



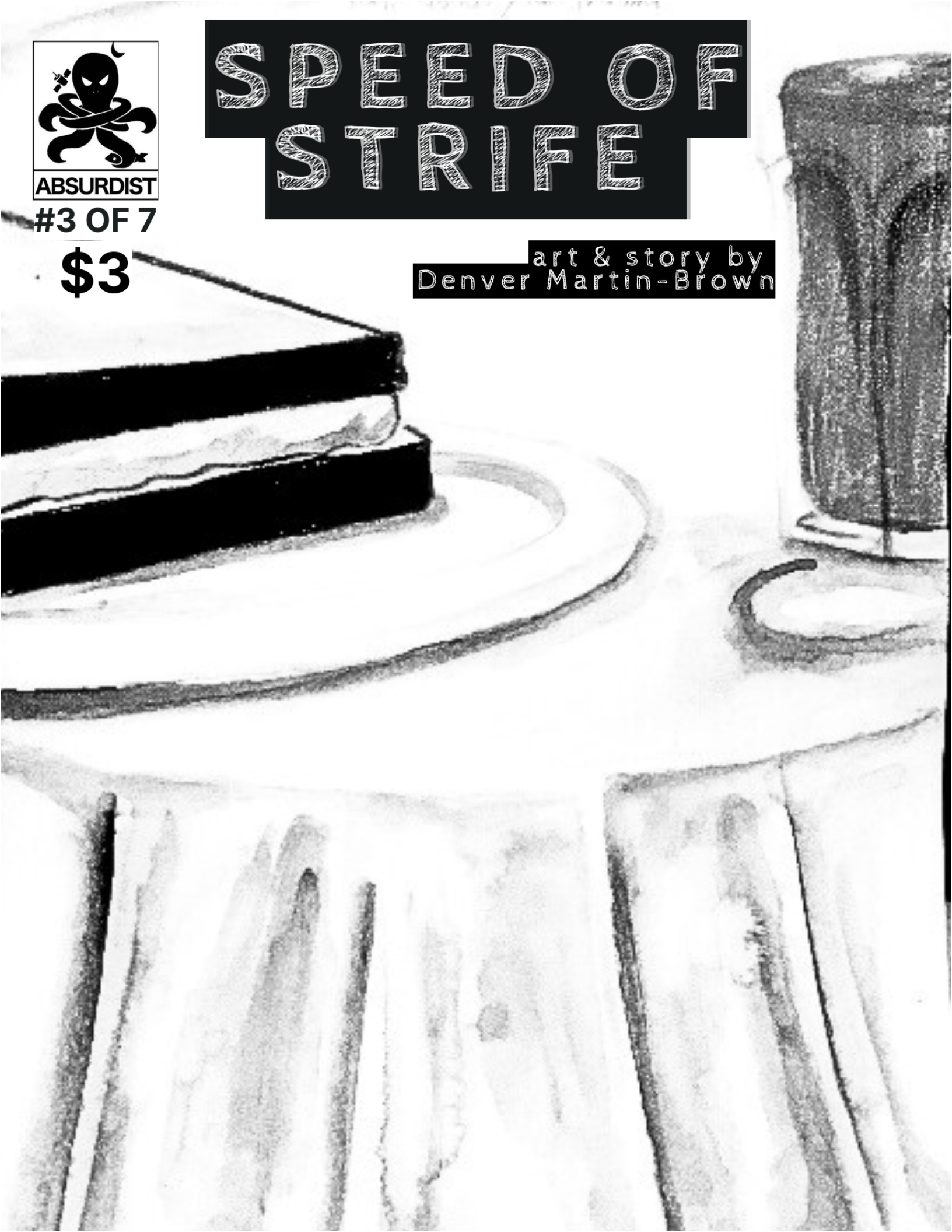
ABSURDIST

#3 OF 7

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SPEED OF STRIFE

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CHAPTER FIVE: talk about your trauma

Katrina became much easier to find after that. She ended up popping in on my lunch break at the cafe. "So, how exactly can I help you with whatever you are trying to accomplish?" she asked, sitting across from me and casually crossing her legs.

"I thought you wanted me to stop trying to investigate things?" I asked with a mouth full of grilled cheese.

"Well, I do, but you seem like the kind of person who will only try harder when someone tells you to stop."

"So, is this reverse psychology, or are you trying to make my investigation go fast?" I asked, wiping my mouth.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure yet. I'll play it by ear."

"Fair enough. Also, hello, didn't expect to see you."

She chuckled and looked away. "Hello. Sorry, I guess I was coming at things a little too hot. I'll try to be more conversational." She held out her hand.

"My name is Katrina, but seeing as you live here, you probably already know that, just like you knew where I lived. So, the real question is what made you come here to poke around?"

"I'm Athena. I wanted to know what makes a whole town ok with kidnappings and supernatural activities."

"Nice name. And that's a fair reason, but I think it's the wrong one."

"Well, what would be the right reason then?"

"The unfortunate fact of the situation is not that the town is ok with it. These small town girls who might party, or drink, or rebel against their christian parents, have become completely docile. In fact they are almost doll-like and the parents and teachers love it. It's not about the town being ok with it, it's about them loving it."

"I didn't know we had reached the level of praise."

"Wait 'til you're here for a Sunday. I'm sure you've seen the Church in this town by now. Step inside: you'll see exactly what I am talking about." She played with a crumpled up straw wrapper in her left hand and the waitress came to take her order.

As I watched her fiddle, I noticed something. Her hand was covered in the black filigree-like marks that look like they snaked up her arms.

"Nice tattoos," I said.

She turned, mildly shocked, "Uh thanks, most people around here don't like them." The way she said it, it sounded like she didn't like them either.

"Will you be in the church?" I asked.

"No. Me and the church don't exactly agree with each other," She laughed.

"I mean, I can't say churches really agree with me either. Or religion in general."

"I would call my aversion to holy ground a little more than a disagreement. It's more of a fist fight in front of a supermarket at 3 am."

"I have very little idea what you mean by that."

“It’s kind of like, I never asked for it. I did not seek it out, but it is in my life and it is actively making it a shit show.”

I almost choked on my food as she said it. “That’s a good one, I like that.”

“I’m glad you like my humor, not many people do.”

“I don’t really get the bias against you so far. You seem pretty cool.”

“Well, I guess it’s easy to blame the person who wasn’t born in this culture. A lot of the opinions around here are ‘different is bad’.”

“Well mine aren’t,” I replied. “And, believe it or not, I want to help you. I will go to church on Sunday; maybe I can find out something that might help,” I said, while the waitress brought the checks.

“If there is something that actually can help, I am more than willing to listen.”

“You see, and here I was thinking you knew everything already.”

“You know, sometimes I think I do, but then something comes around to punch that idea right out of me.” She left cash for both meals on the table and headed down the street. So much for being more conversational. I didn’t even get a goodbye.

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The church had cars parked all the way down the street on Sunday. They even pulled into the grass around the church and blocked driveways, but I guess no one needed to get out of their driveway if they could just walk to church. Everyone dressed like it was the national golf championship, or a charity luncheon, or a tea garden themed baby shower. The only things showing on the women were necks and knees and the men were completely buttoned up and buckled.

I remember church back home, anyone would pop in, in any outfit. It was less about appearance and more about just wanting to give people something to participate in. There was a collection by the door. I put in a dollar the few times I went. The sermons were almost personal, as the few people who came in typically had specific issues. I think our pastor ended up being more of a therapist by the end of it, in his small stone building where everything was either hardwood or a candle. I don’t believe this priest would be like that. He might pretend to be, but he would never stick around long enough to have it be meaningful. When people entered and were seated he sent a collection basket around to each individual, as he adjusted his robes and ran his hands through weirdly slicked back hair.

I was never told what denomination this church was. I knew the one back home was Lutheran by the sign, but I saw no sign here and the pastor didn’t talk in any way to let me know that the church belonged to any other denomination besides his own.

His first words to his audience are, “How is everyone this fine morning?” There was a combined response of happy clapping and words like ‘great’. “I am happy to hear that all you good people are doing well. Things have been peaceful in this small town of ours, and as wonderful as it is, it has created some worry. You see, some people see this time of peace as a possible calm before a storm, the sort of silence before a bomb explodes. To these people I say this: ‘And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose’. This is Romans 8:28. I like to remind people of this passage in times of worry, for it is stated here in these pages that we need not worry about a storm, for as long as we follow the word of

the Lord we will always be sheltered. God will not turn on his followers, though we may have hard times, he will only send us these trials to build us as people, and not to forsake us. We are people of the Lord and therefore we need not fear his wrath, and his love will protect us from the wrath of any other worldly force that threatens us. Now many may ask about other worldly forces. What do we do when the hands of Satan come down upon us and bring us to our knees? To these people, I say to do like Jesus and turn the other cheek, for to turn to violence is to act like the devil himself. We will not form mobs or armies, we will simply continue our lives, keeping the temptations of the devil out of our minds and away from our activities. We will pray in times of adversity, for we must always be the bigger person by asking advice from the biggest person we know.” He ended his statement with excitement while the congregation chanted amen. Girls all around me nod in agreement. I am a little perplexed, because even though he wasn’t wrong, he didn’t really say much.

As people line up for some sort of communion, which I think would make this Catholic, all I can feel is a strange sense of unease. The communion that they were standing for wasn’t those little wafers, it was cookies. It was just actual, whole, chocolate chip cookies. I am not an expert on the religious significance of certain foods, but I don’t think Jesus had those.

I didn’t get up and take one, because it would be weird to take something from this group that I’m pretty much researching like David Attenborough in a remote rainforest. I watched the girls the most closely and noticed something interesting. They all were following commands from their parents. They were small things like “Stand here,” or “Take one,” or “Smile and say thank you,” but they

would immediately perform the task like a dog. They seemed somewhat self aware, and could talk, but would still snap to obedience when given commands. What was even weirder is that all the girls looked alike, despite the variety of their parents' appearances: they all had blond hair or highlighted blonde hair. It went about two inches past their collar bone and it was all parted to the right, so the majority of their hair fell over their left eye. Their tattoos were not seemingly randomly placed, some on collar bones, some on necks, and some on arms. They were all on a similar scale, about 5 inches and pitch black.

The symbol was almost rune- like, it was similar to the infinity symbol filled in with two lines through the widest parts of either side. The left side had a longer line than the right. Not out of the ordinary for young women, but people this conservative didn’t seem like they liked making eye contact with them. Meanwhile, the girls displayed them almost pridefully. The second their hair covered the tattoo, or fabric laid over it, they moved it out of the way. It was like it needed to breathe.

I tried to leave at this point. I had seen all I needed too and I didn’t particularly like being exposed to it. Making my way to the door, I was blocked by yet another overbearing personality. He was about 6 feet tall, and definitely overweight. He had a mop of brown hair and an awkward, kind of high pitched voice as he stepped in front of the doorway.

“Hey, you’re the new girl in town right?” he said a little too loud.

“Supposedly,” I responded, trying to get around him.

“Supposedly? That seems like something you should know, honestly. I mean, do you expect us to get a lot of new

people in this town?" It was hard to tell if he was joking or mad.

"I mean, I just got here so I don't really know that, but yeah, I guess I am the new girl." He was almost impossible to dodge around to get out.

"Well, it's cool to see you here then. I'm William, the pastor's my dad and we like new faces. So, what was your church like back where you live?"

"It wasn't really anything like this. It was more about organizing community activities and stuff. Anyway, I have to go. I have someone waiting for me to feed them."

"What could be more important than the teachings of god?"

"His name is Wally. I have to go now."

"Is he like your boyfriend?"

"No, he is more of a roommate. Bye now."

"Wait, give me your number so you'll know someone."

"I already know people."

"Well then you'll know one more." He shoved his phone at me. I wanted to leave and fighting seemed pointless. I gave him Paradox's number and dodged around him as he looked it over.

Outside the church, just beyond the cul de sac, was a familiar crop of red hair accompanied by Jess. This should be a fun dynamic to see. I walked up and Katrina gave me a two finger salute as Jess ran up and hugged me.

"It's nice to see you too," I responded.

"I haven't heard from you in a while, you never called me," Jess said, overly excited. Katrina looked at us, holding back a chuckle while watching me be awkward.

"Um, Athy?" Jess jumped me out of what I realized was starring over her head at Katrina.

"Um, yeah sorry, it's just been a lot with getting the job and getting all my stuff in and everything- what did you call me?"

"Athy, like short for Athena."

"You don't need to shorten it. I'd actually prefer you didn't," I said, coldly. She got a look of confusion. I really did want her to be at least six inches from my face when talking. Katrina stood more straight, her face became a little more serious.

Katrina chimed in, "So what did you think of the sermon?"

"Just weird. It wasn't all bad, but it didn't seem right."

"Yeah, that tracks. They were expecting you today then."

"One person certainly was."

"Yeah, I figured he would be," she smirked.

I chuckle, glad to hear that this doesn't just happen to me.

"Anyway, do you want to get lunch with us? I'm sure you could use some more expressive company," Jess interjected while taking my hands..

"Sure?"

We went to lunch at the same pizza place where me and Jess met.

Jess seemed giddy. I tried to talk to Katrina about her week, but the more I did, the more Jess seemed to interject into the conversation.

We sat down and ordered. I decided to pry a little, because small talk wasn't getting me anywhere. "So, how did you two meet? I never really got either of your full backstories."

Katrina smiled. "We met in high school. Mutual outcast type-deal."

Jess continued, "Yeah, I was the only one who would talk to her. She's the only one here without a whole family line from this town."

“Really?”, I said. “So did you both move here, or is Jess just a sympathetic soul?”

“I moved here when my mom married Dave. Jess has always lived here, just doesn’t like it ‘cause her house has consistent internet access, unlike most people here who are still on weird dial-up.”

“It makes me feel like I moved here because I actually know what’s on the outside.” Jess looked off wistfully.

“So, where were you born?”, I asked Katrina.

“Oh, I don’t know. I was five when I moved here, and after my mom died, I didn’t have people to tell me stuff like that. I don’t know if Dave could even find my birth certificate.”

Jess looked baffled, as I was, but for different reasons. “I thought you didn’t like talking about your mom.”

“Well, I guess times are changing. Besides, it’s important for context,” Katrina replied. Jess seemed unhappy with her.

“And your biological dad couldn’t take you? Seems like most places would be better than with almost a total stranger,” I ask. Jess really looks angry now. Katrina seems to notice, but she answers anyway.

“I never knew him or anything about him. He could be dead, he could have no idea I exist, but either way I can’t find him, so Dave it is. I’ve made it this far, so it could be worse.”

“What is everyone’s issue with Dave anyway? It’s not like he’s a murderer or arsonist, he just stood against the church,” Jess broke in.

“Stood against the church?” I ask.

“That’s a strong word for it,” Katrina said. “When I was younger, they wanted me to go to the church’s preschool. Every other kid in the neighborhood was going, but Dave

refused because he didn’t want to pay for it. So, I never got to socialize with the kids early and I never got the early religious influence.”

“Which is good! More people should be willing to go against the church and make their own choices about their kids’ education,” Jess cheered.

“Yeah, if that’s what happened. In reality, he told the church rep that came to our house to eat a dick, spent all the money he could have used to send me to school on whiskey, and left me alone while he went to work to figure out how to read by myself.”

“So, it sounds like you aren’t that close with him. I’m sorry to hear that. I hope you find a family in your lifetime,” I said. Katrina gave a little smile and nodded. Jess just huffed and went back to her drink. Our food came, which gave a little respite from the awkward conversation.

“What about the guy in the woods, is he your family?” Jess barked.

“Does he treat you well enough?”

“Jess, keep your voice down!” Katrina whispered harshly.

“Well, you seem to think he gives you enough attention. That’s what you wanted from Dave, right? Attention? He never told you you looked pretty enough, or sent you to all the right activities. You have no idea how lucky you are!” Jess stormed out at that point. My head was reeling. Katrina just stared down while she rolled a straw wrapper between her finger and thumb.

“I’ll pay for her meal. I’m sorry about that,” Katrina said, with no eye contact.

“It’s totally fine, we can split it. And it’s not your fault. I don’t know everything that’s going on, but I think you are allowed to not feel attached to Dave,” I responded, “And you’re allowed to attach to anyone you want.”

“Attach is a strong word.” She pauses and looks outside. “But I don’t have a better

one.” Katrina was quiet for a few minutes, “She has a point. I would like attention from someone. Granted, if Dave called me pretty I think it would scare me more than make me feel better.”

“Well, that makes me worried, but, I mean, who doesn’t want someone to tell them they’re doing things right. Support is good and it’s the foundation for healthy growth, or at least that’s what therapists told me when I was little.”

“I guess. I sort of have that.”

“From the man in the woods?” I ask cautiously, “Or whatever she was talking about?”

“I should have never told Jess. I know she can’t keep her mouth shut when she wants to stir trouble.”

“Who is he? Is he that weird living sandbag I saw?”

“No, he makes the weird sandbag guys out of people who have disappeared.”

“Do you... help him with that?”

“God, no. I have to do things for him, not with him. Don’t make that mistake.”

“So you feel like you don’t have a choice.”

“I don’t feel.” Katrina was cold. “I know, but that’s not important.”

“How is that not important?”

“Because it’s beyond my control at this point, I’m not sure I ever had control. It’s like your friend’s problem. That’s why you’re here isn’t it, Riot?”

My blood went icy. “What did you say?”

She snapped up, becoming aware of her own words. “I should go.” She tossed down some money and ran out of the pizza place. I was still in shock as I started walking back to my car near the church. I peer into the woods behind the houses, guessing what might be back there and how it knew what I

was. I climb into my car. I can’t see; I put on my reading light. The windows are black, like they were covered in a trash bag or something. I pull on the handle, with no luck. I was stuck.

“So, you’re our little Theseus,” a gruff, velvety voice echoed from the back seat. I wanted to turn, but something in me told me I knew better than to do that. “I heard you’ve taken an awful big liking to my work.”

“Who are you?” I ask, slightly shaken.

“I’m the man who likes to have fun in this town, simple as that.”

“What’s your name?”

“Oh honey, now I know you know better than to ask for that. Or is this the first time you’ve met a guy like me?” he took a sharp inhale, “Oh, I don’t think it is.”

“What do you want?”

“You know that answer already, love. Now, usually girls meet a penalty for coming across me in their free time, but you’re not really my type. I only need one beat-up super-powered love child in my possession, so I’ll let you off with this: Leave my girls alone, or you’re gonna find answers to questions you didn’t even know you had.” The blackness dissipated, and I could see outside. I turned around. The seat was empty.



Art and Story by
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CHAPTER SIX:

you don't have to be perfect. just f*cking do things.

I was essentially back to nothing. Just as I start to make progress, and maybe even make a friend, I am set back so far that I know less about this place than I did before I got here.

They already know who I am. I'd love to know how they found that one out. I have kept my alter ego very well hidden. This might be the first time I was found out. Despite the warnings, I needed to dig deeper.

I was allured by Katrina, but I had to stay objective. I should have known better than to start being friendly before I knew too much about her. I can't let my wants get in the way of helping people.

Costume on and blades ready, I jump off my balcony at midnight. I decided to scan around the church again first, because I still don't trust the people there. It was just a little too off.

The street lights were on, all but one that flickered in the parking lot. It was hollow compared to the previous morning. I could sense that I was not alone. I did something I didn't do before; I knocked on the door. There was no answer. There was no answer from the church, but I heard a tap from behind me mimicking the knock.

I turned to see a girl I hadn't seen before. She was platinum blond in all white. She tapped on the edge of the water fountain. With a silky, grating voice, she spoke to me.

"Well, aren't you so cute. Love the costume, did you make it yourself?"

"Who are you?" I ask.

"I don't know, why don't you tell me?"

"Cut the bullshit. I'm not here for anyone's games. Tell me who you are and why you are here, or I'll kick your teeth in."

She giggled and walked slightly closer, keeping her hand on the fountain. I drew my knives and rushed forward. She leaned back and gave a fake pout, "Aww is the big bad superhero going to hurt little old me?" I can't say I'm proud of myself, but I threw that bitch almost against the church doors and I got what I needed. Hands off the fountain, she started panting and sweating, racing to find her footing and get back to it. I blocked her path.

"Why do you need to be on the fountain? What are you?" I press again. She hissed, with her mouth splitting across her face as her eyes shrunk into two yellow dimes. Her finger became long and very pointed, as if the bones themselves were peaking through.

"That fountain marks the line between church and world. Those who cross the line face the wrath of being on holy ground," she growled, in a voice now sounding like that of an old woman.

"So, you're something that can go near a church. Are you a resident of this town?"

She cackled. "You think I'm one of those petty children? They'll be lucky to ever be like me." She smacked my face with her talons. As I reeled back, she ran and she

grabbed the fountain. She stopped sweating, but kept her gross form. "I'm an attractor. I get help for those who ask me for it."

"So you lure the girls to the woods?"

"No, I only work on men, like him." She points behind me, and I quickly turn just fast enough to see the deformed sandbag man bring down a very large arm onto my head. I'm knocked down and quickly picked up the legs. I slash with a blade, only to be met with being dropped on my head. I blacked out.

It was cold and almost completely black, but in my delirium I could make out some shapes. I was in a chair. I wasn't tied to it, I was just sitting. I could hear footsteps on the stone floor. They sounded far away, but I could feel the closeness of eyes on me. Light crept in suddenly, then burst in as a door was opened and then shut quickly. It was too sudden for my eyes to handle. I didn't know who was in the room with me. I could stand, but something in me said I knew better than to try to escape that easily.

There was no breathing or steps. It felt like a week went by as this thing just stood in front of me. I had never seen it before, but I had heard it. I knew better than to look at it. I waited, wondering what he was waiting for. I wanted to know almost as much as I didn't want to know.

"So, the little one didn't listen? Shocking. Children never want to listen to their teachers, no matter what the intent of the lesson is. That being said, I still see this as quite the betrayal of trust. I come to you, on my own and with no prompting, to warn you, and you turn around and decide to ignore my words. Such a sad, sad thing, when children have to be punished." I heard a slight pacing. "Luckily, I know just the appropriate send off for you," he cooed. I was terrified. I couldn't even move my legs to escape. How would I

be able to defend myself? I should have never tried to do this alone.

Any move I make at this point would just make it worse, I just have to suffer through. I got myself into this mess, so I should just stay here and deal with it. I didn't even know who he was or what he could do, so attacking could get me killed.

"What, no questions?" he scoffed. "How polite. Glad to see you learned something from being around me. Now, don't worry child, just a few lucid moments and you'll be out of the dark." With that, I felt something come over me. Not like fabric, it had no thread pattern. It was cold; it formed around my eyes and mouth and overcame me, as if someone had dunked me in water but I could still breathe.

It seemed like as soon as it overcame me, it pulled itself back. Suddenly, I was on my back, staring to my left at the soft, dirt ground in low candle light. One final echo of his voice rang out, "Out of the dark, and into the darkness." It was blurry, but I could see two legs walk away from me. They were red and moved like nice trousers. I lay there for several minutes, thinking it was best not to move and disturb my captors before coming to a strong realization that I was, in fact, going to need to disturb my captors to escape. That's how escaping works, and escaping is a good idea.

Sitting up showed me that I was still in the woods, but that also meant I could be just about anywhere. I was in a circle of torches and seemed to be completely alone. The ground had no symbol, there was no parofinalial and nothing to even stop me from leaving. I stood undisrupted and looked around before hearing a shrieking cackle from the woods. Hyenas. I'm going to be killed in rural America by hyenas. Or at least, hyena-like people.

I see the first man coming from my left. He had a cartoonishly stretched smile and eyes pushed wide open. He was joined by other people with the same cartoonish faces. "I like this one, she has some real depth," one hissed. Their voices all sounded like a snake impression. They started coming out of the woods in droves now.

"Is that a joke about my costume?" I ask. I will admit, my dark green suit with joint and side cutouts to keep the high speed fluctuation from ripping it was probably incredibly confusing. I have also found that a sense of humor really helps in these places.

"Yes, some real depth," they breathed out to each other. I guess they were going to pretend not to hear me. Fair; I'll turn and go. I sprint out, only to meet a wall of these same-faced human beings in a circle with linked arms. They stared in, arms outreached while still linked with one another. Their arms started coming closer together as they started approaching me in unison, large smiles seeming more and more unearthly, all while muttering phrases about real depth. I remember something, I've heard that phrase before.

I was fifteen. It was one of my first solo missions since meeting Orphan and Paradox. I had a huge argument with Paradox that ended with him saying I couldn't do anything on my own and I wanted to say I could. I came across this cult, big faces with big mouths just like these, and they were cannibals. Paradox's dad had to get me out and I had to eat my words to keep from being eaten. I can say I learned a lot since then, but not enough. I remember their lines were impossible to break. As they came within a yard of me, I started feeling like I would have preferred hyenas. No one's dad was here to help me now.

And as quick as they approached, they cleared. They were knocked on their backs, running and preparing to fight. No one's dad had come to save me, but someone's daughter did.

I wouldn't have recognized her if I hadn't seen the covered left eye and red hair. She looked incredibly strong, landing a few steps in front of me and impacting the ground enough to make it tremor. She wore a hood and short cape, and her weapon of choice seemed to be a forearm guard with extendable blades, which she jolted out as she rose to stand.

"Leave, or be left to be found by the next unfortunate passerby," her voice seemed to boom in the open forest. As to be expected, they scrambled, and then somehow popped out of existence in puffs of smoke. She turned to me, where I could see her sides, back, and hands were covered in the black tattoos. She was confident, and a little threatening.

"Well, this is awkward," I said. "You know those guys?"

"They are gluttony demons. They come and go out of existence when summoned," she said, adjusting her weapon. "So I guess just not telling you everything isn't going to keep you out of it."

"No, not in the slightest."

"I would really love it if you would stop nearly getting yourself killed though."

"Well, then you should talk to your boss or whatever he is."

She became quiet and stern. "I am here to take you home, Athena. Just be happy there's only one piece of you to take back."

"How do you know who I am?"

"It was kind of easy. You know, a masked teenage superhero is on the news busting the cult of a weird magician, and then a teenager shows up in town asking about

strange, collaborative religious behavior. A cowl can't hide everything."

"I was never on the news."

She stopped.

"I didn't take credit for that. How did you know?" Silence. "How did you know it was me?"

"I... Let me take you home. I owe you a lot of explanations," She said. I nodded and she took off flying beside me.

Her flight speed was close to my running speed. It was more of an extended glide, every once in a while she would push off from a tree to keep up her momentum. We scaled my balcony. I entered my room and turned back to her. She had turned back into her normal looking self in her normal looking clothes. I took my mask off.

"Where do you want me to start?" she asked, in a less confident tone.

"My identity," I said. I was stern.

"I was there that night. You may have noticed some covering on your wounds that seemed unnatural."

"What was that? And why were you there?"

"I was there in a similar sense. The man in red, the man you have seen once or twice, is my boss in a way. He wanted me to find the source of Chaz's magic and bring it to him if I could. I wanted to stop what he was doing, and figured I could do that as part of taking his magic. By the time I got there, the victims were freed and you were off to your car. I could sound sultry and say I recognized your unforgettable green eyes, but the truth is I recognized your license plate when I saw your car at the church."

"You didn't answer my first question."

"I know. I'm sorry, I'm just not sure exactly what to call it. Essentially, it was a magic band-aid. It won't affect you in any way, I just thought you might need help. It's

this energy I and few others can control. It's like a solidified shadow."

I relaxed a little. She did save my life, so she does deserve some trust. "I guess it kind of did, but why help me? Aren't I going against whatever this red guy's plan is?"

She sighed. "I have to. I was his first victim, as I'm sure you have heard. He treated me differently because the girls he collects are followers. I don't know what they are following, but that is what he calls them. He wanted me to be a weapon instead. He carved me all these black markings. They came with a lot of powers and perks, as well as a new eye. I don't know why he chose me, but now that I have it, I can't give it back and I can't stop him. He has his hold on me now."

"Because you know better?" I asked

"So you felt it too. I don't understand it either, but yes, everytime I am around him I lose all faith in my ability to do anything. I listen to him cause I'm too afraid to do things for myself."

"Who is he?"

"He isn't someone with a name, he is someone with a purpose. I call him Red. It's not creative, but it works."

"Well, what's his purpose then?"

"To have a following that will always listen to him, as far as I can tell. He's very secretive, but he wants young women under his command, the more controlled the better."

"And once he has collected as many as he can?"

"I'm not sure what comes next."

"How do you know he's not gonna end up using you, and then killing you? You have to have some mental defence against knowing that might be the outcome."

She sighed and sat on my bed. I walked behind her to change into pj's. I could tell it was going to be a long night. "I'd like to say so but," she said. "You've heard of

Dave. He's about as caring and understanding as any deadbeat step dad, the kind that's strict in how he doesn't set rules. He doesn't tell you what to do, and mostly doesn't give a shit, but when you break the rules he has, he will let you know. Man, will he let you know. And the one friend I have only seems to like to hang out with me for the controversy and Dave's alcohol, plus whatever makes her want to protect him so much."

"What are you saying?"

"At this point Dave's the only thing between me and a state home. Seeing how close I am to graduating high school and leaving on my own terms, it's not worth it to fight him. I can't have a job because he rages if I don't do all the chores around the house after school, so even when I do graduate I won't have anything to use to leave. It kind of already feels like I am marching towards my demise."

"Well, you have more than one friend now. And I will do my best to keep you from getting killed," I say, putting my arm around her. "Also, not all state homes are totally bad. There are some good foster parents out there."

"Wait, are you an orphan?"

"I am. I was 8 when I lost my mom and dad."

"I'm really sorry I-"

"Don't worry about it. I had some bad times, I can understand the fear."

"Did you lose them to a cult?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Just a hunch," she chuckled. "Is that how you got your speed?"

"Yeah." I showed her the scar on my arm. "I fell in a caldron of some sort of blessed or cursed blood and I guess it worked into my veins. Now I'm just trying to make the best of it."

"That's good. Red told me I always had powers, he just had the keys to unlock them. I don't know exactly what that means, but it's mostly distressing."

"I can imagine."

"It makes me think that my powers were from my parents, and they aren't here to ask. They could have been demons, or angels, or just the actual devil. I have no idea, and I might never."

"I don't think you have to worry. You don't seem too Satan-y." I gave her a nudge, trying to cheer her up. With the nudge, I saw her smile, and it was one of the best compliments I've ever gotten. I was so glad to have her to tell my life story to. She looked up and met my eyes.

"Well, you don't seem too Satan-y either. I'm glad you came here. I could use some help." She laughed. "Not to change the subject, but what exactly are you and Jess?"

I chuckled. "I think we are dating, but she hasn't told me yet."

"That sounds like Jess. She's never been the best with the idea of relationships being two ways. When the time comes to talk to her about it, just take it easy on her. She's not good with not getting what she wants."

"No kidding. Did she ever do that to you?"

"Oh, no, I have somehow avoided that fate."

We joked like this for a while, talking about Jess, her dad, the weird kid from the church, and a variety of other characters until we both crashed and got woken up by the sound of Lula coming back from some morning community college courses. It ended up being 1 o'clock before either of us moved, which is probably the best thing that happened to me in this town so far. Seriously, I don't know the last time I actually slept like that.

NEXT ISSUE:
CHAPTERS SEVEN & EIGHT



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