

Grσσk Mythology

Hercules

(Heracles) and His Labours



Never was there a boy like Hercules – twice as large and ten times as strong as any other boy. When he swung his arms, everyone took a few quick steps back. When he stomped, all the land shook. That boy was so strong, he was always breaking furniture or smashing things by mistake.



At last, his mother had to send him out to tend the goats and sheep to keep him out of trouble.



What the young Hercules did not know was that his father was Zeus, the god of thunder, and the most powerful of all gods. Since his one parent was a god and his mother was a mortal human, Hercules was a “demi-god.”

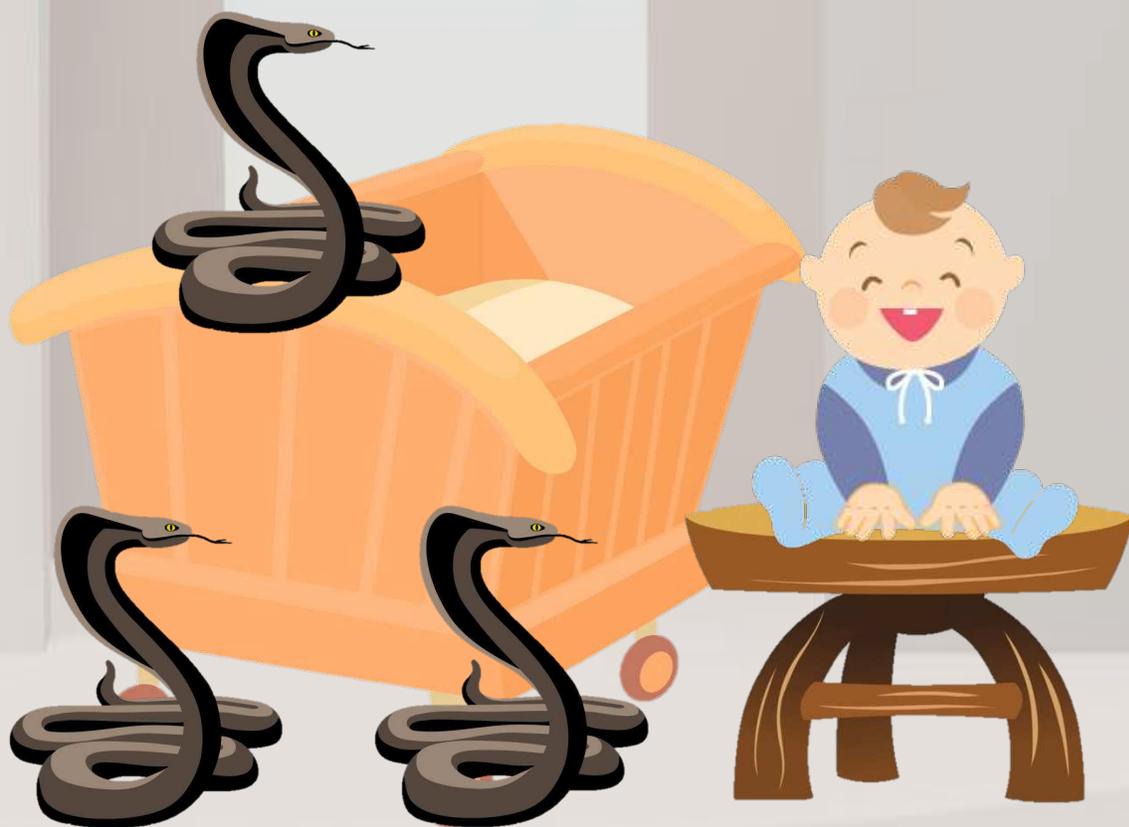


Yet being a demi-god did not protect Hercules from one powerful danger – the goddess Hera. For Hera was the wife of Zeus. And as wife of Zeus, you can be sure that Hera was not happy that her husband was father to a child by another woman.

Whenever Hera thought about it, it made her furious. And she thought about it a lot.



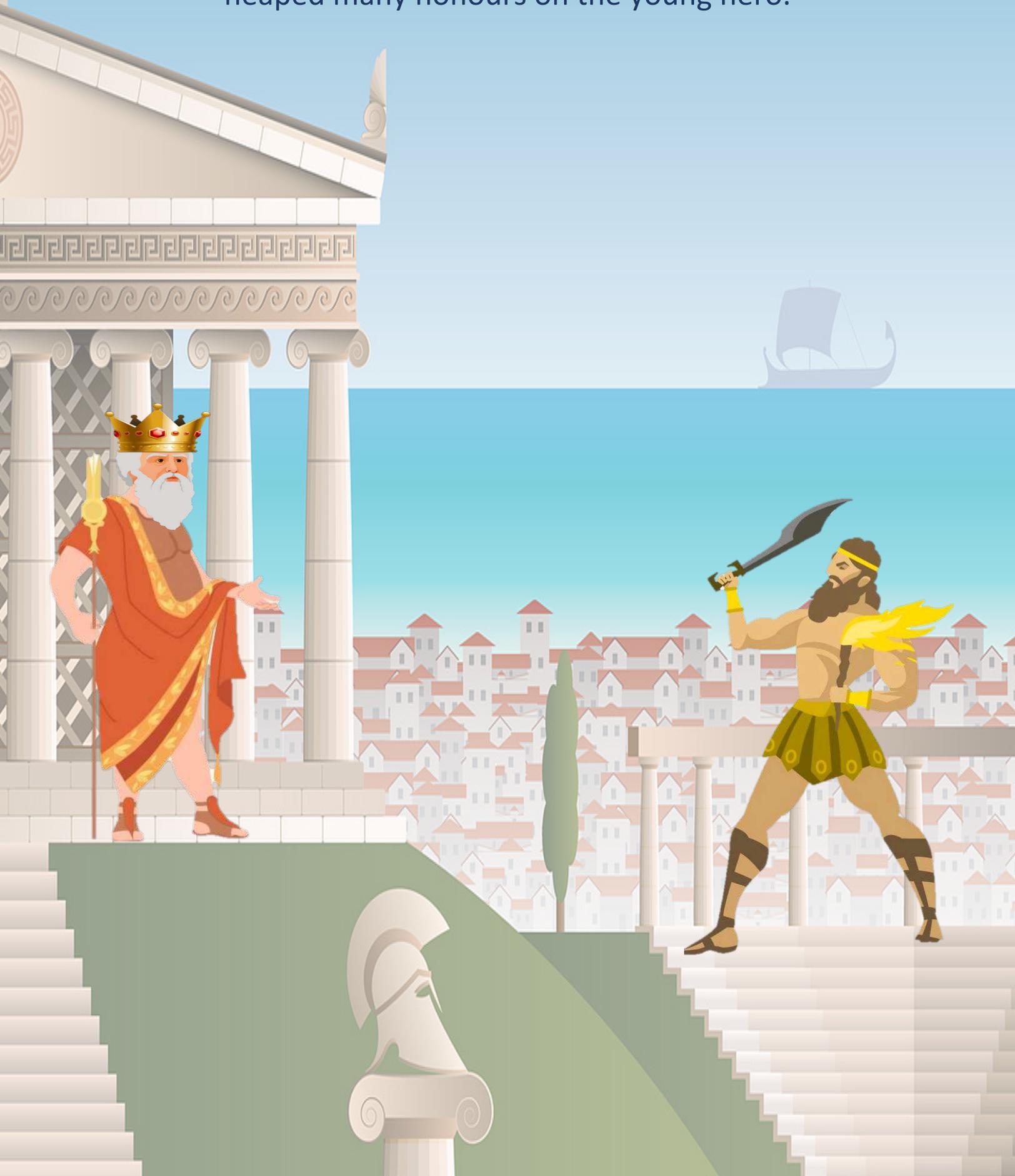
When Hercules was a baby, she sent two snakes into his crib. But the super-strong baby crushed the snakes with his bare hands.



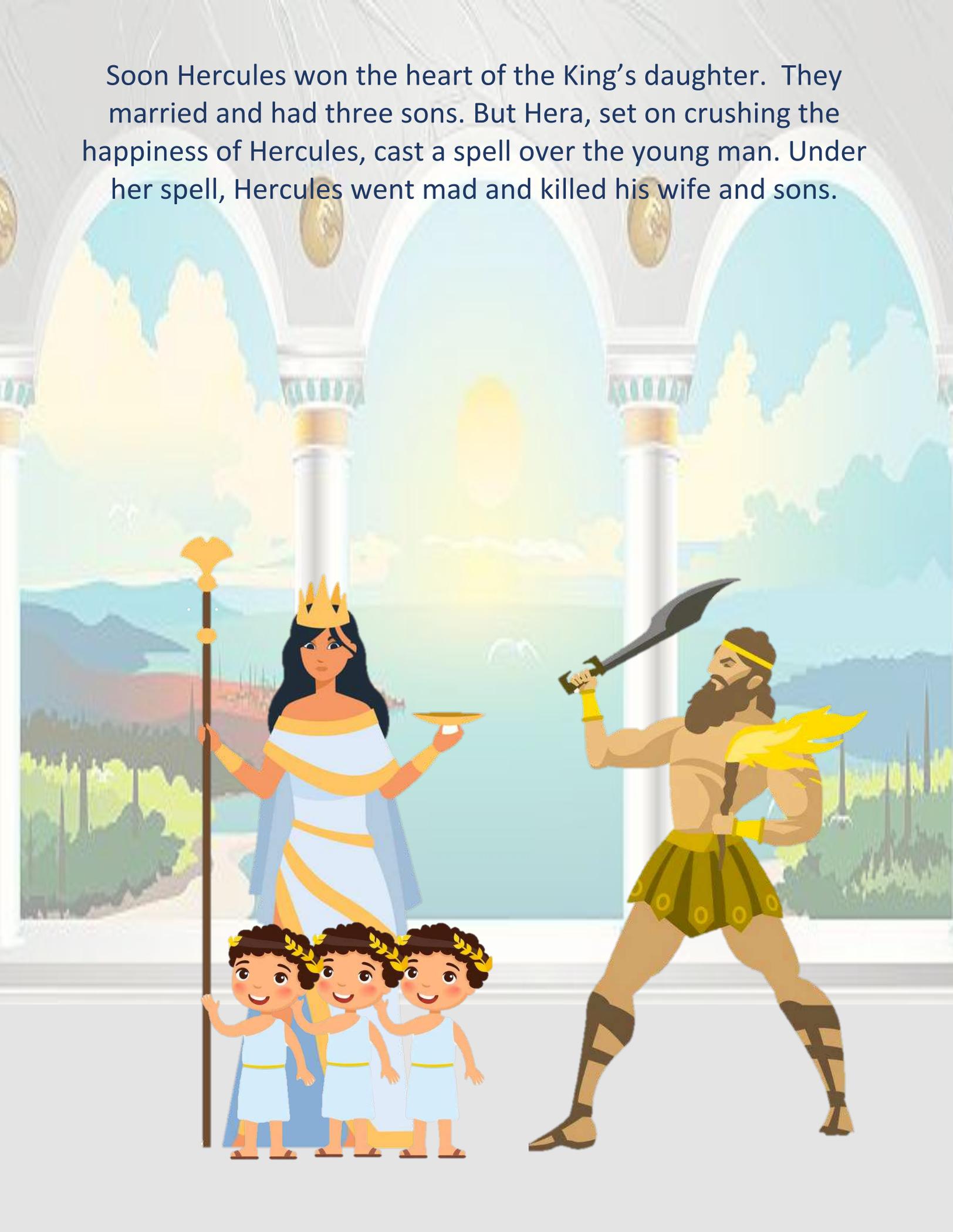
When Hercules grew up and became a young man, he drove away enemy invaders who had taken over a city-state next to his own, a kingdom called Thebes. Hercules chased the very last invader away.



The King of Thebes was able to rule again, and the grateful King heaped many honours on the young hero.



Soon Hercules won the heart of the King's daughter. They married and had three sons. But Hera, set on crushing the happiness of Hercules, cast a spell over the young man. Under her spell, Hercules went mad and killed his wife and sons.



When the spell was over and Hercules saw what he had done, he was stunned. He sunk into a grief so deep that he felt he could not go on.

His friend Theseus, another young hero, pleaded with Hercules to visit the Oracle at Delphi. She was the most famous prophet in the land. Only the Oracle could give an answer of what Hercules could do to make up for what he did.



When the Oracle was asked a question, she often spoke in riddles and it was hard to know what she was saying. But this time, the Oracle was clear.

To pay for his sins, Hercules must, for ten years, serve his cousin Eurystheus (we will call him “Eury”), King of a nearby land. During this time, said the Oracle, King Eury would give him ten impossible tasks to do.



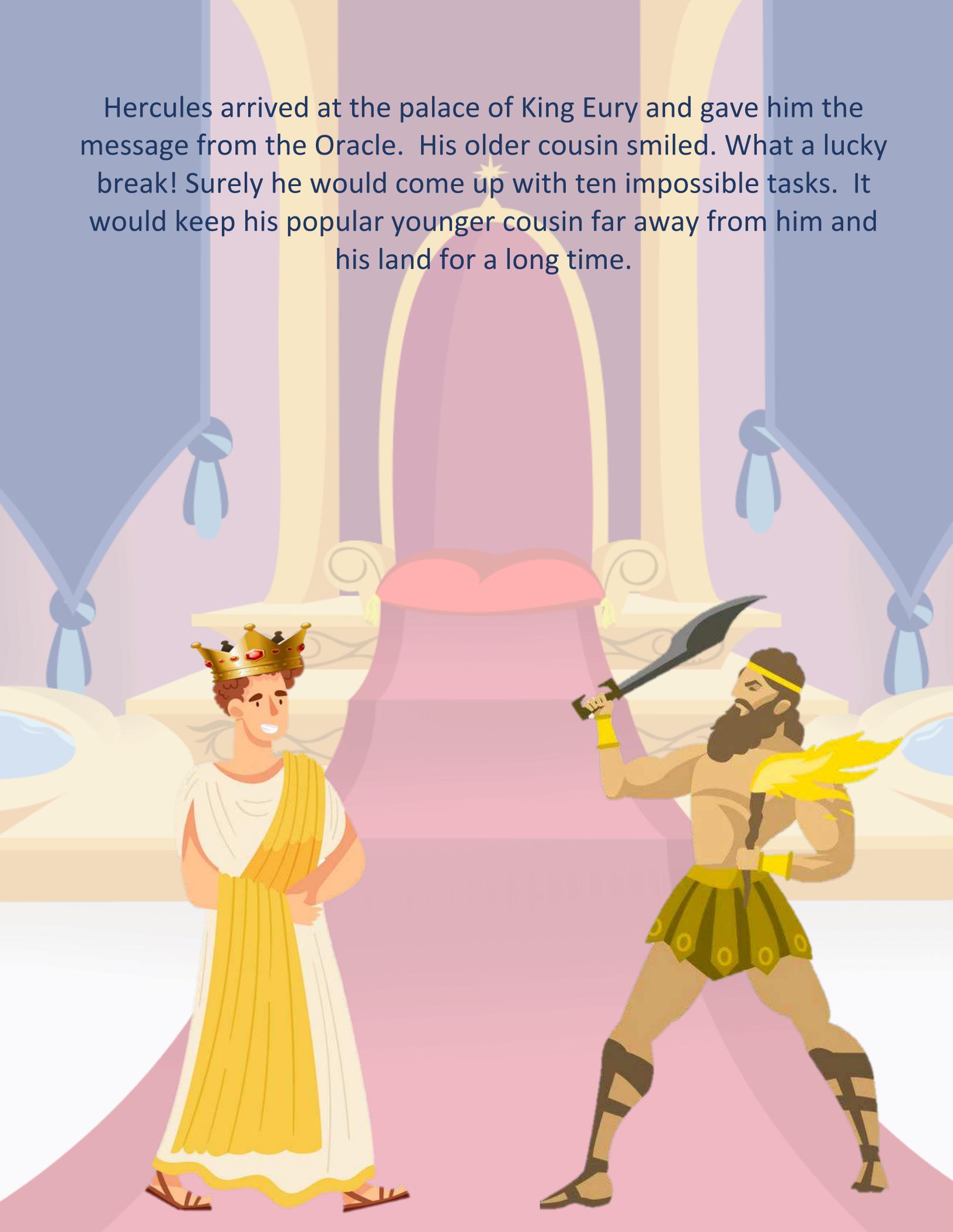
For you see, the Oracle at Delphi could see into the hearts of men. She knew that King Eury wanted nothing more than to be rid of his stronger, more popular younger cousin. She knew that he would come up with ten very difficult, even impossible, tasks.



When Hercules heard this answer, he knew it was his choice to do what the Oracle said. After all, was he not the strongest man on earth – the son of a god? Yet Hercules felt he needed to somehow pay for his sins. If serving his cousin King Eury for ten years was a path to that end, then that is what he would do.



Hercules arrived at the palace of King Eury and gave him the message from the Oracle. His older cousin smiled. What a lucky break! Surely he would come up with ten impossible tasks. It would keep his popular younger cousin far away from him and his land for a long time.



If Hercules happened to perform every one of the tasks, then he, King Eury, would take the credit. And if his younger cousin happened to die while trying, well, so be it.



Hercules' first task was to kill the Nemean Lion, a beast that had been striking terror in the countryside nearby. The Lion could not be harmed by any weapon, so there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

Hercules chased the Nemean Lion and trapped it in a cave. He strangled the beast with his bare hands, then skinned it.



The hero hung the skin of the Nemean Lion around his head, with the open head of the lion over his own face. That is how Hercules returned to the palace of King Eury.

The King was indeed surprised, but he was ready with a second task.



Hercules was to slay the giant Hydra dragon snake. The Hydra had many hungry heads, each one blowing hot steam from its fangs. Even worse, when one snake head was cut off, two more would grow back in its place!

But Hercules had a plan – as he cut off each snake head, his nephew quickly seared the cut with fire so the head would not grow back.



But because Hercules had help with this task, King Eury did not count it. Instead, he gave Hercules an extra task.



Next, Hercules had to bring back to the King a huge deer that was the pet of the Athena, the goddess of the hunt, who took care of all animals. Athena's deer had golden horns and hoofs of bronze and was faster than any other creature alive. Hercules chased her pet deer for many months. Finally, he shot an arrow that wounded the animal.



Carrying the animal on his shoulders, he came upon none other than the goddess Athena herself. She was shocked to see her pet, hurt like that. Hercules explained why he was forced to capture the animal, and he said that he was sorry.

Athena understood. She forgave him, as long as he agreed to set the animal free. Hercules agreed. So Athena healed the deer's wound and let Hercules carry her pet back to King Eury.



King Eury was stunned to see Hercules walk into his throne room, carrying Athena's deer! But he had another task ready, just in case.



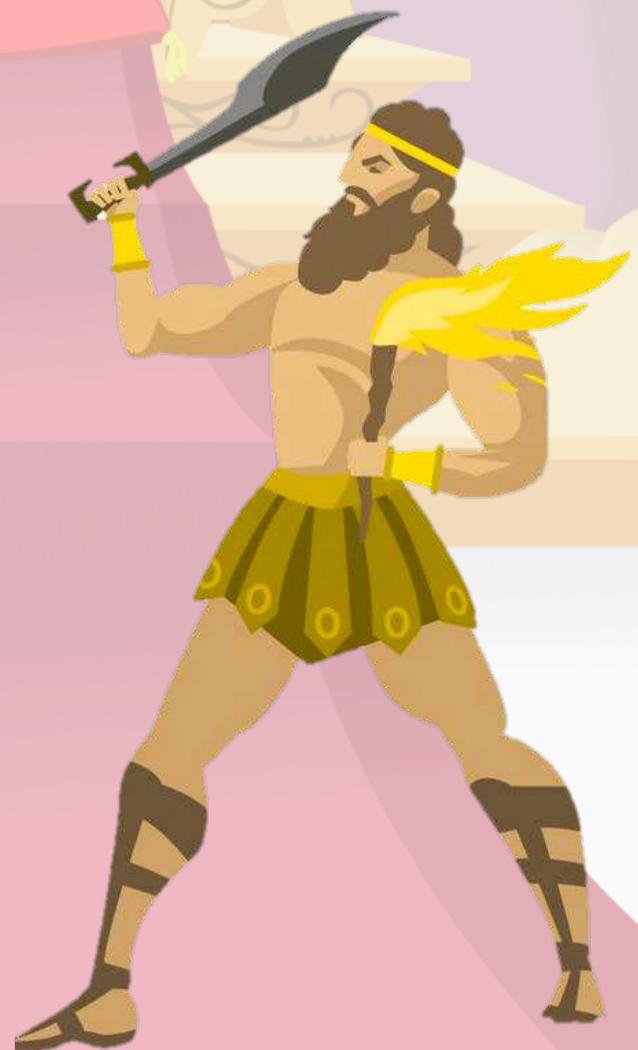
Hercules would have to capture a fearsome boar – a wild pig with a bad temper and long pointed tusks. Every day, the boar would come crashing down the mountainside, attacking and killing everything in its path.

Hercules chased the Boar into a deep pile of snow. He trapped it into a net and carried the net, with the beast in it, back to King Eury.

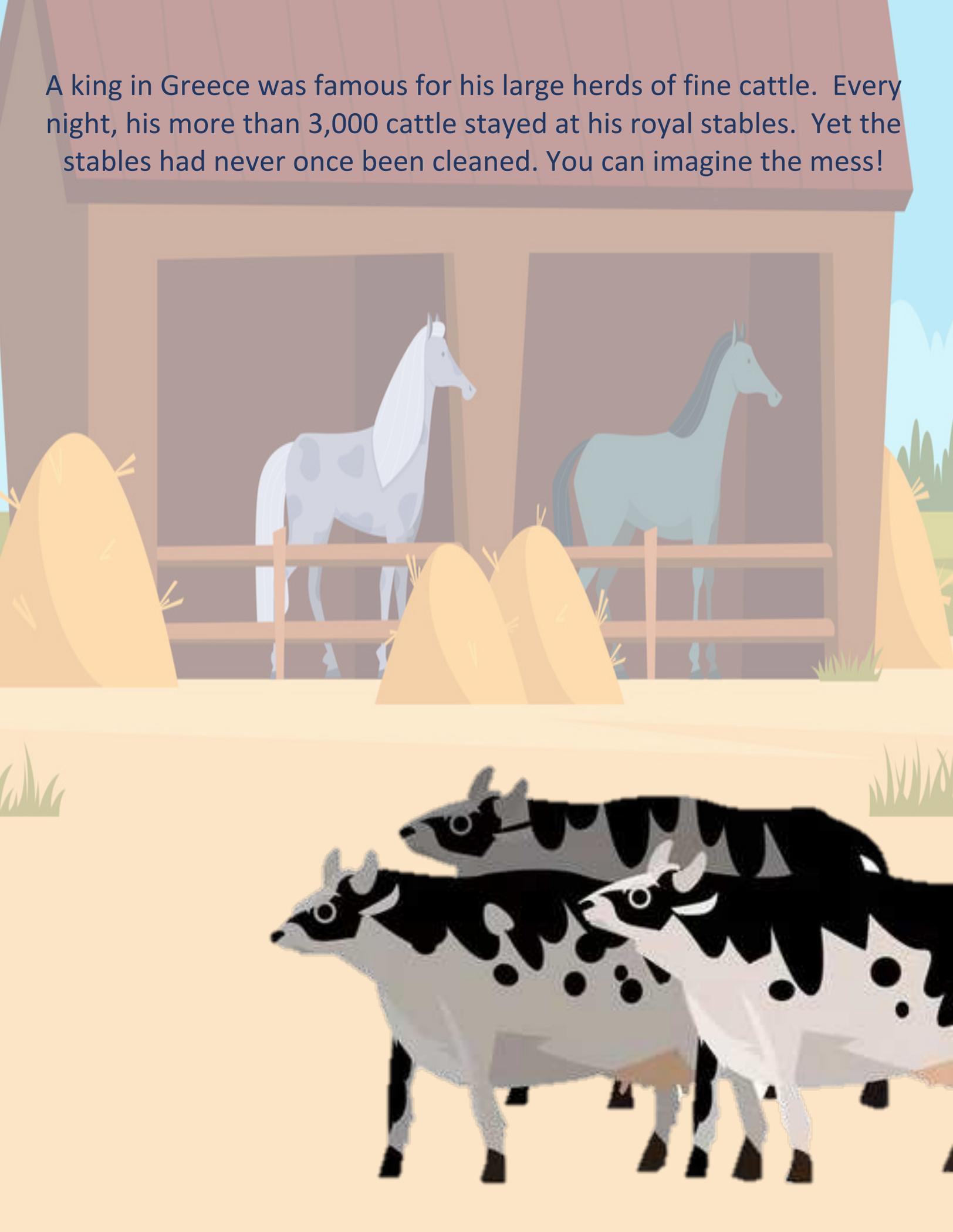


Now King Eury did not know what to do! Could nothing or no one beat Hercules?

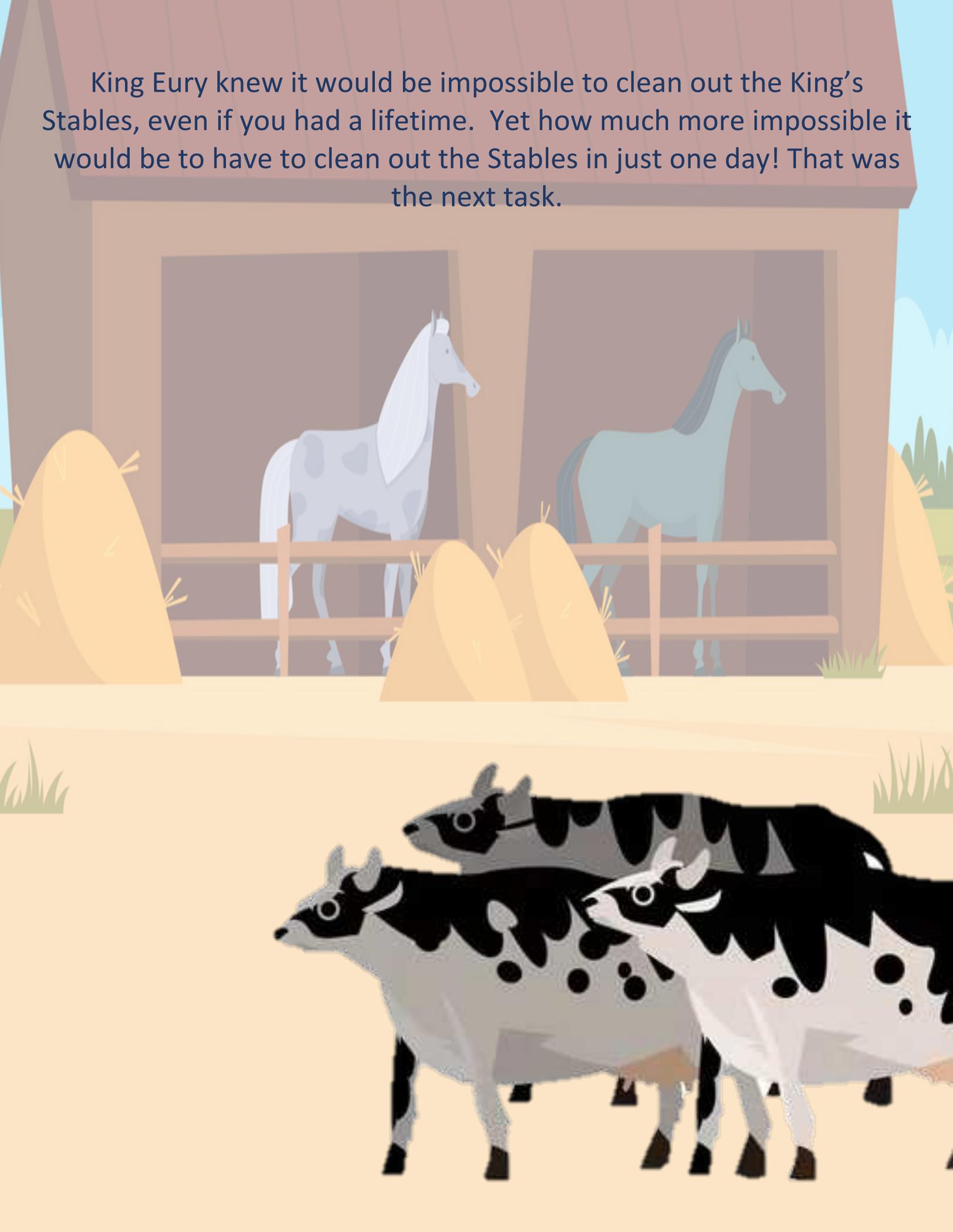
King Eury knew the next labour had to be truly impossible.



A king in Greece was famous for his large herds of fine cattle. Every night, his more than 3,000 cattle stayed at his royal stables. Yet the stables had never once been cleaned. You can imagine the mess!



King Eury knew it would be impossible to clean out the King's Stables, even if you had a lifetime. Yet how much more impossible it would be to have to clean out the Stables in just one day! That was the next task.



Hercules went to the King who owned the fine cattle. He said he would clean out the royal stables in one day, on one condition. The condition was if the King would give him 10 percent of his fine cattle.

The King could not believe anyone could clean out the Stables, period. But if this stranger could do such a thing in one day, it was worth the price.



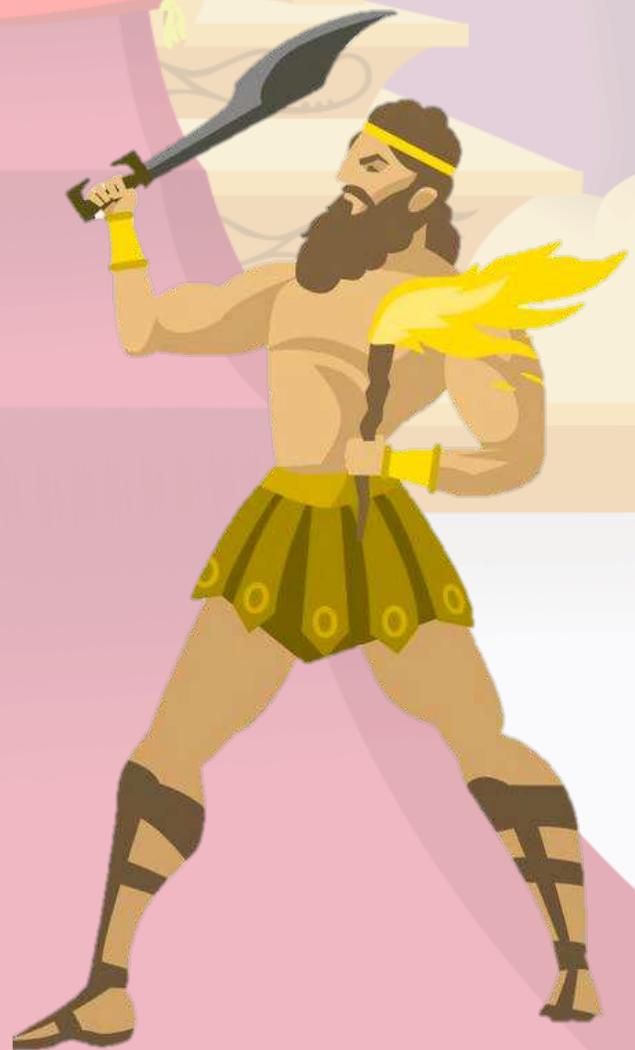
The next morning after the cattle went out to graze, Hercules tore a large hole at one end of the stable wall, and another large hole at the other end. Then he dug two wide trenches next to two rivers that flowed nearby.

He turned the course of both rivers into one stream and directed the flow of the stream into the hole in the stable wall. The two rivers rushed right through, and everything flowed out the other side! By the end of the day, the stables were as clean as could be.



The King gave Hercules the cattle he had promised. But King Eury said the task didn't count because Hercules had been paid. And so he would have to do yet another extra task.

There were other labours ...



... Hercules had to drive away a flock of man-eating birds.



... He had to wrestle a Minotaur to the ground.



... He had to ride a chariot of wild horses and tame them.



... He went to the faraway land of the Amazon women and brought back the queen's belt.



... He even travelled to the very end of the world.



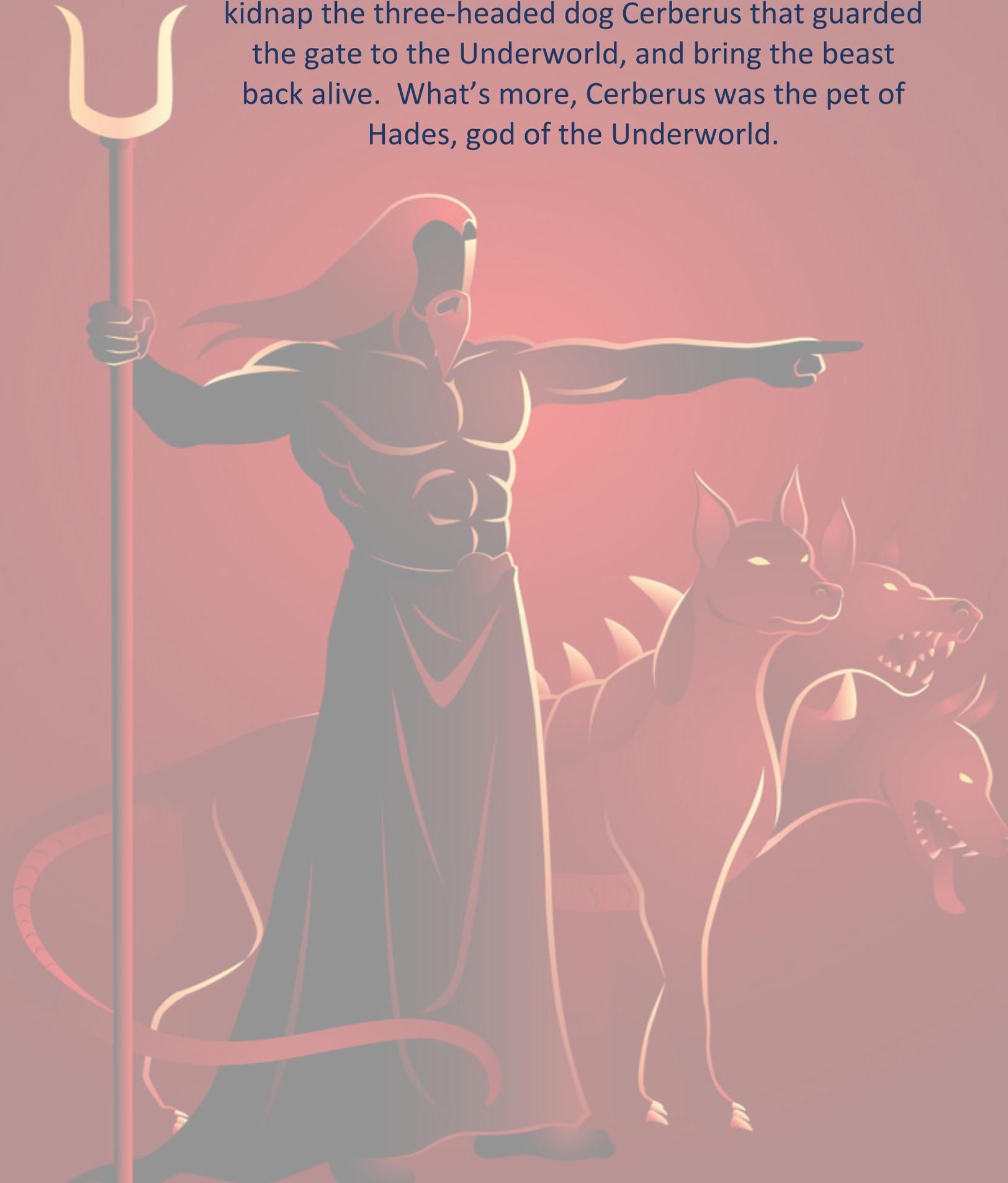
The next labour was the hardest of all. Hercules had to get the golden apples that belonged to Zeus, the king of the gods and his own father. What made this task truly impossible is that the golden apples were a wedding present from Hera, the wife of Zeus and the very goddess who hated him. Yet Hercules also accomplished this task. He tricked Atlas, who held up the world, into doing it for him.



At last, the final labour of Hercules was the most impossible one of all. He had to go deep under the earth to the Underworld, the land of the dead. No one had ever gone to the Underworld and come back alive.



To make it even more impossible, the task was to kidnap the three-headed dog Cerberus that guarded the gate to the Underworld, and bring the beast back alive. What's more, Cerberus was the pet of Hades, god of the Underworld.



King Eury knew that Hades would not let anyone try to harm his pet. But he had no problem letting harm come to Hercules!

When Hercules got to the Underworld, he went to see Hades. He asked Hades if he might borrow his pet for a while and take him to the land of the living. Hercules promised not to harm him. Hades was impressed that Hercules had come to ask permission first, instead of fighting his pet, and so he agreed.

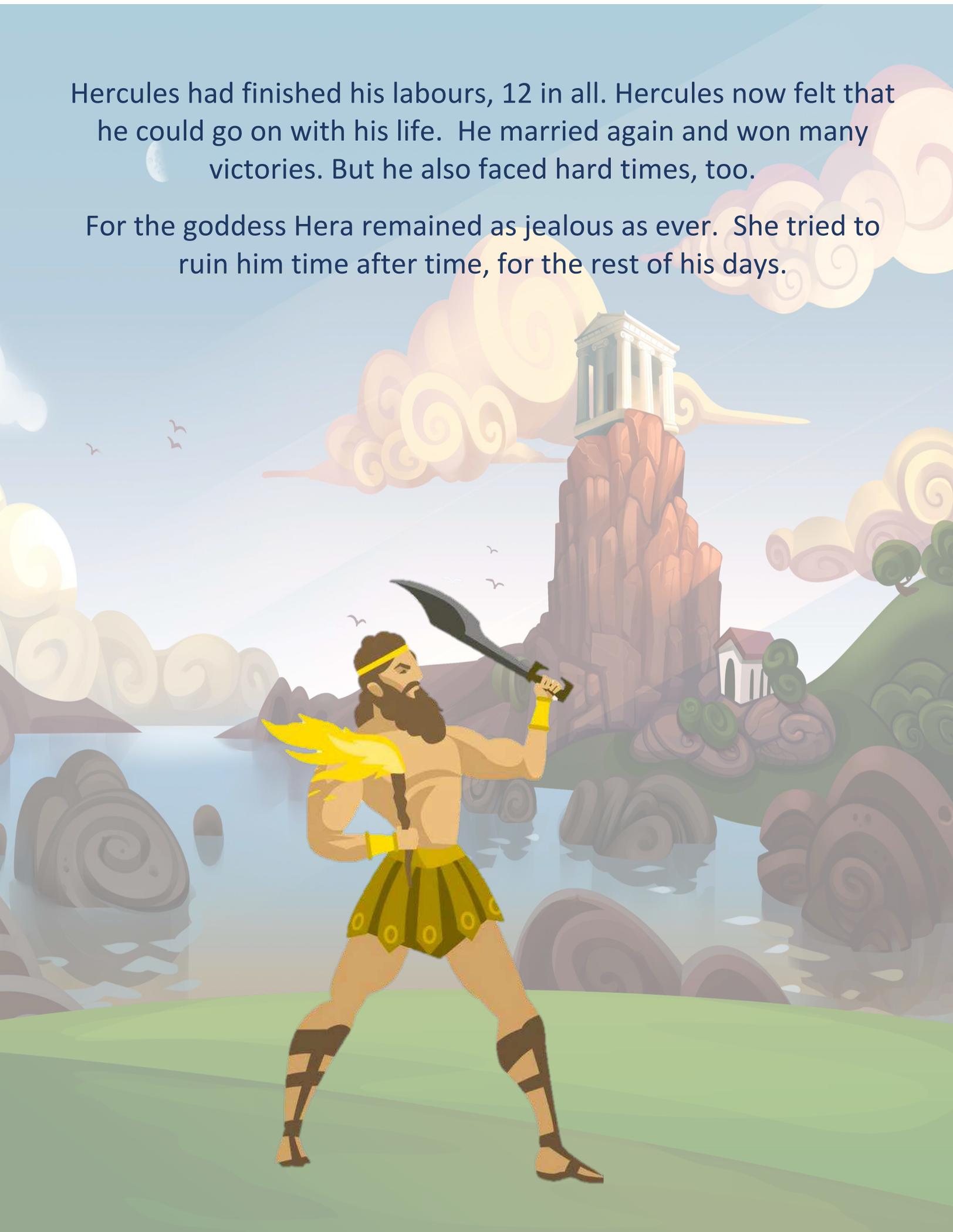


When Hercules came to King Eury's palace with the three-headed dog, the King froze in fear, then rushed behind his throne. Calling from behind his hiding place, King Eury told Hercules that he had credit for the final task, and in all tasks, and should go right away and take the beast with him. So the labours of Hercules ended.



Hercules had finished his labours, 12 in all. Hercules now felt that he could go on with his life. He married again and won many victories. But he also faced hard times, too.

For the goddess Hera remained as jealous as ever. She tried to ruin him time after time, for the rest of his days.



When Hercules died, he won a final prize. He became the only demi-god ever allowed to rise up to Mount Olympus, the place in the clouds where the gods lived. For all the good deeds he had done in his life and for all the hardships he had faced, Hercules would live forever at Mount Olympus, as an immortal god.





THINK

DIGITAL ACADEMY

