

G L E N N H E F L E Y

Forever Jack

Thief of Heaven

by Glenn Hefley

For Eric, Dave, George, Jennifer, and Terron

and to Eddie

I miss your face

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Prologue

New Mexico - the Sacred Wastelands, four weeks before Easter

"I come as a thief..." -- God, Rev 16:15

The storm builds from nothing. The vast expanse of the Apache sacred hunting grounds sixty miles south, southwest of Albuquerque has been calm for six days; winds have been no more than playful zephyrs, the clouds no more than wisps of forgotten dreams. A full moon nears its zenith, while the sun is still falling to the west, where the horizon is serrated by dark mountains. This wasteland is where the wind's wake.

In less than an hour the winds rise from playful, to tempest. Their surging power scouring plant, rock and creatures with sand and splinters of iron. The yellow sun touches the horizon, discharging to orange, then red. With each spectrum shift to deeper blood, the winds build, reaching with desperate sweeps for full gale; pulling in from the surrounding atmosphere, every errant particle of moisture -- forging the moisture into clouds. The clouds circle, massing into storm.

When the sun melts into the glow-worm on the mountain edges, the storm is dark and full. The last ray of sunset reaches out its bloodline of light, touching the center of the unnatural event, as if igniting a fuse.

Lightning detonates.

A white bolt slams into a dry river bed, hitting the worn and smooth rocks like a solid.

Creatures, large and small and those which creep, and slither brace in the tremble; pressing bellies to sand, or retreat to hovels and holes. Crystals in the underdark of a cavern below the dead stream, hum and

glow, powered by the voltaic lance; toning primal music with angelic voices. When the thunder hammers the surface, the lance is only an afterglow, and the crystals shatter in bedlam and chaos.

The storm is gone. As if the lance and hammer strike scared it away. All that is left are scattered clouds, a dying wind, stars, and a hole.

The hole is shallow, the aftermath of the lightning strike. In the hole is a man. He is kneeling, like a sprinter at *Ready*, or a servant before his master. He wears a black mantel, the cowl of which hides his face in shadows.

His clothing is from another time, an ancient time. In that time, the cloth and cut would have been common, and attracted little attention. It would be common clothing of a man in the city, not in the desert, or the wastelands. The clothing of a man who, while not considered wealthy, did not worry much about meals, or shelter. His pants are black linen cloth. The shirt is gray, and edged with red and silver trimming. His belt is wide leather with no buckle. The boots are soft brown leather; the soles have no heel.

The cut of the garment is loose across his form, but even with this, heavy muscles in the thighs, shoulders and forearms can be divined. They are not the muscles of a man who has built them, or sculpted his body for appeal, but the cords created by massive strain, and constant use – the kind of muscle which comes to life under the demand of moments; moments where either the hand holds onto the rope, or the body falls into the abyss. Simple moments. Defining moments.

As he stands and straightens his back, from under the half sleeves of the shirt, bright iron spikes are seen puncturing his wrists. The wounds are fresh; they drip blood on the scorched sand. The spikes are nine inches long and slight of one inch thick.

The man tips his head back to look at the moon, and scans the stars of the sky. Cloud wisps scurry away from his gaze, breaking up into the errant particles they were gathered from. He brushes the cowl with his

right hand, letting it slide back from his head, revealing dark thick hair, light blue eyes, and a jaw line which has been carved by clenching back screams, during the simple and defining moments of his life.

A smile parts his lips as he notes the moon is between the Crocodile and the Hippopotamus. These are the constellations of his life, *her constellations*. He relishes these constellations, knowing they are about to change.

Around his neck is a simple leather thong, which drops beneath his shirt. At the end of this leather tether is a five-inch lead bar, about the same width as the spikes. The bar is wrapped with thick soft leather. At one time, the leather was stamped and delicately carved with hieroglyphs, painted with artistic care, but that was long ago. Years of wear, and use, have worn the leather smooth. Only traces of the pillar glyphs remain. He places the leathery bar between his teeth as he looks down at the spike in his left wrist.

The head of the spike is hammer worn, mushroomed, and presses into his skin just above the pulse line. The fingers of his right-hand find purchase between the spike head and his flesh, and he pulls the nail from his wrist with a clean and rapid jerk. The muscles of his jaw line do their work, as he slides the extracted spike under his belt to cross his spine.

The wound instantly begins to heal, and he watches it with fierce eyes; the healing of the wound much more painful than the spike's removal. The muscles of his throat press arteries against his skin, and his pulse throbs under the surface of strain. A wisp of moist heat licks out as the wound closes into a scar.

His healed left hand now grips the head of the spike in his right arm, and he pulls it from his flesh as well, placing the spike to cross the first at his back, but this time he buckles from the healing pain, knees landing in the scorched sand, groaning as the right wrist mends.

He breathes. At first the breaths are heavy intakes of the ozone

tainted air. After a few moments of consciously controlling the rhythm he slows his lungs and heart rate. When his breathing regains its normal gait, he pulls the leather wrapped bar from his mouth, and lets it fall under his shirt to hang innocently at the end of the thong again. Gathering himself, he stands and walks out of the hole, and away from the scorched sand, the ozone taint, and the scattered rocks of the dead river.

Walking without haste for several hundred yards, rotating his wrists and shoulders, he comes across a smooth patch of sand. The surface here is the result of non disturbance, a place only touched by the wind, unblemished by plant roots, animal tracks, bones or jutting rocks to mar the sand face.

A crow calls at the night as the man kneels beside this blank spot of sand. Somewhere a cat howls. He listens to the calls and searches the wasteland with blue eyes glowing like jacklights in the dark. Nothing in the area attracts his attention. Shadows move under the moon from bush to blossoming ocotillo, to rock piles. The nocturne of the desert night begins to play; scales rub against sand, throats call for mating, wings flap against the crossing of a zephyr.

After gaining familiarity with the night song, he settles on his heels and slides from his belt the iron spike pulled from his left wrist. With the tip he sketches a delicate Glyph on the smooth surface of the white sand. It is not a Glyph which any mortal would give meaning to, but rather a mnemonic symbol. Once complete, he lays the spike on the sand to underline the glyph and whispers, "Who am I?"

The tones of his query vibrate the sand-sketched glyph as a solid shape. An odd heaviness resonates out across the desert, depressing the natural nocturne. The landscape feels like is being pressed under glass. Then, with a rushing exhale from hovel and hole, the desert answers, "*Soul Thief.*"

The heaviness passes. Night-crows call and take flight. Creatures that creep, crawl and slither return to pursuits of mating and territorial

challenge.

With the spike removed from his right wrist he delicately traces another glyph next to the first. This symbol is more elaborate, and has a feeling of great age. Once the next glyph is complete, the man sits back on his heels, arms folded on knees, critically examining his work. He spends several minutes adjusting the details of the design, seeming lost in far away thoughts as he works. After achieving a satisfactory rendering, he underlines the glyph with the spike as he did with the first one, and whispers, "Where have I been?"

The heaviness this time is more than an odd feeling. The pressure bends branches and brings a flying desert owl to ground. The sands, the granite rocks, the collective life of the desert, inhales... Listening ... *Remembering.*

The desert's answer is a litany of sounds from every throat and hollow. Words, whispers, cries, expand across the high flats and rush down the dead river gulches. Within the maelstrom are the desperate screams of horses, fierce battle clashes, steel cracking heavy wood, the pounding of hooves on soft sand, the wails of birth, the rhythm of hammers on iron.

"*Jack the Daw.*" The desert names.

"*Forever Jack.*" The sky returns.

"*Sunset.*" The moon adds.

"*Death.*" The dry river ends.

"Jack. Jack the Daw." The man whispers, nodding his head in slow agreement with the voices of the past, "The Forever Jack."

The man named Jack, picks up the first spike and twirls it absently in his hand. The desert returns to its normal night songs and mating calls. Gentle fingers of wind touch the flowering clusters of ocotillo. An ocelot caterwauls from across the gulch. The shadow of a cat runs across the sand, and ducks under a nearby bush.

The two etched glyphs in the sand represent the present and the past,

the foundation of a future in the Living World, where time is felt, and experienced. His eyes trace over the etched lines, enjoying for a moment the illusion of permanence.

Drawn as the glyphs are, side by side, the lines and symbols appear to reach for each other across a vast distance of something more than space, or time. For every journey, the glyph for his past seems(feels) heavier, fuller, while the glyph for his present feels sparser, as if "*Who Am I*" is diminishing.

He stops the twirling spike, and uses the tip of the iron to draw a single line connecting the two glyphs. "It's just a feeling." Jack says to the Eastern horizon, "just a feeling, nothing more." The glyphs are always the same, never more or less in design or purpose. How could they be different? Yet the feeling returns on each journey. A sense of ... *urgency*?... *dread*? No, not so open as dread, but darker than urgency.

Calming his pulse and lungs he concentrates on the glyphs together, allowing them to become parts of a larger pattern on the sand. He clears his mind of any lingering thoughts, any flaws of clarity, and then with a voice of power, and shadow, commands, "What is my direction." It is not a question.

The desert continues its natural rhythm. Jack waits, noting two thin lines slowly furrowing the sands from the top of each glyph, creating a triangle. Jack continues to watch with the calm expectation of repeated experience.

The two glyphs, Past and Present, fill with warm amber light; the pouring of hot forge gold into a foundry sand cast. Jack prepares, sinking his fingers into the warm desert sand. The amber fills, then solidifies within the sand cast etchings.

The formed glowing glyphs then rise from the sand castings, solid and complete. Individual lines from each rune brighten, separate and float to the top of the triangle, placing themselves into the empty space, creating a new glyph. His *Direction Glyph*.

Jack watches the process, feeling a growing pulse sensation in the sand around his fingers. When a new line finds its place in the structure of the *Direction Glyph*, the throbbing frequency in the sand around his fingers changes as well. The sound of his own pulse grows, beginning as a low tone from many miles away, then increasing to a rushing throb behind his eyes.

When the last line sets in the Direction Glyph, completing the picture, the electric pulsation in the sand and the beat of his own heart synchronize. The sensation is paralyzing.

Jack sees nothing for several moments, nothing but gray. No heaven, no earth, nothing. His senses are absorbed in a wash of rushing thunder; a flash flood of energy and time.

When the Direction Glyph fades, becoming a sketch in the sand, the roar in his ears subsides.

Jack leans back and sits cross-legged in the shadows, his awareness is now only a detached interest in the world. He looks up at the stars, and sees Virgo and Aries and Taurus are now in the sky, the constellations of his youth, *her constellations*, are gone.

He knows the word of the new rune. It is the name of a city. A city he has never been to, nor heard its name spoken, yet he knows the word. It's a Faus memory, a false recollection. One of thousands now in his mind, placed there by the storm of the Direction Glyph; bits and pieces thrust into his mind like grass blades piercing the trunks of trees after a tornado. Sometimes, he has found, when two try to occupy the same space in his mind, like the constellations, the old memories are push out, overwritten. His core language also changes, though he never notices this at first, because to him, it is the only language he has ever known.

He tries the name, feeling its texture and harmonic, "Chicago." The word resonates off his lips and for a brief moment seems alive in the air.

"Chicago." He repeats, this time with more force. Images flash through his mind: Moments of history, street names, gangsters,

museums, wars, traffic, sky-scrapers, Pilsen, a church... no... Not a church.

He holds this image in his mind, focusing, pressing the Faus memory for understanding. A cloister. Guardians of a relic.

"Saint Jude." He whispers with recognition and predatory interest. The shadows hear the Soul Thief's enthusiasm, and tremble with intoxicated noir.

Jack smiles.

Chapter 1

Chicago -- One week since arrival

"They do not despise the thief, When he stealeth to fill his soul when he is hungry" -- Proverbs 6:30

Jack the Daw, now with identification showing his name as Jack Dawson, sits on the fabric upholstered window-box at the front of his rented flat looking out at the sunset falling on south Chicago. The flat is the second floor of a red brick building etched with signs of age and distress, above a Rexall Drug store; a business which has been closed for years. Marks on the bricks of the building from fire, bullets, and gashes (from something blunt and heavy) give a braille history of the neighborhood.

During the two days since his arrival in Chicago, Jack has read this history with interest, as well as other chapters he has discovered etched into nearby walls. The coarse bricks have black tears from rain run off and mold; they are the walls and shells of tired souls who have lived too long and witnessed too much.

Neighborhoods in Pilsen are not all dark bricks and weathered stories of violence. Many of the larger buildings display massive murals of Chicano history; stories of violence and pride in vivid colors, with no need for braille.

Behind double pane glass, Jack bites into his apple, allowing the delicate spray of fine juice to linger on his pallet, and then enjoys the hard texture of the fruit against his teeth. The lower window section is

raised a few inches to let the tumult and sounds of Pilsen's nightlife and exotic scents into the room. They are musky scents of exhaust, sweat, aromatic drugs, urine, sun spoiled beer, and heavy perfume, mixing with the underlying and pervasive scent of fear so common in the cities. From fear there is little escape; it is the ever-present dark room where humans create all of their poisons and disease.

The wind off the Great Lake tumbles news-pages into traffic, and flutters the short skirts of young Hispanic girls. Most of the commercial buildings in the area are brick or stone. Most of these roofs are flat with bulky AC and heating units. Dark pipes and black electric cables cut across gray-white tar-cap roofing. Some homes have sharp peak roof lines with brown tar shingles, walls of heavy brick, and tall windows in white frames. Most of these homes are narrow and long, with two floors, and low chain-link fences at the sidewalks.

For the family homes, long driveways serve for utility access. For buildings and apartments there are alleyways; black iron fire escapes, dark-green trash dumpsters, discarded clothing, damaged shopping carts, and small piles of weathered cigarette filters. Above all of this is a webbing of black wires, circling pigeons, and calling crows.

Prostitutes walk the sidewalks and scan the traffic as soon as the sun touches the horizon, and the street lights threaten dark alleys. The whore's cheeks are scabrous with meth-pox, filled with foundation creams and smeared with bruising rouge. Young women and teen-agers are the first to appear. The older women, with their thinning, papery eyelids, and sallow, ashen skin; the outlines of d-cup breasts flattened, pressed to bas-relief by tight yellow tank-tops; come out after the night is full, and the men quit looking so closely.

Always there are the homeless, and the drunks. In the great cities these men and women exist unseen, transparent, unnoted; rag-pickers who move through unnamed alleyways. A population engulfed by doctrine, over-killed by evangelism and erased by subtle propaganda.

Wearing orange wool caps, casino T-shirts, and surplus coats, the

rag-pickers move without physical grace. They bend and mumble. They pick up bits of string, cans, pennies and lost earrings. Ceramic cups with broken handles are wrapped protectively inside yesterday's news; a treasure saved in their wobbling wire carts. These, and the others of Christ's favorites, still exist between the light of the everlasting and the darkness of eternity; shuffling through time, like Jack himself.

It is this city, these streets and people, which now hosts the remains of Saint Jude, brother of James. A man who ate supper with God, and gave his life to love and tolerance. The Saint of *Lost Causes*. The Forever Jack, loves the place. It is perfect. Smiling he takes a bite from his apple, and feels the last ray sunset warm his body with the joy of life.

With the sun beyond the horizon, darkness cat-paws through narrow alleyways alarming streetlights to life. The heat of the city's interior is swept away by chill winds off the massive black of Lake Michigan. Window lights flicker to life. Distant roads and highways become streams of white and red. Occasionally a flashing point of blue moves through the currents of traffic like a shark.

Jack studies the clips of music blasting from car trunks and the cadence of street talk. He gathers phrases and body gestures into his mental dictionary, like a rag-picker of nonverbal etymology.

Scanning the sidewalks and street corners, he identifies predators and prey. Some move in small packs, some move like wraiths. He memorizes tattoos, bandannas, T-shirts, and plaid over-shirts. The walks of members, and the walks of lookers, the fast eyes of the crack-looker, and the far away stare of heroin death-heads.

Night alleys are gravitation wells for lost souls and addictions. Lookers, pimps, connections and hookers, pull up sleeves, empty pockets, and lift skirts to satisfy the need and urge in constant demand. If you are *looking*, *It* is down there. Everything else on the street is trappings, distractions, signs, leading to the dark doors.

Amazed at how little the world has changed, Jack leans back against the window frame, closes his eyes, and tosses the core of his apple into the waste basket across the room. Clearing his mind he listens, identifies and filters everyday life in south Chicago.

Every city, like every desert, has its own music. To move, as he needs to move, to walk, as he needs to walk, the normal noises have to be memorized. Once the sounds are memorized in their variations, they can be filtered from the ear, so only the new sounds, the different sounds, the sounds which are most dangerous to him, will draw his attention. Jack soaks it in; bits of rap music, the bouncing of cars, the angry shouts of hookers, grown men begging for a rock on credit until morning.

After three hours he achieves silence. He opens his eyes. The beer clock in the window of the liquor store across the street marks the hour at nine. The activity of the street below has increased, but the music hasn't changed. It's all repeats and forever loops. Nothing new. Nothing threatening.

Jack closes the window and uncurls from the narrow bench.

Shadows stretch out from curtains, and chairs, moving across the floor and ceiling to cover the windows and the skylight above the dining table. One shadow exists on its own, the shadow of a cat. It crawls out from under the flower print sofa and strolls to the front door. Sitting on the hardwood entry way, the cat cleans itself, occasionally flicking its tail. Jack walks past the windows, past the guarded portals, to the bathroom and the promise of a hot shower. There is work to be done this night.

Once showered, he dresses in a black T-shirt, black cargo pants, and a Chicago Cubs jacket. The cross-trainer shoes are black and gray, but otherwise nondescript. He used Gorilla glue to add small patches of soft leather to the soles, to keep them from squeaking on polished floors.

His tools and cloak are already stowed in a small dark blue backpack.

Once all is in order, he checks the clock, and nods his head at the expected advancement of a single hour.

Saint Jude's is nine blocks east of his flat. His Direction Glyph, conjured in the desert after his summons, suggested a relic of Saint Jude will be required to steal the soul he is after. Since the soul's allotted time is fourteen days away acquiring the relic is not a problem, but remains a question.

Never before has he required a relic of any sort to steal a soul. Stealing is what he does, and at first the idea was even appealing. However, he cannot think of a single reason such an object would be necessary, or even helpful, and has been angling the puzzle for five days. He has also failed come up with a single reason *not* to follow the advice of his Direction Glyph. So with some time on his hands, and more curious than ever, Jack hefts his small backpack to his shoulder, checks the flat's status with a quick scan, and leaps from the floor to the table, the table to the skylight, and vaults through the protecting shadow to the roof and into the new night of Chicago.

On the sandy grit of the tar-cap, Jack pauses to listen for any sound, or any movement above the silenced din of the neighborhood. Chicago's Pilsen churns below, above, and out to the horizons, but only the expected mortal fray and afflictions vibrate the night air. No unique sound creeps, or crawls, or flies.

Taller buildings surround three sides of the drug store and flat. To the right and behind are apartments, to the left a three-story business office structure, built on that ground ten years before the great Chicago fire. Out across the world in front of him, is a sea of homes and a few late night office buildings; all with shades drawn, lights on, and shadow theaters displaying the dramas inside. The silent screens draw Jack's attention for a moment, as shadows unfold human tales of violence, passion, love, and suicide. Couples share the bliss of flesh, friends fight over fractured trust. Everywhere the Living World hums, and performs its shadow dance for the Soul Thief.

Jack pulls himself away from the spectrum of humanity, and suppresses the chaos of personal memories and experiences which rush onto his mental stage while watching silent screens. "Being human is hard." He whispers to the world at large, and steps deftly to the north alley edge of the building, and jumps off.

Trajectory lands his right foot on a brick window sill of the five-story apartment building across the alleyway, where inside an older Hispanic woman takes a shower after working fourteen hours, while her son rifles through her purse for drug money in the living-room. Jack lets his foot smoothly slide off the scabrous brick sill as his weight comes down, and then catches the sill again with his right hand as he falls past. Then he lets go, landing in the dark shadows of the alley path.

A gray tabby cat startles from its investigation of a green dumpster, and goes prone. Its golden eyes watch the larger predator move down the alley to the street. The tabby has no interest, if the predator has no interest in him, but the tabby's shadow follows the man to the alley mouth, then runs back when the gray tabby resumes its scavenging deeper into the alley.

Jack enters the fray of humanity on the sidewalks. Small crowds stand outside of taverns and beer bars. Plumes of blue-white smoke exhale into the night above. Lake Michigan's wind is chill and damp. No rain has fallen for weeks, yet the air feels muddy, heavy. The auras of street lights are bloated with moisture. The bricks always feel wet.

On each block, as Jack moves east, crossing streets and passing through packs of people, there is some type of tavern, beer bar, or tattoo shop always in view. Check-cashing and liquor sales are often combined. Pawn shop window displays are over packed with items; tide-pools gathering the salvage debris of life erosion.

Base beats from passing cars vibrate store windows, and the back of Jack's jaw. Wild yells in chorus with car horns celebrate fleeting twitches conjured by hookers on the corner. The celebrations could seem pointless, even pathetic, but to Jack they are just *more*. From High

Tower to Street Curb, nothing has really changed.

He enjoys existence in cities like this, and streets like these. No matter the language, the country, the religion, or the God, humans have to subdue the flesh; and it has never been easy. The battles on this social plane are hard won, and few survive the trails, but survival is not victory, nor death defeat.

He cannot say the people he passes are losing the battles, because for many of them there is no battle. Fear parallelizes their lives; fear of losing what they have, or not getting what they want. A majority of these incredible and powerful creations, never really face any battle. Their own fears simply herd them through the day, driving them like cattle to the market, and mutilation.

Saint Jude's is three blocks away when he hears a *new* sound. This sound cleaves through his filtered din of Pilsen. The resonance is not human, nor from the Living World. It is the shearing sound of silver airfoils and blue flame, severing the fabric of Light and Shadow. An *Other* has arrived, and it is near by.

From the tone and texture of its entry, Jack guesses it to be a celestial. He takes two quick steps up to the mouth of the next alley and ducks into the dark; once inside the passage, he begins to run.

Ahead of him a drunk sits on the abrasive black tar-pack; his back against the wall, his legs sprawled. One leg straight, the other bent, like the Hanged Man of the Tarot deck. A street lamp attached to the building on the right, spills a puddle of amber light behind him. The bottle in the drunk's hand still holds two fingers of vodka. He snores from deep in his chest as Jack glides past. The grip on the bottle neck never loosens.

Jack reaches an accessible fire escape attached to the building on the left. The black iron rattles as his feet touch the steel grid of the first landing. He quickly adjusts his weight to dampen the sound of his climb, but still takes the stairs in sets of three. At the third floor landing

he leaps over the rusted rail to a brick window sill and scales the wall in silence up the next floor, continuing to the roof, moving now in diagonal direction from the fire escape ladder.

On the roof a crow waits, shifting on its feet, one to the other, its head turning from side to side, eye to eye, watching Jack climb with black eyes; not black as a color, more like black as a hole. Once over the side of the wall, Jack takes the crow's shadow without pause, sending the phantom bird to circle the building. The wraith raptor glides away on a single pulse of silent wings, tips one wing down over the edge of the building, and disappears into the north alleyway. The flesh and feather crow remains on the wall, blinks its black eyes, and says nothing.

In fluid motion, without flicker he *shadow skips* across the roof top, while escaping the nap-pack and jacket; donning cloak and cowl. Shadows stretch on their own, to better hide his presence. Moonlight dims across the tar-cap, no longer reflecting off every sandy grain of a gray-white surface. The *Other* is close, and Jack has a strong suspicion of where it has perched.

Five *shadow skip* steps across the length of the roof, places him behind the front street facade of the building, allowing him to confirm his suspicion. It takes no skill or concentration to discover his suspicions were correct, with annoying accuracy.

Three hundred feet away, and two hundred feet in the air, the Forever Jack spots the angelic *Other*, a *Grigori*, a *Watcher*, sitting on the steeple spike of Saint Jude's Church.

The *Watcher's* narrow four wings half furled in the night air, glisten in the moonlight like silver switch blades against the blackness and stars. Each wing separately adjusting to the gusty winds pushing in from the dark waters, maintaining its stoic balance. Its body, a flawless surface of living steel, crouches, arms folded above bent knees, as unmovable as stone inside a mountain on that tip of delicate aviary. Blazing indigo eyes scan the world below, waiting. Alert as an eagle

watching a brace of rabbits; Heaven's raptor.

The Grigori, the Fallen, the Watchers. One of the two hundred son's of God now bound to earth, until time is not time, and earth is not earth. Until the world is without form once more, and the face of God flutters across the deep.

They are not the Damned, but they no longer stand in the host of Heaven. Cut off, they wander the earth, watching, waiting. Some of them seek repentance, some of them seek other goals. It is dangerous to put human thoughts in their minds, to assume human motivations. The Grigori are not human, and never were. Even those who take human form are not *human*; though their fall was caused by human failings¹.

Jack watches the Grigori; its scythe like wings, its perfect unblemished body; doubting its choice of landing has anything to do with his own plans or choice of target. The steeple of St. Jude's church is simply the highest point in this area.

Perhaps it perches there every night, taking in some vicarious connection to the Father.

For now, Jack decides, to assume that much; that the Grigori would not be leaving soon, and will be an obstacle every night; *until time is not time*.

Being a Grigori, a random value and one Jack doesn't recognize from the many he has encountered in the past, it is impossible for him to guess its reaction to the theft of a Saint's relic, especially the *bones* of a Saint.

As a group, the Grigori would have motivation for stopping him, and for helping him, and motivation for the countless points in between. There was no guessing exactly how many points in between might exist for an *Other*.

How many can dance on the point of that pin?

Assume him hostile then. Assume him an obstacle. Assume him

¹ Genesis 6:1-5

dangerous. Add him to the game; a piece on the board. Jack nods his head as these thoughts emerge in his mind.

Visual flashes, from the eyes of the crow's shadow, have not discovered any other Fallen ones in the area, which is Jack's first concern. He has learned over time that some travel in groups, while others seek solitude. If others are around it is best to spot them first.

Throughout the ages, the Fallen have been noted by many; they are called Air Spirits in some lands, Earth Spirits in others. Some are recorded as teachers, and spiritual guides, others recorded as demons and agents of chaos. All of the descriptions of course, are correct, to some degree because of the various personalities of the creatures themselves.

It is tempting to call one of his crows, and even a few cats to stalk the area, but it is risky enough to have the shadow crow flying through the streets, and crossing the roof lines within the Grigori's view. The Watchers are well aware of his companions, and his shadows. The shadows of living creatures are difficult for them to see, even in daylight, so for now, he will do with the sketchy information.

Jack prefers to move without restraint, when the hunt is this young. His true weapon is information, from which he can glean options. Being identified by a Grigori this early, could limit his options in drastic, and fatal measure. Jack waits, and continues to wait for a full fifteen minutes. The Grigori sits and stares at the traffic below, as unmoving as a gargoyle.

After a few more minutes, Jack's body relaxes under the cloak, and he mentally shrugs his acceptance of being able to go no further tonight. Pleased however that the Grigori is definitely not after him, and from its actions, unaware he is on this roof.

Sitting further down, allowing the facade to fully block his view, he assesses the acquisition of the relic from this point, and is pleased with the summation he comes to.

The area would require a more thorough stalking. Places of harbor and flight needed to be discovered and prepared. If he could find the purpose of this Grigori, and possibly its name it would certainly present more opportunities for distraction.

On the whole, however, his assessment leads him to believe the Grigori is not a huge challenge, not here in Southwest Chicago, with the fear of the desperate pulsing despair from the streets below.

He cannot ignore the Grigori, not if he wishes to remain unnoticed; which he does. However, in such a perfect layered cloud of dark human emotion, Jack knows he can work around the creature. In the iniquity of the streets at night he will be little more than another smug mark on God's earth.

Once the relic is in his hands, and wrapped deep in his cloak, he could make his way back to his flat without worry of notice. He just needs remain unnoticed by the Grigori until he is fully prepared. But no real problems are presented by its presence on the church steeple.

"It's here for my mother, isn't it." A small voice says behind Jack.

He doesn't jump, or turn. It is a novice thief who believes he has seen everything, or reacts to surprise with guilt or evasion. Jack turns his head slightly to the origin of the voice, spying a small head peaking out from behind an AC unit halfway across the roof. The head belongs to a small boy.

This, Jack decides, is a problem.

Jack checks the Grigori, which is, at the moment, looking out across the city toward the downtown area. In the distance Jack picks up an awareness of approaching sirens, and spots echo flashes of blue light touching the tops of buildings. *It's here for my mother*, the boy had asked. *Is it possible he can see the Grigori on the church steeple?*

Normally human eyes could not see the Grigori in their angelic form. A quick viewing of traditional artwork which supposedly renders their form was proof enough of this fact.

Customarily these images portray the Grigori as hideous, and twisted, some of them are amazingly absurd. Eyes in their breasts, mouths in their asses, goat feet and the like. Jack always feels a strong if irrational affront to the Father when looking at these portrayals of his creatures. No, humans do not see the angelic forms of the Grigori; *normally*.

There are, however, moments when human eyes see clearly into the spiritual world of the Living Earth. Innocent eyes at the moment of innocence lost, is a common enough example. Often the cause of madness as well. Jack looks back at the boy. The death of a mother is not a moment of *innocence lost*, it is a natural occurrence.

A shock, to be sure. A deep loss, undeniably. But Innocence is not so fragile. For the young, it usually fractured under the weight of an unnatural betrayal. However, the boy certainly looks like he can see the Grigori.

Sirens are coming closer, the Doppler blue light pulses echo with more focus, bringing tragedy hounds to gather in the streets below, and perhaps at this building. Sirens, screams, and madness are all normal sounds in this area, sounds he has been purposefully ignoring. However, the human world interjecting itself into his plans he has been forced to lift some of these filters.

Jack checks the Grigori once more, seeing its calm, immovable attention rapt on the onrushing emergency vehicles. Holding to the shadow paths on the roof, Jack *shadow-skips* back from the front edge-wall to the AC unit hiding the boy. The boy's eyes widen when Jack appears beside him, gently pulling him away from the Grigori's view, hiding him completely behind the AC unit.

"Talk in whispers, okay?" Jack says to the boy, who is perhaps ten, or eleven.

The boy nods his head. There is fear in his harrowed eyes, but not fear of Jack.

"That's good. You are safe for now, but the creature you see on the church is not what you might think it is." Jack says, keeping his voice even, and soft.

"I think it is an angel of death." The boy whispers.

In that, Jack decides in a sigh, the boy may not be far from wrong.

Chapter 2

9 B.C. Alexandria Egypt

Never take morsels from a Jackal when he can see you.

"Listen to me Dismas." The Old Man says as he leans over to choose a date from a silver plate sitting on the low table in front of his ornate divan. The silver plate is plain and deep, the simplest of designs. The table, however, is carved with the story of a Roman hero, who Dismas doesn't know, and inlaid with sandalwood and bits of ivory. The Old Man's large body reclines comfortably on plush cushions of silk and fine flaxen wool, while he carefully inspects the proffered delicacies.

He grins when one appeals to his eye, plucking it from the pile with the long fingernails of his thumb and index finger, and savors the treat as through there was not a whole bowl still on the table. The nails are glossed white, polished and filed to spear points. With his selected date firmly in the power of his manicured talons, the Old Man leans back again on the divan, and plops the fruit into his mouth with sublime joy.

Dismas studies this well known ritual from his recline on a stack of Arabian carpets under the window. Well known, yes, but not well understood. He has watched the Old Man choose his dates for almost four years. How every date from the pile can be selected with such care, and enjoyed with such attention, is not his gift to understand; yet still, it is mesmerizing to observe.

Dismas sits up, and stretches his thin dark arms in a great yawn (great for a boy of nine years), and then stretches out his long thin legs. Bending at the waist, he presses his palms to the floor in front of him, and then tumbles forward, exiting the fluid motion cross-legged on the

clean tiled floor, near the center of the room, three feet from the Old Man's table. His full attention focused on hearing the Old Man's next words.

The Old Man nods a nearly imperceptible sign of approval. "You're nine years old now, and you still have both of your hands. It is time to teach you some rules. So I will teach you." The Old Man's voice is deep and raspy. It feels like night in the desert to Dismas; the sand, the wind, the chill.

"Rules?" Dismas asks. He has lived at the Old Man's side for close to four years. Adapting to his expectations and habits was simple to do; estimating the Old Man's motivations however is a constant puzzle.

"Yes. Rules." The Old Man repeats the word, his facial expression close to a sneer. Perhaps he is making fun.

"But we are thieves. What rules are there for us?" Dismas asks, and shoots forward snatching a date from the pile; retreating quickly to his spot on the floor.

The Old Man pauses with his mouth open to reply, but closes it again. He moves the silver dish a bit closer to his side of the table, and sits up on the edge of the divan. "There are plenty of rules Demn." The Old Man says, adjusting a couple of the wide pillows, while keeping an eye on his pile of dates, "and now you are old enough to learn them."

Dismas take a small bite of the stolen date. It is glazed with a light honey syrup -- the Old Man's favorite glaze -- and sprinkled with a fine brown sugar. Only one spice merchant prepares the glaze properly in the whole city of Alexandria (according to the Old Man). This single, special, spice merchant lives in the Jewish quarter of the city, and has few customers who want the Egyptian honey glaze. So getting the merchant to prepare the glaze for the dates is difficult, and normally expensive. The Old Man however feels the delicacy is worth both the coaxing and the price. Stealing the dates from the Old Man is a rare delicacy as well, and Dismas savors the taste with great care and

affection.

After slowly chewing the morsel, Dismas asks, "Why should I do this? Only because you tell me to?"

The Old Man sips from a small stemmed glass of amber liquid. Dismas knows the drink to be very thick and bitter. He's only stolen a taste of it once. It was not worth repeating the experience.

"No," the Old Man responds, setting down the small stemmed crystal glass. "you do this so you can keep both of your hands tomorrow."

The room is small, above the shop of a rug merchant, located in the Egyptian quarter of the city, only a few streets from the harbor. The walls are baked bricks covered in a light tan plaster. The plaster coating is thick and rounds the corners and edges of the structure; a common style in the city. The thick plaster protects the interior from the heat, keeping rooms cool and restraining the shouts and tumult from the market street below. With the window open to let the wind off the harbor cool the room, the din of the crowd, the baying of camels, the alarms of bells, and the hawking of merchants all flow freely into the room behind Dismas. It is very difficult for him to ignore, but he tries to focus only on the Old Man.

The throng of merchants and hawkers call to the passing crowd, and many times the members of the crowd call back. Then the two argue and shout. Occasionally there is dirt kicking and swearing. Sometimes others join in, to give their opinion, and add their swearing. It is the normal way of the street market. Then sometimes there is a sale, and sometimes there is not.

Sometimes there is blood.

It is a dangerous business sometimes. Especially for those who like to join in and add to the swearing and dirt kicking.

"I like both of my hands Old Man, so I will listen and learn." Dismas responds after a few moments, seeing now that the Old Man is serious, even if he is relaxed and in a good mood, *at the moment*.

The Old Man nods and slowly chews the date in his mouth. It is good to ponder, and think, Dismas has found; or to at least pause before answering questions, pretending to ponder and think. The Old Man likes it when he is taken seriously, and not pandered to or agreed to off hand like many of his visitors do in this room. He likes to see Dismas question and judge what he will learn, and from who. So Dismas questions, and he judges, and he ponders, because he likes the Old Man, and because he doesn't always have to listen to every visitor to this room, if he decides no.

"First," the Old Man says, holding up a single finger, then using that finger to select another date, "on the road -- never families, never women and children."

Dismas watches the Old Man select, with great care, his next gratification. He was the first person Dismas had ever seen who ate, not because he was hungry, but for the enjoyment of the experience. This notion was so completely foreign to him, Dismas began to orbit the Old Man, trying to understand him; attempting to learn lessons he could not name, and yet they haunted his mind to know.

This first rule appears, on the surface, to be a good thing, but the Old Man is not a good man. He is a thief, and a leader of thieves. One of the Jackals of the desert. A Jackal even the Lions hesitate to cross. Mercy and kindness are not deciding factors. Dismas studies the Old Man for a moment longer, and then asks, "But, are not families lightly guarded?"

"Yes." The Old Man agrees.

"And do not families carry their treasures when they travel?"

Again, the Old Man agrees, his eyes remaining locked on Dismas.

"Then your rule makes no sense to me Old Man." Dismas say and strikes forward like an asp, snatching another date from the silver dish and again retreating to his place on the floor.

The Old Man lifts an eyebrow of consternation, then moves the dish a bit closer. With his eyes distractedly returning to the empty space of

his date pile, where there was once a delicate sweet, he says, "It makes no sense to you Demn, because you only think about your hands today, not tomorrow. You are also not thinking about tomorrow's dates."

A fight breaks out on the market street below between two merchants vying for the same customer. Such antics are common. This merchant fights are staged entertainment, most of the time, to hide secret negotiations between them for the sale, while amusing the client and crowd.

Other times, the blood is real.

The Old Man takes no notice of the disturbance outside. He tastes a sip of the amber liquid, "Dismas, if we rob the family on the way to Alexandria, or leaving Alexandria, the merchants begin to hire more guards, and use different routes. They say to the Governor *'the thieves are so bold, so terrible, they slaughter women and children.'* Soon the Governor has to act, and sends out many more soldiers than normal, guarding every road, escorting every trade caravan. So we have a hard day, every day."

The Old Man lifts his eyebrow and touches his thumb to his chin, "But... if we only attack the merchants, and only the new merchants, and whenever we can insure families arrive in Alexandria untouched, what then?"

"When families arrive safely, merchants feel safe as well. They hire fewer guards, because they don't like spending their money. They ship more weight, because they like making more money."

"When the prominent merchants have no trouble, they believe it is because of their prestige and power. They like to think this. They *want* to think this. When they do think this, they invest more money in new merchants and fatten foreign caravans believing their name, associated with the enterprise, will keep it safe. Then, when we take the fattened cargo from the inexperienced merchant, we don't have to kill so many, and the prominent merchant blames the new merchant for being

careless, focusing less on the thieves."

The Old Man spreads out his arms, encompassing in his words, the whole of the city, "Merchants are greedy and they never expect thieves to think." His arms relax, and he takes a date from his dish, pops it in his mouth relishing the flavor and texture, "Do you understand?"

Dismas sits still, keeping eye contact with the Old Man. As he expected, the Old Man's rule has nothing to do with Good or Right, but focuses on Value, and Cunning. He brushes an errant hair from his eyes, "Yes," he answers, "I understand.", still pondering the full implications of the lesson, half listening to the merchants and the crowd on the street below, selling their wares. He has listened closely to those men all of his life, discovering their secrets, listening to their plans. They are not stupid sheep out on the desert roads, bawling for slaughter. Many of them are as tough as seasoned wood, and have fought off raiders all of their lives.

He leans forward putting his chin on his hands. The Old Man is a Jackal, but he is old, and still has both of his hands. There are very few old thieves, and even fewer who could eat for the enjoyment of the experience, rather than needing to fill a starving belly. "What about other road men Old Man?" he asks slowly, watching the Old Man's eyes as he develops the question, watching for signs of acceptance or discouragement. "Do all thieves follow this rule? I hear better than most. I hear talk of families being robed and families being slaughtered."

The Old Man nods his head to this, spending more time than normal choosing his next date. His composure of deep thought, of ancient sadness, adds heaviness to his words when he finally answers. "Not every thief understands wisdom. In fact very few do, which is why the Roman crosses are always full, and dog's bellies are stuffed on the chopped hands of thieves. For those who fail to see wisdom once shown, the Lions and Jackals take care of them." He takes a date and places it in his mouth, "The desert is unforgiving to those who do not accept wisdom." His attention remains on the plate of honey-covered

dates, but Dismas feels a chill in his spine and understands just how serious the lesson can become.

Dismas leans back and nibbles on the second stolen date, pondering what he has heard, letting it expand in his mind; laying the motivation, like a colored lens, over the map of actions he has witnessed from the Old Man in the past. The Old Man always acts as though his exploits have far reaching consequences, as if what he did to accomplish a success today, would also determine success or failure next year.

"Old Man," Dismas says after another nibble, "let us pretend for a moment the merchants aren't so greedy, or that they are not so ignorant of thieves. Let us pretend they begin to insure their cargo with guards and families. What will a wise Jackal do then?"

The Old Man's eyes smile, and there is a brief flash of pride across his face. The kind of pride any teacher feels when the student understands the lesson further than expected. The smile does not show on the Old Man's lips however. He remains serious; stoic.

"As you suggest," the Old Man says, after a sip of the bitter amber liquid. "Let us pretend. But, let us also pretend that *you* are the Jackal, and I am your second. I give you until sunset to tell me how we will survive this change."

"I do not need until sunset Old Man!" Dismas boasts and strikes for the date dish.

The Old Man's left-hand snatches Dismas' right wrist, twists, and pulls. Dismas instinctively twists his body to avoid an injury to his elbow, but in doing so is unprepared for the sudden pull. He falls forward, off balance, and slams his forehead into the edge of the table.

Blood leaks from the wound across his left eye. Dismas ignores the wound, frantically moving to regain his balance and his view of the Old Man. He manages to get his knee up and under him, his calf and foot muscles tensed like loaded springs, but the Old Man has his wrist in the grip of an iron shackle. There is no where to spring.

Dismas glares through his own blood into the Old Man's eyes like an angry cat. He doesn't feel victim or unfairly treated, though it is likely he will suffer a broken wrist before he is able to escape again.

"If you reach too far Dismas, I no longer have to be quick. I can be old and slow." The Old Man takes a date from the silver dish, the exact one Dismas was striking for, "At the cost of two dates, and a bit of patience, I lured you past your limit and protected the rest of my delicacies. Against a thief such as yourself, this is a good bargain, yes?"

Dismas quickly reviews the conversation, and in hindsight sees how careless and poorly he estimated the Old Man, even while he shuddered under the status and power of this Jackal. But now was not the time for condemning his foolishness. His arm is now in the Jackal's teeth. He not only had to keep his arm, but regain the Jackal's respect.

He cannot win by strength, and trapped by the wrist, he could not win by speed. He had to out think the Jackal.

Dismas sighs... he might have a better chance at strength.

The Old Man places the date in his mouth, then, with a deft stroke, scratches his sharp index finger nail across the boy's arm, below the death grip, leaving a livid white line. The message is clear; Loose your wits, loose your hand.

Dismas lowers his eyes from the Old Man's satisfied grin, and looks at the livid line. It pulses there, glowing harshly against his dark Egyptian skin. The sight of it opens an anger inside him, an anger he has never experienced before. Not the hot fiery anger of a child, this is something cold. Something dangerous.

His mind is suddenly crystal clear. Dismas judges his body's position, the table height, the position of the Old Man. The hand trapping his. Cold logic assesses everything in the room, and then identifies the keystone.

Dismas looks back up at the Jackal's eyes... and smiles.

Before the Old Man can react to the little cat's glee, Dismas twists his

arm hard against the Old Man's thumb, and slides his marked wrist from the steel grip. No man can hold with only fingers, no matter how strong he is; for grip, the thumb is required.

With striking speed Dismas grips the near edge of the small table and pulls down. The table on the Old Man's side instantly tips up. He catches the flying silver dish in his left hand, and instead of tumbling away, he presses his shoulder against the flat of the table and charges with his legs, hearing a satisfying yelp from the Old Man, having jammed the joints of his reaching fingers into the shielding wood.

Now Dismas tumbles away, his actions flowing on a timed rhythm like a choreographed dancer. With agility and fluid motion, Dismas leaps to his stack of Arabian carpets and then springs to the open window.

The Old Man is not idle. He is already on his feet, and though holding the bruised fingers of his right hand, the table is hurling through the air at the escaping boy. It smashes to the side of the window, turning into a hail of harmless timber as Dismas gains the ledge and turns, silver dish of dates in his hand. The Old Man glares at him, but he knows he can not cross the room before the boy can fall from he window.

"I have learned something very important Old Man." Dismas says, popping a date into his mouth. "Never take morsels from a Jackal when he can see you. Always take the whole meal and get away fast."

Smiling he sets the silver dish on the thick window sill, "Thank you for my wisdom. I will be back at sunset to answer your challenge and to learn more from you." With that, he falls from the window, leaving the dates on the sill.

From inside the crowd of the market street, he spies the Old Man at the window, laughing, and with his own joy, Dismas runs into the city.

Chapter 3

Chicago, near the relic of St. Jude

*There must be some kind of way out of here, said the Joker
to the Thief
-- Bob Dylan*

"Tommy!", a man's voice screams from a widow on the floor below to the south. "Tommy!", it continues to scream, over and over, breaking through Jack's filters, his mind registering that the repeated scream is the source of the disturbance summoning the emergency vehicles.

The boy looks sceptically at the edge of the roof, to the screaming commands, and then back up at Jack, "It is my father.", He says calmly. "He wants me to come back."

The voice is dead, without inflection. No expectation, or question. "He wants me to come back, so he can kill me too."

It's here for my mother, isn't it? The boy had asked before, believing the Grigori was an angel of death.

Innocence has indeed been lost in this boy, lost through betrayal, Jack recognizes with a sigh.

"I should go." The boy says, looking back over at the edge of the roof.

Looking into the night above them and catching images from the scouting crow, Jack whispers, "You don't have to." It is hard for him to grasp, and always has been, the choice to intervene or not when tragic endings are thrust into his face. There are tragic endings to life in the Living World every day, but he knows, unlike the humans in the world,

even a moment like this is not the truth of the world. Still, once in human form, empathy is difficult to dislodge. Life wants to live. Knowing the other side doesn't help.

"He's my father."

Jack glances at the edge of the roof, and then out in the direction of the Grigori. "Tonight he isn't."

The boy notices Jack's attention is on the Grigori when he says this last, and a sliver of hope blossoms in his eyes.

"No." Jack quickly responds to the false hope in the boy's eyes, "The Grigori, the angelic, has nothing to do with your father. It is only watching." He puts his right hand on the boy's shoulder and looks him in the eye, "I only meant that tonight, your father is not your father, you don't have to honor him right now. It is okay to stay here until the police arrive."

The boy thinks about this, unsure, his brown Hispanic eyes internally focused. For a brief moment Jack believes the boy will return to his father anyway, and Jack knows he will not stop him. Any struggle will attract the Grigori's attention, and he cannot afford to be noticed so clearly right now. Not here. Not so close to the church.

"Will you..." The boy begins, then pauses, still unsure of what he should do. His father's command continues to pull. He looks back up at Jack, "...will you stay with me until the police come."

The shadows are close and full all around them, and through the crow's borrowed eyes he can see the cars rushing up, closing in on the street below. It will be simple enough to fold himself into the Shadow between worlds and return to his flat, unnoticed. Not the preferred method of travel right now, but better than having this boy cry out in tears or terror, "Yes." He says, "but only until then."

The boy relaxes and leans back against the AC unit, his chin down on his chest. From the boy's manner, Jack perceives he no longer envisions a future ahead of him, only a path of trials, all of which lead

no where, and offer nothing. Innocence has fallen to confusion. The boy is not experienced enough to realize that as long as there is life there is hope, but then again, in the world around him, where would this boy learn such a lesson?

Distracted by the arrival of the police on the street below, and the shouts of other residents, Jack doesn't notice the man who climbs onto the roof from the fire escape. It is the boy's stiffening which alerts him.

"Didn't you hear me?" shouts the man, his voice on the edge of hysteria. "I was calling for you!"

He is not a large man, but clearly deranged, a drug madness hazes his eyes, and in his left hand he has what Jack recognizes as a pistol. Without any further display, the man raises the pistol, bringing it to bear on the boy, and Jack.

"Close your eyes." Jack says, while wrapping the boy inside his cloak, and leaning back to fall into the moon shadow of the AC unit. The shadow becomes solid as he falls, and then pliable, enveloping them in liquid darkness. The retort of the gun explodes, but the sound is far away, happening somewhere up above; while the boy and he are falling.

The boy's body goes stiff as stone, and Jack covers the boy's eyes with his own hand. The boy did not keep his eyes closed. The sensation of falling was too much for him. However there are things in Shadow humans should never see, no matter how old they are. In this place, the place between worlds, the intentions and thoughts of human spirits become creatures of a sort, taking shape, breathing, growing teeth. In shadow, ideals and perceptions have physicality -- their teeth can bite, and gnash, and often do.

The Shadow of the boy's father is more hideous than any rendition of the Grigori Jack has ever seen. It is difficult for him to believe that this is a human Shadow. He has seen some twisted forms in the past, but this man's Shadow is truly monstrous. Fear and derangement have grown

tormenting tentacles, and despair has removed the man's lungs from his chest, leaving an open cavity, a crow mouth, the ribs now fangs, the liver a black tongue. Behind the tongue Jack spots the eyes and forehead of a young woman. The boy's mother? The man's image of her anyway. His belief, his hunger, manifesting physical form.

As horrible and primal as these things are, in Shadow Jack has nothing to fear from them, this is his world. In Shadow, the Thief is master. Jack turns his attention from the twisted spirit of the drug crazed man and calmly focuses on his flat, bringing to mind unique details; the apple core in the waste basket, the floral design of the padded window box, the grain of the end tables, the shape of lampshades; as the details accumulate, the flat comes into focus, and an instant later, he steps out from the deep shadow of the flat's door way, onto the wood entrance way, back amongst the earth-bound creatures of the world.

Jack removes his hand from the boy's eyes. The child remains paralyzed with fear. He carries him to the couch and lays him down, turning the boy's face to the back, letting him hide for a moment, and get use to the room.

He crosses the dinning area to the back where the kitchen is laid out. A cat's shadow follows him to the refrigerator, and watches as Jack pulls out several apples, oranges, and a pineapple.

After a quick job of cutting the fruit into chunks and separating the pile into two bowls, he returns to the living area, and to the boy. He sets one of the bowls down on the coffee table, and sits in an overstuffed recliner with the other. The cat jumps up onto the arm of the chair, and peers at the boy with slight interest.

There is nothing Jack can do for the boy, no words to help him through this moment of time. He either comes back to the earth-bound living, or remains terrified in the small area of shadow he is currently trapped in. It could take minutes, hours, it might take days. Jack waits, hoping the boy is strong enough to return, knowing that every minute past an hour, the odds for the boy decline exponentially.

It is fifteen minutes, before signs of life begin to show in the boy's body. Jack gets up from his chair and returns to the kitchen, refilling his bowl with cut fruit, returning to his chair with two colas from the frig.

The boy hears Jack's footsteps, and turns to face him. "You were right." He says, "That wasn't my father. I saw what it really was, when you pulled me away."

Jack puts one of the cola cans down on the coffee table in front of the boy. The boy, sits up, and reaches for it. "No," Jack says as he leans back into the overstuffed chair, "that wasn't your father, that was merely a shadow of him."

The boy pops the can, and looks at Jack, the question plainly displayed as confusion. "A shadow," Jack explains, "a moment of thoughts or emotions. Everyone has them, in fact most people have several of them at the same time." He takes a sip of the cola, "but none of them is the whole person. What you saw, is what he had inside him for a moment, but not like a possession, or a demon, more like, what he thought of himself, what he was carrying around inside. Tomorrow, the next day, what you would have seen could have been completely different. Perhaps even beautiful."

The boy drinks the soda, gulping it, as though a sudden thirst inside of him could not be extinguished by mortal refreshments. He sets the can down on the coffee table, the empty aluminum making a brief hollow ring, and presses the palms of his hands against his temples. "So he did that to himself? He did that to his insides?" his voice desperate, reaching, clawing for understanding.

Jack leans back, studying the boy. It was still possible he could slip back into madness, but his insight was dead-on. "We all do it to ourselves, kid."

"Why?" The boy suddenly demands, his eyes feral.

"Because being human is hard." Jack says.

The boy shakes his head, his dark brown hair falling across his face,

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, to be honest, I just know that it is." Jack admits, and gets up from the chair, moving to the front windows, looking out into the street below.

They are silent for a while, both in their own thoughts, Jack knowing the boy's struggles with his experience were still his own. He sighs, and despite experience, says "What you saw, you never should have seen, which is why I told you to close your eyes. I should have covered them myself, and I am sorry for that."

"Telling you to forget it, or telling you it wasn't real, will not help you. I know that, and I can't undo what has been done. For many nights, the memory will probably give you nightmares, and your mind will try to make sense of it all," He glances back at the boy who is completely focused on Jack, "but there is no sense to be made, which will only make it worse."

Jack paces in front of the windows, "No one will understand you when you try to explain it to them; they will call it delusion or hysteria. They will tell you that your mind was in shock, traumatized, and it might even feel better to believe them -- for a while."

Jack turns from the window and looks back at the boy, "The only thing I can offer you is; when belief in delusion no longer works, and you begin to feel the terror of it again, which you will, I can tell you now, it was real. And it was terrifying."

The boy looks away, his face placid and worn. He says nothing. He has the same composure he did on the roof, looking out on a life of trials with no future or hope.

"You should get some sleep. You are tired, and confused. Tonight you won't dream, and you are safe. Try to believe me, and sleep."

The boy doesn't respond right away, but eventually lays back down on the couch, his eyes glued to Jack. "Are you going to be here when I wake up?" he asks.

Jack returns to the stuffed chair, sits, and leans his head back closing his eyes. "Yes."

The boy closes his eyes, and turns to face the back of the couch. In moments Jack can hear the steady breathing of sleep coming from the boy.

The excursion tonight has netted many puzzles to solve, and while his own mind wishes to begin untwisting the knots, he brings it to rein, and slips into sleep himself; in only a few hours it would be time to find his true target; Detective Lisa Sarah-McNeil.

As Jack fades into light sleep, several cats crawl out from under the couch, end tables, and from behind doors. They jump to window sills, and peer down at the traffic, switching their tails as car lights and reflections attract their eyes. A couple, stalk across the back of the couch, and sit on the stuffed arms, watching the boy sleep.

Forty minutes more, the moon is framed in the upper windows. A crow lands on the skylight, its talons scrap on the Plexiglas cover. Jack opens his eyes to the sound. The crow pecks on the plastic dome. "I'm awake." Jack answers softly, and sits forward on the chair, looking at the sleeping boy.

A couple of the cats sitting sentry around the boy yawn and stretch, but are otherwise undisturbed by Jack's questioning stare. Jack nods his head; the boy's sleep has been sound.

If the boy had shown signs of nightmare or disturbance, the cats would have tried to sooth his sleep or wake him up. It is their way.

Jack never trained them for this behavior, and has always felt that they did this simply because they did not like the disturbance themselves. That the cats could also see the Shadows of the humans, Jack discovered from the start. Whether it is because they are shadows themselves, or because in life they were always partly in Shadow, and saw the mental apparitions of humans, again, he didn't know.

The crows, like the one on the roof, are more apt to be guided, and

given specific tasks. The cats, are more like allies; their personal desires were in-line with Jack's desires. They do what is of interest to them, but their goals are normally short term personal goals, where the crows act as though service is enough of a goal. Jack simply accepts their help as he accepts most things, and gives little thought to their true nature. That both of these creatures are true allies, with no pressing personal agendas, is enough for him and he enjoys their presence.

The boy's resilience is commendable. In less than two hours he has seen his father kill his mother, and his father try to kill him, as well as the demon of his father's shadow, and is able to sleep soundly.

Jack leans back in the chair again, pressing gently into the darkening shadows of the room, letting them cover his eyes, and examines the boy.

With his eyes in Shadow, his vision of Thomas acquires a deeper clarity, and a new puzzle surfaces; the boy's shadow, his mental apparition, is exactly as his physical form; he is what he believes he is; nothing more, nothing less. The coloration of the shadow is even a bit lighter than his physical presence. On top of this, there is only one.

A tapping on the plastic skylight distracts him from continuing to explore his curiosity. He looks up at the crow again, "Yes, I know." He says, and stands up, stretching out his body, "I'm coming out. Meet me around back, we'll take the bike this time."

The bike was found in New Mexico, outside of a bar, where the owner was set on a drunken sexual attack of a girl who apparently worked at the place. Jack had never ridden a motorcycle before, and wasn't sure this was even a good one, but he liked the way it looked. It was a horse that would never tire, or bleed.

At first it was too loud for his senses, and disturbed his preference for stealth, but as he rode to Chicago, he became aware that the motorcycle attracted much less attention than he believed it would. In fact, people would go out of their way, not to notice him.

The man's leather jacket, helmet and boots all fit him well. He left

the drunken man unconscious. The barmaid was very helpful in getting his boots off. She kept his wallet, which Jack thought was fair, and she helped Jack understand the basics of the heavy black machine; fuel, clutch, shifter, acceleration. It took little time to get the bike on the road, find the highway heading north and cross out of New Mexico.

On the way to Chicago, he came across several other bike riders. Some of the bikes were much quieter than the Harley-Davidson V-Rod, which he rode. Some also appeared to be much faster. Again however, the style and feel of the bike grew on him, and it was put in his path; which was exactly how things worked in his world.

He is a thief, and to get done what he has been sent to accomplish, he often stole things. Jack doesn't feel any guilt about theft, but certainly, acquiring objects of need, from those who were using them for evil, was acceptable, but certainly not required.

It tended to work out nicely so for the most part, such arrangements are preferred. For example, the drunken man was arrested for rape, soon after Jack left, and would not be reporting the bike stolen for at least a few days, or years, depending on how the system works for rapists.

In Jack's world, convenience carries a great deal of weight.

When the coincidences begin to pile up so high that even he can't ignore them, Jack reminds himself that most of his needs are very specific, and it is far more likely that a human of evil intent would have the objects which fulfilled his needs. Knives, loose cash, lock-picks, collections of weapons, false IDs were not items that most fathers of three, heading off to work, had on them. However, back alley fences, robbers, gang members, and other collectors of ill-gotten gains tended to have these items and more, on them all the time, or knew where to find them. Again, convenience carries a great deal of weight.

Jack picks the backdoor lock of the abandoned Rexall drug store, and brings the bike out into the alley. The crow lands on his right shoulder and fusses in agitation as Jack pushes the bike out to the street. Starting

the bike at night would certainly attract some attention, but starting it the back alley, is rude.

"Show me." Jack says to the crow, once on the street and ready to start the bike. Closing his eyes he can see a woman standing on the roof of a building, a few miles north, looking down into a dark park. Her green eyes are hard, filled with a slow burning hatred and pain, which has been distilling into an intoxicating depression.

The woman has dark red hair, her lips are tight, pressed together, baring the exit of a scream. Her dark pants serve to highlight the gleam of the detective badge clipped to her belt. She wears her gun on her hip, and Jack notices a second on her right ankle.

She is a woman who understands violence, and understands criminal minds. Unlike many lawmen Jack has come across in his experiences, she is not in this line of work for glory or violence. She is a huntress. After she has captured her prey, she cares little what happens to them. To the criminal, she is definitely someone to fear. Jack has met these types before, and has a healthy respect for them as adversaries. They cannot be bribed, or distracted.

Something, or someone in that park, got away from her, Jack reasons from her posture and expression.

A call chirps on her radio, which she answers. She's told of another Shade related death, and given an address. She tells the caller she is on the way. She leaves the roof and at the street, gets into a light blue Mustang, which the street lights have turned a burnt orange/yellow. She powers on the engine, and thunders out of the parking lot heading south. A red light soon flashes in the windshield.

Jack knows the address as soon as he hears it, and even knows the building, though the crow shows him anyway. It is the building across the street from St. Jude's. The building he found Thomas at, and now, the building he will meet his target. A puzzle piece in his mind floats around trying to find a place to fit. The building is certainly a focal

point, but is that meaningful or just coincidence?

The crow, following the woman to her destination, flies very close to the steeple of the church, and Jack notices the Grigori is not there. He questions the crow, and receives a blank response; it didn't notice any angelics on its journey.

Jack turns the key to the bike, thumbs the ignition button and brings the machine to life. It roars, ready for battle, ready for speed and night. Jack feels the same way, and moves the machine into the darkness and street lights.

He doesn't notice a cat running after him.