

Hera's Fury

Eric Feka

The Legend of Herakles, Prologue

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Much of Herakles's life was a direct result of the circumstances of his birth. This is the story of that birth - of Zeus's duplicity and his wife Hera's anger at his betrayal of their union. Herakles, named Alkides at birth, became the focus of Hera's fury from the moment he was born.

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King Kreon of Thebes sat on his throne and listened as the three refugees from Mykênae told their tale of woe.

'I am not surprised that you are banished, Amphytryon,' Kreon said. 'To my ears it sounds like you killed King Elektryon yourself and then made up the story about your club bouncing off a cow's horns to cover your tracks.'

'It was a freak accident, mighty Kreon. Likymnios, who is King Elektryon's last surviving son, witnessed the tragedy and so he is banished along with me and his sister Alkmena, who is also my wife.'

'And you are fortunate he is known to me and has accompanied you here to seek safety in Thebes,' Kreon said, and sat back in his throne. 'Thebes is always in need of good warriors, and you are famed throughout Hellas. I will grant you your wish to settle here, but first you must help me. A giant vixen has been causing problems for the people of Thebes.'

Some say that it is a magical creature, the spawn of Ekhidna, and destined to elude all who pursue it. I want you to prove them wrong and catch it.'

'It would be an honor to help the people of Thebes, mighty Kreon,' Amphitryon said,

'but there is one more favor I ask.'

Kreon raised an eyebrow. 'Go on.'

'My wife Alkmene will only lay with me after I have avenged her brothers who were killed by Taphian raiders. Will you grant me men and ships to help me take the islands? All the spoils and the glory will fall to you and Thebes, of course. My only purpose is to kill those who killed Alkmene's brothers.'

The King looked at Alkmene, who was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. It didn't take long to make up his mind.

'Barbarian raiders are a threat to all Hellas and so I will join you in your quest for vengeance. After all, my own cattle may be the next target.'

Amphitryon left for Athens the next day, and returned accompanied by his friend Kephalos.

'I thought you had run away from your promise,' Kreon said. 'So when will you rid Thebes of this monster? In the weeks since you gave your word to rid us of this pest, it has killed many a beast and not a few men.'

'Kephalos and I will go out at first light tomorrow,' Amphitryon said. 'He has Laelaps, the hound who is destined to always catch all that she pursues. Not even the elusive vixen will be able to escape her jaws.'

'I will ride with you,' Kreon said. 'It's not that I don't trust you, but I want to lay eyes on this monster myself.'

So the next day, the three men went to where the fox had last been seen and let loose Laelaps. The hound sniffed the air this way and that, and then darted off up the side of a nearby hill. How Laelaps knew that the fox was hiding in a stand of trees nearby the men will never know. Their eyes were following her, then the vixen appeared from nowhere, and it was running for its life with the hound in pursuit.

'It is as large as a wolf!' Kreon said, and the men urged their horses forward to stay in sight of the two running beasts.

'Laelaps is almost upon it,' Kephalos said excitedly, but just as the hound was about to close its jaws on the fox's hind leg, it vanished.

Laelaps stopped, sniffed the air, and then ran directly at the horsemen. As the hound tore past the three men, the fox darted out of a shrub behind them and raced away. The men turned just in time to see the fox again disappear just as the hound's jaws were about to close around its leg.

An hour passed and still the fox and hound had not resolved their chase. 'It is a paradox that cannot be solved,' Amphitryon said. 'A hound that can never miss its pray, pitted against a fox that eludes all who pursue it. '

There was a noise behind them the three turned to see a giant eagle perched on the uppermost branches of a tree. It watched the pursuit with keen interest for a moment, then it screamed and rose back into the air.

The men turned back to the pursuit but the fox and the hound were standing still as statues. Amphitryon dismounted and carefully approached the beasts, but they made no move. He reached out and patted Laelap's head, but found stone where there should have been flesh.

'They are dead,' he said, 'both turned to stone.'

'Well, I suppose that's one way to solve the paradox,' Kreon said.

Kephalos was distraught. 'My dog,' he said, and jumped down from his horse. 'Oh no, Laelpas, what has happened to you? She who once guarded Zeus when the King of the Olympians was but an infant has been turned to stone by the one she once guarded!'

'Stand back, Kephalos,' Amphitryon warned, 'something is happening.'

The stone animals were beginning to glow and melt. 'A strange day becomes even stranger,' Kreon said, and urged his frightened horse to trot away. The other two followed Kreon's example and led their frightened horses to what all judged to be a safe distance.

As they watched, the ground around the stone animals began to smoke and bubble, and the beasts themselves began to burn with an intense white flame. There was a rumble, and both animals shot into the sky where they exploded, scattering glowing stars into the heavens that shone brighter than the sun for a moment, and then faded.

'I think we will have two new constellations to brighten the night sky tonight,'

Kephalos said. 'It's a fitting end for such a one as Laelaps, to reside forever in the heavens.'

(ii)

Having discharged his promise to Kreon, Amphitryon kept the King to his word. A few days after the fox and the hound had ascended to the heavens, Amphitryon, Kreon, and Likymnios sailed for the Taphian Islands with an army big enough to extract revenge against the raiders that had killed

Alkmene's brothers.

'We will return soon, my love,' Amphitryon said on the morning that they departed.

'Not too soon, I hope,' Alkmene said. 'They must pay a heavy price for killing my brothers and driving a wedge in my family.'

The weeks passed and Alkmene began to worry, but those around her who knew the ways of war told her that all would be well, and that such matters take time. And then one night while she lay alone in her bed thinking of her husband, Amphitryon walked in with his helmet under his arm and his spear over his shoulder.

'It is done, my love,' he said. 'Your brothers are avenged.'

He told her of all that had happened, of the golden hair in Pterelaos's head that made him immortal, implanted by his father Poseidon, and of the treachery of his sister Komaithe, who told Amphitryon the secret of her brother's immortality. Ultimately, her treachery cost Komaithe her life and that of her brother, as well as the freedom of their home island, which Amphitryon had subjugated in the name of King Kreon and Thebes.

Alkmene was ecstatic to hear that her husband had avenged the death of her brothers.

She took him into her arms and they loved one another for what seemed like an eternity. But when the sun next rose, he was gone, as was his helmet and his spear. She did not see Amphitryon for the rest of the day, but that night he again came into their bedroom with his helmet under his arm and his spear over his shoulder. 'Alkmene, my love,' he said, 'it is done.'

I have avenged the death of your brothers.'

'But I knew this already. Why are you telling me again?'

Amphitryon looked puzzled, but continued on much as he had the night before.

Again, he told Alkmene about the golden hair planted in Pterelaos's head by Poseidon, and of Komaithe's treachery that cost her and her brother their lives. And again, they loved one another, but this time the night lasted only as long as a night usually does, and her husband was still beside her when the sun rose.

'Why have you told me the same story two nights running,' she asked Amphitryon when he finally opened his eyes.

'What are you talking about?' he said. 'I was looking out over the seas the night before last, fretting about not being her with you. The moment the ship docked, I raced here to hold you in my arms.'

Alkmene said no more, but went instead to the megaron where Kreon had his throne and he was there with many of his court. 'I gather Amphitryon came to you last night,' the King said, 'throughout the entire voyage home, he talked of nothing else but his eagerness to see you again. We thought we

would have to restrain him from running into the sea the night before last. It lasted for so long and he was so eager to get home.'

Alkmene burst into tears and ran out of the room leaving the King and his court wondering what they had done to upset her so. She ran back to her rooms where Amphitryon was bathing.

'I think something terrible has happened,' she cried out.

'What do you mean?'

'Last night was not the first night that I saw you. You came the night before as well, but it was not you! The night lasted for so long and the King said you spent the long night with him, waiting for the sun to rise so that you could sail home.'

'What?' Amphitryon said. 'I don't understand.'

Alkmene pulled herself together. 'You came to our bed and lay with me on the night before last,' she said, as calmly as she could.

'How? That's impossible. It wasn't me.'

'Yes,' Alkmene said, 'that's the whole point. If it wasn't you, then who was it?'

'I don't know, but there is someone in Thebes who may be able to tell us,' Amphitryon said. 'Come, we will seek the counsel of the blind seer Teiresias at the temple to Apollo.'

Amphitryon and Alkmene ran as quickly as they could to the temple and into the garden beyond, where the seer Teiresias liked to watch Helios steer his chariot into the sky every morning.

'Ah, the new citizens of Thebes,' he said as they approached. 'What brings you to my garden so early in the morning?'

'A strange thing has happened,' Amphitryon said. 'My wife Alkmene says that I came to her two nights ago and we spent the long night together, but I was still with King Kreon.'

'Ah yes, the long night,' Teiresias said. 'You know that the sun is dragged across the sky on a chariot steered by Helios, do you not?'

Amphitryon shrugged, remembered that the seer was blind, and was about to say yes, when Teiresias sighed and shook his head. 'My eyes don't see, friend, but that does not mean that I am blind to everything. In the mornings, I like to come out here and feel the sun's warmth on my skin. A few days ago, there was no sun to shine down upon me. It seems that Helios had neglected to hitch his chariot for that day, and there is only one Olympian with the power and influence to make such a thing happen. Until now, I could not understand why he would do such a thing. Why would the greatest of the Olympians want a night to last as long as three? But you have solved the mystery for me. It was Zeus who came to you that night, sweet Alkmene. He made the night last as long as three and then disguised himself as your husband Amphitryon. You have shared your bed with the King of the

Olympians!

(iii)

On mount Olympus, Hera, Queen of the Olympians and wife of Zeus, looked down at the world and burned with anger. 'Did you hear him?' she asked her messenger, Iris, the spirit of the rainbow. 'The next descendant of Perseus to be born into the world will become King of Mykênae,' she growled.

Through her window, Hera could see a heavily pregnant Alkmene wandering the gardens of Thebes.

'Surely making such a prophecy is a dangerous thing, even for the King of the Olympians,' Iris said. She looked over Hera's shoulder to the world below and giggled.

'How can you laugh at such a time, when my husband boasts of his infidelities and their results are paraded out in the world for all to see?'

'Pregnancy is such a difficult thing, my Queen. Sometimes they end early and the child enters the world too soon, while at other times, it seems that the baby does not want to leave the womb.'

Hera paused a moment as she considered Iris's words, and then she, too, laughed.

'You are a devious one, Iris,' she said. 'Is not Sthenelos a son of Persues? And his wife is expecting a child to be born a few months after this one?'

'Yes, my Queen. Eurystheus will be his name,' Iris said. 'There will be two descendants of Perseus born within a few months of one another, but only the child who will be named Alkides, son of Alkmene, will be a King. Poor Eurystheus will never rule, and will most probably have a difficult life.'

'That is such a shame, and he has such a deserving father,' Hera said. 'Perhaps we can change things a little so that Eurystheus will be King. After all, Alkides is a direct son of Zeus and will be well looked after.'

'What a wonderful idea,' Iris said. 'But will Eileithyia the spirit of childbirth, help us in such an endeavor? Not everyone will understand our intentions.'

'I am the Queen of the Gods as well as her mother,' Hera said. 'Eileithyia has always been a faithful child and will definitely understand my anger at her father.'

'Eurystheus will probably never know that it was Zeus's prophecy that made him King,' Iris said.

'Then we will make it our business for him to know, and for all of Hellas to know as well,' Hera said. 'Zeus may be King of the Gods, but he should still treat me, his wife, with respect. If he will brag to the world about his conquests in the mortal world, then I will brag about mine.'

(iv)

'Finally, the son of Zeus is born and not a moment too soon,' Amphitryon said, when he heard the cries of a child echoing through the house.

One of the slaves who helped deliver the child bustled out of the room and Amphitryon bailed her up. 'Is Alkmena well?'

'Yes sir,' she said, 'but the child did not want to come at first. Then Alkmena saw a vision of Athena and she sent me into the room behind. There was a person there I'd never seen before, a young woman who had her arms and legs crossed tight. When I tapped her on the shoulder to ask who she was, she vanished!'

'An unusual tale,' Amphitryon said, 'but what has it to do with the birth of the child?'

'The child was born the moment the woman vanished. Alkmena said that Athena told her it was Eileithyia, the daughter of Hera, who had delayed the birth of the child for several days.'

A moment later, Alkmena came out with the baby wrapped in a blanket. 'Alkmena!

What are you doing?'

'Please, husband, I am afraid. Athena came to me in a dream and said that Hera is furious that her husband was unfaithful to her. This child is the fruit of his infidelity and while we have it, the Gods will fight out their quarrels within our family.'

'Will you abandon a child of Zeus?'

'If Zeus is so concerned, he will intervene to save the child's life, will he not?'

'I thought Galanthis's tale was the ranting of an overexcited fool,' Amphitryon said,

'but if Hera is bent on vengeance against the child, then it might be best to abandon it.'

Alkmena burst into tears, but pushed her way past her husband and raced to the fields beyond the city. With another son on the way tomorrow, Alkmena was terrified that Hera would kill them both, and so she had decided to leave the child in a field where the Gods could decide its fate. Her heart, however, was not hardened against the child because fear motivated her and not hate, so she put the boy in a sheltered spot and made sure he was covered and warm.

Athena watched Alkmena leave her son and run back to Thebes. The Goddess knew that unless someone nourished the child soon, then it would surely die. She picked it gently from the ground where it lay and, in the blink of an eye, moved far way away from Thebes, to a secluded spot by a stream. Her plan was to trick Hera into feeding the boy, but she did not want the Queen of the Gods to accidentally figure out whose son the child was. She chose a spot near the ocean, so the sound of crashing waves drowned out all other noises. The baby, despite being only a few hours old, seemed heartened by the rhythmic crashing of the waves.

'You have a love of the sea in you, little one,' Athena said. She wrapped the child tighter in its blanket

and called out in a voice both loud and commanding, 'Hera, I have need of you!' A moment passed and a shadow appeared beside the Goddess of Wisdom from which Hera emerged onto the sandy soil.

'You called for me?' Hera said.

'Yes, this child has been abandoned by its mother and is in need of a suckling teat. If it is not fed soon, it will surely die.'

'Since when has Athena been concerned for the lives of mortal babies?'

'I was passing and its cries softened my heart,' Athena said, 'but I am without milk and I immediately thought of you. Who better to suckle a new born infant than the Goddess of the earth and of fertility, and whose breasts are never dry?'

Hera was flattered by Athena's tone and offered the child her breast. It latched on to her nipple and gulped the milk hungrily. Hera squealed with pain and pulled away. 'What manner of child is this? No wonder its mother abandoned it.'

'It does not matter whose child it is for it is fed now and the milk of a God can sustain a mortal for many days,' Athena said. 'Thank you Hera. We are in your debt.'

Hera looked suspiciously at Athena and the child, and then vanished.

The babe was safe for now, but its future was still clouded. Athena thought of the anguish she saw in Alkmene's eyes when she left her son in the field and thought that she should try to return the boy. He could be no worse off if she rejected him again. There was a blur of movement and Athena was again in Thebes, in the very room where Alkmene was lying on her bed and weeping, with her head in her hands and her eyes shut tight.

'Alkmene, why do you weep so?' Athena asked.

'Because I have abandoned my son out of fear for the future and now I regret what I have done,' Alkmene said, without looking up.

'A child, even one fathered by a God, is still a child,' Athena said. 'I have brought him back to where he belongs.'

Alkmene looked up and when she saw Athena holding the child, her tears flowed even harder, but she reached out and took him from the Goddess. 'His name is Alkides,' she said, putting the hungry child to her breast. Unlike with Hera, he did not suckle too greedily and his tender touch brought a smile to his mother's face. 'It is his grandfather's name and suits him, don't you think?'

(v)

On Olympus, Hera's fury grew as she watched Alkides and his brother Iphikles flourish under the care of Alkmene and Amphitryon.

'Every day he lives, the insult from my husband burns deeper,' she said.

'He is but an infant, my Queen,' Iris said, 'small and dependent upon his parents to protect him from all the horrors of the world.'

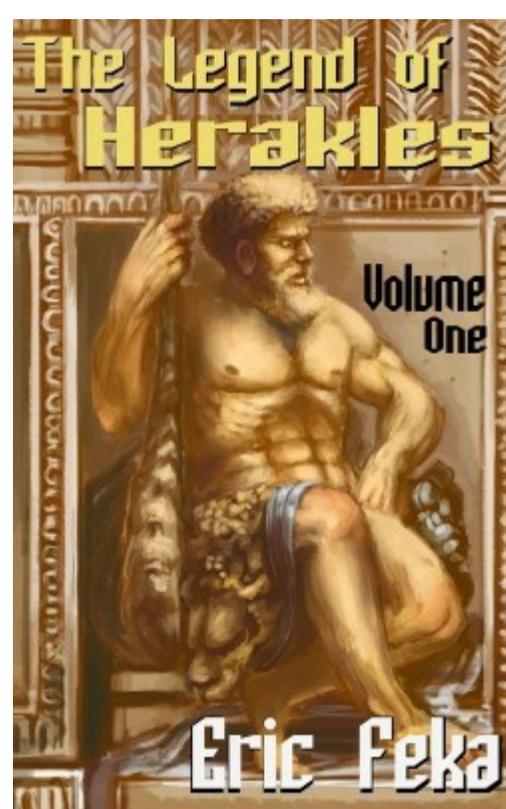
An evil look crossed Hera's beautiful face. 'But not all the horrors of the world can be defended against,' she said, and two serpents appeared in the world below.

(vi)

Alkmena was sitting beside the cot where her two sons were slowly drifting off to sleep. Iphikles was all but asleep, while little Alkides was fighting back against the inevitability of losing consciousness, as was his way. Alkmena herself was beginning to drift off when a movement beside the cot caught her eye. Unsure of what she had seen, she drew back a cloth that was obscuring her view and what lay beneath froze her blood.

Two giant vipers with glowing red eyes had somehow stolen into the room and were slithering up the base of the cot. She screamed at the top of her lungs and looked for a weapon with which to strike the serpents, but there was nothing within reach.

The fanged monsters had crawled into the cot and Alkmena could see no other way to defend her sons that with her own body. She was about to throw herself between the vipers



and her sons, when Alkides bounced out from under his blankets. The infant jumped over his sleeping brother with remarkable agility for one so young, and grasped a viper in each of his pudgy hands.

Alkmena watched in horror as he smashed the heads of the snakes against the walls of the cot, and then, while the beasts were stunned, strangled the life out of them.

Amphitryon burst in with his sword in his hand. 'I heard you scream,' he said. 'What's the matter?'

Alkmena couldn't find her voice, so she pointed into the cot. The two vipers lay lifeless while Alkides had crawled back under his blanket. As they watched, he yawned once and fell fast asleep with his arms around his brother.

Also by Eric Feka

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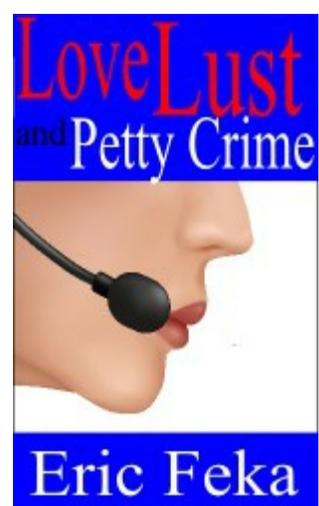
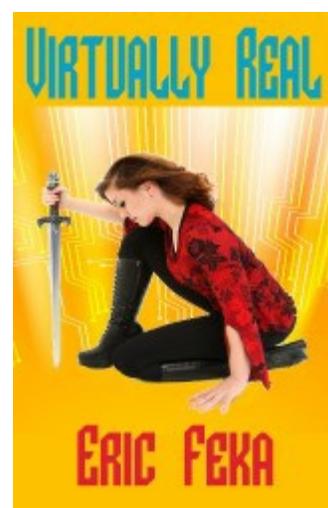


name to Herakles and complete ten tasks. The story then follows his exploits through the first four of these tasks: The Lion of Nemea, The Hydra, The Golden Hind (during which he joined Jason on the Argo), and the Boar of Erymanthus.

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Virtually Real



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Gods and Heroes

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