

PUBLIC DOMAIN
SUPER HEROES
Presents:

SPY SMASHER
— & —
HOP HARRIGAN
IN:
**OPERATION
PAPERCLIP**

James L. Richardson

PUBLIC DOMAIN SUPERHEROES PRESENTS:

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Prescott, Ontario, Canada**



CHAPTER 1

The South American airfield was little more than a dusting of gravel, half-swallowed by the jungle and rutted from overuse. Spy Smasher's plane was sleek with a unique profile, its propeller so finely aligned that it was nearly silent on its approach but for the hum of the engines. As he cut those engines, they died with a reluctant whine.

Spy Smasher climbed out, high boots crunching into soft dirt, jaw clenched tight. He looked like a man who hadn't slept in days despite the leather cowl covering his head and goggles hiding his exhausted eyes. In truth, he hadn't truly slept in nearly a week and his eyes scanned every tree line for threats he knew would come. His cape was torn, his belt gear half-spent and he needed a shower in the worst way.

A second engine hummed above. A slower, more conventional plane, its prop wash and roaring announced its presence long before he spotted it. Hop Harrigan's plane dipped low and came in hot, skidding slightly as it touched down. The blond pilot jumped out before the propeller had even spun down, hauling crates from the belly of the craft like he was racing a stopwatch.

"You look like Death's leftovers," Hop called with a wave. He shoved a box of .303 rounds into Armstrong's arms and hoisted a crate of rations over one shoulder. His hold was only half full, but Spy Smasher's plane was built for speed and stealth, so what Hop had would tax its capacity. "You forget what Bill and Wally taught us about sleeping? Y'know, to do it even when the world is burning?"

"I'll sleep when the mission is over," Spy Smasher muttered. He popped the crate open and checked the ammunition, nodding. "You bring the fuel?"

"Every drop I could carry. Rations, too, he added, rattling the crate on his shoulder. "You didn't ask, but even you eat. You're welcome." Hop looked his friend up and down, assessing his state. "I should slip you a mickey. You really look beat."

"Then thank you," offered Spy Smasher, ignoring the rest of Hop's comments. He

knew he was beyond the point of really needing sleep, but this close to his target, he couldn't take the time to recharge. Dr. Satan was slippery and crafty. There was every chance he'd slip the net if Spy Smasher let off the pressure, even for a few hours.

His cape, draped over one shoulder, wasn't exactly the best outfit for shifting cargo, but his identity was too important to risk. While Hop knew full well who he was beneath the cowl and goggles, the enemy was near and he didn't dare risk removing the dramatic uniform at the moment. Alan Armstrong's secret identity was of more concern than his comfort. If Hop thought it strange that he was still in full Spy Smasher outfit to help restock his plane, he didn't voice the opinion.

They worked in silence for a moment. Boxes of gear shifted. Sweat dripped. Bugs buzzed around their heads like vultures. With the two men working efficiently, the small hold of Spy Smasher's airplane was rapidly filled. When they had a moment of rest as the tanks drank aviation fuel, Hop broke the silence. "Still chasing ghosts out here?" he asked, squinting at the jungle. "I've got sources putting Dr. Satan in Silk City. Setting up shop, laying some kind of legal groundwork, getting nice and respectable. Yet here you are, Tarzan."

Armstrong didn't look up. He just chambered a round.

"He's still here," he answered, flatly. His tone brought Harrigan's head up with a snap.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because half a dozen of his goons just surrounded us." The statement brought Harrigan to full, martial awareness. Without missing a beat at his task of refuelling the futuristic air-frame, he subtly shifted a hand to his hip and popped the leather retaining strap off of his own weapon.

The first shot snapped past Hop's shoulder before the words finished leaving Armstrong's mouth. Even as he moved, Harrigan was drawing his automatic pistol. While he hadn't expected trouble in a part of the world most people couldn't find on a map, the weapon was oiled and loaded and it slid smoothly up into his hand in one practiced, fluid motion.

Both men dove for cover. As Spy Smasher landed behind a fuel drum, his cape

snapped out behind and above him, distracting the enemy's attention and aim away from his vulnerable torso. His suit was bulletproof to a degree, but he could tell by their sound the enemy was using large-calibre rounds which would break ribs or cause internal bleeding. It was always best to avoid being hit at all and the flutter of his cape tended to draw the eye as he moved. The ridiculous affectation of a cape in battle had saved his life enough times that he no longer resented the ostentation.

Hop thumped down ungracefully behind a supply crate as bullets tore up the gravel strip in a line directly on his heels.. Shouts came from the trees, distorted and cold. There was none of the anger that both men were used to hearing from an enemy in a fire fight. The flatness of the voices was more ominous than the gunfire.

Spy Smasher reached to his belt and with his attention on the enemy in the brush, flipped open a hidden panel by feel alone. With practiced precision he flicked two of the switches down, one up and then gave the whole device a very specific twist. In answer, an electric whine sounded behind him, deep in the wing structure of his idle plane.

High above him, atop the wings, the twin turret guns swivelled and opened fire. Controlled bursts swept the jungle line. Two goons dropped, bodies twitching as the streams of bullets tore through them. Neither man so much as cried out as they fell.

"Did your plane just shoot somebody?" Hop shouted over the chaos. He wasn't as close to the guns as Spy Smasher, but the roar of their fire was still almost deafening. "And can it do it again?"

"Limited ammo! We've still got three more out there!" called Spy Smasher in answer.

"Four," Hop corrected, ducking as a round pinged off metal near his head. The two men locked eyes. Both had served for years on the front lines in Europe and the hard won experience served them well. A few glances, a hand signal and a nod was enough to rough out a plan of counter attack without saying a word.

They moved in sync, their military muscle memory kicking in. Hop flanked left, circling wide through low brush, while Spy Smasher pulled an unconventional micro-grenade from his belt, clicked a switch to change the yield and tossed it to his right. He and Hop pressed their hands over their ears and clenched their eyes tight, knowing

what was coming. The explosion bought them three seconds of blind men, the micro-charge being more incandescent flash than destructive power.

Hop tackled one from behind, using the butt of his sidearm to silence him. Spy Smasher disarmed another by grabbing his gun arm from behind and breaking his wrist with a brutal twist. A knee to the gut doubled the man over and the flat edge of a hand to the back of his neck dropped him.

The final shooter turned to run but Hop put a round into his fleeing form, ending the fight. Both men were only slightly winded, still in fighting shape despite the years since the war. For them, the battles had yet to end.

The jungle was quiet again. Smoke hung low. The plane's turrets whirred once and went still. Spy Smasher clipped the device on his belt closed and quickly pulled a fresh clip from another compartment, sliding it smoothly into place with a soft click. He racked the slide to set the first round in the chamber, scanning the undergrowth warily.

"That all of them?" Hop asked.

"For now," said Spy Smasher, blowing out a relieved breath. His posture suggested he was less sure of his statement than his tone suggested. Dr. Satan was no fool. Six men might not be his entire assault force.

"I hate this place," Hop muttered.

"Then let's finish up. Get me fuelled up and you can leave." Hop looked at him skeptically, uncertainty in his gaze. Spy Smasher answered the unspoken question. "Because I'm not leaving until I know for sure that bastard's gone."



CHAPTER 2

The jungle was quiet again. Another man might consider saying it was too quiet, but Spy Smasher was grateful for the silence, even if it wasn't likely to last. Hop refuelled the plane, double-checked his systems, and gave Armstrong one last look. He was clearly not happy about leaving his friend to face the enemy alone.

"You sure about this?" he asked.

"Never," Alan said with a weary smile. "But I'm doing it anyway."

"Old habits die hard," suggested Hop. "Just don't be an old habit."

"I'll do my best," answered Alan Armstrong, as he removed the cowl and goggles and unclipped the cape. With a grunt, he poked his finger through a bullet hole in the black-lined yellow cape fabric. A big one.

"You'd better," called Hop, turning for his plane. "You owe Midnight for the supplies and you know how she gets."

"She knows I'm good for it, Hop," Armstrong shouted back.

"Yeah, but if you die, she'll take it out of my paycheck," laughed the Harrigan as he swung up into the body of his small cargo plane.

Hop gave a jaunty salute and after a dangerously short taxi down the uneven track of gravel was nothing but receding engine's roar, the plane lost in the mist that hung above the jungle canopy. Before long even the engine noise was lost in the cacophony of jungle sounds and humidity.

Left alone, Armstrong dragged the corpses of the attackers into a row and covered them with a tarp from his supplies. The surviving combatants each received a dose of tranquilizer that would keep them out of his hair for at least twelve hours. It would have been simpler to put a bullet into them, but if his suspicions were correct, these men weren't as guilty or dangerous as their actions would indicate.

When he was finished, he gave himself an injection of vitamins and caffeine, then

wolfed down a ration pack without really tasting it.

He made sure the plane was prepped for a quick take off if needed, reloaded the two gun turrets with the ammunition Hop had delivered and deliberately turned a hidden switch beneath the seat until he heard a click and saw a tiny, almost invisible light flash once on the control panel. With that task complete, he pulled out his grooming kit and tidied himself up in his reflection on the silver body of his plane.

He left the Spy Smasher gear stashed in his plane and propped a stylish hat on his head. He scooped a camera from his equipment locker and set out to follow the trail the goons had used. Broken branches, crushed grass, the occasional wad of tobacco spit made the path they had taken as easy to track as a well-lit boulevard. The trail opened to a clearing around a village carved into the green, tired, weather worn buildings leaned into each other like tired drunks at its edges, giving way to newer construction that hoped to attract tourist dollars at the centre of town. The men who had attacked he and Hop had either come from this town or at least passed through on their way to the ambush.

The locals gave him friendly, curious but cautious glances as he scanned the streets around him. The town was large enough to be accustomed to tourists, but small enough to still be wary of strangers. His civilian outfit of khaki trousers, an open shirt, informal hat and a constantly clicking camera was meant to convey avid tourist, giving him a reason to look around and peer into shadows. With any luck, he might find a clue that would lead him to the man he was truly after.

He settled himself into the role. Tourist. Aimless. Curious. Harmless. He pointed his camera at random elements in the village, made a show of looking around at the place with curiosity about everything around him, every inch the American tourist. The locals knew there was money in his pockets and proffered their produce, textiles and pottery for his approval. He simply smiled and pretended not to understand their offers. It was a little harder to pretend not to understand their insults when he didn't buy anything.

He made himself comfortable at the only establishment in town that offered food, drink, lodging, and perhaps three serviceable chairs. The fan overhead did its best to move the thick, oppressive air, but it was punching well above its weight. He ordered a

local beer but casually slopped the liquid onto the dirt floor and his tabletop as he pretended to drink.

He had managed to surreptitiously dispose of almost half the beer in his glass when he saw him: a white man in a well pressed suit, perfectly tied tie and a fedora perched like it belonged there. A pencil line of moustache slashed across his face, slicked down with a glistening pomade. A toothpick rolled around his mouth as he chatted up a beaming local girl. His Spanish was halting, his accent definitely American.

Armstrong sipped his now warm drink and watched the man in the mirror behind the poorly stocked bar. Mr. Fedora finished his conversation with a charming nod and strolled off, casual as a cat. He flicked the toothpick into a spittoon and drew a fresh one from a case he kept in his inside jacket pocket. Armstrong waited ten heartbeats, then followed.

Mr. Fedora made his way down a side street, past laundry lines and shuttered stalls, before pausing to glance around. He did a dummy check, quickly spinning, casually stretching and then pulling a loose board almost as if by accident. A signal lever, Armstrong was certain. Then he gracefully slipped under a leaning fence into what looked like a long-abandoned building.

Armstrong gave it a full minute, then followed. Inside, the place was all dust and rot. No sign of Mr. Fedora but there was an elevator, polished, humming, and waiting like it had been expecting company. It was obviously a trap.

Spy Smasher would never step into such an obvious snare, but he wasn't Spy Smasher at the moment. Alan Armstrong stepped inside. The doors closed without the press of a button. There was no response when he pressed the single button on the panel. He stabbed at it again.

The floor vanished beneath him.

He dropped with all the force gravity could bring to bear. No hand holds, no cables, just a chute slick with oil and speed. He hit a turn and lost a little of his momentum, then another sharp, violent turn was immediately followed by a near vertical drop. He finally landed with a gloppy splash in a glass tank filled with some kind of heavy, clear fluid. Definitely not water. It felt like he was swimming in syrup, the goop going up his

nose and sticking heavily to his eyelids when he managed to get his head above the surface. Even his training wouldn't let him tread water in this stuff for long. After only a few strokes and kicks, he could feel the fight against the dense fluid sapping his strength.

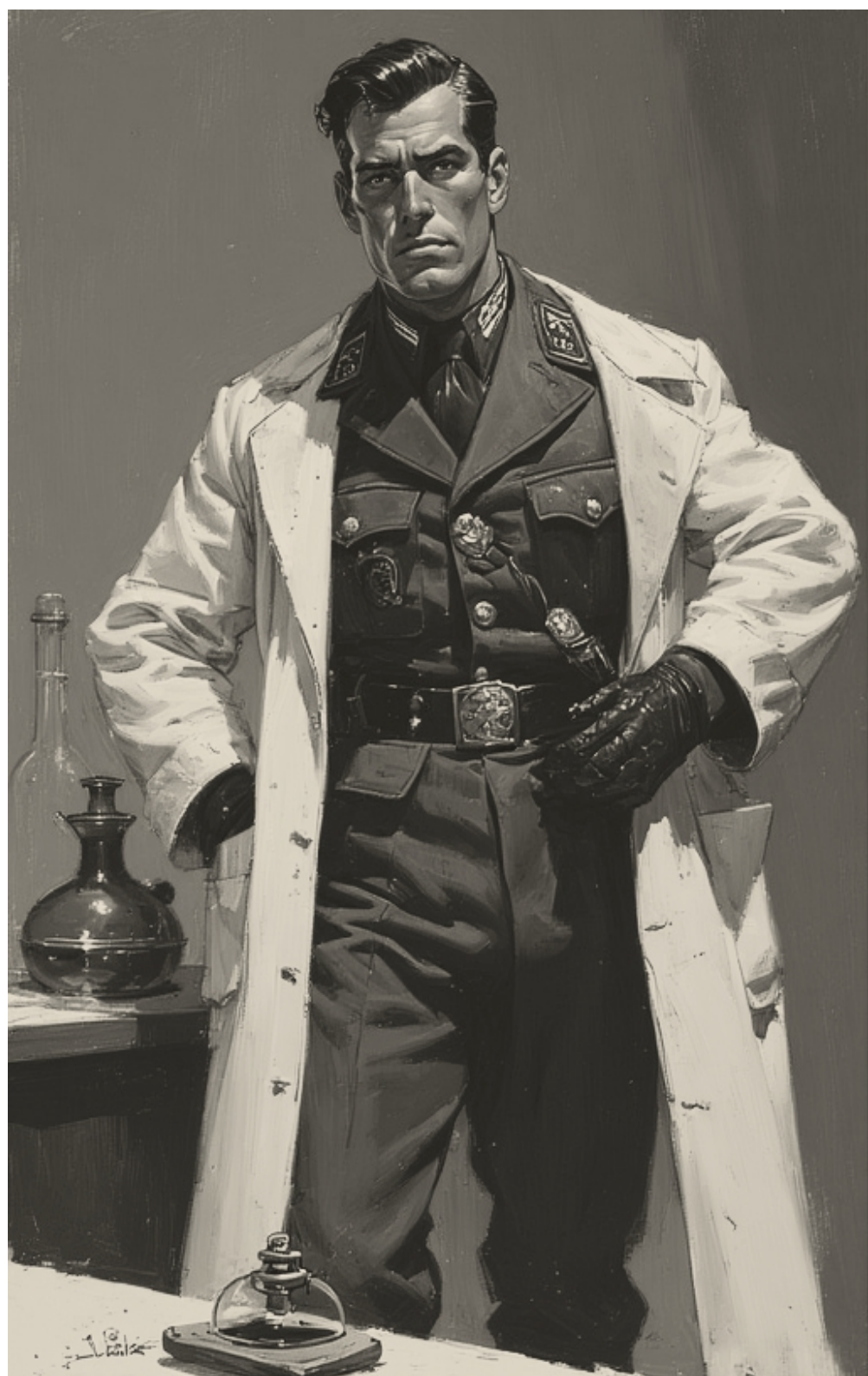
The voice of an instructor rang inside his head. Armstrong and two other men had been dropped in the North Atlantic during a survival exercise, left to tread water in eight foot swells for what had felt like days. When the boat returned to pick them up, the instructor had offered a choice. "You can get in the boat and wash out or find a way not to die until I get back." Armstrong hadn't died and he was the only one not to wash out.

He clamped down hard on the panic he could feel surging in his chest and forced his breathing to slow, his arms and legs to stop flailing. There was every chance his body was buoyant enough to keep him afloat with less effort than he was exerting. This trap wasn't meant to kill, it was meant to immobilize, weaken and humiliate. He just had to find a way not to let it.

He sputtered and spit out some thick, flavourless fluid. Kicking upward, he tried to grasp the top of the tank, but it had sealed behind him. His vision was suddenly dazzled as the tank went from near total darkness to brilliant illumination. Lit from below, he was on display.

A voice echoed through hidden speakers. Calm. Precise. Familiar.

"Welcome, Mr. Armstrong. Or do you prefer... *"Spy Smasher?"*"



CHAPTER 3

Alan Armstrong floated in the tank, weightless, blinking away the sting of the fluid that still stuck to his eyelashes. This trap might not be intended to kill him, but if he had to keep up his efforts to stay afloat much longer, it would do just that. Even with his iron strength, his arms felt like he had a Buick strapped to each and he could hardly force his legs to move at all. A soft chuckle echoed around the room, malice and mockery filling his ears and then the tank walls hissed. With a tiny pop, the walls split apart, disappearing into the darkness with a soft *shhhkt,* allowing the strange fluid to drain as they parted. He dropped gracelessly to the floor, managing to keep himself propped on one knee. His chest heaved as he sucked in breaths not stolen by the effort of keeping himself afloat.

After a few deep, ragged breaths he was able to lift his head and assess what he could see of his surroundings. The room was long and with a low ceiling, lights hanging uncomfortably close to his head once he got himself to his feet. Some sort of laboratory, he gathered, unsurprised. Equipment he vaguely recognized was scattered all about, something decidedly organized in its chaos.

Dr. Satan strode into the chamber, back lit by pale green tubes and the low hum of machines not found in any legitimate laboratory. He wore a lab coat as crisp as his accent, silver-rimmed glasses catching the sterile light. His slicked back hair was held in place with something stiff and shiny, more for convenience than style.

"Relax, Mr. Armstrong," he said, voice smooth as lacquer. "If I wanted you dead, your plane would have landed in a crater. Or better yet, never found the airstrip at all. I've been watching you for quite some time."

"So why all this?" Alan asked, gesturing at the tank and the equipment. "You already have the advantage."

"Because you deserve to hear it. Or at least, the part you'll understand, " answered

Dr. Satan. "And because it amuses me to watch my enemies see the light." His tone was surprisingly conversational despite what Armstrong knew to be a deep hatred for himself personally and Allied personnel in general. It was not the reception Armstrong expected, but any delay was an opportunity, so he played along.

Dr. Satan stepped closer, motioning to the glass tank now rising into the ceiling as if it had never existed. "The war. The Nazis. They're like this tank. Now that they are no longer necessary, we put them away and move on," he said. "You seem to be unwilling to do so."

"The war may be over but the things that were done, the things *you* did, need to be exposed. Justice needs to be served," hissed Alan. His fury at the memory of the atrocities he had witnessed momentarily overwhelmed him, breaking his careful control.

"What I did?" scoffed Dr. Satan. "One day, they will raise statues to my genius."

"You cannot be that deluded," answered Armstrong. "You tortured, exploited, *murdered* innocents. We'll drag you into a courtroom, then in front of a firing squad and into an unmarked grave." He paused for a moment, then finished, with a chuckle. "Maybe they'll put a statue of FDR on top of it."

"And yet," observed Dr. Satan, "here I stand, not rotting in a cell, but thriving. Because your noble homeland decided that some monsters are too useful to waste."

"Operation Paperclip," noted Armstrong, flatly.

Dr. Satan smiled like a knife unsheathing.

"Yes. Apparently I am particularly valuable to your country's future. You see, I wasn't content to build missiles or machines. Machines are mere simplicity. What I am creating is elegance. I wanted obedience. Efficiency. Humanity, rewritten for perfect loyalty. Hitler wanted that as well, but he was too easily distracted by bombs and magical nonsense to see that my work would not only win the war but give the Reich the means to rule the world they would conquer. With a little more time and a good deal more money, we would have been living under the glorious Third Reich for the next thousand years!"

There was no denying the mad glint in Dr. Satan's eye, but knowing what the man was capable of made him even more terrifying than the Fuhrer himself. He was not

ranting, he was explaining and Armstrong could only think to let him continue while he desperately tried to come up with a way to escape.

"Your government invited me to continue my work. Unlike Hitler, they see that I am crafting the way to end every war, everywhere, forever. They know I can do it so they are funding it, Mr. Armstrong. They let me continue. As long as I share."

"You're controlling minds. Turning men into machines," Alan observed. His suspicions were confirmed. He silently gave thanks that he hadn't simply executed the surviving attackers at the airfield. The men who had died in the firefight were unavoidable, but it was likely that none of the gunmen were willing participants.

"Correct," continued Dr. Satan, "Though not quite machines. I call them Obedience Engines. And the secret is...well, let's just call it 'The Element.'" He gestured to flask that held a grey powder that gave off a glow that was just discernible in the low light. It pulsed with a dark red shimmer that was uncomfortable to focus on for long.

"This mineral," Dr. Satan continued in an admiring, almost wistful tone, "is radioactive and rare, to be sure, but it's somehow alive as well. It amplifies the signal I use for mind control and something about it allows the subject to retain all of their personality while fully under my control. The men you encountered were taken from the local prison, unruly and undisciplined. Yet they obediently put themselves into the line of fire at my command."

"They weren't much, Doc," mocked Armstrong. "Hop and I handled them, no problem."

"As intended," replied Dr. Satan, archly. "I wanted you here so I needed to get your attention and give you a trail to follow."

"Didn't want me sniffing around Silk City, I'm guessing," suggested Armstrong.

"Partly," answered Dr. Satan. "I also wanted a subject for my next experiment, someone with indomitable will. A true test of the process."

"I'm betting that the Operation Paperclip ninnies don't know you're this far along, do they?" demanded Armstrong.

Dr. Satan's smile grew just that much wider, menace in every line and crease on his rictus grin. "Of course not. Once I am certain that the process works, my benefactors

will be the first of my new minions, opening the floodgates of funding to allow me to produce enough of the compounds required to indoctrinate the next wave. And so on.”

“Double cross,” spat Alan. “You Nazis never did bother to keep your word.”

“Nazi?” laughed the scientist. “I was never a Nazi. They were a means to an end. We used them, now they're gone. So we use someone new.”

“We?” asked Alan, truly startled that Dr. Satan was working with someone else. That fact was more concerning than the Doctor's plans. If he had a partner or someone was pulling his strings, taking down Satan might not stop the plot.

“All you need to know is that we are the clenched fist of evolution. Our enterprise is the future of humanity and no price is too high for our success. Nazis, Americans, Jews, Catholics,” he half shouted, his fervour once again bubbling up, “will all be distinctions that no longer matter. We will eliminate war, poverty, rampant overpopulation and replace them with control and obedience.”

“Let me guess: with you in charge?”

“Humanity needs visionary leadership to take it into the future,” was his enigmatic answer. In that moment, Dr. Satan's eyes lost focus as if he were seeing his glorious, obscene future laid out before him. That inattention was exactly what Armstrong had been angling for and he acted instantly.

Alan took a step forward.. Before his lifted foot could even complete his first step, servos whined loudly as a pair of robotic arms descended lightning fast from the ceiling, humming with restrained violence. They wrapped him in an unyielding embrace, the coiled strength promising to snap his spine like a twig should he struggle.

“Still, it's funny,” Dr. Satan mused, as if nothing at all had happened. “There's a government bounty on you, you know. 'The rogue agent.' 'Traitor to the cause.' 'Enemy of democracy.' I could collect a tidy sum for dragging you back to Washington in chains.”

“Try it. See what's left of your lab when I'm done. I'll take you and every other monster Paperclip recruited and put you on trial for the entire world to witness. You are a war criminal and I took an oath to bring every last one of you to justice.”

“Bravado. I've missed that. But you misunderstand. I won't hand you over. I'll use

you as a test case. Let's see how long "Spy Smasher" can resist... obedience." Dr. Satan motioned to the ceiling where the tank had ascended and explained, "The liquid you were immersed in was the first part of the process. Your skin needed time to absorb enough of the chemicals in it to facilitate the next stage." He casually looked at his watch and continued, "I think your time is just about up, Spy Smasher."



CHAPTER 4

The mechanical arms stopped just short of cracking ribs as they hauled Armstrong from the floor like a rag doll. He struggled, but the steel grips didn't budge. He was dropped onto a table without ceremony. The surface beneath his still damp skin felt slick and cold. It was covered in restraints already prepped for him.

Goons emerged from the shadows, their blank-eyed, slow, mechanical movements telling Armstrong that they were not in their own driver's seats. Regardless of their lack of free will, they were strong enough to easily keep him from struggling free as they strapped his wrists, his chest and his ankles to the table with the thick, stiff leather bindings. One checked his pulse with detached curiosity and reported the number to the Doctor across the room.

Dr. Satan approached with a syringe filled with a liquid that pulsed with the same lurid red glow he had seen earlier in the flask. The Element.

His hand was steady. His eyes were clinical. His smile was decidedly not that of a medical professional.

"Your resistance is admirable," he said, casually, as if discussing the weather or the Red Sox. "But we all serve something in the end. You're just overdue for reassignment."

He raised the needle.

BOOM!

The elevator door exploded inward, stone and steel flying in all directions. Through the smoke and fire stepped Spy Smasher. His cape billowing, cowl tight, eyes hidden behind tinted goggles he strode through the swirling dust and with a single punch laid out the nearest mindless soldier. Grinding one fist into his other palm, he advanced on the Doctor.

Dr. Satan staggered back. "Impossible," he breathed. "You're *here*," He looked at the table where Armstrong was redoubling his efforts to struggle free, "You cannot be

there," His voice trailed off in confusion. Rallying, he defiantly shouted, "I checked your bio-metrics!"

Spy Smasher didn't answer. He simply continued to stalk towards the Doctor, batting the needle from his hand before the mind controlled minions could close in on him. Shoving the Doctor behind them protectively, they swarmed around Spy Smasher, one goon catching a flying knee to the throat for his trouble. Another was thrown across the lab with a shoulder toss so hard he knocked over a console and a filing cabinet.

Armstrong blinked up from the table, stunned, then grinned in recognition. He played out the bluff, trying to act like his government agent secret identity, not the masked hero alter ego. Perhaps they might convince the Doctor his intelligence was wrong and Armstrong wasn't Spy Smasher after all. It would be best if they could.

"Took you long enough, Spy Smasher!"

The goggled man ripped the restraints loose with brutal efficiency, then passed Alan a pistol.

Across the room, Dr. Satan was frantically throwing levers and slamming buttons on a console. The effort had a result and a new and ominous sound caused the two men to turn towards a new threat, the noises coming from what had seemed a pile of scrap metal in a dark corner. With the inevitability of an avalanche, the grinding, throbbing rhythm grew louder and more menacing. The pile of scrap metal was moving, unfolding into something massive and terrifying.

The robot activated, rising to its full height, a huge cylindrical body teetering on chunky, riveted legs, its multi jointed arms reaching for them even as it found its balance.. Eyes glowing and chest hissing, it lumbered into motion with terrifying force and deceptive speed.

Spy Smasher launched at it, fists flying, cape snapping like a whip. Alan joined him, low and fast, aiming for joints, vents, and hinges. They hit it with everything they could reach. Pipes, chairs, even a typewriter bounced off its metal hide but nothing so much as slowed its deadly progress. It steadily forced them back toward the elevator shaft and neither bullets nor blunt objects were enough to be enough.

Dr. Satan was gone. He had vanished in the chaos, a trapdoor sliding shut behind

him with a hiss.

"It's not going down!" Alan shouted, flinging a bottle of something foul ineffectually at the metal behemoth. The robot swatted a steel table aside like cardboard and the gargantuan arms swiped back at Armstrong so quickly he had to backpedal furiously, nearly losing his balance.

"Then we go *up*!" the goggled Smasher barked.

They turned and sprinted to the elevator shaft, its door agape where Spy Smasher had blown it in. Armstrong could see now that it must've been behind the dummy elevator that he had walked into. The seam in the ceiling in front of the destroyed door showing where the tank he had wound up in had risen back up. They were no longer even trying to slow the mechanical terror.

The elevator car was long gone, the hired help apparently in enough control of their faculties to exercise the better part of valour and beat feet. Only the thick electrical cable tethered to the bottom of the lift remained. They grabbed hold and climbed. Hand over hand. The rubber casing of the cable was slick beneath their grip, but desperation lent strength to their hands. Below, the robot looked up... and began to climb as well. Its clawed hands bit into the concrete walls like climbing picks, legs spread wide in an ungainly chimney climb.

"Of course it climbs," Spy Smasher muttered. "Why wouldn't it climb?"

"Save the sarcasm for when we're not about to die!" wheezed Armstrong, his breath coming in ragged pulls as he dragged himself higher.

They climbed faster. The shaft echoed with their huffing breaths and the slow, steady pursuit of a machine that had no concept of fatigue. If the elevator car had stopped on the main floor, blocking the only way out of the shaft, their efforts would amount to nothing but a slight delay of the inevitable. Neither man knew if there was an exit above and there was no light to see by in any case. They doggedly kept climbing. There was nothing else they could do.



CHAPTER 5

Barely feet ahead of their relentless pursuer, Alan and the goggled Spy Smasher scrambled out of the shaft. Their luck had held and the lift car had ascended to a higher floor, leaving the door at ground level accessible to them when they reached it. The two men had desperately clawed at the metal gate, managing to raise it and dive through just ahead of their mechanical pursuer. A second later, the robot's clawed hand burst through the half raised metal gate and it dragged itself out of the shaft, chunks of metal raining down around it as it ripped through the door behind them.

Neither man wasted time looking back. They simply ran as fast and directly away from the robot as they could. They needed room to manoeuvre and time to plan but were entirely out of both.

"Give me the belt" Alan snapped as he paced Spy Smasher.

The masked Smasher hesitated, then pulled off and handed him the goggles and cowl in one motion. Hop Harrigan's sweaty, exasperated face looked back at him, bewildered.

"You want the outfit *now*? Helluva time to accessorize!"

Alan waved off the mask and goggles, snatching the utility belt instead.

"This isn't about fashion, Hop," he bellowed between whooping breaths, "The belt's the key."

The robot barged through the door of the building behind them like a battering ram with legs. Its eyes glowed hot, chest venting steam, footsteps shaking the ground as it accelerated.

"It climbs. It runs," Hop complained, "It better not fly or I quit!"

They ran on.

The building, already in disrepair before being battered by a giant robot, collapsed behind them with a thundering boom. Against their instinct, both turned to look at the noise, only to see that the machine was steadily gaining on them. They turned sharply

down an alley, hoping that they might have better agility than the surprisingly speedy metal behemoth.

On the face of it, the two humans were much nimbler than Dr. Satan's robot, but it was much more single minded. Rather than following its quarry around the sharp corner, it thrust one arm out, into the wall of the building that framed the alley and hauled its massive metal bulk *through* the wall, cutting the corner and blasting out of the far wall only steps behind the two men.

Voices rose in protest at the thunderous noise of the machine's passage, only to turn to panic as the remaining walls of the building began to wobble and tilt. People scrambled out and into the streets and alleys in all directions as the entire structure became the second casualty of the robot's rampage. Hop and Alan, nearing exhaustion, ran on. As they ran, Alan was clawed at the compartment in the large diamond-shaped belt buckle. His hands worked by muscle memory alone, his mind and eyes fully engaged in running desperately for his life.

They barrelled through the village, kicking up dust, knocking over crates, spilling carts, barrels and even an entire fruit stand behind them slow the steel and steam nightmare that was running them to ground. The robot followed like a mechanical hurricane, clay pots, chairs, tables and fruit swirled in its path like a demented tornado. Vendors screamed. Livestock scattered. A goat did a shockingly acrobatic back flip to avoid being stomped into mutton.

The panic surged ahead of the running men like a wave, the screams and crashes of the pursuit alerting the villagers that this was no ordinary afternoon. In the manner of panicked people everywhere, the villagers managed to make matters worse. Instead of running away from the noises, they ended up in the men's path.

Hop grabbed a baby carriage mid-roll as he vaulted over it and spun it clear of the robot's oncoming path. Alan scooped a stunned and flailing nun out of his way and deposited her as gently as he could in the shelter of a doorway without missing stride. He still had the belt, his fingers frantically tapping, flipping and spinning the controls within.

"Any time now with the magic trick!" Hop yelled, dodging a wheelbarrow full of

melons. On a whim, he hoisted one and tossed it like a football at the robot's head. It impacted with a splat, but if it had any effect, it wasn't a helpful one. The robot churned up the dirt of the road as it continued its relentless pursuit.

Alan didn't look up. Beneath his fingers, the switches and dials finally snapped into the configuration he needed. He snapped the compartment shut and wrapped the belt around his waist, muttering under his increasingly ragged breath.

"Okay, we gotta lead that thing away from the buildings. Find open ground."

"While we're running for our lives?!" Hop yelled, incredulous. "The buildings are the only things between us and steaming, crushing death!"

"Open ground!" Alan shouted, wheeling off to his right towards what he hoped was the last line of buildings in the tiny town. Not that there were many buildings left, he thought wryly.

They broke into open ground. No walls. No stalls. No cover, at all. The jungle had been cleared for half a mile around the little village and there wasn't so much as a tall tree to hide behind. The robot stalked forward, its pace unhurried now.

"Oh no," Hop muttered. "I don't want to go out like a tin of beans."

The robot raised its arms.

Then the sky screamed.

Spy Smasher's plane dove in from the sun, cannons blazing. The first volley staggered the robot. The second tore open its chest and it lost the ability to walk. It stood, casing ripped open, steam spewing from a dozen holes in its body, arms flailing uselessly in a parody of the deadly menace it had been only moments earlier. The plane wheeled and dove again, the third volley sending the dying robot flying back in a shower of sparks and smoke, arms spinning like broken windmills, beating randomly against the ground.

It landed in pieces. Then caught fire. Then exploded for good measure. A pile of scrap metal once again, this time for good.

The plane landed a dozen yards away, hissing and ticking. Its canopy opened with a hiss.

"That. Was. Amazing!" Hop shouted, breathlessly. He sounded like he would have

jumped and whooped for joy but he was too busy doubling over to catch his breath and keeping himself from throwing up.

"Belt does more than hold my pants up," Alan replied as he sent more commands to the plane as it taxied to a stop. Still gasping for the breath to speak, he clicked the device decisively shut. "But it helps with that too."

Alan put a friendly hand on Hop's shoulder, giving his buddy a grateful shake. "You swooped in there like my guardian angel, Hop. I'm glad you got the message when I used the old code. I figured those zombie goons had at least one or two guys held back to report, so I couldn't just tell you the plan. Thank you."

"No sweat, buddy," Hop answered. "Your outfit was a tight fit but it was kinda fun playing hero. Terrifying. But fun."

Hop took a breath and continued, "So how many people could have leaked your identity to Dr. Satan?"

"Not many," said Armstrong, "but he's got working mind control, so I don't think it was a leak, more likely Satan extracted the information against someone's will." He gave Harrigan's shoulder a friendly squeeze and added, "Your grand entrance might make him rethink the reliability of intelligence gathered via syringe."

"We can hope," said Hop. An audible grinding sound came from his left leg as he shifted his weight and he had to reach out and steady himself against Armstrong's arm. "Damn. Dode's gonna kill me!" he spat.

"Why, what's wrong?"

"I busted my leg!" he exclaimed. For emphasis, he tugged up his pant leg and lifted his left foot off the ground, balancing himself against his friend. The foot dangled grotesquely. He shook his leg and the foot fell to the ground with a metallic clunk. "She swore I couldn't break this one. Mr. Wang spent a week on the gyro stabilizing stuff and she used some special alloy to strengthen the frame. Said it was 'Hop-proof'."

"Well, whoever 'Dode' is, she couldn't have expected you'd be running from giant killer robots," observed Armstrong.

"You don't know the company she keeps," said Hop with a sly smile.

"So, can you...hop?" asked Armstrong. As he spoke, Harrigan was unfastening the

cape from his borrowed uniform and handing it to him.

"I'll manage. At least my plane isn't on fire this time," Hop answered with a grin. "Might as well live up to my nickname."

"The cape suits you. You should get one of your own," Armstrong suggested, turning toward the village in the dying light of the day. With practiced movements, he fastened the cape around his neck.

"And what, run around calling myself 'Super-Pilot' or something? Nah. I'll leave the cape and cowl to you and Captain Midnight. I'm no hero, just a crazy fly-boy with a bunch of weird friends."

"I'd take 'Super-Pilot' over 'Spy Smasher' any day. I'd love to get my hands on the nitwit that hung that code-name on me. Sounds like something out of the funny pages."

"You're talking to a guy with one leg that everybody calls 'Hop', Spy Smasher. I'll see your nitwit and raise you the knucklehead that hung that on me while he was cinching up the tourniquet. I should have left him in the burning crate after I got us back on the ground." He sighed deeply and finished, "But, I protect small children and knuckleheads."

"And Spy Smashers," smiled Armstrong.

"They *always* seem to need it."

Smoke rose from a half a dozen small fires and at least two more collapsed buildings in the village. The villagers were gathered at the last line of intact buildings, curiously peering out towards the two men and the pile of metal that had just destroyed their home.

"Time to go, Hop," said Spy Smasher. Somehow, in the few moments since the robot's destruction and the plane landing, he'd managed to don his signature cowl and goggles. He was still wearing his open, civilian shirt beneath the cape, but his identity was hidden and Spy Smasher had work to do. "See that the gang puts together an air drop to help these people rebuild, will you?"

"Aerodrome City will take care of it, no sweat, Spy Smasher." Harrigan knew his friend well enough to use his code name again now that he was back in uniform. The

secret that OSS Special Agent Alan Armstrong was actually Spy Smasher, the former national hero now wanted for espionage by every agency in the United States was known only to a few and with any luck they had muddied the waters enough with their ruse to keep Dr. Satan guessing, where ever he had slunk away to.

They climbed into the cockpit, Alan behind the stick, Hop in the backseat.

"So what now?" Hop asked as they lifted off. "Dr. Satan has a head start and you can't be seen in the states like that," he finished, gesturing at Spy Smasher's outfit.

"Alan Armstrong goes back to work at the OSS, without the fancy get up. Then we call in some muscle. Satan isn't done and with his technology and some time he has the ability to create a small army."

"Captain Midnight?"

"Yeah. Tell her to start with Silk City."

END

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