

Pyrite 11.5

The Doctor turned, a little frazzled looking, but still composed and in control. “Good, you made it,” she said curtly. “I’ve sent Number Man on ahead with Doormaker and the Clairvoyant. They should have evacuated to another safe house to regroup.”

Sent them on ahead?

“You stayed behind?” I asked.

She looked at me, silent for a moment, and then understanding spread across her face. “Apocrypha. Yes, I’ve stayed behind, for the time being.” The centrifuge behind her whirred and clicked to a stop. She turned towards it and took the vial it contained. “We’ve a few desperate gambits to attempt, now that the being has attacked us here.”

She held up the vial as though in toast, face grim and resigned. I didn’t need Khepri’s memories to know she intended to drink it.

“You have a pollentia,” Alexandria said. “The risk of deviation —”

“I’m aware,” the Doctor said. “As I said, we’ve a few desperate gambits left to attempt. Measures of last resort, if you will. My taking a vial was always one of them.”

Was it? She’d had to be talked into the idea, last time. Of course, last time, she hadn’t believed Khepri’s group about Scion’s attacking Cauldron at first, either.

I wasn’t sure it was worth it for her to take it now, if there was even a point to it when it was impossible to account for what she might wind up with and plan around it. A Tinker power, a Blaster? She’d have to be on the level of the Triumvirate to even really make a difference — and that was ultimately what kept me silent. If she *did* get something that put her on that level, then another fighter with that kind of strength behind her, whatever form it took, would be invaluable if everything else fell through and it came down to an all-out battle, again.

“It’ll knock us out,” Eidolon pointed out. “What if he comes down while we’re all incapacitated?”

“That’s why it’s best to hurry, while the being is still distracted upstairs,” the Doctor said. Eidolon said nothing to that, and I wondered if she realized that she’d just ascribed human attributes like an attention span to Scion after arguing so adamantly that he was too inhuman to be undone by his emotions.

The Doctor, seeing no other protests, lifted the vial, and was about halfway to her mouth when she hesitated, turned to me, and asked, “In Khepri’s timeline, did this work? Or was it pointless?”

I heard what she didn’t ask: did she get powers, or had she indeed suffered the deviation that made Case Fifty-threes?

If I'd been able to tell her either way, I wasn't sure I would have. In fact, in any other, less desperate situation, I would have given her the equivalent of a fuck you and let her figure it out the same way all the Case Fifty-threes had.

But with Scion knocking on the proverbial door and the fate of mankind in the balance, holding onto grudges or wishing poetic justice on someone was counterproductive. So I told her the truth.

"You didn't get the chance to try," I answered.

Her lips pulled into a grim smile. "Perhaps it's fitting, that I can't know for sure and have to take the same chance as all our other vial patients. No guarantees."

I said nothing. If she was expecting recriminations from me now of all times, she wasn't going to be getting them, no matter what I might have thought in the privacy of my own head.

Grimacing, the Doctor looked back down at the vial in her hands and lifted it towards her lips to down its contents —

And it was at that exact moment that it shattered in her hands.

The crack of shattering glass echoed throughout the entire place, and the bulbs above our heads burst just the same as the vial had, plunging the entire room into darkness as the Doctor gasped. It tinkled as it landed about us, and I was thankful that my cloak kept any of it from getting into my hair.

A short incantation and a second later, my little ball of light flickered into existence and we could see again. The Doctor's hands were covered in thin, red lines that bled freely, and yet more scored her face and neck where the shards of the vial had cut her. The sludge of her intended formula was splattered over her front.

"Doctor?" asked Eidolon.

The Doctor grimaced and shook her head. "S-superficial."

I was struck by a sense of déjà vu. I'd wondered, before, at the difference between fate and a simple causal chain. How much of what had happened since getting my powers was inevitable and unavoidable, and how much was just the natural consequences of our decisions and their interactions? How much was immutable, and how much could I steer onto better paths? What would happen no matter how much I tried, and what could be changed?

The players were a little different, the situation wasn't quite the same, but here we were, huddled at the bottom of Cauldron's safe room, Scion above us, a shattered vial on the floor, and our options rapidly dwindling.

"How much did you drink?" asked Alexandria.

"Barely any," the Doctor said grimly. She looked down at the mess over the front of her shirt. Even now, it was sliding off and onto the floor. "Almost none."

The difference was, “dwindling” wasn’t the same as “gone.” We weren’t in so desperate a state that I needed to push the idea of another Trigger Event or use Amy to manufacture one. Eidolon wasn’t dead. Millions and millions of people hadn’t been slaughtered. We weren’t at the ends of our rope, we were at just the beginning.

That could change all too quickly.

“We need to move,” I told them, “get to the Garden before he does. Scion will —”

The appearance of a golden glow along the walls and the shadow it cast on my arms stopped me, and with a bit of dread, I turned around, towards the stairs at the far end of the room.

Scion was there, face drawn into a rictus of fury as though it had been carved from stone.

His gaze found me and slid off, found Alexandria and slid off, found Eidolon, paused for a moment, and then slid off. At last, he found the Doctor and stayed as the glow beneath his skin intensified. His eyes widened just the slightest, barely noticeable from this distance in the dark with him the main source of light.

An instant later, he was among us, barreling past the three of us as though we weren’t there and grabbing the Doctor by her neck. He lifted her up effortlessly, and she gasped as she clawed at his hand with her mangled ones, leaving smears of blood all over his skin.

“Doctor!” shouted Alexandria.

She burst into motion, and I remembered how Pretender had fought using her body in the time that never was, how she had torn off chunks of his body with her raw strength and carved away at him. She could definitely hurt him, although not enough to seriously threaten him. It would be like trying to empty the ocean with a bucket.

Scion backhanded her with his free hand and sent her flying into the wall. The entire place seemed to shudder with the impact.

Eidolon, rather than trying to fight head on, retreated, sending a blast of what seemed to be wind towards Scion. The golden glow blocked it effortlessly.

I glanced back at Eidolon for a moment, wondering — but thinking about it, it seemed obvious that he hadn’t picked out a power for fighting Scion himself, yet, or at least, if he had, it hadn’t “warmed up” enough to be of use. The wind power was probably what he’d been using to turn the tumblers in the locked doors we’d passed through on the way down.

My options flitted through my head at light speed as I floated around the other side of Scion, putting the Doctor out of the direct line of my fire, but I was coming up blank with anything that would be of use. Attack him with lightning? It would channel through him and into the Doctor and accomplish nothing except killing her. Attack him with wind? Similar problem. It was more feasible, but it wouldn’t do anything more than piss him off and it would probably kill the Doctor to achieve what amounted to a minor annoyance.

Anything bigger and stronger ran the risk of damaging the facility around us, and when we were hundreds of feet underground with untold millions of tons of steel and water surrounding us on all sides, collapsing the building seemed like a terrible idea.

The Doctor started screaming. For a second, I didn't understand why, because in the scant moments he'd had a hold of her, Scion hadn't exactly done anything except glare.

I saw it almost immediately after that, though, the way her skin was peeling, the way her fingers were starting to flake away like ash as motes of shining gold ate away at them. Hard to see in the dim light, lit only by the harsh glow of Scion's inner incandescence, but as more and more of her flesh evaporated off of her bones — which themselves started to dissolve the same way shortly after — the flakes became more numerous, more obvious, more easily seen.

He was ripping her apart, I realized after a moment with a growing sense of horror. Slowly, one little fleck at a time, he was shredding her to bits, pulling her apart probably at the cellular level, starting with her extremities.

Was this supposed to be revenge? Punishment for her and the rest of Cauldron ripping his counterpart to pieces the same way for their vials?

She was a monster, and just what I knew of Cauldron's evils would have gotten her hanged at the Hague a dozen times over, but I wasn't just going to stand there and watch Scion fucking *unravel her* like she was a ball of yarn.

I threw myself to the side, swung my arm up, index finger extended, aiming for his elbow.

“Ερε Εχάτη!”

A beam of pink light bloomed from my fingertip, swept up along the arc of my arm's motion, and carved a narrow line in the floor and along the wall. The arm holding the Doctor aloft flopped to the floor as she dropped, still screaming, as the motes of golden light continued to peel her flesh away.

Alexandria jetted towards her, sweeping the Doctor up off of the ground and flying away.

“Eidolon!”

Eidolon, in the back, made a gesture with his hand, and something invisible rippled through the air. It carved a deep gash in Scion's back when it hit.

With the Doctor and Alexandria both out of the way, I flung another spell at him.

“Αερο!”

Blades of wind tore into him, ripping into his flesh and sending gouts of blood across the room. Scion staggered for a moment, but didn't fall. Even as I watched, the missing parts filled in and his wounds sealed over as easily as breathing. His arm was already halfway reformed.

My hand swung up and my finger pointed towards his head.

“Έρε Ελάτη!”

His head vanished, and this time, he actually staggered back, like he'd taken a heavy blow. I didn't wait for him to recover, because we only had a handful of seconds to take advantage of his injury.

“Move!” I shouted. “Into the Garden! Now!”

None of them argued; both of them raced towards the stairwell and the thick vault door at the end of the room, with me not far behind. The Doctor was still screaming, Scion's power still eating away at her, but there was no time to deal with that, right now.

“Μάχηα Ένάτηα Γραεα!”

Light rained. Beams of pink bloomed around me, bombarding the vault door, until it started to glow from the heat. Even as thick and strong as it was, it could only take so much abuse, and melted slag started to seep across the floor. Good thing that we were all capable of flying.

The way opened before us, and we dropped down the stairwell at speed, far, far faster than if we had simply let gravity do all the work. At the bottom, we all made a sharp turn and out into the Garden, the gigantic hangar room that held Scion's counterpart.

It was just as eerie as the first time I'd been here. Just as incredible, just as awe-inspiring. A veritable mountain of flesh, with arms, legs, limbs, heads jutting out. By some unspoken agreement, we found an outcropping of flesh to hide behind and hunkered down.

And still, the Doctor screamed. The motes of gold had ripped away her fingers and her hands and were slowly making their way up her arms. I had no idea the amount of pain she had to be in, to have not only her body, but her nerves being slowly torn apart. The fact she was still screaming gave me at least some indication.

It was like a festering wound. Despite Scion being far above us and no longer in contact with her, his power still kept eating at her. I remembered, it worked that way in Khepri's timeline, too. Even after he had left and moved on, flecks of his golden light would still cling to whatever and whoever they had touched, often to detrimental effect.

My mind screeched to a halt. No, not a festering wound. A *curse*.

In which case, I could fix it. Cleanse it. Couldn't I? At the very least, there was nothing lost in trying.

All Wounds Must Be Repaired

I waved my hand over the Doctor. “P a i n B r e a k e r.”

For a moment, the glow of the Noble Phantasm working struggled. The motes of golden light stubbornly clung to the Doctor's wounds, refusing to be moved, to be jettisoned and torn away, like they had a mind of their own and had planted their metaphorical feet. I felt a hollow disbelief in my chest — Medea's, not my own — that they could possibly be that strong.

Me, I wasn't all that surprised. Scion and his counterpart crippled the passengers when they scattered them across the world, made them weaker, added safeguards and limitations both to

protect the capes using the powers and to keep any cape from being strong enough to truly threaten the entity. None of Scion's powers were at all limited, and they had such age that even a Noble Phantasm might have trouble fighting their sheer, ontological weight.

But eventually, the motes dissolved and vanished, and the Doctor's wounded flesh filled back in as the curse was undone.

There was no sigh of relief from my lips, only a grim smile. I wasn't cruel enough to watch her die so horrifically. I also had no place offering this woman any kind of forgiveness or mercy for the things she had done.

"Apocrypha," Alexandria called solemnly.

My head rose, but her stare was locked on the doorway we'd come through at the bottom of the stairwell, half-hidden behind the pillar of flesh we'd ducked into the shadow of. My stomach clenched as I saw what she saw.

Scion.

"He's here," Eidolon announced unnecessarily. He began to rise, something like *presence* rolling off of him as he prepared to fight.

"No, wait." Alexandria's raised hand stalled him. "Look."

Eidolon hesitated.

"He's not...attacking?"

And indeed, Scion wasn't. In fact, although he'd undoubtedly followed us down here and we weren't well-hidden at all, he seemed to have quite forgotten about us altogether. Any trace of the anger he'd had before was gone, and instead, the forlorn wonder and longing he'd had when first faced with one of my Simulacra had returned.

After a moment, he lifted off and higher into the air, floating deeper into the room. He passed us by, ignoring us entirely, as though we weren't even there. As he went, he reached out with his hands and gently laid them upon the surface of his counterpart's body, with a tenderness and affection that I'd seen shades of only when he'd been interacting with my Simulacra. I might have been tempted to call it a lover's caress.

The cruel smile that curled on my lips was only partly Medea's.

Things had gotten somewhat off track when he decided on his own to come to Cauldron, but it looked like bringing him here would have been the right decision either way. Plan A was still in play.

"It seems as though you may have been right," Alexandria said. "This...*this* is beyond anything we expected out of Scion."

I wasn't above an *I told you so*, but now wasn't the time or the place for it.

“Come.”

I lifted off the ground, too, and the Doctor, unconscious from her whole ordeal, drifted up beside me. After a moment, Alexandria and Eidolon floated up to join me, and I led them after Scion, careful to keep a certain distance so that we didn't ping whatever danger sense he must have had going.

We followed at a sedate pace as he went deeper and deeper in. I saw flashes of spots I recognized from either Khepri's memories or my own trek through the Garden when I took reference pictures, and just from the way he was going, I could tell that he was making as straight a line as he could for the corpse of what would have been his counterpart's projected body.

I felt a little like a kid at Christmas, anxious to unwrap my presents. It was a work of effort to contain the giggle that threatened to break past my lips, half my own and half a feedback loop from Medea.

When he finally reached her, the androgynous, long-haired body, half-finished and incomplete, Scion hesitated for a moment. Then, he reached out and cupped her slack-jawed face, running the pads of his fingertips over her cheeks and her smooth skin. It'd been effectively braindead for who knew how many years, their mining it for powers had likely finished it off somewhere along the lines, and it had been the better part of a year since Contessa had slid the knife I'd marked with a Death Rune into its neck, just to make sure it was well and truly dead, and yet there was no decay. The corpse was as supple and full of life as if it had died only moments ago.

We were behind him, so we couldn't see his face. I wasn't sure whether it would be more or less expressive than it had been with the Simulacra, but at the very least, I could imagine the devastation twisting his features as he realized his counterpart was gone beyond recovery.

I had a decent idea of what would come next, so I lifted my hand and opened my mouth, prepared to kick off the next stage of the fight.

And at that moment, a pane of light drew itself in the air above him and behind, right in what would have been a human's blindspot, and a lithe woman in a pantsuit and fedora dropped through, knife in hand and poised to stab.

My knife. The one with the Death Rune on it that I had never taken back.

Contessa.

There was no way of knowing what alerted him. Maybe it was Doormaker's portal, maybe it was the sound of the air as she fell, maybe he could sense her connection to her passenger. Whatever it was, it was enough for him to whirl around and grab her by the wrist, the tip of the knife a whole foot away from his head.

Contessa dangled, hanging by her wrist, helpless, but not done. She let go of the knife with her right hand and it dropped perfectly into her left with an economy of motion and a degree of flawlessness that I had never actually witnessed myself firsthand. She stabbed towards his ribs, aiming to slip in and deal a fatal blow as though it mattered at all where she struck him with that thing.

Maybe it did. The metaphysics of something like Scion made my head ache on the best of days.

Scion stopped this attempt, too, grabbing her other wrist with his other hand. She let out a gasp, but didn't drop the knife. That easily, he'd beaten her.

It felt frankly ridiculous, considering my image of the woman was of an unstoppable force who never made the wrong move.

For a long moment, the air remained tense as Scion stared at her, looking from her face, to the knife, to her hands, and then to some point above her head. The rest of us remained frozen — likely, none of us wanted to make a move that would set him off with Contessa in the way, although it may have just been as simple as neither of them expecting her to show up at all.

And then Scion did something none of us expected: he spoke the second word he'd ever said.

“*You.*”

Almost paradoxically, Contessa's lips curled into a cold smile. “*Me.*”

Scion *snarled*, and I snapped off the first spell I could think of to get her out of his grasp.

“*Τροψα!*”

In a flash, she was gone — teleported back to the hiding spot we'd huddled behind a short while ago. In hindsight, that might have made a better way to get the Doctor out of Scion's grasp earlier, too.

Scion whirled around, eyes wide and face furious, and snapped out his hands. There was barely a moment to throw up any defenses.

“*Μαροδοζ!*”

His beam of golden light smashed against a pane of purple light, and was stopped. My skittering heart slowed down a little and I let out a shaky breath. My barrier held.

And the second beam shattered it like cheap glass.

Someone screamed as the beam consumed me, and it felt like every nerve in my skin was suddenly on fire as I plummeted towards the ground below, landing on the gray flesh like a cushion. The jolt only turned the searing fire into sharp daggers digging into every cell, every nerve, and somewhere along the line, the scream petered out as whoever was screaming lost the air to keep going. It took me a moment to realize that it was me.

I gasped in a breath as the air in my lungs ran out, and for a few seconds, I thrashed around, every part of me burning and aching, but somehow still *alive*. There wasn't room in my head to wonder whether it was just because of Medea's natural hardiness or if my spell had blunted his blast enough for me to survive.

An eternity later, my lips reformed over my teeth and my eyes healed so that I could *see*, and I stared up at the fight above me, still spasming from the slowly fading agony as my skin finished regrowing

— of course. Not human. Medea had a healing factor that might not have compared to Herakles or King Arthur, but wasn't something to sneeze at, either.

In the air, Alexandria and Eidolon tag-teamed Scion with startling effectiveness. Alexandria zoomed across like a jet fighter, scooping away great tracks of flesh with every pass, and whenever Scion turned to follow her, Eidolon hit him from behind with a blast of wind so concentrated that it formed invisible blades, just like he had back in the safe room. Then, Alexandria swooped back around from a different angle and carved away more, even as the flesh she'd already taken had filled back in.

But as impressive as it looked, they were barely doing anything. Annoying him, really. Like flies he was trying to swat, but couldn't quite catch when he tried. Eventually, he'd get tired of swiping at them with his metaphorical hands and start pulling out powers that would let him land a hard blow.

Gingerly, I tried to pull myself to my feet, propping myself up awkwardly on the flesh that squished under me. A glance around revealed me alone in my "bed." I didn't know if the Doctor had been vaporized in Scion's attack or just thrown out of sight when I got hit, but she was nowhere to be seen.

No time to look for her, right now.

The air above me warbled, and I looked back up to see Eidolon throw an entirely new attack Scion's way from a power that I hadn't seen him use before. It distorted space as it traveled, and my eyes watered as I watched it carve across the distance towards its target. When it hit, it would do catastrophic damage, no matter how quickly Scion recovered from it.

And then Scion did something I didn't expect.

He dodged.

Whatever the attack was, however it worked, it was apparently dangerous enough that even Scion worried about it, because he stopped short of trying to track Alexandria and deliberately got out of the way of the bubble of warped space as it flew past him. It went on and kept going, and eventually, it hit a large mound of the counterpart's flesh, easily the size of a few elephants, and before my eyes, the flesh twisted, churned, ripped, tore, pulling yet more mass through the distorted portals leading to other worlds, and then disappeared.

A sound of distress came from Scion, and he turned now away from Alexandria, giving Eidolon his full attention.

There. That was it. Eidolon just had to keep using that power. Even if he missed, whatever it did to the counterpart's corpse would inflict a damage of its own.

Scion didn't even bother to look at Alexandria as she came by for another pass, he just blasted her without ceremony, expression, or any visible gesture, forcing her back as the beam ripped away her costume. At the last second, she managed to get her arms up in time to protect her face.

Eidolon wound up again, the air around his hands — no, it wasn't the air that was twisting, it was the *space itself*, the fabric of reality. Scion was already moving to dodge, like he knew where it was going to hit. With whatever Thinker powers he had, he probably did.

There was something I could do about that.

“Ατλας!”

The air around Scion froze, thickening with a layer of dark power, and so did he. With his body rendered unable to move, Eidolon's attack struck true, and something like satisfaction curled in my belly as I watched it rip Scion apart like a blender, pulling yet more mass through from the “well” of his true form. Under the power of it, even my ancient spell destabilized and came undone.

The flesh was slower to knit back, this time, but still so rapid that it was approaching instantaneous. I kicked off the blob beneath me and floated back up to Eidolon's side, a little unsteady but well enough to keep going.

“How long can you keep that up?”

“Long enough,” he answered strongly.

“This won't be enough to kill him,” I told him, “but we'll pressure him and keep him off balance. The more damage we do, not just to him but to his counterpart's corpse, the closer we'll get to winning.”

“Right.”

Reformed, Scion came for us, the glow intensifying beneath his skin. With one hand, I flung out my cloak and wrapped it around Eidolon, even as he charged up another attack.

“Τροψα!”

My teleport carried us to a spot twenty feet behind Scion, and the beam of light he'd fired at our previous position arced off into the distance, carving up yet more of his counterpart's body. Eidolon let loose his blast of distorted space, and Scion, despite my teleport, because even if his powers had trouble predicting me, Eidolon must have been as clear as day, started to move to avoid it.

“Ατλας!”

Only to jerk to a halt as my spell caught him in place, again. Eidolon's blast took him on the side, caught him on the edges, and his arm, leg, and most of his torso stretched and warped into a smear of gold and blood. Spaghettification was what it was called, if I remembered my physics right.

Scion tore himself free with a flash of golden light and managed to avoid having his whole body mangled, turning towards us as the missing flesh filled back in again.

“Τροψ —”

But the weight of the entire world suddenly pressed in from all sides, and some instinct of Medea's told me my teleportation had just been shut down, stopped. No, the right word was "forbidden." The rules had just been changed to disallow the mystery of spatial transference.

My wide eyes met Scion's.

Because *he* had changed those rules.

And with us now rendered incapable of an emergency escape, he charged up another beam, the glow under his skin intensifying as it condensed down to a point in front of his chest.

“Μαροδοξί!”

A hasty barrier erected itself in front of me to block the incoming blast, but I had no intention of staying behind it, because a quick incantation dilated my personal time as I grabbed Eidolon and dragged him out of the way, up and to the side. The blast, stronger than before, cracked my barrier and destroyed it without trouble. If it hadn't killed me, it would have at least left me as bad off as the last one had.

Time snapped back to its proper flow, and I didn't waste even a moment to counterattack.

“Μάχηα Έκάτηα Γραεα!”

Indiscriminate beams of pink light bloomed and fired from all around me. Several hit Scion, searing through his flesh with ease, but many more went wide and carved away yet more chunks of the counterpart's corpse, leaving great troughs gouged out in their wake. Scion whirled about to see the damage and gave a wordless shout as he caught sight of what I'd done.

He spun back to face us, furious, his glow growing brighter with his rage, and he started towards us — only to abort abruptly and dodge out of the way of Eidolon's next attack.

No, you don't.

“Ατλαςί!”

My spell pressed in on him again, stopping him in place.

But he'd seen it one too many times, now, and with a pulse of golden light, he broke free, shredding my spell like a piece of wet paper. The distortion of Eidolon's attack passed him by without touching, and it was only after he'd already dodged that Scion seemed to remember what lay below us, in the path of that attack.

He disregarded us entirely to watch as yet more of his counterpart was ripped, torn, and shorn, and a noise of distress whined out of his throat.

He spun back around, and this time, when Eidolon flung another bubble of distorted space at him, he sent a beam of light at it instead. The beam struck the bubble, warped it, sent scatterings of reddish light one direction, blue the other, and a rainbow of colors in between everywhere else as they met, fought, and unraveled each other.

Scion sent out a follow up beam, but the same distortion surrounded Eidolon and it curved around him, flung off towards the ground and gouging out yet more mass from the counterpart. The distortion around Eidolon warped and compressed, flowing down and condensing to a ball in front of his hands, and he fired it off at Scion.

This one, Scion dodged again — right into my line of fire.

“Μάχηα Έκάτηα Γραεα!”

He fired back, shooting my beams with beams of his own, trying to counter every single one of them as he fired another to detonate Eidolon’s bubble a safe distance from his counterpart. Even if he understood how the spell worked enough to do that, however, his powers’ difficulty in reading *me* meant there were inevitably many that he missed, that made it past him and scored large, burnt holes into the flesh of the Garden below.

Scion snarled and threw his arms wide, hands held flat, and a flash of Khepri’s memory showed him clap and all of the capes fighting him collapse, dead.

But before I could get a spell off to try and stop him, a gigantic blob of grey flesh flew through the air and smacked him straight in the chest. Arms and legs, clad in silvery skin, flopped every which way, limp and lifeless. A half-formed head with a mop of uneven hair bobbed and dangled near his ankles. My incantation died in my throat.

What?

Scion recoiled with horror as the blob fell back down to the ground. Alexandria, half of her costume gone and most of her mask disintegrated, rose to meet him, and she swung a disembodied grey arm at his face to the sound of a mighty *CRACK*. It couldn’t have done much damage to him, not really, but the arm itself snapped in a dozen different places as the shards of the bones ripped and tore through the muscles and skin. The expression on Scion’s face as Alexandria discarded the ruined limb was hard to describe.

But what it told me was much more important. We were winning. Not on the powers front, because nothing we’d done so far had been much more than a frustration to him, but mentally, we were cornering him, hammering at his weaknesses.

Alexandria swooped back down and hefted another chunk of flesh, ripping it free from the main mass as she lifted it and came back up. Scion made a strange, nasally noise when she threw this chunk at him, too, and this time, he obliterated it before it could even touch him as though it were diseased.

Eidolon caught on to the strategy, and he turned away from Scion to target the mass of flesh instead. A gesture, a swipe of his arm through the air, and down below, a series of neon green concentric circles detonated, wiping out large swathes of the corpse.

The power he would have used against Noelle, once upon a time. Or rather, the power he would have used on the evil Alexandria clone, strong enough to even take *her* out in one hit.

Scion shouted and rushed towards Eidolon, and this time, Eidolon gestured at him, and the green concentric circles exploded, destroying Scion's body, instead. Without even pausing, he gestured back towards the counterpart, and yet more of it was wiped away in a flash of green.

Scion's body reformed with lightning speed, and he raced towards Eidolon, even as his missing flesh was still filling back in. He blasted apart another bubble of distorted space, another blob of grey meat, chasing Alexandria away with a beam of light. When I moved to give Eidolon a hand, he even sent a beam my way, forcing me to dodge and break off. It broke through my hasty barrier with ease.

Eidolon wasn't waiting for us to come and help him. Even as Scion approached, he was already preparing another attack, another ball of distorted space, more densely packed than the last one, like looking at the center of a black hole. He was already retreating, trying to put distance between them to avoid backlash from his own powers.

Scion, against all expectations, did not fight back with more beams. He didn't glow brighter and try to rip Eidolon molecule from molecule at close range. He didn't fire pulses of blasts to overwhelm with sheer speed and quantity.

Something curled in my gut, a sense of dread, a feeling of doom, like Scion had already won and we just hadn't realized it, yet.

And suddenly, it became clear to me exactly what his plan was.

No, I thought. No, no, no, not again. Eidolon wasn't the only one here, Eidolon wasn't the one who tortured you with images of your counterpart, Eidolon wasn't the one who made you feel helpless, alone, isolated. You should have been focusing on me. *Me*. Why were you going after him, Scion?

Because Eidolon was the one tearing apart the counterpart's corpse. Eidolon was the one ripping into him. Eidolon was the biggest threat, right then and there. Eidolon was the only one whose defeat could be predicted, who was *vulnerable*.

Eidolon was the one who made him *worried*. Afraid. The one who was forcing him to expend more and more energy from his ultimately limited store.

I sucked in a breath to shout out a warning, to tell Eidolon not to listen — but I was too late.

With four words, Scion delivered a fatal blow.

“You needed worthy opponents.”