

Deep Fried Bullets at the Infinite End Times Hotel

Oct 4, 2026 · @Amanda Hariette-Scott

I. Rain on Thamesmouth

The rain in Greater Thamesmouth had been falling for eleven years, and nobody could say any more whether it was weather or policy. It came down the colour of weak tea, carried a faint taste of solder, and stripped the paint off anything left outside long enough to forget it. Declan Rook had stopped carrying an umbrella around the time the umbrella stopped being a defence and became a sort of prayer.

He sat in the back booth of the Drowned Rat, a noodle bar under the Vauxhall Stack, nursing a cup of tea he had no intention of finishing. His left hand did not belong to him. It was military surplus, matte grey, and it ticked whenever the pressure dropped. Everything else about Rook was original equipment, if you didn't count the liver.

'You're a hard man to find,' said the woman who sat down opposite.

'That's the idea. You found me anyway, which means either you're good or I'm cheap.'

'Both can be true.' She slid a card across the table. Plain white, no logo, a single number. Her suit was the colour of expensive nothing, and her left eye had the faint gold ring of a corporate retinal licence. A fixer, then. Meridian-Okafor Consolidated, he'd have wagered the liver on it. 'My employer would like you to find a woman.'

'Everyone would like me to find a woman. It's the second oldest profession.'

She laid a photograph on the table. A woman with a severe fringe and ink on her cuff, laughing at someone out of frame as though the universe had just been explained to her and turned out to be less complicated than she'd feared. Rook looked at it for longer than he meant to.

'Dr Imogen Ashworth-Nair,' said the fixer. 'Theoretical physicist, thirty-nine. Eleven days ago she left the Cavendish Annex with a hardback notebook and a flask of coffee. She has not been seen since.'

'Missing persons is a police matter.'

'The police are a Meridian-Okafor matter. That is rather the point.' She turned her cup a quarter-turn on its saucer. 'Dr Ashworth-Nair was working under a private grant. Her results have been described to me as foundational. I am not cleared to say more.'

'Then say it anyway, or I finish this tea and go home.'

The thin smile again. 'She found a way to encode a human mind completely - every memory, every flinch - and transmit it. Not across a city, Mr Rook. Across the branes. Between universes. Into another body, if the receiver is prepared. If her claim holds, it is the only thing on this planet worth more than the planet.'

Outside, the rain hit the awning like a thousand small coins. Rook said nothing for a while. His hand ticked.

'And somebody's taken her.'

'We know of three interested parties. The Church of the Last Vacancy, who believe the work is a door to the afterlife. The Kessler-Lund syndicate out of Rotterdam, who believe it is a door to a very large invoice. And one we cannot identify.' She produced a second photograph, a grainy still of a credit chip's last transaction. 'Six days ago her chip purchased a single room for a single night. Then it went dark.'

'Where?'

'The End Times Hotel.'

Rook laughed, a short ugly sound. 'That's a bar story. Dead men's rooms and lifts that go sideways. Nobody's ever checked in and come back with a receipt.'

'It is an address.' She pushed a slip of paper across. It was not an address. It was a set of instructions: a Northern Line platform that did not appear on any map, a number of stairs to count, a word to say to a man who would not be there. 'The fee is three hundred thousand euro-sterling. A quarter now.'

'I don't work for Meridian.'

'You came highly recommended by someone who knows you very well.' She stood, and for a second the gold ring in her eye caught the neon. 'He said you'd say no, and then you'd look at the photograph again.'

Rook looked at the photograph again.

When she had gone he sat with the card and the slip of paper and the dead tea, and found himself pressing his thumb to the seam in his memory, the way a man tests a bad tooth. Eight years back, there was a gap about the length of a winter. He had always put it down to the drink. He had always been very quick to put it down to the drink.

He finished the tea after all. It was cold, and it tasted of solder, and it tasted of home.

II. The Last Known Address

Cambridge Sprawl was what happens when a university town is left alone with venture capital. The old colleges still stood, but they stood the way a drowned man's hands stand out of the water, ringed by forty storeys of server farms that hummed like a held note. Rook took the maglev in with a paper bag of chips and a pistol he had named Probity, because it was the only honest thing he owned.

The Cavendish Annex had been sealed with Meridian-Okafor tape, which meant nothing, because Meridian-Okafor's own people had already been through it with a vacuum and a lawyer. Rook went in through the loading bay. Nobody guards a loading bay. People who build prisons forget that the real door is always the one for the bins.

Dr Ashworth-Nair's laboratory was on the fourth floor, and it had been cleaned the way a crime scene is cleaned when the criminals are the ones with the key. No notebook. No drives. A whiteboard wiped to a faint grey ghost of equations. But Rook had spent twenty years reading rooms, and the thing about a room is that it remembers.

The coffee machine was still warm to the touch, which made no sense after eleven days, until he saw that it was plugged into a separate circuit and had been set on a timer. Someone had wanted the machine to keep brewing. A small, stubborn, human gesture. Beside it, a mug with a chip in the rim and the words WORLD'S OKAYEST PHYSICIST in peeling transfer.

He sat in her chair. It was adjusted for someone a head shorter than him, and he left it that way. What would she see from here? A window onto the server farms. A pinboard. On the pinboard, between a conference lanyard and a takeaway menu, a hotel keycard.

It was heavy, old-fashioned, brass-coloured plastic, and it bore no logo, only a number: 0. Not room zero. Just the numeral, embossed and slightly worn, as if it had been pressed between thumb and finger a great many times by a great many people. On the back, in biro, in a quick looping hand: *If anyone asks, I went to find the other half of the equation.*

Rook turned the card over twice. Then he noticed the whiteboard.

The ghost of the equations was not quite a ghost. Wipe a whiteboard in a hurry and the ink dries into the grain, and under the right angle of light you can read what was written. He crouched, tilted his head, and let the strip lights do the work. Most of it was gibberish to him, Greek letters in procession, but one line had been underlined three times, and she had written beneath it, in capitals, a single word.

COST.

He photographed it. He photographed everything. It was the kind of habit that kept a man alive and kept him poor in exactly equal measure.

The lift pinged behind him.

Rook did not turn around. He moved his left hand an inch toward the grey-tinted window and watched the reflection instead. Two figures stepped out of the lift. White coats, white masks, and under the coats the unmistakable hump of body armour. They carried lengths of pipe with copper coils wound around the ends, and they moved the way people move when they have been told that death is a transition and not an ending.

Last Vacancy. The Church.

'Mr Rook,' said the nearer one pleasantly, in a voice filtered through a mask. 'We were told you would come. The Concierge sees all the arrivals.'

'Then the Concierge has been telling people my business,' said Rook, 'which I find rude.'

He threw the mug.

It was not a good throw, but it was a good mug, and it caught the nearer one across the visor with a crack like a pistol. Rook went over the desk and under the second man's swing, the pipe hissing past his ear with a smell of ozone and burnt hair. Probity came out of his coat and shouted twice. The second man sat down against the whiteboard with a look of mild theological surprise.

The first was already up, visor cracked, a copper coil spitting blue. Rook's left hand closed on the pipe and the surplus servos shrieked and held. For three seconds the two of them stood locked, nose to nose, the pipe trembling between them like a tuning fork.

'You're one of hers,' the man said, through blood. 'You're a copy. We can smell it on you.'

'I don't know what that means,' said Rook, and then he shot him, and his hand went on ticking for a long time afterwards, and not because of the weather.

He took the keycard. He took the mug. At the loading bay he stood in the rain and counted the stairs of a Northern Line platform that did not exist, and found that, to his considerable irritation, he already knew how many there were.

III. The Vacancy Sign

The platform was not on the map because the map had never been shown it. Rook found the staircase behind a Tube advert for a skin treatment that had been illegal for six years, a narrow concrete throat that smelled of wet pennies and old goodbyes. He counted as he descended. Two hundred and twelve steps, and the numbers arrived in his head a half-second before his feet reached them, like a script he had read once and forgotten that he'd read.

At the bottom there was no train. There was a bench, a flickering departures board that listed only the word LATER, and a man in a porter's uniform who had not been there a moment ago and was now so firmly there that it seemed unreasonable to imagine him

ever having been elsewhere.

'Good evening, sir,' said the porter. He had a voice like a very expensive door closing. 'Will you be staying long?'

'I'm told that depends.'

'It does. Most guests find they are able to leave whenever they like. It is *arriving* that proves difficult.' He held out a white-gloved hand. 'The word, if you would.'

Rook had read the slip of paper a dozen times, and it had given him a word, and he had been sure the word was a lie. He said it anyway. 'Vacancy.'

The porter inclined his head with the grave satisfaction of a man hearing the right answer to a very old question. Behind him the tiled wall of the platform wasn't a wall at all. It was a pane of rain-streaked glass, and on the other side stood a building.

It was the size of a thought that cannot be finished. Rook tried to take its measure and his eyes simply slid, the way eyes slide off a very bright light. A façade of black marble and tarnished brass, windows in every colour of dusk, each one lit, each one occupied by a silhouette doing something that looked like living. Above the doors, in letters of buzzing pink neon, half of them dead:

THE END TIMES HOTEL NO VACANCY (the NO flickered, failed, flickered again)

'The sign has been like that for some time,' said the porter apologetically. 'We rather lose track of whether we are full or empty. One is never quite sure which is the better state for a hotel.'

'Who owns it?'

'No one owns it, sir. It is merely the place the universes come to be tidied away.' The porter smiled. 'Every reality ends, you see. Heat death, or a very large bang, or a very small mistake. When they do, a little of what remains has to go *somewhere*. We have found that people will pay a surprising amount to be allowed to check in at the end. Allow me to take your coat.'

'The coat stays.'

'And the pistol?'

'Stays with the coat.'

'Of course, sir. We have found it is often best not to argue with the pistol.' He bowed, and the glass opened like a held breath released, and Rook stepped through it into warm air that smelled of cigar smoke, cut lilies and something frying.

The lobby stretched in all directions at once. Chandeliers hung at three different heights, lit by candles, bulbs and what looked disturbingly like captured lightning. A reception desk of black walnut ran away into the distance, staffed at intervals by clerks who did not appear to be human, or to be many different kinds of human, or to be the same human at different ages. A woman in a ballgown played the piano with her hands folded in her lap. The music came out regardless.

On the wall behind the nearest desk hung a board of room keys, row upon row, floor upon floor, going up past the ceiling and out of sight. Each key bore a number. The first and lowest was **0**.

Rook took the brass card from his pocket. He held it up against the board. The empty hook at the bottom left was waiting for it with the patience of something that has outlasted everything else.

'You'll be wanting Floor One,' said a voice at his elbow. 'Though I'd advise against it.'

He turned. A girl of perhaps twelve stood there in a bellhop's pillbox hat that was far too large for her, with a luggage trolley and the eyes of someone who had seen a very great deal of nothing. She did not look at him so much as at the space slightly behind his head.

'Because?'

'Because she's on Floor Nine, and the lifts don't go to Nine unless you're running.' The bellhop pushed the trolley forward, the wheels singing on the marble. 'Tip is optional. But it's all anyone ever has left to give.'

Rook found a coin. It was a pre-decimal sixpence, which was strange, because he did not own any such thing. He dropped it into her palm.

She looked at it, and then, for the first time, she looked at him.

'Oh,' said the bellhop quietly. 'You're one of the ones who came back.'

IV. Floors Without Number

The bellhop's name was Pim, and she explained the hotel the way a child explains a game whose rules she did not invent and does not entirely trust.

'Every floor is a universe that's finished,' she said, as the lift cage rattled down to meet them. It was an antique thing of brass lattice and folding gates, and the dial above the door counted in no numerals Rook recognised. 'Not dead, exactly. Finished. They come here to stay in the shape they ended in. People check in to visit them. Some people check in to *live* in them.'

'And Nine?'

'Nine's the one nobody asks for.' She hauled the gate shut. 'The lift only goes where you're running toward, you see. Walking, it takes you wherever it fancies. So run, and mean it.'

Rook was not a man who ran as a hobby. He had a bad knee, a good pistol, and a profound distrust of any conveyance with opinions. But the lobby's piano had stopped, and from somewhere behind them came the tread of heavy boots on marble, a great many boots, in step. He saw white masks threading between the potted palms. The Church had followed him down.

'Floor Three,' said Pim. 'It's the quickest way to the service stair.'

The gate opened on a corridor that was impossibly *young*. That was the only word. The carpet was fresh as a nursery. The wallpaper smelled of milk. Doors stood open onto rooms in which people moved backwards through their lives with great dignity, unbuttoning, unlearning, un-eating their dinners with a grave and perfectly good-humoured air.

'Entropy ran the wrong way in this one,' said Pim, tugging his sleeve. 'It was lovely until the end. Don't make eye contact. They get lonely.'

An old man in a dressing gown stood in a doorway, smiling at Rook with the delighted expression of a child about to blow out a candle. As they passed, Rook saw the man's face smooth, very slightly, like a sheet being pulled flat.

Floor Five was a city made of a single sentence. The streets were its clauses, the towers were its verbs, and the rain that fell on it was the full stop, falling over and over again without ever quite arriving. Floor Six was a cathedral of ice built around a sun that had been cooled to the temperature of a thought. Floor Seven was an ocean where gravity had failed halfway, so that fish drifted in wet constellations through the air and a tall, tired woman in a lifejacket sat on a deckchair playing patience on the surface of the water.

The Church was on their heels. Rook heard a copper coil crackle and a corridor's worth of wallpaper blistered behind him in a long blue line.

'Lift!' shouted Pim.

He ran. His knee screamed, his surplus hand ticked like a bomb, and the lift's brass cage swung down out of nowhere to meet him with the gate already open. He dived through, hit the floor, and the whole cabin leapt upward with the groan of a thing that has been told what to want.

Floor Eight flashed past in the lattice, a glimpse of grey desert under a bruised sky, and in the desert a single table laid for dinner, and at the table a thousand empty chairs. Then Nine, and the lift slammed to a stop so hard that Rook bit his tongue.

The gate opened on a bare concrete service corridor, strip-lit, smelling powerfully of hot oil and gun-metal and something mysteriously sweet. At the far end hung a pair of stainless-steel swing doors, with a stencilled sign.

STAFF ONLY. KITCHENS. THE KITCHEN DOES NOT TAKE REQUESTS.

'She's on the other side,' said Pim, very quietly. She had not entered the lift. She stood outside the gate, pillbox hat askew, small and strangely solemn, and she was already, he noticed, becoming difficult to look at. 'They keep the important guests next to the fryers. It's the only room in the building that's never quite finished.'

'Pim. Why am I one of the ones who came back?'

The child considered him. For a moment she looked a thousand years old.

'Everyone who comes here has been sent,' she said, 'by someone who loved them. Or someone who owned them. It's very hard to tell the difference from this side.' And then the gate rattled shut between them, and the lift dropped away into the dark.

Rook stood alone in the corridor. Behind the swing doors, something began to sing, a low, bubbling, oily sound, like the sea frying itself in a pan.

He checked Probity. Six rounds. Six, in a hotel that served the end of everything, was the sort of number a man could write a will around.

He pushed through the doors.

V. The Kitchen

The kitchen of the End Times Hotel was a cathedral built by a lunatic who loved steam. Copper hoods the size of bandstands hung from a ceiling lost in vapour. Ranges ran away in rows, each burning a different colour of flame, and between them moved cooks in stained whites with faces that Rook's eye refused to hold. Somewhere a ticket printer chattered out orders in a script he could almost read.

At the centre of it all stood the Chef.

She was seven feet tall if she was an inch, built like a railway bridge, with forearms scarred pale from a lifetime of oil and a toque that had once been white. She was dropping a wire basket into a vat of bubbling gold with the unhurried air of a woman lowering a coffin. When the basket came up, it was full of small, glistening, crackling things the size of a thumb joint.

'Table forty,' she called, in a voice like gravel being poured down a stairwell. 'Last Orders. Don't let them go soft.'

Rook watched a waiter shake the basket over a paper cone, dust it with salt and vinegar, and carry it away through the steam. The things in the cone were bullets. Real ones, jacketed and nose-down, each battered in a golden shell so crisp that it rang faintly when the cone was set on a tray.

'You're staring,' said the Chef, without turning. 'Everyone stares.'

'You deep-fry ammunition.'

'It is the only dish that's on every menu at every ending.' She tossed him a cone, and he caught it by reflex, and it was hot enough to sting through his good hand. 'In some universes the last thing standing was a city. In some, a god. In most, a round in a chamber. People get nostalgic. They want to taste what finished them.' She wiped a hand on her apron. 'The powder's drawn. The primers are dead. It's only lead and vinegar. Eat. You look like you've been told something unpleasant about yourself.'

Rook did not eat. But he sniffed the cone, and the smell was malt and fat and old brass, and a memory rose that wasn't his, or was only partly his: a Friday night, a chip shop in the rain, a woman's cold hand on his, laughing at something he'd said.

'Where's Ashworth-Nair?'

The Chef's eyes, for the first time, moved. Not to him. Past him.

'Ah,' she said. 'The late arrivals.'

The swing doors burst inward. Four men in grey tactical coats with the Kessler-Lund wolf-and-ledger stitched over the heart came through them at a run, and behind them a fifth, tall and narrow, with a jaw of polished chrome and a pistol with a barrel as long as a forearm. Voss. Rook knew the name the way a man knows a diagnosis.

'Mr Rook,' said Voss, pleasantly. The chrome jaw clicked on the consonants. 'My employers would like the doctor and the notebook. You have, I think, neither. Which suggests that you can still be useful by walking away.'

'You've got a funny idea of useful,' said Rook, and dived behind a range.

The first shots came in a flat, brutal volley. Steel pans rang like gongs. A shelf of copper pots came down with a sound like a church bell being sick. Rook put Probity over the edge of the range and fired twice, and a grey coat spun, and the Chef, ten feet away, calmly ladled a measure of oil into a ramekin as if the entire war were happening in another building.

'Do you mind?' Rook yelled. 'People are shooting!'

'People are always shooting,' said the Chef. 'It's the *oil* that's temperamental.'

He had four rounds left, and nowhere to go, and a cone of hot battered bullets in his left hand that he had somehow never dropped. Then his eye found the crate on the floor by the fryer bank, stencilled in red: **LIVE. FINAL ORDERS. DO NOT FRY.**

A man who has spent twenty years in rooms knows that the solution is always already in the room.

He kicked the crate. Boxes of cartridges slid across the tiles toward the vats, and he put his shoulder under the metal lip of the hopper above the nearest fryer, and heaved. A hundred live rounds poured into four hundred litres of boiling oil.

There is a word for what happens to ammunition in a fire. It is *cook-off*. Hot enough, and the powder doesn't care about the gun. It fires where it lies.

Rook was already flat on the floor with his arm over his head when the kitchen began to scream.

The fryer bank went up like a string of firecrackers lit by a god. Rounds spat from the oil in all directions, ricocheting off copper hoods and steel counters, a hundred small furious suns, and the Kessler-Lund men scattered like pigeons in a hailstorm. One went down with a scream, hit by his own side. Voss stood very still in the middle of it, chrome jaw glittering, firing steadily at the ceiling, and Rook, rising from behind the range, put his last four rounds into the man's knees.

The tall man folded. The pistol skittered away across the tiles.

When the noise finally stopped, the kitchen was a ruin. Steam rolled in thick banks. The Chef stood in the wreckage with a ladle in her hand and the expression of a woman presiding over a mildly disappointing soufflé.

'You owe me a fryer,' she said.

'Put it on my tab.'

'You don't have a tab.' She jerked her head at a steel door at the back of the kitchen, half-hidden by a hanging rack of ladles. 'But I've never had a guest who paid for his own pudding. Go on. She's in the walk-in. She's been waiting for you for rather longer than you think.'

VI. Dr Ashworth-Nair

The walk-in was cold enough to hurt. Rook shouldered through the steel door into a white hush, a long room hung with sides of something that might once have been beef and might once have been Tuesdays, frost furring every surface. At the far end, sitting on an upturned crate in an enormous kitchen-porter's parka with the hood pushed back, was a woman with a severe fringe, ink on her cuff and a hardback notebook open on her knee.

She looked up. She had a flask of coffee in one hand and a very tired smile.

'Hello, Declan,' said Dr Imogen Ashworth-Nair. 'You look better than the last time.'

His hand ticked. 'It's Rook,' he said. 'And I've not had the pleasure.'

Something crossed her face, too fast to name, and went away again. 'No,' she said gently. 'I suppose you haven't.' She screwed the cap onto the flask. 'Sit down. You've been shot at, and you've the look of a man about to be told something. I would rather you were sitting.'

'You've been kidnapped.'

'Kidnapping implies intent. I'm more *detained*, by a rather literal-minded hotel.' She nodded at the door, which Rook now saw had no handle on the inside. 'I checked in six days ago to test a hypothesis. It turns out that nobody checks out of the End Times Hotel until the bill is settled, and nobody will tell me what the bill is. The Chef brings me soup. She's been very kind. I think she's lonely.'

'Meridian-Okafor says you've built a machine that moves minds between universes.'

'Meridian-Okafor says a great many things, most of them in the passive voice.' She tapped the notebook. 'It's not a machine, it's an equation, and the equation is the trouble. Do you know the no-cloning theorem?'

'I know it's a thing physicists say at parties when they want people to leave.'

A real laugh this time, quick and startled. 'Fair. It says you cannot copy an unknown quantum state. You can only *move* it, and when you move it, the original is destroyed. It's why teleportation works at all: what arrives was never duplicated, only relocated, and what was left behind is, strictly speaking, gone.' She turned a page. 'My protocol writes a mind into an entangled carrier and sends it across the branes. A person steps into the reader. A person wakes up elsewhere. And the person who stepped in is *dead*. Not sleeping. Dead. The one who wakes is certain they are the same, and they're exactly as certain as anyone ever is.'

'That's the cost.'

'That's the first cost.' She said it flatly, as one reads out a very old bill. 'The receiving body has to be empty. If it isn't, the arriving pattern overwrites whatever's there. Meridian's board has already asked me for a quote on that, the way you'd ask for a quote on a conservatory. Every immortal executive means a body that used to belong to someone else.'

The cold had got into Rook's good hand. He flexed it. 'And the hotel?'

'That's the thing I came to prove.' Her eyes were very bright. 'My equations said the overwritten patterns don't vanish. They *settle*. A reality that finishes leaves residue, and a mind that's been erased leaves residue, and the residue has to go somewhere. The hotel is

where it goes. It's a dead letter office for everything the multiverse has lost.' She pulled the parka tighter. 'Every guest in the lobby is somebody someone else was written over to make room for. I came to see whether any of them could be sent *home*. I wanted the other half of the equation. The return.'

'Did you find it?'

'I found the bill.' She closed the notebook. 'Declan. I have to tell you something, and I want you to know that I've never stopped being sorry.'

'Imogen,' said Rook, and she flinched, and he understood that he had not been introduced and yet he had said her first name as easily as breathing. 'Just say it.'

'Eight years ago you were dying in a flat in Brixton with the Thames in your lungs. You'd rung me because you had no one else to ring, and you said, *do the thing you keep talking about, I don't mind if it's a bad idea*. I hadn't tested it on anything bigger than a mouse.' Her voice cracked and she took a breath and made it behave. 'I'd been growing blank bodies in the basement of the Annex for two years, no mind, no occupant, as clean as I could make them. I had one almost ready. It lacked a left hand, because the print had failed, and I'd borrowed one from a surplus catalogue. I'd never grown a liver that took. I'm sorry about the liver.'

He did not move. He found he was looking at his left hand, grey and ticking and absolutely, evidently surplus.

'The transfer worked,' she said, very quietly. 'It lost a winter. I thought I'd lost *you*. For eight years I told myself it was the grief. And then my equations began to predict a shadow, a residue of your original pattern, left behind at the point of reading, and I realised that if the hotel was real, then somewhere in it was the man I'd killed.'

The cold hummed. Somewhere far off in the kitchen, a ticket printer chattered.

'I'm the copy,' said Rook.

'You're *Declan Rook*,' said Imogen, fiercely. 'You are every inch him. You've his temper and his terrible tea and his habit of testing a bad tooth with your thumb. You are not a copy of him, you're what became of him. Please don't let anyone, not even me, tell you otherwise.'

He looked at the notebook, and then at her face, and then at the door with no handle.

'Right,' said Rook, at last, in a voice that sounded like gravel being tipped down a stairwell. 'Then I'd better meet the man who sent for me.'

VII. The Concierge

The door of the walk-in opened from the outside, and the Chef stood there with her ladle across her shoulder like a rifle, looking neither surprised nor apologetic.

'He's asked for you both,' she said. 'He doesn't ask for many. Go through the tradesmen's lift. And Rook?' He turned. 'Whatever he says, he means it kindly. That's what makes it so hard to forgive.'

The lift dropped, rather than rose, which seemed to Rook entirely in keeping with the rest of the day. It let them out into the lobby by a door disguised as a panel of mahogany, and the first thing he saw was the sign over the entrance, buzzing and stuttering in pink neon, the NO in NO VACANCY dead now and not flickering back.

In the middle of the great chandelier-hung hall stood a small booth of green glass, like a bandstand for a very quiet orchestra. A lamp burned inside it. A man sat at a desk beneath the lamp, writing slowly in a ledger with a steel-nibbed pen, and the lobby seemed, somehow, to be arranged around him the way iron filings arrange themselves around a magnet.

He wore a morning coat the colour of strong tea. His hair was grey and cut close. His cuffs were damp, and had been for a very long time, and a little water had pooled at the foot of his chair and run in a thin bright line toward the drain. He looked up.

Rook found himself looking at his own face, eight years older, worn thin as a coin by a thousand hands.

'Evening, Declan,' said the Concierge. 'Sit. The doctor, too. I'd offer you tea, but you'd only say it tastes of solder.'

'It does,' said Rook. His mouth was dry. 'It's the only thing that does.'

'That's because I've been making it for eight years and I never learned how.' The Concierge set down his pen. 'I'll make this short, because I've made it long a great many times in my head, and it always comes out worse. I'm what was left at Brixton. When she read you, Imogen, she did it cleanly, as cleanly as anyone could have. But there's always a shadow. A bit of a man that wasn't quite taken. I woke here in this chair with the ledger in my hands, and I've been on the desk ever since.'

'You sent the fixer,' said Rook.

'The eye was Meridian's. The voice that put your name in her mouth was mine. I've a certain reach, down the corridors. It isn't much. A word in an ear, a hook in a dream.' He smiled, and it was a terrible, tender smile, the smile of a man who's been rehearsing his own funeral. 'I couldn't go myself. Nobody leaves who hasn't paid.'

'What's the bill?' said Imogen. Her voice was steady, but her hand was white around the notebook.

'You worked it out, Doctor, I think, in the cold room. You just didn't want to say it aloud.' He closed the ledger. 'The hotel keeps a balance. Every mind that arrives is a mind that was lost. For one to leave, one must stay. It isn't cruelty. It's accounting. The ledger doesn't

care who. But it must be someone, and it must be someone who *chooses*.'

'You've been the one choosing for eight years,' said Rook.

'I've been the one holding the door for the people who've come through it, and I've not once taken it myself, because I couldn't bear to do to somebody else what was done to me.' He turned his hands over on the blotter. They were his hands, thought Rook. They were *his own hands, both of them real*. 'And now there's a way, and I've been a coward about asking, so I'll ask. The return equation, Doctor. You've nearly finished it. It needs an empty body, and an empty body is hard to come by, but the cleanest place in all the multiverse for my pattern to fit is the one it was shaped to fit. The one that has my face.'

The lobby's chandeliers trembled. Somewhere, far above, a clock began to strike an hour that did not exist.

'You want my body,' said Rook.

'I want what was *mine*. And I'm ashamed to say that I think it's mine by any ledger you care to name.' The Concierge's voice did not waver. 'But I won't take it. I want you to know that, whatever else. I can't ask for something I'd refuse to give, and I'd refuse. It's a rotten argument and I've had eight years to make it better, and I can't.' He leaned back, and for the first time he looked what he was, a man older than his years and wearier than his face. 'So I'm asking you to make me an offer. That's all. That's the bill. I'm told you're a man who finds things. Find me one that doesn't cost anyone.'

'There isn't one,' said Imogen, very quietly.

'Then,' said the Concierge, 'we have a problem.'

And behind them, with a sound like the sea drawing breath, the front doors of the End Times Hotel swung open, and a voice said pleasantly into the hush, 'Good evening. I believe I'm expected.'

It was the fixer, in her suit the colour of expensive nothing, with the gold ring burning in her eye and forty armed men filing in at her back.

VIII. Checkout

'Tamsin Okafor,' said the fixer, with a small incline of the head, as though an introduction were a courtesy she'd been saving for the right moment. 'Third generation, if we're being formal. The board prefers I don't say so in the field. I find it concentrates people.'

The forty men fanned out across the marble in a disciplined crescent, long guns raised, laser sights drawing red threads across the chandeliers. From the stairwell on the far side of the lobby came a second sound, the hum of copper coils, and the white masks of the

Church of the Last Vacancy filed in to face them. For a moment nobody breathed. The hotel's piano, somewhere, struck a single note and stopped.

'Doctor,' said Okafor warmly, 'I'm so glad to see you well. You've been very clever. Now give Meridian the notebook, and Mr Rook may go back to his noodle bar and his bad knee, and the gentleman in the glass box may go on doing whatever it is that he does.' The gold ring flared. 'We know what Mr Rook is. We've known since Brixton. Meridian paid for the basement, Doctor. Did you never wonder who kept the lights on?'

Imogen's face went very still. 'No,' she said. 'I didn't. That's rather the problem with funding, isn't it.'

'The Church would like the doctor, too,' said a masked figure on the other side of the lobby, in a mild, reasonable voice. 'We should like to discuss who has the stronger claim.'

'You've the stronger claim to a lie-down,' said Okafor, and the red threads of the lasers shifted toward the white masks.

Rook did not draw. He had no rounds, and a great many opinions. He looked instead at the man in the green glass booth, who had put down his pen and was looking back at him with an expression of grave, exhausted interest.

'You hold the desk,' said Rook.

'I hold the desk,' said the Concierge.

'Does the desk have rules?'

Something happened at the corners of the Concierge's mouth, something terribly like a smile. 'House rules,' he said, 'are the only thing it does have.' He reached out and laid one damp finger on the little brass bell at the edge of the blotter.

He rang it.

Every clock in the hotel struck an hour that did not exist. The sound rolled up through a thousand floors, through frozen cities and fish-haunted skies and a table laid for a million guests, and came back down again as a single enormous, patient note. In the lobby, forty-one guns grew warm, and then hot, and then, as one, leapt from their owners' hands.

They did not fly. They *slid*. Across the black marble, slick as ice, they streamed in a clattering river toward the kitchen's swing doors, and from within the steam there came a mighty, cheerful roar of oil, and the Chef's voice, bellowing, 'Table sixty! Last Orders for forty-one!'

'After midnight,' said the Concierge mildly, 'all weapons are surrendered at the desk. It's a courtesy to the other guests. The kitchen takes them in lieu of gratuity.'

Okafor stared down at her empty hands. The gold ring in her eye blazed, and flickered, and for the first time, Rook thought, she looked her age.

'This isn't over,' she said quietly.

'It never is,' said the Concierge. 'That's rather the point of the establishment.'

'The notebook.'

Imogen had been standing very still beside the booth. Now she opened the hardback in her hands, and for a long moment she looked at it, a woman looking at eleven years of her life. Then she tore the cover off and turned and threw the whole thing, with a physicist's perfect underarm arc, through the open door of the kitchen.

There was a pause. A splash. A hiss. And then, from within the steam, the Chef's voice again, low and thoughtful: 'Well. That'll be a first.'

'You've destroyed it,' said Okafor.

'I've *deep-fried* it,' said Imogen. 'The equations are in my head, Ms Okafor, and I'm afraid you'll find I'm very difficult to digest.'

The fixer looked at her for a long, long moment. Then she turned, in her suit the colour of expensive nothing, and walked back out through the great doors with the forty unarmed men trailing after her, and the white masks parted silently to let her pass. She did not look back. Rook understood that she'd wait at the top of the stairs. Meridian had a great deal of patience, and an infinite supply of money.

'Right,' said the Concierge, when the doors had closed. 'The bill.'

'I'll stay,' said Rook.

'No.'

'You said it yourself. It's a rotten argument, and the body's yours.'

'I said I couldn't ask.' The Concierge got up. It was the first time Rook had seen him stand, and he was smaller than expected, and stiffer, and it hurt to look at. 'I'm not asking. I'm *telling*. I've stood on this desk eight years, Declan. I'm good at it. The hotel obeys the desk. If I leave, nothing stops Meridian walking in here with a cheque and buying every soul on the premises by the pound. I'm not a coward, whatever I said. I'm the only thing standing between that woman and the lost.' He smiled. 'It wasn't ever a bill. It was a job offer, and I only just noticed I'd taken it.'

'Then it's not a balance,' said Imogen suddenly. She had gone quite white, and her eyes were enormous. 'It's not a *ledger*, it's a convention. Declan. Declan, say the name of this place again.'

'The End Times Hotel,' said Rook, bewildered.

'*Infinite*. It's infinite. The sign's been lying to us. It says NO VACANCY because somebody has been counting rooms, but you can't fill an infinite hotel. Hilbert's hotel. A guest arrives, every guest shifts up one room, and there's always space.' She was talking very fast now, the way she must have talked at the whiteboard, hands flying. 'And in reverse. If the desk would hold the shift, if somebody would keep the ledger turning, one could leave without anyone else having to stay. I'd need years. I'd need your cooperation. I'd need to be *alive*, which, I admit, is the part Meridian objects to.' She turned to the Concierge. 'Hold the desk. Just hold it. I'll come back for you.'

The man in the green glass looked at her for a long time, and something in his tired, drowned face unlocked, very slightly, like a door that has been closed so long it has forgotten it has a handle.

'I've not been told that in eight years,' he said. 'I'll hold it.'

He held out the brass card, number 0, and Rook took it, and for a second the two men's hands were on it together, one grey and ticking, the other warm and whole.

'Go on,' said the Concierge. 'Checkout's at noon. It's very rude to be late.'

The rain in Greater Thamesmouth had been falling for eleven years and showed no sign of stopping. Rook sat in the back booth of the Drowned Rat with his hand ticking and a cup of tea that tasted of solder. Opposite him, in a borrowed coat, sat a physicist with a severe fringe, writing in a cheap paper notebook with a biro and the expression of a woman about to be very rude to the universe.

It had taken two hundred and twelve steps to leave, and a fight at the top of them that he did not intend to describe. Meridian's men had been waiting, as promised. Rook had got through them in the end with a broken rib, two borrowed rounds, and the dawning understanding that Meridian could take a great deal from him, but not the one thing it had come for, because that was in her head.

'Hilbert,' said Imogen, without looking up. She had written the word at the top of a page, and underlined it three times, and underneath it, in capitals, a smaller word, struck out.

COST.

'You'll have to be careful,' he said. 'They'll come for you.'

'They'll come for both of us.' She did look up then. 'I'm sorry I did it. I'm not sorry that you're here. It's an awkward position to hold, morally, I'll admit.'

'It's all right.' He found, to his considerable surprise, that it was. He turned his thumb to the seam in his memory, and the bad tooth did not hurt, and somewhere on the other side of it he thought he could hear a clock striking an hour that did not exist. 'Everyone's a copy of who they were this morning, Imogen. I've just got better paperwork.'

She laughed, quick and startled, and put down her pen.

On the table between them lay a brass keycard, and a pre-decimal sixpence, and a single paper cone, rather greasy, that the Chef had pressed into his coat as he left. He had not opened it. He knew, with the quiet certainty of a man who has stopped fighting his own head, what was inside, and he knew that it wasn't food. It was a bullet in golden batter, still warm, with a tiny scrap of paper curled around it.

He unrolled the paper. It was written in a hand like his own.

Bring her back soon. The sign says VACANCY.

Outside, the rain hit the awning like a thousand small coins, and Declan Rook, private detective, original equipment minus the liver, picked up his tea and drank it down to the last cold, bitter, beautiful drop.