

HERO INGREDIENTS

A MUTANTS & MASTERMINDS SHORT STORY

BY AARON ROSENBERG



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Author: Aaron Rosenberg

Editing: Jaym Gates

Graphic Design: Hal Mangold & Kara Hamilton

Executive Producer: Chris Pramas

Team Ronin: Joseph Carriker, Crystal Frasier, Jaym Gates, Kara Hamilton, Steve Kenson, Nicole Lindroos, Hal Mangold, Jack Norris, Chris Pramas, Evan Sass, Marc Schmalz, Malcolm Sheppard, Will Sobel, Dylan Templar, Veronica Templar, and Barry Wilson

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Green Ronin Publishing

3815 S. Othello St. Suite 100, #311

Seattle WA 98118

Email: custserv@greenronin.com

Web Site: www.greenronin.com

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BY AARON ROSENBERG

1992

“**S**o, mija, what do you think?” Papi spreads his arms wide, beaming like he’s showing off a mansion, but all I see is a little corner store, the glass panes of the two outer walls showing off a small interior broken up by rows of freestanding shelves, with a wall of coolers along the back, and a counter against the other side. It’s nice and clean, definitely. I can see that even from out here, but it strikes me as claustrophobic, with those narrow lanes between items. Still, he’s so excited, so I paint on my biggest, brightest smile.

“It’s great, Papi!” He looks so happy it brings tears to my eyes. I know this has been his dream for years, ever since I was a baby, to open his own little shop. After Mami passed, it was all that kept him going—that, and raising me. But he always said that, if he could ever open his store, it would change our lives. Now, after years of practically starving ourselves and wearing our clothes to rags and living off thrift-store finds and clipped coupons and day-old specials, that day is finally here.

Even with all that, I still couldn’t believe it when he told me he’d been able to rent this place. Not just the shop but the apartment that

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sits above it. Which I guess is one good thing about how in-the-dumps Freedom City has fallen into since I was a baby, because we never could've afforded even this much back when the city was in its prime.

Papi doesn't care, though. To him, this place is practically a mansion.

"Trust me, mija," he tells me, wrapping a beefy arm around my shoulders. "This is the start of something great. Everything we need to make a new life for ourselves, it's all right here." He steers me into the store and adds, "Someday, this will all be yours, Donna. But for today"—and, reaching out for something beside the doorframe, he hands me a broom and a dustpan—"you can start with this."

Oh, joy. I feel my future brightening already.

1993

"Papi? Papi!" I shout as loud as I can, but I can barely even hear myself over the horrible sounds echoing all around us: gunfire, some kind of energy blast, wind, and screaming. Oh, the screaming. It's awful, like little animals bleating in pain, and I cover my ears but that isn't enough to shut it all out.

Besides, I have other things to worry about. Like where in the rubble that was the Vasquez Bodega is my dad?

I can't even believe what's happening right now. Things were just starting to go okay, too. The bodega didn't exactly become an overnight success; Papi was thrilled about being so close to downtown, just a handful of blocks from the traffic circle at the city's center, but really, it's not like office workers buy their milk and eggs and butter on the way to work! Yes, Mayor O'Connor has been working to make things better, cleaning up not only the streets but the corrupt politicians and dirty cops, but it's still not exactly safe out there. Still, people started stopping in on their way home, during their lunch break, or in the morning on the way to work for coffee and a roll, so

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business has been picking up, little by little. Papi still gets here way too early and stays way too late—we can't exactly afford to hire help—and I'm here after school each day, and sometimes on weekends, too—but we're getting by.

Now *this*.

I try not to notice the shattered windows, the broken shelves, the collapsed ceiling, the fractured counter. As I pick my way over what used to be rolls of paper towels, bars of soap, boxes of matches, and other items that are now just a big jumble, I only care about one thing—

Papi.

Finally I hear a groan from behind the counter. I'm over there in a flash, or as quick as I can without injuring myself in the process. "Papi?" I call as I work my way through the wreckage. I can see him now, huddled in a corner with a part of the counter collapsed atop him; it at least protected him from the rest of the debris. He pushed it aside and pulled himself to his feet, however unsteadily. I reach him, and wrap his arm around my shoulder. "It's okay, I'm here," I tell him. "Let's get out of here."

The fact that he doesn't argue, as we pick a path out of the wreckage of his lifelong dream, shows me just how badly he's been shaken. But we're alive, provided we can evade the chaos in the streets.

We'll figure out what to do about the shop—if there's even a shop left—once everything quiets down again.



"I don't believe it!" Papi scratches his head and stares some more. "Really, mija, am I dreaming?"

I have no idea how to respond to that, although if he is, we're

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sharing the same dream. Because we're standing here on the corner of 23rd and Raymond, and gaping at the Vasquez Bodega. Only it's not the ruined mess it was a week ago, when we stumbled out of it and barely got clear of downtown before the whole place pretty much became a giant parking lot. It's not the tidy little box of glass and plaster and wood I remember either, though. Instead I'm looking at a single curving wall of glass around the front like a pair of fancy wraparound shades, somehow both clear and shaded, with a sliding panel for a front door instead of the old steel-framed one. Inside, the worn linoleum has been replaced with polished wood and the walls sparkle like the night sky. The countertop is a smooth, gleaming sheet of something that might be marble or porcelain but is almost too bright to look at, and the shelves are practically sculptures, tall and lean and angular and yet as soothing as the gentle light that fills the whole store like a warm, sunny afternoon.

The floor above it, which was our cramped little apartment, has now become two levels and is a gleaming, silvery spire like a fairytale tower.

If this is a dream, I'm not sure I want to wake up.

Then, just like in a dream, the surreal turns to the utterly insane, as a voice drifts over to us. "You are the owner of this establishment?"

Papi and I both turn—and stare as what looks like a walking, talking statue approaches. He's wearing a long green cloak with a deep hood, and what looks like a green toga or kilt beneath that, but it's the parts that aren't covered that have us both frozen in disbelief, because parts of this guy's skin are clearly concrete, other parts definitely metal, and some other stretches of what can only be glass. His eyes glow under that hood, and I shudder when they pass over me to fix on my dad.

"We have restored it for you," the statue declares. "May it serve you well." Then he walks into the building next door—literally, just melts into it like it's made of water—and disappears.

We don't move for a second or two. Maybe longer. But finally Papi turns to me with that same wide-eyed, boyish grin he had a year ago and says, "Let's go see how it looks!"

I can't help but laugh as I follow him inside.

1994

I'm sweeping the aisles—beautiful wooden floors, gleaming marble countertop, wacky futuristic glass windows, yet somehow there's still always dust—when a guy walks into the shop.

Only, what a guy!

He's tall and muscular, but still somehow he moves like a dancer, all smooth and graceful. His hair is white and between that and the lines on his face I put him at least ten years past Papi, maybe more, but he's got the square jaw and good looks of a movie star. There's a twinkle in his blue eyes, only it's more than just a trick of the light, because when he passes under the shadow of a shelf that twinkle grows brighter. Like a spark.

That's when I realize who it is.

I don't say anything, but I clutch my broom close as I follow him over to the counter. "I've heard," he tells Papi, "that you have the best empanadas in Freedom City." His voice is deep and rolling—I try not to think "like thunder" but can't help it—and his smile makes me want to laugh along with him.

"I like to think so," Papi replies with a grin. He doesn't look anywhere near awed enough to know who he's talking to, but he's always good with the customers anyway. I stand there, watching, as he packs a bag full of the empanadas we make at home every night from Mami's family recipe and hands them over in exchange for a few bills.

"Thank you," our customer tells him. "I've been missing proper empanadas." He even pronounces it right. "If they're as good as

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everyone says, I'll definitely be back." He walks out, and I quickly rush to Papi's side.

"Do you know who that was?" I squeak, embarrassed at being so starstruck (I'm in high school now, darn it!) but unable to help myself. "That was—"

"Our newest loyal customer," Papi states confidently, with a wink. "Once he tries those empanadas, he'll be hooked. You'll see." But as he turns away there's an extra little bounce to his step that says yes, he does recognize that he just sold to this city's senior statesman.

1995

"That was a close one!" I hear down the aisle, and I glance back from where I'm restocking the sodas in the cooler. Two people have just stepped into the bodega, and I'm pretty sure my jaw hits the floor as I take them in for a second before scrambling to my feet.

The guy is tall and thin and dressed all in blue and gray but not like a cop, more like a stage performer with his long cape and tall, shiny boots. He's got silvery gray hair that flops over his forehead and his eyes literally glow. Then there's the woman. She's gorgeous; tall and shapely and stunning like a swimsuit model, which makes sense since she's wearing only a shimmering green bikini, some jewelry, and a long silvery net that hangs from a choker and gathers from bangles at each wrist like a gauzy cape. I know she's Siren, part of the Freedom League. The guy is... Eldritch, maybe? They're both clearly superheroes.

And they're here in our shop.

I mean, Papi was right, Captain Thunder was totally addicted to our empanadas and stopped in at least once a week, sometimes more. Never in costume though, and so we always pretended we didn't know who he was, even when lightning arced between his fingers

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while he was reaching for his wallet. But these three aren't even pretending to hide who they are!

They head straight for the counter, and I listen as the guy asks Papi for a roast beef hoagie with cheddar and Siren settles on a traditional hero. They're still talking, something about buildings and a sacrifice and some guy named Malodorous, I think, I'm trying to eavesdrop without being too obvious about it. They get their sandwiches, pay, and go, and Siren winks at me on the way out. "We already know the empanadas are good," she says with a smile. "But after a battle like that, I need a little more substance!"

Then they're gone, and Papi and I just share a glance. Since when did the Freedom League know about our menu?

And, I wonder, how can we advertise that without pissing them off?

1998

"I can't—I won't—do this anymore!" I scream, slamming both hands down on the counter and instantly regretting it as pain jolts through both palms. Five years and the thing, whatever it's made of, is still harder than diamond. There's not a single dent or scratch on it. I wish I could say the same.

"But mija—" Papi starts, and I cut him off before he can sink those guilt hook in too deep.

"Don't 'mija' me!" I snap. "I've been stuck here all through high school! While all my friends were having fun, seeing movies, going to dances, I was sweeping floors, stocking shelves, making sandwiches. Well, enough is enough! I'm done with high school and I'm done with this!" I wave the acceptance letter at him. "I'm going, and that's that!" Never mind how I'm going to pay for college out of state, I haven't really thought about that yet, but I'll think of something. I have to. If I stay here, I'll go nuts.

A quiet cough comes from behind me. I glance over my shoulder—

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ready to curse out whoever's interrupting our argument—and freeze.

Because I'm staring at Lady Liberty.

"Beautiful" doesn't begin to cover it. She's tall and well-built, with a sweeping mane of glossy black hair so dark it's almost blue, and piercing eyes but a warm smile. She's wearing her trademark blue slacks, midnight-blue boots, bicep-high white gloves, and white and red halter top, and she acts like she didn't even hear me screaming at the man who raised me singlehandedly and who loves me more than anything. That just makes me feel even worse, and all my anger evaporates in a heartbeat.

"Sorry, but could I get a few sandwiches?" she asks, in that deep, rich voice that always makes me wonder if she sings the blues, and if not why not.

"Uh, sure." I shove the letter into my back pocket and slide around the counter to the deli section. "What can I get for you?" Papi could have made her sandwich, of course, but he thinks I haven't noticed the way he's been rubbing his hands lately, like they're starting to ache. And of course I've been mad, so I've been pretending not to.

Besides, it's always a thrill to serve one of the Freedom League.

Lady Liberty tilts her head to the side, considering. "Let's go with four roast beef and cheddar and four turkey and Swiss," she decides finally. "Oh, and two cheddar and provolone. And two tuna."

"Got it." It's the same every time with her—not the exact same order, but she'll come in and get a dozen sandwiches at a time. I guess a powerhouse like her needs a lot of fuel?

I make the sandwiches, Papi packs them into two bags, and she pays him. The smile she gives me as she turns to go is a little knowing and a little sad, like she heard the whole fight and she wants me to know that I'm being childish and ungrateful, and for a second I want to smack her, even though I'd probably break my hand on her perfect cheek. But who does she think she is, telling me how

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to deal with my dad? I'm so angry I actually slip back out into the aisle and storm after her, meaning to give her a piece of my mind, but by the time I reach the front door she's already ducking around the corner.

The odd thing is, she's going the opposite direction from Freedom Hall.

I hurry to follow, but now as much out of curiosity as anything else. Which is why I stop stomping and move more quietly, slowing at the corner to peek around.

Which is when I see her surrounded by a whole group of shabby-looking men and women.

At first I think they're attacking her, which is ridiculous, and right away I realize it's not the case. They're actually all standing still, or in a few cases swaying on their feet, and looking up at her with the same awe I know I always feel. They've got their hands out, and she goes around the little circle, putting a long, slim, waxed-paper cylinder in each one's grasp.

The sandwiches I just made.

When she's handed out the last one, Lady Liberty smiles at them. I duck back just as she floats up off the pavement. She doesn't leap up or anything like that—it's more like the air calls to her and the ground lets her go and they're all happy with the parts they're playing, no effort or struggle involved on any side. She drifts higher, then suddenly zooms away, passing over me and the shop and heading back toward Freedom Hall. I just watch her go. Now I know why she's always placing such a big order, and I feel even worse than I did before.

People like her are always putting others first. But here I am, Donna Vasquez, determined to be selfish and think about me and only me and nobody else.

That's not the way my Papi raised me.

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Besides, if I went away to school, I'd never get to serve Lady Liberty or Captain Thunder or any of the others.

That thought weighs heavy on my mind as I go apologize to my dad, but somehow inside I actually feel lighter than ever.

2001

"Help... me... please." The man that stumbles into our shop looks like he's been through a meat grinder, every inch of him black and blue and bloody, his clothes shredded like he got caught in an explosion. Even under all the dirt and soot and blood, though, I know him right away. He doesn't have his bow but there's a broken quiver dragging from his belt, and that blue-gray tunic and what's left of his head-covering are pretty easy to identify.

What's funny is, until this moment, I had no idea the Bowman was one of our customers. Now, seeing the fiery hair that's usually hidden by that mask, I realize he's the one I always just call "Red." Real creative, I know. He's a regular, too. Comes in at least twice a week, and always for the same thing: a Cuban sandwich and one of the Mexican Cokes we have, the kind with real sugar. And a bag of Bugles, which makes him about the only person I know who actually eats those things.

Here he is again, only this time he's in costume—or what's left of it—and he's bleeding all over our floor.

Papi is already around the counter, stooping to get his shoulder under Red's arm and grip the injured hero around the waist. "Mija, get the mop," he orders, helping what's left of the Bowman slide in behind the counter and lowering him down to rest on the floor with his back against the wall, beneath the fold-out cutting board we use for sandwiches. I hurry to get the mop and bucket from the closet in the corner, then rush back with it and clean up the blood trail he left from the front door. I mop the rest of the floor while I'm at it—I was going

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to anyway, as soon as I'd finished my PoliSci paper.

The Bowman looks a little better now that he's not moving, after downing the bottle of water Papi handed him. "Thank you." He does look totally wiped, though. "It was the Crime League. Got the jump on us, blew up Freedom Hall. Not sure who made it out beyond me and Captain Thunder and Lady Liberty. We each took off in different directions to split them up. Lucky me, I drew Blackstar."

He winces. "I caught him one in the shoulder, but he took out my bow with his return shot, and nearly me with it." He chuckles but doesn't actually sound amused. "Not much of a bowman without a bow, am I right?"

He falls silent as the shop goes dark. And I mean pitch-black, like somebody just dropped a blackout curtain around us. I strain and strain but can't even make out outlines, not of Papi and the Bowman, not of the counter, nothing.

Then I see a tiny glimmer in the distance. I'm not sure how far it is, or how big, but it gets brighter and bigger until I can barely look at it.

But, blinking back tears, I can make out the shape of a man. A man floating in mid-air.

The front door whooshes open, and he drifts toward us like he's in no hurry at all. It's weird because everything around us is still pitch-black—his light doesn't actually break up the darkness all around, it's more like a solid shape, totally self-contained. And his light is dark too, in a way. I can't really explain it, like it's edged in black, and it just feels murky, like a shadow but somehow bright.

"I seek the one called the Bowman," he states, coming to a stop just before the counter. "Give him to me and I will let you live."

Papi glares up at the guy—we're sort of inside that shadowy light, so it's all still dark and hazy but at least I can see Papi and this guy, who's in a black jumpsuit and has these weird metal bands covering his entire forearms. He's got short black hair and a beard and looks

seriously hardcore, but is my dad fazed? Yeah, right. "There's nobody here but my daughter and me," he replies. It takes everything I have not to glance behind him where the Bowman sits huddled on the floor beneath that cutting board.

The guy—he's got to be Blackstar—frowns. "His blood leads here," he says, and we all look at the floor beneath his feet. Which is freshly mopped and totally clean. "You are attempting to hide him from me," he adds. "This is unwise."

I try to say something, can't, clear my throat, and try again. "I mopped the floor," I manage finally, sounding like a mouse squeaking. "I do it every day. It's my job."

He turns his head to stare at me, and I see that his eyes are all shadowy, too. Then he raises his hand and what looks like a laser beam but made of pure black lances from his forefinger and hits the mop—which turns to air or dust or something, leaving me holding nothing.

"I will ask again," Blackstar tells us. "Answer truthfully or pay the price. Where is the Bowman?"

"We don't know!" Papi insists, and he should win an acting award for his performance. "Really! Yes, he was here, okay? Crawled in, begging for help!" His audience of one clearly likes that part, puffs right up. "Then he muttered something about not putting us in danger and limped out the back door." Which is exactly something the Bowman or any of the others would do.

Blackstar studies us a second, his face stiff and stern like a statue. Then he drifts backward without even turning around. The door opens as he approaches, and he's through it and gone in an instant. A second later, the lights come back on and I feel like all the air just came back into the room. I'm gasping for breath, and only then notice that I'm sweating, too.

"Thank you." The Bowman sounds a whole lot better as he crawls out from under the cutting board and pulls himself to his feet—he wobbles a little but manages it otherwise. "You risked your life for me."

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Papi shrugs. "You do that for us and everyone else here, every day," he replies. "How could I do any less?"

The injured archer claps my dad on the shoulder, and the smile he gives him looks half-surprised and half-pleased, a little puzzled and even a touch sad, too. "You would be surprised, my friend," is all he says, though. Then he taps his forehead in salute and slips out into the aisle exiting the shop without another sound.

Once he's gone, Papi gives a great big sigh and leans back against the shelves, wiping at his forehead. "Are you okay, mija?" he asks me.

I nod, and then step in close and hug him fiercely. For a second, I thought we were all dead, and I didn't want to go without saying what I say now: "I love you, Papi."

His arms tighten around me in return, sweaty and warm and comforting. "I love you too, mija, my Donna," he answers. "Always."

I laugh, half from sheer joy and relief and half because I just had a sudden image of Red coming in for his usual next time but wearing his costume, and banging that great big bow against the chips display. If he does, I don't care *who* he is, I'm making him pick them all up!

2002

"Papi!" I scream as I run through the double doors, startling orderlies and nurses and security guards and patients alike. All of a sudden it's like I'm ten again, being escorted to that dingy little room on the cancer ward, as I cry, "Where's my Papi?"

A woman appears next to me, so suddenly for a second I think she's a super and I wonder if I've seen her in the shop. But no, she's just a nurse, a heavyset woman with skin a little darker than mine and a kindly face beneath tight curls an improbable shade of red. "Who are you looking for, dear?" she asks softly, and I let her put a hand on my shoulder and guide me toward the admitting desk.

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“My father, Hector Ernesto Vasquez,” I answer. “I got a call that he— something happened. At our shop. They brought him here.” I had been at one of our suppliers, negotiating a new deal for paper goods. Since my graduation last month, Papi’s had me handling a lot of those sort of things. “You flash that degree at them, mija,” he says, “and they know you mean business.” Then he laughs at his own joke. The thought of it makes my heart crumble, and I blink back tears as the nurse behind the desk looks up from her screen.

“Room 301,” she tells me. I don’t like the look on her face. It’s the same one I saw when I visited Mami, all those years ago. Sympathy. Like they’re already consoling me for my loss.

The room is bigger and nicer than that one, with a pleasant flower tile on the floors and big windows to let in lots of light. That only means I can easily make out all the wires and tubes running in and out of Papi, leaving him like a human pincushion. I can also see how small he looks, and how frail. When did that happen? This was the man who could lift me with one arm and still lug a barrel of pickles with the other!

“Papi?” There’s no one else in the room as I rush over to his side and take his hand in mine. “I’m here.”

He blinks and turns toward me, squinting. “Mija?” Then he smiles. “Ah. There you are.” His fingers squeeze mine, but there’s no strength in them. “Good. Listen, I need to tell you something.” His voice is weak too, fluttery, and I can hear his breath rasping in his chest.

“What happened?” I ask, leaning in closer. “Who did this to you? The Crime League? The Brotherhood of the Yellow Sign? The Foundry?” I don’t see any obvious wounds, but that doesn’t mean anything with these people; half of them can kill you with a look.

Papi starts to shake his head, but all those wires and tubes hold him in place. He settles for a faint chuckle. “No, mija, nothing like that. My heart.” For a second I think he means me, but then I get it.

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“What do we need to do?” I demand next. “Treatment? Medicine? Physical therapy? A transplant? I’ll talk to the doctors and get the paperwork started.”

“There’s nothing you can do, mija,” he tells me softly. “Nothing anyone can do. I’m sorry.” He manages another sliver of a smile. “I’m glad I got to see you graduate. I am so proud of you, my little Donna. Always so proud. I love you so much, and I am sorry I cannot be here to see what you do with the rest of your life.”

“No,” I tell him fiercely, grasping his hand harder and trying to will strength into it. “No! You can’t leave me, Papi! You can’t!” I start sobbing, and throw my arms around him. “Don’t leave me!”

“Never, mija,” he tells me, his voice a thin whisper near my ear. “I will always be with you. Listen, the breadbox—” I don’t hear the rest, as his words grow so soft I cannot hear them over my weeping.

By the time the doctor comes in to check on us, Papi is gone and I am left crying over him, my tears soaking into the fabric over his unmoving chest.



We hold the funeral a few days later. Just a graveside service. Papi wasn’t religious, and neither am I. I expected some of our neighbors, our old friends from before we moved, my friends from school, a few others we kept in touch with over the years, maybe one or two of our suppliers we’ve grown close to.

I am shocked when the car pulls up and I step out to a packed cemetery. There are people as far as the eye can see. It’s like the mayor died or something.

Or a superhero. Particularly considering the row of brightly attired people standing in front, waiting for me.

It’s Captain Thunder who approaches me first. He still looks the

same after all these years, with those movie-star good looks that only improve with age. “Ms. Vasquez,” he says in that deep voice of his, and reaches out to take my hands, sending a tiny spark through them. “We are all so very sorry for your loss. Your father was a good man, one of the best. We will all miss him.”

“I—thank you,” I tell him. “That’s very kind.” But I can’t help thinking, Papi? One of the best? To me, sure, but to them? To anyone else?

But then why are they all here?

Lady Liberty is next. “He was so kind,” she tells me. “And so generous.” I must squint at her, because she arches one perfect brow. “The sandwiches,” she explains. “The ones I bought to distribute to those in need?”

“What about them?” I ask her. “You bought them, what you did with them afterward was up to you.”

She laughs. “I only paid him a dollar apiece,” she tells me. “He insisted. He figured out right away what I was up to with them and told me he’d let me pay for the ingredients but that was it.”

I stare at her. He knew the whole time? And he basically gave them to her? But of course he did. It was the kind of man he was.

Then there’s the Bowman. “He saved my life,” he reminds me gently, taking my hand. “He risked his own to do it, and afterward he said ‘How could I do any less?’ But so many people would have. Most, even. But not him.”

No, not him. Not my Papi. I look around at all these people gathered here to mourn him, and I recognize them all. They’re our customers, the ones we served sandwiches and empanadas and coffee to every day. Our neighbors, the ones we said hi to and helped shovel their walks and took in when their power went out or they forgot their keys. Our friends, who we fed whenever they didn’t have money for groceries and listened to when they had a fight with their loved ones. And our heroes, who are here today to honor him. A normal man who

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led a normal life running a normal little shop I used to think didn't really matter to anyone but him.

But it turns out, it mattered to a whole lot of people. And so did he.



After the funeral, I go back to the shop, of course. It's been closed since Papi died, and if I'm being honest I don't know if I'll ever open it again. At least, that's what I thought before this morning. Now I'm not so sure.

I step behind the counter, where I'm most comfortable. This is more a home to me than any place upstairs. I did most of my homework back here, through both high school and college, rather than at our kitchen table or the desk in my room. I ate most of my meals here. And of course I sat and talked with Papi here. I'd get home from school, grab a snack and a drink from the shelves and the cooler, slip back here, and tell him about my day. He'd tell me about his, which customers came in, what they bought, funny things they said. I suddenly remember how, that first day looking at this place, he told me, "it's all right here."

And he was right. As usual.

My eye is drawn to a spot of blue atop the shelves along the wall. It's our old breadbox, the one Mami had from her mother, made of steel and enameled white with a blue border and small blue flowers at the corners. When we opened the shop, Papi set it there, so it was like Mami was here with us, too. Looking at it now, a jolt runs through me, shaking me almost off my feet.

Papi's last words to me were about a breadbox.

Reaching up with shaking hands, I pull it down. Something shifts inside it as I do. Gently, cautiously, I lift the lid—to find a thick manila envelope inside. I extract that, set the breadbox aside, and sit down on the stool to check the envelope's contents.

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There are a whole bunch of papers here, receipts and so on, but the important one is the one right at the front. It's a deed. To this building. Dated two weeks ago.

Judging by the rest of the papers, Papi has been slowly paying the previous owner over the years, and finally paid off the last of the agreed-upon price. He owned this shop when he died. That's what he was trying to tell me. It was all his—and now it's all mine.

Now I just have to decide what to do about it.

I say that to myself, but the truth is, deep down, I already know.

2003

"Donna?" A voice calls out. "Everything okay in here?"

It's Red—the Bowman, I correct myself for the thousandth time as he crosses to the counter. "Sure, everything's fine." I tug a few remaining leaves off the wall and look around. "Good thing, too—all that wood paneling was a bit much." Especially since it wasn't so much paneling as actual living wood, bark and all!

He nods. "The Green Man took control of Dr. Metropolis somehow," he confides, his voice low even though we're the only two here. "Turned the city into an ancient forest. All back to normal now."

"Great." I see how his eyes flick to the deli counter. "Hungry?"

He grins at me. "Well, now that you mention it, since I'm already here..."

I laugh. "One Cuban, coming up!"

Gathering the materials for his sandwich, I hum to myself. I can hear the Bowman at the cooler, no doubt grabbing one of the Mexican Cokes. The swish of the broom tells me Michael is almost done sweeping the aisles. I wound up having to hire some help, and he's a good kid, lives near here and has been coming in with his grandma since we first opened. Eventually I'll teach him out to make

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sandwiches, get him to fill in behind the counter from time to time, whenever I need a break or have to take care of other things outside the shop.

But for right now, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. Where I want to be.

Maybe it's not the most glamorous life. Maybe some people would think, "What could be so important about running a bodega?"

They'd never understand. But Papi taught me.

Like with everything else, it's all about what you put into it.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Aaron Rosenberg is the author of the best-selling DuckBob SF comedy series, the *Dread Remora* space-opera series, the Relicant epic fantasy series with Steve Savile, and the O.C.L.T. occult thriller series with David Niall Wilson. Aaron's tie-in work contains novels for *Star Trek*, *Warhammer*, *World of WarCraft*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, *Shadowrun*, *Eureka*, and more. He has written children's books (including the original series STEM Squad and Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles, the award-winning *Bandslam: The Junior Novel*, and the #1 best-selling *42: The Jackie Robinson Story*), educational books on a variety of topics, and over seventy roleplaying games (such as the original games *Asylum*, *Spookshow*, and *Chosen*, work for White Wolf, Wizards of the Coast, Fantasy Flight, Pinnacle, and many others, and both the Origins Award-winning *Gamemastering Secrets* and the Gold ENnie-winning *Lure of the Lich Lord*). He is the co-creator of the *ReDeus* series, and a founding member of Crazy 8 Press. Aaron lives in New York with his family. You can follow him online at gryphonrose.com, on Facebook at facebook.com/gryphonrose, and on Twitter @gryphonrose.



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