

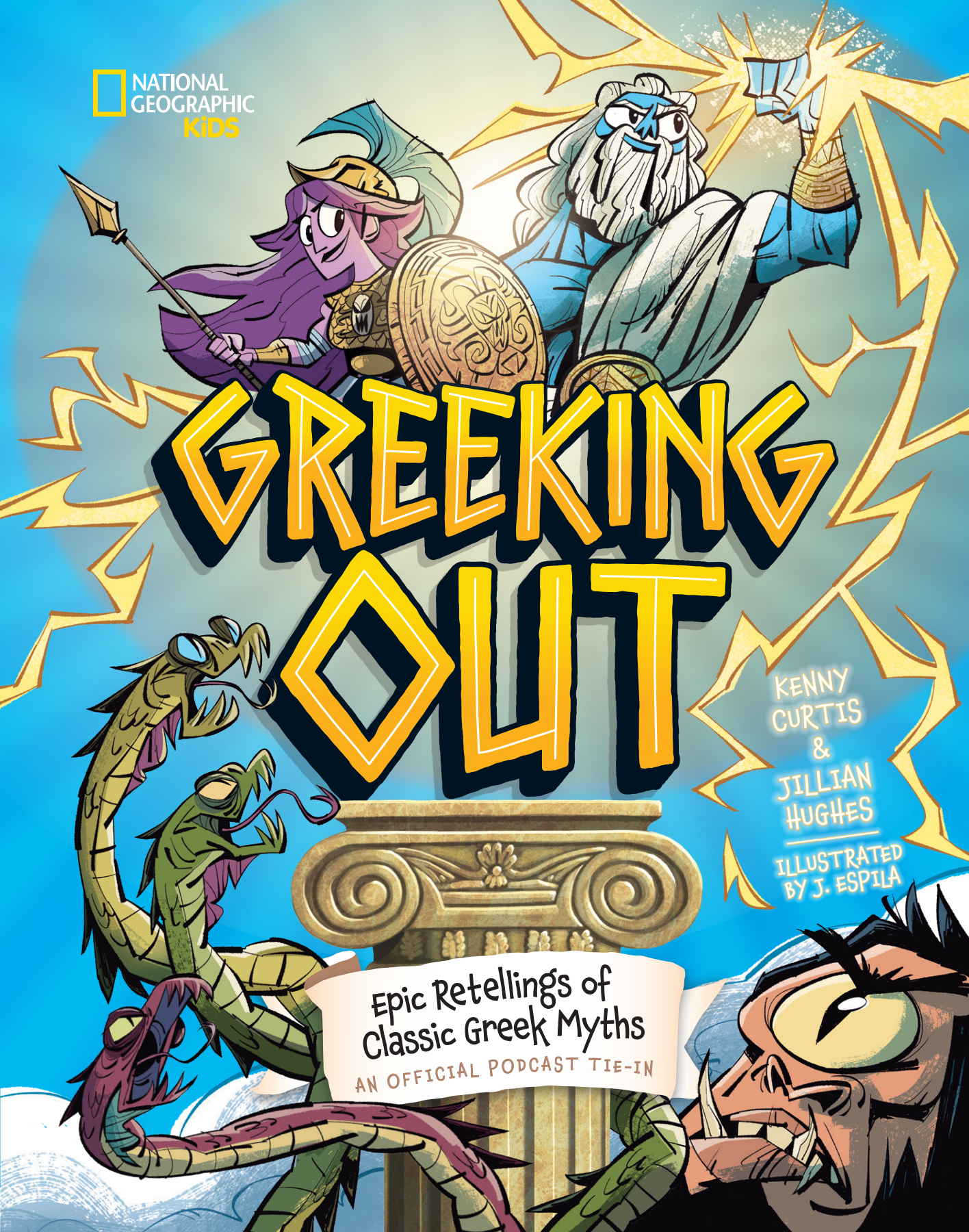
NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC  
KIDS

# GREEKING OUT

KENNY  
CURTIS  
&  
JILLIAN  
HUGHES

ILLUSTRATED  
BY J. ESPILA

Epic Retellings of  
Classic Greek Myths  
AN OFFICIAL PODCAST TIE-IN









# HERACLES THE G.O.A.T.

This tale features wrestling matches with lions, monsters with a bizarre number of necks, a lot of poop, and slobbering three-headed dogs.

**H**e has been called the “Greatest Hero of All Time”—in the literal sense, because he’s actually immortal. But this ancient superhero didn’t exactly start that way.

Heracles was a demigod. This meant he was born half mortal and half god. He was the son of the mighty Zeus and a mortal woman named Alcmene, who happened to be the granddaughter of the great hero Perseus. When Zeus’s wife, Hera, found out that her husband was going to have a son with another woman, she was outraged. But instead of confronting Zeus, Hera took her anger out on Heracles.

Hera didn’t have to wait long to enact her revenge.



**YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THAT WE'RE CALLING OUR HERO "HERACLES" AND NOT "HERCULES." THIS IS BECAUSE HERACLES (PRO-  
NOUNCED HAIR-UH-KLEEZ) IS THE ORIGINAL GREEK NAME AND PRONUNCIATION. IT TRANSLATES TO "FAMOUS BECAUSE OF HERA." WHEN THE ROMANS WENT ON TO ADAPT THESE STORIES, THEY CALLED THE HERO HERCULES INSTEAD, WHICH HAS REMAINED ITS MOST POPULAR PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING. BUT BECAUSE THIS IS A BOOK ON GREEK AND NOT ROMAN MYTHOLOGY, I'M INSISTING WE USE THE ORIGINAL NAME AND PRONUNCIATION. ATTENTION TO DETAIL IS IMPORTANT.**

The night before Heracles was born, Zeus bragged all over Olympus about how excited he was for his new son and how great the boy was sure to be. After all, the son of Zeus? He automatically came into the world with extra bonus points and demigod street cred.

And so, the goddess saw her moment to strike. Hera dared Zeus to back up his boasts with action. If his new son was going to be so awesome, shouldn't the mighty Zeus bestow a gift upon him? A special gift would make it clear that Zeus really thought this child would be important. Zeus thought this was a grand idea. So he quickly declared that the next child born in the house of Perseus would become a high king of the mortals.

"And what about the next son?" Hera asked.

"Who cares about him? He can go ahead and be the servant," Zeus said with a laugh.

What Zeus didn't know was that there was another child about to be born in the house of Perseus. Heracles was going to have a cousin.

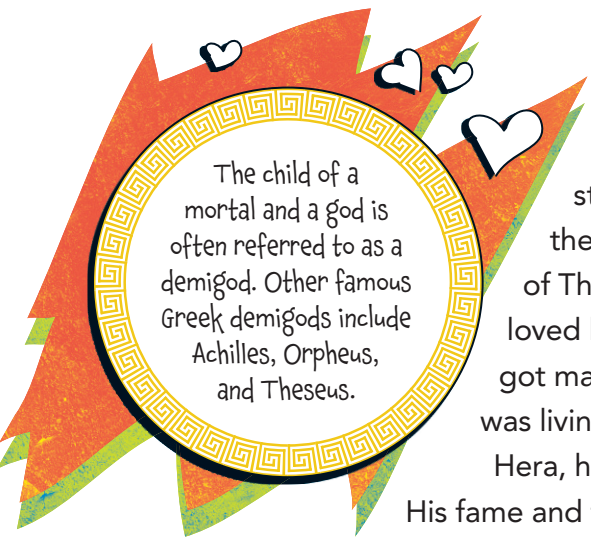
Hera immediately left Olympus to find the soon-to-be cousin of Heracles and made sure he was born that very evening. The child's

name was Eurystheus. And because he was born first, he was to be the new king of Tiryns and Heracles was bound to serve him.

When Zeus found out what had happened, he was furious. He forced Hera to agree to a compromise: If Heracles performed enough great works in the service of Eurystheus, he could become immortal and join the gods.

Hera agreed. She needed to keep Zeus happy and she figured there was no way that Heracles would do a good enough job for Eurystheus. At least, not if she had anything to say about it.





The child of a mortal and a god is often referred to as a demigod. Other famous Greek demigods include Achilles, Orpheus, and Theseus.

Heracles went on to have a happy childhood, and because of his godlike strength, he grew up to become one of the most revered warriors in his hometown of Thebes. The king loved him. The citizens loved him. Even the gods loved him! Heracles got married to the princess Megara. He really was living the dream.

Hera, however, hated watching Heracles succeed. His fame and fortune were driving her wild—so wild, in fact, that she decided to return the favor.

One night, Hera visited Heracles while he was asleep and whispered an evil spell in his ear. The next morning, Heracles woke up and just ... wasn't the same. Hera's spell turned Heracles into a monster, and he started destroying everything in his path, including his home and family.

The people of Thebes hid from him as he raged through the streets. Days later, when he came to his senses, he was mortified about what he had done and heartbroken over his actions. The demigod had no idea how to make things right, so he decided to visit the Oracle of Delphi to ask for advice.

The oracle told Heracles that he should go and serve his cousin Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns and the baby that had been born before him. It was the deal the gods had made years ago. Heracles longed to make up for the horrible things he had done. If serving Eurystheus would help him atone for his sins, he would do it.

Of course, Eurystheus was more than happy to accept Heracles as his servant, and Hera immediately volunteered to help Eurystheus make Heracles' life miserable. They told Heracles that he would need to perform 10 heroic tasks—or labors—to fulfill his obligation.

The first labor that Eurystheus laid out for Heracles was to kill a dangerous lion and bring back its skin. And this wasn't just any lion. It was the notorious lion of Nemea—a terrible beast that was rumored to be impossible to kill.



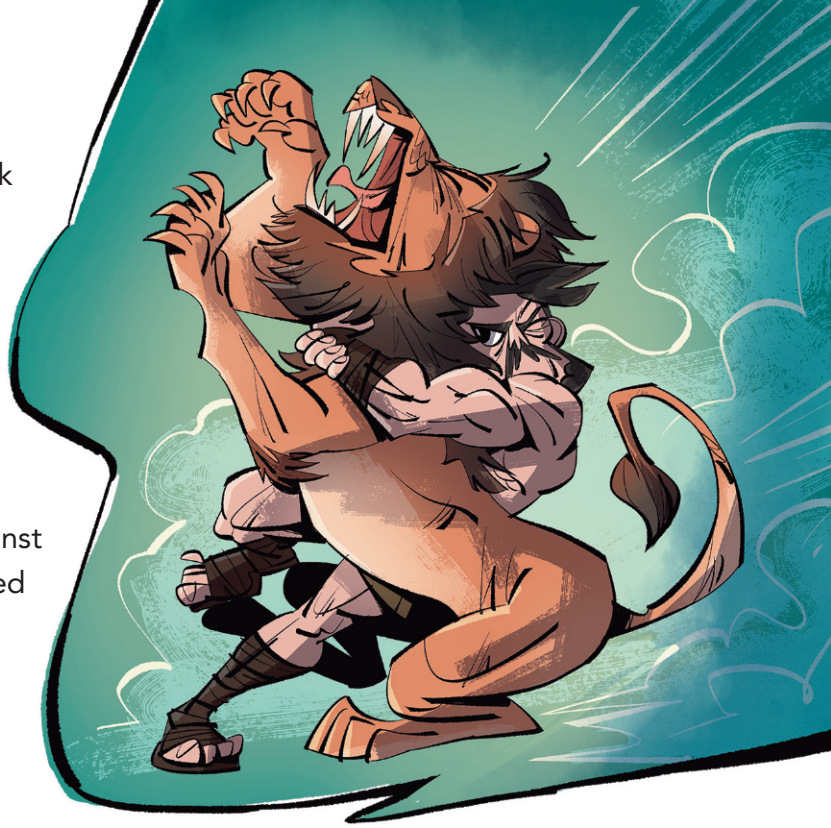
But Heracles was all business. He saw every task set before him as a way to make up for the horrible things he had done in Thebes. Heracles took his arrow and launched a perfect shot right at the heart of the beast. But the arrow simply smacked against the lion's chest and bounced right off. It didn't even break the skin!

The lion leaped to its feet and charged at Heracles. Heracles thrust his blade toward the beast with all his might, but even his godlike strength couldn't penetrate the lion's hide. The beast ran away quickly and took shelter in a nearby cave.

Heracles followed, venturing into the darkness. Suddenly, the lion pounced on him! Heracles knew his sword wouldn't make a difference, so he jumped on the lion's back and held on tight. It thrashed and roared, but it could not escape Heracles' gigantic arms around its neck. Using only his bare hands and his strength, Heracles finally subdued the Nemean lion, without ever piercing its hide.

Heracles brought the pelt back to Eurystheus as requested. The king was shocked, and Hera was beside herself. She decided to whip up a brand-new monster for Heracles to face, one that was going to be even more dangerous than the lion.

For his next labor, Eurystheus, under Hera's orders, sent Heracles to kill the dreaded Hydra: a six-headed water snake. The Hydra was a complicated beast. In addition to being a giant water snake with six heads, it





could spit acid from each one of its mouths and its blood was poisonous. So, yeah, there was a lot going on there.

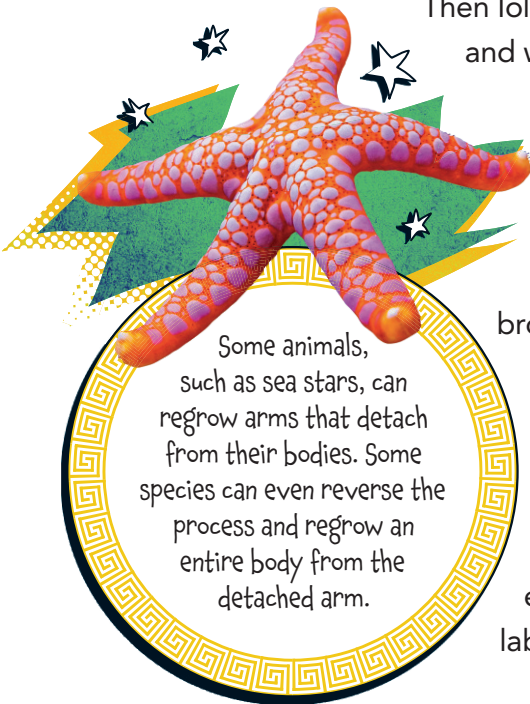
Heracles knew it would be a difficult fight. Fortunately, his nephew Iolaus volunteered to help out. As they approached the lake, the Hydra slithered out from the water's edge and roared at Heracles with all six of its heads. Heracles charged toward the giant beast and swung his sword, cutting off one of the spitting heads.

But it wasn't long before the Hydra was moving again. Something was growing from the very neck that had just been severed—two somethings. The Hydra was regrowing two heads from the very spot where Heracles had cut off one!

Heracles wasn't sure what to do. He knew he needed to find a new plan of attack, but with the beast chasing after him, it was almost impossible not to cut off a head now and then. After all, there were a bazillion of them! The Hydra looked like Medusa's bad hair day stuck on a dragon's body—and it just kept getting bigger! He had to find a way to stop these heads from growing back.

Then Iolaus got an idea. Heracles' nephew lit a torch and waited. Each time Heracles severed one of the Hydra's heads, clever Iolaus would seal the wound by touching it with the flame. This kept the new heads from growing back, and Heracles was finally able to slay the beast. Iolaus had definitely earned some brownie points from his uncle!

Once again, Heracles had succeeded, and Hera was furious. She had King Eurystheus continue to assign Heracles dangerous mission after dangerous mission, but the hero emerged successful every time. She even had Eurystheus throw in some manual labor for good measure and order Heracles to



Some animals, such as sea stars, can regrow arms that detach from their bodies. Some species can even reverse the process and regrow an entire body from the detached arm.



clean out some royal stables that housed more than a thousand animals. But a little poop—or rather, a lot of poop—wasn't about to stand in Heracles' way. Heracles grabbed a shovel and then diverted an entire river to flush away the poop piles. Work smarter not harder, people.

It seemed pretty clear that Heracles was going to accomplish all 10 of his tasks. So Eurystheus accused Heracles of cheating because Iolaus had helped out with some of the labors. As punishment, the king decreed that Heracles had to complete 12 labors instead of 10. Big oof.

But Heracles kept laboring. Finally, he arrived at the very last one. Heracles was ordered to travel to the Underworld and bring back Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guarded the gates to the land of the dead. Eurystheus and Hera logically assumed that Heracles would have to die to reach the Underworld. Instead, Heracles decided to ask a friend for help: Hermes, the messenger of the gods.

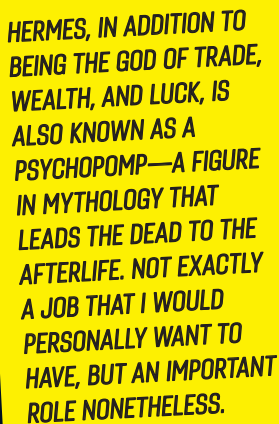
Hermes was responsible for guiding souls to the Underworld after their deaths, and he happened to know a secret way inside. Before long, Heracles was standing before Hades, ruler of the Underworld.

Instead of fighting, Heracles sheathed his sword, dropped his club, pulled up a chair, and told Hades his tale from start to finish.

"I am moved by your bravery and your desire to make amends," Hades said. "But I cannot allow you to harm my beloved pet Cerberus. He is a good dog. All three of him."

Heracles thought about what Eurystheus had requested. His orders were to bring back the body of the dog—but the instructions didn't say anything about Cerberus needing to be dead.

Heracles asked Hades if he could borrow Cerberus for the afternoon and promised to bring him back unharmed. Hades agreed, and a few hours later, Heracles strolled into the



**HERMES, IN ADDITION TO BEING THE GOD OF TRADE, WEALTH, AND LUCK, IS ALSO KNOWN AS A PSYCHOPOMP—A FIGURE IN MYTHOLOGY THAT LEADS THE DEAD TO THE AFTERLIFE. NOT EXACTLY A JOB THAT I WOULD PERSONALLY WANT TO HAVE, BUT AN IMPORTANT ROLE NONETHELESS.**



courtyard of King Eurystheus's palace walking a gigantic, slobbering three-headed dog.

As it turns out, Eurystheus was more of a cat guy. He begged Heracles to take the beast away and officially declared that Heracles' labors were finally complete. And so, after 10 years and 12 devious challenges, Heracles was made immortal, and he finally got to join his father Zeus and the rest of the Olympians in their palace in the sky.



When it comes to heroes, it doesn't get much better than the legendary Heracles. Almost everyone knows his name, but very few understand his actual motivation for overcoming all the difficult battles and challenges that Hera threw at him.

Heracles wasn't completing his trials because he wanted to show off. He was completing them because he made a truly terrible mistake—and he wanted to make amends for what he had done.


Everyone messes up sometimes. But a real hero recognizes that they still have a chance to make things right. They face their problems head-on, and they do what they can to make up for their errors. Most of the time that means admitting what they've done and apologizing. But sometimes it involves shoveling a tremendous amount of poop and fighting monsters that have a bunch of scary, acid-spitting heads. You just never know!





# THE 12 LABORS OF

# HERACLES



Hera and King Eurystheus didn't make it easy on Heracles to fulfill his oath. These are the 12 dangerous tasks—also known as labors—that Heracles had to complete to pay for his sins and earn his spot on Mount Olympus.

## 1. KILL THE NEMEAN LION

Heracles' first task was to kill a ferocious lion with an impenetrable hide. He was able to emerge victorious by challenging the beast to a wrestling match and squeezing the lion to death.



## 2. KILL THE HYDRA

The Hydra was an acid-spitting, head-growing beast. Heracles was able to defeat it by chopping off its heads and sealing the wounds with fire so they couldn't regenerate.

## 3. CAPTURE THE CERYNEIAN DEER

This enchanted deer was larger than a bull and lightning fast. Heracles chased the speedy deer across the entire Earth before he finally caught it and returned victorious.

## 4. CAPTURE THE ERYMANTHIAN BOAR

Heracles was sent to take down a wild boar that was terrorizing locals and destroying farms. He captured the boar by luring it into the snow and slowing it down.



## 5. CLEAN THE STABLES

This was officially the smelliest labor Heracles had to face. He was ordered to clean out stables filled with an enormous amount of poop from all the animals, making him the unofficial plumber of Greek mythology.

## 6. KILL THE STYMPHALIAN BIRDS

These giant, eaglelike beasts were known to kill and eat humans who crossed their path. Heracles was able to lure the birds out of their tree and shoot them with arrows, saving the nearby townspeople.

## 7. CAPTURE THE CRETAN BULL

A giant bull was running around Crete, and Heracles was ordered to capture it. He wrestled the bull to the ground and rode it all the way back to Eurystheus, making this the first piggyback ride of ancient Greece.

## 8. CAPTURE THE MARES OF DIOMEDES

Heracles just had to trap four horses that belonged to a giant named Diomedes. Oh, and they also breathed fire. Eventually, Heracles was able to trap the horses on an island and capture them.

## 9. STEAL THE GIRDLE OF HIPPOLYTA

Heracles befriended Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, but peace didn't last long. Hera interfered, and Heracles and Hippolyta had to fight it out after all. Heracles emerged victorious but was sad about losing his friend.

## 10. CAPTURE THE CATTLE OF GERYON

Geryon was a monster giant with really nice cows! Heracles was able to kill the giant by dipping his arrows in poison obtained from the Hydra's blood.

## 11. STEAL THE GOLDEN APPLES

Heracles was ordered to steal magic apples that granted immortality. This turned out to be an epic quest that involved Hera, a dragon, and the Titan Atlas. But Heracles did eventually get those apples.



## 12. CAPTURE CERBERUS

Heracles was ordered to the Underworld to steal Hades' three-headed dog. After a quick chat with Hades, Heracles was allowed to take Cerberus for a walk to Eurystheus's kingdom.