

# SON OF ZEUS



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THE LEGEND OF HERAKLES, EPISODE I

# Son of Zeus

by Eric Feka

## The Legend of Herakles, Episode 1

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Published by Reluctant Geek

*When it comes to Herakles, Hollywood has it all wrong. In Hellenic mythology, where his legend was born, the most famous son of Zeus was anything but a squeaky clean, square-jawed hero. Herakles's true nature emerged in his teens when he beat his music teacher to death with the man's own lyre - a fitting prelude to the years of violence that were to come.*

*Herakles was big. He was angry. He was pathologically violent. In short, he was the world's first anti-hero. Named Alkides at birth, this is the story of how the most famous son of Zeus came to take the name Herakles, and the horrific crime that changed the course of his life.*

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**(i)**

The beast pricked its ears and a growl rumbled deep in its throat. The unmistakable stench of men had penetrated the fetid atmosphere of its den and disturbed its slumber. The monster had been born a lion, and such it was despite being twice the size of the greatest of its brothers. Its vast bulk and strength marked it as a throwback to ancient times before men had come, when lions without manes had roamed throughout the lands bringing terror and death to all other beasts.

Men had driven its ancestors deep into the hills where they had dwindled and become less ferocious, so it was justice, of a sort, that saw this beast, whom men

named the Lion of Kithairon, drive them away from their homes and feed upon their livestock.

Despite its size, the beast was young in years and its strength had lent it an arrogance rarely seen in the animal world. Its eyes had never fallen upon a foe it could not defeat, nor upon prey that it could not slaughter.

When it was a newborn cub, its mother had tried to teach it the danger of men, that they had long claws and hard skins. She tried to teach the beast to avoid men, but it could not understand. Running was simply not in its nature. In its eyes, men were meat with which it could briefly sate its ever-present hunger.

And so the lion did not turn away when it met men. Against the teachings of its mother, it killed and devoured all it encountered as if they were ordinary animals. And the more it killed, the more they came, because men cannot let a threat lie. Some had managed to stay alive long enough to scar its hide, but they were few and far between. Its great paws batted away sword and spear, its claws sliced through bronze armor as if it were flesh, and its great jaws snapped bone and tore muscle.

With the grace of all things feline, the terrible beast rose and padded silently out of its cave and into the cool morning air. It made its way to a crevice in the rocky hills from where it could pounce upon any who

approached. It had ambushed many men here in the past, in the narrow space between the rocks that restricted sword and spear and ensured that only one man could face it at a time. From its perch above the crevice, it would drop down and push its victim off his feet before tearing at legs and torso with claw and fang.

It tested the air again and settled down to wait. There was only one, which was curious. Men usually came in numbers.

## (ii)

'I am Alkides, son of Zeus,' the young man bellowed into the air. King Thesprios had counseled him to approach the lair silently and with caution, but Alkides was not in the habit of creeping about. 'I come to avenge my people and bring glory to Zeus!' he shouted, then drew his sword and stepped forward, shield held above his head.

The few who had survived the lion's den told how the beast had dropped upon them from the cliffs above the chasm leading to its lair, and Alkides was not one to ignore such knowledge. The gorge was long and narrow and he had barely covered half its length before the lion pounced. It sprung down onto his shield, expecting to knock him to the ground as it had so many others, but

Alkides was no ordinary man. His strength was legend, even so early in his life, and he stood head and shoulders above all other men in Thebes.

Alkides did not crumble at the lion's first assault, as all the others had before him, but held his feet and twisted his shield to throw the lion to the ground. It fell heavily, and scattered the debris of its many kills in all directions. Bent shields, broken swords and gnawed bones covered the ground of the chasm - a legacy of the many that it had already devoured - but it sprung up again instantly. For a frozen moment, man and beast faced one another, both crouched and poised for battle.

Again, the lion pounced and again Alkides fended it off with his shield, but this time it brought a huge paw around as it fell back. The beast's razor sharp claws sheared the shield in two and the force of the blow knocked the sword from the man's grasp.

Weaponless but unable to restrain his battle lust, Alkides bounded after the beast as it tumbled back and struck it in the head with what was left of his shield. With amazing strength, he lifted the stunned animal off the ground and drove it, head first, into the cliff wall.

Thinking it unconscious, Alkides bent to pick up the sword and finish the job, but dispatching such a beast would not be so easy. It regained its senses as the son of

Zeus turned for the sword and charged with its huge maw open.

Alkides sensed the lion's movement and dove forward as he picked up his blade. With an uncanny agility that such a big man could not possibly possess, he twisted back up onto one knee to face the threat and thrust the sword up and out towards the lion as it charged.

The momentum of the beast's assault pushed the sword through the roof of its mouth and out through its right ear. Two of its fangs pierced the skin of Alkides's forearm, but it was dead before it could close its jaws.

His opponent vanquished, Alkides used a scrap of cloth from the debris at his feet to stem the flow of blood from his arm. He did not worry about the wound festering - the blood of Olympians flowed through his veins and it did not easily taint.

### (iii)

Back at his camp, near a crossroad on the road to Thebes, Alkides was skinning the lion when he heard a soft noise behind him.

'Son of Zeus, why do you labor so?' a feminine voice said.

The startled young man scrambled to his feet,

drew his sword, and turned to face the voice. He saw two women sitting on stones a few yards from the fire, identical in face and body. One was dressed in a severe white robe and with her hair hidden by a scarf, while the other wore a dress so revealing she may as well have been wearing nothing at all.

'Who are you to ask such questions?' he said, putting away the sword and returning to his work. While he was surprised, he could see no threat from these two.

'I am Virtue and this is my sister Pleasure,' said the woman with the scarf. 'We have come to offer you your destiny.'

'You offer me my destiny? I don't want to offend either of you,' Alkides said, 'but how can you offer me something which is my own to forge? Nor have I ever heard of such a thing happening to anyone else.'

'The fate of one such as you is uncertain,' Virtue said, 'the child of one Olympian and the enemy of another.'

Pleasure said nothing, but sat and stared at the young man with naked lust in her eyes.

Alkides looked up sharply. 'If it is Hera to whom you refer, then you are wrong. She is not my enemy, nor am I her's.'

'She is your enemy even if you deny it. You are the product of her husband's infidelity and that makes her

blood boil,' Virtue said. 'She sent serpents to kill you when you were just a babe in the cradle, and she plots your demise still.'

Alkides snorted his derision and returned to his work.

'Now that you have killed the Lion of Kithairon, do you think yourself redeemed for the murder of Linos?' Virtue asked.

'I did not murder Linos. He struck me first and I had the right to defend myself.'

'A teacher should be able to strike a wayward student,' Virtue said. 'How else can he teach his reluctant charges? Poor Linos, he was probably the first teacher to be bludgeoned to death with his own lyre.'

'Who are you to question the judgment of Thebes?'

'Yes, sister, do you to question the law of Thebes?' Pleasure said, and got to her feet. 'Linos was a fool to strike one as virile and as volatile as this son of Zeus.'

Alkides stopped working and turned back to look at the two women. He seemed on the verge of saying something, but thought better of it and returned to his task.

'If it wasn't murder,' Virtue said, 'then why did Amphytrion send you away from your lessons? Surely,

tending cows is not glamorous enough a vocation for one such as yourself.'

Alkides kept working.

'He was not banished, sister, just given a moment to reflect upon who he is,' Pleasure said. 'Amphitryon, the man who raised him as his own son, always knew the worth of this young man, which is why he sent him to slay the Lion where so many others had failed. You have done your job, Alkides,' she took a step forward and shed what little clothing she wore. 'Come with me now and claim your reward.'

Alkides looked at the startlingly beautiful woman and temptation beckoned. He paused a moment and reflected upon where he was and who it was that was addressing him. These two had appeared out of nowhere, they knew his name, and much about him, some of which was not common knowledge. After looking long and hard at the naked Pleasure, he realized that however beautiful she was, however sweet her voice or alluring her body, she was no ordinary woman. A heavy sigh escaped from his lips and he turned his attention back to the job of separating the lion from its skin.

'King Thespios will be happy when you present him with the pelt,' Virtue said. 'Have you met his daughters?'

Alkides couldn't help but smile. 'Met them? I have bedded forty nine of the fifty!'

'And the fiftieth?' Virtue asked.

'Ahh, she was a pretty thing but so innocent. It was she who told me that I had been with all her sisters. They came to me in the darkness of night and never said a word so I had thought them all the same girl forty nine times.'

'Thesprios is no fool. Fifty children fathered by a son of Zeus would be a boon to any King,' Virtue said.

'Why did you not bed the youngest one?'

'She loves another,' Alkides said.

'Then she is a fool,' Pleasure said. 'Come now, let me be the fiftieth.'

'There you have your choice,' Virtue said. 'Go now with my sister and your destiny will be a life of pleasure, but your legacy will fade from the world, and men will forget your name with the passing of time. If, however, you choose to resist the wiles of Pleasure and choose the difficult path of duty to your people, then your name will live in the hearts and minds of men forever. What is your choice?'

Alkides turned back to the carcass of the lion.

'My choice is to finish my work and then go to sleep. The sun sinks and I still have much to do.'

When he next looked up, the women were gone.

(iv)

Alkides found it troubling that his encounter with the two nymphs the evening before had unnerved him more than his battle with the Lion of Kithairon. Although he had not spoken a choice, he was aware that he had elected to follow the path of Virtue, and was curious to see where his choice would lead.

Despite Pleasure's obvious charms, Alkides found the choice had been plain in his mind. Although young in years, his birth and masculinity had made him very popular in Thebes, and so his experiences with love and lust had been extensive. The people of Thebes had offered him everything he could possibly desire and denied him almost nothing. He had tasted the indulgent life and, while enjoyable in the moment, it was ultimately hollow and distracting. However, the satisfaction and pride he felt when he excelled at anything - he outstripped his peers in horsemanship, archery, and most everything else except music - was far more fulfilling. From his perspective, it was easily the greater of the two pleasures and the obvious choice.

The day was bright, and the sun shone down

through the trees in a pleasing way. Alkides stretched out on the patch of grass that had been his bed for the night and stared up at Helios steering his chariot across the sky. The charioteer of the sun had made his journey every day since the creation of the world, except for the one day that Zeus had gone to Alkmene, Alkides's mother, disguised as Amphitryon. On that day, Helios unhitched his chariot so that Zeus could spend a night with Alkmene that lasted as long as three. Love, Alkides philosophized, can make even the Gods behave in strange ways.

Would his father have made the same choice? Probably not. Zeus was the most powerful of the Olympians and did pretty much as he pleased. In a strange way, his father had no destiny to forge.

Alkides sighed deeply and went to tend the fire, which had gone out during the night. He had planned to head to Thesias immediately after he had killed the lion and present King Thespios with the pelt, but the urgency with which he had started his quest had faded. He had woken hungry, and the thought of breakfasting on the bread and cheese he had brought as provisions did not excite him.

Taking up his bow and quiver, Alkides set out to find some meat and soon returned with a small deer, which he skinned, gutted, and put on a makeshift spit over the fire. It wasn't long before the tantalizing smell of roasting

meat filled the air and drew more unexpected visitors to his camp.

'You there, will you share your meal with the Heralds of King Erginos of the Minyans?' said one of two mounted men who rode up to the camp from the nearby road. Alkides could see a further dozen or so foot soldiers marching in their wake.

'As a man of Thebes, I have no love for your kind. There are plenty of deer to be had throughout the woods. If you are so hungry for meat, hunt some for yourselves.'

'The men of Thebes have always been fools,' said the second mounted man. 'That is why the tribute we were sent to collect by our King is so impressive. It was one hundred cattle, but now it will be one hundred cattle, one deer, and a beating for an insolent fool.'

Alkides jumped to his feet and drew his sword.

'See how foolish these Thebans are?'

Outnumbered ten to one and he refuses to lie down and take his punishment,' the first rider said, and turned to the foot soldiers who had drawn up behind him. 'We will make an example of him. Take off his nose, ears and hands and send him to the King of Thebes to remind him why the tribute is so large.'

The words of the envoy of the Minyans so

enraged Alkides that he could contain himself no longer. 'For Thebes,' he cried and leapt over the fire to fall upon the surprised soldiers beyond. He was still in the air when his sword pierced the chest of the first soldier and his momentum coming down pushed it right through the man's body and into the chest of the man standing behind. Unable to wrench the sword free because the hilt had become wedged, Alkides used his fists to pummel a third soldier. He knocked off the man's helm with the first devastating blow and crushed his head with the second.

Watching three of their number fall in the twinkling of an eye drained the remaining foot soldiers of bravery and they fled before the fury of the man mountain assailing them. The two mounted envoys weren't so easily intimidated, however, and drew their swords. They had obviously fought together before because, without uttering a word, they rode off in opposite directions from the young Theban, and turned at exactly the same time to charge him.

Alkides did not have time to free his sword, and could only twist under the flashing blades when the mounted men swung their weapons. He managed to grab the wrist of the first envoy as he passed by and drag him to the ground.

Leaving the man stunned on the ground, Alkides

then chased after the second envoy and vaulted onto the back of his horse as he was trying to turn. He punched the surprised man in the back of the head and threw the unconscious body to the ground.

'The men of Thebes do not take kindly to threats,' Alkides said. He pulled his sword free of the two corpses in which it had become wedged and cut off the ears and noses of the two envoys. He then took off their hands at the wrist before sealing the wounds with a burning brand from the fire. 'You can tell your King that this is all the tribute that Alkides, son of Zeus, thinks he deserves.'

Although tempted to await the return of the foot soldiers so that he could complete his victory over the enemies of Thebes, Alkides decided he had better bring news of what had happened to Amphitryon. He knew the King of the Minyans would not take kindly to such an offence and Thebes needed to muster an army to meet the assault. He hastily gathered his possessions, rounded up the two horses, and rode as fast as he could back home.

(v)

Alkides first brought the news of his encounter with the Minyan envoys to Amphitryon, who took it surprisingly well. 'It is about time Thebes stood up to King

Erginos and his band of thieves,' he said.

Joined by Iphikles, Alkides's half-brother, they went before King Kreon to make the case for war.

'There is no doubt that the tribute was steep, but it bought peace for many years which is a rarity in the civilized lands of Hellas,' Kreon said. 'Erginos is a grandson of Poseidon and not someone to be trifled with.'

'They openly mock us, my King, boasting to all who would listen that they have the Thebans frightened out of their wits,' Amphitryon said. 'Alkides was not the first to hear such insults, but he must be the last.'

'Since when do the men of Thebes bow to fear?' said a voice from above the throne.

The four looked up and saw the Goddess Athena holding a sword, a shield, and a javelin. They all fell to the floor in supplication, but none could take his eyes off the Goddess.

'What is your council, wise Athena?' King Kreon asked.

'You have enraged Erginos and his armies march this way as we speak. These weapons are for the son of Zeus, to help him battle the enemies of Thebes.' Athena drifted down and handed Alkides the weapons, then suddenly vanished.

'A son of Zeus marches with us and we have the

blessings of Athena. You are right, Amphitryon, it is time to meet the Minyans on the field of battle,' Kreon said and returned to his throne. He rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands in front of him. 'Erginos has a bodyguard who fight with him, but, as the most skilled fighter of all the Minyans, he still stands at the very right of their lines. We four are the greatest of the warriors of Thebes, of that there can be no doubt, and I propose that we do not join the ranks because that will put us on the opposite side of Erginos. Instead, we will ride and make the enemy think us cavalry to run down any who flee, but that is where they will be wrong.'

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The Thebans waited impatiently for Erginos and his army to reach them, and at one point even feared that the King of Minyans may have let the insult pass. But eventually, the men from Orkhomenos arrived and it was arranged that the two armies would meet on the plains outside the city.

Alkides looked proudly at the hundreds of Theban Hoplites marching in a rank eight deep, the sun gleaming on their banded bronze armor. He wore similar armor, but carried a lance instead of a shield and sat astride

a horse amongst thirty other mounted men, arranged in a diamond directly behind the infantry.

The plan that Kreon had hatched was a simple one. The horsemen would wait until the two lines of infantry had almost met and then ride around to fall upon the enemy's right flank. Herakles was to kill Erginos while the others were to occupy his bodyguard. Iphikles had the task of staying with his brother and protecting his back, while Kreon and Amphitryon were to make sure the small Minyan cavalry stayed clear of the battle.

The riders formed up in a diamond so that there would always be a leader, whichever way they were to turn. Kreon rode at one point of the diamond, and would lead them out past their own lines. Amphitryon was on the point to Kreon's right and would lead them clear of the Theban infantry. It was then up to Alkides, who rode at the opposite point to Kreon, to lead the mounted warriors to the flanks of the enemy line.

When he had judged that the time was right, Kreon gave the command and the diamond moved forward. Alkides maintained his place in the formation, but his attentions wavered. The sight of an armed and hostile enemy invading his homeland made his blood boil. By the time Amphitryon took the lead, Alkides could barely contain his fury.

When his time finally came, Alkides let out a mighty roar and spurred his horse into a gallop towards the invaders. He had never before seen Erginos, but it was obvious who he was. The son of Poseidon marched in the most vulnerable position in his army, unprotected by the shield of another. His bravery and the strength of his arm were legend amongst the fighting men of Orkhomenos, who were braver and more ferocious because of his presence.

At the sight of the man who had dishonored Thebes for so many years, Alkides lost all control. All sights and sounds faded into the background save for the pounding of the blood in his veins. He did not see the Minyan cavalry fall upon his companions, nor did he see Amphitryon turn the diamond to face the new threat, leaving only Alkides and Iphikles to charge the massed infantry on their own.

The Minyan hoplites near Erginos were his bodyguard and were the most fearsome warriors in the army. They jeered at the two screaming fools charging towards them, hurling insults about their state of mind. Two Minyans in the rear ranks turned their spears towards Alkides and Iphikles to stop the charge, while the others maintained their focus on the approaching Theban line.

At the last second, Alkides swerved his horse to the right to avoid the raised spears of the defenders. He

absorbed the shock of his lance that skewered the man behind Erginos, but the spear shattered and left him with only a sliver in his hand. Beneath him, his mount screamed and fell with a Minyan spear caught in its throat.

Alkides threw himself to the right as the horse buckled beneath him and landed on his feet with sword already drawn. He charged into the Minyan infantry, oblivious to everything except the need to kill. In his wake, Iphikles parried the swords and spears of those who tried to attack the son of Zeus from behind.

Alkides's strength made even his broken spear a weapon, and his sword was an arcing agent of death. Four Minyans fell to his assault without knowing who had assailed them. Others saw his fury and balked. Only one stood before him unflinching and it was Erginos, King of the Minyans.

'Ah, you must be Alkides, the fool who started the war that will see Thebes burnt to the ground.'

Unlike many of his peers, Alkides was not one to use words in situations where actions could be far more eloquent. He snarled and launched himself at Erginos, who blocked the blow with his shield and twisted away.

'It is as I thought. You are a grunting barbarian without honor or grace.'

'Shut up and fight,' Alkides growled and again

launched himself at Erginos, who parried the sword thrust and struck Alkides in the head with his shield, but the blow did not have the effect he was expecting. Instead of stumbling about in a stunned stupor as Erginos had anticipated, Alkides grabbed hold of the trailing edge of Erginos's shield with his left hand. The King of the Minyans was surprised at this tactic and tried to shake the man loose, but his grip was like iron. With a strength verging on the inhuman, Alkides forced Erginos's shield up and away from his body and then thrust his sword deep into the King's exposed chest.

Those Minyans who saw their great leader fall so easily lost the heart for the fight and broke from formation just as the two lines collided. The Thebans, aware that Alkides had unnerved the enemy roared in triumph and pressed the advantage.

His bloodlust far from sated, Alkides launched himself once again at the soldiers of Orkhomenos. He used his great strength to push through the shield wall and stab and hack at the bodies behind. It did not take long for the Thebans to push through the thinned ranks at the right of the Minyan line and turn to strike at the heart of the invading host. Demoralized and leaderless, the Minyans turned and fled.

The battle disintegrated into a bloody carnage as

the men of Thebes set off in pursuit. Although he was amongst the pursuing host, Alkides remembered little of the chase. All that remained in his mind was the overpowering smell of blood and the screams of the injured and dying. He did not know how long he fought, or how far he had pursued the fleeing enemy, but when there was no one left to fight, the fury left him and he turned back towards Thebes. Of Amphitryon or Kreon there was no sign, but a lone figure some way away bore a resemblance to his brother, so he made his way towards him.

'A great victory, brother,' Alkides said, but Iphikles did not look up.

'He died in battle, as a warrior should.'

Alkides looked down at his brother's feet and saw the body of Amphitryon, the man who was his father in everything but name.

'Come, brother,' Alkides said. 'One last task remains for us today.' The two men carefully placed the bloodied and mutilated body onto a shield that Alkides liberated from the battlefield and, together, they carried him back to Thebes.

### (vii)

Watching Alkmena prepare Amphitryon's body

for burial was one of the most difficult things Alkides had done in his young life. Together with his brother, they watched her as she worked to ensure their father's passage into the afterlife. It was obvious that she was proud of her husband, but her grief at losing him often overcame her as she toiled over his body, and she frequently broke down and wept.

It dawned on Alkides as he watched Alkmene toil through her pain and sorrow that this was why Zeus needed to disguise himself when he had come to her. Even the greatest of the Olympians would have been powerless in the face of the love that Alkmene had for her husband.

On the first day after Amphityron's death, the brothers watched Alkmene wash and anoint the body of their father. She cleaned his many wounds, and washed off the grime of the battlefield before laying a wreath on his chest and Charon's coin on his lips. On the second day, the people of Thebes came to pay their respects and Alkmene greeted them all and thanked them for their kind words. Before dawn on the third day, the two brothers carried the body to the grave, led by his grieving wife.

Amphityron's was not the only burial that day, being three days after a battle in which many men had died, but it was the most significant. Although not born of Thebes, Amphityron had been loved and respected by all,

especially the King. Over the years, he had become Kreon's most trusted advisor and friend, and Alkides could see the King felt the loss keenly.

Other women wailed and tore at their hair and clothes as they led their husbands to the grave, but not Alkmene. She only chanted softly as she walked, but the agony of her loss radiated off her like heat from a flame, and none who saw her doubted that she truly grieved her husband's death.

'Your grief is plain for all to see, Alkmene,' King Kreon said as they walked from the grave, 'but is there no joy for you this day? Your husband fought bravely, as did your sons. They liberated Thebes from a crippling tribute and brought great honor to the city and themselves.'

'I am very proud of my husband, my King, but the pain of losing him overshadows all other emotions.'

'Then I have news that should lift your spirits and alleviate at least some of your anguish. I want to give my two daughters to your two sons as brides - my eldest daughter Megara for Alkides and Henoixi for Iphicles. What greater reward can I give to the family that has done so much for Thebes?'

Alkmene did not have the time to reply for the Gods chose that moment to descend from Olympus. Athena appeared on the path before Alkides, who had been

walking ahead of everyone else, preferring to be alone with his thoughts on this somber day.

'Kreon speaks wisdom,' Athena said looking directly at Alkmena, who had prostrated herself before the Goddess. 'What better time to reward bravery than when the brave are mourning the loss of those who did not survive the battle? The dead will find their reward in the underworld, where those who are worthy reside forever at ease in Elysium, but the living must be acknowledged here.' The Goddess of Wisdom turned to the kneeling Alkides and smiled. 'You played a great part in the victory, and for your efforts the Gods have chosen to reward you. I will give him two gifts. The first is this golden helm,' she said, and stepped forward to place a beautiful golden helmet on Alkides head.

'Thank you, wise Athena,' Alkides said.

'You think yourself indomitable, young hero, which is why I have a second gift for you. What separates civilized Hellenes from barbarians is their love of knowledge and wisdom, and so this second gift is far more valuable than the first. Beware your anger, Alkides, lest your enemies use it against you.'

'My enemies are the enemies of Thebes,' Alkides said. 'How can I not get angry when they insult the place of my birth?'

'The gift is given, do with it what you will,' Athena said, and faded. Where she had stood, a shadow appeared from which stepped Zeus, Chieftain of the Gods. He came forward and gave the young man a shield. 'An unbreakable shield made by Hephaestus,' the Olympian said in a voice that caused the earth to shake. Alkides accepted the gift in silence with his head bowed.

Hephaestus followed Zeus and presented Alkides with a golden breastplate. 'A gift for you, brave Alkides, from someone who has felt Hera's scorn,' the crippled God said. 'Be wary, young hero, for armor and weapons are not enough against one such as her.'

The beautiful Apollo followed the grotesque Hephaestus, and presented Alkides with a bow and quiver of arrows. Hermes then arrived and presented Alkides with a beautiful sword.

'All these fine weapons are well and good,' the messenger of the Gods said in his usual mocking tone, 'but sometimes, a more brutal weapon does a far better job than the sharpest of blades. A big, heavy club is invaluable when dealing with those whose skulls are thicker than their wits are sharp.'

The last of the Gods to present Alkides a gift was Poseidon, God of the sea and grandfather of Erginos. He brought forward a team of beautiful horses that

stamped and snorted beside the kneeling Alkides.

'I was torn during the battle because you were both of my blood, young nephew, but how could I not admire the way in which you turned the battle for Thebes? I also have some wisdom for you to add to that of Athena. Glory is seldom won by one man alone. Had it not been for the bravery of Iphikles we would be mourning your death here today as well as that of Amphitryon.'

But not all the Olympians were impressed by Alkides's exploits. Hera, wife of Zeus, watched on from Olympus, through her window that showed all things.

'Look at the oaf,' she said to Iris, the personification of rainbows and her messenger, 'swollen with pride and self importance. It makes my blood boil to see him so honored.'

'No mortal man can withstand the fury of Hera, Queen of the Gods,' Iris said. 'Send him to his doom.'

'He is not just a mortal man, as you well know. Did you not see what he did the serpents I sent? And he was just a babe in the cot at the time.' Hera leaned on the sill with her elbows and cupped her chin in her hands. 'This ill-born son of my unfaithful husband has the strength of a bull and the agility of a leopard. It will take more than a sword in the belly to ensure his end.'

'How else then, Mistress?'

'I have another way, but now is not the time. Let him wallow in his false glory for a while.'

(viii)

From atop Mount Olympus, Hera watched and waited as the years passed, and all the time her anger grew. Alkides was the product of her husband's infidelity and his happiness galled her, infuriated her, and filled her with spite. She saw him marry Megara and watched as they created a happy home together. She saw the birth of his two sons and a daughter, and watched as they grew from babes in the cradle to boisterous young children who played in the woods under the watchful eye of their father.

When the fabric of her patience finally tore and she could contain her fury no longer, she summoned Iris to her side.

'The time has come. The buffoon thinks himself stable and secure and an example for all others to follow, but we will show the people of Thebes the truth. We will expose the murderous rage that still dwells within the heart of Thebes's great protector,' she said, and paused a moment, as if weighing up in her mind what she would say next. 'Go Iris, my messenger, and find Lyssa, daughter of Maniae, who is the spirit of furious rage. Ask her to go to

Alkides and madden him so that he sees enemies of Thebes in those he loves. His pride will take care of the rest.'

'As you wish, my Queen,' Iris said, and vanished in a swirl of color. A mere heartbeat later, the spirit of the rainbow appeared beside Lyssa, who was sitting on a grassy knoll by a lake, watching the sunrise.

'Greetings, Lyssa,' Iris said. 'I come at the request of Hera, Queen of the Gods. She asks that you grant her a favor.'

'And greetings to you, colorful Iris. You are just in time to watch Helios and his chariot set the sky alight. Sit and enjoy it with me.'

'This is not a time for idle indulgence,' Iris scolded. 'The favor Hera requires of you is close to her heart and only you can help her.'

'You know well that I take no pleasure in spreading mayhem,' Lyssa said. 'Inducing people to tear themselves and their families apart in furious madness is not something that should be done upon a whim, even if the whim is divine in origin.'

'This is no whim! For years, Hera has watched the seed of her husband's infidelity grow and prosper, and it gnaws away at her. Family life is her divine domain, and watching such a one as Alkides live a rich family life is an affront.'

'Ah, so Hera would have me destroy Alkides, a man whose fame and prestige is known throughout Hellas. The act is doubly heinous because he is a son of Zeus, foremost of Olympians. I'm sorry Iris, such a venture is too dark and foul for one such as I.'

'But your Queen commands it! Will you disobey her?'

'I thought this was a favor, not a command.'

'Hera is suffering, and your inaction will only extend her pain! Her hate festers like a tainted wound and already she sits too long and too often at her window, looking down upon Alkides. Only his downfall will clear the poison from her heart. Only vengeance upon her unfaithful husband will calm her mind.'

'Is there no other way than to drive such a man mad? Surely, Iris of the many colors, you have a place in your heart for a valiant hero such as Alkides?'

'None, for his very existence damages one for whom I care more than any other. Nor is Alkides a hero in anything more than name. His civilized nature is a facade that conceals an evil violence beneath. Hera asks only that you remove the mask behind which he hides his true nature. Let him think that his family and friends are enemies of Thebes. The murder in his heart will take care of the rest.'

'As you wish,' Lyssa said, 'I will do as Hera asks but, with Helios as my witness, I want it known that I do so reluctantly and with a heavy heart.'

(ix)

Alkides was sitting in the home he shared with his wife and children, eating his morning meal of bread, cheese, and dried figs. Outside, he could hear the sound of children playing and was feeling quite relieved to be here inside. It's not that he didn't love his children; he did, with all his heart. It's just that, lately, he had begun to feel that family life wasn't quite for him. It made him feel be-calmed. Stuck. Trapped. Suffocating.

He let out a heartfelt sigh and pushed his plate away. He had no appetite for food this morning. What he really wanted was a little excitement. He hadn't become protector of Thebes to sit around all day and listen to children squeal. Even his short time as a cowherd had been more exciting than this - at least there was a chance that something or someone would try to steal the cows.

Alkides knew that, in a way, he was a victim of his own success. There had been bandits and enemies aplenty just after the battle with the Minyans but, one by one, he had dealt with them all, and his growing fame meant

that the evils of the world gave Thebes a wide berth.

Felling melancholy and not a little strange, Alkides decided to go to his brother's house.

'Maybe company would make breakfast more palatable,' he thought to himself as he rose from the table.

Just then, a strange noise penetrated through the joyous sounds of children playing. It was a metallic sound, not unlike a sword scraping upon bronze armor.

He walked cautiously to his door and peered out towards where his children were playing and, sure enough, through the trees he could see the glint of sun on armor. 'Fool,' he chided himself. 'While you wallow in self pity, the enemies of Thebes come to steal your children.'

'Cowards,' he screamed, and charged through the door, 'leave the children be! Come, face me like men and die with honor.'

He carried no weapon and wore no armor, but Alkides needed neither. His strength and fury were enough. He fell upon the first invader and crushed his skull with a single blow. The second ran screaming like a child towards the forest from where he had come, but he could not escape the wrath of the son of Zeus, who chased after him and brought him down with a blow to the back that snapped the invader's spine.

But these two were not alone, and everywhere

Alkides looked, he could see the signs of invasion.

'Enemies! Enemies!' he cried, and raced back towards his home to get his sword and spear. 'Arm yourselves, citizens of Thebes, for we are under attack.'

Hordes of invaders were pouring out of the homes of his friends and family. Surely they were not all lost? Did the bandits sneak in while he sat daydreaming and kill everyone in Thebes?

'No!' he screamed. 'Where are they? I'll kill you all!'

There was a sound beside him that could only have been an enemy trying to flank him. Alkides threw himself to the right and down, but it wasn't enough. He felt a crushing pain in his back just before consciousness left him.

(x)

When he next opened his eyes, Alkides saw the concerned face of Iphikles looking down at him.

'Brother! You are alive!' Alkides exclaimed. 'What of the others? Are the enemies gone?'

Iphikles shook his head. 'There were no enemies,' he said. 'It was a madness sent by Hera to plague you. If it had not been for Athena knocking you out with a stone,

many more would have died, and you amongst them.'

Alkides sat up. 'A madness? How can this be? I saw the enemies of Thebes with my own eyes. They were coming to take our children. In fact, I slew two of them myself.'

'They were not enemies you slew,' Iphikles said. 'They were your sons.'

'Don't speak such things!' Alkides said, with anger in his voice. 'My children are my heart. I would do nothing to hurt them.'

'Nevertheless,' Iphikles said.

The grief in his brother's voice caused Alkides to pause. 'Is this true? How can it be?'

It was only when Kreon entered the room that Alkides noticed the darkness. 'Where is the sun? Has Helios abandoned his chariot?'

'No, Alkides. You have lain as if dead for three days. We thought you gone, never to rejoin the land of the living as punishment for the heinous crime you had committed,' the King said. 'Had it not been for the word of Athena, who stood over you and protected you from the wrath of Thebes, you would have been hacked to pieces by the citizens of the city you swore to protect.'

Alkides looked about him, unable to put his thoughts into words.

'They are truly dead?' he stammered out, after a moment, 'and by my hand?'

'By your hand, yes, but not by you,' Iphikles said. 'At Hera's request, Lyssa descended upon you and drove you mad.'

Alkides looked like a man bereft, a man lost and unable to see his way clear. But only for a moment. The steel returned to his eyes and he stood up off the bed. 'There is only one action left to me,' he said and reached for his brother's sword, which was leaning on the wall beside him.

Kreon and Iphikles both realized that Alkides was about to take his own life and launched themselves at him, but they may as well have been trying to stop the ocean's tide. They hung from the arms of the huge man like puppets on a string.

Alkides paused with the point of the blade held just below his ribcage. 'Please, my friends, you cannot stop me,' he said. 'My crime is too great a burden to bear and even my life will be too small a penance.'

A bright light appeared by the door, and from within it came Athena, Goddess of Wisdom. She gestured and the sword flew from Alkides's grasp and buried itself to the hilt in the wall above his head. 'Hades is ill prepared for one such as you, Alkides son of Zeus, and your

penance in the underworld would be great indeed,' she said. 'Better to atone for your crimes in the land of the living, despite how long and difficult they may be, than suffer an eternity in Hades's domain.'

'And what of Hera's penance?' Alkides said, anger replacing the sorrow in his voice. He reached up and pulled the sword free of the wall. Athena gestured again, but Alkides held the weapon in a grip stronger than the will of the Gods.

'I followed the path of virtue as I said I would. The people of Thebes have never been safer than while I was their guardian. How does such duty earn me such a reward? Why were my children killed? What will Hera's punishment be since it is she who sent the madness that killed my children? How will she atone for this catastrophe that she has caused to fall upon my family?'

'Again, your temper fails you,' Athena said. 'Hera sent the madness, true, but it was your hand that butchered the innocents. She knows that you are quick to anger and bring death to all who stand in your path, and she used this knowledge against you.'

For a moment, Alkides looked set to attack Athena, but a sadness came to his eyes and he deflated. He dropped the sword and sat down heavily upon the bed.

'All this talk of penance and punishment, and

who owes what and to whom it should be paid is meaningless. My sons are dead, and more than likely buried while I lay here asleep. I did not even get the chance to see to their burial and wish them well in the underworld.'

'They are already in Hades's domain,' Athena said, 'and it is from there that I have just returned. Hades has taken pity upon these innocents and has sent them to reside forever in Elysium, the Isle of the Blessed.'

'Thank you, Athena,' Alkides said, looking shamefaced. 'Your compassion for my family makes me ashamed. I do not know why you are so kind to me, but I thank you regardless.'

'Do not forget that Zeus is my father as well,' Athena said.

Alkides dropped his head into his hands to hide his face, so that the others could not see the tears in his eyes.

'Death is not your fate, Alkides son of Zeus, but the time has come for you to leave Thebes forever,' Athena said. 'Go to Delphi and consult the oracle. She will tell you what you need to do to absolve yourself of this guilt and pain.'

Alkides looked up. 'I will go immediately,' he said. 'There is nothing for me here but painful memories.'

'I will come with you,' Iphikles said.

'No you won't,' Kreon snapped. 'Thebes can ill afford to lose its two best warriors in one day. You have a duty here, Iphikles, to your family and your people.'

'But I cannot let my brother go alone! These are his darkest days and he needs his family.'

'Send Iolaos, your oldest son,' Athena said. 'He has grown to be a fine young man and the stillness of city life sits uncomfortably on his shoulders.'

'Who am I to doubt the word of the Goddess of Wisdom?' Iphikles said, but his voice betrayed his sorrow. 'It was selfish to suggest myself, I know, but my brother and I have been together since birth and a part of me wants us to be together until death.'

'I will miss you more than anyone else,' Alkides said, 'but go now and fetch Iolaos. I want to leave as soon as possible.'

## (xi)

Alkides would not even wait for the sun to rise and set off for Delphi immediately. The journey to the temple of Apollo took six days, and in all that time Alkides barely uttered a word. Iolaos sensed that his uncle was not well and performed the duties of setting up camp and preparing meals without the need to be asked, and rode

much of the journey twenty paces behind. When they finally reached the journey's end, Alkides was reluctant to enter the oracle's chamber.

'A week is not enough time to grieve my loss,' he said when Iolaos had secured the horses. 'What could a mad priestess say that would make the pain lessen or the memory of my sons fade?'

'It was the counsel of Athena herself that you consult the oracle, uncle. Surely you can trust the word of one so wise.'

Alkides grimaced. 'You are right,' he said, and passed through the door into the temple.

Iolaos paused for a moment and looked about him. The temple itself was splendid and a fitting tribute to Apollo, but the darkened doorway that led to the oracle's chamber was anything but. Tendrils of smoke and steam escaped from it. He wasn't comfortable with the ways of Gods and priests, but he had come on the journey to support his uncle and he wasn't about to let him down at the last moment. Iolaos took a deep breath in case he couldn't trust the air on the other side and followed his uncle.

Inside, the temple was dark. A brazier of coals glowed in the middle of the floor - the room's only illumination - and the atmosphere was thick with smoke

and steam that seemed to come from the stony walls themselves. Iolaos could see little beyond the bulky frame of his uncle, which he found reassuring. Whatever monster lay ahead would have to fight its way through the most famous warrior in all of Hellas before it could get to him. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, he could see that there were columns and statues dotted around the cavernous room, and someone had positioned an ornate seat covered in silken cushions directly behind the brazier.

'Fret not, Iolaos, I am no monster,' said a female voice and a shadow detached itself from a column and moved into the light, where it resolved into a haggard woman in a tattered, red robe. She sat down on the seat and lifted her eyes towards Alkides. Iolaos couldn't help but notice that they glowed from within with a strange green light.

'So, the son of Zeus has listened to wisdom for a change,' she said, 'how unusual.'

'I come seeking counsel, priestess of Apollo,' Alkides said. 'I have committed a great crime and seek redemption.'

'I know of your deed, and of how it came to be. This is the way of the world, Alkides. The will of the Gods is rarely questioned and mortal men are often left to pay the price.'

'Only hatred drives the will of Hera, and she must bear some of the responsibility for the outrage committed upon my family. I have never wronged her, but have borne the brunt of her quarrel with Zeus nonetheless,' Alkides said, in a voice edged with anger and sorrow.

'The nymphs told you that the path of virtue will be difficult,' the oracle said, 'and this is only the beginning of your journey to immortality. Brace yourself, for what I am about to tell you will not be easy to hear.'

'Nothing has been easy since I awoke from a dream and found myself in a nightmare.'

'You have good grounds for your anger towards Hera, but you must put it behind you. If you are to lessen the pain of your crime and grasp your destiny, then you must do two things. First, you must abandon your name from birth and be known henceforth as Herakles and, second, you must serve Eurystheus at Tiryns for twelve years and perform the ten tasks that he sets for you.'

Iolaos could see the muscles in Alkides's back tighten and saw his hand drop onto the pommel of his sword.

'What mad request is this? Do you mock me, or is this more of Hera's trickery? How can this lead to absolution? How can you ask me to adopt a name that brings glory to Hera, the one who devastated my family

and my house, and then to serve a King who is more weed than man? '

'Know this, son of Zeus, this is not the usual time the Pythia makes predictions but Athena came and begged a favor of me,' the old woman slumped forward and was silent a while.

After a few minutes, Herakles made to speak, but the oracle cut him off.

'Still your tongue and heed my counsel,' the Pythia said, 'for the devotions of Apollo are strenuous and tire me and rob me of my years. The Gods on Olympus are cunning and none more so than Hera. Her vengeance against you has succeeded even though you have survived the madness she sent, but your allies on Olympus have won you a reprieve.

Zeus, who is King of the Olympians, had a desire to serve both his prophecy and to help his most favored son. He came to Hera and told her that he will allow Eurystheus to be King, but in return, Hera must allow you the gift of immortality. When she balked, he offered that you should win this gift by serving Eurystheus. Hera had no choice but to agree because Zeus was becoming impatient, but I feel that she still plots against you. That is why you must change your name. Bring glory to her while you perform these tasks and she will be less inclined to

impede you.'

'Very well,' Alkides said, although Iolaos could see that he was far from happy. 'I will do as you say and will be known from this day as Herakles, and I will go to serve the weed King in Tiryns. But if this proves a false road, then not even Apollo himself will be able to save you from my wrath.'

'When are we going to Tiryns, uncle?'

'I am leaving immediately, Iolaos, but you do not have to accompany me. You are not in exile and can return to Thebes and your father's house if you wish.'

'I will come with you, if you don't mind, uncle,' Iolaos said. 'If I were to return home my mother would insist I resume my lessons, and I swear that my music teacher is trying to goad me into violence.'

Herakles smirked at the thinly veiled reference to his own past. 'You may come along, but from this day onward you will only refer to me by my new name. I am not uncle or Alkides. I am Herakles. Is that understood?'

'Yes, uncle,' Iolaos said and then caught himself. 'Herakles, I mean.'

Herakles turned back to the oracle. 'I cannot understand the ways of gods and priests, hag of Apollo, but I am thankful for your counsel. As much as it grieves me to glorify the name of the one who so openly plots

against me, I will trust in your word.' He threw a handful of iron coins onto the floor of the temple and stalked out, closely followed by Iolaos.

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# THE LION OF NEMEA

THE LEGEND OF HERAKLES, EPISODE 2



ERIC FEKA

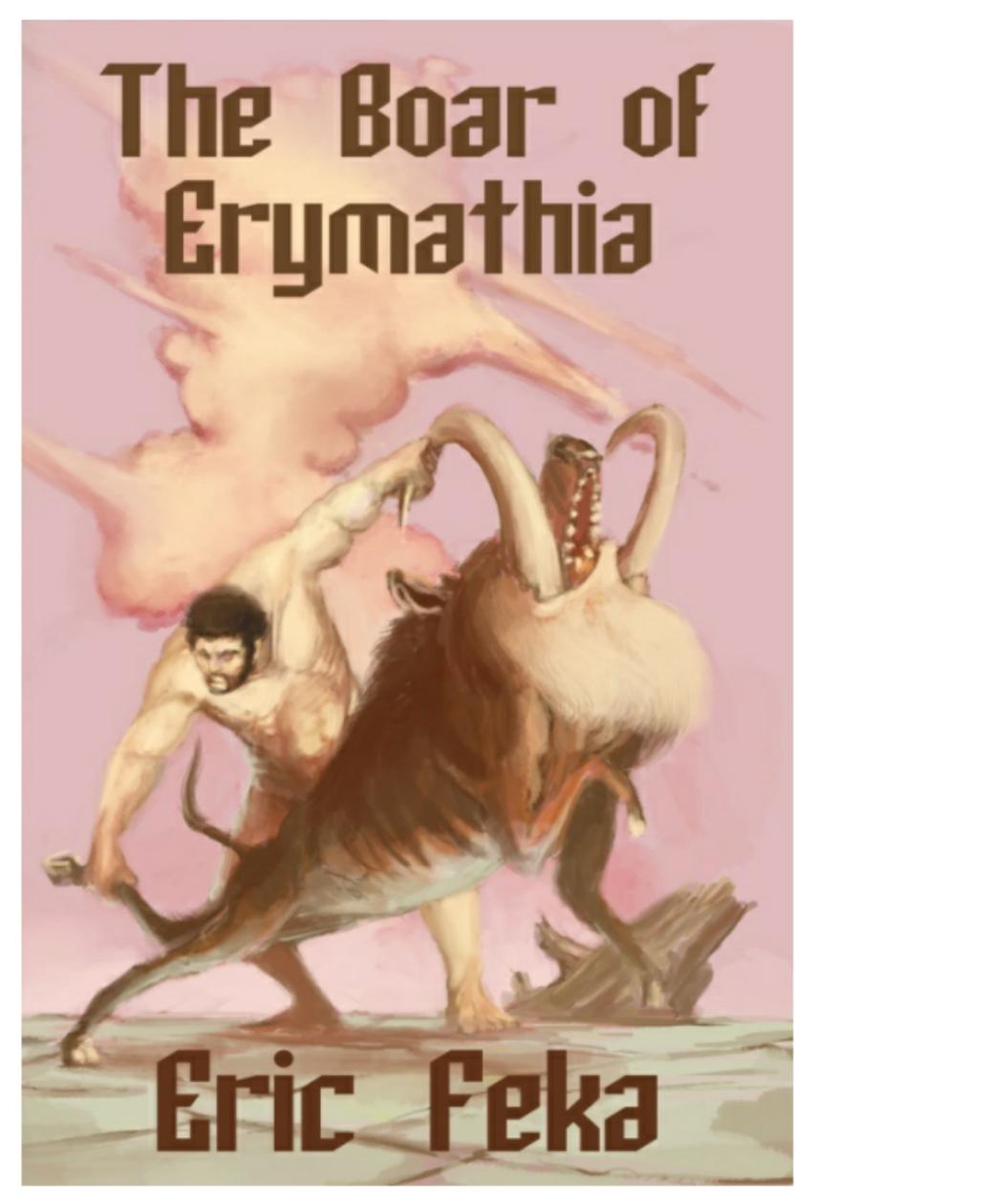
Exiled from Thebes, Herakles finds himself a pawn in the spiteful games of the Gods. As penance for his crime, they have decreed that he must serve his cousin King Eurystheus of Mykênae for twelve years.

In that time, he must perform ten tasks, the first of which is to find and kill the monstrous Lion of Nemea, a horrifying beast that had been terrorizing the people of Hellas for years, and whose golden hide was said to be immune to all mortal weapons.

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