

Almighty
Hercules

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DEDICATION

To my nephew Jordan and wife Sandra. You and Jesus are my inspiration.

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INTRODUCTION

So you think you heard all Hercules epic stories. You know of the twelve labors orchestrated by the wicked goddess Hera. The maniacal gods tricked Hercules in to killing his family, and then sentenced him to perform unfeasible feats to cleans his condemnation. Hera persuaded King Eurytheus to give Hercules twelve impossible tasks no man or god could complete. First was the Nemean Lion. It was covered with a hide so tough no blade, spear, or arrow could scratch its skin-yet kill the beast. Hercules choked the roaring giant to death between his mighty arms. The Lemean Hydra proved to be no match either. Hercules found clubbing off the lake monster's nine heads only made the situation worse. Two sprung in its place. The solution was found in reason. He beat the beast first eight mortal heads to pieces and then seared each of its necks with his torch. He lopped off the ninth immortal head killing the monster.

Neither Ladon the hundred headed dragon or Atlas's cunning nymphs could stop him in attaining Heperides golden apples. He wrestled the behemoth Cretan bull to the ground. The colossus Erymanthian bore he snared in his net and carried back to Mycenae. Even Hades pet Cerberus who guarded the gates to the underworld was no match for this demigod. The gargantuan three headed dog covered with venomous snake heads and sporting a spiked dragon's tail was beaten into submission by the might hero.

These are some of the stories you may know. But there is one that has been lost in the legends of time. Hera's labors were just preparing Hercules to overcome the unconquerable. She had a fiendish secret that was never to be record in the history of the gods. Hercules next task would surmount everything he had achieved before. This last trial does not test just his mind and strength. This will test his very heart!

CHAPTER 1: HADERUS

The dust of the battle field settles unveiling piercing red floating eyes. Spartan generals yell to their formations, “Hold ranks!” A deep gurgling sound grows louder as the beast lowers its head below the rising sea of dust. The fearless Spartans' bake in the summer heat as they baste in their dripping anxiety. There is good reason to fear. This giant Titan descendant destroyed five armies and countless cities along its journey here. These Spartans are the last obstacle standing between this monster and their families and homes. Ten thousand Shields clang together as the order “Close ranks!” is given. An eerie silence covers the hidden battlefield. The army now waits for the beast to strike out.

Agonizing screams drag towards the center of the formation as shields, spears, and bodies fall from the sky. The beast returns its slithering spiked tail back into the cloud. The sound of soldiers hearts beating mingle with the choking evil stench of sulfur. The formations shuffles close to replace the gaps left by their fallen compatriots. Through the heighten quietness, eyes bulge watching the massive barbed tail swerves like a serpent in and out of the dust just ahead. Soldiers see the shredded remains and the useless pieces of shields marking this cemetery. Quivering lips whisper redeeming prayers to the gods asking for immediate help. It seems nothing in their arsenal will stop this monster from Hades!

Haderus's four wings rise slowly and stretch out in the noon light. A

million glistening brass shields lining its wings blast blaring brightness blindfolding the Spartan army. Soldiers lift their shields to protect themselves from the burning heat cast upon them. A roaring head lifts fifty feet upward showing its four gigantic staring faces. The roaring face of a lion gazes down with fangs longer than the tallest Spartan soldier. Fright grips this fearless army. The faces of a raging bull on the right side, and dragon on the left, look toward the opposing flanks. Both mouths erupt with deafening blast strong enough to blow the ranks backward. Fire shoots over the right flank baking the men alive. The lion face pounces on a dozen men, snatching them in his chewing jaws. The bull thrust his horns in the left flank impaling soldiers seven ranks deep. Every spear is ordered thrust at the beast, as archers rain down a thousand arrows. But, their spears graze off the metal monster as arrows ding down marking the beast hundred foot boundaries. The Spartans hold fast waiting for a glorious death. All seems lost!

From the distance a voice shouts out, "Mount Olympus!" The thumping feet of a rushing army runs towards Haderus. The monster seems nervous and begins shaking inside the dirt cloud. All of a sudden, its four faces repeatedly dart and jab toward the darkening cloud below. Thunder cracks as lightening reveals glimpses of the battle stirring in front of the retreating army. The ground violently shakes beneath their pounding feet knocking the soldiers off their feet. They reverently kneel and watch helplessly. A gargantuan human face jolts upward screaming in torment. It jabs down before the army as they watch it begging for help. No mercy is given. Its anguished head lifts upward and then twist completely around before slamming its long neck to the ground. The army waits silently.

A smaller bouncing head pierces through the top of the dirt cloud. It draws toward the center of the formation. Slowly a dark muscular silhouette appears carrying a spiked club on his shoulder. The Spartans break rank and abandon their position. The cloud settles to the ground as shouts of heroic appreciation erupt. "Hercules!"

The Spartan general orders the soldiers back to formation. Nearly ten thousand thankful faces smile as they stand proudly at attention. The general approaches this hero. He gazes at the grim faces of the

beast revealing its demise. Hercules tore the tail from Haderus and used its spikes to slash its neck. The four horrified faces lay dead in front of the army with its own tail still stuck in its neck. The general kneels before Hercules and bows his humble head.

“We Spartan thank you for vanquishing this dread beast. We too are grateful for saving the lives of our families and protecting our homes.”

The formation breaks their silence as gratuitous murmurings flood over the ranks, “Thank you Hercules!” Some honor him with their voices as savior, as some with prayers to this half god. The smiling Hercules rejects these men for their beliefs. He reminds them, “I am just a man.”

Festivity begins as word spreads thought the land that Haderus is dead. Great joy fills the hearts of men once more. The Athenian and Spartan kings decide to host games in honor of Hercules. The countryside farmers and villagers take leave of their work to attend the celebrations throughout Greece. A parade of dancing maidens follow the ox drawn carts filled with food for the banquet at the Athenian acropolis. The praises of Hercules rest on every tongue. This does not delight the gods!

The messenger god Hermes climbs the great stairway to the tower. The giant golden doors of Mount Olympus open. Inside the humungous cathedral to the gods sits the distressed king Zeus. His sad face looks down upon earth. The other gods seem just as solemn as the king. They watch from their thrones as the events unfold before their eyes. Ares shakes his head side to side in disbelief. He cannot believe what he is seeing. Poseidon lowers his trident in disgust.

Hermes kneels before King Zeus waiting for his acknowledgment. Zeus commands him, “Speak.”

I am given a message.” Hermes opens his sack. He retrieves the head from the four faced beast Haderus and holds it up before the king. “Majesty, I was told to give this to you as a gift. Hercules wishes your blessing and says, 'May all the gods and goddesses be honored in my victory'.”

This present infuriates Zeus. “Does my son rival me? He steals the praise from my people and wishes I adorn him with my blessing?” The

king stands and faces away. "Tell Hercules he shall see my blessing!"

Hermes looks upon the gods to see every face is filled with fury. He knows Zeus is about to curse Hercules with all the gods approval. Hermes responds, "Is there anything else my king might wish I deliver?"

"Yes!" Zeus touches the horrified faces of Haderus with his lightning bolt scepter. A flash, and then earsplitting cracking sparks over the head of the beast. Suddenly, the four faces turn to gold. "Return this gift to Hercules. Tell him he has my blessing. Lift my gift high where all can see so my blessing may be poured out on all people. Now go in all haste!"

Hermes rises. He ties the bag shut. "Majesty, I go as you command. May praise be poured out upon you and all the gods." He marches toward the golden doors passing the amused gods. They know not what the future holds for Hercules, but they assure each other with their sarcastic snickers that Zeus will honor his son with a repentant heart.

As he enters the threshold of the doors Zeus commands, "Wait! Tell Hercules to speak these words after raising my gift to him. May every man know the heart of Zeus!"

Hermes spirit secretly urges him to warn Hercules as he walks away.

Zeus states, "Do not attempt to forewarn him Hermes. I will be watching and listening."

Hermes dashes off while leaping upward. His winged shoes fly him over Olympus before descending through the thick clouds below. His heart weighs heavy with the burden he carries. He knows he must fill his commission under the kings order. He knows Zeus and the gods are full of trickery. This gift is not a present, but is a ghastly curse upon all men. He thinks of a way to alert Hercules while pondering how a father could hate his son so.

The crowd looks up to see the shimmering messenger of the gods hovering above. The people bow as he streams by them toward the acropolis. Hercules smiles at the approaching Hermes, waiting for him to descend. He lands alongside him. The gathering grows reverently quiet watching as Hercules kneels before Hermes.

"Rise Hercules. I have a gift from your father." Hermes swings the

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bag from off his back and lowers it.

Hercules reaches up to retrieve the gift, but fails to reach the sack. The twenty foot tall god kneels to a more obtainable position.

“Take the gift your father offers you.”

Hercules humbly takes the sack with outstretched gracious hands.

“I am ordered by your father Zeus that you should raise this gift high where all can see so all may experience the gods blessing. I am instruct to tell you to repeat these words, 'May every man know the heart of Zeus!'”

Hermes feels the gods eyes are upon him, and knows the ear of Zeus listens. The only warning he can give Hercules is his solemn face. Hercules senses something is wrong, but he is blinded by this godly gift. He hoist the golden faces of the beast above his head for all to see.

Hermes leaves Hercules with the words, “Pray to the gods for mercy. Pray to Zeus he will forgive.”

The sensation of the poisonous gift is greater than the merciful antidote. Hermes looks down one last time wishing they would take heed. But he is only left with the sight of them celebrating and a sharp pain in his heart as punishment from the gods.

CHAPTER 2: BLESSINGS OF ZEUS

A veil drapes the monument towering above the Parthenon. A marble column is the podium that holds the gift from Zeus. Two files of men stand on each side tugging the lines that restrain the wind blown veil, as two Greek kings finish dedicating this trophy to Hercules.

The man of honor stands before the audience with his head tilted skyward. His fist rest on his waist supporting his propped arms. Clapping hands and cheering erupt in praise to their hero that has vanquished evil for so long from their land. The two kings give the order to drop the veil.

The magnificent golden head with its four giant faces radiate over all Athens. Their humble hero bows in acceptance to their repeating celebrating chants, "Hercules, Hercules, Hercules..."

As the crowd quiets Hercules remembers the words his father Zeus told him. To honor his father he must speak the words.

"We dedicate this monument to the gods. May it forever stand in remembrance to their kindness." Hercules waits for the audience to subside their clapping hands before speaking the final phrase. "May every man know the heart of Zeus."

The ground beneath slowly begins to vibrate. The surrounding buildings begin to crack. Dark menacing clouds appear out of a clear blue sky. A spider web of lightening bolts rain down on the Parthenon as deafening thunderbolts explode chunks of marble from off the temple.

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The audience disperses in every direction but there seems no safe place to hide. The people scream out, "Help us Hercules!"

A momentary silence is restored as the people huddle near their hero. They hear the golden gift as it begins to twirl upon its pedestal. It spins faster and faster as a vision of Zeus's face appears amidst the blur.

"I have heard your prayers. But they are not to me. Since you worship another god, I will let him be your savior. I give you four more gifts. If you survive them I will again hear your prayers."

Zeus's face dissolves as the spinning head slows to a stop. The trembling audience begs mercy from the gods. The golden face of the man speaks.

"No mercy was shown to me in life. Neither will you receive mercy. We bring you four torments. I bring you the first."

The people move away from Hercules. They curse him for bringing this damnation upon them.

"Since you are devoted to Hercules, I give you the power to praise your mortal god without ceasing."

The sinister face laughs as it looks down mocking the human god.

Every tongue whispers prayers to Hercules. Their voices become one chanting choir that is unable to stop. Hercules is the only one not under the spell. A passing mother hurries by as both her and her new born shout blessings before running homeward. An old man stands before him wishing to ask what Hercules plans to do to break this spell. But, he is only able to say, "You are the most high. You are my god."

No matter where a person runs to, or how far they travel from the demigod, his praise remains on their lips.

No one has slept in three days or been able to communicate their needs or desires. Eating and drinking leads to choking as their words never cease. Citizens of Greece lay in the streets waiting for their demise as Hercules watches knowing he is powerless to help.

Hercules whistles for the winged horse Pegasus. The white stallion lands in the acropolis as he races to mount the winged creature. "To Delphi," he orders Pegasus. "Be off," he commands.

Hours later they descend through the morning mist covering the rough mountainous countryside. Hercules tells Pegasus, "Wait here at

the base of the temple steps.” He dimbs the rugged stairway leading to the ancient temple. A cloaked being awaits at the entrance.

Hercules stands before him and then kneels. “I’ve come to request a solution from the Oracle. My people are in great distress and torment. May I inquirer of the Orade what to do?”

“I am the priest and protector of the temple. You may ask your question of the Oracle, but you must pay a penance first.”

“What do you require and I will pay it.

“Be careful what you ask Hercules.” The protector lifts his budding rod from under his cloak and lays it over Hercules shoulder. “Are you really willing to sacrifice your most cherished possession to save your people?”

He humbly whispers, “To save my people I will do any righteous thing.”

The buds of the rod grow into vines that crawl around Hercules neck. They blossom with leaves as they twist three times around his throat.

“What you require cost more than the normal tribute of gold and silver. What you need is divine intervention. This comes at a higher cost.” The vine begins to dose tight as the Protector continues. “I will ask you a riddle. If you are successful, I will allow you to inquire of the Oracle. If you are inaccurate with your reply, these vines of Vulcan will choke the very strength from you, and then your life. Do you agree with these terms?”

Hercules feels the supernatural strength from the leafy noose choking him. He realizes this is his last chance to save his life. The fearless Hercules responds, “Ask your question!”

“Here is my riddle. What is greater than Zeus, is more wicked than Hades? The rich desire it, the poor have it. And, if you eat this you will die.”

Hercules feels the mounting pressure around his neck as his hands grip the vines closing around his throat. He feels his strength vanishing as he frantically searches for the solution. He pulls apart the vines with his mighty hands to retrieve a single gulp of air, but he can only slow their squeezing that steals his breath and power.

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His mind rest in his thought he is about to die. A dream comes to him as he begins his eternal sleep.

Hercules sees his dear departed mother. She runs to him and wraps her loving arms around her darling son. "How I missed you my son." He cries and trembles in her embrace. "Why are you so upset my child?"

"I have let you down mother. I have brought a curse upon all Greece."

She continues to embrace him as she strokes his hair. "It is not you that has brought this curse. It is your prideful father that kills the people. I will help you with your answer. You will awake again. Remember this. What greater love is there than mine for you? What greater love is there from you to your people?"

His mother slips from his embrace as he so desperately tries to hold on. He wakes once more to see the skull face of the Protector hidden just inside his hood. He remembers what his dear mother said. Instead of answering the Priest riddle he answers his mother's instead.

Hercules strains to cough out his one word solution, "Nothing."

"You have answered wisely." The Protector disappears revealing the path to the Oracle.

Hercules continues up the worn stone path toward the fissure in the earth. A marble table lay before it with a veiled woman sprawling across its top. Mist dimbs up through the fiery crack below. It swirls over her as its coldness eerily strokes Hercules feet. It invites him to step closer.

He cautiously obliges the ominous presence by stepping five paces forward.

I know your question Hercules. The answer you seek is found in another riddle. I will tell you. First, know this" She laughs as she speaks. "The gods and goddesses require your prayers. This is the source of their eternal strength. To destroy the curse you must weaken the gods." She twist as a snake over the table and raises her head to his face.

"How can one beat a god? Is it through might, or is it through cunning? How might a farmer rid himself of ravenous wolves. Is it through strength, or is it through wisdom? That is the first riddle you

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