

Chapter 165: Divine Descent

Now, I think there are very few words for describing how novel an experience it is to get struck by divine lightning. It is *nothing* like getting zapped by any lightning cultivator. I'd know - I later on asked Rae to zap me, just to confirm.

But this was far different from that. Like all powers, Divinity played by its own rules. And what it excelled at was breaking down the powerful. I was not as powerful as the divines, looking purely at my cultivation realm, but with Echo in the mix? Things were different. Resonance had changed me, changed me enough that I was a legitimate threat to the balance of this world.

That's what allowed the divines to act. Usually, they would be bound by causality, chained to their own realms, due to how they interface with the power. But this time, for the first time ever, I got to properly face a god descended on the world.

Everything went white.

Power arced through my veins, crawling through every bit of me that was even slightly flammable. It seared, spearing through my blood and into my heart, driving a brutal stake of pain through me. My flesh boiled and scorched, blackened patterns spreading across my skin, my teeth clattering.

The pain was there for a moment, before electricity overwhelmed my nerves. All my muscles seized up. But then, the true brutality of Divinity started.

Inherently, it is a power meant to interface with others' beliefs. Divines harvest it from people giving them credit for good actions. They use it to influence the world, to tip the scales. It comes from belief, and is usually bestowed to those with belief.

So, with that inherent connection to belief, the bolt crashed directly into my willpower. With violent force, it slammed into my mind, burning all my thoughts for a moment, leaving me staggering black.

Another bolt followed instantly. Then a third, a fourth, a whole orchestra of brutal thunderclaps rocked the mountains, leaving me embedded in the rock, having forgotten who I even was.

My name had disappeared from my mind. The thing that wore my skin felt wrong, displaced. It remembered nothing, not my past, not my present. Little more than a bedragged thing wearing my skin, it grit its teeth.

And stood up.

When the thunderclaps stopped, a thing with blackened, cracked skin in lichtenberg patterns rose from the cracked ground. Saph stood to the side, staring at me, caught in a cage of divine light. She regarded the motions of what was almost me with curiosity, the way my fingers twitched, the way my hand moved through my blackened hair... and the way my fist still clutched my spear.

Another bolt of lightning raced down - but this time I was ready. Animalistic instincts sang in my mind, and I lashed out. The sound barrier broke from the simple movement. Astraeus slammed into the lance of electricity like a lightning rod, dragging in the terrifying power. A quick spin, and the terrifying blow was redirected into the ground.

I snarled at the figure in front of me. Trichtera. Blood red hair cascaded down her shoulders, glowing faintly, and wings of fire spread behind her back. She wielded her rapier, clutching it in two hands as if a longsword, and humming flames coated its edge.

Her eyes were so dark they made me flinch back. She spoke, and it was not her voice. "So you show you true colours," he said. Ru. The god of war, battle, destruction, fire, rebirth and redemption. "You sing the song of the usurpers. You speak where you should kill. What happened to being a warrior?"

Lost in instinct, all I did was snarl, slide my right foot back, and prepare my spear. My mind was iron. Unbreakable. But it was cracked, I was not thinking straight, and I paid the price. Snarling, I circled the thing that wore Trichtera's skin.

A moment later, we both vanished.

The air shattered around us, crinkling with pressure. I stabbed forward, and Astraeus sang of steel as he crashed into divine fire. Flames licked my face, turning my skin hot enough to boil water, but it barely even registered. I was far too tough, now. Far too fast.

Our weapons spun, and in a single passing second, we fought an entire battle. Ru struck at me with brutal violence. His longsword - that's what it was in his hands - hissed through the air as a precise implement of slaughter. It sang with blood-red fire, glancing off of Astraeus as I parried, sliding into a thrust.

He pulled back and beat my spear aside with a parry so brutal it almost dislocated my shoulder. Half an instant later, my arm was back in place, and [Hall of Mirrors] saw me flickering back in place, spear slipping inside his guard without ever completing the motion.

A kick took my legs out from under me, but I stopped the spin in the air, dealing another parry, then flickered behind the divine made manifest. I stabbed at his back, but flaming wings turned bladed and sharp, shredding into my skin, flaying it from my body in a ragged noise of hurt.

I didn't yell or scream, but growled. A snarling, animalistic fury, as I tore towards the god. He scoffed. "Pathetic," he said. "You give in so easily, then break even easier. There is no honor in slaying you, and yet it must be done. Perish, upstart ant, so that the board may tilt in our favour again."

Rather than replying, my spear sung forwards. Ru tilted, avoiding the blade by a hair's breadth - my Qi crashing into a barrier of blood-red light. In exchange, his sword flicked at me. The motion came as fast as a blink and as light as a feather. I lost an eye to it, the sword stabbing into my face.

Another howl tore itself from my throat, but I flickered backwards before the fires could lick at my brain. It hurt. But that hurt drowned in the greater suffering that sang in my blood. The knocking on the back of my mind, as if there was someone trapped.

Trapped in a mirror world, speaking to me in words I could not hear, could not understand.

Instead, I clutched the spear. Gold flowed through me, mending the wounds already. It resonated and sung, twisting with the crystal resonance of my song. Metallic Qi reassembled, growing around me, my wings chiming, growing. Disconnected crystals turned into full planes, bands of light trailing behind me as they *beat*.

One motion that shot me forward before the world could react. I stabbed, and Ru moved to parry. I flickered, and my spear appeared on a different side of his sword. His eyes widened, Trichtera's eyes widened. There were tears in them, as she looked towards me, towards my snarl and my missing eye, and a faint smile when my spear stabbed into her side.

It hit just below her ribcage, slicing through flesh as tough as concrete. I snarled and pressed, but Ru shifted. A flood of fire washed from the wound, pushing my weapon aside, and crackling scarlet lightning crawled from the tip of my spear up my arm. It ached, and I ducked. The slash still cut a neat line across my forehead, skidding off bone.

We exchanged another strike. A thin trickle of blood down his neck, and a gash on my thigh that made me stumble, just for a moment. Divinity poured from his wounds in blinding rays of light, a curling, bloody shape beneath that spoke of war. Ru was not kind, he was not kind on his angels, and he was not kind to me.

He snarled as he regarded me. "Beast. You cannot fight me like this and expect to win. But that is what you are. A monster, one that I will put down."

The sword lashed out, and I parried - but it wasn't a longsword. The tip of fire simply dissipated, and suddenly, I was in the wrong place. Ru stepped forward, and cold steel slid between my ribs.

Somehow, I tilted my head. There was something oddly familiar about this moment, about the way there was a hole through my lungs, through my heart. Almost by force of habit, I reached out and grabbed the sword, moving to shatter it.

Of course, it was far too tough. But that memory dragged bits of my song upwards. A soft resonance of history, of the legend I'd woven. Of how I'd healed.

My mind snapped back into place, just a brief moment before the weapon ignited with brutal, divine radiance.

[*Bell!!!*] Cass cried in my mind.

I blinked at the sword in my stomach with my one working eye, at the wounds that covered my skin. "Oh," I said. Then I looked up at the cruel god wearing a crying woman. "Oh," I repeated.

Cass, finally, manifested. All her power poured out of my gateway, a maelstrom of Qi drowning out Ru's face. Glass consumed me, wrapped inwards, and I... I vanished. I reappeared inside the Astral realm, fully. My entire body warping inside myself, turning to liquid gold and disappearing.

My keeper, Cass, stood in front of me, looking at the bleeding, burnt hole in my chest. Part of my ribcage was missing. Actually, the hole through me was almost big enough to push my hand through. It was a bizarre feeling, and I would have spoken if not for the blood pouring from my mouth in a torrent.

"Bell, oh, no, no, *no*," Cass cried. I heard her words but they felt dull, like I was underwater. It hurt to exist. Blood didn't flow properly with my heart so broken. But still, I stood.

The floating avatar of a girl that existed within me hovered over, touching her small hands to the wounds. She traced them, the blood staining her glassy hands. "No, Bell, please. Please."

She looked at me, worried, terrified even. All the while, the song inside me built.

It was a strange, self-consuming symphony. So new, yet resonating as if it had always been there. Building into a crescendo with every moment, every time that my heart *should* have beat but didn't. My blood stilled, feeling like ice in my vein, but the song thrummed.

Threads and notes danced at my fingertips. I welcomed them, welcomed the familiar hum of survival, the song that sang when I lived on. That told me I would recover. Tones turned to bands of light, sinking into my weary blood, and driving it forward with a rhythm. More poured out of me, more blood pooled beneath my feet, and yet... it flowed.

I smiled, despite everything, and pat Cass' head. My lips moved, but words didn't come. My lungs were completely destroyed. Luckily, my dearest keeper could read my mind, so I just had to think it. 'Don't worry, Cass. I'm okay.'

Eyes wide, she kept staring at me, stuck in shock. The blood poured again after having stymied its flow before. Threads of gold laced themselves together within me, though. They did not form a heart, but instead, wove into simple channels. Little capillaries that my blood could flow through before it was needed again.

Driven forward by song and gold, I smiled. It hurt. It hurt *bad*, but it would pass. My mind felt clear. Some part of me might have been wiped away by the lightning. Something smeared into the ground as only a faint memory. Fear turned to ash, powerlessness but a memory.

My lungs [Superimposed] onto a picture of a reflection. Metallic glass rippled, shuddered, and then flesh reappeared. Muscle and bone grew. My heart was back after about ten heartbeats, and I breathed. A long, deep breath.

"Hey Cass?" I asked. "How did you drag me within myself?"

She blinked at me, then drew me into a hug which I readily returned. For a moment, she just sobbed, then shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I was scared and just... pulled. I pulled and pulled and- And there you were. In front of me. In my reach."

"I healed 'cuz of you," I said. "Thanks."

"That's my duty, isn't it?" she said, snickering as she wiped away a few tears, only to cry more on that facsimile of a face she had. "To keep you safe."

Smiling gently. “Yes, my dear keeper. So. Let’s get back out there and kick Ru back into the dust?”

A small shiver went down her back. Cass, unlike me, did not have her fear blasted away by divine lightning and the entire adrenaline store a superhuman body could house. But she didn’t need to. She was brave. So, she nodded. “Yes. Let’s get him.”

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Light rippled in front of the divine. Ru turned to where his foe, the warrior turned monster disappeared. He frowned, deep lines wearing into the skin of a woman too delicate for his touch. Even now, she burned. Faith like this always *hurt*. Divine intervention was unpleasant, but necessary. That was the duty of an angel.

“Now stop rebelling,” he snarled at the woman he was using. Her hands forced his to tremble on the hilt of his sword, her tears blurred his vision, even as he stomped to kill the usurper that had finally drawn their warrior into temptation.

Voices swarmed his mind. Hir cried for him to stop, Archiva was beside herself at his ‘idiocy’. The two were fools, to believe that anyone could resonate with the Echo and still fight for them. No, he had seen better people than that otherworlder fall to it, and he would see more fall in the future. All of them would have to be put down.

Yet, she was gone, so it would start with the crystal usurper. The living, compressed nest of Zurulen. He sighed, brandished his sword at that divine cage, glancing at their indifferent position with indignation. “Perish, parasite,” he called.

Saph regarded the blade raised at her with the simple precision of someone waiting to die. They didn’t flinch at all, and instead simply sat there and watched, even as Ru readied himself to kill them. Even when golden glass poured from nowhere to form a person.

My stab caught the warrior god’s hand while his weapon was held high. He hissed in pain and spun to face me, giving me a furious glare. “You return,” he spoke angrily. “You hide like a coward and come back whenever is convenient.”

I blinked at him. “Yes,” I said, “that’s how a tactical retreat works. But don’t worry.” The song in my veins thrummed, humming to my words like a particularly excited audience. I shifted, readying Astraeus and leveraging the tip of the spear at the god. “This time, I won’t run.” All I had to do was beat a god.