

Praise for Daniel O'Malley's STILETTO

“An excellent sequel. . . . O'Malley's pivot opens up his universe with a zest that demonstrates his mastery of it, plunging us into the hearts, minds, and intrigues of two engaging new protagonists. . . . O'Malley works his magic in adroit new ways, recalling all the legerdemain that delighted us the first time around. *Stiletto* is laugh-out-loud funny, occasionally bawdy, and paced like a spy thriller replete with chases, betrayals, and tragedies. There is slime, there is heartbreak, and there are wardrobe malfunctions. . . . Fear not, dear reader: Daniel O'Malley's in charge, and the Checquy Files are in masterful hands.”

—Joyce Sáenz Harris, *Dallas Morning News*

“I just loved this book. If you think Daniel O'Malley couldn't top *The Rook*, you were wrong. *Stiletto* is as satisfying and spellbinding as his first book.”

—Charlaine Harris

“O'Malley expands on the intriguing and hilarious paranormal world of the Checquy, Great Britain's ultrasecret espionage and law enforcement agency for supernatural matters. In a devilishly funny follow-up, he leads readers into the ranks of the Checquy's mortal-enemies-turned-recent-allies, the Wetenschappelijk Broederschap van Natuurkundigen, a Belgian society of scientists who make Victor Frankenstein look unimaginative. . . . *Stiletto* delivers the imagination, action, and sardonic wit of its predecessor in spades. . . . This ambitious romp reads like *X-Men* meets *Supernatural* as narrated by Jasper Fforde, only funnier. . . . Daniel O'Malley raises the action, monsters, and witticisms to new levels in this sequel to *The Rook*.”

—Jaclyn Fulwood, *Shelf Awareness*

“O'Malley strikes a skillful balance between irreverent humor and adventure. . . . This *X-Men* meets *X-Files*-style adventure will appeal to fans of superhero comics and adventure novels.”

—Vicki Briner, *Library Journal*

“Wildly imaginative. . . . There are writers who craft intricate plots, writers who breathe life into incredible characters, and writers who pen lines you want to quote all day long. O’Malley is one of the rare finds who regularly manages all three. . . . He offers up a smorgasbord of delightfully insane supernatural events. . . . The ending is both satisfying and, to put it plainly, *fun*.”

—Jeff Somers, *Barnes & Noble Review*

“If you love women characters who kick ass in a variety of ways (physical, supernatural, scientific, and otherwise), and you love strong fantasy worldbuilding, you’ll eat these books right up. . . . *Stiletto* has a lot of action and magic and science and . . . dense intrigue going on. At its heart, however, the book is about relationships. . . . I love that in a world in which no one can trust anyone, women continue to bond, to make alliances, to help each other get dressed for parties, and to stand back-to-back (sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically) in a fight. It’s a fun, sometimes horrifying, sometimes heartrending, sometimes funny, and always thrilling series.”

—*Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*

“Often hilarious. . . . My favorite book of the year. . . . Myfanwy Thomas is back, as delightfully cheeky as ever. . . . A lighthearted romp through a world that’s both familiar and strange.”

—Ellen Zielinski, *Louisiana Advocate*

“Supernatural suspense with dry humor. . . . We are clearly in Jasper Fforde, Douglas Adams, and Tom Holt territory, but O’Malley is decidedly his own voice. *Stiletto* is a worthy sequel to *The Rook* and will be eagerly devoured, a relevant word given the context of the novel, by O’Malley’s increasing number of global fans.”

—Colin Steele, *Sydney Morning Herald*

“O’Malley maintains the first book’s intriguing tone, balanced on the line separating satire from sci-fi/fantasy, and opens up the environment he established in *The Rook*, permitting us to peer deeper into the world of the Checquy. A much-anticipated sequel that is completely worth the wait.”

—David Pitt, *Booklist*

“The much-anticipated sequel to the hit *The Rook*. . . *Stiletto* is less office politics and Cthulhu and more *X-Men* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, as the Checquy battles a variety of monsters and mad scientists as much with strategic planning as with their superpowered agents.”

—Andrew Liptak, *i09*

“O’Malley weaves a complex, action-packed, cast-of-thousands narrative. . . O’Malley riffs on the buddy-comedy genre while continuing to add paranormal frosting to the spy-thriller genre. A craftily imaginative mash-up of spies and the supernatural.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Thank goodness I didn’t find out about Daniel O’Malley’s first book, *The Rook*, until this year; there’s no way I could have waited four years for the sequel. *The Rook* and *Stiletto* follow Myfanwy Thomas, a high-ranking operative in the Checquy, a sort of secret service for the supernatural. She’s a kick-ass supernatural glass-ceiling buster keeping Britain safe from monsters.”

—Alex Lent, *Literary Hub*

“With its blend of intricate worldbuilding and fantastical situations, *Stiletto* both surprised me and made me laugh.”

—Mary Bell, *Library Reads*

“O’Malley’s sense of the ridiculous makes every page spark with wit, and readers who’ve been waiting anxiously for this sequel to *The Rook* (one of our ‘100 Science Fiction and Fantasy Books to Read in a Lifetime’) will be delighted with the results.”

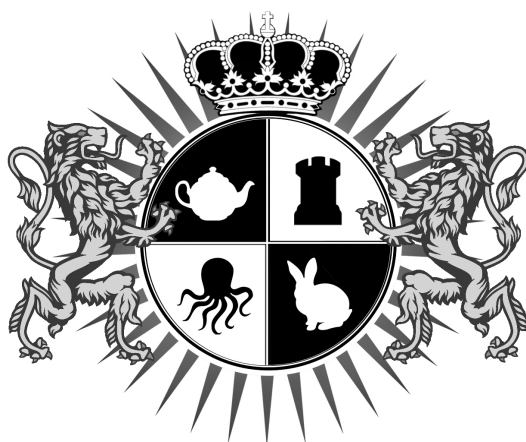
—Adrian Liang, *Omnivoracious*

Also by Daniel O'Malley

The Rook

STILETTO

A NOVEL



DANIEL O'MALLEY



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

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For Mollie Glick
and
for Asya Muchnick
with tremendous thanks

If you had taught her, from the dawn of her intelligence, with your utmost energy and might, that there was such a thing as daylight, but that it was made to be her enemy and destroyer, and she must always turn against it, for it had blighted you and would else blight her;—if you had done this, and then, for a purpose, had wanted her to take naturally to the daylight and she could not do it, you would have been disappointed and angry?

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

Optometry is the discipline of vision. What its boundaries will be depends upon what the word vision means to the profession.

—A. M. Skeffington, May 1974

STILETTO



*To Felicity Jane Clements, Pawn of the Checquy
Group and ward of HM Government:*

*You are herewith called forth by the authority of the
Lord and Lady, in accordance with your obligations
and your oaths, to give service, in secret, for the
protection and security of the Monarch, the People, and
the soil of the British Isles.*

*On this day, you are to proceed with all haste into the
London borough of Northam, to the location commanded.
There, you will bend the abilities instilled within you to the
task ordered.*

*To ensure that you remain unknown and that none
remark upon your presence, you will be given clothing
to blend in among the populace.*

*To discourage civilians from approaching you, you
will be sprayed with urine.*

Bring milk and chocolate biscuits.

— Odgers



1

The woman was crouched in an alley, her back against the wall and her hands pressed awkwardly to the bricks behind her.

She was not an appetizing sight. A tangle of dirty dirty-blond hair hung down over her grubby face. Behind it, her eyes were open a slit, showing white. A string of drool dangled from her mouth. Apart from her ragged breathing, she was utterly still. She was dressed in several layers of filthy clothing and a pair of trainers whose mesh sides had rotted away almost completely and whose soles were peeling off as if trying to escape.

She was also not an appetizing smell. There was a pungent odor coming off her, one that suggested an ongoing lack of access to bathing facilities. And laundry facilities. And toilet facilities. She was actually pretty enough behind the dirt, but to discover that would require several minutes' concerted attention with a damp sponge and, possibly, a trowel. As she was, she fit into her surroundings perfectly.

The alley was terribly narrow, more of an incidental gap between two sets of row houses. Hypodermic needles, feces of unspecified provenance, improperly disposed-of prophylactics, and general domestic rubbish were the primary topographical features.

For a few minutes, rain drizzled in and soaked her, but still she did not move.

A rat scurried between the rubbish, presumably on its way to somewhere more salubrious.

Finally, she moved her hands away from the wall behind her and opened her eyes wide. She took a deep breath that would have been cleansing had she been in a place that was slightly less vile. She licked

her lips, felt the drool that had dripped down her chin, and moved to wipe her face with her sleeve before realizing how disgusting her sleeve was. She sighed and, still crouching, swung her arms about stiffly. Then she looked up blearily at the sound of someone approaching down the alley.

That someone was a tall redheaded man with lily-white skin and freckles that had cornered the real estate market on his face. Behind him was another someone who looked much the same except that he was bigger and had shaved his head so there was only a corona of orange fuzz. Both of them were dressed in clothes that did not look at all out of place in the alleyway.

"Oh, hello," said the first man. The woman squinted up at him and grunted. "Look at this, Petey," he remarked to his associate. "We're looking for something to do, and here something is."

"What?" she said.

"Shut up," said the man easily. Then, just as easily, he punched her in the face. Her head slammed back against the wall, and she fell onto her bottom.

"The fuck?" she spat, pressing her hand against her jaw.

"I *told* you to shut up," said the man mildly. "Now, me and my mate are gonna have a bit of fun right here, and you're not going to give us any trouble unless you want another fist to the face."

"And that'd be just for starters," said the other man, Petey.

Rather than being terrified by the prospect of a vicious assault upon her person, however, the woman seemed unperturbed and somewhat incredulous.

"Are you serious?" she said. Her accent was not one you would have expected to come out of the mouth of a person in those environs. It bespoke an expensive education. "You actually want to do this? To someone who looks like me?" She glanced down at herself and then around at the refuse that filled the alley. "*Here?*" They didn't answer her, but apparently for these men, a blond woman was a blond woman, even if she smelled like carrion left out in the sun. The first man, the hitter, put his hands to his belt. "*Such* a mistake you're making," she said.

Then she reached out and grasped the man's ankle. The smirk

didn't have time to leave his face before she'd yanked on his shin and kicked him, in dizzyingly quick succession, in the testicles, the stomach, the chest. He toppled backward into his colleague's startled arms, and she drew herself up. Moments before, her posture had been hunched and defensive, but now she held herself in the classic boxer's stance.

"Bitch, you've got to be kid—" began Petey, but his assertion was cut off as the woman stepped forward and briskly broke Petey's companion's nose with a smart right jab. The companion's wail of pain broke off as she punched him in the stomach and drove the air out of him. He sounded like a set of bagpipes that had just been stabbed. His knees buckled, and Petey staggered to keep him upright. The woman took a few steps back, sized them up, and was lunging forward when the toe of one of her shoes landed in something vile and squishy. Denied any purchase, her leg shot out from under her, and she lurched violently to the side.

"Bugger!" She bounced off a wall, fell against a pair of rubbish bins that were, ironically, completely empty, and ended up sprawled on her back on the ground. Then the breath rushed out of her as Petey, who had apparently jettisoned his friend in favor of subduing her, dived onto her and pressed her into the pavement.

The man who had hit her seemed to have righted himself.

"Stupid bitch," said the hitter in a sort of wheezy falsetto as he came down the alley to them. "It'll be bloody now. So much worse now."

"Yeah," said Petey. He was lying across her, his weight holding her down, and he pressed his face into her vile hair. "You know," he said, "under all that hair and muck, you're not bad-looking. But you will be when me and Joe are done with you." She struggled, but he had her well and truly pinned. She sighed and looked up. Joe was staring down at her, and the expression on his face was terrible to behold.

"I really didn't want to do this," she remarked. "Pawn Cheng?" The men exchanged confused looks.

"Uh...I got your porn right here, slut," said Joe, grabbing his crotch.

"I'm not talking to you," she said coldly.

Then Joe clapped his hands to his head and seemed to fling himself

backward. As Petey and the woman watched in fascination, he fell onto the ground, revealing a petite Asian woman. She was wearing a black yoga outfit and a grim expression. On her feet, somewhat incongruously, was a pair of heavy boots that looked suitable for undertaking construction work or possibly some sort of hate crime. It appeared that to pull Joe down, she had simply buried both her hands in his thick red hair and yanked with all her strength. There had been no sign of her a minute before.

“Joe!” exclaimed Petey.

Then Joe was up again, and he was roaring with rage. He flung himself at his diminutive assailant. There was so little room in the alley that there was simply no way she could dodge a man that big. He charged toward her, his shoulder dropped to slam into her.

It was almost as if the Asian woman *burst* under his bulk. Streamers and strands of black material erupted from the point of impact, spreading out and then fading away completely. Joe kept barreling forward until he collided with the wall, hitting it so hard that he bounced off it a little.

Petey, at this point, actually held tighter to the woman splayed out underneath him.

“What the *fuck*?” he whispered. “What the fuck what the fuck what the *fuck* is going on? What is that?”

“That’s my colleague,” the woman he was lying across said pleasantly, and then she initiated a wrestling maneuver referred to by some as “the dump truck.” From beneath him, she crooked one arm around his neck and the other around his torso, then she arched her whole body high, rolled him up and over her head, and dumped his arse firmly on the ground before snapping to her feet.

Joe, meanwhile, had been so absorbed by the Curious Incident of the Sporadically Vaporous Asian Woman in the Alleyway that he’d missed his friend’s discommoding behind him. Before his eyes, the air in the center of the alley roiled, and the aforementioned Asian woman suddenly reappeared. However, she didn’t seem in the least bit interested in him.

“Felicity, did you need me for anything else?” she asked in a thick Birmingham accent.

“Nah, I’m fine, thanks,” said the other woman. His heart thunder-

ing with anger and bewilderment, Joe reached into his pocket and drew out a knife, which he flicked open. His hands low, he lunged forward again, but the short woman was already evaporating away with an unimpressed look on her face. He turned around and saw Petey getting painfully to his feet. The blond bitch was tying her hair back from her face. She gave him a look that said he had gotten himself into this situation and really had only himself to blame.

“You—you . . .” Words failed him. This was *not* how it was supposed to go.

“Hey, I’m right here,” she said, and the complete lack of concern in her voice ignited something in him. He barreled toward her, his knife clutched in his fist, shoving past Petey. She swayed to the side, then turned, stepped back against his chest, and caught his knife arm. Before he could think, she had flipped him over her shoulder. He went down on the ground, the knife clattering from his hand, and seemed disinclined to get back up.

Petey came a little more cautiously, but as he moved toward her, she snapped into swift, dizzying motion. She swung her leg with mechanical precision and kicked out at the side of his knee. Under the combined force of her strength and her complete lack of hesitation or mercy, his leg simply crumpled. He fell into the mud and the rubbish, shouting and clutching at his leg. She stepped carefully over the trash and delivered a meticulous kick to the jaw that left him facedown and unconscious in the remnants of a pizza that someone hadn’t wanted anymore. The alley was quiet except for the sound of Pawn Cheng condensing out of the air.

“Well, that was nicely done,” said Pawn Cheng. “You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” said Felicity sourly. She dusted off her clothing, which did not make an appreciable difference to its appearance.

“Honestly, I can’t believe you needed me to step in to help you with two chavs.”

“Give me a break, Andrea,” said Felicity. “I just spent three and a bit hours squatting against a wall. Plus, I’m wearing these ridiculous leper shoes.” She looked down at the men on the ground. At any other time it would have given her profound satisfaction to break every bone in their bodies, or at least to put the boot in a couple of

times. But there was the danger here that she might attract unwanted attention, not least from the house she'd been observing.

However . . . she mused.

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Andrea. "Are you *robbing* them?"

"I'm not going to keep it," said Felicity reasonably. "But I think that losing their mobile phones and their wallets will teach them a valuable lesson about . . . um . . . you know . . . respecting the homeless."

"You don't think they learned that by having the crap beaten out of them by a homeless woman?" asked Andrea. "To say nothing of a chick who can turn into oxygen?"

"You know what would make this lesson extra-special?" said Felicity after a moment. "We should take their shoes as well."

The Asian Pawn shook her head disapprovingly, then shrugged.

"Yeah, all right."

Two minutes later, Felicity was humming cheerfully as she sauntered out of the alley.

God, I love this job.

2

Wake up and get out of the bathtub. If you're late for this cocktail party, the British will take us all out to the parking lot and shoot us in the back of the head. Plus, we need to get the slime out of the tub before the hotel maids come in for the turndown service."

The voice came thundering into Odette Lelifeld's sleeping brain by way of the waterproof headphones that were clamped to her sleeping ears. She was jolted awake, and opened her eyes. The light at the bottom of the bathtub was dim and lavender, and it really was tempting just to snuggle down in the warmth and return to a nice therapeutic stasis. But then Alessio's voice came back into her ears. "Room service will be here in seven minutes, so hurry up."

Odette grimaced and set about speeding up her heart rate from its

restful one-beat-every-three-hours tempo. She pushed herself up out of the depths of the ridiculously large tub. The designers of the bathroom had apparently thought the hotel guests would be either engaging in group bathing or traveling with their exotic pets, because there seemed to be enough room in the tub for a party of six good friends, seven *extremely* good friends, or fifteen pedigree jellyfish. Instead of a bijou orgy or some purebred *Olindias formosa*, however, it currently contained Odette and about fourteen hundred liters of thick, viscous slime.

She surfaced with a little difficulty, the sludge holding on to her, and sat up, taking her first breath in five hours.

"I hate sleeping in a swimsuit," she remarked weakly to the world as she wiped the gunk out of her eyes.

"If I have to come wake you up all the time," said her younger brother, "then you are not sleeping naked in the tub." She felt the headphones get plucked off her head as he bustled by, presumably tidying up the clothes that were still scattered on the floor.

"Did you order coffee?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, his voice cracking a little. "Although you're not supposed to have hot beverages or caffeine until all your new organs have settled."

"You know what? Don't lecture me until your larynx has settled," she retorted.

"Oh, would you like me to cancel the coffee?" asked Alessio.

"No, I'm sorry," said Odette hurriedly.

"Don't step on the floor yet," he instructed. "Otherwise you'll just get it everywhere. Here's the strigil." He handed her a curved rubber blade and then hurried out to the sitting room. She smiled at the retreating back of her thirteen-year-old brother as he closed the door behind him, then stood up and looked around.

"If any British government official is watching me," she said out loud, "I really don't care if you see me naked, but it's very tacky on your part."

No answer was forthcoming.

"Well, all right, then," she said to herself. She peeled off her bathing suit and set about scraping the slime off her body and back into the tub.

Once she'd transferred herself, mostly slime-free, to the shower, Odette carefully examined her legs, limbs, and torso. *Coming along nicely*, she thought. The scars along her limbs were now only faint lines, and a few more nights spent in a bathtub of goop would get rid of them completely. The Y-shaped scar tissue that ran down her chest to below her navel was taking longer to heal and was still a little itchy, but she stopped herself from rubbing at it. She held out her arm, her hand bent back, and flexed. A sculpted bone spur the size of her index finger slid out from the underside of her wrist. *Okay, good*. She tensed another set of muscles, and a drop of amber liquid appeared on the end of the spur. *And good*.

Then she turned on the water and set about the laborious process of getting the slime out of her hair.

So, what do you think of the place so far?" she asked Alessio as she sipped her coffee and swallowed one of her pills.

"What's to think?" he asked without looking up from his tablet computer.

"Well, the view out the window is nice," she said, taking two more pills.

"It's a very gray, cloudy kind of place," said Alessio.

"We're right opposite Hyde Park, and I just saw one of those red double-decker buses go by. I expect we'll get some time off from the negotiations. We can do London things. The Tate. Trafalgar Square. Harrods. And we could go to Buckingham Palace." Her brother looked at her skeptically over his computer. "I'm not saying that I want to meet a prince or anything, but it would be cool to see the changing of the guard." He shrugged. "And the hotel is very posh."

"Every room on this floor is probably bugged," Alessio said grimly, a little frown line appearing between his eyebrows. "And everyone we meet is probably from the Checquy. That woman who just brought up the food was looking around like she thought we'd have entrails on the floor for her to tidy up along with the wastepaper bins."

“She was probably aghast that a twenty-three-year-old woman has to share a suite with her thirteen-year-old brother,” said Odette, swallowing another two pills.

“I’m aghast at that as well,” said her brother. Odette made a little snorting sound as she looked at him thoughtfully. They both had the same heart-shaped face and the same dark brown hair, but Alessio’s hair was dead straight whereas hers had a tendency to go curly unless she was concentrating. Thankfully, she was still a good deal taller than him, but people in their family often went through a growth spurt late in their teens, and she had no doubt that he would eventually be the one resting drinks on her head.

However, at the moment, he looked very vulnerable. There were still traces of puppy fat on his face, and in his little suit and carefully tied tie, he reminded her of a boy going to a funeral, forced to face adult things too soon.

“I really am sorry about all this,” she said to him, and he looked up at her. “You shouldn’t have to be acting as a diplomatic representative, you should be . . .” She trailed off.

“What?” he asked. “At home in Roeselare with my tutors, working on my surgical skills like a regular teenager?” He rolled his eyes. “Grootvader Ernst wanted me to come. He wanted both of us to come. He said it would help.”

“Yes, but I’m actually going to be engaged in negotiations, albeit in some unspecified capacity,” said Odette, pausing a moment to swallow four more pills. “You’re going to be, what? Standing around looking harmless, showing them that we’re not all monsters that have been so heavily modified that we’re no longer human.”

“Only because I’m not fifteen yet,” said her brother. “At least you have some weapons inside you.”

“Not enough,” said Odette darkly. She popped three more pills in her mouth and slammed them down with the last of the coffee. “Now, how long do I have before the meeting to finalize the strategy for the cocktail party?”

“Half an hour,” said her brother.

“All right, I’m going to go do my injections and get ready.”

In the bathroom, Odette eyed herself closely in the mirror. *I need to look businesslike, professional, and normal*, she thought. *Not overly attractive or unusual. Not threatening in any way.* She concentrated, and her lips flushed slightly. *Good. Not too red, not too dark.* Her eyelids darkened subtly, and she dilated her pupils a bit, flinching in the suddenly brighter light.

“Going for the belladonna look?” said Alessio as he came into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

“Well, we have to make a good impression, and people are attracted to dilated pupils,” Odette said defensively. But she constricted them a little. “You’re just lucky you don’t have to go to this thing tonight.”

She watched in the mirror as Alessio carefully rolled up his sleeve, slid his arm into the slime-filled bathtub, and fished around. He finally located the plug and yanked it out. A little dimple appeared on the surface of the liquid, but the slime did not seem to be in any hurry to vanish down the plug hole. They both stared at it in chagrin.

A couple hundred gallons of eldritch ooze probably aren’t going to make a very good impression, Odette thought. *Even if it is nectarine-scented.*

“Try adding some hot water,” she suggested finally. “And the shampoo from the shower breaks it down a little.”

“I may simply have to try flushing it down the toilet,” said Alessio. “I can use the rubbish bin as a bailer.” Odette could all too easily imagine something horrible happening to the toilet as a result. A bathtub of evil somehow seemed much less embarrassing than a toilet of evil. With a toilet, people might think the evil had come out of *her*.

“Better not,” she said hastily. “I think we should just leave it. And since you think the maids are with the Checquy, they aren’t going to bat an eyelash at a slowly draining bathtub full of biochemical soup.”

“Well, I’m not *positive* they’re with the Checquy,” said her brother, the little line appearing between his eyes again. “You could help me with this, you know.”

“This thing I’m doing right here? It requires a fair amount of close attention,” said Odette. She pursed her lips in concentration and watched in satisfaction as her cheekbones shifted under her skin, moving up and out a little.

3

Five hours before her *pied-à-tête* with Joe and Petey, Felicity had been sitting in an office in the Hammerstrom Building, dressed in a suit and very definitely *not* covered in filth. The Hammerstrom Building, despite being the most boring-looking building in the City of London (it appeared to have been designed by a committee of depressive Puritans), was in fact one of the facilities belonging to the Checquy Group, the secret government department that employed the supernatural to protect the populace from the supernatural.

The Hammerstrom Building was the headquarters for all domestic operations of the Checquy, overseen by two executives known as the Rooks. As a result, it was affectionately referred to as the Rookery. It was where government strategists made the arrangements to acquire every child born in the British Isles with unexplainable abilities. It was where the course of those children's lives, including their rigorous education at the remote and heavily fortified boarding school known as the Estate, was planned. It was where the supernaturally gifted operatives, once grown up—the Pawns—received their assignments to stations across the country. It was the place to which intelligence was funneled from a thousand different sources. It was the place from whence elite soldiers sallied forth to combat the unnatural.

It was also where Felicity had arrived early that morning in an effort to catch up on paperwork. She had been sipping an inferior coffee and waiting for her computer to boot up when a courier trotted over and handed her the envelope containing the summons. The last part of the official message—the caution about the urine—had given Felicity a moment's pause, but then she'd shrugged. Service in the Checquy called for all sorts of unorthodox duties. Those duties tended to be especially unorthodox when one was a member of an urban assault team.

And if you want to climb higher, she told herself, you don't ever complain. You just show that you're ready and eager for any challenge.

The location to which she had been commanded turned out to be a house. It was not a particularly pleasant house, being both abandoned and in disrepair, but as a result it blended in perfectly with the surrounding area. It was in Northam, the least convenient district of the Greater London conurbation, too far from the city's center or any public transport for even the most optimistic of gentrifiers, and too far from the edge of the metropolis for people to delude themselves that they were enjoying country living. Evelyn Waugh had once described it as "the perineum of the Empire."

Felicity had found the chief of her team, Pawn Millicent Odgers, tucked away in the kitchen at the back of the house sifting through the contents of some hard plastic cases. A plump woman in her mid-sixties, Odgers spoke with a pure Glaswegian accent. From the shoulders up, with her gray hair in a tight bun and her glasses on a chain around her neck, she looked as if she should be checking out books in a country library. However, the rest of her was swathed in a formidable coverall of dense black material that appeared to be several sizes too large for her. She was shod in boots that looked as though they could kick in a door or a rib cage with equal facility.

"Good morning, Chief."

"Morning, Clements. Did you bring the biscuits and the milk?"

"Yes, sir," said Felicity, holding up her shopping bag.

"Good. Buchanan is bringing the thermoses with coffee and tea."

"So where's the rest of the team?"

"They'll be trickling in. The sudden arrival of a horde of healthy people will draw attention in this neighborhood. Hopefully, they've all shown the same sense you have and dressed down a bit." Felicity, having noted the tenor of the area, had taken the precaution of changing out of her suit and into a pair of jeans and a rather grubby fleece. "Meanwhile, are you ready for work?"

"Always, sir."

"Grand to hear. I'll brief you after you've put on the clothes in that bag over there."

Felicity cautiously opened the bag and saw that it was filled with garments for which the most charitable description was "vagrant camouflage." She sighed. It wasn't the worst ensemble she'd ever been

compelled to wear in the name of duty (one mission had called for her to put on a gillie suit composed entirely of well-manured poison ivy), but the clothes were all covered in filth and grease, and there was a pungent odor coming off them.

Gritting her teeth and controlling her gag reflex, she changed into the vestments of the damned. The shirt had several collars sewn in, so it looked like she was wearing multiple layers of old T-shirts and rugby jumpers. The jeans adhered to her legs in various places. She took a seat.

“Are you sitting comfortably?” asked Odgers.

“Are there lice in these clothes? Because — yes.”

“Then I’ll begin.” Odgers took up a file and settled her glasses on her nose. “In the past three weeks, there have been a series of mysterious disappearances throughout London. Now, at first glance, they seem unrelated. All the subjects went missing on different days; they’re of different races, different ages, different socioeconomic backgrounds. However, Checquy statisticians have identified a pattern. All the missing people have B-positive blood type.”

“Any possibility it’s a coincidence?” asked Felicity as she very deliberately did not scratch herself.

“I thought of that too,” said Odgers. “However, in addition to being B-positive, they had all received organ transplants. Something like four people with new hearts, several with new kidneys, a skin graft. Pancreases, corneas, what have you. And all done in London hospitals.”

“How on earth did they figure that out?” asked Felicity, impressed.

“Oh, you know the statisticians,” said Odgers. “They’re always trawling through all the information they can get. I think they identified this trend after the eleventh disappearance.”

“What’s the Checquy bait, though? Do we have any sign that this is something supernatural and not just, I don’t know, an extremely specific and well-informed serial killer?”

“All of the missing people vanished from their homes in the middle of the night,” said Odgers. “In most cases, it looks as if they went to bed and then, after a few hours’ sleep, got up and walked out the front door. There were no signs of forced entry or violence. They just left.”

"Did they all live alone?"

"No," said Odgers. "There were two teenagers who were living at home, and seven of the victims were married or living with a partner, but none of the parents or partners reported anything strange happening. One woman vaguely recalled her husband getting out of bed, but she assumed he was going to the loo. She just went back to sleep and didn't realize anything was wrong until she came down in the morning and found the front door open."

"They didn't take anything with them?"

"No. They didn't even change out of their nightclothes," said Odgers. "Didn't put on shoes or slippers or a coat. One man apparently left wearing just a T-shirt. It was like they were sleepwalking."

"And no sign of them afterwards?" said Felicity. "No witnesses?"

"Actually, the police managed to find a couple of witnesses," said Odgers. "In Green Park at three in the morning, two homeless gentlemen saw one of the victims walking across the grass. They said he was in his pajamas and staring straight ahead. He didn't respond when they called out to him."

"So something is summoning them?" Felicity asked. She shuddered a little at the thought.

"We don't know what's going on," said Odgers. "After our analysts identified the trend, they checked for connections between the missing people, but they haven't found any."

"The most recent disappearance happened last night. A man called the police right away when he found his girlfriend gone. We got a team to the flat immediately, and one of the Pawns managed to track her scent twelve miles to a house near here. He caught traces of the scents of two of the other victims. We're assuming that all of them are there but that the traces of the others have dissipated or been washed away since they arrived. You're going to be scouting the house for us."

"So the reason that I look and smell like the inside of a dumpster is...?"

"You're going to be homeless," said Odgers, her eyes intent on the files.

"I see. I take it that a homeless woman is not going to get a lot of attention in this neighborhood?"

“We’re less concerned about the neighbors and more about spooking the kidnapper, or the summoner, or whatever it is. The house you’re scouting is supposed to be abandoned. In fact, all of the houses in the row are. But if there *is* something or someone malevolent in there, and you’re spotted, you might get attacked. Or it might lure you in. Andrea Cheng will be providing backup, but obviously we’d prefer you to conduct your reconnaissance and withdraw without any incidents.”

“Understood,” said Felicity. “How long do I have?”

“I’ll trust your judgment. I want the standard information—layout, traps, presence of any living entities, anything unusual. All right, I’m going to do your face now.” She smeared some mentholated ointment under Felicity’s nose and then under her own. “This will help you not throw up on yourself. It isn’t really a smell you get used to.” She briskly applied some specially blended military-grade filth to Felicity’s face and blotted off the excess with a tissue.

When it came time for the promised application of the urine, it was something of a relief to find that she wasn’t to be sprayed so much as lightly misted. It wasn’t a *huge* relief, though, and there was another startling, somewhat unwelcome revelation.

“It’s *my* urine?” Felicity said incredulously.

“Don’t think of it as urine,” Pawn Odgers advised her. “Try to think of it as an olfactory disguise.” Felicity tried and was not measurably comforted.

“But where did you get *my* urine?” she asked.

“The Checquy has samples of everyone’s everything,” said Odgers cheerfully. “Remember, during your time at the Estate, they kept taking specimens of your every fluid and solid?”

“That was for scientific research!” exclaimed Felicity. “And it was *years* ago!”

“Would someone else’s fresh urine be better?”

Felicity could think of no dignified response as she tugged her greasy forelock (Odgers had combed something like vegetable oil into her hair). She wiped her hand on her jeans, cringed at the result, and then left through the back door.

* * *

And now she was returning through the back door with Pawn Cheng. She noted that while the past four hours had left her looking even more disheveled (if such a thing were possible), the kitchen had been transformed into a cramped little command center. The cooker had been manhandled out of the room, and there were floor plans tacked up on the walls. Laptop computers glowed on the counter and the kitchen table. A flat-screen TV sat precariously by the sink showing camera feeds from around the outside of the house.

The main difference, however, was that there were now people bustling around. Some were examining the plans on the walls, some were perched on whatever surface they could find, staring at screens, and others were bent over plastic cases, checking the guns that glinted in their little foam beds. Felicity scanned them all, automatically noting their locations, but she was really looking for six specific people. It wasn't hard to identify them: four men, two women, all dressed in the menacing black coveralls that Odgers had been wearing, although theirs fit. They were all possessed of excellent posture and spoke in quiet tones. One of the men was in a corner doing the splits with his ankles raised up on stacks of phone books.

Everyone looked up as Felicity entered the room. There was a moment of appalled silence, and then a wave of laughter and hooting filled the kitchen. She ducked her head, blushing under her grime.

"Clements, you look fab!" one of the women called. "Are you coming from a date or going to one?" Grinning, Felicity raised a brisk two fingers in reply.

"You'll never make it to the Barghests if you show up to work looking like that," a large man tsked.

"Jennings, don't be hard on Fliss," said one of the men, "just 'cause she looks like she raided your wardrobe."

"Ah, he's just doing his best to flirt," said Felicity. "After all, *this*"—and she gestured at herself—"ticks all his fantasy boxes, doesn't it? We all know he's into that hobo porn." She paused as a short redheaded woman came over and stood in front of her.

"Pawn Clements, I note no difference in your appearance or smell from that of any other day," said the woman flatly.

“Nice one, Cordingley, that was an amusing remark,” said Felicity. The woman nodded. *She’s been working on her humor*, Felicity thought fondly. Someone pressed a cup of tea into her hands, and the team members continued to chaff her and one another as she moved into the room.

It was all comfortingly familiar. She knew these people as well as she knew herself—better, really. She’d been working with them for two years now, since she’d graduated from combat training, all innocent-eyed and nervous-shouldered and hesitant-voiced. They’d helped her gestate into a real soldier. Pawn Gardiner had held Felicity’s hand while she pulled herself together after shooting her first eel-man hybrid, and she in turn had held Pawn Moore’s head and left foot while he pulled himself together after confronting a man made out of scythes. With them, she had battled bunyips in the Barbican, hunted horrors on Hampstead Heath, been air-dropped into Acton, sloshed through the sewers under Soho, and served as sentry at Sandringham House.

They had all seen one another at their best and their worst. She’d seen them covered in spilled blood (mainly other people’s) and spilled beer (mainly their own), and she’d stood as honor guard at Barnaby’s wedding and as godmother to Jennings’s daughter. They weren’t just colleagues; they were her brothers and sisters in arms.

Odgers entered the room and the noise died away as everyone stood to attention. The chief was followed by someone Felicity did not know, a tall, strapping Indian man about her own age or perhaps a year or two younger. He looked vaguely familiar. *I suppose I might have seen him at the Estate*, she mused.

“Welcome back, Clements. Was your reconnaissance successful?”

“For the most part,” said Felicity.

“That sounds half promising,” said Odgers. “Oh, before you report, this is Pawn Chopra.” She gestured to the Indian man.

He’s rather more-ish, thought Felicity appreciatively.

“Sanjay,” he said, stepping forward. Felicity shook his hand. Although he had long eyelashes and smooth elegant features, his grip was strong and his hands had a fighter’s calluses on them.

“Chopra’s been added to the team as of today,” said Odgers. “This is his first mission; he’s just graduated from combat training. Now, Clements, what did you find?”

"I went through the whole place, and of course there's the bad news, but there's also actually some good news. It turns out that we don't need to worry about witnesses, at least not inside. The whole row has been completely stripped. There's no furniture, no carpets, no lighting fixtures, no people in any of the houses."

"This is *not* license for us to cut loose with guns and gifts," said Odgers severely, and there were some disappointed noises from the team. "Not unless it's appropriate. Clements, the inevitable bad news?"

"Well, sir, the *preliminary* inevitable bad news is there have been some substantial modifications. Hallways have been blocked off, doorways have been cut between the houses, there's a few places where rough holes have been made through the floors and ceilings. It looks like something has created a little warren for itself in there." She moved over to the maps on the walls. "There's only one entrance that hasn't been walled up. The whole thing is a labyrinth with booby traps scattered throughout. I found trip wires hooked up to boxes containing mechanisms and vials of chemicals that I didn't recognize." She quickly marked up the floor plans, showing where the changes had been made and the traps laid.

"Little boxes of stuff..." murmured Odgers. "Chopra, what does that suggest to you?" she asked suddenly in a schoolmarmish tone that perfectly matched her schoolmarmish face and figure.

"Um, well, it implies that the source of this malignancy is probably an actual entity rather than some sort of geographical phenomenon," said Chopra.

"So what is the source of these booby traps?" mused Odgers. She turned to Felicity. "What did you see?"

"That brings me to the final inevitable bad news," said Felicity. "At the heart of the row is something I couldn't see. It's approximately five meters by ten meters. One story high. I expect that's where the target is, along with the latest missing person. Maybe all of them."

"You can't see it? What does that mean?"

Felicity shrugged helplessly.

"I couldn't see it, and I couldn't see through it. You know there are a few things my abilities don't work on. Water. The wood of the cedar tree. Salmon. Air."

“You think it’s a barrier made out of cedar?” said Odgers, frowning. “Or ice? Or salmon?”

“I don’t know what it is,” said Felicity. “It could be something new, something I’ve never encountered before.”

“Fair enough,” said Odgers, seemingly unperturbed by the prospect of an Oblong of Mystery. “So, you can take us through the warren?”

“Yes,” said Felicity confidently.

“Right.” The chief stared broodingly at the plans for several moments. “I don’t like it,” she said finally. “Even if you know your way through a maze, simply by entering, you put yourself in the power of the maze maker.” She pursed her lips. “We need to break the maze.” She looked over at one of the support staff. “Gilly, you trained as an architect, right?”

An intense conversation ensued. Various people drew on the plans and scribbled over one another’s drawings. Teeth were sucked. A new nomenclature emerged: everyone began referring to the enemy as “the Homeowner,” and the Oblong of Mystery became the OOM. Calls were placed to sundry Checquy experts to consult on the properties of certain building materials. Finally, a plan was agreed upon, with only two people no longer speaking to each other.

“Good,” said Odgers. “I’ll advise the Rookery of the situation and request permission to commence infiltration. I want everyone ready to depart in eight minutes.”

“Is this a rescue job, sir?” asked Jennings.

“That depends on what we find,” said Odgers grimly. “So move quickly, but move *right*.” The team snapped into action, everyone knowing what his or her role was. The support staff had backed up against the walls, opening a space in the middle of the kitchen for the soldiers to work. The team members began donning their dense black armor.

Felicity shucked off her filthy clothes and tossed them into the plastic rubbish bags that one of the support staff held open. Pawn Chopra flushed and lowered his gaze at the sight of Felicity in her underwear, but the others didn’t react, and Felicity told herself she wasn’t concerned. *When you’ve seen someone cry and vomit and shower and shit, and they’ve seen you do the same, you don’t feel shy around them.* There wasn’t a

single person on the assault team that she hadn't seen naked at one time or another, although never in a recreational setting.

Still, despite herself, she rather wished that the first impression Chopra had gotten of her didn't involve her in her extremely sensible undies, her face smeared with *essence des excréments*.

"All right, on with the school uniform," she said hurriedly. Across the room, one of her teammates put a boot against a plastic trunk with Felicity's name stenciled on it and sent it skidding across the floor to her. "Ta."

First was a bodysuit of thin stretchy material with a built-in sports bra. Then a set of the black coveralls. Felicity rubbed Vaseline over her feet before she pulled on some tactical-grade socks. She stepped into a pair of large boots and laced them up tightly. Then came the combat armor that had been cast for her when she graduated from the Estate. Dense plastic greaves, vambraces, and rerebraces that would protect her limbs. A breastplate, one that made no attempt to acknowledge her gender. She thoughtfully brushed her fingertips over the marks that scarred it. It was festooned with little chips and divots, and a splashy stain was etched into the surface.

"Gauntlets?" asked an attendant.

"Fingerless gloves," said Felicity, pulling them out of her trunk. "I need to be able to initiate immediate skin contact." It wasn't unusual for Checquy soldiers to modify their outfits according to their individual requirements. Two of the other soldiers were also gauntlet-less. Gardiner's armor was all white, while Jennings's appeared to be made out of highly polished mahogany. Cordingley was wearing no helmet. Barnaby had a spiked flail Velcroed to her thigh and she had undone some zips and slid the entire right sleeve of her coveralls off, revealing a small but muscular arm. Buchanan was wearing only the coveralls and a pair of light canvas trainers.

A helmet with a transparent faceplate was squashed down over Felicity's head, and she made a grim mental note to shampoo the helmet's interior after the assault. She shifted through a few stretches to make certain that everything was fitted correctly.

"Will you need night vision?" asked the attendant.

"Uh, probably, yeah," said Felicity. "There's no electrical power in

there.” He undid a couple of catches and slotted a new, bulkier face shield on. She knew that when she slid the visor down, she would be presented with a couple of little monitors.

A steel combat knife was sheathed on one thigh, a dense industrial-plastic blade on the other. Felicity holstered her nine-millimeter pistol on her hip.

Now all the team members were girded in their battle dress. They were a study in deadliness. As Jennings cracked his neck from side to side, the air above him wavered hot and green. Gardiner’s white armor suddenly shimmered like mother-of-pearl. Pawn Barnaby tested her flail, and it swung with a tearing sound that cut through the space. Sparks crawled briefly and crazily over Pawn Buchanan’s coveralls. With a swirl of air, Pawn Cheng condensed herself and appeared in the group. The others’ calm stillness simply hinted at their potential for supernatural violence.

The team stood ready for the call to action.

Which didn’t come.

And didn’t come.

And didn’t come.

Finally, one of the support staff poked his head through the door into the next room, listened a moment, and then looked back. He shook his head and held his hand up to his ear in the universal sign for *She’s talking on the phone*. He grimaced and waggled his other hand in the universal sign for *Might be a while*.

“For Christ’s sake,” said Jennings. “I suppose we’d better sit down while we’re waiting for the order.”

“Bloody bureaucracy,” grumbled Buchanan, settling down on his kit case. “They get us out here in the colon of London, all suited up, and then we have to wait while someone in an office finds the backbone to make an actual decision.”

“Maybe it won’t take that long,” said Chopra hopefully.

“Doubt it,” said Barnaby. She took out a cigarette and nodded thanks to Jennings when its end erupted in a small green flame. “Keep in mind, today’s the day that the Belgians are coming into the country. The entire Rookery is going to be running around, all atwitter. Everyone with any real authority will be taken up with the preparations.”

“Yeah, I’d much rather be doing an actual mission than standing guard duty for the fucking Grafters,” said Gardiner. There was a murmur of agreement.

The Grafters, thought Felicity, and she shuddered in her armor. *Bloody hell*. The Checquy faced monsters every day, but the Grafters held a special place of horror in their hearts and their memories.

Begun around 1474 as the *Wetenschappelijk Broederschap van Natuurkundigen*,* the Grafters were Belgian alchemists. Rather than following the traditional alchemical pursuit of failing to turn lead into gold, however, they had directed their attention to the mysteries of the mortal clay. Somehow, working in primitive conditions, they had gained radical insights into biological science, developing techniques that still remained far beyond modern medical understanding. With their knowledge and capabilities, they possessed the ability to twist and warp living flesh to suit their purposes.

Apparently, the Grafters’ original purpose had been simple research, but then, in the seventeenth century, they’d turned their brains to military applications. On the orders of the government of the time, they created monstrous soldiers and then mounted an invasion of the Isle of Wight with an eye to conquering the rest of the British Isles. It had taken the full supernatural might of the Checquy, and the losses had been horrific, but finally the Grafters had been subdued.

The British had not allowed the matter to rest there. Instead, they pressed their advantage, mustered up the shattered remnants of the Checquy, and dispatched emissaries to deliver some fairly pointed and undiplomatic messages to the Continent. Faced with the unimaginable forces that the British could apparently bring to bear, the ruling government had briskly given in, and the *Wetenschappelijk Broederschap van Natuurkundigen* was dismantled.

The Checquy had never forgotten, though, and over the centuries the Grafters had remained something of a bogeyman to new recruits. This was no mean feat, given that many of the new recruits themselves could be considered eligible for the title of bogeyman. But

* Which could be translated as “the Scientific Brotherhood of Scientists” if your Dutch wasn’t great and you weren’t keen on making the Grafters sound good.

every Pawn was brought up to loathe and fear the memory of the Grafters.

As a result, it had been a matter of significant outrage and consternation when, a few months ago, it was announced by the executives of the Checquy that the Grafters, far from being utterly destroyed and consigned to the secret-history books, had been operating clandestinely for the previous few centuries. Even more outrageous was that the Checquy would not be mustering its power to smash them into oblivion once and for all. Rather, the Grafters were going to become part of the Checquy Group, pledging their loyalty and service to the nation that had once been their worst enemy. It was to be a new era, one of collaboration and camaraderie.

“It’ll never work,” said Pawn Buchanan.

“The Checquy and the Grafters?” Barnaby snorted. “Course not. I’m betting that VIP cocktail do tonight will erupt in magma and blood before they bring out the first tray of canapés.”

“But how can the Court believe the Grafters could ever be trusted?” wondered Buchanan. “How can they even *think* about giving them the benefit of the doubt?”

“Not our job to worry about it,” said Felicity. “That’s a problem for the wonks swanning around Apex House.” *And they’re welcome to it*, she thought with feeling. The world of policy and diplomacy held no attraction for her. Never had. Ever since she was a little girl, she’d wanted to be a soldier. *Give me an enemy I can fight, not one I’ve got to smile at politely over dinner.*

“Yeah?” said Moore. “Tomorrow the Grafters will be walking in the corridors of the Rookery and the Apex. Just you wait until they’re adding some Flemish Frankenstein to our team. Then it’ll be *our* turn to worry about it.”

“It will never get that far,” said Buchanan confidently. “The Grafters are the opposite of everything we are. They may be negotiating today, but within six months, our little team here will be part of an army taking a trip across to the Continent to do a bit of smiting and pick up some tax-free wine.”

“Enough chitchat,” said Gardiner firmly. “At the moment, you need to be thinking about the mission. After we’ve reduced this wee

beastie to ashes, written up the report, and had a pint, *then* we'll have a team meeting and you can bother Pawn Odgers with your concerns." There was an exchange of looks and a little bit of eye-rolling, but they all were guiltily silent. Then the door to the other room banged open, and everyone jumped.

"All right, children, time to move out!" shouted Odgers as she swept into the room.

4

We've got the order, so stir yourselves! Transport's out the back," Odgers barked.

The soldiers hurried out, leaving the support staff to tidy up. As they went through the door, they were each handed a short-barreled submachine gun by a waiting attendant. In front of them was what appeared to be a very unhealthy moving van. They all hustled up the ramp and sat on the benches that ran along the walls. Chopra sat next to Felicity. Odgers came in last, and the door was rolled down behind her. The truck began moving.

Time to get into character, Felicity told herself. She turned her attention to the gun in her hands and automatically checked that the safety was on. Then she ran her Sight through it, confirming that it was full of bullets and that all the components were in good shape. Part of her training at the Estate had involved the laborious memorization of the specifications for (among other things) several dozen kinds of guns. "What good is it if you look at something and don't know what you're seeing?" one of her instructors had said reasonably when she'd balked at learning the structure of an internal combustion engine.

Around her, the rest of the team was getting ready. Chopra was breathing the slow, deep breaths of someone who was doing his utter best not to get unprofessionally excited. His armor caught her eye. The same basic model as Felicity's own, but much glossier; aside from a couple of scuffs, it had no real damage.