

Jack

Now that things have gone the way they have, everyone's got a story. Everyone'll tell you how they or their friend, which you can see in the way they say it they want you to think means them, knew Jack. Maybe even how they helped him, how they were part of his schemes. Mostly though of course they know that's too much and it'll just be how they or their friend was there one time and saw him running over the roofs, money flying from his swag-bags, militia trying and failing to track him down below. That sort of thing. My mate saw Jack Half-a-Prayer once, they'll say, just for a moment. As if they're being modest.

It's supposed to be respect. They reckon they're showing their respect, with everything that's happened. They ain't, of course. They're like dogs on his corpse and they disgust me.

I tell you that so you know where I'm coming from. Because I know how what I'm about to say might sound. I want you to know where I'm coming from when I tell you that I did know Jack. I did.

I worked with him.

I was lowly, don't get me wrong, but I was part of the whole thing. And please don't think I'm talking myself up, but I swear to you I ain't being arrogant. I'm nothing important, but the work I did, in a little way, was crucial to him. That's all I'm saying. So. So you can understand that I was pretty interested when I heard we'd got our hands on the man who sold Jack out. That would be one way of putting it. That would be mild. I made it my business to meet him, let's put it that way.

I remember the first time I heard what Jack was up to, after he escaped. He was daring enough that he got noticed. Did you hear about that Remade done that robbery? someone said to me in a pub. I was careful, couldn't show any reaction.

I'd felt something when I met Jack, you know? I respected him. He wasn't boastful, but he had a fire in him. Even so, I couldn't be sure he'd come to anything.

That first job, he got away with hundreds of nobles and gave it away on the streets. He scored himself the love of the Dog Fenn poor that way. That was what had people all excited, told them he was something else than your average gangster. He weren't the first to do that, but he was one of few.

What got me wasn't so much what he did with the money as where he stole it from. It was a government office. Where they store taxes.

Everyone knows what the security on those places is like. And I knew that there was no way he'd have done something like that without it being a screw you. He was making a point, and my good bloody gods but I admired that.

It was then, in that pub, when I realised what he'd done, how he must have made that night-raid work, how he must have climbed and crept and fought his way in, with his new body, how he must have been able to vanish, weighed down with specie, that I realised he was something. That was when I knew that Jack Half-a-Prayer was no ordinary Remade, and no ordinary renegade.

Not many people see the Remade like I do, or like Jack did.

You know it's true. To most of you they're to be ignored or used. If you really notice them you wish you hadn't. It wasn't like that for Jack, and not just because he was Remade. I bet — I know — that Jack used to notice them, see them clear, before anything was done to him. And that's the same for me.

People walk along and see nothing but trash, Remade trash with bodies all wrong, shat out by the punishment factories. Well, I don't want to be too sentimental about it but I've no doubts at all that Jack'd have seen this woman — whose hands yes were gone and been replaced with little birds' wings — and he'd have seen an old man, not the sexless thing he'd been made into, and a young lad with eyes gone and in their place an array of dark glass and pipework and lights and the boy stumbling trying to see in ways he weren't born to but still a boy. Jack'd see people changed with engines in steam, and oily gears, and the parts of animals, and their innards or their skin altered with hexes, and all those things, but he'd have seen them under the punishment.

People get broken when they get Remade. I've seen it so many times. Suddenly, take a wrong turn by the law and it ain't just the physical punishment, it ain't just the new limbs or metal or the change in the body, it's that they wake up and they're Remade, the same as they spat on or ignored for years. They know they're nothing.

Jack, when it was done to him, never thought he was nothing. He'd never thought any of them were.

There was this one time. A foundry in Smog Bend, and there was a man there, some middling supervisor — this was years after Jack got free, and I only heard all this — who was causing trouble. Informing on guilders trying to recruit. There was gangs following organisers home, and scaring them so they'd not come back, or maybe retiring them permanently.

I'm not clear on the details. But the point is what Jack done.

One day the workers troop in and they take their places by the gears, but there's no klaxon. And they're waiting, but nothing happens. Now they're getting wary, they're getting very antsy. They know it's that overseer who's due in that day, so they're nervous, they ain't talking much, but they go looking. And there at the foot of the steps up to the office, there's an arrow put together out of tools. On the floor, pointing up.

So they creep up. And on the landing there's another. And there's a whole gang of men now, and they're following these arrows, soldered to the banisters, up on the walkway, trooping round the factory, until pretty much the whole workforce is up there, and they come to the end of the gangway, and there dangling is that supervisor.

He's unconscious. His mouth's all scabbed. It's sewn up, with wire.

People know right then and there what's happened, but when the man wakes up and gets unstitched he starts raving, describing the man who done this to him, and then it's certain.

That man was lucky he didn't get killed, is my thinking. There was no more trouble there for a while, I hear. That changed things. I think they called that one Jack's Whispering Stitch. It's things like that make you see why people respected Jack Half-a-Prayer. Loved him.

This is the greatest city in the world. You hear that all the time, because it's true. But it's sort of an untrue truth, for a lot of us.

I don't know where you live. If it's Dog Fenn, then knowing that Parliament's a building like nothing else, or that we've riches in the coffers that would make the rest of the world jealous, or that the scholars of New Crobuzon could outthink the bloody gods — knowing all of that doesn't do so much. You still live in Dog Fenn, or Badside, or what have you.

But when Jack ran, the city was the greatest for Badside too.

You could see it — I could see it — in the way people walked, after Jack'd done something. I don't know how it was uptown in The Crow — I expect the well-dressed there sneered, or made a show of not caring — but where the houses lean in to each other, where the bricks shed pointing, in the shadow of the glass cactus ghetto, people walked tall. Jack was everyone's: men and women, cactus-people, khepri and vod. The wyrmen made up songs about him. The same people that would spit in the face of a Remade beggar cheered this fReemade. In Salacus Fields they'd toast Jack by name.

I wouldn't do that, of course — not that I didn't want to, but you can imagine, in the business I'm in, I have to be careful. I'm involved, so of course I can't be seen to be. In my head, though, I'd raise a glass with them. To Jack, I'd think.

In the short time I worked with Jack I never used his given name, nor he mine. It's in the nature of the work, obviously, that you don't use real names. But then, what could be more his name than Jack? Remaking is the ruin of most, but it was the making of him.

It's hard to make sense of Remaking, of its logic. Sometimes the magisters pass down sentences that you can understand. One man kills another with a blade, take his killing arm and replace it, suture a motorknife in its place, tube him up with the boiler to run it. The lesson's obvious. Or those who are made heavy engines for industry, man-cranes and woman-cabs and boy-machines. It's easy to see why the city would want them.

But I can't explain to you the woman given a ruff of peacock feathers, or the young lad with iron spiderlimbs out his back, or those with too many eyes or engines that make them burn from the inside out, or legs made wooden toys or replaced with the arms of apes so they walk with mad monkey grace. The Remakings that make them stronger, or weaker, or more or less vulnerable, Remakings almost unnoticed, and those that make them impossible to understand.

Sometimes you'll see a xenian Remade, but it's rare. It's hard to work with cactacae vegetable flesh, or the physiognomy of vodyanoi, I'm told, and there are other reasons for the other races, so for the most part magisters'll sentence them to other things. For the most part, it's humans who are Remade, for cruelty or expediency, or opaque logics.

There ain't no one the city hates so much as the renegades, the fReemade. Turning your Remaking on the Remakers, that ain't how it's supposed to be.

Sometimes, you know, I'll admit it's frustrating, to have to keep all my thoughts to myself. Especially during the day, while I'm in at work. Don't get me wrong, I like my colleagues, some of them, they're good lads, and for all I know some would even agree with the way I look at things, but you just can't risk it. You have to know when to keep secrets.

So I stay well out of it. I don't talk politics, I just do what I'm told, stay well out of any discussions.

When you see, when you see how people looked up after Jack had struck, though, my gods. How could anyone not be for that? People needed him, they needed that, that release. That hope.

I couldn't believe it when I heard my crew'd got hold of the man who got Jack caught. I had to keep myself under control at work, not let anyone see I was excited. I was waiting to get my hands on the rat.

For a lot of people, the most exciting, the best thing he ever done was an escape. Not his first escape — that I can't help thinking would have been some tawdry affair. Impressive for all that but a desperate bloody crawl, his new Remaking still atwilt, all grimy, all stained by the grease of his shackles, and stonedust, lying in some haul of rubbish where the dogs couldn't smell him, till he was strong enough to run. That, I think, would have been as messy as any other birth. No, the escape I'm talking about was the

one they call Jack's Steeplechase.

Even now people can't decide whether it was deliberate or not, whether he let it out to the militia that he'd be there, that he'd be stealing weapons from one of their caches, in the city centre, in Perdido Street Station, just so they'd come for him and he could show he could get away from them. Me I don't think he'd be so cocky. I think he just got caught, but being who he was, being what he was, he made the best of it.

He ran for a more than an hour. You can go a long way in that time, over the roofs of New Crobuzon. Within fifteen minutes news had spread and I don't know how, I don't know how it is that the news of him running moved faster than he did himself, but that's the way of these things. Soon enough, as Jack Half-a-Prayer tore into view over some street, he'd find people waiting, and as far as they dared, cheering.

No I never saw it but you hear about it, all the time. People could see him on the roofs, waving his Remaking so people would know it was him. Behind him squads of militia. Falling, chasing, falling, more emerging from attics, from stairways, from all over, wearing their masks, pointing weapons, and firing them, and Jack leaping over chimneypots and launching himself from dormers, leaving them behind. Some people said he was laughing.

Bright daylight — militia visible in uniform. That's a thing in itself. He went by the Ribs, they say, even scrambled up the bones, though of course I don't believe that. But wherever he went, I see him sure-footed on the slates, a famous outlaw man by then, and behind him a wake of clodhopping militia, and streaks in the sky as they fire. Bullets, chakris from rivebows, spasms of black energy, ripples from the thaumaturges. Jack avoided them all. When he shot back, with the weapons he'd just taken, experimental things, he took men down.

Airships came for him, and informer wyrmen: the skies were all fussy with them. But after an hour of that chase, Jack Half-a-Prayer was gone. Bloody magnificent.

The man who sold out Half-a-Prayer was nothing. You wonder, don't you, who could bring down the greatest bandit New Crobuzon's ever seen. A nonentity. A no one.

It was just luck, that was all. That was what took Jack Half-a-Prayer. He weren't outsmarted, he didn't get sloppy, he didn't try to go too far, nothing like that. He got unlucky. Some pissant little punk who knows someone who knows someone who knows one of Jack's informers, some young turd doing a job, whispered messages in pubs, passing on a package, I don't sodding know, some nothing at all, who puts it together, and not because he's smart but because he gets lucky, where Jack's hiding. I truly don't know. But I've seen him, and he's nothing.

I didn't know why he gave up Half-a-Prayer. I wondered if he thought he'd be rewarded. Turned out he'd have said nothing if they hadn't hauled him in. He'd been caught for his own little crimes — his own paltry, petty, pathetic misdemeanours — and he thought if he delivered Jack, the government would look after him, forgive him and keep him safe. Idiot man.

He thought the government would keep him out of our hands.

Most of what Jack did weren't so obviously dramatic, of course. It was the smaller, savager stuff that had them out for him.

It ain't that they were happy about the big swaggering thievery, the showings-off. But that ain't what made Jack a thorn they had to pluck.

No one knows how he got the information he did, but Jack could smell militia like a hound. No matter how good their cover. Informers, colonel-informers, intriguists, provocateurs, insiders and officers — Jack could find them, no matter that their neighbours had always thought they were just retired clerks, or artists, or tramps, or perfume-sellers, or loners.

They'd be found like the victims of any other killings, their bodies dumped, under mounds of old things. But there would always be documents, somewhere close by or left for journalists or the community, that proved the victim was militia. Awful wounds on both sides of their necks, as if ragged, serrated scissors had half closed on them. Jack the Remade, using what the city gave him.

That wasn't alright. It wasn't alright for Jack to think he could touch the functionaries of the government. I know that's how they thought. That's when it became imperative that they bring him down. But with all their efforts, all the money they were ready to spend on bribes, all the thaumaturgy they dedicated — the channellers and scanners, the empathy-engines turned up full — in the end they got lucky, and picked up some blabbering terrified useless little turd.

I made sure it was me first went in to greet him, Jack's snitch, after we got hold of him. I made sure we had some time alone. It weren't pretty, but I stand by it.

It's been a long time since I been in this secret political life. And there are conventions that are important. One is, don't get personal. When I apply the pressures I need to, when I do what needs to be done, it's a job that needs doing, no matter how unpleasant. If you're fighting the sickness of society, and make no mistake that's what we do, then sometimes you have to use harsh methods, but you don't relish it, or it'll taint you. You do what has to be done.

Most of the time.

This was different.

This little fucker was mine.

It's a windowless room, of course. He was in a chair, locked in place. His arms, his legs. He was shaking so hard, I could hear the chair rattling, though it was bolted down. An iron band filled his mouth, so all he could do was whine.

I came in. I was carrying tools. I made sure he saw them: the pliers, the solder, the blades. I made him shake even more, without touching him. Tears came out of him so fast. I waited.

"Shhh," I said at last, through his noise. "Shhh. I have to tell you something."

I was shaking my head: No, hush. I felt cruelty in me. Hush, I said, hush. And when he quieted, I spoke again.

"I made sure I got to take care of you," I said. "In a minute my boss'll be coming in to help us, and he knows what we're going to do. But I wanted you to know that I made sure I got this job, because ... well, I think you know a friend of mine."

When I said Jack's name the traitor started mewling and making all this noise again, he was so scared, so I had to wait another minute or two, before I whispered to him, "So this... is for Jack."

The leader of my crew came in then, and another couple of lads, and we looked at each other, and we began. And it weren't pretty. And I ain't supposed to glory in that, but just this once, just this once. This was the fucker sold out Jack.

I knew it couldn't last, Jack's reign (because that's what it was). I couldn't not know it, and it made me sad. But you couldn't fight the inevitability.

When I heard they'd caught him, I had to fight, to work hard, not to let myself show sad. Like I said, I was only a small part of the operation — I'm not a big player, and that's more than fine by me, I don't want to run this dangerous business. I'd rather be told what to do. But I'd taken such pride in it, you know? Hearing of what he was doing, and always knowing that I was connected. There are always networks, behind every so-called loner, and being part of one ... well, it meant something. I'll always carry that.

But I knew it would end, so I tried to steel myself. And I never went to see him, when they stretched him out in BilSantum Plaza, Remade again, his first Remaking gone, knowing he'd be dead before the wound healed. I wonder how many in that crowd were known to him. I heard that it went a bit wrong for the Mayor, that the crowds never jeered or threw muck at the stocks. People loved Jack. Why would I want to see him like that? I know how I want to remember him.

So the snitch, the tattletale, was in my hands, and I made sure he felt it. There are techniques — you have to know ways to stop pain, and I know them, and I withheld them.

I left that fucker red and dripping. He'll never be the fucking same. For Jack, I thought. Try telling tales again. I did something to his tongue.

As I did it, as I dug my fingers in him, I kept thinking of when I met Half-a-Prayer.

People need something, you know, to escape. They do. They need something to make them feel free. It's good for us, it's necessary. The city needs it. But there comes a time when it has to end.

Jack was going too far. And there'll be others, I know that too.

I knew it was necessary. He really had gone too far. But I can't talk to my workmates about this, like I say, because I don't think they think this stuff through. They just always went on about what a bastard Half-a-Prayer was, and how he'd get his, and blah blah. I don't think they realise that the city needs people like him, that he's good for all of us.

People have their heroes, and gods know I don't grudge them that. It ain't a surprise. They — the people I mean — don't know how hard it is to keep a city, a state like New Crobuzon going, why some of the things that get done get done. It can be harsh. If Jack gives people a reason to keep going, they should have it. So long as it don't get out of hand, which, of course, it always does. That's why he had to be stopped. But there'll be another one, with more big shows, more grand gestures and thefts and the like. People need that.

I'm grateful to Jack and his kin. If they weren't there, and this is what I think my mates don't understand, if they weren't there, and all them angry people in Dog Fenn and Kelltree and Smog Bend had no one to cheer on, gods know what they'd do. That would be much worse.

So here's a cheer for Jack Half-a-Prayer. As a spectator who enjoyed his shows, and a loyal and loving servant of this city, I toast him in his death as I did in his life. And I exacted a little revenge for him, even though I know it was past time for him to stop.

It was a basic Remaking. We took that little traitor's legs and put engines in their place, but I made sure to do a little extra. Reshaped a suckered filament from some fish-thing's carcasse, put it in place of his tongue. It'll fight him. Can't kill him, but his tongue'll hate him till the day he's gone. That was my present to Jack.

That's what I did at work today.

When I met Jack he wasn't Jack yet. My boss, he's the master craftsman. Bio-thaumaturge. It was him did the clayflesh, who went to work. It was him took off Jack's right hand.

But it was me held the claw. That great, outsized mantis limb, hinging chitin blades the length of my forearm. I held it on Jack's stump while my boss made the flesh and scute run together and alloy. It was him Remade Jack, but I was part of it, and that'll always make me proud.

I was thinking about names as I knocked off today, as I walked home through this city it's my honour to protect. I know there are plenty who don't understand what has to be done sometimes, and if the name of Jack Half-a-Prayer gives them pleasure, I don't grudge them that.

Jack, the man I made. It's his name, now, whatever he was called before.

Like I say, in the short time I knew him, before I made him and after, I never called Jack by his name nor he me. We couldn't, not in this line of work. Whenever I spoke to Jack, I called him "Prisoner," and answering, he called me "Sir."