

The door slammed shut, and Nick panicked, one word encompassing all of his fears as he leapt into action.

Dad.

He was home early. Nick's suit practically flew under his bed as he launched himself to his desk. A moment later there was a knock at his door.

"Hey Nick, can we talk?"

"Uh, sure dad."

The door opened as his laptop finished logging in.

"So, you know, working in the Spearhead, I meet people, right son?"

Nick kept his face from twitching by the barest thread.

"I happen to be friends with one of your professors, Hoffstader, and he was telling me how you've been...changing, over the past two months. He's worried about you. You're one of his favorite students and you've been isolated, withdrawn, and—"

"Have my grades slipped?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then what's the problem?"

There was a deep sigh. "Son, remember what I told you about the importance of making connections in college?"

"Dad, I'm doing fine."

Dad, I can't tell you the truth.

The truth was, how could he keep his old friends? Never tell anyone your secret identity. That was the first and most important rule of being a hero. He'd tried keeping them, but after a few weeks of lying to them, *they* had drifted away from *him*.

"I'm just worried about you. And so is your professor."

"Yeah Dad. Look, I'm going out—" Nick lied— "to see some friends."

That got a smile. "Good. Will you be home for dinner?"

"I'll probably grab a bite with them."

Nick grabbed his stuff and shoved it in his bag, pausing briefly on the center of the field of blue where the bright yellow V struck across the center of the chest, the right side a lightning bolt striking.

Suit secured, Nick slung his bag over his shoulder and left. He actually had three hours to kill before patrol. What to do?

Headquarters was downtown, a quick subway ride away. Beneath fifth a few blocks up Nick could see the next train leaving the station. Nick turned and began racing it to the next stop.

Chloe stared at the big board. Really stared. That deep staring where your vision starts to blur and you aren't even really looking at a thing anymore but can still see it in your mind's eye.

Still, nothing made sense.

Association heroes were making a big show of appearing and stopping crimes whenever Chaoticus was about. Three thefts in a row, they were stopping a total of eleven different crimes. It was obvious when you saw it, but how did they not.

And see it they did not. Syntax was adamant that the majority of Association heroes believed they were heroes. In some senses they *were* heroes. It was the upper echelons, Majesty and the team heads like Doctor Quantum who were using it towards their own ends.

Of course, the Association didn't have a formal policy of power supremacy, but they also definitely did not have a policy against it, so the types it attracted were the types who would be a-okay with taking over the world for the good of the unpowered masses.

Chloe blinked and refocused. The lieutenants, Blur, Herodotus, and Super Fly had all been seen at crime scenes during Chaoticus attacks. One of them knew something, they had to, but all three outwardly looked like they were ignorant. If she could pinpoint which one...

"Sup? Ooh, a conspiracy board. Can I—"

Chloe flipped the board telekinetically. "You're early."

He grinned. "Thought I'd catch up on studying. Seriously, what's up with the board?"

He's Statuesque's kid. You can trust him.

More importantly, he was Liberty's kid. Statuesque was a larger than life figure, practically a demigod, if thinking such thoughts wasn't sacrilegious. Liberty was human. Real.

Chloe donned her mask and let her hair free. It was easier being Lady Avian around others. "So yours and your father's identities are your business, but this has to stay secret, understood?"

Nick paused for a moment. *Good. He understands this is serious.* He nodded, so Avian continued.

"Six months ago we began getting information from an informant we named Syntax. They have informed us that certain members of the Association, including all of the leadership, are out for world domination."

Nick leaned back, half sitting on a table. "So, we take them down?"

"It isn't that simple. We have to build evidence. Proof. The board tracks patterns of behaviour, but it is all circumstantial, and if we let them know we are onto them..."

Nick nodded. "So, what *do* we do?"

"For now we focus on Chaoticus. Our informant believes that the Association is going easy on Chaoticus in return for him handing them his power-inducing machine. If we can capture and turn him, we'll have proof, a witness, but we have to do it before he makes that machine, or..."

Nick's face showed understanding. Or the whole island, possibly the whole world is at risk.

"Why can't we tell the division?"

It was the obvious question, and the one she had prayed he wouldn't ask.

"Our informant chose us rather than them because the Association has an informant in the Division."

"So, just keep it...to..." He trailed off as he saw the look on her face. The answer why you couldn't just keep it to the heroes was...

...it was one of them.