

Interlude 8.a: Heavy is the Head (The King is Dead)

The world's strongest hero.

For his entire career, David had laid claim to that title. It was his, proof that his life had meaning, proof that he had actually stood up from that wheelchair and gone somewhere with his life, proof that *he* was more than the sack of withering meat he'd been while bound to it. It was gratifying and empowering in a way that still buoyed him, even as his powers diminished and weakened.

He was the world's strongest hero, the man who could do the impossible. He was the measuring stick everyone used, the ten that sat at the top of the scale for exactly how strong powers and parahumans could get. He was *respected*.

The only one who could infringe upon that title was Scion, and as Scion was the origin of powers on Earth and had naturally kept the best and strongest of them when the agents were being handed out, it was only natural.

Only natural that Scion was still stronger...

Except, was he? Cauldron always assumed so, and David had defaulted to their decisions on the matter, but at his height, back before he started to weaken, was the divide really that great?

If they had attacked Scion when David was at his peak, would the battle really have been so one-sided as Doctor Mother and Contessa believed it to be?

David hadn't known — couldn't, now, because he was nowhere near as strong as he'd been in those early days.

The world's strongest hero. It was still true, *must* still be true, because even if he was losing access and even if his powers were weakening, the sheer breadth available to him and the weaker restrictions on them still outclassed everyone else.

He was still the eight-hundred-pound gorilla.

("For how much longer?" had been an increasingly frequent fear, but he clung to his strength while he still had it.)

It had helped him keep going, keep fighting. He was still indispensable. He was still *needed* — to fight the Endbringers, and at the end, to fight Scion. The Protectorate still needed him, the *world* still needed him. As long as that didn't change, he could bury his fears and his worries and remain Eidolon.

As long as that didn't change...

"Myth and legend," said the girl on the tv screen. "Every single one of them, past, present, and future, from all over the world. People who were real, people who were only ever stories, and people that straddle the line between the two. The...legends I have access to, as long as their impact was

strong enough and unique enough, they're there for me to use, even if people have forgotten about their stories."

"There must be some kind of limit, surely," said the host. "A charge up time, perhaps? Ease of use?"

Apocrypha smiled a confident, secretive smile and held up a single finger. "Only one."

"One...what?" asked the host. "One limit? One minute, one second?"

"One...legend at a time," she answered. "That's it. I can only use one legend at a time. But each one has more than one ability to use. Most of them have at least a minor Brute and Mover rating, on top of whatever their main ability is."

"That ability, the ability to gain and change what powers you have access to, that makes you what the Parahuman Response Team — the PRT — refers to as a Trump, right?"

"I haven't heard anything about what sort of ratings the PRT has assigned me," Apocrypha admitted, "because it just hasn't been something I worried about keeping track of, but yes, that makes me a Trump."

"Like Eidolon," the host said slyly.

"That comparison has been made before, yes," the girl said, still smiling.

David took another swig of his beer.

Except it *had* changed, hadn't it?

Somehow, someway, a little girl not even out of high school had triggered, and she'd gotten a power that matched his — exceeded it, even, in ways, from its apparent ease of use to its sheer versatility, and now, with him weakened and diminished, it was probably even stronger. She was everything he'd been in the beginning, making the sorts of waves he had, only she was younger, brighter, and had done the one thing he had never been able to, no matter how hard he'd tried.

She'd killed an Endbringer.

The one enemy that could present a challenge to him, the one enemy where he felt like maybe, just maybe, he could tap into that wellspring that hovered at the edges of his awareness. The one enemy that *pushed* him to be better, to be stronger, to find other ways of fighting. The one enemy that could prepare him for the sort of fight the battle against Scion would be.

And she'd killed one. With a *giant laser*. Not even some strange, esoteric power, like manipulation of gravity to crush Leviathan beneath his own weight or tweaking the nuclear forces to unravel the bonds holding his molecules together — both things David had tried, back when the Endbringers had first appeared, to no avail — but something as crude and unsophisticated as overwhelming firepower. As though it had been that simple all along.

David took another gulp of his beer, larger than the last. It tasted like piss in his mouth.

The world's strongest man, that was the title he'd held onto for twenty-five years. Stolen, by a fifteen year old girl.

What a joke.

"Because you have a lot of powers to choose from."

"More than you could imagine," she said. "More than I have any idea what to do with, if I'm honest. If I just started reaching without filtering anyone out, my head would spin from the sheer number of options."

"Can you give us an example of one of them?" the host suggested.

Apocrypha's mouth pulled further to one side. "Like King Arthur?"

The host chuckled. "Sure. Tell us what sort of powers King Arthur has."

"Blaster: Run," she quipped. The studio audience laughed, and a couple of them even cheered. David's gut churned. "But other than that... Brute, for the strength to lift a car and take one to the face, Stranger, for the invisibility cloak, Thinker, for the enhanced reflexes, Mover, for being able to outrun a racecar, and Master, although that last one's really more of a technicality. There are a few other things, but it's a lot to go through in power testing, so I'm not sure how they'd be categorized."

The host looked impressed. "That's...quite a lot, for a single legend. Could you explain some of that for those in our audience who aren't as familiar with PRT power classifications?"

Apocrypha offered a secretive smile again. "Not all of it," she said mischievously. "A girl has to keep a few secrets."

A smattering of laughter broke out.

The host smiled. "Of course."

"But for the obvious stuff that I used against Leviathan... The Blaster rating is for Excalibur, which can fire an enormous, really powerful laser. The Brute rating comes from the superhuman strength and durability. The Mover thing is because King Arthur can run really fast, both in short, point-to-point distances and across longer stretches."

"What about the Master rating?" asked the host.

"Charisma, fit for a king who ruled an entire country," came the answer. "That, and the horse. But the horse would only obey me out of loyalty to King Arthur, not because I was controlling it or anything like that."

"A horse?" the host asked.

"Llamrei."

"Is there any particular reason we didn't see it during the Leviathan fight?"

“I never learned how to ride.”

Another smattering of laughter broke out. Even the host smiled and chuckled a little.

“Seriously, though? There just wasn’t a place for it. If I was making a trip cross country, it’d be a different thing. Even if I was trying to get from one end of the city to the other, sure. But against Leviathan, King Arthur is just more maneuverable on foot. Plus, I only pulled King Arthur out at the very end of the fight.”

“But you used someone else for the rest of the fight,” the host said pointedly. Apocrypha nodded.

“Herakles. Um, Hercules, I think is how everyone else would know him.”

“Is there a difference?”

A shrug. “One’s the original Greek, the other’s Latinized after Rome got their hands on the legend. Rome got around a lot more, so that’s the version everyone knows better.”

“Right. Anything you can tell us about him?”

“He’s huge.”

The audience laughed again. Apocrypha gestured towards the screen. “See, they’re laughing, but I’m completely serious. Herk is about nine feet of solid muscle. Those statues of Greek gods you see in museums and heritage sites? The ones that make action heroes look like they’ve never even seen the inside of a weight room? Think that, only add on about fifty pounds of bulk. He can bench press a cement truck with ease and he *looks* like it.”

“I’m guessing, then, that he would have a fairly high Brute rating, by PRT standards?”

“Probably a ten,” she confirmed. “Which, for reference? That’s the level they give the Endbringers. Herk hits hard and he can take a punch like you wouldn’t believe.”

“We have a clip from the Leviathan fight, released by the Protectorate just for this occasion.” He turned towards the screen. “Let’s watch Herakles in action, shall we?”

The screen faded to black, and a moment later, it was overtaken by the gloomy visage of a city, drowning in rain. For a moment, it was hard to tell what was going on, but then the camera focused in on a distant motion, and Leviathan loomed out of the dark, trailing water behind him, as he held a black blob down and tried to drown it.

Alexandria. Eidolon remembered that moment. The frustration he felt as he wrestled with Leviathan for control of the aquifer, unable to do anything but watch the rest of the fight.

And then a blur slammed into the beast with a thunderous crack, slipping past him to land with a splash. There was a second, a fractionary moment, where the blur resolved into a woman, tall and muscular and lead-skinned, snarling as she slid along the road, and then she was gone again, racing back towards the monster.

“NINE LIVES!” echoed from the tv.

And the blur struck Leviathan so rapidly that she seemed to grow a hundred arms, a human blender that carved away at the monster bit by bit with every swing.

The air cracked and howled. The final blow was dealt and Leviathan flew back, propelled by the force of so many attacks hitting him so swiftly. Even the rain was propelled away, creating a momentary break in the gloom.

Then, the blur stopped and became a woman again, scowling and stony-faced. Black ichor was splattered over her face and body and her sword, but it was only barely visible from the camera’s distance and the rain washed it away a moment later. The screen faded back to black, and the host and Apocrypha appeared again.

The audience cheered and clapped. David took another sour swig of his beer.

“Wow,” the host said, eyebrows raised. “That was...pretty incredible.”

“It looks a lot more amazing from the outside than it did doing it,” Apocrypha admitted.

“What was that you yelled there? Nine lives?”

“It’s the name of Herakles’ special technique, the one he used to kill the Lernaean Hydra. One hundred consecutive attacks, moving so fast they look like they’re happening simultaneously.”

Special technique, she was calling it here. *Noble Phantasm* was the term in her dossier, apparently the one she’d given when asked. *Powers* was what David heard, the powers that made her so special, that made her *legends* overshadow him. Already replete with major powers that could compete with the big names, these were the top tier that made even him at his best seem quaint.

“Was that his only special technique, or are there more?”

“He needs more than one?” Apocrypha asked incredulously. The audience laughed again and she smiled. “He does have a few other tricks up his sleeves, yes, but the most incredible thing about Herk is actually his brain.”

“How so?”

“For instance, the Endbringers.” She made a gesture with her hands. “Their flesh isn’t actually all that much tougher than human skin. Maybe twice as strong, three times? The first couple layers are fairly easy for any cape to cut through. *You* could probably do it with a letter opener.”

“I think I’ll stay behind my desk and leave the fighting up to you,” the host said. More chuckles from the audience.

“The trick is,” Apocrypha went on, “they fold their mass over itself through higher dimensions. The deeper in you go, the more times it’s folded, and that means the harder it is to cut through, because it gets impossibly dense after a while. That’s why they’re so tough in fights, because a lot of the damage done by the average cape is basically superficial.”

“That’s...incredible. You figured this out yourself?”

She shook her head. “Herakles did, after that first Nine Lives you saw in that clip. I just happened to have his brain at the time.”

Ten years. Ten years, they’d been fighting the Endbringers, and they’d never figured out how their bodies worked. Ten years, and yet this girl discovered it within the first ten minutes of her first fight with one, as though it had been that easy to do what a hundred Thinkers and a thousand of the best minds in the world had never managed in a decade.

“Herakles discovered it.” What a load of bull that was. Powers were powers. If a Thinker power gave you the smarts you needed to figure something out, then just say that. The only thing behind powers besides the people using them was the agents that granted them.

Nevermind that other girl, the Thinker 7 who had managed to suss out not only the existence but the *location* of the critical weak spot that even Alexandria and Contessa hadn’t known was there. Another bright, up-and-coming star who was eclipsing the greatest Thinkers David had ever met.

Nothing was making sense, anymore. None of it. Thirty years of triggers and powers, and in all that time, there’d never truly been anything the Triumvirate couldn’t handle. Never any individual cape who well and truly measured up to them. Never any cape who actually surpassed them, outshone them.

They were the Triumvirate. The only ones who’d ever even bloodied them were the *Slaughterhouse Nine*.

And now there were capes who were making them look like amateurs. Like common triggers, rather than the pinnacle of Cauldron’s vials. Eidolon, the strongest man in the world. Alexandria, whose mind was unrivaled by any other Thinker, save Contessa. Now, those titles went to a pair of teenage girls.

“So, you spent most of the fight as Herakles,” the host began, “and you ended it using King Arthur. Were there any other legends you used during the Leviathan fight?”

“One,” she replied.

“Can...you tell us who it was?”

“She’s...a little controversial,” hedged Apocrypha. “Not all of my legends are like King Arthur, after all. Some of them can be scary or intimidating, and there’s some things that I probably shouldn’t mention on daytime television.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble.” The host turned towards the audience. “But I think everyone here wants to know more. Am I right, folks?”

The audience hollered and shouted, clapping so loudly it sounded like a hailstorm. The host grinned, and even Apocrypha smiled and gave in.

“Sounds like they’re itching to know. What do you say, Apocrypha? Think we can bend the rules a little bit?”

“Maybe just this once.”

More laughter. David drained the last of his beer, threw it in the vague direction of his trashcan, and picked up another. It hissed as the tab cracked open.

“The third legend I used in the Leviathan fight was Medusa.”

“Medusa?” the host leaned in. “Really? I think we would’ve heard something about that. No one’s said anything about seeing a giant snake lady attacking Leviathan.”

“But she wasn’t always a giant snake lady,” said Apocrypha, shaking her head a little. “Before she became the monster, she was actually very beautiful.”

“Enough to soothe the savage beast, I’m sure.” Another smattering of laughter. “Of course, I doubt you brought her out to take Leviathan on a date, so what *did* you use her for?”

“To steer him out of the city, away from anything that we needed to worry about damaging. There was a trap waiting in the Boat Graveyard, so I could hold him down long enough to line up my shot with Excalibur.”

“You...steered him out of the city?”

“Leviathan wasn’t exactly a horse, and he put up a lot more of a fight than Pegasus, but Medusa isn’t a stranger to taming unruly beasts.”

“It must have been an incredible sight.”

“I think ‘terrifying’ might be the word you’re looking for, there. I was riding on the back of an Endbringer, after all. Most people who saw a woman riding herd on Leviathan would probably run in the other direction.”

And there was the biggest part of it. David took a deep drag of his beer and swallowed it.

A trap. She’d laid a trap. Not in the middle of the fight, not in the hour or two they had before the fight began, but *days* in advance, made *specifically* for Leviathan. She’d *known* he was coming, she’d *predicted* it — the only other thing that no one had successfully done against an Endbringer, not even the largest collection of Thinkers in America.

Not even Contessa.

“Khepri” was the name of the “heroic spirit” she claimed to have used in the Trainyard against Echidna, the one that had mastered even him and Legend. Khepri, Taylor Hebert, her supposed alternate self from a different reality, a different future, where she had received different powers when she triggered.

This, supposedly, was also the source of her knowledge of Leviathan's attack. This was the source of her surety that it would be Brockton Bay on that specific day, and so the reason she'd been able to prepare so far in advance.

Except why would she need *her* alternate self? If her powers let her take the knowledge and experience from futures that would never be, now, if they gave her that sort of precognition, then wouldn't someone older, wiser, and more experienced have been a better idea?

If there was a heroic spirit Khepri, then where was heroic spirit Eidolon, or heroic spirit Alexandria, or heroic spirit Legend?

Where was heroic spirit Hero?

Or maybe the girl had gotten so caught up in her mnemonic device that she'd created this delusion about another self who had been a great and powerful hero.

And it didn't even matter anyway, did it? Even if she was a delusional nutjob, those were a dime a dozen amongst capes. You just had to be like Myrddin: too powerful and too useful to stick somewhere remote and boring. Then, people overlooked stuff like saying your powers were magic or claiming to be possessed by the spirits of long dead mythological heroes.

Who was more powerful and more useful than the chit of a girl who had killed an Endbringer and stolen the title of world's strongest hero?

"Unfortunately," said the host, "we don't have any clips of the mysteriously beautiful Medusa to show to our audience, but since we *do* have you here... Could you give us a glimpse, Apocrypha?"

The girl didn't answer immediately; her hand rose, seemingly of its own accord, and brushed a few strands of her hair, and then she smiled and shook her head.

"Sorry, but I don't think it's a good idea to bring Medusa out here. She doesn't do that well with crowds." She added, "Plus, you know, the whole 'eyes turn you to stone' thing. Probably not a good idea to risk something like that on national television. Bad for the ratings."

The host chuckled. "Yes, it most certainly would be. Although I think I'd make for quite the handsome statue."

"Are you going to stand there and watch that drivel all day?"

David stilled, then turned around to face one of his oldest friends.

"Alexandria."

She was dressed in her full costume, minus the helmet, which meant she'd just come off of some event or other that had required her in her cape identity. She stared at him with a neutral expression, eyebrows slightly raised and mouth a straight line, looking just slightly down her nose at him. Unimpressed, if he had to put a word to it.

It stung, a little. More than it probably should have.

“You missed the briefing,” she said mildly, with a hint of scorn in her voice.

“I did?” he asked flippantly. “Oh. Too bad. Was probably important.”

He turned back to the tv, where the girl had transformed into the diminutive woman she claimed was “King Arthur.” That, more than anything, proved that her talk about heroes and legends was delusion and nothing more; in no sane world did it make sense for the greatest king of British myth to be a five-foot-tall girl dressed in armor and clothes two sizes too big.

The tv suddenly shut off.

“The topic of discussion was the Endbringers,” said Alexandria with an edge. She held his remote in one hand, her arms folded across her chest. “Specifically, what it might mean for one to have been killed, particularly in regards to the effects it might have on the economy, the backlash to be expected from the Fallen and other Endbringer cults, and how this might impact the apparent schedule they’ve kept to since they first appeared.”

“Great,” David said. “You should definitely have that discussion with people who can do something about that. You just need to go...” He chose a random direction and pointed. “About...fifteen-hundred miles in *that* direction. She’s in the middle of an interview right now, of course, so you’ll have to wait until that’s over, but you can’t miss her.”

“David...”

“She’s fifteen years old, about five-nine, maybe a hundred and ten pounds. Wears lots of purple and gold. Long black hair. *She’s* the one you’ll want to talk to.”

Everyone else did. They were clamoring all over themselves, just to get five minutes with her. Why not the big names in the PRT, too? Why not the Protectorate’s leaders? Why not the *President*?

Why not *Cauldron*?

“She’s not Eidolon. You are.”

Eidolon. Like that name even meant anything, anymore. Maybe it had, once. Even just a week ago, it still spoke of power, of strength, of purpose. It was David and everything he was, and it was both his burden and his blessing. It was his *calling*.

The strongest man in the world. Not anymore.

“She’s not. She’s *better*. Her powers are more consistent, they don’t have a charge-up time, she doesn’t lose a good one if she uses it too soon. She’s not *weakening*. If anything, she’s getting *stronger*. She started with Lung, and now she’s done the one thing that even the three of us working together never managed.”

The words were like poison in his veins and on his tongue. Not to her, but to him. Even when it was just his own thoughts, they’d sapped his will from him, but to admit it out loud, to voice them, it was like a blow to the gut.

He'd done a great many things, saved a lot of people, turned a lot of lives around. Undeniably, he'd been a force for the betterment of Earth Bet, a beacon for others to aspire to, a leader who was always on the frontlines.

But he'd never done the most important thing. He'd never stood against the greatest forces threatening the world and stomped them into the ground. And now, with his powers waning and his body aging and his prime long past, he never would.

I might as well never have gotten out of that wheelchair.

Alexandria's brow furrowed.

"Is *that* what this is about? The fact that she was the one to kill Leviathan and you weren't?"

"Isn't that enough?" He spread his arms wide. "Look, Rebecca! She's everything I was twenty years ago, only better! She can do the things I can't! Her power may be less versatile, and even then not by much, but it's more focused! And she killed Leviathan! An Endbringer! We weren't even sure they *could* be killed!"

One perfect eyebrow rose. She glanced pointedly at the beer still in one of his hands.

"And that's reason enough to give up and dive headfirst into the bottle, is it?"

"You! Don't! Need! Me!" He gestured at the tv, which was still off. "You have the new and improved model, now!"

"Don't pretend this is about her, David," said Alexandria. Her voice was hard and unforgiving. "This has been a long time coming. You've been carrying this...*weight* around ever since your powers started to weaken, and it's only gotten worse as the booster shots lose effectiveness. Apocrypha has nothing to do with it. She's just the last excuse you needed to stop trying."

Each word cut like a knife.

"That's not it —"

"Isn't it? You can't think I haven't noticed. How frustrated you've gotten, the last few years. How eagerly you throw yourself into the toughest fights you can find an excuse to be in. How often you ask for another booster shot, even though they barely help anymore. You've been waiting for a reason to give up for a while now, David. Apocrypha killing Leviathan is just the one that got handed to you."

For a long moment, he stared at her, mind awl. He tried to think of a rebuttal, something to say, something that he could use to refute her, but the words wouldn't come. He didn't have anything.

Because she was right, he realized with the clarity only a drunk man could have. He *had* been frustrated with his waning powers. He *had* been feeling less and less useful as they got weaker and weaker. He *had* been throwing himself into the toughest fights he could find, hoping to reach into that wellspring of power that seemed ever out of his reach.

He'd still been the world's strongest hero, there was no doubt about that. But the Eidolon of today couldn't compare to the Eidolon of twenty years ago, and he'd been so keenly aware of that. It had followed him every waking moment. Every Endbringer fight, it seemed more and more evident as he became less and less useful.

Apocrypha was just the final nail.

"So what?" he said at last. "So what if you're right? It doesn't change anything."

"Doesn't it?"

"You don't need me anymore!"

"Just because you're not in the number one slot anymore? Are you even listening to yourself, David?"

"She's *better* than me! She can do things I never could, even at my best!"

"Grow. Up." Alexandria pinned him with a stare. "David. Grow. Up. Being a hero isn't about satisfying your ego or some deep seated need you might have to be useful. You're getting so caught up with the idea of having your top slot taken that you're forgetting the endgame."

No, he wasn't.

"You'll be far better off with her to fight —"

"We'll be far better off with *both* of you," she cut in. "You're forgetting, David. Scion is the *source* of powers, and the ones handed out are *hobbled*. He won't have restrictions, like most capes do. He'll have the best powers at their maximum strength. He'll be at *least* as strong as you were at your best." She tilted her head down. "And he's the only one the Endbringers have always immediately retreated from."

David's brow furrowed.

But it was true, he realized. Always, whenever Scion showed up, the Endbringers retreated. It didn't matter which of the three was attacking, where they were attacking, or if they'd accomplished whatever their apparent goal had been. The moment Scion appeared, they broke off and left. Most of the time, they didn't even fight back to defend themselves.

Was it because they knew what he was? Or was it because they had a much better gauge of his power than David did?

"Even if Apocrypha is more powerful than you, she is *not* your replacement," Alexandria went on. "You *are* still needed, both in the Protectorate and in Cauldron. We're not simply going to toss you aside just because a fresh trigger with more power than sense does a couple of impressive things. You're *Eidolon*. A pillar of the superhero community. A leader, and someone for others to aspire to. That hasn't changed."

She made a rough gesture with one hand. It was the angriest he'd seen her the entire conversation.

“That girl? She’s new. She’s young and idealistic and painfully naive. She killed Leviathan, but she also dragged us into that fight with Echidna and nearly got *herself* killed fighting Oni Lee. She might be more powerful than you, *maybe*, but she also has twenty-five years less experience than you do.”

“She has ten years to get better,” David said morosely.

Alexandria shook her head. “Two,” she corrected him. “Kurt’s been keeping an eye on the numbers. At the rate things are progressing, if we wait ten years, things will have deteriorated too far and our chances are much lower. Two years — that’s the longest we can afford to wait before engaging Scion.”

The Endbringers, she meant. That had always been a concern, a part of their countdown clock. The longer they whittled away at civilization, the worse the numbers got for the fight against Scion.

Except that wasn’t a concern anymore.

David snorted.

“Harbinger needs to recheck his numbers,” he said acidly. “After all, we’ve got the *Endslayer*, now. She can just kill them and give us all the time we need.”

“Can she?” Alexandria asked pointedly. “We still don’t know exactly what they are or where they came from. Are there more, waiting to fill the ranks with Leviathan defeated? If there are, what are the odds that Apocrypha’s Excalibur won’t work on at least one of them? For that matter, we can’t even be sure that it would work on *Behemoth*. It’s entirely possible that the only reason she could kill Leviathan is because it was Leviathan and not one of the other two.”

David had nothing to say to that.

“The girl is strong,” she said again. “But young. Naive. Inexperienced. Even if she did nothing but fight the strongest villains she could find from now until the final battle, that won’t be enough time to match *your* experience. Someone like you should already know that experience counts for far more than just incredible power. She’ll never be your equal.”

Still, David said nothing. He just looked down into his half-finished beer, stewing.

She was wrong. Even if Apocrypha couldn’t kill the other Endbringers, it didn’t matter. All she had to do was be good enough to drive them away before they could do too much damage, and if it hadn’t been for Brockton Bay’s aquifer, she would have managed exactly that with her Lord Camelot.

And she hadn’t even chosen him to help her.

David chanced a look at Alexandria, scowling.

The girl might as well have said it directly to his face — *‘We don’t need you anymore. I’m here.’*

Alexandria’s nose crinkled as her brow furrowed and she shook her head, frustrated.

“Fine. If you don’t want to listen to me right now, go ahead and drink yourself into a stupor, but you’ll be expected to continue your duties as Eidolon in the Protectorate regardless. If you’re not back to work tomorrow morning, I’m coming back here to drag you there myself.”

She turned on her heel. “Door me.”

A rectangle drew itself into the air, then opened up to reveal the blue sky. A cold draft blew through it and cut across David’s fingers. Alexandria stepped towards it and made to leave.

But at the last second, she turned to look back at him over her shoulder.

“Two years, David. You have two years to get your head back on straight and realize that one girl being stronger than you isn’t the end of the world.”

Then, she stepped through the doorway, cape fluttering behind her, and it vanished.

David was alone.