

THE
ROOK

THE
ROOK

A NOVEL

DANIEL O'MALLEY



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York | Boston | London

Copyright © 2012 by Daniel O'Malley

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
www.hachettebookgroup.com

First Edition: January 2012

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
O'Malley, Daniel.
The rook : a novel / Daniel O'Malley. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-316-09879-3
1. Secret societies — Fiction. 2. Supernatural — Fiction. I. Title.
PR9619.4.O52R66 2012
823'.92 — dc22 2011019741

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

RRD-C

Printed in the United States of America

For my father, Bill O'Malley, who read to me at bedtime,
and my mother, Jeanne O'Malley, who read to me the rest of the time.

THE
ROOK

1

Dear You,

The body you are wearing used to be mine. The scar on the inner left thigh is there because I fell out of a tree and impaled my leg at the age of nine. The filling in the far left tooth on the top is a result of my avoiding the dentist for four years. But you probably care little about this body's past. After all, I'm writing this letter for you to read in the future. Perhaps you are wondering why anyone would do such a thing. The answer is both simple and complicated. The simple answer is because I knew it would be necessary.

The complicated answer could take a little more time.

Do you know the name of the body you are in? It's Myfanwy. Myfanwy Alice Thomas. I would say that it's my name, but you've got the body now, so I suppose you'll be using it. People tend to mangle its pronunciation, but I would like it if you at least knew how to say it. I don't embrace the traditional Welsh pronunciation, so for me the w is silent and the f is hard. Thus, Miff-un-ee. Simple. In fact, now that I think about it, it rhymes with Tiffany.

Before I give you the story, there are a few things you should be aware of. First, you are deathly allergic to bee stings. If you get stung and do not take quick action, you will die. I keep those little epinephrine-injector-pen thingies around me, so find one before you need it. There should be one in my purse, one in the glove compartment of the car, and one in pretty much every jacket that you now own. If you get stung, slip the lid off the thing, jam it into your thigh, and inject. You should be fine. I mean, you'll feel like absolute shit, but you won't die.

Apart from that, you have no dietary restrictions, no allergies, and you're in pretty good shape. There is a tradition of colon cancer in the family, so you

should get regular checkups, but nothing has appeared yet. Oh, and you have a terrible head for alcohol. But you probably don't need to know that yet. You've got more important things to worry about.

Hopefully, you will have my wallet, and along with it all the little plastic cards that are so vital for surviving in today's electronic world. Driver's license, credit cards, National Health Service card, library card, and all of them belonging to Myfanwy Thomas. Except for three. And those three are, at the moment, the most important. Tucked away in there you will find an ATM card, a credit card, and a driver's license in the name of Anne Ryan, a name that will not be linked to you. The personal identification number for all of them is 230500. That's my birthday, followed by how old you are. You're a newborn! I would suggest that you withdraw some money from Anne Ryan's account immediately, go to a hotel, and check in as her.

You are probably aware of this next part already, since if you are reading this then you have survived several immediate threats, but you are in danger. Just because you are not me does not make you safe. Along with this body, you have inherited certain problems and responsibilities. Go find a safe place, and then open the second letter.

Sincerely,

Me

She stood shivering in the rain, watching the words on the letter dissolve under the downpour. Her hair was dripping, her lips tasted salty, and everything ached. Under the dim light of a nearby lamppost, she had scabbled through the pockets of her jacket, looking for some sort of clue to who she was, where she was, what was going on. She had found two letters in the inside pocket. The first envelope had been addressed simply *To You*. The second envelope just had the number 2 written on it.

She shook her head angrily and stared up at the storm, watching the lightning fork across the sky. She fumbled in another pocket, and her fingers closed on a bulky shape. She pulled it out and looked at a long thin cardboard box that was getting all soggy and losing its shape. Typed on a prescription label was some long chemical term and the name Myfanwy Thomas. She clenched her fingers and

felt the firm plastic of the epi-pen, then put the box back in her pocket.

This is who I am, she thought bitterly. *I don't even get the luxury of not knowing what my name is. I don't get a chance to start a life. Whoever this Myfanwy Thomas was, she managed to get me into a whole lot of trouble.* She sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. She looked around at the place she was in. Some sort of park. Willows drooped their long tendrils down around the clearing, and she was standing on what used to be a lawn but was rapidly becoming a mud hole. She came to a decision, pulled her feet out of the mire, and stepped carefully over the ring of bodies that were scattered around her. They were all motionless, and all of them were wearing latex gloves.

She was hugging herself and completely soaked by the time she made it out of the park. Recalling the letter's warning, she had been wary, scanning her surroundings for any attackers hidden among the trees. Thunder crashed above her, and she flinched away from it. The path brought her out of the park, and she stared at the scene before her. Clearly, the park was in the middle of some sort of residential area—there was a row of Victorian-style houses before her. They were no doubt pretty, she thought grimly, but she wasn't in the mood to appreciate them as they deserved. There were no lights on in any of the windows, and a cold wind had started blowing. Still, she squinted down to the end of the road and could make out the distant neon glow that promised some sort of business emporium. Sighing, she began to walk that way, shoving her hands into her armpits to stop their shaking.

An ATM visit and a phone call made from a rather battered phone box later, and she was sitting in the back of a cab being ferried to a five-star hotel. Several times, she looked back, checking to see if any cars were following, and once she asked the cabdriver to make two U-turns. Nothing suspicious happened, although the cabbie gave her some funny looks in the mirror. When they finally arrived at the hotel, she muttered something about a stalker boyfriend, and the

driver nodded knowledgeably, his eyes lingering on her face. The hotel-management students who had been saddled with doorman duty on the graveyard shift lived up to their training and didn't bat an eyelid as they swung open the doors for a soaking-wet woman. She walked through the glorious foyer, leaving a dripping trail on the tiles.

The impeccably dressed and coiffed desk clerk (at three in the morning! What kind of monstrous automaton was this woman?) politely stifled a yawn and barely widened her eyes when the person who hesitantly identified herself as Anne Ryan checked in without a reservation or luggage. A bellboy did a poor job of appearing awake, but he managed to guide her to her room and work the key-card thing for her. She neglected to tip him but assumed that her shattered appearance might earn her some forgiveness on that score.

She stripped and rejected a bath on the rationale that she might fall asleep in the water and drown in some flower-scented oblivion. Instead, she showered. She saw massive bruises blossoming on her body. She gasped in pain when she crouched down to pick up the soap, then finished the shower, wrapped herself in a big fluffy robe, and staggered out into the bedroom. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and she stared at the stranger in the mirror.

She looked automatically at the face, which was dominated by two nasty black eyes. *Bloody hell*, she thought. *No wonder the cabdriver bought my story about an abusive boyfriend.* It looked as if she had taken two hard blows to the eyes, and the whites were bloodshot from tears. Her lips were raw red and burned roughly when she licked them. "Someone tried to kick the living shit out of you," she said to the girl in the mirror. The face that looked back was narrow, and although it was not beautiful, it was not ugly. *I am nondescript*, she thought. *Nondescript features with shoulder-length dark hair.* *Hmm.* She opened the robe and looked critically at her body.

Lots of adjectives beginning with the letter S are appropriate here, she thought grimly. *Short. Scrawny. Small breasts. Skinned knees* (although presumably those were only temporary). She remembered something from the letter and felt along the inside of her left thigh. A

small hard scar. *From falling out of a tree and impaling this leg at the age of nine*, she thought. Her body was not particularly fit-looking but seemed blessedly free of cellulite. Shaved legs. A conservative and recent bikini wax. More bruises had risen to the surface, but they didn't conceal the fact that she was not possessed of an especially sexy body. *I think I could do better*, she thought. *I won't be able to hit the level of Hot, but I might be able to manage Cute. If I have a big enough budget. Or at least some makeup to work with.*

Her gaze moved from her body to the reflection of the room behind her. There it was, a huge bed with big fluffy pillows, a very soft-looking blanket, and white sheets so crisp they could be used to sculpt something. It was almost exactly what she needed. If only there was a . . . there was! A welcome mint on the pillow! Well, if there was a welcome mint, then the bed was probably worth staggering across that massively wide carpet to get to. The carpet was soft, and she could have collapsed on it easily, but the thought of the welcome mint was enough to impel her forward. Dragging her feet, she hobbled over and managed to fall asleep without choking to death on her mint.

She had confusing dreams, although later, when she woke up, she wondered if they were confusing simply because the people she'd dreamed about were from pre-amnesia times. But even while she was in the dreams, she was confused. She was kissing someone, but she couldn't see him. All she could do was feel him, and shiver. And when his tongue stretched down her throat, she didn't panic.

Then she was sitting down to afternoon tea in a room full of ferns with a black-and-white-tile floor. The air was hot and wet, and an elderly lady dressed in Victorian clothes sat across from her. The lady sipped thoughtfully from her teacup and stared at her with cool chocolate eyes.

“Good evening, Myfanwy. I apologize for disturbing your sleep, but I felt obliged to thank you.”

“Thank me?”

"Myfanwy, don't think I don't understand what you have done for me," the lady said coldly. "I dislike being in your debt, but thanks to you, a threat to me and my family has been disposed of. If it should happen that I can ever return the favor, I suppose I am obliged to do so, tiresome as that may be. Tea?" She poured Myfanwy a cup, and drank from her own cup. Myfanwy hesitantly tried a sip, and found herself enjoying it.

"It's delicious," she said politely.

"Thank you" came the distracted reply. The woman was looking around her curiously. "Are you all right? There's something strange..." She trailed off and peered at Myfanwy thoughtfully. "Your mind is different. Something has happened to you; it's almost as if—" She stood up abruptly, knocking over her chair, which dissolved into vapor, and backed away from the table. The plants writhed, drawing in around her. "Who are you? I can't understand it. You are not Rook Thomas, and yet you are!"

"Myfanwy Thomas lost her memory," the younger woman said levelly with that strange detachment that comes in dreams. "I'm what woke up."

"You're in her body," said the lady slowly.

"Yes," Myfanwy said reluctantly.

"How inconvenient," said the old lady with a sigh. "A rook with no memory of who she is." There was a pause. "Bugger."

"Sorry," Myfanwy said, then felt ridiculous for apologizing.

"Yes, well. Give me a moment. I need to think." The older woman paced for a few minutes, pausing periodically to smell the flowers. "Unfortunately, young lady, I don't have time to ponder all the factors here. I have problems of my own, and I can't actively help you, here or in the waking world. Any unusual movements on my part would put us both in danger."

"Don't you owe me a debt?" asked Myfanwy. "Thomas helped you."

"You are not Thomas!" the lady snapped in irritation.

"I don't think she's going to be coming around to collect," Myfanwy said dryly. The elderly lady subsided.

"A good point. But the best I can do is keep your secret. I will not

move against you nor tell anyone what has happened to you. Everything else will be up to you.”

“That’s it?” Myfanwy asked incredulously.

“It’s more than you realize, and it could make all the difference. Now, I must go, and you had better wake up.” The plants around them writhed again, and began to withdraw. Darkness flowed down from the glass ceiling above them.

“Now, wait a just second,” said Myfanwy, and the lady looked startled. She raised an eyebrow, and the spreading darkness paused above their heads. “You’re not going to be any more helpful?”

“No,” the elderly lady said with some surprise. Once again, she was sitting at the table. “You are very definitely not Myfanwy Thomas,” she remarked as she poured herself a fresh cup of tea. “Good evening.”

“Good evening,” said Myfanwy. The lady raised an eyebrow again, and Myfanwy felt herself blushing. Clearly she was supposed to say something else, and a vague recollection floated up—a tiny scrap of dying memory. “Good evening... my lady?” The lady nodded approvingly.

“Well, apparently you have not forgotten *everything*.”

She woke up and fumbled by the side of the bed for the light switch. The clock told her that it was seven in the morning. Though she was exhausted, there was no chance she would be getting back to sleep. There were simply too many questions rushing through her head. What was the deal with the dreams? Should she be taking them seriously?

It seemed a trifle unfair to place any more importance on the conversational dream than she did on the tongue-kissing dream. However, the conversational dream had been incredibly vivid. Did she believe that the dreams were subconscious messages? She was vaguely inclined to dismiss them as her brain’s sieving through the garbage of her thoughts while she slept, but she wasn’t really sure.

And who was this Myfanwy Thomas person anyway? A rook?

Wasn't that some kind of bird? Clearly the dream could be discounted, since she was not a bird. The lack of feathers, she thought wryly, was just one indicator. As it was, she had no idea about anything. How old was she? Was she married? No rings on any fingers; no incriminating tan lines. Was she employed? She hadn't thought to check the balance in the accounts earlier. She'd been too occupied with not freezing to death. Did she have family? Friends? With a sigh and then a few grunts of pain, she rolled out of her comfy bed and trudged gingerly over to the table where she'd thrown her jacket. Her scabbed knees hurt when she bent down, and her chest ached if she breathed too deeply. She was about to empty the pockets when her eye fell on the phone and the menu.

"Hello, this is room five-five-three."

"Yes, good morning, Ms. Ryan," said a polished and mercifully nonperky voice. "What can I do for you?"

"Ooh, I would like to order some breakfast. Could I get a pot of coffee, some blueberry pancakes, some orange juice, some wheat toast, some marmalade, and two raw steaks?"

Astonishingly, there was no stunned pause; the voice on the other end cheerfully agreed to send it all up.

"I need the steaks for my eyes; I had an accident," she felt the need to explain.

"Of course, Ms. Ryan, we'll be up soon."

She also asked if the hotel could quickly launder her only set of clothes, and the voice on the phone promised to dispatch a person immediately to pick them up.

"Thank you," she said as she looked out the window. The storm had passed overnight, and the sky was now cloudless. After a few minutes she wandered over to the doors that led to the balcony. She was about to open them when there was a discreet knock at the door. *Remember*, she thought, *someone beat the hell out of you, and someone is still after you*. She peeked through the peephole and saw that it was a diffident young fellow in a hotel uniform with an empty laundry bag. She eyed the crumpled and damp trail of clothing leading to the bathroom and dismissed her paranoia. *I'm willing to risk it for the sake of*

clean clothes. She opened the door, thanked the young man, and, flushing, hurriedly gathered up her bedraggled garments and dropped them into the waiting bag. Then, feeling guilty about the porter she hadn't tipped the previous night, she lavishly overtipped him.

She was watching the morning news and marveling at the lack of items about corpses in a park when breakfast arrived and was laid out carefully for her, prompting another disproportionate tip. She sat down, fished in the jacket pockets, and pulled out the envelope neatly labeled 2. Just looking at it made her feel mildly irritated with the woman who'd written it, the woman who'd put her in this situation. *I'll look at it in a sec,* she decided. *Once I've had some coffee.* She set it to one side, took out her wallet, and nibbled some toast as she looked through the cards. There were two driver's licenses, one of which confirmed that she was indeed Myfanwy Alice Thomas. The address given triggered no memories at all, although she was intrigued to note that it appeared to be a house rather than a flat. It identified her hair as brown, her eyes as blue, and her age as thirty-one. She looked at her picture with disfavor. Ordinary features, pale, with independent-minded eyebrows.

The wallet also contained several credit and ATM cards and a little hand-scribbled note that said *I appreciate what you're trying to do, but you're not really the kind of person who wears your heart in your wallet.*

"Very funny," she said to herself. "It looks like I thought I was quite amusing before I lost my memory." Sifting through the rest of the pockets produced a packet of tissues, a mobile phone with a dead battery, and a pass card on a clip. She spent some minutes fruitlessly examining this last item, which was as thick as four credit cards and featured only a sulky-looking photo and a bar code. Finally she put aside her jacket and took a long drink of very good coffee. There was no time like the present for reading a letter from herself. She could only hope that this letter was more illuminating than the last. Well, at least this one was typed, rather than handwritten.

Dear You,

Have you noticed that I'm not calling you Myfanwy? This is for two reasons. First, I feel that it would be somehow rude to foist my name on you,

and second, well, it's just too strange. Speaking of strange, I suppose you're wondering how I came to write these letters, how I knew they would be necessary.

You're wondering how I know the future.

Well, I have bad news for you. I'm not psychic. I can't see what's coming. I can't predict the lotto numbers for tonight, which is a real pity because it would be exceptionally useful. But over the past year, I've been approached by several people who claimed they could see my future. Random strangers. Some of them knew they occasionally had flashes of precognition, while others couldn't even explain why they'd come up to me on the street. They'd experienced dreams, visions, hunches. At first I assumed they were nothing but random crazies, but when it kept happening, it became harder to dismiss.

So I've known for some time that you would find yourself standing in the rain without any memory of who you were. I knew that you would come to surrounded by dead people wearing gloves. I knew that they would be lying on the ground having been "taken down hardcore," in the words of one particularly batty old woman who spoke to me on the street in Liverpool.

I wonder, are you made up of parts of me? Or are you a completely new person? You don't know who you are, that much I can be certain of, but what else is gone? I suppose you couldn't know that Jane Eyre is my least favorite book in the world. Or that anything by Georgette Heyer is my favorite. I like oranges. I like pastries.

"Do you like pancakes?" wondered the girl in the hotel room, taking a bite of blueberry-filled deliciousness. "I certainly like them. You should have said."

To tell the truth, I find this whole thing alarming. I have a tidy, comfortable life. It's a trifle unorthodox, but I have managed to make it work. And now all I can do is piece things together from what I've been told.

1. I know that I will lose my memory. I have no idea why, but I will try and be prepared and make this as easy for you as it can be.

2. I know that I or you will be attacked, will fight, and will win. I'm laying odds that the last part is you. I organize very well, but I don't fight.

The black eyes are probably mine, though. That sort of thing seems to happen to me.

3. I know that the men who attack me are all wearing latex gloves, which is very important. I know it sounds like nothing, maybe an incidental perversion. You don't understand the significance, but I do, and I will explain it to you, if you want. All you need to know immediately is that someone I should be able to trust has decided that I need to be removed. I don't know exactly who. I don't know why. It may be for something I haven't even done yet.

I can't be certain that you'll read this letter; I can't even be certain that you'll read the first letter. I've just put copies of them in every coat and jacket I own to make sure they'll be available to you when you need them. I can only hope that my limited knowledge of the future will be of use to you, and that you will gain some additional insights of your own.

And that I'll be wearing a coat when it happens.

In any case, we must face facts. There is a choice you must make, because I will not make it for you. You can walk away from my life and go create a new one. If that's what you choose, then you will need to leave the country, but this body comes with a large amount of money—more than enough to buy you a comfortable life. I have left instructions on how to build yourself a new identity, and lists of names and facts that you can use to protect yourself. It would never be a completely safe life, but it would be as safe as I, a person who knows how to prepare, can make it for you.

Or you can choose to adopt my life as your own. You can find out why you have been betrayed. I said before that mine is a good life, and that is true. The body you are in has been privileged enough to have wealth, power, and knowledge beyond the dreams of normal people. You can have those things as well, but this choice will be dangerous. For whatever reason, an injustice has been committed against both of us. An injustice against you because you did not do anything, and an injustice against me because I cannot believe that I will do anything to deserve it.

So, that's the choice you have to make. Unfair? Absolutely. But you still have to make it. There are two keys in the envelope, and both are to lockboxes at the Mansel Bank on Basingthwaighte Street in the City;

1011-A contains all the materials you need to go away and 1011-B puts you back into my life. I would not blame you for making either choice.

I wish you nothing but the best. Whatever you do, be careful until you have opened the box. Remember, they want you dead.

Sincerely,

Myfanwy Thomas

She put the letter down on the table, picked up her coffee, and walked over to the balcony door. She hesitated, but then dismissed her fears. *No one followed me*, she thought. *There aren't going to be snipers waiting for me to come outside. Get a grip.* She opened the door and went out into the morning. It was a nice day. All around her were hotel rooms in which people were eating much the same food as she was, and balconies where they were enjoying the same late-winter sunshine and looking down on the same steam coming off the heated (and completely deserted) pool. But she imagined that she was probably the only person about to decide who she was going to be.

Well, Ms. Thomas, your story is very compelling, she mused. *You have deliberately tried to tantalize me into some sort of pursuit of justice. You give me no details of the life I would be inheriting. You want me to be curious. And although I still have no idea who I am, it seems that I do have a penchant for intrigue.*

I don't know whether I get this from you, she thought, *but I have enough sense to realize that your little mission would be a fool's errand. And I'm not even vaguely intrigued by your promise of "wealth, power, and knowledge beyond the dreams of normal people." Can you hear me somewhere in the back of this brain? If so, then hear this: Don't flatter yourself, darling. Your life holds absolutely no appeal for me.*

She stared up at the clouds, which she couldn't remember ever staring at before. She drank the coffee, and although she knew it was good, and that she liked it with milk and sugar, she couldn't remember ever drinking coffee before. She could recall the movements needed to swim the butterfly stroke, although she couldn't remember ever entering a pool. There were so many memories to build and experiences she knew she would enjoy.

If people are going to be trying to kill me, then I want to be somewhere far away, and I want to be spending as much money as you have bequeathed me. Whatever you lacked in courage, I am going to make up for in common sense. She went back in the room, picked up a pen, and firmly circled 1011-A.

She lay on the bed with a steak draped over each eye, thinking about what she would do next. There were a few issues that needed to be addressed. First, how was she to get to the bank without catching the attention (and, subsequently, the fist) of some psycho with a fetish for surgical gloves? Second, where did she want to go once she opened the door to her new life? The first problem seemed relatively simple. In her panic the previous night, she'd extracted a rather large quantity of cash. Certainly enough to hire a car and driver to take her to the bank. As to the second, well, for all her obvious faults, Miss Myfanwy Thomas as was did not strike her as a liar. She expected to find everything she would need in box 1011-A. Thomas had said there would be instructions and advice on how to build a new life. Of course, there remained the question as to why Myfanwy Thomas hadn't elected to take this wealth she claimed to possess and flee the country herself before she lost her memory. She could have precluded the amnesia and been sunning herself on some balcony in Borneo if she'd had the nerve. So what had stopped her?

Perhaps, she thought, it was the number of predictions she received. But what kind of person believes random "psychics" off the street? And if Thomas was certain the attack would happen, she was equally certain that I could escape her life. Thomas was too timid to change her fate, but I will not be!

Filled with a sudden certainty, she carefully peeled the steaks off her eyes and examined the results in the mirror. The swelling had gone down, but the bruising was dark and thorough. It would be days before all signs vanished, and the aching continued to be a problem. She headed to the bathroom to wash the meat juice off her face and out of her hair, pausing only to fetch a Toblerone from the minibar.

Forty-five minutes later, she stepped into a waiting car and was ferried away in comfort into the City. Her clothes were clean, her hair smelled of flowers rather than steak tartare, and her mind was intent on how she was to go about living. Clearly, she and Thomas were different people. Well, she would be grateful for what had been left to her, and the girl who used to live inside her body could rest in peace.

Taken by a sudden whim, she asked the driver to go by some of the main sights of London. As they drove through Trafalgar Square and cruised past St. Paul's Cathedral, she looked out with narrowed eyes. She knew these places, but only as if she'd read about them or seen pictures of them.

The long black car glided to a stop in front of the bank, and the driver nodded agreeably when asked to wait. *I wonder if Thomas had this same taste for luxury? If not, it's a pity, since she could afford it.* After breakfast, she'd checked the account balances for all her cards at an ATM in the hotel and had been thrilled with the number of zeros that appeared. If this was the wealth Thomas had spoken of in her letter, then she was going to live quite comfortably. If there was more, then it was going to be an excessively good life. She disembarked from the car and walked up the steps, looking subtly around her for the slightest sign that someone was watching her. Not seeing a hint of a glove or anyone staring in her direction, she relaxed and walked in.

I'll have to come up with a name, I suppose. I certainly can't go about being Myfanwy Thomas, not if I'm trying to escape the past. And I'm not particularly wild about Anne Ryan. Probably dangerous to make any decisions before I know what Thomas had planned. There may be a passport or something. Although I've always liked the name Jeanne.

At least, I think I've always liked it.

Still musing, she followed the signs, took the lift down to the lockbox area, pushed open the thick wooden doors, and walked over to the receptionist.

"Good morning, I'm Anne Ryan," she said, producing the driver's license.

The receptionist stood up, nodding. She was wearing latex gloves. And before the woman formerly known as Myfanwy Thomas could say a word, the receptionist wound up and punched her in the face.

She flew backward, the pain in her eyes flaring, and shrieked like a train whistle. Through the stars floating in her vision, she could see three men entering the room and shutting the doors behind them. They surrounded her, and one of the men leaned over her with a hypodermic needle in one hand. Filled with a sudden rage, she swung her leg up and kicked him hard between the legs. Squealing, he doubled over, and she lashed out with a fist, catching him hard on the chin. He staggered back onto one of the other men, and she swung herself up, teeth bared, panic rising as she realized that she had no idea how to fight. Still, certain things were obvious. She shoved the man she'd kicked hard, sending him and his friend against the wall. The remaining man and the woman stood back, seeming almost hesitant to touch her. She noticed that the men were also wearing latex gloves. The woman flicked a questioning look to the standing man.

Taking advantage of this, she leaped toward the woman, reasoning that she would be the easiest target. They didn't appear to have any weapons, and so far it was only the woman who'd seemed willing to hit her. Instead of slamming her target, however, she found herself quickly slung around and placed in some sort of painful arm-lock. She was being taken down by experts. *Sorry, Thomas. It looks as if you overestimated me.* One of the men stepped in and slapped her hard. The pain rocked her, and she reeled in the woman's grasp. The bitch shoved slightly against her arm, and it felt as if several bones were being pushed to their breaking point. Then the man punched her.

"Bastards!" she shrieked. The first man limped toward her, holding the syringe. The pain was rising within her, and when the woman jerked at her arm again, the agony exploded. She closed her eyes and screamed. There was nothing in the world but that scream, drowning out everything else, even the pain. All the air was pushed out of her lungs, and she felt and heard nothing but her voice. When she opened her eyes and took a breath, she realized that there was no

one holding her. Instead, the four people were lying on the ground, twitching uncontrollably.

What the hell just happened? What did I do?

She staggered, panting, but refused to keel over. She looked around, waiting for more people to come in, but no one appeared. *Not even the bank staff?* she thought vaguely, but the doors were apparently thick enough to muffle any sounds of fighting. Her first instinct was flight, but then she was seized with a terrible resolve. Her existence up to this point had been bizarre, admittedly, but she'd made decisions based on the facts she'd collected. Now, nothing she'd thought she understood could be trusted. Any vague suppositions she had had about who Myfanwy Thomas was or what had happened to her were clearly deeply flawed. There was far more to the world than she'd supposed, and she wanted to know everything.

Carefully, she searched the receptionist's pockets, doing her best to ignore the increasingly feeble twitches. Nothing. A cursory examination of the desk revealed a drawer of numbered keys, each in its own little compartment. She found the appropriate keys to match the ones she already had, and, stepping over the people lying on the floor, she walked into the room in which the boxes were kept. With a gasp, she found an unconscious woman with an ID badge indicating that she was the receptionist. *I suppose they knocked her out,* thought Myfanwy weakly. *How could they have found me? And gotten in place so fast?*

She stepped over the bank employee, scanned the rows of enormous drawers until she found the right ones, and matched the keys to the two locks. For a moment, she was tempted to change her mind, but a glance over her shoulder at the bodies on the floor decided her. She set her jaw and opened box 1011-B.

Inside were two suitcases. She opened the first and saw a number of objects wrapped in bubble wrap. She turned to the second suitcase, opened it, and took a step back in surprise. The case was filled with stacks of envelopes, all numbered in the unmistakable handwriting of Myfanwy Thomas.

2

Her initial disappointment at finding a suitcase full of paperwork rather than high-tech gadgets or gold coins gave way to intrigue. She hadn't been certain what she would find, and she supposed that letters made about as much sense as anything else. Hopefully, Myfanwy Thomas had left instructions for a situation such as this. But was there time to peruse them? She risked a look over her shoulder and saw that the four figures had not roused themselves and were not headed toward her but in fact had ceased their twitching and were lying still. The receptionist did not seem to be in any danger of waking up. She sucked her teeth for a moment, weighing possibilities in her mind, and then reason won out over curiosity. *Fuck it, I'll read in the car.*

She tucked the first envelope, labeled 3, in her back pocket, then hefted the two suitcases, which were much heavier than she had anticipated, out of the drawer and onto the floor, and then precariously wheeled them out of the vault. She maneuvered carefully around the bodies and found the lift, which whisked her up to the lobby.

Be calm, she said to herself. Be calm. Not everyone in the bank is going to be wearing latex gloves. In fact, nobody was wearing gloves, and nobody appeared to pay her a blind bit of attention. *Well, that will last right until someone goes to check his lockbox,* she thought, and hurried outside. The stairs down from the bank presented some problems, but the driver noticed her struggling and obligingly toted her luggage to the car. Myfanwy thanked him and slid into the backseat.

"Just drive," she said. "Just go, please." She leaned back weakly

and focused on controlling her breathing and not having a heart attack.

Okay, you're safe, she told herself. Well, what's next? She took the envelope from her pocket and tore it open.

Dear You,

The odds of your reading this are slim to none. Who would choose uncertainty and vaguely worded warnings over a new life of wealth and luxury? I can only assume that you were put under a massive amount of stress, touched someone's skin, and they were paralyzed. Or blinded. Or lost the ability to speak. Or befouled themselves. Or one of several other effects that I won't outline right now. In any case, I know what it's like the first time it happens. It's like a door opening up inside of you, isn't it? Like you've been hit by a truck. It can't be ignored. So even if you would have preferred to open up the other box (which, by the way, would have had you living out the rest of your life as Jeanne Citeaux), I'm glad you made this choice.

Take both suitcases with you and go to the address below. The key in this envelope will get you in, and you should be safe there. It has no connection to me, officially. Open the next envelope when you are established. Try not to be followed.

This note was unsigned, and the key she fished out of the envelope bore no identifying marks. The address given was not the one on either of her driver's licenses and appeared to be some sort of flat. The letter and key were put into a pocket, and she gave the next destination to the driver with the message that he should try not to be followed. The driver nodded and began to follow a course with so many doublings-back and abrupt changes in direction that she was certain nobody could pursue them without being noticed. When she commented on this, he smiled slightly.

"I'm used to it, miss. Many of our clients have the paparazzi after them." Nodding her head thoughtfully, Myfanwy took out the key and turned it over and over in her hands as she looked out the windows. They had by now moved out of the City. At points, they drove along the Thames, which was very pretty, with tour boats cruising

along. Then they would curve away, switching lanes and twisting through residential districts. As the car meandered east, to the Docklands, she began to digest the events in the bank.

Eventually the car stopped in front of an apartment building. The driver carried her suitcases into the lobby for her. She gave him a generous bonus for his excellent driving, then dragged the suitcases into the lift. On the ninth floor, she found the appropriate apartment and opened the door.

It was clear that the apartment had been empty for weeks, if not months. A little light trickled in, but the curtains were drawn. She flicked on the light. The entire place smelled of abandonment. It was eerily quiet. She hesitantly took a few steps, feeling as if she were intruding or had broken into someone's house.

Before her, the living room opened up, with some pieces of furniture sitting solidly under dust sheets. There were no pictures on the walls. To her right was a kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and found some six-packs of bottled water and cans of soft drinks. The freezer held a variety of Lean Cuisines and some plastic-covered trays of frozen meat. There was cutlery in one of the drawers, and crockery in a cupboard. She moved into the living room and dragged the sheets off the furniture, revealing some big, squashy-looking couches and chairs of a dark burgundy color. There was a large TV hanging on the wall.

"How minimalist," she remarked to herself. The bedroom was similarly devoid of character, with a large bed under yet another dust sheet. She peeled back the sheet and saw that the bed was already made up with some soft-looking blankets. A surprising waft of scent rose up when she uncovered the bed, and under the blankets she found a few sachets of lavender. There were soap, shampoo, and towels in the bathroom. A few fresh toothbrushes in their boxes, with toothpaste and mouthwash in the cupboard above the sink. No makeup, but there was a hairbrush and, surprisingly, a few bottles of hair dye.

Don't tell me I'm going gray at thirty-one! she thought in horror, but she noticed that none of the colors were her own. *Probably in case I*

need to disguise myself, she concluded. There was also a large first aid kit on a shelf.

The other bedroom had been made into a sort of office, with a large computer and a complicated-looking printer under more plastic. There was a low bookshelf with some folders on it, and she pulled one out and opened it at random. It appeared to hold the details of the rental of the flat she was standing in. Struck by a sudden thought, she went back into the main bedroom and opened the wardrobe.

There were a few exceptionally bland garments, mostly black and gray. Some white blouses, a couple of suits, a skirt, and two pairs of jeans. All had been carefully hung up and all appeared designed to encourage people not to look at the person wearing them.

Well, apparently I had absolutely no taste, she thought, bemused by the plainness of the range offered. She shuddered, because there was something unsettling about the thought of those clothes on her body without her mind being present. However, as she fingered the clothes, she found that all of them still bore price tags. She carefully closed the doors and went out into the living room, where she pulled back the curtain and let in all the sunlight.

The windows were huge and looked out on the river, with all its traffic. The furniture seemed much more cozy suddenly, and she could see that everything had been carefully positioned in the very best spots. *Thomas put some thought into this place*, she reflected. *This wasn't just a bolt-hole but somewhere to be comfortable*. She felt a little pang of fondness for the woman who'd lived in her body. You couldn't help liking someone who put all this effort into making you feel welcome.

Besides, she's the only person I know, she thought, a little ridiculously. She dragged the suitcases into the living room and opened the one that had no letters but was instead filled with objects packaged in bubble wrap. She plucked one out and weighed it in her hands. It was heavy, and a label reading JUST IN CASE had been stuck on. She carefully unwound the tape and wrappings, and then sucked in a breath of surprise. In her hand she held a small but evil-looking submachine gun. She eyed the suitcase warily, lest it suddenly eject more weap-

THE ROOK

ons, and then gingerly rewrapped the gun before putting it back in the case and shutting the lid.

She turned her attention to the other suitcase and plucked out the next letter. It was much thicker than all the others had been, and written in a cheerful violet ink. She kicked off her shoes and sat on the couch, which was extremely comfortable, just perfect for napping.

Dear You,

I am just going to have to assume that you are where you're supposed to be and stop making all sorts of vague conjectures as to where you might be. That said, you'd better be in the apartment I set up for you because it's taken me ages to prepare it. There were all sorts of things I wanted there waiting for you, and it's been exceedingly difficult to get all this done without being noticed. I (and now you, I suppose) exist under a certain amount of surveillance. And so the establishment of this secret hideaway, where I sit on the right-hand side of the couch writing to you, was quite an accomplishment.

She looked over at the other side of the couch, where her old self had sat. It was kind of companionable, despite the lack of a companion.

There are all sorts of things I must explain to you, but I will have to prioritize carefully. Before I can tell you all about who I am, what I do, and so on, there are a few more immediate things you should know. I assumed in my last letter that you touched someone and disrupted their control of their own body. I'll keep on assuming that, since it's the only reason I can think of why you would have picked the box you did. As an aside, I'll tell you that I feel really bad for you—it takes quite a large amount of pain to trigger your gift unconsciously. Hopefully, nothing has been broken or ruptured inside of you, since that would be really inconvenient. But no, I resolved I wouldn't go down all the avenues of "what might be." You're in the apartment, and safe.

The first time it happened to me, I was nine years old and had climbed a tree. Somehow, I managed to fall and get a sharp branch jammed into my leg. Shrieking with pain, I was bundled into the car by my parents and

driven to the hospital. I was wearing a tracksuit at the time, and so I must assume that's how my parents managed not to touch my skin during this whole thing. Anyway, the ride was dreadful for everyone concerned, for me because I was bleeding and am a terrible coward when it comes to pain, and for my parents because I didn't stop wailing.

Finally, we arrived at the hospital, and either there weren't many people waiting or my shrieking prompted some sort of queue-jumping privileges, because I was quickly taken in to the doctor, who gently cut off my track bottoms (they'd glued themselves to my leg). When he brushed his hand against my skin, he immediately fell over and started screaming. It turned out that he'd lost control of his legs. Some other hospital person rushed in and tried to tend to both me and the doctor. When she touched my bare skin, she lost her sight.

So now we had three people shrieking and flailing about, although I was so thrown by the whole thing that I was getting much quieter by this time and gave out only the occasional whimper when I remembered to. The third medical person had the good sense (or perhaps it was just good luck) to tend to the others first. And the next person to touch me had the even better sense to be wearing gloves, and so my leg was stitched up and bandaged, and when I woke up, it was safe for people to touch me again.

But I knew that I had caused the chaos, and I knew I could do it again if I wanted to. Search your mind, think back, and you'll see that you know how to do it too. If you haven't done it yet (I can't avoid this conjecture, because it's too important), then you're going to have to jump-start your powers. There's a red folder in one of the cases that you can consult for suggestions.

She's got to be kidding, the woman on the couch thought incredulously, but she put the letter aside for a moment and sifted through the case until she found the red folder. Inside, there were detailed descriptions on how best to push her own arm or leg to the near breaking point (without actually breaking it) and how to induce a number of other ghastly sounding but nonpermanent types of damage. "Unbelievable," she murmured. The incident at the bank hadn't been pretty, but at least she hadn't had to do anything like this.

THE ROOK

At first it seemed that the bizarre afternoon had passed without consequence. There were no lawsuits, and my parents never spoke to me about it. But somebody somewhere must have mentioned it, and the talk must have eventually made its way to an exceedingly interested party. I found out later that three months after my visit to hospital, my father received a letter from an obscure branch of the government. I like to think that he and my mother talked it over, but the end result was that my father and I were driven to an old stone building in the City, and I was introduced to Lady Linda Farrier and Sir Henry Wattleman of the Checquy Group.

My father and I were led into a sort of drawing room lined with books and prints. We sat down carefully in armchairs and were brought tea and biscuits, and then Sir Wattleman and Lady Farrier proceeded to explain to my father why it was both necessary and legal that I be taken away from my family and placed in the care of the Checquy Group. I was not really paying attention to all of this because I was only nine and a half and because I could not stop staring at Lady Farrier, who was strangely familiar.

She was not young, but she was very thin, with hair that had been drawn back and up. Her eyes were a dark, dark brown and she spoke in a very calm manner. Nothing seemed to shake or surprise her, even when I managed to drop my teacup onto the floor, where it shattered into a million pieces and splashed tea everywhere. She didn't even blink, although Sir Wattleman's head whipped around in alarm and I half thought he was going to punch someone.

I do remember my father objecting to my being taken, but in a sort of halfhearted manner, as if he already knew he would lose. Lady Farrier very patiently repeated some lines of the law she'd quoted earlier, and there was not the slightest bit of mercy in her voice, but Sir Wattleman seemed to have a bit more pity in him. This is ironic, since I later learned he was one of the most dangerous men in the country and had been responsible for a great many assassinations—most of which he had carried out himself. Nevertheless, at that time he was by far the more human of the two and was doing his best to console my father. He even patted him on the shoulder.

I was finding it increasingly difficult to pay attention to this conversation because of my fascination with Lady Farrier, who ignored me completely. Just as my father finally bowed his head and agreed that he would be leaving

without me, I recalled where I knew her from. My mind was whirling as I submitted to a final kiss and hug from my father, and I honestly cannot recall what our parting words were. He left with Sir Wattleman, and I stood, absentmindedly wiping my father's tears off my cheek, staring at the woman whom, impossibly, I recognized.

Do I sound like a terrible child for ignoring my father as he walked out of my life? Looking back, I cringe and am amazed. I was not normally self-centered. I adored my family and had a little sister and an older brother who were my favorite people in the world. In the days to come, I would dissolve in tears at the thought of them. But at that moment, there was nothing but her.

Every night for the previous two months I had dreamed of her. I'd sat with this woman in a room with black-and-white tiles and told her everything. She was stiff and formal, but I had found myself adoring her. Food would appear on the tables, and she would patiently extract every detail of my life from me. She was especially interested in my day at the hospital but endured my descriptions of all my possessions and the minutiae of my day. I think it was her patience that endeared her to me. How often does a nine-year-old child have such a fascinated audience? In any case, she had listened, and now I found myself face-to-face with her.

In the apartment, she put down the letter for a moment and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. This woman, Farrier, sounded eerily like the woman from her own dream. And the room Thomas described was exactly the same. Even the name the Checquy Group stirred the hairs at the back of her neck and along her arms. Was her memory returning? Even a little? She turned back to the letter.

"Well, Miss Myfanwy," Lady Farrier said thoughtfully. "Here we are again." Numbly, I nodded in agreement, too filled with amazement to say anything. "And now it seems you are going to come and live with us," she added, staring at me meaningfully. It was then that the realization hit me, and I began to sniffle. Perhaps I expected that, like a kindly aunt, she would hasten to comfort me, but all she did was take another sip from her teacup. As I broke down into sobs, she simply nibbled her crumpets and waited for

me to finish. When Sir Henry came in and sat down in his own chair, he didn't do anything either. Though he had been moved by the distress of a grown man, he did not react to the weeping of a little girl. Eventually I managed to get hold of myself, and, wiping my nose on my sleeve, I began thoughtfully eyeing the tray of biscuits. Lady Farrier nodded slightly, and I made a grab for something intriguing and chocolate.

And that was the beginning of my association with the Checquy Group, which has continued since that day. They wanted me because of what I could do—what you can do. Hopefully some of my training has remained with you, because it took me years to attain this level of mastery. Now, with a touch, I can seize control of someone's physical system. I can take away any or all of their senses, paralyze them, make them feel anything I want.

The Checquy Group thought I could be some sort of ultra spy, traveling the world and, I don't know, making people throw themselves in front of cars or something. Unfortunately, at least for the Checquy Group, I am not the spy type. I'm not an aggressive person, I get violently ill in planes, and I'm really quite shy. The Court was disappointed, but I was too valuable an asset for them to simply drop. Instead, I have become an in-house operative. It turns out that I am an extremely capable administrator and have a very good head for numbers. I use my powers only rarely. Thus, while other members of the organization attain high positions through their remarkable accomplishments in the field, I became a member of the Court simply through my work in the bureaucracy.

Does that sound lame? I'm very, very good. There's not a formal timeline for ascending to the Court. In fact, most people never get in. I am the youngest person in the current Court. I got there after ten years of working in administration. The next-youngest got in after sixteen years of highly dangerous fieldwork. That's how good an administrator I am.

“What a geek,” she sighed. Shaking her head, she put down the letter and went into the kitchen, where she pulled a bottle of water from the fridge. She gulped it all down and reached for another. A thousand questions were whirling through her head. What was this power over others that she had inherited? Thomas claimed that it

required skin-to-skin contact, but back in the bank, she had managed to take out four people, all of whom were wearing gloves and three of whom hadn't even been touching her. And what was this Checquy Group? They sought out people with powers. They were led by a woman who could enter dreams. They were empowered by the law to take a child away from her family. And Thomas was a part of it. Slowly, she walked back to the couch.

So, I suppose you're wondering all about the Checquy Group. Oh, and please note that it is pronounced Sheck-Eh. French influences, I think. Or possibly just warped by generations of employees mispronouncing it. Don't worry if the name means nothing to you. Most people never hear of it at all, but it has been in existence for centuries. It worked closely with the House of York, tended to ignore the Tudors, and endured the House of Stuart. However, it does not really matter who is ruling—from the earliest days, the organization's loyalty has been to Britain rather than to a particular ruler. When Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector, the four leaders of the Checquy Brotherhood (a pompous and inaccurate early name for the organization) were waiting to offer their services to him. You might think that Cromwell, a dedicated Puritan (indeed, the dedicated Puritan), would not have suffered such a group to live, let alone employed them. The records I saw describe the exhibition the leaders gave the Lord Protector, and as a result of that demonstration, the Brotherhood continued its existence. We weather the vagaries of history, welcoming new rulers and bending knees to those in power, whoever they may be. We are a tool of the nation, an asset of the British Isles. Those who work within the Checquy can accomplish what no one else can, and so they are the secret arm of the kingdom.

If I sound like I'm proud to be one of them, that's because I am. Threats arise every day, threats normal people cannot be made aware of. It is the Checquy Group that protects them, though it goes largely unrecognized. Although I don't go out into the field, I know that I play an integral part in defending normal people. I love my job, and that's why those random psychics' predictions have hurt me so badly. I don't know which member of the Court will turn against me, but if one does, it means there is something rotten at its core, which means that everyone is in danger.

THE ROOK

The Checquy Group is composed of hundreds of individuals. Some are like me—they possess powers beyond the normal population. The non-powered members are simply the cream of their respective occupational crops. This shouldn't be taken as meaning that I don't admire them. Unlike most other members of the Court, I do not regard the non-powered as being lesser. Perhaps it is because I lack the courage to go out and face what they do, but in any case I know they are just as good as me. Still, by long-standing tradition and policy, non-powered individuals cannot become members of the Court—the ruling circle. The Court answers to the highest individuals in the land only, and not always to them.

Those of us with powers are sought out by the Checquy through a variety of means, and the group was long ago granted the authority to claim any citizens it wanted. Parents are coerced or duped into releasing their children, sometimes with massive payoffs. Adults are lured in with promises of power, wealth, and the opportunity to serve their nation. The initiation is a mixture of ancient oaths and modern contracts under both the official and unofficial secrecy acts of the government. By the time an individual has become a full member, he is bound by a million different ties. Do you realize now what your leaving would have meant?

I've only ever heard of three people who tried to leave the Checquy, and I know the history inside and out. Of those three, the first was a powered individual called Brennan the Intransigent who made a break for it in 1679. He was about to step across the English Channel to France, where he had been lured by the promises of the French government, when he was taken into custody. He was crucified on the cliffs of Dover.

The second was a soldier in 1802 who was driven insane by something he saw in a burrow at John o'Groats and who fled to his parents' home. He was carefully brought back to the Checquy stronghold and then buried alive in his village's graveyard.

The third was a woman who could grow tentacles out of her back and exuded some sort of alarming toxin through her fingertips. In 1875, she fled to Buenos Aires and managed to live there for three months before the hand of the Checquy caught up with her. Her stuffed body is currently displayed above the mantelpiece in one of the London offices. The little bronze plaque indicates that she lived for six months after they caught her.

See how the Checquy Group deals with those who try to leave? They like to make examples of them, and they tend to be creative about how they do it. And did I mention that none of those who tried to escape were members of the Court? Can you imagine how much more creative they would be if you had fled and they caught you? Don't worry, you would have escaped safely. As soon as I accepted what was going to happen to me, I began to consolidate all my resources and knowledge into designing a means of protecting you.

You don't need to know all the details, but suffice it to say that I created a series of contingencies that if activated would have simultaneously crippled the Checquy's ability to pursue you and disrupted the daily functioning of the organization in such a way that they could not have spared the staff or the resources to pursue a Myfanwy Thomas—especially a Myfanwy Thomas who had had plastic surgery and drastically corrupted the records that contained her personal details.

How? I can almost hear you ask. Well, it involved a few things.

1. Lots and lots of research, which started as an attempt to figure out who would have a reason to attack me and ended up giving me a far better understanding of the organization and how to evade it. It also allowed me to build up some rather detailed dossiers on the various Court members. Some of those dossiers describe—well, let's call them indiscretions. They're not crimes on the level of a bring-down-the-government scandal, but they're grave enough that if certain highly placed officials found out about them, it would prompt some inconvenient investigations that would take up an enormous amount of the Court's time.

2. The systematic alteration of most of the files that describe me, including fingerprints and DNA details. The hard copies, anyway. I've used my rank and a few little computing skills to write a program that will corrupt the electronic copies.

3. The insertion of a virus into the computer systems that will, if put into motion, hamper even the most mundane work. The Checquy would still be able to carry out its day-to-day activities, but with far less efficiency than usual. The resulting confusion would give you ample time to get out of the country, get a new face, and attend to a few other things.

If you had elected to leave, I would have had you stop by an unmanned Checquy outpost office in Waterloo Station, log onto the terminal, and e-mail keywords to some accounts in the Checquy mainframe. Once you'd activated these contingency plans, you would technically have been guilty of committing treason against the nation by (temporarily) weakening its defenses. So in some ways, staying and assuming my life is safer. It's a very complicated business, I'll admit.

If it's any consolation, I'm really glad you made this decision.

So, while I don't know exactly who is currently trying to kill you, there are seven candidates—the other members of the Court. One of the psychics confirmed that.

Oh, but before I give you any more details, check your watch and see what day of the week it is. If it's a weekday, well, I suppose it's fairly obvious that you've missed work. Is it too late to call in sick?

Automatically, she checked her watch and saw it was Saturday. Then she did a double take.

Yes, you're going in to work. Yes, you're going in to an office where someone is trying to kill you. You chose not to leave, and this is the only way you can stay. There's a purple binder in the suitcase with the letters. It's thick. That's because it describes the Checquy and what you do for them. You'll probably need to consult it a lot. If it's a workday today, then you should call in sick. Instructions on how to do so are at the top of page 1. Otherwise, you'll want to pick out a businesslike outfit for your first day at work. If it's a weekend, read on.

When last we left our heroine (us), she was nine years old and about to stuff her gob with a chocolate digestive. As I recall, we had all finished our tea, but neither Lady Farrier nor Sir Wattleman spoke directly to me. I remember feeling somewhat irritated by this but not so irritated that I didn't start wolfing down everything on the pastry tray. And then Lady Farrier sent me away to the Estate.

The letter continued, but she was too tired to read further. The pages fell back into her lap, and soon she was asleep on the couch, a couch that had been chosen for its extreme coziness.

If she had any dreams, she did not remember them.

3

My name is Myfanwy,” she said, concerned by how unsure her voice sounded. The face she saw in the mirror might belong to someone named Myfanwy, but it was taking her a little while to think of herself as such. She was, however, beginning to think of the person who had previously occupied her body as Thomas.

“I’m Myfanwy,” she said again, a bit more convincingly this time.

“Were you a morning person, Thomas?” she wondered aloud as she struggled up out of bed. She’d spent most of the previous day sleeping and reading through the dossiers that Thomas had left her. She’d fallen asleep around midnight, her face covered by a report on the Checquy’s diplomatic relationship with the Great Barrier Reef. Now it was five o’clock on Monday morning, and she’d woken with a start, petrified that she was late.

For a moment she’d toyed with calling in sick, but a number of factors had dissuaded her. To begin with, the letter writer had seemed reluctant to suggest that missing work was even an option. In addition, the prospect of staying alone in the contrived apartment another day was, well, kinda creepy. Nope, it was definitely time to go in to work and figure out what the hell was going on. She stumbled to the shower and ran through a variety of possible wardrobe combinations in her mind before settling for a suit. It was Myfanwy Thomas who had picked out the clothes, so at least she didn’t need to worry about turning up and not looking like Myfanwy Thomas.

She’d noticed the previous morning that the cupboard was surprisingly bare of breakfast foods. *Slipping a little, aren’t we, Thomas? What kind of “extremely capable administrator” doesn’t take care to leave*

breakfast for the woman inhabiting her future amnesiac body? Not even a Pop-Tart? A frozen croissant? Honestly. Still, there were coffee beans and a grinder, and she was able to sit down with a cup of coffee and that big-ass purple binder.

Thomas seems like a decent sort, but she's a glorified paper pusher, she thought ruefully. Even if she does work for a paranormal version of the MI5, she's probably dealing with the boring bits. "Heavens! Some kind of werewolf is eating the Queen! Fetch some forms and ask her to fill them out in triplicate, and then perhaps we can attend to her needs at some point during the next quarter." Snorting to herself, Myfanwy opened the binder and read the instructions Thomas had left for getting ready for the office.

Half an hour later, she was wearing one of the ugly suits from the wardrobe, holding a briefcase, and anxiously explaining to the man on the phone that she'd like a cab as soon as was humanly possible and admitting that yes, she was in a hurry, and so, yes, she should have planned ahead. The next fifteen minutes were spent in the lobby of the apartment building looking out for the cab. When it finally appeared, she gave the address to the extremely scruffy driver and was then forced to concede that she didn't know where it was.

As the driver perused his map, she thumbed through the purple binder. She'd only managed to read the summary, which had been mind-bogglingly intricate. She'd found some sticky notes in the flat's office and was marking various important-seeming passages. As a result, every page was marked, some of them three times. Apparently Thomas had not felt an index would be necessary, although there was a vague table of contents.

"So, you have no idea where this house is?" the driver asked. He was elderly and wearing one of those dubious flat caps.

"No," she admitted as she turned a page and found an entirely new alarming topic.

"Whose house is it, then?"

"Oh, it's mine," she said distractedly and was sufficiently absorbed in her reading not to notice the look he gave her. In fact, she kept her head down for the entire trip and so had no idea where the house was located even when they arrived. She thanked the driver as she stared

in utter bemusement at the building in front of her. *Goddamn! I must be loaded!*

"You live in a big house," the taxi driver remarked.

"Yes, it seems I do," she replied.

"Tasteful too," he added. "I'd say it's mid-nineteenth century."

"Oh?"

"Yes. The features around the windows and the gables are a dead giveaway," he said.

"Those and the engraved *1841* above the door."

"There's a Rolls-Royce pulling in the other end of the driveway, and the driver is dressed in purple," he pointed out.

"Yes, that's my ride, I think," she said; she closed the purple binder, paid the man, and got out of the cab.

"If you ever feel the need for a taxi and a driver you can tip heavily, ask the dispatcher for Hourigan," he called after her. "I'll even put on a purple shirt if you like."

"Thank you," she called back over her shoulder. The driver of the Rolls stepped out, and she eyed him carefully. There had been a note about this in the binder:

The Retainers

Rank is complicated in the Checquy Group, the result of centuries of tradition and leaders who look upon a lack of change as evidence of cultural stamina.

But to put it very, very simply: If you have powers and you're not in the Court, then you're a Pawn. If you don't have powers, you'll never be in the Court, and you're a Retainer.

Of course, there are a lot of different levels within that framework. Pawns aren't automatically higher ranked than Retainers—at least, not anymore. A Pawn and a Retainer can possess the same level of authority; they can both be supervisors or section heads. A Retainer can be in charge of Pawns, and vice versa. Admittedly, prejudices endure. For the most part, if it comes down to a choice between a Pawn and a Retainer, a Pawn will get the job. But there are more Retainers than Pawns.

THE ROOK

Retainers are drawn from a variety of places. Of course, we gather from the government, the military, and the clergy. We have drafting agents in the universities keeping eyes out for those who have skills and can manage to be discreet. There's always competition for the best and the brightest, but we have an outstanding budget, and our people have a talent for spotting the exceptional at an early age. And we also draw them from the private sector.

Retainers are crucial to the Checquy Group. They work in administration, intelligence, security, medical—everything. There are only a few sections of the Checquy where a Retainer cannot be employed, and those are positions where having powers is vital.

One subset of Retainer that you should know about is the personal staff of the members of the Court. That includes secretaries, drivers, bodyguards, etc. Bodyguards attend members of the Court only during ceremonial occasions or at times of high alert. So, yes, you'll have several people who periodically guard your body, but presumably, they weren't around when I lost my memory. In any case, you can distinguish the personal staff from regular Retainers because they dress in purple—it's a livery thing, dating back centuries. I've included a list of your personal staff, with photos, in the back of this binder.

The Retainers are bound to the Checquy through a variety of means. Legal contracts. Religious oaths. Oaths of fealty. Penalties under the Official Secrets Act. Penalties under various unofficial secrets acts. Vaguely worded threats of nebulously horrible vengeance. People don't learn the real secrets of the Checquy until they're a part of the group, and then they can't get out. Of course, there's no real reason why they would want to. They're doing good and earning well, and we provide an excellent and understanding staff of therapists.

“Good morning, Rook Thomas,” said the man in purple, opening the car door for her.

“Good morning,” she said awkwardly.

“To the Rookery then?”

“Uh, sure. I mean, if it's Monday, then I have to go to the Rookery, right?” she said, trying to pass her befuddlement off as a joke.

“Monday through Friday,” said the driver ruefully.

“It's the price of having a job, I guess.” He smiled but looked a

little surprised. *Great, I'm already breaking character*, she thought dismally. "Well, we'd better be off."

She'd skimmed some material about the Rookery earlier but now decided she should better acquaint herself with it. She scanned anxiously through the binder's table of contents and then turned to

The Rookery

Of all the Checquy strongholds, the Rookery is simultaneously the most obvious and the most well concealed. Located in the City, the Hammerstrom Building was acquired some years ago under the auspices of then-Rook Conrad Grantchester. It serves as the headquarters for in-country operations and the barracks for the Barghests, and it features a temporary holding and interrogation facility. It also contains one of the key arsenals for the Checquy as well as alternative residences for the Rooks to use in times of emergency or on occasions when we stay at work too late to go home. Both situations arise with depressing regularity. As far as the outside world knows, the building is used only by several law and accounting firms, none of which have any non-Checquy clients on the books. In the areas open to the public, there is a bank, a restaurant, and a pub. The restaurant is terrible; avoid it.

It took years for the building to be refurbished to Grantchester's specifications, which involved a multitude of secret passages, special wiring, and concealed security fortifications. He was also responsible for the astonishingly tasteless decor in your secure residence. How tasteless? you ask. Well, since you'll be seeing it, I probably shouldn't ruin the surprise. But what the hell—I'm facing betrayal, personal attack, and the prospect of my entire identity being wiped away, so I think I should be allowed to take what pleasures I can. Besides, it's absolutely hideous. We're talking about the ultimate bachelor pad, with lots of attention devoted to the sound system, and a carpet so thick and deep and verdant that you need a machete to get to the bathroom. It was designed specifically to get women to go to bed with its occupant.

In many ways, the residence is the worst part of your new life. Compared to the decor, the fact that someone is trying to kill you is almost tolerable. There are two such apartments; it's just my luck that I got the one whose previous owner didn't die but instead rose to become the second most powerful man in the group, and my immediate superior. He insists on asking about the

THE ROOK

residence every time we meet, which is at least three times a week. So I've never been able to redecorate it.

In any case, as a Rook, you are one of the bosses of the Rookery. Thus, you have access to all areas and know all the secret passages, and everybody has to do what you say. All the secret passages are marked down on an electronic organizer in your office desk drawer and in the schematics in the binder, and the locks are keyed to open to your fingerprints, your palmprints, or the access code I gave you in the first letter. Officially, the secret passages were put in for the sake of the Rooks' privacy and security, but I'm convinced that really they're there because Grantchester's years as an agent in the field made him utterly paranoid—and also because he liked to sneak chicks in.

That's the Rookery. It is hidden from the eyes of the populace, a secret fortress that protects the normal people even as they remain ignorant of it. It is a testament to the willingness of humanity to ignore the obvious.

“Front door or garage, Rook Thomas?” asked the driver.

“Oh, it's a nice day,” she replied. “I'll go in the front door.”

The car slowed and she looked up in anticipation, eager to view this bastion of concealed power. Her eyes widened when she saw that there seemed to be an encampment in front of the building. Various small tents had been set up on the sidewalk, and badly dressed people were picketing the doorway, wielding placards that screamed with red exclamation points.

NO MORE CONSPIRACIES! blared a sign held by a man with a lot of beard. THE TRUTH IS IN HERE!

WE KNOW THE TRUTH! proclaimed several placards clutched by small children. The protesters were chanting some sort of rhyme that failed to scan but did manage to establish that the Hammerstrom Building was the secret headquarters of the government's department of the supernatural.

“I don't believe it,” she muttered to herself, watching bemusedly as the denizens of the business district walked past the protesters with averted eyes. Looking up at the building, she had to sympathize with both parties. It was the last building in the world one would expect to contain anything interesting. About nine stories tall and

constructed of an unprepossessing gray stone, the Hammerstrom Building looked like the kind of place in which the most tedious of businesses conducted their most tedious endeavors. There were no sculptures or decorations, no clue as to what might be inside. You would never just wander in to see what was in there. You'd have better things to do.

The driver had the door open, and she realized with a jolt that she should probably get out of the car. Thanking him, she accepted his hand and took a few hesitant steps toward the front door. The protesters, seeing a short woman looking around uncertainly with wide eyes, thought she was a possible convert and converged upon her.

"Miss! Miss!" There was a cacophony of voices, but finally the man with the beard established himself as their ambassador.

"Miss, it might shock you to know that this building is home to one of the greatest conspiracies in history!" he declared.

"Oh?" she said weakly.

"In this building the government keeps its secrets about the truth!" he explained.

"The truth?"

"Yes!" he said, and he paused impressively.

"About what?" she finally asked.

"Excuse me?"

"The truth about what?" she prompted him patiently.

"Everything they've been concealing! Are you aware that the British government has been hiding evidence of alien landings for the past twenty years?"

"They have?" *We have?* She resolved to look up aliens in the files Thomas had left for her.

"Yes! And that's not all! They have teams engaged in secret operations all over the countryside. We're not sure what it is they're doing, but we demand to know! Would you like to sign our petition and be put on our mailing list?" With one hand he thrust a clipboard under her nose, and with the other he fanned several pamphlets.

In the end, she signed the petition. She declined the mailing-list offer but did accept some of their home-cranked pamphlets, slipping

them into her briefcase before, to the horror of the protesters, walking straight into the building through its rather shabby-looking revolving doors.

Inside there was a small, bland lobby with a large, bland security guard behind a desk. There were three lifts, and a building directory listed an assortment of businesses that she knew were fictitious. She looked around and saw that the guard was hurriedly standing and straightening his tie.

“Good morning, Rook Thomas,” he said, dragging his gaze away from her bruises and black eyes and looking her square in the shoes. “How was your weekend?”

“It was nice,” she said, caught slightly off guard. “Yes, very, very . . . nice,” she added, failing to provide any details. There was an awkward pause, but to her secret delight, the large security officer seemed much more ill at ease than she was.

“Yes, well, if you’d just like to step on through then,” he said as he reached under his desk and pressed a button, which buzzed her through a discreet frosted-glass door. She stepped forward, thanking him, and found herself in a painfully bright corridor that took her (unless she was mistaken) around behind the lifts, through a metal-detector archway, and into a lobby that was slightly larger and more nicely appointed than the one she’d just come from. A slightly larger and more nicely appointed security guard was getting up from *his* desk.

“Morning, Rook Thomas,” he began

“Morning. I had a shit weekend, longest I can remember,” she said with perfect honesty.

“Uh, yes, they look nasty,” he said awkwardly, presumably referring to her bruises. “Well, if you’d like to swipe your pass and go on through,” he said, gesturing toward the four revolving doors set into the wall. The partitions were made of heavy steel bars and intricately pierced metal plates. She carefully ran her pass over a small black panel and heard a series of beeps and heavy clunks. The metal doors began to rotate, and she stepped through smartly.

Here was the real lobby, obviously. A high ceiling arched

gracefully. Elevator doors lined the walls, and she recalled from her reading that some led to the underground garage and some to the upper levels—a deliberate move to ensure that everyone entering the building had to go through multiple layers of security and pass the exceptionally large and prominently armed guards who sat at the ring of desks in the center. It was a beautiful room, and it was filled with people bustling about.

Her heels clicked on the marble floor, and she caught her breath as all the people stopped talking and parted in front of her, opening the way to a specific lift. All eyes were fixed on her and she was very aware of her mud-spattered shoes and her black eyes. She straightened her spine and walked carefully to the doors. Was it her imagination, or had that woman started to curtsy? She nodded carefully and kept walking. One man gave a small bow, and an older gentleman in tweeds gave a brief, flickering salute. What was she supposed to do? Seized by a sudden impulse, she paused before the man who'd saluted and smiled. His eyes were fixed firmly ahead.

“Yes, Rook Thomas?” She was surprised by the deference that this man, who was at least twenty years her senior, showed her.

“Oh, um. Are you busy?” she asked awkwardly, without any idea of what to say.

“Not if you need me, ma'am,” he said, keeping his eyes ahead.

“Please, come with me to my office. I would like to hear your thoughts on the project you are working on.” And with that, she began walking to the lift. The only way to do this thing, she decided, was to be brazen about it. Until this man had answered her with fear and respect, she hadn't appreciated the power that came with being Myfanwy Thomas. It wasn't just the fear of what she could do to him should she touch him; it was also the authority of her position.

As the doors snapped shut, she could sense how uncomfortable her escort was. She'd made certain to stand at the back so that he was obliged to push the button for the floor, since she'd forgotten which one her office was on. He stood ramrod straight and very carefully avoided eye contact with her.

“So—” she began, but he cut her off immediately.

“Yes, Rook Thomas?”

“Ye-es,” she said slowly. “What is it you are working on right now?”

“My section is concerned with tidying up after that outbreak of plague in the Elephant and Castle. All the bodies are being dissected more thoroughly, and the witnesses coached.”

“Oh, good,” she said weakly. “And everything is proceeding well?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Excellent; that is very . . . satisfying.” And then there was a long pause. “Do you have any . . . observations? Or . . . suggestions?” What had started as a brief test of her authority was now turning into a humiliating interview in which neither person knew what to say.

“No, no, we are following standard procedure,” he said hurriedly.

“Hmm,” she said, as an ingenious way of not having to say anything. Another nightmarish pause ensued.

“However—” he began.

“Yes?” She pounced on the opening like it was a welcome mint.

“I must confess, and please don’t take this as a criticism of the group, that the process is not as effective as it might be.”

“Really?” she said, as breathless as if he had just come down from Mount Sinai with a few footnotes. “Let’s make an appointment so you can expand on your ideas. We’ll go to my office, and you can set a time with my assistant.” At that, the lift doors opened on her floor, and she very carefully let him go first, since she had no idea where her office was.

Her executive assistant, whom the binder had identified as Ingrid Woodhouse, looked exactly like her photo. A distinguished woman in purple, Ingrid rose and greeted her politely.

“Good morning, Rook Thomas,” her secretary said. “How are you?”

“Great, thanks. Now, this gentleman has a few ideas that I’m quite keen to hear about, so if you could find a mutual opening in our schedules, that would be grand.” She looked around curiously while Ingrid and the man, whose name she hadn’t managed to pick up, made an appointment for him to tell her all about something to

do with a plague. *Eh, it was probably worth it, she thought. I was never going to find my office otherwise. Plus, the poor man actually seemed to think he had some interesting ideas.* She smiled an absent good-bye at the perspiring man (whom Ingrid addressed as Colonel). He left, visibly relieved, and Myfanwy turned her attention to her executive assistant.

“How was *your* weekend?” she asked, purposely heading off any questions about her own experiences.

“Oh, it was nice,” said Ingrid. “You remember I told you my daughter Amy was coming home from York for the weekend?”

“Oh, right. And you had a good time?”

“Yes, very pleasant,” said Ingrid. “Here’s the current situation *précis*,” she said, handing Myfanwy a leather folder. “Now, can I fetch you some coffee?”

“Yes, coffee would be wonderful. Please,” Myfanwy said as she walked hesitantly into her office. For a moment, she paused there and looked around, trying to drink in the lingering traces of her predecessor. It was a large room, and beautifully furnished. Two of the walls were massive sheets of glass looking out on the city. A collection of portraits hung on the other two walls. In one corner of the room, a vase holding an arrangement of roses stood on a heavy table. There was a large antique desk before her, and off to the side was a sitting area with couches and a coffee table. She gingerly sat down behind the desk and eyed the many piles of paper stacked on it with a certain amount of trepidation. They all looked official and important. She carefully cleared a space on the desk and cracked open the folder Ingrid had given her.

There was mention of the plague in the Elephant and Castle and the wrap-up details related to that. There had been three incidents over the weekend, none of which had required the presence of Barghest commandos (whatever they were), and there was a scheduled assault on an antler cult that morning, with E. Gestalt attending. Seven people were under surveillance in the greater London area, and thirty-four overall in the British Isles. Preliminary preparations had begun for the annual review.

Well, that’s all very nice, she thought. If I knew what it meant, I’m sure

I'd be thrilled. Anyway, it seems to be under control, so back to my scheduled programming.

Myfanwy was looking through the desk drawers curiously when Ingrid came in with a cup of coffee and an appointment book so thick it could be used to bludgeon a cow. Myfanwy took a long contemplative sip as her secretary began to describe her schedule.

“Ingrid?” she said.

“Yes, Rook Thomas?”

“Um, I’m sorry to interrupt, but can I get some cream and sugar in this coffee, please?” Her secretary looked at her blankly. “I’ve decided to change the way I take it.” Myfanwy felt the need to explain the abrupt change in a habit that (for all she knew) had been established for years. “I’m doing that because . . .” *Why? Because I want to put on weight? Because I’ve been told I need more sugar in my diet? . . . because I’ve been sleeping badly. And so I wish to dilute the caffeine. But not to cut it out entirely. Because of the headaches.* Ingrid looked at her a little strangely, for which Myfanwy couldn’t blame her at all, but took the coffee and went to modify it. *God, who knew it would be so horrendously complicated impersonating oneself?* she thought, and opened up Myfanwy’s folder.

Assassination of Court Members

One of the reasons this whole plot has been so difficult for me to suss out is that there has been relatively little internal assassination of Court members in the history of the Checquy. Given that it’s a centuries-old militant organization that operates under a shroud of secrecy with a plethora of baroque (and sometimes rococo) traditions and bureaucracy, and that most members are trained to kill and equipped with supernatural capabilities, and that members of the Court wield authority with a terrifyingly free hand, you might expect there’d be more internal violence.

But no.

Oh, there’s been some assassination by outside organizations (supernatural and otherwise—Lord Palmerston had a Bishop shot), and plenty of deaths in the field, but as far as I can tell, there have been only four illegal deaths of Court members that were the work of other Court members. There

have been a few legal executions, of course, including a monumental slaughter in 1788 that was only later declared legal, but the big four illegal ones are notorious:

- 1. In 1678 Lord Charles Huxley was thrown down a well on the orders of his wife, Lady Adelia Huxley.*
- 2. In 1679, Lady Adelia Huxley was beaten to death with a kettle by her husband's lover, Bishop Roger Torville.*
- 3. In 1845, Rook Angelina Corfax was run over by a barouche. It was eventually discovered that this was done at the command of her counterpart, Rook Cassandra Bartlett.*
- 4. In 1951, Bishop Donald Montgomery was strangled with his own tie by Rook Juniper Constable.*

Naturally, it is illegal for one member of the Checquy to kill another—not just because it's murder, but because it strips the British Isles of part of their defense. In the cases above, all but one of the murderers were briskly tracked down, briskly tried, and then executed with a conspicuous lack of briskness. The exception was Rook Cassandra Bartlett, who successfully concealed her part in Corfax's death; it was discovered in her journals years after she'd died. She must have been a fucking genius to avoid the tracking abilities of the Checquy.

My point is, it isn't done.

And it certainly isn't done to me.

Whoever tries to have me killed, whoever succeeds in destroying my memory, well, they're placing themselves in an awful lot of danger to do so. I can't imagine their risking doing it in the Rookery.

Now, one of my initial thoughts was that you could request a full-time bodyguard, but you'd have to explain why, and that would lead to all sorts of speculation about you. You'd then have someone with you all the time, and, frankly, we don't want to draw that much attention to you. The reason I didn't get a bodyguard was I knew it wouldn't do any good.

“Rook Thomas, I just got a call from your counterpart's assistant—all of the bodies were out of town on different assignments over the weekend, and none of them will be back for a few hours, so your

Monday-morning meeting is going to be pushed back,” said Ingrid, coming in with the renovated coffee.

“My counterpart? Yes...” replied Myfanwy, beginning with a question but frantically shifting it into a musing declarative sentence. She now scrambled for some sort of comment to make and settled for stating the obvious. “So, the meeting is being pushed back.”

“Yes,” said Ingrid. “All of Rook Gestalt should be back after your meeting with the headmistress from the Estate, except possibly Eliza, depending on how the antler-cult assault goes.”

“Oh, okay,” said Myfanwy, trying to work out what had just been said.

I think I get it, she thought. One of the two Rooks. There are two Rooks. Like chess. I am one, and the other is my counterpart. Rook Gestalt. It was making a modicum of sense. She had a vague idea about what to do, but now something else was bothering her. What does she mean by all of Rook Gestalt?

“At nine thirty, you will be meeting with the accountants from Apex House to go over the budget for the Elephant and Castle operation,” continued Ingrid, apparently having decided to overlook her boss’s problems understanding the English language.

“The plague one?” Myfanwy asked brightly, pleased that she’d remembered.

“Yes. At ten fifteen you have a half-hour meeting with the head of the Estate, and then at eleven, you have your meeting with Rook Gestalt. I will cancel your appointment with the Minister of Defense.”

“And that’s okay?” she asked, thrown by the ease with which her secretary dismissed the Minister of Defense.

“Of course.”

“Well, okay,” said Myfanwy dubiously. “Now, I was hoping to have some time today to review some figures.” *And acquaint myself with the organization that I appear to be running.*

“If there is any spare time, I shall endeavor not to fill it,” Ingrid said.

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Yes,” her secretary agreed. “Now, you have nothing booked for lunch—shall I order something in so you can eat in the office?”

"No, I want to go somewhere nice for lunch," Myfanwy said. "See if you can't book me a reservation at a place with very good food."

"All right," said Ingrid, looking a little surprised. "Christifaro's?" Myfanwy nodded. "I'll arrange for your car to be ready. And after lunch, Security Chief Clovis is coming over from Apex House, and then you're having dinner with Lady Farrier."

"Okay. So, what are these meetings about?" she asked, getting out a pen and preparing to take some notes.

"The head of the Estate wishes to go over a list of potential acquisitions, and you made the appointment with the head of security. I'm afraid I don't know why."

"Oh, well, I'm sure it will come back to me," Myfanwy said.

"For dinner you are booked in at Simpson's," said Ingrid. "I'll let you know when your car is ready." Myfanwy agreed and Ingrid sailed out of the office like a clipper under full, tailored sails.

I suppose I should do some more homework on how this organization actually works.

How This Organization Actually Works

There is a constant stream of information coming from the civil service to us. Unnatural occurrences aren't limited to graveyards, morgues, and funky cult headquarters. Don't get me wrong, a lot of them happen in those sorts of places, but many more turn up in entirely mundane situations, which actually makes them far more upsetting. People are more likely to cope with the appearance of an animated corpse in a graveyard than one in an ice cream parlor or the changing room of a boutique. They won't be happy with the appearance of the animated corpse in the graveyard, but they tend to be less outraged.

In order to detect all the things that concern us, we receive a torrent of information, most of it completely unimportant. Stacks of reports, pages of figures, and tons of files. We have teams of analysts who sift through the information and intelligence that is forwarded to us and, out of all the details and minutiae, find the trends that reveal when the wheat market is being manipulated by a vampire.

We're also connected to the bureaucracy through the Panic Lines. Various

high-placed officials from all branches of government, both national and local, are given discreet briefings that are designed to be simultaneously specific and vague. We don't tell them to be on the lookout for gremlins or storms of bile, but a few judicious slide shows and the generous use of the adjective unnatural ensure that they get the drift. As a result, we receive panicked calls from police chiefs, government ministers, members of the aristocracy, military officers, councillors, intelligence agents, churchmen, surgeons, diplomats, hospital administrators, etc. We also have people placed in key organizations who keep us abreast of significant developments.

Still, despite all these connections, we maintain our secrecy. Our name does not appear on any piece of paper outside of our organization. In fact, very few on the outside know that we exist. People are given a phone number to call, and information comes to us through twisty channels. Our computer network is not connected to any external system. If you try to track us down, you will not find us, but we will find you.

The meeting with the people from accounting proved spectacularly uninteresting as Myfanwy learned how cheaply one could surreptitiously remove plague-infected bodies and dissect them. The credit for the cost-effectiveness went to the very polite gentleman whom she had coerced into taking a lift ride with her (his name was Colonel Hall). She made a mental note to pass on some sort of praise to him. Despite her boredom, Myfanwy took care to be pleasant to the accountants, who squirmed uncomfortably in their seats and seemed terrified of her. *I guess Thomas wielded some authority*, mused Myfanwy. *Pity she controlled the nerds.*

“Rook Thomas?” Ingrid asked. She’d come in silently behind the poor little accountants, and her voice scared them half to death.

“Yes, Ingrid?” she replied, looking up from rows of figures that made a surprisingly large amount of sense. Thomas had said she was an able administrator, and apparently some of that talent had been passed along.

“The headmistress from the Estate is here.” Judging from the accountants’ reactions, Myfanwy assumed this person was similarly impressive and terrifying to them, so she politely ushered the

accountants out and welcomed in the headmistress. Or at least she tried to, but Ingrid insisted on standing in the doorway and loudly announcing the woman.

“Frau Blüten, Chief Instructrix of the Estate!” the secretary bellowed into the office.

“Yes, thank you, Ingrid,” Myfanwy said and stood up to welcome the rotund woman who waddled in. Frau Blüten was almost perfectly round and could get through the door only by turning sideways and sucking in her chest. Her blond hair was piled up high in intricate coils and braids, and she descended on Myfanwy with arms outstretched.

“Little Miffy! My *Liebchen!* Whatever has happened to your eyes?” she bellowed in a thick German accent. She was the first person who had dared to comment on the black eyes that still adorned Myfanwy’s face. Before a response could be given, she had enfolded the hapless Rook in her fleshy arms and was embracing her tightly.

“It’s lovely to see you, Frau Blüten,” Myfanwy said, gasping; the arms tightened and then released her.

“Frau Blüten?” she said. “Why are you so formal, Myfanwy? No, we agreed when you rose to the Court that you would call me Steffi. You have not been fighting, have you? Of course not! From when you were a little girl you hated to fight, and now do you see what has happened? Yes, I see you do.” The woman’s obvious affection was nice, although her habit of asking questions and then answering them herself was a little disconcerting.

“I was, um, some people tried to mug me.”

“Those poor idiots!” The fleshy woman chuckled.

Myfanwy hesitated. Clearly this person had a great deal of affection for her, but until Myfanwy knew exactly who she was, she was wary of revealing too much, so she shrugged.

“You are very calm! I would have anticipated that you would be shaking and weeping. Come, let me look at you.” Myfanwy was gripped gently by the shoulders, and her face brought up close to the eyes of Frau Blüten. “Hmm, you were hit... what, two days ago? Maybe a little more? Oh, my poor little Miffy! Of course, they were

common assailants? Nothing supernatural? After all, your powers are certainly no secret. No one in the community would be that stupid. Now I would like some hot chocolate. Be so good as to have your secretary bring some . . . ah! Wonderful. Thank you very much. Come, Miffy, fetch your coffee and we will sit on your very comfortable couches and have a nice long talk.” She ushered Myfanwy to the couches and settled her ponderous bulk upon the cushions.

“Steffi . . .,” Myfanwy began hesitantly. “What did you mean about my powers not being a secret? I mean, obviously as a member of the Court—”

She was cut off briskly. “*Liebchen*, even if you had not ascended to the Court, everyone would have known about your powers. My God, you were the most exciting find in decades! All of us knew about your potential. The tutors at the Estate were babbling about you to everyone!” She took a long contemplative drink of hot chocolate and rubbed her jowls. “And of course, I was always aware of your intellectual gifts. You would have risen to the Court even if you hadn’t had such powers.” Myfanwy’s interest was piqued. The letter had spoken a little of her predecessor’s shyness, but here was an opportunity to get another person’s opinion about her.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about these matters lately, Steffi. I’d like to hear your take on my potential.”

Frau Blüten raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’m glad to hear that you’re taking a stronger interest in your career these days.” Myfanwy lowered her eyes, trying to project the image of a shy yet able administrator. One who hadn’t lost her memory and wasn’t trying to glean any and all information she could. “Very well. When you were brought to me at the Estate, you were clutching the driver’s hand, chocolate smeared all over your face, and your eyes brimming with tears. My poor little *Liebchen*. You were attached to that man like he was an inflatable bath pillow and you were floating in the Black Sea. Farrier was all you had left at that point, and when you realized that she had no loyalty to you, I could see the last little light of confidence die in your eyes. That stupid woman! You adored her, and she was too self-important to see it.

“In any case, before you came to us, we’d heard about your powers, and we were very careful. I read through all the files and the records, and at the end of my research I could safely conclude that yours was an entirely new ability, unlike anything that had ever appeared in the British Isles.

“Now, naturally we were eager to learn the full extent of your capabilities, but we were leery of pushing you. Most of the children who come to us are extracted with a great deal more finesse than you were. This is what comes of allowing the leaders to do something they are unqualified for. She can walk through your dreams and he killed all those Nazis while he was naked, so we kowtow to them, but let me tell you, they do not have the best people skills.”

Steffi shook her head at the stupidity of those set above her and then inquired as to whether there might be any biscuits forthcoming. Myfanwy allowed as how there might be, and orders were relayed to Ingrid, who came in with unruffled calm and a plate of little confections.

“Excellent! Thank you, Ingrid. Anyway, as soon as we heard about your powers, we told Farrier and Wattleman. It’s routine to keep the Court abreast of any promising talent. After all, that’s why I came this morning! But they got wind of just how excited we were, and they wanted to see you for themselves first so they could make a connection with you—make you loyal to them. But the power and authority that befuddled your father was enough to completely overwhelm a child like you. So you came to us traumatized, and, much to my regret, you never really healed.”

Myfanwy was sitting with her coffee clutched in her hands. She could see it clearly, although she was certain it was not a memory resurfacing. It was simply that it all made sense. The letters she had read had given her the impression that Myfanwy Thomas had been damaged in some way.

“Go on,” she said quietly.

“Now, Miffy, you mustn’t think that I am not proud of you, but your potential power was obviously much greater than you’ve ever

lived up to. You must know this. After all, you never seemed to enjoy using your gifts. You obtained exactly as much control as you had to—never more—and it was clear you were never going to be an effective field agent. Heavens! You would drop your keys if someone yelled at you. Can you imagine what would happen if we gave you a gun?” Steffi smiled and gave a little rueful laugh.

“No, it was clear that you could not be sent out to whatever sewer or forest or semidetached house some monster had decided to live in. You had a good memory, a quick mind, and you were so thoroughly immersed in the Checquy that there was no question of releasing you back into the real world. So we let you slide into admin. But not without some regret.”

“Hmm,” hummed Myfanwy. She was about to ask how powerful Thomas had had the potential to be when the secretary came back in.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Rook Thomas, but Rook Gestalt will be here in fifteen minutes for your appointment.”

“Coming here?” Steffi asked in surprise. “Tell me, Ingrid, which body is Gestalt wearing today?”

Which body? thought Myfanwy in bemusement.

“The twins will be visiting today, Frau Blüten,” said Ingrid.

“Ugh, well, in that case I shall leave now,” said the portly woman with a shudder. “If ever you worry that you did not flourish in your powers, Miffy, look at that one. An astounding warrior, a master of supernatural gifts, and, in my opinion, a complete failure as a person.” She shook her head.

“In any case, we will make another appointment soon. We got so caught up in reminiscing that we didn’t even have a chance to go over the candidates for the Estate.” Blüten laid a folder of profiles on the coffee table, patted her old pupil on the cheek, and went out. After she left the room, Myfanwy went to the desk and added a few notes to the list of terms and names she needed to look up. The Court. The Estate. Steffi Blüten. Wattleman (killing Nazis while *naked?*). Farrier. But to deal with the immediate future, she returned to the couch and paged hurriedly to the section on Gestalt.

Rook Gestalt

Nine years before I was born, some poor woman had to give birth to four children in one sitting. Three boys and one girl. Two of the boys were identical. That's not the weirdest thing, however. The weirdest thing was that when all four pairs of eyes opened, only one mind was looking out from behind them. This was Gestalt.

Gestalt is kind of disconcerting, because it/he/she/they is/are spread over four bodies. People try to avoid calling Gestalt anything but Gestalt because they get confused about the grammar. However, it's very tiresome to constantly write Gestalt instead of using a pronoun. So, when I need a pronoun in this description, I'll refer to Gestalt as it. I don't do it in general conversation—that would be rude.

Its parents were, understandably, terribly distressed by their peculiar offspring. I suppose that when you have four children and all of them do exactly the same thing at the same time or one of them does something while the other three lie comatose on the floor, you're going to be freaked out. Plus, there's the stress of recuperating from having four babies at once. So, when the Checquy turned up on the babies' first birthday and offered to take them off their parents' hands, the couple was relieved beyond words. Sadly, this is often the case with the children that the Checquy acquires. They're weird children and they have weird needs.

Gestalt took to the Checquy like four strange, hive-minded ducks to water. Or maybe that should be one strange mind inhabiting four ducks. Damn it.

This is why Gestalt is so irritating to work with.

In any case, the Checquy took Gestalt to the Estate. They taught it, trained it, and brought it up in as loving an environment as that sort of place will allow. It was with other children, children who were also strange. Little boys with tusks. Teenage girls who could talk with clouds and get intelligible answers. Some poor youth who possessed a psychic control over flamingos. Speaking as someone who lived at the Estate, I can tell you that it's not a bad place to grow up, especially if you are different and have abilities beyond the ken of mortal men. But Gestalt did not make it work.

To begin with, it made very few friends. You may be thinking, Hey, there were three brothers and a sister, they didn't need anyone else, but you'd be wrong. You must always remember that Gestalt is one person

with eight eyes. It's a common mistake to think of the four as different people. Gestalt takes advantage of that. The bodies have different voices, and somehow it has developed different mannerisms for each body. The bodies don't move in unison or just sit still in some rigid way unless it decides it wants them to do that. It's a brilliant actor to the extent that it can make its bodies have an argument or a conversation. So much so that you will forget that there is one mind controlling the puppets.

The other children at the Estate forgot that Gestalt was one mind. They just thought that the Gestalt siblings were snobs. I know, because I was there. There was only one year when we were both at the Estate, and then Gestalt turned nineteen and graduated. Now, keep in mind that I was a painfully shy nine-year-old, and Gestalt was four stunningly beautiful blonds slated to be the next big thing in the Checquy. And I had a massive crush on one of the brothers—the one who wasn't a twin. So I watched them, and it was brought home to me that Gestalt was very definitely not a normal person. Not even four slightly peculiar persons. But it was a spectacularly powerful person, and everybody knew it.

I've read Gestalt's files, and as a student, Gestalt excelled. It had an excellent memory, could think quickly (four brains to draw on, remember), and absorbed the instruction rapidly and easily. The normal education was sucked up by those four heads immediately, and under careful tutelage, it gained a brilliant control of its powers.

By the time it was nine, Gestalt could control varying combinations of the bodies, could hold multiple conversations at once, and was coordinating bizarre tournaments in which its bodies would fight one another.

By the time it was twelve, it was demonstrated that Gestalt could be continuously awake by letting one of its bodies sleep whenever the others stayed up. It did this for five months.

By the time it was fifteen, the bodies had been carefully moved about the globe to investigate the distance that could safely exist among them. It was demonstrated that they could be placed on opposite sides of the planet without ill effect.

Gestalt graduated from the Estate and immediately went into the field. It earned its Rook status through outstanding operations work. With four bodies, it constituted its own team. During its sixteen years in the field, it achieved

a series of seemingly impossible tasks, culminating with the destruction of a 488-year-old vampire who had been secretly controlling the wheat industry for 252 of those years.

Keep in mind that in an episode that occurred in 1980, it took forty-five soldiers to kill a sixty-four-year-old vampire.

Gestalt is tough.

It rose to the rank of Rook five years ago, and I've been obliged to work with it on many, many operations. I see it every day, and meet with it every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at nine in the morning. Generally, because of the whole multiple-bodies thing, Gestalt has at least two faces in the field overseeing operations. Normally, a Rook isn't called out unless there is a particularly large problem, but Gestalt likes to kick arse, and I have to admit that it does a very good job of coordinating things on-site. On the downside, there's generally at least one of Gestalt's bodies hanging around in the office. Still, it's better than having four of them, especially since none of them seems to know how to deal with the filing system.

If it turns out to be Gestalt who wants you dead, you will need to be very careful.

“Rook Thomas?” Ingrid asked quietly. Myfanwy looked up with a start. “Rook Gestalt is here to see you.”

4

Oh? Yeah? Rook Gestalt? That's... cool," Myfanwy fumbled. "Just give me a moment to get my flesh to stop crawling." Was it her imagination or was her secretary regarding her with a hint of sympathy? "Yeah, all right, Ingrid. Show Rook Gestalt in." She got up to scurry around her desk and compose her face into an appropriate mask of authority.

For a moment, Myfanwy wondered if she had time to put her hair up in some sort of professional style; right now it was just pulled back in a clip. But it was too late. *And besides, she reasoned, the two black eyes are bound to detract from any air of professionalism. Plus, who knows how Thomas carries herself?* As Ingrid came in and announced the entrance of Rook Gestalt in ringing tones, Myfanwy gave a mental shrug and threw caution to the wind. *Nobody really knows anyone anyway.*

"The Rooks Gestalt, as I live and breathe!" she exclaimed in apparent rapture. Two identical blond men looked at her with startled eyes. "Gentlemen, please, have a seat," she invited, gesturing to the chairs in front of her desk. "Well, you're both looking very nice," she said.

"Thank you," said one of them.

It was true, she had to admit. Whatever the other bodies looked like, these two were gorgeous. Thick blond hair, blue eyes, and golden brown tans. *In this country? How in God's name do they manage that? Do their weird genetic powers include the ability to bronze without sunlight?* They were clearly twins, but some care had been taken to make them look different from each other. The twin on the right had

shorter hair, artfully tousled with gel, while the twin on the left had a more standard haircut, carefully brushed. They wore different suits. One twin sprawled in his chair, and the other sat attentively, although neither of them seemed particularly comfortable. And one was staring at her thoughtfully while the other directed his attention to straightening his pants. She mentally christened them Cool Twin and Tidy Twin.

It was downright eerie when Myfanwy remembered that there was one mind in those two heads. It was even eerier when she remembered that there were two other bodies wandering around somewhere, controlled by the same mind. *Stay calm, she thought, and try not to be freaked out by the fact that you're talking to a hive mind that freaks out the freaks in the Checquy. And don't automatically assume that this is the one behind the attack on Thomas. And even if it is, it probably won't make a move in your office.*

"We only just got back from that operation in Essex," Cool Twin was saying. "You're looking, ah, a little different, Myfanwy."

"It's the black eyes," suggested the other twin.

"No," disagreed his brother. "It's something else." Myfanwy tried to look enigmatic and probably failed. She watched them shift in the chairs.

"So, what happened to your eyes?" asked Tidy Twin.

"Oh, uh, someone tried to mug me," she said.

"But you're all right?" he said.

"I'm fine," said Myfanwy. "A bit achy, but fine."

"Interesting..." mused Cool Twin.

Crap, this isn't in keeping with the traditional meek and mild Myfanwy Thomas, Myfanwy realized. She thought about trying to appear more traumatized but instead opted for misdirection.

"So, where are your siblings hanging out nowadays?" she asked. Thomas's notes hadn't included photos, and she was keen to see the brother her predecessor had had a crush on.

"Eliza is leading a team in Aberdeen, chasing down that antler cult," one of them said dismissively. "Robert is back in our office."

"Well, I hope they're keeping well," she said pleasantly. *This*

Gestalt is good, she thought. *It's like they really are three brothers and a sister.* Myfanwy realized that one of the twins had been speaking and she hadn't been paying attention. "I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

"Alex was just explaining that we know they're fine," explained Tidy Twin.

"Ah, of course, of course," Myfanwy agreed sharply, suddenly irritated with his patronizing tone. "They're fine. You're fine. I'm fine. We're all fine. Can I get you a beverage?" she offered. One ordered coffee and the other ordered orange juice. "Certainly. Ingrid?" The secretary, who must have been listening through the open door, appeared miraculously with a tray. "Thank you."

"I understand you came in a little late this morning," said Cool Twin.

"Huh?" replied Myfanwy with startling presence of mind.

"Well, normally you're the second person in the Rookery, after that assistant of yours," said Tidy Twin.

"Yes?" said Myfanwy. *What, do these guys keep tabs on my comings and goings?* "Well, I . . . had an appointment." They regarded her with expectant eyes, and she was suddenly filled with a desire to shake up those proprietary stares. "A gynecologist appointment." She smiled triumphantly at the twins. "To have my vagina checked," she added. They nodded in unison and, to her private satisfaction, seemed somewhat disconcerted. *Of course, they do have a female body*, she remembered, slightly crestfallen. *They probably aren't going to be freaked out at the mention of female matters.* "And . . . it's still . . . there. And okay."

"That's . . . good," said Tidy Twin.

"Yes, anyway, let's get down to business." Fortunately, Thomas had left an agenda for her meeting with Gestalt, and Myfanwy was able to run down the list—or would have been if she hadn't moved the meticulous piles around. "Okay, let's see . . ." She shuffled through papers.

"I *believe* you have some documents for me to sign," said Cool Twin.

"Yuh," she said shortly, finding the stack exactly where she'd left it. "So, um, you need to sign these . . . things . . . which I have already

signed, I think.” She flipped through them hurriedly and saw the signature of Myfanwy Thomas. “Yes, I *have* signed them, and now you need to. So, here is a letter to the . . . Prime Minister . . . of Great Britain that states that we are aware of nothing he needs to know about.” She passed the documents over to the twins, who began signing them. She watched with fascination as they produced identical signatures simultaneously, one with the left hand, one with the right.

“You missed this one,” said Tidy Twin, handing her a contract.

She took it and had a dreadful moment of realization. *Crap. Signature. What did Thomas’s signature look like?* She’d seen it a minute ago, and Thomas had signed at least one of the letters to her, but she hadn’t really spent much time contemplating its form or shape. In retrospect, that had been a mistake. *Oh God.* She took a breath and was aware that Tidy Twin was staring at her. She smiled tightly at him, and then signed it. *Is that it? It looks familiar.* Still, neither twin seemed overly interested in her signature. Nor did either compare the new one with the old ones. “All righty, thanks. I’ll take those and make sure they get to . . . where they need to go.

“Now,” Myfanwy continued, “this week’s schedule. Okay, it looks as if I’ve got rather a lot of meetings with accountants about—are you all right?” she asked. Both the twins Gestalt were staring blankly into space. *That’s creepy.*

“I’m about to go into the headquarters of the cult,” said the twins in unison. “Do you want commentary?”

“Uh, sure,” said Myfanwy. “Should I take notes?”

“Not necessary,” said Gestalt through two mouths. “The teams are equipped with recording material. We’re gathering at the door, and Pawn Kirkman is looking through it. He’s signaling that there are three people on the other side—armed. *Cooper, once Meaney brings the door down, launch stun grenades.*” Myfanwy looked up in surprise—the twins’ voices had shifted, becoming higher, intent. She realized that she was hearing the voice of their sister giving orders. “I’m giving the countdown: Three! Two! One!” The twins’

left arms jerked slightly, presumably mirroring the motions of their sibling more than two hundred miles away.

“Meaney has punched down the door, and we’ve drawn back to avoid the concussion. Now we’re in, with five men in front of me. They’ve covered the foyer and—*take him! Take him!* Okay, a man with antlers is down. *Team one, hold the foyer. Teams two and three move in. Keep in mind, people, that we want as few deaths as possible. Immobilize them.* Kirkman is scanning surrounding rooms. *You four—secure that room. Move forward.*”

For the next forty-five minutes, Myfanwy listened intently as Gestalt led the assault. Soldiers were directed, orders given, cultists restrained or dispatched (depending on the extent of their dedication to the cause). She was treated to a blow-by-blow account as the female Gestalt was surprised by an attack, and her guards were impaled on the prongs of a high priest’s antlers. She watched as the twins’ muscles tensed while their sister kicked and spun and punched, with only sharp, shrill exclamations shooting out of their lips. Finally, after a high-pitched *kiYAA!*, they settled back, breathing heavily, and explained that Eliza had just broken the neck of the leader of the antler cult, and that the complex was secured.

“Wow. Great,” said Myfanwy. “Nicely done.”

“Hmm,” said Tidy Twin absently. “Eliza has blood on her boots.”

“That’s lovely, Gestalt,” Myfanwy said, trying to keep her cool. “More coffee? Or more orange juice? No? Perhaps I could have Ingrid fetch you a couple of moist towelettes.”

Once the twins had left (still somewhat unsteady on their feet), Myfanwy sat for a long time turning things over in her mind. After their commentary on the strike, the twins had had trouble focusing on the rest of the agenda, and they’d agreed to attend to the remaining administrative details later. Watching the satisfaction with which the twins narrated the attack and hearing the play-by-play of their sister’s skill, she’d felt her own muscles tensing. The bruises on her

body ached, and she could easily imagine the twins beating her, their eyes coming alive with violence.

I cannot meet every member of the Court and automatically assume that he or she is the traitor, she decided. It's entirely possible that Gestalt didn't order the attack on Thomas and that I spent the entire meeting sweating through my clothes for nothing. But who did give the order? Myfanwy leaned back in her chair and laced her fingers behind her head.

Too many questions. And I don't even know everything that Thomas knew. Not yet. But I will.

She reached for the purple binder.

The Rooks

For the first few centuries, the Rooks were the martial leaders of the Checquy. That is to say, they headed all military actions. Traditionally filled by members of the noble class, the position called for an encyclopedic knowledge of tactics and strategy, but little else. If the Pawns were the blade the Checquy swung, then the Rooks were its hilt.

The old leaders of the Checquy looked upon the Rooks as weapons and nothing more. They were the hounds to be released, and even if they were the heads of the pack, they were still only hounds. In 1702, it was the Rooks who led the four-pronged assault on Brigadoon and burned every structure in the place. Some of its citizens were put to death, and the rest were shipped down to Wales, where they were set to mining lead. The properties of the mines prevented any of those extraordinary people from escaping, and they all perished in captivity. (In the late 1960s, however, an individual claiming to be "the last son of Brigadoon" surfaced and wreaked havoc for years before being subdued and dissected.)

One notorious Rook, Rupert Chamberlain, was kept chained up in the vaults beneath the White Tower until he was needed, at which point he was transported in a cage to the appropriate location and unleashed upon whatever hapless target the leaders had selected. During his tenure, he devoured the Duke of Northumberland, the ambassadors of France and Italy, an arch-deacon, and one of his fellow Rooks.

Then, in 1788, the situation changed drastically. A massive redistribution of power led to the new status of the Rooks. Rather than being the generals of

THE ROOK

the Checquy, the Rooks were placed in charge of all domestic affairs. They became the administrative guardians of the United Kingdom. Now if something strange comes up within the British Isles, the Rooks are the ones who deal with it. We are executives, and though we still periodically mete out violence, it is by delegation. We don't have to get our hands dirty unless we want to. I, for one, prefer to remain in the office, but Rook Gestalt seems to enjoy fieldwork.

Your main concern will be to master the running and politics of the domestic Checquy forces. You'll be meeting with and coordinating the teams of Pawns who work in the country and assigning them to various tasks. You will also oversee the management of the Rookery, working closely with Gestalt.

Oh, that's going to be fun, Myfanwy thought.

And you meet regularly with the other members of the Court to coordinate the Checquy's movements.

It's all fairly self-explanatory, really.

Oh, well, thanks an awful lot, Thomas, Myfanwy thought bitterly. It sounds like I'm the Defense Minister of Ghosts and Goblins, but as long as the job is "all fairly self-explanatory," I've no doubt it will be fine. The country might get overrun by brownies and talking trees, but what the hell—there's always Australia! Seething, Myfanwy threw down the purple binder and realized that she had been chewing her nails. Great, that's probably a new habit. I can't see Rook Thomas, administrator extraordinaire, biting her nails. This must mean that I'm finally developing my own identity. Myfanwy was staring sourly at the portraits of the Rooks and wondering which of the subjects had been chained up in the Tower of London when Ingrid came bustling in.

"Rook Thomas, I've canceled your lunch at Christifaro's," she said.

"Why?" Myfanwy asked in dismay. "That's the only thing I've had to look forward to!"

"An emergency has emerged, and both you and Rook Gestalt have been summoned to an interrogation," the secretary replied in an unruffled manner.

"Oh. Okay." Myfanwy looked down at her desk, thought for a moment, and then looked up. "Are we getting interrogated, or are we doing the interrogating?" she asked. Ingrid looked a little startled but explained that some poor twerp the Checquy had captured would be interrogated. Apparently, a specific member of the staff would be doing the questioning, and Myfanwy and Gestalt would be there serving in an audience capacity.

"So I don't have to do anything?"

"No, ma'am."

"Should I bring anything, do you think?"

"What, like snacks?" her secretary asked.

"I'll bring my notepad," Myfanwy decided. "And a pen."

"They have stenographers there, you realize. And video cameras," Ingrid pointed out.

"Yes, I know," Myfanwy replied tartly. "But I like to take my own notes."

"Very good, ma'am."

"Yes. Now, would you accompany me to the interrogatory . . . the interrarium . . . the interrogation . . . place? I would value your observations." After all, she could hardly ask for directions, could she?

"Certainly, ma'am. After you." Ingrid swept aside to allow Myfanwy to walk ahead.

"No, no," Myfanwy said hurriedly. "After *you*."

"That's highly irregular, Rook Thomas," Ingrid observed.

"Humor me," Myfanwy answered.

"As you please."

The two women walked briskly down the hallways, and the people ahead of them pressed themselves against the walls so the Rook and her secretary could get by easily. Heavy wooden doors dotted the corridors. Whenever she passed an open doorway, Myfanwy slowed down and snuck a peek. In one room, three men were poring over a map and shouting at one another in hushed voices, like angry librarians. In another, an elderly Pakistani gentleman with a monocle

brandished a walking stick under the nose of a short fat man in a caftan. Through another door, there was a room filled with bookshelves. Seated at a massive wooden desk, a man with curly hair was reading intently from a ledger and absentmindedly stroking the head of a large condor that perched proudly on his wrist. He looked up as they passed, and his eyes widened in surprise.

Finally, they came to a pair of massive iron doors with a metal plate set into them. Ingrid stepped aside and looked at Myfanwy expectantly. Fortunately, Myfanwy vaguely recalled reading something about this. She moved forward and placed both her hands flat against the plate. The metal warmed underneath her palms, and the doors opened slowly, with a sound of grinding gears. Behind those doors was, in a stunning anticlimax, another set of doors, which slid open. A lift.

They descended for many floors, until it was clear that they were several stories beneath the ground. Neither of them said anything, but Myfanwy took the opportunity to eye her secretary in the mirrored walls. Ingrid was tall, in her late forties, and her auburn hair was immaculately coiffed. She was slim and fit-looking, as if she spent every afternoon playing tennis. She wore a few pieces of discreet gold jewelry, including a wedding ring. Myfanwy breathed in gently through her nose and smelled Ingrid's good perfume. The business suit she wore was of a light purple, and exquisitely cut.

Myfanwy looked herself over in the mirror. The hair she had swept back into a clip was coming loose, and her suit (although far more expensive than Ingrid's) was rumpled. She'd neglected makeup entirely, and those damn black eyes lent her the appearance of a raccoon. A raccoon that had gotten hit in the face. After a lifetime of poor nutrition.

The silence was broken only by the humming of the lift, and it felt conspicuous.

"So, Ingrid," Myfanwy said conversationally. "Do you ever get tired of purple?" The secretary turned surprised eyes on her boss, but before she could answer, the doors opened.