

Chapter 156: Upon an Icy Lake

Black fire crested the horizon.

I looked out at that flame, and felt what it caused in me. I felt the rage that spilled, the throbbing ache that was still there. The horror of loss and despair that I'd felt when things had gone wrong. My ears rang with emotion, and the hair across my body stood up in goosebumps.

There was so much that the simple sight of the giant caused in me, even when the place we fought was so different. Now, we were further up north, even further than before. Mountains had risen, and we found the champion in the middle of those frozen peaks.

In a crater, hollowed out by something, there was a lake, amassed rainwater. It had frozen over in the cold, a thick sheet of ice covering its surface, and that is where we waited, as more and more fire crested the rims of the rocks.

Out there, the giant of black flame was climbing upwards. It had carved its way through the north, carving through swaths of land like a bird through the air. Whenever a rock was too difficult to climb, it would swing that sword.

We could hear the air crack when it did, feel the shockwaves as the sound barrier broke, and the mountain splintered. Rock shattered against black fire, and new handholds formed. The giant carved its way through the world with ease, as if there was no obstacle substantial enough to slow it down.

No obstacle except us.

It felt me as much as I did it. The fragment of the mirror it held, the fragment of the gateways it had torn from this world hummed in its chest. A song of loss and incompleteness, a desire, a *need* to be united with more fragments. Those ephemeral strings that I could feel rang, vibrations spreading through them and into my chest.

My heart vibrated. With fury, and excitement, and dread all at the same time. I was afraid. I was afraid of losing someone again. Orvan had failed... so what could I do?

And yet. I knew I would do simply what I had to.

The nova in my chest hummed in agreement. Its motes of stardust roared defiance, that bright light pulsing and surging. I felt my fragmented wings in the air behind me, clinking together softly in the wind.

Emilia sat, calmly, polishing her armor. The rocks beneath her feet were solid, and the usual amusement was wiped from her face. She was geared up, simply putting the finishing touches on a pauldron, making sure it was perfectly prepared for whatever may come.

Eric bit his fingernails nervously, breathing heavily. He was afraid, but it was impersonal. He hadn't been here after all. I breathed out, long and hard, shoving that anger away. It was fine. He was a coward, but I forgave him. There were worse crimes than cowardice.

In comparison to him, even Trichtera, Ru's angel, looked calm. Her ruby eyes were set with fatalistic determination, but the flames flickering off her spoke volumes about her nerves. She was afraid of death.

Chris was not. They simply sat, the eyes of their human shell closed as they meditated, enjoying the soft, cold wind on their face. They hummed a song, too. A quiet, sombre tune that resonated through the mountains. It was almost mournful, a hymn of loss, or memories, of remembrance.

A hand woven from bones and fire rose above the lip of the crater. It grabbed onto the stones, and the giant hoisted itself upwards. The rocks creaked as the titanic monster shifted its weight on them, as more and more of it rose on the horizon.

I watched as a titanic bear skull rose above the rocks. I held Astraeus tight at the sight of the black flames pooling from its empty sockets. The rest of its body rose over the cliff. It couldn't form expressions, woven from flame as it was, and yet, I could swear that the monster sneered at me.

The air was still. Like the last moments of calm as storm clouds rolled over the horizon. A heartbeat passed, then another, and then, with a lurch, the giant stood in the crater. Thunder crashed over us as it stood there, gigantic sword held loosely in one hand. It was covered in dust, though swiftly burnt away in the fire.

And then, the air shifted, and the wind reached us, and the smell of ice was replaced with that of ash.

Flakes of gray drifted down, landing in my hair. I clutched Astraeus tight, watching as the giant took another step. I smelled smoke and decay. Black flames flickered from its body,

licking the lilac sky. I breathed in one more time, a long moment passing in the blink of an eye.

The others stood behind me. Emilia, Chris, Eric and Trichtera. And in front of us, the giant. It brandished its sword with yet another whip-crack. The noise rolled over us, but we stepped forward all the same. As ash rained on the snowy mountains, we stepped onto that frozen lake.

My boots came down on thick sheets of ice. A moment later, I emerged at the centre of the lake, my reflection right beneath me. I blinked, and the giant stood in front of me with a rush of wind. It held out its sword, moving slowly, its tip pointed at my chest, and I returned the gesture.

I raised my spear to point at its heart. Astraesus hummed with excitement, and I felt the maelstrom within him rising. Cass floated just behind me, above my shoulder. One more deep breath.

Then, my Qi roared, and the fight began.

Gold poured from Astraesus in a tide, his maelstrom instantly filling the world with it. Then, fire filled my vision.

The giant cut forward with its sword, a large sweep that carved through the ocean of metal, setting it ablaze. I could feel it feast on my Qi, sending echoing rings through it, even as more and more metal poured out to smother it. I stabbed forward, sending a thrust that his only a moment later, teleporting through the air.

It rang against the flat of the sword, metal screeching against metal. Sparks flew, hissing faintly as they touched the surface of the lake. A blade of gold carved through the world, only to be burnt away by dark fire.

Another swing forced me to jump, and then, there was that horrid whip-cracking noise. I felt the world lurch for a moment as something should have slammed into me - and instead, I found myself off to the side.

The world was turned into a cascading labyrinth of glass. Cass hovered above my shoulder, still, even as the kaleidoscope of reality unfolded around me. A million images were readily available for me to see, but my keeper sifted through them easily and assembled a map for me.

This maze of mirrors she'd made was unravelled. I took a step, finishing my cut the very moment I appeared behind the giant. Metal carved through fire, stabbing into the thick hide beneath. Corrosive bile spilled from the wound, hissing against the ice, and I stepped through yet another doorway of glass before its follow-up could get me.

My vision shifted, the world reforming into an entirely different kaleidoscope of colour. And still, I heard the crack. Another step back was too slow, the large blade carving a line across my stomach.

It struggled against my skin and golden armor, but still cut through. There was a horrid, rending noise, and then, for just a second, I could feel my insides spilling out of me.

A moment later, I [Superimposed] myself on that damage. It largely vanished, leaving a thin line of red in its stead, that quickly vanished once Eric's healing reached me. I drew in a shaky breath, still feeling the memory of the pain, as Emilia dashed in.

Another horrid crack, and the sword slammed into her shield. Unlike my summoned armor, it held, just barely. Denting inwards, it instantly sent Emilia flying backwards, slamming through two spires of rock before she caught herself with the third one. A moment later, Chris was already there, in their form as leshen and rock-hound.

The two shells tore into the giant with fervour, spilling more caustic blood onto the ice, tainting it a dark red. The surface of the frozen lake hissed, and shards of ice broke off it with the next whip-crack that sent both shells flying.

A moment later, divine radiance coursed through my muscles, turning me just a little bit faster. Trichtera and I stabbed the usurper at the same time, giving it only time to defend against me. Gold spilled into flames and burnt. A lance of dark fire stabbed out in retaliation, but I was already gone, having stepped through the reflections.

Blood spilled onto Trichtera. Her cut didn't go deep, but the wounds she caused never healed easily. The fluid hissed against her skin, bubbling and frothing, yet it also fed her armor. I could see the way that the acid hurt her, and built her rage. The way the fury fed her. She growled at the thing and swung again - only to be pulled aside by Emilia before the brutal retaliation hit her.

Instead, the giant's might slammed into my friend's shield. I saw her strain, the way her muscles bulged to resist the motion. Ice cracked beneath her feet, and the metal of her armor screeched. But it held.

In that brief lull, I took another step, appearing behind the monster. My swing finished the moment it started, flickering through the motion like an animation that skipped a few frames. I transitioned between stances faster than a blink, propelled by [Hall Of Mirrors]. And when the retaliation came, it was met with steel.

Another whip crack as the giant spun around. Mercilessly, the sword slammed into my blocks. Once, twice, thrice. More sparks showered from metal upon metal, and Astraeus hummed defiance in my hands. I could feel the spear hold strong, powered by [Unyielding Metal].

I stepped through again, just in time to avoid a massive boulder thrown by Chris. The rock-hound appeared from the stone as it shattered against the giant's skull, and bit down on its neck. Fire licked the rock, charring it, but still, Chris' shell hung on and mauled the usurper.

A breath passed, until it reached up, grabbed the dog, and then proceeded to toss it at me. A dozen shattered panes of glass, me and Chris laid sprawled out on the ice. Trichtera and the leshi were already upon the giant again. With a quick flicker of substantiality, I was on my feet. An alternate version of mine was right next to the giant again, where I materialized once more.

Dark flames instantly caught me when the teleportation finished. From within that fire, a smaller skull, maybe that of a badger, stared at me. Somehow, it was keeping track of my alternate versions.

Jaws closed around my skin, digging in and spilling my blood. I felt the ringing power of Echo coursing through me, making my teeth clatter and my Qi shaky as black flames poured into my wound like venom. A hand of golden glass, half manifested, grew from my skin, grabbing the skull and prying its jaw open, before I pierced it with Astraeus.

More Qi poured out of me to heal the wounds, but they didn't want to properly close. It had hit my parallel versions too, somehow. And it hurt, but it was not enough to kill me. I stepped back, teleporting, as Emilia took another hit, bolstered by Eric's magic. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of her smiling face.

Then, crimson flames appeared between us. Trichtera's rage-core had filled, and erupted in a mass of towering fire. For just a moment, the red was able to contest the giant's darkness, holding it at bay as the angel rushed in with a flap of her wings.

Her sword, a jagged thing more like a saw than anything else, carved yet another jagged line into the giant, even if it sent her sprawling with a whip-crack backhand a moment later. Eric rushed to her side, and the giant's eyes focused on him with an almost curious look. Before it could move, I was in front of it again, right before its face.

And then, that sneer appeared again. The bear-skull tilted upwards, facing me. The world became a kaleidoscope again - a maze of teleportations that should only have been accessible to me. Its sword, however, rocked through one of the panes of glass, shattering it.

Astraeus twisted in my hands to block it, but I wasn't fast enough. By the time my spear caught it, the blow was halfway through my leg. Blood poured down the giant's blade, but the golden glass underneath my skin was unyielding, too. I screamed, and beat the weapon aside.

Liquid gold filled the wound a moment later, my skin stitching itself together. My wounds started dripping radiance instead of blood. It hurt, but I used the torrent of Qi flowing through me as a makeshift skeleton. Another blow came, and this one, I beat aside. Then I stepped through.

My spear lanced through the giant's neck, scraping against the bone of its spine in a torrent of force. Caustic blood and dark flames flowed from the wound, dancing across the gold that covered my skin. My wings flared and beat, somehow, propelling me backward as spears of fire and bone pierced where I'd just stood.

And then, another hit sent pain lancing through my shoulder. It was my injured arm, and I couldn't bring up Astraeus to block in time. More fire blossomed inside it, making my eardrums ring. The world went muted, distorted, shaken. Like an echoing imprint upon itself. But the distraction proved its value.

All at once, my companions were upon the thing. A spike of stone tore through its foot, spearing through the ice of the lake and then all the way into the giant's ankle, mangling its flesh. A hound and leshi beset it with rocks and vines, binding the monster as Trichtera's sword strikes lanced it.

Sneering, it beat them all aside, allowing me yet another stab into its eye socket. More Divinity flowed through me, quieting the Echo. Once more, the giant's eyes snapped to Eric, who chanted in the distance. I could almost see it think before it moved.

A whip-crack came without any harm, and instead, the giant disappeared. I blinked in horror, seeing it stand before Eric. Stone rumbled, the pillar spearing its foot now laying shattered.

Then, I stepped forward, in between them, hearing that horrible noise again, before the sword slammed into Astraeus with enough violence to rattle my bones.

I felt the shaft of my spear creak, and yet it held. Metal unbroken, unyielding, never retreating. I would not lose. I refused to lose. Except, then, an arm closed around me. I blinked, and then, there was a horrid noise. All my insides lurched as the thing *threw* me aside like a ragdoll.

The air whipped against my ears, and I slammed into the side of the mountain, cratering the rock. My world spun for a moment. Dizziness rocketed through my skull. And despite it, through a blurry world, I saw the thing stand before Eric, sword raised, skull sneering.

The blade came down.

And Emilia stood in its path.

A horrid whip-crack shook the world. Blade met a steel shield. I watched, as my friend's bones once again held up the weight of the world. I watched as her insides were rattled, Echo spearing through her, making her Qi unreliable.

And I saw the grin on her face. She didn't buckle. She stood, as her shield caved in and got sliced through. Both her gauntleted hands closed around the weapon. The ice beneath her shattered, but pillars of rock rose to support her. Somewhere along the line, the giant found the time to have spears of fire lance through her joints, trying to get at Eric.

Still she stood. A fierce, defiant grin on her face. I saw it, saw her resolve, even as I rose and stepped in. And then, I felt it.

Another whip crack, as the giant swung again. A horrid blast of darkness that should have carved her in two and broken her. And yet, despite that all, I saw her.

Qi poured into her from the air. A pool of power that fed her muscles, her bones, that made her *more* than she was before. I felt it add to the torrent of movement that already suffused the air, and I smiled.

Emilia grabbed the sword, and with a horrid wrench, she pulled. Like a human mountain, she pushed the giant off balance. She ripped its feet free from the ground, lifted it up, then slammed it on its side with all the weight of the world behind her.

She'd done it. Somehow, Emilia had advanced to maelstrom. Bloodied and battered, she roared her victory, and Chris's final shell finally appeared. The ice underneath the giant

vanished, and we dragged it into the abyss of the frozen lake.
Now, it was our turn.