

I felt almost bad watching the medics working on Winter. I was largely responsible for him being there, after all.

The feeling was easily dismissed. This was hardly the worst thing I was responsible for. I had done *terrible* things. That went without saying; I'd been a Watcher for twenty years. Doing terrible things was a part of the job description. It was very nearly the whole of it, in fact.

In comparison, this was relatively mild. He was still alive. He would likely make a full recovery. And we had been doing good work here. Killing people who deserved it, which was better than what I often did.

I wondered idly, as I watched, whether the link between Zhang and the slave trade had been real. It was plausible, if nothing else. He'd had fingers in enough other unsavory pies to make this one a logical next step. That scene might very well have been genuine.

At about that time, the medics began loading Winter and his dog onto stretchers, apparently satisfied with their work, at least enough to move them to a better location before continuing. The kitsune and the giants went with them, leaving only Watchers and our hirelings on site. Good. That made things simpler.

"How'd it go?" Monica asked, stepping up beside me. In a few minutes her work would start, but for the moment she was still enjoying her customary pregame cup of tea. I'd never asked her what she laced the tea with, although I could feel that there was more in that cup than water and tea leaves. I'd learned not to ask questions I didn't want to know the answers to.

I shrugged. "It went. Did what needed doing. The contractors did most of the real work."

She smiled a little, showing teeth a little too crooked to call attractive. "You usually get contractors to do the work," she said. "Isn't that why I'm here?"

"I don't know," I said. "Are you planning on actually *doing* your work?"

She shrugged carelessly. "Give me another ten minutes or so," she said. "I'll work when I'm good and ready."

From anyone else, that kind of attitude would have gotten her into trouble with the Watchers. Maybe even gotten her killed, depending on who she was talking to. The Watchers didn't like much independence in their contractors. It might give them ideas.

Monica knew she could get away with it, though. She wasn't the best in the world when it came to penetrating magical defenses, and she didn't claim to be. She *was* the best who would even consider working for us, and far better than any of the Watchers. For all her attitude, for all the annoyance and expense of hiring her, when there was a really important target, there was no question who I would call.

"Think I've heard of this guy," Monica said after another sip of her tea. "The one you brought in to deal with Zhang. Bit of a psychopath, isn't he?"

I remembered a shadowy basement full of children, a sword, blood. "A bit," I said uncomfortably. Hard to deny the accusation when I'd seen his face, heard his *voice* while he executed that man. Hard to deny that I'd have done something similar if he hadn't beaten me to the punch, and what did that make *me*?

"How'd you get him to work with you here?"

I shrugged. "We manipulated him," I said simply. "Mostly truth, but we made sure he saw the right truth to make him want to help."

"Mostly truth," she said, looking at me with an odd half-smile playing about her lips. "So which parts were lies?"

Unwillingly, I found myself thinking once more about that room full of children. Surely that had been real, I thought. That scene of misery couldn't have been fabricated. Those children must have been slaves, even if Zhang hadn't been responsible.

It would have been more comforting if I weren't so intimately aware of how easily it could have been arranged. Those kids could have been enslaved, brutalized, had their whole lives torn away, just to provide Winter with a bit of motivation at a critical time. I had done similar things in the past—nothing involving children, that would involve crossing lines that I wasn't willing to *touch*, but I'd arranged other scenes. I'd been the one to provide that critical *push* for other people in the past.

But Monica was waiting for an answer, so I shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "They never tell us that. It's easier to sell a lie if you don't know you're lying."

"I don't think I could work for anyone who would limit my information like that," she said frankly. "Not telling me everything about what I'm doing...I couldn't tolerate that."

"I couldn't work for anyone who didn't," I replied.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's...we do bad things. Some of the worst. That's why we keep our secrets so compartmentalized. Every Watcher does horrible, terrible things. It's a necessary part of this line of work. But I have a hard enough time coping with what I've done. If I had to know about every bad thing the Watchers as a whole do, I think it'd drive me insane."

She smirked and drank more tea. "I have a hard time picturing you doing anything that bad," she said. "What was it? What crimes, what *sins* weigh so heavy on your conscience?"

I thought about blood and death. Civilian casualties in the dozens. Handing a prisoner off to the men in stained lab coats and watching them close the door of the soundproof room. Vivisecting a particularly lifelike construct that turned out to just be someone's pet. A long hallway lined with cells, the residents of which were too dangerous to let out, too valuable to kill. Leaving friends to die, because the mission was more important.

So many bad things, and yet I kept doing them. Because I knew, I *knew*, that the alternative was even worse.

"You don't want to know," I said quietly. "You *really* don't want to know."

She shrugged and drank the last of her tea. "Maybe not," she said, tossing the cup aside carelessly. "Whatever. Let's go loot this place."