



ABSURDIST

#2 OF 6

\$3

# WESTREN & COBALT

THE ULTIMATUM HAS  
BEEN GIVEN!

PITTSBURGH'S  
RESIDENT  
SUPERHEROES

THE KING OF HEARTS  
IS HERE!



WATCH THE BODIES  
PILE UP IN...

**KING'S CORNER**  
PART TWO

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...

The title 'SIREN & COBALT' is rendered in a bold, blocky, sans-serif font. The word 'SIREN' is on the top line, '&' is in the middle, and 'COBALT' is on the bottom line. The text is centered within a large, white, stylized arrow shape that points upwards and to the right. The arrow's shaft is a thick white bar, and its head is a large, white, jagged arrowhead. The background is black, making the white text and arrow stand out prominently.

**SIREN  
&  
COBALT**

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# SIREN & COBALT

in

## KING'S CORNER

### [PART TWO OF THREE]

Siren stumbled up the stairs of the apartment building. The slow rhythm of her steps left shallow echoes in her path. The fluorescent light above flickered as she graced the third floor. Lactic acid and the pain that came with it coursed further and further through her muscles. Each step was more excruciating than the last. The young crime-fighter's purple cloak swayed back and forth as she dragged herself up the stairs, grunting and wincing in a strange two-tone melody. She finally crossed the threshold into the fifth floor hallway. She limped toward the door when the pain in her right ankle overcame her. She collapsed to the floor, grasping the doorknob to the McMurrays' apartment. Small tears rolled out from behind her mask. The leather of her purple gloves creaked as she held onto the doorknob for dear life. She took a deep breath and loosened her grip before standing up and entering.

The scene before her was grim. Jason McMurray's parents were still dead on the couch, posed holding each other like mannequins. The King of Hearts thought this would all be in good fun. Jason himself was shaking like a tuning fork in the corner of the room, trying desperately to get a glass of water up to his mouth. Cobalt was crouched over Dante Knowles. He was holding a towel over Dante's throat, futilely trying to stop the bleeding. A pool of blood slowly gathered beneath the two of them. Dante gasped for air before slowly flickering his eyes shut. Cobalt sprung up, throwing the towel away. His blue

and black uniform was covered in dripping, red stains.

"I couldn't save him." Cobalt said solemnly.

"Damn." Siren practically whispered the word under her breath. She leaned on the wall and put a finger to her ear. "Turing, get Dani."

"Already on it." Turing's voice came in through the heroes' headsets.

"Thanks." Cobalt walked towards Siren, putting his hand on her shoulder. "You alright?"

Siren looked up at her partner, glad that the mask covered her eyes. "I'm fine. How's Jason?"

"I don't know. He's pretty deep in shock." Siren took Cobalt's hand off her shoulder and walked towards Jason. Cobalt grabbed her hand and whispered. "What're you doing?"

Siren snapped away. "I can't just let him stand in the corner alone." She took the glass out of Jason's hand. His body kept shaking but his eyes followed her as she put her hands on his shoulders. "Jason, I am so sorry."

"Did you get him?" Jason asked, looking through her.

"No." Siren looked down at the ground. "He was gone by the time I got downstairs." She looked up, trying to put on a pleasant grin. "But we'll get him. I promise."

“Okay.” Jason sat down at a table on the end of the living room. He looked up at her. “It’s not your fault.”

Siren nodded as she heard footsteps coming up the staircase down the hall, accompanied by a harsh, feminine voice. “I’m usually in bed around now, guys.” The voice said. “This had better be good.” Detective Dani Guevara walked into the apartment, drinking coffee from home when she witnessed the scene. She stopped dead in her tracks. “Oh my god.” She walked over to Dante’s lifeless body, closed his eyes and looked up at Siren. “What happened?” Siren told her about everything. About the King of Hearts and his proposal. “Did you catch him?” Dani asked. Siren shook her head. “And do you have any proof that this King of Hearts was here?” As Dani finished her question, her phone buzzed. There was a new message with two video attachments.

“That was probably from Turing.” Siren said, leaning against the wall for support, “Should be all the footage from our headsets. From when we got the call to when we saw the King of Hearts.” Dani scrolled through the video and came across the King of Hearts standing between Dante and Jason, tied to the ceiling. He had on his blue pinstripe suit, white shirt and red tie. She saw his glossy eye beyond the heart on his mask.

“Who is this guy?”

“He could be Todd McFarlane for all we know.” Cobalt said.

“I know who he is.” Siren interjected. “He called us ‘old friends’.”

“Who is he, S?” Dani asked.

“Notice the scar on his left eye. And the mustache. It has to be David Allen. He just got out of prison yesterday and he left the scene in the same car that picked him up.”

“How do you know that?” Cobalt asked. Siren walked toward the kitchen and

started to climb out the window. “Where are you going?” He followed her.

“Dani,” Siren said, “get a warrant to search his apartment. I’m going to chase a lead.” The two young crime-fighters swung off into the skyline.

“I guess I’ll call it in then. They get to do the superheroing and I get to do the paperwork.” Dani picked up the radio on her belt and called it in. Triple homicide.

“Oh my god.” Victor O’Neill, Dani’s newly assigned partner, spoke on the other end of the radio. “What happened?”

“I think Pittsburgh just met its first supervillain.”

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Siren unhooked her grapple from a nearby roof and fell into an alleyway. She tried to tuck and roll, but it didn’t do much to stop her ankle from hurting. One of Cobalt’s grapple arrows planted itself into the ground next to her. He zipped down and ran toward her as she limped off down the alley. Their footsteps crunched softly in the fresh snow.

“Liz,” he said, “Where are we going? We can’t just leave a murder scene.”

Siren turned around and glared at him. He could feel her stare beyond the mask. She pointed a finger at him. “Never call me by my real name when I’m in uniform, Cobalt. The only reason we left the murder scene is to find the murderer.” She walked toward a fire escape on the left side of the alleyway.

“I’m sorry. Are we going to Allen’s apartment?”

“No.” Siren jumped up to the fire escape. “We’re already here. Technically, this is his mother’s apartment, though.”

“Oh,” Cobalt followed her, “Well, sorry for not wanting to get into semantics. Do you really think David Allen did this?”

They climbed through the window into the darkened apartment. The smell of stale cigarettes and soup marinated the room. Everything was covered in plastic.

“He’s gotten better.” Siren pulled a flashlight from her utility belt. “A lot better. But I recognize that eye anywhere.” Siren approached a coffee table in the living room. She picked up a stack of postcards from Costa Rica. They all had beautiful cursive handwriting on them. “Allen’s mom was supposed to pick him up from prison. She never showed. Looks like he told her to skip town.”

“You got all of that after looking at the postcards for two seconds?” Turing asked, shocked.

“I’m a speed reader.” Siren explained. “I’ve told you this four times.”

“Don’t @ me like this.” Turing said, laughing.

“What were you talking about with a car earlier?” Cobalt asked, approaching her.

“I staked out his release yesterday. That’s where I saw his get-away car. I was about to follow it up. I had my suspicions, but I didn’t trust my instincts. And it got three people killed today.”

Cobalt gave a frustrated sigh. “That is not your fault. At least you know you can trust your instincts, I guess. Can we go back to the book- cave and talk this out?”

“I suppose. Not much we can find here. We need a plan.”

-

Tanner Bishop sat in his chair, watching the centermost of his six monitors. It displayed the King of Hearts running into a car. He recognized the make. It was a Dodge Neon somewhere in the early 2000’s. One of the cylinders was misfiring. He scrolled the video

to the view of the car taking off down the road. He went down to the frame trying to find the best focused picture of the license plate number. After a few rounds of trial and error, he got it. He scanned it and put it into PennDOT’s database. Just then, the door to the “book-cave” that he shared with Pittsburgh’s young heroes opened. Siren was leaning on Cobalt for support as they entered the library basement. She sat down on the cot in the corner of the room and grunted in pain. She took off her mask, black hair spilling out from the cowl.

“Are you okay?” Tanner asked.

“I’m fine.” Liz Moto said, taking off her royal purple boot. She took off her gloves and laid her foot up on the bed. “Eric, could you get me an ice pack?” Cobalt had already taken off the top of his costume. Eric Petersen’s fair, freckled musculature was contrasted by the black of his skin-tight pants. Splotches of blood differentiated the blonde hair on his head from his beard and chest hair. He was putting on the clothes he was wearing that morning, a Pyramid Transnational T-shirt and a pair of black slim cut jeans.

“Sure thing.” Eric said, climbing up the stairs to the library. He went into the backroom, not even noticing Jessica Dillon sitting at the check-out desk.

“Eric!” She said brightly. “How’d it go?”

“Overall net negative for the day, Ms. Dillon.” Eric Petersen walked up to the refrigerator in the back room. Ms. Dillon followed. “Three people died and Liz has a sprained ankle. Typical stuff, y’know?” He took an ice tray out of the freezer and filled a Zip- Loc bag.

“Yeah, I’d have to agree with the ‘net negative’ statement. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Eric blurted out before walking out of the back room. Jessica walked

out to the library. There were only about three people in it. She pulled a small bell from a drawer in the desk and placed it on the counter. She left a note: "If in need of a librarian, please ring bell. Thanks!"

Ms. Dillon walked down into the book cave and saw Eric giving Liz the ice-pack. Tanner was in the middle of a sentence. "...registered to Walter Jefferson."

"What's registered to Walter Jefferson?" Ms. Dillon asked.

"The car the King of Hearts escaped in." Liz said, pressing the ice pack against her ankle.

"The King of Hearts?" Ms. Dillon asked.

"The bad guy." Eric added, his arms crossed as he leaned against the wall. Tanner pulled up a capture from Siren's headset of the King of Hearts. Jessica looked down at him, adjusting her glasses.

"He looks... tall." she observed.

"He's more than just tall" Liz took the ice pack off her ankle. She pulled a first aid kit off the wall and got a roll of gauze. "He's dangerous. We don't know when he's going to strike next." She wrapped the gauze around her ankle and put her boot back on. She got up and threw her mask over her head. "Do we have an address on Walter?"

"Yea." Tanner said, "Mills Avenue."

"Let's get at 'er." Siren said, walking towards the door. Eric stepped in front of her.

"How 'bout we don't and say we did?" He asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Look, this is way above our paygrade. The cops already have the guy's name and know just as much as we do. Do we really have to get any more involved?"

"Of course we do. He has it out for us. He's our responsibility."

"I got into the superhero game

because I thought it would be fun. And yes, running across rooftops and fighting petty crimes is just as fun as I imagined when I was six. But three people getting murdered? Because some guy has it out for us? That's like, the least amount of fun someone could have."

"Eric, what are you saying?" Liz took off her mask to look her partner in the eyes.

"I don't know. Is this really worth it?"

"It doesn't matter if it's worth it, we can't just ignore this."

"He isn't our responsibility. We did the right thing putting him away. Anything after that does not imply causation." Eric observed her. Her breathing was shallow. It looked like it took a good bit of effort to remain upright. "Liz, when was the last time you slept? Or even took a shower?"

"I slept last night."

"No you didn't. You went to go interrogate Nick Warren last night. Tanner told me."

Liz gave an angry glare at Tanner. He pretended not to notice. She sighed. "Okay, it's been 40 hours since I slept last, but I feel fine."

At this point, Ms. Dillon spoke up, "Liz, I don't think that Eric is saying we should just ignore the King of Hearts. But there's no point in rushing in without a plan. Look, you guys take the day off. Tanner and I can handle the library for the rest of the night. Get some rest. You really look like you need it."

"No." Liz whispered. "I have to do something."

"You did do something. Five years ago." Eric said, holding her hands. "But you're human. Getting some rest and thinking it through will give us the best chance to fight this guy."

“Fine” Liz said. She took off her costume, “but we start right where we left off tomorrow.”

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“A triple homicide today in a downtown apartment complex.” The laptop played a live news broadcast for David Allen, Mark Moreno, and the few that were allowed into the office they had set up in Mark’s study. Allen was still in his King of Hearts suit, but he held his mask in his hand as he watched what the press thought of his work. “The victims, who have not been named, were apparently linked to local superheroes Siren and Cobalt. Footage from their masks confirms the identity of the culprit, 38 year old David Allen.” Allen’s mugshot from five years prior came up on the screen. He had such long hair back then.

“I heard he has a different name.” the co-anchor chimed in. His smile almost created a lens flare on the screen. “The King of Hearts. Anybody with information regarding his whereabouts should report to the authorities. Up next, Raymond Tyler plans the tech expo of the century at-”

“Dammit.” Allen slammed the laptop shut and threw his mask on the ground. “The whole point was that they weren’t gonna know who I was.” Mark put together that the cops might start looking here for the King of Hearts. Allen smiled down at his old partner. He wasn’t as dumb as he remembered. “How’s Damien Freeman doing?” He asked, stroking his mustache.

“Damien?” Mark was shocked. “Are you sure you want to go to him?”

“I don’t think I really have a choice.” David stood up and started to walk out when the door to the office opened. Detective Victor O’Neill stepped through the threshold.

His face was lean and pale. Sweat dripped down his brow and formed little droplets on the rims of his glasses.

Victor swallowed his pride. “David Allen. You’re under arrest for the murder of Dante Knowles, Richard McMurray, and Barbara McMurray.” He pulled a gun from his jacket and aimed it at Allen.

David looked at Victor’s piece and laughed. “Are you serious?” Victor nodded. “Okay, look.” David stepped towards Victor, putting on his mask. He had at least five inches on him. “I don’t think you understand how this works. My friend Knuckle Duster back there has been lining your wallet with crooked money ever since you transferred here. That means you work for me, you sack of shit.” In a split second, he grabbed the gun out of Vic’s hand and struck him across the face with it. Allen threw the gun away and crouched over Victor. “Did you bring anybody with you?” Victor shook his head. David scoffed. “Gimme your phone.” O’Neill did. Allen threw it on the ground and stomped on it. “Now gimme your handcuffs.” Allen grabbed the cuffs out of Victor’s hands before he was even done reaching out. He cuffed their hands together.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Victor asked as David pulled him off his feet.

“I need you to prove a point later. And to prove that point, I need to know where you are. Plus it’ll be fun to have someone witness me.” The King of Hearts dragged the detective down the hall. He reached over his shoulder and spoke to Knuckle Duster. “Give all the guys on your payroll an extra thousand tonight. Tell ‘em to raise as much hell as possible. Robberies, vandalism, stabbings, you name it! We’re going to show Siren and Cobalt what organized crime can really do.”

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Dani Guevara got to her Allentown apartment at 7:47 PM. It wasn't the greatest place in town. The halls smelled like old tobacco and fresh paint. Since her husband died, Dani and her daughter had to move into a smaller place. She unlocked the door and walked in to find her daughter, Izzy Guevara-Robinson sitting on the couch eating a bowl of pasta. Izzy was three months from turning 17.

"H-h-h-hey mom." Izzy squeezed out between bites of rotini. She had bright red, curly hair that she wore in a pixie cut. She was wearing a ripped up Dead Kennedys T-shirt and baggy grey sweatpants.

"Use your strategies, Iz." Dani said, hanging her jacket up by the door.

"Sorry. How was your day? I didn't expect you back so soon." Izzy put the bowl in her lap and started touching the tips of each of her fingers to her thumb, shovelling pasta into her mouth with the other hand.

"What? You want I should work a double shift?"

"No. I just didn't think that you would be able to find anybody to cover the night shift. Especially in the middle of the week. Who took it? Was it Cassaday?"

"I would ask how you know." Dani pulled a cigarette and a lighter out of her pocket. "But I've learned to stop asking."

"Mom, you said you would use the vape when you were inside."

"Right." She put them away. "Sorry." She walked over to the kitchen and pulled a small vape pen out of the drawer and puffed on it. "To answer your question, my day was long. Cleaning up after the tights again." She walked over to join her daughter on the couch.

"Yeah. I heard. The King of Hearts is kind of a lame name for him don't you think?"

"Doesn't matter how lame his name is. He killed three people and he's dangerous."

Izzy got up off the couch and walked toward the kitchen. "Yeah, but does he have like a card motif? He used a knife, not cards."

"And how does one kill someone with cards?"

"I bet Cobalt could throw cards and kill people."

"Well, if he did that, then I wouldn't be working with him."

"What if he had to kill somebody?"

"I don't know if he'd be put into that situation."

"Of course he would. Police are. Wolverine murders people all the time."

"Isn't the whole point of X-Men that it's his civil right to slice people up?"

"Something like that." Izzy cleaned her dish and put it on a rack in the sink. She went into her room and Dani stayed up flipping through the news, eventually ending up on some late night talk show. Captain Chameleon's daughter was talking about a scholarship she just accepted from MIT. She had on her Cimmerian armor, shining white and gold with cyan light spilling out from the seams. She was slicing a watermelon in half with a projected laser sword or some shit. Dani pinched her eyes and sighed. She changed the channel to a special interest interview with William Kohl, Pittsburgh City Councilor and all around scumbag. He was calling for the King of Hearts, as well as Siren and Cobalt to be locked up. Dani drank cheap whiskey and hurled choice insults.

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Liz had fallen asleep by the time Yorba was getting ready to close. Eric couldn't sleep. The burden of fresh coffee. He walked down

to the library, smoking a cigarette on the way. When he made his way into the lobby, he made his hellos to Ms. Dillon, who was locking up. He went down into the book-cave and turned the lights on. A violent yelp came from beside the staircase. Tanner Bishop was playing Xenoblade Chronicles on his computer.

“Can’t you go home to do that?” Eric asked.

“My roommates usually take up the big TV. And I want to experience this beautiful game down to the last pixel.” Tanner slammed a fist down onto his thigh.

“Fair enough.” Eric got his bow and quiver out of the secret storage.

“How’s Liz?”

“Honestly?” Eric aimed his bow at the felt targets at the end of the room. Tanner nodded. “Fuck if I know.” He struck a bullseye. “Here’s hoping she comes to her senses.”

“Is coming to her senses quitting?”

“I mean-” Another bullseye. “I don’t know. Maybe. This is some pretty serious shit we’re in.”

“What do you wanna do?”

“I’m not sure if it really matters what I want to do. Curse of the sidekick, you know?” Eric pulled out the arrow he had strapped the speaker on last night. He examined it and placed it on Tanner’s desk.

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David Allen drove Victor O’Neill to the Freeman Family Mortuary in Lawrenceville. The building was falling apart. It was an abandoned church that Damien and his buddies restored into their business. David put the car into park and put the emergency break on. It was Victor’s Buick Park Avenue. He cringed as David threw the transmission.

“Well,” David looked at Victor and smiled. “Here we are.”

“How fitting.” Victor chuckled. “You’ve come here to die.”

“No, that’s what most people come here to do. But me, I’m coming here for a chance to live. Come on, I’ll show you who runs the place.” David got out of the car and dragged Victor out with a ridiculous smile. They made their way up the ornate steps and David knocked on the door. After a few seconds of silence, he kicked it in. Victor flinched as his arm was tugged slightly. A booming voice came from inside the building. “Who in the hell did that?” The voice asked. “The door was unlocked if you would’ve just given me a second.” David and Victor walked in as smoke billowed from a door leading to the basement. The office panel lights in the ceiling were flickering, almost going out. A stained Time Magazine was visible on a stack in the reception area.

“I don’t have a second.” David answered. “I’m wanted.” The smoke grew thicker and thicker when suddenly a dark figure in a shirt and tie with bright, glowing eyes stepped out of the fog.

“Just the reason why I don’t want you here.” The figure spoke. At the sight of Victor, he gasped. The smoke around him swirled up and disappeared. Damien Freeman stood before the two. He towered over Victor, his jaw outlined with a black 5 o’clock shadow. His dark skin was pale and wrinkled. His right eye was scarred over. “David, I didn’t expect you to bring a police officer. You should’ve mentioned it when you came in.”

“Kinda slipped my mind. Look Damien, I need a place to stay. I’m willing to pay a fair price.”

“That’s all you need? Why come to me? Are all the motels closed?”

"I want to stay close to the city. Your place is best for me to lay low."

"Ah, I see." Damien walked over to the front desk and pulled a small bottle of wine out of the bottom drawer. He spoke softly as he poured himself a glass. "You think I'll sympathize with your current predicament."

"Last I checked you need murder to survive, so yeah. Sympathy was expected." Victor did a double take at this.

"I will allow you to stay in my quarters. Just as long as you answer a few questions."

"Go ahead. I'm a book full of answers."

Damien walked over to Victor and looked him up and down, scanning the cold sweat dripping from his skin. "First. If you are trying to avoid the police, why are you handcuffed to one?"

"Well, this one here's on my payroll." David playfully pulled Victor's hand up, jangling the cuffs.

"No I'm not!" Victor interjected. "I'm on Mark's payroll!"

"That means you're on his payroll too." Damien whispered to Victor. "But nevermind. I'll just assume that this is part of your newfound theatrics. Second. How fair of a price are you willing to pay?"

"One thousand a night. You know I'm good for it."

"Fine." Damien pulled a key out of his breast pocket and dropped it into David's hand. "Keep a low profile. No one knows that my compatriots and I sleep here and I'd like to keep it that way. But before you go, I must ask. Third. What are you planning to do to Siren and Cobalt?"

"If I told you," David dragged Victor out of the busted door. "I'd have to kill you."

The Charade checked her watch before going into Dante Knowles' apartment. It was 11:23 PM. The door was open, just a line of police tape keeping the masses from entering the crime scene. She ducked under it and made her way in. She knew she was going into a high profile area so she put on the uniform best suited for that; TOMS sneakers with the sole sanded down to leave no distinguishable footprints, tight fitting jeans for mobility (and style), a black hoodie, her leather gloves, and her white bauta mask.

The scene she stumbled into wasn't grotesque, but it was messy. The door had been kicked in. Everything was tipped over or at least out of place from where it was supposed to be. It was a sea of violently thrown personal assets. Books lay open on the floor. A smashed lamp, still plugged in, was scattered in the corner. The Charade took a look around and began to put the picture together.

"Alright, two guys on this one. One searched the place and the other got Dante. At least that's what I would've done. This does look like a robbery at first glance, but one thing is bothering me. Nothing was taken." The entire room looked like a tornado went through it, but everything was still there. The TV, the two-monitor desktop at the edge of the room. Dante's wallet was even left open on the floor, probably fell out of his pocket during the struggle. The Charade leaned down and picked it up between two fingers. "Perhaps they were in a hurry, the King of Hearts was going to murder Dante in broad daylight so they had to move quick. Or maybe they were looking for something." It was in this train of thought and observation that she noticed the sound of the airflow to the room. She closed her eyes. Every time a bit of air

would flow into the room through the vent, there was a faint rattling noise that you couldn't hear unless you were listening for it. Luckily, she was. She made her way over to the vent. It was behind the flipped over bookshelf which gave her more reason to believe she was about to find something big. She carefully tiptoed through the minefield of open books and broken photos before crouching down and peering in. Nothing visible. She tugged at it a little, felt the screws. The drywall was stripped. Her leather gloves creaked as she slowly opened the vent. She found exactly what she was looking for. A flip phone. She opened it and found one contact: Siren.

"Bingo." The Charade put the vent back together and left with her prize.

-

Jessica Dillon awoke to the sounds of explosions coming from her living room. She bolted up and checked her phone. It was 3 AM on the dot. She quickly put on her blue bathrobe covered in pink dogs and cats, grabbed the nearest blunt object (which happened to be an umbrella) and leapt out into the living room to find nothing. It was just Liz watching TV with the volume all the way up. There were two men and a woman talking about the logistics of cutting a tree in half with explosives accompanied by generic music. Liz turned around and saw Ms. Dillon in her fighting pose.

"Oh man, did I wake you up?" Liz said, reaching for the remote and turning the volume down by half. "I'm so sorry! I didn't realize how loud it was."

"You're fine." Jess put the umbrella down at her side and walked towards the couch. "You know if I was more of a fighter, I

would've clubbed you over the head with that thing."

"I think I could handle it. It's my job"

"Right." She sat down on the couch next to Liz. "Whatcha watching?"

"Mythbusters. It's like reading a book, but with more explosions."

"Couldn't sleep?"

"Well, I slept for a little bit when I got home but ever since I woke up, my mind has just been racing. I decided to watch TV to distract myself, I guess."

"Would you wanna talk about it?"

"No, I'm fine." There was a silence between them. The only quiet moment the two had together in a long time. Finally, once the Mythbusters went back to commercial, Liz spoke up. "I just... I wish I could've saved them." Her leg was bouncing between her arms. She was scratching at her knees. "I know I could've saved them."

"You can't save everybody, Liz. And just because you wear that costume doesn't mean you have to either. People die every day in this city."

"But people don't die every day because of me." Her voice was labored as she took short, deep breaths between words, a strange change of pace from her usual stoic tone. "And when I went in there, the McMurrays were just-- dead. The entire time I was thinking 'this is my fault. I let someone else's parents get taken away like mine did'. And it's not like I'm not used to it. I've solved actual murders before, but there was just something different about it. Something wrong." Liz turned away from her adoptive mother. "I'm sorry. Can we talk about something else?"

"Do you really want to talk about something else?" Ms. Dillon put a hand gently on Liz's shoulder. "If you want to face this guy, you're gonna have to talk about it."

Liz sighed. "Okay."

"What else were you thinking?"

"I thought about all the things I could've done. All the things I should've done to prevent that. I took a half-measure with this guy. And I was too busy thinking about that and not about how I could take him down and bring him in. A murderer got away because I let my emotions get in the way. I was so stupid. I guess that's what I get for dropping out of high school to be a superhero." Tears were rolling down her eyes. She took a deep breath and tried to contain herself. "I watched as he slit Dante's throat. If I had acted fast enough I could've used my grapple gun to disarm him, I could've cut Dante down before he even had the chance to hurt him. I could've... I could've..." Slowly and painfully, she sobbed. "I could've saved them."

Jessica took a deep breath. "Look, we all make mistakes. Even superheroes. But our mistakes don't define us. It's how we learn from them. The next time you see this guy, you're gonna take him down. You know why?"

Liz looked up, tears and snot dripping down from her face. "Why?"

"Because you're Siren. You're better than him. You're smarter than him." She leaned down to give her adoptive daughter a kiss on the forehead. "You're my superhero."

Liz jumped up and embraced Jessica as hard as she could. Her face was still damp with tears, but she slowly cracked a smile and took a deep breath. Ms. Dillon tried to reciprocate, but the kung fu grip the young crime fighter was putting on her made the use of her arms impossible. "Thank you." Liz said, wiping off her face. "I'm sorry I cried. I never want you to see me like this."

"Don't ever apologize for the way you look."

"What?"

"It's just something Eric says all the time. Would you want me to watch TV with you?"

"If you don't mind."

"Of course not."

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Eric Petersen felt the rope dart in his pocket up and down with his thumb. Liz insisted that he purchase them just in case he wouldn't be able to use his bow and arrow, which in this case, he wouldn't. He was seated with Liz in the back of Tanner's Volvo. The only other thing he could do to keep himself occupied was to pull the leather out of the upholstery with his other hand. Liz was setting up her phone as a hotspot for Tanner's computer. She was wearing a hooded sweatshirt with a canvas jacket over it, a black bandana was wrapped around her neck. Eric was wearing something similar. His bandana was bright red. This was the compromise that they came to once Liz finally had enough rest. She figured if they didn't wear their costumes, then the King of Hearts wouldn't be able to know if they were still operating. Eric had conceded after an hour or so of tense debate.

"What's our ETA?" Liz asked, tossing Tanner's sticker-covered laptop up into the passenger seat.

"We've got about 15 minutes." Tanner replied, going a little too fast for comfort.

"What's our plan exactly? I know you like to play fast, loose and aloof, but how is Walter not gonna put two and two together?" Eric asked.

"Well, my plan was to just talk like this." Liz said in the deepest, gravelliest voice she could muster. Eric gave her a confused look and then burst into laughter.

“Are you serious? A Josh Brolin impression is the best you got?”

“Do you have any better ideas?”

“Hey,” Tanner interjected. “Is this something we should be worried about?” He pointed down the road toward a small crowd of people wreaking havoc on an otherwise quiet street. There were two men trying to break into a car and a few more assaulting and robbing an old woman.

“Stop the car.” Liz blurted out, pulling her bandana over her face. She turned to Eric.

“You get the lady, I’ll get the car.” She jumped out and sprinted towards the car thieves.

“Well, I guess a warm-up round can be good sometimes.” Eric pulled his bandana up and got out of the car. “Stay close in case we need an assist.”

“Got it.” Tanner replied, pulling up his laptop and booting up their com system.

Liz only took a few seconds to get to the Toyota Camry these thugs were trying to break into. In a few steps, she jumped off the back of the car and landed a kick to the face of the guy on lookout. Before the man breaking into the car could even look up, she struck him in the head with an elbow. He was out cold. The lookout was still writhing on the ground, trying to get up. He was shortly put back in his place when Liz stepped on his hand and twisted before going to help Eric. She quickly picked herself up after losing her balance.

Using his rope dart as a grappling hook, Eric swung into one thief, knocking him into the wall. He pinned the guy to the wall with his full weapon before kicking him in the head. “You youngins really need to learn how to respect your elders.” There were two men still assaulting this woman, one kept with what he was doing while the other charged toward Eric at full speed. “Back in

my day we mugged old women with guns, like decent people.” Before the thug could even attempt to tackle Eric, he hurdled over his foe’s head. He fell head first onto the asphalt, leaving a massive scrape on the side of his cheek.

“Stay back.” Eric heard the last thug yell from behind him. He turned around to see the woman on the ground and the thug standing over her, her purse slung across his shoulder and brandishing a small revolver. “I’ll shoot, I swear to God.”

“Really?” Eric said, putting his hands in the air. “Tell me, does he swear back?”

“What?” In that split-second, Eric reached into his pocket and flung a disposable pen directly into the barrel of the gun. The thug unknowingly pulled the trigger, sending an explosion of blue ink all over his arm and face. “My eyes!” He cried in between choice expletives. Eric ran over and hit him in the jaw with his best left hook. The mugger collapsed to the ground.

“Oh, I just love it when they ragdoll like that.” Eric bent over to pick up the woman’s purse, but just then, the thug he had knocked onto the asphalt charged at him. This time, he had a combat knife. Just as he was going to plunge the knife into Eric’s shoulder, Liz swept his legs. She caught the combat knife and used the blunt end of it to knock the thug unconscious before he even hit the ground.

Eric turned around to see what was causing the commotion. “Hey, I could’ve handled that.” He said, giving the purse back to the woman, who was now thanking the heroes on her hands and knees.

“A simple thank you would have sufficed, bud.” Liz walked over to the woman on the ground and helped her up. “Are you okay, ma’am?”

“Yes. Thanks to you!” The woman replied. “Is there anything I can do to repay you?” She pulled out two twenty dollar bills from from her purse.

“No, ma’am. You need that more than us. Would you like me to walk you home? From what I heard of the police scanners, the whole city is kinda like this.”

The woman was about to reply, but she was cut off by the revving of a broken engine, followed shortly by the skidding of tires. The Camry on the other side of the street was broken into and flying towards Eric. He tried jumping over the oncoming car, but was cut off by the windshield smashing into him at fifty miles per hour.

“Eric!” Liz yelled, reaching out to her fallen partner. Before she could help him, the car was being forced into reverse and spun at the height of its turn radius to run backwards straight into her. “Go!” She urged the woman.

Trying to lessen the impact, Liz jumped up onto the trunk of the car before grabbing onto the roof and attempting to kick the driver out of the car. This did nothing to phase him as he opened the door, leaving the young crime- fighter dangling from it, her legs and knees scraping on the asphalt below.

“Liz!” Tanner shouted over the com system. “Jump!” As she followed Tanner’s commands, the Volvo slammed into the side of the Camry, sending it and the driver tumbling down the road. Tanner and his car were left without damage. He got out of the blue masterpiece and helped Liz up on her feet. “Looked like you could use an assist.” Liz thanked him before looking back and forth. “Where’s Eric?”

“Over here!” Eric’s voice yelled from the passenger side of Tanner’s car. Tanner and Liz rushed over to their fallen partner. Blood was dripping down from his forehead.

“Are you okay?” Liz asked.

“Oh yeah. Never been better. Just a few broken ribs. Nothing I can’t walk off.”

“Eric, I’m so sorry” Liz pulled the bandana from her face as well as Eric’s. “Look, we can find Jefferson some other time. Let’s get you to the hospital.” Tanner took this cue to leave, which he promptly did at twice the speed he was using before.

A few blocks away a camera shutter flashed as the Charade took a picture of the Volvo. Her trench coat left a trail behind her as she dipped into a nearby alleyway.

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“You’re probably wondering what we’re doing here, aren’t you Victor?” David Allen asked, placing playing cards down on the dashboard of the Buick. “You’re scared, aren’t you?” This was a rhetorical question. Victor’s hands were duct taped to the steering wheel, his mouth was gagged with a rope, and his car was sitting on a pier leading into the Ohio River. “Well, I just got a call from one of my guys that these so-called heroes hit him with a car. Granted, he hit one of them with a car first, but that’s just semantics.” He continued to place cards down on the dashboard coldly, methodically. “Do you know what I’m playing, Victor? You’ve probably seen it somewhere. This is King’s Corner. It’s a lot like Solitaire. The goal of this game is to put every card in its right place, because you do know every card has a specific place it needs to go. I enjoy it. Sorting the deck. It makes me feel like there’s a sense of purpose. I don’t consider myself a religious man, but if there is a God, I think he would treat our lives like the cards. But that’s all baloney. You know who’s really God? I’m God. Yes, that’s right. I am the God of this city. I make sure that everybody has their place. You see, the problem with these

superheroes is that they think they know better than God. These heroes. They think that just because they learn some flashy fight moves and put on some colorful tights that they can supersede their place in the world. Luckily, I'm here. And I make sure that everybody knows their place." He placed a card down. The Ace of Spades. He waited for a second before scrambling them up and leaping towards Victor, pulling on his tie and forcing him to look into the cold, colorless eye of the King of Hearts. "Now I know what you're thinking, Victor. 'What's my place in all this? Will God give me a purpose?' Well, today's your lucky day, detective, because I am giving you a place in the order of things. You remember yesterday when I told you that I needed you to prove a point? The point is this." He unlocked the handcuffs that had been joining them for the past 48 hours and opened the door of the car. "There are no heroes." The King of Hearts slammed the door and walked around to the hood of the car, lighting a cigarette. He picked up a can of red spray paint and painted a giant heart onto the hood before throwing the can into the river. He then went to the back and started pushing, ignoring the muffled sobs and screams coming from Victor. Eventually, the front tires of the car ended up in the water and at that point he just needed to coax the rest of the vehicle in. Victor O'Neill died in the river at 12:30 AM, cold and alone.

**TO BE CONTINUED . . .**

NEXT ISSUE:



# STREIN & CO. BALT

PITTSBURGH'S  
RESIDENT  
SUPERHEROES

**KING'S CORNER**  
PART THREE

## **MORE FROM THE ANNALS OF THE ABSURDIST UNIVERSE:**

Athena is a Speedster who was always very good at getting away from problems. Especially when they were more than she could handle. That's what this next mission was going to be, getting away and dealing with issues that one girl could handle. That didn't exactly work out. As she investigates the strange events in an Arkansas town, she meets the town outcast; Katrina. But is she friend or foe, and how much does she have to do with what's going on in the town?

### **SPEED OF STRIFE**

**ART AND STORY BY DENVER MARTIN-BROWN**



*BE NOT AFRAID. THE SQUID IS WATCHING.*



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