

Chapter One: Jack in the Warren

The deep door well mostly protected the little boy from the sleet. He knew he must lie absolutely still – movement might attract a wanderer looking for a haven like his – but he shivered uncontrollably every time a vagrant icy blast pelted him. He would surely die if ejected back into the rain.

Then the impossible happened. The splintered wooden door he huddled against opened, dumping him into brazen light and the most wonderful heat he had ever felt. Perhaps he had died and this was the heaven the Christers talked about. Rough hands immediately grasped him, shouted harshly at him and to each other. He heard only isolated phrases from different people: “What is this...” “...tryin t’ burgle...” “...lidl thief...” They handled him roughly. No, this wasn’t heaven but he was, more than likely, dead.

The hands roughly thrust him back into the rain and darkness. He bumped and slid down the rain-slick cobbles. He knew he should hurt but felt nothing. The heat and light must’ve been a dream, the rough handling, talk and return to the rain, a nightmare. Just like the rest of life: mostly bad mixed with a little bit of good.

... and then he felt nothing.

More dreams: Of being carried, or was he floating? Swaddled tightly. Strange voices. Shadows leaping against a wall. Instead of the cold and wet it was now only cold but somehow he knew it was all right to shiver. After some interminable period he awakened coughing, very cold. One thing he knew for sure: he wasn’t dead. His throat was too sore and he had a terrible headache. The world seemed to blink on and off in an uncomfortable way. He felt a blanket wrapped tightly about him. Where had it come from, a dry one at that?

He slept; coughing again awakened him. Now, he felt so hot he disentangled himself from the blanket and cast it off. Faint light illuminated a small square: dawn light coming through a window. He must be inside somewhere. How had that happened?

“Ah, yor awake.” A woman’s quiet voice. “Drink this.” A hand behind his head gently lifted it so he could gulp a warm, bitter liquid from a cup. “It’s salix mixed with tea. It’ll ease the sore throat an help the fever.” She gently lowered his head and tucked the blanket firmly around him. “Don keep kickin this off. Y’ need t’ stay warm.” She continued to talk quietly but he was too tired to concentrate, or even care what she said.

He awoke much later. His head ached fiercely and he was cold again, shivering under several blankets though he lay near a blazing fireplace. Full day, albeit a gloomy, overcast one, shone through the little window. A pretty girl, a few years older than him and dark like the woman, appeared.

“Where’s... how...” A fit of coughing interrupted him. After it ended he asked, “How’d I git here?”

“Ed Hanrahan found y’ an lugged y’ here,” said the girl. She disappeared from his view and returned holding a cup. “Mum said for y’ t’ drink this when y’ woke up.” She raised his head, not as gently as the woman had done, and placed a second pillow under it. She held the cup to his lips and he drank more of the bitter liquid. She held it at such an angle that it gushed into his throat. He turned away to avoid gagging and coughed again.

“Mum says y’ gotta drink it all. It’s got medicine in it.”

Used to doing things for himself, he took the cup from her in hands shaking so badly he almost spilled it.

"If y' spill it, y' lidl shit, I'll make another cup an y'll hafta drink it all."

Her imperious tone stiffened his determination to drink the tea without her help. As soon as he finished he lay back as exhausted as if he had run across the entire Warren.

"I can't keep callin y' lidl shit. What's yor name?" she demanded.

"Jack."

"I'm Lilliyaana. My mum's Amelya. Amelya Moritz. She's workin so I'm stuck with y'."

He dozed fitfully, sometimes dreamed weird dreams that he barely remembered later. The headache gradually waned but not the cough or sore throat. The girl frequently changed the damp cloth she had put over his forehead as his fever dried it out. She sometimes spoke to him, but he found it hard to concentrate and didn't try to answer her. Sometimes she brought him water or more tea.

Voices awakened him in the evening. He saw the woman and girl talking quietly. When he coughed they looked at him and the woman came over. He recognized her as the woman who trundled the little cooking cart across Gallows Square every morning. She felt his forehead with her palm and in the same quiet tone of the morning asked how he felt.

"All right." He coughed again. No one had ever before asked how he felt.

She smiled a little. "I wouldn't go that far but yor fever feels like it's down a bit. Is the tea ready, Lilli?"

The girl said yes and brought a cup to the woman. After she helped him drink it she brought out a small vial, opened the lid and poured a viscous fluid into a spoon.

"I got this today for yor cough," she said as he took the spoon. "Drink it."

Later, when the woman tried to feed him some soup he took the bowl and spoon from her and fed himself. Help from others made him uncomfortable. After he finished the woman gave him more of the thick bitter liquid. Eating had exhausted him so much he fell asleep immediately. When coughing awakened him in the night the woman gave him more of the cough medicine.

The girl replacing the damp cloth on his forehead awakened him the next morning.

"Yor fever's down a lidl," said the girl. "How d' y' feel?"

"Better." He did. He no longer had chills though his throat was sore and he felt very weak.

"Well, y'll soon be well nough t' git outta here so I can git my bed back. See, I usually sleep where yor sleepin. Mum don want me in the same room with y' cause I might git yor sickness so I'm stuck sleepin with her." She jerked her thumb toward the door beside the fireplace. "Course yor bein here ent *all* bad. I git t' miss my lessons with ol Bumsuck." She grinned. "His real name's Brunswik."

Brunswik ran the only school in the Warren. On days too hot to hold class inside, Jack had seen him seated on his stool in Gallows Square, his students squatting on the paving stones in a semicircle around him.

She stood up and turned to the fireplace. "Mum said y' need more tea an cough stuff."

He drank the tea eagerly and a glass of water. He had gotten used to the tea's bitterness and was very thirsty.

She talked as he drank it. "Bumsuck charges mum for teachin. I don see why I need im. Mum don read an she gits by jus fine."

Jack, too, had wondered why some people valued reading and writing when just staying alive took so much work.

The next day Amelya pronounced him well enough for Lilliyaana to return to school. When Lilliyaana returned she made tea for him and gave him cough syrup. When he once tried to stammer out his gratitude she interrupted him in her usual brusque manner.

"I ent doin this just for yor sake, y' lidl shit. I want my bed back."

The next day Jack felt even better though still weak. His fever was gone. The cough had diminished and with it the soreness of his throat. The bright daylight peering through the tiny window cheered him. For the first time since the onset of the illness he was hungry. Amelya gave him solid food that evening, pickled cabbage with a few shreds of salt pork in it and potatoes. The next evening he felt well enough to eat at the table with Amelya and Lilliyaana. Amelya made all three of them bow their heads before the meal while she said something called a prayer. They couldn't eat until she finished which annoyed him a little because of his hunger until he remembered that if not for her he wouldn't have survived the night of the storm. And, of course, he was used to being hungry.

"Where do y' live anyhow?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Nowhere."

"A orphan. I figgered so when I seen y' round Gallows Square. That's why yor clothes is such rags. I got sunthin for y'." She went into her other room and brought back something rolled under her arm. "See how this fits." She shook out the bundle.

A jacket, used but in good condition! His was too small and so full of holes he often had trouble finding the ones that led to the sleeves.

"Well," said Lilliyaana, "try it on, y' lidl shit."

"Watch yor mouth, lidl girl," Amelya said mechanically.

He reached for the jacket and slowly pulled it on. It was lined with wool. So warm. An uncomfortable emotion he had not felt for a long time threatened him.

"Amelya, I – I ... " His throat closed so that he couldn't speak.

"Yor welcome, Jack. I know it's a lidl big but y'll grow in t' it."

She showed him how to clean his teeth and made him bathe every other day. She told him to continue these things after he left.

"Y' want t' keep yor teeth healthy. Y' don wanta look like ol Naddick do y'?" Naddick was a crippled, toothless beggar who slept in Gallows Square. "Ent no girl 'd have y' then." When he said, rather sullenly, that he didn't care what any old girls thought of him she laughed and shook her head.

Part of him would have liked to stay in the warm comfort of the house forever but both Amelya and, less subtly, Lilliyaana, let him know that was not to be. Most of him though missed the streets and freedom from Amelya's regimens of physical and spiritual hygiene.

Because of the uncomfortable feeling connected to the jacket, saying good-by seemed awkward so one day while Amelya was at work and Lilliyaana at school, Jack left wearing his warm jacket.

He usually remembered always being an orphan. Occasionally, though, a vague feeling, too amorphous to call a memory, tugged at him: of someone (he was certain it was a *her*) holding him lovingly. When very young, while waiting for sleep, he had allowed the quasi-memory to become real enough to banish all fear, loneliness and other longings he couldn't name just long enough to fall asleep. Upon awakening, however, he was again alone and scared and as often as not, hungry. Sometimes a tightness clutched his throat and his eyes misted. Angry at what he considered a weakness Jack always cleared his throat and blinked away the moisture before it could turn to tears. Gradually, with difficulty, he had forced the tender woman fantasy out of his

mind. In time it became less than a memory of a feeling. When it threatened to reemerge he destroyed it with strenuous activity like running.

The uncomfortable emotion threatened to return as he left Amelya's house. If the tender woman had been real, he thought, she would have been someone like Amelya, though *not* her of course. Amelya would never have abandoned him.

Less than a block from Amelya's house he began to run. The few people about in the Warren looked curiously at the little boy racing up and down its streets and alleys.

* * *

The largest and westernmost of Nelefer's two hills was called Old Town Hill because the original little trading town had been founded on its north slope. The slum called the Warren capped it like a dingy, malignant pustule. Only the most noisome or useless refuse clogged its mazy alleys; no one threw away anything that could be eaten, used or sold. Below the Warren lay the Slopes: North and South Slope and the Gaian Slope. The slumped ridge called the Saddle connected Old Town Hill to Pallasil. (Pallasil had derived from a contraction of "Palace Hill.")

* * *

One evening in early March, about a month after Jack had left Amelya's care, he squatted on the roof of the Gallows Bird Tavern, hidden by its parapet. He watched the daytime workers trudging up from their ill-paying regular or day labor jobs on North Slope crossing Gallows Square. Most of them would spend the evenings behind locked doors where the frustration caused by poverty often led to sullen silence, heated arguments or occasional violence. Among them, singly or in groups, were the kids, orphans like Jack or those with parents too poor or stingy to feed them enough. Hunger had driven them downhill at first light where they rummaged through piles of trash and garbage or filched or begged for food. Getting caught stealing, especially by the bulls, held dire, even fatal, consequences. Panhandling seldom earned more than a kick from locals though an occasional out-of-towner would give a few minims. Jack knew, even when very small, that throngs of young children attracted their worst enemies, the bulls and merchants. Older kids often took advantage of that by coercing young ones by deception or threats to distract the bulls.

Jack had learned early that safety lay in treating everybody as potential enemies. The older kids could steal his food or beat him up just for the hell of it. The younger kids were competition for the best garbage. Shopkeepers meant potential thrashings while bulls dealt in *certain* violence. Or worse. He fought back when he thought he could win and fled when he knew he couldn't. He won often enough to earn esteem among his peers and grudging respect from some of the older kids. Memories of the beatings he couldn't avoid, mostly from adults, he kept hidden in a dark place deep inside until the day he grew big enough to seek vengeance.

Others had already gone downhill to nighttime jobs or in pursuit of endeavors better suited to darkness. Jack would soon follow them. He had begun prowling at night shortly before Amelya nursed him back to health. Darkness made hiding from the bulls easier, especially since they didn't expect to see little kids out then. Remnants of meals discarded by restaurants and more affluent families were fresher and his competitors, feral cats, dogs and rats, easier to chase away than other kids. He learned when and where the best food would be thrown out. For thievery, the dark made access to clotheslines and courtyards easier and safer too.

At last the stars appeared. Jack climbed down a chimney which, though attached to the tavern's side, had once belonged to a now-vanished building adjoining it. He crossed the lot once occupied by the missing building and the now nearly vacant Gallows Square. Soon he left the

safety of the Warren's dark, narrow, twisty byways behind to enter the broad, straight streets of North Slope, many of them starkly illuminated by pole-mounted lamps.

He avoided the brightest streets in favor of unlighted side streets and alleys whenever possible. He went first to the alley behind the restaurant where Benjim's grandmother sometimes worked. A Warren denizen herself and aware of its children's needs, she placed scraps in orderly but hidden piles for them when she took trash out to the alley. He found nothing edible. Either she wasn't working that night or some feral beast or person had beat him to it. His other searches turned up only a few half rotten scraps of fruit and vegetables. His hunger had been blunted but he wished to find something more substantial, if only a moldy crust of bread.

His search led him farther downslope than he liked to the brightly lighted pleasure district near South Cove. Sometimes he could beg a few minims from a drunk. More often they aimed a blow or kick at him which he had become adept at avoiding. Watching intently for a likely mark kept him from noticing the three older boys he most wanted to avoid.

"Hey, lidl man."

Hwaano Keentaana's deep voice warned Jack in time to stop and take a step backward. That put him just out of the boy's reach; he could disappear into the crowd if necessary. Yet he hid his fear of Hwaano and his cronies.

"Where y' off to in such a hurry, lidl man?" Sleek, dark Hwaano's grin meant little. The big kid was unpredictable; one of his manic moods could change to sudden violence for no apparent reason. Cruuz, a slender solemn boy stood on one side of him, Aarvil, a hulking bully with broad, sloping shoulders on the other.

Jack shrugged but said nothing. He looked directly into Hwaano's eyes but kept track of Aarvil at the same time. Hwaano smacked the young ones around, if it wasn't too much trouble, just because he could. Cruuz ignored them for the most part. Aarvil, however, enjoyed hurting them. Though Jack had always dodged him he knew other kids he had injured, sometimes badly, for sheer pleasure.

Hwaano's smile remained but his eyes narrowed, which often meant an emotional change.

"What'll y' do, lidl man, if I wipe the street with yor skinny ass?"

Without taking his eyes from Hwaano's, Jack spat as he had often see Hwaano do and said, "I reckon we won't know till y' try."

Hwaano glared savagely at him for a moment, then straightened, threw his head back and roared in laughter. "I b'lieve I found the bravest fucker on this street. He smacked meaty Aarvil in the stomach and gave him a fey grin. "Even yor wouldna had the balls t' say that t' me, Aarv. An y' better never try it." He laughed loudly again and thrust Aarvil away. "Tell y' what, lidl Jack. Any time yor on the street with me y' don gotta worry bout nobody else. I gotcher back."

Since Cruuz had no interest in little kids he had ignored the whole incident. Aarvil had not. He glared savagely at Jack. He apparently felt the confrontation had cost him respect. And he clearly blamed Jack.

Jack turned uphill toward the Warren hoping he could find something to steal to turn into money. He felt safer as the crowd dwindled. Then he recognized someone coming down the street toward him, the only older boy he trusted, the one who defended the young ones when he was around. Flin was a loner though so Jack seldom saw him.

Flin noticed him at the same time and waved. As they drew near he said in his upcountry drawl, "Hai, Jack. Jus the cob aa wanted t' see."

"Hai, Flin. Watcha need?"

Jack hoped he wanted him to run an errand. Flin paid the young ones for such services in food or a few minims so he never lacked for helpers.

Flin nodded toward a dark alley's mouth. They ducked into it to avoid notice.

"Ye know Zukr the fence?"

"Ai. He lives behind Gallows Square a ways."

"Well, aa got sunthin he needs tonight. Aa got business somewheres else so aa need someone t' git it t' im for me."

"I kin do that."

Flin took a small pouch from the inner pocket of his shirt and handed it to Jack.

"Hide this quick an make sure nobody knows y' got it. Git it up t' Zukr quick as y' kin."

Jack quickly put it in his own inside pocket. "What is it?"

"One a them Beforeworld drugs. They call it scatter cause that's what it does t' yor brain. Ye think a so many things at once ye don know what yor doin. Once ye start takin it ye canna stop. Bad stuff. He knows somebody on South Slope that's gotta have it. He can sell it to 'm cheaper than they can buy it legal."

Jack knew better than to ask where Flin got the drug. Flin kept his secrets to himself.

"Here."

Jack hadn't noticed Flin holding the coin out to him in the dark. He took it.

"Now git," said Flin. "An don git caught."

Jack got. Once in the light he saw that the coin was a fiver: five whole ens! Enough for a full meal with money left over.

Jack, who knew every winding alley and block of buildings in the Warren had, of course, often passed through Amelya's neighborhood – a dozen or so tiny houses a few blocks east of Gallows Square – before he met her and Lilliyaana. He had heard its history from Benjim who lived with his grandmother in one of the three-story apt buildings that bookended the site. Benjim had said his grandmother told him the site where the Moritzes now lived had once been a similar apt block. It collapsed when she was a young woman. After the useable building materials disappeared, as they always did quickly in the Warren, squatters threw up crude dwellings on the site. Finally a family named Andriassin acquired title to the property, cleared away the squatters' shacks and crammed rental dwellings of scarcely better quality in their place. They perched a few feet above the street on the former building's remaining debris of broken stone and plaster. The years and weather had compacted the rubble unevenly to cant the houses at different angles to look as if they had frozen in the midst of a drunken revel.

Sometimes, when Amelya was down slope serving food from her little cart and Lilliyaana was at school, Jack left food on their doorstep, a loaf of bread, a clutch of vegetables or some other item he had either stolen or purchased with money earned from petty thefts.

One day in the spring he saw a wooden box beside the door. Its green paint and the fresh black dirt filling it were the only splotches of color on the gritty cobbled street lined with somber buildings. The dirt's fresh smell contrasted sharply with the City's complex stench. When he passed the house a week later he saw little green shoots emerging from the soil. Thereafter, he passed by more often to watch the miracle of the plants growing so cleanly and greenly. Most of the Warren's flora consisted of sickly, dust-covered weeds in cluttered vacant lots or struggling through cracks in paving and walls. The only plants he had seen grown on purpose were flowers and vegetables in the courtyards, gardens and windows of affluent folk on the Slopes and the marijuana crops on the Warren's rooftops, the latter illegal because their growers sold them clandestinely to Warren residents without paying the required City tax.

The green box reminded him of the flower boxes in the upper windows of the Sudherlin Social Club. One Saturday night he shinnied up a column of its back porch, out of sight of the Club's employees and patrons, plucked the largest four or five flowers he could reach and thrust them into a sack he had acquired earlier for that purpose. He would give them to Amelya the next day, the only day she did not work. She would go to the Evanjellin church in the morning and return home by noon.

He awoke at noon Sunday and made his ablutions at the Warren's community well; he wouldn't dare visit Amelya without washing up. He reached her house about mid-afternoon in his cleanest, least tattered clothes clutching the bag holding the flowers and knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" Amelya called from above. He looked up to see her leaning over the parapet. "Jack, good t' see y'. Be right down."

When she opened the door the fresh yeasty smell of baking bread so overwhelmed the street stench that he almost felt faint. She had apparently changed from the fancy clothes he knew people wore to church. Perspiration stained the armpits of her loose, smock-like dress. Hair escaping her bun framed her sweating face. She favored him with a small smile.

"Come in, boy. We're doin laundry on the roof. Sorry, but this is our busy day, the only one I got t' wash clothes an bake bread."

The room was dark after coming in from in the blinding sun, warm and flooded with the wonderful baking smell. A square hole in a back corner let in a shaft of bright sunlight. He hadn't noticed it when he'd been here sick in February because of a closed trapdoor.

She nodded at his bag. "Whatcha got there?"

"Oh, uh –" Suddenly shy, he held the bag out to her. "I got sunthin for y', Amelya."

"My, how thoughtful, Jack."

She took the bag to the table, reached in, carefully took the flowers out and ...

... they were dead! The stems, though still green were flat, the leaves pale and the purple flowers limp. Seeing his wretched gift, for the first time in a long while Jack felt like crying.

"Jack, how wonderful! I love irises." She smiled again, more broadly.

"But – but they was alive when I, uh, got 'm, Amelya." Despite his best efforts his voice trembled.

"They're fine. All they need is water." From the shelves beside the fireplace she took down a vase and filled it with water from a bucket on the lowest shelf. She trimmed the lower ends off the stems and put the flowers in the vase which she placed in the center of the table. She stepped back to admire the bouquet. The vase did, at least, hold the stems upright though the blossoms drooped like the heads of senile old drunks.

"C'mon," she said, inclining her head toward the beam of sunlight in the corner. "We can't leave all the laundry f' Lilliyaana t' do."

She climbed the ladder up through the opening; he followed. She called out to Lilliyaana that they had a guest but he didn't see the girl at first. A temporary awning covered the half of the roof from the chimney to the trap door side. Garments and sheets hanging from two clotheslines outside the awning shivered in a light breeze. Lilliyaana appeared between two of the sheets.

"Jack, y' lidl shit! Y' shoulda come a coupla hours ago t' help us wash." But she smiled. To her mother: "I dumped the water." Through the hanging laundry's light dance he caught glimpses of wooden washtubs turned upside down at the roof's verge.

"Good," said her mother. "Let's enjoy the breeze for a bit." She sat down on a blanket under the awning. Lilliyaana and he joined her.

“Stay t’ dinner with us, Jack,” said Amelya. “We got plenty. Made lotsa money last week.” Lilliyaana snorted. “She always says that.”

“Well, it’s true this time.”

“I’m almost through my fourth form with ol Bumsuck,” Lilliyaana told Jack. “Then I can git a real job.”

“Y’ got a job. Y’ can’t work no more till y’ finish the next two forms.”

“Cleanin for Miz Andrissin once a week ent a real job. An ol Bumsuck don teach higher forms. He barely knows nough t’ teach four.” She held up her hand when her mother started to interrupt. “We can’t afford t’ send me t’ some school down on the Slopes an that’s that.”

Amelya sighed. “Git yor fourth form done, then we’ll see. Yor prob’ly right bout how much Mesr Brunswik knows. Lot a the stuff he teaches don’t seem nacherl. Like what he says bout the Warren, that Notables use t’ live here. They called it the High City then.” The Notables, City’s aristocrats, consisted primarily of native First Families, members of the Moerrelm Clans and a few wealthy foreigners from the lake cities and beyond. “Whadda y’ think a that, Jack?”

Jack started. No one had ever asked his opinion about anything. He looked around at the big crumbling hulks surrounding their little island of single-story hovels.

“If they ever lived here I figger they been gone awhile. Somebody tol me they used t’ hang people in Gallows Square. Is that so?”

“Ai. That’s how it come by its name back when it was the High City. They did the hangins t’ let crooks know what’d happen to ’m if they burgled up *here*. They called the hangin trees ‘gallows,’ put ’m up at night an did the hangins the next mornin. Folks come from all over the City to see it. Brought picnic lunches. A band played. After the hangins they took the gallows down an put ’m away till the next ’n.”

“I’d like t’ see ’m leave them hangin trees up all night *now*,” said Jack.

Lilliyaana laughed to think how quickly the lumber would appear for sale down slope.

Jack had hardly been aware of Amelya’s departure but of course she had heard the Warren’s history from Lilliyaana before. Now she called from below to say the bread was ready and they should come down and lock the trapdoor. Downstairs, Jack was glad to see that the irises had revived somewhat.

Dinner was salt pork, sharply spicy mustard greens fried in the pork grease and fresh bread. Jack hadn’t eaten anything so delicious in a long time. Nor so freshly prepared.

After they finished eating Amelya asked Jack how old he was. He shrugged and turned awkwardly away. He hated not knowing things about himself he somehow sensed he should.

She turned to her daughter. “Whadda y’ think, Lilli? Don he look bout twelve?”

She shrugged indifferently. “I spose. That’s three years younger’n me.”

“Okay then.” She grasped his chin firmly and turned his face toward her. “Well then, that’s that. Yor twelve years old. This day’ll be yor birthday ever year from now on.” She released his chin and turned to rummage in the box that held her meager kitchen wares. “It ent no birthday without a gift.” She handed him something.

A knife with a blade that folded into its handle! Better than any knife he had ever owned. His were dull cast-offs. He looked up at her with abject gratitude. He would have hugged her if he had known how.

When he left that evening she gave him the rest of the loaf they’d had for dinner. He saved it against the next night he would find little or nothing to eat.

Note to the Reader:

Thank you for reading the first chapter of ***Shadow Jack***, book 3 of the Shadow World series. You need not have read the first two books of the series before reading ***Shadow Jack***. Though some characters appear in more than one novel each tells its own story.

If you *do* want to read the whole series though, I highly encourage it.

You can order a copy of ***Shadow Jack*** [here](#).

Other books in the Shadow World series include:

The Shadow of Armageddon (The Shadow World Book 1)
A Shadow Over the Afterworld (The Shadow World Book 2)
Shadowspawn (The Shadow World Book 4)