

My mistress Cassandra once told me that Tartarus was dark, darker than the darkest night, blacker than anything that we could know. And when I feel the pull of the darkness, I know that I am to be sent to that place. My strange god has led me to the beyond, as I have known that he would. I have died, and been judged wanting. I scream with terror, but no sounds come as I fall into the embrace of the heavens.

And then I am in the place of punishment. I am on my knees, and the thinness of my dress cannot keep out the burning heat of the rough ground. I feel the heat on my arms and on my brow, and my body trembles as the ground shakes. I hear the screams, and the battles and the conflict, and I know that this is a place of violence.

Most of my life has been violence. I was seven when the war started, and for ten years, I had felt its touch upon me, until that final day in Troy when I had defied the words of my mistress and had rescued the Greek warrior, and so taken my path to death as she had predicted. And I know now that I have come to this place of eternal war, and that will be my torment as decreed by the gods for my failure in life.

I try to stand, but my hands burn when I place them to the ground, and I cry out. Then, a hand touches my arm. The skin is rough, like that of a carpenter, but warm. I feel myself being drawn up, until I stand and look at my rescuer. He has a beard that is grey, and eyes that are old, sad and kind. His raiment is strange, a garment made of old, cracked leather. When he speaks, it is with a voice that seems as tired and battered as that garment.

“Oh, it’s you.”

I look at him, my thoughts lost in their confusion. “My name is –”

“I know who you are. Odd. Very odd.”

A Journey Through Tartarus

by Richard W Straw

He steps away, and looks at me, as if he knows me. Finally, he speaks again. “You had better come with me.”

“Are you to be my guide through the Underworld?”

He reaches out a hand to me. "Just... come with me."

I follow him, clinging to his hand as he walks across the dark, muddy ground. As we walk, I look about us, and see only the marks of destruction. There is no grass, no plants, and no birds or beasts to be seen. There is a dark red sky above us, and the lightning flashes from it with all the fury of the gods. The ground is black and dark red mud that boils beneath my feet, and I struggle to breathe, for the air is hot and dank. I can hear the screams of men, and at a distance I can see what seems to be bodies, writhing in agony. My guide says nothing, and does not seem to take notice of their pain and torment.

"Who are they?" I ask him. "Did they sin in their lives?"

He makes a noise in his throat. "They're soldiers. Warriors," are his only words.

"We must help them, lord."

"No." His voice is angry and harsh "There's nothing we can do. The only way we can help them is by finding what I was sent here to find."

I stop walking, and look over at the bodies. It hurts me to walk away, but I do, following the only one here who seems to understand this terrible place. It takes me a long age to draw level with him and ask him the question that I fear. "Is this Tartarus?"

I see that the question has surprised him. "What? No, of course not. Why would you think...?" He says nothing for moments, and then says, "But of course you would."

"I died, lord."

"Well, yes, but that's not –"

"Do you know me, lord?" I ask him.

"I said so, didn't I?" he said, and his tone is now angry. Then his voice softens. "I'm sorry. I knew you a long time ago."

"I died, lord," I tell him again.

He stops walking, and turns to me. His expression is one of grave sadness, and it belongs on this strange face. "Yes, you did. You were so very brave. It's been so long that I've forgotten what your people can be like." He spreads his arms "But this is not Tartarus. For one, do you see any other spirits?"

"The warriors –"

"Apart from them."

"It is said that the spirits of the dead do not trouble others in the underworld."

"Save me from primitive logic," he mutters. "That only applies to the living. If you were dead, you would see them, yes?"

“Yes, I – ” I have no answer for him. “But where else could I be? I died and have come to the beyond, as Cassandra promised me I would. She said I would come to Tartarus. Only...”

“Yes?”

I feel despair well within me. “I had no coin when I died. I cannot pay the ferryman. I will be trapped forever on the banks of the Styx.”

“This is not the banks of the Styx. This is a planet. Designated 123-66, although your race call it Asphodel VI.”

I understand nothing save one word. “Asphodel.” I breathe the name with reverence, for I know it. “One of the places of beyond.”

He makes a noise that might be a laugh, and begins walking again. I try to keep up with him. “An annoying coincidence,” he says to me. “I told you, you are not dead.” Then he says, “At least, not anymore.”

“These are things that only a god could know.” I tremble with fear, and can barely ask my next question. “Are you a god?”

He does not turn to look at me. He shakes his head. “No.”

Ahead of us, the fallen body of a man lies in a pool of dark water. I expect my strange lord to walk past him, but instead he stops and kneels beside the man. As I stand over them, I see that he is young, akin to the warriors of Troy, and clad in a strange red-stained armour that covers almost all of his body. His eyes are open and they stare up at us, but he says no words.

“What has happened to him?”

The strange lord looks up at me. “He’s been attacked with a very nasty weapon.”

I cast my eyes over the man’s body, but can see no wounds. His crimson armour looks strong and resilient. “A sword?” I asked. “Or a lance? An arrow?”

He shakes head. “Not that sort of weapon. It attacked his mind.”

“I do not understand.”

The warrior suddenly screams. I put my hands to my ears, for the sound is so terrible. His is not a scream of a man, but of a tortured thing, an animal that has nothing left. And yet in his scream, I hear words.

“They’re here!” His face holds such fear that I almost weep for him. “They’re all around me. Why are they here?”

The strange lord places his hand on the man’s shoulder, and speaks quietly. “Who are here? Tell me. Is it the Dal – ”

“No, it’s them! It’s them!”

I look around me, terrified, but I see nothing. "What is he saying?" I ask.

The warrior looks past us, into the darkness of the sky. "No, you are dead!" he cries out "I saw you fall. The horde –" He does not finish his words, and instead casts his hands about, as if holding off demons. "I have no family – you are dead! Dead! Dead!"

The strange lord removes the man's helmet, and gently rests his hand across his brow. The man ceases screaming immediately and closes his eyes. He sleeps, and I see that his breath is slow but constant. My protector looks back up at me, and his own eyes are strong and hard with purpose. "Think about the effects that your war had upon you. The Greeks were camped outside your walls for ten years. Didn't you sometimes wake up and think that you would go mad if they did not leave?" I nod. "This weapon does that. It drives men mad. It brought forth things from his past, and attacked him with it." He sighs deeply. "His name is Metrex. Consul's special guard. He lost his family in one of the first attacks on Gallifrey."

"You know him, lord?"

"I know them all. I try to remember them all. There are so many of them..."

I think that I understand him. "This thing attacks men like the Furies torment the unworthy."

"I suppose so. But that's why I'm here. This is a testing ground for this weapon. They sent in this team, but it was a trap. And that's why they sent for me."

"You, lord?"

He gestures in despair and then stands up. "I have a knack for these sorts of things." He looks down at the man. "There is nothing I can do for him."

He makes as if to turn away, but I reach out for his arm. "We must help him."

He shakes his head. "We must find the weapon and take it away. That's the only way to help him."

I look around me. I feel such terror at this place, and yet the torments of which he speaks have not touched me. "Why have I not been afflicted, lord?"

"Because..." He speaks softly, and I see that there is something he does not wish to say to me. "There are reasons."

"And you, lord?"

"It has affected me, believe me." He looks down at the tormented soldier. "But these days I'm not really afraid of anything. Or rather I'm more scared of regrets than anything else." He looks back at me, and his eyes gleam like polished metal, staring at me. "And you are more an effect than a cause."

“Lord?”

“I wonder why it was you?” he says quietly. “There’s been others. But then, you were the first...”

“I do not understand.”

“You say that a lot, don’t you?” He reaches beneath his garment and holds something in his hand. It looks a little like an aulos, a smooth metal tube. He does not play it like an instrument, but just holds it, and as it makes a sound and gives out a light, like that of a lamp, but an impossible deep red in colour, I wonder at its magic. With his other hand, he reaches forward and takes something from the warrior. It is a long staff of complex metal that I do not know, and he grips it by a handle that extends beneath it and seems shaped for his hand. “Last resort,” he says. “Come on.”

His single course across the mud ignores all around him, until we descend a hill and walk down into a shallow dip in the ground. Here, the mud is watery and loose, and a pile of it is roughly pushed against one side of the slope. The strange one walks over to the mudpile, and places the long device on the ground beside him. Then he begins to dig his hands into the mud pile, pushing aside huge clods of it like a plough in a field until he labours heavily. He looks back at me. “Make yourself useful, then. Help me.”

I kneel beside him, feeling the wet mud as it runs over my dress, and digging with my hands in the earth. It gives easily beneath us, and soon we have uncovered something. It is a box, made of patterned bronze that shines dully in the flashes of lightning. It looks like the box in which my mistress might keep her jewels and her hair combs, or, I realise with a feeling of fear, one might keep all the troubles of the world. My strange lord picks the box up as if it weighs nothing, and holds it out.

“What is it?” I ask him.

“This is the weapon.”

“How can that be, lord?”

“That’s... complicated. Explaining Skarosian psycho-temporal technology would be difficult if you were a Time Lord, let alone... what you are.”

“Is it an invention of the gods, lord?”

“I suppose so.”

“Is that what all this is, lord? Are the gods finally at war?”

“What?”

“They told us that they might finally turn on each other, rather than use us to settle their

arguments. It is said to be blasphemy even to suggest this, but still..." I cease my words, fearful to say any more.

He does not answer me. He places the box on the ground, then stands and holds out his strange instrument. Again it utters its sound, a high, fluting note, and the light reappears at its end. Nothing else happens, and he lowers his hand and utters a laugh that is without joy. "Well, that was a long shot, I suppose. They'd have deadlocked it against Time Lord technology." He kneels down again. "We need to deactivate this before we can take it away. And that's going to get difficult. The visions will start to get worse."

"I do not see these visions, lord."

"Of course, you don't, you're not – " He does not finish his words. "I'm beginning to feel things. Bad things." He picks up the long metal object again, and holds it out. "Our weapons against their weapons. Always worth a try." But before he can say any more, he puts a hand to his head. "They're coming," he tells me. "Got to hurry." Then he gives a cry and falls onto his knees. He speaks, but his words are slow and pained. "I can see them. All of them. Molly and Lucie and Adric and..." He holds out his hands to ward off the spirits. But I can see nothing.

"I must help you, lord." I stand in front of him and place my hands on his shoulders. He does not reply, but instead looks past me, to something that he sees behind me. I hear him mutter some words, but I do not know what he says. Something is rising from the mud. I look at it in horror, for I know it. A shape of metal.

"A guardian unit," I hear my lord say, but I know what this is. It is an evil one, like those that pursued us through the trees, but this time bronzed, like the statue of a god, and different in shape. A strange staff located on its top turns, and an eye – for that is what it must be – looks upon me with a blue flame of hate. And I know that this is my fear, that these terrible creatures will plague me like the Furies for all eternity in the pits of the dead. I am on my knees, for I know that I must have been an evil person in life. I failed my mistress, and I failed my lord, and this is to be the punishment. I can hear my lord shouting at me, telling me to flee, but I cannot. I am as stone, and my fear commands me. The evil one speaks, but I do not understand its words. I know only that it brings death.

It is my knowledge of that death that allows me to move. I must defend my lord against it, that is all that I know. I throw myself at the... the weapon, he called it. The evil one screams at me to cease, but I do not. It utters a word that I do not know, and then there is pain running through me, as if I am burning from within. But I do not stop. My hands scabble across the surface of the weapon, feeling the strange indentations in its surface, I push my fingers at them,

and I feel them give way –

And then the darkness comes over me like a cloud in the night. I cannot breathe or think or do anything. I hear things, the screaming voices of the evil ones, Steven shouting out my name over and over again, the tumult of Ilium as the walls are breached. Then the evil one screams and screams, and I hear that strange sound again. Finally, there is a crashing noise like all of the world falling in upon me. It seems to last forever, and then, suddenly, it is gone.

I open my eyes and look up. The evil one is destroyed, its top half torn away by some terrible force. And my strange lord stands over me, holding the staff in his hands, pointing it towards the evil one. His face is angry, and terrifying, and for a moment I fear that he will turn his wrath upon me. And then it fades, and his expression turns back to sadness, and he throws the staff down onto the ground in front of him.

“What has happened?” I ask.

“You did it.”

“What did I do, lord?”

“What you always do. Throw yourself madly at things and somehow make them work. The weapon was turned against its operator. All that fear and terror. Imagine living as a creature that fears and hates all the time, and then wonder what happens when it is forced to face that. It gave me time to use the gun...” He moves to the box that he calls the weapon, and prods at it. It is also shattered into pieces. “Destroyed by its own guardian. Ironic.” He reaches down to pick up the weapon. It is hot in his hands, and he drops it again. “They’re not going to be happy. They were hoping to make use of it themselves.” He shakes his head. “Probably for the best.”

He reaches out his hand, and helps me to stand. “It tried to kill me,” I say.

He nods. “It tried. But you do not exist, Katarina of Troy. So it couldn’t do anything to you.” He stares at me. “At least, that’s how it’s meant to be. You’re an illusion made flesh. Something from the back on my mind. So why are you still here?” He gestures to the weapon. “When the Dalek destroyed it, it should have made you disappear too.”

“I do not...” I stop myself before I can say the final word, but he knows what I am about to say. He laughs in a low, reassuring tone.

“Neither do I. Centuries of this, and still the universe can astonish me. You only need to understand this. You are alive.”

My words are halting, and my breath catches in my throat. “I am not – dead?”

“Not any more.” He turns away from me, and begins to walk away. “And you won’t be for a very long time.”

I follow him as he strides over the dark land. I do not know where we are going, but I know that I have to trust him. And as we crest a ridge of broken ground, and descend into a valley, I see the box that stands in the middle of the valley. I recognise its lines, its structure, and its colour as of the wine-dark sea at once. It is his temple, his gateway to the Place of Perfection.

It is then that I know who my strange lord is. I fall to my knees and place my hand over my eyes. "You are he. You are Zeus."

I feel his hand on my shoulder, and he pulls me to my feet. "I don't look like him."

"No," I say. "You are older, and sadder. But you are him. For cannot Zeus change his form as the tales tell?"

He spreads his arms wide. "A swan? A rain of gold? Hardly. Just a sad old man who has forgotten who he is." He shakes his head. "I change so many times. Sometimes it's for the better. Other times..." I cannot not disguise my fear of him. "Yes," he finally says. "Maybe I am a god. But it's Ares, not Zeus. God of war."

"There is always a war, lord."

He looks at me. "Hmm?"

"My lady Cassandra told me. Men will fight and the women wait and suffer. It has always been the way of things. And that is why I died. I will die." I shake my head in confusion and look at the ground. "Some day."

Then I feel the touch of his hand against mine. He has something in his hand, which he gives to me. I look at my hand, and see a small silver coin.

His old voice is now warm and gentle. "I know that your fate, Katarina of Troy, is to be a good one. Give the coin to the ferryman when your time comes, and he will take you to Elysia."

The tears are forming in my eyes, but I battle them back, and turn to face him. I have to be strong before him. "Thank you, lord."

"Not lord," he says sternly, "I'm the – " He does not finish his sentence. I seem to see a dark shadow casting itself over his face, and he shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. "

I follow him into the temple. I may yet reach the Place of Perfection, but not today. Today, I follow my lord to war. To death, and beyond.