

I was a little nervous as I knocked on the door. Okay, I was more than just a little nervous, and I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't. An apartment building was a hell of an odd place for an interview, and it wasn't the only odd thing about this, either. Everything about it stank.

But what could you do? I'd been looking for weeks, and there was no other work to be had as a psychologist. There was no other work to be had, period. I'd gotten by on savings, odd jobs, and little bit of help from friends, but that couldn't last forever. It was already November, and it was shaping up to be a cold winter. I couldn't lose my apartment now.

And, whatever my misgivings, they were offering good money. *Too* good money, that was part of the problem; when a job pays that kind of money, there's a reason for it. But beggars can't be choosers, so I'd put aside my doubts and applied.

And now I was knocking on the door, and trying not to feel like I'd made the wrong choice.

"Come in," a woman said after a moment. I complied, and found myself in a small, dimly lit room. The only person there was a woman sitting on an old stool who stared at me as I walked in the door, and for a moment I thought I must have gotten the wrong apartment.

Then I noticed *how* she was staring. It wasn't a look of surprise, or confusion, but rather appraisal, as though I were a horse she was considering purchasing. "So you are Dr. Schneider," she said in German. "You seem young for a man of your credentials."

"Yes ma'am," I replied. "I graduated from university this year."

"I am aware. I trust you will not argue if this interview is conducted in German, rather than English?"

"No ma'am," I said, trying to hide my relief. One of the few things I knew about this job was that they wanted someone fluent in English, and I wouldn't have even applied if I weren't. But I was just as grateful that I could do the interview in my native language.

From her shrewd smile, I didn't think my gratitude had gone unnoticed. "Good," she said. "Looking over your record, it shows that you did your time in the military."

"I served my nation and the Party, ma'am," I said, somewhat stiffly. Better to be thought stiff than indifferent, on that particular topic.

"Yes, yes," she said, in a tone of barely veiled boredom. I was somewhat taken aback by that. I didn't feel terribly strongly about national loyalty, but it wasn't wise to do anything that could be construed as unpatriotic. No one smart wanted to be labeled a dissident.

"Continuing," she said, before I could decide how or even if I should respond. "Were you injured during your service?" The last word had a touch of bite to it, almost of mockery. She was pushing the boundary of what could be said safely, and it made me nervous. You never knew who might be listening.

But I still *really* needed this job, so I bit back my first reply. "I broke my shoulder, ma'am," I said instead, struggling to keep my composure. Something about this woman, her confident demeanor, was deeply off-putting.

"Residual injury? Something that would impair you physically?"

"No ma'am. Nothing like that."

"Good," she said, making a small note in her file. "And it doesn't look like you have any dependents?"

"No ma'am."

"Good," she said again, making another note. "We would require you to travel frequently. Very frequently, both in and out of the country."

"I don't have an exit visa." Leaving the country, even briefly, wasn't an easy thing to arrange. They were scared you wouldn't come back.

She waved one hand dismissively. "That isn't a concern. Is the travel a problem otherwise?"

"No ma'am," I said, thinking furiously. There was a very limited list of people who could disregard the absence of a visa that casually. *Very* limited. And even then, most of them wouldn't invest that much in someone they hadn't even hired yet.

She was Stasi, she had to be. Who else would do something like that? And it would explain why she wasn't concerned about being reported for sedition, too. Why worry about someone listening in on you when you were the one who did the listening?

I tried not to think about what the Stasi would want a psychologist for. It wasn't easy. Some of those images were...not the sort of thing you could just forget.

"Good," she said with wintry smile. "Assuming you work out, I can have the visa next week. Now, I'm guessing you want to know a little more about what kind of work you're going to be doing?"

I hesitated. On the one hand, I couldn't really do the job without knowing, and that was obvious enough that I couldn't pretend otherwise without seeming an idiot. On the other, if I *did* admit it, I was as good as asking for state secrets.

"Yes ma'am," I said at last. Better to admit it, and she seemed the sort to appreciate bluntness.

"Good," she said, still smiling. "I recently took over as the head of a certain group. My predecessors have traditionally been reluctant to hire outside help, but I'm something of a progressive. I think my people will keep their heads a little better with advice from an expert. Therapy, consultations, that sort of thing."

I let my breath out and nodded. Not as bad as I'd thought, if she was telling the truth. "This organization," I said. "Would it be affiliated with the government?"

The smile faded from her face. "Let's just say," she said, slowly and carefully, "that there isn't an official relationship between us and the government. And let's leave it at that. Yes?"

I nodded again. "Yes ma'am. I don't think I have any other questions."

She smiled again. "Excellent. So what do you say?"

It still stank, but I still needed the money, and there were worse things I could be doing. So I took a deep breath and said, "I'll take the job."

"Good. Someone will be by within the week to deliver the documents and introduce you to some people."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She smiled at me. "Call me Watcher," she said, walking out the door.

Watcher was as good as her word. Within a few days I had an exit visa—or, more properly, several, in a variety of names. I had the passports to go with them. And, maybe most importantly, I'd met the people I was working for. There were five of them who I'd been told outranked me. If they gave me orders, I was to obey them unless they contradicted something Watcher had told me.

Much like Watcher herself, they seemed to have an aversion to actual names, preferring to go by odd monikers. Loophole was a tall, wiry man who spoke very good English, and apparently no German at all. Snake was shorter, more aggressive, and spoke both English and German with a thick Russian accent. Beast was muscular and apparently French, although her demeanor was much more pleasant than the name would suggest. Fox assured me that he was native Japanese, although his English was flawless. He was charming, in a gloomy sort of way, and I noticed that everyone seemed to like him.

And then there was Nobody. By far the most enigmatic of the group, he was an average-looking guy who always seemed to be wearing the same ill-fitting suit. I thought I'd heard him speak a total of ten words in the two days I spent with him. When I asked Beast about it later, she laughed and said that was typical of Nobody.

Everyone else was my equal as far as Watcher was concerned. Or rather, they weren't—Beast and Loophole both made it very clear that I was the newest guy in the organization, and I'd be wise to remember that—but I wasn't required to obey them. That was somewhat surprising to me. Considering that I wasn't even a spy, I'd expected to be mocked and ridiculed, but instead everyone seemed to be treating me with a great deal of respect.

Over the next months, I eased into my new job. I soon learned that Watcher's description of the travel involved was an understatement. I was in a new city almost every week, and not just in Germany, or even in Europe. No, I was expected to be in New York, Chicago, Hong Kong, Cape Town...the list went on, and that was in just a few months. Apparently I was supposed to meet with each person on their home ground, although even at the time I thought it odd that a German intelligence agency would be so very far-flung.

It was a pleasure working for them, though. It seemed that anything and everything I could want was easily obtained. I stayed in hotels when I traveled, and every expense was paid before I even checked in. I tentatively inquired about talking to some prominent psychologists who were developing novel methods of therapy, and a meeting was arranged within days.

All of which was very nice, but couldn't quite distract me from the work itself. It wasn't going well, to put it mildly. I'd met with about thirty of Watcher's people by then, and I hadn't been able to do a thing for any of them.

I almost wanted to write it off as inexperience, but I could see that the problem ran deeper than that. Almost everything they said was hesitant, and they regularly trailed off without finishing what they were saying. Every single one of them was talking around something, and that was making my job damn near impossible.

Granted, I'd expected that there would be things they wouldn't want to say. I'd been hired to work as a shrink for a bunch of secret agents; it was a given that there would be secrets. But it's one thing when there are topics you can't discuss, and another when almost every sentence has a hole in it. You can't even carry on a conversation like that, let alone build the kind of relationship a psychologist needed to have with his patients.

I wrestled with it for a week or two after I realized that it wasn't getting better. It was risky to ask for more information—that was the kind of thing that made you look very much like a spy, and I had a strong suspicion that if they thought I was trying to spy on them I'd wind up in a ditch. But in the end I decided it was even riskier if they thought I was leeching on their generosity without doing my job, so I wrote a short letter asking for a meeting with Watcher. I thought this request might go over better in person.

Not that I knew where to send it. I hadn't even seen Watcher since that first interview. So the next time Beast came to check up on me, after we'd gone over my instructions for the next week, I gave her the note and asked her to deliver it for me.

She took the letter, but didn't leave. "You sure you want to do this?" she asked.

I hesitated. "Is it a bad idea?"

She shrugged and sighed. "It's an idea. Good, bad, in between. We'll see how it goes." She reached out and patted me on the shoulder compassionately. "Don't worry, Axel. I'm sure it will go over fine."

I was less sanguine, especially after her initial reaction, but I still thought I was right about what was the smarter move. I tried to put it out of my mind. I went out and ate a nice dinner—paying out of pocket, although it had been made clear that this could also be written off as a business expense—before returning to my hotel room.

When I opened the door, I saw Watcher sitting in my room. The left half of her face was covered in claw marks, and her left eye was missing entirely. There was a cane leaning against her chair, as well, which she hadn't brought to our last meeting.

"Good evening, Dr. Schneider," she said.

"Good evening," I replied, somewhat dumbfoundedly. I hadn't expected a reply so soon, and I definitely hadn't expected...this. "What happened to your face?"

Almost instantly, I wanted to kick myself. How idiotic did you have to *be* to ask that?

Watcher didn't seem to care, though. "A dispute regarding leadership," she said with a pleasant smile. "Which I won. What did you want to discuss?"

I took a deep breath and said, "Your people aren't talking to me. I mean, they are, but there's something they don't want to talk about."

"I'm aware," she said mildly. "I gave very specific instructions on the topic."

Watcher was clearly telling me to back off, but I'd come this far. "It isn't working," I said stubbornly. "I don't know what's going on, but I can't do my job if the patient won't talk to me."

She regarded me for a long, long moment. The tension in the room was so thick you could cut it with an axe, never mind a knife.

Then she smiled. "You're the expert," she said. "But you should know that once you learn this, there's no backing out. Not now, not ever. Not even if you quit working for me. Understood?"

I nodded, letting out a sigh of relief. "Understood."

"Good. So let's start small, then. Tell me, Dr. Schneider, do you believe in magic?"

The bus came to a stop and I jolted awake, sitting up straight. I joined the crowd filing off the bus, trying not to yawn. For once I wasn't on business, but I still wanted to be at least somewhat alert.

I'd barely gotten out of the crowd when Beast fell in beside me. "Hey, Axel," she said. "How's it going?"

"It's going," I said, rubbing my eyes. Too little sleep recently. "How about you?"

Beast was silent for a moment, and I knew it was bad news. "Lost another one," she said at last. "Shapeshifter, turned into a cat. They realized he was listening in, and...." She shrugged and dragged one finger across her throat.

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry." I didn't have to ask to know that they'd been friends. There weren't many shapeshifters among the Watchers, and Beast was the best there was. Of course she'd known him.

It still seemed strange that I'd only known about this for half a year. It seemed like it should have taken longer than that to come to grips with the idea of magic. Oddly enough, though, being a scientist had made the transition considerably easier. I'd been trained to believe in induction and empirical evidence, and they'd presented plenty of that. Sure, it had seemed bizarre, but so was gravity when you thought about it. The universe wasn't obligated to make sense.

"Enough about that," Beast said with forced cheer. "Today's supposed to be happy." She grinned and slapped me on the back. "Happy birthday."

I smiled and kept walking. The bar was only a block or so away, and we reached it pretty soon. Inside, there was already a fairly sizable group waiting for us. Loophole and Fox had both made time to come, as had maybe a dozen of the other Watchers.

Watcher herself wasn't there, of course. I hadn't seen her again, but from what I'd heard she had her hands full and then some trying to keep order. She'd made some unpopular decisions since taking over, being more restrictive and less willing to play politics, and the mage clans hadn't liked it.

It was a good night, food and laughter and embarrassing stories for years to come. It was in a sense my induction into the Watchers, one of the guys despite not having any magic to call my own, and the festivities were appropriately grand. And later, when the party was breaking up and the bar was closing and Beast suddenly leaned over and kissed me, I was just drunk enough to return it.

It was a good night.

It didn't take long after that for me to start breaking the Watchers' problems down into two basic groups. The first was pretty normal. They were battered, worn down by a life of stress, violence, and paranoia, but they were still fairly normal. I worked on them with cognitive techniques, and in quite a few cases prescribed drugs, mostly antidepressants and sleeping aids. Quite a few of them were addicts, relying on alcohol or narcotics to quiet the memories of what they'd seen and done, and I ended up starting a sort of Alcoholics Anonymous group. It wasn't perfect, but they were essentially normal psychiatric patients, and I did a passable job of helping them.

The other problems, though...they were a little different. Because they weren't problems, not really. I wasn't supposed to *cure* their paranoia, violent tendencies, and borderline psychopathy. Because too often, those were the only things that kept them alive.

For those, all I could really do was listen. Some of the Watchers were reluctant to discuss topics like that, and I didn't push them. Most, though, seemed to actually find relief in telling me stories. It became something of a contest to shock me with them. This man had poisoned a teenage girl once; he'd tried to poison her father but she ate the soup that was meant for him. That one had roasted a suspect alive during an interrogation. A woman admitted that she'd allowed a vampire free reign over the slums of New Orleans in exchange for information.

After another several months of this, when I'd done all of the actual therapy that I felt I could, I wrote another letter to Watcher. Loophole passed this one along, since Watcher moved around so much that it might be weeks before she checked in at any of the addresses I had for her.

I hadn't seen Beast for weeks, although we were still together. Shapeshifters were one of the most versatile tools in Watcher's arsenal, capable of both spying and holding their own in a fight, and as a result Beast was always busy overseeing operations or taking to the field herself. Between that and how much time I spent traveling, our relationship was very much one of days or hours snatched where we could find them.

It was almost a week, this time, before Watcher found time to talk to me. She approached me in a restaurant while I was getting lunch on the way to my next flight.

"Dr. Schneider," she said, and I could only admire her ability to remain polite under such intense stress. "What is it?"

"You don't need a psychologist," I said bluntly. Neither of us had time to waste on idle chatter. "Not for half these people, anyway. You need a priest. Half these people just want to confess things."

She sighed. "That was my first idea," she agreed. "But there's something you're overlooking."

"Oh?"

"Yes," she said, sounding very weary. "In this profession, you do a lot of things you'd rather not share with God. A lot of things. It's easier to admit to a psychologist." It didn't sound like she was speaking in hypotheticals.

I nodded slowly, and fled the restaurant as quickly as I could.

I closed my eyes, grimaced, opened them again. My head hurt. My back hurt. I'd spent hours in this chair, and it wasn't a comfortable chair, either. Not to mention that I had another job coming up, something that I hadn't done before.

Hard to believe three years had happened so quickly. But that was the way of time, I supposed.

Hours later I was sitting in my hotel room. It was a familiar room; I'd been to this cheap hotel more times than I wanted to remember. London wasn't my favorite city, but it was one of the Watchers', and that meant I visited often.

It was late and I knew I should be sleeping, but I could also tell that wasn't going to happen any time soon. I spent my time looking over the dossier for the man I was going to meet in the morning instead. If I couldn't sleep, I could at least use the time productively.

His name was Michael Sheridan, age sixteen, American. He'd fallen in with a bad crowd and gotten involved with vaguely specified criminal activities. Eventually one of his buddies went too far and killed someone, and Sheridan had decided to report it to the Watchers. How he knew to contact the Watchers wasn't specified. It wasn't important.

What was important was what happened next. They'd gone in to shut the gang down, only to find that it was being sponsored by someone else. I didn't know who that someone was, only that they were highly placed within the mage clans. As a result, the gang had far more knowledge and equipment than had been expected.

Snake had been leading the team personally, which was probably the only reason things hadn't turned into an absolute disaster. As it was there were three Watchers in the hospital, and most of the kids had been killed in the fight. Sheridan claimed that he hadn't known anything about what they were planning.

I would have been suspicious of that, but apparently Loophole had examined him and it was true. I wasn't going to argue with that. Loophole was old—older, now—but he was still one of the best telepaths the Watchers had. If he said the kid was telling the truth, the kid was telling the truth.

Which made it problematic that he wanted to join the Watchers. It was suspicious, and even if he hadn't set us up he might have been damaged by his association with the gang. At the same time, though, the Watchers couldn't afford to turn anyone down right now.

I knew that as well as anyone. An awful lot of the people I was accustomed to talking with had stopped showing up to their sessions recently. Even Beast had been found in an alley in Shanghai last week, riddled with bullets. It hadn't been enough to kill a shapeshifter of her caliber, thank God, but it would be a while before she was up and walking again.

And Watcher wanted me to screen Sheridan before they let him join. A potentially valuable, potentially disastrous kid wanted to sign up to help fight the bad guys, and I was the one who was supposed to make the call.

Good God. No wonder I couldn't sleep.

The next morning I walked into the restaurant five minutes early. He was already there, which surprised me a little. I wasn't accustomed to young people showing up early. Hell, I certainly hadn't when I was his age.

"Good morning," I said, sliding into the booth opposite him. The photo in the dossier had been generally accurate, although he was wearing a dress shirt and slacks rather than jeans and leather. "You're Michael, correct?"

"Mike," he said, eyeing me suspiciously. "And you are?"

"My name is Axel Schneider," I said, smiling. "You can call me Axel or Dr. Schneider, whichever you prefer. Would you like some food?"

He hesitated, then nodded. I waved a waitress over and he ordered a full English breakfast.

I was sticking to coffee. My stomach was still in knots over what had happened to Beast, never mind my own work.

"Okay, Mike," I said. "I'm guessing you know why I'm here."

"Yeah. You're the one who decides if I get in, right?"

"Essentially, although I should stress that I'm just one opinion. Now, could you tell me a little about why you want to join the Watchers?"

He shrugged. "I fucked up," he said simply. "I mean, big time. I got people *killed*. This seems like a good way to try and make up for that, you know?"

"Right," I said. "You feel it's your fault that people died, then?"

"I don't know," he said, sounding uncomfortable. "I mean, I didn't do it, so I guess not? But it feels like it was. Like I should have been, I don't know. Better."

"You regret joining that gang, then."

"Yeah," he said, then a moment later, "no. I don't know. It was the right decision at the time, I guess. But I regret the way it ended."

"How was it the right decision?"

"Well, I've got this power, right? And I figured the only real options are to spend the rest of my life wondering whether I'm crazy, or learn something about it. Figure out what it is, how it works."

I nodded. "So you joined them because it was a place you could fit in? Come to terms with your power and what it could do?"

"Yeah. You could say that." He grinned weakly. "They actually made a lot of fun of me about it. They're throwing fireballs and stopping bullets, and all I can do is move water around. But I guess I learned quite a bit, really."

"Right," I said. "So tell me the truth. Do you *really* want to join the Watchers to help people? Or is it because we're the best source you have for learning how to control your magic?"

He squirmed under my gaze, looking at the floor. "A little of both," he admitted.

I'd been planning on recommending against letting him in, but that line changed my mind. I'd seen plenty of Watchers who'd signed up to help people. By and large they had pretty serious problems—depression, guilt, stress disorders. They wanted to do good and it hit them hard when they realized that most of what the Watchers did wasn't very good at all.

Somebody who wanted power, on the other hand?

That was worth considering.

I was a little surprised when Loophole sent me a message asking me to meet him in New York. I hadn't seen him in years; Watcher had long since recognized that I didn't need babysat. I mostly set my own schedule anymore.

I was more surprised when I found the designated meeting place, and Watcher was there too.

"Dr. Schneider," she said. "It's nice to see you again."

I wondered whether that was supposed to be a joke. Her other eye had been destroyed a few months earlier, when she was caught in a sorcerer's fire spell. My understanding was that she'd come very, very close to being killed.

"Watcher," I said. "What's going on?"

She sighed, and gestured me to follow her. Loophole walked beside us, although I wasn't sure why he was here if Watcher wanted something. "We need you to do something," she said. "Something a little...unusual."

"Unusual how?" I asked warily.

"A few days ago one of our teams was attacked by a group of rogue mages," Loophole explained. "Very dangerous people. They're wanted for quite a few crimes. They managed to get away, but we caught one."

"So track them down."

He grimaced. "We can't. I was trying to get information out of her for hours yesterday. Got nowhere. She's got unusually strong mental discipline."

"And you want me to get her to talk?" I asked, incredulous. "That's...really not my specialty."

"You're the best we have," Watcher said. "At this point you're probably the closest thing there is to a psychologist specialized in mages. If you could analyze her, come up with anything useful, it would be more than we have now."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay," I said. "I'll try."

They were keeping her in a disused section of the subway—or, rather, their own addition to that disused section. It had been carved out of bedrock and reinforced with magic, and you'd need a high-yield bomb to get through.

Before I could go inside, the two attendants made me put on a protective suit of some kind. It was fully enclosed, with panels of Kevlar on the chest and back. It was awkward, uncomfortable, and hard to move in. It was also probably a good idea.

I stepped inside the containment area and found myself in a surprisingly large room, maybe ten meters to a side. A chain-link fence divided the small strip I was standing in from the rest of the room, which contained a bed, toilet, and not a whole lot else.

Except, of course, for the prisoner.

Even forewarned by Loophole, I was a little taken aback by her appearance. She was hunched over, her arms too long for her body, her fingers too long for her arms and tipped with claws. The result resembled an ape more than a human.

"Good morning," I said, loudly enough to be sure she heard me from across the room. "Could I talk to you for a few minutes?"

She crossed the room faster than I would have thought possible, pressing up against the fence. "Talk," she snarled. "Talk about what?"

"I'm here to see if I can convince you to cooperate with us," I said mildly.

She stayed where she was for a moment, then frowned and backed away from the fence slightly. "You aren't scared," she said. "Most people get scared when I do that."

"My wife is a shapeshifter," I said. "And I routinely work with people who've undergone extreme body modifications. I promise that you aren't the strangest-looking person I've known."

She snorted. "Yeah, I'll bet. So why should I cooperate?"

"Well, obviously there's the possibility of more pleasant accommodations. I don't know whether you could be released entirely, but I'm certainly willing to try. Other than that, you'd have to tell me what you want."

"Do you know why I look like this?" she asked, changing mental gears with a rapidity that suggested those gears might be a little stripped.

"My understanding is that the leader of your group alters new recruits," I said. "Making them physically stronger as well as changing their appearance."

"Yeah," she said, nodding. "You know any way to fix *that*?"

I sighed. "No. But as I said, there are stranger-looking people out there. I think it's very possible that you could come to terms with your appearance and find some measure of acceptance."

She stared at me, then snorted. "You're trying to shrink me."

"That's my job," I agreed.

She sighed. "Look, even if I wanted to help you I couldn't. I don't know where they are or what they're doing now."

"Could you tell me anything about why?" I asked. "Even a little might help."

"Maybe it's because they're fucking crazy," she said dryly. "You're a shrink, right? You ever wonder why they needed to hire you so much?"

"It's an extremely stressful profession."

"Yeah, but there's something else," she said, grinning. It was an intimidating grin. "Something everybody knows but nobody ever talks about. See, magic makes you crazy. You know what my power, my *gift* is?"

"No."

"I feel emotions," she said. "I feel them, I recognize them, and I *change* them." She paused. "Most people are afraid when they hear that," she commented.

"I've seen scarier things," I said. "Honestly, that sounds quite useful. It would make my job much easier."

"Yeah, I bet. It wouldn't make your life easier, though. See, I know what everyone's feeling, all the time. You know how hard that makes it to have a conversation? You know how hard it is to make friends when everyone *knows* you can make them feel however you want?"

"No," I said. "Honestly, I can't begin to imagine. But I can say that if what you want is a place to belong, my organization is probably the best you could do."

"Fine," she whispered. "Send your people in. I'll help if I can."

Later, lying in bed, I found myself thinking back on that conversation. Beast was long since asleep, snoring loudly beside me, but I couldn't get it out of my head.

Magic makes you crazy.

It made a certain amount of sense. The power, the sensations, the experiences it allowed you to have...the human mind wasn't really equipped to cope with that. I could see it doing some damage.

I looked at my wife and wondered whether that applied to her. And, if so, how. The prisoner had been emotional, prone to mood swings and obsessed with the idea of companionship, but I'd also seen mages who were megalomaniacal, emotionally dead, or completely withdrawn from the world. Clearly there were a number of ways it could affect a person.

Even after years of marriage, I still called her Beast. That was probably a bit of a hint that she was, if not insane, certainly not a *normal* human being.

But hell. Even crazy people need friends.