

# No One to Blame

*Demongate High Book 5*

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Demongate High

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Helping People Club

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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*



1

**That Morning, August 1, 2031**

*"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, NY. I hadn't ac-

tually 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

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was the real deal and would set their expectations properly. Hopefully this would cut down on crack 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 in a subtle manner 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, this 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 next on top of my dresser.

"Yes it's morning," I shouted at the tiny red form 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 from 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 2030, and I worked out enough to keep fit. I was Japanese on my mother's side, and just plain white on my father's, so I had 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.

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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.

“You still don't like my car, huh?” I asked with a grin once it was half eaten. My car was a yellow 2028 Ford Beyondor, 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 guy made the AI way smarter than normal, which 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 Eifel Tower collapsed because of all that chaos nonsense? He was the one who made the pieces a talisman again after they got finished putting it back together.

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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 someone getting powers from both parents, and I heard rumors about a half-demon 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 Eliazebth, had lived around here most of her life, and recommended it. She moved after she got married to a songstral 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 2026 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 smoothy. 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? They just painted it.”

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

“Well, 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. I'll take care of it, 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.

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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

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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 I 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."

**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 Dieterich, asked me a bunch of questions. He was wearing a standard police uniform, and had glasses similar to mine. In the early 21st century cops got 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

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didn't see him go into the office either. So even though he had retrieved the note from my desk, something they would no doubt see as evidence in the case and take from me. 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 any reason why someone would dump a body 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 in his book.

“Erica 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 wandering about, that's all. Of course it helped when 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 frozen waffles, 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.

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“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 it grape. His know 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's no bloodstains on the stairs, the elevator or the rug in front of the door.”

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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, making sure I wouldn't watch that far. 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.”

**Just after noon that same day**

*"If you read about Mussolini or Stalin or some of these other great monsters of history, they were at it all the time, that they were getting up in the morning very early. They were physically very active. They didn't eat lunch." --A. N. Wilson*

So the bomb squad had come in and ordered everyone out of the building. A sophisticated robot was sent in to see what the shape under the body was, and from their expression it was a bomb all right. More accurate to call it a mine, really, as they decided there was a pin being held down by the body. Once it was moved the pin would go up and the explosion would go off. There was no telling what sort of stuff was in the case, it could be anything from tiny metal balls to plain, straight up C4. They backed everyone away from the building and we all watched as the robot gingerly made a bomb sandwich with two metal plates. It then slowly made its way down the stairs where an agent bound them together with tape and put it into the back of a heavily armored truck. It looked like a freezer truck, but instead of ice coating the walls they were solid metal, and the inside was only about half a meter across. The rest was armor. The door was just as thick, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief when it came down and was locked in place.

I heard Wheelus say as 490 was right there they were just going to hop on the expressway with it and drive it out of town to some field someplace. Apparently the robot had said it wasn't radioactive, so it wasn't a nuke or anything, nor did it have any sort of timer or motion sensor. In fact the technicians remarked on how crude it was, like whoever made it wasn't fully conversant with modern methods. That made their job easier as they could just take it away from here, reducing the risk to the building and people in

the area, so they could study it further. They did want to learn how it was made, which would give them clues as to who made it, after all.

They did another sweep of the room, but Taylor looked over at me.

“Anything else we should worry about?”

*Wait, is he seriously asking me?*

“Like I said, seers are better at telling the future than I am. I can warn someone of danger right before it happens, or tell if there was some big emotional event in their near future. But to say, standing out here in the street, if something else bad is going to happen?” I concentrated, but didn't feel any looming sense of unease as I had before. “I don't think so.”

“Well, getting blown to pieces would be pretty emotional for me, so I'll take your word for it.” He grinned at me.

I managed a small smile.

“All right, let's get back to work,” yelled Wheelus. Seemed he only had one mode, obnoxious.

So the body was loaded onto a stretcher and taken away, and I looked around at the mess of bloodstains now covering my carpet and chair. Yellow police tape was of course stretched over the doorway, and I knew it would probably be a few days before I would get my office back.

*So much for my big opening day.*

To top it all off I hadn't heard the phone ring once in all this, so I had no paying work to show for the day one way or the other.

*I just had all this done, too!* I growled a little as I looked at the blood spattered items and wondered if they could be saved or if I would have to replace them.

“I'll turn the blood into water when everyone leaves,” said a quiet voice in my ear.

Of course! Pretzel! In the excitement I have forgotten all about him, and he was staying quiet so people didn't ask where that voice was coming from. The little guy was an alchemist, able to use his spirit energy to not only manipulate matter not just to change the shape of things, but also its makeup on a molecular level. He literally could turn lead into gold, by touch. Or take a lump of gold and turn it into a fabulous piece of jewelry, nearly without effort. Of course the foundation would pounce on anyone or anything making gold in our world, they were no dummies. I knew of at least three seers whose entire job, day in and day out, was to watch for that sort of thing, alone. That's how seriously they took making gold.

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But turning this bloodstain into water and letting it evaporate? Wouldn't even register, and I would be in the clear.

"Knew I kept you around for some reason," I whispered to him.

"Are they arguing?"

I reached out with my senses, and yes, I did feel some hostility down the hall and around the corner. I didn't know Wheelus enough to know, but I guessed that was his default state, so I didn't think too much about it. Still, I would like to know when my office was going to be available again so I figured I would go ask them. As I rounded the corner I saw Wheelus catch sight of me, and Taylor looked back at me as well.

I took the opportunity to check out their auras, something any supernaturally aware person could do. It showed them both as generally good people, no major evil in them that I could tell.

"Oh, do what you like," he snarled, stomping off.

Taylor motioned me over. "Sorry about him," he said, hooking his thumbs into his belt. "I know it can't be easy for you, coming in to find something like this your first day."

"Even expecting something bad, it was a pretty big shock. What were you two arguing about?"

"Oh, uh," he looked away. "You, actually."

"Does he still want to arrest me?"

He coughed a little. "Well, you did find the murder weapon and warned us about the bomb, so you have to admit it looks a little bad."

"My power told me that, nothing more. I know you don't believe me--"

"Wheelus doesn't, that's for sure," he interrupted me. "Me? Well, you knew about my morning, so..." He looked at me for a moment. "The fact is, I want to hire you to find out who did this. The way I see it, you have a vested interest in seeing who dumped this body here anyway, right? You won't be able to sleep at night until you figure out who did it, so you'll probably investigate with or without us."

Well, he had that right, at least.

"You might as well be paid for your trouble," he continued.

I looked up into his eyes. "Do you sweet talk all the girls you find at crime scenes like that?"

He laughed. "So you'll take the case?"

"You bet!"

"Okay." He seemed relieved. "Your office is closed up anyway, why don't you come down to the station with me and we'll get the paperwork filled out. Wheelus won't put in for funds from the department, but if he

doesn't pay you, I will. Maybe if you impress him he'll change his mind, but I doubt it. At least we can get your name into our computers, just in case the impossible happens."

At this point I would take anything.

"And it gets you a little exposure, lets other officers know you're around. Close this case and maybe more work will come your way. Close enough cases and even a guy like Wheelus might give you a grudging respect."

"Yeah, in twenty years maybe."

We both laughed at that.

He spent about another hour talking to everyone in the building, trying to find out if anyone had seen him enter or heard a struggle. I did the same, only with powers. I didn't like reading minds so I wasn't very good at it. Nor was I a seer, to tell when someone was lying. So I did the next best thing, and tuned into people's emotions. I could open myself up to impressions of those around me and at least tell if someone was really scared or nervous about talking to Taylor. Sadly, no one was.

The reason I didn't like mind reading was because people could feel it. Nine times out of ten, someone started singing a pop tune in their heads if they thought their minds were being invaded. People didn't have to know mind reading existed to feel something happening and instinctively try to counter it. I asked my father about it once, and he said something about powers being balanced, and then started mumbling about the number ten. It seemed to be a sore point for him, somehow, so I didn't press the issue. I was at least average at doing it, according to my instructors, but it wasn't something I really practiced. How could I? Trying to read Pretzel's mind would just backfire on me because he was a demon, and my boyfriend... I didn't even want to think about that.

He compared notes with the other officers walking around but it seemed there were no easy answers.

I got into his police car and he told it to take us back to the station, where I could officially be put on the case. As the car smoothly pulled out of the lot he asked me what I thought of the whole thing.

"It just doesn't add up," he explained. "Apart from the stab wounds, there was no other bruising on the body. Even drugged, he went into that office under his own power. No one saw anything, of course, but it's hard to hide a drugged body on the way into an office building like that."

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He went on. "The techs said he didn't appear on cameras outside the building either, so it's like he just popped into existence inside that office."

"Which obviously didn't happen!" I tried to laugh, but I knew of several ways that could be accomplished. Even I was working my way up to being able to teleport, though I hadn't managed it even once yet. That chilled me a little too- what if that body wasn't real? Pretzel didn't have the energy to make a body like that from nothing, but there could be an alchemist out there who could. If this guy didn't have an identity (or internal organs) things were going to be much harder on me in the near future.

"Unless he can walk through walls!" he went on.

I knew EPSers could do that too, but again, I had never practiced it. Never needed to.

*Stop talking about powers that actually exist!* I silently urged him, but didn't put any power into it.

"Anyway, why would the murderer bring a guy up to your office, stab him with something he found there, leave him, and then put the murder weapon *back* in the desk where he got it?"

Of course, Taylor didn't know about the note that Pretzel had taken from my desk, warning me away from having a business here. And there was no way I could tell him about it, given I had already told him I hadn't gone into the room. Explaining an imp... not going to happen.

Instead I said, "I guess that's what your department or you is going to pay me to find out!"

"I wonder if it isn't just a suicide, like you said."

"It is the easier explanation," I hedged.

"But we have a duty to find out the truth."

"And that is what I will try my hardest to do," I said, all the while thinking: *Even if I can't ever tell you what that truth is.*

We were silent for a moment.

"Can I ask, what did your, uh, abilities told you about the people I was questioning? I assume that's why you were hanging around behind me, anyway."

I blushed a little. "Only one of them seemed overly nervous," I replied. "The lady with the long blue earrings. But I got the sense that it was something unrelated to this case, like she was cheating on her husband. She felt guilty about something, but no one question you asked her, like 'did you see anyone suspicious' trigger a greater reaction. I think she just didn't like having all those cops around."

“Understandable.”

“Why the interest? Not that I mind, but usually people are more skeptical than this.”

We rode in silence for a moment.

“The truth is, I've seen things on this job I couldn't explain. Like a couple of months ago. There's this homeless guy I check in with every once in a while, right? Well, I looked in the ally he usually stayed in and I saw this really pale fellow right in his face. I mean he had the guy shoved up against the wall, totally off the ground. He didn't look that strong, but the homeless guy couldn't budge his arms. Then the pale guy just leans in and, well, takes a deep breath right in front of the guy's mouth. The homeless guy goes into a sort of spasm, and I draw my gun and shout to the guy to move away. He ignores me and keeps just sucking air. I move down the ally and I'm a couple of meters from the guy when he lets the homeless guy go, and he just crumples to the ground. The guy looks at me, and I swear, he had these intense yellow eyes that just bore through me. I must have blinked or something, or imagined the whole thing, because next I looked, he was gone. I was being shaken by someone who had passed the ally, and said he saw me there just pointing my gun at nothing. I tried to help out the homeless guy but he looked about twenty years older, and was unconscious. He died before the ambulance got there.”

*Oh crap! I thought, listening to this story. This guy saw a breath stealer and was going to shoot him? He's lucky the breath stealer didn't take his energy too, while he was under the effects of the stare.*

Breath stealers were sort of like vampires, and really the source of legends about them in the world. Of course, real vampires did exist, but they were thankfully few in number. Breath stealers, on the other hand, were more common, and so stories about the two, who could be mistaken for one another in looks alone, sort of got tangled together. They fed off people's spirit energy, just like vampires fed on blood, and if they didn't feed regularly, they went nuts and just fed on anyone they found nearby. I could sympathize, one of my sisters was one, and she struggled with that exact “hunger” herself. This one probably thought he was doing the world a favor, feeding on a homeless guy like that rather than someone “important.” I wondered if he was still lurking about town.

“So, did you report what you saw?”

“Are you kidding? Anyway, the man was homeless, no one would have cared. And it looked like he had just died of old age. But I knew him before that, and he wasn't that old. It was really freaky. So if you say you

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have ESP, then you have ESP. Maybe you can help me stop things like that from happening again.”

“Oh.”

I wasn't sure what to say. The Foundation was tasked with making sure stuff like that didn't happen, not me. Breath stealers needed to feed though, and the guy was homeless. Maybe they were turning a blind eye as long as he didn't feed on someone too public? Of course it was the duty of all people with power to keep others with power in check, but my stomach was empty at the moment so I could see things from both sides of the issue. If I saw a breath stealer feeding on someone enough to kill them, naturally I would step in to stop it. But everybody had to eat, and breath stealers sometimes couldn't help but help themselves.

*Of course, proving he was that desperate for energy, and wasn't just going around the city sucking everyone he could dry... that was the tricky part. If only a little spirit energy was taken a person was no worse for wear, at least in a couple of hours. So that was the time limit you had, one way or the other, for finding out the truth. If you waited too long the victims recovered, and the breath stealer moved on. Then you had no proof of anything.*

“I'm not making it up.”

“I believe you.” I couldn't tell him why, of course, but I did. It explained why he was willing to trust me- He wanted someone other than his grumpy parter to talk to about stuff like that. I couldn't tell him everything I knew, but at least I wouldn't laugh in his face, either.

We pulled into the station parking lot a moment later, and he held the door for me and I went inside. I showed the lady behind the desk my credentials, and she issued me a laminated card stating I was working with the police. It had my picture and everything, making it nice and official. Taylor took me around and introduced me to everyone, and they seemed nice. He left out the part where I was a “psychic“ for which I was very grateful.

After the tour we went over to his desk and both sat down.

“So, what's the next step,” he asked me. “Detective.”

“Lunch,” I answered. It was almost two o'clock at that point, after all. I could use my powers to go longer than most without eating, but that didn't stop me from getting hungry. “After that, I'll probably have to wait until we learn who the victim was so we can start talking to people close to him. See if they noticed anyone hanging around, or if his behavior changed recently.”

ROBERT ZIEFEL

“That seems reasonable. Do you want me to drive you back?”

“Actually, I think I'll walk down to Walmart to get something to eat. I need to clear my head so I can think clearly later. But if you could come pick me up later?”

“Sure, just give me a call. You really want to walk though?” His eyes glanced down at my feet. I was wearing high heels, but I knew Pretzel could reshape them into something more sensible without heels, so I wasn't worried. I nodded.

“Here's the number to call to get it touch with me.” He handed me a business card, and I gave him one of mine from my purse. “I'll let you know when we find the identity of the guy if you don't call me first.”

I nodded. “I'll be waiting!”

**Two Hours Later**

*“A son can bear with equanimity the loss of his father, but the loss of his inheritance may drive him to despair.” --Niccolo Machiavelli*

I didn't have to wait long, and I hadn't wasted the time. I had been looking over the Foundation database everyone with powers had access to, looking for things that could either do this to a man and get away unseen or cause him to do it to himself. They maintained a public database for “regular” people with supernatural powers to look thing up on, in case someone needed to deal with something right away. I was sure they had one with more information that actual agents had access to, but I could make do with the more public information. So that's what I was doing, sorting through things that fit the bill on a bench in front of Walmart. I had walked down Howard Street from the police station, which had taken me about a half hour. I had gotten some lunch there, then ate outside and scrolled through the site on the left eye side of my computer. Of course I slipped Pretzel some tidbits when no one was looking.

As I scrolled through, I realized the problem was the enormous number of beings, both terrestrial and not, that could have done it.

Obviously an ESPer like myself could, with enough practice in the mind trick, totally overwhelm someone's mind. They would then have total control of that person's actions, even to the point of making them stab themselves repeatedly like this guy had done. It would be hard, and they would need a lot of energy to control someone for that long, but there were people with a lot of energy. The problem there was, they would have needed to be right there with the guy in order to control his actions. They

either made themselves unnoticeable, a use of illusion I had never studied, or teleported into the office directly. Doing two things at once like that, while keeping that level of control over another's mind would be possible, but quite difficult. An ESPer that could do that would be more powerful than me, and probably wouldn't bother with sending corpses as messengers.

A demon or spirit hunter could possess someone and take total control of their actions. Demons typically had to be summoned to come to our world, so it would be the summoner that was ultimately responsible. The demon would just be the tool, in that case. A rouge spirit hunter- that was a scary thought. They were some of the most powerful people in the world, and I wouldn't want to cross one. Still, those guys worked in teams so one going "off the rail" would be noticed and dealt with. Those guys didn't fool around, from what I had heard. Of the three, a summoner was most likely. As the closest to demons in general, they were the ones in the greatest danger of going bad. If a summoner learned I had started this business here recently and wanted to make me leave, picking an innocent that could hardly fight back would be a good message to send.

In essence: "I don't care about normal people, I'll throw them away until you leave." Why not just fight me directly? Answer: he couldn't know what ESPer abilities I had studied, and to what degree, so attacking me blind would be a big risk. Also, summoning enough demons to take me down would probably show up on the Foundation's radar, so I could see one trying to use intimidation like this. Add to that the number of demons that could step through to our world on their own, and that added up to a lot of suspects. If one of them had set up here and didn't want me interfering... The thing in my favor there was the number of demons that could both step over and possess was pretty small. Those that could would have better things to do than harass me, or power enough to take me down outright. So that didn't feel right either.

An artificer like my father could, I suppose, make a ward that made someone so suggestible they would literally do anything. Similarly an alchemist or mystic could brew up a potion that would control someone. Could a mystic curse someone into killing themselves? I didn't think so.

Anyway, a rouge alchemist? I shook my head; No way. There were so few real alchemists the Foundation made sure they were very happy and comfortable with their work. Stranger things had happened though.

I didn't have to worry about the breath stealer that Taylor had mentioned at least. They could hypnotize people, or give them a one word command like "stop" but that was it. One snag in dealing with a person like that

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was, when they fed they could absorb powers from the person they were feeding on. So technically he could have stolen a power to make the guy kill himself. Drat.

Magic existed, and could do practically anything, but actual magic users were few and far between. In the first place typically only demons had the actual capacity to cast spells, so to get magical power you had to sell your soul to one. Angels could too, but they had orders not to be wandering around Earth, and they wouldn't have done something like this.

As for demons, a mental link between the demon and the person here could be formed with a contract. Then, when the person wanted to cast the spell, the demon would instantly know where and why. He could then send the spell energies to the person, or not, as he pleased. Try to save a kitten from being run over? Sorry, your demon doesn't want that to happen, so you get nothing. So typically magic users only did pretty destructive things unless they wanted their magic requests to go unfulfilled at an inconvenient time. After all, if you didn't specify in the contract that the demon had to help you out of life threatening situations, why would they? The sooner you died, the sooner they got your soul. It was a pretty sick situation, and the Foundation did everything it could to "discourage" people from taking that kind of "deal." If it was a magic user, though, I wasn't sure there would be anything I could do. On the other hand, a magic user wouldn't need to bother with warnings, they would just kill me directly.

And of course there were dark rituals that even people without powers could use to call upon demonic energy and do things with it. Naturally those sorts of books were immediately destroyed when they surfaced, but they did occasionally pop up. They usually required a sacrifice, and while I didn't have any statistics on missing persons in Rochester at the moment, they aren't the sort of thing you wasted on a warning. To learn I was in town and kill two people just to warn me away didn't seem right in this case. They could have just killed me outright with it, so a ritual like that went to the bottom of the list.

I sat and thought for maybe another half hour when a police car pulled up and stopped in front of me. Taylor waved to me and I went over to the car.

"We found who the guy was," he said through the window. "I'm heading to speak to his wife, well, widow now I guess. Do you want to come?"

“You did? I mean, absolutely.” I climbed inside.

“Didn't think we could work that fast, huh?” he asked, the car taking off again.

*Whoops, I guess I did sound a little surprised there, didn't I? I was so glad he wasn't some construct I would have to try and explain, I forgot that meant he was a real person after all.*

“How did you manage it?” I asked, hoping to cover my slip.

“Actually, he was reported missing about two weeks ago.”

“What?”

“His name is Nelson Baynard. He works as an insurance agent with Allstate. One kid, a daughter, age 11. Story is he went in to work about two weeks ago, but never made it. And twenty four hours later he hadn't come back home, either. All their savings were gone from their bank accounts too, so this is really going to tear them up.”

“That poor kid.”

“I know. Not looking forward to telling them this.”

“At least as an insurance guy, he should have a good life insurance policy.”

“Yeah, just one problem though.”

“What's that?”

“Wheelus says it's a murder, you say it's a suicide. If you're right and he's wrong...” he trailed off.

“His insurance policy won't pay out, I understand. But that's only for a couple of years, right? Like if he increased the amount his policy paid out before he disappeared.”

“Exactly. So hope he didn't get his policy, or change it recently.”

“You've got that right. Where are we headed?” The car turned onto 490E and started accelerating. Once all cars could drive themselves, speed limits were raised on expressways for cars under computer control. The right lanes were usually used for people driving manually, and had to stay at the old speed limits. Nearly everyone wanted greater speed and safety, so most cars zipped along pretty fast.

“Fairport,” he answered. “We should be there in about fifteen minutes. Did the walk clear your head a little?”

*Shoot, I forgot to have Pretzel turn my shoes back! I hope he didn't notice. Maybe he'll think I just bought some different ones while I was there?*

“Yes. And I looked up some things that could have done this.”

“Wait, you mean like that pale fellow with the yellow eyes I saw? That was real?”

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*Wonderful, he must have thought I didn't believe him. Now I've done it.* I sighed.

“Yes, though he's low on the suspect list. Believe me, there's nastier things than him out there.”

“So what was he?”

“I... can't tell you.”

“What? Now come on-”

“No, seriously. Look, I have powers, okay? I can say that to you because anyone who claims to be a psychic would say that. You can choose to believe me, or not. But the people like me with powers want very much to keep people without powers, like you, safe. But we have to keep ourselves safe, too. Because people like you outnumber us a million to one. Remember Salem? Imagine the US finding out there were people running around, today, that could wipe out our entire armed forces- by themselves. There would be panic in the streets, and Salem would look like a nursery school outing.”

“You're serious?”

I nodded, gravely. “You can't hurt them. You can't even see them. Only people with powers can fight people with powers, and there's a system of checks and balances to make sure we keep a low profile. Telling you too much about my world isn't looked upon well by those making the rules. Believe me, my father has spent enough time trying to change their minds, so it doesn't get out the other way and turn everyone against us. But thus far they're stubbornly clinging to secrecy above all else.”

“But you can tell me this stuff?”

“Again, it's up to you to believe or not. We're just talking, and I could be lying, right? Spinning you a tale to mess with you for some reason.”

“But you aren't?”

“That's up to you to decide. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it has to be.”

He mulled that over for a moment.

“So you think it was something from your side that did this to the guy?”

I nodded again. “Which is a problem for both of us. For you because if that's the case, it's going to go unsolved on your end. For me because I'll have to fight or scare off something that can do that to someone.”

“Wow. So what about these rule makers you spoke of? Aren't they supposed to be making sure this doesn't happen?”

“There are larger battles being fought that occupy them. This kind of thing they leave to us. That's why I'm here, after all.”

“So you work for them?”

“No, not directly. They trained me, and if I got over my head I could call them and get help, but basically I'm an independent agent. Here to take care of this kind of thing that's too small for the larger organization to deal with. Think of me as a fire fighter, putting out the little fires that jump off from the main blaze.”

“This is all going on and we normal people haven't noticed?” He sounded incredulous.

“Like I said, a lot of supernatural things you can't even perceive. And there are a lot of coverups and preemptive strikes. Remember, I talked about seers? They can tell when trouble will happen before it does, so we can clean things up before they get too messy.”

“But a murder like this doesn't even register for them, huh?”

“It's not a great system, I admit, but it's all we've got.”

“I think I liked it better when I thought that you thought I was crazy. Now I find out not only did I see that pale guy, there are worse things than him out there! Things I can't even see? Man.”

“Sorry. I only tell you this because you saw something from my world, and I wanted you to know you it was real. Otherwise I wouldn't have said anything. If you see something like that again, my advice is to back off, because nine times out of time, there won't be anything you can even do.”

“Well, thanks, I think?”

So we pulled into Manor Hill Dr in Fairport and went up to the house where Mrs Baynard lived. It was a pretty nice house, it looked like the Baynads had done all right for themselves. Taylor shook himself off, like he was putting what we had talked about behind him for a moment so he could focus on his job. He rang the bell and we waited, but no one answered.

We looked over at the driveway, and there was a car, but that didn't mean this car was Mr Baynard's and she was out in her own. I reached out with my senses.

“Think they aren't around?” he asked.

“They're in back.”

“How do you-” He took a deep breath, then let it out again. “Right.”

“I could be guessing, you know?”

“Somehow I doubt it.”

We headed for the back yard, where we found Mrs Baynard working in a small garden, watching two girls running around, playing.

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"Mrs Baynard?" called Taylor. She looked up and froze, her eyes darting between us.

"In the house, girls," she said sharply. "Now."

"But mom!" one said.

"No argument. Now!"

The two girls looked over at us and the one who was obviously Mrs Baynard's daughter got a little sad. "Oh, okay."

"It's about my husband, isn't it?" she asked, the pain evident on her face. I didn't need ESP to tell me she was hurting.

"Is this your husband?" he asked, showing her a picture of the dead man.

Her eyes widened, and she gave a stiff nod.

"Then I'm afraid so, ma'am. He was found this morning. We believe he was murdered." He glanced quickly at me and then back.

"Murdered?" she gasped, her hands going over her mouth. "No. No. Who would murder him? He's dead? My husband is dead?"

"I'm sorry. Naturally a full investigation will be conducted. I know this isn't the time, but I need to ask you a few questions."

She was starting to break down, tears forming in her eyes. My heart was breaking along with her, and I was struggling not to tear up myself. Because of my power I could feel her grief much more strongly than most, and I had to shove it away before it overwhelmed me, too.

"Of course, of course," she said, trying to maintain composure. I thought about changing her emotions with my power but decided against it. She needed to grieve, and suddenly stopping would be suspicious to Taylor.

*I'm sorry.*

She turned her back on the window so the girls didn't see her like this, and walked over to a picnic table off in the corner of the yard. "Please, sit down."

Taylor pulled his notebook out again. I wondered why he still used such an ancient tool, but realized just staring at someone while your computer recorded them might seem a little bit creepy. Especially if a cop did it. So the notebook gave him something to focus on besides her.

"Is there anyone who would have wished your husband harm? Have there been any threats against you or your daughter?"

She shook her head.

"Did he owe money to anyone? Gambling debts, anything like that?"

"No, at least not that I know of. But all the money in our accounts disappeared right after he did so I can't really be sure. How- How did he..."

“Preliminary reports show he died of blood loss from multiple stab wounds.”

“Stab- he was stabbed? That means he must have suffered terribly!”

“He may have been drugged at the time. There were no signs of a struggle where he was found. He may not have even felt it.”

“That’s something, at least. Where was he found?”

“In Miss Chesterfield’s office, actually.” He indicated me.

“I didn’t think you looked like a cop,” she said, trying to smile. “It was nice of you to come along.”

“You have my condolences,” I said sadly. “And we’re going to find who did this, I promise.”

“We?”

“I’m a private investigator. Today was to be my first day on my own. It hasn’t gone exactly as I planned. Oh, I didn’t mean-”

“I know. What do you think happened?”

“I think I better just let officer Dieterich finish his questions. I can give you my opinion of the case later.”

Taylor looked at me a second, then turned back her Mrs Baynard. “Was your husband depressed, or on any medications?”

“What? No!” she said, shocked. “I thought he was, you know...”

“I must cover all possibilities,” he said, glancing at me again. “There is a difference of opinion because of certain, let’s say irregularities where the- where your husband was found.”

“What are you saying?”

“Officially, the cause of death at this time is listed as homicide. An autopsy will be conducted, and then the body can be released to you.”

She looked down, her control breaking again. “What do I tell Allyson?”

“I don’t have any kids,” said Talyor, “So I can’t really give you advice about that.”

“She seems old enough,” I said. “I’m sure she’ll be all right.”

“Yes, she’s a good girl. I’m a single mom now, and nearly broke. Please, you have to find out where our money is, at least. If he was gambling, or someone threatened our daughter and he was trying to pay them off, I’ll need to know.”

“That’s a good point.” Talyor made a note in his notebook. “I’ll follow up with the bank about how exactly the money was taken out, which may also be a clue. He didn’t seem disturbed about any recent mail or emails he received?”

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She shook her head. "It was a totally ordinary day. He left for work, I didn't even think about never seeing him again. But now I never will."

"I think that's all I need," he said, closing his book and slipping it back into his pocket. He turned to me. "Do you want to add anything? I can do some things in the car if you want me to wait."

The invitation was clear. *Do you want to tell her about your suspicions away from me?* It was a nice gesture, and it showed a good deal of forethought on his part. As she was more directly involved in what might be something supernatural, she might tell me things she wouldn't tell an offer.

I nodded, and he again expressed his regret for the situation and went back to the car to wait.

**The next day**

*“Yeah I'm telling real stories, but if you pick up a documentary on strippers, you're going to want to see some stripping, so we definitely got that in there.” --Method Man*

I had spoken the night before to Mrs Maynard, in very general terms, about what I thought might have happened to her husband. Obviously I couldn't come out and say “I think a supernatural presence took over his actions and made him kill himself.” After first asking to see the house, I did some sensing around and came to the conclusion neither he, his wife, or his daughter had powers.

*After all, if this was two supernatural people involved, that would make this a very different case.*

I explained about how there were no suspects (I didn't mention myself) because it looked like he had come up to the office alive. I also explained about the explosive device that had been found, and she said to her knowledge he had no experience with things that like. I didn't tell her about the note, or my powers, figuring that would only complicate the situation. I also got a better picture of him, in case I had to show it to people to ask if they seen him lately. Showing people his pale, lifeless face wasn't a good way to get people to stare at it and recall if they had seen him.

Taylor waited patiently while I talked with her, and drove me back to the office, which was a lot quieter now with the police gone. The door was still taped off, and probably would be for several days. So I left, a little frustrated no one had called on my first day. Maybe not calling myself a “psychic“ was going to work against me?

I had dinner and went to bed, with strict instructions for Pretzel not to mess with the alarm this time.

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I dreamed that night. It was a curious effect of my power to see a little ways into the future that I sometimes had dreams relating to what would occur. They were always clearer than the vague impressions of danger or the few seconds of warning I usually got, probably because my conscious mind wasn't getting in the way. As with most dreams, however, they didn't usually make much sense- or I didn't remember them completely. In this dream I was in a strip club. Not performing, thank the All-Father, but looking for someone. Someone who shouldn't be there. I kept getting glimpses of him, but something always got in my way and made me start over. It was very annoying. My alarm woke me up, on time, and I grabbed the pad of paper and pencil from my nightstand and wrote down what I remembered of it.

My tasks for that day were twofold. Firstly, see if I could trace Mr Maynard's steps the last two weeks since he disappeared. Secondly, to contact the Foundation and see what information they could offer me. As that was only one email, I did it first. Basically I asked them if they knew of anyone living in the area that could do something like this. I also mentioned there were rumors of a breath stealer running around feeding off homeless people. I didn't mention who told me, knowing the Foundation they would send an ESPer down here to erase the guy's memory of what he saw that night.

*Leave the poor guy in peace,* I thought.

As I sat down to compose the email to send to various hotels in the area, I got the sense that "patience would reward me." Sadly my powers weren't specific enough to say "Go here to solve the mystery!" so I had to rely on feelings and impressions. I felt that mailing hotels would be a waste of time, but that I would have a clue by the end of the day.

I mailed the hotels anyway.

Basically a photo of him his wife had provided, that I was working with the police, and if anyone had seen him in the past two weeks to let me know.

I was pacing around my apartment, having heard exactly zero from either the Foundation or any hotels, and was silently urging the universe to provide the thing I was supposed to be patiently waiting. My phone rang.

"Hello?"

“Erica? It's Taylor. We got a lead today I thought you might want to look in on. I would go, but it's not a place I should really be seen. On or off duty. I understand if you say no-”

“This isn't a strip joint you're talking about, is it?”

“Wait, how did-” He gave that sigh again. “Right. I don't think I'm ever going to get used to that.”

I smiled. “Which one?”

He gave me the address, which I wrote down and then stared at. It was on Ridge Road. What the-

“Wait, are you sure? That's like right down the street from me!”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That's not creepy at all.”

“Are you willing to go? On duty, people get real nervous about a cop walking around one of those places. They tend to clam up, if you know what I'm saying. Off duty... well, if someone recognized me...”

“I understand.” I struggled with myself a moment. All roads must be traversed in the name of justice, I guess. “I'll go check it out. Where did you get this tip from?”

“We brought in a 'working girl' a little while ago, and I hadn't had a chance to take his missing poster off the wall. She saw it and said she had seen him over there the last couple of nights. Around 8:30 PM.”

“Well, I didn't turn up anything mailing hotels in the area, so it's as good a place to start as any. I'll go tonight, thanks.”

“Good luck.”

“What does a woman wear to a strip club?” I asked no one in particular, standing in front of my closet at 8:00 that evening.

“Are you asking me?” asked Pretzel, poking his head around the corner. *A little too readily*, I thought. *Like maybe he actually knows? Knowing him, that is probably the case.*

“Just thinking out loud. I guess I don't want to go in my suit, I would look *really* out of place. I guess just jeans.”

As I dressed I consulted my powers about the success of the evening. I got a vague sense of disappointment, but not in the way I expected.

*Well, that was helpful*, I thought to myself. *Sometimes I wonder why I bother.*

It took me a moment, after arriving, to get up the nerve to get out of the car and walk up to the door of the place. I felt a little better because I

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knew I wasn't going in alone, the familiar weight of Pretzel on my shoulder reassured me a little. I knew women went to places like this, I just never saw myself as being one of them. Even working a case, I never thought I would see the inside of this sort of establishment in particular. Oh, I could go in for a few minutes using my power to leave my body, but in the end I would need to go inside physically anyway. So I figured I might as well get it over with.

The building was unremarkable, with just a rather plain sign announcing the name. Obviously there were no windows, just painted stone I couldn't quite make out the color of in the fading twilight. I supposed there were two ways to go about marketing a place like this- the ritzy way and the word of month way.

The ritzy way would be to play up the fact this was a strip club, with neon lights and everything. That would no doubt draw attention, both desired and not, as cops would always be lurking nearby. It might bring in more business, but a place like this wants a certain type of client, right? Wealthy enough to not mind spending a hundred or two on drinks and paying women to dance for them.

I was obviously using the word dance loosely in this case.

Other attributes they wanted to cultivate: Too old to be rowdy, but young enough to have friends of a similar bent that could come along. So it was a delicate balancing act.

"Just go inside already!" said Pretzel. "It isn't the demon world, is it? What are you waiting for?"

Have I mentioned that Pretzel can get a little impatient at times?

The other way, the way this place seemed to have chosen, is to be nearly invisible. It was the inside that would sell the experience, so to speak. That meant relying on word of month more than anything to get people inside. As long as anyone that didn't fit management's idea of a good customer was thrown out early enough, the people that came were nearly guaranteed to be of high quality and not make trouble. If you were a repeat customer there would be less chance you would make trouble, because you didn't want to lose the privilege of being let in.

I thanked my lucky stars this seemed to be the second kind of place, it might mean a slightly higher quality of scumbag inside. Honestly, it was a strip club- even wealthy dirt bags are still dirt bags underneath. They just hid it better. I nerved myself and got out of the car, closing it slowly thinking I

would draw less attention that way. There wasn't really anyone around, my powers told me that, but it still would have been hard to act normal.

You know that feeling you get that “you're being watched?” I had the advantage that, if I felt that, I could expand my awareness and actually tell how many, roughly where they were, and if they had powers or not. That was a small consolation as I looked over at the far side of the building where the door was.

*You can do this*, I thought to myself. *Just go inside. You're on the job, and you can take anyone in that room.*

As I walked over I saw there was a man standing there, blocking it off. More like a tree in the shape of a man, as he was pretty big. I looked up at him, and he looked down at me. He had his arms crossed over his barrel like chest, and his arms were like two of mine put together. I wasn't impressed, I could beat him in arm wrestling. Oh sure, it would take powers, but I could take him. He stood there impassively, probably waiting for me to make the first move.

*Is there some kind of protocol I need to follow?* I thought to myself. *Maybe this is a private club?*

“Forty to get in,” he finally grumbled.

“Ah,” I said, intelligently. I wondered if it had just taken him that long to recall what he was supposed to say to people coming up.

*Be nice*, I thought to myself. *Let's not judge this guy by his obviously maintained... attributes. Most people would be impressed.* I wasn't most people.

I hadn't thought to bring copious amounts of cash with me. I wasn't expecting to buy drinks or anything, but I had overlooked the need to carry cash for the time honored ritual tradition: The bribe. Both at the door and for anyone who had the information I wanted, once inside. Still, I wasn't going to let a little thing like that deter me. I had means of one kind or another at my disposal, after all. I felt Pretzel leave my shoulder, what was he up to?

“Actually, I'm a detective working with the police on a murder case.” I got out my PI license and showed it to the tree. I thought taking the high road to start in this case might be a nice change. The tree stood unmoving. “The victim was seen at this... club... several nights in the past and I'm trying to retrace his steps. See who may have, you know, wanted to murder him?”

“Good for you. Hope you find the murderer. Forty to get in.”

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*Well, I did try.* He registered as real to my senses, and I doubted a place like this could afford a lifelike robot for a few million dollars to stand at the door like this. Despite his rather single minded determination to take two twenties from me as a toll.

*Wait, can modern technology make robots this lifelike?* I wasn't sure, robotics wasn't something I really kept up on. Operating my computer was about the extent of my interest in that area. I could instantly look it up, of course, but I wasn't that interested. Though I had heard of such things being worked on, in passing. I was pretty sure they weren't even close, but one could never tell. In any case, him being real, I used my other means of getting in.

No, not showing more cleavage- powers.

"You don't want to charge me to get in," I said, willing him to believe it. He arched an eyebrow at me.

"I think I do. Forty or leave, lady."

*What? He shook off my compulsion?* Of course I hadn't put much into it, this guy didn't look like he had all that much going on upstairs. That may have just been my prejudice talking though.

"You want to let me in, right now," I repeated, this time throwing energy into my will, increasing the chances my command would be followed. Thankfully this time it took hold.

"Yeah, okay," he said, pushing the door open.

"Thank you," I said, nodding my head to him.

*How about that?* He got a little bit more respect from me as I walked past. It wasn't often I had to try something twice, extra power put into the effort or not. Still, it was somewhat likely he had just gotten lucky, rather than showing any real mental fortitude. A weight settled on my shoulder again and I stepped inside.

"I tied his shoelaces together," said Pretzel softly, trying not to laugh.

"You're impossible," I whispered to him.

Walking in, I took a quick look around to see what I was getting myself into. A young woman, naked apart from her shoes, was sitting on the stage talking to a guy below her. She had long black hair, and looked vaguely Asian, though I couldn't see well through the dim lights and distance away she was. She had a scrunchy with cash stuffed in it on her leg, and a tattoo

of a dragon running down the other. Yeah, she was a stripper. The place looked like most bars, I guess, but in the center area was a stage with... oh, All-Father, a pole. Stools were arranged around the stage, most of them occupied. Only a couple of women here, maybe twenty percent? I did a quick reading on the room, but no one stood out as having powers or lots of spirit energy. Easy enough to hide that sort of thing, of course, but at least it was a start. As I got closer I unconsciously began to categorize the guys I saw as I walked to the bar. I figured the best person to ask was the bartender, so that was my first stop.

*Jerk.*

*Loser.*

*Trying hard to believe he's not gay.*

*My boyfriend.*

*Dirt ba-*

*Wait, what?*

I stopped in my tracks, suddenly enough that Pretzel almost fell off. He steadied himself and I'm sure looked where I was looking.

"Uh oh," he chortled into my ear. "Someone's going to get it!" He started giggling uncontrollably.

I shushed him as the person nearest me looked over to see what was making that weird noise.

The person talking to the naked Asian girl was my boyfriend of three years. We had met on a case I had done involving some embezzlement (not by him) and he asked me out. We'd been seeing each other ever since. He didn't know about my powers, or Pretzel, and I wasn't sure if I was allowed to tell him. I planned on asking someone in the Foundation sometime, but was afraid I would get a "no" so I had been putting it off. It probably wasn't fair to him, but I had hidden my abilities from him thus far, so I could probably continue to do so. Oh, he knew I was opening ESP Consulting, he'd helped me move the furniture. He thought the fact that I had "ESP" was "cute" in his words. He seemed to ignore or write off my being able to tell what he was thinking, or tell his future. Maybe he just believed all women were "mind readers."

And no, I never used my power to change his mind about something. That would be wrong. Besides, it would only last a couple of minutes. Not worth the energy expenditure, in the long run.

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I stalked over to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Oh. Erica. Hi,” he said nervously, turning to see who was behind him. His eyes darted about, as if seeking a means of escape. I glared at him and then at the naked girl, who decided it was probably best she was someplace else. She got up and left the stage in a hurry.

“Don't ‘Oh hi’ me, Tyrone Danko. Just what are you doing here?”

“Just, uh,” he continued looking around nervously. “Having a few drinks?”

“And watching the show, I have no doubt. Enjoying yourself?”

“Well, they are there to be watched,” he hedged.

“And then talked to afterwards?”

“She was talking to me!”

“Oh, so it's her fault?”

“Yes! I mean no, I mean, we were just talking. Can we take this outside? People are staring.”

“No, I'm not leaving until I do what I came here to do. I'm here on a case. I just didn't expect to walk in and find you chatting up a naked girl on stage! We're like five miles from my apartment! Don't you have any shame at all?”

“The girls here are the prettiest-” He stopped, realizing he was just digging himself deeper.

I chose to ignore that, though he saw that I knew exactly what his statement meant.

He changed tactics. “You haven't exactly been around much lately.”

“Yes, I've been trying to open a business, if you recall? A detective agency? Ringing any bells?”

“Yeah, I know. But I've hardly seen you the past couple of days and-”

“Oh, so your being here is actually *my fault*? Is that it? My father and all my sisters wished me good luck on opening yesterday. I guess I just missed your email about it. You could have called me last night to see how I was doing. Or were you too busy with one of your new friends?”

“It's not like that! I'm not blaming you-”

“Well that's good, because not seeing me for two days is not an excuse to come to a place like this!”

Suddenly I felt a meaty hand on my shoulder, and another tree was standing there, looking angrily down at me. It wasn't the same guy, but he had the same kind of build and was wearing the same shirt as the guy at the door. It was my left shoulder, thankfully. He would have gotten quite the surprise if he had tried to grab my right one.

“Was there a sale on you guys someplace I didn't hear about?” I probably shouldn't have said, but did.

“I think you need to leave,” he replied, frowning. “You're upsetting the other customers.”

“Oh yes, how terrible for the losers in here to be 'upsetted' a bit.”

“Come on,” he growled. That's when he grabbed my arm and started dragging me out of the place, physically.

That's when I threw him across the room with telekinesis.

I was angry. I realize that. My powers are all about emotion and usually my control is very good.

Well, pretty good.

Well, mostly okay.

Sometimes.

Oh, I might be a little overconfident at times; being able to throw a guy like this with no more effort than lifting a heavy box contributed to that. And as I could do that, it was my responsibility to make sure I never lost control and went that far. My father had tried to teach me this, but not a lot had rubbed off, sadly. The guy hassling at the door, finding Tyrone here, and the stress of trying to solve a supernatural suicide just boiled up inside me. I had the presence of mind to not put enough energy into my strike to break any of his bones or seriously hurt him. That didn't stop him from going sailing across the stage like he weighed nothing. The curtained area in back didn't even slow him down, and there was a crashing sound from beyond and he smashed against something beyond. There was a female voice that yelled in surprise, probably Miss Thing, not expecting to have to dodge a man in quite that way tonight.

“We are leaving.” My tone brooked no argument. I grabbed Tyrone's wrist. In the silence that had descended over the place my voice sounded overly loud, even to me. Every eye not on the back stage area was on me, and people were edging away from me. I pulled Tyron's arm and yanked him out of his seat towards the door, where a path of people parted before me. He was still staring at the curtains that the bouncer had disappeared behind, and I felt a little fear from him. *Good. He should be afraid.*

Oh, I was going to regret that thought later.

As I stalked out, the guy at the door took a step and started to ask Taylor if everything was all right. He fell flat on his face before he got three words out. I heard Pretzel struggling not to laugh out loud, and I felt him rocking back and forth on my shoulder. He was invisible, not inaudible, after all. Hearing his voice coming from my shoulder had already caused one person to stare at me tonight.

I had to admit, even in my anger it looked pretty funny. I couldn't resist a parting shot.

“And you wanted me to pay forty bucks for that?”

I pulled Tyrone out to the parking lot. “We're outside. Shall we continue our discussion?”

His eyes were wide, and he was looking at me as though for the first time. “How did you do that? You can't even open jar lids. Was that some sort of martial arts move?”

The reality of what I had done began to creep up on me. I did know some martial arts, of course. You didn't have a true martial artist as a mother and not pick up a few things.

“Don't try to change the subject,” I said angrily, grabbing the photo out of my pocket. I would deal with the aftermath later. Right now I still had a job to do. “At least tell me you've seen this guy hanging around here the past few nights.”

He looked between the photo and myself. “I don't care about that. Now tell me how you- Wait, yes, I have seen this guy.” He focused on the picture, taking it in hand and holding it up to the light to see it better.

“Really?”

“Yeah, he was here two nights ago. Buying the whole place a round and giving a lot of cash to strippers. From what others were saying, apparently he had been there the last few nights.”

*Well, we know what happened to the Baynard's money,* I thought sadly.

“Did he seem odd to you?”

“Odd? No. He said he wanted to live it up, that's why he was throwing all that cash around. I figured he won the lottery or something. We talked a little, and I got to telling him about your business. Why?”

“Because I found him yesterday morning, dead, in my office.”

I didn't think he could get more surprised after what he had just seen, but he managed it somehow. “No way!”

“He hadn't been to see his wife and child for two weeks. Then two nights ago he learns I'm opening ESP Consulting from you. The next day I find him dead, there in my new office. An interesting coincidence, don't you think?”

“You don't think that has anything to do with me?”

I leaned back against the car, looking up at the stars. “No,” I said quietly. “I just...” *Do I tell him about the note? I guess I better.* “I think it's personal, somehow. I found this note on my desk. 'Leave town or you're next.' Both it and the body were a message to me- someone doesn't want me investigating stuff around here.”

“That's crazy! Who would do something like that?”

“That's what I'm trying to find out. Did you notice anyone taking any particular interest in your conversation?”

He shook his head. “With all the free drinks he was buying I didn't notice much else but him and the girls on stage. He kept setting down money until they did these crazy things he- anyway...”

“Great. Just great. He didn't seem like something- I mean someone was after him? Maybe his eyes were a little vacant? Anything out of the ordinary?”

He shook his head. “He just seemed to want to have a good time. That's all.”

“Did me mention where he was staying? Any plans he had?”

“Seriously, no! I know you're just trying to do your job here-”

“I'm sorry. I just don't have any other leads right now. Someone seeing something here was my last hope, and now I have to tell Tay- officer Dieterich this didn't pan out.”

“I wish I could help more. I didn't think the guy was going to wind up dead. Geez.”

“I know, I know.” I sighed. “Really, a strip club? What were you thinking?”

“So are we... over?” He looked down at his shoes. I didn't even want to see what he was feeling emotionally, so I didn't even try.

“I don't know. Did you do anything but watch?”

“No, I swear!”

I felt his sincerity in that statement though, and figured he wasn't lying. There were times I wished I had been born a seer, so that I could tell

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for sure. *But on the other hand, don't we lie to each other all the time, one way or another? Would I really want to know?* “Okay. Let's just forget this happened? Maybe we can have dinner tomorrow.”

“Yeah, all right.”

I glared at him. “It's your one freebee. Don't push it.”

“Got it. Thank you. Tomorrow- someplace nice.”

“And...”

“And? It will never... happen. Again?”

“Very good. Call me in the afternoon. Who knows, maybe I'll have solved the case by then.”

“Okay.”

*Wait, that was his ringing endorsement of my chances? “Okay?” Maybe we should be over... Disappointment, but not in the way I expected. I hate it when I'm right.*

6

**Back in the apartment, later that evening.**

*“With great power comes great responsibility.”*

*That's the catch phrase of old Uncle Ben.*

*If you missed it, don't worry, they'll say the line.*

*Again and again and again” --“Weird Al“ Yankovic”*

I shouldn't have been surprised to feel someone in my apartment when I got back. Having received one warning already this week I was keeping my supernatural senses perked up a little more than usual. So before I unlocked my door I stood silently and felt beyond it, into my apartment. I didn't detect any wards or other traps, but I did feel someone in that direction. I switched over to trying to detect energy, and found the thing or person in the apartment had less than I did. So that was a good sign. Yes, the amount of spirit energy wasn't a true indicator of combat ability in general. An alchemist could turn you to stone pretty easily, they didn't need a lot of energy. But on the other hand, being in the position of having more than a potential opponent was the better position to be in.

For another thing, they could be hiding their true energy potential with spirit manipulation. I looked around, thinking where I could go and be undisturbed for a moment. There was a stairwell at the end of the hall, I could sit down there and do what I needed to. It was getting to be pretty late, so I doubted anyone would be taking the stairs at this hour. At least, my abilities told me I would be safe there.

I went over there and slumped over, relaxing myself.

“Make sure I don't fall over,” I whispered to Pretzel.

“You know how much more than me you weigh?” he squeaked.

“I'll only be gone a second.”

I forced my perceptions out of my body and drifted down the hall,

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back towards my apartment. That's why I needed to be sitting down when I did this, otherwise I would fall over. As I was no longer aware of my body, it wouldn't balance itself and that could hurt. Of course I would regenerate, but anyone hearing the thump and finding an unconscious woman lying there was more trouble than I needed right now.

I passed through the door like it wasn't there, and saw a woman sitting on my couch. She was maybe in her sixties, and was wearing a grey business suit much like my own. She wasn't wearing glasses, but she had an older pocket style computer in her hand she was doing something with. Her hair was done up conservatively, and was going grey, but still showed some blond. Hard to tell how tall she was, given she was sitting down and in heels, but I would put her at around my height. Appearances can be deceiving, especially when it came to my part of the world, but somehow she didn't seem all that threatening to me. I peered over the computer, she was playing some sort of color matching game that had been popular since computers had been invented.

She raised her head.

"It's all right dear, you can come in," she said, looking vaguely in my direction. "I don't bite."

*Oh goody, a Foundation member is here to chew me out. I knew I was going to regret throwing that guy...*

I reentered my body and told Pretzel to go hide. His energy was hardly noticeable next to mine, but at this point I didn't believe in taking any chances. Being older and more experienced, her senses might be sharper than mine, and could actually tell there was something hanging around me. That was if she was an ESPer, like me. The worse scenario was her being a seer, and could tell he was there instantly. Given he was a demon, and the Foundation believed very strongly they should be in the demon world, where they belonged, the best course was not to chance it. I was already in trouble for tonight, let's not add "years of associating with an imp" to the fire.

I unlocked my door and stepped inside, and the woman put her computer away into a pocket and stood up.

"I'm sorry to have barged in here like this," she began. "I'm Devorah Slenker, and you probably already guessed I'm here from the Foundation."

She offered me her hand, which was a good sign. She could just as easily have used compulsion to make me less able to resist her.

I hung my purse up on a hook near the door and went to shake her hand.

“Is this about my request for information about dangerous individuals in the area from this morning?” I asked, hoping against hope I was wrong. “Or perhaps about the rouge breath stealer I reported hearing rumors about in the city?”

She looked a little confused. “No, I'm afraid I'm here about what happened... where you were tonight.”

I colored. “I was there working a case.”

“Why don't you sit down and explain it?” She gestured beside her and sat down again.

“Would you like something to drink?” I offered instead. “I have some nice teas.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.”

I set about making tea and Devorah patiently waited. She was probably checking out my emotional state, so I tried to remain as calm and collected as I could. I could have put a barrier around my thoughts, but I wasn't too great at it. Besides, that would just look bad, so I figured, let her root around in my head if she wanted. She wasn't actively trying to read my mind, that much I would have felt. Being good at it didn't erase the feeling something was going on, it just made what you got more clear. I figured as long as she was being civil, I could be too.

When I sat down and offered her the tea she thanked me gratefully and waited for me to begin. I told her the whole story, from when I found the murdered man in my office, to the events of the evening.

“I see you've had a couple of busy days,” she said noncommittally.

“I know I should have restrained myself more at the... club, and I'm sorry about what happened but-”

“Now, now,” she said, softly. “This isn't a reprimand or anything like that. That's why I'm here rather than a more, shall we say, forceful agent of the Foundation. You're young, and your emotions run hot. Sometimes you give in to your impulses when you shouldn't. We understand that.”

When she said “young“ she meant “in relation to some members of the Foundation.” One of the top officials I knew of was a breath stealer who had been alive a couple of thousand years at least. Alchemists and artificers could

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also, with some effort, make themselves immortal, so it stood to reason there were probably others at the top that were that old too. Heck, I wasn't sure what the regeneration tattoo on my body was doing to my lifespan, my father would have been insulted if it "only" doubled it. He also said that was the number one reason was why they were so slow to change and embrace new ideas. He was probably right.

She went on. "We just wanted to talk to you, and make sure you understood that our letting you run this business of yours means a much greater scrutiny than you might be comfortable with."

"It's only been two days- you can't judge anything from that!"

"And a hectic two days they've been, humm? Don't worry dear, we take that into account. I'm more here to let you know that if it does seem to be too hard on you, we can provide assistance, if you need it. Also a warning that if we don't see improvement..." She let that hang in the air a moment. "Don't be too proud to ask if you think you're going down the wrong road. We want you to succeed, after all." She looked thoughtful. "Though I guess you already did ask us for something, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"One moment then."

She dialed a phone (Oh All-Father, they still made those single purpose devices? Most communications happened over the internet now, as more and more people had computers they wore on themselves and were connected 24/7) and had a brief conversation with someone.

"The information you wanted should be ready for you by tomorrow," she said, hanging up. "It was an unusual request, so it took a little time for someone to be appointed to fill it, to say nothing of actually getting the data you requested."

"Oh, thank you!"

"Quite all right. I do hope it helps. If there is a supernatural threat lurking about this town, we need to find it, and quickly. It worries me it was cautious enough to avoid detection up until now, but then suddenly announced itself. And in such a gruesome manner, at that! The whole thing strikes me as very strange. Still, you have done well for yourself under the direction of your old employer, so I'm confident in your abilities to act on your own."

"Oh, well, thank you," I said, a little embarrassed. I guess they had kept up on me, which I guess was their job, after all.

"Here's my number," she said, handing me a card. "If you find it's something you can't handle, please call me directly and I'll have someone out right away."

"Thank you, I will. I have a question though."

"Go on."

"If it was something wholly supernatural, as I believe, what am I going to tell the authorities?"

"Tell them nothing, dear. Call us. We'll make sure that the case is closed so that they don't do too much more digging."

"May I ask how?"

"The usual methods. The minimum amount of altered memories necessary for those that were involved. Some changed computer records, that sort of thing."

"And the wife and daughter?"

"That is an issue. We can hardly make the woman forget she was married to the man for so many years. Well, we could, but it would be an awful lot of bother. Also, to take the child's memories of her father away... we would only do that in the most extreme of circumstances. See how the situation plays out. If she needs to be told a little about our work, and you think she can be trusted, that could be discussed."

"Oh, okay."

"Did you think us monsters? We aren't, you know. But we do have to keep them safe, you know that."

"I've heard stories..."

"Posh. The Foundation has its share of enemies, I admit. But we are reasonable, for the most part."

"I'm sorry to have wronged you all like that."

"Nonsense. They're a secretive bunch, and it's easy to imagine all kinds of things in that situation. People older and wiser than myself say this is the best way, so it probably is. Maybe one day they'll step into the light, but it'll be a long while, I think."

"You're probably right."

"Thank you for the tea, and for your honesty," she said, standing. "I found both rather refreshing, actually."

I stood up with her and went to open the door.

"I would advise," she said, putting a hand on my back and causing me to turn, "To practice your emotional control. You didn't seriously hurt that man, and many of the people there were at least slightly drunk, so it could have been worse. As such they'll forget the whole thing in a few days

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and that will be that. But next time, and the time after that? Better to never start down that path, if you take my meaning?"

"I do. I'll try."

She smiled. "I know you will."

With that she concentrated, and grew more and more transparent until she was gone.

A thought struck me as I was washing that cups that, being an ESPer, maybe she *did*.

I got Pretzel back in after she left and went to bed feeling a little better. Tomorrow I would see what sort of supernaturally aware people lived in the area and check them out. I would call Taylor back and tell him the strip club thing was kind of a bust, but that I still had people to talk to. The Foundation wasn't too mad with me, and even offered to help if I got over my head in dealing with whatever killed Mr Baynard.

I still hadn't found anything to conclusively clear my own name, which would probably never happen to Mr Grumpy's satisfaction, but at least I felt like I had a chance.

**The morning of the next day**

*“A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.” --Charles Dickens*

I debated going down to see officer Dieterich the next morning in person, but decided against it. During the night the Foundation had come through with three names of people in the area that might have something to do with this. I was shocked to see no summoners on the list, and wondered if maybe my theory of possession was incorrect. I knew that if one of these people was our killer, having him around to do the arrest might be nice. At the same time, if one of these people was our killer, there would be no way to prove it in a court of law. “I’m a seer so I know this person is guilty“ isn’t admissible as evidence. Yet.

If ever.

Also, powers might get thrown around and the less normal people saw of that, the better. But I did call him and give him what I had learned the night before.

“Can I ask exactly when you went over there?” he asked.

“I guess maybe around 8:30? Why?”

He chuckled. “It’s just that we got a report of a disturbance there last night about that time. Odd, don’t you think? Just after I tell you about the place a woman matching your description was seen there screaming at her boyfriend. Some guy named...” I heard his notebook being flipped open. “Tyrone, that was it.”

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I'm glad he couldn't see me turning red. "Guess I must have missed it. Are you sure it was screaming and not just shouting? There's a difference."

"Could be, could be. The thing that got my attention in the report was eyewitness accounts of people seeing this young woman tossing a bouncer like he was made of foam rubber instead of meat. You think someone with powers could do something like that?"

I ignored the question. "They must have all been drunk or something. You don't know what goes on in those places! Maybe someone was passing some weed around before I got there. And he just tripped or something, and they were high, so they exaggerated." Yeah, it sounded thin even to me. But I couldn't just tell him the truth, now could I?

"Possibly," he agreed.

Marijuana had been legalized for years by this point, and was often to be found in places like that. However, penalties for doing anyone harm under the influence of any substance, be it inhaled or drunk, had gone way, way up in that same time frame. Like 30 days imprisonment and your license gets revoked for a year. Stiff fines too. Cars could drive themselves, but you still needed a license to operate one. With face tracking, license plate scanning and tagging technology being prevalent, those that drove without being licensed were found pretty quickly. If you were high or drunk and started a fight or something- oh, they threw the book at you, metaphorically speaking.

"So you don't know anyone by that name?"

"The important thing now is, he was seen there, and tossing money around. According to my informant-"

"Whose name was not Tyrone?"

"Whose name is not important right now, there wasn't anyone taking an active interest in him. And he had been there several nights after he left his wife and daughter. So if someone was noticing the money he was throwing around and decided to kill him for it, it could have been anyone there in the last several days. And he or she didn't look too obvious about it. At least not enough to distract from the, uh, show."

"That would be a motive for murder!" he said, surprised. "That would fit. Guy decides to leave his family, right?" he asked, mostly to himself. "Spends a couple of nights throwing cash around, gets noticed. Someone knows there's a new detective in town, decides to kill two birds with one stone. Grabs him and ties him up. Brings him to your office, stabs him, and gets out."

“Except for a guy running away from home, he didn't go very far.”

“Didn't say he was bright. Trust me, people have done dumber things and paid for it.”

“I guess he could be one of them, throwing all that money around in a place like that.”

“Right, right. Well, good work, Erica. I'm going to talk to the owner, see what cameras he has around. There may be some in the parking lot or near other buildings I could grab footage from. It'll take a while, I might need to get a warrant, and the suspect list will be pretty big. That's what rookie cops are for, right? We'll run this down yet!”

He sounded pretty upbeat by the end. I felt a little glow of pleasure at the complement too, even though I knew it didn't happen like that at all. It was plausible- and mundane. The evidence didn't totally match up but as long as they believed it could happen that way, it would be easier to steer them in that direction and away from the supernatural. Let them chase this lead down while I looked for the real culprit, and set the Foundation on them.

“Good luck! Hope you find something.”

“Thanks. What's your next move?”

Oh crap- I couldn't tell him, could I? Maybe in a general sense... “There's a couple of people the Fo- ah, that is to say, the people that trained me gave me some names of people in the area I should look into.”

“I see. Are you sure we shouldn't be doing that? This is a murder investigation.” His “we” was clear to mean “the police.”

“I can't. It's, you know, my side of things.”

“People with powers, you mean?”

“I'm not claiming powers exist, you are. Just so we're clear.”

“I don't like this. You can still get shot, you know, I don't care what powers you claim to have.”

*Yeah, but unless they killed me outright in one shot, it would only slow me down. Not that I can tell you that.*

“Don't worry! I am a licensed investigator, you know.”

“Okay, you can take care of yourself. Fine. Just don't take any chances, okay?”

“Promise.”

“Fine. I'll see you later.”

My new list of suspects has three people on it- one man and two woman. Apparently there was another ESPer living in the area, in Greece.

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Then in Victor there was a seer and a possible magic user living in Scottsville. That one had a lot of question marks around it- apparently she was part of a coven, and there was some power around her, but not much. They had never thought it enough to look into, so while I was running around, did they think I could?

“Typical,” grumbled Pretzel. “Make the little guys do all the work.”  
*Didn't Taylor say much the same thing? I guess he was right.*

“Now, now, it could be related. And I want to see all the parts of the surrounding area I can, in case I ever master teleportation. I'll have to have seen a lot of places if it's going to be useful.”

“So you need to see someplace to be able to later teleport to it?”

“Of course. How else would you picture yourself there strongly enough to bend space between there and where you are now?”

“I guess. So how did that Foundation lady get into your apartment?”

“Probably a seer showed her. They can view places without actually going there, like I have to. Or she did it my way, left her body and went to my address and looked inside. I'm sure the Foundation knows where I live, after all.”

“Don't suppose you could keep it from happening somehow? I just hate the thought of sitting there one day and having an ESPer pop in behind me.”

“I could ask my dad for some wards to protect the place, but then it would just look like I was hiding something. I don't want to look like I'm hiding something.”

“Even though you are?”

“Especially because I am. The best hiding place is out in the open, after all.”

“If you want to hide in the desert, you have to look like sand?”

*That sounds familiar...*

“That's from something, isn't it?”

“And old TV show about some ancient war.”

“I see.” I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, let's go talk to the ESPer first. The seer probably knows I coming already, so no rush there. ESPer, then magic user then seer, all right?”

“You're asking me like I have a choice.”

“You're right, you don't. Come on.” Then I screeched to a halt and glared at him. “Wait, can't *you* teleport? And for that matter can't you use scrying as well? Why am I explaining this stuff to you?”

His eyes lit up. "Oh yeah!" he exclaimed. "I haven't done it in so long, I guess I forgot!" He tried to look innocent, but that grin that was always plastered to his face made it difficult.

Imps. *Honestly.*

We pulled into the ESPers' driveway in Greece, off Maiden Lane, and I looked the house over. Blue, with an open porch area that had some furniture in it. There were four thin looking wooden columns running from the meter tall wall around it to the roof. There were three concrete steps up onto the porch and they seemed in fair condition. No leads for dogs or kids toys outside, though the yard was a bit of a mess. The shrubs in front needed trimming and the grass needed cutting, like probably a week ago. And where those beer cans laying about? I shook my head.

I was concentrating on hiding my energy, which was taking a little of my focus. I didn't want to spook anyone inside by having my rather impressive amount of spirit energy coming closer and closer. I know if someone with double my energy came into range of my spiritual senses and then made a beeline right for my apartment, I would run far, far away. Concentrating on that made it a little harder to sense what was going on around me, so I wasn't sure if there was someone in the house or not. Guess I would have to do it the old fashioned way- send in a spy.

"Are you ready for your mission?" I asked Pretzel.

"Is there double dessert tonight?" he asked hopefully.

"I think that could be managed," I said with a grin.

"Then I am yours to command."

"Great. He probably won't let me in, but as long as the door is opened a crack, you can slip in. See if there's anything suspicious going on in the house. See if he's acting weird, that sort of thing."

"I could just make a hole in one of his windows and slip through, too. He would never need to know you were here."

I shook my head. "I want to see how he reacts to my presence. That can tell us a lot. After he knows I'm here he might run or try to destroy evidence. That's where you come in."

"You want me to stop him?"

"No, just come get me. He's been to Demongate I'm sure, so he knows what you are. He could easily swat you with any number of ESPer powers. You aren't invulnerable, you know."

"But I can teleport!"

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“Glad you remember,” I said sarcastically. “Can we go now?”

We stepped up to the main door and I rang the doorbell, feeling Pretzel leave my shoulder so he was ready to slip inside. As I was standing there I started feeling a bit uneasy, like maybe this wasn't such a good idea. It was too late to do anything about it as a disheveled man, probably ten to fifteen years older than I was, cracked open the door. He needed a haircut, and probably could have used a shower too.

“It'll be ready tomorrow, I told you that,” he slurred, his eyes downcast.

“That's great, but I'm here now,” I replied.

He looked up, squinting in the sunlight like he had been someplace dark. “Oh, sorry, thought you were someone else. Can I help you?”

“I hope so. My name is Erica Chesterfield, I'm a detective who's working with the Rochester police on a-”

I didn't get any farther as my senses screamed “Defend yourself“ at me, and he got a look of terror on his face. “Police?” he managed, as I stopped trying to hide my energy and instead threw up a barrier of telekinetic force. His eyes got wide, he was feeling it now! “Oh crap!” He didn't say “crap” exactly, but you get the idea. What he did do was throw telekinetic force at me and slam the door, probably hoping to knock me off the porch and buy time for him to escape. The force careened off my shield, which I had angled to my left just in case he did something like this, and the leftmost pillar on the porch buckled like someone supernaturally strong had punched it.

*So much for diplomacy.*

A small part of me did take note that it wasn't the word “detective” but rather the word “police” that had set him off. Perhaps it would be best to leave that part out from now on? I agreed with myself, that would probably be for the best.

“I'm just here to talk!” I shouted through the door. He didn't seem to take notice, instead I heard his footsteps taking off at high speed away from the door.

So, his choices here, I thought, were to go destroy evidence, which actually didn't make sense. The murder happened a few days ago, what would he still have around here that would implicate him? Another choice was to just try and run, in which case he was probably heading out the back door. My choices were to smash the door down and go after him into his

house, or try and trip him up when he came out the back. I hadn't noticed anyone watching me when I walked up, so I could probably get to the roof pretty easily with telekinesis. However, I had sent Pretzel in for just this occasion and I didn't want to leave him in there alone, so I chose expediency over flashy. Get in, take him down fast, see what he was so nervous about.

*Seems as good a plan as any.*

I gathered energy to blow the door open.

It should be clear that I can both send out force that allows me to move objects around and to create a solid barrier around myself. They're basically the same thing, just me pushing stuff with my mind. It was simply a matter of application whether something went sailing through the air under my command or crashed into that force by itself. There was an advanced technique of combining these two methods to create a third- a tiny barrier propelled at high speed towards something you didn't want to be whole any more. A kind of telekinetic bullet, if you will. I glanced at the door and gauged where the lock would be, carefully aiming my shot. The door wasn't going anywhere, but too shallow and it might not penetrate. I also had to be careful of how much energy I put into it. Too much might blow through the door and take this poor guy in the back. I didn't want it to come to that, not yet, anyway.

The area around the lock exploded into splinters.

*Whoops, I only meant to shear through the lock. Not scare this guy even more.*

Looking at it, the deadbolt was still stuck into the doorframe, while the area around the lock was just gone, blasted away by my power. It was busted, even a metal deadbolt couldn't stand up to that kind of force, so it would probably be pretty hard to get out of there to replace the door. But I could open the door, which is all I needed at the time. I swung it open, shouting again, "I'm just here to talk!"

"You got a funny way of showing it!" the guy yelled, turning a corner and going out of sight. That's when he went "Yaaaaaa" and I heard a crash and thump.

*What the- did he run into something in his haste?"*

I strode after him, rounding the corner myself, to see him sprawled out on his kitchen floor, seemingly unconscious.

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“Oh crap!” I really said, and bent over him to see if he was okay. Health class was a long time ago, so I wasn't even sure he was breathing at the moment. I glanced back to see Pretzel sitting there on the floor, part of which was raised up, tripping him. He must have guessed where the guy was going, flown over here and used his alchemist powers to create a bump in the floor the guy wasn't expecting. He's distracted by me blowing his door down and isn't watching where he's going- ka-slam! Down he goes.

“Sorry,” he said, lamely. “I figured you didn't want him to escape, so...”

“You killed him?”

“I just tripped him. He hit his head on that cabinet door that was opened. He'll be fine.”

“You better hope so. Is he even still breathing? Oh All-Father what am I going to do? This was not how I wanted this to happen!”

“He's really not breathing? In that case, can I have some of his blood- while it's still fresh, I mean.”

I looked him over again. “Oh, yes, he is. Thank goodness.”

“Aw, too- I mean, see, told you he'd be fine!”

I glared at him, then softened. “I suppose I didn't want him to escape.”

“So I did good? Double dessert?”

“Ask me again when he comes to.”

I had Pretzel search the house for some rope, and turned the guy over so he would be at least be a little more comfortable. I figured he would be out for a few minutes, so there was no rush. I took a look around- it was a bachelor pad, no doubt about that. Dirty dishes in the sink. On the counter. On the table. Fast food bags in the trash. Which was overflowing a bit, of course.

“Is this guy an alchemist too?” asked Pretzel, coming back up from the basement.

“The report just said ESPer, why?”

“You better come down and see this.”

We both went down the stairs, and there was a chemical lab set up down there, which various things were cooking away in over small burners. The smell was terrible.

“Uh, turn those fires off,” I said, wrinkling my nose.

“I think the valve is over here,” Pretzel replied, flying over to a propane tank.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Do demons have fingerprints?” He held up his hands. Smooth. “Oh, go right ahead then.”

He turned the knob and the flame died out under the glass beakers, and the stuff within started cooling off.

I had a pretty good idea of what this place was, but I had to be sure. And that meant asking my new “friend” upstairs a few hard questions. The problem, as I saw it looking around, was that no jail could hold a determined ESPer. They could command people to let them out. Walk through walls, or fly over them. They could teleport (but I doubted this guy could, he had *run* away from me, after all) or just plain kill everybody inside and walk out. If they didn't know how to do any of those things when they went in, sitting around for hours in a cell with nothing else to do was excellent motivation to figure out how. It also allowed plenty of time to experiment, and you only needed to teleport once to escape prison.

Usually people with powers either went bad in a supernatural way, using their powers wrongly and so the Foundation could clearly step in, or were straight. Drugs? That meant the normal authorities, the last people I wanted to hand someone with powers.

*So now what can I do?*

First things first- let's see what my smelly captive had to say for himself while he was still unconscious. You might think that was the worst state to be in to get answers, but you'd be surprised. He had less defenses against me as he was, so now was actually the perfect time to strike.

When I went back upstairs I saw he had a nasty bruise on his forehead, which I could probably take care of with a healing technique I knew. I could actually learn two different ones, but you had to be pretty good with the first to learn the second. The first one just sped up the body's natural healing process, while the second forced an injury to heal instantly. Both were pretty hard on the injured person's body, but if someone nearly burned their arm off or something, they could be made whole again. And they lost some weight too, as the body burned fat and things to make the repair, which was usually a plus for most people. Better to get the information I needed first, then heal him, just so he didn't have the resources to fight me.

I took his head in my hands and imagined myself sliding down into his brain, which I did easily. Him being unconscious, and all that. With him in that state I found myself in just a dark place, so I imagined a nice field

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with birds chirping and bunnies hopping around. I had him laying down under a tree, his head on my lap, and he slowly opened his eyes. He must have seen the big, puffy clouds in the shape of ponies and dolphins because he looked up at them, confused, then saw me.

“You're in my head,” he said, resigned. “Ow.” He brought a hand to his head, the bruise was still there.

“I thought we might talk more easily this way. I know you're an ES-Per so you could try and fight me here, but I wouldn't recommend it, you're in enough trouble as it is.”

“What did you do to me?” he asked, sitting up.

“Moi? I did nothing.”

“Then how am I here?”

“You carelessly tripped on something running into your kitchen to escape out the back door. At least that's where I figured you were running to.”

“I tripped? And knocked myself out? Daaaang. What did I trip on, anyway?”

“The floor. The imp that slipped into your house before me made a sort of speed bump while you were looking at me blowing your door in.”

“The Foundation lets you keep an imp? As a pet?”

“He's more my partner. And what the Foundation doesn't know won't hurt it.”

“But they know everything! They sent you to bring me in, right?”

“Actually, no. I was here about a murder investigation.”

“I've never killed anyone!”

Being where I was, I knew he was telling the truth. I was no seer, but being in someone's brain has a few advantages.

“I believe you. But someone did, and I asked the Foundation who could have made someone stab themselves six times and die in my office. Three names came back, and yours was one of them.”

“Oh, controlling them with that domination skill, right?”

“That's the one.”

“I wish I could do that. It might get me out of this situation.”

“I saw the lab downstairs. Care to explain?”

He sighed and sat up. “I took chemistry in collage and got my degree. Things were going okay but then I got laid off. Some people approached me and asked if I could make, well, you know, drugs. They said they would get me the compounds if I would give them the final product. Well, I needed the money so I said sure. I enhanced myself and apparently I made them the best stuff they had ever had. Well, word grew and more people came to me. It was just small batches at first, I didn't think it would get this far!”

I felt his conflict. I've demonstrated that ESPers can see vaguely into the future, but there's a related skill we can use that builds on that. Say I want to play tennis, right? But I've never played tennis, so I really have no skill in it. I can look into the future though, so I can sort of "see" what actions will cause better results in real time. It's distracting of course, having a bunch of realities overlaid atop one another like that, but it would be enough to help me play tennis like an amateur rather than a beginner. I would know swinging in this way makes the ball go here, but swinging this way makes the ball go there. Then I could choose which of those was best, and hope I had enough time to actually make the swing.

He must have been doing something similar. He wanted the greatest return and the most potent drug, so he concentrated on that and it helped him do everything exactly right. For a person who already had a skill in something, like taking a bunch of chemistry courses, it could allow you to be better than the best human!

"What happened?"

"In the end? Men with guns came by and said I would be working for them from now on. I might be an ESPer, but I don't want to fight a bunch of guys packing heat. You know? So now I'm stuck. They come in every few days to pick up the product, and always casually mention they'll shoot me if I don't deliver."

"And if you use powers on them anyway, the Foundation won't be happy because they'll just see power use in front of normal people."

"That's my thinking."

"Whew boy, that's a tough one. Let me think for a minute."

So I did. The problem was going to be how much he wanted to stay here in Rochester. If he would agree to disappear...

"What if instead of punishing you the Foundation helped you to... disappear?" I asked slowly.

"You mean like witness protection?"

"Exactly! You agree to testify against these guys and the Foundation finds you some work someplace."

"Couldn't regular cops do that?"

"Who do you trust more? Normal people who hope you are never found, or a seer who asks the universe 'will this man ever be found by the drug dealers he put in jail' and gets a 'nope' in response? And if they get a yes, they do something different with you until they do get a no response."

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“You have a point.”

“So will you agree to help?”

“If they can help, sure. My job certainly isn't keeping me here. And if I can get some spirit energists or true martial artists to protect me while I pack, I'll move from here like that.” He snapped his fingers.

“Then I have a plan. I'm going to break the meld, and I'll heal your bruise up too. You'll wake up in a few minutes.”

“Okay. Thanks for hearing my side of it.”

“Hey, we ESPers have to stick together, you know!”

He smiled.

“So what do you say?” I asked Taylor a few moments later. “You want to bust up a drug ring in this area with almost no work on your part?”

“How did you know it was my birthday?”

“Is it really?”

“No, two months ago. Seriously, these guys are just going to walk into our clutches?”

“Sure. I get out of here with Andy and we leave the door unlocked. You hang out here in the basement tomorrow afternoon in case they come early. They come for the drugs and, finding the door unlocked and Andy MIA, head downstairs. You're there, catching them red handed coming to pick up drugs, and with what I'm sure will be illegal weapons. Concealed, illegal weapons, at that!”

“I like it. I like it a lot. You're solving cases for me I didn't even know I had! Wait a minute, am I going to be out of a job soon?”

“No, I'll always need big, strong men like you to put the cuffs on and read them their rights.”

“I'm glad I'm good for something.”

“So you'll make it happen?”

“Yeah, I'll make it happen. They may be watching the house though, to make sure he doesn't run. How are you going to get him out?”

“Oh, I have my ways. You can't see me, but I'm winking at you. Don't worry, he'll show up to the trail.”

“He better. If we can pull this off- We'll be in your debt, that's for sure.”

“Just doing what I can to help out my town. I'll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Keep up the good work.”

Next I called Ms Slenker, the Foundation agent that had come to see me before. She said it sounded like a fine plan, and she would come pick him up in a few minutes. Of course I had to send her a picture of the room, which was easy enough. He packed a few things and thanked me.

“Honestly, I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up.”

“You would have thought of this eventually. You were just too close to the situation. You needed a new perspective.”

“I guess. I owe you one.”

I laughed. “I'll send you my bill.”

Pretzel repaired the door so it wasn't suspiciously “shot up“ when the thugs arrived, and we left it unlocked. I went down into the meth lab and concentrated on how everyone would feel in this room come tomorrow. A lot of joy and hatred, which I figured was probably right on the money. I didn't sense any pain or death, so it looked like the police got the crooks-joy- and the bad guys went to jail.

*Not a bad start to the day, if I say so myself.* It wasn't even quite lunchtime yet. I figured I would head over to see the “magic user“ and see what she had to say for herself.

**Just before noon that day**

*“There is a real magic in enthusiasm. It spells the difference between mediocrity and accomplishment.” --Norman Vincent Peale*

My next stop was in Greece, south of where I was, so my car took 390S and got off on Scottsville Road. I drove past the airport, where Pretzel scrunched down in the seat next to me and watched out the window warily.

“What's wrong with you?”

“They remind me of dragons. Only dragons fly around the demon world with impunity like that. A little morsel like me? I learned to be very careful.”

“Well don't worry, no dragons here. The Foundation would have a fit if something like that showed up and started flying around. You're safe.”

“I know. Need I remind you of certain eight legged creatures you shout for me to deal with? Even though you tower over them or could use your powers to just carry them outside from a distance?”

“You need not,” I said stuffily.

“Then I don't want to hear it.”

The car drove me into a parking lot and parked itself, leaving me looking at a row of brown houses all stuck together. Almost as if a house was built, then another was built exactly where the last one left off. They had a sort of weird protrusion out the top, which stuck out past the lower wall. That meant if you were standing and looking out the window in that room, the floor below you was sitting on air, not the ceiling of the floor below. It made for a very odd shape, and the color wasn't all that great either. Each door was painted a drab blue, and on either side of each door grew two flattop bushes. It was clouding up at that point, so all in all I wasn't im-

pressed. It looked like each person got half a tiny front yard on either side, which was hardly worth it. The roof didn't look so great either, someone was letting it go a little too long.

The "house" I wanted was in the middle, and I sat for a moment to think about my approach. Let it not be said I didn't learn from experience!

"Same plan?" asked Pretzel, bouncing up and down on the seat. "That last time was fun!"

"Fun for you, maybe."

"Aw, I saw you make kissy eyes at Andy when you healed him. Just what did you guys talk about while you were rummaging around in his brain?"

"I do not rummage! Kissy eyes indeed. I have a boyfriend... still. I think."

He cocked his head to one side and looked up at me.

"Okay, he might have been cute cleaned up, and I was going for the whole wounded hero thing. He was vulnerable, and there were men with guns, and why am I telling you all this?"

He continued to look at me, his grin getting a little bigger.

"Come on. She doesn't have powers anyway if she's relying on rituals. I don't have anything to fear from her."

"Gonna knock her out, see what she knows?"

"Trust me to be a little more subtle than that."

"Sure, sure," he said, disappearing and settling on my shoulder.

We rang the bell and a woman, probably in her forties, answered the door. She was a bit plump, and shorter than me. She had darkish colored skin and short black hair. She had on a pair of glasses, regular ones by the look of it, and had a no nonsense look about her.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Zintoesu?" I asked.

"That's me." She looked me up and down.

"I'm here investi-"

"Oh, you're like me!" she exclaimed. "Yes, yes, I can feel it. Please, come on in!"

"Uh," I said, because I'm a quick thinker and witty to boot. She flung the door open and invited me inside.

"I was just going to sit down for lunch. You simply must join me. No I won't take no for an answer, come on in. Don't be shy. Do you like ham? Or are you vegetarian? I tried it for a while, but as the Lord and Lady are

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my witness I could not give up hamburgers. The spirit and the flesh were both weak that day, let me tell you.” She laughed. “If you are I have some cottage cheese and fruit both fresh from the market. I'm sure they'll suit you well. Well don't just stand there, come on in.”

Bemused, I entered the hallway and wondered if I was ever going to get a word in edgewise.

“You're here about your abilities, I'm sure. You've come to the right place. I'm sure the spirits guided you here to me for this very reason! Many have come to see me but you're the first I've felt with such potential. My, my! Did you say you wanted ham, I've forgotten.”

We had entered the small kitchen by this time, and there was a table set for one and she busied herself setting out another plate and cup.

“The ham would be fine. But I'm really here-”

“Oh, we can talk all about that in a moment. Sit down, make yourself at home! This won't take a second!”

She went on about various things, and I took the opportunity to extend my senses towards her.

I realized what she meant when she first saw me.

It was a curious phenomenon unique to ESPers. There were a couple of ways someone could “enter” the supernatural world. The first was to be handed down an item through your bloodline, or as a gift. Like a sword that could shoot fire or a cloak that could make you turn into a swan. The item became part of your heritage and so only people in your family could use it. My mother would perhaps hand her boots of speed down to one of us girls, as they had been handed down from her mother and her mother before her. That is, if she didn't decide to become immortal, as my father had offered her.

The second way was to be born with a power, like I was.

The third way, and the trickiest, was to hang around people that were supernatural and hope some of it “rubbed off” so to speak. The Foundation called these sorts of people “the touched” because they were “touched” with supernatural power. Clever, huh? I bet they spent weeks coming up with that name. Anyway, various circumstances could create someone with some powers in common with people born with them, but only under very specific circumstances. There were maybe two people a year that entered the school having this happen. Of course anyone older than 14 that happened to get a pamphlet and a stern warning about experimentation.

I guess a forth way was for heaven or demons to grant you power after the fact, if you caught their attention by being very pious or very wicked.

This lady wasn't any of those things. If you were born a spirit energist, for example, you could do certain things. You could manifest an energy weapon and shoot energy out of your hands. You could trace energy and trap energy. There were no people, born spirit energists, that could just shoot energy and nothing else. You were a person with powers or you were not. The division was very clear.

However, there was a very strange thing that happened to ESPers. Foundation people weren't sure if sometimes people born with ESPers powers somehow lost most of them early in life, or if people born without ESPers powers could somehow pick some up.

In either case, that's what this woman was. She was a very, very weak ESPer. Given the amount of power I had at my disposal, and the number of skills I practiced, she would have little difficulty in feeling out that I was an ESPer, "like her." Except she could only learn a little bit of what I could do, and even then, not all that strongly. I wasn't sure if I should feel sorry for her because she would never know the joy of flying or willing the temperature of your drink up and down or happy that she got to experience a taste of what I could do. So few on Earth did, after all.

As she got my sandwich ready and nattered on about things I looked quickly around the room. *Much cleaner than the place I just was, that's for sure.* Out in the living room I saw what looked like an alter with some weird stuff on it. On the left was a chalice and a seashell full of water, and a small cauldron. Also a white candle in a glass holder and a dried flower. On the right was a red candle in a metal holder, a small knife, a piece of coal and a small statue of a dragon. Near the center was a large feather, a gemstone of some kind, and what looked like a wand out of a movie. If what I remembered from my religion studies class was accurate, this woman was wiccan, and what I was looking at was her alter. That didn't fit well with my purpose for being here, because wiccans generally were all about not hurting people. They believed whatever sort of energies they sent out into the universe came back to them magnified, typically by three. Why would the Foundation send me to check on someone like this? A weak ESPer that might lift a heavy book, with some effort, who was also all about peace and love?

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The rest of her apartment was adorned with various fantasy symbols like unicorns and fairies, all very tasteful.

She set the sandwich and a sliced apple in front of me, poured me some ice tea from a pitcher, then sat down herself.

“So did one of the coven members send you to me? Or did you just know to come here? I know your abilities can seem scary, but don't worry, I can teach you how to control them.”

She said it so sincerely, I couldn't stop myself. I burst out laughing. That set her back a little.

“I'm sorry,” I said, coming back to myself. “You've been so kind, I just couldn't help myself. The truth is I graduated from the school that taught me how to control my powers when I was 18. That's not why I'm here.”

“There's a school for it?”

I held up a hand. “We can talk about that later, if you'd like. I'm actually here because...” I looked around the room again. No way. No way could this woman be a killer. Right? “Well, the people that sent me here were obviously wrong. Unless there's a member of your coven that's found a real book of evil rituals you've been performing, you're not the person I'm looking for.”

“I don't understand.”

“No reason you should. Two days ago I walked into my office to find a dead man. He had been stabbed, or more accurately, I believe he was made to stab himself.”

“No!”

“Yes. I touched him and watched his final moments, possibly under some sort of compulsion or demonic influence. The police of course thought it was a murder, because no one could stab themselves like that, over and over. So I was brought on by the police to help track down the killer. I've been interviewing people with power that live in the area who could have done it. Obviously you aren't the one I'm looking for.”

“I should hope not.”

“I do have to ask if any of your other members might be capable of something like that though. This was the man, do you know him?”

I slid the picture across the table and started in on my sandwich. She shook her head.

“He doesn't look familiar. The only person in our coven that likes the dark a little too much is Karyn. She's actually the one who brought us together, it's her book of shadows we use for the rituals.”

“How old is this book?” I asked, suddenly suspicious.

“Pretty old. I think it was her grandmother's.”

“I see.”

“You don't think...”

“I have to cover every angle. If she thought the ritual did something but it really did something else, it could have caught the attention of certain demons. Usually to empower it you would need a sacrifice, hopefully you haven't been doing much of that.”

“Of course not!”

“Just checking. Real witches with real magic are very, very, very rare. The evil kind are out there, and are created by demons. The good kind do get spell books and training from elders, but any real magic users must be suspected. So, I better look it over if that's okay. Just to make sure there isn't anything in there you don't want to do, even by accident. Or, if it's real magic, we'll have to look into the source. There are certain rituals that normal people can do that will cause things to happen, and that can be extremely dangerous.”

“I can have her bring it over. But honestly, demons? They don't exist.”

“Are you sure? Pretzel, if you please?”

“Really?” he whispered to me.

“It's okay. She has powers, so we aren't breaking any rules.”

“Who are you-” She jumped as Pretzel appeared on my shoulder and waved to her.

“Hiya!”

“You're making me see things, aren't you?”

“No, he's real, go ahead and touch him. While I could project an image such as this into your mind, you might see though it, which would destroy my credibility.” She still seemed to hesitate. “Don't worry, he's harmless.”

“Am not,” he said, stomping a foot.

“Yes, but you're not going to hurt her.”

“Oh, sure. Why would I want to?”

“You hang around with a demon?”

“I caught him a few years back working a case. I didn't want to send him back to the demon world, so he hangs out with me now. Compared to most demons, he's darn cute.”

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“This... I never imagined. And you say there's a school?”

I sighed. “Yes. You didn't qualify for entrance because you aren't a full ESPer. You have some abilities, I just have a lot more.”

She looked confused. “Full ESPer?”

“You would call it a psychic. I'm a psychic, you're 1/8 of one.”

Now she looked troubled. “So my being able to tell things about people, or see what happened to something or lighting candles- that's not magic? That's just psychic powers, my brain doing things?”

“That's right. Like I was saying, magic is usually granted by demons, so if someone in your group can do things apart from what you just described, you could be in danger from them. Of course some angels can do magic, it isn't magic itself that's evil. The majority of magic on Earth though? It's demonic in nature.”

She shook her head. “No, I'm the one with any real power. But you say that power is nothing compared to yours?”

“I can learn more, and what you can do, I can learn to do a lot better.”

“Not that I doubt you, but can you show my an example?”

“Sure,” I replied, reaching for the pitcher. I put my finger along one side of the glass and concentrated. I sent a little power out and it froze solid before her eyes.

She stared at it.

*Do you have a light bulb?* I pushed into her brain.

She stared up at me, then mutely got up and went into a closet somewhere out of sight. She returned with an LED bulb and handed it to me. I concentrated on it and it lit up. That last one was also a skill that stemmed from telekinesis- moving electricity around. LED lights didn't take much power to glow, so it was easy to send a trickle of power into them.

“Shall I continue?” I asked with a smile.

She shook her head. “You've convinced me. I never even thought of doing any of that stuff.”

“That's just for starters. I could control fire for you, tell you the meaning of words in a language I don't know, leave my body and travel at the speed of thought, and more.”

“You have some great gifts,” she said sadly.

“And they took me a lot of practice to learn, and I only feel I've mastered a couple of them. ESPers who are twenty years older than me can do some scary stuff, let me tell you!”

“So where does that leave me?”

“What do you mean? Just because you found out I'm a better painter than you, for example, that doesn't mean you should stop painting.”

“I guess you're right.”

“She usually is,” said Pretzel, causing her to jump a little again.

“Yeah, he takes a little getting used to.”

“Are you saying I'm ugly?”

“You're not going to win any beauty contests.”

“Oh yeah?” He closed his eyes and concentrated, then opened one eye. He hastily closed it again, and suddenly changed into a tiny angelic looking form. We both stared at him. In place of his leathery bat wings were soft, feathery wings. He now looked more like a Ken doll than a miniature Devil, and I had to admit, without that weird grin he looked rather handsome.

“I didn't know you could do that!” I exclaimed. “That's really neat!”

“It's not easy,” he squeaked. “Even changing something as small as me. You've seen me change the shape of things before, did you think I couldn't do it to myself?”

“I just never considered it before.” I looked over at Mrs. Zintoesu. “I guess we both learned some things today.”

“So what are you really?” she asked him directly.

“At a most basic level? A soul, I guess,” he answered. “We demons get a bad rap because some that shall remain nameless consider souls as currency. I guess because more of them go to heaven? So those demons are always trying to get more, just like humans try to make money. Some are ugly or mean or just spiteful because that's what they become when they die. It isn't their fault they turned out that way. Talk to the All-Father, he set the whole thing up, right?”

“I think a philosophical debate is a little outside what I came here to do. Let's just get this person with the spell book here and make sure you guys aren't doing something accidentally you might not want to.”

Mrs. Zintoesu agreed and went off to call, while Pretzel was looking at his wings and flexing his (so to speak) muscles.

“How long will it last?”

“Oh, a couple of hours, though I could end it any time I wanted to.”

“Interesting. You continue to surprise me.”

“Oh yeah, I'm a complex and... and... that brain thing...”

“Intelligent?”

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“Yeah, a complex and intelligent demon.”

“Hummm.”

She came back and said Karyn was going to stop by in a few minutes.

“So is there any way I can learn to do the kind of stuff you can do?”

“No. You are too old. Too old, to begin the training,” I said in a funny voice.

Pretzel started laughing.

“What?”

“Sorry. My father made me watch that movie... never mind. There is one way, but I sure as heck am not going to attempt it.”

“Really? There's a way?”

“Basically I enter your mind and force psychic power through your brain. That blasts open the channels you already possess for powers, and you become a full ESPer, like me.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“It is. Maybe with a lot more practice in melding I could do it, but I wouldn't feel comfortable about it until someone a lot older than me said I had mastered the technique. There's a lot of things that could go wrong trying that.”

“I can imagine.”

“Better that you don't.”

So I talked with her about growing up as an ESPer and about what magic really was. She wondered aloud if knowing about real magic meant she should still be Wiccan. I told her from what I understood, Wicca wasn't just about the magic, it was a way of life. Some Wiccans didn't do any “magic” at all, just tried to live their lives according to the Rede. It was all about accepting others and not judging them, and trying to live as though what you did to people would be done to you. Just because her powers didn't come from “magic” but instead her own hard work and practicing them didn't mean there were any less valuable. She asked after all the things she could learn, and I melded with her to show her some pointers and see exactly what she knew. I had only a vague idea about exactly what skills she could practice, but melded she could try something with me looking “over her shoulder” to know if she could one day succeed at it or not. She didn't know about sending thoughts to others, or compulsion. She was hesitant to learn a skill like that, but I told her it could come in handy, even if it was just to stop a child running into the street if you were too far away

to catch them. I also felt she could still improve what he had figured out on her own, so I gave her some tips and she seemed grateful.

She also asked if I could petition on her behalf to have an older ES-Per come by and see if her total abilities could be unlocked. I wasn't sure what Foundation policy on that was, but I said I would email my contact and ask. After all, she was old enough to recognize the danger of letting people know she had real power. It was also doubtful, at this stage, that she would pick much of it up, given people with real powers started learning them at thirteen, when their minds were still malleable.

Finally Karyn arrived, a very gothy 20-something dressed all in black. She even had the black makeup on, and leather boots that added a couple of inches to her height.

*People still dress like that? It's the 2030s for crying out loud!*

"So Sasha said you wanted to look at my Book of Shadows? I don't know..."

"She's from... another coven I contacted online. I was concerned because you wouldn't ever show it to any of us. I just wanted her to look it over and make sure there's nothing too dangerous inside."

*Smooth, I thought. Very smooth.*

"Of course not, it's just, you know, standard stuff."

"Then you won't mind showing her?"

"I- my grandmother said I shouldn't show it to anyone."

*I was afraid of this.* Luckily, I had also planned for it, and had begun sifting futures when she walked into the room. I needed to see that book, so I focused on how to better command her to give it to me. Just saying something like "give me the book" would make her give it to me, but then try to take it back right away. I needed to say the right thing in the right way, and I think I knew what to say.

"You want to do whatever I think is best with the book," I said, making it a command and sending that command into her brain. I learned my lesson and put extra power into my will as I did it.

"Here you go!" she said cheerfully, handing me a black covered volume.

Mrs Zintoesu looked a bit surprised. Perhaps she was wondering if I was right when I told her being able to command people to do things was useful.

I looked at it from different angles, not yet opening it. Was it my imagination, or did the symbol on the front cover look like something my father would put on an object to turn something into a talisman? I opened my mind to what my power senses could tell me about the thing.

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Not much, I quickly found out.

I had always been a little better than my classmates at sensing powers that were active around me for one reason or another. That's really all I got too, a sense of latent power around the book. I tried sensing the emotional content of the book, figuring if it was full of dark rituals, I would feel hate or anger from it. Nothing. I tried seeing where the book was in the past, or trying to get a glimpse of the book's future. Nothing. I stared at it.

"I have to get back to work," said Karyn, "Just get it back to me when you're done with it."

"Will do," I replied cheerfully, all the while thinking *No, you're probably not getting it back.*

She left, and I told Mrs Zintoesu I had to leave right away as well.

"Oh, you can't stay? I would love to hear more about your life and school and your cases and-"

"Really! My compulsion will only last a couple of minutes, so she will decide that maybe she didn't want me having this after all and come back for it. Best if I'm not around when that happens. I'll be in touch though. Like I said, I'll ask someone about getting the rest of your powers activated."

"I'd really like that."

Out in the car I got on the road again as quickly as possible and sat my purse down on the book. I wasn't sure what would happen if it was opened by any hand but hers but I wasn't taking any chances. talismans could do anything, from blowing up the whole place to just teleporting the book back to her. I didn't care to find out which this was.

*It can't be a talisman, though, it would have become an inherited item if it really had been passed down from her grandmother. Right?* Still, I didn't want to take any chances with it.

My next stop was Victor, all the way on the other side of the world, so I had some time. I called Devorah and explained things, she said to leave the book at my house and she would come pick it up. They would have some experts look it over and see if there was anything dangerous about it. I also requested a copy be made that looked similar, but any dangerous rituals should be subtly changed so they didn't work anymore.

"Why would we want to have even partial rituals out there in the world?"

“It might be uncomfortable if the owner of that book comes around wanting it back, and I have to explain it was full of real dark rituals and was destroyed. She'd take me to court! Destruction of property! Better to hand her back a fake, no longer dangerous book she can read out of to her heart's content.”

“I guess you have a point. I'll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

There was a pause.

“You're going to call me up for every little thing now, aren't you? I'm going to regret popping in to see you like I did.”

“Oh, but isn't that exactly what *you* said to do?” I asked sweetly. “And really, is a book I can't sense anything out of really a 'little thing?’”

“I suppose not. Very well, we'll see what we can do.”

“There is one more little thing, the person I was just talking to could become an ESPer, so I promised to inquire about having someone discuss it with her...”

**Three Thirty that afternoon**

*“Books on horse racing subjects have never done well, and I am told that publishers had come to think of them as the literary version of box office poison.”* --Laura Hillenbrand

I had to drive through the town of Victor to get where I was going, a curious blend of very fast and very slow travel. As I neared the town center the speed limit dropped considerably, and there were a lot of cars crawling through the narrow, two lane street. The town looked to be in a bit of a decline, but there were still a lot of people passing though to get someplace else. My car turned left onto a private road and chugged up a large hill, winding back and forth like a serpent to the top. I passed several houses on the way up, and as I looked out I saw they were all boarded up around here for some reason. Strange.

I overrode the automatics and pulled into the house before the one at the top, which my GPS system indicated was my destination.

“What's up?” asked Pretzel.

“I don't know. Look- all these houses up here are boarded up. I wonder what happened?”

“Maybe one person owned the whole track up here and forced everyone to move so they could sell the land, but the deal didn't go through?”

“I guess. Come on.”

I got out of the car and walked around the house. These used to be nice houses by the looks of things, but they were starting to fall apart a little. I stood and stared up at the final house, which I could just see up the road a ways.

“I don't like it,” I told Pretzel. “If all these houses are boarded up, it makes sense the one at the top of the hill is too.”

“Maybe the guy at the top bought all the others so he wouldn't have any neighbors?” he asked, giggling.

“There would be easier ways to do that around there. Keep going down that road we turned off of and houses become much scarcer. No, it doesn't add up. Also why would a seer be living in a place like this? If these houses are abandoned for some reason, and that one is too, then is she squatting? Any seer worth the name can get a job with any of the supernatural groups around the world, they wouldn't have to be homeless. This just feels wrong.”

“You're the expert on feelings. So what are you going to do about it?”

“I'm going to take a look around that final house from right here.” I sat back down in the car again and tilted the seat back. “Look after my body for a minute, okay?”

“You got it, boss.”

My senses left my body and I drifted towards the house, unimpeded by such things as “terrain“ and “physics.” I looked the house over from the outside, and like the others, it was boarded up. However, this house had two cars parked in front of it, and the board over the front door had been ripped off and flung aside. It looked like some of the windows had been uncovered too, but I didn't see the wood lying there like I did for the door.

I saw movement past one of the windows and my first instinct was to duck down, but then I rolled my “eyes“ and remembered I was little more than a ghost at the moment, no one could see me. Even if that was the seer, she wouldn't be able to do more than vaguely sense me. I passed through the wall and looked around. I spotted someone turning a corner and followed them, and found three men in the room. Two of them were hunched over a very impressive stack of sweet, sweet cash.

“What was it?” asked the more portly man, who was dressed in sweatpants and matching color t-shirt. He had a pudgy face with tiny eyes, and was currently counting out bills.

“Some woman drove up the street,” said the youngest looking guy, the one I had followed in here. He sat down again. He was wearing a black suit, a sharp contrast to the pudgy guy, and a hat rested on the table.

“What woman?” asked the third, the oldest. He had a wispy beard and was also wearing a suit, but one that looked twenty years old. His hair was grey and thinning, and he was the thinnest of the three. He too was counting cash.

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“I don't think she was a cop. She stopped one house down and walked around it. Then she got back in her car. She probably drove away.”

“Probably?” asked sweatpants guy.

“Yeah, I didn't stick around to see. What else would she do?”

“Oh, I don't know, maybe come up here? You idiot, get back out there and see if she's gone! The last thing we need is some dame poking her nose around here!” The older one looked sharply at the younger guy.

*Dame? Who says that any more?*

The younger one sighed and got up again. “Fine. And what exactly to I do if she does come up here?”

“Persuade her,” he answered, patting the gun I now saw laying on the table next to him.

“Oh, great idea,” said Mr Sweatpants. “Start waving your gun around some poor woman's face and see how fast the cops take to show up. We're here to lay low, remember? Keep the girl out of sight, and make sure no one comes poking around. Make something up if she comes up here. You're a developer or something checking out the houses to buy. I don't know. Wave your gun around, honestly.”

*Wait- girl?*

I knew I moved a lot faster than this guy, so I quickly checked the rest of the house, which was pretty big, knowing I could get back to my car in an instant. I found who they were talking about, chained to a post in the basement.

Yes, I said chained to a post.

It was a disheveled little girl, probably about twelve, who looked dirty and sad. Her hair hung limply from her head, and probably hadn't been washed in weeks. Her jeans had held up better, but her shirt was filthy and she had nothing on her feet, which I saw were bruised and puffy. One of her eyes was swollen shut, someone must have hit her, and her legs and feet were tied together with plastic cord the police used in place of handcuffs sometimes. From her hands there was a thick chain that wrapped around plastic tie, then the post, and was padlocked together. I guess I found my “wayward” seer-

*Those idiots at the Foundation, what the heck were they thinking? I thought, my rage building. This isn't some rogue seer that's using her powers for evil, it's a little girl who's been kidnapped. I don't believe this!*

Oh, was I going to give Devorah a piece of my mind when I next saw her. Oh yes. Imagine being able to find this girl but not caring enough to look into it further, just telling me to “Yeah, go check out these three people if you want.” Really? You couldn't have said “We found a little girl being held captive by three gangsters with a pile of money in an abounded house in Victor. We stormed the place, pulled their souls from their bodies, ripped them apart, sent the bodies to another dimension and saved the girl.” No-just “there might be a seer there. Go check it out.”

I flashed down to my car again and woke with a snarl. They were dead- all of them. I would see to it personally.

“Wow, I thought I had a scary face,” said Pretzel as I gunned the motor and slammed the car into reverse, pulling out of the driveway. “What the heck did you see in there?”

“Three people holding a little girl hostage. I'm going to kill them.”

“Kidnapping a little girl?” He whistled. “There's a special place in Naraka, the torture city in the demon world, for people like that. We're sending them there, are we?”

I snarled something to him and turned the car off, coming up behind the two cars owned by the men.

*To set them on fire or not to set them on fire, that is the question*, I thought grimly. I thought there might be more money in the trunks or something, so I settled for slashing all their tires with a small pocket knife I carried as I went past.

“Oh this'll be fun,” said Pretzel with glee, rubbing his hands together. “I don't even need to be an ESPer to feel it.”

“Hey!” said the young guy I saw earlier, coming out of the house and reaching for something under his jacket.

“You!” I shouted at him, pointing. He startled, and squinted at me. I could almost see his throughout process. *Do I know you, lady?*

I didn't give him time to react. “Give me your gun,” I commanded him, not worrying about holding energy back. I had plenty to spare for these dead men, after all.

He pulled it out and pointed it at me. He seemed to struggle with himself a moment.

“No!” he finally shouted. *Oh All-Father, really? You're going to make them fight me on this?* I had planned on taking his gun, shooting him the leg, and letting him suffer a little for what he had helped put that girl though, but if he wasn't going to be reasonable about the whole thing...

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“Fine,” I snarled, and grabbed his head with telekinesis, slamming it down into the pavement. He gave a cry as an invisible hand grabbed his head and yanked it towards the ground as fast as I could make it go. His head cracked like a melon and he went limp, blood pooling around it. I didn't care if he was dead. I still had hold of his head, and thought, no, that isn't going to be enough. These three guys terrorized that poor little girl, it was only fair some of that terror be returned, right? Pretzel was hopping from one foot to the other with obvious glee, enjoying the show. My anger kept me from feeling any remorse over my actions, but a part of me knew I might regret this later. He was a demon- no matter how civilized he acted, at heart, this is what he loved best. Mayhem. Violence. I was supposed to be better than that. Right now though, part of me was cheering along with him.

I had seen that some windows in the house were no longer boarded up, because there seemed to be no power to the place, and those inside needed light. So I stalked over to one of them, telekinetically dragging the guy along with me. He didn't stir. I sent him out to the limit of my range, then quickly zipped him through the window, with predictable results. The window smashed to pieces with a crash, causing the two men in the room to jump out of their seats and grab their guns.

“What the-”

The man, still under my control as I could see them through the windowframe, again rose. Now glass was sticking out of him, and he was bleeding from multiple laceration. His arms dangled limply, and he floated in the air before the two men, their eyes now wide with fear. The blood drained from their faces as they beheld this apparition of death before them.

*You're next.* I sent into their heads, along with insane laughter.

“Jesus!” shouted the one, raising his gun and firing wildly at the man.

*It's a little late to find religion,* I pushed into them. *He can't help you now in any case.*

The older guy seemed to have more presence of mind, and slapped the gun down from Sweatpants Guy. “It's got to be some kind of trick. I bet that witch is doing it. Go get her!”

The man nodded. “Right, some kinda trick. Got to be. Can't be real. Trick. Get the girl. Yeah.”

*Oops. I think I broke him.*

He turned to head down the hall where the stairs probably were, so I flung his possibly dead buddy at him to forestal that and think of what else I wanted to do to these guys to make them suffer.

He moved pretty well for such a fat guy, but didn't quite manage to get out of the way. The young guy's legs slammed into his body and knocked him over, and he started screaming in terror to "Get him off me. Get him off me!"

The older guy was looking wildly around, and caught sight of me standing in the window.

"Hey!" he shouted, bringing the gun around.

*Well we can't have that*, I thought, readying another burst of telekinesis. I aimed for his gun, and neatly plucked it out of his hand, bashing him in the face with it for good measure. It went spinning away and he staggered back.

"You monsters!" I shouted in through the window. "You should burn in- Yes, burn!"

I sent out another burst of energy, setting his hair on fire. What was left of his hair, anyway. He screamed and started looking around for something that could smother the flames, but there wasn't much in the room but the table with the money, some chairs, a gas powered fridge-

He ran over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water, hastily unscrewing it and dumping it all over himself. I let him, as I was now concentrating on the young guy again, making his one arm wrap itself around the fat guy as he tried to push the body off himself. I managed it, and he screamed again as the bloody arm of his friend wrapped around him.

I was thinking of doing another sending, something along the lines of "Brains" or "Give me smooches" but the older guy had finished putting himself out and dove for his gun, catching sight of it on the floor. I figured I should probably do something about that, when there was a loud explosion of air and four people appeared in the room. One was Devorah, of course, while the other three were unknown to me. One man was holding a glowing sword made of energy. The second was a dark skinned man in what looked like tribal wear, holding a spear. The third was a woman in a martial arts stance. Devorah was looking right at me.

"What in the name of the All-Father is going on in here?" she screeched.

"Yipes!" yelled Pretzel, jumping off the window sill, and out of the room before he was spotted.

"Look out!" I said, pointing behind her as the older guy raised his gun. It barked five times, and the woman deftly plucked the bullets out of the air, faster than I could see, and held them up for the guy to see.

"I think your gun accidentally went off five times," she said. "Would you like these back?"

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He tried to skitter away backwards from them, his face even more pale now, but the door was blocked by the fat guy screaming bloody murder and still trying to escape his bloody-buddy.

“My goodness!” said Devorah, looking around. Her eyes fell on the pile of money. “Erica Chesterfield! Are you robbing these poor people?”

“Aarg!” I shouted to the sky in frustration.

“You are coming with me,” she said in a tone that brooked no argument. “And you will not use your powers again until I am satisfied with our explanation.”

I was still too angry to employ any subtlety. “No, you will come with me, and I will consider accepting your apology later!”

Her eyes got wide, and her brows tried to climb up her head as I squeezed in through the window. I strode past them towards the stairs, and the four Foundation people in the room stared at me. I guess they weren't used to Devorah being spoken to like that.

“Oh, will someone shut him up?” I asked, stepping over the fat guy who could do little more than weakly thrash about and give little cries. Must have had a poor constitution, I thought. The older man with the gun was looking at it in confusion, I doubt it had ever let him down before, the poor soul. Devorah raced to catch up to me and spun me around, her eyes full of anger.

“You had better have a good explanation-” she started, poking me in the chest.

“No,” I interrupted, knocking her hand away. “You better have a good explanation. Sending me here, alone, thinking I was going to find some seer who had gone over to evil. What did I find instead? Abandoned buildings. Men with guns! And wait until you see what's in the basement. Come to think of it, how did you even get here? You have pictures of this place?”

“That's not important right now, just show me what you have to show me. And it better be good.”

We stomped down the stairs, and there, as I had seen, was the little girl. She was looking up hopefully from where she was tied, but her hopes fell as she saw us.

“You aren't the police,” she said sadly, her voice barely above a whisper. Her shoulders drooped again, and she put her head down on the floor again.

“Oh,” was all Devorah could say. I kneeled down beside her, putting my hand on her head. She flinched away. “You're right, we're not the police,” I said, calmly. “We get actual results. We're here to take you out of this place and bring you home.”

She looked up, excited. "Honest?"

I smiled at her. "Honest."

I was going to use my telekinetic bullet technique to shatter the lock, but I felt Devorah gathering energy and it just burst apart, along with the bonds around the little girl's wrists and ankles.

"I don't know if I can walk," she said pitifully.

"Come here," said Devorah, holding her arms open. She picked up the girl, who threw her arms around Devorah neck and held on tight.

She cleared her throat. "Naturally, we'll deal with the men upstairs. You should have called for backup, but I understand now what happened. There won't be an inquiry into your use of powers around normal people. We'll clean everything up and seal the place off again. I'll make sure she's taken care of."

She headed for the stairs.

"About the money..."

"You want it?"

"The case I'm working on- the man I found," I looked at the girl. "Uh, in my office, he spent his life savings after he disappeared. So I think his wife and daughter are broke now."

"I see," she said. "Come on."

We went back upstairs and she touched the money, concentrating.

"The money was won placing bets on things like horse racing," she said after a moment. "They were using the powers of this girl to see the outcome. It seems she has a real talent in that area, especially to have manifested it so young. You can have some of it to give to the victims."

"Thank you."

"Just be sure something like this doesn't happen again. Remember, emotional control."

"I'll try."

"See that you do."

They collected the three men, apparently the young guy had been stabilized, so he probably wouldn't die from what I did to him. The two that were conscious looked terrified, which I felt served them right, in the circumstances. They were roughly grabbed and teleported away, leaving me alone in the house.

"Are they gone?" a quiet voice said to me.

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“They're gone,” I replied, my anger now spent. I was a bit tired after all that, and the reality of what I had been about to do was starting to sink in. I had lost control, there was no way around that. At least this time it was directed at kidnappers and thieves and not just a bouncer doing his job. Maybe Devorah was right. Maybe I did need to work on my control.

Still, what was I supposed to have done? Let that girl suffer another hour while the Foundation got around to sending someone to back me up? At least this way it happened quickly. She must have gotten word from a seer that someone was using powers to kill normal people, and that it was me. So she grabbed whoever was around at the time and rushed over here.

*I still want to know how she managed that little trick of knowing where I was. Did she put something on my computer when she was in my apartment? I'll have to have someone qualified check it out.*

I found a bag and stared putting stacks of money into it, methodically counting up to five hundred thousand and not even making a dent in the overall total. I stuck a couple of stacks in my pocket- I didn't want to take Taylor's money, if his department wouldn't pay for my services. I still had to make a living though. *Might as well help myself to some of this, it is just sitting here.* What was that old saying? “God helps those that help themselves.” So I helped myself- They weren't going to miss it.

Pretzel was sampling the blood from the floor, and the glass shards, which made me shudder a little. “Come on,” I said resigned. “Let's go home.”

**Four forty five in the afternoon**

*“You know, we all have our inner demons. I, for one - I can't speak for you, but I'm on the verge of moral collapse at any time. It can happen by the end of the show.” --Glenn Beck*

I had every intention of going home but halfway there my glasses popped up a message that Taylor had something interesting to show me, and could I stop by the station right away? I sighed and told my car the new destination, and it smoothly diverted. I remembered about three minutes before the reminder came up that I was meeting Tyrone for dinner. That wasn't until six, so I figured I had time. I showed my card at the desk and went back to see what Tyrone had for me.

“Some odd footage from a security camera,” he replied, after we exchanged greetings. “A robbery that happened about a week and a half ago now. I wasn't in on that case but I remembered hearing about something odd with it.”

“And when you heard about something odd, naturally you thought of me? That's sweet.”

He glanced away. “Yes, well. You have to admit-”

“Don't worry, I'll take it as a complement. The All-Father knows I can use all of them I can get.”

“The who?”

“I mean to say, Lord knows I can- look just show me okay?”

He looked at me funny. “Okay.” He took me down to a room with a large screen, and told Wheelus I was there, who gave him what I figured was his normal expression, the scowl. He walked in with us. Taylor was flicking his hand back and forth, no doubt bringing the file up on the departmental

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computer. Thirty years ago I'm sure he would have looked ridiculous, grasping and sliding invisible objects, but his glasses knew where his hands were so they intelligently placed the interface "underneath" them. Some concessions had to be made when a pair of glasses could take the place of a whole laptop. We waited.

He got to the file he wanted and made a throwing motion towards the projector sitting on the table, which lit up. Obviously it was on the police network, and controlled by the same central hardware as everything around here. Thus, he only had to "throw" the video at it and the computer behind the scenes figured out where we was and what projector he wanted used. It warmed up and the lights dimmed, and I started watching what must have been a nighttime camera in an upscale shop someplace. Probably K-Mart. They had become a chain of fancy boutiques after Walmart finished destroying every other general store in the world.

A man entered the frame and looked around, a smug expression on his face. He deliberately looked into the camera, and held his gaze there for several seconds. No doubt about it, this was Nelson Baynard, the man who I had found in my office when this all began.

He turned from the camera and went over to a display case, smashing his fists through it, and grabbing the contents. The camera followed him through the store as he smashed things, grabbed up valuables, and generally made a mess of the place. After he walked out the officers turned to me.

"Care to explain?" asked Wheelus with a smirk. "That is, if you can?"

"Can you run it again?" I asked Taylor, who nodded.

I paid closer attention this time, and set my glasses to record the images. "Is he wearing gloves that you can see?" I asked, pointing to the screen. "He's smashing those cases up but it doesn't seem to be bothering him."

Taylor glanced at Wheelus. "The light's too low, I'm not sure we can tell. I mean he must be, right?"

"Of course he is," said Wheelus. "He's wearing those loose sleeves, he must have some kind of exoskeleton arms they use on construction sites strapped on. He just tuned them to punching force instead of lifting force."

"That's certainly one explanation," I said, barely keeping myself from twitching. This was going to be a problem- demonic possession was bad news, especially if the demon in question could make the host invulnerable. And it was looking more and more like that was the case, given what I was seeing. The glass in those display cases was pretty thick, so

people would have a hard time getting through them. But under the influence of this demon he was just smashing them up. That meant both above average strength and invulnerability, two demonic traits that would make whoever was possessed tough to deal with.

“But why,” I asked, trying to keep from thinking about it too much, “Would he walk into a store like that and just start robbing the place? That doesn't make sense.”

“Well, *detective* why don't you tell me?” asked Wheelus.

I shook my head. “I don't know. He had money, all the money from his checking account. He supposedly spent a lot at the club over a couple of days, but I can't believe it would be enough to need to steal a bunch of jewelry besides.”

“Maybe he was going to other strip clubs?” asked Taylor.

“There aren't that many in Rochester!”

“True. I think I'll give them a call anyway though, see if anyone matching his description was seen the last two weeks.”

“Yeah. We still don't know where he was staying all that time.”

“Or why he was killed, or who did it, or how he got into your office or why he even picked your office. Fat lot of good your ‘psychic powers’ are doing you,” Wheelus chortled.

*I'd like to show him some psychic powers right now, like maybe what I showed that old guy- no, he doesn't have enough hair for it.*

“Go away,” I said instead, using what was becoming my favorite mental trick today.

“See ya.” He immediately turned and left the room. Jerk. I had just saved a little girl, and busted up a gambling ring, given that the person that was doing the winning for them was now out of reach. What had he done today that was so great? Resisted the temptation of a third donut?

*Wait, I wasn't very specific in my command, I hope he doesn't start just wandering down the street. Oh well, he won't get far in any case, I'm sure it'll be fine.*

Taylor rolled his eyes. “Sorry about him.”

“Don't worry about it.”

“Are you okay? You seemed more tense than usual when you came in here.”

*Oh sure, I just almost killed three people single handedly before I came here. I would have too, if Deborah hadn't shown up. I can't tell you about it or take any credit for saving the girl, and I have no idea if things are going to work out with my boyfriend later tonight. I'm just peachy.*

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"I'm fine," I said instead. "I haven't found exactly what I was looking for today."

"Yeah, I've had days like that. So what am I looking at here? If you can tell me, I mean, I don't want to get you in trouble. Those exoskeleton arms are pretty bulky, right? I mean maybe the military could make some streamlined ones, but there's no way he has some on, loose sleeves or not. And if he developed some, super-villain style, he could make more than he stole just selling the designs!"

I stared at him. I suppose he would have to take it on faith, just like me telling him about my abilities being real. He could believe me, or not. And like he said, Wheelus had offered him a completely rational explanation for what he was seeing.

"Demonic possession," I said seriously.

"Whoa! Actual, real, honest to goodness demonic possession? Like heads spinning around and all that?"

"No demon would do that. But yes, he wasn't acting under his own will. Something evil had taken him over and made him rob that place. The question is why."

"So, what, I should put a priest on speed dial?"

"If the priest you choose actually wields holy power, that wouldn't be a bad idea. If he's just a normal guy though, forget it."

*That brings up a good point.* I suddenly realized. *Karyn's book may have been full of dark rituals designed to call demons here if you aren't a summoner. If it wasn't, there are certainly other books out there in the world that are. The question is, could similar holy rituals designed to help regular priests and holy men against demons exist? I'll have to look into it sometime.* I hadn't heard of any, as most people with powers had direct means of dealing with demons. That was all part of what we were trained for at Demongate High. So we probably didn't need to know the "slow" way of doing things. We could just deal with the situation, or call in a holy chosen to take care of it.

"Why's that?"

"What?" I brought my thoughts back to what we were talking about. "Well, you see him punching through that glass, right? I doubt he is wearing anything on his arms, he's just invulnerable- he literally can't be harmed by any physical force on Earth. Only supernatural powers can hurt him, so you could shoot him all day and it would just bounce off."

“Wow.” He stared at the footage as Nelson brought both fists down on another glass case and shattered it.

“And this demon made him kill himself? Or did he go to your office after coming to his senses, but was unable to hold the demon off any longer and just killed himself to drive it out?”

“Oh no,” I breathed. I hadn't considered that. “No,” I said after a moment, remembering I had information he didn't. The note. “If he had control he would have stabbed his own heart or something, not made sure he would die as slowly as possible.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

*Still, it doesn't answer most of my questions about the whole thing. Did a summoner around here have this done, or did a demon just pop over for some fun? The Foundation didn't give me the names of any summoners living here, but that didn't mean anything. If I was an evil summoner the first thing I would do after leaving school is find an artificer to make me something to be invisible to a seer's powers. Then I could do whatever I wanted and they would never be able to catch me. So where does that leave me? If it was just a demon he's gone back to the Demon World after having his fun and I'll never find him. If it was a summoner he could be anywhere!*

I stood there, watching Nelson smash the store up, and decided it must be something else. The note I had gotten proved it. Something was happening around here this demon or summoner didn't want me around for, and they were trying to warn me off. That meant they were close by, and poised to strike at any moment. If I kept investigating leads I might have a chance.

“So does this help us at all?”

“It shows us what it wasn't. A stupid move on the part of whoever did this, but maybe they aren't too bright. Some demons aren't, you know?”

“Uh, no, I don't actually.”

“The point is I can stop talking to seers and ESPers around town and focus on summoners and other types that work with demons or otherwise draw on their powers.”

“Are there many like that living around here?” he asked a little nervously.

“I'm not sure. I asked the people that trained me for some names, but I only got three back. I'll have to ask them for the names of any summoners specifically, now that I know this situation deals with demons.”

“So I guess even people with powers don't know everything, huh?”

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I shook my head. “A lot of the time we're just as clueless as everyone else, I'm afraid. I wish I had all the answers, it would make my job a lot easier.”

I watched the footage a third time, making sure I didn't miss anything, and left to go freshen up for my date. I wasn't exactly sure what my next move would be, unless a hotel had gotten back to me and I'd missed the message up till now. Small chance of that though. I could hope for a dream tonight that might give me some indication, but I hated to rely on that sort of thing. Too random to be relied on for something serious like this. I would email the Foundation in the morning, see if they would release the names of any summoners around here, and ask if there were any portents of doom for this area. I just had to hope that if something big showed up, it was with enough warning that I could do something about it.

11

**That evening, about dinner time**

*“Some say that the age of chivalry is past, that the spirit of romance is dead. The age of chivalry is never past, so long as there is a wrong left undressed on earth.” --Charles Kingsley*

Tyrone picked me up and drove us to the restaurant, the Daisy Flour Mill. It was a pretty high class place found at the bottom of a long hill. We didn't talk much, I was thinking about summoners and possessed people. The robbery must have been some sort of fluke, as there hadn't been any others committed by possessed people during the time he had been missing. I had Taylor look into it, and he said no other robberies of this sort were reported in the last few weeks.

So this demon or summoner wasn't warning me to stay away because it wanted to commit more burglaries, therefore it must be something else. But what? Nothing had happened since his death, which only made me more nervous. It might mean whatever they wanted to warn me away from was something that needed a lot of preparation. That meant unless I could find who was behind it I would be too late to stop whatever they were planning. It could also mean really long term plans for the area someone didn't want me snooping around and stumbling into. After all, don't you always find the thing you were looking for a week ago while you're currently looking for something else?

Add to that, what sort of demon had taken over Nelson and caused him to do those things? That could be the difference between something I could fight myself and something I would need backup on, because demon powers varied wildly. Did I dare to try confronting a possessed person myself? I might be able to subdue them, but not drive the demon out. Just knocking someone out wasn't enough, the demon would just leave and how

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could I prove there had ever been one? Especially to people without powers, like Taylor. If you could somehow make the demon itself pass out, it would be forced to leave, I was pretty sure. That would require the possessed person and the demon fighting for control until the demon used up all the energy it had. Little chance of that, humans without powers typically had a fraction of what people with powers did. So that would be no help.

Should I call the Foundation and have someone with holy powers standing by? Or just call when I had the demonically possessed person in hand? Obviously there were only so many people that could easily drive a demon from someone, and they must be in pretty high demand. I'm sure the Foundation preferred to swoop in, take care of the trouble and then swoop away again rather than wait around.

*Like they did with me when I was killing those guys.*

I still wasn't sure how I felt about that- to know I was capable of such things. Smashing some demon's head through a wall is one thing, but those guys had only the barest knowledge of powers, gained from one little girl who predicted horse racing really well. She could just have been really lucky, or knew horses. At least that's what the Foundation would make them think, when they were done with them.

If they let them remember the experience at all, that is.

Entering the restaurant and sitting down, I ordered the Angel Hair Sinclair while Tyrone predictably ordered The Steak. Yes, that was the menu item. Not *a* steak. *The* Steak. How manly.

"So, uh, how's the case going?" he asked as we waited, sipping our drinks.

I grimaced. "I've been doing some running around, and eliminated some suspects, or should I say all my suspects. Let's see, I busted up a drug dealer, saved a little girl and stole a book of what could be dark magics. I still have no idea why this guy stabbed himself in my office, specially, as there must be other... people with psychic gifts... in the area."

"Oh, but none as good as you, I'm sure."

"Well that's nice of you to say, thanks. Usually you just brush me off when I mention anything like that."

"And all that energy you have, it must make things a lot easier."

"I guess. How do you know-"

"I just mean you're usually so animated. Full of life, you know? Energetic. Genki, as the Japanese would say."

"Yeah, that sounds about right." *He couldn't be talking about spirit energy, of course. Wait, when did he take an interest in my heritage and start learning Japanese? Maybe I haven't given him enough credit!*

"All that running around, take care of your town. You must be pretty proud of yourself."

"A little. Are you okay? That came out a lot more sarcastically than usual, even for you."

"I'm fine. I'm just worried about you. You don't seem like yourself tonight. I just wonder if maybe this job is going to be too tough for you. Maybe you should see about doing something else."

"I love my work, you know that. And I've been on my own for, what, two days?"

"Do you love it? Because you seem pretty tense about it. I don't want this job making you crazy or anything. You know, making you do things you would regret." He looked at me out of the sides of his eyes, a little too knowingly for comfort.

"I don't-" *Did someone in the Foundation tell him what I did? No, that would never happen. Right?* "What do you mean?"

"Take me for example. What would you do if I got, I don't know, possessed by a demon or something? Or someone took me hostage. Whatever. What would you do to save me? Could you kill? If you did, could you live with yourself afterwards?"

My blood ran cold. I had never spoken to him about demons, so how was he saying all this? Demonic possession in stories was all well and good, but he was talking like he *knew what he was talking about.*

"Or this little girl you say you 'saved?' Did you have to hurt someone to do it? What if you'd killed them? It would be just awful, wouldn't it, having to see that lifeless face in your dreams every night. You would, you know- Soldiers talk about it all the time. I know! I'm just trying to save you some heartache later on. My advice is to get out of this city and go find a different job someplace. You're not cut out for it, that's all I'm saying. If you're concerned about me, don't be, I never really liked you all that much anyway. Your moving away wouldn't really cause me that much concern. In fact I think I might be happy to see you go, to be perfectly honest."

"Who are you?" I hissed.

He went on, ignoring me. "You're just so needy sometimes. Not to mention going nuts crazy sometimes. As far as powers go, you're just a

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psychic, right? You can't deal with demons, not on your own, anyway. So just give this business up and let the real professionals handle it. Not that there have been many in this area, I admit. I wonder why that is?"

I stared at him. Tyrone never talked like this, he didn't know anything about my world. I extended my senses towards him, fearful of what I would find. I reeled back, stunned. He wasn't hiding his energy anymore, and I felt an evil power inside him. In fact his energy must have been twice what mine was! This wasn't Tyrone anymore, I was looking at the demon. He knew I had felt it, now that he wasn't suppressing his inner energies anymore. He casually picked up the steak knife on the table and started turning it this way and that, looking careful at it.

"You know what would be funny?" he asked in a whisper. "If your boyfriend just up and stabbed himself in the chest while sitting here in a restaurant. Funny? No, that would be hilarious. No, you know what would be hilarious? If he was found poisoned someplace, and a search of his apartment turned up a note about his suspicions that you were trying to kill him. And then they searched your apartment, and they found the poison that was used. The last part would be the only tricky part, but I bet with a little thinking about it, I could come up with something. Maybe take over your landlord, have them plant it. That would amuse me for months on end, I think."

"Don't you dare," I angrily said, realizing he could. In fact he could do any of those things and more. Tyrone had no defense against demons, none at all. I at least knew things about them, and had the energy to fight them off. He wasn't so fortunate. A demon would overwhelm his mind very easily. I shuttered.

"All you have to do is leave this place. Or get another job, if you like it here so much. I can't imagine why, though I suppose it's better than some places."

"Why are you doing this? Are you working for someone? Who summoned you here?"

"Oh, you'd like to know, wouldn't you? Yes, then you could go after that person and tell the cops they did it. No, I think I'll leave you in the dark about that. As for why I'm doing this- why shouldn't I? It's so much nicer here than where I usually am, let me tell you."

"I'll stop you somehow. I'll call in a holy chosen or something-"

"How do you know who I'll be? I could be anyone. Your next client with a grenade in his pocket. A sweet little old lady crossing the street with a shotgun in her bag of yarn. An elephant at the zoo that decides to go crazy

and stomp a few people to get to you. Heck, I could even be your car, drive you right into a building or something. You'll never get away from me. Think it over."

"I will stop you. Somehow. Count on it."

"I tried. I really did." Tyrone shook his head. "Well, I almost have enough anyway, I doubt you can stop me in time. I suppose I could just use what I have, but I really want there to be an impact, and I just haven't gotten the mix right. Soon though, don't worry. I'll leave you to your boyfriend now. Enjoy your meal!"

A sort of mist started rising from his body, and Tyrone convulsed a little and dropped the knife. I tried to get a good look at the thing that was leaving his body, what it looked like would be a vital clue. But it seemed to vanish, probably back into the demon world. No one even raised their heads to look at it. Did that mean the demon couldn't be seen by normal people, or just that they didn't want to see anything that was supernatural? It was amazing what people could ignore when they had a mind to.

Seriously.

Knowing the answer to that would have been a clue as well, but then the mist was gone. It wasn't even necessarily that the demon took itself back into the Demon World either, which would narrow it down. If it was a summoner that brought it here, they could have talked it out before hand. He would release the summoning at exactly this time, that sort of thing. I looked around at the other tables. No one seemed to be taking that great an interest in us, but that didn't mean anything. A summoner suppressing their power here could be sitting one table over and I would never feel it. Get the demon talking, he releases the summoning, and a few minutes later- poof. No more demon. I had no clues from this encounter, and just more questions. Great.

Tyrone sat rubbing his eyes and blinking. "What happened to me? I was saying all this weird stuff. Was I talking in the third person? That was odd."

"Don't worry about it, you're fine now."

"Meaning I wasn't before?"

"I mean you'll be fine. Just-" I closed my mouth as the food arrived, and Tyrone picked up his knife again, confused. We both thanked the server and I stared at my food. I wasn't very hungry at the moment.

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“Oddest thing,” said Tyrone, cutting a large piece of steak off. “Some of what I was saying almost made sense.”

“Don't worry about it.”

“What was I saying? Something about you poisoning me?”

“I don't want to talk about!”

“Okay, okay. But I meant what I said, are you sure you're okay with this investigator job? I mean you did okay as the parter before, but being on your own, I think it's getting to you.”

I stabbed my fork into my pasta, picturing it as a weird looking demon. Stupid demons! Why did one have to attach itself to me? The cute little imp I was friends with notwithstanding. It figured, in this case the demon controlling Tyrone was doing something he might have done himself, so he wouldn't even try to fight it. It could have zipped in, gotten in his mind and found out he was going to bring up this subject tonight, and then just did it himself. Smooth. And dangerous. That's why demons didn't just possess every priest on the planet and get them to kill themselves- the more unnatural the act the demon wanted to do, the more the person would fight back for control. Maybe they couldn't succeed, but the struggle would at least clue someone in that everything was not normal.

“Erica?”

“What? Sorry, I was just thinking. What did you say?”

“Are you sure you're okay being on your own like this?” he sounded exasperated, like he had any right to be.

“Yes I am. I did some good today and I plan to do even more.” *If I ever get any paying customers, that is.* “I admit it hasn't exactly gone according to how I would like but what does? I'm going to solve this case, make sure it doesn't happen again, and move on.”

“Okay. I'm sure you know what you're doing.”

“Yes, I do,” I said coldly.

“What about us?”

“What do you mean, us?”

“You'll have to admit you've been a bit distant lately.”

“Distant? I've been trying to start my own business! You know, the thing I've been talking about for years now?”

“I think you care about this business more than you care about me.”

“I care about helping people, if that's what you mean. My father taught me that, with everything he did in his life.”

He scoffed. “Your father. You talk about him like he's the greatest guy on earth.” I glared at him. “And don't get me wrong, I'm sure lots of

women think that about their dads but he can't be all that great."

*He's the reason you're sitting there, able to complain about him.*

"I mean, if he's so great, why haven't I ever met your family?"

"Ah... He lives in a pretty remote area."

Now that was a bit of a tricky question. My father and my sisters that still lived at home all lived on Demongate Island. Not a place that just anyone could approach and be welcomed, if you know what I mean. I had basically come out and told officer Dieterich that powers existed, and he seemed okay with it. Why hadn't I told Tyrone? Did I think he couldn't handle it? Did I think he would be intimidated by a woman that could crush his head like a grape?

Or did I subconsciously not want this relationship, knowing I would far outlive him thanks to my father's talisman tattoo? In addition to making me regenerate it would keep me young far in excess of a normal human lifespan. I had never really thought about it, but if I told him or not, one day he was sure to notice I wasn't really getting any older.

"Does he? You must see him sometime, though."

*Yeah, when he sends me a teleport ward so I don't have to fly to the island.*

That ward I didn't mind him sending me, as it just saved me some time and hassle. Flying out to an island that didn't exist wasn't the easiest thing in the world to do, because at least part of the time I had to use conventional flights, leaving my destination somewhat vague. That raised all kinds of flags nowadays, so people were encouraged to get there through other means. Flying all the kids there when school started was one thing, they could all be gathered at a nearby airport and all taken at once, on one plane. Flying in a single person here or there- that was a totally different story.

He continued. "I mean usually it's the girl trying to drag the guy to see their family, right?"

"I guess. My family is a little different from most, I'm not sure you would understand."

"You haven't given me the opportunity to."

I stared at him. Was this our moment of truth?

"You want an opportunity? Fine," I said, wondering if this was a good idea. What had Devorah said? Something about emotional control, mastering one's impulses? Still, he's going to find out one way or the other.

*What to do that won't seem that suspicious to others? Not that they saw the demon rising out of him earlier...* I looked around, my eyes falling on my knife.

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“Every time I talk about being an ESPer you just roll your eyes and say stuff like ‘that’s nice’ or you just brush me off. You say I haven’t given you the opportunity, I say I’ve given you plenty of opportunities. You just haven’t taken them.”

“Because you always refuse to!”

“I’ve used my abilities plenty of times around you, I can’t help it. They’re part of me. You’re just too-” *Too dumb to notice? Too clueless?* “You’ve been conditioned too strongly to not believe that sort of thing is possible, so you brush it off.” *Good save, me!* I put the knife down on the edge of the table and focused my telekineses on it. This skill I had really practiced in school, because so many other ESPer skills followed from it. Also, learning that and how to create barriers led to cohesion, the only weapon I really had against things that could only be harmed by supernatural attacks. Why a pinpoint barrier moving at near light speed was considered “supernatural” was beyond me, but my father said a lot of things the All-Father had set up didn’t make a lot of sense if you really thought about it. Do not, for instance, get him started on the number ten.

I had an odd thought.

*Man, maybe I do talk about my father way too much.*

Anyway, I put one finger on the... what do you call the back end of a butter knife? Can’t be hilt, that’s for swords. Handle I guess? I put a finger on the handle and gestured to it with my other hand. The blade part, easy to grasp because it wasn’t sharp, stuck out away from the table. Normally holding it like this would make it easy to get away from me. Not so much when I was pinning it down with my power.

“Pick it up.”

“What?”

“The knife. Take it from under my finger and pick it up.”

“Okay?” He looked at me like I had gone crazy and tried to pick it up off the table. He seemed surprised when he didn’t manage it.

He tried again, straining a little this time. Again he failed.

Then he tried a third time, and I felt, with spirit sense, that he was putting effort into it now. That time he managed it.

Well, I hadn’t put energy into my will, it was only natural he could get it up with some effort.

*Whatever you do, don’t say that sentence aloud to him.*

The knife was trying to get away from him, giving little jerks to try and get out of his hand. I stopped before anyone saw him acting foolish.

“So there’s your opportunity,” I said, putting my palm out for the knife back. “Take it or leave it.”

“Okay, how did you really do it?”

“I used my power. I’m trying to be straight with you here, since you asked. I can do things you can’t, and you’re going to have to accept that. Accept that my world is a lot bigger than yours and I’m a lot more capable than you are to get by in it.”

“Come on, do you have a magnet under there or something?” He looked under that table. “There’s no way you have any special powers. I mean no offense!”

“Let me bite him!” a voice whispered in my ear. I gave a little jump, but it was just Pretzel. “Please!” he pleaded. He settled on my shoulder again, having come back from the salad bar or something. My standing rule for restaurants was he could grab some stuff as long as he stayed out of sight. After all, even he had to eat.

“No,” I whispered to him.

“Aw!”

“No, I don’t see one, unless you put it away already.”

*What? Oh, he thought I was saying no to him. Of course, who else would I be saying it to?*

“No tricks,” I said. “When we’re not in a restaurant I can show you what else I can do. But I warn you, it will change how you see me and you may not want that.”

“Sure, sure, whatever,” he said, obviously not convinced.

*I tried, I really did.*

We finished the meal quietly and I had my car take me home. Our goodnight was not enthusiastic, and I watched him head to his car somewhat sadly.

“Is he really that dense?” Pretzel asked me.

“The Foundation goes out of their way to make sure people like him stay that way. Safely ignorant, if you want to call it that. I can’t blame him for that.”

“So why do you seem so sad?”

“I’m trying to ignore the power that’s telling me I’ll never see him again.”

**Two in the morning, the next day**

*"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." -- Edgar Allan Poe*

The place was deserted. I was barefoot, so my steps made little noise on the smooth tile as I moved between what looked like stores, searching for something. The lights flickered around me, leaving patches of darkness and islands of light. Fountains were still, doors closed. I knew they were here, but where? Could I find them before it was too late? Where was I? I didn't recognize this place, every time I thought I saw something I knew the light would go out around the area and I would lose it. But another would turn on ahead of me, so I was always stumbling forward. I called out, my voice sounding weak and hollow in the empty space around me.

Was I in a mall? What was I doing here? I looked down at myself, and I wasn't wearing anything.

I was dancing onstage. The music pounded around me. My hips swayed and I made eye contact with the people I thought had the most money. Why had I been so nervous about this? It was fun! This was a completely different type of power than I had before. I didn't need mind reading to know what these guys were thinking. I caught sight of a woman, which made me feel weird. Was she thinking the same? I could find out, no, her eyes told me she was. I danced on. Who cares? Let her look, it was just dancing.

The place was packed. The people around me gave looks of disgust as I pushed past them, trying to reach my destination. I didn't care what they thought, I had to save the people in danger of being killed. If only I had been faster, maybe this could have been prevented. But what would that have meant? Would the demon have gotten away? Would I have not learned who brought it here, what their purpose was? The demon was a tool- I needed to find who was picking that tool up. I broke through the crowd to an area sectioned off by the police. They let me through, but not by choice. I flung them from my path with my power, hardly slowing. A mistake, perhaps, but only I could deal with the situation.

I was chained in a basement. At least I thought it was a basement. It smelled musty and dirty. I was frightened. I had been here many days, how many I wasn't sure. I often heard others moving around nearby, but my eyes were bound and I could not see. I knew it would be my turn soon. I would be taken over, forced to eat and possibly to create the bombs. My hands were small, my fingers long. I could do what the thing inside me wanted me to do better than the others. So I was often chosen. Or was I? It was hard to tell, when I was not myself I couldn't look around, so I didn't know how many others were here, or what they were doing. I felt the thing come into me, and was too tired to try and fight it anymore.

The place was crawling with people in uniforms. Wheelus was shouting something through a megaphone, while officers stood by helpless. Two officers seemed to be chained with the others, one was holding two guns, ready to shoot. With them were people of all ages, chained together. What looked like crude bombs were attached to all of them.

I stood as helpless as the rest. Could I save them? How did things get to this point? Using my ESPer abilities would only get me in further trouble with the Foundation, but how could I stand idly by and watch them be killed? Would the demon inside one of these people even risk killing them while it was still inside? They might be pulled along with the soul leaving the body, and end up in a very different place than they expected.

What was Wheelus shouting? Something about not killing? Was the demon going to shoot? Even if I could drive the demon out somehow, trying to explain why the officers suddenly went mad and changed themselves up with the other hostages would be impossible. Why hadn't I seen this coming? Why hadn't I acted sooner? Had the clues been there the whole time? Why was his leg-

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Water splashed over me, and I woke with a start. Pretzel was there with a small glass wrapped in his arms, looking down at me.

“You awake?” he asked me.

“I was dreaming,” I said, confused, looking around. What had I been dreaming about?

He flew down to my nightstand, set the cup down and picked up the pen and paper I kept there. “Here you go.”

Right, I always try to record that sort of thing. I turned on the little light that was built into the pen and started writing down what I remembered of the dream. A mall. The strip club. A basement, being forced to make something. Officers threatening officers. Wheelus shouting. Trying to find people before something happened to them.

I gazed at my clock, it was about two in the morning.

“Get anything?” asked Pretzel.

“I’m not sure, but it does seem important. Thanks for waking me. Where did I put my display?”

Pretzel flew over with it. “Sure thing. It looked pretty serious from this side.”

“I don’t even want to know what that means.” I slipped my glasses on, which adjusted for the low light conditions. I put my hands up and a virtual keyboard appeared under them, allowing me to enter text. I opened up a search engine and searched for any news stories relating to malls in the area.

Just typical stuff, stories about renovations and people complaining they still hadn’t done anything with what used to be “Irondequoit Mall” and it was starting to show. Those that lived nearby were calling for it to be torn down or reopened or something. It had been forty years since that guy tried to turn it into the “Medley center!” When that didn’t work out it stayed empty, and people were getting tired of the space being wasted.

“No,” I muttered. “Dreams like that are about the future. It wouldn’t be about something that happened in the past.”

The trouble with my ability to dream the future was... *As if there was just one trouble.* Part of it was that my conscious mind couldn’t direct the flow of information, so what I got was typically a jumble. I remembered searching for someone, or a group of someones, which seemed to be the common thread in what I had seen.

It frustrated me. My brain was fully capable of creating sections of worlds that, internally at least, were consistent. When one looked around in

a dream, even if things were not as the normal world would have them, you didn't notice. Everything seemed normal. Every night your brain dreamed up a slew of them, memorable or not. Not to mention that every brain on Earth did this, even those of animals. One only had to look at a dog or cat's legs twitching to know they were dreaming around running somewhere. Plus I was an ESPer, supposedly my brain was that much more advanced than typical human brains were.

Did that mean I could just close my eyes and wish up a fantasy more real than any VR simulation could ever hope to be? Nope! I could hardly visualize a single fruit in the kind of detail my brain showed me of the local world when I was dreaming. The best my power, in other words my waking mind, could show me was a vague image that perhaps somewhat related to a topic I was thinking about.

Why couldn't I "dream" while awake? My brain obviously had the capability to dream while I was asleep. That much was clearly proven by my two year old. I could sit quietly and close my eyes and just drift, but never would any dreamlike imagery be shown to me until my brain did something to itself and allowed it. Was "consciousness" really taking up that much of my brainpower that it couldn't do both at once?

"Did you fall asleep again?" Pretzel asked me.

"No, just trying to figure out what exactly to search for."

"Is it the place that's important or the people?" he asked, looking over what I had written on the pad.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you go to various places, but it's the people that you're searching for, right? Except for the club, anyway. I don't know how that fits in. Unless there's something you'd like to tell me?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, you know. Repressed feelings about being a stripper? Give up the detective biz and shake that thing?" I glared at him. "Just asking."

I looked up at the ceiling. "This demon wouldn't be stupid enough to make a bunch of people disappear, would it? I suppose maybe the person who was bringing it here could be."

"You also wrote down about explosives. How do you make explosives, anyway? I'd love to analyze some with my powers!"

"I have no idea. The officers that found the one before said it was pretty crude, too. And in the dream I was being forced to make something. It could have been an explosive all right. But why?"

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“Wait, you get captured!?”

“Huh? Oh, no, I think I was someone else at the time.”

“I should hope so. Don’t scare me like that.”

“What, you don’t want to lose your meal ticket?”

He shook his head. “You think the Foundation doesn’t know about me? Fat chance of that! But because I stick with you, they probably allow it. If you were gone, they would come after me, you better believe it.”

“I don’t know, they’re pretty strict about that sort of thing. At least, that’s what they said in all our classes. Don’t worry so much, there’s no reason a seer would ask ‘Is Erica hanging around with a demon?’ They have better things to be asking the universe about.”

“I guess. Just try not to get captured, okay?”

I laughed. “You got it, partner.”

“Partner? Am I getting a pay raise?”

“Title only.”

“AW.”

I smiled, then looked back at the screen. People and explosives. The first body was rigged with something. Why not just rig my door and blow me up when I opened it? No, the demon wanted to kill whoever was around when the body was moved. Demons didn’t just want to indiscriminately slaughter humans, we were currency for those guys. They wanted to trick us or offer us something we would trade for our souls.

Of course, there were demons that did like destroying things, for instance raiju, the thunder spirits. But those type weren’t typically also the subtle ones, waiting for gratification. If a raiju was around, you knew it. They wouldn’t lay a trap for something to happen, they would just fly over and start throwing lighting bolts at you.

What also didn’t make sense was using physical explosives. A demon or summoner could just go buy wards from an artificer that exploded when moved. They wouldn’t need to build mines that would be recognized by people. I mean an officer just sees a piece of paper on a body, he’s not going to expect that paper to blow up if he touches it. He would however be wary of something pinned underneath a body.

Was this demon acting alone? Not able to buy supernatural things for some reason? Was the summoner trying to keep a low profile, avoid buying wards that could point back to him or her? Why make captive humans do things like that? The way it went about things, it was like it didn’t have any grudge against me personally, just my being here had made it angry. It had a normal man kill himself, rather than just confront me directly.

Now it seemed it was going to abduct other people?

Plus, it seemed to me there had been only the one of them. The people there were not all put to work at once, they were made to do things, then chained themselves back up and were released again. I was sure of that.

Or was this something separate from the case I was working on? I didn't think so, even dreams tended to follow certain patterns, showing us scenes that we had been focusing on while awake. Why take people prisoner? Hostages? Try and force me to leave with more dead bodies? But I hadn't gotten the impression they were about to kill themselves like Nelson had.

They were building stuff. Explosives, I was sure. Was the demon actually going to try blowing up a building? It took a lot of explosives for that sort of thing though, and I wasn't sure if homemade would cut it in this case. I supposed if they had been working for weeks on stuff... but ordering supplies for that much firepower would have raised flags, right?

That would be a reason for wanting me to leave town- so I didn't track down the people that were missing and foil the plan. What use was a blown up building to a demon? I suppose a summoner could want his boss dead or something after being fired, but no summoner was bad enough to have to go through all this trouble. There were dozens of demons you could call upon, tell them 'go murder such and such' and they probably wouldn't even charge for it. Did they think if they stuck to conventional means seers wouldn't be able to make the connection? That would be beyond stupid.

Could I be facing a very young summoner, who could only manage one demon or who only knew one demon summoning ritual? That would explain the odd behavior, all right. It would also explain why the Foundation hadn't had them registered in the area, and only told me about the people they did. Perhaps he or she hadn't been noticed yet, and just stumbled into their powers on their own. It happened sometimes.

The more I thought about it being someone young, the better I liked the idea. It fit the facts. Maybe he was going to blow up his school or something? A demon might be willing to help even a young summoner accomplish something like that. It would put them on the path to evil, allowing them to be claimed more easily later on. Or at least keep them from Heaven. Sending the guy to kill himself- I could see a kid just saying "Do something to scare her off" and the demon took it from there. Neither could be very bright. Anything summoned into the world the summoner was responsible for. You couldn't summon a demon, have them kill a bunch of

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people, then when you died say “But the demon did that, I had nothing to do with it.” The heavenly powers would argue that you did have something to do with it- you called the demon, thus the deaths were directly caused by you. My father’s Petitioner friend Osman told a story about a person petitioned back from Heaven almost killing the guy that had killed her, which would have been very bad for him.

I shook my head. No, there must be a greater plan I wasn’t yet thinking of. If this demon could just possess people, it could kill a dozen an hour and make them scrawl notes telling me to leave town. The demon tried it once, then moved to talking to me directly, telling me to leave and threatening to frame me worse next time. Were there demons like that, afraid of a plain old ESPer but who had no problem risking discovery making people leave under their own power?

*Captive humans...* I did a search on missing people in the area, which didn’t give me much. I had to look for specific websites that dealt with that sort of thing, then search those sites for my area. Still nothing that recent. A few people had gone missing in the last ten years or so, but with all the supernatural stuff that could happen, it was a miracle the numbers were as low as they were.

*I guess the Foundation is good for something.*

I switched over to local newspapers, not that there were any physical newspapers being printed at this point. But the news was still reported, and “archives” of two weeks ago or older could be searched at most news sites. I perked up- There had been a few disappearances recently! I excitedly scrolled through, looking for similarities. The first person was three weeks ago, then another, then another.

Only after several people had disappeared did the police comment that they might be related and that they were looking into it. Was the guy I found part of the group that had been disappearing? I was pretty sure Taylor had mentioned that he had been missing a week or two before being found in my office.

*I suppose I’ll have to get a subscription to the local news.*

It hadn’t escaped my attention that no messages had been left with my office phone, nor had any emails come in from people with cases. I had the money I “appropriated” from the gambling ring, but that wasn’t exactly income. *Wait, do I have to report that money on my taxes? It was cash, so...* Perhaps there were stories in the news about the murdered man being found at my office? I wasn’t sure, I had been too busy trying to solve the murder to watch the news the day he had been found.

ROBERT ZIEFEL

*Is this business even going to work out? I suppose if it doesn't, the Foundation can always use another ESPer.*

I suspected it would take some time to build a reputation around here, but I would have expected some crank callers at the very least. Nothing I could do about it, one way or the other. Calls would come, or they would not. No sense worrying about it right now, I needed to get back to sleep. I made some notes to ask down at the station about the missing people in the morning, and put my computer back on my nightstand.

“Night, Pretzel,” I said, snuggling down again.

“Night.”

**Just after eight in the morning**

*"One machine can do the work of fifty ordinary men. No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man." --Elbert Hubbard*

*"...or woman." -- The author*

I went down to the police station early the next morning with my questions and asked for Taylor. Sadly, the person I got was Wheelus.

"Solved your case yet, psychic?" he mocked.

"Not yet, have you?" I shot back.

"What do you want?"

"I was looking into recent disappearances in the area, thinking they might be related. Can I get the names of the people that have gone missing lately?"

"Let me think- no. Anyway, shouldn't you be working on your own case, who killed that guy we found in your office? I forget, did you say it was murder and I said it was suicide or was it the other way around?"

"He killed himself, he just may not have been in his right mind while doing it."

"Is that so? Well, toxicology reports say he didn't have anything in his system that would have caused hallucinations or anything. I guess that means he just lost his mind, stumbled into your locked office, and stabbed himself repeatedly. What happened next? Oh right, he put the murder weapon back in the desk, then booby trapped himself as he lay down to die on the floor."

"There's more than one way to make a person do something against their will."

“Sure, sure. Ghosts and evil spirits, right?”

I rolled my eyes. *Yes, I suppose.* “Or he could have had gambling debts and someone killed two birds with one stone. They forced him to empty his bank accounts, be seen at the club, then killed him. They knew I was opening up shop so they decided to see if they could scare me off. See, no spirits involved at all.”

“I suppose that’s a halfway plausible theory.” He looked around the station. “Kinda surprised to see you here, actually. I haven’t given up on arresting you for the murder, so I’m glad to see you haven’t skipped town.”

“I’m innocent, so why would I run?”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say. Why do you think a bunch of people disappearing would be related to your dead guy, anyway?”

“Nelson had been away from his house for several days before he killed himself, right? If I could figure out where he was staying, and maybe see if other people reported missing were with him, it might shed some light on what he was doing during that time.”

“You mean like they were all part of a cult or something? Maybe they used him as a sacrifice because they were afraid your powers,” he shook his hands in the “spooky” pose, “would find them out?”

“Well, he was somewhere. And we know he was in one place after he left, the strip club. So he must have been staying somewhere nearby. If he was somehow involved with the other people that have gone missing, maybe we’ll find them nearby too.”

“Eh, I doubt it. The people that have disappeared don’t have anything tying them together. We figured that out with police work, by the way.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Pretty sure. We showed photos of all the missing people to those that reported someone missing. None of them recognized anyone else.”

“So why did they all disappear within weeks of each other?” I asked triumphantly. “That suggests something, right? I mean that doesn’t usually happen, does it?”

“I’ve seen a lot of weird stuff happen that doesn’t usually. Doesn’t mean anything. Coincidence, that’s all. Remember the Eiffel Tower falling down? Same kind of thing, just that one in a million chance of things all going wrong at once.”

“I guess you would know better than me.”

“That’s right. Now if there’s nothing else, move along.”

“Actually, I’d still like to speak to Taylor if he’s around.”

“You can sit over there and wait,” he said, pointing to a bench. “You can use your powers to tell you when he’s coming back.” He laughed and walked away.

*Yes, I probably could.*

I sat down to wait, bringing up the publicly available wireless signal in the building and seeing what it had to offer.

“Going to try hacking into the police database?” Pretzel quietly asked me. “Get the information yourself?”

I snorted. “That only works in movies. Besides, there’s so many layers of protection between me and the information I wanted there’s no way I could get into it.”

“How so?”

“Are you really interested? You don’t seem to like my car, and that’s technology.”

“It isn’t technology I don’t like, it’s objects that can make decisions for themselves. I mean you have an invisible friend, there must be some way we can get what we want instead of just sitting here.”

I sighed. “Okay, I’m going to look like a fool sitting here talking to myself, but maybe they’ll think I’m making a call. This,” I tapped the glasses, “Isn’t really a computer.”

“Huh?”

“My computer is at home, hidden inside a cabinet. This is just the screen I use. See, a long time ago a game company figured out that if you have a powerful computer somewhere that can do the heavy lifting, your customers don’t need to buy that same hardware. That way when one person wasn’t using that hardware, someone else can be. This saved manufacturing costs, electricity costs, the whole works. They could create the image of what’s going on in the game and just send you a copy of the screen. It worked pretty well, given the technology of the time. Once we got high density, transparent screens we could put into glasses though, it really started to make sense. So when I’m home I’m on my own local network and I’m being sent the result of what I’m telling the computer to do. When I’m out in the world it switches over to my cellular connection, and connects that way.”

“How?”

“Apparently every device that can talk to another device gets an address. If you ask in the right way, and the device you’re asking expects the request, there’s really no difference between being local and being remote.

The same encryption is used, and my device is recognized. That way if I wanted a faster machine I could buy one, keep my current glasses, and just hook them up.”

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

I laughed. “Some of this stuff I know, but some of it I’m reading you from a ‘how it works’ website I pulled up. Bet you didn’t even notice me typing, it’s just so common.”

The two looked around the station, and sure enough many people were typing and swiping in mid-air. It might have looked ridiculous in another time, but it looked totally normal to them. Almost beneath notice.

“According to this there was a search company that pioneered the ‘glasses computer’ back in the early twenty tens. They tried to fit the whole computer in the glasses, which of course we would laugh at today. Our current way of doing it is much better.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Now, to answer your earlier question, how do I hack into someplace and get information? The first problem is getting on the network in the first place. Just trying to connect is a problem because I don’t know the type of encryption the station is using. Obviously they aren’t going to write their own, they bought it from some company that sells just that sort of thing. But let’s say I figured that out, or forced someone here to tell me.”

“Would they even know?”

“Probably not, at least not the majority of people standing around here. I would have to find and shake down their technology guy. I don’t know what encryption my system uses, not enough to explain it to someone else, and it’s just a standard home PC. Just a second, yeah, looking up encryption brings up a lot of gibberish. At least for me. But say I do- the system looks at the address of my display unit, right? It basically asks itself ‘does this display unit have permission to be on this network.’ ‘No’ it answers itself. Then it kicks me off.”

“So you would have to steal someone else’s glasses? I could fly around, see if someone sets a pair down and forgets them.”

I shook my head. “Wouldn’t work. When these system were first coming out, theft was pretty rampant. I mean, you stole them and until the person could get home to turn off their PC, the thief got full access to the victim’s life!”

“Scary.”

“Yup, but it was worse when people carried around ‘tablets’ as they were called. Imagine a whole computer someone could walk off with, and as long as they didn’t connect it to a wireless signal, you could never wipe

it or find out where it was! So a retinal scanner was put into the frame. The eye has to be both alive and the same eye that activated the system the last time to unlock it and let you do anything. It's constantly scanning my eye to make sure I'm the same person. If you look at an eye, I mean really look at it like a computer can look at it? There's a huge difference in an alive eye and a dead one. The alive one is almost always moving, for one, because that's how our vision system works. We don't notice, but it is."

"Oh, so you wouldn't be the officer I stole it from, and it wouldn't work. Heck, it could even sound some kind of alarm!"

"Exactly. Now let's say I somehow got past that as well. I still don't know their system, or how to make requests of it. I might have to spend hours looking through virtual filing cabinets for the information I wanted. Plus it could ask for further passwords upon opening their database program I would have to guess, or somehow hack around. You can't just 'hack the planet' like some old role playing games would have you believe, and find out anything you wanted to know."

"I guess. Hey, does this mean that anywhere the officer is, they can hook into whatever hardware is here and look stuff up?"

"Why would it have to be here? That's actually a very bad idea if you think about it. If I was the police, I wouldn't want my system to be easily stolen, right? If someone shot the place up they might get away with the physical unit, and then they can do whatever they want with it. No, I would want it someplace hidden, secure, and remote. But yes, they can do 'paperwork' on the road just as easily as sitting here in this place."

"So, what, they come for the donuts?"

"Pretty much. Some of these might be new hires, who aren't allowed out without a partner. Or they're on probation, or they are hired to be here in case people come in. There's plenty of reasons to still physically be somewhere. But the point is they wouldn't have to be here, making the place vulnerable to attack if the place was mostly empty for some reason. So offsite is the way to go, to add another layer of security to the place."

"I suppose. Hey, these display units have cameras, right?"

"Sure. I can have them take a picture, and a low resolution video stream is always being sent back to my unit at home. That way I can ask it where I was a week ago, and it'll show me a frame of video to help jog my memory. I can also set up things to be captured automatically, like faces or butterflies, if I was into that sort of thing. That way I could ask my system where I last saw a person, or where I left my keys. You've seen me do both things, I'm sure. Why do you ask?"

“Their seeing is better than yours, that’s why! I mean, can Wheelus there just see what any of his offers see? What traffic cameras see? What drones flying around in the sky see?”

“Uh, I guess.”

“Then he could just ask the system to look for someone, or something, and it would search endlessly until it was found. He wouldn’t even have to be awake. That’s not fair! You studied hard to do what you can do, they shouldn’t be able to just buy a chunk of hardware and be better than you.”

“At that one thing. It’ll be a long time before technology will give someone even your abilities.”

“I guess. The fact they’re catching up at all worries me though. I mean you guys were talking about exoskeleton arms to make someone stronger, imagine all Demongate High people with things like that on. Or implanted into their bodies, making them even stronger than demons. Where does it end? Will normal people one day be able to teleport? To create objects out of thin air? I mean that’s what makes me special. If anyone can do that, why should I even exist?”

“We can already 3D print almost anything you know.”

“Do what?”

“Never mind. Don’t worry, you’ll always have a place in things, Pretzel.”

“Can I get it in writing?”

I laughed. “If you think about it, all technological process is geared towards making people better than me. I mean anyone can make something cold, it’s called a freezer. Sure, it works slower than what I can do, but it works. People don’t need my skill at setting fires, they can use a lighter. With cameras everywhere they don’t need to use powers to look into the past, they can just review footage of what happened. I just get to do those things with my brain rather than with tools. Now, if they ever develop something better than calling angels from Heaven to help with things- then I’ll be worried.”

“You and me both.”

We waited around more than an hour and finally Taylor walked in and came over to us.

“Hi, Erica, what’s up?”

“Hey Taylor, glad I caught you. I need a sort of favor.”

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“Okay?”

“Wheelus doesn’t want to tell me anything about the recent disappearances, which is a problem because I think they’re related to my guy that killed himself.”

“I can’t give you any more than he can. If he found out I did...”

“No, no, no,” I waved my hands. “I’m not asking you to do anything you’re going to regret. All I want to do is sit here while you review the information in your mind. You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“What, are you going to read my mind or something?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Yes. If you feel a bit weird that’s normal. Specifically I need the names, I can go talk to them myself and get any other information I need.”

“Wait, you’re serious?”

“Of course. You can honestly say you told me nothing, and your own camera will confirm that. It’s perfect deniability.”

“But your taking the information out of my brain is the same as me giving it to you!”

“Only if you believe what I’m doing is possible. Wheelus certainly won’t. I’m surprised you even do, and it’s kind of nice, actually. The point is you’ll be above suspicion or Wheelus will have to admit my powers are real. Which do you think is going to happen first?”

He thought for a moment. “You really think it’s connected?”

“It has to be. He was reported missing days before he showed up dead in my office. How could it not be?”

“Fine. I’ll just be over here.”

“Thanks.”

And so I read his mind, putting energy into to will and barely slipped past his defenses. His stream of consciousness poured into my brain.

*This is silly. If it’s silly, why are you doing it? Because she seems to like you? No, she’s just using me because I’m more open minded than Wheelus is. She didn’t care who she asked, she just wanted the information. But it’s for her case, and if she can really help find the missing people. Is she reading my mind right now? I do feel something. This is so weird. Okay, focus. How do I get into the database again? Oh, right, click here, enter here, password, oh crap did she just get my password? Have to change it afterword. I could use a coffee. How do I know she’ll be gone from my brain then? She can’t really be psychic, can she? Wouldn’t she be working*

*for the FBI or something? She smelled nice today. Focus! Okay, first report was Daniel Crosby, that was three weeks ago. Then Maria Davidson, then Dominick Peterson a day after that. Did I water my plants over the weekend? Mary Stevens, man, she's just a kid! I really hope she can help. She busted up that drug ring, right? Maybe I should ask her out. No, that would be totally unprofessional. Next was Cristina Montalvo, Agnes Franklin, then our dead man Nelson Baynard and finally Timothy Garza.*

He finished and I hastily disengaged, writing down the last name. You really didn't notice how your thoughts went from one thing to another like a drunken monkey until you were listening in on someone else's. I saved the file as he come over to me again.

"So, uh, is that everything?" he asked.

"Unless there's something you'd like to ask me?" I teased.

"I don't think so." His eyes darted nervously around the station.

"Too bad. I might have said yes. Thanks for doing that for me, hopefully I can pay you back by solving the case."

"Uh, yeah. Good luck." I turned to go. "Wait, would you..."

"Yes?"

"I mean, if you wanted... nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll be in touch."

I left the station.

"What was that all about?" asked Pretzel as I got into the car.

"He was thinking about asking me out."

"Oh. Why didn't you just ask him then?"

"I'm still not sure I'm broken up with Tyrone. Besides, I have a case to solve, maybe two cases at this point. I don't have time for that sort of thing right now."

"No? Well, I hope you don't die tomorrow then, filled with longings and regret over the thing you didn't do. There will always be another case, but there may not always be officer Dieterich."

"When did you get so philosophical, anyway?"

"I watch a lot of daytime TV when I'm not riding around on your shoulder."

"Of course." I shook my head and pulled up a search page for the first name. Of the 31 people with the last name of Crosby in the area, 4 of them were named Daniel. I sighed, then brightened. I could narrow it

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down! I thought about visiting each person's place, then opened myself up to what impression I would have of the meeting. Only one was more positive than the others, so I figured that was the place.

I told my car to take me there and we were off!

**Around ten o'clock that morning**

*"The love of family and the admiration of friends is much more important than wealth and privilege." --Charles Kuralt*

The driveway my car pulled into was in front of a very nice house in a very good neighborhood. Small lawn care drones quietly patrolled the grounds, searching for grass that might have been a little too long, or a stray twig or leaf. They seemed to be everywhere, and I had a stray thought about them ever turning on us. But then, they were only a couple of inches high, even a kid could jump on them and smash them if they were being chased.

I snorted. The zombie apocalypse story had never gone out of style, but what about the robot zombie apocalypse?

"Why doesn't anyone steal them?" asked Pretzel. "A white van, a guy in a mask, he could clear this whole place out."

I gave it some thought.

"For the same reason my glasses are worthless to steal. For one, they're being run by the main PC in the house, so there's not a lot of actual hardware inside each one that's valuable. Two, each one has a permanent number burned into its chips. You try and use it anywhere but here and it'll just power down, useless."

"Oh- wait a second, you just looked that up, didn't you!?"

My hands were in the typing position. I felt my cheeks get a little hot. "So what if I did? You wanted to know."

"You know, if they can ever put that ability inside your brain rather than as a screen outside it... I don't know. Would that save civilization or destroy it?"

"You are philosophical today. Come on, let's see if she's home and will talk to me. You know what to do."

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“Yup, poke around, see if anything is out of place. Ice cream later?”

“Maybe.”

He sang about ice cream the whole way up to the door, but quieted down when I rang the bell. A woman opened the door, peering out hopefully.

“Can I help you?” she asked. I looked her over, she was past middle age and was rather chubby. She had no chin, was short, had brown hair and of course had glasses on. These were actually vision correcting, they didn’t have thick enough temples for the battery and minimal processing circuitry needed to be anything more.

“Mrs Crosby?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I showed her my investigators license. “I’m Erica Chesterfield. I’m working with the police on the recent disappearances that have been taking place. Do you have a moment to answer a few questions?”

“I’m not sure how much help I’ll be, I told the police everything I could think of. But you’re welcome to ask.”

She let me in and led me through a pristine house, minimally filled with expensive looking furniture, tables, lamps and artwork.

*Is this a house or a set piece?* I had never understood rich people buying a house way too big for their needs that they just strategically filled with expensive furniture they would never use. I was of the opinion that a house was a place to live in. If it wasn’t half torn to pieces most of the time from just living there, you were doing it wrong. Sure, it might take me a minute to find something, but I think the *kami* of a place thrived better with a bit of disorder and... just knowing the house was alive. This place was sterile and uninteresting. *Just like those that live there?* thought one part of me. *Be nice*, I said back to it.

We sat down in the kitchen and she offered me some tea, which I accepted. Once poured, she sat down and asked me what I wanted to know.

“Firstly, before your husband disappeared, did he empty your bank accounts?”

She spilled tea down the front of herself and rushed to the sink to blot it off. She then excused herself and went to go change.

*One thing they don’t teach in PI school? Tact.*

She came back, poured herself another cup of tea, and took a big gulp. “How did you know that?” she finally asked. “I didn’t tell anyone about that. I mean the shame of it! Leaving me like that, then adding insult to injury when I sent Lisa for the groceries. She’s one of our maids.”

*One of?*

“She had to pay for them herself because our debit card was declined! I just don’t know what I’m going to do!”

She started crying.

*Oh dear. Here’s where I could use some of that tact again...*

I gave her a minute to compose herself, after using my ability to influence her emotions to calm her down. I had always used it in my old job to make people more trusting of me, so they would tell me things they normally wouldn’t without me having to command them to. I never thought I would be using it to calm someone in this situation.

Once she was a bit steadier I answered her question.

“At least one of the other people that disappeared did the same thing. We think there’s some sort of connection but we aren’t sure what. What’s why I’m here.”

“I see. Well, as you can guess, yes, he took everything he reasonably could, at the time. Obviously we have some investments and such that cannot be just cashed out.”

“Obviously.”

“And you say another person did this?”

“Yes, a Nelson Baynard. His family discovered he had taken all their money with him when he disappeared.”

“I don’t recognize that name. You don’t think they ran away together or something, do you?”

“What? No, nothing like that. I have his picture here if you have an email address. I’ll mail it to you.”

She told me what it was, and I forwarded the picture on to her. She went over to her computer, which had an actual display, and looked it over.

*How quaint. You would think people with money enough to buy all those robots outside would have a better home computer than that.*

“Yes, the police showed me this guy’s picture. I didn’t recognize him then, and I still don’t,” she said at last.

“Very well. What can you tell me about the day of his disappearance? If it’s like Mr Baynard’s he gave no indication anything was wrong, he just left and didn’t come back.”

She nodded. “That’s it exactly. He had taken our grandson to the park, told him to wait there, and never came back. Wayne had his cell phone, of course, and called his parents. His mother was livid when she came back here, but we waited and waited and Daniel never returned. We called the police the next day.”

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“There wasn’t a reason he might run away with your money, is there? Gambling debt? Someone being held for ransom? Sudden change of behavior stemming from some kind of drug use?”

She seemed shocked. “Nothing like that, I assure you.”

She seemed and felt sincere to my power.

“Then I guess that’s it. I’ll let you know if I have any follow up questions.”

“I hope you find him. Wait, along with this other man, were there others this happened to?”

“You’re not alone, Mrs Crosby. Eight people in all have disappeared from this area, one of them a child.”

“How terrible.”

I nodded. “I’ll let you know of any leads I get, as well. And thank you for the tea. Oh, can I get a picture of your husband? I’ll be sending pictures of the others as I get them, to see if you recognize anyone.”

“Of course, I’ll look them over. Good luck finding my husband and the others.”

“Thank you.”

I left, but waited in the car a few more minutes until Pretzel teleported beside me.

“That was the most boring house ever,” he complained. “I bet there’s a secret porn dungeon in the basement, but I didn’t see anything like that. Sorry, boss.”

“Okay. At least we know a few things about our victims, if the trend holds. All had money, and all had family. Let’s check the next person on the list.”

We checked the next two people and got a similar story. The vanished person took themselves away without a struggle, one in the middle of the night, the other walking out of work. Both had kids and were more wealthy than average. And always money had been taken, leaving the family that was left behind in a tight situation.

*Guess I should have grabbed more of that cash that was just sitting there. I always did want to play Robin Hood.*

Our forth family to check was the mother and father of young Mary Stevens, and only the mother was home. She threw the door open when I rang the bell, but showed great disappointment when she saw it was just me.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any new about your daughter," I said. "May I come in, Mrs Stevens? I'm Erica Chesterfield, working with the local police to track them all down."

"Please, come in."

We sat down in the living room. At least this place looked more lived in, even if it was a size larger than any house had a right to be.

"May I ask why you're on the case, rather than a regular officer? I mean I already talked to them."

"I'm a private detective, and one of the missing people showed up in my new office, dead. So I'm trying to find the connection all those people have to each other, and where they now are."

"Do... do you think my daughter is still alive?"

"I have no reason to believe she isn't." *The dream I had suggests she is.*

"Wait a minute- what was your name?"

"Erica Chesterfield."

"I thought so!" She sprang up and went into another room, returning with a printout, which she held up for me to see. "You're her, aren't you?" The printout was my ad and logo, obviously from my website.

"Ah, yes, actually."

"You're real, aren't you? Please don't lie to me."

I hesitated. *I suppose I had told Taylor and Wheelus, even if one of them just brushed me off. Can I really deny this woman a little hope? Plus, if I could actually doing a seeing on her with one of her belongings, it might be another clue! As long as I leave no physical evidence, and do nothing a charlatan wouldn't do...* I nodded. "You had the ad, why didn't you call?"

"My husband. We've been arguing about it." She sank heavily back into the chair, crushing the printout in her hand. "He said we shouldn't waste our money on someone like that, but I said even if you did call yourself a psychic, you must have a license to run an office like that. Why shouldn't we give you a chance? What use is money to our little girl? Of course, that was before we figured out we didn't have any money anymore."

"Wait, you too?"

"What do you mean, us too? The others have been robbed as well?"

"You were robbed? Physically robbed?"

"We still don't know how it happened. First our little girl disappears, then our cards start getting declined. The bank insists my husband walked in there, withdrew everything, and walked out again around the time our

daughter vanished. But he swears up and down he didn't do anything of the sort."

*Oh dear, the demon possessed the father, grabbed the cash, then went into the girl. The cash went with her.*

"The others have similar stories, though of course they took their own money and ran. In this case, the bank wouldn't have allowed her to withdraw anything alone, so..."

"You know what did this?"

"I'm not sure you would believe me."

"If there's an explanation for all this I think I have a right to hear it."

I took a deep breath. "It's very against the rules, of course. I do agree, however, that in this case, you may have a right to know." I gathered my thoughts.

"Well?"

"I'm trying to find the best way to put this- look, how religious are you?"

"Uh, not very? What does that have to do with it?"

I shook my head. The All-Father was really shooting His own foot by letting things be the way they were. It seemed less and less people even set foot inside a church as the years went on. *In the end, will the only beings praising his name be the angels He specifically created for that purpose?* "For the sake of argument, let's say that demons, angels, and other even more weirder things exist in the world."

"For the sake of argument, fine. What does this have to do with my daughter? You don't think she's some kind of devil worshiper, do you?"

"No, but I believe all the missing people that left their homes did so because they were possessed by a demon."

She stared at me. "Maybe my husband was right, I think maybe you should leave."

"I can prove it. There's a demon inside your house right now. He's my parter, so to speak. I found him on a case and didn't have the heart to send him back. As long as he behaves he gets to stay here."

"I suppose he's invisible."

"He is, actually, and hopefully doing his job." I shouted. "Hey Pretzel, get back in here! We're showing you to Mrs Stevens here!" We waited a moment. "Pretzel!"

"Coming!" said a voice from upstairs.

"You have a relationship with a demon named Pretzel?" asked Mrs Stevens.

"His name is something unpronounceable in the demon language. I call him Pretzel."

“You sure about this, boss?” he whispered in my ear.

“I’m sure. She needs to understand what’s going on in this situation.”

“You’re the boss.”

He flew over and suddenly was visible again. “Hi!” he said to the woman, who jumped and screamed.

“See, now that’s proper respect,” he said, looking back at me. He turned back to the woman. “You have ice cream. Can I have ice cream?”

“Ice cream?” she asked, confused.

“You looked in her freezer?” I asked suspiciously.

“You said to look in the important places! No place is more important than that, right?”

I closed my eyes. “And you’ve been checking everyone’s freezer, is that right?”

“Of course. I do my job properly.”

“Really should have been more specific.”

“What do you mean? If there’s a body, it’s going to be there, right?”

My eyes popped open again. *Okay, the little guy has a point there.*

“What is it?” Mrs Stevens finally asked.

“I’m an imp,” said Pretzel, trying to stand taller. “Nice to meatcha! Now about that ice cream...”

“Knock it off!” I chided him.

He stage whispered with one hand over his mouth. “And they call me a demon? Ha! Get a load of this slavedriver.”

“Can... can I...” she reached for him.

“I’m pretty ticklish, be gentle,” he said. She touched him.

“You’re real?”

“One hundred percent. Believe me, I’m one of the nice ones, most demons aren’t as handsome, and charming, and talented, and nice, and helpful, and accommodating, and-”

“We get the point!” I said. “So, do you believe me now?”

“I guess I have to. And you really do have psychic powers?”

“I really do. With your permission I’ll see if I can’t at least tell you if your daughter is alive or not.”

“Real. It’s all real. Demons, and there’s one in my house.” I rolled my eyes, thinking I didn’t have time for this, I had other people to interview today. “Sorry, what? You can do what?”

“Give me a picture of her and something of hers and I’ll see if I can’t at least get an image of where she is.”

“Of course, that’s no problem. Wait here.” She ran off, but stuck her head back into the room. “What else can you do?”

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“Uh...” *Didn't expect that question.* “You want a list? I can't actually give you one. Why? Was there something specific you had in mind?”

“Yes. Can you read an object? I've been told psychics can do that. Find out the history of something, that sort of thing?”

“Sure.”

“What about my husband? Could you read him and see if he really went to the bank or not? If he was possessed, I'd like to get to the bottom of it.”

“I hate to tell another person about my powers, but sure, get him here.”

“I'll call him at work. Give me a minute.”

Moments later I was holding a stuffed animal and a picture of Mary. I spent four minutes concentrating and an image came into my mind of that basement I had seen in the dream. I got the impression she was chained to something, but alive. My eyes opened.

“She's alive, but being held in a basement or something,” I said. “I'm sorry, I can't tell you more than that.”

“So she was kidnapped!”

“She kidnapped herself, probably under the influence of whatever demon is making my life miserable. She then chained herself up and the demon left her body to move another one about. Here, give me your hand.” She did, and I concentrated on looking into her future where her daughter was concerned. I smiled. “I feel you will be pleased the next time you see your daughter again.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, crushing me in a hug. “That means she must return alive!”

“That's the most likely outcome at the current moment, yes.”

She hugged me a moment more, then invited me to see her daughter's room. She was telling me all about how proud she was of her, what she was doing in school, things she had done, when we heard the front door open.

“That'll be my husband. Wait here,” she said, going to get him. I gave her a few seconds then used my telekinesis to float after her. It wasn't easy, but I wasn't going very high.

“I thought I told you we weren't going to hire any crackpots,” I heard Mr Stevens saying.

“I didn't hire her. She showed up at the door asking about Mary. She's the real deal!”

"I'll believe that when I see- she's floating."

"What? Why would you believe it if she was-" Her husband was pointing at me, and she turned again.

"Do I have your attention?" I asked him, spinning in mid-air and touching my feet to the ceiling. I crouched "down" so our eyes met. "I still have a lot of people to talk to today, so I would appreciate getting past the denial stage and go right to acceptance. That okay with you?"

"Um..."

"Good!" I righted myself and lightly touched down. I reached out a hand and touched his arm. "Now, when *exactly* did your daughter disappear?"

They told me the date and time, and I closed my eyes, opening myself up to the impressions of the past that clung to him. In my minds eye I rewinded his past from when he told me his daughter was missing, and "watched" as he went into a bank and started demanding his accounts be closed. His daughter was with him, and after he had the money, which he stuffed into a sack, he drove home. Once there he seemed to come out of it as a vague shadow passed from him into his daughter, who grinned, grabbed the sack of money, and started presumably running down the street. She was going pretty fast, there was every possibility she was just skimming the ground while flying. Mr Stevens shook himself, looked around confused, and went inside.

"Just as I thought," I said, breaking contact. "You were possessed, and after the demon got what it wanted from you, it had you drive back here, possessed your daughter, and flew away with the money. She could be anywhere by now, not even in this town at all."

"What? Explain yourself!"

"I'll explain later," Mrs Stevens told him. "Did you feel she was far away in your vision from earlier?"

"No," I said slowly. "And given what other things I've been learning, I think this demon means to do something here. So they must still be around somewhere. Can I take this?" I indicated the toy and the picture. "I'll check in on her from time to time, see if I catch a glimpse of a landmark that isn't a generic basement." She nodded. "Thank you."

"Is this- what? Who are you?"

"She's the person who is going to find our daughter," said Mrs Stevens. "Do you need anything else from us? Trying to explain to him might take the rest of the day, and I know you have other things you need to do."

"I got what I needed. Thank you. I'll let you know the minute I find anything."

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“I know you will. Good-” She seemed to change her mind. “God go with you.”

“Ugh, like he would lift a finger to help anyone,” said Pretzel, flying past. “See you!” He went invisible again.

She closed the door as her husband stared, slack jawed, at where the little demon had been.

**Around one in the afternoon**

*"If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything. I'm positive that a doer makes mistakes." --John Wooden*

We went back to the car with Pretzel giggling the whole way.

"Think I broke his brain?" he asked when he finally got hold of himself again. By that time we were on the way to our next destination, they home of Christina Montalavo. If history was any indication the house would be large, in charge, and there would be at least one child in the mix as well.

"I'm sure he'll never be the same," I said sarcastically. "We still have four people to go, and I have some new orders for you."

"Yes sir, captain my captain! You can't see it but I'm totally saluting right now."

"I believe you. In your travels around the house, I would like you to find something you think might belong to the person we're looking for. Like this Cristina, maybe a lipstick or something like that. An item her husband wouldn't own. I want to see if all these people are in the same place, and having more objects related to them all will be a big help. I hope, anyway."

"You want me to steal? For shame! What about my immortal soul? Don't I get any say in- oh wait, I'm a demon already. Sure, I can find some stuff."

"Thanks."

"Even though I didn't get any ice cream at that last place."

"Is food all you think about?"

"What else is there? I can't exactly gain wealth, and power is out of the question. Prestige? Forget it, no chance of that. I mean I think I pull my weight around here, but who knows about it- just you! Hanging over my head is that fact that, sooner or later I'm getting killed or tossed back into

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the Demon World. I just know it. So I'm going to try and enjoy myself any way I can while I'm here."

"I didn't realize you felt that way."

"Now you do."

"I just didn't realize I was holding you back and you wanted to strike out on your own like that."

He became visible again, looking alarmed. "What? No, nothing like that! I was just saying, I mean I'm totally happy being under your protection- wing, I meant to say wing. I'm learning so much about the human world, and not exactly starving per se..."

"Are you sure? I wouldn't want you to feel hard-done-by or anything."

"Totally satisfied! But we are stopping for lunch somewhere, right?"

"You realize I still have no paying work, right?"

"Cheap, greasy, and fast it is! I'm loving life..." he singsonged.

"Oh, you're impossible. Fine, I guess we have to eat." I gave my car some new directions, and we were off.

While we were eating I got a message from Devorah, my Foundation contact. Apparently the young seer I had rescued had been released from the hospital and had been reunited with her family.

*If I do no more good than that in my life, I thought to myself, It will have been a pretty crappy life, all told. But at least I can say I did that much.*

Pretzel was right about what he had told that man, though. The All-Father had the power to make sure things like that didn't happen, but chose to do nothing. Of course, looking at it from His perspective, we were given free will and we ran with it. Okay, sure, the being He created to tempt us may have been a little bit too good at his job, which didn't help, but we had basically turned our backs on Him. Trouble was, if a child kept burning themselves touching a flame you worked with them until they understood what fire was. You didn't just throw up your hands and say "Well, he'll never get it, let's just let him burn himself."

In any case, the young seer was now being tested to see exactly what she could do, given that her power shouldn't have manifested for several more years yet.

*Kids are growing up faster and faster these days, I guess.*

After eating, Pretzel and I went back to our appointed task of talking to the families of the victims. One house was empty, so I sent Pretzel in by teleporting and he unlocked the door.

“Before you go in, I’m pretty sure there’s a security system on the door,” he said, teleporting back out to me.

“Why do you say that?”

“The control panel next to the door.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why not just say that, then?” Okay, where do I go to find it?

He told me and I pushed the door open. It started beeping, and I hastily touched it and reviewed its recent past. Yes, I saw a youngish looking man arming it, and noted the code he used. I punched it in myself, and the system accepted it and went quiet.

*Erica Chesterfield, master thief. Would my dad be proud to see me now.* I punched the code into a text file on my computer, wouldn’t hurt to have it around, right?

“Theft, and now breaking and entering. I’m such a great influence on you,” Pretzel said, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye.

“I just need to get something owned by our victim, this Agnes Franklin. And her picture, if possible. Actually without her picture having something of hers is useless, so picture first.”

“Is that her?”

I looked where he was pointing, and there were some pictures of her in frames scattered about the room. “Probably,” I said, getting close and letting my glasses camera get some shots. Looking the pictures over I noticed a much younger looking man as well, and thought maybe it was her son?

I came to another picture, and my eyebrows went up. *Nope, at least I hope they aren’t mother and son, doing that with each other.*

I moved on.

“Hey, what’s the name of this dame?” called Pretzel.

“Have a little respect,” I called back to him, moving through the house. He was looking down at himself.

“You do recall I’m a demon, right? Anyway, it seems she’s been found.”

“What? Where?”

He handed over a printed notice about a funeral for one Agnes Franklin. It was to start in about a half hour. Luckily it wasn’t too far away, perhaps I could get there and get some clues from the body?

“Come on!”

As my car drove itself over there, I was thinking furiously. Why kill a second person? The first I could understand, it was to try and scare me

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away. Had she outlived her usefulness? Broken free? Perhaps she had a higher resistance to being possessed than the demon believed and got tired of trying to control her? I wasn't exactly dressed for a funeral, but then I wasn't sticking around, either. I had to somehow get close enough to the body to touch it and see how she had died.

I wondered if Taylor would have allowed me access to the body of Nelson after the autopsy? That might have answered some questions right there, if I had looked further into his past. *Probably not.* So this was a priceless opportunity, to see where she had been after she was reported missing. That information could lead me right to the other missing people, and I knew at least the girl was still alive, so there was no reason the others shouldn't be.

The car pulled into the church and of course, the place was filling up with people.

*Naturally, she was a wealthy, well respected member of the community. Why shouldn't she have hundreds of mourners?*

I walked to the doors, pulling them open and stepping inside. Already the pews were filling up, and there was the coffin, way, way, way down the aisle.

*Why, oh why, didn't I practice my skills making illusions enough to master making myself unnoticed?* There was an ESPer skill that didn't target any one person, like an illusion did. Rather it just sort of wrapped the ESPer up in an 'ignore me' field, so people didn't pay attention to what they did. That would certainly come in handy right now. Of course, one ignore ward made by my father would have also solved this problem.

Still, I was not without resources.

"Are you here for the funeral?" asked the man standing near the door. *Probably some sort of usher.*

"You will follow all my commands perfectly," I said, putting energy into my will and ordering him with my power. I didn't have time to mess around.

"Of course!" agreed the man, now totally under my power.

"Take me to the coffin."

"Right this way," he said, sweeping a hand out to indicate I should go first.

We briskly walked down the aisle, and I did my best to act like I belonged there. I had learned, while being an investigator, that a no-nonsense attitude and acting like you had every right to be doing whatever it was you were doing would take you far.

*And having ESPer powers doesn't hurt, either.*

We made it to the coffin, which I saw was closed. "Open it," I commanded my now willing servent.

"Right away!" he agreed, and went to the other side to lift it open. It wasn't locked or anything, and he smoothly lifted it.

"Keep it open, and stall anyone that comes up here."

"As you wish!"

I hated to do this to the poor guy, and Devorah's image swam into my mind's eye saying something about 'emotional control' but this was too important for the niceties. I went to touch her.

She looked in pretty bad shape, no wonder it was a closed coffin funeral. I had the feeling I wasn't going to like what I discovered.

I touched her and tapped into her past.

Her last moments of life were her struggling against the man I had seen in the picture. He was strangling her. She tried to fight back, but he was too strong, and soon the life left her eyes even as her spirit was collected by her own personal psychopomp to be led to heavenly bliss or demonic torture. I "watched" in horror as her body was dumped off the Bay Bridge, where it finally discovered, floating next to a dock at a nearby house.

*This isn't part of the demon thing at all, is it? Was the man that did this possessed? But why change the MO now? And why not get rid of the body more appropriately? This doesn't fit!*

The sequence of events seemed clear enough, though. She was killed, possibly under the influence of the demon, and thrown in the bay. The man was then released, couldn't find her, and reported she was missing. She then floated to where she was found, probably yesterday, and the records that Taylor was looking through hadn't yet been updated.

"Excuse me," said a voice nearby. "What exactly is going on here?"

Opening my eyes, I saw the young man in the picture, the man Agnes had been kissing.

"Who are you, exactly?" I demanded of him.

"I could ask the same. Put that down, are you mad?" he said to the man. My slave looked at me.

"Put it down," I agreed.

"Immediately," he said, lowering the lid. "What is my next task?"

"Go about your business," I said.

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“Very well.” He started walking back up the aisle.

“Who are you?” he asked again. “What were you doing to her body?”

“I needed to see how she had died. You strangled her, did you? Or don’t you remember that?”

“What?” He seemed shocked, and stumbled backwards, almost losing his balance on the stairs leading up to the table where the coffin was resting. “How dare you come in here and accuse me of murdering her! I’ve never even seen you before, how did you get in here?”

“I do dare, if it’s the truth. Are you telling me you didn’t strangle her? That what I saw was incorrect?”

“How could I have done such a thing? I loved her, we were married just last month! What are you talking about, ‘seeing’ that?”

“She wasn’t a bit old for you? Answer the question.”

“What does age matter? And what are you babbling about, seeing how she died? I’m calling the cops!”

“Good, get them here. Officer Dieterich will be especially interested to hear your side of the story of where you were in the moments before her death.”

“Look, I’m warning you. You’re trying to blackmail me, aren’t you? What, do you have video of me strangling her or something?”

“What if I did?”

“Forget it, my fiends have already verified my alibi for the night of her death. We were all drinking together. My lawyers will get me off. What am I saying, I didn’t kill her! Now leave!”

*Okay, now I’m confused. Was he possessed or not?* “You don’t have, like a twin, or something, do you?”

“What? No. This is supposed to be a funeral, leave or I’ll have you thrown out!”

*By who, a bunch of priests not devout enough to warrant actual holy power?*

“Fine. But if I find out you weren’t possessed when she was killed, I’m coming back for you.”

“Possessed? What are you babbling about? You’re insane!”

“No, just confused. Look, I may have handled this badly, but if you let me explain-”

“Leave!”

“Okay, I’m going.”

I walked past the rows of people, all whom stared accusingly at me. Should I have used my powers on him, too? Made him scared of me? Forced him to tell the truth? But if the demon had made him do that, he wouldn't remember, or perhaps the demon had allowed him to remember and the man himself suppressed the memory. If I forced him to recall the events it might cause him mental harm. *I suppose I could have tried melding with him, but he would have resisted I'm sure.*

I sat out in my car, a bit stunned at what had happened. Had I accused an innocent man? How could I prove it one way or the other? The man's *body* might have committed a crime, but if his *soul* was innocent, he was innocent. Too late I realized I could have done an aura reading on the man, seen if he was 'good' or 'evil.' That would have at least given me a starting point.

There was a knock on my window, and an elderly gentleman stood here. I rolled the window down.

"I believe you," he said by way of introduction.

"What?" I asked, not following.

"When you say he murdered her. I believe you."

"But did he?"

"You seemed quite certain of that a moment ago."

"Sorry, I'm just, I'm not sure what to think now. I'm sorry for disrupting things back there."

"Oh, she wouldn't have minded, I think. Can we talk somewhere?"

"Oh, uh, sure." I did a quick spirit sense on the man at least, and his spirit energy felt totally normal.

"There are some picnic tables around back, we could sit there."

"Okay," I said, rolling the window back up. I got out of the car and followed him to the back of the church, where there was an open area with tables, just as he had said.

"The name's Warren Greenawalt," he said, offering me his hand. "I was a friend of the late Agnes. So what makes you say she was murdered?"

Like I could tell him the actual reason. I introduced myself as well, then explained. "I'm working with the police to solve another murder. Wealthy people in this area, Nelson Baynard included, all seem to have emptied their bank accounts and left home without saying a word. You don't recognize that name, do you? Or these pictures?" I showed him the pictures I had gathered up thus far.

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“Can’t say that I do, sorry.” He handed them back.

“That’s what I expected anyway. So Agnes’ name was on the list, so I thought maybe I had found another person that had taken their money, run, and then been murdered.”

“What made you suspect Michael there?”

“Oh, that guy I was talking to? Would you believe woman’s intuition?”

“Humm. Well, I don’t have any of that, but I do know Agnes. Michael there showed up in her life not long ago, and suddenly they were married.”

“And now she’s wound up dead,” I finished for him.

He nodded. “Her life insurance policy, and her considerable wealth, will now pass to him. If he stays off death row, I guess.”

“I’m afraid the evidence I have wouldn’t stand up in court.” *Well, it would, he obviously murdered her. But I can’t send an innocent man to jail if it was the demon actually doing the killing.*

“I see.”

“This situation doesn’t fit with what the others have done. She didn’t run away and disappear. She didn’t leave with her own wealth. Whatever is causing people to do that around here, I think didn’t cause this.”

“But you can’t prove it?”

“Not easily,” I said sadly. “If it’s even possible at all.”

He nodded gravely. “His friends did cover for him, as naturally when she was found in the lake he was a suspect in her murder. The police were satisfied with his story, and they’ve moved on.”

“He wasn’t acting strangely at all, was he? It would have just been recently if his behavior had changed.”

“I didn’t have much contact with him, sorry. I mostly just heard about him from Agnes.”

“I understand. So apart from showing up out of nowhere, getting her to marry him, then possibly killing her for money, is there anything else you can tell me about him?”

“Sorry, no.”

“Okay. I promise, I’ll look into it more. If he did kill her,” *while not under the influence of a demon*, “he’ll pay for it.”

“Thank you. She had a lot of year of life left, and I would hate to see that bastard get away with it.”

“As would I. Thanks for the information.”

He nodded, stood up, we shook hands again, and went our separate ways.

ROBERT ZIEFEL

I took the rest of the afternoon to check out Nelson and Timothy, who had vanished as the others did. Both wealthy, both with family that was now broke and terrified of what had happened. Neither recognized any of the people in the photos I had, which by the time I talked to Timothy's wife, I had a full set of. I left feeling helpless and angry, all my power and I didn't know much more than I did when I started the day.

*This demon is really doing a number on people around here. I need to stop him, fast!*

Wealthy people. Broken families. Explosives. Warning me off. How did it all fit together?

**Near six that evening**

*“I am a woman in process. I'm just trying like everybody else. I try to take every conflict, every experience, and learn from it. Life is never dull.” -- Oprah Winfrey*

I planned to pay a little visit to this Michael person, but it would need to be pretty late to do what I needed to do. So I had a few hours to kill after we ate dinner back at my apartment. I was restless, not able to focus on anything, and kept getting up, pacing, and sitting down again. The demon was right about one thing when it spoke to me through Tyrone. People that had a lot of energy tended to find it hard to sit still.

Pretzel looked up from the TV. “What’s gotten into you, anyway?” he asked. “You’re jumpier than an akaname that just stumbled into a homeless shelter.”

“I just feel there’s something I’m missing. That dream is bugging me, there was one part of it that didn’t fit. All of it was about searching for these missing people or trying to stop something from happening. But one part was about the club.”

“Are we going back there?” he asked excitedly. “We didn’t get to see much the last time.”

“Yeah, because I ran into my so called boyfriend.” I checked my email for the hundredth time since returning home, no new messages. Should I email him? Was that what I wanted to do, or what was expected of me to do?

“Maybe we will again, and I can watch an even better scene!”

“I’m glad my personal dramas are so entertaining to you.”

“Oh, they are, they really are. Can we go? Huh? Can we?”

“I don’t think that would be such a great idea. Let me think about it.”

“We’re going to the strip club, going to the joint. Gonna see some boobies, gonna- what rhymes with joint?”

“Quiet!”

“You don’t have to be rude about it. Just get to the point!”

I plopped down again, trying to clear my thoughts and ask my power what I should be doing. *What will move this case forward?* I asked the universe. *Show me a sign.*

I wasn’t a seer, so I had to work with what powers I did have. I envisioned myself going to the strip club, and asked my power if that would result in me being more or less sure about the case. I didn’t exactly get an answer, but I did get the impression that one of the people on my list would be there tonight.

I sighed. “We’re going to the strip club.”

“Yay!”

*Why me?* I asked the universe.

As expected, I received no answer.

Pulling into the place I desperately hoped the bouncer from before wasn’t there. For a wonder, it was someone else, and this time I had come prepared.

I didn’t say a word as I walked up to him, just handed him two twenties. He grunted and opened the door. As I walked past him and he closed the door he remarked “It’s only thirty to get in.”

The door closed.

*Urge to kill- rising.*

I walked in, then ordered a small drink at the bar and walked to the table furthest away from the dancing girls. I took a sip of the drink and grimaced. I had never been one for much alcohol, with the kind of powers I had it was in my best interests to stay sober. *Emotional control* and all that, right? In any case, I had a job to do. I looked around the place, my glasses compensating for the low light automatically, and compared the current patrons there to my list of missing people. I could cross Mary off the list for sure. Cristina, Maria and the late Agnes were probably also not going to show up. That left four people to look for, unless the demon had struck again and was now wearing a new face.

Of course, I could tell by their spirit energy, or in a pinch by taking a peak at their auras. I again wished halfheartedly for powers more like those of a seer, but knew our abilities balanced out. A seer wouldn’t be able to do

cohesion, for example, something that would come in very handy should I have to try and tackle a demon I couldn't hurt otherwise.

*Rather ironic, the best demon detectors on Earth can't even defend themselves from the very demons they find.* I shook my head. *What a world.*

"You're new," said a voice to my right, and I looked up. One of the 'dancers' was there, looking down at me. She wasn't wearing much but a smile. "And you look troubled, here of all places. What's on your mind?"

I was going to flash my PI card at her and tell her to go away, but suddenly I had a thought. "Why do you do it?" I asked, pointing to the stage.

She laughed, genuine and warm. "Oh, one of those huh?" She scooted into the seat opposite me and put her chin on her hands. "You aren't one of those people that tries to get places like this shut down, are you?"

"What? No. They exist, I exist. Normally we don't cross paths. It's just, I caught my... ex-boyfriend here a few nights ago. I guess you could say the place has been on my mind."

"And now you can't stay away?" she asked with a grin. "Since you've seen the inside now you're drawn back?"

"For various reasons."

I looked over and saw someone new coming in, but he wasn't on my list.

"Waiting for someone?"

"Sort of."

"You're just full of mysteries, aren't you?"

"Look, I'm not here for the... entertainment. You don't have to try and do whatever it is you're trying to do."

"What am I trying to do?"

I shook my head. "I honestly have no idea. But it may involve money."

She laughed again. "Don't most things?"

My eyes narrowed. True, I was here, indirectly perhaps, because of money. Without solving this case I felt I could never move forward and do the best I could for others. Plus money had disappeared along with the people, so I was indirectly after that, as well. While I hadn't been hired on the disappearance case exactly, if I solved it for the police maybe they would retroactively say I had been and pay my normal fee. Or at least put the request through so Taylor wouldn't have to cover my fee himself. Knowing Wheelus though, there wasn't much chance of that. *Ah well, it gives me something to do apart from sitting in my office and worry about why the phone isn't ringing.*

“So you asked why I did it?”

“I did.”

“There’s your answer again. Money. The work isn’t terribly difficult, the hours are reasonable, and it beats serving tables or dealing with nasty customers. Here I have people to do that for me.” She indicated one of the muscly guys standing around, glaring at everyone.

“I guess if you don’t mind it.”

“Why should I? Oh, are you one of those throwbacks to the Puritan movement of the 16th and 17th centuries? Honestly, get past it, it’s just a body. Let them look if they want.”

“Huh?” *Oh yes, my usual wit is coming through strongly tonight.* “Sorry, I just didn’t expect a stripper to-” I blinked, cutting myself off. “I am though, aren’t I? I had a preconceived notion of you and didn’t allow for the possibility you might be something more. I... apologize.”

“Accepted,” she said. “I dance because I’m going to school. Collage isn’t cheap, you know?”

“No, I guess it isn’t. What are you studying?”

“Natural Resources Law Enforcement.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Yup! Don’t worry, people always look at me like that when I tell them.”

But I wasn’t exactly looking at the girl anymore. I had just felt that energy again, the same energy I had felt inside Tyrone at dinner.

The demon was here.

I looked around widely.

“What’s wrong,” asked the girl. “You looked spooked.”

“I just felt the person I was waiting for come in.”

“Felt?”

Obviously I wasn’t thinking clearly at the moment.

“You know what I mean. Look, have you seen any of these people in here lately?” I grabbed the photos I had printed out at home out of my purse and showed them to the girl, still looking around.

“Yeah, this guy’s been in here the last few nights, buying everybody drinks and throwing a lot of money around.” She handed me back the picture of Dominick.

“Stay away from him, he’s dangerous,” I said, taking the pictures back.

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“Say what? The man uses twenties like other people use fives. I’ve made more here from him this week than in a month normally.”

“She’s right,” said a voice from behind us. “I am pretty dangerous.” There stood Dominick, or more accurately the demon wearing his body like a suit. “But not to cuties like you. Only to detectives that go poking their noses in where they don’t belong.”

The girl nervously edged away from us. “I think I better go. Nice talking to you.”

I kept my eyes on Dominick and he took the girl’s place. “Surprised to see you here. What exactly do you think you’re going to do?”

“I left my options open. My power said you would be here tonight, so I came. Why are you stealing all that money? Why do you need all these people you’ve got chained somewhere?”

“Oh, seen that with your powers, have you? But you still don’t know where, do you? No, that’s just a little bit beyond your abilities, isn’t it? Otherwise you would have rescued them already. Such a pity.”

“Bet I could touch you right now and see where that body came from.” I raised my hand.

“Maybe you could,” he agreed. “Just one thing- how hard would it be to take the knife out of my pocket, make it look like we were struggling for it, and convince all these people here that you stabbed me?”

I went cold, realizing he was right. As long as he was inside someone’s body, he could hold them hostage just by sitting there. Plus, if I didn’t get a good enough reading on the body on the first try I wouldn’t get another chance. Then I wouldn’t know where to go to rescue the others, and would give him a chance to move them again.

“Thinking it over?” he asked slyly. “Look, is leaving town so hard? There must be other places you could go. I mean your so called boyfriend wasn’t impressed with your little knife trick, has he even called you?”

*Of course. When the demon left his body he must have gone into purgatory and watched what happened after that. That narrows the field a little, it’s a demon that can step back and forth between planes by himself.*

“You haven’t been messing with him, have you?”

“Maybe, maybe not. In any case he’s over you, forget him.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Temper, temper,” he said, wiggling a finger. “Is that why you won’t leave? Stubbornness because I told you what to do? What if I paid you? I have a lot of money still left after- whoops, almost gave it away!”

“I’ll take you down somehow, and rescue those people.”

“Not likely. It’s been fun, but I have dancing girls to watch. I will give you a little hint though, it’s almost done. One way or the other, it’ll all be over soon.”

“Wait, did you strangle an old lady named Agnes? The throw her body in the water?”

“Who? No, I don’t recall doing anything like that.” He got up. “See ya!”

“Don’t you walk away from me!” I yelled, yanking him back with telekinesis. He stumbled backwards over the table, then rolled away from me. “Filthy ESPer,” he snarled, swinging a punch at my face. I reacted with a barrier, making his fist bounce off thin air, so he went to jump on me instead. The nearest bouncer had moved as soon as he had gone sprawling and grabbed him, hauling him off me. The demon took a swing at him instead, connecting with the guy’s right arm. The guy didn’t drop him, just grabbed his arms and started dragging him off. The demon roared, busting free, and surprising the bouncer, who obviously wasn’t expecting this guy to put up this much resistance.

*He’s using his own strength and energy, I thought. Not those of the host. And some demons are much stronger than any human can ever be. Also, with his amount of energy to draw upon, why bother holding back?*

“You’ve ruined my fun for tonight,” he snarled at me. “Guess I’ll have to make my own. Wonder how much I can make that little girl scream. Think about that while you use your filthy power to find me. Face it, I’ve already won.”

He shimmered and vanished.

*Oh no, did I just put Mary in danger? What’s he going to do to her?*

“Are you all right?” asked the girl who had been talking to me. “Where did that guy go? Did he just disappear?”

Everyone in the place was now staring over in my direction.

“Well, this doesn’t look good,” said Pretzel in my ear.

Somehow I had to agree.

A well dressed man was pushing his way towards us. The bouncer heard him coming and stepped aside. “I’m the manager here,” he announced. “What’s going on?”

I pulled out my PI card. “I’m Erica Chesterfield, trying to track down certain individuals wanted for questioning in relation to some recent thefts and disappearances in the area. That man your bouncer here let escape was one of them. I was trying to apprehend him!”

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“Apprehend? Is this true?” he demanded of the man.

“Gee boss, I don’t know. I just saw them attacking each other. He just disappeared though, he didn’t ‘get away.’”

“Disappeared?” I snorted, trying to act shocked. “What are you trying to tell me, he vanished into thin air? You let him go!”

He stared at me like I had grown a third eyeball. “But you saw it yourself, you were right there!” he protested.

“Oh, I know what I saw, thank you.” *Better than you, not that I can admit anything.* “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go after him. Maybe he hasn’t gotten that far.”

“You’re not going anywhere until I sort this out,” said the manager. “The police have already been notified. They’ll be here shortly. You can talk to them about this so called perpetrator.”

“Fine,” I snarled. *Great, now what? Please don’t let it be Wheelus that shows up.*

Moments later, things had calmed down and the girls were dancing again when two officers strode into the room. I didn’t recognize either of them. The manager pulled them aside and spoke softly to them, and pointed at me.

“You’re the new psychic in town?” asked one, coming over to me. I resisted the urge to correct him, there was no point in it.

“I’m the new detective in town, that happens to be psychic,” I replied instead.

“She was telling the truth?” asked the manager.

The officer hesitated. “I heard something about a new detective, but I didn’t know she had been hired for the case. Not that they tell us anything, anyway. She probably is. Who did you say was here?”

“Dominick Peterson, the third person to be reported missing. Call officer Dieterich, he’ll tell you.”

“Oh yeah,” said the other. “Rumor was he was chasing some ta- I mean, that he had, uh, discovered a new talent in the area. That must be you, huh?”

“It must be, here I am.”

“She’s right about the name,” said the other officer, tapping into thin air. “That guy was reported missing some time ago. Anyone else here seen him?”

Everyone was quiet. I pulled out the picture I had of the guy and held it up to the girl I had been talking to. “You said you’ve seen him in here regularly.”

“Oh, that guy. Yeah, he’s been here recently.”

The officers looked at the picture, then seemed to be staring at nothing, probably checking their computers to see if the face matched. “It checks out, that’s the guy. His wife is pressing charges against him for theft all right, would have loved to have brought him in.”

“I guess I’ll have my people keep an eye out for him, then,” said the manager though clenched teeth.

“You do that.” He turned to me. “You’re Erica, did he say? Nice to meet you.” He held out his hand. “Nice job tracking him to this place, too. If you see him again, let us know, all right? Don’t just try and apprehend him yourself.”

“I will,” I totally lied to his face. *Yeah, like you can traverse dimensional barriers and catch him. I can’t even do that, and who knows what else the demon can do. You would be paste in less than ten seconds.*

“Guess that wraps it up,” he said, taking my card back from the manager and handing it to me. “Keep it clean, everyone.”

He and his partner moseyed out, eyes on the mostly naked girls on-stage. I was vaguely disgusted.

“Get out of here,” said the manager, dismissing me with a wave and walking away himself.

The bouncer shrugged and walked off, leaving just the young woman.

“He really stole all that money he was throwing around?”

“He stole it from himself. He walked out on his family for some reason.”

“Really? That’s rough. Well, uh, come by and see us again?”

“Not likely.”

“Your loss. I would have danced for you, and *meant it.*”

She turned around and left before she saw my cheeks redden.

“Can I stay?” asked Pretzel.

“We’re leaving.”

“Aww.”

Once in the car I turned my powers to again trying to see where Mary and the others were, but got only that image of the basement to show for it.

“Wait a second,” I said, coming out of it. “Don’t you have scrying powers, Pretzel?”

“Sure,” he replied. “What about them?”

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“And you didn’t think they might have come in handy?”

“Not really, and besides, you didn’t ask. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without something of theirs, because I don’t know them. Plus, if it’s true what you say and they’re in a dusty old basement somewhere, that’s all I’ll see. I won’t be able to move my point of view to see the outside of the house and tell you the location. I’m no seer, I just happen to have that one skill... for some reason.”

I yelled in frustration.

“Ow!”

“Sorry. Is there no way to save her?”

“You could always ask the Foundation for some help.”

I mulled it over. “I really want to do this on my own, but on the other hand, if it endangers an innocent child, I have to use all the resources I can.” I dialed Devorah’s number, and she answered after a few rings.

“Hello?”

“Devorah? It’s me, Erica. I... may need some help.”

“All right, what I do for you?”

“I need a seer to find someone, and fast. I think I may have put a child in danger.” I went on to explain my meeting with the demon, and Devorah agreed that was serious enough to ask a seer to get a clear answer on. I went to the back of the place, making sure no one was around. Once the coast was clear I sent Devorah a picture of the place, and she teleported in to get the photo and toy that had been owned by Mary. Seconds later I was alone again, waiting while she went to go find a seer. I waited. Minutes ticked by. “Hello?” No one answered, but my phone showed the call as still connected so I waited some more. Finally she came back on the line.

“I asked three different seers around here, and none of them could give me a good answer.”

“What?”

“I know, it’s most troubling. I asked the last one to find out if the girl was already dead, but even that resulted in nothing. I’m sorry, but she’s either been moved to a place that’s warded off or into the Demon World. Probably that latter, as the demon no doubt realized this is exactly what you would do.”

“I suppose. Thank you for trying.”

“Of course. I’ll have them check again at random times, if she ever is able to be seen again, we’ll have her. Obviously I’ll have to keep the toy.”

“You’ll have better luck getting a location than I will, keep it.”

“Thanks. And good luck.”

“No luck, huh?” asked Pretzel.

“No. Even asking for help got me nowhere. I can’t believe this!” I banged my steering wheel.

“Taking it out on me isn’t going to help,” said the car. “How about a nice, relaxing drive in the country?”

“Sorry, and no. Just... just take me home.”

“As you wish.”

**Eleven o'clock that night**

*"There is a higher court than courts of justice and that is the court of conscience. It supersedes all other courts." --Mahatma Gandhi*

"And you're sure you should be going out in your... emotional state?" asked Pretzel.

"I'm fine," I said to him, probably more harshly than I should. "I am going to accomplish *something* today. Either I will know from that man's brain where the victims are being held, or I will know he is a murderer. Either way at least something will get resolved."

"If you say so. What's the plan again?"

"You're going to go in and make sure he's asleep. If he is, deactivate the alarm system, then unlock the door. I'll head in and meld with him. Being asleep he won't be able to resist, and I'll get all the information I'll need out of his slimy little brain."

"And if he's not?"

"Don't suppose you have any way of knocking him out?"

"I'm a couple of centimeters tall, what am I going to do?"

"Just asking. All right, it should be late enough, we're leaving."

"Can't say I didn't try," he muttered, following me out the door. "Wait, you never answered my question!"

"Do you need the code?"

"Nah, I watched you punching it in."

"Oh, you can remember that, but not the plan for more than five minutes?"

"Because I saw the code being used. Photographic memory, remember?" He tapped his head. "Guts."

"I hope so. You mess it up and set off the alarm, I'm going to be even more pissed than I am right now."

"I'm sure she'll be fine. Yeah..."

"But whatever happens to her it'll be my fault. Why did I think I should go there, anyway? What did I think was going to happen? It's not like I could do anything to a demon that's possessing someone, right?"

"You're on the case though, and every step brings you closer. He'll slip up and then you'll have him!"

"You think so, huh?"

"Sure, I guess it sounded good. I mean yeah, no problem."

I shook my head. *He is still a demon, I guess.*

We parked the car out of sight of the house and I locked it. We made our way to the front door, and Pretzel vanished, reappearing inside. I watched him disappear out of sight and hoped he really did know the numbers. *Maybe I should have asked him, just to check. No, I have to have faith in- wait, have faith in a demon? I really am messed up tonight.*

He came flying back, and I heard the locks being disengaged from the door.

"See," he said quietly. "Nothing to it. I love this stuff!"

"And he's asleep?" I asked him.

"Oh, shoot, I forgot to go check. Wait here." He went invisible and I put my hand over my eyes. *Really, All-Father?*

He was back a moment later. "Clear. Always wanted to say that."

"But is he asleep?"

"I don't know. He looks asleep. I could use my power to tell you what his sheets are made of, but I can't tell a sleeping human from one that just has his eyes closed."

"Great, you're a big help."

"I am, it's true. I should get a raise, or at least a snack when this is all over."

*I'm not sure he understands sarcasm, sometimes.*

I quietly let myself in, then shut the door. My glasses tried compensating for the darkness, but they didn't have a lot to work with. I got out my little LED flashlight and pressed the button to turn it on. Better to light a candle than trip and fall over something in this guy's house.

I followed where Pretzel said to go to get to his room, and slipped inside. *Never actually snuck into a man's bedroom before. Certainly an interesting experience.* I clicked the light off and waited for my eyes to adjust.

"Are you just going to stand there admiring him?" Pretzel hissed. "Do it!"

"Some of us can't see in the dark," I hissed back. "Give me a minute."

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Finally I figured I was as ready as I was ever going to be, and crept carefully beside his bed. Touching his head with a finger, I willed myself into his psyche.

*What's going on? His panicked thoughts reached me without effort.*

*Just relax. We're going to take a little trip down memory lane, and finally get some answers.*

*You! You're that woman from the funeral.*

*Very good, your memory is working perfectly. Let's think about Agnes for a moment, shall we?*

*Wait, how are you doing this? What's happening to me?*

*Don't worry about it. We're inside your mind right now. If you can't be safe inside your own head, where can you be safe? Now, about what happened to Agnes...*

*You can't make me!*

Of course, trying not to think of Agnes was like telling someone not to think of a purple elephant. They did. Images and sensations streamed past me, mostly of greed, and of him thinking about how he was going to get away with murder.

*So you did kill her. I'm disgusted. This doesn't relate to the local demon at all.*

*Demon? What are you talking about? This is all a big misunderstanding, I swear.*

*Really? Let's go back to her last moments of life, shall we?*

*Please, no!*

But he was powerless to resist, and like a movie I watched in horror as he killed his wife. He knew exactly what he was doing, and I felt no trace of demonic presence in his thoughts. I knew, as sure as I knew I had two arms, that this man was a murderer. He knew it too. There was no blank period, there was no fighting off the impulse to kill that the demon was suppling. There was just his fingers around her neck, and her weakly struggling to get free. I paused the "action" as the life left her eyes.

*Are you saying that isn't you? That this was, perhaps, some sort of accident?*

*All right, I killed her, okay? What does it matter, she would have been dead soon anyway.*

*And you know this, how?*

*She was old.*

*That's your reasoning? You are so dead.*

*Wait- Let me explain.*

*Oh, this should be good. Go on then, explain this grizzly scene to me.*

*Okay, look. Let's say she dies, right? She has no kids, so who does her money go to? Right, the state. Do you really think they would use it properly? No! But me, on the other hand, I would use it properly.*

*Oh really. Tell me about exactly how you would have used her money. He tried to stop it, but scenes of him lounging around pools and taking cruises flashed into our mental perception. This is you convincing me, huh?*

*No, no, I mean, yes, I wanted to do those things, but I wanted to invest in business too. Donate some to charity, that sort of thing.*

But I could tell he was lying. I didn't need to be a seer at this point. You can lie to yourself, but you won't really believe it. That's what was going on here. For the moment we were one person, and he knew how false his words rang even as he thought them.

*So what do I do with you?* I asked, imagining him in chains before me. He obediently appeared, struggling to get free.

*Are you going to turn me in?*

*Turn you in?* I laughed. *You have no idea how much trouble you're in, do you? Growing up, my father always said that the punishment should fit the crime. Once, when I was old enough to know better, I was practicing my telekinesis in the house. My parents had always said to me I shouldn't do that, but I thought I had good enough control. Of course I didn't, and something went flying through a window. My father could have repaired that window in a minute, just by touching the pieces of glass and flowing them back together. Guess what he did instead?*

*I don't know, spanked you or something?*

*No. He gathered the pieces up, set them down on the table, handed me some adhesive, and told me to get busy. I cut myself almost immediately, of course, and he just healed it. "I didn't tell you to use your hands," he said to me. Turned out, he wanted me to use my powers to fix it, so I did.*

*Powers? Telekinesis? Who are you? Why are you telling me all this?*

I imagined a gag in his mouth, and one obliged by appearing. *I know, I shouldn't. You're sweet to be worrying about me, but for what I have in mind for you, you won't be telling anyone, so my secrets are safe. Where was I? Right, that wasn't the end of it. I had to hunt around in the grass for every last bit of glass that came from that window. I learned a little about ESP, precognition, seeing, the whole works. In the end I managed it. I glued that window back together, and I learned control. My father didn't get angry, or yell,*

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*or send me to my room. He made me fix the window, and when it was done, he put it back and hugged me. "Now do you understand?" he asked. And I did, a little. I understood that my actions have consequences. I laughed. Of course, that didn't stop me getting in trouble again, or being impulsive and hotheaded at other times in my life. So tell me, how do you put the window back together? I made the gag disappear again.*

*Give all the money away?*

*I considered. That's a good start, but you see, the thing is, you killed. You'll probably go to the Demon World for it, and be turned into some greedy demon after being tortured a few hundred years. You stole more than money, though. You stole a life. You can't ever put that back.*

*What do you want from me? I'll confess to the cops...*

But we both knew that wasn't true. He had worked out that I was in the room with him, and he was planning to try and overpower me the second this meld ended. Not that he could, but he was going to try.

*No, I thought sadly, Something of equal value must be taken from you, to balance the scales.*

*You're going to kill me?*

*Nothing so crude. What you really stole was all the potential Agnes had left for doing things in her life. It seems only fair the same thing be taken from you.*

With that, I flooded his brain with psychic energies, and our connection broke.

It broke because he didn't have enough brainpower to support it anymore.

"What did you do to him?" asked Pretzel, looking down at the man, who was awake now but staring blankly at the ceiling. He was already starting to drool.

"I stole his potential," I explained. "He'll live on, but now it'll be as a vegetable. He'll never have another conscious thought in his brain, ever. Doctors will do the 'humane' thing and allow him to linger on, possibly for fifty years or more. He wanted her money, let it go towards paying someone to change his diapers."

"Thank you," said a voice behind me. I whirled, about to blast whatever I saw across the room, but it was a ghost, not a person. Agnes stood there, wispy and faint, but smiling.

Beside her was a skeletal figure with white wings, looking rather impatient. As impatient as a guy with a skull face could look, anyway.

“Coming?” he reluctantly said.

“Yes, now I will. Thank you, Erica. Even knowing that I probably continued to exist in Heaven, you stayed the course and avenged my death. His soul will never be in balance again, there is no good he can do in this state that will show his remorse. You’re a good woman in my book. When it’s your time, come look me up. I’ll be waiting.”

She took the outstretched hand of the psychopomp and both twinkled and vanished.

“Wow,” breathed Pretzel. “How about that?”

But where Pretzel seemed impressed, I was feeling a bit sick. It was true, I knew about Heaven, but that thought had never crossed my mind. Why had I reacted the way I did upon learning of her death? Is it because of how she died? Because she was older and deserved better?

Really, who was I to go around destroying people’s brains just because they were murderers? Was trying to bring justice to someone futile? Was I playing God, with what I had done? Agnes had said he would never get the chance to repent, and that was now true. I had stolen that emotion away from him just as I had stolen anything else good and fair that he might have done with his life.

Had I just broken another window? A window I had no hope of ever repairing? Was my soul tainted now, even though I had left him alive? How could I claim the moral high ground when I had done something perhaps even more terrible than he had? At least Agnes’ death was quick. His would be slow, and he wouldn’t even realize he was dying. He wouldn’t realize anything, now, ever again.

“Admiring your handiwork?” Pretzel asked, that stupid grin on his face wider than ever. “Because I have to say, this was inspired. I could turn on the light, if you wanted.”

*Inspired? By who, Darth Vader?* This shook me out of my daze. “No, we’re leaving. Come on.”

I sent my power into the man, who didn’t resist or even seem to notice me floating him off the bed.

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“Now what are you doing to the poor guy? Oh, oh, leave him in some kind of lewd position? That would be the funniest thing!”

“Just come on.”

I went through the house, sending him ahead of me and knocking things to make it look like he stumbled around. I deposited him in a heap right under the alarm control panel.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” I explained. “I’m leaving. Lock the door behind me. Then re-arm the system so it looks like he’s been here alone the whole time. I don’t think the times of arming and disarming are logged, but maybe... can’t worry about that now. When it’s done arming, hit the medical emergency button, that should summon an ambulance automatically.”

“Ah, we’re making it look like he thought something was wrong, staggered out here, pressed the button, and collapsed.”

I nodded. “Teleport back outside when you’re done.”

“Got it.”

I left, and a moment later he appeared with a small bang.

“Okay, it’s flashing and everything. His phone started ringing immediately too, so when he doesn’t answer they’re sure to send someone to check it out.”

“Great. Let’s go before anyone shows up.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

We climbed into the car and I had it take me home. The entire way back the whole situation played over and over in my head. There was no way around it, I was too impulsive. I got an idea in my head and I went with it. There was no thinking if that idea was right or wrong, or what the consequences would be. My father had tried, but obviously I was still just as bad as I had been.

Was I a monster? Little better than a demon?

I wanted to do the right thing. Agnes even praised me! She wouldn’t have gotten peace any other way, and might even have become another wandering ghost that a spirit hunter would have to deal with. In the back of my mind I was a bit surprised her Psychopomp had waited around that long, but maybe she had asked it to check back in with her? Would they do that? So little was known about them, usually they didn’t talk very much.

*I'm getting off track.*

Who was I? What was I becoming? Were my powers being used correctly? I couldn't find a little girl so I took it out on a murderer? Wasn't that the exact same situation as that demon I had been harassing? I tried to stop him, he couldn't stop me, so he took it out on a little girl. Someone close to that man can't take his being a vegetable out on me, so he takes it out on someone else. Where did the cycle end?

The police would never have suspected him again, right? They had just lumped all the names together, even though the situations were very different. But my finding that out didn't give me the right to just step in and do whatever I wanted to the guy, right? The All-Father judged you at the end of your life, as a whole, not just any one single action. For all I know some of that money might have made its way to cancer research or something. It wouldn't now.

As my car pulled in I stripped off my clothes and just tossed them on the floor. I ignored Pretzel's whistle, and just fell into bed.

*Is satisfying justice enough? Does my having powers make me more capable than a judge that's studied law for thirty years? We both hand out a punishment, the sentence for murder would have been life without parole, which is what he got. But what right did I have to pass that sentence?*

**Eight in the morning**

*"I learned really valuable lessons from 'Blue's Clues.' I'd repeat them every day. 'You can do things. You are smart.'"* --Steve Burns

I was still feeling a bit bad the next day, but already the natural equilibrium of my mind was reasserting itself. We had talked about it in one class or another at school, probably when I was learning about the ability to influence emotions in people. Happiness levels typically returned to normal pretty quickly no matter what you did, powers or not. When I got my new car I was pretty happy, but after a few days it hardly registered when I saw it. It was just normal now. Even something big like being married, or losing a loved one, the normal brain took it in stride.

This was going to be the same way. Okay, maybe I had screwed up and maybe I hadn't, the point was to set it aside and keep working on the case. I had people to find and a demon to stop, so that's what I was going to do.

I had two major plans for that day.

"Finding the people and stopping the demon?" Pretzel had asked when I told him.

"That might be possible, but I'm shooting for more realistic goals. Narrow the search down to figure out what we're dealing with, and where they are."

Demons acted in predictable ways. There were exceptions, like Pretzel, who had been away from "home" for some time now and started to be more of an individual than just another imp. For the most part though, if you met one type of demon you had met them all. Oni would always attack a certain way, Devils would always open negotiations with a demand for your soul, that sort of thing. There was a whole class dedicated to this at Demongate High, learning to spot the patterns in a demon's behavior.

After breakfast I switched my TV over to monitor mode and brought up a couple of windows from my home computer. I had it bring up the footage of the dead man I had found, and watched it in slow motion looking for anything I had missed.

I also brought up a word processor window, and started writing down what we knew about the demon.

He could move between our world and the Demon World, or at least Purgatory.

He probably didn't have any offensive attacks, as he hadn't energy blasted me while at the club. He'd tried to grab me, which could mean a few things. That he wanted to touch me and use some sort of touch based attack, or that he went berserker easily and was going to try and pummel me. I knew demons had to touch to possess, they couldn't do that from a distance, but I didn't know if a demon could jump from body to body that way. *Have to look that up some time.*

He was strong enough to break free from that bouncer, and had a lot of energy.

He could fly, unless that little girl he was in was some kind of olympic level sprinter. He might have been able to use his own strength and endurance to run with, but he still would have had to deal with having tiny legs. That would limit how fast he could go, and I had seen him zooming away like a rocket.

He could possess people.

I logged onto the Foundation website and did a search on their demon database, focusing on those demons known to possess people.

It came back with a list:

- Aswang
- Devil
- Dybbuk
- Encantado/Ezu
- Grigor
- Possessor (duh)
- Preta
- Rakshasa
- Vilkatis

## NO ONE TO BLAME

*That narrowed it down nicely!*

I looked the list over, then clicked into each demon's write up. An Aswang could fly and knew enough about dark arts to probably open a portal by themselves. They were not super strong, though like most supernatural creatures they knew how to spend more energy than normal people could at one time. They mostly preyed on the weak or infirm, and tried to steal their souls. Would one go to all this trouble?

A Devil could do whatever they wanted, with magic. One could easily hide their nature by not doing magic, and just grab someone in combat. They had plenty of energy, were strong... could they fly without their wings? I suppose it would be pretty silly to possess someone and then lose the ability to fly. They weren't invulnerable, but again, a spell could have been cast before Nelson smashed up that jewelry place. They were greedy, and also wanted all the souls they could get.

Dybbuk could fly and were strong, but it noted here that they typically manifested some sign of their presence, like the walls bleeding or lights turning red. Would that happen if they were inside someone though? They were strong enough and could fly, had lots of energy just like a Devil, and could come to Earth on their own. They rarely did, though, and if one did it could have any number of reasons for doing so.

Encantado didn't want to do anything but protect people, while Ezu wanted the opposite. They would just possess someone and then try to destroy that person immediately. They weren't all that bright. So it being one of them was very low on the list, if they made it on at all.

Grigor, the fallen angels. Ugh, I hoped it wasn't one of them, they were nasty. They were just as strong as a Devil, were invulnerable, but again, should manifest some change to their environment. Couldn't get here on its own, but could be summoned. They certainly hated us enough and were smart enough to go through a plan like this. Making a bunch of people blow themselves up? Taking who knows how many others with them? Yeah, that was their style.

Possessor were strong... *okay, throwing that criterion out, it seems all*

*these suckers are.* Great strength proved nothing. Could fly, could be insubstantial, but it was noted here most had no more energy than a regular person. Would certainly do bizarre things to cause havoc, but didn't think much ahead. It would be the case I got the patient one to deal with.

Preta, the hungry ghost. No, he would have inhaled that meal rather than leaving when he had control of my boyfriend. *Should I start calling him my ex?*

Rakshasa didn't fit either, they were shape-shifting demons mostly. At least that's what they were best known for- not having an actual form of their own. Didn't really fit.

And of course the vilkatis, which is where most stories of werewolves came from. Defiantly not one of them.

I sat and stared at the list.

"Did that help?" asked Pretzel.

"Not really," I answered, but at least we have a short list now. The trouble is these are just the general case of each demon. Nothing says they can't be artificers, or have more energy than normal. Or maybe it's a grigor that doesn't have that manifestation thing. Or maybe it's a demon not on this list that learned how to possess people, or had a talisman made to gain that ability. There are too many edge cases to rule out anything."

"If it's summoned, it might be doing something against its nature under the orders of the summoner," he reminded me.

"Yes, there's that too." I bookmarked each demon's page so I could get back to it, and turned my attention to the video I had captured of finding Nelson. I paid particular attention to the "mine" they had pulled from under his body, and stopped the video on a frame that showed it clearly.

*Was anything ever found out about that explosive device they found under Nelson?* I wrote in an email to Taylor.

He got right back to me. *Crude, looked homemade. Simple switch to trigger it, wouldn't have wanted to be the one near it when it was set. If it had been done wrong- kablooy. Casing welded together from local materials? The explosive material itself was probably professionally made. It was detonated by our disposal team and they said it was top grade stuff. Odd that the casing was so crude. Hope that helps!* He even sent me the pictures

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they had taken of it, showing the material and construction. They had x-rayed the thing and there was the battery, the simple switch, the detonator cap, and the block of explosive material. The rest of the case seemed to be filled with tiny metal spheres, further increasing the damage it would have done.

The demon probably wouldn't have cared if it had been made wrong. The worst that would have happened to him was accidentally blowing my office up. The host would have been unharmed, and would have just tried again someplace else he knew I would be.

The reason the demon needed all that money was becoming clear though. He probably purchased the explosive part from some kind of black market. *Around here?* Though, I suppose if it could fly, it could go pick up stuff somewhere. That wouldn't be cheap. I really had no idea how much black market explosives cost, but the total wealth of seven people would be overkill, right?

Unless he was buying a ton of the stuff.

That thought made me shiver. The question then was, why go through the trouble of making custom cases for the stuff? Someone with access to raw explosive material would also be able to package it correctly, right? But as I sat and thought about it, maybe that wasn't the case. To equate it to wards, seeing a ward made by someone allowed you to tell, from another ward, if the same person made it. Not just by the way the thing was made, but by the fact that each ward had to have "signature" of some kind that truly activated it.

Bomb making would be somewhat similar. Each person would have their own techniques, materials, and tools. As such, a means to track what devices came from what manufacturers, potentially making the person putting them together easier to find. Could a condition of the sale be making your own casings? Or was it just that the demon wanted to further torment its victims by making them work for hours on the thing they knew would soon kill them? I could see that.

The casing was crude though, it looked like just a piece of metal someone found laying around, cut up, and then welded together into a sort of box shape. Thinking back, all the people I had spoken to about those that disappeared said the same thing. They took money, nothing else. No

tools, no supplies, nothing. So somewhere along the line the demon had purchased tools, like welding equipment.

And that meant hardware stores.

I pulled up a list of hardware stores in the area, and then used my ability to look into the future to try and determine which would produce the best results if I asked around. Luckily there weren't that many, so I just decided to go to them, one at a time, and asked my power if I would be find something in that area.

The forth one I thought about visiting gave me a good feeling, while none of the others did. It was in Panorama Plaza, in Penfield, not too far away.

"Let's go shopping!" I announced, grabbing up the pictures of all the victims that I had printed. *Time to do some leg work.*

My car drove me out there, dropping me near the hardware store. Nearby was a sporting goods store, typical restaurants, gas stations, and a general electronics place. I marched smartly up to the counter at the hardware store and spread the pictures out before the person standing there. It was a teenager, typical of the breed.

"Erica Chesterfield, PI," I said, showing my license. "Have any of these people been seen around here?" I asked.

"Gee, I don't know," said the boy. "Let me check with my manager."

The manager was summoned, and when I explained I was on the trail of thieves, murderers and kidnapers, he took me back to the office where his security system was. I gave him an electronic copy of the pictures and he ran it through his facial recognition system, which was a standard part of any security software at this point.

"Sorry, doesn't look like any of them of come through here," he apologized. "Anything else I can do to help?"

"But... but..." I sputtered, "They must have come here. Not one of them?"

"That's what the system says. I admit it's not the highest end system, but watch."

He took my picture and fed it into the system. Within seconds it popped up my face and the time I had come in. It even started showing my conversation with the guy at the desk.

"Okay. Dang, I was so sure, too. Sorry to have bothered you."

"That's okay. Hope you find them."

## NO ONE TO BLAME

*You and me both.*

“That was a bust, huh?” asked Pretzel. “Too bad. Your powers aren’t slipping, are they?”

“No, can’t be. I defiantly felt more positive about coming here than to any other location. I just can’t imagine what went wrong.”

“Try again now,” he suggested. “Maybe they all went into the restaurant there or something, not the hardware store.”

“I suppose you could be right.”

I closed my eyes, imagining the stores side by side in my mind. *Which store should I go in to get the best result?*

My power gave me a flash of basketballs, volleyballs, golf clubs, shin guards, and other sports stuff.

“Uh, okay? I guess we’re in the market for a new tennis racket.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t ask me. Come on.”

We drove over to the other part of the plaza, as the hardware store was by itself, a short distance away. I went into the sporting goods store, and the clerk there didn’t even need to call a manager to make my day brighter.

“Yup, I’ve seen all those people in here lately. Even the kid, which I thought was strange. All bought the weirdest thing, too, like there was a run on them.”

“What did they buy?” I asked excitedly.

“This,” he said, walking over to a display of fitness equipment. He hefted a box, and I staggered a little trying to keep it up as he plopped it into my arms.

“What is it?” I asked, trying to balance it and read the box.

“Training vest.” He took it back from me and set it back down with a thump. “See the pockets? You put a weight inside and it makes you heavier. Then you run around in it and get stronger. That’s the theory, anyway.”

“Okay?” I looked, and he was right. It was a dark vest with eight small pockets on each side, then two larger ones at the top. This was repeated on both sides of the front and back, for a total of 40 small, rectangular shaped pockets. “And they all bought one? Even the little girl?”

“Yup. She even brought it up herself, didn’t even seem to struggle to lift the box. I tell you, that little girl must be stronger than I am!”

I handed him one of my cards. “Look, can you call me if someone comes in and buys another one of these?”

“Sure,” he said with a shrug, taking it. “Can I interest you in one? They’re a popular item, you might be at the forefront of the next exercise craze.”

“I’ll pass, thanks. My muscles are all up here.” I pointed at my head.

“Suit yourself.”

Walking out, I looked around to see what other places were around here.

“You know,” I said to Pretzel, “I think we’ve been going about this the wrong way.”

“Oh?”

“We’ll see in a minute.”

I walked over to the electronics store, and again, the person behind the counter there immediately recognized the group.

“Yes, they came in quite steadily, actually. Bought all the same stuff, which I also thought was strange. The little girl was rather rude to me, too, when I asked her what she was going to do with the stuff.”

“What did they buy?”

“Odd and ends. A ton of wire, some switches, a bunch of batteries, LED lights, that sort of thing.”

“Great. Just great. Okay,” I handed over another card. “I think they’re making bombs. If anyone else comes here buying the same stuff, can you get in touch with me right away? Just email me the word bombs, I’ll know it’s from you.”

He paled. “Seriously? Bombs?”

“One has already been found and defused, but unless I miss my guess, a lot of people are going to be in danger before this is all over.”

“I’ll let you know, promise.”

“Great. Thanks. Don’t try tackling them or anything, just let them buy what they want and email me. They are super dangerous.”

“Even a little girl?”

“You would be surprised what even one little girl can do.”

“I guess. Okay. Is there anything else?”

“Not at the moment. Have a good day!”

“Right, you too,” he replied, looking spooked. I walked out.

“Is bingo perhaps appropriate?” asked Pretzel.

“It’s getting there. Time to have a little look around this neighborhood.”

“But what are they making?”

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“Jackets to blow themselves up with. I was thinking about more mines like that guy had under him. But no, that’s not it at all. He’s got them rigging up jackets full of explosives and is going to make them blow themselves up. Probably in a crowded area somewhere, for maximum impact.”

“You think?”

“Look at what they bought. Cut the flap off the pockets on the vest, and you can stick forty cubes of explosives in there. Wire it all up with batteries and some switches, and the demon can probably blow them all up with one press of a button.”

“Wow, what artistry.”

“Now is not the time to be impressed!”

“Oh, sure, whatever. I mean, what a sick mind to come up with something like that.”

“Yeah, good try. Look, if the demon is buying stuff from this area, maybe he’s got his victims nearby too. I’ll check some basements in the area.”

“Shouldn’t you just ask the future again?”

“It’s sort of vague, but I guess it doesn’t hurt.”

I did, and got the feeling I would be disappointed in my efforts to check this area. I did it anyway, knowing if I didn’t try, I would later regret it. I checked houses up and down the street, returning to my body when the strain got to much, resting a moment, then going out again. Several things worked against me. There were a lot of houses in this area, and even I could only move so fast. Certainly if I wanted to cover distance, I could fly the length of the US in under a minute. But forget trying to see any detail going at that speed. So I had to keep my speed down and carefully check every room in every basement in every house nearby. I didn’t consider myself a quitter, but after about forty minutes of this I gave it up as hopeless.

“Your glasses were ringing, I think you got a call,” said Pretzel, when I came back the last time.

“Thanks.” I looked, and sure enough I had missed several calls from Taylor, and hastily called him back.

“Where were you?” he asked, picking up.

“Sorry, I was... out. What’s up?”

“You’ll want to get down here to see this. There’s been another incident of someone stabbing themselves, and this one was screaming about being possessed.”

“I’m there!”

**One o'clock in the afternoon.**

*"There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them." --Denis Waitley*

I told the car to take me to the address Taylor gave me, and silently urged it to go faster. I knew it was taking the shortest, fastest route to get there, but for once I really wished I had practiced my bilocating more so I could learn teleportation. Several times I almost put it on manual control, but knew that would be foolish. In my present state who knows what I might do?

Mow down little old ladies crossing the street? Swerve around kids playing in yards as a shortcut? Okay, maybe that was fanciful, but I thought taking no chances at this point was the best way to go. I finally arrived at the most recent "estate" to be visited by my demonic foe, and parked off to the side away from the police cars, fire truck, and ambulance that were in evidence.

"Officer Dieterich is expecting me," I said to the officer who was out by the front door. He looked my license over and nodded, letting me inside. It was another set piece house on the inside, which didn't surprise me. I followed the officer's directions to the kitchen, where the action was taking place.

Or had taken place, by the state of the room. It looked like everyone was wrapping things up here, and both Taylor and Wheelus came over to me.

"Your powers didn't tell you about this one?" said Wheelus, nastily. "We had to call you? For shame!"

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“Erica, thanks for coming,” said Taylor.

“Of course. And my powers didn’t tell me about this because I was using them to try and track down things related to Nelson.”

Wheelus waved a hand. “Sure, of course you were. Always some convenient excuse for why your powers didn’t work ‘this time’ and how they’ll certainly work the next time. But please, poke around. The adults are done here, anyway.”

He chortled and walked off.

“So what happened?” I asked Taylor.

“As far as we can tell from the 911 call and Mr Lamay’s statements, his wife suddenly went crazy. About an hour ago, he called 911 to report his wife was acting erratic. Yelling about being possessed, and how ‘the devil’ wanted her to take the car and drive somewhere. Apparently she struggled with herself and eventually made her way into the kitchen, over there.” He pointed to a space where a marked off area was, the body obviously already moved. “She then screamed that ‘the devil’ would never take her soul, and plunged a knife into her own chest. She died of that wound.”

“And what does Wheelus think happened?”

“He thinks the husband murdered his wife and made up a story.”

“Why would someone make up a story that sounds that ridiculous?”

“Don’t look at me. Given what you’ve said in the past, though, I thought I should get you here.”

“Thanks, I do appreciate it. Where is the man now?”

“He’s being watched by another officer while Wheelus decides if he’s going to arrest him or not.”

“Sounds like an open and shut case, what’s the delay?”

“His son. Apparently he saw the whole thing, and backs up his father’s versions of events. Plus, from what we can tell there’s only one set of prints on the murder weapon, hers.”

I looked around. The knife block was thrown, and things were strewn all over the kitchen, clear signs of a struggle. In this case, the woman’s struggle with herself not to fall under the control of the demon. *Finally, someone with the resolve to fight back. If only the others could have, but then, a demon will wear you down because they can keep trying to possess you longer than you can resist.* “This would have fit with the other disappearances,” I said. “She came from a wealthy family with at least one child. She would have driven away, emptied her bank account, and then probably started to work on the explosive vest that would ultimately kill her.”

“What vest?”

“I checked out those people you didn’t tell me about. They all went down to Panorama Plaza and bought a vest with a lot of pockets in it. Also wire, batteries, switches, and the like. I’m guessing when we find them, they’ll be wearing those vests and the pockets will be full of the same explosive material you found in the mine from earlier.”

“Can’t you track them down? You got that far.”

I shook my head. “Nearest I can get is a basement somewhere. I asked some seers where the little girl was, but they said they couldn’t find a trace of her either. Like she’d been moved to somewhere their power can’t reach.”

“Where’s that? And what’s a seer?”

“You don’t want to know, and a person that has more ‘figure stuff out’ powers than me but less ‘blow stuff up’ powers.”

“Oh, okay. Well, anyway, we’ll need to follow up on this, can you tell me exactly which stores these were?”

I did.

“Great. So the cases are related, huh?”

“Looks that way. I’ll want to see what happened for myself, but maybe we can go talk to the guy first?”

“Sure, but he’s still pretty shook up.”

*I can take care of that, if it’s a problem.*

We went to go find Mr Lamay, who was sitting in a chair in his office, handcuffed to a radiator. Wheelus was poking around in his drawers.

“Don’t you need a warrant for that, or something?” I asked him.

“Any one of these could have been open when I entered the room.”

“Right,” I said sarcastically. “Mr Lamay?”

The man nodded.

“I’m Erica Chesterfield, I’ve been looking into cases similar to yours that have been happening over the past three weeks. Can I ask you a few questions?”

He nodded again.

“Wait a second,” said Wheelus, jerking his head to look at me. “What other cases?”

“All those missing people, the man in my office was on the list, you know. Nelson Baynard, he was number seven to be reported missing in the last three weeks. Along with Mary, Dominick, Daniel...”

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“How did you get that list of names?”

“Mind reading,” I answered honestly.

“Dieterich, if you gave her those names...”

He raised his hands defensively. “Honest, I in no way provided her with any names.”

“You better not have.”

“Who are you, exactly?” asked Mr Lamay, eyes darting between the two officers.

“I’m an independent consultant—”

“She’s a psychic detective,” interrupted Wheelus. “Still want to answer her questions?”

“At least she may believe me.”

“I’m the one you have to convince though.”

He looked back at me. “Ask your questions.”

“What exactly happened?”

“I do not know what began all this, my wife was in a different room. My son was with her. He suddenly yelled that she seemed to be having a fit of some kind, and I ran to see what was the matter. She seemed to be struggling against herself in some way, and was shouting about not wanting to go where this spirit that had possessed her wanted her to go.” Wheelus snorted. “Believe what you wish, but I am telling the truth. I ran to her, asking her what was wrong, what could I do to help? She threw me backwards as though I weighed nothing.”

“Yes, a convenient explanation for your bruises.”

He continued. “Then she made her way to the kitchen. By the time I had gotten up she had already stabbed herself and said something about this body now being useless. I ran to get the phone so I could call for help. When I returned to the room she was not moving, and was probably already dead at that time.”

“I am sorry for your loss. Please believe me when I say your wife probably did the best thing she could. She saved herself a lot of anguish at the hands of that demon that had possessed her.”

The man’s eyes got wide and he crossed himself. Wheelus went back to pawing through the man’s desk.

“Your son saw the whole thing?”

He nodded.

“I’ll want to talk to him as well.”

“I told him to go to his room until this whole thing is sorted out.”

“Yes, let’s go talk to the son again,” said Wheelus. “Don’t you go anywhere now.”

*Jerk.*

We headed up the stairs to the son's bedroom, and I introduced myself again. The son was probably about half my age, which put him around thirteen. He had a typical adolescent boy's room, with posters of anime girls on the walls.

"I'm Shannon," he said to me. "Have you arrested my father?" he asked Wheelus.

"Not yet, kid," he replied. "Tell the nice psychic what happened."

"You're really psychic? Cool!"

"Get on with it!"

"Okay. My mother and I were doing a raid in World of Warcraft 3, she was a paladin." His eyes teared up but he blinked them away. "Anyway, she took her glasses off so I looked over at her. Out of the corner of my eye, you know? Because the game takes over the whole display-"

"If I have to tell you again...."

"Okay, I'm just telling you what happened- and there was this... thing sinking into her. I couldn't make it out, it was like this creature had enveloped her, and she was trying to fight it off. It sank inside her, and she started going crazy."

"Crazy how?" I asked.

"Like her body wanted to move in two different directions at once. She yelled at me to run away, but I was frozen, I didn't know what was going on."

"Great job, kid," snarked Wheelus.

He threatened to tear up again, and I wondered if a little emotional influence was in order. *You've been playing fast and loose with your powers lately, why not back off a little?*

"What would you have done?" he spat. "Something heroic, no doubt."

"Just keep going," I said gently. "Ignore him. What happened next?"

"She started saying some weird stuff. I wish I could have recorded it, but the game was going, so... Something about having them locked in a basement. And they were going to kill themselves, and it would be soon. They were building the bombs in a house somewhere. Somewhere not far from here, I think she said it was-"

He didn't get to finish as a vaguely defined form stepped out of nowhere in front of him. He flinched back, and before I could do anything, the man shaped thing, which I could totally see through, enveloped Shannon.

"Get it off of me!" he cried, ineffectually batting at it. Wheelus jumped back with a curse, but Taylor looked over at me for direction.

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“He’s insubstantial, there’s nothing I can do about it!” I cried.

We all watched in horror as the shape sank into Shannon and disappeared. Shannon went still.

“What the heck was all that about?” asked Wheelus. “Some kind of joke, right? I’m not amused.”

“No reason you should be, pathetic human,” said Shannon, obviously now under the influence of the demon. His eyes darted to Taylor. “Ah, just the thing!”

With unnatural speed the boy surged forward and tackled Taylor around the middle, knocking him over. All the rooms in this house were enormous, so he didn’t have anything to stumble against, but instead went down to the floor, hard. Rather than going down with him, Shannon spun, Taylor’s gun in his hand and pointed at me.

“Told you I would kill you,” he said.

“Drop it!” shouted Wheelus, pointing his own gun at the youth.

Shannon just laughed, taking aim at me.

*Such a small gun couldn’t take me out, even if he gets me in the head,* I thought. I noticed he was aiming for the body anyway, and allowed him to shoot me. Two shots ripped through my chest, which hurt for all of a second, but then they closed up and I was fine.

*Thanks dad.*

I sank to my knees anyway.

Two more shots rang out, making Shannon jerk a little. The window off to the side shattered, as obviously the bullets had just bounced off. “Oh, you want some of this action?” he asked. He swung the gun around and fired three times at Wheelus’ leg, buckling it and making him go down.

My wounds were already healed, but I didn’t want the demon to know that. I fell forward onto my chest, hoping it would leave if it believed me dead.

“Should have just done that in first place,” said Shannon, tossing the gun back to Taylor. “Oh well, I warned her.”

I heard and felt his body fall next to mine, as well as officers pounding up the stairs towards us. I wanted to move, but the demon might still be around. Obviously it had been waiting in purgatory and watching us, to have timed that so perfectly. The question was, had it flown off to celebrate or was it sticking around to see what happened next? *I’ll have to wait a moment, but if I’m going to save that leg, every second might count.*

I wondered what the officers that stumbled into the room and started cursing thought about all this. Taylor was getting up, his gun was on the

floor next to two people that had been shot. *Obviously he wouldn't catch it, he wouldn't want to smear the kids' prints.* One of them, his partner, bleeding to death from the leg while the person that asked to see him specifically was presumably already dead, having been shot through the chest.

"What's going on!" someone demanded.

"He grabbed my gun and shot them!" said Taylor, now standing again.

"No!" protested Shannon, "I... I don't know what happened? Why are they shot? What's going on?"

*Keep it together kid.*

"You have the right to remain silent," one of the officers said, and I heard handcuffs being pulled out. "Don't just stand there, get those ambulance people up here!"

"Right," said another voice. He pounded down the stairs again.

"Erica?" Taylor leaned close to me, tentatively touching my shoulder. "Erica are you all right? Oh no, he shot her. All because I called her here. Oh no!" *Would my ex's reaction be that genuine?*

I figured I had better move if I didn't want Wheelus to die, and raised myself up.

"Jesus!" cried the other officer who was handcuffing Shannon. He jumped away from me. "I thought you were dead for sure, lady. Are you okay? You probably shouldn't be moving."

"I'm fine," I assured him. "Give me a few seconds and I'll see what I can do about Wheelus' leg."

"What?"

"Trust her," said Taylor.

I touched the leg, focusing on my skill of using more energy than a normal person could. It looked pretty bad, and I figured I would need all the help I could get if I was going to save it. I was no spirit energist, able to gather energy for a specific task, but anyone that learned even the fundamentals of manipulating their inner energies could briefly spend more than their skill might otherwise allow. I then threw that energy into my will and concentrated on healing his leg.

*Now, if I had been a little more practiced at this, I might have been able to heal all his damage instantly. Of course that would be really suspicious. At least this way he'll be up in a matter of days, rather than a month or more. I felt my power take hold, and his bleeding stopped. Good, that's all I can do. The rest is up to him, now.*

## NO ONE TO BLAME

The medical personal rushed in, shoving past me and getting him on a stretcher. One of them looked at me.

“Uh, did you get shot?”

“Does it look like I got shot?” I said, knowing full well that might not be the best answer. I was a little out of sorts, after all.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “There are two holes in your blouse and blood around the wound.”

“Oh that. Yeah, don’t worry about me. Take care of him.”

“Whatever you say. I’ll be back with the stretcher when you collapse.”

“Not going to happen!” I said cheerfully, as the two men hefted Wheelus between them and started down the stairs.

The other officer had finished cuffing Shannon, who was on his knees and looking shocked.

“I want that gun in an evidence bag,” said Taylor. “You do it, I don’t want any questions about what happened here.”

“What did happen here?” he asked.

“I’m still not sure. I’m going to have to watch the footage.”

“Am I in trouble? I’m just a kid. I didn’t shoot anyone, honest!”

“Quiet!” said the officer. He pulled a plastic bag out of a pocket and slipped the gun inside. He grabbed the bag and sealed it, looking over at Shannon as he straightened up.

“Did you get shot?”

For a second I thought he was asking me, but when I looked over, he was asking Shannon. Examining his shirt, he showed us two bullet holes, but no wounds on Shannon’s back. “So you got shot and somehow are fine,” he said questioningly. “The kid got shot and he’s also fine. How did Wheelus get so lucky?”

“Yeah,” I snapped. “The bullets should have seen who they were headed for and just stopped dead because they didn’t want to touch him.”

The guy gave me a dirty look, and hauled Shannon up to his feet. “I want all of you downstairs, now. I want some answers here.”

I shrugged, but stepped out of the room.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Taylor, totally not looking at my breasts as he focused on the bullet holes in my shirt.

“I heal fast, it’s something my father made for me. Maybe if you’re really good I’ll show you my tattoo sometime.”

“What does... never mind.” Suddenly his demeanor changed. “How am I going to explain this to the chief?”

20

**An hour later**

*"I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." --Isaac Newton*

Naturally the officers there wanted to take my statement about what happened. I offered them the video footage my glasses would have recorded so they could get another perspective on the situation. They said a verbal account would be sufficient.

*Great, now what do I tell them?* If I told them the truth, that a demon possessed Shannon and made him shoot Wheelus and myself, I would look like a madwoman. After all, I wasn't shot, was I? They already had an officer prying the bullets out of the wall behind where I was standing while another scoured the outside for the ones that went out the window.

On the other hand if I told them what had appeared to happen, the boy just going nuts and going for the gun, that would get Shannon in trouble. Plus his credibility as a witness would go away, and then his father would be jailed for murdering his mother. Even without succeeding in taking over Mrs Lamay, this demon had really done a number on this family.

In the end I told at least a partial version of the truth. I explained how the shadow like figure had come out of nowhere, attached itself to Shannon, and then how he started acting different. At that point they said maybe they would take a copy of my video footage, and would I like one of the emergency personal to look me over?

## NO ONE TO BLAME

I declined, telling them I was feeling just fine, thank you. They shrugged and told me where to send the video.

By this time, Wheelus had left in the ambulance and Taylor told me he needed to go back to the station to see what the chief wanted to do with him. I really wanted to see what Mrs Lamay had been shouting about but I figured I could always come back here later if I needed to. I agreed to come with him, and he was driven to the station by another officer.

*I guess to be specific, he was driven by the other officer's car to the station.* But I digress.

When I arrived he was already in the chief's office, so I waited outside to see what my next move would be. I didn't have long to wait, as Mr Lamay and his son were brought in and processed, then forced into separate cells in the station's holding area. Sitting there on the bench I had an idea.

"Shannon? You okay?" I asked through the bars of his cell.

"Yeah," he answered quietly. "Did I really shoot that guy? Or you?"

"It wasn't you. Your body did, yes, but a demon was in control of you at the time. While I was waiting I sent an email to a contact of mine that works for a group that handles this sort of thing. They'll look into it to make sure I'm telling the truth, and both you and your father will be set free."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because they'll want his to go away. I have footage of you being possessed. So does Taylor, and by extension the police now have it too. Those people I'm talking about will not want that footage out there. They will make it go away, and in exchange for you not speaking about what happened in your house, you'll be released. I've heard about similar situations all the time."

"Possession happens that often?"

"Not possession, per se, but anyone recording or seeing something they shouldn't have."

"Oh. What's..." he lowered his voice. "What's really out there?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, I can't tell you. Just know that many myths have basis in fact. If there's a supernatural creature you've read a story about, that story probably wasn't a fabrication, but a historical account of someone dealing with it. Many times the people in charge allow that sort of thing because the more stories are out there, the more gets lost in the noise. But the stories that survive are the true ones." I snapped my fingers. "You know, there are still webcomics made by students at—" I almost said Demongate

high. “-the school. Look for a story about the Children of Loki, and you’ll find a comic more factually accurate than you might think, just stumbling into it otherwise. One of the teachers at the school wrote it years ago, and it still floats around the web. They tried to take it down, but in the end decided it was just too fantastical to believe, just like most other webcomics.” I winked. “You know better, now.”

“Children of Loki. Got it. You say these people can just make the footage go away?”

“I’ve learned not to underestimate both their stubbornness for covering up the truth, and their resourcefulness in making that truth disappear.”

“Oh.”

“But that’s not why I came over here to talk to you. You were in the middle of a story, and I wanted to hear the end.”

“The end?”

“What was your mother saying? Where are the people that have been taken being held?”

“Oh, that! She said something about the lake. She said it weird though, like ‘I won’t go to Lake.’ She should have said ‘the lake’ right?”

I smiled, excited. “Unless she meant Lake Ave, or Lake Road, they’re both nearby.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. You think?”

“It’s worth a shot. Thank you. If this pans out, that one word is going to save a lot of lives. Then your mom’s death won’t have been in vain.”

“I hope you can stop this... whatever it is.”

“I’m going to do my best to try!”

A little while later Taylor dejectedly slunk out of the chief’s office. I got up and went over to him.

“Why the long face, said one horse to another.” I said to him.

“I’ve been suspended without pay for a week,” he replied with a grimace.

“What? That’s so unfair!”

“It really isn’t. He did get my gun away from me, and shot two... well, one and a half people with it, anyway.”

I looked down. *Oh yeah, I really need to change this shirt.* “So, what’s your next move?”

“Next move? Go home I guess. No badge, no gun, no car... for a week.”

“Or,” I said brightly, “You can come with me and experience the excitement of not having any of those things, but solving the case anyway!”

## NO ONE TO BLAME

“What are you talking about?”

“Lake road! That’s what Shannon was about to say to me before he got taken over. I think the people must be held there someplace!”

“Lake road? That stretches for miles you know?”

“Yeah, about thirty. I looked it up. Or it could be Lake Ave, Mrs Lamay just said she didn’t want to go to lake. That’s why we’ve got to hurry, there’s a lot of ground to cover!”

“I guess if you don’t mind me tagging along. I better go home and change though, impersonating an officer is a serious offense.”

“Then what about those... never mind. You need a ride?”

*I was going to say “strippers that dress as cops”, but their “costumes” probably have enough differences from regular police uniforms to be okay.*

On the way to Taylor’s house I saw a Goodwill shop, and told the car to pull in there.

“I’ll just be a second!” I said, hopping out the car.

“Want me to watch him?” whispered Pretzel.

“I trust him, but yeah, stay here. I’m just buying a new shirt.”

“Okay.”

I went inside and saw luck was with me. The Goodwill chain routinely hired those with “disabilities” like the blind, and as luck would have it, there was a man who was blind manning the counter.

Of course, technology had solved at least some of the issues with being blind, as the image recognition engine could identify whatever the person was looking at and announce it into a special chip implanted in the ear canal. That way they wouldn’t have to announce every five seconds they were blind, but rather just receive a soft visual notification that something was going on that needed their attention.

Still, human nature being what it was, those who were deaf or blind still found it difficult to hold advanced positions, and so places like this still existed. *Of course, magic, or even a creation made by a half senile alchemist could cure just about anything.*

My father often argued that by not allowing even these sort of cures into the world, the Foundation was condemning countless people to lives not as rich as they might have been otherwise. Disguising these cures as “breakthrough medical techniques” would certainly be enough to discourage the curious, how much did the average person understand about most medical procedures? Get specialists in on it, and soon it’s no more outlandish to cure blindness than it was to have cars that drove themselves.

But that was neither here nor there. I dashed inside and looked through the clothing section. Choosing a blouse in my size I went into the changing room and tried it in. It was a good fit, so I switched the tags from their blouse to mine, and went to pay.

The man there did an excellent job with only audio clues to go by, holding up the cash I gave him while the computer totaled it. He bagged my purchase and looked right at me to wish me a good afternoon.

As I bounced back to the car I was pretty pleased with myself for having pulled it off. It wasn't until I reached for the handle of my door that I stopped dead.

*Am I congratulating myself on pulling a fast one... on a blind man?*

I shook my head. I really was sinking into dangerous territory, wasn't I? First almost killing some guys, then frying someone's brain, then being happy about getting away with something that wasn't even a crime. *You just switched the tags, it wasn't creating cold fusion or anything. What is wrong with you?*

I shook myself and got back in the car, commanding it to drive on.

"Something wrong?" Taylor asked. "You look troubled, and I think your car is upset at being yelled at for no reason."

"I am," said the car. "I wasn't sure it showed, so thank you, for noticing."

Taylor looked up at the ceiling. "What the? I was just making a joke, but it actually picked up on that? Quite the AI you have in this car, Erica. I didn't think they could be that interactive. The one in my car is so stuffy."

"I think the person that had this car before me had a weird sense of humor," I explained. "It's a standard package, they wouldn't allow it on the road if it wasn't, but I think they upgraded the CPU and loaded some different personality files into it."

"We aren't taking over," insisted the car. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"As a condition of the sale he made me promise that, before I junked the car to send him the core files from the AI. He showed me were to plug in a USB drive to get them, and I took the deal. Something about how it evolved over time? It was technobabble to me, but we was sincere and I didn't feel any danger in what he had done."

"Huh. I like it."

"Oh stop, you're making me blush," said the car. "Answer the man's question, already!"

NO ONE TO BLAME

“What?”

“He asked you a question, didn’t he?”

“Oh, no, I’m fine. I was just congratulating myself for something stupid. I’m just a bad person, that’s all.”

“Really?” asked Taylor, unconvinced. “You’re running around the city, getting shot, risking possession or whatever, trying to save a bunch of people you don’t even know, and *you’re* the bad person?”

“It’s just, lately, I’ve done some things I regretted. I don’t want to say more.”

“Okay.”

He didn’t press the issue, and we pulled into his apartment complex.

Now in plain clothes, Taylor and I made our way to Lake Rd, which bordered Lake Ontario.

“Now what?” he asked, as we pulled off the road.

“Now, I’m going to check this area out, and see if I can’t spot some likely hiding places.”

“You are? What am I going to do?”

“Wait for me to get back.”

“Now just a second, I may not have my badge but you still shouldn’t go alone. What if you get possessed, or whatever?”

“You’re sweet, but I don’t think you exactly understand.”

“So explain it.”

“Can’t, sorry. What I can tell you is that I’m going to concentrating on that for a while, so if you talk to me, I won’t answer. Don’t think I’m ignoring you or anything, I’m just elsewhere. Mentally, I mean. Don’t move the car, either, or I’ll never find my way back.”

“If you say so!”

“And don’t try anything. I have a fierce, invisible guardian that will bite your fingers off if you do.”

Pretzel belted out a spooky laugh, spoiled only slightly by how high pitched it was because he was so tiny. *He tries his best though.*

“That was the car, right?” Taylor said, looking around. “You programmed it to do that.”

“Just keep telling yourself that.”

*Oh great, now I’m being melodramatic with the only person who somewhat believes I have powers. At least he didn’t brush me off, like some other person I could name.*

I leaned back in my seat and relaxed, willing my psychic form out of my body so I could zip up and down the road in a flash. At this point I just wanted to see if anything around here was out of place or strange. My next pass would be checking basements and such. I first went east, looking back and forth over the properties on both sides of the road. I could see why the demon had chosen this area, there were some nice houses here, overlooking the lake. Nothing really stood out though. I was also trying to keep my psychic senses open, which was a bit tricky at the moment. It was like rubbing my belly and patting my head, but doing it while riding a broomstick. I didn't feel anything particularly negative from any of the houses I past, something I was counting on feeling from a place with a bunch of prisoners.

I soon reached the end of Lake Rd, which terminated at Sodus Point, and zipped back to the intersection of Lake and Bay, where I had parked.

*That was the majority of the street, but I suppose there could be something this way, as well.* I then went west, crossing over a bridge that swiveled, so it could let boats through part of the year and cars through the other part. *I'll head to Lake Ave, I can get there by following this road and turning left.*

"This road" was Lake Shore Blvd, and I... *Wait a second.*

I turned around again and flew higher to get a better vantage point. Lake Road at this end was a narrow strip of land with a couple of houses, connecting Webster to Irodequoit. It was the houses that interested me, because they looked so run down. I had only briefly glanced at them, figuring a demon that was obsessed with wealthy people wouldn't be caught dead in a place like that. What I nearly missed was the cars.

Flying closer I took another look. They weren't "houses" so much as they were children's drawings of houses come to life. And then left to rot and fall down. They were complete rectangles, with pointy roofs, exactly like a kid would draw them.

*If they've been lived in since a hundred years ago, I'll... go without saying the word 'fish' for a week.*

What was odd about this particular one, however, wasn't the fact that had been allowed to get so run down in a prime waterfront area, but that half a dozen cars were parked around it. Nice cars, the kind of cars you didn't expect to see parked around a falling down kid's drawing. It wasn't worth me going inside with this form, I wouldn't be able to see anything more than my real body could. I would need to get inside and bring some light.

## NO ONE TO BLAME

I flashed back to my body and opened my eyes.

Taylor jumped.

“Did you miss me?” I said.

“That was vaguely creepy.”

“Sorry. Do you still have access to the police database?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Why?”

“I need to know what kind of cars were stolen when these people drove off. Or what cars they took, you know what I mean.”

“Sure. I can see about getting that information.”

He did some things in mid-air and nodded. “It’s letting me log in. Now, here’s the report on the missing people...”

He gave me a description of the vehicles, and I got excited.

“That’s them. Come on, it’s on this side of the bridge, we don’t have to go around.”

I started the motor and told the car to drive west of here, I would tell it when to stop.

“Wait a second,” protested Taylor. “We need to call for backup. We can’t just storm in there!”

“Sure we can. Anyway, remember, it’s a demon in control of these people. Your officers can’t deal with it. Quite honestly I’m not sure how I’m going to deal with it. Wait, yes I do!” I quickly composed a message to Devorah:

*Cornered demon, come quickly with holy chosen to Lake Road*

“I’ll set this to take a picture and send with a keyword. All we have to do is stall the thing until help arrives.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to get them here and all go in together?”

I shook my head. “It may not be there. I’m not going to get a bunch of people here if we bust into an empty house. I’ll be able to feel it if he’s in there.” *If he’s not suppressing his energy currently, anyway.*

“I guess you’re the expert at this sort of thing.”

I gave a weak laugh. “Well, it’s not something I do every day, but I have received a fair amount of training in combatting demons.”

“What do I do?”

“Oh, you? Uh, stay out of the way, I guess. Hold the light, maybe?”

“Yes, I’ll just be over here, all manly and providing illumination with my smile. Why did I even come here?”

*Because you think I’m cute and you want to ask me out?* “Oh, I think you know.” I grinned. “Now come on, we’re here.”

We parked in front of some sad looking docks that had some small boats tied to them and crept towards the house. There were two bizarre houses side by side, one that looked like it had been made with just boards of wood nailed up, the other... I wasn't even sure. Pieces of plywood maybe? Both were in very sad shape, and the mossy, dirty, missing pieces of the side house was our target.

"These are the cars that were reportedly taken. I don't believe this!" breathed Taylor.

"Up for a little breaking and entering?"

"I can't do that, I'm a police officer."

"Not until a week from now, you're not. Anyway, think how the chief will reward you when you bring in all the missing people."

"I'll be fired for sure," he muttered.

"Then you can come work for me," I said, slapping him in the shoulder. "Now come on."

"Are you sure? This place looks ready to collapse any second."

"Oh, don't be a baby. They've obviously been using it."

I added the picture to my message, so they would have a good shot of where to teleport to, and boldly walked up to what passed as a front door for the place. I figured I might have to punch it, covering a telekinetic strike of some kind, but the door was ajar, and I gave it a shove. It stiffly opened and we stepped inside.

**Moments later**

*“Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers.  
Pray for powers equal to your tasks.” --Phillips Brooks*

The inside was as filthy and bad smelling as the outside suggested, with only small shafts of light peaking in from where the walls were missing planks. The windows had, by the looks of things, long been boarded up, and if it wasn't obvious from the outside, the inside made it clear this place had been long abandoned.

Squirrel nests and the remains of nuts covered the floors, making it difficult to walk. Or at least it would have been, had a path to a door in the floor not been cleared as it had.

Was this it? Was I finally going to confront this demon that had been plaguing me. And in its own lair, no less? Somehow, I didn't think so, the house felt empty. We headed to the door down into the basement and I lifted it up. Looking down I could see it was pretty crude, hardly more than a hole in the ground, but there had been some activity here. Shining the light down I saw the remains of a workbench, some tools, and not much else.

“We're too late,” I said. “No one's here.”

“You think they all left without their cars?”

“They could still be here, just... it's tough to explain. Come on.” *How do I tell him they could be in purgatory at this very moment?*

We dropped into the hole, and I saw the rotting wooden ladder that would allow us to get out. It had fallen down, so I picked it up and set it in place again, then looked around. I felt Pretzel leave my shoulder, and figured he was going to look around too. Not much was left down here, but a bunch of poles had been attached to the ceiling above. Taylor wiggled one.

“You suppose these things hold the house up?”

“If so, you better not jostle them. But no, I think that's where they were chained to.”

“Who could do something like this?”

“Something that isn't human. Come on, look around for anything that might give a clue where they went.”

“Okay.”

For my part I opened myself up to the past, feeling my way back in time at this very spot. What I saw wasn't pretty. Recently, like within the past hour, the demon had obviously rushed here and started making everyone hustle to leave. One by one he had them put on the jackets and attach themselves to another person, then as one they went up the stairs.

The people themselves were all filthy, and looked exhausted. Any that protested being shoved into the vest full of explosives were taken over and forced to do what the demon wanted. I couldn't imagine why they all needed to be wired to each other, but then it hit me- it was probably some form of insurance. They couldn't be separated without some kind of circuit being broken, which would probably set off all the vests simultaneously.

Cruel, and somewhat ingenious. This demon could only be inside one person at a time, so he made sure that everyone went together if someone tried to run. A very severe form of insurance.

"I found something," said the quiet voice of Pretzel, settling on my shoulder again. "Smells like blood. I'll direct you."

It wasn't like there were a lot of places to check, but he led me over to the workbench and had me crawl underneath it. Looking up I could see some letters, and Taylor got down beside me.

"What do you think that says?" I asked, pointing to the letters.

"Now how in the world did you know that was there? Wait, don't tell me. Looks like EVM written in blood."

"Yeah, thought so."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Not yet." I poked it with a finger, opening myself up to the psychic impression left by the person writing it.

"What are you-"

"Shhh."

It seemed absurd to believe that a non-psychic could leave a psychic message in a few letters written in blood, but in truth, most writings carried with them an impression. It didn't matter if it was a stone tablet ten thousand years old or a modern play in a language spoken all over the Earth I just didn't happen to know. I could touch the writing and gain insight as to the meaning behind the words. How this happened, how this information was "stored" so to speak, Foundation researchers still didn't understand. It didn't matter, the ability worked, and I used it now to figure out what the person was thinking as they desperately scrawled this message with their own blood.

NO ONE TO BLAME

“Eastview Mall,” I said. “That’s what this means!”

“You don’t think...”

“Yes, I do. Come on, we’ve got to get over there!”

We rushed back outside, and I hastily told the car to take us to Eastview. It hesitated, probably looking that address up, but then pulled out of the parking area and started east down Lake Rd again.

“It’ll take us fifteen minutes to get there,” I despaired, the map overlay being shown on my glasses.

“You could drive it yourself,” said Taylor.

“What? An officer of the law advising me to speed?”

“Not an officer until next week, remember?”

“Good point, but ultimately useless. This car will drive itself faster than I would on the expressway, and that’s what’s mostly between us and the mall.”

“Oh, true.”

We pulled into the mall, where it looked like we might be too late. Police cars were already mobbing the place, and people had obviously been escorted out, because they were all milling around and talking excitedly.

*Yes, anything to give you a bit of a story to tell, right?*

We parked where we could and made our way on foot.

“Shouldn’t you get that backup here?” asked Taylor.

“I sent the message as we pulled in,” I explained. “It’ll take a few minutes though. I have no idea how many holy people the place has on call. They may need to track one down.”

“Great.”

We tried to barge inside, but an officer stopped us.

“Taylor?” he said, surprised. “What are you doing here dressed like that?”

“I’m not... I’ve been... just let us through!”

“Sorry, no can do,” he said. “Orders not to let anyone else in.”

“You *will* allow us in and escort us to where the crisis is taking place,” I commanded him.

“Right away,” he said, holding the door open for us. Taylor stared at me.

“It’s a gift,” I told him simply.

“Remind me never to deny you anything,” he said, allowing me to go first through the door.

“Oh, I don’t use it on friends, only in situations like this.”

“I should hope so.”

The officer took us to the center of the mall, where the scene was playing out. There was a man with a megaphone, trying to get the two... police officers... to stand down?

*What in the world?*

It didn’t escape my notice that Wheelus wasn’t here. My dream had shown him, I recalled, but now he was in the hospital. Just goes to show that trying to see the future in your dreams was a tricky proposition. I supposed if the situation at the Lamay residence had played out differently, he wouldn’t have been shot, and would be here now. Funny how that worked.

Looking around I saw several people bleeding on the floor, obviously shot. The people that had abducted themselves were in a circle, looking obviously scared out of their minds. One officer had joined them, getting a vest from somewhere, while another held two guns and was calling for news agencies to get here.

“Who are these people?” said someone who was clearly in charge, coming over to us.

“I brought them here,” said my most recent “acquisition”. “She told to me, so I did, because she said so.”

“I didn’t ask you!”

“Please, sir, let her help,” said Taylor. “She’s been sort of specially trained for this sort of thing.”

“Yeah, well so have I. You want to get blown up? You have any idea how much explosives those guys are carrying? Get out of here!”

*Oh well, in for a penny and all that.*

“I’m in charge here now,” I told the man, once again implanting the command into his head with my power.

“All right, this woman is in charge now!” he shouted. “What do you need to know?”

“What happened? How did this situation start?”

“Okay, some time ago these people entered the mall and the little kid announced they were all wired to blow. Naturally, everyone was a bit freaked out, some people thought it was a joke and such. She threw something at that poor bastard there,” he indicated what looked like what was left of a body some distance away, “And they didn’t think it was a hoax anymore. We got called, and we’ve been trying to negotiate ever since.

## NO ONE TO BLAME

Thing is, one of my officers suddenly went nuts, and just walked over there, putting on a spare one of those vests you see them wearing. He was freaking out, and the girl told him to be quiet and threatened to blow them all up right then and there. Then another officer went over there, grabbed his gun and his own, and started shooing people. Honestly I don't know what's going on. My negotiator keeps having to deal with different people. Sometimes they're demanding stuff, sometimes they just stand there looking terrified. Maybe they're getting orders from somewhere? But we're jamming all transmissions into this place, so I can't see how."

*He's jumping from body to body? I suppose at this point they can't really resist.*

"But we can't just grab them, see how they're all wired together? I think it's true what they keep saying, cutting any one off and they all go up. I have no idea what to do. Thank goodness you showed up. In fact, you better get to work defusing this situation."

He grabbed me and dragged me off toward the guy with the megaphone, yanking it away from him.

"Hey! What's... Sir?"

"She's in charge now!"

"Uh, okay?"

He thrust the megaphone at me. "Go to it."

"Gladly."

But I didn't need it, as the officer holding the guns came towards me.

"Didn't I kill you just recently?" he asked.

"Not so much, no. What are you doing with these people, anyway?"

He ignored my question. "Some kind of regeneration?"

"Maybe. What are you doing?" I repeated.

"Wait, he was there too. Get over here, big guy!" he called over to Taylor.

"Leave him out of this!" I demanded.

"No, I don't think so. Come on, I don't have all day!"

Taylor cautiously approached. "Can't you just do what you did to them?" he asked.

I shook my head. "He'd shrug it off, I'm not actually that great at it."

"If you say so."

"Trust me, a demon like this will be much stronger willed than just a normal human."

"Don't you ignore me!" shouted the officer, pointing both guns at us. "Though I do thank you for the complement. Wait, no." He shifted both

guns to Taylor. "I think shooting him will be more satisfying. It seems you'll just bounce back from it, that's no fun."

*Have to bring him back to me.* "Look, what do you want?"

"Want? I want these people dead! I want their families torn apart and left for broke. I want them to suffer!"

"Why?"

The question seemed to puzzle him. "Why not?"

"Wait, that's your reasoning? You did all this because 'why not?'"

He looked indignant. "I don't have to explain myself to you!"

"No, I suppose not. Look, you want to blow these people up, right? You want their families to suffer. What's the point? They're nobodies, no one will even care after a week or two."

"I guess. So what do you suggest?"

"Maybe we can work out a deal. Maybe I can get you something you want more than this."

"I want this pretty bad."

"Enough to blow everything, right now? Don't forget, you're attached to that man's soul right now. He goes, there's a chance you go with him. To Heaven. Are you sure you want that?"

"Oh, you're right. I totally forgot that might happen! Yes, that's a problem, isn't it? Getting them to blow themselves up while I'm not inside one of them. I should have worked out how to make a remote detonator, but that seemed like a lot of work. Hey, I bet you could command them to do it."

"I could, but I want to negotiate with you face to face."

"Ha! That's my biggest advantage here. Unless..."

"Yes?"

He reversed one of his guns. "Take this and shoot your boyfriend."

"I haven't spoken to- oh, you mean this guy! He's not- If I do that, you'll come out and we can talk face to face?"

"He has to be dead after you shoot him. No just hitting him in the hand or something dumb like that. Shoot him dead!"

"What if I shot this guy instead?" I pointed to the officer I first commanded to bring me in here.

"What?" said Taylor.

"I would be honored to die for the cause," said the officer.

"No, he doesn't mean anything to you. That's the whole point!"

"You can't just shoot someone here!" protested Taylor.

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“I can if I want!” I shot back.

He looked shocked, but the demon looked pleased. “That’s the spirit! Shoot him dead as a gesture of good faith, and we’ll talk.”

“You promise?”

“You have my word.”

“Okay, hand it over.” I took the gun from the demon and pointed it at Taylor.

“Wait, can we talk about this?” pleaded Taylor, his hands up.

*Just stay quiet, I pushed into his brain. I’m going to try something, and I’m really bad at it but right now it’s my only option.*

His eyes got wide, but he didn’t give away that I had done anything.

*Please, All-Father, let this work!*

I used my meager skill at illusion to deceive the demon into believing I pulled the trigger and shot Taylor dead.

From Taylor’s perspective I did nothing but stand there. Illusions were basically false sensory information passed from my brain into someone else’s, in this case the demon. For a wonder, it seemed to work, as the demon danced from one foot to the other as I made the illusionary Taylor fly backwards off his feet and collapse as the imaginary bullet hit him. I concentrated on keeping the illusion up and acting sad, like I had just shot someone I cared about.

“I didn’t think you would actually do it,” said the demon, leaning over to look at the floor. Taylor leaned away from him but said nothing.

“If it’ll save these other people, I’m sure he would have gladly died.”

“Uh, what’s-” the person who used to be in charge started to say. I stomped in his foot.

“What did you do that for?” asked the demon suspiciously.

“Just for good measure. Are you going to keep your promise or not?”

“I guess I have to,” he said. “Hey host, don’t do anything stupid. I can get back in again if I have to.”

“He can, believe it,” I agreed. “Everyone step back.”

We all took a step back, leaving the demon room to appear. A black form started seeping out of the man, and I readied myself.

*When he comes out fully, he’ll be vulnerable. It’ll take him a second to become intangible, so I have to strike as hard as I can at the instant he’s all the way out.*

I activated my ability of getting better at something by intuitively reading the future, then held onto that as I focused on energy expenditure. I

wanted to hit this thing as hard and as I accurately could, with the only thing that could conceivably hurt him. Cohesion. I never considered myself a combatant, and I hadn't known the cohesion skill long, given what it took to master. I didn't think I would miss, but at the same time, if I didn't take this thing down in one shot, I might not get another.

The demon solidified. The light around us turned red, and I could have sworn the blood in the fountain turned into blood, but that could have been a trick of the light.

I had barely enough time to register a mostly humanoid form, ugly and misshapen. I didn't stop to admire any other changes to the environment thanks to his manifestation power. *Though that does answer the question of that being suppressed inside a host.* The demon stood about human height too, so I released my attack, making his blood splash into the air and burn away.

"Liar!" it shouted, clearly seeing Taylor again. In all of that I forgot to maintain the illusion, and the dybbuk, or progenitor spirit, was seeing him again. "I'll tear your head off, recover from that!"

He jumped at me and we both rolled to the ground. The creature was immensely strong, but I didn't really have to worry too much. As long as he didn't gouge my eyes out, I would be fine. I mean I would be fine regardless, but I had to see in order to attack him again.

Rather than try and physically do this him I just slammed him with cohesion again. After all, he was right on top of me so I could hardly miss. He screamed as more blood burned up in the air.

He rolled off of me, clutching his chest.

"I'll be back to kill you, count on it," he said, and vanished.

*I'm going to have to ask my father for some wards, or that thing could kill me in my sleep.*

"Are you okay?" asked Taylor, extending a hand and helping me up. "What was that thing, anyway?"

"It was a demon, of sorts, and he got away. So no, I'm not really that okay," I answered. "But it'll take him a while to heal, and physically I'm fine, so for the moment at least, we're in the clear."

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“So what do we do about them?”

We all looked over at the terrified people, still believing at any moment they could be blown up.

“Now that is an excellent question.”

**The morning of the next day**

*”Trying to suppress or eradicate symptoms on the physical level can be extremely important, but there's more to healing than that; dealing with psychological, emotional and spiritual issues involved in treating sickness is equally important.” --Marianne Williamson*

“What did you call it?” asked Wheelus, lying in his hospital bed. Taylor and I were visiting him, to tell him that everything had worked out. I argued against even making the attempt, but Taylor said the man was his partner, so I reluctantly agreed to tag along.

“A dybbuk. He’s the soul of one of the original people the All-Father made. They got destroyed in the flood, and neither Heaven nor Hell wanted them, so they just kind of float around Purgatory.”

“And this one thing caused all this trouble?”

“I admit, usually they aren’t this lucid. But they have been known to do similar things, that is, cause trouble for people. They hate us because they were supposed to be perfect, but yet we took their place. And we are far from perfect.”

*That point has been made clear to me, at least lately.*

“And after you beat it, what happened then?”

“Without the dybbuk ordering them around, the bomb squad managed to get those jackets off everyone very carefully. They then pulled the detonators out of each stick of C4 that was in the pockets and dismantled the whole thing.”

“Well, I’m sorry I wasn’t there to see it.”

“You wouldn’t have believed your eyes,” said Taylor with a laugh. “I’m still not sure I do!”

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“Good, keep on disbelieving. It makes my job easier,” I remarked.

“But how did you get him out of that guy? Offering to shoot me? Where did that come from?”

“His being a dybbuk made all the difference. Those guys are pretty insane, and so I knew what level to engage him on. If it had been a Devil I might have offered gold or my soul to get him out. When a dybbuk comes here it wants something, and this one wanted to see people die and leave others behind that would mourn them. I played up on that. I suspected it might be one of them, given the erratic nature of what he was doing.”

“But what about the money?” asked Wheelus. “Where did that all go?”

“We aren’t sure,” answered Taylor. “The explosives guys said even at black market prices, way more was stolen than needed to be.”

“Think he just dumped it someplace? I mean you say he was crazy.”

“Maybe. I’ll ask some of my colleges to look into it.”

“Hey, what gives,” asked Taylor. “You sound like you believe all this stuff!”

Wheelus shook his head. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. I got shot in the leg three times, which I can tell you from others that’s happened to, they’re laid up for a month or more. The doctors here tell me they’ll be surprised if I even have a scar by the end of the week! They’ve never seen anything like it!”

I tried not to look too smug.

“Erica did say she was going to do something, so I guess it worked.”

“Plus, she did find those people for us, so all the families are reunited.”

“True,” said Taylor. “As no one person was really to blame for the whole situation, no one is being charged with terrorism. They’re all being treated as hostages. I mean you only had to look at them to see that, they were messed up. Especially that little girl, they’ll need some serious concealing.”

“I can imagine, being forced to live for weeks, chained in that underground area. Seriously though, how are we going to close this case? It’s all well and good to lay here and think Erica’s story kind of fits all the facts. I don’t want to be given a mental evaluation by the department! Which is the least of what would happen, if I tried to close the case with that story!”

“I don’t know. I suppose if Erica is willing to let Nelson’s death go at suicide...”

I glared at him.

“Right, I thought not.”

“His family might get his life insurance money if you determine it’s suicide. I bet there’s laws against us knowing for sure, to make sure this exact thing doesn’t happen. We feel bad for the family and just say he was murdered, and leave the case unsolved forever.”

“Right, right. I know. I guess it just goes in the files as unsolved anyway though.”

“Sorry.”

“I suppose it’s not your fault,” Wheelus grudgingly admitted. “Oh, and you can stop in some time and pick up your check. I looked online for your rates.”

“What?”

“I put in a request to get you hired, somewhat retroactively, I admit. I had you listed as a possible, because I knew Taylor would probably whine about it, so I just changed it to definite. No big deal, it’s not my money.”

“That’s what you were doing? I did wonder.” He had been typing away at his virtual keyboard for several minutes, but it was bad manners to ask someone what they were doing.

“Who are you, and what have you done with my parter?” asked Taylor.

“Look, I saw that kid change, and there was something that came out of nowhere just before that. There’s no way a thirteen year old knocked you around that like, plus stealing your gun? Then what you’ve been telling me about how she went right to the house and found the clue that led you to the mall? If she hadn’t been with you the whole time, I would have arrested her for being the mastermind behind all this!”

“I believe you, given you tried to arrest me when this all began.”

“And then he changed his mind. Odd, the suddenness of that reversal, isn’t it?”

My cheeks colored a little.

“I’m not saying that I believe everything,” Wheelus went on, “But I’ll admit I may not know it all. And if more weird things like that are going to happen, I’d rather have her on my good side than not.”

“Thanks, Wheelus. I really didn’t expect that.”

“Powers not working again?”

“I have to ask a question to get an answer.”

Taylor looked thoughtful. “Well, you should get your rest,” he said. “I’ll see you in a week when we’re both back on duty.”

“What do you mean, I’m milking this injury for all it’s worth! If you really did heal me you weren’t doing me any favors! Have you seen the nurses here? I was injured in the line of duty, you know.” He winked.

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“There’s the Wheelus I know,” I said with a laugh. “See you later, and thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah, get out of here.”

We both went to the elevator and Taylor pressed the down button.

We waited in silence a moment, and finally he seemed to decide something.

“You said you have to ask a question to get an answer.”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“What if you asked if maybe having dinner with me some time would be a good idea?”

I smiled. “What if I said I might say yes even without asking something like that?”

“So are you accepting?”

“I don’t know, are you actually asking?”

“I’m asking.”

“Well, when I demonstrated my power for my old boyfriend I never heard from him again. You’ve seen what I can do, so I guess that’s one hurtle down.”

“What’s the second?”

“Convincing my invisible guardian demon you’re worthy of dating me.”

He started to grin and laugh, but then he saw I was serious. “You’re serious?”

“He may be small, but he is fierce.”

“What’s his name?”

“Pretzel,” I replied, stepping into the elevator.

“Well, nice to meet you, Pretzel,” he said, stepping in after me.

“We’ll see,” he replied.

“Okay, I saw your lips move, you’ll have to do better than that.”

I just shook my head and laughed.

So life wasn’t great, but at least I got paid for my first several jobs. Even if they had all been rolled into one big job. I had done some good, and some bad. I knew what I needed to practice, too. Illusion and cohesion. Plus a bit more of ordering people around, that had also come in handy. The problem with using my powers on a regular basis was that they became a crutch. I had an angry dybbuk out there now, who was nursing his wounds

and probably deciding how best to kill me. I needed to stay sharp-sharp-sharp and stay on my toes to beat him when he came for revenge.

And I was sure he would.

I hadn't officially told my boyfriend we were over, and I hadn't heard from him since the dinner. It might be best to at least call him and tell him I was seeing someone else now.

My phone still wasn't ringing, so apart from any work Taylor and Wheelus came up with for me, money would still be tight. One job does not a career make. I wondered if maybe I should run two ads, one that played up the psychic angle and one that didn't. A case was a case, and if someone thought they were coming to see a regular detective, that was fine with me. I could even change up the office a little, for meeting with different clients. Or just take off everything but my name on the door.

And speaking of money we needed to track down where all the wealth went that the dybbuk had stolen. He wouldn't have just burned it, right? If he still had that resource he would be more dangerous, he knew where to get explosives from, after all.

I had looked up why my attack was so ineffective against the dybbuk. With the amount of energy I had put into it, he should have been torn in half. Turned out they had sort of a partial immunity to any sort of supernatural attack that wasn't a weapon of some kind. A spirit energist hitting them with a sword they conjured would cut them up, but hitting them with a blast of energy would largely be ignored. It was a good thing I hadn't realized that before, I might not have tried attacking it at all. Then where would I be right now? Dead, maybe, or at least a lot of people would have been blown up.

Who was really to blame for all this? The All-Father, for causing dybbuk to be created in the first place? Humanity in general, for being so weak willed as to easily fall under a demon's sway? Perhaps we are all to blame, that we haven't moved past our baser natures, negating the need for a Demon World once and for all. Was it the people who sold the demon the explosives? The man who sold him the wires? Could I blame the dybbuk himself, insane and angry as he was? He couldn't help the way he was any more than I could. Was I a big enough person to offer forgiveness and understanding to a creature like that?

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*Probably not, I thought, because the next time he shows up, I'll be ready.*

I took Taylor's hand and we stepped out the elevator, walking to the exit of the hospital.

"Hey," shouted Pretzel, "No touching!"

## Glossery

Artificer- A person that creates objects of power, such as wards and talismans. Wards act as batteries for supernatural power, and can be used once, then burn away. talismans are permanent and can be made into a variety of shapes, including tattoos on someone's body.

Akaname - a demon that likes to eat dirt, can keep things clean and heal sickness by licking things.

Aura - an energy field that surrounds people, mirroring their emotional state and growing brighter or darker as good or evil acts are committed.

Compulsion - An ESPer skill to force a person to believe or take some action you suggest.

Dreamer - Extinct power, at one time could draw upon a fraction of the All-Father's power, while sleeping, and change reality to an extent. Dean cut this power off, see Book 2.

Illusion - An ESPer technique to implant false images, sounds or physical sensations into another person's brain.

Invulnerable - The name we give to beings and things unable to be harmed by normal means.

Kami - A spirit that resides inside an object, connecting it to others of its kind.

Psychopomp - The being tasked with collecting humans souls and bringing them for judgement

Seeing - An ESPer technique to obtain vision of distant places

Spirit Energy - What allows people to put effort into doing something, such as lifting something heavy or running long distances. Most supernatural powers also consume at least some energy.

Spirit Manipulation - The ability to use more energy than your normal

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physical body allows. Using this skill is automatic for the most part, but by concentrating, an even greater amount can be expended for a brief instant.

Talisman - More durable than a ward but taking much longer to create, a talisman shows no outward sign of being supernatural. Like a ward, can be activated and used by anyone, and they can in theory create almost any effect. Most inherited items are talismans created long ago in history and passed down in a family. As with wards, almost any effect can be placed into a talisman upon creation.

Telekinesis - ESPer ability to move objects with only the power of the mind

Ward: By drawing symbols with ink on a surface and charging it with spirit energy, an artificer can create one time use objects with certain effects, such as paralyzing or healing someone the ward is attached to. Other types of wards such as origami folding or wood burning are also known. Can be activated by anyone but an artificer can spend more energy to increase the effect upon activation.