



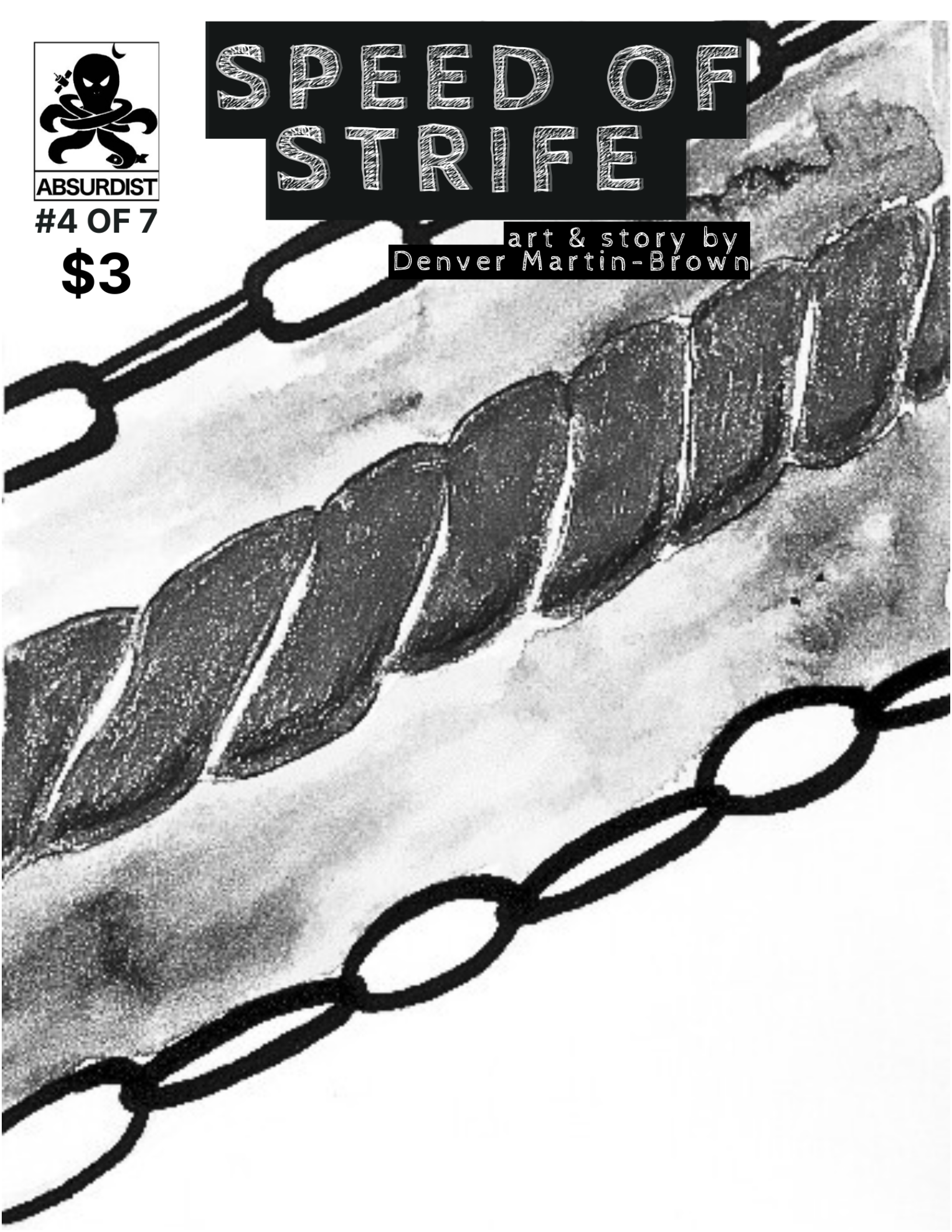
ABSURDIST

#4 OF 7

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# SPEED OF STRIFE

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN: this is terrible. let's keep going.**

Katrina was worried about falling asleep at my place. She was sure Dave would either have her head, or worse, he wouldn't have even noticed she was gone. The high school wasn't happy with her missing class, but after Red got her the first time, it started happening often enough that they stopped calling home about it.

She didn't hold it against me at least. I saw her almost every lunch break that week. I was lucky her lunch break lined up with mine, or at least I assumed it did. I was a little afraid to ask. I saw Jess a few more times. She seemed much colder to me at this point, which I can't say I fully minded, but I didn't mean to cut her off completely.

After a lot of pouting, she did finally join me and Katrina one day at lunch. Well, sort of.

"Well, glad to see I was invited to this little hang out," she said, obviously kind of pissed, as she stormed up to us. She pulled a chair up to our table. "So, did you too hear about that pizza guy that was kidnapping people?"

"You mean the guy we talked about the first day I was here?" I said.

"Yeah, But there is new news about him," she replied. "Apparently, he's been sentenced for a crazy long time, but the lights in his old pizzeria keep turning on at night, and the people can hear voices inside when the lights are on, but by the time police get there, everything is back to normal."

"Sounds like a small town ghost story to me. It might just be kids breaking in to hang out," Katrina said.

"You know, you could just say 'Wow, that's cool'. You were a lot more agreeable when I was the only person you had to talk to," Jess spat.

"That's a little harsh, I don't think she meant that as an insult to you," I chimed in.

"Well, how would I know? I barely see her anymore. For all I know, she hates me," she continued.

"I'm sorry Jess. Things have just been getting a little more hectic at home," Katrina said.

"Well, you make time for Athena. Is she more important than me, or do you just like her because she actually buys into the whole, 'Oh poor me my step dad doesn't care about what I do' bit?"

"I don't like her more and I barely talk to her about Dave at all. I've tried to start doing it less," Katrina said.

"Yeah well I guess I wouldn't know. Come find me when you actually want to act like my friend." Jess got up and stormed out at that point.

"Don't worry about her, she's being a bitch. You know it's ok to talk to me about your step dad, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, she's not wrong. I did complain to her a lot about him."

"I disagree. I think you should talk to your friends about your problems and she's just not a good friend." I take a bite of my sandwich. "Speaking of disagreeing, I think

maybe we should look into that whole pizza place thing.”

“I agree.”

“I thought you said it was small town gossip.”

“Yeah, to Jess, who shouldn’t get involved. You are going to do it whether I tell you not too or not, so I have nothing to lose.”

“I’m glad we’ve reached this point in our relationship. So, when should we go?”

“Midnight? Because we don’t sleep apparently.”

“Sounds swell.”

“I don’t think I would call it that,” Katrina said.

Another boring work day followed lunch. I ended up reading the entire course catalog for the local community college and twirling my pencil fast enough to replace our need for air conditioning. I took a nap at home and when I woke up, Katrina was on my balcony, completely suited up.

“How do you get in and out of that thing so fast?”

“Magic.”

“I guess that makes as much sense as anything.” I got dressed quickly and we opted to take my car instead of run the whole way there.

The lights weren’t on, but what looked like a couple flashlights could be seen through the frosted glass. The front door had been boarded and papered with demolition notices, giving cult members probable reason to want to come back and find their shit. It also raised the question of how they got in, if not using the door. There was the obvious way, but if they were using the tunnels we couldn’t try and sneak in that way. There would be too many chances for people to see us and send warnings, and we needed the element of surprise ‘cause we were probably outnumbered.

I turned to Katrina to ask about a plan, and she wasn’t there. She was instead on top of the building near a roof access door. She can fly. I know she can fly, but I have a very hard time choosing to comprehend this.

She waved like she wanted me to sprout wings and follow her up. I stick my arms directly into the air to give the ‘what the hell am I supposed to do?’ signal. She then walked over to the side of the building and pointed down. I zipped over, and there was a fire escape ladder on top of a dumpster. I climbed it quickly. “Why couldn’t you fly me up?” I ask.

“You’re 4 inches taller than me and it’s a little hard to maneuver.”

“You seem to do ok.”

“Yeah, at least it seems that way when you aren’t doing it.” She turned, and made her way to the roof door. It was locked, unsurprisingly. We couldn’t be too loud breaking it down, lest we tip off the spooky spectators downstairs. I took out a knife. The door was wooden and thinned with age, so cutting around the door knob to sidestep the lock was pretty easy. Down the stairs we went. It was very quiet, no guards and no traps.

A thought crossed my mind. In all of this, we never took a moment to consider the possibility that whoever could be here might not be cult people or criminals. The police could easily be here, or a cleanup team, or FBI investigators. I stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Katrina asked.

“What if these are cops? What if we are literally breaking into a building full of cops?”

“I mean I think we can leave pretty quickly if we are. Why are you worried about this now?”

“Vigilantes and cops aren’t perfect friends. I’ve had some negative experiences.”

“Ok well, I promise if any cops come after you, heads will roll.”

“Well we don’t need to kill the cops.”

“Well if they see too much, they see too much. Sometimes it’s got to happen.”

“Wait, how often do you kill people?”

“We are bottle necked in this staircase, let’s have this discussion later.” Katrina turned and walked away.

We reached the bottom of the stairs. The door was cracked open, a little light flooded through. We crept up and peaked in. Luckily, or not, it wasn't the police. They looked like average people wandering around in the dark with flashlights.

“What do you think they're doing?”

“I don’t know, but I can tell that it’s nothing good. They are definitely cultists,” Katrina muttered.

“How can you tell?”

“I can see it. It comes with the demon powers, I’ll explain later. What should we do about it?”

“Can you tell if they are just regular people, or not?”

“Seems like it? I’m not seeing anyone like us.”

“Ok so, leave them be, or apprehend them?”

“Probably apprehend them before they could do something sketchy. Look over there.” There was a large amount of rope and chain, as well as hand weapons and a few books, all for ritual purposes, most likely. “They practically set it up for us.”

“I’ll dash low to the ground, while you go overhead?”

“Let’s go.” I dash to the left, while she arcs overhead to the right, causing a split in focus. There is a little shuffling and gasping, but not much as we round up the intruders. I grab the rope and run a large circle around the entire group, knocking a few people over and

leaving them open for Katrina to subdue further. Hogtied, it was easy to see the variety of people we had before us. There were parents and children, older people that could be grandparents, all in a wide variety of races.

“Well, I have to say this is an odd group. They don’t look like cultists,” Katrina said.

“Actually, I think they look exactly like cultists.” I hate to think about how many times I had seen this before, but it was all too common. “The important reason is why they are here.” I step forward to interrogate, but Katrina stops me with her arm.

“Allow me. I can make this fairly quick.” I allow her to step forward. She kneels before one of the younger girls. I saw her push her hair out of her face and discomfort sunk into the girls eyes. “You’re scared,” Katrina said, “But not just of me, you’re afraid because of what you are a part of. You feel like this could have been avoided, like other things in the past. Well, the past can’t be fixed, but the future can, so tell me what is going to happen next before we have to find out.”

The girl quivered. “Chaz promised us power.” It wasn’t the girl who spoke. It was a woman, probably a mom, tied up close to her. “He promised we’d be more than we ever were before and we would always be safe.”

“Why did you need to be more powerful? What were you afraid of?” Katrina stood in front of the woman.

“For when it all ends. When all the people with power, people like you, finally rise to take over this planet, we may rise with you.”

“That sounds dramatic,” I scoff.

“I would think so, considering the world is ending as we know it.”

“What exactly did he say would make you a better version of yourselves?” Katrina

tried to redirect the conversation, "How was he going to make you like us?"

"Pain," the woman said, "Pain would unlock our bodies ultimate will to survive and then we could survive anything."

"Have you ever seen this actually work?" I asked.

"We have an older daughter. She took to it quite well. She was strong, tough, invulnerable, but she is not here anymore." I wanted to ask, but I decided it would be best not to. "I mean, certainly you two must know something about that, considering you're both so powerful."

Katrina stiffened. "What did you come back here for? What can you use this place for if your leader is gone?"

"We were trying to find what's left."

"What is left?"

"Nothing."

"What were you expecting to find?"

"The powerful ones, we had not seen them since a week before Chaz was arrested. They are important to keep track of."

"So you were looking for your daughter?"

"We were looking for all of them. Our daughter is no more or less important than any other."

"When did you last see her?" Katrina said. I could hear her voice getting colder.

"I can't recall."

"How do you not know?" Katrina began to yell.

"It was not our place to keep track of those with powers. We have our own responsibilities."

I walked forward to put my hand on Katrina's shoulder. She jerked away and walked a few steps away, putting distance between her and the woman. She seemed to be wiping her face and I could hear her

grumbling. "Listen, this isn't why we are here," I say to her calmly.

"This is exactly why we are here," Katrina said out loud. "We are here because we are the only ones who seem to care about the children of people like you." She pointed to the woman.

The air was sharp with silence. Their eyes were like needles against my spine as I stared at Katrina. "Go search the area," Katrina ordered me. I was hesitant, seeing her so angry, but I listened. I dodged around the walls of the eating area and the now empty ball pits into the backstage area, full of colorful props and baubles that were used in Chaz's magic show to get the kids to come close. I absentmindedly look through things while trying to overhear what Katrina was doing. The idea of a parent that doesn't love a child and the world people like this create overlap in a way that makes them not similar at all to me. It still made my scar hurt to think of how families are destroyed by these mad men. These megalomaniacs convince people they are god for their own bravado. I know that's why my parents joined, why they put up with so much insanity and harm. I know they did everything out of love.

But I suppose I can't think that everyone is like that. It's the question no child will ever know and almost never wants to. You'll never know if in this world you are the child that was brought here to simply be loved, out of societal obligation, or just to serve the needs of our parents. Some parents may love their kids, but others just need them.

Existential horror was interrupted by a lot of sudden banging and slamming. Oh god, Katrina is going to actually kill them. I run out to the center room to see the people cowering against the door and Katrina recovering from what looks like being slammed against the floor.

“What the hell happened?” I yell.

Katrina looks up, and points behind me. Half a second later I am forced backwards. My back cracks against a support beam. I slide down, gasping for the air that just got beaten out of me and see the mole eyed, long fingered girl from that night at the church.

She smirks back at me and turns to Katrina, now upright, and hisses, “This is certainly out of your line of work.”

“Why are you here?” Katrina barks.

“Now, now, don’t get testy, you know that you have your job, and I have mine. And we don’t overlap.” She lingered closer. The people shrunk closer to the door. Katrina stood sturdy. Her lip gushed a little spring of blood.

“I don’t care what Red says my job is or isn’t, tell me what’s going on before I crush you like the soulless husk you are.”

“I always liked a challenge.” She bares her claws.

“You are so fucking unhelpful.” Katrina jerks her left arm, and 3 blades extend from a wooden bracer. Katrina and Mole Eyes rush each other, Katrina’s blades crashing into her arm followed by a punch to knock her off balance. Mole Eyes rakes her hand across Katrina’s back, opening fresh wounds with her talons. Katrina lands and turns around in a swift motion, while her opponent catches her balance. I see Katrina’s blood run black like oil, while the creature leaks thick sludge, like soaked sand. I dart to the side, gauging what I can do to help. I believe Katrina can handle this girl, so I arch to the people at the door and start trying to hack through enough wood to let the door be pushed through. I feel something catch my ankle and I am pulled out of the crowd. Mole Eyes stare me down.

“Come now, don’t you want to dance too?”

“Not in the least actually.” She slashes at me. I guard with her blade, while I kick up at her nose. I jump to my feet and slash forward, landing one on her cheek and one on her non wounded arm. She gets me across the stomach and on the leg. She is fairly quick; even if she’s not keeping up with me, she recovers fast. My wounds aren’t deep, and I feel like the odd one out for bleeding red. She goes for another low slash, and I manage to cut her back as she dives. She cuts like paper. I can see her bones, I think, and they look clean. I feel my blood run cold. The chill sets in more when I realize that it was nowhere near this cold when I started the fight. I take my eyes off of her to look at the door. It was busted open, now letting in the night air as all the people have left through it. Katrina leans against it, holding a piece of wood, smirking.

“What do you have against serving Him? So many souls would ill for the power you were given.” Mole Eyes regained her footing.

“Well, besides being roped into it against my will and being kept in the dark about most everything except that we round up innocent people, and then all the pretty ones reappear with matching tattoos and the ugly ones ‘disappear’, I’m upset we don’t get calamity pay.”

“You were born for this. We didn’t do anything that wouldn’t have happened on it’s own. And you would know exactly what’s going on, if every time you do learn about something you didn’t make a screaming mess of it.”

“Well, you don’t call me the spirit of dissonance for nothing. I love making messes and screaming. So I am going to ask, though I suspect I know the answer, what exactly are you doing with a completely unrelated cult?”

“I’m not going to tell you, but I am going to tell Red what you did here. We’ll see

how much autonomy you receive with your powers after this.” Katrina deadpanned at those words. She walked up to her opponent, and by the coldness in her eyes I thought she was going to snap her neck on the spot. She leaned over to the creature's ear and, in a hushed tone, relayed some sort of melody into her ear. Beautiful, but eerie, Mole Eye's face melted into a distant stare.

With a tap on the forehead, the blond demon collapsed, unconscious. “We should leave. I'm sure Red isn't too far behind her.”

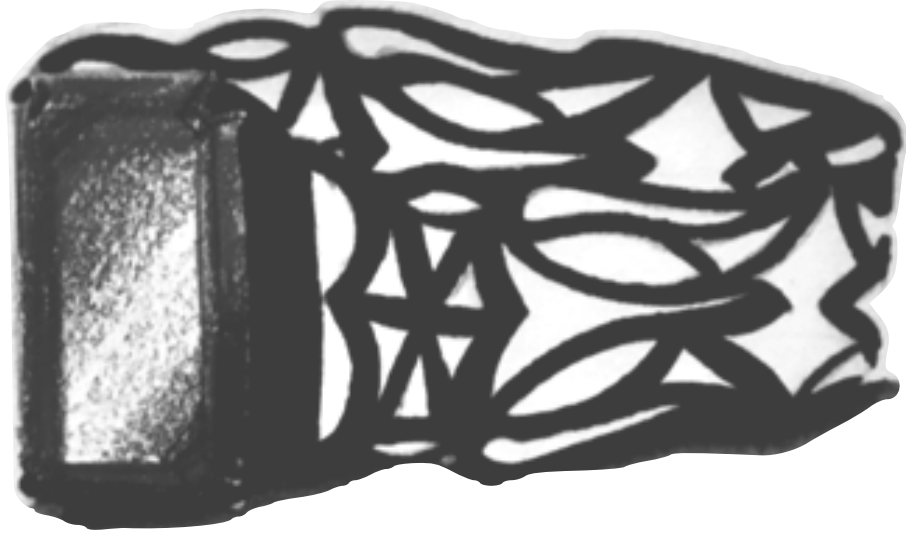
“Is she going to wake up?” I asked, scared.

“Yeah, she just won't remember what happened here.”

“You can just do that to anyone?”

“It's a little more complicated than that, but I can explain that later.” We bailed, heading back to my place for some much needed explanation.

“You've never done that to me right?”



## **CHAPTER EIGHT:**

# **let's use our powers of anxiety for good and not evil.**

We sat down, tired and achy, my cuts were already scabbed over and Katrina's didn't even seem to exist anymore. "Ok, so, it seems we have a lot to cover before we go to bed tonight."

Half hanging off my bed she groaned, "Is this going to be an every night thing now? Don't you get tired? Or do you just sleep really fast when you blink?"

"That would be great, but no, I don't, and also I will stop doing this when I actually understand what's going on here. Let's start with the blood thing."

"You really don't want to know about that."

"I very much want to know about the blood thing. Mainly, how people without actual blood are walking and talking."

She sighed, "The more demon-like you allow yourself to become, or are forced to become, the thicker and dryer your blood becomes. Eventually, it becomes nothing but sand and stops flowing. You can live forever, as long as you can keep it all in your body. I don't know why people would want to live like that though."

"I don't know either. That doesn't sound like much of a life," I sat down on the bed in front of her, "Next question: how do I know you're not erasing my memories like you did to her?"

Katrina sighed and sat up, back to her normal self with her one bad eye and shy composure. "That's a good question. I don't know."

"Well, what did you mean it's a little more complicated than that?"

"Ok, so you know these black marks that are on me and every other girl in this town?"

"Yeah, by the way, are the girls in town going to turn into whatever that thing was because of the tattoos?"

She sighed, "You mean Lillian? No, I mean, I never became anything like her. I got these when I got my powers and it seems like the more you have, the more powerful you are. I think there is some sort of demon blood or hell-fire dust in them or something, but the main point is that they rank people Red has collected and marked by importance. I can only use my powers to affect people less important than me, which includes people who haven't been marked at all."

"So, you can do it to me?"

"Not exactly. The complication comes in when you take into account how you got your powers. It was a similar process to me, but you only have a scar to show what happened. Your 'marks' run through your veins and are most likely from a completely different entity, so I don't know how it stacks up."

"You've never tried it on anyone with powers from another source?"

"I have never met anyone with powers from another source. Taking on Red and everything he has done in this town was definitely all I could handle at once."

“Do you want to try?” I have to admit I was a little curious to know how it felt.

“Not really, because you will never know if it worked or not.”

“Couldn’t you make me just forget like a sentence, or like, five minutes?”

“I’ve never done that and I’m not going to use you as my test dummy, alright?”

I huff, “Fine.”

“Hey, It’s frustrating to me too. But, I promise you I have not tried. Unfortunately, my word is all I can give you on the subject.”

“Well, I’ll take it. Also, her name is really Lillian?”

“Yeah, I think she gave it to herself for the irony,” Katrina chuckled.

“Alright, well what gave you the ‘spirit of dissonance’ title?”

“We all have titles like that. I get mine because my hypnotism powers and environmental control abilities come from my singing, kinda like a siren.”

“What can you do with it? I don’t see you use it often.”

“Minor mind control, and along with the aid of some magical objects which are no longer in my possession, I can manipulate some forms of light into matter. I don’t find a lot of joy in controlling people.”

“Yeah but the light part, that’s a big deal.”

“It was, but I couldn’t hold on to it too long. Red wanted it for obvious reasons and he definitely outranks me.”

“So, he can control you?”

“Something like that, it’s a little different then mine but it’s hard to describe. You have seen it.” She absent mindedly pulled her out of her eyes, showing her fully scared face. Her left eye was pretty mangled, though it seemed less so when she was using her powers.

“I have. What about the title? Sounded pretty official. Does it get you a lot of street cred?”

“Not exactly. They are really just for us. I have the spirit of dissonance because I sing to control people and Lillian is the spirit of imitation. She can look normal sometimes, so I guess she’s imitating an actual human being, or at least she tries.”

“That’s a pretty wordy name to call out in a fight. I’ll just say dissonance if I want your attention, or diss. Either way, you should know I’m calling you.”

“I guess we are certainly making a habit of that at this point. Although, I have to say ‘Diss’ is a weird name for whatever weird kind of vigilante I am. Now, can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you ask me the rest of your questions tomorrow? It is 4 in the morning.”

“Haha sure. Want to spend the night again?”

“Beats being roped into anything that’s going on out there. Or seeing Dave drunk passed out in his chair,” Katrina gestures outside and plops down on the bed beside me.

“Hey, by the way,” I poked Katrina in the stomach, “Diss is a hero.”

She slapped my finger away, “You’re a dork.” She rolls over. It takes almost no time for her to drift off. I linger awake for a few seconds. This was a lot to take in. I mean, not too terribly much, I’m getting used to Katrina’s odd information drops. I was afraid to trust her with most things, but here she is, sleeping next to me without fear. I guess I should trust her like that too, but it’s still entirely too new to me. I have never had someone I was close to like her. It was cool and fun, but something else really bothered me.

Did her parents really not care about her? I know she never really knew them, but she had to have remembered feeling love at some point in her life. It really breaks my heart to think about. But, my heartbreak is replaced with a slight tinge of new fear. She said she has killed, but how many? And why?

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