

MARIO ROUTI



REBECCA  
NEWTON

AND THE LAST ORACLE

# Contents

Front Matter .....	i
<i>Title Page</i> .....	<i>i</i>
<i>Publisher Information</i> .....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Dedication</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
The Last Oracle .....	1
1.....	1
2.....	7
3.....	13
4.....	18
5.....	22
6.....	26
7.....	31
8.....	34
9.....	38
10.....	40
11.....	43
12.....	47
13.....	50
14.....	54
15.....	60
16.....	73
17.....	77
18.....	80
19.....	83
20.....	88
21.....	92
22.....	94
23.....	100
24.....	102
25.....	110
26.....	113
27.....	122
28.....	124
29.....	133

30.....	144
31.....	149
32.....	159
33.....	173
34.....	184
35.....	187
36.....	189
37.....	190
38.....	194
39.....	196
40.....	207
41.....	213
42.....	215
43.....	217
44.....	227
45.....	230
46.....	232
47.....	241
48.....	251
49.....	256
50.....	260
51.....	264
52.....	272
53.....	278
54.....	280
55.....	287
56.....	290
57.....	293
58.....	296
59.....	301
60.....	306
Back Matter .....	309
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	309
<i>The Author</i> .....	310
<i>Also Available</i> .....	311

REBECCA NEWTON  
&  
THE LAST ORACLE

A NOVEL BY MARIO ROUTI

BOOK II

OAK TREE PRESS

# PUBLISHER INFORMATION

Published by Oak Tree Press

65 - 67 Bute Street, Luton

Bedfordshire, LU1 2EY

[www.oaktreepress.co.uk](http://www.oaktreepress.co.uk)

An imprint of Andrews UK Limited

[www.andrewsuk.com](http://www.andrewsuk.com)

Copyright © 2015 Mario Ruti.

The right of Mario Ruti to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover design, layout and formatting: Damonza

*To my children*

Dear Diary,

Today was my sixteenth birthday and I received the Flame for the second time, which means I have decided to remain an Orizon. Most Orizons need to make that choice at eighteen but I, being the daughter of the King and Princess of Utopia - and therefore a princess myself - needed to make this decision two years earlier.

The truth is that ever since my mum became the Princess here and decided to stop keeping the immortality fact a secret from the trainees, everyone chooses to remain an Orizon. I mean, who would choose not to be immortal if they were offered the option?

Today was the first time that I got to hear the tragic story of Leylah, my mother's best friend from her youth, when she was still on Earth. I was named in her memory. I also heard the whole story of what my mother and father went through just to be together. I know my dad can get on my nerves sometimes but I really hope I will find a man as loyal and loving as him someday. He was the ruler of the Kingdom of Beast, later renamed Thunder, which makes him really ancient, even though he looks young enough to be my older brother. I know the Wise Tree is older but, apart from that, I think that my dad is probably the most ancient soul here.

When I first heard that Mum and Dad had started out as sworn enemies, I thought it was really exciting. It was like one of those classic romantic novels in the library and I'm glad that they decided to tell me all the details of their turbulent meeting and what happened consequently. The truth is my dad was seen as the bad guy for centuries, but in reality he was always the sweet man everyone knows him to be today.

They told me about how they met and the long battle that raged from here to the Elysian Fields and I was thrilled to realise that my mum had not only met with the Gods, but had even fought alongside them.

It was also the first time that Mum talked to me about the Earth. I still find it hard to imagine what it's like over there. Mum actually lived there, and so did most of our family, but I've only ever been here all of my life. Everyone in Utopia is friendly and life is peaceful, a bit like a living sonata. We do a lot of interesting things, one of which is the War Games. People gather from all around the Land of the White Sun to enjoy the War Games and to see who has gained the most from their training. It is an incredibly exciting time.

My favorite part is watching Alexander participate. He is the son of our Lady Felicia and Lord Leiko. The mighty Hercules is his grandfather so, as a prince, he also took the Flame when he was sixteen instead of eighteen, just like me. Alexander is nine years older than me and apart from his enormous strength, he is the swiftest and most agile fighter imaginable. He fights furiously and yet he never seems to have a hair out of place. It's a bit unnatural to be honest but I don't mind, because when he poses in victory it makes him look even more like the great heroes you read about in books.

Now that my Flame has been renewed my life will become more interesting. For the past sixteen years, I've done more or less the same things every day. I go to the training grounds, I read my books, I go to the cultural events and the art classes and I eat my meals. Nothing really exciting has ever happened to me. I have been living a very peaceful life which, in some ways, is good but as the Flame I received at birth gradually weakened inside of me, the beauty that's all around me seemed to dim a little bit more with each repetitive day.

I would talk to Dad about this constantly and he always knew what to say. That's probably because he was forced to run his Kingdom without the Flame for so

long. He is so wise. He's just opened up a new school for the more "curious of mind" and he even intends to be one of the instructors. He tells me that there will be all sorts of different subjects to study there but he won't tell me what they will be. He says he wants to keep me in a state of anticipation, like a child searching the heavens for a rainbow after a storm.

I can hear Mum in the kitchen. I know she's dreading tomorrow because she realises she is going to have to stop being so over protective of me. Up till now, I've never even been allowed to go to the other Kingdoms of the Land of the White Sun, let alone to Earth. I wonder what it must be like in those Kingdoms now that everyone lives in peace. I can only imagine what marvels they've managed to construct with the powers of the Flame.

Tomorrow is the day I begin training with actual weapons instead of wooden equipment. Mum says that, if I want to, I can watch how my crystal sword will be made. I hope that at some point I will be taught how to make a crystal sword myself. I've never been like the other girls who like to stay away from crystal mining and spend all their time in the fields with the animals. The work of putting pickaxe to stone always seems to calm my nerves and I like that, much like fishermen describe how peaceful it is to be sitting in the middle of a silent lake.

The people who work in the mines around Utopia are always so cheerful and I like hanging out with Bull the Minotaur, who seems to enjoy mining just as much as training. He always says, "Mining toughens the hands and uses every muscle, including your brain. You have to be precise with your strokes or you'll end up cleaving your foot. In a lot of ways, it's similar to sword fighting except we have shade and cooler air."

Since I wasn't fully ready to handle a real weapon, the pickaxe was the closest I could come to practicing with a sword. My body has always been slim but quite

athletic and I'm pretty sure I have more muscles than most of the teenagers who are allowed to train with swords at my age.

Sometimes Mum yells at me for spending so much time in the mine when I should have been studying but recently she seems to have given up worrying about that. She and Dad just exchange knowing smiles whenever I tell them that I've been in the mines. My dad always blushes when Mum looks at him, as if he were still a shy young boy, although he is never actually the bashful, peaceful and modest person my mother claims he is. Often, after Bull and I finish mining, Dad will challenge Bull to a sword fight. I asked him why he picks Bull every time and he said, "He's the only opponent who can give me a real fight, dearest."

I never understood it though because Mum never let me stay to watch them - until last night. It was the most amazing sight. I've never seen anything like it in the training grounds. My dad was so fast but Bull overcame him with sheer cunning and strength. The noise of the swords clashing was deafening and time seemed to stand still as I watched Dad going up against one of the most revered fighters of all time. For the first time ever, I saw a crystal sword break, which I thought was impossible, but apparently Bull is that strong. The sound that came from it was like a wave of thunderbolts crashing down, rolling out across the whole of Utopia.

Bull and Dad hid in the bushes like a couple of naughty little boys as Lady Felicia and Mum came running into the area. I thought I would never stop laughing! Bull was too big to be able to hide from them for long and he wore a guilty grin as he hung his head to shield his face from the scolding they both gave him.

Mum wants me to make friends but I simply don't seem to be very good at it. Well, at least I have Mo, the Cyclops, but Bull has always been my best and closest friend. He taught me almost everything I know. We played constantly, using wooden swords because Mum

refused to let me use a real one. I love his cooking the most because that Minotaur can really put together a scrumptious meal. He makes something different every day.

So, tomorrow my warrior life really begins, even though we don't have wars lately as the demons don't dare attack us anymore. I'll start receiving combat training from Nemesis, the General of the Amazons, General Hunter, who leads the Centaurs, and other instructors. I will also get to watch several young Orizons arrive from places all over Earth in spaceships that I have never seen the inside of. Many of us will be heading to the Welcome Ceremony when they arrive and will then go on to the amphitheater to hear the same speech that I have heard every year of my life - although my mother always makes it sound like she's giving it for the first time.

There's just so much to do tomorrow. I can't wait for the morning to come. I wonder what my future is going to be like. I can't stop thinking whether I will ever have a chance to meet the Gods like Mum did.

Of course, the most fun part of my life right now is my dear English bulldog, Bebi. He has been with me since forever. He was my grandparents' gift to me for my first birthday. They brought him over to the Land of the White Sun fifteen years ago and made him immortal. Bebi even sits with me at the table and shares every dish that I have. He also enjoys playing with my mum's favorite pet, a lion she saved years ago on Earth that she named Larry. When I'm in the house and my parents are not, Larry is my guard although I can't understand what he is supposed to be guarding me from, since we live in peace, but my parents are over protective and...

\*\*\*

The door to Leylah's room cracked open slowly and she saw her mother's eye peeking through.

"Honey, it's getting late," Rebecca said. "You need to rest for tomorrow and don't tell me that you don't, because you fell asleep on your horse this morning."

Leylah giggled at the memory. "Yes, Mother. I'm just updating my diary."

"Okay, sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you too, Mum," Leylah said, feeling her heart glow at her mother's gentle kindness and realising her eyelids had grown heavy. The door clicked shut and Leylah bent her head over her diary once more to bid it goodnight. As she closed it she stroked the leather binding which had cracked from the years of use. The pages inside were fragile, with the papyrus starting to brown and the ink seeping through to the other side, as if trying to escape into the exciting future she herself was dreaming about.



*London, UK - Earth*

A man in his late thirties, Ricky Soblett, awoke to brilliant sunshine in his Knightsbridge apartment. Pulling himself out of bed he walked to the glass wall that overlooked Hyde Park and stretched luxuriantly before padding to the bathroom. The generous proportions of the apartment dwarfed him.

Peering into the mirror through puffy blue eyes, he gave a sigh of satisfaction as he carefully combed what was left of his red hair and flexed the scrawny muscles that were trapped inside his tight polo t-shirt. He bared his large yellow teeth and stroked his closely cropped red beard. His nose had caught the sun the previous day and looked raw and red like an eggplant. Behind his back his employees thought he resembled a rat but he considered himself to be a truly dashing fellow. His high opinion of himself knew no bounds.

The sun dazzled him as the front door of the building opened for him and he walked quickly through the densely planted area, avoiding the splashes from the automated sprinkler system. He could not understand why the building managers bothered with flowers when the space could be used much more effectively for parking, so that he wouldn't need to walk all the way round to the garage.

His new assistant, an attractive woman in her mid twenties, was waiting for him at his limousine, espresso in one hand and the *Financial Times* in the other. Grabbing the espresso, he took a noisy sip as he climbed into the large

car, sinking so far down into the leather seat that his head just barely showed in the window.

His assistant left the newspaper on the seat next to him.

“Sir, the...”

Ricky raised a hand. “Do not talk to me until I finish my coffee. I’ll fire you the next time you interrupt.”

Her mouth tightened as she vainly searched her brain for an acceptable response.

“Is that clear?” he demanded.

She nodded and began to settle into the limousine next to him but he put his hand up again.

“This is my space, go sit with the driver.”

She shut the door with a little more force than she would normally have used and stalked around to the front of the car. Ricky sniggered and took another sip.

A couple of hours later he was at his desk in his office, playing a game on his mobile phone. He loved his business - building luxury boats for rich clients - but it was running so smoothly these days he often found time hanging heavily on his hands. There was never any shortage of wealthy people wanting to buy the best boats in the world.

He looked up as raised voices interrupted the absolute quiet of the office. A customer was giving one of his employees a hard time. Ricky stood up from his desk and strolled closer to his office door in order to hear more clearly.

“There’s no way I’m going to pay such an exorbitant price,” the customer was saying in a heavy eastern European accent. “I made you a fair offer and if you don’t like it, then someone else can have my business.”

“Sir,” the smart young man replied, smiling politely as he had been trained to do, “I understand how you feel. It is a lot of money but this is the lowest price that I can offer you. Would you like to speak to the manager?”

"No, I just want to purchase this boat. I made you an offer. All you have to do now is tell me yes or no!"

Ricky slunk into the cubicle, aware that his bodyguard, Marcus, was right behind him sensing possible trouble. "What seems to be the problem?" asked Ricky.

"Your young man here won't see reason regarding the price of the boat I want."

"How do you think a business works?" Ricky asked a hint of menace behind the rodent-like smile.

"You meet all of my requirements for an affordable price," the man blustered, taking an instant dislike to the ugly little man in front of him.

"So," Ricky's smile now looked more like a snake preparing to pounce, "do you think it is your job to set the price for what it takes to make our services possible?"

"Uhhh... No."

"Do you know how to build the product we offer?"

"Of course I don't."

"Can you find this specific product elsewhere?"

"No, that's why I came to you."

"Then I will set my price as I choose and if you have a problem with this, you can leave."

The customer stood for a moment, speechless, then turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, slamming the door on his way out. Ricky turned his attention to the employee and crossed his arms.

"You're fired!" he said.

"What? Why?"

"If you don't have the guts to handle a customer on your own, then you are not the sort of salesman I want representing my business."

"With all due respect, Sir, I thought that I should try my best to satisfy the customer and to not lose him. I thought we were expected to be polite to the customers and win them over."

"I don't pay you to think, just to sell. Maybe you should *think* about that in your next job."

Ricky walked slowly and deliberately back to his office, feeling energized by the encounter. He loved the feeling of exerting power over others.

Marcus, his bodyguard and one of the few people in the world Ricky had any respect for, followed him into his office.

"Mr Soblett, if I may ask, why did you fire Jack?"

"I tell every employee when they begin working for me that I will not tolerate failure under any circumstances. It's even written in their contracts. Go look at that and leave me alone."

Marcus gave a small bow of acceptance and went back to his seat by the door.

The hours passed and one by one the employees went home, until only Marcus was left, sitting patiently by the door. Ricky called out for him to summon the limousine and was surprised when Marcus came into his office instead and stood in the door, blocking his way out.

"Get out of my way and..."

Marcus grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him back into his chair. "Shut up! Sit down and listen."

Ricky did as he was told, his brain spinning through all kinds of possibilities. He had heard stories of bodyguards betraying their bosses before. Was he about to be kidnapped?

"Little Ricky Soblett," Marcus said, calmly and deliberately as if about to deliver a lecture, "son of Theodore Von Soblett, who sadly passed away six years, six months and six weeks ago. Do you even know who your father really was, Ricky Soblett?"

"What does my father have to do with you?"

Marcus moved forward in a blur of speed and Ricky swiftly found his chin connected to a nine-millimeter gun.

“Answer the question!”

“Please...” Ricky trembled. “My dad was a great man who started out working every waking hour in a waterside bar. The bar eventually became his and years later he turned it into one of the best boat-building companies in the world - a business that he passed down to me.”

“Do you want to know his *real* past?”

Marcus dropped a folder onto the desk in front of him. Ricky looked down at it. It had his father’s name printed across the top of it.

“Go ahead, take a look,” ordered Marcus. He then sat down and placed the gun on his lap, waiting patiently once more. Ricky opened the folder, snatched the papers up and began to read. Once he’d finished, he sighed and looked at his bodyguard.

“As I said, my dad was a great man, and though some people might have believed him to be ruthless, there’s no way he could have been responsible for any of this.”

“Your father was part of something a great deal bigger than this little business of yours.”

“Little?” Ricky exploded.

“Okay, hear me, Soblett, if you interrupt me again, I’ll shoot you!” Ricky swallowed and fell silent. “As I was saying, your father was involved in something so big that it affects the entire world. The information that you have just seen leaves you with the following choices: You may choose to prove yourself like your father did before you and finally take his place in the world, or you can die in that chair right now. Which will it be?”

“How do I prove myself?”

“You kill a couple of hundred innocent people. They die and you are anointed the next leader of your Sartani family, having access to possibly the most important secret in the history of creation.”

“Sartani? My dad was a Sartani leader?”

"Indeed. And now, Ricky, your answer please."

"And you expect me to be responsible for taking the lives of so many people?"

"It's either you or them."

"And how am I supposed to kill them?"

"You are going to bomb a boat."

"Just a random boat?" He gestured at the pictures and models of boats that decorated the walls and surfaces of his office.

"No, we have a particular boat in mind. If you accept, then you will wake up tomorrow morning with a formal invitation in your mailbox. The address will be there."

Ricky shrugged as if the answer was obvious. "Then I accept."

"Now, that's my boy," Marcus laughed sarcastically, standing up and patting Ricky patronizingly on the cheek. "We were sure you would go for it, just like your father did. You will retrieve the bomb from a coffee shop as instructed. If you fail to retrieve the bomb, if you are seen with another person while you retrieve the bomb, or if you send someone else to pick up the bomb for you, then we kill you. I hope I have made myself clear."

Marcus picked up the file that lay open in front of Ricky and left the office.



*Utopia, The Land of the White Sun*

The thunderous sound of trumpets burst into the room as Leylah opened her eyes. She could smell breakfast cooking downstairs but she wanted to lie in bed for a moment longer. She always loved the feeling of waking up in the morning, gradually stretching and losing the stiffness of the night while contemplating what might lie ahead, especially on such a momentous day.

She looked up at the wooden ceiling of her room and watched as dust motes danced in the beams of sunlight. The door creaked and footsteps made their way to the foot of the bed. In a flurry of movement she pulled the blankets over her head to try and protect herself from the attack she knew was inevitable. Turgoth, her father, jumped onto the bed, holding her down as she squirmed beneath his tickling fingers. Leylah thrust out her foot, trying and failing to push him away and save herself from his morning tickle torture.

“Dad! Dad! Stop it Dad, please... I’m sixteen years old, stop with the...” Her shouting turned to uncontrollable giggling as her mother joined in, the two of them pinning her to the bed. She was helpless to save herself until they finally chose to stop, all of them gasping for breath.

Turgoth climbed off the bed and pointed wordlessly to the door, which she knew meant, “*Downstairs, breakfast, now!*” and his daughter emerged out of the warm, crumpled blankets.

Rebecca put her hand on her daughter’s arm as she passed her, her face growing serious. “Listen, Leylah, please don’t

make any more fuss about the fact that I haven't allowed you to join the War Games today. There's plenty of time for you to do all that in the future, after you've had some real training. These Games can become dangerous sometimes and I don't want you to get hurt just trying to prove how good you are."

Leylah nodded sweetly at her mother, her meekness taking Rebecca by surprise. She had expected her daughter to put up more of a fight than that.

"Come on then," she said, relieved but still not sure that she trusted Leylah not to be planning something, "let's go eat breakfast."

Leylah put her clothes on and hurried after her mother. Bebi, her beloved bulldog, was already sitting next to her plate as usual, his patient eyes following her as she walked down the steps. Her plate was stacked twice as high as her parents' and Bebi licked his lips in anticipation.

Leylah sat down next to him, and looked at him questioningly. Bebi placed his right paw on her leg. Leylah made a pouting, frowning face. Bebi then put his left paw on her leg. Leylah faked a grimace at the weight. Bebi removed both paws and turned his back to her, quickly jerking his head round to stick his tongue out at her.

Turgoth and Rebecca laughed at the ritual morning squabble, pleased that their daughter did not think she was too grown-up for such childlike games. The four of them enjoyed their breakfast, their joyous mood continued as they prepared for the ceremony.

\*\*\*

The sound of trumpets filled the air once more. Leylah patted Bebi on the neck and walked into the stables. Her horse was sitting in the hay when she opened the stable door and he rose to strike a dramatic pose, elegantly

flipping his mane on the way up. Leylah beckoned him forward and mounted in one swift movement, galloping out of the stable with Bebi and Larry the lion running at the horse's heels like bodyguards.

Her parents accepted the obvious challenge and rode close on her tail as she raced through the paths of Utopia, streaking past the houses and leaving a cloud of dust in her wake. Her mother was closing in fast on her right as they left the Museum of the fortress behind and Leylah pulled her horse towards the area designated for tethering the horses, forcing her mother to slow down.

Turgoth cut in from her left as they came closer to the amphitheatre. Leylah shakily stood up on her horse's back while the others drew closer. With one athletic leap she jumped into the air and landed by the posts where the horses would be tied, just in time to see her father finish tying his horse and raising his hands triumphantly in the air.

Leylah felt a gigantic hand land her on the back and a low gruff voice muttered in her ear, "You'll get him next time, Leylah."

Leylah turned to find her large Cyclops friend grinning broadly at her. "Oh, Mo, you made it!"

The Cyclops swept her off her feet and engulfed her in a mighty hug and she found herself gasping for air for the second time that morning. Eventually, he released her back onto the ground and shook hands with Turgoth.

"So, how have things been lately?" asked the Cyclops.

"They have been well and a little boring," she grinned. "Are you participating in the War Games this year?"

"I always try to participate. You know that," Mo said, lightly jabbing a finger into her belly. "The real question is..." he whispered conspiratorially, "are you?"

Leylah gave him a mischievous smile. "Mo, what do you mean? Of course I would never do something as reckless as that," she said loudly, for her mother's benefit.

"No, of course not," Mo followed her lead. "How foolish of me to think that you would participate in something soooo dangerous!"

Leylah could hear her father chuckling as he helped a worried-looking Rebecca dismount.

"Run along you two," Rebecca said. "Time is passing."

Mo and Leylah joined the crowd at the entrance of the amphitheatre, mingling with Amazons, Sharkans, Porth, Orizons, Centaurs and Cyclopes as they all jostled to get through the newly constructed gateway. Turgoth and Rebecca had disappeared round the back of the building.

"So, how furious is your mother going to be?" Mo asked as they shuffled their way forward.

"What do you think? She's going to be absolutely livid. I'm more worried about Alexander though. At least I know my mum won't accidentally stab me."

Mo chuckled. "You're right. At least, when she does it, she'll have good reason."

"I'm sixteen years old and she still acts as if I am a fragile little girl," Leylah complained. Mo shrugged and grinned and she felt momentarily annoyed that her friend didn't seem to be giving her the sympathy she felt she deserved.

The crowd was pressing in around them and Mo put his arm around Leylah like a shield so that she wouldn't be smothered. She forgave him for not taking her predicament seriously and rewarded him with a grateful smile, both of them enjoying each other's company.

Bebi arrived panting and pushing his way through the countless legs before brushing his head against Leylah's knees as they emerged into the open space inside. He then darted towards the front row seats and laid himself across two of them as if reserving them. Leylah and Mo laughed

and made their way over to join him, settling down comfortably.

Every head looked up as Pegasus swooped in from the sky and flew around the amphitheatre carrying Lord Leiko and Lady Felicia on his back. The crowd cheered as they landed and Leylah could see her mother standing next to them on the stage. She wondered where her father was.

“Hey Mo, can you see my father? He’s not where he usually is.”

“Where is he usually?”

“Where else? Standing next to my mum!”

“Maybe they’ve decided to change things a bit?”

“You think so? They don’t normally modify the ceremony at all.”

“Well, they might feel the need to make changes just for fun.”

“Mo, ‘fun’ is not a concept any of our rulers are very familiar with.”

Mo gave her a light dig with his elbow. “Ah, well, then it should be amusing to see how badly they mess it up if they choose to try.”

Leylah laughed but continued to search the amphitheatre for a glimpse of her father.



The amphitheatre grew quiet as the last of the stragglers took their seats. Felicia walked briskly onto the stage and held out her arms to the crowd. She wore an emerald dress which was neatly fitted together at the shoulder. She looked as beautiful as ever, easily capturing the attention of the whole amphitheatre as she started to speak.

“As you all know, this is our twenty seventh year of peace. Due to this fact, some of us may no longer see the need for training but, on the contrary, this is the moment when we need to be at our best and most alert. It is during periods of peace that Evil has the time to make its next plan. Evil never stops working to find ways to undermine and defeat Good. This peace will only last for as long as we stay strong and vigilant and the moment will inevitably come when we will need to rise up in force to vanquish Evil once again!”

She paused as everyone let out a roar of applause. As the cheers died down, she smiled and continued.

“During the last few years our War Games have reached a new level. In the past we always trained for the day when the King of Beast would bring his army to our gates and we would need to defend the Sacred Flame. However, with the help of our Gods, we forged a revolutionary path of peace between us and all of us joined forces when a greater enemy, in the shape of the Titans’ army, attacked us. United, we managed to crush them!”

The crowd let out another roar of triumph and agreement.

“Since then we’ve faced no serious challenges but through hard and continuous training we have kept ourselves in top form. With the War Games, each of us strives to show

what we have learned in our training. There are no losers or winners here, only those who understand how far they have come. It is also, of course, a spectacular show, which I know you're all looking forward to. With that in mind, I would now like to ask our young trainees to come to the stage."

Young Orizons and Sharkans emerged from the crowd and walked towards the stage from all directions, forming lines like marching ants as the crowd kept a steady storm of applause, clapping in time to their marching feet.

Lord Leiko raised his voice above the thunderous beat: "Today, we graciously accept these boys and girls into our family. May the Flame guide you to always serve Good and to defend it with all your might."

Doctor Afterland stepped out onto the stage bearing the Flame in his hand. He administered it to each of the young people in turn, pausing to allow them to bask for a moment in the rapturous reception of the crowd as they received the Flame.

"Was it difficult for you to choose the Flame?" Mo asked Leylah as they clapped and cheered.

Leylah smiled up at him. "What would I do without a Mo by my side?"

He laughed. "No, but really, was it difficult?"

"Honestly, it wasn't. I was actually very excited and looking forward to it. If I had to make the choice over again, I would still do the same."

Mo nodded thoughtfully. "Being mythical creatures, we Cyclopes don't need the Flame to gain immortality but, if I ever had to choose, I would opt for the Flame. My people lived through the Lomani wars and we were finally rewarded. Now we even have our own Kingdom. There's no way any of us would simply give all this up to do the same thing we were doing under Turgoth's rule. No offense."

“My father went through a lot in the struggle to get the Flame for his people,” Leylah said. “I don’t blame him for the drastic measures he had to take in order to do so. I’m proud of my father.”

“And so you should be. He’s a great man.”

Once the last trainee had received the Flame, Rebecca switched places with Felicia on stage, pausing to allow the ceremony to finish before she began talking.

“I came to this land nearly thirty years ago. At the time, all of our people were at war. Since I was new here, I had questions about why our Kingdoms had been fighting for so long. King Turgoth, who is now my husband, had to kidnap me in order to get me to listen to him. Talk about a charming first date, huh?”

Everybody laughed, although they had heard the joke many times before and were more than familiar with the history of Rebecca and Turgoth’s great romance.

“Not long after I met Turgoth, the Gods went to war with the Titans and we were all deeply affected during that war, as well as after it. Today, all of our Kingdoms sit happily united in the same amphitheatre. Sometimes, it takes even more love to listen to your enemy than it does to defend your loved ones. We all share the same benefits now and it is our responsibility to ensure that the Flame does not end up in the hands of real Evil.”

Rebecca paused for a breath before continuing: “Alas! Evil still exists on Earth and we transmit our love to those living on that planet to help them combat it. Thanks to their efforts, the Dark Side activity on Earth has decreased lately, but do not think even for a moment that it is not still there, looking for ways to grow stronger. We stand here today to make sure that it never triumphs and that the Titans do not escape their prison. We thrive together! We defend the Flame together! And we will crush Evil every time... together!”

A deafening pounding of feet and hands rose up from the amphitheatre as Felicia replaced Rebecca on the stage.

“Thank you, Princess Rebecca. Now, this is why we are constantly accepting more warriors into our already mighty family. We are here to combat the Evil that the Titans bring to us, whether it is here in the Land of the White Sun or down on Earth.”

Felicia paused to look at the crowd, ensuring she had their full attention before continuing: “Newcomers who have never seen the Land of the White Sun before will soon be arriving from Earth. They will need to receive all the support we can give them in order to learn all they can about our world. We would like volunteers who are willing to welcome and accept these children with the love we share among us. If you would like to volunteer, please see Princess Rebecca, Bull, Doctor Afterland or me after this ceremony. Now, let’s all go have fun at the arena. Good luck to all the participants!”

They all continued to shout, chant and clap as they left the amphitheatre and headed towards the arena.



Felicia waited patiently outside the amphitheatre entrance for volunteers to make themselves known to her. Rebecca was also waiting there for Leylah.

"Goodbye for now, Mo," Leylah said, giving her friend a hug before going to her mother, "I'll catch up with you later at the arena."

"Leylah," Rebecca said as they walked together, "I think you should volunteer this year."

"I should volunteer? It would be my pleasure, Mum, but why are you telling me this now?"

"Gregory and Anna will be arriving this year. Gregory is Bill and Samantha's son and Anna is Sergei and Tamina's daughter. They were my best friends when I first came here to the Land of the White Sun and I'm sure that you'll become just as good friends with Gregory and Anna."

"Okay, but I've never volunteered to help with the training of the newcomers before. What would my duties be?"

"You will answer their questions to the best of your ability. Occasionally, you will help them in their training and guide them along for their first season here. Bull did it for me all those years ago, so it's our turn to return the kindness that was shown to me - the same kindness you've had since birth."

"So... I become their mentor for the next few months?"

"No, you become their friend. Bull still gets asked questions by young people even to this day, including me. We're here to help them whenever they need it. I think you should let Felicia know you would like to do it."

"I'll be happy to do it, Mum," she said, pecking her mother on the cheek before leaving her to make her way to Felicia.

Felicia was even more radiant up close than she had seemed on stage, her face glowing with an unmatched beauty. Just as Leylah was about to reach her, someone crashed into her from behind, sending her sprawling on the ground and knocking the breath out of her lungs.

Through the confusion she heard a calm voice that reminded her of the sound of waterfalls in the mountains. "Are you okay, Leylah?"

A hand appeared in front of her face moving up and down, checking that she was conscious. She shook her head clear and looked up. Her heart seemed to stop beating, as if it had been melted away to nothing by some invisible heat source when she saw Alexander's concerned eyes staring down at her. She struggled to regain her breath and find sensible words, but neither came for what seemed like an agonizingly long time.

"Leylah?"

"Um, yeah... uh... I mean, sure, I'm fine."

As she looked around she saw Felicia smiling at her in a way she had never seen before and she suddenly felt self-conscious, as if she had given away an innermost secret.

"I was trying to get out of the crowd," Alexander was explaining apologetically, "and I wasn't looking where I was going. I'm so sorry."

Leylah struggled back up to her feet, avoiding his eyes and trying to suppress the blush that had turned her face crimson while dusting herself down. "No," she said, "it's absolutely fine. Getting out of the theatre is probably more difficult than a War Game."

"So, what are you up to?" he asked.

"I was actually just going to your mother to volunteer to greet a couple of trainees."

“Oh, really? Your mother tells me Gregory and Anna are coming this year. I was hoping to greet them myself.”

Leylah darted a look at her mother, who smiled back at her innocently. “Yeah, my mum told me about them. Do you know them?”

“Yeah, they are about your age but I met them when I visited Earth last year and they showed me around. It was a lot of fun and they are good kids, so I wanted to return the favor.”

“Nice,” Leylah said, with a hint of suspicion in her voice.

“Well then, shall we go talk to my mum together?”

“Okay,” she said, following him up to Felicia.

“Hey Mum, Leylah and I would like to volunteer to greet Gregory and Anna. Is it possible for both of us to look after the same trainees?”

“Of course,” Leylah was sure she could see a mischievous twinkle in Felicia’s eyes. “That won’t be a problem at all.”

Alexander patted Leylah on the back. “Good! Now we’re all set. We’d better get into the arena before the crowd starts to grow impatient for us.”

Seeing Leylah’s glower, Alexander realised what he had let slip.

“Yeah,” she said, deliberately loudly. “We’d better pick some really good seats this year, Alex.”

He nodded. “Agreed. Let’s try to get as far front as we can.”

Leylah cut the conversation off before he said anything else and ran back to Rebecca. “I cannot believe you, Mum,” she hissed angrily.

“You can’t believe what?” Rebecca pretended to have no idea what she was talking about.

“You and Lady Felicia planned that, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean, little one.”

“You know what I’m like around him and you did that on purpose, Mum. Stop trying to shove Alex on me.”

“A mother can only try.”

Infuriated by her mother’s complete lack of contrition, Leylah mounted her horse and galloped to the arena towards the excitement that she knew lay ahead.



The War Games arena was even bigger than the amphitheatre. The entire building was made out of stone in the style of the Coliseum of Ancient Rome. The dense crowd surrounding the wide open space at the centre was growing restless with excitement.

As Leylah entered with her grandparents, Julius and Adriana, her heart began to beat faster. She could feel the electricity in the air and the rumble of the crowd which made the very ground beneath her feet tremble with anticipation.

They found reserved seats relatively close to the front. It was an unspoken rule that the Cyclopes and the Porth always sat in the back because of their size. The Centaurs also had their own special area, just as they always did in the amphitheatre.

As Leylah sat beside her grandmother, silent and nervous, she saw her mother riding into the arena and her palms began to sweat. She felt waves of nausea passing through her as the moment of open defiance drew closer.

Rebecca dismounted from her horse and patted off a few specks of dirt from her white silk dress as she walked across the arena, taking her seat next to her father, Julius. Leylah was careful not to look in her direction, knowing that if she caught her mother's gaze she would give herself away.

Rebecca glanced at Leylah and could see that her daughter was deliberately avoiding her eyes, looking all around the arena instead. She put her daughter's air of agitation down to excitement. It seemed like yesterday that she was just a little baby in her arms with dimpled cheeks and barely a hair on her head. Now Rebecca was looking at a strong