

Laurel knocked on my door before entering. An affectation, given that she knew I was aware of her presence long before she reached that point, but that was Laurel. She was not a polite soul, but she did have an odd sense of humor and an absurdist streak.

"Come in," I said, reading over a report from Istanbul. Vision had been difficult for me to imitate for several months after losing my second eye, but I had been well motivated. Detecting and manipulating light were not in line with my original talents, but they weren't terribly difficult things to learn.

She opened the door and stepped into my office, nodding deeply in my direction. I could feel the movement, even if I wasn't focusing on her enough to have a sense comparable to sight. "Watcher," she said. "Mission complete."

"Good," I said. "Report."

"Target is deceased. Collateral damage was minimal. Winter wasn't happy with it, but I think he'll come around."

"Good work. Take a few days to recover, then there's another job waiting. This one's in Aurora, just outside Denver. Another lunatic messing about with life."

She sighed. "Why do they never learn?" she asked plaintively. "We have four rules. *Four*. How can this be *that* hard for people?"

"Hope springs eternal in the deluded breast," I said dryly, handing her an envelope. The files had been redacted extensively in preparation for being given to an agent. I had then removed additional details in preparation for giving it to Laurel, specifically. There were details she didn't need to know. There were details that would just get in the way of doing what was necessary.

She took the file and walked out. I watched her go without sight and then turned my attention back to the report from Istanbul. Initial reports had come in from informants nearly a month earlier, and while I had initially dismissed it as exaggeration, the preliminary report from the Watcher sent to confirm suggested that they were relatively accurate. If so, this might demand much more than a single assassin.

I might even have to go myself to ensure that it was handled with appropriate caution. Once, the thought would have held a certain appeal. It had been years since I was on the ground to deal with a threat, after all. But now, all I felt was a mild annoyance at the prospect of such a disruption to my routine. It could take weeks to catch up on a single missed day.

When I first became a Watcher, I would never have guessed that running the organization involved so much paperwork, and so little action.

I finished the report and filed it away to await further information, then turned to the next item. One of our contractors had recovered a moderately dangerous item and wanted to transfer it to a safer

storage area; I forwarded that to Keeper, since such things were more her field than mine. A full meeting of the Conclave had been scheduled for two weeks hence; my presence was required, if not precisely *desired* by any party. A Watcher in Brussels had confirmed that her target had unknowingly violated two of our rules, and was requesting a confirmation before killing him; I signed off on it.

After about an hour, I became aware of an oddity within the area, a presence. It was hard to define or explain what that awareness was; it was just an *awareness*.

I didn't bother looking around. Even if I weren't blind, I wouldn't have seen him; that was one of his many gifts. "Hello, Nobody," I said.

He stepped up in front of me. He was wearing a cheap, badly fitted suit, and looked just as uncomfortable in his body as he did in the suit. He was a little overweight, a little short, balding.

Nobody never really got comfortable in his body. He couldn't keep one long enough. This one had lasted two years, which might be the longest of any I could remember.

"Hello, Watcher," he said, looking at me curiously. "What are you doing?"

"Paperwork," I said patiently. You learn to be patient with Nobody rapidly; any other approach quite simply doesn't work. "What are you doing?"

He frowned. "I had something to say, I think. Something about...um. What was I supposed to be doing today?"

"You were recovering a hostage from Syria," I said. Normally, Nobody would not be remotely my first choice for a hostage situation. But the sectarian violence was particularly vicious in the area this job took place in, and he was the only single person I was confident could handle the threats. There was effectively nothing in this world that could really *threaten* him. At worst he could be annoyed, or temporarily inconvenienced, and odds were very good that he wouldn't even notice.

"Oh," he said. "Right. I remember now. She's dead. I tried to save her but they shot her anyway. It was bloody. I got blood on my suit." He glanced down at his clothing in annoyance. Any bloodstains that might have been there weren't there now.

I sighed. "Better than leaving her there," I said. "Good work, Nobody."

He frowned. "I had another name once," he said. "A real name."

I smiled sadly. "So did I."

The awareness sharpened, focusing on me much more strongly, and I shivered at the intensity. The room seemed to grow several degrees colder, and the air seemed to grow close and confining around me, although I knew that it was all in my head.

"At least you can remember your name, *Sofia*," he said. His voice had none of the plaintive, meandering quality it had before. On the contrary, it was strong and authoritative. Even in his cheap

suit, his sheer *presence* now would cow almost anyone into meek obedience. "Don't pretend to understand me, Watcher. Don't pretend that you know what you're talking about. We both know better."

I watched him go in silence. It was always startling to get a glimpse of the real Nobody, through the layers of rust and the cracks in his mind. It was sobering to be reminded of what he really was.

We would kill him, if we could find a way to make it stick. The whole reason he joined the Watchers was out of hope that he would come up against something that could figure out a way to end him. I couldn't really blame him; his peculiar form of immortality was not something that I would ever choose.

He'd been trying for five hundred years at least, since he joined the Watchers, and God only knew how long before that. Nobody's memories were fragmentary at best, and if he knew how he'd gotten this curse placed on him or who he'd been beforehand, he hadn't told me.

After a few seconds, the fire went out of him, and he was back to being Nobody. "Are we doing the right thing?" he asked. It wasn't a rhetorical question, or a plea for reassurance. It was a genuine question.

"No. But if we don't do it, who will?"

He nodded as though that made perfect sense. "In my experience no one," he said seriously.

I watched him go, and then went back to my paperwork.