

~~HOPELESS HEROES~~

# HERE COMES HERCULES!



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Hopeless Heroes: Here Comes Hercules!

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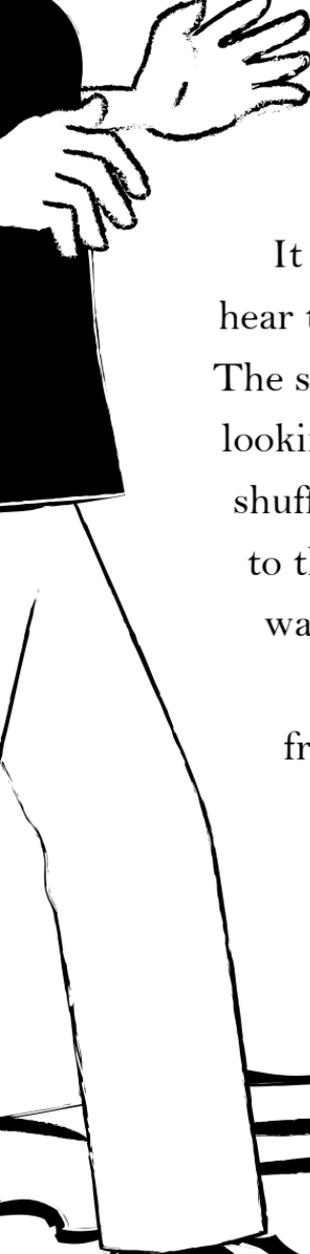
*In memory of my father Constantine,  
a real Greek hero*





The tiger lay at Tim Baker's feet with its mouth wide open. Its striped fur was grimy and tattered, as if it had fought in many fights. Its lips were drawn back in a snarl. Pointy yellow teeth gleamed in the fading light. They looked very sharp.

Tim felt the sweat trickle down his face. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. He had to keep going. The day was nearly over, but there was still a lot to do.

A black and white line drawing showing the hands and legs of a person. The hands are at the top left, one holding the other. The legs are long and thin, extending downwards. The person is wearing a dark top and light-colored pants.

It was hot and humid and he could hear the rumble of distant thunder. The storm was getting nearer. Not looking where he was going, Tim shuffled forward. He stepped closer to the tiger, who watched and waited in silence.

Tim's foot landed centimetres from its head.



‘Sorry,’ he said, edging around the massive beast. He was careful not to tread on its outstretched paws.

The tiger gazed back at him through glassy eyes. It looked like it wanted to leap up and growl. Instead it lay silent and still, poised as if ready to pounce. Tim bent down and patted its furry head. A cloud of dust flew out, which made him sneeze.

‘Wow, you’re dirty! Guess I’ll have to clean you, too. But not now. I gotta dust before Mum comes home.’

The tiger said nothing. It lay on the living room floor, watching Tim hunt reluctantly for the duster.

Tim often spoke to the tiger-skin rug. It kept him company after school, while Mum was at her second job. Mum worked in an office during the day, then as a cleaner in the evening. She worked from early in the morning until dinner time. Mum didn't like being away from home for such long hours, but she had no choice. They needed the money.

Which meant Tim had to help out at home. Everyone had to pull their weight, Mum said. Tim tried. It didn't mean he had to like it.

He found the duster crammed under the sofa, where he'd left it the last time he had done the dusting. Sighing, he pulled it out and turned to the mantelpiece.

First the crystal skull, then the wooden elephant. Tim's house was full of things his parents had collected from overseas. Rugs, statues, paintings ... It was like living in a museum. A reminder of better





times, the jumbled collection now sat around gathering dust.

Tim moved on to the old Greek vase. It was big and black, with a narrow neck and two curved handles. Two black figures stood out on a clay-coloured panel: a muscleman wrestling a fierce bull. The bull was bigger, but it looked like the man was winning.

‘You know what?’ Tim said to the tiger, taking a break from cleaning. ‘That bull looks familiar. Weird. I don’t think I’ve met any bulls lately.’ He raked a hand through his mop of curly brown hair as

he examined the picture closely. That wiry red hair, the stocky build, the angry face ...

Tim jumped. That was it! The bull looked like Leo. Just as cross and just as stupid. If his worst enemy had horns, Leo and the bull would be twins. 'I guess that's why they're called bullies,' Tim muttered. 'They look like bulls.'



He wondered how on earth the man could be defeating the animal. It was twice his size and pure, solid muscle. But the man looked like he was used to adventures and heroic feats. He probably wasn't stuck at home doing housework all the time. And the bull almost certainly didn't call him Cinderella!

Tim whipped the duster about roughly. Everyone thought the nickname Leo had invented for him was funny. Everyone except Tim. The vase wobbled alarmingly and started to topple. Steadying it with both hands, he gazed at the jagged writing on the vase. He wished he could read it. It might explain the man's secret. It might tell him how to defeat Leo.

‘One day, I’ll learn to read the words. I’ll tell you what they mean,’ Tim told the tiger-skin rug.

The tiger looked back blankly.

‘Hey, it’s not easy! Even Mum can’t read it. It’s in Greek. The alphabet’s different.’

The tiger said nothing. It didn’t believe him.

‘I can read some of it.’ Tim gripped the vase carefully, the way his mother had shown him, and tilted it so he could see better. ‘That’s an E and that looks like—’

Just then, the phone rang. Startled, Tim jerked backwards, his fingers still looped around the handles.

**CRASH!**



The vase toppled to the floor, smashing into bits. Tim's heart beat faster. Mum would go nuts if she found out. He had to fix it, quickly, before she came home.





The phone kept ringing. Tim leapt over the pieces of broken vase to answer it.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi darling.’ It was Mum. ‘Just letting you know I’m stuck in traffic. I’ll be a bit late.’

Tim’s mind raced as he tried to remember where he’d put the superglue. ‘Good. I mean ... okay.’

Mum paused. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘Yeah. I’m dusting, that’s all.’

‘You’re a good boy.’ Mum sighed. ‘One day, things will be different. I promise. I won’t have to work long hours forever.’

‘I know.’ Tim eyed the broken pieces anxiously.

The Greek vase was the only thing in the house that was worth any money. It was very, very old – thousands of years – and that made it valuable. Sometimes Mum talked about selling it. It would bring in enough money for her to quit her second job, giving her more time at home with Tim. She could never bring herself to do it, however: the vase was the last thing Dad had given her before he died.

And now it was smashed. Scattered in

pieces across the living room floor.

And it was all Tim's fault.

'Gotta go,' he chirped, trying to sound as if nothing were wrong. 'See you soon!'

Tim scrambled around on his hands and knees, gathering chunks of vase. It wasn't too bad, he decided, fitting two bits together. With a bit of luck, he could fix it so it was as good as new and Mum would never know.

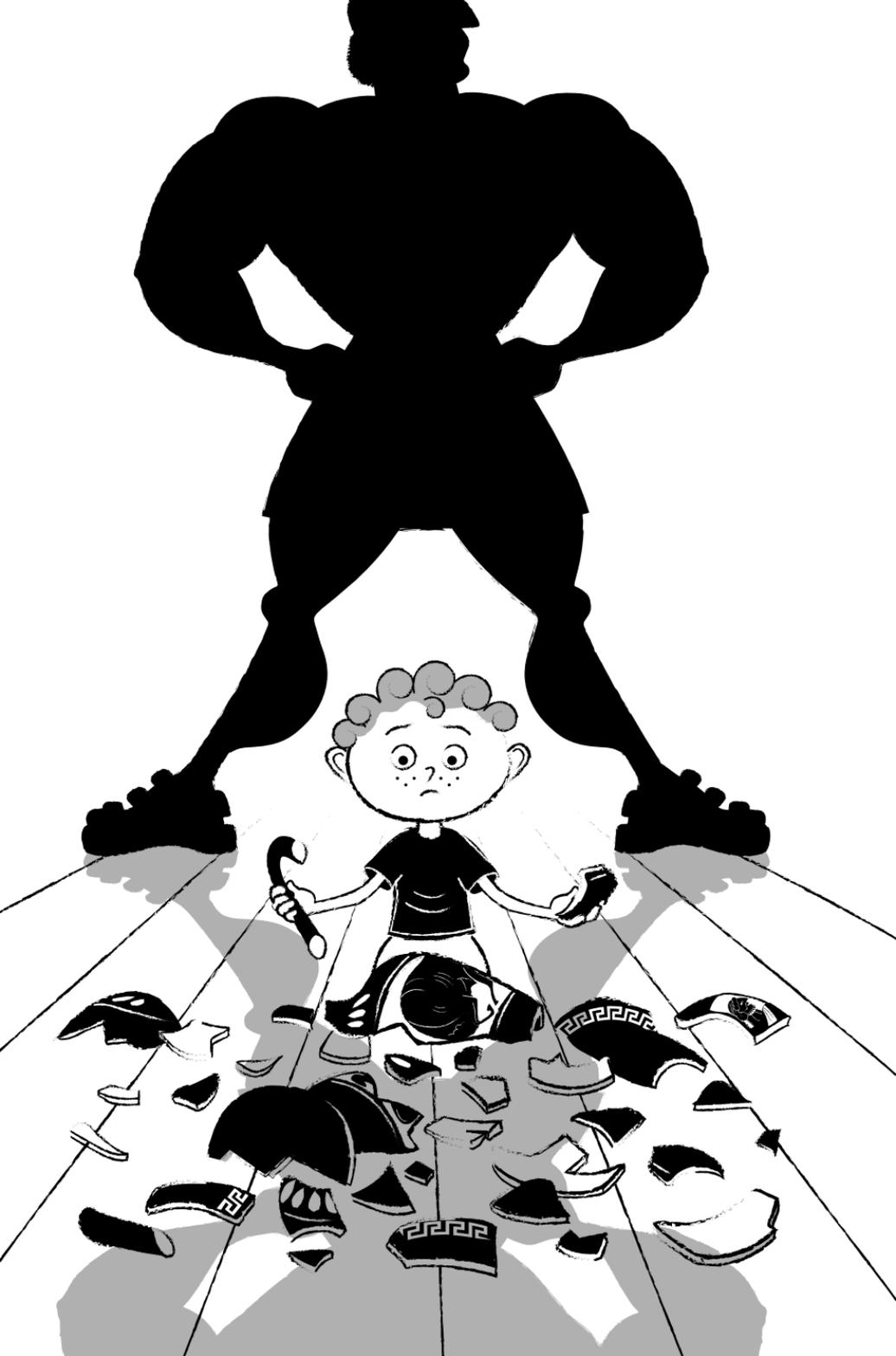
**'FREE AT LAST!'**

a voice boomed.

Tim nearly dropped the pieces. He looked up.

And up.

And up.



An enormous man loomed above him. His legs were like tree trunks and his shoulders were as broad as the coffee table. He wore a grey garment fastened on one shoulder, exposing a muscular and hairy chest. A thick brown belt encircled his waist and his feet were thrust into the largest sandals Tim had ever seen.

‘Who – who are you?’ Tim’s voice shook.

‘Do not be afraid,’ the muscleman said. ‘I was a prisoner in the vase. You broke it and set me free.’ With a hand the size of a dinner plate, he helped Tim gently up to his feet.

Tim’s knees had gone all wobbly. This couldn’t be happening! He stared at the man in disbelief.

‘How did you get in there? You’re far too big.’

‘I was trapped by the wicked Hera.’ The man planted his fists on his hips and twisted his spine until it cracked. ‘Ah, that’s better. It was cramped in there. Hot, too.’

‘Hang on, what did you say? The wicked who?’

‘Hera. The foulest, most evil woman in the world. She is so terrible, even the rocks tremble as she passes. Don’t you know her?’ The muscleman’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

Tim shook his head. ‘Not me, sorry.’

‘And who are you, exactly?’

‘Tim Baker.’

An enthusiastic smile crept across the muscleman's face. 'You're a baker?'

**EXCELLENT.'**

He rubbed his hands together. 'I'm starving. Give me two large white loaves, extra crunchy crust.'

'No, I—'

'A small wholemeal?'

'Baker's my name, not my job. I don't have a job. I'm ten.'

The man sniffed. 'You don't have a job. You haven't heard of Hera. Are you perhaps of feeble mind?'

'No kid has a job!'

'Really? I suppose I have been trapped a long time,' the man admitted, stroking

his wiry black beard. 'Then I shall try to explain: Hera is the queen goddess, wife of my father Zeus. You've heard of the mighty Zeus, at least?'

Tim had come across that name before. Frowning, he tried to remember where. Was it in a cartoon?



A book? Some sort of story, he was sure of that.

‘My father is lord of the sky and ruler of Mount Olympus,’ the man said, pulling himself to his full height. ‘You must know of him.’

‘Mount Olympus? Like in mythology? Greek gods and stuff?’ Tim clicked his tongue. ‘They’re just stories. They’re not real.’

The man lowered his bushy eyebrows as he peered down at Tim. ‘Not real?’ he echoed, sounding displeased. ‘Of course they are. They’re as real as me, and I am a demigod – half god, half human. Are you of poor vision? Do you doubt your own eyes?’

Tim couldn't argue with that. He said nothing.

'Queen Hera has hated me since I was born,' the man continued, clenching his fists. 'When I was only a few days old, she sent snakes into my cot to kill me. But I showed her: I seized the snakes and strangled them with my bare hands.'

Tim felt the blood drain from his face. What sort of person would do that to a baby?

'Wh-why does she hate you?'

'She's jealous of my mother, who is far more beautiful than her. Hera never forgets an insult ... and she never forgives. She trapped me in that cursed vase, snatching me from my beloved wife

and daughter. Now, thanks to you, the spell is broken.'

'Spell?' Tim thought for a moment. If this were really happening ... if he weren't imagining things ... did that mean what he thought it meant? A wide grin broke out on his face. 'Hey, are you a genie? Are you going to grant me three wishes?'

**'A GENIE?'**

The muscleman's voice boomed across the room, rattling the windows in their frames and making Tim wince. 'Do I look like a genie?'



Tim peered at the muscleman. He wasn't exactly sure what a genie was meant to look like.

'I think so,' he said. 'Except for the dress.'

'It is not a dress! It's a chiton.'

The man tugged at his short tunic.

Tim held out a piece of vase. 'Genie, fix this so that it's as good as new. That's wish number one. Number two – make Leo

leave me alone. And wish number three – I wish I didn't have to clean up all the time.'

'Stop calling me that. I am not a genie.'

The man glared at him.

'Oh.' That meant no wishes, Tim realised with dismay. 'Then what are you?'

'I am a hero, the bravest and mightiest of them all. You must have heard of me: my name is Hercules.'

Tim jumped. A real live superhero, right here in his house! That was nearly as good as a genie.

'Cool! What do you do? Can you fly?' he asked eagerly.

'No.'

'Can you shoot spiderwebs out of your wrists?'

Hercules frowned and shook his head.

‘Can you shoot laser beams out of your eyes?’

Hercules folded his arms across his chest and looked grumpily back at Tim.

‘Well then, what *can* you do?’ Tim asked. ‘What sort of hero are you?’

‘I can do lots of things,’ Hercules said. ‘Like this.’ He grunted and flexed his arm muscles. They bulged like volcanoes about to erupt.

‘Yes ... and?’

‘And this!’



Hercules lifted the sofa and raised it over his head. The wooden armrests bumped against the ceiling, leaving deep scratch marks.

‘That’s good,’ Tim said, nodding. ‘Can you stick this vase back together?’

Hercules let the sofa drop into place. It fell with a clatter. He peered at the pieces of vase scattered on the floor. Squatting down, he prodded them with fingers the size of sausages.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘The bits are too small. I can’t pick them up with these super-strong fingers.’

Tim sighed. ‘I’ll fix it later.’ He scooped up the pieces and shoved them in a drawer, out of sight. With luck, Mum wouldn’t

notice that the vase was missing before he had a chance to repair it.

‘Heroes don’t fix pots,’ Hercules said scornfully. ‘When I was your age, I wrestled a cow with my bare hands. Have you ever wrestled a cow?’

‘Um, no.’ Tim was trying to be polite, but didn’t see how any of this would help. Flexing muscles and wrestling cattle wouldn’t get the housework done.

‘Cows, hmmm. That reminds me. I haven’t eaten for thousands of years. Do you have any food? I’m starving.’

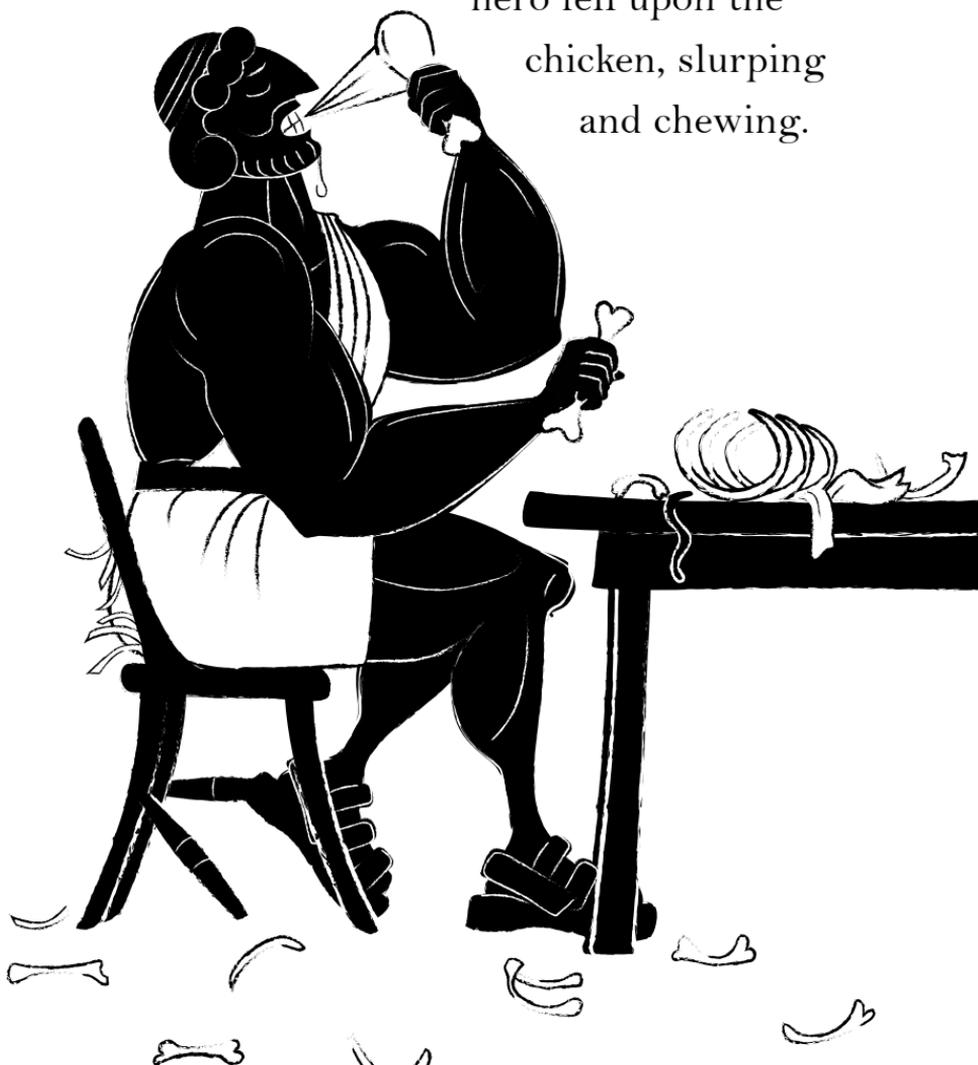
Tim led the hero into the kitchen. Hercules sat on a cane chair. It creaked and strained under his weight. Tim opened the fridge door and peered inside. ‘There’s

some leftover roast chicken. Would you like some?’

Hercules didn’t bother to answer. As soon as Tim put the platter down, the

hero fell upon the

chicken, slurping and chewing.



Within seconds, all that was left was bones. Burping, he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

Tim watched silently then cleared up the mess. Heroes may be cool, but he couldn't help thinking a genie would be more useful.

'Thank you, Tim Baker. Heroes need food to stay strong,' Hercules said, patting his stomach. 'That was a good meal. How did you get the drumsticks so tender?'

But Tim was more concerned about his wishes.

'If you're not a genie, does that mean you can't help me?' he asked.

Hercules licked his fingers and looked thoughtful. 'I can't fix the pot. I don't

know who this Leo is and why he must leave you alone. But as for your third wish ... Yes, I,

## THE MIGHTY HERCULES,

shall help you with the cleaning.'

Tim brightened. Maybe heroes were useful after all! 'Can you weed gardens?' he asked, thinking of all the jobs he still had to do that day.

'Weed? What is that?'

'It means you pull out the weeds – the bad plants. If you don't, they take over and kill the good plants.'

'Kill, you say?' Hercules' eyebrows shot up. 'Worry not. I shall save them! That's what we heroes do. Show me these evil

plants at once.’

Tim led Hercules out the front door. He pointed out yellow dandelion flowers and white clover blossoms. They nestled amongst the blades of grass and peeked out of the flower beds. ‘Those are weeds. We only remove the bad plants. Nothing else.’

‘It shall be done,’ Hercules said, locking his fingers together and cracking his knuckles. ‘Stand back, my friend. This might be dangerous. I don’t want you to get hurt.’