

LEVELED Book • X

The Labors of Hercules



MULTI
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Adapted by Keith and Sarah Kortemartin
Illustrated by Matthew Forsyth

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Focus Question

Why was Hercules a hero? Which of his actions were heroic, and which were not?

Words to Know

accumulated
ascended
cautiously
feats
hide
immortality

labors
nymphs
penance
pillar
pyre
temporarily

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Correlation

LEVEL X	
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Reading Recovery	40
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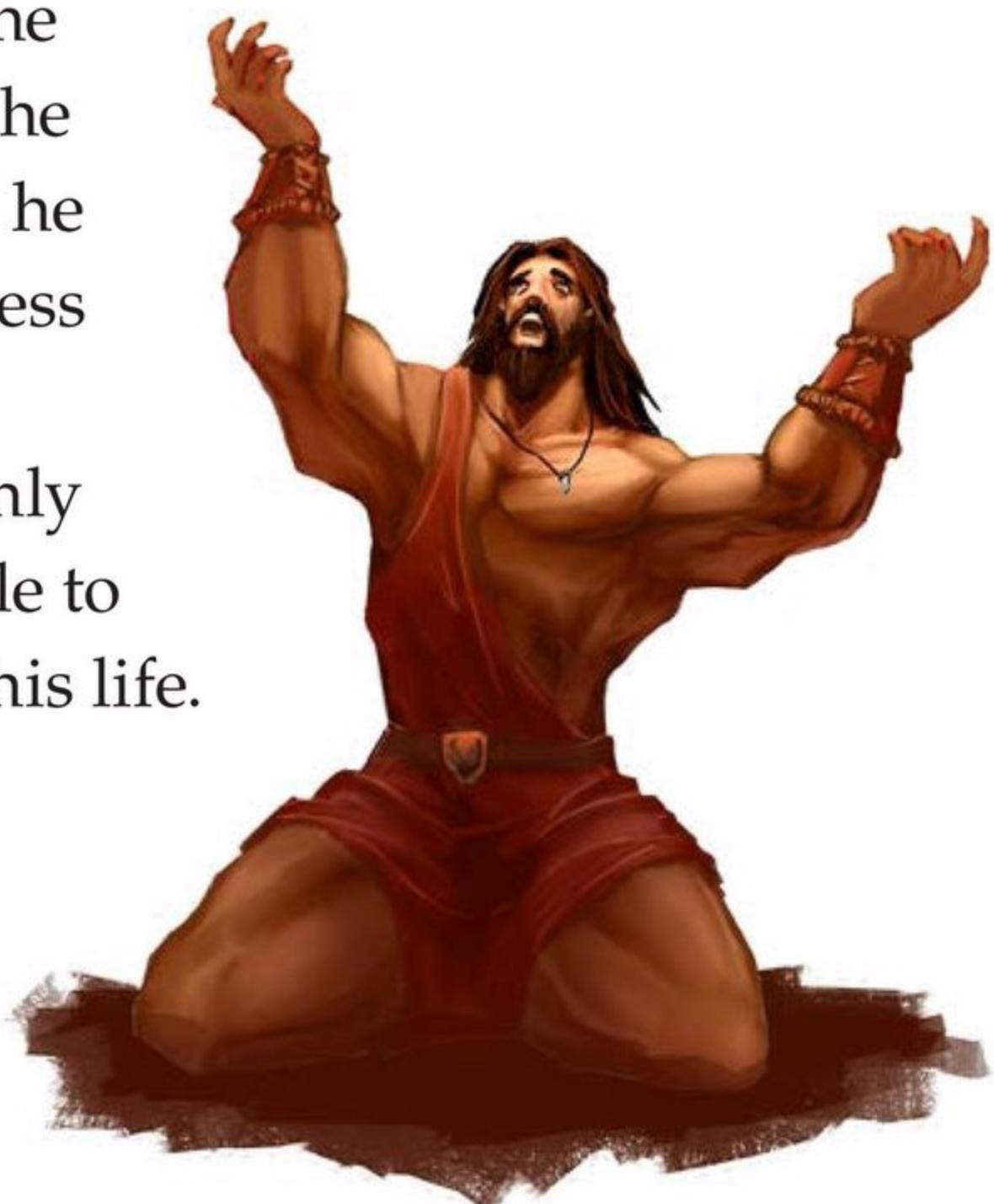


Introduction

The legendary **labors** of Hercules are one of the most beloved myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Hercules was the child of Zeus, king of the gods, and a mortal woman, Alcmene. The goddess Hera, Zeus's wife, was angry that Zeus had a child with Alcmene. She swore revenge on both mother and child. Hera sent witches to torment Alcmene in childbirth. She also sent snakes to murder the infant Hercules in his crib. Strong even as a baby, Hercules strangled the snakes and survived.

However, Hera didn't give up. She watched Hercules jealously throughout his life, searching for ways to cause him pain and suffering. When he grew to manhood and married, Hera hit upon one of her cruelest strategies. She caused Hercules to go into a fit of insanity for a short time. When Hercules regained his senses, he saw his dead family. He had murdered his wife and children with his own hands!

Heartbroken, he pleaded with the god Apollo to cleanse his spirit. Apollo sentenced Hercules to perform ten labors for King Eurystheus of Mycenae. These deeds required strength, dedication, and intelligence. The stakes were high—if Hercules failed, he had to live with the stain of his crime. If he succeeded, however, he would gain forgiveness in his own eyes and those of the gods. Only then would he be able to move forward with his life.

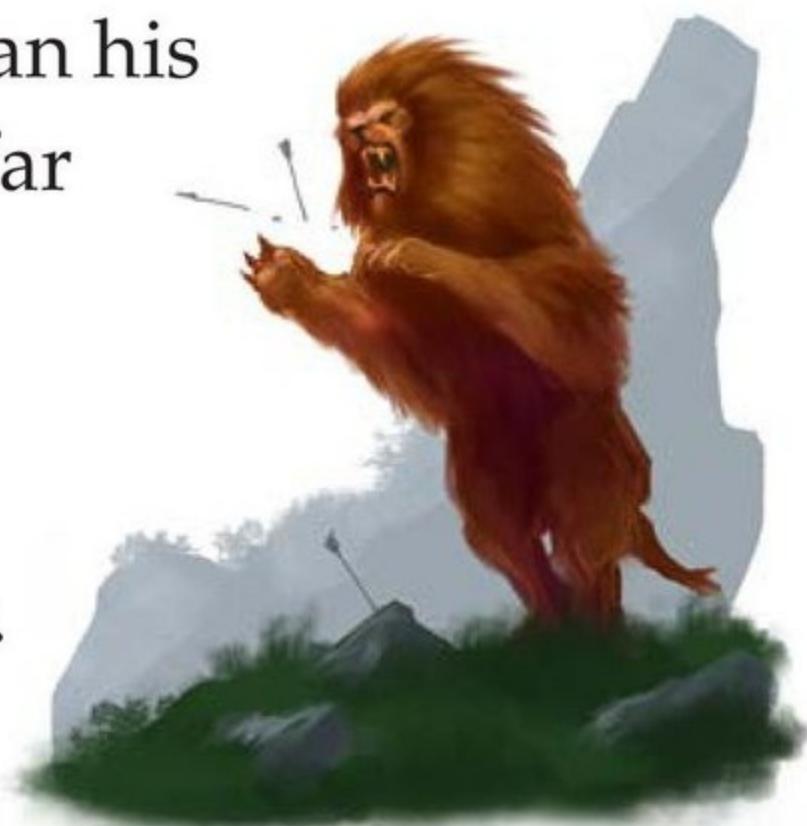


Hercules's Strength and Resourcefulness

Hercules faced mythical creatures that had supernatural powers and **immortality**. He also encountered strong and vicious beasts. He used combinations of strength, courage, creativity, and skill to defeat them.

His first labor was to overcome the Nemean lion. After taking a young woman hostage, the lion used her as bait to draw warriors to her rescue. As the men approached, it would leap out and attack them. Hercules began his attack by firing arrows from afar straight at the lion's heart, but they only bounced off its **hide**. When he threw his spear, the weapon didn't penetrate either.

Finally, Hercules picked up his club and chased the lion into a cave. He blocked off the opening so that the lion could not escape. He jumped onto its back, dodging fierce claws and sharp teeth. Wrapping his powerful arms around the lion's neck, he choked it until it took its last breath.



When the lion was finally dead, Hercules tried to skin it. However, none of his tools were sharp enough. Finally, he used one of the lion's own razor-sharp claws to skin the animal.

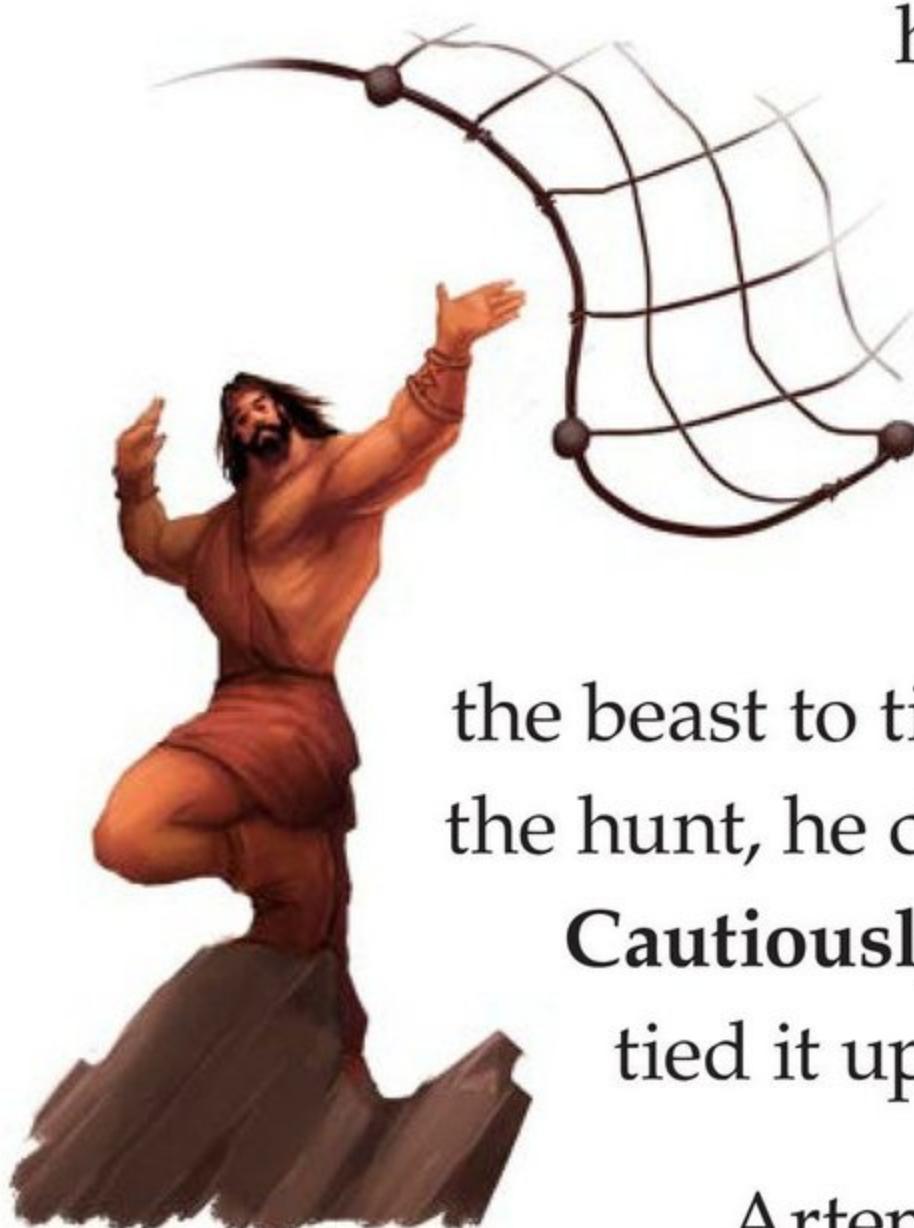
Hercules went on to defeat the Hydra (an enormous, many-headed snake), a powerful boar, and vicious, man-eating vultures. He was forced to change his methods each time he fought, often turning his challengers' weapons against them—just as he had with the Nemean lion.

As Hercules accomplished each labor, Eurystheus grew more afraid of Hercules. He did not allow Hercules to come to his palace. Instead, the king issued all his commands through a messenger. When Eurystheus learned that Hercules had received payment for two of his labors, he increased the number of labors from ten to twelve—at Hera's insistence.



Hercules's Restraint and Prudence

However, not all of Hercules's labors could be accomplished through violence. In fact, Hercules also had to learn not to take needless risks. For the third labor, Eurystheus decreed Hercules bring him the Ceryneian (sair-i-NEE-uhn) Hind. This deer was the special pet of Artemis, goddess of the Moon, wild animals, and the hunt. Hercules knew that he could not risk angering Artemis by killing the deer. Carefully and patiently, he tracked the hind, waiting for the beast to tire. After a full year of the hunt, he closed in as it was sleeping. **Cautiously**, he threw a net over it, tied it up, and set off for Mycenae.



Artemis was enraged at the capture of her pet. Hercules was honest with her, explaining how he'd been driven mad and had killed his family, how he had taken on his labors as **penance**, and finally, how Eurystheus had demanded that he capture the hind.



Artemis had compassion for the suffering hero. She allowed him to take the hind; however, she gave the condition that he return the hind after the labor. Hercules kept his word to the goddess.

In his ninth labor, Hercules traveled to the land of the Amazons. He had to bring back the belt of Hippolyte, queen of this tribe of fierce female warriors. Hercules took an army of friends with him. They hoped not to fight the Amazons, but instead to visit in peace. As their ship drew near to the shore, Hercules shouted, "Hippolyte! I have a favor to ask of you." The Amazonian warriors looked at one another, but their spears did not waver. A woman emerged from the ranks. "I am Hippolyte," she called to Hercules. "What is your errand?"

Hearing his tale, Hippolyte was sympathetic, and she agreed to grant the belt to him of her own free will. All seemed well, and Hercules and his army feasted with the Amazons. But Hera passed among the Amazons in disguise, whispering that Hercules was about to betray their trust and kidnap the queen. In response, the Amazons donned their armor. Hercules felt forced to slay Hippolyte and take the belt from her. He boarded his ship with the belt—and a heavy heart.

Hercules's Ingenuity

Hercules thought his way through seemingly insurmountable obstacles. When Eurystheus commanded that he clean the stables of King Augeas, Hercules came up with a particularly creative solution. The king hadn't cleaned his stables, home to thousands of cattle, in more than thirty years. The job was enormous—and filthy. Hercules smashed two large holes in the stable walls, one on each side, and then dug a canal from a nearby river to the stable. The river flowed into the canal and through the stable, carrying away years of **accumulated** filth with it.

Hercules was not above the use of trickery to accomplish his goals, either. He successfully outsmarted several of his challengers. For his eleventh labor, Eurystheus demanded that Hercules fetch one of Zeus's golden apples, located in a garden guarded by **nymphs** called the Hesperides. No one was allowed inside except for the nymphs' father, Atlas.

Hercules immediately set off to find Atlas. He wondered if he should tell his story again, hoping for Atlas's sympathy, or come up with a lie instead. Hercules found the god groaning under an unimaginable burden. Atlas held the weight of the whole world on his shoulders.



Hercules asked, “Great Atlas, how would you reward me if I **temporarily** relieved you of your burden?”

Atlas replied, “No reward would be too great.” He eagerly agreed to enter Zeus’s garden and retrieve an apple. In turn, Hercules bore the weight of the world in his place.

Atlas was overjoyed to be free of his burden. In fact, he didn’t want to take it up again. He told Hercules that he would take the apple to Eurystheus himself. Hercules would have to wait for him, holding up the world in his place.

Sensing a trap, Hercules laid his own. He agreed to Atlas's requests, but asked that Atlas hold the world again for just a moment so Hercules could get into a more comfortable position. Once Atlas had lifted the world onto his own shoulders again, Hercules escaped with the apple, leaving Atlas miserable. Yet again, Hercules had used both his wits and his strength to successfully complete a labor.



Do You Know?

Hercules is a Latin name that was used by ancient Romans. Ancient Greeks called the same hero *Heracles*. In both languages, his name means "glory of Hera." In ancient Greek and Roman art, Hercules is almost always shown with two symbols: the Nemean lion's skin worn as a helmet and cape, and his wooden club.

Hercules: The Immortal Hero

For his final task, the hero descended into the Underworld, the land of the dead. His mission was to capture Cerberus, its three-headed guard dog. He easily overpowered the monster. By completing his final task, Hercules had finally cleansed himself of his murderous crime. Hercules had earned forgiveness and could continue on with his life.

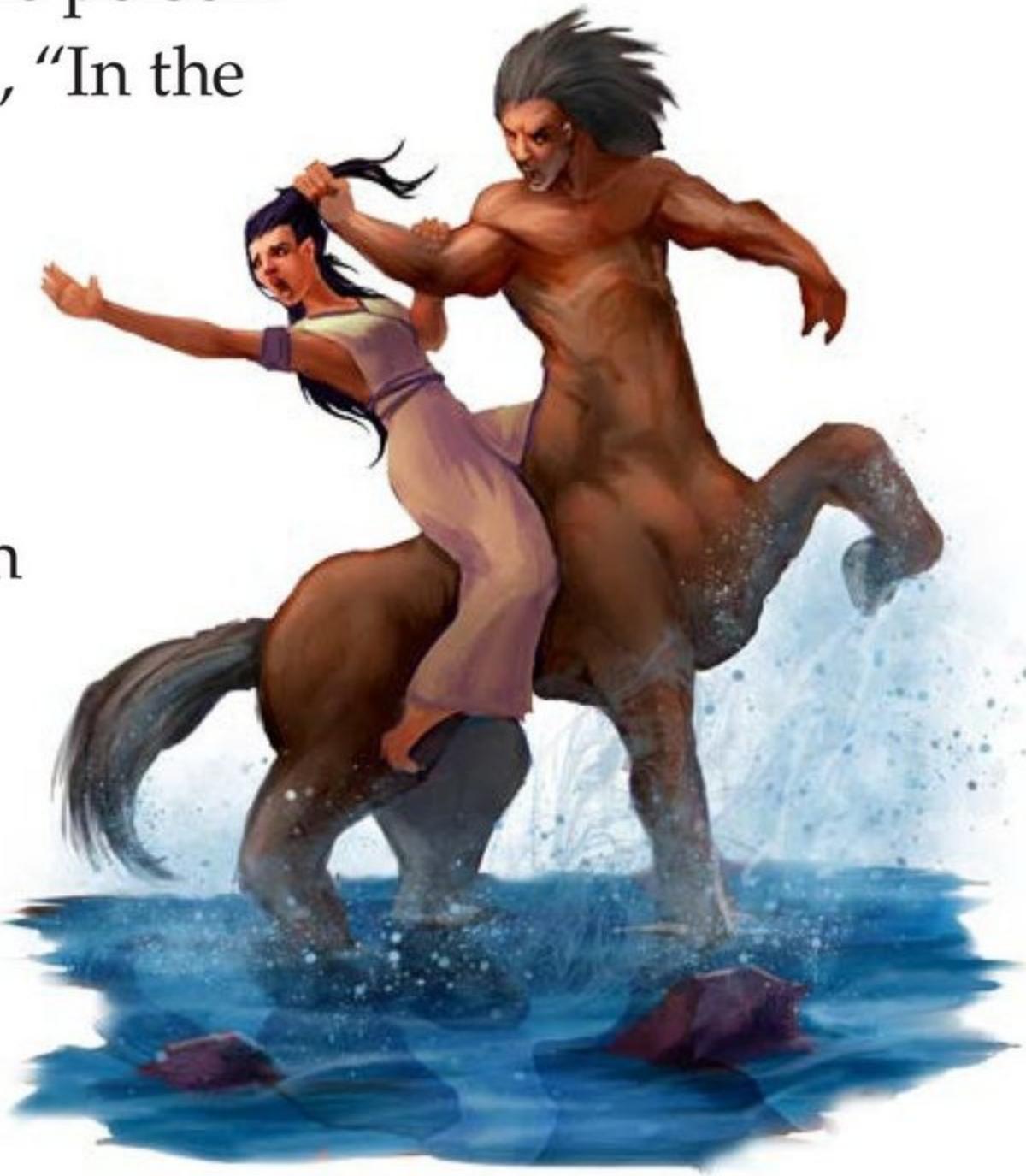




After completing his labors, Hercules went on to accomplish numerous other heroic **feats**. He married a woman named Deianira. This second marriage was also ill-fated. A centaur named Nessos offered to carry Deianira across a deep river. Midway across, Nessos attacked Deianira. Hearing his wife scream, Hercules

shot off an arrow that he had dipped into the poisonous blood of the Hydra. As Nessos bled to death, he rubbed his cloak into his blood, which was mixed with the poison.

Nessos whispered, "In the future, if your husband ever wrongs you, give him this cloak. It has been soaked in a special love potion."



When Hercules and Deianira grew apart, she remembered the cloak. She handed it to Hercules, who wrapped himself in it and was instantly seized with pain. Wild with agony and unable to wash the poison from his skin, Hercules commanded a large **pyre** to be built. The great hero lay down in the midst of the flames, hoping to perish and end his torment.

Zeus looked down upon the pyre from Mount Olympus, deeply moved. Turning to Hera, he said, "Has he not suffered enough? Let your anger be stilled."

Hera bowed her great head and agreed. After all, he was a son of Zeus, and he had proven that he was mighty and courageous beyond human expectations. The gods raised Hercules up, and he **ascended** in a **pillar** of fire to Mount Olympus, where he lived as an immortal forevermore.



Glossary

accumulated (<i>v.</i>)	built up or collected over time; increased (p. 10)
ascended (<i>v.</i>)	moved upward; rose in position or rank (p. 15)
cautiously (<i>adv.</i>)	carefully; with caution (p. 8)
feats (<i>n.</i>)	amazing actions or accomplishments (p. 14)
hide (<i>n.</i>)	the skin of an animal (p. 6)
immortality (<i>n.</i>)	the state of living or being remembered forever (p. 6)
labors (<i>n.</i>)	difficult physical work (p. 4)
nymphs (<i>n.</i>)	in stories and myths, spirits in the shape of young women who live in mountains, forests, meadows, or water (p. 10)
penance (<i>n.</i>)	something a person does to show regret or atone for bad behavior (p. 8)
pillar (<i>n.</i>)	a large post or column used for support, usually made of stone, wood, or metal (p. 15)
pyre (<i>n.</i>)	a pile of wood used to burn a body or bodies (p. 15)
temporarily (<i>adv.</i>)	lasting or occurring for a limited amount of time (p. 11)

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A *Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book*

Word Count: 1,542

Connections

Writing and Art

Imagine that you are Hercules. Choose one labor and write a journal entry about completing that task, including how you accomplished it and how you felt about it.

Social Studies

Research Greek mythology to learn about other Greek heroes, such as Achilles and Theseus. Write a short essay comparing their heroics to Hercules's labors.

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