

WATCHERS

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Fiction

Vicky pushed open the glass doors to the pristine Royal District's interrogations office, a far cry from the inner city's dungeon. Stepping up to the front desk she flashed her badge to the burly guard, a flat screen projecting the words: THE WATCHERS PROTECT YOU.

"He's in block A-9," the guard said after glancing over her badge. "You've got a real handful this time, Vic. This guy's a nut-job."

"Thanks, Charlie. I'll try to not get too excited."

Charlie flipped a switch and two reinforced steel doors slid open, leading Vicky into a similarly bright hallway with smaller steel doors lining the walls on both sides. Near the end of the hall a man and a guard stepped out of a room. As Vicky neared them, she saw the trails of sweat running down their foreheads.

"Johnny, what's going on?" she asked.

"Oh, you're here," he shook his head. "We can't get jack out of this guy. I don't know if he's got balls of steel or what—"

"Beating up the criminals doesn't always work, Johnny."

"We tried talking to him first! Asking questions, playing the whole good cop spiel but it was no go. Just kept refusing because we're, 'too stupid to understand,' Well, at that point I just figured screw it and started wailing on him."

"That you wouldn't understand what?"

"I don't know, whatever point he was trying to make I guess. But there's something about him that just seems...wrong. Like he's in on some cosmic joke that I'm just not getting."

"I'd better go in and talk with him," Vicky said.

Johnny stepped between her and the door. "Wait, Vic. I don't want you going in there by yourself. This guy is way out of whack."

"Who was the one who passed the combat exam at the academy with an A and not a C+?" Vicky smirked. "Certainly not Mr. Johnny Lowe. Keep the guard here in the hall if it makes you feel better."

"Bring up old wounds again why don't you," Johnny mumbled.

“Take five, tiger. You need them.”

As the door shut from behind her, all humor wiped itself clean from Vicky’s face. The room’s already tight space was made even more cramped with the inclusion of a metal table and two matching chairs. In one chair sat a young man, his face covered by hair and shadows as he looked down and wiped blood off from his nose. The other chair laid across the floor in one of the corners.

Vicky crossed the room and placed the chair back in its spot. She took a seat across from the man, letting him look at her before speaking.

“My name is Victoria Mendoza. What’s yours?”

The young man’s eyes narrowed. “You have my file, why are you asking my name?”

“Politeness. Call it a force of habit,” she shrugged.

His laugh began so quietly that Vicky almost thought he was choking on his blood. He finally lifted his head to address her, his face marred by bruises and cuts.

“Is that how you talk to all the crazy people around here?” he asked.

“Do you think you’re crazy?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think does it? Nothing matters here except I pulled a knife and got caught. End of story, right?”

“I want to know why you did it,” she said.

That made him pause. His expression changed from defiance to silent confusion. “My name is Evan Ryder.”

“Good, now we’re getting somewhere,” she said, pulling out the case file on Evan.

Scanning the brief biography, she found his date of birth. He wasn’t that much younger than her.

You just had a birthday recently, how was that?”

“Why is my birthday of any importance?”

Vicky shut the file, giving him one of those looks of authority that her mother used to give her as a kid.

Evan shrugged. “I didn’t throw a party or anything. I was working that day.”

“No family then?”

“No. I don’t have any family.”

“How did you start working at that marketplace?”

“You know how I got that job. Same way that you got yours. Same way that everybody gets glued to their occupations for the rest of their lives.”

“I want you to tell me your side of the story.”

Vicky got the impression that he must think she was the weirdest damn Watcher he'd ever come across.

“How about you tell me a little about yourself first? Since you want to get to know me so badly, it's only fair that I should get to know you too right?” He smiled.

Vicky raised a brow at his coyness but didn't argue his request.

“Go ahead.”

“You don't seem like any of the cops I've met. Definitely not like that asshole who beat the shit out of me,” Evan said as he gently rubbed the side of his face.

“You're somehow different from other cops.”

“What makes you say that?” Vicky asked.

“I overheard your conversation. Sounded like you got a perfect rating compared to your partner. What the hell kind of criteria did you have to meet to get that score?”

“All it took was a little dedication and hard work, that's all.”

“Sure it did. So from what I can tell you actually want to be in this job. That's interesting.” Evan laughed.

The sound of papers shuffling against the metal table reflected the sigh Vicky kept inside.

“The criteria was just standard combat knowledge; hand-to-hand, how to handle a wide breadth of firearms, the basics. Now, I answered your question so you answer mine.”

“You sure don't waste time,” Evan gave a broken grin. “It was when I was sixteen. Normally they don't permanently employ minors but I was a special case, being that my parents were gone by then.”

“They had the accident by then?”

Evan held up a hand to her.

“I'm afraid it's my turn again, Vicky.”

This time she sighed, leaning back in her seat to give him the floor.

“Why did you become a cop in the first place?”

“You know the system just as well as I do. They deemed me fit for the job so I took it.”

“Believe me, I know the system very well.”

Vicky flipped a few pages of the file to find one with a photograph attached by a paper clip. The photo was of a switchblade knife, its handle made of a deep red wood with the letters M. R. carved at the bottom.

“Then why did you pull that knife on your coworker? Obviously you

knew you weren't getting away with it."

"I got the clerk job because they said I had a 'special talent for making people feel welcome,'" Evan chuckled. "But that was a load of crap because I never liked people even when I was a kid."

"These letters on the knife. Are they initials?" She flipped the file around and pushed it towards Evan. He nodded.

"My dad gave me that knife when I was about 11 years old. Called it a family heirloom."

Vicky turned the papers back towards her.

"You don't hear much about heirlooms these days."

"That's kind of sad. Your old man didn't leave you something special?"

"There wasn't any 'old man.'"

"Ah," Evan curled his fingers around his chin thoughtfully. "So it was just you and mom, was it?"

Vicky's jaw tightened only a fraction.

"The parental figures of my life, absent or otherwise, aren't really important here are they? I'm only here to represent the law."

"The law is fucked. I know it, I know you know it. I bet the dead pieces wrapped in plastic knew it while I was selling them to those Superiors."

His voice carried with it the thickness of acidity, nearly spitting out the last word with pure abhorrence.

"Is this why you attacked your coworker in a Royal District market? You're just another one of those delinquent anarchists?"

She was certain he would have taken great offense to her comment, but surprisingly the anger in his features almost washed away completely with the resurgence of that crooked smile.

"I like to think I at least have some level of tact."

"Could've fooled me. My partner caught you before you had time to escape," she said.

"I didn't try to escape or hide. I knew I would have been found eventually. I have to hand it to your guy though, faster with his fists than his brain, but he sure got there pretty quick."

Vicky decided not to acknowledge that quip.

"Well, if you say you have more tact than an average anarchist, what was your real reason for causing that disturbance?"

"Before I get to that, can I get an ice pack or something for my face? It's starting to hurt like a real fucker right now."

Vicky went to the door to tell the guard and in moments returned with a frozen thermal pack. Handing it to him, Evan held it tenderly to the red swells now turning a deep purple. She couldn't help but feel the slightest bit of pity for Evan. Johnny beating up the kid that bad was going on overzealous.

A few seconds of silence passed. Evan's gentle patting of the pack against his broken face becoming absentmindedly repetitive as his eyes stared vacantly at a spot on the floor.

"You know, I just got the beating of a lifetime yet it's actually not the worst pain I've ever felt."

Vicky's brow furrowed at the emptiness in his tone.

"The reason I attacked the guy I've worked with for almost a year, the reason I couldn't fucking take it anymore, why I refused to spend another eight hours shelving yarns of hair and packets of minced leg meat, was because of that knife. Because of my father and my mother."

"What was it?" Vicky almost whispered but kept her voice steady.

"It was around the same time when I was given that knife. It was during one of those riots when the Superiors were starting to come into power. The streets were so crowded and reeked of the sweat and blood of protestors and Watchers fighting; many times killing each other. My parents only brought me there to show me how unjust the Superiors are, for wanting us to be nothing but cattle and slaves. They were part of the rebel group against the Superiors, planning on taking them all down with whatever means necessary. I grew up watching them strategize in secret of plans to kill the Superiors. During those years I didn't know of whom I needed to be more afraid of, the Superiors or my own parents. Until the day of that riot at the Centre of the Angels eleven years ago."

Vicky's spine became rigid as stone. It took all of her will not to make a sound of complete shock.

"I was pressed between the side of a car and my mother's body shielding me from gunfire overhead," Evan continued. "My dad and a few other rebels were trying to hold their own against a group of cops. One by one, they were killing us off. David, Amber, Lily, all of these people like my parents being killed in front of me. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw him standing there on a street corner. I remember it so clearly because somehow that corner was empty except for him. A thing that seemed so human but there was nothing human about it. That was when I knew what I should have been afraid of, what I've been afraid of nearly all my life until now. In that instant my mom saw him too then

she whispered to me, ‘Run.’ It was like I heard it through somebody else’s ears, but my body moved for me. The car exploded behind me and threw me—how far did it throw me? God, it must’ve thrown me across the world. Everybody was screaming and running without knowing where to go. I could have easily died there trampled on the pavement if she hadn’t picked me up. A girl I’d never met before saved me that day.”

Lifting his gaze to meet hers, Evan’s expression darkened. The hollows of his cheeks and circles under his eyes became more prominent, making him look years ahead of his time.

Vicky’s mind flatlined, though her face remained stoic. Staring blankly down at the case file, she shuffled through the pages again.

“You remember don’t you?” Evan spoke low but firm.

His cuffed hands pressing onto the table, the thermal pack forgotten now.

“You were there at the riot that day, you lifted me up from the ground and took me to the nearest hospital. You told me your name that day and asked me mine. I’m very good at remembering names,” he ended with a humorless smirk.

She folded her hands together atop the table.

“I’m afraid I’d have to charge you with impersonation of another person’s identity as well,” Vicky said, “there is no information in your file that states your parents died from an explosion. It says they died in an automobile accident. A crash. Not an explosion.”

Evan burst out in sudden, burning anger.

“Don’t you see? They hide everything from you! It doesn’t matter if you’re a Watcher taking orders directly from the Superiors, they don’t trust you or any of us!”

“I’m afraid I’m going to ask you to keep your voice down, Evan,” Vicky said coldly.

He complied, sinking further into his seat with veiled composure.

“I’m telling the truth. I know it was you who saved me that day. ‘Vicky Mendoza,’ that’s what you told me your name was.”

“Say that I do believe you, what then? That doesn’t change the fact that I’m a law enforcer now and you’re a criminal. What happened in the past doesn’t matter anymore.”

“My mom used to say the past can change everything,” Evan said. “Why were you there that day? Where was your mother?”

“She was on duty,” was Vicky’s stern reply.

“So a cop too, huh? Funny coincidence.”

The two of them stared at each other intently. The white light of the room slowly burned behind Vicky's unblinking eyes, causing darkness to creep around the edges of her vision and casting Evan's silhouette in dim shadow. His mother believed that past events had an effect on the present. Vicky's mother always told her never to believe in coincidences.

Evan broke the silence. "If your mom was a Watcher too, then I don't think she would have been too keen on you being at a riot."

"She didn't know," Vicky said as she turned away. "I never told her."

"Because you believed in the rebels, didn't you?"

Her head snapped towards him.

"I can see that you're not like the others. I could see it then at the Centre of the Angels and I can see it even now, when we're on different ends of the spectrum. But that spectrum is just where they place us to divide us, from each other. It doesn't exist if you don't let it. The power they hold over us, it's all fake. I know you understand what I'm talking about. They hide everything from us, Vicky, while they use us as their playthings. My parents saw it and fought to have others understand, but people are too comfortable in their ignorance to just see what's right in front of them."

"Evan, what you are saying is liable to get you locked in prison for a very, very long time. And if it is true, if your parents really were killed while defending you and what they believed in, then you're a fool for squandering the freedom they allowed you to keep."

Vicky was nearing her breaking point, every word she spoke only tightened around her chest like rope.

"None of us are free," Evan said as he burst from his pent up rage and shot up from his seat, "giving me a job, letting me live as a 'citizen' was just a part of their plan. They kept constant watch on me, just like they do with you. With all of us."

"Sit down, Evan," Vicky said.

He didn't listen.

"They don't trust us. They're afraid of us. As long as we're not on their dinner plates or hanging up on their walls, purchasable from plastic containers at stores, they don't know what we're truly capable of. They like to think of themselves as all-seeing gods, but they're not. That's why they need people like you, Vicky. You're their eyes in this city. As much as they treat you like you're expendable, they need you. But if you let them see only what you want them to see, you have the power."

Now Vicky stood.

“You know, I’m trying hard, Evan. I really am. But you’re making it increasingly difficult for me to not think that you’re utterly insane.”

“I’m not crazy and you know it, I can tell. You’re not like any of the other ignorants out there, Vicky. You see it too, the way they treat us like cattle even while they need us. We can change everything if you could just help me. We could help everybody.”

Evan paused to take a steady breath. The eyes that looked right into Vicky’s held in them a desperation that she hadn’t seen since that day she sat next to a young boy in a hospital waiting room.

“That’s why I let myself get caught today, I needed to find you. I’ve heard about you on the news, all the work you had done. And I immediately recognized you. So I committed that crime today so that we could meet again and so I could tell you the truth. Because I knew you were the only one who would understand.”

Vicky found that her resolve had shattered into splinters. She turned away from Evan.

“My time is up, Mr. Ryder,” she said and slapped the file shut.

Evan remained motionless even as she stepped towards the door.

The last words he spoke to her came as only a whisper, “It will be if you keep playing their game.”

Without another look back, Vicky left the interrogation room and met with Johnny’s expectant gaze on the other side.

“Vic, what happened? You look like death,” Johnny said.

“Nothing,” she quickly turned down the hall. “I have to go.”

“Vicky, wait! What did he tell you?”

She broke into a near run until reaching outside the interrogations office, a burning sweat on her face meeting with the crisp chill of the night. Footsteps caught up behind her.

“Vicky, seriously, what’s wrong with you? I’ve never seen you so shaken up.”

Vicky stayed quiet for a long moment as her quick breaths became slow and steady. A wind loosened some of the strands of her ponytail.

“Do you ever think that what we’re doing is all worthless?”

“What?” Johnny asked.

They’re using you, they’re just using you.

Evan’s words played back in her head in rapid succession, making her wince in the wake of another headache.

“Never mind,” she played it off with a small laugh. “Just a migraine again, I’m fine. See you at the station tomorrow.”

With that, Vicky walked the short distance from the offices to her car, leaving Johnny behind in the cold.

Driving through the streets of the Royal District always gave Vicky the sickening feeling of vertigo. The neon lights and glowing advertisements swirling together across her field of vision almost blinded her. A red light signaled a moment's rest from her nausea, which she gladly accepted with a heavy sigh.

All the events of just a couple of hours ago weighed heavy making her neck and head ache, as if the ponytail at her nape was tightening to rigid tautness; a horse a slave to its reigns. Vicky brought a hand up to massage her forehead then slowly felt a quiet gnawing overcome her. She was being watched.

The sensation was more akin to the weightiness of dread, heavy with familiarity. Through the sea of passerby outside of the side window, she located the eyes of a man burning right into her.

Those eyes. The eyes that Evan saw before the place where he stood burst in flames.

Suddenly she felt like she was seeing the man through Evan's eyes, into that pallid shade of nothingness. An empty pit yet much worse. Instead of falling through the heaviness of the dark, those eyes made her plummet into feather light emptiness. The man shifted against the wall of the cafe he was leaning against and Vicky found herself shifting with him from the driver's seat. Did he know what she was thinking? Would he inform the Superior? The only coherent thought going through Vicky's mind was the image of him igniting her car with roaring flames.

Then he turned on his heel, blending into the surrounding crowd and vanishing.

Vicky snapped back to the road, the light turning green at just that instant. Her body switched to autopilot, her foot on the gas pedal blurring the lights into a never ending splotch of anxious color.

They're afraid of us. They like to think of themselves as all-seeing gods, but they're not.

Back in the grey darkness of her cramped office, Vicky shed off her blazer and tossed it aside without paying attention as to where. Sitting in the center of her desk was her laptop, the blink of a cold blue light on the corner indicating an incoming video call.

The Watcher's Superior Enforcer would have been informed by now that Vicky had gone to the interrogations office like he had instructed her earlier that evening. Now he wanted all of the details that she had

gathered so that he and the Superior Justices can decide what to do with the criminal, Evan Ryder.

Vicky sat in her desk chair and opened the laptop screen, the call blinking with the ID name: Superior Enforcer. The ringing was so distant it may as well have been just the quiet roar of her pulse in her ears.

Only let them see what you want them to see. You have the power.

She remembered a conversation she had with her mother the day before the Centre of the Angels riot, before her mother was killed during one of the many shootings.

She had said to a fourteen year old Vicky, “In this cruel time we live in, you can’t believe in coincidences. If something happens, that’s because it was meant to. Even if it means it’s you against the whole world.”

Vicky reached back to the tie at the nape of her neck, pulling it off so that her hair fell across her shoulders in waves of black.

“I have the power,” she said into the empty room.

Closing the laptop, she cut off the only source of light so there was nothing but darkness.