

### Pyrite 11.3

Scion didn't quite react, at first. His hands remained in position, cradling a face that was no longer there. Flaming globs of flesh and gore hung from his fingers, even as the Simulacrum crumpled to the ground with its central processing center no longer sending any signals to the rest of its body. Everything above its shoulders was gone, and only small bits and pieces remained, most of which were all over Scion.

To anyone who didn't know what the Simulacrum was, it might have looked the same as a human getting her head blown off. Less gore, because a lot of it had been vaporized, but anyone who had seen a high caliber rifle decapitate someone (or watched Ballistic kill one of Noelle's cloned capes) would have seen the obvious similarities.

I think *I* would have been fooled, if I hadn't already known that it was a fake. Not real. My stomach still churned a little at the sight of it, even knowing that.

Scion didn't react *immediately*. But it didn't take long for his hands to start shaking. And once they started shaking, he lifted them slowly up towards his face, like he actually needed his eyes to examine the chunky bits of false flesh still clinging to them. His expression was somewhere between frozen shock and stony stoicism, and it was so utterly *human*.

For an instant, he reminded me of Dad on *that day*, that one, bad day that I was never going to forget as long as I lived. That moment when he got the call from the police and everything just *stopped*, the way his face had fallen into a sort of stunned disbelief that said he'd heard right, yes, and he understood the words, sure, but they didn't make sense and he couldn't wrap his head around it. That moment *before* the reality set in, where reality was unreal and nothing was true, and thoughts like, "*this has to be a bad dream,*" fought against the inescapable facts.

It was almost enough to make me feel sorry for him. I knew that pain, where your entire world was ripped away and you didn't have any ground to stand on and it felt like you were struggling on a turbulent sea in a dinky little rowboat without any land in sight. It was an old friend that visited every once in a while to check in and remind me of what was gone and could never return.

It was *almost* enough. And that probably said good things about how close to human he was, about the efficacy of our plan to beat him. If he acted human enough that I could almost feel sorry for him, empathize with him, then he was human enough to *die*.

Slowly, I let out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, and it hissed through my teeth — too loudly to escape notice.

Scion's gaze snapped to me, found me effortlessly amongst the foliage, like he'd known where I was the entire time and I'd just been too insignificant for him to notice before. And that was when the shock wore off and he came to the — correct, of course — conclusion that I'd been the one to fire that arrow and obliterate what he must have been thinking was his counterpart.

If he'd been thinking clearly, the ruse would have been obvious. But him not thinking clearly was the whole goal, and I'd just gone and managed to overachieve it like a kid at a spelling bee.

As his face twisted into rage, brow knitting and lips pulling back from his teeth, I scrambled away and wracked my brain for the next site, the one that looked closest to this one so the disconnect would be easier to overlook and he'd be easier to fool.

“Door to site F!” I shouted.

The silvery pane of light unfolded ten feet in front of me as I ran full tilt away from Scion, and I rushed through the foliage and dove for the Door —

Not fast enough, because a blast of golden light caught up and chased me through it. I hit the ground on the other side as sparks of light sheared off of me and something *popped* like a soap bubble, but I didn't have time to think about that because there was no way he wasn't *right fucking behind me*, fuck. I stumbled to my feet and somehow managed to throw myself across the clearing of Site F, but there was no time to make it to the much sparser copse of trees in the distance, so I did the only thing I could.

I pressed myself up against the silvery flesh of the next Simulacrum and hid behind it instead.

Not a moment too soon — a flash of golden light announced Scion's presence, and I chanced a glance over the Simulacrum's shoulder and flowing hair to see him recoil, face twisting up with shock and surprise as he saw the counterpart that he thought had just been *killed*. What a shock it must be to have a miracle torn out of your arms so violently, only to have it presented to you again mere moments later.

With him distracted, I patted myself down, glancing at my arms only long enough to see the flicker of the personal forcefield that I hadn't had much need of in quite a while reasserting itself. Nothing ached or twinged aside from that, so while he'd blasted it apart with a single hit, it had absorbed enough of the attack that whatever had gone through it hadn't done much to me at all, if it did anything.

So. I could take one good hit from him like this, but if I tried to get into a prolonged fight outside of an Install, it probably wouldn't end all that well for me. Not wholly unexpected, if I was being honest. It had just been so long since I'd actually *needed* that forcefield that I'd never really figured out all of its limitations.

Once I was sure I wasn't injured, I peered back over my fake's shoulder and watched it reach out for him, again, and I watched him slowly descend again, until its fingers could find his face. Dragon had programmed all of them to act slightly differently, so that no two Simulacra went through the exact same set of motions in the exact same order. The hope was that while it wouldn't fool an actual *person*, it would manage to fool *him*, or at least enough to keep him from considering it too deeply.

I wasn't sure whether or not we'd underestimated him, in that regard. This time, he wasn't reaching for the Simulacrum's face, but instead was touching the hand that was stroking his cheek. The expression on his face might best have been described as bewilderment; that felt like a better word for it than just confusion.

Somehow, in all of that, I was escaping notice. There was no telling how long that would last, though. Scion's senses were superhuman, but if his stimuli were all being perceived through his

human projection... Ah, fuck, what had Lisa called it? Something about a threshold? As long as he was too engrossed in the fake, maybe he wouldn't even see me slipping away.

Not the greatest thing to pin my hopes on, but I didn't exactly have a plethora of options. Certainly, I couldn't just hide behind the fake all day and wait for him to figure out how badly he'd been played. It would kind of defeat the whole point.

He reached up and ran the fingers of his other hand over the Simulacrum's face, exploring the contours and the curves. I took that as my cue, and with a single *Vantage*, I stepped out and put myself at the far sparser treeline.

Scion's attention snapping towards me again was a feeling more than it was something I saw or heard.

I dove to the side just in time to avoid the beam of golden light that lanced through the spot where I'd just been, and it carved a neat hole through the foliage, like an artist had simply erased them from his masterpiece. Even if I'd weathered the first blast on the way in, I wasn't fool enough to think it was a good idea to keep taking them head on and trying to blow right through them. Even with someone like Herakles or Siegfried Installed, I might have been pretty leery of that idea.

When I spun back around to face him, he had moved to put himself between me and the Simulacrum, like he was protecting it from another attack from me. Good for me, in that it meant he wasn't paying enough attention to it, so he didn't watch it shut down the instant he was out of its sight. Also good that he was still under the impression it could be the real thing. Bad, in that it also put me up against Scion on my lonesome and I had to figure out how to get things back on track.

If it came down to it...

Well. That would be a nasty surprise for him, wouldn't it?

His hands glowed with golden light, and he fired another beam at me at speeds that would have utterly overwhelmed a regular human. If I'd been Khepri as she was in life, a skinny teenage girl with nothing in her arsenal except bugs, that would have been it. Game over.

Luckily, I wasn't *just* a skinny teenage girl.

I dodged to the side, rolling across the grass to avoid his follow up blast, and as I sprang to my feet and off the ground, I pulled a fraction of Aífe into myself and hefted her spear in one hand.

Soaring Spear of Deadly Thorns  
"Gáe Bolg Prototype!"

The spear was cast with all of my strength and speed, and it soared through the air like a rocket as a streak of vivid blood red. Scion, having never seen it before and having no frame of reference for what it did or what it was, didn't react fast enough to block it, and it slammed home in his chest, right where his heart was supposed to be. Right where it *would* be, if he was an actual human.

Gáe Bolg Prototype was the original form of Gáe Bolg, back before the thrust that always found the heart, back before the missile that mimicked Ildánach Lugh's Five Roaring Stars. It was the weapon

of the myth, the one that sprouted and bloomed and had to be cut out of the victim's body in order to be removed.

It was as much a sure kill technique as Cúchulainn's thrust.

Against all odds and any reason I might have expected, Scion took the blow like it meant something. He folded over as though the wind had been knocked out of him, and his hands went to the haft of the spear just under the blade that was buried all the way into his chest. I wouldn't have been surprised if it went all the way through and the tip burst out his back.

And then the spear bloomed inside of him, and jagged red thorns burst out from under his skin, shedding his fake blood as they did and splattering it everywhere. All across his chest, they broke through, tiny barbs that jutted out like hives, leaking ichor across his perfectly sculpted torso and the staining the white of his bodysuit.

For a second time, I wished it would be that easy. That this would be enough to kill him. That the curse of the spear would spread to his real body in some distant alternate world and rip him apart. If only he could have been killed with that little effort.

I wasn't stupid enough to believe it.

The instant my feet touched the ground again, I sprinted forward and cut the distance between us with another *Vantage* as I pulled my right fist back, cocked and ready.

*"Thunder Feat."*

With the weight of a dwarf star, with a speed surpassing thought, reaching ever so close to light, with all of the strength and power I could muster, my god-killing blow struck home on his body. At that level, with that much behind it, it wouldn't have really mattered *where*, but I aimed for center mass and landed on his ribs, right below his raised arms.

To call what happened "an explosion" was not at all inaccurate. To compare the sheer force and power released in that moment to one of the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan during the Second World War would not have been at all inaccurate. To describe what happened to Scion's body as "complete obliteration" would not have been at all inaccurate.

My fist did not so much make contact as it did disintegrate everything in front of it. The air itself howled its passage. The molecules surrounding it glowed and ignited like a quasar. Even the golden flesh of my target was reduced to an atomic slurry.

And the entirety of Scion's torso disappeared.

At that level, there wasn't some crazy explosion of blood that went everywhere. That would have required his blood to remain liquid under the pressure of my attack instead of instantly scattering into their composite elements. There weren't globs of flesh, either, because that would have meant the molecular bonds were strong enough to resist the force ripping them apart.

There were no signs left behind. His torso was simply gone, as though erased from existence.

And then the power behind my blow continued on and obliterated the Simulacrum he'd been trying to shield with his own body. Of course — that much power behind a single attack, I might have been able to crack open the Earth's crust, if I really tried.

What I didn't expect was for Scion's hand to reach out and grab me by my throat. Especially since it was connected to his body only by a thread of sinew, muscle, and skin. He lifted me up to meet his face until my feet dangled off the ground, glaring at me with an expression that could only be called utterly murderous as the glow beneath what remained of his skin began to intensify. Sparks of golden light shone from between his fingers — they were bright enough that I could see them on the edges of my vision.

His flesh was already filling back in. Rapidly enough that he would be back to full form in a matter of seconds.

He intended to kill me like this. I didn't know whether he was going to take it slow or not, since I'd destroyed another Simulacrum right in front of him, savor the kill as much as possible, or if he would just end it in an instant to get it over with. I wasn't going to let him, either way.

Aífe's spear that had been flung away in the aftermath of my Thunder Feat vanished into motes of light as I pushed her power away, and I reached out and grasped again for a close-range Noble Phantasm that would do enough damage and shock him badly enough to make him let go. Another spear was out — no time or space to wind up. A bow was out for obvious reasons. A sword? He might be too close even for that. When it came to daggers, though, there weren't really that many with enough power behind them.

*Ab.* How about a variable Noble Phantasm? One that could change forms and be used as needed in a variety of different configurations? In one form, a bow. In one form, a spear. And if I needed to get even closer...

*Set. Include.*

I yanked my chosen Hero back into me, and seized by the idea percolating in my head, I focused all of Karna's power upwards, compressing it into a tight ball. Not a sword or a spear or a bow, but because it could take the form of *any* projectile weapon...

I turned my gaze directly to the center of Scion's face, right at the bridge of his nose —

O' Brahma Curse Me  
"Brahmastra Kundala!"

And fired Brahmastra Kundala as a laser beam directly from my eye.

It felt a little silly, almost, the idea of shooting a laser from my eye like some comic book hero from the fifties or sixties. But I couldn't argue with the results, the way it bored through Scion's head and seared away his flesh and bone almost as neatly as my Thunder Feat had. It accomplished what I wanted, too, because without a head, his hand dropped me and I fell back towards the ground, free.

The landing wasn't exactly graceful. But it didn't have to be.

I scrambled back to my feet and took off running the instant I could. Karna was kept only so that I had an option if he caught up to me again before I was ready.

I didn't waste time, either. Even as I sprinted away and put as much distance between us as possible, I was already calling out again.

“Door to site D!”

Ahead of me, another pane of silver light drew itself into the air and folded inwards. Another world, this one completely different to the one I was on, waited for me on the other side.

I didn't wait to check if Scion was recovering faster or slower than before. I didn't look behind me to make sure he was following or to see if he was winding up for another attack. I just dashed as fast as I could for safety.

I passed through the Door and stepped out onto the barren landscape of what I could only call a savannah, complete with the stifling heat that you could expect of such a place. No blast chased me through and tried to fry me like an egg.

And before I could make it another step, a flash of golden light announced Scion's arrival — *ten feet ahead of me.*

“FUCK!”

He wasted no time; he fired another beam of golden light at me, and I dove to the side to avoid it. Barely had I gotten my bearings back before he fired another one, and another, and another, all in rapid succession, and it took every reflex I had and all of my not inconsiderable speed to keep up, keep ahead of them, keep him from landing a critical blow.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he was catching on. I'd only shown him two of the Simulacra; had he just sniffed out the game plan that quickly?

Behind him, I spied a glimpse of the next Simulacrum, and the brief fraction of a second I'd turned my focus away to see it nearly cost me a hit. I had to redouble my speed, trying to put more distance between us as he fired more and more blasts of golden light at me. He didn't let me; he kept steadily advancing even as I retreated, and any ground I gained was lost a moment later.

No, he hadn't figured it out, yet. If he had, he probably would've destroyed my fake first, instead of immediately going on the attack against me. The fact he hadn't meant that Plan A was still in play, it could still work.

I just had to be a bit cleverer and work a bit harder to pull it off.

On his next attack, I leapt up and over it in a Salmon Leap instead of dodging to the side. He tracked me through the air with his eyes, hands lifting up to fire at me again while I was incapable of escape.

Whoever said I was escaping?

Brahmastra Kundala formed in my hand as a flaming spear, and I threw it at him with all my strength, and then another, and another, and another, firing them off with rapid speed. His first blast of golden light met the first head on, and the collision of two opposing attacks of such power released an explosion that actually had enough force behind it to buoy me in the air another six feet up.

But the second spear, the third, the fourth, they all struck home, and they exploded in plumes of fire when they hit, obscuring him behind their flames. There was no way to know how much damage each did; whatever injury they caused would be healed by the time the smoke cleared.

I landed nimbly on my feet, this time, and spun on my heel to face him, dancing backwards to put at least a little more distance between us. I chanced a glance behind me, in the direction of my Simulacrum. His focus on me was intense enough I doubted Scion would notice it until we were right on top of it.

That was fine. If I had to lead him by the nose to the next one, I was just going to have to do it.

A burst of golden light chased the flames away, and they parted around him as Scion floated through them, face carved into a rictus of anger. I thrust Karna away and pulled in Galahad — Lord Camelot manifested in my right hand, large and seemingly unwieldy with the Round Table in its center.

A resolute heart... I honed my focus and determination to a razor's edge and set the shield in front of me, such that I could peer out over the spoke of one of the cross's limbs.

I would not be moved except as I chose to move. I would not be stopped except as I chose to stop. I would not be defeated. I would not be struck down. This shield was the form of my resolution, and its strength was the strength of my will. I would not break. Neither would it.

The next blast struck Lord Camelot with a sound like the ringing of a gong, deep and metallic and vibrating through the air such that I could feel it in my bones. Lord Camelot weathered it without trouble. There wasn't even a scuff mark.

Scion's brow furrowing in consternation was satisfying on more levels than I really cared to think about.

The next blast boomed through the space between us with a discordant buzz, and I put Lord Camelot in its path. It hit a lot harder than the one before, its golden light spilling out around the edges of my shield, and it felt like it was trying to push me back, even as it tried to erase me.

My feet were planted and didn't move. My shoulders were squared and didn't give. Lord Camelot held and rebuffed it.

Of course it did. This was the embodiment of the hopes, dreams, and ideals of some of the strongest heroes who ever lived. This was the form of their shining castle upon the hill, compressed into the shape of a shield. It would not be cast down that easily.

I leapt back from the next attack, and the follow up smashed into Lord Camelot again, driving me back — back, and closer to the Simulacrum. Deliberately, I kept myself far enough from it that it wouldn't be directly in his line of sight when he looked at me.

Scion, having seen that beams and blasts weren't working, chose that moment to form his power into a sphere, rapidly growing as he held it out in front of him until it was larger than him, and then growing some more. In seconds, it was easily large enough to swallow me and my shield whole, and it was *still* getting bigger.

He couldn't overwhelm me with sheer strength, so he was going to go *around* my defenses and make them pointless.

I gritted my teeth, glanced back long enough to check on the Simulacrum, and then honed my determination even sharper. The bottom edge of my shield bit into the ground as I planted it in front of me like a tree, and I tightened my grip on the handle in its center.

In my mind's eye, I saw a castle, a fortress with gleaming white bricks and stalwart ramparts. It was not simply a real thing, it was an ideal, the dreams of a brotherhood of knights who believed in the idea of a Britain united, whole, and perfect.

That castle now would be my shield.

Fortress of the Distant Utopia  
"L o r d C a m e l o t!"

Around me, beside me, behind me, towering walls rose, glittering blue, glowing, filling in with pure white brick, fluttering with blue and gold banners. In front of me, the form of my shield traced itself into the air in lines of blue light, twice the size, twice as magnificent. The arcane symbols carved into its surface shone brilliantly.

Scion's sphere slammed into the barrier and stopped. I felt it almost like a physical blow, trying to erode away my will, trying to erode *me* away. The outer edges of Lord Camelot began to unravel.

*No.*

I focused my will and determination, imagining it as the mortar that held the walls together. As long as I remained strong and stalwart, the walls themselves would remain firm.

*I will not be undone. You will not deny me.*

The sphere of light bore into the barrier and tried to erase me. Golden sparks flickered on my hands from the overflow, where the sheer power behind it inevitably seeped in through the metaphorical cracks. I snarled, clenching my teeth tighter, and *held on*.

An eternity later, it was finally over, and the sphere petered out, spent, as I finally relaxed and let Lord Camelot dissipate, too. A long breath hissed out of my lips, not quite relief but something close to it. What Lord Camelot itself hadn't been able to stop, my own forcefield had blunted to nothingness.

And then a flash of light announced Scion's presence — *behind me*.

I flinched, spinning around as fast as I could as I swung my shield between him and me —



Except he had frozen, full stop, as a pair of silvery hands wrapped around him from behind and a head of long, silver hair draped itself over his shoulder.

The expression of bewildered surprise on his face was different from before. He didn't look down at the thin hands running across his torso or over at the head resting on his shoulder with any sense of awe or longing, but rather with a kind of pure confusion, like he was seeing something strange and unrecognizable for the first time and didn't have the first clue what to make of it. This time, when he reached down and took hold of those hands, he wasn't gentle or tender, as he had been before. There was no sense of wonder in any part of him.

He pulled himself free without any effort — unsurprising, since the already weak Simulacrum would be breaking down even at that moment, accelerating with every motion — and spun around to face it.

I took the opportunity to sneak away, and this time, he didn't notice me at all. When I'd reached as safe a distance as I could manage, I let Galahad go and Lord Camelot disappeared from my hands.

I settled in on the nearest stretch of ground I could find and pulled my invisibility cloak out, carefully unfolding it and pulling it up over me. I had no idea if it was enough to hide me from any of his more esoteric methods of locating me, but it should at least be enough to hide me from sight.

Scion didn't seem to notice me at all. In fact, I was beginning to suspect that he wouldn't notice anything shy of an actual attack, he was that engrossed as he roughly examined the Simulacrum. It was hard to see exactly what he was doing to it, and even what I *was* seeing was probably only a fraction of what he was actually doing, since he had to have at least a couple powers he could call on to check more closely, but he seemed to be looking it over. Yes, “examining” was definitely the best word.

He was going to figure it out.

I chewed on my bottom lip.

Nothing for it, then. I wasn't going to be able to swing around from the opposite side fast enough, and any Noble Phantasm that could take them both out like this before he noticed the energy buildup was a pretty intensive one.

And Lisa had called me paranoid and overly cautious for installing a self-destruct mechanism.

I opened my mouth to call out the self-destruct code, but Scion had gone utterly still, and the low level glow of his skin rapidly intensified to the point that I had to shield my eyes behind my arm. An enormous pressure bore down on the plain around me and a rush of wind whipped at me so hard that it nearly tore my cloak out of my grip.

When the light faded, both Scion and the Simulacrum were gone.