

## Pyrite 11.9

I was in motion the instant the world resolved back into existence, before my brain even had time to properly register my feet landing back on solid ground, and I bounded back and as far out of the way as I could. There was nowhere to really hide, exactly, because what stretched out beneath me was a large, grassy plain, with tall grass that came up to my waist, a great valley easily big enough to fit the entirety of Brockton Bay that sat between two mountain ranges that jutted up in the distance.

Hiding wasn't the point. The point was to just put as much space as I could between me and Scion.

It might not have mattered, because the fight had resumed up in the sky, with renewed intensity. Beams of light in varying hues flashed across the gaps like shooting stars, momentarily eclipsing the sun in intensity, as the combatants traded blasts back and forth. Scion seemed to have all but abandoned defense, taking hits that he could have, *should* have been able to avoid, just so that he could fire back faster, forcing everyone else to fire less frequently, to dodge more, and so in a strange sense, his stronger offense made for a better defense.

I was stuck in the strange position of not having much of a role, again. I didn't even have Khepri's original power of bug control, as ineffectual as it might be, to use to distract him or run battlefield control.

*BOOM*

The roar of a cannonshot echoed and jolted me, and the projectile shot, just barely visible to my eyes, and skipped harmlessly off of Scion's body to explode in midair. Chevalier, appearing from somewhere behind me, strode towards Scion, hefting his absolutely massive sword like it was made of sheet foil.

What? Where had *he* come from?

*Fwoosh* went the sound of a rocket as it meandered on a path towards our glowing, golden foe — Miss Militia, it had to be — and it impacted, exploding, obscuring him in smoke for a brief moment before Legend and Purity fired into the cloud moments before a blast of green light blew it all away. Scion's mangled body was already reforming, bodysuit now long gone, and he fired back, forcing the others to dodge where they could and defend where they couldn't.

As though to make up for Legend and Eidolon having to focus less on attacking, more beams and projectiles of varying kinds shot through the air, most of them shrugged off or ignored as they scored lines of differing severity into Scion's body.

I didn't dare to look away, even as I wondered where they were all coming from. Had they all been there during the shift phase, arriving even as the rest of us were moved? Or had Armsmaster called them in with Class S protocols and brought them over with him when he came himself?

Maybe this was even Piggot's doing. Her preparations for when everything went to shit.

It didn't matter how or why, what mattered was that they were *here*, even if they weren't doing more than superficial damage. This wasn't Gold Morning — and that was a good thing. We weren't

flinging everything we could at him in the spiteful hope that if something didn't stick, we'd at least give him a black eye. We weren't breaking ranks and scurrying away to pursue petty grudges or last minute pleasures.

But that might have also been a bad thing. As far as I could tell, from the powers I recognized, this was all a ragtag group of as many heroes as could be gathered on short notice. It was an army pitifully small compared to Khepri's, less than a hundred people, all told, compared to the thousands she'd held in thrall at her height.

It made it harder to press Scion, to make him feel threatened and persecuted. But it also made it all the heavier a blow every time we lost someone, doubly so when many of these people were celebrated local heroes in their hometowns.

*BOOM* went the echo of another cannonshot. *Fwoosh* was the hiss of another rocket. Scintillating lasers and eye-watering swirls of twisted space joined them. Scion handled them all, firing back, dismantling everything that came his way that even so much as remotely threatened him and contemptuously ignoring everything that wouldn't give him more than a scratch.

I should have been up there, too, I found myself thinking. But my options were extremely limited, and the others —

*Hang on.*

The others *weren't there*.

My eyes roved the battlefield, looking for any sign of Odysseus's conspicuous black-armored form or the streak of green that was Achilles or the trail of crackling lightning that was the Count of Monte Christo, but somewhere along the line, my teammates had vanished, retreated — because their time limits were running out and they were waiting for me to take the lead. Most of them were virtually useless against Scion without an Install, and running around in the open would've just gotten them killed.

It was going to be up to me to push things forward. It should have felt like a burden, but somehow, it felt like I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Up above, Scion had finally grown tired of the attacks, and he flung his arms wide again, in a gesture I recognized.

“Panacea — defense, now!”

It almost took too long for her to pull in the Install and jet forward, planting her shield into the grass as an invisible ripple radiated out from her at the same time as Scion's hands came together and another invisible wave rippled out from his palms.

Even then, she still wasn't quite fast enough. A handful of people dropped to the ground, rendered “stilled” by Scion's attack. Scion, seeing that most of us had survived, turned his attention to Amy's transformed body and *sarled*.

Did he think she was me?

I tackled Chevalier, the cape nearest to me, and dragged him behind the protection of Lord Camelot just in time to take shelter from a blast of golden light that splashed against its surface like rainwater and left motes that ate away at the grass. Revel, nearby, was not so lucky, and half of her body was simply *erased*.

A pang of loss echoed in my chest, the remnants of Khepri's own regrets. I had never gotten to know Revel, but the woman in my inherited memories was...maybe "friend" was too strong a word, but Khepri had cared for her all the same. Felt the pain of her loss, even as her mind was unraveling and friend and foe started to become harder to distinguish.

This couldn't keep going like this. Just firing at him willy-nilly until he managed to pick us all off was pointless.

"Dragon!" I shouted into my communicator. "The Simulacra —"

*"I've assumed direct control of all remaining Simulacra present,"* said Dragon.

"Stagger them!" I ordered her. "Introduce them one at a time from unexpected angles at random intervals!"

Another plan was percolating in my brain, this one an idea I'd toyed with vaguely but never codified into one of our contingencies because it ran a few risks I wasn't generally comfortable running.

I threw myself out from behind Lord Camelot, conscious that this was the second of Amy's batteries and we were starting to run low on those. This wasn't the time to hold back, anymore. Conserving my energy for the end was stupid if we didn't get there in the first place.

My metaphorical hands reached into the halls of legend —

*Install.*

And I pulled Karna into me, fully, this time.

Why not Gawain, again? Because it was too far past noon, or too close to noon for him to be at his best. To get the sort of enormous power he'd had before, I would've had to use the Veil of Light, and the amount of energy it would cost me rivaled Karna to begin with. If I was going to be using that much energy up and reduce my remaining Installs to a meager two or three, Karna just had more versatility in general.

The ornamented bow settled into my hands, again, and it felt more right, more proper, than it had when I was using it before. I pulled back on the bowstring and nocked a flaming arrow.

"Brahmastra Kundala!"

The flaming arrow flew, and it exploded in a blaze as it struck its target, obliterating a large chunk of Scion's body. The smoke cleared almost instantly, and Scion raced towards me, screaming furiously — remembering, no doubt, the Simulacra that had been destroyed in front of him, the funerary pyre of his counterpart's half-formed corpse, the flames that had eaten the bloated mountain of flesh at the bottom of Cauldron's compound.

I dodged, putting more distance between us, and I nocked more arrows one after the other, almost faster than I could even think of doing it, sending them searing into his body with the *fwump* of muffled explosions sucking in air to fuel the fire. Beams of light and twisting orbs of compressed space chased him as he chased me, nipping at his heels as he nipped at mine.

Time suddenly slowed, and he was immediately in front of me, swiping at me with his gold-covered fists, screaming all the while, snarling. Karna was faster than Atalanta, though, and I dodged, ducking under his arms and leaping up, firing another arrow almost point-blank into his face and blasting away most of the top half of his body.

He followed me, even as the damage filled in, pursuing doggedly, and the bow in my hand vanished to be replaced by a golden spear that ignited into flames. This, I cast directly into his chest, and then another, and another, and another again, annihilating as much of him as I could until only scraps remained.

Even still, that wasn't enough to stop him.

My feet landed with nimble grace, and I glanced back — *There*. A grim smile pulled at my lips. *Good job, Dragon.*

Scion chased me down, ignoring the attacks being pelted at his back, firing potshots as he came, so furious that he wasn't thinking straight as I dodged and countered and led him back. He only had eyes for me, because all he could think about in that moment was all of the pain I'd dealt him and how angry that made him.

Until, that was, I ducked behind one of the remaining Simulacra, dodging smoothly behind it and breaking line of sight for a single instant as his gaze was drawn to its familiar features.

For a moment, he stopped cold, stunned, like he'd forgotten that I'd pulled a trick like this before. And then he recoiled, and even as I moved out from behind it, he ignored me and my arrow in favor of obliterating the Simulacra with a horrified shout.

I spun out of the way and leapt further backwards as all the other attackers flung their powers at Scion while he was distracted, moving towards the opposite end of the field. Vijaya came up again and I took aim, centering myself on where I knew Scion's back would be, right over his heart.

"Bring the second one in, have it meet me halfway," I ordered, trusting that Dragon would hear me.

Another flaming arrow left my bowstring.

"Brahmastra Kundala!"

It struck and exploded with another *wbump*, expanding into a pillar of roiling fire that swiftly snuffed itself out. Even the embers burned down and vanished, smoldering in the grass but not igniting it.

I kept retreating, firing more arrows as blasts of all kinds came from the others. The presence of the approaching Simulacrum coming up from behind me was something I sensed more than anything else, and my lips pulled tight against my teeth.

Scion barreled out of the cloud of smoke, face twisted into a snarl, screaming even as his mouth reformed and his flesh filled back in. He flew towards me at speed, a streak of glaring golden light, and I redoubled my speed, leaping into the air as he came close and still firing yet more arrows to harry him and keep him focused on me.

Scion didn't let me go. He fired blasts at me as he closed the distance, and I batted them to the side with my hands as I switched back to the golden lance whose true form hid Karna's most powerful Noble Phantasm. The skin on the backs of my hands tingled from the strength of his attacks, like a particularly strong static shock, but Kavacha and Kundala blunted whatever damage they might have done down to virtually nothing, and I counterattacked by blowing fireballs from the palm of my hand as though they were bubbles.

He ignored them like they were gnats buzzing around his head, letting them hit and tear out fist-sized chunks from his chest and shoulders, and he followed me down as I hit the apex of my jump and fell back towards the ground. The moment I felt myself land, I pushed off again, flipping backwards — and over the next Simulacrum, which reached out for Scion like a woman welcoming her husband home.

Scion recoiled again, but it lasted only a split second, because almost instantly, he was upon the fake, ripping into it, screaming even louder than before. Chunks of silvery flesh went flying every which way. He tore it apart seemingly at random, taking a fistful of its face here, its shoulder there, its midsection next, without any apparent rhyme, reason, or pattern. Motes of golden light clung to whatever he pulled away, glittering and eating at whatever was left until it had all dissolved.

I used the time to back away a little, watching him, waiting to see his next move as I started to slowly angle myself towards the next one, the last one.

But Scion had no intention of letting me try it again. The moment he had reduced the Simulacrum to an unrecognizable mess, he turned, wide-eyed and wild-faced, searching, and then with a shout, he flung out an arm and fired off a wave of golden light that erased everything it touched as it chewed threw the intervening space — until, at the last, it consumed the final Simulacrum, destroying it utterly.

*Shit.*

He turned to me immediately afterwards, snarling, screaming, and in a flash, he was on me, attacking, grabbing for me with glowing golden hands. Karna took over, or his ingrained instincts did, because my body moved before I could even think of it, deflecting him with precise, practiced motions that couldn't be called anything other than expert martial arts.

They were different than Aífe's. More refined, although that was something of a misnomer. They flowed differently, like the basis of their understanding of what "martial arts" were was different. Karna's martial arts were built on an entirely different principle than the Western martial arts of the ancient Celts, and without Karna himself there to guide me, I think the incongruence might have made me mess up.

Instead, I sent Scion's attacks wide, pushing them away from my body without ever touching his hands themselves. The progression of his movements was as transparent as glass to me, and I could

tell where he was going to aim for next by the way his muscles — fake and simulated though they were — expanded and contracted.

There wasn't time to think of anything else. Scion's attacks grew faster and more ferocious, and as they did, the glow beneath his skin became brighter and brighter. It took all of my focus to track his movements and deflect them, and there was no room in my head to start planning counterattacks or how to get the plan back on track.

Suddenly, a sword sprouted from his chest and he stopped. No, not a sword, a thin shard of crystal in the shape of a sword, long and translucent, like it had been carved from an absolutely enormous gemstone. Scion looked down at it, perplexed, and I looked over his shoulder just in time to meet a pair of eyes behind a set of glasses.

And then an armored fist smashed into the pommel like a freight train and a gravelly voice called out a name.

Heaven's Wheel of Destruction  
“Bölværk Gram!”

I had no chance to dodge or get out of the way. Even Karna at his fastest wasn't fast enough to escape that Noble Phantasm before it went off.

That was probably what Armsmaster was counting on.

My arms came up reflexively to protect my head, and the wheel-like chakrams that floated around my shoulders swung around like shields — just in time for the sword in Scion's chest to ignite and explode with green light, obliterating Scion and sending me flying.

It was not a critical blow, nor a debilitating one. Karna's miraculous armor once more blunted even a Noble Phantasm as powerful as Gram, vastly reducing the damage it inflicted on my body. Even so, the blast *hurt*, ripping at my skin and bleeding through even so powerful a protection, and although I could keep going, the sting of the hit was almost enough to put me down for a minute or two.

Almost. It felt like a bad sunburn, only all over the front of my body, and I half expected to look down and find my entire front half peeling and raw. For a single instant, I regretted giving Armsmaster such complete information on the capabilities of my Heroic Spirits, because the only reason he would have tried something like that was if he knew I could come out the other side mostly unscathed.

That was another Noble Phantasm down. Sigurd had the advantage of his dragon's blood, and that would extend the number of times Armsmaster could use his Noble Phantasm, but even like that, there was a limit.

Panacea had used two, Tattletale had used one, Clockblocker had used one, now Armsmaster had used one, and Dad had gone through one of his charges even without using a Noble Phantasm. We were running out of time on their Installs, and that meant we were running down the clock on how long they could directly contribute to the fight.

I grimaced.

And to make matters worse, Scion had destroyed the last Simulacrum, by my count. Our options for creating that critical opening were dwindling just as quickly as my team's Installs. With enough time and mass, Panacea could mock up something — except there was no Rachel Lindt here to provide her an excess of organic mass to shape.

That idea I'd had before, it seemed like it was quickly becoming the only viable option.

To get there, though... Well, first, I was going to have to cheat like it was nobody's business and break some of my own rules.

As Scion finished reforming, I dropped Karna and picked up Aífe the instant he was gone, and I wasted no time pulling out her most costly and difficult Noble Phantasm, the one that could easily hike up her cost to match the likes of Karna and Gawain.

Great Valley of the Warrior Queen's Battlefield  
“ I n G l e n n M ó r ! ”

I spread my arms wide, and beneath my feet bloomed a field, a field of wild grass and windflowers. It stretched out, growing larger and larger rapidly, wiping away the plains around me and replacing them with another set of plains from another time, another place. The scars of the battle so far — washed away. The smoldering flames from Karna's attacks — gone. The craters from explosions, from Legend's lasers going awry, from Eidolon's blasts of twisted space veering off target, from any of the various other attacks by any of the other combatants — they were all wiped clean.

And in their place, lush grassland. Windflowers, wildflowers, flowers without names that had been extinct for nearly two thousand years. Rich, wild grass, so green that it almost glittered like emeralds, with blades so crisp they seemed newly grown. Hard-packed earth and stone, rugged and solid, beaten down by the steps of countless feet.

In the distance, the mountains encircling the original valley twisted into new shapes, forming jagged spires that reached into the clear blue sky.

And in my chest, something ached with nostalgia as Aífe saw her home for the first time in almost two millennia.

“Now, my braves warriors!” I bellowed out, Aífe guiding my tongue. “Now, my noble disciples! Your beloved teacher calls you back to this Earth from the Crown! Answer my call and come forth!”

Golden light blossomed. Golden light bloomed.

It was not Scion's.

As though drawn from the aether, as though sprouting up from the ground beneath them, as though they were rising up from the graves where they'd buried their blood, sweat, and tears so many centuries ago, an army grew from the soil. A dozen, a hundred, a thousand, many of them swathed in rugged robes and tightly bound leather armor, some of them dressed only in dull, red body paint,

and each of them bearing spears and shields and swords, they coalesced from golden dust into the form of men.

They were of all shapes and sizes. They were of all ages. Some were old men who had lived long lives without ever earning glory. Some were young boys who had died before their time, forgotten. Some were in the flush of their prime, as strong as they had ever been, having left behind great deeds that were praised throughout the land.

There was only one thing they all had in common. No, two things. They had all once been one of Aífe's students, and they all still revered her, even two thousand years later, even those whose legends had wound up eclipsing hers.

A young boy with a golden ring about his thumb and a wild-man with eyes of blood and a spear to match were among them.

For a single moment, there was silence and stillness, and then the gathered army roared and leapt into action, attacking Scion without pause or mercy. Scion attacked back, firing blasts at them and ignoring their weapons — until their weapons started warping space, twisting to follow him, until they began crackling with power and hitting far harder than they had any right to, until they burned and froze when they cut and sprouted deadly thorns and bled acid. Then, he focused on avoiding those weapons, counterattacking when he could, his entire attention taken by Aífe's army.

They wouldn't last long. Those who weren't wiped out by one of his blasts would fade almost immediately after using their Noble Phantasms, and those who weren't killed or didn't use up all of their energy in one go would disappear soon enough, because their time back upon this Earth in this long-gone land was already so very short.

It didn't matter. The army fighting wasn't the point. All I needed them to do was pin this land in place long enough to pull off my next trick.

I retreated away from the action, and then I gritted my teeth and braced myself for the pain to come.

*Set. Install.*

Pain.

My entire world became pain.

An instant became an eternity and an eternity became an instant, and for that scant second or so, all I knew was the agony of my body being ripped apart. My Hotswaps had gotten only marginally easier, and in that moment, that margin seemed so very narrow, indeed.

But once it was over, I was back to being Taylor Hebert.

*Here comes the riskiest part.*

I took a deep breath. In the distance, the fabric of the valley began to unravel, already destabilizing as Aífe's army continued to dwindle. Without Aífe, the entirety of its existence hinged upon those



warriors who had shared it and shared it still, and once they were gone, it would vanish just as quickly.

Loyalty of the Enthralled  
“Tyranny of the Queen.”

Madness pressed in against my thoughts, trying to rob me of my reason, trying to force me to *fight*, *fight*, *FIGHT*, and I pushed against it as best as I could as I called forth a handful of members of Khepri’s army and sent them about the necessary task. I put them out of my mind, focusing on them in the background with my new Multitasking skill, and turned myself instead towards the next parts of my plan.

My feet left the ground and my cape fluttered behind me as I took off into the air, angling myself for a good line of fire as I pulled out an ordinary small caliber pistol.

*Flechette.*

A magic bullet was loaded into the chamber, the same kind of bullet that had almost killed Alexandria over two years ago. Her power steadied my aim, pressed against my mind, bidding me to wait... wait... wait...

*Now!*

*Bang* went my little pistol, inaudible over the roar of the army still fighting. The magic bullet flew, zeroing in, closing towards my target — and Scion suddenly jukeed out of the way, letting it soar harmlessly past him and bite into the ground.

His instant win power. Whatever worked as his equivalent to Contessa’s power. So, even after having ascended, even transformed into a Noble Phantasm, he still recognized the power that even he had to rightly fear?

*Damn.*

My head throbbed as I grimaced. My thoughts felt disconnected, out of order, like they were a tangled web of threads stretching out from my brain in every direction, and they all ended at different lengths. The madness encroaching came ever closer, gnawing at the edges, and it was only a matter of time until I was little better than Khepri had been, at the end.

*Focus.*

I hadn’t been banking on Flechette’s power winning the day, just now. It was just one step in a plan.

Scion burst through the crowd of the army, making his way immediately towards me, snarling a wordless battlecry. I turned away from him and put on a spurt of speed, flying as fast as I could manage, and he followed just as I expected he would.

Blasts of golden light came my way, but I pulled on one of the nameless Yangban who had only ever been identified with a number and used her precognitive danger sense to avoid them as I flew.

When the time was right, I swerved to the side, swiftly switched to Legend's powers, and then I blinded Scion with a brief flash of light — just long enough to switch to Trickster and swap myself for the lump of misshapen flesh that Khepri's Panacea had been building.

An instant later, I pulled Legend back to the front and flew as fast as I could back towards the fight, and I arrived just in time to watch Scion discover another likeness of his counterpart and blast it apart with another horrified scream.

Scintillating lasers left my hands as I blasted him over and over, and the still living Legend blasted from the opposite direction as Aífe's remaining army clambered to reach us. They'd been reduced to less than half of their original numbers, either by their own actions or Scion's counterattacks, and as a result, the valley that they had once called home was being even further eroded.

It meant I was running out of time. I'd been counting on it to... to...

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to focus, honing my thoughts into razors to shred the encroaching madness.

Right. I'd been counting on it to *ease the burden* of Khepri's Noble Phantasm. Hers had no mitigating factors to keep the cost down, so once the valley was gone for good, the price for keeping any portion of it manifested would skyrocket and I would rapidly chew through my remaining allotted Installs.

Scion burst into motion, screaming, shouting, utterly furious, and he came at me at speed. I didn't even have time to turn before he was on me, and he had me by the throat, still screaming, still snarling, and I had a moment of strange *déjà vu*, like I'd been here before, like he'd had me at his mercy just like this, except I was pretty sure I —

My head suddenly cleared and the madness vanished, and I was so surprised that it stunned me for a moment until I realized what had happened: Khepri had taken the burden of the madness.

It wasn't completely gone. I could feel it, feel *her*, hovering at the edges, pressing in from all sides like the cloying air of the Locker, hungry to smother me beneath its weight, but it stayed there, stretching no further in, quiescent. Somehow, somehow, my alternate future self had drawn the madness of her Noble Phantasm into herself and cordoned her own mind away from mine.

I didn't know how. At that moment, I didn't care, except that she'd done me that kindness, giving me a clear shot towards my goal.

*Shadow Stalker.*

My body shifted, became like smoke as I used the power of my old tormentor, and I slipped out of Scion's grasp like sand through his fingers, wispy and intangible. My flight pack, transformed into the form of a cloak, pulled me back and out of his grip, and his fist closed without my flesh to offer any resistance.

Scion's gaze still found me as I reconstituted into solid form, and he screamed even louder as he swiftly charged up a golden beam to fire at me.

*Glaistig Uaine.*

Three phantoms rose around me, ghostly and insubstantial. One summoned a shield, a barrier, and it exploded on contact with his beam, reflecting the entirety of the attack back at him as the backlash bled over to me. The second pressed his hand against my shoulder and my injuries were immediately healed, reversed as though they had never been.

The third reached out and touched Scion, and instantly, he jerked back into place, and then his body was ripped apart by his own attack, flinging him backwards. He jerked back into place, and his body was ripped apart by his own attack, flinging him backwards. He jerked back into place.

The slightest flex of his own power shattered Gray Boy's loop, but I'd already put more distance between us, so I was ready as he came after me again, snarling, screaming, furious —

*Trickster.*

— and I swapped myself with another of the creations Khepri's Panacea had been putting together.

I watched with the Clairvoyant's omniscient perspective as he recoiled away, horrified, and blasted it to bits over and over and over again until nothing was left, screaming and retreating all the while. He didn't even seem to notice the other blasts from Legend, Eidolon, and Purity, nor Dauntless's spear ripping into him, or even the scant remaining warriors who were still clinging to existence, hanging on that little bit longer to keep fighting.

I noticed. It was hard not to, when I could see all of them and equally so the way the valley was starting to truly fall apart. It wouldn't last much longer, and that meant my own time limit was fast approaching. I had to accelerate things and move on to the final stages of the plan.

"Armsmaster," I whispered, and another cape's power carried my voice to his ear. "Prep the Longinus, get it ready to fire. I'm going to open him up for the final blow. Tell Dragon to ready her Seeds; she'll know when to use them."

Armsmaster, at some point having returned back to his natural form, gave me a terse nod to show he understood, and broke off from the rest of the combatants. There was nowhere truly safe, but he found a spot and pulled a panel off of the back of his armor, and it unfolded into a thin laptop. His fingers moved at positively blinding speed across the keyboard.

In the distance, at the edge of the enfolded reality that was In Glenn Mór, the mountains that stood in the real world crumbled and cracked open. In the in-between space where the real world met the valley, the barrel of an absolutely enormous cannon glinted faintly, barely visible from so far away, but utterly menacing in its sheer vastness.

By the time I had flown back to the fight, Clockblocker and Tattletale had rejoined the fray, the former making strafing runs at Scion with Achilles' chariot and the latter firing blasts of menacing black energy as she zipped back and forth so quickly she was little more than a blur. Dad had rejoined them as well, firing beams of purer white light from further afar, flying in formation with Legend and Eidolon as they married their own attacks to whatever openings they could find between the others'.

Scion screamed and fired back, faster and more ferocious than before, but they splashed off of Clockblocker like they were nothing, and Tattletale was still far too fast to be caught out so easily.

But it was easy to see how hard they were pushing, how much more effort they had to expend to keep fighting at that level. At that rate, they'd chew through their remaining charges — both of them — in less than a minute. Dad, ironically, was the best off of the three of them.

The attacks from other heroes had petered off. Some, I knew, had been picked off and killed, erased like smudges on a masterpiece, but others perhaps had sensed that they were far out of their league and had no place trying to wedge themselves into this fight. There would be an accounting when all of this was done, and I would have to carry the weight of those who had died to make this whole thing work.

*Trickster.*

Clockblocker swerved around for another run, his chariot charging straight at Scion — and then, instantly, mere moments before he would have hit, he was swapped with the third mass of misshapen meat sculpted into the form of Scion's counterpart. It flopped onto him, draping its arms over his shoulders, its head of too-long hair smacking against his chin as the rest of it sagged down towards the ground.

Scion screamed and flung it away, blasting it out of the air with an absolutely massive beam that swallowed it whole and simply deleted it from existence. He spun around, looking for whoever had thrown it at him, whoever had tried to attack him with his counterpart's likeness again —

*Oliver.*

And he came face to face with me.

He froze. In the background, so did everyone else, hovering, now that I was in the line of fire, again. Scion's expression twisted into disbelief, and then became wonder, and I had to keep myself firm and my expression straight as he reached out to cup my cheek with the same tenderness and longing he had my first Simulacrum at the beginning of all of this.

To sell the illusion, I closed the distance just a little bit more and reached out to cup the hands touching my face, imagining Brian — imagining *Dennis* in his place instead. I drew upon the memory of private moments alone, of affection and companionship, and I looked into his face, hoping I was conveying those very things that would sell this illusion all the more. Scion didn't even seem to notice the deception.

He was hooked.

The last of Aífe's warriors had faded away, and the false reality of In Glenn Mór fell away to reveal the real valley that had been hidden beneath it. The drain of maintaining Khepri's Noble Phantasm suddenly skyrocketed, and I knew this was it, that there was no better time, no better chance than now.

My grip on Scion's hands tightened.

“Now.”

The squelch of pierced flesh was like thunder, it was so close. Three Seeds flew straight, flew true, and two struck Scion’s shoulders as the third sunk into his lower back near the base of his spine. Scion gasped, eyes wide, surprised, uncomprehending, and his back arched the way a human’s might when stabbed from behind.

In the distance, the barrel of the Longinus glowed as it completed its charging sequence.

I swapped so fast that it almost felt like I’d torn the skin off of my chest, and in an instant, as Oliver’s power fell away and Medusa’s swelled to fill its place, I whispered the words that doomed him.

Self Seal Dark Temple  
“Breaker Gorgon.”

And as he was ensnared in the illusion of his worst moment, faced with the reality that his partner was forever gone and he was truly alone, I let go and fell away towards the ground below. Scion remained where he was, trapped, frozen in the motion of cradling a body that wasn’t there.

“Fire.”

He disappeared under a torrent of bright light, light so bright it had no color at all, and it slipped through the portal of his avatar to scour the landscape of his true body beyond, terminating suddenly in the air where it disappeared into another reality. There was no way for me to see it, not from my place, not without the Clairvoyant there to give me sight beyond sight, but I could imagine a sea of glittering glass fragments evaporating beneath the harsh glow of the Longinus’s shot, and I knew it was over.

The blast from the cannon thinned, narrowed, and petered out, and it left behind not a trace, no sign of the golden man who had heralded the beginning of this age of parahumans, who had spoken only a scant handful of words in thirty years, and who everyone had so long believed to be the pinnacle of heroism. He was gone, and he didn’t return.

Just like that, the greatest threat to human survival that mankind had ever faced...died because he was just too human himself.