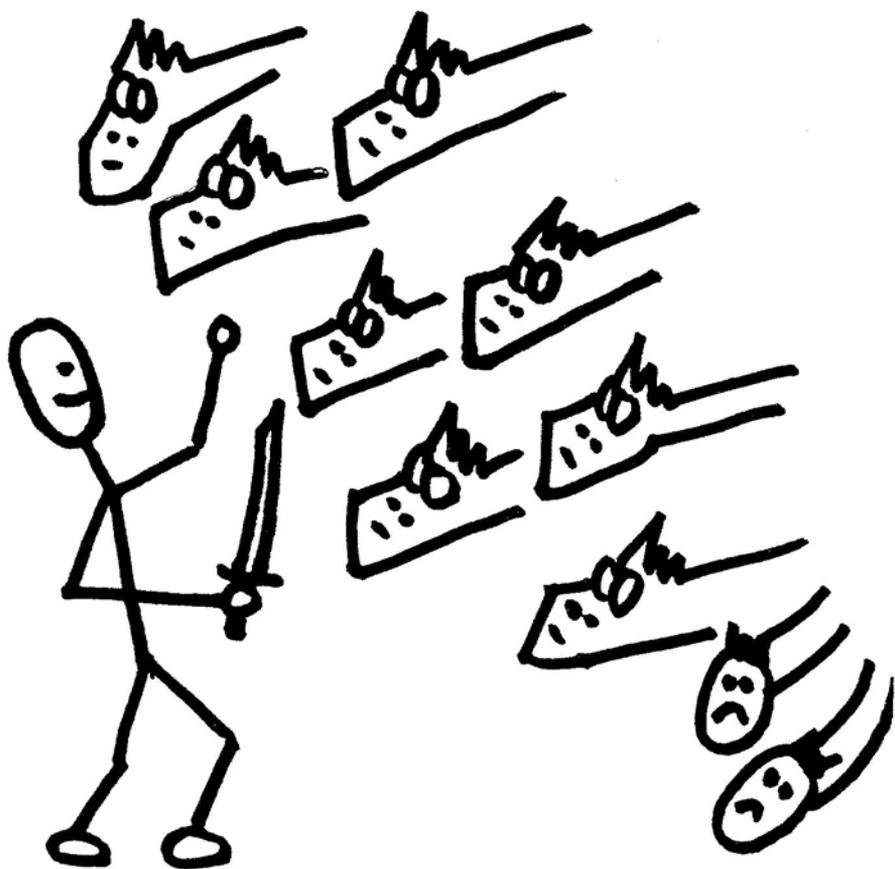


HERAKLES and the HYDRA

(A Greek Tragedy)



by Christina M. Strichter

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Herakles and the Hydra (A Greek Tragedy)

Herakles wandered through a swamp. It was muggy and gnats swarmed around his head. It smelled like damp hay. Every time he took another step forward he got more mud between his feet and his sandals. He was tired and didn't feel well; he'd had grape leaves at lunch and grape leaves always gave him gas. Not ten feet away Herakles noticed a white marble statue covered in moss. It was a statue of Athena Nike, her wings of victory outstretched. A long crack ran through her face. Herakles sat down at the base of the statue to rest.

"Little runt Eurystheus. Sure, I slew the Nemean lion, so he thinks the nine-headed Hydra will be a cinch. That's the problem with being a hero. People always expect heroic things of you. And I'm sick of it!" Herakles scraped some of the growth from the statue. There seemed to be an inscription underneath. It was well-worn; if there had been a temple to the Goddess of Victory there, it must've sunk into the swamp 200 years ago. He tried scraping some of the accumulated dirt off with his thumbnail. "Eurystheus could've at least given me a day or two off. Hades, it *is* the weekend!"

All light disappeared from the already abysmal swamp. Eighteen glowing eyes appeared in front of Herakles face. He stopped trying to uncover the inscription on the statue. He grabbed his sword and he stood up, his eyes staring directly into one pair of the yellow eyes before him. He took a deep breath and a gnat flew up his nose. It tickled his nose hairs. Herakles sneezed rather loudly. The yellow eyes before him blinked.

"Yuck! It's bad enough living in this drippy hole, waiting for some hero to try and kill me, but you have to come and blow mucous all over me too! Didn't your parents ever teach you to cover your mouth when you sneeze?"

Herakles wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean to."

"All right. This time, that is. Don't let it happen again."

"No problem. Say, I couldn't help but noticing your nine pairs of glowing yellow eyes. Are you the nine-headed Hydra?"

"Four more than five and three less than twelve. The very same."

Herakles sat down again. The Hydra was undoubtedly as nasty as all the rumors said it was, but it hadn't done anything vicious. Maybe it wasn't the right nine-headed Hydra. He continued scraping away at the covered letters in the marble.

"Excuse me, human," the Hydra asked, "But what exactly are you doing?"

"I'm trying to uncover an inscription."

"Oh, I do love a good mystery! Stand back, I'll help. I'll steam the inscription clean!" The Hydra let loose a jet of steam onto the encrusted stone.

Herakles brushed the remaining dirt away with his hands. He could barely make out the lettering, but it looked like "IVST DO IT."

"Do what?" the Hydra asked. "Humans are so enigmatic."

"Look, Mr. Hydra. I hate to tell you, but I've been sent here to slay you. It's not fair, I know, and I don't want to do it. I think you're pretty swell for a monster and all. But I think we can cut a deal. I was sent here specifically to kill a nine-headed Hydra. So if you'll let me cut off just one head, you won't be a nine-headed Hydra anymore. What do you say?"

The Hydra sighed. "I should've known. The warranty on this hero-proof swamp just ran out two weeks ago."

Herakles and the Hydra just stood there looking at each other. It was an awkward moment for both of them, and Herakles turned his head and watched a frog catch small insects with its tongue. The Hydra looked away as well, though the Hydra had to find eight other interesting things to stare at in order to avoid looking at Herakles. Herakles shifted his weight from foot to foot and noticed that some of the mud on his toes was drying up. He hoped it wouldn't dry too hard or he'd have to chip his foot out with his sword.

"Well?" Herakles asked.

"Are you good with that sword? I mean, can you sever just one head with a single stroke? I'm willing to sacrifice a single head if you think I can live in peace afterwards."

"You bet. Just lay any old neck right down here on the base of this statue. A second of pain for a lifetime of peace."

The Hydra turned all of its heads toward Herakles. "You aren't going to use anesthetics? Not even a local?"

"Look, I'm just a hero and I'm working for Eurystheus. If I had the gold to pay insurance premiums as an anesthesiologist do you think I'd be here in the swamp?" Herakles asked. "Does it look like I *like* this? Does this look like the sort of work a Son of Zeus should be doing? No. I should be sitting in a lawn chair sipping lemonade while three scantily clad women fan me with palms leaves and perfume my body. But Hera doesn't like me, so I go mucking around swamps hunting down monsters that have more manners than the king."

"Okay, okay! Sorry I asked." The Hydra rested its outermost head on the base of the statue. "Slice away."

Herakles raised the sword above his head and brought it down as forcefully as he could. The Hydra's head popped off, but from the stump of the neck not just one, but two heads grew back! Most astonishing of all, however, was that the heads were most unlike the Hydra's other heads. Instead they were plump human heads with brown hair and squinty eyes.

"Oh dear," the Hydra said.

"What the hell," Herakles said.

"Hi, I'm Warren and this is Albert," one of the heads told them. "We're from the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals. We protest this mutilation of an endangered species, especially since it serves no useful purpose. In fact, if the body we are now attached to would just head straight over to our main office in Vrahati, we will report this dreadful act at once!"

"Oh dear," Herakles said.

"What the hell," the Hydra said. "Hey, Hero. I'll take care of Albert, you take care of Warren, okay?"

Herakles nodded. The puffy-cheeked little human heads screamed as Herakles's sword and eight Hydra heads closed in. The one called Albert crunched at first and then squished between the jaws of the Hydra, while Warren received a few sharp blows to the neck from Herakles. Both of the offending heads were

removed, but Herakles, the Hydra, and the statue of Athena Nike were covered with blood.

"That was really odd," said Herakles.

"Most surprising," said the Hydra.

"And totally unethical!" shouted four new heads in unison.

This went on and on, the number of heads increasing at an exponential rate. Soon there were sixty-four human heads and eight Hydra heads on the Hydra's body. All of the human heads had different names and all appeared to be active members of PETA. They were all screaming about how much trouble Herakles would be in and admonishing the Hydra for its lack of self-respect and self-restraint. Herakles put his sword down so he could put his hands over his ears. But not even that could drown out the shouts of the protesting heads.

"SILENCE!" the Hydra shouted. The human heads cringed. The Hydra turned to Herakles. "Look, Hero. I've lived a long life. It's been good. But I can't go on like this. These inarticulate babblers would make me miserable. Could you do the noble thing, and just cut off my other eight heads? I'm ready to die."

The human heads looked like they were trying to riot. "No, you can't do that!" "There's a ban on assisted suicide!" "Heroes are supposed to save lives, not take them!" "This beast is a crucial part of the ecosystem of this swamp! If you kill it, the whole swamp will die!"

Herakles felt a tear roll down his cheek and watched it fall onto his blade. He had never intended to destroy so noble a beast. But the Hydra certainly had the right to die with a little dignity. Herakles lifted up his sword, and with a single swift blow, he chopped off all eight of the Hydra's remaining heads. In their place sprang up sixteen new PETA members. Herakles looked upon the hideous beast in disgust and threw his sword into the swamp.

"Litterer! Litterer! Don't you know swords aren't biodegradable?" one of the heads shouted at him.

"Shut up." Herakles knelt down and passed his hand over all nine pairs of the fallen Hydra's eyes. He raised his hands

toward the sky and said, "Oh Zeus, please ask your brother, Hades, to give this poor Hydra a place of honor in the great Underworld. He was a worthy creature, most unworthy of such a death."

As Herakles finished his short prayer he heard a strange noise. He turned and found that the statue of Athena Nike was sinking into the swamp. After only a few seconds, only the wings, arms, and head remained above the ground. To accompany this, the humans heads started falling off the Hydra's body with small bodies of their own. They ran toward Herakles and attacked his ankles. He kicked them away at first, but he was soon surrounded by all eighty of them.

"Get away you little creeps! Get away from me!" Herakles waited until the statue of victory disappeared completely. As soon as the wing-tips were submerged, he knew that all hope was gone. He started running to Argos as fast as he could. He pulled out ahead of them, but somehow he couldn't lose them. After a full day of running, the palace was in sight. Herakles laughed a sick laugh. What would that runt Eurystheus do when these obnoxious creatures took over the entire country?

"If only I hadn't been a hero," Herakles remarked, somewhat out of breath. "I never asked for this. All the responsibility. All the pressure."

He came to a river. It was only waist deep, but it had a strong current. Herakles waded across, glancing behind him as he went. The small heads jumped in the river after him, but were washed downstream. He watched until the last of their bobbing heads had disappeared from view. Then he climbed out of the river and wandered to the top of a nearby hill. "Why couldn't I have been a normal guy, just like everyone else?" he screamed. But no one answered.

He took off his wet clothes and wrung them out as best he could. He waited on the hilltop for about an hour, naked, hoping his clothes would dry. He put them back on, still damp, and went down the other side of the hill, to Eurystheus's palace, to see what odd-job was waiting for him next.

THE END

