



Hercules and the Nemean Lion

It was no secret that Hera, queen of the Olympian gods, hated Zeus' son Hercules. She hated him so much that when he was just a baby, she sent two huge, vicious snakes to try to kill the boy while he was sleeping in his mother Alcmene's palace. Hercules was much stronger than she had imagined, though, and her rage only grew darker as she watched the baby giggling and tying the two snakes in knots, flinging them around his cot. Hera didn't try to harm the boy again for many, many years, but she kept a close watch over the would-be hero, and when the time came that Hercules found himself in exile and in need of forgiveness from the gods, she decreed that he would have to complete ten inhumanly difficult and very dangerous tasks. These tasks, she said, would be set by Eurystheus, the King of Tiryns – a man who hated the hero – and Hercules would have twelve years to complete them.

On the first day of his service, Hercules went to Eurystheus, trying to stay optimistic – after all, what did 'inhumanly difficult' have to do with him?

'I'm the son of Zeus!' he told himself as he approached the palace hall. 'Anything is possible for me.'

'Hercules,' Eurystheus boomed as the hero approached, and he smiled craftily. 'As you know, I am ordered by Hera to set you ten tasks. Each of these will benefit mankind and you will earn your forgiveness – *if* you succeed. Go first to Nemea. A huge beast stalks there, the child of the monster Typhon who challenged Zeus all those years ago. This lion has been terrorising the people of the area for far too long, and it's time *someone* took care of it. By someone, of course, I mean you.'

'I will do it, Eurystheus,' Hercules replied. 'I'll kill the monster and sacrifice it to Zeus. You know, my father, the King of all the gods...'

'Yes, yes, very good,' Eurystheus sneered. 'We all know about your wonderful heritage. Of course, this job is a little beyond what you're used to, isn't it? You might want to use that head of yours, if you can... *If* you succeed, bring the skin of the beast here and I'll give you your next instructions... if you fail, though, I'll have to tell Hera and see what she has to say about the matter...' With this, the King turned away and had his servants dismiss the hero, pushing him out rudely out of the hall.

'Guess there are no parting gifts for me then,' the hero muttered to himself, and set out on the long journey to Nemea.

Hercules travelled for several days, sleeping by the roadside, and always making sure he had his trusty club and dagger with him. Eventually, he came more and more often to abandoned settlements – ghost-towns with no signs of life and deep claw marks on the



doors of the houses. He was in the right place. He kept walking until he found fresh tracks – footprints the size of a wagon wheel! – and took out his dagger as he began to track down the monster.

It wasn't long at all before he heard the creature roaring ahead of him, just beyond some trees. When he saw the monster, even Hercules gulped. He'd seen mountain lions before of course – even hunted them. This wasn't a lion at all. It was a monster, plain and simple. This "lion" was huge – as tall as Hercules – and it had a massive rust-coloured mane. The monster opened its mouth to roar again and Hercules saw its teeth, dripping with blood, its fangs long and very sharp. As he gazed at the beast, it turned and saw him, and in an instant began charging towards him, teeth bared and claws out.

Hercules only had a second to react. As the monster pounced, he rolled out of the way and got beside it, swinging his dagger up as he did so. There was a loud crunching sound and Hercules almost lost his footing in surprise, wondering how he'd managed to get the creature so easily. Then he looked down at his dagger – or what was left of it. The metal had buckled and collapsed, so that all that was left was a twisted lump of iron on the end of the handle... and the Nemean Lion, completely unharmed, was coming back for a second run at the hero.

Hercules barely had time to groan in dismay before the lion was on him again, snapping its teeth near his face and trying to scratch the hero with its huge claws. It was all Hercules could do to hold it off, until he remembered his club lying next to him. With all his might, he swung it at the monster and knocked the beast off him. The lion roared again, circling round for another go at the hero.

Now Hercules saw red, and this time he charged forward, bellowing and swinging his club ready for another hit. **WHACK!**

He hit it again, and this time the lion was the one to run away, making for its lair where it had taken its victims so many times before. Hercules followed close behind and caught the monster up as it entered a cave with two exits. Here, luckily, he remembered Eurystheus' snide comment to use his head, so first he blocked the rear exit with a load of boulders from the nearby mountain, making sure the beast couldn't get away. Then he steeled himself for the fight, and proceeded into the darkness of the cave.

Once again, the monster – now cornered and very, very angry – leapt out at him and tried to overpower the hero, but Hercules knew what to do. He swung his club again, aiming for the monster's head. As the lion moved to avoid his swing, he leapt onto the creature's back and gripped its neck until it ran out of air. Hercules only let go when he was really sure that the monster was dead – he certainly didn't want to be surprised again! Then, since even he would have struggled to carry such a huge creature all the way back to Tiryns, he used the monster's own claws to get its skin off.



As he was heading back to Eurystheus' palace, an idea struck the hero. 'I wonder...' he thought to himself, 'if this skin could be useful,' and he swung it over his shoulders as a cloak. 'Now we'll see if Eurystheus still feels like being rude to me!'

Back at the palace, Eurystheus was at that very moment sitting with his guests in the grand hall, about to make a toast to his own health and Hera's success in getting rid of that annoying, brainless Hercules. Suddenly, a messenger ran in calling the King and announcing Hercules' imminent return. The King couldn't believe his ears – he'd been sure the lion would finish him off! – and he ran to the palace walls to see for himself.

In fact, Hercules was already close by, covered in the lion's skin and looking quite a lot like a monster himself! Eurystheus squealed and ran back inside, locking himself in his chambers and ordering his henchman to give Hercules all his tasks in future. Surely, he thought, if this one hadn't got him then his next idea, the Lernaean Hydra, would certainly do the trick. In the meantime, though, the King stayed in his chamber and hid in a bronze jar he'd had built especially for the purpose of avoiding the hero. And that is the story of Hercules' first labour...