

Pyrite 11.8

A flash of light. The ruinous force of a thunderous explosion. In an instant, like the detonation of a bomb, the corpse of the Other's avatar and Scion's both exploded and I was thrown back, to land upon another mound of flesh. Something hot, wet, and slimy was stuck to my cheek, and when I wiped it away, a small hunk of gray meat flopped to the ground, charred almost completely black.

Eidolon floated down beside me, hands akimbo and shoulders halfway tensed. "That can't be it."

If only it could be.

"No," I agreed, "but it might give us the opening we need."

Scion's body reformed in a scant few seconds, and he clutched to his chest the scattered remnants of the avatar's corpse. He didn't sob or cry and his shoulders weren't shaking, nothing so cliché or quite so human, but he was curled inward around the little remains he had left, stationary, motionless, and the glow beneath his skin was dimmer than I could ever remember seeing it.

It wasn't quite the same as Khepri's memory of the final blow, but maybe it didn't have to be. He just needed to be vulnerable enough that he wouldn't resist when that final blow came.

I wasn't sure I was going to get a better moment. My Simulacra were designed to hit at his only real weak spot, but they were only that: facsimiles of the original. Wouldn't the original being destroyed in front of him hit harder than anything I might do with the Simulacra?

I hesitated only for a moment.

The Longinus was too much to put through more than simulated firings, so we hadn't ever been completely sure that it could reliably fire through a Door. Too much work and too many fiddly bits meant that we hadn't been able to risk the barrel or any of the other parts deteriorating after the first shot. All our best guesses, however, showed that it should be able to, so even if the conditions weren't the ideal we'd eventually settled on, there was nothing to say it wouldn't work.

Dragon had made fifteen Seeds so we could be sure we had enough. Only one was strictly necessary, but the more Scion was pinned with, the stronger the guarantee of them working. I had three on me in my Breaker form; the rest were backups stored in various locations. The others were carrying some of those around, just in case.

My mind was already made up. While I'd been rationalizing it, my hands had already started moving, and I dropped Gawain as I reached for the pouches hanging from my belt on either side. From one, I drew a long, thin, blade-like tube. It terminated in a barbed point, and as I hefted it, it whirred and clicked and transformed in my hand, panels sliding back to make it more aerodynamic as it adjusted its targeting data to accommodate the atmospheric conditions.

Tinkers really were such bullshit.

I took aim — more difficult, through the haze of smoke and fire that surrounded us — and with the other hand, I lifted my crown off of my head so that the Clairvoyant could see me and create the Door I needed.

As though he'd read my mind, Eidolon gestured, and a tunnel of clear air opened between me and Scion, giving me a straight shot.

I took a breath, centered myself, and *threw*. The Seed shot through the open tunnel like a rocket, on course to strike its target square in the chest.

“Door to —”

Scion's hand snapped up and caught the Seed, and he turned to look at it with wide, furious eyes. His hand trembled, and then he crushed it as though it was made of cheap plastic.

Shit.

His eyes turned from the Seed and found me next, and his lips curled into a snarl.

He recognized me.

Double shit.

My body moved before I could even think about what came next, and it was half instinct that had me tackling Eidolon out of the way as I reached for the Illusionism skill I'd practiced on the Nine to make Scion think I'd leapt the other way, instead.

We tumbled amongst the mounds of flesh, narrowly missing a spot that was still aflame, and it jiggled beneath us as we landed together, me lying awkwardly atop him, one of his knees digging into my stomach, with his cloak sprawled out beneath us.

“What —”

I slapped a hand over the mouth of his mask, only belatedly realizing the futility of it, and hissed at him. “Shh!”

For some reason, he decided to listen and immediately clamped up.

I chanced a look over my shoulder. It was hard to see through the smoke and the smog, but Scion picked up a dangling half-formed body, thinking it was me, and held it aloft by the neck. For a moment, he looked as though he wanted to snap its spine, end it right then and there.

Instead, he paused, as though searching for something, and between one blink and the next, they both vanished.

Fuck.

I hadn't tested Illusionism across the boundaries between realities, there was no way it would hold up — fuck, that wasn't the important part. There were only a handful of places he could have gone, none of them good.

Scrambling to my feet, the mass beneath me flopping and jiggling like the world's most demented water bed, I reached up for my communicator and thumbed it on.

"Tattletale, I've lost sight of Scion," I said hurriedly. "Can you give me a position?"

Lisa's voice crackled in my ear.

"Hang on, we're recalibrating, should have a location for you in — fuck!"

"Tattletale?"

"Fuck, he's here! Brockton Bay! Fuck, fuck, fuck, Dragon, quick, deploy the —"

And right then, it cut off.

"Tattletale?"

Nothing. Silence.

My heart skipped a beat. A familiar dread curled up in my stomach. Scion had decided to punch back not by going after me directly, but by destroying the things *I* cared about, too.

Had he learned that from *me*? Had I, in the act of trying to make him vulnerable by punishing his psychological weakness, inadvertently taught him cruelty? Last time, it had been Jack Slash who had spurred him into action, who had made him turn to mass murder and torture, and this time —

No. There was no time to waste. Panic later, act now, get your shit together and *move*.

"Door —"

"— to Brockton Bay!" Eidolon shouted, a step ahead of me.

Had he been using his wind control to eavesdrop? Not important.

A silvery pane of light described itself in the air in front of us, and I sprinted for it at full tilt, Eidolon flying fast on my heels. I jammed my crown back onto my head almost as an afterthought.

What was waiting for us on the other side of that Door...was not Brockton Bay.

For it to have been Brockton Bay would have required there was still a city to own the label. What we came upon as we stepped through the Door was not a city, it was a smoking ruin, a crater carved into the ground, perfectly spherical, as though the hand of God had reached down and gouged it away with molecular precision. The road we stood on just abruptly ended twenty feet ahead, shorn cleanly, and everything was gone between one building and the next as though it had been destroyed along property lines that marked the edge of the city's official limits.

For a moment, I stopped and was...numb was the only word I had. Numb disbelief. Maybe muted horror worked, too. Everything in my chest was cold and unfeeling, like I'd swallowed an ice cube and this was the aftermath.

The numbness quickly gave way to a terrible mix of despair, pain, and anger, like I was a balloon filling up with too much hot air and any second I would explode. My knees shook and threatened to give out. My pulse thundered in my ears. I couldn't decide whether the churning in my stomach made me want to puke or scream myself hoarse. The entire world fell apart around me, and for the first time in since the Locker, I felt completely and utterly alone.

It was all gone. Everything I cared about, everybody I loved, all of my friends, the little family I had left, everyone who had ever meant anything to me —

"I'm...sorry," said Eidolon awkwardly.

I rounded on him, venom on my tongue, ready to eviscerate him, shout, curse, tear at each of his fears and insecurities, until he understood some base modicum of the agony surging through my veins like blades, but somehow, I managed to swallow it and keep from ripping his head off — figuratively or literally. What the fuck good was sorry worth in a situation like this? I'd just lost *everything*.

Melanie — Colin — Missy — Dad — Amy — Lisa — Dennis — how small the list of people I cared about was, and they were all gone.

Somehow, I managed to wrest control of the hurricane whipping through my body and hone my mind back into something resembling focus.

Wallowing wouldn't do any good, and neither would tearing into Eidolon, even if it might have made me feel better for a few short moments. It wouldn't bring them back, it wouldn't undo any of this, and it wouldn't keep it from happening again.

Because this was just the beginning. *I* had set Scion on this path. Not intentionally, no, but I'd done it just the same. He'd had his revenge, now, and even if I managed to win, even if I managed to beat him, I'd already lost in the most important way.

So the only thing left to do was to make sure I at least took him down with me.

I'd like to say it was altruism, the high-minded idealism to keep him from making anyone else feel like I did, just then, but really, all I wanted to do was take my pain out on the nearest acceptable target, and there was really only the one available.

A flash of light played off of Eidolon's costume, little more than a glint compared to the midday sun, and I whirled around and looked up, half expecting Scion to be bearing down on us, hands glowing. But it wasn't Scion, because as I found him up in the air, something was up there with him, firing beams of searing light at him and darting around to avoid the retaliatory blasts.

My first thought was Legend. He was the fastest cape on record, and the quintessential Blaster, besides. But the colors were all wrong, because the person up there, fighting back, was covered from head to toe in sleek, black armor. A cloak whipped about behind him.

My stomach flip-flopped. Something like hope bloomed in my chest.

“Dad?”

Another figure tore into the sky like a rocket, trailing a dark, green coat and a tail of blackish energy. I could barely make out crackles of darkly colored electricity and strands of pale, flyaway hair beneath a hat — the trademark features of Edmond Dantès, the Count of Monte Cristo.

So that she could never be trapped again, I’d given that Heroic Spirit to —

“Tattletale!”

And the hulking mass of gleaming metal, shaped vaguely like a human but four or five times the size, complete with a pair of stubbed wings on the back that jettisoned glowing dust-like particles, a long, segmented tail, and a head crowned with horns, that could only be Dragon herself.

A heavy, cross-shaped shield landed on the pavement in front of me, and with a grunt, a woman in dark armor touched down beside it. A moment later, the shield dissolved, and the figure of the woman shifted into a familiar girl with mousy brown hair, wearing only half of her costume, like she’d been in a rush to put it on and hadn’t had time to do all of it.

“You’re all okay,” I breathed.

“For a value of the word,” Amy grouched. She rolled her shoulder like it had actually been a chore to carry around Lord Camelot. “Clockblocker is taking a breather. We doubled up on defenses when Scion decided to drop by, used it as cover for Dragon to turn on that camouflage system of yours. Totally hax, by the way. Not that I’m complaining.”

Dragon...

I turned back to the crater, reexamined it more critically, with that in mind.

Of course. Not that it was impossible for Scion to do it, but the cut was too precise, and that was because the illusion of the crater ended where the territory encompassed by the castle did. I had no delusions that Castle Avalon, even with all of its defenses, would have stood up to a concentrated effort from Scion to destroy the city.

But Scion had only been trying to destroy the *city*. Not an entire world in miniature, bounded within the Akhilleus Kosmos.

The air buzzed, and when I looked back up, Lisa had multiplied as she moved so swiftly it was almost like she was in a dozen places at once. Beams of scintillating black light lanced out from her hands, and Scion, trying to fire back, was too slow to catch her. Her beams carved into him, gouging away chunks of flesh, and his passed through her — she was moving so quickly that it looked like she was leaving an image behind to take the hit.

“Enfer Chateau d’If,” I muttered as Amy stepped closer to me. “That’s another Noble Phantasm.”

“Plan A looks like it’s shot,” she said, a thread of worry in her voice.

“For the most part,” I agreed. “We’re not done yet, though.” I turned to her. “We’re moving to Contingency A-113.”

Scion was still conserving energy as much as he possibly could. That meant he was avoiding anything particularly draining or strenuous, and that meant he wasn’t using his most powerful abilities. There was no way that could last, though, not if we started throwing Noble Phantasms at him with any regularity.

And since each of my teammates mostly had only three shots with those...

“Are we even sure that one will work?” Amy asked. “We couldn’t exactly test that system on *him*, after all.”

“He’s not an Endbringer,” I answered. “His body’s close enough to human that he’s really more like a cape than anything else. It should work.” *Probably*. “We can’t have the battle here, either way. Not with so many bystanders —”

A bright, blue beam shot through the sky, and Scion turned away from Lisa long enough to fire back and unravel it. But the blue beam, instead of simply dissipating, split into at least a dozen smaller beams that curved and reoriented, homing in on his body. A blistering ray of black distracted him long enough for them all to hit, carving out baseball sized hunks of his flesh and cauterizing the wounds.

A figure in a blue and white costume followed up behind them, muscular, fit, with patterns of flame and electricity up and down his bodysuit.

Legend.

I gave Amy a little push, somewhat harder than I meant to. “Go. Get back inside and tell Armsmaster we’re moving to A-113. He needs to shift us all to the Longinus so we can put Scion directly in the line of fire. Serial shift, starting with Scion himself. Tell him to send the rest of the Simulacra, too.”

“Got it.”

She turned and took off at a sprint, and once she hit the line marking the edge of the crater, she vanished into the castle.

No communications in or out. The downside of the castle’s camouflage system: it made you completely invisible to any form of detection, from sound waves to radio waves to infrared, but that also meant that none of those things were allowed out through the illusion. It would defeat the point.

I spun back towards Eidolon. “Eidolon —”

But Eidolon had already taken to the sky without a word, lifting up to join the fight with Legend. A moment after, the figure of Dantès dropped out of the sky and landed a short way away from me, and a few seconds later, the crackling black lightning peeled away and the flickering, flame-like cloak dissolved to reveal Lisa, dressed only in a skintight catsuit and a haphazardly applied domino mask. She even only had one boot on.

“Damn,” said Lisa, looking down at the ring on her finger. One of the gemstones was dark. “Thought I had more time than that.”

She looked at me and grinned. “Heya, Chief. Sorry I cut you off earlier, things got a little —”

I hugged her. Tight, sudden, and without warning, held her just long enough to reassure myself that she was there, breathing, *alive*, and then let her go. She blinked.

“Contingency A-113,” I told her as though nothing had happened. “Rest up, take a minute, let Legend and Eidolon handle the fight for a little while. You’ll need as much energy as you can get, soon.”

“Right. Gotcha.”

With the message relayed, I turned my attention back up to the fight to see Eidolon and Legend weaving in and out through Scion’s blasts, sans Dad, who must have retreated at some point as his time ran low. They flung their own attacks back — Eidolon with hard-hitting attacks that Scion had to focus on, and Legend with searing, sizzling lasers that hit while Scion was preoccupied with Eidolon. They tag-teamed him with expert ease, falling into patterns of attack, counterattack, dodging and defense, and although it had to have been years since they were on the same team, they fit together so neatly that it looked like they had spent all of that time side by side.

It made me feel a little useless, watching them. It was true that most of my Heroic Spirits — the ones I used with any regularity, anyway — were impressive enough that they could have been said to stand on level with the Triumvirate. Most of them, however, didn’t have any particular ability to fly, so I couldn’t go up and join them.

Didn’t mean there wasn’t anything I could do.

Without any convenient rocks on hand, however, I was going to have to get creative. Fortunately, there was a whole lot of decently solid material right beneath my feet.

I knelt down on the road, flattened my fingers into a stiff knife-hand, and with as much strength as I could muster, I thrust down into the asphalt. Small chunks flew off, but it was the larger chunks I needed, so I scooped up a fist-sized hunk —

Fuck fuck fuck, owowowowowow!

— and tried not to let on the fact that it felt like I’d just broken every single one of my fingers.

“Holy shit,” said Lisa. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“The line between insanity and genius is measured by success,” I managed to grit out when all I wanted to do was scream.

Lining up my shot, I pulled my arm back, wound up, and focused all of my strength behind that hunk of asphalt. This wasn’t my preferred way of doing this, in part because it was easier to control a punch than a projectile, but the execution was similar enough that it shouldn’t make a difference.

I waited for a lull in the fighting, a moment where Eidolon was retreating and Scion was turned away, towards Legend, and then I flung my arm forward, let loose that hunk of asphalt —

“Thunder Feat.”

It streaked through the air like a rocket, and the rumble of its passing was intense enough to almost throw Lisa off her feet. Even to my eyes, the moment of it leaving my hand and landing home were so close they almost seemed to overlap.

The hunk struck Scion like a bomb, and it ripped apart his chest in much the same way my punch had earlier, and after obliterating a good portion of his body, it continued on up into the sky as white hot bits that eventually burned up into nothing from the friction of the air. If a blow like that had landed on the ground, there was no doubt it would have ripped apart whatever was behind him.

The same moment Scion turned to look at me, I pulled in Atalanta, one of my more cost effective Heroic Spirits, and materialized her bow. He didn't have time to give me any more attention than that, however; the instant his eyes narrowed on my form and my transformation, Eidolon flung another ball of distorted spacetime at him, and as he unraveled that with another scintillating blast of golden light, an equally bright beam struck him from Legend, searing away the flesh that had only barely started to fill back in. For an extra punch, I drew back on Tauropolos and shot an arrow at him, one he easily destroyed. His follow-up blast was one I dodged equally as easily.

Hitting him had never been the point, though.

The moment of focus he gave me left him open again, and as I landed again and nocked another arrow, Eidolon hit him with one of those concentric blasts of green light. I felt the backlash from it even from down on the ground.

Scion had barely recovered before he flickered and vanished — and suddenly, he was right in front of me, reaching for my neck with hands wreathed in golden light. The moment seemed to hang as I pushed myself into my fastest dodge, bending backwards and somehow still keeping my bow fully drawn.

This close, there was no way for me to miss, and my arrow, as strong as a tank shell, hit his head and bounced off.

A feat of acrobatics that would probably have wowed any Olympic judge saw me roll over my shoulder and throw myself back thirty feet in a second. I was still midair when I drew back and fired another arrow that did absolutely nothing to him. Lisa, forgotten behind him, ducked away and out of sight, like she wasn't even important enough to warrant the attention required to smite her.

Small mercies.

I landed and threw myself further back, firing over and over again as he slowly advanced. As he swatted my arrows away with contemptuous ease, my mind replayed the moment of his teleportation, and I realized he hadn't actually teleported at all. No, he'd become a blur, moving faster than he'd shown so far, fast enough that he'd come uncomfortably close to grabbing me.

Time dilation. So he'd started using my own tricks against me, had he?

A beam of blue light struck Scion from on high, and he turned towards it long enough to block it with a pane of golden light that sent it scattering as motes around him like rain off an umbrella. Ignoring me, he turned his attention back to Legend, and in an instant, he'd become a blur again, streaking into place behind Legend.

A warning was on the tip of my tongue as I turned my own aim towards him, but Legend dissolved into light and vanished before the fatal blow could complete, and another explosion of green overtook Scion in the same instant. For a brief second, I lost sight of him.

When I could see him again, he had fully recovered from whatever damage he had taken, and his arms were held akimbo as the glow beneath his skin grew brighter and brighter, forming a shell around his body. I realized his intent only a moment later.

“Shit!”

My bow tracked him — uselessly, because there was nothing I could do that would hurt him at all, and there was no time to pick out another Heroic Spirit and switch. By the time I had my next Install completed, it would be over already.

Across from him, Eidolon gathered up his own ball of twisted space, making it larger and denser until the point at the center was so black it sucked in light. Next to him, Legend had reformed and was firing beam after beam at Scion, to no avail, because they all struck the shell of golden light and splashed off uselessly. Some of them shed embers, some of them shed flakes of frost, and some of them seemed to be trying to bore through it like a drill, but Scion ignored them all and was unmoved.

It had become a contest of who powered up their attack first.

Until, that is, a spiraling helix of white light shot across the sky and carved its way into Scion's bubble. It cut through the shell, a concentrated pair of beams brighter and more intense than even Legend's had been, and though it was greatly diminished by the time it broke through, it *did* break through, boring a hole through Scion's torso, and distracting him for the crucial moment it took for Eidolon to finish and fling his attack.

Scion had no intention of being hit with it, though. The shell flowed down into a point, and then that point jettied off as a ball and collided with Eidolon's sphere. They twisted together, smearing all colors of light through the outer edges of the twisted space, and then what I could only imagine was the singularity at the center...evaporated, for lack of a better word.

At the same moment, Scion fired back at the person who had blasted him with that helical beam — had to be Purity, although how she'd made it here from wherever she'd been, I had no idea — and I tracked it towards a vague blob of white light just as intense as the beam had been.

Definitely Purity.

She defended herself with a much smaller, weaker counter, already retreating. Scion might have tried to pursue, but Eidolon and Legend went back on the offense, pulling his attention back onto themselves.

BANG

The thunderous crack of a high-powered rifle echoed, and an anti-materiel round not dissimilar from the one that had come far closer to killing me than I liked to think about slammed into Scion's torso, to no real effect. The flattened disk fell to the ground, completely ignored.

I didn't turn to look, but Atalanta's instincts and understanding of projectile motion gave me a general idea of where Miss Militia had settled.

A crackling, glowing lance, however, that speared through the air and pierced his chest was not as easily shrugged off. The jolt of the electricity that seemed to make it up sent Scion's body into involuntary spasms as it raced up his simulated nerves and through his nervous system, and it withdrew just in time for another, much smaller and weaker sphere of twisted space to land.

Dauntless rose into the sky to join Legend and Eidolon, his crackling lance held in one hand and his shield attached to the other. Even his armor now glowed, like it was lit from within, and he flew faster than I remembered him capable of, although not nearly as fast as Alexandria or Legend could.

People had been saying that he would one day become as strong as the Triumvirate, although the Dauntless of Khepri's timeline hadn't survived to see that potential realized. Here and now, it seemed that it was more or less true.

If there was anyone else waiting in the wings, they didn't show. Probably for the better, because there weren't many capes who could stand and fight on this level, and more people would just mean more bodies when Scion decided to escalate.

Up in the air, the battle continued. Purity hung back and out of the way, keeping herself at enough of a distance that she could see any counterattacks coming well in advance. I couldn't blame her conservative fighting, here, because she was easily the squishiest of the combatants up there. Instead, she interspersed quick, narrow beams whenever she saw an opening

CRACK

Miss Militia and I did much the same from on the ground, even though our attacks did even less than Purity's. Dragon did strafing runs whenever she saw an opening that no one else took advantage of, but she seemed to be trying to preserve her ammo, or maybe her energy, and she didn't engage quite as readily. The real heavy hitters just then were Dauntless, Legend, and Eidolon, and they kept Scion preoccupied and too busy to focus on anyone else. He wasn't on the defensive, exactly, but as he was, he couldn't spare the time and the attention to attack our weaker links.

I wanted to be up there with them, in the thick of it, actually doing something meaningful, but this wasn't the main event. This was just a delaying action, a way of buying for time while we waited for Armsmaster to put our ploy into play —

The towering walls of Castle Avalon suddenly shimmered into existence, and the city that stretched out within it did, too. In the distance, the castle itself stood tall and unbowed, completely undamaged.

Scion froze, stunned, as he bore witness to the city he thought he'd destroyed, whole and unscathed. I could only imagine what must have been going through his metaphorical head, but in mine, I felt a thread of triumph that we'd managed to pull the wool over his eyes as I dropped Atalanta again and prepared for what was coming.

I didn't have to wait long. The instant the crater became a castle, my earpiece crackled with Armsmaster's voice.

“— *Shift in three.*”

The surprise gave way to rage. Scion snarled and batted aside every attack that came his way, and the ones he couldn't just defend against, he let hit his body and ravage it unchecked. He was too focused on the fact that he'd been fooled, on the fact that his ultimate act of revenge hadn't even worked and it had all been nothing more than a trick.

“— *two.*”

He gathered up another sphere, and it swiftly bloomed and grew in size as he took aim at the city again. He seemed determined to see it destroyed, no matter what it took, and I started to move as I tentatively reached out to Achilles; better for me to use it than for Dennis to spend another charge defending the city *again*.

It turned out to not be necessary.

“— *one.*”

Because between one blink and the next, Scion's body blurred, then vanished.

He'd been successfully shifted.

One by one, around me, the others did, too. First Eidolon, then Legend, then Dauntless, then Purity, and one after another, they all disappeared in rapid succession.

And then it was my turn, and I turned to take one last look at the castle and the city it defended before my view shimmered and I was shifted from Earth Bet to another world.

This was it. One way or another, we were putting an end to this.