

Bonus Interlude 9.b: Photon Liner Mundanity

Crystal Pelham's day began early, a routine she'd gotten into in order to make it to class on time in the mornings, no matter whether she flew or took the bus. She rolled out of bed at 7:30, slapping the alarm that hadn't actually been ringing more out of habit than anything else, and stretched, throwing her arms up towards the ceiling as she bent her back and let out a satisfied groan.

For a moment, she held that pose, relishing the burn of the muscles in her triceps, shoulders, and upper back, and then she sagged, sighed, and stepped across her messy floor — carefully avoiding the piles of dirty clothes that had been discarded over the course of the last week.

She could already imagine her mother's stern voice scolding her for being such a slob, and it brought a smile to her face.

Leaving the door open behind her, she made a beeline for the bathroom; that door, too, she left slightly ajar, to let the place breathe a little so that the mirror wasn't fogged to hell and back when she was done. Then, after making sure she had a clean towel, she stripped out of her pajamas and let those drop unceremoniously to the floor, too, and she climbed into the shower. This glass door, patterned with whorls and waves to give privacy, she *did* close.

As she cranked up the water, setting it to just shy of scorching, she thanked her lucky stars that she wasn't like some of those pyrokinetic capes she'd heard about, the ones whose powers normalized temperatures near their bodies so they couldn't burn themselves. She wasn't sure she could have taken it if she'd never been able to enjoy a hot shower again, after she'd gotten her powers.

The world melted away for Crystal, in the way it only did under the steaming stream of her daily shower, and she spent what felt like hours just letting the water beat down on her shoulders and her back, running down the curve of her spine and over her thighs. Every part of her felt like it was turning into putty, like she was collapsing into a puddle of goo without a care in the world.

God, hot showers were the best. Especially when she had time to take the showerhead and enjoy the spray on more than just her shoulders and back.

Reality was never kind enough to let her enjoy her paradise for forever, though. Eventually, she had to drag herself out of the blissful fog and actually wash up, and today was no different, so it was with regret that she grabbed her bottle of shampoo, pumped the nozzle, and set about massaging it into her scalp and her hair.

Twenty minutes after stepping in, when she could no longer justify using up more hot water, she opened the glass door and stepped out to dry off. In spite of her efforts, a ring of vapor fogged up the outer quarter of her mirror, but not enough to make it impossible to see herself in it.

Once her hair was properly brushed, she wrapped herself in her towel and then in her bathrobe and left the bathroom, turning down the hall and traversing the short hallway that led into the rest of her apartment. The first place she went now was the kitchenette, and the first thing she did was reach into her cupboard, fill up her coffee machine, and put on a pot of coffee.

With the coffee brewing, her next step in her morning routine was breakfast, so she grabbed a pair of eggs from the carton in the fridge and set about making herself an omelet. She'd become so

practiced at this that by the time one was done, the other was ready, and about five minutes after she'd started, she sat down at the little island that separated the kitchenette from her living room and ate.

When she was finished, she stepped around her little island, her mug of coffee in one hand, and went into the living room towards the lump lying on her couch.

"Hey." She bent down and gave the lump a shake. "Time for breakfast."

"Mrglfrgle," the lump mumbled sleepily and curled deeper into the blankets. It made no sign of getting up and starting the day as Crystal had.

"Hey." She tried again, shaking the lump a little more firmly. "Come on. You're definitely not lying on my couch all day. Get up."

"Mmphmhm," the lump said again and ignored her.

Was she too young to lament the wake-at-noon sleeping habits of teenagers? Whatever. She'd be twenty soon enough, and then she could legitimately claim she wasn't a teenager herself anymore.

Crystal sighed and set her coffee down on the coffee table. Then, she took hold of the blankets and *yanked* them off of her house guest.

Amy Dallon tried to roll over and pull the nonexistent covers back over herself, but a couch was not as spacious as a mattress, so she only managed to fall onto the floor with a yelp and a thud that had probably been heard in the apartment beneath them. She squinted up, bleary eyed and grouchy, at the culprit who had interrupted her sleep.

"What was that for?" Amy grumbled.

"It's time for you to get up. My apartment, my rules. Rule number one is keeping a reasonable sleep schedule."

"It's..." She glared at the nearest clock. "Fucking...eight o'clock in the morning. You couldn't let me sleep for another few hours?"

"Sorry, no can do. If you plan on having breakfast today, you'd better do it now, before I do the dishes, because if you dirty them again, you get to clean them," said Crystal. "I'm gonna make some bacon, but if you want anything else, you're gonna have to make it for yourself."

"Aren't you just the most gracious of hosts..."

Crystal lifted one eyebrow. "I said I'd let you stay with me until things get smoothed over with Vicky and Aunt Carol. That doesn't make me your mom, kiddo."

"You're, like, three years older than me," Amy groused. "When are you going to stop calling me that?"

Crystal's lips tugged upwards at the corners.

"Never. Perks of being the eldest."

Amy sighed, and then gingerly began to pick herself up off of the floor, wincing all the while. She moved at a glacial pace, and every moment looked like it was utter agony.

“It’s been two days. Are you *still* that sore, Amy?”

“That girl’s a slave driver,” said Amy grumpily. “Totally different person once she starts training you. Fuck. I ache in places I didn’t even know could ache.”

Once she’d gotten to her feet, she threw out her arms, much as Crystal had when she climbed out of bed, rolled her shoulders, and *stretched*, only the sound that came out of mouth was strangled, loud, and half-tortured, like someone had just yanked a sword out of her back.

Okay. That was a bad metaphor, considering what had happened about a week ago.

Even her face was screwed up in pain, eyes squeezed closed, nose scrunched up, lips pulled back into a snarl. Everything was pulled into a rictus of agony, and she looked like nothing so much as a poor hiker getting stitches after being halfway mauled by a bear.

That was better. Less... Not as close to the fact that Amy had nearly been disemboweled by a crazy Nazi.

Amy kept it up until she ran out of breath, and then her whole body sagged as though she had enormous weights strapped to her wrists. Despite having slept for the better part of ten hours, she looked as exhausted as she had before she’d gotten any sleep at all.

“Fuck,” Amy swore again tiredly. “I’ve never wished I could use my power on myself more than I do right now. *Om*.”

“If it hurts you that bad, maybe you should quit and forget about it?” Crystal suggested. “I mean, I get the whole trying to get in shape thing, but this doesn’t look that fun, from the outside. You look like shit.”

Amy’s expression twisted. “No. I’m not gonna give up just because I feel like I got hit by a train. If that... If Lisa can do it, then there’s no fucking way I’m going to drop out at the starting line.”

That... Okay. Crystal couldn’t say she’d ever seen Amy this competitive about something, or this determined, not since she’d gotten her powers a couple years ago and devoured every medical text she could get her hands on, but it was...*good* to see her so passionate about something, again. Even if that passion was born out of spite.

“I...could teach you a few stretches, if you want,” she offered. “Help relieve the pain a little.”

That didn’t mean Crystal was just going to watch her cousin suffer, though. Passion and spite were both fine, in moderation, but letting Amy torture herself out of a grudge or a rivalry with some other girl was just stupid and pointless. Not when Crystal could help her out. Who knew? Maybe learning a little yoga could be good for Amy. Help her relieve a little stress, instead of carrying it around all the time.

...Oh great. Not even old enough to drink, and she was already turning into her mother. Wasn’t that only supposed to happen once you got older and had kids?

Amy's lips twisted into a thoughtful frown. "I... Yeah, that actually sounds pretty good. I might take you up on that." Her stomach let out a loud, thunderous rumble, so loud that even the neighbors might have been able to hear it, and her cheeks flushed a little even as it startled a laugh out of Crystal. "Um, maybe a little later, though. You said something about breakfast."

"I'll put on enough bacon for the two of us." She glanced down at Amy's stomach, smirked, and cocked her eyebrow up again. "Maybe I should make that three. You, me, and your stomach."

"Fuck off," Amy growled. It lacked any real heat.

"If you want an omelet or something, you'll have to make it yourself, though. Like I said, I'm your roommate and your cousin, not your mom. Just because I'm letting you stay here doesn't mean I'm gonna cater to your every need."

"Gee," Amy said flatly, "your generosity is overwhelming. Thanks."

Crystal rolled her eyes. "I'll get the eggs out for you. You're on your own after that."

Amy grunted.

"...thanks," she said, much more sincerely than before.

Crystal waved it off.

"I've gotta go into the fridge for the bacon anyway."

Amy, likely having seen the excuse for what it was, wisely chose not to comment. Good. There was a limit to Crystal's generosity.

Ducking back into the fridge, Crystal grabbed the bacon and the carton of eggs — low on both, and the rest of the food wasn't much more plentiful. She was going to have to do some shopping. Today was as good a day as any.

She set the eggs out for Amy, who was steadily but gingerly making her way over, and took the bacon out herself, setting enough strips of it in the skillet to feed Amy and herself both and then some, just in case Amy really was that hungry.

The girl had never been a particularly big eater, but Crystal could well remember how Vicky had started wolfing food down once she started playing basketball, and this looked way more intense than that. She was more surprised that Amy hadn't eaten everything in the fridge already, if anything.

"So, how was the party yesterday?" she asked, making small talk as the bacon began to sizzle.

"It was fine," Amy grunted. Her hands were shaking a little as she cracked the first egg. "We ate, we hung out, we had cake. You know. All the stuff you do at birthday parties."

"For your friend... Taylor, right?"

"Yeah."

Apocrypha.

It was a bit of an open secret for New Wave. They *all* knew who was under the mask, or at least her first name, even if not all of them had gone as far as tracking down exactly who she was. Crystal hadn't exactly cared enough — still didn't, if she was being honest — although now it was more because... Well, the Taylor that Amy talked about sounded kinda dorky and nerdy and awkward, like a normal teenage girl. She was someone Crystal could see herself maybe getting to know.

Apocrypha...was intimidating. There wasn't really another word to use for the girl who had blasted Leviathan to bits after getting into a knock-down drag-out fist fight with an Endbringer. That sounded more like the kind of person you admired — from a safe distance.

That wasn't even getting into the mess that was the Echidna incident.

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

Amy snorted. “I thought you said you weren't my mom?”

“I don't have to be your mom to be interested in your personal life, Amy,” Crystal said dryly. She bumped her hip against Amy's and pretended not to notice the hiss she took in through her teeth. “You're my cousin. You're family.”

“Am I?” Amy muttered, more to herself than to Crystal. Crystal didn't know how to answer that. She wasn't sure she was the one who was *supposed* to be answering it.

They lapsed into something of an awkward silence as they kept cooking. The sizzle of the bacon filled the space their words should have been, and then the accompanying crackle of Amy's scrambled eggs as she cooked them, too.

It was only a few minutes later, as they sat down at the island with their food, that Crystal found the courage to ask the important question.

“Have you talked with Vicky and Aunt Carol at all?”

Amy didn't answer immediately; she continued eating, chewing her food slowly as though she was chewing on her thoughts.

“No,” she said woodenly. “I haven't.”

All of that waiting for a simple no?

“Any particular reason why? You can't just stay here for the rest of your life.”

“Why not?” Amy said sourly. “I certainly can't go *home* anytime soon.”

“Because *you're* the only reason I haven't moved back home myself?” Crystal suggested pointedly. “I was making plans to move back in with my parents when you showed up on my doorstep, remember?”

Amy's mouth drew into a miserable line.

“Plus, you've got no source of income,” Crystal told her. “You don't have a job. You'll have to go back to school, because those are supposed to be opening back up, soon. I could front you the first

month's rent, but I'm not paying for an apartment that I'm not living in, so if you want to stay here, that's on you. Are you gonna try juggling a part time job, school, *and* being a healer, all at once?"

Amy didn't answer, but the increasingly downtrodden expression and the hunch of her shoulders was as much as an admission that she had no clue what to do about all of that.

"You could start charging for your —"

"No," Amy interrupted. "I'm not going to start forcing people to pay me money to get healed. That would be..."

Wrong, she didn't say, but Crystal heard it anyway.

"It doesn't have to be everyone," said Crystal. "You could do the usual charity stuff for a few hours and handle, I don't know, a few rich snobs once a week. Fix their flats, tighten up whatever needs tightening, take a few years off, whatever they want done."

"Waste my time, you mean, when I could be helping people who actually need it."

Crystal rolled her eyes. "It's not like you're healing every spare moment of every day that you can. Nor should you, for that matter. You'd put every doctor in the hospital out of a job."

Amy's mouth pulled tight and her brow drew into a worried furrow, and Crystal realized then that this was actually a sore point for Amy.

"You're not... You don't actually feel guilty just because you don't spend every waking hour in the intensive care ward of the hospital, do you?"

"Sometimes," Amy mumbled, like she was ashamed of it.

"Jesus Christ, Amy, you're not *God*. You'd wipe yourself out if you did something like that."

"But I'm a healer," she said. "And there aren't that many around. I have these powers, don't I have a...a *responsibility* to use them for a greater good?"

"And who told you that?"

Amy didn't answer, but then, the picture was starting to come together, and Crystal didn't really need her to.

Fuck, that was messed up.

"Is that why you don't want to talk to them? To Vicky and Aunt Carol? Did *they* tell you that you had to use your powers to heal people in order to be a good person?"

"No," Amy said stonily. "They didn't say anything like that."

"Because they didn't have to, did they?"

They would just *expect* it. They might never come out and say it, but both Vicky and Aunt Carol would have the sort of attitude that using your powers "for good" was just what a person did. Because once you got powers, you were a cape, and if you were a cape, you used your powers, and if you used your powers for good, you were a hero, but if you didn't, you were a villain.

Crystal couldn't even say that she didn't understand it. The New Wave kids had all naturally fallen into the idea of being superheroes precisely because their parents were. It hadn't really ever occurred to them to do anything else with their powers. They were just...the next generation of the team.

Except that Crystal and Eric didn't really do much, once the excitement of getting their powers and becoming "real heroes" wore off, because life moved on and they still had other things to do with their time — like school, which was enough of a hassle *before* you added in staying out late at nights to patrol. Vicky was the only one who had stuck with it so seriously.

Again, Amy didn't answer.

"Why are you and Vicky fighting? Does it have something to do with the fact that you haven't been healing much at all recently?"

"She wanted me to do something I couldn't," Amy said quietly. She didn't look up from her plate, even though she'd long since finished her scrambled eggs.

"Like what?"

For a long moment, Amy didn't answer again, she just chewed on her bottom lip, staring intently at her plate as though hiding behind her hair. The silence dragged out for several long moments, broken only by the screech of the fork against the surface of the plate, and Crystal was sure she would have to ask again before Amy finally spoke up.

"She wanted me to heal Carol. Her brain damage, I mean."

Carol. Crystal wasn't sure why she latched onto it at that moment, but she did. Amy had called her own mother Carol, instead of Mom. Had she always done that? Crystal couldn't remember, but she was sure there must have been a point in time, *some* point in time over the last ten years, where Amy had called Aunt Carol Mom.

When had she stopped? When had Amy started calling her own mother — adopted or not — by her first name?

"Well, that's silly," said Crystal. "Vicky knows your powers almost as well as you do. Why would she ask you to fix Aunt Carol's brain damage when she knows you can't do brains?"

But contrary to rallying behind this, Amy just got more and more miserable, sinking further and further as her head dropped with every word. A strange suspicion wormed its way into Crystal's gut.

No, that was just silly. She was reading more into things than she should be. Wasn't she?

"Amy," she said, "everyone knows you can't do brains. Right? That's part of your Manton Limit."

Amy didn't answer for another long moment. The suspicion crystallized into a cold certainty.

"...I can do brains," she said at last, like pulling teeth. "But I promised myself I wouldn't. Because of how easy it is to screw up or change something fundamental without even meaning to. The brain's so delicate. If I get even one thing wrong, I..."

A chill swept down Crystal's spine.

“Vicky doesn’t understand,” Amy went on. “She thinks it’s just...like the same as fixing anything else. Just...take a look at what’s there, reconnect a few loose wires, fill in the gaps where something’s missing. But it’s not. It’s this great, big mess of electrical impulses and neurotransmitters, and one piece can drastically affect parts it’s not even directly connected to...”

Her fists clenched. Her fork whined in her grip. “I-I can fix Mark’s depression. I could’ve fixed Carol, too, but... If I tweaked the wrong thing, or worse, if I was tempted to...to make them like me more or always be happy or...or I don’t know, *anything*...”

“So you don’t do brains because you’re scared,” Crystal concluded, but it felt like someone else was talking through her mouth.

“I can change people on a fundamental level. Reach into their fucking heads and *unmake them*,” Amy said. “Or remake them or unravel them or... Fucking... I could turn Armsmaster into fucking Mannequinn 2.0 —”

“But you wouldn’t.”

“O-of course not! I’m not the fucking Simurgh or...or Jack Slash or —”

“But you could also do the opposite, couldn’t you?” Crystal asked. “Like turning Jack Slash into Mother Teresa?”

“I-I mean, yeah, if I got my hands on him and I tried, instead of just...turning him into a blob of goo or something.”

“Then I’m not sure I totally understand the problem, Amy. I mean, you can turn monsters into angels.”

“But it’s so *easy*,” Amy said, almost a whisper. “And once I start... *Fuck*, where do I draw the line? What if I start twisting people’s minds every time I touch them? Just... I see all the little things that are *wrong*, and I start automatically fixing them before I even think about it. How long before I give the girl I like a hug and make her like me back without even meaning to?”

For some reason, *that* was the thing Crystal’s brain latched onto. “Wait, *girl*? *That’s* why you never took a liking to all the boys that Vicky tried to set you up with?”

Amy’s mouth twisted into a grimace.

“I’m baring my goddamn soul, here, and the part that has you freaking out is the fact that I’m gay?”

“Hey, I can only deal with so many mind-blowing revelations at once, here!” Crystal protested.

“How do you expect me to keep up when you’re dropping bombs on me left, right, and center?”

And in spite of everything, this managed to lighten the mood a little, and Amy chuckled, not quite a full blown laugh. Crystal counted that as a victory, no matter how small.

“Have you tried explaining this to Vicky?”

Amy shook her head. “She doesn’t want to listen. Plus, you know how she is.”

“Right. Stubborn as a mule at an ox convention.”

Although Crystal had never really understood that expression. Amy snorted.

“Plus,” she added, “she hates Taylor anyway. She’s been telling me since day one that Taylor’s no good, and ever since Echidna, she’s been blaming her for everything that went wrong, saying stuff about how Taylor’s the reason Carol got hurt, the reason I got kidnapped, the reason why I wouldn’t heal Carol’s brain damage —”

“To be fair,” Crystal pointed out, “Taylor *did* drag you into that whole thing.”

“Mostly because she has a hard time saying no to people, especially her friends,” Amy shot back. “I basically told her that she wasn’t going into that mess without me, so...”

Crystal held up her hands and surrendered.

“And Aunt Carol?”

“She hasn’t said a word to me,” Amy said. “I don’t know if she blames me for not healing her after Echidna or if she hates me for leaving her like that for so long or what. She hasn’t stopped Vicky, either.”

Good God, what a fucking mess. This really was way above Crystal’s head, and there was no way she could solve it herself, that much was becoming incredibly clear. It wasn’t like she could just let it be and let Amy and her family hash it out, either, because, fucking hell, if she did, things would never get resolved.

So she was going to have to take this up to someone with a better idea of what to do.

“Okay,” she said, standing up from her seat. “I’m not going to pretend I have any idea what to do about all of this, and I can’t exactly force you to talk to them or them to listen to you, so I’ll tell you what. Stay here for now and we’ll figure out what to do later. I’ve still got the rest of the month paid up, so we have that long to put our heads together and come up with a plan.”

Amy’s shoulders sagged and the tension bled out of her body; the relief on her face was so plain that it almost hurt to look at.

“For now,” Crystal went on, “I’m going to get dressed and go do some shopping, since we’re a bit low on food. I’ll be back in about an hour. If you want to nap on the couch, I’m totally okay with that.”

“Thanks,” Amy mumbled. “I really appreciate it.”

“You’re family, Amy. That’s what family does for each other.”

And with those parting words, she left and made her way back down the hall towards her bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, Crystal was dressed and ready to go, purse in hand, hair dried, and debit card primed.

“I’m heading out!” she called over her shoulder.

“See you later!” Amy replied.

Crystal opened the door —

“Oh. Hi?”

— and came face to face with a blonde-haired girl with bottle green eyes, hand raised and poised to knock. Several large duffle bags were set off to the side, way too large for a girl her size to have been carrying around herself, and yet there was no sign of anyone having helped her.

“Guess that means this is the right apartment after all,” she said. “Amy’s in, right? Right. Staying with you because her sister’s a bitch and her mother’s wound tighter than Tagg’s boxers.”

“Excuse me, who are you?” Crystal asked, crossing her arms and making sure to block the doorway. Her voice sounded a little familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it.

“A friend of a friend. Or a girl looking for a new place to stay, and this apartment is conveniently available — or will be pretty soon. A little bit of column A, some of column B. Take your pick.” The girl leaned to the side, trying to peer around Crystal and into the apartment. Crystal stepped sideways to block her. “Hey, Panpan! You’re alive in there, right? You weren’t looking too hot yesterday!”

A startled squawk came from inside the apartment.

“What the fuck are *you* doing here, Lisa?”

“Looking for a new place to stay!” As an aside, she grinned at Crystal and said, “It’s a good thing you’re not *Lazereyes*, Dreamboat, ‘cause that glare would be seriously hazardous to my continued well-being if you were.”

“WHAT?” Amy shrieked.

There was a grunt and a groan, and Crystal took her eyes off the new girl long enough to look back and see Amy pulling herself along towards the door, teeth gritted and brow drawn down.

“What do you mean, looking for a new place to stay?” Amy breathed. “I thought you already *had* an apartment.”

“*Had* being the operative word,” said the girl, Lisa. “My place was fine, but the rest of the building was in pretty bad shape, so I had to move out before they condemned the place. I figured, hey, we can tolerate each other and we spend a lot of time in the same company —”

“That doesn’t —”

“— so hey, maybe we could just be roomies. I get a place to stay, and conveniently, so do you, one that doesn’t involve bitchy blondes or shouting matches over your choice in friends.”

“You’re half right, at least,” Amy bit out.

The girl’s grin got sharper. “Oh-ho, there’s that rapier wit! Ah, you slay me, Panpan!” She shrugged. “But see, you’re in a bit of a pinch, aren’t you? I mean, you don’t exactly have any income, and I just so happen to be something of a low key millionaire...”

It clicked into place.

“Wait, you’re *Tattletale!*” Crystal said.

“For the time being,” the girl said, still grinning. “Dunno, though, I’m thinking about rebranding. Try to find a more heroic sounding *nom de guerre*, as it were, seeing as I’m basically officially on the side of angels.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Can we discuss this inside, though? The front porch isn’t exactly the place to be having this talk.”

“No,” Amy said flatly. “Because it’s really simple. No, you’re not staying here.”

Lisa raised an eyebrow. “You’ve got a better solution? Crystal wants to move back home and you can’t pay the rent, so you need a roomie who can cover the costs, right?” She gave a cheeky wave. “Hi, roomie!”

Amy scowled and turned to Crystal for help. Like, “Come on, you tell her! She’s not welcome here, right?” And she was kind of right, Crystal *wasn’t* really comfortable having a villain — reformed or otherwise — anywhere near her apartment, let alone sitting in it, unsupervised, with her cousin for an hour or more.

On the other hand...

Well, it wasn’t often the universe dropped a solution to your problem in your lap, was it? And plus, this girl *had* been the one to figure out Leviathan’s weak spot, and she was one of Taylor’s — Apocrypha’s — friends, right? Apocrypha was a Ward, now. If they thought Tattletale was actually a threat, she would’ve been thrown in jail, wouldn’t she? Or made to officially join the Wards or something.

“Listen,” she said instead, “I’m going to go do some shopping. While I’m gone, Amy, I want you to have a serious discussion about this, and we can talk about what you decide when I get back.”

“Crystal,” Amy began.

“I’m not your mom, Amy,” Crystal said again. “And my parents aren’t Aunt Carol. We can’t afford to keep you in this apartment for the foreseeable future, so either you have to find a way to stay here that isn’t on our dime or figure things out with Vicky and Aunt Carol.” She looked meaningfully at Lisa. “And she’s offering you a way to do that, so you have to decide if it’s worth it.”

Amy swallowed whatever she’d been about to say, scowling.

“I’ll be about an hour,” Crystal repeated. “I’ll see you then.”

She stepped out and around Lisa, then started off down the stairs; she’d take off once she’d cleared the building and got down onto the main street.

“Tell Photon Mom I said hi!” Lisa called out.

Crystal was beginning to see why she got on Amy’s nerves so much.

It took about five minutes to fly over to the nearest supermarket, and as Crystal touched down on the sidewalk and stepped through the automatic doors, she pulled out her cellphone, scrolled down the contacts list, found her mother’s name, and pressed dial. While it rang, she started towards the refrigerated section, where she would find eggs and bacon, and grabbed a small basket along the way.

Click.

“Hello?” Sarah Pelham’s voice said.

“Hi, Mom,” said Crystal.

“Crystal?” A shift, and in the background, she heard, “*It’s Crystal, Neil.*” Then, coming back to the phone, “*Crystal, is something wrong?*”

“Define ‘wrong,’” Crystal said wryly.

Mom sighed. “*Did something happen with Amy?*”

“Ooh, mother’s intuition, huh? Pretty sharp.”

“*You two didn’t get into a fight, did you?*”

“Oh, no, that would just be too easy.”

Crystal reached in and grabbed a carton of eggs, a full dozen, and as she wedged her cellphone between her shoulder and her ear, she opened it to check and make sure they were all intact.

“*Crystal? You’re not still at the apartment, are you?*”

“No, I’m going shopping. I haven’t gotten groceries since Amy dropped in and I had to extend the lease another month.” Inspection done, she closed the carton and set it in her basket. “Anyway. I was talking with her about that and the subject of Vicky and Aunt Carol came up.”

Mom sighed again. “*I’m not going to like this, am I?*”

“Something is seriously wrong over there, Mom. Amy doesn’t even call Aunt Carol her mom, she calls her *Carol.*”

“*Oh dear.*” Power for understatement, right there. “*Did she tell you what they’re fighting about?*”

“Amy says that part of it is about Taylor, um, *you-know-who.*”

“*You-know-wh — oh. Apocrypha.*”

Crystal nodded, even though her mother couldn’t see her. “Yeah. So part of what they’re fighting about is her, because she’s Amy’s friend and Vicky hates her guts or something, which, I mean, I kinda understand why, but...”

“*But Amy’s finally branching out and making friends instead of just tagging along with Vicky, yes,*” Mom said knowingly. Another sigh crackled through the phone. “*Which might be part of why Vicky’s so angry about it. She and Amy have been practically joined at the hip ever since they were kids and now Amy is starting to make her own friends... You said part of it, though. The other part?*”

“That’s...a bit more complicated,” Crystal admitted.

Ugh, how to explain all of this? Maybe having this conversation while she was out shopping wasn’t the best of ideas, either, but it wasn’t like the supermarket was packed at eight-thirty on a Sunday morning. The whole place was basically abandoned.

She kept her voice low and quiet anyway, just to be sure.

“Crystal...”

“So according to Amy,” she began, “the other part that has Vicky so steamed right now is that Amy wouldn’t heal Aunt Carol’s brain damage, after the whole...Trainyard thing. With you-know-who and the we-can’t-legally-talk-about-her situation.”

“Well, she couldn’t. Amy can’t do brains, that’s a well-known part of her Manton Limit.”

“Yeah, about that...”

“Crystal...” Mom said again, a note of warning in her voice.

“So it turns out that’s not exactly true, but Amy’s been telling everyone it is, and I’m not entirely sure Aunt Carol knew, but Vicky sure did.”

“What do you mean, not exactly true?”

“As in, not at all, really? There’s a limit, but it’s entirely self-imposed.”

“Because it’s one of her rules,” Mom muttered darkly.

That...sounded like there was a story behind it, but Crystal didn’t press.

“She said she’s afraid of going too far. Of sliding down that slippery slope, because she could just make people be whoever she decided they should be.” And then, the one that Crystal hadn’t realized was actually a really huge deal until she actually thought about it more. “Because she could have just made Aunt Carol like her more.”

“Oh.” Mom heaved a deep, heavy, mournful sigh. *“Oh, Carol.”*

“But Vicky doesn’t seem to understand that, or maybe she doesn’t care to, and she’s just angry that Amy didn’t fix everything immediately. I’m... I don’t know, but if she told Aunt Carol that the whole Manton Limit thing was a lie, then...”

“It might explain why Carol isn’t trying to bring her home, either.” Quieter, Mom added, *“Or maybe she just sees a chance to be rid of the child she never wanted.”*

Something drew tight in Crystal’s chest. “What was that, Mom?”

“Nothing, Sweetie, don’t you worry about it.”

Deciding there were some things she might not want to know the answer to, Crystal dropped it.

“So that’s the situation there. Amy’s back at the apartment right now, and I told her we could front her the next month’s rent if she had to stay there, but after that, she’d have to figure everything out for herself.”

“You didn’t think to offer letting her stay with us?”

“I...honestly, I’m not sure it’s a good idea. I mean, I know we’re not exactly tight on cash, but we’re not Aunt Carol, either, and an extra mouth to feed, and I’ll be going back to college, so that’s tuition to pay...”

“Oh, Crystal,” Mom said. “You just let me worry about money, okay? If we have to put Amy up for a while, then that’s fine.”

“I’m not sure we’ll have to worry about it anyway,” said Crystal. “Taylor’s friend Lisa showed up looking for an apartment and offered to pay the rent for the both of them.”

“Taylor’s friend Lisa?” A pause. *“You mean Tattletale?”*

“Currently planning to undergo voluntary rebranding, but yeah. Her.”

“I’m not sure I like the idea of leaving Amy with a villain, reformed or not.”

“I can’t say I’m super excited about the idea, either, and they seem to get along like oil and vinegar, but if we can’t get Aunt Carol and Vicky to make up with Amy anytime soon...”

Mom sighed again. *“I understand. I’ll try and talk to Carol, see if I can’t convince her to at least sit down and talk things out with Amy.”*

“You don’t sound too hopeful about that,” Crystal observed.

“Where do you think Vicky gets her stubbornness from?” Mom asked wryly. *“I don’t like it, but you might be right. If Amy decides not to stay with us and can’t find some other way to pay for the apartment, leaving her with Tattletale — with Lisa — might be the only real option. Has she talked with...Taylor about any of this?”*

“Not as far as I know, no. I’m not sure what Taylor could do about it, anyway. I don’t think her family is exactly rolling in dough, either.”

“No, I suppose not.” Another sigh. *“Alright. Keep me in the loop, okay? I’ll try and get everything settled, but let me know if anything changes with Amy and the apartment. If all else fails, we can let her stay over for a little while.”*

“Will do.”

“Bye, Sweetheart.”

“Bye, Mom.”

Click.

Stuffing her phone back into her pocket, Crystal went back to shopping, reciting her list in her head as she went.

It was around ten o’clock when she finally stepped out and back into the parking lot, arms laden with bags of groceries containing enough food to at least last the week, and it took her about fifteen minutes to fly her way back to the apartment. She made sure she went slowly enough that she didn’t jostle anything too much or risk dropping it onto the pavement far below — a hazard she’d learned from in the early days, when she’d done a quick grocery run and flew back at full speed, only to make a mess when she slowed down to land.

After navigating the stairs back up and twisting the doorknob open with a little difficulty, she stepped back into the apartment and called out, “Girls, I’m back!”

There was no reply. A faint noise came from the living room, probably the tv.

“Girls?”

Crystal set the bags of groceries on the floor of the kitchenette and peered over the island into the living room, where Amy and Lisa were both glued to the tv, eyes wide and mouths open in what looked like horror.

Oh God, had they turned on a horror movie? What a way for these two to bond.

“Girls?” she tried for a third time, walking over to them and looking towards the television. “What are you —”

It took Crystal a moment to realize what she was seeing, and then her brain puts it together, and the image of Leviathan, of a person mocked-up in a costume to *look* like Leviathan, only missing an arm and with the “tail” halfway sheared off and so very obviously *dead*, loomed through the screen, hanging upon a makeshift cross. Around him, arrayed like cultists before a sacrifice, there were a dozen figures in robes, holding various Endbringer icons and idols. In the background, someone was chanting, a heavy, almost musical sound, and the cultists echoed it in kind.

And brought before the corpse of Leviathan was a girl, a startlingly familiar girl, tall and thin with long, wavy dark hair. She was mocked up in a costume as well, and although the boots were all wrong, the pants were obviously just jeans that had been dyed purple, whole parts were missing, and the vest was entirely the wrong shape and color, it was obvious that this was supposed to be Apocrypha.

There was no mask, so it was also obvious that this wasn’t Taylor, the *real* Apocrypha, and her mouth was taped shut, her cheeks stained with tears, her eyes wide with terror as two large men dragged her by the arms and shoulders before the effigy of Leviathan. They shoved her down, holding her there and pressing her head against a wooden block.

“Apocrypha,” a voice declared off-screen, haunting and reverent, “you took from us something that cannot be reclaimed. You stole from us Mighty Leviathan, one of our gods. You are *guilty* of the sin of Deicide.”

A third man walked into the camera shot, hefting a giant ax and wearing a black hood. The girl dressed as Apocrypha struggled, sobbing against the tape over her mouth, but her captors held her down and she couldn’t escape.

“For such a mortal sin, there can be only one punishment.”

The man in the hood reached down with one hand, and with an almost incongruous gentleness, he pushed aside the girl’s hair, baring the pale skin of her neck.

Oh God, no, Crystal thought. She wanted to turn away, didn’t want to see what she knew was about to happen, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the scene in front of her.

The man in the hood lifted his giant ax, gripped the haft with both hands, swung —

THUD

The girl stopped moving. Her body collapsed, sagging, as her blood splattered over the effigy of Leviathan.

“You have one day, Apocrypha, to present yourself before us at the grave of Mighty Leviathan and atone. We will sacrifice as many as needed to appease our gods’ fury, but only your blood will soothe their wrath.”

And on the bottom of the screen, a timer appeared.

23:59:59