



THE
EXTRAORDINARIES

TJ KLUNE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE EXTRAORDINARIES

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Fic: This Is Where We Scorch the Earth

Author: ShadowStar744

Chapter 67 of ? (IT KEEPS GETTING LONGER!)

267,654 words (LIKE A LOT LONGER!!)

Pairing: Shadow Star/Original Male Character

Rated: PG-13 (Rating might go up, but I don't know if I would be good at it, ugh)

Tags: True Love, Pining, Gentle Shadow Star, Violence, Happy Ending, First Kiss, Maybe Some Smut if I Can Talk Myself into It, But Who Knows

Chapter 67: Caught in a Storm

Author's Note: Hey! Sorry I haven't updated in a while. I was having computer problems, and then my summer was really busy. I also had writer's block, which is the worst. I didn't mean to leave it on a cliffhanger for four (!!!) months, but your comments asking me when I was going to update next gave me the inspiration I needed. Thanks for that! I can't promise when the next chapter will be out, because I'm starting my junior year (ugh), and I'll probably be really busy. Hopefully, it won't be too long. And sorry for any mistakes! My beta reader is apparently "busy" (whatever that means), and I'm not very good at editing. Just point out anything wrong in the comments, and I'll try and fix it. Thanks!!!!!!

Nate Belen wasn't a damsel in distress, even if he was currently tied up on top of a bridge waiting for Shadow Star to save him. As he regained

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consciousness, awareness seeping in, all he felt was pain. He groaned lowly. Everything hurt. His neck. His legs. His right hand.

And his heart.

His heart hurt worst of all.

Because it had been broken into tiny shards.

The words that Shadow Star had growled at him echoed in his head.

I care about you, Nate, but I can't be with you. Nova City needs a hero. And I have to be that hero. I can't take the chance of my enemies finding out how much I care about you. They could use you against me. This is over.

A single tear tracked its way down Nate's face. Not that he was a crier! No, he didn't cry over anything. He was strong and brave and never cried.

Except when his stupid superhero almost-sort-of boyfriend broke up with him.

"I see you're awake," an evil voice said.

Nate opened his eyes.

And gasped.

The wind whipped through his thick hair. He tried to struggle against the binds wrapped around his body, but it was no use. He was trapped.

At the top of one of the spires on McManus Bridge, the biggest bridge in *all of Nova City*.

Birds flew by. The stars were bright overhead. And in front of him, black cape billowing, was Pyro Storm.

His mask covered his face, leaving only a slit for his mouth. His eyes were covered in red lenses. His costume was tight—black with red piping—and showed off his strong, muscular body. He had an eight-pack. His chest was really strong. His thighs were thick. His boots were killer. On his chest was a symbol that caused the good people of Nova City to cower in fear: a tornado made of fire.

Nate felt his heart start to race, but he would never let Pyro Storm see he was scared. No way. He struggled against the binds that held him. "What do you want with me?" he snapped courageously at the supervillain.

Pyro Storm tilted his head back and laughed. "Oh, Nate. It's not *you* I want."

"Then why am I here?" Nate asked heroically.

Pyro Storm flew a little closer to Nate, eyes narrowing behind his mask, cape billowing. “You know why.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do,” Pyro Storm retorted. “Everyone knows to whom your heart belongs. And since I have captured you with my diabolical scheme, we both know who will come to your rescue. He always does.”

Nate felt a trickle of sweat drip down his forehead. “He doesn’t care about me.”

Pyro Storm shook his head. “You’re wrong about that. You mean everything to him. Even though he could have anyone in the city, man or woman, he has chosen *you*. You must be something extraordinary for him to have fallen the way he has. And now I know how to strike at him. How to get him to his knees.”

“You’ll never win,” Nate snapped valiantly. “Villains were only made for one thing: to be *defeated*.”

“Wow,” Pyro Storm said, sounding really impressed. “Did you think of that all on your own?”

Nate nodded. “Yes.”

“That was pretty great. I can see why he likes you as much as he does.”

And then a voice growled, “You shouldn’t have touched him.”

“Shadow Star!” Nate gasped.

Because, *yes*, it was. Shadow Star had come.

He looked as amazing as he always did. He wasn’t as buff as Pyro Storm, and his costume wasn’t as obscenely tight, but he still was the most handsome Extraordinary that Nate had ever seen, even if he couldn’t actually see his face, given that it was hidden behind a black mask that covered his entire head except for his mouth. His costume glittered like a starry sky, and no matter what the haters said, it absolutely did *not* look like it was sequined. Instead, it was as if he were covered in tiny jewels.

Shadow Star had once pulled Nate close, and just when Nate was sure he was about to be kissed for the first time in his life, Shadow Star had turned and ran, climbing up the side of a skyscraper quicker than Nate could follow.

But he was here, now, hanging off the spire across from Nate by one hand, his other hand a fist as it dangled toward the river hundreds of feet below. Shadows grew around him like they were sentient, thick bands of

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tentacled darkness that whipped back and forth. Nate wished he knew Shadow Star's secret identity more than anything else.

"Ah," Pyro Storm said, turning to face his greatest nemesis. "I see you got my message, Shadow Star."

"I did," Shadow Star said, his voice a deep rumble that made Nate shiver. "Though I'm sure the city would appreciate if you sent me a text instead of burning it into the side of the mayor's office."

"Had to make sure I'd get your attention," Pyro Storm said.

"You have it, though I'm not sure you want it." Shadow Star glanced at Nate. "You all right?"

Nate nodded. "I . . . I'm fine."

"I'll get you down."

"That'd be nice."

"I need to talk to you."

Nate didn't know if that was good or bad. "O . . . kay?"

Shadow Star stared intensely at him. Or, at least Nate thought he was staring intensely, given that he couldn't actually see Shadow Star's eyes. He wondered if they were blue. He hoped they were. A cerulean blue, like an exotic ocean. They were probably beautiful and hot and full of anguish and pain at the sight of Nate trapped by Pyro Storm.

"Wow," Pyro Storm said. "You could totally cut the sexual tension out here with a knife. Are you guys soul mates? Because you seem like you're soul mates."

Shadow Star turned away, staring off into the distance, full of quiet angst and strength. "I don't know if I can believe in love. I've been . . . hurt. In the past."

Pyro Storm nodded. "Oh, I get that. It sucks, right? But sometimes, you have to move on from whatever hurt you in the past. Or *whoever*."

"You don't know what you speak of, villain," Shadow Star said, clenching his fist. "It's not as easy as you think it is. Loving someone whether they're an Extraordinary or not only brings sorrow."

Oh, the quiet power Shadow Star had. Nate's stomach twisted painfully. "It's worth it," he said. "Because without love, we have nothing."

Shadow Star glanced at him before looking away. "It's not you, Nate. You have to know that. I don't care that you have ADHD that you think makes your brain all screwy, or that you get terrible migraines. Even when you let your dad down last year with bad grades, I know you tried.

You try. You try harder than anyone else I've ever met. It's one of things I . . . I . . ." He shook his head. "Nate. I have so much to tell you. Things I should have told you long ago. But I'm scared of letting someone in, letting someone get close. To see the man behind the mask."

"I see you," Nate said fervently. "All of you, mask or not. Which is why I will do what I must to keep you safe."

Pyro Storm was distracted as Shadow Star began his hero's lament, saying that he'd ignored his heart since he'd learned they were made to be broken. Pyro Storm didn't see that Nate had managed to get one of his arms free. He was up really, really high, but he wasn't scared. Nothing scared him.

Nate leapt from the bridge spire directly onto Pyro Storm's back. The villain shouted in anger as Nate wrapped his leg around his waist, reaching between them and pulling the cape up and over the villain's head. "And *that's* why you don't wear a cape, you dick," Nate growled awesomely, like a badass.

Pyro Storm cursed as he struggled to find his way out of his cape. Nate tried to hold on as best he could, but Pyro Storm was bigger and stronger. Nate couldn't avoid the elbow that Pyro Storm threw back at him. It struck the side of Nate's face. Nate saw stars.

He let go of Pyro Storm.

And began to fall.

"Nate!" Shadow Star screamed.

To be continued . . .

Comments:

ExtraordinariesSuperFan 14:45: OMF GOD! This was AMAZING! But why did you have to leave it on ANOTHER CLIFFHANGER????!! AAAAAAAAAAAAAA

PyroStarIsLife 15:13: I kno u said u didn't want to hear about it n e more, but I think Pyro Storm and Shadow Star are in love. They have so much tension!!!! They should kiss and see if they like it. Nate would understand!

MoltenMagma 16:04: How much longer is this going to go on? You've been writing this for almost a year. I just want Nate and Shadow Star to finally get together. This is already the longest work in the fandom.

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ExtraordinaryGurl 16:14: JLKHGSLKDHT!!!! I LOOOVE IT SO MUCH. THIS IS MY FAVORITE FIC ON THIS ENTIRE SITE GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH-HHHH

ShadowStarIsBae 16:25: Why does Nate suddenly have ADHD and migraines???? That's never been brought up before. Noah Fence, but this is REALLY improbable. How did Nate get out of his binds? How did he jump on Pyro Storm? I like this, but you need to have it be realistic if you're going to talk about real-life Extraordinaries.

FireStoned 16:36: SHADOW STAR IS STRAIGHT. HE LOVES REBECCA FIRE-STONE. STOP MAKING HIM GAY, IT'S WEIRD. HE'S NOT GAY. NOT EVERYTHING NEEDS TO BE GAY ALL THE TIME. I DON'T UNDERSTAND YOU SLASH SHIPPERS. STOP MAKING THINGS GAY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

ReturnOfTheGray 17:15: Sorry I couldn't beta this. Stuff came up. But you did good. I really liked it. Tho, you really talk a lot about Pyro Storm being more muscular than Shadow Star. What's that about? Text you later.

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Nick Bell stared at his phone as he shifted on his bed in his room. “Not gay,” he muttered to himself. “He has *sequins* on his costume.” He thought about deleting the comment, but others were already responding to it, coming after FireStoned with a vengeance, so he decided to leave it up. Whoever Firestoned was, they’d learn fast that one absolutely did not comment on a ShadowStar744 fic like that. After all, Nick was one of the most popular writers in the Extraordinaries fandom (even if he’d had to use the screen name of ShadowStar744 since Shadowstar1–743 were already taken, those bastards), and slash would always be more popular than the hetero nonsense FireStoned seemed to want. *Straight people*, Nick thought as he shook his head. He’d never understand them.

The other forty-two comments, though. They weren’t too shabby. Especially for a shorter chapter that ended on the thirty-second cliff-hanger in a row. Thank god his fans understood. They were the only reason he’d continued writing what could be considered a quarter-of-a-million-word masturbatory ode to Shadow Star. Without them, the fic probably would have ended a long time ago, or worse, been one of those unfinished works that turned into a cautionary tale for new people in the fandom. He could deal with the occasional idiot like Firestoned.

He switched over to Tumblr and reblogged a few things, thumb twitching over a rather risqué drawing of Shadow Star in an evocative pose that was both physically impossible *and* erotic, but decided against it. Ever since his dad had discovered what Tumblr was and that his son had accidentally posted a drawing that apparently *no one under the age of eighteen should be looking at*, he’d kept things clean. It was the only way that Dad had let him keep his Tumblr

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page at all, even after the powers that be decided showing something as inconsequential as nipples could be considered pornography. That, and his dad had demanded the password. Nick had nightmares of his father logging on himself and posting to all of Nick's followers that he'd be grounded if anything remotely explicit showed up on his page again, just like he'd threatened to do.

Nick had been mortified.

Which, of course, was made worse when Dad frowned, and as if it were an afterthought, said, "Also, I feel like we need to discuss how it's a naked man on your page, Nicky. Unless it's just supposed to be artistic. I don't get art."

What Nick said next weren't words, not really. They were a combination of sounds better suited to a nature documentary on the mating habits of elk in the Pacific Northwest. His brain had shorted out as he'd tried to come up with a logical explanation as to why he'd decided to reblog a picture of Shadow Star with a comically large bulge that made him look like he needed to seek medical attention immediately.

His father waited.

Finally, Nick said, "Yeah. So. Um."

And Dad said, "Right. Have you had sex?"

"No, Dad, oh my god, why would you even—"

"Do you know what condoms are?"

"Yes, Dad, oh my god, I know what condoms are—"

"Good. That means you'll use them if, and when, you decide to have sex. Which won't be for a very long time."

"Yes, Dad, oh my— I mean *no*, I'm not having sex, why would you even say that?"

"If it were with a girl, I'd be telling you the same thing. Wrap it, Nicky. Always wrap it before you stick it anywhere." He tilted his head and squinted at his only son. "Or if it's stuck in you. It don't matter to me one way or another. What's that called? Bottoming? I don't care if you're a bottom or the other one. Use protection."

Nick had gone into a full-blown meltdown: synapses firing, eyes bulging, breath caught in his chest as he started to hyperventilate. His father had been there, of course, as he always was when Nick lost his mind a little bit. He sat next to Nick, wrapping an arm

around his shoulders and waiting until his son's head started to clear.

They didn't say much after that. Bell men weren't the greatest when it came to *feelings*, but Aaron Bell had made it clear, perverts were everywhere, and that while some of the people Nick interacted with online might be nice, they might also be men in their late forties still living in their mothers' basements, waiting to lure in an unsuspecting sixteen-year-old for nefarious deeds like making their victims into hand puppets or wearing their skin.

And while Nick didn't think that would happen to him, he wasn't sure. He was a cop's kid. He knew the statistics, had grown up hearing stories of some of the terrible things Dad had seen on patrol. He didn't want to end up as someone's hand puppet, so he didn't reblog porn anymore, no matter how tasteful it was.

(Which meant he'd also had to scrub his *other* Tumblr page which was considerably more adult, but the less said about that one, the better.)

And that was how he'd come out to his father at the age of fifteen. Because of Extraordinary porn.

He'd been so young, then, so naïve. He was sixteen now. A man. Perhaps he was a man who once bought a pillow off Etsy with Shadow Star's face on it. He had tracked the delivery at the top of every hour, making sure that the moment it was on their doorstep, he was the one who got to the door first. It wasn't that he was embarrassed by it (even if it was now hidden under his bed), it was just . . . there'd be a lot of questions, and Nick hadn't been in the mood to answer said questions.

(It does need to be said that three days after receiving the pillow, he kissed it—even though he knew it wasn't exactly normal.)

But Nick was still a man. He'd promised to make good decisions this new school year, a clean slate for both of them. New day, new dawn, blah, blah, blah.

He was shoving his feet into his beat-up Chucks when there was a knock at the door. That too had been part of their agreement. Nick would be trusted to have his door closed if he was responsible enough to do his own laundry so his father wouldn't see any evidence that Nick had been . . . *exploring* himself. Nick loved his

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dad, but his singular talent for making Nick's life excruciating was something that needed to be addressed.

"Breakfast," Dad called through the door. "You better be getting ready, Nicky."

Nick rolled his eyes. "I *am*."

"Uh-huh. Stop your *Tumblr*ing and get your butt downstairs. French toast waits for no man."

"Be right there. And it's not *Tumblr*ing, you philistine. God, it's like you don't know anything at all."

He heard his dad's footsteps retreat down the hall toward the stairs. The floorboards squeaked, something they'd talked about fixing for years. But that was . . . well. That was Before. When things had been right as rain and everything had made sense. Sure, his dad had worked too much back then too, but she'd always been there to rein him in, telling him in no uncertain terms that he *would* be home for dinner at least three times a week, and they would eat as a family. She didn't ask for much, she pointed out. But it was understood by all that she wasn't asking.

Dad still worked too much.

Nick pushed himself off the bed. He turned his phone to vibrate (muttering about *Tumblr*ing under his breath) and crossed the room to his desk to slip it into his backpack.

She was there on his desk, as she always was, trapped in a photograph. She smiled at him, and it hurt, even now. Nick suspected it always would, at least a little bit. But it wasn't the ragged, gaping hole it'd been two years ago, or even the constant ache of last year. Seth, Jazz, and Gibby didn't walk on eggshells around him anymore like they thought he'd burst out crying at the slightest mention of moms.

Dad had taken the photo. It'd been on one of their summer trips out of the city. They'd gone to the coast of Maine to this little cottage by the sea. It'd been weirdly cold, and the beach had been rocks instead of sand, but it'd been . . . nice. Nick had moaned about being away from his friends, that there wasn't even any Wi-Fi, and could his parents possibly *be* any more barbaric? His father laughed, and his mother patted his hand, telling him he'd survive.

He hadn't been too sure about that.

But then, he'd been thirteen, and so of course he'd been overly dramatic. Puberty was a bitch, causing his voice to break along with a group of zits that had decided to nest against the side of his nose. He was gawky and awkward and had hair sprouting everywhere, so it was in his very nature to be overly dramatic.

Only later did Nick find out his father had taken the photo.

It'd been halfway through the trip, and they decided to find the local lighthouse that was supposed to be scenic, which was code for boring. It'd taken a couple of hours because it was in the middle of nowhere, and the paper map she insisted on was absolutely useless. But then they nearly drove past a sign half-hidden by a gnarled old tree, and she shouted, "*There!*" Brightly, full of excitement. Dad slammed on the brakes, and Nick laughed for the first time since he'd set foot in the state of Maine. She looked back at him, grinning wildly, her light hair hanging down around her face, and she winked at him while his father grumbled and reversed the car slowly.

They found the lighthouse shortly after.

It was smaller than Nick expected, but there was something exhilarating about the way Jenny Bell threw open the car door as soon as they stopped in the empty parking lot, waves crashing in the background. She left the door open, saying, "See? I knew we'd find it. I *knew* it was here."

The Bell men followed her. Always.

The frame of the photograph was oak and heavy. He had taken it from his mom's nightstand without a second thought. His father hadn't said a word when he'd seen it on Nick's desk the first time. It was something they didn't talk about.

One of the somethings.

She smiled at him every day. She must have seen Dad with the camera, because she was looking right at it, her head on her son's shoulder. Nick's head turned toward the sky, his eyes closed.

They looked too much alike. Pale and green-eyed and blond with eyebrows that had minds of their own. There was no doubt where he'd come from. Dad was big, bigger than Nick would ever be, tan skin and dark hair and muscles on top of muscles, though they were softer than they used to be. Nick was skinny and all gangly

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limbs, uncoordinated on his best day, and downright dangerous on his worst. He'd taken after her, though she'd made being a klutz endearing, whereas he was more likely to break a table or a bone. She'd told him she'd met his dad by literally falling on top of him in the library. She'd been on a ladder, trying to get to the top shelf, and he happened to pass right on by the moment she slipped. He'd caught her, Dad would say, and *she'd* say, sure, right, except you didn't because I landed on you and we both fell, and then they'd laugh and laugh.

Nick looked like her.

He acted like her.

He didn't know how Dad could stand to look at him some days.

"I'm going to do better," he told her quietly, not wanting his father to hear. The fact that he spoke to his mom's photo would probably get him back to the psychiatrist, something Nick was desperate to avoid. "New Nick. You'll see. Promise."

He pressed his fingers against his lips, and then to the photo.

She kept on smiling.

Dad was in their small kitchen, an old dishrag thrown over his shoulder. He'd taken off his uniform at some point after he'd gotten home from the night shift. Breakfast was their time—unless Dad had the day off. It was usually all they got for weeks. It'd get even harder now that school was starting again, but they'd figure it out. After the events of last spring, they were working together as a team.

The table had already been set, plates and silverware and glasses of juice. And, of course, the oblong white pill with the cheery name of Concentra. "Concentra will help Nick concentrate," the doctor had told them with a straight face. Dad had nodded, and Nick had somehow managed to keep his mouth shut instead of saying *something* that probably wouldn't be appreciated.

Dad kept the pills locked up in the safe in his room. It wasn't because he didn't trust Nick, he'd told him, but he knew the dangers of peer pressure, and he didn't want Nick to get caught up in the world of drugs and dealing them under the bleachers on the football field.

“Thank you for not letting me become a drug dealer,” Nick had said. “I felt the pull toward a life of crime, but you saved me.”

Nick picked up the pill now, Dad turning to watch him with an eyebrow arched, and he swallowed it, chasing it down with a sip of orange juice. Gross. He’d just brushed his teeth, and now he had a mouthful of the plague. He grimaced as he stuck out his tongue, raising it up and down, showing that he’d swallowed the pill.

Dad turned back toward the stove and the growing stack of French toast.

An old TV sat on the counter near the fridge, turned to the news as usual. Nick was about to ignore it until the perfectly coifed anchor announced they were going live to Rebecca Firestone, now on the scene.

Nick’s attention snapped to the screen as he grabbed the remote off the table and turned up the volume.

Nothing else mattered. Not the bitter aftertaste of the pill. Not the fact that his father seemed to be making enough French toast to feed a family of thirty-four. Not the fact that Nick was pretty sure he’d forgotten to put on deodorant after his shower. No. All that mattered was Rebecca Firestone. Because if Rebecca Firestone was on, that meant one thing.

Shadow Star.

There she was, makeup expertly applied over glowing white skin, brown hair cut pixie-short, eyes wide and teeth Hollywood white as she smiled at the camera. In the background, police cruisers lined the sidewalks, lights flashing. “Thank you, Steve. I’m standing here on the corner of Forty-Eighth and Lincoln in front of the Burke Tower, where last night, a brazen attempt at a break-in occurred.” The screen cut away, showing the gratuitous skyscraper rising high above Nova City. “Sources tell me that a group of armed militants attempted to parachute onto the roof of Burke Tower. Though their intentions remain unclear at this point, their plans were immediately vanquished upon landing when they were met by Nova City’s own Extraordinary, Shadow Star.”

“Immediately vanquished,” Nick muttered, making a face. “Because that rolls right off the tongue. Get an editor, Firestone. You’re an embarrassment to your profession.”

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The screen returned to Rebecca Firestone. She was smiling widely, her cheeks flushed. “I was able to speak with Shadow Star off camera earlier this morning, and he told me that while the militants were prepared, they didn’t get much farther than attempting to gain access through the ventilation system. All seven were incapacitated in a matter of moments and have since been handed off to Nova City’s finest. No civilians were injured.”

Nick absolutely did not swoon. And if he did, it had nothing to do with Rebecca Firestone. She was the gnarled barnacle attached to the wonder that was Shadow Star. Most everyone thought there’d been something between them at one point. And even though Nick knew Rebecca Firestone was nothing but a nosy jerk who lived to play the role of a professional damsel in distress, Shadow Star was always there to rescue her, no matter what she did to get herself in trouble.

Nick was not a fan of the self-proclaimed intrepid reporter. She was obviously using Shadow Star to make a name for herself in the cutthroat world of reporting on Extraordinaries. Maybe Shadow Star tended to give her exclusives he never gave anyone else, and *maybe* there’d been that one picture where he’d saved her from a burning building, Rebecca clutched in his buff arms, her face in his neck. And yes, Nick had printed that photo and used it as a target for the dartboard in his room, but he wasn’t jealous. He was just a firm believer in journalistic ethics.

“With me now, is Nova City’s Chief of Police, Rodney Caplan.”

The camera panned left, and a large Black man stood next to Rebecca Firestone, sweating profusely, his caterpillar mustache wilted. His uniform was straining at the stomach, and he reached up to wipe his brow before attempting a smile that came off as a grimace.

“Cap looks like he could use a vacation,” Nick said without looking away from the TV.

“We all do, kid,” Dad said. “Maybe next time he comes over for dinner, you can tell him that. See what happens.”

“I did last time. He laughed at me.”

“That’s because it was a dumb thing to say.”

“Positive reinforcement,” Nick reminded him.

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“Right. Sorry. It was a dumb thing to say, but you used your words. Proud of you.”

“Thank you.”

“What can you tell us, Chief?” Rebecca Firestone asked.

“Absolutely nothing,” Cap said. “In fact, you already know more than you should. Probably more than we do.”

Rebecca Firestone barely faltered. Some might say she was professional; Nick was not one of those people. “This is the third major criminal operation we’ve seen in the last five months attempt to gain access to Burke Tower. Granted, they have all failed thanks to Shadow Star, but—”

“Not *thanks* to Shadow Star,” Cap said, glaring at the camera. “Thanks to the hardworking men and women of the Nova City Police Department. We absolutely don’t need these costumed vigilantes flying around with their capes and their powers, trying to—”

“Shadow Star doesn’t wear a cape,” Nick and Rebecca Firestone said at the same time.

Cap turned to stare at Rebecca Firestone.

Dad turned to stare at Nick.

Nick ignored him.

Rebecca Firestone said, “Isn’t it true that Shadow Star has—”

“For all we know, Shadow Star is responsible for these crimes,” Cap said, mustache drooping farther as he frowned. “As a way to increase his profile. These groups could be working for him. A setup to make him look like the hero. Nova City was safer before the Extraordinaries reappeared, and I will do everything in my power to see all of them behind bars.”

“Yes,” Nick said. “Invite Cap over again. I have some things I’d like to discuss with him.”

Instead of responding, Dad reached over Nick’s shoulder and switched off the TV. It was an effective rebuttal. Nick was impressed. Annoyed, but impressed. “I was watching that.”

“Breakfast,” his dad said, like Nick hadn’t spoken at all.

Since Nick was supposed to make this a better year, he didn’t argue, at least not out loud. The retort in his head was fierce and devastating.

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“Why weren’t you there?” he asked, pulling at the chair and sitting down.

Dad scrubbed a hand over his face as he sat on the other side of the table. “If I tell you that I was, you get to ask me two questions, and two questions only.”

Nick gaped at him.

Dad put two slices of French toast on his plate.

“But—I want—you can’t just—”

“Two questions, Nicky. Make ’em count.”

His father was amazing. Gruff, but kind. He was good at what he did. When he laughed, his eyes crinkled, the lines around his mouth deep, and that made Nick happy, though it didn’t happen as often as it used to. He was courageous and just, and sometimes, Nick didn’t know what he’d do without him.

But he could also be the biggest jerk. Like right now. “Seven questions.”

“No questions,” Dad replied, handing Nick the butter.

“Six questions!”

“I’m bored with this.”

“You’re terrible at negotiating. How am I supposed to learn how to adult when my parental figure refuses to work with me?”

“Life sucks, kid. Take what you can get.”

“*Fine.* Two questions.”

Dad pointed his fork at Nick. “While you eat. You took your pill. You need food in your stomach.”

“I’m supposed to wait thirty minutes before—”

“Nicky.”

“What did they want?” Nick asked through a mouthful of French toast.

“I don’t know. I didn’t talk to any of them before they were taken downtown. Cap told me to go home because he knew it was your first day of school. Said to remind you there’s an empty cell with your name on it if there’s a single grade below a B minus on your report card at any point this year.”

“I wonder if the mayor knows that officers in his police department are threatening minors.”

“He does,” Dad said. “And he supports it completely. You get one more question.”

Like he didn’t know what Nick was going to ask. “Did you see him?”

“Yes,” Dad said, mopping up a disgusting amount of syrup.

Nick waited.

Dad said nothing.

Nick could play this game.

On second thought, he absolutely couldn’t. “*And?*”

“Is that another question?”

Nick barely stopped himself from throwing his fork at Dad’s head. “Why are you like this?”

Dad grinned at him. “Because your adolescent angst brings me joy as a parent.”

“Dad!”

“Yes, Nick. I saw Shadow Star. I even talked to him. In fact, I got his autograph for you. And his phone number. He gave it to me after I told him about your crush on him. He said he’d love to go out on a date with you, because he thought you were dreamy when I showed him a picture of you—”

“Please tell me I was adopted,” Nick begged. “It’s the only thing that could possibly salvage the wreckage that is my life.”

“Sorry, kiddo. You came from my loins.”

Nick groaned and dropped his head to the table. “Why did you have to phrase it like that?”

Nick felt a hand on the back of his neck, squeezing gently. “Because I think it’s adorable when you get flustered. Especially when talking about your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Nick muttered into the tabletop. “He doesn’t even know I exist.”

“Probably for the best. He’d most likely be scared away when he saw the Tumblr you do about him. Nobody likes a stalker, Nicky.”

Nick knocked his dad’s hand away as he sat back up. “I am *not* a stalker—”

“No, I didn’t see him. None of us did. And he’s lucky we didn’t,

—-1

—0

—+1

or we would've arrested him on the spot. Damn Extraordinaries. All they do is—”

“Make your job harder, yeah, yeah. I know. You say it all the time. But, Dad. He can climb walls and control shadows. I don't think you fully grasp how amazing that is.”

“Oh, I fully grasp it, all right. But he needs to let us do our jobs. Life isn't like one of your comic books, Nick. This is real. People can get hurt.”

“He's one of the good guys!”

Dad scoffed. “Says who?”

“*Everyone.*”

Dad shook his head. “This isn't black and white. It's not about heroes and villains. Shadow Star is as much a pain in my ass as Fire Guy—”

“Pyro Storm, and don't you dare compare them like that. Pyro Storm is Shadow Star's archnemesis, and the fate of Nova City hangs in the balance as Shadow Star fights for us against the tyranny of—”

“They're douchebags who wear tights they bought at a thrift shop.”

Nick glared at him.

Dad shrugged.

Nick decided to be magnanimous. “I'm going to pretend you never said that.”

“What a blessing.”

Maybe not *that* magnanimous. “This is the worst start to a school year ever.”

“Speaking of.”

Yeah, that was his fault. He should've seen it coming. “We're not going to do this again.”

“I think we are,” Dad said, sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms. Nick saw the bags under his eyes, the wrinkles on his forehead that hadn't been there a couple of years ago. He felt a sharp pang in his chest. He forced himself not to look at all the ghosts that still haunted the kitchen: the spice rack neither of them had dared to touch, her favorite towels hanging off the front of the stove, the ones with little cats embroidered onto them. “Just so we're on the same page.”

Better to get it over with. “I’ll pay attention.”

“And?”

“I’ll do my homework every night.”

“And?”

“And if I’m having trouble, I’ll ask for help.”

“And?”

“And if things start to get too much, I’ll tell you.”

“Why is that?”

Nick barely restrained from groaning. “Because it’s easier to stand together than it is to struggle apart.”

Dad nodded slowly. “Good.” Then, “I know it’s been tough, Nick. And I wasn’t the best person to be around.”

Alarmed, Nick said, “That’s not—”

Dad held up his hand, and Nick subsided. “I made mistakes—mistakes I shouldn’t have. I made you a promise to do better, and I’m going to keep it. I may need you to remind me every now and then, but I know you will. And you know I’ll do the same for you. We gotta be a team, kid. It’s . . . it’s what she would have wanted. You know that as well as I do.”

Nick nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“Good. Pound it out.” He held up his fist.

God, his dad was so embarrassing.

Nick fist-bumped his father anyway. It would’ve been rude to leave Dad hanging.