



ABSURDIST

#1 OF 7

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SPEED OF STRIFE

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PROLOGUE: YOU'RE IN A CULT AND YOU CAN'T CALL YOUR DAD

I can remember very little, luckily. It comes back in little bits of bad dreams and the occasional flashback. I know we were well off, and then we weren't. I know dad was frustrated and mom was scared. Not outwardly, the kind of scared you see mothers do when they want you to believe everything's fine, and then they freak out when there's no milk in the fridge or a glass is too close to the edge of a table. I remember crying and reassuring, and neither ever helped the other. I remember acting like I didn't know what was going on, so my parents didn't have to deal with my worry too.

And then it stopped. The crying stopped and smiles came, but not the kind of smiles that were commonplace. They were the smiles of someone who was posing for the 87th picture at a family reunion. They were uneasy, but whatever happened put money in the bank and seemed harmless. Only it wasn't.

I remember men that came and went, and my parents coming and going with them. And I remember the day they showed up for the last time. They wanted all of us over for something, and my parents smiled like they just got asked to be in their 88th picture. I don't remember the car ride, or walk to their barn or a church, or what they used to get us to enter. I only remember blood. I should remember screaming, but all I could think of

was blood. I remember the last time I saw my parents' faces. I remember the lifeless pale masks that they became after their life left them. I remember my brain convincing me that the before and after were somehow two different people. I remember a knife, a cut, a fall, the liquid I was dunked in, and then snaps.

Outside the barn

In the woods

Along the highway

In the police station

In the car to show them the barn

A courtroom

A foster home

The details of those didn't really matter, but out of all of the lost bits of info, I remember one. 226 miles: that was the distance between the barn and the police station. I ran at sunset. I made it there before the moon fully rose.



CHAPTER ONE:

my therapist was right about you.

I think speed is overrated. We all want to travel fast, a mile a minute, and chase the speed of light. Everything expensive and flashy has to go fast. You know what else is expensive and flashy? The scars from where they picked all of the bone chips out of your leg, because you crashed your Lamborghini into a barrier late at night. 130 mph doesn't mean shit if it kills you to get there.

It's a lot like the foster system. I was taken in by a woman named Jane, and her husband, Ben, pretty quickly after I was put in the foster system. They said it was 'to have me in a stable environment, so I could recuperate quicker'. In reality, I wonder if it wasn't just cause I was a cute white girl who was acting "so strong and being so brave". Not to say that I don't like them; these two have been nothing but good to me, albeit a little hands off. They seemed to get the "quick" cases often. I saw a lot of them leave before their beds were worn in. Most had issues with schooling, others with parental authority, and a handful with me. I still remember the one kid that came in when I was 13: Leroy. He was a quick case after being found malnourished and scared in his apartment bathroom. His parents didn't seem to want him I guess, which would be enough to scare any kid really. The thing about Leroy was that he never really stopped being afraid. We had lunch together, sharing macaroni out of a large bowl. I went for some extra before he did and he went in for my hand with his fork. Got me pretty good and I remember running halfway down the block to hide in the park. Jane found me, very confused as to how I got there exactly. I told her. She never really asked about it again.

Over the years, we started getting fewer quick cases. So I kinda became an only child, and eventually they adopted me. We stopped getting kids about 3 years ago, and I asked Jane why. She said, "We weren't doing these kids any good, just being a place for them to stay quickly while they set up another place to stay briefly."

Yes, speed is efficient. Speed is a skill. It can even be life saving, but you can't just bring speed to the table. You gotta bring something that you can do well with that speed. I can run at speeds around 60 mph, so I learned to use that speed to be an effective knife fighter.

In retrospect, that sounds like less of a skill, and more of a habit that gets you arrested, but I don't do it to kill people. I only do it to disarm and disable people from attacking, so they stop doing whatever they are about to be arrested for.

"Riot, I think we have to do this now." Orphan was the only one here with me on this mission, which was less than ideal.

I was one of three: Riot, Orphan, and Paradox: a brooding group of young heroes who weren't terrible at actually helping people. See, Paradox's Father was a pretty well known hero that goes by King Cat, and despite being a "beacon of light for our city", barely casts a ray into his own sons life.

Paradox, in an attempt to get his old man's attention, formed our little team to take care of the crime his father was too good for. This would be fantastic, if he was reliable in any way. See, being a vigilante was only one of his many unhealthy coping mechanisms. I can't remember the last time I saw him when he wasn't on some sort of upper or downer. I

guess it was a downer day, which was why on the day of this very important mission, he was impossible to get a hold of.

I remember my first meeting with Paradox. I was about 15, with a sprained wrist from a biking accident (turns out if you can run 60 miles per hour, you can peddle even faster, and stray bumps on the path are even harder to see). He was the same age, both with a lot of childhood hang ups. For everything I solved with avoidance, he solved with hatred. When he first saw my wrapped arm, I think he got excited because he thought I had been in a fight. When it turned out I hadn't gotten into a fight, thought he was weird and told him to buzz off, he got angry. That led to him trying to sprain my other wrist, which made me smack him off with scared force. I ended up breaking his elbow. We were dragged into the principal's office, and after some weird forced apologies, we actually ended up joking about it and becoming friends. I guess I stopped telling him to leave me alone at some point, and we told each other about what we could do. Eventually, I met Orphan, his brother, and we decided to do something with our powers. Paradox was still angry, but I thought it might help him fight better.

I probably put up with more than I should have because I didn't have many friends. I kept to myself mostly, it's just my nature. I get most of my non superhero interaction from internet forums and my tortoise named Wally. I think I talked to both about the same amount. I've met a few friends, even a few people I would call more than friends, but it's easy to lose touch when you don't see people face to face. So in reality, I have two friends.

"We can't wait like two more minutes?" I ask, in no hurry to end up blindsided in the middle of a rescue. Orphan didn't answer. Instead I got the reply in the form of a victim screeching. We were here to stop a kidnapping turned into possible human

trafficking bust, but I guess the victims wanted to take things into their own hands.

One girl was screaming and kicking as she was being moved from one vehicle to another, like about 3 girls before her. With a bite to one of the men restraining her and a lot of leg flailing, she has instigated every man in the parking lot to silence her.

"I'll get the perimeter. You secure the girl."

"Go."

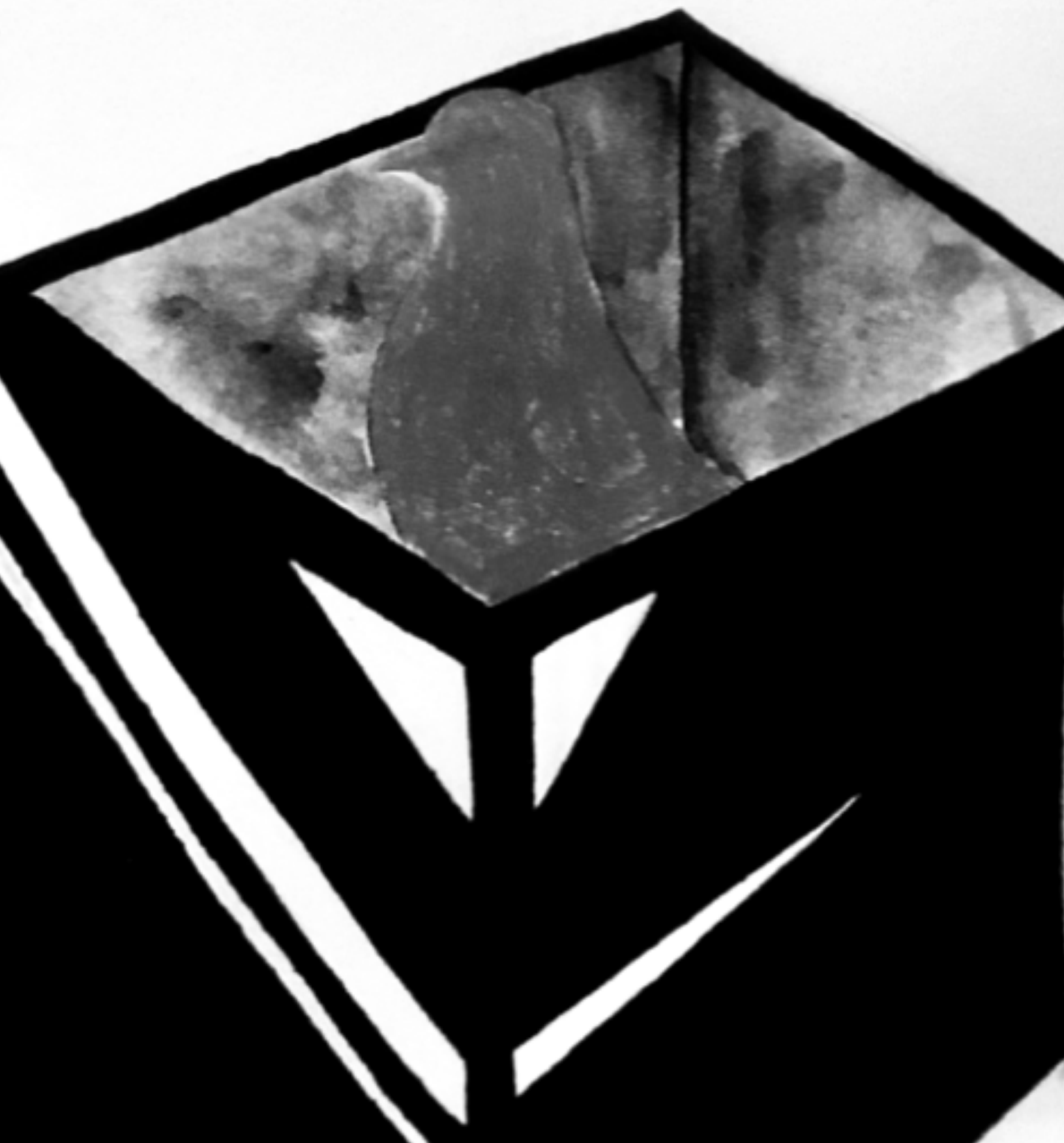
With that, Orphan jumped forward and I slid down the nearest fire escape ladder fast as I could go. I slashed at the legs and shoulders of each human trafficker with my trench knives and speed. I knocked them to the ground, but with non lethal blows; they didn't all stay down. The first couple of guys went down and stayed down due to the unexpected shock, but the guys that saw me before they got hit were harder to keep down. By about halfway through, they know what's coming. They will always try and trip me or clothesline me. I can usually get around these moves deftly, but then, smack. A pipe hit me in the back of the knees and I fell forward, ripping my knees open. The same guy smacked me in the back of the head with the pipe. It hurt like hell, and made me regret not wearing a helmet, but I still turned quickly, cut the guy's thigh open, and kicked him over.

Just when I thought I was making headway against this gang, two more fuckers would come at me from seemingly nowhere. In pain, and overwhelmed, I just kept fighting. In a blur of what felt like fifty men, I finally got enough guys to run or stay on the ground so I could focus on the girls we were trying to save. I looked towards the van and Orphan. Orphan was trying to keep one girl from going into complete shock. I move to look in the back of the van, and see why. The van, that we were both too busy to watch, was covered from floor to ceiling in the blood of those poor girls, so close to being rescued. One thug who had taken them out, and then

slit his own throat to keep quiet. Some of those girls had been reported missing only days ago, some weeks ago, and some didn't have enough people that cared about them to report them gone. All 10 were under 19, with the youngest only being 12. It was the second time I had seen those pale frozen faces and it was the second time I couldn't do anything to help.

We call the police, they take the men into custody, some needing to be taken away in ambulances. Pictures were snapped and lines were tapped. Families had to be called. The one girl left got taken to a hospital near her home. I could barely pay attention to the police questions. I had to leave. I needed to find Paradox, because he needed to tell me why he wasn't here today.

Every car was in his driveway. His curtains were drawn . I climbed in his window and pushed all his noisy bead curtains aside. His eyes glazed and he was covered in a thin layer of sweat, there were needles and papers and pills on every surface. It's impossible to say what he was even high on at this point. He had the news on in the background of his high. His head rolled to look at me. With a distant glance he said the words. "I'm glad you got one. Getting none would have made a real shit show." His head rolled back. I left.



CHAPTER TWO: here's the thing. f* ck everyone.

I didn't want to be a part of this anymore. It's not that I was mad, or depressed, I just couldn't be a part of Paradox's issues. His issues had to be his. I couldn't make up for the parts of him that were missing, it wasn't even about anger, or punishment, or retribution. I couldn't be mad at him for a terrible upbringing and a disease, no matter how much I wanted to be.

I just don't have it in me to be angry; no matter how hard it is to watch someone throw away something that you could never get back, getting mad won't make them see your side. I can't waste any more time trying so hard to understand him.

I just want to get out of the way of other people's mistakes and make some of my own. I want a chance to screw things up for myself, and not be at the blunt end of someone else's failure. So I'm headed to the only place I know where literally no one else is going to bother with what I'm doing: Arkansas.

It was the summer before my senior year. I had free reign to drop out if I wanted, and, if I didn't, grades during senior year wouldn't really matter to any college I might go to anyway. So, whatever. It's not like schooling is the top priority to someone who specializes in running real fast and being able to spot the 8 steps to cult indoctrination through a concrete wall. And this small town seemed like it was gunning for it. I was about 15 minutes out of Strong township; a lovely little city boasting 528 occupants. I wanted to monitor, but I also wanted distance because this town was about as pretty as a postcard in a dumpster fire. Historic

"preservation" had left most of the town in disrepair and the only well built apartments were just over county lines. I got myself in a place with two roommates: one who seems pretty sulky, and the other, who seems entirely too perky. I haven't been around long enough to figure out the specifics but I don't really want to be around enough to have too. This was a little too 90's family television for my liking.

Strong was the mission, if you can call it that. I decided to set up camp after a small stint with a blogger on some creepy story forum. The "relationship" wasn't much (they were way too into astrology for my liking) but the stories were. Everyday, there were new stories of people going missing at night. Lots of young women, but definitely not exclusively. They could be gone from anywhere between two days to two weeks, and were discovered in various sorts of shape. Some were perfectly fine, acting like nothing had ever happened; some were slightly more dazed and confused, with lack of memory and a few change in their appearance; and still some were far worse, acting like they couldn't talk and could only smile, with appearances so altered they looked like an antique porcelain doll made to commemorate a person who passed away. Along with the return came black marks on their bodies. They seemed to be permanent tattoos, but their designs seemed archaic and unplanned. At first, this seemed to me like the ramblings of an aspiring (and failing) Stephen King copy, but the more we talked the more they swore it was all true. They even went as far as to send me police records of some

disappearances, as well as a few of the outliers that were considered unrelated cases and seemed much more violent.

It was a little too ritualistic for my taste, and being in the right age range for the suspected kidnapper made me prime for the picking. Plus, seeing as all the girls came home safe and no one in the town really cared if their daughters got more quiet, no one was going to follow behind to stop me. It was time to get caught in my own carefully selected mess.

Or, at least whatever mess I was allowed into. I guess that's the thing about fighting people, you kinda have to want to hurt each other. Otherwise, it's just assault and that's never good for either party. And beyond that, crime wasn't really done in plain sight, so what you could find without also doing something illegal put a great limit on what you could actually stop as well.

Granted, vigilante justice isn't really legal either, but I'm going to tell myself that that was besides the point.

I let out the first audible noise for the last 75 miles of scarcely touched back roads connecting my big city and this tiny spec of a town. I think the silence was too much for me; I usually try to stay away from thinking this deeply about what I've gotten myself into. It's at this point I let out the second audible noise of the car ride, which was my stomach rumbling like it just folded in on itself. The last thing I need is to be sad and have low blood sugar, so I make up my mind to eat at the next place I see. I wish I had not made that decision. The sign was all kinds of purple and gold with cartoon lettering that read "MR. MYSTICAL CHAZ'S FAMILY PIZZA". It was accompanied by all sorts of quips like "playplace open all day and night!" and "get dinner and a show for just one ticket in". It was in two miles and the only thing I could probably hope to see for the next 40.

The building was just as gaudy as the sign. I check my blood sugar levels just to see

if I had any hopes of getting out of this. 70 mg/dL. Welp, guess I get to see a magic show. After securing my insulin and making sure my little shelled best friend's heat lamp had enough battery power to last all while I would be gone, I head inside. After a turnstile and a hand stamp, I make my way to a table with some over the counter green pepper pizza and a diet soda they didn't even have a lid for. I also got some bread-colored rocks with parmesan cheese, and a pre-wrapped cookie that claimed to be fresh. At least I could have it in the car if I was desperate for a sugar boost. Children run by screaming, and the parents look just as confused as to why their kids are here past 10 o'clock at night as I am. I thought I saw something about a special night owls deal by the door and I guess everyone could stand to save a buck or two. I also see an overly dressed man I think is a magician on stage. He's either that, or a very gay version of an Elvis impersonator. I guess he's the Mystical Chaz. He was admittedly way younger and in much better shape than what I was expecting from someone who spends as much time around pizza as he must. Under the mask and top hat, he might even be considered sort of handsome.

What he was doing was definitely not handsome. He was doing the average magician tricks with scarves and shit, but was just entirely too into it. He was more into it than the kids. Perhaps he can feel the lull in the audience, because he starts calling to people to get up on stage with him. He's not asking for volunteers, he is telling them to get on stage. I started paying slightly more attention.

"Thank you to these lovely assistants of mine. You are going to help me pull off my next big trick." He explained this with entirely too many hand gestures. He then proceeded to run to the backstage area and come back with a small box with holes in it. Oh good, birds are fun. Maybe this will end up being fun. He brings a small dove out of

the box and hands it to the youngest child and instructs him to pet him and then pass him up to the oldest child. They all seem pretty happy with the feathery fluff ball so I go back to eating, which is interrupted by the sound of a snap. I didn't look up. The children screaming and the silent parents told me enough of what had happened. The lights flipped off. There was a whooshing sound. That was not the magician. That was me getting to the car in .5 seconds and getting my suit and trench knives. While I was out there I could hear the screaming build, but by the time I got back inside, it was silence. The building was empty of people, as well as chairs, tables, balloons, and most of the pizza scraps strewn around the place. I guess magician wasn't just a made up title, or at least illusionist. It was eerily silent by comparison to its previous state. I stood still, waiting for a sign. It was only when my ears readjusted that I noticed the faint echo of the crowd's chatter. At first, I thought it was my ears filling in the sound, but after a few seconds it became obvious I couldn't make it go away.

I crept forward, slightly afraid of what might be ahead. Maybe it's ghosts and everyone has already died. As I crept back into the food area the floor gave more under my feet and I could hear the sound building from beneath me. I look towards the center of the room, where a Thanksgiving-style dining table had previously been covering a large seam in the floor. I fly over and look down. The gap wasn't lit, but there was a sliver of light from the above room. I could see a movement, colors of clothing, and what sounded like a quiet panic. I was about to call out when, with the sound of a bullet train and loud, increasingly distant screaming, all signs of life were gone. There wasn't time to process. I bolted in the direction the screaming fled. I jumped, slid, and burst through any obstacle made by the restaurant or woods surrounding. I ran. I ran not knowing what I was going to need to stop for.

I just hope there will be something above ground where they stopped. Or at least more vague noises of panic. I got a little more than I hoped for when my foot caught on a small opening in the ground, causing my to tumble forward about 4 feet. I thought it was a rabbit hole, but when I saw there were about twenty in this one circle, I figured I must have reached the right place. These little holes appeared to be a sort of release vent. Every few seconds, one would open with a burst of either steam or smoke and a low, grumbling roar. It seemed like a very bad cover, but I suppose I can't expect too much from the magic Chaz. I scoured for a hole big enough to fit through. The biggest one was about two and a half feet wide, which was not easy, but it was doable, and people needed help more than I needed comfort.

A quick squeeze and flip, and I was in a room so oppressively hot you'd have thought it was Satan's armpit. There was no one where I stood, but that didn't mean I couldn't feel the sweat that had evaporated into the air. It was somehow quieter down here than it was on the surface. Soundproofing I guess? What surrounded me was essentially an old mine with what looked like bank vaults dug into the walls. I head down the dirt hall to the closest door. The lock is something like a child's slide to see the picture puzzle. I'm not very good at these, but I try my best to figure out what the picture is even supposed to be. No luck. It's either a demonic clown or a goldfish, and that's about as far as I got. I go by the dull mine lighting to the next door. Something similar, but you had to clear a path to move a little lever. I have about as much luck with these types of puzzles as I did the last. I count five doors, all with equally complex locks. I couldn't make out any reasoning for each one or what might be inside. I start to walk past the doors to find something to help, someone I can help.

I heard a quick crash behind me. I whip around. I see a vase has shattered on the

floor. I step closer. I hear another crash. It was a lot closer. It was another vase, against my head. I black out.

I wake up with an intense view of the floor. I'm reclined to the point of being upside down. My head feels like it's dangling from my body by a string. My limbs aren't moveable, from ties or maybe my own grogginess, and all that's in my view is the reddish dirt of the mine floor.

"Well, not an escape artist are we?" a voice coos from out of view. "I suppose that's my job, not yours". An entirely too cartoonish cackle echoes through the room. As my head comes more into place, I can hear a few small, childlike whimpers. I still can't see anything but dirt. To my right: dirt, to my left: dirt. I try to look up at my body but I can only barely see that I'm restrained. When I let my head relax again, I see a pair of purple oxfords in front of me attached to black trousers. "I thought I was missing one from the crowd tonight, but it doesn't look like I need to help you very much." I listen, frustrated but hoping he'll monologue till I find a way out. "Oh aren't you going to ask me what I mean? Or are you just gonna hope I keep talking so you can struggle your way out?" Oh god dammit, when did villains start learning from their own mistakes? He walks again out of my sight and the whimpering intensifies.

I choke out, "What are you doing?" with blood rushing to my damaged head.

"Well, a lot of us don't have the blessing you do", he cooed. "Some of us need to be given power against our will. I remember when I became powerful. I was around 13 when I learned that I had some special abilities". A child cried out in the background. "Unpresented ability to solve puzzles, invisibility, transmogrification of objects, I could be almost god-like if I wanted to be." The sound of metal sliding against metal could be heard. "If it weren't for the man who gave me my powers. I'm sure the

villain with daddy issues is a played out trope so I'll save you the sob story, but I will say that the one day I couldn't stand being hit anymore was the day no one ever saw my father again, and a new tree suddenly grew behind our house." A shoosh and another cry. I begin to try and twist my arms. The restraints were tight, but they felt like rope, I had a chance. "You see, it's the point where a human can take no more that they become something more. And that's all I want to give people, something more." A duller thud echoed with the sound of something hitting the ground. I could hear several cries as I found I could dig a fingernail on each hand into the rope and speedily start pulling it into pieces. Within seconds, I have shredded through the rope and I'm able to reach my feet. I bend my body, keeping it as flat as possible to not catch his sight. In a glance, as I reach up I see him and children and red. I shred quicker, freeing my feet and causing me to slide off of the slanted metal table. It was enough to catch his attention from the children, thank god.

I couldn't look at them. I didn't want to know what he was doing to them, not now. I wasn't armed, so I had no idea how I was going to subdue this guy, let alone defend myself. I got to my feet, seeing his purple sparkly ass turn away from me as I did.

"Oh well aren't we clever?" his voice dripped with an almost lust for killing. Fists up, I try to make a plan.

No, I can't take the time to think of a plan, he's too powerful. I rush around the table at him and punch. I swing at nothing. He's gone.

I glance around in a panic as the kids scatter backwards into a cage for safety. Suddenly the table is gone. No wait, it's not gone. It's a war hammer now. Why is it a war hammer now? Dear God, it's huge. "Well, I wish I could say I could do anything with anything, but I can only make objects into others of like material. Living cells stay

living, metal stays metal, etc.” He talked from the air. “And you can always shave a little material off, but then you can’t get it back. It’s a lot like people, once something’s gone it’s gone for good.”

I focus on the now floating hammer, and start to try and figure out how I can make him whittle it down cartoon style. I look around, and behind him is a sword I assume he was using on the children. I dash low to the ground to avoid the swinging and grab it. I hold it to block my face and stare at the massive hammer. “Oooo a little fencing, I wouldn’t have taken you for an aristocrat.” I think I could strangle him and feel nothing at this point, but my plan works as the hammer thins out into a huge long sword. It lifts over what was most likely his head, and I take advantage to dash past and cut him on the low thigh. I hear a wince as blood appears in the air. So the invisibility is like a paint, or a surface layer. I can work with this in a dirt filled cave.

I run around the floating open wound scraping the floor with the sword and creating enough of an air current to make it airborne. I seemed to make progress until I felt something latch onto my back and pull me to the ground. My back arches as I feel my suit getting wet around the pain. I jump off to see what appeared to be an extra long, extra barbed flail wielded by a pair of dirt covered legs. Hopefully that’s a little more metal gone. “I can play dirty too, doll”.

“Please stop being this way” I dash backwards.

“Oh, don’t leave now”, he coos more angrily, “I still haven’t shown you what true power can be”. He growls and swings backwards with the flail. I run back, bouncing off the cave wall as the flail comes toward me. I fly by it, and scrape my blade against the chain. It makes a noticeable notch, but nothing drastic. I can make this work. He turns and whips again, but as he does, what was once a chain turns into a flurry of

throwing knives. I dart. Only one manages to gash my arm. It’s nothing compared to the open wound on my back. I look back at him and there’s nothing but a hilt in his hand now, but I figure he’s aiming to fix that. I do the only thing I can think of, which is to run haywire around the room and pick up as many of the knives as I can before he does.

I’m now armed and overpowering. He laughs.

“Aren’t you so clever, taking my weapon away piece by piece until I have nothing? But I don’t think it’s the size of the weapon that matters.” The hilt turns into a gun and aims at my face. I flinch and somehow a throwing knife ends up in his shoulder. He’s bleeding. He collapses and drops the gun, in too much pain to focus. I grab what rope is left on the ground from my bounds and restrain the now-visible magician.

“It’s over now. And I doubt those puzzle doors will withstand police lock cutters.” I pull him up. The children gasp. I remember that they’re there for the first time in a millennium.

“What do you know about people?” Chaz screams.

“What?”

“You’re here to help these people aren’t you? But what do you know about suffering, about pain, about what people truly need to be helped? I want to open their worlds. You think it’s really better that they stay in their powerless box? You think that’s their choice?!” he barks, dirty and bloody.

I look down at my arm, and the scar that left me outside my own ‘box’ as he would say. “I could guarantee it”.

I ended up putting him in the cage in the back of the room where he was keeping the kids he mangled. And I would prefer to leave the description at ‘mangled’. I managed to get a hold of the police. After what felt like a year, and yet before we even knew it, 50 people were being carted out of the tunnels. All were scared, burned, stitched up and

pulled apart. Every age was accounted for. I don't know how many of them developed powers, if any. I never wanted to find out. I ran back to my car and changed so I could get medical treatment with the rest of the group, but by the time I arrived at my car my wounds had almost completely sealed over. I have never healed that fast before, but I'd rather be out of here as quickly as possible so I won't question it now. I hit 60 mph in a 30 leaving that building. It was the last place I wanted to be. Thank god I ended up there. Three hours later and local radio is buzzing about the "Magic Mangler". I hate the chosen name, but I wanted to hear the after effects of the case:

"52 victims were pulled from the mines today, all injured and in need of medical care. A reported 28 were children. Also found were around 80 bodies decomposing. It is speculated that the suspect, Chaz Barnes, was working in tandem with a group of followers, who may or may not have believed in his ideals, or have been given powers by him. None of those possible members have been identified currently, but it is believed that they live in nearby towns and may have been able to cover up the disappearances of families in the surrounding area. The main suspect is now in police custody and is receiving medical treatment for a major head wound that has put him in critical condition. We will keep you updated on information as it becomes available".

I didn't hit him in the head, but bless the person that did. They had more balls than I did.

NEXT ISSUE:
CHAPTERS THREE & FOUR



MORE FROM THE ANNALS OF THE ABSURDIST UNIVERSE:

NOBODY KNOWS HOW OLD HE IS.

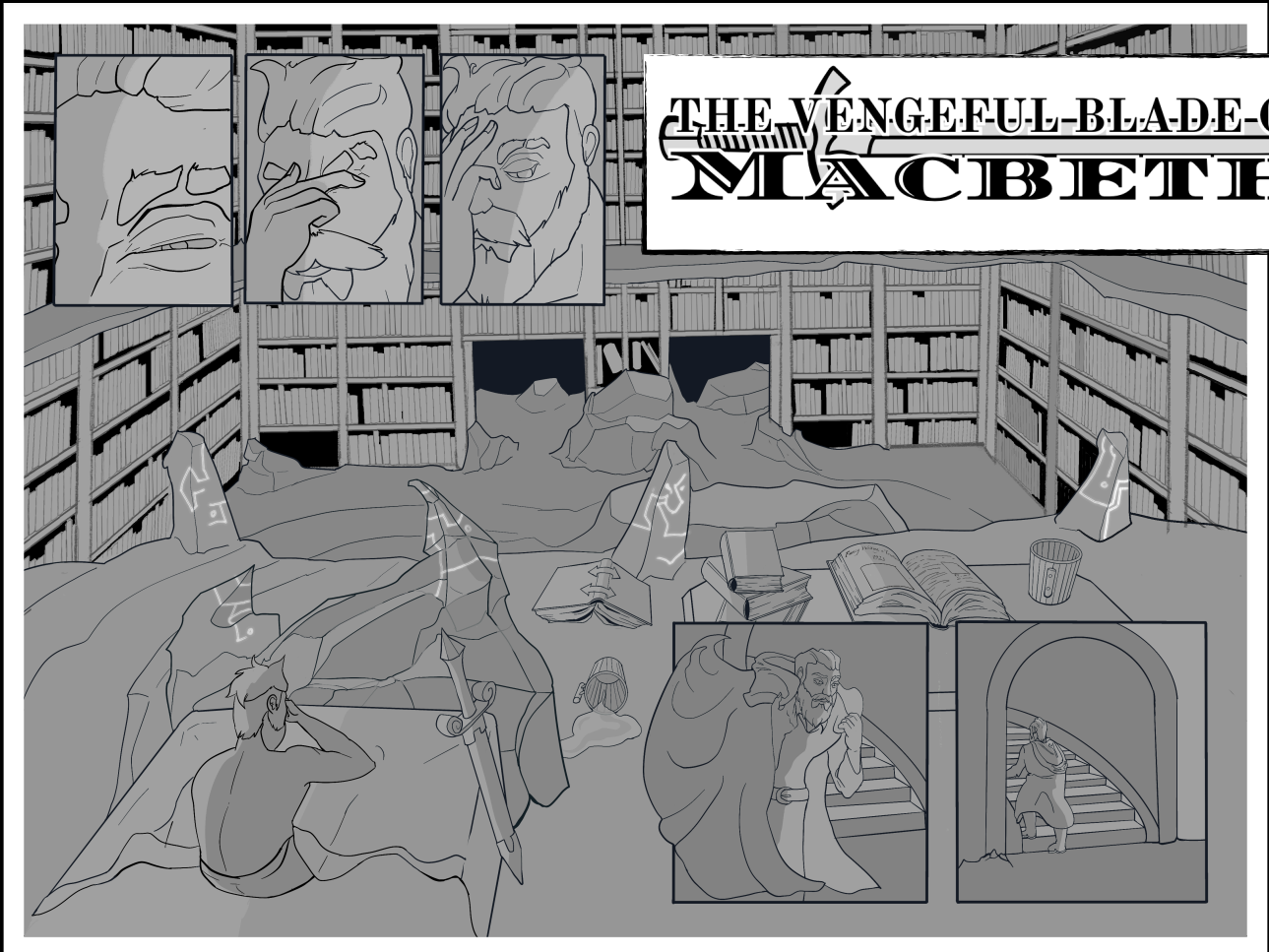
NOBODY KNOWS THE DEPTHS OF HIS KNOWLEDGE.

NOBODY EVEN KNOWS HIS TRUE NAME.

BUT, THE WICKEDEST SOULS IN THE COSMOS, THE DEMONS AND
GHOULS THAT CORRUPT THE SOULS OF DECENT MEN, THE
LORDS OF CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION THAT HIDE IN UNSEEN
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THEY ALL FEAR THE MOST POWERFUL WIZARD IN THE
UNIVERSE.

THEY ALL FEAR...



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