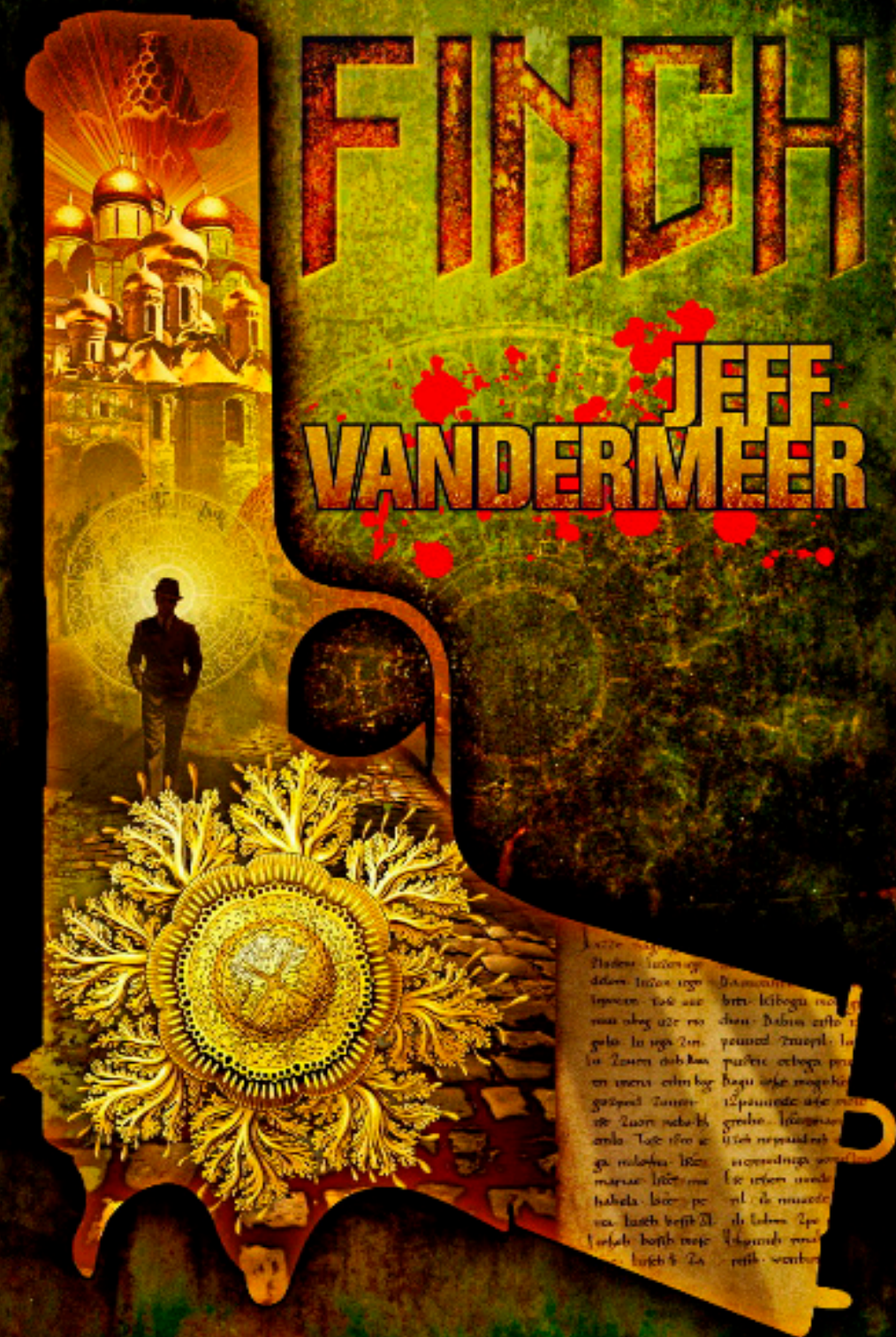


FINCH

**JEFF
VANDERMEER**



MONDAY

Interrogator: What did you see then?

Finch: Nothing. I couldn't see anything.

I: Wrong answer.

[howls and screams and sobbing]

I: Had you ever met the Lady in Blue before?

F: No, but I'd heard her before.

I: Heard her where?

F: On the fucking radio station, that's where.

[garbled comment, not picked up]

F: It's her voice. Coming up from the underground. People say.

I: So what did you see, Finch?

F: Just the stars. Stars. It was night.

I: I can ask you this same question for hours, Finch.

F: You wanted me to say I saw her. I said I saw her! I said it, damn you.

I: There is no Lady in Blue. She's just a propaganda myth from the rebels.

F: I saw her. On the hill. Under the stars.

I: What did this apparition say to you, Finch? What did this vision say?

1

Finch, at the apartment door, breathing heavy from five flights of stairs, taken fast. The message that'd brought him from the station was already dying in his hand. Red smear on a limp circle of green fungal paper that had minutes before squirmed clammy. Now he had only the door to pass through, marked with the gray caps' symbol.

239 Manzikert Avenue, apartment 525.

An act of will, crossing that divide. Always. Reached for his gun, then changed his mind. Some days were worse than others.

A sudden flash of his partner Wyte, telling him he was compromised, him replying, "I don't have an opinion on that." Written on a wall at a crime scene: *Everyone's a collaborator. Everyone's a rebel.* The truth in the weight of each.

The doorknob cold but grainy. The left side rough with light green fungus.

Sweating under his jacket, through his shirt. Boots heavy on his feet.

Always a point of no return, and yet he kept returning.

I am not a detective. I am not a detective.

Inside, a tall, pale man dressed in black stood halfway down the hall, staring into a doorway. Beyond him, a dark room. A worn bed. White sheets dull in the shadow. Didn't look like anyone had slept there in months. Dusty floor. Even before he'd started seeing Sintra, his place hadn't looked this bad.

The Partial turned and saw Finch. "Nothing in that room, Finch. It's all in here." He pointed into the doorway. Light shone out, caught the dark glitter of the Partial's skin where tiny fruiting bodies had taken hold. Uncanny left eye in a gaunt face. Always twitching.

Moving at odd angles. Pupil a glimmer of blue light at the bottom of a dark well. Fungal.

“Who are you?” Finch asked.

The Partial frowned. “I’m—”

Finch brushed by the man without listening, got pleasure out of the push of his shoulder into the Partial’s chest. The Partial, smelling like sweet rotting meat, walked in behind him.

Everything was golden, calm, unknowable.

Then Finch’s eyes adjusted to the light from the large window and he saw: living room, kitchen. A sofa. Two wooden chairs. A small table, an empty vase with a rose design. Two bodies lying on the pull rug next to the sofa. One man, one gray cap without legs.

Finch’s boss Heretic stood framed by the window. Wearing his familiar gray robes and gray hat. Finch had never learned the creature’s real name. The series of clicks and whistles sounded like “hecleretic” so Finch called him “Heretic.” Highly unusual to see Heretic during the day.

“Finch,” Heretic said. “Where’s Wyte?” The wetness of its moist glottal attempt at speech made most humans uncomfortable. Finch tried hard to pretend the ends of all the words were there. A skill hard learned.

“Wyte couldn’t come. He’s busy.”

Heretic stared at Finch. A question in his eyes. Finch looked to the side. Away from the liquid green pupils and yellow where there should be white. Wyte had been sick off and on for a long time. Finch knew from what, but didn’t want to. Didn’t want to get into it with Heretic.

“What’s the situation?” Finch asked.

Heretic smiled: rows and rows of needle lines set into a face a little like a squished-in shark’s snout. Finch couldn’t tell if the lines were gills or teeth, but they seemed to flutter and breathe a little. Wyte said he’d seen tiny creatures in there, once. *Each time, a new nightmare.* Another encounter to haunt Finch’s sleep.

“Two dead bodies,” Heretic said.

“Two bodies?”

“One and a half, technically,” the Partial said, from behind Finch.

Heretic laughed. A sound like dogs being strangled.

"Did the victims live in the apartment?" Finch asked, knowing the answer already.

"No," the Partial said. "They didn't."

Finch turned briefly toward the Partial, then back to Heretic.

Heretic stared at the Partial and he shut up, began to creep around the living room taking pictures with his eye.

"No one lived here," Heretic said. "According to our records no one has lived here for over a year."

"Interesting," Finch said. Didn't interest him. Nothing interested him. It bothered him. Especially that the Partial felt comfortable enough to answer a question meant for Heretic.

The curtains had faded from the sun. Tears in the sofa like knife wounds. The vase looked like someone had started a small fire inside it. Stage props for two deaths.

Was it significant that the window was open? For some reason he didn't want to ask if one of them had opened it. Fresh air, with just a hint of the salt smell from the bay.

"Who reported this?" Finch asked.

"An energy surge came from this location," Heretic said. "We felt it. Then spore cameras confirmed it."

Energy surge? What kind of energy?

Finch tried to imagine the rows and rows of living receivers underground, miles of them if rumor held true. Trying to process trillions of images from all over the city. *How could they possibly keep up?* The hope of every citizen.

"Do you know the . . . source?" Finch asked. Didn't know if he understood what Heretic was telling him.

"There is no trace of it now. The apartment is cold. There are just these bodies."

"How does that help me?" he wanted to say.

Finch usually dealt with theft, domestic abuse, illegal gatherings. Flirted with investigating rebel activity, but turned that over to the Partials if necessary. Tried to make sure it wasn't necessary. For everyone's sake.

Murder only if it was the usual. Crimes of passion. Revenge. This didn't look like either. If it was murder.

"Anyone live in the apartments next door?"

"Not any more," the Partial replied. "They all left, oddly enough, soon after these two . . . arrived."

"Which means they made a sound." *Or sounds.*

"I'll interrogate anyone left in the building after we finish here," the Partial said.

What a pleasure that'll be for them.

Still, Finch didn't volunteer to do it. Not yet. Maybe after. Not much worse than door-to-door interviews in unfriendly places. Many didn't believe his job should exist.

"What do you think, Finch?" Heretic asked. Just a hint of mischief in that voice. Laced with it. Just enough to catch the nuance.

I think I just walked in the door a few minutes ago.

The bodies lay next to each other, beside the sofa.

Finch frowned. "I've never seen anything quite like it."

The man lay on his side, left hand stretched out toward the gray cap's hand. The gray cap lay facedown, arms flopped out at right angles.

"Might be a foreigner. From the clothes."

The man could've been forty-five or fifty, with dark brown hair, dark eyebrows, and a beard that appeared to be made from tendrils of fungus. That wasn't unusual. But his clothes were. He wore a blue shirt long out of fashion. Strange, tight-fitting long pants. Dirty black boots.

"He's not from the city," Heretic said. Again, an inflection that bothered Finch. A statement or a question?

What's on his mind?

Finch squatted beside the bodies. Took out his useless pen and his useless pad of paper. Above him, the Partial leaned over to take a picture.

The dead gray cap looked like every other gray cap. Except for the one glaring lack.

"I don't know what caused the injury to the other one, sir."

I don't know what caused the leg situation.

"When we find out," Heretic said, "we will be just as understated."

The exposed cross section, cut almost precisely at the waist, fascinated Finch. He almost forgot himself, poked at the tissue with his pen.

The cut had been so clean, so precise, that there was no tearing. No hemorrhaging. Finch could see layers. Gray. Yellow. Green. A core of

dark red. (A question he was too cautious to ask: *Was it always that dark, or only in death?*) Within the core, Finch saw a hint of organs.

"Is this . . . normal?" Finch asked Heretic.

"Normal?"

"The lack of blood, I mean, sir," Finch said.

Gray caps bled. Finch knew that. Not like a stream or a gout, even when you cut them deep, but a steady drip from a leaky faucet. Puncture wounds healed almost immediately. It took a long time and a lot of patience to kill a gray cap.

"No, it's not normal." The humid weight of Heretic was at his side now. A smell like garbage and burnt glass. Made him nauseous.

"None of this is normal," the Partial ventured. Ignored.

Finch looked up at Heretic. From that angle: the pale wattled skin of Heretic's long throat.

"Do you know who . . ." Finch hesitated. Gray caps didn't like being called "gray caps," but Finch couldn't pronounce the word they did use. *Farseneeni* or *fanaarcensitii*? The Partial circled them, blinking pictures through his fungal eye.

"Do you know who that is?" Finch said finally, pointing at the dead gray cap.

Heretic made a sound like something popping. "No. Not familiar to us. We cannot see him," and Finch understood he meant something other than just looking out a window.

"Have you . . . ?" Couldn't say the whole sentence. Too ridiculous. Terrifying. At the same time. *Have you eaten some of his flesh and picked clean the memories?*

But Heretic had been around humans long enough to know what he meant. "We tried it. Nothing that made sense."

For a second, Finch relaxed. Forgot Heretic could send him, Sintra, anybody he knew, to the work camps.

"If you couldn't decipher it, how will I?"

Then went stiff. Richard Dorn, a good detective, had questioned Heretic too closely. Nine months to die.

A bullet to the head. In that case.

But the gray cap said only, "With your fresh eyes, maybe you will have better luck."

Heretic pulled a pouch out of his robes, opened it. Finch rose, stood to the side as Heretic sprinkled a fine green powder over both bodies. Could've done it using his own supply, but Heretic enjoyed doing it. For some reason.

"You know what to do," Heretic said.

In time, a memory bulb would emerge from both corpses' heads. Did the *fanaarcensitii* rely too much on what made them comfortable? No autopsies, just mushrooms. But also hardly any experts left to perform them.

Nausea crept back into Finch's throat. "But I've never. Not a gray cap. I mean, not one of your people."

"We don't bite." The grin on that impossible face grew wide and wider. The laughter again, worse.

Finch laughed back, weakly.

"Write down whatever you encounter, whether you understand it or not."

Mercifully, Heretic looked away. "A gray cap and a man. Dead in such a manner. We need to know *everything*."

"Yessir," Finch said. He couldn't keep the grimace off his face.

Heretic seemed to take it for a smile. As he walked past on his way to the door, he patted Finch's elbow. Finch shivered. A touch like wet, dead leaves sewn together and stuffed with meat.

"Report in the morning," Heretic said. "Report and report and report, Finch." The laughter again.

Then Heretic was gone. The hallway shadows ate him up, the apartment door opening and closing.

Finch could hear his own breathing. Shallow. The sudden panicked drumming of his heart. The butterfly blinks of the Partial, still snapping photographs.

Took a breath. A second. Closed his eyes.

A sunny day by the river. A picnic lunch. A tree with shade. Long, cool grass. With Sintra.

2

No obvious bullet or stab wounds. No tattoos or other marks. Grunting with the effort, Finch turned the man over for a second. He seemed heavier than he should be. Skin warm, the flesh solid. From the position of the arms, Finch thought they might be broken. A discoloration at the edge of the man's mouth. Dried blood? When Finch was done, the man settled back into position as if he'd been there a hundred years.

No point checking the gray cap. Their skin didn't retain marks or burns or stab wounds. Anything like that sealed over. Besides, the cause of the gray cap's death was obvious. Wasn't it? Still, he didn't want to assume murder. Yet.

Out of the four "murders" in his sector over the past year, two had been suicides and one had been natural causes. The fourth solved in a day.

Disappearances were another subject altogether.

He stood. Looked down at the tableau formed by the dead. Something about it. Almost posed. Almost staged. But also: the man's neck, half-hidden by the shirt collar. Was it . . . twisted? Who could tell with the gray cap. Impossibly long, smooth, gray neck. (*Did that mean Heretic was old, this one young?*) But also torqued.

Finch glanced up at the tired, sagging ceiling. About ten feet.

"They look like," Finch said. "They look like they both *fell*."

Could that be the sound the neighbors heard?

"The spore camera's first shot is of them on the floor," the Partial said.

Finch had forgotten him.

Turned, stared at the Partial. The Partial stared back. Taking Finch's photo with each blink.

"I could . . ."

"What?" the Partial said. "You could what?"

I could tear out your eye with my bare hands. Not a thought he'd seen coming.

"You know what I think?" the Partial said.

Finch tamped down on his irritation. Tried to remember that, in a way, none of the Partials were more than six years old. Disaffected youths no matter what their age. All pale. Or made pale. Humans who'd gotten fungal infections and liked it, Truff help them. Got an adrenaline rush from heightened powers of sight. Enhanced by fungal drugs autogenerated inside the eye. Pumped into the brain. In a sense, their eye was always looking back at them.

I'll never know what you think. Not in a million years.

"You *volunteered* for that," Finch said. Pointed at the Partial's eye. "That makes you crazy. So I don't need to know what you think."

The Partial snickered. "I've heard it all before. And you'll never know what you're missing . . . But here's what I think, whether you want it or not. That man's not really human. Not really. I should know, right? And something went wrong. And maybe they didn't die here but were, I don't know, moved."

Finch gave the Partial a long glance. Turned to kneel again by the man's body. The second half of what the Partial had said made less sense than the first.

"Just do your job." *I'll do mine.*

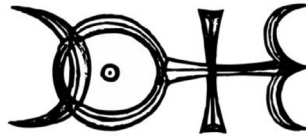
The Partial fell silent. Hurt? Seduced by something new to click?

Finch really didn't care. Something had caught his attention. Two fingers of the man's left hand. Curled tight into the palm. Grit or sand under the fingernails. Finch got to his knees, leaned forward, took the man's hand in his. The warmth of it surprised him, the green spores already ghosting into the flesh. He pried the fingers back. Revealed a ragged piece of paper. A pulse-pounding moment of excitement.

Then he pulled it out. Released the fingers. Let the arm fall. Shielding the paper from the Partial with his body.

Normal paper, not fungal. Old and stained. Torn from a book? He unfolded it. Two words, written hurriedly, in black ink: *Never Lost*. And below that some gibberish that looked something like *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Self-contained, or once part of a longer message?

Definitely torn from a book. On the back a printed sentence fragment, “the future can hold when the past holds ambiguity such as this,” and a symbol. Somehow familiar to Finch. Although he didn’t know from where.



Stuck the paper in his boot before the Partial could blink that he’d found something. Got up. Pulled gloves from his jacket pocket and put them on. Opened the pouch at his belt.

Heretic had forgotten the preservatives, but would blame Finch if it wasn’t done. Corpses didn’t last long otherwise. Within forty-eight hours, you’d be breathing them, as the spores did their work.

Carefully, he sprinkled a blue powder across both corpses. Not spores this time, but tiny fruiting bodies. The powder smelled like smoke from the camps to the south. Or the camps smelled like the powder. Pointless to wear the gloves after the hundreds of fungal toxins and experiments that had been released into the air. The millions of floating spore-eyes. Yet still he did it.

Blue mingled with green. The green disappeared as he watched, colonized by the blue. The two bodies would not decay now. They would linger, suspended, until Finch returned to collect their memories.

“... and know you don’t want to eat the memories,” the Partial said to Finch’s back. Sounding triumphant.

Finch’s thoughts had been so far away he’d missed the first part.

“Is that all?” Wanted to laugh.

Did they talk this way together in the barracks near the camps where the gray caps housed them like weapons? Spewing out each day and night like black ants. Foraging on the flesh of the city. Observers and security both.

“You’re afraid of change,” the Partial said. “Of being changed. That’s why you hate me.”

Swiveled abruptly in his crouch, hand on his gun. Met the Partial’s corrupted gaze.

"Is that all?" Finch repeated. "I mean, are you done with your picture-taking?"

No skill when every blink was an image. No honor in a perpetual voyeurism. A kind of treason against your own kind. "It warps the privacy of your own life," Wyte had said once, as if he knew. "Permanent occupation. I wouldn't want to live that way." Yet now Wyte did. And so did Finch. In a sense.

"I'm never done," the Partial said. "And if you've got a past, you should be worried. They'll work through all the records some day. Maybe they'll find you."

Funny thing is, Partial, Heretic already knows my past. Most of it. And he doesn't give a fuck. That's not who I'm worried about.

Wanted to say it but didn't. Unsnapped the clasp on his holster. The fungal gun trembled there like a live thing. Wet. Dripping. Useless against a gray cap. Very useful against a Partial. *Still human, no matter how much you pretend.*

"Get the fuck out of here."

"I see everything," the Partial said. "*Everything.*"

"Yes," Finch said, "but that's unavoidable, isn't it?"

The Partial stared at Finch. Seemed about to say something. Bit down on it, hard. Walked out into the hall. Slammed the door behind him.

Leaving Finch alone with the bodies.

* * *

Now Finch can see the frailty death has lent them. Now Finch can see the vulnerability. The way the light uses them in the same way it uses him. He walks to the window. Looks out across the damaged face of Ambergris.

Six years and I can't recognize a goddamn thing from before.

Harsh blue sprawl of the bay, bled from the River Moth. Carved from nothing. The first thing the gray caps did when they Rose, flooding Ambergris and killing thousands. Now the city, riddled through with canals, is like a body that was once drowned. Parts bleached, parts bloated. Metal and stone for flesh. Places that stick out and places that barely touch the surface.

In the foreground of the bay stands the scaffolding for the two tall towers still being built by the gray caps. A rough pontoon bridge reaches out to them, an artificial island surrounding the base. The scaffolding rises twenty feet above the highest tower. Hard to know if they are almost complete or will take a hundred years more. Great masses of green fungus cling to the tops. It makes the towers look shaggy, almost as if they had fur, were flesh and blood. *A smell like oil and sawdust and frying meat.* At dusk each day the gray caps lead a work force from the camps south of the city. All night, the sounds of hammering and construction. Emerald lights moving like slow stars. Screams of injury or punishment. To what purpose? No one knows. While along the lip of the bay, monstrous fungal cathedrals rise under cover of darkness, replacing the old, familiar architecture. Skyline like a jagged wound.

Twenty years of civil war. Six years of the gray caps.

To Finch's left, southwest: smudges of smoke, greasy and gray, above the distant mottled spectacle of the Spit, an island made of lashed-together boats. A den for spies. A sanctuary for the desperate and the lawless.

Beyond the Spit, the silhouette of the two living domes covering the detention camps. Broken by the smoke, hidden by debris. Built over a valley of homes. Built atop the remains of the military factories that had allowed the two great mercantile companies, House Hoegbotton and the invading House Frankwithe & Lewden, to dream of empire, to destroy each other. And the city with them. Finch had fought for Hoegbotton. *Once upon a time.*

Between the domes, the fiery green glitter and minarets of the Religious Quarter, occupied by the remnants of native tribes. Adapting. Struggling. Destined someday to be wiped out. He can see the exposed crater at the top of the Truffidian Cathedral. *Cracked. All the prayers let out. Nothing left.*

To Finch's right, on the north shore: the Hoegbotton & Frankwithe Zone. Huge tendrils of reddish-orange fungus vein into the rocks lining the water. A green haze obscures any view of what might be left on the north shore. Six years ago, the HFZ had just been northern Ambergris: wild, yes, but not infected. Then, under sustained attack by the gray

caps, the rebel army had retreated there. So much heavy armor, munitions, and ordnance had gone in, along with twenty thousand soldiers, that it is hard for Finch to believe all of it could just vanish or mold. Yet, apparently, it had. They'd gone in and the gray caps had created the Zone around them. Only the rebel commander they called the Lady in Blue and some of her soldiers had escaped the trap.

Once, the HFZ had grown in size every day. Now, it has stopped, covers about ten square miles. Almost every citizen can see it. For all the good that did. *Will the rebels return?* is the question everyone asks, even now. When the wind is strange—gusting this way and that without purpose—great glittering particles from the north drift orange and purple and blue across the bay into Ambergris. Even the gray caps don't enter the HFZ except by proxy. Content to let the remnants of the rebels wander through a toxic fungal stew, goes the theory. Almost like another camp, without fences or guards.

Except, no one comes out of the HFZ.

Beyond the towers, beyond the bay, the far shore of the River Moth. Distant. Unattainable. Beyond that, although Finch can't see it, just feels it: the eastern-most edge of the Kalif's empire, the Stockton Commonwealth to the south, the Morrow Protectorate to the north. Between them and Finch: security zones. Blockades. Set up by the surrounding countries. All three as determined as the gray caps that no one gets out of Ambergris. Even as they send in their spies to steal the city's secrets.

Finch turns away from the window. It leaves him sad and cold and frightened. The towers especially. What will happen when the gray caps have finished them?

A view like that could drive a person mad.

3

When the time comes, right, Finch?"

Back at the station, which used to be Hoegbotton & Sons' headquarters. High ceilings. Hints of gold leaf and mosaic. Dull light from tiny round windows set in rows across both side walls. A tortured light that never gave any hint of the weather outside. Sometimes in the early morning and late afternoon they had to use old lanterns. The chandeliers had been ripped out long ago.

Back at his desk with the other detectives. The must of fungal rot from the green strip of carpet running from the front door down the middle. The whole back of the room hidden by a curtain. Smell of bad coffee from the table that also housed their only typewriter. Shoved up against the far wall. Next to the holding cell.

Ten desks. Seven detectives. Skinner, Gustat, Blakely, Dapple, Albin, and Wyte furiously scritchng away on their notepads with sharp pencils. Some on the phone. All of them like schoolboys in an incomprehensible class. None of them likely to ask questions of the teacher.

Only a weak hello when Finch had walked in. Too much effort. Not yet over the paranoid morning jitters. Ever more difficult to know what to say. How to act. They all assumed the gray caps spied on them. Difficult to remember all day long. Especially when strange things happened with just enough irregularity to make them think *that was the last time*. The air pungent with old and new sweat. Laced with some underlying funk that was almost sweet.

Albin, just off the phone, out of the corner of his mouth: "I'm not risking my life for a lost dog. Too many Partials there. Besides, it's an old Hoegbotton neighborhood." Albin, the Frankwrithe & Lewden man. Finch might've shot at him back during the war. Former

scientist. One of the few not killed by the gray caps or snatched by foreign powers in the chaos of the Rising.

Finch's mood had soured on the way back to the station. A tortuous route. The gray caps had banned bicycles and motored vehicles four years ago. Too many suicide bombings by rebel sympathizers. Not much fuel anyway, and no one outside the city willing to resupply, even on the black market. Too dangerous. And few alternatives since the horses had been eaten long ago.

Instead, makeshift bridges over the canals. Through a sector where a lot of gray cap buildings had gone up, scrambling the landscape. Changes didn't correspond to any map. Sliced through existing apartment complexes, divided or blocked streets. Displayed an arrogance about the way things had been and were now that angered Finch.

Then a mob to avoid at the corner of Albumuth and Lake, when he'd almost made it back. One of the huge blood-red drug mushrooms hadn't yet released the morning ration. Not Finch's problem. But the addicts were mad. They wanted their fix. *Wanted out.* They stood beneath the slow-breathing dead-white gills waiting for the purple nodules that also fed them. *Wanted oblivion. A nice trip into waves of light and a past that didn't include dead bodies and nightmares.*

Maybe someday he'd join them. Instead, another rickety bridge over another canal. Had looked down at his frowning reflection in the silver-gray water and hadn't recognized it. Broad shoulders. Still muscular but losing some of it. Too much alcohol. Not enough nutrients in the gray caps' food. The man lingering in the water seemed at least forty-five, not forty. The hooded eyes. The paleness of the face. Wavery. Indistinct. Never in focus.

"When the time comes, right, Finch?"

"Sure, Wyte," Finch said. "When the time comes."

"You'll know what to do." The voice, once so deep and gravelly, had changed since Finch had first met Wyte. Become soft and liquid, lighter yet thicker.

"I'll know what to do."

The ritual conversation.

Ritual had a purpose. Ritual cordoned off fear. Ritual made the abnormal ordinary. The memory hole beside each of the desks. The

deep green vein running the length of Wyte's arm. Pushing up ridge-like against the fabric of Wyte's long sleeve. Like the green carpet leading back to the curtains and what lay beyond.

Finch took his gun from its holster. Recoiled from the touch of the grip.

"For Truff's sake," Finch said. Laid it on his desk with a squelch.

The gun had been issued by the gray caps. Dark green exoskeleton, soft interior. Its guts stained his hand. Reloading didn't seem like an option. It had been seeping a lot lately.

"I wonder if it's dying on me," Finch said. To Wyte, who sat at the desk to his left.

Should I have been feeding it?

Wyte grunted. Reflexively writing up reports on nothing in particular. Lost husbands. Unidentifiable corpses. Vandalism. Finch had cases, too, but nothing that couldn't wait.

"Hate these things," he said, again to Wyte. Again, to indifference.

Heard Blakely muttering to Gustat: ". . . they're saying that we're addicted to a special mushroom that grows out of our brains." Gustat chuckled but it wasn't funny. Rumors could get a detective killed by some desperate citizen. *Any excuse that didn't slip through the fingers.*

Finch rummaged in a drawer. Found a worn handkerchief. It predated the war. He'd gotten it from an expensive clothing store further up the boulevard. Didn't know why he kept it. Luck? Grimacing, he picked up the gun with the handkerchief. Shoved the thing into a space under his desk. Next to the box with the ceremonial sword his father had given him. Brought back from the Kalif's empire twenty years before. Wrapped in cloth. Finch could always get to it in a pinch. Made him feel perversely safer knowing it was there. In its gleaming scabbard.

"I'd rather get shot than use that gun," Finch said, too loud. Not sure if he meant it.

Gustat and Blakely, joined at the hip, looked up, glared. Both had a flushed look. Like they'd been drinking.

"Shut up, Finch," Blakely said.

"Yeah, shut up," Gustat echoed. Fiercely.

This caused Dapple to bring a case file so close to his eyes it hid his face. Dapple was the worst of them. He'd been an artist once.

Landscape painter. Watercolors. Popular with the tourists. No market for that now. No landscapes to speak of that you could spend hours painting without taking a bullet for your troubles. Sure to become a druggie, or a creature of the gray caps in his cringing way. At least Gustat and Blakely, even though they annoyed Finch, still had their wits about them.

Almost as if to cover for Finch, Wyte asked, "So, Finchy, just how bad was it?" "Finchy" sounded closer to his real last name, so Wyte often called him that. To avoid slipping up.

Finch turned toward Wyte. Hadn't wanted to. No telling what he looked like.

Wyte: a tall man, late forties, with a handsome face, powerful shoulders and chest. Tattered olive suit. Eyes gray. A spark of green colonizing the brown of each pupil. Right temple: a purple birthmark that hadn't been there yesterday. Smelled of cigarette smoke to cover the stench of mushrooms. Even though cigs were hard to come by. Once, he could have entered a crowded bar and all the women would have found a way to stare at him.

"A double," Finch said. "In an abandoned apartment. One gray cap. One male human." Then told Wyte the rest.

"Dancing lessons gone terribly wrong," Wyte said. His grin only manifested on the left side of his mouth.

Skinner, next to Wyte, hazarded a snicker. But Skinner snickered at everything. Finch didn't find it funny. He was still seeing the bodies. Skinner expressed too much zeal pursuing cases that involved the rebels. Why hadn't Skinner become a Partial?

"This is nothing good, Wyte." *Good equaled will go away quickly.* This could linger.

Wyte, as if realizing his mistake: "Do you want me to take the memory bulbs?"

"No thanks."

Who knew what a memory bulb would do to Wyte in his state? Finch didn't want to find out. The late Richard Dorn had sat at his desk for nine months after the gray caps had forced him to eat a memory bulb despite his wasting disease. Dead. Turning into a tower of emerald mold. The desk sat in a corner now, abandoned, a smudge on the seat of the chair.

Worse for suspects kept in the holding cell. Bring in a thief, do the paperwork, then the gray caps decided. Attempted murder? Might be disappeared by morning. Or sent to the camps. Or let off with a fine. The guy Blakely had brought in the other day was still there. Slumped in a corner. Clearly thought his life was over.

Never bring anyone in unless you have to. Unless you're certain.

"Are we in trouble on this one?" Wyte asked. Black patch on his neck, slowly moving. Nails a faint green. A whiff of something toxic.

Not the same kind of trouble.

Finch shrugged. "Who knows?" A routine call could turn into disaster. A disaster could go away overnight.

Wyte leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. Red stains on the shirt's underarms.

Finch had known Wyte for more than twenty years. They'd fought in the wars together. Known the same people before the Rising. Played darts at the pub. Had drinks. Sudden gut-punching vision: of his girlfriend back then, a slender brunette who'd worked as a nurse. Laughing at some joke Wyte had made one night, the days of Comedian Wyte now long past except for the occasional flare-up that just made it worse.

Some cosmic mistake or cruelty, to work cases together when Finch had once worked for Wyte as a courier for Hoegbotton. Each a reminder to the other of better times. Since then, Wyte's wife Emily had left him. He'd taken up in a crappy apartment just north of the station. Never saw his two daughters. They'd been smuggled out to relatives in Stockton before the Rising. Finch couldn't work out how old they might be now.

Someday Wyte will be a silhouette on the horizon. Someone familiar made distant.

And Wyte sensed it.

"You can help with the fieldwork going forward, Wyte," Finch said. *If you don't become the fieldwork.*

"No problem. Be happy to."

"I'll put my notes in order," Finch said, "and after I use the memory bulbs, we'll start in on it. Tomorrow."

Wyte wasn't listening anymore. Gaze far away. Disengaged. Apocalyptic thoughts? Or maybe he was just registering the inside of the building.

They all conducted an unspoken war against the station. It tried to make them forget its strangeness. They tried not to forget.

Finch turned back to his desk and started sorting through the mess. Hadn't organized it in a week. Hadn't had the energy.

Mirror. Pills to protect against infection. Spore mask for purified breathing. Writing pad. Pencils. Telephone. Broken telephone. Folders on open crimes. Folders on closed crimes. Paper clips across the bottom of drawers. A list he'd made of complaints from people who had called him, thinking he could help. Usually he couldn't.

Maybe once, early on, he had convinced himself he could do some good, sometimes even imagined he was a mole, getting close so he could strike a blow. Imagined he was in it to defend Ambergris from the enemies that surrounded it. Imagined he was protecting ordinary citizens.

But the truth was he'd been tired, had stopped caring. Broken down from too much fighting, too many things connected to his past. And when that spark, that impulse, had returned, it was too late: he was trapped.

"I'm not a detective."

Heretic: "You're whatever we want you to be, now."

If he just left one day, what would happen to Wyte? To his other friends? To Sintra?

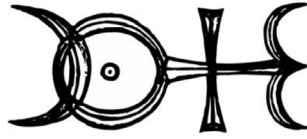
And: Did they know about Sintra?

Nothing seemed missing from his desk. Still, a good idea to take stock. Lots of things disappeared during the night, or were replaced by mimics. More than one detective had screamed, picking up a pencil that was not a pencil. Finch took out the piece of paper he'd found in the dead man's hands. Placed it in front of him. What could the words mean? Finch took out a writing pad, scrawled

Never Lost.

Bellum omnium contra omnes

across the top. Stared at the strange symbol. It looked oddly like a baby bird to him.



Randomly ripped from a book to write on? Or something more?
Abandoned the question. Wrote:

*two bodies
fell*

Thought about the Partial, daring to contradict Heretic. Heretic's secret amusement. What did that mean? At least he knew what Heretic on the scene meant: the gray cap must suspect the case had some connection to the rebels and their elusive commander, the Lady in Blue. She who was now larger than the city and yet not of the city. Most saw her hand in any act that seemed to cause the gray caps grief. Although such acts of resistance seemed rarer and rarer. Some thought she didn't exist. Or was dead.

The trapped rebel soldiers. The Lady in Blue.

Was the fate of either better or worse than his?

* * *

Finch sees again, back across six long years, the columns of tanks and infantry in retreat, traveling through the city toward the north. Recognizes with hindsight that the path they took had been chosen by the gray caps. Forced by the rising water.

Distant explosions had split the air as the gray caps attacked stragglers at the end of the column. Even then, small-arms fire no longer registered with Finch unless it was close by.

Despite the risk, many people had come out to watch the rebels. From the roadside. From balconies. Peering out of windows reinforced with metal bars. To bear witness to the rumbling tread of the tanks. To remember the faces of the troops: pale and dark, old and young and middle-aged. Beneath green helmets with the intertwined H&S/F&L insignia that rankled so many. Armed with automatic weapons, bayonets, knives. Most in uniform. Many damaged. A

welter of bandages on heads, legs, arms, that hid evidence of strange fungal wounds.

One man's face held Finch's attention. Salt-and-pepper beard, creases in his forehead, wrinkles that made him look as if he were squinting. A red patch on his cheek. Body slumped, then tensed, against the lurching of the tank. A gaunt hand clutching his Lewden rifle, knuckles prominent. Gaze turned forward, as if unwilling to acknowledge the present.

Which had made Finch realize again that these men and women leaving, they were the same ones who had fought one another during more than three decades of the War of the Houses, broken only by armistices, cease-fires, and the dream of empire. The ones who had brought ruination upon Ambergris in so many ways before the Rising.

Yet they were still from Ambergris, of Ambergris, and even Finch felt it in his chest, Wyte standing there beside him with his Emily. Almost as if Ambergris itself was retreating, leaving behind only ghosts and children. But also leaving a perverse giddiness. A sense of celebration at seeing such a mighty force. The retreat portrayed as a new beginning. The lull before the launching of a great offensive.

Even the tanks were part of Ambergris. They'd come out of the eighty-year-old metal deposits found in eastern Ambergris that had catapulted the city out of the past but not yet into the future.

Rebel tanks had two turrets: one pointed ahead, one unseen beneath that pointed at the ground. Specially built to open up and deliver bombs to underground gray cap enclaves. Once, their rough syncopated song had been heard all over the city. Juddered through the ground into the walls of buildings and tunnels alike. Like a kind of defiant echoing growl.

In retreat, though, it was the singing of the troops as they left that Finch heard, their voices ragged over the rumble of the tanks. Patriotic songs composed long centuries before. A refrain that had started as a prayer by the Truffidian monks.

Holy city, majestic, banish your fears.

Arise, emerge from your sleeping years.

Too long have you dwelt in the valley of tears.

We shall restore you with mercy and grace.

City of wounds. City of wounding. For a moment, Finch had felt the urge to climb up onto one of the tanks, to join them in what was then the wilderness of North Ambergris. But Finch wasn't one of them. He'd had no officer to report to. Had bought his own weapon. Off the books, off the record. An Irregular, fighting alongside other Irregulars in his neighborhood. Defending their sisters, brothers, parents, and neighbors against the invaders.

After the last tank had rumbled past, Finch had gone back with Wyte and Emily. To await the next thing. No matter what it might be. *The need to work. To eat. To have shelter.* People were already telling themselves things might still be better under the gray caps than during the War of the Houses, at least. Joked about it. Like you might about a passing storm.

Waiting it out at Wyte's house. By candlelight. Drinking. Laughing nervously. Trying to forget. Finch's father dead almost two years.

Just after midnight: a sound like a giant flame opening up and then winking out. A devastating *whump*, as of something hitting the ground or rising from it. When they looked outside, they'd seen a dome-like haze above the north part of the bay. Green-orange discharge like sunspots. They'd just watched it. Watched it and not known what to say. What to do. Barricaded the house. Spent the rest of the night with weapons within reach.

In the morning, a paralyzing horror. Across the bay, when they slipped out through back alleys to get a clear view: the seething area that became known as the HFZ, and no sign of anyone alive. No sign of the tanks. No messages from the rebel leadership.

Thought but not said: *Abandoned. Gone. On our own.*

Then the realization, as the gray caps began to appear in numbers in the streets, and as their surrogates the Partiala began to help occupy the city, that the war was over for now. That each citizen of Ambergris would need to make some kind of peace with the enemy.

Always with the hope sent out across the water toward the HFZ: that the tanks, the men, might come back. Might re-emerge. That the rebels were not dead. Destroyed.

Lost.

4

Mid-afternoon. A soft, wet, sucking sound came from the memory hole beside his desk. Finch shuddered, put aside his notes. A message had arrived.

Some detectives positioned their desks so they could see their memory holes. Finch positioned his desk so he couldn't see it without leaning over. Tried never to look at it when he walked into the station in the morning. Still, the memory hole was better than the dead cat reanimated on Skinner's doorstep, message delivered in screeched rhyming couplets. Or the mushroom that walked onto Dapple's desk, turning itself inside out. To reveal the message.

Exhaled sharply. Peered around the left edge of the desk. Glanced down at the glistening hole. It was about twice the size of a man's fist. Lamprey-like teeth. Gasping, pink-tinged maw. Foul. The green tendrils lining the gullet had pushed up the dirty black spherical pod until it lay atop the mouth.

Finch sat up. Couldn't see it. Just heard its breathing. Which was worse.

The gray caps always called them "message tubes," but the term "memory hole" had stuck. Memory holes allowed the detectives to communicate during the day with their gray cap superiors. Finch had no idea if the memory holes were living creatures or only seemed alive. Fluid leaked out of them sometimes.

Once, impulsive, Finch had crumpled up the wrapper around the remains of his lunch and shoved it down the hole. Lived in fear the rest of the day. But nothing had happened. When he'd thought about it since, it had made him laugh. Heretic, down there, hit in the head with a piece of garbage. Maybe cursing Finch's name.

Now Heretic's message vibrated atop writhing tendrils.

Finch leaned over. Grabbed the pod. Slimy feel. *Sticky.*

Tossed the pod onto his desk. Pulled out a hammer from the same drawer where he kept his limited supply of dormant pods. Split Heretic's pod wide open. Spraying slime.

Beside Finch, Wyte winced, got up for some coffee.

Disgusted, or was it too close to home?

"There's no pretty way to do it, my friends," Finch called out. "Just look away." No one acknowledged him this time. Too usual. Even Finch's refrain.

In amongst the fragments: a few copies of a photograph of the dead man, compliments of the Partial.

And a message.

Pulsing yellow. An egg of living paper. He pulled the egg out of the shattered pod. Began to massage it until it spread out flat. Kept spreading, to Finch's surprise. Then began to unspool. Like a long, wide tongue. And kept on growing.

That was unusual enough for the other detectives to gather round.

"What in the hell is that?" Blakely asked, Gustat beside him. Dapple shyly peeked over Blakely's shoulder. Albin and Skinner were out on a call or they'd have been right there too. Anything to waste time.

"Looks like Heretic's given you a long to-do list," Gustat said. Too young to have known anything but war and the Rising.

Finch said nothing. By now, the pliant paper had grown to drape itself over both sides of Finch's desk, sliding into his lap. Clutched at it. Saw the rows of information in the reed-thin, spidery print common to gray cap documents. He let out a long, deep breath.

"It's the records of everyone who ever lived in the apartment of the double murder I was at this morning. Going back . . ." He checked as the paper finished unspooling. "Going back over a century. More."

Pulse quickening. *How am I supposed to investigate that?*

MORDEN, JONATHAN, OCCUPANCY 3 MONTHS, 2 DAYS, 11 MINUTES,
5 SECONDS—WORKED IN FOOD DISTRIBUTION IN THE CAMPS . . .

WILDEN, SARAH, OCCUPANCY 8 MONTHS, 3 DAYS, 2 MINUTES, 45
SECONDS—NEVER LEFT THE APARTMENT EXCEPT FOR GETTING FOOD.
HAD THREE CATS. LIKED TO READ . . .

* * *

A sudden panic. Smothered by the past. Lost in it.

Tried to get a grip. Wadded the paper up, pocketed the photographs. While the other detectives gave out nervous laughs. Returned to their desks. Frightened again.

No one wanted this kind of case.

A sudden anger rose in Finch. *Did Heretic really think that this list would be helpful?* It was scaring the shit out of him.

Wyte had been standing behind the others, holding his coffee mug. Loomed now like an actor from backstage, suddenly revealed.

"A lot of information," Wyte said.

Finch glared at him. Hands splattered with yellow and green. "Find me a towel."

Wyte put down his coffee, rummaged in a desk drawer.

SILVAN, JAMES, OCCUPANCY 15 MONTHS, 3 DAYS, 1 HOUR, 50 MINUTES, 2 SECONDS—COLLABORATOR WITH A SPLINTER REBEL FACTION . . .

HUGHES, SHANNA, OCCUPANCY 1 MONTH, 2 WEEKS, 3 DAYS, 10 MINUTES, 35 SECONDS—KILLED BY A FUNGAL BOMB . . .

"Maybe they got it from the old bureaucratic quarter?" Wyte whispered out of the side of his mouth as he leaned over to give Finch the towel. Smell of sweat mixed with something sweeter. "Maybe they just copied it down?" Returning to his desk, receding into the background.

"It's half-encrypted with their symbols, Wyte," Finch said. Tried to correct for the disdain in his voice. "It contains surveillance information. They collected it themselves."

From underground. Using a million spore-eye cameras. Somewhere, he knew, in one of a series of images captured by the gray caps: evidence of his past that Heretic didn't know about. *Finch as a Hoegbotton Irregular fighting against Frankwrithe & Lewden in the War of the Houses. Finch standing side by side with F&L soldiers against the gray caps before they Rose.* What he'd done.

FINCH

Except the gray caps didn't have the time to pore over that many images unless given a good reason. And Finch hadn't. Only Wyte knew the truth.

GILRISH, MEGHAN, OCCUPANCY 10 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS, 6 DAYS, 14 HOURS, 15 MINUTES, 6 SECONDS—OWNER OF A GROCERY STORE . . .

BARRAN, GEORGE, OCCUPANCY 2 YEARS, 1 WEEK, 5 DAYS, 7 MINUTES, 18 SECONDS—DIED OF OLD AGE . . .

Finch stared at the first rows of names on the paper. The sheer density of information defeated him.

Kept thinking about the bodies. Saw them lying there on the floor of the apartment. *They dropped in out of thin air.*

Why there?

A riddle wrapped in a puzzle. Perversely comforting, that the memory bulbs might hold the answers.

Never lost.

Bellum omnium contra omnes.

Never lost.

Said it three times under his breath. Wondering if Wyte was staring at him. Still didn't dislodge an answer.

"Well," Finch said, out of the corner of his mouth, "do you know what those words mean? *Bellum omnium contra omnes?*"

But Wyte was done talking to him about the case.

Sometimes the overlay of reality seemed a sham. One day, he would turn a corner on a rubble-strewn street. Pass through an archway into a courtyard. Be back in that other, simpler world. When he worked in the same building but as a Hoegbotton courier. Not as a detective. When he worked for Wyte, not with him.

Am I dead? he thought sometimes, walking down that green carpet he remembered from a different city, a different time. *Am I a ghost?*

Six in the afternoon. Time to leave. He packed Heretic's list in a satchel and holstered his miserable gun. Watched Blakely and Gustat put on spore gas masks "just in case." *Just in case of what?*

Just in case there's one fungus in the whole damn city you haven't been exposed to yet?

A nod. A handshake or two. Muttered goodbyes to Wyte. Then they dispersed. The night shift would arrive soon. Partial patrols outside started in only two hours. Curfew. Gray caps lurking. You rarely saw more than one, but that was one too many. A detective's badge might help or it might not.

The others headed north, up Albumuth. Wyte was a hulking shadow hanging back at the rear. Finch went south, but not home. Not yet. First, he had to pick up the memory bulbs from the crime scene. But he also had decided not to trust the Partial. Wanted to interview some of the residents of 239 Manzikert Avenue himself.

A different route than that morning. Late-afternoon sun like dark gold against brick walls. The street sloped on an incline before following a gentle curve downward. Tight high walls of shoved-together tenements and lofts. Hoegbotton territory, before the Rising. Finch brushed by a man or woman covered up in robes. Another person ducked into a doorway, face made a question mark by an old gas mask that might or might not keep spores out. Stain of blue-green lichen in the gutter. A rancid quality to the air.

Faintest hint of the bay from the cross street. Mostly obscured by mansards and rubble. Glimpse of the two towers. Did the sky match? Or was it darker between the towers? Had a bet going with the other detectives about the purpose of the towers. To dull the fear.

A hint of shadow moved behind him as he rounded a tight corner. It made him cautious. It made him paranoid. He stopped a minute later. Pretended to tie his shoe. Managed a backward glance. Nothing.

Imagined it?

Wouldn't put it past Heretic to have him followed. Or maybe it was just some ragged kid hoping to mug a passerby. As he rose, Finch made sure to pull his jacket back. To show his gun. Such as it was.

239 Manzikert Avenue was a dark vertical slab of stone and wood with blackened filigree balcony railings crawling up the front. Trees

left black leaves and rotting yellow berries on the steps. If the berries had been edible, the steps would've been clean.

Ornate double doors stripped of the metal that had once served as inlay. Steps guarded by a three-legged cat that hissed. Then hopped away. Beyond the doors, a hallway studded with lights so dim it would've been hard to read by them. Finch stepped inside. The feeling of being followed shut off. Like it'd been attached to a timer inside of him.

The floor squeaked. Freshly waxed. It hadn't been waxed in the morning. Finch smiled. Old Hoegbotton trick. Cheap security. *Bell the cat*. He went squeaking to the stairwell. Already knew the elevator didn't work.

The outside light couldn't seem to push through the tiny windows set into the walls. The stairwell got darker the further up he went. But, gradually, more evidence of people. A dog howling. The flushing of a shared toilet. A screaming child. A mother's raised voice. The smell of something spicy being cooked for dinner. Filtered through the exhausted, stale funk of a place in which too many had lived in close quarters for too many years.

Finch knew not to start on the first couple of floors. No one liked to live that low if they had a choice. *Ambergis Rules*. Better to live next to a corpse than one floor above the gray caps' underground realm. His father had taught him that.

Stopped at the fourth floor. Just to be safe. Fourth or sixth. Anyone on the fifth was long gone. Either after the corpse arrived and before the Partial came to talk to them. Or after the Partial came to talk.

Finch had a simple formula. A polite knock. Short questions, in a friendly tone. Didn't like to go in like Blakely, guns blazing. Or like Gustat, using threats to coerce. They got information, sure. But not always the right information.

He worked the long line of closed doors to either side of the discolored, torn carpet. At the fifth door, a mother answered, holding her son. Maybe five or six, born around the time of the Rising. The mother looked worn. Pale and thin. Probably starving herself to feed the child. Probably thought that holding the kid would make Finch play nice. The kid's open, eager face confounded Finch. Almost like seeing another species. Parents kept their children hidden. Went out to forage for them. Finch's father had done the same for him. During the wars.

“What do you want?” she asked.

Finch decided he wanted nothing. Asked a couple of easy questions. Showed her the photo of the dead man. The woman didn’t recognize him.

Tried a couple more doors. A middle-aged man in a tank top and shorts answered holding a frying pan. For defense? For dinner? Either way, he didn’t know anything, hadn’t seen anything.

Neither did the old married couple who might’ve lived there for forty, fifty years. Might even have recalled when 239 Manzikert Avenue hadn’t been a dump. The man stood behind the woman, peering out with the kind of distant stare Finch associated with the camps. The wife had a blotch of purple on her forehead that might’ve been a birthmark or might’ve been fungus.

The next interview went better. A man of about sixty answered. Slight build. Large blue eyes, accentuated by the wrinkles in his forehead. A cultured voice. He wore a too-tight dinner jacket. The points of the collars on the white shirt beneath stabbed the flesh of his neck. His wrists showed from the dark ends of his cuffs. He looked like a child in a straitjacket.

As Finch questioned him, he slowly realized the man had dressed up for the interrogation. Had heard him at other doors down the hall. Soon, the man was asking him to come in for tea. Polite in a way that hadn’t been common in Ambergris for years. Finch guessed violinist or theater owner. Either that or he’d once been the doorman.

He didn’t know anything about the murders. (Finch couldn’t recall when he’d started calling them *murders*, but the word felt right.) Thought the man in the photograph looked familiar, but couldn’t place him. In the way people do when they’re trying to help.

Then the man asked if the people living there had been of use.

“People living there?” Finch echoed.

“Yes. There were people living there. A man. A woman.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I don’t know their names.”

Didn’t know anything else, either.

Who was lying to him then? Heretic? The Partial?

Remembered Heretic’s strange mood as he headed up to the fifth floor.

* * *

In the apartment, the bodies lay much as before. Except that each had sprouted a thick, emerald-green stalk topped by a nodule. The detectives called them memory bulbs. No one could pronounce what the gray caps called them. Sounded like a word between *loam* and *leer*. An aqua-colored nodule for the man. Bright orange for the gray cap. Which meant Finch had learned something new.

The bodies still looked peaceful. Even with the dull light streaming through the open window. The man looked better preserved than when Finch had seen him that morning. Sometimes death did that. For a time.

A figure stepped out of the back room. The Partial, grinning.

"Shit." Finch's gun appeared in his hand. Heart pounding.

"I'd aim that somewhere else if I were you," the Partial said. Fungal eye blinking and blinking. *Recording*.

Finch transferred his gun to his left hand. Shook his right. Green liquid hit the floor. *Goddamn gun*. Wiped his hand on the side of the couch.

"Did you follow me here?" Finch demanded.

One eyebrow arched. "Getting paranoid? Afraid you'll be found out?"

Snarled, "Why do you keep saying that?"

The Partial smiled. Triumphant. "Everyone has something to hide."

"Why didn't you tell me two people lived here?" he asked the Partial. "A man and a woman. Did you question them? And where are they?"

A preternatural calm to the Partial as he countered with, "Tell me what was in the dead man's hand."

Finch stepped back. Took in the narrow face, all slab of tongue and uncanny black-green left eye. Right eye atrophied from the repurposing. Dull orange lichen lived there now. The tongue moved like Finch's pet lizard's tongue. Tasting the air. The amount of energy that went into the eye meant they had to suck on gray cap—provided mushroom juice seven or eight times a day. *Looked like green pus*. What was their name for themselves? A gray cap word. Sounded like *grineeknsenz* or something just as ugly. Rumor had it they'd made a pact with the gray caps. That soon they'd be made more like the gray caps, in return for their service.

"Nothing important," Finch managed finally.

"Isn't that for me to decide?"

"It's for Heretic to decide. It'll be in my report."

"I hope it is." The Partial's gaze was cold and dark. "We notice more than the gray caps, Finch. And we're more prepared to use what we find than they are."

That surprised Finch. Was the Partial criticizing Heretic? *Safer to ignore it.*

"What did the people who lived here tell you?"

"Nobody lived here."

Finch chewed on that for a moment. Was the Partial *hiding* something from Heretic? He patted his satchel. "I've got the entire list from Heretic of anyone who lived here." *Idiot.* "You're saying it won't include the two who lived here?"

"They don't live here," the Partial said, a hint of warning in his voice. "They don't live anywhere anymore. They didn't know anything important."

Dead, then. Disappeared into the abyss of history.

Appalled, Finch said, "Heretic knows this?"

The Partial nodded, folding his arms. "Don't take anything from the bodies this time except for the memory bulbs. I'm supposed to guard them. I've been here all day. Someone will always be here."

The way the Partial said this made Finch think the man, the abomination, was applying for martyrdom. Did the Partial think Finch was weak just because he hadn't allowed the gray caps to take his eye? Part of Finch wanted to hit the Partial in the mouth for that. Instead, he squatted next to the man's body. Looked so peaceful.

Was he alive for a time? In the room? Was he fighting the gray cap? Fleeing him?

The Partial, from in front and above him: "I'll watch. Just to make sure." *Make sure of what?*

"Stay where I can see you."

"Such distrust," the Partial murmured.

Finch knelt beside the man's body. Pushed aside the matted hair on the man's head to get a good grip on the stalk. Held the bulb in

his hand. *Sticky, porous, rubbery.* Gently twisted it off the stalk. A *pock* sound as he detached it. He put the bulb in his pocket. Pulled the stalk out at the root. Left behind a round indentation about a half inch deep. Blood began to fill the small wound.

That'll leave a scar.

Let loose a yip of nervous laughter. Shut it down.

But the Partial still noticed it. "I knew you didn't want to eat their memories."

Finch ignored the Partial. Repeated the process for the gray cap. *No blood, no pock sound.*

"You might be the first person to ever eat a gray cap's memory bulb. Aren't you the lucky one."

Finch rose to face the Partial. "Pathetic idea of security, by the way. One Partial. First thing any intruder will want to do is shoot out or cut out your eye. Followed by cutting off your head to make absolutely sure." Said each word slowly. Savored each.

The Partial wasn't smiling now. The eye twitched. He advanced on Finch until he stood inches away. Finch looked into that ruin of a face and tried not to turn away in disgust.

"Finch. Finchy. Whoever you are. You're not as smart as you think. I'm not the only one here. We've got this whole building staked out. If anyone comes here, we'll see them. The spores will see them."

Bellum omnium contra omnes. "Never lost" in a dead man's hand.

"Who would come here? And why?"

"Followers of the Blue." The Partial seemed on the verge of saying more. Caught himself.

But Finch had heard enough. A grin broke across his face. *Didn't turn back soon enough.* He gave the Partial a last poisonous stare.

"What? Nothing more to say?" the Partial called after him as he headed down the stairs. "I'm disappointed, Finchy . . . Someday, though, Finchy, someday . . ."

Out onto the street, amid the black leaves. The rotten fruit. A memory bulb in each pocket. Looking now for the signature of the rebels in every figure that he passed.

* * *

Followers of the Blue . . . The Lady in Blue.

A thousand tales told about her by now. Told by old men to young men. Told by mothers to sons and daughters. Most are about her voice. No one agrees on where the Lady in Blue came from, but everyone agrees that during the worst of the War of the Houses her voice was heard coming from courtyards, buildings, even underground. Or seemed to. Some thought she was an opera singer transformed by grief over a slain lover. That she was in some way the voice of the city, coming up from the earth. Believed this even though it could not be true. None of it could be true.

Then her voice started coming to the people on the radio stations of House Hoegbotton and House Frankwrithe, before the Rising. In those interim years when the Houses combined forces to confront the true insurgents. The enemy hidden in the ground.

Finch remembers some of those broadcasts. Listened to them with his father. Near the end.

The Lady in Blue would begin in a low, slow voice. Almost the murmurs of a lover. Her voice would build in volume and strength. Until she was exhorting the people of Ambergris to stand firm against not only the “underground invader,” but also against the avarice and selfishness of its own leaders.

That her voice came from everywhere was reinforced by background noises in her broadcasts. Many different settings. Sometimes the sounds of the River Moth behind her. Sometimes a windy tower. Sometimes a water-clogged basement that she would claim was actually an underground gray cap stronghold. Often, she sounded weary. So incredibly tired. And other times strong, defiant.

Then the gray caps Rose, and Hoegbotton and Frankwrithe alike became the rebels. Dead. Dispersed. Fled. Lost. But the Lady in Blue survived, and by surviving she seemed to have again become greater than herself. Neither the green of the Hoegbottons nor the red of the Frankwrithe & Lewdens, but all the colors mixed together. People clung to the hope that she would return in force to save them. Even though she’d never been more than a voice on the radio to most of them.

Finch has seen the gray caps' files on the Lady in Blue, of course. Knows that she was born Alessandra Lewden in the Southern Isles. Received her education from various private schools in Morrow and Stockton. Then became Alessandra Hoegbotton in a politically advantageous marriage arranged during a brief truce between the Houses. Wife to the opera singer Joseph Hoegbotton, who was shot dead by an insane rival after a performance. After which Alessandra disappeared for several years. Until House Hoegbotton needed her for their latest propaganda tool: radio broadcasts. Across enemy lines. The disembodied voice of the self-described "Lady in Blue" coming out of houses and the back rooms of cafés.

Unclear from the files if Alessandra had given herself over entirely to Cause Hoegbotton. But it didn't matter when Cause Hoegbotton and Cause Frankwithe-Lewden came together. The Lady in Blue just became more powerful. Sometimes, she was the only thing connecting the two factions.

But fascinating to Finch: her voice coming over the radio had driven the gray caps insane with anger. At first, they did not understand this new invention, brought to Ambergris by the busy scientists of the Kalif's empire. So for a time her voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Magically. Or a magic that was beyond them, unaffected by spores or fruiting bodies. You could not re-create radio using fungi. You could not spy on it from within.

The gray caps, the files revealed, had spent at least as much time trying to track her down as preparing for the Rising. But they could not locate her. They flooded tunnels. Sent spore armies rushing down remote streets. Blocked off passageways. Still, they couldn't find her. Which made Finch, even conflicted, admire her, reading the files. Understanding the cost of being constantly on the move. Constantly in flux.

Sometimes that cost came through over the radio. A mad howling. As if the city were a creature gone insane. Capturing the sounds of warfare. Of demolition. Of fighting with the gray caps or the Partials.

But for the last several months Finch knows there have been no radio broadcasts from the Lady in Blue. From Alessandra Lewden.

Little or no organized rebel activity anywhere in the city. Meanwhile, the towers continue to rise in the bay. People grow more and more used to their situation. Becoming cynical about the Lady in Blue. Distrust reborn between former Hoegbottoms and former Frankwrithes. Even Wyte's noticed it.

The fact is she hasn't saved Wyte, him, or anyone from six years of living under gray cap rule.

5

Home is an apartment in a twelve-story rundown hotel. He'd moved there six years ago, three months after the Rising, two years after his father's death. In its day, during the worst of the fighting between House Hoegbotton and House Frankwrithe, it had become famous as a kind of sanctuary. Far enough away from the battles to be neutral. Near enough to the merchant quarter to be profitable. Everybody trying to make money on the war.

But those days are gone. Outside the hotel, a statue of a dead composer stands guard beyond the crumbling steps that lead to the gaping front door. Powder-burned, nose shot off, one raised arm just a stone stump. A raving madman lives near the statue. Finch has no idea how he survives the gray caps' patrols at night.

Inside, the lobby is dank and dim and molding. An old crooked photograph on the wall captures a few signs of the hotel's lost luxury in a scene from some long-ago party. A strain of pale green lichen has infiltrated the faded burgundy of the carpet. Gives the floor a spongy feel and sheds a disconcerting, ghostly glow that leads Finch through the entrance after dark.

Elsewhere, bulbs burn fierce or dull, like mismatched cousins. Always, a ghastly yellow haze. A curling faded wallpaper that sometimes isn't. Smells that change by the hour, dictated by the currents in the basement. Walls knocked out. Old furniture piled high. A courtyard through the middle of the hotel. The basement is awash in water, an intrusion from the River Moth.

Finch knows many of the people in the building by name. A kind of survival strategy. *Strangers mean danger*. Like a leftover slogan from the old days when Hoegbotton gangs purified their neighborhoods of the "F&L scourge," and F&L gangs returned the favor. He doesn't

know how safe his presence makes those around him, but he does his best. Tries to notice what's going on. Likes to believe he is doing what his father would've done.

The crumbling sign on the roof still reads “ otel Mur t.” Crows nest in it.

Sometimes Finch hides behind the sign.

Peers out across the skyline, toward the bay, from its shelter.

His apartment was on the seventh floor, but Finch ignored the dirty marble stairs and the stubborn elevator. Followed the wormy carpet into a darkened courtyard instead. A snarl of bushes and long grass along the path. At the center, a ragged vegetable garden of tomatoes, carrots, squash. Didn't know who tended to it. He turned left, pushed open the first door, took familiar steps down into the dark two at a time.

Bottom of the stairs. Finch turned right, faced a door at the end of a stub of hallway.

Rebecca Rathven lived there. He could hear the sounds of water, the slap of fish surfacing, coming through the air ducts. Mixed, sometimes, with Rathven's cackling laugh as she read something funny in her books. On a quiet night, the odd sounds traveled as far up as Finch's floor. Finch liked the sounds. And he liked Rathven. Found her useful. Found her interesting. Sometimes in a sinister way.

Who takes a flooded basement as an apartment in a hotel full of empty rooms?

Finch knocked. Heard footsteps. A pause. An appraisal through the peephole.

She was used to visitors, but still cautious. People came to Rathven for information from the past. They came to her if they'd lost the thread. They came to her to talk. Why? Finch, like most people, had books, but Rathven had a *library*.

That library changed with every visit. Rathven kept shifting the stacks against the inroads of the river. People who owed her favors helped her create barricades of wooden beams and homemade sandbags. He'd told her to move, to go higher. But the effort, *all of those books . . .* she said she would, but she hadn't yet. Might never.

The door opened wide enough for Finch to smell soggy pulp. *Trying to save the unsalvageable*. A wavery yellow light crept into the hall. Rathven's long face appeared, tilted up at him. Startling white skin, almost translucent. Looked at times like something broken. Then like something strong. Dark hair shot through with lighter strands. Thick black eyebrows, hazel eyes, high cheekbones, thin lips curled in a smile. Blue dress and brown sandals. Finch could never tell her age. Somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five. Had never found a way to ask.

"Finch." The word invested with some secret amusement. "Come in?"

Smiled, shook his head. "But I do have something for you. A list. A long list."

"A list of what? Laundry list? Shopping list? Enemies? Friends?"

Finch laughed. "You should've been a detective."

"I *am* a detective," she said. The ritual refrain.

"List of names," he said. "People who lived in an apartment where two murders took place. And you'll love this: it's more than a century of names."

Not quite a frown, but a kind of quiver to the lips. A caution entering the eyes. She'd guessed the source. Not hard, really.

Rathven had been in the work camps for three years. Had the brands on the bottoms of her feet, the red-gold marking of fungus she could hide but never forget. There was a pulsing sensation sometimes, she'd told him. A restlessness. He'd never asked what else had happened to her there. Didn't really want to know.

She helped him because he'd gotten her brother Blaine, who went by the name "the Photographer," out of the camps and into the hotel. Dozens of old cameras in the Photographer's fifth-floor apartment. The man used the cameras to take thousands of photographs of water. Funded that obsession by running a black market for goods. Finch bought or traded with him like everyone else. Using gray cap vouchers, food pods, or salvaged items.

If the Photographer ever cut him off, or Rathven ever stopped helping him, Finch knew it would feel like a punch to the kidneys. *Friendship or need?*

He leaned over, pulled the list from his satchel. Felt tired suddenly, like he'd stolen something from her but realized it too late. "Could you

read it? Tell me if any names are familiar. Maybe from your books.”
Would pay her in information and fungal antidotes, like usual.

Rathven took the paper gingerly. Prodded the spongy edges with one finger. “Only if you tell me why.”

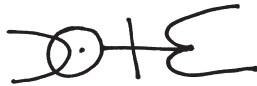
“Recent murders.”

The color went out of her face.

“Got a piece of paper?” he asked.

She nodded, reached behind her. Handed him an old envelope. Return address from somewhere in the Southern Isles. *Might as well be some imaginary place now.*

Drew the symbol. Handed the paper back to her. “Do you know what this is?”



A disdainful glance. “It’s a gray cap symbol, of course. Very poorly drawn.”

“Can you check it out? I’ve seen it before. But I don’t know what it means.”

“Sure. I don’t know how long it will take.”

“That’s fine . . .” Lingered, unsure how to ask for more. Then just said it: “Another favor. Memory bulbs tonight. Can you check on me? Call, or knock on the door if the phones are out? In an hour or two?” No idea when Sintra would get there. No point taking chances.

Now came the frown, as he knew it would. But she nodded. “I will. I will, Finch. Don’t worry.” Reached out to squeeze his arm. Then withdrew her hand quickly. As if she’d shown weakness.

He stared at her now. Smiled. Sometimes he felt a closeness with her he shared with no one else, not even Sintra. She’d never fought the Rising. She’d just read her books, preserved them. Protected them. Shared them. Eked out a living making crafts. At least, this was the story she’d told him. A small part of him still wondered why she’d been taken to the camps. Or why she’d been let go. “*I was too sick to work,*” she’d told him. But she’d never looked sick to him.

"The gray caps like to confuse randomness with purpose," Wyte had said once. But Finch didn't believe that. Just believed they kept the purpose buried deep.

"Thank you," he said. The words came out a little ragged. "Long day. I'll call when I take them. If the phones work."

"I'll come up and knock if I don't hear," she said. In return, he knew he'd have to help push back the encroaching river one more time. Each task had its own price with Rathven.

She shut the door, taking the light with her.

Finch's apartment was near the end of the hall. Had to negotiate a hothouse wetness to get there. Tendrils and caps of red-and-green fungus sprouted from the walls. Gray caps only cared about keeping the streets clean. No help from his next-door neighbors, either. Almost like they thought it gave them camouflage.

No one around, except his cat Feral, a big brute of a tabby, crying to be let in. Bumping up against his legs while Finch made shushing sounds. Feral was loud, always trying to trip Finch and bring him down to eye level.

Sometimes the little old man in the apartment opposite heard Finch and came out, but not tonight. A former accountant, the man liked to sit in a shaft of sunlight from the hall window. Smile and talk to himself and nod, and read from the same ragged book.

Two minutes to unlock and then relock. Only Sintra knew the sequence. Still not comfortable with that idea. Had thought about changing the key.

Flash of another dark room. A worn bed. White sheets dull in the shadow. Didn't look like anyone had slept in it in months. Dusty floor. Two corpses.

Flipped a switch. Relief when the lights actually came on. Faded floral print wallpaper. Root-like edges to the frayed beige carpet. Worn-out furniture.

Relief at being able to hang up the role of detective in the closet, along with his jacket. To let the tough exterior come off like a mask worn for a festival.

"Hold on for Truff's sake," Finch said to Feral as the cat ran to the kitchen through the living room.

Feral had wide round eyes. They gave his owlish face a perpetual look of surprise. Finch had rescued him as a kitten from a fungus that had wound tendrils around the animal while he slept. Still had purple patches on his flanks, sometimes growing, sometimes not.

No sign of Sidle, his windowsill lizard. Never really knew if it was the same lizard anyway. Felt compelled to pretend for some reason.

After feeding Feral, Finch put the two memory bulbs on the kitchen counter. Poured himself a glass of Trillian's Premium Whisky, aged eighteen years. An F&L brand trading off a famous name. Something no self-respecting H&S man would've drunk before the Rising. He had six bottles left in the closet. Next to the boxes of cigars. These had been his father's habits, his legacy. Nothing better had replaced them. The smell of cigar smoke made him feel like his father was right there, beside him.

Cigars. Whisky. Both working as a kind of peculiar clock or timer. When they ran out, would his life as Finch run out, too?

Heretic's touch like wet, dead leaves sewn together and stuffed with meat.

Dinnertime, but he wasn't hungry.

A long, shuddering sigh as he sat in the old leather chair next to the couch in the living room. Under the light of an old glass lamp shaped like an umbrella that he'd taken from the lobby. Watched the dusk dissolve into night.

On the far wall hung three of the hotel's original tourist scenes of Albumuth Boulevard. A far better view than the one from the small balcony abutting the kitchen. All the balcony could show him was more of the night sky, a sliver of the two towers, and the alley below. *A view saved for emergencies.* A second view could be had from the bathroom by opening the small latched window and standing on the toilet. Finch could look down into the courtyard whenever he wanted. Between the two sight lines, he had as much forewarning as he could expect. If what came after him was human.

Not a bad place. At least he had a separate office next to the kitchen and extra bookcases, overflowing, on the wall closest to the door. He'd made them from planks torn up from the rotting eleventh floor.

Even before the Rising, Finch had enjoyed reading. So many nights at the old house in the valley he and his father had sat reading in silence, separate yet together. To block out the night. The wars. Now the gray caps' camps lay so close that a crushed foundation under a heap of garbage was all that remained of the house. Nothing left but the books and other things he'd rescued.

Some books had been bought during cease-fires. Before the Rising destroyed the idea of bookstores. A few had come from his grandparents, who had returned to the Southern Isles when he was ten. Memories of them were like spent matches dull against a sudden darkness. He leafed through the books for signs of them sometimes. *A folded letter. A note that never dropped to the floor.*

But most of the books had been his father's, rescued from the old home. About a dozen Finch knew from long repetition, part of his father's home-schooling when it was too dangerous to go to class.

His father had started out as a brilliant engineer. In his youth, he had served in the Ambergris military in that brief, bright window when they'd taken on the Kalif's empire. He was with the troops as they advanced into a desert strewn with oases and hunched trees with gnarled black branches. As they took the Kalif's lands, and contemplated their own vision of conquest. As they were pushed back.

With Finch's mother dead in childbirth, his father had raised him after the war. A strange life, seesawing between wealth and poverty. Father's many important yet strange friends. His connections with Hoegbotton & Sons. And yet sometimes things had been bad enough Finch's father had supported them doing odd jobs and trading books for food. Or burning books for fuel.

Back at the old house, there had been many photographs of his father. The broad-chested muscular form of the man, tight in that characteristic Ambergrisian uniform of olive green. Wedge of a hat tilted to the side as was the fashion. On a hill or in a city or atop a tank. Surrounded by fellow soldiers or alone. Always smiling. Eyes dark dots looking into the camera. Seeming aware of future fame, but not of how it would come. Nor of how far he would fall.

Finch had chosen "John" for his new identity because it was his father's name. "Finch" was just a common bird, a creature

no one would ever notice. He'd burned all photographs except one the night he'd changed his name. Displayed on the mantel, it showed his grandparents just arrived from the Southern Isles. At the docks with their suitcases beside them. Looking faded, remote, and confused. Grandpa had been a carpenter. Grandma a homemaker. There were no relatives on his mother's side. His father was four years old in the photo. This image was all Finch was willing to risk.

Once, Sintra had asked about the people in the photo. He'd said he didn't know them. That he'd found the photo on the street and liked it. True, to a point. Hadn't known the four-year-old. Never really knew his grandparents. Just another nonmemory from a lost life, and most days he didn't regret that.

On the back of the photograph, his father had scrawled a few lines: "Sometimes a man will see in his own image a desert, and it is the need to make that desert bloom which drives him again and again to action, as hopelessness compels us to our end. Sometimes, too, a man will flee in the enemy's direction, eager to weather any punishment—physical or mental—that proves he is still alive. Or, he does so from a pride that lies to him, tells him he can change what seems unchangeable." From a book? His own thoughts? Finch would never know.

Feral jumped up on his lap. Began to purr as Finch petted him.

The rough-smooth taste of the whisky scratched and soothed his throat. He sank further into his chair. Maybe Sintra would come by tonight.

Never lost.

"Yes, I know, fat boy," Finch murmured. Could sit there all night. Forget what he had to do and pull out a book that he'd read three or four times already. Pretend he lived in a better world.

Turned on the small radio on the table next to him. Feral stopped purring for a second. Only one station across the dial: the gray caps' station. Gone any cacophony of voices and music. Usually just a single signal, filled with cryptic clicks and whistles. Punctuated by propaganda delivered in flat tones by human readers. ". . . A spy is caught and killed just outside the Zone . . . Sector

509 has been scheduled for renovation. Anyone living there should relocate immediately."

But, tonight, nothing. That made thirty-seven days of static. What did it mean? Was it just another slackening of attention? Or something more serious? Finch had noticed a pattern. The new dislodged the old. A puppet government in place for six months dissolved when the gray caps turned to building the camps. Electricity no longer reliable since they'd started in on the two towers. These failings brought a twisted optimism. *Maybe they can't do everything at once.* Or maybe there was a purpose to all of it that he just couldn't see.

He pushed a complaining Feral off his lap. Walked back into the kitchen.

The memory bulbs lay on the counter. Vaguely round. Pitted and whorled. Smelling of both salt and offal. Already rotting?

Finch looked down at the cat, which had followed him expecting a treat. Wondered what would happen if he fed a bulb to Feral.

"You want to eat one of these and I'll eat the other?" he asked Feral.

The cat walked back into the living room. Finch laughed. "Smart choice." Picked up the phone receiver, dialed Rathven's number. A crackling interference. *At least it's working.*

Through the static: "I'm taking one now. Give it an hour. If I don't call back, check on me."

"I will. Be safe."

"Thanks."

Finch put the receiver down. *Be safe.* Don't slip on the carpet. Don't fall out the window.

Which poison first? Finch picked up the orange one. *Get the worst over with first.*

Each time he ate a memory bulb, he became someone else. *Different* when he returned.

These would be his fourth and fifth. The first had belonged to a girl of ten and had given him nightmares for a year. Montages of a ragged doll. Soup made with dog bones. A bleak apartment without even wallpaper. Turned out there'd been no foul play. Her parents dead, she'd starved to death. The second had been a young man, the third a young woman. A double suicide unspooled in his head. Left him with

longings he didn't know he had. Regrets that weren't his. Memories of people he didn't know. Or want to know.

Finch had never eaten two in one night.

How many would change him by just a little too much?

Fuck it.

Opened his mouth wide. Placed the bulb on his tongue. The taste of the gray cap bulb was dry. Like dirt and sand. The worst part was you had to eat them whole. Crunch down on the ridiculous size of it until your jaw ached. No good cutting them up, grinding them down to paste, adding them to food or water. Ruined the effect. His skin prickled as his mouth took in the strange texture, the taste. An odd, sickening blend of cinnamon-pepper-lime. Sour breath.

Dread, and yet also a thin layer of anticipation. To be taken out of his own life. If only for a little while.

He stumbled into the chair. Feral butted his head up against his slack arm.

Memories didn't come out the way one might expect. Nothing logical or ordered about them. Almost as if you were standing on a street corner as a motored vehicle raced by. As it passed you, a thousand pieces of confetti flew up. You had to try to catch as many of them as you could before they hit the ground.

Finch closed his eyes.

Leaned back.

Let it hit him all at once.

Come to:

At the bottom of a well. Layers of rough stone spiraled up to a distant pale light. A wriggling mass of worms or insects or something thick and strange pushing down through the light, extinguishing it. Sudden image of a monstrous City, balanced atop a single building greater than anything ever built in Ambergris, and it all housed in a cavern so huge that the ceiling is lost in blue-tinged darkness.

Come to (faster now):

A stumbling, jerky run through a tunnel. A surrounding mob of gray caps click and whistle with insane speed. A glimpse of blue sky,

winking out. A burning motored vehicle, ancient model. A parade with a huge black cat caged and orange-yellow-green lights spread out along the route. Superimposed: an enormous grub drowning in a sack of its own liquid skin. A dark-green frond of fungus five stories high. Blood, lots of blood, pooling out across the ground. A man's face, in extreme agony, suddenly gone black in silhouette, turning into a huge door made half of volcanic rock and half charred book cover. And on top of the door a smaller door, and a small door set into that one. Hand on the doorknob. Opening . . .

Come to (slower now):

A stone fortress in a desert. Spinning out into open space—falling, falling, falling. And then a face Finch recognizes, the dead man's, smiling. Beatifically. More mud and dirt and the smell-sound of a river nearby. Side view of water flowing, ear to the grass. Something licks the moisture from his eyes before huffing and going on its way. Falling again, through black fabric studded with stars. The dead man falling, too, staring right at Finch, expression oddly calm. Words from the man's mouth in the clicks and whistles of the gray caps' language. And then, a sudden and monstrous clarity that can never be put into words.

Come to:

Moving slowly among a thousand swaying fungal trees in a thousand vision-shattering shades of green. Nearby, a rotting tank with the insignia of the Houses on its side, asleep under the fruiting bodies. The sound of footsteps. A hint of movement other than spores, strained through the heavy sky. Hunting for something. But what? A man. Moving in front of them. Night. Strange numbers and words spilling out emerald against a field of darkness. Shadowing the man. The orange sky dominated by the shambling hulks of floating fungal fortresses. *Things* crawl and fly and swim between the fortresses. Running now, just yards behind the man. But the man was turning to face them. The man was looking right at him when he disappeared. Winked out. Leaving only the smile. And that only for an instant. An intense feeling of

confusion and surprise. Then: falling through cold air and couldn't feel his legs.

Returned whining. Keening. A low, animal sound from deep in his throat. Lay curled up on the chair. Sweating. Things crawled around inside his skull. Didn't know how much time had passed.

An enormous grub drowning in a sack of its own liquid skin.

Coughed. Sat up.

A rotting tank with the insignia of the Houses on its side, asleep under the fruiting bodies.

Feral rubbed up against his extended arm. Finch got up, made it to the phone, dialed Rathven, said "One done, one to go" when she answered, and hung up. Grabbed the second memory bulb. Collapsed back to the chair.

A monstrous City, balanced atop a single building.

Started laughing. Didn't know what was so funny or why he couldn't stop.

Falling through cold air and couldn't feel his legs.

Wondered how much this would mess him up.

6

The night half over. *Something important slipping away?*

Drank more whisky, and let it swirl around his mouth. Held the burn in the back of his throat. Followed by numbness.

The sounds out in the dark beyond the window hadn't made him shudder or start for a long time. Skitterings. Moanings. A cut-off shout of alarm.

A spotlight of lavender and crimson painted itself across the far wall of his apartment, then leapt away. Once, Finch had seen a shoal of spores take the form of a huge, bloated green monster. Spiraling red eyes. It had bellowed and dived into a neighborhood to the north. Smashed itself into motes against the ground.

A child might see that and cry out in delight.

Sidle, quick-shadow, scuttled up the side of the wall near the window. Pursuing moths that had flown into the apartment. Sidle was a happy little predator with bright black eyes. Didn't care about anything but his next meal. Finch could put him in a cage with a branch and water, and Sidle would be content his entire life. So long as he got fed.

"I guess we'll soon find out what kind of bastard he was," Finch said to an oblivious Feral. Feral was looking up at the wall. Mesmerized by Sidle's stalking of the spiraling moth. Finch wondered how many Sidles Feral had caught over the years.

Finch forced the second bulb into his mouth. Chewed it into a dull paste as he moved from the chair to the couch. Lay down. Swallowed.

The room spun a little. Righted itself.

The ceiling had a few odd discolorations but nothing to suggest infiltration. *Invisible spies*. Who lived upstairs, anyway? Sometimes

lately he had heard a person pacing across the floorboards in the middle of the night.

After a minute or two, Finch sat up. Nothing seemed to be happening. Nothing at all.

The dead man sat in the chair next to him, smiling.

"Uhhh!" Finch leapt to his feet.

The man was flanked by a Feral grown large as a pony. A Sidle grown as large as a Feral. They both looked at him the way Sidle had been looking at the moths.

"Sit down," the man said. An order, not a suggestion. In a strange accent. The man looked much younger than he had on the floor of the apartment. Had lost the fungal beard.

Finch sat down slowly. Didn't take his eyes off the man. Left hand groping across the cushions. Where was his gun?

"I've been waiting for someone like you," the man said. "You won't understand it, but I'm going to give you what I know. Just in case."

The window behind the man no longer showed the city. What it did show was so impossible and disturbing Finch had to look away. And yet the image entered into him.

The man said Finch's name. Except he didn't say "John Finch." He used Finch's real name. The one buried for eight long years.

Finch tried to slow his breathing. Failed. Chest felt like something was going to explode.

He must be *inside* the man's memories.

Then why is the man sitting across from you?

"Who are you?" An obvious question. But it kept pounding against the inside of his skull. So he had to let it out.

The man laughed.

"I didn't say anything funny."

"More to the point," the man said, "who are *you*? And who are you with?"

"Shut up. This is just one of your memories. Manifesting in me. It isn't real."

Blindly, unbelievably bright, a light like the sun shot through the window. The night sky torn apart by it. Through the tear: a turquoise sea roiling with ever-changing patterns.

"You don't have to understand it. Not now," the man said.

Didn't know if he was inside a mushroom or outside the universe. Glimpses of the city from on high: each street, each canal, an artery filled with blood. Hadn't known there could be so many shades of red. Spiking into his eyes.

"Be careful," the man said, echoing Rathven, and took Finch's hand. The man's hand was warm. Calloused. *Real*. "Don't lose your self, no matter what happens."

The man and Feral and Sidle disappeared. The window became a huge mouth, and they were all nothing more or less than memory bulbs within it. Finch fell through the same skein of stars he had seen in the gray cap's memory.

Woke up:

Teetering on the battlements of an ancient fortress, looking out over a desert, the sand flaring out for miles under the seethe of dusk. Moments from someone else's childhood. A parent's death. Sitting in a blind. Crawling through tunnels.

Woke up:

A cavern glittering with veins of some blue metal, huge mushrooms slowly breathing in and out. Seen in a flash of light that faded and kept fading but never went out: more caverns, an old woman's face, framed by white hair; another woman, in her twenties, her thirties, her forties. A shadowy figure hobbling down a street.

Woke up:

The insane jungle of the HFZ, almost floating above it, through it, coming out into a clearing ringed by twelve green men planted in the ground, arms at their sides, their mouths opening and closing soundlessly. And the jungle was made of fungus, not trees, poured over trucks and tanks and other heavy machinery junked and rusted out and infested with mushrooms, some of it still slowly, slowly moving. And back to the fortress, at the edge of a man made cliff, many hundreds of feet above the desert floor, and out in the desert a thousand green lights held by a thousand shadows motionless,

watching. A sound of metal locking into place. A kind of mirror. An eye. Pulling back to see a figure that seemed oddly familiar, and then a name: *Ethan Bliss*. Then a circle of stone, a door, covered with gray cap symbols. And, finally, jumping out into the desert air, toward a door hovering in the middle of the sky, pursued by the gray cap, before the world went dark.

Wake up . . . Came out of it seconds, centuries, later. To find Feral and Sidle watching him. Feral on the floor near the couch. Sidle on the windowsill, a large black moth trapped between his clockwork jaws.

The phone was ringing and ringing. Reached out for it. Put it to his ear.

“Are you okay?” Rath’s voice.

“I’m going to be fine. I think.”

Hung up.

Closed his eyes.

“I can’t remember ever reading a book like *Finch*. Audacious in technique, and extravagant in imagination, it has the rare quality of making the macabre poignant. In the midst of a disturbed and disturbing narrative landscape, Jeff VanderMeer gives us deeply sympathetic characters—especially Finch himself—who inspire us to care about their flawed and tyrannized world. I’m impressed.”

—**Stephen R. Donaldson**, *New York Times* best-selling author