



MARIO ROUTI

REBECCA
NEWTON

AND THE WAR OF THE GODS

Contents

Front Matter	i
Title Page.	i
Publisher Information	ii
Dedication	iii
The War of the Gods.	1
1	1
2	9
3	16
4	22
5	27
6	38
7	42
8	48
9	62
10.	72
11.	82
12.	94
13.	102
14.	110
15.	118
16.	128
17.	135
18.	145
19.	154
20.	163
21.	168
22.	178
23.	193
24.	201
25.	211
26.	224
27.	233
28.	244
29.	257
30.	264
31.	270
32.	290
33.	294
34.	307
35.	314
36.	321
37.	328
38.	336
39.	361
40.	367
Back Matter	373
Acknowledgements	373
The Author.	374
Also Available	375

REBECCA NEWTON
&
THE WAR OF THE GODS

A NOVEL BY MARIO ROUTI

Book III

OAK TREE PRESS

PUBLISHER INFORMATION

Published by Oak Tree Press

65–67 Bute Street, Luton

Bedfordshire, LU1 2EY

www.oaktreepress.co.uk

Oak Tree press is an imprint of

Andrews UK Limited

www.andrewsuk.com

Copyright © 2016 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: Damonza

Cover model: Emily Wyatt

To my brother

1

Earth - Present time

Her airy presence filled the space as she entered the room. She was dressed in a long, blue, ancient Greek-style tunic, the edges of which were embroidered with patterns of golden thread and colourful flowers. Around her slim waist she wore a leather belt, its clasp adorned with a carved golden sun. Her feet, naked in a pair of leather sandals, stepped lightly on the emerald green carpet as she headed towards the stairs that led directly below the General Secretariat's seat to the rostrum. Her white silken veil fluttered behind her as she ascended the steps to the podium, upon which stood one of the most renowned global emblems: a map of the World, cradled within olive sprigs. Her beautiful face, radiating power and nobility, appeared above the heads of the crowd on both wall-screens of the General Assembly as it was simultaneously broadcast on billions of television screens all over Earth.

She took a gentle breath, smiled and started to speak:

"Mr. Secretary General, Ladies and Gentlemen of this Congress, citizens of all nations, I salute you.

“My name is Rebecca Newton. I was born and raised here, on Earth. The beautiful land of England, for which I will always feel, deep in my heart, a very sweet nostalgia, was my original home. But still, I am an Orizon, which means that I come from another, faraway world – one which we, its inhabitants, call The Land of the White Sun...”

As the world listened attentively, waiting before their screens to hear what she would say next, she stopped talking.

The select crowd below the rostrum was made up of nearly two thousand people who filled the enormous United Nations General Assembly Hall in New York. Representatives from all of Earth’s 193 countries were there, as were the cameras and reporters of all the most powerful global media outlets. The whole world held its collective breath as the elegant young woman with the long brown hair and sparkling green eyes remained still and silent before them.

She was the undisputed star of perhaps the greatest event in the history of Earth, but she said nothing. The Secretary-General introduced her as the “Ambadress of another planet” and now she was on the United Nations rostrum, being watched by all mankind. Yet, the mysterious woman, having formally saluted and having uttered no more than a few startling words, now seemed to have no more to say.

The suspense continued uninterrupted for less than a minute but to those who waited it seemed like an eternity.

* * *

Rebecca was finding it hard to swallow past the lump in her throat. Her heart was fluttering and beating loudly, like an old clock that had fallen out of time. A drop of cold sweat ran from the back of her neck down her spine, making her entire body shudder as it travelled. Her arms and legs

felt heavy, as if they were carved out of granite. She could barely breathe and feared she might pass out.

As the seconds ticked endlessly past, she felt the huge burden of responsibility that lay upon her shoulders. Her mind, which just a few minutes prior had been calm and full of certainty, was now overflowing with doubts:

Is it possible that the time isn't right for such a revelation? Or, even worse, was it a mistake for her to be there at all? Should she have embarked upon this mission to enlighten these people in some other way or some other place? Was this all a catastrophic error of judgement?

She remembered what her husband, King Turgoth, had told her just before she boarded the spaceship that would carry her to Earth. He had taken her hands in his, kissed her tenderly on the forehead and said: "Dearest Rebecca, I know how much you love humankind and that you will do everything in your power to help the people of Earth. This mission of yours, however, does not only require a warm heart but also a cool and collected mind."

She had raised her face and looked into his wonderful grey eyes, which, though always brimming with love, strength and resolution, now seemed like two dark and troubled lakes. Rebecca had merely smiled at him in reply and nodded for him to go on. He sighed and his long hair fell forward, caressing her cheeks.

"What I am trying to say is that maybe you should approach this mission a little more realistically. Always remember that humanity is divided into hundreds of states and that many of them share complex rivalries and long-standing historical feuds. A great number of their leaders do not understand any language other than that of power. There are bound to be those who are blinded by their selfish ambition or by religious fanaticism and who won't be able to comprehend in the slightest the danger that's currently threatening them. You are going there in hopes of uniting

them but still, many won't be thinking beyond how *they* will be able to obtain an advantage over others from the situation. Even in the face of such a terrible crisis the worst offenders will do everything to save only themselves. They won't care – not even for a moment – about their nations or about their fellow man. Awakening the Good inside them may prove to be a great deal harder than you imagine – especially now, when most of the people on Earth are either terrified or under the direct influence of Evil.”

Rebecca knew that Turgoth was right but still she had chosen to follow her heart's path.

* * *

She had begun the mission with a spectacular arrival on Earth, flying the Orizon crystal spaceship in low over the towering skyscrapers of Manhattan. Having landed it – in all its dazzling splendour – near the United Nations Headquarters, the princess had emerged in full view and floated up into the air before the eyes of stunned bystanders, flying slowly, like an elegant blue and white bird. Some of those who witnessed the apparent miracle simply stared – speechless and frozen in place – while others ran screaming from the scene, filled with panic at what seemed to them to be an alien invasion. Had they seen who was piloting the spaceship they would have been even more in awe, but Rebecca had decided that Bull the Minotaur should not appear for the moment. She figured it best to let them get used to one wonder at a time.

Reacting to the arrival of an unidentified flying object, UN security forces immediately scrambled into action, followed by armed policemen and soldiers. They had surrounded the spacecraft within minutes of its engines falling silent, by which time the princess was already flying high above their heads on her way to find the Secretary

General of the international organisation. So far everything had gone according to plan but it wasn't long before the trouble that Turgoth had warned of would arrive.

The Secretary General was waiting and informed her that the leaders of the eight most powerful countries had agreed to her request to address the people of Earth.

"They respectfully suggest, however," he said, "that you initially meet with the Security Council."

"My message is for all mankind and not just the powerful or the leaders of nations," she replied. "Please convene an Extraordinary General Meeting within the next twenty-four hours."

The General Assembly is the main body of the United Nations where member states gather to discuss the major problems facing the world and usually those involving several countries or continents, for which international cooperation is required. It is the parliament of a world government and, unlike those of the Security Council, its resolutions are not legally binding for its member states.

She had succeeded in capturing the world's attention but would she be able to persuade people to put aside their differences and unite against the danger that threatened to destroy them? Or would her arrival merely create even more chaos on Earth?

As she fought to breathe she raised her gaze above the heads in the crowd, trying to ignore the two thousand or so pairs of eyes that were focused on her with a mixture of suspicion and fear and staring instead at the impressive dome above her. In the centre there was a golden circle which looked like a sun while the rest – black and dotted with hundreds of small lights – reminded her of the starry night sky. Throughout her life she had spent many evenings looking up at the night sky, always able to draw strength from the stars.

Why should she worry? Was she not the immortal princess of the Orizons, who always had the floor in the assemblies of the Land of the White Sun kingdoms? Was she not the one who had suggested bold strategies in War Councils? Time and again she had delivered fiery speeches in order to fill her comrades' hearts with hope and courage before charging with them into battles against the terrifying monsters that the Tartars had spawned. Was she, herself, not the one who had requested from the Gods to take on this mission? And had the Gods not only accepted but also changed many rules for her sake, granting her the ability to fly on Earth which, until then, had been impossible, even for an Orizon? Had the Gods not agreed to allow her to go to Earth, despite the fact that she had already been killed once at the hand of a Titan in the Elysian Fields? No other Orizon who had fallen in battle had ever been permitted to travel to Earth before. This was the reason why her husband, Turgoth, who was killed by her own hands in an era that now seemed like centuries ago, could not accompany her on her journey.

In the war against Evil and in the many battles she had fought to protect the Sacred Flame, she had never stepped back. How could she quail now, at the most crucial moment?

She remembered the last words Turgoth had said to her just before she ascended the stairs to enter the spaceship that would transfer her to another universe. Before kissing her goodbye, he had hugged her tenderly and said: "My princess, I wish I could be there to support you but you know I can't be. The Gods have already made an exception for you. After all, our own world is in danger, too, and we must prepare our defence..."

As his strong arms held her tightly she could feel the aura of his body passing into hers like pure energy. One of the

sweetest smiles she had ever seen on his lips illuminated his face.

“Bear my concerns in mind but do what your heart knows to be right. I trust your heart, Rebecca Newton. I have absolute faith in you and, from here, I’ll do everything I can to support you in this difficult battle you are going to fight on Earth... Be strong. I love you!”

Rebecca felt a gentle pinch in her heart at the memory, followed by a sweet warmth a moment later. She managed to take a deep breath, the air fanning a flame which was flickering inside her chest – kindling a fire that seemed to be threatening to spread further throughout her body.

She felt the need to take another breath but feared the air would feed that fire, making it so fierce that it would consume her. Inside her head a voice was telling her to stop being afraid – to entirely surrender herself to whatever came next.

Obedying the voice, she took a deep breath and the flame ignited an explosion inside her. Her body remained still but her mind and soul erupted. The explosion had originated in her heart and its blast filled the hall, penetrating its walls and rolling out across the universe in every direction.

Many of the congressmen who wore headphones in order to follow the speech of the Ambassador of the Extraterrestrials via translators wrenched them from their ears to protect their eardrums from the shrill whistling. The lights and wall-screens flickered menacingly.

Rebecca felt her heart rate return to normal. She took another deep breath, which now seemed to cool her to the depths of her soul. Just as the crowd began to grow restless and exchange exasperated looks, she resumed speaking.

“What I am about to tell you will almost certainly conflict with every scientific, philosophical or religious belief you have ever held or been taught. However, believe me when I say that you have virtually no time in which

to absorb the shock of my words. With every passing moment the dangers threatening your planet increase and multiply a thousand times over. The terrible events which have overwhelmed so many of you lately – the merciless terrorist attacks, the deadly epidemics, the ever increasing tension and conflict between people and countries, the mass suicides, the dramatic environmental and seismic phenomena – are all linked. For this reason, I would ask that you reserve judgement of my words until you have heard everything I have to say.”



2

Tartarus - A few weeks before present time

His voice, soft as velvet, was barely audible in the empty crevices of the domed cave or amongst the high arches that surrounded it.

"I think I need a little more of your black nectar, my dear Echidna."

"Right away, my lord," she replied, and released her two sisters from her embrace in order to slip into the dark waters of the River Styx. Moving with all the silent stealth of an aquatic reptile, she swam rapidly across the round cistern, the perimeter of which was lined with the raised forms of eight stone dragons.

A few moments later, Echidna emerged on the opposite side of the cistern, the scales of her body wet and shining beneath the mournful light emitted by a mighty purple polyhedral crystal hanging from an iron chain anchored to the centre of the cave roof. She slithered towards him with the lustful, hypnotising rhythm of a cobra approaching its sleepy victim.

"Your wish is my command, my king," she whispered, arriving before his throne, which was sculpted high on a

black volcanic rock. Chiselled by Demons, with all their frightful art, it was decorated with a cluster of reptiles wrapped around human bones and skulls that howled silently with toothless, gaping jaws.

His heavy, drunken eyes looked down at her, struggling to focus. Echidna was kneeling with her hands stretched forward and her forehead touching the floor.

"Enough with the formalities," he mumbled. "All I want right now is a little more of the *Water of Oblivion*."

He turned the golden cup he was holding upside down, just to show her that he had drained it to the last drop.

Echidna, who resembled a woman in every aspect except for her skin and eyes, which were more like those of a serpent, rose up from her prone position. As she walked she arched slightly back from the waist, swaying her head from side to side in an attempt to unstick the long, red, fire-like hair that was falling wet to her thighs from her back. She reached the place where three stone settees stood, covered with furs, skins, large pillows and gold embroidered fabrics. All around them, oddly-shaped musical instruments and small tables were arranged, on which many kinds of gold and silver pots were strewn. She lifted an amphora and placed it on the floor. Bending over it she gathered her hair in front of her face and squeezed it, allowing the water of the Styx to flow into the vessel. Once the very last drop had fallen, she took the amphora with slow, ritualistic movements and emptied its contents into a large cup which lay on one of the tables.

As the snake-woman took the cup to him, she murmured an ancient spell. The man rose from his throne and, with a sharp movement, threw back the hood that covered his head. Muttering unintelligibly to himself, he nervously loosened his black cloak, letting it fall behind his wide shoulders. The thud of his boots echoed off the distant walls

as he descended the stairs on the rock. After taking three steps he stumbled, emitting a growl of irritation from deep within his iron chest. Regaining his balance, he paused and stared at the empty cup he held in his hand for a few moments before hurling it into the cistern, his mirthless chuckle filling the cave in the heart of Tartarus.

The golden cup traced a curved path before disappearing with a splash into the dark waters. Echidna's two sisters shrilled and laughed mincingly and then dived, pretending they were hunting for it on his behalf. But all the creatures of this underworld knew that the Cistern of the Styx was bottomless.

When the man reached the last step on the black rock, he sat down heavily, moaning. Echidna was already there, waiting for him on her knees, her eyes downcast and her hands outstretched, offering him his new cup. He took it without saying a word and stared distractedly at its contents.

"Drink the Black Water, my lord," Echidna coaxed. "Let the balsam of our Styx soothe all your worries."

"I have been drinking this bittersweet poison of yours for thousands of years, Echidna, and... you know something?"

The female creature was about to ask: *what?* – but knew that if she spoke up at that moment, it would seem quite unusual to him and would perhaps make him suspicious. So she did not say a word, but rather raised her head and pretended to look at him with a puzzled expression, allowing herself to set her eyes once more on the fierce face that exuded a tremendous ancient power but was also cursed to be remembered by no one, not even a moment after taking their eyes off it.

His long, grey hair fell onto his shoulders, messy and sweaty, like the mane of a lion that had already fought a mortal combat. His wide face was full of angles, as if chiselled

by some almighty craftsman unleashing his ferocious wrath by hitting his steel hammer with unutterable rage onto the hardest of rocks. A wry smile dawned upon the non-existent lips of his wide mouth. Where his eyes should have been, there were two orbits with an ineffable darkness nesting within.

Echidna, simultaneously enchanted and scared, lowered her eyes and instantly forgot his face.

“You see, now?” he sighed. “It seems that the Black Water of Oblivion and I have become one.”

He stroked her hair and she leaned closer in order to lay her head on his knee.

“Many times,” he growled, “I have thought that what you are offering me is not my remedy, but another punishment imposed by those filthy Gods.”

His words pierced her cold heart like burning blades. Of course, this was not the first time she had seen him in one of his black moods and she could always find ways to calm him. It was best to remain absolutely silent, letting him soliloquise until sleep weighed so heavily on his eyelids that he could no longer fight it. If sometimes she responded to something he said, she only did so to change the subject and direct his thoughts elsewhere. But this time, the snake-woman had a very specific mission that – if she wanted to keep her head on her neck – she must carry out.

“Why do you say so, my lord?” she simpered. “My sisters and I always do everything in our power to soothe your pains and make you forget. I...”

“The Water of the Styx cannot make me forget,” he interrupted her, taking the bait. “This black liquid, that no one knows where it originates from nor where it ends, all it can offer me is numbness of the mind, allowing me to fall into your arms and sink into a sleep with dreams full of images of my past glories. Yes, it can make my mind

travel back, transporting me, albeit briefly, to those times when I was still a Creator and the absolute master of many worlds. For a while it can make me feel my old power and joy. But when its effect wears off and I wake up, all the ugly memories once again overwhelm me. They weigh me down so heavily that I feel as if entire mountains are crashing down onto my shoulders. Then I become scared and suffer unbearably, since it's like I'm reliving all my torment in one single moment. It's as if the thunderbolts of Zeus are burning my body once more and then, defeated, I sink into endless chaos. And it's like – oh... it's like I'm watching the gates of this hell slam shut in front of my injured face, sealing me in forever."

"But my lord, you will always have your kingdom. You will always have the world of Tartarus."

"*My kingdom?*" He grabbed her by the hair, pulling her head back with a force that made her gasp.

"Look at me, snake!" he snarled.

She saw that his head now resembled a bust of cold grey ice with veins of liquid fire – a hot lava that seemed ready to gush over her through his blood red eyes. She let out a scream of anguish and feebly tried to divert her gaze elsewhere.

"What you call *my kingdom* is a dark endless labyrinth engineered by the sick mind of that despicable creature, Hades, who lives among my mortal enemies, the hideous Gods of the Elysian Fields!"

The cup fell from his fingers onto the granite slabs of the ground. The carved psychedelic symbols fluoresced and created a shrill whistling sound as the water of the Styx splashed over them.

"What you call *my kingdom* is nothing more than an infinite grave."

He threw her aside and sprang up. His voice now contained no trace of humanity.

“What you call *my kingdom* is my eternal prison!” he howled before dropping to his knees, as if struck by a thunderbolt.

Aware of what was to follow, Echidna crawled frantically away from him, cowering on the edge of the cistern and quivering with fear yet unable to take her eyes off him. She had heard of this miracle – this transformation – as recounted in awe by some and in whispers of horror by others, but she had never seen it with her own eyes. Now – behold, the Lord of the Titans was about to appear before her in all his glory.

His face turned as black as coal and a thick, stinking smoke belched from his wide-open mouth. The arches of the cave trembled from the force of his howls as his bloody flesh fell away. His bones creaked and snapped horribly as they enlarged and shifted in shape, taking on the form of a beastly hybrid between a gigantic gorilla and a tyrannosaurus. The clouds of black smoke moved as if they had a life of their own, wrapping themselves around those eerie bones before transforming into the muscles, the flesh and the steel scales of the almighty armour of the most dreadful being of Tartarus.

The frightful monster rose to its feet, towering above her, the sharp spines of its dorsal fin sending down showers of sparks as they scraped against the rocky surface of the cave. Its two tails swung savagely from side to side, smashing into the rock of the throne. Echidna lost her ability to breathe and felt her heart stop at the sound of the long, bony scythe springing out of his right wrist, whistling as it wildly reaped the air above her head. Every fibre of her being vibrated with ineffable terror and, simultaneously, unprecedented pleasure, as, for the first time in so long, she heard that portentous voice emerge through the breasts of the *Absolute Evil*, like a volcano roaring or the screams of thousands of Demons preparing for war.

“I am Cronus, Lord of the Titans. The Universe is my kingdom... And I will take it back!”



3

Utopia - At the same time

She ran out through the main entrance of the hospital. From within the crowd many saw her and called her name.

“Princess Leylah!”

Others waved at her silently, inclining their heads in deference. She did not stop to speak to or greet anyone nor did she even turn around to look at them.

She descended the stairs two at a time and then ran at full speed like a flash of lightening towards the courtyard gate. So fast was she travelling that she failed to see the huge object lying in her path until she fell onto it.

“Leylah?” Mo, the Cyclops, said in surprise.

She didn’t answer, but simply stood up and ran past him.

“My dear, what’s wrong with you?” Mo’s voice resonated from behind her like a mournful trombone.

She kept running for at least another hundred yards before she finally reduced her speed. She took a few more steps and then came to a complete stop. For a few seconds she stood there, looking around, apparently baffled. She felt as if every ounce of her blood was pumping through her brain at full speed. Her heart was beating like crazy

and so loudly that she thought it was about to explode. She didn't understand why this should be. After all, she was an Orizon warrior and could effortlessly run several miles while constantly controlling her heart rate through her breathing. But it wasn't the running that was causing whatever was happening to her body right now.

She turned around and looked back at the beautiful hospital. Like most buildings in Utopia, it had been constructed along the noblest lines of ancient Greek architecture, but it had also sustained enormous damage from the fury of the Demons that the Lord of Tartarus had sent to attack them. The once splendid statue of the God of Medicine, Asclepius, which had stood proudly in the centre of the large square in the courtyard, was now no more than a charred and beheaded body. It had been created by one of the land's greatest sculptors, who had chiselled it from the brightest, whitest marble to have ever originated from the womb of Thunder Mountain, which was now black and broken.

Dozens of carriages bustled in and out of the half-ruined central gate of the courtyard delivering the injured of every tribe in the Land of the White Sun. Above the crowd, the form of her best friend, Mo, the kind-hearted Cyclops, stood out as he gazed after her with a puzzled look, scratching his big head and blinking his one and only eye.

Leylah's own eyes were drawn to one specific window of the hospital.

"I love you, Alex," she whispered, before turning around and setting off once more at full speed, her blue boots barely touching the ground as her strides grew longer and longer.

"I love you!" she sang into the wind and, with one mighty leap, took off almost vertically from the ground. She used her arms and legs like a diver who, after a deep journey underwater, finally reaches the seabed and quickly returns to the surface for air.

Very few Utopian warriors could pull off such a steep takeoff, even among those who received the most intense training. Leylah, herself, had been unable to achieve it until that very moment, when she soared effortlessly upwards, literally without even thinking about it. Her soul was already in heaven and her body could do nothing but follow. All she wanted was to fly high – really crazy ridiculously high.

She felt so light – like a single feather from the breast of a tiny songbird. At the same time she felt that all the muscles in her body were as strong as those needed to power the flight of a mighty dragon. Gliding through the air, she rose higher and higher, constantly keeping her gaze fixed on the sky and without even once thinking about glancing down. Her only wish was to become one with the infinite blue heavens that stretched out above her.

She closed her eyes and continued to rise, losing all sense of her rapidly increasing distance to the ground. She couldn't have cared less about it; she simply wanted to soar for the sheer joy of it.

"I wonder how high I must go to reach the gate that leads to the Elysian Fields?" she thought and laughed at the boldness of the idea, knowing that no creature from the Land of the White Sun had ever been able to pass through the Gate that led to the world of the Gods on its own. This was a feat that could only be performed by riding the legendary flying horse, the winged Pegasus, or by climbing onto one of the golden chariots of the God of Light, the bright and mysterious Apollo. Nonetheless, Leylah carried on savouring the fantasy.

"And when I reach the crystal palace of the Gods, will the magnificent Aphrodite accept me in her quarters? Oh yes, it's the Goddess of Love who I will head to – to fall at her feet and beg her to cast her spell to make him love me back."

Her laughter seemed to well up from deep inside her heart. She was intoxicated with love – the sweetest wine that can ever be savoured by any beings, from the humblest human on Earth to the most powerful God in the Elysian Fields.

At last, she had told Alexander that she loved him!

How many times had she pictured that very scene? How many nights had she laid awake, plotting and planning all the variations that she could possibly imagine? How many times had she felt that it was the right timing and the right situation in which to open her heart to him? But always, at the most critical moment, something had happened to ruin everything. How many times had these three tremendous little words been on the tip of her tongue, yet she had found herself unable to utter them – to even whisper them – because she had quailed at the prospect that he might laugh?

Still, no matter how she had imagined it, the reality of it had played out so much differently.

Alexander had been laying in his hospital bed, badly wounded by the poisonous knife of one of their most devious enemies, General Varta. Leylah had rested her head on his chest, anxiously listening to the rhythm of his heartbeat. When he eventually woke up and asked her what had happened, she had burst into tears and tried to tell the whole story in one breath, leaving herself gasping for air. Alexander had hugged her, gently caressed her hair and told her:

“Listen to me. Everything is over now. We’ve done it.”

Leylah had kept crying in his arms, releasing a hundred different emotions while he remained patient and silent. Finally, she had lifted her head from his chest and met his eyes.

“Alex?”

“Yes?”

“I have something to tell you.”

He waited for her to go on.

“I... I love you!” she said, gently pressing her cool lips against his.

With that she ran out of his room without looking back and didn't stop running even when she burst through the hospital gate. And she went on running until the moment she tripped over Mo.

Now she was flying, carried away by the surge of that power that had finally been released from inside her and was currently driving her high – unbelievably high.

She was blissful. With her eyes still closed, she increased her efforts to rise higher, thinking of nothing but those three magical little words:

“I love you!”

How long had she been travelling towards the sky? She didn't know. She had also lost all sense of time. She felt fine, with cool swirls of wind wrapping and caressing her body, playing with her blonde hair and whispering in her ears words that sounded like those of a forgotten ancient language. She couldn't make out what they meant, but the words themselves were so tantalising that they made her laugh out loud.

As she flew higher, the air currents suddenly whistled farewell and wandered away from her. The air became thinner and thinner and the cold grew sharper, so much so that she began to feel as if she were swimming in the waters of a frozen lake and she opened her eyes.

White. Everywhere around her there was nothing but white. She had reached the clouds!

“This is far enough,” she thought, and stopped kicking her legs, simply keeping her arms outstretched.

She remained like that for a while, hovering in the sky, above everyone and everything, revelling in the peace and

happiness. With her arms still wide open, she tilted her body and let the gravity of the Land of the White Sun pull her back again, sinking into the frozen white foam.



Tartarus

The mighty iron gate of the Great Hall of the Styx swung slowly open. A maid dressed in black entered first.

“Rise for Rhea, Queen of the Titans and of all the beings of Tartarus!” she announced loudly.

Echidna and her two sisters sprang from their daybeds, hastily pulling veils over themselves and turning towards the entrance. They knelt and touched their heads to the floor. Even though they could see nothing, all three of them sensed the exact moment when the Queen passed by. Her powerful, menacing aura pervaded the entire atmosphere of their cave like an unspeakable sin.

Echidna couldn't resist the temptation and dared to slightly raise her head in order to sneak a furtive glimpse. The snake-woman envied many people, but most of all Rhea, not only for her position as King Cronus' wife, but also for her tall, slim, muscular body, which mixed human features with those of a serpent and a wolf.

The Queen unfastened her mantle and beckoned for the maid to lift it off her shoulders. Underneath she wore a short, black tunic and, from head to toe, her body,

covered with golden scales, was adorned with a complex composition of finely carved animal bones, gemstones and golden jewellery, all bound together by a web of thin chains and leather laces. Her golden crown emphasised her two wolfish ears which protruded through the rich blonde hair that streamed down to her waist in waves.

“Welcome to our humble cave, my queen,” Echidna said.

Rhea cast an indifferent look towards them. “Oh, my dear serpents. But what are you doing on this dirty floor? Get up! Unless you have now become so accustomed to crawling in the dirt that you can no longer stand upright.”

She continued past them to the edge of the cistern and stood for a while, staring at her reflection mirrored in the dark water of the Styx. Satisfied, she turned towards the black rock. A smirk of satisfaction twitched on her lips as she noticed that the throne, which had been chiselled there, was now smashed.

“Everything happened exactly as you had planned, Your Majesty,” she heard Echidna say.

“Indeed...” Rhea murmured, moving towards the daybeds. Her long, gold fingers caressed the strings of a musical instrument, slipped around the rim of a cup and fondled a transparent veil. The Queen of Tartarus inspected the area with theatrical movements, some of which indicated curiosity, while others revealed disdain or even disgust. Then, she sat down in an armchair.

“Come here!” she commanded.

The three sisters rushed to obey her and knelt once more before her.

“My husband told me everything. You made him extremely angry.”

“Oh, Your Majesty, we did exactly as you ordered,” Echidna whined.

“Yes, but you broke the rules of the ritual. You spoke when you shouldn’t have spoken and, along with that, you

dared to utter words that you ought never to have said; under no circumstances."

"But we..."

"And you did well, by the Great Creator!" Rhea laughed loudly, and then asked in syrupy tones; "But, tell me... Did King Cronus transform before you?"

"Yes, and he revealed himself to us in all his glory," the snake-woman replied, unable to hide her excitement.

Rhea changed her tone once more. "Of course, as you might have guessed, this was the first and last time. The king will never honour you with his presence again."

Echidna hesitated for a moment. Then she mumbled: "This will sadden us greatly, Your Majesty."

Rhea smiled enigmatically. "Oh, yes! I am sure you will be *very saddened*."

"But, on the other hand, we will derive pleasure from the fact that you, our beloved queen, are satisfied with the service we provided for you."

"Of course I'm pleased. You carried out my plan down to the final detail... But you couldn't have done otherwise, after all, could you?"

Echidna gulped.

"Besides, everything is about to change, and not only in Tartarus," the Queen continued. "The day when the Gods and all their loyal followers will be dead will soon come, and we, the Titans, will become the absolute rulers of all four worlds. Then, we will carry our thrones to new, resplendent palaces, which we will build in the Elysian Fields, in the Land of the White Sun and, of course, on Earth. And, then, what else will happen... my dear Echidna?"

"Tartarus will require a new governor," replied the snake-woman, her voice filled with anticipation.

"Yes," Rhea grinned ironically. "You have a good memory, despite the fact that you are the one who offers the Water of Oblivion!"

“And, have you decided who is to be the new governor of Tartarus?” Echidna asked.

“I have done some thinking about that, yes. But, first things first.”

“When that day finally comes, I hope Your Majesty won’t forget my two sisters and myself.”

The Queen laughed unkindly. “So, you are hoping for some sort of reward?”

Echidna was reluctant to answer. Her eyes, however, gave her away.

“Oh come now. Don’t be afraid. We are friends! You can talk to me openly,” Rhea coaxed.

“Yes, I admit that we do indeed have some expectations and...”

“Very well! I will reward all three of you properly,” the Queen interrupted her, and smacked her palms together three times. General Varta’s tall figure immediately appeared at the entrance of the cave and behind him stood two Demons holding their battle-axes at the ready.

“At your command, my queen,” General Varta boomed, his face constantly changing form, finally becoming sheet white, featureless apart from a wide grin full of sharp teeth.

The snake-women froze in terror.

Rhea’s grey, wolfish eyes sparkled and her hair flared up as if electrified. Her voice dripped venom.

“For years – for entire centuries – you kept my beloved husband away from me, holding him here, inside your squalid cave, so that he may drink from the water of the Styx and fall into a drunken slumber on your filthy beds. You constantly filled his cup with this loathsome black liquid, immersing him in a world of fantasies, far removed from reality. You are the ones who made him idle and tempted him to forget his true purpose – the dominance of the Universe. You transformed the King of the Titans,

the almighty Cronus, into a spineless creature, and... you expect to be rewarded for this?"

"Have mercy on us!" Echidna's two sisters whined, prostrating themselves still further at her feet.

Rhea's sardonic laughter resonated throughout every corner of the cave of the Styx. Then her eyes focused on Echidna. "Did you hope to become the Queen of Tartarus, you vile snake? To sit on *my* throne?"

"You deceived me and betrayed us! Curse you!" Echidna hissed.

"Cut off their heads!" Rhea howled.



The Queen of Tartarus, accompanied by General Varta, entered the Hall of Thrones and ascended the stairs to sit next to her husband, King Cronus.

"It has all been arranged," she whispered in his ear. "The cave of the Styx is sealed forever."

Cronus nodded. He wore a golden mask, which he used to cover his face at all official gatherings, so she wasn't able to discern the expression on his face.

The gates were thrown open and within minutes the entire hall was packed with Titans.

Rhea gestured to General Varta, who was standing to her right. He, having now taken the form of a bearded man with a formal expression, took a few steps forward and raised his glacial voice above the babble: "The king will speak!"

Cronus rose from his throne and threw his black cloak off his shoulders. He stood with his head held high and his hands on his waist, upright and imposing, his golden armour shining under the light of the dozens of dark crystals that hung from the ceiling. He remained frozen for several minutes, laughing behind his mask, savouring the

vibration that rose from the wild battle cries and cheering that roared from the loyal throng.

The King of Tartarus waited until the very last voice had fallen silent before speaking.

“My brothers and comrades, hear my words. Thousands of years have gone by since then, but I know you all still remember the cursed day of our defeat and our imprisonment in this hideous world, Tartarus.”

The Titans snarled with displeasure. “We will never forget!” one shouted.

“Revenge! – Revenge!” many others chanted rhythmically. Cronus motioned for them to quieten so that he might continue:

“It was that same day when my beautiful sister, Hubris, with her body smashed and her face horribly disfigured from the blows of our enemies, decided to hide away forever from all of us, locking herself in that dark, damp cave and transforming it into her own private palace.”

Cronus remained silent for a few moments with his head bowed and his fists clenched.

“How long did we have to listen to her wails and curses? And how many times did I, myself, stand at the gate of her cave, trying to comfort her and to convince her to leave that place and rejoin us? But, alas, she never listened to me...

“So, long years passed, with her terrible screams echoing through the labyrinths of Tartarus, piercing our ears and torturing our cold, immortal hearts until suddenly, she fell silent. And then we all thought – some of us even with relief, I dare say – that Hubris had put an end to her life...

“But how wrong we were. My sister was not only still alive, but she had also decided to forge her anger into strength and transform her sorrow into art. There, in her dark cave, blending the soil of Tartarus with the black blood which still dripped from her unhealed wounds she began moulding the first Demons. In this way she started

giving birth to an army of these creatures – a few at first, yet thousands later – assigning them to serve us as our workers and soldiers and to help us build a new kingdom. It was then that we started standing on our feet again and the first seeds of hope that we might one day escape and seek our revenge were sown in our hearts.

“Regaining our powers, we tried to break the gates of Tartarus, which were locked and sealed by the Gods. But soon, we realised that they were indeed inviolable and we accepted the bitter truth that only the will of our most hated enemy, Zeus, could open them.

“Still, we didn’t stop trying. We kept searching for another way out, ordering our Demons to dig with whatever tools they could manufacture – and, if needed, even with their claws and teeth – in every direction. But again... nothing. Tartarus, it seemed, was a world without surface, without sky, without sun, without light!

“Despair had fallen heavily upon us once more. Many of us retired to our palaces, having accepted defeat – just as Hubris had once done. I, myself – your king – was the worst of all, as I gave up every effort, seeking solace in dreams and hallucinations by drinking the Black Water of Oblivion from the Styx...”

Cronus again fell silent for a few moments and the Titans began whispering to each other, wondering what was coming next. Then, his deep voice resonated even louder, silencing them once more.

“All this now belongs in the past! The era of grief has come to an end, thanks to the iron will of our beloved queen, Rhea,” he said, pointing towards his wife. “She convinced me to emerge from the cave of the Styx and, with not only her wise counsel, but also with her decisive actions, she managed to guide me back to reality, reviving our hopes for a better future.”

Cronus took Rhea's hand as she rose majestically from her throne to stand beside him.

"Long live the queen!" they all chanted rhythmically.

Now, it was her turn to speak:

"My brothers! Today, here among you, I feel more joy overwhelming me than ever before in my long life. But how could I not, when I have my king – full of strength, determination and pride – back by my side and when I see my people ready for war and revenge?" Her voice rose even higher. "What did the Gods think? That we would give up and quit? Did they truly believe that we, the mighty Titans who have existed from the beginning of time – still alive – would actually endure our imprisonment in this endless labyrinth, this infinite grave?"

The crowd was now shouting their approval while Rhea kept screaming, stoking the fires of their excitement: "Fearless Titans, cast all your sorrow into the flames of the hatred that burns inside your hearts. And waste no time. Prepare your weapons and your armies. The day of the ultimate battle is approaching. And this time – I swear to you by the Great Creator – we will prevail!"

The royal couple sat back down on their thrones. Cronus waited for the cheering to abate before standing and again addressing his subjects:

"Titans, listen to me! Today we are gathered here to decide on the strategy that we will follow in the future. But first, let's assess the situation: At last we have in our hands a part of the Sacred Flame, now turned into the Black Flame – into the energy the Gods and their followers call the *Cursed Flame*. As they very well know, it is the only weapon capable of destroying them.

"With the Black Flame we can achieve what we have always desired, which is to finally open the gates to the other worlds, through which we, as well as our Demons, will be able to pass. We have already succeeded, with our

minimal Flame, in sending a few Titans into the Elysian Fields, before the astonished eyes of the Gods. Thus we were able to gauge our powers as well as our enemy's. At the same time the Demons inflicted great damage on Utopia, in the Land of the White Sun. But, of course, we did not win that war. We did not expect to. It was just a test – a kind of suicide mission, you might say. We still have many difficult battles ahead of us ...

“But what I observe here today – with both pride and joy – is that our will for ultimate victory is greater than ever. Still, the Black Flame we have in our possession at the moment is insufficient for us to make a mass exodus from Tartarus. Therefore, we need a strategy to best take advantage of the means at our disposal.

“So, with all this in mind, anyone who has a plan of action to propose should speak now.”

Typhon, one of the mightiest Titans, instantly stepped forward. He had one of his three right hands raised, with his fingers clenched tightly into a fist, requesting permission to speak. Cronus nodded to him. The fearsome warrior leaped up the stairs to stand on the large semicircular landing only a few yards below the royal thrones. He bowed his three heads – the middle of which was human while the other two, sprouting from his thick, muscular neck, were those of horned snakes. He emitted a husky grunt as black bat wings quivered behind his muscular back and his two serpentine tails banged nervously on the floor. Then, his voice boomed through the Hall of Thrones.

“Your Majesty, the quantity of Black Flame at our disposal is small, but it is certain that we have enough to open one gate to the Land of the White Sun, making it possible for at least one Titan to pass through, along with the Demons. I, therefore, ask permission to be the first Titan to pass through the gate and strike the final blow against these miserable Orizons!

“My lord, I am more prepared for victory than ever before. My Demons are so thirsty for blood that, if we delay any longer, they will start devouring one another. Grant me the opportunity and I swear to you that I will lay the heads of our enemies before your feet and I will place the Sacred Flame in your hands in its entirety, so that we may all invade the Elysian Fields together. Do me the honour of allowing me to be the one who will give you the power to defeat the Gods once and for all.”

Many of the Titans screamed their support for Typhon and he turned towards them, raising his six hands and stretching his wings wide, his chest bursting with pride.

From the depths of the crowd an eerie, frog-like croak was heard: “My brothers! Do not underestimate the Orizons!”

It was Python, the Supreme Sorcerer of Tartarus.

Typhon’s six eyes bulged with hatred as he watched Python’s flabby form ooze out of the crowd and slowly climb the stairs, gasping with every step, before finally reaching the thrones. He was dressed in a black tunic, creating a stark contrast to his snowy skin that was flecked with yellow spots. As always he held his wavy magic wand with its large purple crystal shimmering menacingly at its end.

Once the sorcerer had caught his breath, he made an inept attempt to bow towards the royal couple. Cronus gestured in response, allowing him to speak.

“My king, and you, my brother Typhon, please hear me out. Personally, I have many doubts concerning the success of a direct invasion of the Land of the White Sun. The Orizons are indeed relatively weakened and disorganised after the last attack by our heroic Demons but we must not forget that these same creatures have successfully protected the Sacred Flame for many millennia.

“Likewise, we must bear in mind that we no longer have a spy in the enemy camp. The Amazon Claudia, who was

our eyes and ears in Utopia, has passed into nothingness. We are not aware of what is currently happening in the land of the Orizons, nor of what the Gods are preparing to do. That means that if we decide to attack again, this time we will have to carry it out blindly, without the slightest idea of our adversaries' plans of defence. Therefore, this puts us at a greater disadvantage than last time.

"The only thing preventing the Gods from getting involved is our inaction. When we forced the Orizon elite to enter Tartarus a few years ago to retrieve the baby we had kidnapped and tricked them into bringing the Flame to us, the Gods did not hesitate to show up at the eleventh hour – even within our Kingdom – in order to protect the flame. Our interference gave them the right to intervene, according to the ancient rules prescribed by the Great Creator. So, if you, brother Typhon, were to enter the Land of the White Sun, you would not only find yourself confronted with the Orizons, but also with all their Gods."

"I will smash them all then!" Typhon roared but the sorcerer ignored the interruption.

"We were lucky that General Varta managed to steal a tiny part of the Flame during our last attack but who can assure us with absolute certainty that this time we will be able to get the entire Sacred Flame?"

"I protest!" General Varta spoke as he descended the stairs to confront the sorcerer, quivering with rage as his face changed into a black skull, its eye sockets filled with fire. His voice came through his pointed teeth like slithers of pure ice: "What do you mean, Python? That the Sacred Flame fell into my hands simply by luck? What I have accomplished has been described as one of the greatest Titan feats of the last millennia and you are telling us that it was nothing more than... an accident?"

"A Titan feat?" the sorcerer replied, inflating his thick neck even more and moving his wand menacingly towards

Varta. "But you are not even a Titan; only a mere mortal we dragged up from the Well of Death to serve us."

"Are you forgetting that I'm here because Queen Rhea herself demanded it?" General Varta bellowed. "She chose me from among all the cursed souls – and not randomly, since she judged that *I* was the only one who could carry out some of the most difficult tasks in the war against the Gods. And it was King Cronus himself who assigned me the leadership of the Sceptomorphs – the beings that will help us rule Earth."

"But it was my magic power that pulled you out of the Well of Death."

"An act you have bitterly regretted since you realised that my magic is growing stronger than your own." The general pushed his faceless skull so close to the Titan that they nearly touched.

"Your breath, Varta, reeks of a toxic arrogance!" Python growled.

Typhon then exploded at both of them: "I will show you who is the most powerful here!" he raved, his two snaky heads hissing sinisterly.

"Silence, all of you!" Cronus shouted, freezing them all in their tracks.

The king of the Titans usually took great pleasure in any antagonism that boiled up among his loyal followers, believing that all discord made them stronger, but at that moment he needed all the beings of Tartarus to unite in order to achieve their common goal.

"General Varta, you were the one who brought the Black Flame into Tartarus and that says it all. But now I am asking you to calm down and remain silent. This is an order."

He turned to Typhon.

"My brave brother, we are all aware of the heroism you showed during our last fight against the Gods on Earth. You were the only Titan to have come so close to