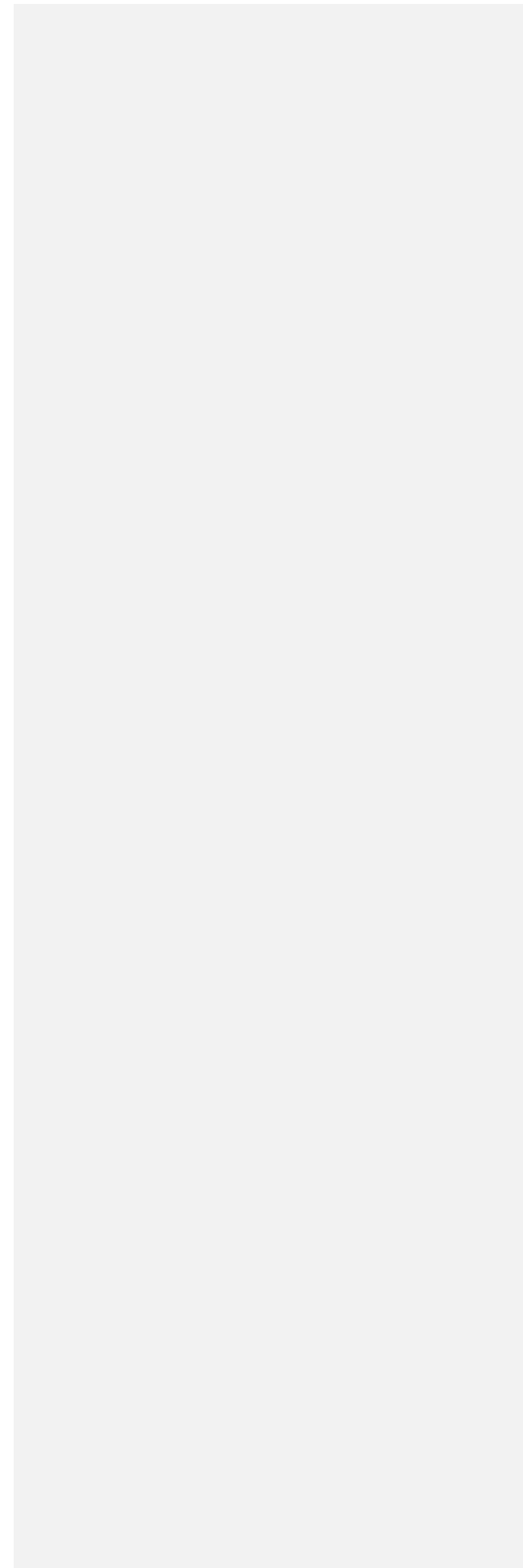


Our Masked Hero

By: Emily Brown



For the last couple of hours, Mason ~~struggled-had~~ unsuccessfully ~~to ignore~~ed the persistent ache he felt in his lower back. It crept up on him at ten-thirty this morning, *come on, really? It's not even eleven yet.* The Motrin he washed down with this morning's foul brew was doing jack squat. Every time he ~~ed~~ sat down ~~in his~~at this computer chair with zilch for lumbar support, he felt his mood plummet.

If you'd told him that he'd be stuck as a powerless supervisor at a dead-end job in his mid-twenties, where his mind-numbing work trapped him in a boring cubicle nine hours a day, entering blurred numbers into a spreadsheet, he'd probably shrug and say, "seems about right".

Mason arched his back in an attempt to stretch the muscles, but it was no use. Walking offered his only relief, and that hurt too. He sighed and saved the progress on his program. Mason spared a glance at the time. *Christ, it's only ten-forty?*

He sucked his tooth and looked around his cubicle. There were pictures of his friends and family thumb-tacked to the cork-board walls, but it still didn't give him that "welcoming" vibe he needed.

It's a little earlier than usual, but a fifteen-minute break sounds pretty good right about now.

Maybe not.

Though a break sounded nice, it probably wouldn't ease his backache. Worse yet, Halley waited in the break room. For him. So they could... talk. Dread trickled down his esophagus and pooled in his belly, dissolving the butterflies in a pool of acid.

How much would she hate me if I blew her off again?

With a sigh, he stood up from his chair and hesitated for a moment before forcing his feet in Halley's direction. He smoothed out the creases of his black dress pants as best as he could and pinched the knot of his tie between his forefinger and thumb to straighten it a little. You'd never ~~kn~~²~~e~~w when you'd run into the boss out in the hallways. She was a stickler for looking tidy, and wasn't afraid to tell you if you looked like shit.

On his way to the breakroom, he passed Jax Washington's cubicle and noticed he wasn't there. *I wonder if he's out picking up Satan's dry cleaning?*

"Hey, Quinn," Mason called, walking to the next cubicle. "Where's Jax?"

Quinn poked her head out of the opening of her office, "He left a couple of minutes ago, something about having to go feed his cats?" she said. Her brown eyes narrowed, "Why?"

"Was gonna invite him to have a cup of coffee with me," Mason said with a shrug. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, "You wanna come?"

Quinn rolled her chair over to the doorway of her office. She stared Mason down and crossed her arms over her chest, shooting him a look of disapproval. "Aren't you supposed to be talking with Halley?"

Mason scuffed his shoe on the ground and winced at the squeak the rubber made against the hardwood.

Quinn rolled her eyes, "No thanks, I haven't had coffee in months. And I'm especially not tagging along after last time."

Mason ~~seoffed in mock hurt~~scoffed and placed his hand over his heart, "I apologized."

“Apologies don’t get coffee stains out of your boss’s shirt,” Quinn sneered. “If you and Halley hadn’t scared me, I never would’ve ~~never~~ had to pay a ridiculous dry-cleaning bill on Satan’s pant-suit.”

“We paid you back for that,” he defended, weakly.

“Money doesn’t make up for the fact that I got suspended for two days, with no pay, for ‘roughhousing on the job’.”

“Okay, fine, I get it. I really am sorry, though. Still friends?” Mason pulled his hand out of his pocket and offered it to Quinn as a truce.

She eyed the hand as if it offended her, but she took it anyway. They shook.

“Don’t think I won’t get you two back for that,” she called out as he walked away.

I just hope her revenge is kinder than last time. Mason shuddered at the memory of finding a whole fish that had been sitting for two days too long in the ceiling of his cubicle. *I got suspended for that, but you don’t see me complaining about it still.*

Mason reached the break room, which was a miniature kitchen with hideous yellow walls, a dirty microwave, a table that was too large for the space with mismatched chairs, and perpetually sticky counters. The only saving grace to the break room was the open floor plan, with an old~~the~~ television,~~and the~~ hung next to huge window that looked out upon the streets of New York.

There sat Halley with a half-gone cup of coffee, back towards the window. Her bright red hair was down and curled today, the way he admired it the most. Something about the way it framed her face made her look more picturesque than usual.

“Hey stranger,” she said. Her cold tone sent a shiver down Mason’s spine, though he’d never admit it.

Mason grabbed a cup from the cabinet. He eyed the coffee pot suspiciously, the glass was stained with a thick rim of old coffee. *How long has it been since that has been washed?* “How’s it going?”

“Living the dream,” she said flatly.

Mason caught her gaze, *blue eyes look icier than usual today*. In an effort to make Halley laugh, and dissipate some of the tension in the room, he said, “Hey, is it really still a cabinet if it doesn’t have a door?”

Halley gave him a quizzical look, “What else would it be called?”

“A walk-in pantry, but... like, not?”

Halley turned away from him, her gaze focused on the door leading out of the room. Mason admired her attractive profile for a moment. She had glow-y pale skin, high cheekbones, and her nose was slender, even though it was little too long to fit her face, Mason still found her quite pretty.

“Tough crowd,” Mason mumbled as he poured the coffee into his mug. He leaned against the sink, not wanting to get too close to Halley, and gazed out the large window. He admired the nice weather as he took a sip of his coffee. *Extra bitter, just like Halley* he chuckled to himself. “This is swill,” he said, trying to cover his laugh with a cough.

“I had to put two extra sugars in mine,” Halley said. She picked at her cuticles a little before saying, “I’m pretty sure the grounds expired last month. No one drinks the stuff besides us anymore.”

“Yeah, Quinn reminded me that she switched to tea months ago,” Mason said and took another sip.

“Oh. So you invited her to hang?” Halley asked. Somehow her face seemed to radiate even more disappointment than before.

Mason scratched the nape of his neck, “Uh. Yeah? I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Is that so.”

Mason shrugged and nodded.

Halley finally cast a glance up at Mason. Her eyes were colder than before. “Look, Mace, I wanted to talk to you about the other night.”

Mason blew out a breath of hot air. He opened his mouth to respond but something caught his eye outside the window. Mason made his way over to the window; two stories down and across the street, there was a man in a ski mask, carrying an expensive looking purse, being pursued by another masked man, whose mask was more costume-y. He was also decidedly taller.

Commented [EB1]: I added this in to differentiate between the two masked men.

“What the hell?”

Halley sighed, “A little harsh but whatever. Look, I know you don’t want to talk about it, I mean clearly since you’ve been avoiding me and inviting other people to hang out when we could be in a situation alone together, but-”

“No, not you,” Mason said and waived a hand in her direction, eyes still glued to the window. “I think I’m witnessing a real-life Captain America moment.”

“*Jesus*, you’ll do anything to ~~not~~avoid talking to me, won’t you?”

“I’m not joking, come look.”

Mason watched as the masked vigilante caught up to the mugger and punched him in the face. Almost as if he knew the punch~~it~~ was coming, he dodged the mugger’s fist and hit him in the stomach. Mason heard Halley’s chair drag on the floor and felt her by his side seconds later.

“How is he dodging every attack?” Mason wondered aloud.

“How has he not knocked ~~him~~ out the mugger yet?”

Mason gave Halley a perplexed look and went back to watching the fight. Every move the vigilante dodged and countered at an usually fast speed. It was impressive almost to the point of impossible.

“That must be the victim,” Halley said, pointing to a woman running down the street.

“Hey... doesn’t that guy serving the ass kicking look like Jax?” Mason asked after a moment of silence. “I swear he was wearing that same outfit when I saw him at the meeting. Without the mask, of course.”

“This is New York City, that could be anybody.”

“What are the odds that they’d be wearing the *same thing* as Jax though?” Mason asked. Finally, the vigilante knocked the mugger out and handed the woman her purse back, just in time for the cops to arrive.

“Since black pants and a blue button down is a pretty common fashion trend among the American businessman, I’m gonna say pretty likely.”

“I’m gonna ~~go~~ see if I can go down and catch him,” Mason said. He ripped his eyes from the quickly dissipating scene and met with Halley’s.

Commented [EB2]: Unnecessary, WIT pg. 215

Her mouth was set in a frown and her hands planted firmly on her hips. “Do whatever the hell you want, Mason,” she spat. “You always do anyway.”

What the hell? Mason stood in the middle of the break room, mouth hanging open slightly in shock. *Should I follow her out? I don’t really want to...* Then, Jax came into the break room, looking sweatier than usual and, honestly, a little beaten up.

He was just about to go after Halley, too. *Oh well.* “You okay, man?” Mason asked.

Jax puffed out a breath and immediately went towards the sink and got a glass of water. He wiped at his glistening hairline and took a big gulp of water. “Yeah, I had to go home to feed my fiancée’s cat and it doesn’t like me. Did you know cats can box?” He moved in front of the microwave and twisted one of his loose curls around his finger and shoved it behind his ear.

“Yeah,” he said took a sip from his all but forgotten coffee. The lukewarm liquid tasted worse than before. “Seems likely.”

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That night, Mason sat at his dining room table eating beige chicken and brown rice. TV5 replayed a segment about the “Masked Hero” who saved the personal effects of a woman mugged on the street.

The anchors stated that the identity of the Masked Hero was still unknown and that they had no leads.

I may have some ideas about that.

Each time, the Masked Hero would leave the criminal knocked out and locked up in handcuffs for the cops to deal with.

A few days had gone by and Mason kept thinking about it, was the problem.

He couldn't shake the idea of Jax being the Masked Hero.

Jax started out as a temp but was hired full time after a couple of months. He was always a pretty quiet guy and he'd been with the company for two years, but Mason didn't really know that much about him.

It would make sense.

Mason remembered that a few months ago, he heard Jax mention to one of the accountants that he'd been going to the gym a lot more and he his arms did look decidedly more toned. Mason also noticed that Jax had been wearing glasses and was styling his wild, curly hair differently, too. It could be in an effort to conceal his identity.

And he still kept thinking about it.

It had been two weeks, and the Masked Hero was sighted more and more since his first debut.

There was a robbery at the Starbucks on 8th, where Jax was *conveniently* at the Bank of America doing some "early morning banking" just up the street.

Mason read the full story on Facebook only hours later and decided to print out the article just in case.

Next came the attempted sexual assault in Central Park that was reported on the TV5 6 o'clock news hour. At work the next day, Quinn mentioned that Jax was on a jog in the park as well and stumbled upon the cops and crying woman. She said he figured he had gotten to the scene just after the Masked Hero had left.

Mason's suspicions started to grow, so he cut the article out of the newspaper that day and tacked it onto the corkboard at his desk.

Each time, the Masked Hero would leave the criminal knocked out and locked up in handcuffs for the cops to deal with.

If I was the hero I would've kicked their ass into next Sunday so that other criminals would know I meant business.

Commented [EB4]: Moved this here so that we knew more about the Masked Hero's morals and to foreshadow Mason wishing he was the hero.

The pictures ~~Mason~~~~he~~ had of his family and friends hung in his cubicle, had been replaced by newspaper clippings and sightings of the Masked Hero. There was a picture of the letter "J" in the middle of all the clippings, to represent Jax. He wanted to put a real picture up of him but ~~he~~ figured that would look too weird to anyone who might glance into his cubicle and see it. He had a few red threads, like you would see in those detective shows, connecting Jax to the sightings.

Mason leaned back in his chair and observed his hard work. Jax would've been near all the sightings within the last three days—the mugging two blocks away from the office, the assault on 14th, and the attempted robbery at the Cartier store.

Each time the Masked Hero would apprehend the villain. Each time the media praised him. The newspapers had a new “Our Masked Hero” article written in bold letters on the front page of the newspaper almost every day.

Mason didn't like the name much, it wasn't very flashy or catchy. He stared at the news clippings and snickered to himself, *if I was a superhero I'd want my alias to be something cool and mysterious like Shadow Bane or Phantom Archer.*

It didn't matter, he figured the Masked Hero would pull a Tony Stark and reveal his identity in a press conference soon enough.

“What's this?” a voice asked from behind him.

Mason swiveled around in his chair, startled, to see Quinn peeping into his cubicle. Relieved he whispered, “Check it out, I'm linking all of the Masked Hero sightings to Jax.”

“Dude, what?” Quinn walked further into Mason's office to see what he was talking about. After studying the map, she said, “Tell me you haven't been working on this for two weeks.”

“Uh. Well... yeah. But I've been working on work stuff at home, so I've been staying caught up on my actual work,” Mason felt his cheeks warm with embarrassment as the lie tumbled from this mouth. “I'm just taking a break from staring at numbers for two hours.”

He watched Quinn glance at his computer screen, which he knew full well was displaying an Amazon search for superhero pajamas. She rolled her eyes. *Caught.*

“I have deadlines to submit every day and I’ve been meeting them. So think I’d know if I was letting something get in the way of my work,” he tried to defend himself.

“You know Satan expects you to have the report finished and ready to present by end of the week. You can’t seriously tell me you don’t have work to do,” Quinn reminded him, her eyebrows furling.

Don’t you have work to do? Mason waved her off. “Look, *I’m* the supervisor. You shouldn’t be telling me when I should be doing my work. But if you must know, I kept falling asleep, so I was adding to this instead. It’s so cool, ~~look~~—”

“I don’t have time. I have actual work to do *supervisor* Mason,” she interrupted. “And it’s not cool. It’s creepy.”

Mason rolled his eyes and watched her walk away. *It is so cool, she just doesn’t get it.*

//

The next day the four o’clock news reported that the Masked Hero, saved the life of a man who was getting car-jacked at around twelve-thirty that afternoon.

“These criminals just keep getting dumber, Deborah,” the news anchor said. “A carjacking in broad daylight?”

“God bless the Masked Hero!” her co-anchor said.

Mason stepped out of the breakroom, where he'd been keeping an eye on the news, and walked down to Jax's cubicle. He was sitting in his chair, reading the same news report on Facebook.

"Amazing isn't it?" Mason asked. The sudden noise made Jax jump.

He turned around to face him. "What is?"

"The Masked Hero," he said, narrowing his eyes. "I've seen him in action. About a-a few weeks ago? He moved ~~so fast~~, impossibly fast. He knew every move before the mugger made it too. It was awesome."

"Oh... yeah," Jax said, and nodded his head. He pressed his mouth together and started to turn back to his monitor.

~~nodding his head in the way that makes you certain they don't care about what you're saying.~~

Jax turned back around and blinked at him, his mouth settling into a frown.

"I'd say he's our real-life Batman."

Jax spun his chair around, clicked off his Facebook page, and brought his spreadsheet back up.

Mason narrowed his eyes at the back of his head. *What are you hiding? Also, I need to find out what conditioner you use.*

He was walking away when he heard Jax say, "Batman didn't have superpowers, dumbass."

~~Followed by a~~ laugh that sounded exactly like Halley's followed.

//

"I have to head outgo, I left my oven on."

Commented [EB5]: I think that changing it to "I think I left my oven on" would make more sense, but I want it to sound a little outlandish so Mason will be even more suspicious.

Mason spun his chair around to see that Jax was in the doorway of his cubicle. He was studying the new additions to his Masked Hero sightings map and moved his chair in front of it so that Jax couldn't see.

I'm sure you did. He cocked his eyebrow, "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

Jax lifted his broad shoulders in a shrug. "Just a feeling."

Why did he just now realize it was still on? He didn't go out for lunch today. Had it been on all morning? Was someone in his apartment to let him know it was on? Why couldn't they turn it off? Mason shook his head, *no third degree, not yet.* "Dude, it's almost time to leave. It can't wait another ten minutes?" he asked.

Jax's green eyes stared at him, unblinking. "No."

"Look, if you wanted to leave early you need to check with Satan, uh, *Linda* first. Don't make up weird, outlandish excuses," Mason said.

Jax quirked an eyebrow. "Did you just call her..? Never mind. Look I'm not lying, I really did leave my oven on. You want my apartment to burn down, man?"

“Of course not,” Mason ~~rolled his eyes~~~~seoffed~~. “I just don’t understand what’s going on with you. First you need to feed your cats halfway through your shift, then you need to water your fiancées flower pots, then you have to go on a walk in Central Park to “meet someone”, and now you need to go home to turn your oven off?”

He pulled at his shirt collar. “Uh, yep.”

“You’re really standing by your ridiculous excuses?”

“It’s the truth.”

I got him to sweat but still no confession. Maybe I’ll tell him I’m suspicious? That could get him to crack.

“I mean you gotta check with Linda before you go, but I don’t care,” Mason replied and swiveled his chair around to face his computer again. The numbers started to blur on his screen and he sighed loudly. “Just know that I’m onto you Jax.”

“Yeah, okay. Whatever, man,” Jax said, his voice already distant.

Clearly, he left because he was too nervous that I’m going to discover his secret.

Mason rubbed his eyes hard enough that, when he pulled his hands away, he could see spots. He turned to look at his map, *where are you going next, Jax? What innocent person would be attacked this time?*

He wondered if the next assault would be more exciting, like if the Masked Hero was going to stop a ruthless drug lord from shooting yet another one of the clients that couldn’t pay up. Mason could see it now...

The drug lord—Doctor Death—sat at his large mahogany desk, hands folded and resting on the cool wood. Proudly, he wore a ring for every person he personally killed. ~~H~~ and his jeweler ~~had~~ just dropped off another one ~~that is~~ morning.

~~T~~wo large men brought in a struggling, scrawny man and threw him on the floor before Doctor Death. The men ~~walked around to Doctor Death~~ approached their boss, ~~both~~ kissing his hands before they took their places behind him.

“Doctor Death, I can explain. I have the money just not with me—” ~~F~~he client shook as he spoke. “Doctor Death, I can explain. I have the money just not with me —”

“I’ve heard enough of your excuses,” Doctor Death growled. “I gave you a month to collect, and when you couldn’t pay up I gave you a two-week extension. Time’s up, Buster. Where’s my cash?”

“I don’t have it,” Buster cried.

“Very well. I hope you said your goodbyes to your family this morning,” Doctor Death said. He stood from his desk and pulled a ~~shiny~~ gun from his suitcoat.

But ~~before his index finger squeezed~~ before he pulled the trigger, the Masked Hero crashed through the window of the office. He was clad in all black and he traded in his ~~ski mask~~ costume mask, for a more modern looking one.

“No! You again!”

The Masked Hero jumped over the desk and slammed his feet into Doctor Death’s head, knocking him into the desk and leaving his foe unconscious. He jumped onto his bodyguards and knocked their heads together. Their heavy bodies and they slumped to the floor, unconscious.

The Masked Hero grabbed a small metal box from his pocket and put it on the desk. He pressed a button ~~that made the~~ and the device started ed beeping.

"You saved my life!" Buster cheered.

"Come on, man, this place is gonna blow!" the Masked Hero said. He grabbed ~~the~~ man Buster off the floor and threw him onto his back. He jumped ~~onto~~ through the windowsill and hooked his belt to the zip line ~~he came in on and started their, starting their~~ quick decent to the city's sidewalk.

"Who can I thank for saving my life?"

"My name is Mason," the Masked Hero said.

Behind them, the building blew up and—

"Mason!" Quinn shouted.

"What?!"

"I ~~said, are you asked if you're~~ coming out tonight?"

Mason blinked ~~a few times~~ and noticed his computer monitor said it was half past five.
Had I been daydreaming for that long?

He turned in his chair and saw Quinn was leaned up against the frame of the entryway. Her black hair was down and laid neatly on her left shoulder. She already had her coat on and her purse was hanging from her hand ~~as if it weighed a thousand pounds~~.

Behind Quinn, standing just outside his office, was Halley. She, too, had her coat on—a brown trench coat that fit too snugly over her back and made her look like a wannabe private investigator. Her eyes were averted from Mason’s gaze but he knew she wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t forgiven him at least a little.

“I’m already out? ~~guess I should,~~” Mason said, his eyebrows knitting together. He shifted his attention from Halley to Quinn.

“To Puzzles, idiot,” Quinn said, grinning—and dragged his attention from Halley to Quinn.

Mason’s eyes grew wide, oh, oops. “Right, of course. Yeah, sure. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Good,” Quinn said. She turned to Halley, whose nostrils were flared, and lips pressed into a thin line ~~didn’t look so enthused.~~ “See. I told you he would if we asked *nicely*.”

Commented [EB6]: Showing, not telling.

Halley rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

Mason got up from his desk and grabbed his ~~coat from off his chair~~ coat where it hung off the back of his chair. He put it on swiftly and ~~swung his bag over his~~ hung his bag on his shoulder. *As if I wouldn’t have gone if they asked rudely—it’s not like I have a lot of friends.*

He hadn’t talked to Halley since the incident a week and a half ago. He knew it was a dick move, but he didn’t want to give her the wrong impression.

Outside of Halley, the only other ~~person he was friends with was~~ friend he had was Quinn but she was busy doing freelance jobs to build her portfolio. ~~o. She was hoping to eventually get a better job, so she’d, hopefully, get a better job.~~ What little free time she did have

was usually ~~spent skyping~~spent on Skype with her girlfriend, Sam, who was still going to school in Vermont.

Mason wouldn't be lying if he said he lived a pretty lonely life. He left his family, his best friend since fifth grade, and his college friends all back in Colorado. He moved here for a better, more exciting life.

He's yet to convince them his New York lifestyle was as fast-paced and exciting as he told them it would be.

//

It only took three beers for Halley to start talking to Mason again, but as soon as she started Mason wished she'd stop.

"You're not even that fast at typing," Halley sneered, "And you use the 2013 version of Microsoft Office, *douche*."

Mason could hardly hear the petty jabs over the loud music and chatter in the bar. ~~Which, it was all Quinn's fault anyway, which was all Quinn's fault.~~ *I wanted to go to Puzzles.*

Puzzles was their regular spot, but the girls had insisted on trying something new, which landed the trio at a table they had to *stand* at *outside* on a chilly September night.

Mason shivered and unlocked his phone. Maybe he'd play Candy Crush or something—anything short of leaving the bar and stewing about her comments.

"Hey!" Halley shouted. "I'm talking to you! Don't you know it's rude to be on your phone when someone's talking to you?"

The grip on his glass tightened so hard that the tips of his fingers turned white. “You’re not talking to me,” he said slowly, carefully. “You’re insulting me about small, petty things because you’re pissed.”

Quinn’s eyebrows shot up. “Now seems like a good time to go to have a cigarette.”

Halley waited until Quinn was out of earshot before saying, “Yeah, hell yeah. I’m pissed at you. What’s your damage?”

“Have you ever considered that maybe I’m pissed at you too?” Mason spat.

“*You’re* pissed at *me*?” Halley laughed. “You’re priceless. It’s one thing to leave me alone in my bed the next morning, but it’s totally another to act like it never happened and ignore me for two weeks!”

Mason dropped his gaze. Suddenly the table seemed to be more interesting than Halley’s accusatory ~~glare~~.

Commented [EB7]: I don’t think that was a real word. Changed it to this one.

“Don’t have a lot to say now, do you?”

“What am I supposed to say? You kept wanting to know ‘what we are’ and ‘when can we go out on a real date’.” Mason said, exasperated. “I needed time and you were smothering me.”

“Well excuse me for wanting to know where we stood with each other,” Halley said in a grave tone that she’d never used on him before, “~~for wanting to know where we stood with each other~~. Don’t try to make it seem like I’ve been acting like some clingy one night stand, either. I asked you *twice* where we stood with each other and ~~each time~~ you refused to give me an answer both times.”

She stared him down, waiting for him to answer.

I admire how independent and strong she is, but right now it's intimidating as hell. How can I get her to stop looking at me like that?

“Look, Mason,” she sighed, her irritation still evident ~~through her demeanor alone~~through her pursed lips and slight eye twitch. “We’ve been friends for years, don’t let something like this ruin it.”

“Wait,” he said. His eyes snapped up to meet hers. “You—you *don’t* want a relationship?”

Halley shrugged and finished off her beer. “I wanted to discuss the idea with you because I did want to be with you, I have for a while now. ~~But~~ But after this? After how you treated me and acted like a child about this whole thing? I don’t want you anymore.”

~~Mason was immediately confused,~~ “Wait, what?”

Halley rolled her eyes and put some money on the table to cover her share of the bill. “What don’t you understand? I deserve better,” she said. “Someone who’s mature enough to have a conversation about a one night stand after it happens.”

“You’re telling me that I’m not good enough because I wanted to sort out my feelings before we talked about it?”

“No, see, that’s not what you did,” she snapped. Halley put a hand on her hip and pointed a finger at him—it was always—her stance before she really laid into someone. “You ignored me. You invited people you don’t even talk with to lunch and breaks so you wouldn’t be alone with

me. ~~Y~~ You ignored my ~~calls, and you calls and~~ changed the subject when I ~~would try to~~ tried to bring it up—that whole obsession with Jax being a superhero? I mean what the hell is that?”

“He always leaves work with a flimsy excuse and it’s always ~~—~~ just before the Masked Hero shows up ~~in the city!~~”

“Stop. I don’t want to hear about the weird fantasy world you’ve been living in inside your brain,” she sighed. “Anyway. ~~Even worse, even~~ What’s even worse is that when I tried to talk to you as a *friend* you wouldn’t listen. I don’t need you blaming this on me, Mason. This is all on you.”

Halley shook her head and moved away from the table.

“Wait,” he said, calling out to her before she could walk too far away.

“What?” she asked and turned to face him.

“I *do* have feelings for you,” Mason said. He glanced down at his drink and then back up at her. “I just... I have such a boring life, you know? And you... you’re so exciting. ~~I—~~ it doesn’t matter what we do together because we ~~always have fun~~ always end up having fun. I’m worried that ~~we~~ would become boring too.”

Halley’s dark lashes seemed to judge him.

“Plus, you and Quinn are my only friends. I didn’t want to ruin that if we ever broke up.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t tell me that sooner, because I’m a fairly understanding person. We could’ve talked it out together but you decided to act like a douche instead.” Halley ~~smiled~~

~~sadly~~said with a sad smile, “I’m gonna need some time, okay? We’re... we’re still friends, but I need some time.”

Mason watched her leave, and his mouth opened and closed a few times. He wanted to yell at her, really. He wasn’t being that huge of a douche. ~~I-~~it wasn’t his fault she was being too pushy. Now that he thought about it, she didn’t give him a chance to explain himself. And for her to accuse him of being a child?

That bitch.

He half expected Quinn to come back after Halley left, but when she didn’t, he paid for the bill and left the bar.

//

Ten minutes later, on his walk home, ~~that night,~~ the Masked Hero flew past him. He was ~~running~~ so fast that he was ~~almost a blur~~appeared as a blur.

Mason stopped in his tracks and watched the blurred silhouette run down the sidewalk. *Where is he going?* No one else really seemed to care about the Masked Hero. Some were just annoyed that he pushed them out of the way.

Without thinking, he ran after him. He knew he wouldn’t catch up but he hoped he’d be able to at least catch a glimpse of his eyes or maybe see if he had a super-suit now.

After taking several wrong turns, Mason was decidedly lost in an area of the city that didn’t look ~~very~~~~too~~ welcoming. There was no sign of the Masked Hero anywhere and, if he was being honest, he was feeling a little dejected.

All you had to do was follow him, Mace, and you couldn't even do that.

Mason pulled out his phone and pressed the “home” ~~into the search bar of~~ ~~button in~~ his Maps app. *You've been living in New York for how long now and you still don't know how to get home? Seriously?*

He was only a block away from his apartment when he ran into Jax walking down the street with a group of people he didn't recognize.

“Hey man,” Mason greeted Jax as he walked past him and his friends.

“What's up?” ~~he said back.~~

Mason was almost to his doorstep when he heard Jax call out, “Hey I heard the Masked Hero is down on 5th rescuing a kitten from a tree. Still convinced it's me?”

The group of friends Jax was with started laughing.

Mason's ears turned bright pink ~~as~~ embarrassment flooded his bloodstream. He didn't know that Jax had known about his suspicions.

“Wait, wait, wait, did I tell you guys? This sad mother fucker has a map up in his office that tried to prove *I'm* the superhero,” Jax laughed, slapping his leg.

Mason sighed and unlocked the door to his apartment, his stomach sank as he tried to drown out the raucous noise of Jax and his friends' ridicule that echoed in his brain.

How am I ever going to face him on Monday?

//

On Monday, Mason was at his desk once again. The spreadsheets were staring him down in the worst kind of way. He glanced down at the time, it was eleven in the morning.

At least my back hasn't started hurting yet.

"So I heard you had an interesting night on Friday."

Mason turned to see Quinn standing in the doorway of his cubicle with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, I got bitched out by Halley and then got mocked for my interest in the Masked Hero," he said bitterly. The news clippings were ripped up and sat on top of his trash can that wasn't emptied over the weekend, his pictures of his family and friends were back in their rightful places. "Then I got a phone call from Linda telling me that I needed to see her in her office straight away this morning."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. So in our meeting she told me that if I keep slacking off she said I'm being put on going to be put on two weeks' probation with out ~~no~~ pay and will be considered for termination."

"That sucks," she said, her mouth turned down into a frown. "I'm sorry your Jax-is-a-superhero thing wasn't real, either. I know how... interested you were in it."

"Yeah me too."

Quinn stepped further into his cubicle and leaned up against the wall. "Why was it so important to you that he was the Masked Hero again?"

Mason shrugged. "Things have been so stagnant lately. I just thought, wouldn't it be cool if Jax was a superhero? You know how things get stuck in your head and you run with it?" *I have nothing but time to think about this stuff, my life is so boring.*

"Not really. But, you know, if you would've put the amount of time into thinking about keeping Halley happy, that you put into this whole Masked Hero nonsense, maybe you'd have a girlfriend," Quinn pointed out. "Personally speaking, they make things a little more exciting."

Mason sighed. "I didn't want to get bored with her, ~~just~~ just based on how my life is now I know I would've."

"Are you a psychic?"

"No."

Quinn tsk'ed. "Then you can't know that. Halley is a great girl. You lost out big time."

"I know, I really fucked up with Halley. But she's already decided I'm not good enough for her, so it doesn't matter," Mason swiveled around to face his monitor again. "I just wish you'd let it go."

Quinn stayed silent for a moment. She walked up to Mason and put a hand on his shoulder, ~~squeezing and squeezed~~ gently. "There will be other people, other relationships. Learn from this ~~and~~ -don't make the same mistakes you did with her," Quinn said. "And don't try to blame everything on her next time, asshole."

"That was bad," Mason admitted with a grimace.

“Halley is one of my best friends, but you are too. So once everybody gets over themselves, let’s all go to Puzzles for a drink. Sam’s coming down for a weekend soon and I want you both to meet her.”

She ruffled a hand through Mason’s hair and left his office.

Mason glanced at his spreadsheets, his lower back started to ache.

//

Mason was seated on his couch; he was eating a dinner of beige chicken and brown rice and was watching the nightly news. The Masked Hero was at it again and the news reporters had the newest scoop.

With a deep sigh, Mason reached for the remote and flipped the channel to *Parks and Recreation*. He felt something nip at his toes and ~~he~~-jumped. His dinner spilled everywhere.

He looked down at his new dog, a one-year-old puppy that he adopted from a shelter a few weeks ago. He wasn't used to the extra presence in his apartment yet and the constant attention he seemed to need. Scout was scarfing up the chicken that fell to the floor and, even though it wasn’t seasoned enough, he loved it.

It was for the best anyway. He was meeting up with Quinn and Sam later for a movie and he’d rather eat popcorn than the only meal he’d been eating for months, since it was the only thing he knew how to cook.

On the upside, Quinn told him that Sam was bringing a friend from school for him to meet. According to Sam, Brian was a writer who had a busy schedule, so he wasn’t really looking for anything serious which was sort of perfect.

Don't screw this up, Mace.

Mason sighed and scratched Scout's head.