders to their precious gates, we will sail through the fourth gate, and strike at their heart. They will suspect nothing, and we will stab them where it will do irrevocable damage. We will strike their capital – Altunia."

"Forgive my ignorance, Kantal, but what fourth gate?" His king's face was knotted, which meant that he was confused. That was good. That was how he had planned it. He stroked the pommel of his great-sword.

"The Nadari are willing to sell out. For the right price, they will let us through the defences. We can sail right up to Altunia, out of sight of sentries. We can sail secretly to their very vulnerability."

There was one last snag – well actually two, but the second did not need to be raised just yet. There was plenty of time for that. But his king prised out the first issue with administrative flair.

“What is the price?”

He gulped. He didn't really have a proper concept of money, but he didn't need one here. The demand was rude; very rude. And yet he was not a treasurer. He was a soldier. Finding funds was not his job.

“It is a lot.”

His king stroked the hairs on his chin. He wasn't pressing for a figure, but he wasn't balking either. That was positive. And yet the King was one step ahead. He always seemed to be one step ahead. That was probably what made him a king.

“Is it this Enabler who has brokered the deal with the Nadari?” His king disliked the Enabler almost as much as he did.

“Yes.”

“And you trust this Enabler?”

Ouch. Trust was such a strong word. He hated him certainly, but he also recognised the man's use. The Enabler had ways to make things happen.

“I believe he will deliver what he is selling us, yes.” Another stroke of the chin. It was sinking in. Or that's how it looked.

“And you believe that Altunia will be frail enough to yield?”

“With the gates heavily assaulted on all fronts, yes, I believe Altunia will be breakable.” Of course, they would need to be sure of the Mandahoi, but he would not broach that yet. He had a lead.

The King stood and looked down at him. The man's face suggested he had won. His neck was craned uncomfortably as he looked up at the ruler, but he did not break the connection. This was his moment.

“Your plans will be reviewed by every general in my army, and my chief treasurer. If they nod, then we travel to Maegwyn. I want this done before the season is out.”

The King marched from the room with a purposeful step. He strode towards the exit, then halted abruptly. He didn't turn.

“And well done, General Kantal.”

Damn. He was promoted. The fifth son of a blacksmith makes general. Now all he needed to do was to make this damn plan stick.

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 diverse too: there were aches; sharp pains; dull throbs; numbness; those terrible pins at the other end of the spectrum. The only remedy was to stand in the stirrups, cocking one's arse at the riders behind, but even then legs would grow heavy. The saddle was always calling, and so therefore was the punishment.

“Pfff.”

The only man riding ahead of him turned in his direction. The look was disapproving. He went stiff with unease, pain gnawing at his concentration. He was still in awe of this man, even despite the years behind them. He straightened himself as far as his discomfort would allow, ready for the reprimand.

“Are we boring you, General?” He did like being called ‘General.’

But the authority in the stare was unsettling. He took a moment, breathing through his nose. No need to seem awkward, even if he was.

“Of course not, your Majesty. I am in awe of your wise direction. I only exhaled at my unfortunate discomfort.” The words came out smoothly enough, but each one grated in 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 really wrong?”

There was a snigger at his back; the twitter of a dozen scheming aristocrats. He was the one out of place here, the commoner amongst the elite, but he had earned the right. No, he had more than earned the right. The King, his master, put up with him because he was worth putting up with. Or that's what he hoped. He looked to the powdered fools and sneered. When he turned back, the King still glared, waiting on the response.

“My arse hurts.”

There was just the tiniest elevation in the right side of the King's lip, his blond moustache tilting. But the authority didn't leave the man's face, and the twittering fools gasped from behind. It didn't take long for them to start whispering against the vulgar words. They would be calling him a fool, uncouth, and a piece of gutter scum. He wasn't good enough to grace their company, let alone lead their army. And it was true, wasn't it? It had always been true. Why had he never seen this before? The King stared on with stony authority, displeasure rampant on his face. And then his face contorted. It was too much. He gulped.

The royal mouth opened wide, the eyes closed, and the King let out an almighty roar. When he'd finished laughing, he wiped the spittle from his lips and smiled.

“I do so love your honesty. My arse hurts too.”

The peacocks were muttering under their collective breath, which was pleasing. He

grunted in pleasure. He loved getting one over those prim bastards.

“It’s not natural to straddle such beasts.”

The King dropped back, moving alongside. “Maybe not, but Man has been doing it long enough. And besides, how else would we make this journey?”

That was true enough. He looked about, taking in the surroundings. To his right was a sharp mountain range; stark against the pan flat lands about them. In all other directions the scrubbed brown plains of Mikaeta stretched away, a subtle heat haze rustling the horizon. But to the east, to his right, the mountains stood like sentinels, protecting the luscious lands behind. That was Ahan, a glorious gem amongst a world of decay, but that land had also been snatched away from Delfin’s legacy; from Delfinia’s present King; and therefore from him as-well. He wanted to retake Ahan. It was an obsession.

But you couldn’t beat a mandahoi, and so Ahan remained without their grasp.

And yet that was what he was out to change. It was the very reason they were here, making this journey. A century and a half had passed without a noticeable dent in the barricade that was Ahan’s borders, and he was the latest to try. But he would succeed where all others had failed. He would succeed. The Mandahoi were a plague sent forth by the invaders who now ruled in Ahan, but he was the antidote and he would overcome the odds.

Or at the very least he was willing to try, and he had his own plans. They were good plans too.

And therein lay the dream: to drive the Mandari invaders back into the sea. It was a good dream, and it grabbed his attention right then. Only his king pulled him back.

“Kantal?”

“Sorry, your Majesty.” What were they talking about? Oh yes, of course. The pleasures of riding. An unfortunate necessity. “I agree, unfortunately. Horses are a necessary discomfort.”

The King slapped him on the back and assented with a soft grunt. He could hear the renewed disappointment from the ‘cocks behind, and he sniggered. The King ignored his immaturity.

“A horse is a fine friend in combat too. Let’s not forget that.”

An image flashed through his head; a wraith in a whirlwind of steel. That was the untouchable enemy; the plague of the Mandari; the Grey. Horses were no good there.

“Not against the Mandahoi, your grace.” *Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi.* His tongue slid over his front teeth, to the sharp relief of the gold replacement. His mind wandered, only to be torn back again. By his king.

“Indeed. Most weapons are useless against that particular foe. Most nights I wonder how we’ll ever overcome them.”

This was his territory, but even he had reservations. Against the Grey, confidence only accelerated the downfall.

“There are ways, but they are,” he licked his lips, “hard.”

A grunt from his king. There was little more to say on the matter. Instead, they could dream of the wealth that lay beyond those mountains. A wealth outside their grasp. Or was it? His plan was a good one, even if all the pieces weren’t yet secure. And

hopefully, most of the details would be set when this journey was over. It was a good plan.

“You do trust me, don’t you?”

The monarch stared wistfully to the barren plains of Mikaeta; enemy territory. Well, perhaps enemy was too much, but not friends. Not anymore. They were civil neighbours once – Delfinia had once even been a part of the greater Mikaetan Empire – but that civility had long passed, sliding with the decay of this once famous civilisation. Mikaeta was now in a sorry state, and it dawned that this was the nation they sought the help of. Was that a good idea? They were here to reinstate a rickety alliance. He looked around, and the reality of the challenge sank in. This had seemed easy when he’d conjured the idea, but not anymore. It was a good plan, but the pieces were flaking. There was work to do yet.

And to emphasise the challenge, they started past a great rent in the mountains of the Adunas Encolae. It was the entrance to a valley called the Bloody Gash. That was where he had been made, and it was also the way into Ahan and all its wealth. But that was still a hard way, and he gulped. Unfriendly eyes would be all over them as they passed that valley, but their convoy held open hands. They would not be endangered.

He looked upon the wretched defences that the sorry Mikaetans still barracked, balking at their neglected state. Flags hung shredded and limp; outposts sat in disrepair; and any sight of metal was accompanied by riotous rust. It was depressing to look upon. So many years of defeat contributed to that, and it was always defeat. It was always defeat.

But no! Not this time. His plans would not end in that same way. He couldn’t fail. That was why he was making this trip. With his king.

But his king had still not responded. Was he truly trusted?

“Your Majesty?”

“Of course I trust you, Kantal. Of course I do. I only wonder. For one hundred and fifty years, we have been trying to lever that limpet from our territories, and fifteen decades 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 defiance of the Mandari, but none had succeeded. There were moments of fleeting gain, but ultimately it had been a story of utter defeat. Ahan remained in the hands of the invaders, and he was only the latest to try to reclaim it. That was still daunting.

“I am not confident either.”

His king turned to him, alarm on his face. “If anyone should be confident—”

“Your grace, 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, your Majesty. We are here to make sure that we can take the chance.”

How they would earn the chance and make sure that the Mandahoi were kept contained was still to be determined, but he would not broach that subject now. His king was already staking a lot. They needed allies.

When they came around the angle of the mountains, *Mother Bright* was dipping

towards the horizon. The creamy stone of the Beha Lomal glowed with a fiery quality as *Mother* bathed the mountains in her tiredness, and his breath caught. It was stunning. The sky beyond the mountains was darkening, a rich bruising punctured by the steadily appearing stars. Shadows were long, and the dry scrub absorbed the rays of the tiring sun-god. The effect was so stark that it seemed that his horse stepped over burning coals. He scanned the roots of the mountains, sure he must see his goal, tingling at the prospect. But the legendary city didn't appear, and his stomach knotted.

But then it did appear, looming out of the shadows, dominating the scene. He shuddered. It was a marvel of the past, a relic of the old Mikaetan power, and it was incomparably daunting. He hunkered down upon the back of his horse. Even its name brought a man out in a sweat.

“Maegwyn.”

Every time he came to this place, he wondered if this was how the legendary Elai had felt. The fortress was a marvel and a nightmare, and the very definition of authority. But it was also a place of poisonous politics, and this time he was to be at the centre of that storm. He would rather face a mandahoi.

Maegwyn was a fortress of impossible proportions, embedded in the elbow of two mountains. A great ring formed the periphery, many stories high and palace-thick. A small city in itself. Those walls were the most daunting siege prospect in the known world, but within those encircling arms was a city of wealth and purpose. A prize of value. And that wasn't the greatest part either. The keep at the rear of the complex soared into the sky, numerous floors spearing rebelliously into the heavens. He approached the fortress and found his head tipping at the sight. It was almost as if the tower surpassed the mountains themselves. The wind whipped, and he shivered. And yet his cloak was thick.

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

The city-fortress was a symbol of Mikaetan history, but it was no longer obedient to that authority. Maegwyn was now garrisoned by Gorfinian tyranny, and that nation – the nation of Gorfinia – formed the third corner of the old Tri-liance; a partnership which he was hoping to reinstate. Maegwyn was geographically the natural place for negotiations, being as it was a central location, but the use of the fortress did offer the ever-difficult Gorfinians an upper-hand in discussions. It was their threshold that he would be crossing. But he couldn't worry about that. He had to trust in the negotiating skills of his king. They needed friends, and these were the best options. He gulped.

The task seemed harder with every passing moment. One hundred and fifty years had gone by without a victorious step being taken towards Ahan. So why did he think he could do the unthinkable? It was a good plan, he was sure of it. It was well-considered and thorough. But would that be enough? He could only hope.

The gargantuan gates, themselves at least four stories in height, opened just a crack. It was so subtle that only keen eyes would spot it, but he had keen eyes. Soon true darkness would creep over the landscape, but in the final dregs of light, riders could be seen galloping at pace. The Gorfinians were coming. He tensed, but there was no reason for that. They were invited after all. Besides, what chance was there of a

Gorfinian betraying the trust of his allies? He laughed, struggling to hide it as a cough, and his king flicked a stern look in his direction.

“Sorry, your Majesty. Just 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.” The king paused, presumably to let his words sink in. The ruler had an uncanny ability to make threats stick, and this was no exception. He gulped, but fortunately, that was the end of the unpleasantness. “The doormen have come to greet us. Let us meet them with open palms.”

And with 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 any different?

This was illustrious company indeed. It was a wonder that he had managed to retain his composure. Or had he? He was rubbing his sweaty hands together. No. The nerves had got to him.

He would rather face a mandahoi.

“Lord King, we are grateful for your invitation.”

His king was leading proceedings – the greater of the two men where negotiations were required. He would probably be utterly impotent if he tried to speak in any case, such was his state. He wasn’t sure his nerves would permit a coherent sentence. He tried muttering under his breath, but the result was not heartening. He kept his head lowered, peering only occasionally from his cover. It was the most comfortable he could make himself, but it was not good. This was truly an impenetrable problem, a challenge beyond his means. Thank the *Father* his king was here to support him.

No, not support. His king was here to lead. He was definitely subservient 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 his king, to the left of their host, was a man of grand proportions. And that was the ‘tri-liance’, those three men. Or at least it would have been many decades ago. Not anymore. But he was here to reinstate that bond. He rubbed his sweaty hands together and looked at his lap. How would he do this?

He and another were the only others in seated attendance – five places taken in total – and yet the table would seat thirty. The vast chamber was oppressive, which did nothing to settle him. And then there was the attire. The damned costumes.

A man in a deep hooded cloak – near-black; wool of some sort; very austere – leaned towards their host. If anything, the host’s cloak was even plainer than his servant’s, but that was expected. This was the tyrant himself; the ruler of Maegwyn. He was the Hooded King of Gorfinia, and no-one ever heard him speak. As the Hooded King ceased his apparent whispering, the aide straightened and relayed the message.

“My Lord would like to remind you that you invited yourselves.”

A shiver went through him. This was certainly not a place of friends, but he hadn’t

expected such immediate spite. His king seemed undeterred, thankfully.

“Of course, Lord King Gorfin. Then we are grateful for your hospitality.”

The King’s hood was so deep that it projected to near elbow length from his face. What of the inner-cowl could be seen was only black, and his features were therefore 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, and he shivered. It was certainly working on him.

He gulped and noted that the hood of the servant was also very deep. It was a badge of honour for these strange Gorfinian people; the depth of the hood determining social standing. So even the servant was probably a high-up aide, or perhaps even Gorfinian nobility; whatever that involved. He gulped once more, forcing himself to stop fiddling with his hands. As he looked away from the Gorfinian horrors, he came face to face with the man opposite him. Another hood and another cloaked existence. It cut right through him and forced his hands to fidget once more. He sank lower in his chair, head bowing instinctively; as if to hide his face. Everyone else seemed to be hiding their faces, albeit in hoods. Why not him? Damn the attire.

The man opposite was, in many ways, more intimidating than the Hooded King. And worse than that: this freak was here at his invitation. This man had ways, which was why he was present, but with that usefulness came a shroud. But in this poisonous atmosphere he fit like a pair of greaves and seemed at perfect ease. The bastard.

A tap grabbed his attention, and he turned to see the aide lean in once more. When the hooded assistant pulled away, the weight of expectation paralysed him. What flavour of spite would this be?

“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 on both of their behalf, and with the subtle elevation of the Hooded King’s hand, curtains were thrown aside to reveal a battalion of servants. They scurried from the edges of the room, turning the vast table into an exquisite example of casual feasting. When the transformation was complete, the only stretch of polished bone that remained uncluttered was the section that held the wide map of the near world. Yes indeed; the table was made of the bone of some beast, and a big beast at that. He shivered again.

But despite that, the room was incredible. It was taller than most houses, lined with pillars, and 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 the chamber were frankly incredible, and he thought he could even see to the northern lands of Rhagastos. This citadel 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 he now served. The place reeked of history, incredible stories infecting every part of the room, and this fact crawled all over him. He was an imposter in this place.

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. He was the one who was out of place.

As proceedings lagged and pleasantries were forced, it was actually the man to the left of their host who twitched the most. But what did this man have to be nervous about? 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. 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 expected.

“A fine spread, Lord Gorfin.”

As the man spoke, his chin quivered. It was not the sign of a strong leader. His face was smooth and unblemished; his cheeks rosy like a virgin’s. His eyes danced with something sour, and every time he spoke, the tone was edged with deep-rooted discontent. He portrayed power through his dress and his actions, but he could not hide his weakness – not truly. This man was the polished symbol of Mikaetan decay; he was the Emperor. But still, he had no reason to be nervous. Not here.

Then it struck him: this was the seat of his ancestors. He wasn’t nervous, he was angry. The Hooded King was sitting in his seat.

The servants continued to scuttle about, darting back and forth from the wings of the room whilst conversation continued around them. Fear was a powerful tool indeed. He gulped again, and the man opposite sniggered. Damn the bastard. He straightened his back and drew his attention back to the head of the table. The hooded aide finally pressed the direction of the discussion.

“Your Majesty, lord of the magnificent lands of Delfinia, what is it we can help with?”

Everyone in the room knew why they were here, but it appeared that the Gorfinians wanted to labour the point. Only the Mikaetan Emperor seemed oblivious to the forced tension, glutinous as he was upon the spread before him, his eyes darting jealously.

In response to the question, the King of Delfinia wiped his own mouth, removing an escaped dribble of wine. Then he stood to address the audience; to share the plan. It seemed rather formal, but then what did he know? This was not an arena in which his particular skillset flourished.

As the King of Delfinia passed on his way to the map, he offered the slightest touch on the shoulder. The unexpected interaction cut right through him, and his awareness of the other participants’ critical gaze was heightened. He wanted this over, and he wanted it over soon. This was not his territory. He dropped his head once again. He would rather be hidden.

“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 loosed his objection. And bizarrely, that wobbly strike struck even harder than the sharp steel of a mandahoi could. The Emperor may be flabby and soft, but he was still an emperor. He was of the line of Villas, and that was a great line indeed.

“And why should we offer you help? What has Delfinia ever done for us, apart from splintering our great union in the first place?”

His king stumbled over his attempt to counter. “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, but the greed in his eyes betrayed the false intentions. He was ushered back by the soothing palm of the Hooded King, but it was really an unnecessary measure given the preposterous transparency of the Emperor’s feint. “We have pleaded for assistance from Delfinia for decades, and what have we received? Nothing. Not even a damned response. Do not forget that it is Mikaeta that still holds the flood of the Centro from your gates. Never forget this.”

The King fought this 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—”

The Hooded King raised a hand, and his aide coughed. It was eerie. “Please. Let the King of Delfinia speak.”

The Emperor nestled back into his well-cushioned chair, firing a spiky glance across the table whilst ramming more food into his mouth. But the Gorfinian King’s head did not even move, and there was no sign of emotion. That was the power of the hood; it was all-concealing. That was the power of Gorfin.

“Thank you, Lord. As I was saying, we request your military support for an assault on Ahan.” There was a disrespecting snort from the Emperor, but his king did not react. He would let the plan speak for itself. The all-important plan. He shivered.

This was his plan, his genius, and he tingled at the beautiful details. He hoped these powerful men would see it the same way. He was being laid out for all to see, and it thoroughly discomfited him. He was desperate for a positive exchange, but he was at the mercy of his king’s bargaining capabilities.

“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.”

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

But the Emperor’s response was at best dismissive, whilst the Gorfinian king remained silent as ever. Intentions laid out, it was time for the challenge. He wanted to crawl under the table, even though the attention was not upon him.

It was the Emperor who shifted first. “And how many have tried in the past? Ahan has been a locked realm for over a hundred years, and yet you come here with promises of success. How naive. You do realise that we three nations once formed an alliance, but even with such combined authority, we could not prevail.”

“Yes indeed, and we shall form a tri-liance once more, but this time with success. Please, I implore you to entertain the proposal at the very least.”

The Emperor opened his mouth, but it was left gaping when the Gorfinian King interrupted with a hand. He leaned into his aide, who straightened and drew the attention

of his king.

“Then 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? He could now sense the lingering eyes upon him, and he dropped his head further. Was it possible to force one’s head into one’s own chest?

“And this is the man that conjured this miracle?” Each word of the aide speared his faltering confidence, and he closed his eyes. This was not how it was supposed to be. He was never designed for this.

The king hummed his confirmation 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 he raised his head and went to open his mouth, the prospect of his peasant twang froze him. 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 respond? He was the most common of stock. 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.

Was it hot in here? No; it was just him. He could see it in the faces of the other table guests. They were smirking at his impotence. When the Gorfinian King raised his fist, he assumed it was for the ear of the aide. Instead the Hooded King thumped it down with stony authority, noise crashing through the room, shredding his residual nerve. He was a ghost now, and the aide’s words nearly blew him away.

“Tell me, General. What makes you think that you have earned the right to gamble with my Lord King’s property?”

It was a good question, and if he 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 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 – 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.

The third son was well-placed too. He was somewhat eccentric, but somehow, someway, 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 silver 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 liked to understand things, just like Queen Delfin did. And he had the enthusiasm to persist. He had unjustified and incredible passion. It was just a shame he 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 was weaving through the early morning streets of Triosec, trying to avoid those who taunted him. He kept his head low, hitting the main artery and targeting a magnificent building that was set back. It was all stone, with a shallow but elegant sloping roof, and it was a wonderful sight. That was his home, or at least his spiritual home, and that was where he was headed. It was 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 he was even able to dream. Those times galvanised him for what lay back in his real home; the smithy. That was 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. It almost made him want to skip.

“Oi, Jossie.”

The streets were near empty, which was the point, but apparently not empty enough. He looked down to the dust-caked mud-veined road. This was the centre of Delfinian power, and yet the decay was overpowering. 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 that seemed strange. These citizens had great potential ahead of them – far more than he did – so why did their passion not burn bright? Even he could, at a stretch, imagine raising this city from the 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 this great nation in this state, stealing as they had the finest principality: Ahan. He had read that as part of his learning, his study, and that story resonated with him in a deep way. Ahan had been lost a hundred and fifty years ago, 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 until Ahan was reclaimed, and as a child of Delfinia, it resonated with him. Perhaps if Ahan had not fallen, then Delfinia might not be in this state. And then, perhaps he may not be the fifth failure of a blacksmith.

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

“Now!”

Fists swept from the alley and grabbed at his 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 row of desiccated teeth, yellow and browned. He whimpered. It had been a while, he supposed. He had to look on the bright side.

The filthy alley seemed to darken threateningly. The exits would already be covered. The biggest bully, a young man of nineteen called Beef – a reference to his intelligence perhaps? – came up behind and laid hands on his shoulders, resting a block of a jaw on his mop of hair. He instinctively puckered his arse. He might be needing that later.

“Be gentle, Chick. This one’s delicate.” In his head, he liked to call them the Farmyard Friends. He’d never actually say that though.

A hand left his right shoulder, and he 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 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? He supposed that even low filth had the pleasure of wiping their feet on the lower scum. He 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 him by the throat. It was familiar; too familiar.

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

And yet this wasn’t the same young man from the smithy. This Brin was different. This was not the downtrodden glare that brother four normally wore. This creature had a disturbing lust in its eyes.

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

The look of 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.

His brother seemed to consider something worrying, but thankfully he shook his head. The rest of the group turned down the offer too, which was nice. His sphincter relaxed. 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 – his 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 also certain that a rib or two were cracked, but that pain barely registered. His near-crippled hand clawed at the dusty ground, and his attackers sniggered at their victory. One final jab to the lower back and he vomited instinctively. Then he lay his face in the acidic discharge.

“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. It hit the ground with a wet slap. His vision faded, and the last thing he saw was his library book being ground into the dirt. In some ways, the desecration of that fine artistry was the saddest part of all. A tear escaped and 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 tempted to stay there indefinitely. If he didn't move, the pain stayed quiet. Feet moved horizontally and absently in front of him; 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. Why would they? They were busy.

He reached out for the ruined carcass of his book and caused a woman in a long colourful robe – a fashion which was perversely imported from Mandari Ahan – to trip, hopping 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 him, 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 held 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 recognised the librarian at the front desk, the snake-thin man peering over pretentiously small spectacles. He was the post-noon clerk, and they weren't on good terms. 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, 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 stretched himself to his full height, but was quick to recede. He was evidently subservient to the new arrival. Then again, in this place, everyone was. “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 him, closely followed by a body. And it was a

strange gangly body with odd protrusions in any place it was possible. He was Bulge, the head librarian, and he was a friend; if friend was the right term. In fact, he was the only near-friend if truth be told, so he should grab 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 Brin that morning. It didn't bear thinking about.

But Bulge would never act forcefully, and that was the difference. He trusted his only friend. Not that he had much choice.

Bulge laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, and challenged the junior librarian with his gaze. The other man peered defiantly over those pathetic spectacles, trapped into silence by the natural order of authority. Bulge was king here. But then the clerk 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."

For a moment, Bulge's mouth formed a hard 'O', but nothing came out except his tongue, which just seemed to loll. The head librarian scratched at the bloated curve of the stomach – how the name was earned – and promptly turned and marched down the hall, beckoning him to follow. 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, and 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 he 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 nonetheless. They had been here many times before.

"Was it the Animals again?"

Bulge didn't like to call them the Farmyard Friends when their acts were so ghastly. But there was no point on insisting on the name in any case, even if it would offer small satisfaction to hear someone else use it. 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 he was better off limiting himself to the attentions of the juveniles. He wanted to eloquently lay down the 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, was actually a contributing element. He almost gagged at the memory of his brother’s meek and fetid appearance. Bulge looked straight at him, and he knew the librarian understood. It remained unsaid between them.

Noise disturbed them, which was probably good. Best to avoid awkward questions. He looked to a gallery even higher than where he and Bulge were sat. He had never seen that place anything but silent, but stood there now was a man. He was a magnificent looking man, a man of authority, and his identity was obvious. That was the Royal Gallery, and that man was therefore the King of Delfinia.

He 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 the King was a young man of Jossie’s age, but the gulf between them was inconceivable. The King’s companion was everything he was not, and the other’s satisfaction with this was clear in the smile. That was the Prince of Delfinia, and the prince was looking upon the scum. That was amusing in a way, that the entire span of social class was represented in this small space. He 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.”

He was shocked at this attitude, but Bulge just shrugged and stared at the monarch. It was a stand-off of sorts, a challenge between the magnificent ruler and the man they called Bulge for all the wrong reasons. Even Bulge’s loose-sack robes couldn’t hide his ridiculous shape. It was no contest really.

But the librarian didn’t care, and that was awesome. He liked Bulge, but in that moment he utterly adored him, thinking of him in the same shade as he considered Delfin herself. And she was the greatest revolutionary of them all. Bulge was the father he’d never had, and the librarian would even stand up to the King on his behalf. The monarch turned from the balustrade, turning his back on them. This time he did smile, only to regret the use of those muscles. The prince smirked and then turned to follow his father into the hidden luxury of the Royal Gallery, but there had been something else in those eyes too. It was fleeting, but it was also powerful. He would remember that look.

“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 had been a stupid question really. But then he scrunched up his face and furrowed his brow. 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. He had always loved the silence. It was a time when he could be entirely himself, and 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, 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 a question. He didn't get a chance to speak before Bulge cut in.

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

And he did. As he flicked through the books, it was almost as if 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, and he was good at puzzles.

But still the beatings continued. He would not reveal his learning until success was assured. It was a challenging mantra to stick to.

Solo practical exercises were easily fulfilled in the cavernous and often empty library. Realistic practise with others was, unfortunately, harder to come by. After all, 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 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. 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. He watched duels and flashing blades, marvelling at impossible skill and dexterity, and he would act along

in the shadows, mimicking. 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 pitiful 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 desperately wanted to consume that high-end military theory, to further enrich his learning, but his time in that place was short. Maybe one day.

“Get here you little girl.”

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

“GET—” His training reacted, dancing through his head, and he side-stepped neatly, twisting 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 the third gang member would be blocking the exit. His brother, Brin, was sniggering in the shadows, as had become usual. He should be angry, but he wasn’t. His heart pumped and something deep inside him squirmed. It was the same thing that propelled him in his learning and his imaginings. But it was constrained. Something restrained him.

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 the cold spread through him. He wanted to antagonise, to get them frothy and reckless, 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 fracturing mind. But it was gone. His lessons were lost to the isolation in which he flourished. Here he recognised his worth, and so he was pliant. He exhaled audibly in resignation.

“No. No I haven’t.” A tear escaped, and that was a first. But he was not crying because of the bullies. 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 roar 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. 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 stared at 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. It was barely more than 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 missing, meaning that there was a very real risk of the volume being rendered useless.

But when you knew the words as he did, it didn’t matter. He could recite them word for word.

Because they were Delfin’s words, by her own hand, and he was in awe of her. What she had done meant that anything was possible. He had to cling to that.

And these were the original documents, by her own pen, and the experience of reading the volume was all the more powerful for it. 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 was 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 he whispered the words with a practised rhythm. The first page may even be his favourite.

I am the enigma. Even to myself, I am the enigma. Who am I?

To half the near-world, I am the traitorous bitch who has unravelled the future and sent the continent into chaos. To the other half, I am the saviour; the one who freed the world of tyranny.

But which persona do I think fits best? That is not an easy question.

They say that history is written by the victors, but that is not true. History is written by those with a quill, and more importantly, those that can write. Many great deeds have gone unwritten, and they now fade into myth as a consequence. There are, similarly, many examples of sore losers and their well-documented excuses making it into our core learning. So, what should we believe?

Well here’s an idea. Let’s listen to the first-hand account. If I achieve anything revolutionary, then it will be this idea. Unfortunately, I fear that this is myth already.

As you may have already gleaned, my life will be painted by two people: those who worship my shadow, and those who hate my existence. If you are reading this, then hopefully you have already concluded thus, but I say to you now: pay no attention to either party. History is not written in absolutes – it exists in shades. The concepts of

right and wrong are meaningless. There is only the terrible toil of the journey. What's right for one is wrong for another, and so it is that the world exists in balance. All that we can do is strike a fair path through that equilibrium, and I look back upon my life and I see that this is what I've tried to do.

Did I do it perfectly? I do not believe there is such an outcome. Did I do it well? Better than some; worse than others. I am not exceptional. I am merely average. It was only my circumstance that was exceptional, and I say this here: I would have given that up in a blink.

I am old now, and I have a favourable number of years behind me. I don't believe that wisdom can be measured in years, but I do believe that wisdom is perpetually accumulating. Until death that is. One hopes then that wisdom is not lost with the end of life, but that it is enshrined in text and passed through generations. But history is not necessarily written by the wise. Look a man in the face and you can see his idiocy. See the same words in text, and it is harder to tell. Well, this is me unloading my wisdom. Make of it what you will.

So, what is it that drove me to my actions? To the terrible or the magnificent, depending on your view. Was it a lust for power? Or was it a virile yearning to see the bloated Empire on a different path? Perhaps it was a devious side to me, a desire to cause chaos and watch the consequences. Or maybe I had genuine intentions on making the world a better place. What do you think?

Because I tell you now – this is all wrong. What drove me to greatness? That is easy. It was the sadness of my childhood, and it was the potency of a curious streak I harboured to hide the hurt. All I wanted was to forget, but the harder I tried, the more my past caught up with me. That history still stares me in the face, and I now know that only death will relieve me. At least, I hope that death will relieve me. The Order of the Veil are not generous with their understanding.

But I digress – something I frequently do in my sunset years. The point is that my only virtue is my curiosity, though it is an unfortunate circumstance that this is also my curse. But curiosity led me to great things, of that I am sure, and so I offer this advice: keep hold of the child in you.

Because curiosity in a child builds the foundation for a great adult.

And curiosity in an adult has no bounds. At least, it didn't for me.

With it, I solved the mystery of my family's sad past; but in doing so, I also brought down an Empire. Through curiosity, I have managed to forgive without the bounds of my moral comfort, but in doing so, I have torn my heart to shreds. I have trampled societies, tumbled practices that have stood for hundreds of years, but in doing so, I have also embedded a more balanced community and outlawed some truly terrible acts. I have conquered almost all before me, leaving a realm as strong as any in the near-world, and yet I see only failure. Why that is, I don't know. This inadequacy plagues my nights and infects my waking moments. It curses me.

But that is enough of my pondering. It is time for you to see for yourself. This is my life, in my words. Make of them what you will. But promise me as my reader and my judge that you will ask yourself this question: would you have done differently?

His fascination was only broken when he reached the front desk. The clerk looked at him over those spectacles, and offered the usual scorn. He gulped, and held up the volume.

“I would like to borrow—”

Rage was not a sufficient expression of the clerk’s reaction. The pencil-thin man drew himself around the desk and attempted to wrestle away the precious volume, but when things were about to get dangerous, 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 it was undervalued at that, though he didn’t say it.

Bulge leaned over his belly and peered into him. “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, and his face betrayed what Jossie could only describe as sadness. But then he turned to the clerk.

“Let him go. I will take full responsibility.”

He left to the chaotic sounds of the clerk’s incredulous objection. He would have to thank Bulge for this. Either that or apologise. He clutched the volume tightly.

“Oi, Jossie.”

He fingered the incredibly valuable collection of papers, conscious of the sweat dripping from his nose. But it wasn’t because of the heat. Beef was before him, and 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 book. The Friends rounded on him, and the anger bloomed.

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 so 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.” The bully pulled at his sleeves, and stepped slowly forward.

Was two years enough? It didn’t matter when he had that book to protect. 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, but he was not distracted. His fury was focussing and his guardianship was gratifying. Beef wriggled on the ground, and that was funny in a satisfying way. It was a new sensation for him, 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 he was prepared. As Chick's right hand extended, he shifted and forced Chick to follow his momentum until he crashed into the third thug coming up behind. Their skulls cracked satisfactorily, but they soon had their senses back. For what that was worth.

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

The third thug – who he noted he'd never known the name of – was motionless on the ground, but the twitch of an eye gave the game away. He ducked, and Beef's fist flew over his head. He then grabbed the passing forearm and hit at the elbow with as much as he could muster. It turned out that it was a lot, and the arm sheared exquisitely. Beef fell to the floor, wailing. It was the point of victory, the apex of success, and so he screamed. His fury was broken, but when 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 he smiled again. He spoke only to himself, but he didn't whisper the words. Beef still had his sense of hearing, after all. "From now on, I am only Kantal." He was the smith.

As the chief bully lay whining on the floor, he went to get his book and dusted it down. He was the guardian, and Delfin's words would now offer him a purpose. That was warming.

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. He had 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 somehow never noticed. And they were not by Delfin's hand. It took a moment to decipher them, but once he'd identified the faint leaden letters, he spoke the words to himself.

"Even you couldn't beat a mandahoi."

It was an attack on Delfin, and so it was also an attack on him. He was her guardian, and he walked to the smithy with a tangible purpose flourishing in his mind.

Three | 15yrs ago

HIS FATHER STOOD ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROOM. The huge blacksmith was in front of the window, and it was dark.

“You little shit!”

Bullying on the streets had seemed bad, but it turned out not. In the past, his father had sort of ignored him. Not now. Now he was in the way.

“I don’t know what I’ve done!”

Wasn’t that the truth. All he strived for was anonymity, but that was getting increasingly difficult. It’d been okay when Bulge presided over the library. That was his sanctuary, a place where he could hide and immerse himself in knowledge, but the opportunity was gone. Bulge had died.

It was most unexpected – the man was not that old. But then, perhaps the name said it all. He was certainly not a healthy man, and those protrusions must have hidden something unsavoury. But it was upsetting. In all honesty, Bulge had been his only friend. Then again, it was probably not surprising. Very little in life went his way.

And the worst thing about it was that he could no longer legitimately access the library. He had lost his private space.

The new clerk was not his friend. The last time he tried sneaking into his sanctuary, he was left fleeing from the Wings. Being chased by bullies is one thing, but running from the elite Royal Guard of Triosec was quite another. He wasn’t ready for that.

And the result was more time at home. A lot of time at home. And a father that hated him. He was fuming now.

“You’ve fucked up my coal store is what you’ve done. One job I gave you, and you’ve mixed all the grades like a petulant little shit. I’ll have to bin the whole lot of it.”

One look at Brin’s face was enough. It was his brother’s doing. There was little point in arguing. Then again, there wasn’t another option.

“I didn’t—”

“How dare you!”

And then his father came at him. Even his mother barely objected despite the moistness under her eyes. She had never approved of the violence, but she never stopped it either.

The injuries from the last scrap with his father still stalked his body. That middle finger on his left hand had never been the same again, and he could swear that his hearing was permanently stained by the pummelling; there was a persistent ringing in his head when quiet came by. But last time his father had been authoritarian rather than infuriated, and this time it was very different. He almost feared for his life. How silly that seemed, but the look in his father’s eyes suggested otherwise. This was it.

And damn, his father was quick. One step forward, one sweep of the arm, and he was

jerking out of the way, scurrying over the ground. His father stalked forward.

“Come on, l’il Jossie. You keep telling me how you punished the bullies. Punish me!”

A fist exploded towards his stomach, and he barely rolled out of the way, leaping deftly onto his feet. He backed away from his father, but Brin ushered him forward. As he looked around, every one of his brothers had a smirk on their face. They were all in on it. The bastards.

“Leave me alone!”

His father’s eyes narrowed and he ground his jaw.

“You live in this house, then you play by my rules. You want different rules, then you leave.”

This was so unfair. Brin was actually sniggering at him – an open display of his guilt. Bastard, bastard, bastard! “Bastard!”

“You dare call me a bastard?”

Whoops. He should have held his tongue there. “Sorry father.”

His father lunged, but he was nothing if not quick on his feet. He skipped out of the way and left the larger man floundering. Perhaps if he kept this up, his father would just get bored?

“You little shit. You asked for it.” As the vast frame of his father stood, there was something in his hand. He went cold. Not that. Anything but that.

The Dark Side of the Stone, the priceless volume he’d been given by Bulge. There was a manic edge to his father’s grin.

“We’ll destroy this little luxury, for starters.”

No. He wouldn’t, would he? Damn! What could he do? What could he do? He could stop the bastard, that’s what. His purpose was back, and he stepped forward.

“Leave that alone.”

“Come and get it, li’l Jossie.” The old man sneered. Bloody sneered! If he wanted petulant, he would get petulant.

He jabbed for his father, his knuckle screaming for the bony flesh about the man’s eye. But the older man was wise to that feeble assault. His father doubled him over and a knee crashed into his stomach. Wind was swept from him, and he huddled over, straining for breath, recovering. His father goaded him and he looked up. That was stupid.

A fist swept to the right side of his face, and the world juddered into darkness. When his senses re-set, he was looking up at his father. Spit landed in his eye.

“In this house, you play by my rules.”

The volume was in his father’s hands, and he had hold of a clutch of pages. The ignorant bastard was about to destroy an invaluable volume. It was beyond tolerable. He screamed, one of utter venom, and jumped to his feet, ignoring the flourishing pain. His father actually looked a little shocked at that.

“You leave her words alone! You are not worthy.”

He swung his right hand at the face and his father raised his arm in defence. Only then did he swing his left. As the right hand connected with the defence, the left impacted

with the cartilage of the nose. His giant of a father tumbled to the ground, and he nicked the volume deftly from his embrace.

He went to his room to tend to his injuries. On his way out, he turned to Brin, eyes narrowed.

“You dare set me up! Next time, that will be you.” He pointed to his inanimate father.

It was fair to say that a reputation as a bitch-kicking juvenile didn’t win him 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 in the household. But despite that, he was definitely the most learned. Conversation with his family was like counting sand. It was just an impossible waste of time, and when he wasn’t reading his book, his thumbs twitched. 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, so he ignored the call. He would only respond to ‘Kantal’.

But he did really need a forename, didn’t he? His father had a point.

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

He continued to stare at the words on the ageing paper, but he was not truly reading. He had absorbed the book over the years, and he could recite every page. It was that same book as it ever was, the work of Queen Delfin, mother of Delfinia. It was her story, by her hand, and it was a rare piece of prose. No, it was more than that. It was the priceless original. Bulge had let him keep it. The fact that the other librarians had not even noticed its absence spoke more than enough. But their loss was his gain. Delfin was his guide, and he worshipped her.

And fortunately, his family didn’t recognise its value either. They would surely sell it if they did, but it was saved by that age-old adage: ‘ignorance is blinding’. There was certainly a truth to that.

So much written about Delfin 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 answers she was given, even when her father blocked her. 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 six-hundred-year-old Empire of Mikaeta. She broke the very lineage of written history just by being curious, and that was impossibly inspiring. He liked to think he had that same quality bubbling inside him too. He could change things, do things, and he was sure of it. Now he just needed to prove it.

“Joss!”

No. He would not recognise that name. He would not. He focussed his attention

back on the page. He had read *The Dark Side of the Stone* hundreds of times, and yet he never tired of its inspiration. If anything, the shapes of the words on the page were comfort enough. He smiled.

“*Bellowing Brother*, Kantal, will you listen to me?”

He turned, but made sure to look amused with it. He loved winding his thick old father up. “Ah, father. I didn’t notice you there.”

“I was calling yer bloody name.”

He 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 this 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.”

Yes, that was definitely too much. “Care to say that to my face?”

His father was huge. He was fifty times the proposition of Beef, who was in reality a sallow and flabby excuse of a juvenile. Yes indeed, his smith of a father was still in remarkable shape for his age. His arms were like fence posts and he had legs to match, and he could also swing a right-hook with the best of them. But Kantal had prodded, and he had won. Since then, he had insisted on Kantal.

“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 did in fact 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, just to float his pride. He could not back down now.

And he therefore needed to change the subject. “What do you want?”

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

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

“What do you mean?”

“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 family, so why taunt him with this suggestion? Usually his father laid into what he called the ‘scrawny shard’ of his frame, although it was this scrawny shard that had toppled the huge man just last year. But though that earned some distance, it didn’t earn respect. The bastard. Why was he saying this?

“Why, father?”

“It’s because the others are out, and I have a real important job. 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 told him to sod the bastard, but one chord pulled in the other direction. It was the part of him that wanted to learn. 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, even. It could hardly do harm to learn. And that’s what his queen would do, wasn’t it? He would learn the meaning of his name, but he would do it for himself. His father was just an unfortunate accessory.

He followed.

He’d expected to walk right into the forge room, where the real work takes place, but instead he was led into a storeroom out back. He laughed to himself and earned a scowl from his father. The man dwarfed him in so many ways.

They stopped next to a mess of bitter and scorched iron compound, twisted and deformed where the heat had contorted the material. It was huge, double the size of his father, and it was entirely underwhelming, whatever it was. He looked over the mess and his shoulders sagged.

“What is it?”

His father was gazing at the thing as if it were offspring. It was a look he’d never experienced. It seemed utterly absurd to idolise such scrap. He almost spat on it and left the room. But something kept him rooted.

“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 his pride. He looked over the metallic mess – all black stains and flashes of light – and noticed his jaw had dropped. He shut it quickly, not wanting to betray his amazement. He couldn’t see how it would become fine steel, but he had to trust his father in this. And he hated him for it. His father couldn’t know what lay in his heart, but this was profound. That scrawled phrase still haunted him. He hadn’t known where to start with his new purpose, but this seemed as good a place as any. Three years of waiting, and it seemed the day had come.

“How did you get it?”

“I didn’t. The customer did. This bloom is more valuable than everything I own.”

Damn. “Who is the client?”

“It is the King himself who has ordered this work.”

His breath caught. He could still see the King and his son standing at the Royal Gallery in the library. Since when was his father taking commissions from the King? He didn’t ask the question.

He looked more intently at the twisted mess, and furrowed his brow. How would it become a thing of beauty? But he kept that to himself too. Something else was burning, a question brighter than the chaos of inquisitiveness in his head. This was what he wanted to know.

“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. He barely registered it, in fact. One blade? He didn’t know a lot about smithing, but this was a lot of metal. His father did look nervous, and that was telling. If his father was uneasy, then he should be terrified. But his inquisitive streak was burning bright too. He wanted to learn. He would succumb absolutely to his father’s word. Only a fool turns down a lesson, and this was a fine opportunity at that.

“What do we do first?”

His father smiled, but it was also part grimace. “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.

He was working with his top off, skinny body on show, and when his brother returned home, the bastard laughed and sauntered straight through to the forge room. Brother two was barely more sympathetic, but he 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. That and a rather larger one of waste. It was satisfying. He could get used to that sensation.

And he ached all over too, having exercised muscles that he’d only sporadically used in the past. At least, he’d rarely used them. His father seemed unaffected by the day’s exertion. When his father finally dragged his eyes from the piles of metal, *Mother* was deep and the shadow of dusk hid his father’s facial features. Somehow though, his mood shone through the darkness. He was smiling.

“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. In private. He still had a reputation to uphold.

His father came over and slapped him on the shoulder. The smile now only sharpened 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 his way. 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 curious side and it fanned the child in him. He had spent all 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 he found happiness. Genuine happiness.

And he found purpose too. He rarely even read Delfin's book. He hoped it could last. By the *Father of Paths*, he hoped it would last.

His brothers refused to work Mahani steel. They considered it a terribly poor substitute, and as he 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 into 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, their steel blooms – being formed of iron dust at best – were patchy and sub-standard.

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 helped their father when he insisted, but it was always begrudging. They would not learn. And so the Mandari ways stayed without their grasp.

But he was hungry where his brothers weren't, and he absorbed the lessons like a sponge. Each meticulous stage was a miracle, because what the Mandari 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 worked 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. Then they were reheated and forge-welded into a single piece of gleaming steel. And 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 at least – unrivalled.

In this exercise he was ignorant, 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. And looking back, it had been manufactured from materials that should not have been usable. That was astonishing. And with each passing day, his brothers' smirks slid into something else entirely. He liked to think it was jealousy. In fact, he had adopted a smirk himself, and he wore it often when his father stood beside him. He enjoyed wearing his pride. It was still a novel experience.

This was one of those moments. It was late evening, the smithy was illuminated by torches, and a cold wind brought bumps to the skin. His brothers were staring upon what he'd made. His father spoke with a mischievous quality.

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

Oh the gift! Oh the bloody gift. He walked right across the forge-room and picked a bland looking broadsword that Jeb had only recently finished. "Will this do?"

His father – father! – was smiling broadly, but he did not speak. Not yet. Jeb, by contrast, offered a glower. This was an entirely new sort of hatred.

"Aye. That will just about serve." His brother's eyes lit up like a spitting furnace, but he had the immunity of his father. Not that he feared Jeb in any case. His father made him hold out the broadsword, firm as he could, and he braced himself. And then his father proceeded to slash down with the new forged Mandari steel. It bit deeply into the wide weapon, and left a mighty gash in the body of the blade. Jeb would need to re-work it, and he laughed. His father smiled too.

"Still think this is sub-standard steel?"

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

He left the forge-room, but Jeb caught him on his way out. "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. All went dark around him. No, it had not been light. But he'd been able to see his attackers, and now he couldn't. Moisture saturated 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 bed-sheet was heaped limply on the floor. It was the middle of the night, and all was dark around him. His breathing was loud in the silence.

What was that? A dream? A nightmare? It had all seemed so real. The Farmyard Friends were all over him. Punishing him. His breath raced 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 the worst of it was that he didn't know why he should be scared.

How many years of his life had been scarred by that history? And he'd been released from that humiliation for three years now. He was free of the horror of the Friends. But he'd never had a nightmare until now. Not one. Something hot and aggressive coursed through him, and he recognised it. It was the same thing that had driven him in the past. It was the inner-anger that drove him to succeed. It was a fear of loss. And then he understood. He'd never had these emotions before because he'd never had to fear loss, but now he did. And the sensation was haunting his dreams.

But what did he really have to lose? Only Delfin's precious volume had brought the protective streak out of him before, but that text was safe beneath his bed. He lay back down, breath settling. He found himself inspecting the darkness in the room. Damn it, he was now entirely awake. Sleep would not be coming soon. The midnight shadows were heavy indeed, but something caught his attention. All was not dark. He went to investigate.

As he tiptoed from the room, the reality of his new life struck him. He shivered. But

more than that, his skin crawled with understanding. He did now have something to lose. That was entirely new.

His father was in the forge room, on his own. He was 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 walls of the smithy. As he snuck in, nerves took him, but wherever he looked, there was only familiarity. There was nothing to be afraid of. He caressed the situation.

“Pa.”

His father jolted, and it was only when Jossie stepped into the light that the older man visibly relaxed. He had been disturbed from thought. And then the focus of his father’s attention became clear. He understood. The blade lay before him, reflecting the candle-light with awesome majesty. The dance of the metal was almost overwhelming. The patterns were astonishing.

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

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

“You can’t! Can you?” His words were edged with poorly concealed hope. But no. His father wanted the blade. There was a natural order to things, and he was still bottom of the pile.

“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 his obsession that his stomach dropped. He wanted to hand that weapon over as little as his father did. Maybe less. His hands balled and his father raised his eyebrows. They were sat side by side, father and son. An impossibly gentle hand was placed over his tensed fist.

“What’s wrong, Joss. Why are you up?”

There was no other option but to speak. The nightmare was still vivid, and the thought of handing off this beautiful thing added weight to his mood. He felt small and frightened, scared of a life where he had substance. He was frightened of a life where he had a father, and also of a life where he wasn’t bottom. It was the life he was never destined to have, but now he had it. He looked at the blade before him, and smiled. But there was sourness in his smile. This lump of Mandari steel had turned his life around. And now it was leaving him.

You couldn’t beat a mandahoi, but maybe he didn’t need to. He had another purpose now, didn’t he?

“Come on, son. What is it?”

The nightmare grew vivid and his face was scrunched up. He would have to share the memory. It would consume him, otherwise. And besides, his father needed to know. He was as responsible as anyone.

“You know I’ve been bullied all my life.”

His father 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 like a furnace. "Help me? He was part of the gang." There was only silence. The shadows continued to dance the perimeter. "I have failed you, son. I'm sorry. I never should have let your mother name you." To his credit, he sounded embarrassed.

All fifteen years of his life were forcing their way inexplicably into his head, every damn painful moment of it. He was on the cusp of something normal, and so his past consumed him. It devoured him. And he needed it to be gone. He may have even loved his father these last few days, but he still hated him certainly. He hated him with a passion born of suffering. The man had to know.

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

Tears screamed for release, but he held them at bay, gulping them down. 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 everything they did to you."

The memories of the violations surfaced and tears started rolling. Resistance was failing. His whole body tensed at the memory, and he pulled away from his father. Intimacy would forever be his worst enemy.

"No father, you won't. There's no way you can inflict that punishment."

His father seemed incensed. It was as if he suddenly recognised a great debt that needed paying. "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. It was torture and satisfaction rolled into one. He got up and walked to his room. When he had finished pummelling the wall, his fist was bloodied. He only slept when the tears of his childhood had dried up.

When the King turned up the following day – an entire entourage in attendance – he 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. Maybe that was partial payment for the debt. Was that fair? They could discuss that later. This was an opportunity, and anger would not ruin his path to purpose. His life was on track because of this blade, and he needed that to continue. This was a turning point, and his past would not prevent it.

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 golden crown. His cloak was silver-blue, Delfinia's colours, but beneath that fine garment he was in rather plain clothing. Fine, but plain. Only the high leather boots suggested obvious wealth.

"I hear it's a fine weapon." News travelled, apparently. Either that or the King had eyes everywhere.

"Aye, she's a beauty."

Everyone in the smithy was on their knees, excepting his father. But even though he was on his knees, he was forward and prominent. That was a rarity in his short life. He only managed infrequent glances from his low vantage, peeking at the King's Guard in their brightly polished armour, but then he felt eyes upon him and he forced his head down. A heavy hand squeezed his shoulder, and he was ushered up. And there he was, standing before the King. Remarkably, this was the second time in his life, and he smiled broadly.

But the last time, he had been sitting and he'd been beaten to the brink. The King would not see that same soft child here. That was probably good. Here he could stand with the straight back of the proud. Pride. It was such a foreign sensation.

"This is my son..." And there it was. His old man refrained from using his embarrassing girl's name. Damn, that was warming. He may even entirely forgive the man for that gesture alone. His father continued, "he helped with the work."

And then a young man stepped forward. The youth – who was wearing similar robes and arguably more elaborate underclothes than the King – was a mimic of the older man facially. His chin tapered and he had the high cheekbones that singled him out as high-nobility. The hair was still rich gold and thick, and the fairness of his skin suggested the young man was little older than himself. And with a flash of the other's smile, he recognised the youngster.

He had been at the library too. He was the son and the heir.

"Then I thank you." There was the faintest whiff of recognition in the eyes of the prince. Did he really remember? Would he say anything? His heart skipped and his anger warmed his gut, but the heir turned away. Nothing said and nothing truly 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. The blade was quickly in his father's hands, and he almost reached out for his portion.

But he stopped himself. He was still bottom, and he did not need that symbol of recognition. He had the firm hand of his father, and the knowing smile of the heir of Delfinia. It was a high point for certain. And perhaps more than that, he had his purpose. He had a genuine purpose. His life had turned for the good, and he wanted to live his name. The remainder of the exchange passed him by.

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. Excitement blossomed, and those words that he'd obsessed over leaked out of his mind. He didn't

need them anymore. He had a name, and he had a purpose. He was the smith.

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 ignore it, or at least he would ignore it for now. In that moment, he was prince 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. That was the sound of his brothers starting their day. To be fair to the idiots, they did have a remarkable capacity for early schedules even despite late festivities, though it could hardly be called a virtue. But today was different. His father was shouting.

“WHERE!”

He 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 seemed foreboding. 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, but he really was groggy this morning. The sound of his brother’s whimpering response only just registered. What had they done? He wanted to laugh at their pathetic display, but he was too tired to laugh. It turned into a yawn. No, the sleep-gremlin had him by the delicates for sure. He could barely function.

And then his door crashed open and his father marched in. The fury was rampant on his face.

“Still here, then?”

The question was aimed at him, but he couldn’t work out for the *Uncle* what it meant. He tried to shake the weariness away, but from the shadows beyond his father he caught a whiff of something putrid. Jeb was smiling cruelly at him. It was the same ugly smile he’d worn last night. Now he was alert. He stood despite his giddiness.

“Of course I’m still here. Why would I be anywhere else?”

His father flicked his eyes, and he was drawn to a packed rucksack. It was his packed rucksack. The sour smile stretched in the shadows, and the cruel menace of the bullies jumped out of his past. 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 then, let’s just have a look inside.”

“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. He fell to his knees. There

was a snigger from the bastards, 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 then it was obvious, and his father found what he was looking for. Of course it was there, and the rising dread guided him to 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 his father – the same man who may have actually loved him yesterday – with fury rampant on his face. He was slumped on his knees and held the jewelled dagger above his head.

“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.

He raced through the living space, and only remembered that his book was still beneath his bed when he was exiting the smithy. He would miss those words, but he couldn’t go back. Not now. And besides, he still had Delfin’s philosophy etched in his memory. He would not forget that precious gift. It was all he had left of his childhood. He had nothing else to his name. Not even a place to sleep.

Four | 13yrs ago

HIS BOLT-HOLE WAS HIS SANCTUARY. It wasn't much, but it was his place. He was king here. For what that was worth.

He shifted into a more comfortable position, moving his head onto the plumpest part of the old rag that served as a pillow. He pulled the tarp over himself and wrinkled his nose. Perhaps he could hide the stench from his nostrils. Nope – didn't work. Discomfort swarmed through him, and he wriggled around until he was looking out of his palace. There was the faintest blur of daylight in the sky.

"Bugger it." It was time to get up.

He hauled himself onto his knees and discarded the near rigid tarp. As he kneaded the sleep-ache from his shoulders, he licked his lips. His stomach obediently rumbled.

Fortunately, he'd had a windfall last night. He wouldn't go hungry today. That foolish baker should really look after his wares better.

He unpacked the invaluable loaf from the paper – an olive mottled bread, with a salted crust and herbs baked in. He had mauled half of it last night, but it was singing to him now. He would devour the rest. It would energise him for today at least. Maybe longer.

He crawled out of his bolt-hole and stretched into the barely-light. Probably best to move now. While the town was still asleep.

"There he is. Get him!"

His head spun, his wild hair swinging and snapping with the action. There he was – the baker. Damn, but he was persistent.

He gave a shrug of the shoulders. The baker looked bedraggled and the bastard wasn't happy, especially when he saw the bread in his hand. Definitely not good. There were few options, so he smiled back, turned on his heels, and ran. Ran like a bastard.

He had spent his years on the streets avoiding the Wings like the plague, and there was a very good reason for that. If he was part of the 'Lost' – the plague of the streets of Triosec – then the Wings were the antidote. And they were not a kind remedy. They punished disease with an iron fist.

The one advantage he had was that he was familiar with the darker parts of town. His pursuers were probably not. He could dart in and out of the small places, moving like a rat through the city. And that was exactly what he did. He shot down the road, his bare feet slapping the ground and echoing from the high walls of the buildings. He looked over his shoulder, to the baker. But that man was less keen on the chase. Instead, he was moving towards the bolt-hole. That wasn't good. Everything he owned was there. His meagre possessions were still there, at the baker's mercy.

"Shit."

Three sharp turns later, expertly executed so that the pursuing Wings scampered wide

of the mark, he was bearing down on his home once more. Home. This hole was his home. Then again, he supposed that it wasn't any longer.

The baker's arse was the only thing he could see of the man. The bastard was digging in his bolt-hole. But he was not an idiotic waif. His meagre sack of ownership was better concealed than anything, and his chance had arrived.

The baker wiggled his arse, burrowing deeper into the hole. It was funny to watch and he happily plotted his path. Four conveniently placed crates offered the necessary route, and he made his move. His feet made a hollow noise as they impacted the crates, and the arse wriggled more urgently. But it was too late. With an expert series of steps, he landed succinctly onto that same posterior. From that vantage, he swept the meagre sack of possessions from its hiding place, and then he abandoned his home. A deft hop back to the stone, and he was sprinting down the street. As his bare feet slapped against the cobbles, the baker finally managed to stumble out of his indignity. The trader screamed, but he was already gone. That man would not pick up the chase.

Unfortunately, where the baker was convenient, the Wings were resourceful, and their numbers slowly snared him in a trap.

"Just like a bloody rat," he mused. As the sky hit the first golden hues, he found himself surrounded.

The Wings approached, five of them in total. They were big, but that wasn't saying much when he was a scrawny little vagabond. All he wanted was a life of peace in his squalor, but oh no. He couldn't even eat his breakfast in peace.

Just because it was stolen...

"Are you coming easily?" Well, that was a stupid question. He continued backing away, but it was not a permanent option. There was nowhere to go.

The moment had a distinct familiarity to it. Something from his past. When he placed his measly bag of possessions at the side of the street, something definitely registered. Beef stood before him in his mind's eyes. Just a shame the reality was somewhat tougher on this occasion.

"I didn't do nuff'in." It didn't hurt to sound ineloquent. It was expected of the Lost.

"You stole some bread, son. Do you know what the punishment for that is?"

Proportionate, no doubt. "You will have your hand chopped from your wrist."

Oh no. Entirely out of proportion.

Did the bastard smile then? Yes, he did. The guard continued forward, followed by his buddies, and this was it. They were armed with fine looking blades – he should know – and lots of armour. He was armed with the remnants of a loaf.

And some old socks. Perhaps he could knock them unconscious with those pungent articles?

And what was weirdest was that the anger didn't come. He was impotent in this situation, and his dry mouth slapped open and shut. He couldn't fathom it. Hands were almost upon him, and he was backing into failure. There was nowhere to go, but neither was there fury to fuel him.

And then the baker arrived. Oh, thank the *Father!*

The bastard baker cried for his head, and the bile rose. He really was a foul human

being. Chasing a young desolate through the night for restitution of a single loaf – it was pathetic. But the greedy baker would be the architect of his own failure. His cry for justice disturbed the attention of the Wings for the briefest moment. It was time to retaliate.

He shouldered the first guard in the gut, catching him off guard. As the man flailed to the ground, his bright steel was expertly whipped from his grip. Now he was armed. He swept the weapon at the second guard with an almighty scream, but it was controlled. It always was. That man pulled his gauntlet into position just in time, but stumbled to the floor nonetheless.

The other three guards were back in command of their senses by the time he assaulted them, and the fight was a poised one. It had been some time since he had used his talents, but he trained perpetually and was still quick and strong. He could not break the three men, no way, but he didn't need to. The baker intervened and the path was forged. He leapt at his new target.

He pressed the immaculate steel to flesh, and blood leaked down the baker's neck. He laboured his breathing and put his lips to the man's ear.

"Just a loaf of bread, and now you're going to die."

Of course, the baker didn't die. He may be a fighter, but he wasn't a needless barbarian. He was pretty sure the man pissed himself, and that was funny. When the knife left the man's neck, the baker cried for justice. The Wings had little option but to take up the chase once again.

But by then, he was free. And he had his bag. The Wings would pursue him, but he would go to his sanctuary. They would never think to look there. Who would search for a vagrant at the library of all places?

He fled to his sanctuary and reflected on his new existence. It turned out that living on the streets was rough. Even compared to a life of misery, this was worse. Perhaps it was not worse than the abuse of his past, but it was not much better. And anyway, at least back then he'd had the friendship of Bulge. Now he was all alone. No-one was there to offer even a cool word of support.

And worse than that, he had no outlet either. He had no way to quench his hunger for learning. Two years ago he had been on the cusp of 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, and then finally having it pulled mercilessly away. It drove one insane. But alas, such was the curse of his existence. In some ways misery suited him better. 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 is nothing if not resourceful. Within a cycle of *Father 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. Actually, the 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, and this was why Kantal fitted in.

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

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 wanted to live his name.

That taste of creation had been so sweet that his dreams were now consumed by that experience. He dreamed of that weapon he had helped craft. He longed to replicate the satisfaction that he'd felt in those heady days, and he desperately sought his path back. But in his position, that was a challenge. Just staying clean was a problem beyond his capacity.

True enough, there were small victories to be had on the streets: a meal forged from waste; clothes salvaged through charity; and privacy crafted by cunning. But each success was disappointingly temporary, and he found himself quickly twitchy once more. He had only one outlet for his curiosity, and it was the same sanctuary that saved his childhood. He sought out the library.

The archives held some truly magnificent volumes on the art of the smith, and no small amount on the revered craft of weapon-lore. He consumed the text hungrily, but with each earned lesson, he found himself further from where he wanted to be. He had experienced perfection, and anything less would just not do. His frustration drove him on.

He searched hungrily for the ways of the Mandari, to supplement what fragmented learning he had retained from his experience with his father. But the trouble with Mandari art was that it wasn't well known outside of Mandaria. He craved that weapon that his hands had made, but the King had paid dearly for it. He could never own such a thing. All he had to do was look at his reflection to recognise that truth. It was a weight on his optimism.

But if Queen Delfin had taught him anything, then it was persistence. The library was vast, and he would search until every flaky page had been turned. He had nothing else to occupy his time.

His unsolicited access to the building was through a window that seemed to remain permanently unlocked about the upper gallery. It was still early morning, but he clawed his way closer to the top of the wall even despite his sweaty hands. He looked back down to the street with a trembling lip. It was filling up nicely, the day's tradesmen emerging for business. More eyes to spy his approach. Damn.

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 him the final distance. He gulped and hauled himself onto the roof. Phew.

Of course, he would much rather have climbed earlier in the day, before the threat of city life was rife. But by the time he'd shaken his tail, the early chance was gone.

It would probably be sensible to lay low a few days. And where better to lay low than 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 in the building always offered danger with the noise of 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 after all. But on entry, it was evident that he would not need to hide his presence. He hauled his meagre sack of possessions through the window with barely a care. The library should be open by now, but such was the lack of demand, the new chief-librarian often neglected to air the doors at all. It saddened him despite the freedom it offered. Delfinia was rotting.

He pulled the window casually shut, but before it was closed, the inflamed cry of the baker drifted in. That man truly did hold a grudge, and he chuckled. Then he popped a morsel of the stolen bread into his smiling mouth, appreciating its flavour all the more. It was very good bread, he had to give the bastard that. And with that satisfaction, plus the waning stimulus of panicked flight, he had a sudden urge to lie down. He appreciated the deathly isolation, and found himself looking to the Royal Gallery. If anywhere was likely to house comfy surroundings, then...

He licked his lips at the prospect of cushioning. After all, he was nearly a king here. But unfortunately, the climb to that place was a bit of a challenge, especially with aching limbs. It was toil he could do without. And yet despite his fatigue, he managed to claw his way across the far wall of the library, gripping barely proud bricks. But halfway across the void, he almost succumbed to the tiredness that now infected his body. He made the final precarious moves with incredible care, and with his hand on the rail of the gallery, he exhaled. 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 support over the banister, but he 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 was actually painful. 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 lot of confidence. And it was remarkable confidence too, because it seemed so out of place on such a young man. But in this man, a man he recognised, it was not out place. This man was born into confidence. He looked to the belt and saw it immediately. It was there. The sabre that he’d helped forge with his very own hands hung at the prince’s waist. It

was an effort to look away from the thing.

“I said, what are you doing?”

He remembered himself and dropped to a knee. “Apologies, your Majesty.” Urgency rose in him, and with it came that consuming and possessive anger. He dearly hoped he would not need it.

“Oh, get up. And I’m not ‘your Majesty’. 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. He smiled as he nodded.

Only then did embarrassment strike. He was in a state, and he was sure he could make out his own dishevelled reflection in the man’s teeth.

“So?” The prince tapped a foot, 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 and weaponry. 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 met. The expression was hard, and daunting. But he had grown too. He was rougher certainly, but he had his own particular brand of defiance. The heir stated the obvious.

“What makes you think that you have a right of access to these archives?”

Bulge escaped in his words, “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 prevented him from apologising.

“This bugger minds.” Stern authority and a hand on the hilt of the magnificent weapon diluted his resolve ever so, but he stood firm. Then that stony face melted into something else. The hardness had been for show after all. “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.” The prince tapped the pommel of his precious sabre.

He gazed longingly once more. It was an effort to respond.

“I beg to differ, your...”

“Highness. It is highness.”

“Yes of course, your highness. But as I was saying, the maths behind the mayhem is of utmost importance.”

The prince turned and strutted into the room. He followed obediently.

“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. He could not proclaim authority on the matter of course, but he had read enough to know the basics.

“And from where will all these fine men come?”

The prince swept about the room, and he followed the exhibition. There truly were some treasures here, and a comfy looking lounger 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 army?”

The royal face turned stony, and the circumstances clicked smoothly into place. He now 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 lesser forces.”

He jumped hungrily into debate. If he had lacked intelligent conversation at the smithy, then the streets were barren. Excitement pushed him on. “And if these inferior forces are pounced upon by the enemy, will they not be defeated by your very logic?”

The prince was evidently not used to being attacked, especially by a vagabond. Come to think of it, the heir 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 of 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—”

“Yes, please, stop.” He had been raising his voice, almost to the point of anger, and now he flushed. It would not be sensible to shout at one’s future king. He hung his head.

“Sorry, your highness.”

“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, your highness. 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 below, but when he turned to look over the banister, the main entrance remained closed. The prince bridged the confusion. “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, arms reaching for him. He was going to be grabbed! He was going to be handed over to the Wings. No! He wouldn’t succumb. He slapped the prince’s hand away, his anger spitting into life. He wouldn’t succumb...

He paused. It was mighty bold to strike one’s future king. Bold or stupid.

The prince looked affronted, which was unsettling. He hadn’t meant to do that. He edged to the banister, but peculiarly his breathing slowed. He stared levelly at the prince, and went no further. He wasn’t sure of the basis for his actions, but he stood

nonetheless. The heir furrowed his brow, but then he smiled. It was a broad friendly-looking smile.

“I only wanted to show you this.”

With a kick of a lever, a trapdoor sprung and a ladder ran smoothly to the library floor. Oh blessed relief! He didn’t know whether he could struggle across that precarious wall once more. His limbs had suffered enough already.

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

“Sorry, highness. 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, and was looking up at the prince when the instructions were expanded. “Oh, and Kantal. I will see you at the Fields tomorrow at midday.”

That he was not expecting. It turned 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 regretting it too. He looked to the heir, a man standing on the other side of the open courtyard, prancing. He was a colonel already, despite his clearly inadequate learning. Military science was a mystery to the man, and yet here he was. Lord of an army. He, meanwhile, was little more than a learned tramp. And for that apparent inadequacy, he was being drenched in the spittle of a disciplinarian. It appeared that the man had a real problem with his own poor looks, and revelled in the aggression he could apply to others. The sergeant turned to the cluster of officers, and then switched back. His eyes were narrowed, as if in menace.

“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. He had been obedient to no-one at any point in his life. He’d even floored his mountain of a father. This frankly scrawny sergeant could not dampen the fire in his gut. His edge was alert, but he wouldn’t need it yet. He would handle this the proper way if he was able. It would not serve to make enemies this soon. 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. He hid it by scrunching up his face and itching his nose.

“You don’t have anything to say?”

He’d got it wrong. Of course he had. He looked to the prince, but the young colonel

didn't seem to care. Oh well. There was no other option. He tried to talk his way out of the situation. This was unlikely to go well.

"No."

"NO WHAT?"

His face was drenched, and it turned out that this authority figure had an oral hygiene problem. And that simple fact made the sergeant closer to him than any of his actual family. How sad was that?

"No sir."

The sergeant was riled, but that was clearly the correct etiquette and the reprimand ceased. 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 he was here to ask.

Actually, of course he did. There was no other reason to come. He'd come to fulfil his purpose.

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 them. And since then, nothing. Yet if he wanted to be a great smith, what better place to practise the art than here? He wanted to make the world's greatest weapons, and these would therefore be his customers. Then again, deep down, he actually only wanted one weapon. He looked to the prince's waist. That was the only true reason to be here, and he wasn't sure it was enough. It would never be his.

"What are you doing here, you shit?"

Not a little shit anymore. Was that progress?

"I've come to join the Royal Guard." It came out with a questioning inflection at the end, which raised eyebrows. There was silence for a moment, but not for long. What was he expecting? Did he expect a slap on the back?

The laughter rolled through the open space, and the petty sergeant's guffaw was taken up by all and sundry. And looking about, he judged that there was more than a sprinkling of sundry. This was supposed to be the finest that Delfinia had to offer, but they certainly didn't look the part. No wonder the Mandari held such sway.

"Think you can fight, I s'pose?"

At least he could speak properly. This 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 stepped into the space before him.

He looked to the heir, who was still gazing intently. At least the prince seemed interested in his performance. That was something at least. He was offered the slightest nod. What did that mean? Was he a piece in a play? What was he doing? Did he want to join the army? He wanted revenge, though he didn't know what for. Most likely he wanted revenge on his father, and he wanted to make great weapons. And he really

wanted that weapon, the one that winked at him from the prince's waist. But was this really the way to get it? Then again, what other option was there?

And then it didn't matter. This was a question of pride and survival.

"You little shit."

The hulking git recognised him, and it was two-way. 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 grinned. His teeth were rotting. Perhaps that was a requirement of the Royal Guard? If anything, Beef's breath was worse.

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

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

Beef lurched, and he saw the path. He would have the better of this encounter. But when he sidled past Beef and jabbed at the exposed neck, his old bully managed to spin. The git came again. In the interest of evasion he dropped onto his previously bullied arse, and exhaled.

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

It turned out that Beef was actually quite quick. That was surprising given his considerable bulk. The only option was to dance out of the line of pain and wait for his moment. The turgid fight became frustrating, but finally a plan hatched. With the prince looking on, and with his possessive edge now screaming from within, he channelled that anger in the way that was uniquely his. If he had something to fight for, then the anger fuelled him, and here he was fighting for a future that had been ripped away once already. His past would not catch up with him again.

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.

This was just wasting time. He had greater deeds in mind, and this flailing heap of lard was just an 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 eyes – ghosts from his past – looked upon him, little Jossie slapped the side of Beef's head with heavy metal. He gazed at the blood trickling over the sand 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. Give that here."

The tendons in his wrists flexed as the disciplinarian came for him. He was about to start a chain of carnage, but instead he recognised the tiniest shake of a head from the corner of the Fields. Such a small gesture, yet such a huge effect. He dropped the poor lump of metal.

The sergeant took him by his shirt, knuckles white with fury, and he whimpered. The bastard knew it was fake, but he didn't care. 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 him everything he needed to know. That was 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 he was given back his ability to breathe.

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

He walked past his sponsor harbouring a surge of gratitude. But it was mingled with something else too. After all, it was the prince's fault he was here in the first place. But without that man, his temper would probably have got him killed. He wasn't stupid. He had to be grateful for the intervention at least. And besides, it was almost like the prince was looking out for him. Perhaps they shared a goal?

A flash of light distracted him, and he turned to see his sabre being shown off. The bastard. Even if they did share a goal, they wouldn't share that sword. The class chasm was just too big. And Kantal was on the wrong side.

He was on boot polishing duty. Again. Twenty cycles, and all he'd done was shine stuff: floors; boots; crockery; cutlery; other people's steel. He'd almost ended up shining a handful of cocks too, 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 the self-confessed pinnacle of the Delfinian military machine, and they wore the arrogance that went with that title. 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 had a honed edge to it. The word shit could be made to sound almost divine.

But he had never lived a life of embellishment, and he would not succumb to polish. He hated this place.

How 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. Surely the Royal Guard was the pinnacle, wasn't it?

No. 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 such was the potent threat of the Mandari that it was the only option. It had been like that for generations.

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. This would probably mean a beating of some sort – there was usually a beating involved. It was fair to say that he wasn't popular.

"And your father's okay with this?"

The accent was polished, and he 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. But when the second man spoke, a shot of acidic spittle burned his throat.

“It was his idea. I need to earn my wings.” It was the prince.

“You’re not a Wing. You’re a colonel of the Royal Guard.”

The prince strutted before his companion, his shoulders back and his eyes focused directly ahead. There was no way the bastard would see him, 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 he had his sword.

“You know what I mean. My father is an embattled war veteran. I am a raw pup. I need to taste 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 passing him, strutting by like superior peacocks. He seethed.

“Morning Kantal. I trust you are well?”

He was, quite literally, blown dumb. But he would have to speak. Not responding would be the worst thing he could do.

“Y-y-y-es, your highness.”

“Not highness, Kantal. Colonel.” He hadn’t looked at him once, but he didn’t need to. His companion offered a glance, the look of a man who’d just picked dog-dirt off their boots, but it didn’t matter. He had been recognised by the senior man. He almost smiled.

“Back to work, Kantal.”

With the appreciation over, he reflected on the unexpected experience. It was fleeting, but thoroughly enjoyable. Not that it got him anywhere.

The two senior officers proceeded to have an extended argument while they embellished their appearance with the final immaculate touches. The prince came over and took the boots off him, complimenting him on his work. He was a clever bugger. Then he returned 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 of his past resonated. That was a path he’d once considered, wasn’t it? It was a path less chosen, but it was still a path. His mind drifted and his mouth opened mechanically. He was not in charge of his voice. “Yes you can.”

He gulped. How had he forgotten about that? But it was an impossible objective, as he’d concluded before. It made sense to forget about it. Then again, anything was better than shining stuff, wasn’t it? Maybe this was always supposed to be his path. Maybe he’d been chasing the wrong goal. He stared absently at the floor.

The two officers were obviously looking in his direction, but he kept his eyes low. He was still struggling to make sense of the trajectory he just set himself upon. He had time to take it back.

“Kantal? You’ve never argued that truth before.”

The other officer seemed to sense an injustice. “Your highness, you do not talk 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?”

He looked to his prince then, meeting the intense gaze. The captain spluttered. Why was it that their fates were seemingly entwined? Not that he was complaining. But was this a path he could really follow?

“You’ve never made that bold claim before, Kantal. Why would you say that now?”

Because he was an idiot – that was why. *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 colonel.”

“It’s highness to you—”

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

But the truth was he had nothing to say. It may have been the wistful dream of his childhood, but it was not a path he could tread. He didn’t know the way. It was a fleeting scrap of madness, that was what it was. It was boredom playing mischief. 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. “Pah. Mandari steel is second rate. They are freakish ghouls who have sold their souls. The *Stranger* touches them. That’s what makes them so potent. It’s like fighting a ghost.”

The prince stood, and smoothly removed the steel from its home. She was beautiful. He lusted upon the thing his hands had made. The folding caused the blade to reflect glorious patterns, like she was burning. It was seductive.

“Offer your fine Delfinian steel, captain.”

The captain ticked his gaze between the two men, evidently at a loss as to whether his commander’s order was genuine. Eventually he stood and swept out a length of dull grey steel whilst offering that same dog-dirt look. As the petty officer spoke, it was a struggle not to snigger.

“It is Gorfinian.”

The prince nodded, then swept his own weapon back, and then pushed it forward almost lazily. The Gorfinian steel – some of the finest metal in the world – was split clean in half. The prince smirked.

“This is Mandari steel, captain. But more than that, it was Delfinian made. And by him.” The hand rose and pointed in his direction. The captain chewed his lip.

“Sorry sir.” He was clearly at a loss for what was going on, but the destruction of his fine steel was worse. In all honesty, the fact that it had sheared like it did suggested it was a fake, but he was not about to ruin the prince’s exhibition.

“Mandari steel is not the finest because it has the purest raw materials. It doesn’t. It is the finest because it is infused with a love of perfection. It is infused with the gift of

time, and time, captain, is the ultimate scarce resource.”

A part of him wanted to believe that he’d read that somewhere before, but he knew he hadn’t. It was beautiful.

And time was a scarce resource. And he was wasting his time here. That was surely why he’d made the impossible claim.

“Sir. Let me come with you.”

He didn’t even know where ‘where’ was, but anything was better than this infuriating stagnation. He’d 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 the prince was ever confounding, but it seemed to yield unexpected results. Presumably the prince got something out of it too?

He 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. His breath caught, and there was a rhythmic rumbling sound in his ears. That was a new sensation for him, and he pondered its source. He thought it was nerves, but it could also have been excitement. It was certainly madness.

It was a plain old street, oddly familiar, though not forged of pleasant memories. Citizens bustled past, not noticing him. Ignoring him even. Just like the old days. 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 against the enemy. But before that push, he needed to be here. At least, that’s what the prince decreed. He wasn’t so sure.

The building looked noticeably finer than when he’d fled it three years ago. They had spent the earnings well, and a congregation of military folk evidenced the flourishing business. He spotted familiar faces amongst the punters, and a jet of cold went through him. He quite literally had no idea how this would play 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 what looked like a combination of joy and fear. It occurred to him that he understood so little of her that he couldn’t place the basis for either emotion. He reached with his right hand and brushed her outstretched palm, his nerves tingling at the touch. She smiled. He was her little girl, and he had returned. He wanted to scowl at his mother, but he found that 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. Brin was still bigger than him, but he had never been stronger. Not since the days of the violation. He released his mother’s hand, and with a whinny of apparent delight she galloped through the smithy. As he walked past his bully of a brother, he didn’t even dignify the fool with a glare. Jossie had grown beyond the bullies. 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. It was not Brin that he needed to be scared of.

You couldn’t beat a mandahoi, but he was going to try.

“What clothes is them? You pretending to be a soldier now?” It appeared that Brin’s language lessons had not been high yielding.

“Joss. You really shouldn’t be here. Father’ll go mad.”

His head snapped to brother two; the rational sibling. His air of confidence suggested

that he had now adopted his rightful place as the chief-deputy of the smithy, usurping the older but less useful brother. That was amusing. He offered his brother a callous smile.

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. His father stayed within the bounds of the smithy, and the shadow hid his features. But it was clear that joy was absent. His mother hung at his father's left, pleading for mercy. That was strangely satisfying, however useless the gesture. In one corner of his mind, he had never felt so wanted. But in the other, he knew he was loathed. What was to be done with such contrasting emotions?

And standing at his 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. It was he who made the mischief today. He swallowed his nerves.

"What do you want, little Jossie."

His father was being patronising. It worked. He rubbed at a rib, and a recollection slotted into place. His father had given him that injury during their mighty scrap. He remembered now, clear as the azure blue sky. Not that the ache had over-bothered him, but that was an important day because he had won. This 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 his direction. "The Royal Guard is full of crooks. No wonder they took you in."

There was audible 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. Did that suggest 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 that before? Most likely because it had never been there before. 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 one effort to pave the truth must surely be 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 clenched and the perspiration on his forehead grated. 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 offer the truth. But if the only way down that path is via the hater’s embrace, then I will forego the pleasantries. Let’s get down to business.”

Confusion reigned, which was certainly more pleasant than the threatening atmosphere that had just burst.

“What business?”

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 settled. The hushed chatter of the punters and general din of the city faded with the passing heartbeats. Only silence. And between him and his father there was something darker too. It stretched, expanding, every moment heavier than the last. He raised his left hand, a heavy velvet purse gripped within it. It was the prince’s money, all the prince’s money, and he could see his father’s eyes switch. The pressure went up a notch, but ultimately 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 he had. 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 clinked. But his father was immovable.

“Coin is of no use if you don’t have my respect. I will not help you.”

He rocked from side to side and his shadow shifted. His head dropped. How could he have been so stupid? Some grudges ran too deep, and a look to brother one returned that same infuriating smile. He had been beaten three years ago, and he could not turn the tide today. Here, he was always the bullied.

But then the smile melted on brother one, and his shadow did something else. It morphed and warped, and stretched to the side, breaking. And then there were two shadows, and someone else spoke. He smirked.

“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 eased the sabre from its housing and offered 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 sunk into kneeling submission.

Brother one ducked back into the darkness and hid himself.

The entire population of the street stood dumbstruck.

And his father softened. Oh how he softened.

“Of course, your highness. I would be delighted to accept your commission.”

The prince took the velvet purse and threw it over. “This needs to be extra special. I

want a double edged straight blade. A warrior's 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.

"Your highness, where in l'Unna would I get that much Mandari steel?"

"Already sorted," and with an extension of the prince's arm, a cart trundled into view. Only then did he begin to enjoy the moment.

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

All of a sudden, 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. It gave him his purpose.

"Jossie!" He turned to see his mother galloping towards him, her eyes averted from the prince. She held a cloth parcel before her, and she held it out to him. As she offered the gift, she bowed her head, and he acknowledged it with a gentle touch of her outstretched palms. This was most unexpected. What gift would his mother have for him? She didn't even know he was coming.

But when he unwrapped the cloth, he almost leaned down to kiss her. "Thank you mother. This is a gift of great value."

She didn't lift her eyes, but her lips curled and her cheeks went rosy. He looked down at Delfin's journal, and placed a gentle hand on his mother's cheek. What an unexpected gesture. He opened the first page and the leaden scrawl was still there:

'Even you couldn't beat a mandahoi'. It had always been his destiny after all.

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 most likely.

"Well it isn't any more. I think our fates are entwined, 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."

His breath caught. If it had been a theory before, then now he was certain. Their fates were shared, and it was all because you couldn't beat a mandahoi. But he was willing to try.

He gulped. What had he done?

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

Before him was the 'Main Gate': the Bloody Gash. It was a natural valley forged through the encircling mountain ranges, and despite the swiftly flowing river called the Emperor's Tears which called the place home, this was the only open gate. It was the easy option. But the scene before him was contrary to this. It was still hell on l'Unna.

The King had invested in a group of entrepreneurs from the Reach who'd appeared in Triosec with the most fabulous contraption. 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-yellow mist which hung about suffocating the onlookers, but it was worth it. When the demonstration had left a modest wall severely damaged, the King was quick with his money. He pledged a hefty reward for the effective neutralisation of the Mandari resistance. The Freemen – with their rich golden skin, piercings, and strange blue markings over their near naked bodies – hungrily accepted the offer, and war was planned.

And the King, with a clear sub-text of retreat in mind, had invited his son along. This was evidently a fabulous day to offer his heir first combat, even if it was at a distance. And because the prince was here, so was he.

As 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 he still baulked at the numbers – was pulled up behind. The cannons were allowed to spew hell once, twice, three times, and only then did the King begin to believe. He ordered a squadron of cavalry to advance into the cannon-mist, but the fog was all that could be seen. There was only one answer to the prince’s question.

“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. As such, the heavenly patterns from the Mandari techniques were only discernible on closer inspection. With this beautiful weapon, the artistry was not so subtle. It seemed to burn as the reflection of the light was enriched by the delicate weave of her forging. He rotated the weapon onto its vertex, and watched the patterns swirl once more. It was beautiful.

“Kantal. I fear you may have fallen in love.”

The prince’s amusement was plain, and he stumbled to defend himself. “I have never loved.” Sadly, that was true.

“Well, it appears that you have now.” He ignored the taunts of his superior, and continued to rotate the weapon. His prince continued regardless. “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 clear order of the day.”

He nodded, but made sure to add his own perspective. “Of course, retreat is not always a straightforward 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 serious, but there was also the subtlest shade of suggestion. There was an unspoken understanding between the two men. At least, that’s how he interpreted it.

“Of course, colonel. I will not take undue risk.” He nearly smiled, but he quickly

smothered any evidence. The prince saw through it, shrewd as he was.

“And that sword is not insurance.”

Wasn’t that the truth? There was no insurance against a mandahoi. But he suspected that although this was the commonly held truth, there must always be anomalies. And for whatever reason, he was an anomaly. As he thumbed the pommel of his great-sword, that sense flourished in him. His prince looked back to the scene before them.

“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 made by the Freemen’s magic. Two hundred cavalry had made their way gingerly into that oblivion, and the King’s spirits were so buoyed that he even ordered a thousand infantry to advance. The mass of men swarmed either side of them and into the fog, and when the rearmost infantry was barely visible, he may have 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. Finally. And yet something subtle caught in the back of his throat. It was disappointment. 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. Perhaps it was some sort of military instrument? Some form of battlefield communication. But he would know of such a piece. It made no sense, but the falling pitch was strangely foreboding. What was that? It was only when the steel heads started to burst from the lingering cloak that it made sense. It was obvious really. This was the bite of the enemy, archery on a scale unprecedented, and it was remarkable to look upon. 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. 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 in reality, it was nothing more than a village trick. Novelty. This was projectile death, a masterful demonstration of archer authority, and it was so overwhelming that he almost forgot about his sword.

Almost.

The missile that struck just paces ahead of him was nearly three quarters the length of a man, and its shaft was as thick as his wrist. It didn’t quiver spectacularly like the pathetic arrows in the Fields. Instead it burrowed into the ground with a mole-like hunger. The dry earth rebelled, objecting at the penetrating action of the missile, but the arrow did not relent. It dug deeper and deeper. That was fear right there, and he dropped instinctively into a squat. It was the only thing to be done.

Of course, the Mandari resistance was never going to crack that easily. But he had dared to hope, hadn’t he? That hope had been shattered for sure. “The cannons are not the answer, are they?”

The prince looked down at him from his authoritative place on his horse, but he wasn't expecting a response. It was a rhetorical question. The screams went up, and only then did his prince bother to respond.

"No, they are not. It seems my father was right to be cautious."

And there it was. Failure. The Delfinian force had been consumed by the fog, and he doubted they would emerge.

But worse than all that, he had been 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 the Mandari's work for them. The Mandahoi could stay at home for all that mattered.

In mere heartbeats, the crazed remnants of a cavalry advance burst through the fog. But the beasts were few in number, and that was numbing. 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. The flank of a horse was a comically easy target for an archer, and so the cavalry never stood a chance.

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 back through the fog. There was terror on their faces, but 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."

He stood, tightening and loosening his grip on the great-sword. As he stared into the mist, he saw his future 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, wouldn't there? There would have to be.

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

The retreating infantry swarmed past, offering a collective cry of warning – a call to flight – and Kantal turned to his prince. His master offered an almost apologetic smile, but it was still a smile. This man seemed to know him 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 beast that was most startling. The prince's horse reared up, and his master was in trouble. A black stab was burrowing its way into the flank of the white mount, and it slumped to the ground. As it failed, the poor beast shrieked in agony.

The prince was silenced by the turn of events, but it was only for a moment. He cried in his own pain, scorched as he was by the trapped limb beneath the horse's bulk. His master needed help. He rushed forward to intervene, and he gripped his sword tighter. He might be needing that.

His moment was coming after all.

“Your highness.” 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 him wanted to cry out for assistance. But another part overruled. The prince was wide-eyed, but there was something else there too. When the heir of Delfinia spoke, he recognised the sub-text. Was it really sub-text? It didn’t matter. Not really.

“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 then it flourished. He would be needing that.

This was what he’d always been meant for. But he’d only known that recently. He was an anomaly, and he was here to fight the odds. Death was a certainty, but the timing of death wasn’t. That was what he could change. He would control the date of his death, or at the very least, he would bring forward that of another’s. He faced the Grey and he dreamed of victory.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi, until you believed. And he now believed. His moment was here.

Arrows still punctured the fog, but he ignored the interruption. This was between him and the Grey; nothing else would get in the way. The battle was lost – it always was against the Mandari – but he would have his victory. His moment of notoriety. He looked on with manic intent edging his gaze, and he snarled. The anger of a life long-suffered balled in his stomach, and he fed on that emotion. He would be needing that.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi, unless you had the will. And his will was more than that. It was obsession.

Flight was the other option of course, but what option was that? Flight only brought more of the same: an existence of scrabbling indifference; a life of squalid nothingness. And he was here to protect the prince, so what sort of fulfilment would flight be? No. To run was to embrace his past, and he was not prepared to do that. He had always eyed the future because of what it offered. It offered hope, and that could drive a man to greatness.

And you couldn’t beat a mandahoi without it.

He stood firm despite the chaos. What good has ever come from flustering hands? But within the pit of his stomach, his anger boiled. It was controlled, pliant and extractable, but it was definitely there. It was fuelling the determination that drove him on. It was the engine behind his abilities, and it was well oiled today.

Because you couldn’t beat a mandahoi unless you had the tools. And he now had the tools. They were intended for nothing else.

He gazed upon his great-sword, knuckles white with his affection for her. And damn she was a great sword. He marvelled at the glorious multi-coloured smirk of the weapon, smiling at the waves of her construction. She was a beautiful thing, made by the hands of his hateful father, and she was a clone of her enemy’s weaponry. Maybe even better. Born of Mandari steel to defeat the Mandari scourge. His weapon was a true cannibal in the making. But that was required. No, more than that. It was a minimum.

After all, you couldn't beat a mandahoi without harnessing their world. And he had immersed himself in it.

Time ticked abrasively by. He lusted after the moment of his becoming, and his foot tapped to the beat of his heart. What had brought him here? What had led him to the brink of madness? A great woman once said that: ‘Anything could be solved by curiosity’. Well, this was the culmination of endorsing that philosophy. On this field, facing death. It didn’t bear thinking about, but then the best things in life were rarely understood. Instinct was the only true guide.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi without curiosity, and he had questioned all his life.

But his prince had brought him here too, and he had to smile at the fortune of that. He looked to his superior and tried to break down the mixed emotions that the prince betrayed.

“Get out of here you fool!” He dismissed the prince’s words with a tilting of his head. He didn’t truly mean that. Surely the prince knew exactly why he’d come here? And wasn’t that encouragement in the man’s eyes? Without his intervention the prince was doomed, and that was really all that mattered. It was as simple as that.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi without a purpose, and now he had that purpose. His prince had given it to him.

He turned back to his destiny, and sought the comfort that he would take into battle. Every moment that he’d spent training swam through his mind, and his muscles twitched expectantly. He could feel the flow of the fight already. It would be tough. But there was always a way. There had to be a way – had to be – and if it was there, he would find it. The battle was lost and the Grey would be scouring the field of detritus. And here he was, waiting to shred the cloth.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi without the element of surprise, and standing firm was greatest surprise of all.

Two allies burst from the vapid blanket, pursuing the logical course of flight. He ignored their warning cries, and he only vaguely recognised one of the two being dropped by a burrowing arrow. But there was nothing he could do for them. They would only distract his focus. He was here for a greater purpose, and he had to stay on course.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi without a singular determination; and he had only one purpose.

And they were coming. The shadow in the fog was deepening, and the form of the Grey was approaching fullness. The last fleeing ally grunted past, but nothing would detract him now. He was approaching the moment. His moment. He ground his shoulders by rotating them, loosening himself to the flow of his anger. Death was here, the stuff of nightmares and the eternal rot. But he was wise to the challenge.

The Mandahoi were upon him, but he was an anomaly. The world changed here.

It burst from the eddies of fog, and for just the briefest moment, the Plague seemed mortal. Grey clothed; bare arms; a hood. You could not trust a man in a hood, and he gritted his teeth. Confidence oozed from the approaching mandahoi, but he was a man

nonetheless; a man with a mastery in killing. But he too was a master, and he saluted his enemy with a dip of his great-sword. It was almost time.

Because you couldn't beat a mandahoi without the Father on your side. And despite the animosity, his father had made his blade.

But then the odds grew longer. Two further mandahoi melted into existence and stalked forward. They had equal purpose in their form. The first was almost upon him, coming to make his acquaintance, coming to ply his trade. A tremor of nerves fluttered, but he did not falter. The infusion of his body was complete, the chaos was consumed, and his purpose was set. All his life had been moving towards this moment, and now it was here. Now it was here. He smiled at death itself.

And then he recalled the words: *even you couldn't beat a mandahoi*. Here, now, he was chasing the impossible goal. But what if it was just that; impossible? He had never considered failure before, but the steel dance was about to start, and it burst into his head. That was the problem with uncertainty – only the *Father* had the answers. He looked to the sky, searching for the approval of the gods, but there was nothing to be seen but the bank of fog. If he was going to do this, then he was going to do this alone.

After all, that had always been his way.

The mandahoi was quick. He had to give him that. One moment he was a step away, and then they were together. Tussling. Dancing like lovers.

How perverse.

Glorious steel swept gloriously down, and the Mandahoi bastard's eyes seemed to smirk. He was smiling. As he heaved his own weapon into the way, the mandahoi continued to weave elegantly around him. His opponent sang with two blades; two routes to death, and the mastery of the two weapons was simply astonishing. Speed was essential.

He could never compete on speed. Or skill. Not here he couldn't.

So actually, deviousness was essential, and a great steaming pile of luck. He needed the gods on his side, or more specifically, he needed a particular god on his side. The *Father of Paths* worked in mysterious ways, and he hoped this was one of them.

With an angled rotation of his great-sword, the double pronged assault was stalled. The smile of the man faded as they faced off, and he sneered in return. It was already a victory. Few had even managed what had just been done.

The dance continued and the mandahoi drifted in and out of his circle. He was clumsy by comparison – not a sensation he was used to – but he was nothing if not reactive. The Grey was quick, very quick, and poised on his feet, but that wasn't enough here. No. He wouldn't fail that easily. He had lived a life where any shadow offered a threat, and he avoided the mandahoi in the same way. Rapid evacuation was not unfamiliar for him; just ask the baker.

But forward progress was slow, or actually, non-existent. The fury that pushed him was there, but it was retrenched, swamped by his conscious faculties. He simply struggled to keep himself alive, and he couldn't think fast enough to attack. He had

absolutely no time for anger. He was impotent.

The mandahoi danced past, sliding behind and cutting in. He spun clumsily out of the way, and he saw the other two mandahoi for a dizzying moment. His stomach dropped. They were strutting past, not even considering him a threat, just moving straight for his prince. The bastards. He needed to draw them in, wanted them close, but he didn't have a way. He had his hands full with this single mandahoi. The attention of two others would be instant suicide.

But he had to try, and the moment was gifted.

His dance partner came once more, but this was vicious – other-wordly. This was intended for one thing, and one thing only. Bullying submission. Both immaculate blades streaked towards him, and he recognised the path of attack. The bastard smiled, certain of the outcome, but he was forged of sterner stuff. Or rather, his sword was.

Where a milder blade would have shattered, his great-sword was resolute. His weapon screamed back at the mandahoi, and he screamed with her. He pushed back on the Grey with all his strength, and knocked the bastard to the ground, throwing his weapon down hard. His beautiful sword only missed the mandahoi by a hand's width. She burrowed into the parched earth, kicking up dust, and that was enough. It got the attention of the other two.

And then there were three. And the nightmare consumed him.

And it was a nightmare – there was no other word for it. It was a whirlwind of grey, a tornado, whistling and shrieking in his ears. And it slowly broke down his resolve. He could not sustain his resistance. How he'd survived this long was a mystery; his every step seemed blessed. But where his conscious faculties failed him, his fury didn't. If he had command of one thing, it was survival. And survive he did. The paths had always been kind to him.

In the madness he recognised something – a chink, perhaps. There is always a weak spot. All Mandahoi were not equal, and the third Grey, though deadly fast like a snake, was less than the others. He was a youngster, a raw pup, and that presented a gift. The pup was still only halfway between man and weapon. He was not fully forged, and he would therefore bend. He was soft steel.

The pup stayed at the edge of the dance, dipping in and out while the masters commanded the situation. But every door is open at some time, and so the *Father* forged his path. The two masters stepped back from an onslaught at the same time, and he took his moment.

In an instant, he switched his trajectory, reversing his momentum against the rules. The pup was bested by the move, and back-stepped wildly, poise utterly broken. Therein lay the gift. He came at the pup like a hungry demon, grinning manically. Victory was close, and with each wild growl, the mandahoi retreated further towards his human weakness. The great-sword sang happily, scraping the length of the pup's blade, and then the sword snarled, raking the flesh of the youngster's knuckle, drawing first blood. The boy dropped his weapon and recoiled, yelping like a puppy. Poor sap. The two senior mandahoi were recovering fast, coming at him, but he quickly slashed at the pup's calf. The youngster fell to the ground.

And then there were two.

And yet, the proposition was not less. His lungs were on fire, such was their draining quest for air. He would need this done soon.

The whirlwind continued, and the pup's place on the ground barely altered the dynamic. He could swing his weapon with just enough zip and purpose, but he was back-footed, always searching for a route of attack. But the Mandahoi were growing erratic as the fight continued against their expectations. A small victory. Each time steel struck steel, the Grey betrayed hopes of weakness in his weapon. But his great-sword would not give. She would never succumb, and certainly not to them. She was a mandahoi cannibal.

Indeed, even against the second mandahoi's almighty brute of a weapon – a *paw*; half sledge hammer and half sword – she stood and fought back. The paw pummelled at his great-sword with a juddering quality, but he would not be beaten by vibration. He was more than that, and so was his sword.

"What's the matter? Don't like it when the odds are balanced!"

His taunts of the Mandahoi were rather childish, but in truth, he was still a child. This was the reason he had never had, and when the nearest mandahoi betrayed a subtle grimace, he almost shouted out.

And then he did shout out, but this was a cry of pain.

The blade struck with such awful pace that it seemed it had swept right past him. But his body cramped up, and only then did molten pain strike.

He wore armour, of course he did, but in most places he only had leather strapped to him. All the better for moving with. He took a moment and looked down. There was a deep gash in the leather plate of his torso. Red fluid was leaking out. No time for that; the whirlwind still roared. He threw himself back into the maelstrom.

And with pain scorching his body, and sense leaking out of his mind, the streets took charge. The anger welled up, searing his throat, and a red haze fell. It was time. The Mandahoi swept forward, into his grasp; willingly. The fools. The reign of the bullies must end.

With each beat of his heart, death drew closer. Steel whipped mercilessly around, biting at him, dominating his diminishing consciousness, but he resisted as he'd always done. There was still a path; there always was. Behind him, he could sense the first mandahoi pushing his victory, blades quivering at the prospect of blood. And they would taste blood soon, such was his weakness. If he was going to take the path, it needed to be now.

But the bastard ahead of him would not relent either. Two was too much. One was too many; they were Mandahoi after all. Tiredness dragged at his lids and blood saturated his torso. But anger was a powerful ally. From the edge of his vision, he recognised the path and he pushed his luck. There was precious little left to do.

The sprawled pup, clutching his calf, looked in his direction. But the young mandahoi had already done his job. He half rammed and half flopped forward, but the move was intentional. The master mandahoi stepped back and fell over his student. And with the mandahoi dropping to the ground, he angled his great-sword just so. She eased through

the flesh of his neck as if it were silk.

He crashed to the ground face first, the taste of copper filling his mouth. Without pause, he rolled rapidly away, consciously ignoring the wail of the pup now trapped under the dying body. He swept to his feet, threatened by dizziness, but *Father Fortune* was with him after all. Shock consumed his final opponent and the mandahoi senior just stared on. Paralysed. It was time, and mercy was forgotten. He made a stump of the last mandahoi's left hand, and he smiled while he did it. The bullies were well and truly beaten.

He swayed over the carnage before him and the veil really was dropping. Darkness cloaked his vision, but he would not fall. Not yet. This should be the greatest moment of his life, but it was difficult to see that when he leaked out of his severed stomach. But as his life drew away from him, he was greeted by a giddy false ecstasy. Why would life feel so magnificent at the edge of death? Maybe it was the sick sense of humour the gods harboured. In that moment, standing over the Mandahoi, he felt like a god.

"Lie down."

The mandahoi looked at him, head cocked. Confused. Maybe they didn't share a language? He extended a hand, and his pointing finger did the trick. The mandahoi edged towards the pile of his comrades with grim realisation on his concealed face. And then the man lay down. Was he really going to this?

The pup still whimpered from the base, and the second body was lifeless and limp. The third mandahoi lay still, cradling his stump in his one good hand, accusation in his stare. But that wasn't a problem. He was on the edge of oblivion and he didn't care who he offended. Little Jossie swept his sword into the pile of Grey, and became the most notable soldier in Delfinian history.

And then he keeled over.

His hand clawed at the dry earth, the tips of his fingers stinging where he'd scraped them raw. But 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!" The punishment flooded his body and his back arced. It was 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 in response. He opened his barely functioning eyes, noting the sight before him. There was assistance there. 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 meagre sanctuary, and he was dragging himself to his...

Could he call the prince a friend? Certainly not, that was too strong, but he was dragging himself to the only place he now had. He needed 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, but he resisted, tonguing the acid to

the back of his mouth. His wounded stomach scraped across the parched earth, and again 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 he shifted it around his stained mouth. And given the taste, it could be only one thing; flesh. They didn't tell you about that in the books.

The prince looked at him, sorrow in those eyes even despite the heir's own predicament. But he was now the weakness, and the prince was his hope. The flesh in his mouth forced another heave, and he ejected the offending item involuntarily. 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, a symbolic grey haze shrouding his senses. When it cleared, he was face first in the dirt. His tongue was in 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 that. He clawed with his right hand and a nail bent back on itself. That pain barely registered.

“Kantal!”

His prince! Of course. Yes of course. He was returning to his senior officer. As he lifted his head, it was like lifting the world itself. When he finally managed to get the trapped man in his sights, the image swayed from side to side. He couldn't keep his damned head still. The man was so close now, but the voice still seemed distant. It was like the prince cried out from another time and place. He shook his head, but that was not a good idea. The dizziness was overwhelming, and he conceded. 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. Legs! He still had lower limbs. How had he forgotten that? With every effort still left to him, he forced himself onto all fours, struggling with his balance. Air breathed over the deep slash to his stomach, and it was like molten steel had been poured over him. Strangely euphoric too. His head left him again, but he retained his knees, and was soon capable of 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 sound like the lung will pop out. Too much smoke perhaps. Then why was he not coughing? Too soon, and when it did come, it was like someone had reached down his throat and was throttling his guts. The back of his acid stained throat tickled, and the vomit threatened again. That was not going to get any nicer any time soon. 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. He actually managed a chuckle. It was perverse. 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 Bloody Gash. 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 his act. That was more than he could ever have asked for. But he feared that his prince would not share his sense of satisfaction. It would be nice if the prince could escape, but that seemed remote. Perhaps he could give the prince some peace.

“Thank you, sir.” To speak was to drain what little reserves he had. His head crashed back to the dry ground, consciousness fading. His eyelids were heavy. So heavy. It was time to sleep.

“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 – it made him feel sick to be honest. And yet he didn’t think he had any sick left in him.

The juddering turned gradually into a shudder.

And the shudder turned into a tremor.

And then it was impossible to ignore. He focussed his eyes to investigate. The prince smiled knowingly, and the reality sank in. He was a fool. Of course they wouldn’t leave the prince. They were being rescued.

The heir actually managed a grunt of a laugh, though it was heavily filtered. This was no place for joy. As the rescuing officers came into view, the prince looked at him with sorrow in his eyes. Sorrow and something else.

“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. “You can’t beat a mandahoi, Kantal.”

A shot of energy raced through him, shocking him. Was that pride? How would he know? He had forgotten its taste.

“But you, sir, can beat three.”

He managed to turn his head to the haze, to the battlefield behind. 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 had the last. He had proven his point, and he had saved his prince.

The sight of the blade caught him, and he smiled. 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 and a screaming darkness consumed him. As he slipped into the protective ignorance, the prince nodded through his fading vision. *Blessed Mother,* 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, he would be out of here, and Gorfinian hospitality was not to be relied upon either. There was genuine danger in the room. He rose from his seat and looked to the far end of the room. Uncountable fools had been thrown out of that window, and in many cases it would have been for declarations of far more substance than his own. He ground his teeth together and fidgeted his hands. The King of Gorfinia ruled with fear, so when he was irked, the retribution could be steep. He didn't fancy the price of that backlash.

The aide shifted and balled a fist. "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."

There was only silence. It was such a deep silence that it filled the room with suffocating pressure. When the King of Gorfinia raised his hand, he feared it would be dropped in anger. He feared for his life. But the fist didn't drop. Instead the Hooded King gestured to his aide. His wishes were to be relayed.

"We will hear your plans."

The pressure evaporated, and he felt momentarily giddy. When the room stopped spinning, he noticed that it was pitch dark outside. A clear night too. Cold. He breathed easily and his breath misted before him, but he had to hold the back of his chair to steady himself sitting down. On his way past, his king squeezed his shoulder. It was a welcome gesture.

He took a mighty gulp of water and considered his speech, pulling his lips over his teeth. He had to be confident with the telling, even if that same assurance wasn't coursing through him. He had been confident once, but this political cauldron had stripped the assurance right back to its bones. They were fragile bones as it turned out. He had been proud of the well-considered plan when he'd conjured it; but now it was flaking. This environment was germinating doubt, and those trivial weaknesses now seemed like gaping holes. Here he was looking to take the chance, but he still needed to earn it. He sucked down the fluttering sensation in his stomach. He would do this for Delfin.

"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 sharp knife in our hands. They will bleed from within.”

When he put it like that, it fit like a gauntlet. Yes, it would work. Wouldn’t it? The rest of the room seemed ready to question it.

It was the Mikaetan Emperor who drew attention, shuffling in his chair and smacking his lips. He didn’t look impressed.

“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? His brow grew warm and his hands went clammy. His king saved him from blustering through a response.

“Forgive us, Imperial Majesty, but you have not heard the full detail.”

The wobbly ruler stood, his chair tipping and crashing to the ground. Before he even got a word out, 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 than ever. What do you think has changed that you can come here and claim elevation above the greatest in history? What?”

His king looked affronted. The Mikaetan Empire may be waning, but it was still the largest of the three neighbours. The Emperor held a weight way beyond that which he carried on his gut. The man would not be won. And it was then that the fifth table-guest twitched – right on cue. It was time. He did not relish introducing his guest, but this was why he was here. He was useful.

“May I introduce to you, the Lord of Chance.”

He swept a hand to the man opposite, and his guest nodded very subtly. He seemed to be acknowledging the room. Of course, the hood hid much of the man’s face, but his actions were at least suggestive. Suggestive of what? Condescension probably. The Lord of Chance held little respect for others. But that was surprising given what of the man’s face was visible. Lorrd Chance’s jaw was not something to be proud of.

Half of the chin was covered by heavy iron, a mask of some sort. Not a full mask, but a semi-concealing piece. That meant that 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 it was worse than that. It was as if it had always been that way. There was something lizard-like about the man, and if it weren’t for the human looking hands, he might have believed the freak was actually a lizard. As it was, he must just be deformed. Unfortunately, the facial disfigurement had also soured the man’s personality.

Yet the freak was here at his bidding. He still struggled with this fact.

The Gorfinian aide gazed with piercing blankness, another face cloaked in darkness. All these abstract monsters were really getting to him, and he rolled his shoulders involuntarily. Their host raised a hand in greeting.

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

Freaks stick with freaks.

“I am honoured to be here, Lord Gorfin.”

The man that he hated and feared in equal measures spoke with a grating tone. He lisped where the facial deformity restricted his ability of speech. The voice was almost serpentine, and disturbingly it complimented the warped skin of his face.

The aide nodded, but there was nothing further from the blank canvas of the Hooded King. There was not a hint of communication between aide and king, and yet the aide shuffled and tilted his head. That was curious.

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

The aide spat the words. That was shocking. That there was venom in the words was hardly surprising – Gorfinian hospitality was famously cold – but it was the Hooded King’s non-involvement that really surprised. It spoke of either remarkable cohesion, or it sang of a balance that was entirely at odds with the perception. Gorfinia was feared, but from where did that fear originate?

Lord Chance straightened himself like a snake readying to bite. He had the skin of a snake, and the hood of a cobra too. There was not a hint of a nerve in the man. He was calm and measured. And threatening.

“I am to fortune what this man is to the Mandahoi.”

With his open palm, the Lord of Chance gestured in his direction. It chilled him. What did he mean? Was he being mocked? Probably, the bastard. His breathing grew short and his jaw clenched. Anger bubbled. It was the same emotional crest that he touched before a fight – the crazy before the calm. But here and now he was around a table, and he was confronted by the bastard he’d invited along. This was not his territory. He spoke through gritted teeth.

“And what am I to the Mandahoi?”

The hooded snake turned to him, and the visible jaw cracked into a wicked smile.

“Why, you are the scourge.”

“Hear the man! Yes, indeed.” It was his king who interrupted. And thank the *Father* he did. He had the look of a snarling wolf when his blood was up, and it must be plainly obvious he was about to erupt. He needed to cool before he ruined the whole thing, but the environment was suffocating. So suffocating. Maybe that’s why half the table favoured hoods. Perhaps he should try it out. No, never. He was better than that.

“So, scourge of fortune. Why are you here?”

It was the aide who pushed on, and Kantal eased back into his chair. He let proceedings move around him as his breath steadied. His emotions were still running hot, but no-one seemed to notice. The room was focussed on the cool act of the cobra.

But the sight of Lord Chance’s easy authority did nothing for his mood. He had wondered many times whether the man’s usefulness warranted putting up with him, and it was always a tight argument. But the use always won out. He idly fingered the pommel of his magnificent blade, and caught himself easing her subtly from her sheath. Don’t be such a fool! Spilling blood in this place was guaranteed to lead to a swift exit. Such an exit was most likely through that window too. He ground his teeth and growled.

And the Lord of Chance ignored all this, calm authority in his reclined seating position. The freak pulled a smile onto his puckered lips. He hated the man, but he was very useful. Always the use.

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

A gasp escaped the Emperor, and even the aide shifted on his feet. Only the Hooded King stayed utterly still. It was frustrating that the freak held such power over words, but this had never been his arena. The Emperor twiddled his hands and sweat covered his brow.

“There is no fourth way.”

The Lord of Chance, who also went by the name Enabler, leaned forward, clasping his hands together, two index fingers pointed to the ceiling. Was he enjoying his moment?

“The fourth way is by sea.”

“It is guarded. It always has been. That archipelago makes it near impossible to gain access. It is useless.”

He concentrated on managing his breathing while the freak wove his magic. They were on the same side here. He could not afford to bear anger in this place. He would be punished like the common stock he was.

He looked around the room as his pulse settled, and a disturbing fact caught him. He disliked every one of his allies. How curious that was. But they had a common purpose, and that was what bound them. At least, he hoped it would bind them. He hoped it was sufficient. The Enabler waved his hand dismissively.

“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 clear that the Mikaetan Emperor was the pessimist in the room. He licked his sweaty lips. The Gorfian symbiosis of king and aide appeared to listen intently, not conceding anything in those blank hoods. But this was the moment, the differentiator. He held his breath and looked for the all-important reaction. He was looking for anything that suggested the room was being won over.

“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 less effective alongside the wobbling jowls. He was going to be harder to crack than expected.

“Why gold of course. Is there another currency?”

That actually got a snort from the aide, and he slid a hand over the gaping space of his hood. The Emperor nestled back into his chair. The mocking suggestion had flushed the ruler’s cheeks, and he stayed silent. The jowls wobbled gently. But silence was not affirmation and he needed this done, if only for his sanity. He sucked up his discomfort and stood. This was his idea after all.

“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.”

The Emperor attacked without pause. “And why is it that Delfinia places the stake through the heart? Why is it not a unified force?”

The flabby face wobbled aggressively once more, though it was less troubling this time. In fact, in that moment, it was simply disheartening. There was so much tension in the room, and yet the fight had not even begun. How had these three nations ever worked together?

“Forgive my terse observation, but we hardly feel like a unified force.” The Emperor offered that sneer, but he was not to be deterred, “And besides, it is Delfinia’s plan. It is only right that Delfinia takes the lead.” That only added to the friction. So much friction. This was the pivot of the discussion, and the room seemed to be turning. But there were other angles that were, as yet, entirely unexplored. As yet.

“And who is it that is paying for this passage through the fourth gate?”

The Gorfinian aide stared right at him, but his king stood and drew the attention.

“The price demanded by the Nadari for their treachery is high. 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. The Emperor’s fist impacted the table and he wobbled violently.

“How dare you! You mock me, sir, to come here and ask me, the Emperor of the Eternal 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. He was sweating. His plans to take the chance remained feasible, 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.

The King of Delfinia exhaled and reclined. Gorfinia had not made a move, which he couldn’t decipher, but it didn’t appear to be promising. This was where his king needed to throw in his weight. He was at a loss, but his king soldiered on.

“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 with effort. It looked like he was trying to solve a puzzle, which he probably was. Ahan was the jewel of the near world – of the entire world, perhaps – and to forgo that prize was expensive indeed. But he could see doubt in the eyes of the Emperor. He was no risk-taker. In fact, he was barely a taker at all. That brought a laugh, and Jowls turned upon him.

“You mock me?”

“No, Imperial Majesty, of course not.” He spluttered a bit, and his king shot him a warning look. Jowls was obviously trying to leverage a beneficial compromise in his head, but he couldn’t think fast enough. The moment got ahead of him, and he spoke with a panicked edge.

“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.” His king nodded. He too was sweating, but that was a consequence of financial insecurity. The ruler of Delfinia would be committing a lot here. He was glad his king trusted him. His king would have to commit a whole lot more before the fighting began.

“Does Gorfina commit troops?” The Hooded King nodded solemnly. A good outcome. “And what about funds?” The shake of the head was not surprising. Gorfina 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. He had his plan, and he had his somewhat reluctant players. His dream was marching to reality, and he finally took some alcohol. He even smiled openly when his king offered a friendly hand to the Emperor.

And then the freak spoke.

“General. I have some residual concerns with your theory.”

Surely not now? He suspected that the freak was doing this to wind him up, and the bastard was doing it well. His grip tightened and the goblet in his hand shook subtly.

“Your manoeuvre will certainly draw the heavy forces, but you forget the finer barbs.”

They still needed to earn the chance, but he didn’t want to talk about that now.

Because you couldn’t beat a...

“And what barbs are those?”

The Enabler’s 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, 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 at the back of his plans, intoxicating his confidence and draining him. He ran his hand over his unruly stubble, appreciating the coarseness, and narrowed his eyes. Was this to be his undoing?

“Did you know this?”

His king looked most displeased.

“It had crossed my mind.” Only he could get away with being so flippant. Even he may struggle to get away with it here.

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

“So this plan we have may not even work.”

He exhaled, which hardly spread 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. He was sweating profusely already, his back drenched and itchy. But the peacocks didn't seem to care. He turned to the manicured tail, and 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 it wasn't appealing.

He ignored his discomfort and sought to appease his king. He had to. "It will work." His lack of confidence radiated, 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. Annoyingly, that made things worse.

Of course, he had an answer to the problem. Remove the Mandahoi and you have a chance. A chance. What he had designed was a way to exploit the chance, but he had not yet created that 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 relied on money. Bloody money. His political insights were short, 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 Gorfinia. He did not know how to tell his master.

"Bellowing Brother, Kantal! Convince me."

There was no option. Not anymore. 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. To maim a handful of the Grey was ultimately meaningless. His true calling was to dislodge the limpet-like Mandari from Ahan. He would free the Motherland and restore the legacy of his dead queen.

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 he was not to be stalled. "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. The Mandahoi are too numerous. But there is something that will."

His king's displeasure diluted for a moment, and those piercing eyes took on a rather sceptical impression. "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." A fine showing. 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 he believed it now that he’d said it out loud, but then he recalled the man. 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 he needed something and that the other had access to it.

It was chance, utter chance, but every victory needed its touch from the *Father*, didn’t it? The Lord of Chance melted into his thoughts and he shuddered.

“Who on l’Unna has sold you this fanciful tale? And what’s more, why do you believe them?” His king was evidently not convinced. At least not yet.

“Your Majesty, I do 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, but it would add weight nonetheless.

That did indeed get his king’s attention.

“You mean unhuman 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. He seemed to be from another time and place. It was known that the Old Ones 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.

He could see the shrewd ruler cooling, warming to this opportunity. He could take the chance if he could earn it, and two sendeté could knot the Mandahoi for many days and moons. The confidence started to bubble once more. There was just one last stumbling block, but there was no way his king would miss it.

“How much for these services?”

He licked his lips. “The overall cost of the exercise will, ah, double.”

“Argh!” That was a fair response. “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, your Majesty.”

“You will bankrupt the Crown at this rate!” He sensed the shock in the peacocks, and smiled. “You think this funny?”

“On the contrary, your Majesty. I was hoping for more support from our, ah, allies.”

The look he was given wiped any smugness right up his gullet. He simply had no solutions to these problems, and yet this was not his part in the game.

“We will have to call it off.”

“Your Majesty, 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!” The King had the agreements in his hand, the fruits of many years of scheming, and he was about to be cast them aside. And yet the monarch paused.

His king was waiting and he took his chance.

“Do you remember that battlefield, your Majesty? The one where you were trapped beneath the dying horse.” The King’s sour mood instantly stalled, and he drove home. “That was a whim, and you know what happened that day.”

He had played his last card. Now it was up to the *Father of Paths*.

The Chance

“YOU THINK WE CAN DO THI-SH?”

Damn it. Despite his best efforts, the alcohol was getting the upper hand. He had been drinking for an entire evening, and that was not something he usually did. True, he had paid the barman to give him only the mildest ale, but there was a limit. Volume was volume.

Unfortunately, his companion appeared unaffected by the session.

“Of course. It is what we have agreed, isn’t it?”

“No, but...” Bloody alcohol. “You think you can draw the excess Mandahoi successfully into the trap?”

The man nodded. Maybe man was too strong. Thing, perhaps. Nothing was visible of the creature’s face. A deep woollen cowl covered the entire head. When the pewter mug went into this space, only the slurping confirmed the existence of familiar anatomy. In many ways this thing was just like a Gorfinian. Perhaps they were related?

The he-it was one of the Unther – the detritus of the time before man. The strange people were incredibly elusive, and yet he had happened upon one here, in a popular drinking-hole in Triosec. It was, frankly, incredible fortune. He had always been lucky when it mattered.

In the haze of the place, the Enabler appeared at the edge of his vision. He turned instantly, paranoia fuelled by booze. He scanned the environment, checking for the presence, but couldn’t find him. Damn, that man was intoxicating his mind. He would be glad to be rid of him.

His business companion pulled his attention back.

“See something?”

“Just my imagination.”

A hearty draught of ale settled him, but he found himself empty. Another frothing mug soon followed, and he sighed. He was not good with alcohol. He needed to close this arrangement while he still had the capacity.

“I asked you a question.” He didn’t like to pressure this ‘Ancient’, a being who may be hundreds of years old, but he needed to command this meeting. He looked at the thing and twisted he head. In fact, this thing might even be old enough to have met Queen Delfin herself. Should he ask? He would dearly love to ask questions about her.

“And I answered yes.” They were back on the matter at hand. Did the Ancient really answer his question? Actually, yes he did. The Ancient nodded, but he needed more.

“Details – I need details! By my calculations, I can draw at least seventy percent of the Academy into the border scuffles. But they always hold reserves, not least because a proportion of the Grey are ‘pre-scholar’. But even students present a major risk to my plans, especially if they end up in Altunia. I need you to draw out about a hundred

Mandahoi. How will you do this?"

The Ancient leaned back and put his hands behind his hood. Perhaps he was being just too forceful.

"You don't think that a pair of marauding sendeté will occupy your enemy?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. He needed sobriety and it was getting away from him. He shook his head; it was all he could manage in that moment.

The door slapped open and smoke swirled. A waft of cold air punched dizziness into him. He needed this over soon. Was that the Enabler again? He definitely needed this over soon. His odd table-guest laid out the details.

"They will be lured by another conflict. That is how we'll do this. We will lure them to the perfect fight, and then we will unleash the dragons."

"What lure?"

The thing twitched and shuffled, leaning forward onto the table. "I have already explained this to you."

Negotiations were not his strength, but this needed to be watertight. It was going to be a hard sell. He steadied himself and stared into the dark of the cowl.

"Convince me." There were a few heartbeats of combative staring, but ultimately the Ancient relented.

"The town is called Nazalia. It is located above the Death's Cowl, in the Beha Lomal mountains. It is a neutral trade route, but it is also close to Altunia. We believe the Mandahoi are based near Altunia, and we need to waft the lure right under their nose. So we have chosen Nazalia."

Something wrinkled in that statement, and he squeezed his eyes together. He had assumed that this man operated alone.

"We?"

"You think I can do this on my own?" The response suggested that he'd asked a stupid question. He didn't know why. He couldn't think about that at the moment.

"Nazalia is a good choice. Who will make the assault?"

"Mercenaries. It doesn't really matter." The mug went into the dark space and then came out again. "They are little more than fodder. We just need to ensure that there is enough lure. That will carry its own cost."

And this was exactly why he needed certainty. He was asking a lot of his king already, but this little addition may double the price of the exercise. Double! Then again, without this little trick, the Mandahoi remained a threat.

He needed to earn the chance to take the chance, and this was how he'd earn the chance. He gulped, but his drink was on the table.

"We have discussed cost before. Tell me, friend," though he wasn't sure he meant that, "how can you guarantee that the Mandahoi will be drawn in sufficient numbers? There are a lot of assumptions here. Perhaps the payment should be staggered?"

A laugh of such potency went up that he could sense the other patrons turning in their direction. That did nothing for his comfort, and he found himself touching the hilt of his great-sword.

"You need not worry. We have ways of, ah, coercing the Mandahoi to our will. The

Academy will be emptied – of that I can assure you.”

“But how can I—”

The Ancient leaned forward once more. “If I showed you our ways, then I’d have to ensure your silence. You would not like that. Do what you want with the payment, but you can count on the successful completion of what’s been promised. Regardless how you stagger the transaction, you will need to pay the whole damn lot.”

That seemed pretty final. He drank again and the same fleeting image of the Enabler stalked the edges of his vision. But when he turned, the bastard wasn’t there; it was all in his mind. He needed this done.

“See something.” He snapped back to the Ancient. The thing seemed to be smiling even despite the darkness of his face.

“No. Apparently not.”

“You know; you and him are remarkably close. Cut from the same bolt.”

“Me and who?”

“You know who I mean. You are the same.” He had an inkling what this man was talking about, and it made him nearly retch. He swallowed another gulp of beer.

“We are nothing alike.”

The Ancient laughed. It was not a nice sound. “No, not alike. But you are the same. Cut from different ends of the same cloth. You both have power over the path.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Then think about it. All those things you’ve done; not natural. Not natural at all, at least not for a human. I should know...”

This was entering wholly unfamiliar territory, and his head swam. What was this thing talking about? The prospect of finding out was not a nice one. Best cut things here.

“Let’s stay on sh-ubject shall we? I think we have a deal.” He extended a hand and grabbed the Ancient’s wrist in a passive embrace.

“I rather suspect we should reserve finality until you have convinced your king.”

His king! Damn, that was probably a good idea. As he climbed from the bench and swayed, he was certain. That was definitely a good idea. He would rather deliver this expensive news to his king than sit with this monster any longer. What had he been talking about?

He left the inn, and was sure he could hear the bastard laughing. And then a second laugh joined in, but he didn’t turn back. He couldn’t bring himself look.

The Future | 1yr later

IT WAS SUCCESS, utter success. Of course it was a success. He had planned the whole thing meticulously. He rode straight-backed through the streets of Altunia, victory edging closer with every step taken. 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. Success!

Something crawled down his back, and he assumed it was 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 over the rounded cobbles. He'd expected a fight at the gates, a chaos of citizens and steel, but instead he'd got nothing.

They were later than expected, floating into the estuary closer to midday 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, which had been called the Foundation Isle when the Delfinians were still custodians, showed clear signs of defiance. There were a handful of house guards littering the gatehouse. But the showing was weak as expected, because the Mandari were embroiled in the diversionary tactics of his genius. It was success, utter success, and yet 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 high expectations? That was rare these days. He had always been able to dream. At many points in his life, it was all he had.

“General.”

The interruption came from the guiding hand of his colonel, but he ignored the gesture and indulged his thoughts. He was drawn back to his moment of becoming, to that scene on the field of the Bloody Gash where he had faced the ashen breath of death and survived. No, he'd more than survived. He'd become Mandestry. On that day he'd acted for the benefit of his colonel, intending to win favour with the untouchable echelons of the military hierarchy. Now he looked down to the colonel. How far had he come? Maybe he had exceeded expectations. The colonel still stared at him.

“Yes?”

He was already following the suggestion of the extended arm, but he wanted his officer's view regardless. 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 out to sea. It was impossible to see exactly what the source was, but it didn’t require much in the way of intelligence to work it out. There was only one thing in the estuary that would burn so well – a fleet. Was it the Mandari fleet? It seemed 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 hid it beneath the heavy layers of his armour. He looked away, not wanting to be infected by events. It was irrelevant. This had always been a one-way journey.

And if his fleet was burning, what of it? The rewards would outweigh that cost. Enough had been paid already. He stared straight ahead, sparing himself from the smoke smeared sky by refocussing on the gatehouse. He continued doggedly on.

“General.”

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

His colonel dropped back, and he straightened his back, chin up. He wanted to seem confident for his troops. But the truth was otherwise. He was still sweating, or in fact, what he now realised was that he wasn’t sweating at all. His spine was tingling, and there was a very good reason. It was the nerves. His entire life amounted to this.

He grunted, the noise coming 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.

And yet this was not the time for doubts. As they rounded the height of the incline, he thrust his arm into the air and received a welcome confidence boost from his men. They still had every chance. He smiled for his men, but it was at least in part forced.

And then the smile came easier. Upon the gatehouse of the Foundation Isle there was only a smattering of guards. He turned to his well-ordered men, and grinned more broadly. 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. He chuckled. It would take a hundred mandahoi to stop them now.

And then he gulped.

Time in conflict takes on a strange quality, as if it relaxes its formal definition and takes on a new, volatile one. It seems to take one of only two characteristics as the fight flourishes. It would either stagger slowly, achingly, from moment to moment, or it would take on the pace of a stallion, rushing by with just the barest recognition. He could not tell which form it had taken yet, but he looked to the sky and it became clear. 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 that was now named after Jinal; the invader.

He stalled his horse on the near side of the bridge and his troops tramped either side of him. No need to take her any further. She would be useless in the siege. His potent force settled into formation – rigid rows of surly looking men in well-made flexible

armour, ready to assault – and he smiled. He jumped from his fine mare and gave her a pat on the neck. Then he stepped onto the bridge and rubbed the inside of his thighs. He still hated riding. He walked through the ranks, slaps on the shoulder encouraging him forward, but his gaze didn't waver. He halted about half-way across the bridge, angled his head back, looked to the gatehouse, and surveyed the resistance. There was almost none. The guards 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.

He cursed to himself and then dropped his hood. One mandahoi; so what? He would have the bastard for breakfast. Or lunch in fact. They were late.

He cleared his throat.

“You are defeated. Resistance would be wasteful. Open your gates and none shall suffer needlessly.”

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

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

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

Suddenly the plume of smoke had meaning, and he looked for it. 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. He had a job to do and a king's trust to repay.

He looked back to Keles – the mandahoi who had become a legend in his short years of service – and chuckled. Fame had made the man arrogant.

“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 a shiver went through the ranks of his men. He would need to rally them in the face of this unexpected obstacle. He would have 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 slim.

He had barely any time to make his choice; you didn't on the 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. There were only opportunities, however remote they may seem. His men attacked.

Thank you

Thank you for reading this book. If you enjoyed it, please consider taking a moment to leave a review at your favourite retailer. Self-published authors rely on word of mouth, so your voice is very important!

Thanks again.

James Hockley

The Story Continues...

As you've probably gathered, this is not where the story ends. No indeed. The story continues in the epic fantasy trilogy, the first book of which is called [Fear's Union](#).



Fear's Union picks up roughly where Mandestroy drops off – Ahan is being attacked on all fronts. But far from continuing General Kantal's own story, we now switch allegiances and follow the lives of three young Mandahoi warriors. How will they cope against the immovable force that is Mandestroy? Well, you'll have to read on to find out.

And if you'd like to find out how to get your hands on exclusive bonus material, check out James Hockley's [website](#) or flip forward to the connect page.

About the Author:



James Hockley has a normal job, a brilliant family, great friends, and he enjoys beer and grilled meat. He also spends almost all of his spare time locked in his own imagination, and the rest of his spare time trying to articulate that mental chaos into English.

In 2016, James became a self-published author (hurrah!) of epic fantasy fiction. His first work, the first instalment of the Age of Ku trilogy called Fear's Union, was available in eBook format from April 2016. And this book – his second work and a prequel to Fear's Union – was made available from the end of July. But there is much more to come from the World of Ku, so keep in touch.

James also blogs about his writing and publishing experiences on his [website](#), as well as reviewing all his fantasy reads. James lives in Bristol, UK, with his wife and his young son.

And if you're interested in the writing experience, then come and check out the [Writing Mandestroy](#) page. Here, James has documented every draft of Mandestroy, every plan made, and even every hour recorded in an online calendar. You'll be surprised how much effort goes into even such a small book!

Connect with me:

Follow me on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/HockleyJames>

Friend me on Facebook: <http://facebook.com/HockleyJames>

Join me on Goodreads:

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/15218850.James_Hockley

Subscribe to my blog: <http://www.jhockley.com/fantasy-author-james-hockley-blog/>