

WORM

ARC 1–3

by

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under the name

WILDBOW



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Arc 1

Gestation

GESTATION 1.1

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 a 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 bath-

room 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 piece-meal 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 force-field 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*?

GESTATION 1.4

I felt a chill. A part of me really wished that I had thought to get my hands on a disposable cell phone. I didn't have a utility belt, but the spade shaped section of armor that hung over my spine hid a set of EpiPens, a pen and notepad, a tube of pepper spray meant to hang off a key chain and a zippered pouch of chalk dust. I could have fit a cell phone back there. With a cell phone, I could have alerted the real heroes about the fact that Lung was planning to take a score of his flunkies to go and shoot kids.

At least, that's what I had heard. I was in a state of disbelief, turning the words around in my head to think of a different context that would make sense of it. It wasn't so much the fact that *he* would do something like that. I just had a hard time wrapping my head around the idea that anyone would.

Lung answered a question for one of his gang members, lapsing briefly into another language. He grabbed one of his minion's arms and twisted it to an angle where he could get a look at the guy's watch, so I guessed it had something to do with their timing or when they were leaving. The gang member who'd had his arm twisted winced as Lung let it go, but didn't complain.

What was I supposed to do? I doubted I could find any place in the Docks that would be willing to let me inside to use their phone. If I headed to the Boardwalk, I wasn't sure I would find any places that were still open, and I didn't have change for a payphone. That was another oversight I would have to correct for the next time I went out. Cell phone, spare change.

A car pulled up, and another three guys dressed in gang colors got out and joined the crowd. Shortly after, the group – twenty or twenty five in total – started walking north, passing below me as they walked down the street.

I was out of time to consider my options. As much as I didn't want to face it, there was really only one option that I could have no regrets about. I shut my eyes and focused on every bug on the neighborhood, including the sizable swarm I had gathered on the way into the Docks. I took control of each of them.

Attack.

It was dark enough that I could only tell where the swarm was with my power. That meant I couldn't even tune out the swarm if I wanted to have any idea about what was going on. My brain was filled with horrendous amounts of information, as I sensed each bite, each sting. As the thousands of insects and arachnids swarmed over and around the group, I could almost see the outlines of each person, just by sensing the shapes of the surfaces the bugs were crawling on, or the areas the vermin wasn't occupying. I focused on keeping the more venomous types at bay for the time being – I didn't need any allergic thugs going into anaphylactic shock from a bee sting or getting serious complications from the bite of a brown recluse spider.

I sensed the fire through the swarm before I realized what I was looking at with my eyes. My power told me of the bugs' recognition of the heat, but I didn't even have time to devote conscious thought to block out the instincts the fire set in motion before the damage was done. The primitive thought processes of my bugs were reduced to confused impulses to alternately flee and to pursue the heat and the light they so often used for navigation. Many bugs died or were crippled by the heat. From my vantage point, I could see Lung lashing out with streams of fire from his hands, directing them at the

sky.

I suppressed a laugh, feeling heady with adrenaline. Was that all he could do? I directed the swarm to gather, so those who weren't already biting and stinging were in the midst of the gang. If he wanted to turn his flames on the swarm, he would have to set his own people on fire.

The heated air and the smells gave me enough information, by way of my insects, to tell where Lung was in the crowd. I took a deep breath, and then sent in the reserves. I took a share of the venomous types I'd held at bay and directed them to Lung. A handful of bees, wasps, a number of the more poisonous spiders, like black widows and brown recluses, and dozens of fire ants.

He healed fast when his power was working. Everything I'd read online said that people with healing abilities would shrug off the effects of poisons or drugs, so I knew I'd have to pump him full of enough venom to overwhelm that aspect of his power. Besides, he was a big guy. I judged he could take it.

From the information that I could glean from my bugs, Lung already had maybe a quarter of his body covered in armor. Triangular sections of metallic plating were piercing through his skin, where they would continue to grow and overlap until he was nigh impenetrable. If they weren't already, his fingertips and toes would become like blades or metal claws.

I felt a sadistic glee as I organized the attack on Lung. I directed the flying insects to attack his face. With distaste, I focused the crawling ants and spiders on... other vulnerable areas. I did my best to ignore the feedback that I got from that particular attack, as I most definitely did not want the same kind of topographical map that the swarm had provided just a minute ago. Lung was bad news, and I needed him out of action as soon as possible. That meant delivering the hurt.

Rationale aside, I did feel a stab of guilt about taking pleasure in someone else's pain. I quieted that moment's remorse by reminding myself that Lung had spread tragedy, addiction and death to innumerable families. He had been planning to kill kids.

Lung exploded. No metaphor there. He detonated in a blast of rolling fire that set his clothes, several pieces of litter and one of his gang members alight. Almost every bug in his immediate vicinity died or was crippled by the wave of extreme heat. From my vantage point on the roof, I watched as he turned himself into a human bomb a second time. The second explosion turned his clothes to rags and sent his people fleeing for cover. He stepped out of the smoke with his hands burning like torches, the silvery scales that covered nearly a third of his body reflecting the flame.

Damn, damn, damn. He was fireproof? Or skilled enough at using fire to superheat the air around him without burning himself? The meager scraps of clothing that covered him were burning away, and fire licked and danced around his hands without him seeming to care.

He roared. It wasn't the monstrous roar one might expect, but a very human sound of rage and frustration. As human as it sounded, though, it was loud. All the way down the street neighborhood, lights and flashlights flickered on in response to the explosions and the roar. I even saw a few faces peering through windows to see the action. Idiots. If Lung's next attack shattered any glass, they could get hurt.

From where I was crouched on the side of the roof, I directed some of the more harmless insects to attack Lung. He lashed out with fire the moment they started crawling on him, which I had more or less expected. He was managing to kill the majority of the bugs with each burst of flame, and knowing what I did about his powers,

I knew his flames would only get bigger, hotter and more dangerous.

In a typical fight, you figure someone would get weaker as the fight dragged on. They would take their lumps, get tired, exhaust their bag of tricks. With Lung, it was the opposite. I found myself regretting that I had used only a relatively small number of the more venomous bugs, because it was becoming clear that what I'd used wasn't having much effect. He had no idea where I was, so I figured I still had the upper hand, but my options and the number of bugs in my swarm were running out. Despite my earlier glee, I wasn't sure I could win this anymore.

I hissed through my teeth, all too aware that time was running out. Before long, Lung would set fire to the city block, become immune to bites and stings in general, or destroy my entire swarm. I had to get creative. I had to get meaner.

I focused my attention on a lone wasp, and piloted it around Lung's back, up behind his head and then had it circle around to his face and straight at his eyeball. The wasp touched his eyelash, and he blinked before it could hit the target. As a consequence, the stinger only sank into his eyelid, prompting yet another explosion of fire and a scream of rage.

Again. I thought. A honeybee this time. I wasn't sure if he eventually got armor plated eyelids, but maybe I could use the stings to make his eyes swell shut? He wouldn't be able to fight if he couldn't see.

The bee struck home this time, sinking his stinger into the ball of Lung's eye. It surprised me in that it didn't stick or kill the bee, so I had the bee sting again, and this time the barbs let it stick in the skin at the corner of his eye, at the side of his nose. The bee died that time, leaving some tiny organs and a venom sac hanging from the stinger.

I expected him to explode again. He didn't. Instead, he set himself

on fire, head to toe. I waited a moment, poised to attack with the next wasp to attack the moment he dropped his guard, but as the seconds passed, I realized he wasn't planning on extinguishing himself. My heart sank.

Surely he was burning up all of the oxygen in his vicinity. Didn't he need to breathe? What the hell was the fuel source for his fire?

Standing in the street, he turned around, searching for me, with the flames that licked and rolled over his body casting light where there had been only gloom. Abruptly, he hunched over. I wondered if – I hoped – the various toxins and venoms in his system had done the trick. Then his back separated into two. A meaty looking gap appeared along his spine, followed by an eruption of long metallic scales all down the gap. After bristling for a few moments, the scales lay flat like dominoes falling. He stood and stretched, and I could swear he was a foot taller, now with an armor plated spine.

Still on fire, head to toe.

If the 'constantly on fire' thing had tipped the balance of the fight to futile, watching Lung grow and look stronger than ever had pushed me to the point of being spooked. I started thinking about an exit strategy. Rationally, I figured, Lung's men were scattered to the four winds and they were probably in pretty rough shape. Whatever Lung had been planning for tonight, chances were he wasn't going to be able to carry out whatever plans he'd had after this debacle. I had more or less accomplished what I needed to, and I figured I could run and find a way to contact the PHQ just in case.

That was the rational perspective. Justifications aside, I just wanted to leave, right then. If things dragged on and I stayed put, there was a very real chance that Lung would give evidence to the rumor that he could grow wings, at which point I would be spotted for sure. I wouldn't be able to beat Lung at this point, anyway, which

left only a graceless retreat as the remaining option.

Lung had his back turned to me, so I lifted myself up, slowly. Crouching, I backed up to retreat to the fire escape, watching Lung carefully as I set foot on the gravel of the roof.

As if a gunshot had gone off, Lung whirled around to stare at me. One of his eyes was just a glowing line behind his mask, but the other was like an orb of molten metal.

A victorious roar filled the air, less human than the outcry he had made earlier, and I felt a kind of resignation. Enhanced hearing. The package of powers the bastard got from his transformation included superhuman hearing.

GESTATION 1.5

You don't properly appreciate what superhuman strength means until you see someone leap from the sidewalk to the second floor of a building on the far side of the street. He didn't make it all the way to the roof, but he came to a point maybe three quarters of the way up. I wasn't sure just how Lung kept from falling, but I could only guess that he just buried his fingertips into the building's exterior.

I heard scraping and crunching as he ascended, and looked to my only escape route. I didn't harbor any delusions as far as my ability to get down the fire escape before Lung came over the top of the roof and deduced where I'd run off to. Worse, at that point he could probably just beat me to the street level by jumping off the roof, or even just shoot fire at me through the gaps in the metal while I was halfway down. The irony of the fire escape being anything but didn't escape me.

I wished I could fly. My school offered the choice between Chemistry, Biology and Physics, with Basic Science for the underachievers. I hadn't picked Physics, but I was still pretty sure that no matter how many I could gather together, jumping off the roof with a swarm of flying insects gripping me would be just as ineffective as the 9 year old superhero wannabes you heard about in the news, jumping off ledges with umbrellas and bedsheets.

For the time being, I was stuck where I was.

Reaching inside the convex armor that covered my spine, I ran my fingers over the things I had buckled in there. The EpiPens were meant to treat anaphylactic shock from allergic reactions to bee

stings and the like, and likely wouldn't do a thing to Lung, even if I could get close enough and find a point to inject. Worst case scenario, the injections would supercharge his power by prompting a surge of whatever hormones or endorphins fueled his power. Not useful, dangerous at best. I had a pouch of chalk dust that was meant for climbers and gymnasts, I had seen it in the sports store when I was buying the lenses for my mask. I had gloves and didn't think I needed the dryness and extra traction, but I had gotten the idea that it could be useful to throw at an invisible enemy, and bought it on a whim. In retrospect, it had been kind of a dumb purchase, since my power let me find foes like that with my bugs. As a tool against Lung... I wasn't sure if it would explode like regular dust could when exposed to flame, but fire didn't hurt him anyways. Scratch that option.

I tugged the little canister of pepper spray free from my armor. It was a black tube, three inches long, not much thicker around than a pen, with a trigger and a safety switch. It had been a gift from my dad, after I had started to go on my morning jogs for training. He had warned me to vary my route, and had given me the pepper spray for protection, along with a chain to clip it to my belt loop so it couldn't be taken and used against me by an attacker. In costume, I had opted not to keep the chain for the sake of moving quietly. Using my thumb, I flicked the safety off and positioned the tube so I was ready to fire. I crouched to make myself a smaller target, and waited for him to show himself.

Lung's hands, still on fire, were the first thing to show up, gripping the edge of the roof hard enough to bend the material that covered the roof's raised lip. His hands were quickly followed by his head and torso as he hauled himself up. He looked like he was made of overlapping knives or spades, smouldering yellow-orange with the low

temperature flame. There was no skin to be seen, and he was easily seven or eight feet tall, judging by the length of his arms and torso. His shoulders alone were three feet across at the very least. Even the one eye that he had open looked metallic, a glowing, almond shaped pool of liquid-hot metal.

I aimed for the open eye, but the spray fired off at a sharp angle, just glancing off his shoulder. Where the spray grazed him, it ignited into a short lived fireball.

I swore under my breath and fumbled with the device. While he brought his leg over the edge, I adjusted my angle and shot again. This time – with a small tweak of my aim mid-shot – I hit him in the face. The ignited spray rolled off of him, but the contents still did the trick. He screamed, letting go of the roof with one hand, clutching the side of his face where his good eye was.

It had been vain to hope that he would slip and fall. I just counted myself lucky that however metallic his face looked, there were still parts of it vulnerable to the spray.

Lung hauled himself over the edge of the roof. I had him hurting... I just couldn't do anything about it. My bugs were officially useless, there was nothing left in my utility sheath, and I would hurt myself more than I hurt Lung if I attacked him. Making a mental note to pick myself up a concealable knife or baton if I managed to live through this, I bolted for the fire escape.

"Muh... Motherfucker!" Lung screamed. With my back turned, there was no way to see it, but the roof was briefly illuminated before the wave of flame hit me from behind. Knocked off balance, I skidded on the gravel and hit the raised lip of the roof, just by the fire escape. Frantically, I patted myself down. My costume wasn't on fire, but my hair – I hurriedly ran my hands over it to make sure it hadn't been ignited.

Small mercies, I thought, that there was no tar used on the roof. I could just imagine the flames igniting the rooftop, and just how little I'd be able to do if it happened.

Lung stood, slowly, still covering part of his face with his hand. He walked with a slight limp as he approached me. Blindly, he lashed out with a broad wave of flame that rolled over half the roof. I covered my head with my hands and brought my knees to my chest as the hot air and flame rushed over me. My costume seemed to take the brunt of it, but it was still hot enough I had to bite my lip to stop from making a sound.

Lung stopped advancing, slowly turning his head from one side to another.

"Cock. Sucker," he growled in his heavily accented voice, his cussing interrupted by his panting for breath, "Move. Give me something to aim for."

I held my breath and stayed as still as possible. What could I do? I still had the pepper spray in my hand, but even if I got him again, I was running the risk that he would lash out and bake me alive before I could move. If I moved first, he would hear me and I would get knocked around by another blast of flame, probably before I could get to my feet.

Lung moved his hand from his face. He blinked a few times, then looked around, then blinked a few more times. It was a matter of seconds before he could see well enough to make me out from the shadows. Wasn't pepper spray supposed to put someone down for thirty minutes? How was this monster not an A-Lister?

He suddenly moved, flames wreathing his hands, and I screwed my eyes shut.

When I heard the crackling whoosh of the flame and wasn't burned alive, I opened my eyes again. Lung was firing streams of

flame, aiming for the edge of the roof of the adjacent building, a three story apartment. I looked to see what he was aiming at, but couldn't make anything out in the gloom or in the brief second of light Lung's flames afforded.

With no warning, a massive shape landed atop Lung with an impact I could swear people heard at the other end of the street. The size of a van, the 'massive object' was animal rather than vehicle, resembling a cross between a lizard and a tiger, with tangles of muscle and bone where it ought to have skin, scales or fur. Lung was now on his knees, holding one of the beast's sizable claws away from his face with his own clawed hand.

Lung used his free hand to strike the creature across the snout. Even though he was smaller than the beast, the impact made it rear back. It took a few short steps back in reaction, and then rhino-charged him off the edge of the roof. They hit the street with an audible crash.

I stood, aware I was shaking like a leaf. I was so unsteady on my feet, from the mixed relief and fear, that I almost fell over again as two more impacts shook the roof. Two more creatures, similar to the first in texture, but slightly different in size and shape, had arrived on the rooftop. These two each had a pair of riders. I watched as the people slid off the backs of the animals. There were two girls, a guy, and a fourth I identified as male only because of the height. The tall one approached me, while the others hurried to the edge of the roof to watch Lung and the creature duke it out.

"You really saved us a lot of trouble," he told me. His voice was deep, masculine, but muffled by the helmet he wore. He was dressed entirely in black, a costume I realized was basically motorcycle leathers and a motorcycle helmet. The only thing that made me think it was a costume was the visor of his helmet. The full-face visor was

sculpted to look like a stylized skull, and was as black as the rest of his costume, with only the faint highlights of reflected light on the surface to give a sense of what it was. It was one of those costumes that people put together out of what they can scrounge up, and it wasn't half bad if you didn't look too close. He reached out a hand towards me, and I leaned away, wary.

I didn't know what to say, so I stuck to my policy of not saying anything that could get me into a worse situation.

Withdrawing his hand, the man in black jerked his thumb over one shoulder, "When we got word Lung was aiming to come after us tonight, we were pretty freaked. We were arguing strategy for the better part of the day. We eventually decided, fuck it, we'd meet him halfway. Wing it. Not my usual way of doing things, but yeah."

Behind him, one of the girls whistled sharply and pointed down at the street. The two monsters the group had been riding on bounded across the roof and leaped down to the street to join the fight.

The guy in black kept talking, "Wouldn't you know, his flunky Lee is there with a half dozen guys, but Lung and the rest of his gang are nowhere to be found," he laughed, a surprisingly normal sound for someone wearing a mask with a skull on it.

"Lee's no slouch in a fight, but there's a reason he's not leader of the ABB. He got spooked without his boss there and ran. I guess you're responsible for that?" Skull-mask waited for a response from me. When I didn't offer one, he ventured towards the edge of the roof and looked down, then spoke without turning to look at me, "Lung is getting creamed. The fuck you do to him?"

"Pepper spray, wasp and bee stings, fire ants and spider bites," the second of the girls said, answering the question for me. She was dressed in a skintight outfit that combined black with a pale shade of blue or purple – I couldn't tell in the dark – and her dark blond

hair was long and windblown. The girl grinned as she added, "He's not holding up too well. Gonna feel a helluvalot worse tomorrow."

The man in black suddenly turned to look at me, "Introductions. That's Tattletale. I'm Grue. The girl with the dogs-" he pointed to the other girl, the one who had whistled and directed the monsters. She wasn't in costume unless I counted a plaid skirt, army boots, a torn-up sleeveless T-shirt and a hard plastic, dollar-store rottweiler mask as a costume. "-We call her Bitch, her preference, but in the interests of being P.G., the good guys and media decided to call her Hellhound instead. Last and certainly least, we have Regent."

I finally caught up with what he was saying. Those monsters were *dogs*?

"Fuck you, Grue," Regent retorted, with a chuckle and a tone of voice that made it clear he wasn't really that offended. He was wearing a white mask, not quite as decorative or made up as the ones I associated with the carnivals in Venice, but similar. He'd placed a silver coronet around his short black curls, and wore a ruffled white shirt with skintight leggings tucked into knee-high boots. The outfit was very renaissance faire. He had a build that made me think more of a dancer than a bodybuilder.

Introductions done, Grue looked at me for several long moments. After a few seconds, he asked me, "Hey, you okay? You hurt?"

"The reason she's not introducing herself isn't because she's hurt," Tattletale told him, as she continued to lean over the edge of the roof and watch whatever was going on at the street level, "It's because she's shy."

Tattletale turned around and it looked like she was going to say something else, but she stopped, turning her head. The smile she'd been wearing faded, "Heads up. We've gotta scram."

Bitch nodded in response and whistled, one short whistle fol-

lowed by two long ones. After a brief pause, the building was suddenly rattled by impacts. In just moments, the three creatures of hers leaped from the alleys to either side of the building and onto the roof.

Grue turned towards me. I was still standing on the opposite end of the roof, by the fire escape. "Hey, want a ride?"

I looked at the creatures – dogs? They were bloodied, snarling creatures out of a nightmare. I shook my head. He shrugged.

"Hey," Tattletale said to me, seating herself just behind Bitch, "What's your name?"

I stared at her. My voice caught in my throat before I was able to get the words out, "I don't... I haven't picked one yet."

"Well, Bug, a cape is gonna show up in less than a minute. You did us a solid by dealing with Lung, so take my advice. Someone from the Protectorate shows up, finds two bad guys duking it out, they're not going to let one walk away. You should get out of here," She said. She flashed me a smile. She had one of those vulpine grins that turned up at the corners. Behind her simple black domino style mask, her eyes were glittering with mischief. If she had red hair, she would have made me think of a fox. She kind of did, anyways.

With that, they leaped over my head, one of the three beasts hitting or stepping on the fire escape on the way down, eliciting a screech of metal on metal.

When I realized what had just happened, I could have cried. It was easy enough to pin down Regent, Tattletale and Bitch as teenagers. It wasn't much of an intuitive leap to guess that Grue had been one too. The 'children' Lung had mentioned, the ones I had gone to so much effort to save tonight, were bad guys. Not only that, but they had mistaken me for one, too.

GESTATION 1.6

I heard the cape arrive on his souped up motorcycle. I didn't want to be seen fleeing the scene of a fight, and risk being labeled one of the bad guys by *yet another* person, but I wasn't about to get closer to the street either, in case Lung was feeling better. Since there was nowhere to go, I just stayed put. Just resting felt good.

If you'd asked me just a few hours ago about how I thought I would feel meeting a big name superhero, I would have used words like excited and giddy. The reality was that I was almost too exhausted to care.

It looked as though he flew up onto the roof, but the six-foot long weapon the man held kind of jerked as he landed. I was pretty sure I saw the tines of a grappling hook retreating back into the end of the weapon. So this was what Armsmaster looked like in person, I thought.

The largest superhero organization in the world was the Protectorate, spanning Canada and the States, with ongoing talks about including Mexico in the deal. It was a government sponsored league of superheroes with a base in each 'cape city'. That is, they had a team set up in each city with a sizable population of heroes and villains. Brockton Bay's team was officially 'The Protectorate East-North-East', and were headquartered in the floating, forcefield-shrouded island that you could see from the Boardwalk. This guy, Armsmaster, was the guy in charge of the local team. When the core group of the top Protectorate members from around Canada and the States assembled in that classic 'v' formation for the photo shoots, Arms-

master was one of the guys in the wings. This was a guy who had his own action figures. Poseable Armsmaster with interchangeable Halberd parts.

He really did look like a superhero, not like some guy in a costume. It was an important distinction. He wore body armor, dark blue with silver highlights, had a sharply angled v-shaped visor covering his eyes and nose. With only the lower half of his face exposed, I could see a beard trimmed to trace the edges of his jaw. If I had to judge, with only the lower half of his face to go by, I'd guess he was in his late twenties or early thirties.

His trademark and weapon was his Halberd, which was basically a spear with an axe head on the end, souped up with gadgets and the kind of technology you generally only saw in science fiction. He was the kind of guy who appeared on magazine covers and did interviews on TV, so you could find almost anything about Armsmaster through various media, short of his secret identity. I knew his weapon could cut through steel as though it was butter, that it had plasma injectors for stuff that the blade alone couldn't cut and that he could fire off directed electromagnetic pulses to shut down force-fields and mechanical devices.

"You gonna fight me?" He called out.

"I'm a good guy," I said.

Stepping closer to me, he tilted his head, "You don't look like one."

That stung, especially coming from him. It was like Michael Jordan saying you sucked at basketball. "That's... not intentional," I responded, not a little defensively, "I was more than halfway done putting the costume together when I realized it was already looking more edgy than I'd intended, and I couldn't do anything about it by then."

There was a long pause. Nervously, I turned my eyes from that

opaque visor. I glanced at his chest emblem, a silhouette of his visor in blue against a silver background, and was struck with the ridiculous thought that I had once owned a pair of underpants with his emblem on the front.

"You're telling the truth," he said. It was a definitive statement, which startled me. I wanted to ask how he knew, but I wasn't about to do or say anything that might change his mind.

He approached closer, looking me over as I sat there with my arms around my knees, he asked, "You need a hospital?"

"No," I said. "Don't think so. I'm as surprised as you are."

"You're a new face," he said.

"I haven't even come up with a name yet. You know how hard it is to come up with a bug-themed name that doesn't make me sound like a supervillain or a complete dork?"

He chuckled, and it sounded warm, very normal, "I wouldn't know. I got into the game early enough that I didn't have to worry about missing out on all of the good names."

There was a pause in the conversation. I suddenly felt awkward. I don't know why, but I admitted to him, "I almost died."

"That's why we have the Ward program," he said. There was no judgement in his tone, no pressure. Just a statement.

I nodded, more to give a response than out of any agreement with the answer. The Wards were the under-eighteen subdivision of the Protectorate, and Brockton Bay did have its own team of Wards, with the same naming convention as the Protectorate; The Wards East-North-East. I had considered applying to join, but the notion of escaping the stresses of high school by flinging myself into a mess of teenage drama, adult oversight and schedules seemed self-defeating.

"You get Lung?" I asked, to change the subject from the Wards. I

was pretty sure that he was obligated to try and induct new heroes into either the Protectorate or the Wards, depending on their age, to promote the whole agenda of organized heroes who are accountable for their actions, and I really didn't want him to get on my case about joining.

"Lung was unconscious, beaten and battered when I arrived. I pumped him full of tranquilizers to be safe and temporarily restrained him under a steel cage I welded to the sidewalk. I'll pick him up on my way back."

"Good," I said, "With him in jail, I'll feel like I accomplished something today. Only reason I started the fight was because I overheard him telling his men to shoot some kids. Only realized later that he was talking about some other villains."

Armsmaster turned to look at me. So I told him, walking him through the fight in general, the arrival of the teenage bad guys, and their general descriptions. Before I finished, he was pacing back and forth on the roof.

"These guys. They knew I was coming?"

I nodded, once. As much respect as I had for Armsmaster, I wasn't in much of a mood to repeat myself.

"That explains a lot," he said, staring off into the distance. After a few moments, he went on to explain, "They're slippery. On those few occasions we do manage to get in a toe to toe fight with them, they either win, or they get away more or less unscathed, or both. We know so little about them. Grue and Hellhound were working on their own before they joined the group, so there's some information there, but the other two? They're nonentities. If the girl Tattletale has some way of detecting or tracking us, it would go a long way towards explaining why they're doing as well as they are."

It kind of surprised me to hear one of the top level heroes admit-

ting to being anything less than perfectly on top of things.

"It's funny," I said, after a few moment's thought, "They didn't seem that hardcore. Grue said they were kind of panicking when they heard Lung was coming after them, and they were casually joking around while the fight was going on. Grue was making fun of Regent."

"They said all this in front of you?" he asked.

I shrugged, "I think they thought I was helping them out. The way Tattletale talked, I think she thought I was a bad guy too or something." With a touch of bitterness, I said, "Dunno, I guess it was the costume that led them to that assumption."

"Could you have taken them in a fight?" Armsmaster asked me.

I started to shrug, and winced a little. I was feeling a little sore in the shoulder, where I'd tumbled on the roof after being blasted by Lung's flames. I said, "Like you said, we don't know a lot about them, but I think that girl with the dogs—"

"Hellhound," Armsmaster said.

"I think she could have kicked my ass on her own, so no. I probably couldn't have fought them."

"Then count it as a good thing that they got the wrong impression," Armsmaster said.

"I'll try to look at it that way," I said, struck by how he easily he was able to employ the whole 'take a negative and turn it into a positive' mindset I'd been trying to maintain. I envied that.

"That a girl," he said, "And while we're looking forward, we need to decide where we go from here."

My heart sank. I knew he was going to bring up the Wards again.

"Who gets the credit for Lung?"

Caught off guard, I looked up at him. I started to speak, but he held up his hand.

"Hear me out. What you've done tonight is spectacular. You played a part in getting a major villain into custody. You just need to consider the consequences."

"Consequences," I muttered, even as the word *spectacular* rang in my ears.

"Lung has an extensive gang throughout Brockton Bay and neighboring cities. More than that, he has two superpowered flunkies. Oni Lee and Bakuda."

I shook my head, "I know about Oni Lee, and Grue mentioned fighting him. I've never heard of Bakuda."

Armsmaster nodded, "Not surprising. She's new. What we know about her is limited. She made her first appearance and demonstration of her powers by way of a drawn out terrorism campaign against Cornell University. Lung apparently recruited her and brought her to Brockton Bay after her plans were foiled by the New York Protectorate. This is... something of a concern."

"What are her powers?"

"Are you aware of the Tinker classification?"

I started to shrug, but remembered my sore shoulder and nodded instead. It was probably more polite, too. I said, "Covers anyone with powers that give them an advanced grasp of science. Lets them make technology years ahead of its time. Ray guns, ice blasters, mechanized suits of armor, advanced computers."

"Close enough," Armsmaster said. It struck me he would be a Tinker, if his Halberd and armor were any indication. That, or he got his stuff from someone else. He elaborated, "Well, most Tinkers have a specialty or a special trick. Something they're particularly good at or something that they can do, which other Tinkers can't. Bakuda's specialty is bombs."

I stared at him. A woman with a power that let her make bombs

that were technologically decades ahead of their time. No wonder he saw it as a concern.

"Now I want you to consider the danger involved in taking the credit for Lung's capture. Without a doubt, Oni Lee and Bakuda will be looking to accomplish two goals. Freeing their boss and getting vengeance on the one responsible. I suspect you're now aware... these are scary people. Scarier in some ways than their boss."

"You're saying I shouldn't take the credit," I said.

"I'm saying you have two options. Option one is to join the Wards, where you'll have support and protection in the event of an altercation. Option two is to keep your head down. Don't take the credit. Fly under the radar."

I wasn't prepared to make a decision like that. Usually, I went to sleep at eleven or so, waking up at six thirty to get ready for my morning run. At my best guess, it was somewhere between one and two in the morning. I was emotionally exhausted from the highs and lows of the evening, and I could barely wrap my head around the complications and headaches that would come from joining the Wards, let alone having two insanely dangerous sociopaths coming after me.

On top of that, I wasn't so ignorant as to miss Armsmaster's motives. If I opted to not take the credit for Lung's capture, Armsmaster would, I was sure. I didn't want to get on the bad side of a major player.

"Please keep my involvement in Lung's capture secret," I told him, painfully disappointed to have to say it, even as I knew it made the most sense.

He smiled, which I hadn't expected. He had a nice smile. It made me think that he could win the hearts of a lot of women, whatever the top two-thirds of his face looked like. "I think you'll look back

and see this was a smart decision,” Armsmaster said, turning to walk to the other end of the roof, “Call me at the PHQ if you’re ever in a pinch.” He stepped off the edge of the roof and dropped out of sight.

Call me if you’re ever in a pinch. He’d been saying, without openly admitting, that he owed me one. He would take the lion’s share of the credit for Lung’s capture, but he owed me one.

Before I was all the way down the fire escape, I heard the thrum of his motorcycle, presumably carrying Lung towards a life of confinement. I could hope.

It would take me a half hour to get home. On the way, I would stop and pull on the sweatshirt and jeans I had hidden. I knew my dad went to sleep even earlier than I did, and he slept like a log, so I had nothing to worry about as far as wrapping up the night.

It could have gone worse. Strange as it sounds, those words were a security blanket I wrapped around myself to keep myself from dwelling on the fact that tomorrow was a school day.

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"We don't know how long he had been there. Suspended in the air above the Atlantic Ocean. On May twentieth, 1982, an ocean liner was crossing from Plymouth to Boston when a passenger spotted him. He was naked, his arms to his sides, his long hair blowing in the wind as he stood in the sky, nearly a hundred feet above the gently cresting waves. His skin and hair can only be described as a burnished gold. With neither body hair nor clothes to cover him, it is said, he seemed almost artificial.

"After a discussion including passenger and crew, the liner detoured to get closer. It was a sunny day, and passengers crowded to the railings to get a better look. As if sharing their curiosity, the figure drew closer as well. His expression was unchanging, but witnesses at the scene reported that he appeared deeply sad.

"I thought he was going to crack his facade and cry any moment', said Grace Lands, 'But when I reached out and touched his fingertips, I was the one who burst into tears.'

"That boat trip was a final journey for me. I had cancer, and I wasn't brave enough to face it. Can't believe I'm admitting this in front of a camera, but I was going back to Boston, where I was born, to end things myself. After I met him, I changed my mind. Didn't matter anyways. I went to a doctor, and he said there was no sign I ever had the disease.'

"My brother, Andrew Hawke, was the last passenger to make any sort of contact with him, I remember. He climbed up onto the railing, and, almost falling off, he clasped the hand of the golden man.

The rest of us had to grab onto him to keep him from falling. Whatever happened left him with a quiet awe. When the man with the golden skin flew away, my brother stayed silent. The rest of the way to Boston, my brother didn't say a word. When we docked, and the spell finally broke, my brother babbled his excitement to reporters like a child.'

"The golden man would reappear several more times in the coming months and years. At some point, he donned clothing. At first, a sheet worn over one shoulder and pinned at either side of the waist, then more conventional clothes. In 1999, he donned the white body-suit he still wears today. For more than a decade, we have wondered, where did our golden man get these things? Who was he in contact with?

"Periodically at first, then with an increasing frequency, the golden man started to intervene in times of crisis. For events as small as a car accident, as great as natural disasters, he has arrived and used his abilities to save us. A flash of light to freeze water reinforcing a levee stressed by a hurricane. A terrorist act averted. A serial murderer caught. A volcano quelled. Miracles, it was said.

"His pace increased, perhaps because he was still learning what he could do, perhaps because he was getting a greater sense of where he was needed. By the middle of the 1990s, he was traveling from crisis to crisis, flying faster than the speed of sound. In fifteen years, he has not rested.

"He has been known to speak just once in thirty years. After extinguishing widespread fire in Alexandrovsk, he paused to survey the scene and be sure no blazes remained. A reporter spoke to him, and asked, 'Kto vy?' – what are you?

"Shocking the world, caught on camera in a scene replayed innumerable times, he answered in a voice that sounded as though it

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might never have uttered a sound before. Barely audible, he told her, 'Scion'.

"It became the name we used for him. Ironic, because we took a word that meant descendant, and used it to name the first of many superpowered individuals – parahumans – to appear across Earth.

"Just five years after Scion's first appearance, the superheroes emerged from the cover of rumor and secrecy to show themselves to the public. Though the villains followed soon after, it was the heroes who shattered any illusions of the parahumans being divine figures. In 1989, attempting to quell a riot over a basketball game in Michigan, the superhero known to the public as Vikare stepped in, only to be clubbed over the head. He died not long after of a brain embolism. Later, he would be revealed to be Andrew Hawke.

"The golden age of the parahumans was thus short lived. They were not the deific figures they had appeared to be. Parahumans were, after all, people with powers, and people are flawed at their core. Government agencies took a firmer hand, and state-

The television flicked off, and the screen went black, cutting the documentary off mid sentence. Danny Hebert sighed and sat down on the bed, only to stand just a moment later and resume pacing.

It was three fifteen in the morning, and his daughter Taylor was not in her bedroom.

Danny ran his hands through his hair, which was thinned enough at the top to be closer to baldness than not. He liked to be the first to arrive at work, watching everyone arrive, having them know he was there for them. So he usually went to bed early; he'd turn in at ten in the evening, give or take depending on what was on TV. Only tonight, a little past midnight, he'd been disturbed from restless sleep when he had felt rather than heard the shutting of the back door of the house, just below his bedroom. He had checked on his daughter,

and he'd found her room empty.

So he had waited for his daughter to return for three hours.

Countless times, he had glanced out the window, hoping to see Taylor coming in.

For the twentieth time, he felt the urge to ask his wife for help, for advice, for support. But her side of the bed was empty and it had been for some time. Daily, it seemed, he was struck by the urge to call her cell phone. He knew it was stupid – she wouldn't pick up – and if he dwelt on that for too long, he became angry at her, which just made him feel worse.

He wondered, even as he knew the answer, why he hadn't gotten Taylor a cell phone. Danny didn't know what his daughter was doing, what would drive her to go out at night. She wasn't the type. He could tell himself that most fathers felt that way about their daughters, but at the same time, he knew. Taylor wasn't social. She didn't go to parties, she wouldn't drink, she wasn't even that interested in champagne when they celebrated the New Year together.

Two ominous possibilities kept nagging at him, both too believable. The first was that Taylor had gone out for fresh air, or even for a run. She wasn't happy, especially at school, he knew, and exercise was her way of working through it. He could see her doing it on a Sunday night, with a fresh week at school looming. He liked that her running made her feel better about herself, that she seemed to be doing it in a reasonable, healthy way. He just hated that she had to do it here, in this neighborhood. Because here, a skinny girl in her mid-teens was an easy target for attack. A mugging or worse – he couldn't even articulate the worst of the possibilities in his own thoughts without feeling physically sick. If she had gone out at eleven in the evening for a run and hadn't come back by three in the morning, then it meant something had happened.

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He glanced out the window again, at that corner of the house where the pool of illumination beneath the streetlight would let him see her approaching. Nothing.

The second possibility wasn't much better. He knew Taylor was being bullied. Danny had found that out in January, when his little girl had been pulled out of school and taken to the hospital. Not the emergency room, but the psychiatric ward. She wouldn't say by whom, but under the influence of the drugs they had given her to calm down, she had admitted she was being victimized by bullies, using the plural to give him a clue that it was a they and not a he or a she. She hadn't mentioned it – the incident or the bullying – since. If he pushed, she only tensed up and grew more withdrawn. He had resigned himself to letting her reveal the details in her own time, but months had passed without any hints or clues being offered.

There was precious little Danny could do on the subject, either. He had threatened to sue the school after his daughter had been taken to the hospital, and the school board had responded by settling, paying her hospital bills and promising they would look out for her to prevent such events from occurring in the future. It was a feeble promise made by a chronically overworked staff and it didn't do a thing to ease his worries. His efforts to have her change schools had been stubbornly countered with rules and regulations about the maximum travel times a student was allowed to have between home and a given school. The only other school within a reasonable distance of Taylor's place of residence was Arcadia High, and it was already desperately overcrowded with more than two hundred students on a list requesting admittance.

With all that in mind, when his daughter disappeared until the middle of the night, he couldn't shake the idea that the bullies might have lured her out with blackmail, threats or empty promises. He

only knew about the one incident, the one that had landed her in the hospital, but it had been grotesque. It had been implied, but never elaborated on, that more had been going on. He could imagine these boys or girls that were tormenting his daughter, egging one another on as they came up with more creative ways to humiliate or harm her. Taylor hadn't said as much aloud, but whatever had been going on had been mean, persistent and threatening enough that Emma, Taylor's closest friend for years, had stopped spending time with her. It galled him.

Impotent. Danny was helpless where it counted. There was no action he could take – his one call to the police at two in the morning had only earned him a tired explanation that the police couldn't act or look for her without something more to go on. If his daughter was still gone after twelve hours, he'd been told, he should call them again. All he could do was wait and pray with his heart in his throat that the phone wouldn't ring, a police officer or nurse on the other end ready to tell him what had happened to his daughter.

The slightest of vibrations in the house marked the escape of the warm air in the house to the cold outdoors, and there was a muffled whoosh as the kitchen door shut again. Danny Hebert felt a thrill of relief coupled with abject fear. If he went downstairs to find his daughter, would he find her hurting or hurt? Or would his presence make things worse, her own father seeing her at her most vulnerable after humiliation at the hands of bullies? She had told him, in every way except articulating it aloud, that she didn't want that. She had pleaded with him, with body language and averted eye contact, unfinished sentences and things left unsaid, not to ask, not to push, not to see, when it came to the bullying. He couldn't say why, exactly. Home was an escape from that, he'd suspected, and if he recognized the bullying, made it a reality here, maybe she wouldn't have that re-

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lief from it. Perhaps it was shame, that his daughter didn't want him to see her like that, didn't want to be that weak in front of him. He really hoped that wasn't the case.

So he ran his fingers through his hair once more and sat down on the corner of the bed, elbows on his knees, hands on his head, and stared at his closed bedroom door. His ears were peeled for the slightest clue. The house was old, and it hadn't been a high quality building when it had been new, so the walls were thin and the structure prone to making noise at every opportunity. There was the faintest sound of a door closing downstairs. The bathroom? It wouldn't be the basement door, with no reason for her to go down there, and he couldn't imagine it was a closet, because after two or three minutes, the same door opened and closed again.

After something banged on the kitchen counter, there was little but the occasional groan of floorboards. Five or ten minutes after she had come in, there was the rhythmic creak of the stairs as she ascended. Danny thought about clearing his throat to let her know he was awake and available should she knock on his door, but decided against it. He was being cowardly, he thought, as if his clearing of his throat would give reality to his fears.

Her door shut carefully, almost inaudibly, with the slightest tap of door on doorframe. Danny stood, abruptly, opening his door, ready to cross the hall and knock on her door. To verify that his daughter was okay.

He was stopped by the smell of jam and toast. She had made a late night snack. It filled him with relief. He couldn't imagine his daughter, after being mugged, tormented or humiliated, coming home to have toast with jam as a snack. Taylor was okay, or at least, okay enough to be left alone.

He let out a shuddering sigh of relief and retreated to his room to

sit on the bed.

Relief became anger. He was angry at Taylor, for making him worry, and then not even going out of her way to let him know she was okay. He felt a smouldering resentment towards the city, for having neighborhoods and people he couldn't trust his daughter to. He hated the bullies that preyed on his daughter. Underlying it all was frustration with himself. Danny Hebert was the one person he could control in all of this, and Danny Hebert had failed to do anything that mattered. He hadn't gotten answers, hadn't stopped the bullies, hadn't protected his daughter. Worst of all was the idea that this might have happened before, with him simply sleeping through it rather than laying awake.

He stopped himself from walking into his daughter's room, from shouting at her and demanding answers, even if it was what he wanted, more than anything. Where had she been, what had she been doing? Was she hurt? Who were these people that were tormenting her? He knew that by confronting her and getting angry at her, he would do more harm than good, would threaten to sever any bond of trust they had forged between them.

Danny's father had been a powerful, heavyset man, and Danny hadn't gotten any of those genes. Danny had been a nerd when the term was still young in popular culture, stick thin, awkward, short sighted, glasses, bad fashion sense. What he had inherited was his father's famous temper. It was quick to rise and startling in its intensity. Unlike his father, Danny had only ever hit someone in anger twice, both times when he was much younger. That said, just like his father, he could and would go off on tirades that would leave people shaking. Danny had long viewed the moment he'd started to see himself as a man, an adult, to be the point in time where he had sworn to himself that he wouldn't ever lose his temper with his family. He

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wouldn't pass that on to his child the way his father had to him.

He had never broken that oath with Taylor, and knowing that was what kept him contained in his room, pacing back and forth, red in the face and wanting to punch something. While he'd never gotten angry at her, never screamed at her, he knew Taylor had seen him angry. Once, he had been at work, talking to a mayor's aide. The man had told Danny that the revival projects for the Docks were being cancelled and that, contrary to promises, there were to be layoffs rather than new jobs for the already beleaguered Dockworkers. Taylor had been spending the morning in his office on the promise that they would go out for the afternoon, and had been in a position to see him fly off the handle in the worst way with the man. Four years ago, he had lost his temper with Annette for the first time, breaking his oath to himself. That had been the last time he had seen her. Taylor hadn't been there to see him shouting at her mother, but he was fairly certain she'd heard some of it. It shamed him.

The third and last time that he had lost his temper where Taylor had been in a position to know had been when she had been hospitalized following the incident in January. He'd screamed at the school's principal, who had deserved it, and at Taylor's then-Biology teacher, who probably hadn't. It had been bad enough that a nurse had threatened to call for a police officer, and Danny, barely mollified, had stomped from the hallway to the hospital room to find his daughter more or less conscious and wide eyed in reaction. Danny harbored a deep fear that the reason Taylor hadn't offered any details on the bullying was out of fear he would, in blind rage, do something about it. It made him feel sick, the notion that he might have contributed something to his daughter's self imposed isolation in how she was dealing with her problems.

It took Danny a long time to calm down, helped by telling himself

WORM

over and over that Taylor was okay, that she was home, that she was safe. It was something of a blessing that, as the anger faded, he felt drained. He climbed into the left side of the bed, leaving the right side empty out of a habit he'd yet to break, and pulled the covers up around himself.

He would talk to Taylor in the morning. Get an answer of some sort.

He dreamed of the ocean.

Arc 2

Insinuation

INSINUATION 2.1

I woke to the muffled sound of the radio in the bathroom. Reaching over to my alarm clock, I turned it around. 6:28. Which made today a weekday like any other. My alarm was set for six thirty, but I almost never needed it, because my dad was always in the shower at the same time. Routines defined us.

As a wave of fatigue swept over me, I wondered if I might be sick. It took me a few moments of staring up at the ceiling to remember the events of last night. Small wonder I was tired. I had gotten home, snuck inside and gone to bed at close to three thirty, just three hours ago. With all that had happened, I hadn't slept those full three hours, either.

I forced myself out of bed. As a slave to my routine, it would be wrong to do otherwise. I made myself change into sweats and walk down to the kitchen sink to wash my face, fighting to keep awake. I was sitting at the kitchen table, pulling on my sneakers, when my dad came downstairs in his bathrobe.

My dad is not what you'd call an attractive man. Beanpole thin, weak chin, thinning dark hair that was on the cusp of baldness, big eyes and glasses that magnified those eyes further. As he entered the kitchen, he looked surprised to see me there. That's just the way my dad always looked: constantly bewildered. That, and a little defeated.

"Good morning, kiddo," he said, entering the kitchen and leaning down to kiss the crown of my head.

"Hey, dad."

He was already stepping towards the fridge as I replied. He looked

over his shoulder, "A little glum?"

"Hunh?"

"You sound down," he said.

I shook my head, "Tired. I didn't sleep well."

There was the slap of bacon hitting the frying pan. It was sizzling by the time he spoke, "You know, you could go back to bed, sleep in for another hour or so. You don't have to go on your run."

I smiled. It was equal parts annoying and sweet, that my dad hated me running. He worried about my safety, and couldn't turn down a chance to drop hints that I should stop, or be safer, or join a gym. I wasn't sure if he'd worry more or less if I told him about my powers.

"You know I do, dad. If I don't go today, it'll be that much harder to make myself get up and do it tomorrow."

"You've got the, uh..."

"I've got the tube of pepper spray in my pocket," I said. He bobbed his head in acknowledgement. It was only moments later that I realized I didn't have it. The pepper spray was with my costume, in the coal chute in the basement. I felt a pang of guilt at realizing I'd lied to my dad.

"O.J.?" he asked.

"I'll get it," I said, heading to the fridge for the orange juice. While I was at the fridge, I also grabbed some applesauce. As I returned to the table, my dad slapped some french toast on the frying pan to join the bacon. The room filled with the aroma of the cooking food. I helped myself to the applesauce.

"You know Gerry?" my dad asked.

I shrugged.

"You met him once or twice when you've visited me at work. Big guy, burly, Black Irish?"

Shrugging again, I took a bite of french toast. My dad was part of

the Dockworkers Association, as the Union spokesperson and head of hiring. With the state of the Docks being what they were, that meant my dad was pretty much in charge of telling everyone that there were no jobs to be had, day after day.

"Rumor's going around he found work. Guess with who."

"Dunno," I said, around a mouthful of food.

"He's going to be one of Über and Leet's henchmen."

I raised my eyebrows. Über and Leet were local villains with a video game theme. They were pretty much as incompetent as villains could be while staying out of jail. They barely even rated as B-list.

"They going to make him wear a uniform? Bright primary colors, Tron style?"

My dad chuckled, "Probably."

"We're supposed to talk about how the powers thing has influenced our lives in class today. Maybe I'll mention that."

We ate in silence for a minute or two.

"I heard you come in late last night," he said.

I just gave him a small nod and took another bite of french toast, even as my heart rate tripled and my mind searched for excuses.

"Like I said," I finally opened my mouth, looking down at my plate, "I just couldn't sleep. I couldn't get my thoughts to settle down. I got out of bed and tried pacing, but it didn't help, so I stepped outside and walked around the neighborhood." I wasn't totally lying. I'd had nights like that. Last night just hadn't been one of them, and I had gone walking around the neighborhood, even if it was in a different way than I'd implied.

"Christ, Taylor," my father answered, "This isn't the kind of area where you can walk around in the middle of the night."

"I had the pepper spray," I protested, lamely. That wasn't a lie, at least.

"What if you get caught off guard? What if the guy has a knife, or a gun?" my father asked.

Or pyrokinesis and the ability to grow armor plating and claws? I felt a little knot of ugliness in the pit of my stomach at my father's concern for me. It was all the more intense because it was so justified. I had almost died last night.

"What's going on, that has you so anxious you can't sleep?" he questioned me.

"School," I said, swallowing around a lump in my throat, "Friends, the lack thereof."

"It's not better?" he asked, carefully stepping around the elephant in the room, the bullies.

If it was, I wouldn't be having problems, would I? I just gave him a one shoulder shrug and forced myself to take another bite of french toast. My shoulder twinged a little as it made the bruises from last night felt. As much as I didn't feel like eating, I knew my stomach would be growling at me before lunch if I didn't. That was even without accounting for the energy I burned running, let alone the escapades of last night.

When my dad realized I didn't have an answer for him, he resumed eating. He only had one bite before he put his fork down again with a clink on the plate.

"No more going out in the middle of the night," he said, "Or I'm putting a bell on the doors."

He would, too. I just nodded and promised myself I would be more careful. When I had come in, I had been so tired and sore that I hadn't given any thought to the click of the door, the rattle of the lock or the creaks of floorboards that were older than me.

"Okay," I said, adding, "I'm sorry." Even with that, I felt a twinge of guilt. My apology was sincere in feeling, but I was making it with

the knowledge that I would probably do the same thing again. It felt wrong.

He gave me a smile that seemed almost like an unspoken 'I'm sorry too'.

I finished off my plate and stood up to put it in the sink and run water over it.

"Going on your run?"

"Yeah," I said, put my dishes in the beaten up old dishwasher and bent down to give my dad a hug on my way to the door.

"Taylor, have you been smoking?"

I shook my head.

"Your hair is, uh, burnt. At the ends, there."

I thought back to the previous night. Getting hit in the back by one of Lung's blasts of flame.

Shrugging, I suggested, "Stove, maybe?"

"Be safe," my dad said, emphasizing each word. I took that as my cue to go, heading out the side door and breaking into an all out run the moment I was past the chain link gate at the side of the house.

INSINUATION 2.2

The run had helped to wake me up, as did the hot shower and a cup of the coffee my dad had left in the pot. Even so, the fatigue didn't help the feeling of disorientation over just how normal the day seemed as I made my way to school. Just a matter of hours ago, I had been in a life and death fight, I had even met Armsmaster. Now it was a day like any other.

I felt a bit nervous as I got to homeroom. Having basically skipped two classes the previous Friday, failing to turn in a major assignment, I figured that Mrs. Knott probably knew already. I didn't feel relieved when Mrs. Knott glanced up at me and gave a tight smile before turning her attention back to her computer. That just meant the humiliation would be redoubled if and when class was interrupted by someone coming down from the office. A part of me just wanted to miss this class too, just to avoid the potential humiliation and avoid drawing attention.

All in all, I felt anxious as I made my way to my computer, which kind of sucked because Computer class was one of the few parts of the school day I didn't usually dread. For one thing, it was the one class in which I was doing well. More to the point, neither Madison, Sophia nor Emma were in this class, though some of their friends were. Those girls didn't usually feel the need to harass me without the trio around, and I was further removed from them because I was in the advanced stream of the class. A good three quarters of the people in the room were computer illiterate, being from families that didn't have the money for computers or families that didn't have much in-

terest in the things, so they practiced typing without looking at the keyboard and had lessons in using search engines. By contrast, I was in the group that was learning some basic programming and spreadsheets. It didn't do a lot for my already geeky reputation, but I could deal.

Mrs. Knott was an alright teacher, if not the most hands on; she was usually content to give us advanced students an in-class assignment and then focus on the more rambunctious majority for the rest of the class. This suited me just fine – I usually wrapped up the assignment in a half hour, leaving me an hour to use as I saw fit. I had been recalling and going over the events of the previous night during my morning run, and the first thing that I did when the ancient desktop finished its agonizing load process was to start digging for information.

The go-to place for news and discussion on capes was Parahumans Online. The front page had constant updates on recent, international news featuring capes. From there, I could go to the wiki, where there was information on individual capes, groups and events, or to the message boards, which broke down into nearly a hundred sub-boards, for specific cities and capes. I opened the wiki in one tab, then found and opened the message board for Brockton Bay in another.

I had the sense that either Tattletale or Grue were the leader of the group I had run into. Turning my attention to Tattletale, I searched the wiki. The result I got was disappointingly short, starting with a header reading “This article is a stub. Be a hero and help us expand it.” There was a one sentence blurb on how she was a alleged villain active in Brockton Bay, with a single blurry picture. The only new information for me was that her costume was lavender. A search of the message boards turned up absolutely nothing. There wasn't even

a hint as to what her power was.

I looked up Grue. There was actually information about him, but nothing detailed or definitive. The wiki stated he had been active for nearly three years, dealing in petty crimes such as robbing small stores and doing some work as an enforcer for those who wanted a little superpowered muscle along for a job. Recently, he had turned to higher scale crime, including corporate theft and robbing a casino, together with his new team. His power was listed as darkness generation in the sidebar under his picture. The picture seemed crisp enough, but the focus of it, Grue, was just a blurry black silhouette in the center.

I searched for Bitch, next. No results. I did another search for her more official title, Hellhound, and got a wealth of information. Rachel Lindt had never made any real attempt to hide her identity. She had apparently been homeless through most of her criminal career, just living on the streets and moving on whenever police or a cape came after her. The sightings and encounters with the homeless girl ended around a year ago – I figured that was when she joined forces with Grue, Tattletale and Regent. The picture in the sidebar was taken from surveillance camera footage – an unmasked, dark haired girl who I wouldn't have called pretty. She had a squarish, blunt-featured face with thick eyebrows. She was riding atop one of her monstrous 'dogs' like a jockey rides a horse, down the middle lane of a street.

According to the wiki entry, her powers manifested when she was fourteen, followed almost immediately by her demolishing the foster home she had been living in, injuring her foster mother and two other foster children in the process. This was followed by a two year series of skirmishes and retreats across Maine as various heroes and teams tried to apprehend her, and she either defeated them or suc-

cessfully evaded capture. She had no powers that would have made her any stronger or faster than the average Jane, but she was apparently able to turn ordinary dogs into the creatures I had seen on the rooftop. Monsters the size of a car, all muscle, bone, fang and claw. A red box near the bottom of the page read, "Rachel Lindt has a public identity, but is known to be particularly hostile, antisocial and violent. If recognized, do not approach or provoke. Leave the area and notify authorities as to her last known location." At the very bottom of the page was a list of links that were related to her: two fan-sites and a news article relating to her early activities. A search of the message boards turned up too many results, leaving me unable to sift through the crap, the arguments, the speculation and the villain worship to find any genuine morsels of information. If nothing else, she was notorious. I sighed and moved on, making a mental note to do more investigation when I had the time.

The last member of the group was Regent. Given what Armsmaster had said about the guy being low profile, I didn't expect to find much. I was surprised to find less than that. Nothing. My search on the wiki turned up only a default response, "There are no results matching this query. 32 unique IP addresses have searched the Parahumans.net Wiki for 'Regent' in 2011. Would you like to create the page?" The message board didn't turn up anything else. I even did a search for alternate spellings of his name, such as Regence and Recant, in case I had heard it wrong. Nothing turned up.

If my mood had been on the sour side as I got to homeroom, the dead ends only made it worse. I turned my attention to the in-class assignment, making a working calculator in Visual Basic, but it was too trivial to distract me. The work from Thursday and Friday had already given us the tools to do the job, so it was really just busywork. I didn't mind learning stuff, but work for the sake of doing work was

annoying. I did the bare minimum, checked it for any bugs, moved the file to the 'completed work' folder and returned to surfing the web. All in all, the work barely took fifteen minutes.

I looked up Lung on the wiki, which I had done often enough before, as part of my research and preparation for being a superhero. I'd wanted to be sure I knew who prominent local villains were and what they could do. The search for 'Lung' redirected to a catch-all page on his gang, the ABB, with quite a bit of detailed information. The information on Lung's powers was pretty in line with my own experience, though there was no mention of the super-hearing or him being fireproof. I debated adding it, but decided against it. There were security concerns with my submission being tracked back to Winslow High, and then to me. I figured it would probably be deleted as unsupported speculation, anyways.

The section beneath the description of Lung and his powers covered his subordinates. He was estimated to have forty or fifty thugs working for him across Brockton Bay, largely drawn from the ranks of Asian youth. It was pretty unconventional for a gang to include members of the variety of nationalities that the ABB did, but Lung had made it a mission to conquer and absorb every gang with Asian members and many without. Once he had the manpower he needed, the non-Asian gangs were cannibalized for assets, their members discarded. Even though there were no more major gangs in the east end of town to absorb, he was still recruiting zealously. His method, now, was to go after anyone older than twelve and younger than sixty. It didn't matter if you were a gang member or not. If you were Asian and you lived in Brockton Bay, Lung and his people expected you to either join or to pay tribute one way or another. There had been local news reports on it, newspaper articles, and I could remember seeing signs in the guidance counselor's office detailing

where people who were targeted in this way could go for help.

Lung's lieutenants were listed as Oni Lee and Bakuda. I already had some general knowledge about Oni Lee, but I was intrigued to see there were recent updates to his wiki entry. There were specific details on his powers: He could teleport, but when he did so, he didn't disappear. As he teleported, his original self, for lack of a better term, would stay where it was and remain active for five to ten seconds before disintegrating into a cloud of carbon ash. Essentially, he could create another version of himself anywhere nearby, while the old version could stick around long enough to distract or attack you. If that wasn't scary enough, there was an report of him holding a grenade in his hand as he repeatedly duplicated himself, with his short lived duplicates acting as suicide bombers. Topping it all off, Oni Lee's wiki page had a similar red warning box to the one that Bitch/Hellhound had on hers, minus the bit about his public identity. From what they knew about him, authorities had seen fit to note him a sociopath. The warning covered the same essential elements: exceedingly violent, dangerous to approach, should not be provoked, and so on. I glanced at his picture. His costume consisted of a black bodysuit with a black bandoleer and belt for his knives, guns and grenades. The only color on him was an ornate Japanese-style demon mask, crimson with two green stripes down either side. Except for the mask, his costume gave off the distinct impression of a ninja, which just added weight to the notion that this was a guy who could and would slide a knife between your ribs.

Bakuda was a new entry, added to the ABB wiki page just ten days ago. The picture only showed her from the shoulders up, a girl with straight black hair, large opaque goggles over her eyes and a metal mask with a gas mask styled filter covering the lower half of her face. A braided cord of black, yellow and green wires looped over one of

her shoulders. I couldn't pinpoint her ethnicity with the mask and goggles, and her age wasn't any easier to figure out.

The wiki had a lot of the same details Armsmaster had mentioned to me. Bakuda had essentially held a university ransom and she did it with her superhuman ability to design and fabricate high tech bombs. There was a link to a video titled 'Bomb Threat @ Cornell', but I didn't think it wise to play it in school, especially without headphones. I made a mental note to check it out when I got home.

The next thing that caught my eye was the section heading titled 'Defeats and Captures'. I scrolled down to read it. According to the wiki, Lung had apparently suffered a number of minor defeats at the hands of various teams, ranging from the Guild to the local teams of New Wave, the Wards and the Protectorate, but consistently managed to evade capture until last night. A blurb read, 'Armsmaster successfully ambushed and defeated the leader of the ABB, who was weakened from a recent encounter with a rival gang. Lung was taken to the PHQ for holding until the villain's trial by teleconference. Given Lung's extensive and well documented criminal history, it is expected he will face imprisonment in the Birdcage should he be found guilty at trial.'

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I wasn't sure what to think. By all rights, I should have been angry that Armsmaster took the credit for the fight that could have cost me my life. Instead, I felt a building excitement. I felt like shaking the shoulder of the guy sitting next to me and point to the screen, saying, "Me, I made that possible! Me!"

With a renewed enthusiasm, I switched tabs to the message board and began looking to see what people were saying about it. A post by a fan or minion of Lung threatened violence against Armsmaster. There was a request by someone asking for more information on

the fight. I was given pause by one post that asked whether Bakuda could or would use a large scale bomb and the threat of potentially thousands or hundreds of thousands dead, to ransom Lung back.

I tried to put that out of my mind. If it happened, it would be the responsibility of heroes better and more experienced than I.

It struck me that there was one person I hadn't looked for. Myself. I opened up the advanced search page for the Parahumans.net message board and did a search for multiple terms. I included insect, spider, swarm, bug, plague, and a mess of other terms that had struck me when I had been trying to brainstorm a good hero name. I narrowed the timeframe of posts to search for posts made within the past 12 hours and hit Search.

My efforts turned up two posts. One referred to a villain called Pestilence, active in the UK. Apparently Pestilence was one of the people who could use 'magic'. That is, he was if you believed magic was real, and not just some convoluted or deluded interpretation of a given set of powers.

The second post was in the 'Connections' section of the message board, where rescued damsels left their contact information for their dashing heroes, where conventions and fan gatherings were organized and where people posted job offers for capes and the cape-obsessed. Most were cryptic or vague, referring to stuff only the people in question would know.

The message was titled, simply, "Bug"

I clicked it and waited impatiently for the outdated system and overloaded school modem to load up the page. What I got was brief.

Subject: Bug

Owe you one. Would like to repay the favor. Meet?

Send a message,

Tt.

The post was followed by two pages of people commenting. Three people suggested it was something important, while a half dozen more people decried them as tinfoil hats, Parahumans.net's term for conspiracy theorists.

It was meaningful, though. I couldn't interpret it any other way; Tattletale had found a way to get in contact with me.

INSINUATION 2.3

I didn't have any time to contemplate the message I'd received from Tattletale. The bell rang and I had to hurry to properly log off and shut down before heading to my next class. As I gathered my stuff, I realized I had been so caught up in researching on the villains I'd met last night and in Tattletale's message that I had forgotten to worry about getting into trouble for skipping class. I felt a kind of resignation as I realized I would have to face the music later in the day, anyways.

Madison was already in her seat as I got to the classroom. She had a pair of girls crouching by either side of her desk, and all three of them broke into giggles as they saw me. Bitches.

My seat of choice was the far right, front row, closest to the door. Lunch hour and immediately after school was when the trio tended to give me the hardest time, so I tried to sit as close as possible to the door, for a quick escape. I spotted a puddle of orange juice on the seat, with the empty plastic bottle lying just underneath the chair. Madison was going for a two for one. It was both a 'prank' and a reminder of how they had doused me with juice and soft drinks last Friday. Irritated, I carefully avoided looking at Madison and took an empty seat a few rows back.

Mr Gladly entered the room, he was short and young enough you could almost mistake him for another high school student. It took a few minutes for him to start the class, and he immediately ordered us to break into groups of four to share our homework with one another and to prepare to share it with the rest of the class. The group

that had the most to contribute would win the prize he had mentioned on Friday, treats from the vending machine.

It was stuff like this that made Mr. Gladly my least favorite teacher. I got the impression he'd be surprised to hear he was *anyone's* least favorite teacher, but that was just one more point against him in my book. I don't think he comprehended why people might not like him, or how miserable group work was when you didn't identify with any of the groups or cliques in the school. He just figured people liked doing group work because it let them talk and hang out with their friends in class.

While the class got sorted, I figured I'd avoid standing around like a loser with no group to join and get something else out of the way. I approached the desk at the front of the room.

"Mr. Gladly?"

"Call me Mr. G. Mr. Gladly is my dad," he informed me with a sort of mock sternness.

"Sorry, uh, Mr. G. I need a new textbook."

He gave me a curious look, "What happened to your old one?"

Soaked with grape juice by a trio of harpies. "I lost it," I lied.

"Replacement textbooks are thirty five dollars. I don't expect it now, but..."

"I'll have it for you by the end of the week," I finished for him.

He handed me a textbook, and I looked over the room before joining the only group with room for more: Sparky and Greg. We had been in a group several times before, as the leftovers when all the friends and cliques had banded together.

Sparky had apparently picked up his nickname when a third grade teacher used it in an ironic sense, and it had stuck, to the point where I doubted anyone but his own mother even knew his real name. He was a drummer, long haired, and was so out of touch with reality that

you could stop talking in the middle of a sentence and he wouldn't notice. He just went through life in a daze, presumably until he could do his thing, which was his band.

Greg was just the opposite. He was smarter than average, but he had a way of saying every thought that came into his head – his train of thought didn't have any brakes. Or tracks. It would have been easier to be in a group with just Sparky and essentially do the work by myself than it would be to work with Greg.

I got my share of the homework out of my new backpack. Mr. Gladly had asked us to come up with a list of ways that capes had influenced society. In between the various steps of my getting ready for my first night out in costume, I had taken the time to fix up my art project and had come up with a fairly comprehensive list for Mr. Gladly's homework. I had even used newspaper and magazine clippings to support my points. I felt pretty good about it.

"I didn't get much done," Greg said, "I got distracted by this new game I got and it is really really good, it's called Space Opera, have you played it?"

A full minute later he was still on the same topic, even though I wasn't playing any attention to him or giving him any feedback on what he was saying, "...you have to understand it's a genre, and it's one I've really been getting into it lately, since I started watching this anime called – Oh, hey, Julia!" Greg broke off from his monologue to wave with enough energy and excitement that I felt a little embarrassed to just be sitting next to him. I turned in my seat to see one of Madison's friends coming in, late.

"Can I be in Madison's group?" Julia asked Mr. Gladly.

"That wouldn't be fair. Greg's group only has three people. Help them," Mr. Gladly said.

Julia walked over to where we were sitting and made a face. Just

loud enough for us to hear, she muttered a disgusted, "Ew." I felt much the same about her joining us.

It was downhill from there. Madison's group moved so the four of them were sitting right next to our group, which let Julia talk with them while still sitting with us. The presence of all the popular and attractive girls in the class just got Greg more wound up, and he began trying to insert himself into their conversation, only to get shut down or ignored. It was embarrassing to watch.

"Greg," I said, trying to distract him from the other group, "Here's what I did over the weekend. What do you think?"

I handed him the work I had done. To his credit, he gave it a serious read.

"This is really good, Taylor," He said, when he was done.

"Let me see," Julia said. Before I could stop him, Greg dutifully handed my work over to her. I watched her glance over it, then toss it onto Madison's table. There were a few giggles.

"Give that back," I said.

"Give what back?" Julia said.

"Madison," I said, ignoring Julia, "Give it back."

Madison, cute and petite and crush of choice for half the guys in our grade, turned and managed a combined look and tone of such condescension that a grown man would have flinched, "Nobody is talking to you, Taylor."

That was that. Short of running to the teacher and complaining, I wasn't going to get my work back, and anyone who considered that an option has clearly never been in high school. Greg looked between me and the girls with a kind of panic before settling into a funk, Sparky had his head down on his desk, either asleep or close to it, and I was left fuming. I made an attempt at trying to to salvage things, but getting Greg to focus was impossible, as he con-

stantly tried to apologize and made lame attempts to convince the other group to give my work back. Our time ran out, and Mr. Gladly picked out people from each group to stand up and go over what they had come up with.

I sighed as Mr. Gladly picked Greg to do our group's presentation, and was forced to watch Greg botch it badly enough that Mr. Gladly asked him to sit down before he was finished. Greg was one of those kids I always figured made teachers groan inwardly when they raised their hands in class. The sort of kid that took twice as long to answer as anyone else, and was often only half-right or so off-tangent that it derailed the discussion. I couldn't imagine what had possessed Mr. Gladly to pick Greg to do our group's presentation.

What made things worse was that I then got to watch Madison rattle off *my* very impressive sounding list of ways capes had changed the world. She cribbed almost all of my stuff; fashion, economics, Tinkers and the tech boom, the fact that movies, television and magazines had been tweaked to accommodate cape celebrities, and so on. Still, she got it wrong when explaining how law enforcement had changed. My point had been that with qualified capes easing the workload and taking over for most high profile crises, law enforcement of all stripes were more free to train and expand their skill sets, making for smarter, more versatile cops. Madison just made it sound like they got a lot of vacation days.

Mr. Gladly named another group as the winners, by virtue of the sheer number of things they had come up with, though he made a point of saying the quality of Madison's work was nearly good enough to count. From there, he moved on to his lecture.

I was steamed and I could hardly focus on the lecture, as my power crackled and tugged at my attention from the periphery of my consciousness, making me acutely aware of every bug within a tenth

of a mile. I could tune it out, but the extra concentration that took, coupled with the anger I felt towards Madison and Mr. Gladly, was distracting enough that I couldn't focus on the lecture. I took a cue from Sparky and put my head down on the desk. Being as exhausted from the previous night's activity as I was, it was all I could do to keep from dozing off. Still, spending the class half asleep made it go by faster. I was startled when the bell rang.

As everyone gathered their things and began to file out, Mr. Gladly approached me and quietly said, "I'd like you to stick around for a few minutes, please."

I just nodded and put my books away, then waited for the teacher to finish negotiating where to meet the prize winners from the class contest so he could pay for their prizes.

When it was just me and Mr. Gladly in the classroom, he cleared his throat and then told me, "I'm not stupid, you know."

"Okay," I replied, not sure how to respond.

"I have something of an idea of what goes on in my classroom. I don't know exactly who, but I know some people are giving you a pretty hard time."

"Sure," I said.

"I saw the mess left on your usual seat today. I remember a few weeks back when glue was smeared on your desk and chair. There was also the incident that happened at the start of the year. All of your teachers had a meeting about that."

I couldn't meet his gaze as he brought that last event up. I looked at my feet.

"And I'm guessing there's more that I don't know about?"

"Yeah," I said, still looking down. It was hard to explain how I felt about this conversation. I was gratified, I think, that someone had brought it up, but annoyed that that someone was Mr. Gladly. I felt

kind of embarrassed too, like I had walked into a door and someone was trying too hard to make sure I was okay.

"I asked you after the glue incident. I'm asking you again. Would you be willing to go to the office with me, to talk with the principal and vice principal?"

After a few moments of consideration, I looked up and asked him, "What would happen?"

"We'd have a discussion about what's been going on. You would name the person or people you believe responsible, and each of them would be called in to talk to the principal, in turn."

"And they'd get expelled?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

Mr. Gladly shook his head, "If there was enough proof, they would be suspended for several days, unless they've done something very serious. Further offenses could lead to longer suspensions or expulsion."

I gave a rueful chuckle, feeling the frustration welling up, "Great. So they *might* miss a few days of school, and only if I can prove they were behind it all... and whether they get suspended or not, they feel a hundred percent justified in whatever else they do to the rat for revenge."

"If you want things to get better, Taylor, you have to start somewhere."

"That isn't a starting point. It's shooting myself in the foot," I said, pulling my bag over my shoulder. When he didn't immediately respond, I left the classroom.

Emma, Madison, Sophia and a half dozen other girls were standing in the hall, waiting for me.

INSINUATION 2.4

"Nobody likes her. Nobody wants her here," Julia said.

"Such a loser. She didn't even turn in the major project for art, last Friday," Sophia responded.

"If she's not going to try, then why is she even coming to school?"

Despite the way the conversation sounded, they were talking to me. They were just pretending to talk to one another. It was both calculating in how they were managing plausible deniability while at the same time they were acting totally juvenile by pretending I wasn't there. A blend of immaturity mixed with craftiness in a way only high schoolers could manage. I would have laughed at the ridiculousness of it, if it hadn't been at my expense.

The moment I had left the classroom, Emma, Madison and Sophia had crowded me into a corner, with another six girls backing them up. I was unable to squeeze past them without getting pushed or elbowed back, so I couldn't do much more than lean against the window, listening while eight of the girls were rattling off an endless series of taunts and jibes. Before one girl was even finished, another started up. All the while, Emma stayed back and stayed quiet, the slightest of smiles on her face. I couldn't meet the eyes of any of the other girls without them barking a fresh torrent of insults directly to my face, so I just glared at Emma.

"Ugliest girl in our grade."

They were barely thinking about what they were saying and a lot of the insults were wildly off the mark or contradictory. One would say I was a slut, for example, then another might say a guy

would puke before he touched me. The point wasn't being witty, being smart or being on target. It was more about delivering the feeling behind the words over and over, hammering it in. If I'd had just a moment to butt in, maybe I could have come up with retorts. If I could just kill their momentum, they probably wouldn't get back into the easy rhythm again. That said, I couldn't find the words, and there weren't any openings in the conversation where I wouldn't just be talked over.

While this particular tactic was new to me, I'd been putting up with stuff like this for a year and a half, now. At a certain point, I'd come to the conclusion that it was easier to sit back and take it, when it came to most things. They *wanted* me to fight back, because everything was stacked in their favor. If I stood up for myself and they still 'won', then it only served to feed their egos. If I came out ahead in some way, then they got more persistent and mean for the next time. So for much the same reason I hadn't fought Madison for the homework she had taken from me, I just leaned against the wall next to the window and waited for them to get bored with their game or get hungry enough to leave and go have their lunches.

"What does she use to wash her face? A Brillo pad?"

"She should! She'd look better!"

"Never talks to anybody. Maybe she knows she sounds like a retard and keeps her mouth shut."

"No, she's not that smart."

No more than three feet behind Emma, I could see Mr. Gladly leaving his classroom. The tirade didn't stop as I watched him tuck a stack of folders under one arm, find his keys and lock the door.

"If I were her, I'd kill myself," one of the girls announced.

Mr. Gladly turned to look me in the eyes.

"So glad we don't have gym with her. Can you imagine seeing her

in the locker room? Gag me with a spoon.”

I don't know what expression I had on my face, but I know I didn't look happy. No less than five minutes ago, Mr. Gladly had been trying to convince me to go with him to the office and tell the principal about the bullying. I watched him as he gave me a sad look, shifted the file folders to his free hand and then walked away.

I was stunned. I just couldn't wrap my head around how he could just ignore this. When he had been trying to help me, had he just been covering his own ass, doing what was required of him in the face of a situation he couldn't ignore? Had he just given up on me? After trying to help, in his own completely ineffective way, after I turned his offer for help down twice, he just decided I just wasn't worth the effort?

“You should have seen her group fail in class just now. It was painful to watch.”

I clenched my fist, then forced myself to relax it. If we were all guys, this scenario would be totally different. I was in the best shape of my life. I could have swung a few punches from the very start, caused a bloody nose or two, maybe. I know I would have lost the fight in the end, getting shoved to the ground by force of numbers and kicked while I was down, but things would have ended there, instead of dragging on like they were here. I'd hurt physically for days afterwards, but I'd at least have had the satisfaction of knowing some of the others were hurting too, and I wouldn't have to sit through this barrage of insults. If there was enough damage done, the school would have to take notice, and they wouldn't be able to ignore the circumstances of a one-against-nine fight. Violence gets attention.

But things didn't work that way here. Girls played dirty. If I decked Emma, she would run to the office with some fabricated story, her

friends backing up her version of events. For most, ratting to the faculty was social suicide, but Emma was more or less top dog. If she went to the principal, people would only take things more seriously. By the time I got back to school, they would have spread the story through the grapevine in a way that made me look like a total psycho. Things would get worse. Emma would be seen as the victim and girls who had previously ignored the bullying would join in on Emma's behalf.

"And she smells," one girl said, lamely.

"Like expired grape and orange juice," Madison cut in with a little laugh. Again, bringing up the juice? I suspected that one had been her idea.

It seemed like they were running out of steam. I figured it was just a minute or two before they got bored and walked away.

It seemed Emma got the same impression, because she stepped forward. The group parted to give her room.

"What's the matter, Taylor?" Emma said, "You look upset."

Her words didn't seem to fit the situation. I had maintained my composure for however long they had been at it. What I'd been feeling was more a mixture of frustration and boredom than anything else. I opened my mouth to say something. A graceless "Fuck you" would have sufficed.

"So upset you're going to cry yourself to sleep for a straight week?" she asked.

My words died in my throat as I processed her words.

Almost a year before we had started high school, I had been at her house, the both of us eating breakfast and playing music way too loud. Emma's older sister had come downstairs with the phone. We'd turned down the music, and my dad had been on the other end, waiting to tell me in a broken voice that my mom had died in a car

accident.

Emma's sister had given me a ride to my place, and I bawled the entire way there. I remember Emma crying too, out of sympathy, maybe. It could have been the fact that she thought my mom was the coolest adult in the world. Or perhaps it was because we really were best friends and she had no idea how to help me.

I didn't want to think about the month that had followed, but fragments came to mind without my asking. I could remember overhearing my dad berating my mother's body, because she'd been texting while driving, and she was the only one to blame. At one point, I barely ate for five straight days, because my dad was such a wreck that I wasn't on his radar. I'd eventually turned to Emma for help, asking to eat at her place for a few days. I think Emma's mom figured things out, and gave my dad a talking to, because he started pulling things together. We'd established our routine, so we wouldn't fall apart as a family again.

It was a month after my mom had died that Emma and I had found ourselves sitting on the bridge of a kid's play structure in the park, our rear ends cold from the damp wood, sipping coffee we'd bought from the Donut Hole. We didn't have anything to do, so we had just been walking around and talking about whatever. Our wandering had taken us to the playground, and we were resting our heels.

"You know, I admire you," she had said, abruptly.

"Why?" I had responded, completely mystified about the fact that someone gorgeous and amazing and popular like her could find something to admire in me.

"You're so resilient. After your mom died, you were totally in pieces, but you're so together after a month. I couldn't do that."

I could remember my admission, "I'm not resilient. I can hold it together during the day, but I've cried myself to sleep for a straight

week.”

That had been enough to open the floodgates, right there. She gave me her shoulder to cry on, and our coffee was cold before I was done.

Now, as I gaped at Emma, wordless, her smile widened. She remembered what I had said, then. She knew the memories it would evoke. At some point, that recollection had crossed her mind, and she had decided to weaponize it. She'd been waiting to drop it on me.

Fuck me, it worked. I felt the trail of a tear on my cheek. My power roared at the edges of my consciousness, buzzing, pressuring me. I suppressed it.

“She is! She's crying!” Madison laughed.

Angry at myself, I rubbed my hand over my cheek to brush the tear away. More were already welling up, ready to take its place.

“It's like you have a superpower, Emma!” one of the girls giggled.

I had taken off my backpack so I could lean against the wall. I reached to pick it up, but before I could, a foot hooked through the strap and dragged it away from me. I looked up and saw the owner of the foot – dark skinned, willowy Sophia – smirking at me.

“Oh em gee! What's she doing?” one of the girls said.

Sophia was leaning against the wall, one foot casually resting on top of my backpack. I didn't think it was worth fighting her over, if it gave her an opportunity to continue her game of keep-away. I left the bag where it was and shoved my way through the gathered girls, bumping an onlooker with my shoulder hard enough to make him stumble. I ran into the stairwell and out the doors on the ground floor.

I fled. I didn't check, but chances were they were watching from the window at the end of the hallway. It didn't really matter. The fact that I had just promised to pay thirty five bucks of my own money

for a World Issues textbook to replace the one that had been soaked with grape juice wasn't my top concern. Even if it was pretty much all the money I had left after buying the pieces for my costume. My art midterm was in my bag as well, newly repaired. I knew I wouldn't get any of it back in one piece, if at all.

No, my primary concern was getting out of there. I wasn't going to break the promise I had made to myself. No using powers on them. That was the line I wasn't crossing. Even if I did something utterly innocuous, like give them all lice, I didn't trust myself to stop there. I didn't trust myself to keep from offering blatant hints that I had powers or spoiling my secret identity just to see the looks on their faces when they realized the girl they had been tormenting was a bona-fide superhero. It was something I couldn't help but daydream about, but I knew the long term ramifications would spoil that.

Perhaps most important, I rationalized, was keeping the two worlds separate. What use was escapism, if the world I was escaping to was muddled with the people and things I was trying to avoid?

Before the thought of going back to school had even crossed my mind, I found myself wondering what I was going to do to fill my afternoon.

INSINUATION 2.5

If you looked at Brockton Bay as a patchwork of stellar and squalor, upper class and lower class with no middle ground, then downtown was one of the nice areas. The streets and sidewalks were wide, and that meant that even with skyscrapers in every other lot, there was a great deal of blue overhead.

Following my retreat from school grounds, I hadn't been sure what to do. My dad worked an unreliable schedule, so I couldn't spend the rest of the afternoon at home unless I wanted to risk having to explain what I was doing home on a school day. I didn't want to hang around the general area of my school, so that had left me the options of the half-hour walk to downtown or a trip to the Boardwalk. Between my morning runs and the previous night's escapades, I had seen enough of the Boardwalk, so I'd decided to head downtown.

I didn't want to dwell on the subject of school or Emma, so I turned my focus to the recent message from Tattletale. She wanted to meet, presumably to repay the favor she felt she owed me. I considered the possibility that it was a trap, but I couldn't imagine any angle where it would be. She just didn't have any reason to go after me. The worst case scenario was that it wasn't Tattletale, but that wasn't the impression I'd had. What she said in the message seemed to flow with what I had seen of her last night. I would be careful, nonetheless.

It was perplexing. These guys were, in large part, virtual unknowns. From what I knew of Grue and Hellhound, they were both

marginally successful B-list villains who had been barely scraping by. Now both were on a team that was pulling high profile heists and confounding even the likes of Armsmaster. The two of them seemed totally different in methodology and style, and if I was remembering right, both Grue and Hellhound had lived in different cities prior to teaming up and setting roots in Brockton Bay. That raised the question: who or what had drawn these four very different individuals together?

It was possible that Tattletale or Regent were the uniting factors, but I couldn't really imagine it, having seen what I did of their group dynamic. Grue had poked fun at Regent rather than treat him like a leader, and while I couldn't put my finger on it, the more I imagined Tattletale uniting that group of unconnected people with powers, the harder I found it to picture. In fact, when I thought about it, hadn't Grue said they had fought for a considerable amount of time over how to deal with Lung? It didn't really sound like they had any leadership worth speaking about.

It wasn't hard to sympathize with Armsmaster. The whole scenario there was just bizarre, and it was made worse by the fact that there were practically no details as far as Tattletale or Regent went. Information, it seemed, was a major factor when dealing with capes.

The streets were busy with people on their lunch break. Businessmen and businesswomen were heading to restaurants and fast food places. My stomach growled as I passed a line of people waiting their turn at a street vendor. I checked my pockets and winced at the realization that I didn't have enough for even a hot dog. My lunch had been in my backpack.

I stopped myself before I could finish that train of thought and put myself into a worse mood by dwelling on what had happened at school. Still, as I thought back to the circle of villains and Tattle-

tale's message, the amusing thought crossed my mind that I could ask them to repay the favor by buying me lunch. It wasn't a serious thought, but the ridiculousness of the mental image – me eating a burger with a group of supervillains – put a dumb smirk on my face. I was pretty sure I looked like a moron to anyone on the street who happened to glance at me.

As I thought on it, though, the notion that I might actually consider taking Tattletale up on her offer of a meeting nagged at me. The more I thought on it, the scarier the idea got, and the more it seemed to make sense.

What if I did take them up on the offer? I could meet them, talk with them, see what they had to offer, and all the while, fish for information. If I got anything worth sharing, I could turn around and give it to Armsmaster so he could use it against them. Just going by what Armsmaster had said about these guys and the scarcity of information on them, it would be a pretty major coup for the good guys.

Okay, so they would likely see my ploy as a monumental betrayal if and when I pulled it off. I would be making enemies. That said, I suspected that when it came out that I was a hero and not a villain, they would count it as such regardless. Didn't it make sense to leverage as much information as I could from them before they caught on, as far as their misconception went?

I turned around and headed in the direction of the public library. It was only a few blocks away.

The library was busy, which made sense, given the number of offices and businesses around, the number of people wanting some quiet during their lunch hour, and people doing research or casual browsing they couldn't do at their workplaces. I would have included Brockton Bay's biggest and fanciest high school, the nearby

Arcadia High, in that generalization, but I doubted many students were spending their lunch breaks at the library.

The Central Library looked almost more like a museum or art gallery than anything else, with tall ceilings, pillars and massive pieces of artwork hung to frame the hallways between the major sections of the building. I headed up to the second floor, where there were about twenty computers and a line of people waiting their turn to use them. I anticipated a fifteen or twenty minute wait, but as the clock approached one o'clock, people headed back to work and the line rapidly thinned out. A free computer came up within a few minutes of my joining the line. I let the person behind me go on ahead, waiting a bit longer so I could get a station with a little more privacy.

By the time I sat down, I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to write. I found the message with the search function and clicked on the username 'Tt'. A drop down menu appeared, and I chose 'send private message'. It gave me the option of making an account, signing in with an already existing account, or sending the message as an anonymous guest. I chose the last option, then typed:

Subject: Re:Bug

Bug here. Would like to meet, but want proof you are Tt. I'll reciprocate if needed.

I didn't send it right away, taking a moment to consider. Getting decent proof would prevent any potential problems like the message turning out to be a trap laid by, say, Bakuda. Leaving the burden of proof on Tattletale and leaving it up to her to decide if she wanted verification I was indeed 'Bug' meant I didn't have to worry about coming up with exactly how one might prove their identity. I reread it twice over, then sent the message.

The reply came only two or three minutes later. It was fast enough that I couldn't imagine Tattletale taking the time to check and dou-

ble check every aspect of her message the way I had mine. Was that recklessness on her part, or just the benefit of experience?

I closed the tabs I had opened in the meantime and checked to see what she had written. It was a private message, from her to me, and it set my fight or flight instincts in high gear:

Subject: re:Bug

Proof? Last night you didn't say anything until I asked your name. Big guy had a mess of nasty bites and you pepper sprayed him and I told my pal G that when he asked. Good enough?

G R and me will meet you at the same spot we crossed paths last night, k? Don't have to get gussied up if you catch my drift. Rest of us will be in casual wear.

If we meet at 3 will that give you enough time to get there from library with everything you need? let me know

Ta ta

My heart pounded. She knew where I was, and she was letting me know. Why? More to the point, how? Had I unwittingly entered an online exchange with a savvy hacker? I knew my way around computers, my mom had made sure I had one since before I could read and write, but I would be lying if I said I could tell if I was being hacked or do anything about it.

I would have interpreted the casual mention of my location as a veiled threat if it didn't run contrary to everything else in her messages to me. Besides – Tattletale was talking about meeting me in casual clothes. I took that to mean they wouldn't be in costume. I couldn't understand why, but at the same time, it was hard to imagine her threatening me with one breath just a sentence after she'd offered to meet me in a way that made her totally vulnerable.

Tattletale had unwittingly raised the stakes for my scheme. My primary goal was to gather information on them, and here I was get-

ting a chance to see them with their masks off. It was too good to be true, which made me wonder what kind of safeguards they had in place to protect themselves.

I just had no idea what I would be getting into.

The screensaver came up while I stared at the monitor with thoughts racing through my head. The words 'BROCKTON BAY CENTRAL LIBRARY' scrolled across the screen in varying colors.

If I went, best case scenario, I could get enough information to turn them in. I'd get mucho cred from the good guys and respect from an international celebrity. If I'd judged Armsmaster right, I'd get even more brownie points if I gave him the info and let him – or helped him – make the bust. On the flip side of the coin, the worst case scenario was that it was a trap, or they'd figure out what I was doing. It would mean a fight, maybe a beating. There was an outside possibility I could get killed, but somehow that didn't concern me as much as it maybe should have. Part of the reason for my lack of concern, I think, was that the possibility existed any time I went out in costume. That, and from my interactions with them last night, I didn't get a 'killer' vibe from them.

On the topic of the status quo... if I didn't go, what would happen? This particular window of opportunity would likely pass, as far as being able to get the dirt on Tattletale and her gang. That was okay, as I thought on it. It was a high risk, high reward venture anyways. Taking that path would mean turning down the meet, then killing time for the rest of the afternoon, trying to avoid dwelling on the fact that I had missed two straight afternoons of classes and might, maybe, miss more. It was depressing to think about.

"Excuse me?"

Startled, I looked up. A middle aged woman in a red jacket stood just behind me. As I met her eyes she asked, "Are you done?" She

gestured at the computer, where the screensaver was still scrolling.

Heady with the relief that she hadn't been, irrationally enough, Tattletale, I smiled and told her, "Give me thirty seconds."

Subject: Re:Bug

See you at three.

INSINUATION 2.6

I showed up in costume. I didn't care if they thought it was rude or paranoid, I would rather be capable of surviving having a knife pulled on me than play nice.

I had caught a bus from the library to my house and put my costume on under my clothes. Most of the armor panels of my costume were separate pieces, held in place by straps that ran into slits in the fabric of the costume. Not all of them were, though. I'd made some of the armor part of the bodysuit, I'd made narrow, rigid sections of armor running along the center of my chest, back, shins, wrists, hips and the tops of my shoulders. so that when I strapped the larger pieces on, grooves on the underside of the armor would fit over them and help keep them from flopping around. I checked myself in the mirror before I left, and didn't think anyone would notice unless I held a strange posture and they were paying a great deal of attention to what I was wearing. I wore loose fitting clothes over the costume, – one of my larger pairs of jeans and a sweatshirt, and even with that, I felt painfully conspicuous

I changed much the way I had the previous night, finding an empty alley, quickly pulling on my mask, pulling off my outer clothes, and stuffing the clothes into one of my dad's old backpacks. I'd hidden the backpack before I went patrolling last night, but today, I opted to take it with me. I headed out the other end of the alley.

When I was a short distance away from the site of last night's brawl, I sent a dozen flies out to scout. I focused on what they were sensing.

Bugs, it probably goes without saying, sense things in a very different way than we do. More than that, they sense and process things at a very different speed. The end result was that the signals my power were able to translate and send to me in a way my brain could understand were muted. Visual information came through as ink blot patches of monochrome light and dark, alternating between fuzzy and overly sharp. Sound was almost painful to focus on, breaking down to bass vibrations that made my vision distort and high pitch noises that weren't unlike nails on a chalkboard. Multiply that by a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, and it was overwhelming. When my power was new to me, I hadn't been able to hold back. The sensory overload had never actually hurt me, even at its worst, but it had made me flat out miserable. These days, I had that part of my power turned off a good ninety nine percent of the time.

My preferred method of sensing things through my bugs was touch. It wasn't that their sense of touch translated much better than the hearing or sight part of things, but had more to do with the fact that I could tell where they were in relation to me. I was acutely aware when they were very still, if they were moving, or if something else was moving them. That was one thing that translated well.

So as I sent the bugs out to scout, the twelve sets of compound eyes first identified the trio as blurry silhouettes atop a larger, more defined shadow, backlit by a flare of white that had to be the sun. I directed the flies closer, towards the 'heads' of the figures, and they touched down on skin. None of the three were wearing masks, which I deemed reason to believe Tattletale had been telling the truth. They weren't in costume. There was no guarantee that the three were really Tattletale, Grue and Regent, but I felt confident enough to head around to the fire escape and climb up to the roof.

It was them, no doubt. I recognized them even without their cos-

tumes. Two guys and a girl. The girl had dirty blonde hair tied back into a loose braid, a smattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose and the same vulpine grin I recognized from the night prior. She wore a black long sleeved t-shirt with a grafitti-style design on it and a knee length denim skirt. I was surprised by the bottle-glass green of her eyes.

The smaller and younger of the two guys – about my age – was undoubtedly Regent. I recognized the mop of black curls. He was a good looking guy, but not in a way that would make me say he was handsome. He was pretty, with a triangular face, light blue eyes and full lips pulled into a bit of a scowl. I pegged him as having French or Italian heritage. I could see where he would have girls all over him, but I couldn't say I was interested, myself. The pretty boys – Leonardo Decaprio, Marcus Firth, Justin Beiber, Johnny Depp – had never done it for me. He was wearing a white jacket with a hood, jeans and sneakers, and was perched on the raised lip at the edge of the roof, a bottle of cola in hand.

Grue was startling in appearance, by contrast. Taller than me by at least a foot, Grue had dark chocolate skin, shoulder length cornrows and that masculine lantern jaw you typically associated with guy superheroes. He wore jeans, boots and a plain green t-shirt, which struck me as a bit cold for the spring. I did note that he had considerable muscle definition in his arms. This was a guy who worked out.

“And she arrives,” Tattletale crowed, “Pay up.”

Regent's scowl deepened for a second, and he fished in his pocket for a wad of bills, which he forked over to Tattletale.

“You bet on whether I would show up?” I ventured.

“We bet on whether you would come in costume,” Tattletale told me. Then, more to Regent than to me, she said, “and I won.”

"Again," Regent muttered.

"It's your own fault for taking the bet in the first place," Grue said, "Even if it wasn't Tattle, it was a sucker bet. Showing up in costume makes too much sense. It's what I would do." He had a nice voice. It was an adult voice, even if his appearance gave me the sense of a guy in his late teens.

He extended his hand to me, "Hey, I'm Brian."

I shook his hand, he wasn't shy about shaking my hand firmly. I said, "You can call me Bug, I guess. At least, until I come up with something better, or until I decide this isn't an elaborate trick."

He shrugged, "Cool." There wasn't the slightest trace of offense at my suspicion. I almost felt bad.

"Lisa," Tattletale introduced herself. She didn't offer me her hand to shake, but I think it would have felt out of place if she had. It wasn't that she seemed unfriendly, but she didn't have the same aura of geniality about her that Grue did.

"I'm Alec," Regent informed me, with a quiet voice, then he added, "And Bitch is Rachel."

"Rachel is sitting this one out," Grue said, "She didn't agree with the aim of our meeting, here."

"Which raises the question," I cut in, "What is the aim of this meeting? I'm a little weirded out with you guys revealing your secret identities like this, or at least, pretending to."

"Sorry," Grue... Brian apologized, "That was my idea. I thought we would make a token show of trust."

Behind the yellow tinted lenses of my mask, my eyes narrowed, flicking from Lisa to Alec to Brian. I couldn't draw any conclusions from their expressions.

"Why, exactly, do you need my trust?" I asked.

Brian opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked to Lisa, who

bent down and picked up a plastic lunchbox. She held it out to me.

"I said we owed you. All yours, no strings attached."

Without taking the box, I tilted my head to get a better look at the front, "Alexandria. She was my favorite member of the Protectorate when I was a kid. Is the lunchbox collectable?"

"Open it," Lisa prompted me, with a roll of her eyes.

I took it. From the weight and the motion of the contents inside it, I immediately had a pretty good idea of what it was. I undid the clasps and opened the box.

"Money," I breathed, caught off guard by suddenly having so much in my hands. Eight stacks of bills, tied with paper bands. Each of the paper bands had a number written on it in permanent marker. Two fifty each...

Lisa answered before I had the number totaled up in my head, "Two grand."

I closed the box and did the clasps. With no idea what to say, I stayed silent.

"You have two choices," Lisa explained, "You can take that as a gift. A thank you for, intentionally or not, saving our ass from Lung last night. And maybe a bit of incentive to count us among your friends when you're out in costume and doing dastardly deeds."

Her grin widened, as if she'd said something she found amusing. Maybe it was the irony of a villain talking about 'dastardly deeds', or how corny the phrase was. She elaborated, "Between territory disputes, differences in ideology, general power struggles and egos, there's a rare few people in the local villain community who won't attack us on sight."

"And the second option?" I asked.

"You can take this as your first installment in the monthly allowance you're entitled to as a member of the Undersiders," Brian

spoke up, "As one of us."

I shifted my gaze between the three of them, looking for the joke. Lisa still had a bit of a smile, but I was getting the impression that was her default expression. Alec looked a little bored, if anything. Brian looked dead serious. Damn.

"Two thousand a month," I said.

"No," Brian cut in, "That's just what the boss pays us, to stick together and to stay active. We make, uh, considerably more than that."

Lisa smirked, and Alec chuckled as he swished the contents of his coke bottle. I made mental note at the mention of this 'boss'.

Not wanting to get sidetracked, I quickly thought through the earlier part of our conversation in the context of the job offer.

I asked, "So Bitch didn't come because she was against the, er, recruitment?"

"Yeah," Alec said, "We voted on it, and she said no."

"On the plus side, the rest of us voted yes," Brian hurried to add, giving Alec a dirty look, "She'll come around. She always votes against adding new members to the group, because she doesn't want to divide the money five ways."

"So you've done this recruiting thing before," I concluded.

"Uh, yeah," Brian looked a touch embarrassed, he rubbed the back of his neck, "It didn't go well. We tried with Spitfire, and she got scared off before we even got to the job offer. Our fault, for bringing Rachel along that time."

"And then she got recruited by someone else," Alec added.

"Yeah," Brian shrugged, "She got snagged by Faultline before we got a second chance. We've made an offer to Circus, too, and she told us in no uncertain terms that she worked alone."

"Taught me a few new curse words while she did it, too," Alec said.

"She was pretty vocal about how she flies solo," Brian admitted.

"So you're going the extra mile, with no costumes as a show of trust and a cash bonus up front, to get me to join," I said, as the pieces came together.

"That's the gist of it," Brian agreed, "Long and short of it is, especially with Lung taken out of action and the ABB diminished by his being gone, there's bound to be some pushing and shoving over territory and status among the various gangs and teams. Us, Faultline's Crew, the remaining ABB, Empire Eighty-Eight, the solo villains, and any out of town teams or gangs that figure that they can worm in and grab a piece of the Bay. If it comes down to it, we want firepower. We haven't screwed up a job yet, but the way us three figure it, it's only a matter of time before we end up stuck in a fight we can't win, with Bitch as the only one of us who can really dish out the hurt."

"I just don't get why you want me," I said, "I control bugs. That's not going to stop Alexandria, Glory Girl or Aegis."

"You fucked up Lung," Lisa shrugged as she spoke, "Good enough for me."

"Um, not really," I replied, "In case you missed it, you're the ones who stopped him from executing me last night. That just goes to prove the point I was making."

"Honey," Lisa said, "Entire teams of capes have gone up against Lung and got their asses handed to them. That you managed as well as you did is fantastic. The fact that the asshole is lying in a hospital bed because of you is the icing on the cake."

My reply stopped before it even left my mouth. I only managed a dumb, "Hunh?"

"Yeah," Lisa raised an eyebrow, "You do know which bugs you had biting him, right? Black Widow, Brown Recluse, Browntail Moth, Mildei, Fire Ants—"

"Yeah," I cut her off, "I don't know the official names, but I know exactly what bit him, what stung him and what the venoms do."

"So why are you surprised? A couple of those bugs would be fucking dangerous if they bit just once, but you had them bite several times. Bad enough, but when Lung came into custody they had him checked over by the docs, and the idiot doctor in charge said something like, 'Oh, well, these do look like bug bites and stings, but the really venomous ones don't bite multiple times. Let's arrange to check on him in a few hours'."

I could tell where the story was going. I put my hands over my mouth, whispering, "Oh my god."

Tattletale grinned, "I can't believe you didn't know."

"But he regenerates!" I protested, dropping my hands, "Toxins aren't supposed to be even one percent as effective against people who heal like he does."

"They're effective enough, I guess, or his healing stopped working somewhere along the line" Lisa told me, "By the time they got to him, the big guy was just beginning to suffer from large scale tissue necrosis. His heart even stopped a few times. You *do* remember where you had the bugs bite him?"

I closed my eyes. I could see my reputation going down the tubes. One of the spiders I had been using was the brown recluse. Arguably the most dangerous spider in the United States, more than even the black widow. A single bite from a brown recluse could make a good chunk of the flesh around the bite blacken and rot away. I'd had my bugs biting Lung in the more sensitive parts of his anatomy.

"Let's just say that even with the ability to heal several times faster than your average person, Lung is going to be sitting down to use the toilet."

"Okay, that's enough," Brian stopped Lisa before she could go on,

"Lung is going to recover, right?"

With the look Brian was giving Lisa, I thought she might lie, regardless of the truth. She shrugged and told me, "He's already recuperating. Slowly, but he's on the mend, and he should be in good working order in six months to a year."

"You'd better hope he doesn't escape," Alec said, his voice still quiet but bemused, "Because if someone made my man bits fall off, I'd be out for blood."

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose, "Thank you for that, Alec. Way you two are going, our potential recruit is going to run off to have a panic attack before the idea of becoming an Undersider even crosses her mind."

"How do you know this?" I asked, within a heartbeat of the thought crossing my mind. When Brian turned my way with an expression like he thought he had said something to offend me, I clarified, "Tattletale, or Lisa, or whatever I'm supposed to call you. How do you know this stuff about Lung... or about the fact that I was at the Library, or that the cape was on his way, last night?"

"Library?" Brian interjected, giving Lisa another dark look.

Lisa ignored Brian's question and winked at me, "Girl's gotta have her secrets."

"Lisa's half the reason we haven't failed a job yet," Alec said.

"And our boss is a large part of the rest," Lisa finished for him.

"So you say," Brian grumbled, "But let's not go there."

Lisa smiled at me, "If you want the full scoop, I'm afraid the details on what we do only come with team membership. What I can tell you is that we're a good group. Our track record is top notch, and we're in it for fun and profit. No grand agenda. No real responsibility."

I pursed my lips, behind my mask. While I had picked up some info, I felt like I had a lot more questions. Who was this boss they

WORM

mentioned? Was he or she setting up other teams of highly successful villains, in Brockton Bay or elsewhere? What made these guys as effective as they were, and was it something I could steal or copy for myself?

It wasn't like I was signing the deal in blood or anything. I stood to gain so much.

"Alright then, count me in," I told them.

INSINUATION 2.7

As I agreed to join the Undersiders, there was some whooping and cheering. I felt a touch guilty, for acting under false pretenses. I also felt pleased with myself, in an irrational way.

"Where do we go from here?" Lisa asked Brian.

"Not sure," Brian said, "It's not like we've done this before. I suppose we should let Rachel know, but she said she might work today."

"If the new girl is okay with it, let's stop by our place," Lisa suggested, "See if Rache is there, celebrate the new recruit and get her filled in."

"Sure," I said.

"It's just a few blocks away," Brian said, "But we would stand out if you came with in costume."

I stared at him for a moment, not wanting to comprehend his statement. If I took too long to respond, I realized, I would ruin this plan before it went anywhere. Whatever the case, I could have kicked myself. Of course this was the natural progression of events. Joining their team would mean I would be expected to share my identity, since they already had. Until I did, they wouldn't be able to trust me with their secrets.

I could have blamed the lapse in judgement and foresight on my lack of sleep or the distraction of the events earlier in the day, but that didn't change matters. I had maneuvered myself into a corner.

"Alright," I said, sounding calmer than I felt. I hoped. "This costume is kinda uncomfortable under clothes. Can I get some privacy?"

"You want an alley, or..." Lisa asked, trailing off.

"I'll change here, just take a minute," I said, impulsively, as I glanced around. The buildings on the street were mostly one and two stories tall, with the only buildings taller than the one we were on being the one half a block away, and the one right next to us. There weren't any windows on the building next to us with a great angle for seeing me change, and I doubted anyone on the distant building could see me as more than a figure two inches tall. If someone could see me change out of costume and make out enough details to identify me, I'd be surprised.

As the three of them headed to the fire escape, I pulled out the clothes I'd stuffed into the backpack. Armor panels aside, my costume was essentially one piece, with the exceptions being the belt and the mask. I kept the mask on as I undid the belt and peeled off the main costume. I wasn't indecent – I was wearing a black tank top and black biking shorts underneath, in part for extra warmth. Silk wasn't the best insulator on its own. I stepped into my jeans and pulled on the sweatshirt, then rubbed my arms and shoulders to brush off the mild chill. I put my costume and the plastic lunchbox in my backpack.

I felt a stab of regret at not having chosen better clothes to wear than a loose fitting sweatshirt and jeans that were too big for me. That regret quickly turned to a pang of anxiety. What would they think when they saw the real me? Brian and Alec were good looking guys, in very different ways. Lisa was, on the sliding scale between plain and pretty, more pretty than not. My own scale of attractiveness, by contrast, put me somewhere on a scale that ranged from 'nerd' to 'plain'. My opinion of where I fit on that scale changed depending on the mood I was in when I was looking in the mirror. They were cool, confident, assured people. I was... me.

I stopped myself before I could get worked up. I wasn't regular old

Taylor, here. In the here and now, I was the girl who had put Lung in the hospital, accidental as it was. I was the girl who was going undercover to try and get the details on a particularly persistent gang of supervillains. I was, until I came up with a better name to go by, Bug, the girl the Undersiders wanted on their team.

If I said I made my way down the fire escape filled to the brim with confidence, I'd be lying. That said, I had managed to hype myself up enough to get myself down the ladder, mask still on, costume in my bag. I stood before them, glanced around to make sure nobody else was around, and then pulled off my mask. I had a few terrifying heartbeats where I was half-blind, their facial features just smudges, before I put on the glasses I'd had in my bag.

"Hi," I said, lamely, using my fingers to comb my hair back into order, "I guess it wouldn't work if you kept calling me Bug or new girl. I'm Taylor."

Using my real name was a big gamble on my part. I was afraid it would be another thing I would be kicking myself for five minutes from now, much like the realization that I'd have to go unclothed. I rationalized it by telling myself that I was already in this wholesale. Being truthful about that one thing might well save my hide if any of them decided to do some digging on me, or if I ran into someone I knew while in their company. I figured, hoped, that by the time this whole thing was over, I could maybe pull some strings with someone like Armsmaster and avoid having them leak my real name. Not impossible to imagine, given the level of security around some of the prisons they had for criminal parahumans. In any event, I would cross that bridge when I got to it.

Alec offered the slightest roll of his eyes as I introduced myself, while Brian just grinned. Lisa, though, put one of her arms around my shoulders and gave me a one-armed squeeze of a hug. She was a

little older than I was, so she was just tall enough to be at the perfect height to do it. What caught me off guard was how nice the gesture felt. Like I had been needing a hug from someone who wasn't my dad for a long time.

We walked deeper into the Docks as a group. While I had lived on the periphery of the area my entire life, and while most people would say the neighborhood I lived in was part of the 'Docks', I had never really been in the areas that gave this part of the city such a bad reputation. At least, I hadn't if I discounted last night, and it had been dark then.

It wasn't an area that had been kept up, and kind of gave off an impression of a ghost town, or what a city might look like if war or disaster forced people to abandon it for a few years. Grass and weeds grew between slats in the sidewalk, the road had potholes you could hide a cat in, and the buildings were all faded, consisting of peeling paint, cracked mortar and rusty metal. The desaturated colors of the buildings were contrasted by splashes of vividly colored graffiti. As we passed what had once been a main road for the trucks traveling between the warehouses and the docks, I saw a row of power lines without wires stretching between them. At one point weeds had crawled most of the way up the poles, only to wither and die at some point. Now each of the poles had a mess of dead brown plants hanging off of them.

There were people, too, though not too many were out and about. There were those you expected, like a homeless bag lady with a grocery cart and a shirtless old man with a beard nearly to his navel, collecting bottles and cans from a dumpster. There were others that surprised me. I saw a woman that looked surprisingly normal, in clothes that weren't shabby enough to draw attention, herding four near-identical infant children into a factory building with a faded

sign. I wondered if they were living there or if the mom was working there and just couldn't do anything with her kids but bring them with her. We passed a twenty-something artist and his girlfriend, sitting on the sidewalk with paintings propped up around them. The girl waved at Lisa as we walked by, and Lisa waved back.

Our destination was a red brick factory with a massive sliding metal door locked shut by a coil of chain. Both the chain and door had rusted so much that I expected that neither offered any use. The size of the door and the broadness of the driveway made me think that large trucks or small boats would have been backed up through the entryway back in the factory's heyday. The building itself was large, stretching nearly half the block, two or three stories tall. The background of the sign at the top of the building had faded from red to a pale orange-pink, but I could make out the bold white letters that read 'Redmond Welding'.

Brian let us in through a small door on the side of the building, rather than the big rusted one. The interior was dark, lit only by rows of dusty windows near the ceiling. I could make out what had been massive machines and treadmills prior to being stripped to their bare bones. Sheets covered most of the empty and rusted husks. Seeing the cobwebs, I reached out with my power and felt bugs throughout. Nobody had been active in here for a long time.

"Come on," Brian urged me. I looked back and saw that he was halfway up a spiral staircase in the corner. I headed up after him.

After seeing the desolation of the first floor, seeing the second floor was a shock. It was a loft, and the contrast was startling. The exterior walls were red brick, and there was no ceiling beyond a roof and a skeleton of metal girders overhead to support it. In terms of general area, the loft seemed to have three sections, though it was hard to define because it was such an open layout.

The staircase opened up into what I would have termed the living room, though the one room alone had nearly as much floor space as the ground floor of my house did. The space was divided by two couches, which were set at right angles from one another, both facing a coffee table and one of the largest television sets I had ever seen. Below the television set were a half dozen video game consoles, a DVD player and one or two machines I didn't recognize. I supposed they might have a TiVo, though I'd never seen one. Speakers larger than the TVs my dad and I had at home sat on either side of the whole setup. Behind the couches were tables, some open space with rugs and shelves set against the walls. The shelves were only half filled with books and magazines, while the rest of the shelf space was filled with odds and ends ranging from a discarded shoe to candles.

The second section was a collection of rooms. It was hard to label them as such, though, because they were more like cubicles, three against each wall with a hallway between them. They were a fair size, and there were six doors, but the walls of each room were only eight or so feet tall, not reaching all the way up to the roof. Three of the doors had artwork spray painted on them. The first door had a crown done in a dramatic graffiti style. The second door had the white silhouette of a man and a woman against a blue background, mimicking the 'mens' and 'womens' washroom signs that were so common. The third had a girl's face with puckered lips. I wondered what the story was, there.

"Nice art," I said, pointing at the door with the crown on it, feeling kind of dumb for making it the first thing I'd said as I entered the room.

"Thanks," Alec replied. I guess that meant it was his work.

I took another second to look around. The far end of the loft, the last of the three sections, had a large table and some cabinets. Though

I couldn't take a better look without crossing the whole loft, I gathered that their kitchen was in the far end of the loft.

Throughout, there was mess. I felt almost rude for paying attention to it, but there were pizza boxes piled on one of the tables, two dirty plates on the coffee table in front of the couch, and some clothes draped over the back of one of the couches. I saw pop cans – or maybe beer cans – stacked in a pyramid on the table in the far room. It wasn't so messy that I thought it was offensive, though. It was mess that made a statement... like, 'This is our space.' No adult supervision here.

"I'm jealous," I admitted, meaning it.

"Dork," Alec said, "What are you jealous for?"

"I meant it's cool," I protested, a touch defensively.

Lisa spoke before Alec could reply, "I think what Alec means is that this is your place now too. This is the team's space, and you're a member of the team, now."

"Oh," I said, feeling dumb. Lisa and Alec headed to the living room, while Brian walked off to the far end of the loft. When Lisa gestured for me to follow her, I did. Alec lay down, taking up an entire couch, so I sat on the opposite end of the couch from Lisa.

"The rooms," Lisa said, "Far side, in order of closest to farthest, are Alec, bathroom, mine." That meant Alec's room was the one with the crown, and Lisa's door had the face with the puckered lips. She went on, "On the side closer to us, Rachel's room, Rachel's dogs' room, and the storage closet."

Lisa paused, then glanced at Alec and asked, "You think she-"

"Duh," Alec cut her off.

"What?" I asked, feeling lost.

"We'll clean out the storage closet," Lisa decided, "So you have a room."

I was taken aback. "You don't have to do that for me," I told her, "I've got a place."

Lisa made a face, almost pained. She asked me, "Can we just do it anyways, and not make a fuss? It'd be a lot better if you had your own space here."

I must have looked confused, because Alec explained, "Brian has an apartment, and was pretty firm about not needing or wanting a room here... but he and Lisa have been arguing regularly because of it. He has nowhere to sleep but the couch if he gets hurt and can't go to his place, and there's no place to put his stuff, so it gets left all over. Take the room. You'll be doing us a favor."

"Okay," I said. I added, "Thank you," as much for the explanation as for the room itself.

"Last time he went up against Shadow Stalker, he came back here and bled all over a white couch," Lisa grouched, "nine hundred dollar couch and we had to replace it."

"Fucking Shadow Stalker," Alec commiserated.

Brian came back from the other end of the loft, raising his voice to be heard as he approached, "Rache's not here, and neither are her dogs. She must be walking them or working. Dammit. I get stressed when she's out." He approached the couches and saw Alec sprawled on the one.

"Move your legs," Brian told him.

"I'm tired. Sit on the other couch," Alec mumbled, one arm over his face.

Brian glanced at Lisa and I, and Lisa scooted over to make room. Brian glared down at Alec and then sat between us girls. I shifted my weight and tucked one leg under me to give him room.

"So," Brian explained, "Here's the deal. Two grand a month, just to be a member of the team. That means you help decide what jobs we

do, you go on the jobs, you stay active, you're available if we need to call."

"I don't have a phone," I admitted.

"We'll get you one," he said, like it wasn't even a concern. It probably wasn't. "We generally haul in anywhere from ten grand to thirty-five grand for a job. That gets divided four ways... five ways now that you're on the team."

I nodded, then exhaled slowly, "It's not small change."

Brian nodded, a small smile playing on his lips, "Nope. Now, how on the ball are you, as far as knowing what we're up against?"

I blinked a few times, then hedged, "For other local capes? I've done research online, read the cape magazines religiously for a few years, more since getting my powers... but I dunno. If the past twenty four hours have taught me anything, it's that there's a lot I don't know, and will only find out the hard way."

Brian smiled. I mean, really smiled. It made me think of a boy rather than a nearly-grown man. He replied, "Most don't get that, you know? I'll try to share what I know, so you aren't caught off guard, but don't be afraid to ask if there's anything you're not sure about, alright?"

I nodded, and his smile widened. He said, through a good natured chuckle, "Can't tell you how much of a relief it is that you take this stuff seriously, since some people -" he stopped to lean over and kick the side of the couch Alec was lying on, "-need me to twist their arms to get them listening, and some people," he jerked his thumb over his right shoulder, "think they know everything."

"I do know everything," Lisa said, "It's my power."

"What?" I said, interrupting Brian. My heartbeat quickened, though I hadn't exactly been relaxed to begin with, "You're omni-scient?"

Lisa laughed, "No, no. I do know things though. My power tells me stuff."

Swallowing hard, hoping I wasn't drawing attention by doing so, I asked, "Like?" Like why I was joining their team?

Lisa sat forward and put her elbows on her knees, "Like how I knew you were at the library when I sent me the messages. If I felt like it, and if I had the know how, I'm sure I could have figured it out by breaking into the website database and digging through the logs to find the address you connected from, but my power just let me skip that step like that." She snapped her fingers.

"And why exactly did you mention you knew where she was?" Brian queried, his voice a touch too calm.

"I wanted to see how she'd react. Messing with her a little," Lisa grinned.

"God dammit-" Brian started, but Lisa waved him off.

"I'm filling the newbie in," she waved him off, "Yell at me later."

Not giving him a chance to reply, she turned to me and explained, "My power fills in the gaps in my knowledge. I generally need some info to start from, but I can use details my power feeds me to figure out more stuff, and it all sort of compounds itself, giving me a steady flow of info."

I swallowed, "And you knew that a cape was on the way last night?"

"Yeah," she said, "Call it a well educated guess."

"And you knew the stuff about what happened in the PHQ the same way?"

Lisa's smile widened, "I'll admit I cheated there. Figuring out passwords is pretty easy with my power. I dig through the PHQ's digital paperwork and enjoy a little reality TV by way of their surveillance cameras when I'm bored. It's useful because I'm not only getting the

dirt from what I see, hear and read, but my power fills in the details on stuff like changes in their routine and the team politics.”

I stared at her, a good part of me horrified that I'd gotten into an undercover situation opposite a girl with superpowered intuition.

Taking my silence for awe, she grinned her vulpine smile, “It's not *that* amazing. I'm really best with concrete stuff. Where things are, timing, encryption, yadda yadda. I can read something out of changes in body language or routine, but it's less reliable and kind of a headache. Enough information overload without, you know?”

I did know, her explanation echoed my own thoughts regarding my ability to see and hear things through my bugs. Still, her words didn't make me feel that much better.

“And,” Brian said, still glowering at Lisa, “Even if she knows a lot, that doesn't mean Lisa can't be a dumbass sometimes.”

Lisa punched him in the arm.

“So what are your powers then?” I asked Brian and Alec, hoping for a change in topic.

They didn't get a chance to tell me. I heard barking from downstairs. A matter of heartbeats later I was standing, three paces from the couch. Three snarling dogs had me backed against the wall, drool flying from their mouths as their teeth gnashed and snapped for my hands and face.

INSINUATION 2.8

“Call off your dogs!” Brian shouted.

The largest of the dogs, an ugly Rottweiler or a mutt with strong Rottweiler blood, seized my wrist in its jaws. My knees almost buckled in response to the pain, which only worsened when it abruptly snapped its head to one side and wrenched my arm. I fell, and in a heartbeat, the other two dogs – a German Shepherd and a hairless terrier with a missing ear and eye – were on me.

The German Shepherd set to barking and snapping at my face, occasionally catching the hair that hung in front of my face to pull at it. The other started raking at me with its claws and nipping with its teeth, trying to find somewhere on my legs, body or backside that it could set its teeth into.

While those two were at it, the Rottweiler still had my wrist in its teeth, and it began pulling, as though it wanted to drag me somewhere. I grit my teeth at the pain and tried to think something I could do that would amount to more than curling up into a fetal position to protect my arms, legs and face.

“Call off the fucking dogs!” I heard Brian bellow, again.

A tooth or claw scratched my ear. I think that's what spooked me, because my composure broke and I cried out.

Just a second or two later, a much longer span of time than it sounds like when a pack of dogs is tearing at you, there was a whistle. Hearing the noise, the dogs abruptly backed off. The one eyed terrier offered one hostile bark followed by a long growl even as it walked away, as if it still had enough mean left in it that it had to let it out

somehow.

Lisa and Alec helped me to my feet. I was shaking like a leaf. One of my hands gripped the forearm of my other arm, as much to stop the worst of the trembling as to cradle the injury. I had tears in the corners of my eyes and I was clenching my teeth so hard my jaw ached.

On the opposite side of the room, Brian was rubbing the back of one of his hands. The three dogs were sitting in a neat line ten feet away from a girl who was lying on the ground. The girl had blood running from both of her nostrils. I recognized her from the picture I had seen on her wiki page. Rachel Lindt. Hellhound. Bitch.

"I *fucking* hate it," Brian growled at the girl, putting emphasis on the swear, "When you make me do that."

Bitch propped herself up a bit, half against the wall opposite me, so she had a better view of the room. A better view of me. Seeing her in person just confirmed my impressions of her from her picture online. She wasn't attractive. An unkind person might call her butch, and I wasn't feeling particularly kindly towards her. Most of her features looked like they would have been better fit on a guy rather than a girl. She had a square face, thick eyebrows, and a nose that had been broken more than once – maybe broken again just a moment ago, given the blood trickling from her nostrils. Even as far as her physical build went, she was solidly built without being fat. The trunk of her body alone was bigger around than mine was with my arms down at my sides, just by virtue of having a thicker, broader torso and having more meat on her bones. She was wearing boots, black jeans with tears all over them, and a green army jacket over a gray hooded sweatshirt. Her auburn hair was cut shortish.

I took a deep breath. Then, speaking slowly so I wouldn't stumble over my words or let a tremor into my voice, I asked "Why the fuck

did you do that?"

She didn't reply. Instead, she licked her upper lip clean of blood and smiled. It was a mean, smug sneer of a smile. Even though she was the one lying on the ground with a bloody nose, she somehow had it in her head that she'd beat me. Or something.

"God fucking dammit!" Brian was shouting. He went on to say something else, but I didn't really hear it over the buzzing of my power in my ears. I realized I was clenching my fist, and habitually forced myself to relax it.

Then, like I had done so many times over the past few days and weeks, I searched for a reason to justify why I was backing down. It was almost reflexive. When the bullies got on my case, I always had to take a moment to collect myself and tell myself why I couldn't or shouldn't retaliate.

For a few moments, I felt adrift. Around the same time that I realized I couldn't find a reason to back off, I realized I had already wrenched free of Lisa and Alec's support and crossed half of the room at a run. I reached for my bugs and realized I'd been using my power without thinking about it. They were already gathering at the stairs and by the windows. All it took was a thought, and they started flowing into the room in greater numbers. Cockroaches, earwigs, spiders and flies. Not as many as I might have liked, I hadn't been using my power for long enough to gather those from further around the neighborhood, but it was enough to count.

Bitch saw me approaching and raised her fingers to her mouth, but I didn't give her a chance to signal her animals. I kicked for her face like I might kick a soccer ball, and she aborted the whistle to cover her head with her arms. My foot bounced off of one of her arms and her entire body recoiled as she flinched.

Because I hadn't slowed down before reaching her, I had to use

my hands to stop myself from running into the wall. A line of red hot pain ran down my arm at the impact, starting at the point where the Rottweiler had bitten my wrist. Reminded of the dogs, I glanced to my right, and saw the largest of them standing, ready to come to his master's aid. I brought a large share of my bugs in between myself and the beasts. The last I saw of them before the swarm blocked most of my view, the dogs were rapidly backing away from the swarm, startled.

Finding myself standing over Bitch, braced against the wall, I pressed the attack. Her arms were covering her face and chest, but I saw her exposed ear as a target and brought my foot down on it. Her head bounced against the floor, and blood bloomed from the top of her ear. The sight of the blood almost stopped me, but I knew that backing down now would give her a chance to set them on me again with a whistle. My toe found her exposed stomach, and as she drew her knees upward to protect her belly, I aimed a sharp kick between her legs. I managed to get kicks to connect firmly with ribs three times before she brought an elbow down to protect it.

I didn't get a chance to do any more damage, because the dogs had gotten over their fear of the bugs and were closing in, circling around me and Bitch as the swarm extended. I abandoned my assault on Bitch to step away and face them. I knew I could set my bugs on them, but something told me the dogs weren't about to yelp and run away while their master was being hurt. I might have the swarm attack them, but if the pain of the bites and stings didn't stop them, they'd attack me and I'd be in the same situation I'd been in a minute ago. I doubted Bitch would call them off a second time.

A shadow fell over my vision, like a jet black curtain sweeping in front of me, blocking my view of half the room and the dogs. It dissolved into wisps of black smoke a second later, and I was startled

to see Brian right in front of me, between me and the dogs.

"Enough," he intoned. The little one-eared cyclops of a terrier snarled at him in response.

There was a sound I didn't recognize. It was only when Bitch tried again, more successfully, that I realized the first sound had been a weak attempt at a whistle. The dogs looked to their master and then retreated, still edging away from the swarm. I backed away a little as well, being careful to keep Brian between myself and the mongrels.

Bitch coughed, then raised her head to look me in the eye. She rubbed her ear with one hand, and her palm was red with blood as she pulled it away. As the German Shepherd approached her, she rested the same hand on its head. The other two dogs moved closer to her, as if they could protect her, but their attention was fixed entirely on me and Brian.

When a good few seconds had passed and Bitch had made no further overtures of aggression towards me, I sent an instruction to the swarm to make their exit. I could see Brian visibly relax as they faded into the cracks.

"No more fighting," he said, his voice calmer, "I'm directing that at you, Rachel. You deserved whatever Taylor gave you."

She glared at him, coughed once, and then glanced at the other two before turning her angry gaze to the floor.

"Taylor, come sit down. I promise we'll--"

"No," I interrupted him, "Fuck this. Fuck you guys."

"Taylor--"

"You said she wasn't cool with me joining. You *never* said she was pissed off enough to try and kill me."

Bitch and Brian started speaking at the same time, but Brian stopped when she started coughing. As her coughing fit subsided, Bitch looked up at me and snarled, "If I ordered them to kill you,

Brutus would have torn out your throat before you could scream. I gave them the hurt command.”

I laughed a little, just a little more high pitched than I would've liked, “That's great. She has her dogs trained to hurt people. Seriously? Fuck you guys. Count this as another failed recruitment.”

I headed for the stairs, but I didn't get two steps before that curtain of black appeared again, blocking my way. Brian's powers in the wiki had been listed as darkness generation. I knew where the stairs and the railing for the stairs was, so I put my hand in front of me to make sure I wasn't walking into an opaque forcefield, and on finding it to be more like smoke, I kept moving. As I entered it, the blackness slithered over my skin, oily with a weird consistency to it. Combined with an absolute lack of light that left me unable to tell whether my eyes were open or shut, it was ominous.

As my hands made contact with the railing, a pair of hands settled on my shoulders. I wheeled around and knocked them away, my voice raised as I half-shouted, “Back off!”

Except the words barely reached *me*. The sound echoed as if from a distant place, and had a hollowness to it that made me think of someone shouting from the bottom of a deep well. The darkness didn't just block off the light. It swallowed up noises as well. I'd let go of the railing when I turned to face the other person in the darkness, and I had a moment's panic when I realized I couldn't tell where the stairs were anymore. The texture of the darkness was inconsistent, making it hard to identify the full scope of my movements. I was reminded of those times I had been underwater and lost track of which direction the surface was. I could tell which way was up, sure, but that was about it.

Sensory deprivation. When those two words came to my mind, I felt myself relax some. Brian's power mucked with your senses...

Sight, hearing, touch. I wasn't limited to those three. Reached out with my power, I identified where all of the bugs in the loft and the factory below were. Using them to ground myself like a sailor might use the constellations, I figured out where the stairs should be and found the railing. The hands hadn't grabbed for me again, so I hurried down, down the stairs and out of the oppressive darkness.

I was only a few paces from the door when Brian called for me, "Taylor!"

When I turned to face him, I saw he was alone.

"You're going to use your power on me again?" I asked, wary, angry.

"No. Not in the open, not uncostumed, and not on you. It was stupid of me to do it in the first place. I wasn't thinking, I just wanted to stop you from bolting. I can barely tell it's there, so I forget how it can affect other people."

I started to turn away, ready to walk, but Brian took a quick step in my direction, and I stopped.

Brian tried again, "Look, I'm sorry. About using my power on you, about Bitch."

I cut him off before he could get any further, "You don't have to worry. I won't tell anyone what you guys showed me tonight, I won't be attacking you guys if I run into you in costume. I'm pissed, but I'm not that pissed." I wasn't sure how much of that was a lie, but it seemed like the thing to say.

When he didn't say anything in response, I added, "You guys offered me a choice. I could take the money and go, or I could join. Let me change my mind. After what your teammate just did, you owe me that much."

"If it were up to me, I'd kick Bitch out and keep you," Brian spoke.

His words were like a bucket of water in my face, waking me up.

I'd been pissed, furious, and why? Because I'd felt betrayed and disappointed. The irony of that, given my whole reason for being there in the first place, didn't escape me. I wouldn't have been as disappointed and betrayed as I was if I didn't enjoy their companionship on some level. Here Brian was, expressing similar sentiments from the other side of things.

I let out a long sigh. I guessed, "But you won't?"

"It's complicated. As much as I want you on the team, we count on the boss for our allowances, information, equipment and for fencing anything we steal. We count on her to deploy our heavy hitters. We'd lose all that if we kicked her out."

"I became a-" I almost said superhero, "cape to get away from that shit, from assholes like Bitch." There was also the fact that Tattletale spooked me, but I couldn't say that out loud.

"Come back inside, Taylor. Please. I personally guarantee I won't let her pull another stunt like that or *I'll* quit the team. You're hurt, you're bleeding, your clothes are ripped, and you left your bag with the money upstairs. I'm trained in first aid. At least let us patch you up, get you in some new clothes."

I glanced down at my arm. I had my right hand clasped around my other wrist, and there was blood on the sleeve of my sweatshirt. And my costume was still upstairs? Fuck.

"Fine," I sighed, "But just so you know, I'm only coming back because *she* doesn't want me to. I quit, she wins, and I'm not fucking having that."

Brian smiled and opened the door for me, "I'll take what I can get."

INSINUATION 2.9

As Brian and I returned to the loft, I felt more than a little apprehensive. It wasn't just that I was going to be around Bitch again, but I was also having to face Lisa and Alec. After shouting and talking about quitting the team, I was turning around and going back. A part of me wanted to apologize, but a larger part of me felt I shouldn't. I had been justified in everything I had said and done, right? Maybe it was just because I wasn't used to violence or raising my voice.

As I'd feared, there was a bit of an awkward silence as we reached the top of the stairs. Bitch was sitting in a chair beside one of the tables, her dogs nowhere to be seen. As she saw me, she scowled, but didn't say anything. Alec grinned as I came back, but I couldn't decide if it was because he was glad or if it was at my expense. I didn't know him well enough to guess either way.

"Glad you came back," Lisa told me, a bit of a smile on her face, "Alec, can you go get the first aid kit? It might be in the storage closet."

While Alec did that, Brian sat me down on the arm of the couch and I pulled off my sweatshirt to get a better look at the damage. I pulled the bottom of my tank top up around my ribs to get a look at where one of the dogs had been gotten at my stomach and back. My clothes had taken most of the damage, and I'd only suffered three or four shallow-ish scrapes. There was bruising and some raw areas where I felt tender, but I figured I'd recover from that in a day or two. I had a cut on my ear, which would be harder to hide, but I was pretty sure I could keep the incident from my dad without him raising hell.

There was only one spot of real damage, a puncture where it looked like a fang had buried itself deep in the top of my forearm and then dragged an inch or so down towards my wrist as it made its exit. The area around it was already turning colors with bruising. I wasn't sure how deep the puncture was, but I was pretty sure it should have been hurting more than it did. The blood from the injury had trickled down my arm, and was still welling out.

"Christ," I said, mostly to myself.

"That was awesome, you know," Alec told me, as he returned with the first aid kit, "I didn't think you had it in you to kick someone's ass." I glared at him, but he just sat on the back of the sofa, his legs kicking like an excited kid.

"I think we're going to clean that and stitch it. Tattle's power should give us a better sense of whether stitches are necessary," Brian said, quietly.

"Alright," I agreed.

I would hardly describe getting stitches as a bonding experience, but Bitch more or less stayed quiet throughout the process. We were both sat down and told to sit still while Brian both cleaned and sewed up the hole in my arm and the tear my kick had made in Bitch's ear. Brian insisted I take two Tylenol, though the pain was still limited to a mild ache in my arm. I grudgingly obliged. I'd never liked taking pills, and never felt they made a real difference.

"You have first aid training?" I inquired, to make conversation and break the tense silence.

Alec complained, "We all do, Brian made us all take a comprehensive class less than a week after we were gathered as a team. Such a pain in the ass, believe me. He'll make you do it too."

"I already did," I admitted, "One of the first things I did." I jumped a little at a snarling from my left, but it was just Rachel cussing as

Lisa taped a cotton pad to her ear.

Brian just looked at me and flashed that boyish smile again. I looked away, embarrassed that a guy like him would get pleased like that on my account. He got up to head to the bathroom, garbage from the bandages, sutures, cotton swabs and ointments in his hands.

With Brian gone and Lisa absorbed in trying to patch up Bitch's ear, I was left with Alec. To make conversation, I said, "Alec. You were going to tell me what you do. You go by Regent, right?"

"The name is a long story, but what I do is this." He looked over his shoulder at Brian, who was returning from the washroom with a damp washcloth in hand. Brian, mid-stride, stumbled and fell onto the floor.

"Way to look good in front of the new girl, gimpy!" Alec mocked his teammate, laughing. Grateful for the break in the tension, I couldn't help but laugh too. While Alec continued laughing, Brian got to his feet and ran up to the smaller boy, at which point he got Alec in a headlock and began punching him in the shoulder repeatedly. This abuse only made Alec laugh harder in between his cries of pain.

Lisa turned to me, smiling at the prank and play fighting between the boys, "It's a bit complicated to explain, but basically, Alec can get into people's nervous systems. This lets him fire off impulses that set off reflexes or make body parts jerk into motion. It's not a dramatic power, but with timing, he can make someone fall over mid-step, drop something, lose their sense of balance or pull the trigger on a gun."

I nodded, absorbing the information. It sounded very underwhelming to me, but I was willing to admit I could be underestimating it.

"Well," I said, after a long pause, "I think I pretty much get what

everyone can do, then. Correct me if I'm wrong, but Bitch can turn those dogs into those freakish monsters I saw the other night?"

Sitting a few feet away, Bitch muttered, "They aren't freakish."

Lisa answered my question, ignoring her. "*Rachel* can do it with any dog, actually," she said, stressing the name, "And no codenames when we're not in costume, 'kay? Get in the habit of using the right name at the right times, and it's that much harder to slip."

It was hard to think of Rachel by her real name. Bitch seemed really fitting given the stunt she had pulled. I apologized to Lisa, "Sorry."

Lisa gave a small nod in response, then told me, "She can use her power on any dog, but only Brutus, Judas and Angelica are trained well enough that they'll listen to her when they're pumped up."

Ah, so that was it. "And Brian makes that oily darkness that screws up your hearing. The Parahumans wiki said it was darkness generation."

Brian smiled, "I put that into the wiki myself. It's not wrong, but it does catch people off guard when they think they know what you can do, and there's something more to it."

Lisa added, "It's not just hearing. It also cuts off radio signals and dampens the effects of radiation."

"That's what her power tells her, anyways. I haven't had much chance to test that part of things. I get by as is," Brian said. He turned his hand palm up and created a handful of the darkness. It was like smoke, but so absolutely black that there was no texture to it. It was like someone had taken a scalpel to reality and the blackness was what was there when everything else was gone. I couldn't even gauge the dimensions of it, unless I looked at it from a different perspective. Even then, with the way the darkness shifted and billowed like smoke, it was hard to judge the shape.

More of it just kept pouring from his hand, climbing upwards to cover the top of the room. As the light from the windows near the upper edges of the room and the florescent bars on the ceiling was cut off, the room got a great deal darker.

He closed his hand into a fist, and the darkness thinned out and disintegrated into strands and tatters, and the room brightened again. I looked at the light coming in from the windows and was surprised it wasn't later.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Nineteen minutes before five," Lisa said. She didn't look at a watch or a clock as she said it, which was unsettling. It was a reminder that her power was constantly available to her.

Brian asked me, "Do you have somewhere you need to be?"

"Home, I guess," I admitted, "My dad will wonder where I am."

"Call him," Lisa suggested, "Now that the introductions are over with, you can just hang out for a bit, if you want."

"We could order pizza," Alec suggested. Then when Lisa, Brian and Bitch all made faces, he added, "Or maybe everyone's sick of pizza and we could order something else."

"Stick around?" Brian made it a question.

I glanced at Bitch. She was sitting on the table behind one of the couches and looking like a mess, with a bloody bandage over one ear, blood smeared below her nose and lip, and a bit of green around the gills that suggested she was feeling a little worse for wear. With her in that state, I didn't feel particularly threatened. Staying meant I could work to get things more copacetic and maybe dig for a bit more information. I'd also missed socializing with people – even if it was under false pretenses with a group that included an apparent sociopath. It had been a sucky day. Just chilling out sounded good.

"Okay," I decided, "Yeah, I think I'd like to."

"Phone's in the kitchen if you want to call your dad," Lisa said.

I looked over my shoulder as I headed across the loft. The others got settled on the couches, with Alec turning on the TV while Lisa and Brian took a second to clean up.

I found the phone and dialed my dad.

"Hey dad," I said, when I heard the phone being picked up.

"Taylor. Are you alright?" He sounded worried. It *was* unusual, I supposed, my not being home when he got back from work.

"I'm fine, dad. Is it cool if I hang out with some people tonight?"

There was a pause.

"Taylor, if there's anyone that's making you make this call... the bullies or someone else, tell me everything is fine. If you're not in trouble, tell me your mother's full name."

I felt momentarily embarrassed. Was it so unusual for me to hang out with people? I knew my dad was just trying to keep me safe, but it was bordering on the ridiculous.

"Annette Rose Hebert," I told him, "Really dad, it's cool."

"You're really okay?"

My gaze roved over the kitchen, taking in the details, as I gave him my assurances.

"Better than ever. I kind of made some friends," I said.

My eyes settled on their dining room table. There was a stack of money, wrapped with a paper band just as the money in the lunchbox had been. Beside the money, plain as day, was the dark gray metal of a handgun.

My attention caught by the gun, I only barely caught my dad's question. "What are they like?"

"They seem like good people," I lied.

INTERLUDE 2

There were very few things, in Victoria Dallon's estimation, that were cooler than flying. The invisible forcefield that extended a few millimeters over her skin and clothes just made it better. The field kept the worst of the chill from touching her, but still let her feel the wind on her skin and in her hair. Bugs didn't splat against her face like they did against car windshields, even when she was pushing eighty miles an hour.

Spotting her target, she whooped and plunged for the ground, gaining speed where anyone else would be slowing down. She hit the asphalt hard enough to crack it and send fragments of it into the air, touching ground with her knee and foot, one arm extended. She stayed in that kneeling position for just heartbeats, letting her platinum curls and the cape that was draped over one of her shoulders flutter in the wake of air that had followed her descent. She met the eyes of her quarry with a steely glare.

She'd practiced that landing for *weeks* to get it right.

The man was a twenty something Caucasian with a shaved head, a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, jeans and work boots. He took one look at her and bolted.

Victoria grinned as he disappeared down the far end of the alley. She rose from her kneeling position, dusted herself off and ran her fingers through her hair to tidy it. Then she raised herself a foot off the ground and flew after him at an easy forty five miles an hour.

It didn't take a minute to catch him, even with the head start she had given him. She flew just past him, grazing him. An instant later,

she came to a dead stop, facing him. Again, the wind made for a dramatic flourish as it stirred her hair, her cape and the skirt of her costume.

"The woman you attacked was named Andrea Young," she spoke.

The man looked over his shoulder, as if gauging his escape routes.

"Don't even think about it, fugly," she told him, "You know I'd catch you, and trust me, I'm already pissed off enough without you wasting my time."

"I didn't do anything," the man snarled.

"Andrea Young!" Victoria raised her voice. As she shouted, she exercised her power. The man quailed as though she'd slapped him. "A black college student was beaten so badly she needed medical attention! Her teeth were knocked out! You're trying to tell me that you, a skinhead with swollen knuckles, someone who was in the crowd watching paramedics arrive with an expression bordering on glee, you didn't do anything!?"

"I didn't do nothing worth caring about," he sneered. His bravado was tempered by a second look over his shoulder, as though he'd very much like to be elsewhere right that moment.

She flew forward, her fists catching him by the collar. For just a moment, she contemplated slamming him up against a wall. It would have been fitting and satisfying to shove him hard enough against the brick to crack it, then drop him into the dumpster that sat at the wall's base.

Instead, she pulled up a little, bringing the two of them to a stop. They were now just high enough above the ground that he'd feel uncomfortable with the height. The dumpster, mostly empty, was directly below him, but she doubted he was paying attention to anything but her.

"I think it's a safe bet to say you're a member of Empire Eighty-

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Eight,” she told him, meeting his eyes with a hard stare, “or at least, you’ve got some friends who are. So here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to either tell me everything the triple-E’s have been up to, or I’m going to break your arms and legs and *then* you’re going to tell me everything.”

As she spoke, she ratcheted up her power. She knew it was working when he started squirming just to avoid her gaze.

“Fuck you, you can’t touch me. There’s laws against that shit,” he blustered, staring fixedly over one shoulder.

She turned up her power another notch. Her body thrummed with current – waves of energy that anyone in her presence would experience as an emotional charge of awe and admiration. For those with a reason to be afraid of her, it would be a feeling of raw intimidation instead.

“Last chance,” she warned him.

Unfortunately, fear affected everyone differently. For this particular asshole, it just made him dig in his heels and become obstinate. She could see it in his body language before he opened his mouth – this was the sort of guy who reacted to anything that spooked or unsettled him with an almost mindless refusal to bend.

“Lick my hairy, sweaty balls,” he snarled, before punctuating it with a spat, “Cunt.”

She threw him. Since she could bench press a cement mixer, though it was hard to balance something so large and unwieldy, even a casual toss on her part could get some good distance. He flew a good twenty five or thirty yards down the back road before hitting the asphalt, and rolled for another ten.

He was utterly still for long enough that Victoria had begun to worry that he’d somehow snapped his neck or broken his spine as he’d rolled. She was relieved when he groaned and began to pull

himself to his feet.

"Ready to talk?" she asked him, her voice carrying down the alley. She didn't move forward from where she hovered in the air, but she did let herself drop closer to the ground.

Pressing one hand against his leg to support himself as he straightened up, he raised his other hand and flipped her the bird, then turned and began to limp down the alley.

What was this asshole thinking? That she would just let him go? That, what, she would just bend to his witless lack of self preservation? That she was helpless to do any real harm to him? To top it off, he was going to insult her and try to walk away?

"Screw you too," she hissed through her teeth. Then she kicked the dumpster below her hard enough to send it flying down the little road. It rotated lazily through the air as it arced towards the retreating figure, the trajectory and rotation barely changing as it knocked him flat. It skidded to a halt three to five yards beyond him, the metal sides of the dumpster squealing and sparking as it scraped against the asphalt.

This time, he didn't get up.

"Fuck," she swore, "Fuckity fuck fuck." She flew to him and checked for a pulse. She sighed, and then headed to the nearest street. She found the street address, grabbed her cell from her belt and dialed.

"Hey sis? Yeah, I found him. That's, uh, sort of the problem. Yeah. Look, I'm sorr- ok, can we talk about this later? Yeah. I'm at Spayder and Rock, there's this little road that runs behind the buildings. Downtownish, yeah. Yeah? Thanks."

Victoria returned to the unconscious skinhead, checked his pulse, and listened intently for changes in his breathing. It took a very long five minutes for her sister to arrive.

INTERLUDE 2

"Again, Victoria?" the voice disturbed her from her contemplations.

"Use my codename, please," Victoria told the girl. Her sister was as different from her as night was from day. Where Victoria was beautiful, tall, gorgeous, blonde, Amy was mousy. Victoria's costume showed off her figure, with a white one-piece dress that came to mid-thigh (with shorts underneath) an over-the shoulder cape, high boots and a golden tiara with spikes radiating from it, vaguely reminiscent of the sun's rays or the statue of liberty. Amy's costume, by contrast, was only a shade away from being a burka. Amy wore a robe with a large hood and a scarf that covered the lower half of her face. The robe was alabaster white and had a medic's red cross on the chest and the back.

"Our identities are public," Amy retorted, pushing the hood back and scarf down to reveal brown frizzy hair and a face with freckles spaced evenly across it.

"It's the principle of the thing," Victoria replied.

"You want to talk about *principles*, Glory Girl?" Amy asked, in the most sarcastic tone she could manage, "This is the sixth – sixth! – time you've nearly killed someone. That I know about!"

"I'm strong enough to lift a SUV over my head," Victoria muttered, "It's hard to hold back all the time."

"I'm sure Carol would buy that line," Amy said, making it clear in her tone she wasn't, "But I know you better than anyone. If you're having trouble holding back, the problem isn't here –" she poked Victoria in the bicep. "It's here-" she jabbed her sister in the forehead, hard. Victoria didn't even blink.

"Look, can you just fix him?" Victoria pleaded.

"I'm thinking I shouldn't," Amy said, quietly.

"What?"

"There's consequences, Vicky. If I help you now, what's going to stop you from doing it again? I can call the paramedics. I know some good people from the hospital. They could probably fix him up alright."

"Hey, hey, hey," Victoria said, "That's not funny. He goes to the hospital, people ask questions."

"Yeah, I'm well aware," Amy said, her voice hushed.

"This isn't, like, me getting grounded. I'd get pulled into court on charges of aggravated assault and battery. That doesn't just fuck with me. It fucks with our family, all of New Wave. Everything we've struggled to build."

Amy frowned and looked at the fallen man..

"I know you're not keen on the superhero thing, but you'd really go that far? You'd do that to us? To me?"

Amy pointed a finger at her sister, "That's not me. It's not my fault we're at this point. It's you. You're crossing the line, going too far. Which is *exactly* what people who criticize New Wave are scared of. We're not government sponsored. We're not protected or organized or regulated in the same way. Everyone knows who we are under our masks. That means we have to be accountable. The responsible thing for me to do, as a member of this team, is to let the paramedics take him, and let the law do as it sees fit."

Victoria abruptly pulled Amy into a hug. Amy resisted for a moment, then let her arms go limp at her sides.

"This isn't just a team, Ames," Victoria told her, "We're a family. We're *your* family."

The man lying just a matter of feet away stirred, then groaned, long and loud.

"My adoptive family," Amy mumbled into Victoria's shoulder, "And stop trying to use your frigging power to make me all squee

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over how amazing you are. Doesn't work. I've been exposed so long I'm immune."

"It hurts," the man moaned.

"I'm not using my power, dumbass," Victoria told Amy, letting her go, "I'm hugging my sister. My awesome, caring and merciful sister."

The man whined, louder, "I can't move. I feel cold."

Amy frowned at Victoria, "I'll heal him. But this is the last time."

Victoria beamed, "Thank you."

Amy leaned over the man and touched her hand to his cheek, "Slingshot break to his ribs, fractured clavicle, broken mandible, broken scapula, fractured sternum, bruised lung, broken ulna, broken radius -"

"I get the point," Victoria said.

"Do you?" Amy asked. Then she sighed, "I wasn't even halfway down the list. This is going to take a little while. Sit?"

Victoria crossed her legs and assumed a sitting position, floating a half foot above the ground. Amy just knelt where she was and rested her hand on the man's cheek. The tension went out of his body and he relaxed.

"How's the woman? Andrea?"

"Better than ever, physically," Amy replied, "I grew her new teeth, fixed everything from the bruising to the scrapes, and even gave her a head to toe tune-up. Physically, she'll feel on top of the world, like she had been to a spa and had the best nutritionist, best fitness expert and the best doctor all looking after her for a straight month."

"Good," Victoria said.

"Mentally? Emotionally? It's up to her to deal with the aftermath of a beating. I can't affect the brain."

"Well-" Victoria started to speak.

"Yeah, yeah. Not can't. Won't. It's complicated and I don't trust my-

self not to screw something up when I'm tampering with someone's head. That's it, that's all."

Victoria started to say something, then shut her mouth. Even if they weren't related by blood, they *were* sisters. Only sisters could have these sorts of recurring arguments. They had gone through a dozen different variations on this argument before. As far as she was concerned, Amy was doing herself a disservice by not practicing using her powers on the brain. It was only a matter of time before her sister found herself in a situation where she needed to do some emergency brain surgery and found herself incapable. Amy, for her part, refused to even discuss it.

She didn't want to raise a sensitive issue when Amy was in the process of doing her a major favor. To change the subject, Victoria asked, "Is it cool if I question him?"

"Might as well," Amy sighed.

Victoria tapped the man a few times on the forehead to get his attention. He could barely move his head, but his eyes lolled in her direction.

"Ready to answer my questions, or do me and my sister just walk away and leave you like this?"

"I... sue you, he gasped out, then managed an added, "Whore."

"Try it. I'd just love to see a skinhead with a few broken bones go up against a superheroine whose mom just happens to be one of the best lawyers in Brockton Bay. You know her, right?"

"Brandish," he said.

"That's her name in costume. Normally she's Carol Dallon. She'd kick your ass in court, believe me," Victoria said. *She* believed it. What the thug didn't understand was that even if he lost the case, the media circus that would be stirred up would do more damage than anything else. But she didn't need to inform him of that. She asked

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him, "So do I get my sister to leave you as you are, or are you willing to trade some information for relief from months of incredible pain and a lifetime of arthritis and stiffness in your bones?"

"And erectile dysfunction," Amy said, just loud enough for the thug to hear her, "You fractured your ninth vertebra. That's going to affect all nerve function in extremities below your waist. If I leave you like you are, your toes will always feel a little numb, and you'll have a hell of a time getting it up, if you know what I mean."

The skinhead's eyes widened a fraction, "You're fucking with me."

"I have an honorary medical license," Amy told him, her expression solemn, "I'm not allowed to fuck with you about stuff like that. Hippocratic oath."

"Isn't that 'do no harm'?" the thug asked. Then he groaned, long, loud and with the slightest rattle in his breath, as she removed her hand from his body.

"That's just the first part of it, like how freedom of speech and the right to bear arms is just the first part of a very long constitution. It doesn't look like he's cooperating, Glory Girl. Should we go?"

"Fuck!" the man shouted, then winced, tenderly touching his side with one hand, "I'll tell you. Please, just... do what you were doing. Touch me and make the pain go away, put me back together. Fix me?"

Amy touched him. He relaxed, and then he started talking.

"Empire Eighty-Eight is extending into the Docks on Kaiser's orders. Lung's in custody, and whatever happens, the ABB is weaker than it was. That means there's territory for grabs, and the Empire sure ain't making progress downtown."

"Why not?" Victoria asked him.

"This guy, Coil. Don't know what his powers are, but he's got a private army. Ex-military, all of 'em. At least fifty, Kaiser said, and every one of 'em has top notch gear. Their armor's better than kevlar.

You shoot 'em, they're back up in a few seconds. 'Least when you shoot a pig, you can be pretty sure you broke a few ribs. But that's not the fucked up thing. These guys? They've got these lasers hooked up to the machine guns they carry around. If they don't think bullets are doing it, or if they're after people who are behind cover, they fire off these purple laser beams that can cut through steel. Tear through any cover you're standing behind and burn through you too."

"Yeah. I know about him. His methods get expensive," Victoria said, "Top of the line soldiers, top of the line gear."

The thug nodded weakly, "But even with money to burn, he's fighting us over Downtown territories. Constant tug of war, neither of us making much headway. Been going on for months. So Kaiser thinks we should take the Docks now that the ABB are on the outs, gain some ground somewhere easier. Don't know any more than that, as far as his plans."

"Who else is up to something? Faultline?"

"The bitch with the freaks in her crew? She's a mercenary, different goals. But maybe. If she wanted to branch out, now would be the time to do it. With her rep, she'd even do alright."

"Then who? There's a power vacuum in the docks. Kaiser's declared he wants to seize it, but I'm willing to bet he's warned you about others making a play."

The skinhead laughed, then winced, "Are you dense, girl? Everyone's going to make a play. It's not just the major gangs and teams that are looking for a slice of the pie, there. It's *everyone*. The Docks are ripe for the taking. The location's worth as much money as you'd get downtown. It's the go to place if you want to buy black market. Sex, drugs, violence. And the locals are already used to paying protection money. It's just a matter of changing who they pay to. The Docks are rich territory, and we're talking the potential for a full scale fucking

INTERLUDE 2

war over it.”

He looked up at the blond superheroine and laughed. Her lips set into a firm line.

He continued, “You want to know my guess? Empire Eighty Eight is going to take the biggest slice of the Docks, because we’re strong enough to. Coil’s going to stick his thumb in just to spite us, ABB is going to hold on to some. But you’re also going to have a bunch of the little guys trying to take something for themselves. Über and Leet, Circus, the Undersiders, Squealer, Trainwreck, Stain, others you’ve never heard of? They’re going to stake out their ground, and one of two things is going to happen. Either there’s war, in which case civilians get hurt and things get bad for you, or there’s alliances between the various teams and solo villains and shit gets even worse for you.”

He broke into laughter yet again.

“Come on, Panacea,” Victoria said as she stood up, touched ground with her boots and brushed her skirt straight, “We’ve gotten enough.”

“You sure? I’m not done yet,” Amy told her.

“You fixed the bruises and scrapes, broken bones?” Everything that could get her in trouble, in other words.

“Yeah, but I didn’t fix *everything*,” Amy replied.

“Good enough,” Victoria decided.

“Hey!” the skinhead shouted, “The deal was you’d fix me if I talked! Did you fix my cock?” He tried to struggle to get to his feet, but his legs buckled under him, “Hey! I can’t fuckin’ walk! I’ll fucking sue you!”

Victoria’s expression changed in an instant, and her power flooded out, blindsiding the thug. For an instant, his eyes were like those of a panicked horse, all whites, rolling around, unfocused. She grabbed him by the shirt collar, lifted him up and growled into his ear, her voice just above a whisper, “Try it. My sister just healed you...”

most of you, with a touch. Did you ever wonder what else she could do? Ever think, maybe, she could break you just as easily? Or change the color of your skin, you racist fuck? I'll tell you this, I'm not *half* as scary as my little sister is."

She let him go. He collapsed in a heap on the ground.

As the two sisters walked away, Victoria pulled her cell phone out of a pouch on her belt with her free hand. Turning to Amy, she said, "Thank you."

"Play safe, Victoria. I can't bring people back from the dead, and once you've gone that far..."

"I'll be good. I'll be better," Victoria promised as she dialed with one hand. She put the phone to her ear, "Hello? Emergency services? Requesting special line. New Wave, Glory Girl. Incapacitated criminal for you to pick up, no powers. No, no rush, I can hold."

Looking over her shoulder, Victoria noted the thug, still floundering and half-crawling, "He's not going to get up?"

"He'll be numb from the waist down for another three hours. His left arm will be iffy for about that long, too, so he's not going to move unless he can drag himself somewhere with just one limb. He'll also have numb toes for a good month or so, too," Amy smiled.

"You didn't actually..."

"No. Nothing was broken, and I didn't screw up anything, beyond a temporary numbness. But he doesn't know that. Fear and doubt will complete the effect, and the suggestion becomes a self fulfilling prophecy."

"Amy!" Victoria laughed, hugging her sister with one arm, "Weren't you just saying you weren't going to mess with people's heads?"

Arc 3

Agitation

AGITATION 3.1

Tuesday morning found me running again, first thing. I woke up at my regular time, apologized to my dad for not having breakfast with him, and headed out the door, hood of my sweatshirt up to hide the mess of my uncombed hair.

There was something appealing about being out and about before the city had woken up. I didn't usually get out quite this early, so it was a refreshing change. As I headed east at a brisk jog, there were no cars or people on the street. It was six thirty in the morning, and the sun had just finished rising, so the shadows were long. The air was cool enough for my breath to fog. It was like Brockton Bay was a ghost town, in a good way.

My training regimen had me running every morning, and alternating between more running and doing other exercises in the afternoons, depending on which day of the week it was. The primary goal was to build my stamina. In February, Sophia had goaded some boys into trying to catch me, I think the goal had been to duct tape me to a telephone pole. I had escaped, helped mostly by the fact that the boys hadn't really cared enough to run after me, but I found myself winded after having run just a block. It had been a wake-up call that came about just when I was starting to think about going out in costume. Not long after, I had started training. After a few starts and stops, I had settled into a routine.

I was more fit, now. While I could hardly say I was heavy, before, I'd had the unfortunate combination of a slight bulge for a belly, small breasts and broomstick-thin arms and legs. It had added up to

me looking something like a frog forced to stand up on its hind legs. Three and a half months had burned away the body fat, leaving me very lean, and had given me the stamina to run at a steady jog without leaving me panting for breath.

I didn't aim to just jog, though. I steadily increased my pace with every block I ran as I headed towards the water. By the fifth block, I was running.

My general approach was not to get too worried about counting the miles or measuring the times. That just felt like it was distracting me from my own awareness of my body and its limits. If it felt too easy, I just pushed myself a step further than I had the previous day.

The route I took varied every day, at my father's insistence, but it usually took me to the same place. In Brockton Bay, going east took you to one of two places. You either ended up at the Docks, or you ended up at the Boardwalk. Because most areas of the Docks were not the sort of place that you just breezed through, given the vagrants, gang members and general crime, I stuck to main roads leading past the Docks and to the Boardwalk. It was usually close to seven by the time I got to the bridge that went over Lord Street. From there, it was a block to the Boardwalk.

I slowed down as the sidewalk ended and the wooden platform began. Though my legs were aching and I was out of breath, I forced myself to keep a low and steady pace rather than just stop.

Along the boardwalk, people were starting their day. Most places were still closed, with the top notch security systems, steel shutters and iron grates protecting all of the expensive stores, but there were cafes and restaurants opening up. Other stores had vans parked in front, and were busy loading in their shipments. There were only a few people out and about, which made it easy to find Brian.

Brian was leaning on the wooden railing, looking over the beach.

Balanced on the railing next to him was a paper bag and a cardboard tray with a coffee in each of the four pockets. I stopped beside him, and he greeted me with a broad smile.

"Hey, you're right on time," Brian said. He looked different than he had when I saw him on Monday. He was wearing a sweater under a felt jacket, his jeans didn't have any rips or tears in them, and his boots were shined. On Monday, he had given me the impression of a regular person who lived at the Docks. The fashionable, well fit clothes he wore today made him look like someone who belonged on the Boardwalk alongside the customers who shopped in stores where nothing cost less than a hundred dollars. The contrast and the ease with which he seemed to make the transition was startling. My estimation of Brian rose a notch.

"Hey," I said, feeling just a touch embarrassed at having taken so long to respond, and feeling painfully under-dressed in his presence. I hadn't expected him to dress so well. I hoped my being out of breath was enough of an excuse for the delay in response. There was nothing I could do about feeling unfashionable.

He gestured towards the paper bag, "I got donuts and croissants from the cafe over there, and a coffee if you want it."

"I want," I said, then I felt dumb for the awkward lapse into cave-man speak. I blamed the early hour of the day. To try and save face, I added, "Thanks."

I fished out a sugar-dusted donut and bit into it. I could tell right away that it wasn't the kind of donut that was mass produced at some central factory and delivered overnight to the shops for baking in the morning. It was freshly made, probably right at the store a block away, sold right out of the oven.

"So good," I said, sucking the sugar from my fingertips before reaching for one of the coffees. Seeing the logo, I looked over at the

cafe and asked, "Don't coffees there cost, like, fifteen dollars a cup?"

Brian chuckled a little, "We can afford it, Taylor."

It took me a second to process the idea, and as I made the connection, I felt like an idiot. These guys were raking in thousands of dollars on a given job, and they had given me two thousand dollars up front. I wasn't willing to spend the money, knowing where it came from, so it was just sitting in the cubbyhole I kept my costume in, nagging at me. I couldn't tell Brian that I wasn't spending it, either, without risking having to explain why.

"Yeah, I guess," I said, eventually. I leaned my elbows on the wooden railing beside Brian and stared out over the water. There were a few diehard windsurfers just getting ready to start the day. I guess it made sense, since there would be the occasional boat going out on the water, later.

"How's your arm?" He asked.

I extended my arm, clenched my fist and relaxed it to demonstrate, "Only hurts when I flex it." I didn't tell him that it had been hurting badly enough to cost me some sleep last night.

"We'll leave the stitches in for about a week, I think, before we take them out," Brian said, "You can go to your doctor and have him do it, or drop by and I'll take care of it."

I nodded. A turn of the salt-water and seaweed scented wind blew my hood back, and I took a second to push my hair out of my face and pull my hood back up.

"I'm sorry for Rachel and that whole incident last night" Brian said, "I wanted to apologize sooner, but I figured it would be a bad idea to bring it up while she was in earshot."

"It's okay," I said. I wasn't sure it was, but it wasn't really his fault. I tried to put my thoughts into words, "I think... well, I guess I expected to have people attack me from the moment I put on a cos-

tume, so I shouldn't be surprised, right?"

Brian nodded, but didn't say anything, so I added, "It caught me a little off guard that it came from someone that's supposedly on my team, but I'm dealing."

"Just so you know," Brian told me, "Just from what I saw after you left last night and as people were waking up this morning, Rachel seems to have stopped protesting quite as loudly or often about the idea of having someone new join the team. She's still not happy about it, but I would be surprised if there was a repeat performance."

I laughed, a little too abruptly and high pitched than I would have liked, "God, I hope not."

"She's kind of a special case," Brian said, "I think that growing up the way she did kind of messed her up. No family, too old and, uh, not really attractive enough to be a good candidate for adoption. I feel bad saying that, but that's the way those things work, you know?" He glanced over his shoulder at me.

I nodded.

"So she spent a good decade in foster care, no fixed place to live, fighting tooth and nail with the other foster kids for even the most basic luxuries and possessions. My guess? She was screwed up before she got her powers, and with things happening the way they did, her powers pushed her into the deepest end of the antisocial pool."

"Makes sense," I said, then I added, "I read her page on the wiki."

"So you've got the gist of it," Brian said, "She's a handful to deal with, even for me, and I think she actually considers me a friend... or as much a friend as someone like her can have, anyways. But if you can at least tolerate her, you should see we've got a pretty good thing going with the team."

"Sure," I said, "We'll give it a shot, anyways."

He smiled at me, and I dropped my gaze, embarrassed.

I spotted a crab scuttling across the beach almost directly below us. I reached out with my power and stopped it in its tracks. Though I didn't need to, I extended my finger and pointed at it, then waved my finger lazily as I made the crab follow where my index finger was pointing. Since Brian and I were both leaning over the railing, and there was practically nobody on the Boardwalk that wasn't busy with work or getting their store opened for the day, I was pretty certain nobody else would figure out what I was doing.

Brian saw the crab dancing in circles and figure eights and smiled. Conspiratorially, he leaned closer to me and whispered, "You can control crabs, too?"

I nodded, feeling just a bit of a thrill at how we were huddled like this, sharing secrets while the people around us were totally in the dark. I told him, "I used to think I could control anything with an exoskeleton or shell. But I can control earthworms too, among other things, and they don't have shells. I think all it takes is that they have to have very simple brains."

I made it run in circles and figure eights for a short while longer, then released it to go about its business.

"I should bring the others their morning coffee before they come looking for me. Want to come with?" Brian asked.

I shook my head, "I gotta get home and get ready for school."

"Ah, right," Brian said, "I forget about stuff like that."

"You guys don't go?"

"I take courses online," Brian said, "My folks think it's so I can hold a job to pay for my apartment... which is kind of true. Alec dropped out, Rachel never went, and Lisa already applied for and tested for her G.E.D. Cheated using her power, but she has it."

"Ah," I said, my focus more or less dwelling on the idea that Brian had an apartment. Not the fact that Grue the successful supervillain

had an apartment – Lisa had mentioned that to me – but that Brian the teenager with parents and schoolwork to focus on did. He kept changing my frame of reference for trying to figure him out.

“Here, a gift,” he said, as he reached into his pocket and then extended his hand.

I felt a moment of trepidation at the notion of accepting another gift. The two grand they had given me was a weight on my conscience already. Still, it would look bad if I didn't accept. I made myself put my hand under his, and he dropped a key with a short beaded chain looped through it into my palm.

“That's to our place,” he told me, “And I mean that. Ours as in yours too. You're free to come by any time, even if nobody is there. Kick back and watch TV, eat our food, track mud on our floor, yell at the others for tracking mud on the floor, whatever.”

“Thank you,” I said, surprising myself by actually meaning it.

“You going to come by after school, or should I meet you here again tomorrow morning?”

I thought on it for a second. Last night, not long before I'd left, Brian and I had gotten to talking about our training. When I had mentioned my morning runs, he had suggested meeting me regularly. The idea was to keep me up to date, since I wasn't living at the group's hideout like Lisa, Alec and Rachel were. It had made sense, and I'd agreed. It didn't hurt that I liked Brian the most of anyone in the group. He was easier to relate to, somehow. That wasn't to say I didn't like Lisa, but just being around her made me feel like I had the Sword of Damocles hanging over my head.

“I'll come by later,” I decided aloud, knowing I might chicken out if I didn't commit somehow. Before we could get caught in another thread of conversation, I gave him a quick wave and started my run back, the key to their place clenched in my hand.

Heading back home and preparing for school left me with a gradually increasing feeling of dread, like a weight sitting on my chest. I'd been trying not to think of Emma's taunting and my fleeing from the school with tears on my face. I had spent an hour or two tossing and turning in bed, the event replaying over my head while the throbbing of my wrist jarred me awake every time I started to drift off. Beyond that, I had been pretty successful in avoiding thinking about it. Now that the prospect of going back was looming, though, it was impossible not to dwell on the subject as I headed home, got ready and caught the bus.

I couldn't help but dwell on the coming day. I still had to face the consequences of missing two afternoons. That was a biggie, especially since I had missed the due date for handing in my art project. I realized my art project had been in my bag, and the last time I had seen my bag had been when Sophia was standing on it, smirking at me.

There was also the issue of going to Mr. Gladly's class. That usually sucked enough, what with Madison being in that class and my having to do group work with the likes of Sparky and Greg. Knowing that I had to sit there and listen to Mr. Gladly teach when I'd seen him blatantly turn his back to me when I was being bullied... that sucked more.

This wasn't the first time I'd needed to psych myself up to going to school. Deceive myself into going and staying. The worst days had been back in my first year at high school, when the wounds of Emma's betrayal were still fresh and I wasn't yet experienced enough to anticipate the variety of things they could come up with. Back then, it had been terrifying, because I hadn't yet known what to expect, didn't know where, when or if they would draw the line. It had been hard, too, to go back in January. I'd spent a week in the hospital

under psychiatric observation, and I'd known that everyone else had heard the story.

I stared out the window of the bus, watching the people and the cars. On days like this, after being publicly humiliated, getting myself to the point where I was willing to walk through the door was about making deals with myself and trying to look past the school day. I told myself that I would go to Mrs. Knott's computer class. None of the Trio would be there, it was usually pretty easygoing, and I could take the time to browse the web. From there, it was just a matter of convincing myself to walk down the hall to Mr. Gladly's class.

If I just made myself do that, I promised myself, I would give myself a treat. A lunch break spent reading one of the books I'd been saving, or a rare snack bought from the store after school. For the afternoon classes, I'd inevitably come up with something else to look forward to, like watching a TV show I liked or working on my costume. Or, I thought, maybe I could just look forward to hanging out with Lisa, Alec and Brian. Outside of the part where I nearly got mauled by Bitch's dogs, it had been a nice night. Thai food, five of us lounging on two couches, watching an action movie on a huge entertainment system with surround sound. I wasn't forgetting what they were, but I rationalized that I had no reason to feel bad about spending time with them when we were – for all intents and purposes – just a group of teenagers hanging out. Besides, it was for a good cause, if it meant they relaxed around me and maybe revealed secrets. Right?

As I got off the bus, a pair of old notebooks in one hand, I just kept all that in mind. I could relax in Mrs. Knott's class, and then I just had to sit through three 90 minute classes. Maybe, it occurred to me, I could try and find and talk to my art teacher over the lunch break. It would mean staying out of the trio's way, and I could maybe work something out as far as doing another project or at least not getting

a zero. My marks were okay enough that I could probably manage a passing grade with a zero on the midterm project, but still, it would help. I wanted to do more than just pass, especially with all this crap I had to put up with.

Mrs. Knott arrived at the classroom around the same time I did, and unlocked the room to let us file in. As one of the last of fortyish students to arrive, I'd wound up at the back of the crowd. While I waited for enough space to open up at the door, I saw Sophia talking to three of the girls from the class. It looked like she had just come from her track practice. Sophia was dark skinned with black hair normally long enough to reach to the small of her back, though she currently had it in a ponytail. I couldn't help but resent the fact that even with her being sweaty, dusty, and a notorious bitch, pretty much every guy in the school would still pick her over me.

She said something, and all of the girls laughed. Even though I knew, rationally, that I probably wasn't on the list of their top five things to talk about and that they likely weren't talking about me, I felt my heart sink. I moved up towards the jam of students waiting to get into the door, to break the line of sight between myself and the girls. It didn't quite work. As a group of students entered the room, I saw Sophia looking at me. She made an exaggerated pouting expression, drawing one fingertip in a line from the corner of her eye down her cheek like a mock tear. One of the other girls noticed and chuckled, leaned closer to Sophia as Sophia whispered something in her ear, then they both laughed. My cheeks flushed with humiliation. Sophia gave me a final smirk and turned to saunter away while the other girls filed into the classroom.

Kicking myself even as I did it, I turned away and walked back down the hall towards the front doors of the school. I knew it would be that much harder to go back tomorrow. For one and three-quar-

ter school years, I had been putting up with this shit. I'd been going against the current for a long time, and even though I was aware of the consequences I'd face if I kept missing school like this, it was so much easier to stop pushing so hard against the current and just step in the other direction.

My hands jammed into my pockets, already feeling an ambivalent sort of relief, I caught the bus back to the docks.

AGITATION 3.2

I was pleasantly surprised to find that the bus line that ended at the old ferry put me only a fifteen or twenty minute walk away from the loft that Lisa, Alec and Bitch called home. I could be spending a fair bit of time there before I gathered enough information or earned enough trust from them to turn them in to the authorities, so the convenience was nice.

It was a nice day, if a bit windy. The air was crisp and cool, the sky was a brilliant and cloudless blue that was reflected in the ocean, and the sand of the beach sparkled in the light of the sun. Tourists were already crowding the railings or migrating to the beach, pinning down the corners of their beach blankets under picnic baskets and shopping bags. It was too cold to go in the water but the view was spectacular. I enjoyed it for a few moments before venturing into the crowd. I walked with my hands in my pockets, as much to protect the stuff in my pockets as keeping the worst of the chill out.

Living in Brockton Bay, you learned stuff like that. How to protect yourself, what to watch for. I knew that the Vietnamese teenagers who were leaning against the railing of the boardwalk were members of the ABB, even if they weren't wearing their gang colors, because the only Asian kids in Brockton Bay that had that much swag were already part of Lung's gang. I knew the tattoo on the arm of the guy lifting boxes into the florist's van that read 'Erase, Extinguish, Eradicate' meant the guy was a white supremacist because it had the letter E repeated three times.

The man in the uniform who was talking to a shop owner wasn't

a cop or security guard, but one of the enforcers the merchants of the Boardwalk hired to keep the undesirables from making trouble. They were why the Boardwalk didn't have beggars, addicts, or people wearing gang colors hanging around. If your presence offended or worried the tourists, they would step up to scare you off. If someone shoplifted or panhandled in the Boardwalk, they ran the risk that one or two enforcers would drag them behind one of the shops and teach them a lesson. Anything more serious than shoplifting or panhandling, well, there was always someone on duty in the floating base of the Protectorate Headquarters. Any of the store owners or employees could call the likes of Miss Militia, Armsmaster or Triumph in, given a minute. The tourism revenue the Boardwalk picked up earned a *lot* of goodwill from the government and government sponsored capes.

I headed off the boardwalk and into one of the alleys leading into the Docks. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw one of the uniformed enforcers staring at me. I wondered what he was thinking. Good kids didn't hang out in the Docks, and I doubted I looked the part of a guileless tourist.

The abandoned factories, warehouses and garages of the Docks all blended into one another very quickly. The colors of the building exteriors weren't different enough from one another to make buildings recognizable, and the people or piles of garbage that I had been unconsciously noting my previous visit had all shifted locations or been replaced. I found myself glad for the artistic graffiti and the row of weed-entangled power lines that I could use as landmarks. I did not want to get lost. Not here.

As I arrived at the foot of the huge factory with the Redmond Welding sign, I found myself wondering whether I should knock or just go on up. I didn't have to decide – the door opened just a second

after I'd come. It was Brian, and he looked as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

"Hey," he said, "Lisa said you'd arrived. I thought you had school."

It took me a few seconds to get my mental footing. Any demonstration or mention of Lisa's power kind of had a way of doing that to me, and that was on top of having a conversation sprung on me without a chance to prepare. "Changed my mind," I said, lamely.

"Huh. Well, come on up."

We headed upstairs. I saw Brian was wearing different clothes than what he had been wearing earlier in the morning. What he was wearing now bore a closer resemblance to his clothes from the day before – a green sleeveless t-shirt and black slacks with a lightweight fabric, like yoga pants or something.

Alec was waiting, leaning against the back of a couch, as we entered the living room. He was wearing a t-shirt with some cartoon or video game character on it and basketball shorts. He stood straight as he noticed us.

"Alec and I were sparring," Brian told me, "Lisa's on the phone in the kitchen. Rachel and her dogs are in her room. You can watch us, if you want, but no pressure. Feel free to use the TV, put on a DVD or play a video game."

"Don't save over any of my files, dork," Alec said. He'd started with the 'dork' thing last night. It wasn't exactly malicious, but it grated.

"My name is Taylor, not dork, and I wouldn't do that," I told him. Turning to Brian, I said, "I'll watch, if it's cool."

Brian smiled and nodded, while I moved to kneel on the couch and watch them over the back of it.

As it turned out, it was less of a 'sparring' session than an attempt on Brian's part to give a less than fully committed Alec some basic lessons on hand to hand fighting.

It was one-sided, and not just because Alec wasn't trying very hard. Alec was a very average fifteen year old guy in that he had little muscle worth speaking about. Brian, by contrast, was fit. He wasn't big in the sense of a bodybuilder or someone who exercised just to pack on muscle like you saw with some of the people just out of prison. It was a little more streamlined than that. You could see the raised line of a vein running down his bicep, and the definition of his chest showed through his shirt.

Besides the difference in raw physical power, there was also the age and height gap. Alec was two or three years younger and nearly a foot shorter. That meant Brian had more reach – and I'm not just referring to the length of his arms. When he stepped forward or backward, he moved further. He covered more ground, which put Alec on the defensive, and since Brian was stronger, that put Alec in a bad position.

Brian stood without much of a fighting stance, hands at his sides, bouncing just a little where he stood. Twice in a row, I watched Alec swing a punch, only for Brian to lean out of the way. The second time Alec's arm flew by, Brian leaned in and jabbed Alec in the center of his chest. It didn't look like much of a punch, but Alec still sort of woofed out a breath and stepped back.

"I keep telling you," Brian said, "You're throwing punches like you'd throw a baseball. Don't bring your arm so far back before you punch. You're just broadcasting what you're about to do and it doesn't add enough power to the hit to be worth that."

"What am I supposed to do, then?"

"Look at how I'm standing. Arms up, bent, then I just extend my arm, wrist straight. Fast enough that whoever I'm hitting generally can't step out of the way, so they've got to either take it or block it."

"But you weren't standing like that ten seconds ago when I was

punching you," Alec complained.

"I left an opening to see if you would take advantage of it," Brian replied.

"And I didn't," Alec noted with a sigh.

Brian shook his head.

"Well fuck this then," Alec said, "If you're going to go easy on me and still kick my ass, I don't see the point."

"You should learn how to fight," Brian said.

"I'll do like I have been and bring my taser," was Alec's response, "one poke and they're out cold. Better than any punch."

"And if the taser breaks or you lose it?" Brian asked. He needn't have bothered. Alec was already sitting himself down in front of the TV, remote in one hand and game controller in the other. Brian's disappointment was palpable.

"Mind giving me a few quick and dirty pointers?" I asked.

Alec sniggered, Beavis and Butthead style.

"Grow up, Alec," Brian said, "If you want to quit, fine, but don't be a dick." He turned to me and flashed that boyish smile. Then we started.

I knew he was going easy on me, but he was still a damn tough teacher.

"Make two fists. No, don't wrap your fingers over your thumbs. You'll do more damage to your hands than you will to the person you're hitting, if you do that. That's better. Now jab at me, okay?"

I tried to emulate what he'd been describing to Alec. Arms up, bent, and extending my fist with a snap. He caught my right hand in his left.

"Okay, now you're going to do two things different. Step into the jab so you've got your body's momentum behind the hit, on top of your arm's power. Second, I want your left arm up as you're jabbing

with your right, and vice versa. If I see the chance, I'm going to pop you one on the shoulder or ribs, so be ready to fend me off."

I winced at the idea, but I played along. I jabbed, he stepped away, and he jabbed me in the shoulder. He didn't hit as hard as he could have – I think he only hit as hard as it took to make it hurt and drive the lesson home, but I suddenly felt a stab of sympathy for Alec.

Things continued in that vein. Brian didn't stay on one topic for long. When I started struggling with something, he shifted gears to another area that complemented or built on what I was having problems with. When I failed for the fifth time to fend off his retaliatory jabs at my shoulders and ribs, he started talking about posture.

"Rest your weight on the balls of your feet."

I tried it, then told him, "I feel like I'm going to tip over backwards if you hit me."

He bent down to check, and I lifted my toes two or three inches off the ground to demonstrate how I had my weight balanced on my heels.

"No, Taylor. The balls of your feet. He raised his bare foot and pointed at the padded part between his toes and the bridge of his foot.

"How is that a ball?" I asked, raising my own foot to point at the vaguely spherical part of the foot where the ankle met the ground, "this is the only part that looks ball-like."

"You guys are so lame," Alec chimed in, without turning around. Brian swatted him in the back of the head.

We moved on from posture, Brian's recommendations on balancing did help, to self-defense again. From there, we changed topics to the mental side of things, both for me and my opponent.

"So I throw a punch like I'm aiming to put my fist through them?" I confirmed.

“Right,” Brian said, “Instead of just trying to make contact with the point where your hand meets their body.”

“What about when they're attacking me?”

“Best bet? Don't give them a chance. Stay aggressive and keep them on their heels. If neither of you have formal training, then that's going to give you the best odds. They won't be able to turn the tables on you unless you make a mistake or they can guess what you're going to do as you do it. Which is why you mix it up. Rights, lefts, punches, jabs, elbow, knee, kicks and if you're bigger and stronger than them, you can try tackling them to the ground. With all of that, you stay on them until they aren't in a position to fight back.”

“Are you formally trained in anything?” I asked. I suspected he was, since the only other way for him to know as much as he was demonstrating was to have actually been in a good number of fights, and I wasn't thinking that he seemed the type to fight without reason.

“Ehhh,” he hedged, “Some. My dad was a boxer when he was in the service, and he taught me some when I was little. I moved on to other stuff on my own – Karate, Tae Kwon Do, Krav Maga – but nothing really held my interest. I only took a few weeks or a month of classes for each. I know enough and keep in shape, which is enough to hold my own against anyone who isn't a black belt in whatever, which is the important thing, I think. Keeping up with the more serious martial artists is a full time job, and you're *still* going to run into people who are better than you, so I don't see the point in stressing too much over it.”

I nodded.

We moved on to key areas to attack.

Brian pointed to the body parts in question as he explained, “Eyes, nose, temple, chin and throat are the areas above the shoulder. Teeth or ears if you can hit hard enough. I can, you can't.”

"Sure," I said. I wasn't offended by his bluntness. He was stronger than me, so he had more options. Tip toeing around it didn't do either of us any favors.

"Below the shoulders, diaphragm, kidney, groin, knee, bridge of the foot, toes. Elbow is a good one if you can do anything with it," he took my wrist in his left hand and my shoulder in his right, extending my arm straight as he brought his knee up to gently tap the outside of my elbow. I could see how he would have screwed up or broken my arm if he'd done it full strength. He went on, "But in my experience, it doesn't come up often enough to worry about."

It was a little disquieting to hear Brian methodically describing how to break a human being. I saw him as a nice guy, if I ignored his career choice.

Not entirely by accident, I changed the subject, "I was thinking about investing in a weapon for hand to hand. When I was fighting Lung, fists were no good and I found myself really wanting a knife or a baton or something. Don't know if they would have been any good against his armor, but you know..." I trailed off.

Brian nodded, "Makes sense. You don't have a lot in the way of upper body strength, no offense."

"None taken. I tried to get something like a push-up routine going, but I got sick of it fast. At least with running, there's that sense of going places, you get the scenery."

"Push-ups get repetitive, yeah. Well, the boss is good about supplying us with gear. Lisa's the one who talks to him, she's talking to him right now, in fact. Put in a word with her if you want something like that. It's untraceable too, so the good guys aren't going to be tracing any serial numbers or whatever from your weapon back to your purchase."

The fact that Lisa was talking to their boss made me very curious,

all of a sudden. That said, I couldn't really traipse in to eavesdrop without being suspicious. Instead, since Lisa was out of earshot, I thought I'd seize the opportunity to ask, "So who is this boss of ours?"

Brian and Alec exchanged a look. When they didn't immediately say anything, I wondered if I'd pushed it too far. Had I been too nosy?

"Figured you'd ask," Brian said, "Thing is, we don't know."

"What?" I asked, "We have an anonymous sponsor?"

"It's really fucking weird, yeah," Alec said, then he hammered a button on the game controller, "Boom! Triple headshot!"

"Alec, stay focused," Brian sighed the words, with a tone suggesting he didn't expect to be listened to.

Alec bobbed his head in a nod, his eyes not leaving the television, before adding, "It's weird but it's basically free money, a good team, contacts, access to everything we need for stuff, and pretty much no drawbacks."

"*Lisa* knows, I think," Brian grumbled, "But she says that when she joined the Undersiders, she made a deal that she was going to keep quiet on the subject. I'm not sure if that means she knows who he is or if it's just to keep her mouth shut if her power tells her."

"So let me get this straight," I said, "This guy gathers you all together, offers you a salary and what? Doesn't ask for anything in return?"

Brian shrugged, "He asks us to do jobs, but most of the time it's stuff we'd do anyways, and if we say no, he doesn't make an issue of it."

"What kind of jobs does he ask us to do?" I asked.

Lisa's voice just behind me startled me, "This. Pull up your socks, boys and girl, because we're robbing a bank."

AGITATION 3.3

"No," Brian intoned, "Such a bad idea."

Lisa still had the phone in her hand. Bitch had arrived just behind her, and stood in stark contrast to Lisa's jeans, sweater and tight ponytail, with an army jacket, and virtually no attention paid to her hair. The littlest of the dogs, the one-eyed, one eared terrier, trailed after her.

"Come on," Lisa wheedled, "It's a rite of passage for dastardly criminals like us."

"Robbing a bank is moronic. We've been over this," Brian closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, "You know what the average haul is for hitting a bank?"

Lisa paused, "Twenty thou?"

"Exactly. It's not millions like you see people getting away with in the movies. Banks don't keep a lot of loose cash on hand, so we'd be pulling in *less* than we would for most other jobs. Account for cost and the fact that this is Brockton fucking Bay, where banks have a little more reason to keep the amount of cash in their vaults to a minimum, and we'd be bringing in twelve to sixteen thou. Divide five ways and it's what, two or three thousand bucks each?"

"I could do with an extra three thousand dollars to spend," Alec said, putting down his game controller and shifting his position on the couch to follow the conversation better.

"On what?" Brian asked. When Alec shrugged, Brian sighed and explained, "It's a horrible payoff for the amount of risk involved. There's three big superhero teams in this city. Figure there's another

dozen heroes that fly solo, and we're almost guaranteed to get into a fight."

"So?" Bitch spoke for the first time, "We win fights. We won before we had *her*." She raised her chin in my direction as she said that last word.

"We won because we picked our battles. We wouldn't have that option if we were cooped up in the bank and waiting for them to come to us, letting them decide how and where the fight happened."

Lisa nodded and smiled as he spoke. I thought for a second that she was going to say something, but she didn't.

Brian continued, getting pretty passionate as he ranted, "We won't be able to slip away like we have when things got a little out of control in the past. Can't avoid the fight if we want to get away with anything worth taking. The bank is going to have layers of protection. Iron bars, vault doors, whatever. Even with your power, Lise, there's a limit to how fast we can get through those. Add the time we have to spend managing hostages and making a safe exit, and I pretty much guarantee that there will be time for a cape to get wind of the robbery and slow us down even more."

Alec said, "I kind of want to do it anyways. Hitting a bank gets you on the front page. It's huge for our rep."

"The runt is right," Bitch said.

Brian grumbled, "Not fucking up is better for our reputation in the long run." His deeper voice was really good for grumbling.

Alec looked at me, "What do you think?"

I'd almost forgotten I was a part of the discussion. The last thing I wanted was to rob a bank. Hostages could get hurt. The fact that it would potentially put me on the front page of the paper wasn't a high point, either, if I ever wanted to drop the supervillain ruse and become a hero in good standing. I ventured, "I think Brian makes a

good case. It seems reckless.”

Bitch snorted. I think I saw Alec roll his eyes.

Lisa leaned forward, “He does make good points, but I have better ones. Hear me out?” The rest of us turned our attention to her, though Brian had a frown that made it seem like it would take a lot to convince him.

“Ok, so Brian said similar stuff before, before we hit that casino a few weeks ago. So I was kind of expecting this. But it's not as bad as it sounds. The boss wants us to do a job at a very specific time. I got the sense he was willing to offer a fair bit if we went the extra mile, and I negotiated a pretty good deal.

“The bank robbery was my idea, and he liked it. According to him, the Protectorate is busy with an event on Thursday, just outside of town. That's part of the reason the timing is so important. If we act then, there's almost no chance we'll have to deal with them. If we hit the Bay Central, downtown-”

“That's the biggest bank in Brockton Bay,” I interrupted her, half-disbelieving.

“So everything I said about them having security and being careful is doubly true,” Brian added.

“*If we hit the Bay Central, downtown,*” Lisa repeated herself, ignoring us, “Then we're hitting a location just a mile away from Arcadia High, where most of the Wards go to school. Given jurisdictions, New Wave won't be able to jump on us without stepping on the Wards' toes, which pretty much guarantees we go up against the team of junior superheroes. With me so far?”

We all nodded or murmured agreement.

“Figure that's happening in the middle of the school day, and they won't *all* be able to slip away to stop a robbery without drawing attention. People know the Wards are attending Arcadia, they just

don't know who they are. So everyone's constantly watching for that. Since they can't have all six or seven of the same kids disappear from class every time the Wards go off to foil a crime without giving away the show, chances are good that we'd go up against a couple of their strongest members, or one of the strongest with a group of the ones with less amazing powers. We can beat them."

"Okay," Brian begrudged, "I'll accept that we'd probably do alright in those circumstances, but-

Lisa interrupted him, "I also got the boss to agree to match us two for one on the haul. We bring in fifteen grand, he pays us thirty. *Or* he gives us enough money to bring our total up to twenty five, whichever is more in the end. So we could walk away with two thousand dollars and he'd pay us twenty three thou. So as long as we don't wind up in jail, we're guaranteed five thousand dollars apiece, bare minimum."

Brian's eyes widened, "That's insane. Why would he do that?"

"*And*," Lisa grinned, "He'll cover all our costs, just this once. Equipment, information, bribes if we want 'em."

"Why?" I echoed Brian's earlier question, disbelieving. Lisa was throwing around sums of money that I couldn't even wrap my head around. I had never even had more than five hundred dollars in my bank account.

"Because he's sponsoring us and it stands to reason he doesn't want to fund a team of nobodies. We manage this, we won't be nobodies. That, and he really wants us to do a job at that particular time."

There was a few moments of silence as everyone considered the deal. I was frantically trying to think of a way to try to convince these guys it was a bad idea. A bank robbery could get me arrested. Worse, it could lead to me or a bystander getting hurt or killed.

Brian beat me to it, "The risk to reward still isn't great. Five grand each for hitting what may well be the most fortified location in Brockton Bay and an almost guaranteed confrontation with the Wards?"

"Second most fortified location," Lisa countered, "The Protectorate Headquarters is the first."

"Fair point," Brian said, "But my argument stands."

"It'll be more than five grand for each of us, I guarantee you," Lisa told him, "It's the biggest bank in Brockton Bay. It's also the hub of cash distribution for the entire county. Said cash gets transferred in and out by armored cars on a regular schedule-"

"So why don't we hit one of the cars?" Alec asked.

"They have ride-alongs or aerial cover from various members of the Wards and the Protectorate, so we'd be caught in a fight with another cape from minute one. Same problems that Brian's talking about, as far as getting caught up in a fight, difficulty accessing the money before shit goes down, yadda yadda. *Anyways*, the Brockton Bay Central has cars coming in twice a week, and leaving four times a week. We hit on a Thursday just after noon, and it should be the best day and time for the sheer size of the take. Only way we're getting away with less than thirty thousand is if we fuck up. With what the boss is offering, that's ninety thou."

She folded her arms.

Brian sighed, long and loud, "Well, you got me, I guess. It sounds good."

Lisa turned to Alec. There wasn't any resistance to be found there. He just said, "Fuck yeah, I'm in."

Bitch didn't need convincing any more than Alec had. She nodded once and then turned her attention to the scarred little dog.

Then everyone looked at me.

"What would I be doing?" I asked, nervously, hoping to stall or find holes in the plan that I could use to argue against it.

So Lisa outlined a general plan. Brian made suggestions, good ones, and the plan was adjusted accordingly. I realized with a growing disappointment and a knot of anxiety in my gut that it was almost inevitably going to happen.

Arguing against the bank robbery at this point would hurt my undercover operation more than it helped anyone. With that in mind, I began offering suggestions that – I hoped – would minimize the possibility of disaster. The way I saw it, if I helped things go smoothly, it would help my scheme to get info on the Undersiders and their boss. It would minimize the chance that someone would panic or be reckless and get a civilian hurt. I think I would feel worse if that happened than I would about going to jail.

The discussion went on for a while. At one point, Lisa got her laptop, and we debated entrance and exit strategies while she sketched out a map of the bank layout. It was uncanny, seeing her power at work. She copied a satellite image of the bank from a web search into a paint program, then drew over it with thick bold lines to show how the rooms were laid out. With another search and a single picture of the bank manager standing in front of his desk, she was able to mark out where the manager's desk was. That wouldn't have been too amazing, but without pausing, she then went on to mark where the tellers were, as well as the vaults, the vault doors and the enclosed room that held the safe deposit boxes. She noted where the fuse box and air conditioning vents were, but we decided we wouldn't mess with either of those. That stuff was cool in the movies, but it didn't do much good in real life. Besides, this was a robbery, not a heist.

While we worked, Alec got restless and went to make an early lunch. Of the four of us, I got the impression he had the least to con-

tribute, at least strategically, and that he knew it. I wasn't sure if he just didn't have a very tactical mindset or if he just didn't care that much about the planning stage of things. My assumptions led to the latter, as he seemed more willing to go with the flow than Brian or Lisa.

He brought us a plate of pizza pockets along with assorted sodas, and we ate as we wrapped up the plan.

"Alright," Brian said, as Lisa shut her laptop, "I think we have a general idea of what we're doing. We know how we get in, we know who does what when we're inside, and we know how we want to get out. Keeping in mind that no plan survives contact with the enemy, I think the odds are still pretty good."

"So, the enemy," I said, resisting the urge to wince at the realization that I would be up against good guys, "My only experience fighting in costume... or even just fighting, is against Lung, and that didn't go well."

"Don't sell yourself short," Brian said, "You did better than most."

"I'll rephrase," I said, "It could have gone *better*. We're going up against the Wards and they aren't pushovers."

Brian nodded, "True. Let's talk strategy and weaknesses. You know who the Wards are?"

I shrugged, "I've researched them. I've seen them on TV. That doesn't mean I know the important stuff."

"Sure," he said, "So let's go down the list. Team leader: Aegis. You'd think he has the standard Alexandria package, flight, super strength, invincibility, but that isn't exactly right. He does fly, but the other two powers work differently than you'd expect. See, he isn't invincible... he just doesn't have any weak points. His entire biology is filled with so many redundancies and reinforcements that you just can't put him down. Throw sand in his eyes and he can still see by

sensing the light on his skin. Cut his throat and it doesn't bleed any more than the back of his hand would. The guy's had an arm cut off and it was attached and working fine the next day. Stab him through the heart and another organ takes over the necessary functions."

"Not that we're stabbing anyone through the heart?" I made it a hopeful half-question, half-statement.

"No. Well, it wouldn't be a bad idea to stab Aegis through the heart just to slow him down. If you did it with something big enough. The guy's like a zombie, he gets back up within seconds of you beating him down, keeps coming at you until you're too tired to fight back or you make a mistake."

"And he's super strong?" I asked.

Brian shook his head, "Lisa, want to field this one?"

She did. "Aegis isn't strong, but he can abuse his body in ways that makes it seem like he is. He can throw punches hard enough that they'd break his hand, mangle his joints and tear his muscles, and his body just takes it. He has no reason to hold back, and he doesn't need to waste any time protecting himself from you. He can also draw on adrenaline... you've heard stories like how little old grandmothers lifted cars off the ground to save their grandkids?"

I nodded.

"That's adrenaline at work, and Aegis can do that for hours at a stretch. His body doesn't run out of steam, he doesn't get tired, he doesn't exhaust his reserves of adrenaline. He just keeps going."

"So how do you stop him?" I asked.

"You don't, really," Brian said, "Best bet is to keep him occupied, keep him sufficiently distracted or stick him somewhere he can't escape. Trap him in a dumpster and throw it in the river, you can get a few minutes of relief. Which is all harder than it sounds. He's the team captain, and he isn't stupid. Rachel? Sic your dogs on him. A

two ton canine or two should keep him out of our hair until we're ready to run."

"I don't need to hold back?" Bitch asked, her eyebrow quirked.

"For once, no. Go nuts. Just, you know, don't kill him. Alec? You're the backup there. Keep an eye on Aegis, see if you can't use your power to throw him off. Buy enough time for a dog to get its jaws on him and he's probably out of action."

"Sure," Alec said.

Brian extended two fingers and tapped the second, "Number two. Clockblocker. Let it be known, I fucking hate people who mess with time."

"He stops time, if I remember right?" I inquired, as much to stay in the conversation as to get the clarification.

"More specific than that," Brian said, "He can stop time for whatever he touches. The person or object he touches is basically put on 'pause' for anywhere from thirty seconds to ten minutes. Only good thing is that he doesn't control or know how long it's going to last. But if he gets his hands on you, you're out of action. He'll either stand next to you and wait until you start moving, then touch you again, or he'll just tie you up in chains and handcuffs so that when his power wears off, you're already in custody."

"Long story short, he touches you, you're boned," Alec said.

"The upside is that whoever he touches is also untouchable. Can't be hurt, can't be moved. Period. He uses that defensively, and he can do stuff like throw paper or cloth in the air and freeze it in time, making an unbreakable shield. You don't want to run into something that's frozen. A car that drove into the side of a piece of paper that Clockblocker had touched would be cut in two before it budged the paper."

"Noted," I said.

Brian continued, "The third heavy hitter on the Wards is Vista. You know that myth about how the capes that get their powers young are exponentially more powerful? Vista's one of the kids who keeps the myth alive. Clockblocker is sort of a one trick pony, his trick involves screwing with one of the key forces of our universe, but it's just one thing. Vista *also* messes with physics on a fundamental level, but she's versatile.

"Twelve years old, and she has the power to reshape space. She can stretch a building like taffy, so it's twice as tall, or squeeze two sidewalks closer together so she can cross the street with a single step."

"Her weakness," Lisa added, "Is the Manton effect." She turned her full attention to me, "You know what that is?"

"I've heard it mentioned, but I don't know the details."

"Wherever our powers come from, they also came with some limitations. For most of us, there's a restriction about using our powers on living things. The reach of powers generally stops at the outside of a person or animal's body. There's exceptions for the people with powers that *only* work on living things, like you, Alec and Rachel. But the long and short of it is that the Manton effect is why most telekinetics can't just reach into your chest and crush your heart. Most people who can create forcefields can't create one through the middle of your body and cut you in two."

"Narwhal can," Alec cut in.

"I said most," Lisa said, "Why these restrictions exist is a question nearly as big as where we got our powers in the first place. The capes that can get around the Manton effect are among the strongest of us."

I nodded, slowly. I wondered if that had something to do with why Lung didn't burn himself, but I didn't want to get further off topic,

"And Vista?"

"Vista can stretch and compress space. She can also do funny things with gravity. Thing is, the Manton effect keeps her from stretching or compressing *you*. It also makes altering an area a lot harder for her if there's more people in that space. So if all of us are in one room, chances are she won't be able to affect the whole room."

"*But,*" Brian added, wiping a string of cheese from the corner of his lip, "Every time we've run into her, she's been faster and overall more powerful with her power, and she's had new tricks. Every second she's on the battlefield is a second things become harder for us. We take her down sooner than later. Aegis, Clockblocker, Vista. Those are the ones we're most likely to run into, and whoever else winds up coming, they're the ones we have to deal with, or we're fucked."

"Let's quickly go through the rest. Kid Win."

"Tinker," Lisa said, "Flying skateboard, laser pistols, high tech visor are staples for him. Expect something new, depending on what he's come up in his workshop. He's mobile but not that threatening."

"Triumph?" Brian said.

"He turned eighteen and graduated to the Protectorate. Don't have to worry about him," Lisa said.

"Gallant."

"Glory Girl's on and off boyfriend, he pretends to be a Tinker in the same vein as Kid Win, but I think he just runs around in second-hand armor with a fresh paint job. His thing is these blasts of light. Getting hit by one feels like a punch in the gut, but the blasts also mess with your feelings. Make you sad, make you scared, ashamed, giddy, whatever. Not that bad unless you get hit by a bunch in a row. Don't."

"That just leaves Shadow Stalker. Bloodthirsty bitch," Brian scowled.

Alec explained to me, "She's got it in her head that Brian is her nemesis. You know, her number one enemy, her dark opposite. She's been going after him every chance she gets."

"She was a solo hero," Tattletale said, "Vigilante of the night, until she went too far and nearly killed someone, nailing him to a wall with one of her crossbows. The local heroes were called in, she got arrested, and made some sort of deal. Now she's a probationary member of the Wards, with the condition that she uses tranquilizer bolts and nonlethal ammo for her crossbow."

"Which she isn't," Brian growled, "At least, not when she comes after me. That arrow she shot through my side had a fucking arrow-head on it."

Tattletale shook her head, "Her powers and Brian's sort of have a weird interaction with one another. Shadow Stalker can sort of transform. She becomes extremely lightweight, can pass through glass and thin walls and she's nearly invisible. Only thing is, while she and the stuff she carries are all wispy in her transformed state, the stuff she shoots with her crossbow only stays that way for a half second. Then the effect wears off and it's a regular arrow flying towards you. So she can leap between rooftops, almost impossible to see, hard to even touch, and all the while she's shooting very real arrows at you."

"So what do you do?" I asked.

"Her power doesn't work well while she's inside Brian's darkness, for whatever reason. She isn't as fast or agile, he can see her better, and she can't see him in the darkness," Tattletale told me, "So it becomes something of a very intense game of tag, with one very fast person that's essentially blind and deaf but carrying lethal weapons, while Brian, the other, is trying to take her out without getting shot."

"Let's avoid that," Brian said, "It's too time consuming and she may

want to use that kind of scenario to delay us. Just don't get shot, and if you see her or see the opportunity, inform the team and do your best to take her down without losing sight of a priority target.

"So that's the plan, then?" I said, "So many maybes."

"That's the way these things go, Taylor," Brian said, his tone a bit terse, "I think we've done a pretty good job of covering all the bases."

"Oh, I didn't mean to sound like I was criticizing your plan-" I said.

"Our plan," Brian interrupted.

I didn't want to think of it that way. Instead, I said, "I'm a touch nervous, is all."

"You don't have to come," Bitch said, her tone a touch too casual.

"In all seriousness," Brian told me, "If you're having second thoughts..."

"I am," I admitted, "as well as third thoughts, fourth thoughts, and so on. But I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm coming with."

"Good," Brian replied, "Then we've got the rest of today and tomorrow to prepare. Taylor? You can meet me on your run first thing. I'll have a cell phone for you. You can text Lisa with anything you think you'll need, like those weapons you were talking about. Look up models and brands ahead of time if you want something specific."

"What's her number?" I asked.

"I'll put it in the phone before I give it to you. Lisa? You confirm the job with the boss, talk to him about the other stuff."

"Got it."

"So unless there's anything else, I think we just planned a bank robbery before noon," Lisa said with a grin. I looked at the digital clock displayed under the TV. Sure enough, it was half past eleven.

I couldn't help but wonder if that was a good thing.

AGITATION 3.4

"I'll be there. Yes-" I saw a light in the living room window and put my hand over the lower half of my cell phone while I briefly investigated. Damn, my dad was home. I put the phone to my ear, "I'm sorry, I've got to run. No. No. Look-"

As I heard the front door open, I snapped the phone shut and jammed it into my pocket. I'd apologize for hanging up later. I definitely didn't want my dad to see the phone. I didn't think he would stop me from owning one, but ever since my mom's death, cell phones had carried strong negative connotations. That, and I'd have to explain where I got it and how I'd paid for it.

Brian had given me three identical cell phones – all disposables – first thing in the morning, and I'd decided to go with him to the loft rather than head to school. The way I figured it, I didn't have much of a chance of focusing on classes with Thursday's bank robbery occupying my attention on top of the stress of just being there and waiting for the other shoe to drop as far as my skipped classes. Besides, I rationalized, it didn't make a lot of sense to go if I knew I would be skipping again to go rob the bank. I'd promised myself I would go the day after tomorrow. Face the music.

I'd spent the day with the group. Rachel had been out of the apartment, the others weren't specific on why and I wasn't interested enough to risk looking too curious by asking. So it had just been me, Brian, Alec and Lisa. We'd hammered out the fine details of the robbery and I had decided what weapons I wanted Lisa to ask the boss for. I had elected for both a combat knife and a telescoping police

baton. The knife would serve for emergencies and those people who were just too tough to hurt with the baton. The baton, twenty one inches long when fully extended, was for more general use, offering more clout than I'd otherwise get with my fists. Lisa had promised I would have them for tomorrow.

After that, we kind of avoided the subject of the robbery, by some unspoken agreement. It wouldn't do to overthink it or risk getting too nervous. Either way, I had felt a need to burn some nervous energy, so I had helped clear out the storage closet around lunchtime, with Lisa and Brian's help. We'd sorted out the stuff, found a place for it all, and set up the room with odds and ends they had lying around. The stuff included an extendable clothes rack, a dresser, an inflatable mattress and a bedside table with a lamp attached. It was enough space for me to keep some toiletries, a spare change of clothes or two, my costume and my equipment. Lisa spent a lot of time talking about what I could do to make the space my own, what I could buy, how I could decorate, but I was happy enough with what we had there. I kind of liked that it was a bit spartan, because it sort of fit with how I didn't plan to be around that long while still feeling weirdly appreciative at being accepted as a part of the group.

Having tired ourselves out, we'd all collapsed on the couches and watched some of Alec's movies from Earth-Aleph, the alternate Earth that our Earth had been communicating with since Professor Haywire tore a hole between realities. Media was one of the few things that could be traded back and forth through the hole. Long story short, you could get books, movies and DVDs of TV shows from the other world, if you were willing to accept the price tag. The benefit? I got to spend the afternoon seeing how the other universe had handled episodes one and two of the Star Wars films.

Fact: they were still pretty disappointing.

By the time my dad got in, I had pork chops defrosted, dusted with lemon and pepper and sitting in a frying pan, with vegetables in the microwave. Cooking was sort of something you started doing when you had only one parent, unless you really, really liked takeout.

"Heya," my dad greeted me, "Smells good."

"I started dinner a bit early because I have somewhere I want to be, tonight, If that's cool?"

He tried to hide it, but I could see a bit of disappointment. "Of course," he said, "Your new friends?"

I nodded.

"Let me get changed and then I'll ask you all about them," he promised as he headed upstairs.

Great. I hadn't had to answer these questions last night because my dad had been working late. My mind started racing to anticipate questions and come up with plausible details. Should I use their real names? Or at least, the names they had given me? I wasn't sure if that would be a breach of trust. I decided to use their real names for much the same reason I'd decided to use my own with them. It just prevented disasters if my dad ever happened to meet them, which was a terrifying thought, or if they called for me.

I didn't need to worry about my dad hearing about four kids being arrested, all of whom had the same name as my 'friends', since most or all of them were minors and their names would be kept from the media under the law. I was also under the impression that the courts didn't always unmask capes when they arrested them. I wasn't entirely sure what was up with that. It seemed like something to ask Lisa about.

By the time my dad had come back downstairs, I'd resolved to try and keep my lies as close to the truth as possible. It would be easiest to keep everything straight that way. That, and I hated lying to my

dad.

My dad had changed out of his dress shirt and khakis, into a t-shirt and jeans. He mussed up my hair and then took over the last bit of the cooking. I sat down at the table so I could talk to him.

"So what's going on?" he asked.

I shrugged. I hated feeling this tense around my dad. He'd never bugged me about the bullying, so I'd always been able to come home and sort of let my guard drop. I couldn't do that now, because I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop as far as my skipped classes, and my new 'friends' brought a whole mess of secrets and lies into the mix as well. I felt like I was on the verge of a terminal breach of trust. One mistake or a single concerned phone call from the school, and my dad would probably flip, and things wouldn't be the same between us for a long time.

"Are you going to tell me their names?" he asked. He set the food on plates and brought it to the table.

"Brian, Lisa, Alec, Rachel," I confessed, "They're alright. Get along with most of them."

"Where did you meet them? School?"

I shook my head, "I wanted to get away from school for a bit, so I caught a bus downtown to catch a bit of a break. I ran into them at the library." Partial truths. You couldn't really catch a bus downtown and back during the lunch break – I'd tried, when I was avoiding the trio – but I doubted my dad would research that. I did sort of cross paths with the Undersiders at the library, though.

"They go to the library at lunch? What are they like?"

"Brian's pretty cool. He's the one I've talked to the most."

"A boy, eh?" My dad wiggled his eyebrows at me.

"Dad, stop! It's not like that," I protested. I doubted Brian had the slightest interest in me, not least because I was two or three years

younger than him. Besides, well, I was me. I opted not to mention the age difference to my dad.

Changing the subject, I said, "Lisa's alright too. Really smart, though I haven't talked to her all that much. It's nice being able to hang out with another girl again, even if she's pretty different from me."

"If she's smart, she can't be that much different from you."

I could've kicked myself. I couldn't explain she was a bad guy, while I was an aspiring superhero, or exactly how she was 'smart'. I'd talked myself into a minor corner where I didn't have an answer ready, and I needed to avoid doing that. Fumbling for an answer, I said, "She's only a year older than me, and she's graduated high school already." That was the truth. She cheated, but she did technically graduate.

My dad smiled, "Impressive. Tell me they're all excellent students that can serve as good role models for you."

I could have choked. Good role models? Them? I kept my composure and limited myself to a little smile and a shake of the head, "Sorry."

"Alas. What about the others?"

"Alec is the youngest, I think. Kinda hard to connect with. He's an amazing artist, from what I've seen, but I don't really see him draw. It seems kind of hard to get him interested or involved in anything. He always looks bored." As I said the words aloud, I realized they weren't exactly true. The two times I'd seen Alec react to anything had been when he'd played his little prank on Brian, tripping him, and after Bitch and I had been fighting. A streak of schadenfreude to his personality, maybe.

"And the last one? Rita? Rachel?"

"Yeah, Rachel. I don't get along with her. I don't like her."

My dad nodded, but didn't say anything. I was halfway expecting the typical parental line of 'maybe if you try to show interest in things she likes' or some other inane advice. My dad didn't pull that on me, he just took another bite of pork chop.

I elaborated a bit, to fill the silence, "She wants things her way, and when she doesn't get that, she gets mean. I dunno. I get enough of that at school, you know?"

"I know," my dad said. It was a good lead-in for him to question me about what was going on at school, but he didn't take it. He stayed quiet.

I felt immensely grateful, right then. My dad was respecting the boundaries I'd set, not pushing, not digging for more. It made this conversation so much easier that it might otherwise have been, and I knew it couldn't be that easy for him.

I felt like I owed him something for that. Sighing, I admitted, "Like, at school. The, uh, the people who're giving me a hard time? They sort of ganged up on me on Monday. Just, you know, taking turns insulting me. It's why I needed to get away and went downtown." I felt embarrassed, saying it, because it was humiliating enough to live through without having to recap it, and because it felt so disconnected from the rest of the conversation. But if I didn't say it right then, I don't think I would've been able to.

My dad sort of went still. I could see him compose himself and choose his words before he asked, "Not to diminish how much it sucks to get put down like that, but they didn't do anything else?"

I raised my eyebrows in question as I chewed. They had, kind of, but I couldn't really say "They used Mom's death to fuck with my head" without having to explain the Emma thing.

"Anything like what happened in January?" he asked.

I lowered my eyes to my plate, then shook my head. After a few

moments I said, “No. January was a one time thing. They've pulled smaller ‘pranks’ since then, hassled me, but no repeat performances on that front.” I made air quotes with my fingers as I said ‘pranks’.

“Okay,” my dad said, quietly, “That's a relief to know.”

I didn't feel like sharing any more. You'd think I would feel better, after opening up, but I didn't. I felt frustrated, angry, awkward. It was a reminder that I couldn't have a real conversation with my dad like I used to be able to. More than anything, I felt guilty. Part of the guilt was because I'd apparently let my dad think that every time I was bullied, it was like it had been that day, nearly four months ago, when things had been at their worst. I stabbed at a bit of fat with my fork.

“When were you going out?” My dad asked. I glanced at the digital clock on the stove and noted the time.

I was glad for the excuse to escape, “Now? Is that okay? I won't be long.”

“Meeting your friends?” he asked.

“Just going to meet Lisa for coffee and conversation, away from the rest of the group,” I told him as I stood up and moved my plate to the sink. The lie was heavier on my conscience after the open disclosure I'd just had with him.

“Here, wait,” he said. He stood up and fished in his pocket for his wallet. He handed me a ten, “For the coffee. Sorry I don't have more. Have fun?”

I hugged him, feeling painfully guilty, then headed to the back door to pull my shoes on. I was just opening the door when I barely heard him say, “Thank you.”

“Love you, Dad.”

“I love you too. Be safe.”

I shut the door, grabbed the gym bag I'd stashed under the back

steps and headed around the house at a light jog. I held the gym bag low so my dad wouldn't see me carrying it.

I took the same general route I took on my morning runs, heading east, towards the Bay. This time, though, instead of turning up towards the Boardwalk, I headed south.

Back in its heyday, every inch of the city had been a bustling metropolis. Ships were coming and going at all hours, trains were coming through to deliver goods to be shipped overseas and the city teemed with people. The northern end of the bay – especially the area close to the water – was all about the industry. Ships, warehouses, factories, railroad and the homes for everyone who worked those jobs. You also had the ferry running across the bay itself.

The ferry was my dad's pet project. Apparently, it had been one of the first things to go when the import/export dried up. With the ferry gone, the Docks had sort of been cut off from the rest of the city, unless you were willing to drive for an extra half hour to an hour. My dad held the opinion that the lack of that transportation to the rest of the city was why the Docks had become what they were today. He believed that if the ferry were to start running again, jobs would be created, the people in the low income neighborhoods would have more access to the rest of the city, and the low-class, high-class, no-middle-class dynamic of Brockton Bay would smooth out.

So when I'd been trying to think of a place that was fairly private but easy to find, I thought of the ferry. I could probably thank my dad for the idea.

I approached the station and found a disused restroom to change into my costume.

The building and the ferry itself were well kept, at least on the outside, which was one of the reasons my dad felt it would take so little effort to get things going again. Still, that wasn't the city's is-

sue. They didn't want to provide the addicts and the gangbangers easy access to to the rest of the city, all the while paying to provide the service, for mere hopes of *maybe* getting improvements for the future. So the city kept the station and the ferry looking pretty for any tourists that wandered far enough south from the Boardwalk and maintained eternal 'temporarily out of service' and 'coming soon' signs up around the building and in the brochures. Aside from the regular replacements to keep them looking new, the signs hadn't been taken down in nearly a decade.

I ignored the doors to the station's interior, and instead headed up the stairs to the outdoor patio that overlooked the bay. There were some large panes of glass to break the wind, and stone tables and benches for those wanting to sit to eat. It was one of the best vantage points for seeing the PHQ in all its splendor. The headquarters was a series of arches and spires mounted on a retrofitted oil rig. Even the platform it was built on was beautiful, though, with hard edges and sweeping lines. The entire thing was lit up by tinted spotlights and set against a faint corona of shifting colors, like the aurora borealis trapped in the shape of a soap bubble. A forcefield, forever on, shielding the people who watched over Brockton Bay.

"Wasn't sure if you would show up," a male voice broke the silence.

I turned to face Armsmaster, "I'm sorry. I had to hang up on your receptionist. Real life called."

He looked somehow different than the first time I'd met him. His lips were set in a hard line, his feet set further apart. His arms were folded across his chest with his Halberd in one hand, the pole resting against his shoulder. It conveyed such a different attitude that I momentarily wondered if he was the same person under the suit.

"I need to call in a favor."

WORM