

Worm

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Gestation 1.1

Brief note from the author: This story isn't intended for young or sensitive readers. Readers who are on the lookout for trigger warnings are advised to give Worm a pass.

Class ended in five minutes and all I could think was, an hour is too long for lunch.

Since the start of the semester, I had been looking forward to the part of Mr. Gladly's World Issues class where we'd start discussing capes. Now that it had finally arrived, I couldn't focus. I fidgeted, my pen moving from hand to hand, tapping, or absently drawing some figure in the corner of the page to join the other doodles. My eyes were restless too, darting from the clock above the door to Mr. Gladly and back to the clock. I wasn't picking up enough of his lesson to follow along. Twenty minutes to twelve; five minutes left before class ended.

He was animated, clearly excited about what he was talking about, and for once, the class was listening. He was the sort of teacher who tried to be friends with his students, the sort who went by "Mr. G" instead of Mr. Gladly. He liked to end class a little earlier than usual and chat with the popular kids, gave lots of group work so others could hang out with their friends in class, and had 'fun' assignments like mock trials.

He struck me as one of the 'popular' kids who had become a teacher. He probably thought he was everyone's favorite. I wondered how he'd react if he heard my opinion on the subject. Would it shatter his self image or would he shrug it off as an anomaly from the gloomy girl that never spoke up in class?

I glanced over my shoulder. Madison Clements sat two rows to my left and two seats back. She saw me looking and smirked, her eyes narrowing, and I lowered my eyes to my notebook. I tried to ignore the ugly, sour feeling that stewed in my stomach. I glanced up at the clock. Eleven-forty-three.

"Let me wrap up here," Mr. Gladly said, "Sorry, guys, but there is homework for the weekend. Think about capes and how they've impacted the world around you. Make a list if you want, but it's not mandatory. On Monday we'll break up into groups of four and see what group has the best list. I'll buy the winning group treats from the vending machine."

There were a series of cheers, followed by the classroom devolving into noisy chaos. The room was filled with sounds of binders snapping shut, textbooks and notebooks being slammed closed, chairs screeching on cheap tile and the dull roar of emerging conversation. A bunch of the more social members of the class gathered around Mr. Gladly to chat.

Me? I just put my books away and kept quiet. I'd written down almost nothing in the way of notes; there were collections of doodles spreading across the page and numbers in the margins where I'd counted down the minutes to lunch as if I was keeping track of the timer on a bomb.

Madison was talking with her friends. She was popular, but not gorgeous in the way the stereotypical popular girls on TV were. She was 'adorable', instead. Petite. She played up the image with sky blue pins in her shoulder length brown hair and a cutesy attitude. Madison wore a strapless top and denim skirt, which seemed absolutely moronic to me given the fact that it was still early enough in the spring that we

could see our breath in the mornings.

I wasn't exactly in a position to criticize her. Boys liked her and she had friends, while the same was hardly true for me. The only feminine feature I had going for me was my dark curly hair, which I'd grown long. The clothes I wore didn't show skin, and I didn't deck myself out in bright colors like a bird showing off its plumage.

Guys liked her, I think, because she was appealing without being intimidating.

If they only knew.

The bell rang with a lilting ding-dong, and I was the first one out the door. I didn't run, but I moved at a decent clip as I headed up the stairwell to the third floor and made my way to the girl's washroom.

There were a half dozen girls there already, which meant I had to wait for a stall to open up. I nervously watched the door of the bathroom, feeling my heart drop every time someone entered the room.

As soon as there was a free stall, I let myself in and locked the door. I leaned against the wall and exhaled slowly. It wasn't quite a sigh of relief. Relief implied you felt better. I wouldn't feel better until I got home. No, I just felt less uneasy.

It took maybe five minutes before the noise of others in the washroom stopped. A peek below the partitions showed that there was nobody else in the other stalls. I sat on the lid of the toilet and got my brown bag lunch to begin eating.

Lunch on the toilet was routine now. Every school day, I would finish off my brown bag lunch, then I'd do homework or read a book until lunch hour was over. The only book in my bag that I hadn't already read was called 'Triumvirate', a biography of the leading three members of the Protectorate. I was thinking I would spend as long as I could on Mr. Gladly's assignment before reading, because I wasn't enjoying the book. Biographies weren't my thing, and they were especially not my thing when I was suspicious it was all made up.

Whatever my plan, I didn't even have a chance to finish my pita wrap. The door of the bathroom banged open. I froze. I didn't want to rustle the bag and clue anyone into what I was doing, so I kept still and listened.

I couldn't make out the voices. The noise of the conversation was obscured by giggling and the sound of water from the sinks. There was a knock on the door, making me jump. I ignored it, but the person on the other side just repeated the knock.

"Occupied," I called out, hesitantly.

"Oh my god, it's Taylor!" one of the girls on the outside exclaimed with glee, then in response to something another girl whispered, I barely heard her add, "Yeah, do it!"

I stood up abruptly, letting the brown bag with the last mouthful of my lunch fall to the tiled floor. Rushing for the door, I popped the lock open and pushed. The door didn't budge.

There were noises from the stalls on either side of me, then a sound above me. I looked up to see what it was, only to get splashed in the face. My eyes started burning, and I was momentarily blinded by the stinging fluid in my eyes and my blurring of my glasses. I could taste it as it ran down to my nose and mouth. Cranberry juice.

They didn't stop there. I managed to pull my glasses off just in time to see Madison and Sophia leaning over the top of the stall, each of them with plastic bottles at the ready. I bent over with my hands shielding my head just before they emptied the contents over me.

It ran down the back of my neck, soaked my clothes, fizzed as it ran through my hair. I pushed against the door again, but the girl on the other side was braced against it with her body.

If the girls pouring juice and soda on me were Madison and Sophia, that meant the girl on the other side of the door was Emma, leader of the trio. Feeling a flare of anger at the realization, I shoved on the door, the full weight of my body slamming against it. I didn't accomplish anything, and my shoes lost traction on the juice-slick floor. I fell to my knees in the puddling juice.

Empty plastic bottles with labels for grape and cranberry juice fell to the ground around me. A bottle of orange soda bounced off my shoulder to splash into the puddle before rolling under the partition and into the next stall. The smell of the fruity drinks and sodas was sickly sweet.

The door swung open, and I glared up at the three girls. Madison, Sophia and Emma. Where Madison was cute, a late bloomer, Sophia and Emma were the types of girls that fit the 'prom queen' image. Sophia was dark skinned, with a slender, athletic build she'd developed as a runner on the school track team.

Red-headed Emma, by contrast, had all the curves the guys wanted. She was good looking enough to get occasional jobs as an amateur model for the catalogs that the local department stores and malls put out. The three of them were laughing like it was the funniest thing in the world, but the sounds of their amusement barely registered with me. My attention was on the faint roar of blood pumping in my ears and an urgent, ominous crackling 'sound' that wouldn't get any quieter or less persistent if I covered my ears with my hands. I could feel dribbles running down my arms and back, still chilled from the refrigerated vending machines.

I didn't trust myself to say something that wouldn't give them fodder to taunt me with, so I kept silent.

Carefully, I climbed to my feet and turned my back on them to get my backpack off the top of the toilet. Seeing it gave me pause. It had been a khaki green, before, but now dark purple blotches covered it, most of the contents of a bottle of grape juice. Pulling the straps around my shoulders, I turned around.

The girls weren't there. I heard the bathroom door bang shut, cutting off the sounds of their glee, leaving me alone in the bathroom, drenched.

I approached the sink and stared at myself in the scratched, stained mirror that was bolted above it. I had inherited a thin lipped, wide, expressive mouth from my mother, but my large eyes and my gawky figure made me look a lot more like my dad. My dark hair was soaked enough that it clung to my scalp, neck and shoulders. I was wearing a brown hooded sweatshirt over a green t-shirt, but colored blotches of purple, red and orange streaked both. My glasses were beaded with the multicolored droplets of juice and soda. A drip ran down my nose and fell from the tip to land in the sink.

Using a paper towel from the dispenser, I wiped my glasses off and put them on again. The residual streaks made it just as hard to see, if not worse than it had been.

Deep breaths, Taylor, I told myself.

I pulled the glasses off to clean them again with a wet towel, and found the streaks were still there.

An inarticulate scream of fury and frustration escaped my lips, and I kicked the plastic bucket that sat just beneath the sink, sending it and the toilet brush inside flying into the wall. When that wasn't enough, I pulled off my backpack and used a two-handed grip to hurl it. I wasn't using my locker anymore: certain individuals had vandalized or broken into it on four different occasions. My bag was heavy, loaded down with everything I'd anticipated needing for the day's classes. It crunched audibly on impact with the wall.

"What the fuck!?" I screamed to nobody in particular, my voice echoing in the bathroom. There were tears in the corners of my eyes.

"The hell am I supposed to do!?" I wanted to hit something, break something. To retaliate against the unfairness of the world. I almost struck the mirror, but I held back. It was such a small thing that it felt like it would make me feel more insignificant instead of venting my frustration.

I'd been enduring this from the very first day of high school, a year and a half ago. The bathroom had been the closest thing I could find to refuge. It had been lonely and undignified, but it had been a place I could retreat to, a place where I was off their radar. Now I didn't even have that.

I didn't even know what I was supposed to do for my afternoon classes. Our midterm project for art was due, and I couldn't go to class like this. Sophia would be there, and I could just imagine her smug smile of satisfaction as I showed up looking like I'd botched an attempt to tie-dye everything I owned.

Besides, I'd just thrown my bag against the wall and I doubted my project was still in one piece.

The buzzing at the edge of my consciousness was getting worse. My hands shook as I bent over and gripped the edge of the sink, let out a long, slow breath, and let my defenses drop. For three months, I'd held back. Right now? I didn't care anymore.

I shut my eyes and felt the buzzing crystallize into concrete information. As numerous as stars in the night sky, tiny knots of intricate data filled the area around me. I could focus on each one in turn, pick out details. The clusters of data had been reflexively drifting towards me since I was first splashed in the face. They responded to my subconscious thoughts and emotions, as much of a reflection of my frustration, my anger, my hatred for those three girls as my pounding heart and trembling hands were. I could make them stop or direct them to move almost without thinking about it, the same way I could raise an arm or twitch a finger.

I opened my eyes. I could feel adrenaline thrumming through my body, blood coursing in my veins. I shivered in response to the chilled soft drinks and juices the trio had poured over me, with anticipation and with just a little fear. On every surface of the bathroom were bugs; Flies, ants, spiders, centipedes, millipedes, earwigs, beetles, wasps and bees. With every passing second, more streamed in through the open window and the various openings in the bathroom, moving with surprising speed. Some crawled in through a gap where the sink drain entered the wall while others emerged from the triangular hole in the ceiling where a section of foam tile had broken off, or from the opened window with peeling paint and cigarette butts squished out in the recesses. They gathered around me and spread out over every available surface; primitive bundles of signals and responses, waiting for further instruction.

My practice sessions, conducted away from prying eyes, told me I could direct a single insect to move an antennae, or command the gathered horde to move in formation. With one thought, I could single out a

particular group, maturity or species from this jumble and direct them as I wished. An army of soldiers under my complete control.

It would be so easy, so easy to just go Carrie on the school. To give the trio their just desserts and make them regret what they had put me through: the vicious e-mails, the trash they'd upended over my desk, the flute –my mother's flute– they'd stolen from my locker. It wasn't just them either. Other girls and a small handful of boys had joined in, 'accidentally' skipping over me when passing out assignment handouts, adding their own voices to the taunts and the flood of nasty emails, to get the favor and attention of three of the prettier and more popular girls in our grade.

I was all too aware that I'd get caught and arrested if I attacked my fellow students. There were three teams of superheroes and any number of solo heroes in the city. I didn't really care. The thought of my father seeing the aftermath on the news, his disappointment in me, his shame? That was more daunting, but it still didn't outweigh the anger and frustration.

Except I was better than that.

With a sigh, I sent an instruction to the gathered swarm. Disperse. The word wasn't as important as the idea behind it. They began to exit the room, disappearing into the cracks in the tile and through the open window. I walked over to the door and stood with my back to it so nobody could stumble onto the scene before the bugs were all gone.

However much I wanted to, I couldn't really follow through. Even as I trembled with humiliation, I managed to convince myself to pick up my backpack and head down the hall. I made my way out of the school, ignoring the stares and giggles from everyone I walked past, and caught the first bus that headed in the general direction of home. The chill of early spring compounded the discomfort of my soaked hair and clothes, making me shiver.

I was going to be a superhero. That was the goal I used to calm myself down at moments like these. It was what I used to make myself get out of bed on a school day. It was a crazy dream that made things tolerable. It was something to look forward to, something to work towards. It made it possible to keep from dwelling on the fact that Emma Barnes, leader of the trio, had once been my best friend.

Gestation 1.2

My thoughts were on Emma on the bus ride home. For an outside observer, I think it's easy to trivialize the importance of a 'best friend', but when you're a kid, there's nobody more important. Emma had been my 'BFF' from grade one all the way through middle school. It hadn't been enough for us to spend our time together at school, so we had alternated staying at each others houses every weekend. I remember my mother saying that we were so close we were practically sisters.

A friendship that deep is intimate. Not in the rude way, but just in terms of a no-holds-barred sharing of every vulnerability and weakness.

So when I got back from nature camp just a week before our first year at high school started, to find that she wasn't talking to me? That she was calling Sophia her best friend? Discovering that she was now using every one of those secrets and vulnerabilities I had shared with her to wound me in the most vicious ways she could think of? It was crushing. There's just no better way to say it.

Unwilling to dwell on it any longer, I turned my attention to my backpack, setting it on the seat beside me and sorting through the contents. Grape juice had stained it, and I had a suspicion I would have to get a new one. I had bought it just four months ago, after my old one had been taken from my locker, and it had been just twelve bucks, so it wasn't a huge issue. The fact that my notebooks, textbooks and the two novels I'd shoved into my bag were wet with grape juice was more troubling. I suspected that whichever girl had been holding the grape juice had aimed for the open top of my bag as she poured it. I noted the destruction of my art project – the box I'd put it in was collapsed on the one side. That bit was my fault.

My heart sank as I found the notebook with the white and black speckled hardcover. The corner of the paper was soaked through with as much as a quarter of each page stained purple. The ink had diluted and the pages were already turning wavy.

That notebook was – had been – my notes and journal for my hero career. The testing and training I'd done with my powers, pages of crossed out name ideas, even the measurements I was using for my costume in progress. After Emma, Madison and Sophia had stolen my last backpack and stuffed it in a wastebasket, I had realized how big a danger it was to have everything written down like that. I had copied everything over into a new notebook in a simple cipher and wrote it bottom to top. Now that notebook was spoiled, and I was looking at having to copy some two hundred pages of detailed writing into a new notebook if I wanted to preserve the information. If I could even remember what was on all of the ruined pages.

The bus stopped a block away from my house, and I got off, trying to ignore the stares. Even with the gawking, the knowledge that my notebook was ruined and my general nervousness about missing afternoon classes without permission, I felt better as I got closer to home. It felt worlds better to know I could drop my guard, stop watching my back and that I could take a break from wondering when the next incident would happen. I let myself into the house and headed straight for the shower, not even removing my backpack or taking off my shoes until I was in the bathroom.

I stood under the stream with my clothes on the floor of the tub, hoping the water would help get the worst of the juice out. I pondered. I don't know who said it, but at one point I had come across this notion

about taking a negative and turning it into a positive. I tried to take the day's events and turn them around in my head, to see if I couldn't find a more positive twist on it.

Okay, so the first thing that came to mind was "Yet another reason to kill the trio." It wasn't a serious thought – I was angry, but it wasn't like I was going to actually kill them. Somehow, I suspected that I'd hurt myself before I hurt them. I was humiliated, frustrated, pissed, and I always had a weapon available – my power. It was like having a loaded gun in your hand at all times. Except my power wasn't that great, so maybe it was more like having a taser. It was hard not to think about using it when things got really bad. Still, I didn't think I had that killer instinct in me.

No, I told myself, forcing myself back to the subject of positive thinking. Were there any upsides? Art project wrecked, clothes probably unrecoverable, needing a new backpack... notebook. Somehow my mind fixated on that last part.

I cranked the shower to off, then toweled dry, thinking. I wrapped the towel around me, and rather than head to my room to get dressed, I put my wet clothes into a laundry hamper, grabbed my backpack and headed downstairs, through the kitchen and into the basement.

My house is old, and the basement was never renovated. The walls and floor are concrete and the ceiling was exposed boards and electrical cords. The furnace used to be coal fueled, and there was still an old coal chute, two feet by two feet, where the coal trucks used to come by to unload the winter's supply of coal for heating the house. The chute was boarded up, but around the time I was copying my original 'superpower notebook' over in code, I had decided to play it safe in all respects and start getting creative with my privacy. It was then that I'd started using it.

I removed one screw and removed the square wooden panel with the peeling white paint that covered the low end of the coal chute. I retrieved a gym bag from inside and put the panel back in place without screwing it back in.

I emptied the contents of the gym bag on the disused workbench that the house's previous owner had left in our basement, then opened the windows that were at the same level as the driveway and front garden. I closed my eyes and spent a minute exercising my power. I wasn't just grabbing every creepy crawly in a two block radius, though. I was being selective, and I was gathering quite a few.

It would take time for all of them to arrive. Bugs could move faster than you thought when they moved with purpose in a straight line, but even so, two blocks was a lot of ground for something so small to cover. I busied myself with opening the bag and sorting out the contents. My costume.

The first of the spiders started coming in through the open windows and congregating on the workbench. My power didn't give me a knowledge of the official names of the bugs I was working with, but anyone could recognize the spiders that were crawling into the room. These were black widows. One of the more dangerous spiders you could find in the States. Their bite could be lethal, though it usually wasn't, and they tended to bite with little provocation. Even under my complete control, they spooked me. At my request, the dozens upon dozens of spiders got into place on the workbench and began drawing out lines of webbing, laying the lines across one another, and weaving them into one work.

Three months ago, after I'd recovered from the manifestation of my powers, I had started to prepare

for the goal I had set for myself. It had involved an exercise routine, training my power, research, and preparing my costume. Costumes were harder than one might think. While members of official teams surely had sources for that stuff, the rest of us were left to either buy costumes, put them together piecemeal with stuff bought from stores or make them from scratch. Each option had its problems. If you bought a costume online, you ran the risk of being traced, which could blow your secret identity before you'd even put a costume on. You could put a costume together with stuff bought from stores, but very few people could do that and look good. The final option, putting a costume together yourself, was just a hell of a lot of work and you could run into the issues of the prior two options – being traced or winding up with a lame costume – depending on where you got your materials and how you went about it.

In the second week after I'd figured out my powers, when I still wasn't entirely sure what was going on, I had come across a segment on the discovery channel about a suit that was made to withstand attacks by bears. That segment talked about how the suit was made of synthetic spider silk, which had inspired this particular project. Why go synthetic when you can produce with the real thing?

Okay, so it had been harder than that. Not just any spider worked, and the black widow spiders themselves were hard to find. They weren't typically found in the northeastern states, where it was generally colder, but I was fortunate that that key element that made Brockton Bay a tourist destination and a hotspot for capes also made it a place where black widow spiders could live, if not thrive. Namely, it was warm. Thanks to the surrounding geography and the ocean bordering us on the east, Brockton Bay had some of the mildest winters you could find in the Northeastern States, and some of the most comfortably warm summers. Both the black widows and the people running around in skintight costumes were thankful for that.

With my power, I had ensured the spiders could multiply. I'd kept them in safe locations and fattened them on prey I directed straight to them. I had flipped that mental switch that told them to breed and lay eggs as if it was summer, fed more prey to the hundreds of young that had resulted and had earned countless costume spinners for my trouble. The biggest issue had been that black widows are territorial, so I'd had to spread them out to ensure they didn't kill each other when I wasn't around to control them. Once a week or so, on my morning runs, I rotated the locations of the local spiders so I had a fresh supply all filled with proteins for the production of the essential materials. This ensured that the spiders were always ready for working on the costume in the afternoon, after school.

Yeah, I needed a life.

But I had a badass costume.

It wasn't a great looking costume, just yet. The fabric was a dirty yellow-gray. The armored sections had been made out of finely arranged and layered shells and exoskeletons I'd cannibalized from the local insect population and then reinforced with dragline silk. In the end, the armored parts had wound up dark mottled brown-gray. I was okay with that. When the entire thing was done, I planned to dye the fabric and paint the armor.

The reason I was so pleased with my costume was the fact that it was flexible, durable, and incredibly lightweight, considering the amount of armor I had put on it. At one point I had screwed up the dimensions

of one of the legs, and when I tried to cut it off to start fresh, I had found I couldn't cut it with an x-acto knife. I had needed to use wire cutters, and even that had been a chore. As far as I figured, it was everything a superhero wanted for a costume.

I wasn't exactly willing to test it out, but I harbored hopes that it was bulletproof. Or at least, that the armored sections over my vital areas were.

The plan was to finish my costume over the course of the month, then as the school year ended and the summer began, I would take the leap into the world of superheroics.

But the plan had changed. I took off my towel and hung it from the corner of the bench, then began pulling on my costume to test the fit for the hundredth time. The spiders obediently moved out of my way as I did so.

When I had been standing in the shower, trying to find the good aspects in the day's troubles, my thoughts had turned to my notebook. I had realized I was procrastinating. I was constantly planning, preparing, considering all of the possibilities. There would always be more preparations, more stuff to study or test. The destruction of my notebook had been the burning of a bridge. I couldn't go back and copy it into a fresh book or start a new one without delaying my game plan for at least a week. I had to move forward.

It was time to do it. I flexed my hand inside the glove. I'd go out next week – no. No more delays. This weekend, I would be ready.

Gestation 1.3

My training schedule consisted of running every morning and every other afternoon. In the process, I had picked up a pretty good knowledge of the east side of the city. Growing up in Brockton Bay, my parents had told me stuff like “stick to the Boardwalk”. Even on my runs, I had scrupulously stayed on the Boardwalk and avoided the bad part of town. Now it was Sunday night and I was in costume and breaking the rules.

I had dyed and painted the costume on Friday, bought temporary costume pieces (belt, the straps for the mask and the lenses) on Saturday and finished the most necessary details over the course of my Sunday afternoon before heading out for the evening. The costume wasn't complete yet, lacking the full extent of the armor paneling I had planned out, but the armor covered the most essential areas – my face, chest, spine, stomach and major joints. The mask design featured dull yellow lenses, the only color on the black and gray costume, as well as sections of armor designed to imitate a bug's mandibles while simultaneously protecting my jaw. The mask left my hair free, which did leave the back of my head more vulnerable, but that was just one of the sacrifices I'd had to make to go out in an unfinished costume.

It was just after midnight, and I was crossing the line between one of the nicest parts of town and the part of town where the crack whores and gangsters lived. The distance between the two was thinner than one might think.

The Boardwalk was where the tourists came. Running north-to-south along the beach, there were shops that sold dresses for over a thousand dollars, cafes with ludicrously expensive coffees and stretches of wooden walkways and beaches where tourists could get a great view of the ocean. From pretty much any point on the Docks, you could see one of Brockton Bay's landmarks, the Protectorate Headquarters. Besides being a marvel of architectural design with its arches and towers, the PHQ was a floating base of operations that a squadron of local superheroes called home, outfitted with a forcefield bubble and a missile defense system. There had never been occasion for either to be used, but I had to admit, it made you feel safer.

If you headed west from the Boardwalk, away from the water, you found yourself in the area the locals just called the 'Docks'. When the import/export business in Brockton Bay had dried up, there had been a whole lot of people who were suddenly out of work. The richest and most resourceful people in town had managed to make more money, turning the city's resources towards tech and banking, but all of the people who had been employed on the ships and in the warehouses had few options left to them. They faced leaving Brockton Bay, sticking around while scraping up what little work they could or turning to more illicit activity.

This all contributed to the boom in the local supervillain population. The potential for big money coupled with the number of eager-to-please mooks and henchmen made it the city to be for the villains in the late 90s. It took a few years for the hero presence to establish and organize themselves, but they did, and there was something of an equilibrium now. As far as cape population went, Brockton Bay wasn't in the top 5 cities in the U.S., but it was probably in the top ten.

Just moving from one block to the next, you could see the change in the area. As I made my way into the Docks, I could see the quality of my surroundings decline steeply. There were enough warehouses and apartments in the area for even the most destitute to find shelter, so the only people on the streets were unconscious drunks, whores and gang members. I steered clear of any and all people I saw and ventured further into the area.

As I walked, I was using my powers to draw a swarm together, but kept them out of the way, moving just over the nearby rooftops and through the interior of buildings. Anyone paying attention to the local cockroach population might think something was up, but there weren't many lights on. I doubted most of the buildings here even had power.

The lack of lights in the area was what made me stop and draw myself against the side of a building when I saw a spot of orange in the dark street ahead. The orange was the flame of a lighter, and I was able to make out several faces around it. They were Asian, some wearing hoodies, others wearing headbands or long sleeved shirts, but all wore the same colors. Red and green.

I knew who these guys were. They were members from the local gang that left the tags 'Azn Bad Boys', ABB for short, all over the East end of the city. More than a few went to my school. As far as the criminal element in Brockton Bay went, they weren't small potatoes. While the typical gang members were just Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese and Chinese forcibly recruited from Brockton Bay's high schools and lower class neighborhoods, the gang was led by a couple of people with powers. Gangs didn't tend to be that racially inclusive as far as who joined, so it said something that their leader had the ability to draw in members from so many different nationalities and keep them in line.

The street was unlit, so my ability to see was dependent on the moon and the few indoor lights that were still on and shining out onto the sidewalks. I started actively looking for their boss. There were more gang members coming out of a two-story building, and they were gathering in the street. They didn't have the atmosphere of people who were just hanging out, either. They were expressionless or scowling, and they weren't talking.

I spotted their boss as the gang pulled away from the door of the building to give him room. I only knew about this guy from what I had heard on the news and read online, but I recognized him immediately. He was a big guy, but not so big that he would send people running when he walked down the street, like some people with powers were. He was a little over six feet, though, which put him head and shoulders above most of the gang members. He had an ornate metal mask over his face, and wasn't wearing a shirt, despite the chill. Sprawling tattoos covered his body from the neck down, all depicting dragons from Eastern mythology.

He went by 'Lung', had successfully gone toe to toe with whole teams of heroes and had managed to keep himself out of jail, as evidenced by his presence here. As for his powers, I only knew what I could scrounge up online, and there were no guarantees there. I mean, for all I knew, he could have misled people about what his powers did, he could have a power he was keeping up his sleeve for an emergency, or he could even have a very subtle power that people couldn't see at work.

The information online and in the papers had told me this: Lung could gradually transform. Maybe it

was based on adrenaline, his emotional state, or something, but whatever it was, it made his powers more potent the longer he was in a fight. He healed at a superhuman rate, got stronger, got tougher, got bigger, and he grew armor plating complete with blades at each fingertip. Rumor had it that he even grew wings if he fought long enough. If that wasn't enough, he was a pyrokinetic, which meant he could create flame out of thin air, shape it, intensify it, and so on. That power apparently got stronger as he transformed, too. As far as I knew, there wasn't an upper limit to how strong he could get. He only started returning to normal when there was nobody left to fight.

Lung wasn't the only one with powers in the ABB. He had a flunky, a scary sociopath called Oni Lee, who could teleport or create doubles of himself – I wasn't a hundred percent sure on the details – but Oni Lee had a distinctive look, and I didn't see him in the crowd. If there was anyone else with powers that I needed to watch out for, I hadn't seen or heard anything about them in my research.

Lung began talking in a deep, commanding voice. I couldn't make out the words, but it sounded like he was giving instructions. As I watched, one of the gang members drew a butterfly knife from his pocket, and another of them put his hand on his waistband. Between the gloom and the fact that I was standing half a block away, I couldn't see well, but a dark shape stood out against his green t-shirt. Chances were it was a gun handle. My pulse sped up a bit as I saw the gun, which was silly. Lung was more dangerous than fifty people with guns.

I decided to move away from where I was and find a better vantage point to monitor their conversation, which seemed like a good compromise between my curiosity and my self preservation. I slowly backed away from where I was, glancing over my shoulder to make sure nobody was watching, and then circled around the rear of the building I was lurking beside.

My investigation paid off. Halfway down the alley, I saw a fire escape that was leading up the back of the building that Lung and his gang were standing in front of. The feet of my costume had soft soles, so I was nearly silent as I ascended.

The roof was covered in gravel and cigarette butts, which made me think I wouldn't be nearly so quiet walking over it. Instead, I walked on the raised outside lip of the roof. As I neared the part of the roof directly above Lung and his gang of 'Azn Bad Boys', I crouched and crawled forward on my stomach. It was dark enough that I doubted they would see me if I jumped up and down and waved my arms, but there was no reason to be stupid.

Being at the top of a two story building when they were on the ground floor made it hard to hear them. Lung had a strong accent, as well, which meant I had to wait until he had spoken a few sentences before I could figure out what he was saying. It helped that his mooks were utterly, respectfully silent as he spoke.

Lung was snarling, "...the children, just shoot. Doesn't matter your aim, just shoot. You see one lying on the ground? Shoot the little bitch twice more to be sure. We give them no chances to be clever or lucky, understand?"

There was a murmur of assent.

Someone else lit up a cigarette, and then leaned over to light a cigarette for the guy next to him. In those moments that his hand wasn't cupped around the flame, I could see the gathered faces of just a dozen

or so of the gangsters gathered around Lung. In hands, waistbands and holsters, I could see the dark metal of guns reflecting the orange flame. If I had to hazard a guess, all of them had weapons.

They were going to kill kids?