

Hello, Heracles! by István Tasnádi

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Chapter 1.

Peculiar Twins

Do you know who I am?! Ever heard of Heracles, the greatest hero of all time? Sometimes called Hercules? Herc? NOT Herc. We're talking about a Greek guy here, so let's just stick with Heracles. So, you know Heracles – well, I'm not him.

Just almost. I'm his half-brother, and my name is Iphicles. We're almost exactly the same age, so for a while everyone thought we were twins. Until my brother got himself busted. I'm a simple earthly mortal, just like you. But my older brother? He's a real star, a demigod! And he's totally hooked on heroics. He even saved my life while we were still sharing a cradle.

So what happened was Hera, my brother's stepmom, or rather his dad Zeus' current wife... make sense, or should I draw it out? Alright then!

[image text: page 7]

[Here - Zeus - Alcmene - Amphitryon - Heracles - Iphicles]

[image text: page 8]

[Awake, my beauties! Let my divine light shine upon you, let your cold blood be warm. Warm, boiling, until vengeance rages through your twisting bodies!]

[Muhahaha! Go, my beauties, go!]

So Heracles' dad is Zeus and his mom is Alcmene, who also happens to be my mom. Zeus' current wife, Hera, was super not okay with her husband's first child and wanted to kill little Heracles. And I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Heracles and I were about four months old when this happened. I'd just learned that sucking on my thumb was super fun.

“Slink and slither through the dust until you reach the cradle where Zeus’ bastard son lies!” Hera hissed. One of the snakes began to choke me. I cried out as it tightened around my throat. Luckily that woke Heracles up and he took care of those snakes good and proper.

Our mom ran in when she heard all the hullabaloo. When she saw the dead snakes, she almost had a heart attack. I’ll say it again, we were just four months old. As far as my mom was concerned, me rolling over onto my stomach would’ve been an achievement of epic proportions. And there my twin brother is murdering evil snakes with his bare hands.

Hera was also quite distraught over the snakes. A plain old mortal woman would’ve been more than capable of retaliating in kind, but this is the divine wife of the head honcho we’re talking about here. And Hera’s thirst for revenge was legendary! She snatched up the two dead snakes and stormed off skyward. From amongst the clouds she shouted back to my poor mom that she won’t rest until that bastard child has kicked the bucket. My brother, that is. At that moment, nobody predicted a bright future for little Heracles.

Just then my dad arrived, late as always. Our mom breathlessly told him what happened, and from the deluge of words he drew a rather interesting conclusion.

“Alcmene, let us give thanks to the gods that nothing worse happened. I must conclude, however, that it is only because of Heracles that our little boy Iphicles got into trouble. The snakes would have posed no threat to him if they weren’t sharing a cradle. We must separate them!”

That’s when my mom totally lost it.

“No, we can’t do that to them. They’ve been together since they were born, they belong together! Just look how they’re hugging one another, it’s like they understand what you’re saying. Why, they could be twins.”

“But they aren’t,” Amphitryon said darkly.

[image text: page 10]

[Whaaat?!]

Luckily, our mom put on one hell of a show. She shouted that both of us were his sons, and that if he tried to send either one of us away, she’d pack her bags and be out of there with us before he knew

what happened. Well, that certainly had an effect on my dad, as evidenced by the color completely draining from his face. For a moment he just stood there, mouth taut, but finally he grudgingly conceded. He said he would forgive Heracles this once. But if he put me in danger one more time, he really would send him to the faraway countryside to stay with foster parents.

And that's how we came to grow up in the royal court of my father, King Amphitryon, under the watchful eye of our mother. Then when we turned six we went off to royalty training.

[image text: page 12]

[Royalty Training]

Chapter 2. Anger Management Issues

One of our classmates was Eurystheus, Hera's favorite nephew. He was absolutely gaga over Heracles, constantly tagging along after him and being a nuisance. One time he even wrote him a sun ballad.

It was pretty embarrassing that he was such a huge fan of my brother. Finally, Heracles had had enough, so one day he took Eurystheus' harp and smashed it right over his head. I'm not sure what was louder: the twang of snapping strings or the breaking of Eusti's heart.

[image text: page 14]

[Hello! Where should I sit?]

[Here! Here! Here!]

Luckily the school was co-ed: the daughter of the king of Thebes, Megara, was also in our class. To say all three of us had a massive crush on her would be an understatement. And Megara, of course, didn't even notice me or Eusti.

"Is the seat next to you free, Heracles?" she asked with a smile.

"Uh huh..." Heracles drooled like a doofus, eventually remembering to slide over to make room for her.

Megara sat down next to my brother, and Eusti and I hung our heads and acknowledged our obvious and unavoidable defeat.

“Figures! I just *knew* she’d pick him.”

“Shut up, Eusti.” I elbowed him in the ribs.

But our torment was far from over, and we had to sit there and listen as they got to know each other.

“So what does your dad do anyway?” Megara inquired. Heracles furrowed his brow as if this question required a great deal of thought.

“Well... uhh... my stepdad is a king.”

“Wicked!”

“No, he’s a good guy.”

Our teacher was a man named Linus.

[image text: page 16]

[Good morning class!]

[Good morning Mr. Linus!!]

Heracles had always been pretty rambunctious, but things really began to escalate when he started getting into his teens. He trolled poor Linus so hard every class that the teacher could barely finish a single sentence.

“Students, today is a special day because – ”

“Class is cancelled?”

“No, Heracles, class is not cancelled. In fact, the supervisor is visiting.”

“The POOPervisor?”

And of course he always made Eurystheus the butt of the joke.

“Seriously, does anyone else smell that?” my brother wrinkled his nose. “Eusti, did you drop a deuce?”

“What?!”

Heracles was so horrible to him that Eusti has since turned from fanboy to arch nemesis.

Before Linus we'd had plenty of teachers who had nervous breakdowns, but on that day, during the supervisor's visit, a nervous breakdown wasn't the only thing our poor pedagogue had to worry about.

[image text: page 17]

[Heracles, class has started if that's alright with you.]

[Eh, not really.]

"Ah, and here's our lovely supervisor. What an honor!" our teacher gushed. Talk about a teacher's pet.

"Children, let's take out cosmogony workbooks."

Heracles, of course, wouldn't rein himself in, supervisor or no.

"Come on, I hate the cosmos."

At first, Linus tried to put a positive spin on the whole thing.

"Now, now, Heracles, you might consider showing a bit more interest in the subject. After all, it's your family tree we're talking about here."

"There's too many foreign words."

"Then let's take a look at some. What was the world's original state?"

"Okay, even I know that: Chaos."

"Chaos, correct! And what was spilled over all the world before creation?"

"Umm... coffee?"

"No, it was Night. Not unlike the darkness which is clouding your mind, my boy!"

[image text: page 20]

[And what do we call Night?]

[NYX!]

[Man, I can't stand this guy!]

“Nyx, correct! And who can tell me who was born from the marriage of Night and Chaos?
Heracles?”

“Pass.”

Unfortunately, Linus didn't notice Heracles was starting to clam up, and he went on with his questioning.

“No, not pass, but instead...? Megara?”

“Eros?”

“Correct! And from what was Eros born? Let's let Heracles answer this time!”

“From marriage.”

[image text: page 21]

[Silver egg.]

“Now Megara, no cheating! So, from a silver egg.”

Heracles tapped his foot irritably. He wasn't so great at handling not being the best at something.

“Alright then my boy, bonus question: what was the relationship between Kronos and Zeus?”

“That's easy!” Heracles sighed with relief.

“I'm glad to hear it. So?”

“My grandfather, Kronos, heard a prophecy that one of his kids would overthrow him and take his throne, so after they were born he devoured the whole lot of them.”

[image text: page 22]

[Except for my dad, Zeus. My grandma hid and gave birth to him in secret on Clete!]

[Don't you mean Crete?]

Unfortunately, Linus kept on pushing.

“And what happened to Zeus' siblings? Go on, Heracles!”

“So eventually Zeus slipped some poison to his dad, and Cronos vomited up all the kids he’d devoured.”

[image text: page 23]

[BLAARGH!]

[Yum...]

For his part, Heracles considered the inquisition over and wanted to sit back down. But Linus wasn’t done yet.

“Where are you off to Heracles?! Let’s take a look at some pieces of art!”

“Oh come on, it’s time for gym class.”

“Later.”

“But the king said we’re supposed to have gym class every day.”

“And how exactly do you plan to strum a lute when your arms are shaking from lifting weights?”

“I don’t *want* to strum a lute. Besides, my arms never shake, no matter how much I lift.”

“Let’s hear an invocation of the gods. ‘Come now, invisible god!’”

Heracles picked up the lute and tried to play something. But all it took was one wrong note before he was slamming the instrument down. He didn’t like it when he couldn’t do something perfectly.

“I don’t have to plink and pluck this stupid thing, I’m a demigod!”

[image text: page 24]

[With sausage fingers!]

The supervisor had a good laugh at Eusti’s joke, and our poor pedagogue interpreted this as encouragement, so he kept pushing.

“Come now, come now, let’s see those sausage fingers sizzle.”

That was a final straw. Heracles snapped and began shouting.

“I won’t plink and I won’t pluck. When my dad was this age he was cramming titans and cyclops into volcanoes!”

“Because he had no upbringing.”

It was the supervisor who’d cracked this joke. I leaned closer and took a good long look at her. Something wasn’t right about this woman. She was familiar from somewhere. But where? Meanwhile, Linus continued being a smart aleck. “Thank your stepfather Amphitryon for letting you have a part in such a wonderful upbringing.”

The supervisor whispered to him. “...half-witted brute...”

“He gives you a chance to be more than just a half-witted brute who smashes everything he doesn’t like...”

“...bastard child...”

“And fills the world with bastard children.”

And then it came to me: Hera! The supervisor was Zeus’ wife, and she was manipulating our teacher into antagonizing my brother. But why?

Heracles bellowed: “What did you say about my father?!”

Hera stepped over to Linus and whispered into his ear.

“...dressed up as Amphitryon...”

“What, you didn’t know? Your famous father, Zeus, dressed up as Amphitryon and conned his way into your mother’s bed. And you are the result of that deception!”

Heracles couldn’t contain his anger any longer. He raised the lute over his head and struck.

Megara totally lost it.

“Mr. Linus! Oh, divines! Why, oh why??”

On hearing all the commotion, Alcmene and Amphitryon rushed in.

Our mother burst into tears, Heracles spluttered and tried to explain that he didn’t mean to hurt Linus, but that they had to have music class instead of gym, and something inside him had snapped. He had to let his energy out somehow.

Hera snorted with laughter at this.

“Just like his father!”

Amphitryon recovered from his initial shock and rounded on Heracles:

“Now this is finally too far. Have you lost your mind, boy?! You’ve killed your teacher!”

“And right under the supervisor’s nose, to boot.” Hera added. “Into the dungeon with him!”

Hearing that, our mother throw herself at the king’s feet.

“No!!! He couldn’t help it, it was Hera’s curse!” she pleaded, gesturing toward the supposed supervisor.

Hera then removed her disguise, spitting contemptuously. “Of course he can’t help it, the poor innocent little thing!”

“He’ll be brought before an independent court.” Amphitryon said.

But the goddess had other ideas:

“No need to bring the courts into this. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth: off with his head!”

Suddenly a great rumbling coursed through the building, and accompanied by several lightning and thunderbolts, Zeus himself, King of the Gods, descended from the sky.

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