

PAPA LUCY & THE BONEMAN



BOOK ONE



BOOKS OF
BEFORE & NOW

JASON FISCHER

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Jason Fischer

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

— PROLOGUE —

On the shore of a lake, a midden rose from the grit. A cairn of bone and shell could be seen for many miles, nothing more than a nameless curiosity to most. Over long centuries, travellers had added to this midden, stacking their sacrifices until the grave became a hill, the hill a shifting plain of death. Now, it only served as a landmark.

Over time, the purpose of this enormous shrine of bone was forgotten. Only the maddest or most fervent made the trip to this lonely place. Those who stayed reported bad dreams, an eerie feeling that the midden was calling to them, and always, the urge to climb into the grave, to burrow deep, deep into the bones.

Then the pilgrims stopped visiting altogether. Pilgrimages to Sad Plain became more popular, where the faithful gathered up shards of glass. They sliced at their feet and faces, wailing and petitioning the Family—Papa Lucy for protection, the Lady Bertha to curse an enemy.

Few came to call upon the Boneman.

So when the midden shifted, bones and rubble sliding and crashing into a cloud of fine white dust, there was no one to witness it. One whole side of the cairn collapsed, leaving the dome in ruins.

A naked man emerged from the midden, covered in centuries of filth. The woken sleeper clambered across the carpet of calcified shards. On shaky legs, he headed for the water's edge and waded out into the soupy murk, sluicing the brine along his face and arms, washing away the thick crust that clung to his flesh.

This lake had been fresh water once, fed by streams from the nearby Range, and clear all the way to the sandy bottom. The fish had been plentiful here. He'd known many friends in the fishing villages, spent several pleasant summers hidden here. It had been his favourite escape from the intrigues of Crosspoint.

Now it was a place of desolation, of death fully realised. The water was still and stank of sulphur, its basin ringed with dried scum. The thick grass on the dunes had died off, and the sand drifted now, blowing through the burnt ruins of the old villages, holiday spots where he'd loved and laughed and walked as a man.

That was all before Sad Plain. They had all been injured that day, but none were struck so badly as he. The fiery kiss of the enemy had melted the very flesh from his bones, but he could not die. His blackened skeleton had stood firm when the fires guttered and he had walked on, the visible frame of his bones held together by nothing but his own dark magics.

His mastery over death was no easy thing to set aside.

His brother fallen. His wife swallowed into madness. All of their forces scattered and broken. He'd fought on alone. Allies turned foes, a city turned to shards, the world itself turning on them. The Mother of Glass. Only his skeletal shape stood firm, destroying the enemy when things were at their darkest. This broken sorcerer had been many things before Sad Plain, but ever afterwards he was known as the Boneman.

"It worked, brother," he said out loud, his voice hoarse, his throat coated with a thick slime. The magic had taken centuries, and more death than he could imagine, but the flesh had grown

back onto his body. He could feel the contours of his face, his shoulders and arms.

Smiling, he scrubbed furiously, the caked-on grot giving way to the vinegary brine, coating the still surface of the water with a spreading film of grease.

Then he saw it.

"No," the Boneman whispered, rubbing at his eyes. Was he going crazy? He'd been aware throughout his internment, a clever mind bound in a dark place, each thought a decade in the making.

What he saw was real enough, and not his imagination. His arm had the shape and feel of the old limb, but it didn't look right. The skin was see-through and rubbery, a translucent gelatine coating him from head to toe. Once he'd been olive-skinned, but now he was the colour of toffee.

Jellied organs, opaque muscles, all of his parts were present and working. But even now, after all this time, he remained an abomination. He was not fit to be seen walking the busy streets of Crosspoint.

He wept, and the tears were knives pushing through his eyes, long dormant tear ducts leaking across his face.

Is Crosspoint even there, still? he thought. *What if I've slept through everything?*

Wading through the lake, the Boneman pushed through the slick of scum he'd washed from himself. The lake water was too cloudy for the sunlight to penetrate, and once the ripples ceased, he could see his reflection quite clearly.

A skull stared up from the water. The bone was wrapped in the same smoky rubber as the rest of him, his jaw-bone and teeth clearly visible, a dark ladder of vertebrae feeding into the base of that terrifying visage. A jelly beak protruded from his nasal cavity, a nose perfect in every dimension save that it was see-through, as were his lips. His tongue was like a sea-slug, a clear thing darting out past his blackened teeth.

His eyes were the only parts of *him* that remained, soft and brown and witness to far too many horrors. It was all that had escaped the fires, perhaps the cruellest part of this curse.

Our enemy could not kill me, so she left me the means to see myself. To live as a monster forever, he thought.

So this is what it feels like to have won.

The Boneman shuffled back towards the shore. A chill wind blew across the lake's surface. The raised goosebumps felt obscene as they ran along his see-through arms.

He felt cold, after feeling nothing for so long. The Boneman took stock of his new body, feeling all his other processes revive. His lungs wheezed, his coiled bag of guts squirmed, and his heart squeezed out a flow of whatever passed for blood in this jellied flesh.

A cloud, heavy with moisture and the colour of mustard, passed across the sun. He walked towards the ruined village as the rain broke, fat drops that stank of iron and stung his eyes.

The Boneman stepped around a handful of boats drawn up to the ruins, wood rotting and bleached bone-white by centuries of sunlight. The bottoms of all the boats were staved in.

Passing through a sand-choked door, the Boneman entered one of the huts. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw a tangle of nets and long man-bones, fat clusters of trinkets, and other homemade magic nailed to every available surface.

He puzzled out the charms, the patterns of colourful beads and knotwork. They tingled with failed potential and soured hope.

The Boneman spent the night in that forgotten place, alone with the cracked pottery and the ephemera of the long-dead family. Although the roof leaked and the wind howled through gaps in the battered planking, it was better than being out in the open. He found a flint stone and a heavily scratched striker that was probably older than the village itself. It seemed appropriate for

him, so he kept it, making a fire to warm himself from the broken bones of the boats.

The sparks from the striker terrified him, and he cringed from the first lick of flame. He fought down the fear, fought down the memory of his flesh melting, running from his bones. He was cold, and this wasn't just a fire, it was survival.

He did not sleep, having slept for far too long. He watched the play of shadows on the wall instead, and spent the stormy night with the company of ghosts and memories, anything to avoid thinking of what he was meant to do now.



The far doors were closed to him now, and so were the shadow roads. When the Boneman pushed at the fabric between the worlds, it felt...different. His will slid across the boundaries of the universe as though they were greased, and he could not get a grip upon them.

Other magics were harder to perform now. Moving a pebble a short distance with his mind left him weak and shaky. When he reached out to the rest of the Family, he heard nothing but the chill silence of the Aum, that mirror-land throwing back his words. It was the first act of an apprentice mage to bounce messages across that invisible realm, much like a child skips stones across water. By rights, he should have been able to easily reach into it, find word of his brother.

Something was keeping him out.

The sun climbed through the sky, baking the storm-soaked ground into humidity. The Boneman left the village and the dead lake forever. He looked back only once, to wonder at the scale of the midden his brother had built above him.

Cradling the flint and striker, the Boneman owned nothing else but his nudity and the growing hunger in his gut. He was terribly

thirsty, but he was not foolish enough to drink from the poisoned lake water.

Be an ascetic, he scolded himself. *It's not like you actually need to eat or drink.*

As the thought came to him, he wasn't sure if this was true now. So many things had changed. Perhaps he had nothing left to him now but mortality, a second chance with a body that hadn't turned out right.

The old lake road was pitted and overgrown with weeds, and he followed it back to the tradeway. A wayhouse had once stood there, strategically located on the route between Crosspoint and Langenfell. He remembered the small cluster of shops that serviced the holidaymakers, the taverna that raged all hours of the night.

During his slumber, he'd heard the faint whispers of pilgrims in the town, felt their essences trickle towards the midden. For a while, the visitors believed they slept at a safe enough distance, but too many of them visited the cairn, slipping into the bones and breathing their last. Soon, the wayhouse was abandoned, and the Boneman left alone in his tomb.

He walked through the cracked clay buildings, saw the field of sagging poles where merchants had once tethered horses and the big lizards used for haulage work. The taverna was still standing, and he spent a few minutes inside, nudging through the broken bottles and plates. He remembered bringing his wife here, the grand nights of cards, of philosophies argued until dawn, of friendships sworn and toasted to.

All of those people were dead now. He left that place quickly, the memories sitting bitter on his mind.

The Boneman sat cross-legged in the market square, where only the scars of old peg holes remained to show where the stalls had been. The sun beat down upon his bizarre body while he cast his mind outwards, looking for anything: a sign of civilisation, even a

lone traveller who could tell him where the places of men were in this age—if they did not flee in terror when they saw him.

He found nothing but the rats in the ruins and other creatures roaming the hills about, native beasts thriving in the absence of the settlers. He called to them and even gave summons to a great serpent lurking in its nest, but he was too weak to seize control. They easily shook off the strange tickle in their simple minds.

Lip curling, the Boneman called for the rats. Soon a pair came before him, pale and sleek, eyes glazed, small rib-cages heaving rapidly. He snapped their necks clumsily and wondered how he'd go about eating them.

Further searching revealed a knife half eaten by rust and a musty old rug that he turned into a poncho by cutting a hole for his head. While looking for more wood to feed his tiny cook fire, the Boneman saw something behind a stable that drew him up short.

A light horse cart, wearing the decay of decades, not centuries. The tyres were flat, the rubber tubing cracked, but there was plenty of junk in the wayhouse. He might be able to fix this. The cart was in good shape, and it wouldn't take much to get it rolling again.

A skeletal horse was still fitted to the harness, the long bones scattered, the broad bridge of its spine still held together by dried sinew. A faint stain on the paving stones showed where its throat had been cut.

A sacrifice, then.

"They left you here for me," he whispered. He stroked the long horse skull and felt the history of the bones, the dry marrow telling him that yes, the horse was obedient, that it had died in confusion and pain.

A further communion with the remains gave the Boneman a flicker of insight into the master's actions. He felt the kindness of the man, the love and regret that forced the knife blade so many years ago. He guessed the killer of this horse to be a devout man,

intent on his final destiny. There'd been no malice meant to this animal, and he was simply destroying his means of escape should all courage fail.

"It's okay now," he told the large skeleton. "It's going to be okay."



In sleeping, the Boneman had lost most of his magic, but this one thing remained to him. Death was his, and in this strange second life, the sorcerer could still hear the whisper of life that ran in bones. The trick was in knowing how to speak to these off-casts of life and just what to say.

Always with compassion, he thought.

One of the dead rats had its nest in the rubble of a wheelwright's shed and offered up this knowledge to the Boneman, even as its tiny carcass roasted on the spit. *And only with the direst of need. They've earned their rest, and it's cruel of you to disturb it.*

Nobody was there to see when the Boneman set off from the abandoned outpost, the horse cart limping along on ruined wheels.

Between the shafts of the cart, still strapped into the mouldering harness, the horse skeleton ran tirelessly, hauling the Boneman along the old tradeway. The vertebrae flexed and rolled before him, the ribs swaying slightly as four ivory legs pounded the ground in a clumsy canter.

Each bone touched its neighbour, reminded by the Boneman's gentle insistence of the connections the pieces had held in life. The horse-form held true, even though the sinew and tissue were mostly gone. A scrap of mane fluttered from the long skull.

A spirit inhabited these bones, an essence brought back over from the Underfog, the realm on the edge of death. Either the horse itself had returned or something else that was willing to wear this frame, obedient and desperate to take one more step in the land of life.

Wrapped in rags, driving a monster down a forgotten road, the Boneman found his situation absurd. He needed to find his brother, the mightiest sorcerer this world had ever seen, but had no idea of where to look.

He pressed on, shaking the reins to urge more speed from the dead horse. *He won't be too hard to find*, the Boneman reasoned. *Papa Lucy has a way of standing out.*

PART ONE

— THE FAILED APPRENTICE —

Lanyard Everett was alone and halfway towards dead. He limped out of a dry sea, barely noticing when his boots stopped grinding against the crust of salt. He kicked up plumes of red dust with each step.

Behind him lay a vastness of white, stretching to the fuzz of horizon and beyond that for untold miles. The saltpan had become his entire world, blinding him with every pass of the sun, and the ground seemed to glow during the chill of night.

His tracks led back to murder, to the ruined seed of a town, to an enemy who taunted him in his dreams. His master would have stood resolute against that nest of monsters, but Bauer was long dead. Lanyard's education was half-finished at best.

He'd been overwhelmed, driven out.

Lanyard crossed into the Inland, leaving dead seas and defeat behind him. He hauled a wind-car, sails limp in the still air, the tube frame bent and buckled and its wheels no longer rolling true. He'd stripped the seized-up motor from its housing behind the driver's seat, dumping it to reduce weight, which made no difference if the wind didn't blow.

He'd lost count of how many days the air had been still. The sun did its best to bring him down, and a makeshift scarf, torn from a strip of sail, brought some relief to his face and neck.

A shirt worn to grey, a ragged pair of pants, and boots that wouldn't see another mile. Lanyard owned nothing else but the shotgun strapped to his back with a leather cord.

Every inch of the stock was carved until the etchings were halfway towards being a book. Pictures and words and marks that not even Lanyard understood. An iron base-plate was a later addition, fastened on with bolts, nails, and screws.

Both of the shotgun barrels were etched with words that went deep into the steel. Most of the script was filled with oil and dirt now, obscured or worn, but Lanyard knew enough of what they meant, enough to know that the gun was holy and very old.

What remained told the story of the bound man, of the Crossing, of promises made and things to come. These teachings were outlawed now, and the signs and marks brought death in all of the towns.

Lanyard Everett killed a Jesusman for this gun. One of the last. Bad luck had dogged him ever since, but he wouldn't lay down the brute of a shotgun...or perhaps it was bound to him now, forever his by blood and betrayal.

Still, a gun was a gun.

Barely surviving the crossing of the saltpan, he saw the Inland before him in all its sunburnt glory. Far ahead, a haze and maybe the shape of movement near that shimmer. Lanyard cursed his bleary eyes. He headed for what could be a mirage, praying for water, knowing what would happen if he was wrong.

Even here, at the edge of things, the maddest of the settlers kept their holdings miles back and on the other side of the Range. The moment he fell, he was done. His body might never be seen by human eyes, and the sun and moon would fight over his bones until they were splintered, buried in the Inland dust.

The front wheel of the skiff caught in a drift of powder, and Lanyard hauled it out and onto firm ground. Not for the first time, he considered abandoning the wind-car.

My luck, I'd die five miles on, and the winds would blow over my carcass just to mock me, he thought. Gritting his teeth, he plodded onwards.

The heat-haze turned into a soak, a patch of clay that ran with moisture. It had been freshly dug out, and a small group of people squatted by the waterhole, watching his approach.

Crooked folk, perhaps a dozen. Lanyard noticed their patched outfits, necklaces of finger-bones, vests of braided human hair. A bicycle lay sprawled and rusting on the ground nearby, and a pair of riding birds knelt by the soak, lapping at the trickle of water.

The crooked mobs ate man-flesh when they could get it, and Lanyard felt the weight of their stares. A woman spun a pair of clicker-sticks on a string. The birds ceased their guzzling, their legs unfolding to bring them up to their full height. Their bony crests brought them to almost ten feet tall.

"Man," one of the birds croaked. The other laughed at him, a sound that was somewhere between a kettle boiling dry and the hissing of a snake.

Eyeing the water, Lanyard stepped forward cautiously, leaving the skiff where it was. None of the crooked folk moved against him, yet, but he made note of the rusted gun leaning against a rock, of the crossbow made from truck springs and inner tubes resting across one man's lap. Homemade knives swung from every belt.

"It's ours," a man said, rising from his haunches and putting himself between Lanyard and the water. He was heavy with fat, patches of hair sticking out from a pate covered in scabs and scars. The grease-streaked remains of a suit jacket hung loose around his gut, the buttons long gone. He wore a kilt that might have once been sackcloth.

"A sip and I'll go," Lanyard croaked. The fat man shook his head. Lanyard noticed that the other crooked folk were circling around him, still keeping caution and distance, wary of the Jesus gun.

"Spent an hour digging that out," he told Lanyard. "I'm King Jollylot, and that water is on my land. Want a drink, you'll have to buy one."

Nodding once, Lanyard pointed to the skiff. Jollylot looked it over and shook his head.

"Buggy's so broken it's hardly worth fixing. How'd it get into such a state?"

"Ran into some bad people," Lanyard managed, and Jollylot smiled, showing a graveyard of teeth.

"That you did," the crooked man said. "Bad people everywhere these days. Gimme a look at the gun."

"No," Lanyard said.

"Seems to me you're carrying the kit of a Jesusman," Jollylot said. "Man carries that, makes you wonder how he came by it."

Keeping perfectly still, Lanyard sensed the crooked mob slowly pushing in on him, felt the moment just before the rush. He'd get one or two of them, sure, and this shabby pack of man-eaters knew that too. But numbers would always tell.

I was meant to die like this, Lanyard realised and held himself ready. For a moment, he considered jamming the god-cannon underneath his chin, evaporating his skull in a final act of defiance.

No.

In one movement, he slipped the leather cord over his shoulder and swung the shotgun up. Lanyard held the muzzle level with Jollylot's nose. Blinking into the double throat of the gun barrels, the big man stepped back, holding up his hands.

"Cut him up, Jol," the birdwoman cried. "Birds are hungry."

"Quiet," Jollylot said.

"Water," Lanyard demanded, the word cracked and desperate.

King Jollylot noticed the wavering of the shotgun, the way that Lanyard could barely stand. He scoffed, lowered his hands.

"You're dead already," he told Lanyard. "Take the trade, stranger, or Slopkettle here will whittle you up for the pot, one toe at a time. And we'll take your kit, anyways."

A whip of a girl crept forward, eyes mad and wide, tickling at the dozens of flensing knives that hung from her bandolier. A distraction. From the corner of his eye, Lanyard saw another cannibal, wrestling with the action of the pig-gun.

"You want this?" Lanyard said, and Jollylot nodded. Turning the gun over in his hands, he held it by the barrel and offered it to the crooked man. Jollylot bared his rot-tooth smile, and that was the moment Lanyard darted forward, swinging the gun like a club.

King Jollylot went down with his head stoved in, dying with a squeal and an almighty fart. Lanyard kept moving, clearing the body and splashing through the soak, dodging the beaks of the birds, driving them off with one round from the gun. The mob drew short as he broke through their closing circle, turning around to cover them all with the shooter.

"You're mine now," Lanyard Everett said. He fetched another shell from his pocket, quickly feeding it into the break action of the gun. Kneeling down in the mud, he scooped up a handful of the water, savouring that brackish muck. The outlaws watched him, sullen and fearful.

Then a wind began to blow, and he smiled.



Lanyard dreamt of the old man again. Perhaps the enemy was still close enough to touch his dreams. Perhaps he'd been out in the Waste for too long and had simply lost his mind.

In the dream he was younger, still the prentice of a man named Bauer. The grey traveller held court over their cookfire, and Lanyard looked down to see the jag of stone cradled in his hands,

the same one he'd driven into the face opposite him, many years and miles ago.

"Can't escape what you are," Bauer said, and then Lanyard murdered him again, like he always did. He pried the holy gun out of that dead grip.

Lanyard held the god-cannon for a moment and it felt cold and mean. Then terrible things came out of the darkness and into the light of the fire, monsters beyond measure, and he realised that a Jesusman's gun made little difference.

He died a hundred deaths before he woke.



Lanyard saw beyond their savage façade and knew that Jollylot's mob were scared and hungry. So he made their lives a misery. He handed out beatings and insults, taking the best of their food.

They needed a bossman, someone more terrifying and brutal than they were. Lanyard decided that he fit the bill.

This mob had just lost a clan war, and a squad of bailiffs out from Price had their trail, hounding the outlaws until they ran. They'd given up any claim on their old turf, and newer, stronger mobs had taken over. There was nowhere left for them to go.

King Jollylot had been licking his wounds out on the very edges of the Inland, contemplating a push across the saltpan when Lanyard found them. This mob was as dead and lost as Lanyard was. They had a greypot but nothing to put in it, a barrow full of animal skins and shovels, and not much else. Everything else had been tossed or burnt in a desperate gamble to travel light and fast.

His new tribe, loyal only so long as they feared him. Strength was the only law in these in-between places, and mercy was a concept that never left the town-walls. Those who survived out here had forgotten all but the cruel religion of Papa Lucy and the Boneman, and everything else was meat.

The first attack came in the small hours of that first morning. They sent a boy with a fuzz of beard, creeping towards the fire that Lanyard claimed for his own. The wretch pulled out a knife, a sharpened jag pried from a car, handle wrapped in a strip of canvas.

He only had a moment to learn that the new bossman slept lightly and moved as fast as a snake. Lanyard snatched the boy's ankle, pulling his feet out from under him. A moment of struggle ended when Lanyard wrestled the knife from his hands. Terror in his young eyes, wide with the knowledge that he was at his end. Kneeling down on the boy's chest, Lanyard opened his throat in one slice.

"Put this in your pot if you want to eat." He snarled, knowing that those feigning sleep around the fire were watching intently. Eyes downcast, Slopkettle bent to her work, her flensing knives dancing across the body of the lad who'd drawn the short straw.

Bone knives, finger-lengths of old steel. Junk. Lanyard handed the dead boy's knife to the flenser, and she found a place for it on her bandolier.

"You hoped to be running your knives all over me," Lanyard said. Slopkettle did not try to deny it.

Lanyard never knew the dead boy's name and didn't ask. In the grey of the pre-dawn, the riding birds hovered over the leftovers, gnawing on the bones and offal that Slopkettle tossed over her shoulder.

Breakfast came later. When the sun rose, the greypot bubbled over the coals, sending the smell of people-meat across their rude camp. As bossman, Lanyard was offered the first bowl of stew, but he declined, chewing on a heel of bread as the crooked folk quietly ate one of their own.

The mob suffered his rule in silence, and none rose to challenge him after that night. *That will come later*, Lanyard decided. *When they are stronger, they will turn on me.*

Mutch and Dogwyfe were the bird-riders. The pair were heart-bound, scarified and marked for life, the closest thing to marriage under the old laws of Cruik, by those who followed that bastardised rite of Papa Lucy. They both wore a motley of badly tanned animal skins, with the occasional pale or tattooed square marking a man-kill. Mutch was older than his bride, and his hair was starting to go thin on top, with grey streaks running through the tangle of his beard.

On the promise of a bird and safety with King Jollylot's mob, Dogwyfe had long ago used her braid to strangle her first husband in his sleep. Divorce was not an option for the heart-bound.

Their birds were named Gog and Magog, a pair that Mutch had raised from stolen eggs. Lanyard had always thought the giant birds were equal parts hungry and stupid, there was no denying their usefulness. Their feathers formed a dusty coat of grey and brown, necks curving up to a honking crested head, scanning about with a permanent beady eyed stare. A bird was just as likely to tear out a man's throat as listen to him, and any bird rider worth his salt wore a map of many scars.

While these two birds would never amount to much on the racing circuits of Rosenthall and Langenfell, Mutch did a reasonable job of breaking them in. He had repurposed a lot of scrap and rubbish, using it to craft harnesses and tack for their birds. It was ugly but functional, much like the bird master himself.

They would bear riders, obey most commands, and, most importantly, would go on the attack when prodded. They could disembowel an enemy with their talons and their beaks could take off a man's hand.

Dogwyfe taught Magog a few words, mostly profanities or the names of people who were now dead. Sometimes, Magog would hum to herself, the words of some nursery rhyme slipping from her beak, and Lanyard could picture the bird's mistress crooning

over it as a hatchling. Dogwyfe held more love for her bird than for her man, and Lanyard marked this well.

Gog was the male of the pair and a much larger riding bird, Mutch's steed and a brute, who never took to the man-tongue. He understood the threats of his master well enough though, and his crest and neck were scarred from whip and knout.

Lanyard held a parley with the bird-riders. He offered them a third-share of any loot found by the mob, double what Jollylot had promised them. He needed the birds and they knew it. The deal was acceptable and a trade-stone from Jollylot's kit was brought out, kissed by the three of them to seal the trade.

"We'll all end up as rich as Neville, you'll see," and this brought Lanyard the smiles. *Those two were the only true threat here*, Lanyard thought and knew he would sleep safer that night.

Two birds, a bicycle, and a handful of savages as likely to kill him as anyone else. Lanyard knew he had enough to make a beginning.

At the edge of the Inland the pickings were lean. Badlands for miles in every direction, with little to see but red dust and flies, but even here a clever pair of hands could survive. Under his direction the mob gathered and laid away a store of bush tucker, grubs and roots, and bitter seeds to grind into flour for damper. The cannibals were slow students at foraging, better at stealing food than finding it. Lanyard persisted, beating those who worked too slowly or who came back to camp with too little food to show for their time.

If I hadn't come along, you lot would have eaten each other. One more month, there'd have been nothing but bones around a waterhole, Lanyard thought, stowing waterskins and sacks of provisions into the skiff. His ribs no longer showed and he felt strong enough to walk for miles.

"Enough hiding," Lanyard declared over supper that night. "We've enough food to do what needs doing."

He thought of the saltpan to the west, of his sworn enemy on the far side. He could lead this mob there, with the birds at the

forefront, the rest all howling and rushing in with their crude weapons. He knew he could easily throw these people into a certain death. Their sacrifice might give him the grace to do what Bauer had taught him, in that place where the veil between worlds was thin, where the true monsters had stepped through.

It was his sworn duty, and now he had the guns that he'd prayed for, the means to go west and put things right.

You'll fail, he told himself. You'll walk back into their lair, and they'll kill you, oh so slowly.

"We go east," Lanyard said after a long moment, a stone twisting in his gut. "I'm taking back what Jollylot let slip through his fingers. We go roving."



They prowled the tradeways of the Inland, preying on travellers, raiding outposts and holdings. Bailiffs were sent to hunt down Lanyard's mob, first from Price and then the high walls of Quarterbrook spewed out a posse of coin-hunters, a mixed group of birdmen and bikers.

Lanyard had travelled these parts years ago and still remembered the hiding places his master knew, blind gullies and ruins that few had seen, ways of fused stone from Before that wouldn't hold a trail.

Each time he gave the hunters the slip and watched as the townsmen tore around the plains, their machines belching smoke and whining in the distance.

Travel became dangerous in the area, and the few who escaped the cookpot told of the growing gang led by a stranger who wasn't crooked at all. One rumour had it that the leader was actually a Jesusman, others that this Lanyard Everett had killed one and eaten his heart to gain that forbidden knowledge.

Other crooked mobs were being attacked by this new group, and the turf war between the outlaws was vicious enough to be noted

with some worry by those huddled behind town walls. They could see the muzzle flashes in the distance, watch furrows of dust flying about as the cannibals warred amongst themselves.

Mere months after arriving from the west, Lanyard Everett looked upon a scene of destruction and nodded with some satisfaction. His mob now numbered over sixty strong, and old enemies of King Jollylot joined up for plunder or fled elsewhere for easier pickings.

The Inland was his.

Three motorcycles cobbled together from parts found in the bleed-throughs. A full brace of bird-riders and enough guns to give anyone pause. A skirmish with a lost posse of lawmen netted them a working buggy, which Lanyard claimed as his own, instantly falling in love with the wheels and the snarl of its engine.

One day his mob ransacked a compound, tearing down the tin barricade with chains and hooks. Pouring into the breach, the outlaws fell on the handful of farmers who had huddled together for protection. The sounds of slaughter were heard within, the only rebuttal to the attack was the pop of a pistol, and that soon ceased.

Lanyard guided the buggy through the carnage, past the stripping of sheep and pig carcasses, and did not blink at the horrors that his people inflicted on the farmers. *Life is hard and these people were fools to settle here*, he reasoned, watching Slopkettle perform her craft on the man she'd marked for the greypot.

If not us, somebody else would have done this.

Every swaggering step, every bullet fired, every inch of steel he had driven through other men, all of it based on that old comfortable lie. Still, a river of ghosts and blood could not lift him away from his biggest failure. He'd been given meaning once, but he'd lost his way. Underneath everything, he was a coward and a fraud. Worse than a fraud.

An apostate.

He climbed out of the buggy, poking through the buildings for plunder, gun at the ready in case a farmer lay in wait. Lanyard spotted an enamel bathtub in a hut, chipped and rusty, a bed of coals banked in the dirt underneath it.

It was full of warm water, and he picked up the bar of soap, pondering it for a long moment. Before the mob had arrived with guns and slaughter, someone had drawn a bath, someone who even now was likely dead or dying.

“No point wasting this,” he said, peeling off his boots. Hollering out of the door, Lanyard called over Mutch. The birdman trotted over on Gog, the bird’s face and beak splattered with blood.

“Don’t give me that look,” he said, noting Mutch’s frustration at missing out on the looting. “You’ll get your bloody share. Watch this door, I’m having a bath now.”

Lanyard stripped off his clothes, easing into the warm water with a gasp of delight. In seconds a ring of filth appeared around the water’s edge. Ignoring the distant screams, he scrubbed away what felt like years’ worth of dirt and grime.

Lanyard had a tattoo on his chest, the washed out image of a bleeding man bound tightly to a tree, arms outstretched. The man’s hands were clenched into fists but for the index fingers, pointing left and right. BEFORE and NOW were writ under each hand.

The Jesus.

He was always careful to hide this tattoo. It marked him as a Jesusman, and even the lowest crooked man would observe the law and enforce the old pogrom. Nothing but death awaited him should this secret be discovered. Once it was a noble calling, but now, the Jesusmen were outlaws, sorcerers, and heretics.

As far as Lanyard Everett knew, he was the last one.