

A Reasonably Proficient Assistant Thwarted

Of course, Fire-man knew he shouldn't even be thinking about a one night stand at a funeral. Especially this one. But every time Miss-Stretch's grey eyes flitted over towards him, a tiny firework exploded in his chest.

Fire-man looked around the gargantuan church. Above the gothic wooden beams, and rosy cherubs, the ceiling seemed to expand the harder he looked. An infinite darkness, like a chunk of space, crammed in up there, hidden. He thought he saw a glimmer of a star, and it reminded him of an acid trip he had taken in the park with his friends on the last day of school. Long ago, before he dedicated his life to protect the innocent.

The view in front of him was blocked by an unruly afro. He tapped Shrink-O on the shoulder, who without even needing to be asked, nodded and shrunk down a few inches.

The coffin had 'Let's do the impossible' carved into the side, in elegant calligraphy. A ginormous statue of Jesus, with his arms piously outstretched loomed above it. Fire-man wondered whether Jesus would find it offensive, to see himself portrayed dying on a crucifix, if he was looking down, and if he existed. Jesus looked solemn, as if He himself was paying His respects to Captain Righteous. The gravity on every mourner's face bounced around the church like an echo.

Fire-man realised he should be at least partially offended that he wasn't asked to do the eulogy. After all, he had worked beside Captain Righteous on a daily basis, though it felt more like *behind* him. But the Commissioner had asked Heal-ix to do it, which wasn't unreasonable. The three of them had founded the Clan of Heroes together, a decade ago. A tiresome, cliché-riddled monologue that Captain Righteous would relay to Fire-man every few weeks, with excessive enthusiasm, as if it was the first time he had ever told it.

But Fire-man didn't want to write a series of compliments and heroic accolades about Captain Righteous. That was truth. A truth he had only allowed to partially crystallise in his head, just like a particular memory that haunted the periphery of his mind. He certainly didn't want to regale his peers with a plethora of valiant anecdotes. He couldn't muster the counterfeit zeal that would be required. He just couldn't.

The entire crowd stood up in unison, lurching Fire-man's focus back to the present. He followed suit. Heal-ix shuffled slowly to the stage. *Now that's a properly sombre look*, Fire-man thought. It put his own to shame.

Heal-ix dropped the hood of his dark green costume and unsheathed a large dagger from his belt. Dramatically, he sliced across his hand and held it up. Blood splattered on to the church's grey stone floor. Gasps rippled

through the vastness. Stars continued to glimmer in the chunk of space, crammed in above, hidden.

“I bleed for my brother, Captain Righteous,” he boomed to a splattering of applause. Fire-man swallowed a flash of rage. *What a cheap trick. Completely pointless.* He also felt it somewhat rude, borderline sacrilegious, and certainly unhygienic, to intentionally bleed onto a church floor. “Utter crap”. His mouth accidentally betrayed his thoughts. A woman, covered in long black feathers, whose name Fire-man couldn’t remember, turned around. She seemed unaware that the googly bird eyes sewn into her costumes’ cap negated the stern look she gave him. Fire-man dabbed at his eyes and said “Utter crap... that we’ve lost him”. She nodded soberly.

The wound on Heal-ix’s hand healed instantly. Obviously. He looked across at the crowd, a bit too melodramatically for Fire-man’s liking. One solitary tear trickled down his cheek and joined the blood on the floor. Then, after a pause, a bit too long for Fire-man’s liking, he spoke. “I have healed from countless injuries during my career fighting evil, but I will never heal from this, my deepest wound, the loss of my beloved friend, the indestructible Captain Righteous.”

Fire-man imagined running over to Heal-ix, shouting “He’s *clearly* not indestructible!” and then punching him in the face. Any injury he caused Heal-ix would be fleeting, of course, but the fantasy was comforting, nevertheless. So much so, that it played in a loop in his mind. Distracting him from the drone of the eulogy.

He looked across the church, over at Miss-Stretch and was delighted to have caught her eye, again, just as she looked down, blushing. They played a cat and mouse game with their gazes for a while, until an urgent thought struck him. He glanced around, as nonchalantly as he could manage. He exhaled deeply, relieved that Psy-trix was nowhere to be seen. He knew that she had made a Hero's Oath to never read minds outside of the fight against evil and injustice. But all the same...

Amidst the dulcet murmur of Heal-ix's eulogy, a few words jumped out at Fire-man.

"Of course, Icy-Kill panicked after I destroyed his Freeze-ray. Before he flew away, he threw the little girl down Hunter's Well, knowing with my valiant nature that I would be compelled to rescue her. I did so, very bravely, saving her life. I remember holding her tightly, yet categorically in no way inappropriately, and she was shivering and shaking. I looked over at Captain Righteous who had just jumped out of the helicopter, mere moments too late to save her, though it didn't matter, because I just did. That little girl looked up at me and said 'Thank you. I owe you my life' and I replied 'You're Hunter's Well-come'." The audience tittered.

What? Fire-man thought. Captain Righteous said *he* had rescued her, *He* held her in *his* arms and made that lame quip.

"Utter crap," Fire-man whispered, this time imperceptibly.

“Little did we know that the father of that little girl was none other than the Commissioner.” Heal-ix gestured over to an obese balding man, who nodded back. “And with his financial backing, within a year, the Clan of Heroes was born.”

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A painfully slow hour later, Fire-man was milling around the church, endlessly recycling stock condolence phrases. He tried to casually network with the full heroes. Captain Righteous’ death was the perfect catalyst for conversation, after all. It was a fine balance; doing this, without overtly neglecting the side-kicks. His own kind.

Whispered tones in a corner piqued his interest. He overheard that the Beige Panther had now been arrested. A few weeks back, Fire-man had caught wind of the odd rumour of tax evasion. But he didn’t think it was a *criminal* matter. Hadn’t the man been an accountant before he earned his stripes? Fire-man gasped as he suddenly remembered. Hadn’t Psy-trix worked with the Beige Panther to bring down Evil Weevil? Could she have... Surely, the fight against evil and injustice wouldn’t include... No, it couldn’t have been. She had made a Hero’s Oath. Not her own kind.

A particular haunting memory tried to push itself forward from periphery of his mind. Fire-man suppressed it.

The feathered lady waddled over. Despite his efforts, Fire-man couldn't quite distil the whispered conspiratorial words from the corner, over the soporific ramblings of the bird woman, whose name he *still* could not for the life of him recall. Then he felt the ground shudder. He sighed and braced himself.

Thumping footsteps approached him from behind. Fire-man spun around and mustered the best respectfully sombre smile that he could manage. "Unbreaka-bull, I'm glad you could make it."

"Why you no costume?" Unbreaka-bull half spoke, half growled.

Even without the huge horns on his costume, Unbreaka-bull was a looming figure. Almost seven feet tall, with muscles that seemed to ripple, even when stationary. His shadow seemed expand and swallow up the entire church floor.

"I thought a black suit might be more respectful than bright orange."

Unbreaka-bull's face suddenly contorted. Fire-man's buttocks clenched, a reflex of his when agitated. Had he somehow offended the man-beast? It was only when he saw the accompanying snot bubble, that he realised Unbreaka-bull was *crying*. His huge horns undulated rhythmically. "Me sad he dead."

"Well, he will be sorely missed. It just goes to show how precious--"

"Me would have saved him. Me would have shield him from falling beam."

“Well, with all due respect, you weren’t there,” Fire-man said as he fiddled with his tie. He always found himself edging backwards when speaking to Unbreaka-bull. The man-beast had limited concept of personal space, and repugnant breath. “It was intense. Trying to rescue so many people from a collapsing skyscraper. It wasn’t easy to-”

Unbreaka-bull let out a long gurgling yell, probably more crying. “Brave, brave man. Indestructible Captain Righteous. Dead!”

“Well, he’s not *technically* indestructible. I... should probably, you know, mingle with some of the other-”

“You no blame self, Fire-man. You only sidekick, not Clan of Heroes.”

Fire-man cleared his throat and shuffled back further. “Well, I’d like to think that I’m an affiliate member.”

“No blame self,” Unbreaka-bull said, slapping Fire-man on his shoulder, sending him stumbling.

Heal-ix strode over, holding the lid of a thermos flask, steaming with coffee. He shook hands with Fire-man and nodded solemnly. His daggers tinkled against his green chain mail trousers, which were a bit too tight for Fire-man’s liking. “I’m sorry for your loss, Fire-man.”

“Thank you. He was a good man. By the way, sorry to be a stickler for the rules, but the church did specify that food and drink isn’t permit-“

“No! He was a *great* man. I can’t believe the legend, one of the founding members of the Clan, as well as me, probably the second bravest of its members after me, the only man to ever defeat Magnatron in hand-to-hand combat, although I never got the chance, probably because Magnatron is scared of me, *died* so pitifully in an earthquake.”

Fire-man nodded. “Just goes to show how precious-”

“A bloody earthquake!” yelled Heal-ix, dropping head down and raising his arms, unintentionally imitating the huge statue of Jesus looming behind him. A splash of coffee leapt onto Fire-man’s shoe.

Unbreaka-bull let out another bizarre sound, not unlike what Fire-man imagined an a bovine mating call might sound like.

Heal-ix shook his head and looked up. “I’m sorry Fire-man, I need to keep it together. For your sake.”

“Actually, I’m doing okay. I mean, it just goes to show how-“

“Poor, lowly sidekick. Your boss now dead. Your hero.”

“Lowly?”

“I said lonely.”

“You said lowly.”

“Sorry. I meant lowly.”

“Wait. What?”

“Poor you.”

“He wasn’t technically my boss, as such. We were more like colleagues. To be honest, it was often me who-”

“It must have been a pleasure, an honour, to work for a man with such an aptitude for quips.”

“I suppose.”

“Tell me Fire-man, he must have made a humorous statement when he first told you about the earthquake.”

“Actually, it was *me* who told *him*. I’d been scanning the police radio when I heard-“

“But what did he say? Bet it was hilarious.”

“I think he said: ‘Let’s go shake things up’.”

Heal-ix jerked his head backwards, dropped his thermos lid of coffee and howled with laughter. Unbreaka-bull followed suit, making an odd grunting noise. Another huge bubble of snot grew into an unfeasibly large size and then popped, some splashing on to Fire-man’s tie. “He funny.”

Heal-ix composed himself, and looked off into the distance solemnly. Fire-man followed his gaze, somewhat confused. “You know,” Heal-ix said, “I’ve healed from countless injuries during my career fighting evil. But I will never heal from this, my deepest wound.”

Fire-man was annoyed that Heal-ix hadn’t even registered the spilt coffee on the floor. “Yes, er, you already said that in your speech.”

“By the way,” Heal-ix said, pulling out a card from his overly tight dark green chain mail trousers, “I thought you would want to see this. Evil Coli sends his commiserations.”

“Who he?” asked Unbreaka-bull.

“Evil Coli? He’s a super villain. Used to be Magnatron’s sidekick. Just earned his stripes.”

More confusion than usual crept into Unbreaka-bull’s gormless face.

“You must know him. Gives his enemies food poisoning. Purple costume. Glasses. Lovely message inside the card.”

Fire-man opened it up.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Heal-ix added, “I will not rest until he, and his evil scum colleagues are destroyed. But still, nice gesture.”

Fire-man couldn’t ignore the spilt coffee any longer. He sighed, mumbled an apology, then walked off to try to find a mop. He saw Heal-ix’s thermos flask on a chair behind a pillar. He peered around and then blew on it, purloining a wave of heat, and giggled. He felt Jesus’ glare on him.

“Is that an appropriate use of your powers?”

Fire-man yelped and spun around. “I wasn’t... I didn’t... Oh, Miss-Stretch. It’s you. How do you do?”

She grinned. “Well, hello you.”

In slumber, Fire-man had found it remarkably easy to avoid the memory. To edge it back to the periphery of his mind. The next morning, he woke up to a sore jaw and an unfamiliar dishevelled, scrawny cat, eying him suspiciously. It took him a few moments to realise where he was, and why he had been smiling in his sleep.

He leaned over to the small dresser but his cigarettes were just out of reach. An elongated arm shot past him, grabbed the pack and dropped it in his lap. He turned round and pecked Miss-Stretch on her lips. He marvelled at how pretty, how pure, she was. Porcelain-like, unblemished skin, and a tiny mole on her nose. She reminded him of his old English teacher, who would make him blush every time she asked him a question.

“Last night was... amazing,” he said, pulling out a cigarette. “That thing you did, changing the shape of your... Wow!”

Miss-Stretch tittered, sat up, and helped herself to a cigarette. “You were great too,” she said, her voice as sultry and as enticing as her eyes. “You made the earth move.” A finger stretched up to her mouth as she winced. “Sorry, I didn’t mean... That was insensitive... The earthquake.”

Fire-man smiled. “Its okay. To be honest...” His mouth hung open for a few moments. He shut it, looked back at the cat and took a few drags. “I

know Captain Righteous is this legendary hero, but he was also..." He shrugged. "...flawed."

She leaned towards him and raised an eyebrow.

"He had some annoying habits."

"Oh, do tell."

"Don't get me wrong. His contributions in the fight against evil-

"-and injustice. Yeah, I get it. Tell me the juicy stuff, Fire-man."

He drummed his fingers against the side of the bed. "Between me and you, he was a bit of a jerk, Miss-Stretch. He was patronising. He was actually pretty stupid. He would concoct these ridiculously complicated plans. I'd have to come up with an alternative and somehow convince him it was his own idea. And he *always* got the credit."

Fire-man rubbed his eyes. He stubbed out his cigarette and grabbed another one. "His quips that everybody adore. Imagine having to listen to that crap day after day after day."

"His catchphrase was a bit dorky I guess."

"Exactly." Fire-man stuck out his chest and jutted his chin forward. "*Let's do the impossible*. If you are doing the impossible every mission, then maybe *you* don't understand what the word means."

Miss-Stretch giggled.

She put out her cigarette and snuggled up to him. Her hair smelled of lavender and her body felt delightfully warm. She placed a hand on his chest. Her cat idled up between them, chaperoning their intimacy.

“Don’t take offence at this,” she said. Her voice was so soft, Fire-man felt that nothing she could say could ever really offend him. “But your uniform is pretty dorky too.”

“I know!” Fire-man said, slapping his forehead. “It’s horrid. But Captain Righteous designed it. I desperately tried to change it. I even made some prototype alternatives but he insisted. He said it represented fire.”

“It makes you look like a carrot.”

“And not exactly ideal for sneaking up on villains.”

Miss-Stretch nuzzled in closer. Fire-man sniffed her hair. The cat ostensibly yawned, though Fire-man couldn’t help feel it was displaying its razor teeth.

“I even hate my name. It’s confusing. I don’t work for the emergency services. I *begged* Captain Righteous to be called the Extinguisher, but he wasn’t interested.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“That he was wouldn’t listen?”

“That you’re confiding in me.”

Fire-man smiled, and slowly sucked his belly in. “Anyway, what you got planned for today?”

“Not much, why?”

He leant towards her and admired her long luscious eyelashes.

“Maybe we could hang out. Stay in bed.”

“That would be great,” she said. “My friend’s coming over to return a dress, but I could get rid of her quickly.”

Fire-man nestled in closer, and pushed his hand towards her legs, under the duvet.

“Although Psy-trix is a talker. Might take a while.”

Fire-man bolted up. “Psy-trix is coming here?”

“Yeah, she’s due any minute. Why?”

Fire-man tumbled out of bed and frantically scrambled into yesterday’s suit. In a frenzy of fingers, he buttoned up his shirt unevenly.

“Sorry, I’ve just remembered. I’ve left the window on, I mean, the oven open.”

“From before the funeral?”

“Erm, yeah.”

“From yesterday morning?”

He grabbed his jacket. “Look, I would really like to see you again.” He pecked her on the mouth. The cat hissed at him.

“Last night was amazing!” he shouted over his shoulder as he bolted out of the door.

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It gnawed at Fire-man over the next few days, yet he still managed to avoid it. His blossoming romance with Miss-Stretch was a pleasant distraction. One night, he woke up in a cold sweat, after dreaming that it was *him*, not the Beige Panther in shackles, behind bars. Hours earlier, he had been gently probing Miss-Stretch about Psy-trix and was unnerved when she described her friend as “a little too over-protective.” What did *that* mean? He was desperate to ask if Psy-trix ever used her mind-reading powers against non-villains. But there was simply no way to ask it without rousing suspicion.

But he couldn't evade it forever. That's the thing with memories. You can't escape what is already inside you. And it wasn't accompanied by guilt or, if he was being really honest, even regret. It was more curiosity. Why that particular day? Those particular comments?

Captain Righteous had made hundreds of quips over the years. Thousands. But standing there, in that shuddering skyscraper, with the world disintegrating around them, his words reverberated in Fire-man's head, playing in a loop.

The chaos. The piercing screams. The huge cracks snaking across the walls. The businessman in a tasteless purple suit, covered in blood. Who

Fire-man had lifted out from under a pile of rubble, who didn't even acknowledge him, yet yelled thanks to Captain Righteous as he scurried away. The clouds of smoke and dust. The hysterical woman hobbling on one high heel with her make up running.

Captain Righteous' earlier words penetrated all of it, and looped inside Fire-man's mind, incessantly, preposterously, nauseatingly. *Let's shake things up.* As the chaos grew and the disaster thrived, those words also grew. Louder and louder.

A small fire blazed, on a desk with some computers on it, throwing out occasional sparks. Fire-man ran over and blew on it. It died down gradually, but faster, he was fairly sure, than if any mere mortal had done the same. He looked across the corridor at Captain Righteous who was leaning into a smoky lift shaft, looking up and signalling for a woman to jump down. She yelled as she plummeted, her red hair shimmering through the air. Captain Righteous caught her with one hand. He yelled out: "Thanks for dropping by." He didn't *speak* the words into the woman's ear, which was merely inches away. He *shouted* them across the whole floor for everybody to hear. As the woman sprinted to the stairwell she was laughing, *actually* laughing. As was the rotund security guard who grabbed her hand and guided her away.

Let's shake things up.

Thanks for dropping by.

Let's shake things up.

Thanks for dropping by.

The words swirled around inside Fire-man. Combining. Synergising. Infuriating. Captain Righteous' face. Chiselled jaw and perfectly shaped goatee. The red-head's laughing face. The rotund security guard.

It wasn't a wish. There was no active intention. It was more like a premonition. At that exact moment, a huge steel beam shuddered above Captain Righteous who hadn't noticed it. Basking in his own heroism.

Fire-man froze. It wasn't panic. He had, after all, defused Magnatron's bomb down that mineshaft with his toes, whilst simultaneously restraining A-Stitch-in-Slime. He'd untied that little boy from the train track, with barely milliseconds to spare, with a broken rib. These were far more stressful scenarios. No, this was different.

He didn't *will* the beam to fall and crush that over-rated, over-hyped, remarkably stupid, idiotic-quipping, forever-exaggerating, super-sized-egoed, glory-seeking, narcissistic, *let's do the impossible*-saying, apparently indestructible man. No. Fire-man was merely curious to see what would happen if he let nature take his course. Instead of, once again, intervening and saving this imbecile's life.

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With dinner prepared, Fire-man cleaned his tiny flat, indulging in the mutual deceit of being tidy, common in new relationships. As he was making the bed, he couldn't help but grin at the thought of him and Miss-Stretch in it later.

His phone buzzed. It was a blocked number. "Hello?"

"Fire-man. It's the Commissioner here."

Almost dropping the phone, Fire-man, juggled it awkwardly, before finally getting a grip. "Yes, hello sir. Thank you for calling," he said, realising he sounded too perky. He coughed. "I mean, obviously, it's a shame we're speaking under such circumstances."

"Quite. Sorry I didn't catch you at the funeral last week. There were a lot of big wigs around. Lots of business to discuss. I'm sure you'll understand."

"Yes sir, of course. I probably wouldn't have made much sense. I was so upset," Fire-man lied.

"Lovely service by the way. Heal-ix's speech was so touching, I wept. I'm not ashamed to admit it."

"Sure, me too." Fire-man strode over to a large mirror. "I was hoping to discuss my future prospects."

"Of course, Fire-man. Poor you. Hopeless and lonely. With your mentor fallen. We need to find you a new superior."

“Well actually sir, I’ve thwarted dozens of super villains, I was thinking maybe I could...” He coughed again.

“Yes?”

“Go it alone.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You know, be a full Hero.” His reflection winced as he said the words. A painful silence followed. Then a roar of laughter cackled down the phone. Fire-man pictured the commissioner jerking his head backwards and dropping a thermos lid of coffee.

Another silence ensued. Even longer and decidedly more painful.

“Oh. You’re being serious.”

“I learned a lot from Captain Righteous, you know. I really believe...”

“Look kid, I like you. I do. And don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re not a thwarter. You’re an assistant thwarter, and a reasonably proficient one, I hear. But your power, putting out fires slowly, I’ve got to tell you, you’re lucky to make sidekick. If you could control fire... that would be something!”

“I do other stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Captain Righteous had a terrible sense of direction. Awful.”

Silence again. Painful still.

“I had to guide us. In emergencies.”

“Map reading? That’s your supplementary power?”

“Well, sometimes, there was a lot of pressure for us to-”

“Look kid, I’m gonna do you a favour. I’m gonna pretend that the last 30 seconds of this conversation never happened.”

“Thanks?”

“We need to hook you up with another Hero. Unbreaka-bull is looking for a sidekick.”

Fire-man rested his head on his reflection’s in the mirror. “Sir, I will go with literally anybody else but him.”

“Hmm, let me see.”

Fire-man heard paper rustling down the other end of the phone.

“How about Psy-trix?”

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