



ABSURDIST

#1 OF 6

\$3

SIREN & COBALT

PITTSBURGH'S
RESIDENT
SUPERHEROES



Siren and Cobalt put away David Allen five years ago. Now, he's a free man; with a plan in motion. Watch as good deeds bite back and revenge takes its toll in...

KING'S CORNER

PART ONE

by Jude Profit

LIZ MOTO was just like any other four year old girl, until she found her parents, gutted in the kitchen. The next fifteen odd years are a turbulent journey of martial arts training, careful education, and a growing sense of compassion.

Now, using her newfound skills, she patrols the streets of Pittsburgh, her hometown, as the gentle guardian SIREN.

ERIC PETERSEN came from a rough home, studying archery and loose pop culture was the only way to stay sane when Chuck Petersen is your father.

Having run away from home five years ago, Eric now finds himself in a new profession: as the quipping and dashing archer hero known as COBALT.

TOGETHER, THEY ARE...



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SIREN & COBALT

in

KING'S CORNER

[PART ONE OF THREE]

David Allen was released from prison today. Siren looked down at him with binoculars, perched a block away. In a crouch, most of her yellow uniform was covered with her royal purple cloak. Only her cowled head and gloved hands stood out. To her surprise, he wasn't doing much. Just waiting. She put him in there five years ago. He was the first one her and Cobalt turned in. They figured they should start with the biggest heroin operation in the city. He left the block wearing the same clothes he came in with; black jacket, white shirt, blue jeans, shoes that cost more than your first car. He rubbed his freshly shaved head as he waited for his ride. He had a nose that protruded like his face was a sundial. It cast a shadow over his newly grown mustache. He was chewing gum obnoxiously. She clocked a tattoo on his right hand. It was a rough tracing of the king of hearts playing card. His good eye glowed green in the afternoon sunlight as he looked down at it. His other eye was foggy and glossed over, a scar across it. Siren threw a shuriken into it during the bust. He told her she would pay for that.

A Dodge Neon with chipping grey paint pulled up. A rack of dry cleaned clothes hung in the back seat. Red lettering peeled off of the side of the car, spelling out "Dynamite Cleaners". The phone number for a local pizza place was below it. She couldn't get a visual on the driver. As the car pulled off, she drew her grapple gun. A voice came in through her headgear.

"Liz?" Cobalt asked. "Where are you? We gotta brief Jason and Dante on the bust tonight."

Siren flinched a bit, stashing the gun on her belt. "I'm sorry. I'm still on patrol. I'm on my way."

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Cobalt let out a long, heavy sigh as he made it to the top of the Andy Warhol bridge. The Allegheny River flowed chaotic below him. To his right he could see straight into the seats at PNC Park. Not that he would be one to follow baseball. To his left, the skyline of Pittsburgh stood tall and proud. The obsidian surface of the US Steel Tower against a setting sun put a void into the archer's blue goggles. He took a deep breath and the blue spandex of his uniform stretched ever so slightly.

"Oh, I just love the smell of vertigo." He said, pulling a shortbow off his back and an arrow from his quiver. "Turing: bump some tunes." "AMBULANCE" by My Chemical Romance played in the archer's headset. As soon as the choir of overlaid Gerard Ways led way into electric guitar, Cobalt stepped off of the bridge. The air flowed through his spikey blonde hair as he made his way down. He screamed with excitement. Just as he crossed the threshold of the bridge itself, he fired his arrow. A strong, metal wire attached to the archer's bow became taught as the arrow embedded itself

into the bridge. This, dear reader, is one of Cobalt's many tools of the trade. He calls this one "the grapple arrow".

Pressing a button on his bow, Cobalt zipped up to the arrow's vantage point. He sent himself flying onto the bridge, swinging narrowly through traffic with his grapple arrow. He had to wait for the arrow to retract back to him before firing it again. These things aren't cheap, after all. This would be a problem for most others, but after a few years of getting around the city this way, the archer has developed a unique rhythm. Waving and cheering to oncoming pedestrians, he made his way to the 9th and Penn parking garage. Siren was there waiting for him, eating a turkey sandwich. Darkness had just started to set as he made a soft landing onto the concrete roof.

"You know, you could've at least brought me a lasagna or something." He said, stashing his bow on the magnetic strip of his quiver. He sat down next to Siren. She smiled at him. It still seemed warm despite the lack of eyes in her mask.

"You're late." Siren said, wiping mayonnaise from her lip. "I already gave Dante and Jason the rundown." Dante Knowles and Jason McMurray were waiting in the parking garage a few floors down. This time, they were there to buy something called "Snakehead". The use of moles is unorthodox within the capes and tights community, but Siren likes the way it brings the community together.

"Fastest bird in the west, if you ask me." Cobalt pulled out a roll of duct tape and a walkie talkie. "So what's my cue exactly, Mr. Carey? What's my motivation?" He started strapping the radio to an arrow.

"As soon as they realize it's a set-up, you go in." Siren said, standing up. The head and wings of the purple bird insignia on her

chest poked above her crossed arms. "Once you get them riled up, I'll- what are you doing right now?"

"Like you said," He stood up, stashing the arrow. The shaft comically loomed over the quiver and wobbled back and forth as he walked. "I gotta rile them up." He walked past her, they stood side by side and grasped their hands together for a moment. Another smile from Siren. Cobalt walked to the edge of the roof. "Wish me suck or whatever." He jumped down, swinging across ninth street and taking a vantage point on a nearby roof. Siren listened intently to the wire that Dante was wearing. Cobalt was busy paying attention to the appearance of a Penske truck. Both men that emerged had their top buttons undone, showing off gold necklaces. The driver had a light blue suit and buzz cut. The passenger sported a shoulder-length, straight blonde do with a tan suit. The archer notched his arrow. "Oh they make this shit too easy." he whispered.

The dealers talked with Jason and Dante for a second. Jason did most of the talking, as coherently as he could. Dante gave them a duffle bag. As soon as the driver yelled "Monopoly money?", spilling colorful paper onto the concrete below him, Cobalt fired his radio arrow. Everyone's attention was drawn to Cobalt's voice. "That's right, space monkey!" he said. "It's time to go directly to jail! Do not pass go and do not collect \$200!" Dante and Jason pulled guns from the back of their belts. Cobalt swung onto the scene, immediately detaching a grapple arrow and notching another round. He aimed it at the tan suit in a matter of milliseconds. "Same goes for the Fight Club 2 Tyler Durden you brought along with you."

"They warned me about you, but I didn't think you'd be this stupid." He shouted at Cobalt, pulling a gun from the back of his

belt. Before he could even pull the trigger, Cobalt lodged an arrow in the barrel. Tan suit threw the gun away and began charging. "You little shit!"

"Oh, we got a frisky one here." Cobalt said, ducking away from the passenger and kicking him in the head. He fell unconscious to the ground. Cobalt put a finger up to his ear. "That's your motivation, S." At those words, Siren swung in.

"What took you so long?" she asked, letting her cape drape over her arms.

"Hey, it's not my fault he fumbled with the gun. Not like this guy." Cobalt pointed at the driver, who had a shotgun aimed at the crimefighters for a few seconds now. "You're a pretty good gunslinger. Do you do parties?"

"Try anything funny and I shoot!" The driver shouted, pointing the gun wildly at everyone on the other side of the garage.

"I was trying to do funny things, and honestly, I'm hurt." Cobalt turned to his partner. "I believe it's your turn, miss."

"Is it now?"

"I insist."

"Okay, but only if you insist." Siren threw three smoke pellets from her utility belt. The blue suit made a couple shots. A bit higher than they should be for how she was running at him. Before he could fire again, Siren struck him in the face with the butt of his gun. He watched as she threw the stock and barrel in opposite directions. He went in for a punch, but before he knew it she was holding his fist. He screamed in pain as she twisted it around. He collapsed, she leaned in.

"What is Snakehead?"

"I'm not telling you nothin'!" The driver snarled between yelps of pain.

"Alright then, have it your way." Within seconds Siren had him in a pair of handcuffs. "We'll find out soon enough."

Siren put a finger up to her ear. "Dani, situation's clear. You're good to come up." Faint flashes of police lights became visible as a squad car pulled up. Detective Daniella Guevara stepped out of the driver's seat. Her long jacket flowed behind her. Short, wavy, brown hair came down around her bronze face. Out of the passenger seat came an older man, shorter than Dani, but then again Dani was taller than average. He was balding, but hints of blonde hair poked out to compliment his mustache. He wore thin-framed glasses and a canvas jacket over his disheveled shirt and tie. Dani lit up a cigarette as she approached the superheroes.

"Nasty habit, Dan." Cobalt taunted.

"I'm gonna die anyway, blue. What's a few more wasted minutes?" Dani replied, exhaling smoke.

"You see, that's the kind of mentality that allows the cancer-producing industry to thrive. Who's Bruce Willis from *Death Becomes Her*?"

"This is Victor O'Neill. Just transferred in from Chicago. He really wanted to meet you guys."

Victor extended a hand, "I'm a really big fan." he said smiling.

Siren accepted his handshake with a tight grip "It's very nice to meet you, Victor."

"You as well." Victor stepped toward the driver. "So we finally got Marco Giuliani, huh?"

"Who's Marco Giuliani?" Jason asked from behind them. He put his gun down. The thing looked ridiculously big in his pale, skinny hands.

"The chrome dome in the cuffs." Cobalt answered. "Long history with KD."

"Who's the guy on the ground?" Dani asked. She crouched down and turned his face toward her.

"I'm pretty sure it's called the floor when it's inside." Cobalt added.

"I'm not sure who he is. We only knew Giuliani would be delivering the Snakehead." Siren said. She spoke into her mask's communicator. "Turing, can we get facial recognition on the accomplice?"

Back at Siren and Cobalt's headquarters, Turing looked over his numerous monitors. On two there were first person views from cameras embedded in the young heroes' masks. Turing dragged his mouse and took the image of the passenger, dropping it into another software. "Nick Warren." He explained. "He's been charged with arson and armed robbery. Twice on the last one, actually. Records say he isn't affiliated with any gangs."

Siren thanked Turing and relayed the information to the room. "Moreno is trying to expand his territory. I guess we're scaring him."

"Do you think he's planning anything?" Dani asked.

"I wouldn't say so." Siren said, walking towards the back of the truck. "I've never known him for planning very far ahead. This is the biggest sale he's made in almost six months. And from what I can tell, this is something special. Something exotic." She started unlocking the back of the truck.

"Still don't have any leads on what Snakehead is?"

"My best guess is some sort of gene-splicing drug, or maybe it's just an amphetamine."

Cobalt walked to the back of the truck, stashing his bow. "Well, we won't need any leads when we can see it with our own eyeballs." Siren and Cobalt lifted the shutters and were immediately struck with the offending smell of sea salt. Cobalt started hacking. "Smells like Mera's

unmentionables." Siren took a flashlight out of her utility belt and shined it into the truck. The light glistened off the slimy chartreuse skin of an amphibious, humanoid creature. It seemed female given her shapely figure covered in a tight white dress. Claws poked slightly from her fingers and toes. Her eyes were glossy and black. She was chained to the truck by her neck and wrists. Sobs escaped her mouth in between ramblings in a strange, frantic language.

"What is that thing?" Dani asked. Her cigarette dropped from her agape mouth. Marco was getting ready to speak when Siren did for him. "A human being."

"What do you mean?" Cobalt asked "It has gills."

"*She* is Atlantean." Siren said.

"How did you know?" Marco asked.

"I do my research" Siren explained. "We need to get her out of this truck." She stepped in, drawing a set of lockpicks. "She's an Aquatic Atlantean. She can't be on land for too long. We need to get her to water." Faint clicks and clacks resonated in the truck as she began to pick the lock around the Atlantean's neck brace.

"So she's human, but she has to live underwater?" Cobalt asked.

"No." Siren explained, "She lives primarily underwater, but all Atlanteans are amphibious to my knowledge. Doesn't mean we can just leave her in this truck." Siren twisted her hands and the restraints popped off. The Atlantean collapsed to the floor. Her ribcage poked through the white satin. She put her hand up to her throat and looked at Siren before embracing her.

"So wait," Dante said, "Atlantis is real?"

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“What d’ya mean they took the fish girl too?!” Mark Moreno slammed his fists down against the desk in his study. Hundreds of books he had never read lined the walls. Sweat gleamed off of the top of his balding head. His thick, black eyebrows furrowed. His short figure caused him to look up at the men across from him, Marco Giuliani and Nick Warren. He was standing between two tall guards in suits and sunglasses.

“They dropped her into the Monongahela.” Marco said, looking down at the floor.

“Do you know how much time and money I spent trying to sell that scaley broad?” He motioned an empty hand towards each of the men beside him. “That’s \$300,000 and six months down the drain. I had a reliable buyer and you decide to change the plan at the last minute and sell to some college puke that still needs a fake fuckin’ ID.” Each guard put a gold brass knuckle on Mark’s hands. He walked around his desk and stood in front of Marco and Nick. “Now boys,” He put a hand on each of their shoulders “I’m not mad.” Nick and Marco’s reluctant smiles were quickly cut off by Moreno sucker punching the two of them. Most people in the city know him as Knuckle Duster. “I’m fuckin’ furious!” Both men were on the ground, but Mark just kept punching them. “I should’ve never bailed you idiots out of jail. Serves you right to rot.” His strikes created a savage rhythm with the shrill, loud grunting of his voice. This song of violence was cut short when he stood up and wiped the sweat and blood off his brow, hyperventilating. “Get these assholes out of here. And bring in the cop.”

“Yes, sir.” The two men behind Moreno’s desk spoke in unison. They dragged Marco and Nick’s unconscious bodies out of the room. Victor O’Neill walked in.

“Vic! How the hell are ya?”

“I’m good.” Victor did a double take at Marco and Nick. “Are those guys gonna be okay?”

“Oh yeah, they’ll be just fine.” Mark took off his knuckle dusters and set them on his desk. He slicked the small amount of hair on his head back. Out the bottom drawer of his desk, he retrieved a bottle of gin with two glasses. “Can I get you a drink?”

“No, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” Mark poured himself one. “So, what did you learn about our superfriends?”

“Not a lot. They have these kids they work with. Dante and... what was the other kid’s name?”

“Jason? The kid that we was selling the Snakehead to?”

“Jason! That’s it! Jason McMurray, yeah.” Suddenly, David Allen busted in. He wore a blue pinstripe suit with a white shirt and red tie. His gloved hands held a Colt Python.

“Knuckle Duster!” David yelled. He smiled mischievously under his blue ski mask. His brows tilted against the bright red heart painted in the center. “Long time no see.”

“Dave?” Mark asked. “What the hell’re you doin’ here so late?”

“Um...” Victor stuttered. “And who are you?”

“Oh, just an old friend.” David spoke softly. His voice was a low, gravelly drone. “Stopping by to ask for a favor. But for now, you can call me the King.”

Mark chuckled. “The King?”

“The King of Hearts.” David pointed to the heart insignia on his mask. He took the glove off his right hand and showed his tattoo.

“That’s gotta be the dumbest shit I’ve heard in my life. So what? You get put away by a few freaks and you start playing dress-up? You think you’re King Fucking Tut or something?” Mark took a swig of his gin. “It’s pathetic, Dave. You should really see somebody. Psychiatrically, I mean.”

The King of Hearts chuckled. He aimed the Colt at Knuckle Duster. “The money, Mark. Now.”

“About that. I can’t give it to you.” Mark finished off his gin and wiped his lips.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I could give it to you. I’m just not gonna.” Moreno’s men came back into the room.

“Sir, what do you want us to do about this guy?” one of them asked.

“Get him the fuck out of here.” Moreno smiled and poured himself another drink. “Have yourself a nice night, Dave.” One of his men grabbed the King of Hearts on the shoulder. David knocked the guard to the floor with the butt of his gun. Then he shot both of Moreno’s men in the head, quickly pulling the hammer back from his hip. Their bodies spilled onto the floor in mid-draw. Victor grabbed his head and ducked down into the corner, blood and chunky grey matter splattering around the room.

The King of Hearts aimed at Moreno, “Get me the money, fuckface.” He squatted down next to the crooked detective. “Now, tell me again what you learned about Siren and Cobalt.”

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The Charade opened the window to her bedroom, making special care to come in quietly. It wasn’t the easiest task. Her knee was a little shot from kicking a mugger into a dumpster. The length of her tan trench coat

flowed behind her. She took note of her situation. It was dead quiet. She took a deep breath and sat down at her desk. She draped her coat on the chair behind her, leaving her black suit under it. She took the strap off of white bauta mask. Her black, curly hair flipped to the side as she set it down. The ridges in the white leather scowled at her. She reached down to the camera around her neck. The digital raws showed what she was doing that night, stalking Siren and Cobalt.

She reviewed the entire bust. Dante Knowles was there as usual. He’s been working with them for years now, practically a celebrity himself. There was a new kid, Jason McMurray. The frail ginger was a new mole for Pittsburgh’s heroes. To Charade’s understanding, his parents threw him out for being with another man. We can’t all be so lucky. Siren put him up in a shelter on the South Side: Morrison House. The rest of the bust seemed pretty standard. Dani brought a new partner. From the research she’s done, Charade has categorized him as “untrustworthy”. She set the camera down and put a finger up to her chin. After a few hums of inquisition, she pulled out a clunky laptop from under her desk. She brought up a records-browsing system of her own design.

“Alright, Victor O’Neill.” She said in a cold monotone. “Let’s find out who you really are.”

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Siren and Cobalt made their way over the Pittsburgh skyline. The busy and lively city gave way to sprawling green fields surrounded by clusters of buildings and houses. Siren was swinging from rooftop to rooftop with her grapple gun. Her purple cape flowed behind her in three points, rippling in the wind as she turned sharp corners. Cobalt

freeran above, propelling himself forward with the occasional grapple arrow.

“So how did he get an Atlantean?” Cobalt asked, his words being broadcast to Siren and Turing over their communications system.

“I’m not sure.” Siren answered.

“How does anybody catch an Atlantean?”

“Probably with a big net.” Turing interjected.

“If it’s a human being I think a net would be a bit too primitive.” Cobalt said.

“I mean, have you ever had to avoid a net?” Turing asked.

“Can’t say I have.”

“I’ve heard of Atlanteans being sold on the black market.” Siren explained. “I never suspected Moreno would be involved in it. Turing, check any black market flights that have come into the east coast from the Atlantic mainland. Cross reference known crew with Knuckle Duster’s associates.”

“Already on it.” Turing said. He started typing frantically on his keyboard. On his monitors, he could see familiar streets from Siren and Cobalt’s POV. They were coming back to HQ. Just as they approached the door, he spun around in his chair to greet them. “So,” he interlocked his fingers and crossed his legs “I bet you’re wondering why I’ve gathered you all here today.”

“Are you gonna make that joke every time we come back?” Siren asked.

“Until I decide to stop, yeah.” Turing, or Tanner Bishop as he was regularly known, was a tall, thin young man. He had shaggy, curly brown hair, a wide, pointy nose, and a mouth that went around his entire head. He was wearing green pajama pants and a grey shirt marked with emojis. It read: “LOL NOW CRY L8R”.

Cobalt pulled down his bandana. A scruffy, blond beard spilled out, the frames of the goggles resting at the bottom of his neck. “I think he gathered us here today to beat a dead horse.” The bright blue eyes of Eric Petersen blinked as he adjusted to the light. He had a thin nose and freckles along his cheeks. A bright smile poked from his beard.

“How’s that cross reference going?” Siren took down her mask to reveal the young face of Elizabeth Moto. Straight black hair cascaded down her neck as she drew her cowl off. She had thin black eyebrows and a small round nose. She opened her thin, brown eyes and looked over Tanner’s six-monitor setup. A small mole was perched next to her right eye.

Tanner pulled a profile up on the screen. “The only match is Nick Warren, which tracks.”

“Do we have an address on him?”

“Yeah. Apartment on South Pacific.”

Siren pulled her mask up. “Alright, let’s get at it.”

Eric stood to block her from leaving. “Whoa. Hold your horses there, Patti Smith. It’s almost 4 in the morning and you gotta open the library at 8.”

“I’ll be back in 30 minutes. You can go home and get some sleep if you want.”

“But I want to get some sleep with you. Come on, can’t this wait until Thursday?”

“He might be somewhere else by Thursday.”

“Since he’s awaiting trial,” Tanner interjected, “if he leaves the state, a warrant will be issued for his arrest.”

“See?” Eric said, taking Liz’s mask off. “Hey, technically it’s our day off. Let’s enjoy it!”

“Okay.” Liz finished pulling her mask down. “I haven’t slept in a while anyway.” Liz and Eric got into civvies and walked a

few blocks from HQ to their apartment complex on the edge of Squirrel Hill. Frost hung off the trees in a crystalline version of morning dew. Despite it being March, it was still freezing in the city. They crossed the threshold into their apartment at 4:03 AM. Liz opened the door quietly, trying not to wake Ms. Jessica Dillon, Liz's adoptive mother, whose bedroom was just across the living room. Eric's full size *Yor: Hunter From the Future* poster and Ms. Dillon's print of Klimt's "Judith" hung on opposite ends of their television. On the nightstand next to their old, grey couch was a cheap, suitcase turntable. Under it was Andy Moto's record collection. Liz inherited it when both her parents were murdered. She was only four. She listens to them regularly. Her favorite was The Stooges' *Funhouse*.

They made their way into their bedroom, holding hands. A promotional poster for Justice League International was displayed by the window. Eric's first bow and quiver were hung up behind the bed next to his silver medal from the 2010 Youth Olympics in Singapore. The walls were plastered with drawings and paintings he had done since high school. His guitar was propped up in the corner, missing strings. The only thing Liz kept in this room were her GED certificate on the wall and a picture of her parents and her together on the bedside table.

"Can I ask you something?" Eric took off his shirt, throwing it behind his head and into the laundry basket on the other side of the room. His physique looked like it was carved out of wood. Beneath his bulging pecs were two long surgical scars. His torso was a tapestry of splotchy bruises and small cuts.

"Sure." Liz reached into the dresser next to the door and put on Eric's XXL Dr. Pepper t-shirt, covering up her own scarred,

marble musculature before jumping into bed. She brushed her teeth with a toothbrush she grabbed from the nightstand.

"How do you know so much about Atlantis?"

"I thought I said so. I do my research." She spit into a small tin can.

"Well, I know that, but like, what research brought you upon that? Please tell me you were playing the Wikipedia game and just stumbled on it."

"I try to keep up on anything supernatural. Most of what I find is bogus, but with that werewolf running around the Upper East Side and that Broadsword guy fighting monsters all over the world I figured I should know what we could be up against at all times."

"And what reputable news source told you about Atlantis?"

"The New York Times, actually. It was just a small column."

"Oh." Eric reached into the nightstand and pulled out a CBD oil vape rig. It's the only thing that's helped with his insomnia. "I stand ill-informed." He took a drag and blew a huge cloud of vapor on his way to bed. "Follow up question."

"Shoot." She wrapped her arms around him.

"Why are you so amazing?"

Liz blushed before embracing harder. "You're such a dork, you know that?"

"Hey, that's why they call me the dork knight." He adjusted himself, putting his arm below his pillow and embracing Liz. "Goodnight. I love you."

"I love you too." She put her hands around his face and kissed him.

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Liz never fell asleep. At 4:58, once she knew that Eric was out, she got out of bed and got dressed. She left the bedroom silently. She left a note in the kitchen:

Hey babe,

Hope you got some rest. Decided to leave for the library a little early to get some filing done. There's a fresh pot of coffee with your name on it. Can't wait to see you!

Love, Liz

After making the aforementioned pot of coffee, she left. When she got on the street she knew she should've worn something warmer. She had only grabbed a hoodie and sweatpants. It had started to snow.

She got to the Yorba Public Library at 5:24. Instead of going in through the front, she decided to take the basement entrance. It just felt more comfortable. She opened the door and Tanner was sitting at his computer with his attention focused on Xenoblade Chronicles. He was sipping on Coca-Cola and petting Crystal, Liz's brown tabby cat. He quickly turned around.

"Liz!" He shouted. "Man, that was short."

"Couldn't sleep." Liz shrugged.

"I gotcha." An awkward pause hung between them. "Wanna see what Nick Warren is up to?" Tanner asked, with finger guns.

A grin crept across Liz's face. "You read my mind." She walked over to the wall and touched the top corner, then the bottom corner, then the middle. Part of the wall popped open and swung out to reveal Siren and Cobalt's uniforms hanging from a rack.

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Nick Warren lived in a shabby basement apartment in Bloomfield. In the year he'd

been in Pittsburgh, sometimes he wished Mark Moreno never brought him to this dump of a city. He had arrived back at his house shortly after he woke up in Moreno's hallway.

His face was smashed and bloody. Little streaks of red stained his blonde hair and white shirt. He was sound asleep when Siren found her way in. The door was deadbolted so she took the window as a more direct approach. She crouched atop Nick in his bed. Her head tilted as she observed him.

"Boop his nose." Turing said into his communicator.

"What?" Siren whispered.

"Boop. His. Nose." She shrugged, pulled up a finger and poked Nick on the nose. His face contorted in pain as he bolted up.

"What the fuck?" He yelled. "You?"

"I have questions." She grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up to the wall. "You were on the crew of a flight coming in from mainland Atlantis to the Indiana Airport. Pretty big job for a guy of your experience. How'd you get the Atlantean?"

"The Mainland Atlanteans sell the Aquatics as slaves." Nick's voice was labored, breathy. "They think it's good sport. I just bought one wholesale and then brought it on board. She enjoyed the flight over. Being put in a cage, not so much."

"What does Knuckle Duster want with an Atlantean? Why traffic one in?"

"He was asked to."

She put her forearm against his neck. He gagged at the impact. "By whom?"

"I don't know." Siren pulled her fist back. "Honestly! The only thing I know about her is that they call her Masquerade."

"Masquerade?"

"Yeah. She wears a mask. Sound familiar, don't it?" He spit in her face. She dropped him to the bed and walked out of the

room. Nick rubbed his neck and started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Siren turned her head.

“You don’t even know. This isn’t your town anymore, birdie. This is the King’s city now.”

“The King?”

“The King of Hearts. You know, I didn’t expect much of him with that costume he was wearing and all. I didn’t catch much, but then I heard the shots. He just... killed everybody.” Nick’s laughter continued as Siren left the house.

“That sounded spooky.” Turing remarked as she made her way down the street.

She grappled up to the roof of a Whole Foods a few blocks from Warren’s place. She put her finger up to her ear. “Turing. You can go home.”

“Yeah, it is almost six in the morning.” His voice gave way to a yawn. “Goodnight, Liz!”

“Night.” The line went dead as Siren pulled a flip phone out of her utility belt. She brought up a contact for Jason McMurray. It’s customary for her to check in with her agents after an operation. She sent him a text when she first left HQ again. No answer. She tried calling him. Nothing either. “Hmm. Strange.” It was in that moment that she realized it was almost 7 in the morning. She put her hand under her mask and rubbed her eyes.

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Ms. Jessica Dillon unlocked the front door of the Yorba Public Library at 7:45 AM. She walked down the small atrium, commemorated with bricks in the floor listing big name donors. She crossed the threshold into the library itself, the movies and

checkout desk on her left, the reference desk and books to her right. She ran the library with Liz under her wing. She’s been running it for six years, though she’s worked here for thirteen. Jessica was a pear shaped woman in her mid thirties. Long dreadlocks came down to her back. One was colored bright blue because, as she says, “you only have one chance to be alive.” She walked over to the checkout desk where Liz was eating cereal and putting new books into the system.

“Hey Ms. Dillon.” Liz said, cereal still in her mouth.

“Good morning, kid.” Ms. Dillon replied, pulling her red cardigan over her Battle of the Books t-shirt. “Or is it still nighttime for you, ‘Lil Ms. Yellow Tights?”

“Yeah. I was supposed to get some sleep, but Tanner helped me chase a lead instead.”

“Does this have to do with the Snakehead bust last night? How’d that go, by the way?”

“It went well. Turns out Snakehead is an Aquatic Atlantean slave Knuckle Duster was selling.”

“An Atlantean? In Pittsburgh?!”

Liz nodded excitedly. “We put her in the Monongahela until further notice.”

“What if she swims away?”

“She’s still human, she’ll want to stay near civilization. Plus we put an ankle bracelet on her.”

“Is that very ethical?”

“Well like you said, what if she swims away?”

“Fair enough. Does Eric know you chased this lead?”

“No. He thinks I spent the night back home. Please don’t tell him, okay?”

“You got my word, kiddo.”

-

Tanner Bishop parked his blue 1993 Volvo 940 Turbo in front of the library at 11:59. He was just on time. Tanner lived in West Mifflin with a few roommates, so he had to use the Volvo to get to work every day. He's had it since college where he refurbished the whole thing by hand. He grabbed his Pokemon backpack from the back seat and locked the doors before heading in. The hole in the sweatpants he had stolen from his ex shot cold into his kneecaps. He cringed. The gigantic black winter coat he was wearing more than made up for it, though.

Tanner waved to Eric, who had been manning the front desk for an hour now. "You're late." He said, drinking coffee and reading.

"Yeah I was up kinda late last night" Tanner yawned on the last word before heading behind the desk and taking off his jacket. He looked behind him and saw Ms. Dillon preparing books in the back. "Where's Liz?"

"She's downstairs taking a nap." He looked down from Tanner back to the Spider-Man trade he was reading. Tanner sat down. "I guess she didn't sleep well last night."

"Well that's fair. She didn't sleep at all." Tanner cracked a fresh Coke and started drinking.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh..." the word escaped Tanner's lips involuntarily "I probably wasn't supposed to tell you this, but after you guys went home she came back and we saw what that guy knew."

Eric slammed his comic shut. "Are you serious? This was supposed to be our fucking day off and she went behind my back?"

Tanner shrugged, his mouth agape. "I don't know what to tell you, man."

"I can't fucking believe this." In that moment, a woman approached the front desk. A face Eric hadn't seen in two years. "Mom?"

"Kira?" Karen Petersen was a tall, thin blonde in business casual wear. She had a face that may have been beautiful twenty years ago, but with numerous sessions of botox, her face started to look like the skin was stapled to it. Eric had her freckles.

"It's Eric, mom."

"Yeah, it's Eric." Tanner interjected.

"I'm sorry." She exclaimed. "I'm trying. How have you been, Eric? Happy belated birthday."

Eric sighed. "I've been alright, I guess. How's Chuck?"

"We're officially separated. Speaking of which, what were you planning for Thanksgiving?"

"Same thing I've been doing the last five years: eating Chinese food with my girlfriend."

"Oh." She tapped her bright pink nails on the countertop feverishly. "I was wondering if you would want to come over, have dinner with your brother and I. You can bring the Asian too!"

"Her name is Liz."

"Right. Liz can come too. Please just promise me you'll think about it."

"I'll think about it. No promises."

"Okay. Let me know. I love you." She walked out of the library. Eric crumpled up the nearest piece of paper and threw it furiously at her. It landed somewhere by the Blu-Rays.

"You missed." Tanner whispered, amazed.

"Yeah, I did." Eric stared off into the distance. "I'm gonna go outside for a hot sec."

"Okay, feel better dude."

Jessica Dillon finished wrapping her stack of new books at 12:32. She walked out and saw Tanner playing his Nintendo Switch at the front desk. More Xenoblade. "Hey Tanner!" She said.

"Hi, Jess!" Tanner replied, waving frantically.

"What did I tell you about playing your Switch at the front desk?"

"To do it all the time." He winked.

Ms. Dillon shook her finger at him, then looked to the empty chair. "Where's Eric?"

"He went outside." With that information, she walked out front. Eric was sitting on the curb smoking a cigarette. There were two fresh butts put out next to him, smoked to the filter.

"Hey buddy." Ms. Dillon said. Her voice was smooth and calming.

"Hey." Eric barely noticed she was there. He took another puff, exhaling away from her. "Please don't tell Liz I'm smoking again."

"I won't." She sat down beside him. "What's up?"

"Well first, I found out my girlfriend and partner lied to me and went behind my back and then immediately afterward my mom came in and-" He finished off the cigarette, put it out and lit up another one. "She called me Erica. Erica, for Christ's sake. It's been, like, half a decade already. I have a beard. I got my titties fucking chopped off. How long can it realistically-" He was yelling at this point. He put his head between his knees and ran his hands through his hair. He picked himself up and hit his cigarette again. "She wants to be back in my life. She's finally divorcing my dad, so better late than never, but- She said something about

Thanksgiving. I just don't know if I'm ready."

"That's perfectly understandable. After what he did to you, I can't imagine being back in that house would be good for you, even with him gone." Eric looked up at Jessica, her brown eyes lit up in the afternoon light. "And until you're ready, fuck your mom. You don't owe her anything."

Eric flicked his cigarette away and stood up. He embraced her. "Thanks." They started to walk into the library. "I still don't know what to do about Liz though."

"You'll figure it out. Trust me." As they walked into the atrium of the library, Liz sprinted into view. She barreled towards the glass doors separating them.

"Come here." she whispered. "It's an emergency." The three met Tanner behind the front desk. He spun around in his chair.

"Jason just sent me a text." Liz said, "'911. Meet me at my parents' place. Urgent.'" She gave a worried look to all of them.

"You guys go do your thing." Ms. Dillon cracked her knuckles. "I'll run this popsicle stand."

Tanner, Eric, and Liz ran to the door that lead to the basement. Eric looked back and said "You're so lame" to Jessica. Once they got downstairs, Liz and Eric suited up as Tanner booted up his computer. Siren and Cobalt left out into the Pittsburgh skyline as Turing stayed behind for recon.

"Do you know how to get to Jason's parents'?" Cobalt asked, wind cutting out most of his voice.

"Yeah!" Siren shouted. "I went there to get stuff his parents wouldn't give him. Our communications are down." She put her hand up to her ear. "Turing?"

Static waned as Tanner's voice slowly became audible and the heads up displays in the heroes' masks came up. "Sorry about

that.” He said. “My computer takes a sec to boot up. These aren’t usual business hours.”

“Do we really have to go do this right now?” Cobalt asked. “Couldn’t you have just called him?”

“I tried.” Siren answered. “He never picked up. After a while it just went immediately to voicemail so the burner’s probably off.”

“Or *destroyed*.” Cobalt said dramatically.

“I don’t want to assume that. Let’s wait until we get there.”

-

All the lights were off and the blinds were drawn at the McMurrays’ apartment. Siren and Cobalt were able to swing up to a fire escape and came in through a window in the kitchen. A voice came from the right. The slight outline of a couch and a bookshelf could be seen in the living room.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” The voice droned.

“Who are you?” Siren asked, she pulled a small metal cylinder out of her utility belt. She threw it up into the air and it expanded into a steel bo staff. She caught it and assumed a fighting stance. Cobalt notched an arrow, tugging at the bowstring slightly. They looked at each other and nodded before heading into the living room. It was pitch black. They could see two figures on the couch and three in front of them. The voice came from the one standing in the middle.

“Oh, just an old friend.” The voice was gravely and hypnotic. “For now, you can call me King.”

“So you’re the King of Hearts?”

“The King of Hearts?” Cobalt laughed.

“Seriously? It’s a little late for Valentine’s Day, bud.”

“Oh, Cobalt. Always with the jokes.” The King of Hearts said. He stepped into the faint light coming in from the blinds. His wicked smile and bright red heart glowed in the darkness. “I’ll be the first to let you know that your career in comedy is coming to an end.”

“Are you threatening us?” Siren asked.

“No, I am simply offering a proposal. You quit or I keep doing it.”

“Doing what?” Siren could smell the iron in the air.

“Oh,” the King stepped back to the front door of the apartment “this.” He flicked on the lights and revealed Dante and Jason tied up to the ceiling in front of him, duct tape over their mouths. Sweat shined off of Dante’s dark brow as he screamed futilely. Jason was struggling to get out of his bonds, scratching frantically at the ropes. On the couch were Jason’s parents, their throats slit and their bodies posed holding each other. It seemed that in the interim, the King of Hearts put an open beer in Mr. McMurray’s hand. Siren gasped, looking at the carcasses on the couch. She brought her free hand up to her mouth. Cobalt put his arm on her shoulder. “Why?” Cobalt asked, white knuckling the handle of his bow.

“Oh, why does anybody do anything?” The King of Hearts pulled out a knife. “To earn my place in the world.” He quickly slit Dante’s throat. Blood gushed from his adam’s apple.

“No!” Siren screamed.

The King of Hearts went for Jason, but before he could even make two steps, Cobalt fired an arrow at the ropes, collapsing Jason to the ground. Siren threw her bo staff down and leaped at the King of Hearts,

winding up for a right hook. Hearts performed a roundhouse kick, striking Siren in the face and sending her flying. She landed on the coffee table. It broke under the inertia of her body.

“If you don’t quit doing the cops and robbers game that you’ve brainwashed this city into putting up with for the last five years, then people will die. Every day. That’s my proposal. Think about it.” the King of Hearts threw a smoke bomb down and disappeared out the front door.

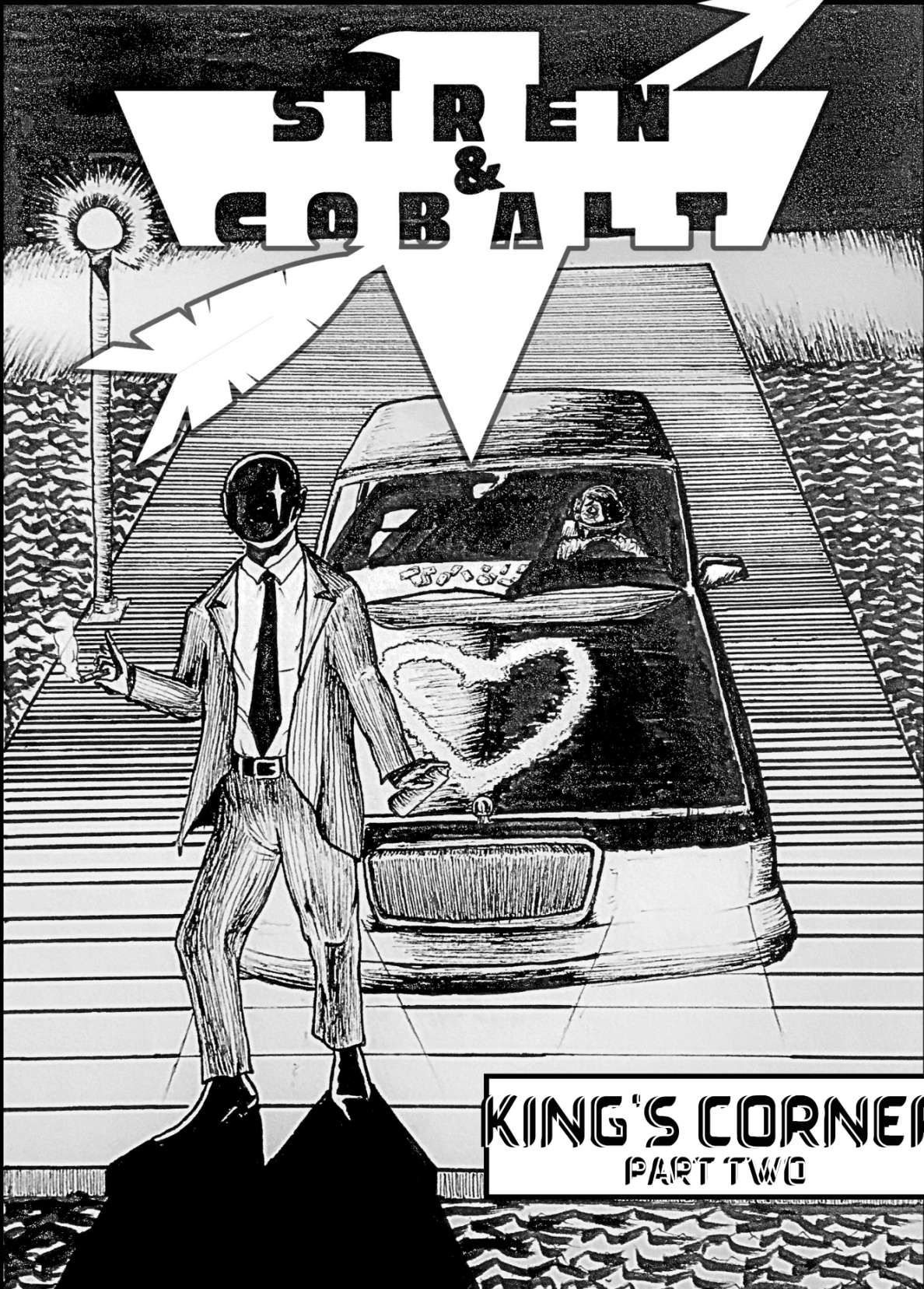
Siren got up, adjusting her mask. “You okay?” Cobalt asked.

“Call 911!” Siren shouted as she got up. “Do some first aid. I’m going after the big guy.” She ran out into the hall. She looked to the right and saw a staircase. The rhythmic tapping of his dress shoes echoed throughout the hall. She ran to the stairs and leapt down. Going down the middle of the loop around staircase, she could cover two or three flights at a time. Finally, they got down to the lobby. He was only mere feet away from her. They ran out onto the street where a car was waiting. Dodge Neon. Dynamite Cleaning. He got in and took off. Siren collapsed to the ground, out of breath and in pain. “Dammit.”

“Did you get him?” Cobalt asked over the communicator. Siren limped back into the building.

To Be Continued . . .

NEXT ISSUE:



KING'S CORNER
PART TWO

BE NOT AFRAID. THE SQUID IS WATCHING.



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