

# THE JAWBONE & THE JUNKMAN



BOOK TWO



BOOKS OF  
BEFORE & NOW

JASON FISCHER

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THE BOOKS OF BEFORE AND NOW BOOK TWO  
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*To Kate, Logan and Lottie,  
you are my everything.*



## — PROLOGUE —

**H**e was a boy who'd gone by ten or more names before they put a noose around his neck. The boy had left these names discarded like snake skins in his wake, and when they told him he was going to die, the town clerk recorded his final name with the hammer strikes of a rebuilt typewriter, punching these words into the fibres of the parchment, trying to force permanence into this identity with ink and clacking strikers.

The boy had kicked away his last meal in a clatter of cursing. When they came for him, he burst out of his cell, cutting up one of the jailers with the sharpened edge of a spoon.

The boy was wild, and tough, and perhaps fourteen years old. Even he didn't know. He spat and swore, laughed and mocked the crowd and his jailers, giving various opinions on laws and those who would hide behind them.

Those who served the townlaw nudged the boy onto the trapdoor, next to a more experienced criminal, the one who'd led him into this noose. The man saw the hard edge in the boy's face and nodded once. Respect, and the boy drank it up, even here at his end.

The boy was observant, and even in all the clamour he noticed three things as his life came to an end.

The man who passed the sentence in the court room was the one who reached for the lever.

A girl even younger than the boy, half-hidden behind the gallows post. Well-dressed and well-fed. Forced to observe this execution.

Then the crack of a rifle, startling the whole crowd, the same second that the executioner pulled the lever.

The boy fell, and kept falling, down into the dank pit beneath the gallows, but where he expected a broken neck or a prolonged minute of choking, he struck the damp clay, his noose trailing around him.

A bullet had severed the rope as it stretched to its fullness, the noose gripping his throat for only one painful moment.

He watched as the older man fell next to him, his own noose working, but his neck did not break. He twitched and choked, eyes locking onto the boy's.

The boy set himself beneath the man, let him push down and finally stand on his shoulders to ease the choke of the rope. He deserved to hang, they both did, but the older man still wobbled and fought for every breath.

"The boy is down there!" someone cried, and faces peered down from above.

"Don't you leave me," the older criminal rasped, fighting for balance on the back of a child outlaw.

Survival. The boy ran with his noose flapping, leaving his old boss to dangle and choke in the darkness, his last word a gurgled curse against the boy that the slipknot thankfully interrupted.

A passageway led into a room with two coffins waiting for two bodies, and the undertakers were interrupted mid-cigarette by a boy running full-pelt.

He was wild and resourceful, the boy with ten names, but the cry had gone up, and the lawmen were out in force to hunt him down. Dashing headlong through an empty tannery, the boy drew up short as someone caught his noose, pulling him down by it.

The boy fought to get to his feet, even with his hands bound, and saw the man who clutched the other end of his noose. In his other hand he held a rifle, a good one, one that could have made the shot from the windows up in the tannery roof.

The man appraised him with a heavy eye and let go of the rope. Setting aside the rifle, he pulled a Bowie knife out of a battered old sheath on his belt, cutting the cord around the boy's wrists.

In later years, the boy would carry the heavily worn knife as his own and kill this man with a rock, but today he was grateful for the

liberty, unaware that he was speaking with a Jesusman, that most despicable of characters.

“A nice lanyard they fitted you with,” the man said, and introduced himself as Bauer. The boy took off the noose and put on that most heavy and final of names.





**PART ONE**  
**JAWBONE**



**F**ifteen years from the day that he murdered a god, Lanyard found an intruder lurking by the tradeway. A puppet in the making, it was a hideous arrangement of bone and skin, as if someone with only the vaguest idea of a human was trying to make one. It lurched across the scrub, hailing them, reaching out with a knotty club that was meant to pass for an arm.

Lanyard's prentices circled it like children baiting a mad dog. They rode motorbikes and bicycles scavenged from the bleedthroughs, and the younger ones slapped around in sandals carved from old tyre treads.

They jeered and poked at the beast with sticks, none of them game to get any closer. Lanyard stood back, watching, arms folded. He had a shotgun slung over his shoulder, an ancient and most holy weapon, but this was a failsafe.

Today, he'd given the kids a devil to practice on.

"Please," the thing said. "I'm lost. Let me share your water, your food."

Someone threw a rock then, cracking the beast in the ribs. The creature drew down low, limbs scrabbling out like a spider, and it shrieked, a yipping and yiking that was half pain and half warning. The prentices scattered, daring each other to do more.

"Why do you hurt me?" it mewled, sharp fingers bent backwards, drumming at the clay, and then it found its own rock. It whipped an arm forward, a limb made of four joints, a trebuchet of meat and sinew.

The rock flew like a bullet and struck a girl in the temple. She fell from her motorbike, the machine bouncing across the ground. The girl rolled, screaming, a tangle of limbs, blood, and dust.

"Mal, enough," Lanyard called out. An older boy was waiting outside of the circling pack of kids, seated on the back of a riding bird. His mount still had tufts of chick down and was barely eight feet high at the crest, just big enough to ride. Lanyard had bought the bird the same day he'd freed the boy from a slaver, and he often found the pair daydreaming together, the boy muttering into the bird's ear, the bird clacking and parroting what words she could glean from her young master.

Mal turned at the sound of his name, stirred from a distant thought. When he saw the look on Lanyard's face, he reached down to the bird's flank, slowly drawing the lance out of its sheath.

"C'mon, Collybrock," he told the bird. She loped forward, screeching and nipping at the other prentices until they cleared out of the way. The younger prentices waited at a safe distance from the creature and pretended not to be relieved.

"Please, friend," the man-thing said to Mal. "I mean no harm. I'm in terrible danger."

"Friend," Collybrock squawked, breaking off into a warble of laughter. Mal licked his lips, setting the lance in the crook of his arm. The strange creature raised itself upwards on arm and leg bones, the whole mass clicking and shifting until it was almost the height of the bird. It swayed in time with the bird, skin stretched taut and slick with sweat.

Its mouth was obscenely wide, and the lips curved up into a smile, revealing row upon row of teeth.

"We can be friends," it told Mal. "I can tell. You have a good heart."

At that point, the creature struck forward like a whip, knobs of sharp bone reaching for the boy's face. Mal whistled through his teeth to Collybrock and the bird danced sideways, kicking out at the pin-wheeling monstrosity.

Mal drove the lance through the monster, the sharp blade instantly piercing that weird flesh. Lanyard had crafted the lance-head from a truck spring, hammering the thick steel flat, grinding the edges and the point into something he taught young Mal to shave with.

Lanyard had etched the ancient marks into the steel, crude copies of the sorceries carved into his old gun. Enough to do the job of binding and killing these things, and that was good enough for what needed doing.

Mal held the creature at bay with the cross-piece of the lance, even as the creature wiggled and tried to free itself from the foot-long spike. Digging his heels into Collybrock's flanks, Mal drove the intruder back, herding it left and right, until it tripped in a tangle of confused meat.

Mal drove the lance down as hard as he could, pinning the intruder to the earth. The chittering thing howled then, more from the loss of liberty than from pain.

"Make with the marks and the words, quickly now," Lanyard told the younger prentices, who had gathered around the monstrous thing. They used sticks and knives to carve into the clay-pan, making the marks of binding, the closing fingers of an invisible fist to hold the monster in place. At the very last the creature tried to withdraw back through the world veil, but it was trapped, flesh and foul spirit both.

"Enough!" it finally cried, limbs curled in around the lance, unable to free itself. "Cry pardon."

"No," Lanyard growled. He walked around the circle, checking on the work. One of the marks was weak, so he added another to reinforce the ward, digging into the dirt with a yellowed thumbnail.

"You are vermin. Squatters," the creature cried, staring at Lanyard. Its eyes resembled those of a dead fish, alien orbs that tracked the old man as he paced around it.

"You should not be here. None of you!" it continued. Lanyard shrugged the old shotgun from his shoulder, checking the breech action. He snapped it closed with a sharp click and brought the barrels to bear on that squirming face, a pancake of features that did not have a skull to lend them shape.

"End me, but there are so many more of me, and every day we tumble through the holes in the fence," it crooned. "I do not fear you!"

Lanyard considered the gun in his hands, the ancient pictures of the Crossing, the threats and promises carved into every inch of the weapon. The weapon of a Jesusman.

"You're not even worth a bullet," Lanyard said.

He brought the gun down like a club, cracking bones, grinding that alien flesh into the dust, knowing that the sigils carved into the stock were causing the creature a deep agony.

"Cry mercy," the thing finally bleated. "I fear you. I fear!"

"Good," Lanyard said, gore running from the butt of his gun. He stepped back, breathing heavily from the exertion.

"You kids, get in there and finish the job," he snarled, and the prentices waded in, hefting knives and clubs marked with the old killing signs. The trapped monster bleated with terror, and later pain, and then it was just a smear of dead meat.



"Pay attention," Lanyard said that night. He drew a stick from the cook-fire and scratched at the air with the hot coal on the end. He spoke a word and gave it just enough emphasis to leave a track of fire where he drew lines and shapes.

Soon he had drawn out a map in flame, a chart that hung in mid-air where his students could see it.

"Up here is the Overhaeven," Lanyard said, pointing to a circle at the top. "The gods live here. The Jesus, your bossman. John Leicester, too, he looks after the statue-lovers. We got no other friends in that place."

He drew a line downwards, marking out another circle. "This here is the Greygulf, the world between worlds. There're shadow-roads there, quick ways to get around. You'll walk here one day, but not till I say, and even then only for a moment."

He looked around at the eager faces, hungry for their legacy, and he felt a weight of sadness settle over him. He shook his head.

"Too much time in that place will ruin you," he said. "Remember, all of the Witches used to be Jesusmen."

"Beneath the Greygulf is the Aum. It's a place of endless night, a darkness that speaks to mirrors and madmen."

The kids watched him intently as he drew with fire. He wondered what it had been like in the Before, when people watched their televisions. Every bleedthrough spat out endless TV boxes, all of it useless now.

Going by everything the Boneman had ever told him about that marvellous old world, this was a low age, humanity reduced to bare-arsed survival in a shit-hole.

“Right at the bottom of this whole mess, you’ll find the Underfog,” Lanyard said, circling around the lowest part of his diagram. “This is the place where dead spirits go, preparing to die their Twice-Death. Don’t any of you ever try to go there while you are alive. I mean it.”

Left and right of the Greygulf, he drew shapes, a cross-arm to the vertical axis of his burning shape. He drew circle after circle, as far as he could reach.

“This is our world, the Now,” Lanyard said, pointing one out. “We came here from the world called the Before. It’s dead now, killed off by Papa Lucy, and he nearly killed this place, too.”

He snuffed out one of the circles between thumb and forefinger, a blank spot in that fiery map, emphasised by all of the bright shapes around it.

“These other worlds, they all touch on ours. Especially now that Papa Lucy has weakened the world veil. Creatures and spirits sneak into the Now, and it’s your job to kill them.”

He saw the bright eyes of his prentices, lapping up the call to adventure. *I’m bloody telling it all wrong!* he berated himself.

“There’s no glory for you lot! Just murder and madness,” he snarled. “The towns will shut you out, or they will pretend to obey the Boneman’s new laws, but they will shun you.”

A few of the excited faces dropped away, but there were still too many. He pressed on with the hard truths.

“The moment you swore to serve the Jesus was the moment you crossed a line. You’re not *human* anymore, and that scares the wall-huggers.”

So much talking hurt Lanyard’s throat. He sipped at his billy-tea and let the prentices walk right around his burning diagram, wide-eyed as they took in the structure of the universe.

*It will grind the life out of you kids,* he wanted to say. *Nothing marvellous about all that misery.*

“Mister Lanyard, when do we get guns?” one of the prentices said, which stirred him from his grim reverie. She was the girl who’d taken a tumble from the motorbike, a bloody wad of cotton still strapped to her head. For a moment he searched for her name, sifting through



dozens of dead faces, kids who'd followed him from towns and shanties, who'd escaped from the crooked mobs to join his service. Every night their screams tore at his nightmares, new ghosts to add to his collection.

Kirstl. This girl was called Kirstl. She was Mal's sweetheart, and this romance was a new thing, all clandestine kisses and stolen tender moments. Tilly knew of course, and thought she was keeping this secret from Lanyard, who knew in his own way, both of them ready to chaperone the moment it was needed, just one more task when it came to shepherding the prentices through their education.

*Would it be wrong to cut the kids loose? To let them have their happiness? A life away from violence and fear?*

Kirstl looked to him hopefully, eyes alight with her imagined future adventures, and Lanyard was already digging a grave for her in his mind.

"You're not ready," he said. "Mal doesn't even have a gun yet. Stop worrying about that. Focus on your marks and words, on learning your trade."

He waved a stick at the diagram, accidentally smudging the lines. Grunting with annoyance, he snapped his fingers, and the burning chart dissolved into smoke. Rising painfully to his feet, Lanyard left the campfire and prentices both, limping out into the darkness of the plains.

Too much talking. Too many faces.

He watched from a short distance, unseen. The prentices grumbled and settled down for the night, whispering and joking as the fire crackled.

Some of the kids stared vacantly and did not join in this quiet camaraderie. Mem and Lyn, twins he'd rescued from Witches' Nest on another bloody day. Rella, a wild brawler at ten who often screamed in her sleep. Seidel, a lad who started at loud noises and often cut himself, or others.

Mal, who kept his own counsel, sharpening his lance-head on a whetstone. Lanyard worried about this swarthy young man the most.

Lanyard knew this look, and marked these children well. If you gave these prentices their guns too soon, more than one would simply blow their brains out. He'd learnt that lesson the hard way, over and over.



He felt the tear in the world veil, but they were too late to stop an attack on a farmhold. Lanyard and his students were greeted by smouldering ruins, dead sheep, and no people to be found anywhere.

"Look here," Lanyard said, pushing some tin sheeting with his boot. "Not with your eyes, the other way."

He pointed out scar after scar in the world veil, all the weak points left over when someone or something had gone through. Footprints, drag marks, and bloody clumps of dust led the way to each scar, and then nothing.

"Witches," he said, pointing out the way that the footprints changed from man feet to a dog's paws, to a bird's talons, to the coil of a serpent.

Mal and the other prentices perked up at the word and puffed themselves up, wicked little hand weapons at the ready. Lanyard shook his head.

"They'll kill you," he said. "At least twenty of them hit this place. You'll end up in their greypot if I send you lot through."

Trying to calm the rising tide of panic in his mind, Lanyard sought access to the Aum, to that black place of mirrors and prisons. He felt at the edges of it with his mind, unable to grip it easily, but he frowned and pushed forward with a brute effort rather than the relaxed method the Boneman had tried to teach him.

He was in. He focused his mental energies towards the walled city of Crosspoint, towards his first prentice. She was working at the Lodge of the Jesumens, perhaps one thousand miles away from the dusty Inland.

*Tilly. I need you here. Witches.*

He felt the thought bounce across that endless darkness. There were other things in here, lost creatures, insane from the isolation, and they hunted words sent across the Aum, fed from the energy, came hunting for the mind that dared to brave that place.

The alternative was days of dusty riding, swapping bikes for camels and birds, and ending up with a chapped arse for no good reason.

*Tilly!*

*Lanyard, I hear you,* the girl said over that impossible distance, her voice distorted and weak.

*At least twenty Witches,* he replied. *They are feeding now.*

*We come,* she said, and broke off the tenuous connection. Lanyard blinked and emerged from that internal darkness, his eyes once more drinking in the daylight.

"You kids, move away from there," he said, pointing to the spot that made his skin crawl. A moment later, a silver light slashed through the air, a doorway irising open from somewhere else. He saw that monochrome light, the connection of a shadow-road, then shapes emerging from the Greygulf.

Men and women, kitted out for killing. Everyone was marked with scars or burns, and some had lost limbs, others their souls. They moved with a quick nervous energy, scanning for threats, rune-carved guns at the ready.

The Jesusmen.

At their head was a woman with fuzzy brown hair, pulled back tight in a ponytail. She wore Lanyard's old slouch hat, pulled low, and a canvas dust-coat. A pistol hung from her hip, heavy black iron, etched with forgotten words, just marks that Lanyard and Bauer and countless others before them had copied, etched over and over until they no longer meant anything. She flashed a smile at Lanyard, her lips marred by a split scar that ran over the edge of her chin.

"Bossman," Tilly Carpidian said. She led the way into the wreckage, cradling a pike she'd marked in the same ways as Mal's lance. She watched carefully for survivors or for hidden killers, noting each shimmer that marked a tear through this reality into another.

"Let's go," she said, and the Jesusmen spread out, pushing through the scars in the world veil.

Some places led to the Greygulf. Others entered worlds of searing heat, of snow and darkness, or into planes that made Lanyard queasy just looking through their tears.

Even as the holes slowly puckered shut behind each of the Jesusmen, the cracks of gunshots drifted back into the Now, the shouted words of their rite. Bind, unmake, destroy. There used to be more tricks in the Jesusman's kit, but they'd lost so many things.

"You'll be like them soon enough," he told the prentices behind him, who thrilled at the action, the confidence of the gun-toting

knights. "Then you'll wish for this day, when it was someone else going through."

"Through," Collybrock warbled. Mal leaned against the bird's neck, ruffling its feathers, watching the older Jesusmen do battle with the predators. When he met Lanyard's eyes, he did not look scared or excited.

The boy was simply sad, and already weary from a thousand burdens. Lanyard would add a thousand more before he was done, and he wondered if it might have been kinder to leave young Mal in chains.

The guns of the Jesusmen roared justice and defiance, but mostly they barked out in futility, crackled with vengeance for those too dead to care.