

No One To Blame

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Demongate High

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The Unveiled World

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No One to Blame

Paragon Universe

Lonely Divide

No One To Blame

Robert Ziefel

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination, arose through the Demongate High Paragon campaign played by Robert Ziefel and his friends, or are used fictitiously.

No One To Blame

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For Those That Seek

*Be it scientific, art, spiritual or physical,
never stop looking for the right questions
to get you closer to the truth*

No One To Blame

1

That Morning, August 1, 2039

“For the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: ‘If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?’ And whenever the answer has been ‘No’ for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.” --Steve Jobs

The sun was just beginning to rise as I awoke that day, feeling excited for my first day on the job. Gentle light was filtering in through the blinds of my apartment windows, and on my dresser the tiny red form of Pretzel continued to snooze. I smiled- today would be the day! My new office was furnished, the ad for my consulting business was in, no detail had been forgotten. I didn't have to rush out the door or scramble to pull last minute things together because everything was under control.

Then I woke up for real.

I looked blearily over at the clock, which showed rather brazenly I was an hour late getting up. I dimly recalled setting it the night before, so as I squinted at it in the harsh morning sunlight I wondered how that could be. There was a tiny amount of panic growing in my heart that this was not the way I wanted my first day on the job to begin. Luckily I was my own boss, but still, it wasn't a good sign no matter how you looked at it.

Who am I? Ericka Chesterfield at your service. No seriously, hire me. I had turned twenty five that year and so finally qualified for getting my PI license, which I had done just recently. June was spent talking to marketers, real estate agents, gun shops and the like getting ready to open my own professional investigation office off Chili Road in Rochester, New York. I hadn't actually purchased a gun yet, they were expensive and I had other means at my disposal. One day, perhaps, but not yet.

I knew I would be great at being a PI because my schooling at Demongate High had prepared me well in the use of my powers. Also I had worked as an assistant at another office because you need five years

experience before you can strike out on your own. They were really, really sorry to see me go.

Because I closed cases. With my abilities I-

What do you mean, what's Demongate High? What "powers?" I guess I better start at the beginning. Not to sound too uptight, but I was not your every day, fake "psychic" looking to take you for every penny. That's what a "psychic" was- a person that fed you a story based on things they observed about you or thought you wanted to hear. Then they took you for whatever they could and moved on. So I didn't blame people for having the kind of attitude towards psychics that they did, most of the deserved it! Of course the Foundation helped with that attitude, as it kept people who maybe did glimpse some real power guessing. Anything they could do to keep the world of demons away from regular people- they did.

Now me? I was an ESPer; short for ExtrasenSory PERson, that is, a person with real power and the means to use it. I could do all the tricks (and then some) usually associated with those stupid fake "psychics" you see on TV or wherever. In my case, what I could do was real. Lifting objects with my mind? Check! Contacting spirits? Check! Telling the future, or seeing the history of an object? Double Check! My powers were real, and I had attended a high school, Demongate High, where I learned to control them. My graduating class was about two hundred students with powers as subtle as throwing energy blasts to as obvious as humming someone into an easy, peaceful slumber. It was all about how your soul used the energy of life within you to make things happen in the real world, and I had plenty of that. Not as much as my dad, but then, who did!?

The ad I had placed in just about every medium I could afford didn't list me as a "psychic detective" or anything like that. I was listed as I should be- "ESP Consulting." Of course I had gone back and forth about what to call myself when I decided on the name for the business. It might bring in more business being listed with the other "psychics" in town, but more crazies too. Being listed as an ESPer would weed some of them out, because they wouldn't know what that was. But those that did would know I was the real deal and would set their expectations properly. Hopefully this would cut down on crank calls and emails, too.

Naturally it wasn't all gumdrops and lollypops; demons and angels

were real, and not everyone was on the up-and-up in regard to using their powers responsibly. That's where the Foundation came in. They didn't want the general populace to know all this was going on behind the scenes, so they kept a tight grip on people with powers when they went out into the "real world."

I was no exception.

I had to get their permission to open this business, and swear before several Seers I would not use my more overt powers where normal people could see. Overt meaning blowing stuff up with my mind, or setting someone's hair on fire by thinking about it. I had plenty of abilities I could use subtly though, so I wasn't too worried about that. Most of those kind would be what I'd use in my business as a PI anyway, so I figured I would be all right. My worry right now, that second, was why my alarm hadn't woken me up an hour and a half ago.

I pushed the button on my clock to see when the alarm was supposed to go off, and it was set for another hour in the future, making me grind my teeth. Had I been that careless? Wait, maybe I accidentally moved the time forward on it, too? I grabbed my computer view screen and slipped it over my eyes, making it come to life. Objects in my view highlighted and I saw I had some email. The clock matched up though, so I tore them off again and shouted for Pretzel.

"Oh, is it morning?" said a sleepy voice on top of my dresser.

"Yes, it's morning," I shouted at the tiny red imp who was rising from his little bed. He shook out his wings and looked around. "What did you do to my alarm?" I pointed at it angrily.

"Oh, I was watching you toss and turn and it looked like you fell asleep really late so I thought you could use more sleep so I moved your alarm by a couple of hours so you would be nice and rested in the morning." He eased back a little after that came tumbling out of him. "Was that the wrong thing to have done?"

"Aarg!" I shouted to no-one in particular, throwing my covers aside and yanking off my night shirt. I stormed into the bathroom.

"And they call me a demon..." I heard Pretzel mutter as I jumped in the shower.

I knew I was being a little unfair to him. He was genuinely trying

to help, I knew, but sometimes he just didn't understand why humans did things. Being a demon meant he used to be human at some point in the past, but somehow had broken the All-Father's rules enough to be sent to the Demon World after he died. That's where his soul eventually became the imp he was today. The process made him forget being human for the most part, as he took on the characteristics that defined being an imp. Most imps, heck, most demons for that matter were cut of the same cloth. If you met one kamaitachi you had met most of them, as all demons of a type acted the same way. Didn't know why, personally, but it was true, so I accepted it.

I had cornered him on a case a few months ago after he had somehow found his way to our little corner of the multiverse, and didn't have the heart to send him back. The Demon World was Hell, you know! So he promised to be good and I said he could stay with me if he behaved himself. He had been playing tricks on the people in the house he was staying at, so it was still in his nature. What that meant for me was that sometimes even trying to be helpful, it worked out wrong for him. Our arrangement was working out so far though, so I put up with his odd behavior and he helped me when he could.

He had to stay out of sight, having a literal demon riding on one's shoulder tends to freak out the Foundation and normal people alike. His powers of invisibility made sure he kept a low profile, while his powers of Scrying and Alchemy helped me out directly. Being the size of a pet turtle didn't hurt either, he could hide pretty well. Otherwise he looked like all imps; red skin, leathery wings, tiny horns and a tail. Oh, and that grin of his, which was kind of creepy. He had been learning and changing since coming to the real world, so I often wondered if one day he wouldn't act like an imp at all anymore.

I quickly dried myself, put on my new suit and some makeup, then checked myself over in the mirror. I was pretty average looking, I thought, with blue eyes and shoulder length blown hair. I was 1.7 meters tall, the US finally switching over to the metric system in 2025, and I worked out enough to keep fit. My mother was half Chinese and half Japanese, my father just plain white, but I had only a hint of Asian features. It came through more or less strongly in my sisters, which I supposed was only natural.

Walking briskly through the kitchen I grabbed a bagel and some juice to eat in the car. My computer view screen again went over my

eyes and I asked it where my keys were. The left eye glass showed me a picture of my keys on the table next to the couch, and I grabbed them up. I looked around the room.

I could only afford a studio apartment, so it was pretty small. Everything in it was small, from the table and chairs to the bathroom. I had tried to spruce the place up a little, with some pictures and things hung on the walls. I had a small set of triangular shelves pushed into one corner with some figurines I had picked up over the years, but a lot of my possessions were in storage or still with my parents. One day I would have a nice house, and plenty of room to spread out. But for now, just having someone over felt like moving both walls in a couple of meters. Of course, sometimes that was nice...

“What am I missing?” I asked. My computer again responded, showing me the gym bag I had packed the night before with more casual clothes, in case I needed them.

“Ah yes, thank you.”

You're welcome, replaced the picture, then faded back into a natural view as I grabbed the bag and headed out the door.

“You coming, Pretzel?” I called.

“Are you still mad?” His voice ghosted in from the bedroom.

“Furious. Come on, you've been looking forward to this as much as I have. I won't make you miss it.”

He winged his way over to me and took his customary place on my shoulder. I felt him grab my hair so he didn't get bounced off and he went invisible so we could leave the apartment.

Getting into my car, I heard a pleasant female voice inquire “Will I be driving you somewhere or would you like manual control?”

“Take me to work,” I replied, having programmed the address in earlier.

“Very good,” responded the voice.

“Creepy voice,” I heard Pretzel say in my ear as the car started itself, then pulled out of the garage and onto the street. I knew the car would take 104W to 390S, then 490W to Chili Ave, and at least at this hour traffic wasn't as bad as it might have been earlier. I tore into my bagel. As I left the vicinity of the house my computer showed it was switching over from *LAN comm.* to *CELL comm.* and the lock icon showed my encryption path was stable. That icon faded out, leaving just the unread message count in the upper right corner of my vision.

“You still don't like my car, huh?” I asked with a grin, once I had

swallowed that chunk of bagel. My car was a yellow 2028 Ford Beyond, in pretty good shape, given the age. There were some rust spots starting to form on the driver side, which worried me a little. The AI wasn't the best, but it had been "customized" by the previous owner, and like all cars it could drive itself. This left me free to eat and catch up on those emails I noticed earlier. Somehow it being able to talk and drive itself made my little friend nervous.

"It's just a thing," he said. "It shouldn't have a personality."

I laughed, already feeling better now that I had some food in me.

"You lived in the Demon World how many years? Saw things I don't even want to imagine? And you get upset that my car asks me where I want to go?"

"It's just unnatural, that's all."

"It's technology," I countered. "No more unnatural than my computer." I tapped the glasses on my face. I didn't need to wear glasses, the lens weren't vision correcting. But they did have a camera, microphone, and could project an overlay onto my vision which had come in handy at times. They were more expensive than the old style monitors some people still used, but allowed me the freedom to basically walk around with my home computer wherever I went. This helped me keep my life on track, so I felt naked without them. More and more people were wearing them all the time, so it was more odd to see someone without glasses these days than with them.

"You could step on them. The car- not so much."

"I bet if I needed to I could flip it over though."

"You better not!" The car's voice sounded shocked, if that was possible.

"See!" said Pretzel. "Exactly what I'm talking about!"

"What will I do with you two?"

That was part of the "customizations," recognizing keywords and responding in a funny way. It was like a game to discover new ones, and the previous owner had thrown in some wacky phrases that made it say something funny. I still wasn't sure I knew all of them. Either that or the previous owner made the AI way smarter than normal, and just told me what he did so I didn't get suspicious. That was a slightly unsettling thought.

My emails were mostly spam, but one was from my parents, Dean and Yasui, wishing me good luck on my first day. Oh, and almost all

of my six sisters wished me the same thing. Yes, I have six sisters. My father really, really wanted a boy so they kept trying, I guess. But all he got was us girls, whom he did spoil terribly. I shook my head.

My father was special.

I know, every girl thinks their father is the best, but it was a little more true in my case. He was not only the best Artificer in the world, called in to identify dangerous artifacts or construct new ones, he had the potential to master every kind of power on earth. Remember a few years ago when the Eiffel Tower collapsed because of all that chaos nonsense? He was the one who made the tower a *talisman* again after they got finished putting it back together.

Oh, and he was immortal, and had twice my *Spirit Energy* to power his various abilities. Apparently he'd been some kid named "Toby" before, but then reality changed... he didn't like to talk about it. Needless to say he had been *brought into being* to solve some problems in the early 2010's, when he was in high school. He did, and got famous for it, but it wasn't without a lot of study and practice that he had become so powerful. Most people only have one power, like my being "just" an ESPer. My mother was a simple True Martial Artist, so her powers were more geared towards personal combat. You'll hear about people who received powers from both parents, and I heard rumors about a Cambion that was also a Shaman and a True Martial Artist, but I had never met anyone like that. My father being who he was though, each of my six sisters and I got a different power. We all had gone, or would go in the case of the younger girls, to Demongate High. Living in his shadow was hard for all of us, even mom. Anyone in the supernatural community knew the seven of us as "Hey, aren't you Dean's daughter/wife?"

I was going to work very, very hard to step out from that shadow and make my own way in the world. That's partly why I moved here to Rochester. One of his friends from school, a girl named Elizabeth, had lived around here most of her life, and recommended it. She moved after she got married to a Songstrel she rescued, but she said it wasn't a bad place to live.

The worst part about the area were the ghosts, and I don't mean human ghosts, I mean the ghosts of places that used to exist. For instance, after Kodak went out of business in 2031 the town just sort of fell apart. It had been failing for quite some time, but somehow the spirit of the

place just sort of gave up after that, I thought. I wanted to bring a little happiness to the area, if I could, and helping people would do that. The fact the city didn't have an ESPer like me already working there was a nice bonus. At least, not as a PI, anyway.

The twenty minute trip between Parkway Manor and Paul Road, where my new office was located, went smoothly. I did have a vague feeling of unease as we got closer, and the car noticed my glancing around.

"I am fully functional," it reminded me. "You are in no danger of a collision. If you wish to take manual control I will not be offended."

"No," I told it. "Something is bothering me, but I don't know what it is."

"Very good."

"What's wrong?" asked Pretzel.

I shook my head. "I don't know, but my ESP is going off. I'm not going to like what I find at the office for some reason."

"It's just nerves," he assured me.

"I hope you're right."

I entered the building I was renting space in, at a very reasonable \$300 a month, and said hello to the people I passed. My "office" was really just a room with a desk and a door into a small bathroom, but it was all I needed. Most of my work was "in the field" so a huge office wasn't necessary.

I passed someone on the stairs I had seen around, she worked in one of the other offices here, and she said hello to me.

"There's a funny smell coming from your office," she said, stopping midway down the stairs.

"You mean like paint? It was just painted before I moved my stuff in."

She shook her head. "No, not paint. You'll... see."

"I'll take care of it. There really shouldn't be anything in there that could spoil, I don't think I left anything here. Maybe one of the workmen did though. Thanks for telling me."

"Sure. Good luck on your first day!"

I thanked her and continued up the stairs. As I neared my door I found she was right, there was a rank odor wafting from my door. It was foul, and Pretzel said softly into my ear, "that's blood."

I looked around, there was no one in the hall with me, so I softly said back to him, "Are you sure?"

“I know what blood smells like,” he replied. “Fresh, day old, week old, dried, human, animal, demon- I like blood. It’s good stuff. Blood being here is bad. Be careful.”

I almost brushed him off, what could be waiting for me on the other side of that door? I had no enemies, did I? In the six or so years I have lived here the agency I had worked for closed a lot of cases, but I was just a junior member. I hadn’t put any mob bosses away, or anything. Also on the left side of my body, under my arm, was a tattoo my father had given me as a gift when I graduated- it let me Regenerate damage at a prodigious rate. Any wound that didn’t immediately kill me would be healed in less than a second, so I didn’t fear very much.

Yes, my father was that good at making *talismans*. He would have made me more, in fact that very generous nature he displayed got him into some trouble with the Foundation during the chaos crisis, when one of the higher ranking members was influenced into being terrified of what my father could do. I told him I wanted to at least try making my way in the world without “cheating” with things he had made for me.

For some reason my parents had shared a look and my mother simply told me “Good.” and felt pleased the rest of the day. (I could tell, it was bursting out of her. I didn’t need to even try focusing my ESP powers on her.) I didn’t get the sense she had made a bet with my father that I would say something like that, but rather that it was something my father had said in the past now coming back to bite him.

In any case, I wasn’t helpless, not by any means. I didn’t have quite the versatility of my father, but I could handle just about anything regardless. I wasn’t cocky, my time at Demongate taught me not to take anything for granted. Something was going on behind this door, and my powers were all about finding things out.

I drew upon my extra senses, reaching out with them, past the door to see what I could feel on the other side. I felt something there that shouldn’t be, and a lot of strong, dark emotions. Hate and pain predominately, which I reeled back from. I knew I had to see it for myself, so I slipped the key into the lock and turned it, peering into the darkness of the office.

The smell got stronger.

I flicked the light on and there in the floor was a body- a dead body. Glancing over him I saw multiple stab wounds, inflicted all over his body, and blood had soaked into his clothes and dried. I hurriedly closed the door again and tore off my computer so it wouldn’t record what I was

seeing. My stomach rolled, and I took a deep breath, using my power to will myself into becoming more calm. It worked, but I still put my back against the wall for support.

“What was it? What did you see?” asked Pretzel, concerned.

“There’s a dead man in my office,” I answered quietly. “What in the Demon World is going on?”

“You want me to take a look?”

“Don’t touch anything. I’ll have to call the cops and if the room seems disturbed, there’s going to be a lot more uncomfortable questions.”

“I was there for a lot of your cases in the past few years, if you recall,” he reminded me, “I know what I’m doing.” I opened the door a crack and felt him leave my shoulder, taking flight with his leathery bat’s wings. I just stood there, taking in deep breaths until I could be steady enough to call 911. After all, he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Are you okay?” a man’s voice said. He was down the hall a ways, obviously he had come out of the office down the hall and saw me.

“There’s-” I started to say, and had to clear my throat. “I just found someone dead in my office.”

“What? Really?” He wrinkled his nose. “Oh, God, that’s the smell, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“How- What-”

“I’ll call 911 in a second. This place will be crawling with cops pretty soon. You better leave unless you want to get caught up in it.”

He glanced around. “Is that... legal?”

“You never talked to me, didn’t smell anything, you had no idea it had happened.”

He looked relieved. “Right. I’ll just go then. Goodbye.”

He moved past me, as far across the hall as he could, and disappeared around the corner towards the stairs. I opened the door a crack and Pretzel came out, his weight again on my shoulder.

“I found a note,” he whispered.

“A suicide note? Why did he have to pick *my* office? How did he even get in there? I never thought it would be this my power was warning me about.” I was shaking- I was not prepared for this. I knew I might be hired to track down killers or find out why someone died, which was fine. Knowing you were going to walk in and see a covered body on the floor was something I was prepared to deal with. Seeing those glassy

eyes staring at me, smelling the smell of a dead man- that was a little bit more than I was prepared to handle.

“If it’s a suicide note it’s an odd one. I took it, you’ll want to see it. Hold out your hands.”

“You took something from a crime scene? What did I tell you!” I hissed.

“You’ll want to see this,” he said, sadly.

I held out my hands, and on the stationary I had put on the desk the day before was scrawled “Leave town or you’re next.”

2

One shaky phone call later

“Commonplace people dislike tragedy because they dare not suffer and cannot exult.” --John Masefield

I have to wonder about police attitudes sometimes, you know that? They came, sirens blaring, down Chili Ave to the office building like it was on fire. It wasn't. Granted, there was a dead person here and yes, my father had *once* tangled with some zombies, so there was little chance it was going anywhere. Even someone not a part of the supernatural community could tell you that. Still, they cleared everyone out of the building but me, and started taking pictures and whatnot.

One officer, identifying himself as Taylor Dietrich, asked me a bunch of questions. He was wearing a standard police uniform, and had glasses similar to mine. In the early 2000s, as cameras started to become more commonplace, cops had gotten all bent out of shape if you recorded them while they “worked”. Mainly because it always looked bad for them. Typically because they were bullies with badges, and didn't like getting called on their behavior. Once cameras started getting small enough to record an entire days worth of footage, and bandwidth was fast enough to transmit said footage elsewhere as it was being recorded, they realized their tactics of smashing cameras and taking away memory cards wasn't going to cut it.

So they just started recording everything too. Of course, penalties for “accidentally” smashing up someone's computer got them in trouble too. It only took a few cases where someone was obviously filming and had their camera broken by a cop, while the second, hidden camera continued filming, for them to stop that practice. Obviously it was legal to film them, they were out in public, and the slap on the wrist measures that didn't bother them much kept them breaking stuff that didn't belong to them. In the end, just because you see one person with a real camera someplace doesn't mean there aren't fifty more nearby, waiting for you to make a mistake and slap it up on the Internet for all to see.

Big brother in reverse- we should be so lucky to have everything work out like that.

Of course, all this camera stuff made the Foundation a mite nervous. Those with powers were still human, and invariably slipped up and did something where someone could see. More importantly, where evidence could be recorded and uploaded to allMovies, the successor to youTube. Very few, luckily, were about stuff blowing up, as people with powers didn't really need to rob banks to get rich if they really wanted to. No, it was more about doing good, like healing wounds or lifting heavy objects off of people. The most common defense when someone was called in about "inappropriate use of powers on camera" was: "Well, I couldn't just stand there and let that poor man die, now could I?"

So the Foundation was currently stuck, and endless debates went on about what to do about the problem. I realized the officer was ready to take my statement-

"So you came up the stairs to work and smelled the body?" asked Taylor. He was just a little taller than me, maybe .1 or .2 meters, and clean shaven.

"That's correct."

"You opened the door just enough to turn the lights on and see there was a body, but you did not enter the room. Nor did you see anyone going into the room after you got here?"

There's a trick to lying I can share with you. Growing up in a house where one of your younger sisters is a Seer teaches it to you. Seers, of course, can take one look at you and tell if you are lying to them. Most of the time, anyway, even they aren't perfect. The trick to lying is this-tell the truth. Counter intuitive, I know, but it's really the only way. You just have to plan things out a little more than you might otherwise, and you can tell the absolute truth to someone while still being dishonest to them. Just don't volunteer information about the question they ask you. Lawyers will also tell you this- go ahead, ask one.

Case in point; this officer asked if I had gone in the room, or seen anyone go in. Obviously I had not gone in, and Pretzel was invisible, so I hadn't see him go into the office either. With those facts in mind I could answer him truthfully:

"That's right."

Even if he asked me if I had taken anything out of the room, I was still covered. I hadn't, Pretzel had done it. He just brought it to me.

"So what exactly is an ESP Consultant anyway?" he asked, glancing over at the sign on my now open door.

Oh no, he's going to use the word "psychic" in his next sentence. I didn't need to have powers to know that.

"I use my powers of ESP to help people," I answered simply. "This was supposed to be my first day on my own though."

He looked at me strangely. "You mean like a psychic?"

Bingo. Can I call them, or what?

"Yes," I answered levelly, "except that what I do is real." I could say that, it was only showing off powers that couldn't be explained away that would get me in trouble. Naturally every sham practitioner in the world would say that, so it was safe.

"Right, right," I could tell he was trying not to laugh. "Your first day huh? Why didn't you see it coming?" He chuckled.

I did see it coming, you moron, I thought. I just didn't figure it would be this bad.

"Well, Seers have a better grasp of the immediate future than ESPers," I said instead. "I knew something was wrong, I just didn't know what. Plus it wasn't happening to me directly. If someone came to kill me, my powers would tell me beforehand. But just finding a body? No, it wouldn't bother."

This was obviously not the answer he was expecting, so he ignored it in that way men have perfected over thousands of years.

"Can you think of a reason why this body would be dumped here?"

I shook my head. "The door must have been locked, it wouldn't have been easy for them. I had worked for another agency before this in the area, but I was just the junior partner. It was my boss anyone would have beef with, I would think."

"What did you say your name was again?" He flipped back.

"Ericka Chesterfield."

"Oh yeah! You found that missing kid a month ago, didn't you?"

I blinked. He actually remembered that? Wow. I had used the ability to get flashes of the future and both Pretzel's and my *Seeing* abilities had him tracked down in a day. It had turned out he had just gotten lost and was wandering around, rather than being kidnapped, so it would have ended well either way. I just saved him a few hours of scared walking about, that's all. Of course it helped that he passed landmarks familiar to me. If he had been kidnapped, and just thrown in a basement somewhere, I would have been clueless. It was just how *Seeing* worked, sadly, that you couldn't "zoom out" so to speak, but were forced to see just the area the target was.

“Yes, that was me.”

“Maybe there’s something to your powers after all, then!”

I sighed. “May I?” I asked, offering him my hand.

He smiled. “Oh, this should be good.”

He closed the notebook and put his pen away, taking my hand in his. My heart beat a little faster, there *was* something about a man in uniform.

By touching him I could do a couple of things- some of them benign, others not so much. I could invade his mind with my own and fry it, making him a vegetable, or merely take a peek into his past. I chose the latter, for obvious reasons.

“You had a frozen waffles sandwich, one side peanut butter one side jelly, for breakfast this morning.”

He jerked his hand away as though I had burned him. “How could you possibly-”

“Taylor!” A voice shouted from inside the office. “Stop flirting with the lady and get her in here. We need to see if she can identify the victim.”

“Uh, you can go in now,” he said lamely.

“Thank you officer,” I said sweetly, moving past him.

The window at the back had been opened, and I’d had time to more properly prepare myself, so seeing the body didn’t make me faint or anything. It wasn’t pleasant, but I could stand to look at it.

“So do you know this guy?” asked the bellow. He was solidly built, and also in uniform. His hair was cut very short and he had a dark mustache. Under his badge was a name tag stamped with Wheelus, which I took to be his name. That’s right, nothing gets by me!

“I don’t think so,” I said, as I forced myself to look at his face. I slipped my computer on and looked again, but over his face was a small square with “no records found” next to it.

“My facial recognition database agrees with me, this man is a total stranger to me.”

“That figures.”

He looked at the body with disgust. Not disgust that the man was dead, mind you, but I got the sense that the death was inconvenient for Mr Wheelus. Possibly involving a lot of paperwork and talking to people he would rather have avoided. Didn’t strike me as a people person, did Mr Wheelus.

“Well, you’re the big psychic, right?” He waved his hands around in the universal “oh spooky” pose. “What can you tell me about the body?”

I felt a flash of irritation directed at his comments and him. I had to remind myself that he didn’t know any better. Thousands of years of efforts by the Foundation led him to be completely at ease with his worldview. To see Pretzel hop off my shoulder and turn his gun into chocolate would probably give him a heart attack. Just as well that he didn’t know a slight *Telekinetic* pressure on either side of his head would crush it like a grape. His not knowing meant he was ignorant, not stupid. That ignorance was by design, and I had to uphold it. He could well be stupid, I wasn’t ruling that out. But at the same time to do his job he might need a thick skin, which meant he acted a bit like a jerk to those around him.

“I’ll have to touch it,” I said, coldly ignoring his jab at me.

“Oh, please go right ahead,” he said, handing me a plastic glove. I snapped it on and leaned closer to the body, touching it with my index finger.

Seeing the recent past wasn’t too hard with my abilities, so I watched in horror as the man calmly entered my office and looked around. He sat down at my desk and pointedly looked at the clock on the wall. He studied it for ten seconds, meaning he wanted me to see what time he had entered- he had known I would do this. Ice started forming in my stomach, it was only ten minutes or so before I had been scheduled to arrive, had my alarm gone off at the proper time this morning. He picked up a pen and tore off a sheet of my stationary, then wrote the note Pretzel would find, leaving it on the desk. He then started going through the drawers, and he smiled as he found the letter opener I had put there. Then he seemed to struggle against himself as he plunged the letter opener into himself again and again. I couldn’t watch any more, and tore my hand away from the body, gasping.

The bellow just stood there, arms folded. “Well?” he demanded.

“He used my letter opener,” I said, leaning against the wall behind me. “And he timed it so he would be dying just as I arrived. But my... alarm clock got messed up, so he died almost two hours before I got here.”

“An interesting story, but this is a murder. No one could stab themselves this many times and just sit there. Also he didn’t tumble out of the chair, he was laid down on the floor where you found him. And where’s

this letter opener? I suppose he just put it back in the desk after he was done stabbing himself?"

He was right. Even after stabbing himself like that he must have put the opener somewhere, then gotten up from the chair and arranged himself for me to find. What kind of force could make a person do that?

I scanned the room, it was nowhere in sight. "Maybe?" I said softly. "Middle drawer."

Wheelus went over and yanked the drawer open, and his eyes got wide.

"You're under arrest on suspicion of murder," he said, glaring at me and pulling out his gun. "Put your hands on your head and lay down, do it now. Taylor get in here!"

Oh crap oh crap oh crap!

I was going to have to use my powers to get out of this. I didn't like messing with people's minds, but it seemed it would have to be done unless I wanted to answer some very hard questions while chained to a table an hour from now.

I put energy into my thoughts and threw them at Wheelus as I spoke, the mental energy adding force to my words.

"You don't want to arrest me."

Yes, I used the Jedi Mind Trick. I'm not proud of it, but it was all I had at the moment. It's actually called *Compulsion*, and yes, the movies stole it from us. My father made me watch them, even the terrible "Episode 1" to get ideas in using my powers.

His eyes unfocused a little. He now believed he didn't want to arrest me, but he wasn't sure why. My power could only hold him a couple of minutes at best, but it bought me time to convince him otherwise. "I don't?"

"I can't be a suspect! Look at me- how would I have held this guy down long enough to knife him that many times?"

He looked over at the body. The man did look stronger than I did. "And you've seen enough bodies to tell he hasn't been dead that long. Did I kill him silently? Raising no commotion that anyone heard and looked in on? Was the office in disarray when you got here, or was it exactly as the workmen left it yesterday? He wasn't dragged in here, there are no bloodstains on the stairs, the elevator or the rug in front of the door."

He looked, and I could tell the reasons I was offering were sound. My power made him believe what I said, but my words now were building my case for when that wore off.

I hated to do it, but I was going to have to lie to this guy. I didn't have any particular feeling against truth telling, but he was just doing his job as he saw it. I didn't want to be untruthful to him, even in this.

"I was just guessing about the letter opener, honest. I didn't think it would actually be there! I just thought it was the right shape for the wounds, that was all!"

Taylor was in the door, unsure what to do. Wheelus put his gun back. "Yeah, okay, you convinced me. Sorry about that."

And there it was- the reason the Foundation was so hard on people using powers out in the real world. People with powers knew how to spend more energy than regular people did, so even things like making someone believe something usually worked on them. They could resist, anyone could, it's just they didn't have much of a chance.

"Tag this and bag it," said Wheelus, "It will have prints on it."

Yeah, the victims' ... and mine.

"Wait, I put that letter opener in there, it's mine. It'll have my fingerprints on it!"

"Well, don't leave town little missy," said Wheelus. "We may have some more questions for you."

Oh great, I thought. Once they find out there really are only two sets on there, they're going to come knocking again. He still thinks this is a murder when really it was a suicide! A very, very bizarre suicide. That I can never make them see the truth of.

As far as mornings went, walking in to find a dead man must have been the *worst possible thing*.

But no, I was wrong.

I had that growing sense of unease again as two men with a body bag entered the office. There wasn't enough room for all of us so Wheelus, Taylor and myself were waiting in the hall. The feeling grew sharper as the men bent down to pick up the body. They were just about to lift him up into the bag when I screamed "Wait!" and dashed back into the room again.

“I think there’s some kind of explosive device under him!” I said, pointing. The two guys looked at each other. The one nearer the feet bent his head and looked under the body, then jerked back.

“I think she’s right!” he said.

“What?” asked the other in surprise. They both looked, and there *was* something under his back. If I had continued watching him with my power, I’m sure I would have seen him plant it there. But the guy made sure to stab himself as brutally as possible, guessing I would freak out and not watch past that. I looked back to see Wheelus staring at me.

Oh no, how long has it been? Is he still believing he doesn’t want to arrest me?

“Tell me again why I shouldn’t arrest you?”

“I must have seen it out of the corner of my eye, that’s all!” I nearly wailed.

“Give her a break, Wheelus, you can see she’s not the killer.”

“I guess if someone puts on a little show for you and holds your hand, you think they can’t possibly be a murderer, is that right, Dieterich?”

He reddened. “Look at her- no bruises. Someone getting stabbed like that would fight back, and she doesn’t have a mark on her.”

“Unless she drugged the poor guy.”

“The autopsy will show if that’s the case.”

“Unless the evidence gets blown up.”

“Then why wouldn’t she have done it earlier, rather than what she says happened? Because I don’t see her stabbing a guy to death, then setting an explosive under him and dragging him on top of it. Then calmly walking out of the office to clean up, coming back and calling us, and then helping you find the murder weapon and warning you about the bomb. Why stand three feet from it, and warn us? She must have caught a glimpse of it, that’s all.”

He seemed to struggle with himself a bit. “Just get a bomb squad in here.”

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