



Super Man and the Bug Out
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Super Man and the Bug Out

"Mama, I'm not a super-villain," Hershie said for the millionth time. He chased the last of the gravy on his plate with a hunk of dark rye, skirting the shriveled derma left behind from his kishka. Ever since the bugouts had inducted Earth into their Galactic Federation, promising to end war, crime, and corruption, he'd found himself at loose ends. His adoptive Earth-mother, who'd named him Hershie Abromowicz, had talked him into meeting her at her favorite restaurant in the heart of Toronto's Gaza Strip.

"Not a super-villain, he says. Listen to him: mister big-stuff. Well, smarty-pants, if you're not a super-villain, what was that mess on the television last night then?"

A busboy refilled their water, and Hershie took a long sip, staring off into the middle distance. Lately, he'd taken to avoiding looking at his mother: her infra-red signature was like a landing-strip for a coronary, and she wouldn't let him take her to one of the bugout clinics for nanosurgery.

Mrs. Abromowicz leaned across the table and whacked him upside the head with one hand, her big rings clicking against the temple of his half-rim specs. Had it been anyone else, he would have caught her hand mid-slap, or at least dodged in a superfast blur, quicker than any human eye. But his Mama had let him know what she thought of that sass before his third birthday. Raising super-infants requires strict, loving discipline. "Hey, wake up! Hey! I'm talking to you! What was that mess on television last night?"

"It was a demonstration, Mama. We were protesting. We want to dismantle the machines of war — it's in the Torah, Mama. Isaiah: they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Tot would have approved."

Mrs. Abromowicz sucked air between her teeth. "Your father never would have approved of that."

That was the Action last night. It had been his idea, and he'd tossed it around with the Movement people who'd planned the demo: they'd gone to an army-surplus store and purchased hundreds of decommissioned rifles, their bores filled with lead, their firing pins defanged. He'd flown above and ahead of the demonstration, in his traditional tights and cape, dragging a cargo net full of rifles from his belt. He pulled them out one at a time, and bent them into balloon-animals — fanciful giraffes,

wiener-dogs, bumble-bees, poodles — and passed them out the crowds lining Yonge Street. It had been a boffo smash hit. And it made great TV.

Hershie Abromowicz, Man from the Stars, took his mother's hands between his own and looked into her eyes. "Mama, I'm a grown man. I have a job to do. It's like ... like a calling. The world's still a big place, bugouts or no bugouts, and there's lots of people here who are crazy, wicked, with their fingers on the triggers. I care about this planet, and I can't sit by when it's in danger."

"But why all of a sudden do you have to be off with these meshuggenahs? How come you didn't need to be with the crazy people until now?"

"Because there's a chance now. The world is ready to rethink itself. Because —" The waiter saved him by appearing with the cheque. His mother started to open her purse, but he had his debitcard on the table faster than the eye could follow. "It's on me, Ma."

"Don't be silly. I'll pay."

"I want to. Let me. A son should take his mother out to lunch once in a while."

She smiled, for the first time that whole afternoon, and patted his cheek with one manicured hand. "You're a good boy, Hershie, I know that. I only want that you should be happy, and have what's best for you."

Hershie, in tights and cape, was chilling in his fortress of solitude when his comm rang. He checked the callerid and winced: Thomas was calling, from Toronto. Hershie's long-distance bills were killing him, ever since the Department of Defense had cut off his freebie account.

Not to mention that talking to Thomas inevitably led to more trouble with his mother.

He got up off of his crystalline recliner and flipped the comm open, floating up a couple of metres. "Thomas, what's up?"

"Supe, didja see the reviews? The critics love us!"

Hersh held the comm away from his head and sighed the ancient, put-upon Hebraic sigh of his departed stepfather. Thomas Aquino Rusk liked to play at being a sleazy Broadway producer, his "plays" the eye-catching demonstrations he and his band of merry shit-disturbers hijacked.

"Yeah, it made pretty good vid, all right." He didn't ask why Thomas was calling. There was only one reason he ever called: he'd had another idea.

"You'll never guess why I called."

"You've had an idea."

"I've had an idea!"

"Really."

"You'll love it."

Hershie reached out and stroked the diamond-faceted coffins that his birth parents lay in, hoping for guidance. His warm fingers slicked with melted hoarfrost, and as they skated over the crypt, it sang a pure, high crystal note like a crippled flying saucer plummeting to the earth. "I'm sure I will, Thomas."

As usual, Thomas chose not to hear the sarcasm in his voice. "Check this out — DefenseFest 33 is being held in Toronto in March. And the new keynote speaker is the Patron Ik'Spir Pat! The fricken head fricken bugout! His address is 'Galactic History and Military Tactics: a Strategic Overview.'"

"And this is a good thing?"

"Ohfuckno. It's terrible, terrible, of course. The bugouts are selling us out. Going over to the Other Side. Just awful. But think of the possibilities!"

"But think of the possibilities? Oy." Despite himself, Hershie was smiling. Thomas always made him smile.

"You're smiling, aren't you?"

"Shut up, Thomas."

"Can you make a meeting at the Belquees for 18h?"

Hershie checked his comm. It was 1702h. "I can make it."

"See you there, buddy." Thomas rang off.

Hershie folded his comm, wedged it in his belt, and stroked his parents' crypt, once more, for luck.

Hershie loved the commute home. Starting at the Arctic Circle, he flew up and up and up above the highest clouds, then flattened out his body and rode the currents home, eeling around the wet frozen cloudmasses, slaloming through thunderheads, his critical faculties switched off, flying at speed on blind instinct alone.

He usually made visual contact with the surface around Barrie, just outside of Toronto, and he wasn't such a goodiegoodie that he didn't feel a thrill of superiority as he flew over the cottage-country commuters stuck in the end-of-weekend traffic, skis and snowmobiles strapped to their roofs.

The Belquees had the best Ethiopian food and the worst Ethiopian decor in town. Successive generations of managers had added their own touches — tiki-lanterns, textured wallpaper, framed photos of Haile Selassie, tribal spears and grass dolls — and they'd accreted in layers, until the net effect was of an African rummage sale. But man, the food was good.

Downstairs was a banquet room whose decor consisted of material too ugly to be shown upstairs, with a stage and a disco ball. It had been a regular meeting place for Toronto's radicals for more than fifty years, the chairs worn smooth by generations of left-wing buttocks.

Tonight, it was packed. At least fifty people were crammed around the tables, tearing off hunks of tangy rice-pancake and scooping up vegetarian curry with them. Even before he saw Thomas, his super-hearing had already picked his voice out of the din and located it. Hershie made a beeline for Thomas's table, not making eye-contact with the others — old-guard activists who still saw him as a tool of the war-machine.

Thomas licked his fingers clean and shook his hand. "Supe! Glad you could make it! Sit, sit." There was a general shuffling of coats and chairs as the other people at the table cleared a space for him. Thomas was already pouring him a beer out of one of the pitchers on the table.

"Geez, how many people did you invite?"

Tina, a tiny Chinese woman who could rhyme "Hey hey, ho ho" and "One, two, three, four" with amazing facility said, "Everyone's here. The Quakers, the commies, a couple of councilors, the vets, anyone we could think of. This is gonna be huge."

The food hot, and the different curries and salads were a symphony of flavours and textures. "This is terrific," he said.

"Best Ethiopian outside of Addis Ababa," said Thomas.

Better than Addis Ababa, Hershie thought, but didn't say it. He'd been in Addis Ababa as the secret weapon behind Canada's third and most ill-fated peacekeeping mission there. There hadn't been a lot of restaurants open then, just block after block of bombed-out buildings, and tribal warlords driving around in tacticals, firing randomly at anything that moved. The ground CO sent him off to scatter bands of marauders while the bullets spanged off his chest. He'd never understood the tactical significance of those actions — still didn't — but at the time, he'd been willing to trust those in authority.

"Good food," he said.

An hour later, the pretty waitress had cleared away the platters and brought fresh pitchers, and Hershie's tights felt a little tighter. One of the Quakers, an ancient, skinny man with thin grey hair and sharp, clever features stood up and tapped his beer-mug. Gradually, conversation subsided.

"Thank you," he said. "My name is Stewart Pocock, and I'm here from the Circle of Friends. I'd like us all to take a moment to say a silent thanks for the wonderful food we've all enjoyed."

There was a nervous shuffling, and then a general bowing of heads and mostly silence, broken by low whispers.

"Thomas, I thought you called this meeting," Hershie whispered.

"I did. These guys always do this. Control freaks. Don't worry about it," he whispered back.

"Thank you all. We took the liberty of drawing up an agenda for this meeting."

"They always do this," Thomas said.

The Quakers led them in a round of introductions, which came around to Hershie. "I'm, uh, The Super Man. I guess most of you know that, right?" Silence. "I'm really looking forward to working on this with you all." A moment of silence followed, before the next table started in on its own introductions.

"Time," Louise Pocock said. Blissfully. At last. The agenda had ticks next to INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, STRATEGY, THE DAY, SUPPORT AND ORGANISING and PUBLICITY. Thomas had hardly spoken a word through the course of the meeting. Even Hershie's alien buttocks were numb from sitting.

"It's time for the closing circle. Please, everybody, stand up and hold hands." Many of the assembled didn't bother to stifle their groans. Awkwardly, around the tables and the knapsacks, they formed a rough circle and took hands. They held it for an long, painful moment, then gratefully let go.

They worked their way upstairs and outside. The wind had picked up, and it blew Hershie's cape out on a crackling vertical behind him, so that it caught many of the others in the face as they cycled or walked away.

"Supe, let's you and me grab a coffee, huh?" Thomas said, without any spin on it at all, so that Hershie knew that it wasn't a casual request.

"Yeah, sure."

The cafe Thomas chose was in a renovated bank, and there was a private room in the old vault, and they sat down there, away from prying eyes and autograph hounds.

"So, you pumped?" Thomas said, after they ordered coffees.

"After that meeting? Yeah, sure."

Thomas laughed, a slightly patronising but friendly laugh. "That was a great meeting. Look, if those guys had their way, we'd have about a march a month, and we'd walk slowly down a route that we had a permit for, politely asking people to see our point of view. And in between, we'd have a million meetings like this, where we come up with brilliant ideas like, 'Let's hand out fliers next time.'

"So what we do is, go along with them. Give them enough rope to hang themselves. Let 'em have four or five of those, until everyone who shows up is so bored, they'll do anything, as long as its not that.

"So, these guys want to stage a sit-in in front of the convention centre. Bo-ring! We wait until they're ready to sit down, then we start playing music and turn it into a dance-in. Start playing movies on the side of the building. Bring in a hundred secret agents in costume to add to it. They'll never know what hit 'em."

Hershie squirmed. These kinds of Machiavellian shenanigans came slowly to him. "That seems kind of, well, disingenuous, Thomas. Why don't we just hold our own march?"

"And split the movement? No, this is much better. These guys do all the postering and phoning, they get a good crowd out, this is their natural role. Our natural role, my son," he placed a friendly hand on Hershie's caped shoulder, "is to see to it that their efforts aren't defeated by their own poverty of imagination. They're the feet of the movement, but we're its laugh." Thomas pulled out his comm and scribbled on its surface. "They're the feet of the movement, but we're its laugh, that's great, that's one for the memoirs."

Hershie decided he needed to patrol a little to clear his head. He scooped trash and syringes from Grenadier Pond. He flew silently through High Park, ears cocked for any muggings.

Nothing.

He patrolled the Gardner Expressway next and used his heat vision to melt some black ice.

Feeling useless, he headed for home.

He was most of the way up Yonge Street when he heard the siren. A cop car, driving fast, down Jarvis. He sighed his father's sigh and rolled

east, heading into Regent Park, locating the dopplering siren. He touched down lightly on top of one of the ugly, squat tenements, and skipped from roof to roof, until he spotted the cop. He was beefy, with the traditional moustache and the flak vest that they all wore on downtown patrol. He was leaning against the hood of his cruiser, panting, his breath clouding around him.

A kid rolled on the ground, clutching his groin, gasping for breath. His infrared signature throbbed painfully between his legs. Clearly, he'd been kicked in the nuts.

The cop leaned into his cruiser and lowered the volume on his radio, then, without warning, kicked the kid in the small of the back. The kid rolled on the ice, thrashing painfully.

Before Hershie knew what he was doing, he was hovering over the ice, between the cop and the kid. The cateyes embedded in the emblem on his chest glowed in the streetlamps. The cop's eyes widened so that Hershie could see the whites around his pupils.

Hershie stared. "What do you think you're doing?" he said, after a measured silence.

The cop took a step back and slipped a little on the ice before catching himself on his cruiser.

"Since when do you kick unarmed civilians in the back?"

"He — he ran away. I had to catch him. I wanted to teach him not to run."

"By inspiring his trust in the evenhandedness of Toronto's Finest?" Hershie could see the cooling tracks of the cruiser, skidding and weaving through the projects. The kid had put up a good chase. Behind him, he heard the kid regain his feet and start running. The cop started forward, but Hershie stopped him with one finger, dead centre in the flak jacket.

"You can't let him get away!"

"I can catch him. Trust me. But first, we're going to wait for your backup to arrive, and I'm going to file a report."

A Sun reporter arrived before the backup unit. Hershie maintained stony silence in the face of his questions, but he couldn't stop the man from listening in on his conversation with the old constable who showed up a few minutes later, as he filed his report. He found the kid a few blocks away, huddled in an alley, hand pressed to the small of his back. He took him to Mount Sinai's emerg and turned him over to a uniformed cop.

The hysterical Sun headlines that vilified Hershie for interfering with the cop sparked a round of recriminating voicemails from his mother, filled with promises to give him such a zetz in the head when she next saw him. He folded his tights and cape and stuffed them in the back of his closet and spent a lot of time in the park for the next few weeks. He liked to watch the kids playing, a United Nations in miniature, parents looking on amiably, stymied by the language barrier that their kids hurdled with ease.

On March first, he took his tights out of the overstuffed hall closet and flew to Ottawa to collect his pension.

He touched down on the Parliament Hill and was instantly surrounded by high-booted RCMP constables, looking slightly panicky. He held his hands up, startled. "What gives, guys?"

"Sorry, sir," one said. "High security today. One of Them is speaking in Parliament."

"Them?"

"The bugouts. Came down to have a chat about neighbourly relations. Authorised personnel only today."

"Well, that's me," Hershie said, and started past him.

The constable, looking extremely unhappy, moved to block him. "I'm sorry sir, but that's not you. Only people on the list. My orders, I'm afraid."

Hershie looked into the man's face and thought about hurtling skywards and flying straight into the building. The man was only doing his job, though. "Look, it's payday. I have to go see the Minister of Defense. I've been doing it every month for years."

"I know that sir, but today is a special day. Perhaps you could return tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? My rent is due today, Sergeant. Look, what if I comm his office?"

"Please, sir, that would be fine." The Sergeant looked relieved.

Hershie hit a speed dial and waited. A recorded voice told him that the office was closed, the Minister at a special session.

"He's in session. Look, it's probably on his desk — I've been coming here for years; really, this is ridiculous."

"I'm sorry. I have my orders."

"I don't think you could stop me, Sergeant."

The Sergeant and his troops shuffled their feet. "You're probably right, sir. But orders are orders."

"You know, Sergeant, I retired a full colonel from the Armed Forces. I could order you to let me past."

"Sorry sir, no. Different chain of command."

Hershie controlled his frustration with an effort of will. "Fine then. I'll be back tomorrow."

The building super wasn't pleased about the late rent. He threatened Hershie with eviction, told him he was in violation of the lease, quoted the relevant sections of the Tenant Protection Act from memory, then grudgingly gave in to Hershie's pleas. Hershie had half a mind to put his costume on and let the man see what a real super was like.

But his secret identity was sacrosanct. Even in the era of Pax Aliena, the Super Man had lots of enemies, all of whom had figured out, long before, that even the invulnerable have weaknesses: their friends and families. It terrified him to think of what a bitter, obsolete, grudge-bearing terrorist might do to his mother, to Thomas, or even his old high-school girlfriends.

For his part, Thomas refused to acknowledge the risk; he'd was more worried about the Powers That Be than mythical terrorists.

The papers the next day were full of the overnight cabinet shuffle in Ottawa. More than half the cabinet had been relegated to the backbenches, and many of their portfolios had been eliminated or amalgamated into the new "superportfolios:" Domestic Affairs, Trade, and Extraterrestrial Affairs.

The old Minister of Defense, who'd once had Hershie over for Thanksgiving dinner, was banished to the lowest hell of the back-bench. His portfolio had been subsumed into Extraterrestrial Affairs, and the new Minister, a young up-and-comer named Woolley, wasn't taking Hershie's calls. Hershie called Thomas to see if he could loan him rent money.

Thomas laughed. "Chickens coming home to roost, huh?" he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hershie said, hotly.

"Well, there's only so much shit-disturbing you can do before someone sits up and takes notice. The Belquees is probably bugged, or maybe one of the commies is an informer. Either way, you're screwed. Especially with Woolley."

"Why, what's wrong with Woolley?" Hershie had met him in passing at Prime Minister's Office affairs, a well-dressed twenty-nine-year-old. He'd seemed like a nice enough guy.

"What's wrong with him?" Thomas nearly screamed. "He's the fricken antichrist! He was the one that came up with the idea of selling advertising on squeegee kids' t-shirts! He's heavily supported by private security outfits — he makes Darth Vader look like a swell guy. That slicked-down, blow-dried asshole —"

Hershie cut him off. "OK, OK, I get the idea."

"No you don't, Supe! You don't get the half of it. This guy isn't your average Liberal — those guys usually basic opportunists. He's a zealot! He'd like to beat us with truncheons! I went to one of his debates, and he showed up with a baseball bat! He tried to hit me with it!"

"What were you doing at the time?"

"What does it matter? Violence is never an acceptable response. I've thrown pies at better men than him —"

Hershie grinned. Thomas hadn't invented pieing, but his contributions to the art were seminal. "Thomas, the man is a federal Minister, with obligations. He can't just write me off — he'll have to pay me."

"Sure, sure," Thomas crooned. "Of course he will — who ever heard of a politician abusing his office to advance his agenda? I don't know what I was thinking. I apologise."

Hershie touched down on Parliament Hill, heart racing. Thomas's warning echoed in his head. His memories of Woolley were already morphing, so that the slick, neat kid became feral, predatory. The Hill was marshy and cold and gray, and as he squelched up to the main security desk, he felt a cold ooze of mud infiltrate its way into his superbootie. There was a new RCMP constable on duty, a turbanned Sikh. Normally, he felt awkward around the Sikhs in the Mounties. He imagined that their lack of cultural context made his tights and emblem seem absurd, that they evoked grins beneath the Sikhs' fierce moustaches. But today, he was glad the man was a Sikh, another foreigner with an uneasy berth in the Canadian military-industrial complex. The Sikh was expressionless as Hershie squirted his clearances from his comm to the security desk's transceiver. Imperturbably, the Sikh squirted back directions to Woolley's new office, just a short jaunt from the exalted heights of the Prime Minister's Office.

The Minister's office was guarded by: a dignified antique door that had the rich finish of wood that has been buffed daily for two centuries; an RCMP constable in plainclothes; a young, handsome receptionist in a silk navy power-suit; a slightly older office manager whose heart-stopping beauty was only barely restrained by her chaste blouse and skirt;

and, finally, a pair of boardroom doors with spotless brass handles and a retinal scanner.

Each obstacle took more time to weather than the last, so it was nearly an hour before the office manager stared fixedly into the scanner until the locks opened with a soft clack. Hershie squelched in, leaving a slushy dribble on the muted industrial-grade brown carpet.

Woolley knelt on the stool of an ergonomic work-cart, enveloped in an articulated nest of displays, comms, keyboards, datagloves, immersive headsets, stylii, sticky notes and cup-holders. His posture, hair and expression rivaled one-another for flawlessness.

"Hello, hello," he said, giving Hershie's hand a dry, firm pump. He smelled of expensive talc and leather car interiors.

He led Hershie to a pair of stark Scandinavian chairs whose polished lead undersides bristled with user-interface knobs. The old Minister's tastes had run to imposing oak desks and horsehair club-chairs, and Hershie felt a moment's disorientation as he sank into the brilliantly functional sitting-machine. It chattered like a roulette wheel and shifted to firmly support him.

"Thanks for seeing me," Hershie said. He caught his reflection in the bulletproof glass windows that faced out over the Rideau Canal, and felt a flush of embarrassment when he saw how clownish his costume looked in the practical environs.

Woolley favoured him with half a smile and stared sincerely with eyes that were widely spaced, clever and hazel, surrounded by smile lines. The man fairly oozed charisma. "I should be thanking you. I was just about to call you to set up a meeting."

Then why haven't you been taking my calls? Hershie thought. Lamely, he said, "You were?"

"I was. I wanted to touch base with you, clarify the way that we were going to operate from now on."

Hershie felt his gorge rise. "From now on?"

"I phrased that badly. What I mean to say is, this is a new Cabinet, a new Ministry. It has its own *modus operandi*."

"How can it have its own *modus operandi* when it was only created last night?" Hershie said, hating the petulance in his voice.

"Oh, I like to keep lots of contingency plans on hand — the time to plan for major changes is far in advance. Otherwise, you end up running around trying to get office furniture and telephones installed when you need to be seizing opportunity."

It struck Hershie how finished the office was — the staff, the systems, the security. He imagined Woolley hearing the news of his appointment and calling up files containing schematics, purchase orders, staff requisitions. It wasn't exactly devious, but it certainly teetered on the meridian separating planning and plotting.

"Well, you certainly seem to have everything in order."

"I've been giving some thought to your payment arrangement. Did you know that there's a whole body of policy relating to your pension?"

Hershie nodded, not liking where this was going.

"Well, that's just not sensible," Woolley said, sensibly. "The Canadian government already has its own pension apparatus: we make millions of direct-deposits every day, for welfare, pensions, employment insurance, mothers' allowance. We're up to our armpits in payment infrastructure. And having you fly up to Ottawa every month, well, it's ridiculous. This is the twenty-first century — we have better ways of moving money around.

"I've been giving it some thought, and I've come up with a solution that should make everything easier for everyone. I'm going to transfer your pension to the Canada Pension Plan offices; they'll make a monthly deposit directly to your account. I've got the paperwork all filled out here; all you need to do is fill in your banking information and your Social Insurance Number."

"But I don't have a Social Insurance Number or a bank account," Hershie said. Of course, Hershie Abromowicz had both, but the Super Man didn't.

"How do you pay taxes, then?" Woolley had a dangerous smile.

"Well, I —" Hershie stammered. "I don't! I'm tax-exempt! I've never had to pay taxes or get a bank account — I just take my cheques to the Canadian Union of Public Employees' Credit Union and they cash them for me. It's the arrangement."

Woolley shook his head. "Who told you you were tax-exempt?" he asked, wonderingly. "No one is tax-exempt, except Status Indians. As to not having a bank account, well, you can open an account at the CUPE Credit Union and we'll make the deposits there. But not until this tax status matter is cleared up. You'll have to talk to Revenue Canada about getting a SIN, and get that information to Canada Pensions."

"I pay taxes! Through my secret identity."

"But does this... " he made quote marks with his fingers, "secret identity declare your pension income?"

"Of course I don't! I have to keep my secret identity a secret!" His voice was shrill in his own ears. "It's a secret identity. I served in the Forces as the Super Man, so I get paid as the Super Man. Tax exempt, no bank accounts, no SIN. Just a cheque, every month."

Woolley leaned back and clasped his hands in his lap. "I know that's how it used to be, but what I'm trying to tell you today is that arrangement, however longstanding, however well-intentioned, wasn't proper — or even legal. It had to end some time. You're retired now — you don't need your secret identity," again with the finger-quotes. "If you already have a SIN, you can just give it to me, along with your secret identity's bank information, and we can have your pension processed in a week or two."

"A week or two?" Hershie bellowed. "I need to pay my rent! That's not how it works!"

Woolley stood, abruptly. "No sir, that is how it works. I'm trying to be reasonable. I'm trying to expedite things for you during this time of transition. But you need to meet me halfway. If you could give me your SIN and account information right now, I could speed things up considerably, I'm sure. I'm willing to make that effort, even though things are very busy here."

Hershie toyed with the idea of demolishing the man's office, turning his lovely furniture into molten nacho topping, and finishing up by leaving the man dangling by his suit from the CN Tower's needle. But his mother would kill him. "I can't give you my secret identity," Hershie said, pleadingly. "It's a matter of national security. I just need enough to pay my rent."

Woolley stared at the ceiling for a long, long time. "There is one thing," he said.

"Yes?" Hershie said, hating himself for the note of hope in his voice.

"The people at DefenseFest 33 called my office yesterday, to see if I'd appear as a guest speaker with the Patron Ik'Spir Pat. I had to turn them down, of course — I'm far too busy right now. But I'm sure they'd be happy to have a veteran of your reputation in that slot, and it carries a substantial honorarium. I could call them for you and give them your comm...?"

Hershie thought of Thomas, and of the rent, and of his mother, and of all the people at the Belquees who'd stared mistrustfully at him. "Have them call me," he sighed. "I'll talk to them."

He got to his feet, the toe of his boot squelching out more dirt pudding.

"Hershie?"

"Yes, Mama?" She'd caught him on the way home, flying high over the fleabag motels on the old Highway 2.

"It's Friday," she said.

Right. Friday. He told her he'd come for dinner, and that meant getting there before sunset. "I'll be there," he said.

"Oh, it's not important. It's just me. Don't hurry on my account — after all, you'll have thousands of Shabbas dinners with your mother. I'll live forever."

"I said I'll be there."

"And don't wear that costume," she said. She hated the costume. When the Department of Defense had issued it to him, she'd wanted to know why they were sending her boy into combat wearing red satin panties.

"I'll change."

"That's a good boy," she said. "I'm making brisket."

By the time he touched down on the roof of his building, he knew he'd be late for dinner. He skimmed down the elevator shaft to the tenth floor and ducked out to his apartment, only to find the door padlocked. There was a note from the building super tacked to the peeling green paint. Among other things, it quoted the codicil from the Tenant Protection Act that allowed the super to padlock the door and forbade Hershie, on penalty of law, from doing anything about it.

Hershie's super-hearing picked up the sound of a door opening down the hallway. In a blur, he flew up to the ceiling and hovered there, pressing himself flat on the acoustic tile. One of his neighbours, that guy with the bohemian attitude who always seemed to be laughing at poor, nebbishy Hershie Abromowicz, made his way down the hall. He paused directly below Hershie's still, hovering form, reading the note on the door while he adjusted the collar of his ski-vest. He smirked at the note and got in the elevator.

Hershie let himself float to the ground, his cheeks burning.

Damn it, he didn't have time for this. Not for any of it. He considered the padlock for a moment, then snapped the hasp with his thumb and index finger. Moving through the apartment with superhuman speed, he changed into a pair of nice slacks, a cable-knit sweater his mother had given him for his last birthday, a tweedy jacket and a woolen overcoat. Opening a window, he took flight.

"Thomas, I really can't talk right now," he said. His mother was angrily drumming her rings on the table's edge. Abruptly, she grabbed the bowl of cooling soup from his place setting and carried it into the kitchen. She hadn't done this since he was a kid, but it still inspired the same panicky dread in him — if he wasn't going to eat his dinner, she wasn't going to leave it.

"Supe, we have to talk about this. I mean, DefenseFest is only a week away. We've got things to do!"

"Look, about DefenseFest... "

"Yes?" Thomas had a wary note in his voice.

Hershie's mother reappeared with a plate laden with brisket, tsimmis, and kasha. She set it down in front of him.

"We'll talk later, OK?" Hershie said.

"But what about DefenseFest?"

"It's complicated," Hershie began. His mother scooped up the plate of brisket and headed back to the kitchen. She was muttering furiously. "I have to go," he said and closed his comm.

Hershie chased his mother and snatched the plate from her as she held it dramatically over the sink disposal. He held up his comm with the other hand and made a show of powering it down.

"It's off, Mama. Please, come and eat."

"I've been thinking of selling the house," she said, as they tucked into slices of lemon pound-cake.

Hershie put down his fork. "Sell the house?" While his father hadn't exactly built the house with his own hands, he had sold his guts out at his discount menswear store to pay for it. His mother had decorated it, but his father's essence still haunted the corners. "Why would you sell the house?"

"Oh, it's too big, Hershie. I'm just one old lady, and it's not like there're any grandchildren to come and stay. I could buy a condo in Florida, and there'd be plenty left over for you."

"I don't need any money, Mama. I've got my pension."

She covered his hands with hers. "Of course you do, bubbie. But fixed incomes are for old men. You're young, you need a nest egg, something to start a family with." Her sharp eyes, sunk into motherly pillows of soft flesh, bored into him. He tried to keep his gaze light and carefree. "You've got money problems?" she said, at length.

Hershie scooped up a forkful of pound-cake and shook his head. His mother's powers of perception bordered on clairvoyance, and he didn't

trust himself to speak the lie outright. He looked around the dining room, furnished with faux chinoise screens, oriental rugs, angular art-glass chandeliers.

"Tell Mama," she said.

He sighed and finished the cake. "It's the new Minister. He won't give me my pension unless I tell him my secret identity."

"So?" his mother said. "You're so ashamed of your parents, you'd rather starve than tell the world that their bigshot hero is Hershie Abromowicz? I, for one wouldn't mind — finally, I could speak up when my girlfriends are going on about their sons the lawyers."

"Mom!" he said, feeling all of eight years old. "I'm not ashamed and you know it. But if the world knew who I was, well, who knows what kind of danger you'd be in? I've made some powerful enemies, Mama."

"Enemies, shmenemies," she said, waving her hands. "Don't worry yourself on my account. Don't make me the reason that you end up in the cold. I'm not helpless you know. I have Mace."

Hershie thought of the battles he'd fought: the soldiers, the mercenaries, the terrorists, the crooks and the super-crooks with their insane plots and impractical apparati. His mother was as formidable as an elderly Jewish woman with no grandchildren could be, but she was no match for automatic weapons. "I can't do it, Mama. It wouldn't be responsible. Can we drop it?"

"Fine, we won't talk about it anymore. But a mother worries. You're sure you don't need any money?"

He cast about desperately for a way to placate her. "I'm fine. I've got a speaking engagement lined up."

There was a message waiting on his comm when he powered it back up. A message from a relentlessly cheerful woman with a chirpy Texas accent, who identified herself as the programming coordinator for DefenseFest 33. She hoped he would return her call that night.

Hershie hovered in a dark cloud over the lake, the wind blowing his coat straight back, holding the comm in his hand. He squinted through the clouds and distance until he saw his apartment building, a row of windows lit up like teeth, his darkened window a gap in the smile. He didn't mind the cold, it was much colder in his fortress of solitude, but his apartment was more than warmth. It was his own shabby, homey corner of the hideously expensive city. On the flight from his mother's, he'd found an old-style fifty-dollar bill, folded neatly and stuck in the breast pocket of his overcoat.

He returned the phone call.

The super wasn't happy about being roused from his sitcoms, but he grudgingly allowed Hershie to squirt the rent money at his comm. He wanted to come up and take the padlock, but Hershie talked him into turning over the key, promising to return it in the morning.

His apartment was a little one-bedroom with a constant symphony of groaning radiators. Every stick of furniture in it had been rescued from kerbsides while Hershie flew his night patrols, saving chairs, sofas and even a scarred walnut armoire from the trashman.

Hershie sat at the round formica table and commed Thomas.

"It's me," he said.

"What's up?"

He didn't want to beat around the bush. "I'm speaking at DefenseFest. Then I'm going on tour, six months, speaking at military shows. It pays well. Very well." Very, very well — well enough that he wouldn't have to worry about his pension. The US-based promoters had sorted his tax status out with the IRS, who would happily exempt him, totally freeing him from entanglements with Revenue Canada. The cheerful Texan had been glad to do it.

He waited for Thomas's trademark stream of vitriol. It didn't come. Very quietly, Thomas said, "I see."

"Thomas," he said, a note of pleading in his voice. "It's not my choice. If I don't do this, I'll have to give Woolley my secret identity — he won't give me my pension without my Social Insurance Number."

"Or you could get a job," Thomas said, the familiar invective snarl creeping back.

"I just told you, I can't give out my SIN!"

"So have your secret identity get a job. Wash dishes!"

"If I took a job," Hershie said, palms sweating, "I'd have to give up flying patrols — I'd have to stop fighting crime."

"Fighting crime?" Thomas's voice was remorseless. "What crime? The bugouts are taking care of crime — they're making plans to shut down the police! Supe, you've been obsoleted."

"I know," Hershie said, self-pitying. "I know. That's why I got involved with you in the first place — I need to have a purpose. I'm the Super Man!"

"So your purpose is speaking to military shows? Telling the world that it still needs its arsenals, even if the bugouts have made war obsolete? Great purpose, Supe. Very noble."

He choked on a hopeless sob. "So what can I do, Thomas? I don't want to sell out, but I've got to eat."

"Squeeze coal into diamonds?" he said. It was teasing, but not nasty teasing. Hershie felt his tension slip: Thomas didn't hate him.

"Do you have any idea how big a piece of coal you have to start with to get even a one-carat stone? Trust me — someone would notice if entire coalfaces started disappearing."

"Look, Supe, this is surmountable. You don't have to sell out. You said it yourself, you're the Super Man — you have responsibilities. You have duties. You can't just sell out. Let's sleep on it, huh?"

Hershie was so very, very tired. It was always hardest on him when the Earth's yellow sun was hidden; the moon was a paltry substitute for its rejuvenating rays. "Let's do that," he said. "Thanks, Thomas."

DefenseFest 33 opened its doors on one of those incredibly bright March days when the snow on the ground throws back lumens sufficient to shrink your pupils to microdots. Despite the day's brightness, a bitterly cold wind scoured Front Street and the Metro Convention Centre.

From a distance, Hershie watched demonstration muster out front of the Eaton Centre, a few kilometers north, and march down to Front Street, along their permit-proscribed route. The turnout was good, especially given the weather: about 5,000 showed up with wooly scarves and placards that the wind kept threatening to tear loose from their grasp.

The veterans marched out front, under a banner, in full uniform. Next came the Quakers, who were of the same vintage as the veterans, but dressed like elderly English professors. Next came three different Communist factions, who circulated back and forth, trying to sell each other magazines. Finally, there came the rabble: Thomas's group of harlequin-dressed anarchists; high-school students with packsacks who industriously combed their browbeaten classmates who'd elected to stay at their desks; "civilians" who'd seen a notice and come out, and tried gamely to keep up with the chanting.

The chanting got louder as they neared the security cordon around the Convention Centre. The different groups all mingled as they massed on the opposite side of the barricades. The Quakers and the vets sang "Give Peace a Chance," while Thomas and his cohort prowled around, distributing materiel to various trusted individuals.

The students hollered abuse at the attendees who were trickling into the Convention Centre in expensive overcoats, florid with expense-account breakfasts and immaculately groomed.

Hershie's appearance silenced the crowd. He screamed in over the lake, banked vertically up the side of the CN Tower, and plummeted downward. The demonstrators set up a loud cheer as he skimmed the crowd, then fell silent and aghast as he touched down on the opposite side of the barricade, with the convention-goers. A cop in riot-gear held the door for him and he stepped inside. A groan went up from the protestors, and swelled into a wordless, furious howl.

Hershie avoided the show's floor and headed for the green room. En route, he was stopped by a Somali general who'd been acquitted by a War Crimes tribunal, but only barely. The man greeted him like an old comrade and got his aide to snap a photo of the two of them shaking hands.

The green room was crowded with coffee-slurping presenters who pecked furiously at their comms, revising their slides. Hershie drew curious stares when he entered, but by the time he'd gotten his Danish and coffee, everyone around him was once again bent over their work, a field of balding cabbages anointed with high-tech hair-care products.

Hershie's palms were slick, his alien hearts throbbing in counterpoint. His cowlick wilted in the aggressive heat shimmering out of the vent behind his sofa. He tried to keep himself calm, but by the time a gofer commed him and squirted directions to the main ballroom, he was a wreck.

Hershie commed into the feed from the demonstration in time to see the Quakers sit, en masse, along the barricade, hands intertwined, asses soaking in the slush at the kerbside. The cops watched them impassively, and while they were distracted, Thomas gave a signal to his crew, who hastily unreeled a stories-high smartscreen, the gossamer fabric snapping taut in the wind as it unfurled over the Convention Centre's facade.

The cops were suddenly alert, moving, but Thomas was careful to keep the screen on his side of the barricade. Tina led a team of high-school students who spread out a solar collector the size and consistency of a parachute. It glinted in the harsh sun.

Szandor hastily cabled a projector/loudhailer apparatus to the collector. Szandor's dog nipped at his heels as he steadied and focused the apparatus on the screen, and Szandor plugged his comm into it and powered it up.

There was a staticky pop as the speakers came to life, loud enough to be heard over the street noise. The powerful projector beamed its image onto the screen, bright even in the midday glare.

There were hoots from the crowd as they recognised the feed: a live broadcast of the keynote addresses in the Centre. The Patron Ik'Spir Pat's hoverchair prominent. The camera lingered on the Patron's eyes, the only part of him visible from within the chair's masking infrastructure. They were startling, silvery orbs, heavy-lidded and expressionless.

The camera swung to Hershie. Szandor spat dramatically and led a chorus of hisses.

Hershie hastily closed his comm and cleared his throat, adjusted his mic, and addressed the crowd.

"Uh... " he said. His guts somersaulted. Time to go big or go home.

"Hi." That was better. "Thanks. I'm the Super Man. For years, I worked alongside UN Peacekeeping forces around the world. I hoped I was doing good work. Most of the time, I suppose I may have been."

He caught the eye of Brenda, the cheerful Texan who'd booked him in. She looked uneasy.

"There's one thing I'm certain of, though: it's that the preparation for war has never led to anything but war. With this show, you ladies and gentlemen are participating in a giant conspiracy to commit murder. Individually, you may not be evil, but collectively, you're the most amoral supervillain I've ever faced."

Brenda was talking frantically into her comm. His mic died. He simply expanded his mighty diaphragm and kept on speaking, his voice filling the ballroom.

"I urge you to put this behind you. We've entered into a new era in human history. The good Patron here offers the entire Universe; you scurry around, arranging the deaths of people you've never met.

"It's a terribly, stupid, mindless pursuit. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

With that, Hershie stepped away from the podium and walked out of the ballroom.

The camera tracked him as he made his way back through the Convention Centre, out the doors. He leapt the barricade and settled in front of the screen. The demonstrators gave him a standing ovation, and Thomas gravely shook his hand. The handshake was repeated on the giant

screen behind them, courtesy of the cameraman, who had gamely vaulted the barricade as well.

The crowd danced, hugged each other, laughed. Szandor's dog bit him on the ass, and he nearly dropped the projector.

He recovered in time to nearly drop it again, as the Patron Ik'Spir Pat's hoverchair glided out the Centre's doors and made a beeline for Hershie.

Hershie watched the car approach with nauseous dread. The Patron stopped a few centimetres from him, so they were almost eyeball-to-eyeball. The hoverchair's PA popped to life, and the Patron spoke, in the bugouts' thrilling contralto.

"Thank you for your contribution," the bugout said. "It was refreshing to have another perspective presented."

Hershie tried for a heroic nod. "I'm glad you weren't offended."

"On the contrary, it was stimulating. I shall have to speak with the conference's organisers; this format seems a good one for future engagements."

Hershie felt his expression slipping, sliding towards slack-jawed incredulity. He struggled to hold it, then lost it entirely when one of the Patron's silvery eyes drooped closed in an unmistakable wink.

"Hi, Mama."

"Hershie, I just saw it on the television."

He cringed back from his comm as he shrank deeper into the corner of the Belquees that he'd moved to when his comm rang.

"Mama, it's all right. They've signed me for the full six months. I'll be fine —"

"Of course you'll be fine, bubbie. But would it kill you to brush your hair before you go on television in front of the whole world? Do you want everyone to think your mother raised a slob?"

Hershie smiled. "I will, Mama."

"I know you will, bubbie. You're a very good-looking man, you know. But no one wants to marry a man with messy hair."

"I know, Mama."

"Well, I won't keep you. Do you think you could come for dinner on Friday? I know you're busy, but your old mother won't be here forever."

He sighed his father's sigh. "I'll be there, Mama."

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