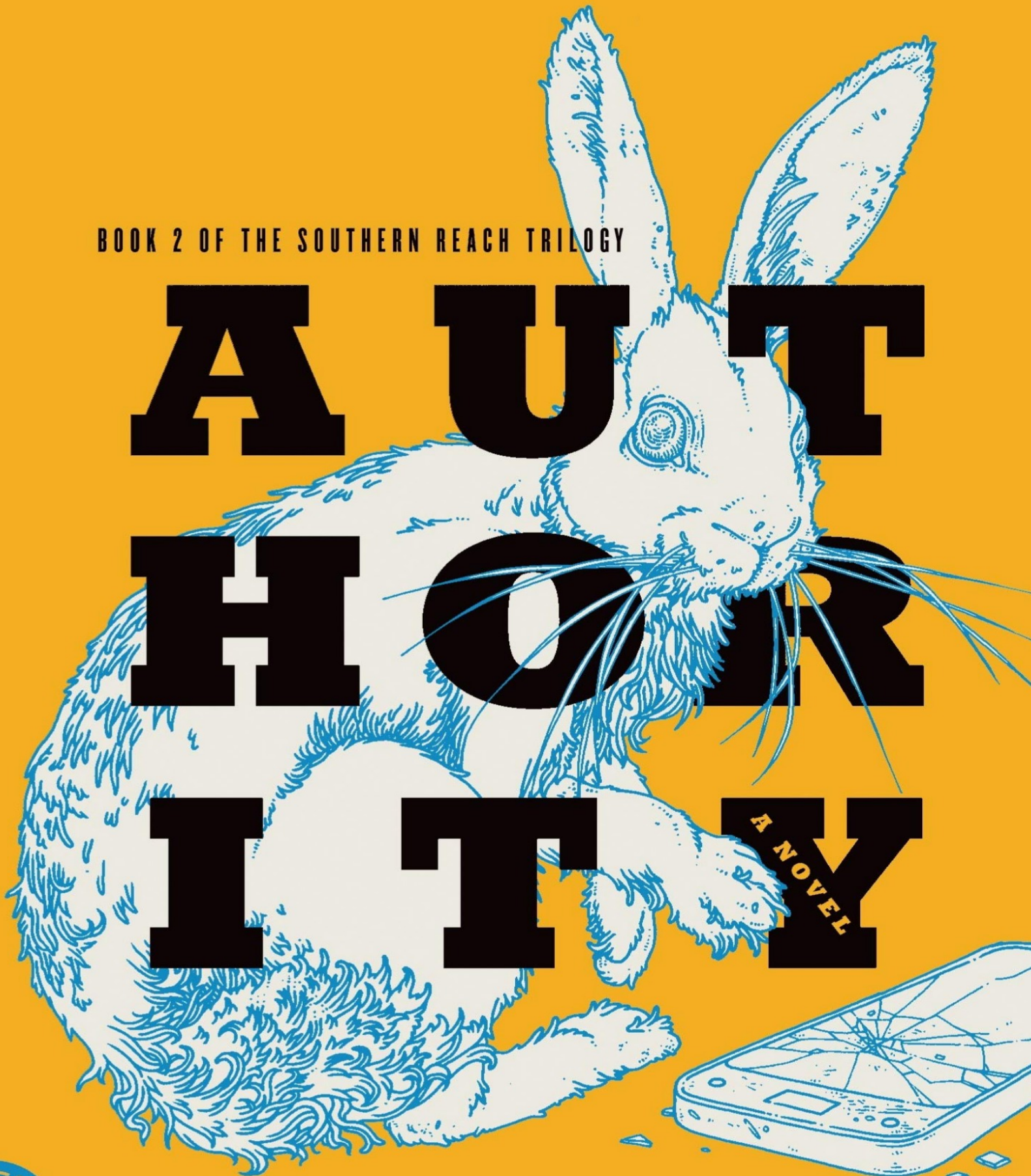


BOOK 2 OF THE SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY

**A U T
H O R
I T Y**

A NOVEL

JEFF VANDERMEER






AUTH

ORITY

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For Ann

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Acknowledgments

Also by Jeff VanderMeer

A Note About the Author

Copyright

INCANTATIONS

000

In Control's dreams it is early morning, the sky deep blue with just a twinge of light. He is staring from a cliff down into an abyss, a bay, a cove. It always changes. He can see for miles into the still water. He can see ocean behemoths gliding there, like submarines or bell-shaped orchids or the wide hulls of ships, silent, ever moving, the size of them conveying such a sense of power that he can feel the havoc of their passage even from so far above. He stares for hours at the shapes, the movements, listening to the whispers echoing up to him ... and then he falls. Slowly, too slowly, he falls soundless into the dark water, without splash or ripple. And keeps falling.

Sometimes this happens while he is awake, as if he hasn't been paying enough attention, and then he silently recites his own name until the real world returns to him.

001: FALLING

First day. The beginning of his last chance.

“These are the survivors?”

Control stood beside the assistant director of the Southern Reach, behind smudged one-way glass, staring at the three individuals sitting in the interrogation room. Returnees from the twelfth expedition into Area X.

The assistant director, a tall, thin black woman in her forties, said nothing back, which didn't surprise Control. She hadn't wasted an extra word on him since he'd arrived that morning after taking Monday to get settled. She hadn't spared him an extra look, either, except when he'd told her and the rest of the staff to call him “Control,” not “John” or “Rodriguez.” She had paused a beat, then replied, “In that case, call me Patience, not Grace,” much to the stifled amusement of those present. The deflection away from her real name to one that also meant something else interested him. “That's okay,” he'd said, “I can just call you Grace,” certain this would not please her. She parried by continually referring to him as the “acting” director. Which was true: There lay between her stewardship and his ascension a gap, a valley of time and forms to be filled out, procedures to be followed, the rooting out and hiring of staff. Until then, the issue of authority might be murky.

But Control preferred to think of her as neither patience nor grace. He preferred to think of her as an abstraction if not an obstruction. She had made him sit through an old orientation video about Area X, must have known it would be basic and out of date. She had already made clear that theirs would be a relationship based on animosity. From her side, at least.

“Where were they found?” he asked her now, when what he wanted to ask was why they hadn't been kept separate from one another. Because you lack the discipline, because your department has been going to the rats for a long time now? The rats are down there in the basement now, gnawing away.

“Read the files,” she said, making it clear he should have read them already.

Then she walked out of the room.

Leaving Control alone to contemplate the files on the table in front him—and the three women behind the glass. Of course he had read the files, but he had hoped to

duck past the assistant director's high guard, perhaps get her own thoughts. He'd read parts of her file, too, but still didn't have a sense of her except in terms of her reactions to him.

His first full day was only four hours old and he already felt contaminated by the dingy, bizarre building with its worn green carpet and the antiquated opinions of the other personnel he had met. A sense of diminishment suffused everything, even the sunlight that halfheartedly pushed through the high, rectangular windows. He was wearing his usual black blazer and dress slacks, a white shirt with a light blue tie, black shoes he'd shined that morning. Now he wondered why he'd bothered. He disliked having such thoughts because he wasn't above it all—he was *in* it—but they were hard to suppress.

Control took his time staring at the women, although their appearance told him little. They had all been given the same generic uniforms, vaguely army-issue but also vaguely janitorial. Their heads had all been shaved, as if they had suffered from some infestation, like lice, rather than something more inexplicable. Their faces all retained the same expression, or could be said not to retain any expression. Don't think of them by their names, he'd told himself on the plane. Let them carry only the weight of their functions at first. Then fill in the rest. But Control had never been good at remaining aloof. He liked to burrow in, try to find a level where the details illuminated without overwhelming him.

The surveyor had been found at her house, sitting in a chair on the back patio.

The anthropologist had been found by her husband, knocking on the back door of his medical practice.

The biologist had been found in an overgrown lot several blocks from her house, staring at a crumbling brick wall.

Just like the members of the prior expedition, none of them had any recollection of how they had made their way back across the invisible border, out of Area X. None of them knew how they had evaded the blockades and fences and other impediments the military had thrown up around the border. None of them knew what had happened to the fourth member of their expedition—the psychologist, who had, in fact, also been the director of the Southern Reach and overridden all objections to lead them, incognito.

None of them seemed to have much recollection of anything at all.

* * *

In the cafeteria that morning for breakfast, Control had looked out through the wall-to-wall paneled window into the courtyard with its profusion of stone tables, and then at the people shuffling through the line—too few, it seemed, for such a large building—and asked Grace, “Why isn’t everyone more excited to have the expedition back?”

She had given him a long-suffering look, as if he were a particularly slow student in a remedial class. “Why do you think, Control?” She’d already managed to attach an ironic weight to his name, so he felt as if he were the sinker on one of his grandpa’s fly rods, destined for the silt near the bottom of dozens of lakes. “We went through all this with the last expedition. They endured nine months of questions, and yet we never found out anything. And the whole time they were dying. How would that make you feel?” Long months of disorientation, and then their deaths from a particularly malignant form of cancer.

He’d nodded slowly in response. Of course, she was right. His father had died of cancer. He hadn’t thought of how that might have affected the staff. To him, it was still an abstraction, just words in a report, read on the plane down.

Here, in the cafeteria, the carpet turned dark green, against which a stylized arrow pattern stood out in a light green, all of the arrows pointing toward the courtyard.

“Why isn’t there more light in here?” he asked. “Where does all the light go?”

But Grace was done answering his questions for the moment.

* * *

When one of the three—the biologist—turned her head a fraction, looking into the glass as if she could see him, Control evaded that stare with a kind of late-blooming embarrassment. Scrutiny such as his was impersonal, professional, but it probably didn’t feel that way, even though they knew they were being watched.

He hadn’t been told he would spend his first day questioning disoriented returnees from Area X, and yet Central must have known when he’d been offered the position. The expedition members had been picked up almost six weeks ago, been subjected to a month of tests at a processing station up north before being sent to the Southern Reach. Just as he’d been sent to Central first to endure two weeks of briefings, including gaps, whole days that slid into oblivion without much of anything happening, as if they’d always meant to time it this way. Then everything had sped up, and he had been given the impression of urgency.

These were among the details that had caused a kind of futile exasperation to wash over him ever since his arrival. The Voice, his primary contact in the upper echelons, had implied in an initial briefing that this was an easy assignment, given his past

history. The Southern Reach had become a backward, backwater agency, guarding a dormant secret that no one seemed to care much about anymore, given the focus on terrorism and ecological collapse. The Voice had, in its gruff way, typified his mission “to start” as being brought in to “acclimate, assess, analyze, and then dig in deep,” which wasn’t his usual brief these days.

During an admittedly up-and-down career, Control had started as an operative in the field: surveillance on domestic terror cells. Then he’d been bumped up to data synthesis and organizational analysis—two dozen or more cases banal in their similarities and about which he was forbidden to talk. Cases invisible to the public: the secret history of nothing. But more and more he had become the fixer, mostly because he seemed better at identifying other people’s specific problems than at managing his own general ones. At thirty-eight, that was what he had become known for, if he was known for anything. It meant you didn’t have to be there for the duration, even though by now that’s exactly what he wanted: to see something through. Problem was, no one really liked a fixer—“Hey, let me show you what you’re doing wrong”—especially if they thought the fixer needed fixing from way back.

It always started well, even though it didn’t always end well.

The Voice had also neglected to mention that Area X lay beyond a border that still, after more than thirty years, no one seemed to understand. No, he’d only picked up on that when reviewing the files and in the needless replication from the orientation video.

Nor had he known that the assistant director would hate him so much for replacing the missing director. Although he should have guessed; according to the scraps of information in her file, she had grown up lower-middle class, had gone to public school at first, had had to work harder than most to get to her current position. While Control came with whispers about being part of a kind of invisible dynasty, which naturally bred resentment. There was no denying that fact, even if, up close, the dynasty was more like a devolving franchise.

“They’re ready. Come with me.”

Grace, conjured up again, commanding him from the doorway.

There were, he knew, several different ways to break down a colleague’s opposition, or their will. He would probably have to try all of them.

Control picked up two of the three files from the table and, gaze now locked in on the biologist, tore them down the middle, feeling the torque in his palms, and let them fall into the wastebasket.

A kind of choking sound came from behind him.

Now he turned—right into the full force of the assistant director’s wordless anger. But he could see a wariness in her eyes, too. Good.

“Why are you still keeping paper files, Grace?” he asked, taking a step forward.

“The director insisted. You did that for a reason?”

He ignored her. “Grace, why are none of you comfortable using the words *alien* or *extraterrestrial* to talk about Area X?” He wasn’t comfortable with them, either. Sometimes, since he’d been briefed on the truth, he’d felt a great, empty chasm opening up inside of him, filled with his own screams and yelps of disbelief. But he’d never tell. He had a face for playing poker; he’d been told this by lovers and by relatives, even by strangers. About six feet tall. Impassive. The compact, muscular build of an athlete; he could run for miles and not feel it. He took pride in a good diet and enough exercise, although he did like whiskey.

She stood her ground. “No one’s sure. Never prejudge the evidence.”

“Even after all this time? I only need to interview one of them.”

“What?” she asked.

Torque in hands transformed into torque in conversation.

“I don’t need the other files because I only need to question one of them.”

“You need all three.” As if she still didn’t quite understand.

He swiveled to pick up the remaining file. “No. Just the biologist.”

“That is a mistake.”

“Seven hundred and fifty-three isn’t a mistake,” he said. “Seven hundred and twenty-two isn’t a mistake, either.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Something is wrong with you.”

“Keep the biologist in there,” he said, ignoring her but adopting her syntax. *I know something you don’t*. “Send the others back to their quarters.”

Grace stared at him as if he were some kind of rodent and she couldn’t decide whether to be disgusted or pitying. After a moment, though, she nodded stiffly and left.

He relaxed, let out his breath. Although she had to accept his orders, she still controlled the staff for the next week or two, could check him in a thousand ways until he was fully embedded.

Was it alchemy or a true magic? Was he wrong? And did it matter, since if he was wrong, each was exactly like the others anyway?

Yes, it mattered.

This was his last chance.

His mother had told him so before he’d come here.

* * *

Control's mother often seemed to him like a flash of light across a distant night sky. Here and gone, gone and here, and always remembered; perhaps wondered what it had been—what had caused the light. But you couldn't truly *know* it.

An only child, Jackie Severance had followed her father into the service and excelled; now she operated at levels far above anything her father, Jack Severance, had achieved, and he had been a much-decorated agent. Jack had brought her up sharp, organized, ready to lead. For all Control knew, Grandpa had made Jackie do tire obstacle courses as a child, stab flour sacks with bayonets. There weren't a whole lot of family albums from which to verify. Whatever the process, he had also bred into her a kind of casual cruelty, an expectation of high performance, and a calculated quality that could manifest as seeming indifference to the fate of others.

As a distant flash of light, Control admired her fiercely, had, indeed, followed her, if at a much lower altitude ... but as a parent, even when she was around, she was unreliable about picking him up from school on time or remembering his lunches or helping with homework—rarely consistent on much of anything important in the mundane world on this side of the divide. Although she had always encouraged him in his headlong flight into and through the service.

Grandpa Jack, on the other hand, had never seemed fond of the idea, had one day looked at him and said, "I don't think he has the temperament." That assessment had been devastating to a boy of sixteen, already set on that course, but then it made him more determined, more focused, more tilted skyward toward the light. Later he thought that might have been why Grandpa had said it. Grandpa had a kind of unpredictable wildfire side, while his mother was an icy blue flame.

When he was eight or nine, they'd gone up to the summer cottage by the lake for the first time—"our own private spy club," his mother had called it. Just him, his mother, and Grandpa. There was an old TV in the corner, opposite the tattered couch. Grandpa would make him move the antenna to get better reception. "Just a little to the left, Control," he'd say. "Just a little more." His mother in the other room, going over some declassified files she'd brought from the office. And so he'd gotten his nickname, not knowing Grandpa had stolen it from spy jargon. As that kid, he'd held that nickname close as something cool, something his grandpa had given him out of love. But he was still astute enough not to tell anyone outside of family, even his girlfriends, for many years. He'd let them think that it was a sports nickname from high school, where he'd been a backup quarterback. "A little to the right now, Control." Throw that ball like a star. The main thing he'd liked was knowing where

the receivers would be and hitting them. Even if always better during practice, he had found a pure satisfaction in that kind of precision, the geometry and anticipation.

When he grew up, he took “Control” for his own. He could feel the sting of condescension in the word by then, but would never ask Grandpa if he’d meant it that way, or some other way. Wondered if the fact he’d spent as much time reading in the cottage by the lake as fishing had somehow turned his grandfather against him.

So, yes, he’d taken the name, remade it, and let it stick. But this was the first time he’d told his coworkers to call him “Control” and he couldn’t say why, really. It had just come to him, as if he could somehow gain a true fresh start.

A little to the left, Control, and maybe you’ll pick up that flash of light.

* * *

Why an empty lot? This he’d wondered ever since seeing the surveillance tape earlier that morning. Why had the biologist returned to an empty lot rather than her house? The other two had returned to something personal, to a place that held an emotional attachment. But the biologist had stood for hours and hours in an overgrown lot, oblivious to anything around her. From watching so many suspects on videotape, Control had become adroit at picking up on even the most mundane mannerism or nervous tic that meant a signal was being passed on ... but there was nothing like that on the tape.

Her presence there had registered with the Southern Reach via a report filed by the local police, who’d picked her up as a vagrant: a delayed reaction, driven by active searching once the Southern Reach had picked up the other two.

Then there was the issue of terseness versus terseness.

753. 722.

A slim lead, but Control already sensed that this assignment hinged on the details, on detective work. Nothing would come easy. He’d have no luck, no shit-for-brains amateur bomb maker armed with fertilizer and some cut-rate version of an ideology who went to pieces within twenty minutes of being put in the interrogation room.

During the preliminary interviews before it was determined who went on the twelfth expedition, the biologist had, according to the transcripts in her file, managed to divulge only 753 words. Control had counted them. That included the word *breakfast* as a complete answer to one question. Control admired that response.

He had counted and recounted the words during that drawn-out period of waiting while they set up his computer, issued him a security card, presented to him

passwords and key codes, and went through all of the other rituals with which he had become overly familiar during his passage through various agencies and departments.

He'd insisted on the former director's office despite Grace's attempts to cordon him off in a glorified broom closet well away from the heart of everything. He'd also insisted they leave everything as is in the office, even personal items. She clearly disliked the idea of him rummaging through the director's things.

"You are a little off," Grace had said when the others had left. "You are not all there."

He'd just nodded because there was no use denying it was a little strange. But if he was here to assess and restore, he needed a better idea of how badly it had all slipped—and as some sociopath at another station had once said, "The fish rots from the head." Fish rotted all over, cell corruption being nonhierarchical and not caste-driven, but point taken.

Control had immediately taken a seat behind the battering ram of a desk, among the clutter of piles and piles of folders, the ramble of handwritten notes and Post-its ... in the swivel chair that gave him such a great panoramic view of the bookcases against the walls, interspersed with bulletin boards overlaid with the sediment of various bits of paper pinned and re-pinned until they looked more like oddly delicate yet haphazard art installations. The room smelled stale, with a slight aftertaste of long-ago cigarettes.

Just the size and weight of the director's computer monitor spoke to its obsolescence, as did the fact that it had died decades ago, thick dust layered atop it. It had been halfheartedly shoved to the side, two shroud-shadows on the calendar blotter beneath describing both its original location and the location of the laptop that had apparently supplanted it—although no one could now find that laptop. He made a mental note to ask if they had searched her home.

The calendar dated back to the late nineties; was that when the director had started to lose the thread? He had a sudden vision of her in Area X with the twelfth expedition, just wandering through the wilderness with no real destination: a tall, husky, forty-year-old woman who looked older. Silent, conflicted, torn. So devoured by her responsibility that she'd allowed herself to believe she owed it to the people she sent into the field to join them. Why had no one stopped her? Had no one cared about her? Had she made a convincing case? The Voice hadn't said. The maddeningly incomplete files on her told Control nothing.

Everything in what he saw showed that she had cared, and yet that she had cared not at all about the functioning of the agency.

Nudging his knee on the left, under the desk: the hard drive for the monitor. He wondered if that had stopped working back in the nineties, too. Control had the feeling he did not want to see the rooms the hardware techs worked in, the miserable languishing corpses of the computers of past decades, the chaotic unintentional museum of plastic and wires and circuit boards. Or perhaps the fish did rot from the head, and only the director had decomposed.

So, sans computer, his own laptop not yet deemed secure enough, Control had done a little light reading of the transcripts from the induction interviews with the members of the twelfth expedition. The former director, in her role as psychologist, had conducted them.

The other recruits had been uncappable, unstoppable geysers in Control's opinion: Great chortling, hurtling, cliché-spouting babblers. People who by comparison could not hold their tongues ... 4,623 words ... 7,154 words ... and the all-time champion, the linguist who had backed out at the last second, coming in at 12,743 words of replies, including a heroically prolonged childhood memory "about as entertaining as a kidney stone exploding through your dick," as someone had scrawled in the margin. Which left just the biologist and her terse 753 words. That kind of self-control had made him look not just at the words but at the pauses between them. For example: "I enjoyed all of my jobs in the field." Yet she had been fired from most of them. She thought she had said nothing, but every word—even *breakfast*—created an opening. Breakfast had not gone well for the biologist as a child.

The ghost was right there, in the transcripts since her return, moving through the text. Things that showed themselves in the empty spaces, making Control unwilling to say her words aloud for fear that somehow he did not really understand the undercurrents and hidden references. A detached description of a thistle ... A mention of a lighthouse. A sentence or two describing the quality of the light on the marshes in Area X. None of it should have gotten to him, yet he felt her there, somehow, looking over his shoulder in a way not evoked by the interviews with the other expedition members.

The biologist claimed to remember as little as the others.

Control knew that for a lie—or it would become a lie if he drew her out. Did he want to draw her out? Was she cautious because something had happened in Area X or because she was just built that way? A shadow had passed over the director's desk then. He'd been here before, or somewhere close, making these kinds of decisions before, and it had almost broken him, or broken through him. But he had no choice.

About seven hundred words after she came back. Just like the other two. But unlike them, that was roughly comparable to her terseness before she had left. And

there were the odd specifics that the others lacked. Whereas the anthropologist might say “The wilderness was empty and pristine,” the biologist said, “There were bright pink thistles everywhere, even when the fresh water shifted to saline ... The light at dusk was a low blaze, a brightness.”

That, combined with the strangeness of the empty lot, made Control believe that the biologist might actually remember more than the others. That she might be more present than the others but was hiding it for some reason. He’d never had this particular situation before, but he remembered a colleague’s questioning of a terrorist who had suffered a head wound and spent the interrogation sessions in the hospital delaying and delaying in hopes his memory would return. It had. But only the facts, not the righteous impulse that had engendered his action, and then he’d been lost, easy prey for the questioners.

Control hadn’t shared his theory with the assistant director because if he was wrong she’d use it to shore up her negative opinion of him—but also to keep her off-balance for as long as possible. “Never do something for just one reason,” his grandpa had told him more than once, and that, at least, Control had taken to heart.

* * *

The biologist’s hair had been long and dark brown, almost black, before they’d shaved it off. She had dark, thick eyebrows, green eyes, a slight, slightly off-center nose (broken once, falling on rocks), and high cheekbones that spoke to the strong Asian heritage on one side of her family. Her chapped lips were surprisingly full for such a thin frown. He mistrusted the eyes, the percentages on that, had checked to confirm they hadn’t been another color before the expedition.

Even sitting down at the table, she somehow projected a sense of being physically strong, with a ridge of thick muscle where her neck met her shoulders. So far, all the tests run had come back negative for cancer or other abnormalities. He couldn’t remember what it said in her file, but Control thought she was probably almost as tall as him. She had been held in the eastern wing of the building for two weeks now, with nothing to do but eat and exercise.

Before going on the expedition, the biologist had received intense survival and weapons training at a Central facility devoted to that purpose. She would have been briefed with whatever half-truths the Southern Reach’s command and control deemed useful, based on criteria Control still found arcane, even murky. She would have been subjected to conditioning to make her more receptive to hypnotic suggestion.

* * *

The psychologist/director would have been given any number of hypnotic cues to use—words that, in certain combinations, would induce certain effects. Passing thought as the door shut behind Control: Had the director had anything to do with muddying their memories, while they were still in Area X?

Control slid into a chair across from the biologist, aware that Grace, at the very least, watched them through the one-way glass. Experts had questioned the biologist, but Control was also a kind of expert, and he needed to have the direct contact. There was something in the texture of a face-to-face interview that transcripts and videotape lacked.

The floor beneath his shoes was grimy, almost sticky. The fluorescent lights above flickered at irregular intervals, and the table and chairs seemed like something out of a high-school cafeteria. He could smell the sour metallic tang of a low-quality cleaning agent, almost like rotting honey. The room did not inspire confidence in the Southern Reach. A room meant as a debriefing space—or meant to seem like a debriefing space—should be more comfortable than one meant always and forever for interrogation, for a presumption of possible resistance.

Now that Control sat across from the biologist, she had the kind of presence that made him reluctant to stare into her eyes. But he always felt nervous right before he questioned someone, always felt as if that bright flash of light across the sky had frozen in its progress and come down to stand at his shoulder, mother in the flesh, observing him. The truth of it was, his mother did check up on him sometimes. She could get hold of the footage. So it wasn't paranoia or just a feeling. It was part of his possible reality.

Sometimes it helped to play up his nervousness, to make the person across from him relax. So he cleared his throat, took a hesitant sip of water from the glass he'd brought in with him, fiddled with the file on her he'd placed on the table between them, along with a remote control for the TV to his left. To preserve the conditions under which she'd been found, to basically ensure she didn't gain memories artificially, the assistant director had ordered that she not be given any of the information from her personnel file. Control found this cruel but agreed with Grace. He wanted the file between them to seem like a possible reward during some later session, even if he didn't yet know if he would give it to her.

Control introduced himself by his real name, informed her that their "interview" was being recorded, and asked her to state her name for the record.

"Call me Ghost Bird," she said. Was there a twinge of defiance in her flat voice?

He looked up at her, and instantly was at sea, looked away again. Was she using hypnotic suggestion on him somehow? It was his first thought, quickly dismissed.

“Ghost Bird?”

“Or nothing at all.”

He nodded, knew when to let something go, would research the term later. Vaguely remembered something in the file. Perhaps.

“Ghost Bird,” he said, testing it out. The words tasted chalky, unnatural in his mouth. “You remember nothing about the expedition?”

“I told the others. It was a pristine wilderness.” He thought he detected a note of irony in her tone, but couldn’t be sure.

“How well did you get to know the linguist—during training?” he asked.

“Not well. She was very vocal. She wouldn’t shut up. She was...” The biologist trailed off as Control stifled elation. A question she hadn’t expected. Not at all.

“She was what?” he prompted. The prior interrogator had used the standard technique: develop rapport, present the facts, grow the relationship from there. With nothing really to show for it.

“I don’t remember.”

“I think you do remember.” And if you remember that, then ...

“No.”

He made a show of opening the file and consulting the existing transcripts, letting the edge of the paper-clipped pages that gave her most vital statistics come clear.

“Okay, then. Tell me about the thistles.”

“The thistles?” Her expressive eyebrows told him what she thought of the question.

“Yes. You were quite specific about the thistles. Why?” It still perplexed him, the amount of detail there about thistles, in an interview from the prior week, when she’d arrived at the Southern Reach. It made him think again of hypnotic cues. It made him think of words being used as a protective thicket.

The biologist shrugged. “I don’t know.”

He read from the transcript: “‘The thistles there have a lavender bloom and grow in the transitional space between the forest and the swamp. You cannot avoid them. They attract a variety of insects and the buzzing and the brightness that surrounds them suffuses Area X with a sense of industry, almost like a human city.’ And it goes on, although I won’t.”

She shrugged again.

Control didn’t intend to hover, this first time, but instead to glide over the terrain, to map out the extent of the territory he wanted to cover with her. So he moved on.

“What do you remember about your husband?”

“How is that relevant?”

“Relevant to what?” Pouncing.

No response, so he prompted her again: “What do you remember about your husband?”

“That I had one. Some memories before I went over, like I had about the linguist.” Clever, to tie that in, to try to make it seem part and parcel. A vagueness, not a sharpness.

“Did you know that he came back, like you?” he asked. “That he was disoriented, like you?”

“I’m not disoriented,” she snapped, leaning forward, and Control leaned back. He wasn’t afraid, but for a moment he’d thought he should be. Brain scans had been normal. All measures had been taken to check for anything remotely like an invasive species. Or “an intruder” as Grace put it, still unable to say anything to him remotely like the word *alien*. If anything, Ghost Bird was healthier now than before she’d left; the toxins present in most people today existed in her and the others at much lower levels than normal.

“I didn’t mean to offend,” he said. And yet she *was* disoriented, Control knew. No matter what she remembered or didn’t remember, the biologist he’d come to know from the pre-expedition transcripts would not have so quickly shown irritation. Why had he gotten to her?

He picked up the remote control from beside the file, clicked twice. The flat-screen TV on the wall to their left fizzled to life, showing the pixelated, fuzzy image of the biologist standing in the empty lot, almost as still as the pavement or the bricks in the building in front of her. The whole scene was awash in the sickly green of surveillance-camera noir.

“Why that empty lot? Why did we find you there?”

A look of indifference and no answer. He let the video continue to play. The repetition in the background sometimes got to the interviewee. But usually video footage showed a suspect putting down a bag or shoving something into a trash bin.

“First day in Area X,” Control said. “Hiking to base camp. What happened?”

“Nothing much.”

Control had no children, but he imagined that this was more or less what he’d get from a teenager asked about her day at school. Perhaps he would circle back for a moment.

“But you remember the thistles very, very well,” he said.

“I don’t know why you keep talking about thistles.”

“Because what you said about them suggests you remember some of your observations from the expedition.”

A pause, and Control knew the biologist was staring at him. He wanted to return fire, but something warned him against it. Something made him feel that the dream of falling into the depths might take him.

“Why am I a prisoner here?” she asked, and he felt it was safe to meet her gaze again, as if some moment of danger had come and gone.

“You aren’t. This is part of your debriefing.”

“But I can’t leave.”

“Not yet,” he admitted. “But you will.” If only to another facility; it might be another two or three years, if all went well, before they allowed any of the returnees back out in the world. Their legal status was in that gray area often arbitrarily defined by the threat to national security.

“I find that unlikely,” she said.

He decided to try again. “If not thistles, what would be relevant?” he asked. “What should I ask you?”

“Isn’t that your job?”

“What is my job?” Although he knew perfectly well what she meant.

“You’re in charge of the Southern Reach.”

“Do you know what the Southern Reach is?”

“Yesss.” Like a hiss.

“What about the second day at base camp? When did things begin to get strange?” Had they? He had to assume they had.

“I don’t remember.”

Control leaned forward. “I can put you under hypnosis. I have the right to. I can do that.”

“Hypnosis doesn’t work on me,” she said, disgust at his threat clear from her tone.

“How do you know?” A moment of disorientation. Had she given up something she didn’t want to give up, or had she remembered something lost to her before? Did she know the difference?

“I just know.”

“For clarity on that, we could recondition you and then put you under hypnosis.” All of this a bluff, in that it was more complicated logistically. To do so, Control would have to send her to Central, and she’d disappear into that maw forever. He might get to see the reports, but he’d never have direct contact again. Nor did he particularly *want* to recondition her.

“Do that and I’ll—” She managed to stop herself on the cusp of what sounded like the beginning of the word *kill*.

Control decided to ignore that. He'd been on the other end of enough threats to know which to take seriously.

“What made you resistant to hypnosis?” he asked.

“Are *you* resistant to hypnosis?” Defiant.

“Why were you at the empty lot? The other two were found looking for their loved ones.”

No reply.

Maybe enough had been said for now. Maybe this was enough.

Control turned off the television, picked up his file, nodded at her, and walked to the door.

Once there, the door open and letting in what seemed like more shadows than it should, he turned, aware of the assistant director staring at him from down the hall as he looked back at the biologist.

He asked, as he had always planned to, the postscript to an opening act: “What’s the last thing you remember doing in Area X?”

The answer, unexpected, surged up toward him like a kind of attack as the light met the darkness: “Drowning. I was drowning.”