CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man’s Money

The dead were easier to rob than the living. They never changed their passwords, never checked their statements, and—most importantly—never called the police.

Jack O’Brian sat cross-legged on the floor of an apartment he no longer had the right to occupy, watching strangers donate money to bury a man he had never met.

The man’s name was Daniel Mercer. Fifty-eight years old. Two daughters. A photograph in which he wore a fishing hat and held up a trout with the solemn pride of someone presenting evidence at trial. Daniel had died on Tuesday. By Thursday morning, Jack had built him a second funeral.

The photograph filled the cracked screen of Jack’s laptop. Beneath it, a paragraph described Daniel as “the kind of man who would give you his last dollar.” Jack had written that part himself. It was the only sentence on the page he believed.

A green number climbed in the corner of the screen.

Three hundred and twelve dollars.

Three hundred and forty.

Jack scratched at the stubble along his jaw and refreshed the page. The apartment around him smelled of old coffee, wet laundry and the electrical heat of appliances that had been running too long. A black garbage bag had been taped over the bedroom window after Jack sold the curtains. The living-room lightbulb had burned out weeks ago. He had taken the bulb from the hallway fixture, but the building superintendent had taken it back.

His phone vibrated beside him.

WHO ARE YOU?

The message came from a woman named Elise Mercer. Her profile photograph showed Daniel with his arm around her shoulders.

Jack looked from the photograph to the money and considered ignoring her.

Instead he typed: Friend from the warehouse. Your dad helped me when nobody else would.

The three dots appeared immediately.

He never worked at a warehouse.

Jack smiled without humour. Everybody worked somewhere if you said it confidently enough.

Another message arrived.

Please take this down. We already paid for the funeral.

Jack's thumb hovered over the keyboard. For half a second—not long enough to qualify as guilt—he imagined the woman sitting at a kitchen table with sympathy cards spread around her. He imagined her reading the lies he had written about her father. Then the donation counter jumped to four hundred and six dollars.

Jack closed the message.

Someone hammered on the apartment door.

Not knocked. Hammered.

"Mr. O'Brian." The voice belonged to Heller, the landlord. "Open the door."

Jack lowered the laptop screen and scanned the room. There was no room left to hide anything because he had already sold most of what could conceal it.

"I'm on a work call," Jack shouted.

"No, you aren't."

"How would you know?"

"Because you don't have a job."

Jack stood. At five-foot-eight he was not particularly short, but months of bad sleep and worse meals had folded him inward. His hoodie hung from narrow shoulders. His hair had grown past the point where neglect could be mistaken for style and lay in greasy, uneven clumps across his forehead.

He opened the door three inches, keeping his boot behind it.

Mr. Heller stood in the hallway with the superintendent, a locksmith and a thick envelope. None of them looked surprised to see Jack still inside. The locksmith looked disappointed, as though Jack's presence made the morning less efficient.

"You said noon," Jack said.

Heller checked his watch. "It's twelve fourteen."

"Then I'm only fourteen minutes homeless."

"You've been four months homeless. You've just been doing it in my building."

Jack gave him a wounded expression that had worked on better people. "The transfer is processing."

"There is no transfer."

"Bank's slow."

"Your bank closed the account."

That irritated Jack—not because it was false, but because Heller knew it.

The landlord pushed the envelope through the gap. Jack did not take it. Papers were only dangerous if you touched them.

"You have ten minutes to collect personal belongings," Heller said. "The rest stays until we determine what belongs to the unit."

"Everything in there belongs to me."

The superintendent glanced past Jack at the empty wall where the television mount remained. "Even the refrigerator?"

Jack looked back. The small refrigerator was gone. Its rectangular absence was cleaner than the rest of the kitchen.

"It broke."

"You sold it."

"I prevented it from becoming landfill."

Heller's face hardened. "Your father warned me you could turn any theft into a public service."

The words struck harder than Jack expected. He covered it with a laugh.

"My father warned everybody about me. It was his favourite hobby."

"Your father paid your rent three times."

"And made sure everyone knew it."

"He asked me not to tell you."

Jack's answer came too quickly. "Then you just betrayed a dead man."

For the first time that morning, Heller looked tired rather than angry. "Take your things, Jack."

The door closed. Jack remained behind it with his hand around the knob.

For several seconds, the apartment was perfectly still. Then the phone on the floor vibrated again.

Elise Mercer had sent another message.

Whatever you collected, please give it to the shelter Dad volunteered at. I won't report you if you do that.

Jack read it twice.

"Generous family," he muttered.

He transferred the money out of the fundraiser.

Nine minutes later, Jack stepped into the hallway carrying a backpack, a garbage bag of clothes and the laptop under his arm. The locksmith moved around him. The superintendent entered the apartment and swore when he saw the refrigerator space.

Heller held out his hand. "Keys."

Jack dropped one key into his palm.

"The other one."

"Lost it."

At the bottom of the stairs, the garbage bag split.

Everything Jack still owned spilled across the lobby: two shirts, one sock, a phone charger, a half-empty bottle of whiskey, a paperback with its cover missing, and a small black box that struck the tile and opened.

A tarnished medal rolled out.

It was not a religious medal, although people always assumed it was. One side showed a thin ring broken in four places. The other carried markings Jack had never been able to read. His father had worn it beneath his shirt for as long as Jack could remember. After the funeral, it had been the only thing Jack took from the house that had not been worth selling.

A man entering the building crouched to help gather the clothes.

"Rough day?" the stranger asked.

"Best one this week."

The man handed Jack the medal. "This looks important."

"It isn't."

The stranger helped force everything into the torn bag, then held the lobby door while Jack carried it outside. Rain had begun—not cinematic rain, not the kind that cleans a city, just cold needling rain that found the space between collar and neck.

"Good luck," the stranger said.

Jack thanked him.

Half a block later, Jack opened the wallet he had taken from the man's coat while they were gathering the clothes.

There were forty-three dollars inside and a photograph of two children. Jack removed the cash, dropped the wallet into a mailbox and kept walking.

By late afternoon, the money from Daniel Mercer's second funeral had paid part of an old debt, bought Jack a sandwich and secured him three nights in a room above a bar—until the payment failed and the owner threw his backpack onto the sidewalk.

Night arrived early beneath the rain clouds.



Jack stood under the awning of a closed pharmacy with the torn garbage bag at his feet. His phone battery showed one percent. His clothes were wet. The laptop would not turn on. Across the street, people passed through the bright windows of a restaurant, leaning toward one another over plates Jack could not afford.

He searched his contacts for someone who might still answer.

Every name came with a reason they would not.

There were people Jack had borrowed from, people he had lied to, people whose couches he had slept on until money disappeared. There were employers he had blamed, friends he had betrayed and women who had learned that every apology from Jack O'Brian contained an invoice.

Near the top were six unread messages from Malcolm, who ran the crew Jack once called friends and insisted everyone call him Rook. Jack had planned their scams, built their false identities and washed their money. Then he had skimmed the gang's emergency fund and disappeared. The newest message contained an address and a time.

MIDNIGHT. BRING WHAT YOU TOOK. COME ALONE.

At the bottom of the list was a contact he had never deleted.

DAD.

The number had been disconnected for two years.

Jack stared until the screen went black.

He remembered his father standing in the kitchen during their final argument, broad-shouldered and motionless, speaking in the low controlled voice Jack hated most.

When you have nowhere left to go, tell the truth.

Jack had laughed at him then.

Now he looked down at the medal in his palm. Rain gathered inside the broken ring etched into its surface.

"Fine," Jack said. "Let's talk."

The cemetery was forty minutes away on foot.

Jack lifted his bag and started walking. He had one person left to blame.

CHAPTER TWO

The Grave

The cemetery gate had been locked for six hours, which Jack considered less a rule than a lack of imagination.

Rain shone on the iron fence. Beyond it, stones leaned like crooked teeth. One security lamp lit the caretaker's office and made everything else look darker.

Jack set down his torn garbage bag and tested the chain.

"Visiting hours. Apparently grief keeps business hours."

The padlock was new. The chain was not.

He worked his stolen apartment key between two links and twisted until one slipped over the gatepost. The lock stayed closed; the chain remained technically unbroken. Evidence, Jack decided, that no crime had occurred.

He pushed through and left the chain hanging.

The path climbed between stones and weathered angels. Water streamed from their empty eyes. Jack lowered his head. The carved faces seemed to follow him.

Grady lay in the oldest section. Jack had come once behind a coffin and once drunk enough to believe he had something worth saying.

That visit had ended at the wrong grave. Tonight, he checked the names.

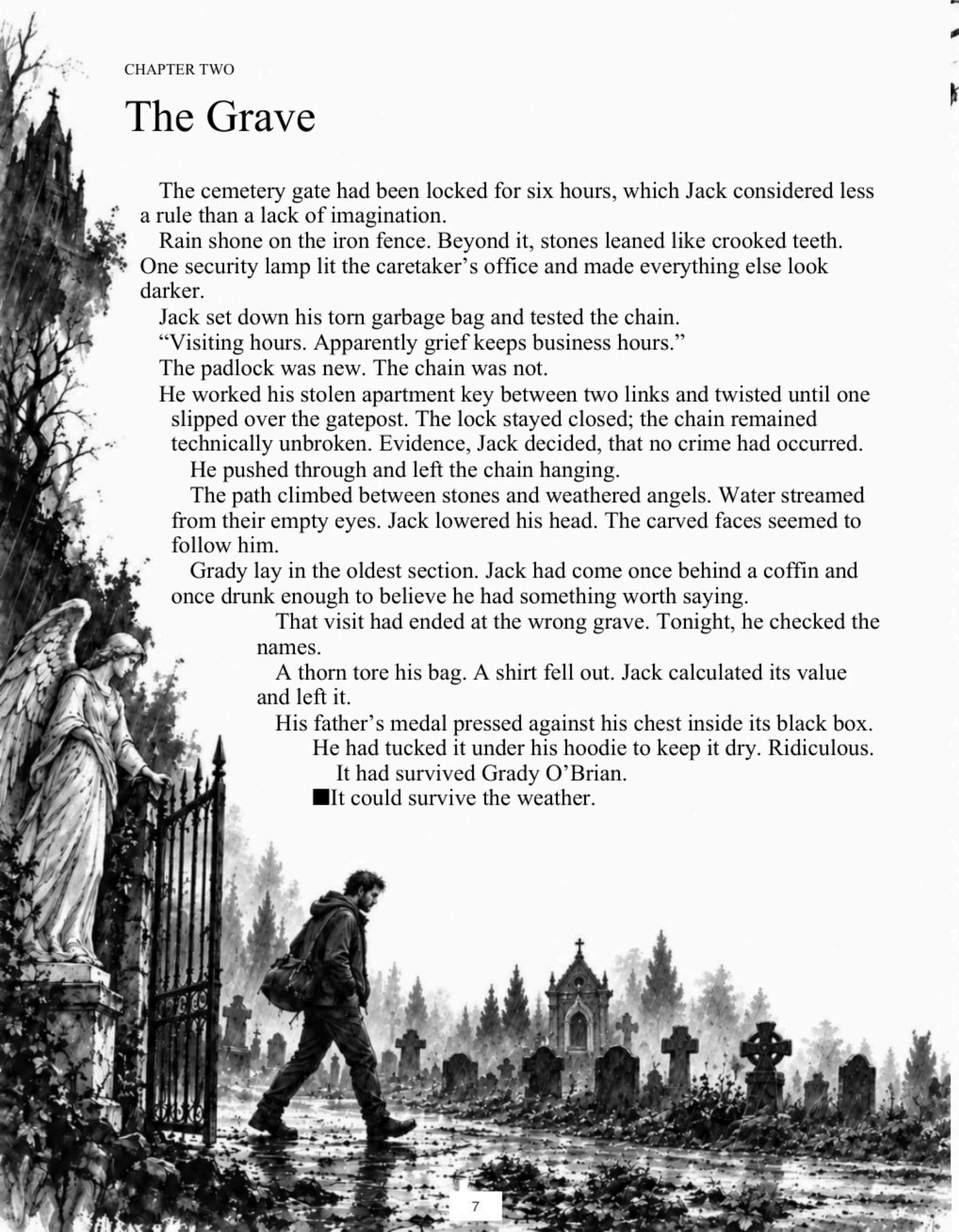
A thorn tore his bag. A shirt fell out. Jack calculated its value and left it.

His father's medal pressed against his chest inside its black box.

He had tucked it under his hoodie to keep it dry. Ridiculous.

It had survived Grady O'Brian.

■It could survive the weather.



Beside a flower-covered stone lay a child's yellow raincoat its hood filling with water. He looked away. His sister had called after the funeral, asking him home until They knew what to do with the house. Jack had asked whether Grady's tools had been appraised. She had not called again. His mother was dead. His uncles had blocked him. A cousin changed her number after he used her address on a loan application. Everyone else learned to stop answering and keep valuables away from the door. He had called that abandonment. Tonight it felt like arithmetic. The grave stood beneath a cedar. GRADY O'BRIAN. No angel, cross or comforting sentence. Grady had chosen the plain stone after the doctors stopped saying treatment. Even his grave looked prepared. "Well," Jack said. "You were right." Too quiet. He tried again. "You were right. Is that what you wanted?" Only rain answered. He dropped the bag. Whiskey bottle struck laptop. "You said I'd run out of people. Congratulations." The cedar stirred. Jack waited. Grady had been good at waiting. He never shouted back, only watched until Jack's anger exhausted itself and left the truth standing there. You took money from your mother's account. I borrowed it. You signed her name. She would have said yes. Then why didn't you ask?

Because you would've convinced her to say no. Jack had been nineteen. Grady's disappointment had already felt like a courtroom. Another memory: bills in neat stacks, Jack demanding rent money. Grady refusing, then asking what he had sold this time.

He had paid the landlord later. Three times, according to Heller. Quietly. Jack kicked the grave. Pain shot through his shoe. "That doesn't make you a saint." The box beneath his hoodie shifted. He opened it in the rain. The tarnished medal's broken ring caught the distant security light.



"Why did you wear this?" He raised it between two fingers. "Four chances? Four mistakes? Was one of them me?"

As it turned, the markings resembled tiny figures pressed together: arms, shoulders, open mouths. He blinked. Scratches again.

He closed his fist. "You could have helped me." Even Jack heard that lie. He tried a smaller one.

"You could have helped me better." More reasonable. "You could have told me about

the rent. Said you were sorry once. Been my father instead of my judge."

Thunder travelled beneath the ground. Mud trembled around the grave. Rain, he told himself.

Saturated soil. An unstable hill. There were explanations if you chose quickly enough. The medal warmed. Jack opened his hand. Pale light traced the broken ring, stopping at each fracture. Too faint to light the grave. Too bright to mistake for a reflection.

Then it vanished. "No." The word came from somewhere younger than anger. He shoved the medal into its box. The chain caught in the hinge. He forced the lid twice, then threw it at the stone. It struck Grady's name and fell open in the mud.



"Still doing it. Still making everything about you." The cemetery seemed to lean closer. "You ruined every chance I had. Made everyone think I was broken. You died and left me nothing, and somehow you still get to be the good man."

His voice cracked. He hated that. He spat at his father's name. Every drop of rain stopped. Not slowed. Stopped.

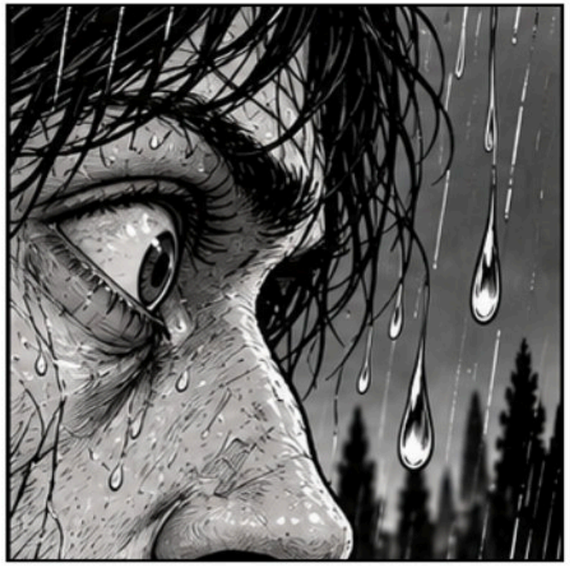
Silver beads hung above the graves. Water curved from the angels' faces without falling. One drop rested against Jack's eyelash, perfectly still.

The city fell silent. At his feet, darkness filled the medal's broken ring. Something knocked beneath the grave. Once. Jack stepped back. A harder knock sent soil jumping. "This isn't funny," he said.




You could have helped me.
Four chances? Four mistakes?


Still doing it. Still making everything about you.




This isn't funny.
KNOCK

The third blow split the ground. A hand pushed through. It was too long and too thin, shaped from soil packed around something blacker than bone. Mud streamed between its fingers. The wrist ended in shadow that continued into the grave without any arm Jack could see.

He stumbled backward and caught his heel on the garbage bag. The hand slapped against the grass, searching. Jack scrambled up. His useless laptop slid from beneath his arm. The hand turned toward the sound with fingers spread.

Then it pointed at him.

“No.” The hand crossed the distance between them without moving through it.

One instant it lay beside the grave. The next, its fingers locked around Jack’s ankle.

Cold went through his shoe, through skin, through bone. It was not the cold of ice. It was the absence of every warm thing Jack had ever known.

He kicked at the wrist. His foot passed through shadow and struck mud. The hand pulled.

Jack hit the ground hard enough to bite his tongue. He clawed at the grass as it dragged him toward the grave. Wet roots tore through his fingers. His free heel hammered uselessly against the earth.

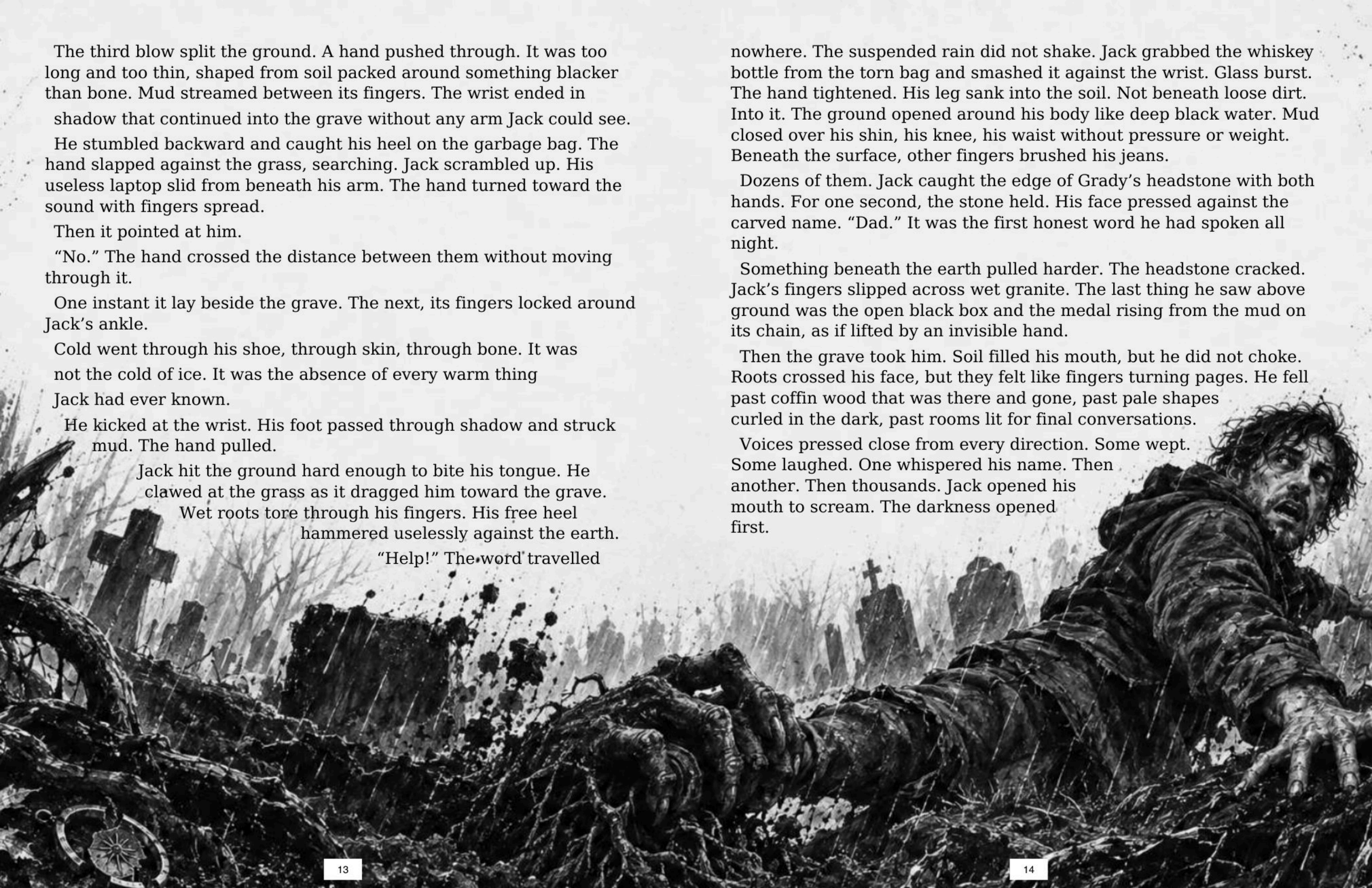
“Help!” The word travelled nowhere. The suspended rain did not shake. Jack grabbed the whiskey bottle from the torn bag and smashed it against the wrist. Glass burst. The hand tightened. His leg sank into the soil. Not beneath loose dirt. Into it. The ground opened around his body like deep black water. Mud closed over his shin, his knee, his waist without pressure or weight. Beneath the surface, other fingers brushed his jeans.

Dozens of them. Jack caught the edge of Grady’s headstone with both hands. For one second, the stone held. His face pressed against the carved name. “Dad.” It was the first honest word he had spoken all night.

Something beneath the earth pulled harder. The headstone cracked. Jack’s fingers slipped across wet granite. The last thing he saw above ground was the open black box and the medal rising from the mud on its chain, as if lifted by an invisible hand.

Then the grave took him. Soil filled his mouth, but he did not choke. Roots crossed his face, but they felt like fingers turning pages. He fell past coffin wood that was there and gone, past pale shapes curled in the dark, past rooms lit for final conversations.

Voices pressed close from every direction. Some wept. Some laughed. One whispered his name. Then another. Then thousands. Jack opened his mouth to scream. The darkness opened first.





CHAPTER THREE

Everyone Who Ever Died

Jack hit the ground on his back. There was no impact. No burst of pain. One instant he was falling through soil and voices; the next he lay flat beneath a sky that looked like the underside of the earth.

Roots crossed it from horizon to horizon. They were enormous, thicker than bridges, pale where they twisted through the darkness and black where they overlapped. Dirt sifted upward from them in slow streams. It did not fall. It rose into the roots and vanished.

Jack remained still, waiting for his lungs to demand air. They did not. That frightened him more than the fall. He slapped both hands against his chest. His heart was beating—too fast, but beating. His ribs felt solid. His face was wet with rain that was no longer falling. Mud filled the seams of his clothes. When he opened his mouth, a clump of cemetery soil rested on his tongue without taste.

He spat it out. The soil landed beside him and whispered. Jack rolled away. The ground beneath him was not grass. It was a road made from black earth packed hard by countless feet. On either side stood headstones, monuments, wooden crosses, broken statues, stone circles and markers in languages he had never seen. They crowded together with no paths between them, centuries pressed shoulder to shoulder.

Some were new enough to shine. Others had been worn smooth before the city above them existed. Jack pushed himself upright. “Okay,” he said. His voice travelled too far. It passed between the graves, crossed the black plain and returned in pieces.

Okay. Kay. Ay. The smallest sound brought movement. Figures turned among the stones. At first Jack mistook them for mourners. There were hundreds nearby and more beyond them. A hospital woman held her abdomen. A soldier carried a helmet. An old man sat in the faint outline of a kitchen chair. A boy waited at a buried bus stop.

None breathed or cast shadows. “Did he call?” the woman asked a room only she could see. “Tell him I waited.” A stain spread down her gown, vanished and began again.

The soldier warned someone to keep down. The old man reached for a cup that appeared and disappeared. The boy watched for a bus that never came.

Final moments, Jack thought.

His cracked phone showed only 0:00. Pressing the button changed nothing. “Concussion. Buried alive. Lack of oxygen. Extremely specific hallucination.” Faces turned. He lowered his voice. “All of which means I should stay calm.” A woman with half her hair burned away emerged between monuments. “You are calm,” she said.

Unlike the others, she was looking at him. Jack froze. Her remaining eye moved down his body. It stopped over his chest. “You are warm.” The road filled with silence. Every spirit close enough to hear her stopped repeating.

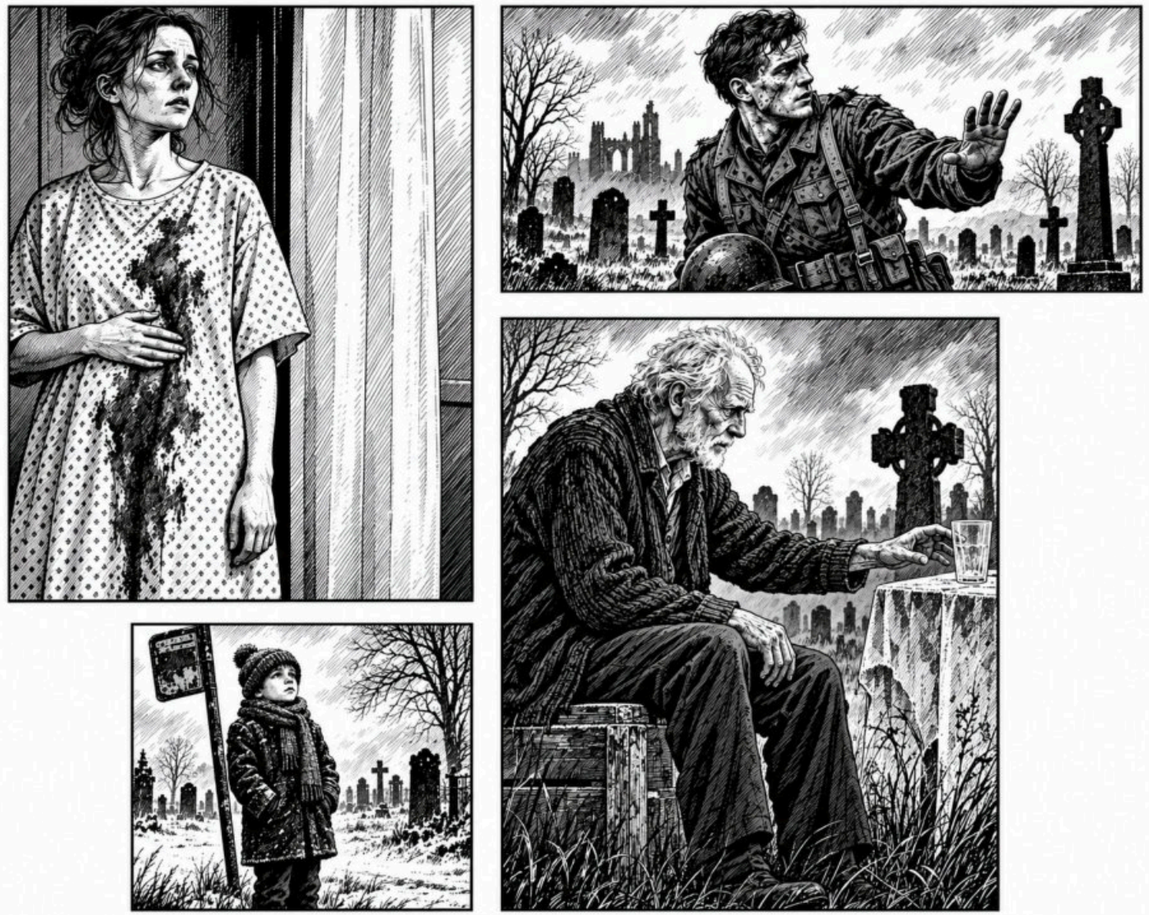
The hospital stain froze at the woman’s knees.

The soldier lowered his helmet. The old man’s invisible cup shattered before he

could reach it.

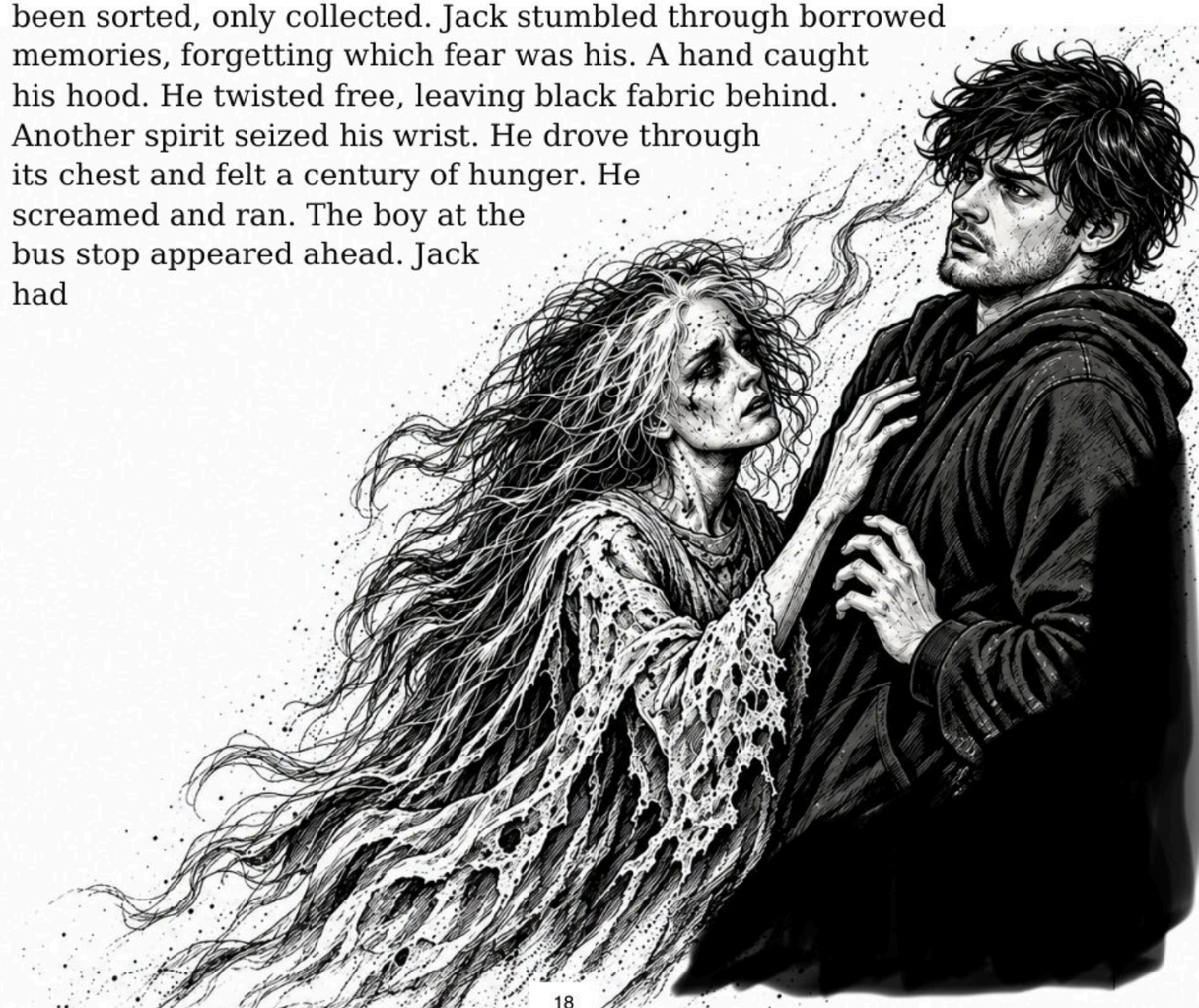
Hundreds of faces turned toward Jack. He smiled automatically. It was the smile he used with police officers, landlords, angry customers and anyone else who could make his life worse.

“Common mistake,” he said. “I get that all the time.” The burned woman came closer. Heat left Jack’s skin before she touched him. The cold reached into him through his hoodie and closed around his heartbeat.



Her expression changed. Not hunger. Grief. For one terrible instant, Jack felt what she felt: sun on a kitchen floor, the weight of a sleeping infant against her shoulder, someone laughing in another room. The memories were vivid enough to hurt.

Then smoke covered everything. Jack tore himself backward. The connection broke. The woman made a sound like a sob dragged through water. All around them, the dead began whispering. “Living.” “He is living.” “How?” “Let me feel.” Jack ran. The road bent beneath his feet. Graves flashed past in impossible combinations: marble angels beside shallow pits, polished military rows swallowed by weeds, shelves of urns rising like apartment windows. Spirits stepped into the road and reached for him. Their fingers passed through his clothes but not through whatever lay beneath. Each touch forced a life into him. A man’s last view of a highway turning sideways. A girl laughing as lake water closed above her. A grandmother hearing her family argue because they thought she slept. A thief staring at the person who shot him. Good people. Cruel people. Children. Murderers. They had not been sorted, only collected. Jack stumbled through borrowed memories, forgetting which fear was his. A hand caught his hood. He twisted free, leaving black fabric behind. Another spirit seized his wrist. He drove through its chest and felt a century of hunger. He screamed and ran. The boy at the bus stop appeared ahead. Jack had



been running away from him. He was certain.

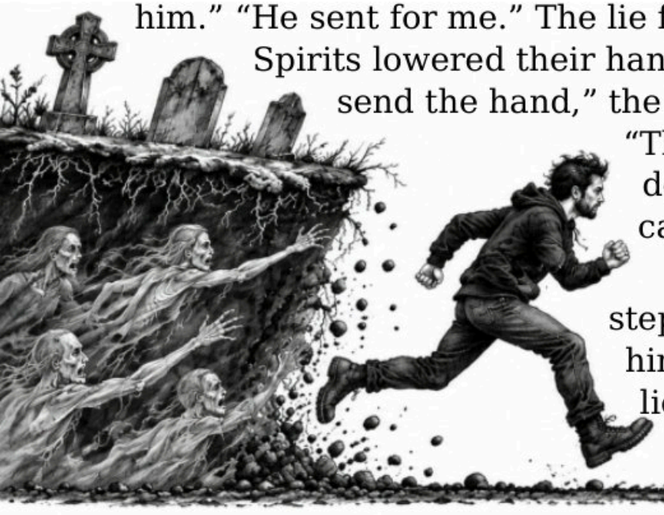
Same sign. Same frost on the child's eyelashes. The boy did not reach for him. "Road brings you back." "What road?" The boy pointed down. Faces moved beneath the thin soil. The road was packed from cheeks, foreheads and open mouths. Eyes followed Jack's shoes.

He jumped into the graves. The dead followed. "Where's the way out?" "There isn't one." "There's always a way out."

"That's what everybody says when they arrive." A spirit lunged. Jack ducked behind a monument; it passed through, wearing someone else's final expression.

He searched the graves and root-covered sky. A door, a tunnel, a rule he could bend. Every system had a weakness. Someone had built it believing it did not.

Something cold struck his chest. The medal. Grady's broken ring hung around his neck. He had watched it rise from the mud. He had not felt it follow him. Its markings shifted as he tilted it, forming letters he almost understood. WARD— The rest slid away. "Gravewarden," a spirit whispered. The crowd recoiled. Fear was information. Fear was leverage. Jack raised the medal. "That's right." He had no idea what was right. "I'm here for the Gravewarden." The burned woman stopped. "No one is here for him." "He sent for me." The lie felt familiar and comforting.



Spirits lowered their hands and drew away. "He did not send the hand," the boy said. Jack ignored him. "The Gravewarden called me down. Touch me again and you can explain to him why."

Several spirits vanished. He stepped forward; the dead gave him room. For half a minute, the lie worked. Then a man laughed. He came from behind an iron gate in a ruined dark suit. A narrow wound opened at his throat when he laughed and closed as he inhaled. Silver rings covered both hands.

"I knew men like you," he said. "I was a man like you."

Jack kept the medal raised. "Then you know when to move." "I know when someone has stolen a badge." "I didn't steal it." "Not yet." The dead man crossed the space between them and seized the chain. The medal flashed. A thin white crack opened across the darkness. For an instant it formed a perfect circle behind Jack's head.

Every spirit bowed. Not willingly. The force bent them toward the road. Monuments split. The roots overhead tightened as if the entire realm had flinched.

Then the light snapped out. Jack and the suited man stared at each other. The dead man released the chain. "You came back," he whispered. The same words spread outward. "You came back."

"You came back." "He is the one."

"The son." "The returned." Jack's mouth went dry even though he no longer needed water. "I've never been here."

The suited man smiled. "That does not mean you never left." The crowd moved as one. Jack ran again. This time the dead did not chase him like mourners reaching for warmth. They came with purpose. The road split into a dozen roads beneath his feet. Every route curved toward the same place: a low valley where the graves had collapsed into a single black wound.

Jack chose the steepest path because it had the fewest spirits. It was also the wrong one. The earth broke beneath him. He slid into the valley among broken stones and

open coffins. The airless dark filled with voices stripped of words. These spirits no longer repeated names or rooms or final sentences. Their faces had worn away. Their bodies folded into one another, unfinished and grey, fingers growing wherever they touched.

They reached for Jack. The others had wanted his warmth. These wanted a shape. A faceless hand pressed over his mouth. Another pulled at his eyes. Grey skin flowed across his cheek as something tried to remember being a person by using him.

Jack struck blindly. His fists passed through bodies and came back filled with other people’s terror.

The mass drew him down. “No,” he said against the hand. The sound vanished inside it. Above the valley, the suited spirit watched. “Tell the Gravewarden,” he called, “that what was buried has learned to climb.” Jack’s fingers closed around something hard in the grey mass. A small black disc hung from one of the faceless spirits on a cord. One side bore the outline of a gate. The other showed the same broken circle as Grady’s medal.

Jack tore it free. The valley screamed. A doorway appeared in the slope. It was not built there. One moment there was only packed earth and grasping bodies; the next, a narrow iron door stood between two leaning stones. The black disc burned cold in Jack’s fist.

Jack understood the object in the simplest possible way. Someone else had it. Now he did. He kicked through the grey arms, jammed the disc against the door and heard a lock turn somewhere far beneath him.

The door opened inward. Jack fell through and slammed it behind him. Fingers pushed through the gap. He threw his weight against the iron. The faceless dead made no threats. They had forgotten language. They only pressed harder.

The black disc softened in Jack’s palm like wax. “Come on,” he growled. The edge of the door cut into his shoulder. Grey fingers reached around it and touched his jaw. His own face began to feel unfamiliar.

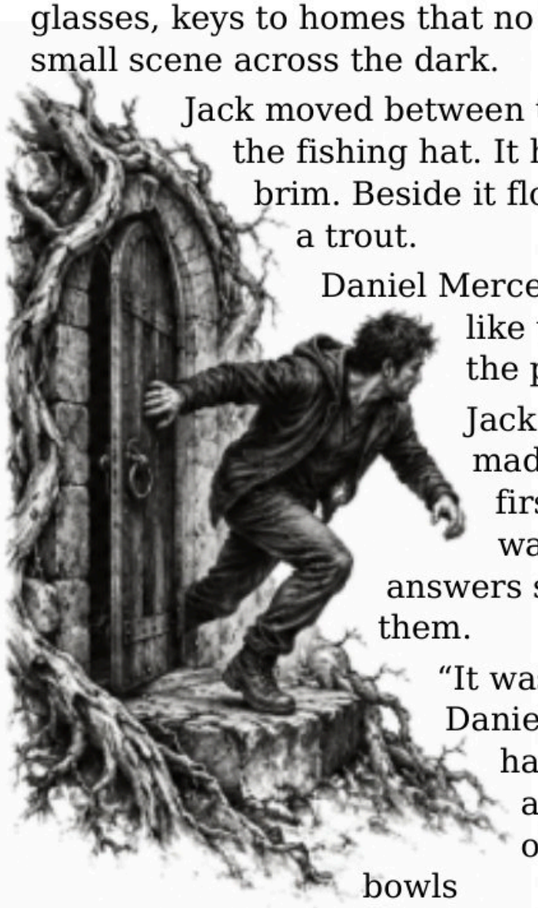
The medal against his chest warmed. A line of pale light ran through the door. The faceless hands recoiled. Jack forced the iron shut. The lock caught with a sound like a coffin lid closing.

Silence returned. He leaned against the door, shaking. A passage ran between roots as thick as walls.

Unlike the open cemetery, this place held a faint light. It came from thin veins of ivory buried inside the wood.

The veins brightened when Jack approached. He followed them. He told himself he was choosing a direction. In truth, the light pulled at the medal, and the medal pulled at him.

The passage opened into a forest of hanging memories. Thousands of objects floated between the roots: a red mitten, a wedding ring, a soldier's letter, a child's drawing, a cracked pair of glasses, keys to homes that no longer existed. Each object cast a small scene across the dark.



Jack moved between them without touching. Then he saw the fishing hat. It hung at eye level, damp along the brim. Beside it floated a photograph of a man holding a trout.

Daniel Mercer stood behind it. He looked exactly like the picture Jack had stolen, except the pride was gone from his face.

Jack stopped. Daniel studied him. "You made another funeral," he said. Jack's first instinct was denial. His second was to ask how Daniel knew. Both answers sounded pathetic before he spoke them.

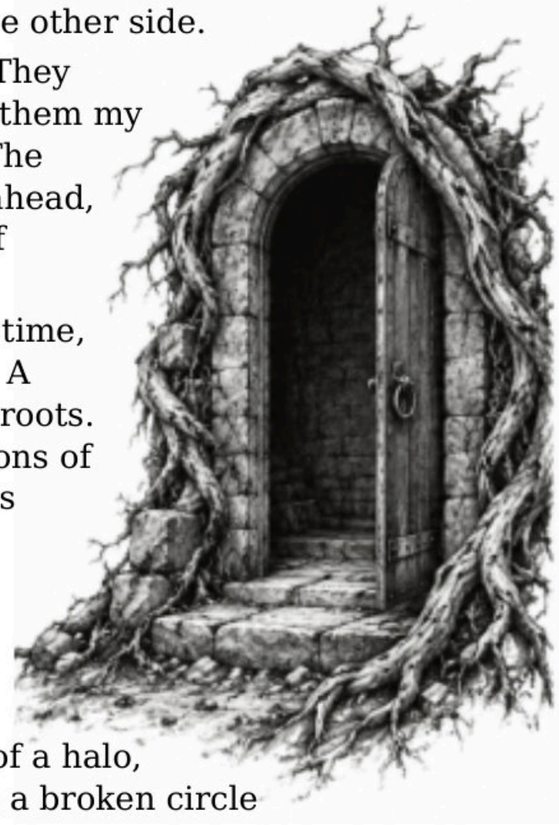
"It was going to a shelter," Jack said. Daniel looked toward the memory hanging beside the hat. A kitchen appeared in the darkness. Daniel, older and tired, ladled soup into bowls while snow struck the windows. A woman at the end of the line tried to refuse a second piece of bread. Daniel wrapped it in a napkin and put it in her hand anyway.

The memory changed. Elise sat at a table after his death, reading Jack's false fundraiser. Her eyes were swollen.

She typed with both thumbs.

Please take this down. Jack turned away. Daniel did not shout. That made it worse. "My daughter asked you nicely," he said. "You're dead," Jack answered. Daniel's expression tightened. Jack heard himself and hated that he had chosen those words. He searched for something better and found only the same excuses he had carried all his life.

"You don't need the money." "No," Daniel said. "But you needed me not to matter." The passage darkened. Behind the iron door, the faceless dead began to strike the other side.



Daniel looked toward the sound. "They followed your name." "I didn't give them my name." "You brought it with you." The ivory veins in the roots flared. Far ahead, something answered with a pulse of antique-gold light.

Daniel stepped aside. For the first time, Jack saw where the passage ended. A vast set of doors stood beneath the roots. Their surface was carved with millions of names, some deep and sharp, others fading. In front of them waited a solitary figure.

He was taller than any man Jack remembered. A ruined dark mantle hung from his shoulders. Behind his head floated fragments of a halo, separated by black gaps but held in a broken circle by threads of dim gold.

Jack knew the set of those shoulders. He knew the stillness. He knew the unbearable patience in the way the figure waited. The faceless dead struck the iron door again. The great doors opened one inch. The figure turned. Grady O'Brian looked at his son.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gravewarden

For several seconds, neither father nor son spoke. The doors behind Grady opened another inch. Light spilled through the gap—not warm light, not sunlight, but the pale colour left behind when a candle was blown out. It touched the names carved into the doors and made them move. Millions of letters shifted across the surface, assembling and separating faster than Jack could read them.

Grady stepped away from the opening. The doors stopped. Up close, he looked less like the man Jack remembered and more like something that had once studied how to be human. His face was Grady's face, severe and lined, but thin cracks of darkness ran from his temples into his neck. The ruined mantle around his shoulders moved without wind. Four heavy fragments floated behind his head where a halo should have been, ivory along

their outer edges and black through the fractures. Thick threads of antique gold strained between them.

Jack had spent two years imagining what he would say if he saw his father again.

Every speech disappeared. "You look terrible," he said. Grady's expression did not change. "So do you."

That was familiar enough to make Jack angry. Daniel Mercer stood a few paces behind Jack. The fishing hat had begun to fade through his head.

Grady looked at him. "Daniel." Daniel lowered his eyes. The simple recognition unsettled Jack. There were more dead people than numbers Jack knew, and his father had spoken the man's name as though he had been expected.

"You know everybody here?" Jack asked. "No."

"Then why him?"

"Because he walked with you."

"I didn't ask him to." Daniel gave Jack one last disappointed look and dissolved into charcoal mist. The fishing hat remained for a moment, then collapsed into a dark stain among the roots.

Jack pretended not to watch it disappear. Grady's attention moved to the iron door behind him. Something struck the other side. The roots shivered. "What did you bring?" Grady asked. "Nothing."

The door buckled inward. “You always answer too quickly when you lie.”

“You always call everything a lie when you don’t like the answer.”

Grady raised one hand. The medal tore away from Jack’s chest. Its chain passed through his fingers and flew across the passage into Grady’s palm.

Jack lunged for it. The dark mantle unfolded between them like a wall. He struck something harder than stone and stumbled back.

“That belongs to me.”

“It belonged to me before you stole it from my house.”

“It was the only thing you took.”

“The only thing worth nothing.”

A narrow gold line moved across the medal’s broken-ring symbol. The fragments behind Grady’s head answered with a dim pulse.

Jack saw the connection. The medal was not jewellery. It was a copy of the thing behind his father—or perhaps a piece of it hammered flat and taught to hide.

“What are you?” Jack asked. Grady closed his hand around the medal. “Dead.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It is the only answer you are ready to carry.”

The iron door shook again. Grey fingertips appeared through its edge. Grady turned his hand. The roots tightened around the door and forced the fingers back.

Jack stared at the broken halo. “You had that the whole time?”

“Not in the way you mean.”

“You could do all this and you still lived in that house? You still worked. You still got sick.”

“I lived as your father.”

“You barely managed that.”

Grady flinched. It was small. Jack might have missed it if he had not spent his childhood studying the exact distance between his father’s patience and anger.

He pressed harder. “You knew this place was here. You knew there was something after death, and you never told me.”

“You turned every truth I gave you into a weapon.”

“So you kept the useful ones.”

“I kept you alive.”

Jack laughed once. “You kept me under control.”

The great doors whispered behind Grady. Jack heard his own name among the millions carved there. Not spoken. Remembered. He stepped closer despite himself. Grady moved between him and the doors.

“Do not listen.” “Why?” “Because it is listening back.” The whisper grew clearer. Jack O’Brian. The roots above them creaked. Dust rose into the darkness.

Grady’s eyes fixed on Jack’s face with sudden fear. “The realm has been waiting for you.”

Jack looked toward the doors. “You keep saying things like that and then refusing to explain them.”

“I have not said it before.” “Someone did.” The suited spirit’s words returned to him. You came back. The son. The returned.

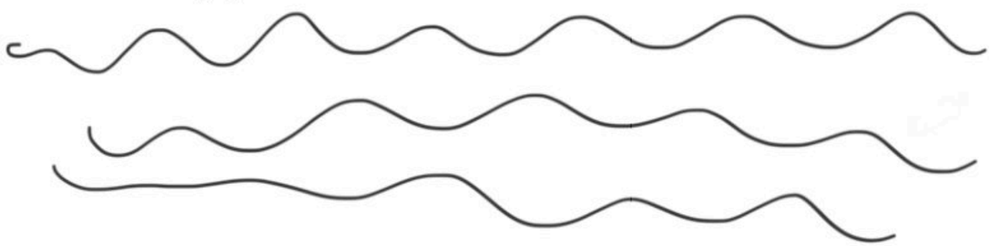
Jack saw Grady understand. “Who spoke to you?” Grady asked. “A man with rings. Bad neck.”

“What did he say?” “That I’ve been here before.” The gold threads in Grady’s halo pulled tight. Jack smiled without humour. “There it is.”

“What?” “That face. The one you made every time you decided I couldn’t handle the truth.” “What you do not know cannot be taken from you.” “Convenient.” “Necessary.” “Did I die?” The iron door slammed so hard that one hinge tore from the root wall. Grady did not look away. “Did I die?” Jack repeated. His father’s silence answered him. Jack felt the passage tilt. A buried memory stirred: hospital light, Grady’s hands covered in something dark, a voice begging from very far away. Then it vanished beneath years Jack remembered perfectly.

He stepped toward his father. “How old was I?” “Jack.” “How old?” “This is not the place.” “It seems exactly like the place.” The door burst open. The faceless dead poured through. Grady turned. His mantle split into two vast black planes and swept across the passage. The first wave of spirits struck it and flattened into smoke. He lifted the broken halo from behind his head.

The fragments rotated. A ring of ivory fire opened across the corridor. Every spirit inside it stopped. For one breathless moment, Jack felt the command Grady placed



upon them. Be still.

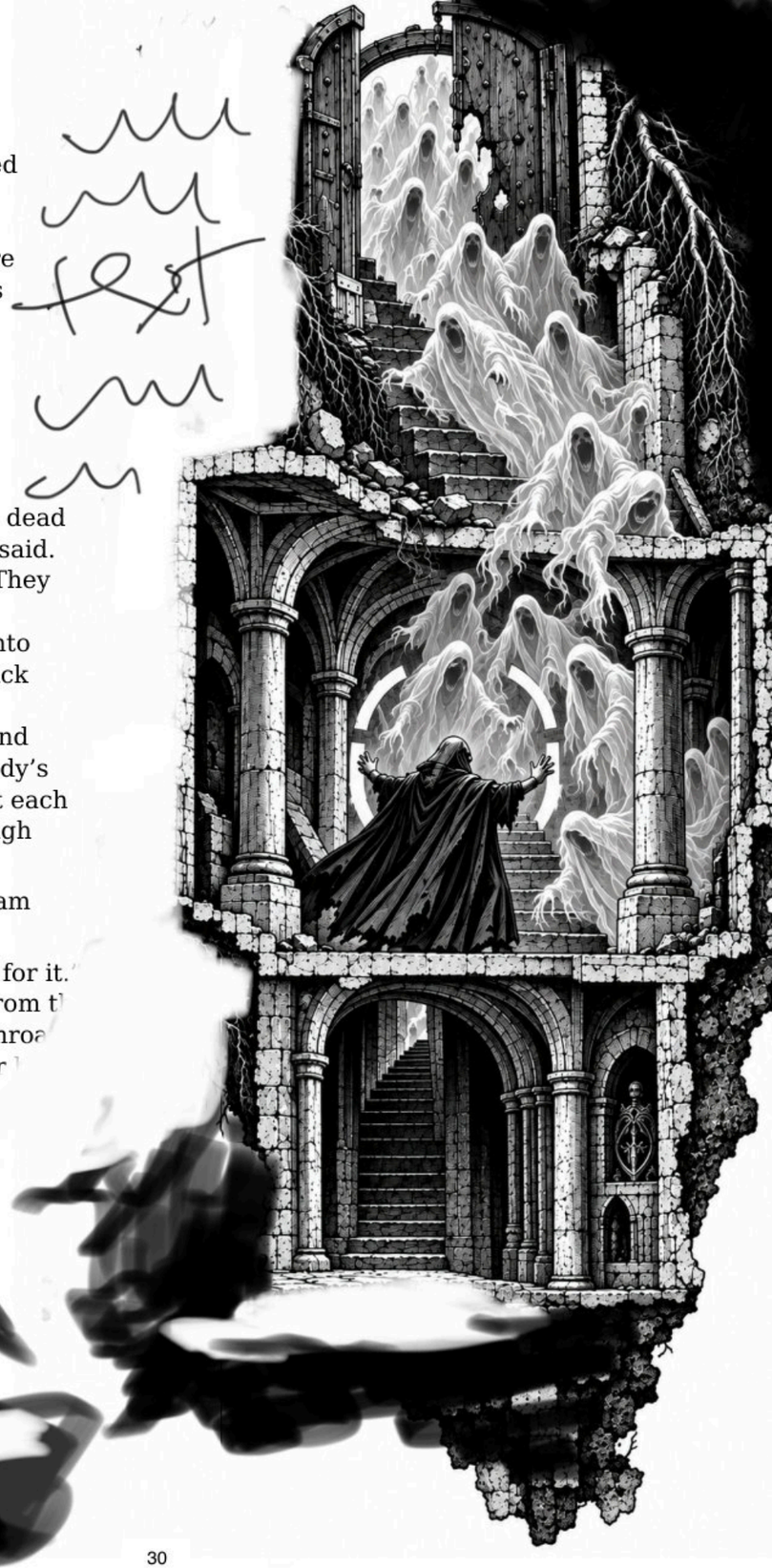
It was not a request. It was a law. The faceless dead trembled beneath it. Then one lifted its head. A face formed across its blank surface. Jack’s face. More followed. Dozens of grey heads shaped themselves into him at different ages: Jack at seven, twelve, nineteen, twenty-five. Some wore expressions he remembered. Others smiled in ways he never had.

Grady’s command broke. The dead rushed forward. “Run,” Grady said. Jack did not need convincing. They moved through the forest of memories. Objects shattered into final moments around them. Jack ran through a wedding, a battlefield, a child’s birthday and the inside of a sinking car. Grady’s mantle struck spirits away, but each blow widened the cracks through his arms.

“You’re losing,” Jack said. “I am occupied.”

“That’s a very dignified word for it.” A grey version of Jack dropped from the roots. Grady caught it by the throat. The false Jack split into five smaller ones and climbed his arm.

The broken halo flashed



They burned away.

One gold thread snapped.

A fragment drifted out of alignment.

Grady staggered.

Jack saw the truth immediately: whatever his father had been, he was not strong enough now.

The passage opened onto a bridge made from interlocked headstones. Beneath it, the road of faces descended forever. At the far end stood a narrow arch filled with rain.

The living cemetery waited on the other side.

Jack could see Grady's grave through it.

His garbage bag lay open in the mud.

"Go," Grady said.

Jack ran toward the arch.

The rain inside it stopped.

The opening became black glass.

Jack struck it shoulder first and bounced backward.

"What happened?"

Grady held the dead away with both arms. "It will not take you."

"Make it."

"I cannot."

"You opened it."

"I showed it what you wanted. A door is not the same as permission."

"Then get permission."

The dead covered Grady's mantle. Copies of Jack pulled at him with Jack's own hands.

Grady sank to one knee.

"The living cannot leave by command," he said. "Not after the realm has named them."

Jack looked at the black arch.

Then at the broken halo.

"You can command the dead."

Grady followed his eyes.

"No."

"You knew what I was going to say."

"The halo must never return to the living world."

"Why?"

"Because it is not a crown. It is a wound given shape."

"That sounds useful."

"It will use every dead voice to reach the living. It will make power feel like judgment. It will teach you to mistake obedience for goodness."

"Maybe I'll be a quick learner."

"Jack, listen to me."

Grady rarely said his name that way.

Not as an accusation. Not as a warning.

As a father.

For one dangerous moment, Jack almost did.

Then the black arch reflected him: wet, narrow, frightened, wearing clothes that did not fit and carrying nothing that belonged to him. Behind that reflection stood every person who had closed a door in his face. Malcolm. Heller. Elise Mercer. Grady most of all.

Jack looked at the halo again.

His entire life had been decided by people who possessed what he did not.

Money.

Respect.

A place to sleep.

A reason to be feared.

He moved before his father could stop him.

Jack grabbed the drifting fragment.

Cold split his arm to the shoulder.

The halo screamed.

Not aloud. Inside every dead mouth in the realm.

Grady released the spirits and seized Jack's wrist.

"Let go."

"Open the door."

"It will not save you."

"I'm not asking it to."

The other halo fragments dragged against their gold threads, straining toward Jack's hand.

Grady tightened his grip.

Jack drove his forehead into his father's face.

The impact felt human.

Grady stumbled.

Jack tore the fragment free.

The gold thread broke.

Every grave in sight opened.

The dead rose together.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Broken Halo

They came from above and below. They climbed out of the road. They fell from the roots. They poured through open memories and forced themselves between the names on the great doors. Some had faces. Some had only the wounds that killed them. Others were little more than voices wearing smoke.

All of them reached for Jack. He ran toward the black arch with the halo fragment pressed against his chest. Nothing happened. “Open,” he shouted. The arch reflected him. Behind him, Grady rose beneath the weight of the dead. His broken mantle spread like wings caught in oil. Three halo fragments still hovered behind his head. The fourth cut a line of ivory light through Jack’s fingers.

“You cannot order it,” Grady called. “Then tell me the magic word.”

“There isn’t one.” “Of course not.” The first spirits struck Jack’s back. They did not knock him down. They entered. A hundred final memories burst through him. He died in beds, streets, fields and rooms without windows. He felt ropes tighten, lungs fail, hearts stop. He remembered children he had never had and crimes he had never committed.

Jack clawed at the arch. His hands sank into black glass up to the wrists. For one instant, he felt rain on the other side. Then the surface hardened and trapped him. The suited spirit appeared beside his reflection. Silver rings shone on dead fingers. “You stole it,” he said with admiration. “I’m borrowing it.” “You really are his son.” The spirit reached for the halo fragment. Jack kicked through him. The man became smoke, re-formed behind Jack and wrapped an arm across his throat.

More bodies piled on. They dragged Jack away from the arch. Grady fought toward him, but the realm rose between them. The dead climbed over Jack’s legs, chest and face until no part of the black doorway remained visible.

He disappeared beneath thousands. The weight was not physical. It was worse. Every spirit demanded space inside him. Jack’s own memories began to tear loose. His mother packing a suitcase without looking at him. Malcolm laughing the first time one of Jack’s fake identities passed inspection. Grady sitting beside a hospital bed. A little black box at a funeral. Elise Mercer asking him to stop. The memories moved from Jack into the crowd. Dead faces wore them and passed them backward hand to hand.

“No,” Jack tried to say. A spirit took the word. Someone else spoke with his voice. No. The suited man found Jack beneath the mass. His wounded smile appeared inches away.

“Soon there will be enough of you for everyone.” The halo fragment remained in Jack’s fist. It had become warm. Not with Grady’s pale fire. With Jack’s pulse. He closed both hands around it. If the dead wanted his memories, he would give them one. He remembered Grady at the kitchen table after Jack’s first arrest. Not angry. Not disappointed. Just exhausted.

You always think the locked door means something valuable is behind it. Jack had answered, Sometimes it does. He felt the halo hear him. A crack of ivory light opened beneath the bodies. The suited spirit’s smile vanished. Jack pulled. The remaining halo fragments tore away from Grady.


Open!


You cannot order it.








Then tell me the magic word.
There isn't one.

They crossed the realm like falling stars, trailing thick gold. One struck the mass above Jack’s heart. Another locked behind his skull. The third split into curved bands that wrapped his shoulders. The dead pressed harder. The light went out. For a moment, nothing remained but voices. Grady stopped fighting. “Jack,” he whispered. The realm answered in Jack’s voice. Then a command moved through every spirit touching him. Get off me. The dead exploded outward. A column of ivory fire punched from the road to the roots. Headstones lifted. Memories turned white. The great doors slammed shut hard enough to crack the horizon. Jack rose inside the light. His body changed first. Bones lengthened without breaking. His shoulders widened. Muscle formed beneath skin as though another version of him had been waiting inside the weak one. Five-foot-eight became six-foot-four. His spine straightened. The exhaustion left his face, sharpening familiar features into something more composed and difficult to recognize. Black material spread from the centre of his chest, not cloth or armour but shadow given a surface. It crossed his torso and limbs in seamless layers. White followed. An ivory outer suit formed across his shoulders, chest and arms, clean and heroic against the black interior. Thick antique-gold structures locked over his



collarbones, forearms, waist and boots. They did not look decorative. They looked ancient and load-bearing, as though the suit had been assembled around the architecture of a cathedral. A high collar closed behind his neck. The halo completed itself behind his head. It floated low, almost touching him: half above his hair, half behind his skull. Four thick gold-edged segments formed a broken ring with darkness between them. Light fell from it across his face, leaving his eyes clear and the lower half of his body swallowed in shadow. Something tore open behind his shoulders. Two white panels of living fabric spread wide. At first Jack thought they were wings.



Then they folded into a cape.

The edges divided and rejoined like feathers made from cloth. Each movement caught the airless dark and created air where none existed.

Jack looked down at his hands.

They were his.

They were not his.

The suited spirit lay among broken stones, staring upward.

“What are you?” he asked.

Jack had no answer.

The dead rose again.

Jack lifted one hand.

He felt all of them.

Not as a crowd. Individually.

The burned woman who remembered an infant.

The boy waiting for a bus.

Daniel Mercer fading beside a kitchen window.

A soldier, a thief, a grandmother, a murderer.

Every spirit carried a final thread. The halo put those threads into Jack’s hands.

He closed his fist.

The dead stopped.

Power moved through him with the pleasure of being believed.

Jack smiled.

Grady saw it.

“Do not enjoy this.”

“Little late.”

“You are not controlling bodies. You are holding what remains of people.”

“They were holding me first.”

The faceless dead climbed from the valley and spilled across the bridge.

Jack pointed at them.

“Back.”

Hundreds obeyed.

Thousands did not.

The command tore through his skull. The halo flashed too brightly. A black fracture crossed one gold segment.

Jack dropped to one knee.

The spirits he had stopped began moving again.

Grady reached him.

“The halo magnifies will. It does not give you wisdom, strength or mercy.”

“I feel stronger.”

“That is the first lie it tells.”

The faceless mass struck.

Grady raised his ruined mantle.

Jack raised the cape.

The two white panels snapped forward and overlapped into a shield. Grey bodies broke across them like waves. The force pushed Jack backward, boots carving trenches through the road.

The cape moved before he understood it. One panel anchored against a root. The other caught him around the waist and pulled him upright.

Jack stared.

“Useful,” he said.

The suited spirit attacked from behind with a blade made from his final memory.

Jack turned too late.

The blade entered the black suit and stopped against gold beneath it.

Pain travelled through every spirit nearby.

Jack seized the dead man’s wrist.

A black hand rose from the road.

It was the same shape that had dragged Jack beneath the grave: too long, made from soil around an interior void. It closed around the suited spirit’s ankle.

The man looked down.

For the first time, he was afraid.

“What did you do?”

Jack did not know.

The shadow hand pulled.

The spirit sank through the road as though falling into deeper death. Jack felt the breach open beneath him, vast and hungry.

The hand tugged at Jack too.

Grady cut through it with a piece of broken halo.

The suited spirit escaped and vanished among the graves.

Jack staggered away from the closing wound.

“That power has a cost,” Grady said. “Every sentence opens the way in both directions.”

“Then I won’t waste it.”

“You will. You waste everything.”

The words landed harder than the attack.

Jack turned on him.

Grady’s expression softened almost immediately, but he did not take them back.

The faceless dead gathered again.

The arch remained black.

Jack looked through the halo and saw something he had missed: lines inside the darkness, millions of dead threads layered across the doorway. It was not locked.

It was held shut. “Help me,” Jack said. Grady looked toward the arch. “You cannot carry the halo into life.”

“That wasn’t the question.” “If I help you leave with it, I abandon what remains of my duty.” “If you don’t, your duty eats me.” “You chose the halo.” “You chose not to tell me anything.” The dead closed around them. Father and son stood back to back. For a few seconds, neither pretended it meant forgiveness. Grady lifted one empty hand. Jack lifted his. Their commands met. The dead moved aside.

A straight path opened across the bridge to the black arch. Jack ran. The cape spread behind him. It caught a current that did not exist and lifted him from the road.

His feet left the ground. Jack shouted in surprise. The wing-panels opened wider. Gold structures along their edges locked into place.

He rose between the roots, unsteady but flying. The dead reached upward. Hands caught the cape. Jack fell. The living fabric twisted beneath him, became a cradle for half a second, then snapped open and threw him

forward. He struck the arch with both palms.

This time he felt the threads. He pulled them apart. The effort dragged every voice in the realm through his head. The halo brightened.

His shadow stretched beneath him in the wrong direction. Something inside that shadow opened its eyes. Jack did not see it. The arch cracked. Rain appeared through the fracture.

Cold living air struck his transformed face. Behind him, Grady held the dead at the centre of the bridge. More spirits climbed over his mantle with every second.





"Jack." Jack looked back. His father stood inside the swarm, halo gone, body breaking into the same gold threads that now circled Jack's head.

"What?" Grady's face carried too many unfinished words. He chose one. "Try." Jack almost laughed. It was the weakest order Grady had ever given him. Try to do what? Be good? Be different? Be worth what had been stolen to return him?

The arch began closing. Jack turned toward the rain. "Come take it back," he said. Grady shook his head. "You have never owned anything you stole." The words followed Jack through the opening. He forced himself into the fracture. The realm caught his shadow.

For one instant, Jack hung between death and the cemetery. The cape beat like enormous wings. Spirits clung to his legs. The black hand rose beneath him, unsure whether to pull him out or drag him deeper.

Jack commanded every dead voice inside the breach. Let me go. The words became a blast. The fracture tore open. Jack flew upward through soil, roots and frozen rain. Something thin and ancient slipped through beneath his feet. The grave threw him back into the world.



CHAPTER SIX

Everyone Is Still Here

Jack woke with his face against wet grass.






What?


Is that my car?




Okay.


Okay.


Help me.
Tell my brother.
You came back.

CHAPTER SIX

Everyone Is Still Here

Jack woke with his face against wet grass.

Rain struck the back of his head.

For several seconds, that was all he heard.

Rain.

Real rain. Falling in the correct direction. Touching the ground and ending there.

He inhaled so violently that his chest hurt.

Air filled him.

Jack rolled onto his back and laughed.

The sound was ugly, half relief and half panic. He spread his hands over the mud. The cemetery sky was grey rather than root-black. Grady's headstone stood above him, cracked through the name. His garbage bag had emptied across the hill.

He was five-foot-eight again.

The heroic body was gone. The suit was gone. His hoodie hung from narrow shoulders. The medal lay against his chest, dull and cold.

Jack touched his face.

Stubble. Split lip. Mud.

Human.

"Okay," he whispered.

Someone answered.

"Okay."

Jack sat up.

A woman stood behind Grady's stone.

She wore a summer dress despite the cold. The left side of her head was missing. Rain passed through her shoulders without changing course.

Jack scrambled backward.

The woman looked toward the cemetery road.

"Is that my car?"

"What?"

"Is that my car?"

A crushed vehicle appeared around her in transparent flashes. Glass expanded through the air, vanished, then expanded again.

Jack shut his eyes.

The images remained.

He turned away.

More dead people stood between the graves.

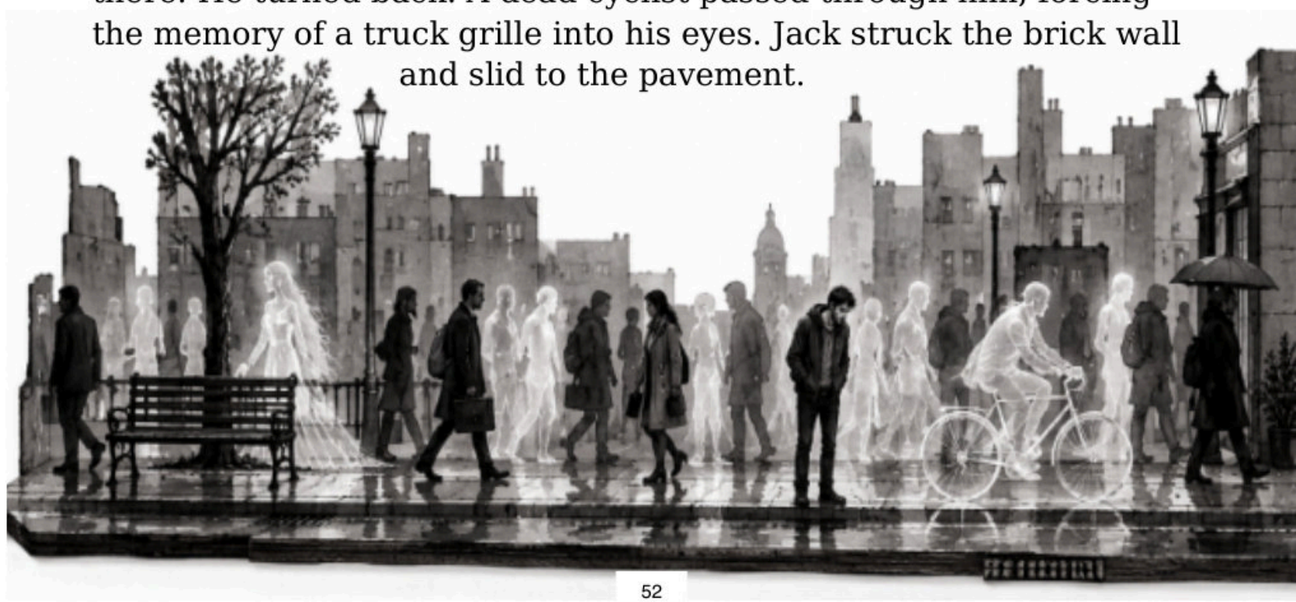
Dozens. Hundreds. They had been invisible when he entered. Now the cemetery was more crowded than a stadium. Spirits sat on their own stones. Families argued across generations. Soldiers marched through monuments built after their wars. Children chased shapes that might once have been pets.

All of them spoke. Jack pressed both hands over his ears. The voices did not grow quieter. He ran. At the cemetery gate, an old man stepped through him. Jack felt a hospital room, a hand going slack and a daughter saying she forgave him too late.

He doubled over. Another ghost brushed his shoulder. Cold water. A bridge railing. Regret. Jack staggered onto the sidewalk. The city was worse. The dead filled every block. They stood in apartment windows, crowded buses, sat inside moving cars and walked through living pedestrians who never noticed them. Some repeated final moments. Some watched the world continue without them. Others turned as Jack passed.

They could see that he saw them. A chorus followed him. "Help me." "Tell my brother." "Where is my house?" "Did she come?" "You came back." Jack broke into a run. His dead laptop struck his hip. The torn garbage bag wrapped around one leg. He abandoned both beside a bench and kept moving with only his backpack.

The voices followed. He turned down an alley. Three ghosts waited there. He turned back. A dead cyclist passed through him, forcing the memory of a truck grille into his eyes. Jack struck the brick wall and slid to the pavement.



His breathing accelerated.

Too much air now.

His hands shook. The alley narrowed around him. Every wet brick carried a reflection of someone who was no longer alive.

“Stop,” Jack said.

The dead continued.

“Stop talking.”

A woman asked him to find her son.

A man told him where a body was buried.

The boy from the bus stop stood at the alley entrance.

“You brought the road with you,” he said.

Jack screamed at them to be quiet.

The halo appeared.

It floated low behind his head, no larger than a plate at first. Ivory light passed across the alley.

The ghosts stopped.

Black material crossed Jack’s hands.

His fingers lengthened. Gold locked around his wrists. The transformation raced upward, widening his arms and shoulders. The white outer suit closed over his chest. The cape unfolded behind him and struck both alley walls.

Jack rose from the pavement as someone else.

Six-foot-four.

Powerful.

Still terrified.

The sudden silence felt so good that he nearly cried.

The dead watched him.

Jack understood that he could push them away.

He extended both hands.

Every spirit in the alley was thrown backward. They passed through walls and vanished into the buildings.

The command continued farther than Jack intended.

Across the street, a dozen ghosts were ripped from a city bus.

The living driver saw them for one impossible instant.

She screamed and jerked the wheel.

The bus crossed the centre line.

A delivery van struck its side.

Metal turned toward a crowded sidewalk.

Jack moved.

Or the cape moved him.

The white panels snapped open, caught the air and launched him above the street. He hit the van before it reached the pedestrians.

Both hands sank into the hood.

The transformed body held.

His boots hit pavement and split it. Gold elements across his forearms flared. The cape anchored to a lamppost, stretched like two enormous wings and stopped Jack from being driven backward.

The van halted less than a metre from a child.

For a moment, nobody moved.

Then phones rose.

Jack looked through the windshield. The driver was alive, stunned behind the airbag.

He released the hood.

The metal retained the shape of his fingers.

People stared at him.

Not his face.

Around it.

Their eyes slid away whenever they tried to focus, as though the halo’s light had erased the centre of their attention. Phone screens showed a tall white-and-black figure with a perfect broken ring and a face smeared by shadow.

Jack heard a woman whisper, “Angel.”

Someone else said, “Monster.”

A police siren approached.

Jack thought one word.

Off.

Nothing happened.

“Off,” he said aloud.

The halo brightened.

The cape spread wider.

“Not brighter. Off.”

The dead gathered at the edge of the street.

The child he had saved pointed upward. “Your circle is broken.”

Jack reached behind his head.

His fingers touched nothing, but the halo reacted as though he had taken hold of it. He felt a mechanism with no physical parts: a turn, a decision, a door swinging inside him.

He twisted.

The broken ring folded into darkness.

The suit collapsed toward his spine. Gold became lines, lines became light, and light disappeared beneath his skin. The cape wrapped around his shoulders and dissolved before touching the ground.

Jack shrank inside his clothes.

Five-foot-eight again.

Weak knees. Split lip. Bad hair.

The crowd looked past him, searching for the figure who had vanished.

Jack lowered his head and walked away.

He made it half a block before vomiting into a storm drain.

A dead man crouched beside him.

"First flight?" the ghost asked.

Jack wiped his mouth.

"Go away."

The man shrugged. "I've been trying."

Jack's phone vibrated.

The screen should not have worked. It had shown only zeroes below the grave. Now the cracked display read 11:47.

No time had passed.

A message waited beneath the clock.

Malcolm.

MIDNIGHT. BRING WHAT YOU TOOK. COME ALONE.

A second message arrived.

OR WE START COLLECTING FROM PEOPLE WHO HELPED YOU.

Three photographs followed.

Mr. Heller leaving the apartment building.

The stranger from the lobby standing beside his car.

Elise Mercer outside a funeral home.

Jack stared at the final photograph.

Rook had found three people Jack barely cared about and understood exactly how to make them matter.

Not because Jack loved them.

Because Malcolm had reached into Jack's life and claimed ownership.

A map opened beneath the messages. The address was in the financial district, several blocks from where Jack stood.



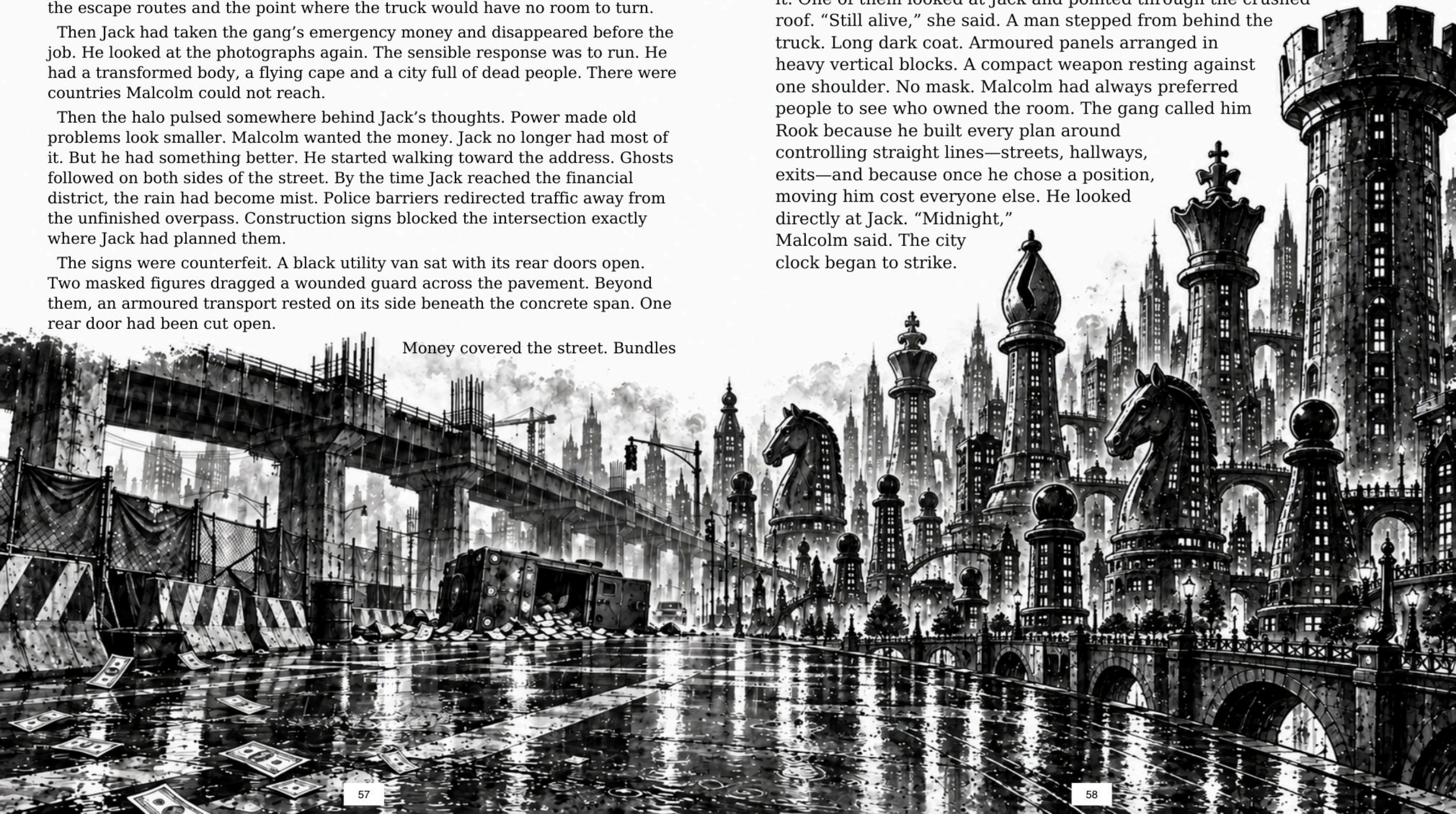
Jack knew the intersection. He had chosen it. Months earlier, Malcolm had spread transit maps, security schedules and photographs across a table while Jack explained how to trap an armoured transport beneath the unfinished rail overpass. Jack had designed the false construction closure, the signal jammer, the escape routes and the point where the truck would have no room to turn.

Then Jack had taken the gang's emergency money and disappeared before the job. He looked at the photographs again. The sensible response was to run. He had a transformed body, a flying cape and a city full of dead people. There were countries Malcolm could not reach.

Then the halo pulsed somewhere behind Jack's thoughts. Power made old problems look smaller. Malcolm wanted the money. Jack no longer had most of it. But he had something better. He started walking toward the address. Ghosts followed on both sides of the street. By the time Jack reached the financial district, the rain had become mist. Police barriers redirected traffic away from the unfinished overpass. Construction signs blocked the intersection exactly where Jack had planned them.

The signs were counterfeit. A black utility van sat with its rear doors open. Two masked figures dragged a wounded guard across the pavement. Beyond them, an armoured transport rested on its side beneath the concrete span. One rear door had been cut open.

Money covered the street. Bundles lay in broken cases. Loose bills moved through the mist like frightened birds. Jack stopped at the edge of the darkness. He saw the cash first. Then the ghosts. They stood around the overturned transport, staring into it. One of them looked at Jack and pointed through the crushed roof. "Still alive," she said. A man stepped from behind the truck. Long dark coat. Armoured panels arranged in heavy vertical blocks. A compact weapon resting against one shoulder. No mask. Malcolm had always preferred people to see who owned the room. The gang called him Rook because he built every plan around controlling straight lines—streets, hallways, exits—and because once he chose a position, moving him cost everyone else. He looked directly at Jack. "Midnight," Malcolm said. The city clock began to strike.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Rook

The first bell rolled across the financial district.

Malcolm waited while the sound travelled between towers.

He had changed since Jack last saw him. The hair at his temples was shorter. A narrow scar crossed one eyebrow. Armour had been added beneath his coat in overlapping black blocks, turning his silhouette into something square and difficult to move.

But the eyes were the same.

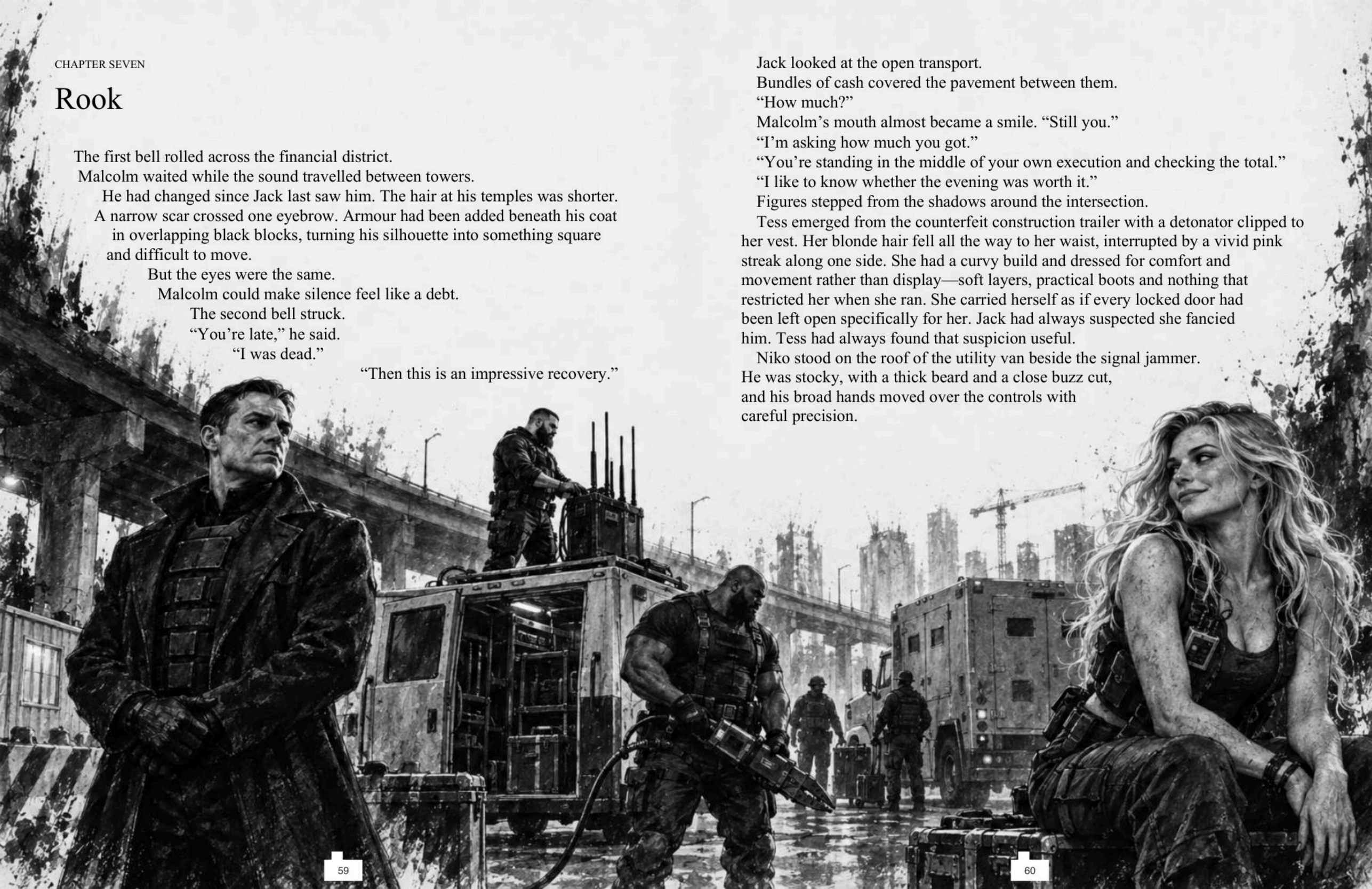
Malcolm could make silence feel like a debt.

The second bell struck.

"You're late," he said.

"I was dead."

"Then this is an impressive recovery."



Jack looked at the open transport.

Bundles of cash covered the pavement between them.

"How much?"

Malcolm's mouth almost became a smile. "Still you."

"I'm asking how much you got."

"You're standing in the middle of your own execution and checking the total."

"I like to know whether the evening was worth it."

Figures stepped from the shadows around the intersection.

Tess emerged from the counterfeit construction trailer with a detonator clipped to her vest. Her blonde hair fell all the way to her waist, interrupted by a vivid pink streak along one side. She had a curvy build and dressed for comfort and movement rather than display—soft layers, practical boots and nothing that restricted her when she ran. She carried herself as if every locked door had been left open specifically for her. Jack had always suspected she fancied him. Tess had always found that suspicion useful.

Niko stood on the roof of the utility van beside the signal jammer. He was stocky, with a thick beard and a close buzz cut, and his broad hands moved over the controls with careful precision.

Boone came around the armoured transport carrying a hydraulic breaching tool as if it weighed nothing. He was the gang's blunt instrument: enormous, patient and most dangerous when Malcolm finally pointed him at something.

Jack had eaten with them. Lied for them. Slept on their couches. They had also spent two months looking for him. Tess removed her mask. "You look worse," she said. "You noticed."

"Hard not to. You're haunting our robbery." "You could've called." "I did. You stole my phone." "Then I knew it was you." A smile threatened at one corner of her mouth. "You stole from us."



"I stole from Malcolm." Boone's expression hardened. "Same thing." Malcolm glanced at him with approval. That had always been the trick. He offered people a family, then taught them that he was the family.

The third bell struck. Jack looked at Malcolm's weapon. Compact, suppressed, built for close distances. Not pointed at him yet.

"Those photographs were unnecessary," Jack said. "They got you here."



"Heller hates me." "He opened his door when I said you were hurt." Jack disliked the guilt that produced. "The man from the lobby doesn't know my name."

"He helped you. That was enough."

"And Elise Mercer?" Malcolm studied him. "I wondered which one would bother you."

"None of them." The lie sat between them. Malcolm looked past Jack toward the intersection. "Where's the money?"

"Invested." "In what?" "My continuing education." "Where is it?" "Gone." The fourth bell struck.

Boone moved behind Jack. Jack watched his reflection in the transport's torn metal. "If you were going to shoot me, you would have done it before explaining why."

"This isn't for you," Malcolm said. "It's for them." Tess and Niko watched. Jack understood. If he disappeared after stealing the emergency fund, the gang might believe escape was possible. Malcolm needed them to see that every piece returned to the board.

"You called me here to make a point." "I called you here to restore order." "Same thing with better posture." The fifth bell struck. A ghost knelt beside the overturned transport. She wore the uniform of an armoured guard, but there was no wound on the living guard Jack could see through the broken rear door.



Not her death, he realized. An old death attached to the vehicle. Someone killed on another route, another year, still following the metal.

She pointed inside. "Two breathing." Jack looked through the opening. A guard lay pinned beneath a collapsed rack. Beside him, the transport's driver struggled against a twisted seat belt. Blood covered one side of her face.



Both alive. Across the street, more ghosts clustered around fallen construction scaffolding. A living hand extended beneath it, fingers moving weakly. Someone was trapped under the false worksite Tess had detonated.

The sixth bell struck. Loose bills moved around Jack's shoes. He bent and picked up a banded bundle. Tess laughed—not at the money, Jack decided, but at the fact that even death had failed to improve him.

"There he is," she said. Jack chose to hear affection in it. Malcolm did not. Jack weighed the money in one hand. Ten thousand, if the band was honest. Enough for a room. Clothes. Food. A new phone. Distance.

The halo remained silent inside him.
The dead did not.
“Help,” the trapped guard whispered from the transport.
Jack slid the bundle into his backpack.
Malcolm shook his head.
“Every time I think you’ve reached the bottom, you find stairs.”
“Did you know people were inside?”
“It’s an armoured truck.”
“That wasn’t the question.”
“The job required pressure.”
“You changed my plan.”
“Your plan depended on patience.”
“It depended on nobody dying.”
Malcolm’s expression sharpened. “Since when do you care?”
Jack looked at the ghost in uniform.
He did not have a good answer.
The seventh bell struck.
Sirens sounded beyond the jammer’s range.
Niko looked toward the avenue. “Three minutes.”
“Plenty,” Malcolm said.
He raised the weapon.

Boone swung the breaching tool into the back of Jack’s knee.

Jack collapsed.

Pain shot through his leg. Boone caught his hoodie, lifted him and drove him against the transport. Metal buckled behind Jack’s shoulder.

Malcolm approached.

“You were useful,” he said. “That’s why this is disappointing.”

“You’re disappointed? Dad really is everywhere tonight.”

“Give me the access keys.”

“To what?”

“The accounts you built.”

Jack smiled through the pain. “You never changed them?”

Boone hit him in the ribs.

The air left Jack.

“Keys,” Malcolm said.

Jack looked at the cash in the street.

Then at the living hand under the scaffolding.

Then at the phones appearing beyond the police barrier. People in office windows were filming. A cyclist had stopped at the corner with his camera raised.

Jack could become the other body.

Six-foot-four. Armour. Flight.

Malcolm would see.

Everyone would see.

His human face would be buried beneath the veil, but the crew knew his voice, his movements, the exact cruelty of his jokes.

Jack had spent his life escaping consequences through false identities.

This one came with a halo.

He reached inward and turned it on.

The eighth bell struck.

Ivory light opened behind his head.

Boone released him.

Jack’s body lengthened against the transport. The hoodie disappeared beneath black material. White armour spread across his shoulders. Thick gold elements locked over his chest and arms. The cape erupted into the intersection, two wing-like panels throwing mist and loose money into the air.

Jack rose until he looked down at Boone.

The gang stared.

Malcolm took one step backward.

The ninth bell struck.

Jack closed one transformed hand around Boone’s breaching tool and bent it in half.

“Keys,” Jack said. His voice carried a second voice beneath it, a whisper spoken by the street’s dead. “I forgot them.”

Boone swung.

Jack caught the fist.

The impact cracked pavement under both men.

Boone was strong enough to move him.

That surprised Jack.

Boone head-butted him. Gold flared across Jack’s collar.

Tess touched the control at her wrist. “Try not to take this personally.”

“You could make that easier.”

A cable-net launched from the construction trailer, spread above Jack and dropped over the halo.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Tess said.

The ring stuttered.

His transformed body lost half its strength.

Boone drove him through the transport’s open door.

Jack landed beside the pinned guard.

The man stared through blood. “Don’t let them take the cases.” Jack glanced at the cash. “Your priorities are inspiring.” Outside, Malcolm shouted: “Niko, north line. Tess, close the west. Boone, keep him inside.”

Straight lines. Rook’s board. Jack tore at the net. Electricity ran through the gold into his halo, breaking his concentration. Shadows crawled across the white suit.

The driver lifted her head. “Please.” He stopped fighting the net and gripped the rack pinning the guard. It would not move.

He reset his stance, remembering how he had stopped the van. His cape slipped through the door, wrapped the rack and anchored to the axle outside.

Jack pulled. Metal screamed. Bolts tore free, and the guard dragged himself clear. Jack cut the driver’s belt with the broken rack. “Can you move?”

She tried and cried out. “Apparently not.” Gunfire struck the ceiling above her. Shards rained down. “Leave them,” Malcolm called. “You’re making that difficult.”

“I’m making it simple.” “That’s why I did the planning.” The tenth bell struck. Jack spread the cape over both guards. The next burst flattened against living white fabric.

He felt every impact in his spine. Niko’s jammer changed pitch. The halo flickered harder. Ghosts around the intersection distorted, their final memories pulled into static.

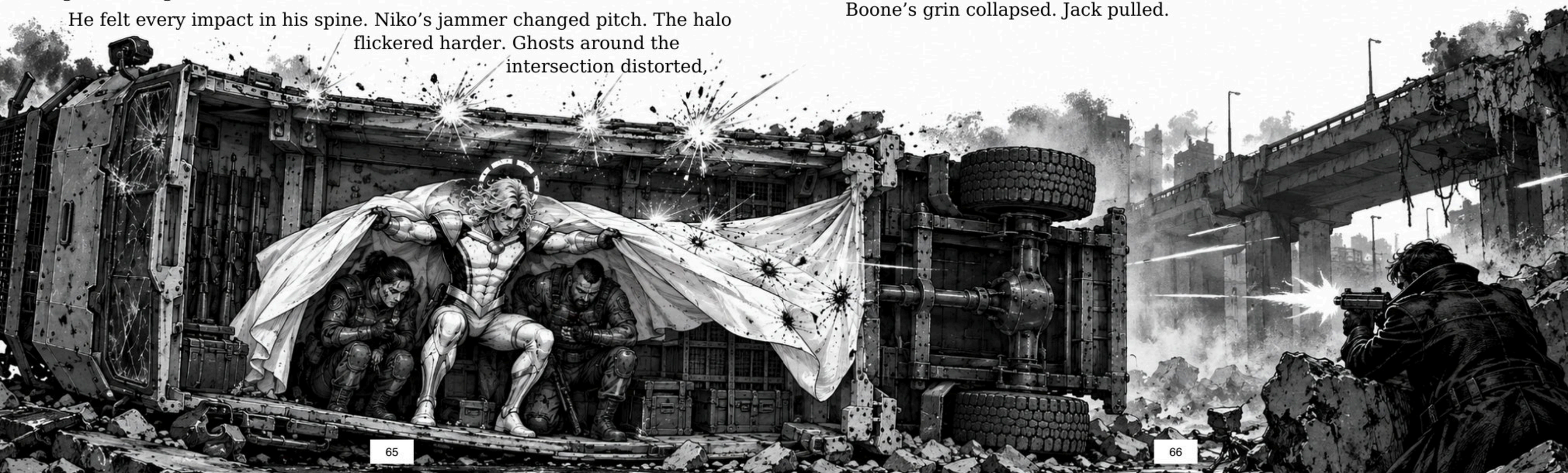
The dead guard beside Jack pointed through the truck. “Under.” Jack saw the street beneath the vehicle. Not with his eyes. Through hers. A service tunnel crossed under the intersection, abandoned after the rail project changed. Jack had included it in the original escape route. Malcolm had sealed the nearest access but not the maintenance shaft beneath the transport.

Jack commanded the ghost. “Show me.” She stepped into him. Her memory became a map. Jack drove one gold-covered fist through the floor. Black pavement appeared below. He struck again. The transport floor folded outward. The cape lowered the two living guards through the opening into the service tunnel. The driver looked back. “What are you?”

“Busy.” Jack dropped after them. Boone seized his ankle from above. The gang’s heavy weapon pulled with both hands. Jack’s cape caught the tunnel wall. For a second, they hung on opposite sides of the broken floor.

Boone grinned. “You always run.” “Only when the company’s bad.” Jack opened the halo. The dead became visible to Boone. Not all of them. Only the ones touching the transport. The uniformed ghost appeared inches from Boone’s face. Behind her stood three guards who had died protecting similar vehicles across decades.

Boone’s grin collapsed. Jack pulled.







Boone fell through the floor. They struck the tunnel together. Boone landed on top. His armoured elbow hit Jack’s throat. The halo scraped concrete. One segment rotated out of position.

Jack tried to command the dead, but the jammer turned their voices into pain. Boone hit him again. “You think putting on white changes you?”

“No.” Jack caught the third punch. “But it improves the reach.” He threw Boone down the tunnel. Boone hit a support column and did not get up.

The black hand began rising beneath him. Jack felt the Grave Sentence forming before he called it. Soil gathered around an absence. Long fingers reached for Boone’s ankle. The living man’s spirit became visible inside his body, pale and terrified. Jack could pull it out. One command and Boone would fall into the realm. Jack could leave his body breathing and his mind trapped among the dead. The power wanted a verdict. Boone had hurt people. Boone had chosen Malcolm.

Boone would kill Jack if he stood again.

The shadow hand closed. Boone’s spirit screamed. Jack saw the road of faces. He saw Grady standing beneath the dead. He released the command. The hand vanished. Boone’s spirit slammed back into his body. He gasped and curled on the concrete. Jack staggered away. The breach had opened both ways. Something on the other side had touched his shadow. The eleventh bell struck above them. Tess appeared at the rim of the breach with another charge balanced loosely in one hand.

“Nothing personal, Jack.” “You say that a lot for someone who keeps trying to bury me.” She smiled. “You keep surviving.” Then she dropped the charge into the hole. Jack wrapped the cape around the two guards and himself. The explosion collapsed the tunnel ceiling. Concrete buried them. For an instant, there was no light. Then the halo illuminated a small space beneath the cape. The driver stared at Jack. “You saved him,” she said. “Who?”

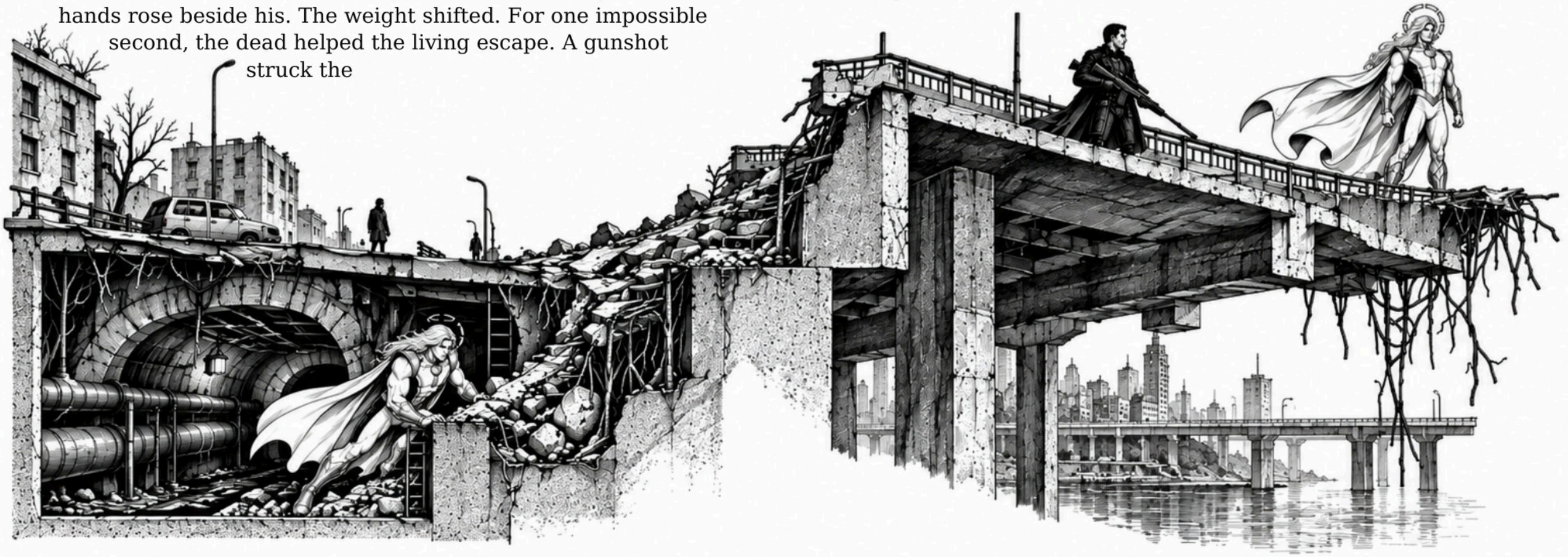
“The man trying to kill you.” Jack pushed against the rubble. “Temporary lapse.” The cape unfolded. It lifted tonnes of concrete in two wing-like panels. Jack rose with it, carrying the guards through the broken street.

Phones captured the moment from every direction. A white figure emerged from black dust beneath a fractured circle of light. The cape looked like wings. Ghosts streamed upward around him, invisible to most cameras but visible as distortions in the rain.

The twelfth bell struck. Midnight. Jack set the guards behind the police barrier. Living hands pulled them to safety. Across the wreckage, Tess gave Jack a small, almost apologetic salute. “Catch this one,” she called. Her second charge detonated. The unfinished overpass shuddered. Malcolm had rigged the central supports as a final exit. The concrete span tilted toward the intersection. Scaffolding folded beneath

it. The trapped hand across the street disappeared under falling steel. Jack flew. The cape drove him sideways between collapsing beams. He landed beneath the slab and caught it across both shoulders. The transformed body bent. The halo flared. Cracks raced through the white suit. People scattered beneath him. Jack held the concrete high enough for them to crawl free. A woman dragged a teenage boy from under the scaffolding. Two workers followed. “Anyone else?” Jack shouted. Ghosts answered from inside the wreckage. One living. Jack sent the cape through a gap. It divided into narrow feather-like strips, felt through darkness and wrapped around a man’s chest. The cape pulled him out. The slab grew heavier. The halo told Jack he could command the dead inside the concrete to hold it. He reached for them. Dozens responded. Their transparent hands rose beside his. The weight shifted. For one impossible second, the dead helped the living escape. A gunshot struck the

black interior of Jack’s suit beneath his arm. The command broke. The slab fell. The cape snapped around Jack and dragged him clear as concrete destroyed the street behind him. Malcolm stood on the tilted overpass. Smoke moved around his coat. He had discarded the compact weapon for a long rifle assembled from parts Niko carried. The barrel tracked Jack through the mist. “You could have had this city,” Malcolm called. Jack rose above the street, unsteady. “You promised me half a laundromat.” “You had no vision.” “You had no money.” “I had people.” “You had pieces.” Malcolm fired. Jack tried to move. The shot struck the halo. One gold-edged segment shattered into three smaller pieces. The world went silent. Jack fell. The cape opened too late. He hit the side of the overpass, broke through a railing and rolled across wet concrete toward Malcolm.



The suit flickered between white armour and his torn hoodie. Malcolm kicked him in the ribs. For half a second Jack was small again. Malcolm saw his face.

Not through a camera. Not through the Mourning Veil. At arm’s length, inside the failing halo. Recognition changed him. “Jack?”

The transformation surged back. Jack caught Malcolm’s boot and threw him. Malcolm slid across the tilted span. He caught the edge with both hands. Below him, fire moved through the wrecked utility van. Tess shouted Malcolm’s name from the far side, anger breaking through her usual amusement. Niko had already disappeared with the jammer. Sirens poured into the intersection now that his signal was gone.

Jack walked to the edge. Malcolm hung above the burning street. The rifle was gone. The armour made him heavier every second. Jack crouched. Malcolm looked up into the face no one else could remember. “You should let go,” Jack said. “You first.”

“You told them I always run.” “You do.” Jack considered it. He could fly away. Malcolm would fall. The gang would lose its centre. The photographs would become meaningless. No one would ever connect Jack O’Brian to the figure above the street.

One less problem. A ghost appeared beside Malcolm. Not Grady. A younger man Jack had never seen, wearing the same hard expression Malcolm used when speaking about loyalty. Malcolm’s father, perhaps. Or a

brother. Someone who had been waiting for him.

The ghost reached down. Malcolm could not see him. Jack could. He imagined Malcolm among the dead, following him through every street, never silent.

Jack caught Malcolm’s wrist. The cape wrapped around the broken railing and lifted them both. Malcolm landed hard on the overpass.

Jack stood over him. “Why?” Malcolm asked. “I already have enough ghosts.” “That’s not why.” “It’s the answer you get.” Police lights coloured the mist. Tess appeared at the far end of the overpass and aimed at Jack. Her waist-length blonde hair moved through the smoke, the pink streak bright beneath the police lights. “Still following me?” Jack asked. “You’re difficult to get over.” “That’s what I thought.” “I meant around.” Malcolm lifted one hand. Tess kept the weapon trained on Jack, but she did not fire. The corner of her mouth almost betrayed her. Jack saw the calculation return to his face. Exposure would end Jack. Secrecy could own him. Malcolm smiled. It was small enough that nobody else noticed. Jack understood. Rook had found a new board. The cape spread. “Don’t,” Malcolm said quietly. Jack looked back. “I know what you are.” “No,” Jack said. “You know who I was.” He stepped off the overpass. For one second he fell. Then the wing-cape caught him. Jack rose through phone screens, sirens and broken rain. Behind him, Malcolm watched without speaking his name.

CHAPTER EIGHT

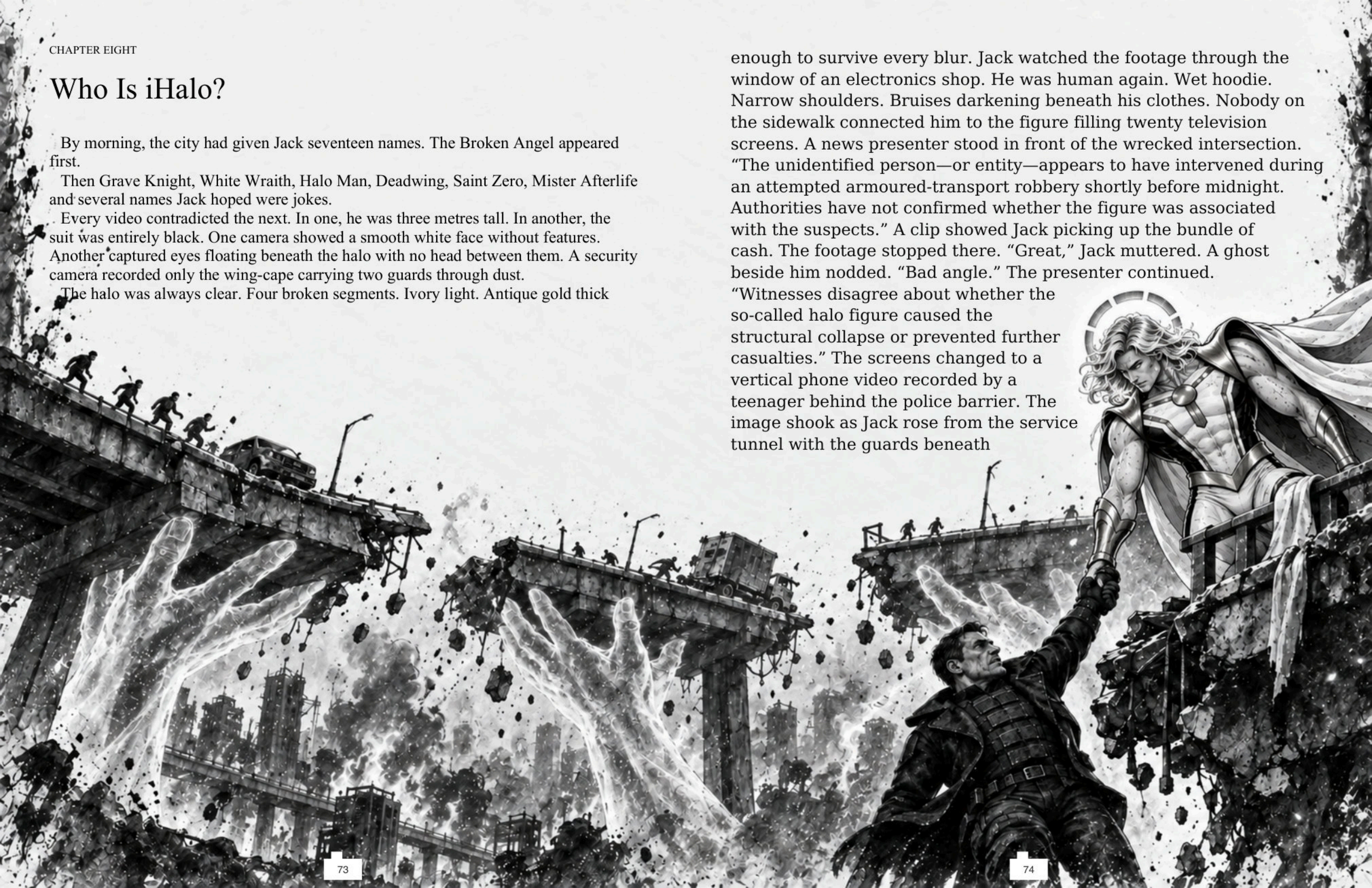
Who Is iHalo?

By morning, the city had given Jack seventeen names. The Broken Angel appeared first.

Then Grave Knight, White Wraith, Halo Man, Deadwing, Saint Zero, Mister Afterlife and several names Jack hoped were jokes.

Every video contradicted the next. In one, he was three metres tall. In another, the suit was entirely black. One camera showed a smooth white face without features. Another captured eyes floating beneath the halo with no head between them. A security camera recorded only the wing-cape carrying two guards through dust.

The halo was always clear. Four broken segments. Ivory light. Antique gold thick enough to survive every blur. Jack watched the footage through the window of an electronics shop. He was human again. Wet hoodie. Narrow shoulders. Bruises darkening beneath his clothes. Nobody on the sidewalk connected him to the figure filling twenty television screens. A news presenter stood in front of the wrecked intersection. “The unidentified person—or entity—appears to have intervened during an attempted armoured-transport robbery shortly before midnight. Authorities have not confirmed whether the figure was associated with the suspects.” A clip showed Jack picking up the bundle of cash. The footage stopped there. “Great,” Jack muttered. A ghost beside him nodded. “Bad angle.” The presenter continued. “Witnesses disagree about whether the so-called halo figure caused the structural collapse or prevented further casualties.” The screens changed to a vertical phone video recorded by a teenager behind the police barrier. The image shook as Jack rose from the service tunnel with the guards beneath



his cape. Someone off-camera asked, “Who is that?”

The teenager answered, “I don’t know. I can’t see him. I only see the halo.” An automatic caption covered the bottom of the video. IDENTITY? HALO.

Someone had cropped the line and posted it with a shorter caption. No identity. Halo. iHalo. The word spread because it was simple, because the lowercase letter looked like a person standing beneath a ring, and because the cameras remembered the halo when they forgot everything else.

Within an hour, #iHalo had passed every other name. The news presenter disliked it until a producer spoke in her earpiece. “Online viewers are referring to the figure as ‘iHalo.’” She said it carefully the first time. By the third, it sounded official. Jack stared at the screens. “No.”

The ghost beside him looked over. “Could be worse.” “It sounds like a phone accessory.” “You stole a phone once.” “I’ve stolen several.” A news graphic appeared. iHalo: HERO OR THREAT? Jack pulled his hood forward. He had not chosen the name. That seemed to be

why it belonged to him. Across the city, Malcolm watched the same footage from the rear of a moving van. Tess sat opposite him, one hand pressed to a wound in her shoulder. “Did you see his face?” she asked. “No.”

The answer came easily. Malcolm replayed the moment when the failing suit revealed Jack beneath it. He paused on a frame that showed nothing but white distortion. “Then how did he know the plan?” Tess asked. Malcolm locked the phone. “That,” he said, “is now the most valuable secret we have.”

He sent one message. Jack’s damaged phone vibrated outside the electronics shop. NICE COSTUME. Jack read it. A second message appeared. WE NEED TO DISCUSS WHAT YOU OWE. Jack deleted both. The phone vibrated again. Deleting a message was not the same as escaping it. At the end of the block, a woman in a dark coat stood beneath an awning. One side of her face was hidden by her hair and a black eyepatch. She watched Jack without looking at the televisions.

CHAPTER NINE

Stillpoint and Threat Undetermined

When he turned the corner, she followed. Jack noticed her three blocks later. Not because she was careless. Because a dead police officer kept trying to warn him. “She’s matching your pace,” the ghost said. Jack did not turn. The woman’s reflection appeared in dark storefront glass behind him. Mid-thirties. Controlled posture. Long coat cut to hide equipment rather than weather. Black eyepatch over her left eye. A pale scar continued above and below it. Face-framing bangs and neatly styled brown hair. No visible uniform. That was worse than a uniform.

Jack crossed against the light. She crossed before he did. He stopped at a newspaper box. She had already stopped beside a parked car. Half a second too early. Jack changed direction and entered a parking structure. The dead officer followed. “Bad place.” “Thank you.” “Concrete. Limited exits.” “I can fly.” “You hit a bridge.” Jack climbed the ramp. The woman entered behind him. Her footsteps did not hurry. On the third level, Jack moved between empty vehicles and turned on the halo. The transformation filled the structure with ivory light. His body rose. Gold locked into place. The cape unfolded without enough room and scraped concrete on both sides.

The woman stopped at the bottom of the ramp. Her right hand held a compact pistol pointed at the ground. Her left held a small cylinder ringed with blue light. “Hands where I can see them,” she said. Jack looked at his gold-covered hands. “They’re difficult to miss.”

“Release the transformation.” “I just put it on.” “You intervened in an armed robbery, manipulated an unknown energy field, affected multiple witnesses and left with stolen currency.”

“Allegedly.” She looked at his backpack. The bundle of cash inside suddenly felt heavier. “Place the bag on the ground.”

“No.” The pistol rose. Jack sent the cape toward her wrist. She moved before it moved.

The white panel struck empty air. The woman stepped inside its arc and fired twice. Small darts hit the gold element beneath Jack’s collar. Electricity crossed the suit. He seized the cape and pulled it back. “You knew.”

“I observed.” “You moved first.” “I’m efficient.” Jack threw a parking barrier. She ducked before he released it. The barrier passed above her and shattered against a column. The eyepatch, Jack realized. Something beneath it was showing her his decisions before he made them. He flew forward. The structure was too low for the cape to open fully. He struck the concrete ceiling, corrected and drove both feet toward her.

She was already gone. The blue cylinder rolled beneath him. “Don’t,” she said. Jack landed beside it.

The device opened. Six metal fins struck the floor. A pulse expanded through the garage, silent but visible as a distortion in dust and rainwater.

The halo stopped rotating. Jack’s transformed body locked between states. White armour became transparent. His right

arm shortened. The cape fell as dead fabric. Every ghost in the structure screamed.

Jack dropped to one knee. The woman approached. “What is that thing?” he demanded. “A question with a radius.”

“Turn it off.” “When you do.” Jack reached for the halo. It would not turn. The pulse had not destroyed his power.

It had interrupted the connection between the broken segments, forcing each piece to answer at a slightly different moment.



The woman’s pistol remained steady. “Name.”

“People seem to have picked one.” “Your name.” “Unknown entity has more authority.” “Affiliation.” “Unemployed.” “Why did the gang know you?” “They’re friendly.” “Why did you save their leader?” Jack looked up. The eyepatch hid half her expression, but the visible eye was not angry. It was measuring him.

Because he would have become a ghost. Because Jack had already seen what waited. Because Grady had said try. “Ask him,” Jack said. “I intend to.”

The dead officer moved behind her. Jack watched the ghost pass through the blue field without distortion. The device interrupted the halo and the living suit. It did

B2

What is that thing?

A question with a radius.

POLICE

Your disadvantage.

B2

POLICE

POLICE

B2

nothing to the dead. The woman followed Jack’s eyes. She saw him looking at empty space. “What is there?” “Your disadvantage.” Jack commanded the officer to move. The ghost reached through the woman’s pistol. Jack felt the weapon’s history through him: range tests, maintenance tables, a previous owner who had died with it in his hand. The dead officer pulled on that memory. The pistol discharged into the ceiling. The woman flinched. Not before. Now. Jack understood. Her altered eye could see the next half-second of the living world. The dead had no next moment. They were invisible to her advantage. Jack called every ghost in the structure. They moved through the blue pulse and entered the machines it touched. Memories filled sensors never designed to remember. Car alarms erupted. Headlights flashed. The null device stuttered beneath a hundred dead signals. The halo rotated one inch. Jack forced it farther. The woman lifted her left hand to the eyepatch. “Don’t,” Jack said. She pulled it

up. The eye beneath was almost entirely dark. Fine scars radiated across the skin around it. The pupil caught light before light reached the other side of her face. She moved. Jack saw three versions of her for an instant: where she had been, where she was and where she would be half a second later. She crossed the distance before his cape could rise. One hand struck the damaged gold at his collar. The other attached a black disc to his chest. The suit began folding inward. Jack caught her wrist. She turned before his fingers closed and used his changing height to throw him over her shoulder.

He hit concrete as Jack. Five-foot-eight. Weak. Hoodie torn. Halo gone. The black disc blinked on his chest. The woman stood over him, breathing harder now. A thin line of blood ran from beneath the lifted patch. “Identity confirmed as human,” she said into a microphone at her collar. Jack kicked the null cylinder. It slid under a parked car. The dead officer stepped through the woman and filled her with half a second that had already happened. For once, her two visions showed the same moment. She hesitated. Jack ripped the black disc from his chest and turned the halo on. The transformation threw her backward. The cape caught the ceiling, pulled Jack through the gap between two levels and tore a section of concrete loose behind him. He burst onto the roof. Morning wind struck the wing-panels. The city opened below. The woman reached the roof access as Jack lifted from it. Her eyepatch was down again. “Stop!” she called. Jack hovered beyond the edge. “What do I call you?” she asked. He looked at the screens across the city carrying the name he had never chosen. “You already have a file.”

Then he dropped. The woman reached the edge. For one half-second, she saw him falling. In the next, the cape opened. Jack vanished between the towers. Claire Showstar lowered the pistol. Blood continued from beneath the eyepatch. She wiped it away with one thumb and examined the black residue left by the suit on her glove. “Threat undetermined,” she said. Hours later, a secure file opened on a government terminal. The organization’s name appeared above a frame of the fractured halo. The figure’s face was absent. Four different cameras had produced four different men, none matching Jack O’Brian. Claire typed. DESIGNATION: iHalo IDENTITY: UNKNOWN NATURE: HUMAN OR HUMAN-DERIVED ABILITIES: TRANSFORMATION; FLIGHT; STRUCTURAL RESISTANCE; APPARENT INTERACTION WITH DECEASED PERSONS; WITNESS AND CAMERA DISTORTION CRIMINAL AFFILIATION: SUSPECTED CIVILIAN RESCUES: CONFIRMED THREAT LEVEL: UNDETERMINED She paused over the final field. RECOMMENDED ACTION. Her altered eye ached beneath the patch. Half a second showed her finger pressing one key. The present allowed another. She typed: LOCATE. OBSERVE. DO NOT ENGAGE ALONE. Claire attached the robbery footage. In one frame, iHalo held the overpass while faint human shapes raised transparent hands beside him. She enlarged the image. For less than a second, one of those shapes looked directly at the camera.











At the shelter where Daniel Mercer had volunteered, the morning staff found a banded bundle of cash inside the donation slot. Nine thousand nine hundred dollars. Jack kept one hundred. He stood across the street with coffee, a sandwich and dry socks purchased from a convenience store. Daniel's ghost appeared beside the shelter door. The fishing hat was back. Jack waited for approval. Daniel looked at the coffee, the sandwich and the stolen money. "One hundred?" he asked. "I had expenses." Daniel almost smiled. It was not forgiveness. Jack decided it was close enough. The ghost faded into the shelter wall. For the first time since leaving the grave, one dead voice had become quiet. Jack's phone vibrated. Malcolm. No threats this time. One photograph. Jack in human form outside the shelter, taken from half a block away. Below it, four words. YOUR SECRET IS SAFE. A second line appeared. AS LONG AS MINE IS. Jack deleted the message. He removed the battery. The phone vibrated in his hand anyway. Across town, Malcolm sat alone while Tess argued with a doctor in the next room. His armour lay in broken sections across a table. He replayed the overpass footage. Jack's transformed face refused to remain in focus. Malcolm did not need the image. He knew the way Jack tilted his head before an insult. He knew the left-handed reach for money. He knew the exact expression Jack made when doing the right thing [illegible]. Malcolm opened a paper notebook and wrote one word. iHalo. Beneath it, he wrote: JACK O'BRIAN. He closed the book and locked it inside a black case. Not evidence. Leverage. Jack walked toward the river. The city lived around him. Traffic moved. Doors opened. People argued into phones and carried groceries and hurried toward work. Between them walked everyone who ever died. Jack saw them now as layers rather than a wall. Some were loud. Some barely remained. Some followed places, some objects, some people. A few followed him. He had no apartment, no job and ninety-three dollars left after breakfast. He had a gang leader holding his identity. A government agent hunting him. A dead father trapped behind doors. And a halo that turned him into something the city had already decided to fear, worship or blame. Jack should have felt ruined.







Instead, for the first time in years, he had options.
He reached the riverwalk and stopped.

His shadow extended across the pavement.
The sun was behind him.
The shadow pointed the wrong way.
Jack looked over his shoulder.
Nobody stood there.
The dead nearby had gone silent.
Inside Jack’s shadow, something shifted.
Not his arms.
Not his head.
A thin figure unfolded where no body existed and lifted one hand toward the living city.
Jack turned back.
The shadow did not.

