



The Tower Laboratory

By Elaine Cunningham

Ain't no substitute for practice. You want to do something right, you'd better set your mind to doing it wrong a few times before you figure out what's what. That goes double when you're getting ready to fight things that want to kill you. It's just plain good sense to start out with something that probably won't.

I'm the team's Mechanic. It took both me and the Engineer a solid month to build us a practice robot, but she was a beauty. Big, fast, and mean as a prom queen. The two of us stood grinning at the thing like proud parents.

"Almost a shame to turn her into scrap metal," I said.

The Engineer shrugged. "We disassemble it, or it disassembles us."

And there it was, down to the nuts and bolts. I do like a practical, plainspoken man. The Engineer and me were about as different as two people could be, but we made a solid team. I wasn't so sure about the two new boys.

The high-ups in the Stygian Society had promised us a Chemist, and the little man in the white lab coat did look the part. He came strutting in with some kind of

weapon strapped to his back. It looked like a cross between a moonshine still and the contraption my daddy rigged up to spray the peach orchard back home. The green slime in it glowed and bubbled.

The Chemist walked right past me and gave the Engineer the once-over.

“Dr. Emerson Wilks, I presume? From *Yale*?”

He said the last bit like it was an insult, which pretty much guaranteed we had us a Harvard man here.

“Your goo-flinger’s got a loose valve,” I said.

Harvard Man turned me to and tucked both his chins down so he could look at me over the rim of his glasses. “It’s a *catalytic propulsion device*. And you are?”

“The gal with the chainsaw.” I pulled Susie out of her holster and let him get a good look at my custom built death-dealer.

“You’re the Mechanic,” he said with considerable more respect than he’d shown the Yale professor. “Good. I think I have a loose valve.”

You know, I probably could have told him that.

Our new Psychic came in while I was tinkering with the goo-flinger. He nodded and touched a finger to the brim of his hat to say howdy, then got busy setting up an old Victrola.

Strange looking fellow. Couldn’t see much of his face, what with the long brown beard and a big curling mustache that probably had enough wax on it to make a candle. Rumor had it he used to work a Wild West show, and it looked like he’d raided the costume trunk on his way out. His striped satin vest and fancy hat

would have looked right at home in some old saloon, playing the sort of card game that ended in a gunfight.

Which, come to think of it, was pretty much how this night was likely to go.

I wiped the grease off my hands and sashayed over to make his acquaintance.

“Bet you already know who I am.”

A long-suffering look crossed the Psychic’s face. I’m guessing he’d heard that one about a hundred times.

“You want to know how I got this job,” he said.

As a matter of fact, I did. The scientists had years of schooling and lots of practice blowing things up in this or that laboratory. My daddy was a man of all work, and I grew up with a wrench in my hand. There wasn’t a machine built I couldn’t run, fix, or improve. But how did a person get to be a psychic?

“I died,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

He took off his hat, revealing a shiny dome as bald as an egg. He pointed to a long, deep dent on one side. “Kicked in the head by a horse. Dead before I hit the ground.”

“Huh,” I said. “Seems like it didn’t take.”

He shrugged. “Not so you’d notice. Mostly.”

Just then the starting alarm chimed—deep, ringing notes like church bells preaching death and doom. That was my idea. Atmosphere counts for a lot.

“This is a practice run,” the Engineer said, raising his voice over the sound of the robot’s engines kicking in. “Five hits will shut it down. Fight to win, not to destroy.”

He raised one of his gizmos—couldn’t tell you much about it, since he never let me take it apart—and sent a half-hearted bolt of lightning at the robot. A bell chimed, and one of the red lights on her chest plate turned on.

Well, that was easy.

Or not.

In less time than it take to blink, the robot spun toward her attacker and lashed out with one foot. It caught the Engineer right in the breadbasket, lifted him off his feet, and flung him against the warehouse wall. He slid down and stayed there.

I threw a wrench at the robot. Yeah, that wasn’t the smartest thing I could have done, but you know what they say about redheads and tempers. The wrench clanged as it bounced off the robot’s shoulder.

Bright blue light flared in the robot’s eyes and she swung a long metal arm in my direction, too hard and fast for me to block with Susie.

Good thing I dropped and rolled, because just then the Chemist let loose with his spray gun. Green droplets flew every which way, like they were coming out of a garden hose.

“Hey!” I protested.

“Sorry.” He started to fiddle with the nozzle. Being a scientist, he seemed more concerned with getting the setting just exactly right than he was the riled-up, twelve-foot robot coming his way.

Piano music poured from the Victrola, the kind of jumpy, nail-biting music you hear played at the movies when something big is about to happen. With it came swirls of dark smoke. Some of that smoke curled around the Psychic, who floated up a foot or two into the air.

That was a pretty good trick. I didn’t see the sense of it, though, until he raised one hand in a make-believe gun, like a kid playing cops and robbers. When he lowered that thumb, a ball of smoke shot at the robot and knocked her back a step.

Another hit, another red light.

A second blast exploded from the Chemist’s goo-flinger, this one as short and compact as an arrow. It hit the robot dead center. A fourth red light shone through the spatter of green.

Should have been the fifth one. My wrench hit that robot harder than Babe Ruth ever hit a baseball.

Fair or foul, I was the only one without a hit on the scoreboard. I revved up Susie and stalked in.

“Chainsaw off!” croaked the Engineer.

I pretended I didn’t hear him. When I was done, a month’s worth of engineering and mechanical know-how lay scattered over the warehouse floor. All five lights on the robot’s chest piece gleamed like rubies before they winked out.

“Good practice, team,” the Engineer said. “Same time tomorrow?”

He was yanking my chain. I suppose I had it coming, but I didn't back down from man or robot.

"Sure, I could fix her up by then. No problem."

"Don't know about you fellers, and you, too, ma'am," said the Psychic, still floating, "but looks to me like we're ready for the real thing."