

The girl moaned. It was a sound full of significance to those who heard. They bustled into action, rolling up their sleeves, fetching what would be needed: pitchers of hot water, fresh linen, blades, and needles. Mother, grandmother, sisters, servants, and aunts—all were assistants to this princess, Alkmene, busying about in her quarters at the royal court of Thebes. As for Alkmene—she hardly knew they were there. She was in a place that was only herself, disconnected from them all. Waves of pain and energy were there, beyond words to describe. So much life was on the move within her; Alkmene thought she must surely die.

She crawled, bent double. Breath whistled out of her; she was urged to suck in more. Squatting, she reached into a mist of tears and pain. It might have been a bedstead that that she gripped, or else a bony shoulder; whatever it was, she braced herself against it, and she would have bitten it too, had someone not slipped a **wad of willow bark** into her mouth. She clamped the pith. What now? What was all that yelling in her ears?

She grew aware of blurry movements, slippery forms. Then a strange version of peace descended. Voices were becoming distinct.

"My," said one, *"there's a bruiser."*

"Bless us," said another. "He looks hungry already."

The use of willow bark dates back to the time of Hippocrates (400 BC) – it has a chemical similar to aspirin

Anna Bates of Canada gave birth to the largest baby in the world in 1879. It weighed 23.12lb

"Well," yet another was saying, "we called on Hera. Look at the gift she gave—did you ever see such a boy?"

"Call him *Herakles*" said the first voice, decisively. "Hera's glory. As he is, and no mistake."

Alkmene closed her eyes.

Hera, she thought, *no, please, not Hera. Hera, must know nothing of this—*

Hera herself is not the goddess of childbirth, her daughter, Ilithyia, is.

But it was too late. Hera, soother of the pangs of birth, was already there. The goddess had disguised herself as an old crone, and was mingling with the hubbub of women around the royal crib. She felt pleased: the mortals here were praising her favor at this remarkable delivery, a boy so immediately robust with promise and good looks. But as she slipped away from the scene, Hera caught the mutter-ings of an ancient palace nurse, tut-tutting as she went. "I swear," croaked the dame, "no man fathered *that!*"

"Really?" ventured Hera from behind her shawl.

The old woman paused, and peered cautiously around: they were still in the royal precincts. "All I'll say," she confided, "is that there's bodies of ours and bodies of theirs and this is one of theirs."

"Whose d'you mean?" hissed Hera.

"Hah!" said the nurse, hobbing away, and nodding skyward with a cackle. "From up there, I shouldn't wonder."

Most versions have Zeus visiting Alkmene in the form of her husband and then "blessing" her. Her husband comes home shortly after and "holds hands" with her. When she gives birth, she does so to twins, one to Zeus and one to her husband.

Hera did not need to launch an investigation. It was all too plausible. She had yet to forgive her husband for taking up with a

Zeus' boyfriend is Ganymeade, a kid he kidnapped in the form of an eagle. He made him be the water bearer and turned him into the constellation Aquarius when he thought Hera might mess up his good looks.

Luke Skywalker was also a farmhand.

mortal boyfriend—a giggling farmhand.

Now, it seemed, he would humiliate her further, betraying her on earth as in heaven. How long before this Herakles—the so-called "glory of Hera"—was

recognized as none other than some stray litter of Zeus?

Hera planned a quick revenge. That night, the palace of Thebes was breached by a snake. It flickered across the room where baby Herakles lay tucked up in a basket, close to his sleeping mother. The reptile arched over the cradle, poised to strike. A pudgy hand reached out, and tried its pip upon the glinting visitor. The snake lunged, spitting venom. But Herakles only chortled, and clutched harder. A set of small fat fingers closed and dug deep with a squeezing, unstoppable force. Then there was a distinct click. A backbone snapped. The snake slid broken to the floor.

Sylvester Stallone does the same thing to a snake in *Rambo: First Blood II*.

Little Herakles had defeated his first monster.

Did Hera abandon her resentment at that? Of course not. But she held her anger in reserve. Let the infant prodigy prosper for a while. There was some fun to be had testing him later; and, after all, the victim must know what life was like—if he was to be hurt hard by losing it.

So Herakles flourished through his

The Hercules Beetle is one of the strongest animals (proportionally) in the world.



youth. The question of parentage stayed obscure, since his mother, Alkmene, had a husband who duly became king of Thebes, and by whom she bore two further sons. One was called Eurystheus. From the outset, Eurystheus never accepted Herakles. Growing up lanky and pale, Eurystheus loathed the hearty enthusiasm with which Herakles made every occasion a race, a challenge, a bout. The younger half-brother was Iolaus, who took a different view. No sooner than he could walk, Iolaus followed Herakles, in a spirit of puppy-like devotion. When Herakles went to wrestle, it was Iolaus who carried along his flask of oil and rubbed his limbs; Iolaus too who brought the sharp-edged scraper that athletes used to shave off mud and sweat. Iolaus adored Herakles not so much because he was the invariable winner but because whatever was happening, to be

The world record for skipping stones is 51 skips, set by Russell Byars on July 19, 2007.

close to Herakles was to know that fear

The Danes call skipping stones "smutting"

was somewhere else. For his part, Herakles loved Iolaus as a boy who never refused a game—even when it was simply **skimming**

stone disks across a pool.

While Eurystheus brooded indoors, plotting his chance for a kingdom of his own, young Iolaus learned how to handle a chariot. Soon he was skillful enough to drive Herakles to the plain of Olympia: a site where both Zeus and Hera had been honored for as long as mortals could remember. At Olympia two rivers flowed through meadowlands where calves fattened on sweet grass and willow bushes

There is an International Stone Skipping Federation that monitors stone skipping records.

hummed. Herakles and his sporting friends liked to meet here for their competitions: to see which of them could lift the biggest boulder, sprint quickest between the rivers, and so on. After one such feat of strength—Herakles had not only raised a massive rock but lobbed it clear over an olive tree—they heard an abrupt boom of thunder, and took it as a signal of applause from Zeus. So the lads decided to set up a special festival at Olympia, a celebration of physical effort that would please the gods. They laid out sandpits

The US Olympic Committee reserves the right to use the word Olympics. It is against the law to call anything “olympics” as the organizers of the Robolympics (for robots) found out when they were sued.

to wrestle in, and pegged targets for throwing. Herakles paced six hundred of his feet to mark the length of a stadium, set within sloping banks from which, eventually, onlookers might cheer runners and riders. Herakles decreed the prize: a crown of olive leaves to the fastest, the strongest, the one who boxed most fearlessly.

It was after one such **Olympic** gathering that Hera played her next deadly game with Herakles.

He was married now, with infants of his own; he was preparing to become, before very long, the ruler in the palace at Thebes where he himself had been born. That Herakles would make a fair and steadfast leader was widely expected; meanwhile there was no doubt that his appetite at least was fit for a king. To those who

Sampson preferred the jawbone of a donkey as a weapon, using it to kill 1,000 Philistines.

had joined with him at Olympia, Herakles offered a generous feast. He was last to leave the table, singing and waving the **thighbone of an ox**, which he and his sparring partners had picked clean. Murderous fury ensued. Possibly his wife greeted him with words of reproach; probably his senses were adrift in wine. But only a heaven-sent

madness could have pushed Herakles to swing that hefty bone so

furiously within the walls sheltering his own family. One blow, and his partner's lifeblood was sprayed across the house. As for the children who awoke at her scream—their skulls cracked open like eggs.

Suicides get the seventh level of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. They are turned into trees and bleed when their branches break.

Amid the wreckage Herakles collapsed. He was still whimpering, and muttering to himself, when at first light he stumbled toward a remote marsh, carrying a length of rope. By the water's edge he located

a good-sized stone, and knotted the rope around it. Then he fastened the rope about his own neck, and hoisted the weight. Now one great fling to clear the shallows...

But the goddess was not going to let him go so easily.

"Wkat're you fishing for there?"

Herakles looked up. An emaciated, gray-bearded **angler**, poling his skiff through the reeds, was regarding him with mordant interest.

"Leave me be," said Herakles.

The old man cocked his head.

"Fine chance I'd have, if I tried to stop such a foursquare brute as you."

He paused, and punted a little closer.

"You know what they'll say?" said the fisherman, knowingly. "They'll say you took the easy way out."

"The easy way?" gasped Herakles.

"Of course. Now, I don't know what you've done that brings you to this, but I do know what you're doing now, and I call it shirking. That's what they'll say. You shirked. You couldn't take the punishment."

The sanctimonious intruder came closer still.

The angler fish:



This is true. The best way to purify yourself is with hot water and soap. Incidentally, it is also better at cleaning windows than Windex.

"I'll tell you something else," he said, softly. **"It takes more than water to purify a man."**

Then he moved off, humming to himself. Herakles lowered the stone, and for a while did nothing but

examine the dark stains on his swollen hands. Slowly he untied the knot about his neck. He judged a direction by the glow of the rising sun. Then he set himself to walk toward Delphi: the shrine in the northerly mountains where the god Apollo issued forth advice. As Herakles did not begin to understand what strange violence had caused him to harm those whom he cherished, so he could not fathom by what means he could make amends. He was *not* a shirker; shirking was not his style. When hurt, he endured. If someone met a punch that dumped him in the sand, Herakles always whispered by his side: *"Be brave. Brave. Get up . . ."* But here was something else. He had wrought destruction on the defenseless, in a rage that remained a mystery to him. Those victims would never get up; he could not bring them back. What on earth could he do—to express his remorse, to cleanse

himself of the deed?

Apollo's oracle at Delphi was precise enough.

"Serve twelve times the king of Tiryns, to the best of your strength. Serve one year a queen of Asia, to the least of your strength. Then your crimes will be discharged."

As with every Delphic counsel from Apollo, this message emerged as a strange goaty cackle through a fissure in the ground.

The priests at the site listened carefully, inscribing the sounds; with due gravity they told him what the god decreed.

Herakles pondered the information.

How many labors?

Most versions say he starts with only TEN labors.

"You're sure," he said at length, "it was the king of Tiryns? It couldn't be any other king?"

The priests nodded.

"And a queen of Asia," added one of them. "For one whole year."

"Yes," said Herakles. "I heard that." He drew a deep breath. "Better report for duty, then."

So he trudged toward Tiryns. There was little to cheer him on the way except, with a quick rattle of hooves and wheels, the arrival of a loyal ally—Iolaus, who had ignored the many voices warning him that Herakles was mad and best avoided.

"Little brother," said Herakles, sadly, "what do you think of me now?"

"Enough," said Iolaus. "Get on board, and tell me where we're going."

"To serve the king of Tiryns," said Herakles.

"Tiryns?" queried the driver.

"Yes," Herakles said, with a grimace. "To be purified in mud."

News travels faster than a chariot. So the king of Tiryns was primed for the arrival of his novice servant. He twined his thin fingers and smiled. How satisfying: to be invested with the obligation to make a **misery** of Herakles. Dear, dear Herakles . . .

Hercules Ayala is a professional wrestler in Puerto Rico and has absolutely nothing to do with this myth.

He does look strong, though.



Misery was the name of a Stephen King book. In the movie, the psycho woman hits the author's ankles with a sledge hammer, but she used an axe in the book.

They did not come immediately face-to-face. Abasing himself, Herakles begged an audience with the king. The king nodded, with an equally extravagant show of condescension. Then the two sons of Alkmene regarded each other. It occurred to Herakles that the neck of Eurystheus resembled a young shoot of asparagus. **It occurred to Eurystheus that Herakles quite lacked a neck.**

"So what," said Eurystheus, "can you do for me?"

"Whatever," said Herakles, "is your wish: times twelve."

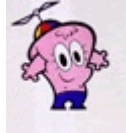
Eurystheus sniggered. "Is that what you sportsmen call a *dodekathlon*?"

"Of sorts," agreed Herakles.

Eurystheus was not capricious. He had already conceived of ways in which his kingly power might be extended by having, at his disposal, what amounted to a highly effective one-man army. Only a few days previously, a delegation of farmers from the land of Nemea had petitioned his assistance in tracking down an animal that was plundering their livestock. Rumors told of a tawny-colored beast whose claws could bring down a bullock in moments; teams of trappers from all over the land had so far failed to catch it; already several distinguished hunters had lost their lives in the pursuit. As Eurystheus reasoned: either Herakles would fail—in which case, the next in line for the prestigious throne of Thebes was Eurystheus himself; or else Herakles would prevail over this monster—in which case it could be publicly presented as a daring initiative on the part of King Eurystheus.

"Let's start," said Eurystheus, "with a challenge I know you'll enjoy. It pits you against opposition in your own league, of your own kind, one might say . . ."

Herakles listened to the commission without protest or



No Neck
Joe also
lacks a
neck.

questioning. He went to where Iolaus was waiting for him, outside the city gates.

"Which way?" asked faithful Iolaus.

"Sure you want to come?" asked Herakles. "Actually, it's nothing too impossible: a bit of hunting, that's all. We head up to Nemea."

"Ah," said Iolaus, "I think I've heard about this."

Herakles began inspecting his bow, and testing the tips of his arrows.

"You can forget that," said Iolaus. "They've tried all sorts of missiles, and swords."

True. The beast that was terrorizing Nemea was a huge lion, fearsome enough by itself, but a creature which Hera, foreseeing the challenge to Herakles, had also rendered invulnerable.

The two companions arrived in a valley that was eerily bereft of the many herdsmen and smallholders who had once prospered there. Herakles knocked at the doors of several farmsteads, hoping to get information about the lion: each lay in abandoned disarray. But soon enough there was fresh evidence of trouble. A huddle of milk cows stood by a barn, lowing mournfully; in their midst were relics of horn, hoof, and blood-sprayed hide. Iolaus stooped and picked up a felt hat, the sort worn by the local peasants. He shivered. "Still warm," he whispered.

The trail of blood took them upward to a cave, set behind brambles and fern. Herakles unsheathed a dagger.

Nobody (except maybe Oedipus) has a harder time on Mothers and Fathers day than the Nemean Lion. Just who does he give flowers to? His parents could be either Typhon & Echidna - or - it could be Zeus & Selene - or - it could have just come from the Chimera. Who knows?

"I told you, knives don't hurt this thing," said Iolaus.

"I don't want any scratches," said Herakles, slashing at the undergrowth. In its recess, the lion was feasting and drowsy, but quickened when it heard this noisy approach, Iolaus froze where he was: some distance below, he saw the lion stiffen and crouch, with Herakles cheerfully swiping his way ahead.

For a few seconds—to Iolaus, it seemed beyond any reckoning of time—Herakles and the lion stared directly into each other's eyes. Deliberately, Herakles tossed his knife aside. Then the lion sprang, and in a thrashing bundle, Herakles and the lion rolled together into the thicket. There was a rapid turning and spitting and breaking of branches; finally, a concealed, compressed silence. It took all the courage that Iolaus could muster to step gingerly toward that quietness. He could hear heavy panting in the undergrowth—but whose was it?

A voice gurgled up.

"Hey," it called, "this you should see."

Iolaus burst forward. Deep in the thorns lay a large golden form. All that could be seen of Herakles was a pair of brawny arms, almost affectionately clamped around the neck of the warm but lifeless lion. With a grunt Herakles shifted himself beneath.

"Dummy backward roll"—double armlock. He fell for it!"

Iolaus made himself useful, pinching or sucking the thorns from his brother's punctured flesh. He found one sharp edge that could

pierce the lion's skin: the lion's own claw. So it was that when

There is no such wrestling move as a dummy backward roll.

Google only has it existing in this story from this book (*Songs of Bronze*) and in websites that are making fun of this book.

Herakles returned to the court of Tiryns for his next challenge, he wore a new attire. Eurystheus was not the only one who went pale at this apparition: a man clad in the scalp of a lion. It was not so much a trophy as a costume that simply declared: Here comes the hero with a lion's heart.

Since many people also praised the wise command of Eurystheus, the king quickly assigned a similar task. This time, Herakles should tackle a monster called the Hydra, which lurked in a swamp in the territory of Lerna, not so far from Tiryns. Periodically there were sightings of the reptile, said to have a multitude of heads, each rich in poison; but folktales could not agree whether it was five heads or five thousand. "Perhaps," mused Iolaus as he and Herakles traveled toward the desolate shore, "the thing grows as many heads as it likes."

Iolaus was right: so long as lifeblood flowed from the Hydra's limbs, there was no limit to the generation of new parts. Hera had made sure of that.

"You'll let me use these, perhaps?" said Herakles, patting his beloved knotty club, and shaking his bow and quiver.

"I want you to use this too," said little Iolaus, rapping his own chest.

Their chariot reached the marshlands of Lerna: a bleak place lying below a foggy pall.

"Now where?" wondered Iolaus.

"That way," Herakles said, pointing.

Iolaus picked up the reins, adding as an afterthought: "How

In the Disney version, Scar is the Nemean Lion and Hercules wears a Scar coat for a while.



d'you know?"

"Good question," said Herakles. "I don't. But something—or someone—is telling me so."

Herakles was serving penance. In their separate ways, both Hera and Eurystheus were determined to see that he suffered fatally in the process. But Herakles, though he did not yet know it, had also gained an ally. A powerful ally: Athena, no less, the divine daughter of Zeus. For reasons of her own, Athena had no cause to be fond of Hera. She knew why Hera had taken umbrage at the very existence of Herakles, but she failed to sympathize. Why should one stalwart mortal be hauled through misery because he happened to have his origins in some forgotten passion of her father, Zeus?

Athena knew perfectly well where the Hydra of Lerna had its lair. The least she could do was give Herakles a gentle indication.

So Herakles and Iolaus were led to a dank range of reeds, bogs, and osier beds. Such daylight as visited this place was draining away; their first job was to kindle a fire. Herakles dipped one of his arrowheads into pitch, and soon had the shaft in flames. He shot the brand toward a far-off clump of rushes. There was a hissing disturbance within, and a rumpus in the water. Then they caught sight of the Hydra: indignant, and probing around with more heads than could be counted—searching to spit venom at whatever had caused the fiery intrusion. Herakles picked up his club.

"I'm coming too," said Iolaus, grasping a spear.

"No," ordered Herakles. "Give cover."

Herakles waded out to meet the advancing Hydra, and rapidly dealt well-aimed blows as various fanged heads spat toward him.

Hydra is the largest constellation in the sky – but good luck seeing it! Why? Because it is only seen in the southern hemisphere.

Herakles hit hard and true: the heads that tried to bite him went flying. But no sooner had one head been detached than another, or two, sprouted in its place. The more Herakles swiped, the more he was beset.

Iolaus saw his chance. He grabbed a burning log from the fire they had made, and scurried forward to where Herakles, now sweating and desperate, seemed to be losing the battle. "You strike," urged Iolaus. "I'll scorch." And so they worked in unison. As Herakles clouted away one waving head, so Iolaus darted forward with his torch, and seared the wound with a sizzling poke. No new heads grew where the blood was stanching. The attackers ducked about, each guarding the other, until finally all that remained of the Hydra was a stump of congealed sores.

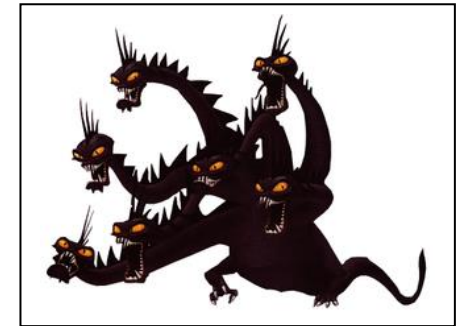
For much of the journey back to Tiryns the two men were mute with exhaustion. But before they reached the city, Iolaus put a question to Herakles.

"This being brave. Is it something I can learn?"

"You did well out there," murmured Herakles. "Very well indeed."

"Maybe," said Iolaus. "But you went first, as always. Is there a secret? I want to know."

Herakles pondered. "It's an act, isn't it? The power of make-believe. The odd thing is . . . promise you won't laugh . . . I used to get fired up by believing that my opponent was some maniac—yes, a maniac—coming after my wife and children. Now? Now—I've got nothing to defend. In that case—if you see what I mean—



nothing to lose."

Whatever Iolaus made of this advice, he was given little chance to try it. Back in Tiryns, Herakles obediently sought out his next assignment. Eurystheus gave instructions: they concerned the capture of a magical deer in the hills of Keryneia. But as Herakles made to go, Eurystheus called out to him.

"By the way. You seem to have forgotten something. These are

How many labors?

Although many myths leave this out, he started with only ten, if you want to get picky. After Iolaus helped him, Eurystheus said this one didn't count and tacked on an eleventh labor.

your labors, are they not?"

Herakles nodded.

"Good," said Eurystheus, smiling. "Let's remember that, shall we? But in case you forget, let me advise you that your devoted provider of transport—our little brother, Iolaus—has been detained, on the serious

charge of aiding and abetting a known murderer. I have had no choice but to order his death."

Herakles gazed at the grinning king. He said nothing, while his knuckles went white; then he turned, bleakly, and left.

For several months the hero lived wild and spoke only to himself. He dwelt in tracts of forest never bitten by an ax. His bed was a gathering of bracken. He ate what he could forage or snare. He studied spoor and tracks. Patiently, disconsolate, Herakles learned the habits of the animal he had been charged to catch.

One night she came down to the pool and he saw her from his hide. He had his bow pulled taut. It was a clear shot to the heart. But something stayed his arm: an instinct of respect. There was a being, ringed in moonlight, stooping to take water. She was not to be pierced like this. So Herakles lurked there for many more days and nights, stalking again, fashioning traps. At last he lured the hind,

bound her legs, and carried her down from the tree-dense heights. Her rapid pulse thudded through his head. On his way back to Tiryns, he passed a rustic sanctuary to Artemis. The worshippers were astonished to see his load: it was a creature sacred to their goddess, glimpsed but never seen; it must not be harmed. "I have *not* harmed," said Herakles, setting down the deer. A priestess undertook to hurry off and tell Eurystheus. "Ask him what next," Herakles called out.

What next was another beast: a boar, grossly oversized, that had been rampaging in the lands of the River Erymanthus. "'This time' Eurystheus insisted, 'I want to see the spoils myself. Understood?'" Herakles got the message. He followed the boar up to the snowline and pinned it down; then he trussed it up, and brought it into Tiryns.

Court officials tried to block him as he strode through the palace. "The king's in council," they protested. "He mustn't be disturbed!" But Herakles barged on, with the tusky hog on his shoulders twitching its slabs of muscle and blinking its dark little eyes. In his chamber, Eurystheus clutched at the arms of his throne, while his advisers scattered.

"As you requested, Highness," grunted Herakles, lowering his enormous load, and kneeling to unbind it.

"Did I?" panicked Eurystheus. Then, as the boar began to snort and run: "How am I supposed to get out of here?"

"Use your legs, my lord," said Herakles tersely—adding, under his breath, *Those two streaks of piss hanging down from your*



waist—"

Well, obviously Eurystheus did NOT suffer from

Paruresis

Herakles let the boar run about and make its mark on the palace before he subdued it again. "Lively little creature!" he remarked to Eurystheus, when finally, the king crept out of his pot.

Humiliated, Eurystheus vowed further revenge. He would impose on Herakles ever more disagreeable tasks. So came the charge to assist a fellow petty ruler, called Augeus, whose territory included Herakles' beloved site of Olympia. Petty though he was, Augeus maintained the largest stock of cattle and horses anywhere in Greece. The challenge to Herakles was to relieve the exhausted stable hands there—lads dropping from the nonstop effort of sweeping muck out of the stalls. Herakles surveyed the

How Many Labors? Since Hercules got paid for this labor, Eurystheus said that it didn't count and tacked on a twelfth labor.

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Eurystheus dived into the nearest place of refuge: it was one of the huge clay storage jars that stood to collect the tithes and taxes he exacted from the people he ruled.

scene awhile, awed by the mountainous job. Then Athena came, and whispered in his ear. Herakles called for a spade. But instead of using it to shovel the steaming piles of dung, he began to dig a channel alongside the animals' byres. Working into the night, he took his trench across fields,

until it connected with the local river. He heaped a dam across the current. Then he stood at ease. Water gushed into his conduit, and flowed copiously through the stables. It purged them soon enough: the world's first sewage drain.

Next Eurystheus dispatched Herakles to Stymphalos, a stagnant lake. The stench of the place was so foul that it kept everyone away. But an island in the middle of this lake was the breeding place of a flock of steel-clawed water-birds, increasingly relentless predators of sheep, cattle, and—latterly—humans too old or too young to defend themselves. Holding his breath, and with his bow drawn for shooting, Herakles waded into the fetid shallows of Stymphalos, hoping to pick off the winged oppressors one by one. It was no use: not a single creature flapped into sight. Then he found something pressed into his hand: a set of clackety bronze castanets. He gave them a shake, and their report sent up a first flush of birds.

Another, more enthusiastic rattle, and the entire flock went squawking skyward. Now Herakles could step back, and fire his arrows to swift effect.

He did not collect them all. Some he picked up and took to a rocky outcrop, where a young woman sat admiring his marksmanship. She wrinkled her delicate nose and turned away;



Herakles halted and bowed. "Sorry," he said. "I'll bury the lot of them, straightaway. But—thanks to you, again."

Athena smiled. "My hero. You can do it. On you go."

Herakles went on. He went south, to the island of Crete, where he subdued a colossal rogue bull gone out of control. He



Wonder Woman is the best known Amazon. In the DC universe, Hercules is a little stronger than Wonder Woman and equal in strength to Superman.

went north, to the steppe lands of Thrace, where he threw a harness around a quartet of man-eating mares kept by King Diomedes, and drove them back to Eurystheus as a docile chariot team. He went eastward into Asia, to a region ruled by the female tribe of **Amazons**, and took from their queen Hippolyta the golden belt she wore as an emblem of her royal authority. He went westward to Hesperia, where the sun dips away

from the world, to broach the domain of a three-bodied monster called **Geryon**, and abscond with a herd of cattle. It was the work of many weeks to get those cattle back to Tiryns; but no sooner had Herakles delivered them than Eurystheus sent the hero back in the same direction. This time it was toward the place that Eurystheus deemed

Geryon owns a two-headed dog named Orthrus (Cerebus's brother). This is not the same dog in *Clash of the Titans* probably because the director didn't know his mythology.

"the edge of the world," where the great Titan Atlas was holding up the heavens. Eurystheus had heard tales of three golden apples, called the apples of the Hesperides, which only Atlas could reach. The challenge for Herakles was to obtain those wondrous fruits. So again Herakles trekked westward, high up into the mountains of the land beyond Libya. He found Atlas amid the vapors of low cloud, standing sullenly under the burden that Zeus had long assigned to him. "You want what?" grunted Atlas. "Apples? If you want those, then you'll have to take this—" he said, rolling his eyes to the weight that sat on the top of his spine. Herakles agreed. He was short of stature, but not will. Piling cushions and pillows around his neck, he took the load. With a deep sigh, then a chuckle, Atlas wandered off. Suddenly, Herakles feared he might have been tricked. What if Atlas never came back? But the simple colossus only roistered around for a few hours before he ran out of things to do. Meanwhile, though Herakles never knew it, Athena was standing by. She had the skies in the palm of her upraised hand. The suffering hero was not alone. His cause had become hers.

The **golden apples** duly appeared, and were duly con-signed to the king who had wanted them. But for Eurystheus, they brought little delight. By now he was tired of this trial. Whatever he imposed upon his hated half-brother, it was not enough. Quite the opposite. With each and ever more impossible task, Herakles only seemed to grow stronger, wiser, and



Interesting apple facts:

- * Apples are part of the rose family.
- * An apple a day doesn't really keep the doctor away.
- * Don't let your dog eat apple seeds – they contain cyanide.
- * Malusdomesticaphobia – the fear of apples

happier; yet—and no less irksome to Eurystheus—more flexible, more questioning, more open to doubt. What next for the indestructible lump? Hunched in his throne, the king of Tiryns gave a careless shrug. "Final task. What else can it be—but the last monster of all?"

Herakles looked quizzical. Eurystheus began to giggle. "Death, you lumbering fool. Go on. Descend and give it a fright. Then come back: as we're *sure* you will."

Eurystheus shook with laughter. Herakles turned away, but paused at the door. "A souvenir, master?"

"Ah, yes, yes. Let me see . . . well—if Death has its own home, the premises are sure to be guarded. So—bring it up—whatever it is that keeps watch on that miserable realm."

Death and Herakles had long since ceased to be strangers. So he accepted the test with a nod. As he left Eurystheus, however, the Icing issued one last petulant instruction. "Since I exterminated your beloved little helpmate," Eurystheus called out, "I don't know quite *how* you're accomplishing all this. But for the last time, let me stipulate, again, that the task is *yours*. So you shall—I decree—go it alone."

The Gates of Hell

In Turkmenistan, there is a hole 230 feet wide that has been burning for over 40 years known as the Gates of Hell. It is the results of a Russian oil drilling gone wrong. Opps.

There are ways down to the Underworld for those who would seek them: cracks in the surface of the earth that are known to have swallowed stray goats and mortals made tools by curiosity. Herakles came to the edge of one such fissure—and was met there by a

tall figure in resplendent robes, helmeted and holding a spear.

"Well, my stalwart," said Athena, holding out her hand. "Shall

we proceed?"

Herakles sighed, and relayed to his ally the parting injunction of Eurystheus. The goddess nodded, and gave him a kiss; and Herakles pitched himself into the gloom.

He crashed on downward, slithering along dark tunnels in an almost freefall chute of icy crystals, pumice, and dust. Groggy and dazed, Herakles at last found his feet in a cavernous and clammy hollow, utterly quiet, and filled with a sour, unmoving air. But this profound interior was not entirely deprived of light. Some yellowish glow subsisted beyond, and Herakles began to stagger in its direction.

Was it some kind of gateway? Maybe. But before he got much closer, he became aware of a sentinel figure crouched there.

Herakles halted, and strained his eyes. He heard a regular breath, backed by a ticking growl. Its hackles rising, a huge dog sniffed the stale surrounds. Herakles thought to himself: *Simple strategies are generally the best*. So he stooped to pick up a stone—a movement in itself often sufficient to make most hounds turn tail. But no eyes blinked as Herakles threw the stone, which pinged against a rocky door. The ratchet-growl from the creature turned to angry barking; then, with a leap, the enormous guardian flung itself forward. With his right

Strategies for surviving a dog attack:

1. Do not run!
2. Remain calm.
3. Try command words like "Down!" or "Go Back!"
4. Avoid making eye contact with the dog.
5. Fold your arms tightly and make sure your fingers are covered.
6. Allow the dog to sniff your legs.
7. If the dog bites, grab the neck if it is a smaller dog. If it is a bigger dog, try to shove something hard or pointed into the dog's mouth.
8. If all else fails, roll into a fetal position so that at least the dog cannot injure your vital organs.

hand, Herakles grabbed for its throat. Then a second set of jaws came slathering at him, and he blocked them with his left. Then the attack was tripled—and the hero had no defense. He felt hot doggy breath in his face, heard the rip of his flesh—and saw blood squirting away from his wrist, where the beast had clamped its third set of teeth and torn through the sinews. He tried, as of old, to tell himself to be brave. But a black fog rolled over him, and he swooned to the ground.

When his senses returned, he seemed to be lying in a bower, exquisitely decked with swags of evergreens and dried flowers. Herakles smiled. So this was it: his awakening in the afterlife. In a moment, he thought, he would raise himself, and see if he could find his wife and children. And faithful Iolaus; Iolaus must be somewhere close by . . .

Then he became aware of voices. He gazed up to a pair of faces. One was very pale, caring, and beautiful; the other older—hairly and forbidding, but not unkind. "The hound was only doing his duty," said the bearded one, sternly.

"Hush," soothed the young woman. "Whoever you are," she said to Herakles, "please, just try to move your fingers for me."

His torn arm had been wrapped in a poultice of dried leaves. He flexed the fist, and found it functioned perfectly. He shook his head in disbelief. "There," said the girl. "Good as new."

Wine arrived, and meat, and plates of honeyed barley cakes. Soon Herakles was chomping happily, as Hades and Persephone explained how Cerberus, their three-headed black mastiff, had come loping to find them—once his cornered victim was down. "You were lucky," said Hades. "He could have polished you off in a trice."

"Oh, no," murmured Persephone, "he's an old softy at heart. Just like his master," and she bent down to stroke the huge

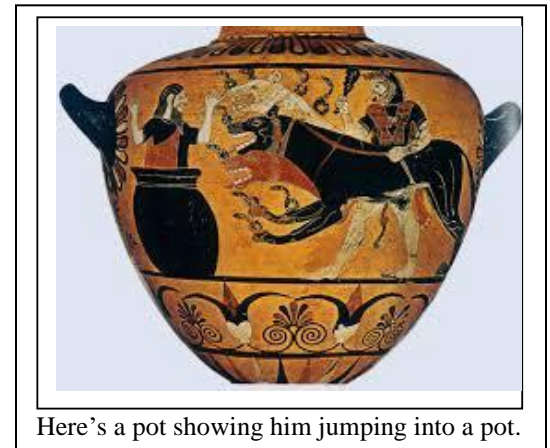
animal, now slumped by her feet, its three tongues lolling out.

To the gentle Persephone, and gruffly muttering Hades, Herakles explained the reasons for his trespass. The rulers of the netherworld wanted to know more, much more, about the eleven previous adventures, and the spite that had devised them; and they respected, of course, the unlamenting manner in which Herakles bore his fate. As Hades said: "This Eurystheus—he sounds a nasty piece of work. But whoever he is, he shall stand before us, in due time. Nothing will be hidden from us then."

Hades was reluctant, but Persephone persuaded him. Yes, Herakles might indeed take Cerberus for a walk into the upper world. The huge beast must be kept firmly on the leash; but, they reassured the hero, he was very well trained, and would obey Herakles in everything.

The reaction of Eurystheus, when Herakles strolled into the palace hall with Cerberus at his side, can be imagined easily enough. Once more the king stared, screamed, and **then plunged**

himself into the nearest storage pot. Herakles let the dog sniff around, before leading him back to the depths. Then he reported back to Tiryns. The twelve punishing labors had consumed as many years. Herakles still loomed as a bulky and stubborn presence. But his spark of boyishness was long gone. His eyes were pools of pain, sunk deep in knowledge of the world. He was



Here's a pot showing him jumping into a pot.

too weary for recriminations; and Eurystheus, for his part, had little spirit left. The king had gained no glory—only ridicule, and public humiliation.

Thereafter, the hero himself was freed. He had done what had to be done. He wandered back to Greece by many other lands. People in various places still recall the lion-shrouded man who once passed their way, and claim it was for them that once he swung his knotty club. The adventures of Herakles grew wherever he went. But a quiet life was all he sought, and no more exertions beyond raising altars to Athena and the other beneficent gods. Even Hera, by now, had become fond of him.



His end on earth was ghastly all the same.

He had married again: a girl by the name of Deianeira. During their courtship, the following incident had occurred. Herakles was out hunting one day, and heard some cries of distress. He headed in the direction of the alarm, and came to the edge of a wide river. On the other side of the waters, he could see that a lecherous old centaur—a creature half-man, half-horse—had trotted beyond its usual habitat, and was blocking the path of a girl. Herakles would have intervened in any case, but he recognized the frightened form of Deianeira. Across the torrent, Herakles boomed a warning. The excited centaur, Nessos, took no heed. Herakles shouted again, and Nessos

glanced up from his overtures of lust. Who was this noisy passerby? Nessos continued trying to straddle Deianeira, clouting her down with his hooves. Seconds later, a whistling arrow struck home in the centaur's heart, and his forelegs buckled under him.

There was a pack on his back, and it slipped onto the ground. His breath catching short, the centaur saw his lifeblood seeping toward the pack. Then Nessos gasped out to Deianeira. "My dear," he said, "forgive me; I did you wrong. Your splendor overcame me. Let me make amends. In that bag—the finest wool. Promise me—tease it out—make a shirt of it—then give it to your love, and I swear: he'll . . . he'll never be faithless, no, never, not so long as he lives—"



Deianeira watched, horrified, as the creature fell dead into her lap, and rolled the whites of its eyes. She heard Herakles, across the river, calling out for her. She signaled that she was safe; then thoughtfully picked up the centaur's precious pack.

In due time, Deianeira became a wife, and did as wives did in those days—tended a loom, and spent many hours surrounded by baskets of thread. Herakles proved an attentive and kindly husband. (Once, he amazed Deianeira by not only repairing her loom but briefly testing it too: anyone would think he had done it before.) But during her hours alone, Deianeira was prone to fret. She was married to a man twice her age, with so much wisdom of the world; a man still vigorous, a man whom the years had made more handsome and dignified—a man who commanded affection wherever he went. She held up the stuff that Nessos had given her. It was, undoubtedly, the finest wool; it would make a marvelous garment. In a few days' time, she knew, Herakles was due to go and preside over a seasonal ceremony to Artemis, a festival at which

there would be dancing choruses of girls budding into puberty. Her husband should look magnificent in a new mantle. And if he *were* to be tempted by some adoring nymph—well, she did not see in what way a simple shirt could keep a man faithful, but it could serve (she told herself) as a token of *her* trust in him.

So she weaved busily, and in time for her husband's departure she had fashioned a tunic of matchless quality, which Herakles held up with wonder and gratitude. "What have I done to deserve this?" he asked.

"It's for the ceremony," said Deianeira, "and, of course, to remind you of me."

Herakles set out for the distant sanctuary with the shirt wrapped safe among his ritual equipment. He journeyed, as usual, on foot, joining bands of pilgrims on the way. After several days of walking, a large and exuberant crowd gathered at the forest clearing where the goddess was to be honored. But it was only after Herakles had been gone a day or two that Deianeira happened to confide, to her mother, about the special gift she had made. Deianeira's mother nodded approvingly. What was the material that made it so special? As Deianeira explained, her mother's face turned pale. "No good ever came from Nessos!" she cried. "Whatever have you done?"

In tearful panic, Deianeira called up teams of messengers, to catch up with Herakles and destroy the shirt. They rode hard, nonstop, toward the sanctuary. But they were too late. As their horses tore into the precincts, Herakles was emerging from a recess, donning the bright new robe. A gasp went up from the assembled worshippers: at first, because the gown appeared so pure and white; then, because the same gown seemed to be erupting all over with little knots of fire. Delight turned to horror as Herakles realized what was happening. He swiped at the flames with his

hand; but the garment bequeathed by Nessos only burned more intensely. **Herakles dropped to the ground, rolling over and over in vain fury to smother the heat.** By now the shirt was gathering flesh for fuel. Herakles screamed to the skies. Bystanders came forward with water to douse him, but the whirl of fire only spurted and jumped more eagerly. It did not peter out until it had reduced the great body of Herakles to a small nub of ash.



What happened next was unseen by mortal eyes. As if in a dream, the hero found himself treading on ground as cool and smooth as marble. Someone was holding his hand: it was Athena, guiding him through mist toward the solid forms of pillars and halls. Herakles gazed in wonder at his own form. His last sensations were of being engulfed by a thousand hot and angry waves. Now it seemed as though he were restored—not to the body that had been consumed but to the shape he was in when at his prime, pitching rocks and blocking punches at Olympia.

Athena brought him before a throned figure—powerful, bearded, not unlike himself—who boomed a welcome.

"Herakles, my son: come and join us. You are to begin your time again—in a manner of speaking: for what, to us, is Time?"

The question was addressed to the others standing round: Apollo, Artemis, Hermes, Hestia, and the rest. Some nodded, some laughed. Grimy Hephaestos scowled. Then Zeus gave one of his apologetic coughs. "There is, however," he continued, "something we think you ought to do. Herakles, glory of *Hera*, now to be born anew . . . would you mind?"

Zeus turned to the ample-bosomed lady standing behind his throne. Hera stepped forward. A low chair was brought to her by one of the attendant Olympians. She sat herself down, and pulled her robes aside to reveal one firm, creamy-pink globe.

She patted her lap. As if entranced, Herakles stepped up and, as softly as he could manage, lowered himself onto Hera's knees. For a moment, the queen of motherhood looked entirely content as the hero nuzzled her teat. But she recoiled when he did as he was told—and sucked with full force. Docile as he was, Herakles had lost none of his formidable powers. With a shriek of alarm, Hera pushed her oversized baby away. What Herakles drew from Hera's breast sprayed out in a great jet across the heavens.

And there it stays, amid the stars. We call it the Milky Way.

The Milky Way is just one arm of the Milky Way Galaxy which consists of 200 billion to 400 billion stars, a black hole center, and an unknown number of planets and planetoid objects.

Scientists have yet to find any milk.



So – place your bets – who won this showdown?



Check the back of this page for the answer (but only after everyone in your group has made their prediction!)

Story borrowed from:
Spivey, Nigel. *Songs on Bronze*. Farrar, 2005.

And the winner was.....



Actually - it was a tie! Cue sad trombone sound effect.