

Chapter 166: To Break a God

Ru came at me like a missile.

It was a brutal, violent motion, the rock shattering beneath him as he launched himself forward. He was wrapped in scarlet fire, cascading down him like rivers of magmatic blood. The sword grew in his hands again, metal warping with a screech, going from a rapier to a longsword, before growing some more, into a montante.

The metal howled as divine fire reshaped it, and glowed an angry red as it crashed into my spear. Ru had not summoned anything - he was not one to keep spirits around. All his strength was his own. The epitome of a lone warrior, a general of massacre, standing at the front of a bloodied field. That was his legend.

Astraeus screamed as he struck Ru's sword. The collision was brutal, quick, and efficient. I stabbed, he parried and reposted. I wound with the longer part of my spear, driving his weapon outside, stepping in to strike him with the butt of the weapon. He stepped backwards, just out of reach, then blocked my follow up, catching it on his crossguard.

For a single blink, the clash was purely martial. A heartbeat later, it turned much, much more than that.

Invisible spears made only from my will mixed in with ones woven from my Qi. That resonant song pulsed through my veins, speeding me up, making time feel malleable. Whenever Ru sped up, so did I, the world warping to accommodate me. Air shattered around us again and again, the breaking sound barrier humming with the rhythm of the fight.

Violence blossomed between us. My willpower scraped his flesh, and his bladed flames dug into mine. But he wasn't too far beyond me. I kept up. Despite everything, I kept up.

Another version of myself grew from my wings. Vivi, who was ready for deployment in Eden, dragged herself out from those golden shapes. She laughed as she saw our opponent, giggling with madness and manifesting her spear in her hands. Like a rabid, starving wolf, she tossed herself into the battle.

A heartbeat later, Ru's willpower chopped off one of her arms. Blood pulsed from the wound in tune with her heart - but only once. Then, a metal prosthesis sprouted like a flower, growing to replace what she'd lost. Vivi only laughed, tossing herself into the battle once more.

Her rabid movements created openings, forcing the god on the back foot even when he defended himself. I shifted in to exploit them. Flickering motions of shifting limbs in a tangle of violence. Astraeus boiled with power, our combined maelstroms turning the world into a mess of blurring colours.

Reality warped at my fingertips. Willpower so iron it manifested into invisible weapons struck Ru, slamming into armor woven from divinity and hard-headedness. He fought like a battle hungry maniac, that same glint in his eyes as Matt. He laughed as I moved in.

When my spear slammed into his stomach, piercing through, spraying blood all across the snow, he laughed and punched my face in.

My nose shattered, blood pouring from it before another, healthier version superimposed on it. I healed, but still stared at the god with disdain as he kept laughing. Blood poured out of him. "Yes!" he praised, despite that. "Now you fight! Like a warrior! Show me your fangs, show me the last howls of your death, monstrous one."

Divinity poured from the heavens in streams, and Trichtera's wings caught fire. Blood poured out of the wound even faster as Ru fed the mortal shell, burning her from the inside out. He did not care about this angel, I noted. Did not care about the violence, about the warping of the world.

They mattered to him, of course. They mattered, because this was his world, and it was his to warp, his to fight battles in. Another chain of possessiveness, another link in the net that would keep me caged. He never would have tolerated my ascension. After all, Ru was a warrior, and slaughter his bread and butter.

I breathed. The shattered air still filled my lungs, cold ice calming me. Saph still sat in that cage of Divinity, staring at our battle. The song in my veins thrummed, and sang, and hummed in fury. I heard its bloodlust rushing through me, the notes of defiance and freedom. It told me to soar, demanded I took to the skies.

My wings beat again, musical notes humming in their wake, figuring out the potential of this new power. I coursed Echo through myself, making myself even faster, finding those frequencies where things escalated, and the hidden rhythm of the fight. My heartbeat throbbed, and the song fused with it.

Steps turned to drumbeats, slashes to violins. Violence sang between us, and the notes dragged me along with their demanding purpose. Vivi relished in the blood that sprayed her

in every exchange, her own or someone else's. She enjoyed the violence, avenging those that had caused our deaths in other worlds.

Other versions of me had already fallen to Ru. I felt it in the resonance, the song whispering of the possibility of defeat. But the possibility was not this reality. I drew from every victory and every loss, yes, but I still built my own legend. My own symphony.

The song sang louder, and I sidestepped a brutal blow. An alternate version of myself closed in, and we traded places. I flickered through the [Hall of Mirrors], avoiding strikes as I teleported between them. Reflections upon reflections of myself formed a path through the storm of slashes, the flood of fire.

I stepped in close, within reach, and called upon that resonance. The song pulled me along - but I refused. I was not pulled. We moved *as one*.

Bloodlust broke against my mind, and the symphony turned crystal clear. It sang as my wings beat, speeding me forward as the world warped. Ru shifted to block, but he was too slow. Astraeus pierced him again, slamming through his shoulder, turning his right arm limp.

Blood pooled in the snow, the battlefield stained red. It crunched and sprayed with our every movement, flakes dancing in the air, breath misting as we fought. Another exchange, and another version of me died, saving my life. We changed places. I healed. Ru did not.

Willpower and Qi stabbed into him, and the song within me took a higher note. Frantic, frenetic with energy that pulsed. Yet, again, I refused to be a puppet. I would dance *with* it, not *to* it. We were one and the same, that power and me, so I wanted.

I waited until the resonance strengthened, heightened, and then exploded forward. In tune with the song, listening to that invisible beat that told me a little bit of what Ru would do - and that thought caught a glimpse of it. A prescience that had not been there before. A knowledge, no, an instinct. I did not need to think, not need to see, I simply *knew* what Ru would do before it happened.

Because he, too, was bound to the song. Not because he was weak, but because he dictated it. If I could tell the next few beats, I could anticipate Ru's moves.

It wasn't exact or perfect, but I felt the change ripple through me, through the world. When he stepped, I knew how he'd land, and my body responded more smoothly. Excellence squeezed from me, my understanding of his fighting style skyrocketing at a prodigious pace.

And that was the truth of it. Ru could have killed me quickly had he attacked an hour or two ago. Hell, the fight would have been easier on him five minutes ago but... I was a bit of a genius, and a bit of a prodigy these days. More so than ever before.

Through the network, I felt it. The way I learnt. I adapted, as Chris would. I understood the song like Ann did, and directed it in the way Matt might. It coursed through me, with me, beating higher and spinning in whirling tones. I dodged, cut, and carved.

Trichtera looked at me with wide open eyes, bloodshot and furious from Ru's takeover. Yet, I could still see her behind it. Her shock at what I was doing, at the fact that despite everything, I was *winning*. And Ru saw it too.

He frowned, and more fire poured from the skies. The clouds evaporated, and the lilac sky had turned blood red behind them. The snow was replaced by scarlet rain, the kind that pressed down on me. The snow underneath my boots turned to mud, making it harder to step, harder to find footing.

I blinked, and saw corpses strewn about. Ru grinned a cruel grin. There was a weakness that washed over me as I blinked the sight away, a staggering kind of dissonance. My eyes opened to find a field of bloodied snow, and the descended god charging right at me.

Again, I moved, trying to shift through the [Hall of Mirrors] - but I lost my balance. I slipped on wet snow, and the montante dug through my throat. Iron flooded my mouth, blood leaking from the wound as I staggered back. Vivi rushed in, bringing the god's attention on her as I willed it to mend.

My Qi, too, stumbled. It felt heavy and slow, the maelstrom being choked by... whatever it was Ru had summoned. Flames burnt at the edges of the field, flashes and visions invading my eyes even when they were closed. Dizzying cruelty, a legend of blood-forged violence that hung so thick in the air it all smelled of iron.

Clawing against my throat, I felt strings of skin regrow, even as Vivi was brutally carved in two. Another version of her reappeared from me a moment later, still wearing that same feral grin. She seemed almost at home, here.

Even as she shambled and stumbled forward, she never once lost her will. And that was what this was, I noted. Will.

Ru was pressing down on us with his domain, his legend. Another application of faith, or a manifestation of his realm? I did not know, but I knew I could live, still. He could not just turn

me into a corpse, or I would no longer be breathing. My skin mended even as Vivi died again, clawing free from me once more.

Blood flowed up from the corpses and into Ru, spreading his wings wider. They eclipsed the sun, shimmering with crimson light. He laughed at me, mocking as I shook on my legs.

“Come on, warrior! Face me. Face me before you die!” His feet fell as surely on the slippery blood as they would on gravel, grass or concrete.

“I’ll wipe that sneer off your face,” I replied, wiping the blood from my lips. Flames flickered up from the blood, licking at the golden armor that coated me, corroding it. Parts flaked away like rust, only to be replaced by new gold, fighting against that decay. I breathed in the stench of iron, and moved, despite it all.

My balance shifted. I slid, stumbled, righted myself, and tumbled. Mirror-glass carried me forward, my view of the world adjusting as Cass helped me find my footing. I ran at Ru, my wings beating, and struck.

A moment before my spear hit, he vanished. Trichtera’s body dissolved into the bloody ground, reappearing behind me. I parried the thrust he threw with a spear woven from willpower, invisible and brutal, then spun into a slash, which he blocked, winding into me. Vivi came to his side, forcing him to twirl as she leapt over the sweep.

Both of us attacked at once, yet both were blocked as the sword split in two. Then, a dozen stab wounds covered my leg.

Willpower-blades had pierced them, and blood pooled again. I grit my teeth and stepped forward anyways. Defiance roared in my ears, and the song rose again, despite everything. It laced through my Qi, dragging it along, and my maelstrom fed into this realm.

Blood had iron in it, after all. The metal still listened.

Ripples spread across the bloodstained field of corpses, ripples in Ru’s dominance. I lost my footing again, slipping, and tumbling to the ground when all my weight was on the torn-up leg. Despite that, I rolled away from a descending stab, deflected another with a quick motion, then gave the god a kick to the chest and beat my wings to get back to my feet.

I breathed. We fought. Spear met sword and metal met flesh, over and over. Fire scorched me, seared my insides and my outsides. I burnt and bled and burnt again. But I lived.

In the middle of the bloodshed and the hurt, the disorientation, the confusion. Despite forgetting my own name, forgetting who I was, forgetting what I wanted. I lived. I still breathed. I still walked.

Somehow, despite everything, a smile crept on my face. Even when divine fire scorched my insides again, when glass and metal flowed from me like a tide, pulling and tearing at the bloody battlefield, I smiled. I slipped and stumbled and fell, yet I fought.

Ru scowled at the display. "Pitiful. You are already dead. Lay down and die," he said. And honestly, it made me laugh.

At first I just snickered at him, but soon the joy bubbled out of me. There was something visceral about it, laughing in the face of death. Despite the dizziness and creeping dread, I felt free. Elated. Uncaged. My maelstrom howled in my chest, and I felt myself grow with every passing heartbeat.

"Hah. Hahaha! Kill me yourself, shithead god. What, you don't got the guts to do it? Can't even squash one mortal ant?" I taunted smugly. My Qi flowed through me faster and faster. With every second, my maelstrom ground away at the suppression, picking up speed. The divine frowned, and more fire poured forth.

It was so bright, it shone through Trichtera's skin. She glowed like an irradiated piece of the sun, crimson patterns lighting up her skin from underneath. Blood pooled from her, joining the ground, before rising again. Streamers of violence coalesced into swords behind the woman that Ru puppeteered.

More blood rose, forming into puppets, an army of blood-warriors to wear me down. And still, I laughed. The song inside me sang, rising higher and higher. It refused to falter, refused to take a break - and I couldn't help but agree. I stomped forward, sending blood flying. The droplets flew through the air, tiny little sanguine things...

Tiny little *reflective* things.

I stepped through the mirror, and in a blink, I was upon Ru's bloody army. The golden tide spawned from Astraeus, and my maelstrom tore harder. The blood underneath my feet quivered, then shook when Vivi activated her maelstrom, too. Then Cass added hers...

And things began to crumble.

Qi and Echo burnt in this manifested realm. I jumped, carving bloody soldiers in half. Fire infested me, burning against my golden armor, but it didn't hurt. Instead, I laughed. I spread my wings, beating them again, and speeding up with a crystalline whine.

The air stopped resisting me, friction giving away to perfection. It was all, *all* mirrors. Ru was nothing but that, too. Smoke and mirrors, false bravado, and a terrified, petulant bastard at the heart of him. He snarled at me, swinging his sword as if there was any meaning in that violence, as if the bodies he'd amassed were supposed to give him some credence as a god.

But they didn't.

More power poured from me, from the world, tearing at it. The great balancer, the thing that made things shift was as simple as it had always been: Perspective.

Divinity feasted on belief. So many, many people thought that Ru was strong. But right now, standing in front of me with his petty insults, his taunts and his bloody battlefield, he seemed pathetic. If people believed in him, then maybe that belief, too, was pathetic.

My will, my decision crashed into the world. Because the world *resonated* with me. And that is what truly told me why the divines did not want Echo to spread. I'd thought it was the counter to Qi, and, to some degree, it was. But much more violently than that was the fact that it could counter Divinity.

My song spiralled from me, winding notes of glass and gold. Ribbons of beautiful noise streaked through the air. They danced above Ru, above Trichtera, and hummed in the air, forming lines and circles, as if painting a target.

The god turned to look at them, but when he did, I already vanished. Vivi stabbed at him, occupying his attention in another blood thirsty mistake, as I followed the noise. Blinking and warping forward, I found myself in front of one of those targets, where my song was strong, where the world resonated.

And I slashed.

Astraeus hummed as he sang through the air. He, too, was part of my network. He too was part of my song. And he found purchase on the strings that I could not see. For a brief moment, reality was cut. There was a lull in that music, a tearing noise like nails on a chalkboard, and then a faint snap. Like a string under tension being cut.

The I heard Trichtera scream.

“Ahhhh! Fio! My skin! It boils, it hurts, please. Stop him. Please. Please!” she cried.

Apparently, what I had cut his connection to her mouth, and some of his divinity. Because while Ru could not speak to me anymore, he could still fight. His arm rose and fell, trying to cleave Vivi in two. And he would have... but he was too weak.

His sword sank halfway through Astraeus' shaft, but the other version of myself had snatched his blade itself. Her golden gauntlet was cut, her hand bled, but she grinned at him. “You're mine for now, little warrior. See which one of us bleeds more, hm?” she asked, giving a sweet, cheery smile, before bashing his nose in with her forehead.

I simply vanished. And cut again. A hum, and a snap, and then one of Ru's arms let go of the blade. Instead, it held the other one down. “Stop it! Stop it, Ru!” Trichtera demanded desperately. “Stop possessing me!”

‘Avatars are meant to be wielded. Do as I ask, Trichtera. This warrior has become a parasite.’

His voice rang down from the sky, making my bones rattle, but I still smiled. There was desperation in there. Vivi and the half-possessed woman clashed again, sending sparks flying, blood spraying, but I could see the edge of the battlefield now. Bloody corpses tried to come at me, but Astraeus' flood of gold beat them back. Another movement, and I snapped another string, straining the resonance of my song with a dull screech.

Yet, that was enough.

With a third cut, the blood finally cracked, and was replaced by a tidal wave of stone. Emilia stood by Trichtera's side a moment later, encasing her in a small mountain of rock with a single stomp. I could see the music hum in her, the way we resonated with one another. A third voice joined that chorus when Chris appeared, and a wave of icicles rose from the snow to shred the last of Ru's warriors.

The song rang higher. I fought, and snapped the strings. One by one, Ru's puppeteering was carved apart. But it wasn't just that. It was his connection to this world. The faith he could receive. It was a million pinprick connections to everyone who believed in him... and I severed them. Bit by bit.

Even once Trichtera was free, I still heard them. Even when Eric healed the angel's frail, burnt out body. When she laid in the snow as a gently healing husk. I kept cutting.

Ru's voice turned from a demand to a whimper. The divine cage around Saph broke. And yet, I kept cutting.

My rhythm slowed. Stella appeared to watch what I did as well. Cuts covered the world, arcing slices that coalesced around nodes where strings of faith had been. My nova churned, and I kept cutting.

A tapestry of slashes kept appearing as the minutes passed, as my song turned to a gentle, slow hum, a rhythmic stepping where one motion followed another. It took half of a full hour in order to complete the action, but by the end, there was a circle slashed into the world - no, more of a sphere.

It was a three dimensional thing made from a thousand flat plains where my spear had passed. A rend so perfect, it created an isolated thing of space. Almost tentatively, I reached out, grabbed that section of reality, and pulled.

My hand peeled away the world like a strip of loose fabric. Behind it was a shimmering sphere of mirrors, glinting a scintillating red. And inside, caged by a thousand singing mirrors was... Ru.

Not an avatar. Not a puppet. Not an altar. But the god's real body. A bear-like beastkin, twice as tall as me, and so muscle bound it was terrifying. He wielded a great deal of weapons on his back, his leather armor was bloodstained, and one of his eyes was permanently closed by a scar.

Despite that, when he faced me, it was with lamentation. "Ah, warrior," he greeted with a sad smile. "Have you dragged me out here to kill me?" Then he looked at the lilac sky, and nodded once, as if to himself. "I suppose dragged is wrong, isn't it. You simply carved away my divinity."

"What?" I asked.

Ru tilted his head, but there was nothing threatening about it anymore. I could feel it, after all. What had happened to him. Instead, he just looked at me, incredulously. "You broke my Divinity, warrior," he said, holding a hand to the sky. "This world is still my home. But it no longer belongs to me. I am no more a god than an ant is." And despite that, he smiled. "So, will you kill me?"

I blinked, and looked at him, and then I shook my head. "No." And at that, he smiled more. "You wanted your Divinity stripped?" I asked.

"Who can say," Ru said with a shrug. "Belief... Divinity, it twists the self. I was too weak, warrior, so I broke. Then I broke again, and now, I begin anew. You have granted me a new beginning." He dipped his head to me. "You have the right to strip that from me. Kill me, if you will."

Then I sighed. "Go off, Ru-

"No, my name is Rufus," he said, almost gently.

"Fine. Go off, Rufus. Do whatever it is you wanna do. Just don't cause any trouble."

"This world is still my home. I will protect it. But... perhaps, you can do more for it than me. Your song seems less sinister than I am used to. Please, keep Eden safe if you can," he said. And then, he dipped his head again, and walked off. Broken, yet free.

Maybe he and I were alike, in that way.

I looked to the sky. Well, not quite alike. I still had a little ways to go, and a few more things to do. But I would find my freedom. No matter what.