



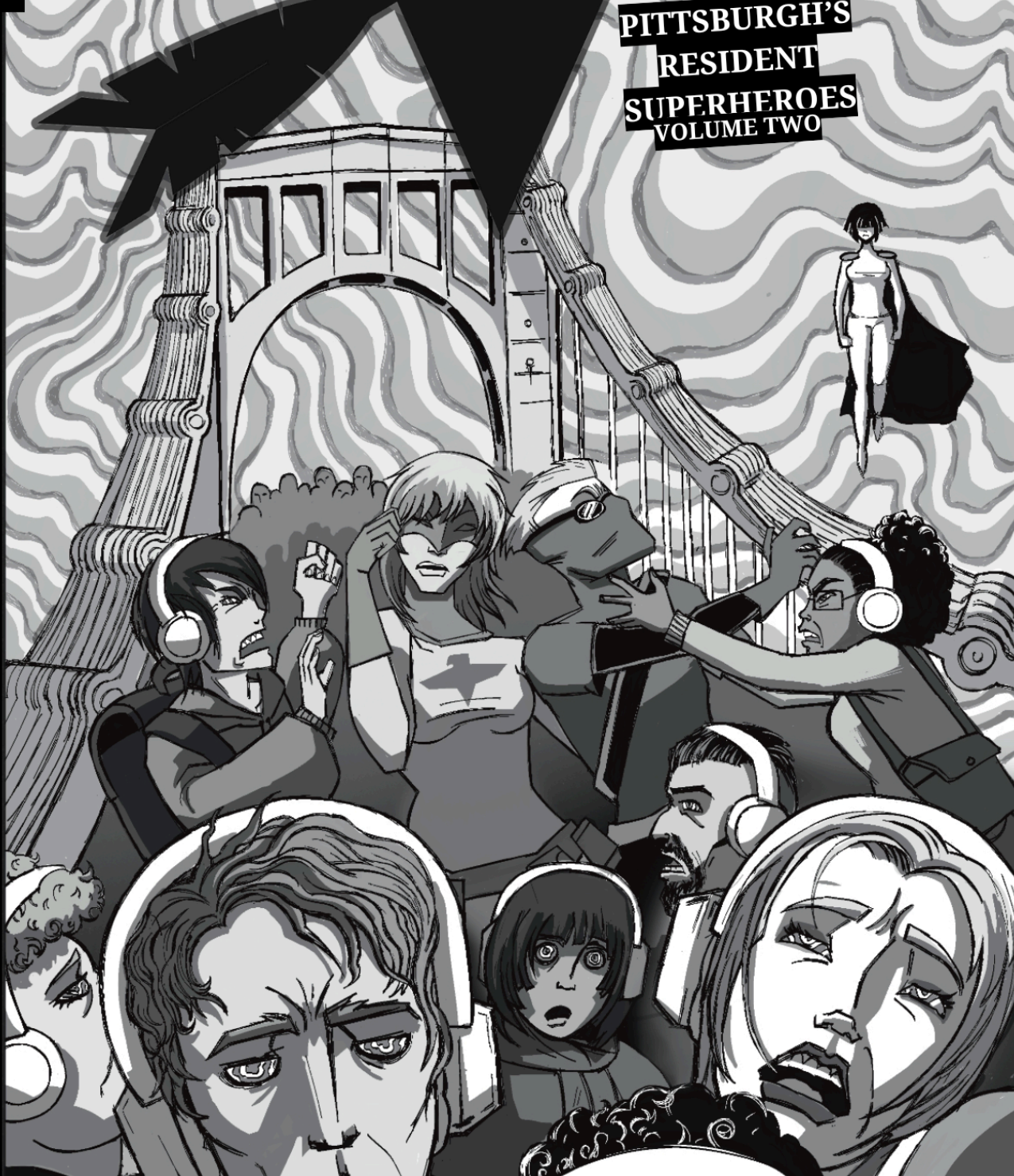
ABSURDIST

#5 OF 6

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# STRENGTH & GLOBALITY

PITTSBURGH'S  
RESIDENT  
SUPERHEROES  
VOLUME TWO



## FEEDBACK LOOP

Part Three of Four

by Jude Profit

**Liz Moto** and **Eric Petersen**, seemingly normal librarians in love, have been living a double life as **Pittsburgh's Resident Superheroes**. With her expert skills in **deduction, armed combat** and **forensics**; along with his **impeccable aim** and **quick mouth**, they are...



Our young heroes have been protecting the public of Steel City for **five years** now. They encountered their first **super-villain** in the **King of Hearts** four months ago. It's Autumn of 2020, and things are only getting more complicated for **the sleuth** and **the archer**.

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13

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# Siren & Cobalt

in

## Feedback Loop

### Part Three of Four

New Year's Day was cold and dry in Pittsburgh. There hadn't been much snow in December. Siren and Cobalt were perched a block away from the Andy Warhol bridge, staking out the situation. Dani Guevara's proposal to have the bridge maintained was put through. There was a construction crew working on the bridge, blocking off traffic for a few days leading up to the holiday. The morning was uneventful. Everybody was going about their business, hungover or tired, like any other New Year's Day. The pleasant morning was interrupted slightly by Paragon flying over the bridge, quietly. Siren and Cobalt could see her with their binoculars. They connected to the bluetooth channel that hosted Paragon's speech with Mr. A to listen in.

"They're here." Paragon said dryly.

"Good." Mr. A replied. "You know what to do."

"Do you know what to do?" Cobalt asked.

"Whatever it is," Siren said. "We'll be ready." A man wearing headphones came out of the morning crowd and crossed the restricted line into the construction zone. He walked up to one of the guarding police officers and punched him square in the gut. Slowly, more and more people, all with headphones on, came onto the bridge. All of them were attacking those there for official business until the bridge turned into an all out brawl. Siren and Cobalt swung down.

"It's the headphones!" Siren exclaimed. "We need to cut the lines." Cobalt notched an arrow and let it fly, cutting the cords of about five people's headphones without harming anyone. Siren started throwing shurikens to the same effect. Once the lines were cut, the pedestrians arose foggy, like waking up from a nightmare.

"Hey, S." Charade whispered to our heroes over their intercom system. "Do you need me to intervene?" Charade had been placed as reinforcements, a surprise for Paragon. She was in a coffee shop near the bridge in civvies, watching the fight go down. Izzy Guevara-Robinson's hands clenched onto the walkman in her pocket.

"I think we have this handled." Siren said. Just then, Paragon flew off into the distance at supersonic speed. The boom was strong enough to snap everyone out of the fight, unless they were wearing headphones. Then, more of them started coming off of the street.

"Hello, Siren and Cobalt." All the headphone drones stopped and spoke in unison. "It's so nice to finally meet you." The drones approached slowly, smiling with dead eyes. "I'd like to congratulate you on finding Dr. Frankenstein. My name, on the topic, is Audiophile. You were so close to figuring it out, Siren. Frankly, I'm disappointed."

"You're controlling innocent people just to get our attention?" Cobalt asked.

"Not both of you." The drones stopped and scowled. "Just you, Cobalt."

"Me?"

"You've taken everything from me."

Cobalt paused and stashed his bow. "Are you *trying* to make me quote Thanos? 'Cause it's not gonna work." The headphone drones let out a raspy, bitter chuckle at this.

"No, no. I'm simply stating the facts." The drones continued. "Speaking of facts, you might want to look up." The headphone drones charged to Siren and Cobalt, giving them no opportunity to follow the command. Charade filled them in on the details.

"It's Paragon." She said, "She has someone in the air." It was at this comment that Paragon hovered down until she was about

twenty feet above the scuffle. Then she dropped a man into the mix. He had on a bright orange prison uniform and wore a scar on his eye. One of the headphone drones, a large man about six feet, picked up the prisoner, David Allen AKA the King of Hearts. The tall man started choking the life out of him. Siren noticed this interaction out of her peripheral and lunged towards them. She tried with all of her might to get the heavysset man to stop choking the King of Hearts. Nothing worked. With a slap across the face from the large man, Siren was knocked back. When she was on the ground, she began being pummeled by the remaining headphone drones.

With no further options, Siren threw up a smoke bomb and started attacking her would-be attackers. Nothing lethal or permanently damaging, but simply enough that she could get on her feet and start removing headphone lines as quickly as possible.

“Cobalt!” Siren yelled. “Dinah!” With this command, Cobalt notched an arrow with a bluetooth speaker attached to it. An undetectable frequency went through the hero’s headsets as the headphone drones instruments of control stopped working. After a minute of the screech of the arrow hissing through the streets of the city, the drones stopped attacking. Some even went about their business as usual. The large man choking out the King of Hearts dropped him as his eyes went wide.

“I’m sorry.” The large man said, before running off.

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It wasn’t long before squad cars started showing up. As the cops made a perimeter around the attacked area, Siren grabbed the King of Hearts by his starchy collar and pinned him up against the wall.

“You have three seconds to start talking, Allen.” She said with a grumble.

“I don’t think you’re in any position to start making threats to someone in custody, Big Bird.” Allen said, sneering. “Once the police have me, I’m pretty sure they won’t let a masked vigilante into a high security prison.”

“I can find my way in.” Siren brought Allen back from the wall. “What did you have to do with this?”

“Moi?” Allen said. “I was just minding my fucking business when black, gold, and angry burst through the wall of my cell with her laser eyes. She dragged me here and dropped me into a fight that seems an awful lot like it might be your fault. Oh, how the mighty have fallen!”

Siren grimaced at the King of Hearts and let go of him. “Alright, I believe you. But there’s no question that you’re planning something. I know you stole one of those guns from the Neon Man.”

“I didn’t steal anything. I’ve been rotting in jail for six months.” The police pulled up and told the King of Hearts to come back with his hands up. He followed their instructions. “I’m just glad you know how it feels.” He said. “To be part of someone else’s game, powerless to know where you will be moved next. That’s how I felt when you put me away five years ago.”

“Go to hell.” Siren said.

“I’ll see you there, bud.”

-

Back at the book-cave, our heroes had a meeting about where in the hell to go next. Nobody had any ideas for the first half-hour. The group sat in silence with their masks off as Rose Bishop brought up everything they had on the King of Hearts, the Neon Man, the Midnight Archer, Paragon, the new addition Audiophile, and the mysterious Masquerade. Liz Moto then sat at the Turing station cross-referencing anything that might bring them to the identity of Audiophile, his plan involving “his machine”, and anything they could possibly do to stop it. The rest sat with bated breath as Liz broke a sweat trying to crack the code. Eventually, she swung around in the chair and faced everyone.

Liz sighed.

“Do you have anything?” Eric asked.

“A theory.” Liz responded. “I might actually call it a hunch.” Liz fell silent again.

“I’d like to hear it.” Eric said.

“I second that.” Izzy added.

“Okay.” Liz rubbed at her eyes with her gloved hands. “The best guess that I have right

now is that Audiophile is Raymond Tyler. It would make sense. He definitely has the money to fund Paragon's lifestyle and the technical know-how to make the headphones that controlled everybody. Plus he might have a grudge against Eric specifically for the convention center bombing. His wife and child died there and he had to be hospitalized for several weeks. The connections to everyone else are still unclear and I have no idea what Audiophile is planning next."

"What about the Midnight Archer?" Izzy asked. "Is Tyler funding her as well?"

"Not that I can surmise, but we can't leave that out as a possibility. She might be there if and when we decide to strike. If we go into this blind, there's no way we come out on top. With what Audiophile can do, the whole city is in danger."

"How does he control people with headphones?" Rose asked.

"My best guess is that he put something in headphones made by Saturn Industries that allows him to broadcast a signal to them. The signal would be hypnotic and very obvious. I've noticed background hissing from the connection we have to Paragon's earpiece. That must be the frequency he's broadcasting."

"We should probably *not* be connected to it anymore."

"Already done. We're disconnected, but that doesn't leave it out as a source in our com system. The background code that could connect us will still be there until we find out where it's broadcasting from."

Rose walked over to the computer. "What does the encryption look like?" She asked.

"It's triple-encrypted. With how your stuff runs, it's gonna take a few hours to crack."

"So what now?" Eric asked, standing up. "We sit here with our thumbs in our asses and wait for Audiophile to make the first move?" The media alert on the supercomputer started blaring. A large, drone-like machine was now hovering above the U.S. Steel Tower. On the WPXI feed, the screen had been taken over by a man in a black cowl that covered his entire face. "Pull that up." Eric said. Rose did so and the feed started playing.

"-the newest supervillain in the game." Audiophile finished his sentence. His eyes were shaded over with white, contrasting his black suit, with the texture of vinyl record grooves engraved upon its surface. "Pittsburgh has yet to see the turmoil and chaos that has been brought to other major metropolitan areas, and I plan to deliver. The incident today on the Andy Warhol bridge was simply a taste of what's to come. The machine I am currently planting over the U.S. Steel Tower is a speaker system which has been heretofore unseen. Weighing in at about two tons, the Earworm System will broadcast my patented Hypnosis Signal to every hearing creature within a two-hundred mile radius. If you successfully remove or destroy the machine, you will keep your autonomy on the house. If not however,- well, I think we all know what happens then. You have twenty-four hours, Steel City. Oh, and another thing. Your newest hero, Paragon, might have some choice words with you once you get up there, as a fair warning. Happy New Year." The transmission went to static and the news team went back to their broadcast, trying desperately to warn the public and get information from the authorities. The machine landed on the top of the tower and retracted its fan system, revealing large speakers on every corner. Paragon flew up to the machine shortly after, her eyes glowing red.

"Well, fuck." Eric said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. What in the fuck are we supposed to do now?" Liz had her hand to her chin. Silence fell on the room again.

"Honestly, I got nothing." Liz said. Then, a slow drum beat could be heard over the entire city, faint glimpses of it were heard in the book-cave.

"Is that... Joan Jett?" Izzy asked. The group went out onto the street and heard You Don't Own Me by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts playing out of the speakers of the Earworm System on a loop. The team slowly stepped back into the library.

"Izzy." Liz said, pulling up her mask. "You go home to your mom. This fight is too big for you, kid." Izzy nodded and started walking out of the book-cave. She pulled up the contact for Katie Kohl in her phone. After a beat of silence, Siren turned to Eric with a smirk.

"You have a plan?" Eric asked.

"I have the workings of a plan." Siren brought up a few files on the Turing System. "If we can disable it and figure out where his hideout is within the next twenty-four hours, I think we'll be set."

"Yeah, but how do we do that?"

"Rose, keep chugging away at the encryption on this. While you're doing that, look into the files we borrowed from Saturn Industries' office. If you need backup, call Julia Anderson. Maybe she can find a way to shut it down. Cobalt, suit up. Grab as many explosive rounds as you can. The hardest part of most search and destroy missions has already been done for us." Siren switched out her utility belt.

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Izzy asked Kate to meet her in Oakland. Izzy had been sitting at a bench for about a half hour now. She got there quickly, leaping across rooftops. It's so much easier in tennis shoes than the dress shoes that Charade usually runs in. Kate had to take the bus. Izzy was listening to the Soft mix that Eric had made over the summer. She was in the middle of The State That I'm In by Belle and Sebastian when she saw Kate coming down the street. Kate was wearing sweatpants and a hoodie. It had been her habit to sleep in during long breaks from school. Kate sat a good ways away from Izzy, basically on the opposite end of the bench.

"I wanted to preface this by saying I'm sorry." Izzy said. "For everything."

"Iz, what is this about?" Kate asked. "I need to get on the evacuation bus with my mom by the end of the night. If I'm out too long I could be in deep shit."

"I know. I've tried my best to keep you out of the deep shit."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know how I started acting when your dad died? I have an explanation. Even if it's not the best one. I feel like you deserve that."

"Okay, I'll bite." Kate crossed her arms and leaned back, flicking her head up at Izzy. "Why have you been acting so weird?"

"The main reason is guilt."

"What does that mean?"

Izzy started shuffling through her backpack and pulled out her Charade mask. She

placed it on the bench in between them. "I am the Charade." She said. "I've been working with Siren and Cobalt since July." Kate's eyes went wide looking down at the mask. She looked up at Izzy just for a second before her brow furrowed and her mouth went into a grimace.

"This is what you've been doing the whole time?" Kate asked. "That kid from our high school kidnapped my dad and murdered him and you knew about it. You didn't even do anything. And you've been breaking arms and sending people to the hospital every night? This is what you wanted to tell me?"

"When you put it that way—"

"There's no other way to put it, Izzy. You're complicit in my dad's death and you fucking know it. You've known about it for so long and we've spent pretty much every day together since then and you didn't say a goddamn thing. Fuck you. This is over." Kate stood up and started walking away.

"I'm—"

Kate jumped back. "What? Were you gonna say that you're sorry? It's far too late for sorry. Your superfriends are about to get the whole city laid to waste like and you need to own up to that. Is that why you're not on the evacuation bus? You're gonna stay and save the day, right? Fine. Do it. I fucking dare you to pull this one out of your ass."

-

The streets of downtown Pittsburgh were quiet and still. The only things that could be heard from Siren and Cobalt's perch were distant air raid sirens and You Don't Own Me playing on the Earworm System. All of the civilians had left this part of the city by now. Cobalt clenched the handle of his bow and watched as Paragon hovered over the U.S. Steel Tower. Siren pulled tight her utility belt and trembled her finger ever-so-slightly on the trigger of her grapple gun. Cobalt reached for Siren's hand and Siren accepted. They held quietly for one round of You Don't Own Me. Siren looked over at her partner and gave a quick smile and a nod. Cobalt nodded and notched up a grapple arrow. He took his time to aim. They discussed on their way to the stakeout that the first real move they make, Paragon will be aware and immediately attack.

Cobalt was put on distraction duty while Siren, packing as much C4 as she could into her utility belt, would destroy the Earworm System.

Then, Cobalt made the first move. He fired his grapple arrow and launched up to the Earworm System, immediately notching another arrow of unknown variety. He stood tall and proud against Paragon.

"This is your first and final warning." Cobalt said. "Stand down and we won't have to do any Red Son nonsense."

"Oh, Cobalt." Paragon said in a low tone. She stared off into the city. "Tell me, do you spend all of your time reading comic books no one cares about? You're wasting your potential with this crime-fighting. Pity I have to kill you. You'd make an excellent slave."

"I have a feeling I'm talking to the big guy."

"It's a shame I have to talk to you through this puppet. You know, on second thought, I'd rather it be this way." Paragon flew down to meet Cobalt and started walking slowly toward him. "This is how all idiots deserve to die." As this conversation was happening, Siren had made her way below the Earworm System, placing her devices. Cobalt fired his arrow. The tip of the taser made its way into Paragon's chest. She was stopped for just enough time to allow the blue bowman to maneuver around her and notch another arrow. Paragon pulled the taser arrow out and threw it off the building. "You think your toys will save you. You think any of this will save you. There is no escape from this, you fool." Paragon fired her lasers down at Cobalt's feet. He jumped up and fired another grapple arrow into her chest. He clenched the release and came flying at her. He kicked her in the chest to no avail. The impact nearly broke his feet. He had a hard time recovering from the fall. This gave his attacker an opportunity to grab him by the neck and look him in the eyes.

Paragon grabbed Cobalt's bow out of his hands and smashed it on the top of the Earworm System. She then proceeded to throw him off the building. Eric Petersen fell to his death, ready to accept it. Then something clicked in his brain. He pulled out his rope darts and threw them into the tower, allowing him to hang off the edge of it. A sonic boom came from the top, interrupting

even You Don't Own Me. Cobalt pulled his mask down, revealing the shocked face of Eric Petersen. "Liz!" He yelled. He climbed up the building throwing every ounce of effort he had into getting to the top. When he arrived, the scene was empty. There was no one but Cobalt.

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"Fuck." Eric Petersen slammed his hand down on Turing's battlestation. He paced around the room and ran his hands through his hair. When there was no more hair to run through he would rub his face and slap his cheeks. Rose Bishop sat in silence as Eric changed back into his civvies.

"What are we going to do?" Rose asked.

"I don't know." Eric said.

"Where's Liz?"

"I don't know."

"Is she dead?"

"I'd really fucking hope not, Rose."

There had been no signal coming from Siren's suit since Eric got back to the book-cave. Eric had his hands on his hips and gave a deep sigh before storming off. "I'm stepping out, I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"I just need to blow off some steam."

-

Dani Guevara had been packing a bag in her South Side apartment since the Earworm System went live. She had been hitting her vape like a crack-pipe the entire time. When Izzy eventually did come home, with You Don't Own Me still playing faintly in the background, the mother and daughter embraced. Izzy was crying. She could barely get her words together.

"Honey, honey, honey." Dani cooed as she ran her hands through her daughter's hair. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"S-s-siren told me to g-go home." Izzy tried her best to count her syllables. "I-I-I told Kate I was Ch-ch-ch-ch-ch..." More tears.

"Oh no, honey." Dani held tighter and then chuckled a bit. She pulled back and wiped a tear from her daughter's face. "Just letting you know, that was bad timing on your part. But everything's gonna be okay. Come on, we'll get in the car and get out of here."

“Where are we going?” Izzy asked.

“Wherever a full tank of gas will take us. I figured we could book it east to Delaware or something.”

“What if Audiophile is lying? What if the machine has a longer range? What then?”

Dani paused before sighing. “We’ll figure it out.” She scanned the room quickly with her eyes, taking in her entire life in that split second. “You go pack your things, okay?” Izzy nodded. As she went into her room, trying her best to gauge what would be best to bring, she got a text on her phone. It was from Eric, asking her to meet her at Homewood Cemetery in Squirrel Hill.

-

Eric Petersen was sitting on a tombstone in Homewood Cemetery with an empty beer bottle next to him. He was swigging from it and smoking a cigarette. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Cobalt’s mask. The shine of the blue goggles struck him in the eye initially. He leaned down and looked down into it. He took a deep breath and put it back into his pocket.

He stood up and walked down to the tombstone of Andy and Barbara Moto. He put out his cigarette on the heel of his shoe and stashed it in his coat pocket. He took one last swig from his beer and set it down on the walkway.

“Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Moto.” he said. “I’m sorry it’s taken me this long to introduce myself. I’m Eric. I’m Liz’s boyfriend. Hopefully more than that.” Eric looked away and bit at the inside of his mouth. “Anyway,” he sighed. “I just wanted to say thank you, for making the coolest person I’ve ever known. I also wanted to say sorry. For what I’ve been putting her through these past few months. And for letting her down. She might be dead. I don’t know what to do. Coming here always clears her mind, so I figured this would help.” Silence and You Don’t Own Me hung in the air. “This is stupid. Sorry to bother you.” Eric started walking away when Izzy approached.

“Hey.” Izzy said.

“Hey.”

“What’re you doing?”

“Paying my respects, and bringing bad news.”

“What do you mean?”

“Liz is gone. Paragon flew off with her.”

“Oh.” Izzy took a deep breath. The two found a bench and caught up since the morning. Dani had brought Izzy to the cemetery under the guise of picking up a paycheck from Eric. Ms. Dillon planned on piling in the Volvo with Rose and Eric and heading north towards Canada. Then the question of Audiophile and his true intentions came up.

“What if he’s lying?” Izzy asked.

“I have no idea. I guess we’ll have to call in the big league guys for this.”

“It’s funny. For a second I thought we were the big league guys.”

“Yeah.” Eric said. “Yeah, me too.”

“I suppose I wasn’t cut out for it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a lot of things I need to deal with personally before I have any business telling people what to do. I think this is a good time to quit. Charade No More.”

“You know, when I quit being Cobalt, at least I had some power in the situation. You deserve something like that.” Eric looked down at the ground. “You sure you want to quit?”

“Yeah, I think so. Is that okay?”

Eric looked out into the place he’s called home for as long as he could remember. His entire life flashed before him. Then, something clicked. “You want me to be honest with you?” He asked. Izzy nodded. “It’s not okay. None of this is okay. I keep telling myself that tomorrow will be the day when I get my shit together, when I become a real person and deal with everything in my life and tomorrow always comes with no progress. It sucks that you have to quit because some whacko is taking the entire city hostage and it sucks that we really can’t do anything about it. But that’s the thing, right? There’s always something that can be done about it. There’s always some way that everyone, anyone can help. There has to be something we can do. There has to be somebody willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause and it might as well be us.”

It was then that Eric got a text message from Rose Bishop. Something had come onto the Turing system.

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Izzy, Rose, and Eric sat in the book-cave listening to Rose's spiel about a signal they had been getting on the Turing System. The signal had been connected to the Turing system since before they went to blow up Audiophile's machine. Rose only noticed it giving data twenty minutes ago. In the signal were detailed schematics and code of the Earworm System. They had assumed that Siren hadn't gotten the chance to arm the C4, but the real device she had planted on the System was hacking into it and broadcasting information back to the Turing System. The point at which the Turing system would deduce the location of Audiophile's broadcast point was coming up in a few minutes. Eric had a smirk on his face.

"That's my girl." Eric said. "Siren's alive. She's been stalling." He went over to the secret compartment where his costume lived and started changing. Izzy looked on with wide eyes. "Are you coming with, Charade?"

Izzy put on a rare smile. "It would be my pleasure, Cobalt. What's the plan?"

The Turing System gave a blip. "He's broadcasting from a warehouse in Shaler." Rose said.

Eric paced around, rubbing his chin. "We should try and be stealthy about it. That's what Liz would want us to do." The proverbial lightbulb clicked. "Or... or..."

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Siren awoke in handcuffs, draped over a meathook in Audiophile's warehouse. The place was dark and smelled of mildew, a vast expanse of what was once a meat-packing plant. Pittsburgh's resident superhero hung alone in the void. Siren had turned off the systems in her suit to elude suspicion of her plan. There was no heads-up display and no connection to the Turing System whatsoever. She was flying blind. She took stock of her situation. This wouldn't be the first time that she had been in a similar stance to this. Her fingers went for the bobby pin sewn into her glove.

"Ah, you're awake." Audiophile said, walking in through the double doors in front of her. Siren could barely see the outline of him

standing there. There were two headphone drones standing at the threshold of the door, holding assault rifles.

"That I am." Siren said. "Where's Deborah?"

"Paragon is guarding the Earworm System. She will earn her rest soon enough."

"So, what now? You fake Paragon stopping you, then the first staged superhero conflict in the country starts up and you have the market cornered on it?"

"Very clever. You almost had it figured out. That's just what I told Paragon. She'll be my one man army. And nobody will be able to stand in my way."

"Why is it that you villain types always want to take over the world? There's been at least a dozen folks who have tried to take over the world at this point and they've all been stopped by hooligans like myself. You're not gonna come out on top here, Raymond."

"Oh, so you know my name. Negligible."

"What you're doing is cruel. You're taking Deborah's body and wearing her out until she drops dead. You're taking away these people's free will." Siren, realizing that this wasn't doing anything, took a second to pause. "You had a daughter, didn't you, Raymond?"

"Why do you care?" He asked, scoffing.

"I care because I am a daughter. If I found out my father did this, I'd be horrified. What do you think your daughter would think of you now?"

Audiophile approached and gave Siren a good punch in the gut. She keeled over.

"Soon." Audiophile whispered with great diction. "Your time to perish will be soon."

Siren coughed and then regained her composure. "I can smell the fear on you, you know? You're afraid that this plan of yours is going to crumble beneath your feet. You're afraid of what Cobalt can do."

"Why would I be afraid of the actions of a dead fool?"

"He's not a fool."

"Tell that to my wife and daughter." Audiophile began walking out of the room. "If it weren't for his hubris dealing with that bomb, they'd still be here. If it weren't for both of you, there would be no bomb to speak of."

“So, that’s why you called him out on the bridge. All of this is an elaborate plan to get revenge on Cobalt. I can tell you something else about him, he’s not dead.” Audiophile continued towards the exit without a word. “The one thing I can’t figure out is why you kept me alive.” Siren said. “And for that matter, why’d you keep my mask on?”

Audiophile stopped. “Who you are under that mask is of little importance to me or anyone, for that matter. As for why I’m keeping you alive, call it insurance.”

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Cobalt and the Charade had made their way to Shaler with relative ease. By the time they had gotten there, night had fallen. There were only a handful of hours left on the Earworm System’s countdown. Cobalt clocked three security cameras and a turret placed at the entrance of Audiophile’s lair.

“Oh yeah, that’s the one.” Cobalt said, pointing out the security measures to Charade.

“What’s our move, then?” Charade asked.

Cobalt took a perch on the roof and staked out the situation for a few seconds more. “We gotta take out the turret, but if it goes off like I think it will, it’ll alert Audiophile to us being here. Then Paragon shows up and it’s game over. Tell you what, we’ll do a replay of this morning’s plan. I’ll be on distraction. You get in and free Siren. Once she’s out of Audiophile’s cage, then we should have the upper hand, fight-wise at least. Can you get to the back without being noticed by the cameras?”

“I can try my best.” Charade looked up at the Earworm System, still playing You Don’t Own Me. “What about plan B?”

Cobalt notched an arrow. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Get down there and make me proud, kiddo.” The archer aimed his arrow at the turret as the Charade got down to street level. Circling the block, she made it to the back of the warehouse. She was greeted by two headphone drones holding pistols. Charade flung her grappling hook at the one furthest from her. In one swift movement, she disarmed that headphone drone and knocked the other one out

with the pistol. From that point, it wasn’t hard to render the other one unconscious.

“Blue, I’m good down here.” Charade said over the com system. She tried the door quietly; locked. She started fishing through the headphone drone’s pocket for keys. “About to breach the fortress. Make your move when you’re ready.”

“Copy that.” Cobalt fired a taser arrow at the turret. Electricity shot through the machine and caused it to unload its clip. Cobalt ducked down and avoided being hit by a single one of the rounds.

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“What was that?” Audiophile asked from the console that controlled every headphone drone, Paragon, and the Earworm System. All proceedings seemed normal. Upon further inspection, he saw that the two guards he had behind the building were offline. He pressed a button and spoke to every headphone in the building. “They’re here. Once you see them, take them down with extreme prejudice. Reinforcements will be arriving shortly.” The reinforcements he was speaking of was Paragon, currently dealing with a helicopter sent by the national guard. Downtown, she was throwing the guided missile back at the aircraft.

Audiophile turned up the volume on You Don’t Own Me to its maximum. The city shook with the backbeat of the song. He pressed another button, broadcasting his voice to the Earworm System:

“Pittsburgh,” he said. “Your heroes have tried and failed once to defeat me. They are trying again, but I assure you, there is no hope to be had here. This is truly your natural state. To be a servant to those more intelligent, more... cruel than yourselves. You and your costumed crimefighters think that morality can save you. It won’t. In this world, the only way to make it above the hellscape of poverty and indigence is to slit the throats of your competition, which is exactly what I plan on doing.”

Cobalt had made his way into the warehouse at this point, taking out the security cameras and entering the front door with relative ease. There were no headphone drones in the

foyer to give the appearance of the place being abandoned. He pressed his com system toggle:

“Oh, Audiophile.” Cobalt said, broadcasting his voice over the Earworm System. You Don’t Own Me had stopped at Cobalt’s words. “I caught you monologuing, bud.” Chirpy synths rhythmically paced over the Earworm System as Weird Al Yankovic’s Dare to Be Stupid started playing. “Who’s the idiot now?” Cobalt turned off his com system toggle and limbered up as a handful of headphone drones came charging onto the open floor. Cobalt took a split second to survey the situation before the first shot was fired at him: seven rogues, all armed; three with assault rifles, two with pistols, and one with a simple tire iron.

As the trigger was pulled on the first gun, Cobalt fired three arrows going into each of the rifle’s barrels in a split second. The one who was foolish enough to fire was knocked into the wall by the kickback. The other two threw their rifles aside and started charging. The pistol wielding drones started firing to no avail. Cobalt was using his grapple arrow to maneuver around the floor. He took every couple of seconds to perch on a shelf and fire trick arrows down at his assailants, all while Weird Al was singing about being a coffee achiever and watching Leave It To Beaver. In a flash, the fight was over and Cobalt made his way to the central office.

-

Charade made her way into the room Siren was kept in. She burst through the door and started taking down the headphone drones with skill and force. Siren took this as an opportunity to undo her restraints and join the fight. She grabbed the conscious headphone drone and pushed him up against the wall.

“Where’s the center console?” Siren asked. “Where’s Audiophile’s machine?”

“You will never best me.” The headphone drone said. “You are a mewling lapdog to the illusion of morality and I will see to it that-” Siren yanked the headphones out of the man’s ears and let him recuperate for a second.

“Where am I?” The man asked.

“You’re in a very bad place.” Siren said, crouching down to meet him at his level. “But the worst is over. You’re safe now.”

“I was- I was holding a gun. I hate guns.”

“Me too.” Siren put on her best smile. “What’s your name?”

“Brian.”

“Brian, get out of here. Charade will lead you out.” Siren reached into her utility belt and pulled out a five dollar bill. “Catch a bus to wherever you need to go.”

“Thanks.”

“All in a day’s work.” Siren helped Brian up and handed him off to Charade. They parted ways and Siren went down the first hallway she could find. Three headphone drones came from the end of the hall and started firing. Siren evaded their shots and threw two shurikens, cutting the lines of the headphones without a scratch on the drones. She let her cape fall over her chest and began walking out.

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Audiophile hung over his console, futilely flipping switches and pressing buttons to turn on every headphone within range. The drones wouldn’t be able to show up for a while, since they would be on foot. All of the guards he had in the warehouse had been taken out in one way or another. It was then that Cobalt came into the control room and met Audiophile face to face. The last utterance of “dare to be stupid” came through the Earworm System before the machine was blown out and deemed unusable thanks to some handiwork from Rose Bishop. Audiophile pressed a button and reached under the console. He pulled out a glock and aimed it at Cobalt. The blue bowman in turn notched an arrow.

“End of the line, Ray.” Cobalt said. “Turn yourself in and you might only get a double life sentence.”

“You’re in no position to make threats here.” Audiophile said.

“Oh what? Because of that?” Cobalt aimed down at the console and let the arrow fly. The entire console was lit on fire. Audiophile watched as his means of control burned. “I

regret to inform you that all lines are currently down.”

Audiophile chuckled. This evolved into a hysterical laughter. “You imbecile. You may have found my location and destroyed the Earworm System. I’ll give you that. But do you really think that I’d go into a fight with you without an ace in the hole. The cavalry’s coming. It won’t be long until this is over.”

“You talk too much.” Cobalt let another arrow fly. It grazed Audiophile’s cheek. Blood spewed out from the wound and Audiophile arched back, grasping his face. When he looked up, there was no sign of Cobalt.

-

Siren ran through the floor of the warehouse when she smelled smoke. Shortly thereafter, Cobalt was visible in her peripheral. Cobalt stopped at the sight of the purple-clad crimefighter. He made his way over to her as fast as he could, embracing her and picking her up in the process.

Cobalt set Siren down and Siren had to take a moment to get back into character. A smile still remained on her face.

“Next time you get yourself captured, loop me in, okay?” Cobalt said, holding Siren’s head in between his hands. Siren nodded and grabbed a hand, bringing them down.

“I will. I promise.” Siren said. “We can talk about this later. Right now, we have a job to do.”

-

Charade, on her way back into the warehouse, found Audiophile trudging through the halls, grasping at his face. Audiophile was able to make it to the exit door. Right before he opened it, Charade performed a kick to the villain’s back, throwing him out of the building. She took the opportunity to put him in handcuffs and sit him on the ground.

“It’s the end of the line, DJ.” Charade said, leaning deep down into Audiophile’s face.

Audiophile looked up at her with his blank, white eyes. “And for our encore...” Red lasers came firing down from the sky and cut through Audiophile’s handcuffs. Paragon

hovered down, her cape flapping ever-so-slightly in the breeze of January. Audiophile stood up and walked back into the warehouse. “Kill her.” Audiophile commanded. “I’ll have two more for you in a minute.”

The Charade clenched her fists and prepared for the worst.

TO BE CONTINUED...

## **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?

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