Of Life and Flames

by Rahmi

Summary

Warren gets a(n) sidekick(s) when he graduates. Nobody is really pleased about this.

Notes

From a prompt. Warren getting a sidekick and how he keeps sending them back and having to pick spandex out of uncomfortable places and harassing the kids still in school.

The day Warren graduates, three weeks before Sky High is out for the summer, he gets a sidekick. He glowers at him from under his hair, tells him to pick his own damn name because he's not doing it for him, and stomps off to get fitted for his very own circulation impairing spandex suit.

It's red. And black. Some smart ass has drawn a scowling smiley face in the palm of one of his gloves and he knows he specifically requested they not go with a phoenix motif on the back of it. Bastards. He picks it out of his ass five times before he tries to burn it.

"Didn't think I'd ever see you in one of those," Layla says, when he grudgingly lets Will bully him into modeling it.

Warren's hands are cupped protectively over his dick because spandex leaves nothing to the imagination. "It's flame retardant," he tells Layla, scowl pulling down the corners of his mouth.

She laughs at him. "They sure know you."
He'd tried to burn it three times. Whoever designed it must have gotten their jollies imagining him running around the city with a wedgy, because whichever brainless, flighty sidekick in Costume Support that'd been stuck designing his costume for a final project had made it entirely out of spandex.

No tasteful cover-ups for him.

"Look on the bright side," Layla says, "No Superman-esque underwear on the outside, right?"

"Could have used some on the outside," Warren mutters darkly. "Cause I sure as hell couldn't fit any on the inside."

Layla makes a breathy sound of amusement, quickly muffled in her boyfriend's shoulder. Will starts coughing loudly. Warren just raises his eyebrows at them. Did they seriously think he could fit anything on under his skin tight outfit?

There's a feminine chuckle from the doorway. Warren frowns, looks that way, and wishes that he hadn't. Mrs. Stronghold is holding a camera in her hands. "You should have seen Steve in his first costume," she muses. "I had to beat the girls off with a stick."

"You could have just dropped them off the school," Will says when he can breathe again."

"Mm," Jetstream says, then, "Alright guys, squish together. Picture time!"

Warren leans his face down towards his chest so that his hair covers it. He really wishes they'd just let him wear his jeans and his t-shirts.

Layla jostles the hand he's got cupped around himself, grabbing it once it's far enough away that she won't accidentally grab his dick too. She leans against his shoulder on one side while he tries to gently free his hand. "No more of that, okay? You look fine." She tilts her face up to his, brushing his hair behind one ear while he scowls down at her. "Very dashing," she adds.

"Yeah, right."

"No, she's totally telling the truth," Will says. He pulls Warren's other arm free with casual strength, hooking it around his own shoulders. "Smile for the camera, War."

"You look adorable," Mrs. Stronghold adds. She snaps a picture a quick picture, smiling at him. "Like a real superhero. The bad guy's will never know what hit them."

Will bumps against his shoulder while the flash keeps going off. "Yeah," he mutters, ducking into Warren's space so he can see under the fall of hair he's trying to hide behind. "They'll be too busy staring at your, ahem, package to be doing much evil."

"I hate you all," Warren says direly.

Layla laughs.

His sidekick's name is Kenny. He calls himself Oxy-Boy; Warren thinks of him as Oxy-Clean in the privacy of his own skull.
Kenny, he finds, was the sidekick who designed his superhero costume. Kenny also likes to walk behind him and stare at his ass during patrols. Which. Okay, he guesses he can live with it if they weren't trolling for people who'd like to kill them, but there's a place for stuff like that and it's not now.

"That's creepy," he tells Kenny, letting a lick of fire crawl down his spine. "Stop it. Pay attention to our surroundings before someone tries to kill us."

"Sure thing, Phoenix," Kenny says cheerfully and goes right on ogling his ass.

Warren clenches his fists in frustration. It was going to be a long night.

"I need a new sidekick," Warren mutters. He self-consciously crosses his arms to keep himself from covering his crotch and hopes that Principal Powers actually can't see that low over her desk. This was embarrassing.

Powers raises one delicate eyebrow at him before she goes back to doing paperwork. "As you know, Mr. Peace, sidekicks are carefully chosen to compliment their heroes," she says dismissively. "We can't rearrange the teams simply because--"

"He increases the amount of oxygen in a room," Warren interrupts flatly. Principal Powers gives him a disapproving look for being rude, but when has Warren ever not been rude to an authority figure?

Yeah.

He lets fire play along his fingertips, still crossed on his chest. He's tired. He's sore. He's wearing spandex that's giving him the mother of all wedgies, and he just took his stupid lech of a sidekick to the hospital for third degree burns. "Do you know what happens between the two of us when he uses his powers?"

Principal Powers slowly puts down her pen and gives him her full attention.

"It does this." The harmless fire (to him, at least) running up and down his hands suddenly expands, exponentially, like a flash fire in a gunpowder room. He's careful to keep it from actually burning anything, close to his skin and warming him even as it drains his reserves. "And it heads straight. For. Him. I almost killed him. Give me someone else."

It hurts to pull this much fire out after the night he's had, but he has to make her see, because he can't work with someone he can hurt.

"You can stop now, Warren. I understand." Powers puts her pen down as Warren lets the fire die down, trickling down to fall from his fingertips and expire in harmless puffs of heat. She rubs her forehead. "Medulla told me not to pair the two of you up," she sighs. "Are you sure you can't work with him?"

Warren turns around. "I'm gonna go find the losers while you pick someone out," he says over his shoulder.

Powers doesn't try to call him back, which he's really grateful for. Once he's in the hallway, he
leans against the row of lockers, pissed off at himself and kind of wishing he was still a student here so he could go get vitamin water and a lollipop from Nurse Spex.

He's tired. He wants to go crash at Will's place, fall asleep on his couch and wake up to Mrs. Stronghold sitting on the side, stroking his hair out of his face with a smile.

So he goes to find Will.

The sidekicks are all in Heroic Sayings, but Will's in Mad Science right now. He sucks at it, anyway, and he's always complaining that it just encourages kids to become supervillans, so Warren doesn't feel bad about making him ditch it.

Medulla's in lecturing mode when Warren pushes the door open.

"Mr. Peace." Doctor Medulla pins him with a glare, which Warren pretty much ignores. He's been getting glared at and whispered about since he could walk. He catches Will's eye and watches his friend's entire face go surprised, then sympathetic.

"Mr. Peace," Medulla says again, waving a hand towards him. "I was under the, clearly mistaken!, impression that you'd graduated."

"Stealing Will," Warren says simply. He beckons to the wide-eyed Will.

"By all means, Mr. Stronghold, leave my class, which you are barely passing, to go gallivanting off with your sooty hoodlum friend. That was sarcasm, Mr. Stronghold!"

Will freezes, notebook halfway into his bag. "Uh?" he says. His eyes dart over to Warren again. Warren watches as his face hardens, suddenly older than a high school student, and he gives Medulla a huge, fake smile when he says, "Sorry, Dr. Medulla, but you know I'm gonna flunk the final anyway."

He sweeps out of the classroom to Medulla's stuttering and catches Warren's arm when the world suddenly tilts stupidly to the side as soon as he pushes off from the doorway. "Dammit," Warren hisses.

"Take it easy." Will gets a speculative look in his eyes, the skin around them crinkling. "Want me to carry you?" he asks, serious as a heart attack.

If he didn't know Will was being completely sincere, Warren would punch him. As it is, he's too tired and Will's too damn nice to hit for trying to help. "Try it and I'll kill you, Stronghold," he growls out.

Fire snaps suddenly on the arm nearest Will; Warren looks down at it so fast that his hair slaps into his eyes, because he hadn't meant to do that and after the night he's had shit like that is scary.

Will just waves a lazy hand through the rising flames. "Okay," he says, shrugging. He makes a left, heading towards the front lawn, and Warren trails slightly after him, trying to hide the way his hands are shaking.

He's not thinking about his ex-sidekick.

"I cannot believe you just made me ditch class," Will groans when they hit the student lawn.
"Doctor Medulla's going to kill me. If my parents don't do it first."

"I didn't make you do anything," Warren says testily. He's cold all of a sudden. The spandex is thin and light, just right for him when he's powered up, but now that he's outside it feels like he isn't wearing anything.

He rubs at his arms.

Will's jacket lands on his head. Warren looks over to see him stretching up into the sun, smiling. "Yeah," Will says, "Like I was going to stay in class with you looking like death warmed over."

Warren doesn't have anything to say to that. He sits on the low cement railing, tired and achy and feeling like his fire's a little too close to the surface for comfort. His hair falls against his cheek as he tilts his head and closes his eyes. "I almost killed Kenny last night," he says into the sunlight.

There's silence for a few beats of his heart, loud in his ears, before Will drops on the railing next to him with a little noise of shock. "Oxy-Clean?" he asks. He nudges Warren in the ribs, hard enough that Warren feels an ominous creaking inside his chest.

"Yeah." He shifts away from Will's prodding. "Stop poking me. I don't have enough energy to heal right now."

"What happened?" Will turns to straddle the railing, looking at Warren.

Warren hunches a little further behind his hair and stares at his hands. He honestly hasn't felt this bad about being able to do what he can do since he accidentally fried his mom's favorite plant when he was four.

"I powered up," he says when Will keeps watching him patiently. "He powered up. And then it was nothing but crispy, screaming Kenny."

They're both quiet.

"You know it wasn't your fault, right?" Will says eventually. "They should've known mixing you guys together was bad news."

Warren doesn't answer. Of course it's his fault. He should have known better. But that doesn't mean it can't be the Principal's fault too, a little bit at least.

"Okay, enough of this," Will says. His friend scoots off the back of the railing and crowds up close behind him. "Care for a flight?" he asks.

Holy non sequitur, Commander, Warren thinks snidely. "What?" he asks dumbly. "Isn't that something you should be asking your girlfriend?" Because he'd seen the way Layla's face lit up at the thought of flying with Will and, yeah, he might have done it a time or two, but that still didn't make it okay for Will to suggest them doing it without one of them dying (or about to be grounded).

"Layla'll understand," Will says. "She's not really the jealous type, you know?"

Warren does not point out that Will's speaking complete and utter bullshit. He figures Will thinks it's true enough, but just because he's an idiot who didn't see the daggers Layla was glaring into
Royal Pain's doesn't mean Layla doesn't get jealous.

He does say, "I'm not your boyfriend," though.

Sometimes he wonders about Will.

Will scoffs. "I know that," he says. "But you're my friend, and friends totally take care of friends when they look like crap and have had really bad crime fighting nights. So you're gonna come home with me and Mom's going to make you cookies after she finishes yelling at me for ditching class, okay?"

"No, Stronghold, not okay." He has a perfectly fine apartment he can go back to. One with only a mattress on the floor in the bedroom and some old car magazines and no mother because his had been MIA since he turned eighteen.

...he really wants to go to Will's. That doesn't mean he has to take the Will express to do it.

"Come on," Will says coaxingly, "I'll let you borrow some clothes so you can get out of the spandex."

He's honestly forgotten about the spandex. Apparently, you can get used to just about everything. "They wouldn't fit me, anyway."

"Then you can borrow some of Dad's stuff," Will says immediately.

Warren makes a non-committal grunt.

Will's arm suddenly slings around his waist. Warren stares down at it, nose wrinkling, for far too long before he realizes what, exactly, Will's planning to do. By that time it's too late anyway, and then Will's heaving Warren up into his arms like he weighs nothing at all and throwing the both of them off the edge of Sky High.

"Hang on," Will shouts in his ear as they plunge.

If Warren were significantly less exhausted, he'd burn Will's hair off right now for being a know-it-all, helpful jackass.

His next sidekick is named Stacey. She's tiny and pixie like, literally, butterfly wings unfolding from her back when she concentrates. Her hero name is, unsurprisingly, Pixie.

Warren's raised eyebrows just make her smile. "I guess they thought it'd be useful for you to have a flying 'kick," she says cheerfully. She flicks her hair out of her eyes, looks him up and down in a way that reminds Warren suspiciously of Kenny. "Why is your costume nothing but spandex?"

"Because," Warren grunts out. He tilts his head, looking up at the sky. Was that something coming at them...?

"It looks nice," Stacey says.

Magenta finds him this time, and that's only because she's ditching class by hiding in the trash can.
outside of Principal Powers's office. "What'd you do?" the guinea pig asks, her purple striped head popping out of the waste basket.

Warren grimace. "My sidekick got in the way of a fireball," he admits after a few seconds.

Guinea pig laughter sounds really weird.

"She should have moved," Magenta says after she's done laughing. "Then what happened?" She puts her tiny paws on the edge of the can and wiggles her nose at Warren. Magenta, he knows, has had it in for Pixie ever since the girl told her wearing purple was for three year olds.

He picks her up out of the garbage, because that's just weird. "I burnt her wings off," he tells her while he sets her on the floor.

The guinea pig expands into a girl who's sitting on the floor looking gleeful. "Ouch," she says, but she sounds pleased. She scratches at her ear with her fingers, quick and rodent-like.

"The doctors say they should grow back eventually," Warren says defensively.

His third sidekick just hands him a letter of resignation their first day together. Warren tries not to take it personally.

"You should stop scaring your potentials away, dog," Zach tells him when he passes him in the hall on his way to talk to Powers again.

"Shut up, Glowboy," Warren grinds out. He sends a lick of harmless, flashy flames his way, but Zach just sways with it, out of the way and back as soon as it's gone.

"Actually, I'm thinkin' of something different this year, War-my-man," Zach says. "Glowboy's gettin' kind of old, you dig me?" Zach touches his chin with two fingers, thinking. "Magenta says I should totally go with Neon Lantern."

Warren can't help but snort.

The fourth sidekick's more of a disaster than Kenny was. His name's Troy, the Tin Man. Warren's a little leery at first, because he knows he can melt steel when he gets really pissed, but Principal Powers claims this is the very best chance he's got for a sidekick.

Heroes fresh out of school aren't allowed to go heroing unless they have a sidekick, so Warren accepts it.

"Hey, man," Troy says. They're in Powers's office, getting acquainted while Powers draws up their paperwork. "I can totally turn into tin? It's the coolest power ever, but Coach Boomer didn't see it like that, so."

Warren pulls at the spandex still determined to crawl up his ass and ignores him. He's an idiot.

"So, I mean, you can let me be the hero, right? I mean. You can be the sidekick, because I'm obviously the more powerful one on this team." Troy reaches out to clap him on the shoulder, even though he's got to go on his toes to do it.
Warren shoots him a sideways glare, but doesn't respond. He gives up on keeping his suit from raping his ass and instead starts to fiddle with the cuffs on his wrists. His marks are starting to ache from being covered up all the time, something only a freakin' pyro would know, and he starts to pry the cuffs off with a string of muffled curse words.

It would make a lot more sense if they could design their own costumes instead of making the sidekicks do it as a final project.

"Hey, are you listening?" Troy asks, poking him in the side. "You should listen to me. I'm going places, unlike you."

If Warren bares his teeth at his new sidekick, the kid's too dense to notice it anyway. He just nods to himself and keeps going in, except this time Warren's kind of listening and his blood starts to do a slow simmer.

"It's not like people are gonna accept you as a hero anyway, not with your traitor dad in jail," Troy continues on blithely. Warren's temper shoots through the roof. "I can keep you from becoming like that deadbeat, easy, 'cause I'm just that awesome."

Warren takes no responsibility for the moron ending up in the hospital. None. Fucker.

Layla finds him sitting in the Stronghold's back yard.

"If you're trying to keep a partner, you might want to stop sending them to the hospital," she tells him. She reaches out for his face, her eyebrows drawn together. "Also, either cut your hair or wear it back. I hate it when I can't see you."

Warren lets her stroke her hands through his hair, pushing it behind his ears. He glowers out over the Stronghold's garden. "It's not my fault they're all idiots."

She hums a little under her breath, absently braiding the strands of red in his hair. Warren watches her small hands work out of the corner of his eye and resigns himself to having Will poke fun of his girlie hair again.

"Maybe it's not really their fault either," she says after a couple of moments, releasing his hair so that the braid hits him in the face. "You are a little intimidating, Warren."

"You weren't intimidated by me," he points out.

She draws her knees up to her chest and leans against his shoulder. "That's because I could tell you were really sweet under all that bad boy, flame throwing... stuff," she waves a hand around, "Even after you tried to kill my crush. It's not that easy for some people. They'll get it eventually."

"Yeah, and until then, I get stuck with the idiots."

Layla lifts a hand to touch the bark of the tree and the sun that's been bugging him for the last twenty minutes disappears under the cover of the new leaf growth. She studies the branches, considering, before she turns her head to look at Warren, mouth twisted into something between a smile and a pout.
"You want an apple?" Layla asks. "I'd give you the whole speech on taking the lemons life gives you and making lemonade out of them, but I can't make lemons. I think they're too bitter for me, you know? And more people like to eat apples anyway."

"I'll take an apple," Warren says.

"Hi," his fifth sidekick says. She twirls her long hair around her fingers and smiles nervously at him. "I'm Lani. Undine, I mean.

"I can control water. I can't, you know, make it or anything like that. I'd be on the hero track if I could do that," she giggles self-consciously, "But I can make it do anything I want it to."

Warren heats his fingers up to give himself a small temple massage. "You're fine," he says.

She's a little ditzy, but at least she's not an arrogant asshole or hell bent on watching his ass while he tries not to pull spandex out of it. He can live with ditzy.

"Together, we can rescue your dad," she tells him later that same night, leaning close. "We could become the best supervillian team the world's ever seen."

They're in the middle of a bay, surrounded by water, and she's suddenly not harmless or ditzy at all. She has a damn near limitless supply of water at her fingertips and Warren doesn't think there's a person out there who knows where the hell they are except the kid-villain she'd just drowned.

He blinks at her and feels fire start to warm under his skin.

"Just think about it, Warren. You and me," she coaxes. Warren stares at her dumbly. Lani has the same look in her eyes that Gwen Grayson'd always had and Warren's reaction is the same; he wants to get the hell away from her.

That's the reason it takes so long for what she's saying to sink in.

Warren sees red.

"I liked her," Ethan tells Warren mournfully two days later. He's standing in the middle of Warren's apartment like he belongs there and Warren pauses in the doorway, trying to make his tired brain cough up whether or not he might have accidentally gone to Ethan's house instead of his ratty one-bedroom.

No, he manages to shake out of his skull. No, this is definitely where he lives, because there's the sound of the perpetually drunk guy next door hurling on the floor. Ethan's the one out of place.

Ethan's also still talking. "She's really smart," he says. "Did you know she beat me at chess once?"

Warren gives him a blank look. He's running on empty, has been for two days, playing hide and seek, come find me, fighting a losing battle with someone who's element could kick his ass on a good day.

He may heal quickly, but broken bones still hurt and drowning felt like nothing he ever, ever wanted to think about again, black and heavy and terrifying. And he'd done that for days until the
older superheroes had come looking for him. Right now, he's in that lovely stage right *after* extreme exhaustion, where all he wants is to take a leak and climb onto the nearest flat surface to go to sleep.

Ethan, however, is in his way.

"Popsicle," he growls out, "Move."

Ethan stops fiddling with the piece of machinery he's got and looks up at Warren. "Oh, yeah, sure." He adjusts his glasses right before he melts into a puddle of orange goopy human that Warren steps over shakily on his quest for a toilet.

"I should have known anybody who could beat *me* at chess had to be an evil mastermind," Ethan says behind him as he resolidifies. "Be careful in the bathroom!" he calls when Warren just keeps going. "I'm supposed to keep an eye on you until Mr. and Mrs. Stronghold get here."

Warren tunes him out. It takes him going on fifteen frustrating minutes to remember how to undo his costume and another two to realize that's he's walked into his bedroom and not the bathroom. He's too tired to be ashamed of the tears that start to prickle at the back of his eyes.

God.

She'd thought that he'd... just because of his father. He wouldn't do that to his friends, to his *mother*, even if she has a hard time looking at him sometimes. He's not his father's son.

"I'm not like him," he tells the empty room.

There's a small sound from his door, someone short and dark easing in next to him to gently grip his forearm. "No," Ethan says seriously, "You're Warren Peace. Emphasis on the Peace. She's just really stupid."

Ethan leads him out of the bedroom, his stupid spandex suit undone to his waist and trailing behind him like, like, like nothing he can think of right now. He blinks a few times when they stop before he understands that they're in the bathroom now.

He blinks a few more times before he remembers that Ethan's spoken and processes it. "Thought you said she was smart?" he asks tiredly.

Ethan smiles. "Nope. Stupid."

Warren doesn't ask for another sidekick.

He just quietly waits for his friends to graduate.

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