Through a Glass, Darkly

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Summary

For every choice you make, every path you follow...there is always a what if. Sometimes, there are thousands of them.

Notes

Repost from FF.N posting in 2005.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

"I can't believe you got us lost!"

"Me? Uh-uh, this one's entirely on you."

"You're the one who insisted on coming down here in the first place."

"You're the one who forgot to bring a map! Are you seriously telling me that you don't have a compass in all that tech you carry around?"

"Backpack has a built in GPS!"

"Well Backpack ain't doing a whole lot of good right now, is it?"

"Because you electrified the puddle before it got clear!"

"I thought it was clear."

"And exactly what part of 'Wait! Backpack's not clear!' made you think that?"

There was silence for a moment. Then, a heavy sigh. "Okay, you're right. This is my fault."

"Glad you see things my way."

Virgil glanced down guiltily at the little robot gamely clinging to his partner's back. The casing was charred a nearly solid black, and every few seconds a wisp of acrid smelling smoke escaped the vents on the sides. Richie had built the thing tough…but not tough enough to withstand a few thousand volts of electricity.

"Are you gonna be able to fix it?" he asked quietly.

"Probably." Virgil winced at the short, clipped tone of Richie's voice. He sincerely hoped his friend was just caught up in trying to figure out a solution to their problem and not genuinely angry with him. It had, after all, been an accident. More or less.

Virgil sighed again…here he had thought it would be an easy night. A little patrolling, put in an appearance at dinner, and then head up to his bedroom with Richie to settle in for an all night marathon of "Zombie Hunter II, III, IV, and Zombie Hunter V: Son of Zombie Hunter." Such were the delights of summer vacation. He'd been looking forward to it all week.

Instead, 'a little patrolling’ was quickly turning into an all-nighter. He'd nearly finished his final circuit, almost half an hour ahead of schedule, when Richie had signaled him over the Shock-box. Backpack had detected major meta-human signature activity in the commercial district. The police scanner was going crazy with calls for backup. There was no question that Static and Gear were needed—quickly.

The evening went downhill from there.

They arrived on a scene of pure chaos. It was one of Dakota's more upscale shopping hubs—the kind of place where none of the merchandise on display had price tags because if you had to ask how much it was, you couldn't afford it. Nearly every storefront had been broken into. Shattered glass practically carpeted the street, cars had been overturned, a fire hydrant had been blown apart and was still spewing a tower of water into the air.
There was no sign of the meta-human who was responsible. However, a thrill of uneasiness went through Virgil as he took in the sight of several of Dakota's finest huddling together behind makeshift shelters of cars and debris. To a man they had their weapons out and were pointing them wildly in seemingly random directions, as though they were trying to cover every in of space around them at once.

"That's not overly reassuring." Virgil turned his disc in midair to find Richie hovering beside him, watching the police with the same faintly alarmed expression.

"Tell me about it. What's the 411?"

Richie shrugged, a perplexed look replacing the alarm beneath the green visor. "That's the thing—I'm reading massive energy output in the area, but I can't tell you what kind. Reports off the police band aren't much help, either—" Richie broke off as Backpack beeped insistently. Virgil saw the faint tracings of data scrolling across the interface screen Richie wore, and the perplexity deepened on his friend's face. "Aw man, where have I seen this before?" Richie mused aloud.

He got his answer seconds later.

There was hardly any warning—only a soft whump and a rush of frigid air behind them. Then something slammed hard into Richie's back, and Virgil could only watch in shocked horror as his friend began tumbling out of the air, his attacker still clinging to his back.

Richie reacted like a pro, firing the rockets on his skates at full blast and managing to turn his downward spiral into more or less horizontal flight. He still dipped dangerously close to the earth, but relief welled up in Virgil when he managed to avoid hitting the ground. The offender, realizing its plan had failed, leapt from Richie's back with uncanny grace, twisting in the air like a cat to land on the hood of one of the few untouched cars on the street.

It took Virgil a second to realize he was already moving, pulling power into himself from every available source. By the time he and Richie met in the air again to hover above the meta-human, his hands were crackling with blue light.

"You okay?" he asked tersely as soon as Richie was within hearing distance.

"Yeah! Damn look at that poor guy!" Richie answered, a little breathlessly. Virgil looked, and instantly saw what his friend was talking about. A lot of the bang babies they had encountered over the years had been very fortunate—like Richie and Virgil themselves, the effects of the Big Bang could not be readily seen. A lot of them had not been so lucky.

This poor soul was one of the unlucky ones. The man (if you could call it a man) sitting on the car, glaring at them, looked like the love-child of a professional wrestler and a leprous toad. He had to be at least six foot three, and it all looked like solid muscle. There, the resemblance to anything human ended. The bang baby was completely bald, and his face was far too wide, as though the bones of his skull had been stretched beyond their natural capacity. A wide, gaping mouth through which razor sharp teeth could be seen, and reptilian black eyes completed the demonic features. The guy's skin was a grayish-green, covered with oozing pustules and blisters…as if it was slowly rotting off his bones.

The bang baby was crouched, gargoyle-like, staring up at them with unholy glee. There was, Virgil was worried to note, quite a lot of intelligence in those eyes—but not much sanity. "Well, well, well…if it isssssn't the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Thisssss will be more exciting than I thought." The bang baby's voice was a deep, sibilant hiss, bringing to mind visions of snakes and muck and crawling things.
"Lone Ranger?"

"Tonto?" Virgil and Richie both protested at the same time, identical tones of outrage in their voices. Then Richie crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey, how come you get to be the Lone Ranger?"

"Later, bro," Virgil said quickly. The bang baby crouched further down, muscles bulging. Virgil and Richie automatically split up in the air as the bang baby sprung at them, leaving him high and dry with no target to land on.

In theory, anyway.

In actuality, the bang baby sprung at them, and then seemed to fold in on himself. There was the strange *whump* again, the blast of icy air, and a flash of white light. The bang baby was gone. Virgil paused to share a wide-eyed look with Richie, and then it was his turn to be slammed from behind.

*whump* The weight was gone from his back and he heard Richie cry out in what he fervently hoped was not pain.

*whump* Something hard stuck him across the face, sending him tumbling still farther down.

*whump* The whine of Richie's rockets sounded again, but then there was an awful crash—as though something had struck the side of a building.

*whump* The weight landed between Virgil's shoulder blades again, and finally forced him to the ground.

He hit with bone-jarring force, though thankfully he hadn't been high enough in the air for any real damage to be caused. He felt the bang baby's foot digging into the back of his neck, heard a wheezing, trilling laugh.

"Isssss that all you've got, hero?" The foot was moved from his neck and Virgil immediately rolled to his back, letting fly with a blast of power in the direction the voice had been coming from.

*whump* There was nothing there. At least now he knew why the police had been so freaked out. Painfully, Virgil got to his feet and scanned the street. The bang baby was nowhere to be seen. Richie was on the ground a few yards away, just struggling to his knees and holding one hand to his head. Virgil recharged his disc with a thought and leaped upon it, hurrying over to his partner's side.

"You okay, man?" he asked anxiously. Richie lurched to his feet and leaned against the side of the building he had landed next to.

"Oh I'm just super," Richie muttered sarcastically. "Wasn't that just a special surprise? Where'd he go?"

"I dunno." Richie joined him in the air and the two moved loosely back to back. This time, they were careful to stay closer to the ground. "How do we beat a teleporter?"

"He's not teleporting," Richie muttered. Virgil ignored him—he didn't care about the particulars, he just wanted to know how to take the guy down. The two of them looked around the street warily. Except for the still spouting water, things were eerily silent. A few brave cops peeked over the edges of their shelters, shooting questioning glances at the two heroes.

*whump*

Richie shot straight up the instant the strange explosion of air sounded behind them, narrowly
avoiding getting hit again by the bang baby. Virgil fired off a blast as the bang baby sailed past. He howled in pain as the blast connected with perfect accuracy. Unfortunately, it only seemed to anger him. The bang baby twisted in mid-air to land once again on all fours, hunkering down on the asphalt. Then, he vanished again.

"Okay…that's going to get real old, real fast," Richie growled, rejoining Virgil yet again.

"Any ideas?" Richie cocked his head in a strangely birdlike movement, scanning the street below them. Seconds later, he focused on the hydrant, still churning out the water.

"Actually…yeah." Richie glanced behind him and Backpack disengaged, leaping onto the side of a building and scurrying down. "You just stay up here—be ready to give it all you've got!"

"Wait, what? What're you gonna do?"

whump

Neither of them hesitated this time, they just moved. The bang baby caught Richie around the waist as he fell past this time. This time, though, Richie grabbed on just as hard, firing his rockets at full blast. The two of them sped towards the ground, Richie twisting more or less on top of the tangle of limbs they had become.

"Gear!" Virgil shouted as they hit the asphalt. The cry was echoed by a few of the officers who were still on the scene. Two brave souls broke cover and hurried into the street, weapons drawn. Richie was back on his feet quickly, though, and frantically waved the police officers back.

Virgil hovered indecisively—on the one hand, if Richie had a plan, it was probably best not to mess with it. On the other hand, it went against every instinct Virgil had not to try and help. Anxiously, Virgil searched the street for Backpack, trying to find some hint of what his partner was planning.

"Oh come on, ugly! Is that all you got?" Richie was tossing a zap-trap from hand to hand, even though he knew it would not be much help against this bang baby. That wasn't the point, though. The point was to keep the bang baby focused on Gear.

Virgil realized what his partner wanted him to do a split second before he had to do it. Backpack had made its way from fire hydrant to fire hydrant along the length of the street, methodically busting each of them open. The resulting torrent of water pouring into the street had created a small stream around Richie and the bang baby. "GOTCHA," Virgil chuckled slyly. "Gear, now!" he shouted, raising his hands in the air and calling the energy for a nova ball to him.

"Wait! Backpack's not clear!" It was too late. Virgil let his power loose and Richie was forced to take to the air again or risk being fried right along with his prized gadget.

Electricity met the standing water and did its thing. The bang baby howled again as the shock raced through its body. Richie howled too as the shock raced through Backpack. A truly painful shriek of feedback erupted from his interface with the small robot, and Virgil could only watch as Backpack nearly exploded. The casing blackened, the legs twitched spasmodically, and the "eye" waved wildly as the electricity arced into it. It was over in seconds.

The bang baby collapsed onto the street as the electricity dissipated, and the police swarmed out from their hiding places. Richie dived to the ground, landed next to Backpack, which was still twitching pathetically. A cloud of black smoke was pouring out of the vents on the sides, and the stench of fried wires hung in the air. Virgil drifted down to hover above them.

"Um…oops?" he said lamely.
"Aw man, I can't believe you did that!" Richie shouted. "Backpack—run diagnostic." A pitiful beep answered him, along with a fresh belch of smoke. Richie sighed. "Well, that answers that," he muttered.


"Static! Help!" Both boys looked up at the shout. The police were clustered in a knot around the place where the bang baby had fallen. Even as the shout's echo was dying down, though, the men and woman were flung aside like so many toys. The bang baby roared as he lurched to his feet, gripping one female cop by the neck and raising her off the ground.

Virgil was already moving. He heard Richie behind him, glanced back to see that the burned out Backpack had made it back onto his partner's back and Richie was pulling up close behind him. The bang baby roared again and threw the woman in the direction. Richie instantly changed his trajectory to catch her, leaving Virgil to deal with the bang baby.

"Think…think you can just take me down like that, boy?" the bang baby hissed as Virgil drew closer.

"Thought crossed my mind," Virgil shot back flippantly. The bang baby laughed and suddenly dived forward, hooking his hands into a manhole cover in the street in front of him. As if it were made of cardboard instead of solid metal, he heaved it up and flung it at Virgil like a Frisbee. "Oh, yeah, that'll work." Virgil caught the cover with his power and flung it back, with interest. The bang baby barely managed to duck in time.

Richie meanwhile, having safely deposited the policewoman with her partner, rejoined his friend in the air. The bang baby snarled at both boys, before a twisted smile broke out on the hideous face. "Another time, kids," he spat. Then he rushed forward and dropped down into the manhole, down into the sewer below. Virgil and Richie came to a stop in the air above the hole, and Virgil sighed heavily.

"I hate it when they do that," he drawled.

"Do we follow?"

"No choice, bro. I don't want someone like that running around town."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

Which brought them to their current predicament—slogging through the Dakota sewer system, searching for a bang baby that could disappear at will. Richie was crouched in front of him on the disc, scanning the tunnels with some incomprehensible piece of equipment he had produced from one of his many pockets. The data on the display made no sense to Virgil, but Richie must have been getting something from it for he occasionally directed Virgil to go left or right. After nearly half an hour of it, though, Virgil was beginning to think it was hopeless.

"Gear? Hey, Gear? Yo Gear!" Richie finally dragged his eyes from the screen in front of him, blinking up at his friend in that slightly confused way that told Virgil his mind had been miles away.

"Hmm? What?"

"This is nuts, man…that creep's long gone."

"Yeah, probably." There was something in Richie's voice, though, that begged further questioning.
"What's that gizmo telling you?"

"Not as much as I'd like. I'm still picking up the guy, but he's bursting all over the place. Probably trying to throw us off the trail. These readings are totally random. I can tell you he's still down here, I can tell you where he's been, but I have no idea where he's going or where he'll end up next."

"Great."

"Look, Virg, much as I hate to say it…there's no point in running around here all night."

Virgil sighed, punching one fist into the opposite hand. Richie was right—all they would be able to do tonight was exhaust themselves. Besides, he knew Richie was dying to get back to the gas station to try and repair Backpack. He still hated the thought of just leaving the bang baby down here to cause more mischief.

"You're right, you're right. Let's punch out. You think you can rig something up to keep that guy from teleporting the next time we run into him?"

Richie blinked up at him and Virgil could practically see the calculations start firing across his brain. It was strange, sometimes, how Richie's mind worked. Virgil had gotten used to the "brain blasts" after Richie had become a meta human, but these days it seemed like anything, even a simple rhetorical question could send his partner spinning into a frenzy of scientific invention.

"Hmmm," Richie muttered vaguely, waving a hand in what might have meant 'yeah no problem,' might have meant 'let's get going.'

Or might have meant 'look out behind you!'

**whump** Virgil whirled his disc around, nearly dislodging Richie and came face to face with the bang baby they had been chasing. He looked nearly as startled as the two heroes, and Virgil couldn't help but notice that all the teleporting must have been taking a toll on him. The skin was definitely more grey than green now, and new blisters had appeared across his face.

Richie leapt down off the disc, firing his skates up as he went. He whipped out a couple of zap traps and Virgil powered up, blue lightning racing up and down his body. The bang baby began backing up, wheezing for breath and stumbling slightly. He hissed at the two boys, teeth gleaming in the light provided by Static's power.

"Take two?" Virgil asked his partner, nodding meaningfully at the seven inches or so of watery sludge that filled the tunnel.

"Places and action!" Richie agreed. The bang baby clenched his fists and closed his eyes, and a strange, green glow began emanating from his body. Virgil pushed all the power he had available into the water below them, just as Richie's eyes went wide and he yelled, "oh shit, WAIT!"

The electricity met the bang baby's green aura and time seemed to stop. Sound ceased, the light from Virgil's power faded, and it suddenly seemed as though all the air was being sucked from the tunnel around them. Virgil gasped for breath, and his eyes widened in horror as the green glow around the bang baby began to expand and grow brighter.

There was a tremendous explosion, a rush of wind and Virgil was thrown back into the wall behind him. Light flared all around him, blinding him, and suddenly he felt as though he had been thrown off a cliff. His stomach dropped, he lost all sense of direction, and he was suddenly enveloped in cold so absolute it seemed as though the very blood would freeze in his veins. He screamed, he couldn't help it, and the sound seemed to echo strangely around him, as if the sound was being pulled...
in different directions at once.

Then it was over.

Virgil crashed down into the mucky water, landing on his back. He lay gasping for a few moments, feeling the cold slime of the water seeping into his uniform, and tasting something truly vile in his mouth. He sat up quickly and spat a mouthful of sludge out, furiously wiping his mouth. "Ugh! Oh, man that's gross! Ugh!" He spat several more times, desperately trying to get the taste out. Then his brain caught up with current events. He jumped to his feet, frantically scanning the shadowy dimness around him. The water had shorted out his powers and he groped along his belt until he encountered the mini-flashlight he had taken to carrying for just such an emergency. He flicked it on and began rapidly searching for his partner and the bang baby.

"Static!" Virgil whipped around with the light and found Richie standing behind him. His partner immediately put his hands up to shield his eyes. "Ow, hey, watch where you point that thing!" Virgil adjusted the beam slightly so that it was no longer in Richie's face.

"Sorry. You okay?"

"Yeah…I'm going to drink a gallon of Listerine when I get home tonight, but other than that no major damage. You?"

"I'm fine. What happened?"

"You ssssstupid boy! What have you done?!"

Both Richie and Virgil turned at the sound of the angry words. The bang baby was picking himself up out of the muck to their left, clutching at his head. He glared murderously at them for a moment, then looked wildly around him. "Wrong, wrong, wrong…you made it wrong! Sssstupid child, you've doomed usssss all!" With that, he turned and loped away, quickly vanishing into the darkness.

"If you tell me we have to follow him again, I'm going to hit you," Richie said tiredly.

"No argument here, bro. I think we've clocked enough overtime for tonight. Where are we?"

Richie shrugged as he pulled his gloves off, wringing them out before he stuffed them in a pocket. "We were heading south by southeast…probably somewhere around Delancy and Locke Street."

Virgil nodded. "You wanna just spend the night at my house? You can borrow some clothes and we can still catch 'Zombie Hunter IV' if we hurry."

"Deal. Think your Pops'll let us do the laundry there?"

Virgil raised his sleeve to his nose and sniffed delicately. "I think he'll insist," he said wryly, nearly gagging from the stench that now permeated the fabric. "Right after he makes us hose down in the garage."

Richie laughed shortly. "C'mon, then, let's find another manhole."

The two friends began slogging back through the tunnel. Virgil hadn't dried out enough to get a charge going to power his disc, and Richie stayed on the ground out of a sense of solidarity. Now *that* was friendship. They had only gone a few yards when the sounds of someone else coming towards them reached their ears.

Virgil motioned for silence and pointed upwards into the tangle of pipes that crisscrossed the ceiling
of the tunnel, then quickly cupped his hands. Richie nodded and moved closer. Awkwardly, Virgil
boosted Richie up into the pipes. Richie managed to scramble up onto the thickest of them and
leaned back down. Virgil leaped into the air, caught his partner's outstretched hand on the second try,
and pulled himself up as well. They crouched low over the pipes, staring down into the tunnel below
them. The sounds of footsteps were growing louder.

Scant seconds later, light shone into the tunnel. Several figures could be seen behind the light, which
was being cast by an industrial sized flashlight. It was impossible to make out any features. Virgil felt
Richie tense beside him, and laid a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Boss, you sure you heard something down here?"

"Positive." Virgil nearly fell off of the pipe. The tone was curt and cold, colder than he could ever
remember hearing…but the voice was familiar. The figures paused right below them, and Virgil
heard a sharp, indrawn breath from his partner.

The people below them apparently heard it, too, for suddenly the light was shone full on their hiding
place. Virgil heard a shout of alarm from one of them, and then a horrible boom echoed through the
tunnel. Virgil felt a bullet whiz by his cheek and was so startled he did fall off the pipe, taking Richie
down with him.

For the second time that night, the two heroes crashed into the foul smelling water, landing in a heap
of limbs. When Virgil finally managed to disentangle himself from Richie and sit up, he was treated
to the disconcerting sight of five people grouped around them, each pointing a gun at their heads.
Most startling, though, was the figure directly in front of him, finally illuminated by the light. He had
been right.

"S-Sharon?" he asked shakily, more than surprise coloring his words. It was his sister…but it was
not. His sister didn't wear her cropped close to her head, his sister had certainly never glared down at
him with such hate, his sister would never dress in black leather and body armor, and last time he
checked, Sharon didn't wear an eye patch over her left eye, beneath which a twisted, ugly scar could
be seen that went from forehead to chin.

"Static. You move, we blow your brains out, got it?" the surreal, nightmare version of his big sister
barked harshly. Rough hands grabbed him by the shoulders, and he and Richie were jerked
unceremoniously to their feet. Beside him, Richie was gaping like a fish out of water.

"Bro? We are so not in Kansas anymore," Richie whispered.
Virgil desperately wanted to wake up, as soon as possible. He'd had enough.

He'd had enough of being marched through what seemed like miles of dark, dank tunnels; he'd had enough of listening to this terrifying version of Sharon bark out orders like a drill sergeant and threaten their lives every twenty seconds; he'd had enough of having guns shoved into his back whenever he stopped walking fast enough for them.

He'd really had enough of them shoving him back down into the disgusting water every twenty minutes, keeping him wet enough that he couldn't get a charge going.

He came up from the fifth such dunking, sputtering and gasping for breath, meeting Richie's worried eyes. Virgil glanced meaningfully at the belt around Richie's waist and raised a questioning eyebrow. Neither he nor Richie had been searched yet, nor had their hands been bound. Thank heaven for small favors. Hopefully, Richie had a few tricks in his proverbial bag of goodies that could help them get out of this situation.

Virgil had no idea what was going on, but he knew one thing—he did not want to hang around with these people in order to figure it out. He and Richie had to get away. He spat his umpteenth mouth of dirty water out and sighed. He certainly wasn't going to be much use as long as their captors kept this up.

Richie shook his head faintly, then winked and tapped his wrist twice: wait for it. Virgil nodded back just as faintly as he was hauled to his meet once again and pushed forward. He settled back into his trudging, shooting covert glances at the woman leading the group.

The people surrounding them all looked like refugees from the set of "Mad Max". Their clothes were worn and dirty, and looked as though all that was holding them together was the patches and habit. Like Not-Sharon, they were all wearing body armor—though that was as ragtag as their clothes. It looked like harvested scraps of Kevlar, leather, and even the occasional piece of steel plating. Perhaps most worrying was the fact that they were all armed to the teeth.

Not-Sharon was definitely the scariest, though. The woman who looked so like his sister was dressed from head to toe in black—black leather pants, black boots, a black, long-sleeved shirt, and black leather and Kevlar armor that covered most of her upper body. One long knife was strapped to each leg, and a sawed off shotgun was resting on her back. She was carrying a smaller handgun, and the ease with which she handled it made Virgil nervous.

"You've got nerve, Static, I'll give you that. Coming down to our home turf?" Not-Sharon huffed suddenly. "I always knew you were a crazy bastard, but I never thought you were stupid."

"Look, Sharon, I don't know what's going on, but you've got it all wrong!" Virgil doubted that anything he said was going to make a difference, but he had to try. "Believe me, girl, you don't know what you're doing."

Not-Sharon laughed bitterly. "Oh I know exactly what I'm doing. Your crew can't help you now, Static."

"My crew? What crew?"

Beside him, Richie suddenly crashed to his knees. The water splashed up around him, but not before Virgil saw something small and metallic drop from his partner's hands. The others around Sharon
jerked Richie roughly back to his feet and pushed him forward again. Virgil tensed, ready to take the first opening he saw.

They had gone only a few feet forward when there was a small explosion behind them. Richie's had set off a flare in the water. Not-Sharon's men cried out in alarm and whirled around to bring their guns to bear. As one, Richie and Virgil dived to their right, skirting around the smallest of their captors. They didn't look back, didn't try to take any of their captors out, they simply ran, zigzagging across the tunnel. Richie threw another flare out behind him, this one exploding in midair. More cries echoed through the tunnel as Not-Sharon and the others were blinded. It didn't stop them. They began firing at random down the tunnel.

"You got enough juice for two?" Virgil shouted, feeling the heat of a bullet fly past his ear. In answer, Richie fired his skates up and grabbed Virgil around the waist. Virgil wrapped one arm around Richie's neck as they got airborne, rocketing down the tunnel at a fast enough pace that the hail of bullets were quickly left behind. Richie guided them through the tunnels for several more minutes after the echoes of gunfire had died away, taking random twists and turns wherever he could.

At last, they set down and leaned back against a damp wall, panting heavily. It was Virgil who broke the silence. "What—was—\_that?\_" he gasped. "Rich, what's going on?"

Richie shook his head mutely; then leaned forward to brace his hands on the tops of his thighs. "I don't know, V."

"That…that was Sharon, right? I'm not going crazy am I?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that was Sharon. Or someone who looked like her, anyway."

"This is insane! She tried to kill us. I mean, she threatens to kill us all the time, but she was actually going to do it! And what was up with her face? Did you see that, Rich?"

"Hard to miss," Richie said mildly. "Okay, look…we need to lay low while we figure this out. I've got to fix Backpack and you have to get dry." He glanced down at himself and shivered slightly. "I wouldn't mind getting dry, either," he amended.

"Gas station?"

"Probably safest for now." They pushed themselves up from the wall and began plodding through the sewer again, searching for a manhole. Virgil felt slightly better for having a plan—any plan. It had rattled him to the depths of his soul to see that twisted, hateful caricature of his sister. He wanted to know what was going on, and he wanted to know now. At least he knew that if anyone could figure this out, it was his partner.

They came upon an access to the upper street a few minutes later. It was with a feeling of overwhelming relief that Virgil climbed the ladder leading up, and began prying at the manhole cover. Virgin felt slightly better for having a plan—any plan. He had ratted him to the depths of his soul to see that twisted, hateful caricature of his sister. He wanted to know what was going on, and he wanted to know now. At least he knew that if anyone could figure this out, it was his partner.

He came up in the middle of Hell.

He rolled to his feet and simply stood in awe, staring around him with his jaw hanging open. Behind him, he heard Richie boost himself up out of the sewer, and then a low, shocked gasp.
"Well. This can't be good," Virgil said softly.

"V…this is Travis Boulevard, down by the mall," Richie said, pointing to the rusty remains of a street sign. That morning, Travis had been the hub of the college element in Dakota—teeming with open air markets, thrift stores, and specialty coffee shops.

Now, it was a war zone.

There was not a building on the street that wasn't showing damage. Many had been leveled entirely, and were simply piles of rubble on the ground. Those that were still standing were hollowed out shells, scored by burn marks and graffiti. The rusted remains of cars and rescue vehicles littered the street. Broken glass, trash, and chunks of cement and concrete were lying all about. There was not a single working street light anywhere—the only light came from the moon shining down.

"Richie…listen," Virgil said suddenly. Richie shot him a confused look, but cocked his head and did as Virgil asked, the confusion deepening with each passing second. There was no sound. They heard no traffic, no sirens, no people. All that could be heard was the rustling of the wind through the refuse. "Rich—where did that guy take us? What's going on?"

As a rule, Virgil did not let fear get the better of him. He was often afraid—only a fool would do the things he did and not be afraid—but he never let that fear rule him. If he let himself think for a moment that he wouldn't be able to handle whatever situation he found himself in, he knew he would likely be doomed. Still, as he stood in the hellish remains of a neighborhood that should have been busy with light and laughter and life, he felt himself close to panic.

"C'mon…we should get off the street." Richie's voice sounded as tightly strung as Virgil felt. He glanced up into his partner's eyes and saw the same shifty fear dancing in them. Perversely, it made him feel better to know that he wasn't the only one here who was terrified. There was also something else, though…

"Spill," he ordered as he and Richie moved hurriedly out from the open. They scurried into a nearby alley like rats and began making their way towards the gas station, hampered by the need to stay out of sight.

"Spill what?" Richie answered evasively.

"Whatever's knocking around in that genius brain of yours. You know something!"

Richie sighed and shook his head. "Not here—it's too complicated. Wait until we get somewhere safe."

Virgil looked pointedly around their surroundings and raised an eyebrow.

"Safer," Richie amended hastily.

"I'm not gonna like this, am I?"

Richie's expression spoke volumes.

The two boys hurried on, running as fast as they dared and sticking to the shadows whenever possible. Neither of them noticed a dark figure in the air suddenly change directions, attracted by their movement despite their best efforts, and begin following their progress.

"Wow…and here I thought this place was a dump before."
"Amen, brother. Damn." The two heroes stood in front of their 'gas station of solitude'…or what was left of it. Never exactly a luxurious appointment, it was now little more than three walls and most of a roof. The fourth wall was a pile of debris. Mountains of junk had been piled around the lot, as though it had all simply been bulldozed there and left to rot. Like most of the other buildings they had seen along the eerily silent route to the station, the place was covered with graffiti, and several rusty stains that Virgil was trying very hard to convince himself were not blood. They had yet to see a single soul since getting away from Not-Sharon and her group. It was starting to grate on Virgil's already frazzled nerves.

"Well, we better see if there's anything we can use inside," he said at length. Richie nodded and the two began picking their way across the debris field. From time to time, Richie would bend down and pluck something from the trash, muttering to himself under his breath.

The inside of the gas station was no better than the outside—everything was covered with a thick layer of dirt, and Virgil spotted far too many rat droppings for comfort. There was none of the equipment Richie had acquired or built over the years, and it was obvious that the place had been used as a squat, before, though there were no people present. They found a filthy mattress with several springs poking out, and a pile of even more filthy blankets in one corner, and dragged them more or less into the center of the main room. Virgil sincerely hoped it didn't get cold enough to have to use the blankets.

Gingerly, the two sat down on the mattress, hunched close together on one of the few places that didn't have springs poking out. They sat in silence for a few moments, just staring into space, shell-shocked. Finally, Virgil stripped out of his still-damp overcoat and spread it out on the mattress behind them, then turned to face his partner.

"All right, Rich…what's going on?" he asked tiredly. He was exhausted, he was wet, he was ready to kill for a shower, and worst of all, his stomach was starting to remind him that he had, after all, been forced to skip dinner. Richie looked about as run down as Virgil felt. "What happened? Where did that guy teleport us to? This isn't home!" It couldn't be home…it just couldn't.

"He wasn't teleporting," Richie said shortly. Virgil frowned.

"That's what you said before…what do you mean?"

Richie sighed and a frown creased his brow. "Just what it sounds like—he wasn't teleporting. The energy output was too high. He was tesseracting."

"Do what now?"

"Tesseracting." The frown deepened, creasing into the expression Richie got when he was trying to put something into 'normal words.' "Um…all right, look. Teleporting is just moving matter from point A to point B really, really fast. You break something down to the molecular level and project those molecules somewhere else."

"Okay, I get that."

"Teleporting just deals with space. Now, I don't know about you, but I think it's pretty obvious that we are not in the space we're used to."

"So this really isn't home?" A wave of relief swept through Virgil.

"No, I don't think it is."

"How is that possible?"
"I'm getting to that. All right…tesseracts. A tesseract is a mathematical theory…you'd, uh, kind of have to know quantum mechanics to really understand it." Richie colored slightly, and shrugged.

"Little light reading before bedtime?" Virgil asked playfully.

"Eh, I was bored. Anyway, tesseracting doesn't just deal with space—it deals with space, time, and dimension. I think that guy actually manipulated matter on the fifth dimensional level and used it to travel around."

"Okay, you just lost me."

Richie was on a roll, now. He leaned forward eagerly and began clearing some of the debris from the floor in front of them. Virgil knew he had lost his friend, for now. Finally, Richie stabbed a finger in the thick dirt on the floor and drew a straight line.

"Okay see this? A line is a figure in the first dimension. Now, if we square that—" he added three more lines, making a flat square, "we get a two-dimensional figure. Square that again," he quickly drew some more lines, turning the drawing into a cube, "and we have—"

"A three dimensional figure," Virgil said triumphantly.

"Right. Now, I can't draw this, but if we could square this figure—actually pull it out of the dirt and make it real, so that it existed in both space and time, we'd have a fourth dimensional figure. A tesseract operates on the fifth dimension—a place where you can actually square the dimension we exist in, and you can manipulate that dimension—move anywhere or anywhen you wanted to. That bang baby could actually manipulate the space-time continuum."

"All right, but that still doesn't explain why we're stuck in Bizarre-O world!"

"I'm pretty sure when you zapped that guy, he was trying to tesseract again. The energy boost must have thrown him off…and we ended up punching through the space-time continuum."

"Meaning?"

"Oh c'mon, V! You've watched just as many Star Trek episodes as I have!"

Virgil thought about that for a moment, and about all the strange things they had seen since the bang baby had run away. A cold chill began making its way up his spine. "Dude…are you telling me we've skipped into a whole other universe?"

"Bingo," Richie said grimly.

"But…but…how is that possible?"

"It's not that new of a theory, actually. People have been speculating on the existence of parallel dimensions for years, now. I read this one paper a few months ago that postulated—"

"Focus, Rich!"

"Sorry."

"All right. So…we're sitting in an alternate Dakota. One where things obviously went really wrong somewhere. Okay, I can deal with that. How do we get back?"

"Umm—"
"Richie, tell me you know how to get us back."

"Kind of. I mean, I have some ideas. I can do it, bro! Honest. In theory," Richie murmured, not meeting Virgil's eyes.

"What about in practice?"

"In practice…I don't know if the technology even exists here. I, uh, I think I can build something, but…"

"But what?" Virgil did not like the tone of his friend's voice.

"But it could take a while," Richie said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"How long is a while?"

"Hard to say. Depends on what I can salvage around here…days, weeks…could be months." His voice dropped even lower. "Could be years."

"Oh."

Well, shit.
Chapter 3

Virgil felt immeasurably better when he finally was dry enough to jumpstart his powers. He still smelled horrible, he was really starting to get hungry, and—oh yeah, he and Richie were stuck in an alternate dimension of his hood that looked like the Apocalypse had gone down in it. However, at least he wasn't totally defenseless now.

He cracked his knuckles and sent a charge across the floor of the gas station, clearing a space of dirt and debris. A slightly heavier charge aimed at one of the few light bulbs that remained intact in the room, and they had serviceable, if weak, light. Richie tipped him a nod of thanks and flopped down to sit cross-legged on the cleared floor. Backpack was quickly deposited in front of him.

"All right, bro, empty your pockets," Richie said. "Let's see what we've got here." He quickly followed his own advice and began divesting himself of the various gizmos and gadgetry that made up Gear's…gear.

"You really think you'll be able to fix Backpack?" Virgil asked, turning out his own pockets onto the floor in front of his partner.

"Depends on how bad it's burned out," Richie replied. "Hmmm." The final tally was better than Virgil would have expected, but still not particularly encouraging. "Okay, we've got six zap caps, the Shock Boxes, two scanners, a mini soldering iron, a flashlight, a month old homework assignment, seventy two cents, three paper clips, a Mega-Choco Bar with nuts…"

"And a partridge in a pear tree," Virgil sang badly. Richie just looked at him. "Oh what, like you weren't thinking it?" Richie shook his head and pulled a final pouch from the front pocket of his pants. It unrolled like a personal hygiene kit and in it were a pen-knife, a miniature drill and extra bits, a roll of emergency gauze, and what looked like several pill packets.

"There are so many Boy Scout cracks I could make right now."

"I appreciate your restraint." Richie picked up one of the pill packets and tossed it at him. Virgil caught it automatically and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Broad spectrum antibiotic, specially calibrated for the unique bang baby metabolism. Don't ask where I got it. If you swallowed any of that water, hopefully this'll knock any bugs out before you get sick."

"Smart idea," Virgil said, popping the pills without hesitation and dry swallowing them.

He then scooped up the candy bar he had found lurking in one of his pockets and ripped it open, relieved to find that none of the sewer water had gotten into it. Carefully, he broke it in two and handed half over to his friend, who took it without a word. Still silent, Richie lifted his visor and began gnawing at the bar slowly, a faraway look in his eyes.

"Rich?" Virgil asked quietly.

"I can see it, V. I can see what I need to make…how it'll have to work. I can see it all in my head, but I don't know if I can get it out." Richie cast a helpless glance around the gas station. "If we were back home…yeah, no problem. But how are we gonna find everything we need here?"

"Hey," Virgil said, reaching over to grip his friend's shoulder. "You'll figure it out. You always figure it out. I have faith in you, bro."

Richie hesitated a moment, then smiled warmly. "I won't let you down, Virg."
"Never crossed my mind, man. Now, what do you need?"

"First thing, I've got to fix Backpack. I can cannibalize the scanners for parts, but I might need more wiring."

"Well, we're sitting right in the middle of a junkyard...why don't I go out and see what I can find and you get started in here? You just want me to look for wires?"

"A screwdriver would be nice. Anything that looks like it came off a computer. Maybe see if the water spigots outside still work. We're gonna get thirsty eventually. Oh, and if there are any sheets of corrugated tin out there, we could use that to cover the holes in the roof. Not much we can do about the wall being gone, but I bet I can rig up something to keep the worst of the wind out. Oh, and—"

"Richie!" Virgil was torn between amusement and exasperation. Richie would probably have the place set up like a luxury hotel by morning, if he had his way. "One thing at a time, okay? Fix Backpack. I'll go look for wires and a screwdriver...I'll see if I can find some water while I'm at it." Virgil leaned down and picked up one of the Shock Boxes. "Keep this on at all times, and don't go wandering off, okay?"

"Yes, Mom," Richie sing-songed cheekily. Then, he turned serious. "You too. Stay around the perimeter of the gas station and keep the light shows to a minimum. We don't know what the bang baby situation in this Dakota is."

"Check!"

Virgil shoveled the rest of the candy bar in his mouth; then grabbed the flashlight. Deciding to forgo the disc in favor of keeping a low profile, he pulled his now dry (if still very...fragrant) trench coat on and made his way back outside, to search the piles of junk around the gas station for supplies that would hopefully help them get back home.

Richie watched his friend fade into the gloom then turned resolutely back to the little robot in front of him. Within moments, he had Backpack splayed open under the still glowing bulb Virgil had charged up. Silently, he surveyed the damage, a knot in his gut slowly easing as he realized it wasn't quite as bad as he had feared. He rolled his head from side to side until he felt his neck crack, and then picked up the smaller of the two scanners he had been carrying. With a faintly apologetic shrug, he slammed the scanner down onto the floor, cracking the casing open. He picked the casing apart and began scrutinizing the circuit boards and wiring inside.

Seconds later, movement seen out of the corner of one eye had him diving for the nearest zap cap. He rolled to his feet with the zap cap held ready, staring hard at the wall where he had seen the movement. When nothing immediately leaped out to attack him, he slowly relaxed. "Damn rats," he muttered, sitting back down and immediately losing himself in the intricacies of Backpack's inner workings. He didn't see the movement flicker through one of the holes in the wall again, or hear the soft sigh of relief.

Outside the gas station, opposite the side Virgil had just exited, soft, stealthy footsteps could be heard slowly moving away from the dilapidated building. In the moonlight, two eyes gleamed dangerously, crafty, cunning, and more than a little insane. A twisted smile that showed entirely too many teeth could be seen, had anyone been there to pay attention. The figure made its way further from the gas station, quickly getting lost in the shadows cast by the piles of refuse. As soon as it had reached a safe distance, the figure raised a small two-way radio and hit the broadcast.

"It's me. Get the boys together and get 'em down to the old gas station out by the highway. Tell the
boss he'll wanna see this. I think I just found the solution to our little problem."

Virgil made his way carefully from pile to pile, scanning as best he could with the small flashlight. So far his search had actually been relatively fruitful. He'd come across several busted out electronics that had yielded plenty of wiring, and even a fairly new model of computer. The monitor had been smashed beyond repair but the hard drive looked more or less intact. Richie would no doubt be happy to have the circuit boards. He'd been stacking his finds in neat piles along his path, ready to be picked up with his power when he made his way back to the gas station.

He'd tried to keep the ruined building in sight at first, but quickly discovered that he needed to widen his search area. He'd compromised by keeping his Shock Box constantly on 'receive' and was listening to a steady stream of incomprehensible techno babble from his partner as Richie worked to repair Backpack. As soon as the little robot was fixed, Virgil wanted to explore some of the surrounding buildings…see if they could find a more defensible position than the mostly ruined gas station. Some running water wouldn't hurt, either.

Virgil was brought out of his musings by a stealthy sort of sound…there barely there scrape of shoes on earth that one made when one was trying to walk quietly. Immediately, Virgil flicked the light off and flattened himself against the side of an ancient refrigerator. In the moonlight, he could just barely make out a figure making its careful way towards him. Whoever it was, they were expending a lot of effort to be quiet. Every movement was quick, furtive, and almost utterly silent. Silently, Virgil debated on the best course of action. On the one hand, he didn't want to announce his and Richie's presence at the gas station. On the other hand, if he could get the drop on this intruder, he might be able to get some much needed answers as to the situation in this Dakota.

Mind made up, he skirted around the edge of the refrigerator, and waiting until the figure was almost upon him. Quick as a flash, he leaped out at the figure, hands raised and crackling with blue light. A startled scream sounded, and the figure fell backwards onto the ground.

In the light cast by his power, he could see it was a little girl…no more than ten or twelve years old. Instantly, he drew his power back into himself, raising his hands in the universal gesture of harmlessness.

"Aw, geez, kid, I'm sorry!" he said hastily. "Please, don't be scared…I'm not gonna hurt you."

The girl was scooting away from him as fast as she could, a look of sheer horror on her thin, dirty face. "S-s-static!" she squeaked. "Help! Someone help me!" She finally hit the edge of a pile of trash in her backwards crab walking, and just curled into a trembling, shaking ball.

"Wait! Kid, easy, I promise, I'm not going to hurt you," he repeated as soothingly as he could. What was up with this?

He had no further chance to try and figure the girl's reaction to him out, for at that moment something heavy slammed into his back, sending him sprawling. The Shock Box went skidding out of his reach, quickly lost in the darkness, as Virgil tried to roll with the impact. He came to his feet quickly, already powering up. His attacker was standing between him and the girl, crouched low to the ground. Virgil couldn't see his face—could only make out that it was in fact a man, slightly taller than himself.

"Leah, run!" the man ordered harshly. For the second time that night, Virgil was pulled up short when he recognized the voice. He intensified the electricity crackling around his fists, lighting up the immediate area. The man's features, twisted in anger though they were, slowly became visible.
"Adam?" Virgil asked in wonder. It was indeed his sister's boyfriend…or at least this Dakota's version of his sister's boyfriend. Adam had materialized his familiar Rubber Band Man suit, though Virgil couldn't remember it looking quite so…military. At least that answered the question of whether or not there were bang babies here.

"Let's go, bolt-boy!" Adam yelled in reply. He sprang at Virgil before the young hero had a chance to say anything, forcing Virgil to dodge to the left. He really didn't want to get into it with Adam…not only did his powers make it difficult for Virgil to cause any real damage, but they desperately needed some allies here if he and Richie were going to get home. In his Dakota, Adam was a friend.

"Adam, wait!" Virgil shouted desperately. "Man, I don't want to fight you!" He dodged again as Adam sprang at him again, rolling away in a somersault. He came to his feet again to find Adam staring at him strangely. The girl had not followed Adam's orders, and was instead watching the fight with a horrified fascination. "Look…I know this sounds crazy, but I'm not who you think I am!"

"Yeah, right…you're scraping the bottom of the barrel here, Static. Let's finish this!" Rubber Band Man jumped at Virgil a final time, and this time there was nowhere to dodge. Reluctantly, Virgil fired off a bolt, succeeding only in knocking Adam off course. The other bang baby landed with a thud and was quickly on his feet again, staring at Virgil with that same strange intensity. "What's the matter? Too tired to fight tonight?" he taunted.

"No! Will you listen to me? I don't…want…to….fight!" Virgil shouted back. Then something else caught his attention. One of the piles of garbage was listing dangerously, dislodged by the short battle. To Virgil's horror, he realized that the girl was standing directly beneath it. Adam seemed to realize the same thing in the same instant, for he dived towards the girl.

"Leah! Watch out!" Adam screamed, but Virgil could tell he was going to be too late. The girl stood frozen, staring up at the pile of scrap that was about to crash down on her head. With a thought, Virgil summoned a field of electromagnetic energy around him and aimed at the debris crashing down on the girl. He caught it all, mere inches from Leah's head, and stood shaking under the strain of holding so much up.

"Get the girl!" he screamed at Adam, who had frozen as completely as the girl, staring at the bluish purple field that had saved her life. At Virgil's words, he seemed to break his paralysis and lunged for the child, sweeping her up into his arms and out of harm's way seconds before the strain became too much, and Virgil was forced to let the pile collapse.

Virgil sank to his knees, breathing hard. Adam and the girl were crouched on the ground scant feet away, simply staring at him.

"You…you saved her life," Adam said, astonishment coloring his words.

Richie spliced the final wire, soldering it into place, and sat back on his heels. He put the small soldering iron aside and carefully examined his work. He'd had to replace more circuit boards than he was strictly comfortable with, given the vast differences between what those circuit boards had had to do in the scanners and what they would have to do in Backpack, but it couldn't be helped. He would need the little robot if he was going to find them a way home. "All right, little buddy, that's the best we can do for now." Crossing his fingers, he slipped his helmet back on and activated the interface. "Backpack…run diagnostic."
The interface screen flickered once, twice, and then stabilized. The customary flood of data commenced, and Richie pumped his fist in the air triumphantly. Backpack was back online. The robot's legs shuddered slightly, and then raised it off the floor, awaiting its owner's orders. Quickly, Richie put it through the paces, testing all of its functions. Reaction time was a little slower than he was used to, but it would do until he could find some more powerful circuit boards to make more permanent repairs with.

So involved was he with making sure Backpack was truly operational again, it took him several seconds to realize that he was no longer alone. When the other presence finally registered, he whipped around, one hand going for the zap caps. The movement was quickly aborted as the single light bulb illuminated the face of the other occupant.

"Geez, V, give me a heart attack why don't you?!" he sniped good-naturedly. His friend was leaning against the jagged edge left by the missing wall of the gas station, watching Backpack intently. "I got it back online," Richie continued cheerfully.

"So I see. Good going, Rich." Something in his friend's tone gave Richie pause, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was.

"Everything okay, bro?" he asked. Something was ticking in the back of his mind, something he couldn't put his finger on.

"Couldn't be better…bro." Virgil smiled at him, and again there was something that sent a skitter of unease up Richie's spine.

"Uh-huh. Okay then; did you find anything useful out there?"

"Oh yeah. I found something real useful here. Why don't you step out and take a look?"

Richie couldn't say why, but suddenly he knew…he knew he was not talking to his best friend. His heart suddenly sped up to a pace approximating a jackhammer, and a cold sweat broke out over his body. He had no reason to suspect that this person meant him harm…but Virgil had never looked at him like this—as though Richie were a particularly interesting bug that was about to be crushed. Something inside of Richie was screaming "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" and he heeded that inner voice. As casually as he could, he called Backpack to its usual place on his back, then leaned down and made a great show of clearing up his work area, twisting his body so that Not-Virgil couldn't see him secret two of the zap caps into his belt.

Suddenly, a soft sigh sounded from almost directly behind him and he froze. He hadn't heard Not-Virgil move. "Damn…you really are a smart one, ain't ya? Oh well, I guess we do this the hard way. More fun for me anyway."

Slowly, he turned to face a nightmare version of his best friend, whose hands were crackling with blue lightning.
Chapter 4

Some part of Richie was faintly surprised at the icy calm that had enveloped him. He could literally feel the blood drain from his face, could feel the cold sweeping through him, as though ice water were being poured into his veins. Electricity arced over Not-Virgil's body, casting strange shadows on the wall, and in the half-light Richie could see a thousand details that should have told him right away that this was not his best friend and partner.

The clothes were the same...the mask, the coat, the gloves—it was all the same. There the resemblance to his friend ended. This Virgil carried himself with a bearing that practically screamed danger. How many times had Richie seen Virgil so casually toss a ball of electricity from hand to hand? Virgil had never managed to look so menacing while doing it. Everything about this version of his friend was harder, leaner, and tougher. His mouth was twisted in a cruel smirk that would have looked utterly alien on the real Virgil's face. Worst of all, though, were the eyes. If Richie had had any lingering hope that this person was anything like his Virgil, they would have been laid to rest by those horrible eyes.

This Virgil's eyes were dead. There was emotion in that gaze, but it was something ugly. There was no hint of the warmth or laughter that Richie was used to seeing when he looked at his friend. They were cold, hungry...the eyes of a predator on the hunt. Those horrible eyes were regarding Richie with a degree of amusement, but Richie didn't miss the supreme confidence in that flat gaze. This Virgil wanted something from him, and didn't think Richie could get away.

Richie was very proud of the fact that he only considered screaming like a little girl in the hopes of attracting the real Virgil's attention for a split second. Virgil probably wouldn't hear him in time, anyway.

The ice calm settled further and his eyes darted from side to side, mapping out all possible routes to the outside. The four remaining zap caps were on the floor behind him. Backpack was ready and able to follow his commands. He had two zap caps on him. Odds flashed through his head at a rate most computers wouldn't have been able to handle. In the space of a heartbeat, he had calculated and settled on a plan.

He tensed faintly, and the smirk on Not-Virgil's face widened. "So that's the way you wanna play it, huh?" He didn't sound at all put out by the prospect of Richie putting up a fight. The light around his hands intensified. Richie drew in a deep breath, refusing to show how much the thought of taking on any version of Static terrified him. He knew better than anyone save Virgil himself the extent of his friend's powers.

"Yup. That's the way I wanna play it. Backpack, go!" The little robot skittered up over his shoulders and flung itself at Not-Virgil in the same instant Richie dived to the side, tucking himself into a tight ball.

"What the—" Not-Virgil stumbled back slightly, instinctively raising one arm to fend off Backpack's attack. Richie knew better than to try and have Backpack immobilize this Static. Instead, the robot hit the outstretched arm and immediately slid down the other's body, hitting the floor with nary a blip to indicate damage from the natural electricity field Static generated. Richie didn't waste time gloating over that small victory. Quick as a flash, a zap cap appeared in his hand. He threw it as hard as he could, noting with satisfaction the shock on Not-Virgil's face as the small tube exploded into the ensnaring metal arms. Richie's aim was perfect, and they entangled Not-Virgil's body dead on.

The momentum of the throw carried him to the ground, where he began thrashing angrily, spewing...
out a stream of profanity such as Richie had never heard before. This time, a small smile of triumph curved his lips as he quickly leaned down to scoop up the remaining zap caps and his Shock Box from the floor, then ran headlong towards the opposite side of the gas station from the open wall.

Backpack leaped back onto his back as he passed it, and Richie threw his visor down as he fired up his skates, taking to the air. He shot out of one of the gaping windows, the glass long since gone, and into the night, an angry shout following him.

"V! Virg, you read me?" Richie shouted into the Shock Box as he flew. He had no idea what direction Virgil had taken and he really didn't want to get lost in a maze of metal scrap with a psycho Static on his trail. The junk was piled up all around him, creating a veritable labyrinth of debris.

He knew it would only be the work of a few seconds for Not-Virgil to break out of the trap. They were seconds he had to use wisely. "Virgil! Damn it, come in! I've got major trouble here, bro! V!" With a slight growl, he shoved the Shock Box back into his pocket. Surely the other Virgil couldn't have gotten to his friend without him hearing anything. Where was his partner?

"Backpack find—arrgh!" The order dissolved into a scream of surprise as something heavy slammed into him from above. He hit the ground hard, sliding several feet and coming to a stop with the weight still on his back.

"Going somewhere, sweet thing?" a familiar voice purred in his ear.

"Talon. Always a pleasure," Richie grunted. He bucked wildly, drawing a shrill laugh from his attacker. Then the weight was gone, and Richie didn't even try to gain his feet...he just rolled. Talon's sonic scream hit the place he had been laying split seconds before. At such close range, the sound was still painful—but not incapacitating. That was all he needed.

A second zap cap found its way into his hand as he rolled to his knees. He raised his eyes to the hovering bird-woman above him, who was gearing up for another scream. "Ah, put a sock in it!" he shouted, hurling the cap up at her. As with the nightmare version of Virgil, surprise was on his side...this Talon had obviously never seen a zap cap before.

Had the situation not been so dangerous, Richie might have found time to laugh at the comical expression on Talon's face as she fell heavily to the ground, trussed up like a turkey. He saluted her cheekily and turned away, choosing a path through the rubble at random and running down it. He tried to stay under cover, not knowing how many fliers Not-Virgil had at his disposal. When he got out of this, he would have to tease Virgil mercilessly about his counterpart working with the likes of Talon. Speaking of Virgil...

"Virgil Hawkins, if you don't answer me I swear, I'm going to leave you here!" he gasped into the Shock Box as he ran.

"—Richie?—"

"V!" Richie cried in relief. "What happened to you?" He skidded to a halt near a particularly large pile of junk, pushing himself as far into the shadows as he could go.

"—I dropped the box. Rich, you're not gonna believe who I—"

"Save it, bro! Listen, this world's you just showed up at the gas station. V...he's bad news."

"—Are you okay?—" Virgil interrupted brusquely, worry tingeing his voice.

"I'm fine. It's not just him, though. I don't know how many are on my tail."
"—Richie, where are you?—"

"I dunno, somewhere in the junkyard."

"—I'm on my way. Listen to me, Rich, don't try to take these guys on. If you see anyone just run. Get out of the junkyard if you can—if I can't find you, I'll meet you at the Burger Fool. Got it.—"

"V, you'll need my help…"

"--No! Promise me, Rich…promise me you'll get away, no matter what you have to do.—"

"Virg, what—"

"--You're right, bro. This place's me…he's bad news. Real bad.—" There was real fear in Virgil's voice. Richie had to wonder what his friend knew that he didn't.

"All right. I promise I'll get away."

"—Stay safe, Rich.—"

"You, too. Richie out." He clicked the Shock Box off and leaned back against a convenient sheet of scrap metal for a moment, breathing hard. "All right V, what'd you find out there?" he muttered to himself, peering cautiously from right to left. So far, he seemed to be alone in this section of the junkyard. All right, he had four zap caps left, as well as Backpack. It wasn't much of an arsenal, but it might be enough to turn any fight in Virgil's favor. "I promise I'll get away, Virg…just as long as you're with me."

He moved stealthily away from the junk pile and began making his way back towards the gas station, taking a round about route. Every sense was on high alert, listening for the slightest sound that might indicate the presence of another bang baby. It would be just his luck to run into this world's version of Hotstreak.

He had only gone a few yards when he became aware that he was no longer alone.

He couldn't even say what it was that caught his attention. There was no sound, no hint of movement. Even the wind seemed to have died down, leaving the air still and silent. He was not alone. Slowly, he turned around, and came face to face with something out of a nightmare.

The dog was huge…easily bigger than a Great Dane. Even from a distance, Richie could tell that its head would nearly be level with his. It looked more like a wolf than a dog, with a thick ruff of fur around the neck, and a lithe, majestic frame. Richie felt his breath catch in his throat. Every hair on his body rose to stand at attention, and a chill swept through him.

The dog was translucent. It glowed faintly blue in the pale moonlight, shimmering before his eyes like a mirage. Like a ghost. Two burning red eyes, the color of the fires of Hell, bored into Richie's own, seizing him with a terror that he had never known before. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe…he was trapped by that hellish gaze, trapped as surely as if he was being held in place by chains.

Slowly, a figure emerged from the gloom behind the dog—a tall man with the lean, lanky figure of youth. His eyes were faintly glowing with the same red light as the dogs, and as he stopped beside it, he laid a gentle hand on the dog's head. Richie was aware of screams trying to claw their way out of his throat, of the fine tremors wracking his body, but he couldn't do anything but stare at the dog.

Finally, the ghostly animal looked up at its apparent master, breaking its gaze. Richie felt the absence of those eyes as intensely as a physical blow. He rocked back on his heels with a loud gasp, nearly
falling over. Warmth rushed back into his limbs, and the mind-numbing terror faded away.

He had to find Virgil. *Now.* They had to get out of here.

He turned around to run again, and slammed face first into a solid chest. An arm like an iron band went around him, pinning his arms to his sides. He looked up into the same sick smile he had seen in the gas station, saw the same predatory gaze focused on him. Desperately, he cast an order at Backpack, feeling a momentary thrill of triumph as the little robot wrested its way free from his back and landed on the ground. He heard it skitter away, and knew that it would quickly be lost in the junk. His triumph was short lived, though, as he very quickly had other things on his mind. He had found Virgil.

Too bad it was the wrong one.

The smile deepened on the doppelganger's face, turning into something even more twisted and sick. Wildly, Richie began struggling, pulling against the grip that held him so tightly. He might as well have been trying to batter his way through a brick wall with his bare hands, though. Virgil was strong, but this guy apparently had a lot more time to work out.

Not-Virgil laughed harshly and shook his head. "Well," he said conversationally, ignoring Richie's efforts to free himself, "that was fun. But guess what?" He laid a perversely gentle hand on the side of Richie's face. "Tag. You're it."

The shock raced through Richie, sparking in a wave of sharp pain from his head to his toes. He thought he screamed, but he couldn't be sure. The hand was removed from his face and he felt himself slumping forward into the imposter's hold.

Then, the world went away for a while.
Virgil was used to people displaying a certain amount of nervousness around him. Although Static was well beloved by the majority of Dakota, there were still some who could never seem to get past the fact that he was, after all, something other than human. He could always tell who those people were—even when he was helping them, their wariness was unmistakable. He'd long ago just shrugged it off and rolled with it, becoming used to it after those first few months.

He was not used to people being petrified of him.

He stayed on his knees in front of Adam and the girl, Leah, his hands in plain sight, and tried to look as harmless as possible. Leah was literally trembling, clutching at Adam's waist and burying her face in his side. For his part, Adam kept his arm tight around the girl's thin body, and Virgil couldn't miss the way he turned so that his own body was between Virgil and Leah at all times. This world's version of his friend and sometime partner was watching Virgil silently, a war going on in his eyes.

"Adam…please, man, I swear I'm not who you think I am. I need your help," Virgil said quietly, trying to put all his sincerity into his words and gaze.

Adam glanced down at Leah, and then over at the pile of rubble that Virgil had saved her from, seeming to come to a decision. "Roll up your sleeves," he said finally, tensing visibly. Clearly, he and Leah were both ready to bolt if Virgil made a single wrong move. Confused, but willing to do anything it took to gain this Adam's trust, he slowly complied.

Adam watched him, not even breathing. When Virgil's arms were exposed up to the elbow, the other bang baby hesitantly stretched out his own arm, reaching across the six or seven feet that separated them. He grabbed Virgil's left wrist and turned the arm this way and that. Virgil heard a harsh, indrawn breath as he submitted to the examination and glanced over to see Leah staring at his bare arms in amazement. Adam rubbed harshly at the skin of his inner elbow, as if trying to rub away makeup, and Virgil winced at the rough treatment, forcibly restraining himself from jerking back.

"There's no marks!" Leah exclaimed suddenly. "Adam, where'd his tattoos go?"

"Tattoos? Tattoos, plural?" Virgil repeated, sounding as amazed as Leah did. His Pops would kill him if he ever came home with a tattoo. Adam let go of his hand and slowly retracted his arm, still staring at Virgil the way one might stare at a dog one wasn't quite sure was friendly or not. Virgil stared steadily back at him, willing the other man to see, to understand. "I'm not the Static you know…and I'm starting to think that's a real good thing. I have tattoos in this world?"

"This world?" Adam repeated. "What do you mean, this world?"

"Long story," Virgil said tiredly.

"I've got time," the older man said, his voice grave. He still stood between Virgil and the girl, more or less relaxed, but clearly no less ready to bolt should the need arise. Virgil raked his hands back through his hair and shrugged, rolling his sleeves back down.

"All right…long story short—I'm Static. But I'm not the Static from here. My partner and I were chasing a bang baby in our Dakota and…well, actually, I don't really understand what happened, but we kind of skipped dimensions. At least that's what Richie said—"

"Richie?" Adam interrupted, and Virgil didn't like the way he said the name. "Richie Foley?"
"Uh, yeah. He's my partner…you know him?"

"Our whole crew knows Richie's name." Adam didn't elaborate further. Virgil was about to press him, when a very important bit of information intruded on his brain.

"Aw crap, my Shock Box!"

"Your what?" Adam's voice was thick with suspicion. He shoved Leah further behind him. Virgil got to his feet, hands still raised in a universal 'surrender' gesture, and began looking wildly around the area he and Adam had so briefly fought in.

"It's, uh, sort of a walkie-talkie…man, Rich'll kill me if I lose it."

"Stay right there," Adam ordered. Without moving his feet, he began twisting his upper body out, searching the ground obliquely while still keeping an eye on Virgil. Carefully, he poked through the debris that littered the ground, as though he was expecting something to explode as soon as he touched it. With a twist in his gut, Virgil realized that he probably was.

"Adam—" Virgil started at length. He almost was afraid to ask the questions that were burning inside of him. Something told him he didn't want to know…but he had to find out. "Where are all the people? What happened here?"

Adam was silent for a moment. He stopped his restless searching of the ground. Then looked up at Virgil, and the darkness in his eyes stopped Virgil cold.

"Static happened." Adam's voice was flat, devoid of emotion. However, his fists clenched and Leah shuffled a little close to him.

Virgil had been more than half expecting it, given the way the few people he had seen here had acted around him. He had known something was wrong. However, a thrill of shock still went through him, as though someone had suddenly sucker-punched him. For a moment, blood rushed in his ears, drowning out all other sound. His knees felt weak. The destruction they had seen, the fear…all because of this world's him? How could that be?

"W…what did he do?" Virgil asked shakily. Adam shot him a look that bordered on murderous. Clearly, he still wasn't convinced that he wasn't talking with this world's Static.

"What didn't he do?" Adam asked bitterly. "The Big Bang happened, and he…Virgil just went crazy." Virgil was faintly surprised that Adam knew his real name, but decided it made no less sense than anything else he had heard or seen. "I guess I don't have to tell you that Static was one of the most powerful bang babies created that day. There was so much confusion after the Bang, and Static just slowly took over. Anyone wasn't down with that, got taken down. At first he was happy with just runnin' the other bang babies. He left the normals alone, long as they didn't get in his way."

"I guess it didn't stay that way, huh?"

"No. Static's insane. Doesn't care about anyone or anything…he's a killer, through and through." Adam looked hard at Virgil, as though he was expecting a reaction to the words. When Virgil gave none, faint furrows of confusion appeared on Adam's face. "The more power he got, the more he wanted. Some of us tried to stand up to him, but after…well, it didn't work. He took over the city…those of us who could, left. Some of us stayed to fight," Adam continued.

Suddenly, Virgil saw a glint of something shiny amongst the filthy junk on the ground. Adam saw it at the same time, and his hand flinched back. He reached down and shoved Leah further behind him. They stood like that for a few seconds, Adam still trying to watch the device and Virgil at the same
time. Finally, he slowly retracted himself into a normal shape, and nodded shortly at Virgil. Virgil moved forward and quickly picked the small radio up. Adam seemed to relax fractionally when nothing happened, but still regarded Virgil with wariness.

Virgil checked the box over, satisfying himself that it was undamaged, then moved to call Richie. His partner had to hear this.

"—Virgil Hawkins if you don't answer me, I swear I'm going to leave you here!—"

The box crackled to life in his hands, and Richie's breathless voice issued from it. Adam startled at the sound of the voice, shock blooming on his face. He clutched hard at Leah's shoulder and Virgil heard him whisper "holy shit."

It sounded as though this were not the first time Richie had tried to get in touch with Virgil. His partner had probably thought of another piece of equipment he wanted Virgil to search for. Quickly, he thumbed the broadcast. "Richie?"

"—V! What happened to you?—"

"I dropped the box. Rich, you're not gonna believe who I—"

"—Save it, bro! Listen, this world's you just showed up at the gas station. V…he's bad news.—"

Virgil nearly dropped the box, going cold all over at Richie's words. Leah gave a short, shrill scream and clutched at Adam.

"Are you okay?" Virgil asked, worry thick in his voice.

"—I'm fine. It's not just him, though. I don't know how many are on my tail.—"

"Tell him to get out of there, now." Virgil looked up, startled by the intensity in Adam's voice. The older man had gone ashy, and was watching the box with wild eyes. "If Static brought his goons with him…" Adam trailed off, but his look spoke more eloquently than any words could. Virgil felt a hard knot of fear form in his stomach.

"Richie, where are you?"

"—I dunno, somewhere in the junkyard.—"

Virgil pulled his disc out and threw it on the ground, summoning a charge to it with a thought. Leah flinched back at the display of his powers, but he didn't have time to worry about upsetting the girl. Adam was still watching him with the expression of someone who had been pole axed. Virgil leaped onto the disc. "I'm on my way. Listen to me, Rich, don't try to take these guys on. If you see anyone just run. Get out of the junkyard if you can—if I can't find you, I'll meet you at the Burger Fool. Got it?"

"—V, you'll need my help—"

"No!" Adam's earlier words raced through Virgil's head—'Static's insane…doesn't care about anyone or anything….killer through and through' "Promise me, Rich…promise me you'll get away no matter what you have to do." His voice was shaking, but there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't want to think of his friend meeting up with someone who could inspire the kind of fear he had seen in this world.

"—Virg, what…—"
Virgil cut his friend off, knowing that every instant he wasted talking would be time the intruders could spend getting closer to his partner. "You're right, bro. This place's me...he's bad news. Real bad."

"--All right. I promise I'll get away.--" Richie's voice was quiet, subdued. Virgil knew his friend had detected the fear in his voice, and that even now his mind was racing to figure out what was wrong. There was no time to explain, though.

"Stay safe, Rich."

"--You too. Richie out.--" The Shock Box went dead in his hands, and Virgil tried not to feel anything ominous in the sudden silence. He didn't succeed. He shoved the Shock Box into his pocket and spun in the air to face Adam and Leah.

"I've have to go," he said. "You get Leah out of here, okay?"

"You're not playin' with me. You really are Virgil Hawkins. Another Virgil Hawkins. You're not him." Adam was looking at him in wonder. "I can't believe it."

He sent the disc upwards with a thought, but was shocked to feel something arresting his upwards motion. He looked down to find Adam had grabbed hold of the bottom of his coat, unaffected by his electric field. "Hey!" he protested.

"You can't go by yourself!" Adam called up to him. "You don't know what you're going up against."

"They're after Richie! You said it yourself; your Static's nuts!"

"Yeah, and so's everyone that runs with him! You'll be flying into danger like you wouldn't believe!"

"I don't care if I'm flying into a firing squad! He needs my help." Adam let go of him, staring up at him with a look of indecision on his face. Then he shook his head, and a shadow of a smile passed over his grim face. There was something sad and wistful in the smile, as though Adam was recalling something bittersweet.

Then he looked down at Leah, gently taking her by the shoulders. "Baby girl, I need you to go back to the tunnels. Think you can remember the way?" Leah looked up at him, her eyes huge, but nodded bravely.

"What're you doing?" Virgil asked. In answer, Adam transformed again into his Rubberband Man costume.

"I can't believe I'm saying this—I'm going to help you."

Virgil swallowed hard, torn. On the one hand, he could really use Adam's help...if the other him was even a fraction as bad as Virgil was starting to believe, he would need all the help he could get. However, was it fair to ask Adam to risk his life against someone he so obviously hated and feared? "You...you don't have to do that, man."

Adam looked up at him and nodded, once. A half smile, still guarderd but definitely warmer, quirked his lips. "I know. Leah, go, fast as you can. Tell the others we might need some help out here, all right?"

Leah nodded vigorously, her frizzy blond hair flying every which way. "I got it, Adam. Be careful!"
"Always am, baby girl." With that, the girl turned away from them and ran in the opposite direction, barely a sound marking her progress. Adam watched her go, and then turned back to Virgil. "All right…let's do this."

Virgil lowered himself to the ground and held out a hand to the other bang baby, eyebrow raised inquiringly. There was a moment of hesitation before Adam visibly steeled himself. He gripped Virgil's hand and allowed himself to be pulled onto the disc. He still held himself stiffly, but Virgil could tell his was no longer waiting to be turned upon and attacked. Apparently, hearing Richie's voice had convinced him of Virgil's story. Great…at least one of them was still trusted in this dimension.

Virgil pushed them into the sky, heading back to the gas station at as fast a clip as he could muster. There was no reason for stealth now…if they saw him coming, so much the better. It might distract them from searching for Richie. Adam knelt on the disc in front of him, much as Richie had only a few hours before. As much help as Adam might turn out to be—it felt wrong to be heading into a fight without Richie by his side.

"So…uh, you wouldn't happen to have a freaky lady with an eyepatch on your team, would you?" he asked after a few moments. A thought had been ticking in his brain since he had heard Adam mention "tunnels." In front of him, Adam laughed dryly, and without much humor.

"You ran into Sharon." It was not a question. Adam didn't comment further, but Virgil was pleased to note the warmth that colored his tone when he mentioned Sharon's name. At least this world's version of his sister had someone to care about her. He wanted to ask about his father in this world…but wasn't sure he would be able to handle any more bad news. Better not to know.

After what felt like hours, but really could only have been a few minutes, Virgil caught sight of the gas station looming up out of the darkness. In front of him, he felt Adam tense as the other man crouched lower, as if getting ready to spring at anything that moved. He probably was.

Virgil pushed the disc faster, suddenly seized with a need to get to the gas station sooner. He couldn't explain it—he just knew he had to go. "He said he'd get away. He promised he'd stay out of it." Virgil reassured himself.

And exactly how long would it have taken him to rush back into the fray, had their situations been reverse?

"Damn it!" Virgil swore, and forced still more speed out of the disc. He rocketed over the roof of the gas station, so that what had originally been the front service area was in plain view.

He came upon a scene out of one of his worst nightmares.

There was only a small group of them. Something like relief shot through Virgil as he was able to identify each and every one of the bang babies standing below him. Talon, Onyx, and Kangorr…he knew these people. He knew how to deal with them. It was not the sight of this world's duplicates of his enemies that stopped the breath in his chest, squeezed an icy fist around his heart.

It was the figure they were loosely grouped around.

Virgil stared down into his own face—a dark, alien version of his own face. Instantly, he knew that whatever fear Adam and Sharon and Leah had felt for his counterpart…it was justified. They were dressed identically, looked identical…but this other Static was different. There was something wrong about him. Even from a distance, Virgil could see the coldness in those eyes; feel the aura of menace the other Static projected. He was looking at every dark, ugly thing that had ever lurked in his own
And at the feet of this nightmare version of himself lay the body of his best friend.

Richie was sprawled out on the ground as though he had been dumped there with the carelessness of a child dropping a toy. For one terrible, timeless instant Virgil thought he was dead. He thought he had gotten there too late. Then he saw the slight rise and fall of his friend's chest and relief swept through him with the force of a tidal wave.

He lowered the disc 'til he was nearly on ground level with them. Adam stepped off and fell in beside him, fists clenched and murder dancing in his eyes. They stared at each other across the patch of ground separating them, neither side moving an inch. Virgil clenched his own fists, drew himself up straighter.

"Leave him alone," he growled, his eyes focused on the other Static.

The doppelganger grinned and it was the most sinister expression Virgil had ever seen. Not even Ebon had ever been able to project such threat in his expressions. "Well...this is interesting. Let's see, leave him alone, leave him alone..." He rubbed his chin with exaggerated thoughtfulness. "Mmm, no...don't think I will," he purred.

Blue lightning sprang to Virgil's hands. "I'm warning you...let him go!"

The other Static laughed, and shook his head. "Now why would I do a thing like that when we both know you ain't doin' a damn thing as long as your boy's in the cross fire?"

Virgil gritted his teeth and the lightning danced around his body madly. He did not, however, strike. He didn't dare, not with Richie lying there, helpless.

"Looks like T was right about you." He smiled even more nastily, showing far too many teeth. "Weak," he spat.

"Step up and I'll show you weak!" Virgil replied hotly, desperate to draw them away from Richie.

The other Static looked around his group, and then leaned back, arching his hands over his head in a lazy stretch. "Take care of these jokers," he said carelessly.

Talon took to the sky as Onyx suddenly rushed forward. Virgil and Adam were forced to jump apart lest they be trampled to death. Kangorr dove at Adam as he got to his feet, aiming a devastating kick at the other bang baby's midsection. Adam smirked slightly as his body simply absorbed the blow, stretching a good five feet backwards with the force.

Kangorr fell back with a grunt, and Adam dropped into a fighting stance Virgil had never seen his world's Adam use.

Virgil shot back up into the air, calling a ball of electricity to his hands. He needed to end this as fast as possible.

"C'mon man...you and me, right here, right now!" he screamed down to his counterpart. The other Static just shook his head with that same maddening smile.

"Oh no, brother. I think my way's a lot more fun." With that, he leaned down and quickly hefted Richie up, slinging the other boy over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Adios." He tipped a jaunty wave at Virgil, who dove forward with as much speed as he could muster.
Only to be knocked back by one of Talon's sonic blasts.

He tumbled to the ground with a shout, his disc striking the earth beside him. Blearily, he looked up to see his counterpart take to the air, utilizing a scrap of sheet metal in the way Virgil used his disc. "No!" he shouted, scrambling clumsily to his feet.

"Virgil, heads up!" Adam called suddenly. Virgil snapped his eyes towards the sound of Adam's voice and was barely able to throw himself out of the way of Onyx's charge.

Once, in the days before Richie's own powers had emerged, his partner had asked Virgil how he went into battle with people who posed the kinds of threats the bang babies did. How did he throw himself headlong into a fray knowing he might not come out of it? The answer was simple. There was just no time to think about it. A fight for Static was not the grace and drawn out thoughtfulness of a chess match…it was a blitz of action and reaction. Sure, Virgil had strategy—but it flashed through him in the space of a heartbeat, until it became instinct. Time always seemed to speed up when Virgil was battling—things became brighter, sounds became louder. His world seemed to fragment into a thousand pieces and always there was the throb of action/reaction, action/reaction. It was a dance Virgil had mastered rather quickly and rarely had trouble falling into anymore.

He rolled back to his feet and threw a blast at the rock-like bang baby as he passed. Onyx grunted in pain and went to his knees, but Virgil knew the blast would not keep him down for long. He hopped onto the disc once more and pulled himself into the air. Frantically, he scanned the area around him, at last lighting on a pile of scrap metal lying a few yards away. Onyx gained his feet and turned on Virgil, fury on his craggy face. Virgil snarled back, "Man, I don't have time for this!" He reached out his hands toward the pile and summoned the metal to him.

Piece after piece of debris pelted Onyx, who was forced backwards a few stumbling steps. There was nothing big enough to take the brute out, though. He merely shook off Virgil's best efforts. "You'll have to do better than that," Onyx growled.

Virgil glared back at him, calling still more power up. He had to find something bigger to throw. Abruptly, though, the search for a more effective weapon was the least of his problems. For the second time that evening, Virgil was hit with the force of Talon's sonic scream.

Clutching at his head, pain rocketing through him, he tasted dirt again. For a few, precious moments he was unable to do anything but roll around in agony as wave after wave of sound hit him.

"Virgil!" Dimly, he heard Adam's voice, but it was quickly lost in the sea of painful sound surrounding him. Then, without warning, there was blessed relief. Talon's scream ended in a squawk. Virgil forced himself to his knees in time to see Talon fall to the earth as well, Adam having stretched himself tall enough to grab one foot and literally yank her out of the sky. Saving Virgil, though, cost the older man. Kangorr took the opportunity to hit Adam with a flying tackle, and the two went down in a kicking, punching tangle of limbs.

Shakily, Virgil got to his feet, one hand still pressed to his head. He ran forward a few steps, intent on helping his new ally, but a heavy hand landing on the back of his neck interrupted that plan. Virgil choked out a cry of surprise as he was lifted off of his feet and shaken like a rat in the jaws of a terrier. A low, grating chuckle echoed in his ears, adding to the already throbbing pain in his head.

Then, Virgil was airborne again, Onyx having flung him aside. He landed with a crash in pile of debris, striking his head and back painfully against something hard and unforgiving. Spots dancing before his eyes, he looked up to see Onyx stalking toward him, the fist of one hand rhythmically socking into the palm of the other. Oh, special. A surge of anger shot through Virgil, chasing away the cobwebs that had clouded his mind. He glanced around him, and a humorless smile lit his face as
he realized exactly where Onyx had tossed him. Slowly, he climbed to his feet.

"I told you…I…don't….have…time for this!" he ground out, his voice rising to a roar on the final word. He sent a pulse of power through everything around him, the light of it nearly blinding in its intensity. Everything with the merest trace of metal in it was lifted into the air to hover over Virgil's head…his own, personal arsenal.

Onyx had flung him into a pile of construction scrap. Metal beams, heavy duty wire-reinforced concrete, broken industrial drill bits…even the blade of a bulldozer. Onyx had just enough time to look scared before it was all hurled towards him with the force of a guided missile. The scrap struck him with unerring accuracy, bending around him, forcing him inexorably back. Virgil formed a solid ball of energy in front of him and flung it to follow the bulldozer blade.

When the light finally faded away, Onyx remained standing for a total of two seconds.

Virgil summoned his disc to him again and took to the air, passing over the fallen bang baby with nary a glance. Talon was just getting to her feet, anger written all over her feathered face. She flapped her wings as Virgil drew closer, evidently planning on taking him on.

"Uh-uh," Virgil said shortly. Another burst of power and one of the metal beams he had hit Onyx with flew at the bird woman, wrapping around her body and the lower part of her face as though it was made of silly putty. She tumbled to the ground in much the same position Richie had left her in earlier, though Virgil didn't know that.

Adam and Kangorr were literally motionless, still locked in battle with Kangorr's hands wrapped around Adam's neck and Adam pulling back for a punch. They were both staring at him, jaws hanging. Virgil pulled up even with the two and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring down at Kangorr.

For his part, Kangorr glanced at Adam, back up at Virgil, and abruptly released his hold on the other man. He backed away quickly, hands raised in a gesture of surrender. "Oh I don't get paid enough for this shit," he grunted. He shot one final look at his fallen teammates, then turned tail and ran.

Virgil dropped to the ground, landing next to Adam, who was bent at the waist with his hands braced on his knees, breathing hard.

"Nice…job…kid," Adam panted as Virgil came within earshot.

"He took Richie," Virgil said tensely, ignoring the compliment. "C'mon, get on…we have to catch him!" Adam nodded shortly and climbed onto the disc again, moving automatically to crouch in front of Virgil. "Where would he go?" Virgil demanded as they took to the air again.

He refused to think about the huge head start that the other Static had on them. Virgil had to get to Richie before the other Static went to ground with him. There was simply no other choice. Before him, he heard Adam sigh heavily.

"He'll take Richie to his HQ. Place is a damn fortress."

"Then we'll just have to get to him before he gets there," Virgil said grimly.

"Head down Macy to Fifth…I think I know I shortcut. Stay low…Talon ain't the only flier Static has working for him."

Silently, Virgil complied, squeezing every bit of speed out of his power that he could. He could feel his body's protest as he asked still more of it, but he didn't have time to rest and recharge. Richie was
counting on him.

They continued in tense silence for several blocks with no sign of the other Static, and with each passing second Virgil felt his heart sinking lower. They skimmed the streets, and everywhere Virgil saw only signs of death and destruction. Nothing was left untouched. And the person who had caused it all had his best friend, his partner.

"Virgil, watch it!" Adam yelled suddenly, throwing his hand up. Automatically, Virgil halted his headlong flight, pulling to a stop to hover in the air.

"What? What do you see?" he demanded, looking every which way for the other Static.

What he saw, though, was a single figure standing in the middle of the deserted street in front of them.

In the pre-dawn darkness it was impossible to tell anything about the figure besides the fact that it was too tall to be the other Static. Adam leaped down onto the ground in front of him, staring intently at the figure. Virgil didn't like the other man's posture at all.

"Adam?" he questioned.

"Gimme some light," the other man ordered suddenly.

"What?"

"Light!" Adam barked. Virgil was so startled that he obeyed, sending a pulse of power through the ruined street lights as he had done back at the gas station. Only a fraction of them actually came on, but it was enough to illuminate the street…and the man standing in front of them.

He was nearly as tall as Adam; and looked to be in his early twenties, with a lean, lanky build. In the half-light his pale skin practically glowed, giving him a strange, otherworldly look. A shock of unruly hair, dyed a bright electric blue fell over his forehead. He was dressed head to toe in black, as the other Sharon had been—black boots, black leather pants, a skin-tight black t-shirt, and a black leather trenchcoat—all of which contrasted sharply with his pale skin, so that he seemed more a ghost than a man.

"Uh, okay…who's that?"

"Deimos." There was a world of emotion layered in that single word…none of it pleasant. "We have to get out of here." Adam's voice was tight, and he spoke through gritted teeth. Virgil nearly fell off of his disc in shock.

"Say what?!" he shouted.

"Virgil, now. We have to go back."

"You must be trippin'! I'm not leaving Richie with that bastard."

Adam whirled on him, anger blazing in his eyes. "We can't take him on! Not without backup…Virgil, we have to leave!"

The youth—Deimos, Adam had called him—watched them impassively, neither moving towards them nor backing away. It seemed as though he was merely waiting for them to decide what to do.

"Reinforcements? Dude, there's two of us and one of him! How much backup you need for one
skinny refugee from Hot Topic?"

"Virgil!"

"I'm not leaving without Richie," Virgil fired back, and shot forward on his disc, leaving Adam behind.

"Virgil, no!"

Deimos still wasn't moving, merely watching Virgil draw closer with an odd, amused smile on his pale face. Suddenly, though, his eyes began to change. A deep, scarlet glow began to emanate from them, growing brighter by the second. Seemingly from nowhere, a thick fog sprang up, rushing in from all sides around Deimos to coalesce in front of the youth. A trickle of unease unfurled in Virgil's mind, but he refused to be intimidated. He powered up as he flew, calling energy to his hands in preparation for what he hoped would be a short battle.

And suddenly…he couldn't move.

The fog solidified into a single form—a wavering, ghostly wolf-like creature, nearly three times as big as any dog Virgil knew of. It's eyes were burning with the same red light at Deimos's. Virgil could only stare into those eyes, unaware of anything else around him. The animal's gaze held him trapped, and the longer he stared, the more aware he was of a creeping horror growing in him.

It stole his breath, stole the warmth from his blood, moving stealthily through him and he was unable to stop it. He lost power and fell to the hard asphalt, his disc landing with a clatter beside him, but he was lost in that demon gaze. Fear clawed at him, raced up and down his spine, churned through his heart, until all he knew was the icy dread of those eyes. He couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't save himself.

Dimly, he felt pain stabbing through him, but it was a faraway sensation. Too numbed by the cold fear the dog inspired in him, he couldn't get a bead on where the pain was coming from. The longer he stared, though, the more the pain grew, until the cold was finally shattered by fire.

It licked through every muscle, every cell, stealing his energy, his life. He felt as though his very soul was being pulled from his body inch by inch. He wanted so desperately to scream, but, held prisoner in that hellish gaze, he couldn't make his mouth work.

Then, a heavy weight slammed into him from behind, dragging him forward and breaking the gaze of the animal.

He came back to himself with a gasp, and a choked whimper escaped him as the sucking pain slowly faded, leaving him shaking, dizzy, and weak. Adam rolled with the momentum of his tackle, bringing them both to rest in a littered gutter on the side of the street. They lay gasping for a few seconds, while Deimos's low, amused chuckle echoed around them.

"Don't look at him…don't ever look into the eyes," Adam said sternly. Quickly, he helped Virgil to his feet. Still gasping like a beached fish, Virgil swayed drunkenly for a few seconds, before finally regaining his equilibrium. "We can't win this fight," Adam said grimly.

"No! I'm…not…leaving R-Richie," Virgil panted. He lunged forward again, only to be caught around the waist and spun about. Adam gripped the collar of his shirt and yanked him close, so that they were almost nose to nose.

"Damn it, boy, you won't be able to help Richie if you're dead," Adam shouted at him. "I'll help you. I promise I'll help you, but we have to get out of here."
"Oh come on, RB...let him stay." Deimos's clear voice rang out over the street. "I promise, I'll be gentle." The dog growled menacingly, an odd, distorted sound.

"Static wants something from Richie. He won't kill him...yet." Virgil tried to lunge forward again and the "yet," but again Adam held him back. "Virgil, we have to get away, get help." Without another word, Adam flung him back and took off down a side alley, quickly vanishing into the dark. Virgil stood frozen for a moment, torn.

Part of him was screaming at him to throw himself into another attack at Deimos, and to do whatever it took to get his friend back. The other part of him, though, an inner voice that always sounded irritatingly like his father, was telling him that he was a stranger here. In a world where he could turn into the kind of man the other Static was, what other kinds of dangers would he be facing? This Adam had been willing to take a huge risk to help him...if Adam said it was too dangerous to continue, Virgil would have to trust him. He closed his eyes briefly, before he summoned his disc back to him and leaped onto it.

Deimos's mocking laughter followed him down the alley.

He sped after Adam, quickly catching the older man up and leaning out a supporting arm as he passed in the air. Adam caught the offered hand, swung himself up onto the disc, and Virgil poured on the speed, carrying them away. Away from Richie.

"I'm coming back for you, bro...I promise I'm coming back for you."

Behind them, a long, eerie howl rang out in the night.
Chapter 6

He had actually been staring at the ceiling for a couple of minutes before he realized that he was awake. Even then, all he could do was lay where he was for several more minutes, blinking up at the ceiling tiles, groggy and disoriented. Gradually, several things became apparent, as the fog in his head cleared. He was lying on something soft and comfortable in what, if the height of the ceiling was anything to go by, was a fairly large room. There was a faint whirring sound from somewhere to his left, and a steady circulating stream of cool air was brushing across him. There was no other sound in the room, save for his own soft breathing. He was not at the gas station, nor was he in his bed at home.

He blinked again, brow furrowing in confusion. His head ached and there was an over-tired weakness in his whole body that was already fading to a mere residual—as if he had overworked himself in a fight and was now paying the price. It didn't, however, feel like the many Static-and-Gear related injuries he had suffered over the years. What had happened?

His frown deepened as his mind, rather like an old car struggling to start on a cold day, slowly began dredging up facts. Things started to click into place faster and faster as the aftereffects of whatever had happened to him began to fall away. His thoughts cleared, snapping into their usual laser-like focus and he remembered. The bang baby in the sewers, the catastrophic accident that had left him and his partner trapped in an honest-to-God alternate dimension of their hometown. Finding the gas station, sending Virgil out to look for parts. The terrifying copy of Virgil that had shown up and then—"Tag, You're It." Richie jackknifed into a sitting position, his heart racing and breath coming out in a harsh gasp. He looked wildly around the room, but there was no sign of the other Virgil.

He was alone.

He sighed in relief and swung his legs over the side of the bed he was lying on. Quickly, he took stock of himself, frowning again when he realized everything was still fuzzy and out of focus...not from any injury, but because his helmet—with its specially designed visor in his prescription—had been removed. As had his belt. And his skates. With a sinking heart, he rifled through the various pockets and pouches of his uniform, finding that they had already been rifled through while he had been unconscious (and wasn't that a vaguely creepy thought?) and everything useful he had been carrying was gone. Whoever had searched him had even taken his glasses, kept safe in a padded and reinforced pocket on the inside of his uniform. Well, at least they hadn't stripped him. That would have sucked.

All right then—his eyesight was pretty close to useless without his glasses, but he wasn't totally blind. He could adjust. First things first—he had to figure out where he was. He heaved himself off the mattress and padded across the floor in his socks, squinting as hard as he could. He had been right when he'd thought the room was large. The place was nearly as big as a classroom, with a bland sort of architecture that suggested office space. The walls were a gun-metal gray, as was the carpeting beneath his feet, while the ceiling was plain white tile. Apart from the single twin bed he had been lying on, there was a plain gray metal night stand and a large workbench on one wall. There was no other furniture, only a bank of tall windows on the wall opposite the bench.

Shrugging, Richie shuffled over to the windows. They were made of heavy security glass and the view outside confirmed his theory that he was in one of Dakota's office buildings. He pressed his forehead against the glass and peered down. It was impossible for him to see any details beyond the fact that he was several floors up, and it was daytime. So, he'd been out for a few hours at least. Virgil must be going nuts by now.
Assuming the other Static hadn’t gotten to him, too.

Richie shuddered as he remembered those cold, flat eyes, the feel of being trapped in the other Static’s hold. That hadn't been Virgil…he wouldn't call that impostor by his friend’s name. Virgil would never be that cold…that menacing. Virgil would never use his powers to harm him. No, he wouldn't think about it. Virgil had to have gotten away…that was all there was to it. Richie pounded his fists on the glass and leaned back, turning around to rest against the window. All right… he had two choices.

One, he could try and get out of here himself—not that the idea of running around in his socks was particularly pleasant, but still; two, he could wait around like a damsel in distress for either his captors to show up again, or for Virgil to come and rescue him. No contest.

He strode across the room; heading for the vaguely darker gray blur on the opposite wall that he was pretty sure was a door. As he drew closer, the blur resolved itself indeed into a door, which had obviously not been part of the building’s original design. His eyes narrowed still further, though now it had nothing to do with trying to improve his vision.

It was a plain sheet of metal, with an access number pad to one side. It didn't look particularly complex—if he’d had Backpack on him he’d have had it open in a minute flat. He’d ordered Backpack away in the junkyard, however, determined that his prize gadget not be caught along with him. Hell, even without Backpack, he could get it open…he just needed something to—

He cocked his head to one side and smiled slyly. Yes. That would be perfect.

He moved back over to the bed and flipped the mattress off of the frame, exposing the box spring. As he had suspected, it was cheaply made, held together by staples and wood glue. Still smiling to himself, Richie reached down and tore a hole in the thin cotton webbing covering the actual springs. He braced one foot on the bed frame and gripped one of the springs, jerking quickly. A couple of tries and the spring came free of its holdings. Luckily, the metal was as cheap as the frame…thin and very pliable. He managed to pull one end more or less straight, then knelt down on that part, using his body weight to hold it in place while he pulled the rest of the spring straight, leaving him with a strip of metal about eight inches long.

He went back to the door and scrutinized the box that actually held the number pad. It wasn't screwed or bolted on…the faceplate simply fitted tightly over the pad, and had been painted over. Richie snorted and shook his head.

"Amateurs," he muttered. Carefully, he pressed one end of the wire into the corner of the number pad, smiling when he found to it be a solid piece of soft vinyl fitted over the buttons. He pressed harder, slowly working the wire underneath the rubber, until finally it popped through into the innards of the panel. He twisted the wire roughly, pulling backwards, and the corner of the vinyl came free of its holdings. From there it was the work of seconds to pull the vinyl piece free, leaving him enough room to work his fingers until the faceplate. A couple of hard yanks and the faceplate popped free, revealing the guts of the access pad.

Richie chewed thoughtfully at the inside of his cheek as he examined the mess of wires and circuit boards he’d exposed. "Aw come on…no surge protection? No lockout redundancy? Who designed this thing?" This would be easier than he had first thought. He shook his head and pulled two wires loose, careful not to touch the live ends. He turned his head as he gripped the wires and pressed them onto the main circuit board, wincing as some of the resulting sparks singed his hands. There was a soft popping sound as the live wires fried the insides of the access panel. A faint smell of ozone and burned rubber, and the door hissed open without protest.
The nightmare Static was standing on the other side.

Richie stumbled back from the door with a surprised shout, nearly falling to the floor in his shock. Not-Static was leaning against the doorway, casually, a stopwatch held in one hand. He glanced up from the face at Richie's yell, a toothy smile lighting his features. Like everything about him, it was too harsh.

"Five minutes, twenty two seconds. Pretty impressive," Not-Static drawled. He dropped the stopwatch into a pocket and braced his hands on the doorway, leaning into the room until only his arms were keeping him upright. "You that eager to leave?"

Richie stepped back further into the room, watching the other teen warily, and remained silent. The smile deepened on Not-Static's face. He pulled himself back upright and entered the room. Richie cast his eyes around the room for a weapon…but there was nothing available. Richie rather suspected that had been the plan all along.

Without the uniform, Not-Static looked both more and less like Virgil. He was dressed in a pair of red jeans and a black tank that would not have looked amiss on Virgil. The bold, black tribal tattoos crawling up and down his arms most certainly would have. The easy grin was so, so similar…and yet there was an edge to it that just didn't fit. Not-Static didn't seem put off by Richie's silence. Instead, he merely moved closer and began walking a slow circle around Richie, laughing shortly when Richie moved with him so that they were always face to face.

"Wow. Just...wow. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. You really are Richie...from a whole other dimension." Richie started in surprise and Not-Static chuckled again. "Talon heard the whole thing. You really oughta be more careful around here. There are all sorts of nasty characters hangin' around."

"Yeah. I noticed," Richie said snidely. Not-Static struck an expression of utter innocence, the effect totally ruined by the harshness in his eyes. Then the expression melted away as though it had never been there, replaced with the twisted amusement. He moved away from Richie, much to Richie's relief, and leaned back up against the wall by the door, the picture of casual ease. Richie wasn't fooled for an instant.

"So...my Richie never let on that he was a bang baby. Pretty neat toys you can make, there. What was that thing you threw at me? Took me a few minutes to get out of that...Talon would still be in that dump if we hadn't found her. And that...thing...on your back—amazing." Not-Static shook his head, his voice tinged with what sounded like genuine admiration. Richie's eyes narrowed as he tried to figure out what the other was getting at.

"Just where is this world's me anyway?" There was some relief in the fact that this world's Richie Foley apparently wasn't on Static's side. Richie didn't really want to think about what the alternate him could have done with his genius if he was as warped as this Static...it was too horrible to even contemplate.

Not-Static stared hard at him for a moment, before he shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. He didn't take too kindly to my...accomplishments." A strange emotion flitted through Not-Static's eyes—something that almost looked hurt, but it, too was gone in an instant. "But, what the hell...I think I like the upgraded version, better."

Richie did not like the tone those words were spoken in. He drew himself up to his full height, not that it helped much as he was still shorter than this Static as well, and crossed his arms over his chest. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked evenly.
Not-Static grinned, a touch maniacally. "I've got one or two minor irritations that need to be squashed. No sense in us runnin' ourselves to the ground when I bet you could figure it out in a snap. Consider it charge for room and board."

"Okay one, you don't make people you kidnap pay rent! Two, all that voltage must've fried your brain if you think I'm doing a damn thing to help you."

Not-Static tilted his head to one side and the smile suddenly turned dangerous. Richie swallowed convulsively at the expression leveled at him. He braced for a blow, but instead, Not-Static shrugged and fished something out of his pocket. "I'm sorry you feel that way. Oh, you'll want these back, I bet." He held out Richie's glasses.

Richie didn't move to take them. Not-Static stood there, the glasses still held out in one hand, apparently willing to wait him out. Finally, Richie moved forward to take them. He had been expecting something, but when Not-Static moved it was with the speed of a snake striking. Richie's wrist was grabbed in a painfully tight grip and he was spun around. He was slammed face-first against the wall by the door, his left arm twisted up painfully behind him, and Not-Static behind him, pinning him to the wall with nearly his full weight.

"Now, let's get a few things straight," Not-Static growled softly into Richie's ear. "This ain't your town no more, this is my turf. I call the shots. Everyone here does what I say, and that includes you now." He twisted Richie's arm a little higher with each sentence, until it felt as though it might break under the pressure. Richie firmly bit his tongue to keep from screaming, refusing to give this monster who wore his friend's face that satisfaction. "We clear…bro?"

"Crystal," Richie gasped out. Another harsh twist that, despite his best efforts, brought tears to his eyes and the atrocious pressure was gone. Richie was spun around again, the back of his head cracking against the wall. With perverse care, Not-Static held up his glasses again, unfolded them, and slipped them onto his face. Then, at last, he stepped back and Richie automatically pulled his aching left arm up to cradle it in his right.

"Bathroom's to your left." Not-Static jerked a thumb towards a sliding door in the wall next to the workbench that Richie hadn't noticed before. "I'll send someone down with breakfast. Oh and…I wouldn't go wandering around if I was you. The door might not have stopped you—but locks ain't the only security I got around here. Most of it ain't too interested in takin' prisoners." He reached up and patted Richie's cheek almost affectionately. Richie tried very hard not to flinch. "It's good to see you again, Rich."

With that, he left, the door hissing shut behind him.

Richie swallowed hard a few times, and then slowly slid down the wall until he was resting on the floor, still holding his left arm tightly. He couldn't believe it. He had known this Static had to be…bad. It had been obvious in the gas station that there was something wrong with this guy…but he couldn't believe that Virgil—any version of Virgil—would ever actually hurt him. Would deliberately cause him pain.

"No…not Virgil. Never Virg," he muttered to himself. "That's not Virgil…that's not. Okay…okay, think. Think. Think." There was a way out of this. There was always a way out.

He just had to find it.

They had traveled in silence since retreating from that Deimos character, save Adam's occasional directions. They had taken to the sewers again, and Virgil was starting to feel claustrophobic. From
what Adam had said…there were people actually living down here. He couldn't imagine having to stay in a place like this all the time, venturing to the surface only after nightfall to scavenge for food and supplies. It sounded like something out of a bad science-fiction movie. Only it wasn't a movie… it was reality here. It was reality that had been created by the Static of this world.

For the umpteenth time, dread roiled through his stomach at the thought of leaving Richie in the hands of someone who could create this kind of misery for so many people.

Stubbornly, he pushed it aside. Running around in a blind panic would not help his friend. He had to approach this calmly, coolly…and he could start by getting some answers. For instance…

"Adam? How come things got this far here? I mean…doesn't the Justice League exist here? Why didn't anyone help you guys when your Static started to take over?"

Adam sighed heavily. "Yeah…yeah, we have a JL here. Batman actually does help us out a lot—supply runs and such, keeps close tabs on the situation. Thing is, kid, Dakota's pretty small potatoes compared to the things the League has to deal with. So far, Static hasn't tried to expand his operations…and the only people left here are people that chose to stay. It's a no-man's-land. They don't question that Static's evil, and eventually he'll have to be stopped, but as long as he's here…”

"He's contained. There's no reason to waste resources storming a ghost town," Virgil finished grimly.

"Exactly." It sounded cold, horrible—but it made sense from a strictly strategic point of view. There was no question that the League would be able to take the other Static out…but there were bound to be casualties before it was over. Why risk it if there was no compelling need to?

"How many of you are there left?"

"About a hundred and fifty, not counting the people that stayed for whatever reason and are just trying to eke out a life under Static's thumb." Adam's tone made it perfectly clear what he thought of that attitude. "Some of us still live up top on the outskirts of the city—that's where we get most of our food and water. There's about sixty of us below ground, and that's the main resistance force. We try to keep tabs on what Static's up to, disrupt his operations as much as we can, and keep the League updated."

"And you and Sharon run this whole outfit?" Virgil asked in amazement. Adam laughed, softly.

"Sharon more than me, actually. If sheer attitude counted for anything, she'd have had the whole thing dealt with a week after the Big Bang. She's amazing." Virgil smiled knowingly at the way Adam's voice changed every time he mentioned Sharon…it was as if everything hard and militant about the man dropped away. He had it bad.

"How much farther do we have to go?" Virgil asked at length. They had been traveling for nearly an hour—Virgil hadn't even known there were this many tunnels underneath the city.

"There's a checkpoint up around the next bend. I'll be able to get in touch with home base there…we're liable to get shot if we just try to come waltzing in. I'm going to have to prepare them a little bit."

Virgil nodded. "Do what you gotta do, man." They rounded said bend in the tunnels, and there was indeed an old callbox that had once been used for tunnel maintenance on one wall.

There was also a very familiar figure standing before it.

Virgil paused on the disc in midair, about five feet away from the familiar girl. She, at least, looked
much the same as she did in his world…although there wasn't much difference to be had when one's body was made entirely of water.

"Maria!" Adam called, hopping down from the disc and starting towards the female bang baby. For her part, Aqua Maria dropped the handset of the callbox and raised one arm.

"Static!" she shouted. Before Virgil could react, a wave of filthy water rose before him, in the shape of a giant fist.

"Aw, sh—" was all he had time to mutter before the fist crashed down on him, knocking him out of the air and down into the floor of the sewer tunnel. He felt the familiar almost-pain of his powers fizzling out under the water assault as he struggled not to breathe in any of the water. The surge flowed away and he was left on his knees in the tunnel, choking and sputtering. He really hoped Richie's antibiotics were up to snuff, 'cause they'd be working overtime tonight.

"Maria, wait—it's not what you think!" Virgil heard Adam shout as he struggled to his feet.

"Babe? What's going on? I heard shouting—holy shit! Static!" A new voice joined in the chorus, as yet another familiar figure rounded the bend in the tunnel from the opposite direction he and Adam had come from.

"Hotstreak?" Virgil asked in amazement. He watched in shock as someone he considered to be one of the closest things he had to a nemesis back home (behind Ebon, of course) threw himself in front of Aqua Maria and Adam, his hands bursting into flames. Hotstreak fired a bolt of flame at a pipe directly over Virgil's head, melting the metal instantly and causing the pipe to burst.

Still more dirty water rained down on Virgil from the busted pipe. Slowly, he stepped out from under the stream and wiped his eyes. "Why me?"

"Hotstreak? Maria? You down there?"

"Over here, Boss!" Aqua Maria called. "Callbox 12! We found Adam!"

There was a pounding of feet from still farther down the tunnel and seconds later, the scary version of Sharon appeared, with the shotgun drawn and ready. There were at least seven people behind her, all of them armed to the teeth and looking as though they were spoiling for a fight. They all pulled up short at the sight of Virgil, and he raised his hands tiredly.

"Wait. Let me," Virgil sighed. He cleared his throat and raised his voice an octave or two. "Aaaah! Static!" Then he threw himself backwards into the water again and laid there staring up at the ceiling of the tunnel. Virgil just knew he was going to have to burn this uniform when he got home. There was no way the smell was ever coming out.

"Uh, Baby? I've got something to tell you," Adam said sheepishly.
When the tense silence had stretched into nearly a minute, Virgil sat up again, shuddering at the feel of slime, refuse, and stuff he really didn't want to name dripping down his back from his hair. The inhabitants of the alternate world were frozen in a bizarre tableau. Hotstreak and Aqua Maria were facing him, obviously poised to attack again and just waiting for the word. Sharon and her backup were staring at Adam in shock. Adam, for his part, had thrown himself between Virgil and the group, arms outstretched as though he could keep all of them from attacking.

The silence reigned for another few seconds, and then everyone shattered it at once.

"What the hell?!"

"Have you gone loco Adam?"

"That's Static!"

"We gotta finish him off!"

"Sharon, please, you have to listen!"

The voices rose into a deafening cacophony until suddenly Sharon pumped her shotgun once, aimed at the ceiling, and fired. The roar echoed throughout the tunnel and a hail of cement and dust rained down onto the ground in front of her. "Everyone shut up!" she screamed. Instantly, everyone obeyed.

"That was the most frightening thing I have ever seen," Virgil said slowly. At his words, Sharon whirled on him, aiming the gun at his head. Quickly, Virgil raised his hands in surrender. "Wait! Sharon! Peace, girl!"

"Sharon, stop." Adam stretched one hand out and gripped the barrel of the gun, forcing it down. Sharon looked as though she thought he had gone mad. She subsided, though, and Virgil sighed in relief.

"You have ten seconds to explain." Sharon's voice was icy and Virgil saw Adam cringe. Someone was sleeping on the couch tonight. Then Virgil rewound that sentence in his head and a shudder that had nothing to do with the disgusting muck he was sitting in ran through him. Some things you just didn't think about.

"Sharon, I know how crazy this sounds but this isn't Static. I mean, he is but he's not really. Look, I was up at the old dump with Leah and—"

"Adam are you trying to get me killed?" Virgil demanded. "Look…I'm Static—Virgil Hawkins." Sharon flinched at the name, an expression of pain flitting across her hard features. Her one good eye narrowed dangerously. "But I'm not your Static. I'm from another dimension…and man, that sounds even crazier out loud…but it's true."

"It is true, baby. I saw it with my own eyes. There were two of them. This kid is from another world…one that's nothing like this hellhole, apparently."

"You really expect me to buy that?" Sharon scoffed. There was something in her eyes, though, that was wavering.

"It's the truth," Adam insisted. "He saved Leah's life…he took out Onyx and Talon. And…I saw it.
There were two of them. The other Static…our Static…he got away with this one's partner. This kid took almost a full blast from Deimos and still wanted to go after them. Baby, he's nothin' like our Static."

"You really believe this," Sharon said softly.

"I don't believe, I know." Adam shot an uneasy glance at Virgil. "His…his partner…it was Richie. I heard his voice Sharon, I saw him at the junkyard."

Sharon started, nearly dropping the gun. "W-what? Are you sure?" she gasped. A low murmur raced through the group behind her, and even Hotstreak and Aqua Maria turned to look at Virgil with new consideration. Adam nodded grimly.

"I'm sure."

"Then…then, that kid that was with Static earlier…that was Richie?" Virgil well and truly did not like the way they kept saying Richie's name. Sharon sighed heavily, and then handed her shotgun to Adam. Without a word, she stalked forward, jumping down into the muck with Virgil. She stopped in front of him and roughly grabbed one arm. Virgil held still while she shoved his sleeve up, apparently looking for the tattoos Adam had said this world's him had. Her eyes widened when she didn't find them. Quick as a flash, she reached up and shoved his mask up, revealing his face.

He stared back at her, trying desperately to convince her with his eyes that he was not the man she knew. "Sharon…please. I'm not him. I could never be like him." She recoiled as though he had struck at her. Then she turned quickly to Adam, who shrugged and nodded.

"Up to you, Boss," Hotstreak said quietly, tossing a fireball from hand to hand. Sharon backed away slowly, placing her hands on her hips.

"You try anything funny—"

"I know, I know, horrible, painful death," Virgil interrupted quickly. He smiled tentatively. Sharon did not return it.

"Damn straight. And I'm not letting you get a charge up."

"Sharon, if you let me use some soap I'll sit in the water for as long as you want." Something thick and slimy dripped off of his shoulder to plop into the filthy water. Virgil sighed. "Uh, just not…this water?"

"Maria?" Sharon barked.

"Got it covered, Boss," Aqua Maria replied. Her expression suggested that she was not especially uninterested in the idea of hammering him again.

"Great," Virgil muttered wryly.

Virgil Hawkins, Static, public enemy number one in Dakota City four years running (not that there were any cops left to do anything about it these days) stalked down the hallway of the office building he'd claimed as his headquarters. Up until two years ago, it had been a thriving research and development firm, churning out the latest in high tech computer advancements. Now, it was his base of operations. There had been a wealth of equipment left over when the previous inhabitants had vacated, and Static had seen tremendous potential in the things left behind. Unfortunately, he knew he didn't have the skills to fully utilize it.
Static chuckled to himself at the thought of all the interesting gadgetry that the young man he had just left had had on him. Most of it was incomprehensible to him, but it didn't take a genius to realize that it had been weaponry…most of it designed to take down meta-humans. A positive thrill ran through him at the thought of getting to see what some of it could do against regular humans. It looked as though the answers to all his problems had been dumped in his lap…and in a package he had never expected to see again. It was almost enough to make him think someone up there liked him. Yeah, right.

"Static."

He pulled up short and turned around to find one of his more useful underlings coming towards him from the other end of the hall. "D-man," he greeted, leaning back against one of the walls and waiting for the other to catch him up. Deimos looked as though he had just arrived back at base…he hadn't even taken off his coat, yet. "How's tricks?" Static's eyes narrowed as he took in the expression on the other man's pale face.

"Problems?"

"Possibly." Deimos caught up to him and they began walking down the corridor towards the elevator.

"What kind of problems?"

"The kind where I had to spend two hours digging Talon and Onyx out of a pile of construction junk."

"Huh. I was wonderin' where you guys were. Casualties?" Static's tone did not particularly suggest he cared one way or the other. It was something everyone who worked for him was aware of—in a fight you were on your own. If you could drag yourself (or someone was willing to help you drag yourself) back to base, you were taken care of…but nobody expected backup.

"Nothing major. Talon was a little banged up, but she's still in action…and you know Onyx," Deimos reported dutifully. That was all Static cared about—who could fight and who couldn't.

"What about Bigfoot?"

"Kangorr cut out after Talon got taken down." Again, Static pulled up short, turning to face Deimos in the hall.

"He what?" There was an edge to Static's voice that all his subordinates had come to fear. Deimos shrugged.

"Haven't seen him since the junkyard," he murmured. Static shook his head, an all-too-familiar grin on his face.

"Oh, he'll be back, mon," Static muttered in a fair approximation of Kangorr's accent. The look in his eyes promised nothing but ill. Deimos sincerely hoped he kept the blood off of the carpet this time…it was a bitch to get out.

"How's your guest?" There was a light of genuine curiosity in Deimos's dark eyes. It wasn't every day one met someone from an alternate dimension. An altogether new expression settled on Static's face, one Deimos hadn't seen in almost two years.
"It's really him...I can't believe it. Talon was actually right, about all of it."

"Statistically speaking, it was bound to happen sooner or later," Deimos said implacably. Static snorted in quiet laughter.

"True, that. Still blows my mind, though. Only took him five minutes to pop the best lock we had. Richie was keeping secrets from me," Static sing-sunged, the expression deepening into something unpleasant. "Oh well, nothing I can do about it now. And really...I think this'll work out just fine."

"He's going to help you?" Deimos couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. From what he had seen of the Static that had run off with Rubberband Man...he wouldn't think the teen's partner would be particularly sympathetic to the kind of "help" Static wanted.

"Turned me down flat. Said I must've fried my brain if I thought he'd do anything for me."

"Uh-huh. You don't seem very upset."

Static grinned again and despite himself, Deimos took a step back. "Oh, he's going to help me. He just needs some...convincing."

Richie sat on the floor for nearly ten minutes after Static had left him, just staring blankly at the bank of windows in front of him. Plans, possibilities, odds, and considerations were flashing through his head, but it all took a back seat to one central thought: this Static was insane. He was as bad as Ebon or Hotstreak had ever been. Something told Richie he might even be worse. It made no sense to Richie. How could Virgil...Virgil who had all but an engraved carte-blanche invitation to join the Justice League when he got out of college; Virgil, who was widely acknowledged as the greatest hero Dakota had ever known; Virgil, who was the strongest, steadiest, most rock-solidly good person that Richie had ever met...turn into that? More importantly, what kind of problems did someone like that want him to help squash?

Richie snorted. As if he really needed to answer that. All he needed to do was look at Static to know that any assistance he wanted from Static was assistance Richie was not willing to give. He'd meant what he said...he wasn't helping this Static with a single thing; no matter what. He rubbed his left wrist, feeling the dull ache that hadn't entirely faded away. No matter what.

Finally, he looked up from his contemplation of empty space and decided that as long as he was a prisoner here, he might as well be a comfortable prisoner. He pulled himself back to his feet and shuffled towards the door Static had indicated. It did indeed slide open to reveal a half bath, such as the busy corporate executive might have installed in an office for those late nights. There was a toilet, sink, mirror, and a small shower cubicle. A tiny shelf had been installed over the toilet, whereon rested a stack of towels and washcloths. Hotel-sized soap and shampoo, as well as a tooth brush and paste, had been left on the sink and, strangely, a fresh change of clothes was folded up on the closed toilet lid. Wow...he could be a very comfortable prisoner.

Richie picked up the jeans and plain white t-shirt, noting with surprise that they looked as though they would be a pretty good fit. There were even fresh socks and underwear, which earned a raised eyebrow. Interesting. Well, his mother always had warned him to wear clean underwear in case he got hit by a bus. Why anyone would be concerned with the state of his boxers when he had just been hit by a bus had always been a little beyond him, but still...

And now he was just babbling to himself. With a slight shake of his head, he brought himself out of his rambling thoughts. He pulled the towels off of the shelf and draped the clothes there instead,
tossing the towels to rest on the toilet seat. First things first. He grabbed the toothbrush and squeezed a copious amount of paste onto the bristles. Morning breath, chocolate, and sewer water was not a pleasant combination.

In the enclosed space, the Eau De Sewage that had permeated his uniform was becoming more and more apparent. By the time he spit and rinsed his mouth his eyes were practically watering. Even so, he kept his head under the faucet for a few moments, gulping down the icy water. He hadn’t realized how thirsty he was.

Finally, he shucked off his uniform, grimacing when portions of the shirt stuck to his skin. He didn’t want to know what had crusted on the fabric. He slid the bathroom door partially open and kicked the soiled clothing out, desperate to remove the smell. It helped some, but not as much as he would have liked. He turned the water on as hot as he could stand it, perched his glasses on the side of the sink, made sure the soaps were in easy reach, and then slid into the blessed warmth.

Cleanliness really was next to godliness. Richie sighed as the hot water hit his skin, and the steam reached up to wrap around him like a blanket. For a long moment, he simply leaned his forehead against comparatively cool tile and let the water beat down on the back of his head. If he closed his eyes he could almost imagine that he was in the little cubicle he’d set up at the gas station for nights when patrol ran too long or got too dirty. He could pretend that all of this had been a horrible dream, and as soon as he got out of the shower he could go into the main part of the station and he and Virgil would laugh about it.

Yeah, and that and a quarter would buy him a cup of coffee. Well, not really, but the sentiment was there. This was not a situation he would be able to pretend away. All right…he had to decide on a plan of action. What were his advantages here?

He thought of the speed with which Static had struck him, the pain of having his arm nearly twisted in two. He thought of the view outside the window of his "room"—several stories up and obviously in the heart of Static's territory. He felt the absence of Backpack's presence almost as surely as one would feel the absence of a limb. He had been stripped of his weapons, separated from his partner, and surrounded by the enemy. Obviously, he had no physical advantage here.

Richie smiled grimly as he methodically soaped his hair and body, getting rid of the last of the sewer grime. That left him with his biggest advantage of all…the only one he ever had, really.

"I'm still smarter than you," he muttered out loud. There was no one here who could match Gear for wits. They would slip up. They had to…and he'd be waiting. He ducked his head under the stream of water again, allowing it to sluice over him a few moments more. Then, reluctantly, he cut the water off and stepped out of the shower.

When he exited the bathroom, dressed in the clothes that had been provided and still toweling his hair dry, he realized he was no longer alone. A covered tray that smelled tantalizingly like eggs and bacon had been set up on the metal night stand, the bed had been righted, and his dirty uniform had vanished.

A young man with dyed-blue hair and a leather trench coat was standing in the center of the room, arms crossed over his chest and a forbidding expression on his face. Richie pulled up short and the two stared at each other for several seconds.

Richie recognized the man…had seen him in the junkyard. Unbidden, an image of the strange, ghostly animal rose in his mind. He remembered the terror that had swept through him at meeting the dog’s gaze—the fear and the horror and the feeling that nothing would ever be safe or good or warm again. He quailed at the thought of feeling such fear again, his heart stuttering in his chest. So this
was Static's opening move.

All right, then. Let the game begin. He would watch, he would wait, and he wasn't going to help them.

No matter what.

Virgil was never going to complain about…anything…ever again. He was tired, he was filthy, he was hungrier than he could ever remember being in his life, and he was huddled in a very cold, very damp cell after being frog-marched, blindfolded, through the Dakota sewer system by a trigger happy aqueous bang baby while Sharon-from-the-Hood and her band of Murderous Men followed, weapons drawn and aimed at the back of his head. To top it all off, his best friend and partner had been kidnapped by a psycho version of *him* and each second he spent playing these games with Sharon and her group were seconds the other Static could be doing who-knew-what to Richie. Suffice it to say, Virgil was miserable.

The cell itself had probably once been a maintenance alcove. Virgil thought he could feel the remains of a callbox on the wall above his head, but it was dead, the wires devoid of any electricity. The entrance had been boarded up and though Virgil couldn't tell what was holding the door together, he couldn't find a trace of metal anywhere. Clever. The place was small and totally pitch dark. And had he mentioned wet?

He knew Aqua Maria had been posted outside his door, for periodically a fresh wave of water swept in under the door to slosh around the floor and up onto him. He was chilled to the bone as his clothes had stopped being any insulation almost an hour ago. Much more of this and hypothermia might become a serious concern. Thank goodness it was summer time.

He raised his head from where it was resting on his bent knees at the sound of the door opening. He squinted as the cell was suddenly flooded with light, tensing until the blur standing in front of him resolved itself into Adam. He caught a glimpse of Aqua Maria standing behind Adam, hands on her hips and looking none too pleased. She did not try to stop Adam from entering, though. The door was slammed behind him, plunging the small room into darkness again, until there was a soft click and a flame sprung to life from a lighter in Adam's hand.

"Huh. So that's what they mean when they say 'you look like a drowned rat.' Dreads and sewage don't mix," Adam observed as he sat down beside Virgil. Virgil shrugged and leaned his head back down on his knees.

"I'm having trouble remembering my own name right now, so let's just pretend I said something brave and witty, okay?"

"No snappy quip handy?"

"Don't tell. They'll kick me out of the superhero club."

"Your secret's safe with me," Adam said solemnly.

"So what's the sitch?"

"I think I've managed to convince Sharon to at least keep an open mind. She doesn't trust you as far as she can throw you, but—"

"Can't say I blame her," Virgil muttered bitterly. "I wouldn't trust me, either."
"I trust you." Adam's voice was earnest. Virgil didn't know what to say to that. In light of what he had seen in the junkyard, for this Adam to offer any version of Static his trust was something tremendous.

"So, can I at least get a couple of arm floaties in here?"

"They're going to let you out."

"Really? What's the catch?"

"Obviously, we can't keep dousing you forever... well, I think we can't keep dousing you forever, and Sharon's willing to listen to me for now. You'll be confined to one area of the base, armed guard twenty-four seven. I'll stay with you as much as I can, but I might have to leave. Virgil, listen to me... do not do anything stupid. These people will be looking for the slightest excuse to shoot you dead. They'll fire first and ask questions later. No electrical displays, no smartass comments... if I'm not with you your best bet is to just find a quiet corner to sit in and don't move until I get back. Got it?"

"Got it," Virgil gulped. Adam nodded grimly.

"All right... let's get you cleaned up and I'll see if I can scare us up some food." At the mention of food, Virgil's stomach grumbled loudly, reminding him that half a chocolate bar was nowhere near enough to replace the energy he had expended in the battle in the junkyard. Adam chuckled a bit, and Virgil was fervently glad it was still too dark for the other man to see his blush. All right, food first, then clean, then find some way to recharge his powers. Adam had said he would help Virgil rescue Richie... but Virgil wasn't going to count on anything here. He had to be ready at a moment's notice—and despite his promise to Adam, despite the fact that the alternate version of his friend had proven to be kind so far, he was not going to pass up a chance to find Richie, should one present itself.

Adam rose and offered a hand up to Virgil, which he took automatically. The door was opened again at Adam's knock and Aqua Maria stepped back to let them pass. As Virgil moved forward though, he found his way blocked by the female bang baby. She stabbed one watery finger into his chest, getting right up in his face.

"You try anything, and I will drown you, esse. Got it?" she hissed. Virgil nodded as meekly as he could, struggling to look harmless. It was looking more and more like he would be on his own to rescue Richie, no matter what Adam promised.

They walked through another length of tunnel, though Virgil noticed this one was gradually growing wider and taller. There were water and electrical pipes running across the ceiling, and Virgil could see bundles of newer looking cables crisscrossing those. From time to time he would see a flash or green or red light in the ceiling, and the further they got into the tunnels, the more obvious it became that they had been heavily modified. Some of the design looked vaguely familiar. As he tried to puzzle it out, Virgil voiced a question that had been burning in the back of his mind since Adam had gotten him out of the cell.

"Why do you trust me?"

"What?" Adam turned to him, stopping in the middle of the tunnel.

"Why do you trust me?" Virgil repeated. "It can't just be because of what I did for Leah. How do you know I'm not as bad as your Static?" It was perhaps not the smartest thing he could do to question the trust he had earned, but he felt he had to know. Adam sighed heavily, and his gaze
"It's Richie. I know you can't be as bad as our Static because your world's Richie obviously trusts you."

"Adam—"

"Richie, our Richie, was our Virgil's best friend, too. He was really the only good influence Virgil ever let near himself after they got to high school. After the Bang, though…after Virgil ditched his family and became Static…Richie came down on our side. He and Sharon got pretty close—I guess they took some comfort in each other. When Sharon formed our group—after Static took over Dakota, Richie stayed with us. He's the one who did all this." Here, Adam gestured around to the various improvements that had been made in the tunnels. That was where Virgil had seen it before—it looked like the kind of projects that his Richie was forever working on.

"So—Richie's a bang baby, here, too?"

"Yeah," Adam replied quietly. "Static never found out…we made sure he never found out what Richie could do. There's not a man, woman, or child down here that doesn't owe Richie their life in some way. After a while…I think he became another little brother to Sharon…and to me. I trust you because your Richie still trusts you…and cares about you. I could tell by the way he talked to you. If Richie—any Richie—thinks you're okay, that's good enough for me."

There was something in his eyes.

Virgil stared hard at him, something icy cold suddenly unfurling in his stomach.

"Adam—Adam, where is your world's Richie?"

Adam closed his eyes and turned away, but not before Virgil saw the moisture suddenly gather in them. The ice-thing grew claws and ripped into him, crawling up towards his heart.

"Adam, where is he?" Virgil demanded. He didn't want to know. He could tell by Adam's expression he didn't want to know. He had to know.

"Our Richie….our Richie's dead, Virgil. Almost two years now. He's dead."

A strange calm suddenly enveloped Virgil, though the ice-thing was still tearing at him from the inside…and he found that he knew. He knew without having to ask, and yet the words still forced themselves from his throat.

"How?"

Adam turned back to him, and the darkness in the other man's gaze sent the ice-thing screaming through Virgil, ripping at him with its horrible, chilling claws.

"Static killed him."
"Static killed him."

For one single, timeless moment, the words didn't register. He heard them, but his mind wouldn't let him understand. He hovered in that moment for several heartbeats, until finally his mind could no longer deny what he had heard. Static killed him. Then, the horror hit. His knees nearly buckled, and it was only Adam's hand suddenly on his arm that kept him from tumbling down into the water again. A loud, steady roar was growing in his ears, as though the sound of his own blood rushing through his veins was drowning everything else out.

Static…this world's Static; this world's Virgil Hawkins…had killed this world's Richie. Instantly, everything in Virgil rebelled at the thought. Richie was his best friend! Richie was one of the best things in his life, period. He would never hurt Richie…he'd rather die, first!

How could this Static have turned on Richie? How?

More importantly, how could they have left his Richie with the man who had murdered his Richie's counterpart?

Before he was even aware he had moved, he had slammed Adam up against the opposite wall of the tunnel, gripping the man by his shirt. Unbeknownst to Virgil, small sparks were racing up and down his arms as his powers stuttered to life despite the dampness that still clung to him. Adam had the distinct feeling he would have been in a great deal of pain had Virgil been able to get true charge going.

"Why'd you make me leave him with them?" Virgil demanded harshly. "How could you do that?" Virgil was shouting, and some part of him worried that he would bring Adam's friends running with his screaming, but the larger part of him didn't care.

He'd left Richie in the hands of his alternate's killer. In this world, Virgil had killed Richie. Virgil thought he might be sick.

"Virgil…Virgil, wait…Virgil!" Adam's rough voice cut through the haze that had descended on Virgil. The older man reached up to grip his wrists, forcibly removing Virgil's hands from him and shoving the young hero back a few steps. The sparks intensified for a brief second, almost forming a bolt, before they sputtered out. "Boy, I suggest you don't do anything like that again while you're down here. It'll get you killed," Adam said icily. Virgil flinched a little under the man's glare. He had to remember that however nice he was being, this was not the man Virgil knew.

"I…I…sorry, man," Virgil finally mumbled, deflating a bit. "It's…it's just—how could he do it?" he asked miserably. Something within him twisted hard at the thought of this world's Richie being dead, even as he reminded himself over and over that it had not been his friend who had died. Still, the thought of ever deliberately doing violence to his friend made him sick inside. How could the other him have done it?

Adam sighed and shook his head. "I don't know," he said sadly. "It…it didn't make any sense to us. Even Sharon couldn't believe it."

Virgil's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"
Adam sighed again, and again that faraway look came into his eyes. "I told you that Virgil and Richie were best friends here, too. Sharon said they were inseparable almost from the day they met."

Virgil closed his eyes and nodded, remembering the day a skinny blond kid with glasses had appeared in Virgil's sixth grade classroom. The only empty seat had been next to Virgil, and from practically the moment Richie had shot him a shy, tentative smile there had been something special between them. It had only taken a few short weeks for Richie to become the best friend he had ever had…or ever would. He still remembered running back in from recess one day to grab his jacket and hearing his homeroom teacher talking to a colleague about them. The other teacher had asked why Ms. Finch let he and Richie do so many things together, expressing concerned that neither of them was socializing properly with other children. Ms. Finch had just smiled and said: 'I've known Virgil since he was in first grade…I had his sister a few years ago. This year is the first time I've seen the real Virgil Hawkins since his mother died. And Richie…that's not the same child that came into my classroom last month! I couldn't separate those two with a crowbar, George…and I wouldn't want to try. They need each other.' Even at the young age of twelve, Virgil had recognized the truth in his teacher's words.

"Virgil started to drift away from everyone when he got to high school. He'd always been a troubled kid, but he started making some really bad choices...started falling in with the local gangs. Sharon tried to turn him around, but he wouldn't listen to her. He just kept slipping further and further down…except for when it came to Richie. He never let anything he was doing touch Richie. They were still good friends, and I know Richie tried to help Virgil as much as Sharon did. More, probably."

A soft smile quirked Virgil's lips. No, Richie would never give up on him, no matter what. The smile quickly died, though. "And then the Bang happened."

"And then the Bang happened," Adam agreed. "Virgil…he didn't handle it well. Most of the bang babies went a little crazy. Virgil was a little crazy to begin with. It was like…whatever person Virgil had been turning into, the Bang sped it up. There was no going back for him. Within a year…well, you saw what happened." Adam gestured tiredly towards the surface. "The strange thing was he still didn't let it touch Richie. Most of us were still up top at that point—people weren't ready to give up and leave Dakota yet. The bang babies terrorized any normal human they came across—except for Richie. Anywhere in the city, they left him alone. The bang babies terrorized any normal human they came across—except for Richie. Anywhere in the city, they left him alone. We found out later that Static had put the word out that anyone who messed with Richie was going to have to deal with him. After Richie started showing his own power, after we started moving down here and taking up operations against Static…Richie was the only one who could move around the city without worrying about getting killed. Virgil never knew that Richie was with us…he just thought Richie had gone to ground somewhere. It made it easy for Richie to scavenge for parts he needed, spy on the bang babies, and find supplies for us to raid." Adam broke off and looked away, suddenly. "It was stupid of us to think it would last! So stupid…but we didn't have a choice."

"What…what happened to him?" Virgil asked quietly.

"We don't know. One night, he just didn't come back from looking for new equipment. We didn't hear from him for days, until he started sending messages through the computer he'd rigged up down here. He was at Static's HQ…we never found out if he'd gone willingly, or if Static had forced him. Sharon wanted to charge in and rescue him, but he wouldn't let us. Said this was the only chance we had to do some real damage to Static's operations…maybe even take him down for good. Sharon agreed, but I…I think he was trying one more time to talk Static down…to save Virgil from what he'd become. It didn't work. A week after his last communication…we found his body. A couple of Static's goons were dumping him in the street right outside of Static's main territory. One of Sharon's patrols ran across them…and Sharon just went crazy. She only had three people with her, but she
attacked, tried to drive them off. It…we nearly lost all of them, but one of her guys radioed for help. We got there in time—but Sharon…well, you've seen her eye."

"She got that trying to get to Richie?" Virgil asked in surprise. He knew that his Sharon liked Richie more than she let on, but he couldn't imagine her doing something like that for his friend. Adam nodded grimly.

"When it was over, I found her in the street…blood pouring down her face, broken arm…but she was just rocking Richie like a baby, begging him to wake up."

Virgil felt bile rising in the back of his throat, but forced it down. "H..how do you know it was Static who—" He couldn't say the words out loud.

"He was electrocuted to death," Adam said shortly, the pain in his eyes belying his emotionless, clipped tone. "There were…burns…on his wrists and—"

Virgil was suddenly assailed with the image of the fearsome version of himself he had seen in the junkyard pinning Richie down, laughing as bolts of electricity danced down his body and into the other boy—burning him, hurting him.

Killing him.

Virgil turned away from Adam, running a few steps to the edge of the tunnel where he promptly lost the few bites of candy bar he had eaten earlier. He huddled there for a moment, hands braced on his thighs, and waited for the heaving to end. When at last the nausea quieted, he spat into the mucky water, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He straightened and turned to see Adam regarding him quietly, that same bittersweet expression on his face that Virgil had seen in the junkyard. Adam offered no comment, though, for which Virgil was grateful...he didn't feel up to talking right now.

They stood that way for a few moments, and then Adam jerked his head in the direction they had been heading. The man continued down the tunnel and after a moment, Virgil followed, arms wrapped tightly around his middle, as though he could ward off the sick fear that had enveloped him. This Static had murdered this world's Richie.

What if he tried to do the same to Virgil's Richie? Frantically, Virgil tried to find some reassurance. Adam had said that this Static hadn't known Richie was a bang baby. It would be fairly obvious that this Richie was, but maybe the other Static wouldn't figure out the extent of Richie's power. Maybe he'd underestimate just how clever Virgil's partner really was, leaving Richie with some kind of advantage. He knew that if Richie was physically able, he was more than capable of taking advantage of any opening the other Static gave him.

Assuming the other Static hadn't hurt him too badly to do so. Because when it got right down to it—Richie's power would not protect him from an attack. His partner was brilliant—probably one of the most brilliant people on the planet—but push come to shove, what Richie had said when his power had first manifested had been correct. You couldn't think someone into submission if they attacked you. Take away Richie's gadgets and supplies, and what was left? Neither of them was particularly skilled at hand to hand combat. Virgil would still bet on his partner being able to come up with a hundred plans, a thousand…but would it be enough to stop Static should Static decide to turn his powers on Richie? Virgil wanted so badly to believe that Richie could take care of himself in a situation like that, wanted to believe that that supercharged brain of his would be able to come up with something to protect himself with...but Virgil couldn't be sure.

He had to get to Richie. He had to. Before it was too late.
The silence stretched for several long moments as Richie and the strange man stared each other down. Richie narrowed his eyes consideringly. So far, he knew that he was up against Static, Talon, and this guy. Richie didn't think for a moment that three bang babies could have caused the destruction he and Virgil had seen in this Dakota. There had to be more. All right, first thing he had to do was gather as much information about this place as possible. He couldn't make a move until he knew what he was up against. Richie wasn't entirely certain he could pump the other Static for information without him being aware of it—some of what Static had said suggested he and this world’s Richie had been as close as Richie and Virgil were at one point. That left Not-Static’s lackeys, and hopefully Richie wouldn't have to deal with that nightmare version of his friend much at all.

Somehow, he got the feeling that was just wishful thinking.

At last, the blue-haired man moved, and Richie subtly tried to brace himself for whatever blow or attack was coming. He told himself he could handle whatever they were going to throw at him here. He could do it.

"Your food's getting cold."

 Threats, violence, thumbscrews…breakfast? Confusion blossomed on Richie’s face, and the man smirked a little. He moved over to the nightstand and removed the cover of the tray that was sitting on it, revealing a plate of eggs, toast, and bacon, as well as a tall glass of orange juice. Richie's stomach growled audibly, calling his attention to the fact that half a candy bar was all he had eaten since lunch, yesterday.

"Static told me to feed you. It's getting cold," the blue-haired man enunciated carefully, as though he was speaking to a particularly slow child. Richie scowled, but made no move towards the tray. The man raised an eyebrow, and then simply stepped back, returning to his original stance. Richie hesitated for a few moments more, but finally sighed. There was no point in starving himself if they were willing to feed him. If it was poisoned it was poisoned…but he didn't think the other Static would go to so much trouble to grab him and then kill him right off the bat.

He dropped the towel on the edge of the workbench and walked forward warily, his eyes on the other man. Again, the stranger was still, simply staring at him. Richie stared back for a few heartbeats before shrugging internally. If the guy wanted to play head games, fine. He could play. He turned his attention to the plate and tucked in, ignoring the other man entirely.

He ate in silence for several minutes, the clink of his fork against the plate and the other's even breathing the only sounds in the room. Richie knew it was an intimidation play…and despite himself he was a little intimidated. The incident in the junkyard was still fresh in his mind. Finally, though, the stranger broke the silence.

"So. You're Richie Foley."

 Richie swallowed a bite of eggs and nodded, without looking up. "Yup. I'm Richie Foley. And you are?" Might as well start his fact finding now.

The stranger crossed his arms over his chest and inclined his head slightly. "Deimos," he said softly.

Richie blinked and tilted his head to one side, his mind finding the reference for him almost instantaneously. "Deimos…Greek god of fear and panic. Appropriate."

For a moment, Deimos's eerily calm expression broke and looked impressed. The expression quickly
melted away though, as if it had never been there. "Oh good. You get the significance…I guess I don't need to demonstrate, then."

Richie gritted his teeth and forced his voice to remain calm and steady. "So," he continued flippantly, "you my babysitter?"

Deimos smirked lightly, and though the expression was nowhere near as frightening as the other Static's, it was not pleasant. "For now. You done?"

Richie looked down and shrugged. He jammed half a piece of toast in his mouth and gulped down the rest of the orange juice in three swallows. "Yeah, I'm done."

"Follow me." Deimos turned around and walked back towards the main door, which slid open at his approach. Richie watched his back for a moment, and then rolled his eyes. This day just kept getting better and better...he wasn't even considered enough of a threat to have to walk in front of his captors. Still, it didn't look as though he had a choice...and maybe this would help him find a way to escape. He scrambled off the bed and hurried after the other man, alert for the slightest detail he could turn to his advantage.

Deimos led him down a short hallway, blank except for several doors with the same number pads that had been on the door to the room Richie had woken in. He noted the position of security cameras (not as many as he would have thought) as well as the air ducts and elevator at the end of the hall. They had only gone a few short yards when Deimos pulled up short in front of a door. Richie watched as he punched in a number code and the new door slid open with a soft hiss. Deimos stepped back and gestured with one arm, indicating Richie precede him.

Shooting a narrow look at the other man, Richie complied, slipping past him to enter the room. As soon as he did his eyes widened, and he almost forgot entirely about the person behind him. He heard Deimos hit a switch behind him and the room was flooded with light, confirming what Richie had thought he'd seen.

He was standing in what must have once been a research lab. Bright florescent lights illuminated a room almost twice as large as the one he had been in previously. Long tables were set up from end to end, covered with equipment that practically set Richie to drooling. What he wouldn't give to have some of this stuff at the gas station. Oh sure...he could build anything he and Virgil needed, but sometimes it was incredibly difficult to find the right kind of parts in the scrap. The bank of computers along one wall had Richie's fingers itching. The wall opposite of the door was piled high with what looked like every conceivable spare part Richie could have ever asked for. Apparently, the other Static had had the building stripped when he moved in here and had everything that looked useful brought here.

He walked a few steps further into the room and sucked in a breath as he felt the now familiar rush of ideas start racing across his mind. In his mind's eye, the things lying around him took on new shapes, new functions. He could see them fitting together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, bending and twisting in whatever way his will directed. Dreamily, he walked over to one table and brushed his fingers across a pile of circuit boards, seeing the new invention that was lying within them, just waiting for him to bring it forth.

He turned his eyes towards another pile and this time he gasped audibly. He saw it...here in, this room...he could see what he needed to build to get Virgil and himself home. It was all he could do to keep from rushing over and starting work on it in that very instant. Some small part of him, though, not dazzled by the treasures that lay around him, realized how foolish it would be to tip his hand. His captors couldn't know...they'd destroy the equipment he needed if they knew what he was planning. He could see it, though, it was here.
"I can do it, bro. I can get us out of here," he thought fiercely. He licked his lips and at last dragged his attention away from the lab. There had to be a reason they were showing him this. Static had said there was a problem he wanted Richie to take care of. He turned around to face Deimos again. The other man was watching him silently, a faintly curious look on his face. Richie took a deep, calming breath. "What do you people want?" he demanded flatly.

Deimos cocked his head to one side and tucked his hands behind his back. "Simple, really. Static has a rat problem in the sewers. We can't find them...but he's willing to bet you can. After that...well let's just say Static's looking to expand his territory. Unfortunately, we'll need some heavier artillery if we're going to deal with the neighbors. Again...he's willing to bet you can take care of that."

Richie felt himself going pale at Deimos's words, as the full implication hit him. No way...they couldn't want him to...but he followed the thought to its logical conclusion.

He stumbled back a step, his eyes going wide.

"Holy shit...holy shit," he gasped. "He wants me to help him take out the Justice League."

Static kept his private rooms at the top of the building he had taken over as his headquarters, in what had once been the company CEO's suite. He liked the view; facing out towards the main street of Dakota. On a clear day he could see for miles...and know he owned everything he saw. It was a rush, and he loved it. At the moment, though, the curtains on the huge bank of windows were drawn, and Static's attention was elsewhere entirely.

He lounged on the leather sofa near the center of the section that had been designated his living room, feet propped up on the glass coffee table in front of him and arms stretched out over the back of the sofa. He was staring intently at the wall of television screens in front of him, a small, hard smile playing about his lips. There were nearly twenty screens and with the touch of a button on a remote, he could switch their view to any part of the building he wished.

It also got killer satellite reception.

At the moment, though, all the screens were dark save for one...the one focused on the old R & D lab he had had his people fill with anything that looked useful when they 'renovated' the place. He watched as Deimos led his new 'guest' into the lab, the smile turning amused for a moment as he saw Richie's reaction to the place. The amusement faded somewhat as he noticed the way Richie's gaze seemed suddenly at the same time intently focused and a million miles away. It was a strange look, and for a moment Static wished there was some way of knowing what was going on in the other boy's head.

Abruptly, he pushed himself to his feet and walked over to the bank of screens. A zap of power and the view switched to another camera, this one focused on a much closer resolution, zoomed in on the other Richie. It was amazing...truly amazing to see Richie again after all this time. Nearly two years the other boy had been gone...and suddenly he was back again. It blew Static's mind.

He heard Deimos explain what Static wanted from this Richie, and Static laughed shortly, knowing that this Richie would be able to figure it out. This version of Richie would bear close watching...Static had a feeling that those wonderful things he could make were only the tip of the iceberg when it came to his cleverness. Oh well, it wasn't like Static wasn't up to the job.

"Holy shit...holy shit! He wants me to help him take out the Justice League." Static laughed aloud at the dumbstruck horror in Richie's voice. Oh yes, he'd bear close watching indeed.
"Bingo," Static whispered, his voice unpleasant and harsh.

He reached up and lightly traced the image of Richie's face on the screen, the odd, slightly twisted smile reappearing. It was a look that any of his underlings would have been able to identify immediately, and one that never boded well. He couldn't believe the stroke of luck he had been dealt. The means to finally get rid of his troublesome sister and her ragtag rebels, to finally get the firepower he needed to ensure the Justice League couldn't interfere with his long-term plans, and the chance to…rectify some past mistakes. It was all his.

He lightly touched the screen again, remembering another time when he had had this person here with him. Things had gone wrong, then.

He would make sure they went his way, this time.

Chapter End Notes

Art of Not-Static by makkura:
http://makkurakoyappi.deviantart.com/art/Not-Static-14332841
Chapter 9

There were no people out this late at night. Many of those who had chosen to stay in Dakota moved about at night...but after midnight they tended to scurry back into whatever holes they had come from. It was one of his favorite times, a time when he could abandon his people to whatever amusements they had found for the night and just fly. He loved the quiet, loved the darkness, loved that he had created it all.

He and he alone could move unmolested through the shattered shell that had once been a thriving city and that knowledge was as intoxicating as any drug, more exhilarating than any high. He soared above his city and he was master of all he saw. This particular night, though, someone had chosen to intrude on his time.

There was a vague sort of anger for a moment, anger that someone could still be bold enough to move through his world. A single figure, picking its way across the broken and debris-riddled street, occasionally bending down to pick something out of the rubble and drop it in a knapsack at its side. The anger melted away a little...oh well, who was he to complain about an opportunity for a little fun?

He directed the sheet of metal he used as a board in a steep dive, swooping down over the figure's head. Just as the figure was about to duck into an alleyway, he caught up with it. He laughed aloud as he aimed and fired a bolt of electricity at the figure's feet, knocking the person forward into the alley amidst a shower of dust and pieces of asphalt. There was a soft cry of surprise and fear as the figure rolled away, losing the knapsack in the process.

He lowered himself nearly to the ground, his power cackling in a deadly aura around him and waited for the fear, the screaming, and the begging to commence.

It didn't come.

Instead, there was a soft sigh from the figure as the person lurched back to their feet.

"Virgil." The voice was soft, tired, wary...and so, so familiar.

No one ever called him by his name anymore. Even his sister called him 'Static,' always Static. He was so surprised he nearly lost his charge. He let the power holding him aloft dissipate and jumped lightly to the ground, hearing the metal clang down behind him. As he hit the ground, the figure reached up and pulled the hood of the black sweatshirt it was wearing back, allowing the dim light of the moon to reveal the face.

He was paler, thinner than Static remembered. He'd always worn his clothes baggy, but the ripped jeans and sweatshirt hung on him, now. Still, there was not a look of starvation, about him; merely the lean ranginess that came with having to survive on less than one was used to. He'd let his hair grow a little longer on the top and shaved a strange design into one side. Static couldn't be sure, but it looked like the Eye of Horus from one of those videos on ancient Egypt they'd watched in seventh grade. There was no mistaking the person, though, and now Static understood why the other had been moving so boldly about the streets. It was, after all, Static's decree of protection that had made it possible for him to do so.

"Richie," Static said softly. "Long time, no see." He hadn't seen the other boy in almost a year, in fact...not since right after he had made a serious bid to take over the city. For a time, he had thought that Richie had fled Dakota with the thousands of others who had left, but his people assured him
that the blond boy was still around.

Richie moved like a ghost through the city, staying to the shadows and the tangle of alleys and side streets, so that no one was ever able to tell Static where the other boy was making his home...just that he was still in Dakota. He had refrained from simply ordering them to bring Richie to him, not trusting that the other boy wouldn't get hurt in such a confrontation. Instead, he had waited for the opportunity to see Richie himself, knowing it would come sooner or later.

It looked like it just had.

"I've been around." Richie's voice was still wary, as was the look he was giving Static, but there was none of the terror Static was used to dealing with from the other normal humans that still populated Dakota. He closed the distance between them slightly, pleased when Richie didn't flinch back from him.

"I know. I was hoping you'd come and see me, Rich."

Richie snorted derisively and crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, right...just pop over to the Impenetrable Fortress for video games and pizza? Just like the old days, Virg? Your welcome wagon scares me, man."

"They wouldn't touch you," Static growled, ignoring the fortress crack. He was so much more than any B-Movie villain. "They wouldn't dare."

Richie sighed and closed his eyes. "Yeah. I figured. So," he opened his eyes again and stared hard at Static, "what now?"

Inwardly, Static grinned...how long had it been since anyone was brave enough to use that tone with him? Anyone else he would have left broken and bloody inside of ten seconds. "What do you mean what now?" he asked. Richie frowned in confusion.

"You've been looking for me. I know you have...you've had your people looking for me. Why else would you tell all the bang babies to leave me alone? Well, you found me...what now?"

"Now...why don't you come back to the 'Impenetrable Fortress' with me?" Richie obviously hadn't been expecting that. At the words, his eyes widened and he stumbled back a few steps. His eyes darted wildly from left to right and he looked like he might bolt.

Static moved forward quickly, grabbing the other boy's wrist and jerking him around to push him back against the brick wall. He slapped his palms against the wall on either side of Richie's head, effectively trapping the other and leaned close until barely an inch of space separated the whole length of their bodies. Richie was breathing in short gasps and now there was fear in those dark eyes. Static smiled.

"C'mon, Rich don't be like that. I just want to talk to you...catch up. I'm not gonna hurt you."

"Back off, Virg!" Richie demanded, a slight quaver in his voice. His eyes were flashing fire, though, the fear nearly eclipsed by the anger.

"You gonna run?"

Richie swallowed heavily, then seemed to slump a bit. "No."

Static nodded and pushed himself back from the wall, releasing the other boy. Richie took a deep breath before he raised his eyes to Static's again. Static's smile widened, his teeth flashing in the dim
glow of the moon. "I just want to talk. I promise!"

"I don't want to go anywhere with you, Virgil." Richie's voice was calm and even, but the fear spiked in his eyes. Static narrowed his own eyes and this time, Richie did flinch.

Static sighed, and shook his head. "I said I wasn't going to hurt you, Richie. If you really don't want come with me, I'm not going to make you."

Richie cocked his head slightly and shot Static a narrow look. "You mean that?"

In answer, Static stepped to one side, gesturing grandly toward the open street. Richie's brow furrowed in confusion, but he sidled past, keeping his back to the wall and his eyes on Static. Just as he was about to scoop up his knapsack and vanish again, a sound intruded on the night.

"Everyone back? We need to get down below." The words were called from somewhere further down the street, echoing strangely in the broken buildings. Static snarled to himself as he recognized the voice.

"Well, well, well…if it ain't Bouncy." Automatically, he powered up, calling the sheet metal to his side.

"I want those supplies loaded up now." A predatory smirk lit Static's face as he hopped onto the metal. Looked as though he'd have something to take his frustrations out on, after all.

"Virgil! Virg, wait…who…who is that?" Richie's hesitant voice interrupted his visions of frying Rubberband Man and any of his cronies he had with him to a crisp.

"An annoyance," Static growled. "I'm gonna go take care of it."

"You're…you're what? What are you going to do?" An odd expression flitted across Richie's face, one that he couldn't name. He drew the metal up even with the other boy, staring down into Richie's worried eyes.

"I told you. I'm going to go squash some cockroaches." He turned the sheet and was about to zoom down the street when a soft plea reached his ears.

"Don't." He whipped around in midair and found Richie standing in the same spot, making no move to leave. Static narrowed his eyes and jumped off the sheet, landing directly in front of the other boy.

"Why?" he purreddangerously. "You runnin' with Sharon and her people, Richie?" His tone turned dark and ugly. Richie stepped back, putting some distance between them.

"N-No, Virg," he protested. "I don't run with anyone. I just…don't want anyone to get hurt." He averted his eyes, staring down at the broken asphalt. Static tilted his head, considering, and then a sly smile twisted his lips.

"What's it worth to you?" he asked. Richie's head snapped up and shock raced across his features.

"W-what?" The smile deepened on Static's face and he stepped closer to the other boy.

"I said, what's it worth to you? I leave those jokers alone, what'll you do for me?"

"Virgil," Richie said uneasily, shifting from foot to foot.

"One night, Rich. Just come with me one night. Just to talk. If you want to leave, tomorrow, you can. Give me something else to do, tonight, if you don't want anyone to get hurt."
"If I go with you, you'll really leave them alone?" Richie's voice was wary, suspicious. Static smiled innocently, though the expression didn't reach his eyes.

"I promise." The metal slid through the air to Static's side and he hopped nimbly up on it. The smile still firmly fixed in place, he leaned down, offering his hand to the other boy. Richie swallowed hard and glanced down the street. No one had appeared yet, but they could still hear the voices of Rubberband Man and several others, completely unaware that their worst enemy was scant yards away.

Finally, Richie seemed to steel himself, and the uncertainty vanished from his face. He reached up and took Static's hand, allowing Static to pull him up onto the sheet to stand in front of him. Richie took a deep, calming breath as Static put one arm around his waist, pulling him back tight against the other boy's chest. Static's other hand slid down his arm to loosely grip his wrist and suddenly they were rocketing upwards and into the night.

Facing away from Static as he was, Richie didn't see the triumphant smirk that graced his one-time friend's face.

A little over a year ago, just before Christmas break, Richie had, of all things, slipped on a patch of ice outside his home and badly twisted his knee. The injury had precluded any Gear-related activities for two weeks, school had let out, and then his parents had decided to go visit distant relatives, a trip Richie had opted out of, citing a desire not to travel while on crutches. So, with no patrols or schooling taking up his time, no need to keep up any appearances for the family, Richie had, for the first time been able to concentrate on nothing but the ideas racing around in his brain.

After the first two days, Virgil had made Richie come and stay at his house, fearful that the other boy would get so lost in his inventions he would forget such mundane things as sleep and food. Those two weeks had produced Gear's most effective weaponry ever, upgraded Backpack into practically its own sentience, and designed a security system for the gas station that even Batman had wanted a copy of on his last visit to Dakota. Richie had been on cloud nine.

Beneath the streets of Dakota, Virgil found himself faced with the products of a Richie Foley who, for almost a year, had had no other distractions or responsibilities other than to build, one who had been driven by the added motivation of knowing his survival and the survival of others might well be dependant on how well he built. This Richie had run with it.

Virgil's eyes widened as gradually the tunnel reached its widest point, obviously a main exchange line. The cables and strange devices peppering the roof of the tunnel had been growing thicker for some time, and here and there Virgil could see things moving about the pipes and the cables… nothing as advanced as Backpack, but there were definitely robotics at work. Obviously this world's Richie had had to get creative with the materials he'd had available.

"Adam, is that toaster aiming a laser at my head?" Adam glanced up into the pipes and shook his head.

"Pop-Tart, stand down," he called up. The rather ominous red glow that had been growing in the bread slots of the little machine began to fade away. Virgil hurried his pace a little. This world's Richie had had to get very creative.

At last, he and Adam seemed to reach whatever destination they had been moving toward. Heavy duty industrial sheet metal had been cut down to the size of the tunnel and actually welded to the stone walls, forming an impenetrable barrier across the tunnel. If Virgil looked hard enough, he could actually see where the stone itself had melted and melded with the metal. Within the wall of metal a
large, rectangular door had been cut.

"Hotstreak and Maria were on the outs that week. Rich took shameless advantage," Adam murmured, seeing the direction of Virgil's gaze. There was a sad sort of fondness to his voice. He moved to the wall of metal and knocked twice, then stood back and waited. After a moment the door swung outwards to reveal a rather pissed off looking Hotstreak.

Virgil struggled not to try to fire up his powers when faced by his oft-time nemesis. Strange as it sounded, here Hotstreak was apparently a good guy. Unfortunately, he was no nearly as shy about firing up his powers around Virgil. The young man ignited, fire coalescing into dangerous orbs in his hands. He glared harshly at Virgil, his eyes flicking between Adam and the young hero. Virgil was surprised to see Hotstreak looked almost as angry at Adam as he did at Virgil.

"I don't like this," Hotstreak muttered sullenly.

Adam sighed tiredly and nodded. "I know." He jerked his chin past Hotstreak, indicating that the other man should move out of the way. Hotstreak did so, reluctantly, allowing Adam to proceed. When Virgil moved to follow though, he found his way blocked. Hotstreak didn't try to touch him, but the fire flared more intensely around his hands.

"Give me an excuse," Hotstreak growled. "Just one." Virgil clenched his jaw and shot a pleading look at Adam, who shrugged helplessly. After a few moments, Hotstreak backed away and allowed Virgil to enter. Immediately, he skirted to Adam's side. Hotstreak glared at him before the fires vanished from his body in a puff of smoke.

"How long you on guard duty, tonight?" Adam questioned, apparently deciding to ignore Hotstreak's posturing. Hotstreak tore his eyes away from Virgil and shrugged.

"Zachary's supposed to relieve me in two hours." He raked his hands back through his spiky hair and leaned back against the door, a somewhat suspicious look on his face. "Why?"

"I may have a job later for you and Maria." Hotstreak pursed his lips, and then nodded thoughtfully.

"We'll come find you after shift." His gaze shifted once again to Virgil, turning hard and cold. Adam sighed again.

"Come on, Virgil...let's get you cleaned up. Then we'll see what's on tap at the mess." He turned and began walking again. Virgil sidled one last look at Hotstreak, who flipped him a rude gesture, before he quickly followed the other man.

As confused, worried, and tired as he was, it took Virgil several moments to realize the scenery had changed. As soon as it sunk in though, Virgil stared around himself in shock. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting. He supposed in the back of his mind he had been harboring images of people huddling together in the slime and the sludge, venturing out through the manhole covers at night like a cheesy toxic mutant movie. He should have known better...if they'd had a Richie, he should have known better.

This wasn't a "base." This was a small city. Virgil blinked as he realized they had exited the sewer line and were now in what must have been an old subway station. Florescent lights overhead cast a steady glow on the space. Small structures cobbled together out of wood and metal scrap had been built all along the platform, and abandoned subway cars had been lined up on the tracks themselves, then gutted and turned into what looked like meeting halls from what little Virgil could see of the inside. The place was set up like an army barracks.
He could see the touch of this world's Richie everywhere. There were security cameras that looked as though they had been lifted from fifty different convenience stores, at least a dozen more of the deadly-looking appliances marching along the pipes that covered the ceiling, and still more of the cables and wires whose functions Virgil couldn't even begin to name. None of it looked quite as advanced as Backpack or the zap caps, but then, this Richie hadn't had the resources available that Virgil's Richie did.

There were also people here. As he and Adam walked, people came out of the structures, lining up to watch them pass. Some of them he recognized from his world—classmates, neighbors, people he had helped over the years…most were strangers. They ranged in ages from about ten to fifty or sixty, though most of them seemed to be about Sharon's age. They were dressed in thin, threadbare clothing, and most of them had some kind of armor or weaponry on them. Most common about them, though, were their expressions. They all were looking at him with such hate, such fear. Virgil had the feeling that only Adam's presence was keeping them from falling on him like wolves. He shifted a little closer to Adam, who shot him a reassuring glance.

Virgil was not reassured. He followed Adam closely, new despair welling up within him as he walked.

How would he ever convince these people to help him rescue Richie?

Richie knew what he had to do.

He had known what he had to do practically from the moment that Deimos had explained what it was this Static wanted from him. He'd already laid the groundwork, already plotted his action, and predicted the likely reactions of his captors. That had been the easy part. Now it was simply a matter of waiting for the right moment…and gathering the courage to implement his plan.

It had been nearly an hour since Deimos had brought him to the lab, nearly an hour since he had learned what plans this Static had for him. An hour in which he had sat in sullen silence, cross-legged on top of one of the tables. Deimos had not left him alone in all that time. For the first half hour, the blue-haired man had simply leaned against the wall of the lab, staring coolly at Richie. When he had gotten bored with that, Deimos begun amusing himself by humming the Star Wars Cantina theme and tapping out the rhythm on the wall behind him. Richie thought that a strange hobby for a super powered villain, but he supposed it could be worse…except for the part where it was one of the most annoying things he'd ever heard.

He'd already plotted the angle of the security cameras they'd thought he wouldn't see in either corner of the room. He'd noted that Deimos had yet to lock the door behind them, and so it was a safe bet that the other man had either forgotten or just didn't think Richie would dare try anything. He'd run through everything he knew of the building plans in downtown Dakota, and plotted a rough route based on what buildings he thought he might possibly be in. There was really nothing left to do but…do it. He had calculated his odds of escape at about fifty two percent if things went off without a hitch.

The thing was…he didn't want to escape.

He couldn't leave. Not yet. Not when everything he needed to get him and Virgil home was here at his finger tips. He was not willing to lay odds that this kind of equipment was readily available in this version of Dakota. The League? There was no guarantee that even if Richie and Virgil managed to stay ahead of this other Static long enough to contact them they would be particularly inclined to help any version of Static. His only real choice was to stay here long enough to build the device dancing in his head or somehow secret the parts away.
No, he needed time. He needed time to build, to plan...time during which Static wasn't watching his every move, demanding to know what everything was. This Static wasn't stupid. Evil, yes. Insane, most probably. Stupid...never. He wouldn't let Richie just skip merrily through the lab without an accounting of everything Richie was doing. He needed this Static to leave him alone. He needed this Static to think he had won.

He needed this Static to think he had given up.

Richie stared down at his hands loosely folded in his lap, eyes narrowed. He had to let them think they had won, had beaten him, and cowed him. He didn't know this Static...but he knew how he thought. He knew what kind of personality, what kind of mind it took to inspire this level of fear, maintain this kind of control...and he also knew how to use that to his advantage. It was a gamble...of course it was a gamble. He didn't have a choice, though. He needed Static to think he had won. There was only one way this Static would ever be satisfied of that.

Richie took a deep breath and put his plan into action.

"Dude, will you stop that?" he burst out suddenly. The annoying humming stopped. Richie sighed in relief. "I need more workspace," he said quietly. Deimos looked up from his hands and arched one eyebrow.

"That was fast. I thought you weren't doing 'a damn thing' to help Static."

Richie tried to inject just the right amount of bitterness into his voice. "Not like I have much choice, is there?"

Deimos sniffed and inclined his head. "No. It's not. So...you want workspace, get to work."

Richie sighed heavily. "Look, I just wanna get this over with. The faster I get this shit sorted, the faster I can do that."

Deimos rolled his eyes heavenward, but shoved himself off of the wall. He moved towards the table where Richie was sitting, and Richie made a show of unfolding himself from his position and jumping down to the floor. "Just help me get this table clear and then you can go back to Mos Eisley's greatest hits." Deimos shot him an annoyed look, but complied, bending down to pick up a large cardboard box of spare parts while Richie gathered up the remains of an old hard drive.

As Deimos straightened, Richie swung around violently, smashing the other man in the side of the head with the heavy computer casing. Deimos went down with a yell of surprise and pain, the box he'd had in his hands spilling its contents across the floor. Richie grabbed one of the corners of the table and pulled as hard as he could, throwing his full weight backwards. The table tipped down, and a hail of circuit boards, scrap metal and computer parts rained down on the prone man. Richie didn't waste time waiting to see if Deimos would get up.

He snatched a single item up off the floor and raced for the door, stuffing the item down the waistband of his jeans as he went. As he'd expected, it hissed open at his approach and Richie sent a small whisper of thanks winging towards whatever or whoever might be watching over young super geniuses. He hung a sharp left as soon as he'd crossed the threshold, pelting down the hallway to where he'd seen an elevator when Deimos had been leading him to the lab.

He knew he had seconds, maybe a minute, before Static realized what had happened. He had to make them count.

At the junction of halls where the elevator was he ran directly for the fire escape, reasoning that even
if it was alarmed, it didn't matter. They would know he'd escaped his watchdog soon enough. He hit the door full tilt, slamming it open just as the shrill, piercing scream of an alarm sounded throughout the halls. Over the alarm, he thought he heard the chilling sound of a wolf's howl.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit," he muttered to himself. He slowed down long enough to snatch the socks he was wearing off. Running on bare feet hurt, but at least he wouldn't slip and break his neck. That would be counterproductive.

He raced down the stairs, taking them two and three and a time. He had only a vague idea where he was going, and the clock was already counting down in his head. They'd be on him any minute.

"Hey, you!" Make that any second. He glanced up the stairwell, to see a familiar face leaning over the railing a few floors up from him.

"Shiv?" he muttered aloud.

"Stop!" the purple haired bang baby called.

"Yeah, right!" Richie shouted back. He heard a high pitched whistle that had nothing to do with the alarms going off. Without looking up again, he gripped the handrail and vaulted over, dropping down onto the next flight of stairs just as the flight he had been on was struck with a shower of glowing shuriken, that exploded on impact.

The force of the explosion knocked him off his feet and he tumbled down the final few steps, striking his hip painfully against the hard metal stairs. He rolled to his feet quickly, though, and took up his frantic pace again, ignoring the sounds of still more of Shiv's creations raining down on the steps behind him. As he hit the landing he threw himself through the door…he needed to get to another stairwell.

He came out in a hallway much the same as the one on the floor he had started out on and stood there gasping for a moment. A large sign directly in front of the elevators proclaimed that he was on the fifth floor of TynaCorp Industries. TynaCorp, TynaCorp…he knew them. Bigwig computer research firm that was giving Alva serious competition back in his Dakota. Had one of the most advanced communications nets available…and there servers were…

He turned on his heel and sprinted towards a second set of doors on the opposite side of the hallway. He slipped through the door and pushed it shut again just as he heard someone else crash out into the hall he had just left.

"Shiv…you got him?"

'Aw crap, he's got Puff working for him, too?' Richie thought to himself. He did not like the way his tally of this Static's available forces was shaping up.

"Do I look like I got 'im?" Shiv growled.

"He's heading down! Take the stairs…I'll radio Boom to get on the front door."

Richie slapped his hand over his eyes and lightly banged his head against the wall behind him. There was no time to lament the odds mounting against him, though. Quickly, he began running down the stairs again, trying to balance speed with stealth. He was indeed going down…but not to the front doors.

The alarms were finally silenced a moment later, and their absence left Richie aware of the painful ringing in his ears. Great…that meant that the entire complement of Static's crew had to be after him
now. He wondered how long it would take them to remember this place had also had one of the most advanced surveillance systems around.

By the time he reached his destination, unmolested by anymore bang babies thankfully, his chest and legs felt like they were on fire. He was gasping like a bellows, sucking in great gulps of air, and he silently vowed to start dragging his ass to the gym with Virgil on a more regular basis when they got home. He may be the brains of the outfit, but there was no reason to be in danger of collapse after only a few minutes of running.

Barefoot, panicked, taking-your-life-in-your-hands running, to be sure, but still. Superheroes had to be able to do stuff like that.

He had made it, though. The basement. He'd be trapped like a rat down here unless he somehow managed to get to the parking garage, but that was all right. He'd known they would catch him. The question was...would they catch him before he did what he had come here to do? Still gasping, Richie leaned heavily against the stairwell door for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The basement was lit by dim, red emergency lights, but they provided only the barest illumination.

Finally, he could see well enough to make out his target...a large, fenced in area about ten yards in front of him that, if his memory served him correctly, housed the main lines for the building's communications net. Smiling, he forced his legs to run again, racing across the cool concrete floor.

Once, the gate had been securely locked. The lock had long since been broken, though, and never replaced. He doubted any of Static's people would be able to realize just how important this hub of wires and conduits really was. Score one for the science geeks. He slipped through the gate and immediately moved to the large cabinet-like structure that held the lines. These, too, had been broken into and then simply left. For a moment, Richie held his breath as he swung the doors open, fearing that the lines had been cut or somehow damaged. He was screwed if that was the case.

They were still whole.

Richie sighed in relief, blessing the stupidity of the garden-variety criminal these days. Whoever had examined these probably hadn't even told Static about them, as Richie knew Static would have had them destroyed, or at least had them better secured. Shaking his head, Richie pulled the device he'd swiped off of the floor of the lab.

As palm pilots went, there were better models. This one was a few months behind the times. In Richie's hands, though, anything with a computer chip tended to be useful. He flipped the pilot on, and then glanced up, scanning the myriad wires and cables before him. Quickly, he reached up and selected one, gripping it firmly and jerking it out of its casing. He let that fall free and selected another cable, pulling it down as well. Finally, he plucked at a rubber casing on one of the circuit boards, exposing the motherboard beneath it.

Biting his lip in concentration, he gently took the thicker cable and wrapped the end of it in the tail of his shirt, twisting the frazzled ends of the exposed wires together and wincing as their current shocked him through the cotton. When that was done, he did the same to the thinner wire he had pulled. Crossing his fingers, he pushed the thinner wire into the cable port on the side of the palm pilot, and then balanced it on the lip of the cabinet in front of him. With his other hand he pressed the thicker cable down onto the circuit board, twisting it slowly by degrees until...

"Yes! MacGyver eat your heart out!" Richie hissed as the palm pilot fired up and granted him access to the communication web in the building. His free hand grabbed the stylus and fairly flew over the screen, tapping out commands almost faster than the little computer could handle them. "C'mon,
c'mon, c'mon…” he muttered.

Success.

He sighed in relief and leaned his head momentarily against the cool metal of the cabinet. He'd done it. He pulled the wires free and shoved the palm pilot into the pocket of his jeans. Then he wearily pushed himself back upright and turned around.

He found himself surrounded by complete darkness.

"What the—" This was not simply the gloom of the basement, nor was it the shadowed dark of the lights having gone out. This darkness was almost a tangible thing that wrapped around him, clung to him. He couldn't see anything…not the basement around him, the cabinet behind him, not his hand in front of his face. He took a few stumbling steps forward, feeling himself crash into the gate and then to the floor as it fell open. "Hey!" he shouted. "What's going on?" He lurched to his feet again and spun wildly, searching for a way out of the clinging, all encompassing darkness.

As he spun again…it was gone. Just like that the light returned, its dim red glow seemingly as bright as day after that horrible absence of light.

He was no longer alone in the basement.

There was a girl standing in front of him, a dark cloud of nothingness swirling around her in a halo of utter black. Her strange yellow eyes were regarding him coldly, and there was no expression upon her delicate face.

"Nightingale," Richie whispered, placing her after a moment. A strange, distorted growl echoed from somewhere to his left and he jerked his head around to see the horrible ghost dog had reappeared, Deimos behind it. Blood had crusted on the side of his face from a cut just above his eyebrow, and he looked none too pleased. Remembering the junkyard, Richie jerked his eyes away from the dog, and began backing up.

This time, Static didn't wait for Richie to run into him.

Richie was seized from behind, a hard arm going around his throat, another wrapping around his chest. He was jerked back against the other person and this time there was not even a pretense of gentleness.

"I wish you hadn't done that, Richie," Static whispered into his ear, and there was darkness dancing in his voice. "I really wish you hadn't done that."
Static felt Richie tense in front of him as his headquarters at last came into view. Even among the sky scrapers that made up downtown Dakota, the building he had chosen to take over was imposing. It was also one of the only ones that was still entirely whole, although Static had made certain that none of the buildings around it had sustained too much damage. He didn't need anything collapsing in his back yard.

He swooped downward suddenly, guiding the metal towards the roof of his headquarters. No sense tempting fate by landing on the ground…he really didn't want to have to chase Richie down should the other boy decide to make a break for it now that Rubberband Man and the other rats were out of danger. Static grit his teeth at the thought of Richie trying to protect his sister's people. Then again, perhaps he shouldn't be that surprised after all. At least none of his crew had ever seen Richie with Rubberband Man or Sharon. He wasn't sure what he'd do if Richie had actually sided with the rats against him. Richie was his friend. Hell, Richie was his period…even if hadn't informed the other boy of this fact. Richie would figure it out.

He landed on the roof of the building and allowed Richie to jump down off of the sheet metal before hopping down himself. With a negligent wave of his hand, the charge around the sheet disappeared and it clattered to the ground loudly. Richie stood a few feet away from him, staring out over the broken vista of Dakota. The winds at this height were whipping his bangs around his face madly. The moonlight had silvered his hair, and framed him against the backdrop of destruction in dark silhouette. Static was silent, simply taking a moment to admire the view. Perfect, absolutely perfect.

There were few lights in the city anymore…only those who had managed to rig up generators had electricity these days. Such was not a problem for Static, of course. Still, the view was dotted with light…fires burning in parts of the city, that never really went out. Static smiled a little at the thought of the residents of his city huddling around piles of burning debris for light and warmth. After a few moments, Richie turned away from the wrecked city, facing Static instead. The blond boy wrapped his arms tightly around his middle, as though he were cold, and his gaze was fixed on some point just beyond his toes.

"Nice digs," Richie muttered, his voice thick with some emotion Static couldn't name.

"I like it," Static said carelessly. He stepped forward, closing the distance between them, and reached up with one hand. Gently, he tipped Richie's head up so that the other boy was looking him in the eye. His eyes narrowed when Richie twisted out of his grip, stepping back.

"All right, I'm here. You said you wanted to talk?" Richie unwound his arms from his middle, and stuffed his hands in his pockets, still hunched over as though to ward off a chill. Static shrugged and nodded.

"Not here, though. Why don't we go inside?" Static jerked his thumb towards the door to the stairwell leading down into the building. Richie shot one final look towards the broken skyline of Dakota and nodded. Static gestured for the other boy to precede him, and Richie did so, moving
with the air of someone who knew they were descending into the belly of the proverbial beast. At the
door, Static punched in the access code, and the door released with a soft beep. Richie pushed it
open all the way, but paused at the entrance to the stairwell.

Without looking back at Static, he sighed softly. "You're not going to let me leave tomorrow, are
you?" Though said in an interrogative tone, it was not really a question and they both knew it. Static
tilted his head and smiled, an odd, half formed quirk of his lips that, had Richie been able to see it,
would have sent chills up his spine. Static didn't answer, merely let one hand trail idly through the
other boy's soft hair, to trace down in a barely-there touch against the nape of his neck. Richie
shivered lightly, before he shrugged away from the touch and moved down the stairs.

The arm tightened slowly around his throat, squeezing his airway. He gasped and pulled
ineffectually at the limb, struggling within the iron grasp that held him. Static just laughed, a hard
grating sound that had nothing to do with humor. The arm tightened still further…tighter, tighter,
until finally spots began to swim in his vision and he had to stop struggling or risk blacking out. He
froze in his captor's grasp, and the arm tightened once more before releasing the pressure across his
windpipe. Richie struggled to return his breathing to something like a normal rhythm.

"Richie, Richie, Richie," Static sighed, and Richie knew just from the way his name was said that
whatever was about to happen, it was going to be bad. "I told you, man…this is my world. I call the
shots, here. What'd you think you were gonna do, huh?" Static abruptly released him completely,
gripping his shoulders to spin him around so that they were facing each other. Static's face was
devoid of expression…but his eyes. Richie didn't even want to name the emotion swirling in those
dark eyes. It went beyond anger…into realms that promised only pain for those it was directed at.
Right now, that gaze was focused squarely on Richie.

Silently, he reminded himself that this had been part of his gamble. He'd known this would happen…
he'd known that if he wanted this Static to relax his guard enough to let Richie do what he had to do
to get himself and Virgil home, there would be a price.

Funny, he'd been a lot more certain he was willing to pay that price when it was all an intellectual
hypothetical.

He closed his eyes and focused on Virgil. If he failed, his friend would likely be trapped here,
forever. Virgil was counting on him to get them home, to figure out how to get them out of here.
Inwardly, Richie steeled himself. There was no task too great that he would not do it, no price too
high that he would not willingly pay it for Virgil. He opened his eyes again to face Static. He had to
play this, just right.

At last, the expressionless mask broke and the sick smirk that Richie was quickly coming to hate
settled on Static's face. "What's the word, Birdie?" he asked suddenly, not taking his eyes off of
Richie's face for a moment, but directing his attention to the girl behind them. Richie didn't dare turn
to look, wary of becoming caught in the ghost-dog's gaze again.

"He tried to send a radio signal. We jammed it." Nightingale's voice sounded as though it was being
chipped out of ice.

Static's smile deepened. "Oh, hear that? All this for nothin'." They'd jammed his radio signal.

Which would have sucked, if that had been what he was actually trying to send.

Richie forced himself to slump in seeming defeat, hanging his head and closing his eyes. Inwardly
though, a sweet thrill of triumph ran through him. They didn't know what he'd done. They had no
idea, or they would have thrown it back in his face. He'd pulled it off. Whatever else happened, it was worth it, now. He'd succeeded.

"Bring him," Static snapped suddenly. He stalked forward towards the door to the stairs, brushing past Richie roughly without a second glance at the other boy.

Richie had time for one deep breath before he was seized once again in the all encompassing blackness of Nightingale's power. The darkness wrapped around him like a living thing, binding itself around his arms and legs, snaking around his chest and up his neck. He gasped again as it closed over his head, totally cocooning him in darkness. Instinctively, he struggled, but it was like moving through glue...everything was slow, weighted. For one panicked instant, he felt as though he couldn't breathe. Quickly, though, logic reasserted itself, and he realized that while he could no longer move, he could breathe quite easily. There was a sensation of movement, of being lifted, but he couldn't be sure. He swallowed heavily and closed his eyes. It didn't make any difference, since he couldn't see anyway...but it made the darkness seem somehow less oppressive.

"I can do this, bro. I can do this." For Virgil, he could do this.

Richie had not spoken since entering the building. He followed where Static led, his gaze fixed firmly straight ahead. They had not passed any of Static's people in the hall, as the top floors were considered solely Static's territory. His people only disturbed him up here if it was an emergency. Static led Richie to his private rooms, opening the door and gesturing for Richie to enter with a flourish.

Again, Richie did so silently. He moved to the center of the room, not even looking around him, then turned to face Static. For the most part, his face was expressionless, but there was something like sadness dancing in his eyes. Static shrugged out of his coat and threw it carelessly over the back of his couch, then removed the mask and tossed it on top of the coat. The sadness seemed to spike in Richie's eyes as Static's face was revealed. Casually, Static stretched, arching his back until his spine popped. Then he leaned back against the door matching the other boy's even stare.

At last, Richie broke his silence. "Well," he said quietly, "pretty cushy for a dungeon."

Static laughed shortly. "You ain't a prisoner here, Rich."

A rather bitter smile twisted Richie's lips. "But I was right, wasn't I? You're not letting me walk out of here tomorrow."

"You're safer, here, with me," Static countered.

"Answer me, Virgil! Are you going to let me go or not?" There was real anger in Richie's voice. His fists clenched by his sides and he glared harshly at Static. Inwardly, Static had to chuckle at the other boy's audacity. Anyone else, and Static would have beaten them unconscious.

"No."

"But I'm not a prisoner." Richie's tone was biting. He turned away from Static focusing on the windows across from them. "You promised I could leave, if I wanted to."

"You wouldn't have come with me, otherwise," Static muttered sullenly. Richie tensed slightly.

"What if I'd said no, huh? Would you have made me come with you? Were you lying about that, too?" He turned around again to face the other boy, and nodded shortly at Static's expression, not needing an answer. He went back to his contemplation of the windows, walking forward to rest his
Static moved forward, coming up behind the blond boy to stand at his back. "I've been looking for you for almost a year, Rich. I was worried about you."

"Yeah, right."

Static reached up to grip the other boy's shoulders and turn him around. Richie resisted, initially, but Static had always been the stronger of them. He spun Richie around and pushed him back against the glass, gripping his shoulders hard. "You'll be safer with me. Why you actin' like this, man? I said I wasn't going to hurt you."

"You also said you'd let me go," Richie countered. He tried to shrug out of Static's grip, but Static refused to let go, squeezing harder. Richie surged against him and he pushed back, slamming Richie against the glass with enough force that his head snapped against the window with a dull thud.

"You're staying," Static said firmly. He let go the other boy and backed away, turning to head towards the bathroom just off the bedroom section of the suite, stripping out of his shirt as he went. "There's soda in the 'fridge if you want. I'll be back in a few minutes." He turned around and shot a measured look at the blond boy, who had yet to move from the windows. "Don't leave the room. Some of my guys tend to get a little…jumpy…around strangers." The measuring look vanished, to be replaced by a grin that was both familiar and utterly alien to Richie. "Just give it a week, Richie— you won't want to leave." With that, he swept into the bathroom and a moment later the sounds of the shower starting could be heard.

Richie stayed where he was for a moment, and then reached up to rub his right shoulder with the opposite hand. He didn't have to look to know there would be bruises forming, and his head ached from the force with which Static had shoved him back. He stared towards the door where his one-time best friend had just vanished, and then slowly closed his eyes.

He was given no warning when they finally reached their apparent destination. The darkness holding him simply dissipated, dropping him roughly onto a hard tile floor. He rolled a few times, coming to rest on the hip that was still sore from his headlong fall down the stairs when escaping from Shiv. He stood cautiously, trying to stare all about him at once. Of Static, Nightingale, and Deimos there was no sign. Richie didn't think for a moment that meant they'd left him alone.

He turned a slow circle, taking in his new surroundings. He'd been dumped on the floor of what must have been the employee cafeteria at one time. It had that feel about it. Plus, the smell of overcooked macaroni and Salisbury steak never really faded away from a place. A few of the harsh, florescent lights had been left on, illuminating a wide circle around him, but leaving most of the room in shadow. He was quite sure he didn't want to know what was out in the shadows. He struggled to remain calm, to not give into his instinct to try and run, get away. He had a feeling that would only make things worse.

He tried to quiet his breathing, to listen for any sounds that might let him know where his captors were. Part of him recognized this entire setup for the intimidation ploy that it was...designed to make him panicky and afraid. For a moment, the part that recognized this had a hell of a time convincing the rest of him not to fall for it, though. Only a moment, though. Logic quickly reasserted itself, as it always did with him. He stopped his slow turning and just stood quietly, waiting for whatever was going to happen.

He didn't have long to wait.
A low, dark chuckle echoed from somewhere close to him. It bounced strangely through the room, confirming Richie's suspicion that the place was mostly empty. Stubbornly, he forced himself to remain still. He strained his ears, listening for the sounds of other people around him, but heard nothing. Then, abruptly, there was a flare of light in the shadows just outside the pool of light he was standing in.

Richie felt his heart speed up to roughly the pace of a jackhammer, and cold sweat broke out on his forehead. The darkness slowly receded, revealing Static. The other was stalking towards him with the slow menace of a panther on the prowl. Lightning cackled around him, little blue licks of flame dancing up and down his arms, his legs. An orb of electricity was being tossed from hand to hand, flickering over his hands and fingers in almost a dance. The light he was generating threw Static's features into stark relief against the general dimness of the room…the narrowed eyes, the death's head grin, the glint of something that might have been simply malice, might have been madness in his gaze.

Richie was expecting it, had seen Virgil do it hundreds of times, but it was quite different to be on the receiving end and there was really no way to brace for it. Static let the ball of energy fly forward, striking Richie full in the chest. He was propelled backwards with the force of the blast, quickly fetching up against a wall he hadn't been able to see for the darkness. There he remained, suspended spread-eagle, held against the wall by static electricity. He could feel the power humming against his skin, every hair standing on end…not enough to hurt, no. The voltage wasn't high enough. Richie knew, though, that it wouldn't take much for that to change.

Totally without his permission, his mind began supplying him with measurements of how much voltage it would take to hurt, what the different levels would be. A stinging tingle at first, easily shaken off, with maybe a few minor burns. A bit more juice and then muscle contractions, capillaries close to the skin bursting. If the shock were greater, the point of contact would burn severely, the muscle contractions would become strong enough to stop his heart, his lungs. His nervous system would overload, internal organs near the point of contact would start to burn.

Sometimes, knowing damn near everything really blew.

Static, oblivious to Richie's internal dissection of death via electrocution stepped forward, aiming a jolt of power to the lights directly above them. They flickered on, bathing the two boys in harsh white light, though most of the room was still shrouded in darkness. Richie still could not see any of the others, but there was a sense of movement in the shadows, of eyes watching. Static's people were here. He knew they were here.

Resolutely, Richie focused his gaze on Static's face, trying to ignore the grin still playing about the other's lips and all the things such an expression promised. To see such an expression on the face of his dearest friend…no matter how many times he told himself that this was not Virgil…it still chilled him inside.

"So," Static began conversationally. "Got all that hero shit out of your system?" He tucked his hands behind his back and bounced lightly on his toes, grinning up at Richie. Richie glared evenly at him, not saying a word. Here was where it would be the trickiest...if he played this wrong, all was lost. Static took in his expression and the amusement vanished from his face. The sick grin melted into a scowl that was infinitely more threatening. "I thought so," he sighed. The scowl vanished to be replaced by a blandly pleasant smile, though no emotion reached Static's eyes, which had gone flat and snakelike.

Static backed away, cracking his knuckles, and regarded Richie critically, the way an artist might regard a blank canvas. "See, thing is…you gotta understand some things around here."
He didn't see it coming. Static moved that fast.

There was a whistle of displaced air and then Static's fist crashed against his cheek in a hard backhand. Richie's head whipped to one side with the force of the blow and he tasted blood in his mouth, felt the sting of a split lip. He breathed through the pain, thankful that Static hadn't struck at the correct angle to break his cheekbone.

"I call the shots, here. I tried to tell you. You really should've listened." Static's voice continued in a pleasant, conversational tone, as if he was discussing the weather or the latest sports scores. The fist flew again, burying itself in Richie's unprotected stomach.

This time, he was unable to keep silent. The air escaped his lungs in a long whoosh, and he groaned heavily, nearly gagging. Static's face was still set in a soft smile.

"I'm in charge of this whole damn city, Richie. It's mine. I've got the power here."

"That why you need me to help you take out your big sister?" Richie spat. Careful…he had to be so careful here. Push too hard and he'd likely be killed. Not hard enough and this would all be for nothing. "Let him walk into it, Foley, don't choke now." For a moment, the frozen smile faltered, and fire flashed in those dark eyes. Just a bit further…

"Can't even take out a girl in the sewers. Oh yeah, you're in charge here, man."

Too far.

The smile vanished, replaced by a snarl of bared teeth. Static's fists clenched at his sides and for one, brief moment, Richie saw his death staring back at him from the twisted face of his friend. He recoiled against the wall. "Not Virgil, not Virgil, not Virgil," he chanted in his head, over and over again.

"That…was stupid, Rich," Static murmured softly. He moved forward again, pulling something out of his pocket. He closed the distance between them, leaning close so that barely a breath of space separated them. "Real stupid." He reached up, gripped the back of Richie's neck, pulling him closer so that their foreheads touched, just staring into Richie's eyes the whole time. His other arm moved downward…

Fire licked across Richie's stomach. A horizontal line all the way across his midsection, that burned, the pain becoming worse as he focused on it. Something warm and wet began to trickle down his stomach. Another flash of fire, a vertical line this time, up nearly to the center of his chest. More wetness, more heat and stinging burn and he couldn't see. At last, Static let go of his neck and leaned back slightly. Still smiling, still staring Richie straight in the eye, he held up an object for Richie to see.

"Not Virgil, not Virgil, not Virgil..." It was a knife. A common, garden-variety pocket knife…stained bright red. "Not Virgil, not Virgil, NOT Virgil, NOT Virgil!" He couldn't show his fear…not yet. Not the right moment. He had to hang on, had to play this out. It would be safe to let go soon, safe to let his stony silence break. Then Static would think he had won, and this would all stop. It would stop.

Static reached forward and the pain flickered again, this time down his side. The blade skimmed along his skin, long shallow cuts that just barely pricked the skin…but it hurt. It hurt so much. Little cuts, little cuts…along his other side, a diagonal slice across his chest. The shirt began to gape open in strips, stained with his blood. Not much blood yet, surely not much blood. Tiny cuts, little cuts, couldn't hurt him that much. They couldn't. They couldn't. He knew they couldn't.
"NOT Virgil, NOT Virgil, it's NOT Virgil!"

"No one's gonna stop me, Rich. No one's gonna help you. I can do whatever I want."

The knife dragged up along his chest again, this time not hard enough to split the fabric, just enough so that he felt the point of it against his skin. The blade traced up his throat to rest just under his chin, digging in just a little bit. "I could kill you right now. I wouldn't even have to use my powers."

Now he could let go. Now he could let the fear creep into his eyes, could swallow shallowly against the knife and let his breathing go harsh. He watched those alien eyes, waited for the triumph to bloom. Not yet, not yet, but close. He was close to pulling this off. The knife trembled against his throat for just an instant, drawing a bead of blood, and then vanished. Static wiped it against the leg of his jeans, the red stain disappearing against the red of the denim, and the knife was dropped into a pocket.

Static tilted his head. "I've got the power here," he repeated. He nodded sharply and stepped aside. There was a soft giggle from somewhere in the darkness, and Richie wrenched his gaze from the monster in front of him in time to see a flare of purple-red light in the darkness. The flare briefly illuminated Shiv's face before it flew at him, taking on the shape of a small throwing knife. Richie gasped and turned his head, feeling it whistle just over him to embed itself in the wall above him.

Two more followed, one landing scant centimeters from the side of his throat, the other flying lower. He felt a flash of heat skitter up the side of his leg from that one, though not enough to burn.

"Hehehe…like shooting fish in a barrel." The giggling, maniacal voice sounded closer now. A hail of energy bolts shaped like throwing stars struck the wall all around him, outlining his body. They dissipated without exploding, thankfully, but Richie still felt shaky with the closeness of them. Which was the plan, of course, but he couldn't quite counteract the fear with that knowledge this time.

Static backed away entirely, vanishing into the gloom. "I could let them play all day if I wanted to." Static's taunting voice echoed around the room.

Suddenly, Richie was enveloped in a foul-smelling cloud. He couldn't identify the chemical makeup, but whatever it was, it burned when he breathed it in. Puff…it had to be. He tried desperately to choke off his instinctive gasp, to hold his breath, but to no avail. Reactionary tears sprang to his eyes as he hunched forward as much as he could, coughing and gasping for air that would not come. It seemed as though he could feel the cloud invading his airway, burning its way down into his lungs. He coughed harder, and over the sound he could hear laughter. It sounded as though it was coming closer.

As abruptly as it had appeared, the cloud vanished. So did the power holding him to the wall. He tumbled to his knees on the floor, one hand going around his middle, to clutch at the bloodied fabric that covered the slashes on his torso. He braced his other hand on the floor in front of him, pulling in as much sweet, clean air as he could between raw, hacking coughs. He could still feel the burning sensation in his lungs and his throat, but the pain was fading quickly. He swallowed roughly and pushed himself back to sit on his heels. When he looked up, he realized the other bang babies were no longer hiding in the dark.

They were grouped in a loose semi-circle around him. He'd had an idea of Static's forces before, but as he took in the group in front of him, his heart sank. Puff, Onyx, Talon, Deimos, Nightingale, Shiv, Boom, Mirage…he recognized each of them. Were there more in this building? Did this Static have Ebon at his disposal? Hot Streak? Rubberband Man?

He had no time to contemplate the odds stacked against him and Virgil, for at that moment, Shiv lunged forward, his arm encasing itself in energy. He'd seen Shiv's blades before. Had even seen them up close and personal. It had been a long time since he had seen them without the relative
security of Gear's façade, though...without the comforting presence of Backpack. The blade raced through the air, stopping mere centimeters from the tender skin of his throat. Richie held his breath, not daring to move.

"Can we play some more, Boss? Huh? Can we, can we, can we?" Shiv tossed the query over his shoulder.

"You had your turn." The circle of bang babies parted and there was Static again. He stepped forward, moving until he was standing beside Shiv. The purple haired bang baby shrugged and let the energy around his arm fade, stepping back to rejoin the circle of Static's gang. "What do you say, man? Should I let them play some more? Or do you understand the way things work around here, now?"

Richie pressed harder against the wounds on his stomach. The bloodflow had already mostly stopped, but the pain gave him something else to concentrate on besides this nightmare version of his friend and the creatures standing behind him. Almost...he had almost made it. Static squatted down and took Richie's face in his hands, tilting the other boy's head up so that they were looking eye to eye. Richie could feel fine tremors begin to wrack his body as reactionary shock set in. Static must've felt him shaking, for the soft, slightly wrong smile reappeared.

"Mmm, no, I don't think you do. Not quite yet." The smile twisted again. "D-Man...why don't you give him one more reminder?"

The other bang babies began backing up hastily as Deimos stepped forward, hands shoved loosely in the pockets of his trench coat. He raised one eyebrow at Richie, though there was no other expression on his face.

"How far you want me to go?" Deimos asked quietly. Richie thought he heard a snicker from Shiv, but he was too focused on Static to be sure. Static tilted his head and regarded Richie for a moment. Then he brushed one thumb against Richie's lower lip and the smile twisted yet again, turning sinister.

"All the way." Then Static rose and backed away as well, so that Deimos was left standing alone, directly in front of Richie.

"Oh shit. Oh shit. Hang on, Foley."

Deimos cocked his head to one side, and his eyes began to glow crimson. A creeping, thick fog seemed to roll in from nowhere, drifting across the floor to gather in front of the young man. Richie tried to tear his eyes away from the sight, but it held him transfixed. The fog began to roil and toss, coalescing into a vague shape.

"Neat tricks, D-man has." Static's voice sounded far away. "Only works on bang babies, but damn it's fun to watch."

The ghost-dog took shape within the fog, stalking forward out of the mist, gaining shape and solidity with each passing second. The animal's eyes were glowing with the same red light as Deimos's and Richie felt himself falling into that hellish gaze. As in the junkyard, all those hours and half a lifetime ago, he felt cold closing in around him. His heart began to pound and he felt as though a fist was closing on his airway.

The chill swept through him, freezing his muscles, his breath, the blood in his veins. The cold settled into his very bones as the dog fully materialized. A low, rumbling growl echoed all around him, and the red eyes burned into his own.
Before, the animal had broken its gaze at this point. It didn’t, now.

Something began to pound at his senses, a deep, burning ache that tried to batter its way through the cold enveloping him. Some dim corner of Richie's mind noted that his heartrate had not stopped speeding up, that he could literally feel his pulse pounding through his veins. His breath knifed in and out of his lungs, a harsh, panicked gasp.

Fear. Fear. Fear. Fearfearfearfearfear!

It rocketed through him…and now the pain broke through the cold. Burning, agonizing pain in his chest, behind his eyes. Someone was screaming, and he was vaguely surprised to realize that it was him. Lost…he was lost in the crimson light of the ghost dog, lost in the terror it brought forth. His throat was raw from screaming, and yet it was nothing to the pain ripping through him.

Then, at last, it was over.

He heard, far, far away, someone shouting that it was enough. The dog turned away, breaking its gaze. Richie gasped a final time and fell forward, hitting the floor and trying to curl up in a ball against the awful sensation of searing heat and icy cold that still refused to let him go. He was shaking violently, his heart pounding. Every nerve ending was sending messages of pain and for a moment, it seemed as though he would never be able to move again.

Someone knelt at his side, and a rough hand grabbed a handful of his hair, jerking his head up from the floor. "Any time, Richie. Any time I want, I can throw you to them. We clear?" Static's whisper was harsh.

He couldn't speak, yet, could only sketch out a nod, beyond caring that it hurt his scalp. Static let go his hair, and he dropped his head wearily back down onto the floor. He heard Static get back up, walk away.

"Clean him up!" Static barked as he left and immediately, Richie sensed two more presences moving toward him. He pressed his face into the cool tile for one moment more, and despite the pain, his lips twisted into a careful, hidden smile.

"Checkmate. I win." he thought, as Onyx seized him by the shoulders and dragged him roughly to his feet. "I win."

Far above them all, on the roof, a soft click sounded, lost in the wind that buffeted the building. The sensor alarm on the outlet for the building's airduct system fell victim to far superior technology, and second later, the grate covering the vent was cut through.

Backpack skittered back, dragging the piece of grating away to hide it behind the vent cover. Then, its sensor eye extended again and it leapt up to the hole it had created, crawling into the ductwork of the building.
Eight o'clock in the morning.

Robert Hawkins sat at his kitchen table, a cup of coffee long since gone cold at his elbow, staring at the clock on the wall opposite him. An untouched plate of scrambled eggs and toast, congealed into a rubbery mess, sat beside the coffee. The only sounds in the house were the tick of the clock and his own soft breathing.

He had been sitting thus since six in the morning. He should have been at the center an hour ago, but he had called in sick, letting one of his assistants take over for the day.

Virgil had not come home last night.

Robert picked up the cordless phone handset again, dialed a number that Richie had set up especially for him for the eighth time since he had woken up that morning. The phone rang once, twice, and then a soft click sounded. There was a hiss of static over the line and then a soft beep.

Virgil had said he would be home around one in the morning. Robert hadn't waited up because his son had called to tell him that patrol had been dead quiet, and he and Richie were just going to take one more sweep of the city before turning in. It wasn't any different than a hundred other such conversations he had had with Virgil since discovering his son's identity as Static. He'd worried, of course he'd worried…but he had long ago learned that staying up and staring at the door served no purpose other than to exhaust him and make Virgil feel guilty. Now, though, he wished he had waited up.

The beep sounded again in is ear, followed by a mechanical click. Robert sighed and closed his eyes as his son's voice sounded on the line. If only it really was Virgil he had managed to contact.

Virgil had not come home last night.

"Hello. You've reached the Abandoned Gas Station of Solitude. Your call is important to us. If you are being attacked by a mutant bent on world domination, please press one. If hostile aliens are— whoa!" A faint scuffle could be heard, and then Richie's slightly irritated voice replaced Virgil's.

"V, I told you…this is not a toy. Hey Mr. H. We're not in, obviously. It's been-" Here, Richie's voice took on a faintly canned quality, as prerecorded information was recited. "...twelve hours and thirty five minutes…since we left the gas station. Last contact with Backpack was…nine hours and sixteen minutes…ago. We were…okay…at the time."

"Hey, Rich…what's this do?" Virgil's voice was barely audible, probably standing over Richie's shoulder as the other boy had made that message.

"Virg, wait! Don't-" there was a tiny hiss and a cry of surprise from Virgil, "touch that. I haven't made the anti-solvent yet. Gotta go, Mr. H."
The message ended, and Robert was left with only the dead air of a closed line, the same as all the other times he had called. Only the length of time since they’d had any sort of communication with their base had changed. With a heavy heart, he clicked off the phone. Nine hours. It had been nine hours since Richie’s computers at their base had made contact with Backpack to check on the boys. It was not unusual for Virgil and Richie to pull all-nighters if the criminal element of Dakota was particularly troublesome. Robert had called the special answering machine Richie had made for him before to find that it had been fourteen or fifteen hours since they had set foot in the gas station.

He knew for a fact that the computers contacted Backpack every hour on the hour though. It was possible that Backpack had been damaged in a fight, and the boys unharmed…but something felt wrong to Robert.

The clock wended its way to eight o’five.

They had made a deal a few months after Robert had learned the boys' secret. They checked in with him at least a few times a night when they were on patrol. Virgil woke him up, no matter what time the boy got in, to tell Robert that he was back, had made it home safely. In return, Robert had agreed to trust them, to trust that they could take care of themselves, and to not work himself into a panic when they inevitably were forced to work a late night. He’d promised to save the panic until they were at least eight hours overdue.

Virgil had not come home last night.

His son was now seven hours and five minutes late. Robert decided it was close enough.

He’d check with the Foleys first, on the off chance that the boys has decided to stay the night at Richie's and just forgotten to call him. "Never. They’d never do that." Then he’d try the gas station, in case they had simply been too tired after patrol, and sacked out in their 'base.' "He’d call. No matter how tired he was, he’d call." He tried to tell himself that there had been nothing on the news that morning, nothing that he had heard.

Virgil had not come home last night.

Robert shoved his chair back from the table and rose, heading for the living room. He snatched his car keys off the kitchen counter as he passed, trying to think of what he would do if his boys weren't at Richie's or the gas station…and not wanting to think about either situation. They could take care of themselves…he knew they could take care of themselves. This was all a misunderstanding. It had to be.

He was halfway to the door when a firm knock echoed through the front hall.

Robert froze, staring at his front door, and suddenly he felt his chest tighten, felt a roil of dread in the pit of his stomach. Sharon and Adam had a key. Virgil might have locked himself out, but his son never knocked so politely. There was no one else who would come to their house this early in the morning. Unbidden, memories of another time, with another unexpected visitor rose in his mind.

"Mr. Hawkins…Robert…it's Jean. You need to get to the hospital."

There was no logical reason for the same leaden dread that had gripped him upon hearing the news of his wife to rise up in him now…but it did. He felt the same clammy chill enveloping him, heard the same dull roar rise up in his ears. He moved towards the door slowly, as though he couldn't quite remember how his feet worked.

"Please, no…please God, no…not Virgil. Not my boy, too."
He laid one hand on the door knob, mildly surprised to realize it was shaking, ever so slightly. "Robert…it's Jean. You need to get to the hospital."

He pulled the door open; to reveal a figure he had never expected to see up close, much less standing on his front porch. The other man's fist was raised, poised to knock again. Faintly glowing green eyes widened a bit, before settling into a coolly professional demeanor. Robert felt his jaw drop, but under the surprise, the sick fear began to grow, expand. Why was this man here?

"Gr-Green Lantern?" Robert choked out, his voice gruff with both shock and the nameless, formless fear. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong…he knew it with every instinct in his body. Something had happened to his child.

"Mr. Hawkins?"

"Yes." He steeled himself, inwardly bracing for…what, he didn't know. All he knew was that his son was in trouble. "What are you doing here?"

Green Lantern sighed, his eyes turning sympathetic, and Robert felt the horrible fear coalesce in his gut. He gripped the doorframe tightly, refusing to collapse against it as he wished to do. The tightness in his chest grew, choking his breath.

"Mr. Hawkins…we need to talk."

The water was barely on the side of tepid and the pressure was badly rigged, so intense that it stung to stand under it. The shampoo was some homemade concoction that smelled like hospital disinfectant. The hard spray was unpleasant, probably sloughing off a few layers of skin as well as the grime from the sewers.

It was the most glorious shower Virgil had ever taken. It felt so good to be able to get clean.

He stood under the stinging spray as long as he could stand it…and then for a few moments more, until his skin felt as though it might bruise. At last he hit the lever that Adam had shown him, shutting off the water, and then stepped out of the small cubicle. The bathrooms in the underground base were really little more than jerry-rigged latrines. A single section had been walled off from the rest of the base, and a set of communal showers and toilets installed. Apparently, privacy was one of many luxuries that these people could not afford.

When he was finished mostly drying his hair and body with the thin, threadbare towel that had been provided, he exited to the main part of the bathrooms. Adam was waiting for him. The older man had literally not left his side since springing him from Aqua Maria's care. Virgil didn't want to admit how nervous the thought of Adam having to leave him alone with an "armed guard" made him. A ball of wadded up clothes hit him in the face as he emerged from the showers, and he caught it reflexively. A pair of ancient sneakers followed, clunking onto the floor in front of him.

"Might be a little big, but at least they don't smell like sewer," Adam said quietly.

"Which makes them absolutely perfect. Thanks, man," Virgil answered. He unwound the ball to find a worn pair of jeans and dark blue t-shirt. The clothes were worn nearly through in some places, and they were obviously made for Adam's much taller frame. Virgil wasn't going to complain though… they were clean. He retreated back into the shower cubicles to change, feeling much closer to human. He had to roll the cuffs of the jeans up a few times, but other than that, they fit well enough.

All right…clean, food, rescue plan. Those were his priorities right now. Truth be told, he'd rather have skipped the clean and food and gone straight to rescuing his partner, but the logical side of him
knew he had to take care of himself before he could be any use to Richie. He badly needed to replace the energy he had expended in the fight in the junkyard. His stomach had started up a near constant rumbling in the showers.

He rejoined Adam, who jerked his head towards the entrance to the main thoroughfare of the base. They exited the bathrooms and Adam began leading him back down the main "street," towards the buildings that housed most of the refugees. There were more people out and about now…and each of them stopped to stare as he and Adam passed.

Virgil had never seen such hostility in people, such unadulterated hatred—and all of it was directed at him. He ducked his head, not willing to meet those angry gazes. These people wanted to hurt him…he could sense it. It said a great deal about their respect for Adam's authority that they didn't try anything. Every last one of them, though, watched him…he could feel the heat of their gazes burning into him.

"We'll just grab something to eat in the mess and head back to my place. We can talk…figure out what our next move is," Adam said quietly, after a few tense moments. Virgil didn't answer, but nodded shortly.

What was his next move going to be? He couldn't bear the thought of leaving Richie with the other him for a second…not after learning what this Static had done to this world's Richie. He breathed deeply, clenching his fist so hard his nails dug painfully into the flesh of his palm. If the other Static hurt Richie…if he touched Richie, there was going to be hell to pay. First, though, he had to come up with a plan.

He couldn't count on these people to help him. That was becoming painfully obvious. So...he was on his own. It wouldn't be the first time. It had been a very long time since he'd been so totally on his own, though. All right…all right. He needed to find out who this other Static had working for him. He needed to find out where the other Static had his base, what kind of security was in place. He needed to know how well the streets of the city were patrolled, where he was likely to run into the other Static's people. The sheer magnitude of the task might have daunted some, but Virgil felt only grim determination.

Richie was counting on him.

Adam led them through the living quarters of the base, to the opposite end of the station. Here, another section had been walled off by sheets of plywood, creating a large room. The smell of charcoal fires hung heavy in the air around the 'room,' which Virgil presumed was the mess. Adam pulled a shabbily rigged door open, and the smell of smoke became heavier. A thought struck Virgil.

"Uh, Adam…Sharon doesn't do the cooking here, does she? 'Cause I'm not that hungry yet."

Adam chuckled, mirthlessly. "We don't let Sharon near the kitchen anymore. Eggs. Food poisoning. Sixty people, four working toilets. Wasn't pretty." A slight shudder went through the taller man, and despite himself, Virgil's lips twitched into a smile. At least some things around here seemed to be no different than his Dakota.

"The 'mess hall' was perhaps twice as big as Virgil's living room. Here, there had obviously been some attempt to make the place more homey and comforting, rather than starkly functional. White Christmas lights had been strung up on the ceiling, providing dim, but inviting, light. Several old, mismatched picnic tables lined the hall, many topped with red and white checked plastic tablecloths, such as one might see in a family restaurant. Here and there potted plants had been placed on the tables, though the plants looked rather sickly. Still, it was a nice effort."
There were no people at the tables when they entered, a fact for which Virgil was grateful. He wasn't sure how much more of these peoples' rancor he could take. In the back of the room another partition had been built, rather like the kitchen of a diner. The scent of baking things drifted out into the main part of the room. Virgil's mouth began to water almost painfully, and his stomach growled loudly.

Adam proceeded across the room, up to a window that had been cut in the partition. A bell had been set up on the lip of the window and Adam tapped it once, sending a musical chime through the mess hall. Virgil hung back, not wanting to startle whomever Adam had just summoned. There was a sound of pans clattering together from the back, a shuffle of feet.

A small face appeared in the window—a little Asian boy, maybe eight or nine years old, with a mop of dark hair and a streak of flour across his cheek. The boy smiled happily when he saw who was on the other side of the counter. "Hi Adam!" he said brightly. He turned around and called over his shoulder, "Hey Uncle Carmen, Adam's here!" The boy vanished, evidently jumping down off of whatever he was standing on.

Virgil's eyes widened. "Uncle Carmen?" he repeated softly. "No way, man...don't tell me—" A large, rather bestial head poked out over the lip of the counter, and Virgil nearly choked on his shock.

Carmen Dillo looked a great deal...cleaner than Virgil was accustomed to seeing him. He was also sporting a poofy chef's hat, set at rather a jaunty angle. The bang baby smiled brightly at Adam. "Hey, Adam...Leah told me you had some excitement today."

"Ain't that the truth, Carmen," Adam muttered wryly. Carmen snorted in laughter.

"Should I fix up the couch for you?" he asked slyly, beady eyes twinkling with amusement. Adam chuckled softly.

"I'll let you know. I think Sharon's still deciding." Adam took a deep breath, and then gestured for Virgil to move to his side. Virgil swallowed convulsively and shuffled into Carmen's line of sight. He really didn't want to have a throw down with any of Adam's people, and he didn't know how prepared Carmen was to see him. "Carmen, this is Virgil."

He was ready for the fear, for an immediate attack. He was ready for the suspicion, the sullen anger. He was not ready for Carmen to merely eye him up and down, sniff at him twice, and then cock an eyebrow.

"Huh. So you're Static."

"Uh...yeah?" Virgil replied uncertainly.

"Got the whole 'try anything and there won't be enough left a' ya' to fill a teaspoon' speech?"

"Several times," Virgil muttered wryly. Carmen nodded sagely and stuck out one paw-like hand.

"So long as we understand each other. Welcome to the Underground City, kid."

Automatically, Virgil reached up to shake the other bang baby's hand. How much more surreal could this place get? He thought about that for a moment, and then his eyes widened. "I didn't mean that...I swear I didn't mean that!" He just knew that tempting Fate here would be a very bad idea.

After a moment, Carmen released Virgil's hand, tilting his head and regarding the young man critically. "You really do seem...different," he commented after a moment. He did not, however, elaborate, instead turning back to Adam.
"So…what've you whipped up?" Adam asked, leaning his elbows on the counter by the bell. Carmen smiled proudly, and adjusted his hat with a flourish.

"Well for lunch we're offering soup and stew, along with biscuits made by the very best helper ever, Mr. Michael Yu." Virgil heard the little boy laugh in delight to be included in Carmen's spiel. A faintly suspicious look creased Adam's face.

"What's the difference between the soup and the stew?" he asked carefully. Carmen shrugged.

"One of 'em sat under the heat lamps long enough to congeal slightly."

"Uh-huh…and do I want to know what's in either of them?"

"Mmmm…probably not, no."

"Great. Soup it is, then. Two, please."

"I'll get it, Uncle Carmen!" the little boy, Michael presumably, called out from somewhere further back in the kitchen. Speedily, a tray with two steaming bowls and a plate with two rather lumpy and misshapen biscuits appeared. Adam nodded his thanks and picked the tray up, heading back towards the door.

"Lunch crowd isn't due for another half hour or so…it's usually pretty quiet in here this time of day," Carmen said suddenly, shooting a meaningful glance at Virgil. Adam hesitated a moment before nodding again and changing direction towards the table farthest from the door. Virgil moved to follow him, but a soft hiss from the window caught his attention. He turned to find Carmen staring at him rather intently. "Hey kid…Leah told me what you did for her up top. Thanks." With that, Carmen tossed first one, then another can of grape flavored soda, which Virgil caught automatically. Before he could reply, Carmen had vanished from the window, bustling back into the depths of the kitchen.

He walked over to the table Adam had taken over, a thoughtful look on his face. At least that had gone better than his meetings with Sharon and the rest of her people. Virgil shook his head as he sat down with his back to the door, and passed Adam one of the sodas. Being cheered up by talking to Carmen Dillo…who'd have thought it?

Adam took the soda with a nod of thanks and handed Virgil a bowl of soup in return. Despite the rather…unsettling…conversation he had heard Adam have with Carmen about the soup, it actually smelled rather good. Chopped vegetables and fine bits of spice were floating in a thick, creamy stock that, reminding Virgil of his grandmother's homemade chicken soup. Adam caught his bemused look and shrugged a bit.

"I couldn't believe it either, but he's actually a pretty good cook. Just don't ask what's in it."

Virgil glanced askance at Adam…but he didn't ask. He picked up his spoon and dug in, quickly realizing how ravenous he was now that there was food actually available. Within a few moments he had polished off the bowl and drained half his soda. He looked up to find Adam staring at him, his lips twitching spasmodically.

"What?" Virgil asked defensively. "I'm a growing boy." Adam held up his hands in a gesture of laughing surrender, and then shoved the plate of biscuits towards Virgil. They quickly vanished, as well.

A companionable silence fell over the table as Adam ate his own meal. Virgil sipped slowly at the remainder of his soda, staring at the stained and greasy plastic of the tablecloth. His immediate needs
satisfied, his mind turned to the problem of how to rescue his best friend. His first instinct was to simply storm whatever base the other Static had, and fry things until he got Richie back. Unfortunately, logic rather quickly overruled that instinct.

As much as he hated to admit it…he could not afford to rush off without a plan. To do so would undoubtedly only get him hurt or killed. Or worse…would get Richie hurt or killed. He needed to think this through, he needed a strategy. And those would take time. Time in which the other Static could do who knew what to his partner. Virgil clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached.

Damn it…he needed help. He needed the help that Adam had promised…the help of these people. The people who hated him, feared him. How was he ever going to pull this off? Adam had been willing to listen, to see that Virgil was not their Static…but Virgil knew that was only because Adam had seen Richie. Right now, the rest of these people were willing to trust Adam's judgment, but how long would that last? How could he convince people who had lived in terror of the other version of him for so long to help him? There had to be a way…there had to be a way to earn their trust, to make them see as Adam had. He would find it. There was no other choice.

"Hang on, Rich. Whatever you have to do…hang on. I'm coming for you, as fast as I can."

"Aw, shit." Virgil looked up from his intense contemplation of the tablecloth to find Adam staring towards the entrance to the mess. Hesitantly, Virgil turned as well, glancing over his shoulder.

Hotstreak was standing in the door, glowering at them.

There were no flames around the young man, but Virgil thought he saw a few wisps of pale smoke drifting up from Hotstreak's body. The other bang baby's eyes were narrowed; flashing with hatred and anger that Virgil could see even across the room. Hotstreak merely stood there for a few moments, before crossing the room to stand in front of their table.

"Boss wants to see you," he said coldly to Adam, though his gaze remained focused on Virgil. He crossed his arms over his chest and a rather unpleasant expression crossed his face. "Alone."

"Hotstreak…" Adam began uneasily. At last, Hotstreak looked away from Virgil, refocusing on Adam.

"Oh relax, RB. You know how 'Uncle Carmen' feels about fighting in the kitchens." Hotstreak's voice was perfectly calm, perfectly reasonable…but the calm didn't reach his eyes. "I just wanna… talk. Get a few things hashed out. No big." He smiled disarmingly, and again it was at odds with the anger in his eyes. Adam rolled his own eyes heavenward.

"Virgil—"

"It's okay, man," Virgil interrupted quickly. He shot Hotstreak a measuring look of his own. "It'll be fine." Adam looked at him strangely, but Virgil jerked his head towards the door. "Go on, Adam…I don't want to cause any more trouble between you and Sharon than I already have. It's okay, I promise." At last, Adam relented.

"Don't leave here until I get back. I'll make this as quick as I can." He shot a warning look at Hotstreak, who shrugged and stepped aside, gesturing grandly towards the door. Adam glanced at Virgil uneasily, but rose and hurried out of the mess, throwing several looks at the two over his shoulder as he went.

As soon as he vanished out the door, Hotstreak turned back to Virgil. This time there was not even a pretense of calm. There were still no flames, but the heat of Hotstreak's glare was almost as good.
Virgil took a deep breath and jerked his chin towards the door Adam had just exited through.

"Where you wanna do this?" he asked steadily. For a moment, Hotstreak seemed taken aback. A flare of confusion licked through the anger in his gaze, but it was quickly shaken off.

"Let's go," Hotstreak replied, not answering Virgil's question. Virgil sighed and rose from the table. He thought he saw the boy, Michael, peeking out of the window to the kitchens as he and Hotstreak proceeded towards the door, but couldn't be sure.

They exited the mess hall and Hotstreak immediately turned towards what looked like a less used portion of the subway station. The lights didn't reach here, so well, and there was debris and scrap stacked everywhere. It looked as though this was a catch all for the debris that had been cleared from the rest of the subway station when they had converted it into a base. The two youths walked side by side, neither willing to trust the other at his back, and Virgil could feel Hotstreak practically vibrating with tension. The air around him was definitely growing warmer as they walked.

There were no people about, now, a fact Virgil was grateful for. He wasn't sure what they would do without Adam's presence. They wended their way through the shadowy area, back towards the very edges of the station. Here was a place where a small tunnel that looked as though it led back into the main sewer line had been cut into the wall. A crisscross of faintly glowing lasers covered the entrance to the tunnel, and Virgil could hear the soft skittering clicks of more of the strange guard robots in the pipes above them.

It was at the entrance to this tunnel that Hotstreak stopped, and turned to face Virgil. It was the perfect place for a fight…open enough that they had room to move, plenty of cover available, and far away from prying eyes. Virgil pushed a flare of nervousness aside.

At last, the other bang baby allowed his power to come to the fore. Flames burst to life in his hands, crawled up his arms, flickered their way into a glowing halo around his body. In Virgil's world, Hotstreak had been a punk. A dangerous punk, to be sure, but still just a punk. This version, though, was something different.

Like everyone else around here, he was dressed for maximum protection and quick movement. His dark jeans and blood red shirt clung to him like a second skin, and a black, bullet proof vest with several pockets sewn on served as body armor. It was more than the dress, though. This Hotstreak's entire demeanor was different…oh there was still the air of barely contained violence about him (as evidenced by the very situation Virgil now found himself in), but there was an edge to it that Virgil had never before associated with Hotstreak. This person was craftier, more cunning. This was a survivor, a warrior…not just a mean street punk.

Moreover, despite the fact that Virgil was in a great deal of danger from this Hotstreak…he couldn't hurt the other bang baby. To do so would ruin any chance he had of convincing this world's people to help him rescue Richie. Virgil swallowed hard and subtly glanced around for means of escape, should this go badly.

"I don't know how the hell you got Adam to buy that shit story of yours, but you're not foolin' me," Hotstreak said suddenly, a dangerous growl to his words. "'I've been waitin' a long time for this, Static." The fire flared around him, hotter and more intense. Virgil carefully shifted his weight, ready to dive out of the way should Hotstreak try to throw something at him.

"I don't want to fight you, man," Virgil said evenly. "I'm not your Static."

Hotstreak laughed, a bitter, nasty sound. "I told you…you're not pullin' that on me."
"Look, man, what do I have to do to convince you I'm not who you think I am? Name it, I'll do it." If it would convince these people to help him get to Richie, Virgil didn't care if he had to get down on his knees and beg. His only answer, though, was that same harsh laugh. It cut off after a moment, and Hotstreak's glare deepened.

"I promised Foley I'd fry you, someday. I promised him you wouldn't get away with what you did to him." The words were said in a dead even tone, at odds with the tossing, roiling fire that surrounded Hotstreak. With that, the conversation was apparently over.

Virgil barely had time to dive out of the way as a column of flame suddenly shot towards him. It hissed overhead, enveloping him in heat even as he rolled out of the way, coming to his feet again at the entrance of the tunnel leading out of the base. He wanted so badly to charge up his powers, but he forced himself not to. He couldn't hurt this Hotstreak unless there was no other choice.

It quickly became apparent that there probably wasn't going to be another choice.

The flames rushed towards him again, a miasma of red and orange and heat. He dived to the side again, taking cover behind a stack of wooden crates. Damn it, there was scrap metal all around him, more than enough to use as weapons…and this was Hotstreak. Virgil knew he was more than capable of taking out the other bang baby. He couldn't, though. To do so would ruin any chance he had of convincing the others of his story.

"Hotstreak, think about this!" Virgil shouted. "If I'm the guy who did all this, if I'm the guy who… who killed Richie, why the hell would I come down here like this?" The uppermost crate on the stack he was hiding behind exploded into flame suddenly, raining down burning bits of wood and ash upon him. Virgil covered his head as best he could and scrambled away, deeper into the piles of scrap around him.

"Damn it, fight back!" Hotstreak shouted.

"I don't want to fight you!" Virgil shouted back, just as loudly. "This doesn't make sense, Hotstreak. If I'm your Static, why would I march right into a base full of people who want my head on a plate?"

"You're…you're just trying to figure out where we are. Foley made sure you couldn't track us down here!" Hotstreak didn't sound so sure, now, though.

"By myself? No backup, no way to contact anyone else?" Virgil countered. He ducked behind a pile of scrap metal, kneeling down to peer around it. He could just barely see Hotstreak around the debris that littered this area. The flames had not vanished, but there was definitely a bit of doubt on his face. "You know it doesn't make sense, Hotstreak. Think about it…would your Static really do something this crazy?"

"Shut up, just shut up!" The metal he was kneeling behind was suddenly struck by a burst of flame, superheating it almost instantaneously. Virgil was forced to roll away yet again as the metal began to melt. The hiss of molten metal hitting the concrete floor filled the air, and Virgil couldn't help crying out at the terrible heat. He scuttled back in an awkward crabwalk, before finally regaining his feet.

A soft sound, barely audible over the hissing, reached his ears and he whirled around- in time to see a flash of movement in the shadows behind him. Before he had time to investigate, though, the remaining stacks of debris between him and Hotstreak literally exploded, shoved aside by flame. Hotstreak stalked forward, unaffected by the heat he was generating.

"C'mon Static…you really gonna let me barbecue you? You said I was a dead man walking last time we rumbled! Fight back!"
"I told you I'm not gonna fight you. I can't believe I'm saying this, but you're one of the good guys here. I don't want to hurt you, man."

"Well…that sucks. 'Cause I sure as hell wanna hurt you." Hotstreak raised his fists and brought them down fast, firing a blast of flame at the floor. The flames raced towards Virgil, splitting off at the last moment to surround him in a ring of fire. The heat battered at him, singeing his skin and clothes, but he stood firm. There was a piece of scrap metal just to his left, undamaged by the flames, which he could use to escape if it came to that. No, he wasn't going to just let Hotstreak barbeque him…but he wasn't backing down until there was no other option.

The flames licked closer, close enough that the heat hurt, but still he stood motionless, staring into Hotstreak's eyes. "I'm not him. I'm not."

Hotstreak bared his teeth in a snarl, and the flames leapt higher, nearly tall enough to touch the ceiling. Sweat poured down Virgil's face, and he knew he wouldn't be able to last much longer. Something inside of him told him to stand firm, though.

At last, just when Virgil was sure he couldn't take another second of it…just when he was about to summon the sheet metal and damn the consequences, a new voice rang out.

"Enough! Francis, that's enough!" Virgil gasped in surprise as a wave of water suddenly swept the floor around him, quenching the flames. The resulting steam was nearly as painful as the heat of the flames had been, scalding the skin left bare by his clothes, but he forced himself to remain still.

Hotstreak, to Virgil's further surprise, allowed the flames surrounding his body to dissipate with a puff of pale smoke.

Aqua Maria appeared behind Hotstreak, sidling up to him and laying a hand on his arm. A puff of steam hissed up where she touched him, but neither seemed to mind. Hotstreak responded by wrapping the arm around her shoulders and pulling her close, apparently unmindful of the fact that he was soaking one side of his clothes. A third figure emerged from the dimness behind them.

Carmen Dillo stopped on Hotstreak's other side, and the three bang babies regarded Virgil quietly.

"Told ya',' Carmen said at length, apparently addressing Hotstreak. Virgil's brow furrowed in confusion. His gaze darted between the three as he tried to decide if they were going to attack him. No attack was forthcoming, though. "He smells different. You can't hide scent."

"No way Static would have taken that, that long," Maria added. "He'd have tried to kill you."

Hotstreak nodded grimly. At last, Virgil found his voice.

"Uh…not that I'm not grateful…but what's going on?"

"We had to see for ourselves. We had to know if you were telling the truth or not," Hotstreak answered. His voice, while not exactly friendly, held none of the anger from before. Virgil rocked back on his heels, shock running through him.

"You mean—dude you were playin' me?"

"Static doesn't exactly have a lot of…impulse control," Aqua Maria said. "And he hates Francis."

"No way he'd ever be able to control himself around Hotstreak that long," Carmen added. "Sorry, kid, it was the only way we knew to see for sure. I called Hotstreak and Maria on the comm. system while you and Adam were eating. We had to be sure."

"You…you believe me?" Virgil couldn't keep his own disbelief out of his voice. Could they really be serious?
"For now. I meant what I said before…you try anything, we'll squash you like a bug," Maria replied. Virgil's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, before he nodded.

"Fair enough. Th—thank you." Maria's gaze hardened a bit.

"We didn't do it for you." Her voice dropped softly, becoming soft and sad. "Richie was our friend. A true friend. If what Adam says is true…if Static has your Richie…we must save him. We will help you save him."

Virgil swallowed heavily, and something in his gut loosened a bit. A wave of relief swept him. He opened his mouth to thank them again, but Maria waved him off. Clearly, they still didn't trust him entirely…but they were willing to believe him, for now. They were willing to help him rescue his friend. That was enough.

That was more than enough.

"We better get back to the mess hall, guys. Adam'll be back any minute," Carmen said after a moment of heavy silence.

"I have to get back to the tunnels…I promised Peter I'd only be gone for a few minutes." Maria rose up and kissed Hotstreak on the cheek, with another hiss and puff of steam. She glanced over at Virgil and nodded gravely, before she glided away from them in the direction of the opening back into the sewers.

Carmen gestured for Virgil to join them, and he quickly scurried through the puddles of still steaming water. Together, the three began making their way through the station, back to the mess hall.

"You do realize Adam's gonna kill us when he finds out about this, right?" Hotstreak muttered at length, drawing a short bark of laughter from Carmen. The shadows receded as they got to the more lived in section of the subway station.

"No he won't…I'm the only one who knows how everything in the kitchen works," the animal-like bang baby answered cheekily. Hotstreak snorted softly, his lips twitching into what might have been a smile.

Neither of them left their backs to Virgil, but there was a definite lessening of the tension that Virgil had felt around him since his arrival. Walking between the two other bang babies, listening to their banter, Virgil sighed softly.

For the first time since Richie had been taken, he allowed himself to believe that maybe, things would be all right.
A week.

He had been there a week days. A week in which Virgil had done his level best to act like the year and a half since the Bang had never happened, like they were still in high school together and Richie had just come over to spend a few nights. A week in which Virgil had plied him with their old favorite videos and games, with all night talk-fests and pizza on his living room floor.

Virgil had set him up in a 'guest' bedroom off his own set of rooms—a rather spacious space that had probably once been an adjoining office. Virgil provided all their meals, usually insisting that Richie eat with him on his living room couch. Richie had his own bathroom, his own TV and video library...Virgil had even found some new sets of clothes for him. Richie could barely remember how long it had been since he'd had more than one spare set of clothing.

It had been a week and Richie had realized within the first five minutes that whatever Virgil said, he was very much a prisoner here.

He only had access to his room and Virgil's. None of the other doors would open for him. Virgil wouldn't even let him out into the halls...his entire world for the past week had consisted of this suite. Virgil neatly dodged any request to see more of the building (made out of boredom and a desire to stretch his legs more than anything else), muttering vague things about not wanting Richie to accidentally be hurt by one of his 'people'. Richie didn't buy it for an instant. He knew a mind game and a play for control when he saw one.

At one time, he might even have fallen into it.

Not now, though, and not for a long time...something Virgil couldn't know. Richie knew he was playing a dangerous game here. If Virgil suspected that he had been with Sharon all this time, if he found out that Richie wasn't exactly as normal as he'd been the last time they had seen each other... He just couldn't find out; that was all.

It helped that Virgil was often gone for hours at a time, leaving Richie to his own devices. If only Virgil knew how very foolish that actually was. Richie used those hours well.

The first thing to go had been the security cameras. Whoever had owned the office space Virgil now used as living quarters—they had either been very paranoid or had a god complex. The entire security system was routed through servers behind the walls of the 'living room'. It had been the work of minutes for Richie to hack into them, and minutes more to have the cameras show whatever he told them to. He'd crafted loop after loop of video, feeding them into the security cameras, which in turn fed into the bank of screens Virgil had set up on one wall. By the second day, he'd had complete freedom to do whatever he wanted in these rooms, with the certainty that Virgil would never know. That problem solved, he moved on to the next step.

He had been there for a week...a week in which he knew Sharon had to be going crazy with worry. She had to be thinking he was dead.

He sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the panel that held the security system servers. The wallplate was lying on the floor beside him, and he was staring intently at the guts of the servers. He glanced up at the bank of monitors every few moments, to make sure the hallways outside the room were still clear. The last thing he needed was for Virgil to return and find him thus...he didn't think he'd be able to explain it.
He glanced down at the small device balanced carefully on one bent thigh. He wasn't even certain he could do what he wanted to do with the equipment he had available. He couldn't make it obvious that someone had been messing with the security systems. Virgil may have skipped more classes than he attended in those last years, but the other teen certainly wasn't stupid.

Richie was smarter, though.

He tilted his head and regarded the circuit boards in front of him critically, before finally selecting one. It was part of the backup system in the camera network, so hopefully there wouldn't be any shorts in the system anytime soon. It was a risk he would have to take though. The circuit popped free with minimal resistance and he quickly picked the wallplate up and shoved it back into place.

He scooped the circuit board and the small box that had been balanced on his leg up and rose, moving over to sit on the couch. He glanced up at the screens again, assuring himself that Virgil had not arrived back, yet, and then went to work. Thank whoever Virgil hadn't thought to search him.

The comm. box didn't have much of a range, ordinarily. Its primary purpose was to allow Sharon and Adam to stay in touch with him when he was in one of the more isolated tunnels, working. He'd tested it to a little over three quarters of a mile. It would have to be juiced up considerably if it was going to be any use to him, here. Hence, the parts he'd scavenged from the security system, here. Richie was good at scavenging these days.

He pulled the back of the casing off and loosened the old circuit board from its wirings. It was the work of seconds to fit the scavenged one in place, and Richie was gratified to see a small green light twinkle to life within the wiring. All systems were go.

Still nothing on the monitors.

He sent a silent prayer winging upwards and thumbed the broadcast.

"Foley to base. Foley to base, come in. Sharon? Adam? Can anyone hear me? It's Richie." He listened for a moment, but there was nothing but the hiss of static. He bit his lip, leaned down to rest his forehead on the knuckles of the hand clutching the comm. box. "Sharon...someone, pick up." Silence. "Please, pick up." His voice trembled, just a little. Unconsciously, he reached up with one hand to rub at his shoulder, right over the spot where hand-shaped bruises were finally fading to yellow. "Please..."

"F-Foley?" The voice was barely audible, the broadcast thick with static and interference, but it was unmistakable. Richie sat bolt upright, and his eyes widened. He stabbed his thumb into the broadcast button again.

"Hotstreak!" Richie cried, a wave of relief that left him weak sweeping through him. "Man, you have no idea how good it is to hear your voice!"

"(Foley...Jesus Christ, is that you?)"

"We don't exactly give this number out, now do we?" Richie said, his eyes glued to the monitors.

"(Foley...man, we thought you were...we thought-)"

"I'm okay, Francis," Richie interrupted, gently. He heard a bark of laughter, edged with something more than humor.

"(I told you not to call me that. What happened to you? When you didn't come back... Sharon's been going nuts...we've had patrols out looking for you all week.)"
Richie was silent a moment, swallowing heavily. Then he sighed, softly. "I…uh…tell, tell Sharon I'm sorry—"

"(Richie.)" Hotstreak rarely called him by his first name. It was part of their odd friendship. "(Richie—where are you?)" There was a leaden dread to Hotstreak's voice, as if he already knew, but needed confirmation. Then again, of course he had to know…what else could have happened?

"Give you three guesses and the first two don't count," Richie muttered. He heard Hotstreak swear violently, scream for someone to find Sharon.

"(Did he hurt you? Did that sonuvabitch hurt you?)" Richie almost smiled at the anger dancing in the other bang baby's tone. They liked to pretend to fight like cats and dogs, but Hotstreak had been a good friend to him.

"No. It wasn't like that…I went with him on my own."

"What?)"

"He…he caught me right before I was supposed to meet up with Adam. We were barely a dozen yards away from the tunnel entrance. He heard the group. He heard them, and he was gonna attack them…unless I went with him. Adam had some of the kids out with him…I had to go." Richie heard Hotstreak growl to himself.

"(We're coming for you, man.)" Hotstreak's voice was tight, angry, and more than a little worried. "(Just sit tight. Sharon's on her way…we'll get you out of there.)"

It was so, so tempting. It could be done, too. Richie could take out the security system…he could tell them when the place was lightly guarded. He could let his friends ride to his rescue, and he'd be safe. For one moment, he almost agreed, almost told Hotstreak to go ahead, and that he would help with any plans. He couldn't, though. He couldn't.

He closed his eyes and shook his head, even though Hotstreak couldn't see it. "No," he said quietly.

"(What? Foley, are you nuts?)"

"I said no, Francis. You can't…we can't…damn it, we won't get another chance like this!"

"(What are you talking about?)"

Richie breathed deeply, trying to ignore how much it hurt to follow this thought to its conclusion. "If I play this right…Francis, I can do some real damage here. We might even be able to take him down, permanently."

"(Rich…Richie, no. It's not worth it, man.)"

"It has to be done," Richie said grimly. "We have to stop him."

"(Not if it means leaving you there! Dude, you know Sharon won't go for this.)"

"Francis, please…trust me. I can handle this. This has to end; we can't go on like this."

"(Why do you have to stay there?)" Hotstreak's voice was quiet, reluctant…but Richie could tell he had won. Hotstreak couldn't argue with his logic, as much as the other youth might have wanted to.

Richie swallowed hard, and unbidden, an image of Virgil, the Virgil he had once known, rose in his mind. The sullen kid who had nonetheless taken Richie under his wing in sixth grade, proving to be
a loyal friend no matter what anyone said. The rough and tumble teenager who had only ever relaxed, only ever smiled around Richie. And finally, the twisted, nightmarish creature who only knew hurt and hate, however much he might try to pretend otherwise.

"He needs to be taken down." Like a rabid animal, a dog that was too vicious to ever be trusted. And yet— "But he was my friend, Francis. He was my best friend. It has to be me. I owe him that much." He closed his eyes and drew his knees up close to his chest, curling up tightly on the couch. "I owe him that."

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then, finally, Hotstreak's heavy voice came again. "(I—all right, Rich. All right. I'll convince Sharon. We'll play it your way.)"

"Thanks, man. Listen…don't tell Adam and Sharon why I went with him. Adam would never forgive himself. It wasn't his fault."

"(I understand. You got it, man.)"

Richie sighed in relief. Adam really didn't need something like this on his conscience. He looked up again at the monitors and gasped softly. The elevator at the end of the hallway leading to Virgil's rooms had opened, revealing Virgil himself. "Shit…he's back. I gotta go. I'll call you again, as soon as it's safe!"

"(Foley...damn it, stay safe.)" There was a new edge to Hotstreak's voice, a sharper worry, and despite the imminent danger of the situation, Richie was touched at his friend's concern. Hotstreak didn't often act as though Richie were anything but an annoyance, although everyone knew it was just that—an act.

"I will, Francis. You too." He let go of the broadcast button, and leaped off the couch, racing into his room to shove the comm. box into its hiding place underneath the mattress of his bed. He then threw himself on the bed, back to the door, and mussed the covers around as much as he could, trying to make it look as though he had been taking an afternoon nap, just as he heard the main door of Virgil's rooms hiss open.

He heard Virgil enter, walk across the room to stop at his door, and feigned sleep as best he could. He forced himself to breathe deeply and evenly, not giving into the desire to turn over and see what Virgil was doing. He heard Virgil enter the room, walk across it to stand by the bed. The other teen said nothing, made no noise, but Richie could feel him at his back, just staring down at him. It was through sheer force of will that he remained still. At last, he heard Virgil turn away, retreat back into his main rooms.

He lay quiet for a few moments more, before hesitantly rolling over as he heard the shower in the other room start. He sighed in relief and flopped back down against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling.

Strange—he had managed to get in touch with his friends, had let them know that he was alive, and all right for now. It should have been a comfort, to know that they were only the touch of a button away. He should have felt better for talking to Hotstreak, for knowing that his friends had his back, no matter what.

Yet…all he felt was alone.
spine. He wasn't sure how long he'd been out, but he didn't think he wanted to go back into the real world yet. Not even fully awake, the burning on his upper body was enough to convince him full awareness would bring even more pain.

Somewhere there was the dim memory of it…of fire racing across his chest, accompanied by the acrid stench of disinfectant. Hands—some rough, some surprisingly gentle and feather-soft, holding him down, poking, prodding. Further back in his mind, there was a sensation of something worse, something that hurt too much to even think about. He didn't want to think about it. He desperately wanted to stay here, safe, in the twilight between dreaming and awake.

He couldn't ignore that damned feeling of someone watching him, though. So, against his better judgment, his eyes opened ever so slightly. The bright light blinded him for a moment, and he was proud of himself not wincing. He didn't want to alert whoever was watching him that he was awake…yet. Once his eyes adjusted, he carefully turned his head to the side, to see who the watcher was.

His eyes snapped open of their own volition and cold fear gripped him as he found himself staring into the flaming eyes of Deimos's ghost-dog. For a moment, he was catapulted back into the dark room below, the memory of icy terror and burning pain surging forth. His body reacted reflexively, heart pounding faster, and he struggled to pull himself up from his prone position on the bed.

"Phobos, heel."

The creature turned away at the command, and Richie tried to calm his nerves, casting his eyes toward the ceiling, the walls of his 'room', anything but the hellish gaze of the dog. Despite himself, a shudder wracked through him at the memory of the terror the dog had caused in him. Silently, he praised whatever luck had kept them from encountering this particular metahuman in their own world, else he and Virgil might have been in some serious trouble.

Not that he wasn't in serious trouble right now.

Richie sucked in a deep calming breath and automatically began taking stock of himself. His cheek and jaw ached fiercely where Static had struck him, and he didn't have to look to know there would be an ugly bruise within a matter of hours. The sting of a split lip made itself known, as did the dull, vaguely sick pain in his stomach from Static's punch. There was a spider-web of throbbing heat across his chest and sides and he closed his eyes even as he forced himself to run one hand over the gauze that had been wrapped around his torso. The…the cuts felt like they went from his waist to his collar bone. He'd have to look for himself, but there was no seepage on the bandages that he could feel…the cuts were long, but shallow. More painful than dangerous, which was, of course, the point. Static didn't want him dead.

So…there was hardly an inch of him that didn't hurt in some way, he'd kill for an aspirin, and he was still a hostage of a certifiably insane version of his best friend. To top it all off, with focused awareness on the condition of his body came the realization that he really needed the bathroom. He glanced over at the door leading to the half-bath, nearly wilting at the thought of stumbling the mere dozen feet that separated him from it. Damn it, he hurt.

Abruptly, there was movement to his left, and the next thing he knew he was being pulled to his feet. His wounds protested, and he tried to curl up, but the hold was firm. "Let me-"

"You'd rather piss yourself?" It wasn't really a question, and Richie stubbornly remained silent. Still, when Deimos helped him to the bathroom, he didn't resist or protest. Besides, he was supposed to be cowed, defeated. They had to think they had broken him. He had to keep up the act if he was going to make it out of here alive.
Still, he had some pride.

Fortunately, Deimos recognized that and released him at the restroom's threshold. He turned to give Richie privacy, and while Richie was tempted to try to do something to the man, the fresh wounds reminded him he couldn't...yet. Besides, he really had to pee. So, hoping the blue-haired man wouldn't peek, he did his business. By the time he finished, Deimos was out of the doorway. Richie took the moment alone to look in the mirror.

"It's not Virgil, it's not Virgil...damn it, this isn't Virgil!" he chanted in his head, feeling dizzy for a moment. There was no 'matter of hours' about it...an angry, reddish-purple discoloration had risen on his cheekbone. Blood had crusted in a line down the center of his lip and he gingerly touched the scab with his tongue, hissing at the smart. Worst of all, though, was what he knew was beneath the gauze that swathed his chest.

He didn't want to know, he didn't want to see. Still, he found himself pulling at the bandages, awkwardly unwinding them. They fell away, sticking slightly to the antibiotic cream that had been smeared on them, and with each inch of his own skin that was revealed, Richie found his hands shaking, felt himself clenching his teeth. "Not Virgil, not Virgil, never Virgil. Never Virgil."

Angry, red slashes decorated his torso, slightly shiny with the antibiotic. Blood had crusted over most of them, forming a bizarre, geometric pattern over his chest and stomach. He clenched his jaw harder, remembering the malicious glint in Static's eyes as the knife had swept over his skin again and again. His breath hissed out of his clenched teeth, and one hand reached up, almost, but not quite touching the large slash across his stomach. His hand trembled harder, before abruptly reaching down to grip the loose end of the bandage. With grim efficiency, he re-wound the strips of gauze, tying it off with expertise borne of three years of patching up himself and Virgil after patrol.

He leaned over to grip the edges of the sink for a moment, resting his forehead against the cool glass of the mirror. He could do this...he could. The worst part was over. It had to be.

He was far more unsteady walking out from the bathroom than walking in, and it had nothing to do with his wounds this time. He collapsed on the edge of the bed, unnerved that the mist dog was still there, lying on the floor and seemingly asleep. Its master was leaning on the wall next to it, watching him. Now that he was 'defeated,' he let the tremors he felt show. This Static had to think even the mere sight of the dog would unnerve him.

And truth was, it almost did. Almost.

"Uh, thanks..." he murmured, keeping his voice low and quiet. Deimos simply raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm guessing you've dealt with that before."

"A few times." Deimos eyed him over, and Richie ducked his head, ignoring the self-consciousness of being dressed only in his boxers. He really hoped Static hadn't taken part of that exercise. "Still in pain?"

His hand automatically went to his stomach, feeling the thin bandage there. "Yeah..."

Deimos nodded and pushed away from the wall. He squatted to rub the mist animal behind the ears, then went to the door and left Richie alone. The dog didn't disappear when Deimos left the room.

Richie swallowed, but thus far, the hound was 'asleep.' He dared not do anything while it was around. Damn it, damn it, damn it. He had to know if his signal had managed to reach Backpack...if the little robot had made it here, yet. He really didn't have words for how much he wanted his prized invention right now. With Backpack, he would have an advantage...with Backpack he would have
some protection. Backpack would be tracking him down if it had made it to the building. He couldn't look for it, though...not with the ghost-dog still here. Instead, he looked around the room. Resting by the bathroom door was a pair of sweats.

"Better than sitting here naked." He stood, gritting his teeth as his injuries again protested the movement, and started to go over, but once again the hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention. He froze in place, and knew the beast was looking at him. He hesitated, even feinted resisting the urge to look over his shoulder, before slowly continuing towards the clothes. He very deliberately dressed himself as if it were a daunting task, and made a self-conscious effort to avoid looking at the other side of the room.

If Static was watching, and Richie just knew he was, he was going to see a broken teen, a teen that jumped at the chance to avoid the fear and pain again, a teen that would do his bidding. It was a front, but one he had to play up. Not too much, but enough. The dog certainly helped, as he was actually afraid of it. "He called it Phobos." He tried not to laugh-mainly because that would aggravate his injuries—but it was pretty amusing. "Deimos and Phobos." It was also appropriate...apparitions of fear and panic.

The sweatshirt settled over him, warm and comfortable, and he lightly touched a hand to his chest again. It wasn't Virgil that had caused this. Not his Virgil. No matter how terrible it was to see the face of his best friend when he thought of his tormentor, he had to remember that. Virgil was out there...somewhere...trying to find a way to get him. He wasn't going to dwell on the chance that this Static had brought more backup than just Deimos and Talon to the junkyard, and that Virgil had faced them alone...

No, Virgil was alive and well, and doing everything in his power to find a way to take this Static down.

For lack of anywhere else to sit, he hitched himself back over to the bed, sinking down on it with a sigh. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Phobos lay his...her...its head back down on its paws. Slowly, he let himself fall back down onto the mattress, curling up on his side. And it was only because he was lying at such an angle that one of the heating ducts in the room was directly in his line of sight. So, when the faint, shadowy movement behind the grating became visible, he noticed it immediately.

This time, his heart speeding up had nothing to do with fear. It was just barely visible, a curve of silver, a gleam of a red sensor eye. The light blinked once, twice, and Richie casually reached up one hand, as though he were going to tuck it beneath his chin, crooked a finger in a slight wave. The light blinked again and died down, his signal acknowledged. Backpack knew that he knew it was here. It would wait for him to call it. He turned his face into the pillow, and had Static been there, he would have known that Richie was wounded, hurting, and yes, afraid.

But he was far from broken.

Static didn't normally leave his rooms in darkness. Even when he was sleeping, he always left a few televisions on so that his room was bright enough to see, but not bright enough that it kept him awake. It wasn't that he was afraid of the dark. He was Static, he wasn't afraid of anything. But ever since the...incident, he couldn't bring himself to sleep in the dark. The incident had happened in the dark, and he had been the only source of light. It wasn't guilt, it wasn't superstition. He just...didn't like the dark. It was a fact, and if anyone wanted to challenge him on it, he was more than willing to put them in their place.

So, his current situation was rather odd. His room was dark, no lights, anywhere. The curtains had
once again been drawn, blocking out the last dying rays of the sun entirely. Static was sprawled comfortably on his couch, bare feet propped up on the coffee table in front of him. The red jeans and black tank had been discarded in favor of loose, navy drawstring pants and nothing else. He made a strange picture, as still as a statue, only the gleam of his eyes and the rise and fall of his chest indicating life. There was one source of illumination in the room—a set of three television screens on the wall of screens in front of him. They cast a flickering, blue glow across the immediate area, and all three had Static's rapt attention.

The bottom two, side by side, were of the room and bathroom Richie was being held in. Not that he didn't trust Deimos to keep an eye on the genius, he just enjoyed seeing the rewards of his labor. The horrified expression Richie had after seeing himself in the mirror…it sent shivers down Virgil's spine, and he grinned, remembering the feel of smooth, pale skin slitting under his hand, the warm slickness of blood welling up in the cuts. Part of him had well and truly enjoyed the whole exchange in the cafeteria, of showing the other teen who's world he really was in.

He was in control, he was the one in power. And he loved the feeling that gave him.

Above the twin screens was a larger one, this one displaying not live feed, but a recording. The security cameras had recorded every instant in the cafeteria. From the moment they arrived, to that terrified scream where he knew this other Richie had been broken. It was glorious, and he used his power to rewind the tape again.

He had the power, he was in charge of the other boy's fate. Both were true for all the people in his gang, but his blood didn't get pumping when he thought of what he could do to them. Most of them were expendable, and he'd have no problem teaching them a lesson if they stepped outta line. Richie was different—he always would be. The blond was the one person he had never broken, the one who had defied him to the end.

Now…he had the opportunity to rectify that. He glanced to the live feed while the tape rewound. Richie was dressed in sweats and just lying on the bed, curled up on his side. His expression was blank, staring out into nothingness, quelled and silent. It almost made Static want to get dressed and go down to see his results in person. Almost. He'd decided to give it a day, though…just enough to let Richie sweat it out, wonder if it was really over, or just the beginning.

A scant day ago, he had thought he'd never have another opportunity to fix his mistakes with Richie; what was another day?

He heard his door slide open, and he called a spark of power to his fingers, casting strange shadows around the room. He turned slightly from the screens and regarded the person who had interrupted him. A slow grin lit his face, even as he turned back to the screens.

"Hey, Birdie. Watcha doin' up so early?" He flicked the energy on his finger to the television, starting the tape up again.

Nightingale sidled further into the room, a slow, slinking walk. The girl was dressed in a dark, silky robe, and Static knew from experience that she was likely wearing little or nothing beneath it. She came up behind him, leaning down over the back of the couch to lightly run a hand up his arm. "I thought you might like some company," she answered softly, before lightly boosting herself over the back of the couch to kneel beside him. "But if you don't…" She trailed off, tilting her head so that the shoulder of the robe slipped down, revealing bare, pale skin.

Static smirked. "Now Birdie, have I ever turned down your…company?" His eyes strayed back to the screen, to the taped feed in the cafeteria, in time to watch himself slice into Richie for the first time. He'd almost forgotten what fun a knife could be in the right circumstances. Nightingale
followed his gaze, frowned a bit.

"Enjoying the show?" she asked, no real emotion in her voice. Static grinned and pulled her close, gripping her waist to lift her so that she straddled his lap. It was a common enough ritual between the two. There was no feeling involved...he had an itch, she liked to scratch it. That was it, and all it ever had been.

"You have no idea," he murmured, still watching. Nightingale hummed happily, spreading her small hands over his bare chest. She nipped lightly at his throat as he pushed the robe the rest of the way off her body.

On screen, his image traced the knife up Richie's chest, to rest just under his chin. Static licked his lips, running his hands over Nightingale's dainty curves. She gasped a little as he gripped her hips, drawing her down to grind against him. The teeth at his throat became bolder, nipping down his collar bone.

Richie fell to the floor of the cafeteria, clutching at his middle. The blood showed up in stark relief against the white of his shirt, the pale cast of his skin.

He growled softly, gripped the back of Nightingale's head to kiss her roughly, a gesture that had nothing to do with tenderness and everything to do with plundering. Her hands plucked at the drawstrings on his pants, sliding them down over his hips.

On screen, the mist of Deimos's power swirled, forming the thing D-man liked to call Phobos. Richie lurched to his knees, and the comprehension of what was about to happen bloomed on his face. His face twisted in fear.

Nightingale gave up all pretense of teasing, and so did he. Her nails raked up his arms and he gripped her hips hard enough to leave bruises. Their foreplay dissolved into wet, and heat, and thrusts. Animal like growls and whimpers filled the room, surging toward completion.

And the whole time, Static never took his eyes from the screen, his gaze fixated on the image of Richie as he quivered and screamed in Phobos's grip.
It had been both easier and harder than he'd thought it would be to turn his captivity to his friends' advantage. Easier because Virgil really didn't think anyone could touch him in his home base, least of all Richie, who Virgil was still convinced was just a normal human. The security protocols that Virgil had in place, while adequate protection against an average assault from the outside, were a joke to Richie. Harder because he was walking a fine line...do too much to help Sharon and the others and Virgil was bound to put two and two together and realize his troubles with the 'rats' as he called them had increased exponentially after he'd brought Richie in. It was thus far a line Richie had managed to walk well.

He'd figured out the patrol routes Virgil's people took fairly quickly. Their patterns were more or less random, but it wasn't difficult for him to calculate where Virgil's people would be at what time based on the directions they left in and returned from. Sharon had told him their patrols hadn't had a run in with Virgil's crew for nearly two weeks. Their food stores were healthier than they'd ever been, and they'd managed to lay back a store of much needed medical supplies. Another few days and Richie figured his friends would be in a strong enough position to start taking the fight to Virgil.

That would be the hardest part of all to pull off.

Richie honestly didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep Virgil blind to the truth. Sooner or later, Virgil was bound to start questioning just why his own patrols were suddenly so ineffective, or how Sharon and her people seemed to know exactly where they had to be to avoid Virgil's people. And while Virgil had always been somewhat oblivious when it came to people (a fact Richie was counting on to preserve his skin) there were only so many factors he could go through before he got to Richie.

Richie didn't like to admit just how much the thought of Virgil realizing what he had been doing scared him. Virgil had barely laid a hand on him since that first night. Casual brushes against his shoulder or neck, yes, but nothing violent. The memory of the aching bruises on his shoulders was still fresh in his mind, though. Much as he might want to, he didn't dare delude himself into believing that Virgil wouldn't hurt him. Such thoughts would serve no real purpose, though.

Richie thumbed the power switch of his comm. box, ending his latest conversation with Sharon. He smiled softly at the thought of the woman who had come to mean as much, if not more, to him as his own family ever had. Sharon had taken him in, taken care of him, held his hand through the horror of watching his best friend turn into a monster that had destroyed their home. Though her own pain was just as great, she had always been there to comfort him, to offer a shoulder to cry on. He had tried to do the same for her, and through their shared suffering a bond that was almost as precious to him as the one he had once shared with Virgil had formed. She was his sister now, too, in every way but blood.

He knew that in her heart, Sharon was dead set against what he was trying to do. Oh, she acknowledged the soundness of his plan—she knew it was likely the only chance they had of taking Virgil down. She agreed with his reasoning, and had taken full advantage of whatever information
he had been able to pass on to them. The leader in her, the iron willed strategist that they all owed their lives to in some way, would not let her do any less. The part of her that was his adopted big sister, though, was terrified of losing him. It couldn't be helped. This had to be done.

He stashed the radio in its customary place under the mattress and got to his feet, just as he heard the main doors open. His brow furrowed and a swirl of unease raced through him as he heard Virgil storm in. Hesitantly, he made his way to the door that separated his room from Virgil's, pausing in the archway to take in the scene.

Virgil was dressed in his Static costume, sans mask and coat. He was standing in the center of the room, and Richie could practically see the rage rolling off of him in waves. The unease deepened. As Richie watched, the other teen stripped off the gloves and threw them as hard as he could towards the opposite wall, where the bank of windows faced out onto the city. When those apparently didn't make a satisfying enough crash, Virgil stalked over to the counter of the bar installed near the room he used as a bedroom, snatched up an empty crystal decanter, and flung that at the wall as well. The decanter, probably worth at least several hundred dollars in Richie's estimation, shattered into a thousand glittering pieces and rained down on the floor.

"Bad day at the office?" Richie could have kicked himself for speaking up as Virgil whirled on him, eyes blazing. 'Note to self…internal censor on the fritz. Fix immediately, if not sooner.' For one brief, heart stopping moment there was such a look of calculation in Virgil's dark eyes that Richie was sure he had been found out. The look passed quickly, though, and Virgil merely sighed, closing his eyes. The vibrating anger seemed to dissipate, draining out of the other boy like water out of a broken pitcher, and when Virgil opened his eyes again there was no heat in the gaze Richie now found directed at him.

It was rather eerie, actually. Not for the first time since Virgil had brought him here, Richie was struck by how dangerously unpredictable his one-time friend had become. It made this game he was playing all the more nerve-wracking.

"Damn rats," Virgil muttered, as if that should explain everything. And in his mind, it did.

Richie carefully schooled his face into a neutral expression, never letting on how much it bothered him to hear his friends, the people he considered family, so casually dismissed as vermin. Virgil couldn't know he was one of the 'rats.' Richie didn't really want to think about what would happen if Virgil found out. He said nothing, merely wrapped his arms around his middle and leaned again the doorframe.

Virgil cocked his head slightly, just watching him with an intensity that Richie had seen many times in the three weeks he had been there, but had yet to interpret. In a way, it was more disconcerting than if Virgil had continued to be as forcefully violent as he had that first night. Virgil was always watching him. Whenever the other boy was in the same room, Richie could feel that dark gaze on him. Sometimes he woke up at night with the impression that someone had been staring at him. Since Virgil was the only other person in these rooms….

"It's been almost a month, Rich." Virgil's voice startled him out of his musings. He blinked up at the other boy and raised one eyebrow.

"Huh?"

"You've been here for three weeks. Do you still want to leave?" There was an odd tone in Virgil's voice, one that Richie couldn't really identify. He wasn't sure he wanted to identify it.

"Would you let me?" he muttered testily, again before he could stop himself. He saw Virgil's eyes
narrow, but couldn't call the words back. And really, he didn't want to. He'd never been one to take things lying down. Besides, something in Virgil's expression told Richie the other boy knew exactly how Richie felt already. "What do you expect me to say, Virg? You keep me locked up in here like a damn pet. You're the only person I've talked to for three weeks. People can't live like this, V. I can't live like this! So, yeah, I want to leave."

Virgil sighed again and an expression of genuine confusion settled on his face. "Why?" he asked, almost plaintively. "Why can't you just be happy here? You're safer here than you'd ever be out there. Nothing can happen to you, here." He moved forward until there was only a foot or so between them. "I won't let anything happen to you."

It wasn't the first time Virgil had said such things. Richie knew for a fact that Virgil's protection (both as Static and as plain old Virgil Hawkins) had made his life easier than it technically could have been from junior high on, in some ways. There was an edge to the words that Richie had never heard before, though. Whatever it was, it sent the low-level unease roiling in his stomach again.

"Virgil...you can't make me want to stay here, with you. I'm sorry, but you can't." Richie said carefully. This was nothing Virgil didn't already know...why did Richie suddenly feel like he was teetering on the edge of a cliff?

For a moment, he thought he had crossed the line. For a brief second, there was anger in the gaze boring so intently into his own, like a column of flame rising in Virgil's dark eyes. It was gone in an instant, though, replaced by an emotion that almost looked like sadness. Almost. There was something glittering in the edges of it that made it too hard for sadness.

"I don't want you to leave. I was worried about you this past year, Rich. I don't want anything to happen to you. Ever." Virgil reached up and lightly touched his cheek, brushing his fingers along the edge of Richie's cheekbone. The touch skimmed around the back of his head to cup the base of his skull and draw him forward so that there were only scant centimeters between them. Virgil rested his head on Richie's shoulder for a moment, his other hand going down to rest splayed on Richie's hip. For his part, Richie froze, swallowing convulsively. Wrong, wrong, there was something very wrong here.

virgil turned his head slightly, so that Richie could feel warm breath ghosting across the skin of his exposed throat. The hand holding the back of his head slipped down to rest across the back of his shoulders, pulling him still closer. Still, he stood unmoving, not quite able to process what was happening. At last, Virgil broke the tense silence. He lifted his head so that his lips barely grazed Richie's ear.

"You can't leave." The words were said in a silky whisper, but there wasn't a tone of command to them...rather the nearly-plaintive note had entered Virgil's voice again. "Not you, too. I won't let you leave. But I can make it better for you, Rich. I can make it easier. Will you give me a chance?"

"W-what are you talking about?" Richie didn't like the way his voice stumbled, but there were no words for how nervous Virgil was making him. In all the years they had known each other, Virgil had never acted like this...like he going to...like he wanted—

"You're right...you're not a pet. I've been doin' this all the wrong way. Let me make it up to you, Richie. Give me a chance. I'll make you a deal. The gang doesn't hang around up here...they don't come up to the upper levels. You can go wherever you want to up here...I'll even give you the access code to the roof. All you have to do is give me another chance. Give me one more chance to convince you to want to stay here." The whole time he spoke, Virgil didn't let go of him. The hand across his back dropped lower, coming to rest just above the waistband of his jeans. Abruptly, Virgil leaned back slightly, reaching up with both hands to gently cup Richie's face. "Whatcha say?"
"All...all right, Virg," Richie murmured, trying not to let his nervousness show in his voice. His heart was jackhammering in his chest and he felt his hands shaking slightly. The sense of wrongness intensified as Virgil smiled...a strange, half-formed quirk of the lips that didn't even begin to reach his eyes. Virgil stroked one thumb down the side of his face, coming to rest just at the corner of his lips. Alarm bells started to go off in Richie's head as Virgil leaned in just a bit.

"(Static?)" The small radio Virgil wore clipped to the back of his belt suddenly crackled to life. Richie didn't think he had ever been so happy to hear another voice. Virgil, however, growled softly, before releasing Richie. He reached around and grabbed the radio, bringing it to his face.

"What, Talon?" he barked harshly.

"(Sorry Boss...Puff just radioed her report in. Hotstreak's up on McKay and Wallis. You want us to take him out?)"

"Hotstreak, huh? Tell her not to lose 'im. Get Shiv and Chompers, and then all of you meet me up top. Let's go have some fun."

"(Got it, Boss.)" The radio clicked off, and Virgil tucked it back into his belt.

"Well, looks like I might get to zap some rats today, after all." Virgil smiled up at him and Richie tried not to let his expression give him away. Damn it, he'd have to get back on the comm. the instant Virgil left and have them warn Francis that he'd been spotted. "Catch ya' later, Rich. Main door code's two, two, five, seven, zero. Roof access is five, five, zero, three, two."

"Zombie Hunter cheat codes?" Richie asked, and his throat closed up a little as he remembered the hours they had wasted, sitting on Virgil's bedroom floor playing that game...back before Virgil had really started changing, before either of them had even dreamed of things like bang babies and superpowers. Virgil smirked a little.

"You know it. Remember; stay on the two upper floors. No one ever comes up here without my permission."

Richie nodded silently, and watched as Virgil raced around the room, snatching up his coat, mask, and gloves from the various places he had thrown them. Without looking back at Richie, he left the room, pulling his mask into place as he went. The door hissed shut behind him, and Richie collapsed back against the wall behind him, gasping a little.

Virgil had almost...had been going to... Well. That certainly...complicated things.

"Ah shit, Foley...what did you get yourself into?" he muttered aloud, trying to calm the still rapid pace of his heart. He didn't have time to freak out over this. Virgil had given him the means to explore this place a little further...maybe he could find an access terminal somewhere that would let him hack further into the security systems without running the risk of Virgil noticing something was up. He pulled himself upright, inwardly steeling himself. All right...first thing, he had to call base and let them know that Virgil and his gang were on their way to intercept Francis.

Next...he had to see what else he could turn to his advantage here.

As the mess hall came back into view, so did the figure pacing restlessly in front of it. As soon as Adam saw them, he started jogging towards them, the worry becoming clearer on his face as he drew near. As soon as he realized that Virgil was all right...if a little damp and scalded...the worry melted into anger.
"Told ya," Hotstreak muttered softly. Carmen rolled his eyes. The trio halted and allowed Adam to descend on them.

"You two are on latrine duty for the next month," Adam growled at Hotstreak and Carmen as he at last reached them. "Virgil, are you okay?"

Virgil smiled softly at the concern in Adam's voice. He shook his head. "It's cool, man. I'm fine. Don't send anyone to the port o' johns on my account." Adam looked taken aback, and shot an incredulous glance between Carmen and Hotstreak.

"Sorry, Adam. I talked Maria and Hotstreak into it." Carmen did not sound at all repentant.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure you really had to twist Hotstreak's arm. What'd you do to him?" Adam crossed his arms over his chest and glowered.

"Adam! Seriously man, it's cool." Virgil raised his hands in surrender. "I understand why they did it, no harm done. Really." Adam subsided somewhat, apparently willing to let it go in the face of Virgil's protestations.

"You two satisfied he's telling the truth?" he asked warily, directing the question to Hotstreak and Carmen. He looked as though he was torn between demanding more details and not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth. Hotstreak shrugged and jammed his hands into a set of pockets on his vest.

"For now. I'm still not sure I buy that whole different dimension thing…but there's definitely something weird going on here. Besides...if, if you really saw another Foley-"

Hotstreak trailed off and shrugged again, looking away, but not before Virgil saw a flash of something in his eyes. It was not sadness entirely...it looked almost like guilt. Virgil frowned, but before he could ask any questions, Adam sighed heavily.

"Fair enough," he muttered, shooting Virgil a small, relieved smile. "All right, Sharon wants to see all of us in the war room. At least you weren't lying to me about that," he tossed sullenly to Hotstreak, who grinned without a hint of remorse.

"War room? Sharon has a war room?" Virgil asked, his eyes wide. Carmen shrugged as they began making their way down the main 'street' of the subway station.

"Well...not exactly a room. More of a war lean-to. Kinda. It's got four walls. Really thick walls. You'll see." Virgil raised an eyebrow as Carmen's expression turned half-amused, half-embarrassed.

"Uh-huh." Virgil shook his head and moved a little closer to Adam.

A few minutes later, he understood Carmen's strange look. The "War Room" was one of the gutted subway cars, set up nearest the now sealed entryway to what had once been the subway tunnel. The interior was surprisingly roomy, although most of the space was taken up by long tables on which maps of the city and sewer system had been laid out. There were several whiteboards, the sort one might see in a classroom, tacked to the walls, and elaborate schedules of what looked like guard duties, patrols, and supply raids had been drawn up. It was efficient, organized, and spoke of people who were survivors. It was also...

"Dude, why are there pink rubber duckies all over your war room?" Virgil whispered to Adam. The two were huddled on a hard wooden bench at one of the tables. Hotstreak and Carmen had taken the seat opposite of them, and now they were waiting for Sharon. The walls of the subway car had been covered in heavy ceramic tile...on which dozens and dozens of pink ducks were frolicking. Adam looked faintly mortified.
"We needed to soundproof the place. This was all we could find at the time," he muttered.

"And you kept it because?" Adam and Carmen did not answer, but their gazes slowly slid to Hotstreak, who crossed his arms and slumped in his seat, glaring defiantly.

"What? I think it adds character! Besides, they don't melt!" To prove his point, he tossed a fireball up towards the ceiling, where it harmlessly dissipated in a circle of already blackened tile.

"Hotstreak gets a little…excited…in the meetings, sometimes," Carmen explained, shrugging.

Virgil wisely decided to remain silent.

A few moments later, the door to the car slammed open and Virgil looked up to see the other version of Sharon framed in the doorway. The shotgun had vanished, but the knives were still strapped to her legs, and she hadn't taken off any of the armor. Her one good eye was focused squarely on Virgil, and he nearly shivered at the force of her icy glare. She stepped into the 'room' proper silently, although her cold gaze defrosted slightly as it passed over Adam.

Sharon stalked to the head of the table and sat down on the final bench, regarding each of her people silently for a moment, before her gaze re-focused on Virgil. Virgil stubbornly reminded himself that he was a superhero, damn it, and shrinking in fear from his big sister (even a scary, 'Mad Max' version of his sister) was a very un-superhero thing to do. After a moment, Sharon folded her hands on top of the table.

"All right. I'm guessing you've got your charge back?" Sharon's tone was hard, dangerous, and Virgil had the impression that he had to tread very, very carefully here. He swallowed lightly before he nodded. Impromptu steam bath or no, he could feel the power coursing through him again, ready to spark to his finger tips. "And you haven't tried to fry us."

"Didn't light up once, the whole time I was throwing everything I had at him," Hotstreak supplied quietly. Virgil heard Adam sputter a bit beside him, but the older man made no comment. Sharon nodded grimly.

"Carmen says something smells different about you. Tech tells me something major went down in the tunnel where we found you. He couldn't even understand the readings some of our instruments were giving him." Virgil blinked at the mention of the NightBreed genius, but Sharon gave him no opportunity to question. "Adam…well let's just say if it weren't for Adam, you wouldn't even be here to have this conversation. So…I've got two choices. One, I can assume you've somehow managed to fool all my best people. Or two, I can believe this crazy story Adam told me."

Sharon fell silent and leaned back slightly, watching him gravely. Neither Hotstreak nor Carmen was looking at him, and even Adam seemed focused on the tabletop. Virgil pressed his lips into a thin line, before squaring his shoulders and looking up to meet Sharon's gaze.

"I know you don't have any reason to trust me." Virgil laughed, bitterly. "I'd feel the exact same way in your position. But Sharon…I'm not him. I can't say anything else…all I can give you is the truth." He clenched his fists on the tabletop, remembering the twisted smile dancing on the face of the other him, the darkness in his eyes. He looked up at Sharon again and tried to let every ounce of truth and sincerity shine out of his eyes. "All I want is to get Richie away from that bastard and get home. I swear. I'll do anything you want me to…anything! Just please…please help me get Richie out of there." He fell silent and bit nervously at the inside of his cheek.

He knew that Adam was on his side. He knew that Hotstreak and Carmen were more or less in his corner, now, and that Maria had promised that they would help him save Richie. He also knew that
all it would take was a single word from Sharon and they would throw him back into that cell. Just looking at Hotstreak and Carmen, he could tell that they had nothing but respect for this other version of his sister. Even Hotstreak deferred to her, and Virgil would never have believed that if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

Sharon cocked her head slightly, and glanced from Hotstreak, to Carmen, to Adam. One by one, the other bang babies nodded decisively, but again, it was clear that the final decision was Sharon's. She sighed heavily, and her good eye narrowed in speculation. Finally, though, she shook her head.

"You try anything…and I mean if I think you're breathing wrong, I swear you're not walking out of here. We clear?"

Virgil blinked stupidly for a moment, before nodding hastily. "Crystal," he said. Sharon stared hard at him for a few heartbeats.

"All right. We'll help you." Her voice was perfectly even, and so quiet that at first Virgil wasn't sure he had heard her correctly. Adam, however, sighed in relief, and clapped him on one shoulder.

"You…you mean that?" he asked breathlessly. Sharon was the key. If she said they would help Virgil… Sharon raised one eyebrow and nodded. Virgil let out a soft sigh of his own and nearly wilted against the edge of the table. The last hurdle was jumped. They were going to help him. Finally, finally he could start on the business of coming up with a plan to rescue his friend. He shot a relieved grin at Adam.

"Okay, our first problem is getting your Richie away from Static's HQ. That's not going to be easy, any way you slice it," Adam began.

"Ain't that the truth," Hotstreak muttered, and again there was that strange flash of miserable guilt in his eyes. It was gone in an instant, though, and replaced with harsh determination. "But we'll handle it."

"What kind of backup does your Static have here, anyway?" First things, first. Virgil had to know what kind of odds he was dealing with. Adam sighed and shook his head.

"Too damn much," Sharon muttered, before Adam could answer Virgil's question. "We outnumber Static's people, but most of the bang babies fell in with Static when he took over. Out on our turf, we can handle most of them, but it's going to be a hell of a lot tougher takin' the fight to Static's base. Our biggest problems on the ground are Onyx, Nightingale, and Deimos. Everyone else we don't have too much trouble with. In the air we're dealing with Puff, Talon…and Static himself."

"Any other bang babies on your side?" Virgil asked. He didn't like the way the odds were stacking up against them. He knew that between the three of them, Hotstreak, Adam, and he could probably plow through any defense mounted by the metahumans Sharon had just named. Aqua Maria would doubtless be a great deal of help, as well, especially against Static. Carmen…was pretty much a waste of space in Virgil's world. However, he certainly seemed a great deal more together here. Perhaps he would be more dangerous than he seemed.

"Brickhouse, Nails, and Tech are the only other bang babies we have down here. You know them?" At Virgil's affirmative nod, Carmen continued. "Brickhouse and Tech won't be much help in a fight if we have to attack during the daytime, but Nails is one girl I wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley."

"Dude, you did meet her in a dark alley," Hotstreak snorted. Carmen rolled his eyes heavenward and swiped a paw at the back of Hotstreak's head. Hotstreak ducked deftly, and then turned serious.
"We're going to have to get in and find Foley before we start anything...you know, that, right? I got no problem fighting our way out, but if we have to fight our way in..." He trailed off and shook his head. Sharon nodded in agreement.

"It'll have to be a smoke and mirrors routine. A small team will have to get in position, and be ready to run in, grab your friend, and get the hell out while the rest of us mount up a distraction," she said. She turned her attention to the map of the city that had been pasted to the center of the table top. Rising slightly, she stabbed a finger in the center of town. "Static took over the old TynaCorp building...place is a damn fortress, and there's not a lot of cover in the streets. He keeps his yard clean, I'll give him that."

Virgil puffed out a breath, gnawing on his lower lip thoughtfully. He didn't pretend to know much about the schematics and layout of the various buildings of Dakota (Richie took care of such things in their partnership), but he thought he remembered Richie talking about TynaCorp. They had some wicked security in his world. He couldn't imagine that this other Static would let such an advantage go to waste.

"This'll be tough," Adam said, stating the obvious. Frown lines appeared on his forehead, and as Virgil studied the map, he frowned as well.

For the first time, he allowed himself to look at the situation in a purely strategic way. No two ways about it, if the other Static was as well-defended as Virgil thought he would be...and if they had to waste time hunting for Richie in a huge building like that...people were going to get hurt. People might even die. Virgil deflated, somewhat. He was willing to take whatever risk necessary to save Richie...but this wasn't anyone's fight but his own. Could he really let these people risk their lives for him and Richie? Something must have shown on his face.

To Virgil's shock, it was Hotstreak who suddenly reached over and lightly rapped his knuckles on the table in front of him. Virgil looked up, startled, and met the other youth's grave eyes. "Maria meant what she said back there. Foley was our friend. Foley was my friend. We have to do this."

Virgil glanced around and saw the sentiment echoed in everyone's eyes, even Sharon's. Carmen nodded decisively.

"Our Richie saved our butts more times than I wanna count. When...when Static took him—we couldn't save him, then. We're not gonna let it go down like that again," the animal-like bang baby said firmly.

"You got that right," Hotstreak added, his voice dark.

Virgil didn't know what to say. 'Thank you' seemed inadequate, and so he remained silent. However, some of the tension eased from his shoulders and he was able to focus again on the maps spread before him. There had to be a way to pull this off. There was simply no other option.

Abruptly, though, plans were the last thing on his mind.

A shrill, wailing siren suddenly sounded in the room, echoing strangely off the walls. Sharon shot to her feet, as did Hotstreak and Adam. Virgil stood up as well, unease crawling up the back of his neck. This couldn't be good....

There was a crackle of static from the vicinity of Sharon's vest, and she pulled the edge of her collar up, revealing a small two-way pinned to the inside of the armor. "What's going on?" she barked into the radio. Beside him, Virgil felt Adam tense.
"Boss! Metahuman tripped the proximity alarms in tunnel nine!" A tight, frightened voice came over the two-way.

"Any of our people down there?" Sharon demanded.

"A training patrol. Brickhouse is in tunnel twenty three, she can't get to them. Nails is up top."

"And Maria knows where every sensor is better than anyone," Hotstreak muttered grimly. Which meant that the intruder had to be one of Static's people.

"I'm on my way. Radio the patrol and tell them to get the hell out of there." With that, Sharon cut the connection, and jogged around the table. She and Hotstreak made their way to the door. "Carmen, get this place ready for lockdown. I want everyone armed. Adam, Hotstreak, you're with me. You —" She looked at Virgil, clearly torn.

"I can help," he said evenly. Sharon hesitated a moment more, before closing her eye briefly and nodding. Hotstreak looked him up and down as he hurried around the table to join them.

"Eh, what the hell? Might be fun to see someone else get their ass zapped for a change," he muttered, a feral grin twisting his features at the prospect of a fight. The exited the War Room, and Sharon immediately began running down the center of the 'street,' apparently just expecting the others to keep up. Virgil picked up his pace, awkward in the too large clothes, but managed to stay even with Adam.

"Tunnel nine is almost right on top of us. Sensors in that area have been on the fritz lately, so we've stepped up patrols. Training patrol's usually rookies and teenagers," Adam panted as they ran through the base. Which explained their urgency. Virgil couldn't imagine it would be a good thing if one of the other Static's people managed to stumble onto the base and make it back to Static with that information…..

Carmen broke off at the mess hall, vanishing through the door. Seconds later, a loud, harsh siren sounded through the base. People boiled out of the makeshift shelters like ants. The siren was quickly drowned out by a cacophony of shouts and screams, but strangely there was a feel of strict order and control. The refugees moved like a well-oiled machine. Virgil saw children and the few elderly people being herded towards the mess, able-bodied men, women, and teens rushing towards another, larger shelter, where a tall man was rapidly handing out weapons.

Virgil ignored the people around him, following Sharon and Adam. They were heading for the tunnel entrance he and Adam had come through to get to the base. As they ran, Sharon's radio crackled to life again.

"(Sharon!" Without breaking her stride, Sharon snatched the radio to her mouth.

"Report! What's going on out there!"

"It's Mark's team in the tunnel." Virgil heard Adam swear softly at the news. The voice on the radio continued. "Last we heard they were pinned down about twenty yards from the security door. We've lost radio contact."

"Who's the bang baby?" Sharon barked.

"Sounded like Kangorr." Without another word, Sharon disconnected again, and sped up still more.

"He must be hiding from Static down here…Static would probably fry him for running away from the fight," Adam theorized, breathing hard with the exertion of running and talking at the same time.
"And he found the base," Hotstreak added, his voice grim. "Damn it! Mark's team's never even been in a fight—they're kids!"

Virgil swallowed and forced more speed out of his already aching legs. Kangorr wasn't that much of a threat...to another bang baby. To a bunch of normal humans, most of them inexperienced kids? It would be a different story. And if Kangorr had gotten close enough to base to notice all the modifications in the tunnels—it wouldn't take a genius to realize he had stumbled upon the area the refugees were making their home in. They had to get to the trapped patrol before the worst happened...before Kangorr got away with the information.

Sharon slammed through the security door into the tunnels, Adam, Hotstreak, and Virgil hot on her heels. "Tunnel nine's just under a quarter of a mile away," she shouted back, for Virgil's benefit. Virgil's eyes widened and he cast his gaze about the tunnel.

"Screw this," he muttered, as his eyes lighted on a sheet of metal lining one of the walls. With a thought, he summoned a burst of electricity and called the scrap to him. It peeled away from the wall with minimal resistance, and Virgil leaped into the air as it zoomed towards him, landing expertly. It wasn't near as nice as his disc—but he wasn't sure where that had ended up once they'd confiscated it, and this would work just as well. "Don't freak, okay?" he called as he pushed himself to the head of the pack.

Another burst of power and he'd snatched all three of his companions up in a field of electromagnetic energy. Adam and Hotstreak he simply levitated, pulling them up behind him. He heard a startled, undignified squawk from Hotstreak, but trusted that Adam would keep the other youth from trying to roast him. Sharon he boosted up to stand on the sheet with him, figuring she would rather be in the lead.

He'd figured wrong.

As he automatically reached out a hand to steady her, it was seized in an iron grip, twisted violently, nearly forcing him to his knees. In one blinding motion, Sharon had drawn one knife and laid it across his throat. The expression in her one good eye was wild.

"Let them go!" she screamed.

"Sharon, no!" Virgil heard Adam shout. He struggled to maintain the charge holding them all aloft, though the pain in his arm was wreaking havoc on his concentration.

"I can—ow-I can get us there—damn it, ow—faster! Just tell me where to go!" He raised his free arm in a gesture of surrender. Sharon hesitated, breathing hard, but a split-second later the knife was gone and his arm was released. Virgil straightened just in time to guide them around a bend in the tunnel. "Don't do that again," Sharon ordered, darkly.

"No problem," Virgil muttered back, rotating his sore shoulder.

"Take a left at the first fork." Nervously, Sharon laid one hand on his shoulder to maintain her balance and he pushed them all faster down the tunnels. They were silent as he zipped them through the tunnels, save for Sharon's curt directions. After a few moments, though, Sharon squeezed his shoulder, and pointed downwards, gesturing for silence.

Virgil lowered them to the ground and let the energy surrounding Adam and Hotstreak dissipate. Quietly, he knelt on the metal, not willing to risk shorting out again in the damp muck below. Hotstreak drew even with him, his eyes level with Virgil's, and glared hard.
"I oughta deck you," the other bang baby muttered.

"Later," Sharon hissed. She and Adam were huddled near the last bend in the tunnel, pressed up against the damp wall. Virgil floated the sheet metal closer to Sharon and Adam, Hotstreak following closely. As they drew nearer, Virgil could hear soft sounds from the next section of tunnel.

Someone was whimpering quietly, obviously in pain. There were general rustlings and shifts that indicated movement. Virgil raised himself to the ceiling of the tunnel and cautiously peeked around the bend, hoping the light of his power wouldn't be noticed.

The patrol group was huddled together along one wall—five people, the oldest of whom was a man in his mid-twenties. The others were all teenagers, none of them looking younger than fifteen. It was one of them, a small, redheaded girl, who was whimpering—she was clutching one arm, clearly broken, to her chest. The man had his arm around her shoulders, and was glaring defiantly at the figure in front of them.

Kangorr was casually checking a revolver, and a pile of other weapons lay at his feet. The tunnel showed signs of battle damage…more than one set of giant footprints had been left in the walls and ceiling. Virgil narrowed his eyes. Kangorr still wasn't much of a threat, but the people made things more dangerous. There was always a chance that someone would get caught in the crossfire. He shuddered at the sight of the weapons Kangorr had in front of him. He hated guns.

He lowered himself down to the others, and shrugged at Sharon's questioning glance.

"No one looks hurt too bad," he said, pitching his voice low. "Kangorr has their weapons."

"You might as well make 'dis easy on yourself, mon. I'm goin' ta find your nest no matter what. Static'll be real interested ta' hear where you rats been hidin'." Kangorr's thickly accented voice rang out in the tunnel, echoing off the walls. Sharon's jaw tightened and her eye narrowed dangerously.

"Can you get them out of the fire zone?" she whispered to Virgil tightly. Virgil tilted his head and nodded thoughtfully. Five people would be a bit of a strain, but he'd only have to get them out of harm's way. "Hotstreak, Adam, you two go in hard. I want him taken down fast…but I want him alive. Got it?" Hotstreak and Adam nodded in unison.

"What're you gonna do?" Virgil whispered. Sharon just smiled. It was rather predatory; and Hotstreak laughed softly. From around the bend, there was the terrible sound of a gun being cocked. Sharon's eye went wide and she whipped around.

"Now!" she hissed. Moving as one, Hotstreak and Adam dove around the bend, Hotstreak firing up, and Adam forming himself into a large ball. Virgil pulled his sheet above everyone's heads and whipped around the corner, electricity cackling around him. Trusting Adam and Hotstreak to cover Kangorr, he threw every ounce of power he had into forming a field around the five members of Sharon's group, lifting them off the ground and propelling them back towards safety.

There was a scream of terror as someone realized just who had them in the strange, glowing grip, but Virgil ignored it. He set the people down gently by the bend in the tunnel and let the power fade away. Immediately they started scrambling back, desperate to get away from him.

"Mark!" Sharon stepped out of the shadows behind them, and grabbed the man's shoulder. "Get them out of here…we'll catch up to you!"

"Sharon! But…but…that's Static!" the man sputtered, fear coloring his words. Sharon shoved him back the way she had come, ignoring him.
"Move!" The teenagers did not have to be told twice. They took off in a dead run, two of them supporting the injured redhead between them. The man, Mark, hesitated a moment, throwing one last terrified glance up at Virgil. Then he, too, took off running back down the tunnels.

Assuring himself that they were safe, for the most part, Virgil turned the sheet of metal back towards the others. He wasn't expecting much of a fight. It was Kangorr, after all. To his surprise, though, the bang baby appeared to be holding his own against Adam and Hotstreak.

Virgil focused on the battle in time to see Kangorr ricochet off one wall, avoiding a fount of fire from Hotstreak. Adam bounced after him, but the close quarters were proving a disadvantage, as Hotstreak had to concentrate on not flash-frying his allies. Kangorr landed in the water on the floor, and immediately sprang back up. He met Adam in the air and managed a vicious kick that sent Adam sprawling. Hotstreak moved to cover Adam while he struggled to his feet, throwing ball after ball of fire at Kangorr.

The other bang baby avoided each blast, throwing himself about the tunnel like a pinball, and Virgil noted uneasily that the walls of the tunnel were starting to show a bit more damage than he was strictly comfortable with. Time to finish this. He called a charge to his fists and waited for Kangorr to stop moving long enough to get a bead on him.

Sharon beat him to it.

Where she came from, he had no idea...he hadn't seen her making her way into the fight. Just as Kangorr landed in the water again, though, Sharon suddenly dove into view. Kangorr had time to look mildly surprised before Sharon spun and her heel crashed into his face. He reeled to the left and Sharon moved again, snapping a kick to his stomach, and followed up with a right cross that would have given Oscar de la Hoya pause. Virgil felt his jaw drop.

"Whoa...check out Action Sharon with new kung-fu grip!" he called down to Adam, who was finally shaking off the effects of meeting Kangorr's boots with his face. Adam chuckled briefly, rubbing his jaw.

"That's my girl," he replied.

Kangorr recovered enough to take a swing at Sharon himself. She dodged neatly, but was forced to retreat a bit. That bit of distance gave Kangorr the opening he needed. With a low growl, he raised one foot and stomped hard at the floor, sending a small shockwave that knocked Sharon off her feet. All traces of mirth vanished from Adam's face as his girlfriend went down, and Hotstreak shouted her name. Kangorr reached down, intent on wrapping his hands around the prone woman's throat.

"Do I have to do everything here, boys?" Sharon grunted, scrambling backwards.

Before either Hotstreak or Adam could react, Virgil powered up again and sent the metal hurtling forward. He whistled shrilly and Kangorr looked up just as Virgil let fly with a bolt of power. Sharon ducked, covering her head with her arms.

"Oh shi—" Kangorr was cut off as the bolt slammed into him, throwing him backwards to land against one wall, where he stuck. All in all, it was rather anticlimactic. Then again, nothing had collapsed, no one was hurt, and Kangorr wasn't going to be able to get back to the other Static with the location of the refugees' base. Virgil wasn't going to complain about anticlimactic.

He drifted down just as Sharon pulled herself to her feet, dripping with the dirty water. Adam and Hotstreak jogged forward to join them as Sharon shook the water from her short hair and a faint expression of distaste crossed her face. She placed her hands on her hips and surveyed the trapped
"Sharon, are you all right?" Adam demanded anxiously as he and Hotstreak reached them. He laid a hand on her cheek, checking her over for injury. Sharon nodded shortly and covered his hand with her own, squeezing his fingers gently.

Hotstreak looked Kangorr up and down, smirking a little at the glow of Virgil's power that held the other bang baby to the wall. "Hey…that is a lot cooler when it's happening to someone else. Maybe I won't deck you, after all." He tipped a mock-salute in Virgil's direction.

"You might just come in handy, after all," Sharon added, and though her voice wasn't exactly friendly…it seemed to have warmed a few degrees. She pulled away from Adam and reached for her radio again, relaying that the situation was under control and that they needed a group to come and secure Kangorr.

"What're you going to do with him?" Virgil asked, dropping down to sit cross-legged on the sheet metal. It would be at least twenty minutes before anyone could come to collect them, and while he was perfectly capable of transporting Kangorr himself, he saw no reason to waste his energy if he didn't have to.

Sharon glanced over at him, and then turned back to Kangorr. "I'm thinking we just got a little help planning our party over at Static's," she said. Virgil frowned a moment, before realizing what Sharon was getting at. Then, a slow smile spread over his face.

"I'm on my way, Rich. Just hang in there a little longer."
Static laughed aloud as he rained down bolt after bolt of electricity upon the already broken and blackened street below. He wasn't really even aiming at anything in particular...he was just reveling in his favorite sport: Rat Zapping. Chance had finally smiled on him, and he'd happened upon one of his sister's groups near the end of his usual midnight circuit around the city. It had been almost three weeks since he'd been able to take out his frustrations on some of Sharon's people.

And his absolute favorite target was even among them tonight.

Static laughed again as he pulled himself higher in the air, avoiding a fount of flame that burst up from the street. He zipped through the air, neatly dodging blast after blast from Hotstreak, who was trying desperately to cover the five or so other rats that had been with him, as they scurried back to the sewers. Odd...Hotstreak seemed a bit more intense than usual.

Oh, he and Hotstreak hated each other—always had, from the days when they had run in the same gang. That animosity had only grown after the Bang, and reached a fever-pitch when Hotstreak had refused to join Static's crew, instead choosing to follow that Latina bitch down into the underground with Sharon. This time, though...this time there was something different. Hotstreak wasn't even bothering with the usual banter. He was just throwing everything he had at Static. The last of the rats vanished into a manhole, and this was usually the point where Hotstreak threw up a last volley and a flip promise of future retribution.

Instead, Hotstreak skidded to a halt in front of the manhole that offered safety (for try as he might, Static could never track the rats in the sewers), and glared up at Static. The fire around his body flared more intensely, an aura of near-white heat. Static raised one eyebrow and let his own power dance up and down his body, crackling in a web of light.

"So," he said in a mock-pleasant tone, "you finally wanna finish this?" If anything, the fire blazed hotter around the other youth.

"You have no idea how much," Hotstreak growled, clenching his fists. "You're goin' down, asshole." With that, the halo of flame around him burst outwards, racing up at Static in an arc of burning heat.

Static swooped downwards, barely avoiding the blast. As it was, he felt the searing heat pass over him, burning the areas of his face and neck left exposed by his costume. His mouth twisted in a snarl as he raced down, pulling even with the street at the very last moment. With a roar, he threw his power forward in a lightning bolt of blue. This time, it was Hotstreak's turn to dive out of the way.

The fight wore onwards, neither side giving an inch. They traded blows so quickly that the street was nearly as bright as day, lit by a haze of orange flame and blue lightning. Slowly, though, Static gained the upper hand. Hotstreak was forced on the defensive, as Static threw bolt after bolt at him, at a pace that Hotstreak couldn't recover from. Hotstreak was forced further and further back, away from the opening into the sewers, away from the combustible debris that had littered the street, providing him with ample weaponry.

Finally, Static was able to strike the final, hammer blow. A burst of electricity exploded on the ground in front of Hotstreak, narrowly missing him. The resulting concussive force knocked him off his feet and threw him backwards early four yards, to land with a dull thud on the broken asphalt. The flames surrounding him flickered out as he rolled the last few feet, coming to rest in a bloody heap.
"And it looks like Static has pulled it off in double overtime, folks. The crowd goes wild!" The grin widened, and new pulses of electricity began to crackle around his fists. "I guess the only question now is...do I kill you fast, or slow?"

Hotstreak spat a mouthful of bloody saliva, glaring defiantly, even in defeat. "You're forgettin' one thing," he snarled.

"Oh? What's that?"

"It ain't over 'til the whistle blows!" Hotstreak threw out one hand; and a jet of flame sprung forth.

The fight had sapped Hotstreak's strength, but it was still more than enough to force Static to dive to one side, rolling in a rough somersault to avoid the attack. When he gained his feet, Hotstreak was halfway across the street, making for one of the dark side alleys. He was obviously favoring one knee, but still moving at a fast clip. Even as Static called the sheet metal back to him, Hotstreak vanished down the alley way.

Growling to himself, Static gave chase. No way...no way was he letting Hotstreak get away this time. He was going to kill the other bang baby, if it was the last thing he did. He raced down the same alley Hotstreak had taken, his power cutting through the thick shadows like a hot knife through butter. He was in time to see Hotstreak vanish around one corner, and as he burst out onto the next street he heard a clang of metal to his left.

He whipped around to find one of the manhole covers in the street lying to one side, and punched one fist into the opposite hand. Damn it...he wasn't going to let Hotstreak get away this time.

A thought; and his power pulsed around the sheet of metal he was riding on. There was a screech of tortured steel as his power literally tore it in half, reducing it to a size that would fit down the sewer opening. Stupid bastard...he'd chosen one of the wider maintenance shafts to go to ground in. Charged and ready, he dropped down into the sewers, ready to fire at the slightest movement.

All was still below. Frowning, Static increased the power arcing around him, casting light into the dimness of the tunnel he had dropped into. There was not so much as a ripple in the mucky water below to indicate which direction Hotstreak had taken. He grit his teeth, clenching his jaw so hard that it hurt. Fine...if Hotstreak wasn't going to make this easy for him...

He closed his eyes and cupped one hand to his ear, though the action wasn't really necessary. Hotstreak was hurt and Static couldn't recall ever chasing any of the rats into this particular section of the sewer grid beneath the city. It stood to reason...

"—tic's...my tail...can't...find...never seen...part...tunnels...'nother...way—" There! Static grinned to himself. Hotstreak had phoned home. The transmission Static was able to pick up was badly garbled...though whether that was because Hotstreak was out of range of whatever radios the rats used, or just because Static really wasn't very good at this, he couldn't tell. It was enough, though, to pick out a rough direction and Static wasted no time, following the radio transmission to his prey.

He kept his power tuned into Hotstreak's faint voice, following the transmissions intently, and yet even so—he almost missed it when someone answered Hotstreak's apparent pleas for help finding his way back to base.

"—cis...read?...—" That transmission was even weaker than Hotstreak's, so much so that Static had to strain his limited control to even pick up words.

"—barely...wh...am I?—" Hotstreak sounded relieved to hear whoever was on the other end of the
"—orking…it…there…better?—" Static's brow furrowed as the second transmission cleaned up some. It was still horribly faint, but it was growing clearer.

"—get me…here…back to base?—"

"—got it…ancis…need to take…left at…then about…yards…your right—" The voice continued, directing Hotstreak back to the safety of the rats' nest.

Static, though, was no longer concerned with catching up to Hotstreak.

He froze in midair, holding himself still in the tunnels, and poured every available ounce of energy he had into detecting the radio waves. The frown on his face deepened, turning darker, uglier.

"—okay now?—"

"Yeah…can…make…thanks…" Hotstreak's voice was clearer, but Static ignored it, focusing instead on the other.

"—no problem…keep…safe!—" The voice vanished, and Static lost the connection. His power fizzled out around him, only the field necessary to hold himself aloft remaining. Narrowing his eyes, he directed the sheet metal into a wide arc, swinging back around the way he had come, back towards the manhole that would let him back out into the street.

It was nearly two in the morning by the time he alighted on the roof of his headquarters. Ordinarily, he would take a few minutes to check in with whomever was on guard duty, make sure all his people had made it back, or at least checked in if they'd found other amusements. He liked to take a quick sweep of the building down in the old security office, get a report on what had happened while he'd been away. Not this night.

He moved through the darkened halls of his floors, not bothering to turn on any of the lights. By now, he could walk the path from the roof access to his rooms blindfolded. His door slid open at his touch and he stepped in silently. He shed his mask and lightly tossed it onto the desk set up beside the door, then took a moment to strip out of the coat and gloves as well. At last, he turned around, and immediately focused on door that led to the secondary office suite he'd made into another bedroom. The room Richie now occupied.

He made no noise as he walked across his 'living room', an icily calm expression upon his face. His eyes, though, gleamed with something that was anything but calm. He crossed to Richie's door and opened it, slipping into the dark of the room like a shadow.

Richie had left the curtains of one window open, and moonlight streamed through, illuminating the room with a dull silver glow. Richie was turned on his side on the bed, facing the door, and Static moved over to simply stare down at the other boy. After a moment, he hunkered down and reached out with one hand, almost, but not quite, touching Richie's cheek. The other boy stirred slightly, but didn't wake…Richie always had been a hard sleeper.

He hadn't been able to hear much from the other transmission…it had been so faint, so garbled…but the voice had sounded familiar.

Richie had said he wasn't running with anyone. None of Static's people had ever seen the blond boy with the rats.

It had been almost three weeks since Static and his crew had had a major throw down with any of
Sharon's people. The confrontation with Hotstreak had been sheer chance.

Static cocked his head, and lightly skimmed his fingertips down the side of Richie's face, bringing his index finger to rest, feather-light, on the sleeping boy's lips.

Richie was coming around...he had to be. Sure, he was still upset about being kept under lock and key, but once he understood that Static was just trying to protect him, to keep him here where it was safe, to keep him here where he belonged... Besides, he was free to wander the floors Static kept for himself, now.

The other voice had sounded so much like...

Richie shifted again and Static moved to let his hand rest splayed on the other boy's pale throat.

No. Richie was his, damn it. No way he was running with the rats. Static's people would have seen him with them. Static would have seen him with them. No way Richie could have hidden for almost a year...someone would have seen him with them. And yet...

Abruptly, Static stood; the same icy calm on his face. He threaded his fingers through a few of the longer strands of fine blond hair, traced over the softer patch where the design was shaved.

It looked as though there was only one thing to do, then.

"So what's he like, huh? Think the boss is gonna let us play with him again, soon? Hehe, that was so much fun. I bet you loved letting that hound loose on him, and-" A smack and dull thud was heard around the room, but no one looked up to see what it was. After all, it wasn't the first time Deimos had knocked Shiv out. Leaving the slightly insane metahuman on the floor, Deimos left the old lab Static's people had converted into an 'entertainment lounge' and headed up towards the roof.

This time of the day, the halls were all but silent. For whatever reason, most of Static's gang seemed to keep night hours, preferring to sleep during the day if they didn't have patrol or guard duty. He waited silently in front of the main elevator, not bothering to acknowledge the few people that passed on their way to the lounge or the kitchen...most of them gave him wide berth anyway. When the car arrived, he punched the button for the roof access and slumped against one wall, shoving his hands deep in his pockets.

There were two distinctions in Static's 'gang'. Either you were a lackey-too stupid to be trusted with important things, but too useful to be killed outright; or you were an associate-trusted, important, powerful within the gang. Most of the bang babies that ran with Static fell into the former category. As far as Deimos knew, only he, Talon, and perhaps Nightingale had achieved the latter. It was nice to have the power and respect that came with being second only to Static himself...but it kind of sucked in that it brought actual responsibility. Like having to get the morning patrol reports.

He stepped out onto the rooftop just as the messenger was landing. There were very few people who weren't afraid of him. His power was creating terror, after all. Static was, of course, one of them. Static was the only metahuman who had faced his power down, in fact. Talon was afraid of him... she just didn't let that stop her. They weren't exactly friends—not that anyone one in Static's group would really call themselves 'friends'-but there was definitely a connection between them. "Talon."

"Deimos." She perched on the edge of the stairwell hut's roof.

He took his customary leaning position a little to the right of her. "Any activity today?"

"Puff spotted Kangorr, heading into the sewers."
Deimos nodded. It was the lesser of two evils, really. If Kangorr returned here…well, Static never had any qualms about reminding his gang what the price of cowardice was. "The rats?"

"No sign. Anywhere."

He frowned at that. Static knew of his counterpart, but Deimos hadn't bothered to report that he'd spotted the other Static with Rubber Band Man. He'd figured the 'resistance' would deal with him before the full story could be told. If the other Static had managed to convince the rats of his story, though… Deimos made a mental note to reorganize the patrol groups and randomize the search patterns. There was no sign of an attack, but it was best to be ready.

"How is he doing?" Talon asked suddenly, still staring off into the distance.

Deimos frowned a moment, but quickly realized who she was talking about. His eyes glowed briefly and the rooftop dissolved into a miasma of scarlet, before clearing into Phobos's sight, seeing what his 'familiar' saw. "Scared, hurt, tired. Just as Static wanted him." He let the glow fade from his eyes, and then glanced up towards her. "Thanks for the help."

Talon shrugged a shoulder. "He was bleeding. And I know you always bitch about blood staining."

"Indeed." He returned his gaze to the horizon, and they shared a few minutes of companionable silence.

"Is he anything like ours was?"

Deimos was quiet as memories flashed through his head. By Talon's expression, the same thoughts were going through hers. Talon was the only other member of the gang who knew the truth of what had happened that night. They had handled it together, weathered the fallout, and then never spoken of it again. Deimos couldn't help but wonder why she was bringing it up now. "I don't know," he answered after a moment. Which was the truth. He'd only ever met the other Richie once, and then just by chance.

"Last night Static was…I don't think I've ever seen him like that."

Deimos remained silent at the comment. Unbidden, the events of the previous night rose in his mind. The expression on Static's face as he'd sliced into the other boy with his knife, the viciousness with which Static had struck him, the absolute, unrelenting pace of the 'session.' Static had wanted the other boy broken. It was harsh, aggressive…not that Static wasn't usually harsh and aggressive, but last night had had a new edge to it.

He wasn't entirely certain if it was because the potential means to be rid of their problems was in their grasp, or because of the package that potential had arrived in. "He was doing what he had to."

"He enjoyed it."

"He always enjoys it."

"Not like that. The look in his eyes…"

Deimos turned his head away. He'd seen the look, too. He'd had a front row seat to the whole encounter. The others wouldn't realize the significance of it, but he did, and by the sound of it, Talon did too. "It was one time. He won't do it again."

He felt Talon examine him for a few minutes, and then heard her jump down to stand next to him."We still talking about last night?"
He merely shrugged in answer. Partly because they didn't talk about it, partly because he wasn't sure of the answer himself. "I'll keep an eye on the situation. You stay on your toes, too." His eyes slid in her direction. "Just remember, Static's the boss, no matter what we think."

She watched him for a few more moments, and finally nodded. "That he is." Without another word, she took to the sky again. He watched her fly off to meet with the patrols once more, then turned to the stairwell and headed back down. He knew she wouldn't tell anyone about what they'd discussed; that was part of their relationship. She revealed things to him, as he did to her, but never spoke of them to others.

He had a feeling he'd be exploiting that fact a lot in the days yet to come.

Richie wasn't sure when he had dozed off, or how long it had been, but when he opened his eyes again, Phobos had not moved from its place beside the bed, and someone had apparently come and gone. A glass of water and a bottle of extra-strength Tylenol were sitting on the night table.

Blinking, he sat up slowly, reaching up to rub at the pinched skin across the bridge of his nose where his glasses had been pressed too hard. The pain across his chest had lessened to a dull sting, but one side of his face still hurt like a bitch. It occurred to him briefly to wonder if it was really Tylenol they were pressing on him, but the throbbing ache across his cheekbone and behind his eyes quickly convinced him he didn't care. He downed four of them and slugged all of the water in a few gulps.

A quick glance assured him that Backpack was still safely tucked away behind the grating of the heating vent. Just knowing that his invention was there, waiting for his signal, made him feel immeasurably better. He may have been in the mother of all hostile territories, but at least he was no longer alone. Sighing softly, he turned his gaze to the door. He drew his knees up to his chest, ignoring the way the movement pulled at the cuts, and rested his forehead on them.

All right. His fake out had succeeded (a little too well, he thought wryly, feeling the sting of the cuts). He had Backpack. He had the equipment and parts he needed to get himself and Virgil home at his fingertips. He had fooled the other Static and his lackeys into thinking they had broken him, that he would do whatever they wanted. He just had to keep up the charade. Right. Sure. No problem.

Richie turned his head so that it was his uninjured cheek resting on his knees, and stared at the ghost-dog. How long would they leave him here, he wondered. Would someone be back to drag him down to the lab? Would they leave him here to stew in his own juices for a while, wondering if they were coming back to hurt him some more? He honestly wasn't sure.

He'd thought he would be able to predict this Static…but he hadn't been prepared for the violence directed against him last night. He'd expected a beat down, sure; not a torture session. There was something else at play here.

And he had the distinct feeling that in this world, what he didn't know would hurt him.

A soft hiss from his left alerted him to the fact that his questions were likely about to be answered. He raised his head from his knees and stared at the ghost-dog. How long would they leave him here, he wondered. Would someone be back to drag him down to the lab? Would they leave him here to stew in his own juices for a while, wondering if they were coming back to hurt him some more? He honestly wasn't sure.

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A soft hiss from his left alerted him to the fact that his questions were likely about to be answered. He raised his head from his knees and looked toward the door. It was standing open, but there was no one to be seen. A frown creased his forehead, and he uncurled, setting his feet back on the floor. "W-who's there?" he called suspiciously. There was no answer.

Then something was hurled into the room at him.

Three years patrolling Dakota as Gear had honed his reflexes to a level he wouldn't have thought
possible when he had started high school. Besides…it didn't happen much anymore, but in the beginning he'd had to get pretty good at dodging his own inventions. So, when he realized it was a zap trap flying at him, he reacted almost instantly. He threw himself off the bed as the cylinder exploded into ensnaring metal arms. He hit the floor painfully, landing on his stomach uncomfortably close to Phobos, which had started to its feet. The zap trap hit the mattress where Richie had been sitting, hitting the edge of the bed frame and wrapping halfway around the mattress and frame.

Richie lay frozen for a few moments, breathing hard. The burning sting across his chest intensified and he felt moistness under the bandages that told him the worst of the cuts on his abdomen had opened again. Phobos hadn't moved, but was facing the door, head tilted to one side. Swallowing hard, Richie followed its gaze.

The other Static was leaning against the doorframe, tossing yet another of the zap traps up and down in one hand.

Richie closed his eyes and turned his head…not out of fear (although he would have to have been insane not to be afraid of this version of his friend), but because for one heart stopping moment, he'd been sure it was Virgil…his Virgil…standing there. The other Static was dressed in a pair of well-worn jeans and a gray, long-sleeved T-shirt that hid the tattoos. An easy, charming smile was fixed on his face. It looked like Virgil...for a moment it had looked like Virgil. Richie was quickly learning, though, that however much this person resembled Virgil—the eyes gave him away. Everything dark and ugly about this Static shone through in that reptilian gaze. This wasn't Virgil.

With the pain throbbing through his face, though; the fresh trickle of blood against the bandages on his torso; with the memory of this nightmarish creature ordering Deimos to unleash his full power on Richie fresh in his mind…it was too much. Especially with this Static looking so much like Virgil. It hurt so much. He heard Static move across the room and forced his eyes open, then rolled to his knees. He watched warily as Static stopped by Phobos and grinned down at it.

"It's all right, D. I got this." To Richie's surprise, Phobos lowered its head, and then started to dissolve. The wolf-like body swirled into a cloud of mist from the feet up, growing fainter and fainter by the moment. Within a matter of seconds, it had totally dissipated, as if it had never been there at all. Richie gasped softly, and Static focused on him. "Neat, huh?" he said, his tone perfectly congenial.

Richie pulled himself to his feet and backed away a few steps, keeping his eyes on Static the whole time. The amiable grin deepened into the now familiar smirk. Not for the first time, Richie wondered at his ability to pull this off. Virgil always seemed to know when Richie was lying to him—even if Virgil was denser than solid cement when it came to people, he always knew when something was up with Richie.

"So, alone at last," Static continued. "How you feelin'?" Richie narrowed his eyes and lowered his head slightly.

"Just peachy," he muttered, automatically wrapping his arms around his middle. He heard Static laugh softly and step closer to him.

"Good to hear. Maybe now we can get down to business."

Richie sighed heavily, and licked his lips before answering. "What business?" he asked, trying to put just the right touch of misery in his tone. He rather thought he already knew what 'business' Static wanted to discuss. "You can do this...you will do this. A few days, that's all you need."

Static turned and gestured to the bed, still wrapped awkwardly in the zap trap. "These things got an
Richie hesitated for a moment, before moving towards the bed. He reached for the control module on the zap cap, but froze as Static suddenly grabbed his wrist, hard. His gaze flew to the other boy's face. Static raised his index finger in a chiding gesture.

"Ah, ah, ah...watch yourself, now," he sing-songed nastily. A spark of power danced down his arm to curl around Richie's wrist, making the limb tingle slightly, and the hair on his arm stand on end. Richie swallowed hard again, and sketched a slight nod. Static released him, but didn't back away. Richie could feel the warmth of the other boy's body against his back as Static leaned over his shoulder, watching his every move.

Richie hit the release catch and the zap trap obediently retracted. As soon as it did, a glow of Static's power surrounded it, lifting it back into Static's hands. He chuckled softly, and laid a hand on Richie's shoulder.

"I like these things," Static murmured. "I can't wait to see what else you can come up with. These'll do for now, though." Static turned him around and jerked a thumb towards the still-open door. "Let's go. I've got another patrol leaving in a few minutes, and I wanna know if you need any other parts."

Richie grit his teeth, but kept his eyes downcast as he stepped past Static, heading for the door. Before he had gone more than a few steps, though, Static's hand shot out, grabbing him around the middle, this time. Richie gasped as he was once more pulled back against the other boy. Static leaned in close, right next to his ear.

"Just so you know...last night was just a preview of what I could've done to you. I saw your face, Rich; I heard you scream...you would've done anything to make it stop." Static's free hand reached up to lightly trace the side of Richie's throat. "Just remember that. And remember I can put you back down there whenever I want...and my crew ain't gonna be playin' the next time. I can do things to you that'll make last night seem like a picnic." The hand across his waist suddenly pressed down hard on the cuts on his stomach, and Richie gasped at the pain. "My town, my rules. You remember that, and we can avoid anymore...demonstrations." Static pressed against the cuts one more time, before abruptly shoving Richie forward. He stumbled a few steps before regaining his balance, and then turned to face Static again.

The other boy merely smiled at him, and then jerked his chin towards the door. Richie flicked his eyes once more to the shadowy outline in the heating duct that was Backpack. All right. All right. He could do this. He turned back to the door and reluctantly moved out into the hallway, hearing Static following him. As they walked down the hall towards the lab, a calm settled over him. Though he kept his face carefully neutral, a gleam of triumph bloomed in his eyes. So, Static wanted zap traps? Perfect.

Time for Phase Two.
Chapter 15

Richie sat on one corner of Virgil's couch, his legs curled up beneath him. A hardback novel he'd found in one of the old offices on this floor was spread open on his lap, but he wasn't really reading it. Oh, it was a good story...he just had other things on his mind. Like the person sitting on the opposite end of the couch.

Virgil was sprawled carelessly on the other end of the couch, one leg thrown up on the cushions and nearly touching Richie's hip. A supremely bored expression was fixed on his face as he flicked rapidly through news channels on his bank of TV screens. He never stayed on one channel more than a few seconds, and Richie had calculated that he'd had to have gone through all nine hundred channels he could pick up at least three times. Though Virgil's posture suggested he was perfectly at ease, there was an aura of tension about him...as though his whole body was a spring being wound tighter and tighter.

It worried Richie.

Something had changed in the past week. Something was different, and Richie couldn't figure out what it was. Virgil's behavior towards him hadn't really changed...there had been no repeats of that day when Virgil had almost--done whatever it was he was going to do. He'd gone back to just watching. Staring at Richie whenever they were together, with that odd intensity that Richie now thought he could probably identify. There was something different, though, something that was simmering just below the surface.

"Whatcha reading?" Richie was startled out of his musings by Virgil's soft question. He glanced up to see the other boy had turned off the TV screens and was now facing him, sitting cross-legged on the couch. Richie held up the book so that Virgil could see the cover.

"Inhuman Touch? What the hell's that...alien porn?" Virgil muttered, reaching over to tilt the book into better light. Despite himself, Richie chuckled.

"No! It's awesome...classic sci-fi, Virg. They made a movie out of it a few months after I...after I moved here," Richie tried to keep the hitch out of his voice, but he didn't think he succeeded. It hurt to think of those days...and no matter what Sharon said, the hurt never lessened, no matter how much time passed. Virgil frowned momentarily, but then his face cleared.

"Oh yeah...first time I ever talked you into sneaking into the Cineplex."

"I ended up having nightmares for three weeks straight."

"And you still snuck in with me to see Zombie Hunter IV a few months later."

"Hey, that was worth the nightmares."

"I think we have the whole series here somewhere. We could watch 'em tonight." For a moment...for just a moment, Richie let himself pretend. He let himself imagine that he was simply hanging out with his best friend again, talking about their week, and discussing how to make the most of their weekend. He wanted so badly for it to be the truth...to be reality.

It wasn't, though. And it never would be, again. They would never be able to go back to that...and this was no longer his best friend. This was the man who had destroyed their city, forced thousands to flee in terror, had regularly tormented and tried to hurt or kill the people Richie considered his family. This was the man who for all intents and purposes was holding him prisoner, who hadn't had
any qualms about hurting him to get a point across.

Richie couldn’t let himself lose sight of that, no matter how much he might want to.

"Richie?" Virgil reached over and plucked the book from Richie’s hands, tossing it carelessly onto the coffee table. He scooted a little closer on the couch, so that their knees were almost touching.

"Yeah?" He couldn’t say why, but suddenly Virgil’s proximity made him nervous. There was nowhere to go, though…he was trapped between the other boy and the armrest of the couch.

"Is it better now? Being here, I mean. Are you still mad at me?" The words were said in a perfectly reasonable tone, but there was an odd light in Virgil’s eyes.

"Virgil…" Richie trailed off, unsure of what to say. The feeling of wrongness was back. Whatever was going on, Richie was missing a crucial piece of it. He could feel it.

"I just missed you, is all. I wanted you here, with me. You’re my best friend, Rich…you were always my best friend."

Richie closed his eyes briefly, and let his head hang a little. "You were always my best friend, too, V," he said softly, trying to hide the slight choke in his voice. He looked up again when Virgil’s warm hand descended on the back of his neck.

"I want you to stay here, Rich. I want you here with me…it’s been nice, having someone I can trust."

Richie was silent, just staring at his one-time friend. Something swirled through Virgil’s eyes again, something that sent unease skittering up Richie’s spine. The silence stretched on between them, charged with something Richie couldn’t identify. It was as if the tension he had been sensing in Virgil suddenly went up a few notches. Abruptly, the hand on his neck slid up to touch the side of his head with the eye shaved into it.

"You need to re-do this. It’s starting to grow out." Virgil’s voice was even, emotionless. Whatever had been in his eyes was suddenly shuttered away and though Richie wasn’t sure what was going on…he had the feeling he had missed something big

"—Static?—" As before, the tense moment was interrupted by Virgil’s radio going off. He reached around to the back of his belt and pulled it off, running one hand through his hair and closing his eyes.

"What is it, Puff?"

"—Just got a report in from Shiv…he’s got a bead on some pests. Including none other than Sister Dearest.—"

Richie turned away, trying not to look as though he was hanging on to every word he was overhearing. Sharon had mentioned they were going to try some of the kids up top, soon, since Richie had been able to pretty much map out the patrol routes Virgil’s people took. He swallowed hard at the thought of the younger members of their little band facing down the likes of Shiv and Onyx.

"Oh really? Well it’d be rude of me not to go say hello, wouldn’t it? Get that special team together and be ready to go in five."

"—On it, Boss.—"
Virgil clicked off the radio and rose quickly from the couch. "Looks like the zombies'll have to wait," he chuckled. Richie turned on the couch to watch him move towards his bedroom. Moments later, he emerged, the loose sleeper pants and t-shirt he'd been wearing replaced with his Static costume. He pulled the mask on and grinned at Richie. "I'll catch ya' later...Sharon's always good for a run. Might be a little late." Not waiting for an answer, he strode out the door and vanished down the hall.

Richie waited for a few heartbeats after the door had slid shut, then scrambled for the bank of screens. The touch of a few buttons, and he had the view of the rooftop just in time to watch Virgil take off with Puff and Talon. All right...Puff, Talon, Shiv, and Virgil. Nothing Sharon's teams wouldn't be able to handle ordinarily, but if they had kids with them...

He ran to his bedroom and snatched the comm. box out from its hiding place beneath his mattress. He thumbed the broadcast switch as he moved back into the 'living room' plopping back down on the couch so he could have a clear view of the security monitors.

"Foley to base. Pick up, Francis, I got a major 9-1-1 here."

"—I keep telling you not to call me that! Whatcha got, Foley?—" Hotstreak responded almost instantly, and Richie smiled softly, despite the potentially dire situation. Sharon had people manning the comm. station 24/7, fearful of missing any message he might be able to send. Hotstreak had never said anything, but Richie knew he had to be volunteering for double duty...apart from Sharon it was Hotstreak he talked to the most.

"Listen, you gotta get on the line with Sharon and her group. Shiv spotted them, and they've got all the fliers heading their way," he said urgently. Hotstreak swore softly and Richie heard him yelling at Tech to open up another channel to Sharon.

"—Damn it...her and Adam took some of the rookies out for training.—"

Richie nodded grimly. "I was afraid of that." He waited in tense silence to hear whether or not Tech had gotten through. The radio system was pretty damn reliable (Richie had made sure of that), but it wasn't foolproof. And Tech, though certainly no slouch in the brains department, just wasn't as gifted as Richie was. Richie glanced up at the monitors, assuring himself that they were still empty, before turning his attention back to the box in his hands. If Tech couldn't get through, maybe he could boost the power, the way he had done last week when Hotstreak had gotten lost in an unfamiliar part of the tunnels... "Any luck?"

"—Hang on...they must be almost out of range. Lot of interference.—" Richie bit his lip nervously, and wiped one suddenly sweaty palm on the hem of the white t-shirt he was wearing.

There was the softest of sounds behind him. Half a sigh, half a growl and it turned his blood to ice in his veins.

The snapping crackle of electricity filled the room, and Richie felt every hair on his body rise to stand on end. The electricity swept through the room, arcing over the TV monitors and turning them dark. Every light bulb in the place was overloaded, exploding in a series of dull pops, and plunging the room into darkness. His heart in his throat, Richie leaped up and whirled around.

Virgil was standing just behind the couch.

He'd shed the coat and mask. Bolts of blue lightning were racing up and down his arms, casting an eerie illumination in the room, highlighting the tattoos on his arm in strange shadow. His fists were clenched by his sides.
Richie had never seen such fury in the other boy's eyes.

"How?" The panicked thought skipped through Richie's head and was gone even as the answer came to him. Mirage. Virgil had had Mirage create an illusion of him leaving the building. Virgil had set him up.

They stood facing each other silently for a few heartbeats that seemed to stretch into an eternity. There was no sound save for the crackle of Virgil's powers, and Richie's harsh breathing. Finally, though, the standoff was broken by the comm. box in Richie's hand suddenly bursting to life again.

"—We got 'em Rich! They're heading back down right now. No sign of any of Static's people.—" Virgil's eyes narrowed dangerously at Hotstreak's triumphant voice. Slowly, as if his arm was made of lead, Richie raised the box to his mouth, never taking his eyes off of Virgil.

"Everyone's safe?" he murmured.

"—Yup. Good job, man.—"

"Yeah. Hey Francis? Do me a favor?" Virgil still wasn't moving, but the light was flaring more intensely around him. Richie sucked in a deep breath.

"—Sure thing...name it.—"

"When Sharon gets back...tell...tell her I love her?"

"—Getting mushy on us, Foley? Adam might be jealous.—" Hotstreak's voice was gentle, teasing, and it was all Richie could do not to scream. "—Will do, man. Now you better get off before anyone comes back."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll do that. You guys...you guys be safe. Be safe."

"—You too! Talk to you later, Foley.—" The light around Virgil reached a fever pitch, crackling so wildly Richie had to wonder if the other boy even had any control over it. Richie stared into Virgil's eyes, at the white-hot anger dancing in them. Finally, he sighed and lowered his head. He swallowed past the lump rising in his throat, tried to quell the fear rolling through him. When he spoke, his voice was quiet...but at least it was steady.

"Goodbye, Francis," he whispered.

Back at his kitchen table, Robert Hawkins could only sit and stare at the tabletop. A fresh pot of coffee had been brewed and poured, but the mug in front of him sat untouched. Across the table, Green Lantern sat. Green Lantern, in their kitchen drinking coffee. Virgil would have been thrilled. Except that Lantern's mug was as untouched as his own...and it was Virgil the League hero had come to discuss. Something had happened to Virgil and Richie.

He didn't understand all of what Green Lantern had told him. It all swirled together in a cacophony of words, phrases, and the panicked pounding of his own heartbeat. "Massive energy anomaly in Dakota...we know your son and his partner were in the area...no one at their base...haven't been able to reach the kids since the surge..."

The boys were missing.

Virgil and Richie were missing, and even the Justice League had been unable to find them. Missing.
It was all Robert could do to hold it together. Damn it, Virgil was supposed to be safe…he was supposed to be safe. They both were.

They were only missing, though. 'Missing' still held hope. 'Missing' was not…he had to hold onto that.

"What is it you think happened to them?" he asked finally, his voice steady by sheer force of will.

Green Lantern sighed softly, and shook his head. "Mr. Hawkins, at this point anything…"

"With all due respect, I know you wouldn't have come here if you didn't at least have an idea," Robert interrupted softly. "Believe me, whatever you have to say can't be worse than what I can come up with on my own."

"I understand how you must—"

"Do you have children?" Robert's voice hitched a little, despite his best efforts. Green Lantern subsided, and shook his head.

"No…no, I don't."

Robert nodded slightly. "Then I'm sorry, but you don't understand anything. This is my son you're talking about…and a boy who might as well be my son. Whatever you know—I need to hear it. Not knowing," here his voice dropped to a whisper, "not knowing is worse than anything you can tell me."

Lantern regarded him gravely for a moment, and then nodded. "Fair enough. All right…we know from the police reports that Static and Gear responded to a call about a…what do you call them? Bang babies?" At Robert's affirmative nod, Lantern continued. "We know they engaged the bang baby around midnight. Reports are sketchy, but from the sound of things, it might have been a teleporter. That's always a messy fight in and of itself. The boys made a pretty good showing, but eventually they were forced to chase the bang baby into the sewers. Just before one this morning, the Watchtower detected a massive energy spike underneath Dakota."

Robert closed his eyes and clenched his fists on the table. Missing…they were only missing.

"We tried to raise Static and Gear on their comm. system, but no luck. Batman and I came down to investigate. He's trying to pinpoint where the energy surge happened." Here Green Lantern paused, and Robert felt his stomach drop. "Your son's powers being what they are…we think they may have reacted with the bang baby's and caused the surge."

Robert breathed deeply, trying hard not to jump to conclusions. Virgil and Richie were not…they couldn't be… He opened his eyes and stared hard at the man across from him. He didn't want to ask, didn't want to say the words…but he had to know. He swallowed hard. "Do you…do you think my boys are dead?" he asked calmly, the hardest words he had ever had to utter.

"No," Green Lantern said firmly. He leaned forward and steepled his fingers on the tabletop in front of him. "I won't lie to you Mr. Hawkins…right now we just don't know what happened. But if Static and Gear had been killed last night, there would have been some evidence. That much I can tell you."

Robert sagged back against his chair, pressing his hands to his face. He sat there for a moment, simply breathing and trying to calm the rapid pace of his heart. Green Lantern remained respectfully silent, waiting for him to gather himself. At last, he pulled his hands from his face and found his voice again. "Green Lantern, please. If they're not…not dead…where are Virgil and Richie? What
happened to my son? Did this bang baby take them somewhere?"

"It's a possibility. We'll know more once Batman finds the exact site of the surge." Green Lantern sat back slightly, regarding Robert with sympathy. "Mr. Hawkins...we're going to do everything we can to get the boys home safely. Is there anyone you need me to call?"

Robert shook his head. "No...no, I'll have to call my daughter and her fiancé. They should hear this from me."

Green Lantern sighed heavily. "What about Richie's parents? Do they know what he does?"

"No. He's never told them. I can hide it for a few days...Richie's mother is out of town visiting relatives, and his father—" Robert trailed off, unwilling to open that particular can of worms for a virtual stranger. It was Richie's business. "Let's just say that I should probably charge that boy rent in the summer time. I'd rather not drag Richie's family into this until we know something for sure."

Green Lantern raised one eyebrow, but didn't comment. "I'll trust your judgment on that. There are some other leads I have to look into before I meet back up with Batman."

"You'll...you'll let me know what you find?"

"Of course. We'll be in touch." Lantern rose from the table, and Robert stood up automatically as well. The Leaguer moved for the door of the kitchen, but paused by Robert. "Mr. Hawkins...I meant what I said. We'll do everything we can to get them both back here safely."

Robert nodded and reached out to shake Green Lantern's hand firmly. He walked the hero to his front door and watched as the other man, after checking the street to make sure there were no witnesses present, took to the air in a streak of green light. He shut the door, and made his way back into the living room. He needed to call Sharon and Adam—Sharon had to know what was going on. Somehow, though, he found himself leaning heavily on the bureau beside the door.

His hands were shaking. He watched them with some detached interest, as they trembled on the wood grain.

They were missing. Green Lantern himself had said they weren't...they weren't dead. They weren't. Virgil would be all right. Richie would be all right. Green Lantern had promised him that the Justice League would do everything in their power to get his boys back home. He let his head hang, and tried to forcibly still the tremors.

He would not let himself dwell on the horrible scenarios flashing through his head. Wherever Virgil and Richie were...they were together. They were together, and they were all right. Whatever had been thrown at them, they could handle it. He knew that. He closed his eyes, trying to reassure himself. Between the two of them...if the Justice League didn't find them, they would find their own way home. And if there wasn't one, they'd make one. He was sure of it.

He had to be.

He opened his eyes again and looked down at one of the pictures on the bureau. It was the largest frame—the last family portrait they had taken before Jean's death. Tucked into one corner of the frame was a loose snapshot he'd taken of Virgil and Richie at the pool just a couple of weeks ago. The two boys were grinning like fools, doing their level best to dunk each other beneath the water. Robert's mouth quirked into a smile at the memory.

He reached out and picked up the frame, running his finger over the image of his beloved wife's cheek. "I know you're watching over them. Our boy needs you, now, baby. Help them...please help
Virgil had to hand it to this world's version of his sister. She thought of everything. He sat on the sheet of metal he had torn from the tunnel wall, hovering a few feet above the watery floor of the tunnel, and simply watched her in action. Within five minutes of the retrieval team from the base arriving, Kangorr had been blindfolded, secured, the tunnel itself checked for damage, a repair team dispatched to cover up the battle damage, and a route back to the base decided upon. Everyone, no matter who they were, scrambled to do her bidding when Sharon barked an order. It had been rather amusing to watch Hotstreak darting around like a boot camp cadet running from his drill sergeant.

The people from the base were throwing nervous glances in his direction every few moments, no doubt terrified by the display of his powers. Sharon, however, had yelled at them to 'deal with it' and deal with it, they did. Virgil watched Kangorr, ready to step in should the other bang baby prove troublesome. He needn't have worried.

Kangorr was quickly bound in heavy duty chains that had obviously had the touch of the other Richie or Tech all over them. He was forced to kneel on an industrial handcart, the kind used to transport large stacks of boxes or crates, which the retrieval people had brought with them. Virgil surreptitiously checked the fastenings holding Kangorr, assuring himself that they would hold.

"Hotstreak, you go with the team. He makes a wrong move, fry 'im." Virgil glanced up from his examination of the chains at Sharon's command. Hotstreak nodded shortly.

"You got it, Boss," he said, tossing up a mock salute. He didn't look at all displeased at the prospect of possibly being able to fry someone. "All right, people, let's move it out! We got a long way to go."

Virgil frowned as the four people who had come from the base clustered around the cart. Two drew weapons and aimed them squarely at Kangorr's head while the other two grabbed hold of the steering bar. Hotstreak, meanwhile, fired up again and took the lead. The group moved off down the tunnels…in the opposite direction of the base. He glanced down at Adam in confusion, and the older man stretched his neck up so that his face was level with Virgil's.

"They're gonna take a roundabout way home…don't want Bob Marley there to figure out how close he actually was. Just in case," Adam whispered. Virgil nodded his understanding…it made sense. They really had thought of everything. The three of them waited until Hotstreak's group had faded into the gloom before Sharon spoke again.

"All right, boys, let's head in. I want everything ready when Hotstreak gets back with him." She pulled slightly at the hem of her shirt, grimacing with distaste.

"If Virgil takes us, we could be back in time for you to grab a shower," Adam said, sidling up beside her and wrapping one arm around her shoulders. Sharon leaned in to him a moment, before glancing back up at Virgil.

Virgil lowered the metal and held out one hand, fixing his most disarming smile on his face. "It's the only way to fly."

Oddly, Sharon's brow furrowed, and she flinched back ever so slightly. Whatever the reason, though, she shook it off quickly, and then reached up to grasp his hand, only a trace of nervousness showing on her features. Virgil pulled her up to stand beside him, and then waited for Adam to stretch himself up. It was a tight squeeze with three of them, but Adam and Sharon seemed to have no problem clasping tightly together to make room. Virgil took off down the tunnel.
"So…what'll happen when Hotstreak gets back with Kangorr?" he asked as he guided the metal back towards the base.

"If he ran off right after Static took your friend, he probably won't be able to tell us where in the building Static's keeping him. He should be good for patrol details, guard duty…who's on the injured list, who we're likely to run into," Sharon answered, and Virgil was pleased to note the differentiation when she talked about him and the other Static. He nodded thoughtfully. Even if Kangorr couldn't give them specifics about where Richie was being held…anything that kept them from flying in blind would be useful.

He set them down in the section of the tunnel he had ripped the sheet metal from, taking a few moments to spot-weld it back into place before dampening his powers down. Sharon and Adam may have been able to deal with it, but he was pretty sure any electrical displays within the base itself would cause a riot. As Adam had predicted, they had beaten Hotstreak back easily…the route he had taken would keep them for almost another half hour.

Sharon made a beeline for the communal showers as soon as she'd checked on the group Kangorr had trapped in the tunnels, and Virgil was left with no choice but to follow Adam around as the older man saw to the preparations for keeping Kangorr contained once Hotstreak's group reached the base. Obviously, the walled off maintenance alcove they had stuck Virgil in would not suffice.

There were not exactly facilities available for keeping prisoners. Virgil had a feeling that the kind of confrontations these people were used to having were not the sort one took prisoners in. Besides, it wouldn't have been very smart to bring an enemy meta-human into the base, not after they had gone to so much trouble to keep hidden. Still, the possibility must have occurred to someone, at some point.

There was a small side tunnel, well away from the inhabited portion of the base. In its previous life, it had probably been some kind of maintenance access. It had been walled off from the main line, creating a small room. Yet another heavy-duty steel door had been welded across it, and when Adam opened it up, Virgil saw that more steel plating lined the walls.

"Richie dragged scavenging teams all over town every night for a month to get all this scrap metal," Adam said softly. "There was betting pool on how long it would take Hotstreak to drop him on his head." The older man chuckled, sadly. "Richie won."

"He would," Virgil answered.

They stood in companionable silence for a few moments, broken only when Sharon reappeared, sporting a sleeveless black shirt and a clean pair of black jeans. For the first time since he had met her, Sharon was not sporting any visible weapons. Virgil didn't think for a moment that she didn't have any. She nodded politely to him and greeted Adam with a soft kiss to his cheek.

"Hotstreak just radioed in. They'll be here in a few minutes. Brickhouse will be up in a few, and Tech's bringing some of his toys," she said. Adam nodded thoughtfully. Virgil, however, frowned.

"Wait, rewind that? Brickhouse? Toys? What're you gonna do?"

Sharon crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head. "We're gonna make him sing like a canary," she replied darkly. For a moment, all Virgil could do was blink at her stupidly. Then…

"Say what?" She couldn't be talking about…they wouldn't…"You can't hurt the guy!" Sharon and Adam exchanged a narrow look. Virgil hadn't thought that was what they'd meant when they had been talking about Kangorr helping them break the other Static's security.
"How else are we gonna get information from Kangorr?" Adam asked bluntly.

"I dunno…ask!" Sharon raised one eyebrow at Virgil's incredulous voice.

"You trippin'? He won't tell us a damn thing unless we give him a damn good reason," Adam said sternly. "Only reason good enough is gonna be a world of hurt."

"You can't do that!" Virgil insisted. He had been down that road once…his world's Adam had shown him how wrong he was, then. There were some lines superheroes just didn't cross. It was in the handbook.

Well, unless your name happened to be Batman…but Batman was an exception to whatever rule he pleased.

"Look, do you wanna get your friend away from Static or not?" Sharon asked harshly, her good eye narrowing.

"Of course I do…but not like this! Not if it means sinking to his level! Richie wouldn't stand for that!" Virgil shouted. For one brief moment, Sharon recoiled. Then her hand snapped out, striking him hard in an open slap across his face. Virgil's head rocked with the force of the blow and his cheek burned, but he glared at the woman defiantly. What they were proposing was wrong and he wasn't going to back down on it. In his heart, he knew Richie would agree with him. Fire was dancing in Sharon's one good eye…fire and something else. Something that looked almost like guilt. The moment was lost, though, when Adam shoved himself between them.

"Let's go, Virgil," the older man ordered icily.

"Adam—"

"Now!" Not giving Virgil a chance to answer, Adam grasped his elbow and began physically dragging him away from the room, leaving Sharon behind. Virgil resisted initially, struggling against the hold, but Adam's grip was like iron. Eventually, Virgil's only choice was to follow or use his powers to get away. He still wasn't willing to panic anyone with the use of his powers.

Adam didn't stop until they had reached the War Room, slamming the door open and literally throwing Virgil inside. Virgil stumbled into one of the benches, fetching his hip up against the table. He whirled around to face the older man, who was glaring daggers at him.

"Don't you ever say anything like that to Sharon again, do you understand me?" Adam shouted."

"But—"

"Boy, I don't know if you've noticed, but we're in the middle of a war here! Dakota is the new ninth circle of Hell, we're living in a goddamn sewer, and a fucking psychopath version of you wants every last one of us dead! This ain't your world, Virgil…things are different here. We've all had to do things we never would've dreamed of doing before Static took over. All of us. So yes, it's wrong. Yes, it makes us sick to have to even think about doing this kind of shit. But it's the only choice we have. Don't you ever say we're like him, though…that Sharon's like him. We're just trying to survive. Static gets his kicks from it." Adam sighed heavily, and scrubbed one hand over his face.

Virgil was silent, struck speechless. Desperately he searched for something to say, but words would not come. Unbidden, the image of Sharon's angry, guilt-ridden gaze rose in his mind. Sharon was the leader here…the backbone of this resistance. It fell on her to do everything, to make sure these people were safe. Safe in the middle of a war-zone.
Virgil didn't know about war...didn't know about the kind of suffering these people had gone through. He hoped to God he never did. He did, however, know about wanting to keep the people he loved safe. He looked down at his feet, forcing himself to look beyond his own righteous anger. Could he make the choices this Sharon had made? Could he pit his principles and ideals against the safety of his Pops? His Sharon? Against Richie's safety? If forcing Kangorr to talk was the only way he could get the information he needed to save Richie's life, could he really make a choice?

Adam was right...this world's Sharon was nothing like this world's Static. How could he have said that?

"I—I—Adam...I'm sorry," he whispered finally, feeling very small. He heard the other bang baby sigh heavily, and looked up to see Adam run his hands through his hair. The older man shook his head slightly.

"You didn't know. How could you?" Adam muttered. "Look, if it's any consolation...we know Kangorr. He's a coward. Brickhouse'll rough him up a little, Tech will bring out something that blinks or whistles, and Kangorr will crack like an egg. It won't be bad, I promise. I'm not the one you need to be apologizing to, though." The older man turned away and sat heavily on one of the benches, placing his head in his hands.

Virgil nodded, miserably. "I didn't mean...I just, I know I don't understand what you've all been through. I can't understand it. This is all so messed up!"

"No argument, there," Adam snorted, bitterly. Virgil flinched at the man's tone. Adam must have seen it out of the corner of his eye, for he looked up again. "Virgil...look, I'm not mad at you. Sharon won't be, either, not really. You didn't say anything we haven't said to ourselves, before. Just...some things we don't talk about, here, okay?"

Virgil licked his lips, and nodded faintly. "Yeah. Yeah, I get that." He hated this. He...he hated this. He would give anything for this all to be a dream, to wake up in his bed at home, or at the gas station, and laugh about this crazy dream with Richie. It wasn't a dream, though. It was his reality, for now...and right now he needed to be concentrating on getting Richie the hell away from the other Static.

Kangorr might be able to tell them something useful, or he might not. Virgil couldn't afford to depend on it. He focused on one of the maps on the tabletop, and specifically, Static's fortress. The TynaCorp building. Richie had talked about it a number of times, and Virgil tried to recall anything that could give them an advantage. Unfortunately, most of what Rich had gone on about were the inventions inside the building, and what a genius like him could do with them. The only detail Virgil was intimate with was a small shaded area behind the building and out of main view: the dumpster area. Three desperate bank robbers and what Richie had politely termed a 'high-spirited' chase had not made for his finest hour.

It'd taken him days to get the smell out of his coat...and for a time he'd thought there wasn't enough shampoo in the world to get his dreads clean. Sharon had teased him mercilessly. He handed that little patrol route to Gear afterward. At least if Richie went home smelling, his parents just assumed it had to do with teen body odor. He sighed and hung his head. 'Richie...' He tried not to focus on the thoughts of what his darker counterpart was doing to his friend. "We have to find a way into that building."

The problem was the other Static could hurt Rich before they even found the blond. What they needed to do was get an eye on the inside, or at least an idea of where Richie was being kept. "But the damn place is a fortress. Cameras, sensors" He blinked, looking once more to the dumpster area on the map. Actually, he did remember one other discussion with Rich, about the building's security.
There was a blind spot.

Around the dumpsters, because of the waste and the lining of the area, the building's sensors were heavily limited. There was a basic grid that even a normal genius could redirect for five minutes and Sharon's gang had Tech. The guy wasn't as smart as Rich, but he could probably buy them seven, eight minutes before the alarm was discovered. "Hey Adam?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeah?"

He pointed to the map. "What's security like here?"

Adam glanced up and then stretched his neck out to look at where Virgil was pointing. He frowned faintly. "That's one of the most heavily patrolled areas. There's a blind spot, but there's no way we could get a drop on them. Even if the security was disabled, we couldn't knock out all the guards at once, not without alerting everyone else what was going on."

"You can't." Virgil raised his hand, letting a spark of energy fly between his fingertips. "But maybe I can. Think Tech could knock out security at the same time?"

Adam shook his head. "It's not worth it. There's no way into the building from there, other than the trash chutes."

"Who said anything about going in?" As much as it pained him to think of mounting any kind of attack and not trying to rescue Richie...they needed more information. "Assuming security was taken down and the guards knocked out, would there be enough time for Tech to...I dunno, get a scan of the building's interior? To find out where they're keeping Richie?" He was really banking on this world's Tech, or even Batman.

Adam frowned. "The guards check in at random times. If we tried it and someone radioed in for a status report..." The man shook his head again. "We'd be found out before we could get any useful info. We might not even make it back. The group checks in with Deimos directly."

Virgil shuddered. He remembered that encounter far too well. "Okay...so...what if there was a distraction?"

"A distraction?"

"Yeah. Like when Rich and I gotta take on a really tough bang baby. I'll get them to focus on me, put on a light show, and he'll sneak behind to get 'em with a zap trap." At that, Adam straightened, which Virgil took to be a good sign.

"A distraction..." Adam's eyes trailed to the door. "Like...pretending to mount a rescue mission."

"And you could even unload Kangorr!" Not that Virgil liked the guy, but leaving him here to be tortured...didn't sit right with him.

"You want him dead?"

That caught him off guard. "Huh? No!"

"What do you think Static would do to him for running out on a battle?" Virgil opened his mouth to respond, but he knew before he even got a word out. What was one lackey to a Static who had murdered his best friend? Adam looked to the map again. "You could be spotted from the air."

"Not if we took cover under the trash overhang. I'll just put the bodies into the dumpsters."
"Until a flyer comes down to check why the guards aren't there."

"With luck, they'll be distracted by the fight."

Adam glanced at him, at the map, then the door again. "I don't know if Sharon'll go for it."

"We just need a few minutes…just to figure out where they're holding Richie." He needed to do this. He needed some kind of reassurance that Richie was still…he needed to do this. "Then we can fall back, regroup, and go in for real later. We might even be able to take a few of them out for when we do go after him. Please, Adam."

"If they figure out what we're doing, they might hurt him. Or worse."

Virgil looked to the map, tracing a finger along the edges. "If we just rush in blind, the same thing could happen. At least…at least this way you guys get some intel too, right?" He felt Adam's eyes linger on him a moment longer, and then the older man reached over to clasp his shoulder.

"I'll go get Sharon."
The silence stretched on between them, interminable…a living thing that wrapped around them, choking and dark. The light of Virgil's powers twined around his entire body in a dancing light that was the only source of illumination in the dark room. Richie felt as if everything, time itself, had slowed to a crawl. His whole body felt weighted—as he lowered the comm. box to his side, it was as if the simple machine weighed a ton.

It was Virgil who broke the awful, painful silence.

"So. This whole time...you were one of them the whole time. Runnin' with the rats," he spat. The electricity flared with each word, so that it seemed there was a miniature lightning storm raging around the other boy. Richie swallowed hard, and the comm. box dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers. It landed with a soft thud on the floor by his feet.

He straightened, though, and met Virgil's angry gaze squarely. "Yeah. Yeah, I've been with Sharon all this time."

Virgil let out a soft exhalation that was more a growl than a sigh. He closed his eyes and the strain of reigning in his powers was visible on his face. The mad lightning dimmed and sputtered before finally vanishing. For a moment, Richie was practically blind in the darkness, but his eyes adjusted quickly.

Virgil opened his eyes again, and almost faster than Richie could follow, he vaulted over the couch, landing almost directly in front of Richie. Despite himself, Richie stumbled back, fetching up with his back against the bank of TV screens.

His eyes never leaving Richie's face, Virgil casually stretched out one hand, and a field of energy surrounded the comm. box on the floor. The box flew into his palm, and he glanced down at it, nodding to himself. "Nice toy. You're the reason we haven't seen any of Sharon's people lately." It was not a question. "You've been telling them where we are."

"They're my friends, Virgil," Richie said softly. Virgil's eyes narrowed and he clenched his jaw tightly. Without warning, he flung the comm. box at the wall beside the screens, near Richie's head. The box exploded into pieces on impact and Richie forced himself not to flinch. The electricity raced up and down Virgil's arms again, sparking before Virgil pulled it into himself once more.

"Tell me where they are," Virgil snarled suddenly.

"No."

Virgil did growl at that, an inarticulate sound of rage that chilled Richie to the bone. The other boy stalked forward, and slammed his hands on the screens on either side of Richie's head, as he had done that first night they had met in the alley.

"I can make you tell me," he murmured, staring hard into Richie's eyes.

Richie clenched his teeth and thought of the dozens of people in the tunnels, thought of Francis and Maria. He thought of Carmen, and of the gaggle of children that were always following him around when he worked in the base, fascinated and delighted by the things he could do and make. He
thought of the friends he had made over the past year, of the endless hours he had spent alongside Tech, re-designing, reinforcing, and altering the tunnels, making sure the people would be as safe as possible.

He thought of Adam…the big brother he'd never had. He thought of Sharon—the sister of his heart, the woman he had come to love as if they really were blood. She was his friend, his confidant, his family…his last link to the best friend he remembered. He thought of them all, and the quiet strength that had carried him through more strife than any person should have to bear rose within him.

"No, V…you can't."

Virgil's glare deepened dangerously. He slammed his fists down hard on the screens, and a spark of power danced from his hands, dissipating over two of the screens. Richie jumped, slightly, but his gaze remained steady. Virgil pushed himself back, and turned away to kick violently at the coffee table in front of the couch. The glass top flipped off and shattered on the floor.

"So that's it? You're on their side, no matter what?" Virgil whipped around again, and there was something more than anger in his gaze.

"Virgil—"

"You're not going back to them," Virgil interrupted, harshly. Richie set his jaw and matched the other boy glare for glare.

"You planning on keeping me locked up here, forever, Virg? We both know that won't work."

"You're not going back to them," Virgil repeated stubbornly, his voice still low and threatening. Richie sucked in a breath and took a tentative step forward.

"V…Virg...you can't—"

"Just tell me where they are, Rich. I'll let this go; I'll pretend it never happened. We can end this right here, right now." Virgil closed the distance between them swiftly, and reached up to cup Richie's face in his hands. He pulled Richie forward so that their foreheads touched, his eyes shut tight. "Tell me where they are," he whispered silkily. "We can finish it…together. Finish it for good. I'll make you forget all about them, Richie. I promise."

Richie swallowed, convulsively, his mouth suddenly dry. "Virgil…I can't. I won't. I'm sorry, but I won't help you hurt them." It was evidently the wrong thing to say. Virgil bared his teeth in an ugly scowl and he shoved Richie back forcefully against the screens again.

"Choice?" Virgil bit out. He seemed to force himself to stop shaking, and the bolts of power were pulled in once again. "What makes you think you get a choice?" A now-familiar chill swept through Richie at the words.
"Wh-what's that supposed to mean?" he asked uneasily.

"You're not leaving me. Not now, not ever. You're mine, Richie."

The words were said in such a deadly calm. Virgil's whole stance was suddenly utterly relaxed, utterly at ease. Richie's heart, though, sped up in his chest. This was the calm of that last breathless instant before a hurricane blew ashore, the dead quiet of a predator about to strike its prey. Virgil's eyes gleamed in the darkness, a swirling mix of anger and something that Richie was beginning to suspect went beyond madness.

He'd known. Of course he had known that Virgil—well, it had been fairly obvious after last week what Virgil wanted. Richie hadn't expected this, though. He hadn't expected Virgil to actually think that...

"What the hell?" he burst out hotly, his own anger sparking to the fore. "What the hell's that supposed to mean, Virgil?"

"I think you know. You're a smart guy, Rich. You're not going anywhere." Virgil stalked forward slowly, drawing closer with each word. Richie found his anger crumbling in the face of the slow, panther-like movements, the supreme confidence in eyes that had suddenly gone flat and cold. He found himself stumbling back...though as before, he didn't have any place to go.

For the third time that night, his back hit the wall, and he cursed himself for not dodging away when he had the chance. Virgil stopped just in front of him, so close Richie could feel the warmth of the other boy's breath on his face. Virgil tilted his head slightly, reached up to stroke along Richie's cheekbone with a gentle, loving touch that was belied by the darkness in his eyes. "You're mine."

Then, Virgil kissed him.

With the speed of a striking snake, Virgil seized a fistful of his hair and jerked him forward, sealing their mouths together. There was nothing gentle or loving about it...there was only wet heat and the harsh grate of teeth, and possession and control. Virgil savaged his mouth, pressing up against him, crushing him against the wall. Virgil's free hand trailed down one side of his body and the sudden feel of fingers fumbling at the waistband of the jeans he was wearing snapped Richie out of his shocked daze.

With a strangled cry, he surged against Virgil, shoving the other boy back with all the strength he could muster. Virgil had always been the stronger of them, but Richie had surprise and distraction on his side. Virgil tumbled backwards, landing on the floor and Richie should have taken the opportunity...to run, to hide, to do something. Instead he stood rooted to the spot, breathing in harsh gasps. He raised one hand to his mouth, unsurprised to find a small trickle of blood in the corner.

"Don't...don't you ever..." he began, hating the way his voice trembled. His heart was thundering now, as though it was trying to beat its way right out of his chest, and he felt fine tremors wracking his entire frame as Virgil climbed slowly to his feet.


"Stop this, V." Richie shook his head violently, shrinking back against the wall again. This was insanity...he couldn't believe this was happening. Somewhere, deep inside, there had to be some shred of the Virgil Hawkins he remembered. There had to be. "Stop it. Please."

Virgil's whole demeanor seemed to shift suddenly. The smirk vanished, the cocky arrogance
disappearing as though it had never been there. In its place, gentle concern bloomed. It was an expression he'd seen on Virgil's face many times...a side of the other boy he'd only ever shown to Richie. Virgil moved towards him again, reaching out one hand. "Shhhh," he whispered, pressing one finger against Richie's bloody lips. "It's all right, Rich. Don't be like that."

Still moving as though he were approaching a frightened animal, Virgil slid one arm around Richie's shoulders, pulling him close. Richie resisted, but Virgil's grip was unrelenting. After a moment, Richie stopped fighting, but stood stiff and unmoving in the circle of his once-friend's arms.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out. It's all right, Richie. I'd never hurt you...you know that." Virgil lowered his head into the crook of Richie's neck, nuzzling the soft skin of his throat. Richie's breath hitched as he felt a soft kiss ghost across the throb of his pulse. "I love you, Rich. You have to know that. I love you."

Virgil leaned back and looked into Richie's eyes, gauging his reaction. For his part, Richie just stared straight ahead, stubbornly trying to ignore the stinging burn that was starting behind his eyes. One corner of Virgil's mouth quirked upwards, and he reached up to gently wipe a bead of blood away from Richie's mouth with his thumb. Then, he swayed in close, again.

"Stop." Richie's voice rang out clearly across the darkened room, still shaky, but there was steel beneath the words. Virgil actually did freeze, cocking his head to one side. Richie bit hard on the inside of his cheek.

Virgil's eyes gave him away.

There was no gentleness in Virgil's dark gaze...certainly no love. There was only the glittering anger, the harsh edge that was all Virgil ever presented to the world anymore. The tenderness and concern melted away as easily as the smirking arrogance had.

"I don't want this, Virg. Maybe we could've...maybe before...I can't do this. Not now. Not after everything that's happened." Virgil was silent a moment, his eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly. "Let me go, Virgil. If you really meant that...if you really love me, please...just let me go."

The silence stretched on, and then Virgil sighed. He let go of Richie and took a few paces back. "So. That's really the way you feel." The words were quiet, toneless. Richie licked his lips nervously.

"V...please, you can still stop this. It's not too late. You can still make things all right again. I'll help you, V, I swear I'll help you...but you've got to stop this." He wasn't sure where the words had come from...every logical tic of his supercharged mind was telling him that it was too late, that trying to talk Virgil down was an exercise in futility. He couldn't bring himself to stop trying, though. Virgil was too much a part of him to stop trying.

For a moment, Richie thought he had gotten through...thought he had been right about the other boy.

The hand that suddenly shot out, gripping him around the throat, cured him of that notion rather quickly.

Virgil jerked him forward, pulling Richie flush against his body. "I said you're not leaving," he growled.

"Virgil!" Richie gasped, gripping the hand around his throat. Virgil wasn't squeezing hard enough to cut off his air supply...but it wouldn't take much. "Stop it!" The hand tightened for a moment, before Virgil suddenly flung him away. He crashed into the edge of the doorframe leading to the
bedroom he'd been using, crying out in pain when his shoulder blade caught the edge, hard. The
force of the shove sent him into the room itself, and he barely managed to stay on his feet.

Virgil loomed in the doorway, casually bracing his arms on either side, and leaning slightly into the
room. "Any other theatrics we gonna try?" he asked softly.

Richie ignored the throbbing pain in his shoulder and hunched forward a little, shifting his weight to
the balls of his feet. He was not going to delude himself into thinking he could take Virgil if it came to
blows…it just wasn't going to happen. Maybe he could still run, though.

He had time for one deep breath before Virgil lunged at him. Without thinking about it, Richie
shifted one foot back for balance, caught one of Virgil's outstretched arms, and pivoted with the
other boy's momentum, adding his own strength. At the apex of the swing, he let go Virgil's arm, and
heard a surprised shout as Virgil was tossed to the floor by the bed. This time, he didn't wait. He
broke for the door, intent on escaping out into the hallway. If he could get to the fire escape, he
might have a chance. Not much of one…but a chance.

He didn't even make it out of the bedroom.

Something slammed into the middle of his back, driving him to his knees, and a tingling shock raced
through his entire body. He crashed face-first into the floor, weighted down by a sudden numbness
that spread through his limbs. A popping crackle filled the room, and the deep shadows were chased
away by eerie blue light.

With a monumental effort, Richie hitched himself over onto his back. Virgil had gained his feet again
and a halo of lightning was dancing around his body. The other boy stalked forward as Richie
struggled to get to his own feet. He'd barely even made it into a sitting position before Virgil was
standing over him. The electricity flared brighter as Virgil dropped to his knees, straddling Richie's
waist. Harsh hands descended on his shoulders and slammed him back against the floor, the back of
his head impacting with it hard enough that he saw stars.

He lay stunned for a moment, and Virgil leaned in close again, hovering over him. The electricity
dimmed slightly, but this time it didn't vanish. Small bolts were racing over Virgil's body, and Richie
felt his hair rising to stand on end. They stayed that way a moment, just staring at each other.

Then, Virgil kissed him again, roughly. Richie felt the sting of the cut in his mouth opening wider,
and tried to push the other boy off of him. It was impossible to get any leverage in his current
position, though, and Virgil just chuckled darkly against his mouth, then gripped his wrists and
pinned them against the floor. After a moment, he pulled back, but didn't let go of Richie's wrists.

"G-get off me," Richie demanded shakily. "Let me up, Virgil." In answer, Virgil laughed softly, and
his grip on Richie's wrists tightened.

"I think I like you right where you are," he said easily. He leaned over again and nipped lightly at
the pulse point just under Richie's jaw. Richie shuddered and shook his head violently. "Stop fightin'
me, man. I can make it good for you, Rich...just stop fighting me." He shoved Richie's arms above
his head and transferred his grip, capturing both wrists in one hand. With his free hand, he reached
down and pulled at the hem of Richie's shirt.

"No!" Richie struggled wildly, still shaking his head. "You aren't gonna do this Virgil." His voice
shook with desperation, with denial. "You won't do this...you won't! You're my friend, V...you're my
friend. You won't do this." He struggled harder, trying to buck the other boy off him.

"Stop fighting me!" Virgil growled, and a spark of power burst from the hand holding Richie's
wrists, hard enough to sting and tingle unpleasantly.

In answer, Richie bucked harder, trying to kick, to bite, to get his hands free...anything. Another shock raced through his arms, more powerful this time, but still not enough to really hurt.

"Don't do this!" Richie shouted. "Get off! Let me go!"

Virgil grit his teeth and grabbed one of Richie's wrists with his free hand again, trying to hold him down. "Hold still!" Virgil shouted back. Richie thrashed harder. The bolts of power sparking over Virgil's body intensified, and a scowl darkened his face. Richie felt another jolt enter his body and this time, it was no warning. Pain blossomed in his wrists, and he felt the muscles in his arms seize up. It hurt...but he didn't stop thrashing.

"GET OFF ME!" he screamed again, and felt Virgil's grip on his wrists become so tight that he could feel the bones grinding together.

He looked up into Virgil's eyes...and saw nothing but fury and danger in them. There was no hint of the boy he had known...the boy who had been his best friend in the world. There was nothing of that boy left in this person. The power flared brightly around Virgil, and Richie closed his eyes against it, against the vision of this twisted monster...and found that he knew.

He was going to die, tonight.

Perhaps he had known it from the moment Virgil had caught him talking to Francis. He was going to die.

With that knowledge came a strange sort of calm. It should have frightened him, should have inspired him to fight harder, to struggle more. His body didn't cease its thrashing, but in his heart, acceptance bloomed. He was going to die. On the heels of that realization came another thought, one he latched onto a refused to let go of:

It wasn't Virgil.

It wasn't his friend doing this to him. Not really.

It wasn't Virgil.

"STOP FIGHTING ME!"

The power exploded from Virgil, unchecked, and wild with his rage. It raced into Richie, burning pain that felt as though it hit every nerve ending at once. He thought he screamed...but he couldn't be sure. It burned through him, blotting out everything else.

"Not Virgil...never Virgil."

A white light seemed to expand behind his eyes, brighter and brighter, full of gentle warmth that soothed the burning away.

The flaring power died down, the blue light fading and vanishing, plunging the room into shadow. For a moment, there was silence in the dark room, broken only by soft, harsh breathing. Even that became quieter after a moment. So quiet, it was almost undetectable. The quiet reigned for a few heartbeats...quiet and stillness.

Too much stillness.
It had only taken Richie about half an hour to get the lab sorted to his liking. He'd used the same approach he did at the gas station—what Virgil had termed his "Crap and Not Crap" pattern. A glance from a normal person would reveal merely chaos; and disorganized piles of stuff for him to dig through. Then again, Richie wasn't a normal person. A more mathematical eye would have seen the precise fractal formula everything was arranged in, ensuring that no matter what he was working on, everything he needed was within easy reach.

Hopefully, the seeming chaos would camouflage what he was actually doing.

The 'Crap' part of his "Crap and Not Crap" arrangement he had used to divide up the various components he'd need for different projects. He'd hoarded and set things up carefully. It had to look as though he was simply gathering spare parts. If anyone noticed that his plans didn't exactly coincide with Static's…

The first thing he had done was gather the things he would need to get him and Virgil home. It wasn't as simple as it sounded…it wasn't as if the necessary parts to build a trans-dimensional gateway were on the average inventory at Radioshack. It would take a lot of work on his part—adapting equipment to perform functions it was never intended to perform; and it would take a huge amount of energy.

Fortunately, Richie was very good at getting things to do what they had never been intended to do, and his partner was a walking power plant. It would work. He could see it in his mind's eye…it would work. It had to.

There were other piles, but for the moment he was focused on the small workspace he had cleared in front of him. An array of scrap metal parts and small wires was laid out on the table, along with a screwdriver and electric drill—the essential parts of a zap trap. How many of these things had he built over the years? It didn't even require conscious thought anymore, so used had his hands become to making them. He could produce a dozen in an hour.

This batch, though, was different. He held the metal tube that would eventually be the casing in one hand, examining it critically. He had to do this just right. Sabotaging them wouldn't be particularly difficult. Sabotaging them in such a way that no one would notice until it was too late…trickier.

It wasn't helping his concentration to know that the other Static was standing just behind him, watching his every move with an intense interest that Richie found…disconcerting. Static hadn't spoken to him since entering the lab, but Richie knew the other youth's eyes hadn't left him the entire time they had been in here—nearly two hours. Richie was doing his best to ignore him.

Finally, he decided that he would have to change the positioning of the telescoping metal arms—make the zap traps too top-heavy to fly straight once they were thrown. He'd be able to compensate if he was asked to provide a demonstration, and the traps would still work fairly well if whoever was throwing them had time to concentrate and aim. Richie knew from experience, though, how difficult it was to hit a moving target…in a battle, the doctored traps would be next to useless.

A soft shuffling sounded from behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder to see that Static had hopped up on one of the cleared tables a few feet away, and was idly tossing a loose circuit board from hand to hand. He was still staring intently at Richie.

Resolutely, Richie turned back to the pieces of metal in front of him, his brain shifting into automatic as he began assembling the zap trap. Briefly, he considered making a few zap caps…but quickly
realized how dangerous that would be. Dangerous, and foolish. It would be nice to have a few of the electrically charged grenades, but the risks outweighed the benefits. For one, they wouldn't do a damn thing against Static. Secondly, if Static realized the lethal potential of the weapons, Richie had a feeling the danger for this world's Sharon and her crew in the sewers would be even greater. And if this Static wanted this world's Sharon and her people out of the picture, it was a safe bet that Richie wanted to do everything in his power to prevent that. At least zap traps wouldn't kill. He was so glad he had opted not to combine the two weapons into one. It wouldn't have been difficult, and with as powerful as the remaining metahumans were, it made sense.

"Good thing Virgil talked you outta that, Foley."

His hands slowed a minute as he thought of his friend. He was sure Virgil was fine. Virgil had to be fine. If anything happened to his friend... He shut his eyes and hung his head, taking a deep breath. He tried to picture Virgil, to see his friend's smile, to gain some reassurance from the thought. Of course he could imagine the other boy, thanks to his photographic memory, but it was hardly reassuring. The image was his Virgil for all of a second, and then morphed into Static. The other Static, the darker Static, the Static that had-

"So, how did you get to be a bang baby? My Richie wasn't at the Bang." Richie was startled out of his musings by the question. He turned around slowly to find Static still staring at him, his chin propped up on one fist. Richie tilted his head slightly, considering. He really didn't want to remind this other Static of Virgil's presence in this world...but Richie might be able to weasel some information about Virgil's whereabouts or condition.

He just prayed he wasn't about to find out that Virgil had been captured, as well. Or worse...

"I wasn't, either," he said shortly, carefully. "I was with...I was with my world's Virgil, right after, though. He hadn't changed clothes, and I got exposed to the Bang gas that way."

"At the old junkyard...I couldn't wait to show Rich what had happened to me," Static said softly, a faraway look in his eyes. Richie didn't comment, merely waited silently. Static didn't go on, though, about the Bang in this world, or about Virgil. Maybe that meant they hadn't caught his friend. Richie fervently hoped it was so.

Static was silent a few moments longer, and then a soft click sounded from somewhere on his body. With an annoyed huff, Static reached around to his back and pulled a small two-way off of his belt. "What?" he barked into the radio.

"—Hey Boss, Talon needs to see you. Somethin' about patrol routes." Shiv's slightly manic voice sounded on the other end of the broadcast. Static raised one eyebrow, and the annoyance on his face deepened.

"I'm busy. Tell her to check in with Deimos."

"—Uh, she already did that. He told her to ask you.—"

Static's eyes narrowed, but he hopped down off the table. "I'll meet her in the lounge. Five minutes."

"—Right-o Boss-ma—" Static clicked off the broadcast, ignoring the rest of what Shiv had been saying. Richie had turned back to his dud zap traps during the exchange, and now he heard the other boy move up close behind him. Static said nothing, but Richie felt the weight of the youth's gaze on his back like a physical thing.

Then Static reached up and lightly brushed his fingers over the back of Richie's neck, just at the
nape. It seemed both tender and threatening at the same time. Virgil often touched him in such a manner, but this Static...this wasn't merely a touch. Power danced against his skin, and Richie wasn't sure if this Static was trying to intimidate him, or simply warning him to behave.

"Later, Rich," Static murmured, and then he was gone.

Richie didn't relax for a full five minutes after the door had hissed shut, expecting Static to come back. It didn't happen, though, and gradually he allowed himself to let his guard down. He wasn't so foolish as to think no one was watching him...but it would be harder to tell what he was doing on camera than if someone had actually been in the room with him.

Quickly, he moved to one of the other piles and gathered up a few loose circuit boards. Most of them were outdated and useless, but there were three that were in perfect working order, and exactly the right size for what he had in mind. He glanced up at the security cameras once more, assuring himself that he had plotted their angle correctly...and let his whole armload slide from his hands and to the floor, as though he had dropped them in his haste. He knelt down and gathered them back up again.

When he stood, the three useful boards had been tucked securely into the waistband of the sweatpants he was wearing.

He proceeded to the table with the zap traps and dumped the burnt out boards on the tabletop. If nothing else, they would serve to help throw the weight of the traps off. He worked for another few minutes, and had nearly completed the first dud trap when he felt a new set of eyes on him. His hands stilled on the metal casing, and he slowly turned around towards the door.

The ghost-dog was back, watching him.

He let a shudder wrack through his body, and quickly turned back to the zap trap. He was pretty sure the dog was just supposed to watch him. As long as he didn't make any funny moves, it would leave him alone. He hoped. Sighing, he pressed a hand to his forehead, rubbing at the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses.

"You look like crap."

Richie's eyes snapped open and he looked to the left. Deimos had appeared, a plastic bag dangling from his hand as he leaned against the wall next to the mist mutt. Richie hadn't even heard the door open. "Focus, Rich, focus! You slip up like that while you're working with Backpack..." He shifted himself back into the beaten role, hunching his shoulders a bit. "What an astonishing coincidence. I feel like crap," he muttered.

Deimos tossed the bag to him, and he caught it automatically. "Fresh bandages and antibiotic cream. You need me to fix you up again or not?"

Again? So that meant...Deimos had been one of the ones helping him before. He was a little relieved Static hadn't seen him naked. "I can do it."

Deimos jerked his head towards the door. "There's a clean shirt in your room, too. I'll bring lunch by shortly."

Glancing at the work table, Richie pushed his work away from the edge. He'd been sore most of the morning, ever since Static had reopened his wounds. Some Tylenol would be good, and he'd left that in his 'room' by his bed. At least they were taking care of him. He walked to the door, slightly surprised when Deimos didn't move from his position. "You're not coming?"
Deimos slanted a look at him, eyes glowing red. The man said nothing, but the threat was blatantly obvious. Swallowing loudly, Richie ducked out the door, Phobos at his heels. Obviously, they were confident that he was broken, or that they could keep him in line with threats...threats he knew were far from idle.

He shifted one hand to his middle, as if he were trying to rub the pain of the cuts on his stomach away. The hardness of the pilfered circuit boards against his fingers was reassuring, somehow. They'd work much better than the cannibalized parts from the scanners he had repaired Backpack with. He'd have to wait for nightfall. He didn't think Phobos would be his constant companion...a psychic manifestation of this intricacy had to take a lot of concentration and energy. Odds were in his favor that they'd rely on security cameras in his 'room' during the night hours, when broken little prisoners were supposed to be sleeping.

He knew Backpack would know what to do when he signaled it. Backpack wasn't precisely an artificial intelligence, yet, but it was damn close. It could work out problems and reason out solutions. It would handle the security system in Richie's room, and then he'd have free reign to repair his invention fully. After that, he could turn his full attention to getting himself and Virgil home.

He could play them as well as they could intimidate. Brute force wasn't everything...especially when one was up against a very determined super-genius. Everything was falling into place, and he'd prove that brains outdid brawn every time.

Chapter End Notes

Wonderful art to go with this chapter: www.deviantart.com/view/16220246
Chapter 17

Silence reigned in the hallways of the floor Static had claimed for his own, broken only by soft, even breathing. Static himself sat huddled just outside his door, staring straight ahead into nothing. Some distant part of him was aware that he had been sitting thus for hours, that the sun had risen, and people would be expecting him downstairs soon. That part of him, though, was drowned out, completely eclipsed by one pervading thought.

"I killed him."

It echoed through his head, an endless, looping din that blotted out everything else. He couldn't speak, couldn't move, couldn't feel...could only let the thought wash through his consciousness.

"I killed him."

Somewhere there was a dim memory of screaming his rage and pain out into the silence of his rooms, of loosing all the power within him against anything he laid his eyes on. There was a memory of collapsing amidst the rubble that had once been his living space, of staring at the door to Richie's room and knowing that the other boy was lying on the bed...cold and still. He vaguely remembered racing out of his rooms, away from the sight of the destruction, away from the smell of smoke...and collapsing in the hallway.

"I killed him."

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Richie was supposed to see...to understand. Static had spent so long looking for him...had tried so hard to find him, to make sure he was safe, protected. Richie was supposed to understand that, to realize how much...how much—

'I love you, Rich. You have to know that. I love you.'

'I don't want this, Virg. Maybe we could've...maybe before...'

"I killed him."

They were supposed to be together...like it had been since Richie had moved to Dakota. Richie was supposed to be his. Richie was his...always had been, always would be. Richie was supposed to realize that. Why hadn't he? How could Richie have chosen his sister and her people over him? Richie was his.

Richie was dead.

"I killed him."

Suddenly, he was shaking. His whole body trembled, and he felt bile rising in the back of his throat. He swallowed against it, struggling to regain control. He was never out of control...but he couldn't stop shaking. Richie was dead and he couldn't stop shaking. Slowly, painfully, he drew his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them tightly in an effort to still the tremors.

"I didn't mean it."

The words echoed hollowly in his ears. There was no one there to hear them...and the one they were directed to would never hear anything again.
He buried his face in his knees, trembling so violently he felt as though he might shatter into pieces. A soft, tortured sound filled the hall.

"I didn't mean it," he said aloud again, the words hitching on a strangled sob.

"I killed him."

Deimos was no stranger to life in a gang.

Oh, he wasn't like Shiv, or Puff...who he was pretty sure had practically cut their teeth on a set of brass knuckles and a .38. He wasn't even like Static or Talon, who had started gravitating into the various organizations in Dakota when high school had proven to be lacking what they felt they needed. The Bang, though, had changed all that.

Hell, the Bang had changed everything.

The Bang had made falling in with one of the rapidly-formed gangs of metahumans a necessity...for companionship, for understanding, for protection, for a place to sleep at night. He didn't particularly need the first two, but the latter two had been damn hard to come by on his own. So...the gangs. He'd thrown in his lot with Ebon, first.

Life under Ebon's leadership hadn't been easy or pleasant. It had all been about survival. He'd thought that was the best he could do, and had more or less resigned himself to it. Ebon's gang was harsh, but it was better than running around alone, unprotected and vulnerable to attack.

And then Static had made his power play.

Uniting the groups and posses that had sprung up into one force, proclaiming himself the Big Name in town and crushing anyone who dared to say otherwise. Ebon had been one of those few. It hadn't been pretty. He'd lasted longer than the others, but eventually, Static had run him out of town. Deimos neither knew nor particularly cared where the shadow-man had disappeared to.

After the last big confrontation between Static's gang and Ebon's, Static had offered him a place in his cadre. Deimos had accepted.

On the whole, life got a hell of a lot better after that day. From skulking around in half-destroyed, abandoned buildings, to the comparative luxury of Static's base. From kowtowing to Ebon's vanity and ambitions, to commanding respect and power in his own right. In the three months since he had joined Static's crew, he'd seen his life completely turn around...he was rapidly coming to think joining Static was the best decision he had ever made.

Even if the day to day details sometimes got tedious.

Ebon hadn't been particularly organized. A lot of their activities had been Ebon calling the shots as he saw them. Static held small daily meetings, and even a large weekly gathering. It was more like a business in some respects, but then, when one controlled an empire, some amount of administration was required.

Currently, he was waiting for said weekly gathering to begin. The entire band had assembled in the lounge, as was their custom, and every available seat was taken...save for those directly next to Deimos. The other bang babies still tended to keep their distance from him, wary of his power. That was fine by him.

Deimos propped his feet up on the table in front of him and leaned his chair back against the wall...
an old habit from his days with Ebon. Keeping one's back to a wall had been a necessity with that bunch of people...made it harder for someone to stick a knife in it. He shrugged out of the leather trench he wore, well aware that with so many people in the room, it would quickly get uncomfortably warm.

"Static's running late."

Deimos glanced to his side. Of all the members of Static's gang, Talon was the closest thing he had to a friend. They often worked together, shared similar responsibilities, and neither of them had much use for the rest of their compatriots. It made for a...mutual respect if nothing else. She kept her distance from him, it just tended to be less than the three feet all the other gang members gave him. He shrugged faintly. "It's his party."

"Yeah, but he's late, late. He's never been this late." Talon's feathers ruffled a bit. "Something's up."

Deimos looked out across the crowd. The people were starting to get restless, but no one was daring to leave. "Think he's testing us?"

"For what? Besides, not his style."

Deimos nodded. Patience was definitely not one of Static's virtues. "How late is he?"

"Almost half an hour."

Deimos frowned faintly. Static demanded each member of his gang be punctual, and while the leader himself wasn't always on time, he was never this late. Sliding his legs off the table, he straightened his chair and stood up. "Come on." He headed towards the elevators, ignoring the stunned stares.

Talon followed. "Deimos," she hissed, "what're you doin'?"

The elevator doors opened immediately after he pushed the button and he got in, waiting for Talon to join him before hitting the top floor. "Seeing what's up."

"Are you kidding? That's Static's floor!"

"So? He never said we couldn't visit."

"No one goes up there!"

"I'll take the rap." He shrugged and leaned against the wall. "Look, you said something's up."

Talon slumped in the opposite corner of the elevator. "I didn't mean we should go to see him," she muttered sullenly.

Deimos merely raised an eyebrow at her. "So why'd you bring it up?"

Talon scowled and focused her attention on the numbers above the door.

He didn't really understand their fear. He'd been training in Static's personal gym just one floor below Static's bedroom. What difference did one floor make? It wasn't like there was a threat hanging around that anyone who went to the top would be fried. Hell, the only threat Static had made was of dire consequences should anyone mess with the blond teen hanging around up there.

"You're going first."
“You’re, oh, so kind.” He rolled his eyes as the doors opened; and they stepped onto the floor. He’d never been up there, but right off the bat he could tell something was...off.

Talon narrowed her eyes and took point despite her threat to make him go first, shifting effortlessly into her role as the patrol leader. Silently, Deimos shifted to a position just behind her shoulder.

"Be ready," she said quietly. He glanced askance at her.

"For what?"

"I don’t know." Her feathers ruffled nervously, though, and Deimos silently reminded himself that there was no way someone could get to the top floor without anyone noticing.

"Which room is his?" He glanced over at his companion, frowning when she didn't respond. "Talon?"

"You smell that?"

Deimos inhaled deeply. "Smoke...a fire?"

She nodded.

"Does he like to barbeque?" The joke fell flat, and he coughed softly. "Which room do you think is his?"

"I don’t know." She moved ahead of him, turning a corner down the hall.

A sudden flap of her wings had Deimos running towards her position. "What is-" He stopped the question when he reached her. They’d found Static. Their leader was sitting against the wall outside his open door, half dressed in the costume he usually wore, with a dazed look on his face. Deimos could swear there were tear tracks on his face, but that was impossible. Static didn't cry. He waited for the teen to acknowledge them, but nothing happened.

He and Talon exchanged nervous looks, and Talon shifted slightly closer to their prone leader.

"Boss?" she asked softly. Static neither moved nor spoke, merely stared straight ahead with his hands lying limply in his lap. Deimos had never seen Static like this before. He glanced at the open room, then to Talon. Neither said anything, but they both slowly entered the room, leaving Static slumped against the wall.

"Oh shit," Deimos swore softly.

Talon was taking in the damage as well. "What happened? A fight?"

"With who?" An unsaid 'or what' hung in the air. Obviously, whatever it was, Static had either lost his temper, or control of his power. The place was trashed. They'd be lucky to salvage anything from the room. The coffee table lay on its side, its glass top shattered into fragments. The couch had been upset, nearly all the screens on the security wall had been cracked or shattered completely, and the windows had been blown out. The heavy curtains hung in shreds, and the ceiling was charred and blackened in several places.

The smell of smoke and burnt out electronics hung heavy in the air. Beneath that was the scent of burnt fabric...and something else. It was an odd odor...very, very faint, and yet unavoidable. Whatever it was, it turned his stomach.
Talon stepped over the remains of the coffee table, still eyeing all the damage. "I've got a bad feeling, Deimos." She ran a feathered hand over the burnt out television screens. "What if... whatever's still here?"

A good question. "You check that side, I'll check over here." He pointed towards both bedrooms. "Screech if you need me."

"You too."

A quick look in the kitchen area Static had installed revealed nothing. In fact, the damage seemed minimal on this side of the suite. There were a few charred holes in the wall...but nothing had been shattered or destroyed. A quick two steps and the door to Virgil's personal sanctuary was opened to reveal...nothing. It looked perfectly normal. The bed was even made. "Odd..."

"Deimos!"

He was running across the room before she finished calling his name, his eyes flaring scarlet. Talon was standing frozen in the door the door to the suite's other bedroom, one hand against her mouth. He skidded to a halt beside her, confusion blossoming within him as he realized there was nothing attacking her.

"Talon?"

"Madre de Dios," she gasped. Then she turned and sprinted across the room, into the kitchenette. The sounds of retching reached his ears.

He stepped into the room warily, his eyes darting to the left and right. The room was completely dark...the curtains tightly drawn. The smell of smoke was not so heavy in this area...but here the indefinable odor that had lurked in the outside room was stronger. It was almost familiar, and yet he couldn't identify it...a sickly sweet, burnt smell. It was strange. He stepped further into the room, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness, and noticed for the first time that the bed was occupied.

"Hello?" The person didn't move, didn't even respond. He couldn't see enough in the darkness, so he flicked the light switch. Nothing happened. He huffed to himself and moved along the wall towards the windows, searching for the curtain cord. When he found it, he yanked the curtains open, allowing the early morning sunlight to stream into the room.

He really wished he hadn't.

There wasn't someone sleeping in the bed...it was a corpse.

The body had obviously been gently arranged on the bed, the eyes closed, and a sheet drawn up over the chest. He recognized the source of the strange smell though...burnt flesh. Human flesh. Deimos swallowed heavily as he took in the sight of one of the body's wrists—charred a nearly solid black, the burn in the shape of a handprint. Jerking his eyes away from the grisly sight he focused on the face. It looked familiar...the singed, longish blond hair, the glasses—Foley. Richie Foley. Of course. Who else would have been up here?

Deimos had met the boy only once...a chance encounter the previous week when the blond had been exploring the upper levels. They had barely spoken...Deimos well remembered what Static had threatened to do to anyone caught harassing the youth, and had quickly left him alone.

And now the boy was lying dead in Static's room.

A soft sound behind him alerted him to the fact that Talon had returned. He glanced back at her. She
did not look well, her gaze darting everywhere but the bed. "Static, he..."

Deimos didn't need her to paint a picture. It didn't take a genius to put the pieces together. Putting an arm around Talon's shoulders, he helped her out of the room, though it was more for his benefit than hers. Once outside, he practically dropped her so he could head for one of the busted out windows. He focused on the skyline of Dakota as he breathed deeply.

Static had killed Richie. Static had killed the person he had gone to such incredible lengths to protect...the person he had declared was not to be hurt under any circumstances. Static had killed him. Deimos shook his head. No, that couldn't be the case, that wouldn't be the case. Static was practically catatonic...

An accident.

He didn't care if it was the truth or not, but that's what he'd believe. It was an accident, and nothing more. Taking one last deep breath he stood up and turned around. Static hadn't moved from his position just outside the main door for all they knew, the teen had been there all night and Talon was leaning against the doorway, staring down at Static worriedly. Deimos raked his hands back through his hair and shook his head, crossing the room to stand beside Talon in the doorway.

"We...we need to take care of this."

He glanced up at Talon's soft words, a frown furrowing his brow. "Huh?"

"You and me. We need to take care of this." Her voice was shaking, and she still looked as though she wanted to throw up, but when she met his gaze, he saw only determination. Deimos looked back down at the crumpled form of their leader, and swallowed heavily.

He owed Static, owed him more than his life. Static had saved him, had given him a new life. If he could repay even a fraction of that debt...

"Right." He shut his eyes and concentrated. The gang still had to be run. The underground was still a threat, patrols had to be organized. They could handle that. Between his powers, and Talon's already established authority in the group, they could enforce orders. They had to maintain the status quo, pretend everything was normal.

If word got around that Static was vulnerable, things would go to hell in a hand basket.

He opened his eyes in time to see Talon turn her head away from him. "Are you okay?"

"Not really."

"Well...we'll deal with that later." He ignored her frown. "All right... I'll get Static to another room. Can you deal with the mess?"

"I can't move him." Deimos didn't have to ask which 'him' she was referring to.

"I'll handle the...I can take care of the body." He'd have to get help, but he could handle that. "Can you at least make a clear path for me?"

"Yeah...yeah, I can do that. I'll handle patrol schedules. Everyone usually gets them from me, anyway. I'll be out most of the day...you'll have to handle any problems that come up here."

He nodded shortly, and Talon took a deep breath. They could do this. They owed Static their loyalty...they could handle this.
"What do you think happened?" If possible, Talon's voice became lower, more subdued.

"An accident." He hadn't meant for his voice to be so hard, but obviously his conviction in the statement was transmitted loud and clear. Talon's eyes widened in surprise.

"Are you just gonna ignore what he did?"

He shook his head. "But...there's a time." He glanced to the catatonic teen sitting by the door. "Now's not it."

She sighed. "I never expected..."

"I don't think he did, either." He hesitated, then reached out and touched her shoulder. They weren't ones for physical contact—she especially hated it—but she didn't flinch away. "We have to cover this, cover for him. I owe him that much." He paused. "We owe him that much."

Talon nodded, and shrugged off the hand. "I'll get the worst of this. You take care of Static...then tell the patrols to meet me on the roof in an hour." She turned and headed back into the room proper, leaving Deimos in the doorway to the hall. He hesitated a moment, before stepping out to kneel in front of Static.

Gently, he reached out to shake Static's shoulder. The reaction was immediate, an arm clasping his and the other reaching forward and grabbing the front of his shirt. Deimos knew that with Static in this state, it would be easy to break the hold, but he didn't try. "Static." The glazed eyes turned towards him. "Static..." The hand on his shirt fell back to its limp position. He wasn't totally out of it, but it was a start. Deimos moved to pull the other youth to his feet, but Static's soft voice stopped him.

"I-I killed him." The words were whispered, a harsh, choked gasp...as if they had to be forced out. The simple sentence was layered with pain, and for a moment, Deimos thought he saw tears glittering in Static's eyes. "I killed him," Static whispered again, brokenly.

"We'll take care of it." He and Talon and whatever muscle he needed to dispose of the body. Onyx was too talkative, but he had a few ideas who he could ask to help him.

"I...I didn't mean to."

"I know." He got a firm hold on Static and hauled the teen to his feet. "I know."

"But he was mine," Static continued softly, seemingly oblivious to Deimos's efforts to get him to move. His eyes clouded over slightly. "He was mine..."

Deimos didn't want the full story. He was happy with the ignorant view. Maybe one day, but right now, he'd stick with not knowing. "Can you walk?" Virgil went silent again, once more simply staring off at something. Deimos huffed, but when he nudged Virgil forward, the teen was compliant. Slowly, he maneuvered his leader down the hall, to another set of doors, which opened easily for them.

A quick glance inside revealed it to be an office space that Static had not got around to converting yet. There was still a huge desk dominating one wall, several filing cabinets, and a large couch. The place looked a bit dusty, but it would have to do. He eased Static into the room and led him to the couch, gently pushing him down onto it. "Get some rest. We'll handle...everything."

An arm struck out and grabbed his shirt again. Deimos was pulled forward, and for a moment, Static's eyes were clear, awake. "Don't let them get him. He's mine; I don't care what he said. He is.
Deimos wasn’t sure who Static was talking about, but he wasn’t going to push a man already on the edge. He simply nodded. "I won’t, I promise." That seemed to be the right thing to say. Virgil released him and sank back down on the couch, once more re-entering his zombie state. Deimos shook his head, left the room, and headed back down to the lounge.

The metahumans were surprised when he re-entered the room. Obviously, they hadn't expected to see him again. All the better. He cleared his throat, catching their attention. He mustered the most authoritative voice he could. "Static's preoccupied with a...special project." He saw a couple of the gang members wince. "Today, use the same patrol routes and groups as last week. Talon will meet you all on the roof in an hour. A new schedule will be set by tomorrow."

He eyed the group as they talked amongst quietly amongst themselves, gaze eventually landing on four reptilian members of the gang. "You four." He couldn't remember their names, but then, they might not survive if they couldn't keep their mouths shut. "You're with me. We have a project of our own Static wants done."

"How do we know this is for real, mon?"

"Yeah, what if you're just playing us?"

Deimos eyes took on a red glow as he sought out Kangorr and Shiv. Shiv had taken Deimos's vacated seat, moving it closer to the table so that he could prop his feet up and lean back in the air. Without a word, Deimos walked over to him, grabbed the back of the chair, and yanked it backwards, spilling the other bang baby onto the floor.

"You can take my word for it, or you can take...his." Phobos appeared next to him and he expended the extra effort to make Phobos's manifestation just slightly taller he was. Only Onyx was at the canine's eye level. "Your choice." It was a bit of a bluff. He didn't know how much fear he could cause before they overwhelmed him, but he was counting on their not wanting to find out, either.

It didn't fail. The assembled metahumans dispersed quickly, going to do their patrols or maintenance of the building. Only the four reptilian creatures remained, all of them ducking their heads and shielding their eyes. He willed his familiar away. "Static has a special job for us. You'll do it, and you'll keep your mouths shut about it. Otherwise, you'll answer to Static...after I'm done with you. Clear?" The four quickly hissed their ascent, and he jerked his head to the elevator. "I'll explain after we get there."

He stepped in the lift and waited for them to join him. They'd put two and two together, but he'd make sure they didn't spill the answer.

He owed Static.

Virgil let his eyes stray around the table in the War Room, trying to gauge everyone’s reaction to the plan Adam had just laid out. Sharon looked more or less neutral, staring at the map on the table with her arms crossed over her chest. Carmen was shaking his head, and Aqua Maria looked unsure. Hotstreak, however, was nodding thoughtfully and Virgil already knew Adam was behind him.

"This is nuts," Carmen said, a few moments after Adam had finished speaking. "You do realize that, right?"

"Just might be crazy enough to work," Hotstreak countered, a feral grin lighting his face.
"You think everything's crazy enough to work." Maria did not sound as though she thought that was a particularly good quality.

"Aw, c'mon, babe…that's why you love me." A wet slap and a hiss of steam sounded, as Maria slugged Hotstreak across the shoulder. "We could do it, Maria…you know we could do it. It's not like we've never gone goon-baiting."

"Mmm, yeah…some girls' boyfriends take them out for dinner and dancing. Mine takes me out to harass psychopaths."

"You have fun." Hotstreak covered one of Maria's hands with his own, eliciting another puff of steam. Maria snorted derisively, but some of the doubt vanished from her face. Virgil sighed softly to himself in relief….apparently Maria was willing to follow Hotstreak's lead.

"You really think you can take out any of the patrols Static has around the garbage chutes?" Sharon said at length, still staring at the map.

"Yeah. I'm sure," Virgil replied instantly. He'd take on the other Static's entire gang if it would help him get to Richie.

"And you can protect Tech?" Sharon's voice was hard, and now she raised her gaze from the maps, pinning Virgil with a harsh glare. Virgil tried not to take it personally.

"I promise, I'll protect him," he said solemnly.

"Sharon…you really think this is worth it?" Carmen asked softly.

"We do need the recon," Sharon replied, shortly. Carmen raised one eyebrow, and 'hmmmed' softly to himself. Sharon's gaze darted over to the animal-like bang baby.

"You got something to say, say it." Her voice was considerably softer when addressing Carmen than when she had addressed Virgil. Carmen shrugged and folded his hands on the table, glancing around at each of his companions in turn.

"Look…I wanna rescue this other Richie as much as the rest of you. I do." He focused on Virgil. "Kid, I promised to help you, too, and I will. I just don't know if this is the smartest way to go about it, though. I mean…there's a lot that can go wrong, here."

"There's always a lot that can go wrong," Adam argued.

"Have you guys considered what Static might do to the kid if they figure out what's going on?" Carmen said quietly, and Virgil had a feeling that they had just reached the crux of Carmen's reluctance. The expression on the scaled, tan face was one of pure pain and worry. For the hundredth time, Virgil was reminded of the fact that these people had lost a dear friend in their Richie…in the most horrible way that Virgil could imagine.

A tense silence settled over the table, and even Hotstreak seemed subdued by that thought. Adam ran a hand over his eyes, while Virgil clenched his fists on the tabletop. It was Sharon who broke the silence.

"Virgil? It has to be your call. I agree with Adam…Static wants something from this other Richie. He won't kill him." Out of the corner of his eye, Virgil saw Hotstreak wince; and a few pale wisps of smoke rose from the other youth's body. Virgil frowned softly, but Sharon's voice drew his attention again. "Static could hurt your friend, though…hurt him a lot. Are you willing to risk that?"
Virgil swallowed convulsively, the image of the other Static using his powers against Richie rising in his mind's eye again. His stomach turned, and cold fear unfurled within him. Could he really put Richie at risk like that? Virgil took a deep breath, sending a silent prayer winging heavenwards that he wasn't about to make things worse for his partner.

"I-I know what he might do to Richie," Virgil began slowly. "But I also know if we don't do this, a lot of people could get hurt—or killed when we actually go in to rescue him. Including Richie. I don't want that…Richie wouldn't want that. I think this is the best chance we have to keep other people from getting hurt. If…if it was me—I'd want Richie to do whatever he had to, to make sure of that."

He looked up to see an expression of surprise flit across Sharon's hard features. It was gone in an instant, though, and she rose from her seat. "All right, then. Put it to a vote. Adam?"

"Let's do it," Adam replied grimly.

"Hotstreak?"

"I'm in."

"Maria?"

"I'll go, as well."

"Carmen?"

"I still think you guys are nuts…but what the hell? I'm used to it. I'm in."

Some of the knot that had gathered in Virgil's stomach eased with each affirmation. He'd known they were committed to helping him, helping Richie….but to know they were actually going to do something, now… It helped ease the fear. Sharon nodded decisively, planting her hands on her hips.

"All right…Hotstreak, go find Tech, see what he and Brickhouse got out of Kangorr. Tell him what we're planning. Take Virgil with you…might as well get that meeting over with, now. Make sure he knows this is strictly volunteer."

"No problem, Boss."

"Adam, you and Maria see if you can round up some ground support. Again, volunteer only. If Tech agrees, we'll move first thing in the morning. Questions?" Silence greeted her, and she nodded once. "All right, let's get on it, people."

"C'mon, Sparky," Hotstreak muttered, rising from his seat and jerking his chin towards the door.

"Dude…don't call me that," Virgil answered, rising as well. Hotstreak merely smirked at him. Virgil nodded gravely at Adam, trying to convey with his eyes alone how grateful he was for everything the older man had done for him, before joining Hotstreak at the door. They exited into the base, Carmen following closely behind.

"Dinner crowd will be showing up, soon…I'd better get the food on. Virgil, you can eat in the kitchen with me, if you want." 'Away from everyone else' went unsaid, but was well understood. Virgil smiled tentatively.

"Okay man, that sounds good. Thanks."
"Great…I'll see ya later, then, Kid. Francis, try not to scare Tech."

"I don't scare Tech!" Hotstreak protested. Carmen rolled his eyes heavenward, and shook his head. Without another word, he brushed past them, heading for the mess hall. "Overgrown basketball," Hotstreak muttered, almost affectionately. "C'mon, let's go."

Hotstreak began ambling down the main 'street,' hands shoved deep into the pockets on his vest. He didn't try to make further conversation, and Virgil took his cue from the other bang baby. There were more people out now, and Virgil stuck close behind Hotstreak. The refugees all gave them wide berth, and Virgil could hear frightened whispers following in their wake.

The subway station Sharon and her people used as a base had been large to begin with, but the people had actually knocked out and rebuilt some of the walls, enlarging it still further. Here and there they had cut into the tunnels of the sewer system, so that there were at least a dozen heavily reinforced exits out into the tunnels themselves. Virgil estimated the entire place's size as maybe that of a high school football field.

The mess hall, and the area where Virgil had had his 'fight' with Hotstreak made up one corner of the base, and the holding area where Kangorr was being kept had been in another corner. Hotstreak was leading them to the other side, the corner diagonally opposite of the mess hall. It looked as though it was the most remote area of the base…there were no shelters set up here. There were, however, several generators that looked as though they were the end result of one of Richie's more Frankenstein-esque brainstorm, and a few tin tool sheds…the sort that could be bought and assembled on one's property.

"Hang on a minute…I don't want Tech freakin' out if he's handling something explosive," Hotstreak said suddenly. Without waiting for Virgil's response, he jogged towards the smallest of the tool sheds, leaving Virgil to simply wait.

He glanced around curiously. This obviously had once been this world's Richie's territory. Virgil could see the stamp of his friend's counterpart everywhere. The newer-looking touches were unfamiliar to Virgil, plainly Tech's handiwork, but most of it was Richie through and through. The myriad of cables and wires in the ceiling were thickest here, and still more of the strange little robots were marching over the pipes, performing functions Virgil couldn't begin to guess at.

He saw Hotstreak enter the tool shed, and assumed he must've found this world's Tech. Idly, he wondered how long it would take Hotstreak to prepare Tech to meet him….and if Tech would be willing to help them. He didn't know his world's Tech well enough to make a guess either way. Hopefully, this Tech had been a friend of the other Richie, as well.

While he waited for Hotstreak to call him, he stepped over to the largest tool shed, the one closest to him. Curious as to what exactly the sheds contained, he pushed the sliding door open, wincing as it emitted a rusty squeak. Someone really needed to oil the track. He pushed the door open enough to slip through, calling a spark of power to his hand when he realized there were no lights in the shed.

Several bare bulbs were hanging from wires in the ceiling, and it took him only a moment to find the switch beside the door. Nothing happened when he flipped it, though. Odd…he would've thought this area would be the most well maintained of all. With a shrug, he sent a flare of power into the bulbs themselves. They stuttered to life, casting a bright florescent glow across the small room.

It was a lab. Workbenches had been built along the walls, and each surface was literally covered. There was a set of Bunsen burners and glass beakers on one, several power tools for working with metal on another. Bits of wire, glass, and scrap metal littered every horizontal surface. The walls themselves had been covered with corkboard, and the corkboard covered with post-its, handwritten
notes, and diagrams. Half-finished projects were everywhere...things Virgil couldn't even begin to
guess the purpose of. A single, wheeled chair rested in the center of the room, turned towards the
door as if someone had gotten up in the middle of things, and would soon return.

Except that someone never would.

The lab was also covered in a thick layer of dust...and Virgil recognized the sprawling handwriting
on the notes. He was standing in the middle of the alternate Richie's lab.

Slowly, he moved forward, taking in everything. The half-finished projects, the diagrams, the film of
dirt that covered it all. The place hadn't been touched. No one had done anything here since the other
Richie had left.

Since the other Richie had died.

Virgil felt as though he had walked into a tomb. Everything was laid out in such an achingly familiar
pattern. He could probably say where each tool was stored, open any drawer of the storage cabinets
beneath the workbenches and be entirely correct in naming their contents. This was Richie's
workspace. He felt as though he was intruding on something...something special and private, but he
couldn't bring himself to go back out.

He walked softly over the dusty floor, idly trailing his fingers along the edge of the workbench
nearest to him. The sick fear rose up in him again as he let his gaze wander the lab. This Static had
murdered his Richie...had killed his best friend. What was to stop him from doing the same to
Virgil's Richie?

Unbidden, the image of Richie's lab in their gas station base rose in his mind...covered with dust,
unused. Bile tried to rise in his throat, and he swallowed hard, leaning forward to brace both hands
on the only clear space on the workbenches. He breathed shallowly, trying to quell the nausea rolling
in his stomach. It would not happen. He wouldn't let it. He grit his teeth and opened his eyes again,
still pressing down hard on the workbench with his hands.

An odd splash of color on the corkboard in front of him caught his eyes, and, desperate for a
distraction, he focused on it. It was tucked into the bottom frame of the corkboard, behind one of the
many diagrams pinned up, just one, glossy corner peeking out. A photo, Virgil realized. Still feeling
as though he was going through a tomb, but too curious to help himself, he reached up and gently
plucked the photo from the wall, holding it up to the light.

His knees nearly gave out on him and he stumbled backwards, collapsing onto the other Richie's
chair. His own face stared up at him from the photo, his face and Richie's. They were standing in the
city park, wide grins on their faces, their arms thrown about each other.

It wasn't him and Richie of course...it was their alternate counterparts, but Virgil felt a chill go
through him, staring at the picture. He remembered that day, that photo. Richie...his Richie carried it
in his wallet, had for the past three years. Virgil kept a copy of it on top of his dresser.

Had the other him done the same? Would the other him be the type to keep a memento of a great day
spent with his best friend?

He stared down at the face of his alternate self, noting the hardness in his gaze, an edge that Virgil
knew was absent from his own. The clothes were the same as his own, the hair, the smile, the
expression...but there was something very, very alien in the eyes of his counterpart. Something that
screamed danger. Had the other Richie seen it? Had he tried to stop it?
Had the other Richie clung to some hope of helping his friend...was that why he had held on to this picture? Or had he simply kept it as a memory?

"Sharon won't let anyone touch this place."

Virgil startled violently, leaping out of the chair and whipping around. Hotstreak was standing in the doorway of the shed.

"Wh-what?"

"He used to spend hours in here...Maria and me would have to drag him out just to make him eat. He was always trying to think up ways to make it better down here, safer." Hotstreak's voice took on an almost fond tone, and he smiled sadly. He moved forward into the lab, his gaze trailing over the half-finished projects the same way Virgil's had. "Sharon keeps saying she'll clean this place out...let Tech have a crack at it. But she never does. It's like she's still waiting for him to come back. Hell, I think we're all still waiting for him to come back. I think we always will be."

"I...I'm sorry, man...I didn't mean to— I was just—" Virgil trailed off helplessly, and Hotstreak shrugged, leaning back against one of the workbenches. He tilted his head as he noticed what Virgil held in his hand. Without a word, he stretched out one hand, palm up, and Virgil handed the picture over, avoiding the other's eyes.

Hotstreak sighed softly as he raised the picture to the light. Real sadness flitted across his face, the same pain Virgil had seen in Carmen's expression in the War Room. "Shit," Hotstreak whispered, hurriedly putting the picture facedown on the bench behind him. He shook his head, and Virgil felt as though he should say something. No words came, though.

"I never thought Static would actually hurt him, y'know?" Hotstreak's gaze shifted to some point over Virgil's shoulder, and Virgil had to wonder if it was him the other bang baby was actually talking to. "I thought I knew Static...knew what he was capable of. I let Rich talk me into leaving him there, let him talk me into convincing Sharon...'cause I thought Static would never really hurt him. Stupidest thing I've ever done." Hotstreak lowered his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

"From...from what Adam said, you guys didn't have much of a choice," Virgil said awkwardly.

"There's always a choice," Hotstreak answered, his voice rough.

"I...Sharon and Adam don't blame anyone..."

"Sharon and Adam don't know the whole story." Hotstreak glanced up at him again, and the darkness in his gaze sent a new chill through Virgil. "Static and me...we ran in the same gang before the Bang. I knew things about him even Sharon didn't know...and Richie told me a lot more than he was willing to tell Sharon, when he was with Static."

"What do you mean?" Virgil asked slowly, carefully. A bitter smile twisted Hotstreak's lips.

"I guess Adam told you that Static made sure all his gang left Foley alone, right?" At Virgil's nod, Hotstreak continued. "He did the same thing before the Bang. Anyone even looked cross-eyed at Foley, Static would get in their face."

"Adam said they were friends, here, too." Virgil wasn't sure where Hotstreak was going with this... wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"They were." Hotstreak closed his eyes, briefly. "Static wants something from your friend. My guess is he wants your Foley to help him find us...take out the base. I don't think that's all he wants,
though." Hotstreak raised his head suddenly, pinning Virgil with his gaze. "Richie…our Richie…told me some things about Static when he was in that place. Things Static did…or said…or, or tried. Not much—he never gave me details—but the way Static used to talk about Foley…the way he used to watch him…didn't take a genius to fill in the blanks."

Virgil felt his eyes growing wider and wider with every word Hotstreak spoke, his own mind rapidly coming up with what Hotstreak wasn't saying. He shook his head back and forth, unable to even speak the denial that wanted to burst out of him. No. Just…no. He couldn't accept it…couldn't accept that any version of him would ever—could ever think of…

But, this Static had killed his Richie.

"Did he…you think—" Virgil couldn't say the words. He couldn't say them. They lodged in his throat like a boulder, too horrible to voice. Hotstreak's gaze darkened further, a swirling mixture of pain, anger, and sick, sick guilt.

"I don't know." The other bang baby's voice dropped to barely a whisper. "I'll never know. I think that's the hardest part. Not knowing how much Foley really went through, for us. I…you know…I hope Static found out he was feeding us information and killed him straight off. Isn't that awful? Foley was my friend…but…I hope…" Suddenly he surged upwards, straightening from his slouched position.

He whirled around and slammed one fist into the wall behind him. The impact echoed hollowly around them, and a flare of fire briefly surrounded his body, before he visibly reigned his power in. His fists slammed down to meet the workbench itself, and the other youth seemed to tremble with anger. "I should have saved him. He saved my life; saved Maria's life…I should've been able to save him," Hotstreak choked out, his back still to Virgil. His shoulders slumped suddenly, and he seemed to shrink in on himself. "I should never have left him there, not knowing Static the way I did. But…but I never thought he'd really hurt him." Hotstreak fell silent.

Virgil was stunned into silence, himself. He'd never have suspected Hotstreak was capable of this kind of feeling, the deep friendship and loyalty Virgil was witnessing. In Virgil's world, Hotstreak had only ever really cared about himself. To see this version…it was strange as hell. The strangeness, though, was quickly lost under more urgent matters…like what Hotstreak suspected the other Static might try to do to Richie.

When Hotstreak turned back to Virgil, he seemed to have regained control of his emotions. The guilt and anger were shuttered away, beneath a veneer of calm.

"Tech says he's in. He's got something that he can use to get a read of the building…he'll bring it up to dinner so you two can talk strategy. He…he also thinks we should wait a couple of days." Virgil's reaction was immediate.

"Wait? No! We can't!" Not after what Hotstreak had just said…how could he even suggest stalling?

"Whoa, whoa…chill. Look, I don't like it any better than you do…but Tech brought up a good point. Static's people use a rotating schedule for patrols. It's pretty random, but we can usually get a bead on who's going to be in what part of the city. If we wait a couple days, Static's heavy hitters should be out in the city when we storm his base. It'll be easier for you to take out Shiv and Boom than Onyx and Talon, won't it?"

"Yeah…unless he keeps all his best people around the base to keep us from trying to get to Richie!"

"It's still a risk worth taking. Look…we give it two days. Then we go in, find out where they're
keeping your Foley…and then we hit that bastard hard and fast. We'll get him back.” The conviction in Hotstreak's voice left no room for doubt.

Virgil wished he could feel as confident.

He nodded, though, clenching his fists by his sides. Two days…surely Richie would be all right for forty eight hours. "Please, let him be okay."

He tried to calm the panicked racing of his heart, to think objectively. How well could Richie take care of himself in hostile territory? Virgil's first instinct was to ignore Tech's advice…to storm in and put their rescue plan into motion as fast as possible. Especially with what Hotstreak had told him. And yet…and yet…

"Rich can handle himself." Virgil wasn't sure why he felt the need to voice his thoughts. Perhaps he was trying to reassure himself. "He's…he's the smartest person I've ever met. He'll…he can handle himself." He had to trust that, had to believe it. At his words, Hotstreak perked up a little, looking as though he had just heard something he didn't particularly care for.

"You guys are pretty tight, huh?" Virgil looked up in surprise. Hotstreak's voice was perfectly neutral, but there was a curious light in his eyes and a slight furrow to his brow.

"Richie's my best friend," Virgil replied, without thinking about it.

"That all he is?" Hotstreak's tone had cooled into an icy calm that was at odds with everything Virgil knew about the other bang baby.

"Huh?" Virgil asked, taken aback. "Why're you asking?"

"'Cause I wanna know." Hotstreak straightened and moved a bit closer to Virgil. Confused, Virgil found himself answering automatically.

"Richie…he's…he's been my best friend since we were kids. Hell, I probably wouldn't have made it that first year after the Bang without him." His gaze turned inward, and his voice took on a soft, faraway tone. "He's my partner…the best partner I could've ever asked for. We've been through everything together." Shaking his head, he refocused on Hotstreak. "Why? What's it to you ?"

Hotstreak glanced down at the photograph on the workbench, still facedown. "You're still Static. You're a lot nicer, I'll give ya' that…but you're still Static."

"So?" What the hell was Hotstreak getting at?

"So…just what do you want from your Foley?"

"What?"

"Static used to sound like that when he talked about Foley…like you just did. Talked about him all the time."

"Don't go there, Hotstreak," Virgil's voice had dropped, taking on a slightly dangerous edge.

"Static was Foley's best friend, too. I don't think Foley ever saw it coming, what happened after the Bang. We rescue your Foley…how do we know the same thing couldn't happen?"

It clicked. Virgil felt himself go cold all over, as he realized what Hotstreak was angling at. He thought Virgil could hurt Richie…could do to his best friend what the other Static had done to his
Richie. He stood frozen in that moment for a few heartbeats, and then white hot anger swept through
him. He was nothing like this other Static…could never be like this other Static.

And he'd never lay a hand on Richie, like that. Not the way Hotstreak thought the other Static had
done.

"Don't go there, Hotstreak!" Virgil warned again. He could feel sparks of power building at his
fingertips, wanting to be loosed. The lights above them began to flicker wildly as Virgil lost his focus
on maintaining them.

"Static waited years to get ahold of Foley. Wanted him for years. I should've seen it. Richie…Richie
told me what Static tried to do to him…and I can guess what he didn't tell me. I let it happen, once…
and I'm never gonna know how much that bastard hurt my friend before he killed him. I'm not gonna
let that happen again!" Hotstreak's voice rose with each word, until he was shouting.

The power erupted from Virgil before he could stop it, sparking between his fingers and dancing up
and down his hands. Hotstreak's eyes widened in alarm, and the other youth scrambled backwards,
backing against the workbench. Virgil grit his teeth, struggling to pull the electricity back into
himself. The flaring light dimmed down into tiny sparks dancing between his fingertips. Hotstreak
relaxed fractionally, but the air around him had begun to waver with heat.

"I'd never hurt Richie. Never. He's my best friend, my partner, and I'd never hurt him!" Virgil
growled. He pulled the power back into himself entirely, realizing how dangerously close he was to
destroying the fragile trust he had earned. "Never!"

The other boy relaxed still more as the electricity around Virgil vanished, and the temperature in the
tool shed became noticeably cooler. Hotstreak regarded Virgil critically for a few moments, and the
low level suspicion the other youth had been watching Virgil with was upped a few notches.
Silently, Virgil cursed himself for letting Hotstreak get to him. Hotstreak nodded once, though,
shortly.

"Good to know." He pushed Virgil lightly, forcing the other boy to stumble back a few steps. Then
he straightened. "Now, c'mon, Tech's probably already left for the mess." He left the lab without a
word, not looking back.

Virgil stood frozen for a moment, breathing hard. The electricity crackled around his fists again,
before he regained control. He watched the retreating figure of Hotstreak, unable to quite process
what had just happened. He shook his head…this place just kept getting stranger, and stranger.

Then, he moved forward to follow, gently closing the door of the other Richie's lab behind him.
Chapter 18

An eerie, red glow had enveloped one side of the room, throwing the other half into even deeper shadow. It highlighted every object in the room in stark relief. In the late hours of the night, well past midnight, it might have made the room an even more depressing prison. The walls seemed closer, the ceiling lower. The night seemed to be pressing in on the glass of the windows, pitch black.

Richie lay as still as possible on the bed, curled up on his side away from the glow, trying to keep his breaths slow and even. There could be no large movements; he couldn't even risk subtle shifting. He had unwisely tucked one arm beneath his body, and the limb was starting to tingle with the pins-and-needles feeling of cut off circulation. A nervous sweat sheened his face, a few tickling beads of it running down the side of his nose. He desperately wanted to wipe it away, but he couldn't. Not yet.

The glow swept throughout the entire room…and it was the most comforting thing Richie had seen since arriving in this hell-hole.

Abruptly, the glow dimmed, and a soft, metallic scraping sound reached his ears. He waited silently for his eyes to adjust to the renewed darkness, and then rolled over, throwing the thin blanket off his body. He snatched his glasses from the nightstand and shoved them onto his face, before tumbling out of the bed.

In the weak light provided by the moon, he could just barely make out the rounded shape skittering straight down one of the walls, accompanied by wonderfully familiar clicks and hisses of hydraulic joints. He dropped to his knees as Backpack made its way across the floor to him. The robot stopped in front of him, half crawling onto Richie's lap, extending its sensor eye toward him.

Richie grinned to himself as the same red glow that had swept the room traveled over his body, and a distinctly affronted 'beep' erupted from Backpack as it read the damage that had been done to him. He patted the robot's casing affectionately.

"I'm all right, Backpack. What's the status on security in here?" Backpack moved off of him, backing up a few paces, and the flat dialogue screen slid neatly out of a side compartment, rising to Richie's eye level on one of Backpack's many mechanical arms. He read the information quickly, wishing for the fast interface his helmet afforded him. It was so much easier just to get the data directly from Backpack…English was terribly inefficient.

As he had suspected, the other Static had this room wired for video and sound. The TynaCorp building had a very sophisticated security system…but it had been the work of moments for Backpack to hack into the live feed of the cameras in Richie's room. Whoever was watching him was in for a long night…all they would see was an endless loop of Richie lying in bed, seemingly asleep. He smiled grimly to himself.

"Good job, buddy. All right, let's get you back up to full power." He pulled the stolen circuit boards out of his waistband as Backpack obligingly popped its outer casing open. The cannibalized scanner circuits he had made repairs to his invention with earlier had held out remarkably well…but he'd feel better with Backpack up to full speed. The processing capability of the new boards was much greater than his patch job.

Though Deimos had made sure Richie had left all tools in the lab, it was not actually an involved process to replace the circuit boards. He even managed to get through it with only one singed fingertip. As Backpack fired the final few functions that had been affected by Richie's patch job back up to full power, Richie sat back on his heels, considering his next course of action.
He bit the inside of his lip, mind racing. The other Static had not reappeared after leaving Richie in the lab that day…but Richie had not been alone for the rest of the afternoon. After bringing him something else to eat in his room, Deimos had escorted him back to the lab and there he had stayed until nearly sunset, working on the faulty zap traps. The man had not stayed in the room with Richie the whole day, but when Deimos was gone, Phobos was there.

It had been the ghost dog that had followed him back to the room, and it had stayed with him well into the night. Finally, nearly an hour after Richie had pretended to fall asleep, it had vanished. He had been right…the security cameras were all he was going to have to contend with during the night hours. Hacking the video in the room was a start, but he needed more control.

He didn't dare try to run between his prison and the lab at night…even with Backpack controlling what his watchers actually saw on their screens, it was too risky. Backpack would have to be his hands, eyes, and ears at night. He would have to orchestrate his escape from this room. He itched to order his creation to start secreting him the parts he would need to start the device that would take him and Virgil home…but he couldn't. Not yet.

"Backpack, you're gonna be going on a little trip tonight. I need a full schematic of the building…security systems, air ducts, fire escapes. Everything. Re-route all cameras into your sensor array." If someone came within fifty feet of the door to his cell during the night, he would know about it. An affirmative 'whir' answered him, and he smiled again, a touch shakily.

He was loathe to waste even a moment on anything other than getting the hell out of this place. However, he needed the recon…it would be foolish to try anything until he knew the full scope of what he was facing. Slowly, he got to his feet, and then sank back down to sit on the bed. Backpack's sensor eye retracted and the little robot scurried back to the edge of the wall beneath the air duct.

Richie watched his invention scurry back up to the opening, pulling the grating up with one arm and vanishing quickly, lost in the darkness. Some of the calm and security that Richie had felt evaporated as soon as he lost sight of Backpack, and he once again began worrying at his lower lip. A few hours for Backpack to get the lay of the land, so to speak…that wouldn't be so bad. He'd lose this night for doing anything overt to get out of here…but he'd make it up quickly. A few days…that was all he needed.

Richie sat up waiting for Backpack to return from its scouting mission, and figuring out plans for the supplies he would need when he made his final move. It was slightly more difficult than usual, doing the calculations and planning the diagrams entirely in his head…but even if he had had his notebooks available, he wouldn't have been able to write anything down. Too risky. Still, he was a super-genius…and photographic memories were handy things.

Backpack finally returned to him just before dawn, bearing full schematics of the building and reporting that Richie now had control of what the security cameras saw and heard in his room, the lab, and the hallway. Further hacking would have to wait…he was confident in Backpack's ability to get around whatever firewalls the security system had, but there was no sense in tempting Fate.

He finally crawled into the bed just as the sun was starting to peek over the skyline outside the windows, Backpack safely hidden back in the air duct. He wasn't going to delude himself into thinking that what he had accomplished made him safe, here. He had a feeling that every moment he spent here, he was in more danger than he had ever been in his life. But he did feel…more able to handle that danger. His plans were working…they would see him through.

It seemed as though he had barely closed his eyes for some real sleep, when the sound of the door hissing open startled him awake. He sat up on the bed, groggily fumbling for his glasses on the
nightstand. He shoved them onto his face and blearily focused on the door, momentarily fuzzy with sleep.

He was instantly alert when he saw who was standing in the doorway.

Static was leaning casually against the doorframe, dressed in black jeans and another black tank. He grinned toothily at Richie, and tossed a bundle of cloth across the room to land at the foot of the bed.

"Get dressed. We've got work to do," Static ordered shortly. Richie swallowed heavily, and then scrambled off the bed, grabbing the clothes as he went. He scurried towards the bathroom, carefully keeping his head ducked and his shoulders slightly hunched. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Static smirk at his reaction.

He stripped out of the shirt he had slept in quickly, and checked the wounds beneath the bandages. They had all scabbed over nicely, and he figured it was probably safe to take the gauze off. He left it on, though, in case Static decided to play any more of his power games. He dressed in the plain t-shirt and jeans he'd been provided, and then took a moment to splash cold water on his face and just gather himself.

"A few days, Foley. That's all you need. You can handle this for a few days. V's still out there. He's coming for you...you just gotta be ready when he does," he assured himself. Then, steeling himself, he stepped out of the bathroom again.

As soon as he did, yet another object came flying at his head. Reflexively, he ducked away from the shiny metal, only to hear it smack harmlessly against the wall behind him. He heard Static laughing quietly as he looked down to find a packet of Pop-Tarts lying on the floor.

"Breakfast. Frosted blueberry with sprinkles, untoasted, right?" Richie froze for a moment, blinking up at the other youth in surprise. Static's smirk widened, and he shrugged. "They were always his favorite."

Richie didn't have to ask who Static was talking about. Suppressing a shudder at the thought of this Static knowing anything about him, even what kind of breakfast food he preferred, he leaned down and scooped the packet up. Not for the first time, he wondered where the other him was in this world. Had he been smart enough to leave Dakota? Static had said this world's Richie Foley hadn't been on his side when he'd taken over the city. Richie couldn't help but wonder if the other him was somewhere down in the sewers with this world's Sharon. He hoped so. If anyone would be willing to give Virgil a chance to explain their situation, it would be another Richie Foley.

Static stepped away from the door and jerked a thumb over his shoulder into the hallway. "Let's go, Rich."

"What do you want me to do?" Richie asked carefully, moving with seeming reluctance towards the door. For a moment, Static's perpetual sneer took on an odd light.

"For today...just more toys. Later...well, we'll see."

Moments later, Richie found himself back in the lab, laboring over faulty zap traps. To his mild surprise, Static stayed, instead of calling Deimos or Talon to watch him. He settled into the work quickly, and tried to cast his mind on other things.

Richie always enjoyed it when Virgil stuck around the gas station to watch him work. His friend would sit on the couch and do homework, or read a comic, or just watch Richie as his hands flew over whatever piece of equipment had caught his fancy. They could go for hours without speaking,
Virgil having long ago learned that distracting Richie while he had a power drill in his hands was not the best idea, but Richie was always aware of the other boy.

It was...comforting, that sense of familiarity and companionship that had become such an important part of his life. He always felt calmer, felt his thoughts become clearer, when Virgil was around. It was a phenomenon Richie had never been able to figure out—after all, Virgil was not the most calming individual around—but one he had come to accept and even depend on.

At the present, though, the feel of familiar, dark eyes upon him was anything but comforting. He ignored it as best he could, concentrating on the zap traps. Once he had worked out the best way to reposition the weight of the telescoping arms, it was fairly easy to put them together. He'd made about thirty so far, and Static had not told him to stop. As he worked, he couldn't help his gaze darting over to the piles of equipment that would hopefully get him and Virgil home.

He was a bit sketchy of the actual theoretic part of it. Yes, he had read papers on the theory of multiple dimensions...but very few of them had any serious science to back them up. Yes, he understood quantum mechanics with a thoroughness that would have had many physicists green with envy...but he'd never done anything like this before. He knew, technically, what he had to do.

It really wasn't all that different from transporter or wormhole technology, he thought. All he needed to do was get enough power going to punch a wormhole through dimensional fabric.

"So...how long's it gonna take you to make enough of these things for all my people?"

Virgil would be able to handle that, Richie was fairly certain. The hard part would be directing the wormhole to their actual home dimension.

"Hey...I asked you a question."

Richie had some ideas on that, as well. The energy output to create a tesseract would have had to leave a signature. If he could get a read on that signature, it shouldn't be difficult to track the rift their travel had caused back to its origin point...home. After all, energy could change forms, but it couldn't be destroyed. The signature would exist, no matter what.

"Richie?"

If he could make sure his wormhole would follow the energy signature of the bang baby that had brought them here—

"Hey!" Richie was jerked out of his thoughts as Static's hand suddenly descended on his shoulder, whirling him around. He gasped softly, dropping the zap trap he had been working on.

Static's eyes were narrowed, darkened still further with anger. The other youth tilted his head, regarding Richie with an intensity that sent Richie's pulse skyrocketing. The grip on his shoulder loosened, slightly, the hand stretching out so that Static's thumb was resting in the hollow of Richie's throat.

"Where were you, just now, Rich?" Static asked, his voice soft and deceptively gentle.

"I—I, nowhere. I just...get lost in my work, sometimes," Richie said hastily.

"Really? You that into workin' for me?" Static smiled nastily, and there was a new glint of suspicion in his eyes. Richie swallowed convulsively, and racked his brain for something to say...anything to defuse the situation. Nothing was forthcoming, though. After a few moments of tense silence, the
hand at his neck skimmed down his arm. Static leaned closer, reaching around behind Richie to pick up one of the zap traps on the table.

Richie breathed a bit easier as Static backed away, turning the zap trap over and over in his hands. He still held himself tense, though, watching Static warily. The other boy stared back at him, tossing the zap trap from hand to hand now.

Abruptly, a flare of light surrounded his left hand, and the zap trap stilled in mid-air, hovering between them. "So, these are looking good," Static said conversationally.

Richie remained silent. The smile on Static's face abruptly vanished and Richie tried to brace himself. "How they work again? Like this?"

The electricity disappeared, and the zap trap dropped into Static's palm. In the same instant, it seemed, Static flung the projectile at Richie. Some detached portion of Richie's mind noted that the trajectory of the weapon was already off—spinning perfectly out of alignment, as he had intended it to.

Trajectory didn't matter so much when your target was less than three feet away.

He threw himself backwards automatically, the middle of his back striking the edge of the table he'd been working at, but there was nothing he could do to avoid the trap. It struck him just below the breastbone, the viselike grip of the metal arms wrapping around him and pinning his arms to his sides. The momentum of Static's throw and his own unsuccessful attempt to avoid the trap carried him back onto the table.

He heard the crunch of electronics beneath his body, a thunderous clatter of metal falling to the floor as he landed. His careful piles were thrown into disarray. He hissed loudly as his shoulder blade landed hard on a particularly sharp bit of scrap, and anywhere the metal arms weren't already binding him, bits of equipment were digging painfully into his body.

Despite the fact that he knew it was futile, he couldn't help struggling against the bonds. He stilled, though, as Static stalked forward to loom over him. Without preamble, the other youth boosted himself lightly onto the table, landing on his knees, straddling Richie's legs.

Static braced his hands on either side of Richie's shoulders, and leaned in close over the prone boy. The ugly, smug smile was firmly in place, and Richie couldn't help the thrill of fear that unfurled within him. He knew, logically, that Static wanted him alive for now…but it was difficult to remember that fact with this twisted distortion of his friend looming over him.

"Thinking of trying to run, again, Richie? Tryin' to figure out if you can make it to the front door this time?" Static sing-songed. Then, all pretense of playfulness vanished from his face. "It's not gonna happen. You know that." One hand came off the table to grip Richie's chin lightly, tipping his head back so that Richie had no choice but to focus on Static's face. "But maybe you want a reminder? Another trip down to the basement?"

Richie let his eyes widen, and didn't have to fake fear at those words. He wasn't sure he could handle another…session like that, another round of torture at the hands of someone who looked like his dearest friend. He sucked in a harsh breath.

"N-no," he gasped out. Static's eyes narrowed further, the suspicion growing. "So then, what're you thinking so hard about, hmm?"

Richie's mind raced, scrambling for anything that would throw Static off this train of thought. "It's…
it's how my power works. I...I *see* how everything fits together and...and everything else just—goes away." It wasn't entirely a lie. Richie *did* tend to get lost in thought...just never on something as simple as a zap trap. He deliberately shrunk away from Static's touch as much as he could (not that his desire to do *that* had to be faked), and tried to school his expression into one of barely controlled panic.

"C'mon, c'mon, *buy it,*" he urged silently. After an interminable, agonizing few moments, Static leaned back up, letting go of Richie's chin to brace himself as he leapt down from the table.

Richie lay still as Static stared down at him, holding his breath until at last, the suspicion eased and the arrogant confidence sparked back into Static's gaze. "Hmm. You really *were* keeping secrets from me," Static muttered at length, his voice quiet and distant. Richie didn't think Static was talking to him, for some reason.

The moment passed quickly, though, and Richie again found himself the focus of one of Static's odd, slightly maniacal grins. The power flared around the other boy's hands again, and Richie found himself jerked upwards into a sitting position as the glowing field surrounded the metal of the zap trap holding him. Static stepped closer, reaching up to wrap one hand lightly around the side of Richie's neck.

"Try to stay with me, here. I don't like having to ask things twice," Static purred, soft and dangerous. Richie shivered slightly as the hand slid down his neck, brushing over his collar bone and chest, before coming to a stop over the release on the zap trap. Static paused, the grin widening as he took in Richie's reaction. Finally, though, he pressed the release, and the binding arms fell away, retracting into the metal casing.

Richie sighed in relief, and automatically rolling his arms forward to rub the circulation back into them. The motion was arrested, however, when Static suddenly gripped both his wrists, the pressure just shy of painful.

"I mean it," he said, his voice still soft and yet laced with steel. Richie swallowed yet again, and averted his eyes, nodding briefly. Static released his hold on Richie's wrists and finally stepped back. He moved back to the other worktable, boosting himself up to sit cross-legged on top of it. "Better get this place cleaned up," he said.

Richie hesitated for a brief moment, before scrambling off his own table top to begin taking stock of how much had been scattered and damaged. The cuts on his stomach and chest were stinging again, but it didn't feel as though any had broken open. He didn't need to look to know that Static was watching his every movement.

"A few days. *That's all you need...a few days.*" He could do it.

After all...what could happen in a few days?

Deimos was a patient man. He had a very long temper and it took quite a lot to upset him. There was very little that could break through the eerily calm mask he projected. Losing one's temper, although cathartic, rarely improved the situation, and so he rarely wasted his energy on it.

"Hey c'mon, man! I was just gonna play a little joke!"

Shiv was one of the few people who could get under Deimos's skin...and he did so with annoying regularity. Deimos's reactions to this habit had become regular fare in the various betting pools that circulated through the gang...last he had checked there was a jackpot of over five hundred dollars
going to the person who correctly guessed the month he finally snapped and killed the purple-haired bang baby in.

"Not a very funny joke," he said quietly, tightening his grip on the other man's belt.

"Oh come on. It would've been great! I was gonna let ya go!"

Deimos eyed the zap traps lying on the roof. The ones they'd confiscated from Foley's double...the ones Shiv had stolen from a storage locker that was supposed to be off limits to everyone but Static, Talon, and himself. "I see." He let his grip loosen a bit. "And is this 'fun'?"

Currently, Shiv was half-dangling over the edge of the roof, only Deimos's grip on his belt keeping him from plunging over.

"Well...the head rush I'm getting is wild," Shiv giggled.

Deimos rolled his eyes, then made ready to let go of the crazy metahuman.

"Deimos!" He glanced up at the sound of his name, irritated at being interrupted. Talon swooped down on them, returning from patrol. She landed on the roof next to him, glancing between Deimos and Shiv, one eyebrow raised in inquiry. "What're you doing?"

"What's it look like?"

She sighed. "What'd he do this time?"

"Broke into a storage locker, came up here to get you and me trapped in those things." He jerked his chin towards the grenade traps lying beside them. "He's a waste of space and a pain in my ass. Pick a reason."

She let out a warning cluck. "Deimos..."

He glanced from her to the giggling Shiv, then hauled the man back to the roof and threw him into a heating vent. He smirked at the loud clang Shiv's head made on impact...just a little. "You never let me have any fun."

"Static thinks he's useful...for some reason." Talon's expression suggested that she didn't understand what that use could be any better than Deimos did. Deimos snorted softly, crossing his arms over his chest and focusing his gaze on the skyline of the city.

"I think he lost a bet," he muttered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Talon's mouth twist into a small smile. After a moment, though, the smile melted away.

"Static doesn't have you on babysitting duty?" she asked, moving forward to lean against the roof-ledge, resting her arms on top of it.

Deimos frowned, though she couldn't see him, turned away from his as she was. "No. He wanted to keep an eye on Foley himself."

"He wasn't at the morning briefing."

"I know," Deimos muttered.

"Been a while since he skipped one." Talon's voice was perfectly neutral, but Deimos nonetheless caught the undercurrent of inquiry, of faint worry.
"I know," he repeated, not offering anything further. After a moment, Talon huffed quietly to herself, and pushed herself back off the ledge. She walked over to the devices Shiv had been playing with and picked one up curiously.

"All those things Static took off of him…and that, that robot I saw in the junkyard. I've never seen anything like them," she said after a moment, turning the thing over in her hands.

"If Static has his way, and you know he will, we'll all be seeing a lot of what this kid can do."

"Think he'll really cooperate? You know what Static will want him to do, eventually."

Deimos shrugged. "I don't see that he has much of a choice. We're holding all the cards, here. And if he decides he doesn't want to cooperate…" He trailed off, not needing to paint a picture for her. She shook her head, shuddering lightly.

"Do you—do you think the other one could have made things like this?" she asked at length, still playing with the device in her hands.

"If the other one was a bang baby…I think I'm beginning to see why we can't flush the rats out of their base."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Speaking of the rats...what's up out in the city?"

Talon ceased her fidgeting and finally turned to face him, staring off at a point over his shoulder with a faintly disturbed expression, her brow furrowed. "Nada," she said shortly. "There's nothing going on. No patrols, no supply raids...it's like they've disappeared."

Deimos frowned at that, narrowing his eyes in thought. "So, either they've finally decided they can't beat us, and are running away..."

"Or they're planning something," Talon finished grimly. Neither of them thought the former theory carried much weight. "You think that other Static is helping them?"

"I'd hoped they'd just kill him," Deimos replied. "But it's not a possibility we can ignore. If they let him live long enough to talk...they'd have to realize what a powerful weapon he could be."

"If that's true...he's going to try and rescue his friend."

"He'll fail," Deimos said succinctly, absolute certainty in his voice. Not only would the other Static be facing the incredible odds of the gang...but there was simply no way their Static was going to let his new toy go. "But he could do some real damage...especially if he's getting the rats organized."

"Should I start pulling everyone in?"

Deimos tilted his head, considering. "Static will want an explanation for that...we don't want the rats thinking they've got us on the defensive."

"How about shuffling the roster, then?"

"Mmmm...yeah, let the cannon fodder handle patrols for a few days." It made sense...keep their more powerful members close, to deal with anything that might come up in the base.

"Deimos! They're not cannon fodder," Talon reproved.
"You really think Shiv's good for anything else?"

As one, they turned their gazes on the metahuman still sprawled where Deimos had thrown him.

"All right…cannon fodder," Talon conceded.

"Thank you."

Talon chuckled briefly. "I'm going to take one more sweep around the south side. I'll have the new patrol schedules ready tonight."

"Sounds good," Deimos replied. Talon, however, did not take off. Deimos raised an eyebrow.

"Something else?"

"Static," Talon said quietly. "Deimos…he's not…you don't think he's acting—"

"Keep your eyes open," Deimos interrupted. It was a conversation they might have to have in the future…but not right now. Talon looked frustrated for a moment, before nodding silently.

"You too," she said. Deimos inclined his head…that went without saying. He watched as she hopped gracefully up onto the roof ledge, spreading her wings. Before she took off, though, she shot one final look at the prone Shiv. "He is still breathing, isn't he?"

"I'll take care of him," Deimos said, rolling his eyes. Seemingly satisfied with that, Talon took off, heading for the south side of the city.

As she flew off, the radio at Deimos's side squawked. He thumbed the broadcast on. "Deimos."

"--D, need ya' down in the lab.--" Static's voice ordered over the line. No explanation was offered, and Deimos didn't bother to ask.

"On my way." The radio went dead in his hand as soon as he had acknowledged. He clipped the radio back onto his belt, before turning towards Shiv with a grimace of distaste.

He strode over, and kicked Shiv lightly in the side, turning the prone youth over on his back. The purple haired bang baby moaned softly. There was already a goose egg rising on his forehead, but there was no blood. Deimos toed him in the side again, eliciting another moan. Shiv blearily opened his eyes, blinking up at Deimos owlishly.

"You still alive?" Deimos questioned.

"Ugh….Mommy?"

"Good enough." With that, he turned away, stopping to scoop the grenades off the ground before heading back over to the entrance to the building. Shiv would survive. That counted as taking care of him, right?

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Hours later, having left Deimos in charge of seeing that their prisoner got dinner and was escorted back to his room for the night, Static stretched himself out languidly on his living room couch. Propping his head against the armrest, he idly flicked a burst of power into the bank of security screens. Instantly, he was presented with views all over the building.

Unsurprisingly, things were fairly quiet. Most of his people tended to leave the base when the sun went down, if they weren't required to stay for guard duty. Onyx and Boom had a pool game going in the lounge; Puff, Nightingale, and Mirage were all in the kitchens scrounging up dinner; Talon
was perched up on the roof, reading, and Deimos was still in the lab, looking over the items Richie had made that day. Static knew that Phobos would be keeping an eye on Richie until the boy finally fell asleep for the night, at which point Deimos would allow the security cameras to take over.

Which brought him to his new favorite set of screens...the ones showing the feed from the rooms where he was keeping Richie. At the moment, the blond boy was in the small bathroom, washing the grease and dust of the day's work from his hands. Static tilted his head as Richie turned towards the shower cubicle for a moment. He sank back against the armrest in disappointment when Richie shook his head slightly and simply stripped out of the jeans he was wearing, leaving the bathroom in just a t-shirt and boxers.

To Static's mild surprise, a wide yawn split the boy's face as he made a beeline for the bed, skirting around the form of Phobos nervously. Static hadn't thought Richie had worked that hard...the sun had only been down for about an hour. He frowned as Richie crawled onto the bed, pulling the covers up over his head with a last, slightly frightened glance at Phobos.

Static growled to himself a bit as he lost his view of the other boy. What was the point of having the entire building wired for video if he couldn't see the one thing he really wanted to? Irritated, he sent another spark of power into the bank of screens, this time powering up the VCR.

He smiled as, for perhaps the hundredth time since it had been recorded, the scene in the cafeteria basement unfolded before his eyes. Every panicked glance, every flinch, every pained cry...his to enjoy again, and again, and again. He watched, savoring the expressions on Richie's face, the rich splash of blood against pale skin, the sounds of pain and terror ripped from Richie's throat. All of it, whether Richie knew it or not, bringing him further under Static's thumb, binding the other boy to him.

Abruptly, Static sat up, swinging his legs down and rising. A flare of electricity froze the screen, just as Richie fell from the wall, clutching at the cuts on his stomach. The scarlet splash of blood against the white of his shirt was startling, beautiful. Static stalked forward to rest a light hand on the image, tracing it gently.

He closed his eyes, and sighed softly. He would do things right, this time. Richie had left him, once...had chosen others over him. He wasn't going to let that happen, again. He'd been given an opportunity that shouldn't have ever fallen into his hands...should have been impossible for him ever to have. He had another chance...another chance to fix things, to make them the way they should have been.

"Mine," he whispered softly, into the stillness of his room. A contented smile, one that nonetheless had a dangerous edge to it, settled on his face. "Mine. And I'll make you see, this time. I'll make you understand."

"And what...just forget? Pretend it never happened? You really think you can do that?"

Static shook his head. "He's here...he should be dead, but he's here. I'm not going to lose him...I'm going to make sure I don't lose him."

"You can't have him, just like that. You know you can't."

"But no one tells me no. I always win...in the end, I always win." He pushed himself back from the screens and turned towards the only door in the place that was closed. Richie's room.

It had remained closed for almost two years, now.
Slowly, as he had many times before, he walked up to the door, reaching up one hand to stroke the smooth surface. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against the cool, metal surface. Things would be different, this time. He'd make sure of it.

Chapter 19

Static schooled his features into an expression of mild interest, as he listened to Nightingale prattle on about something or the other. The nighthbreed girl was his eyes and ears in the lower rankings of his gang, always keeping him apprised of what the others were doing…but there was only so much gossip he could stand before it started to bore him. He leaned back in his chair, regarding his other subordinates silently.

He, Talon, Deimos, and Nightingale were all seated at the large conference table set up in the lounge…a pre-dawn meeting of his 'inner circle' (meaning, the only underlings he had with more than two brain cells to rub together). It was a good way for him to keep track of the workings of his gang…and to keep subtle tabs on his most powerful associates. Not only was it tiresome to have to get up in the wee hours of morning in deference to Nightingale's condition…it was also incredibly boring.

He'd considered skipping the meeting all together. It wasn't as though his presence was required to talk about patrol schedules, supply inventories, and who was screwing who on their time off. Talon and Deimos were perfectly capable of dealing with anything that had to be taken care of. Still…he had already skipped the main morning briefing the day before.

Skipping meetings was not something he had ever made a habit of, except for those first few weeks after…well, it was not something he had made a habit of. It was the price of ruling by fear and force—one had to be ever vigilant. It was rather difficult to be vigilant if one was never around those one was supposed to be watching. He trusted Deimos and Talon, to an extent, but he knew better than to become complacent.

"So anyway, Puff told me…Static? Static? Are you listening to me?" Nightingale's slightly petulant voice brought Static out of his musings, and he looked up to see Nightingale had risen from her seat, hands on her hips.

"Huh? Oh, right…tell Boom he's got to stop making bets with Onyx if he can't pay up, and if I hear about it again, they're both going to have to deal with me," Static muttered, recalling the vague gist of what Nightingale had been reporting. Nightingale narrowed her eyes, pouting slightly, but sat back down.

Static turned his gaze on the other two occupants of the room, and found them already watching him. Deimos's expression was, as always, an unreadable, perfect calm. Talon, however, looked faintly uncomfortable. Static sat up and leaned forward, rested his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. He stared hard at Talon, until the young woman looked away, shifting awkwardly in her seat. Static turned toward Deimos, but the other man had already transferred his gaze to the tabletop where his hands were folded. Static sighed to himself…he hated guessing games.

"Anything else?" Static said laconically. Talon glanced furtively at Deimos out of the corner of her eye, before focusing on Static again.

"I want to hold off on switching the patrol rosters for the next few days," Talon said quietly.

"Why? Shiv, Boom, and Mirage have been on city sweep all week."

"I think we should keep Puff and Onyx here," Talon replied. Static frowned.

"I say again…why?" he asked, drawing out the 'why.' It was Deimos who answered.
"We haven't seen any activity from the sewers for two days. Not since your 'guest' showed up. Talon and I think they're planning something."

"So? They've tried 'things' before. There's not a damn thing they can do to us here."

"Not ordinarily," Deimos said. Static let out a breath in an annoyed huff.

"Would you stop with the fortune cookie routine? Spit it out," he ordered harshly. Deimos leaned back in his own chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

"We can't forget that this new Foley isn't the only one who showed up here."

"There's another you running around somewhere, Boss," Talon added.

For a moment, Static was silent, still. He had forgotten. In the sweeping rush of finding Richie…of taking him and bringing the other boy to his base…he had actually forgotten that Richie hadn't arrived here alone. Irritation at his own shortsightedness rose within him for a moment, but he shoved it aside. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

"You actually see the other one go down to the sewers?" He addressed Talon and Deimos, ignoring Nightingale for the moment.

"I ran him off your trail that first night. He was with Rubberband Man. I'd thought the rats would just take care of the problem for us and kill him…but if they thought they'd taken you out—"

"Oh, we'd definitely have heard about it," Static finished. "Damn." He pushed his tongue against the inside of his cheek and drummed his fingers on the tabletop, thinking.

The other Virgil Hawkins, if he had managed to convince Sharon and her people to help him, would no doubt be coming here eventually. Static knew that as surely as he knew his own name. The other him would be coming for Richie.

Static clenched his fists on the tabletop, fingernails digging into his palms. No way in hell this other Static was going to take Richie from him. He wasn't going to let that happen.

He tilted his head to one side, eyes narrowed, silently running through their options. He knew how Sharon and her crew thought...if they'd gone to ground it meant his sister was trying to gather their strength. The other him was a worrying factor, but Static was sure he'd be able to handle him. After all...they may have been the same person, but even their brief confrontation in the junkyard had convinced Static he was the stronger of the two. The other him had been hesitant to use his powers... weak.

Static shook his head slightly, bringing his attention back to his subordinates. A slow, crafty grin spread across his face.

So...the other him thought he could just waltz in here and take something from Static? Static would show him the error of that kind of thinking.

"Tell Mirage she's off all guard rotations...I want her concentrating on a—special project.

"Boss?" Talon questioned softly.

"Hey, they wanna start something up, let 'em. I'd hate to disappoint. In fact...I think this'll work out perfectly." A feral smile lit his features, and Talon and Nightingale suddenly found the tabletop very interesting. Out of the corner of his eye, Static saw a delicate shudder wrack Nightingale's frame.
"Anything else?" he asked. When all three of his subordinates remained silent, he slapped his palms down on the table with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Great! Get to it, then. Talon, tell Mirage I wanna see her before she goes to bed tonight. Today…whatever."

Talon nodded and rose quickly, leaving to inform the others of the patrol roster changes. Nightingale sauntered out with a long look over her shoulder at Static. Deimos remained seated. Though he said nothing, was not even looking at Static, Static knew the other man well enough to recognize that he had something to say. Curious, Static moved around to the seat beside Deimos, reversed it, and straddled it, resting his arms on the back.

"Something on your mind, D?" he asked casually.

"You don't seem all that concerned about that other you," Deimos replied evenly.

Static shrugged one shoulder, idly spinning the chair from one side to the other. "I'm not. I can take him."

"Are you sure? You two have exactly the same powers…the same strengths, the same…" Deimos trailed off as Static shot him a slightly dangerous look. "At any rate--it might not be as easy as you think. Especially if he's got backup."

"D-man…it sounds like you're doubtin' me!" Static said in mock-dismay, with just the barest hint of anger coloring his words.

"Hardly. I just think we need to be on our toes."

"We always are. That's why Sharon and her rat pack are never going to be more than an annoyance…I always win, D. Always." Deimos regarded him silently for a moment, before nodding his acquiescence. Static clapped him on the shoulder, and rose from the chair.

"Do you want me to go wake Foley up?" Deimos asked quietly, also rising from his seat.

"Nah, I'll handle Rich today. You just make sure everyone gets the message about sticking close to home for the next few days."

Deimos raised one eyebrow. "I thought you were going to take a swing through the east side today."

Static waved one hand through the air, vaguely. "Talon can handle it. After you're done with patrols schedules, tell everyone I want them down in the basement right after breakfast."


"Cause…I wanna show off some of our new toys."

Richie had long ago adjusted to a much shorter sleep cycle than he'd kept before his powers had emerged. Sometimes it seemed as though his mind literally would not let him waste time sleeping beyond what was required to recharge his body. These days, he tended to snap awake after only five or six hours, everything already in crystal clear focus and his brain racing with ideas he wanted to try out. It was highly convenient when he had a test…highly annoying when all he wanted to do was laze in bed on a Saturday morning.

Still, pulling two all nighters in a row with only a few short catnaps in between was pushing the boundaries of comfort. Especially with as much stress as he'd been under. He reached up and rubbed some of the gritty feeling out of his eyes, pushing his glass up off of his nose for a moment. It would
be a while yet before his concentration and dexterity started to suffer, but he just didn't like feeling
tired. Sleep, however, was a luxury that was going to have to wait.

He pushed his glasses back down and stared at the objects spread out on the workbench in front of
him. He'd waited about half an hour after Phobos had finally dematerialized for the night to summon
Backpack and send it on its first scavenging mission. It was time to get serious about getting the hell
out of this place.

The basic components of the machine dancing in his head were laid out before him, just waiting for
him to bring them together. He'd already constructed the casing…it hadn't taken Backpack any time
at all to weld the necessary scrap metal together into a box roughly half as large as an average
shoebox.

The easy part had ended there.

Richie pressed his lips together and plucked the most important part of his schemes out of the pile of
equipment. The deep blue, faceted crystal was about the size of a golf ball…a near perfect cut of
Lithium Triborate. In its previous life, it had been part of the satellite communications system of
TynaCorp, a laser focus that had allowed the company to beam information all over the world.
Richie was going to use it to cut a hole through the space-time continuum. Wouldn't that make a
lovely cover for 'Science and Technology Monthly'? He allowed himself a brief chuckle.

He knew it should work. By all his calculations the crystal was sturdy enough…he just needed a
large enough power source. That was where the hard part came in. He knew Virgil was probably
capable of generating a large enough charge. The problem was it would take a lot out of his friend…
a lot. That much power also ran the risk of frying the rest of the internal components if he didn't
shield them correctly. The device would be useless to them if he generated a wormhole, but
destroyed their capability of tracking their home dimension in the process.

Richie let out a soft hiss between his teeth. Any way he cut it…what he was trying to do was rather
like trying to build a space rocket out of spare parts lying around your garage. Beside him, where it
was crouched on the edge of the workbench, Backpack emitted a soft, interrogative *whir*. Richie
smiled briefly, without taking his eyes off the crystal he held between his thumb and his forefinger.

"I know, I know...just standing here looking at it isn't going to get anything done." It wasn't like he
hadn't done the impossible before. And, unlike the average citizen, he probably *could* build a space
rocket out of spare parts in his garage. There just had never been so much riding on his ability to do
the impossible. "I'll bet Edison never had to deal with this kind of crap," Richie muttered.

He lost himself in the familiar comfort of work, letting his mind wander where it wanted, directing
his hands. He let the worry, fear, and pressure of the stakes he was playing melt away and focused
solely on the device taking shape in his hands. Pieces fell into place almost of their own accord, and
with each piece, he felt his certainty growing. This would work. He would make it work.

The hours of the night waned without his noticing as his hands flew faster and faster over the metal,
circuitry, and wires in front of him. Before he knew it, he had the thing half-completed, and
Backpack was beeping insistently at him. He jerked himself out of easy rhythm of invention and
focused on the little robot, whose sensor eye was extended towards the door, waving back and forth.

"Shit," Richie gasped. He quickly swept the scraps and equipment he had been working with into a
small pile on the workbench. Backpack obligingly popped its storage compartment open and Richie
shoved the pile into the small space. "Get this stuff up into the air duct and cut the camera loop as
soon as I'm in the bed," Richie ordered. Lastly, he scooped the wormhole generator up and gently
turned it over to one of Backpack's mechanical arms.
Backpack leaped off the workbench and skittered for the wall beneath the air duct. Richie watched it for a few seconds, before shaking his head lightly and dashing over to the bed. He snatched his glasses off his face and placed them on the night table before sliding beneath the covers. He heard the grating on the air duct close behind Backpack and turned over onto his side, in a fair approximation of the position he had been in when Backpack had recorded the loop that his captors had been watching all night.

He tried to slow his breathing into something resembling sleep as he listened warily. He couldn't hear much through the door of his cell, but after a few moments, he thought he could make out footsteps approaching the room. He bit his lip and swallowed heavily, before settling more deeply against the pillow and feigning sleep. He didn't have long to wait.

He barely heard the hiss of the door sliding open this time, and felt a thrill of apprehension race through him. There was a whisper-soft rasp of footsteps on the bland carpeting of the room as whoever had entered crossed to the bed…but they were making an effort to be quiet. Through sheer force of will, he resisted the urge to try and brace himself, concentrating on keeping his breathing even, his body relaxed.

There was a sense of someone standing over him, of eyes observing him, and Richie had to struggle not squirm under the gaze. He heard the soft rustle of fabric on fabric as his watcher crouched down beside the bed, and then there was a feather-light touch against his cheek.

He forced himself not to recoil, forced himself to stay still, though he couldn't help the soft hitch of his breath. There was a soft chuckle, barely a sound, really, and Richie felt his insides clench. Static. It was the other Static next to him, touching him. Beneath the covers, Richie balled one fist into the sheets and concentrated on remaining still, though he wanted nothing more than to surge up and throw Static's hand off of him. He couldn't stand the other's touch.

At last, after a seeming eternity, the hand slipped from his cheek, and he heard the other Static rise. "Richie…c'mon, man, wake up." The voice was pleasant, almost tender, and it sent chills racing up Richie's spine.

Trying to ignore the skitters of unease, he made himself shift slightly, rolling over onto his back and pushing against the pillow with his head. The light laugh sounded again, and Richie blinked his eyes open, frowning. Because he knew Static was expecting it, he immediately flinched away, nearly rolling off the bed.

Static grinned in amusement and reached down, laying a hand on Richie's shoulder and arresting his movement. Richie stilled instantly, holding himself tense, and Static's grin grew larger, more self-satisfied. "Easy, Rich. Didn't mean to scare you." Which was a bold-faced lie, of course. "How ya' feeling today?"

Richie let his gaze slide away from Static's face and reached over to the night table, grabbing his glasses and sliding them onto his face. "I'm fine," he murmured, ducking his head down and sliding out from under the bed covers. He stood slowly, on the opposite side of the bed from Static, keeping his shoulders hunched, and his eyes on the floor.

"Good." Richie glanced up from under his lashes in time to see Static's eyes rake up and down his body, and the perpetual grin took on a predatory edge for a moment. "You need to hit the john?"

Richie frowned and shook his head, raising his gaze to meet Static's again. The other was watching him with an air of barely contained excitement, and Richie felt the unease rise a few notches. This didn't bode well.
"Good. Let's go." Static gestured towards the door, and Richie felt his frown deepen, glancing down at himself. He was still clad only in the t-shirt and boxers he had 'slept' in, and barefoot. Static shrugged. "This won't take long. You can come back and clean up after."

"After what?" Richie asked, warily.

"After we're done in the basement."

The tiles were ice-cold against his bare feet. The air conditioning had been turned up to high, and the chill air brushed against his skin in an endless, circulating stream. It was nothing compared to the cold that had gripped his insides. Richie tried to remain calm, to think logically. He couldn't let himself give into the apprehension, the fear that was rocketing through him. Static guided him across the room, stopping them almost in the center. All the lights had been turned on this time, illuminating the cavernous area…the basement cafeteria Static had had him tortured in.

Static's entire gang was gathered in the room…just as they had been before. Only Talon and Deimos appeared to be missing.

An icy sweat broke out over his body, and he clenched his fists by his sides to keep from shaking. Against his will, his gaze was drawn to the wall Static had pinned him against…where Static had sliced into him with the knife. Static was wearing the same twisted grin that had adorned his face as he had struck Richie.

The other meta-humans were milling about, keeping their distance from him and Static, yet shooting curious glances their way. Abruptly, Static stepped away from him, clearing his throat. Instantly, all the other bang babies fell silent, and shuffled a little closer. Richie glanced over at the other boy, and saw him pull something out of his back pocket.

It was a zap trap. One of the faulty zap traps Richie had built.

For one terrible moment, Richie felt as though the floor had dropped out from under him. His heart rate skyrocketed, and he felt himself go pale. He'd been found out. They'd realized he had rigged the zap traps.

"Oh no. No, no, no, no! Not again...please, not again. I can't handle that again." He pleaded with whatever gods might be listening, knowing it was futile.

Static was tossing the zap trap up and down lazily, watching Richie. He seemed perfectly relaxed, but Richie knew better. This Static was never relaxed, and even the most harmless looking position could lead to a deadly strike. Richie tried to steel himself, tried not to let his fear show. He kept his head bowed, shoulders hunched, and stood silently waiting.

Finally, Talon and Deimos appeared in the open doorway on the opposite side of the room from where Richie and Static had entered. Without taking his eyes off Richie, Static waved one hand towards the door and it slammed shut. Richie tried not to flinch at the sound. Deimos and Talon sidled to the front of the group.

"So, Rich," Static turned towards him. Richie took a step back, partly to keep up the act…mostly because he really couldn't stand the other's proximity. If the smirk on Static's face was anything to go by, the man found the action amusing. "Don't be like that." Static reached up and wrapped one arm around Richie's shoulders, drawing him close, and Richie felt himself shaking slightly.

"We gonna play with him again, boss?" Richie saw Shiv's arm glow and morph into a long sword. "Can I play first? Can I? Can I-" Deimos reached over and hit Shiv's head hard enough that the crazy
"No, Shiv, not today." It took a moment for the words to penetrate. When they did, Richie nearly wilted in relief. He closed his eyes briefly, and swallowed hard. The arm around his shoulders tightened, slightly. "Today, Richie's gonna show all of you what he's been working on for me."

Richie looked up, startled. Static grabbed his hand, and Richie risked a glance into Static's eyes. His Virgil he could read, but this one... He blinked when slightly warm metal touched his hand, and he looked back down. Static had placed the zap trap in his palm. "Show the nice people how to use your toys." For a moment, he could only stare at the thing stupidly, still trying to process the fact that he was apparently not going to have to suffer through another round of pain at Static's hands.

Richie nodded slowly, and Static stepped back, arms crossed. He cleared his throat, and then looked up at the assembled bang babies. "It's, uh, pretty simple actually," he said slowly. "It's lightweight, and the only thing you need to worry about is aim." He felt himself relaxing fractionally as he spoke. He wasn't going to be found out, after all. Static hadn't noticed the difference between his zap traps and the ones he'd just built. Since no one else had handled his original ones, the hard part of the deception was over.

"You...uh...you have to be sure you do more than toss it, because it needs a velocity of at least three feet per second." Whether the people in the room understood that or not, he wasn't sure. He figured they probably knew that meant 'throw it hard.'

"Show them."

He turned to Static. "What?"

"Show them." Static looked to the people gathered in the room, eyes landing on the largest one. "Onyx, move."

Onyx frowned but did as Static ordered. The other metahumans stepped back, both to avoid Onyx's bulk, and anything that was coming. Looking from the zap trap to Static once more, Richie took a breath and pulled his arm back. His mind went through the coefficients and variables to make the necessary adjustments for the overbalanced zap trap to hit its target.

His arm snapped forward, his wrist adding a hint of backspin to the spherical weapon. His calculations paid off, as the trap struck Onyx's chest and ensnared the large man in metal tendrils. Onyx struggled, but couldn't manage to break out of the bindings. Richie knew eventually he would, but it would take at least a few minutes.

Static moved, stepping away from Richie and walking towards Onyx. The large man stood still as his leader approached. Richie waited, knowing that the traps were just as strong as his original ones. The counter-weight only affected the aim, nothing more. Static inspected the metal, and then pushed the release button. "Good work, Rich."

Richie sighed, feeling still more of the tension in his body vanish. One deception finished-

"D-Man, give it a try."

The tension returned, tenfold. Richie's gaze snapped to Static, searching for any hint of suspicion on the other's face. Static, however, merely tossed the zap trap to Deimos, who caught it, easily. Richie bit the inside of his cheek, hard. It wasn't strictly impossible for anyone else to use the faulty zap traps. It was really just a matter of calculating the correct angle to throw. Still, it would look very suspicious if Richie was the only one who had any luck with the things. He could only pray Static
would chalk it up to Richie being used to throwing them.

Trying to watch Deimos without looking like he was, Richie saw the man examine the zap trap in his hands. Deimos was frowning ever so slightly as he turned it over. The zap traps had fooled Static… surely they would fool Deimos, too. He couldn't notice.

"Please, God don't let him notice!"

The frown vanished. Deimos glanced over to Richie, and then turned to the group, eyes focusing on Shiv. "Run."

Shiv, a finger in his ear, blinked at the order. "Huh?"

Deimos' eyes took on a red glow, and the other metahumans, except Static, quickly found their ways to the walls. "Run. Now."

The second word was almost a growl, and mist began gathering before the leather-clad man. Shiv finally made the connection that he was the intended target, and sprinted towards the exit with a loud yelp.

Deimos pulled his arm back, and Rich shut his eyes, afraid to see what would happen. He had a feeling Deimos wasn't a bad shot. If his aim failed, Static would put two and two together, and Richie would be in hell again. A hell he didn't think he'd survive—at least not mentally.

He focused on counting the time. Five seconds…ten seconds…by now the zap trap would be sailing through the air…twenty seconds…thirty seconds…if someone hadn't made the necessary calculations, the zap trap would be going off course now…forty seconds-

The familiar sound of the trap ensnaring a target reached his ears. There was a thud, and the sound of struggling, and hesitantly Richie opened his eyes. Shiv was two feet from the door, wrapped shoulders to ankles in zap trap tendrils, struggling.

Deimos…had done it. Had hit a moving target across fifteen feet. Richie quickly re-evaluated his sabotaged design…no, there was no error. It shouldn't have worked. He should be trapped against the wall facing another torture session.

Instead, he had Static clapping and grinning. "Nice, D." Static patted Richie's shoulder, and the genius fought the urge to pull away. Part of him noticed that no one was moving to release Shiv from his bonds. "And Richie…" Once again, Static's warm hand descended on his cheek, and Richie tried not to shudder in revulsion. "You did good, Rich." Static turned towards the rest of his gang, focusing on Talon. "Pass 'em out. There'llbe more in a couple days." Static turned to him again. "Right?"

"Y-yeah." Richie looked towards the floor. "No problem." He glanced over to Deimos, and found the man once more watching him. Had he noticed the weight imbalance and figured out how to work around it? If that was the case, why hadn't Deimos said anything? Or had it just been sheer luck that the zap trap worked smoothly? Richie certainly wasn't going to ask.

Phobos appeared beside Static, but the other man shook his head. "I'll take him back." Static reached up again, this time resting his hand on the back of Richie's neck, rubbing the skin lightly. The odd, predatory light was back in Static's eyes, a new edge to his ever-present smirk. Static pulled Richie closer to his side, the hand on his neck sliding down to wrap tightly around his shoulders. "We've got some stuff to…talk about."

If it had been luck that saved him, Richie had a feeling it'd just run out.
Chapter 20

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Virgil was quite sure that sound was going to drive him insane before the night was through. Despite the fact that he knew it was a tiny sound, barely perceptible in the room he was currently in…to him it echoed like thunder. He watched the monotonous march of the hands of the clock on the wall; counting off the seconds, minutes, and hours until he could finally take real steps towards rescuing Richie.

The time was crawling too slowly.

Too damn slowly.

Suddenly unable to bear the agony of lying still and watching that maddening clock, Virgil threw the light blanket covering him off and sat up, swinging his legs down off the ratty sofa he'd been trying to sleep on. Sleep. As if that was going to happen. All told, he'd been down here nearly three days, and all he'd managed to catch were catnaps. It seemed he could barely close his eyes before his mind started dredging up all sorts of images that immediately sent him rocketing back into wakefulness. Images of what could go wrong when they tried this admittedly risky scheme. Images of what could happen to Sharon, Tech, and the rest of them should things go sour.

Images of what could be happening to Richie at that very moment.

The clock was barely illuminated by the light that seeped through the various cracks and crevices in the shelter walls. Enough for Virgil to see it was nearly one in the morning. Another day. That was all he had to get through…one more day and then he could start implementing his plan. Tech was meeting him in the mess hall again tomorrow morning to hash out the final details of their part, and Sharon was going to organize the main strike team. They had decided to attack just before dawn the next day.

He could do it. He could be patient. He should sleep, save his strength. Richie would need him to be at the top of his game. A bitter, ironic smile curved Virgil's lips in the darkness.

Sleep? How could he sleep, knowing what this world's Virgil Hawkins was capable of? Knowing what Hotstreak suspected of this world's Richie's last days? He couldn't. That was all there was to it. Sighing, he stood up, letting the threadbare blanket slide off his legs to pool on the floor.

Sharon and Adam had put him up in the shelter they shared, and Virgil counted it a small victory that Sharon had seemed only slightly nervous about leaving him to his own devices in her home. Being the leaders of the resistance apparently had a few perks in that theirs was slightly larger—if you could call anything about living in what basically amounted to a hovel a perk. Still, it boasted two rooms instead of one, with a ply-wood wall separating the sleeping quarters from the "living room." Their furniture consisted of the beat up sofa that had been doubling as Virgil's bed, a single straight back chair, and a writing desk. No personal effects, no curtains, no rugs…nothing that made the place seem anything even remotely resembling homelike. He hadn't seen the bedroom (and really didn't want anything adding detail to the already frightening mental images he was conjuring, thank
you), so perhaps there was more to the place—but Virgil doubted it.

For lack of anything else to do—it wasn't as if he dared go out for a midnight stroll—Virgil padded over to the desk in the dark and sat down. The hard chair creaked ominously under his weight, but held steady. Idly, he ran his fingers over the worn surface of the desk, noting the small, stubby candles that stood along the edge, five in all. He glanced over his shoulder at the curtained doorway that separated the living room from Sharon's and Adam's bedroom. He could hear Adam's faint snores from behind the faded cloth. Suddenly, he needed light.

He carefully eased open the single desk drawer and reached in, feeling for a box of matches or a lighter. He frowned when his questing fingers met a raised edge and then smooth glass. He pulled the object out; surprised to realize it was a picture frame. Setting it aside, he reached back into the desk, this time finding a box of matches near the back of the drawer.

He pulled those out, too, and quickly shook one out, striking it and lighting each of the candles. In the flare of warm, golden light, he saw the picture in the frame he had found. His breath caught and he felt his stomach drop as, for the second time, he saw a picture he well recognized staring back up at him. The exact same picture graced the bureau by the front door in his home.

It was the last family portrait they had taken before his mother had been killed. In it he and Sharon...this world's Virgil and Sharon...stood before their parents. Their mother's arm was around Virgil's shoulder, while Sharon clung to her father's side. They all looked so happy...so normal. Unwillingly, Virgil found his eyes drawn to this world's version of himself.

In the picture he'd found in the other Richie's lab, Virgil had been able to see instantly the differences between them. Not so with this image. It was...him. There was none of the coldness, the edge he had seen in the other's eyes. This Virgil Hawkins was innocent, carefree. What had gone wrong? Had losing his mother in this world really affected this Virgil so differently?

"Static's insane...he's a killer through and through."

"Our Richie's dead. Almost two years, now. He's dead."

"Static killed him."

"Richie...our Richie...told me some things about Static when he was in that place. Things Static did...or said...or, or tried."

Virgil shivered suddenly, averting his eyes from the face of his counterpart and focusing on the smiling visage of this world's Jean Hawkins. He gently touched the image of his mother's beautiful face, the familiar, bittersweet ache rising in his throat as he looked at her...even though it wasn't really his mother in the picture. He breathed out in a soft huff, and turned his gaze upwards.

"I really got myself into a mess this time, didn't I Moms?" he whispered softly, closing his eyes. He swallowed heavily. Despite the warm glow of the candles, despite the fact that Sharon and Adam were less than ten feet away...he suddenly felt very small and alone.

"I--I don't know what to do. Everything's so messed up...and...he's a monster, here. He's evil and he's got Richie...and I don't know what to do." Despite himself, he felt his eyes stinging. "I know you're with me...I know you're always with me. So I gotta ask...watch out for Richie, too, okay? Keep him safe. Please keep him safe. You gotta help us." His voice broke and he scrubbed furiously at his eyes. "I'm scared, Mom."

There was a soft sound behind him, the whisper of bare feet on the floor, and Virgil whipped around
to see Sharon standing in the doorway between the living room and the bedroom. She was dressed only in a large t-shirt, probably one of Adam's, that came down to her knees, and still wore the eye patch. The candlelight served to soften her features somewhat, and for the first time Virgil thought he could see a hint of the woman *his* Sharon had become in this one. Quickly, he turned away, trying to wipe subtly at his eyes.

"Sorry," he mumbled, "I didn't mean to wake you up." He heard Sharon move across the floor, and then felt her stop just at his back.

"It's all right. I'm a light sleeper. Are you…are you okay?" She sounded genuinely concerned.

"Yeah, uh, allergies, y'know?" he replied lamely. He heard Sharon huff to herself before she reached around him, picking up the picture frame.

"Allergies. Right. So…your Mom, too?" Virgil didn't have to ask for clarification. He nodded, slightly.

"During the gang riots."

"Here, too. It was…it was so hard." Hesitantly, Virgil turned in his seat to face Sharon, who was staring at the picture, sadness evident on her features. After a moment, she half-smiled, a bittersweet quirk of her lips that Virgil had often seen on his Sharon's face, that always meant she was thinking about their mother. "You talk to Mom, too, huh?"

For a moment, Virgil considered stopping the conversation before it could go down that path. Still, it was perhaps a chance to allay some more of Sharon's suspicions. He leaned back in the chair, resting his hands on the desktop.

"All the time," he said quietly. "I--I know she's always listening."

"Vir—his he used to do the same thing. I'd come into the living room and he'd just be standing in front of this picture…talking to her." Sharon moved away from him, and Virgil heard her sit down on the ancient couch.

A soft, delicate shudder wracked its way though his body. The more he learned about this other Static, the more he was forced to admit that there were similarities between them. They had gone through so many of the same things…reacted to them in the same ways. Slowly, he swiveled in the seat until he was facing her, half leaning over the back of the chair. He curled one arm over the top edge and rested his chin on top of it.

Virgil sat that way for a few moments, just staring at the young woman in front of him. He was hesitant to ask the question he had wanted to ask of her practically since he had met her…but he doubted there would be a more opportune time. Besides—he needed to hear the answer.

"Sharon?" he asked finally, his voice soft. Sharon glanced up at him, her one eye suddenly sharp.

"Hmmm?"

"How…how did it happen? How did your…why is he like this?" Virgil let the question out in a rush, forcing himself to hold his gaze steady.

Adam had told him this Static was simply insane—had been a kid making bad choices and finally been driven over the edge by the Bang. Hotstreak had told him much the same thing, though not in so many words. There had to be more to it, though. There had to be. They were the same person, after all, weren't they? There had to be something to account for the vast differences between them.
He thought he was probably crossing a line, but Sharon was the only one who could really tell him what he wanted to know.

Sharon froze for a moment, just staring back at him. Then her eye closed and she leaned back against the back of the couch, sighing heavily. "I've asked myself that so many times," she murmured, her hands tightening on the picture of her family.

"You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want," Virgil said hastily.

"No…no, it's all right. I…I dealt with it a long time ago." From the tone of her voice, Virgil thought that maybe that wasn't exactly the truth, but he didn't call her on it. Sharon gently set the picture aside and sat up, resting her elbows on her knees. She ran one hand over her close-cropped hair, and focused her gaze on Virgil again. "And I understand---you want to know."

Virgil nodded silently, steeling himself inwardly. Whatever had happened to turn this other him into a criminal…a killer…it had to be bad.

"He was always a brat. Typical little brother." Sharon laughed a little, and the sound came out slightly choked. "But…but he wasn't bad. He was always smiling, always happy. I never thought—but he changed, after Mom died. I was so worried about Daddy, I never noticed…I didn't see how much he'd changed. I don't know…maybe if Daddy had been there for him, more, things might have been different."

"What do you mean?"

Sharon frowned, shaking her head. "Daddy…Daddy didn't handle it so well when Mom died. I mean, none of us did…but it really threw Daddy into a tailspin."

Virgil's brow furrowed, remembering the dark days in his own world after his mother had been killed. His Pops had been a pillar of strength through it all, even though Virgil knew he had been just as devastated as Virgil and Sharon…more so, even. Pops had kept it together, had been there to hold him when Virgil woke up screaming from nightmares; when Virgil thought the sadness and pain would tear him apart. They'd survived it, together, as a family.

"I--things might've still been all right, but after Alva and his damn 'urban development' plan forced the center to close—" Sharon trailed off with a heavy sigh. "It was just too much, I guess. Daddy just shut down, started...well, you know." Sharon's voice dropped even lower. "He started drinking, a lot. Wouldn't look for something else to do, after the center was gone. It got so he'd barely even talk to us. We'd have been on the street if they hadn't been so careful with their investments and Mom's life insurance."

Virgil felt his eyes widening with each word, unable to believe what he was hearing. Pops had lost the center in this world? Had started drinking? He'd never seen his father touch more than a glass of wine at dinner. Worse...this world's Robert Hawkins had pulled away from his children, had shut his family out of his life. Virgil couldn't understand...couldn't conceive the notion of something that would make his father do that. His father was the strongest, most loving, and dedicated man Virgil knew.

"Sharon..." he started. His shock must have shown on his face, and in his voice, for Sharon looked up at him sharply. He shook his head. "I don't...nothing like that happened in my world," he whispered. "Pops would never—" He fell silent, unable to find any words to offer her.

For one moment, Sharon looked indescribably sad, and her good eye gleamed suspiciously. The expression vanished, quickly, though, replaced by the hard sternness he was used to seeing. She
"I thought something had to be different. You're so different. You're lucky," she said softly, emotionlessly. "I guess—in the end, V--he didn't think he had any other choices than the ones he was making. He'd lost Mom, he might as well have lost Daddy…I was so busy with school and trying to take care of both of them. Ri...Richie was all he really had…and Richie tried so hard to help him, but it just wasn't enough. It was never enough."

Abruptly, Sharon stopped talking. She pushed herself off of the couch and strode back over to the desk. With slightly more force than was necessary, she pulled the drawer open, shoved the picture back into it, and shut the drawer, rattling the desk slightly. "You should get some sleep," she said briskly. "We've got a lot to do tomorrow." She turned to go back through the curtain separating the two rooms.

Virgil watched her silently, gnawing on his bottom lip. Just before she slipped through the curtain separating the two rooms, though, he spoke again. "Sharon?"

Sharon froze, her back to him, one hand poised on the threadbare cloth. "Yeah?"

"What happened to your father? Did he leave Dakota?"

Virgil had never seen someone flinch without actually moving a muscle, before.

Sharon didn't turn back to face him. Her voice, when she answered him, was so quiet he almost didn't hear her. Her words were clear and steady…but filled with grief. The kind of terrible, choking grief that Virgil had only felt once in his life.

He couldn't fathom how this Sharon had survived it twice.

"Daddy died a couple of months after the Bang. Car accident."

Without another word, she flicked the curtain aside and slipped into the darkness of the bedroom beyond, only the whisper of the cloth marking her passage. Virgil was left alone, staring at the gently fluttering fabric.

"Go fish! Uncle Carmen, tell him to go fish!"

"Carmen can't do that, Michael."

"Yes he can! You don't have any threes, so go fish!"

"Mikey, I'm tellin' you, that's not gonna work."

"Why not?"

"'Cause we're playing Gin Rummy." Hotstreak's voice was a great deal more…patient than Virgil was used to hearing. He entered the mess hall with Adam to find Hotstreak, Carmen, and the young boy that had been helping Carmen that first day gathered around one of the smaller tables.

Hotstreak and Carmen were indeed engaged in a game of Gin. The boy, Michael, was hanging over Hotstreak's arm, staring at his cards with a defiant frown on his face. Carmen was obviously struggling to hold in laughter and Hotstreak…Hotstreak looked as though he couldn't decide if he should be irritated or amused. Beside him, Virgil heard Adam chuckle.

"Give it up, Hotstreak. You're never going to win," Adam said. He stopped behind Carmen,
glancing at the cards. Before he could comment further, though, Hotstreak tossed his own cards down on the table.

"Whatever. That's it, Mikey, you and me are gonna have a talk about card games one of these days. I'm thinking Poker."

"I'd be thinking about your continued health if Maria finds out you're teaching kids how to gamble," Carmen snorted.

The banter continued in that vein for a few moments, and Virgil found himself tuning them out. He slumped down into one of the chairs at a table just behind the one Hotstreak and Carmen were seated at. Idly, he ran one finger across the slick, slightly greasy tablecloth. He was exhausted.

Despite Sharon's admonishment to sleep, he'd sat up the rest of the night, until Adam had come out of the bedroom. After hearing still more of the terrible events that had shaped this world, Virgil had simply found his thoughts chasing each other in endless circles. Sleep had been impossible. Tiredly, he shook his head, running one hand back through his hair. Damn it, he couldn't afford to be fuzzy and unfocused. In less than twenty four hours, they were going to put their plan to rescue Richie into motion. He needed to be at the top of his game.

"Kid…kid! Hey, Virgil!" It sounded as though it was not the first time Carmen had called his name. Virgil jerked himself out of his morose thoughts and sat up, focusing on the animal-like bang baby.

"Huh?"

Carmen raised one eyebrow and rose from the table. "I said, would you like something to eat? I've got cereal…or you can be brave and try the egg-like stuff. It tastes just like chicken."

"Your eggs taste like chicken?" Virgil questioned doubtfully.

Carmen shrugged eloquently. "Freeze dried stuff—it's not just food, it's an adventure!"

Virgil felt his lips twitch involuntarily. "Fun as that sounds, I'm not all that hungry this morning."

Carmen shot him a measuring look, but nodded.

"Suit yourself. Hey Michael, you wanna help me decide what to serve for lunch?" The little boy nodded happily. Virgil watched as the other bang baby bustled off into the kitchens, Michael close at his heels.

Hotstreak shuffled the cards back into some semblance of order before he, too, stood up from the table. "I'm gonna go find Maria," he announced. Adam nodded.

"Remember…big meeting just before lunch," he said, as Hotstreak sauntered past. "It'd be good if everyone saw you and Maria are on board with this."


"I hope you're right, brother. I hope you're right."

Hotstreak shot Adam a slightly cocky grin, and tipped the older man a mock salute. "We'll be there. Catch ya' later, Adam. Sparky." He nodded more or less congenially at Virgil, completely unphased by Virgil's scowl. He smirked a bit, and then headed for the door.
Just as he reached it, it swung open to reveal yet another member of Sharon's 'core' team...the one on whom Virgil's hopes of getting to Richie without a major battle pretty well hinged on. Tech merely stood framed in the doorway for a moment, and Hotstreak leaned in close. The two spoke quietly for a moment, Tech casting several glances in Virgil's direction.

Of all the people of this world Virgil had met and interacted with, so far, Tech had proven to be the hardest to read. They had spoken only briefly the night before, mostly about the timing of their attack and the route they would take back to the sewers after they were done. Besides...Virgil hadn't known his world's Tech that well to begin with, anyway. He had almost nothing to make a comparison to. From what he remembered, Tech had been the quintessential science geek...slightly nervous, completely caught up in his creations, somewhat impatient with those less intelligent than he. Not unlike Richie, in many respects, to be sure, but Tech just hadn't had Richie's confidence and outgoing nature.

Plus, in the end, he'd been nowhere near as smart as Richie.

That nervousness was absent in this world's Tech. The young man seemed a great deal colder than the youth Virgil remembered from his encounter with the Nightbreed. Not that that was particularly surprising...everyone in this world seemed harder, colder. They had to be, in order to survive.

The Tech of this world carried himself confidently, but with an air of disinterest...as if he was constantly concentrating on something other than what was in front of him. His dark coveralls, the silvery shades that never seemed to leave his face, and a tool belt filled with incomprehensible implements gave him the look of a mechanic on the Enterprise. Virgil had yet to see him without some form of gadgetry in his hands...though to what ends, Virgil could only guess.

Their conversation apparently at an end, Hotstreak shrugged and shook his head. Tech nodded thoughtfully, and then refocused his gaze on Virgil, though it was impossible to see his eyes through the shades. He stepped aside, allowing Hotstreak through the door. The two bumped fists in a friendly fashion as Hotstreak passed, before he vanished out onto the main thoroughfare. Tech remained standing in the doorway for a moment, before heading for the table Virgil was seated at.


"Hey Tech, how's it goin'?" Adam replied. Tech's shaded gaze found the older man's face, and he smiled humorlessly.

"So far, fine. Ask me again tomorrow night. You know...if we're not all dead." The words were delivered in a clipped, caustic tone. Virgil's brow furrowed, but Adam merely rolled his eyes.

"And with great attitudes like that, how can we lose?" Adam retorted wryly. Tech shrugged. Adam shook his head, and turned towards Virgil. "I have to go find Sharon...will you be okay here until I get back?"

"Yeah, no problem," Virgil said, his eyes still on Tech. Adam patted him reassuringly on the shoulder, shot a slightly warning glance at Tech, and then disappeared out the door as well, leaving Virgil and Tech alone in the mess hall.

Tech was silent for a few moments, just staring at Virgil. Narrowing his eyes slightly, Virgil stared right back. Tech had not been particularly hostile to him, but Virgil recognized when a genius was imagining all the different ways they could dissect you. He'd seen the look on Richie's face often enough when they were dealing with nasty criminals. Finally, the Nightbreed youth leaned forward, propping his chin up in one hand.
"Let's get one thing straight. I think this is whole plan is nuts. I think Sharon and Adam are crazy for trusting you, and frankly, I think someone, possibly several someones, is going to die tomorrow. With my luck, it'll be me. Suffice it to say, I'm not happy about all this."

"I never would've guessed," Virgil deadpanned. "If you're so set against it, why'd you agree to help? Sharon wouldn't have made you come."

Tech snorted derisively. "Yeah right. And have Maria, Hotstreak, Carmen, Adam, and Sharon mad at me? No, thanks. Besides," his lips twisted into a slightly smug smile, "the only way this plan of yours has a chance of succeeding is if you have me along."

Virgil bit back a sarcastic comment, unwilling to antagonize the other youth for the moment. Instead, he tilted his head and drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "So...did you just come up here to complain, or what?"

The muscle at Tech's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, and inwardly Virgil winced. So much for not antagonizing anyone. The other bang baby was apparently just as wary of starting something with Virgil, though, for he merely reached into one of the many pouches on his belt and pulled out a device about the size of a greeting card.

It was only about two inches thick, with a glass screen and four small plastic buttons on the casing. All in all, it was rather unimpressive, but Virgil was depending on it to tell him exactly where this other Static was keeping Richie. Tech hadn't explained much about it the night before, more concerned with the mechanics of exactly how Virgil was going to watch his back. Curious, now, Virgil picked the device up, turning it over in his hands.

"Think of it as a bang baby GPS. Foley and I used to use it to keep track of each other when we were working in separate parts of the tunnels." Tech's voice lowered a bit. "Foley designed it." He shook his head slightly. "Anyway, I figure your boy's biological signatures can't be all that different from ours. I expanded a few of the parameters just in case...boosted the power. It should work."

Virgil nodded absently, still examining the contraption. "Sounds good," he said.

"So--if we can get close enough to the dumpster area without being spotted, and if you can take out any guards without them raising an alarm, and if we can get a read of Static's base and get back to the tunnels without major casualties, and, oh yeah, if you're not just playing us all and waiting for a chance to fry everyone down here...then we should have enough intel to plan a decent rescue mission."

"Are you always this optimistic?" Virgil asked, quirking one eyebrow. Tech huffed quietly.

"I'm a realist," he said icily. "Optimism was Foley's gig, and look where it got him."

Virgil shifted in his seat, unsure as to how he was supposed to answer that. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Tech reached across the table and plucked the scanner from Virgil's hands. He tucked it back into his belt and then leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Now...you've got the details down, right?"

"We move before the sun's up, get into position before six forty five. Sharon and Adam start their show at seven, and we have twenty minutes before they call a retreat," Virgil recited dutifully.

"Assuming everything goes according to plan," Tech countered. "Shoot for ten minutes, tops."

"Sir, yes, sir," Virgil muttered.
"Hey! You and everyone else wanna live in a fantasy world, fine! Me, I'm the one who has every possible statistic on what can go wrong running through my head. All I care about is getting out of there alive tomorrow."

"I'm not going to let anyone get hurt," Virgil said tersely.

"What are you now, God? Just do your part, tomorrow."

"Oh you don't have to worry about that. You just do yours."

Virgil fancied he could feel the heat of Tech's glare even through the reflective shades. The other youth crossed his arms over his chest and leaned backwards in his seat, glancing away after a moment. "Your friend's probably a dead man, anyway. Static doesn't keep hostages," Tech muttered sullenly.

The sound of Virgil's fist hitting the table echoed through the mess hall. Without realizing it, he had shot to his feet, nearly knocking the chair over. "No! Nothing's gonna happen to Richie! I won't let it!" Virgil shouted. Above them, the lights flickered briefly. Fear bloomed on Tech's features, and he scrambled up out of his seat, backing away from Virgil until his back hit another table.

"Whoa! What're you two doing to my dining room?" Virgil turned to find Carmen standing in the door to the kitchens, Michael peeking out from behind him. Quickly, Virgil reined in the power he'd let slip loose, and sat back down. Carmen regarded them critically for a moment. "Riiight. Tech, don't you have something to be doing?"

"Crazy. Everyone around here's gone crazy," Tech growled. Without another word, he whirled around and stalked out of the mess hall. Carmen stared after him briefly, before turning his attention to the boy behind him.

"Hey Michael…I think I need to talk to Virgil for a minute. Why don't you run and find your mom, and then you can come back and help me serve up lunch, okay?"

The little boy looked disappointed, but nodded his agreement. "Okay, Uncle Carmen." Shooting a slightly curious look at Virgil, the youngster, too, hurried for the door.

Virgil sighed heavily, closing his eyes. He waited silently for Carmen to tear into him, cursing himself for losing his temper like that. When the silence stretched, he opened his eyes again. Carmen was merely looking at him, an odd, measuring look lighting his eyes. Finally, the other nodded to himself, as if he had suddenly had something confirmed.

"C'mon, Kid, you can help me wash up for the lunch crowd." With that, Carmen turned and walked back through the door to the kitchen, apparently just expecting Virgil to follow. Confused, Virgil did so.

The heat of the kitchen surrounded him as soon as he stepped through the door, along with the scent of some kind of chicken dish (then again, maybe it was the eggs). He breathed in appreciatively, glancing around the surroundings. Like everything else in the underground base, the kitchen was a mishmash of cobbled together equipment, interspersed with a few actual kitchen gadgets and tools. There were two large ovens, a battered range, and an industrial sized sink laid out in a convenient fashion. Everything was perfectly organized, as a matter of fact—a clean, professional space that Virgil would never have associated with his world's Carmen Dillo.

Without preamble, Carmen tossed a discolored (but clean) apron at him. Virgil caught it automatically and slipped it on as Carmen jerked his chin towards the massive sink, where a pile of
dirty dishes awaited. The sink was already full of gently steaming, soapy water. "I'll wash, you rinse. Just stack 'em up in the drying rack," Carmen directed.

Still somewhat confused by the other bang baby's actions, Virgil took his place on one side of the sink. Carmen was still oddly silent as he began scrubbing plates down, handing them to Virgil to rinse. They fell into an easy rhythm, and the stack of dirty dishes began to diminish.

"Don't be too hard on Tech."

Carmen's voice was so quiet, that for a moment, Virgil wasn't sure he had heard the words. Blinking, he looked up from the water. "Huh?"

"Tech. I know he's an asshole, but he's got his reasons. He's basically a good kid, and he comes through in a pinch. It was really hard for him after Richie...well, after Richie died. They were pretty good friends...and then suddenly Richie was gone, and Tech had to step up and take over all the maintenance down here. And really...Tech's a hell of a lot smarter than anyone else down here, but he was never on Richie's level. It wasn't an easy transition. And now, hearing that he's going to be charging in to rescue a version of his friend from an alternate dimension...well, it's been strange for all of us. Tech doesn't handle 'strange' well."

Virgil lowered his eyes to the sink again. "I...uh...I didn't mean to get him worked up."

Carmen shrugged philosophically. "Oh don't worry, he's always like that. Besides...it sounded like he was the one working you up. Talking about your friend like that." Carmen's tone was careful and probing, at odds with the seemingly innocuous words.

Virgil frowned, glancing at Carmen out of the corner of his eye. The other seemed utterly absorbed in washing the dishes, a cheerful smile on his face. He handed Virgil yet another soapy pot, and Virgil shoved it under the stream of hot water from the faucet, waiting for the other bang baby to play whatever hand he was holding.

"I know you're scared for him," Carmen said suddenly, his voice gentle. Virgil's hands stilled, still holding the pot under the water. He swallowed heavily.

"I should've protected him," he ground out harshly. "I should never have let them get their hands on him."

"From what Adam told me, you didn't have a choice. You didn't know what you were up against...you'd probably have been killed if you'd kept after Static."

"I should've found a way!" Virgil insisted vehemently. "Richie's the only...I should've found a way."

"Kid, you can't think like that. It'll drive you crazy." Carmen reached up and turned the water off, the dishes now forgotten.

"I should've protected him," he ground out harshly. "I should never have let them get their hands on him."

"Easier said than done," Virgil retorted quietly. He set the pot down in the sink and leaned heavily against the stainless steel tub, still not looking at Carmen.

"All part of being in love, Kid. But you've got to focus on what's happening...not what's already done."

Virgil sighed, raking one damp hand back through his hair. "You're right...I know, you're right. It's just...wait, what?" He snapped his gaze to the other bang baby, who merely stared back at him impassively, a small smile playing about the muzzle-like mouth. "Wait...you think I'm...that we're..."
with Richie…" Virgil trailed off, his eyes widening. Carmen quirked an eyebrow.

"You mean you're not?"

"No!" Virgil said quickly, feeling his face heat. Carmen 'hmmmed' to himself, before he reached down into the sink to pull the plug.

"But you'd like to be, right?"

Virgil, in the midst of gathering up the clean bits of silverware in his side of the sink, dropped them with a loud clatter. He straightened slightly, resting his hands on the edge of the sink, and let his head drop, breathing deeply. "Why are you asking me this," he said carefully. He heard, rather than saw, Carmen shrug beside him.

"You've been on edge since you got down here. I mean…anyone would be worried and scared for his friend, but it's more than that. You have the same look in your eyes that Adam does every time Sharon's out on a dangerous mission. It's been eating you up inside, Kid…it's not good to keep things like that bottled up. You didn't answer my question, though….you love him, don't you?"

Without answering, Virgil reached down and pulled the plug out of his own drain, watching the water swirl away. Carmen was silent beside him, apparently willing to wait him out. Virgil let him wait; acting as though the water draining away was the most fascinating thing in the world.

He'd never analyzed it…never put a name to it. He never even really thought about it. It simply…was. It was a formless, amorphous thing that nonetheless was a vital part of him. It hovered between him and his best friend, never acknowledged, but always there. It was a part of him that twisted in anxious fear at the thought of Richie being harmed by this alternate version of Virgil Hawkins; a part that rebelled at even the suggestion that he wouldn't be able to save his friend and partner…a part that wrenched in agony at the thought that he might already be too late. For perhaps the first time, he let himself recognize that part of him…let himself name it.

And in the face of Carmen's surprising understanding and sympathy, in the face of everything that had happened, it seemed silly to continue to try and hide it. Finally, he looked up at Carmen again and let himself share the truth he'd been unwilling to share with Hotstreak.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah, I do." Recalling the heated, near-fight he'd had with Hotstreak in the other Richie's lab, he hardened his gaze and squared his shoulders. "What's it to you?" he said with a flippancy he didn't really feel.

Carmen grinned a bit, and raised his hands I a gesture of surrender. "Whoa, whoa, whoa…easy, Kid. I'm not trying to start anything…I just thought you might need to talk."

Carmen grinned a bit, and raised his hands I a gesture of surrender. "Whoa, whoa, whoa…easy, Kid. I'm not trying to start anything…I just thought you might need to talk."

As quickly as his defensiveness had risen, it left him, and Virgil slumped a little against the sink. Gratefulness that there wasn't going to be another confrontation about his 'intentions' towards his best friend swept through him. He didn't feel up to it.

Carmen's sympathetic smile widened a bit. "Let me guess…you haven't said anything to him?"

Virgil snorted derisively. "Not exactly something you bring up in between rounds of Zombie Hunter, now is it?" He drummed his fingers lightly on the sink and rolled his head from side to side. "I mean…hell…I wouldn't even know how to start."

"Grabbing him and kissing him would probably get the point across," Carmen suggested wryly. Virgil shot him a faintly irritated look. "Thanks…but I like all my parts right where they are."
"You think there'd be part-removal?"

Any sense of lightness vanished, and Virgil frowned. "I dunno," he said quietly. "I don't know what he'd say." He laughed a little, mirthlessly. "First time I haven't been able to read him like a book."

"You'll never know unless you ask," Carmen pressed.

It struck him suddenly...here he was, washing dishes in an alternate dimension and getting romantic advice from Carmen Dillo. He shook his head, laughing helplessly at the sheer absurdity that had made up his life in the past few days. Somewhere, some great cosmic force was laughing its ass off. Virgil just knew it.

He reined himself in, and then suddenly slid down to sit on the floor with his back against the sink. He looked up at Carmen and shook his head. "Thank you," he said sincerely, though he wasn't really sure what exactly he was thanking the other for. Carmen tilted his head, and for a moment, Virgil thought the other bang baby was going to press his point further. Instead, though, he inclined his head graciously, seemingly willing to let Virgil have a little time to recover his equilibrium.

"Wait 'til you see my bill," he said mischievously. Virgil grinned a bit, but it faded as he rested his head back against the slightly warm metal of the sink.

"How'd you know?" he asked curiously.

Carmen shrugged. "I watch people. Not much else to do if I'm not on duty, these days. You watch enough people, you learn things about 'em. You learn to read them...you see things that other people don't." For a moment, just a moment, there was a flash of darkness in Carmen's voice. It was gone in an instant, but Virgil still caught it.

"You knew," he said softly, in a burst of insight. "You knew about your Richie...and what Static..."

"Didn't take a genius to connect those dots," Carmen interrupted brusquely. "After...after we found him...and the funeral..." Carmen sighed, leaning his own bulk against the sink. "Hotstreak came to me, to talk, you know? He felt so guilty for letting Richie talk him out of a rescue...thought he should have seen it coming. He told me everything...and I filled in the rest of the blanks on my own. I guess he talked to you, too, huh?"

Despite himself, Virgil huffed bitterly. "You could say that."

Carmen rolled his eyes. "That's Francis for ya'...about as delicate as a bull in a china shop during an earthquake."

"He thinks I'm like your Static. He thinks I might...hurt Richie someday." Virgil heard Carmen sigh heavily, and then the larger bang baby shifted down to sit on the floor next to him.

"Kid...Richie was probably the best friend Francis had down here. And Hotstreak's got a lot of faults, but I'll say this for 'im...he's loyal to his friends. Don't take it personal. Once Hotstreak gets his head out of his ass, he'll see he's wrong about you."

"You sound awfully sure about that."

"What, that Hotstreak'll get his head out of his ass? Well, I'll admit, it ends up there a lot more than it should, but he usually gets it sorted out in the end. Maria will set him straight if nothing else."

Virgil smiled a little, but shook his head. "No...that he's wrong about me. You and Adam are the only ones who really aren't expecting me to start throwing bolts any minute."
Carmen's joking manner abruptly disappeared, and he regarded Virgil seriously. "Most of the people down here haven't had a chance to even talk to you. As for me and Adam... Adam's a pretty good judge of character. Me—like I said, I watch people. And I can see... you are like Static." Carmen held up one hand, forestalling Virgil's instant protest. "Let me finish. You're like Static... but you're everything about Static gone right. Everything this Static should have been able to become. It's like looking through a mirror. Sharon... Sharon has more reason than any of us to act the way she does. She'll come around. Right now, she's too close—all she sees is her brother. She's not looking at the reflection... and this is getting to sound like a bad episode of Kung Fu, so I'll stop now. But you see what'm sayin'?"

"Come to Chinatown. Ask for Carmen?" Virgil couldn't help himself. Carmen rolled his eyes again, reaching over to lightly cuff Virgil on the side of the head. Virgil batted him away playfully. "Yeah, man. I see what you're saying."

Carmen nodded sagely. "Good. Now help me up... my knees can't take this anymore."

Virgil rose and offered a hand to the other, helping Carmen heft himself to his feet. As the two made their way back towards the door to the dining hall, Virgil shook his head in amazement. Either his world's Carmen Dillo had been dropped on his head... repeatedly... as a child, or there had been a lot more to the animal-like bang baby than Virgil had ever given him credit for. Virgil rather suspected the former.

"What a trip," he muttered to himself. "Hey Carmen?" he added, more loudly. "Yeah?"

"Um... you won't, you know, tell anyone... what I said about Richie... right?" Virgil asked, hesitatingly. He felt the blush rise to his cheeks again. "It's just... I don't want to make trouble with Hotstreak or anyone. I mean, I don't want you to think I—"

"Kid," Carmen interrupted gently, "relax. I can keep a secret." He winked at Virgil impishly. "But... you have to let me throw the party once we get your Richie out of there, and get you two together."

For a moment, Virgil stood stock-still, blinking owlishly at Carmen. The other burst out laughing at Virgil's pole axed expression and Virgil had to wonder just what he'd let himself in for.

"Oh, Kid! If you could see your face," Carmen chortled. He swung the door between the kitchen and the dining hall open and stepped through, leaving Virgil staring after him in consternation. He made to follow, catching the door on the return swing—

Just as the piercing wail of the alarm began to echo through the base.
Chapter 21

For a brief instant, Virgil and Carmen stood frozen, blinking in shock at the strobing red light that was throbbing through the dining room. The wail of the alarm was earsplitting, but even above the sound Virgil could hear shouts of surprise and distress from outside. Without a word passing between them, Carmen and Virgil began to run. They raced through the dining hall and burst out onto the main thoroughfare.

As before, the scene was comparable to a suddenly disturbed nest of fire ants. People darted about—gathering the children close, passing out weapons, reporting to emergency stations. They scurried through the base, for once seemingly unaware of Virgil's presence amongst them. Carmen didn't hesitate, merely began barreling straight down the main 'street'. Virgil thundered after him, determined that he should not be left behind.

"What's goin' on?" he called over the shriek of the alarm and the shouts of the rebels. Carmen spared him a short glance.

"Hard to say," the other bang baby huffed back. There was an edge of worry on his face, though, and in his words. Virgil frowned grimly, a sense of foreboding rising up within him. They couldn't afford a serious emergency….not now. Not when they were so close to the start of their 'mission.'

He quickly realized that Carmen was heading for the "War Room," and pushed the foreboding aside, concentrating instead on keeping up with Carmen. The other bang baby was surprisingly quick, for all his bulk. When, after only a few moments, the converted subway car came into sight, Virgil was relieved to see Sharon and Adam already standing in front of it, conversing with Tech.

The relief was short lived, however, as Virgil took in the hard, cold set to Sharon's features, and the way her fists were clenched at her sides. Adam had already transformed into his Rubberband Man suit and Sharon was dressed in black and grey camouflage pants and a black tank top, obviously heavily armed and loaded for bear, to boot. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. He skidded to a halt behind Carmen and leaned over slightly, breathing hard. The alarms finally cut off, leaving Virgil's ears ringing.

"What is it?" Carmen demanded. Sharon didn't mince words.

"Kangorr escaped," she said bleakly. Virgil gasped, feeling his stomach drop, even as Carmen straightened sharply, crying out in alarm.

"How?" Carmen shouted, incredulous.

"Kris Andrews traded guard shifts with Jamerson," Tech supplied, shaking his head in disgust. "Jamerson's just a rookie…he got too close and Kangorr got the drop on him. Bastard was out and into one of the side tunnels before anyone knew what was happening. Goddamn cameras fritzed out a couple hours ago. I got nothin'—no surveillance, no tracking. One of the Pop-Tart units winged him on his way out, but there's no way of knowing how bad he's hurt."

"Any chance he can backtrack here?" Adam asked, his voice tight. Thankfully, Tech shook his head.

"I don't think so. Containment's pretty well away from the base…and lucky for us he ran into one of the older tunnels…it's a maze in that section, and there's not a lot of access topside. Even I get lost down there."

That was something, at least. Still, there was no way to be sure. Beneath the steely calm that Sharon,
Adam, Tech, and Carmen were exhibiting, Virgil saw the beginnings of fear.

"We can't risk it," Adam said suddenly, decisively. "We have to go after him."

Tech snorted indelicately. "Even if security cameras were up—he's got too much of a head start. We'll never catch up to him now."

"We have to try!" Adam insisted. "It's the only way to make sure he doesn't give us away."

"Adam's right," Carmen agreed quietly. "If we don't catch him before he makes it up top, and he manages to lead Static to us…" he trailed off, and none of them needed him to paint a picture. And just like that, Virgil saw the militaristic leader in Sharon snap to the fore. There was no need for discussion or debate—there was only what needed to be done and how they had to do it.

"All right…Carmen, you get Hotstreak and Maria caught up and out into the south side tunnels. Tech, get those damn cameras back up. Adam you stand down the general alert, but tell Brickhouse to get everyone ready to move. Then you're with me," she ordered brusquely. "Virgil…" For a brief moment, the now-familiar battle waged in Sharon's eyes…whether to trust him, whether to accept his presence.

This time, though, something changed. Whether it was their conversation the night before, finally 'coming around' as Carmen had put it, or simply a snap-decision, Virgil would never be able to say. This time, for the first time, the fear and suspicion lost out. The set of Sharon's shoulders relaxed somewhat, and she tilted her head.

To Virgil's surprise, Sharon reached behind her back, to a medium-sized utility pouch dangling from her belt. When her hand came back into view, she was holding a small, silver wedge of metal. She extended it to him with a quirk to her mouth that might almost have been a smile. Her expression still wasn't friendly…but at least it was warmer. "Yours, I think?" she said. Adam grinned as Virgil gratefully took his disc back, expanding it to its full size with a flick of the wrist.

"Virgil…will you help us?" she asked softly. Despite the potentially dire situation Virgil felt a small smile touch his lips.

"You know it," he answered just as quietly. "What do you need me to do?"

"Go with Carmen…once Hotstreak and Maria are on the trail, I want you two to start at the tunnel he escaped into. If Tech's right and he can't find his way out of the passages down there, you might be able to catch up with him while we're setting up a perimeter."

"On it, Boss," Carmen answered for both of them. He shot Virgil an honestly friendly smile. "Guess we're partners, Kid." For a moment, Virgil's customary playful cockiness surged to the fore.

"Sure you can keep up?" he said, charging up his disc. He hopped lightly onto the disc and raised it slightly in the air. In answer, Carmen grinned and leaped into the air himself, curling up into a tight ball as he went. He hit the ground and began bouncing toward the detention area at a rather fast clip.

Virgil crouched down on his disc and was about to zoom after the other bang baby, when Sharon's voice stopped him. "Watch his back, all right?" she said, her tone serious. In her eyes, Virgil could see how much it had cost her to extend this new trust to him; to give the protection of one of her friends over to him. Silently, he vowed that he would never make her regret that decision.

"I won't let anything happen to him," he assured her solemnly. She held his gaze for a moment, before seeming to find whatever she was looking for. She nodded once, and then jerked her chin in the direction Carmen had taken. Virgil tipped her and Adam a salute, and then sent the disc hurtling
after the other bang baby.

The few refugees still hurrying to their quarters or assigned stations leaped out of his way with many a startled cry, but none brought their various weapons to bear. Apparently, Sharon had put the word out that he was not to be harmed. Good enough.

He followed Carmen's bouncing form down the main thoroughfare, and then into the less used portions of the base. At first, Virgil thought they were heading directly for the detention area to try and pick up Kangorr's trail. After another couple of minutes, though, Carmen veered off from the route that would take them to the holding cells and towards one of the many side-tunnels that opened up onto the base. He stopped at the edge of the tunnel, uncurling in mid-bounce and landing on his feet with a lightness that belied his size.

Virgil pulled up beside him and let the charge around his disc dissipate, reveling a bit in the free use of his powers after days of holding them leashed. He folded the disc up again, tucking it into his back pocket, and moved to stand by Carmen. The other was fiddling with what looked like the modified remains of an ATM recessed into the wall beside the entrance to the tunnel.

"Hotstreak and Maria are out on patrol...hopefully the radios aren't down, too," Carmen muttered by way of explanation. Virgil cocked an eyebrow.

"Does that happen a lot?" he asked. Carmen snorted.

"The camera system goes down every few days. Even Richie couldn't keep it running for more than a week at a time. We work around it," Carmen said tersely. He punched in a few more numbers on the old ATM keypad, and was rewarded by a hiss of static that gradually cleared into AquaMaria's voice.

"—Maria here...what's going on? We got the alarm signal.—"

"Maria, it's Carmen. Is Hotstreak with you?"

"—Of course. Carmen, what's wrong?—" AquaMaria's voice was worried, strained.

"Kangorr escaped. No time to go into details...Boss wants you and Hotstreak down to the south side tunnels, see if you can head him off before he makes it topside."

"—Shit!—" Both Carmen and Virgil clearly heard Hotstreak's voice, obviously standing beside Maria. When Maria spoke again, her words were tight and nervous.

"—We're on our way! Maria, out.—"

The line went dead and Carmen turned away from the unit, his face grave. The other bang baby shook his head and rubbed lightly at the back of his neck, before seeming to steel himself. "All right, Kid, that's done. You ready?"

In answer, Virgil pulled his disc out again, charging it up. "You really think we're gonna be able to catch him?" he asked as he mounted the disc.

"Hard to say. It really is a maze down there. If we move fast enough, we might be able to get to him before he makes it up top." Carmen's tone suggested very little confidence in the likelihood of that scenario, though. With that, Carmen once again curled up and threw himself back down the way they had come, leaving Virgil to follow.

Carmen led the way through the least used portions of the base, toward the holding area where they
had been keeping Kangorr. Virgil followed silently on his disc.

He tried to stay focused on the situation at hand, but he couldn't help the thrill of anxiety that was building within him. Of course, he was worried that they wouldn't be able to catch Kangorr...that the other bang baby would somehow figure out where the refugees' base was and tell the other Static. In his world, Kangorr wasn't exactly the brightest crayon in the box, but there was no telling what this other one was capable of.

And then there was Richie.

If Kangorr got away, if he managed to lead the other Static to the rebels...there was no way of telling what would happen to Richie while Virgil was engaged in helping the rebels escape and regroup somewhere else. Any delay now would put a terrible wrench in their plans. His partner might be hurt. Might even be...but no. No, he'd sworn he would not let anything happen to his beloved friend. He would keep that promise.

Still...as much as he didn't want to admit it, Virgil didn't think he'd be able to rescue Richie by himself. They had to catch Kangorr...that was all there was to it.

He was surprised at Carmen's speed. The other bang baby set a pace that Virgil actually had to work to keep up with him. They made their way through the base at a fast clip, arriving at the holding cells within a few short minutes.

Right away, Virgil could tell that Kangorr had, indeed, been there. The door to the cell Kangorr had been in was lying several feet away from the doorway, crumpled and twisted. The doorframe itself was showing damage, chunks of the concrete torn out at the hinges. There were signs of a struggle—obviously whomever had been on guard had tried to stop Kangorr. Virgil hoped they hadn't been hurt too badly. The all-too-familiar imprints of Kangorr's boots scarred the concrete floor.

The place was deserted, with not even a single guard on duty. Virgil thought that strange at first, before he remembered that Sharon had put an order out to get everyone ready for an evacuation. Every able-bodied person was probably either trying to help Tech get the surveillance systems back up, or helping with whatever escape plans they had in place.

Carmen straightened from his ball and whistled softly at the destruction. He exchanged a significant look with Virgil and, without speaking, the two fell in side by side. Virgil lowered the disc slightly, sliding into an easy crouch that would allow him to move quickly should he need to. Carmen scanned the area briefly, before moving toward one of the shadowed recesses that marked the entrance to one of the many tunnels.

"Sharon's pretty much got all the main accesses covered. If he's in one of the side systems, this'll be the one he had to take," Carmen said. Virgil nodded his agreement and they proceeded down into the tunnel.

The side tunnels had been used mostly for maintenance and perhaps as part of the subway system, so at least there was none of the disgusting sewer water to contend with. Virgil was thankful for small favors. There were no lights in this section—either they had been cut off in order to try and stall Kangorr, or there was simply no electricity in this area. Virgil summoned a small pulse of power to his hands, casting enough light that he and Carmen could see the immediate area. Unfortunately, he couldn't risk throwing enough light that Kangorr might be tipped off if he was ahead of them.

Virgil cocked his head. "I think there might be a little bit of a problem with this," he whispered. Carmen grinned wryly.
"Ya’ think?” he whispered back. Then, he shrugged. "Well, only one thing to do, then."

"Charge?” Virgil suggested, with an ironic tilt to one eyebrow. Carmen looked taken aback for a moment, before he grinned. 

"I do like the way you think, Kid."

Virgil called more power forth, brightly illuminating the tunnel, and then did exactly as he had said. He shot forward, pouring on the speed. Behind him, he heard the thud of Carmen bouncing after him. He whipped through the tunnels, eyes scanning every nook and cranny even as he zipped through in a rapid-fired search pattern he’d long ago perfected on patrols.

Despite the critical nature of their search, despite everyone’s hope that they would be able to apprehend Kangorr…Virgil really wasn’t expecting to see the other bang baby. Kangorr simply had too much of a head start, no matter how confusing the tunnels were. Access to the topside was not that hard to come by.

Then again, Kangorr always had been a stupid waste of space.

Virgil actually almost ran the Jamaican bang baby over. He turned a corner, keeping his disc low over the floor. To his surprise, he found the object of their search crouched down in the floor of the tunnel just beyond the bend.

Startled, Virgil pulled up short, his mouth falling open in shock. Kangorr was clutching his left shoulder and in the glow of Virgil’s power, he could see blood soaking the shirt beneath the other bang baby’s fingers. The two stared at each other for several heartbeats. Kangorr seemed just as surprised to see Virgil as Virgil was to see him.

Carmen arrived scant seconds later, uncurling in midair to land on the other side of Kangorr, cutting off his escape.

"Wow…that was easy,” Virgil said finally. Then he raised the disc another foot or so, crossing his arms over his chest. "You had half an hour on us! You gonna tell me you couldn’t find a manhole in half an hour?” He tilted his head and painted his most incredulous expression on his face. "Dude…how do you survive here?"

Kangorr growled something inarticulate and probably not complimentary as Carmen snickered.

Virgil drew a bolt of power to one hand, further illuminating the tunnel. Kangorr crouched still lower, letting go of his shoulder to brace both hands on the floor of the tunnel.

"Don't even think about it, man,” Virgil warned, raising his fist, power cackling in a cloud of blue light around it. "It's over!"

Disconcertingly, Kangorr grinned. "I ain't heard no fat lady singin', mon.” Before Virgil or Carmen could react, Kangorr sprang toward Carmen.

Virgil fired off the bolt of electricity he held with a surprised yell, but missed as Kangorr twisted in midair, flipping to aim a kick at Carmen's midsection. Carmen dived out of the way as Kangorr landed with a thunderous crash. The concrete under him split and cracked, a cloud of dust rising up around him. Virgil fired another bolt at Kangorr's position, only to curse loudly as the other bang baby rolled out of the way. Kangorr cried out when the acrobatics jarred his injured shoulder…but he didn't stop.

Virgil and Carmen found themselves staring stupidly after Kangorr's retreating form as the other bang baby raced down the tunnel, quickly lost in the shadows.
"Well…" Carmen said.

"Well," Virgil echoed. "Let's not tell Sharon about this, okay?"

"Not a word. Now come on!" Carmen took off after Kangorr, dropping down to run on all fours this time.

"Smooth, Virgil…real smooth," Virgil muttered, before powering the disc after Carmen.

They raced down the tunnels, taking the twists and turns at incredible speed. Virgil summoned still more power forth, surrounding his entire body with a glow of electricity to light their way. Ahead of them by nearly twenty yards, Kangorr was still going strong, despite his apparent injury.

"Keep on him…I'm going to call for backup!" Carmen shouted suddenly. He veered off suddenly, down yet another side tunnel, leaving Virgil alone in his pursuit of Kangorr.

Which was fine with Virgil.

He forced still more speed out of the disc, rocketing down after Kangorr, pushing himself nearly horizontal in the air with the strain. His gaze was fixed squarely on Kangorr's back…and it quickly became clear that Virgil was gaining quite easily. He was not going to allow Kangorr to escape again.

Finally, Kangorr made as if to duck into another tunnel. Virgil fired a bolt without thinking about it, striking the ground directly in front of his quarry. Kangorr stumbled backwards, losing his balance and landing in a sprawl on the floor of the tunnel. Within seconds, Virgil was upon him, hovering just above him on the disc.

Kangorr gritted his teeth staring up at Virgil. The heat of the other bang baby's glare was obvious even through the sunglasses still, rather ridiculously given the fact they were in a dark sewer, perched on his face. Virgil raised both hands, already surrounded by a glow of power. Kangorr raised his own hands in a gesture of surrender, wincing slightly at the pull on his injured shoulder.

"All right…ya' got me," Kangorr panted, his accent thicker with exhaustion. "You t'ink it's going to save your friends, huh? You're all walkin' dead."

"I ain't heard no fat lady singin', mon," Virgil replied evenly, smirking a bit. The smirk faded when Kangorr ground out a harsh laugh.

"It don't matter if I get away or not…Static's goin' ta' find them. An' then he's goin' to squash 'em." He laughed again, an edge of hysteria to it. Clearly, Kangorr well knew that no matter what happened now, he was finished. He'd find no mercy from Sharon's people. His only hope had been to make it back to Static's base with information on where the rebels were holed up.

"Your boss won't be 'squashing' anyone. He messed with my partner…he's goin' down," Virgil answered darkly.

"T'ink you're gonna save him. Cute. You don't get it, do you? 'Dis be Static's world; his rules, his game. You can't stop him. No one can stop him." Kangorr smiled suddenly—slowly, slyly. "Besides…once he be done wit' your friend, ain't gonna be much left. And what is left, you probably won't want much to do wit.'"

Virgil's eyes widened and the leaden dread that had been his constant companion for the past three days suddenly surged to the fore again. The disc dropped nearer to the prone man, and Virgil's power flared more intensely around him. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded hotly.
"What's he going to do to Richie?"

Kangorr flinched back, intimidated despite his bravado...but the twisted smile didn't dissipate. He shook his head, still laughing softly. "What you t'ink he gonna do to him? Talon an' 'de ghost-boy t'ink no one else knows...but I was watchin'. I saw 'de way 'de boss was lookin' at your partner." Kangorr lurched to his knees, and spat at Virgil's feet. "Ain't gon' be anyt'ing of 'dat boy to save, time you get to 'im. If you get to 'im."

Kangorr was saved from retaliation when Virgil suddenly heard voices behind them. Carmen's, Hotstreak's, and AquaMaria's, all calling for him. Later, Virgil would curse himself for what happened next...for letting his guard down.

For forgetting that this was not the Kangorr of his world.

Virgil turned away from Kangorr for a mere moment; long enough to shout back to Carmen, Hotstreak, and Maria. In that moment, Kangorr moved. The other bang baby surged up from his kneeling position, lunging forward into a handstand. Kangorr kicked upwards, connecting solidly with the bottom of Virgil's disc.

Virgil let out a shout of surprise and tumbled off of the disc, landing hard on one shoulder on the floor of the tunnel. Dazed, he nonetheless kept the presence of mind to roll away when Kangorr stomped down in a move that would have crushed Virgil's head if he hadn't. Virgil kept rolling, managing to get his feet under him within moments, and came up breathing hard.

He heard the pounding of feet behind him, signaling the arrival of Carmen, AquaMaria and Hotstreak. Kangorr heard it, too, turned tail, and ran. Virgil let his power arc around him and aimed a bolt at the fleeing bang baby. He let it fly just as Hotstreak careened around the corner. The distraction was enough to throw his aim off and the bolt struck harmlessly on one side of the tunnel wall.

"Damn it!" Virgil shouted as Hotstreak skidded to a halt beside him. AquaMaria and Carmen were close behind. None of them bothered to ask what had happened. AquaMaria surged past them all as Virgil summoned the disc back to his side, leaping up onto it before the water that flowed in her wake could touch him. Quickly, he followed Kangorr and AquaMaria

"Sparky! Give us a lift!" Hotstreak shouted as Virgil sped past. Glancing over his shoulder, Virgil threw out one hand. Carmen and Hotstreak were surrounded in a field of energy and lifted off their feet, trailing behind Virgil in the air.

They soared after Kangorr, with Virgil and AquaMaria using their powers as much as they dared in the close quarters to try and throw Kangorr off. Kangorr, however, was motivated by the knowledge that he was running for his life. Their best efforts slowed the other bang baby only a little. Already, they had left the dark, maze-like section of the maintenance tunnels, and moved out into the more well-lighted main system. They were bound to come upon a manhole sooner or later. Most likely sooner.

"Man, what are they feeding you people here? He's never this much trouble where I'm from!" Virgil called back to Hotstreak and Carmen in sheer frustration.

"Awwww, what's the matter...wittle Sparkplug too soft?" Hotstreak sing-songed back, unsympathetically.

"Jerk," Virgil muttered under his breath, before pouring on a new burst of speed. Then, he raised his voice. "Where's this tunnel let out?" he shouted back.
"We're only a couple blocks from Static's base, down here," Carmen exclaimed desperately. "We have to stop him…now!"

"Damn, damn, damn, damn," Virgil chanted beneath his breath. He pushed himself harder, passing AquaMaria and closing on Kangorr, who suddenly let out a cry of triumph. To his dismay, Virgil saw a ladder access a couple dozen yards ahead of them.

Kangorr saw it, too. Virgil heard their quarry laugh aloud as he leapt into the air and smashed one foot against the side of the tunnel in a spinning kick. The arch up near the ceiling cracked ominously, bits of concrete and dust raining down into the tunnel. AquaMaria cursed in Spanish and heaved herself forward still faster, as Kangorr's intentions became clear.

It was too late.

With another high kick, Kangorr crumbled enough of the ceiling away that a large section of the tunnel wall suddenly toppled into their path, spewing dirt and debris into the air. Virgil threw himself backwards as broken pipes began gushing dirty water into the tunnel. The rumbling roar of the collapsing tunnel was all that could be heard for a few minutes as concrete, brick, and mortar poured down into the floor of the tunnel.

Hovering a safe distance away from the water, Virgil could only watch as the destruction cut them off from Kangorr, who was certainly racing for the ladder access at that very moment. Blocks…they were only blocks away from the other Static's base.

The debris settled finally, a large blockage that took up most of the tunnel. AquaMaria stretched out one hand as soon as it became evident that the collapse was over, and the broken pipes immediately ceased discharging the mucky water. Virgil set Carmen and Hotstreak down on the floor of the tunnel, shaking his head in disbelief.

"All right…this is just embarrassing," AquaMaria huffed angrily. "Get this moved!"

"There's no time to double back to another manhole," Carmen agreed. "Virgil, can you start moving some of the crap off the top of the pile?"

"Yeah," Virgil answered hurriedly. "Everyone watch out…I can—"

"Fuck this," Hotstreak growled. The air around his body literally burst into flames, encasing his body in a halo of fire. Barely giving Carmen and AquaMaria time to duck out of the way, Hotstreak threw a fountain of fire out, slamming his power into the blockage with the force of a bomb. The debris superheated almost instantantly, and Virgil whistled as it exploded outwards, further down the tunnel.

"Stay out of the way while you blow it up, apparently," Virgil finished lamely. "Wow."

AquaMaria tilted her head slightly, and a wave of filthy water rose up from the floor of the sewer tunnel. It washed forward, sloshing up over the red-hot remains of the pile. Steam hissed up into the air, filling the tunnel and obscuring their vision. Hotstreak and AquaMaria didn't wait for the water to cool things further. As one, they raced forward, flames still flickering around Hotstreak's body. Virgil and Carmen followed closely, ignoring the waves of heat still rolling off the stone and concrete that now littered the tunnel for nearly five yards.

Of Kangorr, there was no sign. The tunnel was empty.

With a growl, Virgil crouched low on his disc and zoomed forward. He overtook AquaMaria and Hotstreak easily, leaving them in his wake. He made it to the access ladder first, his heart dropping as he realized the manhole had been removed. Morning sunlight was streaming in through the opening,
illuminating a small circle on the floor of the tunnel. Without hesitating, Virgil threw the disc upwards, his power already surging to his hands.

He burst out of the manhole and up into the streets of this alternate Dakota for the first time since he had hooked up with Adam. Part of him wanted to relish the relatively fresh air, the feel of the sunlight on his exposed skin. There was no time, though. He ignored that part of him, pushed it to the side as he turned a full circle in the air, scanning the street below.

It was deserted; the only sound was the whistling of the wind through the trash that littered the broken asphalt. He recognized the street, though. Carmen had been right—they were only a few scant blocks from the TynaCorp building. Below him, Carmen and Hotstreak were climbing out of the manhole…AquaMaria surged upwards scant seconds later.

Without looking, Virgil snatched Carmen and Hotstreak up in a field of energy again, turning his disc towards the TynaCorp building and zooming down the street at a much faster pace than they could have managed on foot. AquaMaria followed, the nature of her mutation allowing her to keep up with Virgil easily.

At another time, Virgil might have marveled at the ease with which they fell to working with one another. He'd known that Hotstreak, at least, could work with others when the need arose (and in his heart of hearts, he'd had to admit that he and the fiery bang baby had made a pretty good team)…but this was different. They fell together seamlessly, working like a well-tuned machine. Mistrust and suspicion were forgotten in the face of their common goal, and in their pursuit of that goal they simply clicked…complimenting each other's strengths beautifully.

He did not marvel at it, though. His whole being was focused on catching up to Kangorr, on preventing the other bang baby from bringing harm to the rebels.

On preventing him from ruining Virgil's chances of rescuing Richie.

For the sake of his friend, for the innocents living beneath the streets…Virgil could not fail. He pushed himself to his limits, well aware that time was ticking against them. Every second was precious, now. His eyes darted restlessly on the street below, searching for any sign of Kangorr. They were very nearly at the TynaCorp building…if they continued much longer, they ran the risk of encountering one of Static's patrols.

Fortunately, they found Kangorr before he reached the base.

*Unfortunately*, they were not the first to find him.

Less than a block from the building, Virgil finally spotted their target in the middle of the street. Hissing through his teeth, he quickly jerked himself, Carmen, and Hotstreak into a convenient alleyway, Maria following. He lowered himself to the ground and let the field holding Carmen and Hotstreak dissipate. As one, they crowded close to the mouth of the alley, barely peeking around the corner. Hotstreak swore softly, and Virgil heard Carmen groan beneath his breath.

Onyx and Puff were standing in the street with Kangorr…as was the barely visible form of the ghost dog that had nearly taken Virgil down the night Richie had been taken.

"Well shit," Hotstreak muttered.

They walked in a silence that seemed somehow oppressive...menacing. Static's light touch on the small of his back seemed to burn like a firebrand; the gentle pressure the other youth exerted as he guided Richie down the hall feeling like a lead weight. A dark, primal fear had been clawing at
Richie's guts for the past several minutes…since he had seen the light in this Static's eyes, heard the tone his words were spoken in.

Wrong.

There was something wrong about the way this Static was looking at him. It was something that teased older, more primitive parts of Richie's mind…fluttering at the edges of his consciousness and tapping at his fight or flight response. Richie was ordinarily not one for portents and 'feelings,' preferring the world of hard fact and evidence…but he did not deny instinct and intuition. Such had saved his life and Virgil's life far too often for him to discount it. Richie's own instincts were screaming at him now.

And they told him to run. They told him to run as far and as fast as he could.

He couldn't, though. There was nothing he could do at this moment…barefoot, weaponless, stripped of his tools and his gadgets, Backpack too far away to help him. Here…now…in this moment—he was completely at Static's mercy.

Had the hallway been this claustrophobic and ominous before? To be sure…his heart had been in his throat as Static had escorted him down to the cafeteria, fear twisting in his gut. The walls had seemed to be closing in on him. The whole building, in fact, had felt claustrophobic and ominous to Richie from the start. The feeling, however, had been nothing compared to what he was experiencing now.

For a moment helplessness closed around him, reaching out with icy fingers to choke him. His breath caught in his throat and his heart rate sped up. How much of this hot/cold, slow/fast business could the human heart take? How much adrenaline was racing through his system, had been racing through him for days now? The human body could OD itself on its own adrenaline. Any moment now, he could be plunged into fits, seizures. He could have a damn heart attack right here on the floor, and then what would happen to Virgil? He'd be stuck here, that was what. He'd be stuck, and Richie would be dead, and that wouldn't help either of them, now would it? And another thing…

As quickly as he had allowed it to get away from him, Richie pulled his mind from its nervous blithering. He shook his head slightly, as if to clear it of unwanted and unneeded thoughts. Normal, healthy, seventeen-year-olds did not die of heart attacks. Panicking would do him no good…and he tended to babble when he panicked, so it was both a useless and annoying gesture. He tamped the panic down, forcing himself to look at his situation objectively. Unfortunately that just made him want to panic again.

He felt as though he was marching to his own doom…each step carrying him closer to some unnamed and unimaginable danger. There was no real evidence to support such a notion, but he felt it. He had to get away. He couldn't get away.

Static led him back to the elevators, punching the number for the floor Richie's cell and the lab were on when the car arrived. The thick silence persisted and Richie forced himself to stare straight ahead, not giving in to the desire to turn and see what the youth beside him was doing. He knew what Static was doing; could feel the other's dark stare on him without having to see it. It was what was going on in the mind behind that sinister gaze that worried Richie.

The elevator doors opened on the floor he was being held on within moments, and Static again splayed his hand over Richie's back. Richie was struck by a sensation not unlike insects crawling over his skin. If only this bastard would stop touching him! Gritting his teeth, Richie stepped off the elevator and turned back down towards his 'room' at Static's subtle direction. They walked down the hall and with every step, Richie felt the sense of alarm growing.
At long, long last, they reached his room and Static finally lifted his hand from Richie's back to punch in the security code. The door slid open and Static stepped aside, gesturing for Richie to precede him into the room. Richie did so, though he was unable to shake the feeling that presenting his back to this Static was a Very Bad Idea right at this moment. Well, it was probably always a Very Bad Idea…but at this moment it felt like it was an especially Bad Idea.

He moved awkwardly into the center of the room, immediately casting a furtive glance up to the air duct. The bare hint of silver gleam behind the grating that he knew to be Backpack reassured him immensely. At least he was no longer totally without an advantage. He took a deep breath, mentally squaring his shoulders, and turned to face Static.

The other was lounging against the now closed door, still regarding Richie with the intensity that had so disturbed him. It was a light he had seen in Static's eyes before, but he was no closer to identifying it than he had been those other times. It was a quality, a feeling that he couldn't recognize. What was truly unsettling was the fact that Richie felt he should recognize it.

"Good job." Richie was startled out of his musings by Static's soft voice. He focused his gaze on the other boy.

"What?"

Static smiled, slow and Cheshire-like. "On the traps. Good job," he elaborated. Richie narrowed his eyes slightly, a smart-ass response springing to his lips automatically. He bit it back by sheer force of will, unwilling to antagonize the other boy. He settled instead for a shrug and sullen silence. Oddly, the smile faded on Static's face, replaced by a thoughtful expression.

He tilted his head to one side, regarding Richie critically. Abruptly, he straightened from his position slumped against the wall and moved over to Richie. Richie held himself still, staring at a point just over Static's shoulder. The other youth stopped just in front of Richie, only a few inches between them. The thoughtful look deepened on Static's face.

"You're scared of me," he said at length. Richie started slightly…what was Static playing at? He breathed out in a huff of air and clenched his teeth. This time, he couldn't quite stop the sharp retort that formed.

"Just the way you like it, right?" He met Static's eyes for a brief moment, before averting his gaze. He turned his head to one side and wrapped his arms around his middle, grinding his teeth. Irritating Static was not going to serve any purpose other than to get himself hurt. He couldn't help it, though. This constant façade, the fear, the danger that surrounded him at every turn…it was grating on him.

The thoughtfulness faded from Static's features, replaced by blank neutrality. The other's eyes narrowed slightly as if in consideration. Richie braced himself silently, waiting for another display of this Static's harsh anger. It didn't come. Instead, he shook his head slowly.

"No one else," Static said softly, so softly that Richie almost couldn't hear him, even as close as they were. "No one else would ever…" Static trailed off and a slow, dreamy smile twisted his lips. Richie frowned, unsure of what exactly Static was talking about.

Suddenly, Static reached forward and laid his index finger on Richie's chest, just at the end of the breastbone…at the start of the worst of the cuts he had inflicted. They were no longer painful, but the now scabbed over lines served as a stark reminder of just how ruthless this mockery of his friend could be. Richie flinched back, but Static merely followed the movement, keeping the same distance between them. The odd smile never leaving his face, Static traced the path of the slashes on the t-shirt Richie had slept in, stopping just at Richie's stomach.
"I didn't really want to do this, you know," he said slowly, tracing back upwards, following the path of his finger intently. "But I had to show you who was in charge. I didn't, before. That was stupid of me." Richie swallowed hard and struggled against the impulse to shove the other boy away from him. What the hell was going on?

Seeming to lose interest in outlining the cuts, Static splayed his palm over Richie's chest, just over his heart. Richie stood still, hardly daring to breathe, his nails digging painfully into his palms. The sense of wrongness was growing by leaps and bounds within him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a dull flash of silver as Backpack moved in the air duct. No doubt, his creation was reading his distress in his tense stance and elevated heart rate. Quickly, Richie jerked one hand in a sharp "Cut!" gesture across his thigh, nixing any move the robot might have been intending to make to try and help him. He couldn't afford to have Backpack found out, now.

Thankfully, Static seemed not to have noticed, still lost in whatever reverie he had fallen into. The hand on Richie's chest moved upwards, tracing over his collarbone. Static stopped at Richie's neck this time, resting his thumb in the hollow of Richie's throat, one finger lightly stroking the pulse point just below his ear. With a gasp, Richie finally wrenched himself backwards, away from the other's touch, no longer able to stand it.

He stumbled slightly in his haste, nearly losing his feet. Concentrating on staying upright, Richie missed the almost…pained look that crossed Static's face. It was gone in an instant, though. Before Richie could regain his full balance, Static was on him again. He was pushed into the wall, the hand on his collarbone gentle, but just as threatening as a choke hold.

"You don't have to do that, Rich. No more running. I won. I won a long time ago. It's time for you to stop this game," Static whispered. His gaze had gone flat, but Richie could see anger smoldering beneath the calm…like a banked fire ready to blaze forth at the slightest provocation.

For a moment, Richie froze, his eyes gone wide with horror. Static had figured him out…had deduced that Richie had been playing him all along. For that brief, blinding moment, panic literally short-circuited his thoughts. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on how one looked at it), Richie's mouth had been operating independently of his brain for years before his transformation.

"W-What game?" he choked out, striving for innocence and failing miserably.

Static grinned mirthlessly. "It doesn't have to be like this…we could be a good team, Richie," he said, as if Richie had not spoken. "We were always a good team. No one, nothing would be able to stop us."

Richie opened his mouth to say…something. He wasn't sure what. The point was quickly rendered moot, however, when Static shook his head lightly. The hand at Richie's shoulder pressed harder for a heartbeat, a subtle reminder of strength. Richie pressed himself back further against the wall, and for the first time in a long time, he wished with all his might that the bang gas had gifted him with a power that could be used more offensively.

"It doesn't matter anymore…none of it matters. You came back. I can let it go." Static leaned in closer suddenly; so close that Richie could feel the warmth of the other's breath on his face.

"Oh damn it, Foley, think! Think!" The panicked thought skipped through his head and was gone in the roar of his own heartbeat through his ears.

What the hell? What the hell was happening?

Static's voice dropped lower still. "You were mine. You were always mine." The distance between
them vanished, and now it was Static pressing him back into the wall. Richie's breath came in harsh gasps; his heart pounding so fast it seemed there was no pause at all between one beat and the next. He screwed his eyes tightly shut, silently screaming denial even as his voice froze in his throat.

Static leaned in closer still, tilting his head slightly, and now Richie finally recognized what had been lurking in the other's eyes from the beginning.

"Oh God…oh God, Virg, help!"

"Just stop fighting me…that's all you have to do. Stop fighting me," Static whispered against his lips.
Virgil leaned back against one of the walls that made up the mouth of the alley they were hiding in. One hand found a slightly protruding piece of brick in the wall and he slid his fingers around it, slowly tightening his grip until pain forced him to stop. He bit down on the inside of his cheek, thoughts racing as his eyes darted restlessly between his companions.

Carmen had retreated further into the alley with Hotstreak's radio, and was desperately trying to raise Sharon or Adam back at the base. Hotstreak was crouched just in front of Virgil, peeking around the corner of the alley to keep watch on Kangorr, Puff, Onyx, and the ghost dog. The air around Hotstreak was starting to shimmer with heat, and standing next to him was about to become seriously uncomfortable. AquaMaria was on Virgil's other side, staring back at Carmen worriedly, her watery form trembling in and out of its humanoid shape.

The other Static's people had made no move to enter the safety of the TynaCorp building. Virgil ducked closer to Hotstreak despite the heat, peering around the corner again. Kangorr was facing Onyx and Puff, feet braced apart, shoulders thrown back defiantly, though he was casting uneasy glances both in the direction he had come and at the wavering form of the ghost dog. He seemed to be arguing with Onyx, and Virgil's eyes narrowed in realization.

"Why aren't they moving?" Hotstreak hissed suddenly. "That creep knows his little roadblock wouldn't have stopped us. He knows we were right on his tail."

"He's bargaining," Virgil whispered back. Hotstreak glanced up at him, startled confusion furrowing his brow. "Kangorr's trying to buy his way back in," Virgil elaborated, more sure by the moment that he was right. Hotstreak snorted.

"Yeah, that'll work," he muttered sarcastically. AquaMaria tore her gaze from Carmen long enough to nod briefly.

"Static doesn't make deals," she added, her voice dark. "The best Kangorr can hope for is someone beating it out of him before Deimos turns the dog loose."

"Sharon's on her way with Nails and Adam...they're bringing a couple of patrol squads with them," Carmen interrupted softly. His voice and gaze were both bleak...obviously he didn't think they would arrive in time to do anything. And he was right. They had moments, at best.

Virgil's stomach churned unpleasantly with a sick feeling. Kangorr was going to talk, one way or another...and there was little doubt he could give the other Static enough information that the underground base would be found out. Virgil and the others hadn't managed to run Kangorr far enough into the tunnels to rule that out. It was all but a certainty. Sharon and Adam would not be able to take that chance...they would have to run.

Who knew if they would be able to find another safe haven? Their Richie was dead, unable to put his brilliance to their defense. Even Carmen had admitted that Tech was not a substitute for Richie. Adam had said the Justice League of this world helped them...but in Virgil's world, the Justice League would never have allowed things to get this far in the first place. What other horrors did they have to deal with in this world, that they could let an entire city fall to this other Static's control and call it an acceptable loss? How much help would they be to Sharon and Adam?

The sick feeling grew, spreading through his whole being as realization began to tease the edges of his thoughts. Adam had said almost sixty people lived in the underground base...and Virgil knew
that was only counting the fighters. Families, children, injured, elderly, all were part of the strange band that lived beneath the streets. Virgil made the population of the base at closer to a hundred. Adam had said nearly two hundred more lived on the outskirts of the city, risking their lives to keep Sharon's crew supplied with food, medicine, and weapons.

Three hundred innocent lives...people who had helped him when their every instinct had to have been screaming at them to kill him on sight. People who had extended alliance, however shaky, to him to help him rescue his beloved partner...for no other reason than they couldn't bear to let another Richie Foley suffer at the hands of Static. They had risked so much for him.

Their time was literally ticking away with each breath.

Three hundred people. Three hundred lives...against one. Against Richie's.

"We have to take him down before he talks." Virgil was vaguely surprised to realize that the dull, wooden voice had issued from his own throat. He watched with hooded eyes as his three companions whirled on him, shock written on each face. He tried to smile reassuringly, and had no idea that it came out as a frightening, strangled grimace. "I'm right, right?" he asked.

"Virgil...if we—if we move now..." Virgil held up one hand, forestalling AquaMaria's protest.

If they moved now, it would likely come down to the four of them against all of the other Static's available forces. Virgil would be needed to provide firepower...and Tech would never arrive in time to salvage any of their intelligence-gathering plans. It would tip their hand, alerting the other Static to Virgil's presence with the rebels. If they moved now, they would most probably be quickly outnumbered, outgunned, and the chances of someone getting hurt or killed before they could get to Kangorr were extremely high. It was dangerous, stupid, and it would mean putting Richie's rescue aside...maybe even endangering Richie further.

"We have to," Virgil said softly. "We can't let him rat you guys out."

It was their only choice.

"Don't think about it," Virgil ordered himself harshly. He couldn't afford to think about what this would mean. He didn't know if he was strong enough to go through with it if he thought about it.

He looked up again and almost of their own accord, his eyes found Carmen's. The other bang baby was regarding him with quiet sympathy. More than anyone, Carmen knew what it cost Virgil to propose such a course of action...what it could end up costing him. He averted his eyes, unable to stand that too-knowing gaze. The dizzy, nauseous feeling swirled harder within him and a bitter, humorless smile quirked his lips. Sometimes, being the hero sucked.

"No jackin' around this time...we've got to take him out," Hotstreak said harshly. He pounded one fist into the opposite palm with a small puff of smoke. There was no room for doubt as to what he meant. Kangorr had to die. Virgil swallowed roughly as Hotstreak stared hard at him. AquaMaria laid a quieting hand on Hotstreak's shoulder, but her eyes were no softer as they found Virgil's. Virgil's stomach dropped unpleasantly, even as he set his jaw. He wanted to rail against what Hotstreak meant to do...wanted to scream that they couldn't be serious, couldn't lower themselves to that level. He held his tongue, though. The pretty niceties of right or wrong, black or white, win or lose, had collapsed a long time ago in this version of Dakota...this was war. There was only survival. And there was no time to debate, anyway.

"Do...do what you have to," Virgil said thickly. "I'll—I'll help, I'll cover you...but I can't...I'm
"All right... all right, we can't wait for Sharon and Adam. Me and Maria'll circle around and hit 'em from the left. Virgil, you're air support. We're gonna have to move hard and fast... we have no idea who's in and who's on patrol right now. Hotstreak..." Carmen's face hardened. "Wait 'til their attention's on us. Then you go for Kangorr."

Hotstreak nodded grimly. "He's not getting' away this time."

With that, the time for talk was apparently over. AquaMaria reached up to lay a hand on Hotstreak's cheek for a moment, a small cloud of steam rising from the contact. They spoke no words, but Hotstreak covered her hand with his own, a surprisingly tender expression flitting across his face.

"I'll see you later, babe," he said.

AquaMaria nodded. "I'll see you later," she repeated. The words were simple, casual... but had the feel of ritual to them. Then, AquaMaria liquefied completely and the resulting stream of sparkling water flowed rapidly away from them, towards the back of the alley.

Carmen nodded gravely at Hotstreak and Virgil, before curling in on himself. He followed in the direction AquaMaria had taken, the thud of his balled up body striking the ground surprisingly quiet. Virgil watched as Carmen easily cleared the high brick wall that made up the back of the alleyway, before pulling out his disc again and turning back to Hotstreak. He hopped lightly up onto the metal circle, hovering in the air near the mouth of the alley.

Kangorr still appeared to be arguing with Onyx and Puff. With a start, Virgil realized it had been only a few minutes since they had ducked into the alleyway. It felt like hours. He and Hotstreak watched the group tensely, waiting for AquaMaria and Carmen to strike.

"Remember, stay the hell away from the dog," Hotstreak whispered. "Don't look—"

"At the eyes," Virgil finished grimly. "Yeah... figured that one out, thanks." A shudder raced through his shoulders at the remembered feel of the power of the ghost-dog's gaze.

"No heroics... soon as I flash fry that bastard, we're gone."

"I know," Virgil said impatiently. "I'm not gonna punk out on you, I'm not gonna try and stop you."

"I know," Hotstreak replied, so quietly, Virgil almost missed it. A glint of light shown in the busted out window of a building to the left of the little group he and Hotstreak were watching so intently... like the glimmer of sunlight off of water. If possible, Hotstreak tensed further. "Get ready."

A halo of crackling blue light surrounded Virgil's body, even as the air around Hotstreak's exploded into flame. A flash of tan appeared in the same window. Virgil crouched low on the disc, as Hotstreak bounced lightly on his toes.

"In and out," Virgil repeated to himself silently. "In and out, and don't think about what this means."

"Sp... uh, Virgil..." Virgil glanced down at Hotstreak in surprise. "We will get him out of there... we're not giving up." Hotstreak's voice dropped to a barely decipherable murmur, and he refused to look at Virgil.

There was a crash from the street outside the alley, the roar of rushing water.
"Go!" Hotstreak shouted. Virgil wasted no time. He shot straight into the air, his power sparking around him. He could only pray that he wasn't about to do something that Richie would pay the price for.

"Rich...I'm sorry."

"Oh God...oh God, Virg, help!" The panicked plea skipped through his mind, the words frozen in his throat. Virgil couldn't hear him...couldn't help him now.

Time had stopped, trapping him in an agonizing moment between one breath and the next. He hovered there, unable to process what was happening and yet knowing that he had to. Static's free hand had crept up to slide through the short hair at the base of his neck, an almost-caress that inspired loathing such as Richie had never felt before. Barely a hairsbreadth separated the two of them. Richie could feel the heat of the other's body flush with his own; feel the other's breath ghosting on his face. The realization of what Static meant to do left Richie shuddering in icy revulsion. The need to move--to scream, to run, to do anything--surged through him.

Static chuckled menacingly, under his breath, and the sound seemed to echo through the room. The fingers at the base of Richie's skull tightened fractionally, drawing him forward those final, nearly non-existent millimeters. Richie had nowhere to run...no way to fend this nightmare off. He didn't dare call for Backpack—the distraction might let him slip free from Static, but he had no illusions that he'd be able to make the door before Static took the little robot out. He couldn't fight Static physically. There was no one who could help him. Trapped between Static's bulk and the hard wall, there was nothing to do...but endure.

"Static."

For a timeless instant, Richie thought his own desperation was playing cruel tricks on him; that he had imagined the soft voice. He felt Static sag against him though, hanging his head against Richie's shoulder. Not even daring to breathe, Richie forced himself to open his eyes.

The electric aura flared around Static briefly, a faint glimmer of blue light that thrummed against the bare skin of Richie's arms. "You have the worst timing, D," Static muttered, a distinct edge to his voice. It was not, however, the same tone he used when addressing his other underlings. Richie's eyes flickered to the doorway.

Deimos lounged against the doorframe, still dressed in the black leather he had worn every time Richie had seen him. There was an expression of casual indifference on the young man's pale face, as though he had walked in on the two of them playing cards.

"Then blame Captain Kangaroo. He made me come up here," Deimos said, apparently unruffled by Static's irritation. Richie clenched his fists by his side, hardly daring to hope that chance might have granted him a reprieve.

Static straightened with a soft growl, at last putting some space between himself and Richie. Richie reined in a sigh of relief by sheer force of will, and then held himself still as stone as the hand at the back of his neck let go. Static stared hard at him for few heartbeats, then reached up and lightly ran his thumb over the edge of Richie's lower lip. He smiled coldly, raking his eyes and up and down in a look that made Richie's skin crawl.

"Later then," he whispered, dark promise in his voice. He turned to glare at his subordinate. "You said Kangorr's back?"
Deimos inclined his head. "Puff and Onyx found him running hell for leather up the street." His eyes flared scarlet momentarily, and he let out a humorless chuckle. "He says he wants to deal."

Static shook his head. "Kangorr, Kangorr, Kangorr…only deal I'm giving him is whether I kill him fast or slow." He tilted his head slightly, glancing back at Richie. "I guess I'd better go take care of that now. Watch him." With that, Static strode forward, brushing past Deimos with nary a backwards glance.

Richie wilted back against the wall and closed his eyes again, sending a silent prayer of thanks winging up to anyone who might be inclined to be listening. He pushed his glasses up over his forehead to scrub at his face, and was wildly surprised to realize his hands were shaking. His entire body was trembling, little shivers racing through his frame.

The whole morning suddenly seemed to close in on him—the fear that his faulty zap traps had been discovered, the possibility that this Static was on to his plans, the coldly casual tone of Static's voice as he had pronounced a death sentence on this world's Kangorr…

And…

The tremors worsened and Richie abruptly wiped his hands down the front of his thighs in an effort to still the shaking. "All right…all right…so he was going to…he's.." He stopped, unable to finish the thought. He didn't need to apply his intellect to figure out what Static wanted…what he had been about to do. That was pretty obvious. His mind shied away from it, not wanting to deal with the implications. If he thought about it, Richie rather suspected he'd end up just curled into a gibbering ball for a few hours—and he couldn't afford that. Not now.

He needed to plan. He needed to readjust his scheme. He needed to up his timetable. He needed to…

"Yet," a treacherous inner-voice reminded him. "He'll be back. And you think he's going to stop there?" No, no, no, Richie did not want to follow this train of thought right now. Unfortunately, his thoughts weren't listening. "You think he's gonna take 'no' for an answer?"

A hand descended on his shoulder. Despite himself, Richie jumped, an undignified yelp escaping his lips. The back of his head connected sharply with the wall he had been leaning against and he barely managed to bite back a curse. He straightened quickly, opening his eyes to find Deimos standing directly in front of him. Damn, the man moved like a cat when he wanted to.

As always, the other man's expression could have been carved from stone, but for the barest instant, Richie thought he could read some emotion flickering through the normally implacable gaze. It was gone almost as soon as Richie registered it, though. Deimos arched one eyebrow and snorted softly. "Smooth," he said coolly.

Richie chose not to respond, averting his eyes and focusing on a small patch of carpet just to his left. His hands had finally stopped shaking and he took a deep breath, feeling a bit more in control of himself. The cold dread was still there, forced back behind a veneer of calm…but still waiting for him. He couldn't deal with that now, though. The coldly scientific side of his nature rose up to take charge, and never had Richie been so glad to surrender to Gear's façade. Later…he could deal with all of it later. Right now…right now he just needed to think. He needed to plan. He needed to…

"Get dressed." Get dressed?
"Huh?" Richie blinked in surprise, and Deimos let out an irritated huff, rolling his eyes heavenward.

"You. Go. Get. Dressed," Deimos said slowly, over-enunciating in a condescending tone. "Unless you like wandering around in your underwear," he added sardonically. Feeling the heat rise in his cheeks, Richie glanced down at the plain t-shirt and boxers he had slept in the night before. No...no, he most certainly did not want to be wandering around in his underwear right now.

He sidled away from Deimos, and walked over to the workbench. When he'd gotten back to his 'room' the night before, there had been a small pile of clothes rolled up on the bed. There had even been some rather worn-looking sneakers. Apparently, someone had gotten tired of fetching him fresh outfits every day. Uneasily noting that all the clothes were his size, if not quite as baggy as he usually wore his garments, Richie had simply shoved the clothes under the workbench so they would be out of the way.

From that pile, he selected a pair of jeans, another t-shirt, and a black, hooded sweatshirt. Like the shoes, the sweatshirt had seen better days, but Richie found himself wanting the cover, the layering. He snatched up the sneakers as well, relieved that he would no longer have to run around barefoot or just in socks. Casting one more glance at Deimos, who had moved to the windows and was staring intently down into the street, he headed for the bathroom.

He changed quickly, but took an extra few moments in the relative safety of the bathroom, just leaning against the sink. He let the water run, gripping the cool edges of the porcelain and resting his forehead on the glass of the mirror. What was he going to do?

Virgil would be coming for him. Soon. Of that he had no doubt...he'd know about it by now if the other Static's people had managed to capture or kill Virgil. He had only to wait, to be ready to move when Virgil finally did. The question was: could he afford to wait for his friend? Could he somehow put Static off long enough for Virgil to put whatever plan he came up with into action?

Barring that...just how much more could he suffer through?

Suddenly chilled, despite the sweatshirt, Richie turned off the water and straightened, staring hard into his reflection. "Whatever you're going to do, V...hurry," he whispered. Then he turned away from the sink and slid the door open, exiting back out into the main room.

Deimos had not moved from the window, but he looked up as Richie reappeared. Richie licked his lips and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of the jeans. "So, what now?" he asked. Deimos turned away from the window and regarded him silently for a moment.

"Now, you—" Deimos fell silent, an expression of surprise momentarily shattering his usual eerie calm. His eyes flared scarlet and Richie darted a look around the room, searching for Phobos. However, the ghost-dog did not appear.

"What?" Instead of answering, Deimos stalked forward and seized his upper arm in a tight grip. "Hey!"

"Move," Deimos ordered, the red light in his eyes flaring brighter. Richie was left sputtering as he was half-guided, half-shoved towards the doorway. He was able to cast one last, desperate glance at the air vent where Backpack was concealed before Deimos unceremoniously shoved him out the door.

The other man all but dragged him down the hall to the elevator lobby. To Richie's surprise though, it was the stairwell that Deimos headed for, pulling Richie along for the ride. As the stairwell door slammed open, Deimos at last let go of his arm. Jerking his chin upwards, Deimos indicated that...
Richie preceded him on the stairs.

His confusion growing by leaps and bounds, Richie couldn't help but glance down to the empty stairs below them. He could vault over the railing easily enough, make a break for it...but he had no way of knowing how far he could get before Deimos summoned the damn dog. It was frustrating... Deimos was really the only x-factor of this whole universe. Everyone else, Richie could account for in his plans with reasonable confidence. Even as far removed from Virgil as this other Static had proven to be, Richie still felt he could calculate the other's reactions and degree of power within an acceptable margin of error. After all, he knew Virgil's powers better than anyone save Virgil himself. Having never met Deimos in his world, Richie had no such basis for comparison. It made things... risky.

Passing a sign, he finally noticed where they were heading. He glanced over his shoulder. "What's on the roof?" he questioned uneasily. Deimos shrugged nonchalantly, but there were lines of tension around his eyes and mouth.

"Your room felt stuffy." Deimos's expression didn't change at all, but Richie was sure the other was lying through his teeth.

"Right," he drawled, raising an eyebrow. Two could play this game. "Maybe if you wouldn't dress like you got lost on your way to a *Farscape* convention."

"This from the human spearmint stick," Deimos fired back tightly.

Richie narrowed his eyes, but let the conversation drop. Needling was one thing—full blown antagonizing was probably not a good idea. They climbed the last flight of stairs, ending at a small landing constructed of aluminum. There was a red door labeled 'Roof Access' with a heavy security bar and a small keypad next to it, but Deimos simply pushed the door open.

Richie blinked rapidly at the sudden flood of sunlight, and stepped out onto the tarmac-covered roof, immediately squinting against the high winds that whipped over the building. Automatically, he called to mind everything he could remember about the TynaCorp building. He'd never studied the blueprints closely, but he'd often flown by the building on his patrol routes. Twenty stories, in the middle of a commercial complex made up of much smaller buildings. A quick glance at the city skyline (or what was left of it) confirmed that he was closest to the west-facing side of the building.

"Deimos?" Richie spun around so fast at the familiar voice that he actually overbalanced and fell to the ground. Deimos grinned smugly, but Talon barely took notice. "Why'd you bring him up here?"

"Same reason Static ordered you out of sight," Deimos said. A significant look passed between them, before Deimos's gaze settled back on Richie. Talon was evidently not satisfied.

"That doesn't answer my question." She leaped down off the roof of the small structure that made up the entrance to the stairwell to stand in front of Deimos. She crossed her arms over her chest, tapping one clawed foot in annoyance. Finally, Deimos shrugged.

"Phobos pegged three rats. Could be more." Deimos looked away from Richie, staring past him over the edge of the building towards the skyline. "Just thought I should keep him where he wouldn't be able to do something stupid. Besides," the man glanced towards Talon, "he needed the air."

And there it was again. Deimos's face was still guarded, but Talon's wasn't nearly so, and a wave of unidentifiable emotion passed between them. Richie didn't know what it was, but he could tell it was about him. For a brief instant he wondered if Deimos interrupting what Static was about to do was...
coincidence.

They had radios for communication in the building…why come all the way to the room to inform them of something that Deimos could've handled on his own? Why interpret 'watch him' into 'bring him to the roof'? How was Talon involved? Things weren't adding up again, and he didn't like when things didn't add up.

"Keep an eye out. And if anyone so much as glances up here…"

Talon nodded. Then she tilted her head, sliding a slightly nervous glance in Richie's direction. "You think it's...him?"

Deimos nodded grimly. "The signature's too familiar to be anyone else."

Abruptly, it clicked. Deimos could 'see' through Phobos's eyes…that had been readily demonstrated. And the nature of his power would also suggest that he might be able to sense metahumans in some way. He'd said Puff and Onyx had found Kangorr in the street outside the building. They'd been attacked…that was the only explanation. Hope, almost painful in its intensity, bloomed in Richie's chest.

The only 'familiar' signature Deimos could mean was Virgil. Virgil was here. Richie immediately straightened, straining to hear the familiar sounds of battle over the whistling of the wind. Virgil had come to get him the hell out of here, just as Richie had known he would. All Richie had to do was escape his guard and get his friend's attention. Then he would be gone, away from this nightmare. He could summon Backpack with Virgil's Shock Box...he'd find some way to get the equipment he still needed to make the wormhole generator.

"V, your timing is beautiful."

"Don't even think it."

Richie's head snapped towards the voice. Deimos was glaring at him menacingly, his eyes swirling with red light. Talon had taken off, gliding high in the air to begin circling the roof, presumably ready to dive down and join the fight. In an instant, Richie delved back into the guise of 'beaten prisoner,' too frightened to do anything. "Think what?" he asked, trying to pitch his voice low and slightly tremulous.

"The only way off this roof is through me or over the side." Deimos moved so he was leaning against the shut stairwell door, cocking one leg to rest the heel of his boot against it. "You won't get through me."

Richie continued to play his part. "I wasn't thinking-"

"He's not even close enough to think about helping you. And he's not going to get close enough."

Richie frowned, though if Deimos had known him better, the sudden sly gleam in his eyes would have alerted the other man that something was up. Richie drew himself up straight, squaring his shoulders and glaring defiantly at the other. "You don't know Virgil," he said coldly, in his best 'I'm-a-superhero-don't-fuck-with-me' voice. Predictably, and to Richie's annoyance even though it was what he was aiming for, Deimos laughed shortly.

"You don't know Static," Deimos sneered. "Just stay put." And just like that, Richie saw it--the casual dismissal, usually so frustrating to him, but now it would serve him well.

Let his captor think he regularly hid behind Virgil, drawing up a false bravado from his friend's
presence…all the better for Richie. He doubted Deimos would let his guard down completely…after the stunt Richie had pulled that first day in the lab, Deimos had to know there was more to Richie Foley than necessarily met the eye. But, it was obvious that Deimos thought he was holding all the cards.

Granted, that wasn't far from the truth…but Richie was never without a plan.

He let his eyes swing slowly over the roof, mentally reviewing every angle of the building he could remember from his world. The west side of the building was no good: smooth expanse of gleaming glass windows all the way down. But the south side…about forty feet away…the south side had balconies. There were no fences around the edge of the roof—just a small cinderblock barrier, only about two feet high. It was a bit of a drop; maybe two floors. He wouldn't get out unscathed, but if he could get inside, grab Backpack…

It was possible.

It was very possible.

The problem was: Deimos was between him and the south ledge. The other man had fallen silent, leaning back against the stairwell door with his arms crossed over his chest. The red glow had not faded from his eyes, and from time to time his brow furrowed, eyes narrowing. With a start, Richie realized the man had to be directing Phobos in the battle below. That had to be taking up a lot of his concentration.

Talon was making circles in the sky above them, keeping an eye out. All Richie had to do was make it to the edge before Deimos either got his mutt up here or tackled him. And he could do that. He was fast, faster than anyone here even knew. A little distraction wouldn't be bad, either. But how to distract him…

"Even if Virgil was here to try and catch you, Talon would get to you first. And if she missed, it'd be suicide."

Richie blinked, startled. Damn it, the man had noticed how intently he'd been staring at the roof edge. All right, so directing Phobos wasn't as much of a distraction as Richie had hoped. He jutted his chin forward, matching the other man's glare. Deimos, however, just smiled humorlessly. "Besides…I could call Phobos before you even reached the edge."

"I could make it," Richie said stubbornly, well aware he just sounded petulant. It was having the desired effect.

Deimos regarded him, and then shrugged. "So make it."

"What?"

"Or at least, go ahead and try." Deimos looked almost…amused. "See if you have what it takes. And if you don't make it…" The man shrugged eloquently. Above them, Talon suddenly banked into a steep dive, disappearing from view.

Richie still couldn't hear any of the battle that had to be going on…but he got the feeling he was running out of time. If he was going to do something, it needed to be now.

He waited a few moments, then let his shoulders slump as he lowered his gaze to the ground with seeming reluctance. He could still feel Deimos' gaze on him, but he knew human behavior. Static's minion would assume he'd won the argument and relax after a few minutes. Not totally, just enough to give Richie the window of opportunity to make his escape. He glanced up through his lashes,
trying to determine how much attention Deimos was paying him.

And for the first time since he had arrived in this hellhole, Lady Luck apparently remembered that it had been a while since she'd checked in on one Richard Osgood Foley.

Richie froze, his breath catching in his throat, as a small, blessedly familiar shape appeared on the edge of the roof of the stairwell shed. Backpack's sensor eye wound sinuously down, hanging over Deimos's head for a moment before it retracted slightly and focused on him.

"I have the smartest robot in the world!" Richie crowed to himself triumphantly. Backpack must have followed him through the air-ducts, and let itself out onto the roof through the main vents. For a brief moment, Richie let himself bask in the glow of sheer pride and amazement that his creation had done so without any prompting from him...had actually analyzed the available data and taken it upon itself to follow in case he needed it.

Then reality smacked him in the back of the head and reminded him that he was currently in something of a life or death situation.

He tensed slightly, slowly widening his stance and balancing as much of his weight on the balls of his feet as he could without seeming obvious about it. He darted one last look up at Backpack, giving it a barely perceptible nod and flicking his eyes towards Deimos. The sensor eye retracted totally, and Backpack's silver body appeared over the edge of the shed roof, balancing precariously, ready to spring. He breathed out slowly, his heart already hammering in his chest. He took one, brief instant to appreciate the sheer insanity of what he was about to do.

"Now Backpack!" he shouted.

To his credit, Deimos reacted instantly, lunging towards Richie in a preemptive tackle. Unfortunately for him, he had no idea that there was about fifteen pounds of AI that was rather irritated at the way its creator had been treated hanging above his head. Backpack pounced as soon as Richie voiced his command, landing squarely on the back of Deimos's shoulders. The man went down with a cry of surprise.

Richie wasted no time. He sprinted forward, not even bothering to look to see how quickly Deimos gained his feet. As if the plan had been discussed and practiced beforehand, Backpack let go of Deimos and leaped as Richie passed, landing in its customary position on his back. A fierce grin lit Richie's face as Backpack's legs locked securely around his shoulders and waist, the familiar weight more comforting than he could describe.

He raced across the roof, aware of the sound of footsteps pounding heavily after him. Deimos had gained his feet almost as quickly as he had been knocked down. Gritting his teeth, he lengthened his stride, making it to the security barrier well ahead of his captor. Barely slowing down, he leaped onto the cinderblock wall, ready to simply dive forward.

His body was stopping him almost before his brain had time to process the reason why. As it was, he ended up on the edge of the wall, pinwheeling his arms wildly against his forward momentum. He skidded to a halt after a few seconds, perched precariously on the edge, staring down a twenty story drop to the ground. At last, he realized what he must have seen just as he had gained the wall.

There should have been a balcony a mere two floors down...a dangerous, but still doable drop. The balcony had been torn out.

Richie swallowed hard, staring down a drop of at least four stories to the next balcony.
"Well…that's not good," he said tiredly.

"Told you you wouldn't make it." Richie turned slowly to face Deimos, who had stopped a few feet away from him. The other man was breathing hard, anger written on his normally unreadable face. Richie swallowed heavily as the scarlet flared more brightly in Deimos's eyes. "Get down now," Deimos bit out, clenching his fists by his sides.

Richie turned and glanced behind him, his stomach dropping as he confirmed that, no, the drop hadn't gotten any shorter in the last ten seconds.

Deimos chuckled darkly, the red glow eclipsing his eyes completely. Mist began billowing up in front of him from nowhere, swirling into an ever-thicker cloud. Richie shook his head, sharply. He backed up slightly, teetering on the very edge of the wall.

"Don't be stupid. There's nowhere for you to go," Deimos growled. Richie shook his head again, casting one more glance over his shoulder. Deimos narrowed his gaze. "You don't have the guts." The shape of the dog's head became visible in the cloud.

Richie lifted his chin, gritting his teeth harder. He had seconds, at best. Backpack's legs tightened around his waist, seeming to read his intent. He spread his arms wide and took a deep breath.

"You don't know me, either," he spat.

Then, he stepped off the edge.
Virgil hurtled through the air, calling every available ounce of power forth. There would be no showy displays, no give and take banter today…his goal was to get this over with as fast as possible. He cleared the top of the alleyway within seconds, his gaze instantly zeroing in on the trio of Kangorr, Puff, and Onyx. The ghost dog seemed to have vanished for the moment, but Virgil had little doubt that it would be back.

AquaMaria and Carmen were evidently as aware as Virgil was that time and odds were not in their favor. AquaMaria had swept out into the street itself, a wall of water at least eight feet tall trailing in her wake as she coaxed every available hint of moisture from the sewers below and the long-unused fire hydrants. Carmen was bouncing along at her shoulder.

From his angle, Virgil could see that both were heading for Puff, whose lower body had already vanished into the familiar misty cloud she used to propel herself through the air. That left Onyx for him, and Kangorr for Hotstreak. Fair enough. Kangorr was already running towards the relative safety of the TynaCorp building, but out of the corner of his eye, Virgil spotted Hotstreak already running for the Jamaican bang baby. Onyx and Puff were totally focused on AquaMaria and Carmen…they probably hadn't even seen Virgil take to the air, despite the glow of his powers.

Virgil banked into a steep dive, barreling towards Onyx. He had no idea how long it would be before an alarm was raised…at the outside they had minutes before the other Static's people starting boiling out of the base. Probably less. Summoning a bolt to his hand, Virgil pulled even with the ground, skimming along just above the broken street. Onyx was braced to meet the assault of AquaMaria's wave head on, while Puff had taken to the air.

"Hey, no fair starting the party without me!" he called. To his satisfaction, both Onyx and Puff whirled around, not expecting an attack from behind. For a brief instant, the two froze in confusion, probably unsure as to which Static it was careening towards them. Virgil was more than happy to clear it up for them. He let fly with the bolt, striking Onyx full in the chest.

As he had known it would, the bolt did not do much more than momentarily stun the huge bang baby, but he had successfully distracted them from AquaMaria's imminent approach. Sloppy of them. He grinned in satisfaction as the wave of dingy water swept upwards into the air as AquaMaria raised her arm, slamming into Puff. The girl crashed to the ground, her cry of pain and surprise cut off as the water closed over her head briefly. Carmen rocketed into the middle of Onyx's back without missing a beat, the force of the blow driving Onyx to his knees.

In Virgil's world, this would have been the end of the fight. All that would have remained would have been to hit Onyx with a large enough shock to render him unconscious long enough for the police to arrive. Puff and Onyx had been more dangerous than some, but certainly not a major concern for him and Richie. Unfortunately, Virgil was rather quickly reminded that this was not his world.

Coughing and sputtering, Puff was nonetheless moving the instant AquaMaria's attack receded. Before Virgil's eyes, she lunged forward, leapfrogging onto her partner's shoulders. Using Onyx as a springboard, she leaped into the air and executed an impressive back flip in midair, catching Carmen with a hard kick on his rebound from Onyx's back. Carmen went sprawling as Puff landed with catlike grace on the ground and immediately spewed out a cloud of noxious gas in AquaMaria's direction.

"Hey! No fair! No one told me these guys could actually fight!" Virgil shouted indignantly, even as
Onyx lurched back to his feet. Puff's rough cackle answered him.

"Ya' think Static keeps us around for our conversation skills?" she mocked. Her legs reformed into the violet-tinged fog and she took to the air. Virgil was forced to direct his disc higher as Onyx made a clumsy grab for him.

"Okay, this…could be bad," he gasped to no one in particular. Dodging nimbly out of Onyx's reach, he zigzagged to Carmen's side as the other gained his feet, rubbing at the back of his head.

"Boys! Incoming!" AquaMaria hollered; and Virgil looked up to see her pointing over his shoulder. Without preamble, he forced the disc nearly to the ground beside Carmen, ducking low. The ghost dog sailed over his head, landing on the ground in front of him and Carmen with a distorted snarl.

"Don't look at it!" Carmen yelled. "It can't touch you…just don't look!"

"Check…help AquaMaria, I got Onyx," Virgil said brusquely. Without waiting for an answer, he zoomed towards the lumbering bang baby, who was trying to make his way to Puff. Calling another bolt of power forward, Virgil threw it at the ground in front of Onyx. A concussive boom sounded as dust and bits of broken concrete erupted from the point of impact. Onyx stumbled, but did not go down.

"No damn bulldozers to use this time," Onyx taunted gruffly. Virgil merely cocked his head, grinning a touch maniacally.

"Oh I think I can improvise," he said. He fired another bolt at the ground just to Onyx's left. Onyx shied away, dipping down to pull at the edges of the hole left by Virgil's other blast. As if he were ripping through paper rather than solid asphalt, Onyx pulled a piece of the street twice as big as Virgil's head up and hurled it at him. Virgil banked sharply to one side, dodging the missile easily. Before he had even righted himself, he fired off a third bolt at Onyx feet, this time driving him straight back. Virgil smiled. "Okay, now just hold that pose!"

Before Onyx could react, Virgil raised both hands. His smile widened as the two streetlights Onyx had unwittingly maneuvered himself between bent and twisted under his power. The metal poles twined down, wrapping themselves around Onyx's torso and arms. Onyx bellowed in anger, pulling furiously at the bonds. For the moment, though, they held. Good enough.

Virgil whipped around to find AquaMaria and Carmen doing a fair job of double teaming Puff. The latter had flown high enough that Carmen wasn't able to do much against her, but AquaMaria was hurling wave after wave of water up at her. Between trying to avoid the watery blasts, and trying to get off a shot at her tormentors, Puff was well and truly distracted. Good to see knowing a few new moves hadn't improved her intelligence any.

Disconcertingly, the ghost-dog had vanished again. Virgil scanned their small battleground uneasily, searching for the wavering, misty form. He didn't like not knowing where the thing was. If it managed to sneak up behind one of them…

"Virgil!" At the sound of his name, Virgil ceased his search for the ghost-dog. Carmen was waving frantically as AquaMaria kept Puff busy with a particularly vicious volley. "We have to get out of here! Help Hotstreak!" Seeing that the two had Puff in hand, and that Onyx hadn't yet managed to disentangle himself from the streetlights, although the poles probably wouldn't hold much longer, Virgil nodded sharply and wheeled his disc around.

He sped off in the direction he had seen Kangorr and Hotstreak, praying that Hotstreak wouldn't need his help. He'd meant what he said…he didn't think he had it in him to actually help…help
them…say it, Virgil…help them kill Kangorr. That was a line he couldn't fathom crossing, did not want to fathom crossing. And yet, it might be his only choice.

Hotstreak's trail was easy to follow…the burn marks and small fires smoldering everywhere were a dead giveaway. Hotstreak had thrown himself into his assignment with frightening abandon. Apprehensively, though, Virgil noted that Kangorr had run straight for the other Static's base. The trail of destruction led right into the main courtyard of the complex the TynaCorp building had been built in. It was laid out like an open courtyard, with a large fountain in the center. Surrounding the fountain were small picnic shelters, benches, and what Virgil presumed had been awnings set up for people to have cigarette breaks under. Most disturbing was the fact that the courtyard was less than fifty feet from the other Static's front door. Kangorr may have been a coward…but he wasn't stupid.

It was not difficult to find the two combatants, and as soon as they came into view Virgil could see that help was probably the last thing Hotstreak needed. The young man was literally a column of flame, smoke actually wafting up from the paving stones beneath his feet. Kangorr was crouched on the edge of the fountain, breathing hard, his clothes singed and blackened in several places. Though the fountain had long ago stopped working by the looks of it, there was still a bit of dirty brown water in the main basin, a thick layer of slime floating on top in most places. Evidently, Kangorr felt that the water might provide some kind of protection.

Looking at the determined cast of Hotstreak's face through the flames, Virgil thought that Kangorr was sadly mistaken.

It was obvious that Virgil's assistance was not needed here. He knew he should turn around and go back to Carmen and AquaMaria…Onyx would not be immobilized forever, particularly if Puff noticed her partner's predicament. And what if the ghost-dog showed up again, managed to catch either Carmen or AquaMaria? Virgil found himself transfixed by the scene in front of him, though. He hovered just out of Hotstreak's line of sight, unsure of just why he was watching, but just as unable to tear his eyes away.

"Hotstreak…hey…c'mon, mon. We got history, you an' me!" Kangorr's voice rang out desperately across the courtyard. The man leaped aside when Hotstreak answered with a volley of fire, landing on a different part of the stone fountain.

"Yeah. You've tried to kill me, Maria, Sharon, Carmen…hell, pretty much everyone I give a damn about. We've got history, all right." Hotstreak moved forward, as unstoppable as an act of nature and twice as volatile.

"Hotstreak…Hotstreak! I--c'mon! I, I don't know where your base be…I swear I don't!" Kangorr held out one hand beseechingly, his voice trembling.

He scrambled up onto the mouth of the fountain, a spire of carved stone about ten feet high, with three stone tiers down its length. Kangorr leaped onto the second tier. From his vantage point, Virgil saw Hotstreak's expression harden into a cool cunning at odds with his explosive personality and the swath of destruction he had already cut. Hotstreak said nothing, but Virgil suddenly had the impression of a trap clanging shut.

Unexpectedly, the fires around Hotstreak's body flickered out, vanishing into wisps of pale smoke. Kangorr lowered his arm, a relieved, slightly hysterical laugh escaping him. Virgil, however, could see the air around Hotstreak still shimmering with heat. His eyes darted back and forth between the two, trying to figure out what Hotstreak was up to. Surely…surely he wasn't going to let Kangorr go?

"Hey…hey, mon…I knew ya' wouldn't," Kangorr called. "I knew ya' wouldn't." Slowly, he began
to climb down off of the fountain.

Hotstreak was so fast, Virgil couldn't follow the movement. As Kangorr's foot touched the last tier before the fountain basin, Hotstreak threw out one arm. Virgil gasped as a fireball literally exploded into existence just beyond Hotstreak's fingertips. It flew towards Kangorr with the speed of a bullet, striking the second stone tier, just above Kangorr's head. With a startled cry, Kangorr fell backwards, tumbling down into the fountain basin. A spray of filthy water rose up around him as he flailed wildly. His face never losing its cast of stony determination, Hotstreak summoned another fireball.

And another.

And another.

Virgil watched in horrified awe as time after time, they found their target. The spheres of flame demolished the fountain before Virgil's very eyes, with Kangorr still in it. Clouds of foul-smelling steam rose up from the destruction, obscuring the sight of what was happening. Virgil was grateful for that...bad enough that he could hear it. The stone groaned and creaked, before shattering under the heat with an earsplitting crash. Through the steam, Virgil saw vague shadows of the tiered spire collapsing down into the basin.

And over it all, Kangorr screamed.

He screamed and screamed, and Hotstreak just kept methodically throwing his power at the fountain, until at last, mercifully...the screaming stopped.

The crackle of flames filled the courtyard, and the steam gave way to clouds of thick, black smoke. Hotstreak had set fire to the stone. Even from a distance, Virgil could feel the terrible heat of the inferno Hotstreak had created. There was no way Kangorr could have survived.

Without even realizing it, Virgil sank to his knees on the disc, his stomach turning rebelliously. He struggled to hold onto what little he had eaten, swallowing hard and pressing the back of his hand to his mouth. Killed him...Hotstreak had killed him. Quickly, efficiently...and brutally.

"Holy...holy shit," Virgil gasped, pressing his hand harder against his mouth.

As if by their own accord, his eyes turned to Hotstreak. The other youth was standing in the same spot, just staring at the remains of the fountain. The flames had vanished totally, and the air around him no longer shimmered. Virgil strained, searching for some sign of the unholy glee the Hotstreak of his world had always seemed to feel at causing destruction. To his surprise, he found none.

There was no satisfaction in Hotstreak's face, no happiness. As Virgil watched, the grim mask that had descended on the other twisted into something bitter and disgusted. For one brief moment, Hotstreak looked as nauseated as Virgil felt. Unbidden, Adam's earlier words sprung to Virgil's mind.

"We've all had to do things we never would've dreamed of doing before Static took over. All of us."

Virgil had known, intellectually, that the situations that the people of this world faced were more dangerous than anything he or Richie had ever dreamed of. For the first time, though, he thought he might actually understand what it was that these people had to deal with on a day to day basis. Adam had been right...this was war. And no one here had any choice.

Swallowing roughly, Virgil pushed himself back to his feet and directed the disc over to Hotstreak's side. He hesitated a moment, unsure of what to say. Finally, though, the vulnerability of their position reasserted itself. Hotstreak shook his head lightly, before turning to Virgil.
"We need to go," he said. Virgil nodded, casting one last glance at the wreckage of the fountain. Hotstreak shoved past him, jogging back the way Virgil had come, and after a moment, Virgil pulled the disc around to follow.

It was instinct that saved them.

Something tingled along the back of Virgil's neck…an awareness so familiar that he almost took no notice. Almost. The air sparked with electric power…that had not come from Virgil. Without thinking, he threw himself off of the disc, crashing into Hotstreak and throwing them both several feet forward.

The bolt of power struck the ground where Hotstreak had been a split second before, kicking up a shower of dirt and bits of concrete and blackening the pavement. Virgil and Hotstreak rolled with the impact of their landing, and Hotstreak managed to disentangle himself. Almost as one, the two of them leaped back to their feet, their respective powers flaring to life.

Blue lightning danced through the air—lightning Virgil had not called. He felt Hotstreak tense beside him, and his heart sank as he took in the sight of their attacker--dressed all in black, standing on a simple sheet of metal, a halo of blue light surrounding his body.

Virgil looked up into a twisted, death's head grin on his own face.

"Static," Hotstreak growled.

Richie stepped off the edge of the roof, the gusting winds seeming to wrap around his body in an embrace. For one brief, giddy instant, he welcomed the familiar sensation of flight, the freedom of soaring through the air. Then reality reasserted itself…and he wasn't flying, he was plummeting. Twenty stories below, the hard ground waited for him. The wind whistled painfully in his ears and the gusts were no longer embracing, but pummeling him. He fell.

It was amazing how much more terrifying the experience was when he was without his jet skates, without the sure knowledge that Virgil would be there to catch him if he somehow couldn't save himself. He was on his own, now, and he was going to die if his plan failed. No ifs, ands, or buts.

All of this went through his mind in an instant, acknowledged and discarded as unimportant. The balcony was rushing up towards him…he had one chance. He tipped himself forward in the air, leveling his body out so that he was falling horizontally, not vertically. He couldn't grab the balcony himself—at this velocity, the motion would tear his arms out of their sockets. It was up to Backpack. Richie just prayed the hydraulic joints would hold. He knew they should…he'd designed them with just such emergencies in mind—but he'd never really had the opportunity to test them.

Well…it looked as though he would get the opportunity now.

He closed his eyes as they fell the final few feet to the first balcony ledge. Even though he had braced for it, he couldn't help the scream that was torn out of him as their freefall was violently arrested. Backpack's grip closed painfully tight around his waist as the other two arms left his shoulders to grab the concrete ledge. There was a squeal of abused servos and Backpack let out a distressed series of high pitched whines and whirs. Richie's body slammed brutally against concrete, the impact hard enough that the breath was knocked out of him and his vision went dim. He dallled thusly for precious seconds, trying to decide if he was going to stay conscious or not.

The sudden lurch as Backpack's grip started to slip decided for him. With a cry, he reached upwards, scrabbling for the lip of the balcony ledge. His feet found scanty purchase on a small, protruding lip
at the bottom of the balcony. Slowly, painfully, he hitched himself upwards, Backpack pulling at him as much as it could. After a few moments, he managed to get one leg up and over the ledge.

Backpack let go of his waist as he tumbled over the side, landing with a bone-jarring thud on the floor. He lay there, panting, for a few moments, silently taking stock of himself. Each breath sent a stab of fire through his chest, and when he cautiously ran a hand down his left side, he encountered wetness just above his hip. Backpack's grip had torn through his shirts and skin, leaving a long, shallow gouge on his side. When he sat up, his vertebrae let him know that they had taken a vote on it, and he and his back were not going to be on speaking terms for the foreseeable future…but miraculously, nothing felt broken.

He groaned as he climbed to his feet, pressing a hand against his side. It wasn't bad; it would probably stop bleeding in a few moments. It didn't matter, though, because there was no time to tend to injuries. Painfully, he jumped back up against the chest-high wall of the balcony, pulling himself up so he could lean out over the edge and look back upwards to the roof.

His jaw tightened, eyes narrowing as he saw the outline of Deimos's face staring back down at him from the edge, before the other man vanished. He let go of the wall and turned to kneel beside Backpack, the little robot having already climbed down. Quickly, he checked his creation over for damage, relieved to find only a minor tear in one of the fluid lines in its left front leg. Backpack's internal repair system had already closed off the damaged line.

"Thanks, buddy…I couldn't have done it without you," he said quietly, heartfelt relief in his voice. Backpack beeped at him in what Richie had often thought might be something like affection, before it turned its attention to the sliding glass door that opened into the building. "Right, we have to get out of here," Richie agreed, all business. It would not take Deimos long to figure out which office balcony Richie had landed on. They had mere minutes, at best, to try and make their escape.

And this time, Richie intended to get the hell out of here.

Without preamble, Backpack extended one of its many mechanical arms towards the door. The laser cutter made short work of the lock on the balcony door, and Richie slid the glass open with a small grin. He really did have the smartest robot in the world. He stood still a moment and let Backpack scurry up his legs to rest again on his back, wincing only slightly as Backpack's legs locked around the cut on his side. It was a small matter, easily ignored. They had more pressing concerns.

They had landed in what had once been a medium-sized office. All the furniture had been removed; only a few filing cabinets, their drawers hanging haphazardly open, remained. Noiselessly, Richie padded across the carpet and eased the door to the hallway open a few inches. Backpack extended its sensor eye, scanning the hallway quickly. After a moment, the sensor eye retracted, nodding slightly in an affirmative motion.

Richie was really missing his helmet interface. One of these days, he was going to have to create a voice synthesizer for Backpack. He paused momentarily, the idea taking hold, but shook his head. Definitely no time for that. As quietly as he could, he slipped out the door and began sprinting down the hallway, towards the elevator lobby. All he had to do was get to the other side of the building, get out, find Virgil and catch his attention, all without getting caught by any of the other Static's people.

Right. No sweat. Simple, really.

"I hate my life," he muttered aloud.

He would be forced to take the main stairwell again…it was too dangerous to take the elevators, and while he thought there might be a secondary staircase somewhere, he didn't have time to go
searching for it. Briefly, he considered getting on the elevator and then crawling up through the emergency hatch into the elevator shaft itself… but again, that would take too much time. For the moment, speed was his only hope. He had to put some serious distance between himself and the roof before Deimos raised the alarm.

"Damn it, where’s the Flash when you need him?"

He hit the door to the stairwell at a dead run, uncaring of how much noise he made. Immediately, he started pounding down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time. He leapt down to the next landing from the fifth stair up, stumbling only a little, and raced down the next flight. He made it three floors down in such a manner, then four, and then five. On the sixth, he began to get the sinking feeling that this was entirely too easy.

His lungs were burning, his battered body protesting the abuse. He slowed down on the landing of the ninth story, coming to a halt beside the stairwell door. He leaned against the wall for a moment, trying to quiet his own breathing enough that he could hear if anyone was following him. Except for his own harsh gasps, though, the stairwell was eerily silent.

He swallowed heavily and tilted his head, considering. Static must have called all his people out to help with the fight. That would explain the emptiness of the halls and stairway. There might be others lurking in the building, yet, but Richie thought that staying ahead of Deimos was probably going to be his biggest problem. But where was the other man? If he was down in the lobby, laying in wait, then Richie was in serious trouble. If Deimos was chasing him through the halls, he still might be in serious trouble. It was only a matter of time before Deimos alerted someone to his escape… before security cameras pegged him.

"Damn, damn, damn," he thought. "All right….all right, options. It's not safe to stay in on the stairs… can't just go down the elevator."

Crap. He was going to have to make a run for the elevator shaft… it was his best chance of getting out of the building undetected. All right…. all right, he could slip out into the elevator lobby on this floor. He and Backpack could pry the elevator doors open between them… climbing down nine floors on a shaft maintenance ladder was not going to be fun, but he could do it. He'd just have to hope no one used the elevator while he was in the shaft. It was a risky, shoddy plan. It was also the best he could do at the moment.

Steeling himself, Richie pulled the door open and slid out into the hallway proper.

And that was where his luck ran out. "Crap… should've stayed in the stairs!"

"Uh, whoops! Lookin' for the men's room," Richie said glibly. Shiv blinked at him for a moment before turning and jerking a thumb down the hall.

"Oh, third door on your left, but there's no… heeeeeeeey!" The slightly vacant look was replaced by a cruel smirk. "You're not supposed to be running around!"

Richie smiled disarmingly. "Can't blame a guy for trying." Then he was forced to roll away from the comparative safety offered by the stairwell as Shiv's arm, now encased in a glowing sword of light slashed towards his face. "Shiv, I so don't have time for this!" he gasped, coming to his feet in a defensive crouch.

Several throwing knives suddenly formed in Shiv's other hand, and Richie had to dive again. This time he just kept rolling, tucking his head into his arms as much as possible. He came to a stop in the middle of the hallway, and the wrong angle to simply spring to his feet, and he heard Shiv giggle
maniacally as the last throwing knife was hurled at him. He threw his arms up to cover his face, but Backpack hoisted itself over his shoulders, extending one of its legs. The blade struck, dissipating harmlessly, and Richie had the pleasure of watching Shiv stumble back, eyes wide with surprise.

Without prompting, the machine dropped to the floor. Richie's hands itched for a zap trap, but he was just going to have to improvise. Shiv was momentarily confused, looking from the robot to Richie and back. Then he grinned. The sword retracted with a bright flash, and Shiv clapped his hands together, cackling with unholy glee. The purple light flared again, and Richie's eyes widened at the extended buzz saw and wickedly curved machete he suddenly found himself facing. With a wild yell, Shiv lunged forward, the saw aiming for Backpack, the other arm for Richie.

Richie rarely engaged in physical fighting. His talents were in gadgets and outsmarting his opponent and he damn well knew it. He really had no grappling skills to speak of. Years of being the smallest and slightest at family reunions full of 'boisterous' (in Richie's opinion: brutish) male cousins had necessitated the development of a fairly decent right hook. More years of dodging bullies in various settings had given him better-than-average reflexes.

More Kung-Fu: Fists of Fury marathons than anyone should be able to sit through without having their brain leak out their right ear had given him a vague idea of some defensive moves.

He ducked under the blade, turning as he went, and gripped Shiv's upper arm. Using the other's own momentum against him, Richie pivoted sharply, and managed to throw Shiv into the wall. He couldn't help grinning as Backpack used the distraction to leap forward. Shiv let out a sound that was half a cry, half a moan as Backpack slammed into his stomach, before dropping back down to the floor.

The flush of triumph was short-lived, however. Aware that every second he wasted here made his situation more dangerous, Richie cast his gaze frantically about the hallway for the means to end the fight quickly. Backpack wouldn't be able to help him hold off Shiv forever…the crazy bang baby may have been small potatoes against Gear, but Shiv was plenty dangerous if one had no zap traps or caps to fall back on. Finally, he saw what he needed.

Dashing forward, he slammed his elbow against the glass front of a bright red firebox on the wall. He quickly snatched the fire extinguisher off of its hook and whirled around to face Shiv again. The other had recovered himself and was raising the glowing blade again, the buzz saw having vanished in favor of three wicked-looking throwing stars.

"Hey, catch!" Richie shouted, throwing the fire extinguisher as hard as he could even as Shiv let the throwing stars fly. Richie tried not to cry out as one of them found its mark, cutting into his shoulder. He dropped to the floor as Shiv automatically reached out to catch the extinguisher.

There was a moment of perfect silence. Then there was a slightly muffled whump and the hallway was suddenly filled with a cloud of white. Richie hitched himself to his feet, pulling the collar of the sweatshirt up over his nose and mouth. Through the haze, he could just make out Shiv, the purple energy around his hands completely fizzled out, swaying slightly. The fire extinguisher lay at his feet, broken into two jagged pieces. Contents under high pressure, plus explosive energy puncturing outer casing, equaled big boom.

Sometimes, Richie just loved chemistry.

"Hey…look! A panda!" Shiv slurred, before his eyes rolled up in the back of his head, and he collapsed gracelessly beside the remains of the extinguisher.

Backpack skittered to his side, crawling up to yet again settle on his back. He winced as new cuts
and bruises made themselves known, particularly the gash on his shoulder. Damn, he was lucky Shiv hadn't rigged that star to explode on impact. Panting slightly, he leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees.

"Definitely…investing…in some classes when we get home," he informed Backpack tiredly. "Karate or something. I'll bet Robin knows some people." At least it had been Shiv he'd run into, and not Onyx or Nightingale.

He turned to step over Shiv's insensate body, intent on getting to the damn elevator. He and Backpack *had* to get to some kind of cover.

He hurt all over, his mad dash and the fight with Shiv had pushed his adrenaline to the limits, and the whole general situation had exhausted him. He was running on fumes and good intentions. So, he supposed he could be forgiven for not being entirely alert just when he needed to be most.

Backpack suddenly beeped a loud warning. Richie turned, but barely had time to glance at where the little robot's sensor eye was pointing before a heavy weight crashed into him. He was slammed face first into the same wall he had shoved Shiv into. The world spun for a moment, but he caught a glimpse of red eyes and leather.

He whipped around, and barely managed to duck the fist flying towards his face. He couldn't dodge the second one, though, and it caught him across the same cheek Static had bruised. He yelped loudly and felt Backpack shift, scrambling upwards and over his shoulders to take a flying leap at Deimos.

Deimos, however, was not caught off guard this time. He ducked to one side, shrugging out of the trench coat he wore as he moved. Undaunted by its miss, Backpack rebounded off the opposite wall and flew at Deimos again. This time, the blue-haired man caught the little robot in the folds of his coat. He wrapped the fabric around Backpack a few times, and then tossed the whole bundle down the hallway with a snarl.

Richie knew the measure would only trap Backpack for a few moments…but he wasn't sure he *had* a few minutes to give his creation. Deimos whirled on him, grabbing the front of his sweatshirt in both fists and slamming him back against the wall. Deimos's eyes were glowing red, but Phobos had not yet put in an appearance.

"*You,*" the man growled, anger dripping from his voice. He got no further, though. Richie surged against him, throwing his full weight against the other man. Unprepared for the sudden movement, Deimos tumbled backwards, Richie falling on top of him.

As soon as they hit the ground, Richie was moving—thrashing wildly, kicking as hard as he could and pummeling any part of Deimos he could get at with his fists. The man grunted in pain, but didn't let go of Richie's shirt. More by accident than design, one of Richie's flailing fists finally connected solidly with Deimos' nose. Suddenly blinded, the other man loosened his grip enough that Richie was able to wrench himself away. He heard the sweatshirt rip as he went, but then he was rolling to his feet.

His eyes darted around the hallway, still foggy from the fire extinguisher, desperately searching for some kind of weapon. The broken pieces of the extinguisher were too far away to be of use…and there was nothing else. Deimos had already scrambled to his feet, and was between Richie and the door to the stairs. Behind him, he could hear the whine of Backpack's cutters working on the leather coat that bound it. He had less than a heartbeat to decide on a course of action.

He turned around and ran like hell.
Backpack had managed to mostly free itself, and Richie barely broke stride as he passed it, leaning down to scoop the robot free. It swarmed into position as Richie ran, tucking itself close against his back to cut down on any resistance. He heard Deimos close behind him and desperately strained for more speed. Deimos might have been taller, had a longer stride, but it quickly became obvious that Richie was indeed the faster.

The hallway branched off into a T shape just ahead and Richie sent a silent prayer heavenwards as he barreled around the corner, taking the left branch. The hallway went from private offices to a huge, open floor, one that still had the hundreds of cubicle dividers set up in their maze-like formation. Richie's heart sank, though, as he realized there were no exits off this floor…only two private offices on the wall to his right.

Deimos hadn't yet caught up to him. In an instant, Richie knew what he would have to do. Skidding to a halt, he threw himself into the nearest cubicle, rolling to a stop under the desk just as he heard Deimos race around the corner. The other man cursed loudly as he realized that Richie had vanished, and Richie struggled to get his breathing under control.

"You can't hide in here, Foley. There's nowhere for you to go." Deimos, too, was panting…but his voice had returned to that infuriating calm.

As silently as he could, Richie crawled under the open space at the bottom of the divider into the next cubicle. He lay flat, pressing his cheek against the scratchy carpet. Deimos' boots came into view, a scant two rows over. Richie pulled himself up again and began crawling through cubicles at random, trying to put as much distance between himself and the other man as possible. He would have to draw Deimos deeper into the room, and then try to double back…make a break for the hallway again.

A heavy sigh intruded on his thoughts, and he plastered himself against the wall of his current cubicle, hardly daring to breathe. Backpack's legs tightened fractionally around him. Richie strained his ears, listening for Deimos.

"This is pointless! You're not getting away…just give it up!" Deimos called.

It sounded as though he were maybe ten, fifteen feet away. Richie rolled into another cubicle. He couldn't keep this up forever…sooner or later Deimos was going to just start throwing the flimsy dividers aside.

"I'm warning you, Foley…if Phobos has to hunt you out, you're going to regret it." Deimos' tone had turned cajoling and it was all Richie could do not to snort in derision.

Like he was taking anybody's word in this hellhole. He scrambled under another divider, trying to make his way back towards the entrance to the hall. He froze, though, as he finally heard the loud crash of one of the dividers being knocked over.

"All right! I warned you!" Deimos yelled suddenly.
Richie's stomach dropped to somewhere in the vicinity of his shoes. The dog…Deimos was calling the dog. Richie swallowed convulsively. He didn't know if the animal had any kind of actual tracking abilities itself, or if it was just an extension of Deimos' mind, but he knew his situation had just gotten a lot worse. His frantic efforts to hide in the labyrinth-like cubicles had taken him too far away from the hall to simply run for it. If the dog or Deimos caught him before he could make it back to the hallway, he was done for.

Richie closed his eyes, clenching his fists and resting his head back against the wall of the cubicle for a moment. He didn't know if he was going to be able to do this. There was only one choice then…if they caught him again, this was all not going to be in vain.

"Backpack," he whispered softly. He felt the sensor eye extend over his shoulder. "Listen to me, buddy…I need you to get out of here. Go through the air-ducts again, whatever you have to do. You have to find Virgil, okay?"

To his surprise, the sensor eye waved back and forth in a definite negation. The grip around his shoulders and waist tightened firmly before relaxing again. Despite the dire situation, Richie grinned. Of all the times for Backpack to start copping an attitude.

"You've got to. If they catch both of us, I'm screwed. I'll try to catch up to you, but if I can't—" his voice hitched slightly, and he had to swallow again. "If I can't, you get to Virgil. Show him what I've built, show him all the data you collected on the building…and then you guys come and get me the hell out of here, okay?"

For a moment, he thought Backpack was going to refuse…was actually going to go against a direct order from him. More than ever, he wished for the helmet interface…he was dying to know what was going on in his creation's circuits right now. Finally, though, the sensor eye retracted and Backpack disengaged from his back. The little robot slid silently to the ground, and stood still a moment. The sensor eye extended, touching his knee briefly, before Backpack obediently skittered off into the deeper shadows, towards the walls.

Richie watched it go, surprised at the wave of apprehension that gripped him. Now…now, he was truly alone. He was alone in the mother of all hostile territories; with a very powerful, very pissed off metahuman on his trail. Resolutely, he turned away from the direction Backpack had taken. He'd meant what he said…if it could be done, he was going to join Backpack on the ground.

Slowly, he crawled forward, daring to peek around the edge of the cubicle he was currently crouched in. When the way proved clear, he quickly scrambled across the aisle, into the next set of cubicles. The hallway was about twenty feet away. He could hear Deimos crashing through a section of cubicles farther up from him…evidently the man thought Richie had tried to hide as deep in the maze of workstations as possible. Of the hound, there was no sign.

He licked his lips and slid under the divider into the next cubicle, his gaze darting nervously around him. Suddenly, he thought he knew what those two kids in the Jurassic Park movie must have felt like, running through that kitchen with the raptors on their tails.

Idly, Richie thought he really might have preferred facing raptors. Nah…Deimos and Phobos were pretty scary, but at least they didn't have fangs and claws. Or at least…he didn't think Phobos had real claws and fangs.

He pulled himself into the next cubicle…maybe three more and he'd be close enough to run for it. He began to let himself hope that he might make it out of this after all.

Which, in retrospect, was probably a mistake. Fate hated being tempted like that.
He had made it into the next cubicle when a low, distorted growl reached his ears. He didn't bother to look where it was coming from, didn't bother to turn around. He abandoned all pretenses of stealth and threw himself out into the main aisle.

He heard Deimos shout behind him as he started running again. A chilling howl echoed through the room, and Richie realized with a wave of dread that it emanated from directly behind him. He pounded towards the hallway, some part of his mind noting that he didn't hear Deimos running after him. He had just enough time to wonder why before the reason became obvious.

A terrible, absolute chill suddenly engulfed him, centering in his chest. He gasped at the icy feeling, stumbling slightly. Then, to his horror, the ghost-dog was in front of him.

Through him. The dog had jumped through him.

With a cry, he tried to reverse direction. His sneakers skidded on the smooth carpet, though, and he ended up tumbling to the floor in front of the dog. He tried to throw his arms up, to get to his feet…to do something. He really did. He just found that he couldn't.

The dog stalked forward, until it was standing over him, and Richie couldn't move. He heard his own harsh gasps echoing around him, but he couldn't really feel himself gasping for breath. He could only stare at the hellish red gaze of the dog. The icy, icy cold…the chill of the grave enveloped him, deadening his limbs and stealing his breath. The gasps died away into choking hitches that he barely heard over the thundering of his own heart.

The glow of the dog's eyes intensified, and suddenly the burning heat he barely remembered shattered the cold. He might have screamed, but if he did he couldn't hear it. His heart raced faster, dread swirling in waves and eddies around him. Dimly, he felt himself shaking, the trembling becoming worse and worse by the second until he was practically seizing on the floor.

It was all secondary, though, to the terrible, terrible heat. He felt as though he were being burned alive from the inside out. It was worse than it had been in the cafeteria…worse in ways Richie couldn't even describe. He struggled for something to hold onto, something to keep the pain at bay…but there was nothing. There was only the fear, and the pain, and the red glow of the dog's eyes.

And then…it was over.

The dog looked away from him, and Richie came back to himself with a gasp. He collapsed back against the floor, panting, staring up at the ceiling. His whole body was still shaking, his heart racing far faster than was healthy. His head pounded dizzily and though the searing heat was fading, his lungs still burned for oxygen.

He was dimly aware of Deimos standing over him, and then the other man dropped to his knees. "Much more and he would've driven you to a heart attack," the man said conversationally. Abruptly, Deimos reached forward and seized a handful of the torn sweatshirt. He jerked Richie up so that they were at eye level. "Don't try this again," he said coldly, menace thick in his voice. "Now…where's that damn machine?"

Deimos glanced around as if he expected Backpack to come leaping out of the shadows again, and Richie felt his mouth stretch into a horrible parody of a grin. Backpack was long gone…and it was going to be bringing reinforcements. Deimos turned his eyes on Richie again, glaring harshly. "Where is it?" he demanded again.

Richie had done his best; he'd made his stand. He'd played a desperate gamble…and it had failed. But Backpack had escaped. Virgil was still out there. It wasn't over yet, no matter what Deimos thought.
Richie remained stubbornly silent, not even flinching when Deimos slammed him back against the floor with an inarticulate growl. He laid there, still grinning a touch maniacally.

These people didn't know what they were tangling with.
Chapter 24

The black, foul smelling smoke was still billowing up from the wreckage of the fountain. It lent the immediate area a hazy, surreal quality...somehow unreal. There was no movement, no sound, save the snapping crackle of flame and lightning. Virgil was still, his hands glowing with power. The other Static was hovering above them, not making any move, merely staring down at them.

Despite himself, a shivery whisper of apprehension raced down Virgil's spine as that smoldering gaze bored into him. When he had last seen his counterpart, it had been easy to see just by looking at him that there was just something wrong about this other Virgil Hawkins. Too focused on Richie to take in much else, though, Virgil had not yet understood just how wrong this creature was. Just how evil.

Looking at the other Static now, Virgil knew. He knew this was the person who had driven this world's Sharon into a kind of madness all her own trying to stop him. This was the person who had forced hundred, thousands to flee the city. This was the person who had destroyed his home with a wanton abandon that left Virgil sick just thinking about it.

This was the person who had murdered Richie in this world.

The other Static tilted his head fractionally, the smile becoming even more twisted and mocking. How strange it was to see such darkness on his own face. Even with everything he had learned about this Virgil Hawkins's past, he couldn't quite understand how the other had gone so completely wrong. If things had turned out differently in Virgil's world, could he have become this creature? Could he have turned on his friends and family...his entire city? Could he have turned on the person he loved more than almost anything else? Virgil couldn't imagine it; couldn't wrap his mind around even the possibility.

Over the past few days, though, Virgil had been forced to confront and admit the fact that there were similarities between the two of them, however much that horrified him. He thought he understood what Carmen had been talking about when he said it was like looking through a mirror. This was him: everything his upbringing and his family had made him into; everything the Bang had gifted him with...perverted, warped, and darkened.

"Okay...I believe you now, Sparky," Hotstreak said suddenly. The fire blazed hotter around him as he flicked his gaze between the two of them.

"Thank you," Virgil replied flatly, without looking away from the other Static. "Now get out of here."

"Say what? I ain't leaving you with him!"

"Carmen and Maria are gonna need you more than me." As if to prove him correct, the echo of Talon's sonic scream sounded from the direction Virgil had left the other two bang babies. There was the muted splashing of water, and a tremendous crash of splitting concrete. A flash of fear crossed Hotstreak's face as he realized what Virgil had: Static had called out reinforcements. Still, Hotstreak hesitated. "Go!" Virgil roared.

At last, the fiery youth turned and began running towards the battle. The other Static watched him go, the hateful smile still firmly in place. Virgil let his powers flare around him, silently daring his counterpart to make a move. Hotstreak vanished from their view unmolested, though, and then they were alone.
With a sharp gesture, Virgil summoned his disc back to him, leaping upon it in an easy motion. He raised himself to the other Static's eye level, about twenty feet off the ground. The smirk deepened on the doppelganger's face. Arcs of electricity danced over both their bodies, sparking outwards, wild and unrestrained. Bolts of electricity flickered into existence between them, striking the ground like miniature lightning storms as they both loosened control of the power within them. The air around them began to hum with barely restrained energy.

Neither made a move; they simply hovered in the air, staring across at each other, feeling each other out. The other Static seemed to be floating in a miasma of darkness, despite the sparking of his powers. The sun was high in the sky, and yet he appeared cast in shadow. Whether it was the smoke, the black clothes he wore, or simply the force of his persona…this other Static seemed to swallow the light around him.

Finally, Static broke the silence. "So…you still think you can take me, brother?" he asked slowly, lazily.

"I'm not your brother," Virgil spat back. Static laughed aloud, a cruel, brittle sound.

"Touchy, touchy, touchy." He 'tsked' softly. "No need to get all defensive. But really, now...what do you think you're gonna do here? My crew's gonna tear Sharon's little groupies up."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Virgil said as confidently as he could. Sharon, Adam, and their reinforcements couldn't be more than a few minutes away. Surely Hotstreak, AquaMaria, and Carmen could hold off Static's people until they arrived.

Virgil let his worry for the other three slide away, and drew himself up straighter. All their careful planning had shattered like so much glass, useless now. Fine. Virgil would just have to improvise...it wouldn't be the first time. He could help the others the most by keeping Static off of them, but more than that, Virgil was damn well going to use this opportunity. He glared harshly at his counterpart.

"I want my friend back," he bit out, his voice as cold as ice.

Infuriatingly, Static merely shook his head, still grinning madly. "I don't think so. I'm not done with him, yet. Finders, keepers you know," he sing-songed with false cheer.

The power intensified around Virgil's body, two bolts forming in his hands with barely a thought. "I'm not leaving without Richie!"

All pretenses of pleasantry and amusement drained out of the other Static's face like water out of a broken pitcher. His eyes narrowed dangerously, his own power blazing into a maelstrom around him. "See...that's where you're wrong. You're not leaving at all."

Virgil was reacting almost before he registered that the other him was attacking. Static raised his hands and the swirling, crackling light around him coalesced into a single, glowing bolt. Virgil threw up his own hands as the bolt arced towards him with the speed of a bullet.

The clash of their two powers lit the area around them more brightly than the high noon sun. For a moment, the world in front of Virgil's eyes was swallowed in white light. A roar louder than any thunderclap split the air, and left Virgil's ears ringing. For a moment, the force of it threatened to send Virgil tumbling off of his disc. He held steady though; held his power in check, trying to determine just how powerful this other him really was. As quickly as the attack had begun, it ceased.

The sunspots faded from Virgil's vision and he found himself facing the other him in exactly the same position. Static was breathing hard, his forehead glistening with sweat, but he stood tall on his
sheet of metal. A quick glance downwards revealed the courtyard was cracked and blackened for a twenty foot radius around them.

Great. Just great.

"Well, well, well…gotta say, brother—it's been a while since I had a real challenge," the other Static called scornfully.

"Oh I'm just full of tricks," Virgil answered.

The other Static crouched low on the sheet metal, and grinned again. This time, there was not even the pretense of humor…it was a look such as a wolf might give a lost lamb just before it attacked. Virgil clenched his teeth and widened his stance on his disc, prepared to follow any move the other Static made. If Static thought Virgil was going to be easy pickings, he had another think coming.

"Good," the other Static said softly. "That'll make it even better when I kick your ass."

Then, the other shot straight towards Virgil. With a surprised yell, Virgil gripped the edges of his disc and barrel-rolled out of the way, expecting Static to toss off a bolt. Nothing happened, though, and Virgil righted himself to find the other Static streaking off in the direction Hotstreak had taken. Half growling to himself, he sped off in pursuit.

Leaving the courtyard, Virgil came out onto a scene of pure chaos. Immediately, he was almost blinded by clouds of smoke and hot steam. Coughing, he squinted hard, trying to keep his eyes on the blue glow of the other Static's powers. With one hand, he pulled the collar of his shirt up over his nose and mouth, wishing for the protection his costume would have afforded. Now was not the time for such ruminations, though.

With a sinking heart, he spotted Hotstreak, AquaMaria, and Carmen. The three were back to back in the middle of the street, about thirty yards away from Virgil's position. It was clear that Hotstreak and Maria were doing most of the work…their respective powers were lashing out in all directions in founts of water and flame. Though the smoke and steam obscured his vision, Virgil was able to make out several figures around them.

Puff and Onyx were back in action, and had been joined by others. Virgil saw a figure that could only be this world's version of Boom trying to edge past a seemingly endless volley of water from Maria. Just behind him, Virgil saw the crumpled form of Mirage, blood streaming from a gash on her forehead. Hotstreak was doing a fair job of holding Puff and Onyx at bay, and as Virgil watched, the fiery youth suddenly raised one arm straight up, sending a blast into the air. An indignant shriek echoed around them, and Virgil realized Hotstreak was also fending off Talon. Carmen was more or less stationary…he couldn't leave the relative safety of his position with Maria and Hotstreak, and his mutation would only come in handy in close quarters.

Virgil took all this in nearly instantaneously, years of practice allowing him to size up the fight in a few heartbeats. If nothing went catastrophically wrong, the three would be able to hold their positions until Sharon and Adam arrived. Almost as soon as he had formed that thought, Virgil realized that something catastrophic was about to happen.

The other Static had banked sharply, swinging around in midair to dive towards Hotstreak. A bolt of power suddenly flared into existence and Virgil saw that Hotstreak would be unable to defend himself, his attention divided between his attackers. Virgil dove forward as well, summoning up an energy field with a thought.

Static fired the bolt in nearly the same instant, and Virgil threw out his hand, his heart in his throat.
The shield formed over Hotstreak's head a split-second before the bolt hit. Electricity met electricity, the bolt that would have killed Hotstreak dissipating harmlessly into Virgil's own field. Virgil saw Hotstreak glance upwards, startled, and then the other bang baby merely shrugged and went back to trying to roast his enemies.

Instead of engaging in the battle, the other Static turned sharply again, darting farther down the street. Virgil frowned, but took off after him. As he passed over Hotstreak, Carmen, and Maria, though, he fired a few bolts down at the ground. A grim smile lit his face as the bolts struck true; electrifying the puddles that Maria had formed around Boom. The sonic bang baby went down with a pained cry and Virgil saw Maria tip him a nod of thanks as she was able to turn her attention to helping Hotstreak with Puff and Onyx.

He nodded back before focusing once again on Static's rapidly retreating form. The other was rocketing down the street, occasionally tossing off a bolt back towards Virgil. It was nothing more than a delaying tactic, though, as the other Static wasn't even bothering to aim. Virgil dodged the bolts easily, trying to figure out just what Static was playing at.

He was struck with the feeling that he should be able to predict this other version of himself. He couldn't begin to guess what the other was thinking, though…and at the moment, he couldn't decide if that was a good or a bad thing. He forced more speed out of the disc, matching the other Static move for move.

Finally, Static seemed to tire of whatever game he was playing. Virgil saw the other toss a malicious glance over his shoulder, before he abruptly changed direction. Static veered into a hard left and raced for one of the less dilapidated buildings on the side of the street. He vanished into a busted out window on the top floor of the three-story brick building. Virgil slowed marginally in his pursuit, brow furrowing as he tried to determine why the other would want to take the fight there.

Virgil couldn't not follow, though, and Static damn well knew that. He steeled himself, knowing that he was flying right into an ambush. Every sense stretched to its fullest, Virgil directed the disc in towards the top floor. He chose a different window than the one Static had taken, pouring on a burst of speed and rocketing through the gaping frame.

Though he was braced for attack, none was forthcoming as he burst through the window and into the building. He wheeled the disc into a three hundred sixty degree turn, his hands raised and crackling with electricity. To his surprise, though, he saw no sign of the other.

The broken windows allowed shafts of sunlight through, piercing the gloomy darkness of the building in irregular intervals. They provided no real illumination, though, leaving much of Virgil's surroundings in darkness. Dust rose thick in the air in response to invisible drafts, dancing golden in the beams of sunlight. The floors here were bare, save for the odd piece of scrap metal or hand tool. An intricate web of rafters crisscrossed the ceiling, supported by nearly two dozen thick, wooden columns.

There were things moving in the rafters in scurrying, furtive motions. Virgil's lip curled in disgust as his ears picked up the chittering of disturbed rats. He could find no trace of the other Static, though. Had he doubled back out into the battle, hoping to help his underlings while Virgil was busy here? But no…the other wanted to take down Virgil as badly as Virgil wanted to take him down.

Slowly, hesitantly, Virgil lowered the disc, and then jumped down onto the dusty floor. He winced at the soft thump his borrowed sneakers made, but nothing stirred in the room save the rats. He collapsed the disc with a flick of the wrist, stowing it in a back pocket of the jeans he wore. The disc might have let him move faster, but in such close quarters it might prove more a hindrance than a help. Virgil licked his lips nervously as he took a few cautious steps away from the window he'd
entered through.

Still no sign of Static.

Virgil took another few steps towards the center of the room, straining his ears for some whisper of the other's presence. He got his wish a moment later when a loud clatter, made louder by the relative silence of the building, sounded behind him. Virgil whirled around, hands glowing with blue light, only to see the sheet metal the other had been using lying on the floor a few feet behind him. Virgil looked up into the rafters, summoning more power to provide light. The flare of it cast deep, menacing shadows on the ceiling, throwing the rafters into stark relief.

He saw nothing.

Cursing to himself, Virgil whipped around again. "Come on, brother!" he shouted into the darkness. "Is this how you wanna play it? You afraid of me?"

A low, dark chuckle reached his ears. It echoed around him strangely, though, and Virgil was unable to pinpoint its source.

"I'm not afraid of anything," Static said, his voice quietly threatening. This time, Virgil was able to catch the direction the other's voice came from, and he turned towards the far wall, opposite the windows. It was the darkest corner of the room, and Virgil could barely make out a doorway, presumably leading down to the lower levels.

"So why don't you step up?" Virgil challenged. "Let's finish this!" He took a step towards the corner, and was rewarded by a flare of blue light near the ceiling.

The other Static stood on the rafters, balancing as though it was the most natural thing in the world. His power swirled in a sputtering halo, lighting his body and yet deepening the shadows around him. His face stood out harshly, made more angular and skeletal by the dancing shadows. The predatory smirk twisted his lips again.

"You really should have run when you had the chance," Static said mock-pleasantly, crossing his arms over his chest. Virgil clenched his fists.

"I told you...I'm not leaving without Richie!"

The smirk vanished, replaced with an expressionless calm that was somehow even more disconcerting. Static suddenly jumped down from the rafters, landing on the floor with catlike grace. The entire room began to hum with the drone of electric current. Tiny bolts of blue lightning raced over the floorboards, sparking violently when they came into contact with discarded metal.

"And I told you, I'm not done with him, yet. You oughta be more careful with your property if you don't want to lose it. Sure not a mistake I'm gonna make." Virgil grit his teeth at the mocking, taunting tone.

"Don't talk about him like that!" he hissed. This time, Virgil took the offensive. The nimbus of electric power coursing around him condensed into a bolt, arcing towards the other with the force of a guided missile.

Static actually laughed aloud as he threw up his own shield, the force of Virgil's strike dispersing against it without doing much damage. Static rocked back on his heels, though, and Virgil thought he saw a flash of surprise cross the other's face.

Static gave as good as he'd gotten, firing a bolt of electricity at the rafters above Virgil's head. Virgil
gasped, and was forced to dive to one side as a beam that had to weigh as much as he did collapsed, crashing to the ground. When he came to his feet, Static had disappeared again.

Savvy to the other's tricks now, Virgil immediately flared his powers more brightly, illuminating the rafters above him. The room was huge, though, and Virgil didn't dare drain himself lighting the entire area. Much of the ceiling was left in shadow. Virgil began pacing the length of the room, turning to and fro, his eyes darting restlessly over each new section of ceiling he lit. Every few seconds he thought he heard a creak of wood, or the brush of footsteps moving over the rafters, but the other Static remained out of sight.

"You know…if it wasn't so pathetic, this knight in shining armor bit might be kinda touching." A shadow, too big to be a rodent, moved in the corner of Virgil's vision. He whirled on the area, frustration mounting when he found nothing. What the hell was Static playing at?

"He's my best friend…but you wouldn't know anything about that, now would you?" he shot back.

"Man! Do you listen to yourself when you talk? What, do you lift your one-liners right out of a Superman comic?" Something clattered to his left, and Virgil turned, tracking the sound just in time to see an aura of blue light fade from around a piece of scrap metal.

"What the—"

There was a whoosh of displaced air behind him, and he had enough time to half turn back before a hard shove sent him sprawling. He took the impact as best he could, rolling to his feet again almost as soon as he hit the floor. He fired a blast instinctively, hearing Static lunge out of the way and hit the floor to his right. He raised one hand to fire another bolt, but cried out when his wrist was seized in an iron grip. His arm was forced upwards, the burst of electricity discharging harmlessly into the ceiling. He caught a glimpse of the other Static's face, twisted into a snarl, before a hard punch to his stomach doubled him over. He sank to his knees, nearly gagging, then cried out again as Static grabbed a handful of his dreads, yanking his head back.

"I know more than you think," Static whispered, nearly against Virgil's ear. The other slammed Virgil's head forward, and his forehead connected painfully with the dusty floor. Stars danced behind Virgil's eyes for a moment, but he retained enough awareness to realize when Static let go of him. Instinctively, he rolled away, feeling the rush of air behind him as Static aimed a kick at where Virgil's midsection would have been.

He hitched himself painfully to his knees and fired a burst of electricity in Static's general direction. Virgil had the satisfaction of watching the other fly through the air as Virgil's attack caught him off-guard. Static landed with a resounding thud a few feet away, and Virgil was granted precious time to regain his footing.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded, sucking in great gulps of air to try and quell the pain in his gut.

Disturbingly, the other youth merely ground out another harsh laugh. Virgil's eyes widened as Static rolled into a reverse crouch and then flipped to his feet in one smooth motion. "So hot to get your boy back aren't you, brother? Think I don't know? Think I can't know? We're the same, you and me…more than you wanna admit."

Virgil raised one hand, crackling with electricity. "Shut up," he growled. The other narrowed his eyes, considering, an expression of animal craftiness crossing his face.

"Do you watch him like I used to? I couldn't help it…I always knew where he was, what he was
doing." Static's voice dropped into a silky whisper, as if he was delighting in a shared secret. Richie. Virgil's stomach wrenched again as he realized the other was talking about Richie.

"Stop it," Virgil demanded again, though he didn't loose the bolt.

"Took me a while to figure it out...what was right in front of me, what I wanted." Static sighed, an almost dreamy smile crossing his face. "Oh, I wanted so bad. I had to wait, though. How long did you wait...or are you still waiting? Did you figure it out...V? What was right in front of you?"

"I said shut up!"

The sick smile turned knowing, almost conspiratorial. "Bet you did," Static sang maliciously. He tilted his head in a curiously birdlike movement. "Did you do anything about it? I used to have this dream, where I'd just shove him up against a wall and make him scream for me. Make him bleed for me. Beg for me." His voice dropped lower still, a parody of intimacy. His expression twisted again into an obscene leer. "Did you ever do it? Ever just make him drop to his knees and--"

"Shut UP!" Virgil roared.

He threw the bolt as hard as he could, upping the power behind it. The bolt hurtled across the space separating them, nearly incandescent in its force. Static actually flinched back, throwing up his hands and calling a shield of his own into existence. The bolt struck and the shield actually trembled before the force of Virgil's attack was absorbed. Again, a flash of confused surprise darted across Static's face. As quickly as it had appeared, though, it was gone and the supreme confidence reappeared.

"Uh-oh touched a nerve!" Static exclaimed in mock distress. "Guess that answers that," he smirked. "Good." He took a step closer to Virgil. "I just hate sloppy seconds."

Virgil was moving before he was even aware of it. He hit his double in a full body tackle, sending them both to the floor. An inarticulate scream of pure rage worked its way out of Virgil's throat as he and Static rolled, each scrabbling for an advantage over the other. Virgil punched and kicked wildly, swinging for any part of Static's body he could connect with.

They rolled across the floor in a tangle of limbs, and through it all, Static just laughed. The sound echoed off the walls, above even the crashes and thumps of their scuffle. They hit one of the columns supporting the ceiling, and Virgil cried out as his hip connected painfully.

Static managed to twist out of Virgil's grasp, springing to his feet even as Virgil pulled himself up as well. The other's mad laughter ceased abruptly, as if someone had just flipped a switch, and he snarled, baring his teeth. His fist lashed out without warning, catching Virgil across the cheek before he could duck.

Lights exploded across Virgil's vision for the second time, and he reeled with the force of the other's blow. Static lunged forward, slamming his forearm against Virgil's throat and pinning him against the column. Virgil gasped, clawing futilely at the arm. God damn it, how come he couldn't fight like this? The other Static leaned in close, pressing still harder against Virgil's wind pipe.

"I'm gonna kill you," he whispered, almost congenially. "And then I'm gonna string your body up in the lobby. Hell, maybe I'll even do it in front of Rich. Give him a chance to say goodbye, you know?" He pressed harder with every word, until Virgil's vision started to darken and he could only gasp desperately for air. "And then you know what I'm gonna do? I think I'll take him up to my room and do everything you never let yourself do."

Half fainting from lack of oxygen, Virgil nonetheless renewed his struggles at the words, the implied
threat to his partner. The dark laughter erupted from his counterpart again, barely heard over the roar of blood in his ears. Static shifted still closer, and a last, desperate plan bloomed in Virgil's head. Hell, it worked for girls.

With the last of his flagging strength, Virgil jerked one knee straight up, pushing as hard as he could at the other's chest at the same time.

The arm across his throat disappeared, as Static stumbled back with a pained howl. More on instinct than anything else, Virgil lashed out with another bolt of electricity. The bolt hit Static squarely, throwing the other back several feet. Virgil half collapsed against the column, one hand going to his abused throat as he wheezed for air.

"I won't---let you---touch him!" he panted. Static hitched himself to his knees, glaring fiercely.

"Too…late!" he ground out. Virgil's stomach dropped, a wave of cold washing through him. Jerkily, he shook his head.

"You're lying." The denial fell easily from Virgil's lips…but his voice was shaking.

Static smiled at him knowingly. "Gotta say brother…the sidekick gig's been good to him."

Virgil's knees suddenly went watery, everything Hotstreak had suspected; everything Carmen and Adam had told him suddenly rushing through his head in a swirling din. No. Just…no. Not Richie. He was not too late…he wasn't!

Static pulled himself to his feet, half hunched over in a defensive crouch. "But tell me something… how'd he get that scar on his hip?"

Virgil froze, the cold washing through him again, turning his blood to ice in his veins. Everything suddenly seemed quiet, hushed, as if the very environment wanted to give him a chance to absorb the words. His mouth worked soundlessly, denial after denial trying to claw their way past his lips.

Static crouched lower, grinning in mad delight. "No? S'okay…I'll get the story myself."

"You…you're not…I won't—"

"I'm not, you won't what? Hmmm?" Static shifted his position subtly, widening his stance. "You still think you're gonna stop me? Gonna ride to your boy's rescue? You think he's ever gonna want you after he's had me?" The animal cunning reappeared in his eyes, gleaming dangerously in the gloom. A grim caricature of sadness ghosted across his face. "Had to be a little rough with him, sad to say. He fought me all the way." Suddenly, he grinned…almost fondly. "Richie was always… feisty, wasn't he? Always stronger than anyone thought. He thought you'd save him, you know. He was sure you'd come for him…that you'd do something to help him. He screamed for you…at first. Then he just screamed." He smiled again, sadistically. "Kind of like you're about to!"

He straightened on the last word, throwing his hands out in front of him. A ball of energy formed beyond his fingertips, glowing more brightly than anything he had thrown at Virgil thus far.

Nova blast.

Virgil realized what was going to happen a split-second before he had to react to it. The other Static's nova blast zoomed towards him, lighting the room as brightly as daylight. Automatically, he threw his hands up over his face, summoning his own power to the fore.

The nova blast slammed into him with the force of a freight train, rocking him backwards and
surging against his own electromagnetic field. He wavered for a moment under the onslaught of everything the other could throw at him. It passed over and around him, buffeting him…a storm focused entirely on him. He felt the full measure of the other Static's power.

And found it lacking.

His eyes snapped open, realization hitting him. He lowered his arms suddenly, feeling the waning power of the nova blast wash over his shield with something like wonder. And as the blast faded, he stood tall, squaring his shoulders. The light dispersed entirely, plunging the room back into shadow.

Static had crashed to his knees again, hands braced on the floor in front of him. Sweat bathed the other's face, and he was heaving like a bellows. Virgil well knew the feeling…his own nova blasts had left him feeling as weak as a kitten in the past.

Not anymore. And not since that fateful night on the tanker.

Virgil felt a vicious grin of his own twisting his lips as the other raised his head. The naked shock that bloomed on his features was very satisfying. The other Static looked as though he had been pole axed. "Neat trick. Let me show you how it's done," Virgil said, a hard edge to his voice.

Static scrambled drunkenly to his feet as Virgil's power swirled around him in a spiraling halo. The blue light grew brighter and brighter, sparking into the blaze of white heat. Still grinning, Virgil cut loose. Completely. He let the power flow out of him like a river bursting a dam. Every ounce of electrical energy around him was sucked into the swirling maelstrom he had loosed.

The blast shot across the distance separating them. For the second time, the room was lit from corner to corner. The light blazed outwards, and Virgil heard a pained scream tear out of the other Static. There was an explosion of concussive force, and the air was suddenly filled with the sounds of wood splintering, glass shattering. Virgil made out the dim shape of his adversary's body being thrown backwards through the air, towards the wall behind him.

And suddenly the wall wasn't there anymore.

The roar of breaking wood rose to deafening levels as the force of Virgil's blast blew out the wall of the building that faced the street. The floor began to buck and heave under Virgil's feet, the cracking sound growing louder still. Calmly, Virgil pulled his disc out, flicking it to its full width.

He jumped on and sped towards the hole he had just created, following the other Static's path. He was blinded for a moment by the clouds of dust and dirt rising around him, but in seconds he had shot out into the air over the street. He heard the horrible roar of the top level of the building he had just been in collapsing in on itself, the damaged structure finally giving up the ghost. He didn't look back though. His eyes were riveted to the figure in the street below.

The other Static was lying in the middle of the broken street, surrounded by pieces of debris from the building. The sheet metal he'd been using to fly on was in the street beside him though, a faint corona of electricity still surrounding it. Virgil's brow furrowed as he realized the other must have retained enough strength and presence of mind to summon the sheet to him, using it to glide to the ground, rather than just plummeting three stories.

The other was obviously much worse for the wear, though. Several tears had appeared in the black tank and jeans he was dressed in, and blood stood out starkly from cuts and abrasions. Virgil lowered his disc to hover just above the other, a small measure of his attention on the building behind him. The groaning roar seemed to have ceased though, the worst of the collapse over.
Static was pulling himself painfully into a sitting position, glaring up at Virgil with sheer, unadulterated hatred. Blood dripped down the side of his face from a small cut just at his hairline. Virgil crossed his arms over his chest and glared back just as heatedly. Then his eyes flicked upwards, focusing on the street in front of the TynaCorp building. Static struggled to his feet and turned as well, and Virgil smiled as he heard the other's sharp intake of breath.

Sharon and Adam had arrived with the cavalry.

Clouds of smoke were still drifting up from the area of the street that Carmen, Maria, and Hotstreak had turned into a battlefield. Even through the haze, though, it was easy to see the figures of Static's people running like hell for the safety of their base. Talon and Puff were covering their retreat, holding Maria and Hotstreak at bay. About ten people were scattered through the street, and Carmen and Adam were crouched near a huddled knot of about seven more. There had obviously been injuries…but it was just as obvious that Sharon's people were the victors. Sharon herself was running towards Virgil and Static, her shotgun drawn. Static swore violently, and Virgil smiled wider.

"I told you…I'm not leaving without Richie," Virgil said softly, dangerously. The other turned towards him slowly.

"He's on the fifth floor, east side," Static said just as quietly, his shoulders drooping in defeat. Sharon had nearly reached them, close enough that Virgil could hear the pounding of her boots on the pavement. "Just…just tell me one thing."

Virgil hesitated, cocking his head to one side. Static raised his eyes, and alarms began going off in Virgil's head.

The sheet metal suddenly flew up off the ground, knocking into the bottom of Virgil's disc. He cried out, and the disc tilted dangerously. Virgil righted himself in seconds…but seconds were all Static needed.

Sharon screamed.

Virgil's eyes widened in horror at the sight of Static hovering yards above him…and Sharon on the ground below him, held spread-eagle against the pavement by the glow of Static's power. The electric aura around his counterpart was dimmer, and even from a distance, Virgil could see the strain on the other's face. Still, the hated sound of Static's laughter echoed through the street.

Virgil heard shouts from further up the street, Adam's voice rising above the din in a terrified cry. He didn't look to see what help was on the way, though, his attention focused entirely on Static. The other gestured grandly towards Sharon's prone form.

"Tell me, brother! Who're you gonna choose? You can beat me back to the building…you can probably take Richie out of there before I can get the security system up and running. Or…you can save my bitch of a sister. What'll it be?" Static looked meaningfully upwards, and Virgil followed his gaze to a dilapidated billboard that had been erected on the top of the building Sharon was pinned in front of. Virgil felt the blood drain from his face as he realized what Static meant to do.

Before Virgil could react, though, Static tossed off a weak bolt at the base of the sign. Rusted supports crumbled easily under the onslaught, and the whole thing listed over the side. Another bolt, another hit, and Virgil knew it was going to fall. And Sharon was directly below it.

Even as the realization flashed through his mind, the billboard gave a horrendous groan…and plunged over the side of the building. Virgil didn't know if he could catch it by himself…a nova blast still left him drained, even if it didn't knock him on his ass anymore. Out of the corner of his eye, he
saw Static streaking away towards the safety of the TynaCorp building. If he got to his base, Virgil knew he and the others would have to retreat without rescuing Richie. There was only one choice.

And it was no choice at all.

With a pained cry, Virgil swooped towards Sharon, his hands already glowing. The field holding her to the pavement dissipated at Virgil’s command, absorbed into his own nimbus of power. Barely pausing, Virgil swept her into his arms, pouring on a burst of speed and propelling them out of harm's way. He felt the whoosh of air on the back of his neck as the billboard crashed to the ground a split-second later with a horrendous crash of metal.

He slowed the disc, coming to a stop in midair a few yards away from the wreckage. He lowered them to the ground, stepping off the disc just as Adam and Hotstreak reached them. He watched with dull eyes as the glowing streak that was Static vanished over the roof of the TynaCorp building, barely aware of Adam snatching Sharon out of his arms with a cry of relief.

"He was sure you'd come for him…that you'd do something to help him. He screamed for you…at first. Then he just screamed."

"I think I'll take him up to my room and then I'm gonna do everything you never let yourself do."

"Virgil…Virgil…Virgil!" He turned slowly to face Sharon. Still standing in the circle of Adam's arms, she regarded him with a wide, worried gaze. Her face was a mask of sympathy and sorrow. "Virgil…we have to go. They're gonna regroup…and they've got offensive weapons in the base. We've got too many injured to make a stand, and Hotstreak and Maria are exhausted." Unsaid, but understood was the fact that Virgil himself was nearing his limits.

Hotstreak’s hand descended on his shoulder, squeezing firmly. "She's right, Sp…Virgil. We have to go." Violently, Virgil shrugged out of the other bang baby's grasp.

"Like hell!" he shouted. "You go…I can't leave! I have to get to Richie!" He whirled around and called his disc to him. Hotstreak moved to stop him, but he shoved the other youth aside, hopping onto the disc. He didn't care if it killed him…he wasn't leaving here until Richie was safe. He'd already…he'd already failed his beloved friend. He couldn't fail again.

He rocketed upwards…only to find the motion arrested barely five feet off the ground. With a snarl, he turned to find Adam had latched onto the edge of his disc. The older man's face was a mask of determination. "You can't…Virgil, it's suicide."

"No!" Virgil forced more strength out of the disc, straining to break the other man's grip without hurting him. Adam matched him, though, reaching up with his other arm to grab Virgil's wrist. Electricity sparked around Virgil's body, but Adam ignored it.

By now, Sharon's people had all made their way to them, and Virgil heard uneasy murmurs start up, even as Hotstreak began hustling them towards whatever escape route they had.

"Damn it, let me go!" Virgil screamed. He fired a small bolt at the ground in front of Adam, but the older man barely flinched. AquaMaria and Carmen joined the group.

"I can't, Virgil…I can't let you do this.‖ Adam suddenly yanked hard on the disc and Virgil, unprepared for the movement, tumbled off. To his surprise, Carmen lunged forward, catching him before he could hit the ground. The animal-like bang baby set him gently on his feet, and he immediately threw out his hand to call the disc to him again.

"We'll get to him, Kid. I promise you, we'll find a way to get him out of there…but you have to
come with us now."

Carmen covered Virgil's hand with his own, and Virgil was forced to let the field vanish, lest it hurt the other. The disc clattered to the ground. "You don't understand...you don't know what he's gonna do!" Virgil shouted again, and his voice broke on the last word. "I can't...I can't leave Richie!"

Suddenly, Carmen reached up to lay both hands on Virgil's shoulders. The other bang baby turned Virgil to stand in front of him, his face grim. Virgil heard Adam and Sharon move away, in the direction that Hotstreak had led the others. AquaMaria followed after a moment, leaving him and Carmen alone.

"Carmen...no! Don't you understand? He's going to...he's already...he...he hurt Richie. He's going to do it again. I can't...I have to save him!"

Carmen's face softened, and Virgil was shocked to see moisture gather in the other's eyes. "I know, Virgil. But you listen to me...Richie's alive. He's alive...and we're going to help you get him out of there. But Kid, you've got to be running on fumes. I saw that blast. If you go in there now, you're not coming out...and I don't know if we can save Richie without you. Richie will hold on...for however long it takes you to get to him. But you're not going to get to him if you're dead. You know I'm right."

And he was right.

Virgil closed his eyes, the fight suddenly melting out of him. He nodded silently, his breath catching in his throat. He raised one slightly shaking hand and summoned the disc back to him, collapsing it and stowing it in a back pocket. Carmen threw an arm about Virgil's shoulders and quickly began herding him in the direction the others had taken. Virgil let himself be led, following without resistance.

"We will save him, Kid. We will. It'll be all right." Carmen said, his voice laced with steel.

Virgil nodded again, still silent. Yes...they would save Richie. Virgil wouldn't rest until they did.

He very much doubted, though, that things would ever be 'all right' again.
Chapter 25

There were many reasons Static had chosen the TynaCorp building as his headquarters when he had taken over Dakota. City Hall might have been more luxurious; Alva Industries would have had a ring of poetic justice; the Dakota Mall would have just been fun…but the TynaCorp building had advantages that none of the other buildings in the city could match. The central location and positioning of the surrounding buildings had made it defensible. The security system was top-notch and the building's generators provided all the power they needed. The sheer number of offices and conference rooms had been a plus, too.

Over the years, the gang had gravitated to the upper levels for living quarters. The lower levels, with their more numerous conference rooms and sprawling floor plans, had come to be used for a variety of communal purposes. There was the 'entertainment lounge', into which various gang members had dragged TV's, video games, and even an air hockey table. There was the 'dining room,' where everyone tended to take their meals, finding the actual cafeteria a rather unpleasant place to be after a few of Static's….projects. Perhaps most important, though, was the 'infirmary.'

It had started life as one of the smaller conference rooms on the third floor of the building…about the size of a typical classroom. There hadn't been anything particularly distinctive about it, save its proximity to the elevators and the restrooms. It had just…become the place they congregated when there were injuries to take care of. Over time, a half a dozen army cots had been dragged in and set up along the walls. The industrial cabinets left behind had become a catch-all for the bandages, medicines, and antibiotics they had managed to scavenge. It wasn't a medical facility by any stretch of the imagination…but it served their needs.

By the time Talon made it to the infirmary, sporting a newly singed wing courtesy of a lucky shot by Hotstreak, almost their entire roster was present. She and Puff had managed to cover their retreat back into the safety of the building, but the only one who had really escaped injury was Onyx. Talon had sent him to lockdown the building and hunt out Nightingale and Deimos while she went to attend to her own wounds and get a head count of casualties. Taking in the scene before her, Talon could tell Static was going not going to be pleased.

Puff was the only one really moving about, flying from bed to bed. One by one, Talon took stock of the others present, her frown growing deeper by the moment. Mirage had gone down at AquaMaria's hands almost as soon as she and Boom had joined the fight. The girl was on the cot nearest the door, conscious, but only barely. An impressive bruise was forming across her forehead, and a large gash near her hairline was still bleeding sluggishly. Boom had dragged a chair up to the cot and was talking to his sister softly, seemingly unmindful of the fact that Puff was trying to reset his dislocated shoulder. Snake Guy One and Snake Guy Two (as Talon had taken to calling the horribly mutated reptilian bang babies, as she didn't think they actually had names) had joined the fight late and run afoul of Sharon Hawkins and Rubberband Man. Both were stretched out on beds, groaning in pain. Puff had obviously already gotten to them, as their injuries were already bandaged…but it didn't look like they'd be doing anything useful for a while.

"You need me?" Puff called suddenly, interrupting Talon's mental tally of 'the troops.' Boom's arm had been bound up in a sling and Puff was hovering between him and the Snake Guys, one eyebrow raised in query.

Talon shook her head. "Just a little singed," she said quickly. "I got it."

Puff took her at her word and drifted over to one of the supply cabinets, producing the key and opening it to reveal an assortment of painkillers. Surprisingly, Puff made a pretty decent nurse, if one
didn't mind her lack of anything even remotely resembling a bedside manner. Her only training seemed to come from watching old *ER* episodes and surfing the WebMD sites, but short of injuries requiring major surgery, Puff usually knew how to patch her compatriots up.

Seeing that Puff had things well in hand, Talon grabbed a first aid kit and headed back out into the hallway. She needed to get a report from Onyx and find Static. She'd seen neither hide nor hair of her boss since he had led the…other Static away from the fight. She *had*, however, seen some major fireworks going down just as she had been forced to finally call a full retreat…someone had gotten their ass kicked.

Talon stalked down the hallway back towards the elevators, so involved with her thoughts that she nearly collided with another body before she registered she was no longer alone. Startled, she stumbled back…and then froze, gaping.

"What're you looking at?" Deimos muttered sullenly. Or at least, she thought that was what he said. The words came out somewhat garbled.

"Deimos! What…what happened?" she gasped out after a moment of shocked silence.

The lower half of the pale young man's face was streaked with dried blood, thin trickles still running out of his nose. His left eye had begun to blacken and there was an impressive bruise forming across the bridge of his nose, which looked swollen and painful. Someone had clocked him, but *good*. He had stripped out of his ever-present trench coat, and slung the garment over one shoulder. To Talon's further surprise, the leather had been shredded to ribbons in several places. What the hell had happened? Deimos hadn't been involved in the fight outside, and normal humans were the only ones who could usually get close enough to do that kind of damage.

"Not here," Deimos fairly growled. Without another word, he snatched the first aid kit out of Talon's hands and ducked into the men's room, hitting the swinging door with such force it slammed against the opposite wall. Silently, Talon followed.

Deimos set the first aid kit down on one of the sinks and stared into the mirror above it, wincing as he lightly probed the skin around his nose. He hissed through his teeth at the pain, and Talon saw the muscles of his jaw clench tightly. With more force than was strictly necessary, he jerked the hot water faucet on and pushed the stopper to let the sink fill. The ruined coat slid off his shoulder to land in a heap on the floor by his feet.

"Deimos?" Talon questioned softly.

"He jumped off the building."

The words threw her. Blinking, she shook her head and crossed over to stand next to him. The harsh florescent lighting of the bathroom made the blood streaking his face even more ghastly, and his eyes were dark with barely restrained fury. "What are you talking about? Are you okay?"

"He jumped off the building," Deimos repeated, reaching down to turn off the water and then crossing his arms over his chest. Talon's confusion deepened.

"Deimos…what? Who?"

"He...jumped...off...the fucking building," Deimos said slowly, drawing out each word. A vein in his temple had begun to throb visibly. Who would…

And then it clicked. Talon's eyes widened. "Foley? The kid what?"
"Jumped. He jumped off the south side...four fucking stories."

"Off the roof!"

Deimos tilted his head, asking with only his expression if she really needed him to answer that. For the second time, Talon's mouth fell open in a silent 'o' of shock. Quickly, though, she regained her speech.

"What...how...why...where is he?" she gasped. If Foley was dead, they were all in for it, regardless of how it had happened. She still couldn't wrap her mind around the idea that the kid had jumped off the roof.

"That ungrateful ass is in his cell!" For a moment, Deimos's eyes flared scarlet. "And he's damned lucky I don't use Phobos to teach him another lesson! He's worse than the rats."

Talon stared around the bathroom, at a loss for what to say. Finally, she pointed vaguely at his face. "Do--do you need me to look at that?"

"It looks worse than it is," Deimos said dismissively, though he winced again. "Fucking hero," he muttered, his voice dark. At last, he turned to face her, his eyes flicking to her burned arm. With a gentleness that few would have believed him even capable of, he gripped her wrist and pulled the limb straight. Talon couldn't help hissing in pain as the burned skin was stretched. "Lemme guess....everyone's favorite firebug?" he said wryly.

"Lucky shot," she answered shortly. Deimos' mouth twisted into a brief smirk at her affronted tone.

"Hold still," he said, flipping the medical kit open. "Doesn't look too bad."

"I've had worse," she agreed. With cool efficiency, he pulled a bottle of sterilized saline and a tube of burn ointment out of the kit. Within moments, the burns had been cleaned and disinfected. They still hurt like a bitch, but the pain was manageable.

"At least tell me you killed the bastards," Deimos said as he began wrapping gauze around her arm. Regretfully, Talon shook her head. "They got away."


"Nothing major...Mirage and the snakes are going to be down for a few days. Everything else was minor." She gestured to her own arm. Deimos nodded thoughtfully.

"How 'bout the rats?"

Talon shrugged. "I wasn't taking a survey on the way out. Hotstreak and his little girlfriend held us off long enough for help to arrive. We got a few of them, but everyone was moving on their own steam that I could see."

"The other Static?" Deimos' voice had dropped somewhat, and Talon glanced up to see him regarding her intently, before she looked away again.

"The boss had him off on a wild chase...I didn't see much. But something went down in a big way. Hell of a light show."

"Great." Deimos finished tying off the bandage.

"Static wasn't foolin' around," Talon said quietly. Deimos didn't answer, though, and after a few
tense moments of silence, Talon's curiosity got the better of her. "What happened with Foley? How in the hell did he jump off the building?"

Immediately, Deimos scowled fiercely. He shook his head in disgust. "That boy's been playing us all along. He got the drop on me. I couldn't believe it. Little bastard's sneaky…I'll give him that. And he's fast. He made it to the ledge before I could catch him. I didn't think he'd have the guts when he saw the drop." Deimos dipped his head slightly, and a note of grudging respect crept into his voice. "Barely hesitated. He caught the balcony on the sixteenth floor and made it into the hallways."

She stepped back as Deimos turned back and hunched down over the sink. He began scooping handfuls of water up to his face, rinsing the dried blood away. After a few moments, he straightened, water streaming down his face. Lightly, he touched his nose again.

"Is it broken?" Talon asked. He shook his head shortly.

"Damn close…but no. Come on, we'd better find Static." He shut the medical kit and snatched his coat up off the floor, flinging it over his shoulder again. With mock gallantry, he swept an arm towards the door, gesturing for Talon to precede him.

Picking up the first aid kit, she did so. "You caught Foley, right? I mean…obviously you caught him, or you wouldn't be down here…" she trailed off as she pushed the bathroom door open. Behind her, Deimos chuckled mirthlessly.

"After a chase, yes. He almost gave me the slip a couple times, though. He even took out Shiv. Didn't kill him, of course. No, couldn't make my life easier, could he? I can't believe the little fucker actually tried to run." They stepped out into the hallway…and froze.

Standing in the hall, glaring balefully at his two subordinates, was Static.

"He did what?" Static said slowly, his voice soft and dangerous.

Talon couldn't bite back a gasp at his appearance. Clearly, the one getting his ass kicked had been Static. The youth's clothes were liberally coated in dirt and dust, torn in several places. Almost every inch of visible skin was showing bruises or cuts, and a small gash high on his forehead had dripped blood halfway down his face. Talon could read the subtle signs of Static having drained his powers nearly to their limits in the set of his mouth, the faint lines at the corners of his eyes. Static still carried himself straight and tall, though, and those were the only outward signs of pain or fatigue.

However tired or hurt he was, though, it was obviously going to take second place to what he'd just heard. Static's eyes had narrowed dangerously, and he stalked forward, totally ignoring Talon. He stopped directly in front of Deimos, and though Talon and Deimos had both seen such looks of fury on Static's face before…that fury had rarely, if ever, been directed at them.

"Mind repeating that, D?" Static asked in perfectly controlled, moderate tones. Talon wasn't fooled. Unconsciously, she backed away a couple of steps.

Deimos' eyes slid away from the other's, focusing on a point over Static's shoulders. If he was intimidated, it didn't show, but Talon knew Deimos. He was holding himself taut, and Talon could practically hear the gears turning in his head, trying to judge the best way to defuse the situation. Finally, he flicked his eyes over to her and shrugged.

"Foley tried to escape," Deimos said slowly. "Caught me off guard and ran." Static slammed a fist against the wall behind Deimos' head, leaning in close to the blue haired man.

"He caught you off guard? How the hell did that happen?" Static demanded harshly.
"He's a genius, Static. He wasn't as broken as we thought. He jumped off the fucking roof to get away and—" A flare of power sizzled out from Static's clenched fist, racing along the wall towards the ceiling, before it dissipated. From her vantage point, Talon saw Static's eyes widen in shock.

"He what?" Static bellowed, his voice echoing down the hall. "How the FUCK did he do that?"

"He had…" Deimos trailed off, looking into Static's face for the first time.

"Had what?" the other snarled.

Deimos' gaze darted over to her once again, and for the first time in a long time, Talon actually saw hesitation in his eyes. "He…had an inkling that his Static was nearby. Don't ask me how. It gave him the courage to try to get away."

With an inarticulate growl of rage, Static pushed off from the wall. He turned and took a few steps away, before whirling around again. Talon flinched as Static moved back to Deimos, grabbing a fistful of the man's shirt. He let go almost immediately, though, pushing Deimos harshly back into the wall. He stepped back again, and began pacing…short, frenetic bursts of motion that put Talon in mind of a large predator in a too-small cage. Electricity flared around the youth, but it was dimmer than usual, barely sputtering. Clearly Static had exhausted his powers.

Too bad the same couldn't be said about his temper.

"His Static, his Static," the youth muttered furiously. "He thinks he can just waltz in here and take what's…bastard! I don't care, he just got lucky! Won't happen again…it won't!"

"B-boss?" Talon questioned softly, her brow furrowing in confusion at the muttered ravings.

Static ignored her, still pacing and ranting under his breath. He whirled around suddenly, his fist lashing out against the wall on the opposite side of the hallway. He stood there for a moment, breathing hard, until Deimos finally broke the tense silence.

"I'll keep a better eye on Foley, Static. It won't happen again."

Static went absolutely still, the tension in his frame suddenly vanishing as if it had never been there. Slowly, he drew his fist away from the wall, flexing his fingers almost distractedly. He shook his head slightly.

"Tryin' to leave….always trying to leave. Not this time…I'm not letting go, this time," Static murmured, his voice almost too low to make out. Talon heard him, though, and a shiver of unease whispered through her.

Abruptly, Static straightened again, and turned to face them. His face was perfectly calm and serene…but his eyes were flashing fire. His fists clenched by his sides.

"No," he said slowly, quietly. "It won't happen again." Without another word, he turned around and headed back down the hall towards the elevator, brushing past Talon. She watched him for a bare instant, before focusing back on Deimos.

The other man had stepped away from the wall, and was watching Static's retreating form with all of her concern and more dancing in his gaze.

"This," he said almost conversationally, "is bad."
The trip back to the underground base was made in near silence. The only sounds were the slogging splashes of their feet as they trudged through the sewers. Hotstreak and Maria had gone ahead with the other members of Sharon's band, and Virgil was left with Carmen, Sharon, and Adam. Ostensibly, they were bringing up the rear and watching the backs of the injured resistance members, and the exhausted Hotstreak and Maria.

Virgil knew they were really just trying to spare him having to deal with any unsympathetic faces.

Some distant, vague part of him noted the consideration, and even appreciated it. It was muted, though, crushed under the overwhelming magnitude of what he had done. What he had failed to do. He'd lost his chance to rescue Richie, had abandoned his partner to a fate he could barely comprehend. The knowledge of what his double planned to do to his beloved friend…what he'd already done…swirled through Virgil's head, making him dizzy, turning his stomach.

"Virgil?" Adam's soft voice interrupted Virgil's racing thoughts, and he half-turned to find the older man had sidled up beside him. Carmen and Sharon moved ahead a few paces, giving them at least the illusion of privacy.

Like the others, Adam was fairly radiating compassion. Virgil turned away again without answering, stonily staring straight ahead. If Adam was put off by Virgil's silence, he didn't show it. He swallowed heavily a few times.

"I-I…Virgil…thank you," Adam whispered finally, his voice thick with emotion. Virgil ground to a halt and closed his eyes for a moment, sucking in a breath of air through his teeth. He felt, rather than heard, Adam stop beside him.

"It's what I do," Virgil said softly. "I couldn't let him hurt her." And it was true. Even if it had meant saving Richie, he could not have sacrificed Sharon to do it. It had been the right choice. In his heart, he knew Richie would agree with him.

He was a hero, damn it, and heroes helped the innocent.

The knowledge didn't help.

Heroes also saved the day. Heroes always triumphed over evil. Heroes didn't abandon their partners…their best friends.

Heroes didn't leave the people they loved in the hands of maniacs, to be hurt….to be…to be…

"I think I'll take him up to my room and then I'm gonna do everything you never let yourself do." Virgil twisted away violently, stumbling a few steps away from Adam to brace his hands on the damp wall of the sewer. He hung his head, swallowing convulsively as his stomach threatened to rebel. His knees trembled, going watery, and he started to slide down the wall. His downward motion was halted, though, by a strong arm suddenly wrapping around his waist.

Startled, Virgil glanced up to find Carmen on one side, Adam on the other. It was Carmen holding him up, and Virgil leaned gratefully into the other's offered support. He didn't care what it looked like, how weak it made him seem…he couldn't take anymore. He'd had crisis after crisis after crisis heaped upon him, horror after horror brought out and paraded before his eyes. He was scraping the dregs of his energy reserves and he didn't know what he was going to do next.

He let Carmen and Adam take most of his weight, trying to resist the urge to start sucking in gulps of air against the nausea. He didn't know what to do…what steps to take next. He had no idea how he was going to get his partner away from that nightmare. He was scared sick….
And it was all _nothing_ compared to what Richie had gone through, already.

What Richie was _going_ through.

The realization hit him like a slap in the face. As tempting as it was, as much as he wanted to just curl up somewhere and shake, he couldn't. He couldn't afford to be weak right now…_Richie_ couldn't afford for him to be weak. His partner needed him now, more than ever. And he was _damned_ if he was going to fail his beloved friend again.

"We'll get Richie back. Whatever…whatever Static's done, he'll pay." Virgil was faintly surprised by the ferocity in Carmen's voice. Gritting his teeth, he slowly straightened.

"I'm not waiting," Virgil snarled, hardly recognizing his own voice. "As soon as I get my charge up, I'm going back." He whipped around, pinning each of his three companions with a hard glare. Carmen and Adam were grimly silent, but it was Sharon who voiced argument.

"Virgil…_believe_ me, we all want to go back. But you have to think about this. Yeah, we put the hurt on some of Static's major players…but he knows you're a real threat, now. He's gonna be even more paranoid than usual. I don't know if we can put an offensive together before he trenches himself in. Running in half-cocked is not going to help anything." Sympathy gleamed in her one good eye, but her words were spoken with the hard finality of the leader she was. Virgil inclined his head faintly, acknowledging Sharon's assessment of the situation. What she said made a lot of sense.

He just didn't care.

He clenched his fists by his sides, small sparks of power dancing through his clasped fingers. He didn't care what it took, how hard he had to push himself. Yes, he would go back to the base, rest up a little, get something to eat. He wasn't foolish enough to try anything unless he was at full strength. But as soon as he was…

"I'm going," he repeated firmly. With or without their help, he was going back for Richie.

"Virgil, think about this—" Sharon began, but surprisingly, she subsided as Adam reached over and laid a hand on her shoulder. Virgil shrugged away from Adam and Carmen, stepping back towards the center of the tunnel. Carmen was regarding him quietly, an odd intensity shining in his eyes.

"Kid?" Carmen questioned softly.

Virgil drew himself straighter, pushing everything—his own fears, his despair, his soul-crushing guilt—aside for the moment. Richie needed him now. Virgil may not have been able to save his partner…but his battle with the other Static had shown him an important advantage. He had an ace up his sleeve—one he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of already.

The other Static may have been the better fighter…may have been a harder, crueler person than Virgil could ever dream of being. He was _not_, however, the more powerful.

Push come to shove…power to power…Virgil was the stronger. And he _wasn't_ going to leave Richie again.

"It's all right, Carmen," he said, and where there had been desperate determination before, there was now a bone-deep confidence that rang in every word. "He's going down."

Carmen watched him steadily for a moment more, before nodding silently. Adam sighed heavily as he drew closer to Sharon, wrapping an arm around her waist. She leaned into him, pinning Virgil with a measuring stare. Finally she, too, seemed to acquiesce.
"Hotstreak and Maria'll crash for a few hours, but they'll be back on their feet by this evening. We've got your back, Virgil," she said grimly.

Virgil turned towards her, but any reply he might have made was cut off when a strange, metallic clatter sounded behind them. As one, the four whirled to face the darkness of the tunnel they had been traveling in. In one smooth motion, Sharon drew her shotgun, and Virgil leapt forward, his hands glowing.

No enemy came forward to meet them from the shadows…there was only the steady clicking of metal against stone. Virgil's brow furrowed as he sent a burst of light to the ceiling of the tunnel, illuminating the area around them. Something about the noise was familiar.

"What the hell is that!" Virgil started at Carmen's yell, and glanced behind him to see the other bang baby pointing upwards at the wall near the ceiling. Summoning still more light to his hands, Virgil followed the line of Carmen's sight, trying to figure out just what they were supposed to be looking at.

At last, the source of the noise became clear as it marched calmly into the circle of light cast by Virgil's powers, clinging to the walls of the tunnel like an overgrown spider. Virgil's knees nearly gave out again at the tidal wave of relief that swept through him as he took in the sight.

"Backpack!"

Everything hurt. The insane dive from the top of the building, the subsequent race through the hallways, the fights with Shiv and Deimos…all had left their mark, and those marks were clamoring for his attention. His chest ached, his head was pounding in time to his pulse, and his back protested every movement…he felt like one giant bruise. In another few hours, he'd probably look the part, too. Despite the myriad aches and pains that were making themselves known, though, Richie couldn't stop moving.

He paced the length of the wall under the air vent Backpack had hidden in, arms wrapped around his middle. Deimos had vanished after (literally) throwing him back in his 'room,' leaving Phobos planted solidly in front of the door. The ghost-dog had made no move towards him, and Richie ignored it as best he could. He was most emphatically not thrilled with the thing's presence after a second helping of its power, but he had bigger things to worry about.

Richie had no illusions about his situation. He was in a shitload of trouble.

He'd played a desperate gamble, and he'd lost badly. Backpack had escaped, true, and Richie was confident that his creation would be able to make it out of the building undetected. At the time, the chance of escape had far outweighed the possible consequences should he be caught again. He'd completely blown the cover he'd sacrificed so much to construct, and he knew Static would likely not be fooled again. Still, if he had it to do over, he'd have taken the same chance…it wasn't in him to do otherwise. However, now he'd have to face said consequences.

If Virgil and whatever allies he'd managed to find in this world hadn't broken through the other Static's defenses yet, they weren't going to. Whatever battle had been going on, it had to be over by now. If Virgil had been able to…he would have come already.

He fully expected someone to come storming through the door any moment, to drag him back down to the cafeteria. As nightmarish as the session had been last time, he knew this time would be infinitely worse. Static wouldn't be satisfied with any show this time…he'd be out to break Richie completely.
If not outright kill him.

A chill wracked through Richie's body at the thought, and he swallowed heavily, his pacing speeding up a fraction. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he knew that was a distinct possibility. Yes, Static wanted his inventing abilities…but this horrific version of his best friend was not playing with a full deck. Richie wasn't going to be able to count on him having a lot of impulse control. If it came down to a fight for his life, Richie put his chances of survival at slightly less than those of a snowball in Hell…and that was only if Static was too pissed off to remember to immobilize him.

He could only cling to the desperate belief that Virgil had been driven off…not beaten outright. Because if Virgil had merely been forced to retreat, then Richie knew he would be coming back as soon as possible. The sure knowledge that his best friend would do whatever it took to get him out of here was small comfort, but comfort nonetheless. Backpack would find Virgil, and Virgil would come for him…he just prayed he'd still be alive when his friend arrived. He honestly wasn't sure what his next move should be.

He paced, back and forth, hardly aware of it and yet unable to stop. The nervous, frantic energy that had enveloped him needed some kind of outlet. There was nothing else he could do…not with the dog watching him so intently. There was nothing to do but try to brace himself for whatever was coming.

So lost was he in the rhythm of pacing, the frenzied swirl of his thoughts, that at first he didn't register the sound of the door sliding open. He became aware, though, of someone watching him. He stopped where he was, his back to the door, and closed his eyes briefly. The door swished shut again and Richie slowly turned to face the gaze burning into the back of his neck.

Static stood beside the wavering form of Phobos. Clearly, he was fresh from the fight. The other's black tank top and jeans were torn and dirty, dust and what looked like dried blood smeared across one side of his face. His arms and face were covered with shallow scratches, and several places were starting to darken into bruises. Richie's eyes widened as a dark scowl twisted Static's face. The other youth crossed his arms over his chest, still staring hard at Richie.

"Leave," Static growled at Phobos without looking away from Richie. The ghostly dog looked up at him, and a muscle in Static's jaw began to twitch. "Get out!" he yelled harshly. Richie flinched back as the sound echoed around the room. Phobos's head ducked down slightly, and then the dog slowly dissolved. Static never once shifted his focus from Richie.

The mist of Phobos's body dissipated, leaving them alone. Silence settled over the room, deep menacing quiet. The other youth's eyes bored into Richie's, an almost palpable anger dancing in them. Gone was the teasing, superior smirk; gone was the false cheer and charming grin…Static was furious. Stubbornly, Richie forced himself not to wilt under the hostile gaze.

At last, Static broke the silence.

"You tried to run," he said softly. Richie set his jaw and refused to answer. Static stepped forward, slowly closing the distance between them. "You tried to get away again." The words were spoken in perfectly calm tones, but there was heat underneath the calm. Richie's heart sped up a little more, alarm starting to wail in his head.

Static tilted his head slightly, still drawing inexorably closer to Richie…and there was nowhere for Richie to go, to get away. Realization flashed across Static's face, and he suddenly bared his teeth in a crocodile's grin that held absolutely no humor. "You tricked me again. You were always planning on it, weren't you?"
Richie couldn't spare a moment for confusion... he had half thought to try to maintain his charade, salvage some of the plans he'd made before he'd sent Backpack away. Looking at Static, though, Richie could tell that was no longer an option, if it ever really had been. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, searching for something to say... anything to defuse the situation. With each passing second, he could feel the danger escalating. Nothing came to mind.

Static crossed the final few feet between them, stopping just in front of Richie. With a fatalistic mental shrug, Richie braced himself for a blow. Surprisingly, none came. Static merely stood there, still radiating fury... but making no move. Richie narrowed his eyes slightly. What was the other waiting for?

Abruptly, the other youth's entire demeanor changed. Static's face smoothed over into an expression of thoughtfulness... though the anger still bubbled beneath the veneer. There was a flash of animal cunning in his eyes, there and gone so quickly Richie thought he might have imagined it. "You were trying to get to \textit{him}. The other me." His lips quirked into the barest shade of the mocking smirk Richie had come to know so well. "Did you really think he'd be able to help you?"

"He's never let me down before... he's not gonna start now," Richie snapped, almost before he realized he'd opened his mouth. The smirk vanished and Richie winced inwardly. \textit{"Note to self: internal censor on the fritz. Fix immediately, if not sooner."}

"Sure of that, huh?" Something dark and ugly in the deceptively simple question sent a chill ripping through Richie's body. Static's face was still blank. Richie swallowed heavily, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Yes. I am," he said, nary a tremor in his voice to betray the shivery fear that had suddenly unfurled within him.

Static smiled again, faintly, and the hardness grew in his eyes. "Well... guess you're just gonna have to deal with the disappointment," he said, quiet menace dripping from every word. Unconsciously, Richie clenched one fist, the nails of his fingers digging painfully into his skin.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded, even as some part of him began puzzling out exactly what the other was hinting at.

The faint smile widened, turning mocking and spiteful. "Been a while since I had a challenge, I gotta say. Guy was \textit{good}." He gestured carelessly to his own battered appearance. Richie felt the cold spreading through him, numbing his entire body.

"\textit{No. No, no, no, no, no!}" The silent mantra marched through his head, trying to deny the obvious conclusion this conversation was marching towards.

"But you forgot something, Rich... I \textit{always} win." Static leaned in close, until his lips nearly brushed Richie's ear. "So sorry... but he's not gonna be saving you. Or anybody... ever again," Static whispered silkily. He rocked back on his heels before Richie could react to the words, bouncing slightly, the strange, sick smile still plastered on his face.

Richie stood where he was for a moment, frozen, his mind refusing to comprehend what Static had just said. Inevitably, though, he processed the words, understood their meaning... and could have sworn he felt his heart stutter to a stop. His breath caught in his throat, even as a strange roaring rose in his ears. He was dimly aware of the sensation of ice crawling through his veins, sapping his energy, his strength.
Dead.

Virgil was dead.

He fell to his knees, his legs suddenly unable to support him, and then collapsed into a sitting position, his hands falling limply into his lap. A harsh gasp tore its way out of him, and an odd haze seemed to drift across his vision. As though from very far away, he saw Static crouch down in front of him, felt the other lay a falsely gentle hand on the side of his face. Dead…Virgil was dead.

His partner…his best friend…his brother. The one person he’d always felt free and safe around…the one person who had always understood him, cared about him just for himself. The person who in many ways meant more to him than anyone else in the world.

Oh God, Virgil was dead.

He drew in another shuddering gasp, this one tinged with tears. His whole body shivered and shook, the unwanted weight of Static's palm against his cheek the only point of warmth he could feel. The other was speaking now, his voice soft and reasonable, but Richie couldn't quite make out the words above the roaring in his ears. He wanted to rage against the monster that had taken his dearest friend for him…wanted to rise up and rend and hurt…to avenge his partner. He couldn't make himself move, though. His muscles refused to obey him.

Through the miasma of grief and anger that gripped him, Static's words gradually became clearer. The other's voice had dropped into the soft, soothing tones one might use on a frightened, wounded animal—gentle, inviting. It was sickening. He grit his teeth, gratefully latching onto the anger, using it to force the crushing sorrow away.

The roaring in his ears subsided and the ice enveloping him loosened slightly, as his thoughts became clearer. Something ticked at the back of his mind, calling for his attention.

"It'll be okay, Rich…it will. I can let this go, too. We'll start over. It doesn't have to be like it was before. You'll see."

Everything he knew, had observed about this nightmare version of Virgil began sifting through his thoughts at near-light speed.

Static's thumb lightly stroked his cheekbone, and Richie dragged his focus to the other's face. A supremely self-satisfied smile was teasing the edges of his lips, even as he spun more pretty, gentle words. Richie's fists clenched into a white-knuckled grip that skirted the edge of pain.

The ticking at the back of his mind ceased, leaving him teetering on a precipice of logic, instinct, and a sudden, soul-deep intuition. He hovered there for a bare instant, his mind screaming at him that he might be wrong even as his heart told him to take the leap of faith. He took it.

"You're lying," he whispered.

Static seemed to freeze, his hand falling away from Richie's face. "What?"

"You're lying," Richie spat again, his voice surer this time. "You didn't k-kill Virgil. You're lying!"

Static rocked back on his heels, the controlled blankness of his features melting into anger again. "You think so, huh?"

"I know!" Richie countered. He was right, he could feel it. "You couldn't kill Virgil…you're nothing next to him!" Richie's voice rose into a shout, and Static's expression twisted into something dark and
ugly.

"So what? He's still not gonna be able to get to you. Maybe I didn't kill him, yet. It's only a matter of time," he hissed.

Some small, remaining part of Richie nearly broke in relief…and threw caution to the wind. He'd had enough. "Yeah, right," he growled scornfully. "You won't beat Virgil…you can't. Maybe you held him off this time, but Virgil won't give up. You got lucky. Admit it! V kicked…your…ass."

This time, Static moved. He lashed out at Richie with blinding speed, catching him across the face with a hard backhand. Richie went sprawling with the force of it, the back of is head cracking against the wall. He managed to roll with the momentum, though, coming to rest on his knees a foot or two away from Static. Pain rocketed through his head, and he felt warm wetness dripping down his nose.

Static leapt easily to his feet and stalked forward, reaching down to grip the front of Richie's shirt. He hauled the smaller boy to his feet and slammed him up against the wall, pinning him against it. "It doesn't matter!" Static snarled. "It doesn't matter how many times he tries….what he fucking throws at me. He's not taking you away! I'm not losing you again!" He shook Richie with each word, and Richie reached up to grasp futilely at Static's wrists, trying to still the motion that was pounding his head back into the wall over and over again.

"You're not gonna stop him!" Richie hissed defiantly, ignoring the pain flaring through him with each strike.

Finally, more out of desperation than any plan, he simply surged against Static as Static pulled him forward again. Surprised by the move, Static fell backwards, dragging Richie down with him. They crashed the floor and Richie immediately tried to scramble away, hampered by Static's iron grip on his already torn sweatshirt. They rolled a few times, neither gaining the upper hand, before Richie finally managed to yank himself away.

He lurched back to his feet even as Static gained his own. The other was panting lightly, but as yet he'd not ignited his powers. Richie could only hope that the fight with Virgil had exhausted him. He staggered backwards a few steps when Static moved towards him.

"Damn it, why do you have to be like this?" Static's voice had turned almost petulant. "Why don't you understand? You never understood! You're always trying to leave…you never gave me a chance!"

"A chance to what, kill me?" Richie tossed out, far more flippantly than he felt. He knew he was only delaying the inevitable, but he couldn't bring himself to play the prisoner. It may cost him later, but he couldn't resist the chance to get some small bit of his own back.

To his surprise, Static actually froze, the dark skin of his face going ashy. "N-No…no, you don't understand," Static whispered, and there was an edge of desperation to the words. The youth shook his head violently. Confused and more than a little disturbed by the behavior, Richie reacted too late when Static suddenly lunged forward, tackling him around the waist.

For the second time, the two crashed to the floor, Static landing on top of Richie this time. The other straddled Richie's waist and quickly pinned his wrists to the floor above his head. Dazed by the impact, Richie lay still for a few precious seconds, allowing Static to secure his position.

"I just wanted you to listen! To see! But you never did! You tried to leave! Why? You came back…you came back! Why do you want to leave again? He's not me…I'm better than him! I have things
he'll *never* have! Why do you keep trying to **leave**!" Static's grip tightened on his wrists, until Richie thought he could feel bones grinding together. The pain jolted him back into full awareness, and he began struggling, trying to toss the weight that held him down off.

Growling inarticulately, Static let go of his wrists, only to grab the tattered remains of his sweatshirt. Richie gasped as he was jerked upwards, and then slammed back down against the floor. His head hit with a resounding crack, and white light seemed to explode across his vision. The light faded away almost instantly, but something was wrong…things were darker than they should have been. Static loomed over him, but it was as if he was viewing the other boy from the end of a long, dark tunnel. He knew he should be moving, trying to get away…but he felt disconnected from his body.

Suddenly, Static leaned down over him, close despite the weird tunnel-trick his eyes were playing on him. "Why do you keep fighting me? I love you, Richie…you know that. I always loved you."

Then, Static kissed him.

Harsh, wet heat plundered his mouth, with not even the pretense of gentleness or caring. Stunned by the blow to his head, only half conscious, Richie thought he was imagining it for one brief moment. Then realization set in, pushing some of the muzziness aside, and Richie began struggling anew. A whimper worked its way out of his throat as Static ravaged his mouth, and he desperately tried to buck the other off. Static held him pinned though, his grip returning to Richie's wrists. Finally, desperately, Richie did the only thing he could think of. He bit down. Hard.

Static reared back with a roar of pain, blood dribbling out of his mouth. However, Richie had no chance to savor his brief triumph, or to try anything else. Static let go of one wrist and his fist snapped forward, striking Richie yet another glancing blow across his face.

"Stop *fighting* me!" Static shouted. "You're always *fighting* me!"

His eyes tearing from the pain of the strike, and the strike itself, Richie could only shake his head vaguely. He thrashed under the other boy weakly, spots starting to swim across his vision. Static snarled aloud and punched him again, this time aiming for his ribs, just above where Static straddled his waist. The breath left Richie's lungs in a violent *whoosh*, and the spots grew larger.

Dimly, Richie saw Static raise his fist again, and *this* time a halo of blue light sputtered into existence around his hand. Gasping for breath, pain pounding through every nerve, and his vision already going dark, Richie felt a last, fatalistic smile stretch his mouth. He closed his eyes, waiting for the blow that would finally kill him.

"Sorry, V...*God*, so sorry."

He felt power thrumming along his skin as Static's electrical field flared. Despite himself, he winced at the sting of it...silently bracing himself for the pain he knew was coming.

The blow didn't land. There was a harsh gasp from above him…and abruptly, the weight pinning himself to the floor was gone. His breathing eased almost instantly, and he forced his eyes open to find Static standing over him. The spots were still wavering across his sight…but for a moment he thought he saw an expression of pure horror on Static's face. It passed quickly, though…and Static backed away from him, leaving him lying on the floor.

Confusion bloomed in Richie as Static turned on his heel, striding out of the room without even a backward glance. The door slid shut behind him…and Richie was left alone. He lay where he was, waiting for the other to come back, to finish him off. Minutes passed, though, and Static did not return. Slowly, it dawned on Richie that he wasn't going to.
He hitched himself over onto his side, pain scorching through him. Even that simple movement left him dizzy and lightheaded, the spots threatening to totally black out his vision for a few heartbeats. He curled in on himself, what felt like every muscle in his body trembling. Blood still leaked sluggishly from his nose, and the dizziness wouldn't abate fully. He lay there, staring at the floor under his cheek without really seeing it. With an effort, he lifted one hand to his mouth, and suddenly squeezed his eyes shut, nausea rushing through him. He sucked in a harsh breath through his clenched teeth, and exhaled shakily.

"Virg is coming...he is. Just gotta hang on. Come up with a new plan and hang on, Foley. Just hang on."

He just had to hang on.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Art of Deimos and Phobos: www.deviantart.com/view/22264239

The late afternoon sunlight, just starting to show a tinge of orange and red, streamed in through the windows that faced the city skyline. Static leaned against the glass, resting his head against his forearm. He stared silently down at the courtyard of the TynaCorp building, frowning slightly at the burnt out pavement, the smoking remains of the fountain.

Usually, he loved to stare out of his windows…there were other suites that had truly awesome views, but his was the only one that looked over the entire city. He loved it—loved being able to look out and know he was master of all he saw. A king surveying his kingdom. It was a hell of a rush. Today, though, the view failed to summon its customary pleasure. Today, there were far more interesting things to look at.

Pushing back from the warm glass, Static turned around to face his bedroom, where the view was even better.

The sunlight had cast a glow throughout the entire room, one that gleamed golden on the pale skin and blond hair of the figure stretched out on his bed. A slow, lazy smile curved Static's lips as he traced the line of Richie's body with his eyes. The youth was slightly huddled on his side, facing away from Static, dressed only in a light cotton undershirt and boxers now. The smile widened on Static's face as he stepped away from the window, stripping out of his own torn and dirty shirt as he went.

Soundlessly, he pulled the cool sheets aside and slipped beneath them, sidling up to the other boy. An odd expression of blissful peace settled on his normally hard features as he ran one hand up Richie's thigh, skimming upwards to rest his palm on one slightly jutting hipbone. He heard Richie's breathing hitch slightly, but there was no other movement, no reaction. Static chuckled softly and leaned forward, nuzzling the back of Richie's neck before continuing downward to ghost a kiss across one bare shoulder.

"I knew you'd come around," he whispered happily, closing his eyes as he drew the pliant body into his arms.

"You did?" Richie's voice was a flat monotone, barely audible even in the stillness of the bedroom. He didn't turn in Static's arms, didn't move. Static's arm drifted lower, wrapping tightly around the other boy's waist.

"I knew it the minute I saw you in that junkyard. You'd come back to me. I don't know how, but you came back." He buried his face in the side of Richie's neck again. "I'm sorry I had to be so rough with you," he murmured against the soft skin. "I had to make you see." He pressed a kiss against Richie's neck, a low hum of happiness building in the back of his throat.

"You were the one who didn't see." Richie still didn't move, but tilted his head slightly, giving Static better access. Static chose to ignore the odd comment in favor of taking advantage of the other's invitation. "Then again, you never got that whole 'look before you leap' thing, did you V?"
Static lifted his head, startled and pleased. "You haven't called me that in forever."

"You'll never be 'Static' to me...I remember who you used to be. It's too bad that you don't. I missed you, V." A note of sadness had crept into Richie's voice. A frown furrowed Static's brow...he wasn't following this conversation.

"I missed you, too," he said slowly. Richie's body suddenly moved in his arms, shoulders shaking in laughter, but no sound came from the other boy's mouth.

"No. You didn't." The words were uttered in the same sorrowful tone, and Richie reached down to grasp Static's hand where it was resting on his stomach. Static's frown deepened and a skitter of unease whispered up his spine.

Richie's hand was so cold.

Gently, Static unwound his finger's from the other boy's and covered Richie's whole hand with his own, rubbing the icy skin in an effort to warm it. Now that he'd noticed, Richie's whole body felt cold in his arms. Was he going into shock? Static didn't think he'd damaged the other boy that badly. He'd just been trying to get Richie to understand.

"Rich?" he questioned, still rubbing the skin of Richie's hand. He moved upwards, intending to try and chafe some warmth back into the other boy's arm...but he froze as his fingers brushed Richie's wrist.

"How could you miss me, V? You're the reason I'm not here anymore."

The skin of Richie's wrist was roughened and disfigured, actually flaking away under Static's fingers. Burned. Charred.

The way it had been that night.

Static gasped as Richie finally turned in his arms, facing him.

The other boy's face was a ghastly pale gray, his lips tinged blue. His whole face seemed hollowed out, his cheeks and eyes sunken, as though his skin had stretched too tightly over his skull. Now that the other was facing him, Static could see the distinctive Egyptian symbol shaved into one side of his head, the long bangs of his hair, now gone lank and stringy. Worst though, were the eyes. The dark, intelligent gaze Static had known for so many years...there was no life there now. No spark. Richie's eyes were dull and flat, the eyes of a doll.

The eyes of something dead.

Dream...it had to be a dream. Static was dreaming. It would not be the first time Richie had haunted his sleep. But never like this. Not since those first dark days after the other's death had such a terrible specter appeared. Even the realization that this wasn't real, though, couldn't quite dispel the uneasiness. He tried to draw back, but to his surprise, Richie's cold, cold arms came up around him. The other clung to him, arresting the movement.

"You're the reason I'm not here anymore, Virg," Richie repeated, his voice soft and enticing, the horrible words whispered in the intimate tone of a lover. "How could you miss me?"

"I did," Static said stubbornly. Again, Richie's body shuddered in silent laughter, but those horrible, dead eyes remained fixed and staring. The blue-hued lips quirked into the easy, friendly smile that Static had known since the sixth grade. It was chilling.
"You're lying," Richie said softly. "You don't think of me, anymore. Just him. The other one."
Again, the soundless laughter wracked Richie's body. His arms wound more tightly around Static's neck. "Do you think he'll replace me?" Richie whispered, leaning in close. The impossibly cold stream of the other's breath was finally too much for Static, and he wrenched out of Richie's grasp.

He rolled out of the bed, shaking free of the entangling sheets, and scrambled to his feet. His gaze fell on the bed again and he froze, realizing it was empty. Cautiously, he glanced around the room, breathing out softly as it proved to be empty as well. A dream. A fucking dream. Static raked his hands back through his hair, breathing deeply. His heart was hammering in his chest, racing in what he refused to believe was fear. He was not afraid of a dream, damn it. He shook his head and turned towards the door, suddenly craving a drink.

Richie was standing behind him.

Static jerked backwards, nearly falling over the edge of the mattress. Richie merely tilted his head, the gentle smile still firmly in place. The other was dressed now in the plain white shirt and jeans he had been wearing the night that…the night that he had… Static shook his head again, more violently. "What, V, do you think you can just forget?" Richie's voice was still mild and soft, holding the slightly teasing tone he'd always taken when Static was being particularly dense. The other swayed in close, suddenly, so close that his lips nearly brushed Static's. "Pretend it never happened? You killed me, bro." Static stumbled back a half step despite himself, a flare of anger licking through him even as he did so. It was a dream. It was a dream! This wasn't real! He straightened again, narrowing his eyes dangerously. He was not afraid of a dream.

Richie's smile widened into something harsh and mocking, the ghastly, purplish-blue lips skinning back from his teeth. His glassy, dead eyes bored into Static's, unblinking. The horrible smile widened still further, stretching into a death's head grimace. "Think you can get away from it? From me?"

Abruptly, Richie's whole body seemed to shudder. Static's eyes widened as Richie's skin literally shivered and crawled on his body. The lank, stringy hair grew short and spiky; subtle muscle that his Richie had never developed gliding into existence under skin that was suddenly whole and healthy again. The grisly vision risen from the grave transformed before Static's very eyes into the image of the other Richie…the one Static had left lying broken and beaten only an hour before.

Richie grinned at him, the warmth and friendliness back in the expression…but his eyes were still lifeless and dull. Static's heart raced faster, and this time he could not lie to himself. The sight of this specter chilled him to the bone. Even the knowledge that it was not real brought no comfort. Trapped in this nightmare, with this vision taunting him…Static could feel the icy hands of real fear wrapping around him.

The specter reached up and cupped Static's face in his hands. Static jerked backwards, gasping at the touch, but Richie held him with unnatural strength. The fear ratcheted up another notch. Static had always been the stronger of them. He wrapped his own hands around Richie's forearms, trying to wrench out of the other's grip to no avail. Richie didn't even seem to notice his efforts to free himself. The other leaned closer.

"What's wrong, V? Isn't this what you want? Isn't this who you want?" Richie smiled again, crookedly, the flat, dead gaze still boring into Static. Then, he swayed forward and pressed his lips against Static's. Shocked by the motion, Static froze, squeezing his eyes shut, and Richie pulled him closer, winding his arms sinuously about the other youth. Richie's kiss turned soft and sensual, loving and needy in the way Static had always dreamed of. He almost forgot for a moment, almost lost
himself in what he had wanted and desired for so long….yet the image of those horrible, dead eyes was inescapable. Static wrenched backwards more forcefully, trying to break the other's grip on him.

Yet again, Richie shook in silent laughter and suddenly the body wrapped around Static's turned icy, icy cold. Richie released him, rocking back, and Static opened his eyes to find the other's appearance had shifted again, back to the terrible apparition of the boy he had…killed. The other smiled again and Static almost recoiled from the sight, his horror spiking again. This time, though, with the fear came anger.

"You can't have him, just like that. You know you can't." The soft, mocking tone was Static's undoing. Dream or no dream, no one told him what to do. Fury flared through him and he straightened, clenching his fists.

"You ain't the one in control here!" he spat. The smile on Richie's pale, pale face twisted into a harsh smirk. He laughed again, the sound actually emerging from his mouth for the first time. It seemed to echo around them, through the room, hollow and distorted.

Static growled to himself and lunged forward, tackling the other around the waist. The two of them tumbled to the floor of his bedroom, Static landing on top. Through it all, Richie's expression never changed, the fixed, staring gaze ever faltered. "He's mine if I want him!" Static hissed.

Richie's laughter ceased as suddenly as it had began, and he reached up to lay his hands on Static's shoulders. "He's not me, V," Richie whispered, his voice infuriatingly calm and patient. "And if you think you can escape this…then you're trippin'." With that, he lunged upwards, reversing their positions as easily as though Static weighed no more than a child.

Static gasped aloud and Richie just smiled down at him, still the twisted, terrifying version of the warm grin Static had known all throughout their relationship. Static thrashed wildly, trying to throw the other off of him. His lips curled back in an animalistic snarl. "You think you can tell me what to do?" he shouted as he bucked and thrashed. "This is my world!" He finally got one arm free and lunged forward, slugging Richie across the face as hard as he could. The other's head snapped to one side with the force of the blow, but he merely turned back, giving no hint that he had even felt the impact.

"No, V…you just think it is." Richie's tone maintained its mild, patient quality. It only served to infuriate Static further. He jackknifed his body upwards, at last throwing the other off of him. His lips curled back in an animalistic snarl. "You think you can tell me what to do?" he shouted as he bucked and thrashed. "This is my world!" He finally got one arm free and lunged forward, slugging Richie across the face as hard as he could. The other's head snapped to one side with the force of the blow, but he merely turned back, giving no hint that he had even felt the impact.

Even as Static scrambled to his feet, Richie was rising slowly, and the two stood facing each other, only a few inches apart. Static lashed out again, but to his shock, the blow never connected. Richie flew backwards, his body fetching up with a dull thud against the side of Static's bed. The calm smile never wavered from his face.

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Even as Static scrambled to his feet, Richie was rising slowly, and the two stood facing each other, only a few inches apart. Static lashed out again, but to his shock, the blow never connected. Richie caught Static's fist in one hand, mere centimeters from his nose. Static's mouth fell open. How was this possible?

With a cry of inarticulate rage, Static finally called his powers forth. The crackling blue light exploded from his hands, a sizzling force that should have sent the other youth into spasms. Instead, Richie's sick grin widened. The electricity danced and crackled between them, racing over and through their bodies…and still Richie gave no sign that he even felt it.

"C'mon, V. It doesn't have to be like this." Richie's voice lowered, an edge of mocking laughter creeping into it. "Just stop fighting me."

Static's eyes widened, and then narrowed to slits. With a primal growl he pulled every ounce of electric power he had and focused it entirely at the apparition in front of him. "You can't stop me!
You're mine! You were always mine! You came back to me and you can't stop me!" At long last, the flow of power had an effect. The terrible grin faltered; the dead, staring eyes widened…and then Richie screamed. He screamed, louder and longer than Static had ever heard him scream before.

Richie never stopped holding him, though. Instead, the other actually reached up with his free arm, drawing Static close, embracing him even as his body began to spasm. The electricity coursed over Static as well--and for the first time since the Bang, his power hurt him, hurt him so much he screamed as well. He was in pain, but he didn't stop. The phantasm in front of him actually began to burn…the skin blackening and charring. Smoke rose from the other's body, and still they both screamed.

The scorched skin burned away, and before Static's eyes Richie's face melted into a charred, grinning skull. The screams echoed around them, though the sounds no longer seemed to emanate from the grisly specter before him. Static's own screams reached a fever pitch as the horrible, horrible skull leaned close.

"He's not me. He'll never be yours."

With a final, chilling scream, the body in front of him charred completely, vanishing in a cloud of ash and a dance of blue light.

"I could've loved you, too, V. I could've loved you, too."

And Static jerked into a sitting position on his bed, breathing harshly. His eyes darted wildly around the room, which was just starting to glow orange in the late afternoon sun.

He was alone.

It had been a dream. Just a dream.

Icy sweat bathed his entire body, raising goose bumps on the skin of his arms. Despite himself, he shivered, recalling the horrible sight of Richie vanishing before his eyes. He raked one hand back through his damp hair, surprised to find his fingers were shaking slightly.

A dream. Nothing more than a dream.

Taking a deep breath, Static kicked the soaked sheets off of his legs and climbed shakily out of bed. Taking a few steps over to the wide windows that made up one entire wall of his bedroom, he leaned against the warm glass, closing his eyes and still breathing deeply. He'd won. In the end, he'd won.

He smiled suddenly, pushing back from the glass and turning to face his bedroom. He always won.

He'd almost lost it down in Richie's room, almost pushed too far. He'd stopped himself, though…and now Richie would know better than to try and leave him, again. It was only a matter of time before Richie finally understood…and then they could move on from this unpleasantness. Together. The way it was always supposed to be.

Richie had come back to him…it was time to pick up where they had left off.

"Backpack!"

Virgil's relieved cry echoed off the sewer walls and the little machine beeped incomprehensibly. To Virgil, the sound was as sweet as music. Backpack's sensor eye extended towards him, its electronic gaze seeming to sweep up and down Virgil's body. Evidently deciding it had reached the Virgil
Hawkins it was familiar with, the robot disengaged from the wall and dropped down with a metallic thud and a small splash. Extending its legs enough to keep its body out of the water, Backpack marched forward, finally stopping just in front of Virgil.

"What the hell is that?" Adam's nervous voice sounded from Virgil's left and he glanced over to find the older man staring in awed shock down at the little robot.

"It's Backpack!" Virgil replied excitedly. Behind him, he heard Sharon sigh heavily.

"So you said," she remarked dryly. "What is it?" Virgil looked over his shoulder to find Sharon's gun aimed unwaveringly at Backpack's casing. Carmen and Adam had dropped into fighting stances and all three of them were eying the little robot warily. Apparently, Virgil's obvious relief and joy at seeing the thing was enough to forestall immediate violence…but they were taking no chances.

"It's a robot," Virgil raced to explain. "Richie made it! It's his best invention. Richie must've…"

Virgil's eyes widened, an almost painful hope blooming within him, "he must've sent it to find me!"

Richie had long ago installed a failsafe into Backpack…should the little machine ever become separated from its creator in a hostile situation, it was programmed to immediately seek out Virgil's shock box frequency. It had been days since Richie had been kidnapped. If Backpack was only just now finding him…it had to have been with Richie all this time. It had to have been.

Virgil whipped around again and dropped to his knees in front of Backpack, unmindful of the filthy water soaking into his borrowed jeans. "Is he okay?" he demanded, an almost hysterical edge to his voice. "Is Richie all right!"

"It can talk?" Carmen asked softly, sounding impressed.

Virgil deflated, somewhat.

"Uh…no, actually." Richie had been meaning to install a voice synthesizer for Virgil's benefit…for just these types of situations. Almost instantly, though, the answer came to him. "But Backpack can interface with anything! Tech has computers, doesn't he?"

"Of course, but—" Virgil jumped to his feet again, cutting Sharon off.

"Well then let's go!" He leaned down, intending to scoop Backpack into his arms, but the robot surprised him, leaping onto his outstretched arms and scrambling up over his shoulders to latch itself securely to his back, the way it did with Richie. The sensor eye wound upwards, curling itself over Virgil's shoulder and waving back and forth in a manner that seemed to ask: 'what are you waiting for?'

With a triumphant whoop, Virgil turned and began running down the tunnel, eager to get to Tech's computers…desperate to find out what Backpack could tell him about his partner's condition.

Seconds later he skidded to a halt, and then turned and trudged back to the trio of Sharon, Adam, and Carmen.

"Which way is the base again?"

For perhaps the fiftieth time in the past hour, Deimos hissed in pain as he forgot himself and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration. A steady throbbing had settled across the upper portion of his face, and he was half-sure he would have two black eyes by the time the swelling was done. Frustrated beyond belief, in pain, and more than a little distracted by…certain matters…
Deimos knew that the rest of the gang would be falling over themselves trying to avoid him.

Too bad.

There were things that needed to be done. The building was locked down, yes, and the day's patrols had been cancelled in order to give everyone a chance to lick their proverbial (or literal) wounds, but there were still things to be done. A final report on the injured still needed to be collected from Puff; their medical supplies needed to be re-inventoried; a plan of action had to be formulated for when the rats came back…and there was no doubt in Deimos's mind that the rats, and the other Static, would be coming back. Kangorr's body still needed to be disposed of—once the heat of Hotstreak's brutal attack dissipated, it wouldn't take the stray dogs that roamed the streets long to start nosing around.

Talon had excused herself to oversee the building security and track down Puff almost as soon as Static had left them, leaving Deimos to handle the other myriad things that needed to be done. He had done so with relish, throwing himself into the mind-numbing minutiae that always cropped up after a battle with an abandon he didn't really want to analyze. Holding court in a little-used conference room on the same floor as the infirmary, barking orders into his radio like a drill sergeant with a hangover, Deimos sent those who were still on their feet after the fight scurrying to all floors of the building after whatever task he felt like setting down for them.

Finally, he ran out of things to do.

Growling to himself, he clipped his radio back onto his belt and stalked across the room to lean against one of the windows. The glass was darkly tinted here, and the late afternoon sun was streaming in, blinding him to whatever view the window offered. Closing his eyes, Deimos rested his forearms against the glass.

It had been nearly two hours since Static had left him and Talon in the hallway, stalking towards the elevator with sheer fury rolling off of him in waves. Nearly two hours since he had swept into the room Deimos had left Foley in, with Phobos standing guard, and ordered Deimos to recall his 'familiar.' Static had been pissed.

Static still didn't know everything.

Deimos clenched his teeth, the muscles of his jaw twitching. Static still didn't know one very important detail…and Deimos was the one who had kept it from him. He still honestly couldn't say why he hadn't told Static the full truth behind Foley's escape attempt…hadn't told Static about the strange, spider-like robot. Static needed to know.

There was no telling how much Foley had managed to compromise the security of the base. Deimos didn't have any idea what the small machine was capable of…but given the technology of the weaponry the kid had produced, Deimos was willing to bet something as intricate as the robot wasn't just for show. The thing had seemed damn near alive. Which brought him back to his original question.

Why the hell hadn't he told Static?

The Richie Foley of this world had turned out to be dangerous. More dangerous than Static had ever been willing to admit. This other version, though…this kid was something else entirely. Deimos was certainly capable of putting two and two together—and the answers he was coming up with weren't good. Foley had been playing them…had been forcing them to underestimate him, to think that he was too cowed, too broken to do anything against them. He had to have been doing it from the start…from the very first night. Hell, he had probably used his first 'escape attempt' to call the damn robot to him.
More than that, though…what kind of person could maneuver a situation so deftly? What did it take to stare Static down, to face all that rage and power and manipulate it to suit one's own needs? Foley had been courting death with Static and he hadn't stumbled…he hadn't broken. Much as he hated to admit it, Deimos had to respect that kind of guts.

Still, there was the fact that Foley had been found out. He had been caught and now Static was pissed.

And when Static got pissed, blood tended to flow.

Still rhythmically clenching and unclenching his jaw, Deimos pushed back from the glass, slamming his fists against the smooth surface.

"Good work. That window was starting to look shifty. Now, you want to tell me what's wrong?" Startled, though he would never admit it, Deimos whirled around to find Talon leaning against the frame of the open door, her arms crossed over her chest. She hadn't yet bothered to even change clothes, and her feathered skin was still liberally coated with dust and dirt in several places, her hair hanging lank and sweaty from its customary ponytail. The white of the bandage on her arm stood out starkly, and Deimos could read the strain on her face, despite the air of nonchalance she was trying to project.

Deimos knew he didn't look much better. Without answering her question, he turned back to the expanse of glass, staring at Dakota's broken skyline as if it were the most fascinating sight in the world. He heard the soft rustle of Talon's body shifting from its position, and a moment later sensed her presence just at his back.

"Deimos?"

"It's nothing. Rough day. You should try and catch some sleep while we have the chance." It was a good point…neither of them was naïve enough to think that the other Static and the rats would not be coming back as soon as they were able. Unfortunately, he knew without looking that Talon wasn't buying it.

"You first," she countered. Deimos merely shrugged in response. There was silence for a moment, and then she sighed heavily. When she spoke again, she sounded considerably more annoyed.

"What are you hiding?" she bit out, and by her tone, Deimos knew she was in no mood for evasions.

Again, Deimos merely shrugged. "I'm not hiding anything," he insisted, still staring intently out the window. There was another huffed sigh from behind him…and then Talon smacked him sharply upside the head. Shocked, he whipped around, one hand going automatically to the back of his head, though she hadn't actually hit him hard enough to do any damage. "Ow! What the hell?" he demanded.

Talon stood in front of him, feet planted widely apart and hands firmly on her hips. For a brief, surreal instant, Deimos was reminded of his second grade schoolteacher. She had scared the crap out of him. "My arm is killing me, half our people are down, Static is on the fucking warpath, and you're playing Cryptic Clue. I'm not in the mood, Deimos! I saw you…you weren't telling Static everything. Now spill!" Talon's accent thickened with each word, a sure sign that she was pissed. Still rubbing the back of his head, Deimos mentally threw his hands up in surrender.

Sometimes he thought he had liked it better when Talon was as wary of him as the rest of Static's underlings were.
"Deimos!"

"He didn't want me watching through Phobos."

For a moment, Talon merely blinked at him, as if she hadn't expected him to talk so quickly. Then, his words actually registered, and he saw understanding flare in her dark eyes. She didn't have to ask what he meant.

The irritation seemed to drain out of her, and they were left staring at each other. The silence stretched between them, a silence that was heavy with unvoiced thoughts and unspoken words. It was a silence that had spun between them before, though not for a long while…one that neither had ever been willing to shatter. They read their understanding in each other's eyes, and the silence remained. Some things were better left unsaid.

Finally, though, Talon blinked and looked away. She lightly fingered the bandage on her arm, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. "What else?" she asked quietly, after a moment.

This time, Deimos didn't bother to try to be evasive. He sucked in a deep breath, feeling the beginnings of one hell of a headache forming behind his eyes. "You remember that thing Foley had at the junkyard? Looked like a big metal spider?"

Talon snapped her attention back to him, brow furrowed. "Yeah," she said carefully, "but it wasn't on him when you and Static carried him back to the old gas station." Deimos waited, and after a few seconds, Talon's eyes widened. "It...it was here?"

Deimos nodded grimly. "It must've had some kind of homing beacon or program....that's how the kid got the drop on me on the roof. The damn thing tackled me. There's no telling what he's been doing with it."

"Where is it now?" Talon demanded anxiously. Deimos shrugged.

"It was gone when I finally chased him down. Probably into the air ducts...that's the only way he could've hidden something that size."

"Should we search the duct system? Could it still be here?"

"I sent Shiv on it...as soon as he woke up. Foley clocked him a good one. But no...there's no way he'd risk us finding it. Thing's long gone."

"But Shiv's still in the air ducts?"

"What? He's small enough to fit."

"He's crawling around inside the walls of the building with a head injury!"

Deimos raised one eyebrow, the implied and, so, but, therefore? evident. At Talon's disapproving glare, he relented slightly. "Nightingale's in radio contact with him. Spoilsport."

Talon rolled her eyes and a brief smile quirked her lips, the last of her irritation dissipating. The lightness of the moment quickly dissolved, though, snuffed out under the greater concerns Deimos's revelation raised. Talon fidgeted for a moment, her feathers ruffling.

"What?" Deimos asked, though he thought he already knew what she was going to say.

"Why didn't you tell Static?" There was no judgment in the words, only genuine curiosity.
Deimos was silent for a moment, running one hand back through his hair. "I…don't know," he said truthfully. He didn't know what had prompted him to leave such a monumental detail out of his report to Static. Static needed to know that. Yet…he'd remained silent.

"Static's going to be out to break him, this time," Talon said finally, quietly.

Unbidden, the memory of the expression on Foley's face as he had stood on the edge of the roof rose in Deimos's mind. The boy had been terrified…he would have been crazy not to be. But more than the fear, there had been determination. Determination and stubbornness, and more real courage than was probably strictly healthy.

"That's just it. I don't think he can," he answered.

Talon stared at him in surprise, opening her mouth to speak…but abruptly closed it again. Deimos didn't press the matter. They were dangerously close to voicing the things that were better left to the heavy, burdened silence. As one, they went back to their silent contemplation of the room around them.

Seconds later, the silence was again broken…but not by either of them. Deimos's radio crackled to life at his belt, and the call they had been waiting for (though neither of them were about to admit that) finally came through.

"—Hey D…Talon with you?—" Static's voice issued forth from the radio. Talon straightened slightly, stepping closer to stand beside Deimos.

"I'm here, Boss," she said loudly.

"—Great. Get everyone who's still moving together and meet me down in the lobby in twenty. D, I want to talk to you up here for a minute.—"

Deimos and Talon exchanged significant looks. Deimos thumbed the broadcast on the radio. "Where are you?"

"—My rooms. Check on Richie on your way up…see if he needs anything. I want you up here in ten minutes.—" With that, Static disconnected and both Talon and Deimos frowned deeply. Static had sounded too relaxed…they'd never seen him come down off one of his rages so quickly.

"Deimos," Talon began uneasily. Deimos merely held up one hand, silencing her as his eyes began to glow. He summoned Phobos into existence with a thought, manifesting his 'familiar' in the room Static had been holding Foley prisoner in. It took only seconds to establish the connection, 'seeing' through Phobos's eyes.

"Oh shit."

They exited the tunnels into the underground base to find a crowd of at least fifty people waiting for them.

Talking animatedly with Carmen about Backpack's many capabilities, Virgil nearly walked into Adam's back before he realized the older man had pulled up short, Sharon beside him. Peeking around Adam's shoulder, Virgil swallowed hard at the sight of the grim-faced and silent crowd.

Most of Sharon's main resistance force stood in front of them, blocking their way into the base proper. Virgil felt Carmen lay a hand on his arm, the other's grip stiff and tense. A roll of dread shivered through Virgil's stomach.
Oh God, this was it. Sharon's people had had enough of harboring their own personal nightmare in their midst. They were going to riot…demand that Sharon and Adam turn him over to them. Damn it, why now?

His heart racing in his chest, Virgil began backing away, trying desperately to remember his way through the sewers. He couldn't ask Sharon and Adam to take a stand against their own people for him…he'd have to run! He glanced over his shoulder at the entrance to the tunnels. Surely he'd be able to make the tunnels before the crowd overtook him. Surely…

He saw Adam and Sharon tense, Sharon's hand actually twitching toward the shotgun strapped to her back. Carmen moved to stand in front of Virgil. This was it.

Someone started clapping.

Virgil froze as the sound echoed through the silent chamber, growing louder and more confident as more and more people joined in. The applause was joined by cheering whoops and whistles, the sounds meshing together into a deafening roar. Virgil's jaw dropped.

The crowd suddenly surged forward, enveloping the foursome. Sharon was quickly separated from the group, surrounded by people reaching out to embrace her in relief. To Virgil's shock, though, the jovial celebration didn't stop with her. They were all pulled into the crowd, backslapping and handshakes pressed upon them…including Virgil. Their touches were more cautious, more hesitant…but they reached out to him. Shouted words became clear amongst the cheering, and Virgil realized that he recognized a few of the faces that had shown up with Sharon and Adam at the TynaCorp building for the last of the battle.

"Saw it with my own eyes! Two of them!"

"He was telling the truth all along!"

"He saved Sharon's life! Saved her life!"

"He kicked Static to the curb! Never seen the bastard run like that!"

"It's true! He was telling the truth! He's on our side!"

Dazed and shell shocked, Virgil let himself be pushed along in the crowd. Slowly, it began to sink in that they weren't going to rend him limb from limb. They were congratulating him; they were thanking him. He caught sight of Carmen just to his left, and the other bang baby shot him a wide, relieved grin. In a flash, the numb disbelief gave way to realization…they believed him! They believed him!

For a moment, he simply stood in their midst, trembling slightly. Carmen swept up to his side, and Virgil felt the other lay an arm around his shoulder. "You okay, kid?" Carmen called over the din.

"They…they believe me," Virgil answered, unsure if his voice even carried enough for Carmen to hear. It didn't matter, though. All that mattered was that the people of the resistance believed him…knew that he wasn't the same man as the monster that had take over this city. They wouldn't stand in his way when he went to rescue Richie—they might even be more willing to help him, now.

Richie…

In an instant, the cheering crowd ceased to exist for Virgil. He pulled away from the hands reaching out to him, whirling on Carmen with a determined expression. "Where's Tech?" he asked loudly. Backpack's arms tightened fractionally on his shoulders, as if agreeing that they needed to get down
Carmen's face sobered immediately, and he nodded. Taking Virgil's elbow, he began pushing through the crowd. It took Virgil a moment to realize they were heading towards the back section of the underground base… the part where the other Richie's old lab still stood.

Seeming to sense their urgency, the crowd began to part for them, allowing them to move faster. Virgil caught a glimpse of Adam trying to disentangle himself from the throng in order to follow them, but he paid the other man no heed. Reaching up, he lightly stroked the smooth metal of one of Backpack's arms, as if to assure himself that the little machine really was there.

All that mattered now was getting Backpack interfaced with one of Tech's computers. Virgil was desperate to find out what the robot could tell him about Richie… even as a part of him dreaded what he would learn. What he would have confirmed. His fingers tightened over the cool metal of Backpack's arm.

The other Static's words swirled through his mind, repeating over and over in an endless loop that twisted Virgil's stomach. Static had… hurt… Richie. He had… had… Virgil couldn't even bear to think the words. Perhaps if he didn't think them, they wouldn't be real.

But soon, he wouldn't be able to escape them.

"I'm coming, bro. I swear to God, I'm coming. I'm going to get you out of there." He just prayed it wasn't too late.

They had actually only gotten about halfway to Tech's labs when the young man himself came running to meet them. Had it really only been that morning that Virgil had been arguing with the Nightbreed youth? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Sharon radioed me," he snapped as soon as he was within hearing distance. Virgil was somewhat surprised to realize the other young man looked… frayed. Shaken. His shock must have shown on his face, for Tech's voice dropped slightly and he pulled his mirrored glass off. "She told me everything," he said softly. Then, he seemed to shake himself, and the hardness crept back into his gaze just before he shoved the glass back up the bridge of his nose. "So what's this about a… holy shit!" Tech stumbled back a step, his jaw dropping.

Backpack had scrambled up over one of Virgil's shoulders, extending its sensor eye towards Tech. It balanced precariously on Virgil's shoulders for a moment, before leaping down to stand in front of Virgil. The sensor eye brightened briefly, and then began waving back and forth between Virgil and Tech.

"He built it," Tech said softly, his voice tinged with a faraway quality. "He really built it."

"Huh?" Carmen asked, his brow furrowing in curiosity. Tech tore his eyes away from Backpack.

"Richie… our Richie—he, God, he showed me the schematics for this thing just before he… just before Static took him." Virgil's eyes widened and he heard Carmen suck in a breath. The alternate Richie had been trying to build a Backpack, as well? Tech's awed voice dropped further. "I didn't think it would work… the programming alone was so--" Abruptly, he remembered himself, and for the second time in as many minutes he visibly snapped his walls back into place. "Cool toy," he said coldly. "Sharon says you think it can tell us something about your partner?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Virgil saw Carmen sigh and shake his head. He bit back the instinctively snappy retort to Tech's attitude by sheer force of will, unwilling for the moment to
antagonize the Nightbreed. He had seen the fear in the other's eyes at how close they had come to losing Sharon; heard the haunted guilt as he had spoken of this world's Richie. If being a jerk was how Tech dealt with life down here, so be it. Virgil didn't care as long as the other helped him rescue Richie. "You got a computer?" he asked instead.

Tech snorted contemptuously, lifting one eyebrow. "What do you think?"

Carmen made an impatient noise in the back of his throat. "We're going back for the other Richie tonight."

Tech's gaze whipped over to the other bang baby, clearly startled. "Tonight? Are you nuts? That place'll be locked down tighter than Fort Knox."

Carmen darted a look over at Virgil, and when he spoke again, his voice was quiet, subdued. "It doesn't matter. We have to get him out of there." There was a world of unspoken meaning in the simple words, and Virgil could see the understanding dawn on Tech's face. Tech glanced down at Backpack again.

"You really think that thing can tell you anything?"

"Tech! Just for one minute, pretend you're not a complete asshole. Take Virgil to the damn computer bank!" Carmen burst out finally. Tech flinched back slightly and had the grace to look slightly abashed. He recovered quickly, though, drawing himself up and jerking his chin in the direction of his own labs.

"Whatever. It better not mess up my mainframes," he muttered.

"Richie built it," Virgil said quietly. As though it sensed that they were about to get moving, Backpack swarmed up Virgil's legs, securing itself again to his back. Again the flash of amazement crossed Tech's face, quickly hidden but painfully obvious.

Tech shoved his mirrored glass up the bridge of his nose, before he turned and began stalking away. "I don't think either of you realize how delicate some of my equipment is. That thing could crash our entire security system if it isn't compatib—"

"Richie built it," Virgil said again slowly, hissing the words out through gritted teeth. Carmen laid a restraining hand on one shoulder…fortunate, as Virgil was reconsidering his decision not to antagonize the Nightbreed youth.

Every second they wasted was time the other Static could be using to harm Richie further.

To Virgil's relief, Tech made no other comment. He quickened his pace, and Carmen and Virgil were forced to jog to keep up. That was fine with Virgil…it was all he could do to keep from sprinting. They made their way through the base, Tech muttering to himself the whole time.

Backpack's solid weight on his back was reassuring to no end. Let Tech mutter all he wanted…Virgil knew better than anyone save Richie himself what the little robot was capable of. With Backpack's unique capabilities, Virgil's power, and the backup of the underground resistance…the other Static didn't know what he was in for. He was going to regret ever laying a hand on Virgil's partner.

Virgil would see to that.

In the end, it was almost anticlimactic. Tech's labs were neither as well appointed, nor as complex as anything Richie (either of them) had ever made. It was obviously light-years ahead of anything that
any of the other residents of the underground base could comprehend…but Virgil knew Tech wouldn't have been able to hold a candle to his Richie. Probably not this world's Richie, either.

Backpack leaped from Virgil's back almost as soon as they entered the lab. The little robot skittered across the floor, its sensor eye sweeping this way and that, scanning everything in the room. Finally, Backpack's attention seemed to settle on a large bank of monitors at one end of the lab. It looked as though Tech had taken the guts of half a dozen Dells and cobbled them together into one large Frankenstein-esque computer with a workbench in front of it, into which several keyboards had been built. Backpack scrambled towards the thing, and Tech started after it almost instantly.

"What the—wait! No! Sit! Stay! Damn it, Hawkins, get that thing before it—"

Backpack launched itself onto the workbench, and one of its many internal apparatuses extended outwards. The end inserted itself into one of the many ports on the bank of monitors, and over Tech's outraged yell a series of clicks and whirs could be heard. Backpack's sensor eye raised itself up, snaking backwards towards Virgil as if to say 'get over here!' A soft beep issued from the little robot, and one of the screens on the computer bank lit up.

Tech stumbled to a halt just at the edge of the workbench, one hand outstretched as though to physically rip Backpack off of his computers. Virgil and Carmen were only half a step behind, and both leaned in to see what Backpack was projecting at the same instant. Carmen let out a low whistle even as Tech's jaw dropped.

Virgil watched the data scroll across the screen…some of it was incomprehensible to him, but most of it he understood. And with each new burst of information, hope welled up inside of him. He clenched his fists by his side, sucking in great breaths of air to calm the racing of his heart. It was here. The key to finding Richie, the key to getting into the TynaCorp building…it was all here. "I've got it, Rich. I'm coming. Just hang on…I'm coming."

"Well," Carmen breathed at last. "This is good."

"This is amazing!" Tech interjected. "Holy shit."

"I told you," Virgil said softly, "Richie built it."
The world was spinning oddly, tilting this way and that, and fading in and out of a peculiar gray haze. His thoughts were a disjointed jumble, a collection of vague impressions and sensations that made no sense…and he had no energy to try to make sense of them. He hurt.

The carpet under his cheek was soaked with blood from where Static had struck him across the face. His whole body seemed to throb in time with his pulse, the worst of the pain shooting through his head with each breath. He hurt so much…and yet he knew it should be worse. The pain was distant somehow, muted and lost beneath a strange roaring that had filled his ears. He felt weirdly disconnected from his body, as though he were outside of it. He was aware of the pain…but separate from it.

It occurred to him, in a distant, cloudy manner, that he should be worried. This floating disconnection was a bad thing. He should be trying to move, trying to get up…just lying here was dangerous, wasn't it? He just couldn't quite get his body to work. He'd tried already…or he thought he did. There was a vague memory of feebly trying to stir, to hoist himself to his knees—but the effort had left him dizzy and sick.

It was easier to just lie where he was, to let himself drift in and out with that strange gray haze that kept obscuring his vision…no matter that alarm bells were trying to go off in his head. It was better to just drift; some part of him rather suspected that the distant, throbbing pain was going to worsen interminably when the world finally snapped back into focus. The alarm bells would have to wait until he had reconnected with his body, had dealt with the pain waiting to pounce on him.

So he laid still, his cheek pressing into the blood-soaked carpet beneath his head, his miraculously unbroken glasses pressing uncomfortably across the bridge of his nose. He laid still and stopped trying to make sense of his jumbled thoughts, even as the small part of him that was still processing things screamed against such action. There was something he needed to do…something important. He was in danger wasn't he? That part was too small, though, to cut through the fog that had enveloped his senses.

How long he lay there, he wasn't sure. It might have been moments…it might have been hours. The blood flow from his nose slowed and stopped, caking on his face in a sticky crust. The gray haze continued to dance across his vision at odd intervals, and he let it carry him on its wave. At least the fog seemed to obscure the pain still further.

Finally, though, during one of the brief periods when the fog ebbed away from him, he became aware that he was no longer alone in the room. The warning voice in his head became more insistence, shrieking at him that he was in danger, damn it, and he needed to move.

He succeeded in lifting his head slightly and forcing his eyes to focus for a bare instant. The wavering form of the ghost dog, made even more indistinct by the fact that the movement had caused Richie's vision to gray out again, was standing in front of the door again. The burning, hellish gaze was focused on him and something finally cut through the strange cocoon that had enveloped him, muddying his thoughts and dulling his senses. For the first time since he had been brought to this hellhole, true despair reached out to sink its claws into him.

He had no fight left in him—he'd used it all up.

Let the ghost dog plunge him into false terror again; let the other Static's underlings come back to
beat him down further…it didn’t matter anymore. Richie felt hollowed out, weakened in ways he had never experienced before. He couldn’t even think. He’d lost his desperate gamble for freedom, he’d had to send Backpack away, he was beaten, battered, and he distantly suspected he had a rather serious concussion at the very least.

A shudder wracked through him and he let his head drop back to the floor, his eyes suddenly stinging. A fresh bolt of agony, clearer and sharper now, rocketed through him, and the edges of his vision became a little darker. Richie knew that if Static hadn’t snapped out of his mad rage, the other would have killed him. He would have died. He still might.

And even if Static didn't kill him, what the other had in store for him…what the other wanted from him...it might be just as bad.

The sound of the door to his cell opening intruded on his awareness, but he paid it no mind. The pounding in his head and the restless, disjointed racing of his thoughts swirled together with the gray haze that rose up and obscured his vision once again, blotting out everything else. Gradually, the gray began to darken, the field of his vision narrowing into a mere pinprick.

He let it carry him away with a dim sense of gratitude and relief. At least he would get some relief from the pain. He couldn’t even bring himself to care that this time, the fog might not recede. Footsteps pounded across the floor towards him, but he didn’t have the energy to look to see who had come to torment him now.

As even the pinprick faded away, the tattered shreds of his thoughts turned to Virgil. He clung to the image of his friend with the last of his consciousness.

"Help me, V. God, please help me."

Talon’s startled yell followed him out of the conference room, but Deimos paid her no heed. He knew her well enough to know she would be directly behind him, and Talon did not disappoint. She caught up to him as he whipped around the corner and headed for the stairwell, not even bothering to wait for the elevator.

"What is it?" she gasped as they bounded up the stairs. "What happened?"

"Just move," Deimos shot back. His eyes were glowing, by turns flaring a deep scarlet and dying down to a dull red glimmer, a cycle Talon had come to recognize as a sign he was switching between Phobos's 'sight' and his own. "Fucking damn it to hell."

Talon didn't waste time with further questions. They raced up the stairs, Deimos's longer legs allowing him to pull ahead, though Talon had little trouble keeping up. A steady stream of curse words flowed from Deimos's mouth as they ran…whatever it was he had seen through Phobos, Talon knew it had to be bad. Static had been so, so angry. She had long ago grown used to cleaning up the remnants of Static's rages…but this felt different.

Deimos barely broke his stride as he hit the door that led, unsurprisingly, to the floor Static had been keeping Foley prisoner in. Talon clenched her teeth as she followed, unease the likes of which she hadn't felt in years unfurling in her belly. They ran down the hallway together, and Deimos only slowed when they got to the door to Foley's cell. Talon pulled ahead of him at the last instant, skidding to a halt in front of the door, Deimos a bare inch behind her.

Her hand shot out to the number pad beside the door, punching in the security code as quickly as she could. Obediently, the door hissed open and Talon started forward…only to pull up short in shock.
Before her was the end result of Static in *all* his fury, and though she should have expected it, the sight of it still held her frozen for a brief moment. Only a moment, though.

"¡Ah caga!" she hissed, and rushed forward, Deimos a bare step behind her.

Foley was sprawled out on the floor, obviously left where he had fallen, and for a moment Talon thought Static had *totally* snapped and killed the boy. Then, she saw the faint rise and fall of his chest and something that was almost relief swept through her. She didn't want to even think about what would have happened if Static *had* managed to kill the youth. She dropped to her knees beside the still body, quickly realizing that even if the kid was still breathing, he was in bad shape.

Foley lay mostly on his side on the carpet, blood crusted over much of his face. Blood had soaked the carpet underneath his cheek, spreading out in a sizeable stain. Fresh bruises were forming over the faded, yellowed remainders of Static's first attack only a few days ago, and the black sweatshirt he was wearing was literally torn to shreds. More blood had dried over a shallow slash on his shoulder, and beneath the rusty red and rainbow of fresh bruises, the boy's skin was chalk white.

Talon reached out to lay two fingers against Foley's throat, relaxing fractionally when she found a steady, if somewhat slow, pulse. The cool efficiency that had allowed her to rise swiftly through Static's ranks took over, and she began running her hands over the boy's limbs, checking for broken bones. Satisfied that there were none, she reached up and gently removed Foley's glasses, setting them beside her on the carpet. Then, she lightly forced one eyelid up, noting with a practiced eye the sluggish way the pupil responded to the sudden light.


"You're not helping," she ground out tersely.

"How bad is he?" There was an undercurrent of urgency to Deimos's usually calm voice, one that Talon hadn't heard in years. She spared a glance at the pale young man, and a wealth of wordless meaning passed between them in the brief gaze. Talon turned away again without speaking, refocusing her attention on Foley.

How bad was it? Static had beaten the hell out of him…and she knew Static well enough to doubt that was *all* he had done. The bleeding seemed to have stopped on its own, and there wasn't enough staining the carpet to make her worry about blood loss. The boy had obviously taken a hard blow to the head…perhaps several, and that was more worrisome than any blood she could see.

"Help me get him onto the bed," she said finally, without answering Deimos's question.

Deimos lifted one eyebrow, but complied quickly, scooting around to shove his arms under the boy's shoulders and torso. Talon moved downwards to get a grip on his legs and together they lifted Foley up off the ground. The kid groaned faintly as he was moved, but showed no other signs of waking up. They maneuvered him onto the bed with little effort.

"I'm going downstairs for a first aid kit," Talon said briskly. Deimos nodded silently, before turning away from the bed.

"You need help?" he asked.

"I don't think so…I'll have to call Puff in if he doesn't wake up soon, though."

Again, Deimos nodded once, curtly. He threw one last glance at the figure on the bed, and then strode towards the door.
"Deimos?" Talon called, not liking the carefully controlled blankness of the other's expression. "Where are you going?" He paused at the threshold of the door.

"To see Static," he said, without looking back.

The halls were deserted, those who were still on their feet long since having vanished to find other occupations for the evening. It was just as well...at this point, Deimos honestly wasn't sure what he would have done to anyone who dared cross his path. He stalked through the empty corridors, annoyance and something more rolling off of him in waves. He held himself ramrod straight, his fists clenched by his sides, and though Phobos was nowhere to be seen, a faint sheen of scarlet light was swirling in his eyes.

Deimos prided himself on never losing control. No matter how bad things got, he always kept his head and worked the situation. It was what had helped him to stay alive in Ebon's gang, what had allowed him to rise so quickly through the ranks in Static's, and what made him one of the most dangerous metahumans in the city, even though his power had no effect on regular humans. He hated feeling like things were out of his control. And that was a feeling that had been clinging to him all day.

Foley had well and truly hoodwinked him...had very nearly escaped. The rats had forced Static into a full retreat with the help of the other Static. Half their people were down with injuries, and there was no telling what the rats were planning.

Then, there was the scene he had just left in Foley's cell.

Static had nearly killed the boy. Whatever had snapped him out of it, if it hadn't happened, Foley would have been dead. Again. And Deimos couldn't get the way Static had sounded over the radio out of his head. The other had been talking as if nothing was wrong...had asked Deimos and Talon to check on Foley and see if he needed anything for Christ's sake.

Deimos was starting to have serious reservations about his leader's mental state when it came to Foley. Static was a fucking psychopath. Deimos had always been well aware of that. However, he'd never seen Static so dangerously caught up in anything. Not even with the Foley of this world had Static ever seemed so volatile...not up until the very end.

When he'd killed the boy.

A shiver of unease unfurled within him, one he tried hard to ignore. Deimos didn't particularly care one way or the other if this Foley died. He didn't. His only concern in the matter was to keep Foley from escaping. What Static did to the kid was Static's business.

Deimos shook himself out of his musings as he at last reached Static's floor. He made his way down the familiar hallway automatically, still trying to shake off the feeling of foreboding, of something bad on the horizon. The door to the suite of rooms Static kept for himself was closed, but not locked, and after Deimos's knock went unanswered, he shrugged and let himself in.

He'd been half expecting to find the place trashed...Static tended to get physical when he was angry and household objects didn't fight back. Then again, Foley had obviously already caught the worst of Static's legendary rage. The rooms were quiet, though, still in perfect order. Or at least as close to order as they ever got. Static was, after all, still a teenaged boy. Surprised, Deimos stepped further into the living room, his eyes darting about. Static himself was nowhere to be seen.

The youth had obviously been here, recently. There was a half-empty bottle of Budweiser on the
coffee table in front of the bank of security monitors, the beading condensation on the dark glass showing it to be still cold. The black tank top he had been wearing during the fight with the rats had been thrown carelessly on the floor. Of the shirt's owner, though, there was no sign.

"Static?" Deimos called, moving towards the kitchen that Static had installed. There was no answer.

The lights were all on, and the bedroom door was standing open. Raising one eyebrow, Deimos headed for that room next. The bed was in disarray, the sheets lying on the floor, and the pillows tossed down to the foot of the mattress. The curtains had been thrown back from the windows, allowing the fading afternoon sunlight to stream in. Static was still nowhere in evidence.

Deimos let a soft breath of air hiss out through his teeth, the uneasiness ratcheting up a notch. It wasn't inconceivable that Static had simply decided not to wait for Deimos, and was elsewhere in the building. With everything else that was going on, though, Deimos couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Growling to himself, he turned around and left the bedroom, his hand going for the radio at his belt as he made his way back to the hall door, stomping a bit more heavily than was strictly necessary.

It was then that he realized he hadn't searched the entire suite.

His eyes snapped to the only remaining door in the rooms, the entrance to the 'forbidden territory' as he and Talon had privately dubbed it. It had been a secondary office in the days before Static had taken over Dakota...one Static had converted to a spare bedroom. It was the room Static had kept this world's Richie Foley in...the room where he had killed his childhood friend.

Like the rest of the suite, that room had been cleaned and repaired in the days directly following the death of the other Foley. The rooms had been restored to their original condition, all traces of Static's terrible loss of control removed. Static had moved back into his apartment almost directly, seemingly as if nothing had ever happened, as if the event had had no effect on him.

The door to the spare bedroom had remained firmly closed, though. Static had never entered the room again, to Deimos's and Talon's knowledge. It remained tightly shut up, locked away from sight. Static never made any effort to renovate, to change things around—he simply left it locked. Deimos didn't really understand it...Static had never been particularly superstitious. Still, he had declared the room off-limits, even to himself. In the years since this world's Foley's death, Deimos had never seen the door opened.

It was standing open now.

"Crap." The uneasy foreboding intensified still more. Whatever was going on, Deimos wasn't going to like it. He just knew it. That didn't stop him, though. He crossed the main room in a few steps, stopping just inside the doorway.

In this room, the curtains were drawn, and none of the lights had been turned on. A few rays of nearly blood red sunlight leaked in through the edges of the curtains, but they merely served to deepen the shadows that enshrouded the room, rather than illuminating anything. Deimos stood where he was, taking a moment to let his eyes adjust to the gloom. Even so, he almost didn't see Static.

The youth was seated cross-legged on one side of the bed, back against the headboard. He had changed into a dark, long-sleeved t-shirt and dark pants, so that he appeared almost a part of the shadows that surrounded him. Indeed, in the darkness Deimos could make out little more than the outline of the other's body. As Deimos's eyes adjusted better to the dark, he was able to see that Static was turned toward the other side of the bed, and was lightly stroking one of the pillows.
"Static?"

There was a whisper of movement from the figure on the bed, and Static glanced up at him. In the
dimness, Deimos saw a flash of the other's teeth as he grinned. "Hey, D."

There was a flare of blue light from Static's free hand, and a small orb of electricity shot out towards
a lamp on the bedside table. The lamp sputtered to life instantly, flooding the room with a soft,
golden glow. Seemingly satisfied with the results, Static nodded to himself and went back to staring
at the other side of the bed, still stroking the pillow almost…affectionately. Deimos narrowed his
eyes and stepped further into the room, slouching against the wall next to the door and crossing his
arms over his chest.

"You…wanted to see me?" he said carefully, not sure of what to make of this.

"He had the whole bed, but he always slept on this side, did you know that?" Static said softly, as if
Deimos had not spoken. His fingers halted on the pillow, and he looked up at Deimos again.

Deimos actually froze for a brief moment, totally thrown by the non-sequitur. "What?" he blurted
out, before he could stop himself.

"Richie," Static elaborated, the tone of his voice suggesting that he thought it should have been
obvious. He laughed, lightly. "He does the same thing, you know. Everything the same. I looked,
D…I kept telling myself that I had to be wrong, that it was impossible…something had to be
different. But it's not." Static sighed happily, smoothing his fingers once more over the fabric of the
pillowcase.

"Static—" Deimos began, and then abruptly shook his head. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Static chuckled without looking up from his contemplation of the pillow beside him. "Richie," he
said again, as if that explained everything. The strange smile on his face turned knowing, as if he had
figured out some huge secret. "He's trying to play me."

There was an eerie, faraway quality to Static's voice now, as if he had forgotten that he was speaking
to Deimos. Frowning, Deimos straightened from his slouch and took a few quick steps forward,
halting just at the foot of the bed. "I'd say that's the understatement of the century," he said slowly.
Again, Static went on as if he hadn't even heard.

"He wants me to think it'll all go down the same way again…he wants me to think nothing’s
changed." Static's voice darkened suddenly, a slight frown furrowing his forehead. "I know I messed
up, before. I thought we could get past all that." The frown cleared almost immediately, though. "We
can. It doesn't matter what he said…things will be different, now." He nodded to himself, again.

Deimos's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, as he struggled for something to say. What the
hell was going on? Static apparently wasn't expecting an answer, though. Suddenly, the other youth's
gaze snapped to Deimos, the intensity in those dark eyes startling after the vague way Static had been
talking.

"He tricked me before. He didn't understand. Damn rats and my bitch sister turned him against me."
The smile on Static's face widened still further, turning dark and ugly. "It won't go down like that
again. He still tried to fight me…but I'm going to make him understand, this time."

Deimos tilted his head to one side. "You sure about that?" he said cautiously. For a moment, Static's
eyes flashed fire. Then, he shook his head.

"He's broken, D. A little more, and I could make him beg." Static surged off the bed suddenly,
landing on his feet with easy grace. He closed the distance between them in a heartbeat, so that they were standing almost nose to nose. "I'm not losing him, again. To anything. That's why I need you to watch him, D-Man. Fuckin' rats are gonna be back…we both know that. The other me…he's gonna try for Richie again." Static's eyes narrowed dangerously and he laughed to himself, a harsh, grating sound. "Not that he's gonna do anything. But I want Richie in one piece when this is over."

Deimos met Static's gaze evenly. "I've never let you down."

"I know, but this time," Static raised one hand to rest on Deimos's shoulder, "I want you to guard him with your life. Guard him from the gang, from the rats, especially from that other me." Virgil leaned in so close it was almost, intimate. "I'm not losing him this time. Protect him from anything that could hurt him."

Deimos' eyes narrowed slightly. "Anything?"

"Anything." With that, Static pushed away and turned to look at the bed again. He smiled darkly, something more twisted in the expression than usual. "I want everyone down in the lobby ASAP…did Talon get the word out?"

Deimos hesitated a moment, but finally sighed to himself. "I left her with Foley." He did not elaborate on Foley's condition at the time, and Static did not ask. Instead, the other youth merely smiled again, bending over to gently smooth the bedspread where he had wrinkled it.

"Leave Richie to me for tonight. You two just get everyone together. Pull 'em out of bed, get them down from the infirmary…I don't care. We've got some planning to do. And call Nightingale while you're at it. Make sure she did what I asked. Twenty minutes."

Deimos knew when he'd been dismissed. Throwing one more wary glance at his leader, he turned and left the room. It wasn't until Static's door closed behind him that he allowed some of his disquiet to show on his face.

That…had been disturbing.

"Shit," he muttered, the understatement of the century. He'd seen Static at his absolute worst…but that had been strange on a whole new level. Besides that…what the hell had Static asked Nightingale to do for him? The Nightbreed girl was very nearly as psychotic as Static was…any 'special projects' she was involved in could only spell trouble for the intended victims. Normally, Deimos quite liked watching the results, but things were just too volatile right now for there to be any cloak and daggergoing on. He sighed heavily.

It wasn't his place to question…he was Static's second-in-command, not his fucking psychiatrist. As long as Static's ability to lead them wasn't impaired, it shouldn't matter to him or Talon how disturbingly the electric youth acted. Static knew what he was doing.

Whatever happened to Foley now, the kid had brought it on himself. Stupid bastard shouldn't have tried to escape. Static had made his intentions perfectly clear when it came to the blond boy, and Deimos had a feeling he knew what Static's next move would be on that front. It wasn't a surprise. And it didn't matter. He had his orders and Static was still thinking clearly enough to have a plan of action for when the rats came back. That was all he needed to concern himself with. Anything else was none of his business. It wasn't.

Rubbing his eyes, he entered the stairwell and headed back towards the floor that Foley's cell was on. It was probably exhaustion. The whole day had been draining from start to finish. Right now, he just wanted to collapse in his bed and not think about…anything. Too bad it would probably be
hours yet before he could actually get any sleep.

Shiv was waiting for him in the stairwell on Foley's floor, sitting on the stair railing. "Hey Deimos. Couldn't find your little tin can in the walls. Bunch of rats though…the real kind. And damn, you wouldn't believe the cobwebs we got goin' on! Who's the housekeeper around here? Do we even have one? And--" Deimos paused in front of the sanity-challenged metahuman, gritting his teeth at the stream of babble.

Then, he reached out and shoved the other bang baby backwards off of the railing.

Carmen and Tech were a flurry of activity around him. They had exploded into motion, racing around the small confines of Tech's lab, a veritable tornado of charts, papers, and equipment thrown up in their wake. Even though they were only a few feet apart, they were shouting at each other, voices raised in excitement. Tech had totally dropped his stonewall routine.

Virgil ignored it all.

He stood silently, one hand resting on Backpack's casing, as one schematic after another flashed onto the screen of Tech's computers. Backpack had brought him everything. There were specs for the TynaCorp building, diagrams of the high traffic areas, the paths of the security cameras had been mapped out. Backpack had hacked the entire security system by the looks of it…there were dozens of lines of codes scrolling up the screen, now. Even if the other Static changed the codes, Virgil knew it would be the work of minutes for Backpack to hack the system again. The screen blurred before his eyes as his gaze turned inward.

Everything he needed was here. He took in a deep, shuddering breath, almost unable to truly believe it. He had been prepared to fly in blind, to mount a full-scale assault...he had been forced to delay a rescue attempt, forced to give up by Static, and his beloved friend had paid a price Virgil could barely bring himself to contemplate. He had been prepared to do whatever he had to; to take any risk; to move Heaven and Earth if that was what it took to get Richie back…but everything he needed was here.

"What the hell's that?" Virgil was pulled from his musings by Tech's strident voice, almost directly next to his ear. His brow furrowed as he refocused on the screen Backpack had taken over. The schematics and charts of the TynaCorp building had vanished, replaced by what looked like blueprints.

The plans were totally alien to Virgil, incomprehensible in the way that most of Richie's plans and charts were…and yet he could tell immediately that it was his partner's handiwork. Still, there was something odd about them—they looked...hurried. Unfinished. As if Richie had been dictating to Backpack and having the little machine 'take notes' rather than constructing the plans himself.

Carmen joined the two of them, leaning in close to the screen. "Tech? You recognize any of this?"

"I...it's sorta like…but that's impossible! Look at the energy output!" Tech stabbed a finger forward, touching a section of what looked like quantum equations, still in the strangely abbreviated format.

"What's it mean?" Virgil asked urgently. "What is this?"

"It's impossible, is what it is! This looks like a damn—"

A small noise sounded from Backpack, and the casing split down the middle to reveal one of the little robot's many storage compartments. In it was resting what looked like a half-gutted remote control, about the size of a small shoebox. A large, blue, faceted crystal had been wired into the
metal frame, and several circuit boards had already been inserted below the crystal.

Tech actually swallowed audibly, and when Virgil glanced over at him, the Nightbreed youth's expression was one of stunned awe. Slowly, almost reverently, Tech reached down and picked up the device. "I don't believe it! I mean, I always knew Richie was…but damn! Not even our Richie could've—" Suddenly, Tech whirled on Virgil. "What's different about you two? I heard what you did to Static! And now this!" He thrust the half-finished device towards Virgil. "Even our Richie couldn't have done something like this. Those plans, this thing…it could work! What did the Bang do to you?"

"Tech," Carmen interrupted smoothly, laying one paw-like hand on Tech's shoulder. "It might help if you'd take a minute to breathe and tell us what the hell you're talking about!"

Tech blinked at him for a few moments, a similar expression to the one Richie often wore when Virgil startled the other boy out of his thoughts. He rallied quickly, though, and held the device aloft again. "This! This is what I'm talking about. The other Foley's building a damn miniature quantum cross-rip generator!"

Carmen and Virgil stared at him blankly. Tech sighed heavily.

"If his plans are viable, this thing is going to be able to create a controlled wormhole through a specific section of the space-time continuum."

Carmen and Virgil stared at each other blankly. Tech sighed again.

"It's going to make a big glowy hole into another dimension…probably yours."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Then Virgil's eyes widened and he lunged forward, snatching the device out of Tech's unresisting grip. "This thing could get us home?" he demanded, turning it over in his hands.

Tech looked over at the blueprints still displayed on the computer screen, tilting his head fractionally. "Theoretically," he answered quietly. "I think."

"Wait…you think?" Carmen jumped in quickly.

Tech shot the other bang baby an irritated look. "Yes, okay? I think. Look, these notes are incomplete. I can tell what he's trying to do…but I have no idea how he's going to do it. Some of these equations—he's rewriting quantum theory." Carmen raised one eyebrow, and Tech sighed yet a third time, exasperated. "You're gonna make me say it, aren't you? Fine! I don't understand all of these plans. His math is…I've never seen anything like it."

Virgil stared at the device in his hands, just running his fingers over the casing. Richie had been trying to build something to get them home.

He should have known.

He should have known Richie would find a way to help him, to watch his back even in the face of every horror this world had thrown at them. Richie always had his back.

"Can you finish it?" he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Huh?" Tech was frowning at him.

"Can you finish it? Can you use Richie's plans to finish it?" Virgil repeated, hating the plaintively
hopeful note in his voice and yet unable to do anything about it.

He'd failed Richie so badly...he couldn't do anything to make up for what he'd let happen to his beloved friend, but he could make sure they didn't have to spend one minute more than was absolutely necessary in this hellhole. He could have Richie's plans completed for him...could have their way home waiting for Richie when he got his partner back from the other Static.

He could do that much for the person he loved.

Unfortunately, Fate was not on his side in that one. Tech's shoulders slumped and he shook his head, looking genuinely regretful. "No," the Nightbreed youth sighed. "I just don't understand some of these equations. Even if I did, there's no way we have the equipment down here. I doubt even Richie Foley could generate a wormhole with a converted toaster oven."

Virgil closed his eyes at Tech's words, swallowing convulsively. "You'd---you'd be surprised what Richie can do."

Tech glanced down at Backpack, still crouching low over the computer bank, and then to the device in Virgil's hands. "Maybe I would," he conceded.

Gently, Virgil set the mechanism down next to Backpack and rested his hand once more on the robot's now closed casing. Slowly, he clenched it into a fist, so hard that his whole arm trembled with the tension of it.

"Virgil?" Carmen questioned, his voice gentle.

"I just...I wish I knew...I wish I knew if he was—" If he was what? All right? Virgil knew Richie wasn't all right. But how badly had his partner been hurt? Could it possibly be worse than not knowing for sure? Worse than his own mind was coming up with?

Carmen laid a reassuring hand on Virgil's shoulder, but he shrugged away from the other's touch. He leaned forward, resting his weight against the edge of the computer bench, staring down at Backpack as though willing the little robot to suddenly develop speech and tell him the things he so desperately wanted to know. Backpack couldn't, though, and Virgil let his head hang. The other two were respectfully silent for a moment, giving him time to compose himself.

"So what's our next step?" Tech asked finally.

Virgil raised his head, and looked once more at the screen Backpack had attached itself to. The image had changed again, back to the 3D schematic of the TynaCorp building. Though Backpack had marked out the high traffic hallways, and the most used conference rooms and offices, there was a single room that had been highlighted in bright green, only a couple of stories below the roof of the building. Virgil didn't need the little robot to be able to explain...that was where the other Static was holding Richie. Virgil knew it. That was his target.

His eyes narrowed, and he stepped back from the computer bank, drawing himself up to his full height. "Now—" he began.

"Now," a new voice interrupted, "someone has exactly fifteen seconds to explain what the hell's going on here."

Virgil whirled around to face the newcomer, noting out of the corner of his eye that Tech and Carmen had done the same. As Virgil took in the sight before him, his eyes widened and he felt his jaw drop. Sharon and Adam had joined them in Tech's lab, and were standing slightly behind a third figure. It was the sight of the newcomer that held Virgil frozen, unable to do more than stare as some
of their precious fifteen seconds ticked away. *This* person meant it. Finally, though, Virgil found his voice.

"B-Batman?"
"B-Batman?" For a moment, Virgil could literally feel himself freeze. His brain clamored at him to say something, to do something, but he couldn't make himself move. His fifteen seconds flitted away as he stood with his jaw hanging open. His entire being had ground to a halt at the sight of his sometime-ally. But no, this wasn't the Batman he knew.

Virgil could admit to himself, if few others, that the Batman of his world intimidated the hell out of him. He could work around it, could act like it didn't bother him, but in the back of his mind was always the knowledge that it was the Dark Knight. Batman was one of the most dangerous superheroes in the world, one of the most frightening; for all that he really was just a mortal man.

Like so many other things in this world, though, this Batman was...different. The uniform was the same—for the most part. Batman was always at home in the shadows, but this man seemed molded out of the darkness itself. There was barely any deviation of color between the cape, the utility belt, and the familiar bat symbol emblazoned on the chest. The mask covered more of his face than Virgil was used to seeing, leaving only the mouth bare.

It was more than the minor differences in the uniform, though. Even standing still in the doorway to Tech's lab, this Batman seemed to fill the room. His was an air of menace, of barely contained violence that was even more palpable than the Batman of Virgil's world.

And currently, all that menace was focused on Virgil.

If possible, Batman seemed to loom larger in the doorway. Below the line of the mask, the man's lips narrowed into a near colorless slash. There was the barest hint of movement at his left side and Virgil just knew if he didn't do something very, very quickly, there would be a batarang whizzing towards his skull. At last, time seemed to spin forward for him again.

"Batman! Wait! Uh, I can expl—"

"Time's up," Batman growled.

Behind Batman, Sharon started, one hand going up as though she meant to grab the man's arm. At the same time, Adam started to lurch forward. As quick as they were, though, they just weren't fast enough.

"Yup, there it is. Batarang." The ludicrous thought skipped across Virgil's mind even as the device left Batman's hand, gleaming dully under the lights of Tech's lab as it arced towards him. And he could stop it, couldn't he? "Move, stupid!" He could stop it, all he had to do was...was...shit, what did he have to do to stop that piece of metal racing for his face?

In the split seconds of the batarang's flight, Virgil's reflexes failed him. He stared stupidly at the gleam of metal even as he heard Sharon's shout of denial, Carmen's cry of alarm. The batarang struck...

At the same time that Virgil was nearly brought to his knees by the sudden weight on his shoulders. A loud, metallic clang echoed through the lab as Virgil stumbled forward, keeping himself upright by luck more than anything else.

"Virgil!"

"Kid!"
Virgil's eyes, squeezed reflexively shut in the face of the weapon, snapped open to find one of Backpack's forearms a mere inch and a half from the end of his nose…with the still quivering batarang embedded in the metal. The little robot itself was perched precariously on his shoulders, the source of the sudden weight that had knocked Virgil off-balance. Virgil heaved a sigh of relief, sending a silent word of praise for cyber-enhanced reflexes.

There was a flurry of motion around him, and he abruptly found himself shoved rather rudely backwards. Backpack tightened its grip on his shoulders as he stumbled yet again, the pressure becoming almost painful. Virgil had no time to voice complaint, though. The solid weight of Carmen's paw-like hand had slammed into his stomach, shoving him behind the larger bang baby.

What little he could see around Carmen's bulk was a blur of motion and a cacophony of raised voices. Adam had lunged forward, throwing himself to stand by Carmen, even as Sharon darted to one side, actually drawing the shotgun strapped to her back. Tech had noticeably removed himself to one far corner of his lab, apparently unwilling to get involved in what was quickly dissolving into one hell of a Mexican standoff. It was over in a mere scattering of heartbeats—ending with Sharon, Adam, and Carmen loosely grouped in a semi-circle in front of Virgil, facing down this world's Batman. Despite the situation, Virgil couldn't help but feel a surge of warmth at their willingness to try and protect him…even against the man that Adam had said was one of their few allies outside of Dakota.

Batman hadn't moved from his position in the doorway of the lab. Virgil stared at the man over Carmen's shoulder, meeting the hard gaze evenly. He consciously willed himself not to let his powers flare to life…somehow he thought it would just make things worse. The silence stretched on, broken only by harsh breathing and the muted hum of Tech's computers. Batman's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly behind the mask, focusing for a bare instant on Sharon's drawn weapon and Adam's clenched fists, before settling with disquieting intensity on Virgil again.

Virgil decided he'd had enough.

Backpack was still perched awkwardly on his shoulders, the leg with the batarang embedded in it held outstretched and quivering. A thin stream of dark liquid—oil, perhaps, or hydraulic fluid—leaked from the gash, but Virgil had seen the little robot take worse hits and still be able to function. The damage was nowhere near the leg joint, at least. His own eyes never leaving Batman's stony visage, Virgil reached up and with a neat jerk removed the batarang from Backpack's leg.

Immediately, the robot slid down to its more usual position, locked onto Virgil's back the way it usually rode on Richie's.

Without a word, Virgil shoved past Carmen, shaking off the other bang baby's hand when he tried to grab Virgil's shoulder.

"Virgil!" Sharon hissed, the barrel of her shotgun shaking ever-so-faintly. He ignored her, too.

He stepped forward, past the protective barrier the three had formed in front of him. Adam made a choked noise in the back of his throat, but no one attempted to stop him. His every movement slow and deliberate, he paced forward until he was within arm's reach of Batman. Not a particularly desirable place to be in any case, but most especially when said man was pissed at you…but Virgil had a thought. It was a possibly suicidal thought, but he was willing to go with his instincts on this one. After all, he knew for a fact that the Batman of his world could have done a lot more damage by now. Was he really going to believe that the Batman that this world had produced couldn't?

Silently, he extended his hand, offering the mech-fluid-stained batarang back to the caped man.

He heard Sharon's soft gasp beside him, but paid her no mind, his gaze still steadily fixed upon
Batman's. After a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, one dark-gloved hand reached up, plucking the batarang from Virgil's fingers.

"Just what have you been doing for the past month, Sharon?"

Despite himself, Virgil started at the easy way Sharon's name fell from this frightening figure's lips. Though the question was asked in a perfectly calm tone, there was still an edge to Batman's voice. To hear that edge skirting over his sister's name, even if she wasn't really his sister, set the hairs on the back of Virgil's neck to standing up.

For her part, Sharon had relaxed fractionally, lowering the shotgun to point at the floor. She did not, however, put it away entirely. Virgil could hear Adam and Carmen subtly shifting as well, loosening their battle-ready stances. He didn't think for an instant that it meant that anyone in this room wasn't ready to leap right back into 'attack mode.'

"This, this is actually a pretty new development," Sharon answered warily. Batman at last broke the staring match between himself and Virgil to turn his full attention to the young woman.

"This isn't your brother."

It wasn't a question.

"Not…really." The shotgun barrel lowered still further. "It's kind of a long story."

Batman's eyes narrowed dangerously before he turned fully back to Virgil. Backpack's arms tightened yet again around Virgil's shoulders and waist, and he heard the faint mechanic whirring that usually indicated Backpack was powering up one of its many tools. Abruptly, Batman stepped to one side.

"Walk with me."

It wasn't a request.

He woke to the sensation of gentle fingers carding through his hair.

Oh, there was pain, too. It beat a merciless tattoo against his skull, and with it came a dizzying nausea in the pit of his stomach that spoke of a very nasty concussion. Still, the soft contact gave him something else to focus on, helping him to push the pain aside just a little bit. He concentrated on that, letting the caring, soothing touch ground him against the nausea.

He couldn't quite remember what had happened to leave him in such a state. He thought in some vague way that it couldn't be good—but even that knowledge wavered in his mind, fleeting and ephemeral under the onslaught of hurt. He let it go without much of a fight. After all, things couldn't be that bad.

He didn't even have to open his eyes to identify the origin of the touch ghosting over his poor, hurting head. Those hands were almost as familiar as his own, their touch associated with everything that meant caring, comfort, and safety. Virgil. He turned his head a fraction of an inch, even that small movement a monumental effort that sent the pain stabbing to a higher level. The fingers stilled in his hair before changing position to cup his cheek. Instinctively, he pressed against the warmth.

"You with me, Rich?" He managed to force his eyes open a bit at the soft question, but the sudden gleam of light was too much for the stabbing agony in his skull. He squeezed his eyes shut again with a soft groan. Virgil's hand on his cheek moved slightly, one thumb brushing against his
cheekbone soothingly. Gradually, other sensations filtered through the relentless pain in his head and he realized he was lying on a bed, Virgil stretched out beside him. Not the gas station, then…Virgil's house?

"V? Wha—happ'nd?" Shit, was that him slurring that badly? What the hell had happened? Had they been in a fight? There was a vague feeling of urgency washing through him…insistent enough that he began struggling to push the pain aside to focus his attention on it.

"S'okay, Richie…you're all right." Ordinarily, Virgil's reassurance would have been more than enough to dispel the urgency…but not this time. There was something wrong.

"What…happened?" he whispered again, carefully enunciating the words. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth and he had to force the words to come out clearly. Hell, his whole body felt leaden and slow. If only the pounding in his head would abate, he would be able to figure out just what was going on.

The hand on his cheek disappeared, and there was a subtle, rustling movement beside him. Warm fingers returned to his forehead, brushing aside a few strands of his hair. The touch was gentle, but it served only to intensify the feeling of urgency, of wrongness.

"Little accident, Rich. Don't worry, though…it won't happen again."

Accident? What? Had he blown up his lab again? He was still paying Virgil's father back from the last time. He couldn't remember handling anything inherently unstable, though. He tried to raise one hand to probe his poor, aching head for blood or other injuries, but Virgil caught it, entwining their fingers before gently forcing it down to rest on Richie's chest. Everything about the action was soft, affectionate….and so, so wrong. Virgil was a pretty physical person, but he'd never tried to hold Richie's hand.

And with that, the rest of Richie's brain finally decided to join the party.

This most definitely was wrong, this was not Virgil, and the vague sense of alarm blossomed into full-blown panic. With a gasp, Richie's eyes snapped open and he jackknifed up off the mattress he was lying on.

Which proved to be a big mistake.

The world tilted alarmingly and the nausea intensified to the point where Richie thought he might be sick then and there. Agony rocketed through his head, so severe it seemed as though his skull was being cleaved in half. As if all his energy had been sapped just by sitting up, his body suddenly went limp and boneless, and he would have tumbled off the side of the bed had a strong arm not suddenly wrapped around his waist. Static pulled at him, gently forcing him to lie back against the pillows.

"Easy, Richie." The voice was soft, and Rich gave up struggling against the hands pushing him back against the bed. He didn't have the strength to fight, not now. Muddled as his head might have been, he was still aware enough to know that trying anything now was only going to make things worse.

Using what strength he did have, he rolled his head to the side, looking away from the twisted image of his friend. He expected to see the windows of his cell, or maybe the dull gray walls that he'd become accustomed too. Instead he found himself looking at a wall that had been painted a deep crimson. A simple desk and chair sat against the wall, bare of any personal items. The wall was devoid of any ornamentation…no paintings, no curtains, nothing. A set of floor-to-ceiling windows were visible just on the edge of Richie's vision, the deep black of night seeming to press against the glass.
An oh-so-familiar and yet revoltingly alien hand was laid on his cheek again, and Static slowly tilted Richie's face towards him, smiling disarmingly as he did so. Richie let his blurred vision slide away from Static's face, though. Instead, he focused on the details of the room.

Just over Static's shoulder was a closed door, which presumably was the exit. Catty-corner to that was another door, half-open to reveal the gleam of white porcelain...a bathroom it looked like. Still a cell, then. A bigger, better-appointed cell...but still a prison.

Why move him, though? To keep a closer watch on him? Somehow, Richie didn't think that Static was simply feeling guilty for what he had done to him. No, Richie doubted this Static had felt guilty about anything for a long time. Another mind game then, another bid for dominance.

It could have been worse, though.

The odds had been in favor of Static just killing him.

Letting out a pained breath through his nose, Richie shut his eyes. His head was still swimming, nausea warring with the pain for his attention. Oh yeah, definitely a concussion.

He tried to muster some kind of reassurance for himself—Backpack had gotten away. He knew his creation would have made it out of the building. The little robot would find Virgil; might even have already hooked up with him. With the data Backpack had stored, Virgil would be able to mount a rescue mission. Virgil was still out there...and Virgil would be coming for him. Richie knew these things.

He was hard pressed to feel anything even remotely resembling hope at the moment, though.

Maybe, if his head would just stop pounding for a few moments...if Static would just stop touching him...he could think of something. Maybe he could do something to save himself, pull a plan out of thin air as he had so many times before.

It wasn't going to happen this time.

Richie was nothing if not pragmatic. He was injured, seriously so. He'd blown his cover with Static and the rest of the gang...no way they would underestimate him now. He'd had to send Backpack away. Richie was pretty damn resourceful...but he couldn't see a way out of this. And it hurt too much to even try to think of one.

It was all up to Virgil, now.

"You get some rest, Rich." Static's voice was still soft, gentle...so much like Virgil's that Richie was tempted to pretend, to soak up even a facsimile of the comfort Virgil's presence always gave him.

"I know you've had a rough time, but now you're back in your room, and things'll be different this time. This time, we'll do things right." Richie let one of his eyes open slightly, eyeing Static. The strange, grey fog was closing in on his vision, again, blurring things still farther. He wanted to just give into it, to let it carry him away from the pain again...but he really didn't like the sound of those words.

Suddenly, there was movement from over Static's shoulder, in the darkened corner near the door. An eerily glowing white mist coalesced in the corner, shimmering slightly in the dull glow of moonlight through the windows. A gleam of crimson flared, and the mist solidified into the form of the ghost-dog.

Swallowing harshly, Richie scrambled for non-existent reserves, to try and brace himself for another
onslaught from Deimos's power.

It never came.

The dog's strange, gleaming eyes never wavered from Static, focusing on the other youth with an intensity that shouldn't have been possible to see in features formed of mist. Hazily, Richie watched the dog watch Static, half-aware of the other still touching him, stroking his face, his hair. Gradually, the sensation faded away, dimmed by the grey fog that was swallowing him up. Even the ghost-dog seemed to disappear into it, and Richie felt a dim stab of gratitude.

"It's all right, bro. When you wake up, we'll take out that fake me, take out those rats, take out the damned League. And then it'll be you and me, Rich. You and me. This time, we're gonna do it right."

Finally, Richie let his eyes slide shut, as Phobos faded away into the darkness.

Though Virgil had walked out after Batman with his back straight and head held high, he actually felt about as confident as a field mouse facing a hawk. He kept up the front, though, both to fool Batman (though he very much doubted the man was fooled) and to reassure Sharon and the others that he'd be fine.

A very tiny part of him even kind of believed it.

After all, Batman could probably make him disappear without a trace…but Batman would be the obvious suspect to Sharon if he went missing.

Apart from the curt order to follow, Batman didn't speak as they walked. The only sounds were the echoes of their footsteps, the faint swish of Batman's cape. Virgil didn't press his luck by asking where exactly they were going. It was obvious that this version of Batman knew the tunnels just as well as Sharon and the rest did. It made Virgil wonder just how much time the man spent 'helping' Sharon's little resistance movement.

The first few tunnels Batman led them down were slightly familiar to Virgil, but when Batman made an abrupt turn down a side-tunnel, it only took about three minutes for Virgil to become totally lost. The tunnels were obviously older, but well-used. They were probably supply tunnels…or perhaps for emergency evacuation. At the moment they were vacant, but the wear and tear made Virgil confident that they wouldn't be totally alone for long.

He hoped.

Finally, Batman's pace slowed down, and Virgil came up…not quite beside him, but close to it.

"The Watchtower picked up on a substantial energy surge in this area a few days ago…we haven't had much luck pinpointing the source. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?" Batman's tone implied that he already knew the answer, but wanted to have it confirmed. Virgil saw no reason not to oblige.

"That was probably the energy spike that brought us here in the first place." Virgil was about to try to explain it as Richie had explained it to him all that time ago in the blasted remains of the gas station base, but Batman's mouth twisted sourly.

"An alternate dimension," he interrupted, and there was no mistaking the distaste in his voice.

Virgil nodded hesitantly. "Yes, sir. We think so. No other way to explain it, really. I've got—"
"It's monitoring us," Batman again interrupted flatly, and the sudden shift in conversation caught Virgil off guard.

He blinked stupidly for a moment, and then realized the other was talking about Backpack. The little robot had settled comfortably onto Virgil's back, and had its main sensor eye extended over Virgil's shoulder, trained on Batman in what Virgil had to admit looked like a rather suspicious hostility.

"It's probably just watching you for Richie. It's still trying to figure out who you are."

Judging by Batman's narrow gaze, Virgil doubted the man bought the lie. But there was no way Virgil was going to admit that Backpack was keeping an eye out to try and protect him.

"So…he's alive in your world?" There was a glimmer of actual emotion in the deep voice, this time…a spark of curiosity. It was impossible to read Batman's expression underneath the mask, and Virgil found himself wondering how well Batman had known the Richie of this world.

"Yeah," Virgil said quietly, "he's my—my partner. He came through to this world with me. Static…we got caught in the old junkyard our first night here. I wasn't expecting…" Virgil clenched his fists tightly. "Static took him."

Batman's eyes narrowed, and once again guilt and shame reached up to choke Virgil. "And you're trying to get him back."

Virgil nodded, a short, sharp movement. "He's my best friend, and that, that…other me…" Virgil stopped a moment, sucking in a deep breath through his teeth. "If I have to take him out to protect Richie, I will."

Batman regarded him steadily, his mouth compressed into a thin line. "That's easier said than done," he said finally.

Virgil returned the hard stare. "I can take him," he said seriously.

His power was greater than the other Static's. As long as he avoided a hand-to-hand conflict, he knew he could win. "I'd take on his entire crew to save Richie."

Instead of answering, Batman abruptly turned and started walking down the tunnels again. Taken aback, it took Virgil a few moments to follow. He hurried to catch up to the other, confusion warring with irritation in him. After another few minutes of silence, Virgil couldn't hold it back anymore.

"What the hell happened here? How can you and the League just leave a whole city like this?" he burst out. "I've been here less than a week, and even I can tell this Static isn't gonna stay bottled up here forever…eventually he's gonna try to move out, if someone doesn't stop him!"

Batman stopped again, so suddenly that Virgil nearly ran into the man's back.

"Obviously, things are a little different in your home dimension." Batman's voice had dropped to a dark, dangerous growl. Despite himself, Virgil took a hasty step backwards, and he felt Backpack tighten its grip on him in response to his sudden distress.

"Wh-what do you mean?" he asked hesitantly.

"Here, Lex Luthor and Ultra-Humanite consolidated a powerbase with almost every known villain and petty thug in the western hemisphere about five years ago. Half the League is trying to keep them from razing London as we speak, while the rest of us are busy keeping things contained here," Batman ground out, without looking back at Virgil.
"The Eastern Seaboard is the last holdout against them in North America, and we've lost too many good people keeping it that way. The League has been aware of Static since he made his power play in Dakota. So has Luthor. Yes, Static is eventually going to want to expand his territory, and yes, we will need to deal with him. Right now, though, Static is very low on a very long list of priorities."

Batman turned down another tunnel, this one a little newer. Virgil stood gaping after the masked man, unable to quite process what he had just heard. Good God! He knew things were bad, here, but it had honestly never occurred to him that things might be even worse outside Dakota. Luthor and Humanite working together? Forcing the entire Justice League onto the defensive?

Holy shit!

Swallowing convulsively, Virgil forced himself to hurry after Batman once again. They moved through the tunnel at a fast clip, into a section that actually looked vaguely familiar to Virgil.

"The problem is, Static's too well-entrenched in the city…and he's a very good strategist. We tried a frontal assault last year when Sharon and I convinced Superman that gaining a clear zone between Gotham and Metropolis would be worth the resources. Unfortunately, Static was ready for us. We lost two people before a retreat was called."

Virgil goggled at that. "What! But his gang's not that big!"

Batman's lips compressed grimly. "Static has allies you haven't seen yet," he said darkly.

Virgil's eyes widened. There were more? Sharon and the others hadn't said anything about there being more of them…

"D-Didn't you try…other ways?" This couldn't be right. It just couldn't.

"Superman insisted. We used a metahuman called Ebon."

"Ebon!" That made even less sense.

"Static ran him off when he consolidated all the gangs. We'd have to watch him, but Ebon would never be the threat Static is. He had the power, but not the self-control. He managed to sneak into the base, but things went badly from there."

Virgil frowned. "Whenever Ebon starts to lose, he just retreats." It was one of the reasons Ebon was one of his more frustrating opponents. "I mean, yeah, he's dumb enough to stick around sometimes, but against a guy like Static…"

"They knew Ebon was coming. Or more specifically, Deimos did." Batman stopped walking at an intersection. Finally, Batman looked over his shoulder. "Taking the fight to Static doesn't work. When he decides to bring the fight to us, we'll be ready." He turned forward again. "Unless someone takes him down."

And suddenly, Batman's appearance made a bit more sense.

"Someone like me," he said slowly. Virgil narrowed his eyes faintly. He didn't like being used.

Batman let out a soft puff of air, and for a bare instant, the icy façade cracked a little. "I do what I can to help Sharon and the others…but we just can't justify using the resources it would take to root Static out of Dakota while there are bigger threats all over the world. If someone could take Static down, it would be…useful."
Virgil would have given his eye-teeth for some anti-bang gas about now. Even if it meant he and Richie were normal again, it would be worth it...to save this Dakota, to give Static his dues.

Batman looked towards the ceiling, and then turned to the left of the intersection.

"I need to talk to Sharon and Evans, but I can't be here long."

Just long enough to determine if Virgil was a threat and ask him in a round-about way if he wouldn't mind pruning a thorn in their side. Virgil was suddenly very, very glad that he had never had to make the kinds of choices the people of this world had to.

Batma**n was silent a moment, before he finally spoke again. "Your partner should be your first priority. But if you can take him down, I can promise the League will clean this place up...and help you get home."

Virgil's jaw tightened, but he nodded shortly. If taking out Static could help the League, more power to them...but Virgil would have been gunning for Static anyway.

He owed it to Richie.

Batman must have seen the answer in his face, for the other man inclined his head slightly. Without speaking another word, Batman moved further down into the tunnel, fading into the stretching shadows. Virgil watched him go, an odd, sick feeling churning in his stomach.

Finally, Backpack's arms tightening around his shoulders and waist broke him out of his musings, and when he realized he was only one tunnel away from Tech's lab.

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The TynaCorp building had been a state of the art facility, housing well over a thousand employees on a daily basis. As such, there really was space in abundance for the gang that had taken up residence there. There was very little rhyme or reason to the way the offices had been converted...the largest conference rooms were set aside as medical facilities, meeting halls, and general lounge areas, but beyond that the metahumans that made up Static's gang had pretty much taken whatever rooms suited their fancies as living space. Within reason, of course.

The top floor of the TynaCorp building, housing the executive offices, was unquestionably Static's private territory. Most of the gang save for Nightingale, Talon, and Deimos, refused to even go up there unless Static himself called them up. Even then, they sometimes refused, as being called up to a private meeting with Static was rarely a 'good' thing. In fact, the top three floors were vacant of occupants, leaving a number of office suites simply standing empty.

One of those suites, two floors down and on the other side of the building from Static's rooms belonged to Deimos. Most of the rest of the gang couldn't even fathom how he'd had the gall to claim a space so near Static's territory.

Some of them assumed it was because he was the informal second-in-command after Talon, and no one wanted to challenge him about it. Some said he slept with Static to get it—though since neither Nightingale or any of Static's other bed partners had a suite on the top floors, that theory was often ignored (especially after the origins of the rumor had been tracked to Shiv—who had subsequently been laid up in the medical wing for two weeks). Besides, no one even really believed Deimos would put out, even for their esteemed leader.

In truth, he'd taken the room right after the night he and Talon had found Richie Foley dead and Static in shock. It was closer to the 'control room' Static had, and the nearness had helped Talon and Deimos run things during that first horrible month. It also kept one of them close to Static at all times,
who sometimes sought them out, if for nothing more than silent company. It was safer to be in an unpopulated area, so that the gang wouldn't see how vulnerable, how weak, their leader had become.

After things returned to normal, Static hadn't booted him out of the room, though Deimos had been more than willing to leave. He knew he had crossed a line by taking a suite in what was considered Static's personal territory. The electric youth never said anything, never talked to him about it.

Deimos still wasn't sure if it was a reward of taking care of everything--from the gang to the room where the disaster took place--or if Virgil really didn't care who took rooms on the upper floor. In truth, he'd never bothered to ask, and never had any intention to. He enjoyed the solitude that came with the location. He didn't have as good a view as Static, true, but he doubted anyone would. It was called the executive suite for a reason.

Deimos's room was sparsely furnished…a bed, a desk, and a couch he'd stolen from the lobby of the building made up his entire collection of furniture. There were no adornments on the wall, no decorations or personal items out on the shelves. In many ways, the place was more even impersonal than a hotel room. He didn't care…if he even felt the need for 'cozy' accommodations, he could always just go down to Talon's room.

At the moment, Deimos was sprawled casually on the couch in just his shirt and pants (and damn Foley anyway…Deimos had liked that coat!). A lit cigarette dangled from one hand laid across the back of the couch, and the other curled around a glass tumbler of vodka. Ordinarily, Deimos didn't bother with either vice…surviving so many years in Static's gang only to end up dying of lung cancer would be stupid, and he'd seen enough crap go on in Ebon's gang to put him off hard liquor for a lifetime. Smoking gave him something to do with his hands, though, and at the moment, he wanted the slight buzz the burn of the alcohol was bringing.

For the first time in a long time, Deimos was at a loss.

He had known Static was a crazy bastard. Hell, they were all a little touched in the head in some way or another, Deimos included. Anyone who spent more than a few minutes in the youth's company, though, could tell that as whacked out as the Bang had made everyone else, Static was ten times worse. What Deimos had just seen through Phobos in Static's rooms, though…that was something different. That had gone beyond Static's usual violent psychosis…that had just been stark, raving insanity.

As much as he didn't want to admit it, Deimos had the feeling that things were quickly spiraling out of control.

The rats would be back, and soon. Nightingale still hadn't returned from whatever mission Static had sent her on—and Deimos had his suspicions about what it was—and half their number were down with injuries. For some reason, though, all that seemed secondary to what Deimos had just witnessed.

Watching through Phobos, listening to the ranting of his leader, Deimos had realized one very simple fact. This Foley was going to die, too. Maybe not from the injuries Static had inflicted upon him, maybe not even for a very long time…but it would happen. Sooner or later, despite whatever intentions he might have, Static would kill the other boy. There wasn't even a question of it anymore.

Deimos wasn't quite sure why that realization disturbed him.

No, that was a lie. He knew. He just didn't want to think about it.

Deimos had killed before. He had done so in cold blood, and in ways that were neither quick nor
merciful. He had no regrets about that—they were at war, those people had been his enemies, and you killed your enemies before they killed you. Deimos knew which side he was on, and he didn't regret that either. This situation with Foley hadn't suddenly made his heart grow three sizes or any such bullshit like that.

Deimos did, however, have a twisted sense of a warrior's honor about him. And that sense was very insistently reminding him that this other version of Foley…and the other version of Static, for that matter…wherever they were really from, they had nothing to do with what was going on here. The rats, Static, Deimos, Talon…hell, everyone down to Shiv had made their choices and picked their fights. These two outsiders had been thrust into it against their wills.

Maybe it was the fact that Deimos couldn't help but feel a grudging respect for the boy's courage. Maybe it was because of that nameless, unvoiced thing that hovered between him and Talon whenever they were reminded of what had happened to this world's Foley. Whatever it was, Deimos couldn't quite bring himself to think it was right that this other version should die as a result of a war that he wasn't a part of.

He took a large swallow of the burning liquid and turned his gaze to the window, the stars. He couldn't let it happen again.

He also couldn't betray Static or the gang.

"Talk about your rock and a hard place," he muttered, bringing the glass to his lips again.

He was the only one other than Static and Talon that knew the truth of the other Foley's death. He could see parallel events unfolding again. He and Talon were the only possible allies this new Richie had here, the only ones who could prevent another tragedy. He knew that Talon had just as many reservations as he did…she would follow his lead, whatever he chose to do.

And he couldn't do a thing, because he owed Static so much.

He leaned forward and set the glass between his feet on the floor, taking a deep drag off the cigarette as he did. Betray Static, or let the kid die? He thought the answer to that would be simple.

What did it say about him that it wasn't?
Virgil's footfalls echoed weirdly in the shadowed space of the tunnel, bouncing off the walls and filling his ears with the hollow sound. His steps were slow, deliberate; a counterpoint to the chaos that was currently raging in his mind. From time to time, Backpack's metallic arms tightened around his waist or shoulders, as though the little robot was trying to elicit some response from him. Virgil ignored it all. He had other things to think about.

This world's Batman had left him nearly half an hour ago, and though he knew he should have made his way immediately back to Sharon's base, he couldn't quite bring himself to leave the solitude of the tunnel. Not just yet. He needed to sort things out in his own head before he went back to the others.

This had to end. Tonight.

He could not leave Richie in the hands of the other Static for one moment longer. He could not. The fear that was gnawing at his gut went beyond anything Virgil had ever experienced before in his life. Without knowing how he knew, Virgil could feel time running out for his beloved friend. Every instinct in his body, each nerve worn raw from the constant tension he had lived under for the past several days, was singing at him that he had to do something. He had to save Richie now, or he would be too late.

He already was too late…in so, so many ways.

At last, his slow, halting steps took him to the last junction before the main tunnel that led to the base. He paused there, leaning forward to rest his forehead against the rough brick of the tunnel wall. One hand curled into a fist against the stone, and he closed his eyes tightly. Woodenly, methodically, he raised his hand from the wall and brought it down again, striking the wall with the fleshy side of his fist. The dull, smacking sound filled his ears, in perfect time with his heartbeat, his soft breathing.

"Static's insane…he's a killer, through and through."

Smack.

"He was electrocuted to death. There were…burns…on his wrists and—"

Smack

"He thought you'd save him, you know. He was sure you'd come for him…that you'd do something to help him. He screamed for you…at first. Then he just screamed."

Smack

"Static has allies that you haven't seen yet."

Smack

"If you can take him down, I can promise the League will clean this place up…and help you get home."

Smack

"I have faith in you, bro."
"I won't let you down, Virg."

Smack.

Virgil clenched his teeth tightly and allowed himself to slide down the wall until he was resting on his haunches, breathing harshly. This was going to end. Tonight. Backpack had told him where Richie was being held. He knew the basic layout of the building. He knew the enemies he would likely face. He knew how his power matched up against the other Static's. Batman had promised whatever resources the League here had if he could take the other Static down. He knew he could do it.

Most of all, he knew that he would not fail Richie again.

He had separated from his partner in the junkyard, leaving Richie alone in hostile territory. He had allowed the other boy to be taken. He had been unable to rescue his partner, even as Richie had been working fervently to rescue them from this dimension. He would. Not. Fail. Again.

With one last, deep, breath, Virgil rose to his feet. He knew what he had to do. If he was honest with himself, he'd known from the moment Carmen had held him back from charging the TynaCorp building. Silently, he flexed his hands, letting the familiar blue light spark between his fingers and flare in his palms. The rush of power tingled through him and he pressed his lips into a grim line. The fight with the other Static had drained him, yes, but it was nothing something to eat and a couple of sodas wouldn't fix.

"Sharon's starting to wonder where you are." The soft voice sounded from behind him, and he whirled around, automatically calling a bolt of electricity to life in his hands, even as he registered that it was Hotstreak that had spoken.

The other bang baby was standing a few feet away, leaning against the opposite side of the tunnel wall in a casual pose that only served to underscore the tension in his body. Dark, intense eyes regarded Virgil coolly as the electricity in Virgil's hands died away.

Hotstreak had obviously taken the opportunity to clean up from the battle, but his clothes were the same he'd worn earlier. For a moment, Virgil imagined he could almost smell the thick, black smoke that had billowed up from the remains of the fountain, the remains of Kangorr, clinging to the other youth…but of course, that was ridiculous.

His expression suddenly unreadable, Hotstreak stepped away from the wall, coming to a stop only a foot or so away from Virgil. The taller youth's eyes seemed to spark in the dim lighting of the tunnel, something hard and hot slithering through their gaze.

"I told her Tall, Dark, and Scary wasn't gonna hurt you, but she's worried. We should go back." Not bothering to voice an answer, Virgil simply nodded his acquiescence. Hotstreak, however, made no move towards the tunnel junction that would lead them back to the base. "Thought you should know…Tech's pushing for us to put a hold on anymore rescue plans until he can go through everything that thing brought with it." Hotstreak motioned vaguely towards Backpack. "Says it'd be too dangerous to try anything so soon. He's probably right—little shit usually is about stuff like this."

Again, Virgil didn't reply. He reached up with one hand and lightly rubbed his thumb across one of the cool, metal arms clamped about his waist. Hotstreak's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Sharon and Adam are almost as hot to get your Foley out of there as you are, but if anyone can talk them into waiting, it's Tech."
"Hotstreak," Virgil said quietly, "I really can't tell you how much I don't care what Tech wants to do. I'm not waiting. I can't. I can't leave him there, not for one more minute."

Hotstreak tilted his head slightly to one side. The taller youth looked him up and down, his searching gaze finally settling on Virgil's face. Virgil stared steadily back at him, one eyebrow raised challengingly. They stood that way for several seconds, before Hotstreak finally seemed to find whatever he was looking for. He nodded shortly, to himself, before taking a step back.

"Good," he said firmly. "I'm coming, too."

"And so am I."

A new voice intruded on their conversation and Virgil shifted slightly to glance behind Hotstreak's shoulder, not entirely surprised to see AquaMaria gliding towards them from the darkness of the deeper tunnels. She stopped at Hotstreak's side, silently reaching out with one hand to entwine her fingers with the other youth's. She shot the other a tender smile before fixing her gaze on Virgil, lifting her chin determinedly.

"Whatever Sharon decides, we're with you," she said softly, a thread of steel in her faintly accented voice. Virgil closed his eyes briefly, swallowing hard. For a moment, he was too overwhelmed to respond, stunned by how far they had all come since his first few days in this world.

"Guys," he said finally, his voice low and rough. "I—thank you. But you don't have to do this. This is my fight…I don't want you to go against Sharon." To his surprise, Hotstreak merely chuckled, as Maria shook her head slowly.

"Virgil," Maria said, surprising Virgil with the use of his given name. "It is not just your fight. If anything, you and your friend were dragged into our fight. Static is our problem…we cannot let you face him alone. Besides—"

"Foley was our friend," Hotstreak interrupted his girlfriend, squeezing her hand a bit more tightly. Maria closed her eyes, nodding faintly.

"A true friend…one of the best friends either of us ever had," she whispered. "He was decent. He was good. He sacrificed so much to try and keep us all safe, and in the end we could not protect him."

"If there's any chance we can save your friend…you better believe we're with you," Hotstreak finished firmly. "So just save us all a hell of a lot of time and tell us what you need us to do, okay?"

Despite himself, Virgil couldn't help a short bark of laughter. If only it had been so easy to deal with these two back in his Dakota. It was sad, in a way…seeing these versions of people he had counted as his enemies. It was sad to think about what Hotstreak, AquaMaria and Carmen might have become had things been different for them. But now was not the time for such ruminations.

"All right," Virgil said quietly. "All right. I've got a plan…but let's see what Sharon has to say first."

There was no sense in running off by themselves if it wasn't necessary. After the way Sharon and Adam had been talking just after their failed attack on Static's headquarters, Virgil hoped it wouldn't come to that—but it had become glaringly obvious that in this world, hope was not something to be depended upon. He had to be prepared.

At least he wouldn't be going in totally alone, no matter what Sharon and Adam decided.

Hotstreak nodded grimly before releasing Maria's hand with one final squeeze. "Then let's get this
party started, huh?"

Virgil snorted in quiet laughter, even as Maria rolled her eyes and smacked her boyfriend's chest with the back of one watery hand.

"You did not just say that," she groaned. Hotstreak smirked down at her and she shook her head. "Let's go find Sharon." With that, she turned and glided back into the darkness of the tunnels.

To Virgil's surprise, Hotstreak clapped him soundly on one shoulder as he passed, following his girlfriend's lead. Virgil stared after the taller bang baby for a moment, and a shadow of a smile quirked his lips. The expression quickly slipped from his face, though, as he watched the two go. He sighed heavily, and ran his hands back through his hair before hooking them around the back of his neck. He stood that way, silently contemplating the toes of his borrowed sneakers.

Tonight. It was going to end tonight.

With another heaved breath, he began following the path Maria and Hotstreak had taken.

"Mama, help me…help us both."

Virgil was somewhat surprised when Hotstreak and Maria led him not to Tech's labs, but the 'war room' subway car where they had planned their first ill-fated rescue mission. As soon as Hotstreak opened the door, however, Virgil realized why. He doubted even the distance between Tech's labs and the main camp could have effectively masked the volume of the argument that was taking place. As it was, Virgil couldn't believe that the soundproof tiling in the 'war room' hadn't shattered.

Hotstreak ushered him and Maria into the subway car quickly, casting a somewhat aggrieved glance back over his shoulder at several refugees who had frozen in their tracks, jaws dropped. With an apologetic shrug, Hotstreak entered the car himself, firmly closing the door. For a brief instant, Virgil was seized with the crazy temptation to duck behind the taller bang baby. Having something between him and the two people currently arguing across the table suddenly seemed like a very good idea.

Carmen was slumped in his seat, a strange expression on his animal-like face, eyes hard. With a start, Virgil realized that the affable, easy-going bang baby was absolutely enraged. Across the table from Carmen, Adam was sitting up stiffly, his arms folded on the table in front of him. The older man glanced up quickly as Hotstreak, Virgil, and Maria entered the war room, but he didn't voice a greeting. The man's lips were pressed into a grim, colorless line, and Virgil didn't like the way Adam's eyes slid uneasily away from him.

It was the two people on their feet, however, who commanded Virgil's attention.

"It's crazy and you know it!" Tech slammed his fist down on the table for emphasis, the loud sound echoing in the room. The Nightbreed youth's chest was heaving, and he practically spit the words out.

"It's our best shot. If we let Static trench himself in, we might as well give up now!" Virgil had never heard Sharon's voice sound so hard, so furious. She was standing on the opposite side of the table from Tech, leaning forward sharply, her one good eye narrowed in defiance. Virgil felt something inside of him go cold at Sharon's words, but Hotstreak's hand suddenly landing on his shoulder prevented him from jumping into the argument.

Tech laughed bitterly, his face twisting into an ugly sneer. "You're deluding yourself. You realize that, right? People are going to die if we storm Static's place tonight...and I can pretty much
guarantee it'll be our side fielding the casualties." Tech turned slightly, and even though his eyes were still covered by the dark glasses, Virgil knew the Nightbreed was looking right at him. Tech's mouth tightened briefly before he refocused on Sharon.

"We don't have time to wait, Tech. It could take days to analyze everything that thing brought back with it." Sharon gestured sharply towards Backpack, and Tech snorted contemptuously, shaking his head.

"Static's been running this show for years. What's another couple of days? Oh that's right...this guy's so hot to run in and play knight in shining armor he's willing to let our people die for it." Tech jerked his chin towards Virgil, and Virgil clenched his fists, starting forward a half-step even as Hotstreak tightened his hold on Virgil's shoulder, preventing him from surging forth.

"Tech!" Just from Sharon's tone, Virgil could tell that Tech had crossed a line. Tech seemed to realize it too, for he subsided somewhat, sinking down into his chair.

"Sorry," he muttered, not very convincingly to Virgil's ears. "I get it, okay? I understand why you all want to go in...but you're letting your emotions get in the way, here." Tech's voice lowered, suddenly tired and bitter. "Look, I know we all have our suspicions about what happened to...to Richie before he--before he died. What Static might have done to him. And now he has this other kid...and it sure doesn't take a whole lot of brainpower to connect those dots." Again, Tech's covered gaze slid to Virgil. This time, it was Virgil who looked away, swallowing heavily. "But you gotta understand...this is a fool's errand. Running off half-cocked isn't going to help this other Foley. And I'm sorry, but the odds are the kid's already--"

"Don't say it. Don't you dare say that," Virgil interrupted, his voice as hard as steel. "I'd know."

"Our Static fucking electrocuted Richie to death," Tech spat out. "Those two were best friends for half their lives. You really think your boy is gonna be any better off?"

"Tech, that's enough!" Sharon shouted, slapping her palms flat down on the table's surface.

"No it's not! Going against Static tonight is suicide and you know it. Damn it Sharon, even if you managed to save this other Foley, it won't bring our Richie back. I wish like hell it would. But nothing's gonna bring him back! And I don't want to bury more friends because of some half-assed plan that has no chance of succeeding."

"You don't know that," Sharon said.

"Don't I?" Tech retorted, and Virgil had had enough.

"Stop it!" he said loudly, yanking himself out of Hostreak's grip. He stepped forward, straightening himself pointedly when both Sharon and Tech whirled to face him. Virgil wet his lips nervously at the expression on Sharon's face, but plunged onwards. "I don't want you to fight like this."

"Virgil--" Sharon began, but Virgil cut her off quickly.

"Tech's right, okay? You have to think of your people...and going after Richie is going to be dangerous. I know that." Taking a deep breath, he turned and faced Tech fully. "I'm not asking anyone to die for us. I won't. You do what you've gotta do, man." His gaze hardened, and he drew himself up to his full height. "But I'm gonna do what I've gotta do--and I'm sorry, Tech, but I don't care how dangerous it is. Richie's alive. He's alive and he needs me. And I'm not leaving him there any longer."

"Hawkins, you don't know Static like we do," Tech protested, even as Virgil held up a forestalling
hand.

"I know everything I need to know," he said firmly. "I get what you're saying, man, I really do. But right now, Richie's more important, and it's a risk I've got to take. For him. He'd do it for me...he's counting on me." At last, he let his gaze drift around those assembled at the table. "I won't lie; I could use the help...but I'm not going to ask any of you to put your lives on the line for us. I won't blame you if you can't risk it. But I'm going. I've got to." Virgil glanced at Tech again, silently daring the other bang baby to protest again.

Tech was silent, though, sullenly refusing to look Virgil in the eye. It was Hotstreak who finally broke the uncomfortable quiet that had settled over the war room.

"Me and Maria are going. We already decided," he said calmly, stepping up to stand beside Virgil. Maria quickly joined them. At the table, Carmen ducked his head, and Virgil thought he saw a flash of a sly grin before his voice rang out.

"I'm in, all the way."

Adam glanced up at Sharon before inclining his head slightly. "Sorry Tech...I promised. I'm in, too."

Sharon, however, was silent.

Tech let out a huff of air before slamming to his feet with such force his chair fell over. "You're all insane! Completely insane!" With that, the Nightbreed youth whipped around and stormed out of the war room, shoving violently past Hotstreak to get out. Maria moved to follow him, but Hotstreak laid a restraining hand on her shoulder.

"Let him go," Hotstreak said quietly. Maria hesitated briefly, before nodding her acquiescence.

"Baby?" Adam's soft voice drew attention back to Sharon, who had still not said anything. The young woman was staring at Virgil, her gaze fixed and staring in a way that made Virgil slightly nervous. His brow furrowing, Adam rose, laying one hand on Sharon's forearm.

To everyone's shock, Sharon shrugged out of his grip, turning without a word to follow the path Tech had just taken, shoving past a stunned Hotstreak and Maria before anyone could voice protest. She practically ran from the war room, leaving everyone gaping after her.

"Sharon!" Virgil shouted, uncaring of the attention he might draw from some of the refugees out and about. He ran a little faster as Sharon vanished into the nearest tunnel, under no illusions that he'd be able to find her in the dark maze of tunnels if he got too far behind. "Sharon, wait!"

He burst into the tunnel mere moments after Sharon, but was forced to skid to a halt as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. "Sharon?" he called, worry filling his voice. He raised one hand and called a spark of power forth, illuminating the tunnel a bit as he moved forward. "Sharon, please...where are you?"

There was a soft sound from one of the side-tunnels to his left, the barely-heard scrape of a footstep on stone, but it was enough to send him plunging into the near pitch-black. The glow of his power beat back the shadows, making them leap and dance on the stone walls of the tunnel in weird shapes. Only a little ways in...the glow fell on Sharon.
She wasn't running anymore, made no move to evade discovery. She was simply leaning against the wall of the tunnel, her head bowed and her arms crossed defensively over her stomach. Despite his haste in following her, Virgil found himself hesitating, suddenly unsure of exactly what he was going to do. He glanced over his shoulder before allowing the power in his hands to dim, until Sharon was just barely visible in the circle of light he was generating. He shuffled to a halt a few feet away from the young woman, not knowing if his presence would even be welcome.

"Sharon?" he asked softly. At last, Sharon looked up at him, and Virgil was shocked to see the gleam of tears in her one good eye.

"Are you going to kill him?" she said without preamble, her voice choked with something that was more than sadness and pain. Virgil's eyes widened and he stumbled back a step.

"Sharon, what--"

"I know that's what Batman asked you to do." A bitter, humorless laugh tore its way out of Sharon's throat, horrible to hear. "Hell, you're probably the only one who really has a chance of doing it." Her arms tightened around her middle. "I tried to help him. I tried to be there for him...tried to be whatever he needed. But it wasn't enough. It was never enough. I watched my baby brother slipping further and further away from me and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I...I can't even think of him as anything but Static anymore. After everything that happened...after Richie...I just told myself that he wasn't my brother anymore. That Static had killed Virgil as much as he killed Richie. It was the only way I could deal with it--the only way I could get out there and do what I had to do to try and stop him." Sharon looked up at him again, and now Virgil could see fine tremors wracking her body. "And then you show up. And I see what he should have been able to become...what he could've been. And it's like my little brother is back from the dead. Only he's not, because you're not him. You're not my Virgil. My Virgil's never coming back to me." Finally, Sharon lost the battle with the tears welling up. A harsh sob forced its way from her throat, followed by another, and another.

For one horrible moment, Virgil was frozen, unable to believe what he was witnessing. This wasn't his strong, often annoying older sister. This wasn't the woman who had almost single-handedly held the survivors in this horrible world together, and kept them safe. This was a young woman who, through no fault of her own, had lost almost everyone she had ever loved, and been unable to do anything about it. And suddenly, Virgil wasn't hesitating anymore. Without even thinking about it, he stepped forward, pulling Sharon into his arms. He half expected her to pull away, to be unwilling to give into further weakness. Instead, Sharon buried her face in his shoulder.

"I miss you," she sobbed. "Oh God, I miss you so much!"

Virgil could offer no words to that. There were none. He could only hold onto her tightly, and let her work through the pain on her own. How long they stood like that, or how long Virgil's cries died down, and he could feel her fighting to gain some control of herself. She didn't release him, though.

"I'll help you," she said after long minutes, her voice still thick and choked. "I'll help you save your Richie." At last, she raised her head from his shoulder, looking him square in the eye. Slowly, she pulled herself out of his arms, visibly drawing her own inner strength around her like a cloak. "But I have to know...are you going to do it?"

"I--Sharon..."

"Virgil, please. I have to know."
He couldn't lie to her. Not about something like this.

"Richie is my priority. But if it comes to that...I'll do what I have to."

Shakily, Sharon nodded, biting her lips and closing her eyes tightly. Virgil's heart clenched in his chest, and though he knew it was the wrong choice, he had to give Sharon the option. Despite everything, Static was still her brother. If there was a way he could be neutralized without killing him...

"If you want me to--"

"Don't. God, don't offer me that. I don't think I could say no. This has to end, Virgil. It all has to end...and he's too strong. You're the only one who can end it."

Virgil didn't try to protest.

After a moment, Sharon took a deep breath, reaching up to dash the last of the tears from her face. "Don't tell Hotstreak about this, okay? He'd never let me hear the end of it." She smiled weakly, and Virgil returned it, though there was really very little to smile about. She nodded to him fractionally, a grateful acknowledgement before her face slipped into a cool, professional mask.

"All right, then. We've got another rescue party to round up."

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Richie gripped the soldering iron in his hands a bit more firmly, running an expert eye over his handiwork. He bobbed his head lightly to the strains of Def Leppard blaring out of the radio behind him, the volume turned down to not-quite-ear-shattering level in concession to the only other occupant of the lab.

"Man, how can you listen to this stuff?"

Richie smirked to himself as he set the newly completed circuit board aside and swiveled in his chair. Virgil was sprawled out on the old sofa they had dragged into the gas station, one arm tucked behind his head, the other resting across his stomach.

"Oh shut it, bro, you know not of which you speak," Richie shot back good-naturedly. It was an old argument between them, time honored and true. Pointedly, he leaned over and cranked up the volume just a bit more in time for the chorus. "Rock of ages, rock of ages! Still rollin', keep a-rollin'!" he sang along, horribly (and no entirely deliberately) off-key.

Virgil chuckled softly, and Richie took a moment to simply bask in the peace his best friend's presence always brought him. Peace was certainly something known only by definition these days.

And why had he just thought that?

As if he had sensed Richie's sudden disturbance, the easy grin faded from Virgil's face. Despite the afternoon sunlight pouring in through the windows, the room suddenly felt cold. Seemingly of its own volition, the radio sputtered and died, plunging the gas station into silence. Virgil was looking at him, sadness blooming in his dark eyes.

"V…" Richie began uneasily.

"You know what happened, right? You've figured it out."

Richie looked away from the other youth, turning his attention back to the device lying in pieces on
his workbench. The metal casing...the circuit boards...the large blue crystal focus that was waiting to be calibrated...he had to finish this. It was important that he finish.

"You know what happened," Virgil repeated, seemingly unbothered by Richie's continued silence.

The room was growing darker around him as he picked up the crystal with fingers that were trembling ever so slightly. He had to finish, so much was riding on him finishing. Dimly, dully, as though from far away, he felt the beginning whispers of pain start to creep through his head.

"You know. It's happening again!" Virgil's voice rose in desperation now, echoing around the gas station, and Richie gut clenched as he realized his friend sounded afraid.

"He killed him." The words were barely whispered, choked, almost unwillingly drawn from his throat. "I'm dead in this world. Static killed him."

His hands froze, his fingers lightly gripping the crystal, and he bowed his head. The pain flared more brightly, and he remembered. This wasn't real, none of it was real. A dream, a hallucination, or his just his own desperate desire to be anywhere else than where he was manifesting in his head...this wasn't real. Virgil wasn't behind him, the tools under his hands were nothing but figments of his own creation.

"Static killed him," Richie repeated, and suddenly he was surrounded by shadows. Virgil, the gas station, the crystal in his hands--it was all gone, and there was nothing but darkness pressing in all around him, made even more heavy and menacing with the weight of what he knew to be the truth of his words. The clues all fell together for him, clicking into place like pieces of a puzzle. The things that twisted, hateful version of his best friend had done to him, said to him...the way Static acted around him. Richie didn't need it confirmed. He knew he was right. He didn't know how or why--but he knew that the version of himself that had inhabited this world had met his end at the hands of his supposed best friend. The darkness pressed in closer, endless and fathomless and he was alone. All alone.

The pain in his head was growing again, throbbing harshly and it was so, so tempting to just drift away again, let the darkness swallow him whole and offer him a place to hide. If all that was waiting for him was that nightmare version of Virgil, he didn't want to go back into the light of the waking world. Richie Foley had died in this world at the whims of that monster.

But if he gave up now, there would be no one to find the real Virgil a way home.

There would be no one to watch Virgil's back.

And as surely as he knew his own name, Richie knew that if anything happened to him, Virgil would never forgive himself.

"Wake up," he whispered softly into the shadows around him. His voice seemed to fade away, swallowed by the darkness as if he had never spoken. Silently, Richie bit his lip, ashamed to admit that part of him wanted to stay here, safe in the dark, away from the creature that wore his dearest friend's face. Part of him wanted to give up, yearned to give up. God, he was so tired. He hurt so much. How could he be expected to go on? Hadn't he given everything he had to give?

But he couldn't. Not yet. Not ever.

"Wake up," he told himself more firmly.

The shadows seemed to thin slightly, pinpricks of light invading the all-consuming darkness around him. "Wake up," he repeated, choking slightly on the words even as he offered them again, a
Richie's eyes snapped open.

Almost immediately, he squeezed them closed again, one hand flying to his head as even the weak, diffused light that entered the room from some as yet unknown source set off a sensation not unlike a giant ice-pick stabbing through his temple. He breathed shallowly for a few seconds, praying with all his might to whatever might happen to be listening for some reprieve from the pain, the thick nausea roiling in his stomach.

"Concussion," some inner voice helpfully reminded him. And a pretty damn severe one at that. Not that having one's head repeatedly slammed into a concrete floor was likely to result in anything else.

"Oh God," he groaned out, the words hitching on something closer to a sob than Richie was willing to admit. He couldn't do this. He couldn't.

But he had to. Virgil was counting on him.

Slowly, agonizingly, Richie forced himself to open his eyes, hissing a harsh breath out through his teeth. The room swam sickeningly all around him, his vision doubling, then trebling, before finally settling into something resembling its usual blurry focus. Glasses...where were his glasses? Blindly hoping, he flailed one arm out to his left, sighing in relief when he did indeed encounter a nightstand next to the bed he was lying on. After a moment of graceless fumbling, his questing fingers found the cool metal of his eyeglass frames and he gratefully snatched them up, shoving them back onto his face. On top of everything else, the pain the light pressure of the frames on his bruised and scraped face caused wasn't even noticeable.

Silently, he let his eyes roam around the room. Static hadn't removed him from the place he had woken up in the first time. The dull illumination proved to be coming through the open door that led to another set of rooms, in which the lights were apparently blazing. Richie swallowed thickly before stilling his breathing as much as he could, his ears straining for the sounds of anyone else moving around outside his current cell.

Nothing.

Another quick glance around the bedroom yielded no sighting of glowing crimson eyes in the shadows...it appeared as though Richie was alone.

"Okay..." he whispered, "okay..." He steeled himself, fisting his hands in the cheap cotton comforter that covered his body before slowly attempting to lever himself into a sitting position. It took him three tries, but he managed it, the nausea spiking sharply and black spots swimming across his vision. The room around him spun and tilted, but he stubbornly clung to consciousness, waiting patiently as his battered equilibrium restored itself somewhat.

Virgil needed him. Virgil would be trapped here without him.

The thought gave him the strength to pull the blankets from his body, swing his legs out of the bed and press his bare feet to the thin carpeting that covered the floor. He sat on the edge of the bed, fairly trembling from the effort of even those simple movements. He gritted his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut as he slowly pushed himself up, one hand clutching the edge of the nightstand for support.

Virgil needed him.

A wave of vertigo washed over him, so intense it nearly knocked him back flat on the bed. He
tightened his grip on the nightstand and breathed through it, involuntary tears gathering in his eyes at the pain in his head. Slowly, oh so slowly, he shuffled forward, reluctantly letting go of the nightstand to transfer his hand to the wall behind it, leaning most of his weight against the wall.

Virgil would be trapped here without him.

One foot in front of the other, and slowly his steps steadied. His surroundings settled into more or less stationary positions in his swimming vision and the light stopped stabbing him, though he couldn't force his eyes more than half open. He stumbled his way to the open doorway, pausing just at the edge of the doorframe as he realized he had no idea what awaited him outside this room. He hadn't heard anyone out there...but how could he be sure? What if the other Static was out there...just waiting for him?

A bitter, ghastly smile twisted Richie's cracked and scabbed lips. He glanced down at his body, at the bruises and scrapes that covered nearly every inch of skin exposed by his t-shirt. He honestly didn't know if he would survive another encounter with the demon that Virgil Hawkins had become in this world...but he didn't have a choice.

Pulling yet again on reserves of strength he hadn't known he possessed, he eased his grip from the wall to the doorframe. As quietly as he could, he stepped out into the lighted room, hissing softly as his eyes struggled to adjust to the sudden brightness. He stood there for several heartbeats, just trying to get his bearings and waiting for the pain in his head to once again fall back to a manageable level. When he could open his eyes without overwhelming agony, he let his gaze dart around the room, searching for any hint of a guard.

The place was empty.

Hardly daring to believe his luck, Richie stared out at the room in front of him, taking in every detail. The whole western wall was made up entirely of glass, granting an expansive view of the ruined city under the inky night sky. The simple furnishings and what looked like a small kitchen area to his left singled the place out as a living space, and with a soft shudder that had nothing to do with pain, Richie realized Static must have brought him to his own private living quarters. Great. Just great. His day kept getting better and better.

He walked forward into the room, sidling alongside the wall behind him, afraid to leave its support entirely. He felt a little steadier, but he was under no illusions about his condition...at this point, he was pretty sure a stiff wind could knock him flat on his ass. He let his gaze roam around the room, ignoring the closed door off the kitchen and focusing instead on what appeared to be the entrance to the suite.

The door was closed, of course, mocking him with its tantalizing promise of escape, of freedom.

But escape into what?

Richie at last let go of the wall, stumbling a few steps forward to lean heavily against the arm of the couch that dominated the main area of the room. As he did, he found himself facing a huge bank of TV screens, some dark, but most showing what was clearly the view of different security cameras in the building. Richie tilted his head slightly, his eyes darting from screen to screen. His heart sank a little more with each view.

The place was crawling with Static's gang. Even as late as it was, nobody seemed to be interested in getting any sleep. It was almost as if they were waiting for something, expecting something. Richie's tongue ghosted out to wet his dry lips, wincing slightly as one of the splits made itself known at the contact. In his condition, even if everyone had been asleep, Richie knew there was no way he could
get all the way out of the building undetected. Hell, he could barely keep himself upright.

Damn it. Richie closed his eyes, allowing himself to sink down onto the soft cushions of the couch. Gently, he cradled his aching head in his hands, furiously trying to come up with some way out of this predicament.

Static had killed the Richie Foley of this world. As hazy and surreal as his strange dream had felt, Richie couldn't quite bring himself to write off the realization that had shaken him out of it. It made too much sense. The way Static spoke to him, the way he touched him...the things he said and did. The more he thought about it, the more Richie felt sure he was right.

God, Virgil had killed him in this world.

Suddenly, the nausea that had never really left him reached a fever pitch. Richie groaned heavily, barely managing to twist his body so that his head was hanging over the arm of the couch before his stomach emptied itself. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to come up. Fresh tears welled up in his eyes as his body heaved, ratcheting up the agony in his head another notch. He gagged heavily on the taste of bile in his mouth, clutching at the arm of the couch as the edges of his vision started to grow dark. Damn it, he couldn't afford to pass out...not now. His stomach heaved a few more times before finally settling, and Richie rested limply against the arm, gasping harshly. Clumsily, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before leaning down to rest his forehead against the soft fabric of the couch, weak as a newborn kitten.

"I can't," he mumbled brokenly. "I can't, I can't, I can't." It was too much. Too much pain, too much fear. He couldn't do anything...his ordeal had taken too much out of him.

But Virgil needed him.

Virgil would be trapped here without him.

"I have faith in you, bro."

"I won't let you down, Virg."

His conversation with Virgil, seemingly spoken a lifetime ago in the shattered remains of the gas station in this world, came back to him, and he sucked in a shuddering breath. Virgil was coming for him. Virgil wouldn't give up on him, no matter what. He was so hurt, so close to being broken it made something inside of him quake in sheer panic. He was more afraid than he had ever been in his life, and he couldn't deny that a part of him wanted so, so badly to just surrender...to give up...to do whatever it took to make the pain and the fear stop.

He couldn't, though.

Because Virgil needed him. And that was worth more to Richie than any amount of pain or fear. Virgil needed him, and Richie would not let him down.

He swallowed heavily, forced his body to move, to sit up. Almost of their own volition, his eyes focused on the bank of security screens, traveling down the length of the set up to a set of gun-metal gray panels beneath them. He narrowed his eyes, slightly, his brain still firing on all cylinders despite his injuries. This had to be the executive offices of the Tynacorp building. He remembered reading about this place...about the unique features of the security system that the company had installed.

Still intently focused on the panels in front of him, Richie dragged his body forward, falling to his knees when his legs proved unable to support his weight just at the moment. Stubbornly ignoring the weakness still permeating his being, Richie gritted his teeth. Virgil needed him. He'd fucking crawl if
he had to. As it turned out, he wasn't far off the mark. Half-stumbling, he hitched himself forward, biting his lip as he ended up on his knees in front of the panels. With trembling fingers, he reached out and ran his hands along the seams of the metal, searching for a release.

One more time.

One more miracle pulled out of thin air.

One last desperate act of defiance.

One last attempt to help the person he loved better than almost anyone else on Earth.

Virgil was coming for him. Virgil would need all the help he could get. Slowly, sluggishly, the glimmerings of a plan began to form in Richie's head.

One more leap of faith.

He would just have to trust that, like always, Virgil would be there to catch him.
Chapter 30

The makeshift door was little more than a few wooden planks nailed together and crookedly hung from rusty, salvaged hinges. The privacy it offered was illusory, at best, and it did hardly anything to drown out the steady buzz of voices and activity in the base's main chamber. Still, Virgil was grateful for even the illusion of solitude. He sat on the worn, lumpy couch in what this world's Sharon and Adam optimistically termed a living room, alone for what had to be the first time in days.

Days. Only a few days since he and Richie had chased that bang baby into the sewers in *their* Dakota. Days since they had found themselves tossed into a world that seemed constructed of nightmares, trapped in what surely had to be some version of Hell. Mere days since Virgil had so spectacularly failed the person he would have gladly given anything to protect. How could it only have been days since he and Richie found themselves in this terrible place?

It felt like *years*.

Virgil swallowed heavily, running one hand back through his dreadlocks before letting it fall to rest with his other hand in his lap. Slowly, he flexed his fingers, allowing a spark of blue-tinged power to race over his knuckles, briefly illuminating the shadowy recesses of Sharon and Adam's dwelling. His expression hardened as he allowed the electricity to dissipate, his gaze darkening as his thoughts turned to what he was about to do.

He was not leaving his partner in the hands of the other him one minute longer than necessary. He was freeing Richie tonight, whatever the cost…and he had no doubt the cost would be high. Sharon, Adam, and the others had all pledged their support, but as much as he didn't want to think about it, Virgil knew that when he had protested their rescue mission. The other Static's people would be tired from the afternoon's battle, and Virgil knew that there had been injuries, but the fact remained that he and Sharon's people would be launching a full-scale assault on the enemy's home turf. And Static had to know they were coming.

"Virgil? You okay?" He started at the soft voice, his eyes darting to the doorway and landing on Sharon. The other version of his sister was leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest, regarding him with an expression of concern. Despite the glaring differences between this Sharon and his—for a moment the resemblance was so strong it made his chest ache. He laughed humorlessly, and the concern on Sharon's face melted into a rueful grin. "Sorry, stupid question."

"Shouldn't you be with Adam?" Virgil had left them in the war room about half an hour ago, pouring over city maps and diagrams, trying to choose the best route for their assault. He was under no illusions that he'd be any use in planning an attack in this version of Dakota, and Sharon had insisted he try and get some rest.

As if.

"He's arguing with Hotstreak over where we're gonna surface. Adam thinks Darcy Street's the best way to go, and Hotstreak wants to come up over Fifth."

"Who's gonna win?"

Sharon snorted indelicately. "Doesn't matter, we're going through Pearson Square. *I'm* the boss around here."

Virgil laughed again, more genuinely. Sharon moved over to sink down on the couch next to him,
leaning her head back to rest against the faded yellow cushions. They sat in companionable silence for a few moments. Finally, Sharon sat up again, leaning forward to rest her elbows on her knees.

"You sure you're ready for this?" she asked quietly. There was no censure in her voice, no doubt, only a soft warmth that *his* Sharon only ever showed him when she was truly worried. Virgil felt one corner of his mouth quirk upwards in a small smile.

"I am. I have to be," he replied. "I have to do this... I have to get him out of there."

Sharon pressed her lips into a thin line, nodding shortly. "You know we've got your back."

"I know," he said softly, knowing that there would never be enough words to express his gratitude. Still, there was a small part of him, no doubt fueled by the memory of the crying, exposed Sharon he had held in his arms only a couple of hours ago, that still stubbornly clung to doubt. "Sharon, I—this is gonna be dangerous. Like, *crazy* dangerous. I just... I need you to know I understand if—" His words were arrested when Sharon gently pressed one hand over his mouth.

"It's okay, Virgil. I get it." She smiled sadly at him as she moved her hand to cup his cheek. "But we have to do this, too. This is our best chance, and he has to be stopped." Her voice lowered, becoming barely more than a whisper. "And I—I have to do this. I have to help you save him, and get you home. I know you're not really my brother. Your Richie isn't my friend. But I—I need to know that somewhere, you two are okay. That somewhere, I didn't let you down... and you can have the life *they* were supposed to have, be everything they could have been. I need that, Virgil."

Virgil swallowed around the lump that had suddenly risen in his throat, reaching up to curl his fingers around Sharon's. He squeezed her hand lightly. "You didn't let them down, Sharon," he said, his voice a rough whisper. "It wasn't your fault. None of it was."

Sharon shook her head. "Maybe someday I'll be able to believe that." Abruptly, she took a deep breath, the vulnerability draining from her expression to be replaced with the brisk determination he had come to associate with this version of his sister. "All right, we'd better get back to the boys—even the rubber duckies can only take so much of Hotstreak's temper."

Virgil nodded shortly, rising and offering a hand to the young woman, helping her up with a gallant flourish. She chuckled a bit as she levered herself to her feet, as had been his intention.

"Clown," she muttered affectionately.

"You know it," he replied, with a fair approximation of his usual cheeky grin. The two of them moved towards the door... as Carmen's voice suddenly reached them from just outside, raised in a shout.

"Sharon! Got a situation here!"

Sharon sprinted for the door, a loaded pistol appearing in her grip seemingly from nowhere, even as Virgil summoned a ball of electricity to his hands. The two of them boiled out of the small dwelling, ready to face down whatever had found its way into the refugees' sanctuary.

They skidded to a halt as they were met with absolutely no evidence of a threat, and Carmen standing in front of them. Slowly, the animal-like bang baby raised his hands raised in a universal "surrender" gesture.

"Yeah," he said slowly, "possibly, I could've phrased that better."

"Carmen," Sharon gritted out, shifting her grip on the pistol to flick the safety back on. The gun
vanished into the waistband of Sharon's black jeans, and Virgil let the energy of his powers disperse. Sharon's eyes narrowed as she planted her hands firmly on her hips, and Virgil found himself tempted to take a step back out of range.

"Sorry," Carmen said sheepishly, ducking his head a bit. "But you really need to come and see this."

Richie bit his lip as he carefully slotted the metal panel at the bottom of the security center back into place. His hands were shaking badly, and sweat was pouring down his face in little streams. The salty sting of it in his eyes was distracting, and more than once he'd had to stop and wait for a distressing bout of double (and in one case, triple) vision pass. He'd been half sure he wasn't going to be able to finish—that his body just wasn't up to the work he was asking of it. Even now, he was sure that terror-fuelled adrenaline and sheer stubbornness were all that were keeping him upright.

He pushed himself away from the console, a raw sound of pure pain working its way from his throat. God, everything hurt. He couldn't remember ever being in so much pain, feeling so much despair. He scooted awkwardly across the carpet until his back hit the couch, collapsing limply against the cushions. He closed his eyes and breathed shallowly against the nausea and his swimming head, swallowing harshly as the sour smell of vomit hit him anew.

He done everything he could do. All he could do now was trust that Virgil would arrive in time for his last, desperate effort to be some kind of use. Virgil had to come. That was all there was to it. Richie wasn't sure he had anything left in him to give towards surviving this nightmare, anything left to give towards his own rescue.

He knew he should try and move himself back to the bedroom. The puddle of sick on the floor would alert anyone that he had been in the living room, but the thought of resting his body on a soft surface sounded like heaven at the moment. It was just as well he couldn't find the strength to move, though. Falling asleep was probably not in his best interests.

He let his head fall back to rest against the couch cushions, still panting as hard as if he'd run a marathon and not just made a few adjustments to some circuit boards. He closed his eyes, even the relatively soft daylight streaming in through the windows too much to bear. A sort of haze settled over his awareness and he gladly let himself drift, unaware of how much time was passing until the soft sound of a door opening intruded on his senses. His eyes snapped open, and he ruthlessly bit down on another spike of nausea. Shakily, he raised his head from the couch.

It was Deimos.

Richie clenched his teeth as the taller youth strode into the main room. He paused as he came around the couch, obviously not having seen Richie from the angle at the doorway. Except for a single, arched eyebrow at the mess Richie had made on the floor, the other man didn't react at all to seeing Richie out in the main living area. He merely stopped by the edge of the couch, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared down at Richie's prone form.

He let his head fall back to rest against the couch cushions, still panting as hard as if he'd run a marathon and not just made a few adjustments to some circuit boards. He closed his eyes, even the relatively soft daylight streaming in through the windows too much to bear. A sort of haze settled over his awareness and he gladly let himself drift, unaware of how much time was passing until the soft sound of a door opening intruded on his senses. His eyes snapped open, and he ruthlessly bit down on another spike of nausea. Shakily, he raised his head from the couch.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

"Trying to catch Oprah," Richie spat. His tongue felt heavy and thick in his mouth, and he really, really didn't like the way his words were slurring. "It's Favorite….Things week."
Deimos's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he glanced between Richie and security console. Despite his bravado, Richie felt a new thrill of fear course through him at the consideration in the other youth's gaze. After a moment, though, Deimos sighed heavily and held up one hand.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" he asked.

"What does it matter?"

A low sound that was almost a growl rumbled in Deimos's throat. "Because if you keel over from an aneurysm, I'm the one that has to clean it up. How. Many. Fingers?"

Richie blinked tiredly, trying to force his waver ing vision to focus for a moment. "Three?" he finally hazarded.

"You asking or telling?"

"It's a…useless test anyway. Blurred vision is a common….symptom of all three grades of c-concussion. My brain could….be bleeding out into my skull for all I know."

Deimos snorted indelicately. "You're too coherent for a skull fracture."

Privately, Richie wasn't too sure about that.

Deimos sighed again, raking one hand back through his hair before he leaned down. Despite himself, Richie flinched backwards, instantly regretting it as the abrupt movement jarred his head. For a moment, just a moment, he thought he saw an expression of discomfort flash across Deimos's face. It was gone in an instant, though, the other youth's features dropping back into a blandly disinterested mask, and Richie was left wondering if he had imagined it.

"You puke on me, you will regret it," Deimos muttered darkly, before he slid one arm around Richie's shoulders and smoothly pulled him into a standing position.

The world tilted alarmingly at the change in altitude, and a strange popping noise filled Richie's ears. Black spots started to swim across his vision, and he couldn't bite back a groan. Surprisingly, Deimos's grip became stronger as the taller man took almost all of his weight. After a few moments, the vertigo settled into more manageable levels, and Richie forced his legs to bear up under him. Deimos waited until he steadied himself before slowly moving them towards the door to the bedroom Richie had woken up in.

"You know, you'd make things a lot easier on yourself if you'd just stop fighting him," Deimos said almost conversationally as they hobbled across the short distance. Richie tensed, but remained silent. He felt more than saw Deimos shake his head ruefully. "You're not that much of an idiot. Sharon Hawkins and her rats haven't managed to breach this place in three years. Do you really think your Static is gonna make that much of a difference?"

"What…what d'you care?" Richie mumbled finally. They crossed the threshold of the bedroom.

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"What…what d'you care?" Richie mumbled finally. They crossed the threshold of the bedroom.

"I don't," Deimos said bluntly. "But bloodstains are a bitch to get out of the carpet." He helped Richie over to the edge of the bed, lowering him down onto the mattress. He took a step back once Richie was settled, regarding him critically. "You really don't know what Static can do to you. You think the basement was—"

Richie laughed suddenly, cutting the other man off. The sound was like the grate of broken glass in his throat. Though wholly unaware of it, he presented a ghastly picture—one eye swollen nearly shut, blood painting his split lips and still trickling down his chin, hair falling in his face in matted
"What?" Richie gasped. "What's he gonna do, kill me twice?"

The irony of the words didn't strike him until he saw Deimos recoil slightly. For the second time, that strange expression of unease chased itself across the youth's pale features. Richie laughed again, bitterly, and slowly lay down on the mattress, curling himself into as tight a ball as he could. "Leave me alone," he muttered, shutting his eyes. "Just leave me alone."

Deimos stood over the bed for a few moments more, then slowly turned and left the room. Richie followed the sound of his steps, refusing to open his eyes and watch the other man leave. At last, the sound of the bedroom door sliding shut echoed through the room. Richie lay still, just breathing through the pain that was still radiating from what seemed to be every part of his body.

Virgil would come. He had to. That was all there was to it.

"Please," Richie whispered softly, not really sure who he was even pleading with at this point. "Please…"

Virgil would come.

Even more so than the broken and blistered shell of the city, the outlying areas and neighborhoods of Dakota were a no-man's land. The north side of the city limits, closer to Gotham, was still home to a few stragglers who were either too stubborn to give up what little of their lives remained, or genuinely had nowhere else to go. There were not even stragglers, here. A few of the smaller gangs of bang babies had set up operations in the area after Static had taken over, but they hadn't lasted long.

Most of the houses and buildings had been destroyed in turf wars, or were the casualties of clashes between the Justice League and its allies and Luthor's minions. The parks and small pockets of natural forest, once a beautiful, peaceful respite from the bustle of the city, had begun to go wild in the intervening years. Brush and new saplings were beginning to swallow the streets and foundations of buildings. Though it would be years, yet, before the traces of the battles that had been fought here would disappear, if they ever did, there was something hopeful in the presence of the growing things...something that seemed to suggest that not everything in this world was destruction and darkness.

Just for the hell of it, Nightengale threw out one hand, effortlessly forming a cloud of dark matter at her fingertips, and sent a wave of pure shadow at a small stand of flower bushes, razing them to the ground.

"Stupid flowers."

The crunch of her boot heels on the glass and debris strewn across the remains of the road leading back into Dakota proper was the only sound in the otherwise eerily still night. Nonetheless, the girl's eyes darted continuously over her surroundings, and the dark tendrils of her power swirled around her in a restless halo. These parts of Dakota had been abandoned by the residents almost immediately after Static had consolidated his power base, and by the remaining gangs after Ebon's ill-fated bid to take Static out. That did not mean there was no one left, though.

A soft noise reached her ears, suddenly, from somewhere to her left. A grim smile twisted her elfin features, and she paused in the middle of the street, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I know you're there...you might as well come out and talk to me," she sing-songed into the night.
Her smile widened into an unpleasant smirk as seconds later, she was rewarded by the sound of slow, deliberate footsteps drawing closer. Silently, she grabbed the pair of cheap sunglasses dangling by one arm from the neckline of the thin, black tank top she wore and slipped them on. Protective gear in place, she at last turned to face the owner of the footsteps, widening her stance slightly and planting her hands on her hips. An intense purple glow, the hallmark of the Bang, lit up her immediate surroundings.

"What do you want?" The words were growled out, suspicion and dislike dripping from every syllable.

Nightengale lifted a single eyebrow, the smirk deepening on her features. "Is that any way to greet an old friend?" she tsked, raising one hand to wag her index finger in a mockingly chiding gesture.

"We're not friends. Crazy bitch. What the hell do you want?"

"A little favor. Nothing major--well, not for you. We just--"

"Not part of the deal, Birdie. I helped you root out the rest of your NightBreed freak friends...I help you, Static leaves me alone. Those were the terms. I kept my end of the bargain."

"And now Static wants you to help him again. Last time...honest." Nightengale smiled nastily. "Two days work, tops. And then you never have to hear from us again."

Her proposal was met with a rude snort of amusement. "I don't have to hear from you now. I'm leaving. Find someone else to do your boss's dirty work."

The smile vanished from Nightengale's face. "Oh, you really don't want to do that," she said coldly. "Deny it all you want, but you know we can make life very, very hard for you."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Doesn't have to be that way. There's no reason why we can't all be friends. No reason we have to ever bother you again. But honestly, what are you going to do? You can't leave Dakota...you'd be killed on sight."

Her words were met with icy silence for a few moments, and then came a heavy sigh. "What do you want me to do?"

Nightengale tilted her head, the smile returning full force. She giggled sweetly, the cloud of dark matter twining around her body. "I knew you'd see things our way, D-Struct."
Chapter 31

Carmen’s beady eyes were practically dancing, and a small, secretive smile was playing around the corners of his muzzle. Sharon glared at him suspiciously, but relaxed her stance.

“This isn’t the time to be actin’ the fool here, Carmen,” she said. Her tone was mild, but there was an underlying thread of steel to the words. Clearly, whatever the world, Sharon Hawkins brooked no nonsense. Carmen ducked his head sheepishly, but the odd little smile refused to leave his face. Sharon rolled her eyes heavenwards. “You and Hotstreak haven’t been trying to make moonshine again, have you?”

Carmen barked out a huff of laughter. “Nah, Tech’s got a great batch brewing out by the water pumps. Seriously, you just have to come and see this.” The smile stretched into a full-blown grin, and Virgil could practically feel excitement rolling off the other bang baby in waves. Carmen turned away from them, curling himself into a ball as he went and bouncing back towards the main area of the base.

Virgil shared a glance with Sharon, raising a single eyebrow in question. Sharon shrugged in response. “Better follow him,” she muttered. “God, I hate it when he gets like this…and what do you mean, Tech has moonshine brewing by the water pumps?!” Her voice rose in a shout on the last, and she took off after Carmen at a jog. Virgil shook his head bemusedly before he followed.

The main part of the base was oddly deserted as he hurried back towards the war room, shelters standing silent and the main thoroughfare utterly empty. As he finally caught up to Sharon and Carmen, he realized why.

He heard them before he saw them. Sharon and Carmen were standing at the outer edge of the main gathering area of the base. Slowing to a halt behind them, Virgil became aware of a dull sound filling the cavern-like ceilings of the old subway station, the murmuring of what had to be over a hundred voices. The noise rose and fell in waves, washing over the entire area. Virgil’s eyes widened in shock as he peeked over Carmen’s shoulder.

Every single one of the refugees was grouped in front of the war room. Every. Single. One. Virgil hadn’t seen more than a few dozen of the people living in the underground base, had actually talked to even fewer. He hadn’t realized how many people lived here. A group of about fifteen children stood to one side, loosely bunched around a few older adults and several refugees who were obviously ill or injured. Other than those, though, every other able-bodied man, woman, and a few teenagers were dressed from head to toe in the sort of body armor that Sharon sported, and armed to the teeth.

Sharon’s jaw had dropped in amazement, and beside him, Virgil could feel Carmen practically vibrating with excitement. Silently, Virgil edged closer to Sharon. Across the way, he could see Hotstreak and Adam leaning in the doorway of the war room, watching the crowd with mirrored expressions of astonishment.

Sharon finally shook herself out of her shock, striding forward and placing her hands on her hips. “What’s going on here?” she demanded loudly, her voice carrying over the crowd. Her words cut through the noise of the throng like a thunderclap and the noise almost instantly ceased, dozens of people snapping their attention to her. Sharon met Adam’s gaze over the heads of the refugees, but he simply shrugged, still looking gob-smacked.

“Carmen?” Virgil whispered uneasily, but the other bang baby just shook his head, still grinning like
One of the refugees, a tall man Virgil vaguely thought he recognized from the party that had been with Sharon the first day he and Richie had arrived in this world, stepped forward, shouldering a semi-automatic rifle with frightening ease. He wore his dark blonde hair in a military-style buzz cut, and his ice blue eyes zeroed in on Virgil with an intensity that was almost palpable. Sharon tilted her head slightly.

“Derek?” she asked, and Virgil didn’t miss the tightness in her voice.

The man, Derek apparently, merely shrugged. He turned his head, glancing behind him to the other refugees, and a rueful smirk twisted his lips. “We’ve been talking,” he said, jerking his head to indicate pretty much everyone assembled in the area.

“And raiding the weapons lockers,” Sharon replied flatly.

“And raiding the weapons lockers,” Derek agreed. “Thing is…we know you and Adam are planning an attack on Static’s place tonight.” Derek’s eyes darted over Virgil again, an unreadable expression in them. “That you’re going after this one’s friend…the other Foley.” Sharon’s eyebrows inched towards her hairline, and she shot an accusing glare at Carmen. Derek, however, shook his head, readjusting his grip on his weapon. “He didn’t tell anyone, Sharon…it was pretty obvious when you, Adam, and Hotstreak locked yourselves in the war room for three hours right after you got back. We know you’re going in.” The man paused, squaring his shoulders. “And we’re going with you.” There were murmurs of agreement from those that were close enough to here Derek’s words, and a few raised rifles and shotguns in the air in a sort of salute. Virgil felt a thrill of shock race through him.

Carmen reached over and squeezed his shoulder, and he turned astonished eyes on the other bang baby. Sharon rocked back on her heels, her mouth actually falling open in surprise for a moment. She recovered quickly, though, and shook her head.

“Derek…Derek, whoa, you can’t. I mean, I was gonna ask for volunteers, but we can’t ask you all to risk yourselves. This…this is too much.”

Derek’s eyes hardened, and another low murmur went through the crowd. “No,” he said, his voice low. The sound of it carried, anyway, and the murmuring died down. “No, it’s not enough. It’s not anywhere near enough, but it’s what we have…and it’s what you’ve got. You’ve kept us organized down here, Sharon, kept us going—but Foley…our Foley--” Derek’s voice faltered a moment, before he sighed. “Richie kept us safe. Those bastards would’ve found us years ago if it weren’t for him. He saved my life a hundred times over, saved my little girl’s life…saved all our lives.” There was a wave of assent from the crowd at Derek’s intense words. “We weren’t there—none of us was there when Richie needed us. And I know we didn’t know him the way you did—we weren’t all friends with him the way you were, but we owe him. Now—now we’ve got a chance to take Static down forever, to take back our city, to give the Justice League some breathing room. And we’ve got the chance to pay Foley back in some way for what he did for us. So no, Sharon, it’s not enough…but Foley deserved a damn army and we’re the best you’ve got.” Derek subsided, and a ragged cheer burst forth from the refugees. Sharon swallowed heavily, her good eye glassy with tears, as Derek’s mouth quirked upwards into a wicked smile. “Besides,” the man continued, “Hotstreak’s gonna need all the backup he can get.”

“Hey! Fuck you, Mahoney!” Hotstreak hollered out from the doorway of the war room, flipping Derek the bird as the assemblage broke into laughter and good-natured catcalls. Sharon joined in the laughter, turning and throwing her arm around Virgil’s shoulders. Her face was positively glowing, her expression one of laughter and hope. Virgil had no way of knowing, but he had the feeling that it had been a long time since this world’s version of his sister had looked like
“All right, then!” Sharon shouted, her voice echoing in the old subway station. “Form up into your patrol groups and make sure everyone has what they need. Patrol leaders report to the cafeteria in fifteen minutes…we head out in two hours!”

Virgil closed his eyes a moment, just breathing, and prayed to God, his mama, and anyone else who might be listening that somehow, Richie would know he was coming for him.

* * *

Richie wasn’t sure how long it had been since Deimos had left him. It might have been a few hours; it might have been a few days for all he knew. He drifted in and out of consciousness, huddled on the bed and trying with all his might to pretend he was somewhere else when he did swim back to wakefulness. His own bed in his own house…the science lab at school…the lumpy couch he had dragged into their gas station-slash-secret base. Virgil’s house.

His mind shuddered away from the pain coursing through his battered body in his brief moments of awareness. Instead he focused on Virgil. The house that he secretly considered more a home than his own. The warmth and closeness of Virgil’s family that—for all he knew his parents loved him dearly—he own seemed to lack. He held the memories close, wrapping himself in them like a warm, soft blanket.

Eventually, though, the fog in his head receded. The pain and nausea rolling through him abated slightly…not so much that he dared think about moving off the bed. But enough that he thought maybe Deimos was correct about him not having a skull fracture. He groaned softly, reaching up with one hand to gingerly rub at his eyes beneath the glasses he had left on while he tottered between sleep and unconsciousness. He winced as his fingers brushed against the swollen, bruised flesh around his right eye, knowing without having to see that he had a spectacular black eye.

He took a deep breath, silently bracing himself, and then slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. The motion sent the now-familiar jolt of pain rocketing through his head, but the accompanying dizziness was a little easier to ride out this time, and though his stomach roiled threateningly, the spike of nausea dissipated without him heaving his guts out again. Richie groaned again as he drew his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around the top of them, resting his forehead on top of his bent arms. His movements were as slow as an old man’s, and there was some part of him that was honestly surprised not to hear his bones grinding together like broken glass under his skin. He sat like that for several, long minutes, not even sure what he was waiting for, or trying to work up the strength to do. Gradually, though, he became conscious of a prickling sensation on the back of his neck, a feeling that he wasn’t alone.

“*No, no, please no…I can’t…I can’t take any more.*” He licked his lips, flinching slightly when his tongue hit the scabbed, crusted blood on a split at the corner of his mouth, and looked up.

Static was sitting in an armchair in front of the large bank of windows in the room, just staring at him. The day was starting to fade outside, twilight creeping up on the horizon and casting long shadows through the glass. The sunset behind him cast Static into deep shadow in the chair, only the gleam of his eyes readily visible from the angle Richie was sitting at. Richie tried to steel himself, reaching desperately inside for any scrap of strength left to face whatever Static had planned.
For what felt like hours, they simply stared at each other. Static was silent, unmoving save for the soft rise and fall of his breath. Richie held his gaze steadily, though inside he was quaking at the thought of Static flying into another rage at him.

“Please. Please, please, please.” He had no idea what he was pleading for…mercy? Rescue? Relief? He felt as though he had been flayed open to the core of his being, drained dry and bereft of any reserves he had.

At last, Static broke their staring content, rising from the chair in a fluid, graceful motion. The other youth took a few steps towards the bed, but stopped short several feet away. It was enough to bring him out of the shadows and allow Richie to see more than his eyes. Static crossed his arms over his chest, regarding Richie with a mild, reasonable look on his face. It was somehow more terrifying than any other expression this version of Virgil had presented him with. Because his eyes were flat. Hard. Cold. Devoid of any kind of emotion or life. It was like looking into the eyes of a shark and Richie was suddenly keenly aware of just how helpless he really was.

“I was wonderin’ when you’d wake up,” Static said at length. His voice, like his expression, was curiously calm. If Richie hadn’t known better, it would’ve even sounded full of concern. Richie didn’t answer. If Static was irritated at Richie’s stony silence, he gave no sign. He sidled a little closer to the bed, blithely ignoring the way Richie tensed further with every step he took. “How you feeling?”

At that, Richie couldn’t hold back a ragged, broken laugh that was more than half a sob. Static looked taken aback at the sound, actually taking a half-step backwards. He recovered quickly, though, and moved closer still to the bed. “Hey,” Static whispered softly. He shuffled closer, and Richie forced himself to maintain eye contact, unwilling to let Static out of his sight no matter how much he wanted to look away. “Hey,” Static repeated. “I’m sorry…I didn’t mean for things to get that out of hand. I just got a little mad.”

Another hysterical little bubble of laughter rose in Richie’s throat as he wondered how many conversations between his alternate self and this monster had started with just those after-school-special words before Static had killed this world’s Richie Foley. He bit it back stubbornly and forced himself to remain still as Static closed the last few feet between them, coming to stand beside the bed at Richie’s shoulder.

The sudden touch was not unexpected, but Richie couldn’t suppress a shiver of pure revulsion as Static lightly ran the back of one knuckle down the side of his face, ghosting over the cuts and bruises in a sick parody of gentleness. He fisted his hands more tightly in the sheets. If all he could do was deny Static the satisfaction of seeing his reactions, then fine…he would cling to that with all his might. To his surprise, Static backed off after a few seconds and moved to sit at the foot of the bed. The other youth drew his legs up, mirroring Richie’s position, and rested his elbows on his bent knees, regarding Richie with near laser-like focus.

“I just got mad,” Static said finally, sounding for all the world like a petulant child. “You gotta stop making me so mad. I’m just tryin’ to protect you, Rich. I just want you safe here…with me.” His voice lowered and he tilted his head, so that he was looking up at Richie from under his lashes. Richie felt his breath hitch again at the look in Static’s eyes. He swallowed thickly as the other boy slowly uncoiled himself, stretching out and moving towards Richie inch by torturous inch. Predatory. His every move was predatory and Richie felt like nothing so much as a mouse caught between a cat’s claws. Nothing. He had nothing left to fight with.

He let his gaze drop, staring blankly at his hands lying limp in his lap. He focused on the bruises blooming black and ugly on his wrists, on the places where the skin had split and bled. Evidently
taking Richie’s silence as encouragement, Static slid closer. Richie couldn’t even find it in him to flinch, his still spinning head and aching body absolutely run down beyond the dregs of his reserves. He couldn’t fight. He couldn’t run. He couldn’t do a damn thing to stop whatever new, sick game Static wanted to play.
But he would be damned if he let Static see him afraid.

His skin prickled unpleasantly as Static drew up until he was kneeling right next to him, the shadow of his body blocking out any dying light from the window. Richie exhaled softly and traced the angle of light on the floor with his eyes, calculating the density of the glass and the chemical formulas of the three most likely treatments that had been used to tint the windows. Static’s hand hovered over his, and he blinked. He pulled the schematics of the TynaCorp building out of the tired, fogged recesses of his mind. What would be the force necessary to break through the bullet-proof glass in the executive offices on the third floor?

“Can’t we just start over?” Static said softly.

The fifth floor, now. And the tenth. How large would an explosion have to be to break all the windows at once, and what angle would the force have to be directed at?
Static’s fingers stroked delicately over the back of his hand, an almost ticklish sensation, and he couldn’t take it. He couldn’t take it, he couldn’t feel it. He would not let this man see him afraid.

How much of an explosion could he create with a zap trap, using only the supplies available in his lab?

“Answer me.”

He could make twenty different explosives with the chemicals he kept at the gas station. Thirty if he brought some things from home. How could they combine?

“Hey!”

Harsh fingers dug into the flesh of his jaw, tilting his face upwards forcibly. The pressure it would take to crack his jaw…what was it? How many nerve endings would feel the pain?

“Richie!”

He blinked again, and felt the familiar, tingling rush of his thoughts firing, gave himself over to it in a way he usually tried to avoid because it made V nervous. How many different chemical solvents could he combine using the materials in his lab? How many could he combine before they became too toxic? The formulas exploded in his head and he followed them gratefully, tumbled headlong into the kind of thought process that blotted out everything else—food, sleep, hot, cold. Monsters sitting on the bed that wore his best friend’s face.

“Richie!” A hard, stinging slap across his face rocked his head to one side, and he couldn’t help the little whimper that burst from his throat. Hands seized his shoulders and shoved him down. He didn’t resist...just tried to hold on to the numbers and symbols and possibilities dancing in his head. Tried to hold onto them as hot breath ghosted over his cheek, as fingers twisted cruelly in his hair. It didn’t matter. It didn’t. It didn’t, it didn’t, it didn’t. He closed his eyes and held onto the numbers. And then, abruptly, the weight over him was gone.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

So. Once again I appear, like a confluence of planets or a blue moon, bearing another chapter of the Story That Refuses To Die. I don't mean that sarcastically, or anything, I really don't. Every time I think I'm done and okay with this story just being abandoned, something (or someone whose name shall remain Cypher) prods me to get just that last little bit done.

And so I have. Through a Glass, Darkly is nearly complete and shall be completed (Jesus Christ, ten years after I started it!) within the next couple weeks. There are two more chapters lined up and ready to be put up on my computer, and the finishing touches to be added and edited on the ending and then this baby will be DONE. So no, not abandoned. I can't honestly believe that it's almost over...so much has happened since and because of this story. Cypher became my best and closest friend, my longest relationship outside of family because of this story. I've been able to see the progress my writing has made just looking at the older chapters. I've seen fanfic culture utterly change since I started this story. It's incredible. I am truly, truly grateful to everyone who has stuck with this story and kept reading and commenting--it's been an unbelievable ride. I hope you enjoy (finally!) the end of it.

The TynaCorp building’s lounge was packed to the gills, every available space filled. Metahumans lined the walls, milled around on the floor, perched on every available horizontal surface. The injured were propped against the walls and their friends’ shoulders. Those that couldn’t make it out of the make-shift infirmary were shoved around the intercom speaker. Meetings were typically a raucous affair, full of shouts and friendly (and not-so-friendly) shoving matches. Now, though, an air of quiet tension hovered over the space. This was no weekly meeting, no gathering to show of power. Rumors of Static’s appearance after the battle had gotten around, and their leader was not used to being the losing party.

The last—and only—time it had happened, three of their own people had died in his devastating retaliatory strike.

Talon kept herself aloft in the room, eyeing the disquieted metahumans and wondering where Deimos and Nightengale were. It wasn’t like either of them to be late. Deimos preferred to be early, find himself a niche in the crowd and settle in with his back to the wall. And the Nightbreed, she tended to work the periphery of the room, gathering gossip and the general mood of the gang. More often than not, Talon herself was the one who was late, which made her wonder if a war council had been called. But if so, why hadn’t she been invited? With a flutter of feathers, she swept around the perimeter of the room, scanning. No, there was definitely no sign of her fellow gang officers. It was just her for this meeting.

Well, she’d handled it before she had backup, she could do it again. Though, as the crowd parted for their esteemed leader and she took in his appearance, she had to quietly admit she’d prefer to have someone watching her back. Silently landing in the center of a table near the front of the room, just a few feet from Static, she prepared to handle Static’s temper the instant it flared.
Except, it appeared, it wouldn’t be necessary. Static was calm as he waited for even the quiet talking to die down, his eyes flat and hard. She would have expected his power to be crackling around him in a dangerous aura, blue light sparking off of every metal surface. Instead, he was tightly reined in, still and controlled in a way that usually meant someone was about to die. Painfully.

“For a while now,” Static began in a disturbingly light voice, “we’ve had a rat problem.” There was a consensus of agreement, no one would dare argue with that. “Some of you faced them down today. And you lost.” A dark aura flickered for a moment. “That is not acceptable.” He cast his gaze around the room for a moment, glaring darkly.

Then, the menace was gone. “Fortunately, you’ll get a chance to rectify your fuck up.” He crossed his arms, and now his power flickered to life, sparking energy racing up and down his arms. “The rats are coming,” he growled, “and that other me will be with them.” His grinding teeth echoed in the room. “And tonight we are going to wipe. Them. Out.”

There was no room for debate. It was an order, an absolute fact.

“If any of you let one of those goodie two-shoes through, let one of them get in this building, let one of them even step foot in here,” he snarled, “I will take you apart! You’ll be begging me to turn Deimos loose on you!”

Talon glanced around the room, searching the faces. Puff had shifted subtly behind Onyx, who was staring at the ground as though it held the answers to the universe, and even Shiv appeared to be trying to shrink out of Static’s sight. The threats weren’t unusual. Static threw his weight around any time he felt like it, and seemed to delight in unsettling his people. Those moments were all fiery rage, though, hot and intense as an explosion and over just as quickly. Talon had rarely heard him so matter-of-fact, so quietly intense. In some ways, it was more frightening than his incandescent temper.

Turning her attention back to the front, Talon found Static had reined in his power again, and though the death’s-head grin was in place, his eyes were hard, cold. “Luckily for you, I’ve had our little night bird call in the big guns, so it won’t all be on your heads.” He chuckled darkly. “You know the rules. Keep outta his way, and he’ll leave you alone. Now, Deimos is on special assignment. So Talon will be coordinating the attack outside. Those of you who are too weak to join the main battle,” his grin became sharp, “you’ll be with me.” He swept his gaze from one side of the room to the other. “I want everyone who follows my fucking sister dead, capiche?”

There was a unified ‘yes boss,’ from every person in the room. Static didn’t even acknowledge it, simply marched out, his gaze focused inward. Their people parted for him like the goddamn Red Sea, giving him wide berth on either side. Talon watched his back as he headed for the lobby elevators, and realized that he was serious. He actually would tear apart anyone who failed him, including her, and probably with his bare hands.

She’d have to check in with Deimos before the siege arrived. Standing up, she let out a sharp whistle. However calm Static had been, she couldn’t help the feeling that everything was spiraling out of control. She let out a sharp whistle, taking to the air again.

“All right, let’s set up a perimeter…”

* * *

Pearson Square was only two blocks away from the TynaCorp building, with a branching network of side streets and alleys that funneled down to the west side of the building. It was well within view
of Static’s security systems, but it was also the only area that provided even minimal cover. The team would only have four, five minutes tops before Static’s gang would be upon them. Virgil intended to use every minute of that advantage.

Rather than climb out of the manhole as was typical for Sharon’s gang, Virgil used his power to lift them out from the sewer and move them yards away from the entrance so they could settle in a defensive semicircle. They weren’t alone, of course. They were the power houses of the group, but Richie—their Richie—had made friends with the entire underground. The majority of Sharon’s people followed behind them, some carrying firearms, others just carrying knives and makeshift clubs. One way or another, this protracted war was going to end tonight.

Sharon wasn’t exactly happy, but Virgil thought she was underestimating her people. He’d seen regular police take down metahumans in his Dakota, and these people were highly motivated. Their heroism and determination humbled him, and he silently vowed to do whatever it took to make sure any casualties they took wouldn’t be in vain. Even if it meant doing what this world’s Batman, what Sharon had asked of him.

He’d never been at this point before, had never thought he would get to the point where he was willing to…to kill. He knew, abstractly, that there was a chance—that someday he might be responsible for ending someone’s life, for some innocent dying in what the press would call ‘collateral damage’. But he’d honestly never thought he would ever set out with the intention of killing. He still hoped it wouldn’t come to that—that somehow, some way, he’d be able to resolve this without destroying the other him. In his heart, though, he acknowledged that that was a fool’s dream. At some point in the upcoming battle, he was going to have to make the hardest decision he’d ever had to.

He…it was willing. To protect Richie. To protect the people who had sacrificed so much, had risked their lives and their cause, to help him. To give this world’s Sharon some kind of closure, some kind of peace. He was willing. But he knew it wouldn’t be an easy choice.

He didn’t want it to be an easy choice.

Raising the saucer higher above the group, he ignored Francis’ fire blazing to life and Maria drawing in the local water to peer ahead. In the sky, he saw the red feathers of Talon and that was definitely Onyx to the side, by the main entrance. They hadn’t been spotted just yet, but it wouldn’t be much longer. He ducked down and made sure the team was in position.

Before he could say anything, though, Backpack let out a startled, defined ‘Beep!’ , and its eye extended up over his shoulder to shine on the ground. Virgil dropped, lowering himself to hover just a few feet above Sharon, and the shine resolved itself into a shimmering projection. The others backed up, spreading out to allow Backpack to magnify whatever it was they were seeing. Sharon leaned forward, her good eye wide. It looked familiar, but Static wasn’t entirely sure what he was seeing—it looked like a targeting map in one of the video games he and Richie played.

“It’s a map,” Adam exclaimed. He pointed to the three gang members just starting to head his way, and then to an area inside the grid-like projection, where three corresponding dots were also moving. “And their positions! It’s gotta be Richie! He must’ve gotten access to their security systems!”

Backpack whirred in excitement, a yellow dot blinking at the top of the building. “Is that Richie?” The legs around Virgil squeezed him gently. Near the yellow dot was a red one. “Is Static with him?” He couldn’t keep the anxious tone from his voice. There was a pause, then the projection seemed to zoom in on the lobby, where a smattering of a dozen red indicators blinked. Good.

“We got a problem,” Francis said, and Virgil quickly refocused his attention to the TynaCorp
building and the blockade. As the projection revealed, the perimeter of metahumans had congregated to Talon’s position before them. Onyx and Puff were the ones Virgil really worried about. The rest he was pretty sure Francis could handle. Hotstreak in his world had beaten all of them once or twice, he was pretty sure.

“We can take them,” Virgil insisted.

Francis just shook his head. “Not that.”

Sharon frowned, drawing her weapon and racking the slide. “They’re not moving forward.”

“It ain’t right, kid,” Carmen contributed. “Static’s up to something.”

No sooner had the words been uttered than darkness erupted around them, and a blast of purple-pink energy slammed into his chest, knocking him off his disk and into the void.

* * *

Inside the Tynacorp building, Deimos clenched his fists, glowing eyes staring blankly at the security screens. It was a strange double vision, seeing Static in two places at once, though the more he watched, the more obvious the differences between the two Statics became. It wasn’t just the lack of tattoos or scars. This other Static didn’t exude the same kind of unstable menace, the same taste of insanity.

And however much static wanted to deny it, this other version of him was more powerful. Already, Deimos could tell he was fully recharged, when his leader in the lobby was only at half power.

“Hey D,” Static’s voice came over the radio. “Everything good?”

He hesitated a moment, taking the time to focus. “Yeah, boss,” he finally replied. “He’s secure in the, in his room.” He swallowed, casting a quick look to the bedroom door behind him.

Foley—Foley was in bad shape. For a few moments when he’d entered the bedroom, he’d actually thought Static had killed him. Again. Foley was beaten to hell and back, what looked like every inch of exposed skin bruised and cut and battered. One eye was swollen impressively shut and Deimos was—well, he couldn’t say he was worried, exactly, but concerned at the ugly bruising right at the boy’s temple. More than that, though, Foley was totally unresponsive. Not quite unconscious, Deimos didn’t think, but his good eye hadn’t been tracking anything, just drifting back and forth in some imitation of REM sleep as Foley stared at nothing. If his pupil hadn’t responded to light, Deimos didn’t think, but his good eye hadn’t been tracking anything, just drifting back and forth in some imitation of REM sleep as Foley stared at nothing. If his pupil hadn’t responded to light, Deimos would have thought the boy had suffered some kind of brain damage.

“Good man. I’m counting on ya, D. I’m gonna take that bastard apart, and then I’ll bring his head to Richie. He’ll see. He’ll see there’s no one else, and finally,” his voice took on a possessive, malevolent quality, “finally he’ll be mine. All mine.”

Deimos let out a slow breath through his nose, sighting Nightengale and D-Struct arriving on scene. That was a deadly combo, one that had taken out the other Nightbreed when Static had consolidated his powerbase. “I’ll make sure he stays safe.”

“You’re a good second, D. I won’t forget this. You’ll see, it’ll be as if it didn’t happen. We’ll finally be kings and then, then Richie’ll hand me the world.”

Except that’s not how it’d go. No, he was sure, beyond sure, that this Foley wasn’t going to break. No, he’d bet Shiv’s life that if Static showed up with the corpse of his counterpart, the boy would snap. He wouldn’t break, he’d do everything he could to take Static down.
Deimos wasn’t entirely sure he wouldn’t succeed.

“I’ll let you know if anything changes,” he finally said, waiting for the radio to disconnect before leaning back on the couch. This was it. All he had to do was be the lookout, find any rats that escaped the kill box set up by Nightingale, notify Talon, and finally win the war for Dakota. Foley wasn’t even in any shape to put up a struggle this time, to fight or escape. It would be the easiest battle of his career.

So why was his stomach clenching unpleasantly? He’d trusted Static time and time again. There shouldn’t be any doubt, shouldn’t be any hesitation. There was no reason for there to be any hesitation or doubt. He just had to follow orders and win the day.

For Static.

He knew what he had to do, what was the right course of action. He knew it down to his bones. Right.

He stood and headed for the door to Foley’s room, letting Phobos leap from the building to the ground. The time for indecision was over.

End Notes

Disclaimer: Four score and seven minutes ago, a young author didst bring forth this 'fic, conceived in the principles that she owned nothing having anything to do with "Static Shock," or its creators. She doth humbly ask that those who do own "Static Shock" (as if they hang out on fanfic sites) do not sue.

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