Hercules and the Hydra

Hercules was having a bad day. Everyone thought it was so glamorous and fun to be the greatest of the Greek heroes and to be Zeus’ son. Hercules thought differently. “What do they know?” he thought to himself, as he dragged his feet on the long distance to Lerna. You see, Hercules was Zeus’ son, but Hera – the queen of the gods – hated him, so he had been set ten labours, ten impossible tasks, to complete. If that doesn’t sound very fair, you’re right! Of course, being the greatest Greek hero did have some perks, and one of them was that Hercules was impossibly strong – that was how he had managed to defeat the Nemean Lion just a few days before, his first labour.

“No holiday for me after that battle,” Hercules thought to himself glumly, swinging his club at a nearby tree which split in half with a loud CRACK. “Talk about unappreciated!” Instead, he was on his way to kill the Lernaean Hydra, a terrifying nine-headed, swamp-dwelling dragon which had been terrorising the nearby village. First, though, he was supposed to meet his friend Iolus in the village – something about strategy.

“Hmmph,” Hercules grunted, “strategy! What strategy do I need? It wasn’t strategy who killed the Nemean lion! It’s not strategy that saved all those people, it’s me. What do I need Iolus’ help for anyway? I’m the greatest of heroes and I have this club and my sword! That Hydra is going to regret the day it was born! … or… the day it hatched at least!”

He cheered up a bit after that, happy to have made up his mind. Happy, that is, until, as he approached Lerna, a terrible smell crept up that just got worse and worse as he got closer to the swamp. Hercules stifled a cough as he passed the final rows of trees hiding the swamp from view (after all, it wouldn’t set the right image for a hero to arrive coughing and spluttering!) and finally got his first look at the monster lurking in the swamp.

The Hydra was huge, alright, that was certain: it had dark-greenish, leathery looking scales, each as big as Hercules’ head, and great big body with a long tail coiling in and out of the horrible, dirty swamp water, which hissed and bubbled around the creature. Hercules looked around, trying to see a weak spot, but he couldn’t see its famous heads yet!

He tried to sneak up on the monster, as it seemed to be asleep, and he tiptoed closer. Sneaking up on things isn’t so easy when you’re a colossal Greek hero, though, and just as Hercules was thinking how easy it had all been and what a fuss everyone had made, he stepped on the root of one of the trees and it broke with a loud crack under his weight.

Straightaway the monster woke up – its nine heads darted up and it fixed the hero in its gaze. Each head had a huge mouth filled with teeth and flashing green eyes: 18 pairs of them were currently staring straight at Hercules.
“So much for the element of surprise,” he thought, before he sprang into action. With a roar he ran at the monster and began hitting it with his club, darting this way and that to avoid the attacks coming from its heads.

Meanwhile, Iolus was waiting in the marketplace and getting worried. “He should be here by now...” he thought, agitated. He was holding a couple of flaming torches in his hands. Soon, he began pacing up and down the main street, to try to distract himself from being worried about Hercules. As he got near the swamp side of the village, he heard a noise – it sounded like someone shouting and the swoosh of a sword. “Here we go!” he sighed, as he realised that Hercules had gone on without him, and probably without doing any research, and he ran to meet his friend.

At that very moment, back in the swamp, Hercules landed a lucky hit on the monster, and not one but two of its heads went flying off into the water! Hercules was very pleased with himself indeed, and began to laugh as he continued side stepping the monster's attacks. Suddenly, the Hydra grew two new heads on each of the necks Hercules had just cut! The hero screamed in shock and disappointment, and launched himself at the monster, determined to defeat it, hacking at it with his sword.

By the time Iolus reached the swamp, Hercules was fighting a twenty-headed Hydra! He tried to shout to Hercules over the din of the battle, “Stop cutting its heads off!”

Hercules looked up and saw his friend, “what?” he shouted back, continuing to cut at the monster, “cut its heads off?! What does it look like I’m doing!” as he landed another cut and caused even more heads to grow out from the neck.

Iolus rolled his eyes and was about to shout back, but he realised that it was pointless. As Hercules made the next cut, Iolus threw one of his torches at the creature, landing the flame right on the stump of its neck! The torch made the neck smoulder and burn, and no heads grew out of it! Hercules saw what happened and couldn’t believe it.

“Well why didn’t you say so?” he called to Iolus, crossing the swamp and grabbing the other torch from his hands. Then he threw himself back into the fray, and this time burned each neck as he cut off one of the monster’s heads. Eventually, he jumped around the Hydra to reach its last head, cut it off with a whoosh of his sword, and quickly threw the burning torch at its neck. As soon as the flame touched the monster, it collapsed and disappeared with a flash and a column of smoke – Lerna was safe!

Hercules whooped and jumped around, delighted with his victory. He ran back over to where Iolus was standing and patted him on the shoulder, sending his friend toppling to the ground. “Whoops!” he said, as he picked Iolus up and put him back on his feet. “Terribly sorry! But you know, you really should have said something about the monster – for beasts like that you can’t just go in unprepared! You have a lot to learn, my friend. Where to next?”

Iolus just rolled his eyes again and turned to Hercules. “We’d best go see about the Cerynitian hind...”