

Pyrite 11.6

The words hung in the air for a pregnant moment. Eidolon...didn't seem to comprehend them, at first, as though Scion had spit out a curse in some foreign language and he wasn't sure what it meant. Even I only understood what it was that had been said because of knowledge I shouldn't have of a time and a battle that had never happened here.

But it didn't take long for it to start to dawn on him. I'd never understood how easily these words had disabled him before, because they seemed completely out of left field, disconnected from anything resembling a complete thought, but somehow, they penetrated, and those four, simple words told Eidolon the one thing that could cripple him and destroy utterly his will to fight.

He was responsible for the Endbringers.

I suppose it didn't really matter whether they were true or not. The Lisa of that world had only been about sixty percent sure — little better than a coin toss, in the end, that decided whether Eidolon had unknowingly woken the creatures that routinely destroyed cities — and the answer itself was impossible to know with absolute certainty when you considered the Simurgh was so adept at mind games and might just have planned it all out from the beginning, including the others' erratic behavior after Eidolon died.

What mattered was that *Eidolon* believed it. That, true or not, it meant something to him and he didn't dismiss the idea out of hand. That it struck at the most terrible, insidious doubt he held.

For a man who had given his all, who had put everything he was into being a hero, forsaking the comforts of a normal life, sheering away the idea of romantic companionship, denying himself all of the little humanities that could possibly distract him from that singular purpose, the idea that he had failed in so spectacular a fashion and hadn't even known it would be the worst fate imaginable.

When I looked at it like that, it wasn't so hard to believe that it would give me pause, too.

And Eidolon's hand fell. The attack he'd been preparing petered out. His shoulders sunk into a slump, his head dropped forward. Just like the Eidolon of Khepri's time, he had been defeated. He was giving up.

Scion's hand now rose. The glow underneath the skin of his palm intensified and solidified, like a glove of light that he'd just put on. With Eidolon already dealt a fatal blow, this would merely do to the flesh what had already been done to the mind.

The difference between Khepri's timeline and mine, however? We were not on some far-flung alternate world, him bereft of allies but for the tenuous aid of the Faerie Queen. I was not listening helplessly, unable to do anything and too weak to affect the outcome even if I'd been placed to do so. Alexandria was not elsewhere, left behind as Eidolon and Glaistig Uaine chased Scion through parallel Earths.

And if there was one thing Alexandria and I could agree on right then, despite our differences, it was that we weren't going to let Eidolon die that easily.

Alexandria streaked forward like a missile, the air around her howling as she shattered the sound barrier. I came at it from the other side, almost perpendicular to her flight path. She slammed into him with the strength of a mountain, inevitable, inexorable, unstoppable, ripping his arm off of his shoulder like it was made of wet tissue, and I dove around them, felt the world shake with her passing, as I pulled Eidolon back and interposed myself between him and Scion.

The inability to teleport was a handicap I hadn't realized would be so difficult to manage until I had so drastic a need for it.

“Wake up, you useless fool!” I snapped over my shoulder, a little too much of Medea bleeding into my voice.

Eidolon didn't respond, and I didn't have time to think on it too hard, because Scion fired a blast in our direction without even the slightest gesture. There wasn't time to focus on anything else — I threw up three barriers to block it, instead of the singular pane of light that he had already proven he could destroy with relative ease. It slammed into them like a hammer blow, heavy, powerful, with a ponderous weight behind it.

The first two still cracked and shattered like cheap glass. The third held only barely.

Scion prepared to fire again, but Alexandria swooped back in from behind him and took hold of his other arm, even as the one she tore off before finished reforming, and she tore this one off, too, discarding it onto the pile of gray flesh below us. Scion grunted, but it was evident he was more annoyed than hurt. He took a moment to shoot her with a blast, sending her soaring back and out of the way.

I took the opening and sprinted off with it.

“Μάχηα Έκάτηα Γραεα!”

Beams of light blossomed and fired around me, all aimed in a narrow cone at the false body of Scion's projection. They scored gouges into his body, carving away great chunks with effortless ease, burning through his arms, his legs, his hips, his torso, even his carefully sculpted face, and I had already seared through him over a dozen times before he caught up and started firing back, negating my beams with beams of his own.

The cold, clinical part of me noted he was still having difficulty matching me. I had no idea how quickly his thoughts moved, the speed of his reaction time, if he could dilate time the way Medea could, or whether the simulated brain of his projection slowed things down at all. At the very least, however, his precognitive powers still seemed to be struggling to get a read on me.

I poured more power into my spell and kept firing with larger and larger beams, carving away more and more flesh as they went through him and continued into the gray mass below us. Finally, Scion seemed to grow fed up; he stopped firing back and instead drew his beams out into a solid wall, an enormous pane of golden light that stretched a good twenty feet across and fifteen high.

And then it shot towards us, growing larger and wider as it did.

Shit!

Time dilated again, and the wall of golden light slowed to a crawl as I pushed myself backwards and grabbed Eidolon — none too gently, because ironically, I didn't have time to be careful. I yanked him down with me as the wall approached, and even moving in slow motion, it loomed at speed, quickly reaching a size that it would likely tear a huge chunk out of the building.

Double shit!

We needed the building intact far more than he did. It falling on him or his counterpart's corpse would do not much of anything at all, except maybe pissing him off, but even if Alexandria could survive the whole thing coming down on her head, it wasn't a guarantee that she could make it out before needing to take a breath — the only real weakness she still had left.

My body turned even as we kept going, and I swept out an arm at the empty space that wall would shoot through. The sound of my incantation leaving my mouth came out slurred and stretched, like it was moving through water, but the barriers I called up still formed like normal, three layers deep.

The wall carved through them as though they didn't even exist.

Time snapped back to its proper flow, and Eidolon and I rocketed towards the ground as the wall of golden light soared into the distance, where it would crash into the ceiling. I managed to pull Eidolon against myself and cushion him with my own body — a comical thing, when he was easily half a foot or more taller than I was, right then, and something like twice as heavy — but I slowed us to a stop before we could hit.

Not slow enough. Eidolon's momentum crashed into me, drove the breath from my lungs, and broke my concentration. We fell the last five feet or so and landed on a cushion of the Other's flesh.

With a groan, I pushed him off of me and to the side.

“You waste of human flesh!” I spat, and this time it was definitely more Medea than me. I couldn't bring myself to care about reining in her tongue, just then. “What kind of man, *hero* are you, Eidolon? You're going to be defeated that easily again? Thirty years of heroism, undone in a single sentence?”

With a grunt, I threw up a hand, and more barriers formed between us and Scion's incoming beam of light. Seven layers, this time, reminiscent of the shield wielded by Ajax the Greater. It burst through the first three, and the fourth cracked, but held, until the beam scattered like raindrops.

He was still having some trouble with Medea's Divine Words, but he was getting better at countering them. That he was adapting to them as quickly as he would be awe-inspiring, if it wasn't also terrifying in its implications.

“You *knew*,” Eidolon rasped, hollow and horrified.

I grabbed Eidolon with one hand and dragged him behind me as I took off, swerving around the edge of my barriers, even as they dissipated, and with my other hand, I aimed my finger up at the golden figure above us.

“Ερε Εχάτη!”

My counter beam shot forth from my fingertip, but Scion had seen this attack one too many times now, too. The glow under his skin intensified, and although it wasn't enough to stop it completely, the line carved into his chest and up his shoulder was shallow and pathetic compared to the great scores of flesh I'd been gouging out of his body before. Fatal and catastrophic and absolutely devastating on a normal human, for certain, but little more than a flesh wound to him.

Scion tracked us easily, readying another beam, but before he could fire it off, Alexandria rocketed back around and delivered a devastating haymaker that quite literally tore his jaw off. She didn't stop there; she spun around and reached down with her hands to start tearing fistfuls of whatever she could get her hands on. Blood and viscera rained down, even as the wounds healed as quickly as she made them.

If I was colder, more callous, I would have kept attacking, even at the risk of hitting her. Maybe that was the one thing Khepri would have been good for, right then.

"Of course I knew," I told Eidolon a little distractedly.

I just hadn't known what to do with it. What, tell him? Because the only two ways I could see that ending were outright denial and the very crippling devastation he was experiencing now. Neither one would have been helpful, and if everything had gone to plan, he wouldn't have been involved to hear it from Scion, either.

"I told you before," I went on, watching the fight for an opening, "you *failed*. All it took then was a few words, and all it took now was that he said them again. Why did you think I didn't want you involved to begin with?"

And if he'd believed me and hadn't shut down, what then? It wasn't like he had any more conscious control of the Endbringers than he did the firing of neurons in his brain.

"You could have told me," he rasped.

I whirled around to face him. Something ballooned in my chest, expanding to fill me until it almost hurt, and acid settled in my mouth like venom. It burned like fire on my tongue.

"So you could give up sooner?" I spat back at him. "So you could spend two years moping and feeling sorry for yourself?"

"I...I could have stopped them," he reasoned. "I could have...bought us more time."

A harsh laugh barked out of my mouth and I threw him back towards the corpse of the Other. He fell back onto his ass and stayed there.

"You can't even stand and face *me*! And yet you think you could have found a way to wrangle a trio of city-killing *monsters* under your control?"

The Eidolon that had followed me down would have puffed up and shouted back. The man before me cowered and offered only a meek, whispered, "I could have tried."

I spun back around, refusing to dignify that with a response as I turned my attention back to the fight. Alexandria had resumed hit and run tactics, swooping down on Scion at speeds that would have made her nothing more than a blur to anyone else watching. Each blow she landed was like cannonfire, rocking Scion, tearing out yet more of his body, eroding his well of flesh, one little chunk at a time.

At the rate she was going, it would take her a thousand years to empty it.

But Scion had evidently gotten tired of playing around, because on her next pass, his hand lashed out, lightning fast, and wrapped around Alexandria's throat before she could escape. His thumb pressed against her jugular and his fingers curled around her carotid, and she gave a little gasp as her own hands rose to grasp at his — futilely, because he held on like a vice.

I was already moving in to help her — but she didn't seem to really need it. After a second or two of grabbing at his fingers, she moved instead to his arm, taking hold of his elbow with one hand and his shoulder with the other. It looked like she was trying to apply some sort of pressure point technique to force him to let her go.

And then she wrenched it off of his body like it was a dry twig.

Scion snarled and reached for her with his other arm, but she batted it to the side with a textbook counter and reached for his own neck. Her fingers curled into his throat and *ripped* it out in a great fount of blood.

Scion ignored his ruined throat, and the only sign of his return blow was a brief flash of light as he fired another beam at her, the same kind that had flung her away, before. This time, however, she turned her head so that her bad side faced it and weathered the blow. It still pushed her back, but somehow, she managed to keep from being thrown across the room.

She was back at it an instant later, and she was using some kind of martial arts I didn't recognize to keep ahead of him, avoiding his hands and his fingers as she took swipes at his body with her own. Whenever she saw the opportunity, she tore off another arm, another leg, another hand, and her sheer speed and ferocity coupled with her skill kept him off balance enough that the only thing he seemed able to do about it was fire another blast to get some room.

Even as more and more of her costume was ripped away, even with her body on display for anyone to see, she never let him get more than a little bit of distance. She flew back and resumed her attack before he could turn his focus to me or Eidolon.

I felt useless, watching them go at it. Impotent. Antsy and impatient, too. I was stuck on the sidelines, incapable of contributing without endangering my nominal ally, and I couldn't switch out and choose another hero, because I might need Medea's potent defenses to —

I shook my head. What was I even doing, getting caught up in the fight itself? *This* wasn't the final battle. This was just the lead-up to it, the prelude. I was supposed to be using this to hammer at his weaknesses, not trying to wear him down with everything in my arsenal.

Things needed to get back on track. This was supposed to be a chance to hit him harder with the corpse of his counterpart. I should be doing just that.

It took an effort to tear my gaze away and look over the mounds of flesh beneath us, searching for the best candidate among the half-formed bodies and limbs jutting out from the pile. Any part of it would likely do, but I wanted something that at least resembled one of my Simulacra, so that the ones still left could be useful later on.

There.

I flew over to it and cut it free from the main mass, a half-formed body that was little more than a head and torso. It terminated abruptly at the waist, it had only one arm, and the hair only reached to its shoulders on one side while the other was bald. It resembled my Simulacra only tangentially.

But it was the closest I could find without grabbing the main one, the one that had taken Contessa's killing blow, and I wanted to save that one for later.

Floating up, I hefted the half-formed body with me, waiting for a moment, a pause in the fighting, and then I flung it at Scion as fast as I could.

He'd been about to fire off another blast at Alexandria, but the body flopping onto him caught him off guard and interrupted him before he could get it off. His face twisted with surprise and horror as he looked down at the dead, mouthless face of the mannequin, and he threw it off and away like it was diseased, just as he had the one before.

Alexandria picked up on my idea and swiftly flew down to the counterpart's corpse, and with a sharp yank, she ripped a head free from the bulging mass, trailing viscera behind it, and then she, too, flung it directly at Scion.

It impacted wetly in the center of his chest, and he recoiled. A distressed whine rumbled out of his mouth.

Finally, *finally*, we were getting back on track.

I dove back down and plucked up another hunk of flesh. This time, I didn't bother looking for anything in particular, just the largest hunk of gray meat I could find, and I flung it at Scion again. He swerved to avoid it, blanching, but I took aim, timed it in my head, and incanted, "Ερε Εκατη!"

The arc of the hunk's flight path turned my precision shot into a cutting beam, messy and unfocused, and the bits of skin and muscle that were sheered away flew instead towards Scion, landing on him. He flinched as though he'd been struck by a surprise blow.

Alexandria didn't let up. She had already gone back down and picked out her own hunk, tearing it free much more gruesomely than I had, and she threw the gangly mass of limbs and sinew at Scion, who blasted it before it could reach him and reduced it to ash.

The only one still doing nothing was Eidolon, who sat still on the mound where I'd dropped him, unmoved since.

"Are you just going to sit there helplessly and watch?" I snapped at him. "If you're not even going to fight, then just leave! Go sit in a corner and wait for the end! You're no use to anyone like that!"

This, at least, seemed to reach him, but I didn't stay there and wait to see how, because I couldn't babysit him the entire rest of the fight. Instead, I found another half-formed body, this one much more closely resembling his counterpart, and I lifted it up and sent it flying towards Scion.

He caught it. A complicated expression twisted his face, and he looked at the same time both repulsed and overcome with longing. It was far closer to how he originally reacted to my Simulacra than almost anything else we'd hit him with, so far.

“Ερε Εχάτη!”

So naturally, that was why I blew its head into gory chunks.

Bits and pieces splattered all over his front as the rest of it fell from his grip, and he went still, for a moment. Alexandria swooped in, carrying another disembodied set of limbs, one arm and one grotesquely large leg, and as she had before, she swung the arm and cracked him across the face with it.

This time, he didn't react as he had before. He took it with a deathly calm, eyes and face cold, and a sense of foreboding twisted in my gut as I realized, no, this was not the same Scion we'd been tormenting just a moment ago. Alexandria didn't hesitate or let up, she wound back and took aim with the leg she was carrying as the arm flopped, broken and shattered, back to the ground.

Scion's arm suddenly shot out, and he took hold of Alexandria's neck, again. He didn't wait for her to try and break free; his other hand shot out, lightning fast —

Alexandria screamed as Scion reached in and ripped out her false eye.

She reeled back, putting at least fifty feet between them, one hand slapped over her empty socket, and he let her go, absently shaking bits of skin, muscle, and tiny fragments of bone from his fingers. The look on her face... It was the closest thing to fear I'd ever seen from her.

“Alexandria!” Eidolon shouted, starting to stand as his powers began to swirl around him again.

And that was the moment when Scion turned towards him, holding up a hand that glowed with golden power.

Fuck!

I was too far away. Time stretched out, like a rubber band being pulled from opposite ends, and I raced towards Eidolon as quickly as I could, putting on as much speed as I dilated the moment to the absolute maximum.

It wasn't going to be enough. Medea was fast, but her flight speed was still subsonic by a large margin. Even as I flew, I saw the beam I was racing shoot towards Eidolon, expanding until it was large enough to scour his entire body away at once three times over — no chance for Eidolon's space manipulation to bend a narrow beam around him, no way for him to avoid the worst and take a glancing blow.

Something passed me, something moving so fast that it was little more than a black blur even to me. It outpaced Scion's beam, easily fast enough to reach Eidolon before that fatal attack would.

But she wasn't fast enough to escape with him, I realized. Even going that fast, she just didn't have time to reach him, pick him up, and take off again, not without killing him herself, one way or the other.

She must have known it, too, because she didn't even try.

The set of her shoulders, the rigid line of her spine, the way she covered him with her own bulk as much as she was able. She knew exactly what she was doing, and she was going to make the most of it, whatever it took.

At the last moment, fractions of a second before it hit, she turned her head and looked over her shoulder. Her eyes, one sharp and full, the other an empty, glaring void framed by ruined flesh, found first the beam that was now mere fractions of a second from consuming her, and then swept over and met mine.

Something passed between us. I wasn't sure what.

Then, the beam of light swallowed her whole, and I reeled back, shielding my eyes against the harshness of the glow.

It was over in a moment. Impossibly, incredibly, when I looked back down, Alexandria was still there and still alive. What remained of her costume had disintegrated, leaving her skin to bear the brunt of the blow, and the entirety of her back looked like it had been flayed, exposing raw muscle to the air, even bone, in some places. Somehow, however, it had been enough to shield Eidolon, who seemed entirely unscathed.

It must have hurt, I couldn't imagine it was anything but utter agony, and yet still, she stayed solid, strong, her arms and legs unyielding and straight. She didn't even whimper.

"A-Alexandria," Eidolon said, somewhere between awed and horrified.

"Eidolon," I heard her say quietly, "you have to —"

And that was the moment when Scion appeared behind her and thrust his hand through her chest.