

THE SIZZLING SPIDER

&

THE SINISTER SKULL



JAMES L. RICHARDSON

HOUSE OF JUSTICE

THE SIZZLING SPIDER

&

THE SINISTER SKULL

JAMES L. RICHARDSON

CHAPTER ONE

"If at first you don't succeed." The voice was oddly muffled, coming from under the raised hood of an exotic purple roadster that boasted sleek lines at least a decade ahead of anything on the road in 1949. The words were punctuated by grunts and the occasional clang of metal on metal.

"Hit it with a hammer?" finished another voice from behind the car. Rikki Wentworth had slid silently into the garage, despite her stiletto heels. She was eager to observe the progress of the latest upgrade to her Spider-themed roadster. Beyond the unusual colour, a subtle web pattern, picked out in tiny crystals, covered the vehicle from nose to tail. Dode had suggested the crystals. Rikki had demanded diamond chips. Nothing but the best for The Spider.

There was a shuffling and then a solid 'clunk' sound as something impacted the underside of the hood. "Ow, dammit!"

"Language!" came Dode's voice, though there was amusement in it.

"That was clearly English, Dode," laughed Rikki.

"Ha. Ha," said Lucy Van Sloan, flatly. "Mortal injury gets a pass on swearing."

"And when a bump on the noggin turns fatal, I'll issue the pass in writing," said Dode, wiping her hands on a rag as she popped nimbly out from under the hood. Dorothy 'Dode' Herbert did not bump her head. "You can apologize by washing the car once we're done."

"But we are done! See, Aunt Rikki!" Lucy's enthusiasm wasn't dampened by the additional chore. "It's done!"

"Really?" asked Rikki, her excitement mirroring the seventeen year old's. "Can we take Charlotte out for a spin?"

"Not so fast, young lady," chided Dode. "There's still some testing yet. This is *highly* experimental. Just because Hop Harrigan used it in planes during the war, it's not guaranteed to work the same way for Charlotte's V8."

"You said..." began Wentworth.

Dode cut her off with a raised index finger. "I said it *might* work and we could give it a try. I also said I wouldn't let you take it out until I was sure. It's only installed with straps and twisted wire. If it works, we'll mount it properly."

"It'll work," said Lucy with certainty. "I've gone over Hop's notes and logs."

"Hop?" teased Rikki. "Since when did you stop calling him 'Mr. Harrigan'?" She had seen Lucy stealing glances at the handsome blonde pilot on his last visit. He'd come at a summons from Captain Midnight after the battle with Dr. Satan and his robot. The Nazi scientist had vanished in the aftermath and Midnight was still tracking him. She had called Hop Harrigan for a ride and he'd flown to Silk City to pick her up.

Harrigan and Dode were old friends. She and Mr. Wang had designed his special prosthetic leg with its unusual capabilities. Harrigan, like Rikki Wentworth, was an active crime fighter, getting into all kinds of scrapes and mischief while trying to stop criminals that were beyond the reach of conventional authorities. For a man with one leg, such a lifestyle would normally be suicidal, but Hop was no normal man and his prosthetic was no normal leg.

Dode Herbert specialized in making mechanical devices do things that most people would assume were impossible. "The new fuel supplement will work, Rikki," she said, firmly, "but let me make sure it won't detonate the car like a bomb before you go chasing after the creep of the week, okay?"

"Spoilsport," said Rikki, lightly. "Well, if it works as advertised, I guess it's worth the wait. You know, until Hop gave you this idea, I thought this stuff was purely recre-

ational.”

Dode glared at her, shooting a glance at Lucy. “Nitrous oxide is not ‘recreational’ in any way, shape or form. And don’t either of you forget it.”

Rikki sighed theatrically and turned back to the door to the main house. “We have company, you two. Get cleaned up and come and join us.”

“Company?” asked Lucy, suspicious. “What sort of company? It’s not mom, is it?” Nita Van Sloan, Lucy’s mother, let her spend summers on the Wentworth estate and it was now mid-August. The summons to return to Metropolis and prepare for the school year was due any day.

“We’re meeting in The Spider’s Lair,” called Rikki over her shoulder as she strolled out of the garage.

“Ooh,” enthused Lucy, her suspicion turning to glee. “*Interesting company!*”

The *company* was three men and a woman. The three men were all tall, athletic fellows in crisply tailored suits. Two were blonde, and the third was dark-haired. All were handsome, with sharp cheekbones and neatly cropped hair. The woman was a little younger than Rikki, her titian hair neatly styled in a perfect curl that bobbed and bounced with grace. She was dressed like she was headlining a USO show; slinky but tasteful.

Mr. Wang and Rikki were already seated at the large, oval table that dominated the meeting room in the Spider’s Lair when Dode and Lucy walked in. Rahm Singh was serving tea and Lucy was delighted to see a tray of biscuits already placed on the table. Dode put a restraining hand on her upper arm and mouthed, “Just one,” silently.

Lucy flounced into an empty chair and very deliberately snatched two of Rahm Singh’s nankhatai biscuits, one for each hand. She made a little show of nibbling first from one, then the other, while avoiding noticing Dode’s eyes narrow in disapproval.

“Now that we’re all here, introductions are in order,” declared Rikki. “This is my team; Dode, Mr. Wang, Lucy and you’ve all met Rahm Singh.” She pointed to each as she named them and then gestured to the newcomers one at a time. “This is Jack Weston, the Minute-Man; Joe Higgins, the Shield; Johnny Flagg, the Fighting American; and Joan Wayne, Miss Victory.”

“I feel like I should recite the pledge of allegiance,” said Lucy with a giggle.

“If you did, I hope we’d all stand up and recite it with you,” said a voice from the little speaker unit sitting beside the tray of shortbread. “Patriotism is not just a duty, young lady. It’s an honour.”

“And that sanctimonious old goat is Sam,” said Rikki with an arched eyebrow and a wave at the speaker. “He’s the boss.”

“Uh-huh,” said Lucy, skeptically. Dode gave her a look that silenced her but failed to remove the smirk from her lips.

“So what’s the crisis, Sam?” asked Rikki. “You don’t usually send a squad half-way across the country on a lark.”

“The team I assembled for this is chasing something bad, Miss Wentworth. Something evil,” said the voice. He sounded worried. “Jack has the brief. I’ll let him bring you all up to speed. I have other matters to attend to.” With that, there was a click and the speaker went silent.

“He sounded concerned,” observed Dode. “Sam’s not one to exaggerate.”

“No, ma’am, he isn’t,” said the dark-haired Jack Weston. He produced a folder from his valise and spread the contents across the table so everyone could see.

“Ew. That’s horrible,” groused Lucy as one of the black and white photos slid past her. It showed a skull on a table, surrounded by several lit candles. The photo was poorly fo-

cused, the candles fuzzy, but the skull itself was in perfect focus.

“You don’t know the half of it, sister,” said Johnny Flagg with a rough laugh. “That’s no ordinary skull.”

“The Golden Skull of Nabu,” explained Weston. “Rumoured to house the spirit of the Babylonian god, Nabu. And inside? Something worse. There are legends around this skull going back to Plymouth Rock. There are older stories, too. Bad ones.”

“Magic?” asked Mr. Wang, speaking up for the first time. “Surely not.”

“As real and dangerous as an atom bomb,” said Joe Higgins. “Back in ’43, I ran up against something similar in Italy.”

“And your little Patriot Corps wants to...” Rikki let the question hang in the air.

“Capture it,” said Weston, “and keep it out of the wrong hands.”

“Destroy it,” said Joan Wayne, angrily. She and Weston spoke over each other and shared a look. “Evil like that is beyond human control.”

“Use it,” said Johnny Flagg, quietly.

“Ignore him,” said Higgins, giving his teammate a friendly swat. “Flagg here never met a weapon he didn’t want to fire. Such power isn’t something America needs. We are already the greatest nation on earth. This thing just needs to be corralled before it causes any problems.”

“Says the guy whose whole persona is defensive,” scoffed the man known as the Fighting American.

“Enough!” barked the Minute-Man, slamming a hand on the table. “We’re here to brief the Spider and her team. Stay on task.”

“So what do you need from me, Jack?”

“Our intel says the skull is in Silk City. It’s being auctioned off in the next few days and the scuttlebutt says the sale will happen here.” The Minute-Man looked around the conference room, pointing to the large city map that dominated one wall. “Silk City is your turf. We need you to point us in the right direction.”

“No.”

“What?” cried all four of Wentworth’s guests in unison.

“No,” she said with a smile. “You need Rikki Wentworth to buy the damned thing.”

CHAPTER TWO

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," said Jack Weston. Dode was fixing his bow tie, fussily and he was doing his best to not rip the thing off and dash it to the floor.

Coquettishly spinning to get a full look at her ensemble, surrounded on three sides by full length mirrors, Rikki teased him relentlessly. "Oh, pooh. You look marvelous. And so do I."

"Are you sure they're going to auction the skull at this thing? It seems awfully public," he said, hooking a finger into the collar of his shirt in an attempt to loosen it enough to allow him to breathe.

"Darling, this is Silk City. Criminals don't *hide*. They entertain."

"So Jack is your date?" asked Lucy, giving Rikki an assessing look. The cut of the dress was surprisingly conservative, with only a slight V at the collar to hint at her decolletage. The thigh slit was more Rikki Wentworth, however, exposing an expanse of thigh just short of criminal on one side. Her heels were elegant and high enough that only an acrobat or socialite of Rikki's caliber could pull them off. "What about them?" asked the younger woman, chucking a thumb over her shoulder where Johnny Flagg and Joe Higgins were struggling with their own bow ties.

Rikki plucked a jewel encrusted eye-patch from her dresser and affixed it in place, fluffing her shockingly red hair to hide the straps. The wig effectively concealed the electronic wiring that ran the tiny camera that was housed inside the patch. "Lucy, dear. Blind Betty McQuade is woman enough to always carry a couple of spares."

Joan Wayne, dressed in simple slacks and a bomber jacket over a plain blouse, was in the Spider's Lair and called out, "Mic check, one. Mic check," and all three men and Rikki herself called out in unison, "Mic check, good."

Rikki looked around and asked, "Everybody set?"

All three men nodded, all equally uncomfortable in the unfamiliar tuxedos.

"Okay, boys. Let's go snag a skull!" she laughed, taking Jack Weston by the arm and leading her little army to the garage where an elegant limousine, piloted by Rahm Singh, was warm and waiting.

There was a small crowd at the home of Haldon Balador. To the public at large, the man was Silk City's self-made man, nearly as wealthy as the Wentworths and beloved for his philanthropic endeavours. Many hospitals, orphanages and soup kitchens owed a good deal of their budget to Balador donations.

Privately, Balador's wealth was not nearly so squeaky clean as he led everyone to believe. Gambling, loan-sharking, and human misery of all sorts fed his coffers exponentially more money than his public companies gave away. If the authorities had any inkling of the scope of his illegal operations, they chose to turn a blind eye.

Blind Betty's one eye saw the chief of police, the mayor and at least four city councilors milling around the well stocked bar, deep in conversation with women who she was sure weren't their wives. Balador knew how to court powerful men.

The Spider had kept an eye on his businesses and done more damage to his criminal enterprises than he had ever suffered at the hands of the law. Despite her best efforts, Balador's enterprises insulated him well enough that she didn't have any concrete evidence on the man. For the moment, he was untouchable.

That didn't mean he wasn't useful.

The Spider had eyes and ears throughout Silk City, in places low and high. Her web had

vibrated with the location of the auction in short order. That Balador had his fingers in the pie was no surprise.

This soiree was a charity fundraiser for a new wing for Silk City's children's hospital. At least, that was what the media would report in the papers tomorrow. Somewhere within this vast mansion, a much more nefarious fundraiser would be starting soon.

"Find me a mark, ladies," ordered Blind Betty McQuade under her breath.

In the back of the specially outfitted limousine, Dode, Lucy and Joan Wayne each had their eyes locked to a screen. In the jewelled eye-patch she wore, *her* camera fed back to the Spider's lair, where Mr. Wang was watching a fourth screen and busily programming punch cards to feed to her specially built computer.

The screens in the limousine were fed still images from the minute cameras that sat in the knot of her three escorts' bow ties. A faux jewel over the lens appeared to be a stylish affectation on each man's tie, but the jewel acted like a fish-eye lens, giving each woman a wide, if somewhat distorted view of the room.

"On your left, Rikki," said Dode. "That door. I've seen three men go in there, none come out."

"We'll get you a better look," said Blind Betty, quietly. Turning to her escorts, she said, "Someone be a dear and get me a glass of something expensive." She pointed at the bar near the door Dode had identified. Joe and Johnny nodded and strode over to the bar. Joe returned with the requested drink, while Johnny struck up a casual conversation with the barkeep, turning so his camera had a clear view of the door.

Lucy, scanning the faces of the guests through Johnny's camera, called out excitedly, "There! Aunty Rikki! That's Billy Betts!" A notorious fence, Billy Betts wasn't a likely guest at a high society charity event.

"Good catch, Baby-Girl," cooed Blind Betty. "And it's 'Betty' when I'm in this get-up, even on comms."

"Right, sorry," came the abashed reply.

"Alright, everyone. Game on," said Blind Betty, setting her sights on the obviously out-of-place Billy Betts. His rumpled suit and scuffed shoes might as well have been a neon sign saying "low-class criminal" in capital letters.

Perfect.

"Billy!" called Blind Betty with a sultry lilt in her voice. "I knew you'd be here."

Billy Betts drew himself up to his full height; a towering five feet, three inches. Puffing out his chest and doing his best scowl, he asked, "What's your angle, toots?"

"Like always, Billy. I'm here to put the boss's money to good use." Blind Betty was known to be the cat's paw of the Wentworth fortune. A well connected middle-woman who 'acquired' those items that the Wentworths didn't want declared on their tax returns. Rikki used the Blind Betty alias whenever she needed a barely respectable connection to the underworld, like this event. She had other identities with less savoury reputations, but Blind Betty could tread water in this particular swamp.

"You're bidding?" Billy asked.

"I'm *winning*," she smiled.

"We'll see," he growled. Billy did not have pockets deep enough to be here on his own behalf. He, too, was someone's tool. "Try to keep up, toots."

He pulled open the door and did not offer her precedence. Jack Weston grabbed the door, stiff armed the little man to hold him back and with a little tilt of his head, held the door for Blind Betty. Jack, Joe, and Johnny followed her through, each shouldering the little man aside as they passed.

Behind the door, a very different group was assembled.

CHAPTER THREE

"That looks like Hell's waiting room!" barked Joan Wayne as the camera in Jack Weston's bow tie captured the group of men in the next room. "I don't need a mugshot poster to know that we're looking at Silk City's most wanted."

"You ain't whistling Dixie, sister," said Dode with a low, concerned whistle. The back of the limousine was suddenly full of activity as Joan began to strip out of her plain blouse.

"What are you doing?" asked Lucy, shocked.

"If there's trouble, I want to be in uniform," said Miss Victory, adjusting the deeply plunging blue bustier she wore beneath the blouse. Its white stars flashed in the light that leaked out of the three screens around her. A moment later, she was in full costume, affixing a striking white domino mask in place with a red-gloved hand. Her matching red skirt was dangerously short, and the crimson leather boots that she had worn unnoticed beneath her plain trousers came up to just below her knees. Flung over the whole ensemble, a filmy blue cape in the same shade as her bustier was the finishing touch.

"That's some uniform," observed Dode. "I knew I liked you."

"Steady, girls," hissed Blind Betty over the radio. "We just have to outbid them. There's too many 'civilized' people in the next room. This is just an unsavoury auction."

In the auction room, Jack Weston pulled Blind Betty close and under the cover of a playful, inappropriate nuzzle, said quietly, "But everybody stay on your toes. If this goes pear-shaped, we'll need to grab the skull and leg it in a hurry." His instructions were heard by the three in the limousine, and he saw Joe and Johnny give him tiny, surreptitious nods of acknowledgment.

Suddenly, across the room, a dais was illuminated by several bright lights. A low hum emanated from within and a shape rose up from below to sit dead centre in the spotlights. Over hidden speakers, a sonorous voice announced, "Gentlemen, and *lady*." Blind Betty smiled and gave a little wave to everyone and no one. "Please direct your attention to the pedestal."

A click and the spring-loaded lid popped up, throwing the case open and giving the audience a clear view of the astonishing sight of a golden skull, resting on a bed of crimson silk. Somehow, the empty black eye sockets pulled everyone's gaze to them. There were sharp intakes of breath all around the room as hard men felt real fear they could not explain.

Even Blind Betty and the three men of the Patriot Corps were not immune. Jack Weston's hand clutched at Betty's upper arm, painfully. She, in turn, stiffened in fearful shock and from the corner of her eye saw Joe and Johnny do the same. The effect of the golden skull's stare was both horrifying and fascinating in equal measure.

The lid closed with a click, and behind the dais stood Haldon Balador. His tuxedo was simple but perfectly cut. It accentuated his broad shoulders, deep chest and narrow waist in a way that sang of expert tailors, hand stitching, and obscene money. His shirt was crisp, and the white of the silk was so pure as to almost shine. The only splash of colour on the man was a tasteful triangle of crimson in his breast pocket, a perfect match for the silk that surrounded the skull inside the box.

With the golden skull out of view, the spell that had held the room suspended was broken. Balador spread his hands in a welcoming gesture that was also the signal for the group to take the provided seats.

Betty chose to remain standing, and her three escorts took up station behind and around her in a protective formation. Balador glanced at her briefly, but beyond a slight hint of annoyance that ghosted across his features, he did not acknowledge her.

"You have all just experienced the barest hint of the power of the Skull of Nabu," declared Balador from his stage. "With that power at your disposal, there are no limits to ambition. I will start the bidding at one-hundred thousand dollars."

Of the eight bidding parties in the room, five of them were well out of the running by the time the price topped half a million dollars. Blind Betty had yet to make a single bid, holding back and watching the other two serious bidders carefully.

The number in play crept up and held at seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Balador offered a small smile and raised a hand to declare the bidding closed.

"Two million," called Betty, her tone languid and bored.

Several of the men in the room muttered, angrily.

The man who had made the last bid turned and stared at her in disbelief. He stroked his chin in thought for a moment and then turned back to the stage, offering no counter.

Balador scanned the audience, seeking anyone willing to further line his pockets. No one moved. No one spoke.

He raised a hand.

Then all hell broke loose.

The screams that followed the four-man team through the door told Blind Betty and her escorts that there were more assailants than just the four they were seeing. Clearly this assault was larger in scale than four people in formal wear could hope to deal with.

"Get the skull!" ordered the Minute-Man. Jack Weston's entire bearing changed in an instant. Gone was the casually amorous Lothario. In his place, an iron spine and granite muscles propelled a man of will and conviction across the room. He tossed men aside as they rose from their seats, barreling past, his eyes fixed on his goal.

Behind him, the Fighting American and the Shield leapt into action, fending off anyone who tried to pull the Minute-Man down as he passed.

The three were too late. The four-man squad that had thundered through the door was already on the stage. One man snatched the box containing the golden skull, while another casually backhanded Haldon Balador with enough force to send the man reeling off the platform to disappear into the curtains behind him with a loud thump.

Chairs became projectiles as the bidders saw what the four intended. It wasn't a coordinated attack, but even a well trained soldier such as the men who were stealing the skull had to respect a dozen pounds of wood and metal flying into their faces. The improvised fusillade gave the three men with Blind Betty the opening they needed to gain the stage.

By the door, Blind Betty stole a look into the main ballroom. At least four more men held the cream of Silk City at bay. One man wielded a Tommy-gun, while the other three in view brandished revolvers and demanded silence. No help from that quarter, then.

As the Minute-Man reached for the box, the man who had snatched it from the dais flipped open the lid. Time seemed to slow, as if the air had suddenly thickened to the consistency of syrup. The man placed a hand on the slick, rounded shape of the skull and intoned a word in a language that should not have fit in a human throat. A shock of power pulsed out from the skull and threw everyone it impacted back several feet. Betty's three escorts took the worst of it, pinwheeling and scrambling back and off the edge of the stage to land in a black and white heap of anger.

Blind Betty stepped calmly in front of the four men as they approached the door.

"I bid two million dollars on that sparkler, boys. Makes no difference to me who gets the money," she suggested with a smirk. The men slowed to a halt, forming a loose circle around her, but none raised a weapon to the unarmed woman with the eye-patch.

She reached out and lifted the lid of the box, but before she could open it far enough

to see within, the man who held the case slammed it shut. She pulled her gloved hand back just in time to avoid injury.

“Out of the way, woman!” he ordered. The other three took a half step toward her, menacingly.

“Half a million each, gents,” she offered with a smile and holding her ground. When the only reply was silence, she pivoted on a heel and offered the men a clear path to the door. They brushed past her without another word.

“Ladies, the skull is on its way out,” said Betty under her breath.

“With you?” asked Dode on the other end of the radio.

“Unfortunately, the eight men who have it are not on our side,” said Betty, striding over to help her three escorts untangle themselves.

“Eight?” asked Lucy. That explains the two cars that just pulled up. “Hey, wait! Where are you...” There was a pause, and then Lucy said, “Betty, it looks like Miss Victory is going after the skull!”

“By herself?” demanded the Minute-Man, brushing dust off his rumpled tuxedo and offering a hand to Johnny, who had wound up on the bottom of the pile.

“Looks like it,” said Dode.

“I knew I liked her!” grinned Betty as she led the three men to the door. “Let’s go, boys!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Eight men pounded out of the main doors of the Balador estate. Two black sedans revved impatiently at the foot of the grand staircase. Across the driveway, Miss Victory ran to the nearest sedan, unable to see from her vantage which one the man carrying the large, unwieldy case that must be the Skull of Nabu had climbed into. She lunged at the fender as the car roared into motion.

Initially, she was dragged behind the surging vehicle, unable to do anything but hang desperately on to the curved steel of the rear bumper, but as the car slowed to turn away from the mansion, she was able to scramble upright, and unbelievably, she dug in her heels and *lifted*. The rear drive wheels spun uselessly as she raised the back of the car and held it several inches off the ground.

The rest of her team and Blind Betty McQuade thundered down the grand stairs and flung open the four doors of the vehicle. The Fighting American reached the driver's side and once he had yanked the driver out, the spinning of the wheels slowed to an idle and Miss Victory lowered the vehicle to the ground. The Fighting American reached in and pushed the parking brake to engage it as the rest of the team pulled the men from the car and slammed them up against its body.

“It’s not here!” called the Shield, from inside the back seat. “In the trunk maybe?”

“No, they never popped the boot,” answered Miss Victory. “Must be in the lead car.”

“So we lost it,” said the Fighting American, angrily.

“Minute-Man?” asked Blind Betty with a smirk. “Does your team always give up so easily?”

“I know that look,” said the Minute-Man, cocking an eyebrow.

Betty held a finger to her ear, adjusting the earpiece that her voluminous wig disguised. “Mr. Wang?”

“The transmitter is about half a mile down the road from your position, and the signal is strong, Betty,” came Mr. Wang’s crisp voice in all their miniature earpieces.

“Can you bring the car, Rahm Singh?”

“Momentarily ma’am,” came the clipped, British-accented voice.

“It’s time we all changed into something a little more comfortable,” suggested Betty as the limousine closed the distance from where it had been hidden down the lane.

Emerging from the limousine’s rear compartment, the Spider smoothed the lines of her slinky purple dress and gave her spiderweb patterned domino mask a final, tiny adjustment. She had changed her makeup and left Blind Betty’s eye-patch in a compartment in the back of the car.

“All yours, boys,” she said with a grin.

The three men piled into the car, each already undoing the constrictive bow tie they wore.

Miss Victory gave the woman in purple an appraising glance and said, “*Those* are spectacular!”

Thrusting one leather-clad leg out of the high slit of her evening gown, The Spider turned the purple boot on its dagger point toe. “They are good, aren’t they?”

Lucy stood between the two costumed women and asked, “How’d you do that thing... with the car?”

“The women in my family are born unusually strong,” explained Miss Victory. “Lucky me, I’m the most powerful in anyone’s memory.” She mimicked The Spider’s boot twirl

with her own sharp-toed red boot and added, "Sam didn't just recruit me for my great gams!"

Lucy admired the proffered boot for a moment, and as the three men started to climb out of the limousine, she slowly looked them up and down. "You guys look like Betsy Ross with hiccups!" she giggled.

The three were now clad in their combat gear, each in a variation of red, white, and blue with a stars and stripes motif. The Minute-Man's outfit was a red and white striped top with bloused blue sleeves festooned with white stars. His trousers were tight, red, and tucked into blue boots that came up to his mid-calf.

The Shield wore a red bodysuit with a shield-shaped breastplate over it. The plate bore a stylized American flag oriented vertically. His mask too was on theme; blue with white stars.

Finally, the Fighting American joined the other two. His uniform was mostly blue, broken up by red trunks. A striped design on the torso intersected a white star in a round field of red and blue. His head was covered by a red cowl with white and blue highlights that were echoed in his red gloves and boots.

"They do present a theme, don't they?" said Dode, strolling up.

"The Fist of Liberty isn't a theme, ma'am," said the Fighting American.

"We're not calling ourselves that," said Minute-Man, tersely. "Sam calls us the Patriot Corps."

"I prefer the Star-Spangled Society," put in Miss Victory.

The Shield said nothing, clearly annoyed with what looked to be an old argument.

"The car's ready," said Dode, ignoring the group and addressing the Spider directly. "But it's a bicycle built for two, not five."

"Rahm Singh will bring you all, but Charlotte has the tracking equipment, so I will take the lead."

"Who's Charlotte?" asked the Shield.

The purple roadster, with its subtle spider-web pattern picked out in diamond chips, pulled up beside The Spider, almost without a sound. The gull-wing door lifted, revealing that there was no driver. She clicked a button on the inside of her glove to open the other door. "This is Charlotte," she announced with a grin. "I have room for one more."

"Dibs!" called Miss Victory enthusiastically.

The other three did their best not to look annoyed at being beaten to the punch.

The Spider climbed gracefully into the driver's seat and clicked another button on her wrist. "Follow me, boys. We have a skull to collect!" she called as the door smoothly began to close.

A hand cupped the edge of her door and lifted it open again. Standing there was a man in a tidy tweed suit, his hair bound up in a tight, red turban. In his free hand, he held a short staff, topped by an ornate golden diadem inset with a multifaceted red gemstone.

"Before you rush in, Spider, we should speak."

The Spider looked up from her seat at the wheel into the handsome, dark eyes below the turban and sighed. "Ibis. Why am I not surprised?"

"Who?" asked Miss Victory. She had been about to duck under the gull-wing door of the roadster, but stopped short at the sudden appearance of this stranger. "And where'd you come from, mister?"

"This is Ibis," explained the Spider. "Whenever something magical is in play, somehow he winds up in the middle of it."

The man in the turban sketched a little bow, one hand across his midriff, one behind his back. Without turning, he managed to direct the bow of introduction to the whole group.

"And we trust him," said Rahm Singh, striding up to greet the man.

“Uh-huh,” said the Fighting American. “Well, *we* don’t know him.”

“Sam does,” said Dode, her gaze daring the man in the garish blue costume to disagree. “And they’ve worked together before.”

“It’s true,” said Minute-Man. “Sam included Ibis in my mission briefing.”

“But not ours,” said the Fighting American, accusingly.

“Need to know,” said Minute-Man. “As always.”

“And now that we have that out of the way,” said Ibis, “there is little time. If you are to recover the Skull of Nabu, you will need my help.”

“And if we don’t want your help,” growled the Fighting American.

“You will have it, just the same,” offered Ibis, repeating his polite bow.

CHAPTER FIVE

The warehouse was much like many the Spider had seen before. A low, grubby, but functional structure with roll-up metal doors, some at ground level, some with lowered areas in front of them to allow the loading of larger trucks. She sat with Miss Victory in Charlotte, watching for signs of life around the building. None were apparent.

The tracking device that Blind Betty slipped into the box had led them right to this place. It looked like whoever had arranged for the theft of the Skull wasn't expecting company. No watchmen patrolled the grounds, and no one even looked out of the few windows she could see.

"We're a go, boys," she called over her radio.

Three figures detached from the shadows and approached the building, avoiding the few spots where lights illuminated the paved apron surrounding the structure. Within a few moments, two were alongside the walls at either end, the third disappearing around the building to the back of the warehouse.

"That leaves the front door for us," said Miss Victory with a grin.

"I don't want to scratch the paint," said the Spider with a little distressed huff.

"Allow me," offered the red, white, and blue-clad heroine. She popped the door and sprinted for the nearest roll-up door at ground level. She ran faster than anyone the Spider had ever seen, covering the ground in an instant. Gripping the door at its base, she didn't open it.

She ripped it free and flung it across the paved lot in a shower of wood and metallic splinters.

Turning to where the roadster was concealed beyond the building's lights, she mimicked Ibis's formal bow, one hand on her stomach, the other behind her back. The Spider had already gunned the throttle, and Charlotte roared across the lot and screeched to a halt just inside the destroyed door, tires smoking as she spun the vehicle 180 degrees to put the reinforced trunk between her and whoever was inside. The purple-clad woman hopped lightly out and crouched in the cover of the car's body, brandishing her futuristic pistol.

The rest of the team crashed in through windows and doors at either end of the building and on its far wall. A dozen men, all large and armed with various handguns, a few rifles and one Tommy-gun all spun to meet the sudden threat. On a platform made of several wooden crates, a woman in a cocktail dress stood, chanting over the open box, the Skull of Nabu staring out menacingly. As she turned to point angrily at one of the men and then at the intruders, she never let up the chant. The slit of her dress exposed an expanse of thigh and a thick garter that held at least two evil-looking throwing knives.

The Fighting American didn't wait for any order or signal. Closest to the group since he had been the one to enter from the far side of the building, he simply ran into the crowd, dropped a shoulder, and barreled over several men at a stroke. The Tommy-gun barked briefly but was flung from its wielder's grip in the impact.

The Fighting American disappeared beneath a pile of henchmen, and the Spider lost all sight of him. Shots rang out from the rest of the thugs, and she was suddenly too busy to spare any attention for him or anyone. The operatives closed, Minute-Man shouting orders that the rest of the team completely ignored.

Bullets ricocheted wildly off the Shield's chest as he charged. One took out a light, another a window, the sound of shattering glass punctuating the shouting and gunshots that had turned the warehouse into a chaotic maelstrom. Miss Victory sprinted across the room at inhuman speed and yanked a man off his feet by his collar as she passed him, flinging him into a knot of men. The impact scattered them like tenpins.

Minute-Man leapt onto the crates and charged at the woman, growling, "Illyria! Stop this madness!" The Spider watched, her eyes narrowed as his charge was halted by something like the ring of force that had pulsed out from the skull at the auction. This seemed to be a static field, like a dome around the woman and the box containing the skull. Her chanting never wavered.

Minute-Man tumbled off the crates, slamming his head against the concrete floor with a sickening thud.

While the Spider's allies were managing to steadily subdue the group of men guarding this Illyria woman, none of their efforts seemed to be stopping whatever her goal was. Her chanting and concentration had continued uninterrupted, even with all the violence and commotion surrounding her and the Skull of Nabu.

Her concentration.

Rather than joining the fight or attacking the woman and whatever magic she was attempting to conjure, the Spider leapt over the nose of her roadster and popped the hood. Occupied as they were with each other, neither her allies nor her enemies paid her the least mind.

"Sorry, Dode," she said as she reached into the hot engine compartment. She didn't know much about the specifics of the car's engine, but the device she was after was obvious, even to her untrained eyes. A cylinder, strapped haphazardly to a piece of metal bolted along the inside of the engine compartment. It was the only shiny, new metal under the hood. She ripped it loose with a gloved hand, ignoring the burns she suffered as she held it. She spun open the valve, placing a gloved thumb over the opening where she had ripped the hose off it, and ran for the melee that was winding down at the strange woman's feet.

The chanting was reaching a crescendo, Illyria's voice rising in volume as it lowered into an unnatural tenor that reverberated around the warehouse with impossible force. A man tried to rise from the floor to block the Spider's path, but she kicked him hard in the jaw as she ran past, his effort hardly slowing her. Another clawed at the hem of her dress, catching her off-guard and tipping her off-balance. As she fell, she flung the canister. It clattered and rolled onto the makeshift platform, not slowed by whatever force had repelled the Minute-Man earlier. It came to rest at the base of the crate that raised the skull high enough for the woman to put her hand on it as she chanted.

And then the Spider was fighting for her life, alongside the remaining members of the team.

As she drew a bead on a man who was levelling his revolver at Miss Victory, the droning chant faltered and then stopped for a moment. A high-pitched giggle followed the brief silence. The Spider fired her futuristic pistol, and an arc of electricity dropped the man before he could squeeze his own trigger. She was turning to the makeshift platform before the glow of the discharge from her weapon had faded.

Illyria was clenching her jaw, wrestling with another unbidden giggle that was trying to erupt from her throat. The Spider could see the tendons of her hand, where her fingers were spread over the golden skull. They tensed in sympathy with her jaw.

First, another giggle escaped, and then a full-on gale of laughter exploded from the woman's angry lips. The shimmer that had defined the force bubble around Illyria and the skull wavered and then popped like a soap bubble made of light. The Spider did not hesitate. An arc of electricity spanned the space between the skull and the barrel of her strange pistol for an instant. A thunder-crack split the air, and Illyria was tossed bodily off the platform by the force of its fury.

She landed hard but sprawled atop the Minute-Man, who had just rolled, groaning in pain, onto his back. The impact knocked a grunt from both of them, and they lay still in a heap.

It took a few more minutes for the team to subdue the remaining gunmen, Miss Victory knocking the last man flying across the room with what looked like a casual back-hand slap. The Shield offered the Fighting American a hand to help the other man off the floor where he had landed after tackling his own last opponent, but the blue-clad man slapped it away with contempt.

Minute-Man groaned and reacted with shock when his eyes fluttered open. He none-too-gently rolled the unconscious Illyria off of him and sat up, holding his head in both hands. The Spider strolled over and put a hand on his shoulder. "You okay?" she asked, concerned.

"Better than her," he said, nodding at the snoring Illyria. "I've got a hard head."

The Spider thrust a gloved hand out, and the Minute-Man accepted her assistance to rise to his feet. She could feel the man's power as she pulled him up. He didn't really need her help.

Looking up, the Spider was not surprised to see Ibis standing above her on the platform, looking down at the Skull of Nabu on its crimson silk nest. Without a word, he shut the lid with a firm click. He waved his walking stick over the box, and she briefly saw a shimmering glow surround it before it tightened around the case and disappeared altogether.

"Thanks for the..." she gestured at his walking stick, "hocus-pocus, earlier."

"A simple spell. Your little group had more than enough courage; I simply had to filter out the skull's energy to keep its power from corrupting it as it did at the auction."

"Whatever you say, cheekbones," said Miss Victory, gliding up beside him.

"Will you take the skull, Ibis?" asked the Minute-Man. "Sam said you were one of the few people he would trust with its power. If you showed up, my orders were to let you have it if you chose to take possession of it."

"What?" shouted the Fighting American. The Shield, standing beside him, looked concerned but said nothing.

"The Skull of Nabu is a prison and a vessel, both," explained Ibis. "The last time it was loose in the world, a great warrior buried it to keep those conflicting powers from the grasp of man."

"So, you're gonna bury it again?" asked Miss Victory.

"The forces of evil would find it, wherever I entombed it." He sighed. "Eventually."

"So what then?" asked the Spider.

With a hard, assessing look at the Shield, Ibis said, "My specialty is matching power to wielder. I think it's time that Nabu met a friend of mine." He swept the sealed box off the crate it rested on with an enigmatic smile.

"You're not taking that," said the Fighting American, stepping into Ibis's path.

"Stand down," ordered the Minute-Man, putting a restraining hand on the man's shoulder.

The blue-clad Fighting American spun to face the Minute-Man, fists balled. He pointed an angry hand back at the stage and barked, "We don't know this guy! He shows up out of nowhere, and we're supposed to what... trust him? Blindly?"

"Um..." Miss Victory pointed over the Fighting American's shoulder, meaningfully.

Ibis and the Skull of Nabu were gone.

EPILOGUE

“Thanks for your help, Ms. Wentworth,” said the voice of Sam over the speaker on the conference table.

“I’m impressed you called in Ibis,” said Dode, staring down Rikki, who had been ready to unleash a tirade on the man. “Might I suggest you read your team in, next time?”

“Need to know is need to know,” he intoned. Sam made the directive sound like poetry. Or prayer.

“Ibis seemed to know one of your guys,” suggested Rikki, trying to rein in her irritation. Dode had made the point, and Sam wasn’t one to take a lot of direction.

“As I understand it, Johnny was under consideration for one of the magical powers that Ibis... manages.” Rikki waited for him to let go of the other shoe. “It didn’t work out.”

“The Shield seemed... earnest,” she prompted. “None of my business, but Ibis is a good judge of character, as far as I can tell. If Johnny didn’t pass muster with him...”

“The problem wasn’t Johnny’s character. Ibis sees the bigger picture,” explained Sam. “Johnny was a little too... *American* for the job.”

“Which makes him perfect for your little red, white, and blue brigade,” observed Dode with a roll of her eyes that Rikki hoped he could hear.

“The Patriot Corps defends the interests of these great United States, ladies. Thank you again for your assistance.”

There was a decisive click, and the connection was severed.

“Aunt Rikki?” asked Lucy, reaching across the table, past a cup of Rahm Singh’s excellent tea. “I never got to meet this Ibis fella. Who is he?” She sat back, a nankhatai biscuit in each hand. An unexpected voice stopped her left hand cold, just before the biscuit reached her lips.

“I am a talent scout, of sorts, Miss Van Sloan,” said Ibis, stepping out of the shadows. No one had seen him enter the room. None but Lucy was shocked by his sudden appearance.

Rahm Singh slid a cup of steaming tea in front of the empty chair nearest the unanticipated guest, as if he had expected him all along. Mr. Wang pushed the plate of Rahm Singh’s bespoke shortbread towards him as Ibis took the empty seat.

“There are powers that swirl around, above, and below our reality,” he explained, snatching a nankhatai biscuit from the plate and taking an appreciative nibble. “Powers that need to be wielded responsibly. By the *right* people.”

He never took his eyes from Lucy Van Sloan as he spoke.

Rikki snapped her fingers in front of his face. Twice. “Hey, Ibis!”

“Yes, Ms. Wentworth?”

“Don’t even think about it, pal.”

THE END

