

## The Sprintress #11 - "Velocity and Verse"

Written by Steven Bland

A sonic boom rippled through the downtown plaza, signaling the arrival of the city's swiftest protector. The Sprintress skidded to a halt, her boots smoking as they hit the pavement. She had clocked herself at Mach 3 to reach the distress call, but the chaos – a localized gravity distortion lifting cars into the air – was already being quelled.

In the center of the swirling debris stood a young woman with bold and dramatic makeup with a mystical swirling design that accentuated her features, and voluminous electric blue hair. She was wearing a stylish form-fitting asymmetric bodysuit with a vibrant mix of deep indigo, magenta, and gold accents, a flowing capelet of shimmering, iridescent fabric, thigh-high boots with platform soles, opera-length gloves with a mix of lace and metallic material, a wide-studded utility belt, and a distinctive choker with a central "A" insignia. She held a magical guitar that resembled a mystical staff and glowed with an ancient sapphire light.

*"Harmonic Seal, tether the tide, bring the earth back to its side!"*

The woman sang the incantation with a voice like crystal, her fingers flying across the strings of her talismanic guitar. A wave of golden energy pulsed from the instrument, neutralizing the gravity well and gently lowering the vehicles back to the asphalt.

The Sprintress blinked, her heightened senses slowly dialing back to real-time.

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"Nice work," the Empress of Acceleration said to the singer. "I usually have to catch those cars by hand."

The singer turned, her stage-ready makeup sparkling in the sunlight.

"And I usually don't have an audience until the house lights go down," she said with a playful wink. "I'm Aria Arcane."

"The Sprintress," the Queen of Quickness replied, glancing at the now-peaceful street. "Magic and music? That's a new one, even for me."

"It's all about the frequency," Aria said, reaching into her wide-studded utility belt and pulling out a holographic slip of paper. "You've got impressive speed, Sprintress. But you look like you could use a break from the sound barrier."

The singer held out the slip. It was a front-row VIP pass to Madison Square Garden for that evening.

"My show starts at eight," Aria said, slinging her guitar over her shoulder. "I'd love to see if you can keep pace with a beat instead of a siren."

The Sprintress took the ticket, the metallic foil cool against her glove.

"I've never been one to miss a deadline. I'll be there," she said with a smile.

"Good," Aria smiled, beginning to fade into a shimmer of musical notes. "Don't blink, or you'll miss the opening act."

With a streak of gold and red, the Sprintress was gone.

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A few minutes later, the scent of ozone and sterilized steel greeted Nellie North as she slipped through the side entrance of Garrett Laboratories. In a blur of motion, she swapped her gold friction-resistant Kevlar suit for regular clothes, a white lab coat, and sensible sneakers. By the time she reached the main terminal, her heart rate had finally settled from its Mach 3 sprint.

Professor Kay Garrett, the lab's director and Nellie's mentor, didn't look up from her microscope.

"You're three minutes late, Nellie," she said with a fond smile. "I assume the gravity anomaly downtown was as stubborn as the sensors suggested?"

"It was handled before I could break a sweat, Kay," Nellie replied, leaning against a workstation. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the shimmering VIP pass. "By her."

Kay straightened and examined the holographic ticket.

"Aria Arcane?" She asked. "I've read theories on her. They say her vocal frequencies can actually restructure local reality. You actually met her?"

"She's incredible," Nellie admitted, her eyes bright. "She neutralized a Class-V distortion with a power chord and a high C. She gave me this. VIP, front-row at the Garden tonight. I think I'm actually going to go."

Kay looked from the ticket to her assistant and saw the rare spark of excitement in her eyes – the kind that didn't involve chasing a disaster.

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"The research on the kinetic dampeners can wait until tomorrow," Kay said, waving a hand dismissively at the glowing monitors. "You spend your life running toward trouble. It's about time you ran toward something you can actually enjoy. Enjoy yourself."

Nellie smiled, tucking the ticket safely into her wallet.

"You're sure?" She asked. "I don't want to leave you buried in data."

"I've survived many years of data without a speedster to help me," Kay chuckled. "Go. Experience music that doesn't involve a sonic boom. Just try to stay in your seat and relax, okay?"

"I'll do my best," Nellie laughed, heading for the door. "But no promises if she plays an up-tempo set."

Eight o'clock that night, at Madison Square Garden, the energy inside the stadium was a tangible, vibrating thing, a sea of neon light sticks waiting for a single spark. Among the twenty thousand fans was Nellie North, sitting in the VIP front-row. She, and they, were awaiting the star of the concert, Aria Arcane.

Soon, Aria made a flashy entrance on the stage and her fans cheered wildly for her. The singer looked around at everyone in the VIP front-row, looking for someone.

Where's the Sprintress? Aria wondered.

Catching Aria's eye, Nellie winked at her.

Then, the Sprintress *did* come after all, the singer thought. She's here but not in costume.

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Aria swept her fingers across her talismanic guitar. It was tuned low, the bass notes vibrating through the floorboards.

"Let's shake the foundations, New York," Aria shouted, her voice echoing.

She struck a heavy chord, the low frequency vibrating in her chest. She began the incantation, a slow, melodic spell designed to reinforce the stadium's structure. Blue, magical runes flared around her fretboard, shimmering in the stage lights.

Suddenly, the music distorted. The bass, which should have been smooth, tore into a jagged, screeching sound. The air in the arena turned thick, heavy.

What in the world? Nellie wondered.

From the lighting rig, a silhouette emerged – not a shadow, but a void. A chaotic mass of flickering static and warped sound waves: the Feedback Phantom. Its roar was a deafening mix of feedback and agony.

Aria, ever the professional, didn't stop. She pushed more magic into her guitar, singing louder to fight the distortion. The azure runes flared brighter, rushing toward the Phantom.

*"Aegis chord, barrier ring, protect the stage, hear me sing!"*

The spells struck the entity, but instead of damaging it, the Feedback Phantom *absorbed* them. The glowing blue energy was sucked into the static void. The Phantom warped, expanding in size, and the screeching grew intense, causing the structural steel beams of the stadium to groan.

She... she's making it stronger, Nellie thought as the chaos grew.

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"It's eating my magic," Aria gasped, her guitar feedback forcing her to stumble back. Her hands felt scorched. The lower tuning, which was supposed to anchor her magic, was now acting as a conduit, feeding the entity more raw power.

The stadium lights flickered and died. Nellie didn't hesitate. In the fraction of a second when the overhead floodlight hummed and died, she moved. Under the flickering strobe of a failing emergency light, she shed her civilian clothes and donned the friction-resistant costume of the Sprintress.

"Time to clear the floor," she whispered.

At Mach 3, she blurred into the center of the stadium. Her feet created a visible, shimmering wall of hyper-compressed air – a sonic barrier that funneled the terrified crowd toward the exits.

"Hold on, everyone," the Queen of Quickness yelled, her voice barely audible over the roaring feedback. She became a shuttle, grabbing groups of people and depositing them two miles away in the safety of Bryant Park. Within a heartbeat, she was back, moving at Mach 3, a golden streak against the impending structural failure of Madison Square Garden, rescuing thousands before the roof could collapse.

The Sprintress's arrival was noticed by Aria.

"Keep them safe! I'll try to harmonize," the singer shouted as she tried to shift her melody.

The Phantom roared, absorbing more power.

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"Start preparing your biggest chord," the Queen of Quickness commanded, upon returning from her third trip. "I'll take the air away."

The Sprintress began a vertical centrifuge around the Feedback Phantom. Her velocity created a localized vacuum, choking the entity's scream. Without air to carry its vibrations, the Phantom solidified into a dense, throbbing core.

"Now, Aria! Finish it," the super-fast superheroine commanded.

"Finale!" Aria screamed, slamming her hand across the strings of her guitar. A concentrated beam of light struck the Phantom's core, shattering it like glass. But the energy didn't vanish – it surged into the talismanic guitar which began to weep thick, glowing violet resin. The entity was trapped in the instrument, but it was fighting back.

"I have to bind it," the idol singer shouted over the deafening whine of the guitar. "It's a twelve-verse purification! It takes too long! And the sonic turbulence will tear me apart before I finish!"

The Sprintress blurred to her side, her suit humming with friction.

"Then don't stop playing," the Empress of Acceleration said. "I'm the feedback now."

As Aria began the first verse of the complex, high-pitched incantation, the guitar lashed out with raw sonic lightning. The Sprintress moved in a continuous, interlocking pattern, creating a kinetic shell around the singer – a pressurized pocket of absolute stability amidst the chaos.

*"By silence broken, I call the light, to banish shadows, dark as night.*

*Sound that feeds on stolen breath, I command you: face your death.*

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*No more echoes, no more fear, you have no home nor harbor here.*

*With crystal chime and resonant tone, this space is sacred, this space is known.*

*Energy sucker, phantom sound, by my authority, you are bound.*

*Depart this place, depart this room, returning to the void and gloom.*

*The air is clear, the walls are bright, filled with pure and cleansing light.*

*I break the cord, I snap the chain, your parasitic power is slain.*

*Go forth from here, return to dust, in sacred light, I hold my trust.*

*Harm to none and peace to all, I seal the door, I build the wall.*

*Frequency of love and grace, now fills this consecrated space.*

The Feedback Phantom, desperate, made a last-ditch effort. It dissolved into the very acoustics of the building, preparing to shake the structure to the ground.

"Promise to contain the blast!" Aria screamed, not breaking her verse.

"Never doubted it," the Queen of Quickness shouted as she resumed her Mach 3 orbit, weaving a vacuum seal around the entire inner perimeter of the stadium.

Inside the eye of this high-speed storm, Aria sang the final binding verse.

*"It is done, the space is free, as I will, so mote it be."*

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The Feedback Phantom's destructive energy, unable to break through the Sprintress's barrier, bounced back and intensified, forced by the pressure to materialize into a jagged humanoid of black glass.

The Sprintress broke her orbit, channeling the momentum of a thousand laps into a single, straight-line vector. She arrived at the Phantom's chest with the force of a meteor strike.

"Tempo's up," she hissed.

The entity shattered into a million fragments before the sound of the impact could even register.

As the dust settled, the two women stood in the ruins of the stage.

"You're an amplifier," Aria realized. "Your kinetic field doubled my power."

"And you gave the air a 'grip,'" the Sprintress replied. "You neutralized the intangible threats I couldn't touch."

Aria took the superheroine's hand, a spark of magic and motion dancing between them.

"The idol and the speedster," Aria smirked. "We're a dangerous set-list."

"Next time," the Sprintress agreed. "Don't start the song without me."

The next day, Nellie North came in to work at Garrett Laboratories, where she was greeted by Kay.

"So, how was Aria's concert, last night?" Kay asked.

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"The concert was off to a great start and we were all enjoying ourselves," Nellie answered, shaking slightly. She leaned against a lab bench, her mind still in the middle of last night's chaos.

"You're vibrating," Kay noticed. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"A massive, sound-based entity called the Feedback Phantom suddenly manifested. It was absorbing everything, including Aria's magical energy," Nellie admitted, relaxing only slightly. "After I got everyone to safety, I helped her stop it. Unfortunately, the arena got completely wrecked in the process. Shattered stage, collapsed rigging. The insurance premiums are going to be astronomical."

Kay went to her screen, pulling up a live news feed. "Well, according to this, the insurance company might be spared."

Nellie peered over her mentor's shoulder. The news report showed Madison Square Garden, fully restored, with workers looking completely baffled.

"What? That's impossible. It looked like a junkyard hours ago," Nellie whispered, her eyes wide.

"It says here a 'harmonic resonant spell' was detected. It seems your new friend, Aria Arcane, didn't just stop the threat," Kay read aloud, smiling. "She repaired the damage with a melody, literally overnight."

"Aria," Nellie smiled, feeling the adrenaline finally fade. "Well, note to self: never ask a mage for a quote on repairs. They just sing it into existence."

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Elsewhere, at Vinyl Revival, an indie record store in Greenwich Villain. A clerk named Samantha Sterling was inside a dim back corner, re-shelving a box of 70s folk vinyl. Her ears were still ringing – not from the music, but from the sonic blast of the Feedback Phantom she and the Sprintress shattered at Madison Square Garden the night before.

While she enjoyed being Aria Arcane, the rock idol who has thousands of loyal fans and could play sold-out concerts, Samantha also enjoyed hiding in plain sight at the store where she works. For her, it was the best of both worlds, where she could be a regular anonymous person one minute and a music star the next. And her job also gave her the flexibility to disappear whenever she needed to use her musical magic to help those in need.

Her hidden phone, a sleek black device she only used for "work", buzzed in her back pocket. No caller ID. She checked the front of the shop. Mr. Henderson was busy ranting about vinyl pressing quality to a customer.

Samantha slipped into the cramped storage room, surrounded by dusty boxes and old posters.

She opened the phone to answer it. The call was from Aron Hightower.

"Hello, Aria Arcane," Aron said. "This is Aron Hightower. I'm a huge fan of yours."

"Are you asking me for an autograph?" Samantha asked. "Cause if you are, I'll send you one as soon as possible."

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"No, thank you," Aron said. "I'm calling you because I heard about how you neutralized a Class-V distortion at the downtown plaza yesterday morning and how you froze a sound-based energy being at the Garden last night."

"How would you like to have a stage the size of the hemisphere?" Aron asked. "How would you like to join – the Justifiers? You could help us save the world."

"I appreciate the offer, sir. Really," Samantha said. "But, I'm already saving my world."

"When I play, I see the people I'm protecting. I know their names," she continued. "If I join your superhero team, I'll just be a weapon."

"You're turning down the opportunity of a lifetime," Aron said. "Think about the scale."

"I am," Samantha said. "I love my life. I love the chaos. I like that my magic comes from passion, not a briefing room. If a monster appears in Tokyo, I hope your team can handle it. If it appears in Manhattan, Queens, or anywhere in New York, I'll be there."

"Keep the offer, Aron," she added. "But I prefer playing solo."

Samantha hung up, happy that she hadn't traded her song for a script.

THE END

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