

Empowered

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In comic books, superheroes are individuals with extraordinary skills or powers who decide that their special status requires them to take actions outside the law. Because they appear to be on the side of justice, serving the common good, we tend to forget that they are at heart vigilantes.

They'd used too much explosive, but Kreiger didn't care. The stuff didn't do anyone any good sitting in the basement of the safe house, and the one thing he sure didn't want to do was use too little and risk blowing the whole job. So he'd told Covey to use all he wanted, and the demo demon, had taken him at his word.

Besides, Kreiger liked big explosions.

Covey had certainly orchestrated one. As he and Kreiger and the rest of the gang hunched down behind the truck, the force of the blast blew out the whole back of the building. Even before the dust had begun to settle they were up and running, masks and filters enabling them to breathe where others could not while simultaneously disguising their identities. Across town Joaquin and Sievers were faking their bank break in, drawing the majority of the police to their nonexistent robbery. By now those two should be on their way to freedom via the carefully plotted sewer escape route.

Meanwhile, except for its now numbed and bleeding private security force, the special colored gem exhibition at Vaan Pelsen's was open to anyone who chose to saunter in without buying a ticket. Needless to say, Kreiger and his team didn't have any tickets. They never paid for admission.

Some gems lay scattered like electric gumdrops among the rubble, but Covey's careful placement of the explosives the previous night had only destroyed the back third of the store. Save for shattered glass and bodies, the front portion was largely intact. One guard had somehow survived uninjured. He was quickly gunned down by Pohatan, wielding his Uzi.

Not being averse to physical labor, Kreiger carried his own canvas sack. While Pohatan and Covey kept watch over the street, where dazed pedestrians were stumbling about looking for help, Kreiger and the rest of the team efficiently and methodically helped themselves to the necklaces and rings, watches and bracelets, settings and loose gems from the demolished cases. No alarms rang in their ears. The explosion had destroyed them as well.

Anything worth obliterating, Kreiger mused as he worked, was worth obliterating well.

Having rehearsed the heist for months, they worked fast, intending to be long gone before the first of the duped city police could make it back across town from the faked bank robbery. Still Kreiger urged his people to move more quickly, and to leave nothing behind. Ignoring the shocked and moaning injured among the store's staff, they roughly shoved bleeding bodies aside in their quest for the last of the stock and special display. In less than ten minutes they had reassembled and were heading for the remnants of the back door.

Where a lanky green figure waited to confront them.

"Who the hell is that?" Pohatan gaped at the caped, emerald silhouette.

"Doesn't matter," snapped Kreiger. "Shoot him."

Reflexively, Pohatan brought the Uzi up and squeezed the trigger. The compact automatic buzzed.

Before the bullets could strike home, a giant oak sprang full-grown from beneath the crumbled tarmac between the gunman and the green figure. Slugs thudded harmlessly into the thick wood.

Kreiger's jaw dropped. His careful plan contained no contingencies for inexplicable interference.

The green-clad man stepped out from behind the tree. Lean muscle rippled beneath his tight suit (spandex? Kreiger wondered dazedly) and he wore a green band across his eyes.

"Give it up, Kreiger. It's all over."

"Like hell." Kreiger turned to his men. Already the distant complaint of sirens could be heard approaching rapidly from the north. "Get him!"

Pohatan threw his massive bulk at the figure, only to run headlong into a dense grove of new-sprung spruce that hadn't been there when he'd started his charge. Brownlee succeeded in reaching him, whereupon the figure's arms seemed to metamorphose into long vines. They wrapped around the startled assailant, lifted him effortlessly off the pavement, and flung him clear over the ruined store into the street beyond.

While the rest of his team rushed the floral fighter, Kreiger raced for the truck. A glance back showed that they were having no better luck than their colleagues.

Kreiger stabbed the key into the ignition and fired up the big engine, slamming the truck into drive. He accelerated as he bore down on the green shape, who had just disposed of the rest of Kreiger's colleagues. No time for him to get out of the way, though. Kreiger grinned. He liked running over people almost as much as he liked big explosions.

Giant roots erupted from the ground immediately in front of the truck. Wide-eyed, Kreiger tried to swerve. The roots twisted and grabbed at the truck, coiling around both axles and lifting it off the ground. As the solemn-faced green man looked on, they heaved the vehicle sideways. It smashed into a pair of parked cars, rolled over,

and came to rest among the tables of an outdoor restaurant whose patrons had fortunately run inside and stayed there when Covey's explosives had initially gone off.

The first patrol car to arrive in the parking lot behind the smoking ruins of the jewelry store disgorged a pair of stunned officers, who gratefully took delivery of the still-alive (but badly damaged) Kreiger and the rest of his gang. As the cops looked on, a brace of flexible willows emerged from the earth to lightly grasp the green figure. Bending their crowns to the ground, they aimed him skyward.

"Wait a minute!" yelled one of the officers. "Who are you? *What* are you?"

"Call me *Earth Spirit*," the green man intoned. "I was once one of you, one of the teeming masses. Now because of an industrial accident I'm somewhat more, and this is what I intend to do with my newfound powers. Spread the word among lawbreakers and polluters. Let them know they're safe no more!"

With that, the willows sprang back with tremendous velocity, sending the green man soaring out of sight. No doubt another tree or bush was waiting somewhere to relay him on his way or cushion his descent. The officers exchanged a glance, then set themselves to watch over the battered gang until backup and medics could arrive.

"You know, you're a very difficult person to locate."

"How *did* you find me?" Earth Spirit stepped back into the eave. "And how did you get past all the thornbushes and poison ivy I brought forth to discourage interlopers?"

The small, heavysset man set himself down in a high-backed chair which was growing right out of the cave floor. He mopped at his sweat-streaked brow with a monogrammed handkerchief. "Nice place you've got up here. Spacious, but a little dark for my taste." He smiled. "I'm mildly claustrophobic."

"And hugely curious," said Earth Spirit. "You haven't answered my questions."

"I put out the word quietly. Announced a reward for information. Local farmer noticed a lot of sudden growth up on this mountaintop and got in touch with a regional contact of mine. At that point I decided that a personal visit was in order. May I call you Earth? It's a lot easier, I prefer to be on a first-name basis with people, and besides, the other half's copyrighted."

"If it'll make you comfortable." The green one settled himself into a chair opposite. A compliant vine handed him a drink.

"As for the thorns and the ivy, as you can see, I dressed accordingly. Abercrombie and Fitch. I'm not used to this sort of thing. Silk three-pieces are more to my taste."

"You're from the government," Earth Spirit surmised.

"Not at all, though I'm sure they'll be here shortly. My name is Lemuel French. I'm a lawyer."

The green man frowned. "What would I need with a lawyer, Mr. French?"

The smaller man stared at him in disbelief. "You really don't know? Well, maybe not. Ever since the Vaan Pelsen's debacle you've kept pretty quiet, except for vine-wrapping the occasional mugger."

Earth Spirit smiled. "My actions seem to have had a deterrent effect on local crime."

"That they have. It's one of the problems you're going to have to deal with."

"Problems?" The vine held the drink neatly.

"You're really out of touch up here on this mountaintop, aren't you? No paper, no cable."

"I prefer the company of the natural world," the green man said stiffly.

"You want to live like a Granola that's fine with me, but your activities impinge on the real world. That's why I sought you out. See, I believe in what you're doing and I want to help." He smiled broadly. "For a fee, of course. We really need to discuss your putting my firm on retainer."

"I told you, I have no need of a lawyer."

"So you said." French popped the polished brass clasp on an elegant eelskin briefcase and removed a thick sheaf of papers. "Copies. You'll be served as soon as they can find you. That gives us some time."

Earth Spirit eyed the papers in spite of himself. "What is all that?"

"Let's see. Where to start?" French shuffled the sheaf as cleanly as a Vegas dealer handling cards. "The first suit is from Vaan Pelsen's Inc."

"Vaan Pelsen's? Why would they want to sue me? I saved their merchandise."

"But a lot of it was damaged in the gang's escape attempt. Fancy gold work, that sort of thing."

"They wouldn't have it to fix if I hadn't stepped in."

"I agree completely, and I'm sure the court will take that into account." French had his reading glasses on now. "Here's another: 'Mildred Fox, plaintiff for Sissy and Michael Fox, juvenile principals.' "

The green man looked baffled. "I've never heard of these people."

"They were dining in the restaurant where you threw Mr. Kreiger and his stolen truck. Ms. Mildred Fox is the mother of the two named children. She claims that her kids suffered severe emotional distress from nearly being struck by the escape vehicle, and that among other things they now refuse to ride in the family minivan, thus forcing Ms. Fox, a working mother, to sell it at a loss and buy an ordinary car. Claimant further deposes that her children now experience uncontrollable fits at the sight of any large delivery vehicle."

"This... this is ridiculous!" Earth Spirit sputtered.

"I heartily concur, and we'll make Ms. Fox and her well-coached little schemers look that way in court."

As if by magic more papers appeared.

"Is there much more of this?" Earth Spirit regarded the phone book-sized pile with growing trepidation.

"Depends on your definition of 'much.' A Mr. Colin Hvarty is suing you for medical expenses pursuant to a broken leg and sprained back, plus possible concussion."

"I never intended to break anybody's leg, not even one of the robbers!" the green-clad man protested.

French looked up and smiled apologetically. "Apparently Mr. Hvarty was standing in the street opposite Vaan Pelsen's when he was struck by a flying crook. Did you happen, in the course of your work, to perhaps fling one or more of the miscreants in that direction?"

"I didn't mean to hit anybody."

"Well, you did." French adjusted his glasses. "We'll have to see about getting you some liability insurance, though after the business at Vaan Pelsen's you'd better be prepared to deal with an outrageous monthly premium."

"Superheroes don't need liability insurance."

French peered over the top of his glasses. "Is that so? You want to perform good deeds in this country, you'd better make sure you're fully covered before you start.

"The owner of the parking lot behind Pelsen's has presented a bill for the following: to wit, expenses directly related to removing a large oak tree and a number of smaller growths from his property, and repaving the damaged area. The owner of the restaurant where Ms. Fox and her offspring suffered their trauma is suing for damage to eight tables and chairs, umbrellas, railing, landscaping, and assorted crockery, glassware and utensils.

"A Mr. Loemann and a Mr. Kelly are suing for damage to their respective vehicles. Those are the two cars you unfortunately hit with the getaway truck. Or rather, their insurance companies are suing you. A local nature organization has filed a writ to prevent you from utilizing any vegetation of any species whatsoever in your crimefighting activities until you can present them with an acceptable environmental impact report demonstrating beyond argument that your work does not involve the use of dangerous chemicals, stimulants, or scientifically unapproved bioengineering. The local office of the Food and Drug Administration wants to talk to you about essentially the same thing."

"Go on." Earth Spirit's expression was grim.

"I intend to. The municipal police have a warrant out for your arrest for interfering with police activities. I don't think we have to worry about this one. They don't want to jail you; just co-opt you."

"I don't work for anybody. I'm independent."

"Then you're going to be butting heads with the local law enforcement bureaucracy from now till doomsday. Bureaucrats don't like outsiders poaching their turf. They're afraid you might apply for and get a government grant intended for them."

"But I'm helping them in their work, fighting evildoers."

"You're not going to have enough time to fight the local school bully. See these?" French waved another entire sheaf of papers. "Subpoenas. Calling you as a witness in the Vaan Pelsen's case. Each robber has requested and been granted an independent trial, so you'll have to give testimony in all of them. Also, at least two members of the Vaan Pelsen's gang are suing you, including Kreiger. They claim that since you're not a member of any recognized law-enforcement department, you had no right to interfere, and that they've suffered irreparable mental harm as a result of your activities."

"I was making a citizen's arrest."

"They claim use of excessive force. Among other things."

"That's outrageous! They had explosives and automatic weapons."

"Maybe we can cut a deal. I'll speak to their people." The green man's chest expanded proudly.

"I don't have to belong to an official organization. I represent the Earth."

"Not in this country you don't. And don't go on boasting that you're some kind of foreigner. This is a conservative community." He murmured half to himself. "We can use temporary insanity in at least half these cases, if we have to. I mean, just look at you."

Earth Spirit blinked down at himself. "What's wrong with me?"

"Grown man living alone in a cave atop a mountain? Talking to plants? Running around in green spandex?"

"It's not spandex."

"Whatever. So long as there's no brand-name infringement involved." French sighed tiredly. "Then there's the government."

"What about the government?" Earth Spirit said darkly. "I'm trying to *help* them."

"Why do you think the local police bureaucracy is so afraid of you? If some superhero starts dropping out of the sky on local criminals and the crime rate falls to zero, what do you think happens to their budget? Not to mention their jobs. They're terrified you'll stick around."

"As for helping the government, the spin on the street is good, but they're wary. Nobody knows which party you belong to."

"I belong to no party. I belong to..."

"The Earth; yeah, yeah, you told me already. Even worse. A third-party

iconoclast. They want to know your name."

"I am Earth Spirit!"

"Sure, okay. But they can't find anybody named 'Earth Spirit' anywhere. You're not on the tax rolls, so they want to know if you've filed any returns. You may be 'of the Earth,' but if you want to practice your profession in the U.S. you'd better be able to prove that you're a citizen. Or else have, you should pardon me, a green card. Do you even have a Social Security number?"

Earth Spirit looked away, clearly uneasy. "If I give up that kind of information, I'll have to reveal my true identity. I can't do that. Criminals could threaten me and my work through family and friends."

"There's always the witness protection program, but I don't think it would work for superheroes. Eventually you'd forget yourself, make a redwood sprout in a mall or something."

"This is all that Kreiger's fault," Earth Spirit growled.

"Maybe. You can't do anything about him, though. He's had a restraining order put on you. You can't go near him."

"Why would I want to go near him? He's in jail, where his kind belong."

"Are you kidding? His lawyers had him out of the hospital and back on the street in forty-eight hours. Bail."

Earth Spirit rubbed at his forehead, above the mask. "Is there much more of this?"

"It's not all bad news." French inspected fresh paper. "Mattel wants to start a line of 'Earth Spirit' toys. Two major fashion houses want to license your costume as the basis for new lines of men's clothing. Oprah, Jay, Phil, and Joan all want you for interviews. *Time* and *Newsweek* are preparing features... you can't *buy* that kind of publicity. CAA and William Morris are vying to represent you on the coast, and each claims to have multi-picture deals already cut and waiting for your signature. Personally, I'd go with CAA. They already have Hoffman committed to play Kreiger.

"There are book offers all over the place, and I think that with your okay I can get this incipient Kitty Kelly expose nipped in the bud. We'll also make arrangements to protect you from the people at *Hard Copy*, *Inside Edition*, and *Geraldo*, though even I can't do much about the tabloids. Have you seen the *Enquirer* or the *Star* this week? No, of course you haven't."

Earth Spirit looked up. "That's the good news?"

"Impressive, isn't it? You stand to make millions. Of course, there's the matter of my firm's fee, but I'm sure we can come to an equitable arrangement. Oh, one other thing."

"I can't imagine."

"The FAA wants you to cease and desist all this flying about. They're worried about your influence on air-traffic patterns. Better you should take a cab."

"To fight crime?"

"Why not? The cabbies in this town can get around pretty good."

"What about the government? Why should I have to worry about tax returns? I have no income."

"You're going to. You might as well cash the checks as they come in because nobody'll believe you don't have any income anyway. It's un-American. Don't worry. The accountancy firm that's associated with us will make it effortless for you. And you can use the leftover money to fight crime in whatever way you wish. If there is any."

"Crime?" Earth Spirit murmured uncertainly.

"No. Leftover money."

The green one rose dynamically from his chair and began to pace, fingers flexing like questing stems behind his back. "All I wanted was to help people and battle the forces of evil."

"And you can, you can," French insisted soothingly. "It's just a question of going about it in a careful, intelligent way... and making sure all the proper forms are filled out and filed beforehand."

Earth Spirit halted abruptly, and French flinched. After all, the fellow *did* have superpowers... and was doubtless a little off to boot. That bizarre outfit...

"All right," he said finally. "I'll hire your firm. On a case contingency basis. Get me clear of this Vaan Pelsen's business and then we'll see."

"That's fair enough." French rose, and they shook hands.

"Would you like me to have my friends ease you down the mountain?" Earth Spirit said in parting. "It's a difficult hike."

"Tell me about it," French grumbled. "I'll walk, thanks. Even though I think I shook the couple of paparazzi who followed me from the city, you'll be safer if I don't draw attention to myself. You needn't apologize for your naoveti. It'll be much easier now that I know you're not some nut and that you understand what it means to have to work within the system."

Earth Spirit waved. "Oh I do, Mr. French, I do. Now."

Six months later the first deposition arrived on Tonga, advance scout of an irresistible paper army, but by that time Earth Spirit had already moved on once again, to a land where lawyers were less numerous still.

Passport problems were already beginning to dog him, though, and in Singapore he barely escaped having his suit and mask garnished for nonpayment of one claim.