



HOUSE OF JUSTICE

THE SIZZLING SPIDER
& HOP HARRIGAN IN:

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CHAPTER ONE

"It seems like a lot of trouble for a seed. That's all I'm sayin'," said the taller of the two men standing behind the man at the edge of the roof. They were dressed in simple suits, slightly rumpled but serviceable. Both wore gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints and hats to conceal their faces should anyone witness tonight's exploits.

The man at the edge of the roof was something else altogether.

"You two aren't paid to question, just do as you're told," he snapped. Dressed in a purple bodysuit sporting a cowl that covered his features, leaving only his mouth and nostrils exposed, the dark fabric clung to him like a second skin. On his chest, a black circle was stitched, with a dark red, nearly black skull stitched within. The only name he had shared was 'Blackout,' and neither man recognized his voice or his profile. The boss had only told them to meet him, follow his instructions, and bring back what he retrieved.

Haldon Balador wasn't big on sharing the details of his operation with men like them, but he did pay very well.

"So what's the play?" asked the second man, peeking over the edge before shrinking back.

"The play," hissed Blackout, "is that you stay quiet, stay here and wait for me."

The two men behind him exchanged a look and a shrug. "Fine with us," whispered the first. And with that, Blackout was gone.

Once an operative of the Axis, Blackout was now freelancing, working for nothing but a paycheck, the dreams of world conquest he had signed on to build now nothing but ashes and dust. The skills he had learned while sabotaging Allied operations under the cover of their own blackouts during WWII served him well, but he still dreamed of a day when someone with an iron fist might seize control and fix the world's ills properly. The fools left in charge after the Axis defeat would soon find themselves fighting the foes that the Axis had set out to crush.

Tonight, the task was to retrieve a prize. Blackout didn't care about it, nor the man who wanted it. Balador was only a single rung on a ladder that Blackout had been climbing since the war ended. He only hoped that the man at the top of that ladder would one day see the value he could bring. For the moment, he could only work his way to the next rung.

On his belt, he wore a skull motif, mirroring the design on his chest. He pressed the stud within the left eye socket and a surge of power erupted from the device, sending a pulse outward from his body in an arc. For a hundred yards in every direction, every electric light flickered and went out.

Blackout.

A button on the side of his cowl dropped special lenses over his eyes, giving him a ghostly view of the world around him, exploiting the infrared spectrum, he could see just well enough to navigate and fulfill his assigned task.

This was a botanical laboratory in the middle of a city full of banks, casinos and much richer targets, where men of power concentrated the protection of their assets. No one would get in his way, he was reasonably certain.

Just in case, there was always the stud in the right eye socket of the skull.

Dan Garret was moonlighting. The sarge would kill him if he ever found out, but what else was a man in love to do?

His day job as a cop kept him in beer and baloney, but if he was ever going to give his gal, Joan, a rock and walk her down the aisle...

He took another slug of motor-oil thick, black coffee, recapped his thermos and headed down the sterile corridor, checking doorknobs and shining his flashlight into the various labs and storage rooms. He'd done two sweeps already tonight, one more than he needed to, but sitting at the desk in the office only made him sleepy. Walking the halls was something like walking his beat and it kept his mind off how tired he was.

He patted the folded picture in his breast pocket, sitting right where his badge normally would on his uniform. It was the ring that Joan Mason's eyes had gone wide on seeing in the catalogue. Garret had ripped the page out of the book while she was off looking at other things in the department store. He never went anywhere without it.

He calculated that he needed to work about ten nights a month for the next four months to pay for it. For Joan, he could manage ten nights a month. With a lot of coffee. Security at a botanical laboratory wasn't difficult, but it was deadly dull. Doing more rounds helped, but thinking about putting that rock on Joan's lovely hand helped a lot more.

Suddenly, his flashlight died. He'd put fresh batteries in at the beginning of his shift, as always, but no amount of whacking or tapping would bring the thing back to life. He sighed. There were more batteries in the office. Turning, he realized that *all* the lights were off. Usually there was a dim glow from several of the labs, grow lights or emergency fixtures throwing just enough light to navigate by, even without his torch.

A power failure? There'd been no storm and an electrical failure wouldn't kill his flashlight. The cop in him didn't believe in coincidence. Something was up.

A rustle behind him. Garret spun, but not quickly enough.

Blackout moved swiftly through the dark corridors, the laboratory he sought marked on the little map he had consulted before leaping off the roof and leaving Balador's muscle behind. They would only be needed if he encountered more resistance than expected, but the intelligence the tycoon had provided indicated there would be a single night watchman, armed only with a truncheon. Nothing to be concerned about.

In the dark, Blackout was in his element.

There, ahead. The watchman was smacking his dead flashlight, unaware that it had been affected by Blackout's Dark Field technology. Nothing electrical more potent than the signals inside a human skull would function within it, except the tools Blackout used. It wouldn't last indefinitely, though, powered as it was by a fairly small power pack on the belt he wore. Twenty, perhaps twenty-five minutes at most, but that would be enough.

The mercenary padded up behind the man, a truncheon of his own in his right hand. No one had paid him to kill the guard, so the man would live, so long as he didn't interfere.

Though it was pitch-black in the hallway, Blackout clearly saw the surprise on the man's face as he spun to face him, hearing his approach at the last second. A firm blow with his billy club to the hapless watchman's temple was enough to drive the manto his knees, though not quite enough to steal his consciousness entirely.

"The sarge is gonna kill me..." said the man quietly, as he struggled to return to his feet. Another blow put his lights out.

“But I shall not,” chuckled Blackout, yanking a ring of keys from the snoring man's belt. “You are fortunate, my stalwart friend. No one paid for your life. Only what is behind this door.” A few tries later, he found the key to the lab and turned the knob.

“Tell Balador it went as planned,” said Blackout, handing over the strange, coconut sized seed to the two men on the roof. “I remain available for similar work, and anything more... interesting he might have in mind.”

“What's with the get up?” asked one of the men, gesturing to the purple bodysuit and cowl. “It looks uncomfortable. And a little silly, from my side of the street.”

“The fabric insulates me against the effects of the fields I employ. At this close proximity, my Dark Field would otherwise stop the electrical impulses in my brain. It is part of the technology and I am accustomed to it.”

“I thought you might be trying to compete with that kook in Gotham,” said the other man with a chuckle. “All you need is a cape.”

“Like the dame in Silk City!” said the first man. “Whoo-ee, what a looker!”

“There is also the element of anonymity. I might walk past you gentlemen tomorrow, in a suit or a uniform and you would never suspect it. That has value in my business.”

“Well, this has value in ours,” said the first man, lightly tossing the seed in his right hand. He turned to place the pod in a satchel the other man was holding open for him. When he turned back, the rooftop was empty.

CHAPTER TWO

"Sorry 'bout all the damage, Dode," said Hop Harrigan, sheepishly, as he dropped what was left of his prosthetic leg on the workbench. "There were mitigating... robots."

Dorothy "Dode" Herbert peered up at the grinning blond man who had just tossed a mangled, tangled assembly of metal and newfangled plastic at her, letting her spectacles slide down her nose so she could see his handsome face clearly over the top of them. "I suppose you and that Spy Smasher chappy were teasing those robots?"

"Well, we did end up running for our lives from one. Not sure who was antagonizing who, really. The grenade compartment you rigged up came in mighty handy in the end, though."

"You're welcome," she said with an arch of her eyebrow.

"How long will I be stuck with this dime-store knock off?" he asked, rapping his knuckles on the wood and metal prosthetic he was currently limping around on. Thanks to Dode and Mr. Wang's innovation, Hop wasn't used to limping anymore, so exquisite was the workmanship that his gait appeared to be that of a man with two physically fit human legs, even when he ran.

"Oh, I think we can soup you up, Hop," chimed in a new voice.

Rikki Wentworth, heiress, socialite, and secretly the vigilante known as the Spider, sauntered into the workroom, her dark hair coiffed and bouncy, her makeup perfect. She wore an expensive gown, long evening gloves and a gorgeous diamond necklace that tastefully attracted the eye to her décolletage. "After all, I can't be seen with a date who limps around like a wounded gazelle."

"Date?" asked Harrigan, both puzzled and intrigued.

"A date. You know. Two adults, dinner, wine, a nice night at the opera?" suggested Wentworth, slyly.

"Uh-huh," breathed Harrigan, catching on. "Who's going to the opera?"

"Haldon Balador," explained Mr. Wang, a young-looking Asian man, entering the room. He had a prosthetic leg propped over his right shoulder, the crook of its knee resting on the slope of his clavicle. One hand kept it steady until he hoisted it off to hand it to Hop. By his effort, the artificial limb seemed quite heavy, giving Hop pause. As the leg passed between the two men, Hop had to exert real effort to keep it from falling from his grasp.

"A bit heavy, don't you think?" he suggested. "That much weight will limit my movement."

"Not a bit, Harrigan," said Dode, with a smile. "The micromotors we've installed won't just keep you light on your feet. With this beauty, you'll kick like a mule, too." She reached out and patted the plastic-and-titanium prosthetic affectionately. "We just need you to put it through its paces so we can calibrate it properly before you escort Rikki-Tikki-Tavi here on another fool's errand."

"Haldon Balador is at the top of the criminal food chain in Silk City. Taking him down isn't a fool's errand, it's the Spider's duty," pouted Rikki Wentworth. "Just get Hop ready to dance the night away, please."

"Dancing, too?" asked Lucy Van Sloan, flouncing in. The girl was seventeen, pretty and far too involved in the Spider's adventures for Rikki Wentworth's taste, but she'd been caught up in the Dr. Satan business and found out that Rikki and the Spider were one and the same. Until Rikki could find a way to divert her interest to more teenage pursuits, the girl's safety was best managed by keeping her within the inner circle of the Spider's team. Her mother, Nita Van Sloan had been Rikki's father's personal secretary, privy to the fact that Richard Wentworth had been the original Spider during the 1930s, but learning that her daughter was forging a similar

path would be unwelcome news, Rikki was certain.

And now the young woman was eyeing Hop Harrigan in a way that made Rikki even more concerned. Complications atop complications, she thought ruefully. Past sins coming home to roost and forcing her to deal with issues she had long ago shut away.

"Aren't you supposed to be studying?" asked Dode, the arch of her eyebrow conveying an entirely different meaning than the one it had fired at Hop earlier.

"Mr. Wang wanted my help with the calibrations," said Lucy, brightly.

"She's got the long, slim fingers," he said, oblivious to the daggers the two women shot at him. "Better for the fine work."

The final member of the Spider's team, Rahm Singh, a tall, severe looking Sikh in a tight, neat turban and a crisp, double-breasted suit, ambled in carrying a large silver tray with a steaming pot of fragrant tea and five cups and saucers atop it. In his other hand, he held a plate piled high with shortbread biscuits.

"Nankhatai!" cried Lucy with delight, both at the appearance of the treats and the opportunity to distract the conversation from her returning to her school work.

"Just so, miss," intoned Rahm Singh, somehow managing to bow politely as he slid the tray and plate onto an empty space on the workbench.

Dode sighed and took a deliberately loud slurping sip from the mug of coffee at her elbow. Rikki and Mr. Wang shared a look and rolled their eyes heavenward, used to the long-running beverage dispute between the two strong willed team members. They both smirked as Dode reached over and snatched a biscuit from the plate, without looking at Rahm Singh.

Lucy swiped two, taking one in each hand and nibbling from them alternately. It was a peccadillo she shared with Rikki Wentworth and despite her elegant evening gloves and exquisitely applied lipstick, Rikki did the same. Makeup could be repaired. Nankhatai biscuits were worth the effort.

"So what's up with this Hadon Blowhard fella, anyhow?" asked Harrigan, lifting a biscuit from the plate and grabbing an elegant china cup full of tea with his other, gloved hand. He sipped and looked over the rim of the cup at Rikki, expectantly.

"Haldon Balador," she corrected. "He's the biggest businessman in the city, fingers in every pie, including the ones that don't show up on his tax return. I think he had something to do with a theft at one of my botanical laboratories last week. I want to know why."

"And he's going to the opera, tonight?" he asked.

"Dode created this," she held up a cigarette lighter, wagging it meaningfully.

"You're gonna give him a light?" teased Hop, knowing there was more to the little device than was obvious. Knowing Dode, it could be anything, but he thought he knew what the plan likely was.

"It's a match for the one he carries," she said, with a tsk. "This one will let us hear what's going on in his private meetings. I just have to swap it out for his real one."

"And not get caught doing it," groused Dode, irritably. "Haldon Balador is no fool, he doesn't miss a trick."

Rikki very deliberately adjusted the dress she was almost wearing, exposing even more of her generous cleavage. She primped her hair and gave Hop a lascivious wink. "He'll never know what hit him."

Lucy nearly choked on her nankhatai.

CHAPTER THREE

The opera was, as Hop had feared, not to his taste. A veteran of the European theatre in WWII, Hop still preferred smoky dance halls and Benny Goodman to the highbrow, unintelligible warbling of the performers in this... whatever this was.

Rikki tapped his wrist and when he turned, she whispered, "Isn't it wonderful?" The heiress was obviously enjoying the performance, enthusiastically peering through her little opera glasses and clapping gleefully at each appropriate moment.

"Oh, yeah, swell," said Hop, trying to muster some enthusiasm. He had deep feelings for this woman, complicated and with a history that the two of them alternately ignored and revelled in. They weren't a natural match, but he hated the idea of disappointing Rikki in anything, even if they really weren't meant to be.

"Intermission coming up," Rikki whispered in his ear. "Show time!"

"Swell," he said, quietly. At least the caterwauling would stop while they were in the lobby.

When they had secured drinks and begun the socialite dance of polite smiles and banal conversation, Hop found that the new leg was, indeed, very easy to get used to. It was much heavier than the old model, but the micromotors compensated for the weight and he found himself hardly noticing the difference after just a few minutes of wandering between clusters of guests. Rikki wasn't wandering.

Though her path seemed meandering, she was moving deliberately toward a knot of men surrounded by a miasma of expensive cigar smoke and women dripping in jewellery that could have funded Hop's spy-busting ring for a year and still left funds for aviation fuel.

"There," she hissed under her breath. "Red tie, tumbler in his left hand, cigar in the right. Haldon Balador."

"So how do we..." Before he could finish the thought, Rikki was detaching herself from the crook of his elbow and somehow, effortlessly parting the crowd between her and her quarry. Her hips rolled deliciously above her incredibly high heels. Men stepped back to admire her passing, women to glare at it.

From somewhere, she produced a long, slim cigarette and just as she reached the centre of the circle of power, she put it suggestively to her lips, locking eyes with Haldon Balador, silently.

"Miss Wentworth, how lovely to see you again," he said, sliding his drink onto a nearby table. He reached into a pocket and produced a lighter. From Harrigan's distant vantage, it did look to be a perfect match for the one Dode had built. Before he had popped open the lid of the expensive lighter, Rikki reached out a gloved hand and languidly stroked the curved, gold lid.

"What a lovely lighter," she cooed. "May I?" she asked, even as she snatched it from Balador's hand. She admired the device for a moment, testing the clasp of the lid and then expertly flicking it open and putting the bright flame to the end of her cigarette. She blew a long, luxurious stream of smoke past the admiring men, flicked the lighter closed to extinguish the flame and handed it back to the tycoon. "Thank you, Haldon. Very kind."

She swept up his whiskey glass, tossed back the contents in a single swig, turned on a heel and left the assemblage gawking at her swaying backside. The women who orbited glared all the harder, but Rikki only grinned and let her hips give her answer.

Sauntering up to Hop, she slipped a hand into his jacket and dropped a lump into the inside pocket. "A souvenir."

"I watched the whole thing. You couldn't have swapped it," he said, startled. He'd been wondering how they'd make the substitution now that she'd played her best card and failed.

"An old friend taught me a few tricks," she said with a sly smile. "Mandrake had marvellous hands," she added with lingering emphasis on the word, "Marvellous."

"Uh-huh," said Hop, his tone noncommittal. He knew better than to rise to Rikki's bait. "So now we can listen in?"

"There won't be anything to listen to until later. He's going back in." The bell was chiming to indicate the end of the intermission. "Best get back to our seats."

Harrigan had held a slim hope that once they made the switch, he might be free to skip the second half of the performance. No such luck, it would seem. "Swell."

Rikki hooked her arm through his and kissed him lightly on the cheek, saying, "Oh, come on, Hop. Nothing like an opera to set the mood."

Two hours later, Hop Harrigan was crouched on a rooftop, beside him, the Spider, now arrayed in a blond wig, spider-themed domino mask and a purple gown with a daring, thigh-high slit that exposed her high boots and a shapely leg within. She still sported long evening gloves, though now they were purple and Harrigan knew that the seams would be lined with razor blades, a trick she employed lest she be captured and bound.

From a pouch at her hip, she had produced an earpiece and thanks to some very fancy engineering provided by Mr. Wang and Dode, they were listening in, wirelessly, to a less than interesting conversation occurring in the warehouse below.

"Dode doesn't disappoint," he said quietly. The voices coming through the earpiece were surprisingly clear. "You have a helluva team."

"I do," said the Spider, smugly. "I could use an ace pilot, though," she added, almost shyly.

"Thanks, but I already have one impossible job. I don't need another."

"Heading back to Aerodrome City so soon?" she teased. Running a gloved knuckle down his chest, she added, "You could stick around a while. Might even be fun. Like old times."

Gently pushing her hand away, he said quietly, "Old times were almost twenty years ago, Rikki. Things change."

"Oh," she said, quietly. "What's her name?"

"Lisellotte von Schellendorf, Lise," he said, a smile in his voice.

"That's a very... European name," she said, a question in her voice. Though the war was over, a great deal of animosity remained between the countries who had won that war and the defeated German state.

"Lise flew for the Luftwaffe, trained from birth to be a Nazi super-pilot," he explained. "She defected back in '43 or '44, helped us beat their tactics."

"Huh," was the Spider's only response.

She shifted her weight and gestured for him to get closer to her so he could hear better. "Small talk's over. I can hear it in Balador's voice. Showtime."

Peeking over the roof, Hop saw a car and a truck pull up. The truck backed up to the loading dock, while the car pulled alongside the building, parking near a man door just beyond the loading dock. The clatter from below told him that the loading dock door had been raised and the light and shadows told him the unloading or loading of the truck was underway.

"There's why," he said, pointing over the edge. "New players."

"Y'know, the last time I was on a rooftop like this, with bad guys doing bad guy things in a warehouse, I ended up running for my life from a giant robot."

Hop Harrigan laughed quietly, "Oddly enough, me too."

"I wound up in my underwear," she added with wink.

"That could be a problem," he said, concerned.

"Worried that Lisellotte von Schellendorf wouldn't approve?" she teased.

“Nope.”

“What then?”

“I’m not wearing any.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Welcome, my dear,” said Haldon Balador with an insincere, avaricious smile. He had changed from his opera-going tuxedo with its bright red tie, into a khaki, collared shirt, functional but nondescript brown trousers and high, leather boots. His muscular frame was showed to advantage, the simple clothing expertly tailored to make the most of his fit, trim form.

The woman he greeted was something else entirely.

Tall and lean, this woman's beauty was obvious, but an air of menace surrounded her, causing many of Balador's men to back away from her unconsciously. The ones unloading the truck stopped and gawked, their tasks forgotten. Her hair was a vibrant, brilliant shade of green, like grass on a summer's day. The dress she wore was a silken gown of the exact same shade, while the skin beneath that dress was a paler, almost luminous shade of emerald, like the reflection of light off as pond.

Despite the odd colouring, the curves of her body, the planes of her face, the soft, inviting plumpness of her dark green lips made every man in the room swallow hard. Even Balador himself was not immune. He could not recall ever having seen a more beautiful woman in his life.

“Mr. Balador. We meet at last. I am called Nora Zimo, though most simply call me the Green Sorceress.” She ran a hand slowly across the wood of a nearby crate, the movement ridiculously sensuous, despite the rough, workman-like surroundings. “I understand you have an item I am seeking.”

“Indeed, Miss Zimo, I believe I do. And please, you are among friends. Call me Haldon.”

“And can you supply the facilities I requested as well?” she asked.

“Of course. Balador Industries runs an entire greenhouse network, currently devoted to cultivating exotic flowers for our more discerning customers. A number of them can be repurposed to your needs.”

“Then we are in business, Haldon. I have brought payment, diamonds as requested. Each crate holds a part of the agreed-upon sum, the diamonds mixed in with cut glass. I presume you have a facility that can sort the wheat from the chaff, as it were. Importing them as decorations on cheaply made light fixtures seemed... fitting.”

“Very creative, Miss Zimo. I'm certain my people can tell the difference between diamonds and cut glass on close inspection.”

“There are ten percent more stones than agreed upon, to compensate you for the added inconvenience,” she amended.

“Why that's positively thoughtful, Miss Zimo. I think you and I will get along famously. If you'll follow me, I have the item you requested in my office.”

“I have also brought as many crates of live plants, please instruct your men to treat them with care. They are to be the hosts for my project and must be in prime contrition to ensure the desired results.”

“Of course, of course,” he said. He then turned to a nearby man, his shirt not tailored, his trousers ill-fitting, but almost as powerfully built as the tycoon. “Pete? You heard the lady. Tell the boys.”

Pete nodded and trotted away to deliver the instructions. Haldon Balador had spoken.

The wealthy criminal mastermind and his emerald-hued companion entered a stark, simply appointed office, the furniture and fittings nothing like somewhere Haldon Balador would normally conduct business. The only attempt to brighten the room was a wilting cactus stuffed in one corner that utterly failed to impress. This particular deal required direct involvement from

him and he preferred his extra-legal activities not to overlap with his cleaner, more public business pursuits.

On the desk, a simple cardboard box sat, its flaps folded over one another to hold it shut. Balador unfolded the flaps and stepped away from the desk, allowing the Green Sorceress to peer within. A smile crossed her exquisite features as she looked down.

"If I may ask, as I understand it, your special skills allow you to accelerate the growth of plants, and some other less believable things that botanists would kill to be able to do. So why all this bother over a single seed pod?"

"This is no mere seed pod, Haldon," she answered, scooping the coconut sized seed out of the box and cradling it lovingly. "This is possibly the last plant from a very special planet, where plants have more... autonomy than they do here on our world."

"You can't be serious. A plant from another planet?" asked the tycoon.

She drew her free hand up and down her body, indicating her green skin and hair. "I wasn't always so singular in my colouring. When my powers manifested, my skin and hair turned this lovely shade of green and I was terrified. I begged my family for help. The only help they offered was an old story that my great-great something grandfather was supposedly an alien, with skin like mine is now."

"That sounds..."

"I am aware, Haldon, of exactly how that sounds," she cut him off. "But to cut a very long story short, I've confirmed it to my own satisfaction. My family on that side comes from Australia and there are enough Aboriginal legends of people from the sky with strange powers to convince me, when added to the evidence you see before you." She gave him a little twirl for emphasis. "If I am right, this seed will produce a plant with characteristics like nothing on Earth."

"By feeding on the plants you've brought along," he said, curious.

"Not feeding exactly, but yes, I believe so."

"And what sort of 'characteristics' might this new plant exhibit?"

"I believe it will grow into a plant that will direct the growth of other plants. Create plenty where there is none." She met his eyes, hers cold and calculating, his deeply interested. "Create want where there is plenty."

"You're describing the ultimate economic weapon." He drummed his fingers on the sparse, utilitarian desk. "Control over the food supply."

"Exactly."

"That sounds..." Harrigan didn't think he could find the word to describe how that sounded. He and the Spider had listened in growing horror as the woman explained her intentions and what the seed they were bargaining for might be capable of.

"Bad," finished the Spider. "Hitler would have loved it."

"Well, that's good enough for me. What do you want to do?" he asked.

The Spider stood, adjusted her gown and pulled her long gloves tighter. "Time to pull some weeds."

CHAPTER FIVE

Crashing through skylights was the Spider's favourite part of the job. Nothing says "unforgettable entrance" like dropping unexpectedly into a building through a window in the roof. She had asked Dode to build her a grappling gun specifically for this purpose. It gave her a thrill every time she used it.

For Harrigan it was a new experience. Without thinking about the consequences, he had instinctively landed with his weight shifted to his artificial leg, his body wanting to minimize the impact on his flesh. The pain that shot up through his stump when his metal-and-plastic heel slammed into the concrete floor was excruciating but short lived. He imagined his flesh-and-blood ankle would not have fared as well.

While they knew the threat was this mysterious seed the two criminals had been discussing, neither immediately identified the mid-sized cardboard box on the desk as the likely place it would be found. Both were thinking a seed, something quite small, not the coconut-sized behemoth the Green Sorceress had replaced in the box.

Hop had landed facing the green-skinned woman and was momentarily shocked into immobility by her unearthly beauty and odd colouring. The Spider had no such issues and spun an elegant, spinning back kick into Haldon Balador's midsection, sending the man flying backward with a whoof. He landed on his backside and his head clanged off the metal skin of the warehouse.

"Now that felt good!" she laughed as she turned to face the threat of the Green Sorceress. "Hop! Snap out of it soldier!" she cried, when she saw him standing stock-still, simply staring at the woman.

As she watched in horror, the woman drew a long blade from the top of her high boot. Not quite a sword, but longer than a knife, it glinted as she swung it in an arc. Reflexively, Harrigan threw up his left arm.

The clang of metal meeting metal shocked him out of his reverie and at the same instant the force of the impact tore the blade from the woman's grasp. She reeled back in pain, shaking the stinging from her hand as she retreated.

Harrigan looked down at his ruined sleeve, the metal arm above his gloved, artificial hand exposed and bent by the force of the blow. The hand still flexed at his command, but weakly and haltingly.

"Dode's gonna kill me," he said, despairing.

"I'll tell her there were mitigating floozies," chuckled the Spider, advancing on the green-skinned woman.

Her back to the desk, the Green Sorceress reached into the open box and hoisted the huge seed that was at the centre of whatever was in play between her and Balador. "This will release a toxin that will kill you both if I shatter it," she warned.

"And you as well, Toots," said the Spider dismissively. Put down the coconut and come quietly."

She looked between Harrigan and the advancing form of the Spider and raised the bulbous seed over her head. "This is of my world, not yours. It will not harm me."

"But then you'll have nothing. It's the last one, right?" asked Hop, his arms open, his gun still in the holster at his hip. "We overheard," he added when she looked at him in puzzlement.

"We can take it and have it studied by people who will use it to help others," suggested the Spider, hopefully. "We aren't police. The diamonds don't matter to us." She turned to Hop and added, "Did I just say that?"

A grin was his only answer.

"This world has never treated me with kindness, Spider," said the Green Sorceress, bitterly. "I will take my rightful place. My kind was meant to rule over such as you."

"Can't let you do that, Green Bean," snarled the Spider. She slipped a hand behind her back, and drew a futuristic pistol. "You don't get to choose who gets to eat, sister." She pulled the trigger and a bolt of energy leapt between the tip of the little gun and the pod in the Green Sorceress's hands. There was a hiss and then the seed within reached a critical pressure point and exploded with a splat. The wet, fibrous insides of the pod rained over the room, bits of it landing unnoticed on a the cactus in the corner, but most of it splattering the Green Sorceress.

Whatever poisonous result she had expected did not materialize. Perhaps the Spider's energy pistol had cooked out the toxin or perhaps it wasn't the potent danger the Green Sorceress imagined. Either way, there seemed to be no danger from the slop within the seed, much to the relief of Hop and the Spider.

The emerald-skinned woman wiped the glop from her eyes and launched a frenzied, clawing attack at the Spider. Expecting exactly this, the heroine pivoted, grabbed a wrist and neatly tossed the other woman across the room. Dode's insistence that she constantly spar with the large and formidable Rahm Singh paid off, as usual. The crumpled form of the Green Sorceress slumped to the floor unconscious, the wall she had slammed into proving more than solid enough to stop her rolling, flailing progress.

"Um... Spider?" said Hop, his voice strange and quavering.

She turned, curious.

The small, unimpressive cactus that had sat all but unnoticed in the corner of the room was anything but. Now over six feet tall, it flexed its spiky arms, the spines now longer than the little plant had been tall, only moments ago. The terracotta pot that had held its roots and a bit of soil for stability exploded as two decidedly ambulatory legs split and flexed from the once single trunk of the plant.

"Does that cactus have... legs?" asked the Spider, incredulously.

"Two. And... yep. It's got eyes," said Hop, resigned.

The towering plant creature had grown another foot in height as they watched and two dark-red eyes had opened to glare angrily at the two heroes. An instant later, a mouth screamed open, revealing a maw full of more spikes like the ones growing larger on its arms and torso. Each dripped with a menacing-looking yellow ichor.

"And I don't think it's happy about any of it..." said Hop. "This is feeling very 'run from the robot'," he added.

"I better not lose another dress," huffed the Spider. "They're bespoke!"

"Send Miss Green Jeans the bill!" he shouted, grabbing her arm and spinning her so the two of them could race through the office door and into the main chamber of the warehouse.

The nearly ten-foot-tall, ambulatory cactus didn't bother with the door.

CHAPTER SIX

A bleary-looking Haldon Balador dragged the limp form of the Green Sorceress out of the office, through the wall where the door had been. The massive plant creature had ripped a hole nearly twice as wide as the door-frame, the gaping opening stretching to the ceiling, which sagged ominously.

"Everybody out!" he called, watching the walking, stalking cactus as it chased after the two interfering, so-called heroes. "Get out! Run!" He didn't know if the creature would turn on his men if it finished off the two interlopers, but he hadn't gotten wealthy by wasting resources. Loyal, obedient men were not as easy to come by as Hollywood made it seem in the pictures and the handful here represented some of his best. The woman was also a potentially valuable asset if she had the powers she claimed. Who knew? He might even find another of the strange, obviously powerful seeds somewhere and her skills would then be worth the effort of saving her.

She might even be able to control whatever that cactus thing was. If he could get her clear before the monstrous creature tore the building down around them. It was tossing crates at the retreating heroes, punching huge holes in the building's skin with the missiles, but so far the two had managed to avoid its attacks. A few more holes like that and the whole structure would drop like an avalanche.

He could afford the loss of the building. It would be very gratifying if the two interfering idiots went along with it. He beckoned to one of his men, Pete who was the closest. "Take her, Pete. Get clear. I have something to do."

Pete was among his best. He simply took the woman from his boss, thrust his shoulder under her arm and dragged her along, without a word. Good man.

One corner of the warehouse held several metal cans of gasoline, the fuel for the forklifts that kept the place moving during the day. Balador snatched one up and unscrewed the lid.

The warehouse was already beyond saving, the cactus creature having punched a dozen or more gaping holes in the structure. The police and more would be on their way, sooner or later and there wasn't enough time to properly sanitize the operation. Time for plan B. Burn.

His fancy lighter got the blaze going nicely. Moments later, only the two trespassers and the monster intent on rending them to shreds were left inside the burning building.

"I don't suppose you carry any weed killer?" asked Hop, without much hope.

The Spider gestured at her slinky dress and the wispy, diaphanous, spiderweb themed cape she wore. "Where?" she demanded.

"I'm still trying to figure out where you keep the gun!" came the retort. The two had split up, hoping to confuse the plant creature, or at least slow it down. Instead of chasing one of them as they anticipated, it stopped, picked up a crate in one spiky arm and a barrel in the other, lobbing each as a missile, in opposite directions.

"Well, that didn't work," called Hop from his side of the warehouse. "Now what?"

"Why ask me? You're the hero pilot!"

"I shoot down planes, not houseplants!" he answered, tartly.

"Wait! That's it!"

"What's it?" he asked, dodging another crate. This one slammed through the thin metal skin of the wall behind him. "Think fast Spider! This thing's gonna bring the roof down in a

minute!”

“It's not a houseplant. It's a *cactus!*” she explained, putting emphasis on the last word. “When I was a kid, my dad made me do chores. I used to have to water the plants. I killed a couple of them by over-watering. Cactus types!”

“I getcha. We gotta give Spike a drink!” Hop looked around at the warehouse around them. Crates, barrels, machinery, but no obvious plumbing. “And just how are we gonna do that?”

“Hey, I came up with the idea!” she said, aiming a bolt of energy from her little pistol at the monster. It had no effect, whatsoever. “I wonder if it's because the tissue is so dry,” she said to herself.

“This place must have a can!” called Hop, hope rising in his voice.

“Lots of them,” she said, pointing at the various barrels and shelves lined with cans of industrial lubricants and cleaners.

“No, a bathroom!” he corrected.

“Oh, right!” she cried, realizing what he was suggesting. A washroom meant plumbing and running water. Where... ah! There! Across the room she could just see the glint of white porcelain through an open door. She popped out from cover, sprinting for the washroom. “Keep it busy!” she called as she ran.

“Oh, sure!” he said, sprinting in the opposite direction, his artificial leg clacking as he pounded across the room. “Oh... Hell!” The huge plant turned to follow his progress and finally decided that lobbing heavy objects was not getting the job done. It loped after Hop, its enormous limbs chewing the distance between them with terrifying speed.

“I don't mean to alarm you,” called the Spider as she reached the water closet. “But the building is on fire!”

“Good! We can't let any of that glop get on any other plants!” he said, jinking hard to his right to stay out of reach of the spiky arms swinging at him from behind. “One crazed plant beast is bad enough!”

“Still got one of Dode's grenades in that gam of yours?”

“Sure!”

“Okay, lead our new friend this way. We're gonna introduce it to indoor plumbing!”

“Easy for you to say,” called Hop, diving out of the way of another tossed crate that smashed through the wall behind him. The warehouse was now more holes than walls, he saw. Plus, what was left was starting to really enjoy being on fire. “You're not playing tag with tall, green and angry here!”

“At least he doesn't have a...” A foot long spike, slathered in noxious yellow ooze zipped past the Spider's nose, stabbing half its length into the metal wall beside her. It was followed by several more, shot somehow from the cactus creature's arm. She could see them regrowing even as it turned away from her to throw another barrel at Harrigan. “Never mind.”

Hop looked beseechingly to the sky, part of his mind noting that the ceiling was sagging, ominously. “She had to say it,” he intoned, shaking his head in dismay. “Not bad enough it's ten feet tall and electricity-proof?”

“Just get it over here and stop complaining!”

“Yes, Ma'am!” called Hop. As he had dodged and ran, he had noticed that the new prosthetic leg was much stronger than the old model. In fact, he'd had to compensate and make a concerted effort to limit how much power he pushed off with. Now he changed tactics. He turned hard, slapped a hand against a beam and let his momentum spin him back to face the creature. He ran straight for it and at the last second... hopped. On his artificial leg.

A long, startled cry escaped his lips as he almost hit the nearly twenty-foot-high ceiling, easily

clearing the cactus monster and landing heavily behind it. "Holy Mary!" he shouted as he stumbled forward, unable to fully stop his incredible momentum. "What was that?"

"Mr. Wang," said the Spider, beckoning Harrigan her way. "A leg's never just a leg with that man."

"Come on, Spike! Over here," called Hop, waving his arms. The sleeve of his left arm was so shredded that the artificial limb beneath the cloth was fully exposed. He looked at it ruefully, and asked, "Think your team can do something with this?"

"If we get out of this!" the Spider answered, dodging another fusillade of spikes flung in her direction. "Watch it, Spike. Those things are dangerous!"

The cactus opened its mouth, the mass of spikes within dripping more yellow venom. A sound between anger and amusement burbled out of the maw, and the creature pounded its massive form toward her, ignoring Harrigan.

"I think you've made a friend!" he shouted, circling behind the creature.

An ominous groaning sound came from the far end of the warehouse, where the fire had taken full hold of the inventory and the building itself. "We gotta go, Spider-Lady!"

"We can't let this... walking salad get out of here alive. The cops couldn't handle it and I don't think it's a fan of people."

"Okay. Be ready to move!" The creature was almost within reach of the woman in the slinky purple dress. This might just work, he thought. He reached down and popped his grenade out of the compartment in his prosthetic leg. "A little closer..."

"Don't tell me how to do my job, Harrigan!" she yelled. "Come on, Spike! Watch the pretty Spider!" Her voice was a sing-song taunt and seemed to be holding the creature's attention, giving Hop the chance to maneuver behind it.

The spiky arms reached out for the Spider, but she was already moving. Though it was immense and its spikes deadly, it was thankfully slower and driven solely by rage and base instinct rather than an evolved animal brain. She worried that at the rate it had developed, that might be its next trick, so they needed to end this quickly.

"Now, Harrigan!" she ordered.

Hop once again hopped with intent, this time aiming himself at the thing's spine-covered back. He managed to whip his artificial leg ahead of him, so it was the point of impact, rather than the soft, vulnerable flesh of his good leg. His momentum transferred to the creature, shoving it through the open door of the utilitarian washroom. His grenade followed it inside. Three seconds later, an explosion ripped through the pipes and porcelain fittings, drenching the creature, even as the blast shredded large chunks from its monstrous body.

The water's effect was not what the pair had hoped for.

What remained of the creature seemed to inflate and swell. The behemoth went from a ten foot tall, roughly human-proportioned monstrosity to something far larger and massive, in moments. Its head brushed the high ceiling and its form, bits of it actually on fire, took on the proportions of a bear or an ape, growing thicker and more imposing by the second.

"Great!" lamented Harrigan. "We built a better monster!"

"I don't think so," said the Spider, drawing her pistol again.

"Your bug zapper won't do anything! You tried that already."

She didn't answer him. Instead, she drew a bead on the centre of the monstrous form and squeezed the trigger, unleashing an arc that briefly connected the tip of her pistol to the creature with a blinding flash of electricity.

For a moment, nothing happened, then the creature screamed, long and loud, its entire body suddenly flexing and tensing, apparently beyond its control. It flailed and spasmed. The Spider

fired again. And again.

The fire was closing in. Both the Spider and Harrigan were choking back coughs and blinking furiously to clear their vision. "We gotta go, Spider-Gal!" advised Harrigan, searching for a way out. "This way!" he called, gesturing to what he thought was a path that wasn't blocked by flames or a monstrous plant creature.

"We can't let it get out of here!" she said, angrily stabbing at the trigger again. The pistol spat one last, weak blast of energy into the cactus thing, enough to give it a final, intense snapping spasm that broke its body in two at the midpoint, the legs still standing, the torso, arms and head tumbling to the burning floor. Roars of pain and anger chased the two heroes out of the warehouse.

They were perhaps thirty yards from the structure when the building added its death throes to the cacophony, structural steel and burning wood crying in inanimate agony. A moment later, the far wall collapsed inward and the rest of the structure soon followed. Flames engulfed what remained in short order.

"I think you got it," grinned Harrigan. "But how did you know your little ray gun would work like that?"

"I figured it had something to do with how dry the cactus tissues were. Not sure of the science there, but once it was full of water..."

"Zap. Whoosh!" enthused Harrigan, miming the creature's demise with enthusiasm.

"Zap. Woosh." she said, smiling.

"Whatcha smiling at?" he asked. She was looking pointedly down at his trousers. He reached down and felt the gaping hole in the backside of them.

"You really aren't wearing any underwear," she laughed.

EPILOGUE

"You know, Hop..." Dode trailed off, leaning over the artificial arm she was working on. The woman wore a set of magnifying spectacles, making her eyes appear far too large for her handsome face. Her hair was pulled up in a severe bun, keeping it out of the way while she worked. "I think I can give this little beauty a lot more juice."

"Like the leg?" he asked, intrigued. "That came in really handy, by the way, so thanks!"

"Our pleasure, Mr. Harrigan," said Mr. Wang, from the other side of the table. He was fiddling with one of the micromotors they had developed, but Hop wasn't sure what he was doing with it. "Your safety is as important to us as Miss Wentworth's, and we enjoy building these," he gestured at the prosthetic limb and the various gear strewn about the work-room, "devices for you both."

"Balador still has the lighter. Mr. Wang has his monstrosity of a computer monitoring for interesting conversations, but so far he's only taking care of the Green Sorceress in a safe house and doing his usual, above board business. We'll get more, maybe even something that will let you give the leg another field test," said Dode, distractedly, without looking up from her work.

"It took a bit of getting used to," said Hop, flexing his prosthetic leg. "But the extra power on the arm would probably come in handy. Think I'll be able to lift a car with it?"

"An engine block, maybe. You'll need to practice. It's still going to be connected to your flesh-and-blood shoulder, so heavy stuff is going to need good technique, so you don't rip it off or damage your regular bits," explained Dode. "But with a little training and care, you'll be able to do some pretty incredible stuff with this little baby."

"Just do be careful with it," added Rahm Singh as he entered the room. For once, he wasn't carrying a serving tray full of tea and biscuits. Instead, he had a small satchel, which he handed to Harrigan. "Spare power packs for the arm and the leg. They use a single particle of the element we use to power the more interesting areas of the mansion. In theory, each is virtually infinite in capacity, but I've included two spares to compensate for your... vigorous lifestyle. They are robust, but not indestructible, much like the limbs themselves."

"What Rahm Singh is ever-so-delicately not saying," added Rikki Wentworth, striding into the workroom, her hair wrapped in a damp towel, her body in a clinging silk gown. "Is that your replacement parts here weren't cheap. I'm happy to foot the bill for building them, but let's not need replacements too often, hmm?"

"I'm grateful, Rikki, really," he said with sincerity. "I've got to get back to Aerodrome City, though. Captain Midnight has a line on where Dr. Satan went to ground after your last dust-up with him."

"Oh, not that guy again," said Lucy, flouncing in. She looked around the room, then pointedly at Rahm Singh's empty hands, her face falling in disappointment. She looked coyly back at Hop, "He was awful. Made me steal Aunt Rikki's will and everything."

Dode shot a look at Rikki, and the two women both frowned in concern. Lucy didn't notice. She immediately sat down beside Mr. Wang and dug into whatever he was doing with the micromotor. Her long, elegant fingers were indeed well suited to the work, Hop could see.

"Her will?" asked Harrigan, puzzled. "What for?"

Lucy brightened. "It turns out Aunt Rikki left all this," she gestured around the room, swinging her arms exuberantly to encompass the mansion and all of the Wentworth holdings, "to me! He used his mind-control junk on me. I guess he wanted to take it all for himself." Lucy put her tools down and trotted over to Rikki, not noticing the frown on her face as wrapped her

arms around Rikki from behind, giving her an affectionate squeeze. “But the Spider and her team saved the day!” A moment later, she was bent over the bench, again engrossed in whatever Mr. Wang was doing with the micromotor.

Harrigan blinked. Stunned.

Rikki and Dode watched as he did the mental math, his brows drawn down in concentration. He looked hard at Lucy, then at Rikki, comparing their features for the first time, the bright green eyes, the high cheekbones, and the shape of the nose. Looking back at Lucy, his eyes widened in realization.

The Sizzling Spider and her team will return.