

Better an honest enemy

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Better an honest enemy

by [htbthomas](#)

Summary

than a friend who lies.

Or that's how the saying goes, at least.

Notes

Thanks to my beta, innie!

Chris took another sip of his latte, trying not to chug it down. It was still blazing hot, and if Nick noticed that Chris didn't even hiss at the heat, it could lead to an uncomfortable conversation. But man, he needed it. Last night's battle had gone on for hours, and he still hadn't caught the damned bank-robbing telekinetic. He'd barely gotten thirty minutes of sleep before he had to turn around and go in to the office, so he'd jumped at the chance when Nick suggested going out for coffee.

"You okay?" Nick asked. "You don't usually get three shots of espresso."

Chris winced. Was he that obvious? He was going to have to work on that. "You got me. Rough night."

"Couldn't sleep?"

"Hardly slept a wink," he said. There. That was perfectly true.

Nick's hand came down on his forearm, and he squeezed it lightly. "Sorry to hear that. You worried about something?"

Chris thought about how to answer. Yes, he was worried about a lot of things, and none of them were things he could share with Nick. He opened his mouth to give a vague answer, already regretting the consequences about to hit him...

But Nick's attention was suddenly pulled over Chris' shoulder, toward the entrance. "Hey, Tyler. Is that you?" He lifted the hand from Chris' arm to wave.

"Nicholas?" a voice answered, and Chris mouthed 'Nicholas?' at Nick.

Nick shrugged and gestured toward the mystery person. "Hey, come over and sit with us. It's been an age."

Chris turned in his chair to look at 'Tyler.' He was lean and tall, but not too tall, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans. He gave Chris a nod of greeting, mild expression pleasantly surprised, as he pulled up a chair, twirling and straddling it so the back faced Chris and Nick. "Been a while, hasn't it?" Tyler said.

"Chris," Nick said with a gesture and a clamped hand on Tyler's shoulder. "This is my old college buddy, Tyler. We lived in the dorms together."

"Shared a few classes, went to *way* too many parties." Tyler smiled and shook his head with a rueful laugh. "We were basically inseparable. Trouble walking."

"People used to say, 'Watch out! Here comes TNT!'" Nick chuckled and Tyler's face seemed to light up with the memory.

Chris looked between them. It was hard not to feel a pang of jealousy. Chris' college days had been pretty tame, what with him always being worried that he'd do something to trigger his

power, which wasn't under his complete control yet. He'd been a loner for most of high school and college. It was only as an adult that he'd been able to really make friends.

Like Nick.

Strange that it was Nick, one of the guys from the office, rather than one of the guys who fought beside him on a nightly basis. But somehow it was easier to get to know the guy at the desk beside yours than the guys whose actions could mean your life or death. It didn't help that their names, faces and civilian identities were protected, even from each other. What was he supposed to do, ask Lightstorm his bowling average?

"And Tyler, this is Chris." Nick's left hand clamped on Chris' shoulder, just as the right hand had done on Tyler's. "My best friend."

A warm feeling went through Chris. Nick had never said that before, though Chris had thought it a thousand times. Had... anyone?

Tyler's hand shot out. "Nice to meet you, man."

Chris gripped and shook it, at a non-superhuman level, still a little stunned by Nick's words. "Nice to meet you, too," he said back, automatically.

But it was a mistake. A jolt of pain shot through his arm, and he instantly felt dizzy. *Shit*. It was just a *tiny* lie—so what if it wasn't that nice to meet Tyler? So what if Chris was a little bit jealous of his best friend's ex-best friend. Damn powers.

He tried to cover his reaction, but Tyler's brows drew together anyway. Chris cut his eyes to Nick, embarrassed.

"So," Nick said, blessedly unaware, "are you in town visiting? Here for business?"

Tyler's face twisted into an awkward grimace. "Uh, I live here now. Have for a while."

"And you never looked me up?" Nick shook his head, but he didn't seem mad. "Shame on you, Ty."

Tyler shrugged. "I've been..." his voice trailed off as he struggled to find an excuse, "...busy. Sorry."

Nick laughed and clapped Tyler's shoulder. "Nah, man, no need to apologize. I'm just giving you grief. Go get your coffee—we've got plenty of time to catch up."

Chris only paid half-attention to the conversation Nick was keeping up as the other half of his attention was on Tyler at the counter. Chris was usually so much better at controlling his words and reactions. What was it about this guy?

As Tyler walked back toward them, mug in hand, friendly smile of anticipation on his face, Chris made a resolution.

Next time they crossed paths, Chris would be better prepared.

Tyler took another look at his wine bottle before ringing the doorbell. Was this really what he should have brought? An eight dollar bottle of Merlot? He could afford much better wine, but he didn't want any questions about what kind of money he was making. Or how.

He should have grabbed a six-pack of something and just pretended to drink it. He sighed and pressed the button.

"Tyler!" Nick said when he opened the door. "So glad you could make it!"

He almost didn't. That asshole Crusader had bruised several of his ribs, almost breaking one during their fight last night, all while harping on him to 'do the right thing.' Luckily Tyler had escaped before the guy could do more damage. "Wouldn't miss another chance to catch up."

He wouldn't. The villain game was an all-too-solitary profession, unless you counted your henchpeople. And no self-respecting villain did.

Nick wrapped him in a half-hug around the shoulders and looked down at the wine. "Oh, I love this brand. Chris thinks it's swill, but..." He nodded behind him into the living room.

Tyler looked over Nick's shoulder to see Chris sitting on the couch, a stack of board games on the coffee table in front of him. "It is," he said, making a face. "I can't lie to you."

Great. This guy. He was right about the wine, but still. He'd been so standoffish and twitchy at the coffee shop. What did Nick see in him?

"It's what I love about you, Chris," Nick said, giving Tyler a partial answer as he gave Chris a thumbs up. Tyler closed the door behind them. "You're the most honest person I've ever known. It's refreshing." Nick headed off toward the kitchen with Tyler's wine.

Chris shrugged at Nick's comment, almost regretfully, and took the lid off one of the boxes. Trivial Pursuit, it looked like. A couple other people were gathered on chairs around the room, talking to each other. But the only empty spot was in the center of the couch. Next to Chris. Maybe he could mentally nudge one of the others to move there instead. Maybe the woman sitting on the other end of the couch and talking to her friend in the armchair.

He started to send a mental push toward her but Nick appeared beside him with two glasses of Merlot, filled to the brim. "Here you go," Nick said, handing Tyler one of them.

Distracted, Tyler felt his shot go wide, sending the side table lamp plunging. The two women shrieked, but Chris was suddenly there, catching it before it hit the floor. "Are you two okay?" Chris asked the women quietly.

But not too quietly for Tyler to hear.

They nodded dumbly, but a second later were laughing in relief and standing, back to their conversation. They wandered off, drinks in hand, to the snacks table.

That was weird, right? He got what he wanted—a different place to sit—and he was glad that he hadn't broken Nick's lamp, or hurt the women. He spent his nights as a villain, but he

didn't get off on pain or damage like some of the other guys out there. But it was still weird, Chris being... right there to stop it.

Tyler lifted his glass of terrible wine to his lips to cover the way he was watching Chris as he casually went back to his side of the couch. "Good save!" Nick was telling him. "How are you always in the right place at the right time?" He patted Chris on the shoulder and went to talk to someone he saw on the other side of the room.

As Nick was leaving, Chris gave another shrug at Nick's comment. To Tyler's new perspective, it seemed purposely calculated to be casual. Testing a theory, Tyler sent another mental push toward Chris, just as he lifted a red Solo cup to his lips. If he was wrong, Chris would drench himself in Coke, and Nick's *BFF* would run off to clean up. If he was right...

The cup didn't even wobble.

But Chris lifted his gaze to look Tyler directly in the eyes.

Tyler tried not to react, taking a slow sip of the terrible wine that was already at his lips, regretting it instantly and coughing it back up into the glass. And all over the front of his shirt. Shit.

"Swill, right?" Chris said. Tyler cut an annoyed look at him, but Chris was smiling amiably and standing. "Let's get you something to clean up with and grab you a clean shirt."

He followed behind Chris, feeling chastened. Okay, so maybe the guy had powers—speed, strength, maybe nullifying abilities—but he wasn't a jerk. Which meant he couldn't be a working hero. Those guys were all so self-important and concerned with their image that he couldn't see any one of them living the simple life as an office worker, or bothering to cover their tracks by holding down a menial day job. He wondered if Chris even knew what he had. It wasn't unheard of. If Tyler hadn't been jumped in that alley ten years ago...

When the games finally got started, Tyler asked Chris if he wanted to team up. After all, if he was Nick's best friend, Tyler owed it to him to give Chris a fair chance.

Chris looked up at the staircase, then back at Nick. "You didn't say your new place was a walkup."

Nick gave him a too-big awkward smile. "I knew we could handle it?"

"Oh, yeah?" Chris examined the couch again—a small three-seater, attached cushions. It hadn't been difficult for him and Nick to unload from the U-Haul, so he hadn't had to pretend he was struggling. "This is a little different from a ramp," he joked.

"That's why I asked Tyler to come," Nick said, nodding behind him.

Chris turned his head, and there he was. Tyler. The telekinetic. Did he know? A lot of people with powers never realized it, not until there was some inciting incident. Of course Chris had known he was different since he was a tiny little kid, trying to hide stolen cookies from his

mom. He hadn't even needed to say the lie out loud before he was rolling on the floor, clutching his stomach in agony. The doctors couldn't find anything physically wrong.

But the next time, he told her the truth. And she let him have them. "My big, strong honest boy," she'd said, giving him a hug. He'd been chasing that feeling ever since.

"Hi, Tyler," Chris said, giving him a wave. "Just in time." Between his strength and Tyler's unknown-or-not telekinesis, they could get the couch up the stairs without Nick throwing his back out or something worse.

Tyler's expression broke into a smile. "Hey, Chris!" He threw a hand up for a high-five and clasped Chris's hand when they connected. "The trivia genius. Couldn't have won without you."

"True," Chris said. "You were terrible in almost every category."

"Except Geography!" Nick pointed out.

Nick and Tyler laughed, and at Chris's confused frown, Nick explained, "Tyler caught the travel bug in college. Every other weekend he was out of town, every break he was jetting off to some new corner of the globe. I was so jealous, stuck doing pizza delivery every weekend and most breaks to make my share of the rent."

"Rich family?" Chris asked.

Tyler shrugged. "I do okay."

More than okay, it sounded like. And what was he doing these days? They'd never gotten into shop talk at game night.

"And now he's rolled that family fortune into the stock market, I bet." Nick punched him lightly on the arm.

"Something like that." Tyler neatly sidestepped the discussion by focusing on the couch. "Is that going up next?"

Chris turned his gaze on Nick. "Apparently."

Nick didn't even blush. "If two of us take the ends, the other can support the back."

Tyler caught Chris' eyes. "Nice of him to leave this until I could get here," he drawled.

Chris let out a laugh. "Was he like this in college, too?" He walked around to the other side of the couch, the one facing the stairwell. It meant he'd be carrying it up while walking backward, but it was only fair; he was the strongest of all three, even though they didn't know that.

"Worse," Tyler said. "This one time—"

"Hey!" Nick protested. "Now don't go comparing notes!"

"Too late," both Chris and Tyler said simultaneously. And for the first time since he'd first met Tyler, Chris didn't feel even a touch of jealousy. Maybe he could actually expand his little friendship circle.

Tyler took the other end, Nick braced the back, and they started the awkward climb.

Honestly, he could have carried the couch on his own, in one palm, but it was sort of fun working together, chanting, "1, 2, 3, lift!" and pretending like he was going to drop the end a couple of times. "You want me to switch with you?" Nick asked once or twice.

Chris would blow out a breath and shake his head. "Maybe on the next flight."

Tyler didn't seem to be struggling much, but he was probably unconsciously using his telekinesis. At one of the turns, the couch suddenly got so light on Chris' end that he almost batted it forward. With a gasp, he adjusted his grip into a tighter hold on the corners and looked down at Tyler in reproach. "Hey! We have to *do it right*, or we'll drop it!"

Tyler's face went slack with shock. Then the shock turned into a considering frown.

Okay. He *did* know about his telekinesis. And now he knew Chris suspected it, too.

But Tyler must want to keep it secret, from Nick, at least. He was just trying to help, and he had no idea that Chris was strong enough to carry the couch himself. Chris opened his mouth to add something about being careful with the way he tilted it, anything to soften his words—

"Just keep it in *mind*?" Tyler asked, an eyebrow drawn up. "Or do I need to *master* it first?"

Chris stilled.

No. There was no way. Had to be a coincidence. He thought back over the last two months, and the timeline matched up.

Tyler's face had gone still as well, watching Chris' reaction carefully. But he didn't know what to do, not with Nick here. He felt trapped in place, overwhelmed with the possibilities. And the longer that he stood there, not doing anything, the worse it felt.

"Chris?" Nick asked, a note of worry in his voice. "Are you okay? Did you pull something?" He turned to Tyler. "I knew I shouldn't have cheaped out and used you guys instead of movers. Tyler, help me lower this gently..."

"Don't worry about Chris," Tyler said, one corner of his mouth crinkling up. "He could carry this thing with one hand tied behind his back, I bet."

Was that a jab? "Yeah, don't worry about me, I'm fine," and even as the words came out of his mouth, his arms turned to jelly and the couch slipped out of his hands gone numb. Of course he wasn't fine! Why had he said that—

The couch lurched backward, but stopped short of slamming downward onto the steps. Chris faked a look of strain, and Nick, not pretending at all, cried out, "Chris!"

Chris sat down heavily on the step. He thought he heard a tiny crack from his weight hitting the concrete, but that couldn't be helped. "I think I need to take a breather."

"Take as long as you need," Nick assured him, but Chris barely heard him. All he could focus on now were Tyler's considering eyes.

Oh *no*.

Fuck.

The word had been repeating in Tyler's head for the last day. *Fuck.*

He had finally decided to settle somewhere, establish a base of operations, make a few actual friends for the first time since college and this happened.

He should have known. He should have *known*!

Nick was always a people magnet—he was easy to let your guard down around, so people just felt comfortable around him. So it didn't really surprise him that Chr—no, his name was the goddamn *Crusader*, Tyler had to keep that forefront in his thoughts—and Nick had become friends somehow. But *best* friends? That overbearing, supercilious asshole? He thought Nick had better taste than that.

Of course, he'd been warming up to the bastard, too, celebrating with him on game night, teasing him on moving day, thinking about inviting him for drinks...

It was Villainy Proverb Number One: Don't Make Friends—They'll Soon Become Your Enemies.

Ugh, how could he have been so—

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"—stupid!" Chris slammed his fist into the wall.

It only gave a little, being steel-reinforced. He'd immediately abandoned his civilian apartment, not even taking time to strip it clean. There wasn't anything identifying there anyway; he'd been very careful. So he'd be living at Headquarters for a while, right? No big deal.

But he'd also have to call in sick to work for the near future, too. If Tyler—no, he had to refer to him as *Mindmaster*, even in his thoughts—decided to drop by and out him to the whole office? He probably would, anyway, whether Chris was there or not. He was going to have to start all over again, wasn't he? New name, new identity, new friends...

What would Nick think of 'the most honest guy he's ever known' now?

It suddenly hit him. Even if he had to abandon his old life entirely—he couldn't abandon Nick. Sweet, trusting, always smiling Nick, who collected friends like seashells at the beach.

He couldn't leave him alone to suffer through whatever nefarious plans Mindmaster had for him. Had they *really* been friends at college at all? Or was Nick being secretly mind-controlled?

Chris' safety wasn't important. He had to save—

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Nick!

Tyler froze in place. What had Crusader told him? Had he already poisoned him against Tyler, before he even got a chance to defend himself?

He threw on a jacket and headed out the door without really checking to make sure it was locked. If Crusader had had him followed, it wouldn't matter. The place would be torn apart before he returned. There was nothing of value at his apartment anyway, and most of the currency he'd stolen was safe in an unnamed island nation's bank or floating in the digital ocean.

But he didn't care about any of it. He could steal more anytime he wanted. Nothing was as important to him as getting to Nick.

First.

He jumped onto his motorbike and set off at getaway speeds. He could push aside any slow-moving vehicles along the way, and distract any police that had the bad luck to notice.

Leaving his bike tumbled against the curb in front of Nick's apartment building, he took the stairs three at a time, pushing off with his telekinesis to make himself faster. There was a pounding above, frantic and heavy, and some sort of shouting garbled by distance—so Tyler took a final leap that sent him up the last flight without touching a single step.

And there he was. Pounding one heavy fist on Nick's door, Crusader/Chris shouted, "Nick! Are you okay?!" He turned quickly, before Tyler alighted back down on the floor, face flushed and tight. "Mindmaster," he said, teeth gritted and voice low.

"Crusader," Tyler returned. It was a relief to have it actually out in the open.

Crusader/Chris clenched his fist and raised it defensively, though he didn't make a move to come closer. Tyler picked up the neighbor's heavy potted palm from behind him, and floated it close. He couldn't touch Crusader/Chris with his mind, but Tyler had proven in battle (and on moving day) that his mind could use *other* objects to hit him.

"I don't care what you do," Crusader/Chris said, his voice still a low growl. "Who you've told, what's coming next..." His eyes narrowed. "Just don't hurt Nick."

Hurt Nick? Tyler set the pot gently back down. "That's the last thing I'd ever do, man." He took a step forward, rolling slowly from heel to toe. "He's my friend, and I want it to stay that way." He took another step forward, ready to attack or flee at a moment's notice. "Did you... tell him?"

Crusader/Chris was silent a moment. Then he asked, "About you?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "Not yet. But I'll do whatever it takes to protect him." It wasn't threatening or arrogant, just a simple statement of truth. Of *course* this guy would tell the truth, even now.

Tyler felt the same. And admitting that to himself meant he had to admit something else. Crusa—Chris—was actually a good friend to Nick. "I haven't told him about you, either."

"If I believed you..." Chris frowned and studied Tyler's face. "Why not?"

Because he'd wanted something to hold over Chris if needed? Because if the truth came out it would probably lead to mutually assured destruction? Because he liked being the only one who knew the truth?

All of those were true. But the reason that stuck foremost in his mind was, "Because I actually like you," he said with a shrug, adding, "asshole."

Chris' frown only deepened. He opened his mouth, but before any words could come out, his phone rang.

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Shit. The last thing Chris needed was to be distracted at a time like this.

Tyler held up his hands—as if that was supposed to reassure him—and said, "Go ahead and answer it."

He lifted it from his pocket, never taking his eyes from Tyler, except to glance briefly at the screen. "It's Nick," he said, relief suffusing his voice.

"You see?" Tyler said. "He's fine. Probably calling you from work."

Nick hadn't been at work that morning when Chris had called in sick, and he hadn't been at his usual lunch spot either when Chris had stealthily checked. He hadn't answered any of Chris' increasingly frantic texts or calls, either. Which was why he was here in the first place, frantically pounding on Nick's door. He'd been three seconds from just kicking the door in when Tyler appeared.

Was this a trick? Chris didn't really know the range of Mindmaster's powers—only that they didn't seem to work directly on Chris. He was able to control objects. Perhaps he was controlling Chris' phone. Was he also able to control the minds of the unpowered, even without a line of sight?

The phone stopped ringing then, but a second later, the screen lit up with a series of texts. *Chris? You okay? I got your messages, what's wrong? Do you need me to go by the pharmacy for you?*

Chris looked up at Tyler. "Are you doing this?"

Tyler scoffed. "What am I, Techno-Man?" A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth, but it wasn't sarcastic or cruel. Just teasing, like two friends ribbing each other.

"I don't know what you can do," he stated, voice flat.

"Well, I can't do that. And I don't know all you can do, either. Except that you're really fast and strong. And truthful." The other corner of his mouth turned up, making it a full smile. "And incredibly patronizing when in costume."

"Hey!" Chris said, but he wasn't really offended. His own teammates had said the same thing, and since he had to be honest— "But you're right," he said with a shrug. "I do it on purpose."

"God, *why*?"

"It's a persona I wear, and since I have to tell the truth anyway..."

"Wait." Tyler took another step forward. "You *have* to?"

Chris' guard went up again. Tyler might be acting like his friend, might actually *become* his friend, as bizarre as that idea was, but Chris had never actually told anyone this specific truth. Goddammit. With great power came endless opportunities to fuck it up.

"I..." He flirted with the idea of *not* answering, but even the thought made his back spasm. Briefly enough that he could hide it, but he couldn't risk anything worse. "My power is based in truth. And if I lie, even a little... I pay for it." His back relaxed, and he sighed with relief.

Tyler's face went still, considering. Great. The entire villain community was going to know now. Not only was Chris going to have to leave town, he was going to have to leave the country—new name, new persona, get plastic surgery...

"Huh," Tyler said. "That... can't be easy."

Was that empathy? "It's not. But it's been that way my whole life."

Tyler was silent another long moment. "Well, *I'm* being completely honest with you. I will never hurt him. And I have not, and will not tell him about.." he gestured between them, "...this."

"This?"

"Our *other* job."

Chris really wanted to believe him. But as he'd had to learn a thousand times, for anyone other than him, actions spoke louder than words. "All right."

Tyler cocked his head. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"No." Chris unlocked his screen to call Nick back. "But as long as you don't tell him about me, I won't tell him about you, either." He could feel the strength rushing back into his muscles. "Believe me."

"Oh," Tyler said with a laugh. "You know I do."

The pins cracked together at the far end of the lane with a satisfying crash. "Strike!" Tyler crowed, and Chris clapped for him—and it actually seemed genuine. Chris was a pretty good bowler, when he was controlling how hard he threw the ball. But Tyler? He'd mastered this game long ago.

Nick gave him a high-five as he came back to the seats. "We're crushing them!" Nick cheered, and clapped Tyler on the back, hard.

"Hey! Don't crush me, too," Tyler complained.

When Nick turned to taunt their competition, Chris asked him in a low voice, "You haven't been... you know, nudging the pins in your favor?"

"No! Of course not!" Tyler said. Was he? He'd always bowled like this, with a little mental adjustment here and there, so it was hard to tell. "Well, not intentionally."

"And you aren't—?" Chris nodded his head toward the other team's scores, which were distressingly low by the way their team captain was wringing his hands.

"Definitely not!" Tyler said, completely honest. Somehow being around Chris made that easier to do. "They'd be much lower if I had anything to do with it." He held up three fingers in a mock-solemn Scouts salute.

Things had been pretty good the last two weeks. He and Chris had come to a sort of truce, based on their mutual love for, and mutual desire not to be outed to, Nick. They'd even spent time together without Nick—watching a game together without Nick, who couldn't stand watching baseball on TV instead of in a stadium, or seeing a movie he'd originally planned with Nick, who got delayed at work and couldn't make it. They were doing things that *friends* do. So what if Tyler pretended it was mostly to check up on Chris, not that he actually enjoyed spending time with a guy who could actually threaten his life and livelihood.

Tyler watched as Chris took a sip from his beer and leaned back in the booth, his beefy arm draping across the empty seat between them. He seemed relaxed, not the always-on-high-alert version of Chris he'd first gotten to know. Maybe Chris was also actually enjoying spending time with Tyler? He knew very well now that Chris couldn't pretend to feel any other way than what he did. What you saw, what you heard, was what you got with him.

Nick was right. His honesty was refreshing.

Nick came back to the booth, sitting across from Tyler. "We should make this bowling team official. As good as you are, Tyler, and with my decent averages, we could take it all in the next tournament!"

"What about me?" Chris asked with a cocked eyebrow. He still didn't come off as douchey, which was impressive.

"Well, as long as you don't actually shatter the pins at every game..."

"Hey!" Chris lifted his hands. "That wasn't on purpose."

"You sure about that?" Tyler teased, and Chris' mouth dropped open indignantly, but of course Chris had absolutely meant every word.

Suddenly, there was a sound of a blast that rocked them out of their seats, the lights flickering off a moment later. Gasps and worried conversations started up all around them and Tyler jumped to his feet before he fully realized it. He looked for Chris in the darkness and found him doing the same. What was going on? The sound had come from outside somewhere, and if they were all in danger, it was unlikely anyone else in the bowling alley was superpowered. A second blast erupted just then, louder, and the gasps turned to screams.

Nick appeared between them, placing his hands on both of their shoulders simultaneously. "I'm going to go to the counter and see if I can help out!" Nick called over the din of shouts. He was gone before either of them could respond.

Chris gave him a long look, seeming to search Tyler's face in the dim light. Then with a firm nod, he jogged toward the back exit. Tyler watched him disappear through the rectangle of light and then the door shut behind him.

What did that look mean? Don't get involved? You'd better not be responsible? Or—Are you coming?

It was a lot easier when Chris just spoke aloud. There was never any confusion then.

He found himself outside despite it all, looking on a scene of chaos. The building across the street from the bowling alley had exploded from within, its front-facing walls toppled at unnatural angles. People were shouting and running through the dust, others were gathering to gawk at the destruction. He could hear sirens, but they sounded far away. Had someone blown the building up on purpose? Or was it a gas leak that led to an explosion? He wasn't sure. He scanned the sky and street for superpowered heroes or villains, but all he could see was Chris, somehow already in costume, lifting a piece of wall the size of a car over his head.

Well, Tyler didn't have his costume on him. Showing up as Mindmaster in this situation would be a bad idea anyway. He pulled his hoodie over his head and slipped on the pair of dark glasses and facemask he always carried, then pushed through the crowd. Chris was working on another large section of wall, but Tyler had the vantage point to see that if he moved it, another wall would come crashing down, possibly on top of anyone trapped inside.

"Crusader!" he called out, and Chris turned his head to look Tyler up and down in surprise. "Let me help." Concentrating, he lifted with his mind, bolstering the wall that was poised to fall. He nodded at Chris. "Okay, I've braced the wall beside me. Go ahead."

Chris seemed to consider what Tyler was doing, a look of realization spreading across his face in a rush. "Hold it steady," he said in a tense voice. Ever so slowly, Chris wrestled his section of wall safely to one side, the brick and metal touching down on the sidewalk with a heavy thunk. A small cloud of dust rose as it hit the pavement, and a few moments later, people streamed out from the hole, covering their faces and mouths against the dust, a security guard leading the way.

"Thank you," the guard gasped after waving a dozen people past him. "Thank God you were close by, Crusader." He didn't even look at Tyler—why would he?

"Is everyone out?"

"Of the ground floor," he said, bracing his hands on his knees. "But Lord Ubel is holding the CEO hostage upstairs."

That asshole. Great. Who knew how long he was going to have to hold this wall.

"*That* asshole," Chris said with an eyeroll, echoing Tyler's thoughts, and he couldn't help but let out a quiet bark of laughter. With a flat tone, Chris added, "What are his demands."

"He—" The guard started to cough, and shook his head as he struggled to answer.

"Don't worry," Crusader told him amidst the sirens that were nearly upon them. "Seek medical attention. We'll handle it from here."

The guard looked confused at the 'we' for a moment, but winced and walked toward the patrol cars and ambulances pulling up.

Tyler felt a moment of confusion, too, but the truth settled over him. How strange—a month ago, if someone had told him that he'd be working with Crusader to save people from a collapsed building, he would have mentally pushed that person into the lake.

"How long can you hold that?" Chris asked, sizing up the wall's weight.

"A bit longer. I can handle heavy objects, but..." He'd once lifted an armored car twenty feet above the ground for several minutes, long enough to scare the guards inside. But he hadn't really tested the limits of how long versus how heavy. It hadn't seemed to matter before.

"I'll be fast," Chris said, face serious. "I'll go knock out Lord Ubel and get him and the CEO out before you lose your grip." He gave Tyler another nod, striding toward the opening.

"Wait!" Tyler had a sudden stab of fear. He didn't want to spend any more time heroing than was absolutely necessary, even though he was out of uniform. Not with the police *right there* and a crowd growing by the minute. And if Lord Ubel or anyone else he worked with discovered he'd been helping Crusader, well... "If you brace the wall with your hands, I can"—he mimed an explosion beside his temple with one hand—"knock Ubel out from around the side of the building."

Chris' mouth dropped open in surprise. "You can do that?"

Tyler wobbled his head. "It doesn't work on *you*, but yeah."

Chris' mouth quirked to the side, as if to ask just *how* Tyler knew that it didn't work on him, but there'd be time for that later. He strode to the wall, planted his feet and hands, and told Tyler, "All right, I've got it. Do your thing."

Tyler drifted out of sight of the authorities, then closed his eyes. His telekinesis didn't extend to reading thoughts, but he could sense objects and people from a good distance. There, on the top floor, in a spacious office, were two people. One crouched and trembling, the other standing over them—an easy guess who was hostage and who was villain. He sent the push, almost a punch of energy, and the standing person crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Now to let Chris know that—

"Crusader!" someone shouted. "Is there anyone inside?" The authorities, most likely. Chris started to answer them—he could handle the rest. Time for Tyler to drift the rest of the way out of sight. Tyler didn't need the complications of being held for questioning, or the trouble it might cause if he knocked a couple uniformed officers out in his escape.

He picked up the pace until he was around the corner and circling back toward the bowling alley, shoving back his hood and slipping his mask and glasses back into the pockets—

"Tyler!"

He nearly ran headlong into Nick, his gaze behind him just in case someone was following. "Hey!" he said, trying to look startled rather than guilty. And why should he feel guilty anyway? He'd been helping people this time, right? "Didn't see you there."

Nick put his hands on Tyler's upper arms as if to steady him. "You definitely didn't! And I didn't see you inside the bowling alley." Nick gave him a suspicious up-and-down look. "What were you doing out here?"

Shit. Well, if he was going to look guilty anyway, he might as well use it. Tyler squirmed a little. "I... wanted to see what was going on. You know, when the building collapsed."

Nick's mouth formed a silent 'o.' "You saw that? I was talking to the manager so long that by the time I came out, the police had arrived."

"Yeah. I guess some superhero showed up and got people out." He shrugged, like he didn't really know details.

"Really?" Nick perked up. "Which one?"

Tyler shrugged again. "I don't know, which ones do you have here? I don't really follow that scene."

With a short laugh, Nick said, "That's right, you never cared about them in college, did you? Almost anti-superhero, right?"

"Not *anti*-superhero, not anymore," he hedged. But Nick was right. He was embarrassed to remember the number of hours he'd debated the topic with his roommates, before he'd

realized it was better to pretend not to care. "Just not my thing."

Nick clapped a hand on his back as they turned back toward the bowling alley. With a broad smile, he said, "Eh, well. Can't account for taste."

"Slam him!" Lightstorm's voice was a growl in Chris' earpiece.

The scene was chaos, heroes and villains everywhere. Mixed with the sound of gunfire and helicopters that kicked up dust and wind gusting all around, Chris felt justified in asking, "Slam who?"

But he was looking down at Tyler's prone body below him, one leg bloodied and useless. Tyler's face was a mess, too, his mask torn in several places, and he looked up at Chris' raised fists with something like... resignation.

"Whatever..." Tyler said, just loud enough to be heard over the din, "...you gotta do, man."

Chris knew his duty was to take him out, hand him over to the authorities, ignore the fragile friendship that was building. Why was Tyler here, anyway? It wasn't like him to get involved in major hero-villain battles. Was one of his villain comrades holding something over him? Forcing him to participate in this battle or— No, he couldn't allow himself to follow that line of thought.

But *dammit*, he couldn't allow anything to happen to Tyler, either.

"I can't..." Chris said with a groan for Lightstorm's benefit. And despite the cost he was about to pay, added, "He's... stopping me, somehow."

Tyler's eyes widened a second before Chris folded over in pain. "What are you doing?" Tyler whispered urgently.

Though every nerve was on fire, Chris ground out, "What I gotta do... man."

"Crusader!" Lightstorm yelled, and the voice in his ear was suddenly too much. He rubbed his almost-numb fingers across his ear to dislodge the earpiece, and the tinny voice faded as it dropped to the ground. Then with a grunt, he collapsed beside Tyler.

How was he going to protect Tyler now? With the loss of strength came the loss of invulnerability as well. And he could barely move until the feeling passed, not even to shield Tyler with his body. "I'm sorry," Chris said, and though it was true, the weakness didn't lessen.

"Don't be sorry! You could have killed me, but you—" He stopped, swallowing. "*I'm* sorry," Tyler said. "I can't believe I let them talk me into this."

Chris shook his head. What could he say? Nothing seemed simple anymore, it hadn't for a while now. Well, he could say this: "Idiot."

Tyler let out a laugh that could have easily have been a gasp of pain. "You're right." He closed his eyes. "You feel any better now?"

Chris frowned in confusion for a second, but Tyler was right—he could move his fingers again, the numbness almost gone. "Yeah, I do."

"Then tell me," Tyler continued softly, "all the ways I'm an idiot. We both know it's true."

Chris wanted to chuckle, but it hurt too much. "Okay. You've got all this power—but what do you do with it? Rob banks. Steal jewelry. Mess with the stock market."

"It got me through school."

All around them as they talked, the sounds of battle seemed to diminish. "Yeah. So? To have a career in what? More of the same?" The muscle spasms in Chris' arms were loosening now. "If you weren't going to actually use your education, what was the point?"

"It was..." Tyler sighed. "Just easier I guess. I'm good at it. And I've got everything I need." Tyler smirked but the smile didn't touch his eyes.

His arms were freed enough to thump a gentle finger on Tyler's chest. "Yeah? What about here?"

Tyler's face froze. And then he gave his head a tiny shake.

"You think I couldn't use what I've got to do the same thing you are? Punch my way into a bank vault? Threaten a couple tech billionaires into funneling a stray million or two into my offshore account? I thought about it, you know."

Tyler scoffed. "Yeah, right."

Chris pushed himself to a sitting position, the muscles in his arms popping against the fabric of his costume. "Does it look like I'm lying?"

That was when he realized that despite the battle raging around them, not once had it affected them. In fact, as he watched, a rain of gunfire sliced toward them, and though Chris threw up his hands to block the bullets, they pinged harmlessly against some sort of invisible shield.

He looked down at Tyler, still prone and breathing shallowly. "Are you doing this? The shield?"

His eyes stayed shut, his face tight with concentration. "It's about all I can do right now, but yes."

"Tyler," he said, then repeated more firmly. "Tyler, look at me." When his eyes opened a sliver, Chris told him, "I'm going to get you out of here. Do you think you could keep that up while I'm carrying you?"

"Just so you can hand me over to the cops?"

"Tyler," Chris sighed as much as said. "No. I can say you escaped or beat me up or whatever. Once we're out of here it won't matter if my powers are gone."

Tyler studied Chris' face. "You'd lie for me?"

Chris' heart filled with compassion. What kind of life had Tyler lived? His tone softened. "Do you remember the other day? How it felt to save someone?" He couldn't forget his first time himself. How everything about the future and how he fit into it just locked into place.

Tyler gave him a short nod, but didn't say anything.

"No one knows who Mindmaster is, right? Only me. You could start all over, change your codename, change your costume, do it *right* this time." He lowered his pitch, knowing that this might be the last time he got to say what he'd been thinking for weeks. "Do it with *me* this time."

Tyler's eyes went wide, then turned sad. "I don't know if I can do it."

"You can if I'm there for you." He held out his hand for Tyler to grasp.

Tyler considered it. "You will be, won't you?" Then he reached out and took hold of Chris' hand.

Nick used the tongs to carefully flip the rack of ribs on the grill. This batch was going to be one of the best, he could already tell. People from his new building were standing around the pool deck chatting, drinking, a few kids splashing in the pool. Ah, he loved this kind of thing. Strange that no one had ever held a barbecue for the tenants before.

Brent, who lived down the hall, passed by, lifting his beer bottle in a little salute. "Smells great, Nick!"

Or maybe not so strange. He wanted to get to know his neighbors better, so he made it happen, but not everyone was as much of an extrovert as he was.

There was a laugh off to the left, big and hearty and loud. "You *would* say something like that!" Tyler told Chris through his laughter.

Chris smiled wide, shrugged and knocked back his whiskey. The whiskey he and Tyler were sharing between them. Chris and Tyler didn't live in the building, but how could he hold a barbecue without his best friends?

He closed the lid on the smoker and wandered over toward them. Tyler was halfway through some anecdote, but he fell silent when Nick got close enough to hear. "Hey, Nick," he greeted. "Ribs almost done?"

"I hope you know I'm going to eat at least three racks," Chris said.

Nick laughed. "Oh, I remember the last time! I hope you're gonna chip in." He waited for Chris' nod, then turned back to Tyler. "You aren't going to want four or something are you?"

Tyler gestured at his rail-thin frame. "Where would I put it?"

After a laugh, an awkward silence fell, like Nick had interrupted something that Chris and Tyler weren't willing to continue in his presence. And that was okay, he'd never been the jealous or suspicious type. He needed to get back to the smoker anyway.

Coming around to squeeze both of them on the shoulder briefly, Nick said, "Welp! Better check on those ribs. Don't want to ruin my perfect record!"

He walked away, keeping an ear on them. Slowly, they resumed their conversation as if he'd never dropped by. Good.

After he'd checked the ribs again, his attention drifted to others on the deck, and he found his eyes drawn to a couple of people standing off by themselves, one near the diving board, the other next to the tiki torches. Did they know each other? If not, they should! If he remembered correctly, they were both into board games and hiking.

He called on Brent to keep an eye on things, passing over the tongs with a serious face. "The success of this evening is now in your hands." It wasn't true, the ribs would be fine without him for a few minutes, but it was nice to make Brent feel needed.

It only took a minute or two to lead one toward the other, starting a conversation—and that extra spark of contentment and camaraderie he imparted every time he touched someone. It was a strange power to have—nothing that would earn him a spot on a superhero team—but he'd used it freely since he'd first discovered it in sixth grade.

He left them alone to wander back toward the smoker, hearing them already making plans for next weekend. As always, his power had worked like a charm. He truly believed that even the fiercest of enemies could come to an understanding, if only he added that spark.

It had worked on Crusader and Mindmaster, after all.

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